

THE YAMULEÉ EFFECT: SOCIAL DANCE, PEDAGOGY, AND PERFORMANCE
OF AN AFRO-DIASPORIC SALSA DANCE COMPANY
IN THE BRONX AND BEYOND

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF
THE TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY

DEPARTMENT OF DANCE
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

BY
MILA THIGPEN, BA, EDM, MFA

DENTON, TEXAS

AUGUST 2020

© 2020 by Mila Thigpen

DEDICATION

For my mother, Cassandra.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the many people and places that have supported during my research. I would like to thank my advisor Dr. Rosemary Candelario for her enduring support. I am deeply indebted to my committee members. Dr. Matthew Henley and the late Dr. Linda Caldwell who started me on this journey; and for Mary Williford Shade, Dr. Priya Thomas, and Dr. Thomas DeFrantz who have ushered me towards completion

I cannot begin to express my thanks to Dr. Anna B. Scott for guiding me through a holistic, generative writing process. I am also grateful to my editors, Alexandra Hoerl and Meghann Ridley.

I extended my sincerest thanks to the generous mentors, colleagues, and friends across disciplines and institutions who have lovingly challenged, encouraged, and engaged with me and my research. I am grateful to my teaching and learning communities at Cambridge Rindge & Latin School, Harvard Graduate School of Education, and Boston Conservatory at Berklee/Berklee College of Music.

I want to thank the Texas Woman's University Dance Department for their continuous support and for honoring me as the first recipient of the Linda Caldwell

Scholarship. I also want to thank my cohort members and fellow TWU dance graduates and candidates. A special thanks is in order to Emily Wright who has become a dear peer mentor, editor, and friend. I also extend thanks to Karina Donald from the TWU Center for Research Design and Analysis for her vital feedback and guidance in my coding and analysis process.

I wish to extend a heart-felt thank you to Yamuleé Dance Company, Yamuleé Project Boston, and Yamuleé Ladies Teams for accepting and nurturing me. I have grown not only as a scholar, but also as an artist. In the words of Osmar Perrones, “Thank you very mucho!”

Lastly, thank you to my family for your unconditional love and support. Cassandra, Kyle, Travis, Tricia, Amy, Zaidyn, Amira, Gavin, and CoCo: Even when you did not understand my process on this doctoral journey, you knew how to love me along the way.

ABSTRACT

MILA THIGPEN

THE YAMULEÉ EFFECT: SOCIAL DANCE, PEDAGOGY, AND PERFORMANCE OF AN AFRO-DIASPORIC SALSA DANCE COMPANY IN THE BRONX AND BEYOND

AUGUST 2020

Popularized commercial representations of salsa have shaped familiar stereotypes of this Latin dance form as well as of the people who participate in it. In doing so, these commercial representations of salsa often erase the Africanist roots of salsa. However, there is a realm of salsa dance with its own history, culture, and practice that is understudied in the literature, which disproportionately focuses on salsa as experienced through Anglo-American bodies. In this dissertation, I address this gap by highlighting the overlooked practices of New York-style salsa in its cultural context. To do this, I examine Yamuleé Dance Company, a Latinx dance company based in the Bronx. Through an ethnographic study, I reveal how Yamuleé continues to preserve salsa's African roots, while also locating the Bronx as a global mecca for salsa dance innovation. I argue that this dance company has had such a profound impact—which can be called "the Yamuleé Effect"—because it connects pedagogy, performance, and social dancing;

thus recognizing African and Latin roots, as well as creating an essential communal space for Dominican cultural affirmation.

Yamuleé utilizes multiple dance modalities that centers the narratives of New York-style salsa's social and African genealogies, creating a dynamic archive of Africanist aesthetics. Through specific pedagogical and performance strategies, the company also invites personal dance style development for salsa dancers. All of these factors have allowed Yamuleé to develop an exceptional extended community grounded in a shared history and dance vocabulary. Yamuleé has created a unique, self-sustaining dancing community that not only develops individuals' dance skills, but deepens members' social bonds and cultural wealth. Because of this holistic and unique approach, Yamuleé Dance Company is important, not only because of its respect for salsa history, but also because of its role as a significant innovator of salsa.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DEDICATION.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	v
LIST OF FIGURES.....	ix
Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
So You Think You Can Dance Salsa.....	1
The Need to Re-focus: Responding To The Commercial Representation Of Salsa.....	4
African Roots, New York Branches: Yamuleé Dance Company.....	7
My Introduction To Salsa.....	14
Literature Review: Salsa Music, Dance, And Identity.....	18
Theorizing Salsa Through Critical Race Theory And Latinidad.....	27
Overview Of Chapters.....	31
II. NEW YORK STYLE SALSA: AFRICAN AND SOCIAL GENEALOGIES.....	35
Cuban History In Motion.....	35
African Sacred Dance In Cuba.....	36
Rumba.....	36
Danza/Danzón.....	38
Son.....	40
Afro-Cuban Migration Prior To The United States Prior To 1918.....	42
Afro-Latin Jazz In The Interwar And Post World War II Periods.....	44
Mambo At The Palladium.....	47
Salsa Music And The Emergence Of A New Dance Form.....	50
The Impact Of Eddie Torres.....	52
Salsa Congresses: An Introduction.....	54
III. METHODOLOGY: COMBINING EBX WITH ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH.....	56
Qualitative Research With A Critical Ethnographic Focus.....	57
Entering Community.....	60
Building Community.....	61
Participant Observation At The Yamuleé Studio.....	64
Performing With And “Exiting” Yamuleé.....	64
Interviews.....	65
Artifacts, Symbols, And Documents In Ethnographic Inquiry.....	68

A Special Note On Circularity	68
Data Processing And Analysis	69
IV. YAMULEÉ SALSA CULTURE: AN AFRO-DOMINICAN FAMILY THAT DANCES TOGETHER IN THE BRONX	72
Welcome To Yamuleé	75
Yamuleé As Family, Village, And Home	78
Becoming Part Of The Yamuleé Family	82
A Bronx-Based Dominican Family	86
Family Socials	90
Yamuleé Couples.....	95
Departure And Homecoming In Yamuleé.....	96
V. YAMULEÉ CLASSES: TECHNIQUE AND FLAVA PEDAGOGY	99
Osmar’s Pedagogical Influences	103
Yamuleé Classes.....	104
The Trinity At Work: Pedagogy and Community At Yamuleé	105
Embodied Tension.....	108
Spins.....	110
Open Breaks/Back Breaks	111
Check	112
Stunts.....	113
Embodied Tension In Evolving Techniques: Tradition And Innovation	114
Teaching Teachers.....	118
VI. YAMULEÉ SALSA STYLE: PRESERVING AND EXTENDING THE AFRICANIST ROOTS OF SALSA.....	122
Preparing For Performance.....	125
Blending Rumba With Salsa On 2 In Severa	130
Blending Orisha Dances With Salsa On 2 In Facultad.....	135
Blending Afro-Latin Style With Salsa On 2 In Boogaloo.....	138
VII. YAMULEÉ SALSA PERFORMANCE: CHOREOGRAPHY FOR THE BRONX AND BEYOND	143
Yamuleé Project Teams.....	145
Yamuleé Boston	148
The Houston Salsa Congress And Bringing The Extended Family Together.....	155
Boston: Season Two	161
Yamuleé Ladies And Yamuladies Boston.....	162
Yamuleé Challenge	170
Other Outreach Models: Congresses (Again!), Retreats, And Cruises	173
VII. CONCLUSION: THE YAMULEÉ EFFECT	181
Quarantine Connections	185
Limitations And Future Research.....	187
WORKS CITED	192
APPENDICES	
A. Professional Dancers Who Trained At Yamuleé.....	200
B. IRB Letter	202

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1: Yamuleé Dance Company Logo	10
2: Yamuleé Performing Tumba La Caña Jibarito.....	80
3: Julian And Justin Sandoval With The Author.....	108
4: Instagram Post By Gabriela Avedaño	129
5: Yamuleé Project Team Boston.....	151
6: Yamuleé Ladies Boston.....	169

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

So You Think You Can Dance Salsa

On July 8, 2019, Melany Mercedes and Andrew Aviles open the televised final day of Los Angeles auditions for *So You Think You Can Dance*, Season 16. They come charging hand-in-hand down a runway from backstage to the performance area to face their judges: Dominic “D-Trix” Sandoval, Nigel Lythgoe, Laurieann Gibson, and Mary Murphy. Even though Melany is wearing flesh colored heels, Andrew stands head and shoulders taller than her in black pants and a light grey button-down shirt that compliment his tall, thin frame. Melany’s shimmery pink and black dress tastefully reveals her legs under a ruffled, thigh-high hemline. A brief self-introduction reveals the couple is from the Bronx. When Andrew proclaims that they are also best friends, he crosses his arms with his hands held in fists, a gesture known as the “Wakanda Salute” made popular by the movie, *Black Panther*.

Mary Murphy asks the couple to confirm that they will be performing an International Latin Ballroom dance. Melany confidently corrects Mary, explaining that they will perform salsa “on 2,” which she describes as a street style that is similar to ballroom because it has technique, but with way more “street” and “pizzazz.” Melany’s response provides two interventions. She re-focuses Murphy’s lens to observe their dance

not with ballroom dance expectations, but with a focus on the aesthetics associated with New York style salsa. By comparing this style to ballroom versions as forms of technique, Melany also dismisses the “naturalization” myth, which is the notion that just because the dancers are Latinos, they are born knowing how to dance salsa, particularly at the level of expertise they were about to demonstrate. Melany demands that their dedicated training be recognized.

As the music begins, any salseros watching at home surely recognize the vocal expression made famous by Latin pop music icon Luis Miguel. He starts his signature shout out with a sforzando that crescendos to the end, “Eeeeeeyyyyyy!” By the time his voice fades into the sumptuous orchestrated salsa instrumentation, Melany and Andrew have already performed two bars of dynamic footwork with body movement and traded places on stage. The song “Sal A Bailar” is full of dynamic music and percussive breaks. Andrew and Melany transpose each and every one of the breaks with rib and shoulder punctuations in all directions. While their feet continue the foundational salsa steps, their shoulders and hips ride different but complementary currents of motion. Andrew leads Melany into a series of traveling turns. She circles him like a planet orbiting the sun. He flips her into a back tuck. When she lands, they celebrate with sharp chest pumps in time with the music. The camera cuts to Mary Murphy enthusiastically re-performing this gesture from her judge's chair.

When the camera cuts back to the couple, they are finishing a salsa basic as they establish a hand-held connection. As he leads himself in a right turn and then a right turn for his partner, Andrew winks and points at the judges with a confident smile. He then

performs a flawless fan kick over Melany; his toe draws an imaginary rainbow so high over her head that she does not need to duck. Andrew picks Melany up, and she throws her legs to the front around him. She works with Andrew's momentum by pushing her legs off his hip to redirect her momentum in the other direction. Her body moves around his waist like a hula hoop. Hooking his arm under her knees, Andrew catches Melany on the opposite side of his body. Melany inverts herself, now swinging her torso down and up. Andrew releases her to land on her feet, after which she immediately drops into a side lunge. These fantastic tricks are interlaced with Afro-Latino dance elements like the Cuban folkloric *makuta* step, gestures from the Yoruba orisha deity Shango, and mambo's "cutaway" step. Melany and Andrew also execute extensions associated with ballet and jazz dance technique. The dancers end side by side in similar power stances full of pride. In a dynamic choreography just over one minute long, the couple demonstrates a fluid understanding and command of multiple dance genres, Afro-Cuban folk dance, mambo, and jazz. During her bow, Melany reverently rubs the floor, a ritual gesture of touching the earth that African Americans created during a resurgent participation in African dance classes in the 1970s.

Mary Murphy's compliments the "authentic" look of their dancing and praises the couple for differentiating from "ballroom" salsa by digging into its "roots." Melany affirms that the couple applied criticism from last year's audition, notably that Andrew needed to smile more. (Smiling is not a common expectation in street style salsa, where a mean-muggin' stank face is a legitimate performance choice.) The judges unanimously award the couple two golden tickets to move on to the next round of competition.

The Need to Re-focus: Responding to the Commercial Appropriation of Salsa

I begin my dissertation with this salsa performance because it is an atypical representation of salsa on reality television. In contrast to most televised salsa choreographies that perform Euro-centric aesthetics with Latin dance decorations, Melany and Andrew, who both identify as Latinos¹ and trained in salsa at Yamuleé Dance Company, signify their proficiency with Afro-diasporic, African American, and Afro-Latino sensibilities, cultural norms, popular culture, and movement traditions—along with a few Euro-centric flourishes—through their dance. What does the presence of Africanist gestures on the bodies of Latinx salsa dancers represent? How does this performance of the “roots” of salsa on a major international (not to mention whitened) stage intervene in how we understand salsa?

This intervention is important because the way salsa is presented in the ballroom scene has caused a significant amount misrepresentation, to this point, has not been fully articulated. Salsa is not part of ballroom’s Latin dance canon. Yet, the ballroom industry engages salsa through class offerings, exhibitions, and televised presentations. *Dancing with the Stars* is a ballroom dance television program that features a Latin Night every season to include salsa as one of its genres. Their televised salsa exhibitions often negate the stylistic features of salsa’s deep connection to African aesthetics. Absent are the flexed joints, three-dimensional body movement, syncopated footwork, and nonverbal connections between two dance partners. Instead, the televised salsa performance metrics include limb extension, projected expression to the audience, and flashy costumes.

¹ I use the term Latinos to reflect how this dancing couple identifies on social media.

A video clip from Season 20 of *Dancing with the Stars* (2015) offers a salsa style example quite different from Yamuleé Dance Company. This YouTube video is of the opening dance that kicked off their Latin Night theme in episode three. A visual and choreographic analysis underscores how this typical representation of commercial salsa differs in many ways from the performance described at the beginning of the chapter. In this video, the dancers are all outfitted in skin-revealing costumes. The women wear rhinestone bras that allow for cleavage. Their short, feathered skirts bring attention to their hips and buttocks. The men sport unbuttoned shirts that expose their bare chests. The dancers perform fast footwork and high energy spins. The dancers exchange aggressive body rolls throughout the routine. This salsa showcase is performed all while fire and flames spew in the background.

Dancing with the Stars is rooted in the ballroom aesthetic. However, as we have already established, salsa is not a ballroom category. While salsa is a Latin dance, the Latin division of ballroom consists only of the following dances (Picart 2012): paso doble, jive, samba, cha cha, and rumba (not to be confused with Cuban rumba). Since the ballroom community does not generally perform salsa, their commercialized, televised salsa exhibitions often negate the aesthetics of salsa's deep connection to African aesthetics. Instead, the televised salsa performance metrics include limb extension, projected expression to the audience, and flashy costumes. This results in an extractive process. Salsa is detached from the people, history, and social context that produced it.

This commercial narrative of salsa is an act of cultural appropriation. In this context, salsa dance is reduced to a one-dimensional representation for the sole purpose

of entertainment. Although the intention may not be to harm the salsa dancing community, commercial participation promotes negative stereotypes for Latinos and salsa social dance practitioners such as being hypersexual and exaggeratedly passionate (McMains 2013). True, swiveling hips and sinuous rib cages can be highly stimulating to someone with limited exposure to an Afro-Latino movement aesthetic, invoking a titillating and at times uncomfortable response from both the viewer and participant. However, these reactions simply demonstrate that when salsa dance is taken out of its rich, historical, and cultural context it is reduced to objectification and stripped of its deeper and more positive potential for creating deep connections between salsa practitioners.

Indeed, “Hot and steamy,” “vertical expression of horizontal desires,” and “serious hip action” are all examples of how I have encountered salsa dance being described. I have come into contact with these terms through salsa event flyers and televised dance programs, as well as reactions from people when they learn I am a *salsera*—a salsa dancer. These clichés often unconsciously lead to the objectification of the salsa dancing body, which can be problematic when trying to analyze salsa as an expression of the joy I find when performing. Furthermore, given that salsa is a dance form emerging from a specific cultural practice, it is easy for one to over extend the objectification beyond the dance floor and onto the people who culturally identify with the dance. In practice, this often means objectification of black and brown bodies.

A more ethical process would entail the effort to seek an understanding of salsa in its rich cultural context and demonstrate this understanding through revised aesthetics

and choreography. It would recognize that salsa disrupts and blurs the lines Western society often draws between sensuality (the experience of pleasure through the senses) and sexuality (an erotic response). It is within this disruption that my research, which uses ethnographic methods and focuses on the company that trained Melany and Andrew, the Yamuleé Dance Company, lies. I argue that Yamuleé's dance technique of connecting pedagogy, performance, and social dance with community engagement centers and provides an essential space for the historical recognition of African and Latin roots, while also providing an essential communal space that centers Latinidad identity.

Africanist Roots, Latinidad Branches: Yamuleé Dance Company

Directed by Osmar Perrones, Yamuleé is a salsa dance company with a studio located in The Bronx, New York. Osmar translates Yamuleé as an African word meaning festive, joyous, and free-spirited. Since its founding, the company has gained global recognition and notability in the international salsa congress circuit. Yamuleé's salsa style can be described as salsa "on 2" or "street salsa," which is occasionally interchanged with mambo. Salsa on 1 is also known as LA style. The major difference between these two styles is on which count the dancers "break" or step forward to begin a series of three alternating steps with a pause before completing the second set of three alternating steps in one cycle, resulting in six steps over eight counts of music.

The New York salsa tradition in which Yamuleé Dance Company takes part is a socio-cultural phenomenon that reimagined the mambo in the integrated atmosphere of the Palladium Ballroom. As Latin music evolved into salsa, it reflected the socio-political sentiments of the 60s and 70s, affirming Latino cultural pride. By the early 2000s, this

style of salsa had a global reach. Dancers from all over the world began convening salsa congresses, multi-day events filled with classes, workshops, and social dancing for its patrons. As a leading company, Yamuleé participates in congress events around the world while maintaining a thriving Bronx studio with classes for all ages and skill levels.

Yamuleé Dance Company is significant because it highlights the social nature and cultural performative practices of salsa by taking an approach that understands social dance, pedagogy, and performance as inextricably linked. Throughout my work, I will show how this “trinity” allows Yamuleé to preserve salsa’s African roots, while also locating the Bronx and New York as a global mecca for salsa dance innovation. This trinity centers social interaction and a performative expression of salsa that allows Yamuleé to successfully approach both salsa conservation and innovation.

Salsa performs Africanist roots, and Yamuleé makes an active claim to this lineage. Singer Alvaro José “Joe” Arroyo made the term Yamuleé famous in his 1987 recording “Yamulemao.” This instantly successful song was originally written and performed in 1982 by Laba Sosseh, a Gambian-born musician composer, as “Diamoule Mawo” in Sosseh’s native language of Wolof. With permission from Sosseh, Arroyo re-recorded the song, phonetic vocalization of the original lyrics. Laba faced Joe: “You destroyed her. You destroyed my song.” To which Arroyo simply replied, “You made it for the Africans, and I made it for the world.” (Ardila 2017)

It is of course possible to interpret this exchange as a Latino appropriating and African song. Another possibility is that, being that the two singers were collegial and that Sosseh gave Arroyo permission to record the song, their exchange may have been

light-hearted. Elsewhere scholars have established the dynamic relationship between Senegalese-Gambian and Cuban musicians engaged in performing salsa (Shain 2018). Even if it was a contentious conversation between the two singers, what is being embraced is Joe Arroyo, as an Afro-Colombian recognizing, celebrating, and magnifying Afro-diasporic music.

In the same way this dynamic played out in music, it also plays out in the dancing. Osmar added a Dominican touch in the way he incorporated this song into his dance company's repertory. Osmar, who was born and raised in the Dominican Republic, used a version of "Yamulemao" recorded not as a salsa; but rather as merengue, which is a Dominican music genre. Yamuleé's salsa choreography *Señorita* begins with a short merengue dance transitions to salsa movement along with the music. The second half of the choreography is danced to "Señorita Tentacion" (Miss Temptation) by Raphy Leavitt.

Osmar, having chosen the name Yamuleé, commissioned Lisa Lampert to design the logo (see fig. 1). It is a red abstracted couple dancing from/as the flames. Osmar clarifies, "It's a couple in the fire, so you got to be fire to dance." In fact, the word "fire" (sometimes pronounced as "fya") among the Yamuleé dancing community is a high compliment.

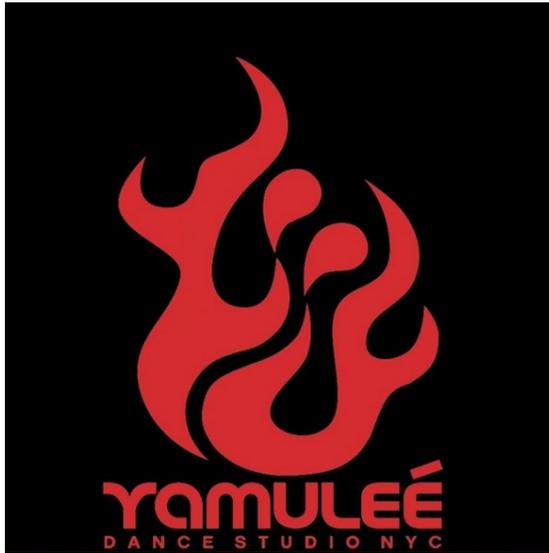


Figure 1. Yamuleé Dance Company logo.

It is impossible to understand Yamuleé without an understanding of the vision of Osmar Perrones, the director and founder of Yamuleé Dance Company. Originally from the Dominican Republic, Osmar had turns as a taxi driver, a bodega employee, and a professional baseball player before becoming involved in dance. He taught and choreographed as a co-director of Santo Rico Dance Company in New York before founding Yamuleé. He is known for his creative routines and passion for salsa. Osmar has over 20 years of experience teaching and performing salsa. he truly knows the importance of technique and hard work.² Osmar and his teaching predecessors all studied

² Unless specified otherwise, all quotes from Osmar, and details about his life are from an in-person interview with him at the Yamuleé Bronx Dance Studio on July 29, 2017.

salsa under the living mambo legend Eddie Torres; they are directly connected to the development of New York as a mega salsa scene.

The salsa congress stage was an important dance career launch for Osmar. He was a social dancer who began taking classes in 1995. In 1997, he was invited to participate in the first Salsa Congress held in Puerto Rico. This was his performance debut with famed company Santo Rico, which represented New York at this international gathering. Osmar was part of with the off-Broadway show *Descarga Latina* with Nelson Flores, Vitico “La Magia” Pacheco, Maribel Maldonado, Stracy Diaz, Maria Tirado, and others. After two years with this production, he freelanced with Pacheco, Fuerza Latina, and Luis Zegarra. Several years later, Perrones returned to Santo Rico as co-director with Tomas Guerrero for three years. He also appeared in Eve’s 1999 top ten single “What Ya Want” and, in 2000, won for three consecutive weeks on *Sabado Gigante*, Univision’s longest running television program and the world’s longest running variety show. In 2003, Osmar founded Yamuleé.

Osmar’s approach is grounded in his belief that “Salsa comes from the streets.” Unpacking this statement reveals much about the history and evolution of salsa rooted in a socio-cultural identity and allows us to understand why the “trinity” of social dance, pedagogy, and performance function in the way they do at Yamuleé. Through this phrase, “salsa comes from the streets,” Perrones references salsa’s historic connotation of *guaperia*, a swaggering, cocky manner. In telling his account of salsa history, Osmar corrects for the commercial appropriation of salsa and preserves salsa’s history and aesthetic development. In other words, Osmar practices counterstory-telling against

Dancing with the Stars, So You Think You Can Dance, and the like. A tenet of critical race theory, counterstory-telling is a method of telling the stories of those often accounts are often omitted from dominant narratives (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). Counter-narratives challenge perceived wisdom.

As a result of this approach and the resulting dancing training regimen conceived by Osmar, Yamuleé dancers are a mobile archive of the African music and movement traditions that survived and evolved from West Africa, through Cuba, all the way to New York City. Yamuleé dancers, individually and collectively, train in multiple Afro-diasporic dance styles, like Afro-Cuban folklore, Palladium style mambo, and Afro-Latin jazz.

Yamuleé is a Black expression of salsa. Its choreography incorporates flexed joints, cross lateral body movement, and syncopated footwork, which are important Africanist elements in salsa's physical expression. Flexion occurs in the knees and hips naturally with each weight shift as a result of alternating steps. As the right foot receives the weight of the body, the right knee is bent and the left hip shifts outwardly away from the body. The rib cage initiates the right shoulder into vertical alignment with the right knee and foot. As the dancer pushes the right foot into the floor, the right leg extends to shift the body's weight to the left, also transferring the jenga-like joint alignment to the opposite side of the body. The arms move in a cross lateral pattern. As the weight shifts to the right, the left hand moves slightly forward and to the right.

Syncopated rhythms are another key African derived element. Salsa's vocabulary, both codified and improvised, relies on the variety in which the feet express different

rhythmic patterns. It is important to note that when a dancer performs a “tap,” the foot makes contact with the floor without transferring body weight. In a “step” the dancer transfers body weight onto the active foot. A toe tap or touch is an example of a syncopated relationship to a basic step. An “on 2” version of a salsa basic is as follows: A dancer will take the first step in place on the right foot. On count 2, the dancer breaks or steps forward with the left. The dancer steps in place on 3. Pause on 4. The left foot steps in place on count 5. The right steps back on count 6. The left steps in place on 7. Pause on 8. In a step called the toe touch or the toe tap, the feet interrupt the basic step rhythm with a catch step causing a falling forward onto the right foot on the “and” between count 1 and 2. The dancer taps the right foot on 2 and quickly steps with the right foot, syncing back into the basic foot pattern. The toe touch or toe tap looks like a dancer intentionally tripped inside a basic step. All these elements and more, are part of Yamuleé’s aesthetic, even as they are erased from performed mainstream interpretations.

