

Articles





Danzas Chuscas: Performing Migration in a Zapotec Community

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Introduction

Danzas chuscas are parodic dances performed in indigenous and *mestizo* villages throughout Mexico. In the village of Yalálag, a Zapotec indigenous village in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico,¹ *danzas chuscas* are performed during religious celebrations, a time when many Yalaltecos (people from Yalálag) who have immigrated to Los Angeles return to visit their families.² Since the late 1980s, these immigrants have become the subject of the dances.³ Yalaltecos humorously represent those who have adopted “American” behaviors or those who have remitted negative values and behaviors from inner-city neighborhoods of Los Angeles to Yalálag. *Danzas chuscas* such as “Los Mojados” (“The Wetbacks”), “Los Cocineros” (“The Cooks”), and “Los Cholos” (“Los Angeles Gangsters”) comically portray the roles that Yalalteco immigrants have come to play in the United States. *Danzas chuscas* such as “Los Norteños” (“The Northerners”), “Los Turistas” (“The Tourists”), and “El Regreso de los Mojados” (“The Return of the Wetbacks”) characterize Yalalteco immigrants as outsiders and visitors. And the choreography in dances like “Los Yalaltecos” (“The Residents of Yalálag”) and “Las Minifaldas” (“The Miniskirts”) reflect changes in these immigrants’ social status, gender behaviors, and class position. In other words, these dances embody the impact of migration on social, economic, and cultural levels. Through physical humor immigrants and nonimmigrants confront the tensions and uncertainties stemming from Zapotec migration into the United States: community social disorganization, social instability, and changes in the meaning of group identity as it relates to gender, class, ethnicity, and culture.

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In this essay I draw upon my field research in Yalálag and Los Angeles to examine the ways in which *danzas chuscas* embody the impact of international migration and social remittances in Zapotec identity, gender, class, and community. I begin by examining the dance of “Los Yalaltecos” (“The Residents of Yalálag”) to explain what causes Zapotec nonimmigrants in Yalálag to make fun of the new social status and upward mobility that Zapotec immigrants attain after migration to the United States. Then I examine the dance of “Los Cholos” (“The Gangsters”) to reveal the impact of social behaviors and cultural values remitted from the violent, antisocial, and drug-related gang culture of inner-city neighborhoods in Los Angeles to the Zapotec village community of Yalálag. Finally, I consider a performance of “Las Minifaldas” (“The Miniskirts”) performed at a Los Angeles *baile* (a community event organized by Yalálag Zapotec immigrants). I examine how experiences of migration and processes of assimilation into urban lifestyles appear to influence changing gender behaviors, gender relationships, and ideas of sexuality among young Zapotec immigrant men and women. By looking at these dances in a transnational context, I argue that *danzas chuscas* provide a staging ground where the struggles over the meanings of group identity, gender practices and ideology, and the incorporation of new statuses and social identities are contested, reframed, and negotiated.

“Los Yalaltecos”: The *Promesas* and the Performance of Class

During the celebration of San Antonio de Padua on June 13, 2004, in the old basketball court of the village of Yalálag, the fiesta committee members announced the following message over a P.A. system:

The fiesta committee thanks all the people who have made the fiesta for San Antonio possible and have supported the construction of the church's new social center and new basketball court. This fiesta could not have been completed without immigrants' donations and the collaborative work between locals and immigrants who live in Oaxaca City, Mexico City, Veracruz, Puebla, and the United States. We welcome all returning and visiting migrants and remind them that this is their home.

After the fiesta committee thanked the immigrants, they invited all in attendance to watch the dances of the four barrios.⁴ As I prepared to film the dances, hundreds of immigrants, townspeople, and Zapotec, Chinantec, and Mixe visitors from neighboring and distant towns sat around the basketball court to watch the performance of the religious and parodic dances of “Los Yalaltecos,” “Las Malinches,” and “Los Negritos.” While the musicians tuned their instruments, fireworks exploded to announce the arrival of the dance of “Los Yalaltecos” of Barrio San Juan. As the nine dancers walked into the basketball court to perform, to celebrate the patron saint, and to entertain the audience, immigrants, nonimmigrants, and visitors began to applaud and laugh at the dancers' attire and movements.

The fiesta of San Antonio de Padua—the protector of the cattle and the hills—is celebrated from June 3rd to the 15th. San Antonio de Padua is not the main patron saint

in Yalálag; however, he has become the most important saint in the village due to the hundreds of miracles he has performed for the Zapotecs in Yalálag and in neighboring towns.⁵ More recently, stories of San Antonio helping immigrants to cross the U.S. border illegally and helping them to find a job, and even alleviating immigrants' hardships, have enhanced his position in the village. As a result, it has become customary that on the day of the saint's fiesta, hundreds of immigrants return to Yalálag from Los Angeles, northern California, Chicago, Oaxaca City, Mexico City, Guadalajara, Puebla, and Veracruz to thank him. For example, while some Zapotec immigrants promise San Antonio that they will come back to contribute economically to the realization of his fiesta, others return to perform a particular service or a sacred vow, known as a *promesa*, to show gratitude for the saint's help. In June 2004 two female immigrants from Los Angeles offered San Antonio the service of adorning the interior and exterior of his church as well as his altar and the arches of the entry door. A friend of mine, who performs in religious and *chusca* dances in Los Angeles, danced in one of the *danzas chuscas* for the whole fiesta as a way to pay a *promesa* he made for the saint. While many immigrants from the United States return to Yalálag to make their *promesas* to San Antonio, others, including those who cannot return to the fiesta due to their migratory status (undocumented migrants, for example), have their relatives in Yalálag pay such *promesas* on their behalf. At this particular fiesta, a Zapotec man in Yalálag paid a *promesa* on behalf of his nephew who was seriously ill in Los Angeles. After the nephew recovered, he sent money to his uncle to buy a cow and offer it for the fiesta.

