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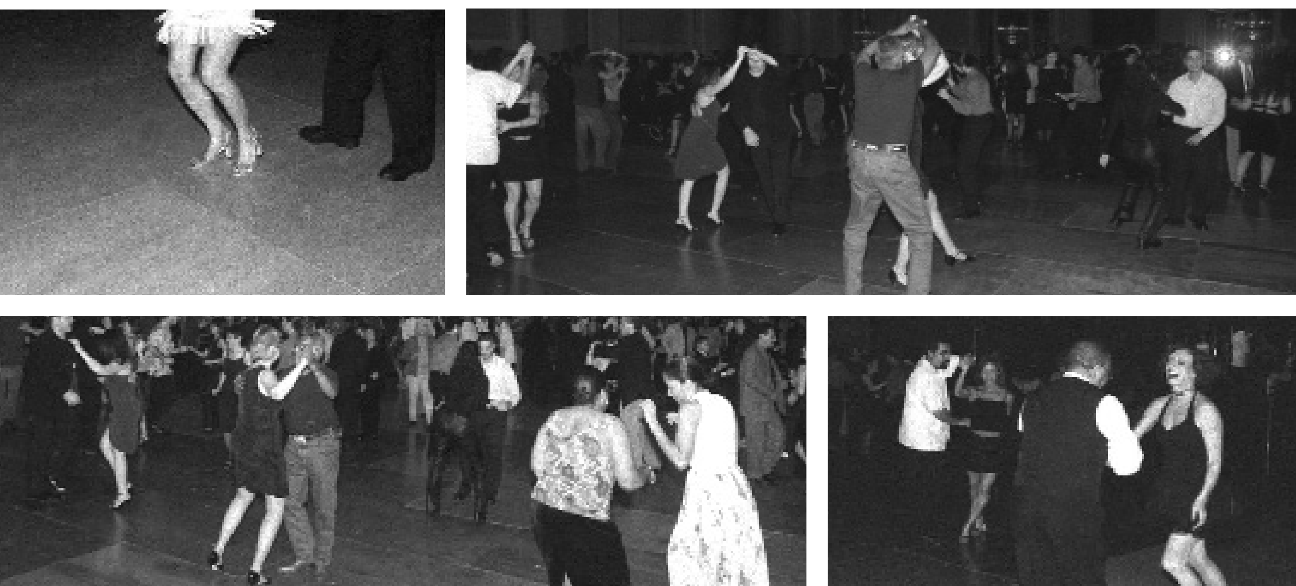

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Salsa Dance:
Latino/a History in Motion[1]

Priscilla Renta

ABSTRACT

In the last decade, research on salsa in the United States has grown. Despite the body of scholarly work that exists on salsa music, explorations on salsa dance have been scarce. This is curious, considering that salsa music and dance are so intimately tied, each existing as a consequence of the other. It is precisely because of this close relationship that the music and dance often share the same spaces—living rooms at home, street festivals, nightclubs, and stages. As such, salsa dance is worthy of more thorough investigation in a space of its own, while still honoring its inseparable connection to its musical form. 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. [Keywords: body, dance, identity, performance, salsa, transculturation]

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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)[2] 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.[3] 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"[4] religious and philosophical notions of disembodiment[5] 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

the dichotomy over the other marks phallocentric society," writes feminist scholar Nancy C.M. Hartsock (2002: 300). According to performance studies scholar Margaret Thompson Drewal (1991: 25), the mind/body split fuels the tendency to associate the intellect with those who are male and that which is objective, while the body and dance are typically associated with sexuality and sensuality, and those who are female, black, and/or queer. Along with this, embodied knowledge is considered subjective, not worthy of scholarly concern.

