CHAPTER 21

“HOT” LATIN DANCE

Ethnic Identity and Stereotype

JULIET MCMAINS

Twentieth-century American social dance history is rife with Latin dance “crazes,” short-lived periods of frenzied obsession with hip-centric dances from Argentina, Cuba, or Brazil. For at least a century, starting with the tango craze of the 1910s and extending through the rumba, samba, and conga crazes of the 1930s into the mambo and cha cha crazes of the 1950s, past the lambada craze of the late 1980s, and onto the salsa craze at the turn of the millennium, Anglo-Americans have practiced dances borrowed from their Latin American neighbors. Their popularity has been fueled by both fear and delight that fiery Latin rhythms propelling isolations of the pelvis and intertwining of the legs will unleash primordial passions and wild abandon even in stiff and stoic North Americans.

Common assumptions about “hot” Latin dance are based on stereotypes of Latin Americans as passion-driven sex vixens, whose physical and emotional impulses overpower their implicitly weaker and less developed rational intellectual reasoning. Although many people may scoff at the suggestion that dancing a few steps of the cha cha makes one complicit in racial/ethnic stereotyping, it is impossible to deny the similarities between stereotypes of Latin dance and Latin people. I will argue that although few North Americans engage in Latin dance with racist intent, at times their participation in Latin dance reinforces harmful stereotypes about Latin Americans. I will further argue, however, that these stereotypes can be weakened when Latinos for whom Latin dance plays a vital role in formation of their own ethnic identity share the dance floor with non-Latinos. Drawing from oral history interviews I have conducted with over one hundred dancers, I introduce evidence from two specific moments in American history when these two groups shared the same social dance spaces: New York’s Palladium Ballroom in the 1950s and salsa as practiced at salsa congresses from 1997 to the present day.
**Latino Stereotypes and the American Ballroom Dance Industry**

While general American interest in various Latin dances has waxed and waned throughout the twentieth century, Latin American immigrants to the United States have independently sustained their own practices of Latin dance. Within Latin American communities in the United States, Latin dance has most often functioned to foster and sustain community that both honors specific national Latin American cultural traditions and blurs them in the formation of a pan-Latino ethnic identity. Thus, Latin dance for American Latinos has often served as a vital means through which to negotiate their ethnic identities. Such a function stands in stark contrast to the way in which Anglo-Americans have often viewed Latin dance, namely as an exotic curiosity, an erotic space of unbridled sexual desire, an alluring sojourn across boundaries of cultural and racial difference, or an escape from the routine of their ordinary lives. Granted, participation in Latin dance also has many overlapping functions for Latinos and non-Latinos, including courtship, exercise, social contact, and creative expression, but the segregated practice of these dances exaggerates the points of difference. In addition to the radically different function it serves, the expression of Latin dance in Latino communities also departs drastically in form from the commercial American versions seen in Anglo communities.

Latin dances as distributed in classes, books, and performances by the American ballroom dance industry throughout the twentieth century were similar to other ballroom dances in their reliance on a vertical posture, extended limbs, and codified steps, which allowed for little personal improvisation or evolution of the form. These Latin dances of the ballroom dance industry were distinguished from other ballroom dances primarily through a fetishized focus on movement of the hips. In contrast, hip movement was only one of the qualities that characterized the Latin dances as practiced in Latin American communities, where they were learned informally among family and friends. Dances in these contexts were often practiced with a flexible spine and flexed limbs held close to the body, and they relied on fluid improvisational structures that responded to changing musical priorities. Latin dance practiced in Latin communities was never constrained by a single style, step, or rhythmic interpretation; rather, it represented a constantly evolving personal and communal expression.

The American ballroom dance industry, however, reduced each Latin dance to a fixed footstep pattern and rhythm, not only simplifying a complex and improvisational approach used in Latin communities, but also freezing the Latin dances at a single point in time. The primary force driving the modification of Latin dances for consumption in America was undoubtedly economic. Until very recently, social dance in Latin America was not taught in formal classes. People learned to dance the way they learned to speak or walk or cook—watching and imitating people in their communities. Thus, little commerce occurred around sale of Latin dance in Latin America. When Latin dances were
exported abroad, however, teaching and selling Latin dance became business. Working in the United States, Anglo and Latino dance teachers alike found it necessary to simplify and standardize Latin dances in order to maximize their marketability (Savigliano 1995; McMains 2006).

So although the gross incongruity between Latin dance as practiced in Latin America and that sold in and by the American ballroom dance industry can be linked to the commercialization of the dances, I believe it was also enabled by, and fed back into, American stereotypes of Latin Americans. Chicano film scholar Charles Ramírez Berg’s description of racial and ethnic stereotypes as “rigidly applied, crude, oversimplified representations of a group” (Ramírez Berg 2002, 166) could just as aptly apply to the ballroom dance industry’s interpretation of Latin dance. Most Americans were willing to accept one-dimensional static characterizations of Latin dances because they mirrored common representations of Latin Americans in flat, ahistorical, rigid generalizations. Furthermore, the broad generalizations about Latin dances used to market them to Anglo-American consumers—spicy, sensual dances of the lower body that unleash uncontrollable passion—were the same stereotypes circulating in the United States about Latinos. Common stereotypes of Latinos and Latin Americans, including the positive (warm, friendly, passionate, sensual, good lovers, family-oriented) and the negative (loud, dramatic, sexually uncontrollable, dangerous, criminal, uneducated, poor, macho), are based on assumptions that Latin emotional and physical impulses cannot be controlled or contained by reason or intellect. Given that dominant Anglo-American culture privileges mind over body, these stereotypes served to justify not only North American superiority over Latin America, but also to reinforce ethnic hierarchies within the United States. Today, most Americans recognize the dangers of racial and ethnic stereotyping and may consciously strive to disrupt them. Few people, however, recognize that the image of hot Latin lovers entwined on the dance floor in a whirl of spicy turns and succulent dips is dependent on these harmful stereotypes of Latin Americans.

