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Salsa



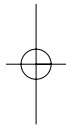
Dance

### Salsa dance: A space of its own

An episode of the fictional law series *Ally McBeal* featuring “Latin sensation” Chayenne of Puerto Rico aired on television in 2001. The episode involved a civil lawsuit where the plaintiff, Sam Adams, played by Chayenne, sued his former salsa dance partner, Inez Cortez (portrayed by Constance Marie), claiming she had stolen some dance moves that they had choreographed together and had begun using them for her own financial gain outside their partnership as dancers and instructors. The lawyer defending his case, Nelle Porter, played by Portia de Rossi, won the suit on behalf of Chayenne’s character—but not before the dancers were able to show mainstream America what this “hot” and “sexy” dance called salsa was all about. Portia de Rossi fanned herself upon witnessing their display.

Over the last decade, research on salsa has grown. This is evidenced by the publication of important works such as Lise Waxer’s anthology *Situating Salsa: Global Markets and Local Meanings in Latin Popular Music*; Frances Aparicio’s *Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music and Puerto Rican Cultures*; Angel Quintero-Rivera’s *Salsa, sabor y control*; and Olavo Alén-Rodríguez’ *From Afro-Cuban Music to Salsa*; Hernando Calvo-Ospina’s *Salsa: Havana Heat, Bronx Beat*; and Cesar Rondon’s *Libro de la salsa*, to name just a few. Despite the body of work that exists on salsa music, explorations on salsa dance have been scarce. For instance, *Everynight Life: Culture and Dance in Latin/o America*, anthologized by Celeste Fraser-Delgado and José Esteban Muñoz, has been pivotal to peaking interest in the counterhegemonic potential of Afro-Latin(o/a)<sup>2</sup> dance. Yet none of the articles on salsa deal with the dancing body, despite the book’s title. Although the essays on salsa successfully engage music and lyrics (a component that warrants even greater investigation), gesture takes a back seat to language and writing, both tools of colonization.<sup>3</sup> It is not until more recently, with the publication of the anthology *Caribbean Dance from Abakuá to Zouk: How Movement Shapes Identity*, edited by Susanna Sloat, that salsa dance has been given a bit more attention. Here Alma Concepción writes on “Dance in Puerto Rico: Embodied Meanings,” including insight on salsa dance, while Nathaniel Hamilton Crowell discusses “What is Congolese in Caribbean Dance?,” where he describes salsa in terms of movement, although he does not take into account that there are other ways to dance salsa aside from the approach he outlines. Nevertheless, such work is both encouraging and necessary for those interested in salsa in terms of movement.

The scarcity of work on the dancing body in relation to salsa functions within a larger, overarching issue concerning the marginalization of dance scholarship across disciplines such as cultural studies and anthropology (see Desmond 1997: 33–5, 60 and Kealiinohomoku 1996: 17). Such marginalization can be linked to “Western”<sup>4</sup> religious and philosophical notions of disembodiment<sup>5</sup> that began with thinkers such as Plato and Descartes. Ambivalence toward the dancing body, for example, was one factor behind the separation of dance from sacred tradition in Western culture (Ajayi 1998: 23, 33). The split between the sacred and the secular/“profane” stems in part from the power of dance to “possess” and “entrance” the body, writes dance historian Gerald Jonas (1992: 40). Philosophers built on the neo-Platonic idea that the “flesh was inferior to the transcendent realms of the intellect and spirit” (Jonas 1992: 42). This set the stage for Descartes to divide the mind from the body, asserting that it can be more easily understood. Considered among the most important thinkers of the Enlightenment—the Age of Reason—Descartes has written a philosophy that is at the core of Western academic investigation. From such schools of thought emerged the mind/body split, whereby “dominance of one side of



Furthermore, European ambivalence toward the dancing body of color is related to the perception of its movement as profane. Salsa dance has inherited this bias and, as such, is often reduced to the one-dimensional exotic and erotic other promoted in U.S. mainstream media and culture. As in the words of dance scholar Marta Savigliano, “exoticism is an industry that requires distribution and marketing” (1995: 3). But salsa dance goes far beyond the moves Chayenne embodied as his lawyer fanned herself in court on the episode of *Ally McBeal*, described at the beginning of this introduction. Salsa dance is often stripped of its cultural politics—rooted in a history of slavery and colonization in the Caribbean and Latin America—for mass consumption. However, many Latinos/as in the U.S. combine salsa dance performance with language and music to construct and affirm an individual and collective sense of cultural identity (see Concepción 2003: 171–2).<sup>10</sup> For Latinos/as, the need to affirm their cultural identity grows in part out of their diaspora experience, which brings with it the pressure of assimilating and of being subsumed and homogenized by the Euro-American culture that dominates U.S. mainstream society. In this context Latino/a experience tends to toggle between the extremes of exoticization and homogenization. This occurs within the social position of marginality that reflects the larger asymmetrical power relations inherent in U.S. imperialism and colonialism. Michel Foucault asserts: “Where there is power, there is resistance” (1978: 95). Within the scheme of inequality, Latino/a cultural affirmation vis-à-vis salsa dance possesses a kind of counterhegemonic potential that involves the body and accompanies the same, often-stated potential in the music. Making this connection explicit is a necessary part of bringing the dancing body into Latino/a studies and salsa scholarship.

