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THE LIFE AND DEATH OF MAMBO:  
CULTURE AND CONSUMPTION IN NEW YORK'S SALSA DANCE SCENE

by

CARMELA MUZIO DORMANI

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2020

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Culture and Consumption in New York's Salsa Dance Scene

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Carmela Muzio Dormani

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in  
Sociology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

## ABSTRACT

The Life and Death of Mambo:  
Culture and Consumption in New York's Salsa Dance Scene  
by

Carmela Muzio Dormani

Advisor: Erica Chito Childs

In recent decades salsa dancing has become a global phenomenon, spawning a variety of styles and levels. Although formerly passed from person to person through Latinx family and community networks, salsa dance has long been practiced in a more codified way. Today, salsa is largely reproduced in dance studio classes, congresses, and competitions collectively referred to as “the salsa scene”. In New York City, the salsa scene retains vestiges of Nuyorican and Afro-Caribbean identity, though it is practiced by people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds and marketed to a global base. Building on long term participation observation and nearly 40 interviews, this dissertation explores the salsa scene as a site of great social importance to its participants and a space in which both community building and cultural commodification take place.

Weaving together sociological literature on immigration and the arts, as well as interdisciplinary writings on Latinx social dance practices and cultural consumption in cities, this work traces recent New York City history, covering major waves of migration in the twentieth century and social change pertaining to Latinx New York. Interwoven with this history, is the story of the mambo dance craze and the evolution of the style of salsa referred to as “on2”. These initial chapters serve to establish the social world of the salsa dance scene and to outline five

social locations where salsa is practiced, providing a broad framework for future sociological studies of dance as a communal activity with varied social and economic roles.

A variety of cultural meanings and racial ideologies are enacted through popular culture portrayals of salsa, competition events, and local social dance practices. In New York, many community members retain a collective set of understandings around the cultural practices and myths that constitute real or “authentic” salsa. These changing practices and on-going narratives of authenticity shed light on the reshaping of Latinx social dance practices. Despite salsa dance’s ongoing commercialization though, this project argues that the salsa scene retains its social, cultural, and political role as a space for community self-expression, Latinx and Nuyoricán pride, and as a potential site of status and power for its participants who are sometimes marginalized by wider hegemonic cultural discourses and social practices. The salsa scene contains active participants who leverage their agency strategically in shaping their cultural and creative world. In doing so, they enact alternative ways of being in community and contribute to one terrain in the broader landscape of resistance to racism and displacement. Latinx dancers in New York claim a particular stake in salsa as cultural practice and product by asserting themselves as rightful cultural guardians of salsa, reinforcing salsa’s connection with grassroots communities (invoking “the street”), and affirming the Afro-Caribbean roots of salsa music and dance.

For my mommy, in whose giant footsteps I skip along.

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## INTRODUCTION

*It is after midnight in East Harlem. At the top of a long staircase, a small dance studio hums with energy as scores of dancers, beginners and experts alike, move together in pairs. They are in sync with the music and with each other: a break step on the two and the six, syncopated body isolations, and a lot of spinning. The scene is purposeful, intense, a little romantic – a perfect New York City night. It is muggy outside; or, maybe it is cold. It doesn't really matter; inside the studio everyone is sweating. I wonder as I watch them, how the partners know which moves to do at any given moment. A secret language, I think, that one needs to learn in order to participate. The song changes and the dancers leave the floor, or else ask a new person to dance. A few moments of shuffling and the dancefloor is in motion again. The dancers ease seamlessly back into that shared language, feeling out their new partners. It looks effortless, but also impossible. Everything is improvised but seamless. Each song is different, but the bodies weave and meander as a unit every time.<sup>1</sup>*

I had not been dancing long when I started to observe the social rhythm of New York's salsa scene – so much more like Jane Jacobs' chaotic, romanticized city sidewalk ballet than the “simple-minded precision dance” with which she contrasts it (Jacobs 1961). I assumed when I walked into my first salsa dance class that I knew what I was getting myself into. Italian American, I nonetheless came of age embedded in New York's Puerto Rican and Latinx communities and learned to dance salsa first from my mother, and later from my friends. I spent my late teens and early twenties in the New York of the early aughts, dancing to mostly bachata, merengue, and reggaetón in the small dives and clubs of Washington Heights, the Northwest Bronx, Jackson Heights, and Williamsburg. Still, when I walked into salsa class, I quickly learned that I was taking my steps on the “wrong” count. Like many people who first learn to dance salsa in a club, a yard, or a living room, I was accustomed to stepping intuitively to the rhythm, rather than maintaining strict adherence to a count. Unlike many Latinxs, my investment in this

<sup>1</sup> Author's reflection, 2012.

version of salsa was not tied directly to my racial or ethnic identity, but to my self-understanding as a New Yorker with long-standing cultural ties to a Puerto Rican community that helped raise me.

Already an experienced dancer in other styles, I adjusted with relative ease and started dancing the style of salsa called “on2”.<sup>2</sup> I learned the new set of rules that were sanctified in the salsa dance studio and soon found out that following intricate partnerwork patterns requires a high level of technical skill – something I would commit years to cultivating. I also came to accept the major mantras of this particular salsa world, for example: that here the word “salsa” is sometimes used interchangeably with “mambo”, that the community which shares events, practices, narratives, and values collectively refers to itself as “the salsa scene,” and that New York City is its spiritual home. As a white dancer in a majority Latinx studio, I took cues from the instructors and long-time dancers about cultural norms, ideas, and practices in the scene. Over time I found out that not everyone – in New York or elsewhere – adheres to the same version of events mythologized in the on2 scene.

Across nearly a decade as a practicing salsaera, I grew from student to instructor and amateur to professional. What struck me more than anything in this time was and is the deep significance with which salsa aficionados imbue their practice. Over the years I bore witness to every variety of sweat and tears – moments of joy, anger, passion, vindication, arguments, reconciliations, and many, many late-night conversations about what it is this community represents. I held my breath during the arguments or broke them up myself. I felt time slow down on stage in the seconds before the music starts and

<sup>2</sup> I describe the various styles of salsa, especially on2, below.

a performance begins. The pressure. The adrenaline. The sheer, unadulterated joy. Once, I went to the emergency room bleeding from the head, injured during an intense rehearsal. Several times, I won major dance competitions. Sometimes though, we lost. I gained, on the other hand, a deeply rooted community, including a fiancé. I fought with my mom, my brother, an ex-boyfriend. I noticed as my own identity began to take shape around being a salsa dancer. As a sociologist I started to document and reflect on the cacophony of social trends and meanings I observed. Eventually, I found I had spent many years as a professional dancer, instructor, and ethnographer in the salsa scene. Like the people described in the chapters ahead I navigated my individual investment in the cultural, artistic, and communal aspects of salsa with its various social locations, and the tension of economizing the practice that I love. The company I danced for went through many iterations in my time there. A team that prided itself on its identity as community-grounded “uptown dancers” started integrating ballroom trained dancers into our ranks over the years and eventually won a few world championship titles at the salsa competitions that had become increasingly relevant in recent years. In this way over time I experienced some variety of each of the prominent social locations in which salsa is danced, loved, and felt in New York.

Salsa has been framed as anything from cultural appropriation to expressive liberation by academics and commentators (Manuel 1998, Berríos-Miranda 2004). Both the musical style and dance form draw heavily on Afro-Cuban roots and a long history of cultural mixing that occurred throughout the Caribbean and thereafter in the barrios and dance halls of New York City, only to return and flourish across Latin America as salsa exploded into a global sensation with innumerable local iterations. Like New York itself,

salsa brings culture together with commerce, serving as a medium for Latinx community assertion and cultural expression while continuously reconfiguring itself as a commodity that is bought, sold, and experienced in a variety of ways. The stories included in this project are an attempt to illuminate people's deep investment in the identities they build around salsa dance, as well as the ways that participants question and reshape the scene itself.

### **Salsa**

In recent decades salsa dancing has become a global phenomenon, spawning a variety of styles and levels. Although formerly passed from person to person through Latinx family and community networks, salsa dance has been practiced in a more codified way for many years, as were its predecessors mambo and cha cha chá, which hail back to the days of New York's Palladium Ballroom (1948-1966).<sup>3</sup> Today, salsa is largely practiced and reproduced in dance studio classes, congresses, and competitions collectively referred to as the salsa scene. The salsa scene retains vestiges of Nuyorican and Afro-Caribbean identity in New York but is widely practiced by people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds and marketed to a global base.

For many Latinx New Yorkers, salsa is an expression of pride. Energetic and electric, salsa music and movement represent the innovations of a community whose spirit of resistance persisted amidst conditions of inequality. Salsa's vitality contradicts the severity of the conditions out of which it was birthed – slavery, colonialism,

<sup>3</sup> The Palladium Ballroom was a music venue which hosted live Latin music from 1948 – 1966. Its history is explored in detail in chapter two.

migration, and generations of residential segregation. That dichotomy is mirrored in the music itself. Salsa is comprised of both rhythm and melody, represents both tradition and change, and encourages both individual expression and interpersonal connection.

In the 1960s and 70s salsa music was, as Jorge Duany (1984) describes it, “the unmistakable voice of the Puerto Rican barrio” (198) or in the words of Christopher Washburne (2008): “a powerfully vibrant and uncontainable cultural expression.” Today, I argue throughout this project, it is the dancers who advance these traditions of exchange, creativity, and counter-hegemonic cultural assertion. For some, dancing salsa provides affirmation, constitutes a pillar of social identity, or serves as spiritual practice. For others, it is simply recreation. In either case, the social connections and cultural meanings enacted on the dance floor are influenced by the fact that salsa is also a commodity that is practiced, produced and consumed in the context of the hyper-gentrified city and amidst conflicts around race, class, gender, and power.

Salsa’s development is a uniquely New York story: the coalescence of many peoples and cultures brought together by generations of migrations, racial and ethnic mixing and transculturation.<sup>4</sup> It draws on a variety of Latin American, Caribbean, and North American music, especially Afro-Cuban styles that were reimagined and popularized largely by Puerto Rican musicians in New York from the 1940s through the 1970s. A soundtrack to accompany the legacy of Nuyorican resistance movements, salsa music’s political roots are exemplified in the lyrics and commentaries of major artists like Eddie Palmieri, Ray Barretto, and later, Rubén Blades. Salsa music is enjoyed across

<sup>4</sup> Defined by Fernando Ortiz as “extremely complex transmutations of culture” (Ortiz [1940]1995, 98). Ortiz’ definition indicates that the process of transculturation entails adopting and adapting some new cultural elements and the loss of others.



generations and ethnicities around the world, but it is particularly sanctified amongst Puerto Rican and other Latinx New Yorkers who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, Juan Flores (2016) describes salsa “not as musical style, nor even a particular music-making practice...but as a generation, the cultural voice and spirit of a historical span of time marked off by an initial collective inspiration and shared socio-historical experience” (xvii). And yet, salsa has persisted well beyond one generation and socio-historical moment. Its worldwide salience is linked now to a set of social dance practices and the communities of dancers who nurture it.

Dance has been a central component of salsa since its inception and across its varied manifestations. Dancers are often described as akin to an instrument in live salsa performance – a vital component in the energy, aesthetic, and instrumentation of the varied sounds which came to be described by the term “salsa”. The dance has taken many forms, often carrying dense cultural meanings for people doing the dancing. But it is always defined by its roots as a *social* dance style, to be shared and engaged on the dance floor not just the stage and characterized by improvised movement and partnering between dancers.

### *On2*

Many styles of salsa are practiced in New York. The most prominent contemporary technical style, and the one that New York dancers export most visibly around the world through travel and social media, is called “on2”. In on2 style salsa, dancers count a full basic step as: 1, 2, 3, [pause], 5, 6, 7, [pause]. Usually, the dancer takes her first step with the right foot under herself, either directly below the hip bone or

slightly forward, on count one. This is followed by a larger “break step” forward with the left foot on the two count – hence the designation “on2” – which the dancer uses to push herself back to her original stance. The third step is taken with the right foot on the three count, also directly below the hip bone. The reverse is repeated on the 5, 6, 7, with the a small step back or under the hip bone with the left foot, followed by a break step back with the right foot on the six count that the dancer uses to push themselves back to their original position, then taking a small step with the right foot, underneath the hip bone, on the seven count. When two dancers come together to do partner work, the leader – usually, but not always, a man – reverses his basic step and begins by stepping back so that the two do not collide. The term “on2”, which is used both as a noun and an adjective, is used to refer to this pattern of stepping, and to the community that practices it.

### **What This Dissertation Does**

This dissertation explores the world of the on2 salsa scene in New York City as a site of great social importance to its participants and a space of both community building and consumption practices. Building on the first full-length ethnographic study of the on2 salsa scene in New York, and the first new qualitative research of any length conducted with this community in nearly twenty years, I interrogate salsa’s various roles as cultural practice and as industry. Throughout, I argue that despite salsa dance’s ongoing commercialization and significant participation on the part of non-Latinx dancers, the salsa scene retains its social, cultural, and political role as a space for community self-expression, Latinx, Caribbean American, and Nuyorican pride, and as a potential site of

status and power for its participants who are sometimes marginalized by wider hegemonic cultural discourses and social practices. Participants in the community retain a collective set of understandings around the cultural practices and myths that constitute real or authentic salsa. These changing practices and on-going narratives of authenticity shed light on the reshaping of Latinx social dance practices, in turn highlighting the ways that broad social and economic shifts have impacted the production and consumption of everyday culture in cities today. This project interrogates the ways in which the salsa scene serves as a space of Latinx social, political, cultural, and economic community and affirmation while also functioning as a site where Latinx culture and ethnicity are marketed for consumption by non-Latinxs and whites in particular.

As salsa dance has become an increasingly codified practice in New York City and across the globe, dancers in rapidly changing New York City have modified the way they practice and present their work in order to meet the changing environment in which salsa is consumed – through teams, social media, new products and online videos – marketing salsa as an ever-changing commodity. A recent exhibit at the Museum of the City of New York entitled “Rhythm & Power: Salsa in New York” noted: “Dance enthusiasts around the world spend millions of dollars annually on music, instructional classes, videos, attire, and congresses” (Washington, *Rhythm & Power*, Museum of the City of New York 2017). This observation underlines the consumptive power of the salsa dance industry. Salsa dancers rely heavily on the marketing of the self and quantify successful participation in the salsa world in economic terms ranging from monetary compensation to social media popularity. This is relevant because it is indicative of people’s relationships with everyday culture – including art, food, sports, entertainment,

and recreation – as well as changes in cultural industries, and economic restructuring of our society more broadly.

### **Chapter Overview**

I begin in chapter one by reviewing sociological literature about migration to New York City and art in migrant communities, theories of cultural production and consumption in the neoliberal city, and interdisciplinary texts on salsa dance. Building on these literatures, I outline three theoretical interventions this project supports. I also describe my research methodology and discuss the importance of New York as a research site.

The second chapter, “‘Sin Salsa No Hay Paraíso’: Salsa and the City,” addresses broad historical and social forces that shaped the development of the salsa dance community in New York City. In it, I describe New York’s history of immigration, cultural innovation, and social change. Interwoven into this narrative is the story of the rise of salsa’s predecessor: the mambo craze.

I then describe five social locations where salsa takes place in chapter three, “‘Doin’ it for my last name’: Practicing Culture, Producing Identity”. I relate data from conversations with Latinx dancers about salsa as a cultural practice. These narratives showcase the way salsa scene participants regularly define and reify salsa’s present and recent past, imbuing New York’s salsa community with a collective memory. I also note that the social locations are porous and often blur.

In chapter four I interrogate race and gender dynamics in the New York salsa scene in contrast to broader racialized and gendered stereotypes of salsa in popular

media. I then address locally specific debates and tensions around race and gender through discussion of the recent popularity of Afro-Cuban dance components in contrast to elements of anti-blackness in the scene and the salsa scene's recent #MeToo interventions.

In the following chapter, “‘Y Estamos en Competencia’: Commodification, Consumption, Competition,” I discuss the newest horizon of racialized hyper-consumption in the salsa scene: the rise of competitions. I begin by introducing the World Salsa Summit as a case study and situating this competition in the larger salsa world. I briefly discuss distinctions between Latin DanceSport, commercial Latin dance, and the salsa scene. I then expand on the economic, and thus social, relationships that are engendered by the competition structure, including “pro-am” competitions and the sale of dance paraphernalia. I continue by discussing debates around authenticity, legitimacy, and technique that are fueled by the competitions. Finally, I expand the historical distinction between “uptown” and “downtown” dancers to interrogate the experiential gap between U.S./Canadian and Latin American salsa dancers.

In the final chapter, “‘We’re Street Dancers’ Surviving the Neoliberal City,” I explore how dancers navigate gentrification and displacement in the neoliberal city of the late 2010s. Drawing on case studies of contemporary dance teams and studios, I assert that dancers strategically claim grassroots urbanity in the hyper-gentrified city. In doing so dancers step into a nuanced but counterhegemonic role in power struggles around the right to urban space. In this way, the salsa scene retains its social and political role as a space for Latinx cultural affirmation, community-building, and resistance to cultural erasure in the neoliberal city. I conclude the project by contextualizing the salsa scene

within current political events and begin to respond to the question: Where is the resistance?

### **Moving Forward**

The production and consumption of culture is central to the study of people and societies. Indeed, constructing ideas around what culture is and what it does has long been a central preoccupation of sociologists. And identities – a critical area of study in the social sciences – are often organized around or defined according to cultural norms, experiences, and practices. In a political environment that is marred by anti-immigrant sentiment and xenophobia enacted against Latinx communities, engaging localized spaces of community affirmation and power provides insight into one small terrain in the broader landscape of resistance to systems of racism and inequality. The salsa scene is a site of both commodification and community resistance. It tells us about the way people experience and participate in the commodification process and about the functions and meanings of salsa as cultural expression. It is remarkable that more than 50 years after the close of the Palladium Ballroom, the salsa scene not only exists but appears to be growing as both a market and a meaningful cultural practice. It has been a privilege to observe this self-sustaining community that bridges the tensions between industry and cultural survival with poise and intention.

This dissertation is meant as a testament to the scene. Thank you.

## CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

This project explores the world of New York's on2 salsa dance scene through embodied participant observation and interviews, using an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates the growing literature on salsa dance with a sociology of everyday culture, consumption, migration, and cities. In this chapter, I begin by contextualizing salsa's development with a review of literature related to Latinx, African American, and ethnic white migrations to New York and the consumption of Latinx cultural production in the city. I then discuss major trends in the literature related to salsa's musical development and the study of Latinx social dance practices. Finally, I outline my interventions, theoretical framework, and methodology

Literature on salsa dance is growing, but remains relatively small, despite the fact that salsa is the most popular social dance practiced today and has become a global cultural phenomenon in its own right. A larger body of work explores salsa music. César Miguel Rondón's *El libro de la salsa: Crónica de la música del Caribe urbano* (2008 [1980]) explores the production and circulations of salsa music from the 1950s through the 1970s from a transnational and Caribbeanist perspective. Rondón's original work, which was translated into English in 2008, predates most other major academic literature on salsa by about ten years. Other seminal works in this area include the anthology creatively titled *Salsiology: Afro-Cuban Music and the Evolution of Salsa in New York City* (1992) edited by Vernon Boggs, *Salsa, sabor y control!: sociología de la música "tropical"* (1998) by Ángel G. Quintero Rivera, and Frances Aparicio's *Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music and Puerto Rican Cultures* (1998). Major works that specifically address New York's Latin music scene include Ruth Glasser's *My Music Is*

*My Flag: Puerto Rican Musicians and Their New York Communities 1917-1940* (1995), John Storm Roberts' *The Latin Tinge: The Impact of Latin American Music on the United States* (1999 [1979]), and Roberta L. Singer and Elena Martínez' (2004) article, "A South Bronx Latin Music Tale". Juan Flores' beautiful anthology, *From Bomba to Hip Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* (2000) and posthumous work, *Salsa Rising: New York Latin Music of the Sixties Generation* (2016) provided major historical and analytical foundations for this project.

Aparicio (1998) argues that the context in which salsa music is produced (Where? For whom? By whom?), the social milieu in which it is practiced, and the way in which it is consumed shape its social meaning as resistance or contribution to cultural homogenization. Aparicio briefly discusses the role of dancing as a site where social meaning is sometimes shaped, renegotiated, or resisted for those who consume salsa music. Here, I expand her analysis to address salsa dancing as the industry it has become in the last two decades, focusing particularly on the question: In the battle for the heart and soul of salsa, is the on2 dance scene a site of cultural resistance or the primary site of commodification and cooptation of what was once a localized social dance practiced primarily in homes and community spaces? Ultimately, I argue that "the scene" does both. Much in the vein of Aparicio's conclusions about the salsa music industry, the context of who is creating the dance and for whom they are producing it is paramount.

While record labels and corporations largely came to control salsa music, for now the dance industry remains in the hands of a widely dispersed set of event promoters and community stakeholders. Only at the tail end of my research did on2 salsa begin to make



inroads in what the wider dance community refers to as the *commercial dance industry*.<sup>5</sup> The salsa dance world is not just an economic entity; it encompasses the community that forms around that industry and the social meanings enacted therein. Those social meanings are greatly impacted by immigration, the context of the contemporary neoliberal city, and larger trends of cultural consumption, necessitating an exploration of literature addressing these broad areas to understand the impact of this creative, performative, artistic phenomenon.

### **Race, Migrations, and Social Change, 1898-Present: Salsa as Re-ethnicized Cultural Product**

Salsa's development is tied to cultural mixing and exchange that resulted from large scale migration and social change in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Building on generations of transculturation – what Fernando Ortiz describes as “extremely complex transmutations of culture” – Cuban popular music found new life in the neighborhoods and dance halls of New York City (Ortiz [1940]1995, 98).<sup>6</sup> In that process, no group was more important

<sup>5</sup> While salsa formats like congresses involve an exchange of services and money, and are therefore commercial, in general, professional dancers across genres often use the phrase “the commercial dance industry” to refer to the highly profitable and formal Hollywood-based dance industry that includes things like dancing in music videos or television shows and touring with musical artists. The commercial dance industry is distinct from smaller commerce based salsa events in terms of both scale and ownership.

<sup>6</sup> Fernando Coronil notes in his introduction to *Cuban Counterpoint* that Ortiz treats Cuban popular creativity as not only legitimate in its social role, but also powerful as a tool of resistance: “In Ortiz's works the concept of ‘transculturation’ is used to apprehend at once the destructive and constructive moments in histories affected by colonialism and imperialism. Through his critical valorization of popular creativity, Ortiz shows how the social spaces where people are coerced to labor and live are also made habitable by them, how in effect power resides not only in the sugar mill, but in the rumba” (Coronil in Ortiz 1995: XV). In short, there is strength in popular traditions, and understanding the conditions of their development allows us to more fully analyze the ways in which their power is and can be harnessed by people.

than members of the Puerto Rican diaspora. Although the primary influences of the musical style come from Cuba, Puerto Ricans in New York – that is to say, Nuyoricans – have been salsa’s most visible innovators, carriers, and cultural guardians. Nonetheless, salsa developed as Afro-Cuban musical styles became influenced by a multiethnic array of migrant communities living in close proximity in New York City. Its development is therefore tied to the broader history of migration to New York, art in migrant communities, and the city’s peculiar tradition of cultural innovation and commerce.

New York has long served as a gateway city for incoming groups. Each wave of migrants has transformed the social fabric, political institutions, and cultural patterns in the city, thus, “remaking the New York mainstream” (Foner et al., 2014; Alba and Nee 2003). The process of immigrant “assimilation” or “incorporation” is therefore a reciprocal one, during which the host society does not remain stagnant, but experiences great cultural shifts as incoming groups incorporate. In other words, the city is not stagnant but dynamic, constantly in the throes of transformation as new groups exert their agency and claim space in the giant metropolis. This process is on display everywhere in New York, from eateries to dance clubs, the fabric of the city is in constant flux and is so greatly influenced by im/migrant groups that it is difficult to construe of an independent identity for New York, apart from its guiding narrative of disparate groups coming together to create new cultural entities. From New York-style pizza to New York-style salsa, the cultural products resulting from this process form an integral part of the city’s identity. The recent unprecedented gentrification in much of New York has been the latest drastic change to this social context.

Latinx New York, though more diverse in the 2010s than it was previously, has been shaped in many ways by the large-scale Puerto Rican migrations of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1898, Puerto Rico and Cuba ceased to be colonies of Spain. Puerto Rico instead came under the direct control of the United States.<sup>7</sup> The neo-colonial relationship with each of these nations would play a central role in the increased migration of people, culture, and ideas from Latin America to the U.S. over the coming decades. The Jones-Shafroth Act was passed in 1917 giving Puerto Ricans U.S. citizenship for the first time and enabling large-scale migration to the mainland without legal barriers. In addition to the push factors of unemployment and overcrowding on the island, Maldonado (1979) notes that following the U.S. occupation of Puerto Rico in 1898, Puerto Rican laborers were recruited to work for companies stateside (beginning with Hawaii and Arizona). Following the end of World War I in 1918, a postwar industrial boom in the states and the constricting of Puerto Rico's subsistence economy by U.S. sugar interests contributed to several decades of increased migration from the island (Thomas 2010). By the late 1920s, around forty-five thousand Puerto Ricans lived in New York City, beginning to establish communities which would serve as destination points and provide a sense of community for the coming post-WWII, large-scale migration (Hinojosa 2018).

During the same time period, from the late 1800s to 1924, heavy migration from southern and eastern Europe occurred, with many immigrants arriving in gateway cities

<sup>7</sup> The U.S. also occupied Cuba after the Spanish-Cuban-American War ended with the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1899. The first U.S. occupation of Cuba lasted until 1902. The U.S. then occupied Cuba from 1906-1909 and again from 1917-1922. This history, along with U.S. attempts at intervention throughout the Cold War period, the Bay of Pigs invasion, the enduring presence of American troops at Guantanamo Bay Naval Base, and the long-standing and punitive policy of economic embargo of Cuba is what I refer to in describing a neo-colonial relationship between the United States and Cuba.

like New York. By 1910, 41 percent of the city's residents were foreign born (Foner et al. 2014). This meant that large numbers of Italians and Eastern European Jews came of age in New York in the coming decades, some of whom went on to become key players in the mambo music and dance world. After several decades of heavy immigration, The Emergency Quota Act of 1921 and The National Origins Act of 1924 drastically reduced immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, and completely restricted immigration from much of Asia. The Emergency Quota Act of 1921 placed numerical limits on immigration and was implemented largely in response to nativist reactions against high levels of immigration from these regions. The number of immigrants admitted from sending countries was restricted to 3% of the number of U.S. residents from that country according to the 1910 census. The 1924 National Origins Act went further by limiting incoming immigrant quotas to 2% of the amount of U.S. residents present from any given sending country, according to the 1890 census. This legislation, also called the Asian Exclusion Act, was aimed at further reducing immigration of Southern and Eastern Europeans and Jews, while completely prohibiting Arabs and Asians from entering the country. Although this legislation did not explicitly limit immigration from Latin America, it effectively cut off immigration and remained in place until 1965.

In the ensuing years, Operation Bootstrap, high unemployment on the island, recruitment of Puerto Rican laborers to New York and other northeastern industrial cities, as well as the popularization of mass air travel led to large numbers of Puerto Ricans migrating to New York as part of "the Great Migration" (Hinojosa 2018, Maldonado 1979). Both Puerto Ricans and African Americans migrated to northern industrial cities to fill labor market openings previously dominated by immigrants. Following the Great

Depression, the economic boom provided by World War II led to increased migration of Puerto Ricans from the island and African Americans from rural southern areas to northern industrial cities. By the 1950s, migration from Puerto Rico peaked in response to available manufacturing jobs, the promise of economic prosperity, and recruitment efforts by U.S. companies and government directed toward Puerto Rican laborers.

Although Puerto Ricans were by far the largest Latinx group in New York throughout the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, it was Cuban music that prevailed in popularity for much of the first half of the twentieth century. According to Christopher Washburne (2008), “Many factors contributed to the popularity of Cuban music in the United States, including Cuba’s economic dominance in the Caribbean, its close proximity to the United States, and a vibrant sheet music industry” (14). This would largely change in the wake of the Cuban revolution [1959] and the ceasing of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the United States [1962].

The Puerto Rican population in New York ballooned between 1950 and 1960 such that by 1960 there were over 600,000 Puerto Ricans in New York, many of whom were working class and lived in Harlem, the Bronx, the Lower East Side, and parts of Brooklyn. At the same time, in the 1960s, a large percentage of New York’s white population moved out of many areas in the five boroughs as part of a larger “white flight” happening in urban areas across the country. Puerto Ricans increasingly lived in relatively isolated neighborhoods and in close geographic and social proximity to African Americans. During the same time period, larger numbers of immigrants began arriving from the Dominican Republic. This increased after United States immigration policy changed significantly with the 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration and Nationality Act.

The drastic shift in immigrant population following the Hart-Cellar Act is well-documented (Portes and Rumbaut [1990] 2014; Kasinitz et al. 2008; Alba and Nee 2003). While older waves of immigration were primarily European, the post-1965 immigrants are largely from Latin America, Asia, and Africa, with smaller numbers coming from parts of Eastern Europe. In 2017, immigrants accounted for roughly 13.7% of the United States population, coming close to the 14.7% high of 1910 (Migration Policy Institute, 2017). Numerically however, this represents 44.5 million individuals, the highest ever number of immigrants in the United States. In New York, immigrants comprised 38% of the population in 2018 (Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs 2018). Moreover, this prolonged wave of immigration has now produced a second and third generation that is active in U.S. social, political, and economic institutions, and indeed in its cultural practices, production, and consumption. This is particularly true in the "gateway cities" that have traditionally served as immigration points of entry.

### *Immigration and the Arts*

Sociology literature has extensively covered many aspects of contemporary immigration, including the social, political, economic, and cultural incorporation of the second generation and beyond. Of particular relevance here, emerging literature has begun to trace the role of art and performance in contemporary immigrant and second-generation life, positing an artistic renaissance in New York City that is grounded in immigrant communities (Kasinitz 2019). Scholars have drawn connections between music/dance and migration as versions of human movement, that are both physical and social; and which are continually reconfigured through global and transnational circulations (Viladrich 2013: 4-5, Scolieri 2008). As Viladrich notes in her work on

tango dancers in New York City, “in recent decades, globalization and transnationalism – along with the explosion of worldwide tourism – have accelerated the wide-reaching journeys of artistic forms, giving birth to unique musical expressions” (2013: 4-5). The ongoing movement of peoples and ideas across borders amidst global economic restructuring thus contributes to new artistic forms, as well as the growth of global markets for cultural products that are activated in localized ways.

DiMaggio and Fernández-Kelly (2010) assert that immigration and art have “become key elements to understanding life, culture, and creativity in contemporary America” (1). They also note a relative lack of literature focused on artistic and creative life within the sociology of immigration, and in particular that writing on immigrant art has tended to focus on aesthetic details at the cost of deeper inquiry into the economic, political, and social contexts in which artistic/creative communities take root.<sup>8</sup> This work speaks to precisely to that area. While New York City has been the site of extensive study of both immigration trends and artistic life, there is still a scarcity of sociological literature focused on the intersections of migration and Latinx artistic/cultural production as it interacts with the social, political, and economic conditions of the city.

Building on this literature I propose the idea of a *re-ethnicized cultural product* to describe how salsa is divorced from a raced and classed Nuyorican and Afro-Caribbean identity and instead marketed as broadly Latin (often with a series of hypersexualized stereotypes attached to it). Salsa is often portrayed in popular media as ambiguously Latin and marketed with a series of hypersexualized stereotypes (Dormani, forthcoming,

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that substantial work on art in migrant communities exists in ethnic studies, ethnomusicology, and folklore studies that can help contextualize this and other sociological studies focusing on migration and art.

McMains 2010). Through the spread of that narrative, salsa is separated from its political history and its roots in working class urban communities, specifically in the Caribbean diaspora living in New York. Salsa therefore is widely marketed and consumed as broadly Latin, obscuring a raced and classed Afro-Caribbean and/or Nuyorican identity present in many iterations of salsa music. This process takes place as local cultural production made by working-class communities of color becomes global popular culture, but it is also enacted at a local level. The framework of a *re-ethnicized cultural product* pertains to products beyond salsa and can be applied more broadly as a theoretical framework for understanding the ways notions of diversity are activated in urban neoliberal economies, even at a localized level, to obscure cultural specificity, and especially blackness and working class creative forms of resistance to erasure and displacement.

### **Culture, Consumption, and Racial Commodification in the Neoliberal City: Salsa Scene as Semi-formal Creative Community**

#### *The Cultural is Political*

The broad and diverse meanings of “culture” are a major topic in the social sciences, humanities, and ethnic studies fields. Clifford Geertz (1973) famously argues that cultures are semiotic texts, which encompass systems of meaning, signification, and symbol, influencing both group practices and individual understandings. These meanings are shared and understood by a group and human behavior is a symbolic action. Frankfurt School theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1944) posit the use of mass culture – that which is influenced by consumption and the accumulation of capital – as a tool for social control and conformity, employed to distract the public from political



engagement. The salsa scene is a little bit of both – semiotic text and marketable food for consumption. It is also performed publicly in formal and informal ways, engaging a dynamic set of meanings and group norms that are in flux.

In the tradition of performance studies, salsa dance is a cultural form that is inhabited individually but also performed for the gaze of others. The framework of performativity, as Hamera (2006) notes, is “especially effective for engaging and describing the embodied processes that produce and consume culture” (5). The physical body, used in myriad ways by different salsa practitioners, is integral in this cultural practice. Moreover, the performance of salsa does not just reflect social conditions, it “makes things and does things, in addition to describing how they are made and done” (6). While formal performance (on stage) is just one part of the salsa scene, many of the social practices in the scene are also performative. This includes practices like “social dancing”, ostensibly an exchange between two dancers, but one that is often performed for onlookers, cameras, or social media stories. It also includes cultural practices beyond the physical dance, including dress, style, etiquette, and ways of socializing. Thus, the salsa scene often, but not always, engages in performative cultural practice.

Culture is also political, whether actively challenging cultural norms or passively supporting a status quo. Antonio Gramsci (1971 [1944]) understood popular culture as a system of meaning making in constant production and contended that cultural leadership and ideas are necessary for revolutionary change. Meaning-making in turn affects the production of culture itself. Hegemony is never a state that is finalized but is always in flux – a project that is constantly being produced. Although Gramsci does not deal explicitly with race and racism, Stuart Hall (1986) points to the utility of applying

Gramsci's work in the study of race and ethnicity. Hall argues that Gramsci's work privileges historical and spatial specificity over the development of a large overarching theory for understanding society as a whole. This, Hall argues, should be applied to the way we study race and ethnicity as each takes on varied meanings across different social and historical arenas. Hall argues that Gramsci's work encourages theorists to pay more serious attention to social processes outside of the state itself, including schooling, cultural organizations, family life and ethnically specific groups which play a vital role in reproducing differences in racially stratified societies (Hall 1986: 26). The salsa scene provides just such an opportunity as a Latinx cultural product that is experienced, performed, and understood in racialized ways. Although it is probably true that not every creative act constitutes a concerted resistance to hegemonic norms, in the contemporary political context wherein demonization of black and brown immigrant communities is the norm, proposing an alternative social world that is multiracial, collective, grassroots, and inspired by working class roots – as the salsa scene does – does indeed constitute a spoke on the ladder in Gramsci's war of position.

Finally, a central contention of this project is that everyday culture – the quotidian – is a critical aspect of the social world. Our day-to-day practices not only make up the minutiae of individual lives, identities, and forms of expression, but also the fabric of our collective landscape. Sometimes overlooked in the social sciences in the shadow of institutions and the state, everyday cultural practices demonstrate social conditions and perhaps more importantly have the potential to impact these same realities. In the salsa scene, dancers claim physical and narrative (digital) space for themselves, often asserting a more nuanced identity – foregrounding Afro-Caribbean, urban, and grassroots traits –

than that assigned to salsa in popular media. In addition, members of the salsa scene regularly describe and take part in social norms of community building and empowerment, modeling aspects of utopia (Wright 2010). By regularly engaging in practices that reaffirm this identity and set of social norms, they activate salsa dance as a tool for challenging elite, white cultural norms and beliefs, or hegemony.