Not only is this image of Latin dance dependent on stereotypes of Latin Americans, it is also intimately linked to Anglo-Americans’ own sense of identity. Stereotypes function partly to enable an individual or a group to form a sense of self through contrast to others (Ramírez Berg 2002, 28). Thus, Anglo-Americans who only shimmy their hips while dancing samba may be performing their distance from the stereotype of the sexual seductress they parody. Although it might seem paradoxical to suggest that Anglo-Americans are establishing their own ethnic identity by participating in a dance borrowed from another culture, my argument is consistent with that made by other scholars. Cultural historian David Roediger has argued that Irish-American minstrel actors and audiences in the nineteenth century were able to establish their own racial identity as white by assuring their distance from blackness in blackface minstrel performance (Roediger 1991, 117). Cultural critic Linda Mizejewski has likewise theorized that Ziegfeld Follies girls assured their own racial status as white by performing sexually provocative numbers in “café au lait” makeup (light-skinned blackface), thereby signaling their own distance from the racially marked sexual stereotypes upon which their performances relied (Mizejewski, 1997, 11). I have argued elsewhere that tanning products
widely used in ballroom dance competitions enact a form of “brownface” in which caricatures of Latinos are performed partly as a means of establishing the performer’s own distance from the ethnic identity and accompanying stereotypes upon which it is based (McMains 2006).

Although my theory of brownface focused specifically on the performance of Latin dance in DanceSport (ballroom dance competitions) in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the concept can also be useful in thinking about American practice of Latin dance on social dance floors over the past hundred years. Although they rarely tint their skin a darker shade, such as do performers of minstrelsy, Ziegfeld Follies, or DanceSport, Anglo-American practitioners of social Latin dance often don a metaphorical mask of otherness in order to execute movements that would be considered inappropriate from within their own cultural frame of reference. It might be said that many Anglo-American Latin dancers throughout the twentieth century have engaged in "participatory minstrelsy," a term coined by dance scholar Danielle Robinson to describe the way in which American immigrants in the 1910s earned membership in white mainstream society by participating in ragtime social dancing, which was at the time widely recognized as black (Robinson 2009, 90). I do not mean to suggest that affirming their own racial identity was necessarily a conscious or even a primary reason for Anglo-Americans' participation in Latin dance, but I do wish to point out that even for non-Latinos, Latin dance is often linked to formation of one's own ethnic identity.

Although I have focused on Anglo-Americans in my discussion of non-Latinos engaging in Latin dance, the same argument may also apply to members of other ethnic groups. For example, Chinese immigrants to the United States have practiced Latin dance for many decades, often in segregated clubs where they may dance to "Latin" music with Chinese lyrics. Such practices may serve both to distance Chinese immigrants from Latinos (whom they perceive to have a lower social status than they themselves aspire to achieve) and to enable them to strengthen their emerging Chinese-American ethnic identity through participation in a social activity that integrates aspects of Chinese and American culture. Thus, even Chinese participation in Latin dancing in America often depends on negative stereotypes of Latinos to strengthen the practitioners' own contrasting ethnic identity.

It might appear I am suggesting that all practices of Latin dance by non-Latinos negatively impact Latinos. I actually hope to demonstrate, however, that when non-Latinos approach Latin dance with the sincere intent of understanding and engaging with another culture, cross-cultural dance practice can actually help to engender sensitivity to, and appreciation for, cultural difference. Writing in 1944 about the American fascination with Cuban dance, New York Times dance critic John Martin reflected on the potential of dance to enable Americans to empathize with the Cuban way of life. He wrote,

We simply cannot practice such a movement without producing in ourselves at least a hint of the feeling that prompts the Cuban to move as he does. We are touching him on his most unrationalyzed level of experience, where his emotional life begins and many of his motivations unconsciously are formed.... Inevitably we emerge with a closer understanding of him (Martin 1944, 23).

By proposing that embodied engagement in the dance practices of another culture can help one better understand the deep emotional motivations of its people, Martin ascribes to dance a power that rivals strategies utilized by international diplomats. I agree with
Martin that an earnest attempt to understand and execute dances of another culture can result in profound discoveries not only of cultural differences but also of basic human similarities. The effort must, however, be based in actual engagement with another culture, not in mere flirtation or parody. John Martin further qualified his assertion,

Sometimes, however, we miss the point altogether in these importations, as, for instance, when on finding that their unfamiliar movements elude us, we embarrassedly throw everything native about them and go our own provincial way. This not only renders the whole process valueless but makes some very dull dances besides... The rumba is built so exclusively on a quite alien basic movement of the body that no one is likely ever to proclaim it easy for North Americans to do. It covers very little space, but confines its attention to a distinctive coordination of the hip and knee and shift of weight. Like the tango, if it is ever "adapted," it will be destroyed (Martin 1944, 23, 38).

