

## BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

# Dancing *Latinidad*: Spinning a World of Salsa Scholarship

Ana Paula Höfling

University of North Carolina, Greensboro, US  
aphofling@uncg.edu

---

This essay reviews the following works:

**Salsa Crossings: Dancing Latinidad in Los Angeles.** By Cindy García. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013. Pp. xxv + 181. \$23.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780822354970.

**Salsa World: A Global Dance in Local Contexts.** Edited by Sydney Hutchinson. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014. Pp. viii + 229. \$30.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781439910078.

**Spinning Mambo into Salsa: Caribbean Dance in Global Commerce.** By Juliet McMains. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. xii + 409. \$35.00 paperback. ISBN: 9780199324644.

---

Before 2013, scholars and enthusiasts interested in reading about salsa dancing could rely on a few academic articles and chapters in edited volumes, but no single book focused exclusively on the pan-Latin dance form that, since the 1970s, has become known worldwide as salsa. Cindy García's *Salsa Crossings: Dancing Latinidad in Los Angeles* (2013), Sydney Hutchinson's *Salsa World: a Global Dance in Local Contexts* (2014), and Juliet McMains's *Spinning Mambo into Salsa: Caribbean Dance in Global Commerce* (2015), three books published in close succession, fill this gap in dance studies and Latin American and Latino studies. These books are complementary in their approaches to the subject: while the edited volume *Salsa World* provides an overview of salsa in various geographical locations, the monographs *Salsa Crossings* and *Spinning Mambo into Salsa* provide in-depth analyses, the former from an ethnographic perspective and the latter a history of salsa organized thematically rather than chronologically. While the authors of *Salsa World* come from a variety of disciplines, *Salsa Crossings* and *Spinning Mambo into Salsa* are written by scholars firmly grounded in dance studies, an approach that allows them to pay close attention to cultural, social, and historical information conveyed through dancing bodies and through the movement itself. All three books, however, answer dance scholar Jane Desmond's call to place dance at the center of cultural studies and to recognize dance as a primary rather than secondary social text. Placing dance and dancing at the center of the analysis, the authors consider the processes of transmission of salsa. They pay attention to "migration, modification, quotation, adoption, or rejection as part of the larger production of social identities through physical enactment," analyzing dance in relationship to "the production of gender, racial, ethnic, class, and national identities."<sup>1</sup> These books are welcome additions to the growing literature on social and popular dance,<sup>2</sup> contributing in particular to scholarship on social dance that intersects with Latin American and Latino studies.<sup>3</sup>

*Salsa World*, edited by ethnomusicologist Sydney Hutchinson, provides a broad overview of salsa dance in various national and regional contexts. Hutchinson suggests that, despite being a symbol of pan-Latin

---

<sup>1</sup> Jane C. Desmond, "Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies," *Cultural Critique*, no. 26 (Winter 1993–1994): 35, 36.

<sup>2</sup> See Sherril Dodds, *Dancing on the Canon: Embodiments of Value in Popular Dance*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Julie Malnig, ed., *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Juliet McMains, *Glamour Addiction: Inside the American Ballroom Dance Industry* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> See Melissa Blanco Borelli, *She Is Cuba: A Genealogy of the Mulata Body* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Marilyn G. Miller, ed., *Tango Lessons: Movement, Sound, Image, and Text in Contemporary Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Celeste Fraser Delgado and José Esteban Muñoz, eds., *Everynight Life: Culture and Dance in Latin/o America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997); Marta E. Savigliano, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995).

identity, salsa has not become homogenized; in fact, it has developed specific local identities, which she calls “dance accents” (3). *Salsa World* draws attention to the processes through which a globalized dance form such as salsa is produced locally. The book is divided into three sections organized geographically: the United States, Latin America, and places “far removed from locations typically associated with the dance” such as France, Spain, and Japan (19). The book’s global scope is also reflected in the editor’s choice of contributing authors, who are based in seven different countries and bring a variety of perspectives, which Hutchinson hopes will aid in decolonizing the disciplines represented in the book (17). Hutchinson’s editorial work is impressive in that it includes her translation of four of the chapters in the volume.

