



Digital Commons@

Loyola Marymount University
LMU Loyola Law School

Dance Department Best Student Papers

Dance

2021

"on 2" and Overseas: The Migration of Salsa Dance

Natalie Farrell

Loyola Marymount University, nfarrell@lion.lmu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/dance_students



Part of the [Dance Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Farrell, Natalie, "'on 2" and Overseas: The Migration of Salsa Dance" (2021). *Dance Department Best Student Papers*. 18.

https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/dance_students/18

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Dance at Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dance Department Best Student Papers by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lmu.edu.

“on 2” and Overseas: The Migration of Salsa Dance

This Paper was selected under double-blind peer review as one of the best academic papers in dance of 2020-2021 by a review committee consisting of members of the LMU National Dance Education Organization Student Chapter, Dance department students, William H. Hannon Librarians, Dance faculty and an external scholar.

Natalie Farrell
I Am, Therefore I Dance
Taryn Vander Hoop
12. December. 2019

Preface

This essay addresses how there are several ethnic groups that are responsible for fostering the migration of salsa dance. Over the course of this essay, terminology such as “Latinx”, “Hispanic”, and “Mexican” are used to identify the geographic locations of where salsa originates from. For the purpose of this paper, the term “Latinx” is a gender neutral term defined as an individual of Latin American heritage from the region of Central or South America.¹ The term “Hispanic” is defined as an individual of Latin American descent from Spanish-speaking countries.² Finally, the term “Mexican” is defined as a native inhabitant or descendent of an individual from the country of Mexico.³

Introduction

In the heart of every major city across the United States, there is a pulse that beats to the Afro-Cuban rhythms of salsa dance. Its infectious groove, ambiance, and joy occupy the hearts of so many people outside of its native land of Cuba. This paper aims to demonstrate how this genre of dance immigrated to America during the 20th century and how it became an artistic landmark in urban spaces. In doing so, I will elaborate on the salsa dance scenes in New York City and Los Angeles. Additionally, I will discuss how salsa dance teams enacted the globalization of L.A. style salsa. I will include how salsa and other forms of Latinx culture became mainstream in American culture during the 1980s and 90s. Moreover, I will elaborate on the social and political implications of L.A. style salsa rooted in the dynamic between Latinx and Mexican salsa dancers. Finally, I will conclude with an analysis on CONTRA-TIEMPO Activist Dance Theater's role in honoring salsa in the concert dance world.

Salsa's Great Immigration to New York City and Los Angeles

Rooted in the vibrant city streets of Eastern Cuba, salsa dance was born from the polyrhythms of Afro-Cuban music in the 1920s.⁴ In particular, the diaspora of Cuban musicians who moved to New York City commenced the migration of salsa to the United States. Cuban composer and bandleader Días Maso Pérez Prado brought his mambo recordings, a derivative of Cuban music, to New York City in the 1950s.⁵ At this time, Latinx individuals who had previously settled in the Spanish neighborhoods of Harlem and Brooklyn were already playing in bands together and pursued careers as jazz musicians.⁶ As Latinx musicians began to occupy popular music and dance venues across the city, Americans became eager to listen and dance to new rhythms like the mambo. The Cuban dance company Las Mulatas de Fuego first introduced

basic mambo steps to amateur and professional dancers in the Manhattan area.⁷ Among these dancers was well-known African-American choreographer, dancer, and anthropologist Katherine Dunham. Dunham opened a dance studio where she had mambo musicians Mongo Santamaria and Tito Puente accompany her classes.⁸ After Dunham gravitated toward the innovative dance style, she performed in the Hollywood film *Mambo*; her performance ultimately helped capitalize the dance's popularity in the commercial sector of dance performance.⁹

The New York City mambo, which is one of the earliest derivatives of salsa dance in the United States, is distinctively different than Cuban salsa. The Cuban version of salsa begins with “a simple step-tap step performed solo, seldom with a partner” writes Sydney Hutchinson.¹⁰ However, the American version of mambo begins with a “back-and-forth, side-to-side dance with a partner” similarly to the ballroom style of rumba that was popularized in Cuba in the 1930s.¹¹ However, mambo dancers in the 1950s put their own modern twist on the Cuban dance form by focusing on open footwork with a speedy temperament; as dancers increased in skill, they were able to mimic the jazz style band music they danced to.¹² Additionally, mambo dancers inaugurated a different rhythmic counting by starting their footwork “on 2”.¹³ In order to make their dance style more distinguishable to the public, they had to remove their dance style from its Cuban predecessors. Ultimately, their decision to start their footwork “on 2” became a notable distinction between New York City mambo and West Coast salsa.

