Embodied Archives: Dance, Memory, and the Performance of Latinidad
Ramón H. Rivera-Servera, The University of Texas-Austin

Preface

On July 2000 I had the opportunity of assisting curator Marvette Perez on an interview with Vincent Livelli, an Italian American Latin music collector from Brooklyn, for the Oral History Program at the National Museum of American History. Livelli, who in the 1930’s heard the buzzing sounds of Spanish Harlem on the radio and was immediately hypnotized, remains one of the most valuable sources on the social and performance culture of Latinos in New York City during this period. I was moved by his knowledge about and love for Latino culture. He responded eloquently and passionately during three hours of probing questioning. We discussed many aspects of the developments of Latino social life including innovations in orchestral performance for Latin music bands, production histories, the complex trajectory of Latin sounds from Spanish Harlem to midtown Manhattan, and its subsequent spread into the tourist tropicalia of the 1940s and 1950s.

The details of his account are rich, and I invite anyone interested in a real historical jewell to peruse through this and many other oral histories thus far archived at the Smithsonian Institution through the Oral History Program. However, and despite of all this wealth of annecdotes and historical reference, I, as a performance scholar who focuses on the live event, continue to feel at a loss when approaching the archive, national or otherwise. Livelli could simply not address the subject, it escaped his capacity to explain through language. His detailed protrait of Spanish Harlem, of The Paladium, the bugaloo, vanished right before my eyes with the absence of movement, gesture,
bodies. I am struck by the difficulty of evoking a memory sufficient to articulate the performing body from within such a rich and complex history. My experience with Livelli and my conversations with many others in his generation have in many ways shaped my current research. I study movement, and dance in particular diligently, not only because of its importance here and now, but because I don’t want us to forget. Because I don’t want to lose the thickness of the performance moment. This is a labor of love, a record of those gestures that have impressed me, those that have challenged me and those that have seduced me. The piece that follows is a sample of my project to archive Latino social dance practices in the present . . . so that we may remember our bodies in the future.

I.

Consider the following situations:

In a small mixed gay club in Rochester, New York, Nestor, a 43 year old Chicano gay man from the Texas Valley, takes to the dance floor, alone, as a remixed version of “Rumba” a Latin House track recorded in 1993 by New York City based Pirates of the Caribbean blasts its heavy house base to the polyrhythmic layers of congas, bongos, timbales, and electronic percussion. He uses the percussive line to mark his stylized stepping in a cutting forward motion across the floor. His choreography is explicitly about demarcating space in the dance floor and is characterized by a slight bending of the right knee rythmically pausing to allow right shoulder punctuation that travels through the curving of the torso and onto the hip, followed by a pointing forward with the left foot on the step. This full sequence is adorned by a forward rotation of the bent arms with on the beat inward contraction at the chest (as in salsa). This territoriality is further
articulated by the intensity of his cutting stare fixed across the room during the forward progression. He ends his approximately ten feet travel with a sudden pause accentuated by a coquettish smile and slow swaying of the hips that usher the quick right turn, sustained pose and sudden back drop to the floor that follow. An almost immediate recuperation follows initiating his travel towards his starting spot. This travel is very much with the rhythm, synchronizing his performance to the dominant sensory stimuli in the club, sound. But his on the beat motion, matching the intensity of the music, is subverted by the softer feel of the pause and pose sequence. These flirtatious instances book-end the travel across space. Nestor slowly shifts his hips from side to side, tilts his head in synch and smiles before and after the drop and recover sequence. For the next four hours he will remain on the dance floor, travelling back and forth on his kinesthetically constructed catwalk, adjusting his strut to the style and rhythm of DJ Hector’s mix and pausing only to get a drink of water from a bottle he has strategically placed between the speakers and the go-go boy platform.

In a primarily Anglo gay male club in Austin, TX, Clara, a Puerto Rican lesbian in her late twenties, enters the dance floor with her partner to a house mix version of Nuyorican actor/singer Jennifer Lopez’s “Let’s Get Loud.” She uses a very small amount of the space around her, focusing instead on a tight kinesphere with her partner. She faces the crowd positioning her back toward her partner who comes close from behind with slow, rhythmic, weight shifts to the sides at the knees initiated with the marking of the beat in a forward isolation of the shoulder. Clara begins moving in sync with her partner, who indicates the rhythm with her hands on the hips. As the rhythmic line accelerates, Clara breaks her synchronization with her partner’s movement, who can no longer follow
her, and shifts her alignment to teasingly flaunting her behind towards the crowd. She quickly transitions from the slow, cool shifting of weight to the sides to an on-the-beat isolation of the hip in a back and forth rocking motion. As the song invites the crowd to get loud, to take life on their own terms, her feet remain motionless as she playfully articulates her hip movement with the rhythm, then pausing counterpointally, accelerating to a double time articulation, to return to the on-the-beat base line once again. She repeats this sequence multiple times until the end of the song. At that point she smiles devilishly with her partner and exits the floor for a break.