### *Consuming Latinx Cultural Production in the Neoliberal City*

The backdrop for the drastic changes in the salsa scene as cultural product and practice over the last thirty years (1990-2020) has been the acceleration of globalization over the same time period. A large literature details the social, economic, political, and cultural shifts that have accompanied globalization and in particular the concentration of financial power and cultural capital in some urban centers. In 1991, Saskia Sassen introduced the idea of the global city to describe the function of major cities as outposts for the global economy and centers of innovation and production in major industries. This framework describes a shift toward a service sector economy that is greatly stratified and highly specialized. The emergence in the 1990s of salsa dance classes and dancers as service sector employees sometimes catering to elite tastes can be understood in this context.

Globalization in cities has been permeated by the large (and often violent, traumatic, and suppressive) shadow of neoliberal policies/philosophies of deregulation, privatization, reduction in social welfare provisions, and free marketization (see: Klein

2007, Harvey 2007, Chomsky 1999).<sup>9</sup> Over the last fifty years, neoliberalism has expanded as both an economic and ideological framework. This trend, in accordance with the expansion of globalization and the consolidation of human populations in cities, has led to the theoretical construct of the neoliberal city.<sup>10</sup> In *Barrio Dreams: Puerto Ricans, Latinos, and the Neoliberal City* (2004), Dávila refers to neoliberalism as “the rubric of economic and urban development policies that favor state deregulation, that is, a decrease in state involvement accompanied by privatization and free market approaches, all in the guise of fostering more efficient technologies of government” (9). Or, as Wendy Brown (2015) puts it more broadly, “the conversion of every human need or desire into a profitable enterprise” (28). Dávila and others have argued, that neoliberal policies and logic have been extended to artistic and cultural production, often in racialized ways, effectively economizing the ethnic identity of marginalized groups as a means of feeding development (Dávila 2012, Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). As with other areas of everyday life, neoliberalism engages culture as an economic resource and site for increased privatization. In New York, this process has advanced over the last twenty years as the city has reached a state of intense hyper-gentrification.

Moreover, cultural “authenticity” as a site for consumption by elites has become a fixed feature of contemporary, stratified urban life (Zukin 2009, Viladrich 2013). Studies

<sup>9</sup> Throughout the project, when I refer to neoliberalism I mean: a series of economic and social policies that promote free marketization and the ideological system that holds up this myth by promoting individualization, false meritocracy, and the economization of every aspect of life.

<sup>10</sup> Urban centers have been major sites for the testing and propagation of neoliberal policies and cultural outcomes. David Harvey (2007) argues, for example, that New York’s 1977 fiscal crisis belongs in the same conversation as Chile’s 1973 post-coup economic shock treatment.

of art and culture often center the aesthetic perceptions of gentrifiers and the so-called “creative class” (Florida 2002). Working-class people who regularly contribute their labor to the cultural fabric of the city are rarely included in the idea of the creative class. As Dávila (2012) notes, neighborhood-based Latinx cultural workers, whom she refers to as “barrio workers”, are often assigned a lower status on the racialized hierarchy of value of New York’s creative economy.

Professional dancers in the salsa scene might not be barrio workers, but they are rarely considered fully realized members of Richard Florida’s “creative class” either. This is partly due to a predominant U.S. cultural imaginary that renders black and brown creative labor as less valuable than that done by whites. While salsa classes are full of a multi-ethnic base, professional salsa dancers in New York are predominantly Latinx, with second-generation Dominicans and Puerto Ricans being particularly dominant. The on2 salsa scene is neither fully realized as an institutional, commercial practice (in the vein of, for example, Dunham modern dance technique) nor fully localized neighborhood practice, since salsa dance has long since morphed into a codified global commodity with a technique and market-logic to match.

I contend that the salsa dance scene serves as a microcosm through which we can analyze Latinx urban cultural production in the neoliberal city today. This is especially true because the scene encompasses both formal (classes, congresses, commercial dance work, a market) and informal forms of organization (social dancing, free, public, participatory art). The scene highlights the ways neoliberal logic and the economic inequality its policies have propagated now guide the ways in which city dwellers consume both formal cultural production like that found in museums and institutions, and

informal cultural production advanced by grassroots communities (especially those with roots in immigration or colonial migration). In the era of the gig economy and social media, these have become sites where people contest the boundaries between informal and formal economies as well as the social implications and cultural meanings around creative work. Dancers, cultural practitioners, and community artists are keen observers of social and cultural shifts that occur around them and in which they participate. In other words, dancers are active participants in defining themselves and are making increasingly visible strides in defining the meanings enacted through salsa. Moreover, the salsa scene is not alone in walking the space between grassroots community practice and global commodity. The creative communities that have evolved around dance, food, sports, poetry, and other activities traditionally associated with leisure are an integral part of the fabric of the neoliberal city. Each of these communities construct a set of social norms, often connected with cultural meanings of/for marginalized groups, and find themselves relating, for better or worse, to an economy built around their practices.

### *Semi-formal creative community*

The salsa scene is not unique in its structure. Similar communities exist that revolve around migrant-origin food, coffee, or beer trends, music and dance forms, styles of poetry, performance, or craft-making. Each of these communities construct a set of social norms, often connected with cultural meanings of/for marginalized groups, and find themselves relating, for better or worse, to an economy built around their practices. Building on the dense and varied literature on cultural consumption in the neoliberal city, I use the framework of “semi-formal creative communities” to describe these groups and posit that they play an increasingly prominent role in urban life. This framework provides

a new way of understanding how people relate to cultural production in today's economically stratified cities. Namely, that outside of formal cultural institutions, marginalized communities in cities at times strategize through creative work which may not be explicitly revolutionary but is intended to make inroads against cultural erasure.

### **Salsa**

This study would not be complete without a review of the growing body of literature specifically focused on salsa. This literature, mostly located in the fields of ethnomusicology, ethnic studies, and anthropology, frequently addresses three main areas: local versus global meanings enacted through salsa; constructing and complicating identity; and the tensions around authenticity, commodification and resistance in the consumption and production of salsa.

#### *Local v. Global*

Works dedicated to salsa nearly universally identify New York City as its birthplace and one of its major creative centers. New York's particular migration history, and cultural, social, and political influences allowed for the creation of a new musical form along with a modified social dance practice called "New York-style" salsa or "on2 salsa". New York dancers also sometimes apply the term "mambo" to this style. Salsa has long since spread across the globe. Among the most prominent discussions in salsa literature is the contradiction and sometimes confluence of local and global expressions, practices and meanings in salsa dance. Lise Waxer (2002) argues that in Latin music "style and meaning are contingent to local and historical practices," while "global flows allow for a variety of performance and consumption practices" (6). For salsa dancers,

both the physical practice of dance and the social experience of the salsa scene are highly dependent on local context. At the same time, the increase in communication, technology, and movement of people and culture that have accompanied globalization connect the various localized salsa scenes and impact the practices executed therein.

Salsa dance is a global phenomenon, fueled by the ongoing movement of people and ideas across borders, but still practiced in locally specific ways (Hutchinson 2004, Hutchinson 2014, McMains 2015). Katherine Borland (2009) argues that in contrast to the strong ethnic specificity of on2 New York histories, New Jersey salseros articulate a message of cultural inclusiveness which embraces the ethnic diversity of salsa community under the rubric of Latinidad. Jonathon Marion notes that L.A.-style salsa emerged as a result of dancers having to market themselves and keep the image of Hollywood flashiness. Internationally, researchers attribute the stylings and specificities of salsa dance style to factors such as city structure in Belfast, Hamburg, and Sacramento (Skinner 2007), socio-cultural apparatus in Slovenia (Pusnik and Sicherl 2010), and post-colonial social movements in Senegal (Shain 2009).

In New York, dancers are influenced by the legacy of the famed Palladium Ballroom, the predominance of Puerto Rican and later Dominican populations in the city, and cross-cultural exchange with other innovations like swing, Latin hustle, and hip hop (Hutchinson 2004, Flores 2016). Sydney Hutchinson identifies distinguishing features of New York salsa including its particular rhythmic features, theatrical presentation, prominence of complex turn patterns, focus on footwork, blending of movements from diverse ethnic origins, and deep rootedness in diasporic Puerto Rican life experiences (Hutchinson 2004). Taking pride in New York's legacy as salsa's place of origin and a



hotbed of salsa creativity, New York salsa dancers research their art form's history and have developed what Hutchinson calls a "community-based dance theory" (Hutchinson 2004: 110). Hutchinson identifies three generations of the New York salsa scene: the first generation of the Palladium Ballroom era [1940s-1966], the second generation characterized by Eddie Torres' development of on2 technique and the rise of Latin hustle [1966-1980s], and the third generation characterized by the international spread of on2 style salsa, growth, and commoditization (Hutchinson 2004). She predicted future trends of hybridization and continued codification of technique, which have since come to pass. Now, sixteen years after her original article, I argue the salsa scene has entered a fourth generation characterized by globalization, hyper-commoditization, and self-economization fueled by social media.

The rise in the commercial potential and practice of the salsa dance industry has occurred more or less in sync with the decline of a profitable live salsa music industry. While the salsa dance industry has changed rapidly even in the last ten years and dancers do struggle to find paid work, the former stars of salsa – the musicians – have faced a steady decline in the commercial viability of salsa music recordings and live performance since the 1990s. Ethnomusicologist and musician Christopher Washburne proposes that the illegal drug trade financially supported New York's salsa scene in the 1980s and that the government crackdown on drug organizations in the 1990s decreased opportunities for salsa musicians (Washburne 2008: 130-150). He additionally points to the shifting musical tastes of Latinx young people and reduced funding for the types of community events where live salsa was and is often performed (97). In her broad ethnographic study of New York, Los Angeles, and Miami salsa, Juliet McMains instead cites the emergence

of the *salsa romántica* genre of the 1980s and 90s – supposedly less popular amongst on2 dancers – and Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s enforcement of New York’s archaic cabaret law, which reduced motivation for venues to book the live bands that inspired dancing (McMains 2015: 104). I agree that the social, economic and political context McMains highlights in New York has played a role in the decline of the live salsa music industry. However, while the reduction of the live salsa music industry might be partly attributed to dancers’ preferences for the shorter, more controlled songs that are played by DJs, I add that the decline of live music at salsa dancing events is compounded today by gentrification and scarcity of affordable space in New York. The high cost of space makes booking live musicians difficult for promoters and event planners who can just as easily hire a low-cost DJ or play music from a pre-set playlist. While many salsa scene dancers consider themselves salsa music and culture aficionados and would undoubtedly prefer live music at their events, the very small venues where a great deal of New York’s social dancing occurs are unlikely to afford live musicians as they can barely afford to book space.

### *Identity*

Work on salsa has identified dance as a site for affirming Latinx identity (Renta 2004, McMains 2001, Flores 2000, Aparicio 2003); reifying or complicating white supremacy (McMains 2001, Bosse 2007, Ehrenreich 2000), negotiating gender roles (Aparicio 2003, Borland 2009, Aparicio 2002), and embodying culture (SanMiguel 2014). In her 2001 article, “Brownface: Representations of Latinness in DanceSport”,

McMains states that Latin ballroom (referred to as DanceSport)<sup>11</sup> like the salsa danced on popular reality television series “is a stylization of social ballroom dances that, although inspired by Afro-Caribbean and Latin social dance practices...bear[s] little in common with contemporary or historical practices in Latin America” (McMains 2001: 55). The relationship between Latin DanceSport styles and their racial and ethnic referents has become partly an imagined one. She frames the practice of self-tanning amongst Latin DanceSport contestants as a form of “brownface” and argues that this obscures African historical antecedents to Latin DanceSport and has tangible effects on the lives of Latinx DanceSport competitors. McMains also argues that an image of a multinational, multiethnic melting pot serves to obscure the eurocentrism and white-dominated systems of logic by which the industry is structured. Furthermore, Latin DanceSport athletes also perform their difference from ethnic Latinxs through a movement technique that is recognizably different from Latin social dance practices. Similarly, Joanna Bosse examines differentiations between Modern DanceSport and Latin DanceSport genres and argues that through these classifications, whiteness is made universal and normative while the racial other is made particular and exotic, physical and sexual. She argues that the hegemonic power of these deeply embedded colonial paradigms relies on pervasive and redundant articulation and that DanceSport has provided one of the many venues for this articulation. Both Bosse (2007) and McMains (2001, 2006) base their studies on the Latin Ballroom industry rather than the on2 salsa scene. Nonetheless, they provide a

<sup>11</sup> Competitive ballroom dancing was renamed DanceSport in the 1980s as part of a longstanding campaign to be considered an Olympic category. See: (McMains 2006).

relevant and informative framework for studying identity and constructions of Latinness in the increasingly regulated on2 salsa scene.

*Authenticity, Commodification, and Resistance in Salsa Dance*

A small but significant literature proposes that salsa music and dance constitute a concerted resistance to racism, colonialism, and cultural marginalization. Marisol Berríos-Miranda (2004) argues that salsa music's international popularity resulted from the confluence of several distinct social conditions and historical events, including: the dilemma of Puerto Rico's colonial status, the civil rights and black pride movements in the United States, the Cuban Revolution, urban migration, and the desire for a Latinx alternative to the hegemony of rock and roll (2004). Salsa provided liberation in several ways. First, salsa represented a refuge for Latinxs after work, offering liberation of the body and mind. Second, as music from the people to the people, salsa challenged oppressive hierarchies of cultural and musical value and hierarchies of race and class. Finally, salsa gave Puerto Ricans a way to free themselves from their dependence on and identification with the United States, a cultural freedom that also resonated with other musicians and audiences throughout Latin America.

Similarly, Delgado and Muñoz (1997) argue that Latinxs across diverse social lines create themselves through the performative opportunities made available by Latin American and Latinx music and dance, constantly making and remaking Latinx cultural identity through a process of productive hybridization. Both Frances Aparicio (1998, 2002) and Priscilla Renta (2004) understand salsa dancing as an expression of culture that is rooted in colonialism and diaspora:

For Latinos/as, the need to affirm their cultural identity grows in part out of their diaspora experience, which brings with it the pressure of assimilating and of being subsumed and homogenized by the Euro-American culture that dominates U.S. mainstream society. (Renta 2004: 142)

For Renta, salsa dancers empower themselves by reproducing the dance as a potentially powerful cultural tool in resisting assimilation and marginalization from mainstream dance settings in places like New York, Miami and Los Angeles. In contrast, Aparicio notes though that salsa has the potential to be either hegemonic or a form of resistance stating, “The tensions between hegemony and resistance in salsa music stem basically from its modes of productions and dissemination” (1998: 92). Moreover, she notes that the social encounter of dancing is “doubly significant given the socioeconomic and the colonial situation of Latinas/os in the United States” (1998: 96).

Narratives around authenticity, commodification, and resistance are indeed central to the way many dancers understand themselves and the practice of culture more broadly. Tamara Johnson (2011) argues that communities of dancers are organized around the ways in which the body responds to salsa rhythm, which she calls microgeographies of movement.<sup>12</sup> These allow for mobility of bodies through particular constructed communities, creative spaces of inclusion for some while defining spaces of exclusion for others. The salsa scene is territorialized as is the dance floor, and the body itself as differences in body movement styles are used to distinguish between levels of authenticity. For Johnson, the debate over authenticity is a political project about legitimacy and it is meant to determine who has a right to the social and economic spaces

<sup>12</sup> This is similar to Hutchinson’s (2007) concept of “kinetopias” and related to Bosse’s description of “dance dialects” (2008), as well as Hutchinson’s description of “dance accents” (2014).

of the salsa scene. The interaction of salsa bodies politicizes the dance floor, creating space that is territorialized and negotiated and where dominant ideals of desirability are contested via movement.

### *Social Locations of Dance*

I intervene in the above literature by building on the understanding of the practice, production, and consumption of salsa dance in New York from a sociological perspective. New York has changed drastically in the last two decades, as has the salsa scene within and beyond the city. Based on my field data, the first in-depth ethnographic data collected in New York's scene in nearly twenty years, I outline five social locations where salsa is practiced, including the relatively new terrains of social media and competitions. Little work has been done in sociology looking at Latinx social dance communities. Approaching New York's contemporary on2 salsa scene from the perspective of sociology, I foreground the identities, articulations, and ideologies of professional and amateur dancers who are fully immersed in this social world. In addition, I uncover the nuanced role of race, social class, and cultural identity in shaping the salsa scene amidst the reconfiguration of cultural consumption in the context of global economic, political, and social change. Dancers, cultural practitioners, artists are keen observers of social and cultural shifts that occur around them and in which they participate. The salsa scene provides a rich and nuanced entry point into this conversation that is neither fully community-based nor fully formalized in large cultural institutions.

## Is there a Sociology of Dance?

In her 1995 book *Dance, Modernity & Culture: Explorations in the Sociology of Dance*, Helen Thomas writes a chapter on “Formulating a Sociology of Dance”. In it, she argues that dance, like other cultural arenas, deserves the attention of sociologists. The chapter is a call for an emergent sociology of dance. Twenty-five years later little work has been done in this area, especially in the United States, despite large growth in studies of leisure areas like food, sports, and subcultures. A pillar of sociology is the deep theoretical tradition of trying to make sense of the cultural world, including some of sociology’s most prominent theorists: Howard Becker, Loic Wacquant, Pierre Bourdieu, Antonio Gramsci, Frankfurt theorists Horkheimer and Adorno, contemporary urban theorists like Jane Jacobs and Sharon Zukin, and critical theorists like Judith Butler.<sup>13</sup> But despite the predominance of dance as social and communal organization in human life, there is no developed sociological field that focuses on dance.

Through the framing of this project, and in particular the demarcation of social locations of dance, I propose a new conception of sociology of dance as a critical field of study. Remarkable for its absence, the sociological study of dance and dance communities has the potential to tell us about a unique dimension of human social experience. Dance is both participatory and performative; and it is an inherently embodied experience in a way that popular culture more broadly is not.

<sup>13</sup> In the theory of “art worlds”, for example, Howard Becker (1974) asserted that all artistic work is a collective action and a form of economic organization that is nonetheless beholden to the social conventions embodied by a stark division of labor (between creators and audiences).

The stage, the street, and the studio function as theoretical concepts that represent distinct but overlapping realms where dance plays a major role in identity formation, social experience, cultural and political expression, and economic exchanges. The *street* is a reverse euphemism for the home, community, or club. When people describe themselves as “street dancers” they often intend to give credit to historically underrepresented communities responsible for the creation of a particular style. Sometimes this is a means of asserting one’s cultural authenticity, but it is also a way to highlight urbanity and is therefore a method of claiming city space that extends beyond the home, highlighting the liberatory potential of public art and performance. The second social location is the *studio*. Ostensibly the main purpose of a dance studio is to spread knowledge of a particular form; however, the functional use is income creation and sustenance for professional dancers who often support themselves by teaching classes to a broader population. The studio provides space and represents the economic dimension of the dance industry, which is vast. Finally, in the tradition of performance studies, many areas of dance are steeped in the practice of self-presentation through social rituals, interactions, verbal and bodily acts, visual cues, and other modes of communication. Staged performances of choreographed routines are a defining feature of dance. Dance’s performativity often extends beyond the physical stage to include social dancing in public under the gaze of others and self-presentation on social media. I refer collectively to these spaces as *the stage*.

Dance is a social experience that people consume and imbue with cultural meaning. Therefore, studying dance from a sociology perspective can tell us about



identity and community formation, and new social, economic, and cultural dimensions of the human experience. This dissertation lays out theoretical frameworks to do so.

### **Theoretical Frameworks/Argument**

Building on sociological literature about immigration and the arts, theories of cultural production and consumption in the neoliberal city, and interdisciplinary texts on salsa dance, I build on three new theoretical frameworks in the chapters ahead. Each of these frameworks build on an area of literature and are outlined above. They are:

- The idea that salsa dance becomes a *re-ethnicized cultural product* through a racialized commodification process. Salsa is often portrayed in popular media as broadly Latin, culturally undifferentiated, and marketed with a series of hypersexualized stereotypes (Dormani, forthcoming, McMains 2010). Through the spread of that narrative, salsa is separated from its political history and its roots in working class urban communities, specifically in the Caribbean diaspora living in New York. Salsa therefore is widely marketed and consumed as broadly Latin, obscuring a raced and classed *Nuyoricanidad* that was present in earlier iterations of salsa music. This process takes place as local cultural production made by poor communities of color becomes global popular culture, but it is also reified at a local level. The framework of a *re-ethnicized cultural product* applies to products beyond salsa and can be applied more broadly to understand the ways notions of diversity are activated in urban neoliberal economies, even at a localized level, in a way that obscures cultural specificity, especially blackness, as well as working-class, creative forms of resistance to erasure and displacement.
- The framing of the salsa scene as a *semi-formal creative community*. Semi-formal creative communities play an increasingly prominent role in urban life. This designation provides a new way of understanding how people relate to cultural production in today's economically stratified cities. Namely, outside of formal cultural institutions, marginalized communities in cities at times strategize through creative work that is not explicitly political to make inroads against cultural erasure. I expand on this theoretical framework below.
- The idea of the five social locations of dance, which focus on the social and communal aspects of dance rather than just its aesthetic and performative components, fleshing out a *sociology of dance*. Dance is practiced by most human beings as a social and communal experience

with some performative aspects, rather than the reverse, and should be studied seriously by sociologists.

Throughout this project, I build on these frameworks and the literature discussed above to argue that social dance communities, including the salsa scene, are an integral expressive outlet for creative resistance in the neoliberal city. While semi-formal creative communities sometimes adopt the market logic of neoliberalism, they also provide outlets for community-building and resistance to cultural erasure in the context of hyper-gentrification, most saliently in their propagation of community bonds and their function as a means of claiming physical and digital space for a multiracial group that at times actively uplifts its roots in Latinx labor and cultural production.

### **NYC Site and Boundaries**

New York City has been of central importance in the development of salsa. Over 50 years after the famous Palladium Ballroom closed its doors and 25 years since on 2 dance studios began opening in large numbers, New York remains a Mecca for salsa dancers. The city has retained its own distinct style, albeit one that is multifaceted and has morphed many times. Much of this project is dedicated to delineating the history and contemporary social conditions that make New York such an integral location in the salsa world. *Chapter Two: Sin Salsa No Hay Paraíso* delves into the historical development of the scene in New York, while *Chapter Three: “Doin’ it for my last name”* and *Chapter Four: “We’re Street Dancers”* describe its current boundaries and meanings in detail. In turn, through the salsa scene we can see how drastically New York has changed over the last 50 years.

Many groups claim ownership of salsa in New York. The wide breadth and range of people who consider themselves salseros in the city necessitates defining the scope of the group discussed in this work. This project primarily focuses on on2 dancers in the community I refer to as the New York salsa scene. The *on2 New York salsa scene* as described here is distinct from the general category of salsa dancer, which of course can refer to anyone who dances to salsa music.<sup>14</sup> The main division between the on2 scene and a more general salsa dancing population is ideological, although boundaries may also be drawn according to race, class, and generation. On2 dancers self-identify as part of the scene. The phrase “the salsa scene” or just “the scene” for short is frequently used in conversation among its participants. I use these phrases in the same way, to refer to the network of people who participate in the local studio classes, social events, and online interactions of this semi-formal salsa industry and the global imagined community with which it is associated. Other salsa enthusiasts define themselves in opposition to the on2 scene, for instance identifying as “authentic,” untrained, or “street” dancers. This group is sometimes openly hostile to on2 dancing. This form of self-identification is complicated by the fact that a large portion of on2 salsa scene dancers identify themselves the same way – as authentic, untrained, “street” dancers – by which they usually mean that they have not professionally trained in formal ballroom or ballet technique. Moreover, the boundaries around the scene are both informal and porous, so an individual’s relationship with it can change depending on context.

Theoretically, the salsa scene is at the crossroads of imagined community, social network, sub-culture, and artistic occupation (Andersen 1983, Hebdige 1979). I use the

<sup>14</sup> The genesis of the on2 New York salsa scene is explored in detail in chapter two.

term “scene” because it is used by participants. The term “scene” also provides a useful framework as academic work has been done on various music scenes. In general, I understand scenes to be geographical spaces where cultural and social activities center around a particular genre (of music and dance) and within which collective identities are often formulated (Bennett 2004, Bennett 2000, Anderson et al. 2009). Participants usually self-elect to identify as part of a scene.

### **Methodology**

My methodology consists of participant observation over the course of more than eight years (2012-2019), with particularly intensive ethnographic observation at the formal outset of the project in 2014 and again in the latter half of the time period (2017-2019). In addition, I conducted roughly 30 individual interviews with students and professionals in the salsa scene as well as several focus group interviews. Under this multi-faceted approach, participant observation provided me with deep insight into the organization of the scene – the structure of events, teams, and institutions – while structured interviews in turn gave me a window into the consumption habits and personal meaning people assign to salsa. Much of my supplemental data comes from the numerous informal conversations, speeches, dialogues, and group discussions I witnessed in real time. Depending on context, at times I was able to video record significant moments. Other times I wrote down my observations soon after they occurred. Throughout the text I use indented text to indicate a direct quotation and indented text in italics to refer to observations from my notes.

I further contextualize my findings through analysis of social media, online forums, footage, and documentation of New York’s salsa scene from its inception during

the Palladium era until today, with a focus on the contemporary. The salsa scene is both a localized community created through shared physical experiences and an imagined one, held together by shared digital media that include videos, photographs, discussion boards, and social media postings. These are essential components in the way most participants experience the salsa scene and they are also part of what distinguishes the salsa scene from other iterations of salsa dance; therefore, it became important that I engage with these media to supplement traditional qualitative research methods. There is no formal archive of salsa related social media posts therefore I focused particular attention to major social media-based debates that garnered a large number of comments, which became increasingly common in the latter years of this study.

In his work on dancing tango, Jonathan Skinner argues that for social scientists of dance and dance communities, sharing or embodying the experience of the dance is paramount (Skinner 2010 in ed. Collins 2010). My role as an increasingly skilled social dancer, performer, instructor, and choreographer embodying the social and performance aspects of the community was essential to truly understanding the role, function and feeling of this community. In addition, being a professional salsa dancer provided me with intimate knowledge into the market transactions that take place between professionals and students in the salsa scene. This in-depth embodied understanding of the way many salsa dancers sell their time, their bodies and a version of cultural or geographical authenticity that is assigned to them by consumers in the salsa scene became essential.

To further elucidate the details of the salsa scene as an expansive community, I engaged in observation and participant observation at a number of secondary sites with

which I am less intimately acquainted, including local salsa congresses, socials, and events throughout the city and sometimes in other cities where I observed the way salsa is danced, spoken about, understood, and performed. Attending salsa scene events in Los Angeles, Miami, San Juan, Boston, Baltimore, France, Germany, Canada, and Mexico, among others, helped me contextualize what is uniquely identifiable to New York's salsa scene and what themes and actions appear to be more universal.

### **Huracán Dance Company**

My primary entry point into the scene and home base throughout my dance career was Huracán Dance Company. In January 2012 I began taking classes at Santo Rico Dance Company, whose studio was located at the time in East Harlem. After nine months of classes, I moved to Los Angeles for a year on leave during which time I learned “LA-style” or “on1” salsa. When I returned home to New York in September 2013 I joined Santo Rico's semi-professional training team. By mid-2014 I progressed to training with a professional team; however, Santo Rico closed. Its longtime director moved to Florida where he eventually began a new branch of his company. Jeff Taveras, a member of Santo Rico's professional team took over and ultimately began to direct his own company, which would become Huracán. In my years as a Huracán dancer, the company moved locations various times. We moved between two different studios in Corona, Queens – a diverse, predominantly immigrant-origin community in Queens. In 2019 the building in which our studio was located was sold and the studio had to leave. The company persisted, instead renting space in Midtown Manhattan and utilizing community space in East Harlem. I explore the case studies of Santo Rico and Huracán in detail in

chapter six and argue that the trajectories of these companies are indicative of major trends affecting dance companies in the 2010s.

As an active member of this particular community site, the location provided me with the opportunity to observe the most intimate layers of the salsa scene experience, including the physical experience of dancing, late night rehearsals, intimate conversations amongst participants, and the behind the scenes operations that go into running a salsa studio, teams, and individual careers. This insider vision and embodied participation enabled me to engage in thick description of crucial aspects of the salsa scene. While Huracán and its surrounding communities influenced my perspective, I expanded my network and observations well beyond this company through my interviews, social media tracking, participation in myriad local events, and travel to dance events in other cities.

In the following chapter I trace recent New York City history. In particular I aim to weave together literature on migration, cultural innovations, and social change pertaining to Latinx New York. Interspersed with this broad social history is the story of the mambo dance craze and the development of salsa music and dance, including the on2 salsa scene.

## CHAPTER TWO: “SIN SALSA NO HAY PARAÍSO: SALSA’S DEVELOPMENT AND THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF NEW YORK CITY

“Si te quieres divertir, con encanto y con primor  
Solo tienes que vivir, un verano en Nueva York”

*“Un Verano en Nueva York”  
El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico, 1975*

“Ocho millones de historias tiene la ciudad de Nueva York”

*“Pedro Navaja”  
Rubén Blades, 1978*

Like many cultural products that arose in 20<sup>th</sup> century New York, salsa’s development charts a history of cultural mixing, social change, and resistance to the struggles of segregation, poverty, and urban crisis. Its spread demonstrates the innovative transformation of everyday cultural productions in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century and the globalization of urban popular culture. In cities all over the world, salsa takes shape in varied ways blending with local traditions and being reshaped by different structures of commercializing and consuming dance. In a hyper-globalized world, salsa can be viewed anywhere – whether live or on the internet – putting the scene at a new crossroads of both codification and growth. Nonetheless, New York remains a key location for salsa dancers all over the world.

In this chapter, I trace the histories of migration, cultural innovation, and social change that contributed to the development of New York’s on2 salsa scene. Literature on migrant communities, movements for social change, and cultural/artistic innovations are



sometimes discussed in isolation. Taken together they more greatly illuminate social conditions which contextualize the varied meanings and roles the salsa scene holds in its participants' lives today. The historical points covered in this chapter serve as a starting point for understanding the nuances of the on2 scene today. Moreover, many dancers and salsa enthusiasts discuss this history regularly as a cultural reference point.

### **The Mambo Craze: 1944-1966**



“Cuban Pete” and Millie Donay (b. Pedro Aguilar and Carmela Dante Di Stefano) at the Palladium.  
(Photograph: Yale Joel/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Image)

The story of the mambo era in New York is so rich in larger-than-life personalities, memories of exhilaration, inter-ethnic sharing, and creative innovations in music and dance that it has come to be told countless times...It is an indelible chunk of Americana by now, and a source of deep pride and fascination among Latin American and Caribbean peoples everywhere. (Juan Flores 2016: 21)

In 1930 the Don Azpiazu Havana Casino Orchestra first arrived in New York bringing Afro-Cuban dance music with them and recording a popular version of the Cuban *son* “El Manisero” – aka “The Peanut Vendor”.<sup>15</sup> The recording was a major hit and contributed

<sup>15</sup> There is some contestation amongst scholars about the impact of this recording. John Storm Roberts (1999 [1979], 76) presents this as a monumental moment in Latin music in the United States. Ruth Glasser (1995), however, contests the idea that the popularity of “El Manisero” was unilaterally responsible for the rise of Cuban music internationally.

to a popular dance craze misnamed “rhumba”.<sup>16</sup> Within a year many major big band jazz singers and orchestras had recorded covers of the song, and it became the first Latin hit to crossover into popular music. The 1930s and early 1940s proceeded with a burgeoning Latin music scene developing in New York, spurred on by increases in the city’s Latinx population, which was already over 100,000 in 1930 and continuing to grow. Class divisions contributed to differences in musical taste (Flores 2016: 10). Though both Puerto Rican and Cuban music styles were locally popular in Latinx communities, it was the *son cubano* that would become “the stylistic backbone of the major trends and eras to follow, from ‘rhumba’ to conga and mambo to cha cha, Latin jazz, pachanga, boogaloo, and salsa” (Flores 2016: 9). A distilled version of Cuban popular music, curated for middle-class American audiences, became associated with downtown glamour, while Puerto Rican folk styles remained more locally confined in Latinx neighborhoods uptown and in the outer boroughs (Roberts 1999 [1979], Flores 2016).

In the 1940s and 50s, more and more musicians in New York, particularly Puerto Ricans, began playing Afro-Cuban son and guaguancó (a form of rumba, unlike American rhumba).<sup>17</sup> These musicians experimented with combining Afro-Cuban music

Juan Flores (2016) allows that there were earlier renditions of Cuban popular music that reached the U.S. but generally agrees with the argument that “El Manisero” was indeed by far the most influential and did spark the so-called “rhumba” craze that followed. He also notes that “El Manisero” was the first Latin crossover hit and identifies it as “unmistakably of Cuban vintage” (4).

<sup>16</sup> “Rumba” is a broad word for a party; it is also an Afro-Cuban dance and music style quite different from the son on which international “rhumba” was (confusingly) based.

<sup>17</sup> Afro-Cuban music itself draws on centuries of cultural mixing. The rhythmic patterns of the music can be traced to West and Central West African cultures, including the Yoruba, among other groups (Sublette 2007). It is likely that “a larger portion of rhythmic influences in Afro-Cuban popular music derived from Congo practices. For instance, Arsenio Rodríguez, who created the son montuno on which salsa form is largely

with traditional styles from Puerto Rico – like bomba y plena – and from the United States – especially the jazz and big band swing which were popular in 1940s and 50s New York. In 1940 Frank “Machito” Grillo formed his own band to play Afro-Cuban jazz – a new sound. Machito had had exposure to jazz bands at the famous Savoy Ballroom. He named his group “Afro-Cubans” at a time when emphasizing African heritage in Cuban music was not yet popular and when clubs in New York were often segregated. In the following year he hired musical director Mario Bauzá, who Vernon Boggs describes as “the father of Afro-Cuban jazz” (1992: 100). The 16-piece orchestra debuted at the Park Plaza Ballroom on 110<sup>th</sup> Street and 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue on December 3, 1940 and went on to become one of the most influential Latin bands ever (Flores 2016: 19). Throughout the 1940s as Afro-Cuban jazz gained popularity, Machito and His Afro-Cubans played popular midtown clubs, including those which were segregated. This was a period of transformative collaboration between Afro-Latinxs and African Americans at the community-level and in the emergent music halls of the era.

Juan Flores (2016) describes 1945 as “the propitious onset of modern-day Latin cultural history in New York” (16).<sup>18</sup> At this time, post-WWII collaborations between Machito and His Afro-Cubans and jazz musicians like Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie resulted in the emergence and popularization of mambo – the first major Latin style created in the United States. Mambo music, though born out of Afro-Cuban danzón and son rhythms, was raised in Mexico City and New York, with African American jazz

based, strongly identified with his Congo heritage (Sydney Hutchinson, personal communication to author, 30 March 2020).

<sup>18</sup> He does so with the important caveat that “of equal importance to such continuities of individual creative achievement and influence is remembering that the earlier decades set the stage and dynamics of what was to come” (17).

harmonies and instrumentation, resulting in a sound that was complex, energetic, and irresistibly danceable. As the popularity of mambo, and soon thereafter cha cha chá, began to grow, New York-born musician Tito Puente and Puerto Rican vocalist Tito Rodríguez came to prominence. Puente (who had been featured as a young percussionist on Machito's first album) was born and raised in New York and became a giant of the mambo era. A *timbalero*, he was responsible for bringing the percussion section more visibility and for bridging the height of the mambo era with the beginnings of salsa (though he famously contested that name). Years later, he would go on to serve as hero and mentor to salsa dance visionary Eddie Torres. Together, Machito, Tito Puente, and Tito Rodríguez became the "Big Three" of the famed Palladium Ballroom and helped usher Cuban popular music and the Palladium into popular culture. Combining these influences with cultural and musical trends of the time, and the distinct flavor of the city, the resultant music gave rise to a mambo dance sensation that found its home in the social clubs, musical venues, and nightclubs of Manhattan and the outer boroughs.

