Gender in Motion: Exceeding Heteronormative Codes in Salsa Dancing

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Abstract

By conducting an analysis of salsa's stereotypical configurations of femininity and masculinity through my own embodied experience as a dancer, this MRP (major research paper) considers how bodies in salsa are visually and discursively constructed as gendered and how through improvised compositions dancers exceed this heteronormative framework. My analysis focuses on the relationality of salsa dancers in local club settings in Toronto to explore how gestures and touch can exceed the gendered binary constructions of "leads" and "follows" to bring forth an alternative understanding of identity that is always in the process of becoming. Informed by the work of Judith Butler, Erin Manning, Carrie Noland, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, my analysis adopts a performative and post-structuralist lens to argue that a salsa dancer's improvised movements can create an individuating body that approaches a Body without Organs.

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Midnight Compositions

Long past the hours that structure the daily routines of individuals, salsa night clubs invite dancers to come experience a collective moment of release in an environment in which they are encouraged to play. To enter this world as one of these dancers, there are corporeal acts that I must perform to participate in this ritualized encounter of friends and strangers. I must first prepare my body, travel to the venue, and be granted entry to join the controlled chaos inside. The words, "remember you need to apply your make-up like you're a drag queen," guide my transformation. The eyelash extensions are glued on, the fake hair is secured into place, the flared skirt is donned, the heels are put on. I have constructed a hyper-feminized persona that is ready to perform. Making my way to the heart of Greek town, I step out of the Broadview subway station and walk north towards the Estonian House to enter a realm where I am a bedazzled creature, a fresh band strapped to my wrist as a symbol of my admission.

Once inside this realm, I cross the foyer that straddles the salsa room on one side and the bachata room on the other. Pulled by the melodies coming from the salsa room, I make my way towards the DJ booth, a part of the room where the more experienced dancers congregate. For years I waited along the sidelines hoping to be asked to dance. Social conditioning had trained me to believe that it is the man's move to make. But when I joined Toronto's dance scene, I watched friends of mine walk forwards and ask strangers to salsa, and thought, what's stopping me? My eyes on the dance floor, I find a dancer whose skill I admire. I take a deep breath and ask, "Do you want to dance?"

Your left hand extends to mine, accepting my request to join me in an ephemeral moment of touch. Stepping onto the dance floor becomes a promise between you and I, a promise to listen and respond to touch. Each dance is a new creation, an unpredicted sequence of steps combined

to produce an improvised composition. Reduced to the counts 1, 2, 3 – 5, 6, 7, only the bare structure of the dance remains intact. When our fingertips touch, we begin to improvise, our bodies extending beyond the formal confines of classroom choreographies. Our movements blur, my senses are overcome by the intensity of our embrace. Is that my hand, yours, or both of ours; a continuation of me into you and you into me, connecting in the middle together in a moment of transformation. Where do I begin, and where do you stop? Continuously moving, shifting through space, our bodies join as one as we move across the dance floor.

Alternating between closed and open positions, we move together relying on the slightest feeling of pressure to bring the dance into fruition. It happens in a multitude of ways, but the transition always ends the same. Opening up into shine sequences, we dance on our own, yet always together, spontaneously choreographing our movements to rhythms of salsa playing around us. Long forgotten patterns begin to resurface, years of training coming back to respond to the sound of the clave. My weight begins to shift, opening up sideways into a rumba, my arms flowing outwards to conjure an image of a flaring skirt. Shifting back to my center I step out to my left; my torso waves up in a backwards body roll as my hips go back and my arms rise up into a whirlwind motion conjuring the winds of Oyá, the Yoruba oricha of wind, powerful storms, and the cycle of life. Soon the moment ends. Silently communicating without words, we reach back to return to each other arms, to feel, to touch, to dance as one.

Introduction: Theorizing an Embodied Practice

The word dance brings to mind various cultural forms of expression, each with their own unique set of movement vocabularies. In the field of dance studies, these styles are subject to an existing cultural hierarchy in which those considered to possess aesthetic worth have been given priority over others.[1] This has historically allowed for classical genres such as ballet and modern dance forms to be acceptable objects of academic research, while social dance forms such as salsa, ballroom, and tango, have received less scholarly attention.[2] In response to the understudied significance of the social dance form, this paper explores how salsa provides a scholarly site to address the performativity of gender by considering how improvised compositions by skilled salsa dancers exceed the heteronormative codes of the social dance form. In so doing, the theoretical axis of the paper pivots on the premise that when gestures turn to touch, two individuating bodies moving as one go beyond the labels of "lead" and "follow" towards a Body without Organs (BwO), conceptualized by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to be a body that evades signification, and, in the scope of this paper, one that troubles gendered characterizations of salsa.

Existing research on salsa concentrates on several key aspects of its historical and contemporary significance. Its role as a symbol for the African heritage and influences in Latinx culture due to its roots in African movement traditions is discussed in John Charles Chasteen's

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[1] Theresa Jill Buckland, "Dance, History, and Ethnography: Frameworks, Sources and Identities of Past and Present," in *Dancing from the Past to Present: Nation, Culture, Identities,* ed. by Theresa Jill Buckland (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), 5-6.; In dance academia, European dance forms have historically been considered more refined, developed and controlled, all of which were used to promote the West's superiority and help maintain notions of the "Other" whose movement traditions were labelled as primitive. While to a lesser degree, this hierarchical arrangement also deemed movement traditions embraced by the general public, often referred to as popular culture, as inferior to those favoured by the upper classes. As those who occupied higher positions within society, maintained influence over high culture, dance styles that did not adhere to the tastes of these individuals were deemed less worthy of scholarly attention.
[2] Ibid.

book *National Rhythms, African Roots: The Deep History of Latin American Popular Dance* and Yvonne Daniel's book *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé* and essay "Cuban Dance: An Orchard of Caribbean Creativity."[3] Its evolution into a style that is tied to Latin America's cultural heritage and the international market is examined by Sheenagh Pietrobruno in *Salsa and its Transnational Moves*.[4] Its display and negotiation of heteronormative gender dynamics is addressed in Britta Schneider's article "Heteronormativity and Queerness in Transnational Heterosexual Salsa Communities."[5] Its musical rhythms, which have been analysed in relation to discussions on gender, urbanization and globalization, are discussed in Frances R. Aparicio's book *Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music, and Puerto Rican Cultures* and Lise Waxer's work titled *Situating Salsa: Global Markets and Local Meanings in Latin Popular Music*.[6]

These contributions have been valuable for my investigation into how salsa both frames the dancing body as subject to a scripted heteronormative set of movements and how through the performative dimensions of improvisation the salsa dancer can move beyond the restrictive and fixed boundaries of this scripted gender identity. In this respect, these dance scholars who have laid the foundation for my research into traditional gender roles have focused on its history of adhering to stable markers of identity. In turn, I seek to consider how using a performative and

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[3] John Charles Chasteen, *National Rhythms, African Roots: The Deep History of Latin American Popular Dance* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2004).; Yvonne Daniel, "Cuban Dance: An Orchard of Caribbean Creativity," in *Caribbean Dance from Abakuá to Zouk: How Movement Shapes Identity*, ed. by Susanna Sloat (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 23-55.; Yvonne Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press).
[4] Sheenagh Pietrobruno, *Salsa and its Transnational Moves* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006).
[5] Britta Schneider, "Heteronormativity and Queerness in Transnational Heterosexual Salsa Communities," *Discourse & Society* 24, no. 5 (2013): 553-71.
[6] Frances R. Aparicio, *Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music, and Puerto Rican Cultures* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).; Lise Waxer, *Situating Salsa: Global Markets and Local Meanings in Latin Popular Music* (London: Routledge Ltd, 2002).

post-structuralist lens of analysis offers the potential to reconceptualize salsa as a dance practice that exceeds its heteronormative framework.

