

DANCING LATINIDAD: SALSA PRACTICES AND LATINO/A IDENTITY  
AT BRASIL'S NIGHTCLUB

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by  
Natalie Gainer  
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Sherril Dodds, Thesis Advisor, Dance Department

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis investigates Brasil's Nightclub, a Philadelphia salsa club, as a site at which notions of Latino/a identity are produced and performed. Research for the thesis was conducted over the course of five months and was ethnographic in nature. From February 2016 until June 2016, the author attended Brasil's Nightclub and collected participant observations and interviews. Findings reveal how the club accommodates multiple conflicting narratives of Latino/a identity and how these narratives are embodied through salsa dance practices.

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## **CHAPTER 1:**

### **INTRODUCTION: CONFRONTING IDENTITY THROUGH SALSA DANCE**

I stand as a single point in a large circle of couples. Flanking me are two women, each entwined with male partners, one pair muttering in Spanish and the other in English. Across from me, holding my hands in his, is a man I have never spoken to. He gently places his fingertips on my left shoulder, pushes me ever so slightly, and lets go of my hands as I rotate around myself. As my eyes and hands meet his again, he quickly thanks me and motions to the man beside him. I take a step to my left and repeat the same movements with a new partner. A diversity of ages, ethnicities, languages, and experience levels envelops me as I move around this dancing circle. Despite this diversity, my peers and I are currently learning a very specific version of salsa dance. In the center of the circle stands a man, our instructor, who conducts this pedagogical process. Through his directions, we absorb both the aesthetic principles and the cultural values of the salsa practice that he teaches. As the night progresses, however, our circle scatters into an open dance floor on which salseros and salseras rebel against our instructor's teachings.

In this thesis I explore these various lessons and rebellions at their site of occurrence, the Philadelphia salsa club, Brasil's Nightclub. Through an ethnographic methodology, I set out to understand the particularities of this club and the specific ways in which salsa dance is taught, performed, and dialectically constructed within it. Located

in Philadelphia's Old City, a neighborhood known for its rich history, upscale dining, and plentiful nightlife, Brasil's Nightclub occupies an interesting space for the city's Latino/a community. With its daily salsa classes and thrice-weekly Latin dance parties, the nightclub asserts itself as a specifically Latin space. At the same time, its placement in the middle of one of Philadelphia's most popular tourist and nightlife neighborhoods attracts a diverse crowd of Latino/as and non-Latino/as. This creates an environment in which multiple narratives of identity confront one another through a dance practice that is rooted in an ethnically specific, Latino/a identity. This thesis focuses on the complications that arise when these various claims to identity convene in a single space. As Latinos/as and non-Latinos/as learn and perform together in a shared dance practice, they confront the notions and images of Latinness to which this practice is tied. I, too, aim to confront these notions as I investigate Brasil's and the stereotypes, hierarchies, and resistances that course through its space. Ultimately, I aim to explore how Brasil's Nightclub serves as a site of the production, dissemination, and reconstruction of Latino/a identity.

## **Rationale and Methodology**

The decision to employ an ethnographic methodology in my exploration of Brasil's follows dance anthropologist Deidre Sklar's assertion of "dance as a kind of cultural knowledge" (6). Sklar discusses the increasingly central role of the body and movement in the anthropological field. This trend, she argues, "implies that the

knowledge involved in dancing is not just somatic, but mental and emotional as well, encompassing cultural history, beliefs, values and feelings” (Sklar 6). The ethnographic methodology allows the anthropologist to ground his or her study in embodied subjectivity. Dance ethnography invites the researcher to embrace the complexities and contradictions that arise when one attempts to understand the multifaceted nature of identity.

Dance ethnography is particularly relevant to studies of Latino/a identity in the United States. As dance ethnographer Juliet McMains writes, many Latinos/as in the U.S. balance identities which teeter on the edges of multiple national and ethnic affiliations. McMains writes that, for many Latinos/as, dance practices allow “practitioners to reconcile aspects of their identity that they may otherwise experience in conflict--modern versus traditional, American versus Latin” (133). Hence, understanding these dance practices often provides insight into the various ways in which this multiplicity of identities is negotiated. Caribbean studies scholar Ana M. Lopez makes a similar point when she writes that “the boundaries of the Latin American nation or Latino community have often been closely associated with music, dance, and their performance and representation as stylistic markers of (imagined) national essences” (311). Dance practices, according to Lopez, are critical in understanding how Latino/a identity is constructed and defined. Through the ethnographic methodology, I hope to centralize the subjects as the transmitters and creators of these embodied constructions of Latinness. In doing this, I aim to recognize the agency that dance practitioners wield as producers of cultural knowledge.

My assertion of the importance of dance to constructions of Latino/a identity comes partly from my own position as a Latina and a dancer. As I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter Three, this position comes with its own set of biases, barriers, and benefits in navigating the field of the salsa club. For now, I will note that, from my position, I attempt to break down the barrier of Self/Other that often undermines ethnographic research. By drawing from my embodied experiences as a Latina dancing a Latin American dance in a United States context, I hope to tackle the multiplex that is Latino/a diasporic identity.

### **Context: A Brief History of Salsa**

The word “salsa” brings to mind a number of differing images. Some might picture the flashy twirls and soaring lifts performed on the popular television show *Dancing with the Stars*; others might imagine a calm, hip-swaying, three step pattern. Even amongst Latin dance practitioners, the term salsa arouses controversy and confusion. While some claim that salsa is a form of Latino social dance with its own unique aesthetic, accompanying musical genre, and history, others view it as an amalgamation of several dance and music genres. My goal for this project is not to rely on any single perspective of the salsa dance style; rather, I hope to draw from all of these perspectives in order to understand salsa as an embodiment of multiple Latino/a identities.

In *Spinning Mambo into Salsa*, dance scholar Juliet McMains traces the emergence of salsa to the 1940s, in New York City's renowned Latin dance club, the Palladium (27). Here, men and women of all ethnicities and races danced the precursor to salsa, the mambo. McMains writes that mambo was "born in Cuba but raised in New York" (McMains 31). Its foundation lay in Afro-Cuban *danzon* and *son* music, but its popularity in diverse New York City nightclubs led to a blending of "American lindy hop...Cuban rumba, Puerto Rican *bomba*, and African American jazz"(McMains 32). Thus, even before salsa was born, its predecessor was a dance of hybridity with a home not in Latin America but in New York City.

Literary critic Mayra Santos Febres echoes Juliet McMains in her discussion of salsa's hybrid nature. Febres writes about the emergence of salsa music an embrace of hybridity and as a total rejection of the Latin genres which came before it. Salsa music lyrics heavily referenced "el barrio," a term which often refers to United States' predominantly Latino/a neighborhoods. According to Febres, when *el barrio* is referenced in salsa music, the word refers to not one neighborhood but an imagined translocational space. She explains that "this barrio is not only in New York, but in Caracas, Santurce, Medellin, Santo Domingo, and in every Caribbean industrial center" (181). Febres discusses how this new musical genre was viewed by many as irreverent towards its predecessors and transgressive towards the dominant, oligarchic political system in which it arose (181):

[Salsa music] represented a threat to the dominant groups because the music was no longer coming from or trying to arrive at a rural arcadia, nor did it have in

mind the romanticization of its surroundings in order to please the oligarchic groups. Its ironic, carnivalizing, and hermetic lyrics were not even interested in denouncing oppression, in opening the eyes of the oligarchy or referring to it in any way whatsoever. On the contrary, if the oligarchy wanted to understand what was being said and played, it had to learn the secret codes of the street. [The] music...resisted its placement at...the dawn of nationhood. [It] was, and still is, the direct offspring of industrialization; a cultural expression of the part-human, part-machine entity of the black, white, and mulatto proletarian. (Febres 181)

Febres highlights the ways in which the salsa genre welcomes the diversity of Latino/a identity. At the same time, she highlights its importance as the foundation for a certain sense of pan-Latinness. Thus, while the salsa genre was born out of the specificity of its Latino/a origins, it grew into a much larger, transnational Latino/a practice.

As the salsa genre developed, it also grew in popularity amongst non-Latinos/as in the United States. Salsa's increased popularity in the United States, McMains argues, arose largely out of a process of commercialization. Mambo dancers who wished to make their living from their practice realized that, in order to appeal to mass audiences, they needed to add flashy tricks, turns, and gimmicks to their choreography. With this realization, and with an increased use of recorded rather than live music, the aesthetic principles of mambo began to transform (McMains 47). By the 1970s, second generation Latino/a immigrants began to embrace this new offshoot of mambo and to label it salsa dance.

McMains' hypothesis that salsa was born out of New York City's mambo dance clubs is significant in that it orients a Latino/a diasporic community at the origin point of contemporary salsa dance practices. Severed from their former dependence on live music, and struggling to promote their dance practices in New York City's harsh performance

market, early salsa dancers transformed mambo into something wholly new. In other words, while salsa dance is often associated with Latin America, it is historically more closely tied to a Latin diasporic community in the United States. Significantly, this diasporic community, mostly the children of Latino/a immigrants, employed salsa dance and music in order to connect to a sense of cultural heritage and belonging (McMains 80). As I move forward, I refer to this history in order to understand how the dance events at Brasil's Nightclub might foster a similar search for a sense of belonging. Even further, I ask how the boundaries of this belonging are contested and remade through salsa practices at Brasil's.