### *The Palladium*

Musicians and dancers came together to create this infectious new style most famously at the Palladium Ballroom – the location that many contemporary New York on2 salsa dancers view as the birthplace of their art form. Located at the corner of 53<sup>rd</sup> Street and Broadway in midtown Manhattan, the Palladium provided a platform where Afro-Cuban music combined with New York's distinct influences to become mambo. Dancing was critically important to this process, as dancers were considered instrumental in a process of call and response with the musicians. From the late 1940s through the

early 1960s the Palladium was one of New York's most popular Latin music and dance venue. It remains the location that most clearly persists in the imagination of today's salsa scene. During these years, Puerto Ricans, other Latinxs, African Americans, and ethnic whites like Jews and Italians danced together at the "home of the mambo" (McMains 2015, Hutchinson 2004, Boggs 1992).

With numerous dance clubs operating in Manhattan of the 1930s and 40s, the Palladium did not become very profitable until promoter Federico Pagani decided to institute a Latin night in 1944. As this proved increasingly popular, Pagani instituted more Latin music. By 1947 the Palladium featured Latin music four nights a week – Wednesdays, Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. There, New Yorkers of all social classes danced in a somewhat racially and ethnically integrated environment – though oral histories indicate that different ethnic groups had different niche nights (McMains 2015: 43). These events often attracted celebrities (most famously, Marlon Brando who, it is frequently written, would sit for hours and play the conga).<sup>19</sup> By 1948, Machito and His Afro-Cubans had become active at the Palladium. During these years the Latinx population in New York City was growing dramatically. These demographic increases, along with "the public's desire to dance again after the demise of the big-band swing sound ...made Cuban popular music even more important" (Boggs 1992: 99). In the early 1950s the two Titos began to headline the Palladium, spawning the urban myth of a fierce rivalry.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> In his 1994 autobiography, written with Robert Lindsey, Brando says: "After going to the Palladium, I gave up stick drumming, bought my own conga drums and signed up for classes with Katherine Dunham" (1994: 67). See also: McMains 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Steven Joseph Loza's *Tito Puente and the Making of Latin Music* (1999) includes the transcript of a 1967 radio interview with Tito Rodríguez, conducted by musician Willie

On Wednesday nights, Italian American “Killer Joe” Piro hosted a popular mambo contest and professional dance show. As Juliet McMains describes based on oral histories of the Palladium era:

The evening began with a free dance lesson for upwards of 250 pupils by Killer Joe, an Italian American former lindy hop champion whose refrain of ‘vaya means go’ echoed through the ballroom.<sup>21</sup> Killer Joe also served as MC for the weekly amateur mambo dance contest, judge by celebrity guests. (McMains 2015: 30)

Although the Palladium is well known for these dance contests and for the famous dance acts that arose out of this era, much of the allure was in the many hours of social dancing guests took part in, almost entirely to live music. This social dancing phenomenon is a significant part of the legacy of the mambo era and is prominent in today’s salsa scene.

The Palladium Ballroom played host to many music and dance acts during its tenure, most famously “the big three”, Machito, Tito Puente, and Tito Rodríguez, revered even today as some of the greatest Latin jazz and mambo musicians to grace New York’s live stages. As the music developed, so too did the dance style as “dancers began with a base of Cuban son, added turns borrowed from American lindy hop, and interspersed these with breaks for solo dance steps adopted from Cuban rumba, Puerto Rican bomba, and African American jazz” (McMains 2015: 31, Hutchinson 2004).

Despite the immense popularity of the Palladium and its almost mythical role for participants in the salsa scene today, during this time period, the tastes and musical preferences of many Puerto Rican and Latinx New Yorkers were defined by local styles

Rosario in which Rodríguez describes professional respect, but mild conflicts over top billing between himself and Tito Puente (see: Loza 1999: 9-10).

<sup>21</sup> Michael McSorley, “Killer Joe” Piro: Past and Present, *Dance Magazine*, October 1955, 40.

like bolero, guaracha, and Dominican merengue. For working-class and newly arrived Puerto Ricans in New York especially, the Palladium was geographically and socially distant.<sup>22</sup> If the Palladium Ballroom retains a mythical role as origin point for the earliest iterations of the mambo dance craze and the salsa scene that extended out from it, then the Latin clubs of uptown Manhattan and the Bronx were certainly the pillars that held up that myth in the intervening decades, allowing the salsa scene to not only survive, but to grow, evolve, and to retain its community-based roots (Singer and Martinez 2004). The Palladium is particularly prominent in the narrative surrounding the salsa scene's development in part because influential on2 dance innovators from the 1980s through today – including Eddie and Maria Torres, Angel and Addie Rodriguez, Nelson Flores, Tito Ortos, Tamara Livolsi, and Billy Fajardo – have continued to foreground it.

On Sunday, May 1, 1966 the Palladium Ballroom closed. It was replaced by other venues that salsa dancer Eddie Torres (only twelve years old when the Palladium shut its doors) would credit as his own places of development (Torres, NYISC public talk, 2017). According to Torres, clubs in uptown Manhattan and the Bronx, especially the Corso club on 86<sup>th</sup> Street, took up the mantle of Latin music and social dancing as New York City faced a new period of change. As the Civil Rights Movement came to fruition and challenged Jim Crow and segregation more broadly, popular attention moved away from mambo and was redirected toward rock-n-roll and other musical styles. Meanwhile, Latin music began to move in new directions, fusing with African American styles and imparting new messages more relevant to the New York-born-and-bred children of

<sup>22</sup> Syndey Hutchinson (2014) notes that other places like Club Caborrojeño programmed jíbaro music to attract this crowd. I explore how the class and cultural divisions between “uptown” and “downtown” music and dance styles continues today in chapter five.

Puerto Rican and other Latin American migrants. Long-standing and newly arising conditions of inequality gave rise to a social environment that would shape the sensibilities and social movements of the generation that transformed mambo into salsa.

### **A Voice of the People, 1964-1980**

During the same time period, between 1950 and 1960, the Puerto Rican population in New York ballooned. By 1960 there were over 600,000 Puerto Ricans in New York, many of whom were working class and lived in Harlem, the Bronx, the Lower East Side, and parts of Brooklyn. Meanwhile, a large percentage of New York's white population began moving out of many areas in the five boroughs. This was part of a larger "white flight" across the country, a process in which ethnic white populations left city neighborhoods as black and brown migrants moved in, and which coincided with the economic ravages of deindustrialization and the beginning of "urban blight". Puerto Ricans thus increasingly lived in relatively isolated neighborhoods and in close geographic and social proximity to African Americans. During the same time period, larger numbers of immigrants began arriving from the Dominican Republic. This migration increased after United States immigration policy changed significantly with the 1965 Hart-Cellar Immigration and Nationality Act.

Neighborhoods began to suffer from a steady decline in manufacturing and stable unionized employment. The industrial jobs that had sustained earlier immigrant groups were being lost in large numbers. Soon deindustrialization and racist policies of exclusion partly based off redlining led to many New York neighborhoods being designated as



extreme poverty areas.<sup>23</sup> The economy no longer guaranteed prosperity or security and unemployment increased. Many large companies ceased operation during the 1960s. As the economy shifted toward post-industrialism, employment opportunities were increasingly limited to non-union, low-wage, high-risk work with little job security. During this period, the city lost over 500,000 manufacturing jobs, the city's tax base shrank as whites left, and expenditure on public services was sharply reduced (Gonzalez 2004: 118). Extreme disinvestment in many New York City neighborhoods contributed to the rapid deterioration of neighborhood conditions. Lack of funding and prolonged neglect of many areas meant that many landlords refused to fix increasingly dangerous conditions and instead abandoned their buildings altogether. Throughout the 1960s the rate of residential fires climbed rapidly, while the city's fiscal crisis resulted in large-scale cutbacks in public services such as police, fire protection, sanitation, and public transportation maintenance (Marwell 2007, Barber 2017). New York City declared bankruptcy in 1975 and faced large-scale arson that birthed the iconic (but never actually said on television) phrase *the Bronx is burning*, though the fires spread well beyond the city's northernmost borough (Berman 1999, Gonzalez 2004, Flores 2016, Marwell 2007). It was against this turbulent backdrop that mambo became salsa.

<sup>23</sup> In the late 1930s the Home Owner's Loan Corporation, an affiliate agency of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) surveyed cities across the country to create maps, with the stated purpose of standardizing the mortgage lending process. In effect they were racial maps. Neighborhoods with any significant black population – as little as 5-10% -- were categorized as “hazardous”. After World War II the FHA and the Veteran's Administration (VA) facilitated the use of these maps to determine loan eligibility. Banks would refuse to issue housing loans or insurance. This effectively codified segregation and ensured its long-term perpetuation.

Amidst massive losses in manufacturing jobs, increases in poverty, and drastic racial change in many New York neighborhoods, the 1960s and 1970s became a politically active time in the city and across the nation. In response to racism and segregation, movements for social change emerged nationally and locally, challenging long-standing systems of inequality. The Civil Rights Movement arose, followed by Black Power and Brown Power movements. In New York, the Puerto Rican Left emerged as a vital force of social action and community power (Muzio 2017). In 1969, the Young Lords, in what was called the Garbage Offensive, piled garbage in the streets on 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue to protest the NYC Department of Sanitation's neglect of East Harlem (Fernández 2019). In 1970, they occupied Lincoln Hospital to protest poor hospital conditions. Meanwhile, groups like El Comité-MINP (Movimiento de la Izquierda Nacional Puertorriqueño) and PSP (Partido Socialista Puertorriqueño) organized in neighborhoods like the Lower East Side, the Upper West Side, and parts of the Bronx to occupy unused or neglected buildings and protest urban renewal programs (Muzio 2009, "Break and Enter" film footage from Operation Move-In, 1971).

Amidst movements for social change, the 1960s and 1970s were also a period of pronounced cultural innovation in New York City, which was influenced and informed by social movements of the time – including Nuyorican Left, Brown Power, and later, community revitalization movements (Gonzalez 2004: 118). Part revolutionary soundtrack and part commercial masterstroke, "salsa" emerged in this period as Latin popular music.

## **From Mambo to Salsa**

To answer the demands of New York's now large Latinx population and the blending of musical styles that was occurring in New York's immigrant and migrant neighborhoods, Fania Records was founded in 1964. Ethnomusicologist and trombonist Christopher Washburne describes the new salsa dura that was a cornerstone of Fania's recordings:

Using the Cuban son as the foundation and building upon the Latin and jazz mixings of the mambo and the Latin soul, and rock mixings of boogaloo, the next generation of Latin musicians in New York City developed a new style that had, at its core, an aesthetic of high energy and an unrelentingly hard-driving sound that was viewed as uniquely of the New York barrios. This new sound would eventually be referred to as salsa dura. (Washburne 2008: 16)

The commercialization efforts of Fania Records were instrumental in the re-branding and marketing of the new form of music that would be called salsa. In the early 1960s Charlie and Eddie Palmieri emerged as important bandleaders, with Eddie Palmieri's *La Perfecta* becoming particularly impactful in the 1960s Latin music scene. Several recordings of this time period used the word "salsa", though it was almost a decade until the word came to be understood as a term for a musical genre itself. Close proximity and cultural exchange with African Americans, the ceasing of U.S. diplomatic relations with Cuba (which also largely ended musical exchanges), and the rapid change in social conditions in New York City all contributed to a shift in the type of sounds created in Latin music, and ultimately in the terms used to describe it.

Although the Palladium – known as the home of the mambo – played a central role in the Latin dance scene into the 1960s, numerous smaller clubs throughout the five boroughs were important incubators for the new musical directions taken during this time

period, often by the New York-born or -raised children of Puerto Rican and Dominican migrants. The Tritons Club was notable amongst these smaller venues as a community-oriented location that produced La Perfecta and Johnny Pacheco (Singer and Martínez 2004, Flores 2016, García 2006: 119). In the 1960s, Dominican American flautist/producer Johnny Pacheco introduced flutes and other wind instruments into the music in the style of the Cuban charanga orchestra (Flores 2016, Place Matters Project, n.d.). This was accompanied by a dance style called the pachanga, which remains popular in some parts of the salsa scene today. The popularity of Pacheco's charanga sound was followed by a period of intense popularity for Latin soul and boogaloo: upbeat Latin-influenced music with an R&B feel and usually accompanied by lyrics in English. Both of these developments, especially the latter, attest to the influence of African American New York in the development of Latin music and dance styles in the 1960s.

The question of who originated the term "salsa" remains contested. It is clear though that the term was largely a commercial invention, used most efficaciously by Fania Records to market a variety of Latin rhythms and sounds to a growing Latinx and Latin American market. In 1966, Venezuelan D.J. Phidias Danilo Escalona launched a show called "La Hora de la Salsa, Sabor, y Bembé," but the term did not become popular in New York until the early 1970s (Flores 2016: 172). At that point a number of tracks and albums used salsa as a generic term and Izzy Sanabria's *Latin New York* magazine played an important role in spreading the term. In 1971, Fania held a mega-concert at the Cheetah club, featuring numerous major Fania artists and produced by Ralph Mercado, as well as Eddie Palmieri. This concert was largely seen as the launch of the salsa era.

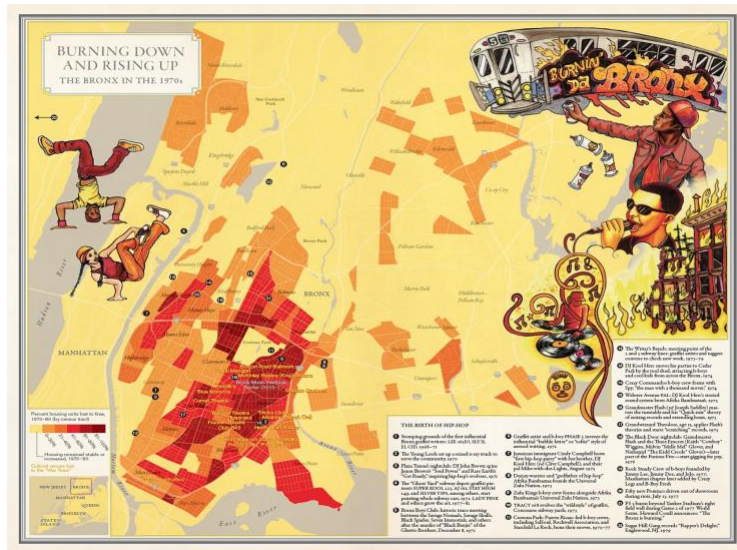
By 1973, Fania Records released a Larry Harlow album called *Salsa*, closely followed by a film titled *Salsa*, cementing the use of the term for this style of music. Despite being two of the major contributors to the development of salsa, Nuyorican pianist Eddie Palmieri and Fania's Johnny Pacheco had opposing views on the term itself. While Palmieri pointed to the irony of using one term as a catch-all for varied types of Cuban, Puerto Rican, and American music, Pacheco is quoted as saying "we should call this salsa and cover the whole thing under one roof" (Kent 2005: 260, quoted in Flores 2016: 105). Some musicians continued to reject this term for years, most famously Tito Puente, who is quoted many times rejecting salsa as a musical term, though he eventually acquiesced:

Well, I mean yes, what does it mean? There's no salsa music. They just put that word to the music that we were all doing all the time, the mambo, the cha-cha, the merengue: they called it "salsa." Salsa is a condiment of food. You eat salsa. You don't listen to it. You don't dance to it, you know? It became a popular word and all American people... "Tito could you play me a salsa?" ...Now I've joined them. I'm not going to fight it anymore, you know? the mambo, call it whatever you want! ... Salsa is actually the condiment that you put on food. (Loza 1999)

Nonetheless, since the mid-1970s, "salsa" has been widely used and understood as a generic term for the upbeat style of Cuban music mixed with diverse cultural influences that occurred in New York. Moreover, it is rarely if ever conflated with styles like merengue, as Puente claims. Still, resistance to the term displayed by some musicians is echoed in New York's salsa dance scene even today, where many on2 salsa dancers refer to themselves as mambo dancers, in part to distinguish themselves from on1 salsa dancers who are the majority in other parts of the country and world.

## The Global City: Post-1977 New York

In the wake of the city's mid-1970s financial crisis, many New York neighborhoods were roiled by the dual tragedies of the crack epidemic and punitive drugs laws put in place in the mid-1980s which decimated many neighborhoods of color (Jonnes 2002, Wolfe 2017, Gonzalez 2004: 135). The passage of the Rockefeller Drug Laws led to the incarceration of more than a generation of young men of color, leaving profound multi-generational impact in its wake. At the same time, community efforts to defend and rebuild neighborhoods that had been largely abandoned by city government and services accelerated, helping to combat the spread of arson and crack (Contreras 2013). This was especially true in the south Bronx, which had been redlined, neglected, and declared a wasteland by media in the 1970s. By the late 1970s some parts of the south Bronx had lost 60-90% of their housing stock to arson and governmental abandonment.



From: Marshall Berman, “Burning Down and Rising Up”

Following community organizing efforts – famously spearheaded by groups like Banana Kelly Community Improvement Association and The Northwest Bronx Community and

Clergy Coalition, among others – conditions in the Bronx began to slowly improve (Gonzalez 2004). Despite the challenges of the crack epidemic and high levels of crime, the Bronx and other outer-borough neighborhoods began to slowly regain population in the 1980s.

During these years, salsa music and dance became less visible as disco music and its accompanying Latin hustle dance style became popular, although one important exception was the abundant success of Rubén Blades. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, hip hop and its accompanying cultural revolution exploded, playing a prominent role in everyday urban cultural life for young people in New York and garnering national and international attention. As second-generation Puerto Rican New Yorkers came of age, many increasingly found common cause with African Americans and identified more closely with the themes and messages of hip hop, which reflected current realities of everyday life for young people of color in the city more clearly than their parent's salsa (Flores 2000, Rivera 2003).

By the 1990s New York was changing again. New waves of immigration and development, as well as intense community organizing, began to pull the city out of its economic crisis. Across the country, cities that had been facing high crime for a generation began to experience the same trend. This time period laid the groundwork for a new urban issue arising in the 2000s that would have been difficult to imagine just twenty years prior: gentrification and displacement, as formerly low-income and migrant neighborhoods in upper Manhattan and the outer boroughs became bastions of real estate development, wealth, and inequality. Against this rapidly changing backdrop of economic revitalization followed by hyper-gentrification, a new commercial route into

the world of salsa began to arise in the form of dance studio classes and the on2 salsa scene.

### **From Mambo Madness to “the Salsa Scene”**

“The dance is a spiritual thing, it's a cultural thing.”

*Eddie Torres, 2013*

Eddie Torres was not even a teenager when the Palladium Ballroom closed down in 1966. Inspired by the Palladium dancers and famous dance acts like successful mambo-era duo Augie and Margo, Torres trained in clubs like the Corso throughout the 1970s, even as Latin hustle took center stage for many dancers. Torres sought a collaboration with famed bandleader Tito Puente that would last throughout the 1980s. During that time, he laid the foundation for his version of on2 style salsa technique, which today is the most popular technical style practiced in New York (Torres 2017). The basic step codified by Torres draws heavily from a traditional mambo count but differs slightly in timing and execution to more closely reflect the way salsa was danced on the street (Torres 2017, Torres quoted in Hutchinson 2004: 123-5).<sup>24</sup> With the goal of teaching salsa dance to a broader audience, Torres also created a syllabus of increasingly difficult decorative solo steps, called shines. This roster of steps was adopted by instructors in early salsa dance studios, many of whom had trained with Eddie prior to

<sup>24</sup> Eddie Torres gives frequent public talks about his mambo story, the details of which have remained remarkably consistent across the years. The first time I heard Eddie’s speech was in 2013; and I heard it many times thereafter. In 2017 and 2018 I documented it closely in notes and video. Hutchinson (2004) quotes her 2003 interview with Torres, in which he shares a similar narrative. His biography can also be found on his website, at: [http://www.eddiatorresny.com/Eddie\\_Torres\\_NY/Eddies\\_Biography.html](http://www.eddiatorresny.com/Eddie_Torres_NY/Eddies_Biography.html).



branching off. Then on2 salsa began to travel around the world with New Yorkers booked to teach and perform at events internationally.

This particular origin story is widely known and shared in the on2 salsa scene, mainly due to the influence of Eddie Torres, who is alive and still active in the scene. Over the years he has been invited to events all over the world to share his knowledge and experience as an instructor and important innovator for this global community. In recent years, he has conducted an annual workshop at the New York International Salsa Congress, in which he shares part of this history and legacy with a large audience. It is clear that the strategic work done by Torres laid the foundation for the emergence of on2 salsa, in New York and globally and advancing the realization of his often-stated dream of seeing on2 salsa recognized as a legitimate style of dance. In that regard, he has seen considerable fruits of his labor in very recent years.

In many ways Torres' personal story provides a useful map for grounding the broader history outlined in this chapter so far. It does, however, also exclude other significant venues and early actors who were active in creating on2 salsa and the scene that has blossomed around it, as well as broader social factors. In the mid-1970s George Vasquez and Denise Gerard – the daughter of Palladium mambo dance legends Cuban Pete and Millie Donay – formed the Latin Symbolics, a group that prominent Latin music promoter Ralph Mercado booked to perform at major venues in this time period (Fajardo 2019). Also in the 1970s, Billy Fajardo, who today is a major figure in the salsa competition world, formed a group called the Disco Dance Dimensions. From 1978 to 1982 the group performed hustle and other Latin dances weekly on NBC as part of Don

Kirschner's Rock Concert (Fajardo 2019).<sup>25</sup> In the mid 1980s, while Eddie Torres was mostly engaged in his long-term collaboration with Tito Puente, Addie and Angel Rodríguez – who had previously danced with the Latin Symbolics – formed Razz M'Tazz Dance Company, championing a timing and style of on2 dance that more closely mirrored mambo timing in the style of the Palladium (see: Hutchinson 2004).

In the mid-1990s, as New York recovered from the brutal financial crisis of the 1970s and the crack epidemic of the 1980s, salsa studios dedicated to teaching on2 began opening up in New York and New Jersey. On2 studio classes differentiated themselves from those taught by large chain ballroom dance studios.<sup>26</sup> They promised to retain the club style, cultural authenticity, and New York flavor of the dance, but also offered an increasingly high level of technique as salseros of the era crafted what Hutchinson (2004) calls a “community-based dance technique” to structure their style. By the late 1990s, members of the “Eddie Torres Dancers” began to break off and form their own dance companies and schools and the process of spreading the style to a broader audience accelerated. Chief among those early companies was Santo Rico Dance Company which was created by Wilton Beltrán in 1994 and then run by Tomas Guerrero, followed soon thereafter after by Nelson Flores' Descarga Latina in 1997, Victor Mayovanex's Karisma Dance Company in 1999, and Osmar Perrones' Yamuleé Dance Company in 2001.

As New York City changed so too did its unique style of salsa. In addition to the basic step, the style is defined by an emphasis on syncopated body movement, fast and

<sup>25</sup> This is also documented in archival videos at Historic Films, on YouTube, and on some websites dedicated to Latin hustle.

<sup>26</sup> For example, Arthur Murray is a chain of Ballroom dance studios with 260 locations worldwide, the first of which opened in 1925 (<https://arthurmurray.com/>).

intricate partner work, frequent spinning, and flashy, flavorful shines which give the individual dancers time to show off their skills to anyone who may be watching the dance floor. It is also defined by a larger set of cultural affinities. Many on2 salsa dancers display deep investment in the roots and history of their art form and subscribe to a general set of ideas about New York salsa. These include viewing the Palladium Ballroom as the birthplace and sacred home of mambo; respecting Eddie Torres as the “Mambo King” and originator of contemporary on2; framing the on2 break step as reflective of deeper connection with the rhythm than the melody of the music because the “tumbao” or the hard hit in the rhythm played on a Conga drum during salsa music occurs on the 2 of a musical measure;<sup>27</sup> connecting the style with African or Afro-Cuban movement; and finally, advocating for on2 as one of the most rhythmic and authentic versions of salsa being practiced today. These basic subjectivities guide New York salsaeros’ understandings of their art form, although they are contested both within and outside of New York.

The emergence of on2 salsa classes and studios in the 1990s, along with similarly regulated varieties of salsa in other parts of the country, gave birth to a network of events

<sup>27</sup> Many studios teach a version of timing that is well-researched, thorough, and distinct. For example, when I began dancing with Santo Rico, and in several instances afterwards I attended timing workshops in which professional dancers attempted to teach their students about musical structure in salsa. Over the course of my time in the scene, the understanding of music also seemed to evolve as greater resources became available and interest was generated. In my first timing workshop I was taught that three musical instruments constitute salsa music: the Conga, which sets the rhythm; the bass, which sets the 1 count; and the piano, which gives us the melody. Serious instructors also teach about the clave, describing the 3-2 clave count and a 2-3 clave count. Such instructors are frequently familiar with the distinction between a musician’s bar of music (four counts) and a dancer’s bar (eight counts). It is, however, not particularly difficult to accumulate students and designate oneself as a salsa “expert”. Debates abound in the scene over who has the right to claim this designation, and who does it well.

including local “socials” and large-scale dance conferences known as “salsa congresses.” The first international salsa congress was held in Puerto Rico in 1997. Since then, salsa dancers have organized, participated in, and at times profited from a global salsa industry. In the wake of that first congress, similar events began in cities across the United States and eventually in cities all over the world. New York began its congress in 2001, at the time called the East Coast Salsa Congress, attracting just around 400 attendees. By 2019 the event had grown to attract thousands. It also included name brand sponsorship (full name: “The *Goya* New York International Salsa Congress”), local news media promotion, and collaborations with corporations (pop up social dancing in a Times Square Verizon store) and cultural institutions (El Barrio walking tour with the Museum of the City of New York). And at the core of this event are a network of thousands of student dancers, a smaller number of professional on2 dancers, and a handful of promoters. In recent years, the event’s new promoters have sought to strategically expand the world of the salsa scene and connect it with the larger infrastructure of Latinx New York’s cultural institutions and networks. At the most recent New York Congress, Latin jazz percussionist Bobby Sanabria was presented with an award. Noted for his community engagement work and cultural commentary, Sanabria mentioned the popularity and global reach of the salsa scene today in his speech, stating, “These are the people keeping our music alive” to great applause from the audience. His claim underlines the broad reach that the on2 salsa scene has had in the last twenty years in particular as New York dancers have traveled widely and, increasingly, have a prominent presence on social media.

Nonetheless the on2 salsa scene persistently displays a cultural and generational boundary with the larger population, particularly the group Juan Flores refers to as “the salsa generation” (2016). At a 2019 meeting at the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, during which a group of prominent Puerto Rican community stakeholders discussing a potential new cultural institution in New York, participants were split on the legitimacy of on2 salsa. Some moved forward accepting the existence of this community, others were actively in favor of it as a vehicle for inviting young people and others into cultural celebrations. At least a few though, expressed active dislike of on2 salsa: *That’s just not real dancing* (Observation, May 23, 2019). Similar critiques of on2 salsa as watered down or inauthentic are frequent both within and outside the boundaries of the on2 scene. Members of the on2 salsa community grapple with the same contestation over authenticity and legitimacy. Certainly, class, ethnicity, and generation divide the salsa scene from the larger salsa dancing population in New York.<sup>28</sup> However, the boundaries are not entirely fixed, as many on2 dancers have family or community ties that go beyond the scene – a dynamic that is more fully explored in the following chapter.

### **Conclusion**

New York’s on2 salsa scene emerged out of this long history of cultural innovation and social change. Today, it is an informal and porous network of people who participate in local studio dance classes, social events, and online interactions. Members

<sup>28</sup> Members of what Juan Flores describes as the salsa generation often relate salsa directly to a time (1960-1975) and place (New York City). Amongst this cohort, on2 salsa is frequently critiqued as lacking flavor. The salsa scene is overwhelmingly younger and middle class than practitioners of salsa in general.

frequently identify with a larger, global imagined community that connects diverse local interactions under the umbrella of “the scene”. Some participants describe New York’s scene as an open and welcoming space characterized by cultural hybridity and community sharing, though it is not without its tensions. Many student and professional dancers seek out opportunities to perform, meaning it is also characterized by artistic and athletic competition, as well as a ruthless market structure.

Salsa represents culture, power, resilience and joy, the blending of peoples and traditions in New York City, survival, and the right to self-determination. The many people who regularly participate in New York’s salsa scene infuse it with further significance by committing a great deal of time, money, and energy to it. Its significance is best understood through the stories of people who participate in its world. In this chapter I addressed historical and social forces that helped shape today’s salsa dance community in New York City, including immigration, cultural innovation, and social change. Interwoven into this narrative is the story of the rise of salsa’s predecessor, the New York mambo, and the overarching landscape of today’s scene. Within the scene, the dense historical development of salsa music and dance play out in people’s affiliations, understandings, and social interactions. In the following chapter I relate some of the conversations in which salsa dancers regularly engage and show how these narratives define and reify salsa’s recent past, imbuing New York’s salsa community with a short- and long-term collective memory.

### CHAPTER THREE: “DOIN’ IT FOR MY LAST NAME”: PRACTICING CULTURE, PRODUCING IDENTITY

"The truest expression of a people is in its dances and its music. Bodies never lie."

*Agnes de Mille, The Dance Notebook, 1984*

New York’s salsa dance scene thrives on late nights. In club venues or *socials* at dance studios, well-known salseros and fresh new dancers alike spend their evenings performing for each other and social dancing together. At a 2013 event paying tribute to dance pioneer Eddie Torres, held at a club that has long since closed down,<sup>29</sup> the designated “Mambo King” talked about fighting to preserve salsa when Latin hustle was rising in popularity in the late 1970s. By his account he fought to preserve mambo, or what would become New York-style on2 style salsa, not just as a dance form, but as a valuable cultural entity. Addressing the crowd of social dancers, performers, and observers, Eddie recounted a meeting with former Young Lord Felipe Luciano:

Felipe Luciano said to me, ‘Eddie Torres is not just a dancer, he’s a culture hero...a culture hero is someone who stands up for your roots, for your culture, and you fight; and you don’t let people take away your language, your flag, your rice and beans, your music,’ and you know what *familia*? It’s up to all of you mommies and daddies to pass it down to the next generation and keep this going because you know there’s nothing like this. (Eddie Torres, public appearance, October 30, 2013)

His sentiments on the connection between salsa and cultural affirmation are echoed across the New York salsa scene. In this vibrant and semi-visible community, dance, movement and music are intertwined with the symbolic meaning and performance of

<sup>29</sup> The club in question was LQs – short for Latin Quarter – which changed management in 2012 and closed down in early 2015.

culture – especially of a specific New York Latinidad that has been largely shaped by Puerto Rican, Dominican, and other Afro-Caribbean communities.

The event described above was the first time I saw Eddie Torres in person, though it was far from the last. It was already many years since he had first come to prominence as a popular and somewhat mythic figure in the scene. I learned in the coming years that few things unite New York's salsa scene like reverence for Eddie, who still today travels the world attending salsa events, sharing some of the history and meanings behind on2, and describing his early attempts to bring a street dance into the studio and onto the professional stage. The story he recounts is in some ways indicative of the larger narrative of today's salsa scene, bridging the gaps between street, stage, and studio, blending the traditions of New York's many migrant communities, building a sense of community in the city today, and prioritizing the importance of cultural preservation.

I begin this chapter by describing the contemporary social traits of the salsa scene. I then outline five social locations where salsa dancing takes place. Finally, I relate data from conversations with Latinx professional dancers that took place during this projects research period (2012-2019) to demonstrate that the boundaries between these five social locations are often blurred. The narratives of authenticity and pride that many Latinx professional dancers invoke showcase their investment in on2 salsa as cultural practice and legacy. The way salsa scene participants regularly define and invest in salsa's present and recent past imbues New York's salsa community with a short- and long-term collective memory. Moreover, it complicates the idea that on2 salsa is simply a commodified product used only to market and sell Latinx cultural production. Unpacking the role of cultural identity as well as tensions around authenticity and legitimacy



additionally lays the foundation for the following chapter, in which I delve into race and gender in the salsa scene.

### **The Fourth Generation**

Prominent ethnomusicologist Sydney Hutchinson (2004) identifies three generations in the development of New York's salsa scene. The first generation is the Palladium Ballroom mambo craze era from the 1940s through its closure in 1966. The second generation, occurring between 1966 and the late 1980s, is characterized by the relative dimming of mambo's popularity, the rise of Latin hustle, hip hop, and house music, and the emergence of Eddie Torres as a cultural innovator. The third generation, beginning in the 1990s, is characterized by globalization and commodification. Hutchinson then predicts future trends of growth, hybridization, and increasingly regulated technique. In the years since her original article appeared [2004], the future trends she predicted have come to pass, and have been further complicated by the astronomic rise of social media and New York's intense gentrification. The salsa scene has therefore entered a fourth generation characterized by: the expansion of social media with individual dancers marketing themselves as brands, the rise of newly important world salsa competitions, a changing relationship with physical space fueled by the increasingly unaffordable city, the emergence of a prominent bachata performance dance scene, and salsa's entrance into the commercial dance world/popular media. This new phase – beginning in the early to mid-2010s – has resulted in a notable shift in the central foci of the salsa scene and has provoked intense conflicts over authenticity and legitimacy in the various styles and influences in salsa.

The late 1990s and early 2000s saw the rise of three major on2 dance companies in New York – Santo Rico [1995], Karisma [1999], and later, Yamuleé [2001]. During this critical time period, as salsa dance studios and companies emerged in New York, the trend gradually expanded to other cities, especially Los Angeles. Considered something of a golden age by some contemporary dancers, this generation also saw the rise of international salsa congresses. Salsa congresses are dance conventions dedicated to salsa, and increasingly to other Latin, Caribbean, or African social dance styles like bachata, Latin hustle, kizomba, and zouk. Often lasting for the span of a weekend or longer, the events include a variety of dance workshops taught during the day, followed by performances in the evenings and social dancing at night. They are most commonly held in hotels. The first international salsa congress took place in Puerto Rico in 1997. Similar events soon began in cities across the United States and eventually in cities all over the world. Los Angeles Salsa Festival began in 1999 (and in 2019 celebrated its 21<sup>st</sup>, and final, year). New York began its own congress in 2001, at the time called the East Coast Salsa Congress and attracting just around 400 attendees, though it later grew to accommodate thousands. Whenever one event folds in a major city, another one (or more) rises to take its place.

The aughts became the heyday of the salsa congress. Congresses, festivals, and conventions sprang up across the globe – Germany, Morocco, Croatia, France, Peru, Canada, India, Italy, Japan, Greece, Curaçao, Denmark – a full accounting of events and locations is nearly impossible to tally as some events last just a few years while others endure much longer. A hallmark of the salsa congress industry was (and, with some qualifications, remains) the promotion of headlining dance acts. In the 2000s, flying

dancers in from New York to perform and teach was integral for the success of international events. These New Yorkers were then featured in the advertising for the event as a draw to local dancers who did not otherwise have access to classes or performances by instructors from salsa's much revered home city. Companies and individual dancers who were active during this time period often boast of having visited 30 or 40 countries to attend congresses in the span of a few years. In this way salsa dance spread internationally at a grassroots level in a way that was distinct from the music industry.

The second half of this generation, occurring between 2005 and the early 2010s, saw the beginnings of an online presence for salsa as one aspect of increased globalization. International congresses continued to be a defining feature of the salsa scene during these years, and the expansion of the internet began to impact the dance and performing arts worlds at large as artists were able to share their work to broader audiences in new ways. Particularly relevant to performance communities, YouTube.com premiered in 2005 and quickly became ubiquitous as a tool for recording and promoting dance. During my years in the salsa scene, I often observed conversations about the rise of social media, during which dancers would say that recording dance moves was initially resisted in the scene, as some viewed it as a way to steal other dancers' moves. Some dancers report that in the scene of the late 1990s and early 2000s recording was seen as the height of disrespectful since individuals' originality, flavor, and charisma were essential components of their success. For example, in a social media post, Tomas Guerrero, the director of Santo Rico wrote:

We live in an era where YouTube and franchise teams have taken over, so most people learn to dance via watching others' work on the net...Back in the day it

was quite the opposite. We didn't have luxuries like YouTube or Google, or the net as a whole at the level that it is today. We spent hours in a studio creating moves, turn patterns and making sure we weren't recycling anyone's material. It was a matter of pride back then" (Facebook post, Aug. 2, 2019).