Since the late 1990s Zapotec international and internal immigrants started to make monetary donations as a way of *promesa* to San Antonio.⁶ Currently, those who immigrate to the United States make monetary *promesas* (see Brettell 2003) that range from fifty to a thousand dollars. Those who return from Mexico City, Oaxaca City, Puebla, and Veracruz make offerings from a hundred to a thousand pesos (ten to one hundred dollars). Since monetary donations of Zapotec nonimmigrants tend to be significantly smaller than those of Zapotec immigrants, Zapotecs generally supplement their monetary offerings by providing food supplies and offering their labor for the fiestas. Throughout the week-long celebration, it is customary for the fiesta committee to thank immigrants for their monetary *promesas*. Usually, one of the fiesta committee members reads from a notebook with pages and pages of names, the type of currency, and the amount of money each immigrant donated. Through the public address system of San Antonio's church, one can hear such announcements as the following: "Mario Molina from Oaxaca sent 200 pesos. Family Monterrubio from Los Angeles sent 50 dollars. Family Fabian from Mexico City sent 300 pesos. Familia Mulato from Puebla sent 150 pesos. Family Tomas from Los Angeles sent 300 dollars. Francisco Diego from Los Angeles sent 500 dollars . . ." And, the list goes on and on until the fiesta is over.

Monetary *promesas* and the influx of money from outside the community have become politicized and thus transformed social relations between immigrants and locals in Yalálag. For example, making donations for the fiesta in dollars or pesos has started to crystallize the ways that class differences within the village have sharpened and how social positions have shifted between immigrants and nonimmigrants (see Brettell 2003;

Goldring 1992, 1998; Rouse 1995). On my way home from the fiesta in 2004, I overheard a local man drinking beer in a little store tell his friends: “*Aquí en el pueblo todos somos iguales. Vengan de donde vengan*” (“Here, in the village, we are all the same. It does not matter where people are coming from”). As described earlier, the repetitive public announcements of monetary *promesas* and immigrants’ *promesas* reveal, on the one hand, the significance of immigrants’ religious participation and the social and economic power they have in Yalálag. On the other hand, they make visible the differences in economic status between international and national immigrants, and between immigrants and the local people.

Additionally, since migration outside Yalálag frequently leads to economic success and social prestige, some immigrants take advantage of the fiesta to boast of their new social status by showing off their affluence in public and private spaces. Some immigrants make expensive monetary *promesas* (between \$300 and \$1,000 dollars) to reward the winners of the racehorses and bullfights that take place during the fiestas. Others spend between \$5,000 and \$12,000 to offer San Antonio cows, pigs, Paschal candles, and fireworks. At times, some immigrant men display their new status by buying alcoholic drinks for local men. Women perform their new status by dressing up in the latest Los Angeles fashions.⁷ According to Teresa, a local woman, such performance of a higher status and economic success is usually interpreted as an act of arrogance and pretension:

For example, when immigrants come to the fiestas, they like to show off that they have money. Besides spending hundreds of dollars in fireworks and food donations for the fiesta, they think that bringing fancy clothes, perfumes, different kinds of shoes, watches, rings, necklaces, and of course, their video cameras makes them richer and more important. But, what I really dislike about their attitudes is that sometimes they look down upon us.⁸

In Yalálag locals have contradictory feelings about the wealth that immigrants bring and the ways some immigrants perform their new status and spending power in the fiesta. That is, while immigrants raise their social prestige by bringing money to the fiesta and show that they have made it in the United States, locals both honor and resent them for it. Over the course of my research in Yalálag, I learned that villagers react negatively to immigrants’ attitudes with feelings of confusion, sadness, anger, or disillusion. They also retaliate against immigrants’ behavior in several ways. All of my informants in Yalálag said that the townspeople gossip about the incongruities between immigrants’ new socioeconomic status in Yalálag and what actually happens in their everyday lives in the United States (see Brettell 2003; Levitt 2001; Mandel 1989, as cited in Brettell and Hollified 2000; Smith 1995). Even though some immigrants consciously display the wealth and upward mobility that they gained abroad while attending the fiestas, in the United States they form part of the working class—and the locals know it.

Nonimmigrants also critique immigrants in *danzas chuscas* such as “Los Yalaltecos.” Victor, a Zapotec community leader, explains how Yalalteco views, feelings, and attitudes toward immigrants figure into the *danzas chuscas*:⁹

I do not know what is wrong with the immigrants. But once they get here, they start showing off. However, the villagers are very sharp. If immigrants arrive with new clothes and want to impress the locals, then the *danzantes* invent *chusca* dances to make fun of them during the days of the fiesta. The *danzantes* are very sharp and clever. What they usually do is to choreograph funny movements. They lift their skirts, move sensually, and walk with arrogance. They copy the ways immigrants dress or appear. What the *danzantes* like to do is to imitate and exaggerate how immigrants behave. Sometimes, you can even tell who they are making fun of. It is hilarious.

On June 12, 2004, I watched a performance of “Los Yalaltecos” at the San Antonio Church basketball court. It included a series of choreographed movements parodying immigrant women and men. With exaggerated hop-step motifs and graceful hip movements, male bodies imitated immigrants’ behaviors. During the performance, we laughed at the chubby and burly men because we knew that they were making fun of immigrants’ Americanized appearance and attitudes. The male dancers playing female characters were dressed like old Yalalteca women with *xhtap* (long skirts) wrapped around their waists and *’ll xha’* (dresses). They also draped *rboz* (shawls) over their left arms, as many Yalalteca women do during social dances. Each “female” dancer wore a plastic mask, painted pink and with blue eyes. Two wore make-up; the others had sunglasses. They wore wigs made of cotton threads that resembled the immigrant women’s long, straight hair, but unlike real women’s hair the wigs were dyed in vibrant yellows. The male dancers also wore plastic masks and were dressed like the old Yalalteco peasants in *calzón y camisa de manta* (a white long-sleeved shirt and white pants made of cotton). Some masks had big moustaches while others had beards, sunglasses, or both. Each male dancer also had two women’s shawls, one wrapped around his head to cover his hair and the other worn around his arms, in addition to a typical Yalalteco hat made of black wool (see Figure 1).

