Moving Borders and Dancing in Place
Son Jarocho’s Speaking Bodies at the Fandango Fronterizo

Jade Power-Sotomayor

The thick metal fence slices into the Pacific Ocean, rusted from the damp salty air. Layers of steel patterned in a tight grid have holes just large enough for a child’s finger to squeeze through, not quite penetrating the depth of the metal barrier. Light seeps through from the other side—el otro lado. Pressing your face against the cold gray fence on the US side of this San Ysidro/Tijuana border, you can make out bodies beyond the metal, pick out familiar faces,

Jade Power-Sotomayor is Assistant Professor in the Department of Theatre and Dance at the University of California, San Diego. Some of her publications can be found in Latino Studies, Gestos, Latin American Theatre Review, and The Oxford Handbook of Theatre and Dance. She coedited a special issue for Centro Journal for Puerto Rican Studies on Afro–Puerto Rican bomba music and dance. As a scholar, educator, and performer, she researches and writes about the fluid reconstitution of Latinx identity through discourses of embodiment and the performing body. jypower@ucsd.edu
hats, and shoes, confusing the flutter of one skirt for the body of a friend only to realize it may be someone else. If you could only get a better look. When looking South, the Pacific coastline veers inland to the East, disappearing from sight, dropping off into the infinite space of ocean and sky. Mexico’s vastness, teeming with bodies, is effectively invisibilized. By contrast, from Playas de Tijuana, El Norte, with its carefully manicured open spaces, its outlet stores boasting in giant letters all-too familiar corporate names, lays before the southern gaze: an impossible banquet, a deadly temptation, flaunting excess and indifference.1

On the last Saturday of May, the annual Fandango Fronterizo brings 80 to 100 musicians, dancers, and community members to the US side of the site. Son jarocho, a danced musical tradition from Veracruz produced and performed through Indigenous, African, and Spanish instrumentation and embodiments, is the language of the gathering.2 Two to four dancers strike the flats of their feet and heels onto the tarima—a small wooden platform lifted just inches above the ground—rhythmically adding another sound to the interplay of voices and strumming that surrounds them, even across the border. A confined space, and perhaps especially small due to the distance it must be carried on this particular day, the tarima calls for movements that follow a vertical axis and are kept close to the body’s center. Here, however, containment is not a limitation. Rather, the fixedness of the dancer’s tarima enacts claims to land and territory, not as property but in an embodied relationship to its history and its caretakers. Each stomp, slide, and shuffle pounds sonic nails in place, with repetitive anchoring towards the earth, while simultaneously the sharp sound of heels on wood rises and floats across space. Bodies dance in place, and in doing so become active agents of that place. On this day, the place is the Kumeyaay land at Friendship Park framed, spliced, and permeated by the border.

Since 2008, fandanguerxs (fandango participants) have gathered here to penetrate and shroud the border with music, dance, and the convivencia of a transnational community.3 A smaller but still sizeable group of fandanguerxs join the event at the faro (lighthouse) on the Playas side. Later, in the evening, those whose papers allow for state-sanctioned crossing will join their southern counterparts, coming together to celebrate until dawn. Some years, this pilgrimage to San Ysidro’s Friendship Park is met with cooperation from the border patrol agents who consent to opening the road that provides direct driving access to the park on the US side.4 Other

---

1. This essay is based on my experiences attending the Fandango Fronterizo in 2011, 2014–16, and 2019. The event traditionally takes place on the Saturday of Memorial Day weekend. I come to the research as an emerging bailadora (son jarocho dancer), having collaborated with the participants of the Fandango Fronterizo, especially through my own practice and research as a Cali-Rican bombera (practitioner of the Afro-Puerto Rican music and dance tradition) and the many formal and informal overlaps of our respective communities. All translations from Spanish, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.

2. Fandango refers to a son jarocho community event. The word is thought to have Bantu origins in the word fanda, which means “fiesta.” Popularized in Spanish, it has broadly circulated as a way to describe a diversity of popular dance/music events in the Spanish-speaking world. For this reason, some son jarocho practitioners in Veracruz use the word huapango (with Nahuatl origins) to claim the local specificity of the son jarocho event.

3. For fandanguerxs, I follow the convention of using an “x” to interrupt the binary gendering implicit in the Spanish reading of the word. Convivencia roughly translates as “conviviality” in English, however conceptually they differ significantly. Convivencia refers to the act of coexisting, of being together. Anthropologists Milagros Ricourt and Ruby Danta theorize that beyond “living together” convivencia refers to the way that social life takes place in public spaces among people who may or may not know each other, thus actively constructing community (Ricourt and Danta 2003). Martha Gonzalez has written extensively about the politics of convivencia in relationship to son jarocho (see M. Gonzalez 2014).

4. Friendship Park was a space at the western edge of the border that in 1971 the federal government designated for families from both sides to come together. Following Operation Gatekeeper in 1994, metal walls were added, across-border in-person contact was no longer allowed (replicating carceral spaces), and it was renamed Border Field State Park (Hernández 2012:252). There are dozens of scheduled events at Friendship Park/Border Field State Park ranging from Christmas posadas to Catholic masses and yoga classes.
years, they have to park and walk for over a mile along the beach with their instruments, making the arrival at the militarized “recreational area” all the more dramatic as it suddenly interrupts an otherwise scenic landscape. As the “border crisis” has taken on new proportions under the Trump administration’s racist dog whistling,5 massive escalation of surveillance, policies of family separations, proliferation of inhumane detainment centers, all coupled with increased migrant movement driven by destitution and violence in Central America—directly and indirectly caused by decades of US international policies—this westernmost point in the fence/wall is evermore symbolically and politically charged and contested.6

Those who walk the inland route across the estuary wetlands must sidestep large puddles of standing water whose dangerous toxicity is repeatedly announced by exclamatory signs along the way. Even so, it seems every year more and different people attend, their arrival an act of defiance in the face of unequivocal state dissuasion. They hail mostly from Southern Alta California (San Diego, Santa Ana, Los Angeles) and the Northern Baja region (Tijuana, Mexicali, Técate), but also from as far as Seattle, Texas, New York, and from southern Mexico, most especially from Veracruz, the birthplace of son jarocho, which is known for its rich Afro-Mexican culture and history.7 They face each other through the fence as the calls and responses; the strumming of the jaranas; the rhythmic scraping of the quijada (donkey jawbone); the melodic interpretations of the requinto, leona, marimbol, and harpa; and the pattering and pounding of the zapateado (shoe-tapping footwork) invite and tease across the divide.

The Fandango Fronterizo is a performative, political gesture of Afro-Indigenous embodied practices at the site of the US-Mexico border that interrupts the discursive racialized and gendered logic of the two nation-states occupying Kumeyaay land. As such, it is an embodied indictment of borders—including Mexico’s own southern border—and the ways they interrupt and choreograph human relations to land through colonially imposed hierarchies of belong-

5. In noting the extreme xenophobia and cruelty in the Trump administration’s immigration policies it is important to resist the urge to frame this as entirely unprecedented. Though more overtly dehumanizing, current policies follow a decades-long pattern of border militarization and institutionalized xenophobia.

6. In January 2020, the US Border Patrol used bulldozers to raze to the ground the binational native plants garden created and cultivated by volunteers since 2007 as part of Friendship Park, demolishing over 200 mature plants on the US side. There was no prior announcement and only later did they explain that they removed plants to reduce possible cover for smugglers. A couple of weeks later, they allowed for a replanting of the garden, this time four feet away from the fence (Spagat 2020).