I heard this nostalgia-tinged narrative repeated many times. Just as musicians of the 1970s hesitated to record their best musical tracks, some dancers who came of age in the salsa scene of the 90s resisted the mass recording of their choreography. Nonetheless, many dance instructors recorded instructional VHS tapes and DVDs as early as the 1990s and sold them at events; however, they maintained creative control of those resources. As social media expanded in the late 2000s it quickly became an important, and then integral, part of the salsa scene. The internet served as a source for information sharing as salsa-related websites emerged as a resource for local and visiting dancers in New York and elsewhere. On the tail wind of this digital globalization of culture and ideas, the late 2000s were an especially active time for salsa dancers and some New York-based salseros were able to make an international name for themselves through the spread of video content.

Today, New York's salsa scene is comprised of several thousand dancers at different levels of proficiency. It is multi-ethnic and multi-generational, though it skews toward a young adult demographic. Physically, it is largely decentralized. The scene organizes itself around two major physical location types: individual dance studios run by professional salsa dance directors that are mostly based in upper Manhattan or the outer boroughs, and central Manhattan studio spaces that event promoters rent out to host social events, especially on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday nights.<sup>30</sup> The scene

<sup>30</sup> Some examples include: DanceSport, Stepping Out Studios, Adelante Studio, You Should Be Dancing Studio.

increasingly characterizes its dancers according to the logic of international competitions, with “amateur” or “student” dancers being those who dance recreationally and not for pay, “semi-professionals” being those who participate in the scene at an advanced level (sometimes on “semi-pro” teams) or are working toward a goal of dancing salsa professionally, and “professionals” being those who make money from performing, teaching, or directing in the scene. The mass of amateur dancers in the salsa scene is diverse, more or less reflecting the demographics of middle-class New York.

Unsurprisingly, Latinxs are particularly prominent and white women are overrepresented. In contrast, professionals in the salsa dance industry in New York are almost entirely Latinx. Dominicans are particularly numerous, with a clear majority of team directors, instructors, DJs, and promoters being Dominican men. Puerto Ricans are also present in large numbers, but they are not as prominent as they were in salsa’s musical development and in the dance scene of the 1990s. Other Latinxs – especially Colombians, Peruvians, Mexicans, and Ecuadorians – are also well-represented amongst professionals, demonstrating the change in New York’s Latinx demographic since the 1990s.

Along with race and ethnicity, social class is one of the greatest dividers between the salsa scene and a broader salsa dancing community, since most dancers in the scene learn how to dance “on2” in class, necessitating the economic means to pay for dance classes that often cost \$20 or more for an hour. This is compounded with the cost of attending salsa events like socials and congresses. Costs further accelerate as dancers become more involved in performance and higher-level dancing, where expensive costumes, dance shoes, and rhinestones become integral aspects of participation.

Local events like socials, congresses, and classes account for the bulk of the salsa scene, but participating in online dialogues, exchanges, and social media posts is also a vital aspect of participation. In eight years participating in the scene, I experienced the impact and evolution of all these areas. In addition, interviewees across the spectrum of professionalism shared their perceptions and experiences in and around these spaces. Each of these arenas becomes part of the social lives of individual participants and contributes to the cultural, political, and economic impact of the scene itself. What is really striking about the salsa scene, though, is the immense value participants attribute to it. Again and again in interviews with dancers – ranging from casual students to committed professionals – people recounted salsa’s important mental and emotional role in their lives. Beyond that, many respondents make casual reference to sacrifices they have made to remain part of this community. Interviewees talk about moving neighborhoods to be closer to their favorite salsa venue or moving to New York in the first place to be part of the salsa scene here. Others mention changing jobs to accommodate a dance schedule or quitting careers entirely to pursue some aspect of dance. Many met significant others in or structure their social circles around the scene. Still others talk about caring for their mental health by making room for salsa.

The wider salsa community in New York (and internationally) is expansive. It includes people who connect with salsa music and dancing in a range of contexts.<sup>31</sup> The

<sup>31</sup> Salsa music remains a major commercial and popular culture force. Each year Barclays Center and Madison Square Garden play host to mega-concerts featuring single or multiple acts that include salsa legends and up-and-comers. Accommodating tens of thousands of salsa music fans from across generations, these concerts are a testament to salsa’s continued popularity. For example, on June 10, 2017, the 33<sup>rd</sup> New York Salsa Festival took place at Barclays Center and featured: Willie Colón, Eddie Palmieri, Tito Nieves, Grupo Niche, DLG, Eddie Santiago, Tito Rojas, and Fruko y Sus Tesos. On the

boundaries defining today's salsa dance scene are many, varied, and complex. As a community, the salsa scene in New York is steeped in its own history and continually reconstructs its own set of social rules and regulations. To help further understand this internal organization, I outline five social locations below where salsa dancing takes place in New York. The boundaries between these social locations are porous and they frequently overlap.

### **Five Social Locations**

The salsa scene provides a nuanced lens through which to view the roles and locations of cultural production in the neoliberal city. Salsa practice is segmented into at least five major social locations that I am calling: the *street*, the *studio*, the *stage*, *social media*, and the *summit*. Each represents a particular set of practices, meanings, and implications.

The first is the *street*. A reverse euphemism for the home, the community, or the club, when people describe themselves as “street dancers” they often intend to give credit to the historical communities responsible for the creation of salsa, or other forms of dance. Sometimes this statement is a means of asserting one's cultural authenticity, but it is also a way to highlight the urbanity of the dance. In this way, it is a method of claiming city space that extends beyond the home, highlighting the liberatory potential of public art and performance. In addition, the term “street” dance harkens back to a more literal usage when invoked in reference to block parties in the 1970s during which people physically danced on the street. The term then became a symbolic figure of speech

very same night, Madison Square Garden hosted El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico. Each venue seats roughly 20,000 attendees and was packed to capacity.

standing in for urban space more generally, and metaphorically for community. Among salsa dancers, this local level is the most sanctified of the social locations outlined.

Embedded in this space, is the idea of salsa as an improvisational social dance, whose lifeblood is the sharing and exchange of movement with family, community, friends, or partners. As Marisol Berríos-Miranda notes, “In the context of the living room (*la sala*) ...people of different genders, races, and ages interact, and social codes of conduct are taught and learned actively through the joyful and playful experience of dancing” (2014).<sup>32</sup> She contrasts this with the experience of being at a dance studio, where people are oriented toward learning a skill.

Most Latinx respondents in this study, and some non-Latinxs, made reference to some version of this location in their interviews. The street was often a point of comparison with later forays into the more formalized world of the salsa scene locations described below. For example, one Latina interviewee stated:

It’s a very big part of all of our family events. We’ll turn a baby shower into a dance party...it’s family. You’ll dance with your uncle and your grandpa and your cousins. And if all the guys at the party are taken, the girls will dance with each other. The salsa scene is very much...ask someone for a dance and thank you very much and you part ways. But at family functions you’re talking and drinking and eating so it all comes together. Everything cultural. The conversation, the food, everything. (Monique, March 22, 2018).

<sup>32</sup> She contrasts *la sala* with both a nightclub and a dance studio here. While I agree that dancing at home functions completely differently than that done in a dance studio, I think an average nightclub arguably allows similar opportunities for people to “learn actively through the joyful and playful experience of dancing.” Rarely does a nightclub pause the music and offer up a set of steps for patrons to follow in order to participate. This is markedly different than the experience of being at a salsa studio or a salsa social, which is geared specifically toward people who have learned to dance salsa to counts. Berríos-Miranda also foregrounds the familial aspect of dancing in *la sala*, which can indeed be distinct from the social relationships of the club, which often center around friends or romantic partners, though there can be some overlap here as well.



In New York, salsa dance that is practiced locally – in *la sala*, the home, the community, or the “street” – remains inseparable from the more formalized salsa scene precisely because so many dancers participate in blended social locations and practices that include both.<sup>33</sup> These blended experiences imbue the scene with a cultural lifeblood that is constantly renewed as dancers navigate the boundaries and openings between this and other social locations of salsa practice.

The second social location is the *studio*. Ostensibly the main purpose of a dance studio is to spread knowledge of a particular form; however, the functional use is income creation and sustenance for professional dancers who often support themselves by teaching classes to a broader population. Much has been written (including here) about the rise of salsa dance studios representing a shift from the grassroots spread of the dance within interpersonal networks to a more formalized and commoditized version (see: Pietrobruno 2006). However, many salsa dance studios in New York see themselves as rooted in “a community-based theory of dance” (Hutchinson 2004). Their existence allows New York dancers to exert some control over the continued sharing of salsa’s story. They also provide physical space in which to continue debates about the legitimacy and/or necessity of various levels of technique in salsa. In cities, the change in how dancers run classes, evolving from studio ownership to space rentals, indicates the changing landscape of New York as a whole. This shift in economic structure is explored in greater depth in chapter six.

<sup>33</sup> Juan Flores (2016) describes the replenishment of people from Puerto Rico and the Caribbean in New York as its own resource in the continued evolution and popularity of salsa music.

In the tradition of performance studies, many areas of the salsa scene can be seen as steeped in the practice of self-presentation through social rituals, interactions, verbal and bodily acts, visual cues, and other modes of communication. However, staged performances of choreographed dance routines are also a mainstay of the scene, and one of its defining features. These are prominently featured as salsa congresses and socials, which are often organized around such performances. Therefore, I refer collectively to these spaces as a third social location: *the stage*. By this, I mean both the literal, physical performance stage and its extended arenas: salsa socials and congresses.

In addition to the performance of choreographies, salsa congresses and socials include social dancing and workshops, and there is an undoubtedly performance-oriented aspect to even these parts of the events. Professional dancers attempt to acquire new students through a well-taught workshop. Meanwhile, both professional and amateur dancers show off on the dancefloor for bystanders or video cameras. Tamara Johnson (2011) outlines the performance geography of the dance floor, arguing that, “Elite dancers...are aware of the ever-present possibility of this gaze...This panoptic spectatorship is one way in which space produces salsa bodies: salsa dancers, while not always sure if they are being watched or not, perform for the possibility of this spectatorship” (112).

The rise of salsa congresses in particular is a fairly recent occurrence (post-1997). Their growth has had its ups and downs (and is discussed further in chapter four). One respondent describes the development of congresses, as he experienced it from a young age to today (at age 31):

They were pretty new [when I started dancing]. It was a lot smaller back then. It was a couple of people you would know, people coming from different states and countries. Shows might be 12, maybe 15 performances.”

*[I laugh, and say ‘must be nice’, because today’s congresses often feature 30-50 shows in one evening.]*

It would be just different types of dancers, different styles and different interpretations of music. It had pretty much the same structure where it was workshops, tech rehearsal, performances, live bands. It’s just, there’s more congresses around [now] and in way more exotic places than you could ever have thought before; even more so in your local neighborhoods like for instance you have the Brooklyn Salsa Congress right here, but we have the New York Salsa Congress and the New York Bachata and Salsa Festival – we have three of our own in New York now and we only had, back then, New York, L.A. and I believe it was Japan, that was all we had back then, and then Montreal happened. (Mike, November 30, 2017)

These spaces represent the globalization of the dance and the fact that if one learns the practices of the semi-formal scene, one can participate nearly anywhere in the world.

There is a global network of congresses and events that can be located in most major cities across the globe. They also represent the social aspects of the scene, and the physicality that is necessary to fully participate. Congresses can be particularly pricey, limiting their participants and reinforcing class divisions between student dancers and professionals.

The fourth social location is *social media*. The rise of the internet and spread of social media represent one feature in the larger arena of the globalization of culture. But the internet has also become its own distinct social location where dancers participate in the salsa scene by posting monologues, engaging in debates, promoting their work, and branding themselves. It also serves as a means of monitoring and judging the views and performances of dancers in other parts of the country and the world, expanding the imagined community of the salsa scene beyond its previously localized margins. While

live performance was previously an in-person experience only, “the textual circulation of salsa on the Internet remodels the dance event into a fixed product or commodity” (Pietrobruno 2006: 207). Meanwhile, the ubiquity of the internet ensures that all of the social locations outlined here become blurred as live dances, choreographed or not, can be circulated widely and rapidly.

A fifth and most recently evolved social location is the *summit* or competition. Alliteration aside, I call this fifth social location *the summit* to differentiate between general dance competitions and those, like the World Salsa Summit, that are geared specifically toward social dance communities. Competitions are a mainstay of many dance worlds. An untold number of young people in the United States grow up recreationally participating in all types of dance styles and attending the competitions that are set up around the country for young people to congregate and perform for a panel of judges. Hip hop dancers also often participate in local and international competitions.<sup>34</sup> The ballroom dance world largely organizes itself around competitions and has done so for many years. Even more relevant, the Los Angeles salsa scene has long featured local competitions (Marion 2014: 70-72). Events like the World Salsa Summit and the World Latin Dance Cup are larger than local competitions, are broadcast to a wide audience via social media, and tend to be fully fleshed out week-long events featuring everything from dance classes to judging certifications to a bustling market of dance-related goods and services.

<sup>34</sup> For example, Hip Hop International is one of the major organizers of hip hop competitions. They administer an annual USA Hip Hop Dance Championship and the World Hip Hop Dance Championship. See: <http://www.hiphopinternational.com/> for more information.

Unsurprisingly, competitions underline a hierarchical ordering of the scene based on one particular version of skill – that which is deemed correct by the judges and promoters who designed the competition regulations. In recent years competitions like the World Salsa Summit have begun cementing the necessity of more formal dance technique in the performance of salsa. Competitions also expand the sense of globality in the scene by pitting dancers from different geographic locations against each other. Moreover, competitions capitalize on and increase the athletic organization of the dance. Finally, and most strikingly, competitions have become the place where the regulation and commodification of salsa is at its pinnacle, as is the performance of a stereotypical version of Latinness. As I explore more fully in chapter five, the logic of competitions has recently permeated into the other spaces of the scene, including starker, economized divisions between who is considered “professional” and “amateur”.

### **“Doin’ it for my last name”**

Latinx salsa dancers often express their connection to the salsa scene as a result of their ethnic, cultural, or historical connection to its music and style of movement. Almost all Latinx respondents I talked to, especially those who were Puerto Rican or Dominican, describe early experiences with dance and music at home and tie their current interest in salsa to those memories. Others talk about being part of folk dancing groups during childhood or attending cultural clubs and programs in high school and college which served as the impetus for their interest in pursuing the dance.

Mike “Movimiento” Garcia complained about his father’s music growing up. The son of a Puerto Rican father and African American mother, he did not become interested in salsa until his mom brought him along to a salsa dance class as a teenager:

I would hear my father playing it, from being of Puerto Rican background. I would turn it off. I didn't want to hear it. I didn't know what they were saying. I didn't know what was going on; it's a lot of noise, just turn it off. But then sitting in class and hearing the breakdown of the music, the rhythm, the history, I fell in love. (Mike Garcia, 3 Nov 2017).

By the time of our interview, Mike had spent 15 years immersed in the salsa scene and pursued the dance at a professional level, though he worked full time on the side.

Elaborating on his decision to continue dancing throughout the years, he said:

I feel like I'm doin' it for my last name. My family watching along from Puerto Rico...although it's a part of them, they've never done anything with it. I'm almost a visible representation of our culture. I keep that in the back of my mind when I'm dancing as well and every once in a while I listen to it in my car just to feel it again and it brings me back to being at home in Puerto Rico or in my dad's car and he would play the music and I used to be annoyed, but I'm not annoyed anymore, that kind of thing. Something that's a little piece of me that I keep with me. (3 Nov 2017)

Mike's story weaves together many of the narratives that take shape around identity in the salsa scene, including both its multiculturalism and its cultural specificity, as well as its distinctly New York flair. Like a number of other respondents with whom I spoke, Mike notes important differences between the on2 salsa scene and salsa as a family or community practice. Still, he ties the two together. In his on2 initiation story, he references his experiences in the studio, his cultural connection with Puerto Ricanness and family members who dance as community practice (the street) but have "never done anything with it," and his eventual progression to stage performance. Although it is clear how each of these social locations play a distinct role in his salsa dancing experience, he also weaves them together seamlessly, describing how each one feeds the other.

Several years prior to my conversation with Mike, I spoke with Cesar, a Puerto Rican salsaero from Williamsburg, Brooklyn who identifies as Afro-Latino. In our interview he demonstrated self-assurance about his role and authenticity as a member of

the cultural tradition of salsa dance and music in New York. At the time of our interview, he was in his late twenties and had been traveling internationally for several years with a professional on2 company. As a consequence, he had been exposed to dancers in different cities in the United States and internationally and was aware of the myriad styles and techniques employed across the globe.

After joking that he really started dancing because of the “forty-to-two ratio of guys to girls” in his school’s salsa club, he expanded on his reasons for pursuing salsa:

It’s a cultural thing for me. It’s always been a cultural thing for me. A big part of the reason I started dancing it in the first place...is I wanted to get more in tune with my culture, you know, I’m Puerto Rican by descent. I didn’t really know much about the music and the impact of the music and the impact that it has on our culture and on cultures around the world. And I’ve really been blessed to see the impact that this has on people around the world. And if it has that much of an impact, if it’s something that can make anybody move, it’s impossible not to love it. (Cesar, 1 Oct 2013)

Like other respondents, Cesar immediately references culture as a reason for practicing salsa and compounds this practice with his Puerto Rican identity. He also makes reference to sharing salsa as cultural practice around the world – a common point of pride mentioned by on2 dancers. The celebration of (globalized) cultural sharing is not without its tensions, though. Many cite salsa’s global reach as a positive and impressive feat, though several talked about a conflict between maintaining the integrity of the dance as they see it and sharing it as widely as possible. For example, when asked what the salsa scene means to her at this stage of life, one respondent noted, “It’s part of my culture that we’re sharing with everyone else in the world...It means everything to me” (Monique). Later in the same interview, however, she pointed out that, “The commercializing of the dance, kind of, it leaves out the cultural part of it...Through social media, I feel it does kind of bastardize it a little bit, but at the same time, it also exposes our culture to

everywhere. You can dance salsa anywhere in the world and that's an amazing thing" (ibid).

### **“Dominicans, Dominicans, Dominicans!”**

I asked Mike Garcia about the ethnic and racial makeup of New York's scene. A fifteen-year veteran of the scene at only 31 years old, he went on with this succinct description:

In New York? Dominicans, Dominicans, Dominicans! There's a lot of Dominicans and Puerto Ricans here, a lot of Colombians are stepping forward too. For us that's our main three. There's Peruvians out there as well, a couple of Ecuadorians I've met and been around, a lot of mixed people like myself; but I think the predominant ones are the Colombians, Puerto Ricans and Dominicans. (Mike Garcia, November 3, 2017)

Despite salsa's Nuyorican origin story, Puerto Ricans have become somewhat rare in prominent roles in the New York salsa scene. An older generation of Puerto Ricans continues to hold leading roles (both informally and as veteran dancers, promoters, and directors in the scene). While an appreciation for salsa music is maintained within family environments, young Puerto Ricans are now far less dominant in the dance scene than they were in the dance scene of the 1990s and early 2000s, or than they were in salsa music's early development.<sup>35</sup> By contrast, Dominicans are probably the most numerous and visible group in the dance companies and social events that constitute the salsa scene. In 1990 Puerto Ricans made up 49% of New York City's Latinx population and were by

<sup>35</sup> Of the prominent dance companies operating in New York in 2018/2019 – by which I mean: Yamuleé, Huracán, Descarga Latina, Balmir, Zafire, Iröko, Framboyán – only one (Descarga Latina) had a Puerto Rican director, and he is one of the few remaining salseros who has been on the scene for over 20 years. All of the directors were also men. An exception occurred first when Maria Ramos directed a Latin fusion team called D'Cor, which ceased to exist in 2018, and then when Delia Madera, a Dominican woman, directed a co-ed team called Rumbayá. Teams for women only are discussed below.



far the largest group. By 2015, they represented just 28% of the city's Latinxs. Conversely, over the same period of time Dominicans grew from 20% to 29% of the city's Latinx population. The visible shift in the salsa scene is therefore likely a symptom of migration patterns and demographic change, but is probably also tied to generational differences, as Puerto Rican migration peaked in the 1950s and 60s, while Dominican migration has continued in large numbers in the 2010s (Bergad, "The Latino Population of New York City, 1990-2015"). Puerto Ricans have also left New York City in large numbers for surrounding states and Florida, although New York still has the second highest number of stateside Puerto Rican residents [1,113,000] (CENTRO Press Release 2018).

My formal interviews included roughly equal numbers of Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, as did my informal group discussion recordings. However, with only one exception, Dominican informants cited only Dominican heritage, whereas hardly any of the Puerto Ricans I spoke to (only three out of ten) identified with just Puerto Rican heritage. The majority identified a mixed heritage that included at least one parent who was: African American, Colombia, Ecuadorian, Dominican, or Salvadoran. Several Dominican respondents were born abroad, while none of the Puerto Ricans I interviewed were born on the island. Moreover, all of the Dominican American respondents who were born in the United States had parents that were born in the Dominican Republic. In contrast, many Puerto Ricans identified themselves as several generations removed from the island. Respondents who identified as Peruvian, Ecuadorian, Colombian, or Salvadoran were almost all born abroad. Unsurprisingly, Latinx respondents who identified with a mixed ethnic heritage were all born in the United States.

Dominican respondents frequently described early childhood experiences with dance and music and often tied salsa to different Latin styles that are more traditionally associated with Dominican culture, like merengue and bachata. For example, professional salsero Franklin began our interview by saying, “I think because of the Dominican culture I’ve always been in tune with dancing just culturally. So, as a kid I remember dancing a lot with my mother in parties” (Franklin, March 21, 2018). Similarly, amateur dancer Pamela described how dancing salsa socially reminds her of her childhood in the Dominican Republic, “Music is just something that makes me happy and whenever I’m dancing...it reminds me of my childhood, because I would just listen to music and start dancing...That’s how I learned to dance merengue, bachata...Just, dancing just makes me happy” (Pamela, March 30, 2017).

Edwin, a Dominican American professional salsa dancer from Queens echoed similar sentiments during an interview in November 2013, in which he connected his salsa dancing with Dominicanness in a more nuanced way.

Carmela: Why do you dance salsa?

Edwin: Why? I dance salsa because, mainly because this style of dance is very challenging, very, very challenging. It’s not easy because you have to learn not only the dancing and the fundamentals of dancing, but you have to learn music. If you don’t know music, it’s very difficult to dance. Salsa kind of gave me that, with numbers and instruments...it helped me learn a lot about music. I enjoy the music...I always loved the music and I always enjoyed it because of my family coming up. That’s pretty much it.

Carmela: Does salsa hold any particular importance to you?

Edwin: Yes, it does because learning about it, it comes from our roots. Pretty much like the Cuban culture it started there and it kind of evolved, it came back to New York with cha cha chá and it evolved into salsa. It’s very important because especially in Dominican Republic, it’s not our main dance, we’re more mainly merengue and bachata, but now we’re starting to branch out into salsa and there’s a lot more salseros that are from the Dominican Republic and I think that means a

lot. Since we don't do it much and I'm doing it, I feel like, you know, we have to kind of get more of the Dominicans to do it. That's what's really important. The fact that I'm Dominican and there's a lot more Dominicans now dancing it and kind of showing people that we can do that, too. It's not just a Cuban, Puerto Rican style of dance, so that's another reason why I really like to do it. That's important.

Edwin's initial response to his connection with salsa is about the technical challenge of the dance itself. Secondly, he presents Dominicanness as being at the core of his cultural connection with salsa, while also constituting a sort of outsider status to be overcome within the scene. Conflicts over the full range of influence and ownership in salsa are a significant part of the scene. Long-term debates between Cuban and Puerto Rican influencers, as well as between New Yorkers of varied ethnic backgrounds are unlikely to ever be fully resolved. But it is only in recent years – perhaps the last ten years – that Dominicans have become stunningly visible as the most prominent ethnic group amongst directors, promoters, and professional dancers in New York. Frances Aparicio described “the difficulties of defining a music that is syncretic and interethnically Caribbean” (1998: 66). If Latinx New York can be viewed in some ways as an extension of the Caribbean, this contestation extends to the world of salsa dance, so closely tied with the music, and holds particular relevance as Dominicans negotiate their role and authenticity as prominent actors in the salsa scene.

### **Claiming Legitimacy; Or, Excavating Liberation**

Both Latinx and non-Latinx dancers regularly navigate tensions around cultural authenticity in salsa, at times leveraging legitimating narratives toward a collective liberation standpoint. In the latter part of our interview, Cesar, the Puerto Rican salsero

quoted above, elaborated on his family members' longstanding ties to salsa, further validating the connection drawn between salsa and his heritage:

My grandmother used to be a Palladium dancer. The Palladium is an old school dance club where all the old top mambo legends used to perform...and she was one of the dancers there. She used to be a performer...And I had a late uncle who used to sing salsa with an orquesta. (Cesar, October 1, 2013)

In the story of salsa's historical development, the Palladium Ballroom plays an almost mythic role. Cesar's reference to his grandmother as a Palladium dancer holds weight in establishing his cultural and historical investment as a salsa dancer. Despite the fact that he had earlier described the start of his dancing as an almost incidental occurrence based on the existence of a school club, he adds weight to his cultural and historical investment in the dance by referencing his grandmother and uncle who were involved in salsa's iconic developmental years. By retelling this story, he is also staking a claim in the most prominent and well-known story of salsa's development, even while grounding his family's experiences in a different version of salsa.

Cesar was not alone in invoking tales of family dancing at the Palladium. Mike Garcia told me a similar story:

One thing that kind of came full circle speaking of family, my dad told me that we had an uncle from Italy that was actually in New York because of family, he was in hospice care and he couldn't speak, but he understood everything that was going on and my father was telling him that I'm a dancer and they showed him videos and he started crying...Come to find out that he used to dance in the Palladium and he was a mambo dancer and he was so happy to see that I was doing that...That was like – what an experience! (Mike Garcia, November 3, 2017)

The assertions of these two black, Puerto Rican men from Brooklyn indicate the continued role of claiming authenticity as a dual process, encompassing devotion to both the “street” (the informal spaces: la sala, the club, or the community) and the class-

bounded, institutionalized, and legitimized story of the Palladium mambo era. This negotiation of legitimacy and authenticity is not unique to New York; it does, however, take on additional significance as Puerto Rican and other Afro-Caribbean migrant communities have a particular stake in salsa's cultural evolution.

Marisol Berríos-Miranda (2004) argues that the colonial dilemma of Puerto Ricans on the island and in New York motivated their creative contributions to salsa (music), which they experienced as a form of expressive liberation and decolonization. She also notes that salsa exemplifies Stuart Hall's description of the role of the "popular" in popular culture: "to fix the authenticity of popular forms, rooting them in the experiences of popular communities from which they draw their strength, allowing us to see them as expressive of a particular subordinate social life that resists its being constantly made over as low and outside" (Hall 1992: 26, quoted in Berríos-Miranda 2004: 161). Berríos-Miranda argues in particular that salsa contributed to a more positive relationship between Puerto Ricans and their African heritage, and that the international status of the music contributed to liberation in urban areas (166). Furthermore, she asserts that Puerto Ricans' passion for music and dance helped them retain and reinvent a distinct identity, leading to cultural liberation for a colonized people (160). The popularity of salsa in turn showed Puerto Ricans that they did not need to identify with the colonizer's culture.

New York dancers often navigate their own identities with the nuances of formalized or technical salsa practices, while retaining a stake in the various origin stories and cultural affirmation practices. Cesar went on to reference ongoing tension in the relationship between technical and informal or street-style salsa:

Carmela: Does your family dance socially?

Cesar: Nope, I'm the only one that dances socially. They only dance at parties.

Carmela: That's what I mean.

Cesar: Oh yea. They dance informally at parties, so it's still very much alive in the family.

Carmela: How is that different than the dancing that you do professionally?

Cesar: The dancing that I do, not to take away from it; it's more technical...you have numbers assigned to steps to aid in the student or the dancer to understand where they're stepping in what given time in the music. Whereas the type of dancing that we do at family parties or anything like that is more *feeling-based*. So, whatever you feel the music is calling for, you do. And it's something that was passed down generation to generation. So, you're kind of born into it. Not necessarily meaning that you know how to dance. But you're born into the music and feeling it and expressing it with movement.

Carmela: And the technical salsa?

Cesar: It's a feeling-based style as well. Once you've mastered the technique itself, then you can really have fun with it...that's what social dancing is, in a nutshell; you're improvising using your technique...once you get to that point, you can actually start to feel it more and let the feeling take over you while your technique does the rest. Teaching salsa with technique also kind of bridges different cultures as well because if you're able to make it into a universal language, a *1 2 3, 5 6 7*, you can have people from Asia, people from Europe, or people from Africa, South America, North America, Russia, anywhere, you can have them dancing on2 or on1 or anything they feel. (October 2013)

Cesar distinguishes between on2 salsa dancing and his family's salsa but infuses both with cultural significance. He eloquently differentiates the two distinct dance contexts – the stage and the street – in terms of the social locations, or the “informal” and the “technical” in his words. But he also recounts beginning his technical training largely as a way of knowing his culture more deeply and of performing it with greater knowledge. Later, he expands on the idea of spreading the music and culture by imbuing the dance with a universally understandable language (numbered counts). Therefore, the technical

style takes on additional meaning as a mechanism for spreading and sharing culture, further affirming power. Cesar employs his understanding of salsa as an essentially cultural practice, to make sense of and validate his continued participation in the salsa scene. His style of movement (“feeling-based”) is imbued with a cultural significance that serves to validate his authenticity and stake in the community. By putting a high value on the cultural contribution of a colonized nation (Puerto Rico) in the performance of a globally renowned dance form, he inherently and perhaps intentionally taps into the style’s counterhegemonic potential.

### **Revisiting Authenticity: Between Culture and Affirmation**

Native American historian Philip Deloria (1998) states, “The authentic . . . is a culturally constructed category created in opposition to a perceived state of inauthenticity. The authentic serves as a way to imagine and idealize the real, the traditional, and the organic in opposition to the less satisfying qualities of everyday life” (101). According to Deloria, “those seeking authenticity have already defined their own state as inauthentic, they easily locate authenticity in the figure of an Other” (101). However, even those who view themselves as insiders contribute to constructing an idea of authenticity by connecting themselves with narratives and practices that have been repeated as seminal moments and locations in the spread of this dance. Therefore, they construct the authentic in the positive – as an affirmation of group cultural contributions, and in opposition to versions of salsa that media and popular culture sometimes present as simple or exotic.

In her work on Argentine tango dancers in New York City, Anahí Viladrich (2013) notes that tango’s various forms are influenced by its spatial and social movement

across borders, race, and social classes. Viladrich uses the concept of ethnic capital to explain the ways that social capital and ethnic networks converge to enable Argentine tango migrants to promote and capitalize on “authentic” Argentine tango. This framework is helpful in understanding salsa as a transnational cultural movement and in framing the ways dancers conceive of and activate cultural authenticity. Although tango has a diverse and nuanced history, it is quite definitively understood as Argentine in origin. Salsa, in contrast, is surrounded by a slew of competing narratives around authenticity and ownership.<sup>36</sup> Cubans, Puerto Ricans, New Yorkers, Los Angelenos, Miamians, and Colombians (to name a few) all claim a major stake in salsa’ origin story and contemporary varieties. Nonetheless, because New York is often acknowledged as the birthplace of salsa and because it remains a primary site of Puerto Rican and other Caribbean Latinx cultural production, it holds a premier status in the global salsa scene.

For Viladrich, the production of authenticity is grounded in space, and she notes that her informants market tango as “a cultural commodity that needs to be advertised, promoted, and experienced in the real barrios...and in the company of genuine tango dancers” (2013: 82). She further posits the coexistence of two social fields of tango dancing, finding that “each setting responds to different ethnic and class constituencies that, for the most part, do not acknowledge each other” (2013: 169). On2 salseros, mostly from New York City’s outer boroughs, sometimes emphatically distinguish themselves

<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, Berríos-Miranda states that she has “come to believe that the promotion of salsa as Cuban, and the resulting resentment in the Puerto Rican community, is not simply a contest for credit between two nations. It is, perhaps more importantly, about specifically discrediting the salsa of the 1970s – not just because it was Puerto Rican, but because it was liberatory” (2004: 170).



from the inauthentic salsa practices commodified on television and in formalized Latin ballroom dance practices, but they also make room for differently localized social spaces of salsa with ease. This differentiation is in keeping with salsa's transcultural and ever-evolving identity.

In her 2013 work on the Los Angeles salsa scene, Cindy García discusses authenticity. Her informants distinguish between the newer dance moves frequently introduced among Los Angeles dancers and “mambo dancers [who] chose a more historically ‘accurate’ way of dancing to the same music, based on techniques...traced back to the Puerto Ricans at the Palladium in New York in the 1950s” (2013: 24). García notes that New York *salseros* affiliate themselves with this version of salsa across ethnic and racial lines. However, she offers a strong critique of this identification and positions it in opposition to “unsequined” dancers of Mexican origin in Los Angeles, by which she means those who are seen as lower class, less desirable, and less glamorous. Her contribution on Mexicanness is interesting, but the oppositional pairing of these versions of identity is jarring. She groups all “sequined” (i.e. trained, dressed up, and upper class) dancers together and is dismissive of the real, lived contributions of Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and other Afro-Latinx communities who maintain the on2 salsa scene. Furthermore, in her discussion of East Coast versus West Coast notions of Latinidad and authenticity, she positions her informants’ disavowal of Puerto Ricanness (Dominicanness is not mentioned) as based entirely on conflict over innovation and resentment about being viewed as secondary to the East Coast, rather than introducing potential anti-black bias directed toward the Afro-Caribbean roots associated with Latinx New York.

## **Identidad**

Across social locations, the salsa scene plays an important role in identity formation for its participants. Salsa's meanings in the lives of its enthusiasts are many, varied, and ever-changing. Many dancers cite long-standing cultural ties of ethnicity, race, and nationality as reasons for their involvement. Others elect to identify closely with the urban cultural standpoint exhibited in the scene. These are often New Yorkers or city-dwellers of non-Latinx descent who express a cultural affiliation with the cosmopolitan identity espoused by the scene. Others still have chosen salsa not for its Latin identity necessarily, but rather for its athleticism, competitiveness, and difficulty level, or because it was readily available at an important moment in their lives (more than one interviewee cited a divorce, for example, as the impetus for beginning dance classes). Respondents also describe a love for the music or general affinity for dancing as major factors that drew them to the scene. Regardless of entry point, many participants ultimately integrate a dancer's standpoint into their vocabulary of self-identification. For example, one identified as an architect by day and practicing salsa on nights and weekends, an identity he displayed with the social media handle "salsarchitect". Thus, social locations and cultural narratives reflect and continue to shape the way salsa dancers understand themselves.

