Preface

HOW TO MAKE IT TO THE DANCE FLOOR IN LOS ANGELES

This salsa story began in October 1999, when some graduate students from UCLA, Collette and Stephanie, were grumbling to me about the previous Saturday night; they had spent it at El Reino de la Salsa in Hollywood.[1] No one had asked them to dance, so they danced with each other, feeling like complete outsiders.

When I asked them to recommend a place to go dancing (I was new in town), they warned me not to go to El Reino de la Salsa if I hoped to dance. The people there, they said, were unfriendly and stuck up and had not even acknowledged their presence. But I had also heard from a male acquaintance that El Reino de la Salsa was one of the best salsa clubs in Los Angeles, known for its live music and Cuban salsa. He felt as though he belonged to the "salsa family" that had emerged within this club's intimate setting. I decided to try my luck at this place, given my interest in finding a Latino-based dance club in which to root my L.A. social life as well as my ethnographic inquiry.

I had illusions of inviting Collette and Stephanie back to the club once I

had performed some of the groundwork to establish myself as a member of the "family." These plans were dashed, however, when, on my first night at El Reino de la Salsa, like Colette and Stephanie, I could not make it to the dance floor. My ability to belong amid the crowd of dancers was dependent on a man asking me to dance. More specifically, it was dependent on a man appraising me as a desirable dance partner. That first night at El Reino de la Salsa, I spent a lot of time sitting around, taking note of how men and women went about forming these temporary partnerships—enactments of the usual heteronormative routine in which women generally wait to be asked by men before they step onto the dance floor. Why, I asked myself, did this heteronormative formation seem so much more heightened than I'd ever noticed before?

The doorman reluctantly seated my friend Jan and me at an empty table tucked into the corner by the door. From my chair I had an unobstructed view of people coming and going, in to dance and out to smoke. When the doorman brought over two other women—we soon learned that their names were Yolanda and Dora—to join us, he told us that we are lucky to have been seated at a table, since none of us had made reservations.

Despite the inauspicious welcome, we four were determined to enjoy the evening. Yolanda and Dora, who told me they were from El Salvador, were thrilled to be there on a rare night out; they had rounded up their boyfriends to do babysitting duty. Jan doesn't speak Spanish, so couldn't converse with Yolanda and Dora unless I translated. After our introductions, however, Yolanda and Dora didn't make any further attempts to use my translation services. Neither did Jan. Yolanda and Dora spoke mostly with each other, and sometimes with me, in Spanish.

Yolanda, Dora, Jan, and I were passed over as dance partners when the musicians opened with a salsa, so I surveyed the scene. A man and a woman in their sixties (I later found out their names, Javier and Ernestina, and that they came to the club every weekend) beat the other couples to the floor. She held the hem of her blue-sequined dress so lightly that the skirt appeared to smoothly sway on its own; then she startled us as she abruptly stepped out to the side, her sequins swishing in response. She and Javier embraced. He paused. Poised on the ball of her foot, she was ready for him to begin at any moment, in any direction. He dramatically waited several counts and then pushed forward across the floor, navigating in between the other couples without taking his eyes off Ernestina.

A white woman in a tight, sleeveless, sequined, pastel-colored leopard-print dress and purple high heels entered the club. She tossed her shoulder-length, permed and dyed red hair, kissed the doorman on the cheek as if she had been here before, and was swept up almost immediately by a male partner; she was on the floor, dancing salsa, within sixty seconds of her arrival. It was stunning. Most of the other people had eased into dancing at a slower pace, as if getting warmed up to the music and to each other.

"How did she make it to the floor so fast?" I wondered. Maybe she was a regular visitor to the club. Perhaps people knew her and liked how she danced. Or maybe it was her outfit. At this thought, I realized that most of the women who were dancing were wearing sequins or leopard prints, high heels, hoop earrings, and miniskirts. Their black-suited partners might not have found my Target pants and minimal heels very appealing. I wasn't yet sure how the sequins fit in, but many of the women dancing had assembled outfits that signified "Latinaness," albeit the kind belonging to the forbidden, exotic dancing Latina bodies represented in Hollywood movies, such as *Shall We Dance?* (2004) and *Dirty Dancing: Havana Nights* (2004).