Outside of the Northeast, salsa moved West when immigrants from the rural spaces of Mexico, Central America, and South America moved to urban cities during the 1970s. In particular, a large portion of these immigrants migrated northward to the city of Los Angeles.

Since the West Coast population was less familiar with Afro-Cuban rhythms, the stylistic nature of salsa evolved into different footwork and timing patterns that is known today as Los Angeles style salsa.¹⁴ In general, the footwork of L.A. style salsa is influenced by West Coast swing and hybrid Latin ballroom dance styles.¹⁵ One of the main Latin ballroom dance influences is the cumbia, a musical and dance tradition that originates from the Mexican, Central-American, and Colombian populations.¹⁶ In particular, the musical influence of the cumbia initiated the “on-1” timing of L.A. style salsa.¹⁷ Jose Neglia, a world-renowned salsa instructor, describes L.A. style salsa:

Los Angeles-mostly partnering, danced to every song, many turns, dips, and drops. Very flashy and accenting all the hits in the music with a large movement with their partner. Little or no shines and little or no torso undulations. Danced on 1.¹⁸

The Impact of Salsa Teams on the Globalization of L.A. Style Salsa

After salsa studios emerged all over L.A. county in the early 1990s, up-and-coming dancers hit the studio to refine their ballroom training. However, L.A style salsa did not become a global phenomenon until Albert Torres brought live salsa musicians and events to the Sportsmen’s Lodge in Studio City.¹⁹ Two participants in his events, Enio Cordoba and Terryl Jones, were ultimately inspired to put together a show with the city’s best known salsa dancers at the Country Western World Championship.²⁰ After the performance received outstanding reviews, the dancers decided to start two of the original and most famous L.A. style salsa teams: Salsa Brava and Los Rumberos.²¹ Luis Vazquez, Joby Martinez, and Janette Valenzuela founded Salsa Brava in 1994 while Francisco Vazquez, Johnny Vazquez, and Martinez Gonzalez founded Los Rumberos in 1996.²² As these world-class teams were recruited to do shows, many of the dancers were invited to teach at international workshops. For example, the dancers in

Los Rumberos were hired to teach their neck drops, dips, and flips around the world; this helped the world begin to distinguish the notable characteristics of L.A. style salsa.²³ For dancers who could not afford to travel overseas and take class from these instructors, they were able to learn L.A. style salsa by purchasing videotapes of the professional dancers or researching them on the internet.²⁴

As L.A. style salsa became increasingly accessible over the 1990s, the demand for salsa competitions greatly increased. Therefore, Albert Torres established L.A.'s premiere salsa competition: the West Coast Salsa Congress.²⁵ The competition included daily workshops, competitions, performances, guest speakers, and much more.²⁶ Unlike the Puerto Rican World Salsa Congress, Torres opted to showcase his dancers instead of the musicians in order to get his dancers to book jobs.²⁷ Salsa teams like Salsa Brava, Los Rumberos, Sabor y Cache, and Royalty Salsa became lucrative businesses that attracted large audiences.²⁸ Aspiring salsa dancers in these audiences were also interested in finding a salsa studio in their hometown. This way they could take class, develop long-term loyalty to their favorite instructor, and eventually advance by assisting their class. The shift from social activity to competitive performance is what ultimately helped globalize the L.A. salsa scene. Because of the prevalence of L.A. salsa in the global dance community, contestants and spectators are drawn to come to Los Angeles to experience the dance form. Since competitions attract nearly 1,000 competitors and over 15,000 spectators, there is an impressive roster of salsa competitions in both the Los Angeles and San Diego areas.²⁹

Like any competition, the most extreme performances amass the greatest remarks from audiences and judges. Since L.A. style salsa is internationally recognized for its flips, tricks, and

risks, it is inherently more likely to do well at competitions.³⁰ As this genre of salsa continues to receive awards for its performances, audiences are inspired to execute L.A. style salsa in this very way. Therefore, the impetus for excellence becomes a requirement for this dance style. In doing so, others are inspired to perform L.A. style salsa with utmost integrity, respect, and honor to its stylistic expectations. Because this dance style is preserved with extensive care, it is able to exist in cultures all around the globe.