Many salsaeros see themselves as cultural guardians – and Eddie Torres as the 'culture hero' Felipe Luciano called him – fighting to retain a legacy while social, economic, and political conditions change drastically around them. At the same time, efforts to formalize and economize salsa as a functional vessel for cultural

work/productivity increase internal division around class, race, and to a lesser extent gender, accessibility, aesthetics, and taste – or, in a word, power. It is perhaps unsurprising that I am mostly sympathetic to on2 dancers, many of whom I view in the same terms that they view themselves: as people who are making an effort to preserve, spread, and own a piece of salsa’s cultural legacy and economic success. While conflicts abound over authenticity, legitimacy, and ownership in salsa dance, the style would be significantly diminished without the efforts of these dancers who fight for space (physical and narrative) for themselves and their version of salsa’s cultural legacy. Some fans of salsa who defend its legacy as a local and perhaps more explicitly political practice bemoan the spread of on2; but in New York, where descendants of the African diaspora by way of the Caribbean are still concentrated, a significant portion of the scene fights to retain at least some ownership over a cultural legacy built out of their own efforts and histories. This is particularly true for Latinxs, especially second- and third-generation Puerto Ricans and Dominicans who dominate the scene. But more recently arrived (first-, 1.5-, or second-generation) Central and South Americans have brought a new nuance to the scene with their own salsa affiliations, which is particularly visible in the momentous spread of Colombian, particularly “Cali-style” salsa (salsa caleña). Finally, non-Latinx New Yorkers frequently – though often imperfectly – adhere to narratives about Latinx cultural ownership and legacy in the on2 salsa world, a small but nonetheless important way of acknowledging the value of Latinx cultural property.

In the following chapter I interrogate race and gender dynamics in the localized New York salsa scene in contrast to broader racialized and gendered stereotypes of salsa in popular media. I then address locally specific debates and tensions around race and

gender through discussion of the recent popularity of Afro-Cuban dance components in contrast to elements of anti-blackness in the scene. Finally, I discuss the salsa scene's recent #MeToo interventions.

## CHAPTER FOUR: HAMILTON IN HEELS? POST-RACIAL AND NEOLIBERAL IDEOLOGIES IN THE SALSA SCENE

*A two-couple corporate gig at La Marina in Washington Heights.*

*I don't know how it happens but in the course of a few seconds we shift gears from performers to instructors. We were hired to showcase two short choreographies at the party, but as the evening progresses the event coordinator asks us if we could, "get the crowd involved a little, maybe do a quick lesson?" We could say no – we're not being paid for that, after all – but we go along with the request.*

*We fall into step together without comment. This is so common there is no real need to communicate. As one we change our steps, shifting from the challenging on2 break to simpler on1 timing – easier for a crowd to follow, absorb, consume. To keep the group's attention, we start improvising steps – easy enough for the audience to follow along – to make them feel like, really, they are a part of it. They are doing it! Intrigued by the sexy, fun thing they saw us do, they want us to teach them more.*

*We are not really teaching, though; we're entertaining. Although we are not doing choreography anyone, we are still performing. The product has changed from the dance show to us, as embodiments of the concept and aesthetic of eroticism. All of a sudden, we are selling a version of Latin New York that is designed to go down easy – all commodity but no culture, all hip rolls but no chains, all salsa and no guaguancó. "Sexy hips now! Go!" My co-dancers laugh along; they know the drill. Soon, the crowd of local and international executives are up and moving around the dancefloor.*

(Notes, September 19, 2016)

I wrote the notes above after performing a private gig for a Dove, Inc corporate party. It was not a particularly unusual occurrence, but one that is indicative of the ways in which salsa dancers transform and transmute themselves for translation into a racialized, consumable product. In spite of the boundaries between its various social locations, salsa is everywhere in New York. During my tenure as a salsa dancer I performed on stage at the 116<sup>th</sup> Street Festival and marched/danced my way through the Puerto Rican Day parade, as do so many salseros who are active in New York. Youth teams, student

groups, and professionals from studios all over the city regularly participate in street festivals, parades, political events, or neighborhood activities at every scale. Popular salsa dance events complete with instructors, DJs, and local promoters are regularly held in Bryant Park, at the Highline, Lincoln Center Out of Doors Festival, Central Park, BRIC's Celebrate Brooklyn! Festival, and other more moderately sized venues. Many times, I was invited to corporations (Dove, BuzzFeed), academic institutions (Lehman College, SUNY Old Westbury), or community organizations (ARTE, Student Leadership Network) to perform or teach about salsa, especially during "Hispanic Heritage Month".<sup>37</sup> In each of these contexts, performing salsa took on different racialized and gendered meanings.

In this chapter I delve into racial and gender dynamics in the New York salsa scene. To begin, I argue that popular media outlets market salsa dance as a *re-ethnicized cultural product*, characterized by a broad, unspecific Latinness that contributes to the erasure of a raced, classed, and politicized *AfroLatinidad*. Building on this argument, I note that a de-politicized and ethnically unspecific version of salsa then becomes marketable at a localized level, translating into commercial and corporate gigs for Latin dancers that reinforce the same racial narratives perpetuated by popular media. This process does not, however, go uncontested at the local level. In the second half of this chapter, I address some major debates around race and gender in the localized New York salsa scene, including the popularity of incorporating Afro-Cuban dance components into

<sup>37</sup> National Hispanic Heritage Month takes place from September 15 to October 15 each year. It is a time period in which corporations seem particularly likely to seek out and approve Latinx cultural programming. Many colleges and universities similarly put together a slate of events related to Latin American and Latinx communities during this month.

the community's dance repertoire as it contrasts with elements of anti-blackness in the scene, as well as recent #MeToo conflicts and conversations that have come to light.

In the United States, salsa's popularization expands upon a long history of Latin dance trends that have relied on the racialized appropriation of styles ranging from Cuban son [1930s] to Brazilian samba [1940s] and Argentine tango [1910s] (Boggs 1992). The effects of this appropriation are amplified as popular dance reality television series like *So You Think You Can Dance (SYTYCD)* and *Dancing With the Stars (DWTS)* disseminate previously localized dance practices to national and international audiences, creating new and widespread images of Latinx social dance styles (Dormani, forthcoming, McMains 2010). The version of salsa that these shows, and other commercial performances of Latin dance, bring into many people's living rooms has little to do with diaspora or resistance to homogenization. It is also a version of salsa that many on2 salsa dancers position themselves in opposition to, casually referring to it as *not real salsa*.<sup>38</sup>

Popular media often portray salsa as hypersexual, perpetually foreign, and primitive and therefore, I argue elsewhere, more palatable to white middle-class cultural norms and power structures (Dormani, forthcoming). This portrayal of salsa reaffirms nativist and white supremacist views of Latinxs as perpetual foreigners and contributes to

<sup>38</sup> Recently, some on2 dancers have attempted to break into the more lucrative commercial dance work. Many dancers across genres use the phrase "commercial dance industry" to refer to the high profit and formal Hollywood-based dance industry that includes things like dancing in music videos or television shows and touring with musical artists. Most notably, on2 dancers have been cast in the recently shot *In the Heights* movie, productions of *On Your Feet* (Gloria Estefan musical), and the forthcoming Steven Spielberg film re-adaptation of *West Side Story*. As the cultural landscape of media in general shifts to foreground more diverse creative voices, the portrayal of salsa may begin to change again.

stereotypical portrayals such as those found elsewhere in popular culture (ranging anywhere from films like *Latin Lovers* in 1953 to the role of Gloria in the popular sitcom, “Modern Family”). Nonetheless, salsa is always marketed as Latin for popular consumption. I refer to salsa dance as a re-ethnicized cultural product to indicate that Latinx ethnicity is mobilized in the commodification of salsa but not in racially, spatially, or politically specific ways. Through the spread of racist narratives, salsa is separated from its political history and its roots in working class urban communities, specifically in the multi-national, multi-racial Caribbean diaspora living in New York. When salsa is widely marketed and consumed as ambiguously Latin, it obscures a raced and classed identity that was present in the salsa music of the Fania Records era, much of which centered Nuyorican, Afro-Caribbean, and working-class identity/ies. Thus, local cultural production made by poor communities of color becomes global popular culture but is stripped of a political voice in the process of commodification.

The process of divorcing salsa dance from Afro-Caribbean and working-class roots and instead ethnicizing it as broadly Latin takes place most powerfully in mass media at the macro level where salsa dance is now produced and consumed for profit and broadcast to large audiences. However, the same racial narratives that pervade these media representations are sometimes deployed at the local level in the on2 scene. Moreover, the on2 scene is not immune to broad narratives of post raciality that suggest multiculturalism as a stand-in for racial justice. Therefore, in practice the scene sometimes perpetuates color-blind racism. As with so many aspects of the dance world, these narratives take on particular power when they are enacted through the body and presented as natural. In other words, dancers in the salsa scene perform a multicultural



community free of racism on the dance floor. In many ways this vision of multicultural community reflects the values of members of the scene itself. However, performing this utopian social aspect at times obscures ongoing inequities of race, class, and gender.

Among on2 dancers in New York, narratives about salsa dancing relate to and reconfigure cultural representations and racial ideologies. A majority of interviewees of all racial backgrounds reference the diversity of the scene as an attribute, speaking either to the happy existence of multicultural space in a society and political moment when that is far from guaranteed, or to the inherent value of sharing Latinx culture. These are, of course, positive social values. Uplifting diversity is also in keeping with some of the history of salsa's development, which has always included a wide spectrum set of New Yorkers. The Palladium Ballroom – hallowed hall in the collective memory of the salsa scene – famously played host to a multi-ethnic crowd. In this early history as well, though, tension exists between the mythic story of a diverse crowd of revelers mixing together and the reality of mid-century racism, segregation, and exclusion, including that experienced by black musicians. Moreover, the Palladium era was also a time in which black and Latinx communities were pushed uptown by segregation, red-lining, poverty, and urban renewal programs even while some social dance trends largely created by these communities were being adapted and brought downtown to mollify a whiter crowd.<sup>39</sup> In some ways the story has not changed much. Nonetheless, the scene identifies itself as a mostly apolitical and post-racial space where Latinness is the norm, but diversity is generally celebrated. Carving out space for Latinx promoters, DJs, and directors to

<sup>39</sup> This uptown/downtown framework is mentioned in chapter two and explored further in chapter five. New York's history of redlining and contemporary gentrification is discussed in chapter six.

collaborate and take ownership of physical space in hyper-gentrified New York City is certainly an achievement, as is the creation of a relatively harmonious multiracial space in the Trump age. However, racialized struggles for control of the scene – a microcosm of social power relations – persist, including in the subtle battle to maintain Latinx control over the venues, teams, and norms of the scene.

### **Dancing AfroLatinidad: Afro-Cuban Movement and Circulations of Blackness**

In New York, salsa dancers frequently tie their dancing to the practice of African and Afro-Caribbean culture. As Santo Rico director Tomas Guerrero told an audience following a public performance, “This dance is a spiritual thing. This is from Africa” (public appearance, June 2014). This is a common sentiment and not merely a ploy to market authenticity, and studios that ground themselves in this narrative sometimes have difficulty amassing students in comparison with those offering history-free classes at centrally located midtown studios. Assertions of pride in African heritage are also complicated by ongoing debates within the scene over authenticity and ownership.

In theorizing AfroLatinidad, Petra Rivera-Rideau, Jennifer Jones, and Tianna S. Paschel note that, “blackness – or the socially constructed meanings and qualities associated with being black – differs depending on distinct national and historical contexts” (Rivera-Rideau, Jones, & Paschel 2016: 2). Large waves of Latin American migration and sustained transnational exchange over the last century have meant that black Latin Americans and black Latinxs do not experience their respective social environments in isolation. Rather, back and forth sharing of conceptions of blackness and racism is well-documented (Torres-Saillant 2000, Roth 2012). In addition, the twentieth century and early twenty-first century have included extensive cultural exchange and

coalition building between African Americans and Latinxs (Opie 2014). On2 salsa, for example, originated with both Latinxs and African Americans at its creative center (as discussed in chapter two). Today, Afro-Cuban dance is regularly incorporated into New York dancers' performance choreographies. New Yorkers, in turn, have a particularly global audience for their performances, since many still travel internationally and are well-known in salsa dance circles internationally. Circulations between African American, Afro-Latin American, and Afro-Latinx visions of blackness, racism, and resistance, are thus ingested and reconfigured here in New York and in turn exported globally along with the dancers and videos traveling from New York to many areas of the world.

A complex challenge to normative racialization plays out in the inclusion of and reverence for Afro-Cuban folkloric dance and influences in the contemporary scene.<sup>40</sup> Dozens of Afro-Cuban dance classes of various origins are currently (in 2019) offered in New York. Prominent studios like Alvin Ailey and Peridance host companies and individuals who specialize in styles with class titles like "Afro-Cuban Folkloric" and "Cuban Orisha Dance"; or fusion-style classes like "Modern/Afro-Cuban". Not all similar classes offered are Cuban. Some refer to themselves as simply Afro-Caribbean; and across the city classes are offered in styles like Puerto Rican bomba y plena or Afro Haitian Movement. Meanwhile, the outer boroughs play host to a number of studios, organizations, and individuals offering similar styles, for example Cumbe: Center for

<sup>40</sup> New York's Afro Cuban folkloric music, dance, and spiritual community is extensive enough to warrant its own full-length study. Therefore, this section should be treated as a very brief overview. See: Jottar 2011 for discussion of Puerto Rican/Nuyorican identification with and use of Cuban rumba in the 1960s and 70s.

African and Diaspora Dance in Brooklyn. In some cases, Afro-Cuban classes feature live music or drumming to accompany the dancers.

Afro-Cuban movement styles influenced the development of mambo and cha cha chá long before the contemporary salsa scene developed. However, the current trend of crossover between on2 salsa and Afro-Cuban/Caribbean dance is somewhat tied to the efforts and interests of two men who came onto the scene in the late-1990s and early 2000s: Frankie Martinez (who in 2000 formed Abakuá Dance Company) and Franklin Diaz. The sustained global popularity of these two dancers in particular led to a surge in the frequency of salseros rooting their practice in current iterations of Afro-Cuban folkloric dance. Today, some salsa dancers train by taking the classes mentioned above, viewing it as a necessary step to further the depth of their cultural practice.

The direct lines of influence between and within Afro-Cuban (folkloric, Orisha) dances and salsa is a topic of much debate in the scene, as these styles are tied with an entire set(s) of religious beliefs and practices, prompting many in the salsa scene to see them as removed from the Afro-Cuban son tradition upon which salsa is largely based.<sup>41</sup> One interviewee described “a controversy right now in the scene with certain dancers teaching Afro Cuban classes and stuff like that without the knowledge behind what you’re doing, the moves that you’re doing.” (Monique, March 22, 2018). Inevitably dancers who lack in-depth training in Afro Cuban begin incorporating it into their routines and teaching it in their classes, resulting in considerable controversy in the

<sup>41</sup> Sydney Hutchinson (personal communication, 2020) notes that these are in fact distinct traditions; however, Cuban timba references Afro-Cuban belief systems and rueda dancers thus also incorporate Orisha moves into so-called “Cuban salsa” at times. Interestingly on2 dancers seem to have minimal interchange with timba/rueda dancers, but frequently seek to incorporate and understand Orisha dance.

scene. Dancers with a long tenure in the scene sometimes describe this phenomenon as a passing fad in the vein of other styling trends that had come and gone in previous years.<sup>42</sup> Others are dismissive of Afro-Cuban as *not really salsa* (Author's observation of dancers' conversation, June 7, 2018). However, trend or not, the Afro-Cuban turn in the salsa scene – and dancers' tendency to describe it as a contemporary trend – is complicated by the obvious fact that salsa itself is partly derived from Afro-Cuban and Caribbean dance forms. Moreover, dancers employ the preposition “Afro” frequently, but rarely “black”. The salsa scene defines itself as Latinx, not black, popular culture.

In her work on urban social movements in Venezuela, Sujatha Fernandes (2010) looks at various conceptions of cultural identity and their roles in urban movements and cultural expressions. Fernandes recounts the racial understandings of a man called “el Gordo” who prefers the term “negro” (black) over “afrodescendiente” (Afro-descendent), because of its roots in vernacular or colloquial uses of “negra/o” as a term of endearment. He goes on to connect racial heritage with political struggle and to assign agency to community struggles around race. This discussion underlines the transition from the celebration of roots and the promotion of a national identity to the emergent focus on particular cultural identities and black and popular culture. The embrace of the opposite amongst dancers in the salsa scene highlights some intricacies of U.S. social understandings of race generally, and the salsa scene community's ambivalence about U.S. blackness particularly.

<sup>42</sup> The details of these “trends” are difficult to describe without visual aid, but things like bent arms for ladies' styling or doing a small hop at the beginning of a basic step have faded in and out of fashion in the past.

The salsa scene reconstructs normative anti-black racial ideologies in a number of ways. One example is the harsh critique of black women. Across my interviews, lighter skinned Latinxs were the most likely to say race had little to do with success in the salsa scene. Non-Latinxs, including whites and Asians, were split.<sup>43</sup> Latinxs who identify as black were most likely to talk about race and the impact of blackness. Monique describes herself as Afro-Latina and is of Puerto Rican and Dominican descent. At the time of our interview she was in her early 30s and had recently transitioned from being an amateur to a full-time professional dancer. We spoke at length about a variety of topics including family and culture, the dynamics of competition dancing, and her experience being a plus-sized woman in the salsa scene. Toward the end of our conversation we talked about her experience of blackness in the scene.

Monique: As an Afro Latina a lot of times people don't realize that I am a Latina. So, as they see me, to them I'm a black woman, and I'm perfectly okay with that. But in the salsa scene, in general, toward black women there is a huge bias, huge. There's actually a Facebook group called "Black Girls do Social Dance" and they made it for a reason because I remember when I first came into the scene I was like, what is it about me that the two white girls next to me and the Asian girl next to me are getting asked to dance and I'm just standing here not getting asked to dance at all? I think people need to be more inclusive and realize that we're damn good dancers, right? There's a big problem I think with black people being represented in the salsa scene. And even I would go as far as saying black Latinas.

Carmela: So that plays out on the social dance floor?

Monique: Absolutely.

(March 22, 2018)

<sup>43</sup> Although I did not gather detailed education or income detail, this split also appeared to fall loosely along educational lines, with respondents who had attended college more likely to discuss race and racism.

Tamara Johnson (2011) argues that the North Carolina salsa scene “is territorialized, and an inside is created for dancers who can adequately perform the proper body movements and footsteps and who can appropriately present their adorned bodies” (111). From a geographical perspective she states the dance floor is divided into spaces of privilege and marginalization that typically align with class, skill, nationality [race], and desirability. This is also reminiscent of how the Palladium dance floor was divided into different social spheres with a wealthier and whiter crowd on the periphery and a more predominantly black and Latinx group dancing in the middle (García 2004: 166). Thus, salsa clubs can be examined as microcosms of broader social interactions. Monique’s reference to the social geography of the dance floor speaks to struggles for inclusion and representation that especially play out across the social location of *the stage* in the salsa scene. The assumption that black women are outsiders, while white or Asian women are a natural component of the scene’s diversity, speaks to broader anti-blackness and power relations that influence who is able to comfortably access both space and inclusion in the scene. In addition to race, these interactions are of course deeply gendered. For example, one Indian male amateur dancer noted that women rarely agreed to dance with him when he first arrived in New York (Amit, May 15, 2018). In an environment where gender roles play out in racialized and essentialized ways, it is not surprising that black women and South Asian men face particular barriers to social inclusion on the dance floor.<sup>44</sup> It is interesting to note though that the boundaries of *Latinidad* in the salsa scene are regularly stretched to include white and Asian women performing an exoticized version of

<sup>44</sup> Media stereotypes portraying Asian/South Asian men as sexually neutral or undesirable are well documented, as are those displaying black women as harsh or angry (Schug, Alt, and Klaur 2015, Muffuletto 2018, Chito Childs 2005).

Latinness – a phenomenon also referenced by Katherine Borland (2009) in her work on gender in New Jersey’s salsa scene. Taken together, these trends speak to the fact that racialized hierarchies exist within Latinidad in New York, as they do in Latin American countries of origin and the United States more broadly.

In our discussion, Monique referenced specific black women in the scene, including one particularly well-known New York salsaera who is the object of frequent ire and criticism because of her decision to wear her hair natural.

I’ve heard comments around they should perm their hair, or they should straighten their hair, they should do this with their hair, it’s too wild. It’s always a conversation and this is something that even outside the salsa scene we’re facing, that we have to deal with. So, when I hear people talking about it, [I think] there’s nothing wrong with it, her hair is beautiful! (March 22, 2018).

It is not particularly surprising to find anti-black bias permeating the salsa scene. The way it manifests is noteworthy though because the dynamics play out in a way that is embodied – expressed through participants’ physical exchanges and bodily interactions – and because the scene is generally socially progressive. Over the years I sometimes heard ridicule directed at the same prominent Afro-Latina that Monique mentioned (personal communication documented by author January 15, 2019, personal communication documented by author February 10, 2017).<sup>45</sup> As one of the most well-known Afro Latina professionals from New York, her hair, it seems, has long been a major subject of contention particularly among the men in the scene. This ridicule has often been cloaked

<sup>45</sup> I heard racist critique directed toward this dancer and centered on her hair various times and documented it twice when it appeared in social media “group chats” I was in. The first time (February 10, 2017) the post was met with significant pushback from some black members of the group chat but defended by others. The second time, which included a picture of a goat that the poster compared to this dancer, it was ignored.



in humor, displaying an enormous sense of entitlement or ownership on the part of the men commenting. Amidst the backdrop of the scene's avowed ideals of colorblindness and Latinx cultural power, conversations harshly critiquing the explicit display of black womanhood were (and are) jarring.

These power postures were also juxtaposed against another normative idea within the scene, in which the notion of “flavor” or *sabor* is sometimes deployed and celebrated in connection with blackness. For example, when I asked one professional dancer, a light skinned Latino of Puerto Rican and Colombian descent – about the role of race or skin color in the scene, he first responded saying that when he was younger he had the impression that success in the scene was equated with having flavor, a trait he had attributed to black, Afro-Latinx dancers. He went on to explain how his perspective widened as he grew older and that he now believes people from everywhere can have flavor.

Carmela: Do you feel like skin color or race has had an impact on your experience? Does it have any impact in the scene in terms of social dancing or performance success?

Andrew: I did [feel that way] before when I was younger and now I don't, and I'll tell you why. When I was younger, I would only see Juan Matos, I saw Delia when I went to Yamulee. And those are people that were identified to have more like flavor and like *sabor* and stuff like that. So, I thought in order to have *sabor*, you had to be of a darker skin complexion, but then I saw Karel and I saw Tamara and I saw Amneris and I was like, they're just as flavorful, in their own right, but just as flavorful. So now for me, it doesn't matter. You can be from Croatia. You can be from Russia. If you have flavor, you have flavor. So, I don't think color or race kind of attributes to success or how good you are; it depends on your work ethic. (May 10, 2018)

While speaking to the universality of notions equating flavor with success in the scene, this dancer also reinforces hegemonic notions that hard work equates with success in dance and life. The meritocratic notion that those who work especially hard will achieve

and deserve success is a pervasive part of U.S. national identity, but it feels particularly sharp and visceral in the dance world, where artists put their bodies through incredible strain in the pursuit of success. The salsa scene is no exception. The myth of meritocracy has a tight hold over many dancers, a large number of whom are the children or grandchildren of migrants and are especially invested in the potential of the American dream. Meritocratic ideas are then frequently expressed alongside a colorblind subjectivity – a common and oft-repeated pair of mantras that, when combined, can reinforce conditions of marginalization.

The exclusion faced by black women does not appear to be directed in the same way toward black men. Although black men face similar stereotypes about what Latino looks like, there are more professional male salseros and prominent amateur social dancers who present as black, and in general, this trait underlines their cultural legitimacy and inclusion rather than negating it. This equation of blackness with legitimacy is in line with larger racial gender dynamics that are well-documented, wherein media portray black men as hyper-masculine, and black women as lacking Euro-centric traits of femininity (Lemelle 2010, Lemelle 1995, Chito Childs 2005, Collins 2004, Jackson 2018). The salsa scene replicates this dynamic, underlined in rhinestoned and choreographed performances. Dance is a physical art form, intrinsic to the body, which reifies racialized gender tropes by presenting them as natural. This naturalization of race and gender additionally takes place in an environment in which many members regularly view themselves as post-racial Latinxs. That being said, the above dynamics are neither uniform nor static.

To an outsider, the social dance floor may appear to be the ultimate melting pot, but it is the site of a series of conflicts and negotiations over belonging, some of which are well-documented (see: Johnson 2011, Borland 2009; Hamilton and Hewer 2009). Negotiations over race, sexuality, body, attractiveness, skill, and belonging take place regularly in the configuration of the social dance floor. The dynamics of the social dance floor play out in somewhat similar ways during performances, as dancers occupy the social location (and the physical actuality) of the stage, as Monique and I discussed later in our interview:

Carmela: What about black Latinas and black women in performance?

Monique: We don't see that many black girls on stage performing, and I don't know why that is. I don't know if it's because they're not getting asked to be on teams? I can't say what it is because there's definitely the talent. They definitely have the talent. It's not that. There's not a lot of us out there. Delia's kicking butt. Desiree's kicking butt. But if you also notice, they're lighter skinned. So, there's colorism, you know? And Desiree can pass as a Latina. So, it's just, yea, I don't know why that is...I can't help but think it is discrimination. But I look forward to there being less of that. It's just the beginning, so I'm not gonna be so hard on the salsa scene, because it's definitely a step up from a lot of social circles. But we have a lot of work still to do.

Darker skinned dancers sometimes contest and reimagine the role of blackness in the performance of salsa. Mike Garcia, the black and Puerto Rican dancer quoted in chapter two, and Monique, interviewed separately, both told me they partnered together with an intentional agenda of representing black, full-bodied dancers on the professional salsa stage.

The goal is to get out there and represent the community that hasn't been spoken for. You know, both of us being fuller sizes, you don't see a lot of us on professional stages, you don't see us, you see them as students, or a project... There's been times where people wouldn't put me on stage because of what I look like or they thought that I couldn't do what they could do and I had to prove everybody wrong and I found a partner who shared the same interests and I

had the goal to represent who we don't see on stage, we don't see big chocolate people on stage doing what we can do.

And going forward I want more people to come out and be themselves. Our natural bodies aren't a stick or small or anything of that; a lot of Latinos have curves and let's show that. Look what we can do with it. Moving forward I just want everybody to be included and further our travels, further our experiences and share our stories. Dance is not just about the music, it's about the stories, it's about the history and the culture. And that's what's important to me. (Mike Garcia, November 3, 2017)

The exoticization of darker skinned dancers and marginalization of blackness and black women in particular exists parallel to reverence for the art and impact of Afro-Caribbean movement and rhythms in the on2 salsa scene. That tension is ongoing. Nonetheless, there is significant effort within the salsa scene to lift up black Latinidad. There is a legacy of denying blackness within Puerto Rican, Dominican, and other Latinx communities (García-Peña 2016, García-Peña 2015, Liberato and Jean 2017, Cruz-Jansen 2003). However, there is also a deep legacy of foregrounding and claiming blackness within the same groups, in particular through activist movements highlighting black and indigenous roots (Lee 2014). This legacy is being extended and emphasized by the second and third generation young people shaping Latinx New York today (Lyon 2019). That influence is evident in the salsa scene as dancers, many of whom are millennials responding to a changing social landscape, contest racist commentary and social practices. As Latinxs reshape narratives of blackness and Latinidad in New York more broadly, a concerted critique of racist narratives and practices does play out in the salsa scene.

### **#MeToo Makes it to the Scene**

Women comprise a majority of the salsa scene, particularly amongst student/non-professional dancers. They represent a slightly higher percentage of the students than

men do in most classes, and it is ordinary to attend a social event with a disproportionately large number of women. All-women performance teams are also more common than all-men teams. At competitions, the number of entrants into the women's solo and duet categories is always larger than that of the men's categories. Still, the gender disparity in number of total participants, while visible, is not enormous. Despite the large volume of women, people most frequently named as salsa pioneers are almost exclusively men, as are those who are invoked as important contemporary practitioners. Many times, I have heard even prominent women's stories described and mediated through the tales of which male director discovered them or worked with them (observation, February 9, 2017). There have been, of course, well-known women dancers for many years, but in recent years some women have been able to eclipse a primary identity as a man's partner or protégé – a process that still presents significant challenges to women professional salseras.

Gender has been explored somewhat more than other topics in scholarship on Latin dance. Perhaps this is because salsa and other social dances often involve partnering between a man and a woman, with the roles of leader and follower traditionally assigned to men and women respectively. These gender-coded roles are an overt part of the dance's organization and are a clear, visible site for analysis. Although deeply entrenched into the normative practice of salsa and other Latin social dances, in recent years dancers have begun to regularly challenge the rigidity of these roles. Frances Aparicio (1998) frames social dancing as a site for negotiation of gender roles. She also notes that the rise of the *salsa romántica* style of music in the 1980s and 1990s was a

gendered production and marketing project.<sup>46</sup> She argues that the feminization of salsa music during this time period is one reason that some salsa aficionados see romántica as a weaker or softer (“monga”) version of salsa (2002). Aparicio makes a nuanced and important argument here, which is that gendering is a central tactic in the negotiations of power between racialized subjectivities and dominant institutions. She argues that the salsa dura versus salsa romántica/monga conversations perpetuate a sexist discourse: the opposition between political agency and affective sentimental discourse.<sup>47</sup> Thus, “the defense of good salsa and of the musical authenticity and expertise of the New York salseros is inextricably bound to gender differentiations” (141).

In her study of New Jersey’s salsa scene, Katherine Borland argues that the studio-salsa community has created a safe space for women’s expression by disconnecting women’s bodily performances from sexual invitation even as it appears to grant choreographic control to the male leader (2009: 467). Despite the deeply gendered structure of social dancing – men lead, women follow – Borland argues that social dancing opens up spaces for women’s assertion. The scene normalizes a power system that ostensibly relies on stark gender disparities.<sup>48</sup> My gendered experiences as a

<sup>46</sup> Salsa romántica is a melodic and commercially successful style that emerged in the mid 1980s and early 1990s. See: Aparicio 1998 and Washburne in Waxer (ed.) 2002: 101-121.

<sup>47</sup> Like the Nuyorican poets of the time (1970s), the salsa singers established an oppositional voice as an alternative to what we call the political feminization they were experiencing collectively. During the 1980s and 1990s, the music industry weakened political, social and cultural reaffirmation of salsa music by plugging romantic ballads into radio play. Lyrics shifted from collective decolonizing affirmations of community to romantic ballads affirming individual heterosexual relationships.

<sup>48</sup> A detailed look into queer participation, performance, embodiment, and inclusion is beyond the scope of this project. Certainly, there is a ripe amount of data to support a book length project on this topic. Kathy Davis (2015) writes about Queer Tango. This has not caught on yet in the main New York scene. It is however quite common to see two

professional dancer in the salsa scene were frustrating, difficult, and at times violent. My encounters mirrored those of some other women who spoke about being sidelined, berated, or harassed in overt and covert ways. Interviews with other women (and men) uncovered a wealth of shared experiences on the part of women, and a struggle to articulate the meaningful ways in which women negotiate misogyny on the part of men interviewed. Though both women and men were able to talk, for example, about women being hit on in the scene, it was only women who articulated the way that power relationships in salsa spaces impacted them in more subtle ways.

Not surprisingly, mirroring national events collectively referred to as the #MeToo movement, a series of occurrences in 2018 and 2019 exemplified how #MeToo played on within the salsa scene. Therefore, in this section, I begin with ethnographic notes on the first public announcement on affirmative consent that I witnessed in my time as a dancer, then I examine a personal social media post from a prominent New York dancer, and finally I analyze a public social media posting that identified a prominent salsa dance director as a sexual predator and became the epicenter of an explosive conflict and moment of reckoning in the scene. These events roughly corresponded with the rise in public allegations against Harvey Weinstein in the *New York Times* during the (re)birth of the #MeToo movement,<sup>49</sup> the testimony of Christine Blasey Ford against Supreme Court

men dancing together. Less common but occasional, are pairings of two women. In fact, performance pairings of two men are often revered: [that pioneer duo; those two champions; contemporary pairings]. As of March 2019, one same-gender male duo even appeared on Jennifer Lopez' World of Dance television show. In the Spring of 2018, the first Queer Latin Dance Festival took place in Oakland, CA. The event features queer performance couples and LGBTQ solo acts and celebrates socials with themes like "Queer High School Prom".

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/harvey-weinstein-harassment-allegations.html>

Justice Brett Kavanaugh, and the beginning of the Harvey Weinstein trial, respectively. This section is not a comprehensive study of gender and sexuality in the salsa scene. I do not address the experiences of transgender, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming dancers. A more detailed study of gender and sexuality in New York's salsa scene would be a welcome addition to the literature. My intention here is to analyze one contemporary and rapidly shifting aspect of women's experiences in the salsa scene, particularly as it becomes a significant conversation in the scene and pertains to broader social shifts.

### **“Anything other than yes means no”**

For a while it seemed like the #MeToo movement would not hit the salsa scene. And in some ways, it still has not arrived in full force. An outwardly apolitical space, the scene is rarely wracked with public statements on broad social topics like race or immigration. More than once I danced at events dedicated to fund-raising for disease research, or to support an individual member of the community. In the wake of Hurricane Maria, some events raised money for Puerto Rico, but promoters rarely attached an explicit political narrative to these events. Yet 2018 was a tumultuous year, and as Hollywood and Washington D.C. wrestled with #MeToo, the scene began to take notice.

*After midnight, I am sitting in my living room watching a live stream of the Chicago Salsa Congress. The emcee is a well-known bachata dancer and promoter from Tampa, Florida.*

*Toward the end of the shows, the emcee makes an announcement to the audience. He directs his message at the other men – but also asks for the women's assistance in reminding them and implementing the message. His tone is accessible, funny even, and he says that if after the shows and social dancing and going to the sensual bachata room, the guys want “to do a kizomba private” back in the bedroom, “anything other than yes means no” to great applause (that nonetheless – is it my imagination? – sounds like it comes mostly from women).*



*I am watching the live stream from home, along with at least 1,000 viewers. It stays posted on their Facebook and their YouTube channel. Later the emcee posts the segment on his personal Instagram page.*

*It's an emotional moment. I can't remember ever hearing a man in the scene make public statements about affirmative consent.*

*The women behind this particular team, along with other women in the scene, have advanced a model of women's solidarity and empowerment in recent years. It feels like their work is at the root of this announcement, and it makes me happy.*

*In a scene that is marked by intermittent sexual violence and vague violations, this feels like an impactful statement, although there's no real measure for its impact.*

(Notes, March 24, 2018)

As in so many communities, including other dance networks in which I have spent time, the sexual violence experienced by women in the scene floats just below the surface and impacts almost everyone in varied ways. While outright rape and assault might be condemned if made public, insidious cases of sexual violence are everywhere. The public statement cited above does not take the place of policies to protect women or a shift in the larger culture of entitlement to women's bodies that remains unchallenged in the scene (as it is in many social arenas). However, the proclamation in support of affirmative consent feels like a start. The fact that it is delivered by a man, and directed toward other men, is a good thing and a welcome shift in comparison to other misogynistic social media postings shared amongst men in the scene and elsewhere.

Months later, in the wake of the Dr. Ford/Kavanaugh hearings, professional dancer Isabel Freiburger posted the following Instagram message to her 17,000 followers:

*We talk about love, inclusion, support and just how generally amazing our dance community is, as though its immune from the realities of society*

and the world at large. I'm calling bullsh\*t. Seriously, boundaries are crossed every day in this community in countless ways. I know. Trust me. I know. We stay quiet because of fear. Fear of judgement, that we won't be believed, or that in some way we brought it upon ourselves. No. more. This community needs to be held accountable just like all communities need to be held accountable and responsible for their actions.

I know I haven't spoken about my own experiences publicly, but this is the best I can do for now. Please know that I am here for you. I believe you. I stand with you. And as much as my stomach is churning right now, if this post helps even one person, it was worth it. Now is not the time for silence. #metoo #standup #speakup #ibelieveyou #ibelieveford.