As the dance began, I became aware of how the dancers’ physical carriage, the dance movements, and the costuming of the characters were used to ridicule and satirize immigrants’ behaviors. For example, as some female dancers walked to their spots, they began to blow kisses to the audience and walked as if they were modeling on a runway. Some of the male characters moved their hands over their heads as if they were combing their hair or adjusting their sunglasses. In one of the *sones* (dances or parts), four of the eight dancers formed a circle and moved counterclockwise. As the two female characters began turning, they started to lift their skirts and move their bodies with a peculiar sensuality. The male characters followed the same step motifs, but their movements were more controlled. One of the character-

Figure 1. Dance of Los Yalaltecos. Yalálag, 2004.



istic movements of the male characters was the energetic swinging of their arms from one side to the other. As their hands were lifted into the air, they began to shake their shawls as if they were asking for the audience's attention.¹⁰

The dance of "Los Yalaltecos" appears here as a social critique of the immigrants and as a performance of the contradictory roles and multiple social positions that immigrants come to play in sending and receiving societies (Mahler 1998). To be exact, if we look at some aspects of the performance of immigrants' behaviors in the fiesta—some of which are indicative of the acts of arrogance and display of an upper status—and compare them with the performance of "Los Yalaltecos," we find that the dancers use a combination of native and Western symbols, such as the plastic masks and the shawls, to signal the tensions created between locals and immigrants. In other words, in "Los Yalaltecos" the dancers act out the ways in which immigrants have internalized dominant ideologies and reproduced power relations and hierarchies within their own community. For instance, some immigrants in Los Angeles talked to me about their feelings of being unable to "adjust" or live in accordance with the peasant way of life in Yalálag. Others said that they do not understand why some immigrants do not take advantage of the American dream and hang out with their countrymen. More significantly, some members of the second generation used derogatory terms such as *chuntis* (Indian-looking or -behaving) to describe Yalalteco immigrants and nonimmigrants who "continue" to typify the peasant and ranching ways of life of Yalálag.

In "Los Yalaltecos" the costuming, the dance movements, and the gestures of the characters are crucial to understanding the message of the dance. On the one hand, they evoke Yalalteco cultural symbols such as the way old people continue to dress and the native way of dancing and making music. On the other hand, these dancers mark their bodies with a system of American symbols such as the yellow wigs and a series of specific body movements and gestures to signal the assimilation of immigrants to American values and nonlocal behaviors. In their portrayal of the immigrants as an assemblage of conflicting images and juxtaposed elements, the locals stage a performance of cultural resistance and a social critique and call immigrants to reflect upon their behaviors and attitudes.

"Los Cholos": Social Remittances in Transnational Social Spaces

During the fiesta of Saint Antonio, I was particularly struck by the distinctive presence and participation of Zapotec teenaged boys and young adult men who belong to local gangs. Some returned from Los Angeles to form their own gangs in Yalálag. Others were local teenagers that joined these *pandillas* (gangs) without ever having traveled to Los Angeles. On June 13 the *cholos* (gang members) appeared during the *jaripeo* (traditional bullfights) and the *baile*. In the bullfights they participated as bullfighters and horsemen and used this public event to show off their virility and reaffirm their presence, power, and rivalry before the village residents and other neighboring gang members. In the *baile* (a nightly popular dance gathering that takes place in the basketball court) they were having a good time. While I saw some of them drinking alcoholic beverages in the temporary stands, others were dancing with teenaged girls on the basketball court.¹¹ Interestingly,

these *cholos* styled themselves in the “*cholo* fashion” of Los Angeles gangs.¹² Their heads were shaved, and they had tattoos on their arms, necks, and hands. They wore baggy pants and loose T-shirts, and some sported baseball caps. While some wore athletic shoes almost identical to those worn by L.A. *cholos*, others created a syncretic style of *cholo* by wearing Yalalteco sandals.

In this section I focus on one negative impact of social remittances in Yalálag and the responses of locals. I argue that the marginal social identities immigrants acquire in the United States contribute to social disorganization and social instability in the emigrant-sending community. *Cholo* immigrants affect their community through “social remittances”: the ideas, behaviors, identities, and social capital they bring from the host country to country of origin communities (Levitt 2001). In other words, they reproduce negative ideas, stereotypes, “values, and practices that they have been exposed to and add these social remittances to the repertoire [of Yalálag,] both expanding and transforming it” (Levitt 2001, 55). Additionally, immigrants’ assimilation into “the oppositional identities of native [U.S.] racial minorities” serves as a role model to create a new social order and new social identities in their community of origin (Portes and Zhou 1993, as cited in Portes and Rumabut 2001; Rumabut 1999).

Many scholars have already argued that the impact of migration in emigrant-sending communities is not always benign (Hamilton and Stoltz Chinchilla 2001; Levitt 2001; Smith 1995, 2005). According to my interviewees in both Yalálag and Los Angeles, *pan-dillerismo* (gang activity) has become one of many severe problems that affect the social life of Yalálag and many other Zapotec village communities of La Sierra Juárez. In the last ten years, gang members—who are either young migrants who have returned to the village or second-generation Zapotec Americans—have introduced L.A. gang culture to their native communities. During the course of my research in Los Angeles, I learned that some Zapotec immigrants have taken their children from Los Angeles to Yalálag to heal them from *pan-dillerismo* (Cruz-Manjarrez 2006). While some of these teens are cured with the help of relatives and the local priest, others go back to Los Angeles and return to street life. When I asked second-generation Zapotec Americans in Los Angeles why their peers join gangs, most agreed on a few explanations. As Gladis, a twenty-year-old Zapotec American from Koreatown, explained: “They become involved in gang activities because they feel discriminated against or because they lack parental supervision. I think that many of our *paisanos* (countrymen) do not have enough time to take care of their children because they work all day long. Thus, I think that these guys like hanging out with the homeboys—*cholos*—or homegirls—*cholas*.” The youths also emphasized that social disorientation and a lack of opportunities for some young immigrants, whose status is usually undocumented, contribute to negative activities such as joining street gangs, taking drugs, and engaging in criminal or violent acts (see Vigil 1988).

Currently, there are no estimates of the number of gang members or *bandillas* in La Sierra Juárez, but it is common knowledge that in the last ten years the *bandillas* have become a threat to the region. According to the Zapotec villagers and municipal authorities, gang members commit robberies, sell drugs, and kill innocent people. Immigrants and nonimmigrants are robbed in broad daylight on public transportation as they travel

through La Sierra to reach their villages. Usually, the robberies occur during the six-hour trip between Oaxaca City and Yalálag. My Zapotec friends say the *cholos* target immigrants because they bring money from the United States for their families.