Osmar’s demanding reputation precedes him; I, too, was intimidated. When we sat for an interview in his office, I was so nervous that I knocked over his table plant—not once, not twice, but three times. Yet, those of us who are privileged to spend time inside the Yamuleé empire get a glimpse of Osmar beyond his iconic status and into his humanity. Like the African drums in the new world, Osmar often communicates clear, deliberate messages nonverbally. He will use a stern look to express disappointment or a subtle smile to acknowledge a dancer. He will use his index finger to critique you during class. Whether a dancer loves or hates his ways, it is understood that Osmar creates great

dancers, and that his ability and willingness to train all dancers is an expression of love for his culture and salsa.

Osmar's passion for salsa is contagious and magnetic. His dancers express their kindred affection for this dance form in class, in performance, and on the social dance floor. Yamuleé's strong sense of community, which I discuss further in Chapter four, leads me to reflect on my own introduction to salsa and its importance to my social development and community making.

My Introduction to Salsa

At my undergraduate alma mater, thirty-three was the number of students of color in my freshman class. The number thirty-three made us the largest, diverse incoming class in the university's history at that time. My school boasted a newly diverse faculty pool as well: three Black males, one multi-racial female, and one Latino professor. However, my thirty-two fellow classmates of color and I were underwhelmed by this accomplishment. Even with this newly found campus "diversity," I fielded some of the most ignorant questions and assumptions from my white classmates. Somehow, I had become burdened with the responsibility of socially educating my Caucasian peers. It was exhausting. However, there was a special place of respite that I found. One of the school's Latinx professors hosted quasi-secret house parties primarily attended by the Black and Latino students. Now that I am older, I realize how inappropriate my story may sound. However, back then, those house parties provided a safe haven where I did not have to explain my differences or preferences. The *clave* sticks in the music would beckon me from the parking lot. Eduardo and his entourage would swing the door open to

greet my companions and me in a Spanglish harmonious pandemonium. Always enticed to the dance floor, my body invited the Afro-Caribbean cadences to travel along my muscle fibers, from hip motion to effortless spins. I was liberated by the rhythm and motion of this dance form that I had just encountered called salsa.

After that, every time I moved to a new city, finding a place to dance salsa was a part of my initiation. With time, I became a familiar face in my Boston neighborhood's dive bar, which held a Latin night every weekend. It is typical for salsa clubs to give a short dance class before opening the dance floor as the DJ spins the evening away. One night I received a frantic call from the club promoter asking me to get to the club early. The regular teacher did not show, and they needed an instructor for a bachelorette party. I fumbled my way through teaching my first salsa lesson, becoming clearly aware of so many questions I had about how salsa is taught. If I was going to begin teaching salsa, I needed to learn how. I sought out a dance group in my area giving lessons.

At the time of my search, the salsa group was holding auditions for a performance group. Although I was new to their salsa aesthetics and terminology, my previous dance experience floated me through the audition. More than fifteen years later, I have performed and taught salsa around the world, including at the prestigious New York Salsa Congress. I developed the skills to be able to include salsa and other Latin dance forms such as cha cha in my teaching portfolio, and developed the first college credit salsa course in the greater-Boston area. As I continue to teach, I also continue to learn about the various ways people engage in, with, and through salsa.

I have always viewed individuals as experts of their own experiences. An ethnographer at heart, I studied dance in Brazil and Cuba to understand how people of those cultures describe their participation in particular dance practices. Brazil is where I was introduced to samba and Candomblé religious dances. I interviewed dancers from Balé Folclórico da Bahia about their experiences dancing Brazilian folk elements in concert dance. Curiosity about salsa's history led me to Cuba. I took master classes with Danza Contemporanea de Cuba and Danza Chevere to further my understanding of Cuban dances like rumba, makuta, palo, rueda de casino, son, and orisha dances from the Santería religion. Learning from dancers who identified with the dances beyond the steps was rich experience that deepened my own understanding of these dances in their lives and culture.

My deep interest in and study of Afro-diasporic dances precedes my research with Yamuleé Dance Company. I was first introduced to samba and Orisha dances while studying in Brazil as an undergraduate. Since then, I have traveled to Havana twice to study Afro-Cuban folklore dances, and their influence on contemporary salsa. I teach and perform salsa in the greater-Boston area, as well as nationally and internationally. Thus, their emphasis on the Afro-diasporic aspects of salsa influenced my decision to make Yamuleé the subject of my dissertation. My experiences as a teacher, performer, and scholar have uniquely shaped my ability to “read” the Africanist aesthetics in Yamuleé's salsa technique, pedagogy, performance, and choreography and to theorize their cultural significance within Yamuleé and the broader salsa community. Similarly, I remain engaged in vernacular, Black youth culture with my experience in teaching dance in an

urban public high school. At the college level, I developed and implemented a college course, Dance and Pop Culture, that consistently puts my students and me in conversation with the racial, socio-political ramifications to dance trends in the United States and beyond. I enact these experiences and sensibilities in analyzing the dynamic intertwining of traditional Africanist, contemporary urban African American techniques in Yamuleé's work.

The various ways in which dancers make meaning of learning and performing salsa creates a wide spectrum of expression and aesthetic differences. The cultural value and implications of salsa dance's practice shifts depending on the people who participate in it. My personal and professional understanding and engagement with salsa began and remains rooted in both salsa's historical and socio-cultural context. My love for this dance form has led me along an unexpected professional dance career path. I have taught and performed salsa in a range of environments, from local dive bars to international salsa conventions. My research includes two dance research trips to Cuba, and attending workshops and lectures with key figures in salsa, which has helped to shape the salsa dance curricula I created for high school and college dance programs. I am also informed from my recent comprehensive literature review on salsa's presence in the academy.

I am intimately aware of how my experience of salsa differs from the commercialized experience I have described previously. I have been aware of salsa's existence in these separate but simultaneous worlds for a while, and my dissertation, in a sense, started as an opportunity to explore these differences before evolving into a more focused ethnography of the Yamuleé Dance Company. I began my inquiry not only by

analyzing salsa as cultural representation, but also by probing the complexity of cultural identity and its embodiment. My graduate studies exposed me to critical theorists and methodologies that enabled me to shape possibilities for researching how practitioners so diverse from each other find themselves so deeply connected to the salsa community created by Yamuleé.

Literature Review: Salsa is Music, Dance, and Identity

This dissertation extends the excellent, but limited, research on salsa as a dance form by focusing on salsa as a site for complex, multi-layered, cultural identities. In this section, I trace major themes in the salsa dance and music literature, with the exception of history, which is addressed in Chapter Two. Additionally, I discuss ethnography as a major methodology used in the literature; my own use of ethnographic methods is detailed in Chapter Three.

The first theme in the salsa dance literature analyzes salsa as a site for the development and practice of shifting cultural identities. In their introduction to the anthology *Everynight Life: Culture and Dance in Latin/o America*, Celeste Delgado and José Muñoz (1997) argue for a scholarly analysis of the dancing body as a site for the construction, expression, and re-envisioning of Latino identity. This anthology examines a various Latin dance styles as models for the interplay of cultural memory and regional conflict. This work prompts a consideration of salsa's significant in Yamuleé Dance Company beyond their prowess as dance technicians and to the deeper meaning and signification of salsa inside the community.

In *Salsa Crossings: Dancing Latinidad in Los Angeles*, Cindy Garcia (2013) provides a model for the application of theories of Latinidad to the study of salsa. Garcia posits that the Los Angeles salsa dance clubs and congresses she studies employ Latinidad as a means to develop social hierarchies that recapitulate and even exceed the “every day” hierarchies of the broader Latin community. In evoking Latinidad, the L.A. salsa scene distances itself from “Mexican-ness” (which they perceive as the lowest social ranking), *la limpieza* (the cleaning service industry – the culture of the common laborer), and what they sense as the over-sexualized culture of the African American community to create libidinal and social capital that satisfies the network of salsa patrons these clubs seek to attract. I give similar consideration to the role salsa plays in the lives of Yamuleé dancers with respect to cultural identity.

Garcia conducted her fieldwork (1999–2005) to develop an ethnography influenced by feminist methodologies and interpretive frameworks, which I modify in my study by utilizing critical race theory and Latinidad studies. She interviewed participants at various dance clubs who practiced different styles and approaches to salsa, weaving their accounts and feminist theory and methodologies into narrative. Garcia also considers data gleaned from migration patterns, demographics, economic profiles, and social networks as they influence, shape, and interact with salsa events (ibid.).

Since my dissertation also calls for the ability to hold space for multiple relationships to the research and the research process, I found the work of Juliet McMains to be a valuable model. For example, McMains devotes a section of her book, *Spinning Mambo into Salsa: Caribbean Dance in Global Commerce* (2015), to documenting

Palladium dancers' descriptions of learning mambo — a dance form that some view as a predecessor to salsa while others consider a form of salsa. While learning in dance academies is commonplace for contemporary salsa dancers, her informants describe in generous detail learning through observation and imitation, without the benefit of formal lessons as a source of pride.

Another theme in the salsa dance literature is of diasporic (re)orientation and political consciousness. McMains also touches on this by drawing Afro-diasporic connections to salsa. As ballroom dance competitor, McMains provides a healthy critique of ballroom's appropriation of salsa. She introduced the term brownface (2001), which refers to the practice of tanning for competitive Latin dance performances. This invites a curiosity about how Latinos react to this kind of representation, which I address in my conclusion.

John Chasteen (2004) documents the African influence on national representations of dance. Particularly, he notes how African roots have been linked not only to those of African descent, but also to the national identities of Brazil, Cuba, Colombia, and Venezuela. The recognition of those links is stronger than in the United States. Furthermore, there are countries like Argentina, Uruguay, and the Dominican Republic that downplay this connection. His work underscores how this Afro-centric connection is prominent in any discussion to Latin American identities.

Chasteen discusses several prominent performance phenomena like blackface tango in Argentina and Carnival. He also focuses on the concept of transgressive national dance and how it challenges social controls and explores how transgressive dances

became official national rhythms through comparing old and new forms of tango, samba, and salsa. He traces a Cuban evolution from *son* to *salsa*, and goes into detail about specific African aesthetics that influenced its development.

Chasteen also explores the political intervention of the Cuban popular dance *danzón* during the first Cuban revolution. Indeed, much of this salsa literature that focuses on diaspora and political consciousness centers on Cuba. For example, Yvonne Daniel explores social developments in Cuba through the lens of the rumba (1995). Daniel asserts that socio-political elites had advanced Cuban ballet before Fidel's Castro's victory, but had left out modern dances and folkloric dances (and, thus, much of the populace), like rumba. The political shift created by Castro incited a shift towards a growing interest in rumba. Cuba's Ministry of Culture programming incorporated Afro-Cuban rumba, symbolizing its inclusion of lower-class expression, to promote a profoundly inclusive sense of nationalism. Daniel then analyzes the difference between Cuba's African derived rumba and the ballroom (commercial) version, in which it is more common for the white elite to participate. Both Chasteen and Daniel highlight how dances marked as "Black" have a legacy of denigration in their respective white, elite societies.

While they do not exist separately, salsa's music form has garnered far more academic attention than its dance companion. This scholarship is important to my dissertation because it documents salsa's African and Afro-Caribbean ancestry. Specifically, the salsa music literature traces the complex racial, ethnic, and national affinities of salsa music and related forms in a way that has not yet been done by dance

scholars about salsa dance. in marking this complex music history, provides ample space for similar inquiries in dance.

Anti-Blackness is a part of salsa's history. This scholarship helps us understand how and why salsa, unlike many other dance forms, recognized its diasporic heritage. In her article "Dancing with the Enemy," Deborah Pacini-Hernandez (1998) demonstrates the effect of racial categorization on Cuban music since the US embargo. Cuban music essentially became a victim of the Trading with the Enemy Act, preventing Cuban music and its musicians from entering the United States. Pacini-Hernandez suggests that the African aesthetics of Cuban music was not marketable as Latino, and therefore Cuban was commoditized as "world music" instead of Latin music.

Later in the article, Hernandez argues that Spanish Caribbean music, though it circulated elsewhere, was not part of the world-music scene, and this is a result of their disconnection from African roots. The author makes appoint to acknowledge the diasporic heritage in the 1960, which is a time period is marked by salsa's cultural and political declarations.

In this way, salsa differed from other types of music. Hernandez notes that much of the African artists being marketed at the time came from the areas Paul Gilroy's termed as the Black Atlantic. She claims that this concept and marketing of world music created an "imagined community," in which all Black musicians and audiences were members (1998, 112). She notes that to both world music and world beat there is a production, promotion, and distribution infrastructure for marketing these music genres owned and maintained primarily by Western-based entrepreneurs who have carved out a

niche for music from the Third World within an international music industry otherwise dominated by US pop.

Salsa's Blackness has also served as a tool of resistance. Peter Manuel also explores questions of heritage and "ownership" in his study of the process by which Puerto Ricans have appropriated and resignified Cuban musical forms as symbols of their own cultural identity (1994, 250). He argues that Puerto Ricans and Nuyoricans are justified in regarding music such as salsa as having been effectively indigenized, but primarily in a socio-musical rather than historical sense. Manuel makes a strong case for explaining how and why Black and mulatto Puerto Ricans began to identify with Cuban salsa music (1994, 261). He suggests that Afro-Latin elements were much stronger and recognized in Cuba than in Puerto Rico. He details bomba and plena as Afro-Puerto Rican musical expressions coming from the Island's region of Loiza. Manuel provides an example of how Afro-diasporic aesthetics survive in Latin dances, and I reclaim the Afro-diasporic presence in Yamuleé salsa aesthetics.

While Manuel details particular Puerto Rican elements of salsa (1994, 264), Andres Espinoza (2014) examines *salsa consciente*, a sonic version of Latinidad that shaped sociopolitical identity for Latinos and was made possible because of influences ranging from the African American Black Panthers to the Puerto Rican Young Lords. Espinoza's dissertation analyzes the event of salsa consciente as a musico-poetic movement that spanned nearly two decades from the mid 1970s to the early 1990s. This musical phenomenon expressed the ethnic consciousness of urban immigrants who came to feel that all of them lived in *una sola casa* (one and therefore the same house) or,

within the same meta-barrio (urban meta-neighborhood or ghetto), a semiotically constructed abstract meeting space where Latino and Latin Americans interact through the common language of politicized danceable music. The term *consciente* applied to salsa evokes the thought of sophistication consciousness within the Marxist sense and/or an ethical conscience that rejects consumerist individualism in favor of social solidarity. Spread through the media of vinyl records and commercial radio, salsa *consciente* was rapidly embraced by communities of assorted national origins because of the socio-musical signature of Latino ethnicity in New York and beyond. Since salsa music has a dance form, it is a logical conclusion that salsa dance companies like Yamuleé enable pan-Latino possibilities for a salsa *consciente*.

Finally, there is a strong methodological trend in the salsa literature for ethnographies. Although their specific subjects vary, this body of literature often grapples with issues of identity, culture, and language in various salsa communities. In her account of the formation of a salsa dance team at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Joanna Bosse develops an analytical process for studying simultaneous expressions of individuality and cultural affinity she calls “movement dialect” (2012, 40). Bosse argues that like language, movement dialects allow for an analysis of individual kinetic behavior as well as the cultural contexts from which those behaviors arise. Significantly, for my project, Bosse’s process enables me to generally embrace salsa as a language and the rich, Africanist movement as a distinct dialect spoken through the dancing body.

Sheenagh Pietrobruno’s book, *Salsa and its Transnational Moves* (2006), an ethnography of the Montreal, Canada, salsa dance community, provides a framework for

ethnographic inquiry that blends multiple methods. Pietrobuono complicates the theory of salsa as a cultural commodity by demonstrating the complexity of a form constantly in motion. In particular, Pietrobruno draws connections between salsa and folk dance in that the movement is often not attributed to specific individuals. While, it is important to recognize the collective contributions of salsa dance practitioners, Pietrobruno prompts me to document individuals, institutions, and events making significant contributions to sustaining salsa.

In “The Re-branding of Salsa in London’s Dance Clubs: How an Ethnicised Form of Cultural Capital was Institutionalized,” Norman Urquía (2005) uses an ethnographic approach to argue that salsa can function as a mode of cultural capital and to discuss the relationship between cultural capital and de-ethnicizing salsa. Through participant observation and interviews, she establishes the shift in salsa’s cultural capital from ethnicized to de-ethnicized. Combining theories of Latin identity and Bourdieu’s theory of social fields, Urquía establishes three major shifts in London’s salsa clubs: exoticization, establishment and institutionalization, and sophistication and diversification. Not only does Urquía provides definitions and etymologies for many useful terms such as salsa and Latin, but his work also helps me discuss the tensions between those who associated and others who disassociated salsa with Latinidad. He shows that, while some dancers construct salsa as Latin, a finding also established by Roman-Velazquez’s (1999) study, many dancers neither pursue nor value Latin identity and instead emphasize ethnically neutral aspects which refer to the skills and knowledge they already possess (Urquía 2005).

I Wen Chang's ethnographic study of the ways in salsa enables eroticism and exoticism in Taiwanese identity formation employs several methods for her qualitative research, including phenomenology and ethnography. Chang uses these methods to draw out the ways in which social dance can disclose cultural values embodied in everyday practice. She concludes that for Taiwanese dancers, salsa is a way to "flirt with globalism," as Taiwanese dancers see salsa as being Latin and Black due to historical roots, but also simultaneously white because of the influence of Western commercialized narratives. This perception of global-ness allows the dancers to play with a foreignness through a "globalized dancing trend" (2015, 25). Chang also considers how salsa intersects with Taiwanese daily life of its practitioners, concluding that salsa provides Taiwanese dancers a soft resistance against dominant Chinese norms of rigid body regulation. Similarly, I consider the influence of salsa on participants' everyday realities in my research community.

Britta Schneider's (2010) ethnographic study of Sydney Australia's salsa scene, which draws out the multilingualism of salsa, raises interesting questions about the intersection of identity, language, and dance. Schneider shows that some styles of salsa are practiced in English only, while dancers from other styles are bilingual. She examines language ideologies and identities that are created in communities that are not based in national or ethnic affiliation, but have transnational ties. Particularly intriguing is her assertion, grounded in poststructural theory, that identity is not constant, rather it is continually reproduced and maintained through its doing. Similarly, I consider how

Yamuleé not only reproduces but also reinvents identity through salsa practice and performance.

Although this rich body of ethnographies informs many of the terms and goals of my own research, in general, they suffer from are two limitations. One is the majority of studies focused on the experiences of white scholars, with the notable exception of Garcia and Chang. It should be noted that while Garcia claims status as a native ethnographer her physical appearance, including the details of her fair complexion and red hair, does not fit the same considerations in the larger community. Garcia is aware that Latinx subjects respond differently to her dependent on whether or not she is perceived as Latina. The other gap is that these research accounts focus on cities outside of New York City. I join Garcia in contributing to the field of dance by focusing on a self-identified Latinx dance company that practices a Latin dance form based in New York City, salsa's birthplace.

Theorizing Salsa through Critical Race Theory and Latinidad

Given the two limitations of the ethnographies discussed in the previous section, I chose two theoretical frameworks, critical race theory (CRT) and Latinidad, that firmly center non-white voices and that allow me to understand the range of people who participate in salsa and their experiences. CRT and Latinidad are frameworks that effectively address previous limitations in the literature because of how they interact and overlap through various themes, such as identity, politics, and marginality in a way that reflects salsa's rich history and complex functionalities in a growing global society. Since salsa in the United States stretches across a racial, socio-political landscape it is necessary

to use an analytical framework that accounts for race relations in the US has the potential to offer fresh insights to into insights to the practice of salsa by a company that explicitly calls on Afro-diasporic roots while celebrating Latin culture, even as they draw students from across racial, ethnic, and national identities.

CRT is an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the ways in which the intersections of race, law, and power influence society, highlighting the significance of the role that race plays in the experience of life in the United States. The work of Derrick Bell, a Harvard law professor who was a formidable voice in critical legal studies, significantly contributed to the development of CRT. In his work, Bell applied a radical critique to the American justice system, insisting that laws functioned to maintain white supremacy (Bell 1992). Other scholars used this approach, which evolved into CRT, to deconstruct the systems and frameworks that reify such marginalization.

CRT scholars believe that racism is endemic to a US social reality. In other words, racism is a common if not daily experience for people of color in the United States. Because of racism's strong social presence, it is difficult to eradicate through legal policies. Some of the foundational tenets from Bell's work include the permanence of racism and what he calls "interest convergence" (Bell 1979), which describes how racism benefits elite whites and working-class whites and therefore gives whites little incentive to work to eradicate racism. Another important tenet of CRT is how scholars within the field discuss race as being socially constructed. Of course, people with common origins share similar physical traits; however, phenotype presents a very small portion of one's genetic endowment. CRT scholars investigate why society ignores current scientific

findings concerning the complexities and blurred borders when trying to define stable racial categories or when trying to create, manipulate, or negate racial categories when convenient. This framework is useful for examining the effects of cultural representation in performance, which would include salsa as a Latin dance form.

Although CRT is grounded in legal studies, it has been applied across various disciplines, such as education, to consider how the education as an institution may bias white students of students of color (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1997, Tatum 1994). I use CRT as a foundation to analyze how systems of power affect how salsa is imaged, taught, learned, discussed, and practiced.

CRT has been critiqued for its focus on the Black/white racial binary. Thus, scholars have produced theoretical offshoots like Latino critical theory, also known as Lat CRT. Richard Delgado, Daniel Solórzano, and Tara Yosso, as part of Lat CRT, made a major contribution to the canon with their development of counter-storytelling. Also known as counter-narrative, counter-storytelling is a critical praxis tool for giving marginalized communities voice in the specific discourses that concern them. Counter-storytelling is a critical academic tool used within critical race theory to ensure that marginalized stories receive attention despite the dominant cultural narratives that often overwhelm discourse (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). I have already mentioned how Yamuleé itself is an example of counter-storytelling.

My CRT lens is also informed by Kimberlé Crenshaw's development of intersectionality. Intersectionality recognizes that various categories of identity interact on multiple and simultaneous strata (Crenshaw 1991). By using CRT to explore salsa as a

site for the intersectionality of differing cultures emerging within a physical practice, I can analyze how salsa tells stories of intersections non-verbally. My dissertation, by focusing on one salsa community in particular, tells the stories of an Afro-Latin street, social, pedagogical, and performance practice that survives and extends their Afro-diasporic legacy. The story I tell performs as a counter-story to the commercialized, appropriated narrative of salsa in American popular culture.

A consideration of the complex sites of intersectionality moving within salsa also invites further investigation of the term “Latinidad.” In the context of intersectionality, I am interested in how the term disrupts the labeling process. Often, cultures are labeled by placing abstract and overarching markers on what is a very diverse group of people; Latinos certainly fall victim to this act of labeling; Latinidad is a disruption of this essentialist act. Frances Aparicio (2003) argues that although Latinidad is often used as a hegemonic term homogenizing Latinos, it can be reclaimed to understand how Latinos simultaneously identify and disidentify with each other. Cristina Beltrán (2010) further interrogates the notion of a pan-ethnic Latino political agenda, as well as the assumption that Latinidad infers a common collective consciousness. Beltran writes, “Yet, as scholars have noted, the process of Latinidad is both complex and contradictory, involving issues of immigration, colonialism, conquest, race, color, gender, sexuality, class, and language” (2010, 5). Beltrán nuances the conversation of essentialism for the Latinx community across multiple political issues. By considering how these issues intersect in numerous ways for individuals, Latinidad can be deconstructed to understand the complexities and

variances of the Latina/o experience. Cindy Garcia provides an example of this in her work on correlating salsa with social hierarchies based on employment sectors.

For this dissertation, I make two styling choices based on honoring Black and Brown voices in academia. The first is that I capitalize Black (and not white) in reference to people and culture to reflect the times in which this dissertation was written. During the spring of 2020, as I grapple with the senseless murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd, I join with scholars such as Lori Tharps and Mike Laws in capitalizing "Black" as an act of personal and professional resistance to racism, as well as a reminder to the reader of the humanity and glorious contributions to society of Black people. The second style decision is that in writing about Yamuleé, I refer to the members by their first names. This contradicts standard academic practice, but I made this choice to reflect the familiar and familial nature of the relationships within the community. Yamuleé's director is always called by his first name, Osmar, and on occasion he is referred to as "maestro" or (master) teacher. I wanted to maintain the culture of the company on the page. I exercise alternative practices for writing about Black and Brown communities in scholarship.

Overview of Chapters

In this dissertation, I explore the social, pedagogical, and performance techniques that Yamuleé Dance Company develops to teach, nurture, and perform a strong Latin culture rooted in Afro-diasporic movement traditions through salsa. Chapter Two, "New York Style Salsa: African and Social Genealogies," locates the company's practice of salsa within the history of its development in New York City since the mid-twentieth

century. This chapter shows how New York salsa developed through a strong connection with Africanist culture and history into a flourishing socio-cultural (and sometimes socio-political) expression and affirmation of Latinidad. In particular, it traces Yamuleé Dance Company's direct lineage to the cultural phenomenon from which New York style salsa (salsa on 2) developed, while highlighting the ways the company's salsa aesthetics differ from commercial representations of salsa.

In Chapter Three, "Methodology: Combining The EBX Framework With Ethnographic Research," I discuss my ethnographic research design and methods, including how I adapt Jawole Willa Jo Zollar's entering, building, and exiting community (EBX) framework as part of my research design. I also detail my data collection and analysis and acknowledge issues concerning positionality and ethics.