Isabel Freiberger Instagram post, September 28, 2018

The posting was met with over 30 comments, almost entirely from women. At the time it was posted, I wrote in my notes:

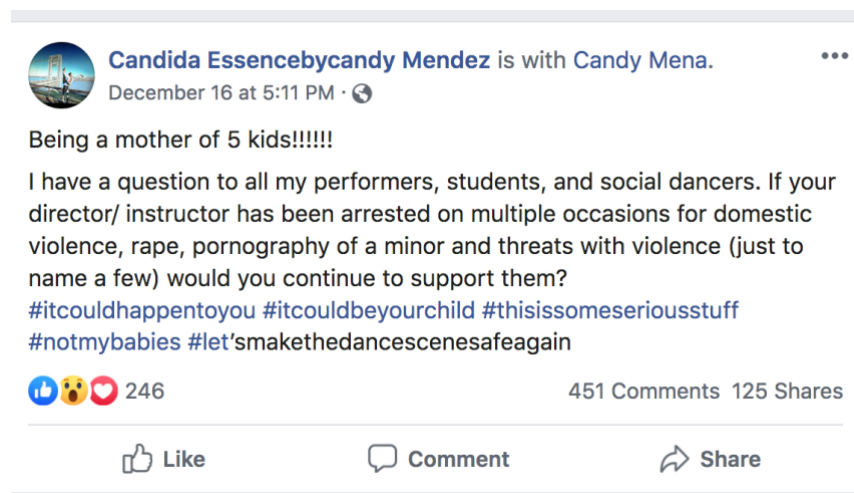
*Still, there have been relatively few ripples in the scene, indicating that there is still a lot of work to be done.*

Notes, September 30, 2018

Isabel's post was not isolated. Certainly, women in the salsa scene have made similar posts, or at a minimum have had similar discussions amongst themselves. Still, I also noticed a pattern of avoiding topics like sexism, patriarchy, and sexual assault in my time as a dancer. In my own relationships with women in the scene, I found these topics came up less frequently than amongst women friends outside the scene. This avoidance could have been attributed to the fact that women are so often pitted against each other in the salsa scene with scarcity mentality that says – somewhat accurately – that women will only be valued when attached to a male dance partner and that skillful professional men are more difficult to find than women. Thankfully, this idea is currently being thoroughly

and successfully contested by women in the scene. A little over a year after I recorded Isabel's post, the greater ripples I thought were missing began in earnest.

On December 16, 2019 a veteran woman dancer in the salsa scene wrote a post on social media identifying a prominent male salsa dance director as a sexual predator. The whistleblower wrote the post in part in response to the man's arrest for aggravated harassment, and to an ex-girlfriend's allegations of sexual assault, stalking, and harassment. The initial allegations were then compounded by several follow-up claims made by various women either on social media or spread through conversation. Some of the allegations –which included rape and harassment – were made by women in the comments of the original post. Others made their own individual posts. Still others seem to have been shared amongst friends and networks in the scene, and slowly made their way to a wider audience. The initial social media post is below:



The post went on to receive well over 450 comments and 125 shares on Facebook. In addition, other dancers posted statuses in support of or in opposition to the original post in the days immediately following the original posting. On the surface the overwhelming response was supportive of the women; however, there was also backlash both in the

comments of social media and during in-person conversations that took place in the months following the posting. Amongst the hundreds of comments some people made statements like, “We do not condone domestic violence but don’t condone defamation either.” Other comments, many of which were later deleted, aggressively challenged the accusations. In casual conversations amongst salsa dancers in the wake of this incident, I observed some dancers retreat from their initial support of the whistleblowers and many express resignation to the fact that the issue would soon blow over.

In general, the incident demonstrated a number of things. First, women coming forward about sexual assault has become more prominent and is enacted in locally specific ways, wherein women use their particular networks and communities to demand accountability. Many dancers say that sexual assault has been prevalent in the community for many years but was rarely brought to light in the past. Men being held accountable when these stories came to light was even less usual. I have no way of verifying these exact claims, but the ubiquity of the sentiment expressed in the post makes it credible. It is likely that national trends related to the #MeToo movement have influenced a social shift wherein women are more publicly stating their stories of sexual assault survival and men are becoming more conversant in the topic. Second, the story spread rapidly on social media, showcasing, in case there was any doubt, the speed and ubiquity of online social interactions and their increasingly visible role both in networking and for accountability purposes in performance communities. Third, despite a large initial upsurge, outrage displayed on social media faded rapidly. Some events canceled bookings with the accused artist, while some individual performers and companies stated their refusal to work with him. It is unclear how long this will last. The drop-off in

outrage and other sexual assault accusations indicates that the initial support that many dancers displayed was at least partly a performance. Finally, and critically, it became clear that many women are in fact willing to launch a more sustained and long-term campaign for equity and security in the dance scene. Although the salsa community has been slow to evolve in this area, the social openings for challenging patriarchy have arrived, partly in the form of millennial women who are now stepping into major leadership roles and younger women who have come of age in a far more gender progressive context than their predecessors.

### **Hamilton in Heels? Post-racial and Neoliberal Ideologies in the Salsa Scene**

This chapter has explored major debates around race and gender in the salsa scene including the contradictions around the salsa scene as simultaneously a multicultural space, a re-ethnicized Latinx generality, and a site for contestation of anti-blackness particularly surrounding the use of Afro-Cuban cultural forms. In addition, I discussed the salsa scene as a space where #MeToo conflicts and conversations are both muted and amplified. The salsa community can only be understood with the larger cultural milieu within which it operates. For example, despite the vastly different medium, the musical *Hamilton*, which debuted in 2015 at the New York's Public Theater and later on Broadway, reveals many of these same tensions. As Phil Kasinitz (2016) argues, the show is an articulation of the multicultural present and future of U.S. cities, a celebration of immigration, and a tribute to the potential for reinvention codified by American democracy. Yet by mid-2016 criticism of *Hamilton* had also begun to emerge, notably from Lyra D. Monteiro (2016) and James McMaster, who critique *Hamilton* for deploying race-conscious casting of actors of color to legitimize an otherwise

problematic rendering of white American history, and for the show's deeply embedded bootstrap narrative. As a cultural phenomenon, *Hamilton* probably works in both ways: as a welcome display of pro-immigrant narrative performed by actors of color who help to reimagine the future of U.S. society and cultural contributions, and as a racial cultural project embodying and further reifying a racist and neoliberal bootstrap narrative/motif into our popular lexicon. As McMaster writes, "Such logic neglects and obscures the material obstacles and violences (structural racism, predatory capitalism, long-burned bridges to citizenship) imposed on racialized immigrants within the United States in order to celebrate the (false) promise of the American dream and the nation-state" (McMaster 2016).

While *Hamilton* was certainly a cultural phenomenon, its prohibitive pricing and availability ensured that only a small fraction of the population has actually been able to see the show. The salsa scene, by comparison, is economically more accessible, physically more localized, and socially more democratic, particularly through social media. I draw this comparison because of *Hamilton*'s explosive popularity and its relevance for the current social and political moment. In *Hamilton*, viewers and critics were able to align post-raciality, a meritocratic bootstrap narrative, and diversity by couching distinctly neoliberal narratives in a progressive veneer, which rendered it nonthreatening to white American cultural hegemony. In the salsa scene, a similar tension plays out between the celebration of diversity – even the radical mobilization of Latinx creative resistance – and colorblind racism, colorism, and neoliberal individualism reified in embodied ways through social practices in the scene. In other words, the salsa community is a progressive arena, but it is not immune to the effects of larger

interlocking systems of oppression, leading me to describe it as a kind of *Hamilton* in heels.

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, salsa becomes a re-ethnicized cultural product in media and popular culture. In this process, media paradoxically mobilizes Latinness as a tool for reinforcing hegemonic ideals of individualism and colorblind racism. Many dancers in today's localized dance scenes take pride in characterizing them as post-racial, open, and welcoming spaces. Moreover, the semi-professional and professional performance aspects of the scene are marked by a pronounced bootstrap narrative, in which hard-work and prowess are signaled as direct and exclusive paths to success. Spurred by the social media revolution, I found this individualistic narrative to be pervasive across commercial dance worlds, whereas technical styles like ballet have long openly acknowledged the importance of talent as well as uncontrollable factors like body shape and structure. While the multiculturalism of the salsa scene seemingly marks an era of racial progress, its effect is to sometimes obscure the political history of salsa and to put excessive focus on individualism and self-economization as a route to success and validation. The framework of a re-ethnicized cultural product applies beyond salsa and can be used as a theoretical framework for understanding how notions of diversity are locally activated in urban neoliberal economies in a way that obscures cultural specificity, and especially black and working-class creative forms of resistance to erasure and displacement. As explored in the previous chapter, in these localized environments, Latinx dancers claim space for cultural ownership.

Post-racial and neoliberal ideologies abound in the salsa scene, but dancers contest and re-imagine their boundaries regularly. As of this writing, consciousness around anti-racism, claiming and uplifting blackness, and women's agency and liberation is sizzling at a higher-than-ever frequency in the salsa scene. These contestations reflect the contemporary national context, and, I believe, are a critical piece of the terrain through which contemporary challenges to repression are disseminated.

In the following chapter, I delve more deeply into the racialized commodification of salsa by discussing the newest horizon in hyper-consumption of Latin social dances: the rise of competitions. I introduce the World Salsa Summit as a case study situating competitions in the broader landscape of the salsa community. I expand on the economic, and thus social, relationships that are engendered by the competition structure, including "pro-am" competitions and the sale of dance paraphernalia. I continue by discussing the debates around authenticity, legitimacy, and technique that are fueled by the competitions. Finally, I expand the historical distinction between "uptown" and "downtown" dancers to interrogate the enormous experiential gap between North and South American dancers.



## **CHAPTER FIVE: “Y ESTAMOS EN COMPETENCIA!”: COMMODIFICATION, CONSUMPTION, COMPETITION**

Within the salsa scene, the newest horizon of hyper-consumption is represented by the rise of competitions. Ballroom dancers have long participated in competitions, but in the early 2010s large new competitive events arose specifically geared toward the Latin social dance community, encompassing salsa and overlapping communities organized around bachata, Latin hustle, and other styles. The most prominent of these events are the World Latin Dance Cup, which began in 2009, and the World Salsa Summit, which began in 2013. After the events launched several years passed before many New York dancers deigned to show up. A small trickle of early participants from New York were mostly protégés of Anya Katsevman, a Latin ballroom professional who crossed over and began working with dancers in the salsa scene. As street style or “uptown” dancers from New York and other major salsa hubs began to enter competitions en masse circa 2015, they influenced the competitive landscape itself. At the same time, this new arena reconfigured the way on2 salsa is codified and commodified. Prior to 2015, many New York dancers did not pay much attention to the competitions, demonstrating a high level of confidence (or arrogance, depending on one’s perspective). Viewing themselves as salsa’s cultural guardians, some New York dancers rejected the idea that they should compete to show their mastery of salsa – a sentiment still echoed by some in the scene. In 2015 a group styling itself “Team New York” brought together some of New York’s most popular dancers to compete and win first place in a major category at the World Salsa Summit. Since then, competitions have grown in popularity and served as a launching pad for a number of on2 dancers’ careers.

The competition world could easily accommodate its own study as the associated events are nuanced affairs catering to a large and diverse audience. Yet, in this chapter I will specifically focus on the way New York's on2 salsa scene has intervened in and been influenced by the rise of competitions. I begin by introducing the World Salsa Summit (WSS) as a case study and situating this competition in the larger salsa world. I briefly outline the disparate worlds of Latin DanceSport, commercial Latin dance, and the salsa scene. I then expand on the economic, and thus social, relationships that are engendered by the competition structure, including "pro-am" competitions and the sale of dance paraphernalia. I continue by discussing the debates around authenticity, legitimacy, and technique that are fueled by the competitions. Finally, I expand the historical distinction between "uptown" and "downtown" dancers to interrogate the experiential gap between U.S./Canadian and Latin American salsa dancers, through the lens of the competition world.

### **Setting the *summit***

Between 2015 and 2016, the floodgates began to open, and by January 2017 large numbers of New York salsa dancers decided to test their mettle in competitions. As more on2 dancers began to participate, the intricately delineated regulations posted by the competition promoters contributed to an escalation of salsa's codification, as did an increase in dancers studying ballroom technique. In 2006, Sheenagh Pietrobruno argued that the rise of the internet and increases in globalized technology contribute to salsa's textualization and therefore a decrease in local stylistic specificity. I argue here that the competition world accelerates this process in several ways: through written regulations of

what constitutes good or correct Latin social dance, through live digital broadcasting of competitions to a global audience, and through the clear demarcation of “amateur” and “professional” dancers according to their economic relation to salsa as a commodity. Moreover, the structure of the competitions highlights tensions around style, definition, and meaning for various dance communities as the instructions to enter different categories clearly (or, sometimes not so clearly) outline the parameters for participation.

Along with large-scale affairs, smaller local competitions have become more common. Such events have long been a staple in the Los Angeles salsa scene but have only recently become central for New Yorkers (Marion 2014: 70-72). Competitions in Canada, Florida, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and New Jersey attract New York dancers. Canadian dancers in particular host the Canada Salsa & Bachata Congress (Toronto), the Calgary Salsa Congress, and the Montreal Salsa Dance Festival, each of which incorporate a full day of competition into their schedule. In the Northeast United States, congresses in places like Connecticut and the Poconos (PA) have done the same, in part to remain economically viable. Other events exist just as a one- or two-day stand-alone affairs. In either case, competitions are strong economic drivers for the current salsa scene. Though not all dancers or promoters have endorsed this medium, it has certainly caught on in pockets of the scene. In addition to events in the U.S. and Canada, there are local and national competitions in countries like Australia, Singapore, France, and many others. A large international competition called Euroson Latino World Salsa Championship takes place in Mexico each summer. Euroson is a massive event of particular importance for Latin American teams and individuals and is described in greater detail later in the chapter.

In chapter three, I describe the social location of *the summit* as a performance-based space motivated by competitive and athletic norms and parameters. As I note there, I call this social location *the summit* to differentiate between general dance competitions and those, like the World Salsa Summit, that are geared specifically toward social dance communities. Competitions are a mainstay of many dance worlds. A large number of young people in the United States recreationally participate in many dance styles and attend large or small competitions where they can congregate and perform for a panel of judges. Competition is also a significant – indeed, foundational – force in hip hop and street dance communities.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, the DanceSport world organizes itself almost entirely around competitions and has done so for many years. Events like the World Salsa Summit and the World Latin Dance Cup are larger than local competitions, are broadcast to a wide audience via social media, and tend to be fully fleshed out week-long events featuring everything from dance classes to judging certifications to a bustling market of dance-related goods and services. They therefore stand out as particularly far-reaching and relevant in the lives of New York’s salsa scene dancers.

Competitions underline a hierarchical ordering of the scene based on one particular rubric that measures dance skills and is deemed correct by the judges and promoters who designed it.<sup>51</sup> In recent years events like the World Salsa Summit have begun cementing the necessity of more formal dance technique in the performance of salsa. Competitions may also expand the sense of globality in the scene by bringing

<sup>50</sup> For example, *Hip Hop International* is one of the major organizers of hip hop competitions. They administer an annual *USA Hip Hop Dance Championship* and the *World Hip Hop Dance Championship*. See: <http://www.hiphopinternational.com/> for more information.

<sup>51</sup> See Addendum A: Competition Regulations for the whole set of rules.

dancers from different geographic locations together to participate. Moreover, competitions capitalize on and increase the athletic organization of the dance. Competitions have become the place where the regulation and commodification of salsa is at its pinnacle, as is the performance of a stereotypical version of Latinness. Moreover, the logic of competitions has recently permeated into the other spaces of the scene, including starker, economized divisions between who is considered “professional” and “amateur”.

### **Latin DanceSport and Reality Dance Television**

Throughout this project I have argued the ways that the salsa scene is different from other versions of salsa dance with which people may be familiar. These distinctions become important here again in understanding the rise of competitions. The salsa scene exists parallel to, but almost entirely separately from, competitive Latin ballroom dancing, which is called DanceSport. Competitive ballroom dancing was renamed DanceSport in the 1980s as part of a longstanding campaign for partner dancing to be considered an Olympic category (see: McMains 2005). DanceSport refers to an extensive network of dancers and organizations that practice formal partnering dances. International DanceSport is categorized as either *Standard* (waltz, tango, Viennese waltz, slow foxtrot, quickstep) or *Latin* (cha-cha-cha, samba, rumba, paso doble, jive). Similarly, American style DanceSport is usually labeled as either *Smooth* (waltz, tango, foxtrot, Viennese waltz) or *Rhythm* (cha-cha-cha, rumba, east coast swing, bolero, mambo).<sup>52</sup> Joanna Bosse (2007) argues that through the classifications of these different

<sup>52</sup> Recently, I have also seen this category supplemented with “Caribbean Mix”, which lists salsa, merengue, and bachata as its styles ([www.worlddancesport.org](http://www.worlddancesport.org)).

ballroom genres, whiteness is made universal and normative while the racial other is made particular and exotic, physical and sexual. McMains (2001) critiques what she refers to as “practicing brownface” in the performance of Latin ballroom dance, specifically citing the practice of applying self-tanner for competition in the Latin or International categories. McMains argues that the relationship between Latin DanceSport styles and their racial and ethnic referents has largely become an imagined one, kept up by the performance of a broad and unspecified version of Latinness.

In 2005, the same year that YouTube launched, two long-running reality dance competitions series debuted for the first time: *Dancing with the Stars (DWTS)* and *So You Think You Can Dance (SYTYCD)*. These shows each feature Latin DanceSport-esque style salsa combined with Hollywood-ized commercial dance choreography. With millions of viewers and network backing, they have had widespread influence. Elsewhere, I argue that the version of salsa that *SYTYCD* brings into many people’s living rooms is made palatable to white middle-class cultural norms and power structures by reinforcing longstanding stereotypes of Latinxs as hypersexual, perpetually foreign, and primitive (Dormani, forthcoming). Though, as discussed in chapter four, the salsa scene is not free of its own nuanced racialization processes, many of New York’s on2 salsa scene dancers resist mass media images of Latin dance by remaining physically rooted in urban communities and asserting their own cultural narrative about salsa. In some ways the continued presence and practice of on2 salsa itself contests the boundaries of media representations of salsa and the racialization that they enforce.

I have argued throughout this project that the salsa scene and adjacent Latinx social dance communities at times contest exactly such universalized notions of Latinness

as those in competitive ballroom, as described by McMains and Bosse. Many dancers who participate in the salsa scene, as opposed to DanceSport, have strong cultural affiliations with a localized style or origin story of salsa and the communities that sustain it.<sup>53</sup> The salsa scene additionally serves to contest hegemonic representations of salsa dance as portrayed in mass media and popular culture. However, the salsa scene does include spaces in which racialized stereotypes of Latinness are performed on stage or the social dance floor. Competitions, though they can serve many purposes, are among the most visible sites for this occurrence.

### **The World Salsa Summit**

*Summit 2017 –*

*It's Sunday at the World Salsa Summit and the ballroom is packed. The event is running about three hours behind schedule. Everywhere dancers mill around in bright costumes – stretching, talking, preparing. The incessant waiting is brutal.*

*The big event was last night, with finals in the most competitive categories – Professional on2 Salsa, Bachata, and Cabaret; Large and Small Team Open; and the Professional Male Solos – but today the amateurs come out en masse.*

*A remarkable demographic change has occurred overnight in the large convention center. Last night a multi-ethnic, Latin American and Latinx-majority crowd thundered with cheers and was dominated by groups from Colombia, Argentina, Ecuador México, and Latinx New York. Today, the ballroom is full of white women.*

*We are in the midst of “pro-am” heats – free form social dancing competitions where professional dancers pair up with amateur partners.*

(Notes, January 22, 2017)

<sup>53</sup> For a detailed look into the demographics of Ballroom DanceSport see: McMains 2006.

*Summit 2018 -*

*My second World Salsa Summit and it doesn't feel like there is too much new to report. One thing that stands out is the presence of groups from some South American countries who come in large groups and exhibit more warmth and solidarity than the New Yorkers. However, New York has now firmly taken a step into the competition world. New York dancers barely showed up two years ago, trickled in last year, and now we seem to be the heart and soul of it; along with some of the South American groups.*

*(Notes, January 10, 2018)*

*Summit 2019 -*

*Another Summit has come and gone; and this time, we won. Notably, the event was much larger than the 2018 Summit. There was particularly high representation from Guatemala, Argentina, Colombia, Mexico, and Canada. And of course, New York. Now that New York dancers have entered the competition scene, it seems unlikely that they will stop dominating anytime soon.*

*Debates continue to rage about the pros and cons of competition, but the competitions are surely here to stay. Early predictions I had from several months ago that the competitions would soon fade now seem inaccurate.*

*In the finals moments of Saturday night, after Huracán's wins were announced, New York based dancers gathered in the wing off stage left to wait for the final result of the night – Salsa Cabaret, a competitive category that involves both dancing and acrobatic tricks. The New Yorkers clustered around Ernesto and Denisse, one of the scene's most popular duos who were, quite clearly, in the lead for the category. Upon the announcement of the 2<sup>nd</sup> place couple (not Ernesto and Denisse) cheers went up amongst the New Yorkers. We know what is coming. As the MC played for time and suspense – the whole corner, some of whom had been rivals just moments ago in different categories – chanted/sang “New York” over and over again. As the announcer picked up the mic again the crowd went hush. “From New York City...”, earsplitting cheers from our little corner, “Ernesto and Denisse!” The New Yorkers go ballistic.*

*(Notes, January 15, 2019)*



The World Salsa Summit takes place every January in Miami. Like other large competitive events it lasts for nearly a week. The days and evenings are full of back to back competitions that take place in a convention center or hotel ballroom in front of a panel of judges. The judging panel rotates members frequently, though there is a small group of regular judges who are always present for the highest-level professional categories. The competitions themselves are segmented in a number of ways, leading to an immense number of different categories in which dancers can participate. Altogether there are often several hundred categories at a large competition. The immense complexity of this categorization system means that novice dancers regularly require a guided introduction to the world of competitive dancing and, even then, it may take several events for dancers to become conversant in the categories.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, there are frequent conflicts over the fairness of the system and individual scuffles related to various dancers' eligibility to participate in particular categories. Conflicts aside, the fluidity of the competitions can be a logistical challenge, meaning that even when the promoters make a strong effort to keep them running smoothly, events often lag one to five hours behind schedule.

The WSS also includes and accelerates a salsa economy that was already in progress at salsa congresses but seems to be at its pinnacle at competitive events. The salsa scene economy includes a number of income-generating configurations for instructors, event organizers, promoters, and DJs. Dancers typically make money in the salsa scene through some combination of teaching classes, directing dance teams or

<sup>54</sup> See Addendum A for a full account of the competition rules and regulations.

companies, choreographing routines for others, and performing at events. With the growth of competitions, dancers also make money by being on a judges' panel, coaching teams and individuals in the particular nuances of competition preparedness, or participating in "pro-am" categories – shows that include one professional and one amateur – with their students. In the tradition of performance communities everywhere many professional dancers hold full- or part-time jobs in non-performance sectors, at times in service-industry jobs. Many others though maintain dance-related side hustles, or complimentary gigs, that allow them to bring in revenue beyond selling dance itself. For example, a significant portion of salsa dancers self-employ designing or making performance costumes, selling branded clothing with their name or team logo on it, photographing or filming dance events, or providing makeup and hair styling at dance events. Each of these areas contribute to a salsa economy that goes beyond dance classes and fleshes out the congress and competition events in which so many amateur and semi-professional dancers participate. These gig industries provide people with income and varied streams of revenue, and they form part of the framework of the social interactions that happen at events. They are particularly prominent at large competitions, where the stakes are high and attendees may be seeking out dance-related services they would not normally pay for (i.e. hair and makeup, extra training, etc.).

The WSS is full of an electric energy as dancers from all over converge to prove themselves, break into a top spot, hold on to their titles, advance their skill sets, or – as is the case for some, but certainly not all, amateur dancers – simply enjoy themselves while gaining experience on the dance floor. Thousands of dancers converge on the hotel, roaming around in groups, wearing gear with their team's logo or colors, and staking out

corners for last minute rehearsal at all hours of the day and night. The large convention center where the event has been held in recent years features a side chamber where dancers can be found practicing tricks, partnerwork, and shines at all hours. In the bathrooms and the performers' waiting room, the air is thick with hair spray as women on teams and in duets make last minute adjustments to hair and makeup. On most teams, all the women wear a matching hairstyle and makeup, down to the color and shading of eye shadow and lip color. This, we are coached, is part of presenting as a team: clean, uniform, and unified. In the main dance area, the panel of judges is raised several feet above the floor. Event promoters and coordinators stalk the floor for ten, twelve, sixteen hours a day, looking for the upcoming competitors, answering questions, and completing last minute registrations for new entries. Dancers are sprawled everywhere stretching, warming up, mentally preparing.

Dance studio logos and flags representing countries from Japan to Ecuador jump out from the crowd of onlookers surrounding the dance floor. Saturday night, during the height of the most prestigious competitions, chants of "Argen...TINA! Argen...TINA!" can be heard, only drowned out by the bull horns particularly favored amongst dancers from Colombia, and at times interspersed with a singsong "Newww Yorkkkk, Newww Yorkkkk". The major categories are hard fought and winning means bragging rights, a year of social media posts tagged #WorldChampions, and increased visibility amongst international audiences. Live viewership is in the thousands, or at times the low tens of thousands, but the impact can be tremendous for individual dancers who are successful.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>55</sup> The World Salsa Summit YouTube channel has 75,000 subscribers. Beyond live viewership, many videos the account posts receive only a few thousand views. Others, though, can received hundreds of thousands or millions of views significantly increasing

Since New York dancers began attending the Summit in large numbers around 2016, teams from New York have regularly won major categories and are unlikely to let up soon. More and more the competitions are seen as a major platform for promoting oneself.

### **Bailando “*sanky panky*”: Constructing the Professional and the Amateur**

One impact of competitions has been to accelerate the regulation and codification of salsa. A widely adopted set of criteria used for judging competitions has gained currency. The criteria judges use to score competitions assign points based on timing (20%), musicality (15%), technique (15%), difficulty (15%), connection (15%), choreography (10%), and overall presentation (10%).<sup>56</sup> Another effect of the competitions has been to concretize a system of understanding dancers’ different roles in the salsa world in a way that is explicitly tied to their economic relationship to the dance. In the past, skill, flavor, originality, and even congeniality have been important parts of dictating who the “pros” of salsa were. Today, competition logic has cemented the idea that those who make money dancing are pros and all others are amateurs. This sometimes correlates with skill, but not necessarily. Functionally, anyone can elevate themselves to the level of “pro” just by entering the professional competition or by beginning to teach a class. Ideologically, this represents a narrative shift in the ways rank and file dancers understand the scene’s organization even outside the competition world.

dancers’ visibility (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qw6koV-hRA4>,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iXOuzMZ8TtU>)

<sup>56</sup> See Addendum A.

A notable feature of the competitions is the immense number of “pro-am” competition categories. The pro-am designation indicates that the dancing couple will consist of one professional and one amateur, or in the case of teams, any mix of professionals and amateurs. Pro-am competitions provide an opportunity for student dancers to work intimately with their instructors. They are disproportionately comprised of professional men dancing with amateur women. I estimate that about eighty percent of pro-ams I have witnessed are configured this way. Less frequently, but somewhat growing in popularity are “same gender pro-ams” in which either two women or two men compete together, usually with a shines routine.<sup>57</sup> Pro-ams featuring a professional woman dancing with an amateur man are also slowly growing in popularity. Functionally, this usually means a long-term economic relationship between the pro and the am wherein the amateur dancer pays for private lessons, competition entry fees as well as a performance fee to the pro, and any other expenses incurred in the competition process. Sometimes, this includes paying for the pro’s travel expenses and room at an event. Participation is expensive! The salsa scene in general skews more middle- and upper-class than the general population; but the amateur participant demographic becomes even wealthier here. Pro-ams work well for people who are willing to pay significant amounts of money to be part of the competitions and to work intimately with their favorite dancer. The economic exchange between pros and ams is rarely confined to just lessons and competitions.

White women are overrepresented in this arena. For example, at the 2017 WSS described in the anecdote above, two Latino professional dancers from my team

<sup>57</sup> “Shines” is the word for salsa footwork.

competed with a total of six amateur women – all of whom are white. This was in stark contrast to the ranks of women professional dancers on our team, which included all Latinas with the exception of me. While white women participate at least nominally at all levels, white men are rarer.

*A rainy Thursday afternoon in New York I find myself shifting through brightly colored rolls of fabric in the garment district. I am at the store to meet an amateur women dancer with whom I am preparing my first Pro-Am. As part of the process, it is her responsibility to make us matching costumes, which has led up to this store. I have been here before, but this time I am guiding someone, coaching her in the glittery social norms of the competition scene.*

Notes, June 2017

It struck me in the moment described above, how fully the process of participating in pro-ams involves a commodification of the self. Technically, amateur dancers pay for a specific service (dance training and performance camaraderie). Functionally, amateur dancers are buying a more expansive commodity akin to a stake in the professional dancer himself. The training implied by the pro-am agreements regularly extends beyond the hours of private lessons or time spent on stage. In the pro-am process, professional dancers become somewhat beholden to the wants and needs of the amateurs who hire them. Though it is not always explicitly stated, part of what amateur dancers are paying for is an ongoing claim to the professional's time and attention. This dynamic is compounded when there is traveling involved – whether it be to the WSS or any of the smaller events in Canada, Florida, or Pennsylvania. More than once I have heard amateur dancers, especially middle-aged or older wealthy white women, complain that their pro is not spending enough time with them. In other words, there is an understanding implicit in the pro-am agreement that the ams have some level of economic stake in and claim to their pros, that is made formal through payment for services. This process is not always

explicitly racialized (as a white woman I was hired for same gender pro-ams by women of various backgrounds). However, at the many competitive events I attended I observed a clear racial dynamic as pairings of Latino pro men with white am women are especially common.

*The final night of a competition in Calgary, Canada I ask a friend, one of the most visible male pros involved in the pro-am competition circuit if he ever feels like the am women with whom he dances work with him for the physical experience of being with him and touching him. “Not, to be clear” I say “in terms of a sexual exchange per se, but a physical one, anyway.”*

*“Like un sanky panky? I mean yea. We have in the Dominican Republic; they all have the same haircut...it’s a guy that hangs around the resorts trying to get American women to have sex with or other physical affections with them in exchange for favors large or small.*

Notes, April 9, 2018

I was somewhat surprised by my friend’s quick response, although I should not have been. There was no reason to believe that the men intimately involved in these economic and social interactions would not be cognizant of sexual or physical undertones to the exchange.<sup>58</sup> Still, the comparison to the Dominican colloquialism of a *sanky panky* was brilliant. The male professional dancers who participate in pro-am events are mostly in their late 20s to their 40s. At North American events like the World Salsa Summit and Calgary Salsa Congress, both of which I attended every year between 2017 and 2019 most (but not all) of the men were Latino. There is also significant overlap of participants. In the United States and Canada the same seven or eight men dominate the small pro-am events, with some variation from year to year and locale to locale. For the

<sup>58</sup> There is a body of literature which documents the trend of white Americans and Europeans frequenting Latin and South American countries for sexual experiences with local residents (Cabezas 2009, Frohlick 2008, Frohlick 2013).

pro-am competition categories at the Calgary event, the professionals participating included five Latino men and two white men, along with one Latina woman and one white woman. The largest portion of amateurs participating in this particular event were white women. There is some variation from event to event, but this was in keeping with what I observed at many small-scale competitions I attended between 2017 and 2019 in the U.S. and Canada.<sup>59</sup>

Calgary Salsa Congress 2018, Amateur competitors

(n=44)	Men	Women
White	4	20
Latinx	5	5
Black	2	1
Asian	1	5

Certainly, most of the professional men take their work as instructors and coaches seriously. Several with whom I spoke note that they avoid sexual relationships with their students. Similarly, many amateur women are deeply invested in their training and are not seeking out sexual relationships. Nonetheless, the pro-am relationship and the economically driven entitlement to the professional's time and dancing body works in tandem with the already existent cache around highly skilled male performers, who women often pursue assertively for sex. Somewhat similar relationship dynamics may play out when the pro-am genders are switched, though it is more difficult to observe since the number is so low.

Despite some problematic social relationships that evolve around competition, the preponderance of these events creates new revenue streams for professional dancers. In

<sup>59</sup> The World Salsa Summit, by comparison, is enormous and ethnic diversity is difficult to trace since dancers from many countries participate.



that way, competition carves a new path for the salsa scene to continue to exist and recreate itself, because its professionals can get paid. Beyond the economic, competitions are distinct in that they accelerate sports-style rivalry and self-criticism. Some dancers point out that even outside of formal competition, performers are always being judged by an audience. Nonetheless, the added weight of a judges' panel does seem to attach significance to competition for many. Moreover, competition outcomes can be quantified and ranked – *won, lost, 3rd place, 5th place*, etc in a way that regular shows usually are not. Finally, the existence of many amateur and pro-am categories means that dancers who may not otherwise be accustomed to a high level of performance pressure, now open themselves up to what can often be harsh critique from judges and other observers.

*We go to a student competitor's room. She is in anguish over the results of her competition. From the outside, watching a wealthy older white woman's agony over the results of a glittery dance competition (that relies on a certain exploitation of Latinx culture) might be difficult to empathize with, if not repugnant. But I've felt that anguish. It's salient because participants tie notions of body, age, and self-worth to their practice.*

Notes, April 6, 2018

There is something perverse about the level of investment dancers at all levels display toward the competitions, though that is not altogether different from other competitive dance or athletics. The competitions facilitate a deeply gendered, and sometimes harsh, judgement process. Within that system, there is ongoing critique of dancers' technique and ability. Men and women both face critique, but I often heard sexist and ableist/fat shaming commentary or notes presented to women in particular, and in ways that make the salsa scene a little bit crueler than it was (Observation during lunch with main judge and competitors, March 24, 2018). I most frequently heard body and "look"-related criticisms directed at women (though men are not exempt). In turn, men are sometimes

directed to perform hyper masculinity, and gay men in particular can face criticism for not appearing “butch” enough in their performance. Meanwhile, according to some judges, women are supposed to demonstrate softness and femininity as part of their technique. These gendered critiques are not unique to the competition world, but they are made more explicit in this arena.<sup>60</sup>

I have seen competition bring great joy and growth into dancers’ lives and offer increased opportunities to both professional and amateur dancers. The competitions extend an invitation to participate in a meaningful way in this community, but only to those who can afford to pay enormous sums to train and enter events. At the same time, they provide financial means to a core group of professional dancers and provide the scene with a new lifeblood. Like so many aspects of the salsa scene, they are full of tension – a collision between oppressive systems played out on the dance floor and the incredible joy of dance and community that is doled out to those who participate. The interpersonal dynamics between dancers and critiques of judges reveal the economics of the competitive performance world, as well as its gendered and racialized dynamics. Participants are highly invested in the intersecting complexities of competitions and often adopt the logic outlined within this social location enthusiastically, entrenching a market logic and highly regulated system of control more firmly than ever in a community that had otherwise retained significant grassroots ownership and control. The competitions thus represent a highly regulated site for the increased adoption of neoliberal market

<sup>60</sup> Conversely, competition events have at times provided opportunities to contest some of the salsa scene’s gender essentializing. Most notably, this has played out in the explosion of same-gender male partnerwork routines that have been successful at competitions for a number of years.

logics, including self-economization, as well as essentialized race and gender narratives amongst dancers. These narratives in turn spread beyond the confines the competition sphere.

### **Authenticity, Legitimacy, and Debating Technique**

Divisions between formal ballroom and community-based salsa techniques have been a part of salsa's story since its origin. Pre-dating even the name salsa, the tension and co-existence of multiple versions of this practice in the mambo dance craze of the 1940s and 1950s is explored earlier in this project. Competition events do not necessarily mean that salsa scene dancers have become Latin ballroom or DanceSport practitioners; however, some elements of ballroom technique have become more pronounced as the competitions become more relevant. On2 dancers have drawn from formal dance techniques since the style's inception – Eddie Torres worked with ballroom dancer June LaBerta on developing his shines syllabus, Billy Fajardo trained at the American Ballet Theater, and mega-successful Palladium dancers Augie and Margo trained at Katherine Dunham's school (Slotnik 2019, Fox 2014). Nonetheless, the competitions inspire conflict over technical authenticity and legitimacy.