Popularization of Latinx Influence in American Culture

Salsa dance is one of the many the elements of Latinx influence that rose to the mainstream surface of American culture. While Latinx traditions had always been instilled in the world's melting pot, demographics indicated the impressive growth of this population in the later 1980s. The Latinx population in the U.S increased by 30% since the start of the decade.³¹ The 19 million Latinx people in the country now account for 7.9% of the nation's population.³² Among this population, 63% of people are Mexican, 12% are Puerto Rican, 5% are Cuban, and the remainder are of Central, South American, or Caribbean decent.³³As this population rose in the United States during this time period, their creative work became more frequently recognizable in American culture. Paintings and other works of art from Latinx sources earned a spot at American museums across the country. Meanwhile, Latinx artists and entertainers were courting mass attention through film, television, and print media. Additionally, the Afro-Caribbean rhythms from Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic permeated in the music and dance scenes of urban cities.

The diverse meanings and layers of context in Latinx art prompt Americans to think differently about their way of life. For example, Americans are consumed by the individualistic

practices that heighten the experiences of the individual and narrow their perspective to only envision themselves. Meanwhile, Latinx culture values community and inclusivity so that the needs of the group can be met. As these messages surface mainstream media, audiences are invited to open their mind up to seeing the world in a way that they never did before. Journalist Richard Lacayo discusses his philosophy on the cultural convergence that Americans experience when engaging with Latinx art by saying:

Maybe convergence is key. This is not just a box-office phenomenon, after all, but an episode in an ongoing cultural evolution in which Americans of all kinds learn to see a bit of Latinx within themselves. In that process a Spanish term might help. The word *Corazon*, meaning heart. Let it stand for what is necessarily in all relations between Americans who are not Hispanics and the Americans who are...Because as they cross over into the American imagination, Hispanics are sending one irresistible message: we come bearing gifts.³⁴

Social Hierarchy Embedded in L.A. Style Salsa

While American audiences bonded over the mainstream elements of Latinx culture, the Los Angeles dance community experienced a significant rift between Los Angeles and Mexican salsa dancers. As opposed to celebrating their joint passion for salsa, Latinx dancers began to marginalize Mexican salsa dancers while they were on the dance floor. Dance theorist and ethnographer Cindy Garcia theorizes that the social hierarchy within L.A. style salsa reflects attitudes about undocumented Mexican laborers.³⁵ In her ethnographic study conducted from 1995-2005, Garcia analyzed the distinction of social choreography at a Los Angeles restaurant where salsa dancing frequently occurred on the weeknights.³⁶ She found that Latinx dancers would occasionally bump the Mexican dancers off the dance floor because they thought these inexperienced dancers had poor salsa technique.³⁷ As a result, the Mexican dancers would give up their space on the dance floor for Latinx dancers and sit quietly on the perimeter of the

dance floor.³⁸ At the restaurant, Garcia explains how salsa practitioners from the Los Angeles community would judge how well dancers performed L.A. style salsa. She noted how the Latinx dancers who performed the iconic L.A. style's acrobatic lifts, neck drops, spins, and dramatic poses would ultimately win the judges' appraisal.³⁹ Meanwhile, the dancers who did not perform as well as the Latinx dancers were accused of "dancing like a Mexican" according to Garcia.⁴⁰

It is no coincidence that the steps of Mexican and Central American style salsa are unwelcomed in salsa spaces around Los Angeles. Garcia argues that L.A. style salsa carries distinctions that underscore social choreography and politics of migration.⁴¹ When Mexican and Central Americans emigrated North to cities in Southern California, they had a difficult time adopting American culture.⁴² The language barrier, foreign culture, and lack of resources made it nearly impossible for Mexicans to leverage upward mobility in the American economic and social class systems. Since most Mexican immigrants came to the United States without proper documentation, they were forced to find low-income jobs as laborers.⁴³ Along with battling the class system, Mexicans lived in fear of anti-immigrant policies, racially charged violence, and prison institutionalization.⁴⁴ Because of the social and political climates surrounding Mexican immigrants in Southern California, Mexican salsa dancers were unable to escape racialized segregation on the dance floor.