II.

Both of these examples represent different choreographic practices employed by U.S. Latino queers in dance clubs at distinctly different geographies: one 45 min. from the Northern border and in a state where Puerto Rican presence, although no longer as demographically dominant, remains the primary cultural referent for *latinidad*. The other just a few hours from the Border with Mexico in a city where *latinidad* is defined through the historical negation and current suspicion of the citizenship of ethnic Mexican communities. In both examples, how the dancer moves and how she reacts to the movement choices of others represents both a strategic negotiation of the social realm of the gay dance club and an engagement with a larger scale of social issues and discourses. Furthemore, taking into account their respective locations—a Chicano gay man in an upstate NY club and a Puerto Rican woman born in California in a mostly white and male gay club in TX—yields a rather multi-leveled socio-spatial model characteristic of the current tranlocated geographies of *latinidad* in the United States. The movements performed by Clara and Nestor are in a very immediate sense a matter of pleasure, sexual
and otherwise, through an engagement with the sensorial machine of the gay club, but it is also, at another level, a complex and critical articulation of their place in the world and a creative articulation of citizenship in an era of globalization.

Here, in the realm of pleasure, these dancer’s negotiate, on the body, the current shifts in the Latina/o social and cultural conditions promoted by the increased mobility of capital, peoples, and cultures characteristic of globalization (Jameson, 1999). In the case of Latina/o America, new patterns of migration have significantly altered what previously were perceived as homogenous concentrations of diasporic or border communities. Advances in communication technologies have brought conceptions of “home” closer than ever before. Mass cultural productions, for example, connect Latin America and communities in the United States to each other, redefining the notion of shared culture. Niche marketing, popular music, magazine and literary culture, and television stations such as Univision and Telemundo hybridize the conception of Latina/o America. (García-Canclini, 2001). Latina/o America is thus not only a rhetorical or political strategy but also a tangible series of practices that enable new cultural imaginaries (Anderson, 1983, 1991). This relationship between the representation of Latina/o lives in popular media and the self-presentation of latinidad, at the dance club for example, demonstrate an enhanced circuitry of exchange between live performance, mass media, and everyday life. Latino dance practices negotiate globalization through the production of embodied notions of community across borders and diasporic locations.

Because latinidad is constituted as a strategic geography that negotiates late capitalist mobility and globalization, it functions as a site of convergence beyond, but always overlapping and intersecting, the national. More specifically, this intersectional
nature of *latinidad* may function as a strategy of “grassroots globalization.”

Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai defines “grassroots globalization” as organizing efforts that seek to negotiate globality from below (Appadurai, 2000). According to Appadurai, “grassroots globalization” practices take advantage of the technologies of globalization to advocate for the concerns of the local. This strategy relies on the identification of common concerns and the mobilization of constituencies across national borders.

Dance—as a local practice that negotiates globalization from below—is both immediate materiality—getting ready, traveling to the club—and utopian futurity—the emergence of community, the possibility of change, pleasure. In her recently published ethnography of club dancing, Fiona Buckland explores the worldmaking power of improvised social dance at gay/lesbian/queer clubs in New York City. She observes how improvised social dancing in the club is a:

playful practice that depends upon the agency of its performers, improvised social dancing produces queer club culture, not as a homogenous, transhistorical object, but as a process of counterpoint, contestation, and polyvocality. This more fluid model shifts agency away from culture and its structural forms, including dance, to participants who improvised movement in response to everyday experiences, which in turn, influenced the experiences and understanding of everyday life. (Buckland, 7)

According to Buckland’s argument dancing serves as a creative forum from where to articulate as well as experience the quotidian. For Latino queers these acts bring together a whole series of intersecting identities, experiences, and desires that produce a truly hybrid, at times conflicted, notion of place and being in the world.
In my interview with Nestor he explains: “Dancing in the club is my chance to have space of my own. Even if I am surrounded by a bunch of people, I make sure that my dance floor is my dance floor and nobody better mess with me. I am fierce when I take on the stage, honey, and I has got to shine!” (Nestor, Interview 1999) For Nestor, who works supervising seasonal farm-worker in Sodus, NY and shares a small one bedroom apartment with five other men who labor at the same camp, the club is truly a space of his own.