Such disregard for embodied knowledge is mirrored in salsa scholarship. Yet salsa dance and music, like their Afro-Caribbean beginnings, are inextricably tied, each existing as a consequence of the other. For instance, the transcultural predecessors of salsa such as "the [Afro-Cuban] *danzón* evolved into the mambo and the cha-cha-chá, [both considered] dance rhythms . . . the name cha-cha-chá came from the sound produced by the dancers' sliding feet" (Gerard and Sheller 1998: 82). In rumba and Afro-Puerto Rican *bomba*, also ancestors of salsa, "the highest drum . . . responds to the movements of the dancers . . ." (Gerard and Sheller 1998: 82).[6] Similarly, Vernon Boggs, who compiled the anthology *Salsiology: Afro-Cuban Music and the Evolution of Salsa in New York City*, calls salsa "the popular dance music of the moment" (1992: 225).[7] It is precisely because of this close relationship that the dance and music often share the same spaces—living rooms at home, street festivals, nightclubs, and stages. It is perhaps for this very reason that the dance and music are often spoken about interchangeably. Still, salsa dance is worthy of more thorough investigation in a space of its own, while honoring its inseparable connection to its musical form.

The absence of the salsa dancing body in dance scholarship and in U.S. mainstream dance performance venues reflects the marginalization of Afro-Latin(o/a) dance in those arenas as well. Dance instructor and scholar Fran Chesleigh suggests that this could be due to salsa being largely a social dance tradition, which is undervalued in comparison to theatrical/concert dances such as ballet, modern, and jazz,[8] which fall under the realm of "art." However, such marginalization can also be related to a particular ambivalence toward the dancing body of color.[9] The power of dance and its potential for military mobilization made the dancing body of color a particular threat for Europeans in their efforts to colonize the Caribbean and the Americas. Although they allowed African slaves to practice their dances in order to ensure productivity, they exerted strict control (Hazzard-Gordon 1990: 7–9), often restricting such activity to particular days of the week and/or times of the year. These constraints, however, could not stop the political mobilization leading up to the Haitian Revolution in the late 1700s, which was inspired by the sacred music and dance practices of *Vodun* on the island, whereby choreographic patterns became military strategy (Browning 2002). Such rebellion led in part to the continual banning of transcultural dances such as the Afro-Cuban *son* (Boggs 1993: 11) and Afro-Puerto Rican bomba. Consequently, colonialism brought with it a physical oppression that included the suppression of Afro-Latin(o/a) dance forms. Historically, Afro-Latin(o/a) dance communities have resisted this form of oppression in part by keeping their dance forms alive, a practice that persists in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the U.S. among Latinos/as. Salsa dance inherits this legacy of resistance against colonial subjugation from its Afro-Caribbean ancestors. The marginalization of Afro-Latin(o/a) dance practices and its scholarship stems from such history.

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).[10] 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,[11] 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.

Salsa dance performance and the performance of Latino/a identity

> Dance sets politics in motion, bringing people together in rhythmic affinity where identification takes the form of histories written on the body through gesture. The body dancing to Latin rhythms analyzes and articulates the conflicts that have crossed Latin/o American identity . . . . Latin/o bodies serve as a site of a long history of racial, cultural and economic conflict. Dance promises the potential reinscription of those bodies with alternate interpretations of that history . . . dance incites rebellions (Delgado and Muñoz 1997: 10).

Although many scholars have given the affirmation of Latino/a identity vis-à-vis salsa music preference over dance, feminist salsa scholar Frances Aparicio has been one of the few to acknowledge the relevance and importance of movement within this phenomenon. She asserts (1989/90: 55):

> Dancing (el baile) is another act of acquiring knowledge and self-knowledge . . . . For the masses and for working class communities, it is something they can truly call their own . . . composing, performing, and dancing to Salsa differentiates the Latino from the rest of North American society.

In contrast, dance scholar Karen Backstein charges Aparicio with ignoring the "physiology of the dance" (Backstein 2001: 455) in her assertion that Latino/a identification with salsa has a political component in comparison to the exoticism and "fetishizing"[12] Aparicio also states she has noticed in some Anglos interested in the dance (Aparicio 1998: 99). Further, Backstein asserts that Aparicio treats salsa "both musically and physically" as "a purely intellectual and political concept—one that seems to ignore other statements by her Latino subjects . . . and the functional history of movements . . ." (2001: 455–6). Yet Backstein's contention does not seem to take into account the unequal power relations between Latinos/as and Euro-Americans in U.S. society and how that may translate into unique and distinct experiences based on their differing social positions. While I agree with Backstein that the physiology of the dance is of extreme importance regardless of who is performing it, it is not mutually exclusive from the Latino/a identity politics described by Aparicio. To see it as either/or brings us back to the mind/body binary that has been so pervasive in the academy, relegating the political to a strictly intellectual activity, of which the body is not a part.

