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The Transformative Power of Planting Fandango Culture as a Culturally Sustaining Approach to Teaching and Learning at a Public University

Abstract

Learning *son jarocho*--an African diasporic and Mexican musical genre born of the colonial experience in the Gulf of Mexico-- at a public university was leveraged as a tool for co-liberation. Drawing from Black feminist theories and Indigenous methodologies, this community-based participatory action research included members of the Son Xinachtli (seed) Collective, comprised of Ethnic Studies and Education faculty and students. We ask: How might the institutionalization of son jarocho impact student voice and community engagement for co-liberation? Using critical auto/ethnographic and storywork analysis to examine three years of son jarocho implementation, findings indicate that planting fandango culture embodies connections to the land and radical love as a source of healing and responsibility. This healing, communal joy of Son Xinachtli planted seeds of community engagement.

Purpose

We need medicines to challenge and transcend the coloniality of power in our everyday lives as students, faculty and community members. *Son jarocho* and the culture of *fandangos* are one tool that can open up worlds of possibilities towards the in-the-moment and long-term co-liberation of the earth and the lives of the earth. This tool relies on community-building, creativity and public expressions. In addition, *son jarocho* was born in agricultural societies during the African diaspora and coloniality of the 15th century in the region adjoining the Gulf of Mexico. There were prohibitive policies against the genre because of its open expressions of sexuality and the critique of the Holy Office and colonial forces. It is especially appropriate to welcome *son jarocho* and *fandango* culture to a public university in an agricultural based area, and birthplace of a white supremacist group. Black and Indigenous People of Color are continuously under surveillance and dehumanized. Planting seeds of fandango culture has been especially healing and necessary. We argue that institutions must center culturally sustaining education as a critical and healing approach to learning and living in the world.

Theoretical Framework

The colonial project consistently fails in California's Central Valley because the will of the people is strong. In the fall of 2018, *fandango* seeds were planted for co-liberation in Northern Valley Yokut Lands. *Fandango* is the culminating communal expression of *son jarocho*, a rural music genre born in the Gulf Coast of Mexico as a cultural expression and transgression to

Spanish colonization during the African diaspora. Once outlawed because of the persecution of the Holy Office on enslaved peoples, the essence of the genre was also threatened by capitalist ventures. The recent resurgence of *fandango* culture all over the world has been leveraged as a tool for building community for the co-liberation of all life forms, including the Earth, Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) and oppressors. In response to the ongoing oppression on campus and in the region, Ethnic Studies faculty at a public university instituted a course that focused on learning culturally sustaining *fandango* methodologies, which included four blossoms (cohorts) of the first planting of seeds. As part of this culturally sustaining strategy for expression, healing, and transgression, the *Son Xinachtli* (seed) Collective was created.

Drawing from transdisciplinary areas such as Black feminist theories and Indigenous methodologies, this community-based participatory action research is co-authored by members of the *Son Xinachtli* (germinating seed) Collective (Son X). This community-based participatory action research process on fandangos and son jarocho compliments and advances the research that affirms the importance of producing more culturally sustaining programming that can help underrepresented students' learning from a decolonial perspective. We explore the following research questions: What impact does planting fandango culture and learning son jarocho have on underrepresented students' learning? How might universities institutionalize culturally sustaining programming that will benefit campus climate? As part of this tradition, *Son Xinachtli* Collective was created at a public university in Central California. In response to the ongoing oppression on campus and in the region, Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) faculty and students came together to create the collective as a culturally sustaining strategy for expression, healing, and transgression. Prior to forming Son X, Ethnic Studies faculty on campus initiated this project through a university research grant in 2018. Thereafter, Ethnic Studies faculty at the university instituted a course that focused on learning son jarocho and practicing in fandango community celebrations during the academic year of 2018-2020, which included four cohorts of student blossoms within three years of participating in community in-person and virtual events.

As mentioned previously, son jarocho was born out of the colonial matrix of power in the Gulf of Mexico in the 16th century as a cultural expression, but also as a challenge to Spanish colonization. There has been a recent resurgence of the son jarocho tradition in various parts of Mexico and in the US, particularly in Xicano/a/x communities. Learning son jarocho in a public university Ethnic Studies course bridged two generations of students' resurgence of voice and community engagement.

Data Sources

This study examines: surveys, participant observations from the classrooms and community, research memos, focus group interviews, student writing essays, a zoom fandango transcript, post-fandango interviews, images, and videos. The given study draws from two years of practice, from 2018 to 2020, as well as weekly organizing for Transformative Tuesday's: a collective of Ethnic Studies faculty and student-sponsored public forum about dismantling white supremacy, the creation of El Plan de Estanislao, a year course on son jarocho, and fandangos (community celebrations).

Son Xinachtli members are also researchers. Seven Son Xinachtli researchers, and education faculty, used semi-grounded theory to code the aforementioned data using Dedoose, an online collaborative coding software. Triangulation and member checks were conducted to verify the validity of the data collected.

Results

Through the activation of ancestral collective power in some of the most volatile places for BIPOC, son jarocho continues to germinate seeds of healing and radical love, leading the way for bridging sones--the sounds of the earth-- by different people and places of unceded Nototomne agriculture-based lands of California's Central Valley. In this weaving of sounds, in-the-moment liberation of bodies and places break the forced silence and forced obedience of peoples and places towards co-liberation of all. Focusing on the process of creating Son X at CSU Stan (2018-2020), this paper highlights the power of voice, expression, and community engagement through son jarocho and fandangos. Using critical auto/ethnographic, storywork analysis, and fandango methodology to examine four years of son jarocho planting (2018-ongoing 2021), findings indicate that son jarocho draws from ancestral knowledge systems to embody and promote connections to the land and radical love as a decolonial source of healing and transgression.