I undertake this theorization of salsa in relation to my experience as a professional salsa dancer and my personal knowledge of specific venues of Toronto's salsa scene, where in the context of emergent transnational salsa communities a number of different salsa styles from Latin America are practised simultaneously.[7] The two salsa venues in Toronto that I focus on are the Dovercourt House and the Estonian House. The reasoning behind this choice is that while there are various nightclubs, such as Lula Lounge and El Rancho, that offer salsa and bachata nights in Toronto, they cater to regular club goers as well as dedicated salsa dancers. This mixture of clientele changes the dynamic of the dance floor, as when music from the top 40 list is integrated into DJ sets it shifts the focus from salsa and bachata to other styles of dance. In contrast, the two venues I discuss are exclusively dedicated to salsa and bachata social dancing.[8]

By approaching my analysis of salsa as a professional salsa dancer as well as a researcher of social dancing, I cross the divide between embodiment and theoretical reflection to address the affective lived experiences of an individual who performs the gendered body in salsa clubs. Drawing on my past and present experiences as a teaching assistant, performer and social dancer, I am committed to developing a theoretical and performative approach to thinking through salsa's gendered dimensions based in the conviction, as articulated by Pierre Bourdieu, that "nothing is more false, in my view, than the maxim almost universally accepted in the social sciences according to which the researcher must put nothing of himself [or herself] into their research."[9]

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[7] The word salsa is an overarching term that is used to account for the various styles within the genre. This includes New York style (on-2), LA style (on-1), Rueda de Casino, Cali style, and more.
[8] Bachata is a popular dance style that comes from the Dominican Republic. Its closer hold and slower pace make it a more intimate dance form than salsa.
[9] Pierre Bourdieu, "Participant Objectivation," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 9, no. 2 (2003): 287.

Years ago, when I first began dancing salsa, I could not have envisioned myself trying to find the words to describe my own embodied practice. The Latinx dance community I found in Vancouver warmly embraced me into its folds and shared with me the foundations of salsa that helped me become an assistant instructor as well as a performer. Through the years that I spent dancing on both national and international stages, I began to realize that these bodies in motion were consistently pushing against the boundaries of what the body is and what it can achieve. While at the time I was unable to fully understand the implications of what I was seeing, questions regarding how salsa comes to define gender, how it is produced through the body's movement, and how it can exceed its heteronormative structure were embedded in my lived experience of dancing.

In scholarly literature, salsa is often described as an expression of the ideal heteronormative couple, with the adherence to traditional gender roles essentialized in the moves that dancers perform.[10] However, this gendered aesthetic is not innate but a learned embodiment. Carrie Noland, in *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture*, describes embodiment as "the process whereby collective behaviors and beliefs, acquired through acculturation, are rendered individual and 'lived' at the level of the body."[11] Within North American salsa milieu, this process of internalization takes place within dance studios. By gazing at their mirrored reflections, dancers learn by mimicking their instructors and guiding their bodies through different shapes and forms to learn the scripted steps and movements of salsa.

The understanding of the gendered nature of salsa as an expression of the ideal heteronormative couple is also reliant upon the visual register, which does not take into account

[10] Schneider, "Heteronormativity and Queerness in Transnational Heterosexual Salsa Communities," 558-9.; Pietrobruno, *Salsa and its Transnational Moves*, 19-20, 145-202.
[11] Carrie Noland, *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 9.

role of gestures, touch and the sensation of social dancing. By analysing salsa as a body in motion encompassing gesture, touch, and affect, I move beyond an ontological view of the body as a discursively constructed stable sense of being towards an ontogenetic approach proposed by Erin Manning that conceives that the senses, such as touch, are integral to understanding the body and the self as always in the process of becoming.[12] I also consider, as argued by Noland, how gestures come from embodied knowledge and can be relearned and transformed.[13] Most importantly, I posit that gesture is a gateway to touch. By pairing Noland's discussion of gestures with Manning's focus on the senses – which for touch in salsa is a motion that results in a reciprocal reaching outwards – I trouble the notion of the gendered body and the self in my analysis of salsa as a social dance form.

Noland's understanding of gestures and Manning's development of touch as a key sense to conceptualize the body contrast with the well-known deconstruction of gender undertaken by Judith Butler in which the body is understood as discursively constructed. Within Butler's ontological framework, language attaches markers of race, gender and sexuality to individual bodies. In turn, the discourse used to create a system of categorization revolves around binary oppositions that individuals internalize through visual markers to form a sense of self. As markers of differentiation, dichotomies such as man or woman, straight or queer, create a hierarchical arrangement of power that limits one's agency to a predesigned set of actions, such as the scripted movements and steps of salsa dancing. By moving from an emphasis on analysing the visual representations of salsa towards the sensory dimensions of gestures and touch experienced by the dancer while performing in the club venues of Toronto, this research paper

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[12] Erin Manning, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty,* N - New ed (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007;2006), xxi.
[13] Noland, *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture,* 175.

examines how embodied motion enacted through improvised social dancing exceeds the heteronormative construction of salsa.

When gestures lead to touch, dancers engage in a level of improvisation in which the scenario of the dance club "includes the possibility of change, critique, and creativity within frameworks of repetition."[14] Scenarios, a concept developed by the performance scholar Diana Taylor, provides a lens to understand salsa as "simultaneously *setup* and *action.*"[15] Similar to a written script, scenarios create a narrative that encompasses the social, cultural and political structures that influence individuals, but go beyond the notion of a script to suggest a more flexible model that acknowledges that conclusions are not always predetermined. Unlike a script that focuses on the use of words, scenarios involve an analysis of how physical performances "such as gestures, [touch], attitudes, and tones [that cannot be] reducible to language" influence the settings that they take place within.[16]

To become activated, scenarios must be grounded within a space. In the case of salsa clubs, this space is animated by the movement of human bodies to become what Victor Turner calls a liminoid space, one that arising from the liminal, activates realities that are "full of potency and potentiality" in which "play's the thing."[17] For Turner, liminoid spaces evolved from the liminal. This process was produced by the transition from religious social contracts to those of entertainment, a process which is reflected in salsa's evolution from religious movement traditions into a secular dance form. Turner's understanding of liminal and liminoid spaces as areas in which there "may be a play of ideas, a play of words, a play of symbols, a play of

[14] Diana Taylor, *Performance* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2015), 15.
[15] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire. Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (US: Duke University Press, 2003), 28. Italics in the original.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Victor Witter Turner, "Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 6, no.4 (1979): 466, 492-3.

metaphors" aligns with Taylor's understanding of scenarios where "playful improvisations, role reversals, impersonations, and misidentifications [can allow] players [to] outstrip the reigning conventions."[18] Within the temporal space of the salsa club, the dancer's body, never alone but always in relation with another, navigates existing social and cultural axes of binary gender identities through an exuberant display of heterosexuality that engages in play, improvisation, role reversals, and drag-like performances.