For many Latinos/as, the cultural and political value of salsa dance, with regard to the construction and performance[13] of identity, is often made tangible (consciously and/or unconsciously) through movement in connection to music both individually and collectively.[14] The intentions behind Latino/a performance of salsa dance in its social and spectacle contexts are multiple and vary from person to person. However, many Latino/a salsa dancers in the New York-based community I highlight here assert that it is the kinesthetic and visual pleasure of the movement in relation to the

auditory enjoyment of the music, that is among the most significant of motivators aside (although not exlusive) 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[15] 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).[16] 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,[17] expressing a multifaceted, transcultural Latino/a identity that is in constant motion.

A brief history can serve to illuminate salsa dance in relation to transculturation and its negotiation between resistance and compliance.

Salsa dance: Latino/a history in motion

The heterogeneity of sources that have contributed to salsa dance makes it difficult to define in the same way that it is difficult to define Latino/a identity, as "identity is not a thing but a process" (Frith 1996: 110). However, in very general terms, most forms of salsa dance reflect transcultural negotiations between African and European dance practices, whereby the colonial encounter is reconciled through the dancing body. The indigenous contributions to salsa dance are much more obscure,[18] reflecting the rampant decimation of indigenous cultural practices by European colonialism. In this sense, the body becomes an "inscribed surface of events" (Foucault 1997: 148).

Polycentrism/rhythm is perhaps the most common of African contributions present in most approaches to salsa dance.[19] Polycentrism/rhythm, i.e., movement from multiple centers of the dancer's body, is closely aligned with the music's polyrhythm. Polyrhythm, which characterizes salsa music and emerges from the African traditions that underpin Latino/a culture, is a type of rhythmic organization whereby multiple rhythms are playing simultaneously. Dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild (1996: 14) defines polycentrism/rhythm in contrast to European dance aesthetic principles as follows:

> From the Africanist standpoint, movement may emanate from any part of the body, and two or more centers may operate simultaneously. Polycentrism runs counter to academic European aesthetics, where the ideal is to initiate movement from one locus—the nobly lifted, upper center of the aligned torso, well above the pelvis. Africanist movement is also polyrhythmic. For example, the feet may maintain one rhythm while the arms, head and torso dance to different drums.

Polycentrism/rhythm is evident to varying degrees in many of the Afro-Cuban and Afro-Puerto Rican dances that preceded salsa dance, which are transcultural expressions in themselves. These include the *orisha/santo* [saint] dances, *rumba*, son, mambo/cha-cha-chá (Cuba), and bomba and *plena* (Puerto Rico).[20] All of these dance practices, like the African dance traditions that have influenced their development, also place a high value on improvisation[21] and on dance as an integral part of community life. In doing so they empower dancers to participate in individual and collective acts of cultural resistance and affirmation throughout history and the present.

In addition, Tato Conrad—musician, scholar, and director of the Arthur Murray ballroom dance studio in Puerto Rico—asserts that many of the turn patterns executed by salsa dancing couples today come from the *contradanza*/French *contradanse*/English country dance.[22] Contradanza reached the islands of Cuba and Puerto Rico in the 1800s, shortly after the Haitian Revolution (Cabrera-Infante 1994). At one point it was a choreographed group dance that evolved into the *danza* (Manuel 1994: 277), a long-standing symbol of national identity in Puerto Rico

(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.

Salsa dance techniques in New York: Transculturating transculturation

> National differences create healthy rivalry, but New Yorker Eddie Torres, the professor of salsa dance, says: 'it doesn't matter which style you dance, whether you start on the first beat—'dancing on the one' (like the Cubans and Colombians)—or on the second—'dancing on the two' (like the Latin New Yorkers, Puerto Ricans and the ballroom set)—as long as you're consistent and understand which beat you're on' (Steward 1999: 14).