7. For more on the history and practice of son jarocho see Daniel Sheehy (1979); Antonio García De León (2009); Martha E. Gonzalez (2009, 2011, 2014); Navarro (2016); and the documentary Fandango, Buscando el mono blanco (Braojos 2006).
ing, ultimately claiming the “inviolability of movement as a right.” Through the togetherness produced by the mechanics of the son jarocho fandango and the act of what I call “dancing in place,” a dancing that creates and claims relation to place, fandanguerxs assert an embodied subaltern identity and an alternate practice of being and belonging that resists and undermines the colonial inscriptions—the literal and metaphoric writing—of borders over bodies and land. The fandanguerxs’ pilgrimage to the site of this herida abierta (open wound; see Anzaldúa 1987) is an act of performative decolonization that unfixes and destabilizes global neoliberal violence; it draws our attention to colonialism, white supremacy, and heteropatriarchy as contemporary structures, not historical events. Witness to over a decade of immigration policy, the Fandango Fronterizo continues to respond, not just to anti-Mexican xenophobia, but also to the targeting of Central Americans through the similarly toxic logics of Mexican nationalism, thereby further disrupting not just this border but all nation-state borders. Furthermore, as a tradition from the Caribbean coast of Mexico that together with the area’s Indigenous and mestizx inhabitants was developed and maintained in communities of escaped and formerly enslaved Africans, son jarocho’s Blackness disrupts white/Indigenous racial narratives about Mexico. Thus, through the geographic “emplacement” of son jarocho’s Black and Indigenous histories in/at the border, fandanguerxs enact a refusal to be permanently desterrados (“exiled,” but also evoking landlessness) by the gendered violence of the border, bringing into question the un-geographic state of Blackness produced by enslavement and disrupting the genocidal project against Indigenous bodies. This is an embodied journey realized through the multiple significations produced by their moving, dancing, music-making, and border-crossing. Their foot-stomping, skirt-swishing, shoulder-tilting, hand-strumming, lip-shaping, gaze-asserting actions effect an embodied sovereignty that interrupts the Western epistemic privileging of logos as the absolute ordering and structuring of knowledge. Dancing in place, the fandanguerxs at the border enact what María Regina Firmino-Castillo calls a “telluric,” or earthbound, relational ontology between humans and their non-human others (Firmino-Castillo 2016:60). They set into relief and interrupt the trajectory of the epistemicide—the intentional and systematic erasure of knowledge systems—produced by the border and the logics that sustain it. Because most popular and scholarly treatments of son jarocho privilege the musical, not danced, aspects of the genre, I approach this event through movement analysis and the work of the dancing bodies.

Nuestro Thanksgiving

The Fandango Fronterizo, according to its organizers, was not originally imagined as political, but as a means to an end: being together, playing, singing, and dancing as a community. It was conceived as a way to unfix fandanguerxs’ ability to share in the communal space of the fandango was circumscribed by their immigration status and access to visas (see for example Zamudio Serrano 2014). Only by default would it become what Chela Sandoval, Arturo Aldama, and Peter García call a “decolonizing performatic,” or the “designed interventionist

8. “The Inviolability of Movement as a Right” is a statement released by the Dance Studies Association in January 2020 following calls from members (Meiver de la Cruz, María Regina Firmino-Castillo, and others) at the 2019 national conference to take a stand on the extreme life-threatening measures being taken across the globe to police, punish, and severely limit freedom of movement across borders (Dance Studies Association 2020).

9. Layli Long Soldier (2017) excavates the violent power of language to produce and justify occupation and genocide.

10. For a complex discussion about the urgency of disrupting settler colonialism through discrete actions that are not simply “consciousness raising” see Tuck and Yang (2012). While I do not propose that the Fandango Fronterizo actualizes a repatriation of stolen land by Indigenous people, Tuck and Yang’s insistence on regaining the specificity of the word “decolonization” to refer to restoring Indigenous relationships to land is central to my argument.

11. Much of the Fandango Fronterizo poster art privileges visual signifiers of musical instrumentation.
actions that intercede on behalf of egalitarianism within any larger (cultural or aesthetic) performance” (2012:6).

Son jarocho artist and feminist scholar Martha Gonzalez describes the convivencia experienced in fandangos as “the deliberate act of being with each other and being present for each other” (2014:69). For even as the Fandango Fronterizo has grown in scope and visibility, it remains an opportunity for creating physical communion in the face of not only material borders but also of a globalized society’s atomizing impulses. As Jorge Castillo, the event’s founder and lead organizer, exclaimed while recounting the way that it draws together son jarocho practitioners from different locations: “¡es nuestro Thanksgiving!” (2015). The appropriation of the colonial holiday is not without meaning here, even if Castillo’s statement was made in passing. His emphasis on “nuestro” (our) articulates an alternative vision of togetherness, one that challenges the political implications of “their” Thanksgiving.

In the US, son jarocho has become a vibrant practice in diverse Chicana communities that activate the fandango as a mode of community building, identity formation, and political expression (see M. Gonzalez 2011).12 Togetherness as a central organizing principle works to distinguish the fandango from other staged performances of son jarocho and, as such, organizers and participants of the Fandango Fronterizo have for the most part structured their pedagogy, practice, and performance of the genre around this site. Here, fandanguerxs experience the repeated and regular contact that is required both for the skill-building necessary to practice the form and for the togetherness that constitutes community. For instance, in reflecting on her own journey as a Chicana fandanguera, Gonzalez emphasizes the importance of being actively and repeatedly present at fandangos in Veracruz, intergenerational events that last late into the night. For her and other fandanguerxs, watching, absorbing, listening, and connecting were as foundational to the learning process as the doing (M. Gonzalez 2009). On a larger scale, in the 1970s El Nuevo Movimiento Jaranero, a group of cultural activists in Veracruz, sought the knowledge of community elders and brought renewed attention to a fandango-centric practice, contesting what had become primarily a concert stage-based and nationalist circulation of son jarocho designed by the state to help craft a homogenous national identity. Jarochxs (Veracruzans), other Mexicans, and Chicanxs inspired by this movement have continued to develop and nurture this vision through various transnational collaborative projects. For instance, in 2003 the Fandango sin Fronteras project became an extension of this earlier work with members of the Los Angeles group Quetzal and groups in Veracruz such as Mono Blanco and Son de Madera.

12. For more on how Chicanxs mobilize son jarocho in contesting anti-immigrant, racist, and sexist discourses in the US see Navarro (2016).
bringing transnational dialogue and study to urban centers in the diaspora, building communities through son jarocho practice centered on the fandango.

As with other community rituals, the togetherness created in the fandango extends across space and time in ways that exceed the event itself. The exchange of verses through call and response, with instruments and dancing feet punctuating musical phrases through rhythmically paired breaks, are as fleeting as the cheeks kissed, the gossip shared, and the food ingested. Yet, the body remains marked, carrying the traces of this lived experience of convivencia to some future time and place (see Schneider 2011). Seen in this way, the fandango, the organizational unit of gathering, is portable, malleable, unfixed, relying on the togetherness of bodies in dynamic motion for its value, enacting human relationships to each other, to history, to geography. The bodies at the Fandango Fronterizo produce a rootedness that is mobile, difficult to pin down, effectively challenging the regulatory and disciplinary control enacted by the wall and the military presence. For instance, at one of the early fandangos at the border, as one of the border patrol agents monitoring the event called for the “last song,” the fandanguerxs commenced “La Bamba” (a particularly fast-paced song)13 and played, danced, and sang nonstop for 45 minutes. Realizing their mistake in attempting to quantify song units in a fandango, the next year the agents gave the fandanguerxs a time limit, not a song limit (Castillo 2015). We see here how a song, or a particular rhythm, creates the sonic framework producing unquantifiable expressive acts offered by individuals to the greater whole.