The format of the competitions is under constant scrutiny. In particular, some dancers take issue with the freestyle heats, viewing them as an insult to the improvisational nature of social dancing and the idea that style, flavor, and originality should be seen as the true markers of skill. During one casual conversation I observed at the WSS in 2017, a group of professional and amateur dancers generally agreed that social dancing heats are a money-making ploy. Each heat typically lasts only 1.5 minutes. Dancers typically pay \$30-\$40 for each round in which they participate and many register

for numerous categories. Even though all the dancers in attendance during this particular conversation were present to participate in competition, several criticized the social dancing heats, posing the question: *How do you judge something that was never meant to be the same?* The legacy of social dancing centers the idea of showing off charisma and originality. Attaching a rubric and scoreboard to social dancing asks dancers to first adhere to a strict set of technical rules that have been determined from the top down – the head judges down to the dancers – rather than organically developed amongst dancers and onlookers themselves. Thus, dancers in this conversation observed that competitions are detrimental to social dancing – “killing social dancing” was the exact phrase used – but, they are also a way for people to make money and for the scene to morph and change shape as an industry.

I observed numerous similar debates play out during in-person conversations and online exchanges between 2017 and 2020. For example, immediately following the 2019 World Salsa Summit one prominent dancer in the on2 scene who does not participate in the competitions posted a social media note criticizing competition, the fact that the judges sometimes train particular competitors, and audience members cheering for their teams. In response, another on2 professional who does participate in the competitions wrote the following:

Competition is not for everyone, and that is **100** ok!!! I genuinely mean that: however: those who embark the journey of competitive dancing: know the hard work, pain and determination it takes to meet their goals... it provides people with a definitive objective and time frame: thus forcing each person to present their best work. You must train your body and mind to overcome the physical and mental aspect of being judged; by a group of peers we trust to be as fair and as unbiased as possible. The job these judges is it not easy: they must often sit for long hours without much sleep, restroom breaks nor food. The same goes for competitors, djs, videographers, photographer, staff and so on... for those who assume that medals are being “given away” like candy: you lack information; for

each competition has its own criterias and categories in which people can represent themselves best: example: on1, on2, same gender, cabaret, large teams, small teams, mixed gender, and the list goes on... for anyone who trash-talk or mock competition, you are the one who looks like a fool... Because whether you like it or not: the people touring around the world, closing shows, headlining events and being in demand are the champions you mock, yet admire... the irony.

(Franklin Liranzo, social media post, January 16, 2019)

Several months earlier I had interviewed the latter dancer about a range of his experiences with salsa, including competitions. Franklin was born in the Dominican Republic and raised in New York. Like many other interviewees he connected his interest in salsa to cultural practice, saying, “I think because of the Dominican culture I’ve always been in tune with dancing just culturally.” Since childhood he had casually participated in school dance programs. Eventually he joined the U.S. Navy and wound up teaching salsa classes while stationed overseas. At the time of our interview, he had been practicing on2 salsa for ten years, eight of which were at a professional level. Also a photographer, he split his time between dance shoots and dancing on2, becoming especially active in the competition arena in the mid-2010s.

Carmela: What do you think about the increased popularity of competitions?

Franklin: I think it’s a positive thing. I used to be against competition. By heart, I’m not a competitor so if I lose, I don’t really take it personal, unlike some of my peers, which is a good thing, if you’re competing you want to win. I guess, I’ve never been a competitor. I like competition because it gives me a goal to get ready for and then I have to put that much more work to be ready for it. So, competition has helped a lot of professionals and amateurs advance both in their dance skills and in their careers because their dancing got that much better and then because they were being broadcasted on YouTube live, more promoters around the world got to know them, and now a lot of these dancers are pretty much set for the whole year.

C: What do you think is the difference between salsa competition and ballroom competition?

F: Both dances are fun but they're structured way differently. In Ballroom, they have a syllabus of steps and they have to execute them the same way with the same technique. Whereas in salsa, it's still a relatively brand-new dance and it's definitely not structured, it's very freestyle so we're talking apples and oranges...I think through competition we're seeing a little bit more of a structure. But at the end of the day, no, because, you've seen competitions yourself, and you have people of different calibers in the same category, and then you just wonder how is this person a professional or even the opposite, how is this person not a professional? Because we're going by dance skill. Whereas when you look at Ballroom, even the students look just as professional as the professionals. So, they're both fascinating. (Franklin, 21 March 2018)

Franklin's comments highlight the framing of competitions as positive athletic milestones. In addition, he mentions the utility of live digital broadcasting in gaining the attention of promoters and audiences around the world. The live streaming of major events is part of the global imagined community of the salsa scene, reinforcing the point that the salsa scene has distinct local iterations, but also functions as a global network of events, practices, and norms. Finally, Franklin talks about the differences between salsa scene competitions and ballroom, calling them "apples and oranges". At first, he says that salsa scene competitions are becoming more structured, but he then criticizes their relative lack of structure by talking about variation within categories.

An extension of the above conversation is the ongoing debate about what constitutes real, legitimate, authentic, or correct salsa technique. During rehearsal one day, I sat down to observe a prolonged exchange between team members. All were veterans of the salsa scene but were different ages and had entered the salsa community at different times. Some were purely on2 salsa dancers, while others had had experience in additional styles. The conversation began after the team finished a private coaching session with Tito and Tamara, two prominent salseros from Puerto Rico, who are both WSS judges and performers renowned for their flavor and attention to salsa history:

Jeff: She said, “the beginning is very pretty, now take the sticks out of your ass and dance salsa” ...so another words, okay we got all that shit out of the way, now get down...what she assumed was this all looks very pretty...now get down.

Christian: Should salsa have technique?

Jeff: It should have salsa technique.

Christian: What is that though?

Migdalia: The thing is salsa technique isn't defined.

Jeff: It is defined. It has to do with your break step.

Migdalia: It's not. Because every studio teaches their own stuff.

Jeff: But that's because not all the studios have taken their time to figure this out.

Migdalia: Everyone has their own technique, like I wanna go learn the Santo Rico technique, I wanna go learn the Yamulee technique...

Jeff: Santo Rico technique had to do with a style of partnerwork, but Santo Rico's basic and Eddie Torres' basic and Tito's basic, they're not much different, they're the same...even if the basic looks a little different the mechanics are the same... When you start seeing this [circular arms], this is a style that came from the beginning, from the Palladium. When someone tells you, you need to rotate around the spine, that's ballroom technique, that is not salsa technique...Salsa technique comes from here, where you're using your rib cage for movement...If you watch [*names ballroom-influenced dancers*] they don't look mambo.  
(Recorded observation, January 4, 2019)

Conversations and debates about the intricacies of salsa technique are not new, but competitions bring them to the forefront in new ways. Jeff, who was in his mid-30s at the time of this conversation and had been active in the scene for around 15 years, is invested in the idea that there is a particular salsa technique based in the classic story of the Palladium era, Eddie Torres, and the advancement of major dance companies of the 2000s like Santo Rico. He distinguishes this technique from ballroom-influenced techniques that have more recently entered the salsa scene. In particular, Jeff distinguishes between moving the ribcage – which has long been taught in on2 salsa

studios, and moving around the spine, which ballroom-inspired dancers have championed in more recent years. The two movements do not necessarily contradict each other, but they represent the different histories and geneses of on2 salsa and of ballroom technique. The younger dancers, Migdalia and Christian, in their mid-20s at the time of the conversation, are less sure about a clear definition for salsa technique. The conversation continued:

Jeff: With salsa technique it has to be, this is a club dance, it started in the club, it's a social dance and it's a club dance, so if you're dancing socially and you're dancing in the club, all of those things don't matter...the emphasis on straightening your leg, none of that matters. So, it has to have that, it has to have that originality. There is a difference, and when you hear Tito talk about, he talks about it all the time, when you dance your arms can't stop moving...

Migdalia: [*Ballroom-influenced instructor*] teaches that too

Jeff: She doesn't teach that

...

Christian: I take her teachings as a better understanding of mechanics and then I use whatever flavor from salsa.

Migdalia: The only problem is that the salsa scene is all over the place, so the technique is all over the place. (Recorded observation, January 4, 2019)

Here again, Jeff mentions a quantifiable way of distinguishing salsa technique from ballroom. He notes that aspects of ballroom technique like "straightening the leg," are not important in social dance technique. What is important is "to have that originality."

Christian, although he seems to disagree, reinforces a similar point, viewing ballroom as "a better understanding of mechanics" to which he says he adds "flavor from salsa".

Such debates around dance technique can be framed in the context of colonialism and white supremacy. Ballroom dancers sometimes present their technique as a more sophisticated version of salsa. However, uptown dancers of the 1970s, 80s, 90s, and 00s



created their own set of techniques that is distinct, highly challenging, and perhaps most importantly in this context, *effective* for executing movement. These immense technical contributions include the creation of various basic steps (on1 or on2), methods for rapid spinning of the follower, a roster of increasingly intricate partnerwork patterns, and numerous variations on body angle and movement configurations that incorporated and built on the rich intercultural mixing already underway in traditions like Lindy hop and Latin hustle. Nonetheless, they are still regularly framed as less valuable than European dance traditions – represented here by ballroom – that can be used to supplement them. What is it that people imagine makes the mechanics of ballroom more technically legitimate than the incredibly high-level of dance movements created by salsa dancers? The stated or implied claim made by some ballroom dancers (and sometimes repeated by non-ballroom dancers) that their technique represents a more advanced version of Latin street dance styles is poorly shielded white supremacy, in that it reserves control over defining what constitutes legitimate and excellent physical movement for practitioners of European dance forms.

**“Not bad for a bunch of uptown dancers”:  
Competition and the Uptown/Downtown Divide**

The first year that Huracán Dance Company competed at the World Salsa Summit we entered the competition with some trepidation. As underdogs, we had been advised by some judges and participants that we were unlikely to be successful on the competition stage. This was because the style we were accustomed to executing was rooted in pre-competition on2 techniques of the 2000s and early 2010s era. Although we did not win,

our third place finish that year was a victory and something of an upset. Following the event, a post by one teammate stood out to me:



Her caption reads: “3rd place in our first competition. Not bad for some uptown dancers.” The self-designation as “uptown dancers” displays commitment to the neighborhood-based alternative to ballroom-infused styles and has roots in the mambo era. As outlined earlier in this project, the story of salsa provides a map to the last century of migration to New York, during which time Puerto Rican and other Afro-Caribbean communities reshaped the city’s cultural landscape, including its food, language, literature, and especially, its music and dance traditions. Close proximity to African Americans and a diverse array of migrant groups resulted directly in the development of new sounds and ways of movement. Nowhere was this more evident than in East Harlem and the Bronx – the very “uptown” to which Jazmin refers – where mambo, cha cha chá, guaracha, and boogaloo became salsa. The continued salience of the label “uptown dancer” in the salsa scene indicates a commitment to the grassroots nature and neighborhoods of salsa.

The uptown/downtown dichotomy serves as a useful theoretical tool. Juan Flores (2016) explores the origins of this divide in the Latin music landscape of the 1930s:

The ‘uptown-downtown’ dichotomy is thus more than a musical demarcation and only partly involves an aesthetic judgement... Two early mid-Manhattan venues [Havana Madrid Nightclub and Chateau Madrid]... anticipate the unparalleled fame of the Palladium Ballroom. The ‘uptown’ scene, on the other hand, comprised Puerto Rican, Cuban, and other Latino musicians and audiences more organically linked to the local neighborhoods and communities, which became increasingly working class over the decades.

In contrast to the show-business, ballroom, and hotel lunge music of the downtown variety, and even to the generally light lyrics and ephemeral themes of the mambos and cha chas of the subsequent generation, much of this voluminous, primarily Puerto Rican output of the 1930s comprises songs, generally populist and anti-colonial in tenor, about Puerto Rican and Latin American politics, labor migrations, and the struggling New York Latino communities during the Depression years... In contrast to the downtown scene, ‘East Harlem served as a source of new musicians, a gateway for innovation from Cuba and elsewhere, and a place where more purely Latin styles were played, and a workshop for fusions of a very different nature from the Tin-Pan-Alley, mass-popular-oriented downtown versions [Roberts 1999: 88]. (Flores 2016: 12-13, 15)

The uptown/downtown designation was extended during the mambo craze to refer to the divide between the Palladium/other midtown Latin clubs and the many uptown musical venues of the era, including numerous places in Morrisania, Morris Park, and Hunts Point (Naison and Numbs 2016). Nearly all of these places closed in the late 1960s and 1970s during New York’s fiscal crisis. In the 1990s as the city emerged from bankruptcy and the crack epidemic, the uptown/downtown designation could be applied to the distinction between the Dominican and Puerto Rican run on2 studios – Santo Rico in East Harlem, Karisma on 103<sup>rd</sup> and Broadway, and Yamuleé in the Bronx – and midtown studios that taught a simpler salsa style to a whiter and more diverse audience. In one group interview, three Dominican American dancers who were active starting in the mid-2000s claimed they understood “uptown dancers” as a term to refer specifically to

Dominican dancers, reflecting the dominance of Dominicans in the salsa scene of the 2000s and the adaptability of the phrase across several generations. By the 2000s, the three companies mentioned above all had Dominican men as their directors and many dancers considered them their own “big three” of on2 dance studios. At its core, the uptown/downtown dichotomy serves as a way to allude to ongoing tension between formalized salsa primarily geared toward consumption, and neighborhood-based Latinx-run grassroots practice, even though both uptown and downtown versions have always been infused with a bit of both.

### **The Uptown/Downtown Divide Goes Global**

While the uptown/downtown divide has characterized some of the debates around U.S. based competitions and the salsa scene more broadly, globally there is also a North/South divide which is evident across the scene, and can be viewed through the lens of the World Salsa Summit and the yearly championship in Mexico. In July 2019 I attended a large competition outside the United States for the first time. Euroson Latino Dance Championship takes place in Mexico each summer and, like the World Salsa Summit, is considered a “world championship”. Despite the rigor of the competition and the large number of Latin American teams competing, my team from New York won our category at Euroson that year. The reaction to our win – in the midst of the political scandal of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement locking migrant children in cages at the U.S./Mexico border – was not warm.

Functionally, Euroson serves as a fiercely competitive Latin American competition. While there were some competitors from European countries like Italy and Greece, some Canadians, and our small team representing the United States, the

competition was dominated by enormous contingents from various Latin American countries. This included participants from countries I had never seen in significant numbers at the World Salsa Summit, like Chile and Cuba. The much larger crowds at Euroson partly reflect proximity, especially for dancers already living in Mexico, as well as the fact that Latin American dancers are not always able to get visas to come to competitions in the United States. Moreover, the cost to visit Miami in early January can be prohibitive for dancers from anywhere, and especially for those who need to fly far distances and obtain costly visas. One factor that did remain constant at both the WSS and Euroson, was the judges. The Euroson judging panel was comprised largely of the same individuals who serve as “main” or “head” judges at the WSS. These judges are almost entirely from the United States, with a few hailing from Puerto Rico (U.S.), and Canada. This means that dancers in the United States, especially the Northeast, have regular access to training with these judges – a fact that some international dancers have highlighted and criticized.

One striking aspect of Euroson was its opening ceremony. The long and detailed ceremony began with a celebration of indigenous culture through a theatrical dance display. This was followed by a prolonged routine displaying Mexican folkloric styles. After about an hour, the performance wrapped up with a song during which each dancer carried a flag representing one of the countries attending the event. I thought the ceremony would end with that globalist display, but it did not. Following the performance, competitors from each present country, in alphabetical order, were invited onto the stage to hold their flag and sing the national anthem. This displayed just how many competitors were in attendance from many Latin American countries, as well as

immense energy and pride some groups displayed in singing their national anthem. By comparison, the U.S. and Canada presented somewhat lackluster displays. Meanwhile, the Dominican flag was represented by four New Yorkers of Dominican descent and no one else. Finally, the ceremony wrapped up and the competitions began in earnest.

The opening ceremony, and week-long fiercely fought competition, illuminated the depth and reach of competitive salsa events to me in a way that went beyond my previous observations at the WSS or the other events. It also put on display a stark north/south divide in salsa, highlighting the role of citizenship and wealth in people's ability to participate in the U.S. events that receive the most attention. As in so many other areas of life, the border plays a significant role in dictating who maintains power and control in the salsa scene. This reality highlights the privilege of dancers with United States citizenship. Of course, the north/south divide transcends the competition world. A large part of being a professional on2 dancer is traveling to gigs abroad. Demonstrating that one has been booked to perform or teach abroad is powerful currency in New York's salsa world. For dancers without papers this can pose significant challenges, as one dancer who is covered by the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program but is unable to leave the U.S., highlighted for me in his interview shortly before I went to Euroson (Interview with Andre, May 22, 2019).

### **Conclusion**

Competitions institute a set of rules and regulations that advance the codification of salsa. The live streaming and global broadcast of major competitive events further streamlines this process. Events like the World Salsa Summit include a complex

ecosystem encompassing social practices (applying matching makeup, displaying team logos, regional solidarity) and economic activity (a bustling gig economy of dance-related services and paraphernalia). They additionally serve as sites for racialized commodification of salsa and salsa dancers themselves. This is particularly visible in the preponderance of pro-am competitions.

While many dancers enjoy and benefit from competitions, their existence also fuels debates about what is authentic and legitimate in salsa, and about what dance technique is or should be. The framing of ballroom technique as an elevated or sophisticated approach to movement mechanics (and in contrast to community-based techniques) highlights one mechanism through which white supremacy and dominance become naturalized.

The evident differences between U.S./Canadian “world” competitions and those occurring in Mexico/Latin America in some ways mirror (and invert) the classic uptown/downtown dichotomy in that they highlight a substantial North/South divide. Citizenship and wealth are major factors in determining who can participate in the highly visible events held in the United States. Exacerbating large-scale political inequities, dancers in the U.S. and Canada have frequent access to training with the main judges and organizers of the competition events, while those in Mexico and other parts of Latin America often do not. Studies exist that focus on salsa in various Latin American countries; however, future work on salsa dancers should continue to interrogate the relationship between scenes in different cities and countries.

In the following chapter I return to New York to explore the context of the neoliberal city in the late 2010s, including the city’s gentrification, its structural impact

on the salsa scene, and the way that on2 dancers have responded to changing conditions. I present the idea of a semi-formal creative community as a framework for analyzing grassroots cultural production in cities today and frame the strategic work done by dancers and other artists as creative resistance.



## CHAPTER SIX: “WE’RE STREET DANCERS”: SURVIVING THE NEOLIBERAL CITY

“Salsa played on while the South Bronx burned.”

*Juan Flores (2016: 230)*

Between 1970 and 1980 the New York Metropolitan area lost more than one million residents (Rappaport 2003: 37). Like many cities, New York had experienced severe economic decline, accompanied by urban renewal policies that proved disastrous to communities of color. In 1975 New York City declared bankruptcy and by 1977 parts of the south Bronx had lost more than ninety percent of their housing stock to arson and planned shrinkage policies, while the city reeled from a major two-day blackout. Then the crack epidemic hit (see: Contreras 2013). The gutting of the city’s social welfare programming, intense violence that accompanied the crack epidemic, and the subsequent over-policing in neighborhoods of color meant that salsa music’s heyday was also a time of intense struggle and social unrest in New York.

Today, the city looks very different than it did in the 1970s. Manhattan is home to some of the wealthiest residential zip codes in the country, with parts of Brooklyn not far behind. Neighborhoods from northwest Queens to Washington Heights to the south Bronx have gentrified at astounding rates and the cost of living has skyrocketed. New York and other cities face high rates of inequality and displacement as working class communities struggle to maintain their right to space in the city. As Richard Florida notes, “the much hoped for urban revival has become an urban crisis” (2017: 3). It was against the ever-changing landscape of New York in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s that many

members of the New York salsa scene came of age. In 2020, at the dawn of a new decade, dancers faced a city that had changed drastically even from the 1990s and 2000s, when many on2 salsa studios took root. Confronted with the fact that dance necessitates access to considerable amounts of physical space, dancers were forced to continually adjust to the changing urban landscape, reconciling the ways in which the city shapes salsa practice not just culturally, but also spatially.

In this chapter I explore dancers' relationships with the city. As discussed throughout this project, the city played an important role in shaping the conditions in which salsa music and dance were created and popularized. Over the decades, changes in New York have impacted the ebb and flow of the scene and the opportunities available to salsa dancers. Today, New York remains an important symbolic location to salseros all over the world. For members of the New York salsa scene – the localized community on which this study is focused – the city delivers both the benefits of New York's stature as a global cultural capital and the challenges of economic survival in one of the country's most expensive cities. I begin with a brief overview of New York's gentrification and the particular rise of cultural plans as part of the contemporary urban planning process. I introduce the idea of a semi-formal creative community as a framework for understanding the creative and cultural affiliations that guide many New Yorkers' lives. This framework refers to cultural producers beyond the institutions and "public art" works that cultural plans often reference. I discuss the appeal that New York holds for some international salsa dancers, which has roots in the city's past legacy and present innovations. I then present the dual case studies of Santo Rico and Huracán dance companies as an interconnected story that helps illuminate how New York's recent

economic and social changes have manifested in the salsa scene. Despite the prominence of studios, congresses, competitions, and other structured events, New York dancers still claim salsa as a street dance. In the final section of this chapter, I explore the ways in which on2 dancers continue to reinforce the narrative of salsa as a grassroots urban practice, and in this way stake a claim in ongoing conflicts over urban space and displacement in New York.

In previous chapters, I argue that Latinx salsa dancers contest and reconfigure the racialized commodification of salsa dance as a marketable product by foregrounding Nuyorican and Afro-Caribbean cultural identity. Here, I build on that framework and assert that dancers also strategically claim grassroots urbanity in the hyper-gentrified city. In doing so dancers step into a nuanced but counterhegemonic role in power struggles around the right to urban space. In this way, the salsa scene builds on its social and political legacy as a space for Latinx cultural affirmation, community-building, and resistance to cultural erasure and displacement in the neoliberal city. This framing of salsa dance in late neoliberal New York further illustrates how Latinx creative communities interact with the environment – shaping and being shaped by the changing city while negotiating cultural meaning through on2 salsa as both practice and product. Salsa dancing has been reconfigured in popular culture, turned into a profitable commodity, and arguably utilized as a tool for reinforcing hegemonic representations of Latinness. Yet, on2 dancers in the New York salsa scene reinforce their connection with *the street* and continue to claim urban space, while also disseminating their ideas to ever-larger audiences via traveling, teaching online, and posting on social media.

## **New York, Again**

In the late 2010s New York City continued an arc of rapid change that had its roots in the processes of deindustrialization, fiscal crisis, and gentrification that played out over the course of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By this time period, the city had reached a state of advanced gentrification, characterized by pockets of extreme wealth and persistent poverty (Moskowitz 2018, Florida 2017, Kasinitz 2018). At the same time, culture and cultural experiences became commoditized in increasingly visible ways. Cities across the United States implemented “cultural plans” as part of their development. Often these plans and strategies build on cultural production and cache that originated with the city’s semi-formal creative communities. In this way, they rely on the labor of immigrant and of-color communities. By relating to culture as something that is and should be cultivated through institutions, regulated, and in turn marketed as part of a city guideline/public policy, these plans enforce the idea that culture must be expedient to be valuable.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, as the workforce of cultural institutions is disproportionately white and middle-class, while the demographic of many cities is multi-ethnic, such plans potentially reinforce the framing of black and brown identity itself as a product, highlighting

<sup>61</sup> Yúdice (2004) argues that the role of culture has expanded into economic and political realms in an unprecedented way and is often invoked to take the place of waning political participation. Art and culture are called upon to contribute to the betterment of social conditions or to increase diversity. The expanded role for culture is directly linked with the reduction of state social services. Culture is invoked as an antidote for social ills, taking the place of what was previously covered by social services. For Yúdice, “The arts and culture sector is now claiming that it can solve the United States’ problems: enhance education, salve racial strife, help reverse urban blight through cultural tourism, create jobs, reduce crime, and perhaps even make a profit...Much as in classic cases of governmentality, in which there is total subordination of technicians to administrators...artists are being channeled to manage the social” (12).

conflicts around race, class, power, and space.<sup>62</sup>

New York City invested in and implemented its “first-ever comprehensive cultural plan” in 2017 called CreateNYC.<sup>63</sup> It did so after holding meetings in all the boroughs over the course of a year and a half in an effort to involve community voices in the development of New York’s cultural plan and development. The CreateNYC Plan outlined eight *strategies* and *actions*, the first of which is to “Increase support for the cultural life of low-income and underrepresented groups”.<sup>64</sup> The action plan for this point reads:

DCLA [NYC Department of Cultural Affairs] is committed to increased funding for cultural programming in low-income communities and for underrepresented groups...implemented directly in grants from DCLA and through increased support to re-grant partners—for example local arts councils and New York Foundation for the Arts. (CreateNYC Executive Summary)

Later in the document, number six on the list of strategies and actions reads: “Expand diversity in the cultural workforce,” with an action plan that includes, “help[ing] junior level staff grow into the next generation of cultural leadership”. The plan is unremarkable as an example of highly regulated urban cultural planning and represents efforts toward cultural expediency (Yúdice 2004). It is part of a larger effort toward branding entire cities and capitalizing on the cultural production that draws visitors to the metropolis (Goldberg-Miller 2017). Most strikingly, while many of the points laid out in the plan are

<sup>62</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff (2009) describe a global shift from the selling of labor to the selling of culture, which they link with the branding of ethnicity itself. They also note that the commodification of culture can be critical for people’s survival and may in fact enrich cultural identity.

<sup>63</sup> <https://createnyc.cityofnewyork.us/about/about-us/>

<sup>64</sup> All quotes are taken from the Executive Summary. See: [https://createnyc.cityofnewyork.us/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/CreateNYC\\_Exec-Summary\\_FIN\\_ENG.pdf](https://createnyc.cityofnewyork.us/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/CreateNYC_Exec-Summary_FIN_ENG.pdf)

progressive, they are focused on formal cultural institutions and organizations.

The CreateNYC community meetings, while likely well-intentioned, did little to address the disconnect between the intentions of a cultural plan geared toward equity and community preservation, and the fact that it has been the city itself that has contributed to marginalization in many communities of color through decades of redlining, disinvestment, over-policing, and then rezoning and facilitating gentrification. These policies have contributed to displacement in working-class communities across the city. Despite funding for cultural institutions through the CreateNYC plan, the gentrification facilitated by city policies of the last forty years threatens the semi-formal creative communities that have taken root in neighborhoods, and which city residents have relied on for cultural survival. The salsa scene is one such entity.

I describe the salsa scene as a “semi-formal creative community” in order to illustrate how groups – especially those with roots in marginalized populations – strategize through creative work to push back against cultural erasure. Dancers, cultural practitioners, and community artists are keen observers of social shifts that occur around them and in which they participate. Semi-formal creative communities are not social movements, nor are they explicitly revolutionary. Rather, they form around creative practices and become cemented as participants buy into a collective effort to hold onto cultural agency and physical space. The salsa scene has a traceable history of development, porous boundaries, and a set of social norms. In this way it has its own structure but is not an institution or organization. It is further held together by a shared set of beliefs, including a shared vernacular for ongoing debates around authenticity, legitimacy, and identity. Moreover, the salsa scene is not alone in walking the line

between grassroots community practice and global commodity. Creative communities that have evolved around dance, food, sports, poetry, and other activities traditionally associated with leisure are an integral part of the fabric of the late neoliberal city. Each of these communities construct a set of social norms and find itself relating, for better or worse, to an economy built to some degree around its practices. These groups play an increasingly prominent role in urban life. The framework of a semi-formal creative community provides a unified way of understanding the various ways in which people relate to cultural production in today's economically stratified cities. In this chapter, I build on this concept to frame the relationship between salsa scene dancers and the city.

### **“I have to go there!”: New York as Pilgrimage**

I met Elvis and Namrata on their third trip to New York and spent time with them again on their fourth visit the following year. Professional dancers who run their own Latin dance company in Mumbai, they spend about eight months of the year saving money and then traveled for the rest of the year to various cities to train in different dance styles. They visited New York for several months each year. They describe their reasons for consistently visiting the city for these prolonged periods:

Carmela: Talk to me about why you decided to come to New York specifically.

Elvis: For me, it was because I wanted to learn more [salsa] and there was nobody teaching. And I would try it only from YouTube. I learned quite a bit to a point, researching stuff about the dance and google, talking to a few dancers and all, but that was not enough...And also since I was also a bboy I always wanted to come over here as break dancing started over here.

Namrata: Elvis' obsession about the Bronx.

Carmela: You mentioned earlier being aware of the fact that bboying and hip-hop culture came out of the Bronx, but that you also came to do Latin dance. Can you tell me more about that?

Namrata: So, that is my reasoning for coming to New York because when I do my research, I would generally see any new concept or any new incorporation or anything that was evolving it was always New York doing something and then others following. So, in my head it was very clear that the pioneers are New York dancers. Then, everybody else. So, it's they who always start something and then of course people put their flavor into it, like Europe or whatever, they of course make their own style of fusion or whatever. But it was always for me clear that this was the melting pot for, and this is where it all originates.

The desire to visit New York and train with salsa professionals in the city is a common sentiment. Alongside New York's cultural ties with salsa is the city's continued role as a hotspot for salsa innovation, and its long-standing status as the birthplace of hip-hop.

Elvis, for example, several times expressed his desire to experience the real neighborhoods he had seen in documentaries and films ("I used to keep watching hip-hop documentaries and they used to show the Bronx and Brooklyn and everything. And I used to be like...I have to go there!"). During our interactions he spoke regularly about the desire to view graffiti and pay homage to the legacy of New York's black and brown neighborhoods and cultural innovations. Much of the media he had consumed over the years depicted 1990s New York or harkened back to hip hop's early years and salsa dura's heyday in the 1970s. However, both Elvis and Nam also continually mentioned how New York is a place where one can "do it all" in terms of dance, and where innovation in the Latin dance scene in particular is at its peak. In this way, their affinity for New York was fueled both by the legacy of the city's past and by the wealth and accessibility of present-day New York.

Elvis' passion for and pursuit of multiple street dance styles was interesting to observe. A skilled salsa dancer, he also spent large amounts of time practicing house dance and, as he mentions, studying hip hop dance and culture. Hip hop of course has



reached an astronomical level of global popularity. Unlike salsa, hip hop has become popular culture both here in its home country and around the world. Salsa music, though garnered significant commercial success, is still somewhat limited in terms of its popular reach. The hip hop dance community is also larger and older. Hip hop dance has transcended localized practice at a high level, with the highest level of today's "commercial dance industry" focused on a variation of hip hop. While the same has not yet happened with salsa, there are some indications that "Latin dance" will continue to grow as a share of the commercial dance world. Some versions of salsa are integrated with popular culture, but on2 salsa and other social dance-based styles remain semi-formal and deeply tied to the creative communities that birthed them. Nonetheless, the processes within these dance communities resemble one another in that each takes on localized iterations in conversation with a global community. For now, New York City – the old city that remains in the imagination, and the new one we confront – retains a symbolic and actual role for many salsa dancers around the world. In order to continue contributing to this cultural product, dancers have to function within that social, economic, and political context of the contemporary city.

### **Huracán Dance Company**

As discussed in the previous chapter, the salsa scene economy includes a number of income-generating configurations for instructors, event organizers, promoters, and DJs. Dancers typically make money in the salsa scene through some combination of teaching classes, directing dance teams or companies, choreographing routines for others, and performing at events. Each of these require access to physical space – for company

rehearsals, group classes, or holding social events. As the cost to rent space in New York has skyrocketed over the last twenty years (2000-2020), the social and economic norms of the salsa scene have changed dramatically and at breakneck speed.<sup>65</sup> A useful case study for understanding the way New York's shifting economy and landscape affects dancers can be found in the trajectory of the Santo Rico and Huracán dance companies. Throughout this project I have referred to data I acquired through attending numerous salsa events – from socials to congresses and competitions – over eight years of participant observation in the scene, as well as to interviews I conducted with dancers across the New York salsa dance world. My primary entry point into the scene though has been my sustained participation in Huracán Dance Company.

As the contemporary on2 salsa scene emerged in the early-1990s, dance studios opened up in New York to teach on2 to a broader audience, and to financially sustain professional dancers. These early studios were mostly run by individual dancers who were able to rent their own studios in upper Manhattan or the outer boroughs. While some Palladium-style mambo companies continued into the early-aughts, during this time period Eddie Torres-style on2 dance companies took root and assumed a prominent role in New York's salsa world. Chief amongst these emergent companies were the “big three” mentioned in the previous chapter: Santo Rico, Karisma, and Yamuleé. Santo Rico was formed in 1994 by a Dominican dancer named Wilton Beltré who had previously trained with Eddie Torres. Upon Beltré's departure around 1996, Tomas Guerrero

<sup>65</sup> According to the New York City Housing Preservation Department, in 1996 the median monthly gross rent for apartments in New York City was \$640/month. In 2017, the median monthly gross rent was \$1,450 representing a 226.5% increase (NYCHVS Findings).

assumed leadership of the team and dance classes.<sup>66</sup> Santo Rico became one of the iconic groups of on2 salsa's golden period in the early-2000s and Tomas a primary engineer of some of the community-based dance techniques that became essential to on2 salsa practice during this time. This included a pivot technique for rapidly spinning follows, and increasingly intricate and musical partnerwork. Over the course of the 2000s Santo Rico traveled extensively. By the time I joined the studio in 2012, they were facing immense economic pressure due to rent increases in the East Harlem neighborhood in which the studio was located. Santo Rico also struggled to adjust to the rise of social media, initially resisting the digital recordings which were becoming a driving force in dancers' success in the early- to mid-2010s. At the same time, Jeff Taveras, a long-time principal dancer with Santo Rico opened a second studio in Corona, Queens in 2012 – called Santo Rico Queens (SRQ) – foreshadowing an emerging trend of on2 companies franchising.

In 2014, Santo Rico closed. Responding to the economic pressures of operating in New York and conflicts with other dancers, Tomas retired and moved to Florida.<sup>67</sup> For a short time, SRQ continued under the direction of Jeff Taveras. Responding to a social environment vastly different than that of the 1990s when earlier studios had emerged, SRQ rebranded, dramatically updated its technique, and changed its business model. In January 2015 Huracán Dance Company debuted under Jeff's direction. Santo Rico and other 1990s/2000s studios had a straightforward business model. Directors would pay

<sup>66</sup> Beltré was incarcerated on drug related charged in the mid-1990s and served around 20 years before being deported to the Dominican Republic upon his release in 2017.

<sup>67</sup> Soon thereafter Guerrero began teaching again and formed an amateur *Santo Rico-Florida* team.

monthly rent on a dance studio space out of which they would conduct classes and rehearsals – often for a “pro” team and “semi-pro” team. Pro teams were typically those that traveled to international and out-of-town congresses, while semi-pro teams performed in local shows and consisted of dancers aspiring to the pro team level. Being part of a team, at either level, was generally an intense, long-term commitment.

As the 2000s progressed, this model gradually became untenable. The 2010s necessitated practical changes to the salsa studio business model. Functionally the changes included shorter classes to accommodate what instructors perceived as shorter attention spans in their students. Cultivating a strong social media presence became critical. Instructors, including at Huracán, began instituting short-term performance classes, which allowed students to sign up for a four- or eight-week class series with the promise of performing at a social or a congress as the goal of the course. These performance classes represented a significant departure from the model of the 1990s and 2000s during which time classes and performance teams overlapped far less. Huracán and many other prominent companies began incorporating competitions into their business model, both as a way of promoting the professional level teams and, through pro-ams, as a way of making money and engaging student dancers. Finally, individual professional dancers increasingly began to market themselves as individuals (or couples) rather than simply team members from larger companies. To a certain extent, there have always been dancers with individual name-recognition, but as self-economization and individual marketing through social media became increasingly prominent in all areas of life, the phenomena particularly spiked for performers. In fact, as social media continued to be increasingly critical, remaining dance companies have begun to galvanize their

professional dancers to market themselves as individuals in the hopes of gaining more work. In turn, event promoters picked up on the trend of individual marketing, promoting their events by advertising somewhat “famous” individual dancers more prominently than teams, which were naturally more expensive to book. As Huracán adopted these changes to meet the New York City of the late 2010s, Jeff Taveras, the former principal dancer of Santo Rico, owner of SRQ, and current director of Huracán emerged as one of New York’s most important contemporary on2 figures.