Out of the Palladium dance tradition in New York came two prevalent techniques for dancing salsa,[23] which is frequently called mambo in the two practices I describe here. The basic movements from each technique are done in a straight line forward and back rather than the more circular or side-to-side fashion of dancing salsa that has typically been attributed to Cuba and Puerto Rico in the past. I use the word technique in the same sense as anthropologist and sociologist Marcel Mauss, who says: "I call technique an action which is effective and traditional . . . . There is no technique and no transmission in the absence of tradition" (1973: 75). These techniques are all of those things: based on tradition, effective and as a result able to be transmitted through codified dance instruction.

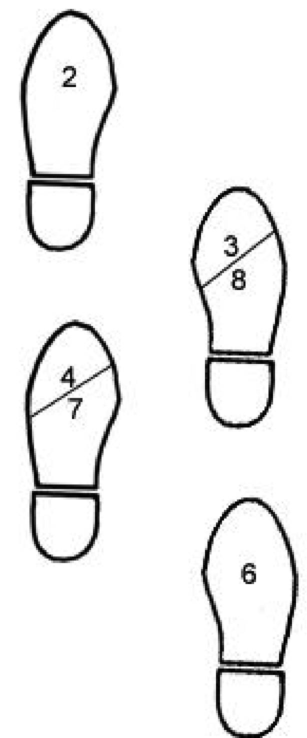


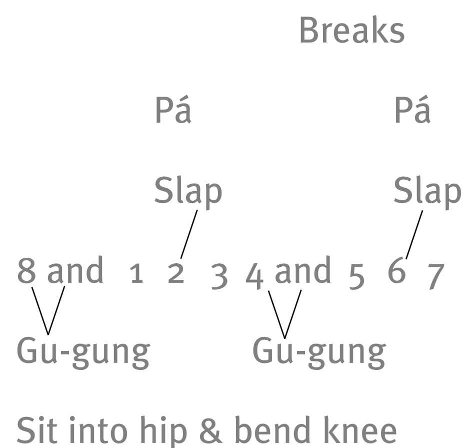
Figure 1

The first is commonly called the Palladium technique (see Figure 1),[24] although it is also referred to as *son montuno* (López 2003) by many Palladium dancers themselves. This technique has been elaborated on and codified by the American ballroom tradition. Aside from the success of the ballroom dance studios in packaging and selling the Palladium approach, Puerto Ricans Angel and Addie Rodríguez have been particularly adept at advancing this approach among Latinos/as in New York for over two decades. The Palladium technique is traced back to Puerto Rican dancers such as Freddie Rios and Cuban Pete during the Palladium era. Rhythmically the approach is designed to respond to what is called the *tumbao*: gu-gung-pá, played by two open tones and a slap on the conga drum. Starting from a neutral position, the weight of the body is shifted to the right side. On the gu-gung, the dancer sits into the right hip and bends the left knee to then "break" forward with the left foot on the pá (Ocasio 2003). This is repeated on the left side by shifting the weight of the body to the left leg, sitting into the left hip, bending the right knee and breaking back with the right. The feet go

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,[25] 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:



In terms of **clave**, the numbers play out as follows[26]:

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
x x x x x

3–2 clave (strokes of the clave sticks fall on 1, 2.5, 4, 6, 7)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
x x x x x

2–3 clave (strokes fall on 2,3,5,6.5,8)

Note: The above depiction refers to the son clave *that underpins much of salsa music. However, there are also some salsa compositions that are arranged in* rumba clave*, where the "third stroke falls half a beat later" than it does in the* son clave *(Gerard and Sheller 1998: 84).*