### **Outline and Literature Review**

In the following three chapters, I view Brasil's Nightclub through theoretical and ethnographic lenses. In Chapter One, I lay the project's theoretical foundation, drawing from three primary bodies of literature in order to understand the relationship between Latino/a identity and salsa dance. First, I turn to the writings of Latino/a and Latin American studies scholars as I investigate various understandings of Latino/a identity in the United States. In order to understand how diasporic communities in the United States define their ethnic, cultural, and national affiliations, I investigate the definitions and limits of the concept of *latinidad*, a term used to describe "a shared sense of Latino/a identity" (Oboler and Gonzalez). The literature surrounding this concept is particularly useful in establishing how some Latinos/as might adapt a sense of ethnic identity that is

more transnational than local. Dance scholar Ramon Rivera-Servera writes about latinidad as a “pen-ethnic imaginary” wherein the commonalities of Latino/a identity form the basis a transnational community. Ideas such as this allow me to understand how Brasil’s Nightclub fosters a specifically Latino/a community while also hosting a variety of individual and nationally-specific identities. However, much literature on latinidad focuses on overarching ideas about Latinness that risk collapsing the differences within this claim to identity. Discussions of the ways in which Latino/a identity is vast and extremely varied are lacking in this body of literature; however it lays a strong foundation for understanding how shared cultural practices circulate in a diasporic community with diverse national identities but a shared ethnic identity.

The specificity of this diasporic identity led me to my second body of literature, which focuses on the narratives of Latino/a identity that circulate in United States discourses of ethnicity. Guided by literature that situates identity in danced contexts, I land on a discussion of the gendered and heteronormative stereotypes of Latinos/as that pervade many salsa practices. This literature focuses on how the gender roles that salsa music and dance set up are the same ones that are attached to images of Latino/a identity in United States popular culture, literature, and media. Primarily, according to this literature, Latino men in the United States are viewed within an archetype of *machismo*, an exaggerated construction of masculinity that stereotypes Latinos as seductive, unpredictable, and proud. Latina women, too, face exaggerated stereotypes of sexual availability and hyperfemininity. Writings on these stereotypes are useful as they elaborate on the narratives of Latinness that dominate United States discourses of

ethnicity and gender; however, they also tend to lack a discussion of the ways in which these gender stereotypes are countered by Latinos/as. With my two-part exploration of Brasil's, I hope to offer a discussion of both how these stereotypes are reproduced and subverted through salsa practices.

Finally, in order to make sense of multiple constructions of Latinness that circulate on the dance floor, I draw on literary critic Homi Bhabha's theorization of dual temporalities in the narrative-building process. Bhabha's concept understands identity formation as a complex and ambivalent process wherein the members of a nation act simultaneously as objects of historically-sedimented notions of national identity and as subjects in the constant recreation of this identity. This concept has its limits, as it dichotomizes the process of narrative formation into two rather oppositional processes. The possibility for transgression of this dichotomy is not fully explored by this literature; however, the duality that it does explore allows me to understand Brasil's within a very similar two-part framework wherein narratives of Latino/a identity are at once constructed as gendered, homogenizing stereotypes and as contestations of these stereotypes.

In Chapter Three, I investigate these constructions of Latino/a identity at Brasil's more specifically through an ethnographic exploration. I first outline my methodological approach in detail and then dissect my position as a Latina, a dancer, and an ethnographer. Then, I delve into descriptions of the two seemingly oppositional portions of the night that comprise Brasil's events. I describe the salsa lesson, during which a discourse of Latino/a heteronormativity and homogeneity is ingrained in students. In

contrast, I then describe the free dance portion of the night, during which attendees rebel against the stereotypes that pervade the lesson. Finally, I offer an interpretation of Brasil's as a discursive space in which Latino/a identity is appropriated, reclaimed, and expanded.

This thesis serves as a relatively small exploration of Latino/a identity and salsa dance at Brasil's Nightclub. Through this ethnographic project, I aim to centralize the experiences of the salsa practitioners who attend Brasil's and to highlight the ways in which subjective, embodied experiences impact these practitioners' claims to identity. Yet my exploration, riddled with its biases and limitations, constitutes only a minute portion of the socio-cultural complexities of Brasil's Nightclub. As I begin my exploration, I hope to introduce Brasil's as a site that warrants a full investigation of the many narratives, identities, and embodied practices that it accommodates.

**CHAPTER 2:**  
**LATINIDAD, GENDERED STEREOTYPES, AND AMBIVALENCE IN UNITED STATES SALSA CLUBS**

In *Spinning Mambo into Salsa*, dance scholar Juliet McMains remarks that salsa dance was “born in Cuba and Raised in New York” (31). While salsa’s rhythmic foundation is rooted in the Cuban traditions of *son* and *danzon* music, the dance style which emerged from the 1940’s New York City nightclubs was an amalgamation of “American lindy hop...Cuban rumba, Puerto Rican *bomba*, and African American jazz”(McMains 32). Since its inception, salsa has been a dance of hybridity, fostered by diasporic communities far removed from their native nations. As the dance style has risen in popularity, its practitioners have become more and more diverse. In the United States today, salsa dance is embraced by people across many categories of race, ethnicity, and nationality, and class. While the integration of salsa into United States mainstream dance practices poses many benefits, it also raises many questions about the relationship between the dance style and its “Latino working class” roots (McMains 130). In this chapter, I will investigate this tenuous relationship as I think about salsa dance at a site even further removed from its origin point in New York City. Following Cindy Garcia’s exploration of salsa in Los Angeles, I hope to “address the significations of the dance practices as they circulate translocally to a city and Latino population not historically noted as central to the social performance of salsa” (*Salsa Crossings* 5). Taking this exploration one step further, I will ask what it means to dance salsa in a city with a much

smaller Latino/a population than both New York City and Los Angeles and in classes in which non-Latino/as are often in the majority.<sup>1</sup> How do salsa practitioners learn and perform Latinness in a space which is outside of the realm of salsa's origins, far from a city with a predominantly Latino/a population? What does it mean to learn and perform a specifically Latino/a dance form in these hybrid, diverse spaces? In this chapter, I draw on three primary ideas in order to explore how Latino/a identities are negotiated, taught, and performed in salsa clubs. First, I explore conceptualizations of Latino/a identity in order to understand how membership in a Latino/a diasporic community might be determined. Then, I turn to writings on Latino/a stereotypes in order to investigate the narratives of Latinos/as which circulate on the salsa dance floor. I focus particularly on the gender roles which these stereotypes make particularly apparent and which fit comfortably within the confines of gendered salsa practices. Finally, I dissect Homi Bhabha's concepts of narrative building in order to deconstruct the matrix of identities which convene in the space of the salsa club. This theoretical investigation serves as the grounding for my ethnographic descriptions which follow.

### **Latinidad in Salsa Clubs**

My exploration of Brasil's Nightclub relies on the idea that its attendees are embracing and partaking in some performance of latinidad. In its most basic form,

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<sup>1</sup> According to the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey, the Latino/a and Hispanic populations of Los Angeles, New York City, and Philadelphia are 48.4% (as of 2014), 28.6% (as of 2010), and 13.6% (as of 2014) respectively (United States Census Bureau).

latinidad is thought of as “a shared sense of Latino identity” (Oboler and Gonzalez). This definition leaves room for both inclusivity and exclusivity. While some scholars limit latinidades to include only those of Latino/a descent who actively celebrate this ancestral lineage, others view it more broadly. For example, Ramon Rivera-Servera calls for a definition of latinidad which accounts for the global, and often circular, flow of Latino/a communities. He discusses how migration patterns in Latin America and the United States--from one Latin American country to the United States and sometimes back to the originary country--have fostered many intersections and overlaps between various communities of Latino/as. With these overlaps a “panethnic imaginary” has emerged; in other words, initially geographically disparate groups of Latino/as have come to find commonalities in their “traditions, language, shared ancestry, religion [and] location” that have fostered a new sense of shared identity (Rivera-Servera 22). Thus, Rivera-Servera posits, with increased migration and flow between communities of Latino/as comes an “expanded notion of community” (Rivera-Servera 22). This expansive, dynamic community, in Ramon-Servera’s view, is the same group of people who claim a sense of belonging in and attachment to Latino/a cultural performances and practices.

Rivera-Servera’s explanation of latinidad is particularly useful in that it reveals the complexities of the identity formation process. His discussion of latinidades as the intersection of many other claims to identity is crucial because it recognizes that a great deal of “cultural sharing” occurs within and between Latino/a and non-Latino/a communities. Latinidad is not the culmination of many experiences, languages, and

ancestral heritages in a single claim to identity; rather, it is the simultaneous coherence and friction of many different “self-named identities” (Rivera-Servera 24).