Both the physical togetherness of the moving bodies at the Fandango Fronterizo as well as the specific dance acts themselves threaten power structures meant to control and eliminate the movement — and by extension the very existence — of such bodies. This is especially apparent when we consider the oft-cited 1766 edict issued in Veracruz by the Spanish Inquisition prohibiting the highly popular son called “Chuchumbé” because it was “scandalous, obscene and provocative” (in Deanda 2010:4). Authorities deemed the Chuchumbé—a word with phallic/umbilical implications—subversive not only because of satirical lyrics that sexualized local religious figures but also for the way mulatos and “people of broken color” danced: gesturing, shaking, moving “belly to belly [...] opposites of all honesty” (4). Concerned with the types of physical contact between bodies of different races, the edict also anxiously disapproved of the proximity of the lower classes—soldiers, sailors, and “social scum” (4).14 The Catholic Church, here acting in concert with the heterosexist logic of the colonial casta system, recognized the subversive potential of nonwhites and lower classes together in a shared space. The production of song/music/dance by a large number of bodies moving for an extended time contested colonial authorities trying to corral, separate, and direct Black, Indigenous, and afromestizx bodies. This anxiety persisted as the Inquisition issued new edicts in subsequent years, re-emphasizing the deleterious effects of the Chuchumbé along with other popular sones (Sheehy 1979:23–28). The singing and dancing of this son specifically, and the physical proximity and affective pleasure it induced, was (unsuccessfully) banned from 1766 to at least 1802 (Baudot and Méndez 1987:165). Today, fandangos continue to gather subaltern bodies in a shared space, be it a rural community, a public urban area, or the militarized international border fence.

The particular way in which son jarocho dancing, or zapateado—a uniquely embodied instrumentation upon which the overall musicality relies—works as the primary percussive voice and provides entrance and opportunity to women, instantiates a feminista praxis of

13. “La Bamba” is a traditional song made popular first in Mexico City by Andrés Huesca in the 1940s and ’50s and later in the US by Ritchie Valens, who reinterpreted it. As such, this song is largely responsible for any mainstream popularity credited to the genre of the same name.

horizontal relationality (M. Gonzalez 2011, 2014). This is especially the case when we consider the gender dynamics associated with dancing versus playing a musical instrument. As opposed to dancing to music, dancing to create music requires the undertaking of an aural as well as visual responsibility that provides agency to a great number of participants who move in and out of the musical space. The mechanics of the music/dance genre distinguish the fandango as a space that allows for participation by people with different skill levels and styles, broadening inclusivity while creating a potential upending of gendered hierarchies of musicality. Dozens of jaranas can be played simultaneously, and dancer participation is limitless. While the tarima at the border is necessarily small, in Veracruz some tarimas are larger pieces of plywood that allow for more dancers. While unique in form, however, the fandango is not without precedent.

The function of the fandango as an event that structures relationality, time, and space, is due to its reliance on an Africanist aesthetics of improvisation, call and response, and the enactment of community protocol. As such it maintains a productive tension between individual expressivity and collaborative communality (see Thompson 1996; Gottschild 1996). Like the hip hop cypher generated from the amalgamation of a variety of African diasporic cultural practices, the fandango’s circle is antihierarchical at the same time that it activates individual agency. The nonlinearity invites individuals to “throw down” musically and corporeally, partaking in a process of meaning-making that responds to the specifics of location while drawing on histories of shared cultural understanding. As the jarocho Arcadio Baxin commented, “This is not music that you can know alone, you have to know it together” (in Pacheco 2013). The fandango doesn’t work unless the group participates, with individuals upholding the community’s protocol. For example, in order for a dancer to leave the tarima, they must wait until someone gently taps them on the shoulder to take their place. There are usually two to four dancers on the tarima, which is never left empty—and dancers must always cede the space to whoever wishes to have a turn. Protocol mandates that this only happen following the estribillo (refrain) when musical improvisation is taking place and verses are not being sung so as not to pull attention from the versing. Likewise, the dancers on the tarima take turns with the more syncopated “danced versing,” creating aural space for their partners while also, as with a drum, taking on the musical responsibility of maintaining the downbeat cadence necessary for pulling the rhythmic strumming of the jaranas into unison. In this way, the fandango realigns and reorganizes bodies against masculinist hierarchies that privilege instrumentation over embodiment and virtuosity over pedestrian knowledge. The Fandango Fronterizo enacts this circle of togetherness with no beginning and no end despite the presence of the border wall. In recent years fandanguerxs in other cities—as distant as Switzerland—have organized fandangos at the same time as the Fandango Fronterizo in a show of solidarity (Castillo 2015). But the dancers on either side of the San Ysidro/Tijuana border do not hold parallel fandangos; rather they place their circle directly on the border enacting wholeness, oneness, healing. Still, as every year brings an added layer of steel, the fandanguerxs struggle to keep the time, to hear each other, to play in sync. Yet perhaps these moments of syncopation, of slipping on and off rhythm and togetherness, are also productive, marking the labor needed to listen, to hear, to see, to pay attention to each other despite many impediments.

Before arriving at the San Ysidro border on the morning of the Fandango Fronterizo, organizers have invested months of labor and logistical planning, anticipating different possible outcomes. Authorities may at any point revoke the laboriously acquired permissions, close roads on the morning of the event, demand legal identification from those attending, and search instruments for contraband. Fandanguerxs raise money for the airfare and travel visas of artists and revered son jarocho elders from Veracruz. Not only do these experts lend authenticity and gravity to the event at the border, they will participate in the binational workshops taking place throughout the weekend. Whether arriving via car on the dirt road, or walking along the beach, before approaching the fence on the other side of which stand the bodies in Playas, fandanguerxs on the US side must first cross through a secondary fence that since 2009 “doubly secures” the area, defining a “security zone” over which US authorities exercise complete control.
Closely watched by several border patrol agents, fandanguerxs pass through an open gate in this secondary fence into an open cement area in front of the “primary fence” built in the 1990s. At 11:00 a.m. the jaranas strike the first notes and the sound of dancing feet announce the rhythm of the “Siquisirí” song that traditionally opens any fandango with stanzas asking for permission to proceed and setting an intention for what will follow. By this point the event’s precarity has been evidenced multiple times. There is no assurance that things will work out even after jumping through the proverbial hoops of policing and intimidation that prevent participants from being at ease, from feeling at home in their fandango.

Dancing in Place

The site of dancing, the tarima, is the fandango’s center, simultaneously a place, a frame, a stage, and an instrument. Fandanguerxs describe it as the sacred center of the event, a womb-like space where dancers come to “dejar el alma” (leave one’s soul) (M. Gonzalez 2011:65). A locus of gathering and communing, it is also a means to an end: sonic amplification of rhythmic dancing. Martha Gonzalez refers to this as “rhythmic intention,” a leaning toward, but not necessarily claiming of, sound in relation to rhythm (66). As a dance form whose downwardly driven footwork is evocative of many Indigenous forms of percussive foot stomping used to connect body to land, the zapateado’s complex and interlocking rhythmic patterns, which often rely on a 6/8 time signature, mark its place in a family of African-derived sonic traditions. Thus, in claiming both sonicity and spatiality on the tarima, son jarocho dancing uses its physicalized sound to activate a relation to that place. Furthermore, while this cannot necessarily be traced to any collective kinesthetic memory, the vertical movement required by the containment of the tarima’s two-dimensional footage cites another history of containment: the forced shackled dances of the enslaved. This close-to-the-earth dancing emphasizes not the visual but the emplaced, not nameable dance steps but the temporal relationship of silence and sound as it crafts a body in space. Thus, the bodies dancing on the tarima placed at the border create a relationship to that place, imagining space sonically and temporally rather than through notions of territory and ownership. Later in the evening the tarima from the US side will be moved across the border, elsewhere, to enact the same dancing in place.

Dancing in place on the tarima activates the collective kinetic power of bodies positioning themselves as the rooted, obstinately immovable survivors of colonialism, genocide, and enslavement. Dancing in place invokes what Imani Kai Johnson refers to as “aural-kinesthetics,” or the simultaneity of music and movement where one seamlessly produces the other, and in doing so, both cocreate the place of dancing, a place that does not exist prior to the dance itself.

