

Leading the Other: Gender and Colonialism in Partner Dancing's Long Century

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In this article I refer to the two roles in social partner dance as “man” and “woman,” although elsewhere I and others have used the terms “leader” and “follower.” Either usage has its advantages and disadvantages, the primary advantage of “leader” and “follower” being that it recognizes the possibility of separating danced role from lived gender. I use “man” and “woman” here because a central purpose of this article is to discuss the political processes by which gender identities are not only performed but also produced in the act of partner dancing. My usage here is meant to imply not natural states of being, but rather social categories reified and instrumentalized through embodied practice.

For most of my adult life, I have spent each summer playing music and dancing in the Swedish folk scene. My return to the United States every August is a shock to the system, from an intense participatory realm of music and dance to an equally intense but very different world of academia. At a certain point, probably around fall 2009 in Boston, I started dancing tango as a way to blunt my annual withdrawal.

The single musical form those two scenes had in common was waltz, or vals as it is called in both Swedish and Spanish. Swedish vals, like its Viennese counterpart, is characterized by a progressive rotation in which dancers circle their own partners while also orbiting the floor in a counterclockwise line of dance. Accordingly, my instinct when I first started dancing tango vals was to take what I had been socialized to hear as waltz music's centrifugal energy and try to lead my partner in something like the rotational movement to which I was habituated. For technical reasons I will elaborate on later in this article, I could never quite reproduce the effect. What did happen was that my continued attempts to make it work shaped my leading technique. Over a decade later I still use angular momentum in idiosyncratic ways, both in tango vals and tango proper.

At the time, my participation in the Swedish folk world was intentionally ethnographic, while I danced tango only recreationally. Since then, I have widened both my practice and my scholarly lens to engage with any and all lead/follow dances I could easily access. I have taken classes and workshops, danced socially in both roles, and interviewed instructors across numerous internationally circulating forms. This work became the foundation for a generalized theory of the lead/follow system (Kaminsky 2020). The position I took in that book (and maintain in this article) was that lead/follow dancing can be understood as a single supercultural phenomenon developed over centuries in conversation between a European elite and its class and colonial Others. From that

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perspective, each individual dance form comes into focus as not a discrete tradition, but rather a variation on that phenomenon. As an extension of this principle, the wider a net is cast over different social partner dance forms, the more complete a picture we can get of the possibilities and limitations of the lead/follow system in all its contexts.

One takeaway from that project was that the man's protective control over the woman's body in lead/follow dancing became increasingly thorough over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I argued that this process manifested not only the bourgeois gender dynamics of the period, but also the class and colonial politics with which those dynamics were intertwined. I pointed to several instances in which interactions between dancers of unevenly powered social groups seemed to produce new technologies of leading and following. In each of these meetings, the man intensified his appropriation of the woman's agency by extending his proprioceptive sense of self deeper into her body. This *appropriation* reenacted the colonizing processes of the very cultural meetings that had produced those new techniques (Kaminsky 2020, 139–142).

However, I never explained precisely how those technical developments might have occurred. The present article begins to rectify that lacuna in the book.¹ Here I focus on one such development, which transpired over the long century from 1844 to 1960 during which lead/follow partnering was the normative social dance system in Europe and the Americas. Given this breadth of scope, my argument engages with this process on a general choreological level, leaving specific cultural manifestations in particular times and places to be treated separately in more focused studies. My hypothesis is as follows:

For as long as the lead/follow system had been developing in European contexts, that continent's generally monocentric movement aesthetic would have meant that a man could reasonably expect a haptic message sent through his partner's readied arm to have an immediate effect on her entire body.² When partner dancing became popularized throughout the Americas in the wake of the mid-nineteenth-century polka craze, however, it met with an African polycentric aesthetic brought by enslaved people (Gottschild 2002, 3–6). Suddenly, each intervening joint in the woman's body between arm and foot became its own nexus of negotiation and possibility. As a result, that same haptic message could be delayed and potentially either dissipated or intensified by a woman's body articulations as it moved down through her torso, hips, and legs.³

My contention here is that the specific challenge brought to the European lead/follow system by African principles of polycentricity fostered a range of innovations and effects that made indelible imprints on popular social dance culture worldwide. Broadly, that haptic cultural interplay touched off two intertwining yet mutually opposing trajectories of development. On the one hand, new opportunities to intensify the lead and micromanage the woman's articulated body parts facilitated a colonizing bourgeois heteropatriarchal, *civilizing* response to this challenge.⁴ Conversely, increased capacities to dissipate and defy the man's haptic impulses enabled a *syncretizing* unsettling of lead/follow equilibrium, fomenting the system's disruption and eventual social decline.⁵

Historical Autoethnography and the Choreohexical Dialectic

The difficulty in arguing such a contention is that the written and pictorial record of these dances is often limited to externalities—depictions and descriptions of what the steps looked like, how people held their bodies, and how they embraced their partners. Little overt discourse about specific haptic communicative techniques is available from even as recently as the twentieth century. Moreover, what few words about the relevant practices have been recorded from earlier periods tend to privilege both elite and masculine positions (e.g., Arbeau 1589, 58; Hazard 1848, 19).⁶

Danielle Robinson has argued for an approach to the historical study of social dancing—where sources are limited and insistence on a single “correct” practice is counterproductive—in which

“the researcher uses his or her body and imagination to bridge gaps among surviving source materials with the goal of arriving at an understanding of collective, social experiences” (2009, 99–100). I consider this approach not only viable but politically necessary for reasons best articulated by James Scott in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: The “public transcript”* constituted by the pictorial and written record tends to privilege and conceal structural power. For Scott, the “hidden transcript” from which a more complete history must be gleaned is typically concealed in code and/or oral tradition (1990, 19, 160–162).

In the case of social partner dance, an embodied autoethnographic approach stands to reveal that hidden transcript encoded not orally but intercorporeally.⁷ Techniques of leading and following have traditionally been largely tacit, learned haptically and somewhat haphazardly in collective practice. That haphazardness is a practical outcome of the principle that, in informal contexts in which men and women keep to their gender-assigned roles and learn to dance in situ, women do not learn primarily from women, or men from men. Instead, everyone hones their skills over time by dancing with people in the *opposite* role, keeping models for effective leading and following at one remove.⁸ As a result, techniques coalesce imperfectly over time in a haptic game of telephone within the community.⁹ Lead/follow techniques are thus, in addition to being largely embodied and unspoken, also subject to individual variation within any given scene. This variation will be amplified by other individual differences in the way of body type, skill level, personality, and various other parameters. Even in contexts in which people dance both roles (such as in tango’s early development) or take private lessons from a common master, that variety will therefore never completely be eliminated.