As the band drew out the last note of the set, the red-haired woman's purple heel caught the hem of Ernestina's dress, and the sequins unraveled and scattered. Javier stooped to help Ernestina collect them. Recorded music came over the loudspeakers as the band and its following took a break, making space on the floor for The Unsequined: those adorned in less flashy attire who seem to be more concerned with dance as a form of socializing. Then a Latino came to the table to invite Dora to dance. Once on the floor, they intertwined their fingers and approximated the rhythm, slowing down or skipping steps to resynchronize as they chatted in place.

While I scanned the room, I took note of the activities and outfits of one other class of club-goers: Women Not Dancing. About eight Latinas in their twenties, all in black dresses, got up from a table and left, without having danced. Maybe they had just come to the club for the dining experience and hadn't wanted to dance, or maybe no one had wanted to dance with them. Maybe they had wanted to dance, refused to subject themselves to the gendered rules of this club, and decided to go to lesbian night at the salsa club in Silver Lake instead.

Then I noticed another group: White Women Dancing with White Women. Two white women—they reminded me of Collette and Stephanie—faced each

other, dancing to differing beats. One of them tossed her hair, while the other waved her arms in the air and spun around. Two other white women were dancing together, embracing on the opposite side of the floor, exaggeratedly pushing their hips from side to side with painstaking effort. None of these four white women had danced when the band was playing. While inwardly I cheered their determination to dance without waiting for men to ask them in this decidedly queer-unfriendly space, I also cringed at their mimicry of the "Latina-like" moves they had seen throughout the evening.

When I used to go to clubs in San Jose with my cousins or friends, we'd take a similar approach, dancing with each other. Usually we didn't make it through the first song, however, before men would come and spin us off in different directions. At times we women would prefer to dance together and refuse offers that would, in effect, split us apart. At El Reino de la Salsa, however, I hadn't yet manufactured this kind of arrangement with the women at my table, and I was not exactly eager to align myself with the Latina-mimicking white women. Stuck at the table in the corner, desiring to dance but without any offers, I was sure this would change once people saw that I know how to salsa. I figured that if I could just electrify everyone with my dancing, maybe the ordinariness of my unsequined outfit wouldn't matter.

I had never had any trouble fitting in to the dance scene at clubs in Colorado, Costa Rica, Cuba, or California's Bay Area, where I grew up. I had been dancing for years, beginning as a child, with my family in Milpitas, California. We danced to salsa, *cumbia,* merengue, soul, and disco music, although no one ever differentiated the genres by name. In Boulder, Colorado, beginning in 1993, I took my first formal lessons in social partner dances with Carmen Nelson. A native of Guatemala who had studied dance with Liliana Valle in Costa Rica, Nelson structured her classes around Valle's concept of *baile popular*, dances from Latin America popularized in Costa Rica, dances of everyday nightlife, including salsa, merengue, *cha cha chá*, *bolero, bolero son*, and *swing criollo* performed in social contexts.

In 1997 I studied dance for a year with Valle, the artistic and pedagogical director of the Merecumbé Centro de Enseñanza e Investigaciones de Baile Popular in San José, Costa Rica. In 1998 I spent five weeks studying *baile popular* with instructors in Havana and at the Escuela Nacional de Arte in Cuba. My interpretations of the social scenes in Los Angeles salsa clubs were greatly influ-

enced by both the informal dance practices of my Mexican American family and the *baile popular* pedagogies of my formal instructors. In neither of these situations did one dance genre seem to overshadow the others.