The villagers told me that when the *cholos* began to settle in the village, the community thought they were a temporary problem. They expected the gang members to return to Los Angeles or change their destructive ways. (Gang culture did not exist previously in Yalálag.) They stayed, however, and instead formed local *pandillas* based on L.A. gang culture. Zapotec immigrant *cholos* continue to identify with their U.S. gangs, such as the L.A. 13 and the 18th Street gangs. They tattoo their bodies and graffiti walls around the village, two of the most notorious acts that publicly demonstrate the gang's sense of extraterritorial belonging and transnational loyalty.

Although some of the elders could not tell me what the graffiti or tattoos represented, a fifteen-year-old girl had a good understanding of what these gang symbols mean: "I know that some of the *pandilleros* belonged to Los Angeles 18th Street gang. I know that having a tattoo of the number 18 means that they belonged to that *pandilla*.¹³ I also know that they like to paint graffiti around the places they like to hang out." Immigrant *cholos* have also formed new *pandillas* in Yalálag, such as 23 West, that are not affiliated with gangs in Los Angeles.¹⁴ According to the same girl, who wished to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation, the number 23 represents the number of founding gang members (see Figure 2).

In Yalálag the local people describe gang members as "*el nuevo mal de la comunidad*" ("the new community evil"). In one of my interviews, Pancho, a forty-five-year-old resident, explained to me that locals think the *cholos* "have polluted the younger generations because the only thing the *cholos* do is to teach teenaged boys to misbehave, but profitably." At the present time, the increasing presence of gang members in Yalálag has gone hand-in-hand with the introduction of drugs, acts of violence against the villagers and between neighboring gangs, acts of vandalism, and the recruitment of mostly male youngsters. One of the worst acts of the *cholos* in Yalálag began with the illicit sale of drugs in *la secundaria* (middle schools). According to a school principal, one of his main concerns and the most

common complaint he receives from the students' parents is the selling of drugs after school. One of the teachers also mentioned that he has started to talk about the consequences of taking drugs because some of his students are becoming drug consumers. Another teacher described what the *cholos* actually do after school:

Everyday, the *cholos* come here to sell marijuana. They wait for our students on their way home. Unfortunately, a few

Figure 2. This graffiti marks a territorial boundary of the gang 23 West in Yalálag.



of our students are very immature. It seems that they do not know that drugs are harmful and may create addiction, so they try them. In addition, because the school is a little bit far from the village, it is a propitious place for this criminal activity. Look, this a very difficult situation. Many of our students come from neighboring villages to study. They live here on their own and lack supervision from their parents. As for the parents of our Yalalteco students, they cannot come here every day to pick their children up. They work. Before, this was not necessary. Look, what is really sad today is that we do not count on the support of the municipal authorities. Unfortunately, being away from the town center makes our middle school a propitious place to persuade our students to consume drugs or join the *pandillas*.

Currently, the consumption of drugs is not seen as an isolated problem or as the only social problem that causes social instability and violence in Yalálag. Drinking beer and *mescal* (a distilled alcohol from the agave plant) are other social problems related to destructive behavior and, at times, gang activities. However, it is the *cholos* who smoke marijuana who are accused of harming locals while under the influence of alcohol and drugs.¹⁵ For example, a woman who is an outsider but works in Yalálag told me that she has been sexually harassed by one of the *cholo* leaders. A family who runs a *tiendita* (small store) in the hills suspects that one of the *pandillas* burglarized it when they were away. According to residents, the community has urged the local authorities to do something about *pandillerismo*. However, the authorities have devoted little attention to this problem because of fear and a lack of knowledge or resources to reduce or stop the gangs' crimes.¹⁶

In the *danza chusca* called "Los Cholos," dancers tackle the existence of a transnationalized *pandillerismo* in Yalálag and represent syncretic cultural stereotypes of the L.A. gang subculture. To invoke the L.A. *cholo* style, male dancers deploy symbols like baggy pants, loose T-shirts, athletic shoes, and baseball caps, while female dancers sport miniskirts, high heels, and pantyhose. Framed by Zapotec musical sounds and choreographic styles to which Zapotec *cholos*, immigrants, and nonimmigrants alike all dance, the dancers mimic in a comical way some aspects of the *cholos*' manners. At this fiesta, for example, when the eight "*cholo*" dancers performed at the San Antonio basketball court the *son* (dance or part) *la cadena sencilla* (simple chain), they used the hand sign "Hook 'em Horns." With arms extended to the sides, elbows facing down in a slight semi-flexion, and their index and baby fingers pointing down and thumbs facing forward, they first crossed lines (two of four dancers each), returned, and regrouped to start the *cadena sencilla*. Accompanied by the tune of the brass band, four dancers began moving clockwise and the other four counterclockwise. As they moved forward to "weave the simple chain" (dance the simple chain), they did a complete right turn with a partner, and then half a left turn to change places. This choreographic sequence was repeated eight times to allow all dancers to reach their starting position.¹⁷ By using a combination of the hand sign "Hook 'em Horns" and a sequence of a step-hop-point/step-hop-point, hop-step/step, and a step-hop-point, the *cholo* dancers conveyed in a comical performance the community rejection of gang

activities and the development of new gangs, as well as the social dynamics and feelings *cholos* engender in Yalálag. The social dynamics include tensions between locals and *cholos* and between families and their troubled *cholo* teens.

One of the most important elements in *danzas chuscas* is the multiplicity of narratives they symbolize. When I asked residents what the dance of “Los Cholos” means, they pointed out that this dance is a playful mockery and does not seek to offend. A community leader explained to me that the *cholos* are perceived in the village as a threat and a shame to the community, and they represent the failure of the American dream. According to one *cholo* dancer I spoke to, the dancers mock the real *cholos* to offer a “lighthearted” social critique of their antisocial behaviors—a critique that the *cholos* experience by watching the *danzas chuscas*.

