

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Salsa's Moves and Salsa's Grooves in Mexico City

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requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in

Latin American Studies (Cultural Studies)

by

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2009

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to:

My family for being supportive, even when referring to salsa as a “phase,”

My friends who listen to me talk about this project and other life challenges,

My fellow salseros who wonder how I was able to call dancing research,

My past, present, and future dance instructors, and

My academic mentors.

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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Emerging from the Latin/o American barrios of New York City in the 1960s, salsa music was a response of growing Latin American diaspora communities. Though the recognized “backbone” of salsa is the Cuban son, it been influenced by other Latino(o) American groups and U.S. jazz artists. Popular memory attests to salsa music’s arrival in Mexico City during the late 1970s, integrated into the sonicscape by means of deejays working in peripheral barrios. Like the music, salsa dancing has its roots in the movements of the Cuban son, but has since evolved into a variety of basic styles such as the On-2/New York style, On-1/Los Angeles style. In 1997, Carlos Carmona, Mexico’s salsa dancing pioneer, brought the On-1/LA style to Mexico City via video recordings. My research examines the way salsa has been integrated into Mexico City’s cultural repertoire via memories, oral histories, and the corporeal expressions of its participants.

Living in Mexico City during the summer of 2008, I relied on the participant-observer approach to ethnographic study. To conduct my research, I attended various

venues where formal salsa dancing occurs such as dance clubs, instructional classes, and professional performances. Within those spheres, I participated as a dancer and an academic. Approaching dancers, musicians, and deejays for interviews, I was interested in their understanding of salsa's historical development and arrival to Mexico City. Utilizing this information, and my own observations of the musical repertoire and movement vocabularies, the act of participation and the presence of the body have become central to my work.

Introductions:

Searching for Carlos Carmona

I first heard the name Carlos Carmona when I was learning to salsa dance in Oaxaca, Mexico in the fall of 2005. While living in Oaxaca, I integrated myself into the salsa dancing community by taking classes and social dancing regularly. As I tried to master the basic elements of salsa, I became interested how many of the established dancers began their salsa careers. Although I did not take classes with Roy Reyes, one of the directors of Tumbao Dance Company, I met him at one of Oaxaca's salsa clubs, where he gave the free dance class every Thursday night. After several months of social outings and conversations with Roy, he informed me that when he first started dancing, Carlos Carmona was one of his instructors. It was not until the spring of 2006 that I saw Carmona perform during a night of salsa dance exhibitions in Mexico City that I attended with Roy. Carmona and his young partner, looking no older than ten years old, dressed in all black from head to toe, moved through a choreographed routine of complex solo footwork patterns and spins. As the duo exited the stage, Roy told me that many of Mexico's dancers considered Carmona to be the person to have "brought" salsa dancing to Mexico. Roy continued to list off several other well known dancers and company directors from around Mexico who had trained with Carmona. Nearly all of Mexico City's current salsa dance company directors have passed through Carmona's tutelage and dance team, Salsabor, at one time or another. Directors such as Gerardo Ramírez, director of Salsa Caliente Dance Company, Gabriel Chavez of SalsaRika, Victor Burgos

and Gaby Bernal of Salsa con Clave, Carlos Tierrablanca of Azul y Oro, and Miguelito Castillo of Our Dance Mambo On2 Project emerged from Salsabor to organize their own classes, performance teams, and events around the republic. At the time I did not recognize many of these names but the message was clear: Carmona was a fundamental figure in the Mexico salsa scene

Having maintained personal and intellectual relationships with salsa music, dancing, and its dancers, I returned to Mexico City in the summer of 2008 to find Carlos Carmona. In my first attempt, I arrived at the Salon Social Romo anticipating the Friday night salsa class taught by Carmona and after an hour of waiting and several shoulder shrugs, puzzled faces, and “let me ask the gentleman who handles that,” I found out that Carmona’s Friday night class had been cancelled months earlier. I was, however, introduced to a different Carlos, Tierrablanca, the director of Azul y Oro and former Carmona alum. I hoped for better luck in my Carmona search when I returned to the Romo a second time to take a class from the internationally recognized Salsa con Clave Dance Company. The directors, Victor Burgos and Gaby Bernal are perhaps Carmona’s most well known former students and because of their personal relationship to Carmona, I expected they would be able to help me. Unfortunately, no one ever arrived to teach class and I was no closer to finding my Carlos.

I had gone to the Romo on the advice of what was an outdated website offering information about salsa classes and instructors in Mexico City. After two failed attempts and a returned email from Carmona’s address, I called the number listed on the website. Fortunately, the number was in service and I had Carmona on the other end of the call. I arrived a few minutes before 7:00 pm to a studio that looked more like an apartment

complex than a dance studio located in the Colonia Guerrero. Upon his arrival, Carmona introduced himself and asked how I had heard about his classes. I responded that I was dancing on a team in San Diego and some friends recommend I take classes from him during my stay in Mexico City. Carmona was more interested in which team I was a part of rather than which friends of mine would know him. When I said I belonged to “Majesty in Motion,” an internationally ranked and recognized dance company in San Diego, he focused on asking about Majesty’s directors, the cost of classes, and the way the teams were organized. Excited that someone from Majesty had taken an interest in him, Carmona invited me to train with the two current couples of Salsabor: 17-year-old Jair and his female partner, 17-year old Lorena, and 11 year-old Jair and his female partner, 15 year-old Lilly.

The young couples of Salsabor represent a drastic change from the long list of dancers that once sustained the team’s popularity and recognition. Created under Carmona’s direction in 1997, Salsabor’s original members included Gaby, Victor and Gerardo. At the time, Carmona was himself learning the basics of salsa from videos he acquired from local Sabrosita 590 radio deejay, Andres “El Maestro” Rosales. Collaborating with Rosales, Carmona simultaneously taught and learned salsa alongside videos projected on the walls of the nightclub Rosales owned. The one-time math professor turned traveling software consultant, Rosales’s frequent visits to New York, and Los Angeles allowed him to build a substantial salsa music and video library. The videos of Eddie Torres in New York and Vasquez brothers in LA provided Carmona with the dance foundations he needed to begin developing his own style and choreographies. Yet, Rosales’s musical selection helped to solidify Sabrosita 590’s mission of bringing

salsa to the airwaves of Mexico City. As the burgeoning Salsabor moved through the basic patterns created by Carmona and Rosales provided listeners in Mexico City access to original and varied salsa music programming, the two men were pioneering into uncharted territory. Although there had been dance teams and salsa on the airwaves in Mexico City, Rosales and Carmona's work help the possibility to formally establish salsa music and dance as a part of everyday and everynight life in the capital city.

My interest in finding Carmona was motivated by personal curiosities about how salsa got to Oaxaca and broader intellectual questions about how salsa in Mexico serves as an example of the way cultural productions travel through and supercede borders. When I found Carmona, he showed no interest in me as an individual. He demonstrated no desire to question what brought me to his classes, or why I would be in Mexico for an extended period of time. Furthermore, Carmona rarely spoke to me or acknowledged my presence during my training sessions with Salsabor. This lack of communication may be indicative of salsa's contrived gender relationships, which give the male control over the progression of the social dance and choreography, while the female passively follows the patterns. Carmona's silence may also represent a reluctance to critique me because he hoped I would return to the U.S. with a good impression of him. It is also possible Carmona did not speak readily or openly with me because he distrusted me. However, this last conjecture I consider to be the most inadequate explanation, as he extended the invitations to train and attend events with his team. Although the young members of Salsabor more readily spoke with me about a variety of topics such as Salsabor practices, social dancing, and their personal lives, they too did not exhibit any desire to ask me about myself. During and after training sessions, the four members of the team were more

interested in asking about what life and dancing was like in U.S. and San Diego rather than any personal information about myself.

As I contacted directors of various Mexico City dance teams, Carmona's disinterest in me was a reoccurring theme rather than isolated instance. Despite introducing myself as a Master's student researching salsa, most of the directors displayed little interest in talking with me at greater length. Although the directors were pleased to have me in class and flattered that I was interested in them, most avoided the topic of salsa's history and development in Mexico. Continuing to attend classes and insisting on an interview, or talk informally at the very least, the most common response was a vague "claro, ahorita platicamos" (Sure, we will talk later). Even asking Carmona to tell his story, to explain why he was identified as the man who "brought" salsa to Mexico, was not enough to warrant a scheduled date and time to talk. Carmona averted my request, responding that he had been working on a history of salsa, and pulling out a stack of pages, stated that one day he would like to turn it into a book. Many other directors deflected my requests with responses such as "I know someone who wrote a thesis about this, let me get back to you with his name," or "Why are you so interested in Mexico?" These evasive responses presented me with the problem of being in Mexico conducting research on a topic that no one seemed interested in discussing or thinking about. These directors have devoted, in some cases, over ten years to developing movement vocabularies, teaching classes, and forming performance teams, suggesting that there is something about salsa that they are attracted to, something that interests them enough to continue participating. What is striking about the time, energy, and money the

directors devote to salsa, is that it does not translate into reflecting on what their actions mean.

The deejays and musicians performing live salsa music in dance halls and clubs did not share the reticence of Mexico City's dancing directors. Approaching the deejays and musicians between or after completing sets, most were non-committal about scheduling a meeting with me but were willing to conduct an interview or talk with me informally on the spot. Asking the musicians questions about salsa's musical history, development, and composition yielded a variety of answers ranging from locating Venezuela as the site of origin to the trumpet being the key instrument in the musical arrangement. On the question of which instrument was central to the score's composition, each musician claimed that it was their instrument. Three Sabrosita 590 deejays demonstrated a more accurate knowledge of salsa's historical roots with responses such as New York or Cuba as sites of origin and located the clave as the central figure of the music. However, when posed the question "How did salsa get to Mexico?" very few of the musicians or deejays were able to articulate a response. Some referenced the historical presence of "tropical" music such as danzón or son in Mexico, some offered vague statements about famous groups coming to Mexico, and others avoided the question all together. A problem inherent in my participant-observer methodology is that only men were interviewed, which may account for the varied aforementioned responses. It is possible that the men were more interested in giving me an answer regardless of its factual basis or validity. Unfortunately, no female musicians or deejays were interviewed because there were only all-male bands or deejays present in the dance halls and clubs I visited. The variety of responses also raises the question of whether the musicians and

deejays lack knowledge on the subject of salsa because they do not have access to resources about the genre, or like the dancers, do not have an active interest in salsa's past.

At stake in exploring the disinterest and misinformation demonstrated by key figures in the Mexico City salsa community is the extent to which these attitudes are transmitted to and perpetuated by salsa's past and present students. While the musical misinformation of deejays and musicians is important to my research, my thesis will primarily focus on the ramifications for the dance and its dancers. Accepting Carmona as the central figure in the salsa family tree allows for further consideration of how the lack of critical insight and information has been integrated into the genres travels, adoption, and adaptation throughout Mexico. The lack of historical knowledge or desire to discuss the importance of salsa in Mexico City expresses a gratification not derived from personal research or reflection on salsa's large-scale importance. While salsa in Mexico City has not reached the same level of acceptance and popularity as other Latin American musics such as cumbia, the number of dance academies, students, musicians, and deejays reveal that there is something captivating about salsa. Thus, a major consideration of this investigation will center on evaluating what purpose dancing serves in the lives of its participants. If understanding salsa's musical and dance history and composition are not requirements for participating in this community, questions about cultural preservation become crucial. The lack of critical engagement may indicate that dancers and musicians do not necessarily have a stake in the longevity and preservation of their contributions to salsa music and dance. Without considering the long-term ramifications of their participation, partaking in salsa is perhaps a momentary release from their daily lives.

The lack of intellectual curiosity and reflection presents the possibility that the sensations of moving through dance patterns and musical compositions are primary motivators for people's participation in dance. By allowing the bodily experience to take precedence over other forms of knowledge presents the danger of losing certain ways of expressing and recording histories. Yet, the importance of the corporeal experience allows salsa's performances to serve as mechanisms for exploring what Mexico City's salsa reveals about the society at particular moments.

Focusing on the salsa community in Mexico City allows me to begin my investigation of the "rumored" influence of Carlos Carmona as it relates to a more general examination of the growth and development of the salsa community in this microcosmic example. Carmona serves to illustrate the way in which this history of salsa dancing in Mexico has been recorded by the memories, oral histories, and corporeal expressions of its participants. Conducting this ethnographic study, I relied on formal and informal interviews as well as the participant-observer approach to facilitate my own presence within this community. The use of these investigative tools reveals how salsa's musical and dance history extends beyond the available, written texts into the memories and bodies of Mexico's participants. The implications of oral recitations as a mode of historical transmission engages methodological and academic discourses about the ephemerality of the body's presence as an "alternative" reading of socio-cultural, historical, economic, and political events. The connection between oral history and the body is unavoidable as only living, breathing, accessible, bodies are able to provide their personal accounts of an event. Thus, instances of death, disease, injury, and migration all sever the relationship between the presence of the body and its ability to tell a story.

What is at stake in exploring what the body articulates through and in its movements, sonic qualities, and visual representations is acknowledging what lies outside of traditional archival practices of recording history. For the purposes of this study, I will analyze the movement vocabularies, live musical performance repertoires, and shared perceptions of salsa's musical and dance history in Mexico in order to read the body as an "alternative" text. I will explore these themes and questions relying on theories primarily from the disciplines of (ethno)musicology, dance studies, and performance studies.

Ma' A y Teoría: Theoretical Frameworks

Examining the role of salsa's dance and musical performances as sources of alternative expressions of histories and memories relies on accepting the body's capacity to articulate such meanings. It was language philosopher, J.L. Austin who proposed one of the earliest attempts to consider the presence of the body as a site of producing meaning. The Austinian model suggests that statements can possess the dual function of being speech acts as well as actions on their own. With this notion, Austin sought to connect the physicality of the body involved in the linguistic elocution of ideas. Within the discipline of performance studies, this concept has come to be commonly referred to as the performative utterance. According to Austin, by "saying these words we are *doing* something."¹ This is exemplified in the utterance "I do" of a marriage ceremony that serves not only as a description of the action but also as the act of marriage itself.

Although the Austinian model is founded on the belief that only the felicitous effects of a performative utterance are valid, scholars Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

¹ Austin, J.L. How to do Things With Words, eds. J.O. Urmson, Marina Sbisa, (Harvard University Press, 1975). pg. 13

propose that the unhappy consequences are worthy of exploration. Specifically, Sedgwick and Parker claim “performativity has enabled a powerful appreciation of the ways that identities are constructed iteratively through complex citational processes.”² For example, the Austinian “I do” utterance is emblematic of a heteronormative act that marginalizes a “queer” population, rendering them silent witnesses. In spite of their silence, the “queer” bodies at the ceremony have a story to tell, have experiences located beyond the verbally pronounced history. Performance and literary scholar, Diana Taylor expands further upon the limitations of the Austinian model of performativity, opening the definition to consider events and bodies as performance sites. As Taylor explains, “on another level, performance also constitutes the methodological lens that enables scholars to analyze events *as* performance. Civic obedience, resistance, citizenship, gender, ethnicity, and sexual identity, for example, are rehearsed and performed daily in the public sphere.”³ In this statement, Taylor proposes a way to bridge the gap between the body’s use of language and the body itself as a language of performance. Expanding the boundaries of performance to include practices of daily life creates the possibility to uncover histories that exist outside of formally recognized and recorded archives.

Exploring what the body articulates through movements, sonic qualities, and visual representations challenges “official” modes of remembering histories. For Taylor, “the rift, does not lie between the written and spoken word, but between the *archive* of supposedly enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones) and the so-called ephemeral *repertoire* of embodied practice/knowledge (i.e., spoken language, dance,

² Parker, Andrew and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. “Introduction,” Performativity and Performance. (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 1

³ Taylor, Diana. The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 3.

sports, ritual.)”⁴ Therefore, the notion of the repertoire becomes a distinct, but equally important model for exploring the ways in which histories that have previously been under-examined are manifested and remembered. Opening up the field of performance beyond the utterance to include all forms of embodied knowledge creates a physical and metaphorical space within which these sources of cultural, historical, political, and social information can be analyzed and valued.

Similar to Taylor’s understanding of performance as “an episteme, a way of knowing, not simply an object of analysis,”⁵ Susan Leigh Foster proposes that bodies are performance as well as expressions of their own corporealities. For Foster, “bodies do not only pass meaning along, or pass it along in their uniquely responsive way. They develop choreographies of signs through which they discourse: they run (or lurch, or bound, or feint, or meander...) from premise to conclusion.”⁶ Bodies, and their corporealities, make possible the transmission and re-membering of cultural knowledge through a distinct form of script writing. As Jane C. Desmond suggests, the scholarly focus should be “more on the representations of the body and/or its discursive policing, that with its actions/movements act as ‘texts’ themselves.”⁷ Comparing corporeal movement to a literary text offers the possibility that the to act becomes a source of “close reading[s]” about the culture, space and time within which the movement is produced.⁸ Each moving corporeality, each moving text, carries with it dual implications of a personal, individual history as well as demonstrations of broader societal changes

⁴ Ibid., 19

⁵ Foster, Susan. Ed. Corporealities: Dancing, Knowledge, Culture and Power. (New York: Routledge , 1996), p. xvi.

⁶ Ibid., xi

⁷ Desmond, 35.

⁸ Ibid., 59.

such as commodification, migration, and adoption that can be assessed through the performative lens.⁹

Extending the performative to encompass embodied knowledge must also grapple with the ephemerality and loss, characterizing performance and the body. As Taylor describes, “debates about the “ephemerality” of performance are, of course, profoundly political. Whose memories, traditions, and claims to history disappear if performance practices lack the staying power to transmit vital knowledge?”¹⁰ What Taylor indicates is the power of the archive to sustain images of accepted and acknowledged events while the performance and the space it inhabits are vulnerable to forgetting, vulnerable to erasure from a cultural past because of its elusive existence. Furthermore, the performance also becomes the site of multiple losses; the loss of itself, its future loss, and the slow loss of liveness in the body that performs. The performance disappears in the moment that it is performed and can never be exactly reproduced. The notion of future loss exemplifies the way in which existing outside of the archive, the performance’s vitality depends on oral or physical cues to be reproduced. When those cues are silenced by reasons such as but not limited to death, migration, or violence, the performances cease to be (re)produced, (re)membered, or provide alternative readings of histories. As a way of accepting the eventual loss, Peggy Phelan suggests the importance of creating an ontology of performance exploring it as disappearance rather than an effort of preserving the ephemeral.¹¹ For Phelan, what is important about the disappearance of the performance is coming to terms with its end and accepting the possibility that something

⁹ Ibid., 35.

¹⁰ Taylor, 5

¹¹ Phelan, Peggy. “The Ontology of Performance: Representation without Reproduction” Unmarked: The Politics of Performance. (New York: Taylor and Francis Inc), p. 146-192.

existing outside of what we can know, something that disappears from our own bodies can have an impact.

No hace falta papel: Theory in Practice

Relying on a multidisciplinary approach to explore salsa music and dance in Mexico City is complicated by the question of how to collect and consider research data. The current trend for many scholars is to utilize a participant-observer approach, as demonstrated by Yvonne Daniels' examination of rumba in Cuba, Berta Jottar's study of diaspora rumba production in New York City, and Barbara Browning's exploration of Brazilian samba. Scholars such as these maneuver their multiple roles as a "participant observer" not only taking dance classes and attending events but also recording notations as ethnographers, literary critics, historians, and anthropologists.¹² For Daniels, the act of writing or attempting to preserve the memory of the dance risks "freez[ing] the dance artificially in the mind or on paper"¹³ In order to avoid stagnating dance's history, Browning proposes it is vitally important to identify with the bodies performing the dance. Beyond the movement vocabularies are people who have their own stories, their own reasons for participating. By "acknowledg[ing] and validat[ing] the anecdotal, the 'non-professional'"¹⁴ connection that becomes part of the scholarly "participant" experience, the dance and its performers are personalized in a way that challenges stationary historical recordings. Through active engagement in dance communities, the

¹² Browning, Barbara, Samba: Resistance in Motion, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. bbxix. See also Palenzuela, Bertha Jottar. Rumba in Exile: Irrational Noise, Zero Tolerance & the Poetics of Resistance in Central Park. Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2005.

