

Culturally Relevant Performance Pedagogies: Exploring the Value of AfroLatina/o Music Performance Projects at a Hispanic-Serving Institution

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Abstract

Within this essay, I reflect on my students' final performative project in my undergraduate Latino Cultural Expressions class at a Hispanic-Serving Institution. I explore how culturally relevant performative pedagogies offer opportunities to examine culture in the classroom beyond mere celebrations of difference and aesthetics. Throughout the semester-long course, we conceptualize Latinidad as inclusive of Blackness and cover musical genres that reflect AfroLatina/o histories. This has led many students to recognize the importance of locating and exploring cultural expressions linked to AfroLatinidad and histories of political oppression and struggle. Thus, student performances prompt compelling dialogue involving race, place, and society where musical forms such as *cumbia*, *bachata*, and *son jarocho* offer opportunities to critically examine histories of conquest and enslavement of Indigenous and Black people.

Participating in Performance Pedagogy with My Students

During the final week of classes in my university freshman- and sophomore-level Latino Cultural Expressions course, I gave my students an overview of the key concepts covered that semester, such as "colonization," "diaspora," and "mestizaje," and mapped them to different Latina/o musical forms such as *cumbia*, *bachata*, *ranchera*, *conjunto*, and hip-hop. I then connected the course material to my own work as a hip-hop artist and scholar. As promised, I gave a performance for the class before they had to share their own performative, collaborative final project. I introduced my track, "Put Them Together," and explained to my students that I had just played this song at the opening of the AfroLatin@ Forum at the Schomburg Center in Harlem, New York. I began:

Most would agree when you examine history
 It's easy to see lies hidden for centuries
 Were politically placed at odds through economy
 Highest US jail rate growing increasingly
 Poorest neighborhoods, low quality goods
 Liquor store on every corner, students misunderstood
 Quick loan outlets, cigarette ads
 Every brand of malt liquor making my people sicker and mad
 Black and Brown collectives can change perspectives
 Let's figure it out, take the past and resurrect it, dissect it
 Pick up the parts cause life is hectic
 Put them together, what do you get?

As I rapped about the criminalization, social stratification, and systemic oppression Black and Brown people face in the US, the energy in the room dramatically shifted. Eyes were more open, and students were engaged in ways I had not seen all semester.

My use of hip-hop performance in the classroom stems from my experiences as a Chicano growing up in a working-class barrio in North East Houston, Texas. In this location, shared spaces among Blacks and Chicana/os resulted in transcultural practices that could be seen in food, dress, language, and musical expression. While musically, I remained deeply affected by growing up surrounded by Tejano music, boleros, norteros, and cumbias, I gravitated towards Black American culture present among peers at school and within the community. Further, the burgeoning hip-hop scene in Houston presented an avenue to express my subject position as an English-

dominant, dark-brown Chicano. At the age of 14, I began to rap at school talent shows and community centers, and I never stopped. While I typically thought of hip-hop and Mexican music as distinctly Black or Brown, my research independently and as an academic, revealed Black and Brown cultural crossings in all of these types of music. Subsequently, I not only engage in fusing these genres on stage, I also indicate their complex racial and cultural crossings in my courses through lecture, discussion, and performance.

Scholars/artists within Chicana/o studies have a history of employing musical forms in the classroom to engage their students. Américo Paredes—a folklore scholar who taught at UT Austin—was known to play his guitar for his students in class while describing the origins, history, and lyrical scheme of the *corrido*. Juan Tejeda—who teaches at San Antonio’s Palo Alto College—plays Texas *conjunto* accordion for his courses and community to outline the history of the Texas Mexican struggle. Micaela Díaz-Sánchez brings her *quijada* (horse jawbone) to her classes at University of California-Santa Barbara to cover the AfroMexican musical form of *son jarocho*. Many others have displayed performances within the classroom that offer students a social and political view of musical aesthetics. In the case of my undergraduate class, performance allowed me to open the way before my students began their own final performance projects.

In this essay, I argue that culturally relevant performance pedagogies provide helpful avenues towards analyzing culture in the classroom beyond mere celebrations of cultural difference and aesthetics, or as Sonia Nieto describes “food, fun, and fiesta” (Nieto & Bode, 2011). This has led many students, for example, to recognize the importance of locating and exploring cultural expressions linked to AfroLatinidad and histories of political oppression and struggle. For their final project in class, students are encouraged to participate in performative praxis to apply concepts learned throughout the semester. This assignment helps to build a collective community within the classroom and allows students to express their cultural identities beyond traditional student/teacher dynamics.

