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Dance Major Journal

Title

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Permalink

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Journal

Dance Major Journal, 11(1)

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Publication Date

2023

DOI

10.5070/D511162286

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You can't standardize salsa dance, so that one (sexy) size fits all

What happens when a lively and adaptable dance form that embodies Latinidad for countless communities becomes a DanceSport?

by Gabriela Brito

As a Latina born in New York to two immigrants from the Dominican Republic, I have practiced salsa and other Latin styles for many years. I learned these styles by watching my family at gatherings, who pushed me onto the dance floor with my for-life dance partner, my brother. Practicing salsa enabled my parents to hold onto important cultural traditions after immigrating to the United States and pass those on to their children. Some of my earliest memories are of my family coming together Saturday nights in our small apartment in Washington Heights to sing and dance together. The aroma of a home cooked Dominican meal, the specific malty taste of Malta Goya, the vibrations of sound emitting from the speaker, and the echoes of laughter from my cousins and I painted a picture for many of my Saturday nights. Most importantly, I remember watching all the generations of my family gliding across our living room as they moved effortlessly to classic songs by groups like El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico. I remember the distinct feeling of joy that came with dancing with my brother as I teased him for having two left feet but ultimately, would still choose to dance with him.

In my childhood, the word identity did not mean much to me because I did not realize the importance of the traditions that I was participating in, to me it was just what we did on Saturday nights. However, when I moved to a suburban neighborhood in Ohio and grew into adolescence, I found myself struggling, internally questioning who I was truly. As a first-generation child of an immigrant, I often struggle to identify as American and Latina because for some I am not Latina enough and for others I am not American enough. However, participating in social dances such as salsa not only makes me feel closer to my identity but also creates a sense of pride in being Latina. Dance in this way served a greater purpose than just entertainment, it was my way of accepting and celebrating my culture amidst predominantly white people and institutions.

Salsa dancing dates back to the early 20th century and continues to be practiced by diverse groups of people globally today. But its development over time has led to a stereotype of "hot Latin dance," meaning that it's categorized, along with other Latine styles, as exotic, hypersexualized, and fiery, manifested through exaggerated hip roles for example. The prevalence of this harmful stereotype in media, such as reality television shows like *So You Think You Can Dance*, has diluted salsa's meaning. Salsa has a rich history and many influences that enable continuing innovations. Furthermore, the idea of salsa as monolithic ignores the localization and globalization of salsa over time, as well as enforces the idea that Latinidad looks the same for all people. Latinidad is defined as the pride one feels when connecting to one's Latine identity and is essential for people who are Latine. Harmful stereotypes of hypersexualized salsa dancing

reinforce a belief of homogeneity across pan-Latine countries, discounts the indivisible relationship between Latinidad and dance, and ignores the depth and breadth of salsa's history.

The history and influences that created what we know as salsa dance today stem from many sources to create a heterogeneous mixture of dance. Generally, salsa dance is a social dance originating from Puerto Rican and Cuban dance influences. Salsa dance also pulls from Africanist aesthetics including polycentrism and polyrhythm. Polycentrism refers to movement from multiple centers of the body and polyrhythm is defined as the use of different rhythmic structures in various parts of the body. Polyrhythm in salsa dance mimics the polyrhythmic nature of salsa music including the *tumbao* two open tones and a slap on a conga drum (sounds like gu-gung-pá), the *clave*, a pattern played on two wooden sticks to accompany the *tumbao*, and other components (Renta 148) to build a multilayered sound. Prior to the creation of salsa, the Cuban dances "orisha/santo dances, rumba, son, and mambo/cha-cha-chá," as well as the Puerto Rican dances "bomba and plena" (Renta 145), built the foundations for what we know as salsa dance today. Later, *contradanza* emerged in both Puerto Rico and Cuba which manifested into the *danza* and the *danzón* respectively, laying down more groundwork for salsa dance.