It is during his weekend outings to Rochester that he is able to live his identity as a gay man, far from the homophobia prevalent in his household. The club, however, is not without its own conflicts as he explains: “You know, people are generally nice, but you never know. I’ve seen a lot going on around here, some dude thought I was a puto the other night! Man you know, just cause I’m Latin and shit. And I’m not about to just fall de pendejo for the first one that comes around. That’s why, you know, you see me in my corner, you know. I like keeping to myself. I also want to meet someone, you see, I am nice and I flirt and all . . . I just don’t want to be messed around with, you know. I got to test people out, you feel me?” These are the issues shaping and being shaped by Nestor’s experience in the dance club. He sees his time in the club as a time for the free expression of his sexuality, but at the same time resents the risks of racism and stereotyping present in the club.

Nestor’s dance is an invitation to watch, perhaps engage, as much as a setting of boundaries. The spectator is at once lured and challenged. His cutting across is deliberately about owning the floor, and yet, his attitude is ultimately imbued with irony as he works his upper body on counterpoint to the step progression and eases into the
teasing sequences that frame it. His movement is not an emasculated stance, instead it gains its strength from a directed and articulate performance of queer effeminacy. Combining fiercely a repertoire of “queenie attitude,” much like in voguing, to accumulate the spectacular sense of groundedness he performs.

Clara, on the other hand, complains about the assumed entitlement of other dancers. “They just think they own the place, especially white boys. They’ll just dance around bumping into everyone. That’s rude, you know. I keep to myself and to my girlfriend. It’s no body’s business how I dance.” (Clara, Interview 2002) She prefers contained polyrhythmic movements and sees the kind of more open movement choices as intrusive. She explains that she doesn’t want to deal with forced contact with other people in the dance floor. She says, “I am tired of it. You grow up going out to straight clubs and all these guys be commin up and trying to get it with you. I mean, even in the street people are always talking about your ass out loud and shit. That’s just wrong!”

Clara’s choreography with her girlfriend, although allegedly in total isolation from her surroundings, is invested a complex dynamic of display that establishes her difference from the crowd that she is seemingly ignoring. Her strategy lies in the rhythmical articulation of the body, a strategy the Nestor also prioritizes in his own dance choices. She maintains a closed space around her, but throught the flaunting of the hip isolation movement facing the audience she commands attentive spectatorship. It is on the dance floor that Clara reacts to her spectators on the street, by rearticulating the racialized and oftentimes racist comments about the size of her glutes through the virtuoso contraction of her rear muscles. Shaking her ass on the dance floor is a way to address her everyday experience, to exorcise, the at times racist fetishism of her onlookers.
Both performers stress a rhythmic layering on their movement that challenges the more common on-the-beat choreographies prevalent in these clubs refusing to be mere ‘slaves to the rhythm.’ Both dancers experience the music with an active sense of agency, communicating relationships through the body that go beyond mere synchronization. The showcasing of skill is paramount to these performances. In the display of rhythmical understanding, through flaunting that they get it, arises the assertive corporalization of latinidad. And it is at this juncture and through this act of identification with rhythm and its critical embodiment that a local articulation of globalization takes place.

The most readily accessible element of contemporary club culture is music. It is published, publicized, and distributed on a global scale. As George Lipsitz has observed:

> It has a peculiar relationship to the poetics and politics of place. Recorded music travels from place to place, transcending physical and temporal barriers. It alters our understanding of the local and the immediate, making it possible for us to experience close contact with cultures from far away. Yet, precisely because music travels, it also augments our appreciation of place. Commercial popular music demonstrates and dramatizes contrast between places by calling attention to how people create culture in different ways.” (Lipsitz, 3)

For diasporic Latino communities, music can be a sight of historical recovery and through translocal identification a way of constituting a present strategy based on affectual relationship to other latinos and their respective cultural traditions. For example, salsa, a musical and dance genre associated with the Spanish Caribbean diaspora to New York City, may provide a space of identification for Mexican migrants in Michigan (Aparicio, 1999).
Celeste Fraser Delagado and José E. Muñoz say that, “dance sets politics in motion, bringing people together in rhythmic affinity where identification takes the form of histories written on the body through gesture.” (9) Latino identities are aurally transmitted through rhythm and embodied in the act of dancing. This relationship to rhythm is historical in the case of Latin America and has been much articulated in Caribbean societies where it is explicitly connected to an African derived aesthetic heritage. But through the circuits of music publishing, promotion and distribution—including live performance tours, radio, television and film; rhythm, and more specifically Afro-Latin rhythms, have become international markers of *latinidad*.