The University of Texas at San Antonio, where I teach my Latino Cultural Expression course, is a public Hispanic-Serving Institution.¹ According to The University of Texas at San Antonio (n.d.) website, out of a total of 28,628 students, the student demographics read: 27.6 % White-Non Hispanic, 8.16% Black-Non-Hispanic, 48.4% Hispanic, 5.2% Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, 0.2%, American Indian or Alaskan Native. Two or more races, 2.9%, International 5.9%, and Unknown 1.1%. Many of the university’s students are from San Antonio and South Texas, though increasing numbers of students are coming from Texas cities like Houston, Dallas, and Austin. The course I discuss in this essay consisted of a total of 40 students, 25 were women and 15 were men; 30 identified as Hispanic or Latino: of these 30, 20 identified as Mexican American or Chicana/o, 9 identified as Mexican, and 1 as Costa Rican. Of the remaining students, 6 identified as Black/African American and 4 as Arab from Saudi Arabia. The majority of the students were from San Antonio, with 6 from the Rio Grande Valley area, 4 from Houston, and 4 international. Because the course serves as part of the university’s core curriculum, it can fulfill the Creative Arts requirement for students who, in this class, came from a range of majors including Finance, Mechanical Engineering, Chemistry, Biology, Interdisciplinary Studies, Psychology, Mexican American Studies, English, English as a Second Language, Communication, Kinesiology, Psychology, Criminal Justice, History, Anthropology, and Business. The diverse racial dynamic and variety of student majors must be taken into consideration when approaching how the course is taught and engaging in cultural relevant pedagogy offers approaches towards valuing these students’ backgrounds.

Engaging in AfroLatinidad through Cultural Relevant Performance Pedagogy

Scholars and educators continue to examine the concept of “culturally relevant pedagogy” in the classroom as a way to improve education for students of color. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995), who coined the term, states that “culturally relevant pedagogy” allows students to “affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate” (p. 469). Since Ladson-Billings’ introduction of the concept to pedagogical theoretical approaches, educators have critiqued its uncritical misapplication by teachers (Howard, 2003; Young, 2010). Further, Django Paris (2012) has expanded

¹ According to the US Department of Education, a Hispanic-Serving Institution is an institution of higher education that has “enrollment of undergraduate full-time equivalent students that is at least 25 percent Hispanic students at the end of the award year immediately preceding the date of application” (www2.ed.gov). UTSA meets criteria of HSI with 48% of undergraduate and graduate students that are classified as Hispanic (<http://www.utsa.edu/today/2014/09/hsiweek.html>).

notions of a culturally relevant approaches to teaching by calling for a “culturally sustaining pedagogy” that “requires that our pedagogies be more than responsive of or relevant to the cultural experiences and practices of young people—it requires that they support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence” (p. 95). Similarly, Christopher Emdin (2011), calls for a move towards “reality pedagogy” that focuses “explicitly on understanding the realities of youth within a particular classroom and supports the teacher in utilizing an understanding of these realities as an anchor for instructional delivery” (p. 287). Ladson-Billings (2014) revisited the concept in her essay, “Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: a.k.a. the Remix,” by acknowledging the importance of Paris’s term writing, “the newer concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy is built on the same foundational notion of students as subjects rather than objects” (p. 77). She further explains, “I hope to help those who subscribe to earlier visions of culturally relevant pedagogy make the transition to the remix: culturally sustaining pedagogy. For if we ever get to a place of complete certainty and assuredness about our practice, we will stop growing” (Ladson-Billings, 2014, p. 77). I view the terms “culturally sustaining pedagogy” and “reality pedagogy” as extensions of “culturally relevant pedagogy” and find all of these concepts valuable in the classroom. As I teach my Latino Cultural Expressions courses, I work to provide students with “culturally relevant material” while making efforts to “sustain” their cultural and linguistic backgrounds within and outside of the institution.

