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Talking Trash: Performing Home and Anti-Home in Austin's Salsa Culture

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Talking trash:

Performing home and anti-home in Austin's salsa culture

ABSTRACT

Austin, Texas, has long been recognized for its racial and ethnic segregation. Policies created in 1927 officially segregated the city, and the public landscape has remained divided. How does a cosmopolitan community of difference constitute itself against the dominant Anglo culture of this Texan city? Analyzing the speech genre of "trash talk" in salsa-club culture, I demonstrate how affect is created in language and how this speech genre co-occurs with other aesthetic practices to produce a sense of belonging across boundaries of race and class. The tension between "home" and "anti-home" creates affective and discursive engagement, mitigating paradox in spaces of alterity. [*affect, class, home, language, music, salsa*]

Perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition.

—James Baldwin

In Austin, Texas, a community of diverse people frequents a particular club to dance salsa. It is by far the most heterogeneous community visible on the public landscape, comprising Venezuelan, Iranian, Turkish, Spanish, Cuban, Haitian, Polish, Israeli, Mexican, Moroccan, French, German, Puerto Rican, Indian, West African, Peruvian, Dominican, African American, and Anglo dancers. How does such a cosmopolitan community of difference constitute itself against the dominant Anglo culture of this Texan city? I assert that speech genres help constitute communities of affect in public spaces of alterity. Analyzing the indexical and metadiscursive elements in "trash talk"—the primary speech genre in the domain of salsa-club culture in Austin (Thornton 1996)—I demonstrate how this genre creates an affectively engaged community composed of people with different assumptions concerning gender, race, etiquette, and permissibility. To be engaged—engagé—is to be emotionally involved but also to be linked and implicated in relations of affective obligation. The genre of trash talk helps to mitigate the paradox present in contexts of heterogeneity, developing new forms of subjectivity in the public sphere (Habermas 1989; Lee 1997).

Postmodern forms of socializing are often characterized by impersonalism, consumption, and anxiety (Stewart 2000). Reactions to these modalities of late capitalism often come in the way of a radical localness—exemplified in discourses of authenticity, purity, nationalism, and other assertions of identity.¹ In this article, I explore a third space—the creation of communities of affect based not on discourses of blood or genealogy but on aesthetic and linguistic practices that bring together diverse populations in what I call a "public home," a space of intimacy in the public sphere that challenges historical concepts of "private" and "public" (Berlant 2000; Herzfeld 1997). Whereas subcultures have been defined by the tension between parent and

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youth cultures (Cohen 1972, 1999; Hebdige 1979; Whyte 1955), heterogeneous communities of affect, often composed of nomadic populations of diverse ethnicity and class, demand a more encompassing trope of analysis.² The post-modern moment, etched as it is in travel and diasporic populations, gives rise to different forms of belonging and to communities that are neither seamless nor conflict free. Indeed, I argue that “home” does not exist apart from its counterpart, the “anti-home.”

Talking trash: Indexicality, performativity, and the creation of a metaculture

Speech genres are underanalyzed domains of human experience primarily because they are among the most naturalized (thus, invisible) forms of expression; yet speech genres constitute modes of perceiving and being in the world (Bakhtin 1986; Hanks 1988). Although the limits (or laws) of genre are always slippery and mutable (Derrida 1980), speech genres, nonetheless, anchor the subject to the time and space of their enunciation; they live a life woven into the pragmatics of speaking. Their analysis is, thus, essential to understanding how subjectivities and feelings are created at the discursive level. As Joel Sherzer notes, it is “especially in verbally artistic discourse such as poetry, magic, verbal dueling, and political rhetoric that the potentials and resources provided by grammar, as well as cultural meanings and symbols, are exploited to the fullest and the essence of language-culture relationships become salient” (1987:296; see also Urban 1991). Exploring these language-culture relationships entails close attention to how language is used to effect, or perform, a particular affective stance. Categories like gender, for example, are rarely defined directly; rather, attitudes about gender (and other nominal categories, including race, ethnicity, class, and subjectivity) are mediated by indexical relations—that is, by signs that point outside themselves to historically determined associations, stances, and acts (Ochs 1992; Silverstein 1976, 1985). Some of these indexicals are referential, whereas others are more pragmatic, relying on intonation, morphology, gesture, and even silence (Gal 1991). Although the importance of analyzing the indexical content of language has long been recognized (Austin 1962; Peirce 1961; Silverstein 1976), the link between indexical signs and performativity has remained relatively obscure. As Benjamin Lee notes,

What [John] Austin discovered was that language cannot be understood without looking at the interplay between indexicality and meta-indexicality, between signs whose interpretation is tied to the moment of speaking and signs that represent such signs. Performatives work because they coordinate these two levels—an indexicalized speech event brings about the very speech act it seems meta-indexically to refer to and describe. [1997:11]

Focusing on the way affect is indexed in trash talk, I elucidate the performativity of speech genres—their ability to create as well as describe a world (Austin 1962). Whereas much of the work on affect and language has been exemplified by data drawn from communities of relative homogeneity (Abu-Lughod 1986; Besnier 1988, 1991; Brenneis 1990; Caton 1990; Irvine 1990; Trawick 1990), I demonstrate how public sentiment is created in spaces of alterity and paradox and, moreover, how the different aesthetic systems employed at the club (music, dance, and gesture) co-occur with language to produce a sense of belonging, a public dwelling for a population that is unusually heterogeneous.³

The primary discourse genre of the club is “talking trash.” This designation itself indexes the affective stance speakers take toward the genre. Trash talk constitutes a sort of “affective register”; it is “a style of speaking” that is informal, passionate, ludic, and divulging (Irvine 1990:128). Talking trash is a colloquial designation for gossip, a genre that relies on secrets as well as on the absence of the person under discussion (Abrahams 1993; Brenneis 1984; Haviland 1977; Kapchan 1996). Much of the talk in this genre is about the intimate lives of the “players” in the club and their relationships with each other. A close reading of trash talk reveals that desire is created in language as much as it is enacted by bodies. Indeed, bodies and words are completely interdependent in this realm: A narrative about a relationship usually survives the actual relationship, creating the persona of the “player” in the eyes of his or her peers. Because of the noise level at the club, however, people can talk trash about the person adjacent to them at the bar and still remain discreet. The irony of this is not lost on the interlocutors. Trash talk contains a high level of intertextuality and reported speech as past conversations are recounted and revised in new contexts and under new circumstances. Most importantly, trash talk is metadiscursive—the interlocutors are conscious of creating a world with their words.

Setting the scene

Salsa culture in Austin has had a mobile history. The late Puerto Rican composer and bandleader (and my teacher) Willie Santiago dated the advent of salsa culture in Austin to the 1980s. When he came to Austin in 1981, there were no salsa clubs *per se*. Willie began playing Latin jazz in a dance club that featured other kinds of music, mostly jazz and disco. The response to his music was positive, and he worked up a repertoire with bands like Orquesta Shati. The musicians drew such an enthusiastic crowd that the club owner asked them to do a regular gig twice a week. For Willie, this was the beginning of the salsa scene in Austin—a group of devoted Latin music and dance lovers has since followed the musicians in the city from club to club as venues have closed and reopened. Music has provided a kind of sonic homing device that has brought different groups together.

Austin has long been recognized for its racial and ethnic segregation. Policies created in 1927 officially segregated the city (Shank 1994), and the public landscape has remained, with some exceptions, segregated (Fox 2004). Austin's fame as the "live music capital of the world" is built primarily on honky-tonk (Fox 2004), folk music, and, more recently, rock and roll and punk music (Shank 1994)—all genres in which Anglos have been the predominant players. There were and are both African American and Mexican American performance venues, of course, but there has been very little mixing among musicians historically (Limón 1994).