Figure 4. Facing El Norte at the US-Mexican border wall for the 2019 Fandango Fronterizo. (Photo by Gustavo Vargas Ramirez; courtesy of the Centro de Memoria del Fandango Fronterizo)

15. For more on the politics of the tarima see Viveros Avendaño (2017) and Guzman-Lopez (2012).
The “sound’s omni-directionality, coming at you from all directions” weaves moving bodies into the music, which in the case of son jarocho, then also produces music (Johnson 2012). Or, to put it another way, “dancing in place” invokes what Ashon T. Crawley calls the “choreosonic,” a portmanteau describing the inextricability of choreography and sonicity, and ultimately the necessity of thinking of them together (Crawley 2017). The Enlightenment attempt to abstract spatial and temporal coherence, Crawley argues, created the philosophical logics that categorically distinguished knowledge-making from sensual, material forms of life. This same abstraction led to the historical production of Blackness itself as an “aversion,” and knowledge-making as a “thinking” outside and away from its objectness (2017:92–138). Using Black Pentecostal shout traditions as a case study, Crawley insists that pulling choreographics and sonics together, steeping in their mutually constitutive performances of “moving flesh,” enables “otherwise realities, otherwise ecologies” (89). These “otherwise” worlds, such as those instantiated in the shout circle or on the fandango’s tarima, recuperate an understanding of knowledge, not as singular and in isolation, but as porous, collective, and produced in relation to other forms of life. Crawley writes:

Otherwise is a word that names plurality as its core operation, otherwise bespeaks the ongoinness of possibility, of things existing other than what is given, what is known, what is grasped. [...] Otherwise names the subjectivity in the commons, an asubjectivity that is not about the enclosed self but the open, vulnerable, available, enfleshed organism. (24–25)

The choreosonics of son jarocho destroy the assumed distinction between movement and sound, between the self and the other as containable expressive units, between land and body, making real an “otherwise” spatiotemporal relationship. As a concept, dancing in place challenges the Western spectacle of dancing, foregrounding instead that the way that dancing as a sound-movement/aural-kinesthetic/choreosonic practice both enacts and refuses place. As music that is meant to be danced, and as a dance that directs and shapes sound, son jarocho is uniquely able to produce place, to embody a relation to a specific space. Bailadora (woman-identified dancer) and scholar Iris C. Viveros Avendaño refers to this sensorial practice on the tarima as “decolonial listening,” a sonic and choreographic attunement to other bodies, other flesh, as part of a liberatory praxis of recalibrating a focus beyond the individual (2017). More than an act of confrontational protest to/at the wall, the Fandango Fronterizo uses flesh to theorize relational collectivity, and to protest the categorizing imperatives of Enlightenment thinking produced in an aversion to that same flesh.

With the body relaxed, knees slightly bent, the torso is shifted towards the front with a weighted pelvis, yet creating a sense of buoyancy; the dancer’s feet shift weight back and forth from side to side. Some steps are accentuated while others are used as the means to an explosive crescendo, creating textured cadencias (cadences) distinguishable only by the experienced listener. Unlike with strumming fingers or pounding hands, here the body’s entire weight must be sustained by the feet as each note is sounded on the wooden box, creating an extra challenge for the ball of the foot, the heel, or the entire flat foot to land in time without affecting the overall tempo of the song. As such, the dancer’s vertical position does not change, even as she is caught in a skipping motion mid-air; the mechanics of the lifting and falling take place between foot, knee, and hips, leaving the torso unmoved. As the space between the notes narrows and the pace picks up, the dancer appears to float, sustained in the air just millimeters above the tarima.


17. Cherríe Moraga’s call for a “theory in the flesh” where “the physical realities of our lives — our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings — all fuse to create a politic out of necessity” also resonates here as another reminder of the radical potentialities of the flesh as site of knowledge and world-making (in Moraga and Anzaldúa [1981] 1983:23).
waiting to drop the next note. Muscle-memory calibrates the exact distance necessary to create sound while still remaining close enough to the ground to arrive in time. Just as the tarima hovers over the dirt, the grass, or the cement laid on top of the dirt, lifted barely enough to create a resonating box, the dancer exists in vibrational relationship to the platform that here stands in place of the Earth, placing the entirety of her physical being in the service of the sound that unfurls beneath her, announcing her presence.

The intensity of the dancers’ zapateado ebbs and flows as they engage other ways of moving and relating on the tarima, actions that collectively comprise the power of dancing in place. Men hold their arms behind their backs in the “cool aesthetic” that Robert Farris Thompson identifies as a central African cultural value while women hold the edges of their skirts, ever so slightly lifting them to assure the clear path of the feet but more importantly adjusting their arms to create space and dynamically accentuating their posture as they move across the tarima (1996). They brush past the other dancer’s bodies, as smiles and looks are exchanged. The skirt, aided by arms hanging low, swings across the body and returns, marking shifts in the direction in which the dancer moves, playing with creating angles that tilt off a central axis that will then realign in the center as the zapateado picks up. While women across the diaspora increasingly wear pants on the tarima in casual workshop settings, traditionally women wear long skirts as part of a sartorial protocol that is thought to keep them connected to the earth.

In the *sones de pareja* (songs for couples), as opposed to the *sones de montón* (songs for many) most often played and danced by groups of two or four women, dancing is reserved for the heterosexual pairing of men and women who engage in coquettish head angling, messaging simulated “courtship” through smiles and eyes, and creating and breaking dynamic tension as they circle each other and then change directions. During one *mudanza*, the sequence of quieter and more space-taking steps used to mark time during the versing, one foot drags in a backwards motion behind the other, resting into a back step that marks the beat. Here, the dancer embodies the simultaneity of a constant forward motion that relies on the foot behind to propel rhythm and motion—a flat foot slide firmly halted by a resonant heel: movement *and* rootedness. Contemporary bodies and traditional ways of knowing and ways of relating—looking back to move forward—create sensual pleasure and political *doing*. Even as one verse of “La Bamba” offers images of ladders and scaling walls, bodies dancing in place take root, refusing to be forcibly moved, even to cross “the border”:

*Para cruzar la frontera / para cruzar la frontera se necesita una escalera grande / una escalera grande y otra chiquita ay arriba y arriba / ay arriba y arriba y arriba iré, yo no soy de la migra / yo no soy de la migra ni lo seré ni lo seré ni lo seré!*

*(To cross the border / to cross the border we need a big ladder / a big ladder and also a small ladder Oh up and up / Oh up and up and up I will go, I am not from the Border Patrol / I am not from the Border Patrol / Nor will I ever be, nor will I ever be, nor will I ever be!)*

The rising-up/uprising they sing of will come from enacting their relationship to place, from the fact they are not, nor will ever be, *la migra* (border patrol).

Dancing in place is not limited to a human/land relationship. Across the repertoire of *son jarocho*, references to the natural world abound, the flora and fauna of Veracruz serving as both description of and metaphor for jarocho history and lived experience of surviving and being in relationship to land and environment. As such, some of the dance steps themselves call upon gestures that embody these natural elements, such as with *la guacamaya*, a colorful macaw, where

---

18. These “La Bamba” verses are part of a popular repertoire. Jorge Castillo believes they have been around since at least 2007 (2015). The group Las Cafeteras wrote a version of the song “La Bamba Rebelde” in which some of the phrases quoted here appear (2012). All translations unless otherwise noted are my own.
arms imitate the rising and falling motion of wings low and close to the body, as the dancers weave in and out to change place on the tarima. Tracing pathways of curving figure-eight lines on and across the tarima, the moving bodies etch invisible but palpable patterns into the wood. These inscriptions here invoke what Karyn Recollet describes as “spatial tags” or “urban glyphing,” aural, visual (and I would add kinesthetic) symbols that extend Indigenous practices of petroglyphing used to record collective memory on rock surfaces (2015:130). Writing about the translocation of once rural native round dances to the urban flash mobs that became a central element in the 2012 Idle No More environmental protests, Recollet suggests that these “spatial glyphs” produce new geographies of resistance, challenging the erasure of Indigenous presence and sovereignty in sites of “capital accumulation” (2015:129–42). From this perspective, the afromestizx fandanguerxs mobilize son jarocho to “tag” the Kumeyaay land of the militarized border, challenging normative gendered and sexual dynamics. Collectively they inscribe patterns of bodily knowledges that carry Indigenous, African, and mestizx stories, desires, and geographies, replete with plant and animal cohabitants, into the sandstone cliffs that lay below the tarima.