In Chapter Four, "Yamuleé Salsa Culture: An Afro-Latin Dominican Family That Dances Together In The Bronx," I use interview data to establish the centrality of social relationships for Yamuleé dancers, relationships that are woven into their participation in salsa dancing. I show how dancers assimilate into Yamuleé's Dominican cultural sensibilities as part of participation, which Osmar and other Dominican dancers govern. In doing so, Yamuleé Dance Company pushes salsa beyond an expression of Latinidad and articulates the possibilities for Dominicanidad in the Yamuleé community and the salsa world as a whole. In the Yamuleé community, social connections among dancers extend beyond the dance floor and social dances events into learning environments for developing individual and collective dance skills.

Chapter Five, “Yamuleé Classes: Technique and Flava Pedagogy,” shows that Yamuleé pedagogy goes beyond the development of salsa skills. I argue that their classes reinforce Afro-diasporic aesthetics, provide instruction in the kinetic language of salsa, foster the social bonds and community cultural wealth described in the previous chapter, encourage innovation through “flava,” and bridge dancers towards performance opportunities. As dancer progress and are chosen to participate in performance groups, they travel inside and outside New York city, promoting Yamuleé’s version of New York style salsa and aesthetics.

In Chapter Six, I analyze three Yamuleé dances performed by Yamuleé’s professional performance team. The choreographies discussed were chosen primarily because they were in performance rotation during the scope of my research. Diverging from the ethnographic methodology of the previous chapters, I employ choreographic analysis to contextualize and demonstrate the Afro-diasporic aesthetics embedded into the choreography.

Chapter Seven, “Yamuleé Salsa Performance: Choreography For the Bronx and Beyond,” explores Yamuleé’s engagement with salsa communities beyond the Bronx. Yamuleé is part of a global circuit of salsa congresses, giving them international exposure to salsa dancers around the world. In this chapter I also share my accounts of participating in project teams, learning and performing Yamuleé choreography through their satellite performance groups known as project teams. Through my narrative, I show how these project teams promote one of the core Yamuleé values—knowledge and respect for aesthetics—while expanding the kinship of New York’s Yamuleé group into

an international, extended Yamuleé community. As a consequence, these global engagements of congresses and project teams allow Yamuleé to transmit New York style salsa's cultural heredity, allowing Yamuleé to not only position itself as a legitimate caretaker of salsa's history, but as one of the most critical innovators in the contemporary salsa space.

In Chapter Eight, "The Yamuleé Effect," I begin by documenting Yamuleé's response to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, forced quarantines and social distancing, and a lack of opportunities for in-person instruction. I show how Osmar's approach, grounded in the "trinity," has allowed him to adapt under unforeseen circumstances and maintain a sense of kinship and community, in part by being a community that adheres and is captured by social media. I draw a parallel between Yamuleé and a self-contained economy of sorts. I then analyze how some of the new frameworks for researching dance I used in this dissertation allowed me to come to this unique understanding of Yamuleé. Finally, I suggest additional research directions and locate additional pedagogical Latin dance communities that are underexamined in the literature and would be most effectively documented using the methods and techniques I have used in this work on Yamuleé.

CHAPTER II

NEW YORK STYLE SALSA: AFRICAN AND SOCIAL GENEALOGIES

Cuban History in Motion

Salsa's origin story begins in Cuba. This island nation is the site of a collision between West African, Indigenous and European cultures. Due to its geographical location in the Black Atlantic, this syncretism has endured and evolved through five centuries of imperialism, colonialism, and enslavement. Cuba can also be read in the wider context of the Caribbean basin, which includes the island countries of Haiti, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, and Cuba. This region is unique for its island cultures that have evolved distinct cultural profiles. As the crossroads for slavery and commodity in the western hemisphere between 1500–1900, the islands of the Caribbean reflect West African, English, Brazilian/Portuguese, French, Irish, Indian (sub-continental), Latin American, Spanish, Dutch, American, Creole, and even Danish cultural influences and traditions. Because the region's imperialist power brokers were diverse and transient (as their influence in the region ebbed and flowed), an accurate mapping of transnational currents of cultural exchange toward and away from Cuba is a fluid consideration. The tracking of traditions and shaping influences for Cuban dance and music is no different; clear in some respects and unmapped in others.

Some elements of these traditions and influences clearly remain unmapped as a consequence of the United States embargo against Cuba (1960–2015), which created conditions where only a few American artists or scholars have been able to study the dynamic Afro-Cuban arts culture. Now that the embargo is lifted, it is imperative that scholars take advantage of broader access to Cuba. It is clear that respective and attentive study of Afro-Cuban culture will improve the quality of cultural studies in many contexts. When I traveled with fellow salsa dancers from Boston to Cuba in 2009 on a research trip, a member of our group (an accomplished architect and urban planner who came of age dancing New York City salsa and is now an active participant in Boston’s contemporary salsa scene) asked the workshop instructor, “Why do I feel so at home here?” Our Cuban liaison replied, “Because everyone’s blood has been shed here.”

African Sacred Dance in Cuba

When the nearly 800,000 stolen peoples of western and southern Africa that survived the Atlantic passage arrived in Cuban ports to be sold as slaves, they did not arrive empty-handed (Gates 2011). They brought with them their traditions, including customs in music, religion, and dance. These spiritual dance traditions continue to be an essential resource that informs both sacred and secular contemporary dance practices. The spiritual practices of the Yoruba people (native to present-day Nigeria and Benin), for instance, evolved into the contemporary practice of Santería, which pays homage to deities known as *orishas*. Each orisha represents a particular manifestation of Olodumare (God) and is worshipped by devotees who honor the deity by wearing specific colors, making offerings of its favorite things, or calling it forth through dance. For example,

Oshun is the goddess of love and of “sweet waters.” She is often portrayed adorned in gold. Those who seek her assistance in matters of the heart construct altars with honey, cakes, and other sweet delicacies. To call Oshun forth, her devotees make their movements fluid to represent the flow of the river. Their steps are small quick underneath billowing skirts to suggest the undulation of water. In an expression of Afro-Latin synchronicity, practices of Orisha worship merged with devotions paid to Catholic saints valued by their Spanish colonizers. The adaptation of Spanish Catholicism in the practices of Santeria helped to secure its survival in Cuban society (Sandoval 2007). These dances continue to circulate in contemporary Afro-Cuban, Haitian, and Brazilian dance, as well as in ritual dances.

In addition to dances honoring their orishas, kidnapped Africans also brought secular dance expressions from their homelands. Social dances that recalled great events, victories, death, and childbirth were remembered, revised, and repurposed in Cuba, and other places in the Caribbean and South America. However, these dances, songs, and musical instruments were repressed by the island’s upper classes of Spanish ancestry. Dances that were interpreted as expressing a comfortable sexuality seemed at odds with the ascetic nature of Spanish Catholicism. African drums “spoke” to those who understood its polyrhythmic vernacular—but not to the Spanish colonizers, who seized these drums. In response, Africans used wooden boxes for percussion. Indeed, this was a common pattern: Africanist slave cultures were characterized by the tug of war that existed between their aural and corporeal traditions and those of the highly regimented socio/religious milieu enforced by Spanish colonial hegemony (Sandoval 2007). These

tensions and cultural interactions ultimately produced new dances in a new land where African influences were still highly visible.

Rumba

When slavery was abolished in Cuba in 1886, blacks flocked to urban areas where they lived in ethnically organized communities known as *cabildos*. The rhythms and movements of *rumba* emerged out of the cultural milieu of neighborhoods in cities like Havana and Matanzas. The term, rumba, comes from the Spanish verb *rumbeo*, to go to parties; dance, have a good time (Pietrabruno 2006). As one group defines it:

In Cuba, rumba is a generic term covering a variety of musical rhythms and associated dances. The rumba has its influences in the music brought to Cuba by Spanish colonizers as well as Africans brought to Cuba as slaves. Rumba is more than a music and dance genre; it is the collective expression of the Creole nature of the island itself. Rumba is a secular genre of Congolese African and Spanish flamenco influences, and is one of the primary ancestors of popular music in Cuba. (Baila Society 2016)

African percussive instruments joined by Spanish musical vocalization in an African call and response structure created the sound score for a combination of African dance forms that survived and evolved on Cuban soil.

Examples of contemporary rumba include the performance of *Yambú*, *Guanguancó*, and *Columbia*, social dances that emerged out of the rumba tradition. *Yambú* is very slow and gentle. It is a dance that feigns the frailty of age. The movements involve small, shuffling steps and performance may be done with a cane. *Guanguancó* is

a dancing ‘chase’ played out between ‘rooster’ and ‘hen.’ Its tempo is faster than *Yambú*. The male attempts to catch his partner off guard with movement of the pelvis (that may be transposed to the hands or feet) known as a *vacunao*, meant to symbolize his sexual dominance. The female dancer responds with a *botao*, a blocking gesture that may involve use of the hands to guard her genitals, secure the hem of her skirt, deflect his approach with the snap of a scarf, or by simply turning her body away from him. *Columbia* is a fast dance usually performed by men. Involving the use of bells that play at 6/8 and 12/8 time, the dance is a challenge/call and response between dancer and musicians. The goal is for the man to display his dance ability (read, his virility and prowess) through demonstration of his agility, strength, speed, and even his humor (Pietrabruno 2006).

Over time, rumba’s social status has transformed significantly. Initially, the Cuban elite, informed by the values and biases of their Spanish ancestry, denigrated rumba as an expression of a low and crude class, where drinking, promiscuity, and criminal activity were stereotypical aspects of daily life. That changed in 1959 when Fulgencio Batista’s government fell to the communist forces led by Fidel Castro. Under Castro, rumba was recognized as Cuba’s national music and dance (American Experience 2004). Castro’s celebration of rumba was part of his strategy of rejecting Catholicism and accepting African-derived social and religious practices in the expression of Cuban culture in order to enable his revolutionary government to promote Cuba as a leader in the post-World War II “third world” political community and identify Cuba as an Afro-Latin nation. Throughout rumba’s evolution, its Africanist sensibilities in its music and

dance have persisted, creating opportunities for modern encounters with other concatenated dance traditions that developed elsewhere in the Caribbean basin, like danzón.

Danza/Danzón

In 1791, the enslaved population of Haiti initiated what has been termed the only successful slave revolt that led to the creation of a modern state. Haiti's revolution against France played out over thirteen years (1771–1804) in concert with the collapse of the French monarchy and the rise of Napoleon. In these revolutionary years, the French colonists with ties to the aristocracy fled, accompanied by their slaves, to Spanish-protected Cuba. They also brought with them their music, *contradanza*. Once on Cuban soil, *contradanza* evolved into *danza* and then *danzón*, which was codified in the late 1800s, around the same time *rumba* was emerging in the *cabildos*.

The original style of *danzón* created by Miguel Failde Perez in 1879, begins with an introduction (four bars) and *paseo* (four bars), which are repeated and followed by a 16-bar melody. The introduction and *paseo* again repeat before a second melody is played. The dancers don't dance during these sections: they choose partners, stroll onto the flooring, and start to bounce at precisely the identical moment: the fourth beat of bar four of the *paseo*, which incorporates a very distinctive percussion pattern that's hard to miss. When the introduction is repeated the dancers stop, chat, flirt, greet their friends, and begin again, right time because the *Paseo* finishes (Manuel 2009).

Danzón acknowledges its African roots in its musical accompaniment (rhythmic structures and use of instruments) and through its movement vocabulary, including the

use of pelvic and spine isolations common to the dances of west and south Africa that continues to be considered risqué by elite members of Cuban society. An example of danzón's movement vocabulary is evidenced in performance of *el deslizamiento* (the slippage), which occurs when performers recapitulate movements (exaggerated or otherwise) typically associated with sexual intercourse. The gesture itself was a small release of the pelvis (Madrid and Moore 2013), yet dancers' audacity to allow for the gesture rather than exercise more constraint drew admonition from culturally conservative outlets. Cuban music and dance scholar John Chasteen noted that Havana newspapers warned youth to avoid "the slippage" in articles such as, "Watch It! Don't Slip!" (Chasteen 2004, 20). This type of social critique was in existence as early as 1878 (ibid.)

Son

Influenced by rumba and danzón, son developed in the mid-nineteenth century. As a consequence, it is another dance form that reflects and transmits African and Cuban aesthetics. Son is particularly important for this story because it has been cast as a direct ancestor of salsa. Like danzón, son was cast as a music and dance form of the 'lower' classes. However, as was the case with many popular social dances that came out of Caribbean, Latin, and South American cultures, in time (and with some kinetic adjustments) son, too, was appropriated by Cuba's middle class:

According to ethnomusicologist James Robbins (1990) Son Cubano is arguably the most influential musical style to come out of Cuba. Son originated in eastern Cuba, and laid the foundations of the international genre called Salsa. It is a music that

incorporates Spanish and African influences. This can be seen in its instrumentation, rhyme scheme, and its call and response form. Early Son was a vocal music accompanied by Tres, Guitar and Maracas. This was followed by a sextet instrumentation using tres, vocals, guitar, bass or marimbula, bongo, maracas, clave — providing the heartbeat of this syncopated music.

The Son Cubano is arguably the foremost influential expressive style to return out of Cuba. Son originated in eastern Cuba, and laid the foundations of the international genre called Salsa. It is a music that comes with Spanish and African influences, which can be seen in its instrumentation, rhyme scheme, and its call and response form. Early Son was a song in the course of tres, guitar and Maracas. This was followed by a sextet instrumentation using tres, vocals, guitar, bass or marimbula, bongo, maracas, clave — providing the heartbeat of this syncopated music

In order to understand the evolution and totality of salsa and its influences, we must trace how Son traveled from Eastern Cuba to the United States. Then, it is necessary to explain how Son's Afro-Cuban DNA made a particular mutation by influencing and receiving vernacular music forms in African American music communities (Garcia 2006).

Afro-Cuban Movement Migration to the United States Prior to 1918

With the defeat of Spain in the brief and highly politicized Spanish-American War (April 24, 1898–December 10, 1898), Cuba was quickly entangled with its overpowering northern neighbor, the United States. With American investment, Cuba became a leading exporter of sugar, still a valuable commodity in the early twentieth

century. The removal of the Spanish social and business patriarchies and an influx of American money and investment resulted in Cuba becoming a much more fluid and open economy, with all the benefits and troubles open-door policies may provide (Tucker 2009).

Economic, technological, and political changes were reflected in the island's arts and entertainment communities, and Cuba's distinct music and dance forms began a phase of transculturation. US jazz musicians began dialogues with Cuban musicians generating new artistic ideas soon after 1898, when a ferry connecting Havana and New Orleans began operating twice daily (Roberts 1999). That Jazz musicians felt kinship with Cuban artists is not surprising, as Jazz music and dance were born out of the African American experience in the urban centers of New York, Memphis, Chicago, Kansas City, and most importantly, New Orleans (Jacobsen 2011) and was also a result of the adaptation of West African musical traditions.

Jazz shares rhythmic characteristics with Afro-Cuban music, including rumba, danzón, and son. Jazz and Afro-Cuban music also share a call and response structure. Two distinct music parts are performed, and the second part references the first. Jazz and Afro-Cuban music abbreviate and modify the 6/8 and 12/8 meters of West African and Congolese rhythms, respectfully (Agawu 2014). Modifications in jazz sound like syncopations against the down beat, whereas in Afro-Cuban music the 6/8 meter is reconstructed as the clave rhythm. Jazz and Afro-Cuban music are characterized by polyrhythm relationships between instruments as essential to their composition.

The common elements between jazz and Afro-Cuban musicians made a co-evolution very likely. They sparked new ideas through rich collaboration. Early pioneers included Jaun Tizol and Louis Armstrong, whose music implemented the Cuban tresillo and clave respectively (Roberts 1999).

These musicians made harmony through music even while racial disparities in Cuba and the United States in the era of Jim Crow threatened social coexistence for African descendants. Given the severe racism and classism of the first two decades of the twentieth century, it is not surprising that the evolution of these music and dance forms shared something else in common. Danzón was appropriated by Cuba's affluent classes. Jazz music and the popular dances it spawned in America were also appropriated, making the journey from sidewalk to ballroom and from nightclub to Hollywood's stages.

Afro-Latin and Jazz Fusion in the Interwar and Post WWII Periods

The ending of World War I in 1918 left Europe devastated and saw America emerge as the richest country in the world. Many cultural changes in America, and by proximity and extension in Cuba (Hull 2013), contributed to the creation of a middle class that possessed disposable income and leisure time. This transformed urban and suburban life, particularly in terms of entertainment. Sheet music allowed anyone with a piano to bring jazz into their parlors. Radios brought live entertainment into the home. Hollywood's productivity brought people into 'air cooled' auditoriums to see what they had just been listening to on the radio. Jazz and its exotic expression fit the youthful self-image and vitality of America's emergent middle class, eventually becoming kinetic symbols of America's burgeoning sense of national pride and place in the world. This is

not to suggest all was right in the land of “golden opportunity.” Much of the rich vitality of Cuban, African American, and Creole expressive cultures went about their daily business behind walls of racist practice and prejudice that were very high and very thick.

The introduction of big band orchestrations, jazz syncopations, and Afro-Cuban rhythms led to the creation of *mambo*. Orestes and Israel “Cachao” Lopez wrote the first *mambo* composition in Cuba in the late 1930s. Other Cuban composers and arrangers picked up Lopez’s mambo, introducing it to Mario Bauzá in the early 1940s. Bauzá was a collaborator with Cuban-born Francisco Raúl Gutiérrez Grillo, known as “Machito,” who coined the term Afro-Cuban jazz and promoted its recognition when he formed the band Machito and his Afro-Cubans with his partner Mario Bauzá in 1940 in New York City. Despite the likelihood of negative responses from white audiences regarding things labeled “Afro,” Machito deliberately recognized and embraced the African derivatives that informed his music.

The opening to Machito’s hit song “Tanga” (a term for marijuana) begins with a traditional greeting found in Santería. Many who recognized the music only as a form of Latin-infused jazz missed this lyrical gesture to Yoruba tradition. This was not the only instance of Machito and Bauzá’s music speaking to dialects of an African-derived vernacular. According to world music scholar John Storm Roberts (1999), Machito and his Afro-Cubans set many standards for jazz and popular music, including: standardizing the percussion section to include congas, bongo, and timbales; creating the first extended Afro-Cuban influenced jazz arrangement “Afro-Cuban Suite”; becoming the first truly multi-racial band touring the US, and being first to blend ‘big band’ (orchestra), jazz

(soloists, improvisation), and Afro-Cuban (rhythm section) concepts and structures together, made manifest in their signature composition, “Tanga” (ibid.).

In Afro-Cuban circles and in the larger world of popular music Machito and Bauzá, Tito Rodriguez, and Tito Puente were recognized as the “Big Three.” Puente in particular, continued to refine his version of mambo with experience as a swing bandleader. Well-dressed black and brown patrons attended these New York city music concerts with enthusiasm. Early mambo social dancers improvised exchanges on the dance floor. Their movement vocabularies included using small, distinct hip movements, syncopated footwork, and occasional stunts like split drops for the men or small assisted lifts for women.

Mambo thrived internationally, and its popularity in the United States was part of a general vogue for Latin America brought on by the circumstances of the second World War (1939–1945), which directed America’s attention to the Caribbean and Central and South America for travel, culture, and business. Europe and the western Pacific were immersed in conflict. Latin America emerged as the only option for most Americans who desired to travel, expand business, or just get away. Hollywood also looked south of the border for inspiration. However, due to institutionalized white supremacy, studios developed entertainment that reflected the racist values of the period. People of color represented by white actors and dancers in ‘café au lait’ makeup (a lighter version of black face, a habit that lasted well into the 1950s), and the cartoon that Carmen Miranda put forward as an icon of South American women, are two such examples. Conversely, Rita Hayworth (born Margarita Carmen Cansino) broke into the top echelon of

Hollywood's 'industry' through a combination of her considerable talent (originally in dance) and an "Anglo-sanitizing" of her name, image, her roles, and press. Mambo, like other Afro-Cuban music and dance styles moved from social dance practices in Afro-Latin communities to circulate in popular music circuits where they appropriated into mass entertainment where it is deracinated and at the same time made both exotic and more white.

These erasures contribute to the problematic commercial narratives of today; however, this erasure was not universal. For example, in New York City, mambo's distinct jazz infusion set itself apart from the more gentrified versions being played elsewhere (McMains 2015). It was out of this distinct style that what would become New York style salsa would eventually emerge.

Mambo at the Palladium

Following the end of World War II, American cultural life faced the inevitable period of adjustment that accompanies a nation's return to peacetime realities. In New York City, the dance halls that had attracted and served departing and returning GIs experienced a rapid decline in patronage. The spacious Palladium ballroom, well-situated in midtown Manhattan, was no exception. Previously restrictive in their policies toward people of color, Palladium management saw a means to improve their business by attracting the Latino community. In 1947, management started hosting Latin bands for matinees. Their popularity soon expanded to Wednesday Night performances, and the Palladium's reputation as the locus for mambo was soon established:

[...] when it first opened, Palladium Ballroom had a racially restrictive policy until business needs forced it to accept blacks, Puerto Ricans and Cubans into its clientele. Immigration from Latin America after WWII was on the rise, and its population would revolutionize the New York City dance scene. With most of the Latin music being played uptown, in neighborhoods like Spanish Harlem, the Palladium became the first venue downtown to host a Latin matinee, starting in 1948. Singers like Celia Cruz, Arsenio Rodríguez, Tito Puente, and Desi Arnaz performed here and the success at the Palladium Ballroom spread Latin music to the other venues in the city. (Young 2015)

Young confirms other descriptions of the Palladium dance floor as a space of integration (McMains 2013), where Latin music and dance enticed New Yorkers to cross racial lines and socialize together.

The Palladium became a ground zero for the mambo craze of the 1940s and 1950s. As a consequence, its dance floor was the launch pad for many dancers who would become career professionals. “Cuban Pete and Millie” were one of the earliest dance couples to gain notoriety. Italian-American “Millie” Donay and “Cuban Pete” (Puerto Rican born Pete Aguilar) were known for more than just their dancing. Their interracial collaboration tested the boundaries of propriety at a time of racial tensions in the United States. Their act was covered (performed by others) in a 1951 episode of *I Love Lucy*, the most popular television program in America at the time. In “The Diet” (season 1, episode 4), “Cuban Pete/Sally Sweet” were portrayed by Lucille Ball and her husband, Desi Arnaz. The Ball/Arnaz recognition diffused some of the racist commentary

and provided a ‘seal of approval’ for their work, provided by America’s most popular entertainment couple.

Augustine “Augi” Rodriguez and Margo Bartolomei came to prominence after Cuban Pete and Mille. They danced the mambo together for the first time in a Palladium dance competition, and won. They fused mambo rhythms and steps with jazz dance and ballet techniques to create a very successful—some might say “sanitized for white audiences”—act. In doing so, Rodriguez and Bartolomei followed the example (and ‘gold standard’) of Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire in their creative and fluid manipulation of a dance form associated with race (Decker 2011). In Rodriguez and Bartolomei’s case, it was mambo. In Rogers and Astaire’s case, it was tap. Rodriguez and Bartolomei created their own style of mambo. With their infusion of other dance styles, the dancing pairs’ evolving technique started translating from the Palladium floor to concert dance and Broadway stages. The immensely popular musical *West Side Story*’s ‘Gym Mambo,’ and rooftop dance to “America,” captured the artistic and kinetic sensibilities of the day, with choreography by Jerome Robbins.

Although a number of the contributions Rodriguez and Bartolomei made to dance occurred in the context of appropriative, commercial culture, they also made another extremely significant contribution to the mambo. They developed steps, movements, and forms that retained the Afro-Cuban base of mambo, even while incorporating other dance styles. This process of creative innovation for mambo would lead to this dance style adapting new monikers like “salsa on 2,” “New York style salsa”, and even “street salsa;” and this is the style danced at Yamuleé Dance Company.

Salsa Music and the Emergence of a New Dance Form

Since salsa music and dance are two interrelated aspects of one entity, one cannot discuss the history of salsa dance without also attending to the history of its music. Salsa music, as it is currently known, evolved in New York City from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s. Historian and journalist César Rondón distinguishes salsa from other Latin music forms through its recurring reference to the neighborhood, or *el barrio* (2008). Rondón ties salsa to the street life of its practitioners, thus taking on and even celebrating the dance's associations with urbanism, crime, and *guaperia*; a swaggering, cocky manner. Regardless of salsa's political narrative (*ibid.*), its seductive *clave*, polyrhythmic *tambores*, and nasal vocalizations came out of the community's experience and memory and in doing so, rang true. Still, salsa dance and music retained their rough edges and profiles as expressions of defiance and *guaperia*.

It was Johnny Pacheco who popularized the term salsa as a marketing tool for representing multiple Afro-Cuban and Afro Caribbean music styles. In 1964, Pacheco along with Jerry Masucci established La Fania record label. In 1968, Pacheco gathered selected musicians from his record label to present the "Fania All Stars." In 1971 their recorded performance at New York's Cheetah Club resulted in the definition of salsa as a distinct arrangement and sound. Fania artists incorporated Afro-Cuban, jazz, and rock and roll musical traditions to produce a new sound that they felt reflected the particular cultural milieu of New York. This was when Pacheco began using the term salsa (Rondón 2008).

The Fania All Stars achieved international success throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. In 1972, the collective of Latin musicians appeared in the documentary *Our Latin Thing/Nuestra Cosa*. At that time, the movie featured male artists headlining New York's Cheetah Nightclub in August of 1971. The concert goers were also the featured dancers, wearing a range of fashion—from summer casual to their *dominguero* (Sunday best). They danced salsa all over the *pegadito* or crowded dance floor, even while trying to keep up with other emerging Latin infused music forms (Rondón 2008).