This essay seeks to present a case for the inclusion of the salsa dancing body in these areas of study as well as in the field of dance scholarship. It aims to do this by demonstrating how salsa dance in New York shapes Latino/a identity,<sup>11</sup> as well as how Latinos/as in this area fashion salsa dance in what dance scholar Alma Concepción calls a “search for continuities between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’” (2003: 170). I also share the interest of Nancy Fraser Delgado and José Muñoz in examining “dance as a privileged site in the production of cultural identities, national boundaries, and subversive practice,” i.e., the “historical and potential function of dance in social struggle in Latin/o America” (1997: 4). However, where there is resistance, there is also compliance. This essay also seeks to articulate how salsa dance in New York represents a transcultural negotiation between resistance and acceptance/compliance in relation to Latino/a cultural politics.

Due to the dearth of scholarly work on salsa dance, my research draws from a variety of sources: my own experiences and conversations with fellow salsa dancers, performers, and instructors in New York (1996–present), which includes my tenure with the Eddie Torres Latin dance company (1996–1998); articles, films and books on salsa music; and the theoretical frameworks provided by dance scholarship, ethnography, and performance studies.

auditory enjoyment of the music, that is among the most significant of motivators aside (although not exclusive) from cultural affirmation. With regard to the political potential of pleasure John Fiske (1990: 54) asserts:

. . . [the] right to enjoy popular pleasures may not in itself change the system that subjugates . . . but it does preserve areas of life and meaning of experience that are opposed to normal disciplined existence. They are oppositional pleasures, and insofar as they maintain the cultural territory of the people against the imperialism of the power-bloc, they are resistant.

Latino/a performance of salsa dance, which often falls within the scope of “identity-affirming pleasures” (Delgado and Muñoz 1997: 21), has the potential to function in opposition to the pressures of assimilating into the Euro-American culture that dominates U.S. society. However, why should we speak of salsa dance—a seemingly benign pleasure that has tended to unite individuals across diverse racial, ethnic, and class divisions—in terms of cultural politics and resistance? One primary reason is that, despite the colonial and imperialist heritage it is steeped in, salsa dance and music are typically represented as apolitical and ahistorical<sup>15</sup> in U.S. mainstream media and culture, thereby diluting their counterhegemonic potential. Yet it is very difficult to divorce salsa dance completely from its cultural politics, since it is a transcultural phenomenon that has been negotiating between dominant and subjugated dance practices dating back to its colonial history in the Caribbean and Latin America. Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor (1991: 64, 66) suggests that both the theory of transculturation and the social process it represents bear counterhegemonic potential.

Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz coined the concept of transculturation in the 1940s as an alternative to the term acculturation that was beginning to take hold in anthropology and sociology. Ortiz took the idea of acculturation to actually mean assimilation (Spitta 1997: 161). As such, this Latin American theory positions itself against what Silvia Spitta refers to as a “one-way imposition of the culture of the colonizers” in order to “undermine the homogenizing impact implicit in the term acculturation” (161). The theory of transculturation also denotes a process that, according to Ortiz himself, “necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of a previous culture, which could be defined as deculturation. . . [and] carries the idea of the consequent creation of a new cultural phenomena . . .” (1970: 102–3). However, Spitta adds that “the ‘new’ culture is never achieved,” that “it is forever deferred and forever in the making” (1997: 161). Such is the case for the transcultural expressions of salsa dance and music in relation to Latino/a identity.

Latino/a identity is based on an “imagined community” that is “more a political, ethnic, and cultural positioning than a genetic or racial identity . . . a political, rather than biological, matrix” (Costantino and Taylor 2000: 8).<sup>16</sup> Since the umbrella term Latino/a encompasses so many different cultures from Latin America, the Caribbean, and the U.S., neither Latino/a identity nor salsa dance can be reduced to fixed, homogeneous characteristics. Similarly, the collective roots of salsa dance come from many heterogeneous sources, the result of a complex history that extends from the colonial encounter to U.S. migration. The salsa dancing body “narrates” this history,<sup>17</sup> expressing a multifaceted, transcultural Latino/a identity that is in constant motion.