When I began my ethnographic research, I quickly learned that this was not always—or even often—the case. Salsa eclipsed all other genres in the Los Angeles clubs I first attended: El Reino de la Salsa, The Legend, Copa Cabana West, Valentino's on Mondays. Latino dance clubs advertised on the web and those endorsed by club patrons turned out to be salsa clubs. That is, Latina/o and non-Latina/o patrons went to these places almost exclusively to dance, and salsa was the dance that mattered most. Had the centralization of salsa affected how patrons across club cultures interpreted their nighttime corporealities? Conversely, had these desired corporealities effectively centralized salsa, making it the only dance that mattered?

When I asked about Las Feliz Edades, a club near my home on the East Side, patrons cautioned me not to go there. Las Feliz Edades, I was told, did not really "count" as a salsa club because the people there were mostly "low-class immigrants" who danced "their old, traditional styles," like *cumbia*, merengue, and *punta*.[2] I was told, "They don't know how to dance salsa there" and "They care more about socializing and drinking than dancing." The disparaging tones of these descriptions came from dancers whose fixations on the latest L.A. salsa moves marked them as *salseras/os* and distanced themselves from the "socializers" at Las Feliz Edades.

Meaning more than simply "one who dances or plays salsa," the term *salsera/o* is often associated in many locales with someone who not only demonstrates a high degree of knowledge of salsa but also has the ability to generate social prestige through her or his performances of it. In Los Angeles, however, the term *salsera/o* refers not simply to a person with knowledge of and a skilled performance of salsa dancing but to a person with apparent mastery of L.A. salsa in particular. It is by demonstrating mastery of this dominant, local style of salsa that salseras/os gain prestige, locally and globally. What does this style entail? Practitioners of L.A. salsa create moves in part by mining the legacy of an exoticized *latinidad* produced in Hollywood for American film and television.[3]

In Los Angeles patrons of salsa clubs divide dance practices into categories of salsa/not-salsa. Salsa has become the referent by which even non-salseras/os (such as socializers) locate themselves. Non-salseras/os commonly claim, "We

don't dance that flashy American salsa style" or "No bailo salsa, bailo cumbia!"[4] Non-salseras/os learn to recognize that alternatives to L.A. salsa practices are predominantly measured against and on the terms of L.A. salsa. Without a reference to salsa, their dance practices would not register outside of their social circles. Non-salseras/os thus learn to identify themselves in relation to the dominant practice of salsa, inadvertently yet inevitably reinscribing the binary opposition of salsa and its others: cumbia, merengue, and cha cha chá, for example.

I had intended to research and write about *baile popular*, but salsa has consumed my work. Local understandings of dance reframe *baile popular* as either not-salsa or only-salsa. I have thus taken on, challenged, stretched, relished in, struggled with, cursed, and submitted to salsa as a dominant analytical framework. My Los Angeles dance club investigations entail the qualitative, ethnographic study of salsa (and not-salsa) as an everyday or everynight social practice.

When the band at El Reino started up again, the red-haired woman with the hem-ripping purple heels followed a new partner to the floor to dance L.A. salsa. As they faced each other, they flung their arms above their heads, punctuating the air with their fingertips. Then they performed a series of rapid turns; with his hand on the back of her neck, he pulled her body toward his, and then abruptly pushed her away, only to pull her back in by the wrist. As the turns ended, he hoisted her over his head, upside-down, her legs opening into a split. Allowing her body to almost drop headfirst to the floor, he caught her by the hips, while she stabilized herself by pushing away from the floor with her hands and wrapping her legs around his waist. He then flipped up her skirt and slapped out a rhythm on her sequined buns-turned-congas. She lifted her torso upward and whipped her hair around as she landed on her feet once again.