Aaron Fox, who did research just outside Austin in Lockhart notes that, there, the redneck mentality prevails, "rooted," he says, "in the southern US, and in the specific white supremacist, antimodern, and antiurban politics and culture of the Confederacy" (2004:25). This mentality has not been limited to Lockhart. Barry Shank (1994) documents the importance of the country-music scene in Austin, with performers like Willie Nelson and Jerry Jeff Walker coming to stand for the musical identity of the city. What is more, in the 1980s, he remarks, because of alliances made across musical communities and political factions, the "cultural identity promulgated in Austin's progressive country scene increasingly reinforced a set of characteristics traditionally associated with white, male, Texan entrepreneurs" (Shank 1994:16). The Anglo male aesthetic exists in the Lockhart clubs as well. Indeed, Fox (2004:70) notes an almost complete absence of African American and immigrant Mexican and Mexican American women, although African American and Mexican men sometimes frequent (Anglo) taverns. The absence of minority women may have to do with cultural mores that assign negative values to unaccompanied women in public bars; however, it is also a response to racism.⁴ Accounts of verbal art in the region document how discourse genres establish regional identity and reinforce the stereotypes that Anglos hold about Mexicans and that Mexicans and Mexican Americans hold about Anglos (Bauman 1986; Bauman and Abrahams 1981; Limón 1994; Paredes 1958). The salsa scene, however, is a decidedly nonredneck space. It defines itself against that culture and population. What is more, it mixes ethnicities, races, and genders in a way that is unique in south-central Texas.

The Austin landscape has changed since the 1980s. The divisions between the Anglo populations and the Mexican American populations became even more pronounced in the 1990s as Austin became more affluent, in part because of the city's development of its soft industry and its status as the second "Silicon Valley." The computer industry attracted elites from other cities (including many non-Anglo professionals) and forced property values higher and higher. African American and Mexican American neighborhoods in south and east Austin became gentrified, raising property taxes and forcing many of the older families farther south or north. Chic boutiques replaced long-standing businesses,

and national chains closed down virtually every independent bookstore.⁵ In economies like this, the exploitation of undocumented workers thrives. As George Lipsitz (1998) astutely notes, the "possessive investment in whiteness" is particularly insidious in contexts in which racial privilege is disguised in discourses of the free market. Austin, Texas, has been a raging free market for quite a while, and its class divisions have only grown starker.

The attractions and tensions of what I call, following local parlance, "the club" are not easy to chart, as the club not only was racially diverse but also was frequented by people of all classes. Many of the regulars in the club were professionals—a Haitian lawyer, two affluent Afro-Caribbean computer specialists, a Senegalese man from an elite (noble) family, a Mexican architect, a Mexican computer operator, a Peruvian environmentalist, an Indian businessman, to identify but a few men. Among the women were a Venezuelan restaurant manager, a Spanish manager of an apartment complex, an African American professor, and a Turkish scientist as well as students from the university. People who were not professionals were also regulars—a Cuban box stacker, a Mexican American man who worked at a supermarket, an Iranian hairdresser, and an African American short-order cook. An overwhelming majority of the Anglo women dancers, myself included, had working-class roots. At the club, in other words, the class mimesis took place as much within color lines as across them. The public home created inside the club constituted itself in contradistinction to the elite Anglo world outside the club (Muñoz 2000).

My own engagement with this research followed a musical progression, a kind of *descarga* (Afro-Cuban jam session) in which I improvised my research on top of the ostinato of my passion for dance. More plainly put, I sought out the dance at an intersection of my life at which I needed a community of affect built around an aesthetic practice. Having learned how to follow just about any lead from my mother, a dance teacher, I was initially exhilarated by my ability to perform this dormant competence. I quickly became engaged on other levels as well, however. As an amateur flutist I had long been enamored of *charanga* music, a genre with roots in the Cuban *danzón*, which features violin and flute. I became interested in taking lessons in this genre and asked a Latin music aficionado (Michael Crockett, the disc jockey of Austin's longest-running Latin music radio program, *Horizontes*) to suggest a teacher. He told me to speak to Willie Santiago, the bandleader of the group the Brew, who played at the club every Thursday night. Willie agreed to instruct me, and I began taking lessons and practicing a couple of hours a day. I was immersed. When I was not listening to salsa music, I was playing it; when I was not playing it, I was dancing. Soon I was a member of an aspiring salsa band, led by percussionist Nestor Lopez and his vocalist wife, Magda Traeger. We practiced weekly in a small living room in north Austin and eventually played a few (very)

low-profile gigs. I took Spanish lessons (rehearsals were in Spanish).

When I found myself coming home from the club and writing field notes and transcriptions of discourse at 2:00 a.m., I knew I had to formalize my relationships. I spoke to my closest friends at the club and told them that my interests had become academic as well as personal. They were amused and supportive. After that, I often went to the club with my camera. I told the regulars that I had begun a documentary film about Willie (which I had). As I was not the first professor to fall in love with the scene, people were not the least bit surprised. My research continued for three years, until a new life and a new job took me away from Austin and the club.

Trash talk and metadiscourse

When I first got to know the women at the club, I found that they had already started the ethnography I hoped to do.

"We're writing 'The Salsa Chronicles,'" Nicole told me. "It's a saga." She laughed. "We have names for everyone here: There's Crazy—he's called that because he truly is crazy; there's Pimple-Face, there's the Guy-Who's-Really-Gay." I cringed at the callousness of some of the monikers, but Nicole seemed unfazed. "We have code names for everyone here," she told me.

Nicole's designations are saturated with affective meaning, although they draw surprisingly little on stereotypes of race. Rather, her words define a speech community at the club. The pronoun *we* in Nicole's discourse refers to the women regulars, the female players. They stand in the corner, to the left of the band, near the hallway that leads to the bathroom. Everyone recognizes these women. They are not exclusive. To the contrary, as soon as one's presence becomes predictable at the club, one is inducted into their ranks—or at least given a chance to belong. These *salseras* are of different ethnic and racial affiliations, although most, as I have noted, have fiercely working-class identifications. Belonging to their group means being part of the discourse community, willing to participate, to divulge secrets (one's own and those of others), and to comment on the scene, especially in regard to the men who are also players. Nicole's use of the first-person plural to describe this subcommunity self-consciously creates the community (Singer 1980). Talking trash means knowing the saga and being implicated in it. A saga, like a chronicle, takes place over time. In fact, putting in time at the club procures a license to belong. The women regulars are quite literally "writing the Salsa Chronicles," not with paper and ink but with body and words.

There are many ways to gauge how affective engagement is constituted in language (Besnier 1990). Words about emotions describe states of desire, disgust, elation, and so on. Emotion may be either explicitly named ("I was sad") or indexed by its recognized attributes ("I cried for hours").

Terms of address form part of this affective lexicon as do adjectives and monikers. Referring to a friend or acquaintance as a "brother" is a way of creating intimacy in a public space, whereas using racial or ethnic labels may create division.

"The Latinos are lucky," Bobby, an African American short-order cook in his early fifties, once said to me. "They've got community. They know who they are. African Americans don't have the solidarity that Latinos do." Bobby's remarks index a desire for placement, a desire to belong that, I submit, is common among the transplanted populations that frequent the club. It is this desire for belonging, for home, that forms the basis of the community of players (the regulars define *player* variously—as a man on the street, a Don Juan, a good dancer, a lady's man, a loose woman, a con artist, or a gambler).⁶ Players are united in their desire to create a home in the public sphere of salsa culture. That this home is grounded in a Latin aesthetic does not prevent others from feeling at home there. What is it that prompts Bobby to imagine a coherent community that congregates under the name "Latino," especially in Austin, where Mexicans have been historically dominant but where salsa—a Caribbean music form—becomes the primary signifier for (what Bobby imagines as) Latin identity? Clearly, notions of wholeness are fictions that in some circumstances work to create community and in others work to mask internal divisions (Spillers 2003). Bobby imagines the Latin community to have a solidarity that his own African American community does not. For him, salsa music is a shared aesthetic, and the linguistic bond is the main signifier for in- and out-groups (defining him as outside the speech community).

In fact, salsa music and dancing were by no means ubiquitous among the Spanish speakers at the club. Indeed, for one Spanish speaker, salsa was not the music that united Latinos but, rather, the aesthetic form that created community across ethnic, class, and racial lines: "The club is the great equalizer," José told me. José is a Peruvian Ph.D. with five kids. His wife is Anglo American. She manages a restaurant. They also own a hotel. He works as an environmentalist. "Someone should really write about this place," he told me. "There's no place like it. It brings everyone together." José is engaged in the saga here but is also creating its metaculture. The emotional stance of this discourse-about-culture entails fascination, and it is shared by most regulars, who cannot help but be aware of their mutual implication despite differences that in other contexts are divisive. José said this to me in so many words more than once over the course of my three years at the club. We also met outside the club to discuss our intellectual observations. He had been in the scene a lot longer than I but was still engagé. Like the dancers in Ettore Scola's movie *Le Bal* (1983), the members of the club community went through the years together, dancing to the music of emergent musical groups, relocating to new clubs as one closed and another opened, and witnessing the transformations in each others' private lives as well—marriages,

divorces, children, and the loss and acquisition of jobs. This was the saga, told in trash talk in bits and pieces, constructed as one constructs a thick descriptive ethnography, by talking to many people and getting many sides of the story. Unlike Scola's story, however (told silently, in the dance and with gesture), words form a large part of the picture at the club in Austin. Indeed, it is the metaculture—formed in words—that goes on to inhabit the participants and live a life of its own.