By the 1960s, Puerto Rican migration to New York City had changed the demographic profiles of East Harlem, the South Bronx and other neighborhoods in Queens and Manhattan. Young people of Puerto Rican descent born in New York became known as “New Yoricans,” and were in search of a unique identity. Detached from the Latin big band sounds of their parents’ era, they gravitated toward American doo-wop and rock and roll. *Latin Boogaloo* was a new sound that created a relatable hybrid for this new and young urban society. The Fania label combined the raw energy of Latin Boogaloo supported by the rhythm and compositional skills of older Latin jazz musicians. Label artists Willie Colon and Hector Lavoe incorporated musical traditions from Puerto Rican folk music. The Fania record label continued to produce dance-inducing music through most of the 1970s. However, by the late 1970s, Fania was in decline.

As the 1980s approached, Cuban American music producer Emilio Estefan formed his Miami-based band “Miami Latin Boys.” The all-male group played rock and roll, funk, and disco music always accompanied by a Latin rhythm section. In search of a

female singer for the band, Estefan also found his future wife, Gloria Estefan. They changed the band's name to the "Miami Sound Machine" and were determined to create music that asserted their Cuban and American affiliation. Their first most notable hit "Conga," reached success as a Cuban conga song with English lyrics. Music producer Sergio George, who had worked with the Estefans, was inspired by this cross-over success and began remaking salsa for the 1980s. His pop-inflected salsa is exemplified in the famous "Vivir Lo Nuestro," a salsa duet recorded by La India and Marc Anthony (Latin Music USA 2009).

Amid all the hybrid and commercial developments, there were artists who were strongly connected to New York City. They did not have the same pop culture profile as Gloria Estefan, but were doing really important work in the New York salsa scene. One of those artists in dance was Eddie Torres who has trained many professional dancers, including Tomás Guerrero and Osmar Perrones.

The Impact of Eddie Torres

The single most important figure linking figures like Rodriguez, Bartolomei, Pacheco, and other contributors to salsa to Yamuleé Dance Company is the legendary Eddie Torres. Inspired by early Palladium mambo dancers, Torres utilized the club as his classroom, sneaking in as an under aged patron during the late 1960s and 1970s. He codified his mambo dance experiences at the Palladium to develop a salsa pedagogy. June Laberta, a ballroom dance teacher more than twice Torres' age, was an influential dance partner. Torres credits her for teaching him the language of teaching. They were an unlikely dance couple that frequented the ballroom dance scene on a regular basis. His

career survived the transition—perhaps even *was* the transition—from mambo to salsa and he remains a sought-after teacher and performer in New York and beyond.

Priscilla Renta, dance scholar and former Eddie Torres dancer, cites the presence of Afro-Cuban derivatives in Torres's curriculum (Renta 2004). Terms like the "slave step" and the "suzie-q" comprise the movement vocabulary for "shines." Originally a derogatory reference to African American shoe-shine boys who would dance for change, "shines" refer to complex sequences of footwork performed by mambo dancers. Torres's curriculum incorporates these mambo influences into the New York style of salsa.

Torres quantified the dancer's relationship to the percussive rhythm of the tumbao in mambo by accenting the "2," thus earning the description of salsa "on 2." Tumbao is the rhythmic heartbeat to the music played on the Conga drum. When counted, salsa on two is considered to be two cycles of three steps with a pause. Musicians write the meter in 4/4 time, while dancers count by sets of eight. Dancers play with and against the quarter notes in the counting to embody the sonic bouquet of polyrhythms provided by various instruments. The cadence is a strong down beat on the 2 and the 6. It has a rhythmic, quickened pulse on the "4 and" and the "8 and;" tumbao is also slang for an indescribable sexiness or swag, another adjective some would associate with Torres.

With examples from the Palladium dancers, Torres continued the tradition of flourishing Afro-Cuban aesthetics with other dances from. For Torres this would spins from the hustle and various African American vernacular moves (Renta 2004). Torres modeled this type of innovation for the next generation of Latin dance professionals

including Tomas Guerrero who started Santo Rico Dance Company and Osmar Perrones, the founder of Yamuleé.

Salsa Congresses: An Introduction

Enthusiasm for learning and practicing salsa continued across the United States and the Caribbean. In 1997, Eli Irizarry ushered in the first salsa congress in Puerto Rico. A salsa “congress” or festival is an organized, multi-day series of dance workshops and performances. Participants self-select daytime workshops designed for a range in skill level and themes such as footwork, ladies’ styling, partnering, and musicality. Performances are scheduled during the evenings, which usually feature workshop instructors and their performance teams. Concert presentations are usually followed by social dance opportunities for congress attendees and may continue into the early morning hours. Dancers move to the rhythms provided by either a DJ or live Latin music orchestra. Whether in Los Angeles, New York, Dublin, or Dubai — congresses play host to instructors, performers, and attendees from all over the world. The first salsa congress, promoted and hosted by Irizarry, attracted more than 300 participants from nineteen different countries to San Juan, Puerto Rico in 1997 (Short 2019). Since the first congress, the hundreds of congresses that now take place annually and worldwide are testament to salsa’s global reach.

Since its inception, the congress format has been an important mode of transmission and circulation for Yamuleé Dance Company and its founding director Osmar Perrones. As Chapter Seven details congresses as key way that Yamuleé extends the transmission of Afro-Latin and Afro-Cuban influences to broader audiences.

In this chapter, I detailed New York salsa's lineage to West African roots by way of Cuba, showing Yamuleé Dance Company's connects to this salsa family tree. Chapter Four discusses how Yamuleé Dance Company extends this heritage using salsa as a means of social and cultural connection. However, before we shift to this discussion, Chapter Three lays out my methodological process for this research.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY: COMBINING EBX WITH ENTHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

In Chapter Two, I explored New York style salsa's Afro-diasporic and Latinx legacies that the Yamuleé Dance Company has inherited. As I studied the disconnections among salsa's specific cultural history, common contexts for teaching and learning salsa, and the role of salsa in popular culture, I began to wonder how my salsa community, *salseros* who fluctuate between social and performative salsa activities, fits into this larger context. My desire to bring these dancers and what they do into the spotlight prompted me to focus my study on two things that are not usually the focus of salsa scholarship: the ways that history, culture, and identity influence how salsa is taught, and then, how that salsa is performed on concert stages.

My research was guided by the following questions:

- How do dancers describe their experiences performing salsa?
- How do salsa dancers discuss their own identity in relationship to this Latin dance form?
- How do salsa dancers relate their performances to other forms of salsa in other settings (commercial, social, etc.)?
- What do dance instructors teach when they teach salsa?

- How does a salsa dancer's understanding of salsa's history impact their pedagogical strategies and performance aesthetics?

Qualitative Research with a Critical Ethnographic Focus

Since the aim of this dissertation is to explore the connections between the historical and cultural Afro-Latin roots of salsa and the particular pedagogical, choreographic, and social practices of Yamuleé Dance Company, I chose a qualitative methodological framework that emphasizes critical interventions in ethnographic inquiry. Ethnography does not only consist of what Clifford Geertz (1973) defines as “thick description,” but it also incorporates analysis by the researcher (Merriam 2014).

D. Soyini Madison (2011), who coined the term critical ethnography, insists the researcher respond to a call to action and that the researcher must be concerned with linking ethnographic analysis to larger systems of power. I employ critical ethnography by highlighting the experiences of a Latin-owned company practicing an Afro-diasporic and Latin dance form. Because critical ethnography also requires reflexivity on the part of the researcher, I also acknowledge some of the biases I bring to this research as a dancer who primarily and formally trained (and now teaches) in a Euro-centric, conservatory dance model, but who also has a significant history seeking out training and performance experiences in Afro-diasporic dance forms. This methodological approach will enable me to understand larger systems of power that may exist within salsa's practice and to explore multiple, and sometimes conflicting, stories of individual and communal identity among salsa practitioners, both of which are essential in helping me address my research questions.

As Chapter One showed, although some scholars have used this ethnographic approach, the current scholarly literature on salsa tends to focus on music and cultural significance. While the few ethnographies that explore salsa through the lens of movement analysis provide a fruitful examination of competitive salsa (McMains 2013) and social dancing (Garcia 2013), to my knowledge, there are no scholarly studies that examine staged salsa performance and the ways that dancers are trained for those performances. Thus, my focus on the pedagogical, choreographic, and performance aspects of salsa represents a significant addition to the literature. Additionally, I engage my unique vantage point as a Black scholar-practitioner. Performance scholars Thomas DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez define Black sensibilities as “the enlivened, vibrating components of a palpable black familiar” (2014, 8). As a Black scholar, I engage Black sensibilities developed from my own experience of living in and among Black identities for translating the data. Black sensibilities acknowledge indigenous ways of knowing. This theory makes space for one’s lived cultural experience to be used as a lens for interpreting and understanding performance. I employ Black familiar as an analytic tool and to bring attention to the Black familiar that permeates Yamuleé’s practice.

In preparation for field research, the investigator must be prepared to candidly answer questions about their research interests concerning the group or system to be studied; make reasonable requests for access to people, facilities, artifacts, rituals, and events; be clear in expressing their intentions for the information they hope to acquire; explain in clear terms their rationales for how and why the group is appropriate for the study; and be prepared to discuss the potential benefits and/or harmful repercussions the

group may expect for participating in the study. The group's leaders and visionaries will be important to the researcher in many regards, not the least of which is to provide and counsel the field observer about the essential rules of behavior and action valued by the culture (Merriam 2014). Part of the required process of preparing for field work is securing Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. The IRB reviews of research proposals involving human subjects ensures their rights and welfare are not being compromised by the researcher. However, for me there were additional essential ethical taken before, during, and after the research process, which I describe below.

For me, relationship building forms both the structure of my research as well as being at the heart of its ethics. My relationship building techniques are deeply influenced by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, the founding director of Urban Bush Women. Jawole is formidable Black woman leader in the field of dance who is particularly noted for her work in dance and community engagement. I was briefly mentored by Jawole and attended the UBW Summer Leadership Institute. She developed a framework for her approach to community engagement through dance, which is taught through Entering, Building and Exiting Community (EBX), a workshop the company offers. EBX is based on experiential learning for participants to embody ethical and effective leadership practices that strengthen and develop community engagement.

I adapted EBX in developing my research relationship with Yamuleé Dance Company and for conducting my research. I started doing this even before processing the IRB paperwork because it was so important to me to set and maintain my own ethical standards from the very beginning stages of my research process. The IRB has become

standard for research to mitigate the research's shameful history of research advancements at the expense of the health and sometimes lives of Black, Brown, and poor people. While the IRB reflects the institutional recognition of ethics, EBX serves to recognize and articulate my own personal code of ethics. The IRB and EBX hold me accountable to my school, the Yamuleé community, and myself.

Entering Community

In choosing ethnographic research on Yamuleé Dance Company, I found myself in constant negotiation of the insider/outsider space. I am an insider because of my salsa experience and passion for the dance form. I am also an outsider because I am not from New York. I used a backward planning model to strategize my entrance into the Yamuleé dance community. I set aside the summer of 2017 as a time that I could move to New York and immerse myself in the Yamuleé dance community. In the fall of 2016, I started monthly and semi-monthly trips to the Bronx to take class at the Yamuleé studios. I wanted to become a familiar face to the regular participants and to Osmar Perrones, the director. Building a consistent presence was foundational to my relationship development. Upon getting anchored in the studio class flow, I began introducing myself and what I was doing there. Eventually, I introduced myself to Osmar and pitched my research project. The magic day came in February 2017 that Osmar signed formal documents required by the Institutional Review Board, giving his blessing to my project. I continued my monthly visits until I moved to New York five months later.

Part of my budget planning included the travel and housing during my New York stay, in addition to Yamuleé's class and event fees. I thought it was important to show my

respect for value of their work and labor. Therefore, I was intentional about not asking for any discounts, and I paid for all my classes. Yamuleé is a business, and class fees are an important part of their income stream. I made this decision to demonstrate my respect and gratitude for being admitted for researching this community. These kinds of decisions accumulated over the course of my research, and enabled me to establish my trustworthiness with the community.

Building Community

A traditional approach to ethnography involves collecting and analyzing appropriate data for understanding how people make meaning of membership in specific cultures and communities. Ethnographers triangulate their data collection, engaging three primary data sources to develop an understanding of the culture being researched. Data collection methods include observation of the group functioning in its habitat, interviews with group members, and the analysis of artifacts the group makes, uses, distributes, and/or values. It is important for the researcher to triangulate data collection methods, looking for agreement and disagreement among and between data sources. Comparisons between data sources are the background against which the study's findings are validated (Merriam 2014).

Participant Observation at the Yamuleé Studio

A traditional academic approach to participant observation involves the researcher takes an active role in the group or culture being researched. There are various levels of participation. The researcher observes a phenomenon in its natural setting rather than a prescribed environment. Researchers use field notes, which refer to how the researcher

collects data during the observation. The researcher will then code these field notes, looking for themes or trends to explain how participants describe their lived experiences within the phenomenon being explored.

In field research the relationships between the observer and the observed exist on a continuum with complete participation/hidden observational role at one end, and complete observation/no identity as a group member recognized at the other. In the first instance, the researcher “goes underground” and conceals her identity in order to exist within the study group as a full and invested member. In the second instance, the observer is known to the group for that role, her participation in the group’s functions is either very limited or non-existent (Merriam 2014). It is not uncommon for researchers to play a mix of roles, fluctuating along the continuum of level of engagement with the group. I was a participant observer for the entire time, making communicating my intentions to my research participants crucial. Managing my level of engagement as a dancer and as a researcher was a dynamic dance influenced by the type of engagement and increasing familiarity with my research community. For example, attending a social at the beginning of my research process I found myself observing more on the edge of the room. Taking classes, however, was a visceral experience and I had to create the habit of taking notes immediately after class.

As a participant observer, I took studio classes with Yamuleé Dance Company four to five times a week over the course of eight weeks. The company hosted several events that I was able to attend while in New York. Their monthly social is an event open to the general public. Patrons paid a nominal fee and dance salsa played by a DJ. The

company held their fourteenth anniversary party during my time in the field. This event began with a slew of evening performances from the company's performance groups with a few guest artists and appearances added to the roster. The event culminated in an open floor of social dancing. Yamuleé occasionally hosts workshops or masterclasses with teachers outside the Yamuleé studio. I attended one they hosted for Italian-based Marco Ferrigno. I recorded these experiences through field notes, research memos, and video clips, when permissible. I was allowed to stay after class and watch rehearsals, but I was not allowed to record rehearsals for *Facultad*, which was being prepared for its debut at the company's anniversary event.

The boundaries between participant observer and researcher can become blurry. Most of my professional training and academic experience bends me towards a Western concert dance bias. For example, during my research I quickly became aware of a cultural difference between my concert dance training and Yamuleé's vocabulary for similar concepts, noting the interchangeability of choreography or piece with "routine" and rehearsal with "practice." While these terms are looked down on in general in concert dance, within Yamuleé, there was no negative connotation about the value of the work either with the English words, or their Spanish translations like *práctica* and *rutinas*. I constantly reminded myself that it is important to acknowledge this kind of bias and respect the vernacular of the community that is the subject of my research.

Informed by my own ethical framework inspired by EBX and ethnography, I prioritized transparency with my participants and respect for their work well-being. In particular, as I was working with an immigrant population, residential documentation was

a sensitive topic. Yamuleé dancers are transient and global by way of origin and performance tours. For these reasons I refrained from asking questions about residency status and from writing about who did and did not travel.

Performing with Yamuleé and “Exiting” Yamuleé

Although it was not part of my original research design, part of my participant observation occurred through my participation in the Yamuleé Project Boston and Yamuleé Ladies Boston. This research also had the effect of extending my participation beyond the time and space of my summer at the Bronx studio. When I returned to Boston, I was able to join the Boston company, effectively extending my connection to Yamuleé, even though I had in a sense exited the field when I left the City. To stay connected to the Bronx studio, I sent an update to everyone in New York along with a picture from my first Boston team performance. Being a dancer with the Boston Project Team held me in deep connection with Yamuleé even from a distance.

This experience forever changed me as a dancer and teacher. Performing in a Yamuleé performance group was a rewarding and insightful aspect to my research, but it also produced both interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts. Coming from a professional modern concert dance experience, I needed to remain aware of my own biases for expectations for organization, communication, and rehearsal structures inside a dance company. I held my tongue frequently to make space for the other members’ expressions and to take note. I became aware of my tendency to judge their commitment and needed to acknowledge we all had different motivations for being part of the team.

Interviews

There are several reasons why conducting interviews was a beneficial data collection method. The interview process gave me immediate direct feedback from Yamuleé members. With this real-time interaction, I could also gain instant clarification as well as probe the rich information yielded from the interview process. Therefore, in order to learn about the practice of salsa from the voices of my participants, I took Rubin and Rubin's (2012) advice that interviewees should not be treated as subjects of the research, but rather as researcher partners. For this reason, I chose a semi-structured approach, in which the researcher prepares a limited number of questions about a specific topic ahead of time, and asks follow-up questions based on what the interviewee says.

Each interview began based on the following questions:

- What drew you to salsa dancing?
- How did you start performing?
- How did you learn about/join Yamuleé?
- What came first for you, teaching or performing?
- What's it like performing salsa?
- How do you prepare for performance?
- Can you generally describe the rehearsal process?
- What's it like dancing in a social setting?
- What does it mean to you to be part of Yamuleé?

All of my interviews with Bronx-based Yamuleé company members took place at the studio. Most of the dancers requested to schedule our interviews after rehearsals, so this

timing may have influenced their responses. Still, I honored their choices to be interviewed in the evenings, even though many of the transcripts reflect a common theme of fatigue. Most of my informants are bilingual in Spanish and English, with Spanish being their first language. Whenever they mentioned they did not know how to say something, I offered them the option to switch to Spanish as needed. In addition to Osmar Perrones, founding director of Yamuleé, I interviewed the following people, listed in alphabetical order by first name.

Puerto Rican Carlos De Jesus returned home to the Bronx after serving in the Navy. Before joining Yamuleé in 2016, De Jesus danced for Framboyan Dance Company. Since 2017, he has taught Yamuleé's beginner classes, danced for the Bajari semi-pro team, and been a rehearsal director for Guarikiten, the student performance team.

Francheska Vargas is of Dominican descent. She learned about Yamuleé from a former member. Vargas started out taking classes before her passion and dedication earned an invitation from Osmar to join the company. She was with the company from 2009–2012. Francheska returned in 2016 and is a current member of the Pro Team.

Gabriela Avedaño is a professional dancer from Oaxaca, Mexico. She relocated to the United States in 2015 to train and perform with Yamuleé. Avedaño is member of Yamuleé's Professional Dance Team. She frequently performs as Osmar's partner, teaches Ladies Styling, co-teaches partnering with Osmar, and choreographs for Yamuleé Ladies Project teams.

Levi Alvarez is Yamuleé's company manager. His segue from student and performer to manager began with negotiating company contracts. Levi is Osmar's trusted think partner for the company's financial strategic planning. He fields various business inquiries from company appearances to studio bookings. A Bronx-based engineer by day, Levi is also a popular master of ceremonies for New York salsa events.

Mariel Perez started dancing salsa with her grandparents in the Dominican Republic. She relocated to the United States as young child moving back and forth between New York and Massachusetts. Mariel's dance instructor Sharon German (Divinity Dance Studio of Lynn, Massachusetts) introduced her to Yamuleé Dance Company at a social circa 2010. In 2017, Perez became the director of Yamuleé Project Boston and Yamuleé Ladies Boston Team.

Molly Hagman is a performing member of Bajari, Yamuleé's semi-professional performance team, and is training with the professional team. Before moving to New York City, Hagman studied various dance forms in her home country of Sweden. Since 2012, Hagman has studied with Yamuleé, first at the Swedish Salsa Congress and now more frequently since her move to New York City in 2016.

As Osmar's nephew and a native of the Dominican Republic, Raul Valenzuela has been exposed to the salsa scene his entire life. He admits to building his performance dance skills before becoming a confident social dancer. He is member of Yamuleé Professional company and is part of the teaching team.

Artifacts, Symbols, and Documents in Ethnographic Inquiry

The analysis and review of artifacts acts as the third leg of a triangulated approach to data collection. Artifacts may take the form of symbols, images, examples of informal, printed, and electronic media, operational manuals, correspondences, agendas, notes, and all other visually oriented materials the group uses to communicate (internally and externally) its ideas, missions, projects, events, and values. In all its forms, this type of data is valuable material for the ethnographer's consideration (ibid.).

Yamuleé Dance Company and their members have a significant presence on social media, which they use to stay connected to the greater salsa community, to communicate events, highlights, and even their values. In addition to their website, video data posted on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube is an informative data point for its ability to combine audio and images at the same time. Yamuleé has an official YouTube channel. However, their website also hosts videos posted by other sources such as Benidorm Summer Festival Spin Media, PhillTX, and Social Dance TV, and LatinParty.com.

A Special Note on Circularity

Another unique aspect of my methodological approach is my embrace of circularity as an important structure throughout my research and writing. There is circularity in my narrative. I start Yamuleé's story in the Bronx, and circle back there at the end to emphasize the importance of (returning) home among my participants. There is circularity present in the three main elements I analyze at Yamuleé: social dance, pedagogy, and performance. The image of the circle emphasizes connections among

these elements and underscores the fact that, at Yamuleé, these continuously interact and circulate. Therefore, my time in the field as a research participant was never isolated to just socials, just classes, or just performances. Instead, I experienced how all three modes of participation in the Yamuleé community embody New York style salsa history as well as extend its future.

Circularity is also central to the aesthetic and chorographical analysis in this dissertation. Firstly, dancing circles are central to many of the contemporary and historical traditions I reference throughout this work. For example, I have participated in dancing circles in several diasporic dances including Di Da Di (Mali), samba and danca de boi (Brazil), rueda de casino (Cuba), and hip hop (United States). Professor Hazzard Donald reminded me of the African connection to circular motion in dance more generally. Circular symbolism must also be recognized as a central part of Afro-Cuban aesthetics. In a lecture given at the 2020 Collegium for African Diaspora Dance Conference on her book, *Mojo Workin: The Old African American Hoodoo System* (2012), Dr. Katrina Hazard Donald spoke about the Congo Cosmogram, which is a circular religious symbol. Noticing, thinking, and writing in circularity allows me to identify connections that would go unnoticed through a linear lens.

Data Processing and Analysis

I used a professional transcription service to translate my interview audio files to paper. This was an efficient and ethical choice because it enabled me to give participants their copies quickly for their review. These transcripts were compatible the NVivo software, that I used in the initial coding stages. This qualitative analysis software offers

a variety of strategies for analyzing different types of data. I uploaded interview transcripts, field notes, research memos, videos, and photos. The software enabled me to create codes and categories. Using the software, I used strategies such as word searches, word frequencies, and word trees, to generate analytical possibilities.

Coding data collected in the ethnographic endeavor is an important part of the research design. Data comes from the three collection procedures previously described. Its content may include the names of subjects, confidential correspondences, unpublished media, and many other data samples that are coded to ensure the ethical treatment of human subjects, that pre-arranged confidences are kept and maintained, or coded for their frequency, special nature, and status. Ethnographer Johnny Saldaña, defines the processes of coding as a “research-generated construct that symbolizes or ‘translates’ data” (2015, 4). Encoding is the process of determining an appropriate code for collected data and its labeling. Decoding occurs when reflecting on a passage of data in order to decipher its core meaning (*ibid.*). Qualitative analysis and coding assist the researcher in identifying patterns, trends, and gaps in the data. Coding for patterns helps the researcher discern between that which may be considered unique and that which is mundane or repetitive. Patterns in the data support descriptions of the “5R’s”: routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships (Saldaña 2015, 5–6).

Coding was an essential first step towards making sense of the data I collected. Coding is a process for taking individual data items and identifying their relationship to the research and inquiry (Saldaña 2015). I utilized several types of coding for labeling my data and connecting the data to my research questions. Process coding, for example,

selects for verbs or gerunds among the data (ibid.). I used this code for its practical alignment with dance because process coding can be used for capturing action, taking note of movement vocabulary or specific steps related to salsa dance. I made use of descriptive coding to focus on nouns, or the concepts and ideas found in common among the data. In vivo coding draws attention to interesting quotes made by informants. This code produced rich concepts from participants that led down trails of discovery, revealing insights to the source's experiences. In particular, in vivo coding led to the title of my project: during my interview with Mariel Perez, she referred to the importance of social dancing, classes, and performance for the company as the "Yamuleé Effect."

I stopped dancing during the 2019–2020 academic year to focus on dissertation writing. As an ethical researcher, I am responsible to Yamuleé Dance Company, even after I leave the field. I care about being transparent and accountable to this generous dancing community. I continued sending updates to Yamuleé directors and communities during my writing process. Near the end of my process, I sent them the dissertation abstract and invited them to my public defense. The EBX framework reminds me that my work does not end here. EBX encourages me to celebrate with the community I have entered. I have tentative plans to return to New York once the COVID-19 quarantine ends, and present my research to the Yamuleé community.

CHAPTER IV

YAMULEÉ SALSA CULTURE: AN AFRO-LATIN DOMINICAN FAMILY THAT DANCES TOGETHER IN THE BRONX

The Yamulé studio sits on one of the busiest streets in the Bronx, Grand Concourse, north of Yankee Stadium. Situated between produce street vendors and clothing shops, it is easy to miss the unassuming vertical burgundy and white signage or the company's logo on the door if one is not looking for them. After I pass through the initial entrance, I immediately face a steep climb to the main studio. At the top of the stairs, I leave my street shoes with the other thirty or so pairs and look through a window into the space where salsa magic happens. Inside, dancers drop their bags, change shoes, and greet each other in relaxed, colloquial Spanglish.