From a gendered perspective, salsa is an exuberant display of heteronormativity in which a man and a woman are passionately interlocked in a dance together. Salsa requires one person to lead and the other to follow in order for the dance to take place. Leader and follower: these terms are in themselves genderless but within a heteronormative system that demands consistent modes of classification they have become synonymous with specific gender roles. From the sidelines looking onto the dance floor, it appears that a couple's relationship favors the man. Enacting the social script's gendered division of labour, he adopts the role of the lead associated with control and dominance, while she follows, restrained and submissive. From the experience of the dancer, the body exceeds these socio-cultural constructs. Both dancers perform gender rather than embody it, with their improvisational gestures pushing against heteronormative conventions of the social script. They perform gender in the sense of Butler's understanding of performativity "as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" to suggest the heteronormative system of governance maintains its authority through the physical labour of social actors.[19] In this respect, dance as a medium collapses the structures that bind the body to gender by bringing attention to what is *a* performance and what can be seen *as* a

[18] Ibid.; Taylor, *Performance*, 136.
[19] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 2.

performance.[20] Salsa is a form of cultural expression that is practiced by individuals on a deeply performed stage where gender roles are carried out through stylized body movements.

To embark upon dismantling the notion of a script in favour of the scenario is to highlight how gestures and touch, as movements, exceed linguistic regulation. To emphasize movement is to reach beyond stable notions of "self" and recognize how a body in movement cannot be contained as it reaches towards what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari define as a BwO.[21] A BwO is a practice that reaches towards a body that evades organization and classification. It is an engendering body that individuates. Individuation goes beyond the notion of "you" and "I" that informs a binary understanding of identity towards a processual approach that, like a BwO, advocates that the boundaries used to define and confine us are in a constant state of fluctuation.

Following Manning, I adopt the term individuation to be understood "as the capacity to become *beyond* identity."[22] An individuating body is dynamic and saturated with potential, always in the process of becoming when it is in relation to another. Communicating without words, individuals in salsa use gestures to signal an invitation to dance; while dancing, they connect through touch. Touch taps into the intensities that circulate the BwO by reaching towards that which is yet to come.[23] Improvisation is what I argue ties individuation and the BwO. When salsa dancing in night clubs, the body does not follow a prescribed path, it is always in variation, always in the process of becoming.[24]

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[20] Taylor, *Performance,* 27.
[21] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 149-166.
[22] Manning, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty,* xv. Italics in the original.
[23] Ibid*,* 136-7.
[24] While my focus is on night club settings in which dancers engage in spontaneous choreographies, it is important to note that within studio environments individuals learn steps and movements in a particular way. However, once these techniques have been embodied and dancers' transition into unstructured dance environments, they are encouraged to play and create new ways of moving. While the skilled body does not dismantle salsa's heterosexual nature or heteronormative codes, it can exceed them through improvised dance compositions.

My analysis in this paper, which culminates in a discussion of the BwO, unfolds in two distinct chapters, the first historical and contextual, the second theoretical and speculative. The first chapter traces salsa's colonial origins to describe how it began as a dance form that fused the body and spirit within West African ceremonial practices in Cuba.[25] Through an investigation into salsa's gendered, sexualized, and exoticized genealogy, I demonstrate how salsa's present manifestation as a social dance form is rooted in the socio-cultural implications of its history. Drawing upon the work of Victor Turner, I argue that salsa's evolution from religious movement traditions to a secular dance form, mirrors the transition from the liminal to the liminoid, with club settings as spaces in which play and improvisation occurs.

The second chapter places Noland's work on gestures in conversation with Butler's theory of performativity to consider the physical labour that goes into the construction of gendered salsa roles and how touch and individuation, as theorized by Manning, coincide with Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the BwO. I focus on how skilled salsa dancers embody the intensities produced by touch to bring attention to how the improvised nature of the dance form requires individuals to continuously reach towards becoming one in motion. By weaving together these theoretical frameworks, I explore how kinesthetic actions produced by these embodied experiences demonstrate how bodies that salsa dance are always in the process of becoming, and therefore, cannot be reduced to gendered identity markers.

[25] This paper will draw upon some of the principles of West African philosophical thought that informed the practices of the Kongo-Angola, Arará, Carabalí, and Yoruba nations that formed in Cuba and contributed to the manifestation of the dance style now known as salsa. The individuals that formed these groups came from various locations. Those who made up the Kongo-Angola nation were from the countries now referred to as the Republic of Congo and Angola, the Arará from what is called the Old Dahomey Kingdom, now Southern Benin, the Carabalí from Cameroon and Nigeria, and the Yoruba from Nigeria.

The Colonial Roots of Salsa

As a dance style with roots that trace back to the African diaspora in the Caribbean islands, salsa has developed out of a violent history of racial and cultural subjugation. Far from its current status as a form of entertainment, its elusive beginnings reveal a story of resilience that sets in motion a reconsideration of its significance as a social dance form in contemporary society. In pursuit of acquiring great wealth and power, the West rapidly expanded its colonial enterprise in the Caribbean in the 1490s and early 1500s. With several expeditions between the years of 1492-1494, the conquistador Christopher Columbus established Spanish control over the island now known to be Cuba.[26] With little concern for the wellbeing of the Indigenous populations, the new settlers disrupted and destroyed countless communities in their efforts to colonize the land and extract its resources. To satisfy the growing demand for laborers to perform the rigorous task of harvesting and refining sugarcane, Spain looked beyond its borders to the shores of Africa to fulfill their needs.[27] Over the course of several centuries, the transatlantic slave trade carried ships full of imprisoned Africans across the ocean to the Americas, permanently changing their lives and shaping the socio-cultural landscape of the Caribbean.[28]

Those who survived the Middle Passage found themselves subject to an endless cycle of mental and physical abuse, a relentless process that was intended to strip individuals of their humanity and reduce them to the status of chattel slaves.[29] Within a society that emphasized the importance of one's relationship with one's community, slaveowners actively worked to

[26] Daniel, "Cuban Dance: An Orchard of Caribbean Creativity," 29.
[27] Ibid, 33.
[28] Nzinga Metzger, "My Spirit Dares to Dance this Body: Black Dance as Freedom and Resistance in the History of the Americas," in *Perspectives on Dance Fusion in the Caribbean and Dance Sustainability: Rituals of Modern Society*, ed. by Neri Torres, Aminata Cairo, Laura Donelly, Sally Crawford-Shepherd and Nzinga, Metzger (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2019), 34.
[29] Ibid.

physically and spiritually sever African familial ties in hopes of breaking their spirits and creating an obedient workforce.[30] But while the objective was to bend the slaves into submission, the process of dehumanization was rarely fully achieved. The unequal power division that existed between the settlers and slaves was precariously held in balance and subject to various forms of resistance.