The players at home, narratives of belonging

Much of the public sentiment at the club is created in narratives that evince a desire to belong. The people that frequent the club are rarely native Texans, and many are recent arrivals to Austin. Indeed, "Where are you from?" and "How many years have you been here?" are frequent conversation starters. Because almost everyone at the club is a nomad, everyone has a story—a rap, a license to belong.

Sharing a bodily practice is clearly the most basic affective link between people at the club, and mastering the dance of salsa, in particular, extends these links. Not surprisingly, a majority of the women who are regulars at the club are professional or aspiring dancers. Hope and Judy performed with a local company and took lessons every day. Hope eventually got an internship at a dance college on the East Coast, but I often saw Judy when I dropped my own daughter off at daily dance classes in town. Of Mexican heritage, Flora is the daughter of professional flamenco dancers, and she also grew up with a classical dance education. Susan is a massage therapist who used to perform in ballroom competitions, as did Rayna.⁷

Among the accomplished dancers, Nicole stands apart from the rest. Bobby once said that Nicole was "the hottest chick in the club." Nicole is from a small town outside of a major metropolitan area in the South. Her mother had a dance school there, and two of the three daughters became professional dancers. Nicole got a master of arts degree from a well-known dance program on the West Coast before coming to Texas. She performs in different dance companies in town, gratis, and makes her living teaching girls modern dance at a local studio. She also gets state grants to teach dance to the mentally retarded in the public school system. I went to a performance by her students once in an elementary school on the south side of town and wound up crying at the pathos evoked by the Down syndrome children making abstract sculpture with their bodies.

Nicole's younger sister lives in New York City and is on the faculty of a prestigious arts college as a dance instructor. Like Nicole, she is tall and lithe. When she comes to town, she accompanies Nicole to the club and is wildly popular with the men. Nicole sits back and takes it all in, watching her sister work the floor. Their friend Angela is from Barcelona. She manages a big apartment complex in town and is in her late thirties. She has been dating one of the African American

bouncers at the club for years. Angela is sharp. She knows everyone at the club, speaks English as well as she speaks Spanish, and wears short dresses that show her thin but shapely legs to advantage. Her sleek blond hair falls to her waist. Angela can perform the man's part as well as the woman's, and when there are not enough men at the club to go around (e.g., on a Wednesday night), she keeps all her girlfriends spinning. She is a great party person, speaking to everyone as if they were her best friends and confiding them to secrecy.

Mary used to do ballroom dancing but found that scene too uptight. She cobbles together a living as a massage therapist and also takes care of a little boy for several hours each day. She has been with him since his birth four years ago, and they are very attached. She is like a part of his family, the nanny to a young urban professional couple. She is not likely to share their values, however. Mary grew up in California, but she spent nine years in Micronesia teaching English and, for a while, was married to one of the islanders, another teacher. She learned the local language and lived in a shelter without electricity and running water for two years. "I had to slouch all the time," she told me, "as women there aren't allowed to stand taller than their men!" Mary does not slouch anymore.

Although some Anglo men are regulars, most of the men who frequent the club more than twice a week do not identify as Anglo. Miguel is typical of the regulars. He gives dance lessons at the club at 7:30 p.m. as well as offering private lessons in his garage. A Mexican in his early forties, he is one of the most elegant dancers in the club. He was trained as an architect in Mexico City but has been in Texas for more than a decade. Before he met his girlfriend, Linda, he would dance with many women, including the students he had taught earlier in the evening. Now he only dances with her—at least when she is there, which is most of the time. She hopes to go back to school in clinical psychology. She is a master therapist now. Another regular among the men, Kam, is Iranian. He is an excellent dancer and is very particular about his partners, often dancing with a lithe, young Anglo woman who was ballroom trained. I overheard someone say that Kam had once been a ballet dancer. He sometimes does double fouetté turns on the floor. He is a hairdresser and drives a Corvette.

Alejandro is a small Mexican man who teaches Spanish in a bilingual grammar school in town. He is so short that he has to modify his dancing moves so that his partner can pass under his arm when he is turning her. He often scurries under the arm of his partner, turning himself around her because it is easier for him to do a lot of fancy moves than it is for him to manipulate the woman. Still, he is a confident dancer, moving lightly and quickly, bringing his partner's arms up and down, side and back, in tandem with his leg movements, a move most men do not master. For Alejandro the move is easy. His small body floats around the dance floor, weaving in and out of the fray. Alejandro seems

to get along with everyone. The women always greet him warmly, and the men tease him. Indeed, he allows himself to play the weak bird among the male cocks. Jean-Michel, for example, a muscle-bound Haitian who is not much taller than Alejandro, pretends to threaten him, pushing him on the chest with his open palm, pulling women to his side and away from Alejandro as if the competition between them were serious. Alejandro smiles and returns the taunt, stepping back, assuming the position of a threatened cat ready to strike. A lesser man might get tired of these performances, but Alejandro knows he can dance. He is confident of his powers and is used to these plays of masculinity. In any case, he dances with more women than Jean-Michel. Still, when I mentioned Alejandro to Bobby, Bobby scoffed.

"But he's really nice," I said. "He's a good dancer, and sincere."

"He doesn't have a clue how to work the women," he said. "I took some of his women away from him, he didn't like it."

The competition among the players is fierce.

Narratives of estrangement: Creating the anti-home

Alejandro is not the only man of small stature at the club. Carlos, one of the best dancers there, is only about five feet tall. Thin and wiry, he is Puerto Rican and wears a panama hat while he dances, a T-shirt under his cotton jacket. Sometimes he dances close to the stage, using it as a prop. He turns his partner gracefully, falling back against the stage, pushing himself off, and spinning with centripetal force. He puts on an incredible show, dancing with the wall, all the while snapping back to put his partner through a plethora of moves, never missing a beat.

"Have you noticed the way Little Carlos dances with the wall?" I asked Bobby. "He's slick."

"He doesn't even know what he's doing," was Bobby's response. "That's a style that originates in Harlem. We all can do it. I asked him once, I said, 'You know what you're doing man?' 'Whadya mean?' he said. He didn't know."

"So why didn't you tell him?" I asked.

"Hell no. If the guy don't know what he's doing, he don't know."

Bobby used to dance salsa in high school.

"Ya know, the kids today always got their Walkmans on their heads," he explained to me one night when we were talking trash, "but we'd bring those small turntables with us. Little portable Victrolas. We'd play those forty-fives. And we'd dance. Tito Puente, Joe Cuba. My high school was right there near Lincoln Center."

Bobby's evaluations of the other players are tough, even aggressive, and index a high degree of emotional engagement. The players are serious dancers and there is much at stake. They recognize each other's talents and are compet-

itive in their possession of style. Little Carlos dances with the wall—a style that Bobby asserts originates in his hometown of Harlem. For Bobby, aesthetic practices like this one index a place (his home), and that place, in turn, has a symbolic value, influencing even those who do not know its power. Little Carlos participates in a style whose history he may not know but whose symbolic capital he wants to possess.

There are many reasons for animosity among players. For instance, Miguel's aloofness causes the other men to resent him. He is a consummate dancer and he knows it. But his skill is not the problem. One or two equally good dancers are not resented. But Miguel puts on airs, he holds himself apart from the other men—at least from the African Americans and Anglos who do not speak Spanish. "He's a racist," Bobby told me more than once. What is more, he only dances with his girlfriend when she is there, creating standards that most other men do not want to comply with. Kam's perceived snobbery also seems to elicit animosity. Kam does not talk trash with the other men and so is outside their discourse community. He does not share secrets or buy others drinks—two acts that, like prestations, serve to bond the players together in relationships of long-term reciprocity and mutual obligation (Mauss 1966). Indeed, buying drinks for others is a rite of passage, one that opens up the possibility of discursive engagement. It is a prelude to talking trash.

