

"FANDANGO AT THE WALL: TRANS-ING SON JAROCHO TO A REFLECTION OF
MEXICAN IDENTITY"*

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Introduction

Music is more than simple sounds. It is able to convey identity, feelings, place, and it is able to vibrate through people's ideologies. It is able to be used as a tool for social justice by teaching through their lyrics and by creating community. However, music can also be used to incorrectly represent communities, specifically when looking at its history. In my study of music, I focus on the genre of Son Jarocho. This genre of music is a cultural reflection that combines Indigenous, Spanish, and African traditions. However, as I learned more about son jarocho, I began to see the gaps in historical narratives about the genre. Specifically, I realized that much of its history did not acknowledge women or Black people's contribution to the genre. Contemporary representations of the music were perpetuating those same notions and affecting how Mexican identity is shaped. This thesis argues for the imperative of acknowledging women and Black peoples as integral to a more robust understanding of the history of Son Jarocho and the film *Fandango at the Wall* (2020).

I structure my study within three cultural and ethnic studies frameworks: queer borderlands history, Black diaspora studies, and trans*ness. I build on the work of Borderlands historian Emma Perez, who conceptualizes the decolonial imaginary as a "rupturing space, the alternative to that which is written in history" [...] "that interstitial space where differential politics and social dilemmas are negotiated" (1999, 4). I also heed the call of cultural and diaspora studies scholar Rinaldo Walcott for expanding the Black diaspora project. Finally, I employ Black feminist and transgender studies scholar Marquis Bey's conceptualization of trans*ness and Blackness as tools of movement and fugitivity. I use my research to critique the film *Fandango At The Wall*, directed by Varda Bar-Kar, who co-wrote the film with Kabir Sehgal, to understand how Son Jarocho is

often discussed in popular culture. By reframing this genre through conceptualizations of the decolonial imaginary, blackness, and trans*-ness I reimagine the complex history of Mexican identity as being an embodiment of Blackness and exclusive of women. This critique of *Fandango at the Wall* allows for the reconceptualization of son jarocho as a tool for resistance and community building.

Afro-Mexicano & Women in the History of Son Jarocho

Son Jarocho is a 300 year old genre of folk music that originates in Veracruz, Mexico. Located on the eastern coast of Mexico, Veracruz is Mexico's first established port by the Spaniards, meaning that this was a concentrated area for the slave trade (Díaz-Sánchez 188). This history is reflected in the musical genre's name with *son* meaning song and *jarocho* referring to a caste-like group of Black and Indigenous peoples. Modern use of *jarocho* relates to natives of the port city and the state of Veracruz. This genre is now played worldwide and has adapted new instruments depending on location, serving as an example for what Loza would call collective cultural expression: "where artists transform a regional stylistic marker... into one with an entirely different set of associations and meanings" (Loza 190). However, for the purpose of my project I will be looking at this genre of music as it relates to Mexico. This music is traditionally created with the *arpa jarocho*, the *jarana*, and the *requinto*. Today it also incorporates the use of *leona* and *quijada*. In addition to these instruments, it is also commonly created with the use of *cajón*, a box snare drum, drum set, and the electric bass in the United States. This genre of music is closely tied to fandangos, a communal gathering of song and dance. It is also closely accompanied with dancing

(depending on the *son*) but is best known for its *zapateado* dance featured on a *tarima*, a wooden platform to create a resonator and serve as another layer of percussion (Romero).

In the 1970s, traditional son jarocho evolved to become faster paced and professionalized. Son jarocho ensembles consisted of professional musicians accompanied by formally trained dancers. Rural musicians began to promote a movement that sought to return to the old rural style of son jarocho while deeming the communal aspect important. This movement, called the *movimiento jaranero*, was primarily led by urban, educated Mexicans and supported by the state through funded tours, concerts, grants, and workshops. By the 1940s this genre was already touring in parts of the United States, especially in California. However, in the 1970s the *movimiento* hadn't yet reached California or had impacted son jarocho for the *sones* were starting to merge with various genres. Chicana civil rights movements at the time used son jarocho as the musical genre of social justice, creating a revival in traditional Mexican culture and a renewed relationship between Chicanas and Mexicans (Gonzalez).

