

## Embodied Collective Choreographies: Listening to Arena Nightclub's Jotería Sonic Memories

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“The rhythms gave us life. The sounds created a space, and we created a space through the sounds to be able to express ourselves. The beats allowed people to transform themselves. Oh yes, the foot stomping . . . even if you didn't know the *comadre* next to you, you were still connecting or communicating through the sounds, as you stomped your feet together.” (Jessie)

The quote I start with above is by Jessie, a queer Chicano from LA who attended Arena Nightclub in Hollywood, California, in the 1990s and early 2000s. Jessie's thoughts capture the power of dancing, sounds, collectivity, and transformation at Arena, which opened its doors in 1991. His quote serves as a map and a reminder of the importance of Arena for many of us in Los Angeles as a space to express ourselves as queer youth in the 1990s. Jessie's comment reminds us of the function of the beats and the music in individual and collective experimentation and coming of age experiences, of the queer world-making that happens in the club. His reflection references the specific gestures and corporeal language we used on the dance floor to connect and communicate—communicate with each other but also to the world, as we claimed space with foot-stomping, collective clapping, and whistles, exclaiming that we were free and everything was alright, if only in that moment. These sounds—the whistles, the foot-stomping, and the clapping—were sonic invocations of community and of claims to space in an otherwise hostile political and social urban landscape for Latinx queer youth and their families in the 1990s. Like Pan Dulce, a short-lived but memorable nightclub in San Francisco in the 1990s, Arena was what Horacio N. Roque Ramírez called a “momentary queer Latino home” (2009, 276). Indeed, Arena was home to many of us.

When I was coming of age, and for many other underaged queer Latinx youth who came into their own there, Arena was a haven. The sonorous experience began with the intimacy of people's bedrooms and bathrooms as they got ready while listening to music with friends and continued to the pre-party in the car while music from the radio or the CD changer played the jams! As we drove closer to the club, we heard traffic on Santa Monica Boulevard, car alarms going off on nearby streets, and the sirens of the ambulances. Before we could even see the parade of fashion, styles, and drama in the parking lot, we could hear Arena and/or feel its pulse out from the street. The sounds in the parking lot became part of the usual “nocturnal soundscapes” of the city (Matless 2005). We could hear the cackling or the loud laughing that would take place, deep house or hip-hop music blasting from cars, the loud conversations, the “shit-talking,” and the shade. Once inside the club, sometimes after waiting hours to get in, our ears were flushed with cheers from the crowds, voices coming through the microphones of the DJs and MCs like the infamous Stacey Hollywood, and turntable wizards and goddesses like DJ Irene. Irene's trademark call and response: “How many Latinos are in this motherfucking house?” at the beginning of her sets allowed queer Latinx dancers to be seen and heard in an otherwise hostile historical moment of exclusion and demonization outside the walls of the club (Alvarez 2018). Among the explosion of sounds were clapping, stomping, and whistles, which Jessie and many others I've talked to remember vividly.

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## Locating Arena

Arena was located at Santa Monica Boulevard near Highland. With an art deco-like design, the 22,000-foot building was converted from an old ice factory, Union Ice, that closed in 1985 (Appleford 1991).<sup>1</sup> In the late eighties, Gene La Pietra and his partner Ed Lemos, who also owned Circus Disco right next door, purchased the building. La Pietra and Lemos saw the need to open clubs like Circus and Arena because of the discrimination people of colour experienced in gay spaces in West Hollywood and other places in LA. By the time Arena opened its doors, the ice factory floor was long-gone, but in its place was a dance floor—workers replaced by dancers. Although many of us were unaware of Arena’s past, we were dancing amid the ghosts of deindustrialization. We were also dancing among the ghosts of those lost to violence and to AIDS.

As I listen carefully, I imagine and hear the haunting sounds of generators, cooling devices, and ice picks, industrial sounds replaced with technologically mediated sounds emanating and mediated from dance music rhythms and from and through the bodies of dancing youth. The sounds of refrigerators and ice picks and other machinery replaced by the sounds of thumping music, of DJ turntables of the screaming crowd, microphones, cheers, of DJ Irene’s “how many Latinos are in this motherfucking house.” On the dance floor, these sounds made up the auditory landscape while sweaty bodies witnessed and spoke to each other through corporeal and gestural communication: stomping feet, clapping, or the Arena clap—when dancers would clap fast and in unison, the sounds circulating as our bodies did around the club, as we cruised, doing the rounds from the bar to the dancefloor, to the patio, to the bathroom, back to the dancefloor, and all of that all over again a few more times before the night ended. Sound permeated, and bodies spoke. Tina, one former patron who drove to Arena all the way from Simi Valley, recalls, “I remember the lights, the smell, the loud music, and the most interesting people I had ever seen.” The comments of Tina and others I talked with reveal that senses are archival, and they activate memories of transitory and liminal moments in queer LA Latinx histories. Abel Alvarado, an artist in LA who is producing a musical based on memories of Arena, remembers “standing on the side ramp looking at hot guys, the outfits people wore and the smell of day-old alcohol, sweat and too much cologne.” He remembers the “Hey girls,” the “Hey girl this, hey girl that” referring to the vernacular gay men often used to talk to each other (Riggs 1991). The music, he remembers, was an “explosion of sound and energy. At Arena, the sound was so crisp and clean. It filled the whole room” (Abel Alvarado, interview with author, June 10, 2019).