Not only does John Martin imply that American adaptation of the Argentine tango has already destroyed both the character of the dance and its value as a means of promoting cross-cultural understanding, but he also foretells the same fate for the Cuban rumba.

Martin's prescient words did little to alter the course of American appropriation of Latin dance over the proceeding decades as the ballroom dance industry continued to Americanize tango, rumba, and numerous other Latin dances. When the adapted or, to borrow dance scholar Anthony Shay's term, "tamed" (Shay 2008, 184) Latin dances showed signs of becoming the "very dull dances" John Martin foresaw, the American ballroom dance industry began incorporating ballet steps (e.g., pirouettes, tours en l'air, arabesques, attitudes, splits) into the Latin dances. Although the resulting hybrid ballet-Latin dances, now featured regularly on the hit television shows Dancing with the Stars and So You Think You Can Dance, have brightened up the lackluster Americanized Latin dances with some show-biz polish, they depart even further from the Latin American social dances for which they were named (McMains 2010).

Not only do the representations of Latin dance circulating in the media and the ballroom dance industry employ radically different technique and vocabulary from that of Latin American social dance practices, they reinforce stereotypes of Latin-ness in their exaggerated performance of sex and passion. In the ballroom dance industry's choreographies of Latin, chest-baring men taunt and tame feisty women, who alternately resist and succumb in swooning dips, their wide eyes and open mouths distorted into caricatures of sexual bliss. These gendered stereotypes of an untamable Latin temptress who is nonetheless controlled by a macho Latin man are furthered by the minimization of improvisation from ballroom Latin. Whereas almost all Latin dances in Latin America include space for improvisation on the part of each partner even within the context of a gendered lead-follow structure, the American ballroom dance industry has virtually eliminated improvisation from its interpretation of Latin dance (McMains 2006). This reinterpretation of the gender roles in Latin dance reinforces common North American stereotypes that Latin American men are dominant and controlling and that Latin American women, although at times showing outward displays of rebellion, are ultimately submissive and complicit in this macho culture. In contrast to these troubling
and widely visible media representations of Latin dance, some American practices of Latin dance invoke the kind of cross-cultural engagement Martin envisioned. I will discuss two such examples of Latin dance practice in which Latin stereotypes have been challenged: mambo dancing at the Palladium Ballroom in the 1950s and twenty-first-century salsa dancing linked to the salsa congress circuit.

**Palladium Mambo**

Located on the corner of 53rd Street and Broadway in the heart of midtown Manhattan, the Palladium Ballroom began hosting Latin bands in 1947. It soon became one of New York’s chicest nightspots, regularly attracting movie stars such as Marlon Brando, Ava Gardner, and Sammy Davis Jr. Although celebrity presence may have helped to bolster the Palladium’s renown, the rich and famous came to gawk at the real stars of the Palladium—mambo musicians and dancers. The Palladium was not the only New York venue hosting mambo dance music between 1947 and its closure in 1966. Dozens of other New York dance halls featured mambo music, including venues catering to Latinos such as the Park Plaza/Palace in Spanish Harlem and the Hunt’s Point Palace in the Bronx, those drawing African Americans to public school dances in Harlem, those attracting a predominantly Jewish clientele such as Ben Maksik’s Town and Country Club in Brooklyn or Grossinger’s Hotel in the Catskills, and some that were geared toward Anglo-Americans such as Roseland Ballroom in midtown Manhattan. Why was the Palladium not only the most famous of these venues, but also the site of the most profound innovations in mambo dancing? I believe that what made the Palladium such a unique space was, in large part, the racial and ethnic diversity of its clientele and the cross-cultural exchanges such confluence encouraged.

On Wednesday evenings, the night of the amateur mambo contest and professional mambo shows, no ethnic group formed a majority. Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Italians, Jews, African Americans, Irish, among others, were equally intoxicated by mambo’s rhythms. Almost all former Palladium dancers recalled its power to integrate people across racial and ethnic barriers that were being upheld in most other spaces throughout the city. Professional dancer Michael Terrace (Miguel Gutierrez) reminisced, “so that’s why they called it a mingling melting pot where the Blacks would dance with the Whites and the Chinese danced with everybody else. So the composition of all our ethnic people were gathered together in one room, everybody loving the same music and the same dance.” Likewise, contemporary Cuban Pete (Pedro Aguilar) explained, 

And there was lots of Latins, yes, but you had Jewish and Italian people and Blacks, those three other ones who loved the music also, they came up. . . . I think Palladium did, the Palladium time and the mambo did the greatest thing for the culture of this country, everybody got together, everybody danced together.
Praise for the Palladium’s racial egalitarianism is a universal theme invoked by Palladium dancers, who agree that status was earned through dance skill, regardless of ethnic, national, or racial background. Although many of the top Palladium dancers were Puerto Rican (e.g., Cuban Pete, Luis Máquina, Margo Bartolomei Rodriguez, Jackie Danois, Aníbal Vázquez, Joe Vega) or Latinos from other Caribbean islands (e.g., Cuban-Dominican Michael Terrace, Dominican Augie Rodriguez, Cuban Tondelayo), others were Italian (e.g., Millie Donay, Palladium emcee and dance teacher Killer Joe), Jewish (e.g., Marilyn Winters, Larry Seldon, Vera Garret, Tybee Afra), or African American (e.g., Ernie Ensley, Dottie Adams, Andrew Jerrick).