In his observation of a salsa club in Austin, Edgardo Díaz Díaz (1998, n.d.:24) asserts that, whereas gossip is the confrontational genre of club-going women, competition and conflict are more explicitly confrontational for men. This is born out in my data as well. Although familiarity and routine are aspects of home, and although some scholars have defined the space of social dance as a "safe haven," especially for populations outside the mainstream (Ross and Rose 1994), the club is by no means free of agon, of competition and aggression. "Guys don't realize that dancing used to be a way to fight," Bobby explained. "In New York, man, dancing was like fighting. You'd dance better than some guy, you'd beat him out. You get the chicks. It's just that way." To be *engagé* is also to engage in combat. There are territories at the club, spaces that some people just seem to own. Even newcomers understand the symbolic spatial arrangement, avoiding the corners that belong to certain cliques and gravitating toward others, as if each space had a different odor and a different aura than the rest.⁸

Meeting Adrian one night near the deejay's station, I asked him, "Why don't you come over there?" and I pointed to the corner near the restrooms where I had left my things. Adrian is Mexican American and plays the tres in a Latin band in town. He has a day job in the archive of the daily newspaper in Austin.

"I don't stand over there," he said. "It's a clique. I don't like to be over there."

Adrian's comment indexes his awareness that some spaces "belong" to—or at least are appropriated by—particular people. These spaces do not reflect ethnic divisions so much as territories that other men respect. Despite the tensions that exist, however, the regulars develop bonds just from inhabiting the same space for so many hours each week, month after month. Even two men that do not like each other will nod from time to time, especially if one of them is talking with a woman that is friendly with both of them. Indeed, the regulars need each other. Their identities as players are dependent on and co-constructed by the other regulars at the club, particularly those who are their fierce competitors. Their performances are dialogic—they borrow moves as well as dance partners from each other and are complicit coperformers in a scene that has its own implicit structure of prestige and hierarchy (Duranti 1986). It is a scene that they not only create together but also cohabit, a public home built on affective bonds and an anti-home built on competition and a mutual recognition of difference.

Often the antagonisms between men are mediated by women. Miguel came over to Bobby one night and said, "My girlfriend [meaning Linda] really likes to dance with you." In extending dancing privileges with his girlfriend, Miguel was making a gesture of honor. But Bobby only said, "Oh yeah?" and dismissed him with his attitude, as if to say, "Why would I be interested in dancing with anything that you've touched?"

"Why do you hate Miguel so much?" I asked Bobby.

"He blew me off one time. When I first started going to the club, I said to him, 'You're good; I'd like to learn some of those moves you do' and all he did was to put his nose up in the air. He doesn't like blacks. I once heard him use the 'n' word. He's a racist. For a long time I said I'd never dance with a woman who dances with Miguel. But Linda is really nice. She's smart. She's cheap like me."

"Cheap? What do you mean cheap?" I asked.

"She's funny," he said, backtracking. "She likes to joke around." I understood this to mean that she was flirting with Bobby, talking trash.

"She must be breaking up with Miguel," I ventured. "She never used to come to the club without him."

"No," he said, "Miguel is still the man. But like she said to me the other night, 'Miguel doesn't want me to go to New York with my girlfriends.' 'Christ,' I told her, 'go to New York. To hell with Miguel!' And she said she was going to go anyway. 'Christ, don't let that man tell you what you can and can't do!' I told her. Like that. She talks to me. She likes to laugh."

This conversation is replete with reported speech—Bobby telling me what Linda told him about Miguel. In reporting the past utterances of others, Bobby asserts some control over them (Volosinov 1973; cf. Shuman 2005). The conversation is a sharing of secrets: Bobby learns about the power dynamics in Linda's relationship with Miguel and so "has something" on and over Miguel. He knows that Miguel desires to control Linda's mobility, on the dance floor and

off, and he encourages her not to permit it. He has become a confidant for yet another woman at the club. His public moves indicate such intimacy—another woman kisses him on the cheek when they greet each other. He thus accrues power in the eyes of the other players.

Intimacy, as Lauren Berlant (2000) recalls, is often mediated by institutions in which "private" life is instructed and conducted. The desires that intimacy carries are thereby controlled (e.g., in marriage), and "having a life" becomes equated with having an intimate and institutionally sanctioned life. The club presents a different space for the creation of public intimacies that implicate the private self. Talking trash is a mode of constructing these alternative modalities of desire—those that are competitive (between male players), those that are adulterous or otherwise illicit, those that are unconsummated or quickly consumed, and those that create intimacies across ethnic and class lines usually not crossed. Intimacy as constituted in the anti-home is not free of institutionalizing influences (dance, after all, is a highly codified form), but the subjectivities created in trash talk associate "having a life" with relations in the public sphere, not in the private one (cf. Herzfeld 1997).

Engagement and obligation

Despite the competition at the club, the regulars rely on each other's attendance. Once, over a glass of wine, Flora told me how she had grown dependent on Hugo's presence at the club. "I go by myself," she said, "but then if my friends aren't there, I'm really disappointed. There's no one to dance with." Nicole told me the same thing in her own words months later. "Once Bobby didn't come to the club for months. We were wondering where he was all that time. We missed him." When the regulars change their habits, the composition of home also shifts as dependencies are realized and readjusted. At the same time, the boundaries of affective engagements are often dangerously hazy. Hugo once lunged at Flora on the sofa in the back of the club, clearly misreading her appreciation of his dancerly expertise and not knowing that she was a lesbian. Bobby shocked Nicole by showing up uninvited at her apartment on Christmas Day when her parents were visiting her. And Carlos stalked Jenna for months after she broke up with him, threatening her physically. Such scenarios demonstrate that the affective bonds developed at the club exceed their context of genesis. Home is not, as James Baldwin notes, "a place so much as an irrevocable condition" (1956:133), one that must be constantly reproduced. There is no agreement among regulars, however, about how this is best done. The parameters of home are always in question. The anti-home is always present. Indeed, transgression is a *modus operandi* at the club: In the span of a year, three regulars were in jail on charges ranging from drug possession to breaking and entering. As a street genre, salsa-club culture attracts those persons searching for modes of expression not

granted in other domains of life. They are outlaws in many senses of the term.

"That's something that nine-to-fivers will never understand," commented Karen one evening when we were discussing a performance by Bill T. Jones that we had both recently attended (although not together).

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Nine-to-fivers, you know. People who just do their workaday thing. Life is just not interesting for those people. They just don't understand what it means to take risks."

The club is a public arena for the performance of risk as ethnic and class lines are transgressed. But the identities performed at the club are by no means homogeneous. For the man who works as a janitor or a geriatric nurse, the club is the place where a more attractive identity emerges. For the woman who spends her day behind a desk or as a lawyer, a therapist, or a teacher, the club is also a place where alternate identities come to the fore. And yet the divisions at the club in terms of class and ethnicity and their relation to gender are dramatic.

"There's a canyon between Anglo females and Latin males," said Nicole one night, "a canyon. They [Latin men] can't understand what I'm doing here, out—a married woman. 'What are you doin' man?' they ask me. I'm just doin' the same thing that they're doin'—relaxing, listening to music, dancing."

Nicole quotes the Latin men as addressing her using the colloquial *man*. Whether Nicole has elaborated her reported speech with an emphatic term of address or is actually reporting the speech literally is hard to know. In any case, insofar as she takes responsibility for her life and demeanor as a player, a regular at the club—someone who comes by herself and often—she embodies some of the qualities that she perceives (through the eyes of the Latin men) as being marked as male.⁹ There is a circuitous route of stereotypes here, as Nicole sees herself from what she perceives to be the perspective of Latin men perceiving her in terms of a traditional culture that defines unaccompanied women in public spaces as whores. The term *man*, then, indexes an affective stance, a subjectivity that Nicole understands as non-Latin and that asserts her identity as a feminist, or at least as a woman who comports herself with an autonomy that (she thinks) "Latin" men do not extend to women.

Maria Pini notes that marriage often signaled a transition out of club culture and into a more normative lifestyle. "Marriage commonly signaled a next developmental 'stage' for heterosexual women. For many women today, however, such clear markers of a 'next stage,' have largely disappeared" (Pini 2001:102). Taking issue with Barbara Bradby (1993), who sees this disappearance as a "prolongation of youth," Pini sees these signs as "indicators of the emergence of new modes of adult femininity" (2001:103). In the salsa-club culture examined here, several of the women players

were married or involved in socially sanctioned relationships with men. Many of these women (including myself) had children—Angela, Nicole, Karen, Rayna, Linda (José's wife), and, in her role of caretaker, Mary. Yet their behavior was anything but traditional. As Georges Bataille notes, "The whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives" (1986:17). This destruction is accomplished in trash talk as well as in the behaviors and comportments of the players both on and off the dance floor.