Students engaged in son jarocho learning and practice in co-liberatory ways. Student researchers created three-tiered definitions of co-liberation intersecting time and place, as observed in the data: 1) moments of liberation as experienced in a single life form (earth, person) in an individual body, heart, mind and spirit; 2) multiple moments of liberation by multiple life forms in a specific region; and 3) prolonged time of freedom by self, others, and earth life, worldwide. Students reported experiencing multiple moments of liberatory practices including *sacando la voz* (pulling out one's voice) and singing for the first time in public, letting go of stiffness to *zapatear en la tarima* in public, and dismantling politics of shyness to speak up in multiple areas of engagement. In addition, Son Xinachtli members reported healing from intergenerational trauma as a result of adopting Son Xinachtli's co-constructed communal agreements in a supportive environment. The process of collectively sharing, writing, and continuing to learn son jarocho in the pandemic, reinforced son jarocho as a pedagogical tool for transborder community building.

Indigenous erasure tactics have been intentionally exerted in the region of and surrounding the university such as adopting Native mascots, but rejecting that the land the university sits on is uncended Nototomne Land. In addition, the university hired its first Native American Studies tenured faculty in 2018 since its inception in 1960. There was no Native programming, much less strategies to recruit and retain Native students in this historically conservative region. The historical society did not have information about the Native Nations in the area. Finally, this area is known for being one of the headquarters of white supremacist violence. In discussing liberation and son jarocho lyrics that addressed softening the hearts of rivals, BIPOC Son Xinachtli members extensively discussed the tactics of healing and liberation moving towards forgiveness and connections to oppressors through radical love.

Scholarly Significance

This healing, communal trust and joy of Son Xinachtli joined other intersectional Ethnic Studies movements by The Collective of Indigenous Students in Activism, Ethnic Studies club, Queer Trans People of Color, Movimiento Estudiantil Chicanx de Aztlán, and WokePOCalypse to help develop individual and collective student power to create El Plan de Estanislao's institutional change. In a single year (March 2019-March 2020), the movement channeled power to achieve several institutional changes recommended by the students which include: 1) the university president publicly denounced white supremacy, 2) the university consulted with local Nototomne elders to adopt a Native Land Acknowledgement, 3) a Central Valley social justice experienced director was hired for the Diversity Center, 4) first admin-funded social justice murals completed on campus, 5) admin-funded social justice center for critical education, healing and action was granted, 6) transformed an abandoned BioAg lab into an Indigenous Sustainability community garden with funding support, 7) connected with local elementary school students and their families to participate in fandangos, and 8) created music for annual intersectional Ethnic Studies programming. It is important to note that part of the healing was yawning and weaving inner-conflict with restorative justice circles along the way, transforming emotional tension to learning experiences of healing and perseverance in efforts towards co-liberation. This storywork continues with increased collaborations with the Black Student Union for centering Black and Indigenous epistemologies.

Fandangos and son jarocho positively influenced underrepresented students with their learning that led to empowerment. The origins and social context of the musical tradition provided BIPOC students an opportunity to build community through a shared affinity and history (Fine, 2014) while also cultivating a space for critical conscience. Fandangos and son jarocho inspired students a *sacar la voz*--literally pulling out one's voice--to become civically engaged once they connected with the local community through affirming programs that encouraged cultural exchange. In other words, fandangos and son jarocho created a space in which BIPOC students felt like they belonged and had a purpose, thereby encouraging them to voice their experiences, complete their academic studies and become involved with social change. Finally, our research on fandangos and son jarocho is a great case study of the ways in which universities can implement culturally sustaining pedagogies that are focused on the recruitment and retention of BIPOC students. May we collectively continue on this journey, with dignity for all life forms.

Audience

The anticipated audience of this work is anyone interested in social transformation, social change, the co-liberation of all life forms, including earth and teacher training programs, student voice, non-dominant student learning, Indigenous pedagogies, Black Indigenous People of Color solidarity building, Indigenous studies, decolonial studies, sustainability studies, dismantling systems of oppression, institutionalizing Ethnic Studies son jarocho course in a public university, Ethnic Studies faculty implementing AB 1460 and body sovereignty. On August 17, 2020 California Governor Gavin Newsom signed AB 1460, written by Assembly member Shirley Weber. This created an Ethnic Studies graduation requirement for all 23 CSU campuses. Beginning in the 2021-2022 academic year, the CSU is to offer Ethnic Studies courses for students achieving their degree in the year 2024-2025 (Zinshteyn, 2020). This research can be

woven into all of the CSU's beginning 2021. Additional legislation pertaining to Ethnic Studies has been gaining momentum for K-12 districts. AB 331 was proposed by Riverside Assemblymember Jose Medina in 2019. It would also require Ethnic Studies as a high school graduation requirement beginning the 2023-2024 school year. This move also urges districts that don't already have a curriculum to offer classes beginning 2021-2022. AB 331 passed the California State Assembly on May 23, 2020 and is on its way to the Governor; if signed, the given literature can expand throughout California's K-12 system. The journey to make Ethnic Studies a K-12 graduation requirement is closer to our schools than ever before. In addition, the State of Washington has passed legislation that requires Ethnic Studies at the elementary school level statewide. Ethnic Studies movements are increasing worldwide as a way of educating people about the social inequities that have become more of a public concern in the last few years.

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