In the context of the fiesta, then, the significance of *cholo* dance performances, as well as the multiplicity of narratives the *cholo* dancers embody, is more complex than it appears on the surface. On one level, the *cholo* dancers use choreographic texts to communicate to the real *cholos* how the locals see, feel about, and perceive them. On another level, the dance performance offers the real *cholos* the opportunity to see themselves from a distance and with a critical eye. Furthermore, this dance provides social and cultural theorists with an understanding of how this Zapotec community sees itself and how it deals with the migration experiences and assimilation processes of Zapotec migrant teens and second-generation Zapotec Americans, who have been affected by a multiple marginality (Vigil 1988) and thus become gang members.¹⁸ Yet, *chusca* dance performances create a livable social space for reminding *cholos* that they are Zapotecs and are part of a community, one that may even be seeking to reintegrate them. The *danzas chuscas* performances, then, constitute a common symbolic language by which Zapotecs communicate with each other.

“Las Minifaldas”: Gender and Sexuality in Transnational Performances

It is almost 10 P.M. on May 3, 2003, and the *baile* (community gathering) is coming to one of its best moments. The rosary and mass are over, and people have had time to buy food and drinks, dance their social dances, and hear popular music. The dancers of “Las Minifaldas” are ready to perform. Juan, one of the organizers of this community event, announces the dance presentation, and as he invites the adults and their children to be seated to watch the performance, the Zapotec brass band *La Nueva Imagen* awaits to hear the signal from the *maestro de la danza* (dance leader) to begin to play. As the dancers show up in the main entrance of the ballroom, Juan asks the audience to welcome the dance ensemble with applause. As the dancers walk in two lines to the center of the ballroom, members of the audience begin to laugh at the dancers’ outfits and their comical presence. The women wear colorful blouses, miniskirts, pantyhose, high heels, and blonde and brunette wigs. As they walk into the ballroom, one of them swings her hips sensually from side to side and holds her hands at her waist. The one behind adjusts her sunglasses, and another one waves her hands to greet the audience. The men wear long black pants, ties, long-sleeve shirts, hats, and boots. All the dancers wear plastic masks of human faces painted with pink ink and blue eyes and Zapotec shawls wrapped around

their hair. They adjust their ties, vests, and sleeves and begin shouting to emphasize their presence. As the brass band starts to play the *son de la entrada* (entrance dance), the dancers form two lines. As they approach, they slightly lift their arms to their sides, make a left turn, return, and regroup in the two lines to begin dancing.

The appeal and relevance of contemporary *danzas chuscas* such as “Las Minifaldas” rest not only on the dancers’ ability to humorously reveal the Zapotec immigrants’ uneasy integration of American and Mexican behaviors, values, and ideas but also on their ability to convey how they perceive, feel, and experience the historical dis/continuities in gender, class, and racial relations that characterize contemporary Zapotec life in transnational social spaces. In Yalálag Zapotec nonimmigrants perform this dance to tease Yalalteco immigrants who now live in cities and adopt urban ways of life such as that of dressing according to L.A. fashion. Local dancers perform “Las Minifaldas” when immigrants return to their place of origin to participate in the patron saint fiesta of Santiago Apóstol.¹⁹ In Los Angeles the dance of “Las Minifaldas” has likewise been danced to celebrate Santiago Apóstol and to raise money for the saint’s fiesta in Yalálag as well as to “liven up” the *bailes* in Los Angeles. However, in Los Angeles “Las Minifaldas” underwent a significant change: Zapotec immigrants took the place of the Zapotec nonimmigrants to make fun of and criticize themselves. When I inquired about “Las Minifaldas,” I learned from Zapotec immigrants in Los Angeles that they make fun of themselves for the very same reasons that Zapotecs do in Yalálag. That is, in the comical dance performances Zapotecs mimic those who have assimilated to urban ways of life, have changed their views of their bodies, and have transgressed the norms and values that regulate their gender behaviors, relations, and ideology.

To understand the meaning of “Las Minifaldas” within the context of the transnational migration and religious celebrations requires the consideration of various factors. These include five decades of migration of Zapotecs from rural villages to the urban areas of Oaxaca City, Mexico City, and California; the development of nascent Zapotec communities in these cities; permanent relationships between immigrants and their community of origin; incorporation of women in the migration process; changing views and roles of gender relations, ideology, and hierarchies; influences of contemporary constructions of sexuality; the impact of popular culture and music; and the transition to an urban lifestyle. Due to social and economic marginalization and a lack of employment and education programs in Yalálag, Yalaltecos began to migrate to Oaxaca City and Mexico City in the late 1940s (De la Fuente 1949). By the early 1960s, Yalaltecos began migrating to California to work under the Bracero Program (Cruz-Manjarrez 2001, 2006).²⁰ Since then, some migrants have returned to Yalálag while others have moved back and forth between their places of origin and immigration, forming transnational economic, cultural, social, and political ties. The experiences of migration and the multiple processes of adaptation to urban environments have had different implications in gender relations, hierarchy, and ideology and in sexuality for both immigrants and nonimmigrants.²¹ For immigrants that are embedded in new gender relations and roles and are exposed to distinctive social constructions of gender and sexuality, the places of immigration have come to represent a new social context for assessing and transforming sexuality and their gender values, ideas,

and behaviors. Those who try on new gender and sexual behaviors, internalize new gender norms, or are forced to acquire new roles often face opposition, critique, and mockery from their families and communities.²² For example, in Yalálag gender relationships are structured by specific roles and domestic tasks, and gender behaviors and sexuality are highly monitored by family and community members. Most women do domestic work and manufacture clothing while men work as peasant farmers, construction workers, or sandal makers. Likewise, young women are strictly monitored to protect their reputations and “respectable” appearance, while young men have more freedom and control over their sexuality and presentation (unless a man overtly expresses homosexual traits).²³

Kinship and marriage relationships are patriarchal. In addition to the restrictions of established domestic roles for men and women, women’s rights and desires are somewhat undermined by their fathers, brothers, and male authorities. During my research in Yalálag, some young women told me that although they want to migrate to work or study, their parents oppose their wishes and/or only allow their brothers to do so. Others said that while some young women are free to choose their husbands, others’ choices are still subject to their parents’ approval. Further, many families still arrange their daughters’ marriages without asking for their opinion.