I was simultaneously fascinated by their incredible virtuosity and disturbed by how precisely they performed the exaggerated combination of violence and sexuality often represented as *latinidad* in U.S. popular culture.[5] It's not that I could not see the possibility that women might gain pleasure and empowerment from performing eroticism in a social space.[6] What nagged at me was that the Latina eroticism performed was mediated predominantly by a history of cultural representations of Latinas as one-dimensionally exotic.[7]

The couple had danced an exoticism that was fed by and simultaneously reinforced the web of associations of Latinas as hypererotic, a legacy of colonialism. In this dance, exotic Latinaness was apparently made even more desirable with

the addition of sequins and ballroomesque arm moves. After a long time sitting, I noticed that women (Latina and otherwise) who did not embody this Latina stereotype and who did not execute L.A. salsa's swift turns, endless flourishes, dramatic lifts, and sparkly outfits, did not succeed in putting their bodies into circulation as dancers.

Without the stability of the sociofamilial groups I had been a part of in other places, I realized that navigating the Los Angeles club scene alone, especially as a woman who did not perform dominant, local conceptualizations of Latinaness, did not feel like a leisurely activity. Was it possible for newcomers to belong to the scene without performing exoticizations of *latinidad*?

With the abundance of clubs in the Los Angeles area, I thought that I might be able to escape the pressures to perform the sequined Latinaness required by L.A. salsa by going to a different club. Perhaps I could fit in among the "socializers" at a club like Las Feliz Edades, where the dancing sounded more familiar and less exotic, where women were included in the social dance scene even if they did not measure up to the exotic dance and outfit standards for L.A. salseras.

As I was to find out, even though many of the practices at Las Feliz Edades overlapped with my own, my status as a fair-skinned American academic ethnographically soaking in details marked me as an outsider. To an extent, I felt like an intruder, venturing into a social haven for mostly immigrant patrons who wished to escape the anti-immigrant American gaze. At the not-salsa club of Las Feliz Edades, patrons deliberately distanced themselves from the L.A. salseras/os. As I was to conclude later, an analysis of the distinctions between salsa and not-salsa interlaces with the politics of migration, citizenship, and belonging that underlie local dance cultures.

In salsa contexts at clubs like El Reino, I started my research as a wallflower, a (non)participant observer. This unsolicited, sedentary position afforded me the opportunity to survey the choreography of belonging, to assess how patrons bestow social membership within the parameters of nightclub culture and salsa ideologies. To these observations I brought an analytic framework of choreography in order to understand the social and political relationships of bodies in motion. Susan Foster (1998: 4) posits choreography as a set of culturally situated codes and values regarding gestures, movements, and speech through which identities, and thus social memberships, are configured. What are the choreographic codes of membership at work in salsa and not-salsa clubs? I asked.

Through a close analysis of bodily practices, both on and off the dance floor, at several clubs, I have assessed how choreographies of belonging overlap with discourses of *latinidad*.

In the context of staged concert dance performances, choreographers are listed, and their choreographic intentions often summarized, in a program. One then interprets choreography based on the performance, considering what the dancers were "supposed to do" within an overall plan that organizes elements such as space, time, and effort. In the social settings of nightclubs, however, there are no program notes, no explicit choreographer, and no summary of what an observer is about to witness. The social codes and dance values in play often become apparent through the tensions that arise when someone breaks with the choreography.

In the ethnography that follows, I analyze dominant club choreographies and their disruptions—the stumbles, mediocre motions, and miscues—in order to understand how women make it to the dance floor. In the course of my research, it became apparent that gendered choreographies in L.A. salsa clubs are tangled up with the politics of globalization, transnationalism, migration, and citizenship, politics not immediately associated with spaces of leisure in a city known for its movie productions, movie stars, and abundance of rich people working in the movie industry. I thus examine how the Hollywood movie industry relates to my concerns about the social, political, and economic implications of the hierarchies of gender, ethnicity, class, and nation within clubs. I address these macropolitics of belonging throughout the book as I present how classed, racialized, and gendered social bodies—bodies of Latin American migrants, Chicanas/os, Latinas/os, and non-Latinas/os—participate in salsa settings.