CONTRA-TIEMPO's Role in Welcoming Salsa Dance into the Concert World

Los Angeles-based dance company CONTRA-TIEMPO Activist Dance Theater uses dance to address complex political and social landscapes endured by minority groups like the one mentioned above. Taking inspiration from salsa, Afro-Cuban, hip-hop, and contemporary dance

styles, CONTRA-TIEMPO is able to change the narrative of concert dance by welcoming marginalized dance styles to their stage.⁴⁵ Artistic Director Ana Maria Alvarez and her company aim to build communities of people with different ages, classes, and cultural backgrounds through dance performance and outreach.⁴⁶ For her company, Alvarez intentionally selects professional dancers and artists who have experienced the complex landscapes she seeks to address.⁴⁷ She theorizes that the members of the community who overcame these experiences will best demonstrate how dance can serve as a vessel for resistance and power.⁴⁸

The company's signature work, *AGAINST THE TIMES*, explores the social and political implications of salsa as a dance of resistance. This dance form is known for its fusion of African and Spanish musical influences that the working-class people in Cuba created from improvisation.⁴⁹ Additionally, this dance form is recognized for its patriarchal characteristics where men are the leaders in the partnership and women are the followers.⁵⁰ Despite its roots, women have since earned more leverage as leaders in the salsa dance community after ballroom dancing was popularized in Hollywood films.⁵¹ In *AGAINST THE TIMES*, the company inverts the social script of who leads who in salsa dance. As men follow other men and women and vice versa, the company demonstrates how salsa can disassemble power structures between partners. Ultimately, the work is empowering dancers to resist injustice and fight for change within hierarchical structures.

The role of salsa dance in CONTRA-TIEMPO'S work *AGAINST THE TIMES*, supports Deidre Sklar's first premise from her doctoral dissertation: "Five Premises for a Culturally Sensitive Approach to Dance". Her first premise reads, "Movement knowledge is a kind of cultural knowledge".⁵² According to this premise, Sklar suggests that movement carries

knowledge that is specific to an individual's understanding of their own culture. Culture is formulated from an individual's racial, ethnic, geographic, economic, and political background. Therefore, Sklar theorizes that movement is embedded with these realities that are specific to both the mover and genre of dance being performed. In relation to *CONTRA-TIEMPO*, Alvarez hand picks her company members so that they are able to bring their unique understanding of culture to her work. In doing so, Alvarez creates an authentic representation of the political and social spaces she emphasizes through a variety of dance styles she incorporates in her works. When her dancers perform traditional salsa movements in *AGAINST THE TIMES*, this adds another layer of cultural knowledge to her choreography. Her choreography captures the rich history of music, migration, and movement embedded in the style that is considered a prolific cultural phenomenon.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay explored how salsa migrated from Cuba during the 20th century and became an artistic landmark in cities around the United States. The diaspora of Cuban musicians to New York City brought the music and "on 2" of the Mambo to the Northeast. As immigrants from Mexico and Central America moved to the West Coast, they fused their Latin ballroom styles with West Coast swing to create L.A. style salsa. The athleticism and daring nature of L.A. style salsa dance teams quickly became a global phenomenon. As salsa teams from Los Angeles competed and taught international workshops around the globe, L.A. style salsa was able to infiltrate cultures outside of the United States. The rise of the Latinx population in the United States during the 1980s allowed salsa and other elements of Latinx culture to rise to mainstream influence. Despite its popularity, the Los Angeles community

experienced a grave problem where Latinx and Mexican salsa dancers were divided. Mexican salsa dancers were not welcomed into Latinx ballrooms because of the social and political implications surrounding undocumented, migrant laborers. Los Angeles-based dance company CONTRA-TIEMPO utilizes salsa to comment on the complex social and political landscapes of minority groups. Ultimately, the company's work demonstrates how dance constitutes the ability to overcome any and all challenges by fostering community.

Bibliography

Center for the Art of Performance at University of California, Los Angeles. "CONTRA-TIEMPO:

What to Know Before the Show," K-12 Education, Design for Sharing: 1-4. Accessed December 11, 2019.

https://cap.ucla.edu/data/dfs/download/6_CONTRA_TIEMPO_Materialspdf.pdf.