To those who endured the dehumanizing process of the transatlantic slave trade, dance became a means of enacting agency within an oppressive regime that strove to divorce one's sense of ownership over one's body.[31] As pointed out by the anthropologist Nzinga Metzger, in an environment where an individual "who by law was not the owner of [his/her] own body, could perform: The act of dancing in a black body alone was in and of itself an act of defiance and resistance."[32] In an effort to reclaim their bodies and preserve their ways of life, religious rituals served as a means to redefine their identities through the power of movement.

Coming from the Latin root *religare,* religion means to "to fasten" and "to bond" the physical and metaphysical realms of being.[33] The broad range of dance traditions that influenced the course of Cuba's artistic development arose from cultural groups whose belief systems embraced a holistic way of thinking that married the secular and sacred realms of being.[34] For the Kongo-Angola, Arará, Carabalí, and Yoruba nations that formed in Cuba, the act of performance tied the body to the cosmic plains above and below them through the medium of dance.[35] In the Yoruba tradition, movement serves as a means of showing respect to the divinities that guide their understanding of the world. Within sacred drum ceremonies, referred to as *Regla de Ocha*

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[30] Ibid, 36.
[31] Ibid, 35.
[32] Ibid, 35.
[33] Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé*, 2.
[34] Metzger, "My Spirit Dares to Dance this Body: Black Dance as Freedom and Resistance in the History of the Americas," 36.
[35] Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé*, 2.

(the Rule of the *Orichas*), all of the divine intermediaries are addressed through music and dance before the practitioners focus on one particular entity.[36] With batá drums playing in harmony with a unified ensemble, members of the community welcome the *orichas* to speak through their bodies by performing "codified movement sequences and identifying gestures that represent differing divine personalities."[37] With the sound of music playing in the background, participants invite spirits into their bodies, joining the individual with his or her community, the body with the soul, the sacred with the secular in a moment of celebration.[38]

In Yvonne Daniel's account of a Yoruba ceremony dedicated to Oyá – a sacred female *oricha* whose power stems from the natural world – she described a sense of magnetic energy in the air that connected everyone within the space to form one living, breathing, entity.[39] As she moved her body, joined the chorus and watched two male dancers become physical manifestations of Oyá, she became, even if momentarily, a part of the community.[40] Dancing alongside established members of the congregation she tapped into her embodied knowledge of the *oricha's* movements she had absorbed through months of practice and relied upon on her intuition to guide her improvised choreography to celebrate Oyá.[41] In her words, the process "enlivened all [of her] senses. More important, this process connected [her] to others. [They] became a dancing, drumming, singing whole."[42]

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[36] Ibid, 14, 18, 20.
[37] Daniel, "Cuban Dance: An Orchard of Caribbean Creativity," 38.
[38] Metzger, "My Spirit Dares to Dance this Body: Black Dance as Freedom and Resistance in the History of the Americas," 36.
[39] Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé*, 19, 21.
[40] Ibid, 22.
[41] Ibid, 16-17.
[42] Ibid, 16.

Embracing the view that the universe is a dynamic force that exceeds its physical frame, West African notions of self were considered to be in a constant state of flux.[43] According to West African philosophical beliefs:

> a person was more than just an individual, and more than a body. S/he was in a constant state of becoming, s/he was a representation of a corporate identity which included family members living, dead, and unborn, s/he was a reflection of the divine, s/he was the living embodiment of the potential for a fulfilled destiny and an extension of the collective destiny of his/her lineage.[44]

Within this ritual space the two men dancing were no longer considered male but due to their relationship with Oyá were considered as females.[45] In fact, it was not only the men who could manifest female *orichas* but female practitioners could also call upon male *orichas* and as such become "male".[46] These gender role reversals demonstrate how the Yoruba religion recognizes a more flexible approach of gender identity.[47]

Rituals, as proposed by Turner are not simply a set of prescribed actions that allow one to honor and communicate with spiritual forces but should be seen as playful performances in which something new can be generated.[48] Rituals activate the body, space, and temporality to create a time and space that exists outside of the normal structures that govern and regulate the actions of social actors.[49] Turner states that it is within this liminal realm, this "process which is betwixt-and-between the normal, day-to-day cultural and social states" that mediums of artistic expression, such as dance and music created the potential for transformation.[50] Unlike the

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[43] Metzger, "My Spirit Dares to Dance this Body: Black Dance as Freedom and Resistance in the History of the Americas," 40.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé*, 23.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Victor Witter Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), 79.
[49] Turner, "Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality," 469-70.
[50] Ibid, 465.

dominant understanding of rituals that prescribe them to be rigid and unchanging, Turner believed that their liminality made them inherently playful and often involved an inversion of existing symbols.[51] In a Yoruba ritual one way this can manifest is through the reversal of gender identity. But beyond its religious connotation ritual is a performance; an act from which something new is generated.

The continuous stream of African culture in Latin America formed an active site of artistic negotiation. Through the process of transculturation, the new forms of movement arising from Cuba formed what is called an *ajiaco.* The word *ajiaco* was first used as a metaphor by the scholar Fernando Ortiz Fernández to describe the process of a two-way cultural exchange that changed the artistic landscape of Cuba.[52] Rather than the melting pot analogy in which all components lose their distinct qualities to form an amalgamated whole, *ajiaco* symbolizes a stew that is made up of various ingredients that maintain their form within the greater whole.[53]

Each of the African nations that formed in Cuba (Kongo-Angola, Arará, Carabalí, and Yoruba) contributed their movements, musical instruments and understandings of rhythm to create new hybrid artistic traditions.[54] While each of these communities had their own unique artistic repertoires they can all be said to share an aesthetic that is characterized by fluidity.[55] These African dance forms required participants to maintain constant flexibility in the joints, to keep elbows and knees loose in order to adapt to changes in the music's tempo. By embracing an approach that allowed any part of the body to initiate movement, dancers listened and responded

[51] Ibid, 466.
[52] Alexander Fernández, "Odu in Motion: Embodiment, Autoethnography, and the [Un]Texting of a Living Religious Practice," *Chiricù Journal: Latina/o Literature, Art, and Culture* 2, no. 1 (2017): 108.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Daniel, "Cuban Dance: An Orchard of Caribbean Creativity," 33.
[55] For details on each dance tradition see *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé* by Yvonne Daniel or her chapter titled "Cuban Dance: An Orchard of Caribbean Creativity" in *Caribbean Dance in Abakuá to Zouk: How Movement Shapes Identity*, edited by Susanna Sloat.

to the music by engaging in various levels of polyrhythms. However, salsa's development was not complete without the influence of European colonizers.

