

Asian American choreographies in Los Angeles Salsa clubs

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Abstract

The world is changing rapidly. Are the ways that gender is considered in dance education changing at the same time? And if there is change, what is changing? In this paper, I-Wen Chang asks, “How does the corporeal practice of Salsa represent the body politics of Asian Americans in the United States’ cultural context?”

The transcultural dance form of Salsa is a popular craze among Americans. In Los Angeles, one of the world’s major Salsa cities, Salsa practitioners from all over the world zoom forward and back, up and around in hundreds of Salsa clubs. However, while many Asian American women dance on Los Angeles’s Salsa floors, there are very few Asian American men participating in the same Salsa scene. How does the corporeal practice of Salsa represent the body politics of Asian Americans in the United States’ cultural context? Drawing on David L. Eng’s theory in *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (2001) and Yutian Wong’s ideas in *Choreography Asian American* (2010), I-Wen argues that the notions of “flow” in Salsa practice, the standard exotic Latino-ness in Salsa, and the contemporary perceptions of Asian Americans are the contextual elements in which she would like to situate Salsa’s social meaning in Los Angeles.

As a Salsa practitioner, I-Wen uses participantobservation and extensive interviewing as a research method. Through a phenomenological analysis that focuses on body orientation and body movement, she notes that both men and women gain agency in pair-dance invitation. She argues that this agency enables the female dancers (salseras) to choose their partners, and thus Asian male dancers (salseros), who are viewed as lacking masculinity, may not survive this selection process. There are three imperatives for this study: first, to subvert the notion in dance studies of immobile gender rules at play in social dance; second, to clarify Salsa practice by non-whites/non-Latinos, such as Asian American Salsa practitioners, which has not yet been discussed in academia; third, to understand the representation of Asian Americans in performance through corporeal and kinetic terms, which has been neglected in the growing scholarship in Asian American cultural criticism.

Keywords: Los Angeles Salsa, Asian American, female agency, dance flow, choreographing gender

In Los Angeles, one of the world’s major Salsa cities, Salsa practitioners dance in hundreds of Salsa clubs. However, while many Asian American women dance on Los Angeles Salsa floors, there are very few Asian American men participating in the same Salsa scene. How does the corporeal practice of Salsa represent the body politics of Asian Americans in the United States’ cultural context? In this paper, I argue that the notions of “flow” in Salsa practice, the standard exotic Latino-ness in Salsa, and the contemporary perceptions of Asian Americans are the

contextual elements in which I would like to situate Salsa's social meaning in Los Angeles.

Before turning to my analysis, I would like to define the key terms that I am using in this paper: "Asian American" and "choreography." I use the term "Asian American" to understand a process of racialization that produces the Asian American subject through media representation and mandatory ethnicity. Here I refer to the people who indicated their race(s) as "Asian," or reported entries such as "Chinese," "Korean," "Japanese," and "Taiwanese." Asian American subjects are never just "Asian," but are subject to mandatory ethnicity as defined by the cultural articulation within the US social context. In addition, "choreography" for this paper indicates a way to examine the status of dance as a corporeal expression, where embodied notions of identity are debated. Choreography in Salsa dance can reveal the codes of identity in Los Angeles Salsa nightclubs. Specifically, by choreography, I refer to Susan 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" (Foster, 1998, p. 4).

Agency and flow in pair-dancing

Salsa is defined by binary sex partnerships: one must be the leader, typically the male. This rule can be regarded as a stereotype of masculine and feminine behavior for the dancers. The leader is responsible for choosing appropriate steps to suit the music and leading the follower (the woman) by his hand pressure, change of body weight, and signals to make the follower aware of the chosen steps. In addition to this movement norm of a leader-follower relationship, each dancer is also dressed in a "proper" way. This array of quality leads women to acknowledge the masculinity of men in Salsa dance, whereas men are responsible for taking care of and protecting the women.

In the traditional conceptions of gender role assignments for pair-dancing, the woman is typically conceptualized as a passive follower. However, if we examine the flow between the two dancers more closely, we can see that the interaction is far more complex. In partner dancing, each partner cannot be understood as a separate part, but must be analyzed as a whole and experiential body. The whole lived body is an intentional body, which is lived through and in relation to possibilities in the world. Salsa, in particular, has a movement flow that favors equality between partners. In addition, its movements are explicitly sensual and erotic, as both men and women move their hips and sway their upper bodies in a soft and subtle way.