From beginning to end, Arena provided an intimate and collective sonic experience—a cacophony of sounds that were part of the multisensorial experience of going to the club—for club kids, ravers, rebels, kids from LA suburbs and exurbs, youth of colour, and drag queens throughout the 1990s and 2000s. The collision of sounds, mediated through the body and the walls and floors of the club, is a metaphor for the collision of worlds that took place at Arena, where queer youth of different class backgrounds, first, second and third generation and immigrant alike, with varying style and aesthetic tastes, came together from different parts of the city. These were important liminal moments in *jotería* histories of LA. At Arena, dancing bodies and sonic choreographies are enmeshed with the spatial and industrial history of the physical site of Arena.

I hear Arena’s sounds as embodied forms of knowledge archiving a queer past that has become trivialized or erased in both mainstream narratives of Los Angeles and queer histories of the city (Alvarez 2018). After the physical site of memories is demolished, our senses serve as a conduit for

memories. These multiple methods help us arrive at and understand nuanced knowledge production at the intersection of multiple disciplines and epistemologies.

I argue that the sonic memories of Arena provide a rich archive of *jotería* life. The soundscapes of Arena function as a sonic epistemology, inviting readers (and dancers) into a specific world of memories and providing entry into corporeal sites of knowledge for these youth. I listen “in detail” (Vasquez 2013) to three specific “soundmarks” or recognizable sounds for members of particular communities, sounds that can be identified by their source and move certain listeners to perform particular actions (ambulance siren, a doorbell, a car horn) (Bieletto-Bueno 2017, 117). In doing this, I register the movement of sounds as performances that mark and claim space. These sounds mark, act, and move; they moved us then into euphoria, community, and temporary freedom, and they move us now into reflective nostalgia meaning-making and history-making. These soundmarks are not static. They exist beyond the specific moment in time and the walls of the club. What does the sonic *do* for our projects of archiving and listening to queer Latinx histories and performances? This essay is an example of how the sonic is important in conveying certain feelings that capture a historical moment. These three soundmarks are whistles, foot-stomping, and clapping: whistles heard in house songs and whistles worn and blown by dancers; sporadic collective and choreographed foot-stomping by people across the dance floor; and clapping that reverberated from one side of the building to the other, the Arena clap (Galloway 2015). Influenced by Kate Galloway’s and Natalia Bieletto-Bueno’s work on soundmarks in Newfoundland and Mexico City, respectively, I hear Arena’s soundmarks as “defin[ing] the acoustic community of a specific area and the social and sonic lives of those situated in that place” (Galloway 2015, 122). Similarly, the acoustic community of Arena remembers certain “soundmarks” that were part of their sonic lives. I also hear these sounds through what I call *jotería* listening.

In exploring the interstitial space produced by interconnected histories, bodies, sounds, spaces, and affects, theories in sound studies, queer of colour, and performance studies help me hear these negotiations as they provide a vocabulary and set of frameworks to contextualize, make sense of and “listen” to the memories of Arena, to understand what the sounds of Arena as choreographies *do*, what the dancing bodies as archive *enact*—what they perform, how they *act*. Sound studies asks the critical questions about the role of sound in our culture, what sounds *do*—the semiology of sounds, sounds as epistemology, sound as connection, sounds as resistance, sound as history and liberation (Casillas 2014; Stoever 2016; McMahon 2017; Anguiano 2018a, 2018b; Tongson 2019). Performance studies and queer of colour critique help us think of how the rituals and their sounds tell us about life, survival, and freedom (Muñoz 1999; Chambers-Letson 2018; Rodriguez 2014). These writings help us remember the relevance of the quotidian, the ephemeral, and the forbidden—the power of intimate gestures, dancefloor *movidas* (Sandoval 2000; Espinoza, Cotera, and Blackwell 2018).