¹³ Daniel, Yvonne, Rumba: Dance and Social Change in Contemporary Cuba, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 24

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, xxx.

people exist on individual levels, perceived through their corporeal idiosyncracies, manner of dress, and mode of speaking. The scholar too becomes one of these individuals, facilitating reflection about what the movements and committed participation signify as experienced through one's own bodily sensations. The combination of the microcosmic level of personal participation and broader observations about the dance communities serve as models for understanding the implications of dance within a specific society.

Forging personal connections with dancing communities relies on being present within the spaces where events take place. Combining the participant-observer approaches exhibited by Montreal salsa scholar, Sheenagh Pietrobruno, Mexico City salsa Xochitl Soto Rodríguez, and Mexico City dance anthropologist Amparo Sevilla, I focused my research on instructional classes, dance halls, and dance performances in the Mexico City area. Because of my interest in Carlos Carmona's influence in the development of Mexico City salsa, I began taking classes at his studio. However, to gain a more in-depth understanding of stylistic, location, and participation differences between salsa academies, I also took classes with SalsaRika at the Mambo Café, Our Dance Company in Colonia Roma Norte, and Azul y Oro in Colonia Hidalgo. Any interviews or informal conversations I had with directors and participants of these various academies generally occurred after classes. I primarily attended intermediate or advanced level classes depending on what were the most advanced levels being offered. However, certain academies such as SalsaRika and Azul y Oro, classes of all levels are held all at once with the groups separated into different areas of the dance floor. In these instances, was able to observe the patterns and participants at various other levels. After classes, I

noted the cost of the class, the type of studio or space where the class occurred, the number of people total, the number of each sex, the style of dance taught, and the way the patterns felt being danced. Noting the style of the dance generally meant whether the class was being taught On-1 or On-2, whereas the way the pattern and footwork felt being danced relates to the fluidity of motion.

For the purposes of my investigation, I limited my social dancing research to locations where formally trained dancers of various levels congregated. Specifically, I regularly attended the dance club Mambo Café, in the Colonia Roma Sur, where dancers came every Wednesday night. This was the one night a week that dancers from various dance academies and companies around Mexico City came together in one space. Although Fridays were also a popular day for dancers, there was no consistent communication between companies about which location would be ideal for reuniting. It is important to note that Mexico City's salsa dance culture is divided between dance clubs like Mambo Café and "salones de baile." The salones will be discussed at greater length later in the paper, but they represent Mexico's historical connection with salsa's predecessors: danzón, mambo, and cha-cha-chá. As Soto Rodríguez and Sevilla explain, the significant difference between "salones de baile" and dance clubs are the patrons who frequent these venues.¹⁵ While both salsa clubs and salones play live music, the dancers in salones are often in their mid 40s or older, come accompanied by a partner of the opposite sex, wear semi-formal dress, and generally have little to no formal dance

¹⁵ Sevilla, Amparo. "Aquí se siente uno como en su casa: los salones del baile popular de la ciudad de México." *Alternidades* 6, no. 11 (1996): 33-41. See also Soto Rodríguez, Xochitl. "Ven devórame otra vez con sabor a salsa" Thesis. UNAM. Dec. 2007

training.¹⁶ However, the dancers in salsa clubs are generally in their mid-30s or younger, come without a designated partner, have no uniform dress, and have taken some level of formal salsa classes. As most of the salones and dance clubs had deejays and live performers present at the same time, between sets I approached the groups or individuals to request an interview or short informal conversation. After attending each location, I noted the distance from my house, entry cost, the age range of participants, style of dress, musical selections, décor and general ambiance, size of dance floor, what time dancers arrived, and hours of operation.

During the time that I was in Mexico City, there were no planned professional level choreographed events in the city that I was able to attend or made aware of. In general, performances seemed to be arranged for specific events such as dance company anniversary parties, directors' birthdays, local and national competitions, and salsa congresses. Because each company has its own set of important dates and forms of communicating, it was difficult to know where and when an event might be scheduled. The primary difficulty in gaining information about planned events was that most companies do not have websites, and for those who do, the information is often out of date or incorrect. In order to examine professional level, choreographed performances, I traveled to Oaxaca, Mexico for the Third Annual National Championship and Cuernavaca, Mexico for an exhibition where Mexico City dancers were present. Because I knew the event coordinators in both of these instances, I was invited to post-performance events, where I approached dancers from Mexico City, Oaxaca, and Cuernavaca for interviews or informal conversations. At each event, I also gained

¹⁶ Informed by Sevilla, but also a personal observation from my investigation.

permission from event coordinators to video record the choreographies. These videos will be useful for considering whether there is a Mexican style of salsa dancing as perceived through popular movement patterns, body isolations, precision of On-1 or On-2 timing and technique, performance attire and the way that dance movements relate to the music.

In order to evaluate the question of whether there is a “Mexican” style of salsa and what is at stake in using Mexico City salsa as a microcosm of cultural exchange and transmission, I will rely on the act of participation and the presence of the body¹⁷ as my two key interpretive models. Specifically, I will explore the social function of the dance hall as well as what movement vocabularies and the bodies reveal about Mexico City salsa culture and Mexican society more broadly. I will draw upon Sevilla’s understanding of the way in which dance halls create an atmosphere within which dancers gain prestige and recognition “basado no en la posesión de dinero (recurso que suele ser escaso entre éstos) sino en el dominio de un conocimiento que adquiere un alto valor simbólico.”¹⁸

This idea is repeated by Carlos Monsivais, one of Mexico City’s foremost cultural critics and cronistas, recognized for his astute observations about what Mexico’s cultural productions reveal about Mexican people. Writing about the presence and function of dance halls throughout the capital city, Monsivais presents the voice of a fictional salsa expressing the pleasure Sevilla discusses, “yo no soy payaso ni farolón pero me gusta que

¹⁷ Lepecki, André. Ed. *Of the Presence of the Body: Essays on Dance and Performance Theory*. (Middletown: Wesleyan Press, 2004).

¹⁸ Sevilla, 39. Translation is my own. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. “Not based in possessing money (a scarce resource among these participants) but in the perfection this type of knowledge that acquires symbolic value.”

se den cuenta de que la muevo, de que no en balde he ensayado y le he metido ganas.”¹⁹ Not only does this character gain satisfaction from having people watch him dance, but also from the way dancing allows him to get to know himself. By asserting, “él que no conoce el baile no conoce su cuerpo.”²⁰ Monsivais connects the act of participating to the way the dancer becomes aware of the physiological presence of the body, recognizing how the body feels in motion. The dancer is able to acknowledge their individual corporeal experience; the way memories have been created and stored in their muscles waiting to be articulated in conjunction with the sensorial cues of the music. It is perhaps the corporeal gratification the dancer gains from feeling their body execute movement patterns that motivates continued participation within the salsa community. Furthermore, that dancers are satisfied with what they have learned about their bodies and the recognition for their achievements, may be the connection between the dancing body and participation.

The foundations of dance study rely on developing an understanding of the cultural and social factors that determine participation. In his anthropological study of ballroom and salsa dancing, Jonathan Marion utilizes Peter Stromberg’s conception of a commitment system that “based on a shared interest and participation, people imagine themselves to be –and thus create themselves as – a community.”²¹ Celeste Fraser Delgado and José Esteban Muñoz situate the role of dance as a force for creating

¹⁹ Monsivais, Carlos. *Escenas de pudor y liviandad*. (Mexico: Editorial Grijalbo, 1981), p. 140. “I am not a clown or a braggart, but I enjoy that they notice how I move her, that they notice I have not trained in vain, that I have done my best.”

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 140 “he who does not know how to dance, does not know his body.”

²¹ Marion, Jonathan, *Dance as Self, Culture and Community: The Construction of Personal and Collective Meaning and Identity in Competitive Ballroom and Salsa*, Ph.D. diss., University of California, San Diego, 2006, 56.

community based on the idea that “dance sets politics in motion, bringing people together in rhythmic affinity”²² The connection between the music and dance, as Frances Aparicio claims, “represents a social encounter, which can be a dance hall, a club, or a party, where bodies are permitted to respond to physical rhythms.”²³ Scholar Jane C. Desmond approaches this notion of community construction with key questions about what is at “stake” in participating and “who dances, when, and where, in what ways, with whom, and to what end?”²⁴ For example, Yvonne Daniels examines the rumba performance in Cuba, defined by the construction of professional, traditional, and public dancing communities. At each of these levels, the participants are determined by philosophies of how rumba should be danced, movement vocabularies, time, money, and level of commitment. Focused on Latin American dance, scholars such as Berta Jottar, and Barbara Browning, espouse that “the body dancing to Latin rhythms” becomes the means to “analyze and articulate the conflicts that have crossed Latin/o American identity.”²⁵ For Jottar, identities were often expressed through the improvisational movement representing the “way in which the present of the past enters the circle is through the participants’ diverse articulations of embodied memory or “performatic” memory.”²⁶ The notion of a “performatic” memory is one in which the societal and individual histories of the present and the past collide in the body and are projected outward through movement. For Browning, the polyrhythmic nature of samba and other Latin musics

²² Delgado, Celeste Fraser and José Esteban Muñoz, Ed. Everynight Life: Culture and Dance in Latin/o America, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 9.

²³ Aparicio, Frances. Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music, and Puerto Rican Cultures. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1998. pg. 95

²⁴ Desmond, Jane C, “Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies,” in Everynight Life: Culture and Dance in Latin/o America, ed. Celeste Fraser Delgado and José Esteban Muñoz, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 37.

²⁵ Delgado, 9.

²⁶ Jottar, 9.

allows the dancer to express performatic memory by connecting their bodies to the sonic space of the music. This connection allows various parts of the body such as the feet, hips, and shoulders to move and express histories conflicting stories of liberation, subjugation, poverty, fear and happiness at the same time.²⁷

The ramification for creating these communities based in musical beats and moving bodies is the ability to assess what they reveal about the Mexico City existing outside of the dance hall. Utilizing Spencer's assertion that "society creates the dance, and it is to society that we must turn to understand it"²⁸ signifies how physical and metaphorical fragmentation serve as significant motivators for creating these communities. As Néstor Garcia Caclini observes of Mexico City, it "cannot be encompassed by any description. If we look at it from the inside, from the perspective of local daily practices, we see only fragments, outskirts, locations determined by a myopic perception of the whole."²⁹ The people who engage in the dance and musical practices inside the dance club find refuge from the plethora of closed spaces and anonymity that exist in everyday life. As the Mexican dance Anthropologist, Amparo Sevilla explains, as a result of the fragmented and isolated lives of Mexico City's inhabitants, the dance halls represent the "pocos espacios públicos que posibiliten el encuentro y la comunicación colectiva para la recreación."³⁰ By entering into this community, through dance the participants are resisting "the monotonous repetition of every-day

²⁷ Browning, 14.

²⁸ Marion, 67

²⁹ Canclini, Nestor García. "Mexico: cultural globalization in a disintegrating city. *American Ethnologist* vol. 22 (4). (Nov. 1995): 748

³⁰ Sevilla, 34. "few public spaces that make possible collective interaction and communication through recreational practices."

oppressions... inciting rebellions in everynight life.”³¹ As Mexican dance scholar Albert Dallal suggests, for the Mexican, “El *dancing* nos permite pasar de espectadores (lo que somos en el deporte, que se realiza en pleno desarrollo dentro de los estadios y concentraciones) a participantes (como ocurre en salones de baile público, cabarets, fiestas).”³² In the Mexico City context, the act of dancing may serve as “un escape, un recurso para olvidar, un refugio, una descarga”³³ from every day life. Within the space of the dance hall, external social structures are (re)configured based on socio-economic status, political affiliation, gender, race, as well as corporeal skills and prowess. By focusing on the way their bodies move, participants enter the dance hall with the opportunity to establish a social rank, gain prestige and personal gratification based on the presence of their body. That this presence disappears at the end of every night may be the motivating factor that prompts the dancers to continue investing their time and energy into this community based on dance and escape.

The live performance of popular, non-Mexican produced salsa music in Mexico City is indicative of the way in which the body has become the primary conduit for re-creation and knowledge. Michael Taussig explains that historically vision has been marked as the as the key site at which copies are produced either physiologically in the body or through the use of film technology. However, the way Mexican musicians cover popular salsa songs inadvertently supports Taussig’s proposition that the materiality of

31 Delgado, 14.

32 Dallal, Alberto. El “Dancing” Mexicano: La danza en México. Cuarta parte. (México: UNAM, 2000), p. 275. “dancing allows us to pass from spectators (what we are in sports, that develops within the sphere of stadiums and concentration) to participants (like what happens in public salones de baile, cabarets, and parties)”

33 Sevilla, 38. “an escape, a resource to forget, a refuge, a release.”

the body be examined as a way of (re) producing types of knowledge.³⁴ What is unique about Mexican musicians performing salsa is that most cannot read music, rendering this group unable to access this archive of musical composition. However, performers utilize their bodies as mechanisms for interpreting the music, relying on their ear to signal the accurate execution of a piece. More than just the ear, the body is forced into a state of heightened awareness as it must mold and shape itself in order to produce the music's sonic qualities. Not being a site of original salsa composition and production, a successful salsa performance in Mexico City is gauged by its ability to mimic the sounds of the original song. What is problematic about the mimetic performance of sonic qualities is that this process does not hinge upon an engagement or knowledge of the historical roots and struggles of the musical form and its musicians. Extraneous to salsa's development and evolution, the Mexican context of repetitive live performances are simpler copies of original popular compositions. By only repeating a set formula, musicians inhibit the way their bodies can express memories and sonic experiences unique to Mexico City. Thus, the live performances in Mexico City clubs are "resistances to recollections, to readings or acknowledgements of memory"³⁵ specific to Mexican culture. Yet, as Freud explains, the sonic repetition serves as a site of fulfillment for the musicians, as "each fresh repetition seems to strengthen the mastery they are in search of."³⁶ Furthermore, performing the popular hits of well-known salsa artists creates an environment of

34 Taussig, Michael. Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses. (New York: Routledge), p. 1-43.

35 Gilpin, Heidi. "Lifelessness in movement or how do the dead move? Tracing displacement and disappearance for movement performance." in Corporealities: Dancing knowledge, culture and power. ed. Susan Leigh Foster. (New York: Routledge. 1996), p. 111.

36 *Ibid.*, 108.

familiarity and communal identity based in sonic stability and microcosmic sensory experience for the musicians and patrons.

Salsa's clave represents stability, both sonically and physically amidst changing faces, sounds, lyrics, and dance moves. The five-beat progression is the centerpiece of salsa's polyrhythmic nature around which all else is arranged. Referring to the clave as the central figure appreciates the influence of an Afro-Cuban heritage but also enters into a discussion about the creation of the genre more broadly. No conversation about the evolution of salsa music would be complete without engaging the voices of Nuyoricans, Puerto Ricans and Cubans. This is primarily a symptom of the way in which the sounds of salsa emerged from Latin/o American dominated New York barrios in the 1960s. The term 'salsa' was created by U.S. record executives and marketing campaigns to obscure the music's Cuban roots because of the concurrent fears of post-Revolutionary Cuban socialist politics.³⁷ Salsa dancing is based in the movements of the Cuban son but has since evolved into a variety of basic styles such as On-2 or New York style, On-1 or LA style, Casino Rueda, and the Colombian style. The demarcation of a style with a geographic location is not a coincidence but often follows the changing styles of the musical production. This investigation will focus on the On-2 and On-1 styles as they indicate cultural exchange patterns between Mexican and United States dancers. It is not necessarily the intention of this paper to resolve the long-standing debates regarding salsa's origins as a musical and dance genre. However, by locating salsa's production

³⁷ This is a common allegation directed towards Fania! Records. See several interviews in Fuentes, Leonardo Padura. Faces of Salsa: A Spoken History of the Music. Trans. Stephen J. Clark. (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2003).

sites within the United States raises interesting questions about what it means to be categorized as “Latin,” the reflection of colonial domination extending from the metropolis outward, and the influence social context. As salsa is not only a sonic but also a dance experience the qualities of the voice, lyrical themes, gender relationships, and constructed identities can be interpreted aurally and viscerally. Exploring the realm of the body provides insight into the production and participation of salsa in way that documented history cannot. Not only does the body become a tool for exploring questions of migration and commodification but also local level, individual examples of who participates and under what circumstances.

Chapter 1:

Salsa's Grooving and Moving Roots

Me gusta el son: How salsa got its groove

Salsa music is indicative of how sonic creations capture changing social contexts through stylistic and instrument combinations that represent migrating populations and their cultural traditions. Emerging from the Latin/o American barrios of New York City in the 1960s, salsa was a response of growing Latin American diaspora communities. One of the early waves of Latin American migrations important for salsa's development began with the 1940s Puerto Rican migration as a result of rising male unemployment rates. By the second half of the twentieth century, immigrants came primarily from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and Cuba, as a result of the negative effects of uneven modernization efforts and massive political upheavals taking place in many Latin American nations. These efforts to "modernize" industries and social systems resulted in the erasure of familiar social, geographical and political landscapes. Yet, the technological and political renovations in many countries did not necessarily signify democratization or social equality, as cities were not prepared to handle the explosions of internal "migratory movements from rural areas to urban centers."³⁸ Thus, as demonstrated by the rapid influx of Caribbean immigrants to New York, immigration was re-directed northward and had a significant impact on the production of Latin American music and the evolution of salsa. This movement from the Caribbean has also

³⁸ Aparicio, Frances. *Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music, and Puerto Rican Cultures*. (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), p. 81

become “an indispensable framework for thinking about the genre and its machinery of importations, voyages, mixtures” that has left an indelible mark on the sound quality and style.³⁹

The collaboration, modification and adaptation exhibited by the musicians of various genres, life experiences, and nations resulted in the hybrid quality of salsa. Yet, this hybridity has prompted and propelled debates about the parentage of salsa among Puerto Ricans, Nuyoricans, Cubans and academics. Many scholars of salsa such as Hernando Clavo Ospina, Leonardo Padura Fuentes and Frances Aparicio recognize the musical “backbone of salsa”⁴⁰ as being Cuban, although the early audiences and musicians were Puerto Rican. This observation questions whether is it score, the interpreters, or a combination of both that transform the music. The recognized “backbone” is the Cuban son with which salsa shares many instruments and sounds, including the tumbao(conga), the bongo, the cascara(timabales), and cow bell. However, instruments such as the Cuban tres or cuatro guitar that were popular with son have been more commonly replaced by the sounds of the piano.⁴¹ Furthermore, the jazz scene in the United States also contributed to the use of brass sounds.⁴² Despite instrumental variations, the center of son and salsa is the clave that “make[s] up the rhythmic guide that stabilizes the polyrhythmic nature of the ensemble.”⁴³ The clave is a series of five beats played over two bars. The sounds can be divided either as primarily 2-3 or 3-2 to

³⁹ Herencia, Juan Carlos Quintero. “Notes toward a Reading of Salsa.” trans. Celeste Fraser Delgado in Everynight Life: Culture and Dance in Latin/o America, ed. Celeste Fraser Delgado and José Esteban Muñoz, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 203.

⁴⁰ Leymarie, Isabelle. Cuban Fire: The Story of Salsa and Latin Jazz, (New York: Continuum, 2002), 268.

⁴¹ Bello, Mike, Salsa Music, Rhythm, Phrasing, and Timing, (Mike Bello Music Publishing, 2000) 8-10.

⁴² Rodríguez, Olavo Alén, From Afrocuban Music to Salsa, (Berlin: Piranha Records, 1998), 78.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 77.

direct the dancing and the arrangement of the song. Another fundamental son-inherited characteristic of salsa is the use of the montuno structure, the alternation between the solo verse and the chorus.⁴⁴ This alternation creates the sense of a call and response between the musicians and the singer but also between the audience and the band. The call and response structure is further developed with soloist ventures into the improvised *sonéo*, allowing the singer to interact with the crowd, as well as demonstrate his/her mastery of Spanish.⁴⁵ It is also within the *sonéo*, that salsa dancing often loses its partner structure and incorporates individual improvisational expressions. During this section, partners demonstrate dexterity and experimentation through solo footwork in response to the musical sounds and spoken words. Though the relationship between musicians and audience members can vary greatly, “depending on the different clubs and particular situations on any given night,”⁴⁶ *soneros* must become adept at recognizing when it is time for the audience/dancers to re-enter the song structure.⁴⁷

While determining salsa’s origins may seem like a futile exercise, what is at stake is the prestige and recognition that accompanies musical creation. As scholar Michael Veal explains of Jamaican dub music, it is credited with expanding the possibilities for technological production and internationally impacting a variety of styles such as trip-hop in Britain.⁴⁸ On a deeper level, the global recognition of dub signifies an example of how Jamaica has been able to resist and transcend vestiges of its colonial past. In a similar

⁴⁴ Ibid., 77.