"Sometimes people ask me, they say, 'You mean your husband lets you go out?' " Nicole recounted. "Lets me go out!" she repeated. "And I tell them, 'What am I, a poodle that he can let out?' I don't need anyone's permission to go out. I have a life. When I don't go out I start getting antsy. My husband says, 'Don't you think you better go out?' He wants me to go out. He doesn't want me hanging around the house with all my nervous energy."

Nicole is a dancer. If she does not speak with her body, she is in exile.

Kisses and co-occurrence

One of the most visible signs of coming "home" is the kiss or the embrace. Perhaps because of the continentalism in the air, the regulars embrace each other on both cheeks when they meet—women kiss women and men, whereas men often hug each other or squeeze each other's shoulders. But this is not automatic. The passage to this greeting is tenuous and the rules unspoken and hard to define. Kissing or embracing some people and not others signals allegiances within subcliques of the club's family, as does dancing with some people but not others. Both exhibit levels of intimacy between certain individuals.

At first, of course, I was a stranger to the players. I did not receive embraces. When I went to the club it was with a group—women, and once or twice, women and men—who stood in the center of the bar or toward the left end, spaces that are demarcated for outsiders. Not until I had established myself as an independent dancer did people greet me with kisses. They did so not so much because I came alone as because I was dependably present, an engaged participant, putting in my time. I was a serious dancer, interested in knowing and dancing with the regulars.

The kisses exchanged at the club are highly context dependent. A meeting between the same people in a grocery store or on the street in the Texas sunlight would rarely evoke the double-cheeked embrace. Kisses are bodily comportments reserved for the club. They are an entrance badge, a way of publicly signaling in- and out-group. They delineate who is at home in the club and who is outside the family. I have seen the fiercest male rivals clasp each other's shoulders in greeting, belying with their body language the words that they use to slander each other in trash talk.

The intimacy created in the space of the club involves a relation to the body—one's own and others'—that claims the space and the scene as one's own. It is an attitude (both a physical and an affective stance) that is first and foremost displayed in the mastery of the dance. Competence on the dance floor is only the first requirement for initiation into this community of affect, however. Newcomers display this competence by dancing with the regulars. Drawing attention to themselves on the dance floor, they are "known" and admitted. As Peggy Phelan notes, "While there has been much written about the gaze, particularly by feminist film theorists and art historians, insufficient attention has been paid to the desire for a reciprocal gaze. The desire to see is a manifestation of the desire to be seen" (1993:18). To qualify as a regular and a player, one must not only know how to dance well and desire to be seen but one also must be routinely "there," a part of the discourse community as well as the dancerly one.

Belonging is signaled by style of dress in addition to discourse and bodily comportment. "I used to wear baggy clothes," one Anglo salsera told me. "Now I never do. My whole way of dressing has changed."

High heels, tight bodices, décolleté blouses, and short skirts. These are the fashions for women at the club. The men wear dress shirts, sometimes with jackets, sometimes with pleated pants, sometimes with jeans. Their attire is generally less flamboyant than the women's, although leather-soled shoes are a must.

That this dressier and more "Latin-associated" style of comportment is taken on as a mode even outside the confines and hours of the club is telling.¹⁰ It indexes not only a change of habit (in the broadest sense of the term) within the frame of the salsa world but also a more permanent change in bodily being (or *hexis*) that is desired by and defines club goers (Bourdieu 1977).¹¹

Trash and class

Because of its public nature and accessibility, the club culture examined here offers multiracial professionals a simulacrum of "street life" associated with the lower classes. For the multiracial working class in attendance, however, club culture is a mode of access to middle-class aesthetics and communicative practices. Bobby, for example, says José's wife, Linda, is a "class act." She wears different sequined dresses every time she and José go out. They are often low cut and always close fitting. From the first, Bobby held Linda and José up as an example of a couple who could manage the salsa scene together even after five kids and a week's worth of stress on the job. "She's a class act," he repeated like a mantra. Describing Linda in these terms is a positive evaluation of her sense of style, but it is also a way of noting that class is performative; it is an "act." The more I thought about Bobby's words, the more I realized that they applied not just to this

elegant woman but also to the performances at the club writ large, as class is acted, enacted, and imitated.

José and Linda are aficionados. They are great dancers who have frequented the Latin music scene for years, and they pay the cover charge at the door. Many of the regulars, however, get into the club for free. "They're friends of the band," a young female doorperson once told me when I challenged her about not letting me in for free. (She had just waved two Cuban men in front of me into the club but stopped me to insist on the cover.) Although sometimes coincident with sharing an ethnic identity with the bandleader, who almost always was a Spanish speaker (usually Mexican, Puerto Rican, or Dominican), being a "friend of the band" was, in fact, a euphemism, a way of delineating those whose presence was essential to draw in business.¹² Some of the regulars who get financial breaks are employed, if they have official jobs at all, in blue-collar jobs that pay only minimum wage.¹³ Their role at the club is pivotal, however, as they dance with many of the (often Anglo) women who are part of the city's burgeoning professional class. These women have to pay the cover. But these "payers" do not define the ambience of the club.

Anglos are a minority, financially and ethnically, at least during the week, when the players are most visible. The bouncers and employees of the club, thus, perform a sort of gate keeping, but this control does not keep minorities and the poor out; rather, it recognizes and privileges those who can dance well and who, thus, attract business. The difference between this club and others is clear when one walks into any number of other establishments downtown. There are no racial ambiguities at the upscale bars, where the young urban professionals are Anglo. There, people drink fine wine, smoke cigars (if they smoke at all), and converse. There is no dance. Women are finely made up. Men have designer haircuts. Bodies are more classical and their movements more restricted. They are posed in postures to be admired, but do not bend, gyrate, turn, or spin. In upscale bars, bodies are draped in expensive materials, whereas at the club, the synthetic aesthetic reigns. The club is a forum for the mimetic reproduction and, sometimes, restructuration of culture and class formed by a mutual desire (and, sometimes, disdain) for otherness. Although such mimesis takes place on many levels (in styles of dance, dress, and comportment), the role of language in the creation of a unique form of subculture is central.

Private publications: The "Salsa Chronicles" continued

In human consciousness eroticism is that within man which calls his being into question.

—Georges Bataille

Talking trash has all the elements that Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) asserts are subversive because of their concern with the

"lower bodily grotesque strata." In this sense, the club is a space of discursive license as well as reflexive intersubjectivity. The "liberatory desire" that cultural studies scholar Lisa Sánchez González (1999) imputes to the dance is also present in the talk, whose rules for appropriate speech are radically altered from those in force outside the club. Trash talk revolves around life narratives (one's own and others') that are often sexual in theme but may simply involve the revelation of other identities and personae than are evident at the club. Trash talk publicizes what would otherwise be considered the private aspects of one's being. Although regulars also discuss the music and comment on people's fashion sense and competence on the dance floor, talking trash is a subcategory of conversation that deals with the personal (and often illicit) lives of the players. In other words, in trash talk, the private lives of individuals become available for public critique and fodder for the creation of public affect. Indeed, like gossip, talking trash creates a speech community among the players by revealing secrets that then circulate and create a shared yet exclusive intimacy, a community of affect, albeit not a seamless one. From the moment I began going to the club, I became an ear for these discourses. Players do not really write the Salsa Chronicles, but they speak them into being.

"Crazy has a diamond in his penis," Nicole told me one evening.

"Really?" I asked, incredulous.

"Yeah," she answered, "it's like a family heirloom, passed down from father to son or something. It's on the head. It's supposed to stimulate the woman."

"Is it cut like a diamond?" I continued. "That must hurt!"

"More like a smooth gem," she replied.

I did not ask how she knew.

Crazy is Cuban. He used to work stacking boxes at a computer outlet. Recently he has been cleaning dorm rooms and doing repairs at a university. He often wears a T-shirt with a picture of the Hanson Brothers on it. He does not know, however, who the Hanson Brothers are—a teenybopper group of musicians popular among the ten-year-old crowd.

"I can't believe he keeps wearing that shirt!" Nicole says each time he sports it. "He just doesn't have a clue!"