In the context of a salsa club, this shared sense of identity can be quite empowering to Latino/a dancers. In her ethnography of salsa clubs in New York, Miami, and Los Angeles, Juliet McMains suggests that salsa dance serves to reconnect Latino/as living in the United States to their Latin American ethnic and cultural heritages. McMains draws on the work of ethnomusicologist Christopher Washburne in order to understand how the salsa genre provides Latinas/os a space in which to negotiate their complex and often conflicting cultural, racial, and national identities:

[T]he hybrid makeup of salsa music itself enables salsa to function simultaneously as a marker of national identity and pan-Latino identity. It is not only the multiple cultural streams on which salsa music is based but also the interactions of people from such diverse backgrounds that enable salsa music and dance to function as a means of affirming both a connection to a national identity and a broader pan-Latino community. (McMains 132)

She evidences this point with several statements from salsa practitioners who discuss the dance’s role in developing their sense of pan-Latino pride. These Latino/a dancers remark that discovering salsa helped them connect with older generations of Latinos/as and to their peers in a celebration of the multifaceted nature of pan-Latino identity (McMains 133-5). For many Latinos/as, salsa dance bridges gaps between race, nationality, and even age.

Salsa serves an important role in Latino/a diasporic communities as it unites and celebrates both the commonalities and differences of groups of people who are so often

marginalized from dominant white cultures in the United States. Moreover, McMains argues, salsa creates an opportunity to unravel many of the harmful narratives surrounding Latinness which pervade United States discourses of race and ethnicity. She describes the salsa club as a “Latino-dominated space that...welcomes non-Latinos [and] provides an opportunity for highly competent non-Latino dancers to challenge stereotypes” (137). Through repeated cross-cultural interactions, which are less likely to happen outside of the club, white salsa dancers begin to reevaluate their former notions about Latinos/as. McMains’ work reveals that salsa dance potentially allows for a great deal of cross- and intra-cultural dialogue; yet she and a number of other dance scholars also call attention to the tenuousness of this potential.

Rivera-Servera’s discussion of *latinidad* problematizes McMains’ optimistic understanding of salsa clubs. More specifically, his idea of a *latinidad* as a self-named identity presents the opportunity for contradictions and transgressions in the identity-forming process. He hints at the ways in which one might choose an identity which upsets traditional racial, ethnic, gender, or sexual categories in some way. In his own studies, he discusses these categorical rebellions especially in light of queer Latino/a performances in predominantly heteronormative settings, focusing on performance’s potential to redistribute power. Like McMains, Rivera-Servera points to the ways in which racial and cultural boundaries might be broken down through dance practices; however, many scholars would posit that this broad and inclusive understanding of *latinidad*, which allows salsa practitioners from a wide range of communities and backgrounds to claim a Latino/a identity, often propagates harmful ideas about what it

means to be Latino/a. While the performance of latinidad potentially brings together diverse groups of Latino/as in a celebration of a shared culture and heritage, it also risks a certain privileging of predominant narratives of race and ethnicity.

Cindy Garcia draws attention to this insidious aspect of salsa in her exploration of salsa clubs in Los Angeles. Garcia understands salsa practices as an embodiment of latinidad that is not bound solely by racial or ethnic identity. She posits that, through dance, someone who is not Latino/a might still embody and embrace some idea of Latinness. Garcia writes:

I envision latinidad put into motion as salsa practices, continuously contested and conceptualized by Latinas/os and non-Latinas/os in salsa settings, rather than an essentialized, bounded race, culture, or ethnicity. Latinidad does not necessarily stick to Latina/o bodies. In the nighttime sphere of salsa dancing, many people, Latina/o or not, enact latinidad. (*Salsa Crossings* 9)

According to Garcia, people of all ethnicities are invited to try on a Latino/a identity in the space of the salsa club. Their ability to adhere to the standards of etiquette and the movement aesthetics of the given club, rather than their ethnic or cultural backgrounds, determine their membership in these communities of latinidades. Through salsa, latinidad becomes “not...a static or unifying formation but...a flexible category that relates to a plurality of ideologies of identification, cultural expressions, and political and social agendas” (Lao-Montes 8). This understanding of latinidad as an identity performance which anyone can explore on the salsa dance floor reasserts a social hierarchy in which many Latino/as are marginalized. Especially in the context of United States salsa clubs--

that is, in a country with a history of oppression of Latino/as--latinidad risks slipping away from a claim to Latino/a identity made by Latino/as and morphing into a false or idealized representation of Latino/as.

Cindy Garcia extrapolates on the ways in which this all-inclusive understanding of latinidad is both empowering and disempowering in her ethnography of the Los Angeles salsa club Chuck's Grill:

Salsa clubs like Chuck's Grill to some degree offer an escape from the marginalizations that many Latino/as in Los Angeles face in everyday life, yet the hierarchies that undergird danced latinidad work with and against the dynamics of white male hegemony and the everydayness of the war against Latinas/os in (or trying to enter) the United States. ("The Great Migration" 130)

At Chuck's, she claims, the schisms between two different types of salsa dancers are manifested in the club's stark division of space. This spatial and aesthetic dichotomy, though fluid and occasionally transgressed, raise many questions about what performances of identity are viewed as acceptable in United States salsa clubs.

The politics of acceptability as they pertain to salsa dance practices are vast and complex. Issues of socioeconomic class, gender, sexuality, nationality, race, age, and ability are all at play on the dance floor. Yet perhaps the most apparent and dichotomized of these identity categories according to writers such as Juliet McMains and Cindy Garcia is that of gender. As these two authors point out in their ethnographies of salsa clubs, gender roles as they are expressed in salsa spaces are often strictly dichotomized and heteronormative. In a traditional salsa partnership, men assume the role of leader--that is,

they initiate and direct all of the couple's movements by physically signalling to their partners when to step, turn, or perform a variety of other tricks--and women assume the role of follower as they respond to and move in relation to their partners' cues. Of course, many contemporary salsa practitioners have attempted to deconstruct this heteronormative structure, and now more than ever, classes and events are offered which welcome same-sex dance partners, female leads, and male followers. Yet strict gender roles persist in many salsa clubs and often play off the gender discourses which surround Latino/a male and female bodies. In order to understand the significance of salsa's gender dichotomies, it is critical to first discuss the stereotypes of Latino/a men and women which circulate in the United States and which are often co-opted by salsa dancers or teachers in order to navigate the social hierarchies of the dance floor. These stereotypes give us some insight into just one aspect of the construction of Latino/a identity through salsa practices.

### **Gendered Latino/a Stereotypes in Salsa**

The evolution of salsa in the United States has primarily positioned male and female practitioners within two respective stereotypes: the "macho" male who suavely yet sternly controls and seduces the female dancer, and the hypersexual female who is available to and at the whims of her male partner. Both of these stereotypes, of course, are rather simplistic and are often contested, rather than affirmed, through individual dancers' salsa practices; however, the ways in which these stereotypes are affirmed in

certain salsa contexts serve to perpetuate narratives of Latino/a identity and notions of how to perform this identity through salsa. More specifically, as I will argue in Chapter Three, these gendered notions prevail in certain pedagogical aspects of Brasil's Nightclub, and thus, a look at how they have become ingrained in salsa practices is particularly relevant to this thesis.

In his essay about the evolution of salsa dance in Cali, Colombia, scholar Alejandro Ulloa Sanmiguel discusses the construction of masculinity in salsa dance. He cites the common “stereotype about salsa dancing, assumed generally to fall within a *machista* (male-dominant) context, in which the man shows off his body and his dance and seduces and conquers women, affirming his role as a macho” (146). While Sanmiguel is careful to note that today, more and more salseros and salseras are pushing back against this stereotype, he also points to its ubiquity within the world of salsa dance and music. For example, ethnomusicologists Maiken Derno and Christopher Washburne explain how the lyrics of the popular contemporary salsa singer La India exemplify the archetype of male *machismo* in salsa. Derno and Washburne translate and interpret the lyrics to La India's hit “Ese Hombre”:

*This man that you see here  
That appears so gallant  
So attentive and proud  
I know him as I know myself  
This man that you see here  
Apparently so divine  
Likeable and effusive  
He only knows how to cause  
Suffering* (Derno and Washburne 145)

In this verse, the authors argue, La India both sets up the archetype and exposes the toxicity of male *machismo*. The image of the suave, seductive, and arrogant man which her lyrics paint is one which is integral to many salsa traditions (Derno and Washburne 146). More uniquely, though, La India reveals the misogynistic principles on which this image is built in the second half of her verse.

With its inseverable ties to its accompanying music, salsa dance practice propagates much the same image of masculinity; however, unlike La India's lyrics, contemporary salsa teachers and practitioners often work with, rather than against, this image. When left unchallenged, the male leader/female follower relationship that is foundational to many salsa practices exemplifies the stereotype of *machismo* which is closely associated with Latin American men. In most salsa classes, social dance spaces, and competitions, the male leader role comes with a set of rules that closely align with the *machismo* stereotype. Men are taught to smoothly and confidently ask for a women's partnership and to lead their partners through exacting yet gentle cues. In short, salseros are expected to embody the seductive yet chivalrous characteristics of the Latino macho character.