During this revival it was advertised as the true Veracruzian identity of being jarocho and as a tool to build bridges amongst Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. By expressing this form of art Chicanas were affirming their Mexican roots through "re-appropriation and re-activation of gathering in order to build a sense of community and belonging" (Hernandez 1). This bridging neglected the genre's history as it pertained to its ties to Black Mexican history. However, this was not the first time that Black people had been institutionally erased from son jarocho and Mexican identity. The influx of

slaves in Mexico became so much that by the end of the sixteenth century there were three slaves to every one Spaniard (Madrid 26). Mexico's denial of Afro-Mexicans existence is also seen in the media. For example, in 2013 a Mexican airline put out a casting call for light skinned people in order to conform to what is popularly shown in the country's media (Archibald 2). This erasure and racism against Black peoples is blatant in the *casta* classification system developed by the Spanish as a system of racial classifications enforced by legal codes that provided a hierarchy of racial types throughout the Americas with (Díaz-Sánchez 189). After Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1810, it propelled the rejection of Afro-Mexicans by promoting a unified Mexican national identity that romanticized their Indigenous roots. The rooted racism in Mexican history is one that is still felt today.

This long history of racism would lead to the disappearance of Afro-Mexican communities within archives since governments were occupied with general documentations of Mexicans. We are left with minimal documentation that dates back to the Holy Inquisition of the 12th century. That which remains highlights another musical genre from Cuba that resembles modern son jarocho called "El chuchumbe" which was used as a form of resistance (Hernandez 43). While today hand percussion instruments have been reintroduced to son jarocho, all hand percussives were taken away from Black people during the Inquisition which led to other creative ways of creating percussive sounds like the *tarima*. This new form of music making is what eventually shaped how *zapateado* is danced today (Díaz-Sánchez 193). Although the erasure of African presence is often explicit, it still lives through son jarocho inadvertently.

Fandango at the Wall still perpetuates the same notions that the Mexican government pushed forward in creating a national identity that did not acknowledge the cultural significance of Black people within the genre. The importance of women in this musical production is also often undermined--simplifying women's contribution to only zapateado dancing. Female musicians are not recognized enough in the archival records of son jarocho unless it is tied to zapateado.

Women were not to play instruments, but instead they were to provide for a labor force that took care of the children and stayed at home. Zapateado dancing was often reserved for women to contribute to the fandangos. Today, however, women are more celebrated and even encouraged to play instruments and to sing. In East Los Angeles, Martha Gonzalez created a foundation that gathers women together to produce music communally. Other women have also repurposed what zapateado is by creating what is called *zapateado rebelde*. Instead of using zapateado as a way to upkeep tempo, they use the dancing to fight the patriarchy by raising concerns about issues in their communities through music. They form a feminist consciousness and celebrate all the diversity found within their group. Although women are not often found in archival records, they are making sure to be heard and seen today in son jarocho (Quintanilla).

Methodologies and Literature Reviews

I analyze visual representations of culture and music through the film *Fandango at the Wall* to begin to construct how son jarocho is understood by popular culture and, in turn, how the Mexican identity is popularly understood. I do so by focusing on which musicians are highlighted and how it shapes the narrative of Mexican identity.

I also apply Chicana feminist epistemology as a method to begin to deconstruct the narrative of the musical genre. I use Chicana artista musician and feminist music theorist Martha Gonzalez's work on the exploration of the Zapatista and Fandango movements and how they have created a process-based musical community that uses their voices for social activism (*artivism*). She does this by using her memories and experiences to explore the music scenery in East Los Angeles. Gonzalez draws from Chicana feminist theories to bring attention to the lack of acknowledgement of women in academic fandango. She uses her privilege to address women in fandango and offers her readers examples of organizations focusing on the artistry of women while still displaying communal process-based music writing. Like Gonzalez, I use my own academic privilege to explore intersections of identity and music. I draw from Chicana feminist theories like that of the decolonial imaginary.

Emma Perez proposes the decolonial imaginary as a theoretical tool to decolonize history by honoring multiple experiences instead of the white heteronormative gaze we are used to being taught in schools. In order to practice the decolonial imaginary one must use the gaze of those that are not honored within our histories. Perez does this by using a queer-of-color gaze to reimagine or reinterpret the written histories of the Southwest (Perez 1999.) In the same way that Perez uses a different gaze than the norm, I use a queer-of-color gaze in my study of son jarocho by applying the conceptualization of trans*-ness to argue for the embodiment of Blackness. In another one of her works Perez acknowledges that there is no pure history, but instead that every history is written with a bias that favors a white heteronormative gaze. She deconstructs how Chican@ history has been created through historical

methodology and notes that there is often a lack of acknowledgement of Chicanas. She argues for the use of her theory, the decolonial imaginary, that rejects methodological assumptions and examines new tools for uncovering the hidden voices of Chicanas that have often been left out of important historical narratives (Perez 2003). During my research I revisited written histories of son jarocho to reinterpret that history to include marginalized voices like those of women or Black people.