Cuba's cultural landscape was heavily affected by dance patterns that arrived with Western settlers coming from Southern Spain as well as the French who had taken over the adjacent island of Hispaniola.[56] Centered over a rigid spine, the Spanish dance zapateado emphasized the movement of the lower body, specifically one's footwork.[57] However, while most European dance forms avoided drawing attention to the pelvic region of one's body, the Spanish incorporated subtle hip sways within various dance patterns.[58] While these still paled in comparison to the pelvic undulations used by their counterparts, they signify the existence of African forms of expression within European culture before their collision in the Americas making it an important note to consider when addressing the process of transculturation.[59]

However, Cuba's *ajíaco* was not complete without the influence of the French. Fearing for their safety after the slave revolution, the French swiftly removed themselves from Hispaniola leaving the evidence of their failed colony behind them.[60] Elegant yet cold and stiff, the French who found their way to Cuba brought with them European court dances.[61] Designed to be theatrical affairs that acted as a means to negotiate social relationships and establish one's place in the social hierarchy, these dance forms were made up of carefully choreographed steps with each individual playing a particular part in every arrangement. But how did these styles whose interactions were so choreographed interact with dance forms that encouraged improvised movements of the body?

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[56] Daniel, "Cuban Dance: An Orchard of Caribbean Creativity," 30.
[57] Ibid, 31.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid, 31-2.

Cuba's *ajíaco* was composed of artistic elements coming from the Spanish, French, and African models of dance. Leaving many of the formal qualities of European dance forms behind, the new national rhythms rising from the slave population in Cuba drew upon the freeing motions of African forms of expression and couple choreography. However, unlike the stiff appearance of European ballroom dances, salsa developed into a sensuous dance that milks each part of the dancer's form – their shoulders, their arms, their chest, their torso, their hips and their legs – to create an image of a body that is fluid and light on its feet. As opposed to court dances that dictated every single move, salsa relies on improvisation. It does not have a choreographed sequence of steps that a couple needs to adhere to. Alternating between open and closed position, dancers can move together while at random intervals breaking apart to engage in shine sequences that rely on each of the dancer's own repertoire of movements to come into fruition.[62]

It does not then come as a surprise that this idea of improvisation falls in line with Ortiz's *ajíaco.* An *ajíaco* does not indicate the formation of a static identity but suggests, as said by Ortiz, that Cuban culture continues to be a "*mestizaje* of kitchens, a *mestizaje* of races, a *mestizaje* of cultures. [It is a] dense broth of civilization that boils up on the Caribbean cookfire."[63] The *ajiaco's* formation is never complete.[64] Coming from these roots salsa responds to its environment by taking on new elements and integrating them into its many forms.[65] It

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[62] Shine sequences are moments within a dance where each individual will dance apart from one another, in their own style, following their own choreographies before reconnecting with their dance partner to finish their dance.
[63] Fernando Ortiz, "The Human Factors of Cubanidad," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4, no. 3 (2014): 463. Italics in the original.
[64] Even when considering the stew that the metaphor originated from, we can see that to this day it does not have one dominant form. It is a dish with no stable recipe. It's ingredients consistently change according to what is available making it an improvised composition of meat and vegetables that work together in perfect harmony to create a delicious *ajíaco*.
[65] Salsa does not have one form. It is a title used to encompass a large variety of styles within the genre each of which is unique to its geographical location. For example, Casino de Rueda is popular in Miami, Salsa-on-1 developed in LA, Salsa-on-2 is danced in NY, Cali style came from Columbia and a new alternative stream that has popped up in multiple locations that integrates elements of hip-hop dancing into salsa.

weaves ritual dances into its contemporary vocabulary simultaneously reflecting the past and present.

Within this process of transculturation, a shift occurred. No longer explicitly affiliated with religious rituals the resulting secular dance form can be seen as a transition from the liminal to the liminoid. Manifestations of liminality were associated with cultural rites of passage within societies that focused on the wellbeing of the collective.[66] Present throughout all stages of life they came to represent the shared experiences of a community as they navigated their social and physical surroundings.[67] On the contrary, liminoid phenomena occur when there has been a transition from the sacred to the secular, from an emphasis on religious rites to acts of leisure.[68] But the question remains: how did salsa evolve into this theatrical affair divorced from its religious predecessors?

The unsettling capability of the dancing body to create feelings of desire and shame influenced the removal of dance from sacred rites in Western religious practices.[69] In the act of fulfilling one's desires, individuals prioritize one's emotions over logic – an act that is frowned upon by societies that aim to control their members. As a means of counteracting this form of indulgence feelings of shame were used to motivate social actors to behave properly. Emotions such as happiness, anger, sadness and fear, among other affects, were considered to anatomically emanate from underneath the ribcage, while the head was seen as the source of all rationality.[70] Following this account "'bad' became fixed on the body and on the emotions, both being the site of violence, illness, and waste. To be 'good' it was necessary to keep any of the evil leaking out

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[66] Turner, "Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality," 492.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Priscilla Renta, "Salsa Dance: Latino/a History in Motion," *Centro* 16, no.2 (2004), 140.
[70] Fiona Buckland, *Impossible Dance: Club Culture and Queer World- Making* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), 92.

of the baser body."[71] This idea that the flesh is weak and that it is responsible for luring individuals into temptation encouraged the belief that the body should be seen as inferior to the mind and spirit.[72] Guided by emotion, dance became associated with the profane acts of self-indulgence that jeopardized the mind's control over the body. This lack of control and transformative emotional state were unstoppable and threatened to expose flaws within the normative system of control.[73]

A body that dances and gives into desire exceeds the heteronormative family unit. As an ideal used to structure identity and relationships based on the binary system of gender, a body that gives into desire is no longer obedient. It is a body that moves outside of the sanctioned behaviours that structure society, away from production (a demand produced by capitalism) and away from the duty of reproduction. Experienced dancing bodies can drown out the mind, put it to rest and amplify the senses to engage in playful practices on the dance floor producing joyful expressions of the body. With an emphasis on the senses, the body over the mind, dancing within club environments can present alternative arrangements of existing hierarchies.[74]

Within salsa club spaces, pleasure takes precedence. Salsa venues move individuals away from their prescribed role in society towards a liminoid space in which desire is embraced. Potent with magnetic energy these liminoid spaces exist outside of the everyday in a time and space that provides its occupants with the opportunity to engage in bodily exchanges that differ from those experienced at home and work.[75] Within this frame, Turner believes that liminoid phenomena produce conditions for experiences that are "plural, fragmentary (representing, in some cases, the

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[71] Ibid.
[72] Renta, "Salsa Dance: Latino/a History in Motion," 140.
[73] Buckland, *Impossible Dance: Club Culture and Queer World- Making,* 92.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid, 43-4.

dismemberment, or *sparagmos*, of holistic, pivotal, pan-societal rituals) and often experimental in character."[76] Derived from the same sense of playfulness as the liminal it encourages social actors to act out their desires, to push against existing social norms and negotiate their relationship with the outside world.

When individuals dance salsa, they do not have one partner on the dance floor, nor is it always a man and woman who dance together. At the end of a song they break apart, say thank you and take another's hand to join them in an intimate embrace. The fact that salsa performances can be seen as hyper-feminine and masculine draws attention to how gender is a result of repetitive corporeal actions that depend upon the visual register to maintain their validity. Acknowledging the "work" that goes into constructing salsa stereotypes brings attention to how gender can be seen as a performance. By considering the religious foundations of salsa, and how these break down the barriers that bind individuals to restrictive notions of being and the ontological body, in relation to the conceptualization of the body in movement, a more complex understanding of salsa's gender roles is engendered.