*Latinidad* in the United States is to some degree constituted in rhythm, a phenomena most recently exemplified in the 1999 media frenzy over the Latin Explosion. And this characterization is not only aural. The established connection between latinidad and rhythm presents a repertoire, oftentimes stereotypical, of equally defining movements. Following a long history of Latino performers that have included Desi Arnez, Carmen Miranda, and Rita Moreno, Ricky Martin shakes his bum, bum; Jennifer Lopez crosses over to pan-Latino success through the authenticity of her behind; and most recently Cameron Diaz shakes her groove thing on every film, possibly marking a latinidad that has remained, for the most part, hidden behind her Goldy Hawn-type characterization. The swaying of the hips, the aggressive undulation of the back, and the polyrhythmic stepping by Latina/o queer dancers constitute embodied practices that imbue the Latino queer body with a sense of history, community and an agency not generally afforded to them.
Dancing in the club becomes a practice of what I term choreographies of resistance, embodied practices through which minoritarian subjects claim their space in the social and cultural realms. The Latino queer body in motion, her ability to move to the Latin rhythm eloquently, shifts the power dynamics of the dance floor and the club, at least temporarily. Similarly, club dancing, for queer Latina/os, represents an engagement with commodified popular culture, but one in which the dominant narratives of the global market are interpreted and rearticulated. This strategy, I argue, exemplifies grassroots globalization. In this dynamic the sexual economies of the globalized Latin Explosion, generally assumed as heterosexual, with the exception of Ricky Martin of course, are queered at the site of the local, reconfigured under a different cultural economy. So, the localizing maneuver performed at the club not only bring a specifically Latino sensibility to a typically urban American social space, but it queers latinidad in the process, rearticulating it for the circulation of queer pleasure.

While some theorists have positioned media as antithetical to performance, in Latina/o queer performance this tense relationship appears to be complementary one that privileges local sites of liveness as the only available means for the cultural articulations of those disenfranchised from access to the cultural capital of mass media technologies. In fact, the queer acts of dancing in a club articulate ways in which the dominance of media is negotiated by those who, while subjects of its redefinition of cultural spatialities, are often represented by its overdetermining narrative without having the opportunity to access its mechanisms for self-representation (i.e. Latin Explosion). These spaces are intersections or crossroads, sites where the impulses for Latina/o comminuty in the U.S. at large are negotiated and queered at the level of the local, the immediate experience.
Arjun Appadurai establishes a compelling connection between this grassroots
globalization practice and the realm of the imagination. And it is precisely in that leap of
faith from the experience of everyday life to the imagination of community, even across
borders, that Latinidad suggests in its most utopian performances.

Cultural critic Lisa Sanchez-Gonzalez has eloquently described this two-leveled
relationship between the engagement with the global aspirations and hopes and the more
local immediate experience as a “pa’ca y pa’ya” aesthetic, a here and there aesthetic. She
utilizes salsa dancing as a metaphor to the social and cultural maneuvers of the Boricua
community and other diasporic populations in the United States. She explains:

As it glides between the p’aca, the whole context of its immediate interaction—the
dancing, improvisations, and joy we experience, as well as the racism, exploitation,
and sorrow we encounter everyday—and the p’alla, a geo-philosophical projection
of past, present, and future possibilities, an audaciously hopeful realm that is just
beyond reach but so close that you can feel it coming. (Sanchez-Gonzalez, 168)

This dual logic, here and there, is masterfully articulated in Nestor and Clara’s
choreography. As Nestor explains: “Anyone can come into the club and walk around, you
know, I just think I do something special . . . I shake my can better, I don’t know how to
explain it like it’s a Latin thing you know, you just got that rhythm from inside you. I
just let it loose.” It is this dance between immediate materiality and history and jumping
onto a larger ontological category that is complicately hybrid what characterizes
identitarian practices on the dance floor. Assuming ownership and belonging of a world
spun out of control. Pa’ca y pa’alla, here and there, anywhere, when there is one such
character assuming her/his place on the dance floor, flowing majestically with the music,
challenging its assumed desiric investments, making it pleasurable, grinding the hips, shaking that ass, stepping in a fire of pain, of struggle, of hope . . . that is where latinidad dances.

References


Jameson, Frederic. *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke UP, 1999).