CONTRA TIEMPO Activist Dance Theater. "Mission and Values". Accessed June 1, 2021.

<https://www.contra-tiempo.org/what-we-do#mission>.

García, Cindy. 2013. "The Great Migration: Los Angeles Salsa Speculations and the Performance of Latinidad." *Dance Research Journal* 45, no. 3 (2013): 125-136. Accessed December 11, 2019.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsjrs&AN=edsjrs.43966087&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

Hutchinson, Sydney. 2004. "Mambo On 2: The Birth of a New Form of Dance in New York City." *Centro Journal* 16 (2): 108–137. Accessed December 11, 2019.

<https://electra.lmu.edu:2084/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=15036699&site=eds-live&scope=site>

Lacayo, Richard, Scott Brown, Cristina Garcia, and Edward M. Gomez. 1988. "A Surging New Spirit In Film, Music, Theater, Art, Design -- the Hispanic Influence Is Exploding into the American Cultural Mainstream." *TIME Magazine* 132 (2): 46-49. Accessed December 11, 2019.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=57895692&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

“Latinx.” Merriam Webster Dictionary. Accessed June 1, 2021. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Latinx>.

Marion, Jonathan S. "Contextualizing Content and Conduct in the L.A. Salsa Scene."

In *Salsa World: A Global Dance in Local Contexts*, edited by Sydney Hutchinson, 64-79. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014.

“Mexican.” Merriam Webster Dictionary. Accessed June 1, 2021. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Mexican>.

Sklar, Deidre. “Five Premises for a Culturally Sensitive Approach to Dance”. In *Moving History / Dancing Cultures : A Dance History Reader*. edited by Ann Dils & Ann Cooper Albright, 30-32. Middleton, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2001.

“What’s the Difference Between Hispanic and Latino.” Britannica. Accessed June 1, 2021. <https://www.britannica.com/story/whats-the-difference-between-hispanic-and-latino>.

¹ “Latinx,” Merriam Webster Dictionary, accessed June 1, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Latinx>.

² “What’s the Difference Between Hispanic and Latino,” Britannica, accessed June 1, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/story/whats-the-difference-between-hispanic-and-latino>.

³ “Mexican,” Merriam Webster Dictionary, accessed June 1, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Mexican>.

⁴ Cindy García, “The Great Migration: Los Angeles Salsa Speculations and the Performance of Latinidad,” *Dance Research Journal* 45, no. 3 (2013): 126, (accessed December 11, 2019). <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsjrs&AN=edsjrs.43966087&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

⁵ Sydney Hutchinson, “Mambo On 2: The Birth of a New Form of Dance in New York City,” *Centro Journal* 16 (2) (2004): 114, (accessed December 11, 2019) <https://electra.lmu.edu:2084/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=15036699&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

⁶ Ibid, 115.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid, 116.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Jonathan S. Marion, "Contextualizing Content and Conduct in the L.A. Salsa Scene," *Salsa World: A Global Dance in Local Contexts*, ed. by Sydney Hutchinson, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), 66.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid, 67.

¹⁹ Ibid,

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid, 68.

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Ibid, 71.

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Richard Lacayo et al., "A Surging New Spirit In Film, Music, Theater, Art, Design -- the Hispanic Influence Is Exploding into the American Cultural Mainstream," *TIME Magazine* 132 (2): 47, (accessed December 11, 2019).

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=57895692&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

³² Ibid

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Ibid, 49.

³⁵ García, "The Great Migration", 125.

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Ibid, 126.

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Ibid, 125.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 125.

⁴⁵ CONTRA TIEMPO Activist Dance Theater, "Mission and Values," (accessed June 1, 2021), <https://www.contra-tiempo.org/what-we-do#mission>.

⁴⁶ Center for the Art of Performance at University of California, Los Angeles, "CONTRA-TIEMPO: What to Know Before the Show," K-12 Education, Design for Sharing: 2, (accessed December 11, 2019).https://cap.ucla.edu/data/dfs/download/6_CONTRA_TIEMPO_Materialspdf.pdf.

⁴⁷ Ibid

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Ibid, 3.

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² Deidre Sklar, "Five Premises for a Culturally Sensitive Approach to Dance," In *Moving History / Dancing Cultures : A Dance History Reader*, ed. by Ann Dils & Ann Cooper Albright (Middleton, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 30.