Many of the US chapters focus on regional specificities of salsa dancing, from unlikely places such as Champaign-Urbana and New Jersey to well-researched places with established salsa scenes such as New York and Los Angeles. Some of the Latin America-focused chapters describe and analyze regional characteristics of the dance, such as the classic *caleño* salsa style in Colombia (marked by fast footwork) and the local development of salsa in Santo Domingo (where men lead with the right rather than the left foot), while others focus on salsa as a symbol of nationhood, such as Priscilla Renta’s essay on Puerto Rican salsa (“The Global Commercialization of Salsa Dancing and *Sabor*”). Renta discusses *sabor* (lit. “flavor,” a term Renta explains as an untranslatable spiritual and emotional connection to salsa music and dance) in relationship to Puerto Rican national identity, and concludes that the globalization of salsa through congresses and competitions ultimately threatens salsa’s *sabor*: “As an authentic expression of creativity ... *sabor* may be among the losses involved in the global commercialization of salsa dancing. ... Eliminating *sabor* obliterates salsa’s purpose in the world of global movement and sound” (Hutchinson, 136). Other authors in the volume also focus on the losses brought about by the global dissemination of salsa: Saúl Escalona, writing about salsa in France (“*Allons à la Fête—On Danse Salsa: New Routes for Salsa in France*”), concludes that salsa is sexualized and exoticized by French dancers and “divested of social and cultural values” (Hutchinson, 180). These two essays counter Hutchinson’s view of a nonhomogenizing globalization by equating globalization with loss of local and national cultural specificities.

In a book where many of the chapters offer brief overviews of the emergence of salsa in various locations, Joanna Bosse’s study of salsa in a small Midwestern town stands out for departing from the omniscient, factual approach used in several chapters and including the voices of her informants as well as detailed movement description and analysis. Based on ethnographic research, Bosse’s essay focuses on social class and cosmopolitanism in her analysis of the dynamics between Mexican laborers and middle- and upper-class salsa dancers in Champaign-Urbana. Bosse identifies strategies of social mobility in the interactions she experiences and observes on the dance floor. She notes that one of her informants, Enrique, “used his position, betwixt and between local Mexican laborers and local elites, as a way to create new social networks. For instance, once his position was established, he incorporated a new technique: about halfway through a song, he would send me, or another of his partners, into a free spin. When I came out of the spin, I would find myself in the arms of one of his friends, someone I did not know and had never danced with before. ... He used this strategy quite often to introduce new friends to local female salsa dancers” (91). By paying attention to the dancing itself, Bosse is able to draw conclusions about networks that extended beyond the dance floor. Although the editor conceptualizes the volume as a “multi-sited ethnography of salsa dance” (3), few chapters include detailed descriptions from ethnographic research such as Bosse’s, despite the fact that most authors are themselves experienced salsa dancers and active participants in their own “salsa worlds.”

In *Salsa Crossings*, Cindy García expertly weaves description and analysis in her first-person narrative, taking the reader along as she navigates the Los Angeles salsa scene, both on and off the dance floor. In her ethnography of salsa clubs in Los Angeles, she analyzes the intersecting hierarchies of *latinidad*, socioeconomic class, and gender that are both constructed and contested every night on the dance floor. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 1999 and 2005, García tells a “salsa story” (xi) in which she is Ruth Behar’s vulnerable observer. García’s initial research question—How do women make it to the dance floor in Los Angeles?—is drawn from her failure to be asked to dance early on in her research. Was it because of her casual and decidedly unglamorous way of dressing? Was it the way she danced, which was perceived as “Mexican” and consequently the “wrong” way to dance in LA? Was it her red hair and fair skin? García shares her anxieties, frustrations, and failures on the dance floor as well as her moments of pleasure, often anchoring her analysis on accounts of her participant-observation experiences.

Rather than conveniently claiming native ethnographer status as a Chicana academic studying salsa, García complicates the notion of native ethnographer and recognizes her position as both insider and outsider to the dance communities she researched. García employs Susan Leigh Foster’s notion of “choreography as

a set of culturally situated codes and values regarding gestures, movements, and speech through which identities, and thus social memberships, are configured" (xvii). She uses her initial failure to "make it" to the dance floor as a jumping-off point for her analysis of "choreographies of belonging" (xvii), "choreographies of power" (xviii), and conflicting "choreographies of *latinidad*" (xxi) shaped by salsa dancing in Los Angeles.