In contrast, in Los Angeles norms of work, family, marriage practices, spousal relations, household division of labor, and patterns of family authority and patriarchy in sexuality and gender behaviors have changed significantly (see Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). For example, men not only learn and are obligated to do domestic tasks that are supposed to be part of women’s territories and roles, but they in fact become skilled at cooking, ironing, and cleaning, and most of them work as dishwashers, cooks, and janitors. Some learn how *not* to be dominant and authoritarian, become less macho, and even abandon dominant patriarchal ideologies and behaviors such as beating women and marrying them without the woman’s consent.²⁴ In addition, because many women learn and can exercise their rights, become socially and economically independent, and are removed from family surveillance and patriarchal domination, they have more control of their lives, bodies, and sexuality.

Symbolically, “Las Minifaldas” perhaps best represents these new marked differences. It exposes the reactions and critiques of Zapotecs whose ideas and values concerning gender and sexuality are shaped by a patriarchal system and the influence of Catholic principles such as virginity, sanctified marriages, childbirths legitimized by marriage, and family honor (see Stephen 2002, 52). Like in all *danzas chuscas*, in “Las Minifaldas” four elements connect and convey nonimmigrants and immigrants’ assessments of immigrants’ changes in gender identity and ideology: the clothing, dance movements, music, and exaggerated mimicry of immigrants’ public behavior.

The clothing used in “Las Minifaldas” links the meanings of the dance performance with immigrants’ new sense of their bodies, the adoption of urban fashions, and above all their new ideas about gender and sexuality (see Figure 3). That is, the miniskirts are the most salient feature in the dance because they best symbolize immigrants’ new discourses and practices of gender and sexuality and embody distinctive gender positions and ideologies specific to transnational social spaces. Zapotec men and women I interviewed both in Yalálag and Los Angeles recounted a saying that best reflects how townspeople and some

conventional Zapotec immigrants perceive the impact of immigration on gender dynamics: “Migration has emancipated Zapotec women.” Currently, young Zapotec women who migrate to Los Angeles have more say in the way they live their lives, their ways of dressing, and their marriages and sexuality, and they are economically independent. This does not mean that they sever family ties nor that their relations with their families and communities are smooth. Quite the opposite: they are always challenged and are often at the center of tensions within their families and communities.

Most women in Yalálag are raised to be well-behaved, highly religious, and “*muy aguantadoras*” (“very forbearing”) with their husbands. Their parents and close relatives monitor their sexuality to ensure family honor and “respectable and proper” behavior. They do not wear make-up or color their hair or cut it short.²⁵ They wear loose dresses or skirts (usually falling below the knees), loose-fitting blouses with short sleeves, and Zapotec sandals. In contrast, immigrant women and their daughters in Los Angeles are more flexible with their personal care and with the ways they carry their bodies. They may dye their hair, use make-up, and wear miniskirts, tight dresses and pants, and pantyhose.²⁶ Many like high heels. With respect to marriage, two changes are most notable: they date before they marry, and they choose their husbands or sexual partners. Thus, because immigrant women have moved away from family control, live in accordance with urban norms, have tried new behaviors and ideas of gender and sexuality, and carry their bodies in new ways, they are portrayed in “Las Minifaldas” as “*mujeres liberadas*” (“liberated women”) and “*mujeres de ciudad*” (“city women”).

In the case of the immigrant male dancers, certainly the miniskirts do not represent sexual and family liberation. However, they similarly refer to men’s assimilation urban ways of life and changes in their gender values, roles, and ideology. What we see in the dance is the substitution of rural peasant ways of dressing with urban dress styles. Immigrant men are portrayed as wearing sunglasses, ties, vests, and pants made of cashmere—all considered accessories of city life. More specifically, “Las Minifaldas” refers back to the new gender roles, values, and social norms that regulate immigrants’ gender behaviors

Figure 3. Dance of Las Minifaldas. Los Angeles, 2003.



and relations in the United States. For instance, unlike in Yalálag, if men in Los Angeles mistreat women physically, sexually, or physiologically, they can go to jail.

Like all *danzas chuscas*, “Las Minifaldas” is performed by nine male dancers.²⁷ The dance structure is composed of eight fixed group choreographies, each set to a different *son* (or songs) and eight steps. The step motifs are a combination of hop-steps and *puntillas* (points), a distinctive pattern of Zapotec dance. According to Romualdo Limeta, a well-known maestro of *danzas chuscas* in Yalálag, the step sequences in *danzas chuscas* draw on basic steps of Zapotec social and religious dances and a few popular dance styles such as polka, *quebradita*, and *norteñas*. There are three defining moments in the structure of the *danzas chuscas*. The first is when the dancers appear in front of an audience and begin to walk to their positions. In “Las Minifaldas,” for example, dancers perform playful mockeries of immigrant men and women that include walking sensually, blowing kisses to the audience, and adjusting their sunglasses, ties, and hats. The second part is when the dancers begin dancing. This section is divided into the entering dance, six *sones* (parts or songs), and the *despedida* or *salida* (farewell). The last part is when the dancers leave the performance space. They may leave dancing or walking.

In *danzas chuscas* music constitutes another significant aspect of the dance performance. It highlights the message of the dance and refers to what Zapotecs consider popular, urban, modern, and new. *Danzas chuscas* are accompanied by a Zapotec brass band, and because many *danzas chuscas* were developed recently, the music is new as well. The director of the brass band and the dance teacher, known as *maestro de la danza*, always work together to define and compose the tunes, so the music is custom-made for each particular dance. Romualdo Limeta explained to me how this process works in his community. In general, he picks or invents eight tunes, many based on a popular song.²⁸ Then he thinks about the steps and tries to make them fit with each tune. With these elements in mind, he asks the director of the brass band to write the music. As the dance teacher whistles the tunes for the director, he composes the music and matches them with the steps. The significance of the music is based on the images and sounds that it represents. Thus, the dance performance is acoustically framed by a Zapotec soundscape and by modern, urban musical sounds that represent both *El Norte* (the United States) and an urban way of life.