As people from such diverse cultures encountered one another on the dance floor, once distinct cultural dance traditions began to merge. The syncopated but stately Cuban son was invigorated with sassy turns borrowed from the American lindy hop. Solo steps from Puerto Rican bomba and Cuban rumba were traded and spliced in between periods of partnered ballroom dancing. Jazz-inflected arrangements of Afro-Latin music inspired similar reinvention on the dance floor where asymmetrical American jazz postures began to pull Caribbean dance styles into new shapes. In her unpublished manuscript based on observations of Palladium mambo in the early 1950s, jazz dance historian Mura Dehn described the ensuing effect.

FIGURE 21.2 Millie Donay and Cuban Pete (Pedro Aguilar) performing mambo at the Palladium Ballroom in 1954. Photo by Yale Joel/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images.
In spite of seeming abandon, the movement is conscious and controlled. The proud stretch is akin to Spanish dancing. The tension works simultaneously from waist up with a light sway in the chest from side to side and from the waist down into hips and legs. The waist is pulled in and stretched. The undulation is above and below, which brings out an alert lightness. You never slump in Mambo. This elegant control is shattered at times by a wild rotation of the torso and head with such speed and vigor that one can hardly see the outlines of the body. Then follows a wavering step—pulling high ones knees. A possessed drunken quality like intoxicated bees balancing on a flower.

Dehn emphasizes contrasting qualities of “abandon” and “control.” Although Anglo-American interpretations of Latin dance often overindulge in abandon without much regard for control, the nuanced negotiation of contrasting traits is typical of Latin American and African Diasporic dance. In the words of dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Dehn is calling attention to the Africanist aesthetics of “high affect juxtaposition” and “embracing the conflict” (Dixon Gottschild 1996) when she describes a mambo dancer whose elegant stepping is momentarily shattered by a whirling head and torso only to be regained in a posture as delicate and tenuous as an inebriated insect poised on a blossom. Palladium mambo differed from the Latin American dances that inspired it, but it extended their tradition of resolving apparent paradoxes through their expression in motion. As in other Latin American social dance traditions, improvisation and individual style developed in response to African-derived polyrhythms figured prominently in the Palladium style mambo. Its basic step—three weight changes landing in a quick-quick-slow rhythm falling under a relaxed torso that allows for independent movement of the hips, rib cage, and shoulders—can be found in most partnered Latin American dances, including, plena, danza, son, guaracha, bolero, danzón, cumbia, lambada, bachata, maxixe, gafiera, and forró. Thus, despite its birth in New York, I believe Palladium mambo to be a Latin American dance.

When they learned mambo dancing in Latin communities alive with these cultural memories, Jewish and Italian and African-American mambo dancers could become equally fluent in mambo as their Puerto Rican and Cuban friends. In fact, the popularity of Latin music and dance among non-Latin people in the 1950s served to strengthen the ethnic pride of New York Latinos at the same time that it helped to promote racial and ethnic integration. New York Puerto Rican Angela Fontanez recalled, “But it was still something very validating about the fact that these people [non-Latino] liked our music and enjoyed our music. And of course from that you had the extension of food and intermarriages, etc., etc., etc. But the Palladium was truly a unique institution in that regard” (Fontanez 1993, 2). Fontanez points out both how the popularity of Latin dance and music among different ethnic groups validated her own cultural identity and how it opened the door to cross-cultural exchange.

Only when it was disseminated nationally by studios such as Arthur Murray, where teachers and students were divorced from the social context of Latino communities, did an Anglo-American mambo begin to emerge that had much more in common with the ballroom industry versions of tango, samba, and rumba than it did with Latin American social dance traditions. Sensuous undulations of torsos and quirky syncopations of
playful feet were replaced by sharp, jutting hips and precisely calculated footsteps dictated by dancing masters rather than the spirit of the music. As it was reduced to footstep patterns and numerical diagrams printed in dance manuals, mambo became a stilted caricature of Latin dance. Just as it had with previous ballroom interpretations of rumba, conga, and samba, the codified mambo relied primarily on exaggerated pelvic rotations and pulsations to portray its Latin-ness, reinscribing stereotypes of libido-crazed Latinos.

**CONGRESS STYLE SALSA**

When the Palladium closed in 1966, the Latino neighborhoods of Spanish Harlem and the South Bronx once again became the center of New York's Latin music and dance scene. In the 1970s and 1980s, few white New Yorkers learned Latin dance in community settings, and ballroom dance studios once again became the primary means of disseminating Latin dance to Anglo-America. It was not until the salsa dance boom of the late 1990s that considerable numbers of Latino cultural dancers once again began to share dance floors with non-Latino dancers. Salsa music, a modernized streetwise take on Cuban mambo developed predominantly by Puerto Rican musicians living in New York, boomed in the 1970s when urban Latin Americans worldwide claimed it as the voice of disenfranchised people. Not until the 1990s, however, did the music and associated dance begin to make major inroads into mainstream American culture. The popularity of a less aggressive style of salsa music called *salsa romantica* in the 1990s combined with a growing interest in partner dancing and a new fashion for all things Latin in mainstream American culture led many Anglo-Americans to take an interest in salsa. The new salsa converts who had not grown up in families where children learned to dance in the home sought to learn salsa dancing in formal dance classes, a foreign concept to most Latinos. Despite their initial incredulity that people would pay for salsa dance lessons, many Latinos recognized the business potential in Anglo fascination with Latin dance, and salsa dance classes began springing up in cities worldwide. This increased demand for Latin dance by non-Latin consumers combined with the simultaneous emergence of the World Wide Web as a new platform through which business could be negotiated enabled development of a new Latin dance industry that, in contrast to the white ballroom dance industry, was predominantly controlled by Latinos.