A crucial element in applying culturally relevant pedagogy and its manifestations requires privileging knowledge that students bring to the classroom. Latina/o pedagogues have offered tremendous insight into value students’ experiences and knowledge. Moll, Amanti, Neff, and González (1992), for example, describe how cultural “funds of knowledge” can help “develop innovations in teaching that draw upon the knowledge and skills found in local households” (p. 142). Flores, Hernández Sheets, and Riojas Clark (2011) highlight the importance of empowering educators through the process of *educación* (learning provided by home, school, and community, not necessarily a formal curriculum), rather than through schooling (learning to promote socialization and control) (p. 3). Ek, Machado-Casas, Sánchez, and Alanis (2010) discuss the importance of meeting at a “cultural crossroads” to assist Latina/o students by, working “with the Latina/o community to take a holistic approach to maintain families’ cultural wealth and to mobilize initiatives by working with parents, teachers, and community members” (p. 842). Within my Latino Cultural Expressions courses, the majority of Latina/o students who come to the courses announce on the first day that they want to learn more about their culture; yet, I make sure to let them know that while there is much to learn, they also bring their own knowledge and insight to the course—their own lifelong experiences of living as a Latina/o. As we undergo culturally relevant material through discussion and lecture, the end-of-semester performances become a way for students to apply their knowledge in the classroom.

Like my performances—which are based on specially-selected thematic and theoretical problems, the final projects in the course invite students to perform and explore the topic chosen, similar to Augusto Boal’s (1993) *Theater of the Oppressed* exercises, where spectators and actors merge to become “spectators” in the collective survey of an issue selected for analysis (p. xiv). Furthermore, I employ what Leavy (2009) describes as “arts-based theory” or the centering of artistic expression that “disrupts traditional research paradigms” (p. 9). Through performance, one can comment and critique oppressive social norms and educate on issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Taylor (1991) examines performance and transculturation to locate “which forms, symbols or aspects of cultural identity become highlighted or confrontational, when and why” (p. 91). Similarly, Alicia Arrizón (2006), employs performance as a methodology to complicate essentialist notions of “race, gender, and sexuality” and “reconfigure *mestizaje* in its polyvalent expression, complexities, and specificities” (p. 9). I apply these valuable conceptualizations in my classrooms because they critically link performance to notions of race, class, and gender and offer valuable insight into the importance of performative analysis.

Using performance within the classroom, I urge students to evaluate cross-cultural expressions and explore the circumstances that informed the development of their chosen artistic expressions. Insights gained allow students to discuss issues surrounding citizenship, gender biases, and racism. This has allowed many in the class to explore understandings of Blackness within Latinidad and colonial connections to anti-Black racism and Black and Latina/o conflict. Agustín Laó-Montes (2007) suggests that an emphasis on “AfroLatinidad” can function as a key role in forming Black and Latina/o alliances that provide “historical agency of resistance and self-affirmation” (p. 118). Throughout the course, we conceptualize Latinidad as inclusive of Blackness and the

musical forms we cover in class help us map connections that inform an AfroLatinidad. This is important for Latino-identified students in my course, because for many, this is the first time they research the Black presence in Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and other Latin American nation-states. Mexico, in particular, is a country that has close ties to my students' own histories; however, as a nation, it has been slow to acknowledge the Black presence within its borders contemporaneously and historically.

Performance of AfroLatina/o musical forms provides invaluable opportunities for researching Black diasporic, Latina/o, and AfroLatina/o cultural identity and helps to formulate new helpful paradigms in these areas. Intellectuals within Latina/o studies have already engaged in valuable examinations of “Afro-Latin@” identity (Rivera, 2003; Román & Flores, 2010). Furthermore, scholars such as Luis Alvarez (2009), Gaye Johnson (2013), Pancho McFarland (2006), and Anthony Macias (2008) offer critical examinations of Black and Chicana/o cultural and political crossings. In class we cover the work of these writers to offer Black diasporic/mestiza/o readings of Black and Latina/o cultural production that later inform final course performances.

The students' performative project thus presents material that is culturally relevant to the students and their performances in class, which together lead to examinations of a politicized history of AfroLatinidad. Correspondingly, these performances prompt compelling dialogue involving race, place, and society. Musical dance forms such as *cumbia*, *bachata*, and *son jarocho*, for instance, offer opportunities to look at Mexican/Chicana/Latina cultural expression critically and examine how these musical forms are tied to conquest and enslavement of Indigenous and Black people.

Description of Final Project

The University of Texas at San Antonio, where I teach my Latino Cultural Expression course, is a public Hispanic-Serving Institution and most of the students who register for my courses self-identify as Latina/o or Hispanic. The university catalogue description of the course presents the class as “an introductory overview of Hispanic visual, performing, and folk arts from their origins in the Iberian Peninsula, through the later blending of cultures and their parallelism during revolutionary periods, to contemporary Latino expressions in the United States.” In the context of historical and cultural knowledge, students are expected to understand the aesthetics that guide the humanities through expressive culture and basic knowledge that governs the arts.