*Jotería* studies, building on women of colour feminisms, explores the embodied and quotidian among queer Latinxs and has helped me think about the interconnected nature of our stories; what the pleasures of the body-dancing, intoxication, laughter, friendship, sex, and hope can tell us about our communities. This corpus of scholarship has documented questions of critical Latinidad, community, corporeality, desire, grief, and joy (Urquijo-Ruiz 2014; Ochoa 2015; Hames-García 2014; Galarte 2014; Revilla 2014; Alvarez and Estrada 2019). As former patrons of Arena have shared with me and described on the Facebook group, for queer Latinxs, Arena functioned as that practice of resistance to the “stronghold of our parents,” a 1990s society in which funding for public education and social services were drastically cut (Armbruster-Sandoval 2017). At the same time, the

media demonized queer youth, and schools practised intolerance and erasure when it came to issues affecting queer students.

In the case of Arena, sound, space, feelings, and bodies cannot be disconnected. The physical site of Arena is important not only for the meaning that clubgoers gave it but also for the layered histories within the structure of the club that can be understood by connecting their spatial and sonic dimensions. Wisely, I listen to women of colour feminists as critical geographers, spatial theorists, and sound studies practitioners, even if we haven't thought of them as such. Folks like Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherrie Moraga, and bell hooks and their concepts of bridges, borderlands, nepantla, "center to margins," have been theorizing the immutable nature of space, gender, sexuality, and history for decades (Anzaldúa 2008; Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015; hooks 2000). They have been listening to the pulse of the country as they listen to their hearts, theorizing in the flesh (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015).

While certainly the Moraga and Anzaldúa (2015) and other women of colour texts are loud, as are the texts within *jotería* studies, and we can hear sonic colour lines they are writing about, sound has been undertheorized in relation to these intersections. I think with them and in relation to Edward Soja's trialectic of Spatiality-Historicity-Sociality (1996, 81), all of which open up radical spaces of epistemological and ontological possibility. Kate Galloway argues that aural histories and aural memory of place are "intersensorially connected to experience and remembered place" (2015, 121). Like the Newfoundland harbour Galloway writes about, Arena becomes an instrument itself, and folks remember it in part based on the intersensorial connection they have to it. I draw and build on all of these by paying attention to the sonic, bringing out (loudly) an undertheorized aspect of sound.

### **Methods: Listening, Archiving and Sounding an Aural Community**

Listening practices are part of creating collective queer knowledge. Drawing from sound studies and scholarship on queer of colour nightlife, I emphasize sound and listening practices as part of the queer Latinx archive. I engage with the interconnected nature of space, sound, and the body in the archive and highlight the interplay between the three; how collective queer knowledge is produced. I also emphasize the process of listening and coconstruction of knowledge as critical to collective queer memory and archiving. Inspired by Jade Power Sotomayor's project on Puerto Rican bomba dancers (2015), I claim that the dancers at Arena were using their dancing, pulsating bodies and gestures as instruments and as communication while they choreographed temporary, ephemeral moments of queer Brown freedom and collective queer memory. Like Power Sotomayor, Horacio Roque Ramírez (2007) and others cited here, I am interested in the dancing body as an archival possibility—in this case, what the memory of these collective dancing bodies tells us about what was good, what felt good, how sound acted—to offer instances of liberation in an otherwise hostile world (Bory 2015). My listening to Arena is informed by queer oral histories, ethnographic interviews, archival material, social media content, and performance analysis. It is part of what I call *jotería* listening, as described below.

Participant observation in a public Facebook group dedicated to Arena and the 1990s inspired some of my thinking here. Videos posted or shared with me document the sounds and styles of Arena on Fridays. These videos and the memories they document form a sonic archive, intricately tied to affective registers, feelings and senses invoked by members talking about their experiences. My analysis is also based on my own fragmented memories, using them as a source for creating what

Gloria Anzaldúa calls “auto-historia teoría”—using embodied knowledge as a form and basis for theorizing, using our feelings and memories to create theory (Bachattrarya and Keating 2018). Above all, this is a *collective* methodology: the ways folks make meaning of these sonic memories make possible my reading of sound *as* knowledge. As I “listen to the listeners,” I engage with aural and sensorial memories and the meanings they carry for Arena goers (Aparicio 1998). This listening demonstrates how we were all part of an “acoustic community,” that we reconstruct history together, and that feelings are integral to that collective sense of history (Miranda 2014; Bieletto-Bueno 2017, 108). Through this lens, it is important to ask how these sounds shaped us as we shaped, mediated, and coproduced them and how these aural markers were important to broader sonic forms of resistance in the city. Together, these methods are helpful to explore how sonic, visual, spatial, and embodied aspects work in tandem to produce Arena as part of, and interconnected with, “sounding communities” in Los Angeles in the 1990s and early 2000s (Perea 2014).

Much of this “listening” to Arena relies on the sounds remembered, even if there is no actual record. For example, Christabel Stirling, as part of her research, recorded herself inside a club and then wrote about it, insisting on “audibility . . . as a valuable way of knowing and understanding the texture of the urban social world and its musical and sonic environments” (2019). Similarly, Allie Martin argues that “soundwalks” in her project on gentrification in Washington D.C. function as “engines of knowledge production” (2019). Following Stirling and Martin, I propose a different version of soundwalking that takes shape through the recreation of memories and sounds as invoked by narrators, participants, and my own recollections. Rather than recording the sounds themselves, the sounds are remembered and then documented to create a sonic tour of “choreosonicity” or performance form of the sounds (Crawley 2013).