Although momentum was building throughout the 1990s, the summer of 1997 can be considered the birth of the modern salsa dance industry when hundreds of salsa dancers from around the world convened in San Juan, Puerto Rico, to share (and sell) their own regional interpretations of salsa at the first World Salsa Congress. The success of this event, which featured dozens of vendors selling salsa music, shoes, and clothing in addition to the classes, performances, and social dancing that constituted the convention's central products, illustrated the international commercial potential of salsa dance. Within a few years, an international network of businesses centered around salsa dance had emerged.
Salsa congresses, which by 2005 were held in nearly 100 cities around the world, were its crowning jewel. Congress organizers and dancers hired to teach and perform at congresses became the most well-respected and influential leaders in the new industry, defining and setting the trends and styles that trickled down to salsa studios worldwide. Although some people refer to this commercialized salsa as studio or academy salsa, I refer to it as "congress style" salsa. I use the term congress style salsa to refer not only to dancing at salsa congresses but more generally to the style of salsa that evolved out of, and continues to be disseminated by, salsa congresses and salsa dancers hooked into the international salsa industry.

Congress style salsa evolved in the early years of salsa congresses through the hybridization of several regionally distinct salsa dance styles. Pretzel-like arm wraps developed in Miami, hip-hop-inflected footwork and body isolations of the New York dancers, and eye-catching drama and speed of the Los Angeles dips and turns melted into a new international conglomeration. When YouTube was launched in 2005, enabling salseros to share videos of their latest steps with dancers on seven continents with the click of a mouse, hybridization only intensified. Although congress style salsa consists of several substyles (including the on one and on two rhythms), congress style salsa can be distinguished from Palladium mambo and earlier salsa styles by several factors. Most readily identifiable is the ever-increasing speed and complexity of partnered turn patterns that, although based on the basic hustle turns that salsa dancers began borrowing in the 1970s, have been turbocharged for the new competitive market. In addition, congress style is characterized by compact, slotted (straight line) dancing, as opposed to more circular and free-form spatial

FIGURE 21.3 Social salsa dancing at the 2007 New York Salsa Congress. Photo by Juliet McMains.
floor patterns. The style also requires a nuanced physical connection that enables its dizzying array of turns to be led between strangers through continuously weaving octopus-like arm positions. Long sequences of partnered turn patterns are punctuated by shorter periods of solo "shines"—improvisational footwork and body isolations that interpret the music's layered syncopations. I do not mean to imply that congress style salsa is better or worse than Palladium mambo or any of the regional salsa styles from which it drew its inspiration. Each has its seductions and shortfalls. I do, however, wish to call attention to how technically demanding the new style is for basic proficiency.

Whereas salsa dancing throughout Latin America in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s was part of a cultural tradition learned from family and friends in informal settings, salsa dance as practiced and promoted by the new salsa industry became so technically complex that it proved difficult to learn without formal instruction. Thus, the burgeoning salsa dance industry produced a split between regional salsa dancers, who learned to dance informally, and practitioners of the new congress style, who engaged in formal training. Although these two communities—one that produced Latin dance as culture and one that consumed Latin dance as commodity—had coexisted even during the Mambo era of the 1950s, the salsa dance boom intensified interaction between the two groups. Whereas prior to the 1990s, membership in each of the two communities was primarily linked to one's relationship to Latin culture—Latinos and Latin Americans participating in Latin dance as culture and non-Latinos consuming Latin dance as commodity—the new salsa dance industry challenged this simplistic distinction. Although salsa classes and congresses are attended by many Anglos, Asians, and non-Hispanic blacks, Latino consumers often outnumber non-Latino consumers at events in the contemporary salsa dance industry. The new demographics of Latin dance commodity consumption challenge easy dismissal of commercialized Latin dance as inauthentic.

Despite a noticeable shift away from individual variation toward standardization, improvisational social dancing still figures prominently in the salsa industry, connecting salsa much more strongly with traditions of dance in Latin America than with Anglo-American iterations of Latin dance. Furthermore, the dominance of Latinos in positions of power in the new salsa dance industry helped to keep salsa rooted in Latin culture even when it borrowed teaching techniques and business models from the ballroom dance industry. Although many practitioners of congress salsa are Latinos in their 20s and 30s, modern salsa has been embraced by an even more diverse racial and ethnic mix than Palladium mambo, attracting Asians, blacks, and Anglos from almost every national background. Thus, similar to the Palladium, congress style salsa has become a means through which Latinos can strengthen their own ethnic identity at the same time it becomes a space in which ethnic stereotypes are challenged and broken through cross-cultural exchange.