Dancers feel and sense their partners as extensions of themselves when their entire bodies are engaged in the exchange of energy between them. As a result, both salseros and salseras have to rely on each other, and this balanced movement flow also means an equality between two partners. This transmission of energy between the dancers allows for communication so that the woman can respond to the male dancer. Many advanced dancers take different cues from each other through hand connection, with the follower using it to communicate feedback to the leader, and vice versa. The sharing of energy, the passing of tension to one another, and the reception of this tension from one another, is a highly sensitive function that requires acute understanding if it is to be effectively and subtly mastered.

As a result, Salsa practitioners – men as well as women – need to be desired by their dance partners. To be desirable does not necessarily mean physically; it can also refer to being desirable

as a result of their dancing skills. Both salseras and salseros have the right to choose their dance partners, so the question is, what kind of quality would be considered attractive and desirable to Salsa dancers in Los Angeles, a city with a large population of Latino and Chinese immigrants?

The standard exotic Latino-ness in Salsa

Salsa is desired within Americanized imaginations of exotic Latino-ness,¹ and is associated with Latin stereotypes that pervade the imagination: the macho forceful male and the sexy enticing female. In Los Angeles, L.A. Style Salsa is very popular. L.A. Style is a male-directed form and has developed into a much more staged performance, full of flashy “tricks.” In order to better understand the phenomenon of more Asian salseras but fewer Asian salseros in Los Angeles Salsa clubs, it is important for us to understand Salsa’s association with Latino stereotypes and how it articulates a standard masculinity in L.A. Style Salsa.

The heightened portrayal of heterosexuality that is present in Salsa resembles these depictions of masculinity and femininity. In this way, Salsa embodies an image of heterosexuality. Club economies manufacture a choreographic structure that supports male dominance. In *Latin: Thinking, Sensing and Dancing in Latin American Dancing*, Ruud Vermay exposes the exaggerated sense of masculinity and femininity conveyed in Latin American dance. Male dancers display a macho, masculine, and butch demeanor. The dancers forge these stereotyped gender distinctions through overstated choreographed gestures (Vermay, 1994, p. 58).

Furthermore, it is also important to indicate the hierarchy at play in Salsa, where third world bodies, practices, and identities are available to be consumed by the first world for pleasures. Postcolonial scholar Marta Savigliano uses the notion of “political economy” to articulate the passion in tango as a form of “emotional capital [that] is extracted from the third world for sale in the first” (Savigliano, 1995). Similarly, dance scholar Juliet McMains argues that the ballroom versions of Latin dances are Western appropriations with only limited similarity to forms practiced in Latin America. Those dances rely extensively on Western stereotypes of Latino-ness for their emotional and aesthetic appeal (McMains, 2006, p. 112). Therefore, the Latin-ness represented in Salsa is intertwined with Western invention, a projection of what has been excluded from Western masculine and feminine ideals onto a racial Other (McMains, 2006, p. 141)

Salsa is commodified as an expression of Latino culture. In the case study of Salsa in Montréal, Canada, dance scholar Sheenagh Pietrobruno observes how Montréal men and women are attracted by Salsa’s performance of masculinity. Montréal is comparatively a more gender-equal society. However, because Salsa is a “foreign dance practice,” Montréal Salsa practitioners find it more acceptable to embrace the pleasures of the male-female power play. Salsa provides Montréalers a way to enjoy the “Latin passion” without questioning the sexist implication in it. In a similar sense, the Americanized imaginations of exotic Latino-ness result in the overstated choreographed L.A. Salsa style. In a similar sense, the overstated choreographed gestures in L.A. Style Salsa result from the Americanized imaginings of exotic Latino-ness.

¹Garcia (2005) is an important reference for understanding Latino identity in Los Angeles Salsa clubs.

The contemporary perceptions of Asian Americans

The hot, sexy, machismo-filled salseros are the standard representation at play in Salsa. I argue that the contemporary perceptions of Asian American men do not fit into these standard gender rules at play in Salsa. Drawing on David L. Eng's theory in *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (2001), and Yutian Wong's ideas in *Choreography Asian American* (2010), I find that while the Asian female is exotic and appealing, the Asian American man, in the United States' social and cultural context, is "castrated," and becomes a feminized figure who lacks masculine attraction. I argue that the contemporary perceptions of Asian American men, coupled with Salsa's masculine expectations, result in fewer Asian men participating in Salsa dance in American Salsa clubs.