When thinking through Blackness I also drew from Black cultural studies as a methodology through which I attempted to find how African culture has had an impact on son jarocho. Marquis Bey uses trans* as a prefix to signal a distance crossed, sometimes what may be institutionalized as “borders.” Blackness is extracted from the individuals to describe movement and fugitivity: “the modality of constant escape, of flight.” He argues that trans*-ness and blackness are one in the same because both are actively fighting restraints imposed by typically white heteronormative institutions. I use this conceptualization of blackness and trans*-ness to analyze how son jarocho is used as a tool of both concepts.

In my study, I bridge Chicana feminist epistemologies, trans*-ness, and histories of the Black diaspora and the Chicana movement to better understand Mexican identity. I draw on Rinaldo Walcott’s scholarship where he demands a rethinking of community in regard to the Black diaspora to build a recognizable political entity. Modern Black studies focus primarily on African Americans, often neglecting the vast diversity found in Black peoples globally. I am implementing an interdisciplinary reading practice that Walcott argues is necessary to extend the Black diaspora, therefore, also extending the way we think about Mexican identity within Southwest Studies.

I also draw from Ruben Hernandez-Leon's research that analyzes Chicaxs use of son jarocho music in relation to social justice movements by creating a piece influenced by their own experience along with twenty-one other participants of jarocho workshops and community centers. They argue that Chicax artists have reinterpreted the genre to highlight the communal aspects of fandango while repurposing son jarocho as a tool for social justice organizing. By using ethnographic methods and analyzing musical compositions, Hernandez-Leon is able to examine key sites, actors, institutions and forms of son jarocho. The intersections of these key frameworks provide a nuanced understanding of Son Jarocho as it relates to Mexican identity in the Southwest.

Afro-son Jarocho

Fandango at the Wall, directed by Varda Bar-Kar and released in 2020, is a documentary film focused on the folk music traditions of *son jarocho* and the Fandango Fronterizo Festival, hosted at the Tijuana, Mexico-San Diego, California border. Arturo O'Farrill, founder and conductor of New York's Afro Latin Jazz Orchestra, visits Veracruz, Mexico where he finds himself in the presence of many *son jarocho* greats. It specifically focuses on Don Andres Vega, Martha Vega, Ramon Gutierrez, Tacho Utrera, Wendy Cao Romero, Patricio Hidalgo, and Fernando Guadarrama. Each person is known for individual parts of son jarocho-- zapateado, requinto jarocho, leona, quijada, jarana, poeta, and versador. The film focuses on the generational knowledge within jaracha culture and ends with a musical celebration at the United States-Mexico border. Fandango Fronterizo, founded by Jorge Francisco Castillo, is an annual

celebration that occurs on both sides of the border. The festival allows the musical notes to traverse the border in ways that people cannot.

The film educates the audiences of jaracha culture, which embodies fandango, food, son, and everyday life. The artists interviewed were able to explain what the music means to them and showed the communal practice's importance in this genre of music. Son jarocho is learned by listening, watching, and imitating previous players. This process was seen when the featured artists would play with their family. Ramon Gutierrez, one of the featured artists known for playing requinto jarocho, has a small band that includes his youngest daughter, who helps them with much of their singing. About twenty-four minutes into the film Ramon Gutierrez, featured requinto jarocho player, introduces a carving technique: "aprendí con mi hermano Gilberto a [hacer] los instrumentos. Son hechos de una sola pieza... de cedro o de macacauba. Solamente en Puerto Rico se hacen los instrumentos excavados... y en África y en Veracruz." Gutierrez introduces a carving technique to make requintos, one that is traced back to techniques only seen in Puerto Rico, Africa, and Veracruz. This is one of the rare moments in the film where the audience is able to reflect on the histories of the location of the film and to think about the history of this genre and how this African practice found a home in Mexico. Veracruz, Mexico is on the Eastern coast of the country. It is Mexico's first port and it proved to be an important place for the Atlantic slave trade.

Most of the artists in the film are shown playing with their family, an example of generational knowledge at play.