That variety is also constrained, however, by some core principles of haptic communication. Although certain external parameters may have shifted over time and place, including clothing and shoe styles, size and texture of floors, and body norms, the fundamental biomechanics of the human form have not changed significantly over the past thousand years. Accordingly, neither have the limiting features of a system in which a man guides a woman’s movements in coordination with his own. The woman establishes her *choreohexis*, the predictable operating principles of her dancing body, according to the dance’s established conventions, with some allowance for personal variation (Kaminsky 2020, 16, 136). The man then uses his embodied knowledge of those conventions to provoke responses in her body. As necessary, he also adapts to her idiosyncrasies as she adapts her body to his interventions. Both their micro-level communication and the macro-level techniques that enable it are effects of a dialectic—the woman’s choreohexis is thesis, the man’s intervention antithesis, their coordination synthesis.¹⁰ Accordingly, the mechanisms that make the system work carry the hidden transcripts of their historical development. All of this makes the present-day dance floor a viable laboratory for reconstructing historical dance techniques about which our information is otherwise mostly limited to externalities.

When the woman’s choreohexis is alien enough to the man to demand a significantly modified approach, one or both must develop new techniques or the system will collapse. My adaptation to the complexity of the tanguera’s body after having been habituated to Swedish monocentricity exemplifies this principle. By pure happenstance, that moment in my personal dance learning trajectory also echoed the earlier historical shift in which a lead/follow system that had developed in Europe suddenly met with bodies acculturated to African polycentric processes. This article builds, in part, on my using that personal embodied experience to decode some of the hidden transcripts embedded in that history.

High-Status Men, Low-Status Women

If the methodological foundation for my research is an embodied take on James Scott’s hidden transcripts inspired by Danielle Robinson, the primary theoretical underpinnings of my argument

are adapted from María Lugones and her theorization of what she calls the colonial/modern gender system (Lugones 2007). According to Lugones, white European supremacy is premised on the notion that to be fully human you must be a man or a woman according to the norms of Western bourgeois heteropatriarchy. Those gender roles and relations are thus imposed on the colonized as a supposed avenue to humanity and, with it, equality with the colonizer. The trap here, however, is that the colonizer has also already defined true manhood and womanhood as contingent on whiteness. When Sojourner Truth asks, “Ain’t I a woman?” the colonial/modern gender system denies her humanity by telling her no (Lugones 2010, 745).

Historical developments in the partner dance relationship can, within this framework, be seen as embodied realizations of heteropatriarchy mobilized as a strategy for upward social mobility. The European bourgeoisie modeled their male/female relations on aristocratic ones in order to assert status, and in the process of so weaponizing that gender dynamic also amplified it (Bourdieu 2001, 96–97). This principle is corporeally manifest in the waltz, iconic dance of the bourgeoisie, whose rotational closed-position structure intensified a chivalric lead/follow dynamic already present in dances of the aristocracy.¹¹ Following Lugones’s line of reasoning, that dynamic stood to be amplified once again in turn by the colonized in their attempts to claim humanity according to the bourgeois logic imposed on them by the colonial/modern gender system. Thus, when that closed-position structure took the Americas by storm in the mid-nineteenth century, its patriarchy was rendered even more starkly in the tango invented in its wake (Taylor 1998, 66).¹² These gender dynamics continued to mark the twentieth-century development of tango as a contested field upon which Argentinian nationalists claimed their whiteness, against an internationally circulating fantasy of the dance as expression of exotic Latinness (Savigliano 1995, 137–168).

The complex tensions increasingly at play in the lead/follow system as it has developed over time also owe themselves to the strained logics by which European heteropatriarchy has constituted bourgeois femininity as simultaneously identified with and alienated from the classed/colonial Other. The identification is primarily a matter of conflating two oppressed positions. Elite men have power over elite women as a function of gender, and low-status people as a function of social standing, creating a structural overlap.¹³ The lead/follow system manifests this principle in the interrelationship between the man’s control over his partner and over his surroundings (Kaminsky 2020, 115–117).

The alienation of the bourgeois woman from the class/colonial Other, meanwhile, has generally stemmed from the former’s supposed need for protection from the latter. Here men of status must isolate “their” women from the dangers of a public sphere potentially teeming with men of ill repute, and from being marked low status and thus sexually available for want of a chaperone (Nead 1997, 167–168).¹⁴ The bourgeois waltz wears this premise on its sleeve, constructing as it does a tension between the public line of dance that each man must navigate for the safety of his woman and the private rotating closed-position bubble he must maintain for the sake of that protection (Kaminsky 2020, 125–126).¹⁵ Argentine tango intensifies the principle even further by bringing everyone into closer proximity and so ramping up the danger.¹⁶

This cloistering principle is also manifest for women of status in the partner dancing venue writ large. On the one hand, the lead/follow structure that choreographs those spaces constrains and privileges dancing women according to bourgeois norms. On the other hand, the dance floor is also a public space with a sexual charge, making it a precarious location for any woman whose social value depends on her public maintenance of virtue. Any partner dance venue catering to women of status is thus likely to demand certain precautionary strictures—chaperones, codes of conduct, and/or the banning of low-status men.

Venues need heed no analogous restrictions to be accessible to men of status, however. The revelation that privileged men might find more libertine opportunities dancing with low-status women is expressed even as early as that earliest comprehensive piece of writing on social dance principles, Arbeau's *Orchesography* (1589, 87). This revelation powers the fantasy of the brothel—to which men but not women of status would have had access—in the tango's origin story.¹⁷ It also informed the fantasy and the reality of quadroom dances, marketed to bring together white men and mixed-race women in nineteenth-century New Orleans (Wells 2021, 42–46).