(due in large part to its primarily European heritage), while in Cuba it developed into the danzón. It was on the islands that it became a couple-dance that allowed for improvisation (Manuel 1994: 277).

According to dance instructor and scholar Fran Chesleigh, the danzón was danced with a basic 1-2-3, 1-2-3, left-right-left, right-left-right step that was also done to many different types of Cuban music, including the Afro-Cuban son, which developed in the early 1900s. Author Hernando Calvo-Ospina (1995: 24) writes:

. . . because of the popularity of its origins on the margins of society and its extraordinary popularity among the working people, the son was violently rejected in the elegant salons of the Cuban aristocracy, who succeeded in having the government ban it. The main reason alleged was the obscenity and immorality of the movements in it provoked in those who danced it.

However, the rejection of the Afro-Cuban son was not just based on class, but also on race. Similarly, although the danzón became part of the upper class European ballroom dance tradition in Cuba, it was also at one point very controversial due to its African heritage. This was certainly the case when Afro-Cuban bassist Israel López Cachao and his brother cellist Orestes López Cachao invented the mambo section of the danzón and its sister rhythm cha-cha-chá in the 1930s (Salazar 1992: 10). Regarding Cuba's version of mambo, anthropologist and dance scholar Yvonne Daniel (2003: 44) writes:

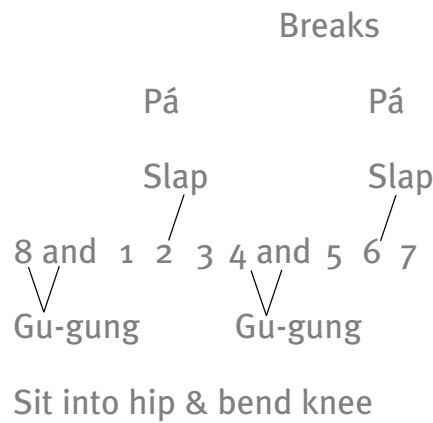
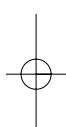
Mambo in Cuba is very specific in particular gestures and sequences. The foot pattern switches son expectations . . . to a 'touch step' repetition that alternates from the right to the left foot. The toe of the right foot touches the floor momentarily and then the whole right foot takes a step; this pattern is repeated on the left and continues to alternate. Above, the hips (really pelvis) the move forward and back with each touch, step on the feet. The hands and arms move alternately forward and back, each arm in opposition to the feet. The feeling and vision of Cuban mambo is bouncy, involving up and down motion of the entire body and occasional shimmering shoulders. All sorts of catchy kicking patterns, quick, small turns, and even little jumps are added.

Mambo and son were influenced by North American jazz and the swing band era, which paved the way for some of the dance traditions that emerged from the Palladium ballroom and nightclub during the 1950s mambo craze in New York. The Palladium dance tradition in turn gave rise to a number of contemporary salsa dance practices that serve as a form of cultural resistance and affirmation of identity among Latinos/as in New York.

left-right-left, right-left-right. The tumbao is underpinned by the *clave*, a rhythmic pattern played by two wooden sticks over a bar (2 measures of 4 beats) of music, or 8 beats. The clave forms the basis of most salsa music and underpins its polyrhythm as well as the corresponding polycentric/rhythmic movement that can happen simultaneously in the upper and lower regions of the dancer's body.

Polycentrism/rhythm is one of the African contributions to salsa dance that has resisted subjugation and complete annihilation throughout colonialism and post-colonialism. In salsa dance, polycentrism/rhythm can play itself out as follows: while the marking of the rhythm is going on in the lower body, the upper body can move along with it. The rib cage can sway back and forth in opposition to the hips as the arms follow with a flexed elbow above waist level. This action is what the American ballroom dance studios call Cuban motion, and what I will call here Latin motion and polycentrism/rhythm,<sup>25</sup> since it is evident in many other forms of Afro-Latin(o/a) dance such as Dominican *merengue*, for example. Interestingly enough, Latin motion/polycentrism/rhythm is one of the most difficult aspects of learning salsa dance. It requires a level of immersion that resists the packaging and selling, i.e., the commodification of Afro-Latin(o/a) dance.