Modern congress style salsa often functions differently for its Latino practitioners than did Latin dancing at the Palladium, where recent immigrants were able to navigate their new American environment through participation in a familiar Latin American cultural practice. In contrast, Latin dancing for many contemporary Latino salsa participants has become a means through which they reconnect to a distant Latin culture that has been weakened through assimilation. Many salsa dancers in the United States are
second-generation Latinos who grew up speaking English and listening to American music. Involvement in salsa dance, which brings them into extended contact not only with lyric and sonic references to their cultural legacy, but also with many other Latinos, becomes a way for second-generation immigrants to affirm both their specific national pride and a more general pan-Latino identity. Salsa musician and ethnomusicologist Christopher Washburne has argued that the hybrid makeup of salsa music itself enables salsa to function simultaneously as a marker of national identity and pan-Latino identity (Washburne 2008, 68). I agree that it is not only the multiple cultural streams upon which salsa music is based, but also the interactions of people from such diverse backgrounds that enable salsa music and dance to function as a means of affirming connection to both a national identity and a broader pan-Latino community. For example, Dominican-American salseras and co-founder of the first Los Angeles salsa dance company Joby “Brava” Aranda recalled,

In high school and college, I lived in Orange County, which was predominantly Caucasian and Asian. Coming from New York, which I was mostly around Hispanics, I kind of lost my ethnicity for a bit. I was listening to KROQ [alternative rock radio station], hang out with surfers and did the American thing. I adapted more to the American culture. Once I got into the salsa scene and into Latin music, it put me back in touch with my roots, especially since the majority of the dancers were Hispanic. Even though salsa is not Dominican, but definitely it’s Caribbean. You hear the music all over in Dominican Republic. So it’s definitely part of my culture.

Aranda’s reference to both a general Latin culture and her own national heritage in response to my question about how salsa relates to her sense of ethnic identity was typical of Latino dancers I interviewed. Despite the fact that very few Dominicans are active in the Los Angeles salsa scene, Aranda was able to strengthen her sense of Dominicaness through participation in a predominantly Mexican Latino community. Her experience is consistent with theories of Latino ethnic identity formation that postulate Latino ethnic identity formation always requires negotiating the relationship between a national identity and a more generalized pan-ethnic identity (Flores 2000). Congress style salsa incorporates elements from American culture (such as turns from hustle and body isolations from hip-hop) into Latin cultural traditions that extend back many generations, enabling some practitioners to reconcile aspects of their identity that they may otherwise experience in conflict—modern vs. traditional, American vs. Latin. Similar to the way that Palladium era mambo, which combined dance steps and techniques from Cuba, Puerto Rico, and America, enabled recent Caribbean immigrants to negotiate their new social identity in America, modern congress style offers Latinos from a variety of backgrounds a way to negotiate hybrid identities.

Joby Aranda’s story of strengthening her ethnic identity through salsa was echoed by many second-generation Latino salseras. When I asked New Jersey–born Yesenia Peralta if she felt a different sense of connection to her cultural heritage when she got into dancing salsa, she exclaimed,
Absolutely, definitely. Without a doubt. No, absolutely. Because we were more like New Yoricans. It was cool to be playing dominos in front and eating, drinking coquitos for New Years. And eating pernil and arroz con gandules and all that stuff. I thought that that was being Puerto Rican. Or Puerto Rican and Dominican, you know because I'm both. But it's so much more than that.

Like many American-raised Latinos, even in places such as Jersey City where nearly one third of the city's residents identify as Hispanic or Latino, Peralta preferred American music to salsa, which she dismissed as music of her parent's generation.

YESENIA PERALTA: My mom used to blast it [salsa]. And we would be mad. And we would lock ourselves in our rooms because we didn't want to hear it. We were like, very—we were very into hip hop and like break dancing. And R&B and free style, but not salsa. I didn't get really interested in salsa till I was about twenty.

JULIET MCMAINS: Why do you think it took so long for you to get interested?

YP: I guess we weren't too interested in our culture, maybe? Like we were proud to be Hispanics and Puerto Ricans and my father's Dominican, but we were very Americanized. So we listened to what teenagers listen to.

JM: So even for the kids who were Puerto Rican, it was not cool, salsa, to your peers?

YP: Well, not while we were growing up. No one was listening to salsa at all. No, definitely not.

Not until she was offered opportunities to dance on stage did Peralta's attitude toward Latin music and her own cultural awareness begin to shift. Within three months of her first salsa class in 1997, Peralta was traveling around the United States to compete and perform. The validation she received on stage opened the door to a growing investment in Latin music and dance so fervent that, ten years later, Yesenia Peralta opened her own studio, where she is teaching Latin dancing to a new generation of Latino youth. Ironically, if it had not been for the growing interest in salsa from outside Latino communities that propelled growth of a salsa dance industry and its attendant performing opportunities, Peralta would likely not have developed much interest in salsa. Thus, it is partially salsa's popularity and validation by non-Latinos that enables Latinos to experience a strengthened connection to their own culture.

Not only do the demographics of congress style salsa dance encourage Latinos from different national backgrounds to develop and strengthen their Latino identity, but also the diversity of salsa practitioners helps to safeguard against reification of racial and ethnic stereotypes. Whereas throughout the twentieth century, most Anglo-Americans participated in Latin dance in segregated communities where they had little contact with Latin Americans, most contemporary salsa dancers active in the international salsa scene dance in racially, ethnically, and nationally integrated communities. Extended social interaction on the dance floor, which often leads to friendships and even marriage off the dance floor, encourages salsa dancers of all races to benefit. For example, Irina, a middle-aged Anglo-salsera of five years, believes that her interactions with the large Puerto Rican population in her city's salsa scene has engendered positive changes in her
own life. She reflects, “I’m more open to creativity. I’m more open to changes. I’m more open to people’s deficits. I’m more tolerant. And it affected work too. I’m more tolerant. If people make mistakes, I’m very patient.” She credits these changes to interactions she has had with Latinos through salsa dancing. She further explains that she has learned this more open interpersonal style from extended cross-cultural exchange with Latinos. “It’s also their personalities—usually they are open and friendly. And I think that affected me too because I am friendly, but I wasn’t that open naturally because I am from the North culture.” Although Irina’s statement that Latinos are usually open and friendly may appear to be based in ethnic stereotype, this example points to an important distinction between prejudice-driven stereotypes and observations of cultural difference based on protracted interaction. Her generalizations about people from Southern vs. Northern cultures do not reinforce cultural hierarchies; nor are they applied inflexibly as evidenced by her own ability to adapt her Northern cultural values.