The fantasized dance encounter between the civilized/white man and mulatta/prostitute carries an erotic charge that begins with the racist sexual exoticism famously scrutinized by bell hooks in “Eating the Other,” but does not end there (2015, 24–26). To this complex, the lead/follow system adds its own peculiar kinks. Here the as-yet-uncolonized woman's resistance, born of an excess of bodily independence and thus sexuality, becomes the justification for and mechanism of the man's control. She becomes the choreological equivalent of pornography's bad girl who must be disciplined with sex for desiring sex.¹⁸

The actual phenomenon of high-status men finding low-status women to dance with may not always be significant enough for the historical record. Nevertheless, it will likely have been a lived reality anywhere high-status women were expected to be chaste, high-status men were under no such obligation, and women of low status had little power to determine their sexual destiny either way.¹⁹ This covers enough of the history of Europe and its (post)colonies to suggest plenty of opportunity for the kinds of developments in the lead/follow system I mentioned earlier, born of the tension between men who expected haptic obedience and women whose bodies were not entirely socialized to aristocratic or bourgeois gender norms.

The enjoyment this practice conferred to men of status is reasonably self-evident, but it does take two to tango. To understand why low-status women would commit to it, it helps again to return to María Lugones's observation that Europe offered its colonized an imperfect path to humanization and whiteness via the performance of bourgeois gender roles (2010, 748). Christi Jay Wells describes the function of nineteenth-century quadroom balls in essentially these terms, as opportunities for mixed-race women to engage themselves to white men in an arrangement not unlike (but never actually legally codified as) marriage (2021, 42). If the dance was an audition for such a role, it makes sense that those so motivated would do their best to learn and embody that bourgeois woman's biddability—to be tempered, perhaps, by some small retention of independence for exotic and erotic appeal as a way to compete with those white women who had the advantage of actual marriageability.

Although the primary catalyzing moments for the lead/follow system's development might be those meetings between high-status men and low-status women, low-status men and high-status women could also be assumed to have their own separate motivations for reaffirming those developments. If low-status women could adopt bourgeois habitus in a play for commitment from high-status men, so could high-status women compete in turn by appropriating low-status techniques of resistance for erotic appeal. (Although colonialism may make womanhood contingent on whiteness, it also identifies the feminine erotic with colonial Otherness and invites white women to manifest their sexuality in that way; consider in the present day how white women are encouraged to establish their hetero/sexual identity through salsa, belly dance, yoga, and so forth.) Colonized men, meanwhile, also encouraged by the modern/colonial gender system to embody their humanity through heteropatriarchy, may be even more motivated to do so as dancers by the fact of having to compete with high-status men for “their own” women.²⁰ With all actors having their own potential motivations for reaffirming these intercorporeal dynamics, those relationships are thus likely to be re-performed and ingrained in all social configurations.

The Polka Craze and Its Aftermath

The waltz has long been associated historically, socially, and structurally with the rise of the bourgeoisie in Europe: Historically, because it took Europe by storm in the precise moment of industrialization and urbanization, when the bourgeoisie eclipsed the aristocracy in power (Reeser 1949, 14–15). Socially, because that class brought it to prominence and became associated with its practice, its rise matched symbolically to the fall of the aristocratic minuet (McKee 2012, 90–91). And structurally, because the way it entrusts the man with the protection of a closed partnership against the general line of dance performs so perfectly the bourgeois patriarchal politics of feminine private and masculine public spheres (Maróthy 1974, 214–215).

This dance's epitomizing progressive rotation manifested a careful balance between linear and angular momentum produced by and also acting intensely upon the dancers' bodies. The interlocking classed and gendered negotiations by which these forces met and were sublimated into that delicate equilibrium—negotiations representing an earlier manifestation of the dialectical processes described above—will be the subject of a separate essay. Suffice it to say here that the result expressed itself choreologically in a tension between scandal and propriety. The dizzying momentum of the waltz was widely recognized in its heyday as sexual and thus potentially dangerous (Knowles 2009, 53; Buonaventura 2004, 71; Yaraman 2002, 8–10). At the same time, however, the partnership's vigorous containment of those constituent and conflicting forces depended physically upon their maintaining danced markers of respectability: erect posture, monocentricity, and fixed frame.

That iconically bourgeois dynamic of sexually sublimated rotational closed partnership within a line of dance eventually became the formal principle for numerous dance fads that followed upon the waltz. It was with the first of these, the polka craze of the mid-1840s, that this became the normative social dance format in Europe and the Americas (Knowles 2009, 196–197n53; Chasteen 2004, 125). Prior to this point, contradances, quadrilles, and even minuets had all remained popular alongside the waltz. The polka, however, superseded all those earlier dances to cement that closed-position line-of-dance structure as the *de facto* norm.²¹ This norm was then reinforced by subsequent dance fads in that same line-of-dance tradition, including mazurka, schottische, and redowa (Gushee 2002, 155).

In the 1870s and 1880s, new forms started to develop in the Americas in the wake of this vogue for European-style partner dances. At first, these were simply new ways to move to existing dance music, only later to develop their own associated musical styles. John Chasteen has noted that Brazilian maxixe, Argentine milonga, and Cuban danzón all developed as techniques for moving to established dance music repertoires like polka, mazurka, and danza (2004, 17–21).²² New in these contexts, however, was a scandalous close embrace, combined with an equally scandalous Africanized practice of hip swiveling known as *quebrada* or “break” (2004, 19). The danger of these two principles was amplified particularly in their combination, which threatened to produce intimate serpentine rubbing (Chasteen 2004, 20; Miller 2011, 20; Sloat 2010, xix).

Documented details of the exact origin or nature of those hip motions are elusive. Here is where we can find the likeliest scenario by supplementing what we know about the externalities with some embodied autoethnographic experience. To begin with the externalities, this period featured two broad types of partner dance. The *rotating dances* that came out of Europe, most famously exemplified by waltz and polka, were characterized by closed position, progressive movement, and revolving steps.²³ The *walking dances* that developed in the Americas in the wake of those European forms inherited the first two of these features but abandoned the third.²⁴

These newer walking dances would include those mentioned by Chasteen in his study—Cuban danzón, Brazilian maxixe, Argentine milonga—as well as the dances that developed immediately

from those, most famously the tango born of milonga. They also included similarly structured dances of the US American jazz age, such as the foxtrot, one-step, and a host of related forms—broadly, those known collectively today in the blues dancing community as “ballroomin’ blues.” The likely historical point of connection between these US and Latin American forms is the cultural nexus of New Orleans and Cuba in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²⁵

The connections between late nineteenth-century dances of Latin America and those of the early jazz age United States have been obfuscated *ex post facto* by a ballroom industry that marketed the “Latin” as exotic Other to so-called standard dances of the United States and Europe (Bosse 2007, 28–40). This manufactured boundary against Latin American cultural forms was further reinforced by a writing of jazz history that sought to claim that music (and associated dances) as fundamentally US-based, erasing connections to the Caribbean (Fiehrer 1991). The resulting classificatory system would allow walking dances like *danzón* and foxtrot, for instance, to be imagined as historically unrelated despite their obvious choreological similarities. My avoidance of “Latin” as an analytical category in this article reflects my effort to work against this discursive trend. On the specific level of my engagement with how African and European dance traditions interacted in the wake of the international polka craze, I consider the Americas as a single multi-cultural space, rather than two separate ones.