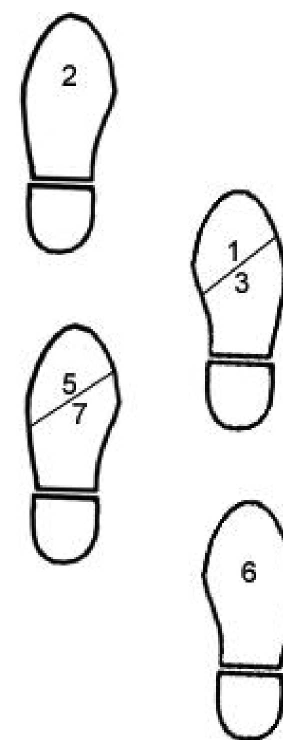


Figure 2

Building upon the Palladium technique is Eddie Torres, a Puerto Rican born and raised in East Harlem, who developed another approach to dancing and teaching salsa dance on 2 in New York, along with the help of his dance partner and wife María Torres. This technique is also designed to be danced in time with the clave, which underpins the polyrhythm of the music, as well as the tumbao that is layered on top of it. However, Puerto Rican dancer, performer, and instructor Nydia Ocasio—a contemporary of Torres and Rodríguez who has been in the New York Afro-Latin(o/a) dance scene since the 1970s—argues that the Torres technique advances dancers too far ahead of the music by making them step on the first beat, thereby slightly missing the tumbao. This is because in this approach the dancer starts with the right foot on 1, the first beat in each bar of music, but the emphasis is with the left foot on 2 (see Figure 2). The feet go 1–2–3, 5–6–7, right-left-right, left-right, left, short (step)-long (step)-in place (step), short, long-in place. Beats 4 and 8 are used to change the direction of the body from breaking forward to breaking back and vice versa. The feet only come slightly off the floor during this transition. The movement during this change in direction generates largely from the hips and knees as it does in the Palladium technique. The rib cage can also sway from side to side contrary to the hips, e.g., when the dancer sits into the right hip to move forward with the left foot (knee flexed), the rib cage moves to the left, the left arm goes back, while the right arm comes forward. As such, Latin motion/polycentrism/rhythm can also be employed in this technique, which is often referred to as nightclub style—how Eddie Torres got most of his training. Journalist Mary Kent (1995: 36) elaborates:

> 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,[27] 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)[28] 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

compliance. This is evidenced by the way in which Torres has transformed his technique into a lucrative salsa dance business.

Although the Torres nightclub technique has only recently been incorporated into the curricula of some ballroom dance studios, its codification and its syllabus of dance steps has been influenced by the American ballroom dance tradition, which has been capitalizing on Afro-Latin(o/a) dance for decades. Kent (1995: 36) explains:

> The late June Laberta, a ballroom dance teacher, was Eddie's greatest influence. She taught every ballroom dance in the book, but her greatest love was mambo. On occasions, June accompanied Eddie to the Corso where the odd couple danced up a storm. He was in his twenties, she was in her late fifties. Creating kooky intricate little moves that come from jazz and everything that she knew, the lean Laberta would spin like a top. June's mentoring was decisive in Eddie's teaching career. She said, 'Eddie I can help you learn the language of teaching'. She took him to ballrooms on Friday nights.... Thanks to June Laberta, Eddie's steps all have names. Today, Eddie's class syllabus documenting 180 steps bolsters the traditions of those old scholars of dance at the ballrooms.

Torres has since developed many intricate turn patterns and spin combinations in connection to the experience Kent describes above. His repertoire of turn patterns was also influenced by the hustle dance tradition that developed in the 1970s. In contrast, ballroom dance instructor Brandis Riba (1998: 44) states:

> All couple style dancing went into decline in the '60s and early '70s as dancing apart overtook the general American culture.... While the Americans were influenced by the genius of Gene Kelly and Fred Astaire who easily blended open dance styles with ballroom, the British kept their ballroom dancing closed, structured and more disciplined. Their idea of Latin dancing was also more structured and did not have the authentic influence enjoyed by the Americans, but it was different and brought an interesting new twist to things.

The decline of partner work in the 1960s and 1970s is also attributable to the feminist movement, says journalist and salsa dancer Anita Amirresvani (1998: 130). But partner dancing (closed work) has become very popular as part of the Torres salsa dance repertoire in addition to his codified choreography of dance steps (open work). These patterns are, of course, gendered, reinforcing hetero-normative male-female couple dancing, as well as the active/passive paradigm associated with the masculine/feminine in the lead-follow structure.[29] However, they also provide a powerful kinesthetic experience for constructing oppositional Latino/a identities that resist assimilation.[30] Recently dancers of the Torres technique have been

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.[31] 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.[32] 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.