The growth of the Fandango Fronterizo since 2008 has resulted in a parallel increased interest and participation in son jarocho in the border region in general (Castillo 2015). Part of this comes from a greater visibility and exposure to the power of son jarocho both as a communal expression and as political protest. Indeed, son jarocho’s ability to create communion as a political protest has been especially fruitful. Even border patrol agents monitoring the three-hour event—mostly white, African American, and Latinx men—tap their feet to the trance-like rhythm and pull out cellphones to record the action. On the Playas side, where a beach boardwalk culminates at the border, curious passersby join the crowd, perhaps hearing son jarocho for the first time.

Following the binational midday fandango, sojourners reconvene later that same evening on the Playas side of the border for a conversatorio (organized discussion), food and drink, and a fandango that will last until dawn. Here they are more, though not completely, free from the constraints of time and policing. Still framed by the border fence, the ritual of the fandango spills over into the darkness of the night while dancers cycle through rotations on and off the tarima, catch up on news, share songs, and admire those whose talent and experience underscores the particular power and beauty of son jarocho. As individuals peel away and return to their communities,

---

19. Idle No More was founded in 2012 by First Nations women to protest a government bill that would severely constrain Indigenous sovereignty by overturning prior protective legislation making it much easier for government and big business to violate environmental restrictions.
the land upon which the bor-
der is etched has existed anew
in relation to bodies dancing in
place, to moving feet, to song, to
melody, harmony, and syncopa-
tion. The fandanguerxs return to
their lives as immigrant subal-
terns, Mexican nationals surviv-
ing neoliberalism and violence,
cultural workers in ghettoized
urban spaces, and activists chal-
elling institutional inequal-
ity from within. The border wall
remains, awaiting more feder-
ally funded girth and reinforce-
ment. The status quo, it seems,
remains uninterrupted. Yet, by
activating an Afro-Indigenous
repertoire of aural-kinesthetic
signifiers, even just for a day, the
fandanguerxs enact an alternate
decolonial relation to the bor-
derlands and to each other.

Dancing Afro-Indigeneity
and Racial Geographies
of the Border

Friendship Park was built to
bring together bodies even as
the fence pushes those same
bodies apart. However, its pres-
ence also invites embodied pro-
test at the border itself (see
Zamudio Serrano 2014). Indeed,
“borders are brought to life, and
acquire their performative power only when they are traversed, transgressed, and trespassed”
(Chambers 2012:xii). As such, the border can be seen as a “scriptive thing” directing behavior.
In “Dances with Things,” Robin Bernstein develops her concept of a “thing”—more a subject-
object relationship than an object—that “arrange[s] and propel[s] bodies in recognizable
ways,” as it “prompts, structures and choreographs behavior” (2009:70). She argues that scrip-
tive things “hail,” interpellating bodies into ideology and thus into subjection. Importantly,
Bernstein notes, the trajectory of these bodies’ movements is not fixed but can either rein-
force or challenge a given power relationship. Normative and transgressive actions are thus
both scriptive possibilities. Any form of reversal or upset to a given dynamic of power ultimately
results in a Bakhtinian reinforcement of the status quo (41). Bernstein’s formulation suggests
how transgression is among the possible outcomes scripted by the border-as-thing, and thus
poses important questions about the political effectiveness of the dancing and music-making
at the border. This becomes more evident when we consider the fact that Friendship Park was
inaugurated in 1971 by First Lady Pat Nixon as a gesture to assuage the horrors of fractured
kinships enacted by the then-fence. In other words, the border space of Friendship Park “hails”
bodies to transgress the physical separation imposed by the border, actively inviting events like

Figure 6. Evening fandango in Playas de Tijuana at the 2019
Fandango Fronterizo. (Photo by Gustavo Vargas Ramírez; courtesy
of the Centro de Memoria del Fandango Fronterizo)
the Fandango Fronterizo and countless other “border meetups” where bodies press up against the fence, and orifices open to imbibe each other’s breath, clearing channels to a shared affective sensuality.20

Yet, despite the materiality of the colonial relationship remaining in place at the close of the event, the Fandango Fronterizo produces other “perform-antics” that slip off and away from the border as “thing,” enacting another set of tricks that engage a different transgression, one that is less scripted though perhaps no less inevitable (Sandoval, Aldama, and García 2012:6). The fandanguerxs’ decolonial performatic exists less as an attempt to erase the border than a means of indexing Afro-Indigenous history and culture and thereby contesting the colonial, white supremacist state’s erasure not just of bodies but of embodied epistemologies. Ultimately, the performing body here disrupts the deterritorialization upon which settler genocide and the extraction of Black labor and the dehumanization of Black life rely (see McKittrick 2006). Performing son jarocho—a tradition from the Caribbean coast of Mexico and a signifier of Afro-Mexicanness—on the border invokes and radicalizes the concept of mestizaje, the discourse of racial mixing between Europeans and Indigenous Americans. The fandanguerxs contest both Spanish and US colonialism by challenging the historical erasure of Indigeneity and Blackness in Mexico, equally foreclosed by colonial powers across the border.21 That said, the participants of the Fandango Fronterizo present a racially heterogeneous group whose light-skinned privilege and embodied identification with Indigeneity and Blackness is not always self-evident. While many of those attending the event self-identify as mestizx and some as afrofemestizx, with the possible exception of those who visit directly from Veracruz, most of the participants would not readily be identified as Afro-Mexican. Likewise, while most of them may have knowledge of family ancestry that includes oral narratives (and increasingly genetic evidence) of Indigenous heritage, the vast majority of these fandanguerxs cannot claim tribal affiliation, though they may be able to name their tribal lineage. Nonetheless, they are enacting a refusal of erasure, activating a conversation about afrofemestizaje in a site whose very existence is contingent upon the completion of such an erasure and disappearance.22

Lettered elites in Mexico, and later the government, scripted “mestizaje” with the intention of celebrating racial hybridity while simultaneously shoring up a white supremacist state and effectively erasing Black Mexicans. Fandanguerxs reappropriate the identifier “mestizaje,” producing an embodied reworking that cites and situates Indigenous/African/Chicanx/Latinx bodies in the Americas.23 Not only is an Afro-Indigenous Mexican tradition at the center of the Fandango Fronterizo, but Chicanxs and fronterizxs—people of the borderlands—also challenge the white supremacist logic that has historically foreclosed their claims to Indigeneity within a US context. María E. Cotera and María J. Saldaña-Portillo call this “mestizo mourning,” the melancholic manner in which Mexican American mestizxs in the US mourn an Indigenous identity they have been denied (2015). They have been denied their Indigeneity not because of biology, “for what are mestizos if not the descendants of Indigenous peoples—but [because of] US statecraft and racial nationalism, a statecraft and nationalism that directly contradicts and contravenes the statecraft of Mexican mestizo nationalism” (2015:562). So, while the discourse of mestizaje in Mexico was central to national belonging, this was not the case with Mexicans liv-

20. Now known as “border encuentros,” the gatherings have been a series of organized events at the border that include workshops but also beach cleanups and developing the garden at the park.

21. For a discussion of postnationalist politics in contemporary son jarocho see Navarro (2016).

22. It is necessary to name and attend to the politics of appropriation and the various ways that colorism functions within the practice of traditions rooted in histories of racially subaltern groups. This is especially so when we consider how discussion of Latinx whiteness and white privilege is often evaded through recourse to the citation of a mixed-race heritage, or the history of mestizaje itself. Conversely, however, dismissing a group as “not-Indigenous/Black enough” participates in the long-standing discursive practice of the erasure of and distancing from nonwhite others.