⁴⁵ Román-Velázquez, Patria. “The embodiment of salsa: musicians, instruments and the performance of a Latin style and identity.” *Popular Music* 18 no. 1 (1999): 123.

⁴⁶ Román-Velasquez, 124

⁴⁷ Ibid., 124

⁴⁸ Veal, Michael. *Dub: Soundscapes and Shattered Songs in Jamaican Reggae*. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2007)

way, by allowing Cuba, or Nuyoricans, or Puerto Ricans to claim authority over the development of salsa reflects deeper intentions to combat the influence of the United States not only as an economic but also as a cultural imperialist. However, it is important to note that during the period of salsa's early success, Cuba was an exception to attempts to claim salsa. Specifically, the Cuban government was suspicious of salsa because it represented unauthorized appropriation of Cuban creativity by the U.S. Yet, in part, salsa's preservation of Spanish, specific or "authentic" instrumentation, and "authentic" composition structures allows each nation to recognize instances of resistance against the United States as a powerful external colonizer. The continued recognition of multiple Latin/o American contributors creates a space where a pan-Latino identity can be formed and sustained. By naming only one group or nation as the progenitor of salsa would isolate and further marginalize all the other listeners and musicians on the outside of that group who identify salsa as "their" music, as "their" Latin creation. As scholar Mayra Santos Febre proposes, it may be most apt to consider salsa as a 'translocal' phenomenon because of its ability to transcend national boundaries, to be integrated into the international market economy while at the same time accepted into urban communities throughout Latin America.⁴⁹ It is this ability to travel and be reproduced that Aparicio finds to be important in examining salsa as a popular music phenomenon. For Aparicio, "rather than delimiting salsa to a specific musical form or to a synthesis of structures," it is more useful to "interpret it as a sociomusical practice, one claimed by very heterogeneous communities for radically diverse purposes."⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Febres, Mayra Santos. "Salsa as Translocation." in Delgado, Celeste Fraser and José Esteban Muñoz. Ed. *Everynight Life: Culture and Dance in Latin/o America*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 175-188.

⁵⁰ Aparicio, 67.

The Latin/o American presence in New York City during the 1950s provided fertile conditions for the development of salsa's many predecessors. Notable Cuban artists Benny Moré, Dámaso Pérez Prado, and Mario Bauzá and the two Puerto Rican Titos, Rodríguez and Puente, had a profound impact on the New York jazz scene. Their cooperative efforts with legends such as Cab Calloway and Dizzie Gillespie created the sounds and idols of the mambo, chá-chá-chá, boogaloo (bugalú), and Latin jazz.⁵¹ Hosted by elite clubs such as the Palladium, the men became images of glamour and success. Yet, the accomplishment was ephemeral as the men and elite spaces that once "reigned supreme in their shiny tuxes and tails began to close their doors for an undeniable reason: people were no longer coming."⁵² These new groups of Latin American immigrants no longer found the idols of the 1950s to serve as adequate emblems and representatives of the Latinity that they experienced. Many of the men were criticized for adapting their styles to include non-Latin elements and were accused of being "prodded on by the American dream of financial success."⁵³ The critiques of these Latin-fusion sounds also reflect the social tensions of attempts to preserve individual and group identities in the vast sea of American dreams and Anglo conceptions of success. Although these styles waned in popularity, the men did not fade quietly into the background, but rather participated in further Latin musical experimentation with the rise of salsa.

Although there are several variations of salsa's production, the early years of the music's production used a band structure where musicians were often the leaders and the

⁵¹ Leymaries., 165-177.

⁵² Fuentes, Leonardo Padura, Faces of Salsa: A Spoken History of the Music, Trans. Stephen J. Clark, (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2003), p. 5.

⁵³ Boggs, Vernon, Salsiology: Afrocuban Music and the Evolution of Salsa in New York City, (New York: Excelsior Music Publishing Company, 1992), p. 104.

stars. The use of the band, also referred to as the *conjunto*, is another Cuban contribution as the instrumental arrangement is best known for its 2 or 4-horn section.⁵⁴ While this arrangement already had a long history in Cuba as displayed by the famous salsa band Sonora Matancera, it was most well known in the United States with the rise of “*charanga* ensembles in New York style-mambo” during the 1950s.⁵⁵ The founding father of these *charanga* ensembles were primarily comprised of virtuoso Cuban musicians such as Arsenio Rodríguez, Gilberto Valdés, Damaso Pérez Prado, Felix Chapottín. There were also significant contributions from Puerto Rican Tito Rodriguez, Tito Puente, Cheo Feliciano, and Nuyorican Joe Cuba. Considering the strong drumming history in Cuba, Pérez Prado became a minority as Feliciano and Cuba joined the ranks. The instrumentation is highly variable for the remaining star musicians: Valdés a flutist, Rodríguez a master *trés* player, lyricist, and *sonero*, Chapottín a trumpet player, Puente on timbales, Feliciano on drums, and Rodriguez on vocals. As salsa legend Johnny Pacheco, a Dominican trumpet player remembers that as Cuban musicians stopped coming to the United States “soon there was a shortage of instrument players”⁵⁶ reflecting the immigration restrictions imposed in response to the Cuban revolution. Yet, this opened up space for other Latin/o American groups. Although the conjunto-charanga style was “imported into salsa in the 1960s,” there were significant differences such as the use of timbales, the higher pitched vocals, as well as more staccato instrumental nuances likely due to the inclusion of Latin Jazz musicians.⁵⁷ Using Pacheco as an

⁵⁴ Manuel, Peter. “Puerto Rican Music and Cultural Identity: Creative Appropriation of Cuban Sources from Danza to Salsa. *Ethnomusicology* 38, no. 2 (Spring-Summer 1994): 269.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁵⁶ Fuentes, 56

⁵⁷ Manuel, 270

example, by 1964 he invented “el nuevo tumbao de Pacheco,”⁵⁸ using the Cuban tumbao, a tres, and bongo, while omitting the timbales. These modifications not only provide listeners with new faces and sounds to identify and enjoy but also recognize the impact of external forces such as governmental policies as well as changing aesthetic and production demands.

Salsa’s transitions were also a sign of the rise in commercial interest and production of this Latin music. In 1964, concurrent with the creation of his “nuevo tumbao,” supported by lawyer Jerry Massuci, Pacheco made a greater contribution to salsa by founding Fania! Records.⁵⁹ It is important to note that at the time of Fania!’s creation, the term “salsa” had not yet been applied to the style of music being created. Although there had been various reports of ‘salsa’ having been used in songs ranging from Ignacio Piñero’s 1920s “Echale salsita” to Venezuelan Federico and his Combo’s 1966 album “Llegó la salsa,” it was not until the mid-1970s that ‘salsa’ became its own genre.⁶⁰ The term ‘salsa’ became official in 1975, when Fania! salsa promoter Izzy “Mr. Salsa” Sanabria was recognized as coining the term after it appeared as the title of a video recording of musical performances. Sanabria’s promotion of the 1973 Fania!-made musical documentaries “Our Latin Thing,” and 1975 “Salsa” cemented the notoriety and popularity of the term.⁶¹ These two video-documentaries captured the concert performances of the Fania All Stars, a marketing effort that brought all the salsa greats on stage to perform and record. Virtuoso musicians such as Puerto Rican Ray Barreto, Eddie

⁵⁸ Padura, 57

⁵⁹ Ibid., 57

⁶⁰ Rondón, César Miguel. The Book of Salsa: A Chronicle of Urban Music from the Caribbean to New York City. Trans. Frances Aparicio and Jackie White. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), p. 24.

⁶¹ Ibid., 188.

Palmieri, Tito Puente, Nuyorican Willie Colón, Jewish Larry Harlow, and vocalists such as Puerto Rican Hector Lavoe, Ismael Rivera, Ismael Miranda, Cheo Feliciano, Cuban Celia Cruz, and Panamanian Ruben Bladés, were some of the most notable All Stars. In part, the Fania! films represented the magnitude of salsa's commercial success and international impact during this period of its history. The films also brought the performers into homes throughout Latin America and the U.S. allowing viewers to connect names with faces and ethnic identities of the performers.

Despite the fundamental contribution of the 1970s Fania! salsa, by the mid-1980s the popularity of the genre and the stars began to dwindle, prompting executives to make significant changes to the music. Initially record managers began standardizing structural compositions, replacing the old legends with younger looks and voices. Throughout most of the 1980s the conjunto style remained popular, though the legendary Titos were replaced for a fresher, “cooler” Tito Nieves (last name meaning ice). In addition, the salsa scene experienced the rise of South American contributions such as Venezuelan Oscar D'Leon, and Colombian Grupo Niche.⁶² To fully revive the popularity of salsa, by the late 1980s record companies gave salsa a full sound and body tune-up resulting in the production of erotic salsa. This mass production of this type of salsa, though maintaining the clave, silenced the traditional orchestral sounds in order to incorporate studio and synthesizer and technology. This large-scale commercialization also manufactured pre-digested thematic content, as albums repeated discussions of sensuality, love, and relationships. This structured environment “destroyed all experimentation or creativity”

⁶² Again, this information comes from my own knowledge of salsa artists and my own song collection.

often abandoning the montuno structure and messages of social awareness.⁶³ The musical virtuosity and vocal grains were exchanged for marketable images and voices such Puerto Rican sex-symbols Marc Anthony, La India and Jerry Rivera. Armed with this new generation of performers and simple sonic qualities, salsa has made its way into markets around the globe.

Me voy pal pueblo: Salsa Music in Mexico

Salsa's integration into the musical soundscape of Mexico City represents a continuation of Mexico's historical relationship and affinity for Cuban musical forms and musicians. As scholar Rafael Figueroa – Hernández explains, Mexico's geographical proximity to Cuba has facilitated exchanges of people, goods, and cultural practices “primero a través de las regiones geográficamente más cercanas como Yucatán y Veracruz.”⁶⁴ and later throughout the rest of the republic. The introduction of Cuban danzón and son are mechanisms for charting Mexico's adoption and adaptation of musical creations based on cultural needs and resources for reproduction. For example, during the late 19th century, danzón entered Mexico through major port cities of Veracruz and Yucatán where they quickly became popular with local populations. By the mid 1880s, in both Mérida and Veracruz, Mexican musicians began to create their own compositions reflecting not only a broad Mexicanization of the Cuban compositional rules, but also local transformations specific to the region. In Mérida “no se respetaron los cánones estrictos que tiene en Cuba la ejecución del danzón para la sección de percussion, en México solo se respetaron la clave y el cinquillo tradicionalmente

63 Ospina, Hernando Calvo, *Salsa: Havana Heat, Bronx Beat*, (London: Page Brothers, 1995), p. 113.

64 Figueroa Hernández, Rafael. *Salsa mexicana: Transculturación e Identidad*. (Mexico: Con Clave, 1996), p. 35. “first through the geographical regions closest like the Yucatán and Veracruz.”

ejecutado por el guiro.”⁶⁵ That Mexican musicians decreased the importance of the percussion section in original danzón compositions demonstrates a musical, social, and historical past less bound to African drumming traditions such as those found deeply woven into Cuban culture. In Veracruz musicians such as los Chinos Ramírez y la Danzonera Veracruzana created danzones with “una cadencia más suave” that “salió tumbando como viva expression” of daily life in Veracruz.⁶⁶ As Figueroa-Hernández observes, “el danzón fue penetrando en la sensibilidad veracruzana para estacionarse ahí” so profoundly that it continues to be a site of compositional creativity for local musicians.⁶⁷

The modification of danzón’s instrumentation and sonic qualities occurred again with son’s introduction to México with the arrival of Son Cuba de Marianao in 1928 to Veracruz.⁶⁸ While the Cuban compositions were originally played with “bongós, guitarra rasqueda, tres, marímbula y maracas y clave,” the marímbula was quickly exchanged for tumbadoras y “los instrumentos de aliento” indicative of the instruments available to newly formed Mexican groups.⁶⁹ It was not only a question of available instruments that changed the sounds of Cuban son, but also that “los veracruzanos aprendían como podían, algunos nada más viendo, otros tomando clases con quien quería enseñar,” causing vast discrepancies in musical knowledge and ability.⁷⁰ Yet, the differences between Cuban danzón and son and their Mexican counterparts did not impede the way

⁶⁵ Ibid., 41. “the did not respect Cuba’s strict canons of the way danzón’s percussion is to be played, in Mexico they only respected the clave and the cinquillo, traditionally played by the guiro.”

⁶⁶ Ibid., 42. “a smoother cadence that created a sound more like a live expression.”

⁶⁷ Ibid., 42. “el danzón penetrated the Veracruz sensibility and has remained there.”

⁶⁸ Ibid., 45.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 47 “bongos, guitar rasqueda, tres, marímbula or bass box, maracas, and clave....wind instruments”

⁷⁰ Ibid., 47. “The Veracruzanos learned what they could, some by no other way than watching, others by taking clases with whomever wanted to teach.”

these musical forms traveled throughout the republic. For example, from Veracruz, danzón relocated to Mexico City where it was first associated with brothels and lower social classes more broadly. However, by the end of the 1920s, danzón and son had taken center stage at many of Mexico City's salones such as the famed Salón México, The California Dancing Club, and Salón Los Angeles. While these salones continued to be associated with Mexico City's working class, the popularity of these Cuban-derived musical forms was sustained by musicians and dancing aficionados. Furthermore, by the 1930s, groups such as El Son Clave de Oro traveled from Veracruz to Mexico City to record their original compositions with RCA Víctor. Though Veracruz remained the primary producer of original compositions, musicians, and groups, with the assistance of Mexico City – based record companies, the sounds of Mexicanized son and danzón flourished throughout the nation.

With the popularity of son and danzón reverberating throughout Mexico, the arrival of mambo and several notable Cuban musicians to the nation's capital were readily welcomed. Dámaso Pérez Prado's 1948 arrival to Mexico City is marked as one of the most fundamental moments in mambo's musical history.⁷¹ Within Cuba, Prado was only one of several Cuban musicians creating mambos during this period but as Figueroa-Hernández claims, "fue en México donde se popularizó y y muchos nos atrevemos a decir que el mambo no se hubiera podido crear en otra parte."⁷² Not only did Prado's orchestra introduce Mexico to other notable Cuban musicians such as Benny Moré but it also served as a creative outlet for some of Mexico's own musicians. For example, Juan

⁷¹ Ibid., 54.

⁷² Ibid., 53 "Mexico was where mambo became popular and we would dare to say in a way that would not have been possible in any other place."

García Esquivel served as Prado's orchestra director and later continued his musical career in New York, while Memo Salamanca took inspiration from Prado's creativity to create his own mambos for Mexico until the 1970s.⁷³ To only mention Prado's contribution to Mexico's musical repertoire ignores the "lazos de amistad, oficial y no, entre Cuba y México" that facilitated several famous musicians passing through Mexico City and the republic.⁷⁴ While Prado spent the majority of his adult life in Mexico City and even became a nationalized citizen, many Cuban musicians utilized Mexico as a geographical and musical intermediary between Cuba and the U.S. As Cuban relations with the United States were strained by Fidel Castro's post-Revolution rise to power, many musicians such as Celia Cruz, Celio González and Mongo Santamaría visited Mexico City before continuing on to New York. Unlike Prado, that these artists were not focused on performing or composing mambos, but rather innovative arrangements of Cuban son, prepared Mexico for salsa's arrival several years later.

Though many of its predecessors had already gained popularity throughout the republic, salsa's arrival is dated between the late 1970s and early 1980s, during Fania!'s final years of international success. Many current salsa musicians and deejays link salsa's introduction into Mexican society to Mexico City's lower class sectors while scholars identify intellectual elites as catalysts for the music's integration. Scholars Figueroa-Hernández and Monsivais identify salsa's appearance in Mexico as part of the "Rumba es Cultura" movement, which unlike New York's barrio conscious salsa supporters, was "respaldado por la intelectualidad."⁷⁵ For these intellectuals, using the term rumba instead

⁷³ Ibid., 55.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 61.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 86. "supported by intellectuals...Rumba as Culture."

of salsa represented a conscious effort to reassert the Cuban roots of the music that Fania!'s marketing campaign attempted to obscure.⁷⁶ It is important to note the paradox of Mexican intellectuals, with no connection to salsa's musical development, attempting to assert an identity for a musical form that had replaced its politicized lyrics with compositions of love and affection. Yet, as Monsivais notes, "creen (los intelectuales) que la rumba es cultura porque piensan que todo lo que hacen es cultural. Son analfabetas populares, es lo que son."⁷⁷ This reflection articulates how the intellectualization sought to transform the music into an object for theoretical speculation rather than a site of enjoyment for lower classes. This observation engages the commentaries of several Mexico City's deejays and musicians who identified salsa music as being associated with Mexico City lower class barrios. Veteran Sabrosita 590 deejays, Andres Rosales and Alejandro Zuarth, claim salsa found acceptance and airplay in the marginalized neighborhoods through the phenomenon of sonideros. With large speakers and salsa music, the sonideros play music with the dual purpose of acting as deejays as well as free-style performers, interacting with the crowd in the same way that live musicians and vocalists would. Set up in neighborhoods on the outer edges of Mexico City, generally without any other promotion than word of mouth, the gatherings are referred to as tibiris.

Salsa's growing popularity among Mexico City's lower classes and intellectuals also garnered the attention of radio programs and local musicians producing original arrangements. By the end of the 1970s, salsa was regularly included in Mexico City radio programs "como lo tenía Pancho Cataneo o los producidos por Armando Cárdenas del

⁷⁶ Ibid., 86.

⁷⁷ Monsivais, 100. "The intellectuals think that rumba is culture because they think everything people do is culture. The people who listen to rumba are uneducated members of the lower class, that is all they are."

Río.”⁷⁸ In addition, Mexico’s Luis Ángel Silva, more commonly known as “Melón,” whose “carrera comenzó durante la década de los cuarenta” was integrated into the Fania! family with the 1978 release of “Llegó Melón,” considered the sixth most popular release of the year.⁷⁹ Melón distanced himself from his percussionist partner, Carlos Daniel Navarro, commonly referred to as “Lobo,” in order to pursue international recognition under the tutelage of musical legends Benny Moré, Cheo Marquetti and Miguelito Valdés.⁸⁰ Yet, Melón’s record did not reach the same level of international recognition that he achieved within Mexico during his early years, despite developing a distinct vocal style blending traces of Mexican son jarocho and rancheras with traditional Cuban son.⁸¹ Melón is one of few Mexican names to grace the pages of salsa’s history although the republic produced several contemporary orchestras with original productions. For example, deejays, musicians, and many of salsa’s dance directors mentioned “La Justicia” as one of the foremost bands that existed in Mexico City throughout the 1970s and 1980s. As Figueroa-Hernández explains, bands like La Justicia, Recuerdos del Son, La Constelación, and Grupo Caliente encountered difficulties similar to those that current bands face when trying to play and record their own music. Because crowds and record companies had already been exposed to commercial salsa, these groups were pressured to perform covers or follow certain “acceptable” hit-models in their recordings. Jorge Suárez, director of La Constelación, expresses how these two groups stifle creative possibilities as recording managers “siempre nos imponen y pues tiene uno acatar las

⁷⁸ Figueroa- Hernández, 88. “like that which Pancho Cataneo or Armando Cárdenas del Río produced.”

⁷⁹ Ibid., 90.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 90.

⁸¹ Ibid., 91.

órdenes de arriba, las políticas de la compañía,” while listeners always ask for the music of “Willie Colón, Oscar D’Leon, de todo el mundo menos la tuya.”⁸² Despite the way the Mexican bands of the past and present in Mexico follow prescribed models, record companies seldom promote original productions because “han faltado confianza en el músico mexicano para poder competir a nivel internacional” maintaining salsa’s position as an imported product.⁸³

Todo comenzo bailando: Developing the Dance

Unlike salsa’s musical trajectory, the development of salsa’s dance form is not as well documented or studied by scholars. Like the music, salsa dancing has its roots in the movements of the Cuban son, but has since evolved into a variety of basic styles. The most widely recognized forms are the On-2 or New York style, On-1 or LA style, Casino Rueda, and the Colombian style. The geographical demarcation reveals how the dance has developed parallel to the changing styles and sites of salsa’s musical production.⁸⁴ For example, Casino Rueda, most popular in Cuba and among diaspora Cuban populations in Miami, is danced in such a way that the men and women form a circle, which they use to transition through a series of patterns without a fixed partner. The Colombian style of salsa is known less for intricate turns, but for fast footwork danced along lateral lines rather than forward and back. The most well known style to emerge from Colombia is the Cali, or caleño style, which developed its fast pace in response to

⁸² Ibid., 101. “always impose and thus one has to follow the orders from above, abide by company politics... Willie Colón, Oscar D’Leon, of everyone else except your music.”