Africanist aesthetics, Cuban dances, and Puerto Rican dances worked together to establish essential components of salsa dance, such as the importance of improvisation and dance as a community unifier even before the existence of salsa. Improvisation in salsa dance likely started when *danza* and *danzón* emerged in Puerto Rico and Cuba. These two dances place high value on individual style and improvisation, influences from Africanist dance traditions (Renta 145). Later, the influence of swing dance further emphasized improvisation on modern day salsa. The foundational dances of salsa dance also became a community unifier by serving as a statement of resistance. For example, Bomba was one of many Afro-Latine forms that were banned amidst periods of rebellion against colonizers' oppression of Afro-Latine people (Renta 141). In this way, dances like Bomba became a way of fighting back against oppression, thus unifying communities. This theme later carries into salsa dance as well.

As these forms migrated to the Dominican Republic, the United States, and Columbia, further shifts in the dance traditions occurred as a result of changing music, thus ushering in the codification of salsa dance. One notable example was the 1950s mambo craze in New York, which developed salsa techniques from the Palladium ballroom and nightclub, the Palladium technique and On-2 (Renta 148-149). With codified technique came the distinction between social dancers and studio dancers, in which you participate in salsa dance for enjoyment or for concert performance and competition. It is also important to note that salsa is a global dance form, meaning that salsa looks different across the places it spread, resulting in localized ways of dancing salsa (Hutchinson 3). The localized nature of salsa dance is a consequence of community effort in which techniques and traditions from the past are built upon and expanded into new creations. This reinforces that salsa is not monolithic and that it has as much depth and breadth as other aspects of culture.

Salsa is an important aspect in Latine cultures, especially when establishing Latinidad, a sense of Latine identity tied to local pride (Hutchinson 12). Salsa is uniquely pan-Latine because the form

is so widely practiced in Latin American countries, and just as accents differ in the Spanish language, the manifestation of salsa dance is different across countries. The tradition of learning social or street style salsa dancing from friends, relatives, or other peers creates a sense of community building and bonding. The living room was my dance studio, my parents, cousins, aunts, and uncles my instructors. I remember my brother and I pairing up and trying to mimic the steps of my family around me, thinking intensely about which foot went forward while my brother went back. A family member would promptly intervene when we would inevitably step on each other's feet while taking the wrong steps. Even so, getting the steps correct was not most important, it was the experience of sharing these moments together and a tangible manifestation of support from the community built around me.

I also noticed this phenomenon in the movie musical *In the Heights*, in the song titled "Carnaval del Barrio." The scene features a large group of Latine dancers smoothly performing complex footwork and simultaneously swinging their arms naturally from side to side. Although the scene is staged, the dancers create a sense of improvisation and enjoyment in a New York alley, while proudly stating their Latinidad by breaking fluidly at the hips and spine or maintaining a more upright position, showing the breadth of nuances in salsa (Miranda, *In The Heights*). The panLatine feel in this scene instilled the same feeling of togetherness I felt growing up with dance at family gatherings; it showed the inseparable nature of salsa dancing to Latinidad, proudly stating the dignity of maintaining connections to Latine culture despite growing up hundreds of miles away from Dominican Republic.

A prime example of Latinidad in salsa is the relationship of salsa dancing and Nuyoricán pride. Nuyoricán is an identity that describes someone of Puerto Rican descent or birth who lives or has lived in New York. Salsa serves as a form of resistance and release for Nuyoricans who felt growing tensions between their life in the U.S. and their Latine identity (Hutchinson 6). By turning to dance as a form of expression, they felt they could maintain their connection to their Puerto Rican descent while allowing the integration of their New York identity. Although this example is specific to people of Puerto Rican descent, the tension between cultures is a common internal struggle for Latine immigrants in the United States or people of Latine descent who were born in the United States. The pressure to assimilate to American culture, exposure to new traditions, trying to provide for a family, and in some cases not being able to communicate due to language barriers, are just a few of the stressors that can come with being Latine in the U.S.