And, indeed, Crazy remains amusingly unaware of the public interpretations circulating around cultural icons like the Hanson Brothers. But Nicole's remark is not just about Crazy's unfamiliarity with U.S. popular culture; it is also a remark about class, about knowing how to dress. "I need a woman to tell me what to do," Crazy once told me. "Money I have plenty. I need someone to tell me how to spend it."

When not wearing the Hanson shirt, Crazy wears a wool jacket in the summertime. He sometimes comes in wearing an electric blue Hawaiian shirt with pink flowers. He puffs a cigar, balancing it in his mouth in the place where his front tooth should be and is not. He is 32, somewhat

walleyed, and greases his curly hair. His olive skin is smooth and smells strongly of cologne. He has three children that live with his parents in Miami. He does not talk about his estranged wife. And he is one of the very best dancers in the club.

Weeks after our conversation about the diamond, Nicole and I were at the club talking across a high table to one another.

"Do you know tango?" I asked.

"No," she said, "I just learned salsa a few years ago. I love to watch people tango, but it's so complicated. You can't just follow. You have to know how to do it. You have to know the woman's part."

"I've thought about taking lessons," I said, "but I think you need to go with a partner."

Just then, Crazy came over, stood behind Nicole (facing me), and gave her a wet, sensuous kiss on the nape of her neck. He looked up at me and smiled mischievously. I smiled back. Nicole smiled at us both. Crazy whispered something in her ear that I could not hear, making Nicole blush. He took her hand and led her to the dance floor. When they returned, he lingered a while and then moved off.

"You know," Nicole said, "for me, this midwestern girl, Crazy's so totally exotic. I can't tell you! I'd like to get Crazy to take tango lessons with me."

Crazy was back at her side, puffing on his cigar and flirting. Our conversation stopped.

Later in the evening, Nicole pointed to the bass player, a Puerto Rican man from San Antonio. The musicians often dance with the clients at break time to canned music. "When he dances with you he plays your arm like a bass," Nicole proffered. "It's completely unconscious. His fingers just run up and down your arm. And he gets hard. That's why he wears those long shirts, I think. It really excites me when I feel that. Sometimes I don't realize how excited I am. Then I go to the bathroom and my pants are all wet just from dancing with him. And it's not sweat either!"

The process of Othering taking place here is evident, the Latin man becoming the exotic object of the Anglo woman. Although neither shocking nor surprising, especially in a public space marked as "Latin" but characterized by ethnic diversity, these processes of objectification are common across the board, the men exploiting the Anglo women as much as the women objectify and play with the men. It is the self-conscious element of play that is noteworthy and that it takes place across ethnic and, often, class lines, to say nothing of race. A relationship of interdependence, I argue, is cultivated in the sexual domain, from which both men and women profit.

"Don't dance with that guy," Mary said loudly as a tall man with salt-and-pepper hair passed by. "He lies. I don't date the guys here, but he came on to me and all. He acts like he's single. He tells everyone that he's single. But he really has a wife and two kids at home. Just lies."

"That's low," I replied.

"Really," she affirmed. "I don't date the guys here. I just tell them that salsa is my boyfriend. I'll dance with them and rub my body against them, but I go home and take care of myself. I don't date anyone from here. They're all . . ." Her voice trailed off and she shook her head.

"Like that guy—Pablo," she continued, leaning her head in his direction. "I see you dancing with him sometimes. He has three kids too."

"I know," I said. "He never comes on to me anyway," I lied. "He just amuses me."

"They all amuse me," Mary said, gesturing toward the pulsing bodies on the dance floor. "It's one big show."

Mary says what is on her mind. "She's open," said one of the Haitian regulars. Three Haitian men "hang" together: Jean-Michel, a 42-year-old computer-systems specialist who drives a huge luxury SUV and wears two-color suits; Charles, a tall, muscular, and garrulous man in his thirties who is a self-professed "lady's man"; and a more serious man, Philippe, in his late thirties. Philippe never asks me to dance and hardly says hello. One night, however, we found ourselves standing next to each other between dances and we began to talk.

"How are you doin'?" I asked in French, "Ça va?"

"Ça ne va pas," he answered. "Not too well."

"What's up?"

"Oh, I'm never satisfied," he confided. "I'm always thinking that things could be better. I'm always wishing things were different. I'm never satisfied," he repeated, a sad smile briefly animating his face.

"What do you want?" I asked, changing from light talk to a more serious demeanor.

"You know," he said, looking me straight in the eye with a sincerity that was almost disarming. "I want something that doesn't exist."

"What's that?"

"I want a beautiful woman, who knows how to talk to anyone and everyone, a smart woman who dresses really chic, a woman who is absolutely crazy in love with me and wants to have my children."

"Maybe you're looking in the wrong places," I ventured. "She exists. But the people here just want to play."

"I even go to church. I go to church just for that reason. I can't find anyone."

I asked him what church he went to. He mentioned a church in an elite Anglo neighborhood and another on the outskirts of that same neighborhood. Not African American churches at all. He is probably one of the only people of color there, I thought.

"And what do you do?" I asked him.

"I work. I watch television."

And as quickly as he had divulged his soul to me, he was off. "Au revoir," he said, moving away.

"Ça y est? That's it? You're going?"

He just smiled and left me holding up the back wall of the club. Prince Charming leaving the ball to find Cinderella, somewhat embarrassed by the single-mindedness of his quest. I later learned that this sincere Haitian is a successful lawyer and owns a lot of property in a very exclusive part of town—near the Anglo congregations that he frequents. So the "work and watch television" line was, in fact, a foil. He was hiding his professionalism, not wanting to be known to the woman with whom he was conversing as anything but a *salsero* on the prowl.

Mary dances with the Haitians all the time. They are in her flirt crowd. "She's real," Jean-Michel told me. Young, muscular Charles walked up to us one night and began to preen before us. Mary put her hand under his vest and caressed his large, hard pectorals. "I'm a boob woman," she laughed. "I love men with boobs!"

He smiled. "People think I'm a lady's man," he told me and Mary, teasing. "But I am always sincere. I don't say anything that I don't feel."

He walked away, and Mary turned to me and said, "I have fun with him. I don't date anyone at the club, ya know? But he's fun to flirt with."

"And he's a great dancer!" I added.

"Yeah. But it's just for fun. You'll never meet the man of your dreams in here." We had had this conversation once before.

"You never know," I said.

"You're right," she answered, her hope renewed. "You never know."

"Wouldn't it be great to meet someone that knew how to dance?" I continued.

"It would be great. But it's never happened to me. I've never been involved with someone who could dance."

"Never?" I asked, surprised.

But Mary only smiled back at me as Alejandro led her to the floor.

Mary's acknowledgment that "you'll never meet the man of your dreams in here" indexes the boundaries of the ludic. Despite a certain longing among players for their eradication, the boundaries of race and class often reassert themselves outside the context of the club. But if the club is a ludic space, it is a frame that leaks; the liminal and transgressive behaviors of the club do have agency outside of the performance frame. For example, Carlos broke into Jenna's apartment and tried to strangle her when she broke up with him, and Jennifer (an Anglo, middle-class dancer from the suburbs of Chicago) moved into a trailer with Hugo, a Puerto Rican immigrant and security guard, and had his baby.

Flirtation is a self-conscious game at the club. Nonetheless, people clearly hope for permanent relationships, as Philippe's narrative indicates. That Jean-Michel appreciatively defines Mary as "real" is a recognition that many of the people in the club are less than sincere. Yet sincerity—realness—is an essential quality of intimacy, to say nothing

of conversation. "I am always sincere. I don't say anything that I don't feel," says Jean-Michel. Charles associates feeling with sincerity, a sincerity that words might betray (but in his case do not). Although this reference to sincerity seems ironic in the context of club culture (and particularly in trash talk, which, by definition, is a ludic genre), it is an ambiguity that motivates communication.¹⁴ Indeed, like simultaneous longings for home and anti-home, the paradox of sincere and fictionalized identity drives conversation (Grice 1989; Searle 1976). The quality of realness is sought in speech as well as in dance:

"I need to feel the music through the partner I'm dancing with," Arzu told me. "The guys who do ballroom are so into their own moves. Sometimes they don't even hear the music. I prefer the untrained guys."

"Nicole calls them 'street dancers,' " I proffered.

"Yeah, there are guys who can do all the moves," she continued, "but they have no soul. If I can't feel the music through the body of my partner, then it's not worth dancing with them."