This choreosonic tour includes collective sounds heard and made by patrons inside and throughout the club, sounds in the parking lot such as music blasting from car stereos, honking, clacking of heels, clinking of glasses, shattering of bottles, and cackling and laughter. One of these I describe in more detail below was the rhythmic stomping of feet, a popular club movement that brought people together in a collective choreography of Latin@ comunitaas and dissent (Alvarez 2018). We felt, heard, and saw these embodied sounds in unison. Part of the challenge of describing in writing the sensorial memories at the heart of this project is their ephemerality but also the inability to verbalize something that was so guttural, visceral, and embodied. Capturing the memory of those sounds is difficult as social media did not exist back then. You had to be there to understand it. But as we remember and listen together, the aural archive we collectively invoke helps us put a name to these kinetic and affective moments that are in many ways beyond words, beyond capturability.

Memories about Arena derived from interviews are central to my reading. These interviews were collected via snowball sample and consisted of individual oral histories, semistructured interviews, and informal group *pláticas* among friends and participants (Fierros and Delgado Bernal 2016). Several former Arena-goers I interviewed, such as Xenia and Adilia, had forgotten some memories until we started talking about it. The sounds started to fill our collective memories, propelling us into a further dialogue about the meaning of Arena for us at a time when few places offered this radical possibility of being. Writing about interviewing methods and knowledge generation, Marla A. Ramírez argues that oral histories from individual interviews capture different recollections than a group setting where participants listen to each other’s memories (2018). Ramírez’s points ring true in my case, as memories were invoked in a collective setting that could not be remembered

individually. There were memories I had forgotten that wouldn't have even made it to this analysis if it weren't for collective remembering among *jotería*.

Finally, my own *recuerdos* or memories are part of this project. Chicana and Latina feminists, Black feminists, and *jotería* studies scholars remind us that our own experiences are a valid source of knowledge. Testimonios allow personal stories to fill in the gaps that quantitative research alone cannot fill (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, and Carmona 2012). In this way, my project follows others at the intersections of sound, performance, and memory who have used their sonic memories as part of their method and archives. For example, Martha González, scholar and lead singer of the Chicana/o band Quetzal, writes about memories of growing up in East Los Angeles, the role of music in her family, and the importance of beats and rhythm in the barrio as she makes connections to and produces knowledge about “zapateado Afro-Chicana fandango style” (2014). Like González, my memories are intertwined with the queer Chicax and Latinx histories of the city and, in conversation with the memories of other *jotería*, add rich texture to the archive. There is a relationship, then, between this scholarship and the collective archive. My own embodiment as a scholar and the places that have shaped me, like Arena, are linked to the collective construction of these resurrected memories.

## Jotería Listening

Jessie's memories at the beginning of this paper are part of what I call *jotería* listening. As a listening practice employed to navigate racist, homophobic, transphobic, and anti-immigrant discourses and spaces, *jotería* listening builds on the work of Chicax, Latinx, and performance and sound studies scholars (Tongson 2011; Vasquez 2013; Casillas 2015; Stoeber 2016; Alarcón 2017). Dolores Inés Casillas' scholarship on Spanish language radio and Latino listening practices is instrumental here as she explains, “the very public nature of Spanish-language radio listening represents a communal, classed, and brown form of listening that differs markedly from ‘white collar’ modes of listening” (2015). Similarly, *jotería* listening to the radio and otherwise offers a unique communal form of listening anchored in common experiences, affects, and epistemologies as *jotería*.

*Jotería* listening is facilitated by Alexandra T. Vasquez's “listening in detail,” a feminist genealogical practice. This method allows for intentional listening found within the details of music and sounds, evoking history, diaspora, and intimacies. This practice allows for an imagining of what folks were listening to or how certain songs took hold of them in their worlds and music (Vasquez 2013, 25). For Karen Tongson, listening to music together allows connectivity, and a song can be like a glue that brings people together (2019). Listening in detail is what Wanda Alarcón does when she “listens” to flashbacks in queer Chicana literature (2017). Influenced by these scholars, I offer *jotería* listening as something more than a mundane practice but rather an invocation of constellations of embodied memories, histories, and resistances. This essay is an invitation to listen to the details and what these tell us about *jotería* world-making; this auditory practice is about listening intersectionally across race, gender, class, space, and time. Through *jotería* listening, we can hear a *jotería* past and its potential and radical futures (Alvarez 2021).