For me, it was translating bills for family members or dealing with the looks people would give me at school as I ate plantains in the cafeteria. Oh, and of course the oh-so familiar question of "where are you really from?" that would come up after I had answered, "New York." These scenarios, as well as countless others, demonstrate the importance of Latinidad. In my case, dancing was one way I could proudly express my identity as a Dominican woman. In this way, salsa goes beyond just dance or music, it is resistance in response to the adversities put in front of us. Put more generally, salsa dance can serve as a tool to strengthen Latinidad globally, regardless of where someone is currently residing.

Although the globalization of salsa has enabled many positive outcomes such as nourishing Latinidad and building a sense of community, I remain concerned about the hyper-sexualization and exoticization of salsa dance. The stereotype of “exotic Latin heat” emerged after the introduction of salsa in Western cultures, resulting in the appropriation of salsa dance and the belief that all salsa is supposed to be fiery and passionate. This is demonstrated in many popular television shows such as *So You Think You Can Dance*, where the choreography aligns with the prevalent exotic and hypersexualized salsa dance we see in the media and dance scene.

Carmela Dormani notes that the show promotes this one idea of salsa dance by praising contestants for their ability to perform “authentic salsa” (Dormani 721). In many of these performances, the dance is accompanied by brightly colored stages, costumes with over-the-top ruffles or sparkles, and sometimes brownface (tinted makeup, a tradition common in ballroom dance competitions). As a result, salsa dance that fits the “hot Latin dance” stereotype receives more attention, and those who don’t exaggerate sensual components are belittled. In addition, the exoticization and codification of salsa dance creates a space that excludes many Latine people or others who practice salsa by outside of DanceSport, the name for competitive ballroom dance built on Eurocentric interpretations of various styles of social dance. This creates divisions, and the DanceSport salsa version is considered “authentic” and valuable, while localized participants in salsa dance are referred to as “the salsa scene” (Dormani 722) and devalued. This hierarchy ranks salsa dance that was learned through traditions and family as inferior compared to the stylized form of salsa developed for ballroom dancing.

Millions of people, including me, dance salsa worldwide, many of whom have passed down traditions of salsa dance to multiple generations of their family. Without its melting pot of influences, DanceSport would not have salsa in the first place, so the roots of salsa dance cannot be ripped away. For me, dancing salsa is never just a performance; it plays an important role in how I connect with friends or family and how I stay in touch with my Dominican heritage. Removing this context in DanceSport, not only belittles this fundamental principle but also sets the incorrect precedent for what people think Latine dance should be. The salsa dance I learned is different from salsa dance practiced in Colombia or Cuba, but the codification of salsa ignores the nuances in different salsa techniques and instead categorizes some as correct or incorrect. Acknowledging that the DanceSport version of salsa dance is not the common denominator of salsa around the world is vital in the fight of valuing non-Eurocentric dance forms as equally valuable to their counterparts.

The continued encouragement of the “hot Latin dance” troupe or “exotic Latin heat” in salsa dance is problematic and has widespread effects. This stereotype fortifies the idea that salsa can only fit into one category, that is sexy, fiery, and in alignment with Eurocentric principles of salsa dance. Additionally, it reinforces the belief that all Latine countries are homogenous, discounting the localized forms of salsa and the history of salsa dance. Finally, it voids salsa dance of its relationship to salsa music because techniques such as the Palladium technique or On-2 that are made to marry the two become watered down and forgotten, while salsa dance originating from DanceSport is uplifted. Moving forward, we must recognize that salsa dance without Eurocentric principles is meaningful in expressing Latinidad, and salsa dance is not

exclusively hot or sexy. I envision a future in which we celebrate all localized forms of salsa dance and continue to pass down Latine dance forms for generations to come—to reach a point where instead of having to consistently resist Eurocentric principles, we are accepted and valued in our communities and beyond.



Gabriela Brito is a junior at The Ohio State University double majoring in Dance and Psychology. As a first-generation Latina, her aim is to instill equity and diversity in dance, while creating a nurturing environment. She participates in the Latine Student Association and served as a Research Assistant in the Expanding Immigrant Healthcare Lab, investigating what contributes to the lack of healthcare in the immigrant community. She has also been a recipient of the Harold E. Collins Scholarship since 2021.

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