Arzu is Turkish. Trained as an aerospace engineer, she has been living in the United States for almost 20 years. Her comments on "soul" have less to do with the use of this term in the 1960s counterculture and black-power movements, however, than they have to do with a perceived something extra that some dancers, regardless of race, possess and others do not (cf. Kelley 1998:45). One might say that she has incorporated the essentialisms present in the club itself, the idea that the aesthetics of the body come from nature, a state of preculture. As Robin Kelley notes, "Words like *soul* and *funk* were efforts to come up with a language to talk about that visceral element in music, even if they did ultimately evolve into market categories" (1998:58). It is this visceral quality that Arzu refers to here while certainly drawing on the meanings present in the marketplace as well. For her, bodies that listen well move well.

Arzu used to live in Los Angeles, where the scene is different. "You have to be really good to dance in LA," she said. "I would go to the clubs, and the guys would ask me to dance, and you could tell they were disappointed. Then they didn't ask again."

"But you're such a good dancer!" I told her. I envy her aura of confidence. She dances with so many men.

"Not good enough," she said, matter-of-factly. "In LA everyone is putting on a show. It's very competitive. You can't relax. It's real intense."

"I hear New York's like that," I said. "I'm glad I live here."

I reproduce trash talk here not for its shock value (indeed, I have left out the more shocking examples) but, rather, to demonstrate that rules for appropriate conversation in the club are much different than those reigning in the nonclub lives of these women and men. The Haitian lawyer would hardly have been so forthright with his fellow churchgoers. Significantly, though, he was looking for the woman of his

dreams in two communities: in an Anglo upper-class church as well as in a club frequented in part by professional Anglo women. Likewise, Nicole does not talk to the parents of the children she instructs in the language of the club. Neither does she recount her stories to her nonsalsa friends in the world of her husband and family. The club allows for a freedom in speech not accorded in most other realms of life. But the speech indexes a behavior that is also unsanctioned. To simply say, for example, that the club is a framed space of license, a catharsis for the uptight professional, is too facile. Not only are many nonprofessionals players but, in addition, the importance of the club in the lives of the players is such that it constructs not an alter ego or a weekend identity but a primary way of defining oneself in the world. Trash talk may be considered what Caren Kaplan calls an "out-law genre." "Out-law genres renegotiate the relationship between personal identity and the world, between personal and social history"; "writing a life story," Kaplan notes, as well as speaking one into being, is "an affirmation of 'home' and . . . requires alternative versions of self, community, and identity" (1992:213). The stories told in the club, indeed, create alternate ways of being at home in the world, ways that depend on the estranging qualities of the anti-home. This is one reason why regulars are so important to each other. They reinforce these new subjectivities for each other.

Conclusion: Home and anti-home in the public sphere

The symbolic importance of and nostalgia for "home" become pronounced in conditions of perceived exile (Naficy 1993; Williams 2001).¹⁵ Indeed, almost without exception, all the regulars at the club were nomadic subjects; often polyglot and belonging nowhere and everywhere, the nomadic subject creates a home in unlikely places. As Rosi Braidotti notes, "Nomadism consists not so much in being homeless, as in being capable of recreating your home everywhere. The nomad carries her/his essential belongings with her/him wherever s/he goes and can recreate a home base anywhere" (1994:16; Deleuze and Guattari 1977). Finding a home in dance—that is, in the moving and mutable body—is, thus, not surprising. Indeed, salsa often comes to stand for identity in the work of Latina and Latino scholars. For Sánchez González, for example, salsa is an index of home: "As a Boricua raised in Los Angeles, I learned salsa in my home and among our extended family," she says. "The music itself has been for me another home in what I came to understand as a species of exile, as part of the legacy of the Puerto Rican working-class diaspora" (1999:239). Sánchez González (1999:240) claims salsa as a uniquely Puerto Rican form that contains the "liberatory desire" fueling struggles against inequalities. Frances Aparicio notes that "salsa music functions as an ethnic marker for Latinos in the United States" (1989–90:44). Indeed, music, more than any other genre,

inhabits the cultural self to the extent that it sometimes comes to stand for that culture completely, such that music is ethnicity or even place (Aparicio 1998:65; Feld 1990a). But this mark of home is informed by class. It is their status as nomadic subjects—migrants, exiles, fugitives, as well as artists and “slackers”¹⁶—that makes the metaphor of “home” necessary and meaningful.

Salsa has always had indexical relations to street culture (Santos Febres 1997:181).¹⁷ Salsa, notes Santos Febres, “espouses the values of the street, of that space that creates an alternative criminalized market economy and that lies outside the margins of power of the bourgeois nation-state” (1997:180). (This was certainly clear at the club, where drugs were sold in the bathroom and gossip about dealers doing time was common.) Thus, for Santos Febres, a senator’s daughter, salsa was not home but an anti-home: “It was demonic, sinful; it could turn any decent girl into a worthless, hip-swinging tramp” (1997:175). Indeed, it was only after leaving home that she discovered the ubiquity of salsa.

Some Latina scholars, however, provide a template for salsa as a liberatory event regardless of ethnic genealogy. Indeed, of all the genres of dance music, salsa is portrayed as one likely to provide access to newcomers, given its history as a hybrid and improvisational form. Salsa, according to Santos Febres (1997:181) was forged in racial diversity, with a strong proletariat backbone. Strongly asserting the role of salsa in creating a “new social consciousness” among Latin Americans in both North and South America, Celeste Fraser Delgado and José Muñoz (1997:26) nonetheless leave a space for the improvisation of salsa to extend beyond its contexts of origin. “Salsa not only crosses borders,” they assert (drawing inspiration from poet Juan Carlos Quintero Herencia), “but corrodes them, convocating listeners not as citizens but as friends engaged in the ‘open conspiracy’ of forging an auditory ‘free territory in the Americas’ ” (Delgado and Muñoz 1997:28; Quintero Herencia 1997). Salsa, as much recent work has shown, is a home to multitudes (Manuel 1991; Waxer 2002).

“Why do my people dance?” José E. Limón (1994:154) asks, referring to the lower-class Mexican American populations of south Texas and the stereotypes that surround them. His answer has to do in part with class and gender oppression, with what he calls the effects of “negating postmodernity” on the site of struggle—the body. Limón posits that lower-class Mexican Americans dance to be able to control at least some aspect of their material lives well—their bodies artfully moving on the dance floor (Martin 1985, 1990).¹⁸

Limón’s insights about the power of dance, inspired by the work of Judith Lynne Hanna (1979) and Randy Martin (1985), may certainly be applied to the club scene examined here. Dancing affords mastery and compensates for lack of control in other aspects of life. Whereas Limón worked with lower-class Mexican Americans in south Texas, in this study I have examined an ethnically and economically diverse pop-

ulation. Here, creating a “public home” for those identifying as Latin or non-Latin also relies on an experience of the power in dance—one based on repetition. By virtue of being a regular, one is initiated into layers of memory, musical memory that is related to body memory (Feld 1990b). The shared emotion created by the music is experienced in the body each time a certain piece is played. Thursday night dancers know all the songs the Brew plays, for example. Rather than boring listeners, the repetition of the same songs unleashes certain memories—certain grooves in the auditory and bodily apparatus—that the body returns to happily, like returning home. For regulars, for players, the sensations produced by these memory evocations are pleasurable and, thus, beg to be reproduced. This is what defines a regular: repetition, history, a sense of home and homecoming. Walter Benjamin (1969) said that humans once believed they would become what they imitated.¹⁹ It is this belief, albeit unconscious, that underlies much of the activity at the club, where “class acts” as well as ethnic and gender performances are on display.

In the contemporary club culture examined here, several ethnicities find their home in the sonic space of salsa music. Not only are many ethnicities represented but many classes are as well. A public space of difference is unusual in this region of the country and is in many ways a response to the larger public sphere of Anglo-dominated society, functioning in all ways against the mores that pertain in that larger sphere. As José Esteban Muñoz notes, “What unites and consolidates oppositional groups is not simply the fact of identity but the way in which they perform affect, especially in relation to an official ‘national affect’ that is aligned with a hegemonic class” (2000:68; see also Wong 2000).²⁰ At the club, affect is indexed in words as well as performed in the dance, and these enactments create new forms of subjectivity in the players. The tension between home and anti-home produces the unique amalgam of club culture. Rather than dividing the heterogeneous community, the paradoxes of race, class, and gender produce another sort of public home, one created metadiscursively in trash talk. This is neither a “Latin” nor an “Anglo” home; rather, it is a heterogeneous home created through the performance of public affect in which several identities are performed, united as Muñoz notes, by their oppositional relation to “an official ‘national affect’ ” (2000:68). For some Latinas and Latinos, the opposition to national affect comes in their ethnic performance of difference (their music, their dance) in the public sphere; for Anglo women, it is the performance of alterity that signals that opposition, whereas for the myriad other ethnicities present at the club, their presence in the most heterogeneous of public spaces in a predominantly Anglo middle-class city creates allegiances with the largest minority population in the city (Latino) while participating in an expressive form (salsa) that is marketed as accessible to everyone.