⁸³ Ibid., 101. “lack confidence in the Mexican musician to compete at the international level.”

⁸⁴ A majority of this information comes from my personal experience as a dancer and various persona conversations with other dancers over the past four years.

the way musical records were imported and sped up by deejays in discoteques.⁸⁵ The two remaining forms of salsa, which will be the primary focus of this thesis, are commonly referred to as *en línea*, or in-line, revealing that the steps generally follow a straight line rather than Rueda's circular completion. On-2/New York dance style was created in late 1970s and early 1980s by Puerto Rican dancer Eddie Torres, a fan of salsa music and regular to the club scene. Working with renowned musician, Tito Puente, Torres synchronized body movements to the sound of the 2-3 clave.⁸⁶ During the mid-1990s, the Vasquez family, Rogelio Moreno and Joby Brava were credited with creating the On-1/LA style by incorporated elements of West Coast swing and Hollywood theatricality into the dance.⁸⁷ The On-1/LA style rose to popularity in part because it marks the first beat of the measure rather than the more complex clave sounds. For all of the aforementioned salsa dancing styles, the most important distinguishing factor is the way the steps relate to the musical composition.

The On-2/New York and On-1/LA styles are not only the most popular forms of salsa on an international level, but also spark debates about how the dancing body should relate to the clave. It is important to note that regardless of the style of dance, salsa's musical composition is created around a 2-3 or a 3-2 clave. The difference between the two claves is the placement in the measure where the beat is heard. For example, the 2-3 clave marks the beats 2,3, 5&7 over a span of 2 measures in 4/4 time while the 3-2 clave reverses the measures placing the emphasis on the 1&4, 6,7. However, the rise of synthesizer-based salsa romántica in the 1980s and 1990s made the first beat of each

⁸⁵ See Waxer, Lise. *The City of Musical Memory: Salsa, Record Grooves, and Popular Culture in Cali, Colombia*. (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002).

⁸⁶ Personal information but also see <http://www.eddiatorres.com/>

⁸⁷ Personal information

measure more musically pronounced and identifiable than the clave. This shift presented an alternative to the way that the clave directed the dancing body, giving beats 1 and 5 precedence. Using either the clave or the pronounced first beat as guides, both the On-2/New York and On-1/LA basic steps span over two measures in 4/4, but on counts 4 and 8 the foot is not in motion.

The significant difference between these two styles is the way in which body movement is integrated into the basic step to reflect the dancer's musical knowledge and appreciation. For the On-2/New York style, the first step is not part of the clave rhythm, but initiates the movement sequence to coincide with the first beat of the measure. As a partner dance, men and women mirror each other's footwork in the basic step. In the On-2/New York style it is important to note that the woman begins the movement sequence with the right foot on the 1 initiates the dance pattern: right (1) – left(2) – right(3)– hold(4) – left (5) –right(6) – left(7) – hold(8). For the men, this footwork is reversed as they step back on 1 with the left foot. Yet, for both sexes, important movement progressions such as turns, back-breaks, cross-body leads are completed on the 2 and 6 following the clave. The importance of the 2 and 6 reflects the way the On-2 style does not necessarily give each step the same amount of musical time, devoting longest amount of time to these two counts specifically. Because the moments are only slightly extended, they depend on the dancers musical awareness to execute them accurately. Thus, dancers of the On-2/NY style develop a heightened sense of musical perception, as they are able to, and in some cases required to integrate extra body movement to ensure the feet only move to the clave timing. Thus On-2/New York dancers are recognized for their body isolations, small steps, and “light” lead resulting from the male lead's use of only one or

two fingers to direct the female follow. It is worth noting that because of the intimate relationship between the body and the musical counts, the On-2/NY style often incorporates solo footwork into classes, social dancing, and choreographies. It is possible that the integration of solo footwork and body movement is due to this dance styles preference and adherence to the structures of early salsa compositions that allows for individual improvisation during the musical montuno section.

Because the On-1/LA style affords each step the same amount of time, dancers generally rely more on aggrandized movements and tricks, which does not necessarily denote musical accuracy. In contrast to the aforementioned On-2/NY style movement patterns, the On-1/LA relates body movements to the 1 and the 5 to coincide with the strong beats of the musical composition. Furthermore, On-1/LA dancers are often identified based on their rigid upper body, wide steps, and jagged, often bouncy movement patterns rather than the smooth body movements and isolations of the On-2/NY style. The On-1/LA basic step is initiated by the male stepping forward on his left foot on the first count of the measure. The movement sequence for the male lead proceeds as follows: left (1) - right(2) – left (3) – hold – right (5) – left (6) right (7) – hold (8). The female follows reverse this footwork as they step back with their right foot on the first count. Specifically, On-1/LA style is characterized by having a very strong connection between the male and female created by tightly gripped hands, which is then used to initiate fast spin sequences and to ensure that the woman moves around the floor exactly as the male lead wanted. It is also worth nothing that the On-1/LA style seldom allows for solo footwork to occur outside of choreographies, whereas the On-2/New York style incorporates this element into classes, social dancing, and choreographies. This

discrepancy between the two styles could be in part related to the On-1/LA's emphasis on the "show" element of partner work, but is most likely a reflection of the musical selection that accompanies these dance forms. Similar to the way much of the synthesizer-based salsa removed spontaneity from salsa's musical arrangement, the On-1/LA style has also removed the solo improvisational element of the dance. These stylistic considerations are important for reflecting on the ways that movement vocabularies demonstrate specific histories and trajectories of cultural productions.

Being created by Latin/o Americans throughout the U.S. and Latin America, manifest in salsa's structure are socio-cultural gendered conceptions reflective of Latin America's male dominated conventions. As scholar Sheenagh Pietrobruno explains, gender-specific identities in salsa dancing are constructed based on a set of machista attitudes that support an active male, considered the "lead" and passive female, referred to as the "follow."⁸⁸ As a partner dance, although rules and expectations differ regionally, the man is generally expected to invite the woman onto the dance floor. This is expressive of the prevailing attitude that being the "lead" affords the men agency to choose the woman who will "follow" his direction through the movement patterns. Female virtuosity and skill are primarily perceived through her ability to be led through patterns and her ability to respond to male orchestrated spin sequences; both examples of how the female is part of the show rather than a director of it. Though there is the possibility for women to express themselves during improvisational sections, this depends on whether the style of salsa or the individual male lead will suspend the partner connection. However, as Pietrobruno observed, despite these contrived, unbalanced

⁸⁸ Pietrobruno, Sheenagh. Salsa and its Transnational Moves. (New York: Lexington Books, 2006).

gender roles, most participants “are not interested in objecting to stereotyped gender fabrications” in classes, social dancing, or professional performances.⁸⁹ It is possible the inequality between male and female dancing participants reflects the dance’s creation as well as salsa’s musical past. For example, recognized founders and legends of the On-2/NY and On-1/LA styles are almost always men such as the Vasquez Brothers, Rogelio Morelos, Eddie Torres, Frankie Martinez, Jayson Molina. Of well-known female dancers, only two come to my mind independent of a male partner: Joby Brava and Josie Neglia of the LA style. Furthermore, examining the musical component of salsa, throughout its history, the litany of male names greatly overshadows the few famous female contributors such as Celia Cruz, La Lupe, and La India, who are often managed and sing with all-male casts. Although recent scholarship examines the rise of all-female bands in certain salsa producing nations, the gender imbalance is likely an ingrained element of the dance.

Asi se baila: Salsa Dancing in Mexico

The historical popularity of *danzón* and *son* in dance halls throughout Mexico City facilitated salsa dancing’s entrance into the performance repertoire of the capital city. *Salones de baile* first appeared in the capital city during the late 19th century as part of multi-purpose structures that provided a space for dancing but also housed other festivities such as religious gatherings or public service meetings.⁹⁰ Yet, as Mexican dance scholar, Amparo Sevilla, explains, two significant factors transformed the physical space where dance occurred: the large-scale migration from rural settings to the urban

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁹⁰ Sevilla, 34.

landscape of Mexico City and secularization. As a result of these two phenomena, “pulquerías, tepacherías, cantinas, patios de vecindades,” and even the streets were used by the urbanized masses as dancing outlets.⁹¹ In response to this trend, new salones opened, making possible the containment of dancing within sanctioned spaces, as well as preserving the reputation of dance’s participants. As Sevilla explains, these salones represented a semi-public atmosphere, within which the dancing bodies were able to express and enjoy themselves without fear of religious restraint or punishment.⁹² Furthermore, these salones represented an escape from the vast, anonymous capital city where people had few opportunities to forge relationships. Yet, the term semi-public reveals the duality of these spaces made private by entrance fees or specific clothing requirements, and yet public by the way in which the dancers and musicians with the resources to enter formed an interactive community.

Though many of Mexico City’s upper classes enjoyed salones, the most dynamic participants belonged to the lower classes. By the 1920s, the new salones were constructed to specifically house dances. These spaces were designed to promote partner dancing, indicative of *danzón* and *son*’s rise to popularity in the capital city during this period. Though there were innumerable salones de baile located throughout Mexico City proper and the surrounding neighborhoods during the 1920s, it was during this time that three out of four of Mexico City’s most famous salones opened. These historic cultural sites included: *Salón México*, “situado en la calle de El Pensador Mexicano” near the Eje

⁹¹ Ibid., 34.

⁹² Ibid., 34.

Lázaro Cardenas,⁹³ Salón Colonia located minutes outside of downtown Mexico City in Colonia Obrera,⁹⁴ and Salón Los Ángeles, located in Colonia Guerrero.⁹⁵ It was not until the mid 1950s, that the last of Mexico City's list of memorable salones was complete with the construction of The California Dancing Club, located outside of downtown on one of Mexico City's oldest roads, la calzada Tlalpan. However, by the 1960s, salones were losing their patrons due to rising unemployment rates, questions of safety in several of Mexico City's neighborhoods, the popularity of the television, and Mexico's adoption of other musical forms such as rock n' roll. As a result, not only have Salón México and Salón Colonia been remodeled or torn down, but danzón and son have also been widely silenced within the capital city.⁹⁶ Yet, some "semi-public" spaces for partner dancing still exist in the form of Salón Los Ángeles, The California Dancing Club, more recent salones such as Salón Caribe, Salon Social Romo, and Salón Hidalgo, and dance clubs. However, the difference between the salones of the past and those of today is that salsa has become the popular music and dance.

Mexico City's historical tradition of salones and acceptance of salsa music fostered an environment of willing participants to learn the On-1/LA style in the late 1990s. Prior to Carlos Carmona's introduction of the formal On-1/LA salsa "en línea," the prevalent form of salsa in the capital city was "salsa callejera," (street salsa) also described as "bailando líricamente."(dancing lyrically).⁹⁷ Emerging concurrent with the

⁹³ Jiménez, Armando. Sitios de rompe y rasga en la Ciudad de México: Salones de Baile, Cabarets, Billares, Teatros. (México: Editorial Océano de México, 1998), p. 19.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 28.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 31.

⁹⁶ See Sevilla, 39-41.

⁹⁷ These two terms came up repeatedly during interviews with Carlos Carmona, Miguelito Castillo, Gabriel Chavéz, Andres Rosales, and Miguel Herrera.

rise of sonideros, the terms “callejera” and “líricamente” reflect how the listening public created movement vocabularies spontaneously in the streets to fulfill their need to dance, to express how the music made them feel. Therefore, the steps and patterns of this salsa mix elements of rock n’roll, cumbia, and other dances popular within specific barrios. As a result, this salsa callejera does not depend on learning specific techniques, training, or composing choreographies.

Carlos Carmona and several of Mexico City’s accomplished salsa dancers identified having grown up listening to salsa and watching salsa callejera as a stimulating their desires to learn the structured version of salsa. According to Carmona, his interest in bringing salsa to Mexico happened during a trip to the U.S. in 1997 when he had the opportunity to watch salsa dancers whose technique differed from Eddie Torres.⁹⁸ Like most involved in salsa dancing, Carmona has always been impressed and inspired by Eddie Torres’s accomplishments but he did not feel an attachment to the On-2/New York style. Specifically, Carmona states, “no me atrae personalmente. Me daba cuenta que para mi – nosotros estamos acostumbrados a pisar con el pie derecho al frente en uno – y hacemos uno dos tres cuatro cinco seis siete.”⁹⁹ Thus after seeing the LA style, Carmona notes, “fui desarrollando mi propio estilo – definiendo mis propios pasos.”¹⁰⁰

Carmona’s developing steps were only part of what he introduced to Mexico when he returned to the capital city. With the assistance of Andres “El Maestro” Rosales, instructional videos, and an array of music, Carmona projected salsa videos on the walls

⁹⁸ Interview with Carlos Carmona. August 16, 2008.

⁹⁹ Interview with Carlos Carmona August 16, 2008. “It wasn’t attractive to me personally. I realized that for me, we (Mexicans) are accustomed to step with the right foot forward on the first count. So we do one, two, three, four, five, six, seven.”

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., “with time, I developed mi own style, defining my own steps.”

of the club Rosales owned, simultaneously learning and teaching the dance form. The core members of Salsabor; Carmona, Victor Burgos, Gaby Bernal, and Gerardo Ramírez, perfected their interpretations of the On-1/LA salsa through continued video instruction and choreographies. Yet, the pivotal moment for salsa in Mexico City occurred in the year 2000 when Victor, Gaby, Carmona, and his partner at the time were invited to perform at the Puerto Rico Bacardi Salsa Congress. Victor and Gaby reminisce, “it was very good to see that all the Mexican salseros, whether actually from Mexico, or from Los Angeles...It was in Puerto Rico that we learned what the ‘L.A. style’ was all about.”¹⁰¹ After this congress, Salsabor temporarily dissolved as Carmona relocated to the Los Angeles- San Diego area, Victor and Gaby created Salsa con Clave, and Gerardo formed Salsa Caliente. Though taking different paths, Victor, Gaby, and Carmona honed their skills with the aid of L.A. elite dancers. For Carmona, living in the U.S. enabled him to learn new techniques and movement patterns from classes and social dancing that he introduced upon his 2001 return. For Victor and Gaby, invitations to travel between Mexico City and the U.S. for congress performances allowed them to consistently integrate and introduce new ideas to the Mexico salsa scene after weekends of working with high-level dancers. As a result of these exchanges and experiences with On-1/LA salsa in the U.S., Victor, Gaby, and Carmona not only expanded the salsa repertoire of the capital city, but also of the republic as they traveled to give workshops and classes. According to Carmona, many of Mexico’s current directors in Oaxaca, Cuernavaca, Acapulco, Yucatán, and various other locations began dancing at his workshops. Though

¹⁰¹ Interview with Dena Burroughs June 2002.

http://www.tosalsa.com/goto.asp?http://www.tosalsa.com/forum/interviews/interview020615dena_victor_gaby.html

this story of salsa's arrival and travels throughout Mexico does not exist in official records, many Mexico City and Mexican dancers share recollections of this series of events, corroborating Carmona's memory.

Chapter 2:

Repeating Musical Mimesis

On stage at the Mambo Café, Yambao Orquesta appears with a sense of visual coherence in various shades and designs of black t-shirts and jeans. Instruments in hand, the band members begin to mark the clave beat accompanied by the raspy sounds of the cáscara that quickly become secondary to the several measures of brass solo.

Approaching the front with two male vocal assistants, Andy brings the microphone to his mouth in time to capture the words “Se que tu no quieres que a yo te quiera” (I know that you don’t want me to want you) as they emerge from his body. Coupled with the familiar notes played by the horn section, Andy’s wave-like vocal intonation reveals to this Mexico City audience that for the next four minutes Oscar D’Leon is in the house.

Comprised of salsa listeners and dancers of various levels, the crowd anticipates the climax, waiting to hear the word “Llorarás” sung by Andy and his vocal accompaniment. However, the musical structure keeps the audience in suspense as the beginning sounds of the horns, cáscara, and clave enter into another solo section. The three front men take advantage of this section to visually titillate the audience by dancing a short choreographed sequence of turns and low-kicks before re-addressing and fulfilling the audience’s desire to hear their harmonized voices.

Every Wednesday and Friday for the past three months, the Yambao Orquesta has guided their audience through popular salsa hits from midnight until 3 a.m. at this

Mexico City club.¹⁰² While the group may be relatively new to the Mambo Café, they come with an established track record. Since 2003, Yambao has played in various other salsa clubs throughout Mexico City. However, the orquesta gained wide recognition in their home country of Colombia before beginning their short-term visits to Mexico. Having traveled to neighboring Venezuela, Argentina, and European countries such as Spain and Germany, Yambao has varied and extensive experience in the salsa scene. At the age of 29, Andy is a veteran on the stage. He has been singing and touring with Yambao for the past four years and with other groups since the age of 16. Andy solidified his reputation as a formidable singer before joining Yambao when he performed with famed “Reina de la salsa,” Celia Cruz on her tour a few years before her death in 2003.

Although Andy, the other vocalists, and the musicians have years of experience and training, this is not the reason the group only practices once a week for their six hours minimum of live performance. The limited rehearsal time is reflective of how the group’s archive and repertoire is primarily comprised of non-original work. Although Yambao is able to slip in a few original works during a night of performance, they primarily reproduce the musical compositions of commercialized salsa hits. In addition to covering Venezuelan Oscar D’Leon, the group also plays popular songs of Puerto Rican Hector Lavoe, Panamanian Ruben Bladés, New York’s Típica ’73, Colombian Grupo Niche and Puerto Rican Gilberto Santa Rosa. What is important about noting the nationalities of these famous salsa performers that become embodied in Mambo Café through the bodies, instruments, and voices of Yambao is that none of them are Mexican. Given that Mexico

¹⁰² Between July 7 and August 27, I was living in Mexico City where I went every Wednesday night to the Mambo Café to dance. During this time, it was the most popular night of the week for salseros to go and dance. It was also during this stay in Mexico City I interviewed Andy, Noel Lopez and Antonio Barud. Noel and Antonio were playing at another local club, Salon Caribe when I interviewed them.

is not a site of original salsa production without recognized national or international artists, Yambao's performance is in part reflective of who has been able to reach the pinnacle of commercial success in salsa music on a global level. Furthermore, Yambao's performance reveals what the audience at Mambo Café wants to hear and is most familiar with. It is also worth noting that Yambao maintains their spot at the Mambo Café based on their consistent, successful, and accurate mimicry of well-known salsa performers. The group's limited practice time indicates the regularity with which they play certain songs, which also suggests this Mexico City crowd's lack of exposure to or conscious rejection of lesser-known salsa compositions.

Yambao's Colombian nationality makes them an anomaly among groups of primarily Mexican musicians in the broader realm of live salsa performances in Mexico City. However, aurally, Yambao is nearly indistinguishable from other local groups. The sonic similarity between the "Llorarás" of Yambao and Mexican Grupo Lopez at El Salon Caribe or Los Generales de la Salsa performing at Salon Social Romo are examples of how a successful salsa performance in Mexico City is one that accurately mimics the sounds of the original composition. Despite the different number of band members, instrumentation, and musical knowledge between Yambao and their Mexican counterparts, Yambao's performance of cover songs raises questions about the why musicians with the capacity to perform and create original pieces would consistently re-create non-original pieces. Though Mexico City has numerous venues and bands that perform live salsa music, for the purposes of my analysis of musical participation, I will focus on the three aforementioned groups. At stake in using these groups as case studies

is exploring the relationship between bodily expression and the motivating factors that perpetuate the participation of whole groups as well as individual musicians.

This chapter will follow three considerations for how the live performance of salsa in Mexico City expresses the lack of musical training necessary to facilitate original compositions, exists as a musical re-enactment devoid of salsa's cultural and historical context, and creates shared and familiar corporal memories through repeating commercialized songs. Specifically, the live performance enables a consideration of the way in which the body becomes the primary conduit for (re)creation and knowledge. As Michael Taussig explains, vision has been historically marked as the as the key site from which the body learns to produce copies. However, the way Mexican musicians cover popular salsa songs inadvertently supports Taussig's proposition that the materiality of the body be examined as a way of (re) producing types of knowledge.¹⁰³ What is unique about Mexican musicians performing salsa is that most cannot read music and are thus unable to access this archive of musical composition. However, the performers utilize their body as a mechanism for interpreting the music, relying on their ear to signal the accurate execution of a piece. More than just the ear, the body is forced into a state of heightened awareness as it must mold and shape itself in order to produce the music's sonic qualities.

