

And Then They Smiled

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During the 2016-2017 academic year, our local school district initiated investigation into the development and implementation of a dual language program. The program would begin in first grades and over the course of a few years, phase out what in name was a late-exit bilingual model, but in practice was an early transition one. This investigative year marked my first full year serving as Community and Attendance Liaison for the district. With new sights set on the development of a dual language program, and the recent change in attendance policies that moved mandates away from court referrals to prevention and intervention, both the program and my position were, in a sense, under (re)construction. This afforded us the ability to explore the community aspects of my job description and partner with the director of bilingual education to cross traditional borders of program development within public schools.

We partnered with doctoral students enrolled in a community development class from our local university and began facilitating learning exchanges in which we invited authentic community conversations with parents, community members, educators, and administration, and initially focused on capturing the local narrative about language, both current and historical. Within the initial semester, we found ourselves immersed in stories at multiple levels of impact that spoke of trauma and dominance around language, and in particular language loss. But more significantly, we developed a more profound understanding of the stories of local leaders that paved the way, challenging segregation within education and civic organizations and embracing and manifesting a call to action through community leadership. Subsequently, we discovered that the logistical and technical components of program development, often at the top of priority lists, were replaced by a deliberate attention to the life force of the stories that spoke to a desire to reclaim not only a heritage language, but also a way of being.

This backdrop serves to frame this thought piece on our community's introduction to Ballet Nepantla and the Company's performance of *Sin Fronteras*. It had been a few years since I had purposefully considered the concept of Anzaldúa's (2012) nepantla even as I explored ways in which to live the various borderlands that exist within public schools and navigate and elicit from them insights into the stories that exist within every member of the community, both inside and outside the physical structures of schools. The Company's performance in the fall of 2017 in Austin, Texas, was a welcomed and needed opportunity for the parents from our dual language program to witness a cultural experience that would provoke them to consider their children's participation in the program as considerably more than learning Spanish for future opportunity, including advantages in employability.

We were excited to have in attendance a group comprised of parents, students, and educators from our local school district. All had an enjoyable experience. For some it reaffirmed the value they place within their families on the cultural strengths of their heritage. For others, it was an exploration of other, a look into art expressed through the lens of a history and way of being different than their own. For me, it only began to scratch the surface of the possibilities in the exploration of borderlands. It was not that the artistic expression witnessed did not continue to speak to the importance of critically developing a cultural awareness within our dual language program, but that it so poignantly resounded within the landscape of a greater community focus.

I began to consider the application of nepantla within my work as Community and Attendance Liaison and more consciously explore the various borderlands that the students and parents with whom I work, traverse every day, oftentimes of great consequence to living a life of hope and joy. Within this consideration, nuanced explorations of nepantla and *sin fronteras* emerged, more fully capturing the fluidity that Anzaldúa (2012) posited in *To live in the Borderlands means you*, challenging us to “be a crossroads” (p. 217).

These concepts lived at the surface of my being for months after witnessing Ballet Nepantla’s performance and when our school district was offered the opportunity to host the Company within our own community, the wheels set in motion to coordinate friends and colleagues to receive them with a great anticipation to both disrupt and reignite our imaginations around the arts as a vehicle of cultural expression, as well as sense making. From negotiating the use of performance space and musical equipment to recruiting community members to prepare a homemade meal for our guests that evening, and everything in between, all became a microcosm of the intimacy of relationship at the forefront of meaningful community development.

Within this tapestry shone a vivid strand and an exemplary model of the *new mestiza*, that through her experience, I was better able to make sense of the profound nature and impact of the day. This *new mestiza*, my niece and co-author, during *pláticas* over coffee or lunch, expressed an experience of personal (r)evolution, a critical introspection of self spurred by Ballet Nepantla’s performance as is documented in and through our conversations.

TIA: I was very excited about you joining us for Ballet Nepantla’s visit. There was no question that you would enjoy the performance, but I also knew there would be time for you to witness their rehearsal and get a behind-the-scenes glimpse into the preparation. What sense did you experience when you were first introduced to the Company and as they prepared for the opening curtain?

SOFIA: I recall feelings of insecurity while observing them rehearse. It was a sense of intimidation by the quality and intensity of their preparation. I had not experienced this level within my own training as a ballet folklórico dancer, and it made me at once doubt my skill level and question my commitment to the art. They were on point and exact in their measurements. I also remember the quality of the traditional ballet moves that were infused and almost involuntarily using it as a unit of measurement of my abilities.