Women, too, are often expected to adhere to certain codes of conduct which are closely associated with popular stereotypes about Latinas. In describing representations of femininity in salsa dance, Juliet McMains describes the ideal salsera aesthetic as "one that is...aggressive, exaggerated, and perhaps liberated in enjoyment of her own sexuality" (63). This aesthetic parallels representations of Latinas which predominate in

United States discourses of Latin Americans. In their discussion of representations of Latinas in U.S. popular culture, Latina/o studies scholars Isabel Molina Guzman and Angharad N. Valdivia discuss the “widely circulated narratives of [Latina] sexual availability, proficiency, and desirability” (211). They draw into this discussion the localization of the hips and buttocks as the sites of eroticization and objectification of the Latina body. This particular mode of the eroticization of the Latina body is quite apparent in salsa clubs, where the movement of the hips often becomes tied to ideas about one’s skill level or desirability. For example, Cindy Garcia writes about one Los Angeles club where professional salseras are hired to stand atop a stage and move their hips in figure-eight formations. According to Garcia, these women represent an ideal of a sexually available Latina; within the social and gendered hierarchies of the club, embodying this ideal often makes women more desirable partners (Garcia, *Salsa Crossings* 97). Similarly, Juliet McMains notes the stereotypes about salsa dance, which she encountered in her studies of salsa studios, as “spicy, sensual dances of the lower body that unleash uncontrollable passions” (134). Thus, the stereotypes which circulate on the salsa dance floor mirror those which prevail in United States popular culture; these gendered narratives position both Latinos and Latinas as icons of binary, heteronormative, yet similarly exaggerated sexuality.

The gender binary which many salsa dance practices perpetuate presents opportunities for both the empowerment and the disempowerment of Latinas/os. The spreading of narratives of a gendered Latino/a hypersexuality is quite harmful in that it necessarily excludes many people who do not adhere to binary expressions of gender or

sexuality. Furthermore, these stereotypes have a significant impact on how Latinos/as are perceived and understand their own identities. Latinos/as on the salsa dance floor find themselves in a quandary in which they must emulate a stereotype about their ethnicity in order to gain status in an environment which is supposedly rooted in Latin American music and dance traditions.

Juliet McMains elaborates on this dilemma when she writes, “At the same time that they may be experiencing a heightened sense of cultural identity, Latinos...must negotiate stereotypes non-Latinos bring to the salsa dance classroom” (134). She explains that Anglo-American stereotypes of Latinas/os as sensual, dangerous, and uncontrollably passionate are often drawn on as marketing strategies in the salsa industry (134). Many of the Latino/a dancers interviewed by Cindy Garcia pointed to salsa’s reliance on stereotypes as well. For example, one Colombian attendee of Chuck’s Grill “characterized L.A. salsa and its Latino/a ‘fanatics’ as more like what Americans think Latinas/s are like” rather than what they are actually like (Garcia, “The Great Migration” 132). In other words, many non-Latino/a salsa practitioners are dedicated to performing an exaggerated stereotype of a Latino/a dance style that does not align with the lived experiences of many Latino/a practitioners. In fact, oftentimes, for Latinos/as, refuting the exaggerated L.A. salsa style means exposing their Latino/a heritage and consequently losing social status in the salsa club.

Cindy Garcia outlines the seemingly paradoxical relationship between social status and Latino/a heritage in one particular club, Chuck’s Grill. She explains how certain stylistic choices expose one’s association with L.A. style salsa, and others with a

“Mexican” style of salsa. In the section of the club which houses a restaurant, dancers move with a subtle bounce in their step. These dancers’ movements are “associated with Mexicanness” (Garcia, “The Great Migration” 129). Garcia asserts that the label of Mexican here is not nationally specific; rather, it is a collapsing of a broad range of Latino/a nationalities into the title of Mexican, the result of a complicated history of California’s status as a border state (Garcia, “The Great Migration” 129).

In contrast, in the section of the club which houses a banquet hall, salsa practitioners perform frequent, quick turns and accent their movements with exaggerated head and hip articulations. These dancers are immediately identified as “L.A style” salseros and salseras. It is this latter style of salsa dancing which is most often associated with aesthetic sophistication and technical prowess by the attendees of Chuck’s Grill. This leaves the “Mexican” style of salsa on the other end of the aesthetic spectrum: it is perceived as unrefined, simplistic, “illegible...and wrong” (Garcia, “The Great Migration” 126). Yet it is the L.A. style which is understood by Latinos/as as an exaggerated mimicry of gendered Latino/a stereotypes. Thus, Latinos/as who frequent the club are put in a disempowering position where they must embody a stereotype about their ethnic group in order to garner respect and desirability within a space that claims Latino/a cultural practices as its foundation. On the other hand, the performance of stereotypical Latinness through L.A. style dancing privileges the appropriation of salsa dance by non-Latinos/as and the assimilation of Latinos/as into this new salsa aesthetic.

At the same time that many salsa practices risk trapping Latinos/as into a performance of stereotypes, they also present a potentially empowering opportunity for

Latinos/as to take advantage of and transgress the salsa club hierarchy. Juliet McMains explains that many Latino/a salsa dancers and instructors intentionally act out stereotypes in order to gain the interest and respect of students and peers. She discusses the practice of “self-commodification,” in which “Latino dance teachers strategically shape their self-commodified identity, a strategy that allows them to profit from stereotypes of the hot sexy Latina/o without becoming constrained by them” (McMains 135). For women, particularly, the embracing of narratives of hypersexuality provides not only an opportunity to gain recognition as a skilled salsa dancer but also a rare space in which the expression of sexuality is encouraged. This, in itself, might be seen as a transgression of the gendered hierarchies which permeate salsa practices. Beyond these instances of self-commodification, though, there are many salsa spaces in which the intersecting matrices of gender and ethnic stereotypes are complicated and transgressed. In many clubs and classes, dancers refuse to adapt to the exaggerated and gendered styles which have become popular on dance floors across the nation. For example, Juliet McMains visits one salsa studio that welcomes same-sex partners and invites all genders to take on the leader role. The narratives which many salsa practices perpetuate are arbitrary and delicate, and thus, they present many opportunities to transgress the hierarchies which they generate. If, like Cindy Garcia, we understand United States salsa clubs as spaces “in which antimigrant violences become aestheticized and mobilized” (Garcia, “The Great Migration” 128), we might also view them as spaces in which symbolic violences--such as the perpetuation of gendered stereotypes about Latinos/as--are undermined. Thus,

many salsa clubs sit at the intersection of the history of Latinos/as as a marginalized group in the United States and the present-day assertion of Pan-Latino/a pride and unity.

### **Salsa Clubs and Ambivalent Narrative Building**

What seems to be at work with the assertion of *latinidad* in salsa clubs is the development of two separate narratives of Latino/a identity. In light of McMains' discussion of the hybrid nature of salsa, it is unsurprising that the environment of the salsa club would invite this multiplicity of identities. Interestingly, though, McMains also highlights the ways in which certain narratives of Latino/a identity which circulate at salsa clubs arise not from the experiences of Latinos/as but rather from Anglo-American stereotypes about them. I would posit that, although a number of representations and performances of Latino/a identity move through the space of the salsa club, these narratives pull in two opposing directions: in one direction towards an understanding of Latino/a identity rooted in the everyday experiences of Latino/as, and in other towards a representation moored in an United States history of the systematic oppression of Latino/as.

One might understand this identity-forming process in the likeness of the temporal split which literary scholar Homi Bhabha conceives as integral to the formation of national identities. Bhabha understands the construction of national identity as a process which occurs along two simultaneous but opposing narrative lines: the pedagogical and the performative. The pedagogical aspects of narrative-building are

those which are constructed, arbitrary, and interested in maintaining ties to the events or ideas of the historical past. Within this temporality, the citizens of a nation stand in as the objects of historically-sedimented ideas of that nation and its people. The performative, in contrast, are those aspects which embrace contemporaneity, centering the lived experiences of a nation's citizens in the identity formation process (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 214). Within this temporality, citizens act as agentive subjects, actively creating, disowning, and recreating ideas of national identity and belonging. These two oppositional constructions of nationhood create a matrix of narratives in which multiple understandings of national identity and about the people who claim that identity circulate at once.

We might think of diasporic communities of Latinos/as in the United States as one sort of imagined pan-Latino/a nation whose members are caught in this matrix and of salsa practices as a double-edged sword which runs through it. On one edge of this sword, salsa dance practices strengthen a long history of the marginalization of Latinos/as through narratives which stereotype and homogenize Latino/a identities. On the other end, salsa spaces are those in which stereotypes and totalizing ideas about Latinos/as are contested. Caribbean studies scholar Ana M. Lopez problematizes this ambivalent relationship between salsa practices and Latino/a identity:

Latin music [and dance] in the United States has often existed in a colonialist vacuum as a catchall category that collapses all of the carefully nurtured (though often imagined) nationalistic origins of specific rhythms. By the same token, however, that colonial vacuum has also been the space where different notions of (an often gendered) *Latinidad* have emerged that realign the idea of "Latino"

rhythms with a contestational Pan-Latin American/Latino community and/or identity. (311)

Lopez deftly points to the inseverable ties between pan-Latino identity and their existence within the cultural hegemony of the United States. Within this context, the hybridity of Latino/a identity is often erased in favor of homogenizing and often sexist stereotypes. At the same time, out of this erasure of hybridity comes a unifying, yet still somewhat harmful, sense of shared latinidad.

Yet I would argue that Lopez's understanding of Bhabha's temporal split focuses too closely on the pedagogical, historically sedimented narratives. In doing this, Lopez overlooks the potentialities for subversion which performativity present.