Among *jotería* studies scholarship, William Calvo-Quirós's essay on *jotería* aesthetics and Anita Tijerina Revilla and Jose Manuel Santillana's on *jotería* consciousness and *jota*-historias inspire my thinking here. I also find inspiration in Gloria Anzaldúa's call in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* when she says, “People, listen to what your *jotería* is saying” (2008, 84–85). Expanding on

Anzaldúa's words, I say, listen to what your *jotería* is listening to, *how* we are listening? How do our listening practices—individual and collective—offer possibilities beyond the limits of a world full of binaries, violence and heteropatriarchy, even in our own racial and ethnic communities? How are we making sense of our listening? What are we saying about our listening? What makes our listening practices remarkable? How do we, as *jotería*, make meaning of sonic archives typically understood through heteronormative white Western ways? What can we hear collectively that we can't hear individually? This last question is taken up by Jessie in the epigraph when he invokes collective communication on the dancefloor, a mode of being together that required a corporeal experience beyond the ears and enveloped our whole bodies. "Even if you didn't know the *comadre* next to you, you were still connecting or communicating through the sounds as you stomped your feet together." Jessie's comment and the comments of others with whom I share memories of Arena have helped me "listen in detail" to the three particular sounds I focus on here. These are recognizable sounds that Arena-goers remember: claps, whistles and foot-stomping. These sounds were all heard on a typical night at the club—all corporeal gestures that brought bodies together, claiming their existence in a world where queer brown youth were invisible, demonic, sinful, an aberration, sometimes to our families, to the church, and in our schools.

*Jotería* listening, as I describe elsewhere, is composed of forms of resistance against silencing, policing and powers that insist on erasing our histories as *jota* historias. Anita Tijerina Revilla and José Manuel Santillana (2014) remind us that our *jota* historias have been erased. How do *jotxs* listen together to music from Juan Gabriel to Selena, to dancing to Bad Bunny? What about the beats and grooves and melodies, the lyrics connecting us across time and space? Perhaps overlapping histories and connectedness give us a shared understanding of the meanings of sounds and the histories of desires and of *putería*, the way our desires and sexual practices and sex-positive stance shape our visions of the world (Xuanito 2007). Our experiences of shared worlds, dancefloors, afterparties, t-parties, house parties or queer cumbia nights, academic conference afterparties, and our collective listening experiences are sacred.

Methodologically, when listening to the sounds of Arena, their collective nature is important, at least on two levels: how the sounds at that moment in time functioned as liberatory modes of expression and community, and secondly, how we listen to the sounds in the present, how we remember those sounds and the meaning we make of them today. This is an interplay between individual memories and collective listening and remembering. Through this lens, *jotería* listening is a *nepantlan* form of listening that hears in-between and outside of binary understandings of the world.<sup>2</sup> *Jotería* listening is part of transing Latinx sound, moving us across static gendered perceptions of the world, transmoving us into worlds of possibilities, listening closely to what the *jotería* margins tell us (Hernandez, Alvarez, and Garcia 2021; Omi Salas-SantaCruz, conversation with author, March 2, 2021). This aural method is facilitated by our experiences as *nepantlerxs*, as racialized subjects navigating interstitial spaces, in-betweeners, constantly attuning our ears and hearts and bodies to the shifting worlds around us and the expansive ways we understand and live out gender and sexuality in our *familias*, our activist spaces, our *putería* (Xuanito 2007; Rodríguez 2021).

One aspect of *jotería* listening is the act of listening to ghosts. When we hear the sounds in the archive of Arena, we hear the ghosts of Arena—phantom buildings, lives lost too soon to AIDS, historical erasures, loss and displacement lingering as reminders of a queer Latinx past, and as signals of a queer future yet to be seen. The sounds function not only as registers of momentary collective ecstasy like the Friday nights at Arena, but also as signals of an incomplete queer liberatory project, always in perpetual limbo like *almas en pena*, souls who cannot rest. For Avery Gordon, "grappling

with ghosts is part of American history,” where the “unseen and people banished to the periphery” are the ghostly subjects of modernity. (2008, 196). “Haunting is the sociality of living with ghosts, a sociality both tangible and tactile as well as ephemeral and imaginary,” she argues (201). Theorizing hauntings in the work of Toni Morrison and Valeria Luiselli, Gordon writes that “the ghost registers and it incites. We have to learn how it speaks” (207).<sup>3</sup> Similarly, *jotería* sonic archives and the ghostly matters of their contents also register and incite us. The sounds speak a language we make sense of through shared collective histories as *jotería*. *Jotería* listening is also about collective translation of sounds that “speak” and incite memories, offering prescriptives for more just futures. Using *jotería* listening as an analytic, I pay close attention to the sounds that mark queer Latinx histories, sounds that offer haunting reminders of loss, pain and displacement but also signal celebration and collective proclamations of life. A *jotería* listening approach can help us listen critically to the sounds remembered in the club and their multiple meanings and functions, allowing us to hear the histories, affects, memories, and dreams attached to these sounds. While I discuss each sound—of the whistle, foot-stomping, and claps—individually, they are all interconnected sonic elements of the nightly cosmos of Arena.

