

## BOOK REVIEW

### *Salsa Crossings: Dancing Latinidad in Los Angeles*

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*Salsa Crossings: Dancing Latinidad in Los Angeles.* By Cindy García. Durham: Duke University Press, *Latin America Otherwise: Languages, Empires, Nations Series*, 2013. Pp. 208. \$22.95 (paper). \$ 79.95 (cloth).

In *Salsa Crossings*, Cindy García places the salsa practices of Los Angeles in a larger context of US Latinidad. She challenges us to rethink utopic frameworks that place salsa dancing as predominantly resistive to the racial and economic violence of globalization. At many levels the book is an outstanding contribution to the growing field of Latina/o studies through its dissection of social conflicts and hierarchies within the communities of Latinas/os and between Latinas/os and Anglo-Americans. García uses critical feminist choreographic ethnography to analyze how women “make it to” the dance floor. Her extensive fieldwork allows her to see that gendered choreographies in L.A. salsa clubs are tied to the politics of migration, globalization, transnationalism, citizenship, gender, class, ethnicity, and nation. The result is a layered and vibrant analysis of what she terms the “sequined” and “unsequined” corporealities of dancers in Los Angeles.

The “sequined” patrons are those who are “highly skilled dancers” at the top of salsa hierarchy; these patrons are usually dressed in sequined clothes and contribute to the libidinal salsa economy, which relies on affect, speculation, and desire. The “unsequined” patrons are placed in the political economy of daily life, an economy that as García describes it, depends on

the exploitation of migrant bodies and people of color. The “unsequined” are dancers adorned in less flashy attire and who view dancing as a form of socializing. By paying attention to how patrons are granted differential club membership, privileges, and mobilities, García maps and analyzes how the spectacle of sequined dancing contributes to the disavowal of anti-immigrant violence in Los Angeles.

García opens the text with her recollections of the 2000 West Coast Salsa Congress in Los Angeles, where the promoter Albert Torres elaborated on the significance of the congress’s slogan, “Creating Unity through Salsa.” García takes that slogan and assesses whether “Unity through Salsa” can be extended to include practices that are not legitimized by the salsa industry. Here, by looking at salsa as action and interaction García creates a text that is unique from other treatments of the phenomenon. Viewing salsa as interaction allows her to include the ways patrons exalt and insult one another’s style, drinking habits, country and how through their interplays create social hierarchies. Thus her focus on movement decentralizes the role of music in salsa and avoids a narrow focus on the genealogy of the genre (which is traced to African and Spanish roots with its developments in Puerto Rico, Cuba, New York, and Colombia). This broader lens allows her to focus on the bodies, which get identified as dancing wrong: “the migrants, the Mexicans, the queers, the ones who are not particularly legible in salsa discourses” (4). Dancing “wrong,” in the context of García’s analysis, implies a desire to maintain ties with the places from which the dancers emigrated, whereas dancing salsa “right” suggests a desire to incorporate dominant forms of Latinidad, which are more closely aligned with whiteness.

The descriptive salsa narratives included in the text allow the reader to meet Rebecca, Maricruz, Sarita, Arlene, Jimmy, Maria Elena and Felipe—some of

the many patrons García spoke with during her fieldwork. *Salsa Crossings* comes to life when García turns to the story of Chuck's Grill, in the City of Commerce where patrons "dance salsa wrong" a statement often associated with being Mexican or Central American. Here, readers learn of the contradictory poles of Latinidad produced in Los Angeles: "the exotic Latino (re)produced by the Hollywood entertainment industry and the laboring migrant from la limpieza" (45). It is here that García applies the concept of *trans-status Latinidad* to interpret the tension between Americanness and Latinidad.

Moreover, García skillfully explains how the circulation of gender and power is different for women in the nightclub since they must abide by heterosexist choreography. She explains that many of the women who want to move up in the Salsa hierarchy have to conform to the rules of "sequined" Latinidad, which often times include shifting the focus from the hips to the arms because it marks a "refined" sexuality. García also calls attention to the masculinity of immigrant men and argues that, although their opportunities to move up the class hierarchies are limited outside the nightclub, inside the club their masculinity is able to circulate in ways that femininity cannot.

In *Salsa Crossings*, García clearly describes the interactions and tensions that occur in the nightclub, so much so that both undergraduate and graduate students in Chicana/o studies, Latina/o studies, dance studies, ethnic studies, women's studies, and ethnomusicology will find this book approachable and insightful. In fact, graduate students will find it useful as a model when completing ethnographic research. While some might criticize the book as an over-generalization of the salsa night scene, the author does an outstanding job of detailing how salsa dancing is entangled with complex negotiations of identity: gender, class, sexuality and gender, using a fresh and intersectional analysis that will be appreciated by all.