The course objectives call for students to: 1) Understand the origins and dynamics of Latino cultural expressions through visual art, performance, dance, literature, music, and multi-media; 2) Analyze the social, political, and cultural forces that have given rise to Latina/o cultural production, with particular attention to the ways in which cultural, historical/collective, family, and personal memory shape these expressions; and 3) explore core concepts like historical memory, Latinidad, *rasquachismo*, cultural citizenship, borderlands, diaspora, and *mestizaje*—in relation to Latina/o cultural production.

At the beginning of the semester, we examine, evaluate, and question the terms “Latino” and “Hispanic” and assess what they mean and where they derive. These discussions push students to think more critically about how they choose to self-identify and why. In the weeks to come, we cover Spanish and English conquest; Mexican and American identity; *afromestizaje* and the Black roots of Mexican/Chicana/o culture; Chicana and Latina feminisms; Nuyorican cultural identities, Puerto Rican reggaeton and Hip Hop; Cuba's music and relationship to the United States; race and place in the Dominican Republic; Columbia and Panama and the transnational genres of *cumbia* and *plena*; Chicana/o theater and performance art; Latina/os in film: representation and empowerment; and Latina/os in sports. By mid semester, students have an abundance of options to choose from for their final collaborative project.

The final project requires that students work in small groups of 4-6 and pull together talents and strengths to identify, plan, and coordinate a performative presentation. Depending on abilities or interests, they must choose a group from one of the following areas to:

- (1) Write and stage a play on Latino cultural expressions and perform it for the final.
- (2) Organize a musical group that expresses an aspect of the musical expressions of Latino culture and perform as a final project.
- (3) Identify a topic about San Antonio for a video that documents a cultural expression.
- (4) Create a visual art project—painting and photographs—about Latina/o culture in San Antonio

and curate an exhibit at UTSA.

(5) Organize a spoken word and performance group to perform the last week of class.

(6) Create a social media page on (Facebook/Instagram/Tumblr/Twitter/etc.) focused on a form of Latina/o cultural production and/or social justice. Give an in-class presentation on the page's mission and activity.

These group presentations must be between 7-8 minutes long, so students must plan a short concise and informative performance. Students must also submit a 1-page reflection that includes a discussion section describing how each person exercised leadership to carry out the project. These reflections ask students to share positive aspects of the experience as well as any problems or changes the student would make to the project or overall assignment.

The assignment gives the students many options to choose from and they have the semester to network and decide on groups. Throughout the course, we discuss students' artistic interests, which help me to guide them to a suitable final collaborative project. The assignment has spawned a number of different forms of presentations, from cooking shows, to news broadcasts, to *novelas*. Students have shown particular interest in musical genres they listen to in their day-to-day lives. While they listen to a mixture of genres, most students have preferred *cumbia*, *salsa*, *bachata*, and *reggeaton*. Therefore, I encourage students, months before the assignment is due, to select an art form and genre that corresponds with their cultural identity.

Student Performative Presentations: Critically Thinking about *Cumbia*, *Son Jarocho*, and *Bachata*

In this section, I share the presentations of three groups who situated their presentations on Afrolatina/o musical forms. These groups include: 1) Colombian *cumbia*, 2) the Black roots of *cumbia*, and 3) the political and historical roots of *bachata* in the Dominican Republic. The first group agreed to work together early in the semester because of their love of *cumbia*. They began their presentation by discussing the history of *cumbia* in Colombia and reviewed concepts discussed during class. They then mapped movement from Colombia to the US and the trends of a commodified *cumbia*. The group outlined this history in their presentations and provided a visual map of the coastal region of Colombia and made note of *cumbia's* roots off of the northern coast, where the slave trade was pronounced in the nation. This allowed them to talk about the history of slave trade on the island and the devastating racism that resulted afterwards. The students expounded on this as they discussed how *cumbia* was whitened for a mass audience in Colombia and the mainstream international market. They also made comparisons to US music and how blues and jazz went through similar processes of appropriation and commodification.