The salsa stories I recount point to choreographies of power. They show that to move up the salsa social hierarchy, local salseras/os must perform an exoticized L.A.-style salsa that distances them from club practices associated with undocumented Mexican laborers. They indicate that in Los Angeles, dancing "like a Mexican" is equated with dancing salsa "wrong." They reveal that belonging as a Latina/o citizen in the United States is in dialogue with the parameters for social membership in salsa clubs. And these stories show that many L.A. Latinas/os attempt to eliminate from their own performances any dance techniques that can locate them as migrants, as poor or working class, as Mexican, or as undocumented, whether or not these categories accurately characterize them.

During my ethnographic research in Los Angeles, I found that social membership and mobility in the nightclubs depends on one's repertoire of select bodily techniques and movement practices. From the timing of exiting the dance floor to the sequined shimmer of a spin and the intricate lift of a properly tweezed eyebrow, dancers tie themselves not simply to a salsa style but also to a particular conceptualization of *latinidad*. This book is concerned with enactments of *latinidad* in salsa spaces.

Grounding Critical Ethnography

Feminist ethnographic methodologies have profoundly influenced this project. The fieldwork took place between 1999 and 2005 in Los Angeles, the city to which I moved in order to study practices of *baile popular*. By studying the gendered salsa relationships amid the hierarchies of class, race, and nation, I have heeded Kamala Visweswaran's (1995: 113) argument that the decolonization of feminist ethnography necessitates the integration of gender with other axes of difference.

Visweswaran (1995: 113) also calls for homework: the critical analysis of one's own position in conjunction with fieldwork. Understanding the ways I became implicated in Los Angeles salsa clubs requires that I consider the degree to which I can claim the status of native ethnographer. And this requires that I call into question the extent to which I can frame Los Angeles, or even salsa clubs within Los Angeles, as home. Native ethnographers such as José Limón went back home to study the practice of polka dancing in south Texas, but my own home is neither singular nor obvious. The Bay Area city of Milpitas is the place in which I grew up and the one that feels most like home. Many place-bound notions of home, however, do not take into account the mobility of populations and that social relationships might occur outside the place, even across distances (Rouse 1991: 14). In my case, many of the people I knew there have moved away, including my parents and me. This place is my home only in memory.

Los Angeles, the place I chose to call home during my research, became the site in which I studied the way salsa practices contribute to the configuration of U.S. *latinidad*. Salsa in Los Angeles became a kind of homing device—for me and for many other Latinas/os living there. Just as many Latinas/os and Latin Americans (who may never have danced salsa before) ground themselves or find themselves grounded as Latinas/os through practices of salsa, I grounded my

ethnography of home not in a place where I already have roots but in a practice through which I rooted myself into a new place. Supposedly.

As I suggested earlier, not everyone conceives of salsa in the same way. My way turned out to be the "wrong" way, which jeopardized any easy claim to insider, "native" ethnographer status. And yet even ethnographers who can legitimately claim that they are from a particular dance culture do not fully participate as insiders, because the importance of the ethnographic project can outweigh the importance of success on the dance floor.[8] To what degree, then, am I an insider in this project, a native ethnographer who performs fieldwork at home?

With an increase in transnational and even intranational migration, insider status in a salsa club based on ethnicity, class, nation, or past experience with salsa is neither automatic nor guaranteed. One often is recognized as an insider only after undergoing rigorous salsa (re)training in accordance with local practices. Latinas/os and non-Latinas/os who have never danced salsa before have been able to join the in-crowd in mere months by virtue of their success in L.A. salsa lessons. In contrast, Latinas/os who have danced salsa all their lives may be considered outsiders if, in the context of Los Angeles, their practices are perceived as Mexican *cumbia* rather than salsa. I qualify my insider/outsider status with an understanding that I could not have substituted a study of samba, reggae, or tango for salsa. As a (red-haired) Chicana feminist ethnographer who has been accused of dancing salsa "like a Mexican" when relieved of her "wallflowering," I recognized I was at times implicated as both an insider and an outsider.