23. For more on feminista reappropriations of “mestizaje” see Anzaldúa (1987) and Arrizón (2006).
ing in the Southwest. In order to reap the shallow promise of US citizenship, they disidentified with Indigeneity to become “white by law.” Thus, the Fandango Fronterizo opens a space for Chicanxs and Mexican Americans to lay claims to Indigenous-based knowledges denied them by US colonial history and law. The Fandango Fronterizo is an opportunity to examine the collision, intersection, and overlapping of two State’s racial geographies produced through colonial encounters with Indigeneity.

Yet, while son jarocho produces embodied citations of what for many Chicanx and fronterizxs is a “lost” history, this clearly takes place in relation to local Indigenous histories and politics. The empowerment son jarocho creates through its geographical translocation from Veracruz is concurrent with enactments of local tribal relationships to this geography that have not been “lost”— including intra and intertribal recognition across borders. For instance, in August 2020 the La Posta band of the Kumeyaay Nation filed a federal lawsuit seeking an injunction to stop further construction of Trump’s border wall through ancestral burial lands (Fry 2020). It is thus important to reorient our understanding of the US–Mexico border as Indigenous land occupied by two colonial nation-states; to map and mark not only the bloody massacres of deterritorialized Indigenous people in the San Diego/Tijuana region, but also the many Indigenous habitants who today live on and off reservations. For instance, in August 2020 the La Posta band of the Kumeyaay Nation filed a federal lawsuit seeking an injunction to stop further construction of Trump’s border wall through ancestral burial lands (Fry 2020). It is thus important to reorient our understanding of the US–Mexico border as Indigenous land occupied by two colonial nation-states; to map and mark not only the bloody massacres of deterritorialized Indigenous people in the San Diego/Tijuana region, but also the many Indigenous habitants who today live on and off reservations. For instance, in August 2020 the La Posta band of the Kumeyaay Nation filed a federal lawsuit seeking an injunction to stop further construction of Trump’s border wall through ancestral burial lands (Fry 2020). It is thus important to reorient our understanding of the US–Mexico border as Indigenous land occupied by two colonial nation-states; to map and mark not only the bloody massacres of deterritorialized Indigenous people in the San Diego/Tijuana region, but also the many Indigenous habitants who today live on and off reservations. For instance, in August 2020 the La Posta band of the Kumeyaay Nation filed a federal lawsuit seeking an injunction to stop further construction of Trump’s border wall through ancestral burial lands (Fry 2020).

In recent decades, contemporary son jarocho performances have also been important sites for identifying and examining Black history in Mexico albeit at times in reductive and stereotypical ways. As Mexican and US scholars alike have noted, son jarocho is seen as one of the most evi-
dently Black extant cultural practices and as such has become an emblem of the persistence of an African diasporic culture—and to a lesser extent people—in Mexico (A. González 2004, 2010; García de León 2009; Pérez Fernández 2003). Likewise, among Chicanx in the US, son jarocho has served as a way to performatively claim Afrolatinidad, thereby destabilizing hegemonic constructions of both Latinidad and contentious US Black/Brown politics (Díaz-Sánchez and Hernández 2013). The Mexicanness performed at the Fandango Fronterizo is one that disrupts discursive histories of blanqueamiento and thus belies a mestizaje that would disappear Blackness by flattening racial difference into an Indigenous/white binary that permanently relegates indios to the historical past.

24. “Blanqueamiento” refers to the social, political, and economic logic of “whitening” in order to “improve the race” applied across the Americas (see for example Miller 2004).

25. Indian/indio is terminology used variously by and about Indigenous people in the Americas.
In Mexico, to be both Indigenous and Black, or afromestizx, while by no means a rarity, is nonetheless difficult to pin down even as studies to recuperate a history of Afro-Mexico accumulate. In the 2015 census where Mexicans could for the first time self-identify as “Afro-Mexican” or “Afro-descendant” based on “culture, history and traditions,” 1.4 million (1.2% of the population) checked this box (Fernandez De Castro 2015). However, despite an expressed interest in achieving governmental recognition leading to assistance programs, Afro-Mexicans are less disadvantaged in terms of income and education than other Indigenous communities. Nonetheless, Afro-Mexicans have long been represented in Mexico as violent, over-sexed, and lazy (A. Gonzalez 2014). The Spanish used enslaved Africans and their descendants to control Indigenous laborers yet, ironically, afromestizxes were denied Indigenous-based land claims (A. Gonzalez 2014:29). Afro-Mexican identity has always been closely intertwined with Indigenous history and culture. For evidence, one need look no further than the site of the Fandango Fronterizo finding there many afromestizx californios, including Pío Pico, Alta California’s “last governor” (1845–46), listed as descended from both “mulatto” and “mestizo” parents. On the eve of the Mexican-American War — when one colonizer replaced another leading to the massive displacement of Indigenous and mestizx people by white settlers — the afromestizo Pico was an emblem of the collaboration and interdependence of colonialism and white supremacy. His racial identity and position powerfully disrupted simplistic understandings not only of Mexican racial identity, but of the US Southwest’s racial geography.

The US–Mexico border is not typically imagined as a Black diasporic space, and while son jarocho is indeed commonly identified as a Black practice, this is because of Veracruz’s proximity to the Caribbean. Locating Blackness at the border disrupts the neatness of dominant discursive moves to regionally cordon off Blackness, reminding us that the border is also, and has long been, a Black place. It challenges beliefs that Black lives are what geographer Katherine McKittrick calls “ungeographic and/or philosophically undeveloped” (2006:xiii). Though the Fandango Fronterizo does not directly engage specifically Black stories of the borderlands, it nonetheless opens a conversation that moves towards recuperation. In her essay on “a black sense of place” McKittrick writes that

the conditions of bondage did not foreclose black geographies but rather incited alternative mapping practices during and after transatlantic slavery, many of which were produced outside the official tenets of cartography: fugitive and maroon maps, literacy maps, food-nourishment maps, family maps, music maps were assembled alongside “real” maps. (2011:949; emphasis added)

In following the routes of son jarocho’s transposition to the US–Mexico border, Black life comes to the surface, deeply intertwined with the many crossings and pathways to survival of mestizx and afromestizx people. Although there is little collective memory of Black lives at the US southern border in the immediate aftermath of the Mexican–American war, historical sources evidence the existence a “freedom train” of runaways and maroons fleeing into Mexico and of the existence of Indigenous and mestizx nonslaves who aided them. More than half a century before the creation of the Border Patrol, slave catchers and vigilantes patrolled border area. Instead of keeping noncitizens from moving North, they endeavored to keep Black people fleeing enslavement from moving south (Avila 2020). It is precisely because of this messy multi-racial history that the border is the ordered, militarized, and “secured” space it is today, burying but not entirely disappearing the histories that exist across and around it.26

Because son jarocho profoundly relies on Afro-diasporic signifiers and embodiments, its placement at the border further complicates and frames this fandango’s politics——interrupting

26. The influx in recent years of asylum seekers from different African countries and Haiti especially (many of whom have permanently settled in Tijuana) has drastically increased the presence of Black migrants in the region (Solis 2019).
not only the gendered narratives of Mexican nationalism but also the anti-Black violence of colonialism. Marking the border in this way recuperates a place for Blackness, the disembodied, displaced, located-elsewhere-and-nowhere, liveness of Black experience. The deterritorialization of Black people from slave ship to plantation to prison normalizes this displacement. As McKittrick argues, “black matters are spatial matters” and space and place give meaning to Black life, particularly Black women’s lives (2006:xii).