If the dancer is responding to the tumbao, s/he will be in time with the music. Numerically, the pá falls on the 2, i.e., the second beat in a bar of music. This technique is often referred to as dancing or "breaking on 2" because the emphasis or the break is on the 2, upon which the pá of the tumbao, or the slap of the conga, falls. Numerically, the basic step in its entirety ends up falling on 2-3-4, 6-7-8 (left-right-left, right-left-right) in a bar of music. The 1 and 5 are transition periods in the hips (perceived as a pause to the naked eye), making it possible to break forward and back. In terms of tumbao, the gu-gung happens on the 8 of the previous bar as well as on the "and" before the 1 of the next bar. This is repeated on the 4 "and," before the 5 of the next bar. Here is how it plays out for the dancer in terms of the rhythm and timing of the music:



There were no studios where one could learn how to dance this style, so the nightclub scene was the nurturing ground for aspiring dancers. And not all dancers were generous . . . . [Eddie Torres] observed dancers like Louie Máquina, who got his name for his ‘real rapid-fire footwork.’ . . and Jo Jo Smith, a professional jazz teacher with a unique style of mambo jazz dancing. The pros at that time were Freddy Rios, the Cha Cha Aces, Tommy Johnson and Augie and Margot (34). . . with an uncanny ability to imitate . . . he [Torres] picked up from every one of their styles: Jo Jo Smith’s jazz movements; Freddy Rios’s very Cuban typical style; a little of Louie La Máquina.’

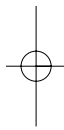
The Eddie Torres nightclub technique, much like the music that came to be known as salsa in New York, developed from a number of diverse sources. These include the Afro-Cuban son, mambo, and North American jazz dance, which was an outgrowth of black vernacular social dances such as swing. For example, swing includes steps like the suzy-q,<sup>27</sup> one of the first steps students learn from the Torres repertoire of choreographed dance arrangements that are used for improvisation. These steps are also called “open work” (as opposed to closed partner work)<sup>28</sup> or “shines,” a derogatory terminology that harkens back to the days when African-American shoe-shine boys would offer to dance for change (Chesleigh 2003, 2004). Such steps are typically done solo, and they include the mambo jazz; the Cuban, which is a variation of the basic Afro-Cuban rumba step; and the “slave” step, similar to bomba and some orisha/santo [saint] dances. Dance scholar Halbert Barton proposes that the solo improvisations which characterize bomba dance are akin to the improvisational open work that Torres has elaborated (personal communication), and I would tend to agree. Others might say that improvisational footwork also has much to do with the swing influence. Both bomba and swing have in common their Afro-Diasporic heritage.

Torres as well as the salsa dancers and instructors who follow and elaborate on his method can be seen as “transculturating transculturation.” Diana Taylor (2003) describes the concept this phrase conveys as the way in which both the social process and theory of transculturation evolve over time. The salsa dance tradition Torres and others are expanding on in New York continues the line of transculturation, which is rooted in a colonial history, whereby the African contributions to Latino/a culture have resisted subjugation and complete annihilation in the Caribbean and Latin America through the dancing body. At the same time, it adjusts to the to the contemporary demands of the Diaporic milieu that is the U.S. context for Latino/as. Salsa dance in New York as represented by the Torres approach also reflects what music scholar Raúl R. Romero highlights when he quotes Néstor García Canclini: “...the socio-cultural hybrids in which the traditional and the modern are mixed.” Romero further adds that these are “indeed those societies or populations that continue to maintain their identities while at the same time keeping up with the development of capitalism” (2001: 23). As such, the transculturation inherent to salsa dance in New York, due to the combination of its colonial history and its diaspora context in the imperialist U.S., necessitates negotiation between both resistance and



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switching roles, with more men allowing themselves to follow and women learning how to lead. This is particularly common among instructors. It has also become increasingly frequent to see men who identify themselves as heterosexual openly dancing together, switching back and forth between leader and follower roles. Women also dance together, although this has traditionally been more socially acceptable.<sup>31</sup> There has also been a surge in female instructors of the Torres technique as of late. However, the partner work taught within the Torres approach is often critiqued for looking “mechanical” by some Latino/a salsa dancers, who identify more strongly with techniques that are perceived as more “traditional” and are learned at home.<sup>32</sup> Commentaries include that the “studio dancers” are “predictable,” while others assert that they are “beautiful to watch,” but “difficult to dance with.” Performer and instructor Nydia Ocasio (2003) also states that her dance education has not happened primarily in a studio. Rather, she grew up dancing at home and learned a lot of what she knows from being immersed in the culture, going to the clubs and being involved in performances. Ocasio herself teaches the Palladium technique, and one of her biggest critiques of the Torres approach is that dancers learn choreographed dance steps—in both closed and open work positions—in a way that hinders individuality, self-expression, and improvisation. I tend to agree with this critique in some cases, although not all, as individuality, self-expression, and improvisation do abound in the Torres technique, albeit within a set structure. Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1998: 283) provides a relevant theoretical slant that can serve to illuminate such phenomenon:



The technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced. These two processes lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition which is the obverse of the contemporary crisis and renewal of mankind. Both processes are intimately connected with the contemporary mass movements.