Yamulé's space is a rectangular studio with a long, mirrored wall and beautifully-maintained hardwood floor that extends into a small kitchenette, where water and Gatorade are available for purchase. Around the corner, there is a bathroom and a small room that doubles as a storage space and an occasional retreat for the men of Yamulé—their “man cave.” At the other end of the studio, windows open onto a view of the busy street. Next to the windows is another door that leads to Osmar's private office. Over the course of my fieldwork, I notice that no one seems to enter this space without Osmar's permission. Since it sits in the back of the studio, students usually position

themselves facing away from the office and towards the mirrored wall. Later, when I have the opportunity to interview Osmar in his office, I observe that his space exudes a minimalist aesthetic, including a desk with clean lines, a sleek leather couch, and selective baseball memorabilia. The studio and Osmar's office are clean, like expecting-your-parents-to-visit clean.

Osmar's comfortable office space inside the studio is decorated with many personal elements and reflects his physical sense of familiar attachment to the studio and Yamuleé members who enliven the space. In this way, the physical space of Yamuleé literally embodies one of the studio's principle values. Yamuleé engages people by creating a sense of community. This value is performed from the moment someone enters Yamuleé's space. Yamuleé regulars, a mix of people who take class frequently and/or participate in Yamuleé's performance groups, take on the expectation to welcome visitors. Carlos is one of many unofficial greeters and host for newcomers. He says,

So, when clients come, I try to make them feel warm in here, or that they enjoy being in this space, because I don't want them to feel that tense atmosphere. So that's one of the reasons I actually do love teaching, even though I teach a lot, but [laughter] sometimes I want to take more classes. But the fact is that I feel like this school needs that— our community needs to have a nice presence to it, that people—comforting. So that's what I try to do. I don't know if Osmar notices, but that's one of my little jobs here, to make people want to be here and enjoy it.

(Carlos Carlos De Jesus, pers.comm.)

Yamuleé's signs of welcoming, however, can be sometimes hard to spot.

Yamuleé pro dancer Molly Hagman explains why some people feel the studio's members can be standoffish:

In class we try to always have fun and relax, but at the same time, we are sometimes so exhausted that we literally just try to pull through and make it through class to then be able to have energy to rehearse. Outside people could notice that the Yamuleé people are very— I don't know. I wouldn't say harsh, but they can seem a little harsh and not snobby, but having that attitude like a little— yeah, the New York and the Bronx attitude like a little rough I would say because especially if you're coming from another country and you're just here to have fun and vacation. Then the people that are there 365 days of the year, spending so many hours, it's literally— it kind of changes— you're not really aware how maybe your approach is, like how you're being perceived or whatever. So, I would say that's probably the thing that a lot of people see about the Yamuleé being as a little cold, a little snobbish— but we're still very humble. (Molly Hagman, pers.comm.)

Molly explains that company members are sometimes too exhausted to engage with new people or guests. Company members are sometimes misread as being cold or unapproachable, but this perception contradicts how they see themselves.

Yamuleé operates as much as a family—or perhaps more—like a village than as a dance company,³ as it contains multiple types of social interactions (platonic, romantic, and familial) and relationships as a means to create and sustain a distinctive dancing community. In this chapter, I explore the practices that Yamuleé dancers employ to generate a distinctive salsa dance community that constructs its own dancing village. I show how these dancers spend so much time together, making significant personal sacrifices for their salsa community. It is not surprising that, within this tight-knit group, other relationships beyond fellow salseros develop; including friends, roommates, and even lovers. To demonstrate this dynamic this chapter explores themes like romance, conflict, resolution, kinship and home. What is revealed through this approach are the deep social bonds instigated and nurtured through their practice of salsa practice, bonds whose importance were underscored during my own negotiation of membership in the Yamuleé village.

Welcome To Yamuleé

I admit that I feel slightly ignored when I arrive for my first site visit, a participant-observation session in the “shines and partnering class,” and wait at the reception desk unnoticed. Was this how the next eight weeks—the time I had planned to

³ The phrase, “It takes a village to raise a child,” as an African proverb, has been repeated to the point of cliché. Although there has been much speculation to its exact origin, I reference it here to evoke a particular worldview that responds to Western individualism (Lester 2016).

spend conducting research at Yamuleé—were going to be? Eventually, I find a spot for my things and change into my dance shoes. When a young woman finally appears at the desk, I return to check in and pay for class.

Osmar puts on music and executes basic salsa steps from the center of the dance floor without saying anything. With that, my first class has begun. The music is loud enough that even if Osmar were speaking, we would not be able to hear his voice. The rest of the thirty or so dancers fall into loose lines behind him and begin dancing as well. As I join the them on dance floor, my melanated complexion blends in with the other black and brown dancers around me. Despite my newness as a student, the familiarity of their faces and body language infuse the atmosphere with a sense of comfortability and ease. Osmar leads the class in an accumulating warm-up. As he repeats movement phrases such as basic and a hesitation left, he adds to the sequence with progressively harder steps like a heel toe taps and direction changes, complicated by syncopation and speed.

Although I may blend in phenotypically with the other students, over the course of the first week, I notice that my choice of class attire reveals my newness to the group. As a heavier dancer, I had been nervous about wearing heels for four hours a day, and decided to prioritize comfort in my baggy joggers and dance sneakers when packing for my field work. However, I notice that most women at Yamuleé wear form-fitting tops, leggings and heeled salsa shoes, regardless of their size. I was surprised to discover an awareness of some kind of peer pressure when I observed women heavier than me

changing from street shoes to salsa heels. They did not wear three-inch heels like the professional dancers, but they still wore a small heel as opposed to wearing flat shoes.

Every day on my way to the studio, I was tempted to conform to the Yamuleé aesthetic, especially since I passed plenty of leggings on sale in my size along the Fordham Road sidewalk clothing racks leading to the studio. I made a choice, however, to adhere to my modest living budget while in the field and to make do with the clothes I brought with me from Boston to New York City. Even so, I was not sure I felt worthy of looking like the Yamuleé regulars. I also was afraid of looking like I was trying too hard to fit in. Ultimately, my fashion choices did not seem to deter my acceptance by Yamuleé dancers. There were many other experiences that made me feel part of the Yamuleé community.

In that first week, I participate in classes ranging from beginner to advance in salsa fundamentals, body movement, footwork, and partnering. The classes are crowded, and, often, it is difficult to see Osmar's feet as he demonstrates from the front of the group. Initially, I opt to stand in the back but, gradually, I am pushed closer to the front as late-comers join the class. Nearly everyone is confused at some point, and I begin to measure my own success not by executing the combination perfectly, but rather by how much I can perform before making a mistake. During one of these initial classes, another dancer from Bajari, Yamuleé's semi-professional performance team, turns to ask me for help with the combination. I am shocked that she thinks I can help her with this complicated footwork pattern, but I feel complimented that she seems to think I have demonstrated enough skill in the first few classes to be helpful to her.

This exchange makes me realize that, whether intentional or not, Osmar's approach to teaching necessitates a collaborative environment among the students that contributes significantly to creating community. We ask each other for help, reviewing the footwork with each other during and after class. Our feet chase after his choreography like kids running after the school bus. I experience a joyful struggle alongside the other dancers as we engage in collaboration and empowerment through salsa steps guided by the rhythmic clave.

Yamuleé as Family, Village, and Home

The shared struggle in class is the foundation of greater bonds. More than just a community, many of the dancers refer to Yamuleé as a family. "Family" was one of the top three words company member Molly used to describe Yamuleé. Valenzuela had the following to say,

The studio feels like home. It doesn't feel like we walk in, you need to say hi to everyone because it feels like we just woke up, and we were just together. And we're like, "Oh, what's up?" Maybe you get into an argument with someone, and two seconds later you're talking. And it's like elementary school in here. And everyone helps each other out somehow. You have your *Degrassi* or *Gossip Girl* drama, always. But everyone just helps each other out however they can, whether it's of interest or because it comes from the heart. So, there's help always. So that makes it a community. (Raul Valenzuela, pers.comm.)

In other words, for Valenzuela, informality, the flow from conflict to conversation, and a spirit of mutual care imbues Yamuleé with a sense of familial relationships. Her

comments were echoed by other dancers. Although they were not explicit about their conflict details when asked, but they all commented on their success in moving beyond conflict to continue dancing and performing together.

While the dancers I interviewed used the word “family” to describe Yamuleé, I have chosen to describe their network of relationships using the word “village” because it further depicts the complex and multiple types of relationships existing within the dance company. As we would expect to see in a village, there is a shared language. Their language is movement, and their understanding of each other is grounded in an Afro-Cuban dialect.

Like any village, Yamuleé has its own community events—rituals, in a sense—and participating in these events reinforces the close bonds between members of the studio. After all, special events require additional pitching in, as one would at a family event. During the August 2017 anniversary party, for example, I saw many dancers engaged in activities other than performing. Some worked the door, selling tickets. One dancer was in full costume adjusting speakers on stage while the audience impatiently waited almost four hours for the show to start. Another community member was organizing the slide show projected as a pre-show visual. The company is like a well-stocked bodega, in that they have what they need to remain sustainable.

Osmar as community leader and company director commands respect because of his reputation and his demeanor. Everyone fears Osmar in the biblical sense. Many times, his side eye will communicate a message. We can see this in a YouTube video of a Yamuleé performance of Jibarito at Balmir Latin Dance Studio’s second anniversary. The

performance itself went well. One of the four couples, however, delayed approximately three seconds in joining the others for the bow (see fig. 2). Osmar commands their attention with just his peripheral vision and strong intention. YouTuber comments, “LOL @ the look Osmar gives that couple who didn't join the rest of the group for the bow at the end. =P”. jbrich16 ads, “woah he scared me!!! Lol.”



Figure 2. Yamuleé Performing Tumba La Caña Jibarito at Balmir Dance Studio’s 2nd Anniversary Party (2013). Screenshot taken by the author.

As is typical for such a close community, the relationships are not always easy. Osmar is a strong-willed patriarch. Sometimes the dancers love to hate and hate to love to Osmar’s training methods. Avedaño shared,

I think it's hard to be the head of this company, so my all respect to Osmar. So sometimes he can be so strong like a military, but he has twenty years doing this, and he is still here. So that's inspiration for me. If he can do this with the this with

all kinds of people—we are dancers. I think when you work with emotions, that's so hard. That's so hard because one day you can be happy, another day you can be sad, maybe you're angry, and everything. You come here, and you take it out when you're dancing. So, it's hard be the boss here. Sometimes you hate him. But you know what? Everybody, when they say, "I hate you," it's because Osmar's right. [laughter]. When he say "you're lazy," you're this, you're this, and everybody's mad with him, but he don't care. He has a lot of experience here. So, if you want to take it, take it. If not, go out. This is his company. So, I think this is the thing. Sometimes you hate him because he is right [laughter]. (Gabriela Avedaño, pers.comm.)

Avedaño reveals that dancers sometimes express frustration with Osmar because he is so accurate in his critique of their dancing and work ethic. Osmar has set the bar high, in part due to his professional baseball experience combined with learning from, dancing with, and training the best salsa dancers. Yet, his dancers recover from their negative emotions and remain committed to Osmar and to Yamuleé, like that of a close-knit family.

Because the dancers' commitment eventually takes its toll on the dancers both inside and outside the studio, they like to contextualize their sacrifices as evidence of the value they place on the bonds created by Yamuleé. Carlos explains how this commitment factors into their fees since they put in extensive time to become good dancers and teachers:

Another thing I want to mention is clients. So, when people come to the studio, and they ask us for privates, and we charge a lot, it's because of that, because people sacrifice a lot of time. I have missed three weddings, 14,000 barbecues, births. I don't know what else, but we miss a lot. So, it's like, when we tell you, "Oh we're charging you sixty bucks for a private," which is actually cheap, and people are outrageous [sic] about it, we're like, "We're out here bleeding, literally. People get cut up dancing. We're sweating. We're stressed out." Some people aren't even— some people have anxiety over the fact that they're not— their regular lives aren't as successful because they're dancing. Things like that, that's why we're charging so much. And then I have to take an hour of the little bit of life that I have to teach somebody. (Carlos De Jesus, pers.comm.)

Yamuleé dancers frequently choose dance over other life events outside the studio. This might be why familial relationships are formed within the dance company. These dancers are deeply bonded through their sacrifice and passion for salsa, and for their dedication to the Yamuleé way.

Becoming Part Of The Yamuleé Family

So how does one become part of the Yamuleé family? Over my eight weeks in the field, taking class four to five days a week, I started to notice little gestures of acceptance that began to indicate I was being adopted. One of the first moments of inclusion I encountered was the opportunity to improvise a semi-private space for my research interviews with company members. I needed a spot far enough away from classes and

rehearsals that I could record the interviews free of excessive background noise. I asked if we could use the men's changing room for my first interview with a Yamuleé dancer.

The more interviews I completed, the longer they seemed to take. Becoming familiar to each other with time, Yamuleé members and I found it easier to converse during the interviews. During my first interview there were male dancers who would enter the room during the interview looking for things. They were very apologetic and gracious. I rarely got interrupted after the first interview, unless my informant was needed for rehearsal. The dancers demonstrated respect for my project, reciprocating my respect for them and their community.

Another gesture of acceptance I received occurred during a Yamuleé social. I was asked to dance by a man wearing a hat. Although it was dark, I could see out of the corner of my eye that he had just come from talking with Violeta Mareira, a stunningly beautiful Afro-Panamanian member of the Bajari semi-pro team. We had one social dance. Afterwards, I thanked him and walked over to say hello to Violeta and compliment her. She always looks so chic and pulled together. (About a month later, I learned this man was her boyfriend. While I was never sure if I should acknowledge that she gifted me a social dance from her boyfriend, I appreciated the gesture and interpreted it as a sign of being adopted into the community.) Adrienne, another regular from classes joined us and said, "There must be a lot of new people tonight. Osmar turned on the AC." I contributed to the conversation with my flashback to my first beginner's class in July. I remember the studio was so cold that I wore my sweatshirt during class. More recently, it had been so hot that I doubled my water intake during classes. Adrienne turned to me and

said, “See you’re one of us. He doesn’t turn the AC on for you anymore.” We cackled hard.

Nicknames are often bestowed at Yamuleé. I started getting compliments during the ladies styling class. I would repeat a movement, and the teacher would turn and say, “Thank you!” Once, Gaby actually called me, “Mila, la que baila!” This is a nickname given to me by a popular NYC dancer many years ago. I use it often to help people remember how to pronounce my name- with the sound of a long “I”. The fact that Gaby, a prominent Yamuleé dancer would refer to me by this nickname indicated to me that I am being recognized as part of the community. On another occasion, Osmar paused to recognize everyone from out of town. He glanced down a row of dancers, looking at people repeating where they are from. He said with pride, “Franca, Italia, then he looked at me and said “Boston!” Everyone giggled. “Dominicans love giving people nicknames,” company manager Levi Alvarez explains(pers comm). Perhaps, I was becoming a little Dominican too.

Given Osmar’s position in the head of the Yamuleé family, it is not possible to truly feel like a member of the community without his recognition, which is why that moment was special. I also received this recognition from Osmar in the week leading into the 2017 anniversary performance and social. Obviously, this was an extremely busy time for the company, and I worried about how my research would be prioritized. Two days before the anniversary party, I had asked Osmar for company member Rasove Ramirez’s contact information, and he told me he would check with his nephew first. Rasove, who is Osmar’s nephew, was highly recommended by other Yamuleé dancers as an excellent

private instructor as well as a research participant. I was interested in meeting Rasove for both reasons.

During the anniversary party, I saw his nephew and went to introduce myself. He said Osmar had mentioned me and he assumed I already had his contact information. I was touched at Osmar's thoughtfulness and impressive memory with all he was managing that week. Not only that, but Osmar had also made sure to message me with a dancers' contact info, at the dancer's request. I had wanted to interview the dancer, but he had to travel unexpectedly and wanted me to know he needed to postpone our interview.

People in close communities are expected to forgive community members for social faux pas that outsiders might be criticized for. While I was at Yamuleé, I believe I experienced this. During my last week of classes I started moving closer to the front. One day I was almost directly behind Osmar and feeling really confident taking class until another company member came in late and cut me in class. I had noticed that she has a habit of doing that to me: cutting in front of me on partner rotations or moving me to the back or side to make room for her. It is possible she cut in front of other dancers, but I noticed she cut me on a few occasions. I was slightly agitated but had to remind myself that she had helped me communicate with Osmar prior to my arrival and I was in her debt. I Also realized in reflection that maybe I was standing in a spot reserved for long-time community members like herself. I did not intend to take anyone's place, but it is easy to get pushed towards the front as dancers who arrive late join the class from the back. I suddenly felt someone brush against my hair. When I turned around, I recognized one of my participants having just teased me. I am not sure whether or not he witnessed

me being put in my place. Like a big brother, though, his gesture encouraged me to let go of the exchange and remain engaged in learning the combination. His light reaction also made it ok that I may have made a social faux pas in the group. The ways in which I was welcomed clearly demonstrate the familial structure of Yamuleé.

A Bronx-Based Dominican Family

It did not take long to recognize that the family that has been created by Yamuleé satisfies a tremendous need for a studio community that prioritizes the Afro-Caribbean roots and aesthetic of salsa. Yamuleé's Bronx studio is like Wakanda, the fictitious Afro-futuristic rendering of a Black utopia that is central to the Marvel Studios film *Black Panther*. But, during my time at Yamuleé, I realized the community satisfied another yearning. For salsa dancers, Yamuleé creates utopian environment with more cultural specificity: Yamuleé is a *Dominican* Wakanda. Because Yamuleé is a village, all are welcomed, but long-term community participation comes with the implicit understanding that becoming part of the Yamuleé requires a degree of Dominican assimilation.

Assimilations complexify experience. For Dominicans living in the United States, the assimilation process is particularly complicated along ethno-racial lines for being mediated by US racial ideology (García-Peña 2015). Shared identity as minorities in cultures and ethnicities located outside of mainstream America, is part of what makes Yamuleé dancing communities feel like satellite families.

The reason Yamuleé functions as a Dominican Wakanda is simple: Osmar was born in the Dominican Republic. For dancers like Raul, who is also Osmar's biological

nephew, this *Dominicanidad* is a major reason why the studio is home literally and figuratively:

Osmar is my family, so my family tends to come over here. So, I'm home twice. And at home, you still want to spend your— with your family, but also with your other family because at the end of the day, I'm in school and here. So, I spend more time here than I do at home. Sometimes it's maybe on Sunday, when I get home early. That's how I catch up with my mom and dad. So, I don't know. Here, it's a really warm, warming feeling. (Raul Valenzuela, pers.comm.)

Like Raul, Francheska draws from salsa experiences to connect with her Yamuleé family and her biological family. Francheska's motivation to learn salsa, in part, was to bond with family and friends during trips to the Dominican Republic:

Every time I go to the Dominican Republic, they know every dance but salsa. They'll put bachata, the dance floor is full. They'll put merengue, the dance floor is full. When they put salsa, everybody would sit. And everything was just so empty. Probably one person would be doing just like random stuff. So I was like, 'Okay. You know what? I need to learn how to dance salsa.' (Francheska Vargas, pers. comm.)

For Raul and Francheska, the concept of family is the thread that intertwines their identities as salsa dancers and as Dominicans. This lattice work of identity for Yamuleé studio as a dancing Dominican space creates a sense of home. We can infer from the history laid out in Chapter Two that salsa represents a different geopolitical reality for Dominicans living in New York City because of the ways in which translocation and

belonging played out through salsa with an increase of the Puerto Rican population in the 1960s.

Osmar demonstrates his cultural and familial pride with frequent references to Dominican culture, baseball, music, and food (Mariel Perez, pers. comm.). He prefers speaking in his first language, Spanish, which, consequently, attracts other dancers who also speak Spanish and little English. Francheska explains,

When it's Dominicans [in the class and rehearsal], we speak a lot of Spanish, and some of these Dominicans, they don't speak English, so we have to— sometimes we speak Spanish—They don't speak English, the Dominicans, because they come straight from Dominican Republic. There's actually one, he's not very fluent in English but he understands it. And then we get into these arguments and they say these jokes sometimes, say, to the Mexicans, and they're like, "What? What is that? I don't know what you're talking about." "Oh, really?" So they get offended sometimes and it's not intentionally. It's just our culture. Sometimes this is how we do things. And vice versa, Mexicans do things that we're like, "What? What's going on?" But it's not intentionally [sic]. Sometimes they just do things because it come from their culture. It's them. We can't change them. We can't change who they are. So all these cultures come in and we really just have to deal with it. And at the end of the day, we're just a big, huge family and we love each other [laughter]. (Francheska Vargas, pers. comm.)

While this is a welcoming space, Francheska's remarks do make it clear that Dominicanidad is at the center of things at Yamuleé. The Dominican-dominated

environment influences one's experience in the studio, from the Spanish dialect, to the humor style, to the conversation topics between classes.

Gaby moved from Oaxaca, Mexico to the Bronx in 2015 to work dance at Yamuleé. She recalls being made aware that her communication subliminally moved from a Mexican to a Dominican Spanish dialect.

I was like, "What did you say?" In Spanish, like, "*Qué tú dejiste.*" Now I say, "*Qué tú dejiste,*" and Mexico is, "*Qué dejiste.*" It's so different. So now, I'm half Dominican. Yeah. And sometimes when I talk with my mom, she's like, "Who are you? Who are you?" "I'm sorry mommy." Everybody here is like so Dominican.

(Gabriela Avedaño, pers.comm.)

Cultural assimilation to Dominican culture is an inevitable outcome of long-term participation with Yamuleé.

This assimilation stretches into the Yamuleé satellite tribes. Kristian Santos (Puerto Rican), who co-directed Yamuleé Boston, started counting in rehearsals with the exact same cadence as Osmar- "five six y seven y one." Mariel Perez (Dominican), was not only the other Boston co-director. She was also the sage of all-things coconut. Mariel could tell us how to use every part of the coconut from making natural deodorant to mixing a *coquito* (Puerto Rican eggnog) which she provided at the last rehearsal before Christmas. The other Yamuleé Boston dancers of Dominican descent would provide

mini-Dominican lectures in between rehearsals. I was encouraged to replace *morena* with *prieta* in my Spanish vocabulary.⁴

The Dominican-centered community at Yamuleé provides an important space for Dominican culture while also allowing others to assimilate and incorporate Dominican culture. By providing this space for Dominicanidad and allowing for others, Yamuleé lives up to its values as a family/village and social community, helping to create a complex lattice of relationships.

Family Socials

Yamuleé hosts socials in the Bronx monthly. These gatherings attract street salsa aficionados, also known as salseros, but primarily serve as a way to reinforce the community bonds among the dancers at the studio. If the walls of a Yamuleé social could talk, they would not; they would only sweat. These events heat up due to the sizable crowds and the physical exertion of dancing. Perez shares her first time at a Yamuleé social,

⁴ *Prieto/a* carries similar controversial interpretations in Spanish in a similar to the N-word in English. This Spanish word's interpretation depends on the context and who's using it. As an insult, it does not carry the same degree of vitriol as the N-word, but is certainly a derogatory term directed at the target's blackness. In other contexts, the term *prieto/a* is a compliment to one with dark skin and other dark features (Mariel Perez, pers. comm.).

And when I showed up to their anniversary and to their Social, it was hot. It was just so hot that you couldn't think, you couldn't eat, you couldn't analyze. Even though it was so hot and sticky, you just knew that you were going to walk out of there feeling nasty, but it felt so good at that moment when you walk in and someone asks you to dance and you dance. And you're having the best time of your life in this oven, because it was literally an oven. There were windows open, there were fans, the AC was probably on...I'm not lying to you, there was 300 people in this small room. It wasn't even a big room and everyone was just everywhere, dancing everywhere, talking everywhere. And it was just sweaty. It was so sweaty but it was the best time I've ever had in my life at a Social, and it was at a Yamuleé Social. And I think ever since that time I knew that I wanted to continue to learn from them or continue coming to their events because it was that much fun. It was that inspiring and everyone was sociable, everyone would dance with you. It didn't matter what level you were at. It didn't matter if you were a beginner. It didn't matter if you were the best of the best, everyone would still dance with you. And you would appreciate the dance, you would appreciate the hot steam, the bad breath, you would appreciate everything that was going on in there because that's how much fun it was. (Mariel Perez, pers. comm.)

Yamuleé dancers value the social dance experience because the studio's culture values such connections. The relaxed, improvisational structure of social dancing creates space for connection and personal creativity. Moreover, Yamuleé socials are so good that they can distract one from otherwise common discomforts and annoyances.

One thing that is unique about Yamuleé socials is the range of movements Yamuleé dancers utilize on the social dance floor—they certainly do not leave their training at the door. As in Yamuleé classes and choreography, Afro-rich vocabularies are also in evidence at Yamuleé socials. Alex El Maestro uploaded an extraordinary display of four former and current Yamuleé professional dancers social dancing to highlight the appeal of Candela’s Friday night socials located in Manhattan.

The dance space is dark enough to feel intimate. Sporadic red, purple, and green lights, make dancers visible. Someone outside the camera’s view is playing a cowbell live over the DJ’s recording of the bouncy salsa *Nengon* by Poncho Sanchez. Delia Madera, Manny Pontier, Ernesto Bulnes, and Denisse Cambria are all wearing jeans. The women bump their dress code up to sexy casual with their top choices. Delia dances in tight black skinny jeans and heels. Her sheer long sleeve shirt exposes her black bra. Manny is wearing a white turtle and a dangly gold earring as a throwback to Turbo and Ozone from the 1980s *Breakin’* movies. Ernesto’s sweat bleeds through his azure blue T-shirt. Denisse is showing skin due to her short black crop top and jeans with deliberate holes at each knee. These four featured and the other dance couples filling the space glide and spin on the parquet dance floor in their casual attire.

Delia and Manny break into a playful rumba (2:02). Denisse and Ernesto break up their partnering with some *despelote*. A form of freestyle, *despelote* originated as an Afro-Cuban form of styling in which the male and female partner get physically close and tease each other without touching through the gyrating of hips and shoulders while performing muscle isolations. In their version, Denisse Cambria and Ernesto Bulnes both

circle the hips and rib cage. Denisse breaks into footwork, invoking Shango, the virile warrior orisha, with a *chachalokufo* (3:45). This is an example of how dancers reinforce “flava”, or a sense of personal style, as a technique and as an aesthetic, sustaining a connection among social dancing, classes, and performance.