Homi Bhabha writes that it is through performativity--through the constant recreation and reinterpretation of what constitutes a nation--that a nation's people "provoke a crisis within the process of signification and discursive address" (214). When the people assert their subjectivity and their lived contemporaneity, they problematize and destabilize the discourses in which they operate. This destabilization of discourses works in contrast to the homogenizing mission of the pedagogical temporality and instead "opens up the possibility of other narratives of the people and their difference" (Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* 300). In the context of salsa practices, this performative temporality is a rather powerful one: it allows practitioners to celebrate a traditionally Latino/a dance style while also asserting the multiplicitous and varied nature of latinidad. Despite the "colonial vacuum" in which United States salsa practices exist, the

performance of salsa presents opportunities for the opposition to and transgression of hegemonic narratives of Latino/a identity.

The site of my research, Brasil's Nightclub, presents a particularly clear exemplification of Bhabha's ambivalent temporalities. In fact, the structure of the night club is such that the pedagogical and performative divide is labeled as such. Every Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday and every other Thursday, Brasil's holds a salsa dance event. The event consists of two parts: from 9:30 PM until around 11:00 PM, an instructor from a Philadelphia Latin dance studio teaches a beginner's salsa lesson. Following the lesson, from around 11:00 PM until the nightclub closes at 2:00 AM, the dance floor opens to anyone, and a DJ plays a mix of salsa, bachata, and merengue music. These nights are labeled as "salsa nights" according to the salsa teacher and the information provided on the club's website; yet, a closer look at the events reveals the diversity of the dance practices which occur here. In the first half of the night, students are taught not only basic salsa steps but also how to embody the narratives of Latinness which align closely with larger gendered stereotypes about Latinos/as. In the second portion of the night, dancers experiment with improvisations and variations on the basic step, asserting their subjective and multifaceted claims to latinidad. While the first portion of the night relies on narratives of Latinos/as which are sedimented in United States' historical and cultural memory, the second portion upholds the multifaceted lived experiences of the club's attendees.

This coexistence of the pedagogical and the performative within the space of Brasil's presents an interesting opportunity for dancers to deconstruct narratives of

Latinness through salsa. If, in the pedagogical portion of the night, practitioners are taught how to embody certain narratives and stereotypes of Latino/a identity, in the performative portion of the night, they respond to, and often reject, these narratives. More specifically, through their improvisatory performances of salsa, the dancers resist the stereotype of the heteronormative, hypersexualized Latino/a which persists in the discourses which circulate during the salsa lesson. Brasil's attendees instead embrace a discourse of hybridity: dancers of all races and ethnicities take the dance floor and mingle, teach, and move with one another. Their movements do not adhere strictly to the basic steps taught in the lesson, and the music to which they dance is diverse, from salsa to merengue to the occasional reggaeton hit. Salsa practices at Brasil's enact a dance of hybridity. The club's two-part structure presents an important opportunity for dancers to move outside of the social hierarchies and stereotypes which pervade U.S. discourses of Latino/a identity. In the following chapter, I will delve into Brasil's Nightclub more specifically and the various ways in which multiple narratives of Latino/a identity are negotiated therein.

## CHAPTER 3:

### LATINO/A IDENTITY AND AMBIVALENCE AT BRASIL'S NIGHTCLUB

For about five hours every Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday and every other Thursday, attendees of Brasil's Nightclub learn two different versions of *Latinidad*. That is, they enter a space in which narratives of Latino/a identity are central but, at the same time, are complex and ambivalent. On these nights, one event accommodates two separate sub-portions of salsa practices. During the first portion, Mike, a Latino salsa teacher from a Philadelphia social dance studio, instructs students on the rhythmic and aesthetic qualities of what he terms "salsa dance" from nine o'clock to eleven o'clock. But Mike does not simply teach the club attendees how to execute the shifts of weight, rhythms, and partnering tricks that are central to salsa dance; he also weaves through his lesson gendered narratives of Latino/a identity which constrain men and women to narrow expressions of gender and sexuality. He paints a delicate portrait of *Latinness*, which is often reimagined in the second portion of the night. From eleven o'clock to two o'clock, the dance floor at Brasil's hosts a free dance. During this second portion, dancers do not follow the instructor but rather perform their own variations, improvisations, and oppositions of the salsa steps taught in the lesson. In doing this, I posit, Brasil's attendees perform a discursive dance, which often transgresses the heteronormative stereotypes of *Latinness* which the salsa lesson establishes. In this chapter, I outline the two portions of Brasil's events and the various ways in which narratives of Latino/a identity are transmitted, taught, performed, and transgressed at Brasil's Nightclub. As I weave

together my ethnographic data, drawn from observations, interactions, embodied experiences, and interviews, I aim to understand Brasil's as a space in which Latino/a identity is consistently undergoing constructions and transformations. Using my ethnographic data as a springboard, I then place Brasil's Nightclub events within Homi Bhabha's framework of ambivalent temporality. I end with a discussion of the implications provided by this framework and suggest that Brasil's acts as a space of both empowerment and disempowerment for its Latino/a attendees.

### **Positionality and Methodology**

My ethnographic investigation of Brasil's Nightclub occurred over the course of five months, from February 2016 to June 2016. After a preliminary visit to the club, I was struck by what I perceived as a vast difference between the first half (the salsa lesson) and the second half (the free dance portion) of the event I attended. This project was born out of the curiosity which this disparity aroused in me. Following dance ethnographer Deidre Sklar's assertion that "cultural knowledge is embodied in movement, especially the highly stylized and codified movement we call dance" (Sklar 6), I set out to understand the seemingly contradictory cultural values and principles enacted at Brasil's.

I visited the site five times following my preliminary visit, a number which was limited largely by the financial cost of attending Brasil's events. During my visits, I collected observations of my interactions with other club-goers, of my embodied experiences of learning and dancing salsa, and of what I saw, heard, and otherwise

sensed. In an attempt to remain discreet in my position as a researcher, I made notes subtly on my phone and later, away from the club space, expanded on these notes. Yet in many instances, my attempts at subtlety were ineffective as I navigated the social web of Brasil's.

One barrier I encountered during my visits was a sense of alienation from other club attendees. This sense, I believe, arose for two reasons: first, my inability to speak Spanish impeded my communication with many of the attendees, especially during the second portion of the night. During the free dance portion, the large majority of dancers in the club are fluent Spanish speakers, and many of them seem significantly less comfortable speaking English. On several occasions, I attempted to explain my thesis in a muddling of Spanish and English phrases; on most occasions, this strategy failed me and whomever I was talking with politely left the conversation. The second, less tangible reason for my feelings of alienation seem connected to the status of Brasil's Nightclub as a space of leisure. Many club-goers seemed reluctant to engage in an investigation of dance in a mode that did not involve dancing. For example, on one occasion, when I explained to a partner that I was writing a thesis about salsa, he became very excited; yet when I asked if I could interview him, he responded by giving me detailed pointers about salsa partnering and the contact information of his favorite salsa teacher, but not his own contact information for a future interview. These barriers to explaining the nature of my thesis inhibited my ability to recruit informants. By the end of my six visits, I had secured only one interview.

These barriers to recruiting informants led me to pay particularly close attention to my every observation and interaction at the club. I adopted a Geertzian lens as I attempted to understand from multiple angles the “tone, character...aesthetic style and mood” (Geertz qtd. In Sklar 6) of Brasil’s club go-ers. As I attempted to smoothly integrate myself into the Brasil’s tableau, my “‘ascribed’ characteristic” as a Latina and my ability to adhere to the common garb worn by women therein were extremely helpful (Hammersly and Atkinson 92). At the same time, my perspective as a Latina is an inherently biased one. I write about gendered Latino/a stereotypes as I observe them, but I cannot separate my own experiences from my observations. My subjectivity as an ethnographer is perhaps best illustrated by an interaction I had with another club-goer. One night, as I stood on the sidelines of the dance floor and observed the night’s free dance portion, a young white woman approached me smiling. She pointed to me and then to a painting on the wall above me and exclaimed, “You look just like the girl in the painting!” I looked up to a large painting of a smoldering, dark-haired woman in a backless red dress and large hoop earrings, a familiar portrait of Latina femininity. I looked down at my own outfit, a backless pink dress and small hoop earrings, and laughed alongside her at the vague resemblance. Later, I pondered this interaction. My appearance and garb seemed to allow me a certain ability to blend into Brasil’s predominantly Latino/a population; yet the woman’s eagerness to associate my appearance with that of a painting reminded me I am privy to the homogenizing stereotypes about which I write. Ultimately, my interaction with the woman reminded me of the delicate balances of power that I must navigate as I attempt an ethnographic study

of Brasil's Nightclub. As I proceed, I attempt to "[recognize] that the field is not a clean space, unsullied by past discourse" (Buckland 8); indeed, through this exploration, I hope to acknowledge the ways in which discourses of Latino/a identity are constantly entangled, destabilized, and challenged.