The dancing in place at the Fandango Fronterizo foregrounds afro mestiza feminist praxis that in turn foregrounds the physical geography of the borderlands and the political and relational histories contained therein. It also actuates the violent realities of forced migration and separation from place. The portable site of dancing in place, the tarima, marks these struggles for survival, simultaneously binding and unbinding them to land and body. Through woman-centered custodianship, the tarima records and marks—both metaphorically and literally with feet in time and in space—the Afro-diasporic women’s embodied relationship to place.27 The Fandango Fronterizo is the performed refusal to be desterrado, a condition necessary to the production of Indigenous erasure and of Blackness as a cloak of objecthood for Black bodies. This decolonial performatic pushes against the anti-Black violence that is itself constitutive of settler colonialism. For it is through the historical imagination and production of Black bodies as fungible, accumulatable, and interchangeable nonhumans—with Black female bodies uniquely positioned in their capacity for reproductive labor, their ungendering producing the Black nonsubject—that colonization is at all enabled (see Spillers 1987).

Disciplining Dance, Writing the Border, Disappearing Bodies

Throughout the Americas we repeatedly encounter the trope of dancing Indigenous and Black bodies, framed by patriarchal, colonial discourse as a threat to all things moral, religious, civilized, human. The well-rehearsed scenario of these dancers inciting revolt and dissent, sexual lasciviousness, laziness, and ultimately an anticapitalist lack of efficiency has long called forth technologies of corporeal control and discipline aimed specifically at prohibiting and limiting any such dancing. From potlatches to ring shouts, dancing has been suspect. Jacqueline Shea Murphy writes about the ways that dance interrupts the assimilationist-genocidal logic by marking the Indigenous as irreconcilably different from the settlers. Once this difference is eradicated, the Indigenous lose their claims to land (2007:29–52). On the other hand, the enslavement of Africans and their descendants was justified by racial differences instantiated, in part at least, by slave dances in plantation societies (Thompson 2014). As documented by Paul Scolieri, Spaniards prohibited Indigenous dances while using syncretized dance forms to force Indigenous people to dramatize their own conquest (Scolieri 2013). Similarly, enslaved Africans, the people-turned-objects in the Middle Passage, were made to prove their aliveness with shackled dancing cued by cracking whips aboard ship decks, effectively increasing their distance from death and proving their worth in a system of racial capitalism. This was seen by slaveholders as an empty physical action aimed at keeping their cargo “healthy” instead of as embodied documentation (see Hazzard-Gordon 1990:3–13). Since for both Indigenous peoples and Africans dance was never something easily distinguished from ceremony, communality, music, and song, its function as a form of knowledge and history was illegible to those who sought to own and/or disappear them. The body-to-body transfer of these dances through centuries is evidence of non-European notions of spirituality, time, space, and relationality. This history is especially significant when we consider the way that media and popular culture in the 20th and 21st centuries continue to construct nonwhite bodies as perpetually dancing. Unleashed

27. For more on the imperative and often under-acknowledged role of women in creating, sustaining, and developing son jarocho performance and community practice see Martha Gonzalez’s research and transnational music-recording project, Entre Mujeres, discussed in (M. Gonzalez 2014).
sexuality and uncontrollable temperaments driving frenetic foot patters and quick-paced directional changes in hip sways mark these bodies as simultaneously desirable and unreliable, available but dangerous (Molina-Guzmán 2010; Mendible 2007).

The power of the racialized dancing body to disrupt the supremacy of logos as the originator of all meaning-making and knowledge is the core of Fandango Fronterizo’s resistance. The event’s efficacy as an “epistemic and cartographic disobedience and resistance” is clear if one looks at the border through the lens of embodiment (Hernández 2018:159). While studies of the US–Mexico border have exploded in recent decades, producing what Roberto Hernández terms the “borderlands academic complex,” local embodied experiences and daily encounters with the violence of the border have been obscured (Hernández 2012). For even as the current “border crisis” reaches new horrific proportions of cruelty that the media in turn spectacularizes, it also remains a quotidian experience for the millions of people who live and work at and around this site. Thus, my urgency is to engage border studies in a way that not only theorizes bodies at the border but also theorizes the border through the body, as Anzaldúa and a legion of Chicana feminists have insisted. As borders transform space into place, they necessitate theories of embodiment, and performance as both an act and an optic (Rivera-Servera and Young 2011). Not only does the border as a “scriptive thing” direct the movement of bodies, relationships, and the flow of power but it is constituted by movement itself. Conversely, the daily desires, needs, and pull toward relational networks of belonging drive the border-crossing bodies in these movement rituals.

28. For instance, in Dancing Across Borders: Danzas y Bailes Mexicanos (Nájera-Ramírez, Cantú, and Romero 2009), “the border” is still employed as a metaphorical frame for thinking about the dances that follow intra- and international immigrants through the borders of time and space broadly conceived.

29. See Moraga’s “theory in the flesh” (Moraga and Anzaldúa [1981] 1983) and Celia Herrera-Rodríguez’s work as discussed in Díaz-Sánchez (2012).
If the borderlands is a space where one becomes rather than is (Madrid 2011:8), then the border also implies activity, a doing, that even in its promise to contain and control relies upon movement. As such, it is a place of constant movement, what Sydney Hutchinson calls a “kinetopia” (Hutchinson 2011:44). Movement at the border produces space and place. The permeation of the border fence by sound waves produced by pounding feet, the directional flow of air interrupted by fluttering skirts, the heat produced by the friction of bodies huddled together in movement, is not simply a border-crossing, an embodied smuggling, a contraband carried in bodies. It is a deactivation, a circumventing of the very terms by which the border has been defined.

Bodily interventions at the border must be framed in relation to the power of the written word to map geographies and relations. Or, as Saldaña-Portillo suggests, citing the work of feminist and critical geographers, we gain insight into the materiality of colonial occupation when we understand it as a “physical writing on the land” (2016:18). Drafting the border between nation-states in the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo at the close of the Mexican-American War, the signatories used the performative power of the word to steal land, resources, and ancestral homes; to corral and remove some human bodies, while subjugating, policing, and exploiting others. Indeed, treaties across the Americas performed the same function, imposing the written word on communities who long practiced their own forms of knowledge production and government, whose sense of palabra had more to do with the spiritual and the moral as legal principles and binding agreements than with the “law” of a coerced signature on paper. The finality of the treaty’s written word trumps other forms of negotiation and ways of relating, performing the ultimate violence of erasure. It was the word that produced the border; first, as “a line drawn in the sand and then re-drawn with wire fences and then re-drawn with steel walls and then re-drawn with steel walls wired with electronic sensors and digital cameras” (Kun 2005b:147).

It was also writing, engendering the birth of new nations and nationalisms that “imagined” these distinct communities into being (Anderson [1983] 1991). Masculinist narratives of national belonging in Mexico did the work of “placing” and “displacing” different bodies: white, Indigenous, Black, mestizx. Even as an increasingly militarized border has in recent decades attempted to curb the perceived threat of invasion from the Global South, the Mexican lettered intelligentsia has long responded to US imperialism with the writing of a national narrative that contests the positioning of Mexico as inferior to the US. For the greater part of 200 years, these narratives have drawn upon the symbolic value of Mexico’s Indigenous population and ignored or jettisoned Mexican Blacks, while continuing to concentrate power in the hands of white and mestizx Mexico. These writings have stereotyped and subjugated Indigenous Mexico through the very literary expression that purports to celebrate them, producing the gendered trope of the female Indigenous sell-out/whore La Malinche, mother to the Mexican race yet never forgiven for her original sin. As Chicana feminist scholars and artists have tirelessly illustrated, these discursive formations have permeated all levels of Mexican society, working to erase and bury counternarratives that have nonetheless been kept alive in the day-to-day transfers of embodied culture (Quiñonez 2002).

Today, it is the writing of “documents,” the “papers” of citizenship that repeatedly perform the originary power of the written treaty and the juridical system that protects it. These inscriptions hold the power to write one’s humanity out of existence, replacing “mother,” “daughter,” “brother,” “lover,” with “alien” and “illegal,” or even the slightly less offensive “undocumented.” The implications of this are even more profound if we consider the way that the word papeles in Spanish signifies both the “papers” of citizenship and a “role” that one takes on, one’s functional

30. Hutchinson draws on musicologist Josh Kun’s (2005a) description of—following Foucault’s notion of heterotopia—an “audiotopic” Tijuana, a space produced and defined by sound.