### **Collective Choreographies: Whistles, Foot-Stomps, and Claps**

The whistle. El chiflo. Un silbato. More than just a sound, a whistle, with varied utilitarian, historical and symbolic meanings, is a sonic reminder that brings up feelings and conjures community. Historically whistles have been used to convene, signal authority, squash riots, and alert to potential violence and assault. Outside the space of the club, whistles are often associated with other environments like ships and trains. Their everyday uses include survival emergency preparedness, crime prevention and campus and workplace safety, and they are often associated with events and rituals like boot camp, traffic management, and sports competitions indicating start and end times or fouls in sports such as soccer. Whistles can also represent sports or be gym class or police whistles (Jennings 2020; Hernandez 2005; Henneberger 1993). A whistle can convey “authority and convinces the participants and fans of the authority and presence of the ref” (Wagner 2016). A whistle can communicate more than just an order to stop.

Another element of whistles is their sacred and ethnically specific cultural meanings. For example, in Northern Plains Native American pow-wow ceremonial dancing, the singers at the drum all remove their hats as a sign of respect for the dancer who blew the whistle. This is an acknowledgment of the voice of the eagle represented by the sound of the whistle (Johnston 2004, 20). In this example, the whistles, which are often handed down within the family, function as a sign of change or emphasis but also sacredness (20). I examine the specific felt, experiential memory of the whistle at Arena, as these associations are imbricated with the identities of the club patrons.

For many minoritized youth in LA in the 1990s, the whistles were a symbol of the dreaded LAUSD physical education classes, a space that, for many, was hostile (O’Connor and Graber 2014). As Juan, one of the dancers, recalls, “school was not a safe place for queer kids back then.” The whistle, associated with gym class, becomes an aural reminder of shame and exclusion, one which at Arena was resignified. At a time of racial tensions in the city, whistles were also sonorous reminders of police brutality and police surveillance experienced by queer youth. On the flipside, whistles have been a tool of protest, like when in 1992 Justice for Janitors took over the “Rebuild LA” headquarters. As Mike Davis recounts, hundreds of supporters were outside beating drums and blowing whistles on the sidewalk (1993, 48).



For those engaged in *jotería* listening and remembering Arena, the whistle becomes a sonic marker that listeners associate with Arena's heyday. Resignification of the sound of whistles is a resignification of the sound as celebration, reclamation, and permission to be, a sound like the others of momentary liberation. Traditionally, in house clubs, the whistle was used to rally dancers from behind the stage and eventually made its way to the dance floor. As described in *Electronic Beats*, ravers used the whistles as a form of applause and later attendees used actual whistles (2017). Arena patrons I interviewed recall the whistle intermittently blown throughout the night as part of the house remixes or hanging around people's necks as part of the outfits. Sergio remembers, "I remember the necklaces with the whistles. [They] were really big, but like whistles with pearls on them and like sequins or like glittery stuff. Whistles were really big you know?" (2018). These were markers of excitement, as Sergio describes. Within the club and for the community of dancers at Arena, whistles were sartorial and aural elements of the experience of the night. As Sergio suggests, the whistles were an important part of the aesthetics and the sonic memories. This is reminiscent of the tequila whistle in Tijuana right before the waiter chugs tequila down patrons' throats. At Arena, the sound emitted usually came to mark certain hours and functioned as a way to rally the dancers. Resignified and similar to how activists used them in protests, at Arena, whistles were used as a way of claiming community. A whistle in the club functioned as a sound to signal celebration.

Stomp. Stomp. Stomp. The sounds of choreographed stomping also form part of the memories of Arena accessed through *jotería* listening. The sound of the foot-stomping fills Jessie's memories in the epigraph above and mine as we talk again. Depending on the song, dancers would begin to stomp together as their bodies crouched down, the sound accentuated by the thick soles of Doc Martens, platform heels, or boots. The foot-stomping, as Sergio remembers, was heard as one large choreography, but people in different parts of the club would start it, and then it would pick up. A singular body stomping their feet was powerful but not like the roar of everyone doing it together. The body through the hands, the feet and the mouths blowing whistles became part of the sonic landscape of Arena; bodies as vehicles for sound but also shaped and moved by the sounds. The stomping feet became a moment of collective choreography where dancers would come together and stomp with the music. These stomps were emphatic, like knee-slapping as a form of claiming of space, like crowds at concerts and their ability to take up space with sound.<sup>4</sup>