What is problematic about the mimetic performance is that it does not require an engagement or knowledge of salsa's historical roots or artists. The socio-historical disconnect embodies Marxist political theorist, Frederic Jameson's observations and

¹⁰³ Taussig, Michael. *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*. (New York: Routledge), p. 1-43.

critiques of postmodern cultural production. According to Jameson, as the “aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production,”¹⁰⁴ reproductions, such as the Mexican live salsa performance, become divorced from their initial point of reference.¹⁰⁵ In the Mexican context, the live performance becomes a simpler copy of commercial productions because in many cases, the musicians do not possess a level of training comparable to the original artists. This is especially important for considering how the Mexico City re-production of salsa songs excludes any improvisation, reflective of the paucity of musical skills and the desire to adhere to the script of the original. Reflecting on these mimetic productions, Jameson’s definition of the postmodern pastiche as “the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language”¹⁰⁶ is particularly adept at capturing the essence of the live performance. That many performers in Mexico City do not have a connection to the specific socio-political environment from which salsa emerged, presents them with the challenge of interpreting songs without necessarily understanding the meanings imbedded in the sounds and lyrics. This intentional mimesis is likely motivated by both the musicians’ personal feelings of satisfaction after an accurate performance as well as external forces. Specifically, the role of the audience is an important factor to consider in terms of how their requests for familiar songs may inform the repertoires of the live performance.

The repetition of specific songs has a dual effect within the Mexico City context: providing an environment of predictability for the musicians and patrons, while also

¹⁰⁴ Jameson, Fredric. Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 4.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

inhibiting the expression of new memories and sonic experiences. The selection of widely recognized songs indicates how specific “hit models” facilitated the commercial success of salsa as a popular music genre. These models function to guarantee a familiar experience for listeners despite differing geographical, political, or national affiliations. Specifically referencing diasporic Puerto Rican and Cuban communities, scholar Francis Aparicio states of salsa, “the repeated melodies, rhythms, riffs, and instrumentation provide a sense of familiarity to the displaced community of listeners and an auditive, sensorial instance for reconstructing the cultural self and collective memory.”¹⁰⁷ Yet, Mexican listeners likely do not share this sensory reconnection and reconstruction with a collective, cultural memory. This is partially because most are not living in the diaspora, but also because salsa’s musical structure and instrumentation are not part of Mexican cultural productions. Therefore, the live performances in Mexico City clubs become “merely substitutions for or resistances to recollections, to readings or acknowledgements of memory”¹⁰⁸ as the body repeats itself as a copy rather than creating new expressions of memories. However, as Freud explains, the sonic repetition serves as a site of fulfillment for the musicians as “each fresh repetition seems to strengthen the mastery they are in search of.”¹⁰⁹ The musicians and patrons depend on the repetition to create a shared sensorial experience, one that provides stability and personal fulfillment.

¹⁰⁷ Aparicio, Frances. Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music, and Puerto Rican Cultures. (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), p. 90

¹⁰⁸ Gilpin, Heidi. “Lifelessness in movement or how do the dead move? Tracing displacement and disappearance for movement performance.” in Corporealities: Dancing knowledge, culture and power. ed. Susan Leigh Foster. (New York: Routledge. 1996), p.111.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.

Mi cuerpo: Learning to Play Music

Being from Colombia, the Yambao complicates an exploration of salsa's live reproduction in the Mexican context. One significant difference between Yambao and several of the local Mexico City groups is their technical ability to play music. Several of Yambao's musicians, including Andy, have received some type of formal training for the instrument they play, and can also read music. While the local Mexico City groups play many of the same songs as Yambao, including Oscar D'Leon's hit "Llorarás," their execution stems from a different modality of interpreting musical cues. Rather than rely on their visual capabilities, Mexican musicians often depend on their body to learn musical compositions. For example, Noel Lopez has been the percussionist for his family's band, El Grupo Lopez, for the past 13 years but has never taken lessons or learned how to read music. Another local drummer, Antonio Barud, of Los Generales de la Salsa, has also been learning to play the drums for the past three years without formal guidance. El Grupo Lopez has six members, of which only the pianist has had formal training, and out of the 11 Generales, only the trumpet player possesses musical knowledge. Both Noel and Antonio credit the ear as being of primary importance to their learning experiences.

For these men, and the other band members without formal training, the body becomes the mechanism through which they learn music. Both drummers focus their attention on listening to the original songs, and with their bodies and instruments, attempt to recreate the sounds as accurately as possible. This trial and error method reflects the heightened sense of corporal awareness that is required to keep control over their movements to produce the ideal sounds. Both men indicated that without being confined

to the rigid nature of the score, they are able to play the music based on how they “feel” the music. Although this method puts at risk the technical precision of the performance, it permits the musician’s to be more conscious of how their bodies are involved in the creative process. For Noel, Antonio and other Mexican musicians that cannot rely on written texts to guide their musical learning and performance experiences, the body becomes a powerful tool for correcting and creating methods to achieve the sounds of original salsa compositions.

Although the groups Los Generales de la Salsa and El Grupo Lopez may not necessarily reflect the situation of all Mexico City groups, they do provide insight as to why Mexico is not known for its original salsa compositions. For example, both Noel and Antonio described being unable to find musical instructors, schools, or programs when they were learning to play their instruments. Unlike salsa producing nations such as Cuba, where the government supports national musical programs, there is no state supported facility in Mexico to provide formal musical training opportunities. Furthermore, Noel and Antonio expressed a lack of unofficial educational programs or resources for aspiring musicians to use as part of their development. The lack of official and non-official infrastructures may partially account for the high number of ear-trained musicians in Mexico City.

Without access to information, many Mexican musicians demonstrate little knowledge about the polyrhythmic structure of the music they play. For example, even though all instrumentation and vocals are supposed to be arranged around the clave in salsa, Noel follows the piano. According to Noel, the pianist directs the score because he has the most musical knowledge and formal training. Antonio recognizes that as group’s

clave player, he is in charge of controlling the progression and tempo during live performance, and yet, during practice sessions, it is the trumpet player who explains musical terminology and maintains the structural cohesion. In both of these groups, the formally trained musicians are in charge of any original composition that occurs. For Los Generales, compositions happen during group practices where Antonio and the other band members offer ideas and rely on the trumpet player to transform them into scores and lyrics. Noel expressed a similar process and leadership bestowed upon the pianist as the creative body. While I do not know the extent of training the trumpet and pianist have received, salsa's score requires a complex interplay between instruments. The difficulty in the scenario of one member composing for the group is that they may not possess sufficient knowledge of all the instruments that would result in a sophisticated composition. The creative process may also be hindered by the limited knowledge and skills of the other group members that would be necessary to learn and execute an original piece of music.

Por eso yo canto salsa: Mimicry of the Greats

Despite being skilled musicians with original compositions, Yambao is useful for considering how, like lesser-trained Mexican musicians, they are in the position of primarily performing salsa covers. While it may seem peculiar to reference both Austrian psychiatrist Sigmund Freud and French literary theorist, Roland Barthes in a discussion about salsa's musical performance, these scholars provide useful insight for considering the psychological and bodily motivations for conscious imitation. As Freud describes, "we are continually taking in objects we desire, continually identifying with or imitating

these objects, and *continually being transformed by them.*”¹¹⁰ It is important to note that that within the Mexican context, the artists use their bodies only to achieve vocal and instrumental imitation of the most popular salsa artists such as Marc Anthony, Hector Lavoe, and Oscar D’Leon. The musicians do not attempt assume the identity of those they perform with regards to physical appearance or personal behavior patterns. In this regard, the bodily mimesis only creates a partial imitation of the object they desire.

Given that the Mexican musicians rely on recordings of these artists to achieve imitative sounds, it is likely that many have never seen videos or live performances of the songs they cover. Coming from Colombia, where salsa has been accepted into the national repertoire of musical production and has been visited by many popular salsa artists, it is possible that Yambao actively chooses to only imitate the sonic qualities. However, it is not the intention nor within the scope of this paper to explore the tour routes of the famous salsa artists being mimicked on the Mexico City stage. Yet, it is worth noting that Mexico has traditionally not been a popular site to visit, thus limiting the exposure to and connection with the performance of famous artists. Without access to or perhaps by electing not to depend on visual performance cues, the Mexican context has developed its own style of live enactment based on the re-production of a specific musical sound.

This imitation is complicated by Barthes’s notion of the grain, understood as something certain musical artists possess beyond the physical, tangible performance that

¹¹⁰ Diamond, Elin. “The Violence of “We”: Politicizing Identification.” in Critical Theory and Performance. ed. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 396

is not only uniquely individual but also irreproducible.¹¹¹ According to Barthes, the grain exists beyond the phenosong and genosong that beget the performance. The phenosong is described as “the phenomena, all the features which belong to the structure of the language being sung, the rules, the genre, the coded form of the melisma, the composers idiolect, the style of interpretation.”¹¹² The genosong is the way in which the melody explores language through “the volume of the singing and speaking voice, the space where significations germinate ‘from within language and in its very materiality.’”¹¹³ For many of salsa’s famous artists, their grain, the way in which their bodies moved the listeners in an indescribable way, was a contributing factor to their success. Yet, in the Mexico City context, no matter how accurate the cover artists are, they will never embody the grain. Not only that, but as Marxist literary critic, Walter Benjamin asserts, “even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.”¹¹⁴ For Benjamin, beyond the grain, exists the “unique” aura consisting of a space and time of creation that cannot be replicated by even the most perfect reproduction.¹¹⁵ It is precisely this aura that is lost in the technical reproduction of original salsa music.

In addition to the elusive grain and lost aura, the re-productions do not account for one of the most important elements of the salsa experience: the soneo. This call and response section has allowed the widely recognized salsa musicians and vocalists to reach stardom by demonstrating their musical training, creativity, and knowledge. During the

¹¹¹ Barthes, Roland. “Grain of the Voice.” *Image- Music – Text*. (Hill and Wang, 1978), p. 181.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 182.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 182.

¹¹⁴ Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed, Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), p. 263.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 263.

soneo, the artists “deconstruct the real by producing alternative imaginaries”¹¹⁶ through the improvised polyrhythmic and vocal expressions of memories and histories contained within the body. As Antonio from Los Generales and Noel from Grupo Lopez stated, the live performance in the Mexican context only imitates and never creates. In this sense, the re-productions are simple copies of complex originals that will never be able to capture the grain or articulate the meanings located within the original production.

It is worth noting that the list of male performers re-presented aurally on stage reflects how the Mexican context re-creates the gendered division of salsa. The groups performing in Mexico City rarely, if ever, had a female in the group. In the event a woman was present in performance, she was the vocalist. This phenomenon is demonstrative of the genre’s gender disparity that seemed to only allow women, such as Celia or La Lupe, to participate as singers. However, these few notable female voices are not performed by the all-male casts in the Mexican context. What is most important about the forms of mimicry embodied in live Mexican salsa performance is that focusing only on the musical element does not hold the musicians accountable for having any connection with the original artists or history of the music.

Otra oportunidad: Repeating Sensations

Yambao, El Grupo Lopez and Los Generales de La Salsa have an established list of commercial songs they polish once or twice a week before performance engagements. This is reflective of the established set of songs they repeat so often that they do not

¹¹⁶ Jottar, 10.

require constant refinement. For example, during a night of live performance, the following list of commercial salsa songs are almost always heard:¹¹⁷

Hector Lavoe:	Mi Gente El Cantante El Todopoderoso
Ruben Blades:	Pedro Navaja
Louie Ramirez & Ray de La Paz:	Mentiroso
Oscar D' Leon:	Llorarás
Típica '73:	La Candela
Gilberto Santa Rosa:	Juliana, que mala eres Un monton de estrellas Que manera de quererte
Ismael Rivera:	Si volvieras a mi

This list does not encompass or reflect all the commercial salsa songs selected for performance in Mexico City. However, the constant repetition of these songs by the three groups under review is expressive of the musicians' desire to masterfully re-create the sounds of the original. This mastery of aural sensations is reflective of the mimesis in the live performance, but also provides a sense of gratification and fulfillment for the musicians. As Freud observes, this "repetition, the re-experiencing of something identical is clearly in itself a source of pleasure,"¹¹⁸ where pleasure becomes the sense of accomplishment. What is problematic about Freud's assertion is not repetition's link to pleasure but the possibility of exact, identical re-production. As Phelan and other scholars argue, the value and the difficulty of examining performance as a way of reading alternative histories is the way in which it evades the economy of reproduction. Despite

¹¹⁷ This brief song list is based on my personal experience dancing to these songs week after week. Certain songs such as *Llorarás* and *La Candela* were specifically mentioned in interviews with musicians as well as dancers.

¹¹⁸ Gilpin, 111.

the fact that El Grupo Lopez can play “Llorarás” every night, each performance is unique and cannot happen again. Like the way in which the imitation of an original will never be the original, no matter how perfectly it re-creates sounds, aesthetics, or movements, it will never be the same as previous or future performances. Because Mexico does not produce its own salsa artists or compositions, it is perhaps the constant need to achieve at exact replication that motivates this repetition.

This repetition also presents a paradoxical performance as the constant re-play functions as an attempt to avoid the inevitable loss of the present while simultaneously perpetuating the loss of original corporal articulations of memory and history. The very nature of the performance, as scholars such as Phelan and Lepecki describe, is characterized by ephemerality and disappearance. The moment in which the Mexico City live performance begins is also the moment of its loss as the sonic-space created by the bodies and instruments of musicians departs from the present to enter into the unconscious. Thus the pleasure of repetition becomes more than the musicians’ personal sense of accomplishment but is also perceived through their attempt to avoid the inevitable evaporation of their performance. Once the liveness disappears from the stage, it takes root in a part of us, is transplanted into memory, which for Phelan is unmarked by representation. However, the Mexican live performance repeats itself to escape its own loss, to avoid disappearing into a site where it cannot be recalled from memory. For the musicians who make their living perfecting an aural mimicry of popular salsa, “each performance registers how much [they] want to believe that what [they] know, [they] see

is not all [they] really have, all [they] really are.”¹¹⁹ The nightly reproduction allows the musicians to feel as if they have mastered a skill, as if they have created something that evades the inevitable disappearance into anonymity at the end of an hour-long set.

The nightly repetition, which allows the musicians to momentarily avoid a sense of loss and anonymity, also creates a sonic stability and predictability for themselves and the Mexico City audience. Nestor Garcia Canclini observes that Mexico City “cannot be encompassed by any description. If we look at it from the inside, from the perspective of local daily practices, we see only fragments, outskirts, locations determined by a myopic perception of the whole.”¹²⁰ This metropolitan center is a national and international commercial center, an industry leader, and one of the primary sites of national migration that constantly makes and re-makes the face of the city. As anthropologist Amparo Sevilla suggests the dance halls function as a way to provide stability and interpersonal exchanges amidst the fragmentation and unpredictability of the city. The shared practice of repeating sonic-scapes in the Mexico City live salsa performance unites the musicians and audience in a dependable community. While the constant repetition of songs is monotonous, it is welcomed within the dance hall as a representational fixture of knowing what comes next. For the audience and musicians, possessing the knowledge of what they will encounter during a night of live performance, gives them a sense of control that they may lack in the throes of life in Mexico City. This may also be indicative of Jameson’s observations of postmodern cultural production and consumption. Specifically, Jameson explains that “the atomized or serial “public of mass

¹¹⁹ Phelan, 178.

¹²⁰ Canclini, Nestor García. “Mexico: cultural globalization in a disintegrating city. *American Ethnologist* 22.4 (Nov. 1995): 748.

culture wants to see the same thing over and over again, hence the urgency of the generic structure.”¹²¹ In this sense, the live performance acquires a ritualistic like characteristic that relies on the sameness of sonic and corporeal experiences to combat the threat of disappearance, while also providing the musician with fulfillment in the secular dance hall. This process of entering the dance hall, unpacking instruments, taking the stage, and packing up allows these musicians to become idols among the dance hall community with the capacity to continually aim for perfection. Amidst the changing faces and spaces of Mexico City, the repetition of commercial salsa songs serves as the clave for live performance, ensuring physical and sonic stability for its participants.

¹²¹ Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible*, (New York and London: Routledge, Chapman & Hall. Inc., 1992), p. 19.

Chapter 3:

Dancing Dancing Dancing

Approaching the Mambo Café, visitors are welcomed by the bright green lights and fake palm trees that distinguish the building from dimly lit neighboring edifices. Symbolizing the separation between the public, anonymous Mexico City street life and the private sphere of the dance hall, bouncers control the red velvet rope, through which visitors pass. Once inside, club policy mandates all bags must be left with the coat check for a cost of two dollars before proceeding to the next attendant waiting to collect the five-dollar basic cover charge. For those who arrive early to take the salsa class offered by SalsaRika, the cover charge is seven dollars. The five, seven or nine dollar cost to enter the club serves as a dual marker of either the economic privilege some participants possess or of the dedication to the dance for those with fewer monetary resources. While it is possible that dancers fit into both categories of being economically secure and devoted, as Amparo Sevilla asserts money is often a “recurso que suele ser escaso entre éstos.”¹²² Within the spatial construction of the dance hall or dance club, the division between the two groups may be generally perceived by where people choose to sit in relation to the dance floor. Inside the Mambo Café, the majority of the space is filled with tables extending from the entryway where the cover charge is taken to directly in front of the floor. Those who choose to sit on the sides and directly in front of the dance floor are generally dancers of various skill levels. Those who position themselves further away are

¹²² Sevilla, 39. “a scarce resource among them.”

frequently non-dancers often concerned with socializing and demonstrating their presence through economic rather than bodily prowess.

The bodies that fill spaces of the Mambo are spatially divided depending on the role they perform within this semi-public environment. As Amparo Sevilla describes, “vemos así dentro del orden social se encuentra la instauración de un orden corporal; existen diversos procesos sociales a través de los cuales se instruyen y administran los cuerpos conformándolos, moldeándolos y apresionándolos en aparatos e instituciones.”¹²³ Inside this environment, dance hall participants partake in the explicit and implicit ritualistic practices and customs that depend on a shared understanding of acceptable corporeal movements and behaviors that sustain the spatial and social separation between dancers, non-dancers, employees, and musical performers.

Dancers facilitate the spatial and social mapping based on where they physically place themselves in the dance hall. For example, amateur, intermediate, and professional dancers are distinguished by what time they arrive, where on the dance floor they place themselves, and their physical appearance. Specifically, those arriving at approximately 9:00 are either directors preparing to give the dance lesson or people who have come to take the class. Yet, despite having paid the seven-dollar entrance fee and having claimed prime tables, many leave directly following the class. This departure is often timed concurrent with the arrival of more advanced dancers, filling in the vacant spaces. The level of dancers is perceived by the spatial distinction, with beginners on the left and progressing in skill to reach professional on the far right side of the dance floor. Next to

¹²³ Sevilla, 37. “we see inside the social order the creation of a physical order; through various social processes bodies are instructed and directed, molding them into apparatuses and institutions.”

these advanced dancers, the musicians occupy the corner space next to the stage, where they have easy access to the stage entrance and the back door of the Mambo Café. The group remains segregated from the dancing participants until they perform and between their sets. On the left side of the dance floor, the deejay remains in his booth separated from the club's patrons by a clear plexiglass shield and elevated by several stairs. Though there is no door separating the entrance into the booth, most participants do not directly approach the deejay to place requests. In spite of their close physical proximity, it is however, only the employees of the Mambo Café that maneuver between these groups, serving as a corporeal connection.

As a generally accepted practice, patrons of the Mambo Café do not approach the bar to place orders but rather contact a server for any requests. This rule likely functions to avoid mass congregations at the bar as well as provide jobs for the roughly ten servers employed by the club. Because dancers spend a majority of the evening in constant motion, moving between the floor and their tables, the employees focus their attention on more stationary participants in the club. This is reflective of the way non-dancers, distanced from the constant flux of the floor are more likely to purchase and leisurely consume beverages. At the price of four dollars per bottle of water, with beers, sodas, and mixed drinks being more expensive, dancers do not generally purchase more than one or two beverages in a night. In addition, regardless of skill level, salsa dancers do not have more than a couple alcoholic beverages in order to ensure consideration of other dancers as well as accurate execution of the dance. Thus, patrons who elect to sit at tables are most often non-dancers who have come to the Mambo Café with the economic capacity to pay for an evening of drinking and socializing in the club environment. It is possible

that this population of customers come to enjoy the spectacle of dancing and live performance, yet, there is likely another motivating factor for their presence at the club. Given that Mambo Café makes most of its money from non-dancing patrons, servers are most attentive to their needs. As Sevilla asserts, the sense of prestige and importance can serve a strong enough factor to perpetuate participation. Therefore, it is possible that the non-dancers find fulfillment in the feeling of self-worth that constant attention garners.