### **Part 1: The Salsa Lesson**

It is nine o' clock on a Friday night in Old City, one of Philadelphia's most lively neighborhoods. As I walk down a street lined with bars, I peer through each window into several crowded dance floors. I reach my destination at the end of the street and am struck by confusion. Brasil's Nightclub, advertised as one of the most popular salsa clubs in the city, is completely empty, and emanating from its large dance floor are not salsa songs but United States top 40 hits. At the door, a man who I will soon discover is the club's salsa instructor converses in Spanish with two men, then turns to the bouncer and tells her to charge the men only half the normal entry fee. Thinking I had severely misunderstood the nightclub's advertisements, I consider retreating from the oddly empty club; before I can, the bouncer glances at me knowingly and informs me that the salsa lesson would begin in a few minutes on the second floor. Relieved by this new information, I hand my identification card to the bouncer, pay my five dollar cover fee, and eagerly walk up a staircase into a smaller but much livelier room. Here, a group of about thirty men and women mingle: some nervously, fiddling their things or digging their hands deep into their pockets, and others nonchalantly, laughing loudly and greeting familiar club attendees with a kiss on the cheek as they enter the room. Two young

women nervously giggle together and remark that the club is quite empty. “Where are your friends?” one of them demands of the other as they both glance around the room imploringly. After about ten minutes of this array of anxious and comfortable mingling, a man claps his hands and informs us, once in Spanish and once in English, that the salsa lesson is beginning.

Mike organizes us (a group of about thirty men and women) into three lines behind him facing a large mirror. A group of people, including the two men who were granted a discounted entry fee, chatter in Spanish as Mike asks them to step to the front row directly behind him; a group of men quietly speaking English walk sheepishly to the back. With this classroom formation, Mike gives his students a hint as to what to aspire to as they learn salsa movements: he positions his Latino/a students as idealized dancing bodies.

Before we begin moving, Mike asks, “Is this anyone’s first salsa class?” Several people raise their hands from the back of the class. Mike glances at each first-timer’s face for a few seconds but says nothing further. Instead, he begins counting: “Ready? One-two-three, one-two-three, one-two-three,” he sings from the front of the room. As he counts, he begins to move. Keeping his elbows close to his torso and his face pointed squarely at his reflection in the mirror, he steps back on his right foot, transferring his weight ever so slightly so that his right hip swings subtly to the right. He repeats this movement but instead steps forward with his left foot while he continues to steadily count in threes. This forward-and-back series he calls “the basic.” Mike leads us through a

progression of movements until we are alternating between the basic step and a turning step. We, the students, follow his every move.

After about fifteen minutes of this game of follow-the-leader, Mike breaks up the three-line formation. He directs us to form two straight lines, which face each other, with women in one line and men in the other. We are instructed to walk towards the person directly across from us. This person, he explains, will be our first partner, but we will eventually dance with each member of the opposite gender who is in attendance. Mike adds that the men will act as leaders, initiating and directing all movement, and the women as followers. “Men,” Mike commands the crowd, “please take your ladies’ hands and walk them into a circle.” We stand in two concentric circles now, with all of the men in the inner circle and all of the women in the outer one. Mike explains that we will dance with our current partner for a few rounds of the basic step. Then, the male dancer will pass his partner on to the next man in the concentric circle.

I press my hands gently down on those of the man standing across from me. My partner asks me if this is my first time at Brasil’s. It is not my first time, but my partner informs me that it is his. Mike begins to count again, but this time he is joined by a deejay’s musical accompaniment. As salsa music blares, my partner and I clumsily fumble over counts and movements. We have only just worked out how to emulate Mike’s demonstrations when the music stops abruptly and the women are thanked and passed along to the next man. Interestingly, the next song that plays is not a salsa but a bachata song. Even so, we are told to attempt the same eight-count routine with our new partners. Mike consistently has us move to a new partner after about sixteen or thirty-two

counts of basic and turning steps. This leads to a series of interrupted phrases, which always begin in the same way and end so quickly and abruptly that my partner and I have no time to experiment with what we are learning. My movements begin to feel robotic as I move from partner to partner, repeating the same movements with little variation.

While the class continues with this series of interrupted movements, two women sneak into the lesson late. They quietly take a place in the circle and begin to dance together, hoping not to call attention to their lateness. Mike catches them out of the corner of his eye and addresses them. “Oh no, this is not *that* kind of party,” he exclaims as laughter erupts from the group of students. Mike reveals the strictness with which he enforces the gender delineations of salsa dance as he separates the women’s hands and pairs them instead with male partners.

I rotate clockwise in the outside circle to my next partner, a white man with graying hair who adds onto Mike’s instructions with his own advice. He tells me to press more heavily into the palms of his hands; this way, he explains, I will be better able to sense the ways in which he directs my body. This instruction is rather effective. We execute the basic step smoothly, our feet and hips sashaying in the same minute ways that Mike demonstrates. My new partner encourages me as I learn to sense his directions. “Good job!” he exclaims as I sense the slight pressure of his palm on my left shoulder and instantly realize that this is my queue to perform a quick twirl. But when, a second later, I miss his signal to turn, he admonishes, “No, no, pay attention to my touch!” He thanks me before he passes me on to my next partner.

I begin to notice a pattern in how my partners' and my own performance is perceived by the teacher and other students as we rotate robotically around one another. It seems that men are rewarded for their ability to be clear, strong leaders; predictably, then, women are rewarded for their ability to sense and respond to their leads. Conversely, men are reprimanded for being unclear or harsh as leads, and women for being too hesitant or too eager as followers. At one point, for example, Mike asserts that the men are directing their partners to turn far too jarringly. He shouts, "Men, remember you are dealing with a delicate woman here! Use a strong yet gentle touch!" To the women, he remarks, "Ladies, *do not* turn until you feel your partner's hand on your shoulder." These principles, the male dancer as a strong, assertive lead and the female as the attentive, receptive follower, guide the lesson rather strictly. Even as we rotate around the circle to new partners and learn a longer sequence of movements and turns, our instruction seems to be bound by this lead-follow relationship.

As the lesson continues, Mike begins to pull women out of the circle every few turns in order to help him demonstrate partnering steps. He chooses only the three women who walked confidently to the front of the room at the beginning of the lesson as his partners. When one of the woman is caught off guard by Mike's pulling her out of the circle, Mike feigns exasperation and exclaims to the class, "Ladies, don't look so reluctant to dance with your man!" Giggles resound through the room as the women rotate and smile warmly at their next partners.

As it grows later, I notice that a number of people have entered the club. They stand around the peripheries of the dance floor and chat in Spanish. Unless Mike pulls

one of the newcomers aside to demonstrate a movement he is teaching, they do not interact with the students in the circle. The lesson winds down around eleven o'clock. A few students break from the circle to buy a drink or greet one of the newcomers, but a large majority of them leave the club. In a matter of minutes, Brasil's seems to transform into a new space. The lights dim, the deejay begins playing a nonstop mix of salsa tunes, and the newcomers scatter across the dance floor. The second portion of the night begins.

## **Part 2: The Performance**

It is Friday night once again and I walk to the entrance of the oddly empty-looking first floor of Brasil's Nightclub. I have arrived later this time, around eleven o'clock, and as I walk into the small second-floor room it is as though I have entered a wholly different club than the one I took a salsa lesson in the previous weekend. On the second floor, dozens of couples dance with a *mélange* of aesthetic and rhythmic qualities. One woman dances with her arms draped fully over her partner's shoulder, seeming to place all of her weight on him as they calmly and slowly shuffle back and forth. Another couple stands further apart, their hands only lightly touching and their torsos upright as

they take turns twirling rapidly under and in between one another's arms. I am struck by how little these various dances resemble the movements taught in the salsa lesson. During the lesson, the rhythms and movement patterns of my peers and I were so consistent that they felt robotic: we rotated after the same sixteen-count phrase, always facing the same direction in the circle and never moving outside of the space it took us to move slightly backward and forward. Now, as I look around the free dance floor, I see couples dancing at a variety of tempos, switching their facing every few seconds, and creating unpredictable movement patterns.

I do not observe for long before the song ends and pairs of dancers part in order to move onto a new partner. One man who looks to be in his fifties, wearing a tee-shirt and jeans, approaches me and asks me to dance in Spanish. I accept with an enthusiastic nod of my head, embarrassed by my inability to respond to him in Spanish. He introduces himself as Sergio and immediately asks me where I am from. I am forced to reveal my inability to speak Spanish as I respond in English, "I am from Pennsylvania, but my mother is from Ecuador." At this latter fact he smiles and responds that he is from Mexico. I tell Sergio that I am doing a thesis project on salsa dance; at this, he becomes very excited and begins to guide me verbally and physically through our movements. "This is salsa," he explains, as he takes my hands and leads me through his version of the three-step basic. Unlike Mike, Sergio takes his forward step on the second beat rather than the first. I have trouble adjusting to this rhythmic change, but once I do, Sergio notices. With this rhythmic connection established, we begin to improvise. He lifts his left arm about both of our heads and presses against my hand ever so slightly; I know that

this is my queue to rotate twice around his fingers. I lift my right arm in order to signal to him to rotate once and face me again. Now, he loosens his hold on my right hand and pulls in my right arm so that we are facing the same wall, my left hip touching his right, and shuffling our feet to a three-step count. I recall the salsa instructor's directions to the men to guide their female partners with a strength and clearness, and note how differently Sergio handles the task of partnering. That is, he often hints at me to turn or to change my facing with a loose, soft shoulder tap or flick of the wrist. His subtleties allow me great freedom as I choose to alternate between single and double turns and, when I lose my balance after a rapid series of spins, refuse his lead altogether. I am struck by how different our relationship is to the strict leader-follower structure that Mike taught us. In the salsa lesson I felt as though I was learning how to attentively respond to my partner's signals; now, I feel as though my body is in conversation with Sergio's, both responding to his signals and offering my own as we sway through the crowd of scattered couples.