In trash talk, some narratives exemplify a longing for “home” (what I have called narratives of “belonging”), whereas others bespeak a longing for the foreign, the strange, the “anti-home.” Both impulses require emotional engagement with a community in which likenesses are co-constructed and differences are the necessary building blocks. The performances at the club are self-conscious: Both Mary and Arzu refer to them as a “show,” and Nicole is aware of herself as an author of a metaculture, a saga. If, following Bourdieu, class is an accumulation of embodied dispositions, then the club is a place where new dispositions are learned, dispositions that are often in opposition to those of one’s private sphere. “Cosmopolitanism, in its wide and wavering nets, catches something of our need to ground our sense of mutuality in conditions of mutability, and to learn to live tenaciously in terrains of historic and cultural transition” (Breckenridge et al. 2002:4). At the club, box stackers become Don Juans, lawyers become players, and professionals talk trash. The club becomes a locus of the “anti-home,” a discursive field in which certain personas are forefronted and others recede.

These data demonstrate that communities of affect are not limited to ethnic, racial, class, or gender identities and their performances. Although these categories do not disappear at the club, they are unhinged from their usual moorings, creating openings for new feelings of home to emerge among the players. Engaging in the dance as well as in the talk creates a uniquely diverse community whose presence on the public landscape stands in stark contrast to the larger Anglo world of central Texas. The ludic frame of the club does not provide a temporary space for transgression that has no issue beyond its bounds. Rather, the bounds of the club, like the bounds of the genre of trash talk, are porous and destabilizing, the mobile identities of its players subtly permeating the larger public sphere. The salsa-club culture examined here is a forum for the mimetic reproduction of difference, creating an outpost of cosmopolitanism in a conservative city, a home for nomads of many classes.

Notes

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1. In his analysis of world music, Viet Erlmann notes that homogenization and differentiation are not “mutually exclusive features of musical globalization . . . but . . . integral constituents of musical aesthetics under late capitalism” (1996:469).

2. Phil Cohen (1972) defined subculture as a “compromise solution between two contradictory needs: the need to create and express autonomy and difference from parents . . . and the need to maintain the parental identifications”; it functions to “express and

resolve, albeit magically, the contradictions which remain hidden or unresolved in the parent culture” (Hebdige 1979:77).

3. The power of poetic forms to create affect, desire, and community is well documented (Besnier 1990; Csordas 1994a, 1994b; Feld 1990a, 1990b; Hebdige 1979; Herzfeld 1985; Irvine 1990; Keil and Feld 1994; Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990; Muñoz 2000; Serematakis 1994; Stewart 1996; Stewart 2002; Trawick 1990; Urban 1988). Although emotions are generally understood to be culturally learned and, thus, inseparable from context (Lutz 1988; Lutz and Abu-Lughod 1990; Lutz and White 1986), many questions pertaining to the translation of emotional repertoires across cultures are still unanswered (but see Irvine 1990; Reddy 2001). How are emotions that are associated with particular aesthetic practices like salsa music and dancing, for example, experienced by audiences for whom they are not second nature, audiences, that is, who do not share indexical references between history, aesthetic form, and emotional response? How, in turn, do these assemblages of translated sentiments form the experience of a sense of home for such a diverse community?

4. Fox continues,

Subtle forms of racialized hierarchy persisted, of course, structuring inter-ethnic sociability in “white” and “red-neck” settings and in the local public sphere. . . . Nonetheless, racial ideology—in particular a defensive articulation of an increasingly denaturalized and deprivileged “whiteness” and a range of anxious and resistant responses to that articulation (such as racist jokes, particularly in the domain of sexuality and kinship)—played an important part in the construction of this community’s culture as “country” and as working-class. [Fox 2004:25]

5. Exceptions include Book Woman, a feminist bookstore, and some used bookstores.

6. These are definitions that I gathered from regular participants in the club scene.

7. My story is that my mother was a dancer. From the age of five, she did ballet, tap, and modern dance. She studied with Henry Letang in New York, taking classes with Martha Graham as well. She auditioned for and got into the Rockettes, but turned the job down for a “better” offer that never panned out. Lost gamble. Then marriage, pregnancy, and my birth. After that, she divorced, remarried, and made her living as a ballroom dance teacher in the suburbs, a bitter pill after such almost-big-breaks. Luckily, she adored motherhood. I grew up spinning turns before mirrored walls in Arthur Murray Dance Studios in Mary-Janes and frilly dresses. My mother would dance with me in the living room of our New Rochelle apartment (which also had a big mirror), I a small pajamaed girl next to a beehive-haired mom who was dancing the man’s part. Now I can follow just about any dance style, although I cannot always explain what I am doing.

8. The competition for space is also a factor when the dance floor becomes so packed that it is hard to move. On the weekends, when the crowds are most dense, dancers often unintentionally step on each other’s toes or inadvertently jab each other with their elbows simply because there is not enough room to move gracefully. Fights have broken out on the dance floor because of bumps that are construed as deliberate, or at least careless, affronts. Indeed, I have seen regulars ram their elbows into the rib cages of unsuspecting men who, overenthusiastically and naively, assume more space on the dance floor than they are entitled to, spinning their partners or themselves in too wide an arc and crashing into others in the process (Limón 1994). In this way, the regulars assert their dominion over the “weekenders,” intimidating them even physically.

9. The homoeroticism in the club is explored in the longer version of this work (Kapchan n.d.).

10. The association of this dressy style with Latinness, like many other signs at the club, is built on stereotypes floating in the cultural domain, particularly in films. See Ramírez Berg 2002; cf. Alarcón 1989.

11. At the club, women often dress “cheap” or “trashy chic,” whereas the men often dress “up.” These are terms used by the regulars.

12. Although all the groups had Latin names, band members were almost always of mixed ethnic origin, and many musicians were Anglos.

13. Indeed, Bobby once said that he had to “go to work,” meaning he had to go the club.

14. For another analysis of how language creates and responds to cultural ambiguity, see Samuels 2004.

15. In her examination of socially scripted racial melodramas in literature and popular culture, Linda Williams notes that

the icon of home is . . . essential to establish the virtue of racially beset victims. . . . One of the ways of constructing moral power is the icon of the good home. The icon of home helps establish the “space of innocence” of its virtuous victims. . . . Black and white racial melodrama originates in the homey virtues of Uncle Tom’s cabin, which renders familiar the American “family values” of the African slave. In an era when even many abolitionists (Stowe included) preferred Liberia to Kentucky as the proper home for emancipated black slaves, the humble cabin of Uncle Tom worked, against official ideology, to make Tom and his cabin seem quintessentially American. The icon of home is thus essential to establish the virtue of racially beset victims. [2001:7–8]

16. *Slacker* (1991) is the name of a documentary movie by Richard Linklater that became a kind of cult film in Texas. Taking place in Austin, it documents the marginal lives and lifestyles of the inhabitants of this city.

17. Puerto Rican poet and scholar Mayra Santos Febres notes, “Immediately the space of the street, urbanism, the tradition of guapería, and crime became principal characteristics that distinguished salsa from its Latin predecessors” (1997:181).

18. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990:61) defines all optimal experiences of flow as exercising control in difficult situations.

19. Significantly, Gregor’s transformation into the most foreign Other—an insect—in Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* happens at home—the most intimate of spaces (Amy Shuman, personal communication 2004).

20. Discussing the link between music and coalition building among Asian American musicians, Wong asks an astute and thorny question: “If hipness is a kind of slumming, i.e., a playacting of the privileging founded on essentialist, classist logic, are colorful performatives of resistance then forever beyond the reach of anyone else. The notion of ‘people of color’ is tricky on several counts and powerfully possible on several others” (2000:77). She suggests that “perhaps we need to rethink the politics of appropriation in ways that will allow for combustion as well as colonization” (Wong 2000:77).

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