[76] Turner, "Frame, Flow and Reflection: Ritual and Drama as Public Liminality," 492. Italics in the original.

Performing Gender and Improvising Gesture

Divorced from its religious connotations, salsa is a form of leisure. Intimate and seductive, the dance brings two individuals together as a gendered couple for an ephemeral moment on a dance floor. Yet in spite of salsa's heteronormative configurations of femininity and masculinity, its continuously evolving nature presents the potential to go beyond its dominant cultural script as highly gendered. Using Taylor's conceptualization of scenarios to ground my discussion, I consider from my experience as a social dancer how bodies moving to the salsa rhythms in the Dovercourt House and the Estonian House club nights I regularly attend can expand the dominant understanding of salsa beyond the visual and discursive registers to acknowledge other modes of becoming. By adopting a perspective that accounts for the dancer's sensory experience of gesture and touch, I explore how improvisational compositions create individuating bodies that move towards a BwO.

Two popular locations for salsa dancing in Toronto, the Dovercourt House and the Estonian House, are located miles apart on different sides of the city yet share many similarities. They do not regularly assume the marker of a "club" space, but rather are chameleon in nature, transitional spaces that change their physical attributes to adapt to the needs of the social actors that activate them. Walking past their modest brick clad exteriors, you may not be able to distinguish them apart from the surrounding buildings. Inside there are maze of rooms with empty white walls and wooden floors. On Mondays, these rooms can be used as a wedding venue, transformed by fairy lights and streamers to frame the heteronormative fantasy of the perfect marriage ceremony; on Tuesdays, the rooms may serve as a conference venue; on Friday

evenings, the interiors are transformed into a salsa night club.[77] Chairs get pushed aside to line the edges of the walls and a DJ booth is set up in a corner of a room with a makeshift bar popping up close by. The bright overhead lights are dimmed; the bare white walls serve as screens for explosive displays of colourful light beams dancing across their surface; once static rooms become dynamic spaces of heightened sociality.

Salsa is a spectacle for those peering in from the outside. Reliant upon the dominant imagery circulating in ads and on the internet, those unfamiliar to the dance rely on their perceptions of its Latino roots and gendered stereotypes to inform their understanding of salsa.[78] To the onlooker it appears to be a theatrical affair, one that promises a passionate performance of a dance between a man and a woman. Sensuous, provocative, and passionate, these are all words that are used in popular culture to describe the nature of their embrace.[79] Yet there is something surreal about this encounter. The display of heterosexuality is so exaggerated that it begins to lose its appearance of authenticity. With her face painted to perfection, her hair let loose, body dressed in clothes that highlight her curves and legs accentuated by heels, the female dancer graciously flows in and out of the male dancer's hold, moving in response to his body leaning into hers. It is

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[77] Fairy-lights are a popular aesthetic that are used at weddings. Weddings are heteronormative events that support the traditional and legal act of marriage which are in turn used to validate intimate relationships.; Friday references the weekly dance social known as Toronto Salsa Fridays (TSF) that takes place every week. This event typically alternates between the Dovercourt House and the Estonian House but has at times been hosted at the Lithuanian House. Before the night begins, these venues offer drop-in classes for the public and often invite professional dancers to perform later in the evening. Unlike Dovercourt House, the Estonian House has a stage dedicated to such performances.

[78] Representations of salsa within the public's imaginary are influenced by ads and popular Western dance shows such as So You Think You Can Dance and Dancing with the Stars that draw upon stereotypical understandings of Latin culture and bodies. For example, searching up the words "salsa dance" or "Cuban salsa dance" on google images brings up pages littered with vibrant photos that depict females dressed up in form-fitting clothing (often a red dress) being dipped by a man. This imagery is supported by television programs such as So You Think You Can Dance and Dancing with the Stars. When the judges discuss contemporary dance styles or ballroom dances, they talk about the dancer's skill and the elegance of their movements. On the other hand, Latin dances such as salsa are portrayed as more emotional than technical and described as hot, fiery and sexy. These often-staged photos and tv programs perpetuate the idea of the sexualized and exotic "Other".

[79] These words, among others such as "hot", "sexy", Latin and "spicy" have been compiled over the last three years based on responses that I have received from audience members in class and conference presentations when they were asked to respond to the word salsa.

a performance, a dance activated by two individuals; it is also a display of heterosexuality, a shimmering illusion that draws attention to how salsa dancing brings gender into being.

This display of heterosexuality is supported by a binary system of gender, whereby particular behavioural characteristics and societal roles are attributed to biological sex. The division of gender into the two recognizable categories, where the man leads and the woman follows his lead, perpetuates scripted gender performances. For example, it is not difficult to identify heteronormative movement based on gendered identity when his right palm rests on the back of her shoulder blade and his left hand holds hers, establishing a physical connection that will allow their bodies to move together. Here, he is the lead, or at least his hand placement indicates this. This dominant stance supports a masculine sense of gender identity. He is strong, his actions are direct, and he is in control of the path that they will take. As the one who follows, she is seen as the obedient partner, the feminine counterpart who balances out and succumbs to his overt display of machismo.

In these descriptive accounts of salsa, the body adopts certain modes of display and movement to embody specific characteristics deemed to be "feminine" and "masculine". These marks of gender, as identified by Butler, suggest "signifiers – both embodied and verbal – that situate the body in the cultural sphere or, in a more radical formulation, that allow for its 'coming in being'."[80] Within semiotic theory, a signifier is the existence of a word or image that works with the signified to create a sign. In this particular case, the elements that adorn the female body such as her clothing and her makeup, as well as her physical characteristics such as her hair, legs, and hips "constitute the 'marks' that enter a hegemonic discursive economy productive of the

[80] Noland, *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture*, 176-7.

body's 'meaning'."[81] This preconceived notion limits the body to the discursive and visual register, which relies on language and vision to inform the body's limits.

As Butler has so persuasively demonstrated, gender is not biologically affixed to a certain sex but is performed. The labels "man" and "woman" do not naturally coincide with an individual's gender identity but are in service of the reproduction of heteronormative culture. As Butler argues, "the association of a natural sex with a discrete gender and with an ostensibly natural 'attraction' to the opposing sex/gender is an unnatural conjunction of cultural constructs in the service of reproductive interests."[82] Associated with culture, this system of categorization creates a false sense of stability through the establishment of the heterosexual family structure as the social norm. This creates a heteronormative framework, with an unspoken set of rules and social script, governing what an individual can and cannot do with their body. However, individuals are not merely inscribed upon but play a role in upholding the dominant status of this script. For the notion of a script alludes to the presence of an author and thus brings forth the realization that it needs social actors to bring these gender categories into being.

Butler argues that an individual's subject formation is a marker that is constructed through "*a stylized repetition of acts*" adopted by the body through "bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds [that] constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self."[83] It is an act that is practiced, embodied, and performed so often that it has become accepted as the norm because it is seen as a natural extension of one's sex. It is this notion of repetition; this need for actors to continuously re-enact these identities that reveals the performative nature of gender.