SalsaRika's hour and a half long session is taught in such a way that is inclusive of beginners through intermediate dancers. The class begins and ends with everyone on the floor going through a warm-up session of basic steps and turns, creating a corporeal connection between all the dancers. Each level is then given a designated space on the dance floor and provided with at least one instructor to lead them through the footwork and partner patterns. Despite the close quarters, structuring the class this way serves multiple purposes. For example, advertising classes of all levels increases attendance as each group gets individual attention from "professional" company dancers. By constructing an "all-inclusive," accommodating environment, SalsaRika and the Mambo Café seek to quell fears of not being a good enough dancer, or being too good of a dancer to attend the club. In attempting to eliminate being labeled as a club "for beginners" or for only "professional" level dancers, both SalsaRika and the Mambo Café profit financially from consistent participation in this dance hall atmosphere. The attempt to create a comfortable environment is enhanced as the more beginner dancers, sharing a space are able to see what they can accomplish if they continue classes. Being able to see the tangible results of training often solidifies beginners' future attendance and dedication to learning the dance form. For the more advanced dancers, the sensation of being

esteemed by beginners and the special attention coming from “professional” dancers perpetuates a sense of achievement and development. Equally important for the company dancers is the satisfaction derived from being seen and venerated, which likely serves as a motivating factor for their continued salsa training perfecting choreographed routines and learning other dance forms. Furthermore, like the beginner dancers, these “professional” level dancers find satisfaction in teaching classes, as they are able to immediately appreciate the progression of their students.

Advanced dancers arriving after the salsa class experience the dual possibility of being publicly and privately recognized for their status through their visibly late arrival and lowered cover charges. For example, the person collecting the cover fee is a member of SalsaRika’s company, and in my personal experience, made assumptions about dancers based on their time of arrival. Dancers arriving after the class were often people the attendants identified as “professional” level dancers, those who train and/or perform with local teams. However, the members of SalsaRika made further assumptions regarding new dancers based on with whom they associated themselves. Those considered “professional” by the attendant were not charged and allowed to pass conspicuously, so that other patrons were not aware of their free entrance. The first few times I came to the Mambo Café alone I was charged. When I arrived with the intention of taking the class, I was charged the seven-dollar entrance fee under the assumption I was not a high-level dancer. I never noticed “professional” level dancers coming during the class, so I do not know if they were charged. When I arrived alone after the class, I was charged the entrance fee, and yet, was treated differently when I came with Mexican dancers. Forging relationships with the director of SalsaRika and several other well-

known dancers, the attendants considered me a “professional” level dancer and no longer charged me. Although recognition of status in the form of monetary remissions maintains a secret among the “professional” level dancers, this special treatment connects them in a way that transcends their identification with specific Mexico City dance groups. The acknowledgement creates a temporarily united community of dancers, which regardless of affiliation motivates them to commingle and partake in the formation of this community.

Abran paso: Moving outside the Mambo

The divisions described within the atmosphere of the Mambo Café are not uncommon to other clubs and salones de baile. The above discussion focuses on Mambo Café because it was the club where the most trained dancers went and the club with which I had the most familiarity. Specifically, I rely on Mambo Café as a microcosmic example for understanding interpersonal relationships, expectations, and how bodies move in relationship to one another. My observations above are specific to the Mambo Café but can inform evaluations about other clubs, salones, classes, and dancing performances. For example, in salones de baile such as Salon Caribe and Salon Sociales Romo, the groups who occupy tables closest to the dance floor are often those with the financial capacity to purchase a bottle of alcohol. In my limited experience in these settings, it was almost a reversal of the Mambo Café; dancers sat further back from the stage, where purchasing power was not required to have a table. In other dance clubs, such as La Rondalla, Afro Caribe, Meneo and Paráiso Tropical, a similar division between dancers, band members, deejays, non-dancers, and wait staff was not to be

breached as per an unspoken agreement. Much like the Mambo Café these salones and clubs catered to dancers of various skill levels, often identified by their time of arrival and physical placement in the club. Like the Mambo Café, La Rondalla hosts OurDance Mambo Project, Afro Caribe has Carmona, Meneo presents Danzantillando and Paraíso employs a couple I did not know to give classes, after which trained dancers arrive. In the salones, dancing patrons often had little to no formal training and danced according to how the music moved them. However, among this group, formally trained dancers were widely known and identified based on their dancing style. In these settings it is common practice that trained dancers arrive later in the evening. This is because salones attract an older crowd, which tends to leave by the time formally trained dancers want to get on the floor. What is important is to note that whether in the salon or a club, the same physical, temporal, and spatial divisions exist to define participants.

The contours of this chapter will consider how the continuity of hierarchal divisions among dancers and patrons in various Mexico City semi-public club environments likely fosters a system of mutual reinforcement with classes and professional level performances. The connection between these three salsa dancing environments is significant because they depend on the use of visual cues and corporeal movements to determine the level of recognition and value placed upon individuals. Not only that, but the actual movement patterns of the dancers in social situations and performances emanate from the instructional arena. Beginning with an exploration of why the On-1/LA style has become the most popular dance provides a foundation for understanding the structure and movement vocabularies taught in classes. It is through these classes that students experience divisions based on their skill levels that become

translated into the unspoken conventions of the dance club. The learned movements from class provide the basis for which dancers are able to escape from the chaos of Mexico City life and focus on the way their bodies move. Salsa classes provide students with corporeal knowledge they are able to repeat and in any club and to almost any song. Like the cover musicians, this repetition allows dancers the possibility of achieving a level of perfection in their movements. Though the professional performance is designed for a specific song, much like the social dancing sphere, there is a similar push towards repeating and perfecting the set movement vocabulary. With regard to both the classes and professional performance, the salsa taught in Mexico City decreases the importance placed upon relating the body to the sounds of the music. This results in technical errors and more importantly, timing problems. At stake in examining the disconnect between musical and corporeal knowledge is how it demonstrates Mexico City's limited the possibilities of salsa growth due to its reliance on commercial music and emphasizing the body as a "show" tool. Specifically, in the club and professional performance, the body becomes an entertainment mechanism, scripted and directed, rather than one that translates the sonic construction of the music through improvisation. This effectively causes Mexico City salsa to have a different set of criteria for evaluating successful dancers and performances.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ As previously stated in Chapter 2, from July 7 to August 27th, I frequented the Mambo Café because it was the location where many professional level dancers went to social dance. During this same period I took classes regularly with SalsaRika, Salsabor, Azul y Oro and Our Dance Mambo Project. During this time I also attended exhibitions and competitions where I was familiar with the performers and judges. A majority of the analysis and descriptions in this chapter derive my personal experiences and presence in these various environments.

No digas nada y baila: Social Dancing

The spatial and social divisions that characterize the physical arrangement of dancers in the club setting are further solidified by outfit and footwear selections. According to British media theorist and sociologist Dick Hebdige, the use of fashion is an important tool for subculture participants to distinguish themselves within the group as well as from “outsiders.” Exploring British subcultures such as reggae, punk, and glam-rock during the 1970s, Hebdige is interested in how style becomes a “series of mediated responses” challenging hegemonic conceptions of cultural productions and racial divisions.¹²⁵ The reliance on the visual spectacle is one of the ways in which these subcultures display their politics of presence, their assertion of alterity. Separated temporally, politically, and geographically, the salsa community of Mexico City too utilizes fashion as an integral part of the ritualistic entrance and experience of the dance hall. However, the public performative gestures in Hebdige’s exploration take the form of *salseros*’ private exertions within the dance halls Mexico City. In traditional *salones de baile*, many male participants arrive in button-up, collared shirts, suit jackets, suit pants, and polished shoes while women often arrive in dresses or long skirts and short-sleeved blouses and high heels. Though I have limited experience in *salones de baile*, many participants appeared to be in their mid-30s or older, and used dress to express their refinement as seasoned veterans on the dance circuit. However, I do not have sufficient evidence to further discuss the use of dress in these *salones* as I focused my research on the dance clubs trained dancers attended.

¹²⁵ Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. New York: Methuen & Co, Ltd, 1979. p. 73.

Inverting the model of the salones, beginning and intermediate level dancers commonly project an outward demonstration of refinement similar to the description above while higher-level dancers arrive in informal, relaxed outfits. Because the beginning and intermediate dancers are already informally confined to a specific location in the dance club and on the dance floor, their appearance allows them to present themselves as serious participants. Unable to corporeally express themselves with the ease and sophistication of more advanced dancers, these beginners and intermediates rely on their physical appearance to reveal how much they care about the dance form and being a part of the community. The time spent creating the visual presentation of suit jackets, suit pants, dresses, make-up, and hair allows lower level dancers to demonstrate their dedication in a way they cannot through the dance moves. More advanced dancers however, often arrive in relaxed outfits such as jeans, t-shirts, skirts, tank-tops, and dance shoes. Though these dancers may spend as much time getting ready to go out as lower-level dancers, their informal appearance makes a statement about the way in which they want their dancing abilities and bodily expressions to be the spectacle. However, given that the various skill levels co-exist on the dance floor, being able to see one another results in exceptions to the visual divisions as some participants attempt to mimic or adopt the style of other dancers. Thus, the shoes become the most informative visual cue for properly identifying professional level dancers. Given that for most of these dancers, economic resources are scarce, dance shoes represent not only a fiscal investment but also the time these dancers have devoted and plan on devoting to their dancing careers. Costing upwards of sixty dollars, dance shoes are a commitment that separates those who recreationally take classes and social dance from those who train with companies. The

expense of the shoes motivates dancers to continue participating in the salsa community, while also serving as a subtle marker of achievement and recognition.

The act of dancing is made possible as a result of the shared acceptance of specific gender codes as well as the close proximity of bodies on the floor. The process begins as men approach women with an invitation to dance. It is the generally accepted that males select their partners, following prescribed gender roles of salsa dancing, as well as gendered relationships in Mexican culture. Reflecting the machista construction of the dance form, the man selects the female body over which he wants to exercise control because he initiates the basic step and movement patterns. In the Mexico City context, the machismo extends beyond the movements of the dance to the performance of gender roles as the man guides the female on and off the floor, as if to protect the woman from the crowd or other men. However, in my personal experience, the male's preoccupation with the women's safe movement around the dance floor stops there. Once on the dance floor, the bodies collide with little concern for personal space or injury. The male leads direct their females through movement patterns at almost all costs, even if there dancing bodies in their path. The lack of improvisation will be discussed at greater length, but it is important to note that because there is little to no break in the connection between partners, the male lead relies on learned, scripted patterns to get the couple from one movement to the next.

The sensation of forcing patterns, at times hitting the body parts of others, prompts questions about how the participants have internalized Mexico City chaos. Specifically, the qualities Nestor García Canclini observes of Mexico City's fragmentation, myopia, and chaos are reproduced through the corporeal relationships on

the dance floor. The way partners move around the floor as if they are the only couple replicates the way each person maneuvers through the anonymous city with concern for himself or herself. However, that the constant collisions do not bother the participants enough to leave the floor or modify the way their bodies move, indicates that the movements may not be solely a re-production of external social relations. As Amparo Sevilla suggests, “el placer derivado de la comunión expresiva de esos mismos cuerpos es algo excepcional, por lo que significa una ruptura lúdica con dicha cotidianeidad.”¹²⁶ That is to say, even if the way the bodies move and collide is a manifestation of external pressures, their re-creation is something their own, stimulating gratification from physically feeling the way other bodies move in relation to theirs in a way distinct from ordinary daily practices.

The dance floor’s disordered bodyscape of dance vocabularies and muscle memories transform the individuals into moving texts. Being a partner dance, salsa requires of its participants the ability to read one another. That is to say, a successful follow should not only understand the lead’s executed cues but also be able to predict forthcoming patterns. As dance scholar Sally Ann Ness describes of her experience learning Philippino partner dances, “the knowledge embodied in my dance was in part a knowledge of his dancing, his buoyancy, his timing, his agility, his finely measured touch. It was a knowledge that became embodied through my hands, which “listened” avidly to his in order to move with him.”¹²⁷ This is important as it reflects the way partner dancing facilitates ones knowledge of their own body, albeit through the body of

¹²⁶ Sevilla, 37. “the pleasure derived from the common expression shared by these bodies is something exceptional in the way that it signifies a recreational rupture with daily practices.”

¹²⁷ Ness, Sally Ann. “Dancing in the field: Notes from memory,” in Foster, Susan. Ed. Corporealities: Dancing, Knowledge, Culture and Power. (New York: Routledge, 199), p. 135.

another. For the Mexico City salsa community, the ability to “listen” to another body ensures that the connection between partners is sustained, enabling dancers to execute their movements properly. In order for sequences to follow smoothly, the lead and the follow have to know the weight, force, and presence of their own bodies. Not only is honing the capacity to “listen” important, but as Sevilla observes, the way in which it provides dancers with the opportunity to know themselves, “genera una fuerte sensación de pertenencia social.”¹²⁸ This relationship between the body and social belonging motivates dancers to continue socially dancing salsa as well as to enhance their corporeal knowledge.

Despite the hierarchical divisions among dancers, they share the common goal of transforming the physical space of the dance floor into a mechanism for expressing personal and corporeal histories. Yet, unlike dance scholar Celeste Delgado’s discussion about how improvised movements allows for the body’s release and re-writing of past memories into the present, Mexico City salsa rarely includes improvisational sections.¹²⁹ Therefore, understanding the (hi)stories of Mexico City salsa depends on exploring the scripted movements for deeper meanings. For example, the reliance on pre-determined movements is likely reflective of both Mexico City’s musical repertoire and the nature of the On-1/LA style. With regards to the On-1/LA style, as mentioned in chapter two, the structure of the dance was designed to include little improvisational footwork, often danced to commercialized salsa music lacking intricate polyrhythmic sensations. Similar to the way that the Mexican musicians do not need in-depth musical knowledge to

¹²⁸ Sevilla, 37. “the fact that one can enjoy their own body, through the synchronized movement with other bodies, generates a strong sense of social belonging.”

¹²⁹ Delgado, 17.

perform popular salsa hits, the On-1/LA style does not require the Mexican dancers to corporeally engage with the complexity of the music. Preoccupied with timing their movements to the 1 and the 5, it is likely Mexico City dancers participate because this style is easier to learn than the more complicated five-beat clave sequence. In addition, the On-1/LA style bears similarity to the beats of cumbia, widely familiar in Mexico City. Furthermore, because the On-1/LA is more concerned with the spectacle of partner work, demonstrating male prowess and femininity in its dancers, the Mexico City sensation of being forced through patterns is likely hyperbolic reaction to the LA style. As a result, Mexico City salsa can be characterized its strong “jalador” quality created from jagged and jerky movements.¹³⁰ Embodied in the Mexico City salseros is perhaps the overt masculine desire to get the female from one movement to the next rather than integrate moments of individual talents and musical awareness.

The live musical performance’s consistent repetition, simplistic compositional structure, and lack of the improvisational soneo, creates a familiar, predictable soundscape for dancers. Without the performance of the improvised soneo, dancers do not have the traditional opportunity to temporarily break apart from one another. Therefore, the male lead determines whether or not the couple will enter into solo footwork or maintain the partner connection. While footwork does possess some scripting, dancers are often more able to re-organize the order of patterns or make up new steps without the pressure of their partner guiding them. As many partnered sections require extensive trial and error sessions, improvisation on the dance floor is often avoided to ensure the dancers

¹³⁰ This is a personal characterization based on my own observations and bodily reaction to the dance form.

continued movement without error. Therefore, the adherence to a set script of partner-based movements stifles what rumba scholar Berta Jottar refers to as the “performatic memory” of improvisation that demonstrates not only a “deep knowledge” of the embodied practice, but also the deconstruction of “the real by producing alternative imaginaries.”¹³¹ Much like the rigidity of the musical performance, the limited dancing vocabularies eliminate the body’s articulations of imagined alternatives or personal memories. What the static articulations reveal is the way in which Mexico City salsa dancers prefer familiarity, prefer to repeat and reproduce specific movements.

Ahora me toca a mí: Classroom Instruction

The On-1/LA style is the most widely danced salsa style in Mexico City reflective of the relationships between live salsa performances and dancer preferences, as well as Carlos Carmona’s influence in the salsa community. The desire to learn the On-1/LA style stems from the popular adoption of Carlos Carmona’s philosophy that “nosotros (mexicanos) estamos acostumbrados a pisar con el pie derecho al frente en uno – y hacemos uno dos tres cuatro cinco seis siete.”¹³² It is important to note that this statement about the way Mexicans feel comfortable placing their feet while dancing may be a post-facto rationalization about why the On-1/LA style was accepted. Being titled the man who “brought” salsa to Mexico, Carmona has much at stake in maintaining his credibility and reputation for having developed a style distinct in its patterns and footwork from the U.S. dancers. However, the formation of his movement vocabulary was likely informed by the videos of famous On-1/LA dancers he brought back to Mexico City from trips to

¹³¹ Jottar, 10.

¹³² Interview with Carlos Carmona August 16, 2008. “we as Mexicans are accustomed to step with our right foot in front first – in order to do the one –two-three-four-five-six-seven.”

the United States in the late 1990s. Unlike the way Mexican musicians rely primarily on their bodies to learn salsa music, Carmona and his initial group of students learned to dance based on the way their bodies moved through sequences represented via visual cues on screen.¹³³

The ability to hear the beats of the music is needed in order to properly time steps as well as transform the body into a corporeal interpretation of the composition. However, for this group of incipient salseros, their auditory capacity was not as important as their ability to see and replicate the movements of the bodies that appeared on-screen. Without the live, present bodies available in LA, the Mexico City dancers developed their style and abilities through this mediated learning system. The notable forerunners, Carmona, Victor, Gaby, and Gerardo, represent the embodied mimicry that Mexican musicians lack, as they consciously attempt to replicate the body movements of others. While these four may not promote or perfect accurate imitation, the way their bodies move is directly linked to the way their virtual instructors move. Having established their ability to re-produce the footwork and partner patterns of famous dancers, Carmona, Victor, Gaby, and Gerardo have become the instructional bodies, replacing their screen projection predecessors.

Not only did the video recordings assist in the creation of a Mexican-adapted On-1/LA style, but they also informed the way in which classes are structured and taught. The element of watching footwork patterns and partner sequences has been maintained by current salsa academies. Regularly taking classes with SalsaRika, Azul y Oro, and Salsabor, I experienced all sessions were approximately an hour and a half in length. The

¹³³ Interview with Carlos Carmona August 16, 2008. Interview with Andres Rosales July 26, 2008.

first half of the class focuses on teaching a solo footwork pattern followed by a partnering section. The difficulty of the footwork depends on the level of the dancers, but is taught as a mirroring exercise. The instructor breaks down parts of the pattern with counts, pausing along the way to have the crowd copy his or her steps. This process continues until the sequence has been taught in full, requiring the students to utilize the visual cues and verbalized counts to position their bodies. Similar to the footwork section, the partner instruction requires that students focus on the visual representation and orally noted counts. Because the two bodies move in relation one another, understand physical cues, and to a certain extent predict the movement sequence, the corporeal learning experience becomes of prime importance. Much like the Mexican musicians' dependence on trial and error, salsa students transform their bodies into learning mechanisms, attempting and re-attempting to execute the movements. This element of partner dancing compels dancers to know their own bodies while they simultaneously learn how other bodies move in relation to their own.

Likely so as not to overwhelm or distract the dancers, music is generally withheld until the majority of students are able to accurately mimic the solo or partner pattern. That both instructional sections do not include music until the patterns have been sufficiently learned fosters the notion that salsa dancing can be learned as an entity separate from the musical composition. It also promotes the mentality that a pattern can be learned and applied to any salsa song, without considering the occasional time changes of the music or the reality that many songs are more compositionally complex than commercialized hits. Because of this manner of instruction, students often do not have an awareness of the relationship between the dance and musical timing. This method does

however, provide students with a feeling of accomplishment, having learned two new patterns and more about the ways their bodies can be moved and controlled.