Only when the song is nearing its end do I feel as though I have begun to adapt to the nuances of Sergio's dancing. As the song changes, though, he begins to walk me through a new dance, seemingly determined to assist me in my learning process. "This is bachata," he explains over the roar of the new, slower beat. Interestingly, rather than continue to dance salsa steps to the bachata beat as we were instructed to do in the lesson, Sergio begins to show me a different set of movements. This new dance he counts in fours. He places my left hand on his right shoulder and holds my right hand in his left as we move from side to side. We shift our weight from right to left and back to the right and accent the fourth beat with a slight upward and sideways pop of our hips. Our torsos

and arms are more relaxed than in our salsa dance; I allow my shoulders and back to twist in response to my weight shifts. The bachata allows us even greater freedom to improvise than the salsa did. We change our body orientations frequently, at times dancing hip to hip and at times dropping our physical connection altogether in order to rotate around ourselves, uninhibited by one another's touch but connected through a shared rhythm. As I look over Sergio's shoulder at other dancers, I feel as though Mike's leader-follower structure has been completely abandoned. One woman dances by herself, moving her hips in large c-shaped dips as she smoothly rotates her shoulder and allows her head to hang heavily but ever-so-slightly backward. Out of the corner of my eye, I see two pairs of women dancing together similarly, at times swaying easily without a partner and at other points grabbing hold of one of the other three women in their small group. I wonder how Mike would react to this disowning of gender roles.

After a few songs, Sergio and I thank one another and part ways. As I rest near a wall, I begin to talk with a young woman named Katy. Katy tells me that she is a newcomer to Brasil's but not to salsa clubs. The daughter of Venezuelan and Mexican immigrants, Katy first started dancing salsa as a small child, when she recalls dancing around her Texas home to salsa music with her mother and aunt. As she grew older, she became more and more interested in salsa as a way of connecting with her ethnic heritage. "I felt like I could not be a Latina and not know how to dance salsa well," she explains. Even as a college student who studied abroad in Paris, France, Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Amman, Jordan, Katy maintained her interest in salsa dance. In each of these cities, Katy sought out salsa clubs and lessons. As we talk, she contrasts her club

experiences in these various cities with Brasil's. Katy has never attended the lesson portion of the night, but the free dance portion, she tells me, is one of the most welcoming salsa environments she has experienced. For example, she cites the varying ways in which her male partners have interacted with her in various cities. "When I went to the salsa club in Buenos Aires, men would toss me to the side after a couple minutes if they did not feel like I was up to their standard of dancing," she reveals to me. Here, in contrast, the men she dances with exhibit a patience and a willingness to dance with people of all skill levels. "And in Amman," Katy continues, "men were furious when I told them I didn't want to dance with them." When Katy turns down a man's offer to dance at Brasil's, she happily notes, he reacts politely and nonchalantly. The most welcoming aspect of Brasil's according to Katy is the sense that its attendees have come together to celebrate a Latino/a cultural practice:

Everyone's first reaction is to talk to me in Spanish, and everyone I have met is from South and Central America... Right now, it's becoming cool to be Latino, which I think is why so many non-Latinos are starting to learn salsa. But at Brasil's there is none of that. A lot of people here aren't what people think of as star dancers, but there's a willingness to teach and to adapt to people's different ways of dancing.

Katy points to the ways in which Latino/a stereotypes have worked as a motivation for non-Latinos/as to learn to dance salsa. In contrast, at Brasil's, the predominantly Latino/a population of the attendees takes the focus away from stereotypes and popular images of what salsa should look like. The predominance of Spanish as the language spoken during the second portion of the night allows Katy to feel connected to a sense of Latinness, which she often has missed in cities like Amman and Paris. At the same time, the lack of

attention paid to variations in skill level creates an environment in which attendees are free to experiment and learn new approaches to salsa dancing. Perhaps it is this sense of freedom that leads Katy to tell me that her visit to Brasil's reminded her that "[she] is happiest when [she] is dancing salsa."

### **Dancing Ambivalence**

The differences between the first and second portions of the night at Brasil's are both plentiful and revealing. As students are taught the basic salsa step during the lesson, they are also supplied with a set of etiquette rules, partner roles, and images that establish certain gendered hierarchies and totalizing principles. Yet many of these rules and roles are betrayed during the second portion of the night. As men and women move from the classroom to the free dance floor, they move in two oppositional narrative directions. In one direction, Mike establishes pedagogical values, and in the other, Brasil's attendees perform a rejection of these values. Through this two-part structure, the Brasil's dance floor works as a space in which gendered homogenizing Latino/a stereotypes are subverted only shortly after they are established.

During the first portion of the night, students learn how to dance salsa within the confines of a binary leader-follower structure. Primarily, the lesson teaches students that Latino/a cultural practices are extremely heteronormative and gendered. Male dancers are given a great deal of power over the movement choices of their female partners, as they direct the women to turn and step forward and backward according to their own rhythmic

whims. The leader-follower relationship which Mike imposes follows the assumption of “*machista* (male dominant)” hierarchies which Alejandro Ulloa Sanmiguel criticizes. But in order to maintain their positions in this male-dominated hierarchy, men must adhere to strict, binary codes of conduct. Mike illustrates these codes of conduct in his descriptive instructions. When he orders the men to be clear and strong yet gentle, he evokes the same boundaries of masculinity which confines the construction of Latino *machismo*. The “attentive and proud” man about which La India sings is the same man which Mike attempts to create: his clarity of movement and direction reveal his confidence and pride; at the same time, his attentiveness is manifested through his gentle touch and his good etiquette as he thanks each woman for her dance. When a male student betrays this image, perhaps by appearing embarrassed after improperly cueing his partner, he is quickly corrected through Mike’s immediate attention and comments. Thus, male students at Brasil’s are taught that salsa proficiency relies on their ability to adhere a stereotype of Latino maleness.

Similarly, female students are taught to adhere to an equally narrow image of femininity. Mike emphatically instructs the female partners that their availability to their male partners is critical. As he directs them to be sensitive and receptive to the cues of their male partners and to consistently meet their male partners with enthusiasm and willingness, he draws on the same narrative of Latina availability and proficiency that Guzman and Valdivia discuss. In contrast to Guzman and Valdivia’s claims, in the setting of Brasil’s Nightclub, this narrative is not an explicitly sexual one; however, it formulates a very similar relationship between the female body and the male subject. As Mike

removes women from the circle of students and partners with her, he puts on display certain Latina female bodies which he determines as ideal examples for the rest of the class. His admonishment of one of these women's lack of enthusiasm to dance with him points back to the stereotype of availability; likewise, as he advises his female students to readily mold their movements in accordance with their partners' cues, he imposes the standards of proficiency, of a Latina woman's ability to respond to a Latino man's needs, which Guzman and Valdivia cite. Women, like men, learn through these instructions that one's skill level on the dance floor depends on their ability to fulfill a stereotype of Latina femininity.

These impositions of gender stereotypes become further ingrained in the teachings of the salsa lesson when behaviors which transgress the lesson's heteronormative structure are punished. For example, when Mike calls attention to the two women who attempt to dance together, he demonstrates to the entire class the same-sex partnering in unacceptable in the space of the lesson. His comment, "This is not *that* kind of party," despite its lighthearted tone, signals to the class that the women's behavior is inappropriate in some way; the laughter which ensues from students indicates a certain complicity in this code of behavior. Moments such as this one work in conjunction with the gender roles of the leader-follower relationship in order to further impress upon students a heteronormative approach to salsa practices. This approach collapses both gender and sexual identity into a binary of heterosexual stereotypes.

At the same time that there is an erasure of the broad spectrum of gender and sexual identity during the lesson, there is a collapsing of rhythmic diversity. As students

rotate around the circle, musical genres switch from salsa to bachata to merengue; yet, we are not taught to vary our movements according to the song, and we continue to dance basic salsa steps where bachata or merengue steps might be more consistent with the music. This disregard for rhythmic changes elicits the “colonialist vacuum” which Ana M. Lopez conceptualizes. Lopez conceives of the erasure of the national origins of a song or dance when it becomes subsumed by the category of “Latin” music or dance. Bachata and merengue rhythms undergo a similar erasure: as their rhythmic nuances become muffled beneath the beat of the basic salsa three-step, they are implicitly labeled as “salsa” songs. Thus, the lesson lacks a recognition of the diversity of Latino/a musical genres and of the specificity of these genres’ national origins.

Mike’s instructions serve to indoctrinate students in a very specific and limited imaginary of Latino/a salsa practices. His pedagogical methods follow along the lines of Bhabha’s temporal split, as he asserts a set of ideas which tie his salsa practices to the heteronormative stereotypes that are deeply rooted in a history of Latino/a marginalization in the United States. Mike’s position as a Latino man seems to further this pedagogical mission. As he acts in a position of relative authority over his students, he also stands in as a signifier of the stereotypes which he proffers, seemingly “giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted” conceptions of Latinos/as (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 215). The first portion of the night, then, operates well within the confines of a pedagogical temporarily. Men and women learn salsa movements, but these movements are tied to a set of heteronormative and homogenizing ideas that are inseparable from a history of Latino/a marginalization.