Conclusion

Thus far we have examined the Torres salsa dance technique and its impact on the Latino/a community in New York as a transcultural phenomenon that resists both assimilation and marginalization, and stems from a long history of rebellion against subjugation of its Afro-Latin(o/a) ancestry. Like Diana Taylor, music scholar Rául R. Romero chooses to look at *mestizaje*—a similar concept to transculturation that is more often applied to Latin America as opposed to the Caribbean—as "a liberating, counterhegemonic discourse, in opposition to the view of mestizaje as the political discourse that fosters 'assimilation'" (2001: 29). However, Ortiz' original theorizing on transculturation took into account not only the creation of a new cultural phenomenon, but also the partial loss of the previous culture(s). The question then remains: what is lost, if anything at all, for Latinos/as in transculturating salsa dance as they simultaneously adhere to "tradition" and diverge from it in order to keep pace with the rapidly changing capitalist landscape that is the U.S. context? How does the aspiration to make salsa dance worthy of the title "art" replicate social hierarchies that harken back to our colonial history and imperialist expansion, and to what extent does it empower and enrich the Latino/a community economically and culturally? Examining such questions provides fertile ground for continued research of this rich topic, which can serve to challenge assertions such as Backstein's when she writes that "consigning" Afro-Latino(o/a) dance forms "to the ghetto of ethnicity . . . de-emphasizes the technical demands of the dance . . ." (2001: 454). Rather, the technical demands of salsa dance in New York serve to illuminate how Latinos/as negotiate their identity through movement, while balancing the demands of resistance and acceptance/compliance, tradition, and modernity.

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NOTES

1 This title was influenced by the conference "Politics in Motion," which generated the anthology *Evernight Life: Culture and Dance in Latin/o America* and Barbara Browning's *Samba: Resistance in Motion*. Susan Manning also uses the concept in her forthcoming book *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion*. The idea of being "in motion" has been used often in dance studies. I employ the phrase as well because it seems to capture the dynamic relationship between salsa dance and Latino/a identity politics and history best.

2 This form of writing Latin(o/a) is employed by María Elena Cepeda (2000). This form is used consistently when referring to either "Latin" dance or music, except in those cases when other authors are quoted. In such instances, variations of the term include Latin/o and Latin/o/a.

3 See Diana Taylor (2003: 17–8).

4 I use this terminology with the understanding that "Western" culture has been influenced by many different cultures besides the European, although this is seldom acknowledged.

5 See Drid Williams (1998: 4).

6 For the purpose of this paper I focus on Cuba and Puerto Rico since, historically,

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.

7 Sue Steward (1994: 493) also states that the music of *salsero* (vocalist and musician) Ruben Blades "grows directly out of the dance tradition."

8 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 inter-cultural landscape of modern theatrical/concert dance, see Susan Manning's forthcoming book *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion*.

9 Phrase employed by Brenda Dixon Gottschild (1996).

10 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.

11 See Sloat (2003).

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

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

14 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.

15 For more on this see Cepeda (2000).

16 See also Flores (2000: 191).

17 Also see Browning (1995).

18 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).

19 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.

20 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.

21 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 Yourba-derived practice.

22 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.

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

24 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.

25 The fact that the American ballroom dance tradition tends to use the terminology "Cuban motion" reflects a concentration on the relationship between Cuba and the U.S. prior to the Cuban Revolution in 1959.

26 See the Eddie Torres audiocassette (1995). Many thanks to Rodney López for his assistance in sketching *clave* on paper.

27 See http://www.streetswing.com/histmain/z3suzyq1.htm.

28 Terminology designated by the America ballroom dance tradition.

29 The hetero-normative paradigm of the closed dance position is not limited to this salsa dance technique.

30 The popularity of intricate turn patterns is not limited to the Torres approach. The Palladium technique, as taught and elaborated by Angel and Addie Rodríguez, also has a repertoire of choreographed open and closed work that is utilized for improvisation within the structure of this approach.

31 However, there are few individuals in this community who identify as gay. Nightclubs like the Wild Palm in the Bronx sometimes host separate gay salsa nights.

32 Latino/a dancers of the Torres technique include those who learned salsa in their homes and by going to nightclubs as well as those who did not.

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