In everyday media discourse, in regard to Asian Americans, there is a tendency for these Asian men to be stereotyped as less attractive, less macho, and less visible. David L. Eng argues that the Asian American male is both materially and psychically feminized within the context of a larger United States cultural imaginary. Eng indicates that the Oxford English Dictionary defines "Oriental" as "submissive," as "weak," as "woman." This "racial castration" suggests that the trauma created by this particular scenario is due not only to a sexual, but also to a racial difference. While Eng's book focuses primarily on the Chinese American and the Japanese American, it also theorizes the numerous articulations of national subjectivity, which depend intimately on racializing, gendering, and sexualizing strategies. Therefore, Eng asserts, subjects, both mainstream and minority, remain invested in the normative identifications, stereotypes, and fantasies that maintain the dominant social order.

Similarly, dance scholar Yutian Wong analyzes the dancing body on the stage to address the notion of Orientalist stereotypes. Wong argues that model minority stereotypes operate in the public imagination as a domesticating discourse that tempers Asian American masculinity (2010, p. 18). She points out that Asian Americans are represented in media as productive members of the society who are nonetheless nonthreatening in comparison to aggressive American masculinity. Wong then analyzes the dancing body on the stage to address the notion of Orientalist stereotypes in circulation. She argues that the Oriental dancing girl is appealing because of her cross-cultural sexual availability. The gendered framing of Asian as a "model minority" in the US has two hidden assumptions: first, the bodies of Asian men are sexually incompetent; second, Asian female bodies are figured as high spectacularized sexual fantasies. The idea of the dancing Asian female body is doubly sexualized through Orientalist fantasies of Asian female sexual availability (2010, p. 18).

Salsa is desired within Americanized imaginations of exotic Latino-ness. Salseras, be them Asian American or otherwise, are able to influence the movement flow, and thus it is important for their dance pleasure to find attractive and skillful partners who fit the standard of "hot, sexy, Latino" salseros. Therefore, contemporary perceptions of Asian American men as emasculated and feminized figures, as Eng and Wong indicate, result in this phenomenon of fewer Asian men dancing Salsa in Los Angeles Salsa clubs. Asian American men find themselves in a marginalized and inferior position when they attend Salsa events and try to invite girls to dance because they either lack or reject a sense of masculinity defined upon Latino standards. On the other hand, Asian American women find that their tender and sexualized impression enables them to fit better into the gendered codes of Salsa practice.

Interview with Asian Salsapractioners

For the Asian salseras I interviewed, Salsa practice is a place for them to freely express themselves, as well as a place of security, a place to show off and be sexy. While the female practitioners state their enthusiasm for Salsa because of its exotic and passionate music rhythm, they also mention the influence of the mass media (e.g. the representation of Salsa on MTV). Initially, they were attracted to the shiny costumes, but later, their love of the music and the flow of the movements had them mesmerized. One of my female interviewees said, "For me, Salsa is a way to find out another country's culture, and it also shows me how these people interact with others."

While Asian salseras cope easily with the rules of Salsa practice, Asian salseros describe it as difficult, particularly the act of dancing in clubs. Both of my male interviewees mentioned how much they have to work on their skills when they began learning Salsa. They both stated that as they began to learn Salsa, during the first year, they could only observe others dancing in the nightclubs. "It took me so long to really be brave enough to ask others to dance, and before that, I spent a lot of time and money to take private lessons to improve my dancing skill," said one male interviewee. For them, Salsa is a dance that requires much effort to access. As I ask their opinions about why there are fewer Asian American men dancing Salsa, they mention that Asians lack the resources of peer group encouragement; the pressure of the Asian culture on studying and pursuing dance were also a factor (which is in conflict with the fact that there are many Asian females dancing Salsa). One of my male interviewees concludes, "It is just so hard and somewhat unfair for guys to dance Salsa."

Conclusion

Salsa reveals codes of racial and gender differences in Los Angeles. The choreographies in Los Angeles Salsa clubs give us some insight into the politics of Asian body representations in U.S. social contexts.

There is another interesting observation that I want to point out for future research. One interviewee mentioned the fact that when Asian men dance, they tend to dance hip-hop, and lack an interest in dancing Salsa. If we take into account that "hip-hop" is a metaphor for "being cool" and gaining masculinity, can we solve our question of why Asian American men tend to dance hip-hop instead of dancing Salsa? The symbolic nature of how masculinity is represented in hip-hop differs from the eroticized male body at play in Salsa. This difference could serve as an indicator of what qualities young men seek to attain for a desired level of masculinity through music, clothes, and dance (Arthur, 2006, p. 105). Social dance and popular dance contain different social meanings in various cultural contexts. Analysis of the body politics in various social dance forms, the everyday expression of bodies on the streets, in media, and in practice, can reveal how naturalized aspects of racialized gender are mobile and intertwined with cultural and gender issues mediated through bodies and their representation.

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