It is not only white salsa dancers whose racial assumptions are altered through participation in salsa. Steve, a black salsero in his 30s, explained how dancing with older white women challenged his own assumptions about race. He recalled, “in my experience in the past outside of salsa, women that—or people that look like that [older, white]—normally think bad things about people who look like me [black]. So I keep my distance.” He went on to explain how his experience dancing with people of different ages, races, ethnicities, and nationalities has made him realize that not all older white people judge him based on his race.

I think the people that get really into the salsa scene, not just go to the clubs and do a few moves, are really open-minded people. That’s what I have found. And these older women, they just want to dance and have fun. They don’t care if I’m green. They don’t care if I’m purple. All they want is fun.

It is impossible to determine whether it was their experience in salsa that made the white women Steve has met less likely to judge him based on his race or if people who become deeply committed to salsa dance are by nature open-minded. Without the close proximity of dancers from different backgrounds now typical in the salsa industry, however, I do not believe merely dancing salsa would have shifted their racial assumptions. In fact, the experiences of one Hong Kong-born New York salsera help to illustrate this point.

When Winsome Lee began dancing salsa in New York in 1993, she was frequently the only Asian in New York clubs. She recalls that early on, her race made her an object of curiosity in the salsa scene.

winsome lee: Asians were a huge minority way back when. And so when I went to the club, I used to have to drag friends to go with me, otherwise I would get—harassed is not the right word, but it was too much curiosity. It was very inconvenient.

juliet mcmains: So did people dance with you?
wl: People wanted to show me how, let’s put it this way. Some people really wanted to show me, some people used that as an excuse. So it was just not always a pleasant experience. Meanwhile I just wanted to dance.
As more Asians began to enter the salsa scene over the next several years, salseros in New York began to treat Lee the same way they would any other accomplished salsa dancer, including hiring her to teach and perform. When she traveled abroad to locales that were not as ethnically diverse as New York City, however, reactions to Lee's dancing were still very much linked to her race. She recalls,

When I was in Argentina I was very well received because they found me “exotic” . . . I went to the first Japan Salsa Congress and that was in year 2000. Now granted the history of China and Japan, you would think the countries don't get along; however they were more than gracious to me, and they—I had a tour actually around the country. I went to four cities and had the best experience there. . . . I think they took pride in that, that you know that there is a fellow Asian, that you know she came from the States and she kind of made her name in the States.

Although Lee was well received in Argentina and Japan, reactions were still tied to perceptions about her race and the novelty of seeing a highly accomplished Asian salsera. Racial profiling did not always work in her favor, however, as evidenced in Lee's experience with event organizers in a neighboring Asian country, we'll call it A. . . . Lee explained,

I brought my partner with me to Hong Kong. He goes, “right after Hong Kong, do you want to go to A—with me to do this gig? Because they asked me to bring an established female instructor from New York who can perform and teach.” And he goes, “and you’re perfect for that gig.” And I never got the airline ticket. Two weeks before the congress I still hadn't received anything. So finally he had to call them up and say, “what is the deal?” And he was told that Winsome can't come. He goes, “why?” “Because she's Chinese.” I couldn't believe they were that straight forward about it. They weren't even beating around the bush, “because she's Chinese.” And my partner said, “well she is not a Chinese dancer, she’s a New York dancer. She wasn't raised there, so she's not involved with your politics. Is it political?” “No her heritage is Chinese and we prefer that she does not come.”

Despite Lee's reputation as an accomplished teacher and performer, the event organizers were unwilling to hire an Asian dancer as their international guest from New York, the cradle of salsa. For the hallowed birthplace of salsa to be represented through another Asian body would have disturbed their image of Latin dancers as exotic racial others. Although this story may be an isolated incident that is not representative of this Asian country's attitudes in general, it suggests that the popularity of Latin dance in Asia may be dependent upon similar racial and ethnic stereotypes that have long characterized American fascination with Latin dance. Coming from a racially homogenous society, however, few Asian salsa dancers have the opportunity to interact with Latinos in racially integrated salsa clubs where these stereotypes can be challenged. Thus, the fact that an Asian-born, New York-trained salsera can make a successful career in the United States but face prejudice when traveling abroad to less heterogeneous countries further supports my proposition that integrated dancing helps combat stereotypes invoked by non-Latino excursions into Latin dance.
Not all effects of salsa's cross-cultural popularity are positive, as noted by dance scholar Cindy García. Writing specifically about Los Angeles, García argues that Latina club-goers abide by a different code of behavior than do the Anglo women, who dress and dance more provocatively, walk around the club alone, invite men to dance, and engage in more promiscuous sexual behavior than the Latina women. García explains, The implication is that Anglo women use “our guys” for night-time pleasures (i.e., sex and dancing with your nalgas hanging out), rarely incorporate them into their daily lives, and leave Latinos dissatisfied with the Latinas of daily life who do not accommodate the exaggerated gender roles of the pan-Latino/pan-Latina club dynamic (Garcia 2008, 208). García calls attention to a vexing effect of integrated salsa dancing in some locales. Anglo women are able to indulge in behavior that would be considered inappropriate for Latina women, who cannot risk damaging their reputation in their own communities (as opposed to Anglos, whose position as cultural tourists in the community offers them some protection in its distance from their daily lives). I have no doubt that García’s conclusions accurately represent the double standards in the club she describes, one that is well known throughout Los Angeles as a “meat market.” Because serious dancing is often secondary to sexual seduction in this venue, female patrons are less likely to develop the deep bonds of friendship built around mutual respect that they might at venues attracting dancers who take dance classes together or practice as part of a performance team.