Beyond the changes I observed Huracán adopt between 2014 and 2019, some studios pushed forward with alternative business models. Studios like Lorenz Latin Dance School and Nieves Latin Dance School successfully focused on filling beginner classes, student teams, and “franchising” through the opening of multiple locations in the five boroughs, rather than pushing advanced technique or professional teams. Many dancers eschewed the studio model altogether and began replicating the business model of commercial dancers from stylistic traditions outside of Latin dance. This included individual marketing, hourly space rental in midtown, and auditioning for commercial dance opportunities.<sup>68</sup> By the 2010s dance companies and individual professional dancers increasingly adopted a model whereby they rented space in larger Manhattan studios, such as Ripley Grier (located on 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 35<sup>th</sup> Street, a long-time home for commercial dance and theater auditions and classes). Rather than attempt to afford the monthly rent of an entire studio, dancers instead rent a room in a larger building at an

<sup>68</sup> An increase in commercial dance opportunities for on2 salsa dancers was just emerging during the writing of this dissertation, most prominently with the filming of the “In the Heights” movie and the success of some individual on2 dancers on popular shows like *So You Think You Can Dance* and *World of Dance*.

hourly rate, therefore allowing them to pay lower costs and potentially offset those costs further by having their students or team members pay for the cost of the room. This shift represents one concrete way in which cultural and creative communities and industries have been affected by gentrification and rent increases in New York. In the summer of 2019, the owners of the building in which Huracán Dance Studio was located in Corona, Queens announced that they were selling the building and tenants would need to vacate. In this way Huracán was abruptly thrust into adopting the model of hourly studio rentals in place of leasing a studio.

What is lost when a community is displaced? Hourly studio rental can placate some functional needs for a dance studio, but it cannot provide what I observed first at Santo Rico, and then on a more significant level at Huracán – a designated space for community that went well beyond the hours of class or rehearsal. There, team members held socials, Superbowl viewing parties, conflict interventions between feuding dancers, late night conversations about salsa, early morning last minute rehearsals, potlucks, birthday parties, game nights, and many things in between. I conducted many of the interviews for this project on a couch pushed to the side of one of the studio spaces. And I observed dozens of students come through each of the studios in the years that I was active there and find community beyond a one- or two-hour dance class. International dancers visiting New York from India, Japan, or Switzerland found a place to observe and participate in New York's salsa community. Those of us who live here found a kinship to return to time and time again. When I moved to Los Angeles for a year in mid-2012, I came back to Santo Rico in 2013 where I was welcomed back without missing a beat. It was then that I knew I would conduct this project. Despite the contours of

occasional individual conflicts and the influence of egregious systemic forms of exclusion, I observed that many people find value and connection in these spaces. While semi-formal creative communities like the salsa scene find new and innovative ways to adjust to changing social conditions and move forward, the loss of physical space adds strain to these already precarious artistic communities.

The interrelated case studies of Santo Rico and Huracán demonstrate several monumental changes in the trajectories of on2 dance studios/companies as they relate to physical space in New York. Santo Rico exemplified the height of success for the 2000s time period in which dancers traveled constantly to out-of-town and international congresses. At the beginning of the 2010s Santo Rico experienced the beginning of the decline in international congresses booking New York dancers, the rise of social media, and the increased unaffordability of leasing a studio in New York, ultimately being indirectly displaced and relocating to Florida in a different form. The rise and subsequent adjustments made by Huracán provide a window into changes that dancers made to accommodate changing economic and social conditions in the 2010s. This was followed by the direct displacement that came with the selling of the building in which Huracán was located, leading the company to adopt the model that had already become increasingly common amongst dancers and dance companies in New York: renting hourly space in larger buildings and pushing dancers to promote themselves individually on social media.

### **Claiming “the street”**

The major changes explored thus far in this chapter have to do with the changing structure of the studio – the economic realm of the on2 salsa community, in which an

exchange of goods takes place. Of course, this is central to the survival of the dancers who make their livelihood off salsa and therefore facilitate the scene's continued existence for everyone else. But the narratives promoted, and conversations held inside those studios are just as important. On2 dancers constantly refer to their practice as a street dance. In doing so, they reinforce an affiliation with community-based dance practice and with urbanness. These statements are repeated by MCs on stage at congresses, by promoters doing press for an event, and by dancers on social media or in conversation, often before or after class or rehearsal in the studio.

During one late-night rehearsal, Jeff Taveras, the *Huracán* director, gathered his team together for a lecture lambasting newer members of the team who he saw as dismissive and disrespectful of on2 salsa's legacy.

Come on, this is a street dance! Ten years ago there was none of this... there was no splits and pointing toes. There was two and a half baby inch heels this thick, why? Because this is what this is. This is what it is... *esto es de la calle, esta vaina e' de la calle, de la calle primero*. We take it from the streets, and we translate it onto the stage. We don't take it from the stage and then translate it, cause we'll never have this [heart]. This is all soul. Dancing mambo, dancing bachata, this is all soul... It has to be here [the heart] first, all of this. All of this music has to be here first. (Jeff Taveras, October 6, 2014)

This speech, delivered with passion and urgency, demonstrates the depth of cultural investment dancers give to salsa practice. It also highlights concepts that hold weight in the community – loyalty to the quotidian, or the street, and connection to the music and culture, described as having heart and soul, or sometimes flavor and *sabor*.

His sentiments were echoed during many casual conversations I observed and formal interviews I conducted. One such interaction took place:

*Late afternoon, out with two fellow on2 dancers after class during our short-lived weekly ritual of taking an Afro-Cuban folkloric dance class in Brooklyn, our conversation turns (as usual) to the state of the salsa scene and our positions*



*within it. One dancer has recently turned thirty and is considering new career options. Might he be interested in teaching dance classes at a college or commercial dance studio? The answer is simple:*

*“We’re street dancers!” he says.*

*There’s a note of pride there that our companion echoes.*

*“We’re not dancers like that.”*

(Notes, September 2014)

This particular interaction was unremarkable. Salsa dancers, like so many artists and group members of every type, seem constantly to think and talk about their community. As I have argued throughout the project, salsa is deeply meaningful to many of its participants for a variety of reasons: cultural, social, or individual. Moreover, people invest large amounts of time, energy, and money into salsa. Correlating with this deep investment, conversations are an opportunity to work through one’s individual relationship with salsa (how to progress to the next level or whether to continue dancing at all, for example), cultural affinity for salsa music or dance, or social issues related to the scene. Many times, though, such conversations also provide an opportunity for New York dancers to reaffirm the idea of salsa as a street dance, or a practice that is rooted in the urban quotidian. I found this to be a cornerstone for on2 dancers of all backgrounds in the salsa scene. Even when disconnected from explicit political ideology, talking about salsa as a street dance positions the speaker in affiliation with a vision of the city that foregrounds working-class communities and grassroots cultural practice.

In some cases, dancers did draw explicit links between the loss of physical space due to displacement and the ability to occupy said space through the physicality of dance. Migdalia, a Puerto Rican dancer from Williamsburg, Brooklyn says:

I don't think anybody is going to survive the gentrification of New York. I think New York as we knew it is on its way to dying. Just because no one can afford to live here...so, I think it's a struggle for us to keep something like salsa alive as a community because people are just gonna keep moving and moving and moving. A lot of studios are closing because they can't afford the rents anymore. And as salsa dancers we're spoiled because our social are held in dance studios. So, it's getting rough because as 1 or 2 or 3 start closing, we're gonna have nowhere to go, unless we take it back to the streets! It is a street dance. (Migdalia Santiago, May 11, 2019)

As gentrification and displacement continued to advance in New York throughout the 2010s, transforming many of the neighborhoods that dancers in their 20s and 30s had grown up in, I heard more explicitly political commentary from dancers in the latter period of my research.<sup>69</sup> However, the framing of salsa as a street dance did not seem to change.

While professional dancers like Mike, Monique, Jeff, and Migdalia do monetize their salsa practice, they enrich their classes and general with a cultural narrative that can strengthen salsa as an identity practice. Moreover, they regularly advance and perpetuate a narrative that foregrounds both ethnoracial cultural authenticity and “the street,” urban landscape and historicization. Often, they view and present themselves as rightful cultural guardians. They are acutely aware that their style of salsa is more standardized and technique driven than the informal salsa danced by family members and friends, yet they are also cognizant of its disconnect from the salsa and Latin dance that is visible to a popular audience through Hollywood reality dance competition series and other mass media. Narratives about salsa dancing in New York relate to and contest these

<sup>69</sup>This was perhaps compounded by the fact that millennials became increasingly prominent in leadership positions within the scene as the 2010s progressed and may be more likely to draw on their political experiences of recession, economic hardship, and displacement ([https://www.bbvaresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/160809\\_US\\_MillennialsOpportunityIndex.pdf](https://www.bbvaresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/160809_US_MillennialsOpportunityIndex.pdf)).

commercialized representations of Latin dance and ground its practice firmly in the right to urban space and cultural specificity.

### **The Neoliberal City**

The backdrop for the salsa scene as cultural product and practice over the last thirty years (1990-2020) has been a transforming New York. Globalization in cities has been permeated by the large (and often, violent, traumatic, and suppressive) shadow of neoliberal policies and philosophies of deregulation, privatization, and reduction in social welfare provisions (see: Harvey 2007). In invoking neoliberalism, I also refer to the ideological system that holds up the myth of free market success by promoting individualism, false meritocracy, and the economization of every aspect of life, or, as Wendy Brown (2015) puts it, “the conversion of every human need or desire into a profitable enterprise” (28). The expansion of neoliberalism as both an economic and ideological framework, in accordance with increased globalization and the consolidation of human populations in cities, has led to the theoretical construct of the neoliberal city.<sup>70</sup>

As Arlene Dávila and others have argued, these neoliberal policies and logic have been extended to artistic and cultural production, often in racialized ways, effectively economizing the ethnic identity of marginalized groups as a means of feeding development (Dávila 2004; Dávila 2012; Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Brenner and Theodore 2005). As with other areas of everyday life, neoliberalism engages culture as an economic resource and site for increased privatization. Moreover, cultural “authenticity” as a product for consumption by elites has become a fixed feature of contemporary,

<sup>70</sup> Harvey (2007) argues, for example, that New York’s 1977 fiscal crisis belongs in the same conversation as Chile’s 1973 post-coup economic shock treatment.

stratified urban life (Zukin 2009, Zukin and Maguire 2004, Neff et al. 2005). Studies of art and culture often center the aesthetic perceptions of gentrifiers and the so-called “creative class”. Working-class people who regularly contribute their labor to the cultural fabric of the city are rarely included in the idea of the creative class. As Dávila (2012) notes, neighborhood-based Latinx cultural workers, whom she refers to as “barrio workers”, are often assigned a lower status on the racialized hierarchy of value in New York’s creative economy.

Professional dancers in New York’s salsa scene might not be barrio workers, but they are rarely considered fully realized members of Richard Florida’s “creative class” either. This is partly due to a predominant U.S. cultural imaginary that renders black and brown creative labor as less valuable than that done by whites. While salsa classes are full of a multi-ethnic consumer base, professional salsa dancers in New York are predominantly Latinx, with second-generation Dominicans and Puerto Ricans being particularly dominant. The on2 salsa scene is neither fully realized as an institutional, commercial practice nor as a localized neighborhood practice, since salsa dance has long since morphed into a global commodity with a codified technique and market-logic to match.

In fact, the scene highlights how neoliberal logic and the economic inequality exacerbated by neoliberal policies now guide the ways in which city dwellers consume formal cultural production like that found in museums and informal cultural production advanced by grassroots communities, especially those with roots in immigration or colonial migration. In the era of the gig economy and social media, these have become sites where people contest the boundaries between informal and formal economy as well

as the social implications and cultural meanings around creative work. Dancers, cultural practitioners, community artists are keen observers of social shifts that occur around them and in which they participate. In other words, dancers are active participants in defining themselves and are making increasingly visible strides in defining the meanings enacted through salsa. The scene encompasses both formal (classes, congresses, commercial dance work, a market) and informal arenas (social dancing; free, public, participatory art). Moreover, the salsa scene is not alone in walking the space between grassroots community practice and global commodity. The creative communities that have evolved around dance, food, sports, poetry, and other activities traditionally associated with leisure are an integral part of the fabric of the neoliberal city. Each of these communities construct a set of social norms and find themselves relating, for better or worse, to an economy built around their practices.

### **Conclusion**

In New York, the social locations where salsa dance is practiced overlap and interact with each other in nuanced ways precisely because so many dancers participate in blended social locations and practices. These blended experiences imbue the scene with a cultural lifeblood that is constantly renewed as dancers navigate the boundaries and openings between social locations of salsa practice. Moreover, Latinx professional dancers often express their connection to the salsa scene as a symptom of their ethnic, cultural or historical connection to its music and style of movement. Almost all Latinx respondents I talked to, especially those who were Puerto Rican and Dominican, describe early experiences with dance and music at home and tie their current interest in salsa to those memories.

This project traces the development of salsa dance in its home city, and through this lens displays a compelling portrait of how New York itself has changed. Despite ongoing tensions around the authenticity of its various styles, participants in the on2 salsa scene – especially Puerto Rican, Dominican, and other Latinx professional dancers – regularly and intentionally claim physical and narrative space for salsa as a grassroots cultural practice. They do this by making clear and specific narrative claims about salsa’s roots, by drawing on family and community ties to blend the technical and informal social locations in which salsa is practiced, and by regularly identifying salsa dance as a street-level urban practice. The narratives employed by dancers reflect strategies that one creative community uses to survive gentrification, the economic restructuring of the last two decades, and contemporary racialization in order to make inroads against cultural erasure and exclusion in today’s New York.

More than fifty years after the close of the famed Palladium Ballroom, the salsa scene persists and appears to be growing as both a self-sustaining market and a meaningful cultural practice. The salsa dance scene tells us about the way one contemporary community sustains its roots in the innovations and collaborations of working-class communities of color, and in doing so claims a stake in ongoing struggles against displacement and erasure in the city. As salsa dance has become an increasingly regulated and commoditized practice across the globe, dancers in rapidly changing New York City have modified the way they present themselves in order to meet the changing environment. Struggling to thrive in the neoliberal city, professional dancers use teams, social media, products, and online videos in new ways to market salsa dance. But alongside this commercialization, the salsa scene retains its social, cultural, and political

role as a space for community building, Latinx pride, and as a potential site of status and power for its participants who are sometimes otherwise marginalized.

**CHAPTER SEVEN: SOCIAL CONTEXT AND CONCLUSIONS:  
CONSUMING CULTURE IN NEW YORK CITY**

In the 1970s as salsa music was reaching widespread popularity, New Yorkers faced a bankrupt city, widespread disinvestment policies, and rapid housing and population loss. Today, residents in New York and other cities confront a different set of challenges around unaffordability and displacement. New York's on2 salsa scene provides a rich and nuanced window into the impact these social changes have had on the production and consumption of everyday culture in cities. This ethnographic study traces the varied cultural meanings and racial ideologies enacted through salsa, including through popular culture portrayals of salsa, competition events, and local social practices. In particular, I engage with the changing landscape of New York City, highlighting the ways in which participants resist systems of marginalization and oppression related to race, class, gender, and the right to urban space through their practices and commentary.

Weaving together sociological literature on immigration and the arts, as well as interdisciplinary writings on Latinx social dance practices and cultural consumption in cities, this work traces recent New York City history, covering major waves of migration in the twentieth century and social change pertaining to Latinx New York. Interwoven with this history, I relate the story of the mambo dance craze and the evolution of salsa. These initial chapters serve to establish the social world of the on2 salsa dance scene. I then outline five social locations where salsa is practiced, providing a broad framework for future sociological studies of dance as a communal activity with varied social roles. Drawing on ethnographic data and interviews, I explore how Latinx and non-Latinx dancers reify their understandings of race, gender, culture, and identity in these various



social locations, and sometimes challenge them. Building on this discussion, I briefly discuss racialized and gendered stereotypes of salsa in popular media. I put these representations in conversation with locally specific debates and tensions around race and gender. Through discussion of the popularity of Afro-Cuban dance components in contrast to elements of anti-blackness in the scene and the community's recent #MeToo interventions, I highlight how systems of oppression subtly impact community interactions, even in progressive, multiracial spaces. Showcasing the breadth and reach of the salsa world, I then introduce the World Salsa Summit and related competitions which highlight the racialized hyper-consumption of salsa dance. Finally, the project returns to New York to explore how Latinx dancers resist salsa's commodification by claiming physical and narrative space in the gentrified city. In this conclusion, I review the project's contributions and contextualize the salsa scene within contemporary social trends, especially a political environment that is marred by anti-immigrant sentiment, xenophobia, and actions targeting Latinx communities. Through this framing, I argue that localized community-building spaces like the salsa scene account for one small terrain in a broader landscape of resistance to systems of racism and inequality and remain a critical area for further research.

### **Political Context**

The exchanges and interactions of the salsa scene are contextualized by current social and political trends, including the Trump administration's continual efforts to malign and marginalize Latinx groups. During the research period of this project, on November 8, 2016, Donald Trump was elected president following a campaign that

repeatedly targeted Latinx communities. A veritable onslaught of racist and anti-immigrant statements and policies followed. While Latin American countries have long been the target of U.S. neocolonial interference abroad and Latinx communities have faced racism at home, the contemporary political environment has included particularly vehement xenophobia encouraged by the White House. Donald Trump's campaign launched with his now infamous speech stating that Mexican immigrants are "bringing drugs. They're bringing crime They're rapists. And some, I assume are good people" (Reilly 2016). Trump then frequently repeated promises to build a wall between the United States and Mexico and to shut down the Obama-era Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program which provides a stay against deportation and the ability to work legally for some immigrants who entered the United States as children.

The first few years of the Trump administration included the rescinding of Temporary Protect Status (TPS) for 200,000 Salvadorans in January 2017, a protracted battle over DACA, which provides coverage to over 650,000 people primarily Mexico, Central America, Peru, and Ecuador (Migration Policy Institute 2019), and the acceleration of family separation policies at the U.S.-Mexico border. In the aftermath of Hurricane Maria, which hit Puerto Rico in September 2017 and officially resulted in 2,975 deaths, Trump repeatedly framed Puerto Rico as a separate country and lashed out at Puerto Rican politicians and communities of the island (Karni and Mazzei 2019).<sup>71</sup> On January 11, 2018 Trump referred to Haiti, countries in Africa, and El Salvador as

<sup>71</sup> This official estimate of the number of deaths from Hurricane Maria comes from the Miliken Institute School of Public Health commissioned by the governor of Puerto Rico. There is considerable debate about the real death toll, which was exacerbated by the inadequate government response.

“shithole countries” (Vitali, Hunt, and Thorp 2018). Soon thereafter, President Trump tweeted that four women of color Congress members, including Nuyorican Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York, should “go back and fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came,’ invoking the racist trope of people of color as perpetual foreigners (Rogers and Fandos 2019). Taken together, these and other actions amount to a sustained violent and reactionary political attack, particularly targeting Latinx communities.

### **So, where is the resistance? Overview and Insights**

Within this context, it is remarkable that more than 50 years after the close of the Palladium Ballroom, the salsa scene not only persists but appears to be growing as both a market and a meaningful cultural practice. Thousands of people of many backgrounds continue to invest emotionally, socially, and financially in its continuance as a self-sustaining community. At the outset of this project, it was unclear to me whether the conversations and actions I had already begun to observe in the salsa scene constituted concerted acts of resistance. I hesitated to call every action a form of resistance, a battle fought in a war of position, but knew that the salsa scene represented more than just racialized commodification of Latinx cultural production. The community is full of active participants who are strategic, who leverage their agency, and who move with intentionality in shaping their cultural and creative world. In doing so, they resist racism and displacement, and enact alternative ways of being in community.

These efforts take place both amidst the physical landscape of the city and the digital work of social media. The site of this study is New York, but in some ways it

could be any large or small metropolis that has struggled through the economic ups and downs of the last century, experienced the local and global social changes that have come to define urban life, and that today seek to mobilize cultural and creative agency as a tool of development (more or less successfully). These are the battlegrounds where the fight for salsa's soul plays out. And each one is riddled with particular social, political, and economic parameters which shape the way the scene evolves and the experience of the dancers who are part of it.

Dancers in New York continue to claim a stake in salsa as cultural practice and product. They do this by asserting themselves as rightful cultural guardians of salsa, reifying salsa's connection with the street, and affirming the Afro-Caribbean roots of salsa (music and dance). They also fight for their space. As the gentrification of the city accelerates, many dancers are driven by more than economic gains as they develop new and innovative ways of advancing the community and of ensuring that they are the ones that own as much of it as possible. Like other musicians and cultural practitioners, many salsa dancers are invested in the legacy of their art and the communities that nurture it.

Social media has emerged as a terrain in which dancers can market themselves and also assert their own narrative about salsa's history and meanings. Through social media, the salsa community uses accessible communication to expand narrative and cultural exchanges between and beyond cities globally. Some have claimed digital space as a forum to advance their views and historical knowledge about salsa. This has both changed and maintained salsa as a practice. As Latinx dancers in New York gain larger social media followings, they have substantially influenced this ongoing exchange. They have also begun to break into parts of the dance industry that were not previously widely

available to on2 dancers, in the process asserting the technical excellence of community-based dance practices.

There is resistance in this music and, despite any efforts to the contrary, there is resistance in the dancing too. One can see it on any night of the week at a salsa social somewhere in the city, fermenting in the exchanges practiced on the dance floor and the improvisations of the movement. And it is there in the ways that dancers verbalize their relationship with culture and community – and indeed, with each other. By tying their dancing with the practice of Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Afro-Caribbean cultures, and with the performance of street dance, these professional dancers impact the configuration of everyday racial ideologies in the context of a global and transnational city.

### **Research Contributions**

This study contributes to sociology, urban studies, and Latinx studies in several ways, particularly through a new conception of the sociology of dance and by broadening frameworks for looking at everyday and popular culture in the contemporary city. The project includes three theoretical interventions. Each of these frameworks build on previous literature and can be applied to future studies. One is the idea of a *re-ethnicized cultural product* to describe how salsa is divorced from a raced and classed Nuyorican and Afro-Caribbean identity and instead marketed as broadly Latin. This framework provides a way of deconstructing how racial capitalism adjusts hegemonic notions to market artistic and cultural production done by communities of color – in this case by neutralizing the black, working class, and urban roots of salsa and presenting it as broadly Latin, with attached stereotypical ethnic indicators like sexiness and spiciness. This

process likely looks different when applied to various cultural forms. The frame of a re-ethnicized cultural product provides a method for tying these processes together and analyzing their overall interrelatedness. This is particularly relevant to cultural production with roots in migrant communities, whose growth has long challenged the U.S. black-white racial binary.

The second is the idea of a *semi-formal creative community* to describe how marginalized groups, outside of formal cultural institutions, strategize through creative work to make inroads against cultural erasure. As discussed in chapter six, this framework is intended to provide an additional outline for studying everyday cultural practices in the city. The salsa scene is not alone in walking the space between grassroots community practice and global commodity. Creative communities that have evolved around dance, food, sports, poetry, and other activities traditionally associated with leisure are an integral part of the fabric of the neoliberal city. Each of these communities construct a set of social norms and find themselves relating, for better or worse, to an economy built around their practices. The framework of a semi-formal creative community can be used in future studies focused on these various communities.

Finally, the third contribution of this project is to propose a *sociology of dance* to frame future studies of dance communities, built around the social locations of dance outlined in chapter three. While there is a rich field of dance studies, and significant work related to dance in the field of ethnomusicology, anthropology, and ethnic studies, outlining a sociological framing for how dance communities can be studied provides a different theoretical and methodological approach to these groups, which form such a rich part of human life. In addition, this framing positions sociology of dance studies to

be put into conversation with other sociological fields that foreground leisure and subcultures, including the sociology of food, sports, art, music and, most broadly, popular culture.

### **Looking to the Future**

This project focuses on salsa dancers, but it is at its heart a community study. Sociological study of everyday and semi-formal creative communities in New York and other cities will continue to be integral in broadening our understanding of the changing fabric of cities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Such projects already exist but must continually adjust to the rapidly changing population and social conditions in cities today, including by making connections between the various creative networks and economies that New Yorkers and other city dwellers construct.

In the vein of a growing sociology of dance field, studies of street, stage, and studio dance environments related to every style would enrich the literature. In addition, applying the social locations of dance to studies can help scholars conducting community studies in which dance is just one aspect of a broader cultural environment. This might include neighborhood studies or ethnographies that do not foreground dance but seek ways to frame the various roles of dance in a given community. Even the commercial dance world, with its high revenues and large social media followings, has not received significant attention in sociology and is ripe for future inquiry.

While there is a significant body of work focusing on salsa, future studies of Latinx social dance communities and practices that have received less attention, and in cities that have not been written about with as much frequency as New York, would be welcome additions. These might include Latin hustle and contemporary bachata. A study

of New York's salsa scene through a critical feminist and/or queer theory framework would greatly enrich the literature as attitudes about gender identity have changed dramatically within and beyond the salsa scene in recent years. Comparative studies of salsa in different cities that interrogate the north/south divide in the global salsa scene would further enrich the literature.

As this research has shown, salsa dance has become an increasingly regulated and commodified practice across the globe, dancers in rapidly changing New York City have modified the way they present themselves in order to meet the changing environment. Studying the salsa dance scene in New York City tells us about the way one contemporary community sustains its roots in the innovations and collaborations of working-class communities of color, and in doing so claims a stake in ongoing struggles against displacement and erasure in the city. Struggling to thrive in the neoliberal city, professional dancers use teams, social media, products, and online videos in new ways to market salsa dance. But alongside this commodification, the salsa scene retains its social, cultural, and political role as a space for community building, Latinx pride, and as a potential site of status and power for its participants who are sometimes otherwise marginalized.

In the current political era culture continues to be politicized in nuanced ways. Its practice holds national attention in ways that traditional political developments do not; and our patterns of consumption around it speak to our collective voices, our social identities and identifications, and our patterns of innovation and resilience in the face of daunting political, social, and economic realities. Celebrations of salsa's power, voice, and transcendence flourish even against the backdrop of a divided and politically



reactionary environment. The unique history and movements created by Latinxs are revered in salsa even as Latinx bodies are threatened, deported, maligned in the national conversation. The widely spread and successful cultural practice of Latinx social dance in an era of xenophobia holds a weight of resilience that goes beyond the parameters of artistic or athletic expression.

## **ADDENDUM A:**

### **WORLD SALSA SUMMIT COMPETITION RULES AND REGULATIONS**

Summit categories are either designated as “showcases” involving a performance of choreography under 2.5 minutes, or “heats”, which are improvisational social dancing categories. Next, categories are separated by style. For showcase categories, this usually consists of salsa on1, salsa on2, salsa cabaret, traditional bachata, bachata cabaret, cha cha chá, and Latin hustle. The addition of the word “cabaret” to a style means that dancers can perform tricks. Tricks are defined as any move during which one or more of the dancers completely leaves the ground, requiring the support of another dancer. This includes anything from an assisted cartwheel to aerial acrobatics. In non-cabaret categories, dancers are docked points or disqualified if they perform any tricks. Heats are a bit more straightforward, and are usually designated simply as salsa, bachata, cha cha chá, Latin hustle, or merengue. Categories are then further separated according to skill level. Interestingly, this particular separation has to do mainly with commerce.

The designation “professional” is for dancers who make money dancing, teaching, or performing. Sometimes there is a “semi-professional/rising star” label for categories geared toward dancers who make a little money dancing or aspire to become professional. By far the largest grouping is “amateur”, which applies to anyone who does not make money dancing. The amateur heat categories are then often further separated by skill level, such as Beginner, Intermediate, or Advanced – or, they segment even further with categories like “Advanced Beginner”, “Pre-Intermediate”, or “Novice”. Each of the above categories are then recreated for select age brackets, including Teens (13-17), Pre-Teen (9-12), Kids (4-8), Over-40, and Over-50. Categories with a large number of

entrants have a semi-final round and then a final round. Enormous categories at times even conduct a quarter-final round first.

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From the World Salsa Summit website, [www.worldsalsasummit.com](http://www.worldsalsasummit.com):

## **DEFINITIONS, RULES & JUDGING CRITERIA**

### **\* ATTENTION COMPETITORS \***

We have implemented very important requirements for you to follow when providing YOUR music to our DJ when you submit your music CD for "showcase" competitions. Please visit the page: **Music CD Req.**

### **Definitions:**

1. **Amateur:** Defined as a student or person who does not make a living as a Dance Instructor, Performer, Dance Competitor or Dance Adjudicator and who never receives financial compensation for these activities.
2. **Rising Star/Semi-Pro:** Defined as a person who receives financial compensation as a Dance Instructor, Performer, Dance Competitor or Dance Adjudicator, but who does these activities on a part time basis and makes the majority of their income in another profession.
3. **Professional:** Defined as a person who receives financial compensation as a Dance Instructor, Performer, Dance Competitor or Dance Adjudicator, and who makes the majority or entirety of their income from these activities.
4. **Pro-Am Division:** Defined as one Professional Dancer (Instructor) dancing with one Amateur Dancer (Student) to form a partnership, or a group of Amateur and Professional dancers performing together to form a team.
5. **Amateur Division:** Defined as two Amateur dancers or students dancing together to form a partnership, or a group of Amateur dancers performing together to form a team.
6. **Professional Divison:** Defined as two Professional dancers performing together to form a partnership, or a group of Professional dancers performing together to form a team.
7. **Same Sex Divisions:** Defined as an all Male or all Female Partnership or Team.
8. **Teen Division:** Defined as a couple whose partners are between 13-17 years of age.

9. **Pre-Teen Division:** Defined as a couple whose partners are 12 years of age and under.
10. **40+ Division:** Defined as an Amateur couple whose partners are both over 40 years of age, or a Pro-Am Couple whose Amateur partner is over 40 years of age.
11. **Heated Divisions:** Defined as a category where all partners or couples dance together on the stage or floor to music that is selected by the organization or deejay. Heats generally last 1.5 minutes and are Just Dance divisions. All Heated Divisions for this competition are Just Dance divisions (see below).
12. **Showcase Divisions:** Defined as a category whereby the partnership or team showcases choreography, and dances to the music of their choice. Showcase divisions mean the competing couple or team will do a solo performance.
13. **Just Dance:** Defined as dance only. No lifts, tricks, flares or drops permitted whatsoever. This is a lead/follow division, rather than choreographed, designed to show the ability to connect with one's partner and display timing, musicality and creativity to whatever music is played.
14. **Tricks, Dips, Drops, Leverage Moves and Flares:** A trick is defined as any movement that requires the support of the other partner to maintain. This is regardless of whether the feet remain on the floor or not.
15. **Open Division:** Means the division is open to any competitor, whether they are Amateur, Rising Star or Professional. Amateurs will not lose Amateur status if they choose to compete in the Open Divisions.

## **Rules:**

A. **Partnerships in all Showcase Divisions** will be designated as one male and one female partner unless specifically designated as a same gender division.

B. **Time for Showcases:** All Showcase Routines (ProAm, Amateur or Professional) should be no less than 1.5 minutes and no more than 2.5 minutes long. This includes optional entrance and/or exit music. These Time Limits apply for all Showcase routines in all Styles of Dance. Couples will have no more than 20 seconds to get into place for performance. Any choreography prior to the beginning of the music will be counted toward the overall timing of the performance. Likewise, dancers will have a maximum of 20 seconds at the conclusion of the performance to exit the floor..

C. **Props** are not allowed.

D. **Salsa Cabaret or Bachata Cabaret Division:** Tricks are allowed. Couples can choose to dance either On1 or On2, but must maintain consistent to that timing for the duration of the routine. Recognized timing for this competition is 1-2-3, 5-6-7. Routines

must be 50% recognizable salsa. The remaining 50% can be made up of tricks, flares, dips and side by sides (shines). **Note:** If the word “Classic” is not designated in the title of the Showcase division, it means the Couple or Team can elect to include lifts and tricks in the routine, but it is not a requirement.

**E. "On1" , "On2" and Classic Bachata Showcase Divisions:** One foot must remain on the floor at all times even during tricks. If both feet of either partner leave the floor via the assistance of the other partner, it will be considered a lift and there will be a 10% deduction from the final score. A maximum of 3 tricks/dips or flares are permitted for the routine. A maximum of 8 bars/32 Beats/4 counts of 8 are allowed for continuous turns. More than this will result in a penalty of 10% off off the final score. All Music for Classic style divisions must be a minimum of 80% recognizable music for that style of dance. **Note:** If the word “Classic” is not designated in the title of the Showcase division, it means the Couple or Team can elect to include lifts and tricks in the routine, but it is not a requirement.

**F Team Divisions:** May utilize actual lifts and overheads. The same rules apply to this division as the Cabaret Division. Routines must be 50% Salsa Dancing. Amateur Teams must consist of All Amateur/Student Dancers. Pro Am Teams can have a maximum of 50% Professionals.

**G. Music Format:** Music for all Showcase Performances to be supplied in CD format. Music will be submitted and competition line up order to be drawn at the competitors meeting. Please see our Information page regarding music by clicking on Music CD Guidelines as written above.

**H. Tricks, Dips, Drops, Leverage Moves and Flares:** A trick is defined as any movement that requires the support of the other partner to maintain. This is regardless of whether the feet remain on the floor or not.

**I. Continuous/Multiple Turns:** Contestants are allowed a maximum of 8 Bars/32 Beats/4 Counts of 8 are allowed for continuous turns. More than this will result in a penalty of 10% off the final score.

**J. Costumes:** Costumes are not required, but are highly recommended. All costumes should be in good taste with all private parts covered by non-transparent material.

## **Criteria:**

Scoring of the Showcase Routines will be based upon the following criteria, and will be weighted in the scoring room in the following manner:

**I. 20% Timing:** Recognized Salsa Timing is designated for this competition as 1-2-3, 5-6-7. Competitors can choose to break ON 1 or ON 2, but must maintain consistency for the duration of the routine. The direction of the break step can be either to the front or the

back, as long as the timing of the break is consistently maintained (either 1 and 5, or 2 and 6). The majority of the routine should show recognizable Salsa Timing.

**II. 15% Musicality:** Couples will demonstrate their ability to creatively work with the timing of their individual music. This can be done in a variety of ways, including patterns, footwork, “hits”, tricks, etc.

**III. 15% Technique:** Technique is reflected through balance, placement and line. This refers also to general technique for partner dance, where the movement is “grounded”, and there is clarity of proper weight changes from foot to foot. Technique and/or body styling that is specific to Salsa Dance. Movement should appear to be both clear and effortless.

**IV. 15% Difficulty:** Reflected by difficulty of patterns, turns, intricacy of shine movements, and level of tricks, dips, drops and flares.

Examples: The amount of turns done on both double and single foot. How intricate were the shines? In the cabaret division, what was the difficulty of the lift-work? Was it properly executed? How about jumps, kicks, extensions? Any movements requiring exceptional balance, flexibility or strength? In order to get credit for any of these things, the movement must be successfully executed.

**V. 15% Partnering/Connection:** This is reflected in the lead/follow aspect of the dance. Are partners truly connected, or are they merely executing choreography while holding hands? Synchronicity during side by sides or shines will also help determine the score in this category.

**VI. 10% Choreography:** The couple’s interpretation of the music. Good choreography should contain clever turn patterns and shines. All choreography should be musical, and couples should show a good usage of the space itself. Originality is a factor here.

**VII. 10% Overall Presentation:** You Will Be Judged By Your Overall Presentation. This includes costuming, showmanship, and also good sportsmanship.

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