When asked, several Yamuleé members said that the music sets Yamuleé socials apart from other socials offered in New York. Hagman describes the music offerings as an “uptown, boogie down Bronx profile. The Yamuleé DJs play music that demonstrates the exuberant range of salsa, creating a unique feature to the experience. Perez discusses different tempos among salsa styles.

When I say romantic those are the slow ones. When I say commercial salsa, I'll say for instance Mark Anthony. Most of his songs are commercialized and everyone thinks any American or anyone from any other country that is not educated on salsa would think that Mark Anthony is the only salsa artist that has ever existed. So with his salsa it's more commercialized. It is danceable but most people who know where the roots of salsa come from, they wouldn't say that his music is danceable. And then there's the salsa like you feel what the rhythm, you hear the thump, you hear the rhythm and you just have to dance to it. And then there's that fast salsa that would say like, "Oh, my God what's the word?" That it would just go [inaudible]. It would just make a noise and it's like, "Okay. But how do I do that with my feet? How would I move my feet to that beat?" (Mariel Perez, pers. comm.)

Perez's statement describes the Yamuleé social playlist as containing music that allows a dancer to find a personal groove across a range of music genres. The complex rhythms and various instruments provide anchors for dancers to engage in bodily expression and interaction with each other. Moreover, good music like the salsa classics played at Yamuleé socials, draws good dancers to the socials. Hagman loves knowing that attending the socials means she will enjoy some challenging dances with strong leaders.

Good music and dancers also attract potential new salseros and thus an opportunity to continue building the community. Valenzuela recalls standing in a corner during his first Yamuleé social. He was intimidated and inspired by the salseros on the dance floor, saying,

Me and a cousin of mine came to a social, and everyone was dancing. The energy was so intense. It felt so good. It was so refreshing...And you just see all these people dancing and having fun, and you're like "What?"...And I told him, I was like, "We need to come and take lessons," because we didn't know anything at all, at all. We would tell people in the streets "Yeah. We know how to dance. We got this. It's in our blood." Yeah. We didn't know crap [laughter]. (Raul Valenzuela, pers.comm.)

Valenzuela returned the very next day to begin taking classes.

All are welcome at Yamuleé socials, and everyone is encouraged to dance at their comfort level. This good will adds to a good time and “good vibe” experienced by participating dancers. Osmar and the dancers remain committed to their Yamuleé hospitality, even when it is not reciprocated. Raul shared a story of being denied entrance

to another salsa social taking place in his Bronx neighborhood for fear that she would be “stealing students” for the Yamuleé studio.

Yamuleé Couples

In such an intense and close community, salsa couples are inevitable. Company member and instructor Scarlett Medrano posted on pictogram, “Yamuleé the new tinder, and Osmar the new and improved Cupid. #yamuleebbq.” This caption accompanies seven photos of Yamuleé dancers with their respective romantic partners, including Scarlett with her “crazy ass boyfriend” and “honey” (as described on her posts) Raul Valenzuela, for whom she has expressed *mucho cariño* and appreciation as a dancer and salsa teacher. Carlos suggested I ask other Yamuleé interlocutors about their dating practices, but declined to answer the question himself during our interview. Yet, he was included in Medrano’s Cupid photo album hugging Leah not Lauriann, and Lauriann is who was introduced to me as his girlfriend a few months prior to this photo being taken. “It’s crazy - and how messy things can get...” Carlos sighed.

Carlos warns, “If you want a dance partner and you want to do your own thing [creative salsa projects], don’t date them.” An exception to this rule would be the dancing pair Ernesto Bulnes and Denisse Cambria. Ernesto and Denise left Yamuleé in 2017. Since their departure, this romantic pair has won consecutive titles at the World Salsa Summit. In 2019, they started Iroko, a salsa dance company. Ernesto and Denise proudly include Yamuleé and Osmar in their professional biographies.

Departure and Homecoming in Yamuleé

The academy's doorway is a salsa rite of passage. Like the embers in the logo, the studio's doorway calls dancers to burn and purge what they thought they knew about salsa and to begin a new way of understanding salsa technique and history. Dancers who persist in training and working hard under Osmar's tutelage become better dancers. They understand that wearing Yamuleé name and logo, which are globally recognizable, assumes that they train hard and value the leverage of strong Afro-diasporic dance technique in social dancing and performance. If and when those dancers leave Yamuleé, they remain Yamuleé family members long after their departure.

Dancers leave for many reasons. Some take breaks to finish college. Some move to other cities and countries. Others start their own dance projects and companies. They all, however, take with them a profound training and familial experience unique to Yamuleé Dance Company, given that Yamuleé has trained many professional salsa dancers (see appendix). As Yamuleé dancers, solid dance technique, and an understanding of how the body works to accomplish professional level dancing are deeply ingrained in them. They embody the histories that shaped New York style salsa, and the improvisational skills with which to inject personal style and flava.

Yamuleé "homecomings" do not necessarily happen in the studios; they may happen in public performances at festivals or Salsa Congresses. For example, a public Facebook video from Jonathan Godinez documented a surprise for Osmar at the 2017 New York Salsa and Bachata Festival. A pair of hands covered Osmar's eyes. Once the lights illuminated the stage, the hands moved away to reveal José Diaz and Delia Madera

along with Rasove Ramirez and partner dancing *Severa*. Osmar rubbed his head as he tilted it back in disbelief. This was significant because not only is Díaz a former Yamuleé dancer, but he relocated to Italy. These dancers, who no longer dance with the company full-time, conspired to create this surprise performance to honor their teacher and mentor. Osmar leaned forward and watched the performance with a huge, elated smile. Marcos Molina commented on the video, “Awesome! I miss those guys.” “Yamuleé O.G’s.” Mario Carrascillos writes, “Love this. Great seeing so much love and respect given to this man who truly deserves it. God bless.”

Another example occurred during the 2018 B.I.G. Salsa Festival in New York City, when Yamuleé danced their international hit choreography *Cocodrillo*—a dance that has been described as putting Yamuleé on the map—as the finale show of performances. This particular dance is not only inclusive of Yamuleé company members across skill level, but it has also become a Yamuleé reunion dance, as many dancers who are no longer regulars performed that night in New York. This dance begins with a musical interlude, “Como Abeja Al Panal” by Juan Luis Guerra and quickly blends to “Llanto de Cocodrillo” by Ray Barretto. In this upbeat, feel good salsa, Perrones uses sophisticated choreography to show off dancers of various performance experiences and skill levels. He also includes female sections and male sections of footwork or “shines” choreography. These performances create heart-felt moments of homecoming celebration among old and new dancers, and their extended family made of students and fans.

My ethnographic research at the studio revealed an extremely complex community that I have framed as a village, to encompass the multiple types of

relationships and rituals experienced within Yamuleé. This dance company is built on familial-type bonds, but goes beyond them in terms of determining who can become part of the Yamuleé Dance Company family. These bonds are reinforced by the studios attitudes towards social dancing—that is a serious, critical part of the total experience for members of the studio. The Yamuleé Dance Company experience is open, as my experience shows, but is centered not only on the Afro-Cuban roots and aesthetic, but also Dominicanidad. This makes it a special community that is satisfying some important needs that are not often satisfied by other dance companies. That fact, combined with the fact that social dancing can be a way to spread the Yamuleé community, either by enticing new members or by providing opportunities for “homecoming” for former members, underscores why Social Dancing/community are one of the three parts of the trinity that make Yamuleé what it is and contribute to the studio’s success.

CHAPTER V

YAMULEÉ CLASSES: TECHNIQUE AND FLAVA PEDAGOGY

I will never forget my first week of classes at Yamuleé Dance Studio. July in New York City is hot: The uptown D train is stifling; the Bronx feels like an oven; and the Yamuleé Dance Studio is sweltering. Black and brown bodies crowd the long, narrow dance floor, vying desperately for a closer look at the complex footwork that serves as the warm-up for Osmar’s challenge class. “If the warm-up is so difficult, how will I get through the rest of the class?” I wonder.

Osmar finishes his warm-up and takes the leaders (all men) and one of the followers (a woman) to work on spinning techniques. The leaders take turns dancing with the one follower, to practicing their hand holds and initiating spins for the follower. The rest of the women follow Osmar’s professional dance partner and Ladies styling⁵ teacher, Gabriela “Gaby” Avedaño, to the other side of the studio. Gaby talks us through a checklist for our posture from bottom to top. “First your feet, then your knees, hips, and shoulders...” The pitch of her voice and her Mexican accent inflect her words with confident deliberation. “Ladies, close your legs!” She gestures to her thighs, while eyeing me with laser focus. After her correction is received, Gaby explains the timing of the turn we are learning. She guides us through the progression: turning clockwise with a two-step

⁵ Ladies styling class focuses on detailed body movement and fluid arms aesthetics

preparation to reverse the turn counter-clockwise. Gaby sing-speaks the counts for us, “One, TWO, *threeee*...,” accenting the two to cue us to step forward on the left foot, then pivot, shifting from left foot to the right to complete a single spin by the end of her extended three. We move right into the back step to complete the movement. “Five, SIX, seven, y one...”

After drilling these techniques for ten minutes, we reconvene as one group, and Osmar partners us up, one leader and one follower, for our first combination. I twist and spin through the first series of rotations with relative ease. However, after multiple spins incorporating changes in direction and hand holds, Osmar adds another complicated series of turns for the leader, and my partner and I start to lose our grasp of the material.

Then, we hear the call, “Rotate!” This is Osmar’s direction for us to continue rotating partners with each practice run of the class combination. This partner shuffle gives us many opportunities to practice our respective roles as leaders and followers and with different people. It also allows followers to rotate in and out, as we are not an even ratio, as there are about eighteen leaders and twenty-four followers. We are trying to grasp a little more command of the combination with each attempt. Some leaders seem to have a sense of what they are doing, and others are just as lost as I am. One of my partners is too overwhelmed to even attempt to practice with me. Instead, he can only apologize as he stands watching Osmar and Gaby repeat the sequence from the center of the circle. Another leader, perhaps sensing my growing dejection, attempts to cheer me up by asking teasingly: “Oh, you didn’t know that Wednesday is a Performance

Challenge class?!” By now, I am tempted to sit out, but with just class about ten minutes from ending, I decide to stick it out. How much harder could it get?

One by one, Osmar selects leaders and followers to perform the intricate class combination for his evaluation. If students do not self-select, then Osmar will assign dancers to each other. His stern, decisive pointer finger directs you to his left if you did not complete the combination correctly, a finger directed to his right meant you did. Like the friendless school kid during kickball team selections, I am one of the last followers to be chosen. A tall man with a kind smile dances with me. We make it almost halfway through the combination before we fall apart. The other students clap encouragingly, even as Osmar’s finger sends us to his left-hand side for failing at performing the combination.

There are multiple layers of tension inside this account of a typical fast-paced salsa class at Yamuleé, and I became curious about why dancers put themselves through this physical, mental, and even emotional strain. Why are Yamuleé dancers so eager to participate in high-stress situations like the one previously described, especially since, as was established in the previous chapter, many people at Yamuleé are drawn to the social dance component of the studio and may not be looking to perform. Surprisingly, a famous environmental experiment, the Biodome, may help us understand the benefits of experiencing the challenges constructed in the Yamuleé dance class.

The Biodome project was designed to create the perfect living environment for humans, plants, and animal life. Beneath a huge glass dome, scientists created an artificial ecosystem, controlled for perfect growing conditions. All seemed to be growing

well with one exception: once trees planted in the Biodome reached a certain height, they toppled over. It took scientists a while to realize they neglected to recreate an important natural element: wind! Trees need to resist against wind as it blows, because that causes their root systems to grow deep into the ground, thus supporting the trees as they grow taller. Just as the trees need resistance to grow deep root systems, I argue that the Yamuleé’s environmental tensions, combined with the inherent tensions in salsa dancing, create the foundation for the deep-rooted social bonds that are so valuable to the dancers at Yamuleé. This process of creating strong roots via the pedagogy of the classes augments and is augmented by the social relationships created and nurtured inside Yamuleé’s dancing community.

Yamuleé dancers create strong roots in their social relationships by working against the tension created by the structure of the Yamuleé partnering classes. This tension is an essential part of the pedagogy. In this chapter, I describe how this pedagogy does more than develop salsa skills. I begin by briefly discussing influences on Osmar’s pedagogy, and then describing the class offerings at Yamuleé. I then move on to enumerate the tensions inherent to salsa dance technique, before moving on to a discussion of other ways that tension plays out in Yamuleé’s pedagogy. One of the most important things Yamuleé classes accomplish is giving dancers a shared movement vocabulary grounded in Afro-diasporic aesthetics. The classes also foster social bonds and community cultural wealth, encourage innovation through “flava,” and bridge dancers towards performance opportunities.

Osmar's Pedagogical Influences

As I have described, tension is central to salsa dance technique. However, the particular kind of embodied tension that I suggest is unique to Yamuleé's pedagogy is a result of the specific way Osmar engages and grapples with some of his most important influences. One of the most important of these influences is Osmar's background as a professional baseball player. Osmar combined his athletic training as a baseball player with his salsa training with Eddie Torres and with Santo Rico to become a master salsa teacher. Playing baseball taught him the importance of making a habit of preparation and also underscored the significance of stamina and muscle memory. He implemented those strategies to develop his dance pedagogy by including drills that enhance both the motor skill and the salsa skill. For example, it is common for dancers to stand on one foot and travel across the long studio by moving their toes, then heel in the direction of travel. This aids in improving balance necessary for spins and ankles strength vital for performing rapid combinations. This also creates agility for rapid footwork combinations.

Additionally, while a member of Santo Rico Dance Company, Osmar developed his ability to teach partnering. He was deliberate in becoming a teacher who could train leaders and followers. He deconstructed how leaders and followers prepare for spinning. Leaders focus on hand connection, tension, and speed; while followers focus on vertical alignment and foot placement. He became so effective that when new women entered the company, they were sent to practice with Osmar so that he could clean their technique. By the time he started Yamuleé, he had proven methods for training both leaders and followers.

Osmar has also translated contemporary influences into a movement vocabulary and aesthetic. These are central to Yamuleé as they provide the basis for shared communication as a family and also form the basis for the teamwork necessary to perform successfully (which will be investigated in Chapter Six). Osmar developed his unique aesthetic of salsa vocabulary by including complex syncopation, counter turns, and even vernacular dances.

Yamuleé Classes

Yamuleé's comprehensive class offerings accommodate all ages and levels. The advanced class described in the opening of this chapter is the performance challenge class, which always starts with a warm up by teaching a progressively harder footwork combination. Afterwards, students self-select into temporary pairs to learn a partnering combination. Everyone rotates, to practice with each other until class is over. For the challenge class, however, the ending is quite different. Leaders and followers pair up to perform for the rest of the class. This formation is called "one by ones". Osmar, "el maestro," decides if each couple passes or fails the performance test.

The company's spinning class meets before the advanced class, and focuses on spinning techniques both individually and in partnering sequences or combinations. The Shines and Partner Work class is offered four times a week for all dance skill levels. Shines refers to classes that work on individual skills of dancing salsa independent from a partner, and tends to focus on building a dancer's movement vocabulary and performance of the steps. An intermediate shines and partnering work class meets once a week. Other weekly classes include styling and body movement, "ladies styling" and a beginner's

class that focuses on the basics and fundamentals of dancing salsa on2. The “Ladies” Styling class is a footwork class that layers on intentional directional changes and flow of the arms. In the warm-up the instructor breaks down the physical mechanics that create the Yamuleé ladies’ aesthetic. First the footwork is introduced to the students. Next, the upper body styling is added to the combination. Yamuleé is committed to the youth in their community with a “Babies” class for ages 3–6 years. They also have a kids class for ages 7–14 years.

“Ladies” Styling, Shines and Partnerwork, and the Challenge Classes highlight Yamuleé’s pedagogical approach. These were the adult classes offered during my time in the field, and I suspected that taking these classes would reveal the pedagogical values of the company. Accounts from these classes illustrate how Yamuleé does more than develops salsa dance skills. Their classes reinforce Afro-diasporic aesthetics, foster social bonds and community cultural wealth, encourage innovation through flava, and bridge dancers towards performance opportunities.

The Trinity at Work: Pedagogy and Community at Yamuleé

Throughout this work, I have referred to a trinity that forms the foundation of success at Yamuleé. These three forces—social dance, pedagogy, and performance—reinforce one another and enhance one another in the circular fashion described in the methodology chapter. In the previous chapter, I established the complexity and depth of the Yamuleé village, and here I will show how those relationships I outlined in the last chapter interact with and contribute to the unique pedagogy of Yamuleé.

Indeed, social bonds are another important element to Yamuleé's class experience. The mini-struggles and hardships brought about by learning difficult dance moves can create opportunities for bonding among community members. Although unpleasant, pain can act as a social glue that fosters cohesion and solidarity in a group—essentially forcing cooperation (Bastian 2014). “What doesn't kill us makes us stronger” certainly rings true of Yamuleé Dance Company.

Class participation at Yamuleé requires active engagement. Osmar believes that students will not learn by standing passively in the back. Once he takes the lead in the front of the room, his feet draw everyone's attention. There are no organized rows of dancers making “windows,” such as the typical set up for classical ballet or modern classes. If one cannot see, one must move to get a view, even if it means necessarily blocking the view of another. For me, I was frequently cut in front of, either in my line or during partnering rotations, by another community member. It was always prefaced with a polite but unapologetic, “Excuse me.” I was paying my dues as a newbie and as an initiate into the community.

Students count the complex rhythms out loud during Yamuleé classes. Osmar will occasionally use specific dance terms, but mostly he counts the rhythm. As we repeat the combination, we are counting out loud, as a strategy for picking up the movement quickly. This struggle to see Osmar's footwork and keep up with his quick pace is a prominent environmental tension. Student dancers engage in multiple strategies for obtaining the class material. We face a studio mirror that extends the entire front wall, and yet I still observe most dancers straining to see Osmar's actual feet perform the class

combinations. Dancers beyond the second row behind Osmar look to the dancers in front of them or turn to their neighbors to ask for help. Because of the strong communal ties, each dancer is willing to consider anyone or everyone as a potential resource for learning the combination. In this way, the bonds established by social dancing enhance the pedagogy while the pedagogy reinforces the sense of community. There is no hierarchy; as I described in a previous chapter, there was an instance where one of Yamuleé's semi-professional dancers asked me for assistance. These communal ties that underscore the class experience give students agency over their respective needs with learning the material.

The partnering section of class always happens in a circular pattern. The regular dancers are expected to initially partner up with visiting dancers. This became an inside joke among Lucas, Violeta and me. Lucas and Violeta take class regularly and perform with Bajari, Yamuleé's semi-professional company. Even though I was becoming a fixture at Yamuleé, Lucas would frequently initiate a pairing with me. I would hear Violeta say "Lucas" in a similar tone to how Desi Arnez would say, "Lucy" during their hit television series. She scolded him because the "regulars" are supposed to start the class dancing with new people, and I was quickly becoming a familiar face through frequent class attendance. At the teacher's direction, the followers rotate counter-clockwise. The result is that everyone dances with everyone, regardless of age, height difference, size, or ability. This circulation embeds a sense of inclusion into the pedagogy.

Yamuleé is all-inclusive in every aspect, including age. During one of the partnering classes, Pre-teens Julian and Justin Sandoval were among the adult dance students (see fig. 3.) At five feet, seven inches tall, I towered over these boys as we danced; still we laughed and learned together during the complex turning pattern.



Figure 3. Julian and Justin Sandoval with the author.

Dancers are constantly supporting one another. They will grab each other right after class to videotape each other performing the combination. The short video clips become a type of kinetic CliffsNotes for the class. Dancers can create extra resources by recording either Osmar or each other performing the combinations at the end of class. Leaning on one another, I suggest, helps alleviate some of the tension that can build in the process of learning class material.

Embodied Tension

To dance effectively with a partner, salsa requires a commitment from both dancers to the mutual generation of embodied tension. Pushing and pulling, opposing and yielding along a continuum of effort, the (traditionally male) leader guides the dance,

while the (traditionally female) follower responds to the leader's movement cues. At the same time, the follower provides the resistance that enables the leader to communicate intentions. The dynamic of reciprocal tension creates a sense of presence and focus between the partners during their dance. Yamuleé's specific approach effectively creates this tension because they focus on the dancers staying closer in proximity which enables quicker transitions from move to move.

“What does it feel like?” one might ask. As an individual dancer, the feet generally stay underneath the hips. Knees are slightly bent, keeping a connection to the ground. The abdominals are engaged to help with balance and posture. In a partnership, the arms are flexed and hands are connected through an open palm with all four fingers hooked on one another. Both leader and follower are pulling away equally to maintain the hands equidistant between the two. If the leader is a “hard lead,” they may be pulling with a lot of force. A soft lead uses less force. Either way, the follower must match the leader's amount of effort. This creates what salseros refer to as tension. It is mutual and equal, though opposite.

This tension is also a prerequisite for a release of energy. Various salsa moves are accomplished during the release. As an individual, the dancer steps into a preparation for spins by creating a spiral in the body. As the lower body twists in one direction, the upper body turns in the opposite direction. This spiral creates tension at the point of intersection of the twists, which generates potential energy. Individually, the dancer pushes into the floor off the foot that is slightly in front of the other. This push initiates a release of energy upon exiting the spiral. The dancer's body collects itself to an untwisted

alignment that is then maintained for the duration of the spins. In a partnered situation, the leader and follower connect through their hands. They push against each other rather than pulling, creating even more momentum for multiple spins. This tension is a driving force of several specific salsa dance techniques.

Spins

Building on what was said above, in a spin the leader feels a connection in the hands as a result of the spiraled tension. He then pushes the follower in the opposite direction of her own spiral twist. He makes a very small circle above her head by rotating his wrist as many times as the desired number of spins. His elbow is bent and out to the side so that his hand is over his partners head.

At the moment the leader initiates a spin through the palm, the follower pushes from the floor and collects her feet and legs into a tight, flexed parallel position. At the same time, she fixes her arm into a right angle with the elbow in front of her chest, upper arm parallel to the floor and forearm vertically positioned in the space between partners. These spatial markers enable the leader to spin the follower with her hand raised high enough to avoid being hit in the head when the leader pushes to initiate a spin. She holds this position through the spins until the leader brings her arm down, signaling the end of the spinning sequence. The follower prepares for either a single spin or multiple spins based on the amount of momentum she receives at the initial preparation. Yamuléé approaches spins differently from other salsa classes in two ways for both leaders and followers. The spinning direction between sets can change quickly and on any count in the music. Also, the number of spins in one direction can be different from the other

direction. It is common, for example, to spin two times to clockwise and with a quick transition spinning three times counter clockwise in a Yamuleé combination.

Open breaks/back breaks

An open break is not so much a dance move as it is a technique for giving the follower more energy than normal. In the open break, both leader and follower step back and away from each other while keeping their elbows flexed with one hand connection. This creates a tension in the arms and builds potential energy. The release of this energy propels the follower forward into various possibilities, depending on how she is led by her partner. Todd Chen⁶ from NYC Salsa Classes defines an open break as follows:

This step indicates to the follower that you are about to initiate a turn. A simple analogy comes from driving. It is proper etiquette to first flip on your turn signals to let other drivers on the road know that you wish to make a turn. When it comes to dancing, your open break is the initial signal from the leader to the follower that a turn is coming. From this point forward, we will be frequently using open breaks with each turn.

Open breaks are not the only way to signal a turn for the follower. The leader can swing the arm, adjusting the arm swing in speed and effort to indicate the follower's speed and momentum for single or multiple spins. Open breaks can also signal more broadly that the leader is about to depart from the basic step. In the case of Yamuleé, the open break leads to a series of complex turning patterns. A YouTube video(:49–51)⁷ from a

⁶ YouTube video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uk5xbikyw7Q>

⁷ YouTube video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=plUKuJNBPTs>

Wednesday challenge class shows dancers using an open break for the leader to change directions. At the same time, the leader preps the follower for a whip spin- in which she completes 2.5 rotations. The result is that both dancers have traded places inside their kinetic bubble.

Checks

A salsa check occurs when the leader interrupts the momentum of the follower to change the follower's direction. Osmar illustrates this maneuver using a movement called the copa in a YouTube instructional video.⁸ Osmar and his partner, Delia Madera, perform an open break, stepping away from each other while maintaining their connection through one hand. This action, in which parts of their bodies move away from each other while other parts stay connected, generates a spiraling tension between them. Then, Osmar reaches for the outside of Delia's hip, redirecting her momentum towards him. Then, the tension between them releases, propelling them towards each other again. Osmar completes the copa by sending Delia into another turn; he adds an additional flourish to the sequence by following her turn with a simultaneous spin of his own in place.

In this same video, Osmar teaches a shoulder check (7:54-8:20). Osmar is facing Delia. He delivers momentum to turn Delia towards her right shoulder. Her upper body opens to her right with her right leg crossing her left, thus creating a spiral of tension. Once Delia's body is facing away from Osmar, he presses his hand against Delia's right

⁸ YouTube video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vlt6w-Y1icI&t=208s>

shoulder from behind, preparing Delia for a copa. Osmar's action redirects Delia and releases her potential energy into spins towards her left side, completing the copa move.

Stunts

A basic performance stunt is the split drop, and this also requires tension to execute. The leader holds the follower under the arms. The leader supports the weight of the follower in a variety of ways. At the same time, the leader squats while the follower jumps or slides into the splits. The follower takes a leap of faith in her leader as she spreads her legs into the splits, while releasing her weight towards the ground. To recover from this stunt, the follower presses down while the leader presses up into their arm connection. The follower simultaneously squeezes her thighs together. As she rises, she brings her feet together underneath her pelvis and retrieves control of her body weight.