TIA: Did that feeling subside at any point? How did you make sense of it?

SOFIA: It was more that it disappeared rather than subsided. We took our seats in the front row, the performance began, the artists appeared...and then they smiled! And a sense of joy washed over me and I remember thinking, is this what I inspire in others when I dance? In an instant I was elevated to a very different way of understanding my own experience as a dancer. It provoked in me a need to reflect about this art that I not only perform, but that has also accompanied me through most of my life.

TIA: What most stood out to you when you were reflecting?

SOFIA: I think it was this crossing from the technical aspects of the performance to the expression of it, if that makes sense. When I was in elementary school, I danced because it was fun and I found beauty in the dress and artistry. I do not recall it being about getting the steps right or wrong. This perspective began to change as I got older and I became more aware about a certain purpose of the dance. There had to be technical components to it. There were right steps and wrong steps. But even at this point, it remained a joyful expression.

TIA: Was there a time when it stopped being joyful?

SOFIA: As I watched Ballet Nepantla, I wondered who they were dancing for, themselves or others. In reflecting on my experience, I remember going from dancing for myself and others, to performing for judges. In middle school, I reached a level of skill that catapulted me to leader within my group. I was not a leader in position necessarily, but I remember working with my peers and providing them feedback and guidance and it made me feel a sense of pride and accomplishment. But I also remember that when I was officially given a position of officer within my dance group, I evolved into judge and jury instead. I became hyper focused on the technical aspects of the dance, on getting things “right” and I lost the joy that I had once experienced. In my own performances, especially solos, I found myself dancing for the judges and only the judges.

TIA: In our *pláticas*, we have discussed the concept of nepantla or in betweenness. I have mentioned some of the challenges that I see daily in the youth and families that I meet through my work in the school district and I begin to consider how so many, for varied reasons, are experiencing these spaces and how we might frame opportunities for them to make sense for themselves and reclaim a sense of hope. You just turned 18 and are entering your last year of high school. How do you understand this concept as it relates to what you were experiencing during this space in which you lost a joy for dancing?

SOFIA: I had never really considered it as a space or in betweenness, but I can see it. What happened in family, happened in dance. The separation of my mom and dad disrupted my security in family, faith and dance. Dance became a discipline of trying to get through the disruption. I was simply following the motions and waiting for things to start making sense again. The technical aspects continued to be the dominant force in dance and in life. I continued to play the role of officer and felt a need to be everyone’s rock. I know you were moved by the performance of *La Llorona*, and I can see why. It draws you in and you connect to the anguish, it is almost as if you are experiencing life and not a performance. I sensed the weight of the tragedy as if it were my own, carrying my own pain as well as that of others.

TIA: I believe you have experienced it with a greater rawness as a performance artist, this opportunity that the arts have to heal and connect community to think in new ways around deep issues. It has been a few months since Ballet Nepantla’s performance, what has continued to stand out for you?

SOFIA: I came away from the performance with a greater awareness of myself, both personally and as a dancer. I relive the moment when they smiled and it was present in my first competition after witnessing the ballet. The framing for that competition was to dance for the joy

of expression, both to feel the joy myself and to share it with others. It was the most alive I have felt in dance and I can only describe it as being outside of my own body and watching myself perform. I knew that if I could dance for me, then that energy would cross over to the audience and that joy would then be reciprocated. It was an overwhelming sense of connection. In that moment, I captured a greater understanding of the art as a whole, the roots of the culture, the why of the dress and the steps, and the regions and the inheritance they represent. The response I received was wonderful. I later watched a video of the performance and wept because I recognized that I had accomplished dancing for the joy of expression rather than the judgement of the performance. I am now remembering why I dance.

Reflection

I consider the mature young woman that my niece has become and continues to become, and I consider the phenomenon of community development within the context of educational spaces and the borderlands that are created. Anzaldúa (2012) called us to take inventory and distinguish between “*lo heredado, lo adquirido, lo impuesto*” – that which was inherited, that which was acquired, that which was imposed (p. 104). Ballet Nepantla’s *Sin Fronteras* is evidence of this inventory, but also of a rupture and a reimagination of the joy and possibilities born of the human spirit through music and dance. And it is in this spirit that I posit Ballet Nepantla’s performance of *Sin Fronteras* as reaffirmation that the strength and health of any community is only as strong as the space in which our commonalities and our differences are acknowledged and embraced as gift and possibility.

References

Anzaldúa, G. (2012). *Borderlands/la frontera: The new mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.