With the majority of the group coming from Mexico, they discussed the popularity of *cumbia* in Mexico, especially Monterrey where *cumbia* is played at a much slower tempo in comparison to *cumbia* traditions in Colombia. The group also made interesting connections to rap performers in Houston who have popularized slowing down the tempo of songs they perform. The group then demonstrated the different dance steps expressed in *cumbia* and danced to "*Cumbia Sobre El Rio*" by Celso Piña—a renowned Mexican accordionist and singer. They remarked on how their version of dancing comes from a *cumbia* style in Monterrey called, "*cumbia colombianas*." They closed the presentation reflecting on what *cumbia* meant to them and why they felt it was important to their culture and identity and what it taught them about migratory patterns, trends, and music as a way to transcend borders mandated by various nation-states.

Another group that made connections to their own histories was a team of Latinas that presented a *ballet folklórico* performance that centered on the *son jarocho* dance steps of *zapateado*.² In the presentation they explained the history of Black and Indigenous roots of *son jarocho* that Anita González (2004) reminds us was "once a derogatory term for poor Black field workers" (xiii). The students explained how this became one of most popularized musical forms in Mexican cultural identity. The group practiced after class for weeks leading up to the final project. They arrived wearing *Jalisco folklórico* dresses borrowed from one of the students' dance programs. By wearing these dresses while verbally explicating the ways the traditions came from Black

² According to Rudy F. García (2009), *ballet folklórico* denotes "a particular kind of folk dancing in Mexico" and "plays a role in shaping a cultural or national identity, both here in the United States and Mexico" (p. 226).

and Indigenous roots, the group pronounced the ways traditional Mexican culture derives from histories of occupation and slave trade in Mexico.

The group foregrounded their presentation on histories of conquest as they introduced *son jarocho*'s ties to the slave trade within the coastal region of Veracruz. They remarked on how the slave trade in Mexico was once the largest in Latin America and further explained the ongoing racism that Black and Indigenous groups faced through racialized *casta* systems. This also allowed them to talk about current racism among some Mexicans and Mexican Americans and how these ideologies are connected to histories of conquest, slavery, and imperialism.

They then set in motion to dance, but before beginning, they described the history of *zapateado*, a traditional percussive dance that sets the beat of *son jarocho*. Referencing, Micaela Díaz-Sánchez and Alexandro D. Hernández (2013), they described how “hand drums were reconfigured to the lower body feet replaced the percussive movement of the hands” (p. 192). The students then introduced the song they would be dancing to, *La Bamba*, a Mexican favorite foregrounded in the history of slave trade and the conquest of Indigenous people. As the group danced, the class witnessed connections between traditional ballet *folklórico* music and Black and Indigenous Mexican histories.

The group also discussed the resurgence of *son jarocho* and contemporary groups such as Son De Madera, Mono Blanco, Sonex, Las Cafeteras, Los Cojolites, and Quetzal. In their group reflections, they expressed how the assignment helped them uncover roots of traditions they had been practicing all of their lives and indicated their interest in exploring and joining a local *son jarocho* group in San Antonio. The songs they used were familiar to them, but they were not familiar with the social and political roots of the musical style and dance. They also wrote about reasons why Black and Indigenous ties might be left out of popular narratives of *ballet folklórico* and drew connections to discuss racism and colonial control of ideology.

The last group I discuss in this essay presented on the politics of *bachata* music and outlined the history of anti-Black racism in the Dominican Republic. The group discussed the tyranny and genocide under the dictator Rafael Trujillo as well as his installment of anti-Black racism throughout the country. One of the students applied Anzaldúa's (1999) “the borderlands” to the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic and noted similarities and differences between the US/Mexico border.³ These discussions are particularly important given the recent exodus of Black Haitians in the Dominican Republic and the need and extension of the Black Lives Matter movement on the island. The students also made connections to other texts we read by such writers as Junot Diaz (2008), Ginetta Candelario (2010), and Josefina Báez (2010), who each detail the complex interweaving of AfroDominican identity in the US. The group then drew distinctions between *bachata* and *merengue* and explained how Trujillo had named *merengue* the national music of the Dominican Republic and even had a merengue band named after him. *Bachata*, as my students described, was the music of the Black lower classes and due to the prominence of anti-Black racism in the Dominican Republic, the music remained marginalized and banned from national and international release. The group then explained how the popularity of genre increased after Trujillo's assassination and was finally allowed to be exported into the US. For all students in the group, who were avid listeners of contemporary *bachata*, they did not know this history before researching the musical form. They then danced to the song “*Corazon Sin Cara*,” by New York's Prince Royce (2010), a favorite of many in the class. The students in the audience cheered as the group expertly carried out *bachata* dance steps to the song's captivating beat.