The walking dances of the Americas (North, South, and Central) retained the primary structural feature that manifested the waltz’s bourgeois separate-spheres heteropatriarchy, namely the private closed hold within the public line of dance. Three factors, however, distinguished the newer walking dances from the older revolving forms. The obvious difference was that, in walking forms, the dancers did not revolve around each other as a matter of course. A second distinction was that walking dances tended, at least at first, to favor a close embrace (i.e., a direct chest-to-chest connection). The third distinction was that, again at least at first, these dances usually involved some dissociation between the upper and lower body (Chasteen 2004, 17–21; Malnig 2009, 73).²⁶ If my theory is valid that the primary factor instigating these developments was the challenge introduced by the woman’s polycentricity, then the first two of these differences would have to have followed from the third. At the core of these transformations, then, is the challenge brought to European social norms by an Africanist aesthetic in dialectical relation to its subsequent patriarchal bourgeois correctives.

Centrifugality, Polycentricity, and Close Embrace

To get a sense of the process by which those shifts might have occurred, we can return to the moment that I, as a budding tanguero habituated to Swedish choreohexis, tried and failed to lead tangueras to do revolving steps in tango vals. What I learned in this accidental autoethnographic experiment was that tango is polycentric, and revolving dances rely on monocentricity to effectively apply centrifugal force to their constituent bodies. The biomechanics of partnered progressive rotation are facilitated by end-over-end motion, which is only effective with exactly two ends. If either partner has multiple operating centers, that inertial body flight effect will not manifest, for the same reason a thrown stick rotates end over end while an unweighted chain does not. All of which is to say, a man who is used to generating centrifugal rotational momentum with his dance partner will find this most difficult when leading a woman whose hips move separately from her chest. If the line of dance is to be maintained, then the walking dance becomes the most viable alternative.

I also had to work out that polycentricity affords the woman greater complexity of motion within the partnership than Swedish dancing had prepared me for. If I wanted to lead my partner to do something specific, therefore, I needed to work harder to make that happen. Here the advantage of tango’s close embrace became apparent. One way for me to gain more control over my partner’s

dissociating body was to increase my surface contact with it. This had the quadruple effect of constricting her movement by making my body an impediment to hers, giving me more haptic information about how her body was moving, giving me more haptic channels to communicate impulses, and increasing the likelihood of physical contact with dissociated parts of her body. The tightening from waltz and polka's closed position into the close embrace favored in many walking dances of the Americas thus also makes sense as an adaptive response to polycentricity.

The synthesis of polycentricity (thesis) and close embrace (antithesis) would have had significant social implications in the late nineteenth-century Americas. Given the hegemonic tendency to frame the woman's freely moving hips as simultaneously feminine, Black, sexual, and in that combination, dangerous, it makes sense to read the man's adaptive reactions to her hip dissociations as reassertion of colonialist/heteropatriarchal control.²⁷ The irony in this situation is that the man's corrective intervention generates as much scandal as does the thing it seeks to correct, or to be more precise, the scandal emerges from the interaction of the man's movements with the woman's. (When the male authority figure disciplines the bad girl with sex for wanting sex, their "conflict" becomes the engine of the pornographic narrative; his moral authority does not legitimate pornography as an art form.) Waltz rotation had been scandalous because of its continuous embrace and dizzying effects, but had also sublimated the sexual implications of the partnership by enacting forces on the dancers' bodies that pulled them away from each other. That centrifugality disappears when the rotation subsides, releasing the dancers into an even closer engagement. The directionality of the dancers' movements shifts from waltz and polka's perpetual lateral escape to projecting directly into and through each other. Any close-embrace attempt the man makes to wrest control over the woman's dissociating hips at this point is less likely to chasten them as to simply join them in reproducing the gestural elements of an actual sex act.

Centrifugality had compelled waltzing couples to move as a unit and so conceal any evidence of disunity. Its abandonment in the walking dances enabled the man to move one way and the woman another. Thus was the waltz's performance of heterosexual equilibrium disrupted. These new dances enacted precisely what María Lugones observes as the failure of the colonized to reproduce the colonizer's performance of perfect bourgeois gender relations (2010, 743).²⁸ Polycentricity had upset the balance of those intense physical forces over which the waltz and polka had exerted such meticulous control, unsublimating their underlying sexuality.

The result was two opposing yet occasionally mutually enforcing effects. One was the reclamation and intensification of patriarchal control, manifesting at its extreme in the kind of performative sexual violence of the apache or lambada—or as described by Julie Taylor in *Paper Tangos* (1998, 59–78). This violence performs all the exotic passion, dangerous sexuality, and pathological patriarchy that colonialism needs to relegate the colonized to the position of uncivilized, non-white, and less than human. The other and more obvious "failure," meanwhile, was the disruption and eventual dissolution of the partnership itself.

Civilizing and Syncretizing Dances

In this article, I identify the period from roughly 1844 to 1960 as "partner dancing's long century." Solo, group, and couple/group hybrid forms certainly remained popular during this period, and partner dancing proper did not begin with the polka or end with the mambo. Broadly speaking, however, this was the era during which lead/follow partnering could be considered the normative operating social dance principle in Europe and the Americas. That period also represented, I think not coincidentally, the apex of European colonialism.

The standard history credits the twist, and particularly Chubby Checker's 1960 hit that made that form into a global sensation, as the dramatic cutoff point marking the end of partner dancing

(Fishwick 2000). This story serves a metanarrative identifying the countercultural 1960s as a moment of radical disjuncture, concealing continuities with early anti-hegemonic cultural currents (Harrison 1993). What goes generally unacknowledged here is that couple dance trends in the Americas had already by that point been gesturing toward dissolution of the partnership for quite some time.