Much like SalsaRika's division of beginners, amateurs, and intermediate dancers in the Mambo Café, the other classes devise a similar inclusive, hierarchical system. In the dance club, SalsaRika had a large amount of physical space to use in separating the approximately 45 students. Similarly, Azul y Oro hold their classes in the salon de baile, Salon Social Romo. Using the entire first floor of the salon, devoid of tables and chairs, Azul y Oro had a vast open space within which to divide the approximately 60 students. The room was divided in accordance with the stage, where company director, Carlos Tierrablanca, demonstrated patterns for the most advanced group of students. Forming a half circle around this group, the beginners with little to no experience were located to the right, while the second level beginners were directly behind the advanced dancers, and to the left side were the intermediate dancers. Carlos Carmona uses a private studio, with much less space than the two previously mentioned academies, but nonetheless facilitates a hierarchal division. A vast majority of Carmona's 25 to 30 students are intermediate to advanced dancers who learn the same partnering series, but all students are instructed the same footwork patterns. Any students who are not at that level were generally located on the left side of the room and works with one another on a modified partner sequence.

For all the above-mentioned academies, the cost of a class is approximately six dollars. Although this excludes certain socio-economic groups, these spaces are designed to be all-inclusive for those who can pay. Regardless of the variable spaces and students, each dancer has a role in the construction of the environment. For example, the directors appear either on stage or at the front of the classroom, symbolic of their prestige and level

of achievement. In the cases of SalsaRika and Azul y Oro, company members instruct sub-groups, imitating the commanding presence of the director. This role of responsibility is a site of satisfaction for these dancers as is their students are tangible markers of accomplishment. That the lower level dancers are arranged in a way that enables them to see what other groups are learning and how other students' progress, fosters desire to get better and progress towards recognition.

While the On-1/LA style is widely taught throughout the capital city, there is one studio that offers instruction in the On-2/NY style. Directed by Miguelito Castillo, OurDance Mambo Project offers classes in a side room of the Academia Balderas. Identical in structure to the On-1/LA classes, Miguelito divides the hour and a half session between a footwork pattern and partner work, separates levels of dancers, and costs approximately five dollars. However, Miguelito's classes have fewer students than other studios, averaging roughly 15 to 20 people. While there are various explanations for this such as holding classes on the same nights as other academies or the studio's location, it is more likely a reflection of the difficulty in learning the On-2/NY style. Being an ex-alum of Carmona, Miguelito is recognized by Mexico City dancers for his presence and training with Salsabor. OurDance Mambo Project is distinguished not only the emphasis on body movement, but also the way in which those movements should be synchronized with the music, characteristic of the On-2/NY style. Miguelito's footwork and partner sections utilize the whole body, incorporating the feet, hips, arms, shoulders, and head to embody the polyrhythmic nature of salsa music.

OurDance Mambo Project classes differ from what Carlos Monsivais observed to be the way Mexicans only move a portion of their body's in salsa dancing. Specifically

comparing Mexican movements with other Latin American groups he states, “el mexicano se menea de la cintura para abajo, el cubano se menea pa’riba, y por eso da la impresión de que es más rápido....Los cubanos y los puertorriqueños alzan los hombros. Nosotros casi no”.¹³⁴ Struggling to describe the way my own body felt taking classes, practicing choreography, and social dancing, this is one of the most accurate articulations of Mexico City’s identifiably distinct form of salsa dancing. In contrast to the On-1/LA instruction, producing dancers only able to move below the hip, Miguelito’s classes are a challenge. Not only are Miguelito’s physical movement patterns more difficult than On-1/LA instruction, he also requires students to listen to the music. While patterns are taught without the initial use of music, during instruction, Miguelito counts the clave beat for students. With the aid of music, Miguelito continues to count the clave and often pauses the music to explain the polyrhythmic composition of salsa in relationship to the dance form. This combination of total body movement and an awareness of the music is significantly more difficult than the alternative Mexico City On-1/LA instructional approaches. Therefore, the students who attend Miguelito’s classes likely participate out of similar aspirations for recognition as the On-1/LA students, but also because of a dedication to learning the complexities of salsa dancing and music.

Bonito y Sabroso: Going Professional

The limited number of students interested in learning the On-2/NY style is an indicator of the even smaller group of dancers dedicated to training with professional teams. This is in part because many professional teams perform On-2/NY

¹³⁴ Monsivais, 139.

choreographies, which only appeals to a specific demographic of salsa dancers.

Furthermore, being part of a professional level team requires dancers to commit several extra hours a week to rehearsals, and increased monetary expenditure for dues and costumes.

Company directors extend invitations to train with performance teams to dancers already skilled in the On-2/NY style or advanced On-1/LA dancers demonstrating potential for learning another style. During my research, I was personally invited to train with Salsabor and OurDance Mambo Project. After my first class with Carmona, he invited me to come to a team practice for what was more like an audition than a rehearsal. After confirming that I danced either style of salsa, Carmona put on a song for 17-year-old Jair and I to dance to. For the next several minutes Jair guided me through intricate partner patterns and spin sequences. When it was all over, Carmona and Jair held an inaudible conversation supplemented by ambivalent shoulder shrugs and head nods before asking me to learn choreography. In the case of OurDance Mambo Project, Miguelito was out of town for the first month of my stay in Mexico City. When he returned, I scheduled private lessons because aside from salsa, he is also recognized for his formidable modern, ballet, and contemporary dance training. During one of our lessons, he told me I should stay and rehearse with his team when they arrived. Unlike my invitation to Salsabor, I was freely allowed to join the warm-up and routine.

Entering this inner circle of elite dancers, I was not only recognized by them as “one of them,” but also by my peers in the public classes who saw me as having left their status. Though most of the students in classes were supportive of my invitation, they did treat me differently, as if I had authority to instruct them on patterns and technique. The

value placed upon company members from within and without is provides a sense of accomplishment that despite the extra time and monetary commitment encourages dancers to take part in teams.

Because the performance team is an exclusive group, rehearsals are often undisclosed to non-team members. The primary focus of these practices is to learn choreography, since ideally the members do not require extensive technique instruction. In my personal experience with Salsabor, practices were determined on a day-to-day basis rather than set, pre-determined rehearsal times. Organizing meetings was dependent upon each individual member's personal schedule. However, OurDance Mambo Project had specific practice times arranged, often directly after the public group classes. Because I was only able to attend a couple team rehearsals with OurDance Mambo Project, the majority of my observations about the team dynamic and choreography process will focus on my experience with Salsabor. After accepting my audition dance with Jair, Carmona asked how long I was going to be in Mexico. He was specifically interested in whether or not I wanted to train for a routine to compete with in the Campeonato Nacional in Oaxaca. With only three weeks until the competition, Carmona was enthralled with my willingness to compete, but did not involve me in the process of creating the routine. Jair and Carmona listened to fast-paced salsa songs I had never heard before. After the song had played for a few seconds, Carmona asked Jair "Y esto?" Depending on Jair's reaction, Carmona would allow the song to continue for a few more minutes or change the track immediately. The two settled on Tito Rodriguez's "Baranga" without once consulting me. When we started to rehearse, Carmona continued to only speak to Jair, explaining the partnering sections and solo footwork. Carmona would tell

Jair what to do occasionally visually demonstrating the sequence with the idea that Jair would then teach me. Unlike salsa classes, Carmona relied on Jair's ability to transform verbal directions into corporeal movements for the both of us. On occasion the two would work together to refine or re-define a section of the routine, but Carmona decided the majority of the creative direction. As a female follow, the only demand placed on me was to read Jair's cues and accurately execute the choreography. During these practice sessions, it became clear I had been selected to join Salsabor because of my dancing ability, not my choreographic input.

While I am unfamiliar with the way in which other companies instruct and rehearse routines, many directors revealed similar control over determining the music selection and choreography. Speaking with Miguelito, Gabriel Chavez, and Carmona, all revealed the process as including moments of epiphanies while listening to music, a trial and error period of rehearsal, and a need to be attention grabbing. As Gabriel described, "primero – más que nada uno escucha una canción y si a él le gusta es como empieza pensar en la coreografía y combinaciones. Como yo escucho la canción muchas veces y de ahí empiezan a salir ideas y más ideas hasta que salga una idea fingida."¹³⁵ However, this process does not necessarily factor in the physical restrictions and skill limitations of dancers. To reconcile this, Gabriel states that combinations are decided upon how well the couple performs them, specifically if the woman "siente cómoda con los pasos y el trabajo en pareja."¹³⁶ This statement seems to place blame on the female for instances where the couple cannot execute the moves rather than examine the capacity of the male

¹³⁵ Interview with Gabriel Chávez August 14, 2008. "First – above all, one listens to a song and if he likes it is when he begins to think about the choreography and combination patterns. Like myself, I listen to a song several times and from there the ideas begin to arise until I have a completed concept."

¹³⁶ Ibid., "feels comfortable with the steps and the partner sections."

to lead patterns, or even consider the partnership as a whole. Ultimately, Gabriel reveals that the most important facet of choreography is “que tiene un clic – entre la pareja y también con la gente. Si no tiene ese clic o le falta uno de las partes – le falta una conexión con los que lo vean – se cae la coreografía.”¹³⁷ This description is similar to Barthes’ notion of the grain in that the way these bodies moving together evokes a response, an indescribable sensation between them and the audience that leaves an impression. This “clic” also fosters knowledge among the couples that their routine cannot be reproduced by anyone else with the same effect. However, what none of the directors took into account is the way in which the choreography represents the ultimate scripting of the dance. There is no room for improvisation, as even the footwork sections are pre-designed. In the same way that the live musical performance follows a script that disallows the body to express its own history, choreography does the same for dancers. Thus dancers do not actively participate in the dance for the satisfaction it gives them in being able to express personal memories, but rather the recognition it gives them for their ability to follow directions.

Although I did not compete in the Campeonato Nacional in Oaxaca, Jair and his regular partner Lorena did, along with 24 other couples from around the republic. The primary stipulation for the competition was the routines were two-minutes, simulating the time restriction at the World Salsa Championship. While there was no requirement as to whether the choreographies should be performed on On-1/LA or On-2/NY, all but one judge were On-2/NY professionals. The On-1/LA judge was Gerardo Ramírez, venerated

¹³⁷ Ibid., “has a special something – between the partners and with the audience. If it does not have this “clic” or it is missing one of the parts, it is missing the connection for those who are watching it and the choreography falls flat.”

as one Mexico's salsa pioneers, while the other eight judges were the team members and director of New York-based Abakuá. Founded by On-2/NY virtuoso, Frankie Martinez, the group is one of the most well-known and respected On-2/NY companies around the world. Their presence in Oaxaca was a considerable draw for many participants and viewers as the group combined their judging duties with a much-acclaimed performance. Furthermore, although Mexico has had other famous On-2/NY dancers perform throughout the country, this was the first time Abakuá had ever been to Mexico. The group is known for its technical precision, impeccable interpretation of the music, and emphasized body movement through the integration of afro-cuban, modern and contemporary dance vocabularies. Given these characteristics, Abakuá's judging criteria was likely focused on similar concerns of timing and technicality rather than theatricality. This is important to note because during the professional performance, costumes, facial expressions, hair and make-up risk drawing attention away from the execution of dance steps. Not only that, but in the Mexican context, as my discussion on Mexico City class room instruction and social dancing indicated there is little pressure placed on dancers to understand and corporeally interpret the music's timing. Therefore, despite extensive training, couples may not be as technically prepared to perform as they are able to (re)present an outward, physical image of a polished routine.

Though many competitors were excited by the possibility Abakuá and Frankie Martinez would watch them dance, many were disappointed by their low scores. The winning couple, Jorge and Lupita, directors of Oaxacan based Salsa Na Ma, embody the higher standard of precise execution Abakuá was expecting. While many performers expected an Oaxacan couple to win because of where the competition was held, the more

plausible reason is because of the couple's On-2/NY training with internationally recognized, San Francisco based Salsamania. Unfortunately, none of the Mexico City couples placed in the publicly announced top three though many performed well. My own ex-partner placed 24th out of the total 25. This is important because it emphasizes the notion Gabriel revealed earlier about creating a "clic" between the audience and partner as the most important aspect of choreography.

For many of the couples, finding this "clic" came at the expense of precision and accuracy in their performance. For example, in my training experience, even though I was still learning the movements, I was told to "echale," meaning to put on a show while we practiced. Unlike many of my salsa experiences in the U.S., where expressions and "showy" facets are added after the choreography can be properly executed, Carmona emphasized the theatricality component. This is because the post-competition conversations center around who "put on a good show." Though the cash prizes, medals, trophies, and rankings are why most dancers enter these competitions, most were baffled about the decision making process at this particular event. It seemed as if most considered the theatrical component to be the most worthy of consideration and based on that aspect, could not understand the results. The confusion and discourses reveal how it is likely more common for Mexican dancer judges to be swayed or impressed by the "show" factor rather than technicality, highly valued by Abakuá and many U.S. dancers.

Despite being disheartened by the results of the Campeonato Nacional, several couples performed the same routine weeks later, showcased in a Cuernavaca event and other clubs around Mexico City. Therefore, there was no pressure of being rated based on the bodily relationship with the music and dance movement patterns. In this type of

performance setting, even though these professional dancers are supposed to exemplify disciplined training through an accurate execution of the routine, they are also expected to look like performers. That is to say, they are expected to display the regality of costumes and hyper-exaggerated displays of gender through hair and makeup.

Specifically in the salsa performance, women are often adorned in sparkly costumes, designed more like intimate wear than dresses of any sort. With most of their bodies on display, the female physique is often thin and petite. Many of the Mexico City female dancers also have long dark hair and use heavy eye makeup and eyelashes to accentuate their feminine features. However, costumes for male dancers are usually tuxedo pants with a long-sleeved top, usually adorned with sequins or some sparkles that line the v-neck cut. This cut is meant to draw attention to the man's chest, as an isolated example of strength and masculinity. There are no expectations, but rather a strong preference that the man does not use makeup or over-stylized hair. What is interesting in terms of the hair is not only how it reinforces the stereotypical desire that women have long hair, but also that it gives her added responsibility. Specifically, because the woman is highlighted as a skilled dancer primarily through her spins and styling, she has to exert more force. Thus even these non-competitive performance settings provide a sense of accomplishment for these dancers as their physical display of status highlights them in addition to the recognition they receive from being associated with dance companies.

The tri-fold spheres of social dancing, classes, and professional performance in Mexico City provide participants with various degrees of recognition for the ways in which they move their bodies. In this sense, salsa dancing creates a mutually exclusive relationship between the body and its participation that may not be present in every day

life. That salsa's everynight life allows participants to spin their way across different dance floors, stages, and through various people's arms, creates a sense of fluidity extending from Mexico City to wherever salsa is danced. In Mexico City, the faces that appear in dance classes are some of the same ones inside the club and on stage, establishing a visually cohesive environment in addition to the sonic familiarity of cover bands. The knowledge, achievement, and familiarity that salsa dancing facilitates promotes the engagement of participants from various socio-economic backgrounds and personal experiences. Although not all aspects of salsa dancing are all-inclusive, the dance form permits everyone willing and able to join a place within the social order of *salseros*, fulfilling a need left vacant by their anonymous capital city.

Not only does participation satisfy a need for individual acknowledgement and collective engagement, the realms of social dancing, classes, and professional performance take on ritualistic behaviors and practices, similar to the live musical performance of salsa. For example, the way participants carefully and attentively apply makeup, style their hair, and select their outfits, exemplify specialized actions. Repeating the motions of hierarchal divisions, gender roles, and unspoken conventions on a nightly basis becomes the requirement to partake in social dancing and classes. Furthermore, these predictable processes raise the professional performance to the epitome of ritualistic processes, as they not only occur with far less frequency, but also represent hyperbolic physical and gender-based relationships. Therefore, those who participate in Mexico City's subculture are not only interested in the act of recognition and getting to know their own bodies in motion, but also the way that each night is made special by the repetitive, ritualistic component of their presence.

Conclusions:

Quitáte la Máscara

This exploration of Mexico City salsa has intended to use the spaces and faces as a case study for understanding the extent to which cultural productions are adopted, adapted, and accepted. Being both a musical and dance emerging from the United States, salsa's presence in Mexico City prompts questions about the role of borders in controlling and/or facilitating the movement of goods and people. Popular memory attests to salsa music's arrival in Mexico City during the late 1970s, followed by its integration into the soundscape of the capital city by means of deejays working in peripheral barrios. Called sonideros, these deejays made their living traveling around barrios playing pirated salsa acquisitions. However, by the 1980s, Mexico City experienced the installation of its first salsa radio station, Sabrosita 590 FM. The pioneer deejays, Andres Rosales, Alejandro Zuarth, and Oscar Zuarth, represent a freedom that many sonideros could never achieve. Not only were these men able to reach a much larger Mexico City base of listeners than many sonideros could imagine, but they were also able to freely travel between Mexico City and the U.S. It was this possibility to maneuver between capital cities New York, Los Angeles, and Mexico City that allowed these deejays to expand their musical selection. Not only that, but their fluidity through and over borders created a division related to musical acquisition, emphasizing the possession of original copies as a sign of value, prestige, and economic capacity.

The status assigned to the “original” recording carries an association with the U.S. This connection has had broader ramifications with regards to the introduction of salsa dancing into the capital city. For example, Andres Rosales was instrumental in facilitating On-1/LA salsa’s entrance into Mexico City by not only being able to provide dancers with quality music, but also salsa videos. According to Rosales, he and Carlos Carmona brought salsa dancing to the capital city via video recordings from Los Angeles and New York.¹³⁸ By projecting these videos, salsa began to flourish with the creation of Salsabor in 1997. This formal instruction and the later formation of other salsa companies have provided Mexico City with an alternative to the previous manner of “bailando líricamente” to salsa. Though the development of salsa dancing in Mexico City took several years to gain acknowledgement and participants, by 2001 Salsa Con Clave, Salsa Caliente, and Salsabor became popular dance groups. Within a few more years, Azul y Oro, SalsaRika, and OurDance Mambo Project would also emerge. On a greater scale, Mexico City’s salsa development has rippled throughout the republic with salsa instruction spreading to Oaxaca, Acapulco, Puebla, Cuernavaca, Chiapas, Merida, and Cancún to list a few. According to Carmona, after his return from the U.S. in 2001, he, Victor, and Gaby began to travel around the republic offering salsa workshops.¹³⁹ Much like the way the salsa dancing transcended international boundaries between New York, Los Angeles, and Mexico City, these dancing bodies of the capital city facilitated salsa’s moves through national divisions. However, the primary difference between the national

¹³⁸ Interview with Andres Rosales. July 26, 2008.

¹³⁹ Interview with Carlos Carmona. August 16, 2008.

development of salsa and its initial arrival to Mexico City is that salsa was “brought” by bodies, rather than in the form of mediated representation.

Though salsa remains more of a subculture in Mexico City, it nonetheless has had an immense transformative effect on dancing spaces and sonic sensations. Relying primarily on the participant-observer model of ethnographic study and oral history, this case study of Mexico City salsa has sought to evaluate the importance of not only the dance hall, but also the classroom setting, and the professional level performance to evaluate the conditions and rewards of participation and presence of the body.

Specifically focusing on the realm of social dancing, Amparo Sevilla suggests the dance hall exists in Mexico City as semi-public environment within which participants seek to gain recognition and a greater knowledge of their own bodies. With the rise in salsa’s popularity, the historical salones de baile of the capital city now contract bands and orchestras to play live salsa music in place of past preferences for Cuban son and danzón. Though these salones continue to be primarily filled with an older generation of untrained dancers, many formally trained dancers have started to attend these salones. Within the atmosphere of the salon, formally trained dancers are easily identified by their time of arrival, manner of dress, and above all, the way their bodies move. These same social markers are present within salsa dance clubs that are filled with formally trained dancers of various levels, bands, and deejays. These spaces facilitate salsa’s instruction and personal recognition of achievement of not only dancers but also bands and orchestras. These spaces provide musicians the opportunity entertain patrons with exact replicas of popular, commercialized salsa music, while allowing dancers to demonstrate their physical prowess and skill on the dance floor. The rigid mapping of space and time

that occurs within these dance clubs allows dancers and musicians to showcase their skills at different times throughout an evening. Gliding on and off floor in their designated area, determined by skill level, the dancers and musicians engage in repeatable ritualistic processes that satisfy their desires to escape the anonymity of Mexico City.