The stomping is reminiscent of fandango dancers and of jarocho stomping on the *tarima* (Díaz-Sánchez and Hernández 2013; Power Sotomayor 2015; Viveros Avendaño 2017). About these jarocho choreographies, Micaela Díaz-Sánchez and Alexandro Hernández (2013) write that explicit corporeality is linked to racialized identities, that certain bodily movements have been historically connected to lasciviousness and marginality. Hence, the dancing body tells histories. Writing about dancing in the 1960s, Marie "Keta" Miranda argues that mod dancers were invoking history through their movements, particularly the heel-toe stomping of what some of the boys she writes about called the Aztec stomp, which was really a Native dance (2009, 68). In Miranda's analysis, the stomps were signalling protest (69). Like the authors above, scholarship on dance points to the Afro-diasporic history of foot-stomping. The stomping happening at Arena was reminiscent of and influenced by African American stepping.<sup>5</sup> As the examples above show, the stepping speaks to camaraderie and collectivity. It is this collectivity that is signalled by the foot-stomping at Arena. I borrow from Miranda (2009), Bufanda (2004), Power Sotomayor (2015) and others to argue that dancers at Arena were dancing and stomping as they *made* history (Miranda 2009). Their bodies, sweaty and adorned, their feet in unison with the beats and the music of DJ Irene, became sounds of resistance, sounds that not everyone hears, but as Jennifer Lynn Stoeber (2016) reminds us, even

sounds we cannot all hear are important. The stomping feet brought people together in a collective choreography of Latinx communitaas, dissent but also emphasis (Alvarez 2018).

Clap. Clap. Clap. Clap. Depending on the cultural and historical context, clapping is a corporeal gesture historically used to get someone's attention, hurry them up, or show respect, admiration, praise, or support. It is used in different dance genres such as flamenco and lindy hop. At Arena, the clapping, happening as house music beats filled the vastness of the club, was similar to the feet meeting the ground during stomping—hands meeting each other rhythmically, becoming instruments. In Chicax communities, clapping has relevance in the context of the Chicano activist group *Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlan* (MEChA): “The unity clap originated with the United Farm Workers as a way to bridge the communication gap between Latino and Filipino Farm workers who did not share the same language; the idea was to create unity. The clap starts off slowly, then gets faster and faster like a heartbeat. We use the clap to have a collective gathering and close and to signify when we have made a decision” (Clark 2017; De La Garza and Ramirez Angeles 2018; MEChA OU 2022). The unity clap is also used by teachers to create community, and other youth groups have used it, modelled after the farmworkers. The role of the unity clap as a form of communication is very important and relevant to this discussion. At Arena, the clap was also a way to communicate from one side of the club to the other. For *Jotería Studies* scholar José Manuel Santillana, who attended Arena in the early to mid-2000s, the clapping was a way to see each other through this collective gesture, to feel connected to others in ways that we often didn't at home. “I had never been to Arena, the place had a softness,” says Santillana, speaking to the club's inviting and welcoming character (conversation with author, February 14, 2022). The softness he refers to was a sensorial and affective contrast to the harshness many youths experienced in their families or hometowns.

As a collective corporeal choreography, the clap brought folks together at sporadic moments of the night. Jessie remembers: “Clapping, of course, [there was] clapping that would be resonating throughout the entire club, somebody would start, somebody picks it up. Similar to the stomp, someone would start and all of a sudden everyone was clapping.” The clapping was another gestural sign of being in communion through sound and dance, of creating a resonant murmur across the club, like the wave at sports events, except this one has sound, forming a corporeal choreography of sonic gestures. The rhythm has a unifying force, the individual in the collective. Juana María Rodríguez illustrates that “thinking about queerness through gesture animates how bodies move in the world, and how we assign meaning in ways that are always already infused with cultural modes of knowing” (2014, 2). She argues that gestures give life to “the possibility of a ‘we’” (2). Just as the clapping at Arena linked the individual to the collective through rhythmic unison, so do memories of clapping gesture toward collective queer memory, creating community with others who remember and keeping alive the memories of people and places who have passed on.

Although clapping filled the room after and during ballroom shows, I am mostly interested in the spontaneous collective clapping, not applause during the show but clapping while people were dancing. The clapping after and during shows at Arena was part of a panoply of sounds that included shout-outs, whistles, and occasional exclamatory yelling. In one of the relatively few videos from the 1990s at Arena on the Facebook page, we can hear someone yelling “Arena is Gay” into a microphone, making a loud sonic claim to the space as they resisted normativity. This statement on the microphone was a reminder and a way to reclaim Arena's queerness, especially on Friday nights.

This comment is particularly telling and a response to the fact that over the years into the early to mid-2000s, Arena on Fridays started to feel too “straight” and no longer a safe place for queer people or for girls and women who liked to go there to be free of harassment at traditionally straight and heteronormative clubs like Florentine Gardens, another popular club in LA in the 1990s. This is not to say that Arena was free of risk or harassment for women or femmes, but they have expressed feeling safer then and now compared to other clubs. As discussed earlier, Arena provided a sense of safety.