I point to my own shifting status as another technique of feminist ethnography. I do so in response to ethnographies in which the body of the ethnographer disappears in the text, only to emerge as a voice that is omniscient and authoritative. As Ruth Behar (1996) writes, a feminist ethnographer draws attention to herself as a vulnerable observer, indicating her bodily presence by revealing her emotions. As she witnesses social injustices, poverty, and death, the vulnerable observer conveys her discomfort, anguish, and fears with the intention of stirring empathy in readers, thereby possibly deepening their grasp of unfamiliar milieus. Behar writes that the vulnerable observer must consider the degree to which she is willing to participate, what to document or leave out, and how to do so without departing from the genre of ethnography when in the midst "of a massacre, in the face of torture, in the eyes of a hurricane, in the aftermath of an earthquake, or even, say, when horror looms apparently more gently in memories that won't

recede and so come pouring forth in the late-night quiet of a kitchen, as a storyteller opens her heart to a story listener, recounting hurts that cut deep and raw into the gullies of the self" (2).

One can hardly equate the salsa club anxieties of wallflowering, the turmoil of walking across a room *solita*,[9] and the dread of the unavoidable missteps, miscues, and mistranslations with the horrors of torture, hurricanes, and massacres. Descriptions of these awkward nightclub moments might elicit laughter, an emotional response more conducive to salsa environs than tears of rage or screams of grief. Yet within salsa clubs, social injustice, poverty, and death—the horrors of everyday life that may provoke rage and grief—lurk just below the surface of sequined corporealities.

As club patrons couple leopard prints and hot-pink feathers with smooth techniques, they produce fantastic nighttime corporealities enmeshed in the hierarchies of nation, race, and class of daily life, all (or at lease some) of which they attempt to obscure. Latinas gain higher positions in the nighttime salsa hierarchy by distancing themselves from the bounces of *cumbia* that mark Mexicanness; the drinking of alcohol, which signifies "illegal" immigrant status; and the practice of walking around the club by themselves, which marks the women with "low-class" promiscuity.

Unlike sequins and hair tosses, laughter in a club setting does not disguise these social hierarchies as much as it makes them easier to bear. Patrons joke about each other's daytime struggles and nighttime shortcomings. Yet the stark materialities of death and survival from outside the club often slip past the doorman, cut through the music, and haunt escapist pretenses of unity. When this happens, no one laughs. The moments of humor embedded in the details of my own awkward club experiences highlight the hierarchies and political undercurrents in clubs. At times I've used humor to elucidate the differential vulnerabilities and mobilities among Latinas in heterosexual economies of *latinidad*. I do so, however, with full appreciation of the tragedies that often lie just beneath the sequined surface of the club scene.

My observations and discussions with both longtime L.A. clubbers and newcomers caused me to reflect on how patrons negotiate their belonging in Los Angeles salsa clubs, to ask how they are called in to corporeality amid the conflicting choreographies of *latinidad* already in circulation when they walk into clubs. Through their social practices in nightclubs where Latino expressive

culture is centralized, Latina and Latino patrons enact the tensions between Americanness and *latinidad*. During my research, the longer I spent trying to figure out how to get to the dance floor, how to participate within these embattled club choreographies, the more I learned from others that I would have to pay attention to the practices and relationships in the club in order to "make it." Furthermore, even if I made it to the dance floor, I might end up stepping on someone else. Or she might end up stepping on me.

In the spring of 2000 the *salsero* who had recommended El Reino de la Salsa suggested I go to the West Coast Salsa Congress. He said that the congress was an annual event to which dancers come from all over the world, united by their love of salsa. For this salsero, the congress provided a space that transcended histories and social differences. Yet I found that what united the cosmopolitan congress participants from a multitude of nations with the L.A. salseros was the mutual acknowledgment that L.A. salsa was spinning like a whirlwind toward the top of local and global salsa hierarchies.