The progressive era, from the 1890s through the 1920s, had brought fundamental disruptions to bourgeois gender and heteronorms in the United States, which had global ramifications as well, given that the United States during this period was also eclipsing Europe as the world's primary cultural empire. Suffragists were demanding full participation in public life. Women became mobile with the rise of the bicycle and the decline of the bustle, and entered both college and the workforce in unprecedented numbers. A degree of economic independence for women also helped enable the rise of lesbian culture (Faderman 1991, 8–9). On a general level, these shifts eroded the cultural underpinnings of a lead/follow system rooted in paternalistic bourgeois gender relations. More directly, however, they also altered the material conditions of partner dancing itself. Young working women now had the means and inclination to go out dancing unchaperoned, facilitated by the rise of the public dance hall (Perry 1985). The slumming vogue enabled women of privilege to enter and participate in the social dance spaces of class and racial Others (Heap 2009, 3). Lesbian spaces and women's colleges also provided significant new contexts for women to dance with one another in the absence of men.²⁹

Accompanying these social, cultural, and material changes were choreological ones, with a move away from *civilizing* and toward *syncretizing* social dance forms. I call those dances “syncretizing,” which arose in the Americas from the mixing of African, European, Asian, and/or indigenous dance aesthetics. “Civilizing” dances, meanwhile, were those that did the work of imposing bourgeois gender and colonial power relations.³⁰ These may have manifested either as originally wholly European forms like waltz or polka, or as syncretizing dances “corrected” for propriety according to those bourgeois/colonialist values like post-1910s foxtrot or tango.

In the mid-nineteenth century, at least, the distinction would have been fairly clear between civilizing partner dances like polka and waltz, and syncretic solo/group/responsorial forms rooted primarily in African or indigenous practice. As previously mentioned, these streams met in the 1870s with the development of new polycentric walking dances.³¹ Waltz and polka continued unabated, however, largely uninfluenced at first by syncretic processes. At this point, the meeting of civilizing and syncretizing practices resulted in change in the latter, but not the former.

Over the course of the progressive era, however, general popular dance practice of the Americas shifted toward the syncretizing end of the spectrum. The civilizing partner dances that had reigned supreme starting at the middle of the nineteenth century with the polka craze held nowhere near that status in the first decades of the twentieth (Gushee 2002, 172). With ragtime and jazz, the civilizing dances were pushed to the margins in favor of walking dances, animal dances, and eventually Charleston and swing era forms. At a certain point, the civilizing tradition responded by integrating and bowdlerizing those syncretic walking dances. This was the project of Vernon and Irene Castle in the 1910s, and eventually of Arthur Murray (their student) and the twentieth-century ballroom tradition (Malnig 2009, 82).³² Now that the shoe was on the other foot, the meeting of civilizing and syncretizing forms resulted in changes in the former more than the latter.

In some cases, the civilizing revision of syncretizing dances meant a simple reimposition of strict monocentricity. Present-day Mexican *danzón*, for example, is fairly rigid, in stark contrast to the Cuban *danzón* from which it developed (Madrid and Moore 2013, 210). The foxtrot as danced today in its various forms is similarly constrained, despite its roots in the freer slow drag (Robinson 2015, 54–56). The Castles did not always sanitize jazz dance dances so completely, however. Rather, observation of their dancing reveals that Irene Castle sometimes simply limited her

dissociation by restricting her movements at the waist to the transverse plane, allowing her to rotate her upper body separately from her lower body without any rise or fall of the hips (Bailey 1915). Argentine tango also engages this device to maintain some dissociation while simultaneously claiming whiteness and distance from three-dimensional “Latin” hip gyrations (Taylor 1998, 110; Kaminsky 2020, 42). This compromise enables her (and tango dancers) to take advantage of new techniques enabled by polycentricity, while also performing a degree of respectability in relation to those movements.

At this point, then, the dividing line between civilizing and syncretizing dances shifts and becomes thinner. No longer can that boundary be discerned between monocentric and polycentric forms. Instead, it must be distinguished between dances that use polycentricity to disrupt the lead/follow relationship versus those that (in true hegemonic fashion) use polycentricity to intensify it. On one side of that line are the syncretic dances in which the woman’s capacity to isolate body parts enable her to regulate her own movements, carving out space within the lead/follow system for riffing practices in line with established African aesthetics. On the other side are those civilizing dances in which the man responds to that potential for independence with proprioceptive techniques developed to extend his influence into the woman’s dissociated body parts, while the woman accedes to that control for the pleasure of coordinated movement (combined, perhaps, with some promise of respectability). Here, where the man can lead her hips in one direction and her chest in another, he is granted for the first time the power to control not only the placement but also the very shape of the woman’s body.

The razor-thinness of this new line between syncretizing and civilizing dances allows easy crossing, as one couple on the floor may go one way and another the opposite, whereas some dancers may even combine the two impulses. Although this line cuts so thin as to enable slicing through such moments, however, certain traditions do nevertheless privilege one side over the other. Argentine tango following its European sojourn, with its tightly led dissociative practices, is largely a civilizing dance by this measure. The ballroom and dance teaching industries of the early twentieth century likewise favored that civilizing impulse (Malnig 2009, 82). In those industries, new technologies of leading and following, seeded at the moment the man turned the woman’s dissociation to his own purposes, have continued to develop to the present day.

The supposed end of the partner dance era in 1960 must thus be marked with an asterisk. The civilizing stream sees no such end, and has never stopped developing the technologies of lead and follow via ballroom and the partner dance teaching industry writ large. What makes this a secondary branch in the narrative is that the civilizing stream never regained anything like the social relevance within popular culture it enjoyed in the nineteenth century. The real decline of partner dance happens, rather, in that syncretizing stream, whose ascendancy in popular culture never abated after the jazz age.

The seeds of the partnership’s breakup were sown already in the syncretizing stream in the nineteenth-century Americas with polycentric body attitudes and the destabilizing potential of their associated techniques. Assuming the partners began by adopting the polka’s straight-up-and-down posture, a close embrace combined with dissociated hips would then threaten with that scandalous serpentine grinding of the nethers. Although this might have been a perfectly acceptable state of affairs for some, eventually an intervention would have been made from within the couple or without to, as they say, make room for Jesus.