In “Las Minifaldas” dance, music, and costumes are equally important. During the dance, these elements together materialize complex processes of social change in Zapotec identity as it refers to gender. In addition, they embody and codify community responses and views of these changes, including social critiques toward those who break the social norms that used to rule their gender behaviors and ideology. As I have argued above, in “Las Minifaldas” dancers represent in comical ways what is socially constructed as urban, different, new, and, more specifically, transgressive. To be exact, through dancing, dancers emphasize that immigrants are no longer the same people they were in Yalálag and confront them with their new gender identity and ideology. This dance, then, confirms changes in the logic and dynamics of this patriarchal system, gender relations, and behaviors associated with Catholic principles among Zapotecs in Yalálag and in Los Angeles. Finally, perhaps more than any other principle of group cohesion, the dance

structure—the steps, choreographies, and bodily movements—stand for the continuities and discontinuities that characterize contemporary Zapotec identity in transnational social spaces.

Conclusion

In transnational communities, migration impacts both emigrant-sending and immigrant-receiving communities. In the case of the Zapotec community in Los Angeles and in Yalálag, migration experiences have contributed to changes in systems of class and gender. At the same time, as a result of assimilation processes, Zapotec immigrants and nonimmigrants have experienced a sense of fragmentation of group identity. Because of the effects of social remittances in Yalálag, Zapotecs are suffering one of many unsettling outcomes of migration into the United States: social instability due to the introduction of L.A. gang culture.

The importance of religious fiestas and community gatherings in the context of transnationalism speak to us about cultural and symbolic processes and social structures that reintegrate Zapotecs in Los Angeles, in Yalálag, and between these two “homes.” Since the late 1960s, many Zapotec village communities in Oaxaca, Mexico, have experienced high rates of out-migration, and while Zapotec immigrants have reconstituted their communities and formed their own families in the United States, they have remained linked to their places of origin (Cruz-Manjarrez 2006; Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2004; Hulshof 1991; Klaver 1997). One of the most important ways that immigrants have reconnected with and reintegrated into their village communities in Oaxaca is through economic and religious participation in patron saint fiestas. By sponsoring and taking part in them, they have reinforced their community ties, legitimized their cultural citizenship (Rosaldo 1989, 198), and complied with their religious obligations to the most important Yalálag patron saint—San Antonio de Padua. Simultaneously, however, immigrants have transformed religious fiestas and used them as a context for valorizing their new social status and class position.

In Yalálag religious fiestas and in Los Angeles community gatherings, *danzas chuscas* performances reveal and embody the significance of change, conflict, and social remittances in this Zapotec transnational community. Because of the increasing social differences among immigrants, nonimmigrants, and second-generation Zapotec Americans, I propose that both immigrants and nonimmigrants perform *chusca* dances to manifest how they see each other and how they are experiencing the historical continuities and discontinuities that shape social change in gender, class relations, and social identity. I argue that *chusca* dance performances are spaces of and for self-reflection, and dancers use humorous representations of immigrant behaviors to tackle the uncertainties and fragmentation of their community as well as the consequences of a transnationalized *pandillerismo*. Finally, in the context of the fiesta and in the moment of *chusca* dance performances, the role of humor cannot be disregarded. In the worldview of the Zapotecs, humor is *como un costumbre* (“part of our tradition”). Romualdo Limeta, the well-known maestro of *chusca* dances in Yalálag, said this to me and added, “These dances are like a

joke on someone from the community, but nobody gets mad. This is the way we are. We make fun of ourselves.”

Notes

I want to dedicate this work to the people of Yalálag and thank them for sharing their tremendous cultural knowledge with me. I also thank Dr. Olivia Cadaval, Dr. Paul Scollieri, and M. A. Anoosh Jorjorian for their critical readings of earlier versions of this essay. Thanks to José Bollo, Mario Molina, Juanita Vazquez, and Romualdo Limeta for their unconditional support throughout this work. This essay draws upon my dissertation, written between 2004 and 2006 while I was graduate student in the Department of World Arts and Cultures at UCLA. Some of the new ideas contained in this version developed as a result of my ongoing postdoctoral research. I translated all quotations from Spanish to English.

1. Zapotecs or *ben'zaa*, which means “people from the clouds,” are the third most populous indigenous group in Mexico. They are settled in three geographical areas of the state of Oaxaca: Central Valleys, Sierra Norte and Sierra Sur, and Isthmus of Tehuantepec. San Juan Yalálag, or Villa Hidalgo Yalálag, is located in La Sierra Norte of Oaxaca, Mexico.

2. The Zapotec migration to the United States began in the late 1960s when economic and social conditions generated a significant expulsion of impoverished Zapotec peasants, who became a source of cheap labor in the agricultural fields of California. In the 1970s they changed their migratory routes to Los Angeles and began to work in the service industry. In the 1980s Zapotec migration intensified, and a great number of young Zapotec men and women settled permanently in California. Since then, Zapotec migration has continued to increase.

3. *Danza chuscas* date back to as early as the 1930s (De la Fuente 1949).

4. The village of Yalálag is divided into four *barrios* (neighborhoods), and each one has its own religious and *chusca* dances. Also, each barrio has its own patron saint, and each saint has his/her own religious dance: Santiago Apostol, the dance of Los Cuerudos; Santa Rosa de Lima, the dance of Los Huenches; San Juan Bautista, the dance of Los Negritos; and Santa Catarina de Asis, the dance of San Jose. During the patron saint fiestas, the four barrios honor and contribute to the success of the saints' fiestas by participating in their religious and parodic dances.

5. Yalálag is a Zapotec village that belongs to the district of Villa Alta. Currently, quite a few Mixes and Chatino also reside permanently or temporarily in Yalálag in order to work or study. Yalálag is the largest town in the region and offers services and education programs that other neighboring villages do not.

6. Immigrants also make monetary *promesas* to other Yalálag patron saints: San Juan Bautista, Santa Rosa de Lima, Santa Catarina Mártir, and Santiago Apóstol.

7. For example, immigrant women are distinguished from nonimmigrant women because they tend to dye their hair light colors, wear city shoes, and bring imported clothes for their relatives to wear to the fiesta.

8. In Yalálag local people also think that immigrants use the fiesta to compete eco-

nomically with each other. For example, from June 3rd to June 12th, one immigrant man offered Paschal candles, known as *cirios*, and a cow to San Antonio. During an interview he said to me that, in contrast to other immigrants, he spent about \$12,000 to pay for the cow and the candles and a family fiesta, which included paying for the manufacturing of fireworks, the ritual activities and ceremonies that accompanied the offerings such as rosaries and a mass, and hiring a brass band.