The second portion of the night, however, seems to introduce a different set of ideas and ideals. As men and women vary and oppose the movements that are taught during the lesson, they invite difference and diversity onto the dance floor. For example, in Sergio's eagerness to teach me the nuanced differences between salsa and bachata, he embraces a distinctive movement style that was completely overlooked during the lesson. Where rhythmic deviations from salsa are ignored during the lesson, they are named and honored during the free dance portion.

Katy points to this embrace of difference during the second portion of the night when she observes the attendees' "willingness to teach and to adapt to people's different ways of dancing." As dancers leave their partners every few songs and return to the dance floor with someone new, they also continuously attempt new rhythms, qualities of movement, and movement sequences. Seemingly, the only thing tying these men and women together is the fostering of a specifically Latino/a context. In contrast to the lesson, where English is the primarily language spoken, most second-portion dancers speak Spanish with their partners by default. Even when exchanges occur in English, they are sure to mention their (usually Latin American) country of origin and ask their partner about theirs. Thus, social and danced interactions at the club seem to revolve around a shared Latin American identity but a simultaneous embrace of the multiplicities of that identity.

Perhaps the most apparent objection to the lesson which occurs on the free dance floor is the rejection of a gendered leader-follower relationship. Women dance with women freely, without the admonishments of the teacher or the speculations of other

attendees. People also dance partnerless, altogether eschewing the idea that a partner is central to salsa dance. Even within partnerships, a much more egalitarian distribution of roles prevails. Both male and female partners give one another cues and direct the couples' improvisations. While it seems that some vestiges of a heteronormative structure remain--for example, I never observed men dancing with men, and it seemed that men consistently took on the role of asking a partner to dance--the second portion of the night holds a much greater potential for inclusivity of gender and sexual difference.

Furthermore, the free dance format seems to subvert the patriarchal hierarchies that permeate the lesson. This subversion is perhaps best illustrated by the different ways in which male rejection is handled during the first and second portions of the night. When Mike notices a woman's hesitance to dance with him during the lesson, he immediately demonizes her gingerly expression by calling the class' attention to it. In contrast, during the second portion of the night, Katy describes how the men she chooses not to dance with kindly and politely accept her decision. These dissimilar reactions to male rejection indicates a significant difference in the degree of agency which women are perceived to have during each portion of the night. The free dance portion does not follow along the same narratives of female availability and willingness that the lesson does. Likewise, this acceptability of male rejection refutes the image of the proud and ever-charming male macho that the lesson proffers. It seems that the second portion of the night begins to break down both the homogenizing stereotypes and the heteronormative structures which the first portion sets up.

The free dance portion of the night works as the performative counterpart to the pedagogical first portion. As the attendees of Brasil's perform variations and oppositions to that which is taught during the salsa lesson, they lay claim to a diverse and ever-changing set of Latino/a dance practices. The attendees stake "their claim to be representative" of a shared Latino/a identity at the same time that they disown stereotypes about that identity (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 214). In their rejection of historically-sedimented and heteronormative approaches to salsa, they assert the ever-evolving nature of this dance practice, or as Bhabha states, they "demonstrate the prodigious, living principles of the people as contemporaneity" (*The Location of Culture* 215). As salseras and salseros recognize and welcome the differences which arise on the dance floor, they embody a new narrative of Latino/a identity that spurns the history of oppression on which gendered, homogenizing Latino/a stereotypes were built. "The possibility of other narratives of the people and their difference" is enlivened in the movements of second-portion attendees (Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* 300).

As a night at Brasil's Nightclub unfolds, many constructions of identity manifest themselves through a myriad of salsa practices. While these constructions are complex, diverse, and sometimes contradictory, a framework of narrative ambivalence sheds some light on their origins and their potentialities. Latino/a and non-Latino/a attendees of the club are taught how to embody heteronormative and homogenizing stereotypes of latinidad in the same space where these stereotypes are contested. Through this accommodation of ambivalence, Brasil's acts as a site at which multifarious constructions of Latino/a identity can be explored, scrutinized, and embodied. In a city where

Latinos/as are in the minority, this space of danced exploration is, in itself, a rather powerful one.

## **CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION**

Entering Brasil's Nightclub often feels like walking into a bifurcated world. On one side of this world, during the lesson, a group of mostly white, English speaking men and women learn a version of salsa that not only trains students in a set of aesthetic principles but also in a set of notions of Latino/a identity. On the other side, during the free dance, a group of predominantly Latino/a, Spanish speaking men and women exchange their diverse dance practices and celebrate in a shared sense of latinidad. In this thesis, I have attempted to explore this bifurcation through an ethnographic methodology. By collecting interviews and participant observations, I aimed to understand the various narratives of Latinness that circulate on the Brasil's dance floor. My ethnographic exploration revealed to me the ways in which the discourses of latinidad that circulate at Brasil's were often gendered and homogenizing. I drew from Latin American and Latino/a studies scholars in order to investigate these discourse and focused particular on literature that contextualized Latino/a music and dance practices. This body of literature led me to view salsa practices in light of the heteronormative leader-follower structure that it often teaches. As I pieced together my field work and my theoretical understandings, I ultimately came to view Brasil's Nightclub as a space in which Latino/a stereotypes are both preserved and contested.

While this thesis has served as an entryway to a better understanding of Brasil's Nightclub as an important space for the construction and exploration of Latino/a identity,

it also opens up many more questions about the research site. First, it is important to note the limits of the framework of ambivalence that I employ. The temporal split that Bhabha theorizes is useful in understanding how two seemingly contradictory narratives of identity might circulate in the same space simultaneously. The structure of ambivalence allows one to neatly parse out what is, in fact, a very messy web of discourses; however, it also necessarily places this discursive process within a dichotomized structure. This structure, I would argue, risks ignoring many of the transgressions that might occur within each strain of the temporal split. A longer thesis would address the boundaries of this binary. I would question the extent to which the pedagogical portion of the night is wholly disempowering and, conversely, the performative portion wholly empowering. For example, how might Latinos/as benefit from the notions of Latino/a identity that the Brasil's salsa lesson propagates? Do these attendees, like Juliet McMains' informants, engage in a "strategy that allows them to profit from [Latino/a] stereotypes...without becoming constrained by them" (135)? And on the other hand, to what extent is the second portion of the night a transgression of gendered stereotypes? This question is particularly salient when I consider the absence of men dancing with men at Brasil's. Despite the presence of women dancing with women and of people dancing alone, the lack of male same-sex pairings seems to indicate a deeply ingrained notion of what constitutes acceptable homosocial or homosexual behavior. Thus, even during the free dance section, the politics of acceptability at the club seem to be fraught with certain caveats. A lengthier thesis would involve a closer look at the various ways in which the

two-part structure of Brasil's intersect and diverge at more points than are immediately apparent.

If we zoom out to look at Brasil's outside of this two-part framework, we still find many complications and omissions to the ideas explored in this thesis. The socioeconomic status that is required to attend the club, for instance, is significant to understanding how the club might exclude large communities of people who practice salsa in Philadelphia. The cover fee for entry into the club not only inhibits people who cannot pay it from attending but also changes the nature of the dance events. If, like Katy, many Latinos/as in Philadelphia already practice salsa with their families in their kitchen, this cover fee takes salsa out of a domestic realm and into a public one. How might this change affect the aesthetic and cultural values that are taught and adopted at Brasil's? Questions such as this one abound, and a lengthier thesis would address them in light of not only issues of gender and ethnicity but also those of sexuality, race, class, and age. In short, a longer thesis would acknowledge and dissect the inherently intersectional nature of Latino/a identity.

Despite these limits, this thesis has attempted to introduce Brasil's as an important space for the dissemination of narratives of Latino/a identity. It has considered the ways in which salsa practices can be co-opted in order to maintain hierarchies of gender and ethnicity. As my informant, Katy, suggests when she states that "it is becoming cool to be Latino," this co-optation relates to a much larger trend of the appropriation of non-dominant cultural practices in the United States. At Brasil's salsa lessons, we see a reflection of dominant social hierarchies in the United States. As predominantly white,

native English speakers are taught how to dance a highly specific version of salsa, they temporarily access a sense of Latino/a identity which they might choose to shed at the end of the night. The Latino/a, Spanish speaking attendees of the club do not have this privilege; in the context of a Western cultural hegemony, they must navigate this pedagogical space as marked bodies, viewed in the light of gendered, heteronormative stereotypes. Yet, the second portion of the night offers a productive, celebratory space to Latino/a attendees. As these salseras and salseros reject the rhythmic homogeneity and partnered heteronormativity of the lesson, they create a space in which the diversity of latinidad is, at least partially, embraced.

By studying spaces such as Brasil's Nightclub, we begin to better understand the quandary of Latino/a identity in the United States. Latinos/as face a complex terrain of discourses in which narratives surrounding Latinness and lived experiences of it often misalign. It is within this disharmony of identities that salsa becomes a means by which many Latinas/os "[negotiate] the relationship between a national identity and a more generalized pan-ethnic identity" (McMains 133). The complexities of Brasil's Nightclub invite the hybridity and conflict that often comes with being Latino/a in the United States. Thus, it demarcates a critical territory of Latino/a identity formation within a larger multiplex of identities.

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