The hierarchal mapping of space and movement patterns characteristic of the dance floor is greatly influenced by salsa's classroom instruction. Inside the Mambo Café, SalsaRika's class, offered before the floor opens up for social dancing, represents the common all-inclusive construction of classes. The way the floor or the dance studio becomes a map of beginner, intermediate, and advanced dancers constructs a visible path of skill progression. These divisions also facilitate the recognition of status, as each group is familiar with one another and the rank of other dancers within this system. It is within the various class settings that dancers learn the movement vocabularies that they demonstrate on the dance floor. Though the classes are generally divided into two parts, the first half devoted to learning solo footwork patterns and the second half focused on partner sequences, the solo footwork rarely appears in social dancing. This is a reflection of how most Mexico City salsa classes offer instruction in the On-1/LA style, emphasizing the partner aspect of the dance rather than solo footwork. Furthermore, because the On-1/LA style is most often danced to commercial salsa songs lacking improvisational montuno sections, much of salsa's instruction in Mexico City teaches movement sequences without regard for the complex musical compositions that characterize non-commercial salsa music. Therefore, many Mexico City dancers are primarily concerned with executing the patterns at any cost, which in part, creates the

sensation of colliding bodies on the dance floor. The focus on carrying out patterns also perpetuates the common disinterest and misinformation that characterizes many of salsa's participants, as most do not consider the way their bodies connect with the musical structures. Therefore, the realm of salsa instruction functions primarily as a way to facilitate broad acknowledgement of the various skill levels present within this community.

Unlike the all-inclusive environments constructed within the dance hall and class setting, inviting dancers of all levels to participate, the number of dancers allowed to participate in professional-level performance is limited. The restriction on this aspect of salsa dancing is primarily a function of the extra time, energy, and money involved in reaching advanced technique levels and routine preparation. In my personal experience, invitations to train with teams were extended only to dancers who demonstrated commitment to classes and showed promise for continued training. This is because the technique instruction and movement patterns of professional level teams are instructed in the On-2/NY style, leading to the extra time and energy exerted in learning this style. Requiring a heightened awareness of the way the body connects with the sounds of the music, a sense of the musical structure of salsa, and increased body movement, the On-2/NY style is difficult for many dancers to learn. Specifically for Mexico City dancers, training in the On-2/NY style is challenging, as their On-1/LA skills do not generally include a developed sense of musicality. The shift between to On-2/NY also requires that the dancers integrate body movement and increased solo footwork patterns, both absent from On-1/LA training. What is significant about the stylistic differences of the On-1/LA and On-2/NY dance forms is that for Mexico City dancers, the professional performance

is more concerned with the “show” quality of executing moves since precise musical timing and technique are often lacking or underdeveloped. Therefore, professional level competition or exhibition performances emphasize that performers should “look” like performers through dress, hair, and makeup. The hyperbolic constructions of selves serve a dual effect for dancers: to distance themselves from their normal, daily identities, and to garner recognition among other dancers and audience members.

Rompiendo la Rutina: Further Exploration

This aforementioned list of salsa sites around the republic demonstrates the importance in understanding the genealogy and mode of transmission that has allowed salsa music and dance to be integrated into Mexico’s everynight life. Speaking with dancers throughout Mexico City, Oaxaca, and Cuernavaca, most identify only Carmona as the man who “brought” salsa to Mexico. This is problematic because of the general amnesia and/or unawareness it demonstrates towards Rosales as an integral figure for Mexican salsa. This sole identification of Carmona construes him as a single actor in this process of modifying the cultural fabric of the city, giving him a reputation he currently strives to maintain. The use of the word “brought” is also problematic, as most dancers do not, or are unable to elaborate on how Carmona accomplished this. Specifically, most do not express any knowledge about the way Carmona literally transported a representational form of salsa across borders.

The lack of awareness was common among musicians who also inhabit this sub-community. That most musicians do not historicize salsa’s arrival to Mexico or Mexico’s historical relationship with salsa’s musical predecessors is reflective of the way in which

those histories are not embodied in live performance. What could be characterized as a combination of disinterest and misinformation raises questions about the difficulty in using oral history as a form of investigation. Examining salsa in Mexico is not a widely explored topic. Therefore, carrying out my research hinged upon the willingness of participants to share their recollections and personal histories. Depending on the presence of the body proved difficult for my research, as many company directors, popular musicians, and well-known deejays were constantly traveling throughout the capital city, Mexico more broadly, and/or in some cases to the U.S. The ever-present uncertainty of when and for how long the people I wanted to speak with would be in the city created a certain anxiety and urgency for my research.

Though I was conducting a participant-observer methodology, ascertaining the history of salsa dancing required more than my presence. My research depended on the dancers, musicians, and deejays in Mexico City talking to me about their experiences. Even though I attended classes, trained with a company, and went social dancing, arranging a formal meeting or informal conversation generally required several attempts on my part. Once I was able to arrange a meeting, disinterest was only part of the challenge, as many interviewees offered inaccurate information. Throughout my writing, I discuss the possibility that a lack of available resources and post-modern disregard for the original as reasons for the low level of critical awareness and/or incorrect information. However, my presence was likely a significant factor in determining the responses I received. Specifically being a Caucasian, American, female, was a double-edged sword; garnering me attention and suspicion within this community. Given that the cast of important figures in the salsa scene is men, their principle reaction to my presence

was based on my appearance. I gained access to inner circles of dance companies and could approach band members and deejays with ease. However, once I introduced myself as an academic investigating salsa, many deflected my questions as if they were suspicious of my motives. Though I was still welcome in the clubs and dance classes, I became known as the American female researcher rather than the American female dancer, or even the American female dancer-researcher.

Approaching primarily all men for my research, reflective of the gender disparity in Mexico City salsa, band members treated me differently than dancers. For example, band members often seemed flattered that I wanted to talk to them, even asking for my number or attempting to arrange a date. Only upon my insistence that I was conducting research did they shift the topic of conversation to my questions about the history and composition of salsa music. I rarely corrected responses provided, though I did occasionally ask questions to demonstrate my knowledge of the subject. In one conversation with percussionist Celio Gonzales, son of Cuban Sonora Matancera's Celio Gonzales, after I described the development from Cuban danzón to salsa, he responded with "Mira esa sabe" (look she actually knows). His surprise was characteristic of the way male musicians and deejays responded with more accurate answers upon the realization that I possessed factual, historical knowledge.

Unlike the musicians, dancers did not generally approach me, but rather kept their distance. In nearly every class, the Mexican salseros observed me, as I them. They watched the way I danced, the way I interacted, and listened to the way I spoke. Unless I approached a specific dancer or director, most were content to have me in the class without further questions. I was not hoping for reactions similar to those of musicians,

but I was hoping that people would be willing to open up. However, many responded similar to Carmona, uninterested in why I was actually in Mexico. It seemed like time was the most important factor, as my consistent and persistent presence slowly earned me recognition and acceptance among these salseros.

Translating my research of moving texts into written text has proven one of the more difficult tasks of this thesis. The challenge inherent in writing about dance and the body dates to the 1920s, as John Martin assumed the position as the first U.S. dance critic writing for the New York Times. At a loss for how to encompass the range of emotions and movement vocabularies presented by modern dance choreographer Martha Graham, Martin's writing exemplified the linguistic gap between bodies and words.¹⁴⁰ Dance scholar Deidre Sklar proposes that while writing and describing corporeal movements proves elusive, dance and the body are still useful tools for interpreting cultural knowledge. Sklar asserts, "one has to look beyond movement to get at its meaning: the concepts embodied in movement are not necessarily evident in the movement itself."¹⁴¹ Echoed by many other dance and performance scholars, I too have integrated this approach to evaluating the Mexico City salsa scene. Despite having hours of video footage, photographs, and my own corporeal experiences with Mexico City salsa dancing, I have not provided a detailed movement analysis of the dance form. Rather, my examination rests upon a critical evaluation of what the body in motion, either in dance or on stage, reveals about external socio-cultural forces. This is in great part because I could

¹⁴⁰ Franko, Mark. "History/Theory – criticism/practice." in *Corporealities: Dancing knowledge, culture and power*, ed. Susan Leigh Foster. (New York: Routledge. 1996), p. 25-52.

¹⁴¹ Sklar, Deidre. "Five Premises for a Culturally Sensitive Approach to Dance." in *Moving History/Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader*, ed. Dils, Ann and Ann Cooper Albright. (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), p. 31.

not find the words to describe how my own body felt, let alone that of another person. Without the words to describe my body's center during a spin, the angularity in my partner's arms, the way my feet danced across the floor during syncopated steps, any description risked overly technical terms or losing the essence of the dance form itself. Furthermore, the way another person feels their body move and the way they perceive its movement is uniquely their own, something I could not put into words for them.

Despite the academic discourses regarding salsa music's multi-ethnic, multi-national, and multi-racial past, the discussion presented on the live performance in Mexico City did not develop these ideas. Worth reiterating is how salsa's complex polyrhythmic musical structure, socially conscious lyrics, and primarily Latin/o American artists "shakes the foundations of classificatory systems that depend on the differentiation between 'national,' 'ethnic,' and 'popular music.'" ¹⁴² Salsa's classification as a "world music" is problematic, especially because of its production from within the U.S. and exportation outward. However, the past presence of Dominican, Cuban, Puerto Rican, Panamanian, Venezuelan, Colombian, American and more recent inclusion of Japanese and Senegalese musicians, does support the linguistic application of the word "world" to this musical style. Specifically, the mixture of Latin/o American populations contributing to the evolution and development of genre has given rise to a conversation about the ethnic and racial divisions that visibly and sonically appear in salsa production. This division, as scholar Patria Román-Velázquez explains, is most prevalent in the drumming sections where historically black Latin/o Americans (most

¹⁴² Febres, 176.

often Afro-Cubans) have been present, engaging a discourse about the African diaspora and racialized conceptions of musical abilities.

The thesis did not address these racial divisions primarily because the Afro-Mexican population is numerically minimal and localized in the Costa Chica region of Oaxaca and costal areas of Veracruz. However, Yambao would be an exception to the Mexico City context, as the group did include Afro-Colombian members. Further exploration of why those members were primarily present in the percussion section would provide insight into the way groups are formulated. A study into the musical production in the costal region of Veracruz would also likely provide insight into the racial divisions and stereotypes that accompany salsa's original production in Mexico.

Examining salsa in Mexico City facilitates further exploration into how music and dance become useful tools for considering broader questions of transnational/local communities and changing migration trends. With regard to the music, focusing primarily on what is revealed by the musicians' bodies in live performance promotes further exploration into Mexico's record industry, radio stations, and transnational commodity trade relationships. By exploring these areas, it may be clearer why certain salsa songs are made popular in Mexico and selected for performance over others. It may also shed light onto why salsa's musical presence remains primarily within the confines of live reproduction. This selection process may be reflective of what Mexican musicians are able to reproduce without training. Considering also Mexican migration trends to salsa epicenters such as New York and Los Angeles would offer more profound insight into how these informal trading networks are created and impact salsa's musical and dance exposure in Mexico. As not only people, but also goods and services flow through the

metaphorical and physical boundaries, it may be useful to consider Mexico City salsa as an example of Mayra Santos Febres' model of "translocal" phenomenon. This model explores the ways music and dance forms "cut across national boundaries to create a community of urban locations linked by transportation, communication technologies, and the international market economy."¹⁴³ The possibility that cities share sonic and corporeal similarities is an important factor that enables the integration and re-creation of communities such as ones within the Mambo Café. Not only that, but my own participation within the salsa community serves as an example of the way bodies transplant themselves into translocal geographical spaces.

Considering the movements of bodies and commodities primarily to and from the U.S., combined with the exaltation of U.S. dance and musical models, stimulates questions about remaining vestiges of colonialism. The example of Mexico City salsa differs greatly from a wide array of examples of mandated acculturation and cultural hegemony being issued from external nations such as the U.S. However, salsa in Mexico illustrates to a certain extent a voluntary relationship and dependence upon U.S. standards for achievement. It can be argued that because the U.S. remains a primary producer of salsa music and the site of origin for the dance, Mexico has no choice but to look to their northern neighbor for guidance. Not only that, but because Mexican migration trends reflect movements towards the U.S., cultural productions are easily accessible without forced acceptance. Thus, that these traveling bodies are able to gain access to cds and

¹⁴³ Ibid., 180.

videos produced mostly within the U.S. raises questions of subtle hegemony, or even hegemony by default.

With popular musical groups emerging from Venezuela, Cuba, Colombia and widely revered dancers from Australia, Spain, and Italy, the U.S. is no longer the only model for successful and skilled salsa artists. Therefore, I use the idea of voluntary action because it affords the participants a sense of agency. Specifically, the dancers and musicians themselves have created a sub-culture within which they actively seek to learn and re-produce music and dance movements emerging from within the U.S. That Mexican men brought salsa musical cds and dance videos into Mexico rather than alien bodies instructing “appropriate” methods of movement and sonic productions reveals the emergence of salsa in Mexico City as a local level decision.

A prime example of the active solicitation of U.S. models is exemplified in the Campeonato Nacional in Oaxaca. That the winners of the competition had formal salsa training in the U.S. demonstrates how success is measured in terms of how closely the movements and timing of Mexican dancers resemble U.S. models. The ramifications for this result speak to a continued revelry of U.S. dancers that seem to be held in higher esteem than even widely accomplished Mexican dancers. This can be perceived in the level of excitement surrounding the competition, primarily a function of the anticipation of having Frankie Martinez and Abakuá perform in Mexico for the first time. The group was also judging the competition, affording them a position of power and prestige above that of the other dancers, including Mexican judge, Gerardo Ramírez. Despite being venerated within Mexico and to some extent known in the U.S., Gerardo’s presence as a judge was not as interesting to dancers as that of the New York-based group.

The presence of On-2/NY Abakuá signals various changes occurring within the broader scope of salsa dancing as well as within the Mexican salsa culture. During the past several years in the U.S. the On-2/NY style has experienced a sort of revival, becoming more popular and preferred by many dancers because of its complex relationship with the music. This change within the U.S. has recently impacted the way Mexican dancers approach their dancing style and goals. For example, when I was first introduced to salsa in Oaxaca in 2005, there were almost no companies in the state or in Mexico that performed in the On-2 style. However by 2008, the Mexican National Championships held in Mexico City marked a drastic stylistic change in the dance form. For example, the first place couple was Ernesto and Marlitza, an On-2/NY couple from Chiapas and the winning team was Fusion, an On-2/NY company from Cuernavaca. What is interesting about these two examples is their relationship with New York dancers, specifically virtuoso Jayson Molina, who traveled to Mexico to help train dancers. Since 2007, Molina has also worked with Gaby of Salsa con Clave to help transition this Mexico City couple to the On-2/NY style. Though I do not know when other Mexico City groups began to learn, teach, rehearse and perform the On-2/NY style, it is likely that it occurred simultaneously with Salsa con Clave and other Mexican groups.

That dancing elites such as Jayson Molina and Frankie Martinez have taken an interest in Mexico salsa speaks to the rising U.S. awareness of Mexican salseros. Victor and Gaby from Salsa con Clave first received notice in the U.S. in 2001 and have since become the foremost association many dancers make with Mexican salsa, having traveled throughout the U.S. and parts of Canada for various congresses and competitions.

However, since 2005, many dancers from Oaxaca and various other parts of Mexico have come to the U.S. with the hope of joining and training with U.S. dance companies. For example, from Oaxaca, former director of Tumbao Dance Company, Roy Reyes, Jorge and Lupita of Salsa Na Ma, and many Oaxacan-based Ritmo y Sabor dancers represent a migration trend to the West Coast. For Roy, Jorge and Lupita, the West Coast provided them with their On-2/NY dance transformation. Currently living in Los Angeles, Roy learned On-2/NY from various trips to New York and training with LA-based Sakara, while Jorge and Lupita learned their On-2/NY skills from San Francisco based Salsamania. Gerardo Ramírez is a lone, On-1/LA body, spending time in Denver, Colorado establishing his U.S. salsa career while most of his Mexico City contemporaries such as Gabriel Chavez, and Carmona hope to some day relocate to New York to hone their On-2/NY skills. These directors, as well as several other Mexican salsa dancers expressed New York as their desired location because of the level of training and expertise located there. For Gabriel, New York is not only the salsa mecca but also for other forms of dance training. Out of the Mexico City directors, only Miguelito embodies the New York experience, having moved to New York and Canada where he and his brother trained with well-known On-2/NY companies.

These migrations and aspirations reveal deeper questions on the topic of safe, legal migration to the U.S. as well as the future development of Mexican salsa. In some cases, like that of Jorge and Lupita, their length of stay was legally limited to one year, as per the visas they secured. Therefore, the couple did not have the luxury of time to secure housing, jobs, and most importantly, training with a company. Yet, for dancers like Roy and Gerardo who have 10-year travel visas, they do not have the same sense of urgency

to ration their time, money, and effort during their stays in the U.S. Not only that, but dancers in this situation often travel between the two countries to both follow the stipulations of their visa, but also exercise a freedom of movement that many Mexicans never experience. Given that undocumented migrants are the highest number of Mexican bodies in the U.S., it would logically follow that even salseros cross without official documentation. In these cases, their time in the U.S. can be indefinite. What is interesting in the case of Jorge and Lupita is that despite the legal restriction on their time in the U.S., the expressed personal desires to return to Mexico after their visas expired. When Jorge and Lupita left Mexico in 2006, several of their contemporaries in Oaxaca also traveled to the West Coast and have now returned. Unfortunately, I did not get a chance to speak with this group of dancers about the reasons for their departure and return to Mexico. However, Jorge and Lupita expressed having difficulties adjusting to U.S. culture and language as a primary reason for wanting to return and remain in Mexico. Yet, select conversations with Roy exhibit a desire to remain in the U.S. and uncertainty about a permanent return to Mexico despite the challenges he experienced adjusting.

Aside from diverging desires to reside in the U.S. or Mexico, age distinguishes Roy from Jorge and Lupita. In his thirties, Roy forms part of the first wave of Mexican salseros along with his Mexico City contemporaries Carmona, Victor, Gaby, Gerardo, Gabriel, Miguelito, and Carlos Tierrablanca. Like Roy, many of his Mexico City contemporaries articulated the desire to either move to or spend a considerable amount of time in the U.S., given the opportunity. A significant motivating factor for this is their hope for acknowledgement from U.S. dancing communities, similar to what Victor and Gaby have achieved. Having devoted the previous decade to honing their personal

dancing abilities and growing their companies, many of these directors express the fear that getting older decreases their chances to “make it” in the salsa world. Not only that, but realizing the shifting preference for the On-2/NY style, requires that many of these directors re-train themselves in a style they have little experience with. In order to do this, many believe coming to the U.S. will provide them with the opportunity to become better dancers. Problematic about the aspirations of these directors to leave Mexico is the further solidification of the U.S. dancing models as superior. In addition, the loss of these pioneers to the U.S. exemplifies the risk of relying on the presence of the body to relate histories and memories. Without these dancers present, the oral history becomes an impossibility. Not only that, but their absence presents a challenge to exploring what the dancing body reveals as a text for reading socio-cultural experiences. In terms of the dance itself, the possible loss of these bodies would leave vacant important administrative and creative positions. Even a temporary relocation of these dancers to the U.S. risks the stagnation of choreographies and classroom instruction, as not every dancing body is equally capable of managing company duties or formulating new routines.

Though a return of the first generation directors from the U.S. would result in a greater proliferation of U.S. movements and dance vocabularies, it perhaps presents a better alternative to losing the various types of knowledge located within the founding bodies. In their mid twenties, Jorge and Lupita represent a younger generation of Mexican dancers. Some of their contemporaries include Oaxacan peers from Ritmo y Sabor, the 2008 Cuernavaca and Chiapas championship winners, and Mexico City’s current Salsabor members. Because of their age, many of these dancers are not in the same financial situation as the older dancers to even consider applying for visas and

travel outside of Mexico. However, that this barrier has not stopped them from integrating U.S. movement vocabularies into their style speaks to a deeply ingrained preference for the foreign model. Specifically, that these groups seek out training from U.S. artists when they travel to Mexico, demonstrates a tenacity to learn from the artists they hold in high esteem. Though this generation has shown great promise and a proclivity for advancing Mexico's salsa technique, they lack the administrative experience, extensive dance training, and long memories of their Mexican predecessors. These factors are immensely important to ensure salsa's continued growth and movement throughout Mexico City and the republic as a whole.

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