All groups mentioned engaged in culturally relevant performance pedagogy that allowed for explorations of a cultural AfroLatinidad. Further, these groups and others connected AfroLatinidad to examine notions of racism, citizenship, and the political relationships between Latin America and the US. One later group for instance, outlined the history of reggaeton and its link to Black West Indian laborers sent to Panama to work on the canal. Others have explored the social implications of Nuyorican *salsa* sounds as well as the roots of hip-hop created in the South Bronx. In all cases, the students' performative work surrounding these musical forms offered much in potentially increasing consciousness and theorization of an AfroLatinidad within the majority of my undergraduate Latina/o students.

3 Gloria Anzaldúa (1991) makes use of the term “borderlands” to describe a space that allows for the negotiation of contradictions as well as the development of an empowering consciousness within alternating cultures and identities (p. 216).

Conclusions: Rewards of a Student-Centered Performative Pedagogy

Giving the space for students to partake in performance pedagogy allows for discourse between performer and audience that transcends traditional classroom presentations and lectures. This allows students to actively engage in material and critical discussions on the topics at hand. I have witnessed many Latina/o students grasping the importance of locating their cultural roots as they find that their education systems neglected to cover important historical moments such as the horrific lynching of Mexicans in the US during the early 1900s; the push and pull factors of Mexican migration to the US; Chicana/o High School Walkouts or Blowouts; and the meaning and history of the Chicana/o Movement. Within these historical moments and many more, music expression can be found as a backdrop to the struggles, joy, pain, and determination of Mexican/Chicana/o subjects. Further, music offers a lens to critically examine these points in time, and for many of my students, the music we cover in class directly relates to their cultural identities. Rewardingly, I have witnessed most students express pride in their cultural roots as a result of their research.

These performances allow students to showcase cultural expressions that inform their identities, and the majority of students who take on the assignment draw critical and at times personal connections between course material and their chosen art form; however, some presentations display Latino culture in purely a celebratory manner. These usually include surface descriptions of a dish or a musical genre. While a critique of these presentations, both from students and myself, can be uncomfortable for students, this is also an opportunity to review and evaluate sociopolitical histories linked to their chosen topic. The student groups covered in the section above, however, made clear connections to course material through examinations of a cultural AfroLatinidad, which is especially important in classrooms where Blacks and/or Latinos make up the majority.

These final projects, predicated on conceptions of AfroLatina/o cultures and histories, have helped me reflect and improve my own scholarly and artistic performances. As a hip-hop artist and performance pedagogy scholar, I research how hip-hop performances, including my own, can be used to highlight the potential for Black and Chicana/o transracial solidarity and cultural fusion. Within the performative dimension of my theorizing, I examine and explore the ambiguities that transcend, problematize, and enhance traditional forms of didactic and argumentative research. For these reasons, I view performance as not just enhancing research, but as a central component of it, and I feel the same when students embark on performative research within my Latino Cultural Expressions courses.

Teaching this course has also allowed me to observe how younger students of color view the world and consume cultural expression, and I have witnessed their eagerness to learn about the cultural expressions with which they grew up. Many of these students were raised on Tejano, Norteño, *reggaeton*, *salsa*, *cumbia*, and the cultural insight they bring to the classroom allows for a closer connection to the material and opportunities for collective learning through shared discourse. I have learned about new songs, traditions, instruments, dances, regional dialects, and foods as a spectator during presentations. Further, students have brought forth a number of points in discussions that enlighten the class to new modes of consciousness such as working to combat anti-Black biased within their own communities and households as well as working to not only empathize with but challenge unjust social conditions that Black Americans face in the US. Teaching this course has also given me the chance to experience the ranges of talents our students have and witness the courage students demonstrate on stage in front of their peers. Finally, it is exhilarating to behold how the classroom shifts during performances and exchanges of ideas.

I look forward to these final projects because I learn much from the expertise students bring to the class, and I feel that most leave the course with more conscious perceptions of race, ethnicity, and cultural expression. I recognize that when students step outside the classroom, they are navigating in a world where Latino-ness is often presented and marketed as criminal and/or inferior. Furthermore the exoticizing of Latina/o bodies, the privileging of light skin, and anti-Latina/o and anti-Mexican biases present even further challenges for young Latina/os working to make sense of themselves and others around them. Yet, if we can get students to think critically about the history of cultural expressions around them, perhaps these students can more critically identify struggles and social injustices Latina/os face and locate methods for improving the social landscape for future generations.

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