Here polycentricity, which catalyzed the dilemma in the first place, also offers some solutions. Dissociation affords the woman a flexibility of body shape that enables various methods for distancing herself from a partner who has entered into close embrace with her. For example, she might tilt into the close embrace with her chest while keeping her hips back, limiting direct access to her lower body. By leaning into her partner, she deftly affirms the connection he has asked for while

at the same time demanding he take her resistance in direct proportion to that affirmation—all in a postural shift that might in itself call back to African roots. To counter, he too must lean in against her weight and so generate even more distance between their lower bodies. Here we get the A-frame used in tango and various other walking dances, the angle of which the woman can calibrate by adjusting how much weight she gives the man. Alternatively, she can put her weight into her hips as she shifts them back, forcing her partner to compensate by shifting his own weight backward so as to maintain their common balance and connection. This produces the O-frame counterbalance effect today best known from the Lindy Hop, which like the A-frame again separates the lower bodies.³³

The disruption of the partnership fomented by the introduction of polycentricity may have been as much a product of these new frame shapes as it was dissociation proper.³⁴ Two partner dances caught on film around the turn of the twentieth century—the Bowery Waltz from 1897 and the “Tough” Dance from 1902—dramatize interpersonal conflict in no small part through an extreme O-frame combined with an in-leaning connection at the neck and shoulders. The frame shape seems akin to nothing more than that of Greco-Roman wrestling. The most striking moment of the Bowery Waltz is in fact one in which the man moves his partner bodily from one side of the screen to the other by tripping her over his hip (Heise 1897).

In the “Tough” Dance, meanwhile, the dancers take advantage of a shared monocentricity to engage in polka-like rotational movement (Bonine 1902). Whereas a traditional polka would stabilize this motion with straight-up-and-down posture, however, here the dancers’ use of that extreme O-frame permits rotational energy to manifest only in fits and starts. A frantic gallop in that frame initiates a slow rotation, which at a certain point accelerates into a violent centrifugality that quickly slingshots the woman out into open position before the man uses the handhold connection to bounce her back into closed and begin the process anew. This use of destabilized rotational momentum to eject the woman violently from the man’s closed hold and then bounce her back in again was a signature move of the early twentieth-century apache dance, for which “tough” dance might simply have been an alternative designation. That dance’s very name identified it with colonial as well as class Otherness, coming from a term for French ruffians who in turn were called apaches after the native American nation (Haine 1992, 452; Malnig 2009, 81).

This move refined itself over the years to manifest in various African American forms like the Texas Tommy, the breakaway, and finally and most famously the Lindy Hop (Anonymous c1910; Kaufman 1929; Wood 1937). All along, the core mechanic remained the polka’s rotational momentum intensified to disruption by the low-center-of-gravity inertia of the O-frame. Although the mechanism for propelling the woman outward demands a certain degree of monocentricity to work, once she is out there, she is then free to manifest the polycentricity that seeded the destabilization of the rotation in the first place. Hence the classic hip swivel in the Lindy Hop swing-out, which functions visually as a celebration of that freedom to move out in open position, and mechanically to intensify the counterbalancing tension. From here, the shift from a lead/follow relationship to responsorial riffing is not so great, nor is the next step of simply letting go the handhold.

The social and gender politics of the Lindy Hop’s tension between lead/follow partnering and solo/group/responsorial processes has been addressed by numerous other scholars (e.g., Stearns and Stearns 1968, 324; Hubbard and Monaghan 2009, 133; Wade 2011, 238–240; Given 2015, 729; Wells 2021, 103–104). My point here is simply that the swing-out’s kinetic dramatization of that tension is also the product of a long historical process—predating the swing era by half a century—by which the interaction of African and European aesthetics in syncretizing partner dances of the Americas have destabilized the bourgeois equilibrium of the lead/follow system. This same principle by which social partner dancing exhibited tensions between lead/follow and solo/responsorial dynamics was perhaps even intensified in the mambo, as the major dance fad of the 1950s following on the Lindy Hop (McMains 2015, 56–57; Wells 2021, 119).³⁵ When

Black dancers in the late 1950s started doing the twist, and that dance took the world by storm in 1960, it was thus not so much a sudden break from what had been going on previously as the culmination of a long dissolution of the lead/follow partnership, whose initial fissures could already be felt in the very first syncretizing partner dances of the 1870s.

Conclusion

It would be tempting, particularly for present-day practitioners of historical syncretizing dances, to imagine such practices as uniformly “resisting” colonialism where civilizing dances reinforce it. In purely mechanical terms, there might be something to this. When African-rooted aesthetic processes started informing hegemonic social dance cultures during the progressive era, the resulting disruptions of the lead/follow system absolutely challenged the bourgeois heteropatriarchal logics that formed the ideological grounding of European supremacy. At the same time, however, those influences were hardly the result of egalitarian cultural exchange. The progressive promise of ragtime was premised on an escape into primitivism that offered white people freedom by making Black people the essentialized representatives of that fantasy (George-Graves 2009). From that point onward, the expansion of African dance processes beyond Africa has always done uneasy double work, challenging white supremacy while at the same time reinforcing it as a potential avenue to participatory minstrelsy (Robinson 2009).

It would also be tempting to imagine that the present-day partner dancing industry, as the dominant force in partner dance globally, has moved beyond its civilizing impulses given that it no longer works to foreclose non-European movement possibilities quite in the manner of Vernon and Irene Castle. Although the situation is certainly more complicated today, if only for the vastly increased variety of dance forms circulated by that industry, that rationalization is also perhaps a little too convenient. One might rather say that civilizing logics and mechanisms have themselves changed and become more complex in the intervening century.

The relevant politics undergo a particularly significant shift between the decline of partner dance in the 1960s and its various revivals in the 1980s and 1990s. The intervening years see an end to the colonial era writ large as well as the global rise of civil rights, peace, LGBT rights, and second wave feminist movements. The argument linking the midcentury decline of partner dancing to women’s liberation is an old one. Less commonly considered is how that decline might also be connected to that period’s general challenges to global white and European supremacy, given how much partner dancing owes to the culture of empire.

The revival of partner dance in the 1980s and 1990s can furthermore be understood as a cultural extension of the conservative backlash against all those movements during that period. The neo-swing movement of the late twentieth century traded on nostalgia for an imagined era of not only traditional gender values but also white racial hegemony, an orientation that continued to color the swing revival well after its heyday (Usner 2001; Hancock 2008). Partner dance instructors with a sexist bent still regularly flaunt the conservative gender politics embedded in the lead/follow system to take potshots at the social advances made by the feminist movement, the very mechanics of that system having constructed for them a convenient internal reality that puts women’s liberation in the wrong. Racial essentializations also continue to be a key stock-in-trade of Latin dance pedagogy in Anglo contexts, as salsa instructors reinvigorate the exoticizing traditions of the old international tango, rumba, and mambo scenes.