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[81] Ibid, 177.
[82] Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no.4 (1988): 524.
[83] Ibid, 519. Italics in the original.

Much like drag, salsa brings to light the corporeal work the body puts into maintaining societal notions of masculinity and femininity.

In the act of fulfilling gender stereotypes – in social dancing and stage performances – "the *reality* of gender is also put into crisis: it becomes unclear how to distinguish the real from the unreal. [In this moment we] come to understand that what we take to be 'real,' what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality."[84] It shows that gender is not innate but requires physical exertion to come into being through visual markers of identification and recognizable gestural routines. As a way of expanding upon the discursive limits of language, gestures, which are anchored in the history of salsa's predecessors – such as the various *oricha* dances – demonstrate that identifications of gender can be temporary and subjective. One's identity cannot be viewed as a stable reality but needs to be approached as something that is continually responding to its environment. If gender is understood as a performative act that requires repetitive social behaviours to come into being, then it is "in its very character as a performative [that] resides the possibility of contesting its reified status."[85]

Salsa dancers learn to emphasize certain parts of their bodies, adopting recognizable gendered movements. For example, female identified dancers focus on emphasizing their hip movements and arching their spines to create the appearance of a fuller derrière while their male coded counterparts learn to maintain a strong frame. These self-adjustments are embodied through salsa lessons and maintained through social dancing. According to Noland, "blind to the contortions demanded, [individuals] no longer sense kinesthetically the impact of [their] movements on [their] tendons, ligaments, and bones" that have restricted and conformed their

[84] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990;1999), xxiii. Italics in the original.
[85] Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," 520.

bodies to fit the social script.[86] However, once salsa techniques are internalized, they provide individuals with the skills to deviate from established rules. For as Noland notes "*culture, once embodied, produces challenges to itself.*"[87] The body put under social pressure may unknowingly carry out these cultural demands but movements such as gestures are "vulnerable to processes of de-skilling and re-skilling".[88]

As locations that exist outside of the responsibilities of work and the domestic sphere, salsa venues promise a site of play and leisure that does not liberate but reinforces societally prescribed gendered roles. Within the dominant script of salsa dancing, the man is presumed to naturally assume the role of the lead while the woman performs the "follow." In the stereotypical depiction of salsa, gender roles reproduce a gendered distribution of power in which the man is described as masculine, strong and in control, while the adjectives used to describe his female partner are often limited to feminine, soft, and submissive. However, it is important to recognize that these labels, like those of man or woman, are not tied to one's biological condition. They are not natural predispositions of one's sex, but rather, *discursively constructed, and can be countered through movements on the dance floor.*

Take, for example, this scenario: I am at a salsa night club and it is close to midnight; the music pauses, indicating that it is time for somebody's birthday dance. Friends and strangers alike step forward to celebrate with the birthday "boy." Moving forward and around and around, we create a whirlwind of movement. I break through the circle to partner with the birthday boy, while the others wait for a moment to intervene. In a flash my time is up and just like that I am

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[86] Noland, *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture*, 30.
[87] Ibid, 42. Italics in the original. It is important to note that even within learning environments there has been resistance to the words female and male that have been used in the past to dictate which role an individual can learn. Instead, many instructors have begun to use more gender-neutral terminology such as leaders (lead) and followers (follow) to encourage everyone to learn the role they want to.
[88] Ibid, 175.

back in the circle, dancing and watching the scene unfold before me. The man who has replaced me takes the lead. No longer choreographing the dance, the birthday boy's movements begin to change. His sharp and defined gestures turn soft, fluid and feminine until another dancer comes between them and once again, he acts as the lead guiding their movement across the floor.

In another scenario, a hand stretches out in a hopeful request. Whose hand is it? It is mine. But how does this simple act of asking someone to dance counteract the heteronormative narrative? While many follows will wait until someone asks for their hand, this is not the case in my experience of Toronto's salsa scene. A woman is not a wallflower that waits around for a man to ask her to dance, nor is she required to accept his request. Participants of both sexes are encouraged by fellow dancers to be more proactive and take initiative by asking a stranger to share a dance. There is a two-way exchange that occurs when bodies embrace on the dance floor. I cannot perform well if they are not a good "lead," nor can they lead successfully without my assistance.

What if I were to redefine the nature of this dancing relationship by drawing attention to how gestures can be experienced in a way that goes beyond restrictive notions of masculinity and femininity? What if the terms that are used to describe the lead were reinterpreted to suggest guidance rather than control? To this end, my ability to respond to a lead's body movements and physical cues displays a unique ability to adapt to the situation in the moment that it occurs. This is not innate. It is a skill that is learned and practiced, a technique that is not limited to one's sex. One's movement within a salsa night club, one's role within this scenario, is not bound to a predetermined set of actions. There is no authoritative figure watching over the dancer's movements, nor anyone to dictate what sequence of steps they are to take. Social dancing calls for alterations to the predesigned script of studio environments.

Creatively pushing against the preordained image of the organized body, the concept of a BwO as developed by Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze, is an opportunity for the body's intensities to move beyond language and towards touch.[89] Although the BwO can be interpreted to signify a body void of functional organs, it is not the "organs" that the concept argues against, but rather, their organization and arrangement into an organism.[90] Societal visible cues such as the colour of skin and sexual organs are used to organize identity markers such as race, gender and sexuality, however, salsa roles are not inherently tied to one's gender but have been conceived as such through popular and mainstream depictions.

Self-monitored gendered behaviours situate the body within a grid-like formation that limits variation and disorganization. Deleuze and Guattari describe what the BwO organs as movements to disorganize, must contend with:

> You will be organized, you will be an organism, you will articulate your body – otherwise you're just depraved. You will be signifier and signified, interpreter and interpreted – otherwise you're just a deviant. You will be subject, nailed down as one, a subject of the enunciation recoiled into a subject of the statement- otherwise you're just a tramp.[91]

Man or woman, straight or queer, this ontological framework suggests that these linguistic signs situate one's body within a pre-existing cultural script that dictates what an individual can or cannot do.[92] The traditional understanding of salsa claims that a man can lead while a woman cannot, due to innate characteristics that have been attributed to each sex. Yet there is something undeniably unsettling about this notion that individuals act according to a designated script,

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[89] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia,* 149-166.
[90] Ibid, 158-9.
[91] Ibid, 159.
[92] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2002), 2.

executing actions that fall within the boundaries established by the overbearing, yet invisible social mechanisms maintained by the dominant cultural framework.