Tension also helps the individual dancer. Take the following account from a ladies' styling class. The phrase "Let's go" signals the start of Gaby Avedaño's styling class. Gaby emphasizes the importance of pushing from the floor and using the whole body to connect through the center—not just using hands and arms, but building a solid vertical foundation from the floor up that flows through the feet, knees, hip, torso, shoulders, arms, and hands. Tucking the bottom of her shirt underneath her sports bra, she exposes her bare midriff to exaggerate body rolls on her petite frame. She reminds us to keep our "feet" together. Gaby's anatomical checklist was a clear explanation of the kinetic chain of movement for ladies styling. The floor is an implicit partner, enabling a salsa dancer to engage with tension as a solo mover. Gaby's approach emphasizes the truth that all salsa dancers must first embody a sense of tension that enables many motor

skills for salsa dancing. Although all salsa pedagogy must instill these tension-based skills, tension is a vital element to Yamuleé’s pedagogy in other ways.

Embodied Tension in Evolving Techniques: Tradition and Innovation

Osmar Perrones has designed a specific system for training dancers. His unique approach to training develops specific salsa skills, of which personal style or flava is one. This not only creates confidence in dancers to become performers; the pedagogy experience creates collective wealth of knowledge and social bonds for Yamuleé’s dancing community. Yamuleé’s salsa training forms connections between salsa historical aesthetics with new possibilities. This is a principle that Osmar introduced in Yamuleé, that other teachers and Yamuleé students and dancers have adopted. For example, Raul shares,

You need to keep your roots and your traditions, but you always need to improvise and not be afraid to test your waters. And it's something that Osmar brings here a lot. He does a lot of studying. You won't see him often taking a class. But you'll see him observing what other people are doing. And of course, he'll criticize, and a lot of times, himself. (Raul Valenzuela, pers.comm.)

Raul practices what Osmar preaches by pedagogical example.

I took one of Raul’s classes, in which he implemented sports drills. He was vocal about his experimentation. It was a unique experience to mix traditional salsa footwork with body percussion and basketball drills. At one point, a fellow classmate named Jimmy blurted out, “Salsarate” combining the words salsa and karate as he rolled his “r” very hard. His pale, freckled face held the intensity of a Bruce Lee movie with subtitles. I

held back my giggles, delighting in Jimmy’s comedic analysis and delivery. We moved from lifting each knee as if to dribble a basketball underneath, right into small karate front kicks. Jimmy picked up on Raul channeling the Bruce Leeroy character from the movie *The Last Dragon*. Raul reminded us several times that he had to challenge us as well as himself by trying out new ideas in salsa. This is an example of the tension produced by teachers experimenting in their own teaching style development.

Personal style is also important at Yamuleé. During one of my observations, I watched Yamuleé pre and early teenage students insert the vernacular dance known as the “nae nae” into a salsa class footwork combination. Instead of reprimanding them, Perrones smiled, encouraging their playful creativity by including their modification as they continued to practice.

Personal style, more commonly referred to as flavor or flava by the dancers, is an important element of New York salsa. Bajari company member Carlos de Jesus remembers receiving how Osmar taught him how to execute the essential qualities of the movements while adding his own flava. He shares,

Osmar is like, ‘Okay, you've got to do the shines the way I do them, but you can flavor it the way you want to.’ And I think that's so important, because we still have our own unique personalities and we all come from families that dance. So, if you look at Ronel [another company member] dancing, he has his own flavor to his own little Dominican thing back home, that he learned, that he does. He puts his little, “Watch out,” that he does little winks and stuff like that. (Carlos De Jesus, pers.comm.)

In other words, for de Jesus, flava, encompassing individual creativity as well as personal familial associations, is as valuable in terms of Osmar's instruction as his ability to push his dancers to refine their technique. Yamuleé dancers develop salsa flava in several ways. Classes in body movement and styling encourage the body's exploration of contra rhythmic coordination throughout the body. Improvisation and observation are also modalities for dancers to explore flava.

Yamuleé's pedagogical approach carves space for the personal histories, realities, and identities of its disciples. For example, although Osmar is Dominican, his dancers represent a pan-Latin American cohort. There are also African, African American and European dancers among the fold, stretching across a multi-generational representation as well. Osmar and Yamuleé dancers build and expand their movement vocabularies creating a rich dictionary from which to craft personal expression in salsa improvisation. Furthermore, Osmar encourages the use of personal expression in his studio instructors.

As Raul suggested, Osmar also choreographs class combinations by pulling in new ideas himself. Some of his choices reflect an historical continuum of Afro-Cuban movement. Take for instance the makuta dance. From the Kongolese-Cuban tradition, makuta is a rare African-Cuban example of a couple's dance. The multiple African ethnic groups that make up the Kongolese traditional pre-date the Yoruba tribe's arrival to Cuba. Three hundred years later, the social dance makuta is still an actively used vocabulary step in Yamuleé class combinations. Osmar and others seem drawn to this dance. In its original couple's form, the dancers take three steps forward towards one another. The third step is actually a tap. The dancers start with that tapped foot moving

backwards, away from each other. What gives this movement flare is that the direction change is led by the pelvis— a pelvic tuck forward and pelvic tilt backward.

More recent additions of Afro-Cuban steps are also present in class. Yamuleé students are familiar with the dance guachineo. Cuban timbaton artist Chocolate popularized this dance move in a 2015 music video for his hit song also titled, “Guachineo.” As the dancer steps on the quarter beats of the music, the dancer’s hips shake side to side in a triplet over the foot, as the dancer shifts weight from one foot to the other. The counts for the step are “1, 3, 5, 7” in salsa dance counts, marking the quarter beat. The counts for the hips are as follows: one y and, two y and, three y and, four y and working in relation to the quart beat of the feet. The hips “shimmy” in the triplet meter. Arms are relaxed and the torso is pitched slightly forward. Most of the dancers bring attention to their backsides through indirect focus teasing any onlookers as if to say, “Look but don’t touch!” Osmar delivers this step in his footwork combinations.

The mixing of old and new cultural artifacts is common across space and time in its many iterations of Afro-Latinidad music and dance. Afro-Cuban dance scholar Yesenia Fernandez Selier describes timbatón as a Cubanized version of reggaetón (pers. comm). Michelle White has further argued that timba and timbatón might actually be millennial versions of son (2014). Because timbatón layers in complex Cuban music histories with familiar reggaetón, it is danceable through various dance styles. It is a common experience in Yamuleé classes to perform elements Afro-Cuban folklore elements like an orisha dance or makuta with contemporary dance crazes like the guachineo or an updated despelote all in one combination. Through salsa pedagogy,

Yamuleé continues this practice of weaving together multi-temporal elements through a pedagogic tapestry.

Teaching Teachers

Osmar has been training dancers for over two decades. This component of his pedagogical approach allows him to augment and expand the global Yamuleé family. Again, we see elements of the trinity—social dancing/community and pedagogy—working together flawlessly. Osmar has mentored many teachers and company directors, like Karel Flores and Juan Matos. Osmar continues grooming new teachers within Yamuleé. Several of his pro team and semi-pro team performers also teach weekly classes. Osmar implemented a teacher-training curriculum to groom new instructors as needed. Instructor and professional dancer Raul Valenzuela recalls:

Before I started teaching, we used to take courses here of how to teach beginner, intermediate, beginner-intermediate, or advanced-beginner, and stuff like that. And you needed to learn, it was 15 steps per level. And there was a cycle class here. And for a while, I was the one that was teaching it. [Osmar] taught it for two months at different levels and taught us basically how to teach it. It was open to students. But we were taking it to learn how to teach. (Raul Valenzuela, pers.comm.)

Osmar put structures in place to ensure his teachers were preparing students with a solid foundation of technical skill and facility with the salsa dance vocabulary of Yamuleé.

Yamuleé instructors also receive individual critique of how they teach. Raul explains,

And after that, we just approached him differently, and he approached us to give us feedback. But I would tell him, "Hey, I know you like these steps more," or, "I know you like to do these steps this way. Can I switch it up?" And he's like, "As long as you're staying in content, you can do as you please. If I see you going out of your way and maybe keeping the students back or maybe the students are not learning as well with you—" then he'll approach us about it. (Raul Valenzuela, pers.comm.)

Osmar leaves space for newer teachers to experiment teaching core content along with new ideas, creating a space for personal flava in pedagogy.

Osmar simultaneously encourages tradition and personal interpretation of salsa from his instructors to teach a progression. Gaby shares the following experience from teaching ladies' styling.

So I'm always like, "First learn this step, and then you can explore your body." Because that's how I learn. And I think is good for you. Sometimes when I start my warm up and those things, I never did that before. So only the single warm up in the first summer. That's it, and then no more. But I was learning this styling, but these ladies, they know how do this, but they don't know how explain that. So I was like, "Let me see. Let me watch some videos." And I was like, "Okay. So this is start here, and then here, something, blah, blah, blah." So I start doing this with three exercise, and then I did six, and then eight, and then, now I change one day like this. I have to do basics always, but sometimes I change a little bit. More for coordination, more for wrists, more for fingers, or something like that. And

always I'm so mad when these ladies from the company, they don't know how to do something because they have this class right here. But they come late. They start 20 minutes after, and I'm like, "You don't need the step. You need the warm up. Please come early, always." But I think they don't know. If I teach every single class something, it's because I'm focusing. You have to learn this, right? You are from this company. So even now, we have a lot of teams, and they're asking me, "Oh, we never know how you do this step." Come to my class. I can teach you right here. (Gabriela Avedaño, pers.comm.)

What Gaby illustrates is how she developed her own philosophy of building foundational technique and movement patterns that will support more complex styling and choreography. Gaby does not want her peers and students to learn only the choreography—rather she wants them to learn how to perform the class combinations and routines from a deeper physical practice rooted in a physiological and sequential logic.

Gaby created her own process to reverse engineer and then communicate the ladies styling aesthetic of Yamuleé. Gaby's warm up incorporates isolations, including articulating through the wrists, fingers, and then arms to push away from the center of the body like the orisha Oshun using her hands to push out small ripples in a calm river. She coordinated this upper body movement with weight shifts in the knees. Hips make a Figure 8. As an arm retracts, the opposite arm follows a circle at the body's center meridian. Gaby designed her class in a progressive manner. She reviews every body movement in detail and isolation, then she combines them by the end of class so that students can master each part of the body before moving them in simultaneously different

ways. The dancer's instrument must work like a symphony, each body part must understand their individual parts for the entire body to move in harmony.

The ways in which Raul and Gaby demonstrate personal approaches to teaching reflect how they process and incorporate their own understanding of Yamuleé technique and styling. By exploring their personal interpretations of salsa dance skills, they each develop personalized approaches to teaching their classes. Thus, flava is reinforced as an element of Yamuleé pedagogy as a teacher and as a student. The class is not only a place to learn. It is a space of experimentation. This is important because it allows us to understand the connection between pedagogy and the third part of the Yamuleé trinity, which is performance. By approaching experimentation in this way, the challenge class allows students to temporarily experiment with performance.

In the same way that this chapter and the preceding chapter focused on the first two parts of the Yamuleé trinity, the following chapter will focus on performance. There are, of course, obvious links between pedagogy and performance—as I have suggested multiple times in this chapter, Yamuleé's dancers would not be able to perform as successfully without taking the demanding Yamuleé classes that improve their dance skills in general and specifically for Yamuleé's aesthetic. These pedagogical elements are successful because they are being used in a space where there is already a rich community that is reinforced through social dancing. Classes also reinforce the community aspect, showing the importance of the trinity and remembering that it works in a circular fashion.

CHAPTER VI
YAMULEÉ SALSA STYLE: PRESERVING AND EXTENDING
THE AFRICANIST ROOTS OF SALSA

The Yamuleé Dance Company Facebook page administrator posted a video clip of the footwork challenge from their March 4, 2020 class. The comment below the video reads in part, “*Did you catch @_danceitaway’s new signature move at the end??*” The post identifies the dancer in the video, Melany Crystal Mercedes, by her Instagram handle. Her new signature move is the “woah,” borrowed from Black youth culture.

The woah is a dance move featured on YouTuber Krypto9095’s channel in a video labeled as the official song to the “woah” dance uploaded in 2018. In his September 2017 YouTube video, DJ Dangerous, the self-proclaimed creator of the woah, provides a tutorial and performs the dance. The “Woah” song is built on the foundation of a trap beat. Trap is a subgenre of hip hop created in Atlanta’s black music scene. The “Woah” dance went viral via social media and with celebrity endorsements from the likes of Travis Scott and Drake. The most notable moment that Mercedes highlights is a contained circling of one arm followed by the other that finishes with a clear halted motion, “like you’re putting your car in park” (DJ Dangerous 2018). An interesting note here is that in the Krypto9095’s video, one of the dancers inserts a salsa move known to salseros as a front step (:38). This performance of the woah dancer’s front step and

Melany's performance of the "woah" demonstrates an African diasporic reciprocity, which happens in a contemporary context when urban culture circulates via social media, creating cross pollinating movement ideas and inspiration among young dancers of color.

Melany is a virtuosic Yamuleé dancer who also teaches co-ed styling at the studio. Another video clip uploaded by the company's Facebook page administrator from one of Melany's "body movement and shines" classes featured on the Yamuleé Facebook page incorporates the dance of Oshosi a hunter and one of the orishas, or links between the spirit world and humanity, who have been referenced previously. In this dance, the dancers are bent forward with head down and their arms are folded in towards the center of the body. Their elbows lead a figure eight to the left and then to the right. The right arm reaches behind the back for a figurative arrow. Then the dancers gesture shooting an imagined arrow from an imagined bow. The upper body movements are carried out while the feet support from below as the weight of the body falls forward, shifting directions to the forward diagonal with each weight exchange. The left front part of the foot is in back pulsing up quickly with a slower deliberate fall onto the front foot like a "ball change" step. This specific gesture is the invocation of Oshosi. The dancers seamlessly transition back to salsa moves like crossovers and side steps with hip rolls. These examples from Melany's classes, promoted by Yamuleé on social media, are examples of the ways that Yamuleé dancers and choreographers incorporate Afro-diasporic movements into their salsa, pointing not only to the Afro-Cuban histories previously discussed, but also a deep engagement with contemporary Black youth culture.

Melany's work is by no means an outlier. Yamuleé Dance Company's connection to the African diaspora extends beyond the dance company's name. Instructors incorporate familiar steps that have been codified since the 1950s mambo era. Osmar himself invokes sacred Afro-Cuban deities to choreography for the company. These performances circulate historical New York style salsa combined with Yamuleé's innovative artistry.

In this chapter, I supplement the ethnographic methods of my other data chapters with choreographic analysis to read Yamuleé's fluid Afro-diasporic salsa choreographies, in the studio, the clubs, and on the stage. In *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance*, Susan Foster argues that effective choreographic analysis necessitates the discernment of a dance's frame, mode of representation, style, vocabulary, and syntax. According to Foster, these categories work in tandem to allow a viewer to "read" the meaning of a dance by recognizing

the choreographic codes and conventions that give the dance its significance.

These conventions situate the dance in the world and among dances that have preceded it. They also give the dance internal coherence and integrity. By focusing on these conventions in a particular dance, the viewer comes to understand not only what that dance means, but also how it creates meaning.

(Foster 1986, 59)

However, this approach presents a challenge to scholars who study dances that blend the codes and conventions of multiple dance forms across cultures over space and time. To address this challenge, I employ an approach that blends choreographic analysis with

ethnographic methods to trace the ways in which Yamuleé sustains traditional Africanist aesthetics while continuing to innovate its technical vocabulary with contemporary Afro-Caribbean and African American urban dance elements.

For this analysis, I focus on three works that were frequently performed by the professional team during my fieldwork: *Severa* (originally choreographed in 2011), *Facultad* (2017), and *Boogaloo* (2018). I argue that in these dances Yamuleé Dance Company choreographs a complex partnering of sacred and secular Africanist (and specifically Afro-Cuban) references with references to the politicized history of salsa music and dance and Pan American Latin culture in the United States. While Yamuleé is not the only Latin dance company employing Africanist vocabularies and styles, it is unique in the way it eloquently and fluently navigates these multilayered histories, vocabularies, and styles with profound intention. Before I move into analyzing those dances, however, I briefly outline how Yamuleé's performance teams work and reinforce some of the connections between the pedagogy discussed in the previous chapter and the preparation undertaken by Yamuleé dancers as they develop their Afro-diasporic vocabularies and styles in order to prepare to perform dances like *Severa*, *Facultad*, and *Boogaloo*.

Preparing for Performance at Yamuleé

Yamuleé has four major performance teams based in their Bronx studio. *Yamubabies* is the class for three to six-year olds. *Areitos* is a performance group for young children through early teens. *Guarikiten de Yamuleé* members are generally teens and young adults focused on learning fundamental salsa skills with an eye toward

performance. In the semi-pro team *Bajari de Yamuleé*, adult dancers further their focus on technique and styling. The Yamuleé Pro Team travels nationally and internationally, teaching and performing Yamuleé salsa technique and styling. The amount of rehearsing is commensurate with the level of difficulty for each team.

It only makes sense that the pedagogical philosophy in Yamuleé classes is designed to help dancers perform if they so choose. The dancers have recognized the rotation of partners as one aspect that helps dancers feel comfortable performing:

Yamulee is one of the schools where you— they prepare you to dance with anybody at any time. So you have to dance with whoever they put you with, no matter if the girl's bigger, taller, if she's shorter, if she doesn't know how to step, if she— or no matter if the guy doesn't know, can't learn that fast, doesn't have good memory, you just have to adjust and be able to make it. (Carlos De Jesus, pers.comm.)

De Jesus recalled preparing for a performance and having his partner switched just days before the show. The class partner rotations build performers' skills for quickly adjusting to multiple dance partners. Classes are a vital link to the performance experience in Yamuleé. Class is where dancers develop the motor skills that make them strong both social dancers and performers and is distinct from the rehearsals that Osmar directs for the pro team.

Class is for you to learn, for him to explain things and teach you fundamentals and give comments on things and where you can ask questions about stuff. And

then in rehearsal, first of all, he's only leading the pro rehearsal. (Molly Hagman, pers.comm.)

Another tool used to prepare dancers for performance at Yamuleé is the guest teacher. Of course, non-performing dancers benefit from these guest teachers, who reinforce the deeply rooted language and aesthetics that are central to Osmar's own classes, but these guest teachers are particularly important for performing dancers because they help the performers expand their movement vocabularies. Yamuleé hosts several guest teachers in their home studio. Teresa Castaneda, for example, teaches Afro-Cuban dances, spanning from orisha dances to rumba. Born and raised in Havana, Cuba, Castaneda trained at the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba. Another regular teacher, Jhesus Aponte, teaches Latin Jazz. This two-time salsa world champion's teaching content incorporates the Afro-Caribbean dance styles of Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Caribbean, African, Hip-Hop, and Funk.

Yamuleé Dance Company also hosts master classes taught by professionals from outside the Yamuleé organization. For example, Italian-based Marco Ferrigno taught a footwork class in the Yamuleé Bronx studio the same weekend as Yamuleé's 2017 Anniversary event. The class was originally advertised as a Juan Matos workshop.⁹ Matos and Ferrigno have a performance repertory that includes a very popular salsa 2007 duet titled "Bad Boys" that begins with a music excerpt from Notorious B.I.G.'s chart-topping, hip hop hit "One More Chance". Despite this very contemporary duet, Ferrigno's master class combination incorporated the orisha Elegua. Ferrigno described

⁹ Perrones trained Matos before founding Yamuleé.

Elegua as the orisha who guides our life paths by revealing and concealing roads. In the gesture we learned, we embodied Elegua sweeping brush over an imagined pathway to cover *el camino* before us. We practiced moving backwards by pulsating our feet and sweeping our arms inward on the horizontal plane.

Sekou McMiller is another familiar associate of Yamuleé Dance Company who was invited to teach at the Bronx studio. The Facebook post reads, *Sekou McMiller is coming to Yamuleé! Take his Afro Latin Jazz Fusion workshop... You know it will be so good!!* McMiller's unique teaching style is influenced by American modern dance, Afro-Caribbean dance, and West African contemporary Acogny technique. During my time in the field, I had an opportunity to study with Sekou McMiller through a weeklong intensive at Broadway Dance Center. Nearly every day of the workshop, Yamuleé semi-pro dancer Amanda Arenas and I rushed from McMiller's workshop at Broadway Dance Center to catch the train to the Bronx for Yamuleé classes. Even with extra rehearsals for the upcoming 2017 Yamuleé anniversary party, Amanda took advantage of the mini-dance intensive with McMiller. Yamuleé dancer Molly Hagman is another familiar face in McMiller's classes. In fact, nearly half of McMiller's workshop participants attended the Yamuleé performance and social because they, like Arenas and Hagman, recognized the cross-over appeal in incorporating Afro-based movement into salsa styling and choreography.

Performing Yamuleé dancers are not limited to Afro-Cuban movement exploration and invention, however. For example, Gaby Avedaño posted the following on Instagram (see fig. 4.):



Figure 4. Instagram Post by Gabriela Avedaño. Screenshot taken by the author.

(After a few months taking my ballet classes very seriously. At last I was able to take the opportunity to take my first private class with the beautiful @michelemorenob. And this fills me with so much hope .. !! Hahaha Sii (hand clap) xq start ballet as an adult is not easy.! Above all, it requires a lot of courage, discipline, and walking hand in hand with the best. Like her)¹⁰

Gaby brought her ballet experience into her choreography for Yamuleé ladies. The Yamuleé Ladies Houston team performed Avedaño’s 2019 choreography, which includes two saute de basque turns (:30). As a ballet term, a *saute de basque* (or the basque step) is a traveling step in which the dancer turns in the air with one foot drawn up to the knee of the other leg. This ballet move is a very brief moment within the salsa footwork, combining 1950s mambo steps. As Celia Cruz sings “Mango Mangue,” her voice lulls

¹⁰ My translation

the viewer into an unconscious sway, like a palm tree soaking in the relief of a refreshing Caribbean Sea breeze on a hot day. The dancers who perform this choreography wear metallic gold tops and short separates that would reveal their midriffs were it not for the emerald green ruffle knee-length bib. Beautifully manicured women parade through the performance space projecting to their audience. With each step, the dancers accentuate their hips and femininity. Their curves visualize the sound of the trumpets swelling in the room. These staged elements bring back the glory and glamour of a 1950s Cuban cabaret performance.

Yamuleé dancers pursue additional training outside of Yamuleé just like the professional, competitive Palladium dancers, decades before them. Even as Avedaño explores European-based dances, the foundation of their choreography remains Afro-Cuban. As other Yamuleé dancers expand their movement vocabularies; it is clear that their social dancing, classes, and performances are also still based in the Afro-Cuban vocabularies, just like the early mambo dancers.

Blending Rumba with Salsa On 2 in *Severa*

In this section, I show how Yamuleé's Pro Team dancers translate this strong foundation into memorable performances. The first performance I will analyze is *Severa* (2011), in which three Yamuleé couples dance to the song of the same name by Puerto Rican singer/ songwriter Ismael Rivera (1931–1987).¹¹ The leaders wear military style

¹¹ *Severa* Performance at the 2018 Houston Salsa Congress. YouTube video:

<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=OWPup43InCE>

tunics in black and bright green, and the followers wear short lime green dresses edged with tassels that flare as they spin and move their hips to the syncopated trumpets that accompany Rivera's singing. The leaders cradle their partners as the followers stretch horizontally in preparation for the first major stunt of the routine. The leaders then throw the followers into the air as they rotate horizontally.¹² As they catch them, the leaders swing the followers around and present them to the audience; the followers punctuate their descent, scissoring their legs into a split drop. Rebounding, the followers arc into the air above their leaders' heads and land in another split drop as the crowd cheers appreciatively.

After this dramatic beginning, the dancers perform various aspects of Cuban rumba, one of the earliest secular dances that originated on the island, including the *guanguanco vacanao* and *chachalokafu* step. The *chachalokafu* is a recurring syncopated foot pattern (quick, quick slow, quick quick slow- right left right, left right left), borrowed from orisha dances that creates a smooth bounced undulation in the body. The *vacunao*, is a flirtatious guanguanco element. In the lyrics "*Yo la vi bailando una rumba,*" the men execute a *vacunao* performed as a sexual pelvic thrust at the same time the ladies block the gesture. This references the rumba guanguanco as previously described, an Afro-Cuban, flirtatious rooster and hen dance game in which the male makes visual gestures towards the woman's pelvis, symbolizing sexual penetration, and making figurative

¹² Time stamp is taken from Houston Salsa Congress 2018. YouTube video:

<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=OWPup43InCE>

contact with her. Yamuleé dancers perform the traditional gender roles and reinforce the playfully sexual nature of rumba.

The couples rotate to a different position on stage in a circular motion just like Rueda de Casino. The dancers use the rueda formation as a choreographic tool, with partners rotating counterclockwise. The followers continue to rotate clockwise to make a circle downstage as the leaders rotate counter clockwise to make a circle upstage. The dancers complete their respective ruedas, seamlessly transitioning into one front and one back line. Their formation play continues with leaders and followers trading places between front and back as well as making a singular line at times. When the leaders are in front, they perform an abbreviated version of rumba columbia. This dance form is an opportunity for dancers to show their skills in rhythm, speed, and creative improvisation. The men execute syncopated footwork “swag,” earning cheers from the audience.

In addition to the numerous incorporations of rumba, the choreography makes reference to Shango several times. Shango is an orisha of the West African Yoruba tradition who survived the Middle Passage through Cuban Santeria. Just like Shango who throws lightning from the sky to the ground to deliver justice, the dancers reach high and away from the body then redirect the arm by shooting to the low diagonal. Approximately one minute into the three-minute performance, all the dancers make this gesture with the same bold and direct effort like a lightning bolt.