García proposes that "Latina/o corporealities are hierarchically classified in accordance to U.S. frameworks of racialization," which places exoticized Caribbean Latinas/os at the top and laboring Central Americans (often metonymically referred to as "Mexican") at the bottom (3–4). García interrogates how these hierarchies are created through movement—whose styles become hegemonic at the expense of others, who are accused of "dancing salsa wrong"—a phrase García uses as the title of one of the book's chapters. In "Dancing Salsa Wrong," García analyzes the salsa practices deemed "wrong" by Los Angeles *salseros*. The casual salsa dancers, or socializers, are shunned for behaviors associated with Mexicanness such as drinking beer, making out, dancing salsa to cumbia music, bouncing, or crossing back in the salsa footwork (45). García proposes that the front and back, elongated and elegant salsa "basic" constructs a desirable US *latinidad* influenced by Hollywood, while cumbia's bouncy crossing back step is associated with a rural, unrefined Mexicanness that sits at the bottom of the LA salsa hierarchy. She analyzes the choreographies of social mobility of LA Latinas/os who "attempt to eliminate from their own performances any dance techniques that can locate them as migrants, as poor or working class, as Mexican, or as undocumented" (xviii). In her analysis of these choreographies of social mobility, García introduces the terms "sequined" and "unsequined" (14–15) to refer to the nighttime social hierarchies constructed in salsa clubs: those who literally dress in sequins, thus conforming to the made-in-Hollywood image of the exotic Caribbeanesque Latino/a, and those who fail to dissociate themselves from their less glamorous daytime immigrant identities.

In salsa clubs, predominantly heteronormative spaces, García's gender analysis looks beyond the male/female dancing couple in her analysis of homosocial networks in salsa clubs, such as the male-led practice of passing a female dancer from one man to another—a practice that García interprets as a way of reinforcing male control on the dance floor. As opposed to the traditional verbal contract between a man and a woman at the beginning of a dance, the primary contract for this dance practice takes place between men (109). It is interesting that Bosse analyzes this same dance practice, in another context, as a way of broadening social networks in a quest for social mobility and inclusion. García does not find female homosociality on the dance floor but rather in the peripheral spaces of salsa clubs: in the women's bathroom, the only place where women can escape the scrutiny of men who control which women "make it" to the dance floor and which ones spend their evenings as wallflowers.

While García's ethnography offers an in-depth study of salsa in Los Angeles during a six-year time span, Juliet McMains's *Spinning Mambo into Salsa* investigates the history of salsa since the 1950s in various locations that have been significant in the development of salsa, focusing specifically on New York, Miami, and Los Angeles. Like Hutchinson, McMains traces the genesis of salsa to the Palladium mambo era, but unlike Hutchinson's chapter in *Salsa World* ("What's in a Number: From Local Nostalgia to Global Marketability in New York's On-2 Salsa"), McMains's book-length historical investigation is enriched by the memories of former Palladium dancers interviewed by the author, as well as by insightful movement analysis informed by McMains's own embodied experiences dancing in various salsa styles. The Palladium Ballroom, where New Yorkers flocked to dance mambo to live music from the late 1940s through the mid-1960s, is widely considered the birthplace of mambo. There, as McMains explains, "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" (32). McMains's impressive roster of interviewees who danced at the Palladium in the 1950s (over one hundred mambo dancers, including Cuban Pete, Barbara Craddock, Luis "la Máquina" Flores, and Dr. Mike), as well as her skilled movement analysis, are decidedly what sets *Spinning Mambo into Salsa* apart from other studies that have tackled the complex history of salsa. McMains uses these interviews in both an academically rigorous and respectful manner: when faced with contradictory information from her interviewees, her "challenge was to weave together a broader story from these personal tales, a history that respected and accounted for individual variation" (14).

McMains writes for multiple audiences and does not neglect her nonacademic readers. Deviating from the usual descriptive/analytic tone expected in an academic text, she includes her voice as a practitioner of contemporary salsa who has, through her research, discovered the playfulness and creativity of old-time mambo. As such, she makes recommendations to her fellow *salseros/as* on how to bring back these forgotten skills to contemporary salsa practice: "Maybe there should be more classes in how to generate

personal vocabulary for shines rather than how to memorize and reproduce long sequences of spirals and swivels" (74). Regarding the authenticity debate surrounding the on-1 and on-2 styles, she proposes that *salseros/as* turn to historical evidence rather than relying on myths of origin. Championing the potential of salsa to unite people from various racial and national backgrounds and from different generations, McMains proposes that the salsa community might be "better served by a concept of authenticity that allows for many different styles of salsa to be simultaneously recognized as authentic" (194).