One specific aspect of the conservative backlash of the 1980s and 1990s of particular relevance to the cultural politics of the partner dance revival is the way it pitted the various liberatory movements of the long 1960s against one another. Feminists and LGBT activists could suddenly be dismissed as racist or classist. Racist and colonialist arguments, conversely, could be couched in feminist critiques. Empire comes to mask its dominance by manipulating those critiques to project

an inversion of the traditional gendered relationship of colonizer to colonized. The masculine racist/imperialist violence of the West is remapped onto the racial/colonial Other, whose excessive patriarchy become evidence of their backwardness and need for continued corrective white/Western control.

Salsa lessons, for instance, become increasingly marketable to Anglos as they confirm stereotypes of Latin machismo and “traditional” gender relationships (see e.g., Boulila 2015, 133–134). This state of affairs stands to reinforce not only white supremacy but also, doubling back, patriarchy itself. Latin dance lessons for Anglos can, in reproducing stereotypes about extreme gender relations, permit access to their performance as an aspect of “authentic” Latin American culture.

In the process, the history of the lead/follow system and its embeddedness in specifically European colonialist bourgeois heteropatriarchy becomes hidden. This concealment is secured by multiple additional folds. The Iberian imperial history that produced Latin America is obscured by a subsequent US Anglo imperialism in the wake of the Monroe Doctrine. As a result, once-colonizing Spanish and Portuguese cultures could be refigured as colonized; thus has the very invention of “Latin America” as a unified space been understood both as a colonial and anti-colonial act (Gobat 2013, 1345–1346). The Latinidad movement in the United States in the 1980s is one manifestation of the principle of the Latin as an anti-colonial category (Aparicio 1999). The associated US Hispanic elevation of salsa as a proudly Pan–Latin American cultural form, accordingly, permits once-colonizing performances of bourgeois gender relations to be read as anti-imperialist.

The recent rise of *aambi* pedagogy (in which everyone learns both roles), queer partner dance scenes, and role-switching practices have all worked to disrupt the lead/follow system’s heteropatriarchal structure to some extent. I have elsewhere argued that these kinds of interventions are necessary for those who, although troubled by the system’s politics, nevertheless wish to live within it (Kaminsky 2020, 172–173). At the same time, much of my previous work has been dedicated to revealing the limitations of these kinds of interventions on a system so deeply engrained in its colonialist and heteropatriarchal history. Here, too, I would add that the aforementioned tendency to camouflage the lead/follow system’s European heteropatriarchal origins can even be reinforced by these kinds of interventions, given their capacity to identify themselves with a modern enlightenment in opposition to the supposedly traditional patriarchies of racial and colonized Others (García 2013, 138–141).

I end with these points not to foreclose on the ethical possibilities of partner dancing. I derive considerable pleasure from the exercise, and my intention is not to destroy that enjoyment for myself or anyone else. My goal, rather, is to encourage dancers’ persistent ethical engagement with the ugly as well as the beautiful of their practice, the oppressive as well as the transcendent. What I wish to foreclose on, therefore, is the easy out of demanding a formula for clean-conscience participation, a set of predetermined steps that permits us to enjoy our dancing unencumbered by these issues (which may, at its worst, involve projecting guilt onto other dancers for failing to follow that formula, and then mistaking that projection for progressive political action). In short, partner dancers cannot contend with the burden of their history by choreography alone. We must also always be ready to improvise with unflinching understanding of the sociokinetic frameworks in which we are complicit.

Notes

1. This article is one of two I have planned on this issue. The other piece addresses how progressive rotation in the waltz might have been forged from a combination of peasant stationary swinging dances and aristocratic processionals.

2. Scholars have generally acknowledged that the partnered embrace and lead/follow partner dancing is European in origin (Daniel 2002, 43; Taylor 1998, 65–66).

3. For a technical discussion of the various mechanisms via which polycentricity permits delay, dissipation, and intensification of lead impulses, see Kaminsky (2020, 39–42).

4. I use “civilizing” here in the general sense of that mechanism of colonial control that both enabled and rationalized an associated exploitative violence (Heraclides and Dialla 2015, 31–56). More specifically in this context, I am invoking the concomitant moralizing demands made on both colonizer and colonized for self-control over one’s own body, as well as men’s control over women’s bodies (Kittay 1988, 63–66).

5. I use “syncretic” here in the sense proposed by Andrew Apter, as an adaptive mechanism of the colonized for claiming and refashioning the tools of the colonizer (2014, 178). The disruption of the lead/follow system in African-influenced partner dancing has also been addressed in (Hubbard and Monaghan 2009, 133).

6. This bias reflects the heteropatriarchal structure of the lead/follow system itself, and may ironically also be one reason why the system has until recently received so little attention from dance scholars, who have tended to seek out more liberatory objects of study (Pietrobruno 2006, 146).

7. The argument that such moments of resistance occur more readily in embodied performance rather than real or metaphorical “transcripts” has also been voiced by Diana Taylor (2003, 30–31).

8. Certainly, dancers may receive instruction in other ways as well. In some informal contexts, beginners might be coached by same-sex peers or relatives. However, once having learned the basics, most still tend to develop the subtle haptic skills necessary for leading and following over time on the social floor dancing with people in the opposite role.

9. Even in formalized social dance classes, instructors will typically demand regular partner switches to induce this collective development of haptic technique, given the difficulties of imparting those skills verbally or visually.

10. The woman’s choreohexis is thesis and the man’s intervention on it antithesis in the sense that he must respond to her body attitude to intervene on her movements; he leads in *reaction* to how her body already operates (Kaminsky 2020, 135–139).

11. Arbeau’s *Orchesography* discusses the need for the man to lead and protect the woman in the context of the aristocratic basse danse (1589, 58).

12. So significant were both waltz and tango for intensifying the lead/follow system, in fact, that scholars of those dances have separately credited each of them with actually originating it (Aldrich 2009, 49; Denniston 2007, 83–84).

13. This is a recurring principle in feminist scholarship relating to, for instance, Orientalism (e.g., Yegenoglu 1998, 39–67), Marxism (e.g., Agostinone-Wilson 2020, 5–30), and colonialism (e.g., Birmingham-Pokorny 1996).