Although I was able to see son jarocho actively being used to symbolize the separation of families while also building community amongst Mexicans and Americans, there was a large gap of representation that the film could have acknowledged. Most of the artists depicted were men and the only issues raised were border-related, such as immigrant rights and the separation of families at the border. However, son jarocho has also been used to advocate for Afro-Mexican resistance. This erasure of Afro-Mexican resistance and representation is parallel to Perez's and Bey's assertions that certain histories and groups of people (e.g., women, BIPOC, LGBTQIA) are often elided in historical and contemporary representation. *Fandango at the Wall* similarly ignores a group of people, that being Black people. Within the first fifteen minutes of the film, O'Farrill vaguely mentions the roots of African culture in Veracruz. As he is talking about the beauty of the Mexican land, he remembers a time when his friend educated him that "the only place in Mexico that really has Afro-Mexican music is son jarocho in Veracruz. And how the roots of son jarocho and Afro-Mexican music [are] directly traced to the landing of slave ships [in Veracruz]." Although the film's goal was not to decolonialize the genre's history, it avoided seizing an opportunity to raise the hidden voices of Black people. The filmmaker mentions the history of African slaves; however, the narrative guiding



the film forms a disconnect with how we come to view the Mexican identity. Most of the works centered around this genre of music focus on the importance of being Mexican. However, I know from firsthand experience that Mexican culture, and even Latinx culture at large, are racist and often reject the African roots within our history and ancestry (Archibold 2). To begin the discourse of Black identities in Mexican culture is to embrace the beauty and importance of Blackness in this culture.

Son jarocho is often used to represent social justice movements at the Mexican border, like at Fandango sin Fronteras. Here the music is the embodiment of blackness and trans*-ness as understood by Bey. It is used to represent the separation of families while highlighting how music can still be produced from both sides in harmony. The sounds are able to traverse physical borders. It is a creative expression that embodies both Blackness and trans*ness, and can be used as one of many tools to build community within the Black diaspora. Blackness bends borders by resisting against them and music goes one step further by not even acknowledging the borders it crossed. Music is naturally resilient because it is able to use obstacles as a way to create echoes, making itself be heard louder and longer. It is also naturally resilient because it cannot be contained.

Son jarocho is a perfect tool to bridge the communities of Latinidad and Blackness because it is a genre for everyone. While there are issues of representation within the genre, its communal musical practice can be useful for inclusion. This inclusion is proven in the film because traditional son jarocho musicians were able to play alongside the Afro jazz orchestra, two genres that aren't often thought of in conjunction. In East Los Angeles Chican@s have also used son jarocho to explore

other genres like punk and rock and roll. Son jarocho is a genre rich in history that is still flexible and malleable enough to experiment with.

The history of son jarocho is important to note because it has been used to speak out against slavery in the past. Perez's conception of the decolonial imaginary made me realize that I had not been looking for the hidden voices within son jarocho. In the YouTube video called "PatricioHidalgo y El Afrojarocho-Tarima, Tumba y Cajon," the lyrics speak about the instruments used within son jarocho, specifically their African origins: "tarima, tumba, y cajón de donde viene tu encanto?" (Youtube). The instruments mentioned originate from African cultures or are similar to the instruments only played in African music. So how can Mexican culture reject Blackness when the instruments used to play their traditional music incorporate these African instruments? Later the lyrics go on to address the African roots in southern Veracruz, México: "Soy hijo de aquel sueño que Yanga volvió tumbao." The singer is saying he is the son of the dream that Yanga overthrew. He is referring to Gaspar Yanga, also known as Yanga or Ñyanga, a renowned African leader that fought against the Spaniards for the freedom of slaves in the late 16th century/early 17th century. He also established the first town of freed slaves in the Americas (Rowell 183). To acknowledge that he is a descendant of this figure is to acknowledge the diversity within his Mexican identity. Not only is this speaking to the existence of Afrolatin@s, but son jarocho is even being used as a tool of resiliency that reflects trans*-ness. Why is this important? By actively searching for Black voices I acknowledge the Afro-Latinidad often rejected in Latinx cultures. Because it is now established that son jarocho is Black and queer, I argue that it is an aesthetic that can also be used to build the Black diaspora project posited by Walcott.

Another way in which to think about the two contradictions of celebrating son jarocho as Afro-Mexican, while also perpetuating racism against them within Mexican culture is by using Loza's conceptual configuration. Music, visual art, and other expressive means frequently reinterpret traditions and label them as innovation. This system aids in creating "a stronger sense of identity, social power, and cultural legitimacy" (Loza 192). This is done in son jarocho by creating an identity of being Mexican, but reinterprets what it means to be Mexican by not acknowledging the African within the genre.