Several of the book's chapters are framed as a comparison between mambo in the 1950s and salsa in the 1990s, when there was renewed interest in this dance form developed in the 1970s. In chapter one, "Mambo to Salsa: Dancing across Generational Divides," McMains considers claims by the Palladium-era mambo dancers that modern salsa is "only a new name for the mambo they developed" (23), but notes that they simultaneously perceive new developments as a deterioration of the dance. Through careful movement analysis, she identifies the differences between the two styles by focusing on the connection between dance partners during turns, the representation of femininity during the dance, the ability of both partners to engage in improvised solos (shines), the use of space, and the relationship to the musical rhythm. She concludes that modern salsa is characterized by an "absence of playfulness, freedom, and fun" when compared to Palladium-era mambo, a dance that embodies Africanist movement principles such as improvisation and use of polycentrism (35–36). While McMains at times shares the nostalgia of her Palladium-era informants for a more playful salsa/mambo, she also acknowledges that technical developments in modern salsa have enabled their own kind of physical enjoyment, such as multiple spins performed at lightning speed, which require a "more refined physical connection so that subtle changes in energy are instantaneously perceptible" (62).

In Chapter 3, "Refashioning Cultural Identities: Academies or Kitchens," McMains continues her inquiry into what is enabled by the commercialization and institutionalization of modern salsa, this time focusing on how teaching and learning salsa in studio settings has opened possibilities for salsa dancing that challenges "traditional" gender roles and fixed gender identities. McMains proposes that styling classes—where women learn to perform femininity through "shimmies, rolls, ripples, and pops of the shoulders, ribs, and hips, as well as stylized articulation of the wrists and fingers" (135)—underscore the fact that gender is learned and performed rather than something innate or fixed. This not only puts women in control of the representation of their own sexuality, but it opens up the possibility for men to "queer" salsa by performing femininity through styling moves in the follower's role in same-sex dancing. McMains argues that studio salsa has also enabled women to take on the typically male leader's role (both as dancers and teachers), as in the case of dance teacher Hallie Kuperman, owner of an LGBT-friendly social dance center in Seattle.

McMains tackles the messy, complex, and contentious debates of authenticity surrounding the two main salsa styles: salsa on-1 or salsa on-2. While salsa on-2 is understood as the "more traditional" salsa, with roots in Puerto Rico, on-1 salsa is seen as less authentic but "more natural" and is associated with Cuban salsa. McMains investigates these origin stories and concludes that the currently accepted connections between Puerto Rico and the on-2 style and Cuba and the on-1 style are "fallacious myths generated by the collective imagination of the international salsa industry" (159). She proposes that practitioners approach the authenticity debate by considering "authentic salsa as that which maintains the essence of salsa tradition, a tradition that both honors its own history and allows for changes in the present so that it will live in the future" (193).

Throughout the volume, McMains stresses salsa's ability to unify, to "bridge difference" and "bring Latinos from different racial, ethnic and national backgrounds together" (194), while acknowledging a generational schism between the Palladium-era mambo dancers and modern salsa dancers. García begins her book with a challenge to the rhetoric of unity through salsa (2), which she identifies as ubiquitous in salsa congresses throughout the global North. García concludes that diversity on the dance floor does not necessarily result in unity; in fact, she shows that the dance floor is precisely the place where hierarchies of *latinidad* are choreographed. Hutchinson's volume focuses on the many local "accents" of a dance practice that has come to represent pan-Latin identity. Even though salsa may reinforce a unifying "Latinness," the authors in *Salsa World* focus on the local particularities of a globalized dance form that varies greatly from place to place. These three books show that salsa has the ability to bring people together, but its unifying potential should not be romanticized: dance also has the potential to divide, to exclude, to build racialized and national hierarchies, and to enforce gender roles that disempower women. Social dance indeed offers a unique opportunity for strangers of various ages and from various ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds to pleurably sway, slide, spin, and bounce in a close embrace for the duration of a song, but the dance floor is not exempt from our fears and anxieties.

## Author Information

Ana Paula Höfling is Assistant Professor of Dance Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She is the author of *Staging Brazil: Choreographies of Capoeira* (Wesleyan University Press, forthcoming). She holds a PhD from the University of California at Los Angeles, and she was an Andrew Mellon postdoctoral fellow at the Center for the Americas at Wesleyan University. She has contributed chapters to *Axé Bahia: The Power of Art in an Afro-Brazilian Metropolis* (Fowler Museum, 2017) and *Performing Brazil: Essays on Culture, Identity, and the Performing Arts* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2015), and she has published in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism*, the *Brazilian Journal on Presence Studies*, and the *Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement*.

**How to cite this article:** Höfling, Ana Paula. 2018. Dancing *Latinidad*: Spinning a World of Salsa Scholarship. *Latin American Research Review* 53(3), pp. 666–670. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.236>

**Submitted:** 12 July 2017

**Accepted:** 19 July 2017

**Published:** 28 September 2018

**Copyright:** © 2018 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

**LARR**

*Latin American Research Review* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Latin American Studies Association.

**OPEN ACCESS** 