Thus, although García raises an important concern, the differences she identifies between Anglo and Latina salseras are not common to all contemporary salsa spaces, especially those of the salsa congress circuit, where the majority of attendees, although ethnically diverse, work in similar middle-class careers. Although not explicitly stated by García, the effects she observed were as dependent on differences of class as on ethnicity. The appropriation of salsa, which began as a musical expression of working-class urban Latinos in the 1970s, by middle-class Latinos in the 1990s is a troubling effect of the salsa dance industry. Although it has alienated many working-class Latinos, it has also brought many middle-class Latinos and non-Latinos into extended contact. In contrast to the club scene described by García, salsa socials have become the main venues for much congress style salsa dancing. Dancing takes priority over drinking and courtship at salsa socials, where interracial and interethnic friendships flourish. For many non-Latinos, salsa becomes the impetus for more extended education and investment in Latin cultures. Many hard-core non-Latino salsa dancers study Spanish, enjoy Latin American cuisine, and travel to Latin America. Admittedly, not all practitioners of congress style salsa engage in deep cross-cultural exploration, but such exchange would be far less likely if Latinos and non-Latinos were dancing in segregated spaces as they did throughout much of the twentieth century.

Steps toward Integration

I am not the first person to suggest that the best medicine to fight prejudice and stereotyping is racial integration. In fact, America’s greatest civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., championed this very principle. Beyond fighting to dismantle segregation,
Dr. King strove to achieve integration, "genuine intergroup, interpersonal doing," as "the ultimate goal of our national community" (King, 1986, 118). Although recent anti-immigration legislation and political discourse directed specifically at Latinos highlights how very far America is from realizing Dr. King's dream, integration on the dance floor may lead us one step closer. Whereas practice of Latin dance by non-Latinos in segregated communities has throughout much of the twentieth century reinforced harmful stereotypes of Latinos, if non-Latinos engage in Latin dance in integrated communities in which extended deep interethnic interactions are fostered, these stereotypes are more likely to be challenged. The two cases I have discussed—the New York Palladium and international congress style salsa dancing—offer evidence that when Latin dance is practiced in racially and ethnically integrated communities, harmful stereotypes of Latinos that are invoked by its practice in segregated communities can be exposed and reconsidered. Furthermore, the inclusion of non-Latin people in Latin dance communities does not prevent Latin dance from becoming a means through which Latinos can develop a positive ethnic identity. In fact, the presence of non-Latinos may strengthen and validate this identity, particularly when they are living in the United States, where their own national, ethnic, and racial identity must be formed in relationship to the dominant national, ethnic, and racial discourses.

I recognize that neither the Palladium nor the international salsa congress circuit is a utopic community free from racial or ethnic prejudice. Of course both suffer from the presence of narrow-minded views and structural inequalities. For example, lighter-skinned Palladium dancers generally had an easier time getting booked to perform at national venues than did darker-skinned dancers. Although many male salsa dancers of African descent have become major stars of the salsa congress circuit, very few women of African descent are performing or teaching at salsa congresses. Even taking into consideration such valid criticisms of the imperfect ways in which salsa and mambo foster cross-cultural community, I believe that these two examples offer alternative models to the mainstream American appropriation of Latin dances that throughout the twentieth century contributed to oppression of Latinos. However, we must remain vigilant to guard against the co-option of Latin dance's emancipatory potential by commercial pressures. We should call out teachers of Latin dance, Latino and non-Latino alike, when they reinforce static one-dimensional stereotypes of Latinos in the language and images they employ. We can counter these representations through continued research and education into the depth and complexity of Latin dance history. We must continue to increase spaces for integrated dance practice, questioning, for example, the effects of salsa clubs in white neighborhoods where few Latinos feel welcome. As the multitude of Latin American dance traditions I have not discussed in this chapter (e.g., Mexican son jarocho, Peruvian festejo, Brazilian forró, Puerto Rican bomba) begin to gain more visibility and commercial value in American society, we should remember the lessons of twentieth-century Latin dance appropriation. Adapting these dances to make them easier and more accessible for Americans will, in the words of John Martin, not only render "the whole process valueless but makes some very dull dances besides" (Martin 1944, 23). Instead, I hope that the custodians of these dances will share their cultural treasures in dialogue with Americans, who by honoring them with discipline, respect, and a genuine interest in exploring Latin dance beyond its hot exterior, will appreciate the multitude of atmospheric and emotional states invoked by their practice.
Notes


5. Katherine Borland comes to this same conclusion when writing about her fieldwork in the New Jersey salsa scene. “As many of the salseros I interviewed explained, second-generation Latinos turned to dance as a means of reconnecting with their cultural heritage” (“Embracing Difference,” 469).
INTERVIEWS CITED


BIBLIOGRAPHY