14. This principle has roots in medieval Europe gender dynamics (Jones 2013, 249–255) and lives on in the intersectional politics of white women’s relationships to Black men (De Welde 2003).

15. This cloistering principle is expressed as a choreological metaphor already in the classic 1589 dance manual *Orchesography*, in which Thoinot Arbeau justifies the need for men to lead women in aristocratic processions specifically because of the potential dangers of their surroundings (1589, 58).

16. The erotic figure of the tanguera personifies this tension between alienation from and identification with the low-status male Other. Classically, the tango origin story fantasizes a bordello populated with ruffians and prostitutes. The men of this fantasy may draw knives and fight over the women they outnumber ten to one. However, when these figures fade away to be replaced by men and women of propriety as the dance gains respectability following its European sojourn, something peculiar happens. While the ruffians disappear, their knives remain, only now to be displaced onto the women’s heels. These resituated stilettos intervene on the new tanguera’s posture to encourage a dignifying upward stretch away from the tango’s lascivious origins, while at the same time transforming her sexualized leg extensions into the very environmental danger formerly represented by those low-status men (Kaminsky 2020, 4). Her spiked feet replace the dueling ruffians and she becomes the carnal threat in need of control. As she extends her chest upward and her heels outward, the resulting tautness in her body expresses the tension between bourgeois feminine

propriety and phallic sexual danger that powers her erotic appeal. Not randomly did Tom Lehrer choose the tango for his famous ode to masochism.

17. Robert Farris Thompson notes that the myth of tango's brothel origins is largely exaggerated; tango was danced in many places, brothels only one among them (2005, 227).

18. I refer here not to any overt narrative trope, but rather the underlying logic of sexual violence as represented in commercial straight porn, exemplified particularly in those scenes showing a woman responding to a man's sexual brutality by oscillating between expressions of suffering and pleasure. Certain unfavorable definitions of pornography have even marked this dynamic central to the genre itself (e.g., Dworkin and MacKinnon 1988, 36). Of straight porn's relevance to a broader sociosexual bourgeois patriarchal order, Geraldine Finn argues: "Pornography expresses and reproduces the hierarchical difference between masculine and feminine which is produced (and produced as 'natural') simultaneously everywhere else in our culture: in the family, in school, in the market-place, in church, in the universities, the libraries, museums, galleries and concert-halls, in science and medicine, industry and entertainment . . . tying femininity to objectivity and immanence and masculinity to subjectivity and transcendence" (1985, 82). For a discussion of the partner dance relationship as an expression of feminine immanence and masculine transcendence, see Kaminsky (2020, 138–139).

19. Marta Savigliano writes of the early days of tango: "Urbanization and industrialization wore a face, that of those wealthy men looking lasciviously at their poor women. These wealthy men paid to embrace poor women, being unable to touch the women of their own class without commitment" (1995, 31).

20. This might be a partial explanation for the phenomenon identified by Julie Taylor of Argentine tango intensifying the patriarchy and underlying violence of a lead/follow relationship inherited from waltz and polka: "A dance of domination like other European, embraced dances became an imitation that surpassed the original" (1998, 66).

21. Egil Bakka has argued convincingly that the international "polka" craze in the 1840s was simply the widespread popularization of a preexisting waltz in 2/4, with a new name (but nothing in the way of actual choreography) borrowed from a briefly popular Parisian dance fad (2001, 42–43).

22. The *danzón* of today is generally known as a more refined dance, monocentric and even stiff (Madrid and Moore 2013, 210). This was not its reputation in the nineteenth century (Chasteen 2004, 19).

23. See Kaminsky (2020) for definitions and discussions of closed position (55–56), progressive movement (125–127), and revolving steps (61–65) in social partner dance.

24. Walking dances of the Americas might also be considered similar to older European processions, but distinguished themselves from the latter in defaulting to a closed position rather than a side-by-side promenade.

25. I am unaware of any scholarship explicitly connecting the dots between Cuban *danzón* and US American jazz era dances like foxtrot and one-step; though their structural similarities as close-embrace walking dances are just as evident as those connecting *danzón* to milonga and maxixe. Alejandro Madrid and Robin Moore have made a strong case connecting Cuban *danzón* to jazz as *musical* practice, meanwhile (2013, 117–149).

26. The term "dissociation" is commonly used in social partner dance contexts to refer to the practice of moving one body part separately from another. It bears no relation to the concept of dissociative disorder in psychology.

27. This principle is dramatized in a scene from the 1960 film *I Passed for White*, in which jazz music unlocks the white-passing woman's Blackness in the form of wild dancing, which her rich white husband must then tame by repeatedly forcing her into close embrace.

28. "Failure" here has multiple possible valences. The colonized may be legitimately trying to gain status via bourgeois norms and finding themselves unable to do so. However, they may also be doing their own political work in failing to mime the colonizer precisely, in a way that "disturbs the visibility of the colonial presence and makes the recognition of its authority problematic" (Bhabha 1994, 111). Failure, in other words, as strategy (see also Halberstam 2011).

29. I thank Stephan Pennington for this insight (personal conversation).
30. I borrow the notion of “civilizing” dances from Elizabeth’s Aldrich essay, “The Civilizing of America’s Ballrooms” (2009).
31. Those streams may also have met earlier to produce syncretic quadrilles and contradances (Szwed and Marks 1988). As those forms do not rely upon the single-partnership lead/follow system, however, they do not speak as much to the specific processes engaged with in this study.
32. For extended discussions of the Castles and their influence on ballroom dancing in the twentieth century, see e.g., Cook (1998), Groppa (2004, 41–52), and Golden (2007).
33. One might question the assumption that the woman, and not the man, gets to determine frame shape in this way. I am partially basing this on the fundamental premise of this article, namely that the partner connection is produced and shaped by the woman’s choreohexal choices. To this point I would add that the man controlling the woman’s body by adapting to its comforts rather perfectly performs the bourgeois gender ideology of chivalry that the lead/follow system functions to manifest.
34. By “frame shape” I mean the shape made by the partnership as a four-legged unit. For an extended discussion of different frame shapes in partner dance and the possibilities they engender, see Kaminsky (2020, 53–55).
35. Mambo solo/riffing dance aesthetics of the 1950s similarly manifested a move away from earlier partner dancing norms, in this case represented by Cuban danzón (García 2009, 169).

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