To reform the dominant understanding of the body and its construction into an organism means to view it as a form that is in a constant state of transformation rather than a concrete entity.[93] This idea of a malleable form that resists classification exceeds the limited definitions provided by the already given discursive mode of categorization. For this reason, I prefer an ontogenetic approach that views the body, not as stable entity but one that is in a continuous state of becoming. As opposed to an ontological point of view that bases its interpretation of the body's orientation with the world from a stable reference point, ontogenesis "refers to the capacity to emerge, to invite a moving-off the grid that challenges stagnant organizations of signifying bodies."[94]

As advocated by Deleuze and Guattari, taking apart the organism is to move away from categorization to experimentation and potentiality.[95] Salsa exists on this plane of potential for when a gesture turns to touch, a dance of improvisation begins. Salsa cannot exist with one dancer but always implies two individuals coming together through touch to engage in a spontaneous moment of creative expression. The pressure of their hand in mine, acts as a flexible way to communicate without the use of words. When the leader reaches out to signal a transition, I respond to "the potentiality […] movement incites within my body. I respond to our reciprocal reaching-toward."[96] Even when touch turns into contact, our movements do not stop, nor does our reaching out. Within this dance of improvisation, we cannot know what is to come. Our

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[93] Manning, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty,* xxi.; Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, 4.
[94] Manning, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty,* 25.
[95] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia,* 159.
[96] Manning, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty,* 88.

bodies are continuously reaching out towards that which has not yet come into being, moving through space and time that unfolds through our dance.

Salsa dancers tap into the "intensities [that] pass and circulate" the BwO to move past the layer of signification towards a body that is always in becoming as a result of being in relation to another.[97] It is an unplanned composition that opens the body up to an experience that unfolds in the moment of its creation. When I join another in the ebb and flow of salsa dancing, I take part in moving beyond the organization of memorized steps. According to Manning, organisms can be "made and dismantled, organized and categorized, understood and comprehended, discarded. But bodies [in movement] are productively infinite."[98] By suspending the dominant view of what bodies are capable of in movement, bodies can produce a force that extends beyond gender identity. In other words, improvisation moves beyond the organization of a body that simply performs pre-determined scripts of gender.

While the dance requires a lead and a follow to come into existence, this does not mean that the relationship between dancers designates someone as a passive recipient of the exchange. Acting as a follow, I am not simply responding to the lead's gestures, I am an active participant within the creation of the dance. Every iteration of the dance is a new variation where the dance's realisation relies on each partner listening and responding to one another's movements, regardless of gender or sexual orientation.

Acknowledging the reciprocal exchange that occurs allows us to reconsider the active-passive model commonly attributed to partner work. This shift in power dynamics serves as an example of how the body in movement can use touch to surpass the classificatory system of gender performance and move towards a BwO. Salsa appears as a heterosexual activity that has

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[97] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia,* 153.
[98] Manning, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty,* 139.

heteronormative codes. Yet, it matters to consider the perspective of the dancer who exceeds normative notions of leading and following. It is a desire for my body to go beyond the simple mechanics involved in executing the steps towards fully experiencing the sensations that they offer. It is about the texture of the move, coalescing two bodies into one as they reach towards the potential in improvisation.

Labels of differentiation and segregation are called into question when bodies are conceptualized as not in equilibrium. When the body's corporeal performance is analyzed in relation to its sensory experience, the body becomes more than a stable entity. The body as an organism tied to a sense of self is dislodged when bodies are placed in relation to each other's senses, triggering a transformation that can only happen when we are connected through touch. This sensing, feeling, moving, body opens itself up through its gesture towards another. In stretching one's hand out to invite a stranger to enter a close embrace, dancers extend their touch towards a shared kinetic experience.[99] In other words, touch continues to reach towards that which is not yet there.

Individuation signals the engendering that comes before signification, a state in which matter is undefined and without form. In the act of reaching out to you, I embark upon a project of dismantling the notion of the individual as understood by the labels produced by society and instead embark on a process of individuation.[100] Contrary to using a system that refers back to the gendered, racialized, and sexualized portrayal of bodies- as identity, I can begin "to undertake a reworking of form", as a BwO.[101] Unstable and unpredictable, individuation takes place at the threshold of what is socially scripted.

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[99] Ibid, 7.
[100] Manning, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty*, 90-1.
[101] Ibid, 90.

Within the liminoid spaces of salsa club environments, movement resists the idea of the body as a stable form. Labels impose the idea that the body is a static entity that can be inscribed upon and that gender is therefore about (self) identification and individualism. However, once these labels are abandoned, the body dancing salsa does not act alone, but is instead, always in relation. It is here, within this plane of possibility, this moment of connective spontaneity that the body breaks from the organism by being in relation with another, thus, destabilizing fixed understandings of gender identity.

Club scenarios allow the staging of social interactions that bring awareness to how kinesthetic actions such as "gestures, attitudes, and tones" bring attention to the limits of language to explain bodily experiences.[102] When we dance there is no "I" and "you" but an "us" and a "we" that extends beyond the notion of the individual towards all matter within the space. When the dance begins, my body responds and adapts, as it learns to move in ways in which it did not before. I cannot pause this movement, nor can I go back to who I was before, I can only move forward. This shift towards an improvised relation in movement breaks from normative interpretations of salsa that reduce gestures of leading and following as only heterosexual.

[102] Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire. Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas,* 28.

Conclusion: Reflections from the Dance Floor

From the perspective of popular culture, salsa appears to be a heterosexual dance form most commonly involving a man and women, comprised of heteronormative codes where the former adopts the role of the "lead", a position of power, while the latter is in the submissive role of the "follow." Yet, the dynamic within their embrace suggests another means of understanding the gendered roles ascribed to their fleeting relationship. In the moment of enactment, salsa dancers can surpass the heterosexual and normative codes that the body appears to embrace. To begin to comprehend this paradox within salsa requires a shift of positionality from that of the observer to that of the dancer. By reflecting upon my embodied social dancing practice, I have sought to move beyond the visual and discursive registers – those that sustain notions of "leading" and "following" – to account for the often-neglected experience of *movement* that privileges gesture and touch. To acknowledge an alternative reading of salsa that is produced in movement is to break from a long history of policing the body. This transition is not simple.

Placing gestures and touch at the forefront of the analysis of salsa as a social dance form provides for an opportunity to move beyond a rigid understanding of the body as inherently gendered towards one of the body as always becoming. Gestures and touch can be seen as both a reinforcement and a challenge to the gendered social script. Unlike language, which is carefully structured and controlled in service of a cultural agenda, in movement there is "something about the inability to coherently regulate the senses (in this case, touch) that offers the potential for reaching out even beyond words to expose the supple limits of the body."[103]

Touch entices us to individuate, to tap into the intensities that flow through a BwO, to welcome the unscripted in a spontaneous dance of improvisation. When I introduce myself to

[103] Manning, *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty,* 86.

another, touch is used to create a two-way exchange. Contrary to a BwO, by falling into the roles of lead and follow we come to be signified and bear the mark of a singular gender identity, based on the binary cultural construction of man and woman. What I have argued in this paper is that when our bodies begin to improvise, we dis-organize, we move beyond a gendered embrace towards a BwO. In movement, we momentarily detach ourselves from the organism of identity, refusing to be restricted by the normative ideas of “lead” and “follow” that indicate a unidirectional flow of power.

The embodied experience of the dancer is not fixated on gender, nor on the social and cultural roles prescribed to it. In the moment of improvisation on the dance floor, experience is concentrated on touch as an invitation to engage in a mutual exchange of energy. The individuating body of the dancer in motion dissolves the barriers that separate "you” from “I” to form a body that is continuously taking itself apart to become more than the sum of its individual parts. When I reach toward you from the dance floor, I reach toward a body that is never at rest, but in a continuous mode of becoming.

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