My study contributes to the fields of Black (diaspora) studies, (Afro) Latinx studies, Chicanx studies, and Southwest studies by focusing on the ways son jarocho can be understood as a tool to build community across racial, gendered, sexual, and physical borders. This project was important for me because as I learned about Blackness, I recognized specific characteristics of son jarocho: its communal aspects of music building, its ties to previous generations, and the manner in which it is used to resist injustices. In a cultural study where Blackness is often overlooked, we can see examples of Black identity within the music. We can use a diaspora of reading practices to analyze son jarocho and to use it as a tool to expand Black studies and incorporate how permeated Blackness and trans*-ness is within Mexican culture. Right now Black studies focuses more on African American culture, but by acknowledging the vast diversity of Black people we will also be fighting against racist institutions found in other cultures. By implementing this diaspora of reading practices we are also decolonizing the narratives of what it means to be Black and what it means to be jarocho.

Women in Son Jarocho

Fandango at the Wall also exemplified how women are left out of the history of son jarocho and their contributions to the genre. The film featured seven important musicians in son jarocho, only one of which is a woman. Martha Vega's importance within the music was reduced down to her dancing zapateado. When she was given the chance to speak the scene featured women cooking in the kitchen, clips of her dancing, and in the background an unidentified woman is seen playing the requinto and singing the music that she is dancing to. The film further perpetuates the erasure of women's importance by failing to acknowledge how women are viewed within the genre. Not only do the women dance and provide a percussive background, but they extend far beyond that by also creating a space of feminist consciousness (Gonzalez 96.) The manner in which women are rejected in the portrayal of son jarocho is a parallel to the disconnect between the importance of women in Mexican culture and their treatment in Mexican history.

Percussive instruments are often described as the heartbeat of music. I draw from my own experience as a musician to reflect on the importance of zapateado. In music one needs to understand tempo, beat, and rhythm, especially when it comes to the music production of a group. Today son jarocho has incorporated the use of the cajon, but in other places where there is no cajon (like when looking at Martha Vega's family) they rely on the resonating steps of women on the tarima to build a bridge between the sounds of the instruments, to keep them together, and to be the driving force to the music. This is one way in which zapateado can be described as a tool for community building.

Zapateado is also a reflection of Mexican identity because, as discussed, the musical genre as a whole is inherently resistance through its conceptualizations of Blackness and trans*-ness. Zapateado offers this same form of resistance by allowing women to build community amongst themselves. It allows women the joy of creative self expression through the individual and the collective. Durings songs where several women are dancing on the tarima, known as *sones a monton*, they are exemplifying the collective consciousness of women within that community (Gonzalez 96). Fandango Fronterizo hosted a group called Mujeres en Resistencia, where they focus on performing their own choreography that reflects a style of dancing called *zapateado rebelde*. The women in this group use dancing as a tool to make a change on this Earth. They resemble stomping as earthquake-like by “[trembling] every oppressive establishment around the world” such as colonialism and patriarchy (Quintanilla 72). Their existence as a group is also a sign of resistance to femicides, genocides, and epistemicide. This is one example where zapateado is used as a tool for resistance outside of son jarocho, but because Mexican identity is rooted in resistance I argue that zapateado and the women dancing it are embodying their Mexican-ness.

Similar to how I discuss trans*-ness in this study, zapateado also offers the traversal of borders by allowing women to travel through worlds as they dance (Quintanilla 70). When they dance they are creating ties to their ancestors by imitating the same dance movements and creating a relationship to the land they are standing on. It was important for me to highlight zapateado because when speaking about son jarocho it is always mentioned, but its importance is often neglected. By speaking about zapateado I am acknowledging women’s history and importance highlighted by Perez.

By speaking to women's contributions to the genre I am decolonizing the history of the genre and decolonizing what it means to be Mexican.

Conclusion

As a Latina who grew up in a traditional Salvadoran household, I know how racist and sexist our Latinx community can be. I wanted to explore those issues within my community by combining it with something I have always loved--music. This was important for me to do because I was able to decolonize my way of thinking through history by acknowledging the marginalized voices in son jarocho. I was also able to tie this to interpretations of what it means to be Mexican to combat some of the issues found within the Latinx communities. Son jarocho is an embodiment and celebration of Black people, women, and adds to the White and Indigenous roots celebrated in Latinxs. To improve our communities we need to reimagine our gaze to one that is interdisciplinary and acknowledges the intersections of our identities. We need to be able to trans* the way in which we view ourselves to break the barriers of racism and sexism completely. This starts by celebrating all the histories of our culture and reflecting that in our popular culture -- not just in academia. To critique what we are watching requires critical thinking into how histories and stories are presented to us. It is up to the audience to think further about what is being featured on the screen and to call for improvements where they can be made.

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