9. In contrast to the Mexican *mestizo* communities in Mexico, indigenous people like the Zapotecs have their own community leaders and forms of government, known as the *sistema de usos y costumbres* or the *gobierno tradicional*. This form of government relies on indigenous political, civic, and judicial structures that regulate the social, religious, and political life of the Yalálag community (Cruz-Manjarrez 2006). In Yalálag community leaders work in the municipality and are representatives of their community before the state government and federal authorities. They also resolve community problems and decide the development of communal projects.

10. The dance group is made up of nine male dancers. As a general rule, eight dancers always perform and an extra dancer always moves around the group. He does so to secure enough space for the dancers and the choreography. At times, when the dancers' paraphernalia falls or the dancers need to adjust their masks or attire, he helps them. In case one of the dancers cannot continue the dance, he takes his place. The Zapotecs say that all their dances have eight *sones* (dances or parts) because each dancer has a part, and each *son* has its own basic steps and choreography (figures).

11. It is important to mention that the *cholos* represent a new type of social identity in Yalálag. The community criticizes them and feels upset about their behaviors but does not exclude them. That is, they participate in community and family fiestas. In the fiesta of San Antonio, for example, some of them were doing labor for the event such as helping the fiesta committee to bring the bulls for the bullfights and helping to build the bullring. They were also socializing with village people and relatives.

12. I thank Allen Roberts for pointing out that L.A. *cholo* fashion is an adaptation of African American hip-hop chic.

13. The 18th Street gang is of Mexican origin and is settled in downtown Los Angeles. Since its origins (1960s) this gang has been composed of Mexicans, but recently Central Americans, African Americans, and Asians, among others, have joined it. Since the late 1990s the 18th Street gang has grown across Central America and Mexico, and gang members in these regions have kept their loyalties and reproduced the L.A. gang culture in their new settlements. Gang members are usually involved in criminal activities such as murder, rape, assaults, drug trafficking, extortion, prostitution, and robberies.

14. This is the largest *pandilla* in Yalálag.

15. It is important to point out that alcoholics also harm locals, but since residents feel more threatened by and afraid of the *cholos*, residents prefer to accuse them.

16. In other Zapotec villages, municipal authorities have tried to negotiate with *cholos* by asking them to leave the village or integrate themselves into the social life of the community. Nonetheless, heated discussions between local people and the *cholos* have led to violent confrontations. In last five years, the Zapotec village of San Mateo Cajonos has

been burdened by the permanent establishment of *pandillas* and their hated acts of vandalism. In this village the level of violence escalated to a shocking degree when quarrels between locals and *cholos* turned into machete fights.

17. While they perform these group movements, they have to maintain a combination of four different steps. The majority of the Yalalag Zapotec *chusca* dances are based on a combination of step-hop-point/step-hop-point, hop-step/step, and a step-hop-point.

18. Vigil (1988) points out that multiple factors may lead to the development of a gang identity. Immigrant teens and members of the second generation who cannot handle social adaptation to American society are victims of ethnic, cultural, class, and racial discrimination and exclusion. They may experience stressful family situations, economic instability, and social clashes with family members and peers, and they may lack opportunities for acquiring a good education. All these factors may lead to drugs and alcohol addiction and other antisocial behaviors.

19. Currently, clothing is one of the most characteristic ways in which Zapotec immigrants and nonimmigrants differentiate themselves. On nonfiesta days in Yalálag local women wear a shirt and a skirt or a dress (always falling below the knees). Besides manufacturing these clothes and the traditional *rebozo* (shawl), women wear Yalaltec *huaraches* (traditional sandals made in Yalálag). Most women braid or tie their long hair. Men wear pants, a shirt with long sleeves, *huaraches*, and a hat made of palms. In contrast to younger generations, old people are still accustomed to dressing in the traditional fashion. Old women wear *huipil* (dresses) and *enredo* (skirts). Men wear *calzon de manta* (pants and a shirt made of cotton), a *morral* (a bag made of cotton), Zapotec sandals, and a hat made of palms. In Los Angeles, in turn, Zapotec men and women have changed their ways of dressing. On a daily basis, women wear pants, blouses, and skirts and a great variety of shoes for the city. Men dress in pants, t-shirts, baseball caps, and tennis shoes or moccasins. For Zapotec nonimmigrants, the way in which immigrants dress is representative of both city life and assimilation to American way of life and ideology.

20. After World War II the U.S. and Mexican governments established the guest worker program, better known as the Bracero Program, under which Mexicans worked in agriculture and transportation and helped to construct and maintain U.S. railways.

21. Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) and Mendoza (2000) have found similar experiences among Mexican mestizo migrants and Peruvian mestizo and indigenous migrants. Lynn Stephen (2002) shows similar patterns among Zapotec immigrants of the Central Valleys who live in California.

22. Of course, not all Zapotecs are conservative. However, based on my research in Yalálag and Los Angeles, I will risk characterizing the majority of the Zapotecs I know as conservative. By this I mean that their community values and ideologies of gender and sexuality are highly influenced by the Catholic Church and include emphasis on family honor, virginity, births legitimized by marriage, monogamous marriage, and heterosexuality.

23. In this Zapotec community, a man is considered homosexual when he acts like a woman.

24. Although Zapotec men and women are still married to a dominant patriarchal

gender system, there are quite a few significant changes in gender ideology, relationships, and hierarchies. In this Zapotec community, the practice of arranged marriage is in decline, yet there are still many immigrant men who return to Yalálag to marry women who do not necessarily agree with this practice.

25. If young women want to get a haircut, they have to ask their mothers for permission.

26. For women in Yalálag, make-up is not part of their daily personal care and cultural values. Make-up has been introduced recently via immigrant women; its use is also due to the influence of mass media and the expansion of cosmetic companies. Ways of dressing and personal care also vary with age and generation.

27. As mentioned above, *danzas chuscas* are always performed in two lines, one of four female characters and the other of four male ones.

28. In the dance-making process, it is possible that a dancer offers the *maestro de la danza* tunes and step motifs to create a new *son*.

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