## Conclusion

As I’ve described above, the whistles, foot-stomping and clapping were sonic invocations of community and claims to space in an otherwise hostile political and social urban landscape for Latino queer youth and their families in the 1990s. The sounds made through corporeal gestures and in unison with the music were critical to the freedom discussed here. As Santillana suggests, when the home or schools operated to restrict or discipline and silence young queer people, Arena offered a space to break speak and be heard through our bodies, gestures, and rituals on the dancefloor. Arena allowed us to “be” ourselves (Santillana, conversation with author, February 14, 2022). As such, sonic memories of Arena provide a rich archive of queer Latinx life. After the physical sites of memories are torn down, our senses serve as a conduit for memories (Alvarez 2018). The sonic choreographies are performances. The stomps and claps and whistles were performing but also watching and cheering. These gestures were moments of ritualistic community making through our bodies, in unison with the music, our bodies extensions of each other but also islands, in ecstasy, in love, sometimes inebriated, and often in sync. These were about “sonic cultural citizenship” (McMahon 2017). At sporadic moments throughout the night, the sounds connected us to each other beyond just sharing the space (Alvarez 2018). These sounds summon queer Black and brown Latinx youth—demonized and made invisible and inaudible in the spatial and cultural politics of 1990s Los Angeles—and ensure they are seen and heard. As Casillas (2014) reminds us, sound has the ability to shape the lives of Latina/o communities, and for Latinos listening to the radio in Spanish, for example, and talking about their situation, that was critical.

These sounds interpellate a broad aural community of 1990s house and dance culture and a geographically specific dance culture in Los Angeles. In the present, this aural community is connected through memories of those moments and through *jotería* listening to house music, especially songs often heard at Arena, the call and response of DJ Irene, or specific soundmarks like sirens and, as I’ve argued above, whistles, foot-stomping, or clapping. When heard by former Arena patrons, these sounds are archival material, queer collective memory, belonging, community, resistive practices of community formation of a time in Los Angeles when queer brown youth were sounding their histories.

As discussed here, *jotería* listening is a collective mode of listening together and making sense of the present and the past. It allows us to conjure worlds and make sense of the sounds of Arena, both at the club in the 1990s and then years later in the early 2020s. This technology, both an active practice of listening together in the moment and listening to the past, allows us to make sense of and collectively hear what would otherwise seem like mundane sounds.

The afterlife of Arena lives in its sounds. The sounds are hauntings, echoes that remind us of the sequins in the rubble—metaphorically and physically—as the memories of claps, whistles, and

stomps mesh with the bulldozers that brought Arena to the ground literally. These hauntings are sounds that don't scare us but remind us of both happy and sad times, and that so much is yet to be done (Gordon 2008). Urban sounds that remind us, bind us, and make us laugh—that won't let us forget. These are sounds of celebration but also of mourning because sometimes we were grieving the loss of friends to AIDS, the destruction caused by the 1994 earthquake, the heartbreak, the LA riots; our collective mourning was sweated out on the dancefloor. These sounds and sonic memories of Arena continue to bring people together.

## Notes

1. Other sources report the square footage of Arena as much smaller. I cited a different number in Alvarez (2018).
2. Linda Heidenreich (2020) argues for history as motion, as *nepantla*, a Meso American concept for in-betweenness. Using a *nepantlan* perspective on history, Heidenreich argues, will help make sense of the global shifts we have experienced. *Nepantla* is a middle space of ambiguity, both fraught and generative.
3. For more on my engagement with Avery Gordon and ghosts as they relate to gentrification in Los Angeles and lost or hidden histories that linger, see Alvarez (2021).
4. Foot-stomping is distinct from clapping, but they are both about syncopation, meaning they are improvised or rehearsed executions of step patterns that have more nuances than standard step patterns (New World Encyclopedia). As such, syncopation accentuates the different ways that bodies synchronize to regular but rhythmically complex beats, the most overt expressions of music-induced pleasure (Witek et al. 2014). In this case, the syncopation accentuates through embodiment, the breath in the whistle, and the foot-stomping created by bodies but also felt by bodies up from the vibrating floor.
5. Literature on this art form traces it back to slavery when enslaved Africans in the US used these dances as a form of survival, a means of communication, and a way to maintain traditions and a link to African tribal dance, which in many places was restricted (Bufanda 2004). Stepping became part of fraternities and sororities in the late 1960s and was further popularized in the 1990s at the apex of Arena when shows like "STOMP" became popular. There was even a stepping show at the inauguration of Bill Clinton. These histories and popular cultural expressions made their way onto the dancefloor at Arena.

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