31. “Palabra” is a concept that comes from danza practice, oral practice of a word/prayer/intention given by a leader in a gathering of people around a circle (see Luna 2011:128). For a discussion of the historical practice of having Native American signatures on treaties performed by the inscription of an “x” see (Lyons 2010).
purpose. Someone *sin papeles* can be seen as a person without a role to play, suspended in the un-geographic state of the desterrados. Even as writing has doubtlessly served, and serves, as a way to “talk back” to colonial powers, telling alternate versions of the same story, it does so always by situating logos at the locus of power, blindsiding the way that relational structures and embodied modes of enacting counterknowledges also work against and alongside writing. Western logocentrism has framed the terms of conversation between colonizer and colonized, disallowing Indigenous, African, and non-Western epistemologies that value the multidimensional apprehension of meanings—sound, gesture, and relational affect.

Indigenous scholarship on sovereignty provides helpful insight for thinking through the decolonial performatic of the Fandango Fronterizo. Addressing similar issues, Kahnawake Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson writes about “ethnographic refusal” as a strategy of redefining this relationship. Members of her tribe engage in various acts of refusal by exercising their tradition of moving freely across northern borders (Simpson 2014). Rejecting the confines of Canadian and American citizenship, these performances of refusal enact an embodied sovereignty that questions the colonial project, showing how one sovereignty can be nested within the other, albeit not without extreme tension. Simpson and a growing group of scholars question the idea that the only way to be sovereign is to have authority/ownership of land (Rickard 2011; Taiaiake 2005; Raheja 2007; Goeman 2013). Reappropriating the concept of sovereignty, these scholars assert that just because the settler state defines sovereignty according to its own legal system does not mean that Indigenous people need to accept those terms; Indigenous people have alternate embodied enactments of sovereignty that are important to them. Recognition by the settler state relies on a politics of inclusion that denies the existence of Indigenous epistemologies and counternarratives. Visual and sensate sovereignty—dance-acts and song-acts—are ways of doing sovereignty in relation, not attaining a state of being sovereign. Michelle Raheja explains Indigenous “sovereignty as a process that is kinetic rather than a rigid set of principles that transcends time and space unchanged” (2007:28).

At the heart of Western logocentrism and Enlightenment thinking is the Cartesian insistence on the material nature of the body in contrast to the nonmaterial nature of thought, making it impossible to link thinking with movement and rendering the body unable to produce Reason or access to Truth. Thus the “body logic” of an embodied practice such as son jarocho is doubly productive: it produces physical sensation, “feelings” of being and belonging, through the conviviality of a danced and musical exchange, instantiating how a culture “feels” as opposed to how it is “represented.” On the one hand, by privileging the practice through the immediacy of the material body it challenges assigning “Indigenous tradition” to the past. At the same time, the “loss” and “disappearance” implicit in definitions of sovereignty framed by Western law, indeed by Western philosophy, are refuted by embodied epistemologies.

**Between Freedoms and Unfreedoms**

**Son Jarocho and Embodied Liberation**

While there are many reasons for arguing that the Fandango Fronterizo activates a decolonial performatic, I am also wary of an overly utopic reading that blindsides the particular ways that son jarocho practice is read—by me and others—as liberatory, especially in relation to Indigeneity and Blackness. Blackness and Indigeneity are performatives that both precede and promise embodied freedom at the same time that son jarocho, as an Afro-Indigenous practice of survival, of “survivance,” enacts the slippery and playful ways that these embodied acts work from within structures of power to destabilize them.32

32. “Survivance” is a term first coined by Anishinaabe cultural theorist Gerald Vizenor (1994) as a way to think beyond “survival” in relationship to the victimhood of Indigenous people, but to also invoke presence, continuation, endurance, and vitality.
Even though there is an undeniable function of the performativity and slipperiness of Afro-diasporic song, dance, and music, it is still imperative to note how corporeal Blackness is employed via and away from visibly Black bodies—a reality further complicated by histories of mestizaje. It is unclear for whom and how this circulation of corporeal Blackness translates into a productive politics of liberation. Frank B. Wilderson III asserts that “the slave can dance but is still a slave” (2012). By contrast, Thomas DeFrantz insists that it is through the dances of the African diaspora that the Black self can exist (2004). At the same time, DeFrantz is cautionary in pointing out the pairing of specifically neoliberal discourses of freedom with the mass proliferation of Afro-diasporic dances (2012). Son jarocho resists technologies of distribution that would have it fulfill “marketplace cravings for black social dance” (2012:135). Yet, its diasporic practice and increasing popularity does not entirely escape these same market forces that read its Blackness as a channel to corporeal freedom. At the same time, the Blackness in son jarocho is not obvious to outsiders—and some insiders—making son jarocho’s Black history and aesthetics opaque.

The basic premise of the Fandango Fronterizo is to disrupt the divisive binary logic imposed by the border: inside/outside, us/them, belonging/unbelonging. However, part of what enables this move into a wholeness and completeness is the labor performed by Blackness and Black corporeal practice to bring “us” to a place and state of freedom. Thus, inadvertently, this move into universal belonging depends upon Blackness existing as something cordoned off from the greater whole, contained and bordered, perpetually suspended, ahistorical and ungeographic. At the same time that son jarocho challenges this marginalization of Blackness by its embodied placement at the border, it also cites “Black cultural practice”—a fraught though nonetheless useful term—for its unique capacity to corporeally liberate and to symbolize insurrection, a capacity defined by its very difference, its distance from the center.

Maybe the fandanguerxs are aware of these contradictions. Maybe they know that their dancing is both liberatory and complicit. Even as the danced action of the Fandango Fronterizo disrupts colonial claims to the borderlands and the anti-Black violence upon which it has been predicated, I imagine a future beyond recognizing the existence of Blackness in the fandango and in Mexico more largely writ. We have recognized for centuries the Black presence in the US with little to show for it, unable to translate recognition into real power, into making Black and Afro-Latinx lives matter. Likewise, I envision a Fandango Fronterizo at which the tribal communities of the borderlands are recognized, where the Indigenous communities in Mexico are present. This is the performative negotiation that the Fandango Fronterizo and 21st–century fandanguerxs must address. For now, the lesson of this fandango at the border is to underscore that the fleeting and impermanent state of the embodied freedom it enacts and places is what Fred Moten calls “fugitive,” not now within reach but sought after (in Harney and Moten 2013). It is both liberatory and incomplete, freedoms and unfreedoms syncopating on and off its bodies as they together sculpt sound into land, dancing in place.

Addendum

In 2019, renowned Afro-Latin jazz musician and composer Arturo O’Farrill released the album Fandango at the Wall inspired by and recorded in part at the 2018 Fandango Fronterizo. Later his project Music Without Borders would release an audiobook of the same name by Kabhir Sehgal and in September 2020 a documentary for HBO produced by Quincy Jones, Andrew Young, and Carlos Santana. The film follows son jarocho from Veracruz to the US-Mexico border and includes vibrant footage of the Fandango Fronterizo (see fandangowall.com).

33. According to Wilderson and Afro-pessimism more generally, “the slave” refers to the position of “the Black” in contemporary society as an ontology inseparable from slavery as a structural “non-human” position (Wilderson 2010).
Fandango Fronterizo founder Jorge Castillo was a central collaborator and participant, however some members of the fandango communities were divided as to whether this attention and visibility for their event represented an appropriation of or an appreciation and amplification of their project.

References


Braojos, Ricardo, dir. 2006. *Fandango, Buscando el mono blanco*. San Pablo, CA: Los Cenzontles Mexican Arts Center. DVD.

Castillo, Jorge. 2015. Personal interview with author. San Diego, California, 14 December.


Wilderson, Frank B., III. 2012. Personal correspondence, 6 May.


**TDReading**