Building on the choreographic tradition that was articulated in the Palladium ballroom and nightclub in its heyday, the contemporary mass movement emerging from the Torres approach empowers itself through reproduction. It is a community that is credited with a high level of virtuosity, which is leading to the “professionalization” of salsa dance for Latinos/as in New York—providing opportunities for New Yorkers as dance instructors and stage performers. Such performances have been occurring in social spaces such as Madison Square Garden, Lincoln Center, and Radio City Music Hall, to name just a few, over the last several years. This movement began with Torres himself more than two decades ago, having already performed for two presidents in his lifetime. In addition to resisting assimilation through salsa dance performance, Latinos/as in this community are also resisting marginalization from the mainstream stages of dance in New York, setting their sites on crossing over to the realm of “art” and performing on Broadway. The implications of this are manifold.

the two largest Latino/a populations in New York, the area this study concentrates on, have come from these locations (see Dávila and Laó-Montes 2001: 19–23). This is with the understanding that salsa dance has developed in its own distinct forms in many other areas of Latin America, the Caribbean, and the U.S. (as well as many other “non-Latino/a” parts of the world). As such, investigation of salsa dance practices in these areas is also greatly needed.

<sup>7</sup> Sue Steward (1994: 493) also states that the music of *salsero* (vocalist and musician) Ruben Blades “grows directly out of the dance tradition.”

<sup>8</sup> However, such dances have also been influenced by social dance traditions throughout history. For a discussion on how these genres have been influenced by African dance aesthetics, see Brenda Dixon Gottschild (1996). For a discussion of how African-American and Euro-American dance practices have influenced each other in the intercultural landscape of modern theatrical/concert dance, see Susan Manning’s forthcoming book *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion*.

<sup>9</sup> Phrase employed by Brenda Dixon Gottschild (1996).

<sup>10</sup> This project deals with salsa dance as it relates to Latinos/as primarily. A discussion of its significance in relation to the many non-Latinos/as who participate in its performance and development requires a much larger space. Furthermore, my focus on Latino/as at this juncture in my work in no way implies the belief that in order to dance salsa one need be Latino/a. The biologically based stance that the ability to dance salsa is “carried in the blood” and therefore more “natural” for Latino/as does not have any bearing on this discussion.

<sup>11</sup> See Sloat (2003).

<sup>12</sup> Latinos/as themselves also engage in auto-exoticization. For more on this see Savigliano (1995).

<sup>13</sup> Performance here is used as the way in which individuals choose to perform their identity.

<sup>14</sup> Based on conversations with fellow salsa dancers, performers, and instructors from 1998–2003. Particular thanks to Addie Díaz, Manny Sivierio, Rodney López, Nydia Ocasio, and Lydia Serrano for sharing so extensively about their experiences.

<sup>15</sup> For more on this see Cepeda (2000).

<sup>16</sup> See also Flores (2000: 191).

<sup>17</sup> Also see Browning (1995).

<sup>18</sup> The *güiro*, a gourd instrument often used in salsa music and many of its predecessors, is one of the few indigenous instruments that have survived European colonization (Alén-Rodríguez 1998).

<sup>19</sup> This statement is based on observations I made in 1997–1999 at the World Salsa Congresses, held in Puerto Rico and featuring proscenium stage performances by salsa dancers from around the world.

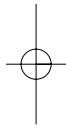
<sup>20</sup> Although these dance forms are predecessors of salsa, many of them are still being performed today in their ritual and social contexts and as staged spectacles of performances.

<sup>21</sup> This does not mean that there is no choreographic tradition. On the contrary, the Afro-Cuban *orisha/santo* [saint] dances, for example, include choreographed steps that correspond to each of the deities in this sacred Yoruba-derived practice.

<sup>22</sup> Dance scholar Patricia Beaman (2002) affirms that the *contradanse*, which preceded *danzón*, actually grew out of the dance traditions of the lower classes in Europe. These traditions were appropriated into the court dance practices that were done socially and later led to the professionalization of ballet and its performance with the development of the proscenium stage in Europe.

<sup>23</sup> I use the term salsa purposely because it is not easily defined, representing the fluidity of transculturation.

<sup>24</sup> A more comprehensive visual depiction that incorporates the entire body (rather than solely the feet) is in the works. Many thanks to Charles Leonard for facilitating the current graphic depictions.



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