Yamuleé’s choreography *Severa* is an example of how the company highlights Afro-Cuban secular dances, in particular rumba and Rueda de Casino. The use of this vocabulary reaffirms salsa’s sometimes-disputed history as coming from Cuban

culture. The dance incorporates multiple styles of rumba. There are three styles of Rumba: yambú, guanguanco, and columbia. Yambú is slow and deliberate. The musical accompaniment features a vocal solo at the beginning before anyone begins dancing. In this dance, which is usually a dance between a man and a woman, the man moves slowly, making comedic gestures suggesting old age, such as feebly dancing with a cane, or bending forward with one of his hands between his low back and hip to indicate back pain. As the dance progresses, these gestures are reinvented. A man may hold his partner's arm as if he needs help walking. As the dance develops, he may drop to the ground and recover with style in a playful nature to reveal dancing skills. Or, if he walked with a cane at the beginning of his dancing, he may begin to use his cane as a prop further along in the dance partnership, twirling it with style or talking his weight to the cane like a small pole vault propelling himself from one spot to another. The woman provides stability as the man sometimes gives his weight to her. Otherwise, she continues in her own improvised feminine version of rumba. As she steps to the side, her hips extend just beyond her foot. Her upper body engaged in a generous *moyeo*, a wave-like articulation of the arms and torso.

Guanguancó is another style of a moderate tempo rumba. It is also usually danced between a man and a woman. In this dance game, the man is trying to “vaccinate” (vacanao) the woman through gesture, and she must respond with a gesture that is blocking his attempt. An important strategy to this dance is sudden movements against the rhythm to distract her as he tosses his hand or kicks in the direction of her pelvis. She

blocks with her hands or turns her body to avoid his playful, symbolically sexual advances.

Columbia is the third example of rumba. This rumba style is usually danced as a male solo, and is doused in bravado (Daniel 1996). The music for Columbia is in 6/8 meter that structures a percussion choir and male vocalists engaged in call and response. Its origins are found in the religious music and chants from Cuba's Abakuá traditions. Columbia is a very fast and energetic dance meant to showcase a man's virility through virtuosity, fast footwork, humor, and his ability to improvise within his environment. All three rumba forms are generally performed in a circular or semi-circular space made of the musicians, singers, and fellow participants.

Rueda de Casino, materialized in Havana's neighborhoods in the early 1950s. As the Spanish term for wheel, *rueda* signifies the circular pattern structure for the dance. This wheel motion referenced the casino wheels, as the casino clubs became a second home for rueda performances as entertainment (Painter 2014). Cuba's partner dances, the son and Cha Cha Cha, influenced Rueda de Casino's development. Rueda borrows turning patterns and figures from mambo and rumba guaguanco like the "cross body lead" and other sequences, in which dancers use momentum generated from tension and release in the connection that enable them to trade places inside the dance.

Rueda dance is as if salsa were combined with square dancing. A group of dancers perform salsa in a circular form, in which leaders and followers constantly change partners. There is one caller, using Spanish to direct the group in real time while dancing among the group. Following the calls, the group weaves in and out of the circle,

changing directions, and rapidly rotating to new partners. Basic calls include *un beso* (a kiss) with the gesture of blowing a kiss, and *mata la*, which is short for *mata la cucaracha* (kill the cockroach), is gestured with a strong foot stomp. Other terms like *prima* and *hermana* have less literal, more contextual translations.

Performing the *prima* (cousin) with the *hermana* (sister), tells the leader to dance with his partner with the same social respectability he would dance with his cousin or sister. This sequence is performed as the dancers “break back” (dancers step away from each other while holding hands, creating tension and moment through the arms) and come together, and rotate around each other (*prima*). Afterwards, the dancers step back away from each other again. The tension between their hand connection propels them step to forward past each other to trade places. Although a codified vocabulary sets structure for the dance, there is space for improvisation.

The African aesthetic of improvisation in *rueda de casino* is a vehicle through which the dancer can reference elements of folkloric and popular culture. It is common to see the dancers enact orisha movements, folk dance, and vernacular dance within the *rueda*. Similarly, Yamuleé uses *Severa*’s choreography to make similar references to folklore culture mixed with athletic New York style salsa.

Blending Orisha Dances with Salsa On 2 in *Facultad*

Facultad (2017) is an example of Yamuleé performing sacred Afro-Cuban elements as part of their choreography. Not only does Osmar include the use of orisha dances, but they also highlight Santeria religious practices in their musical choice. Afro-Venezuelan singer Oscar D’Leon performs Cuban singer’s Benny More’s “Mata

Siguaraya.” The lyrics proclaim the significance of the siguaraya tree, important to folk medicine and religious traditions in Cuba. The lyrics direct the listener to refrain from cutting the tree without permission because there is power in the tree that also provides a home for the orishas. This song reflects Cuban cultural knowledge dating back to the arrival of the Lucumi from the West African Yoruba tribe via the slave trade, who were known as divine herbalists and healers (Galindo 2002).

The men’s costumes for *Facultad* are a similar marching band military look to what they wear for *Severa*, except the green is a vibrant emerald hue unlike *Severa*'s lime green version. The women’s dresses are a matching dark but vibrant green, echoing the accents on the men's tops. The dresses are constructed as a bra top and velvet skirt connected by a wide celery green vertical strip of fabric in the front and back. The entire costume is sporadically placed in rhinestones. The dress bottom is angular with the longest part in the center, and trimmed in fringe that moves with every hip accent and spin. With significant input from the dancers, Osmar takes great care in designing costumes that will enhance choreography and performance experience for the audience.

The prelude to *Facultad*, which premiered at the 2018 B.I.G. Salsa Festival in New York, summons the orisha Oya. This particular orisha is a warrior who rules the wind. Like all orishas, Oya is identified in performance by a unique dance accompanied by its matching percussive cadence. She is represented in movement by whirling arms and undulating spines, followed by accented shoulders rolling backwards and pulsing contractions as she walks and rotates around herself. In the instance of *Facultad*,

Yamuleé dancers performed her movement to the score of a familiar cha cha cha, rather than Oya's traditional percussive rhythm and chants.

Following the invocation of Oya, the dancers lean forward and flip their arm over the opposite shoulder as if being whipped. Yamuleé Boston's director Mariel Perez recalls Perrones coaching this section and reminding the dancers not to make eye contact with the audience, saying, "Don't you know that slaves couldn't look at their masters?" Osmar did not shy away from a choreographic acknowledgement of Cuba's participation in the slave trade.

Given the somber tone of the opening, the quick transition into the upbeat, fast-paced salsa choreography is liberating. A series of spins for the followers seamlessly transitions to the second song, "Facultad," also performed by Oscar D'León (00:01:39).¹³ This choreography is full of rapid direction changes, stunts, and playful choreography. The women kick their legs to the side, parallel to the floor. This creates the space and ease for the men to grab their inner thighs, tossing them over their heads. The women help by pushing off the men's shoulders. As the women enter the air, they make a 180 degree turn and land in the splits in front of their partners. The women pop right out of the splits and back to standing with a vengeance. These fierce ladies spin like tops and stop sharply in perfect synchronicity with musical accents. These women dance with grace and grit like *tamarindo*, sweet *sabrosa* with a little bitter spice. The entire group

¹³ Time is stamp taken from the B.I.G. Salsa Congress 2018. YouTube video:

<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=M3zofFxmkk>

then steps forward four times on the down beat while wiggling their back sides as if they were playing the elders from rumba's Yambú, but with a groove. The *guachineo*, an Afro-Cuban vernacular dance, has made it to the stage.

In both Yamuleé performances and social dance documentation, Afro-Cuban derivatives of sacred and secular dances are centrally important. Yamuleé acknowledges these orisha dances of the Santeria faith, which celebrate a variety of deities prominent in its spiritual practice. In doing so, Yamuleé also acknowledges the very deep historical roots of salsa dancing. By developing choreography, such as that for *Facultad* and *Severa*, that is so attentive to these roots, not only does Yamuleé provide a much-needed counterstory to whitewashed salsa performances, but it also reinforces the importance of a pedagogy that teaches this history and the company's existence as a space for embodied archives.

Blending Afro-Latin Style with Salsa On 2 in *Boogaloo*

Yamuleé's 2018 choreography *Boogaloo* is a dance that demonstrates how Perrones combines Afro-Latino movement vocabularies across timelines into one performance. Boogaloo as a music and dance form was a product of a specific cross-cultural influence. Latin immigrant culture mixing with African American culture became this popular, but short-lived sound. However, Yamuleé Dance Company revives this historically significant music and dance form, with inclusion of their typical stunts, intricate footwork, and musicality. This choreography, like Melany's steps described in the opening part of the chapter, shows how Yamuleé functions not only as a protector of salsa's deepest historical roots, but also as an innovator that is attentive to and developing

performances that acknowledge both more modern chapters in salsa's history and the vitality of cross-cultural exchange in the New York scene.

The 2014 documentary *We Like It Like That* details the rise and fall of Boogaloo in the 1960s. The documentary highlights the dance's contentious history and its place in a debate about the push-and-pull between Latin and African American influence in culture. Born in Spanish Harlem, Boogaloo is a Latin music form that blended mambo, son, and montuno elements with African American soul music. This blending of Black and Latino influences was appealing to US-born Latinos, who wanted music that represented their American experience, as opposed to the immigrant experience that informed previous generations (Allah 2016). As is often the case when influences collide to produce something new, there was pushback from the status quo. Musician Joe Bataan said that boogaloo "hit so hard that the status quo was terrified of it" (*We Like It Like That* 2015, 00:01:35) and the influential Latin label La Fania was even accused of conspiring to assassinate boogaloo because of its adoption of Black influences. Indeed, these influences are central to the dance, and are why Huffington Post contributor Maulud Sadiq Allah made the bold claim that "Salsa" is more African than All Black American musical forms (2016). In response, Jazley Faith has detailed how the salsa community has contributed to resuscitating boogaloo. In *Boogaloo*—a choreography that centers this musical form and blends cha cha cha with salsa on2—Yamuleé created a moving visualization of Faith's observations.

Black and shimmery pale pink set the color story for Yamuleé's *Boogaloo* choreography. The women's costumes are more conservative than is typical for their

performance. The dresses extend to the mid-thigh, finished with a ruffle. The neckline is a combination mock turtleneck and choker. The right arm is sleeveless, and a long sleeve covers the left arm. The men are in black pants and tunic. The neckline of the men's tunic mimics the neckline of the ladies' dresses. The men's tunics are detailed in rhinestones around the neck and hemline to compliment the shimmer in the ladies' dresses.

The soundtrack for *Boogaloo* is Johnny Ventura's 1967 song "El boogaloo está en algo." At the time of this song's release, the boogaloo genre, also known as Latin soul, reached its prime. Music journalist Máximo Jimenez aptly describes Ventura's single as follows:

Esa fusión de ritmos afrocubanos mezclada con el soul de Estados Unidos que en los 60 tuvo sus años de apogeo es la espina dorsal de "El boogaloo está en algo..." (Jimenez 2017)

*(That fusion of Afro-Cuban rhythms mixed with the soul of the United States that had its peak years in the 60s is the backbone of "The boogaloo is in something...")*¹⁴

It is this unique musical fusion that enables Perrones to choreograph a fusion of boogaloo, cha cha cha, merengue, and New York style salsa in three minutes.

This dance begins with a festive merengue section. Using a triplet step on the quarter beat to travel across the stage, the dancers shift into a merengue basic two-step in a close partner hold. The men lift the women to a shoulder sit. They women dive head first into a flip forward and land into a lunge, lengthening the left leg to a dramatic horn

¹⁴ My translation

blast in the music. As the song moves to a boogaloo section, the dancers begin to perform cha cha cha timing in their footwork and fuse boogaloo steps like the cut away and heel drops (00:45-00:49).¹⁵ The cut away is a step ball change that repeats multiple times alternating sides. As the weight transfers to one foot, the rib cage presses forward over the same foot. On the ball change, the rib cage shifts in a quarter turn change of direction over the opposite foot. The Yamuleé dancers use the ball change to turn around, changing their respective facings. In heel drops, the dancers take a wide stance with flexed knees on count 5 and hold this position on count 6 of the musical measure. They drop their heels twice, first on count 7 then on count 8, creating a strong accent from stillness to movement. As the music winds up a melodic scale, the men spin the ladies like tops, in synchrony with the music and each other. As the horns blast, the dancers finish this section facing upstage, as the women's left arm fans upwards with commanding grace.

The third section of the dance is performed as New York style salsa. The dancers partner each other on 2 in their signature speed and finesse. There is a second horn wind up in the music as the dancers spin and end this time with the ladies lunging into a deep back bend. The following section repeats the boogaloo musical format and, the choreography again fuses Cha Cha Cha with boogaloo steps like the cha cha shuffle. The basic cha cha steps are performed as a hop kick, and the syncopated triplet is given more air by accenting the upbeats in the rhythm. The dancers move to a diagonal formation,

¹⁵ Time stamp is taken from San Francisco SBK Congress 2018. YouTube video:

<https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=M3zofFxmkk>

upstage right to downstage left. The dancers perform a footwork combination into the next salsa section. The men spin their partners, moving around them and changing the leading hand. As the ladies hit big horns in the final section, the choreography ends with the men flipping the ladies in an assisted back tuck into a split drop as the men support from an open second position squat.

This chapter has been the first part of a discussion of the way performance works as part of the trinity. I have demonstrated how many of the pedagogical ideas from the previous chapter are augmented by the use of guest teachers to prepare dancers for performance—Yamuleé dancers perform choreographies that show intimate familiarity with the historical, religious, political, and social factors that inform salsa. Some of their choreographies examine these deep histories, while others look at more recent history. This allows Yamuleé to tell a powerful corrective counterstory through performance informed by pedagogy.

CHAPTER VII

YAMULEÉ SALSA PERFORMANCE: CHOREOGRAPHY FOR THE BRONX AND BEYOND

The previous chapter introduced performance via a discussion of advanced training and choreography, and emphasized the ways in which pedagogy and performance have a beneficial circular relationship at Yamuleé. This chapter will continue to develop an account of the role performance has at Yamuleé, but with a particular focus on how the links between performance and social dancing/community reinforce one another. I was able to attain a better understanding of the role performance plays in the larger Yamuleé ecosystem by becoming part of the Boston performance team. While I have briefly referenced this experience elsewhere, in this chapter I will interrogate and analyze my experience in depth. Performing as a part of the Yamuleé community was not originally part of my research design, yet this opportunity yielded important insight into Yamuleé's multi-modal and relational connections. It also gave me more insight into a franchise model for dance companies, a model that has been used by many successful Black and Brown Latin dance artists, but that has been relatively invisible in the academic literature up to this point. Most importantly, through my Yamuleé performative experience I was able to understand what has been a central idea in this work: that, in Yamuleé, performance, classes, and social dancing are

fundamentally intertwined and one cannot talk about any part of this triad without engaging the other two components.

In the previous chapter, I examined Africanist movement vocabularies in Yamuleé's performances from the perspective of a spectator. In this chapter, I continue examining performance and building on the importance of Yamuleé's movement vocabulary, but this time from the perspective of a performer. While watching Yamuleé performances invites recognition of their Afro-diasporic roots, performing Yamuleé choreography invites a kinesthetic experience for embodying their Afro-diasporic movement vocabulary. Using an autoethnographic lens to examine my experience in Yamuleé Boston, I suggest that rehearsing and performing with the Project Team builds a fluency for the body's performance of their rich vocabulary, thus extending the circulation of Afro-diasporic salsa. While I draw on my own experience in describing this process, it is important to note that this process is not specific to me as a performer; this fluency is built into the bodies of all the performers in Yamuleé's extended community through their companies, multiple Project Teams, and through their teaching, performances, and social dancing at salsa congresses. By paying attention to the spaces and opportunities through which the global salsa community experiences Yamuleé, this chapter demonstrates how this rich vocabulary (pedagogy) in Yamuleé's performances turns those performances into modes of transmission that enlarge and enrich the Yamuleé family beyond the borders of the Bronx.

Yamuleé Project Teams

In 2016, Osmar launched the Yamuleé Project, a franchise-model organization that enables him to extend the techniques and training of Yamuleé performance teams beyond the Bronx studio and out to dancers in other US cities. Yamuleé Project Teams provide dancers access to Yamuleé pedagogy and performance without having to travel to the Bronx. The choreography is supported by Yamuleé's technique, thereby offering Yamuleé movement experiences to similar to what is offered in The Bronx (Mariel Perez, pers. comm.). It is through these rehearsals and performances that dancers can train like the Yamuleé dancers in the Bronx, thus reinforcing their ability to dance salsa in the Yamuleé aesthetic. Through this franchise model, intermediate and advanced salsa dancers across North America and in the UK can develop their skills while preparing for performance. Boston Project Director Mariel Perez explains,

The franchise started because a lot of people were asking Osmar, "Oh, you need to do student teams in different states or something." Or like teaching events in different states every month. And he started to realize that people wanted that, they wanted student teams and they wanted student teams to be in their own state, not to be traveling to New York to be on the student team, etc. So that's how the franchise started. He wanted people to learn Yamuleé technique and Yamuleé style, and he wanted to give that to the people that were asking. So of course, he started first in California, then Canada, then Oklahoma, and all the other little states, and then here in Boston. (Mariel Perez, pers. comm.)

Yamuleé Project teams meet a need for dancers who want to train and perform like dancers in the Bronx without having to travel there.

Yamuleé project teams have been established in Houston, Dallas, Oklahoma City, Boston, DC, Seattle, San Diego, San Francisco, Reno, Montreal, Toronto, and London. Oscar Martinez co-directs the project teams from his hometown of Houston, Texas. Oscar's business, dancing, and romantic partner Thalia Vasquez helps with the day-to-day operations, processing costume orders, and other administrative tasks in addition to teaching and performing with the Houston project team. Each participating city has a local director—usually someone who has expressed interest to Osmar and received his approval to run their respective team. Project team directors hold tryouts, select dancers, and schedule rehearsals. Directors select the routine (all based in typical Yamuleé movement vocabulary) they want to perform from an available repertory and receive a pre-recorded instructional video from Oscar for each routine. Directors learn the choreography from the video and teach it to their team. Directors collect monthly dues over a six-month period from their dancers and forward payments to Oscar. The franchise fee in 2017 was \$1,800 per Yamuleé choreography routine, per six-month period. Any profits at the local level can be used by directors to defray performance costs such as costumes, travel, rehearsal space rental, or for director compensation.

Although both Osmar and Oscar recommend face to face time with the teams at some point during their training, the current structure makes remote learning of Osmar's choreography possible. Directors send rehearsal videos to Oscar and Osmar for review. Oscar critiques the videos and sends feedback and critical notes back to the directors.

Oscar is known for his attention to detail and technique, and gives detailed feedback to each team after reviewing videos throughout each team's rehearsal process. The directors use this information to clean the dancers on their respective teams.

Yamuleé is not the only salsa group with a franchise model. Karen Forcano and Ricardo Vega of recent "World of Dance" fame have a franchise called World Dance Crew, which has been operating from Santiago Chile since 2014. Karel Flores has a ladies' choreography franchise known as KF World Teams, which has been operating from a New York base, again since 2014. There are also several Bachata dance companies who operate similar business models. They include Island Touch, founded in New York in 2008/2011 by dancers Jorge Burgos and Tanja Kesinger, AnD World Wide founded by Alex Morel and Desiree Godsell in New York in 2017, as well as Daniel Sánchez and Desirée Guidonet's World Team Project, which has been based in Seville, Spain since 2015. These companies are understudied, and, in my conclusion, I will return to this model and discuss possible directions for future scholarship.

This business structure differs from traditional concert dance models I have encountered. For self-producing contemporary dance choreographers, the model I have witnessed is such that the choreographer spends months in a creative and rehearsal process. The work is performed over one to three weekends. Afterwards, the work becomes part of the choreographer's repertory and shelved until needed or requested. In this Latin dance franchise model, Osmar choreographs a dance in approximately one to two weeks. This choreography can now be licensed to each Project Team. So, Osmar can make the choreography once but sell it multiple times, presenting a potentially efficient

profit model for salsa choreography. Even as routines become classics among the salsa congress community, Yamuleé preserves their professional repertory for themselves.

Only the project team choreographies can be performed by non-Bronx dancers. This does not mean non-Yamuleé dancers never perform their choreographies. Indeed, cameo appearances have become a trend. For example, when Yamuleé performed at the Oaxaca Festival Salsa and Bachata Festival in 2016, Karen Forcano and Ricardo Vega, two cabaret style salsa mega stars, made a surprise appearance and joined the stage during Yamuleé's performance of *Mambo* about half-way through the dance wearing Yamuleé costumes. However, Yamuleé does not circulate, lend, or allow their choreography to be borrowed, while that can be an expectation in the concert dance community.

Yamuleé Project Boston

Yamuleé Project Boston began in July 2017. It was directed by Mariel Perez and Kristian Santos. I learned about the try-outs through Jenna Robey, who had been selected for the team. Although I missed the tryouts, Jenna contacted Mariel on my behalf to make an introduction. I had just moved to New York for the summer for my field research and asked if I could audition for an understudy role in September, which is when I planned to return to Boston. A couple of weeks later, while taking classes at the Yamuleé studio, I asked a young woman if she could share her video clip of the class with me. The ladies styling class had just ended and I hadn't turned my phone on fast enough to record the instructor performing the class combination. The young woman replied, "Sure. What's your name?" I replied, "Mila." She said, "Mila?! I'm Mariel!" I was surprised to be

meeting the Yamuleé Boston director in this chance exchange. Secretly, I had thought I would have an upper hand in auditioning in September if I trained at Yamuleé in the Bronx for a couple of months, but I had not planned on encountering the Boston Project dancers.

Maríel was in town for about a week and had been joined by several other Boston teammates. At that moment, I realized that my audition had just started. Maríel and the other Boston dancers would be assessing me and ability to fit in, whether or not they were conscious of it. Maríel called Osmar over and they began speaking Spanish. Osmar nodded and then returned to the studio sound system after their brief exchange. Maríel asked me, “Did you understand what he said?” I thought to myself- I don’t speak *Dominican* Spanish! I edited my reply to a short, “No.” Maríel said, “He said you work hard.” While he did not say that I was a good dancer, I would later learn that being a hard worker is still a significant compliment from Osmar.

It was not lost on me that becoming part of the Yamuleé Project Team would be a huge opportunity to experience Yamuleé choreography as a dancer in addition to as an observer. For me, not making the team would feel like a fumble in the ethnographic research Super Bowl. Since the Yamuleé Project Teams learn and perform Osmar’s choreography, I would have missed out on the chance to deepen my understanding of how performance is connected to the social dancing and pedagogical aspects of Yamuleé.

When I returned to Boston from my time with Yamuleé in New York, I attended a regularly scheduled Yamuleé Boston rehearsal held at The Muevelo Dance Studio in Malden, Massachusetts, just north of Boston proper. Maríel and I exchanged *saludos*

when I entered the building. I sat down in the small waiting area just to the right and changed into my dance heels. The other dancers were kind and welcoming. The group was made up of mostly black and brown folks, Dominican, Puerto Rican, Haitian-American and African American. There was also one Asian male dancer and one Caucasian male dancer for a total of fifteen dancers in the room, including me. I entered the main dance area just beyond the waiting area to the left. Kristian formally introduced me as auditioning for the company. I had hopes of making the performance team, but was prepared to request to be an understudy. In the worst-case scenario, I would still get to learn the choreography.

The other dancers had learned about one-fourth of the dance already. I focused on learning the new material being taught that day, and marking through the earlier sections. The directors, Kristian and Mariel, taught a section of choreography without music. Then we practiced that section several times with music. After several repetitions we rotated partners. Even though I was familiar with Yamuleé style class choreography, I was challenged in learning the choreography out of sequence. At the end of rehearsal, the directors announced that I would be joining the team as the newest member. I was thrilled! By October, Jandy Hierro joined the group, and we became a performance group of eight couples (see fig. 5.)



Figure 5. Yamuleé Project Boston Team (Pictured left to right) Jenny Robey, the author, Priscilla Colón, Eden Lopez, Kristian Santos, Luis Talavera Diaz, Mariel Cuevas, Mariel Perez, Jennilyn Rosado, Jose Ventura, Eric Telfort, Juno No, Aaron Fisher, Lilyvette Pérez, and Greisy Cab. Not pictured Jandy Hierro, Alexandria Pierre-Etienne. Photo by Alexandria Pierre-Etienne.

In my first season, our team learned *Aprende*, which is danced to Oscar D’León’s song “Aprende Conmigo.” This choreography is considered an intermediate level routine because it builds on partnering skills, spinning, and styling. Although the music may seem slow to observers, it feels fast when dancing, which, as I would soon learn, is typical of Yamuleé choreography.

Luckily, I was caught up with the other dancers in knowing the same amount of choreography as everyone else by my third rehearsal with them. One of my stronger skills as a dancer is learning choreography, so I picked up the footwork quickly. The challenge for me was the partnering combinations. Partnering, particularly in Yamuleé choreography, requires not only individual skills but for those individual skills of two dancers to also align as partners. As a follower, I have to understand how my own body enables multiple spins. My partner has to understand how to lead me with the right timing

in the music and with the right amount of pressure for guiding my spins. Learning the choreography is a constant toggling back and forth between individual and dual skill development, similar to the tension I experienced learning in the Bronx studio.

Dancing on this team required trust in ourselves and in each other, and trust was the one element I could not fake. I thought I hid this reality well, but I was exposed during our partner assignments. Up until that point we constantly rotated partners during rehearsals, but we were getting closer to our performance debut. Now that we knew the choreography, the directors had to form couples so that we could solidify spatial formations. Eden Lopez and I had developed enough rapport that he was one of the dancers I felt I was best matched with. At the last rehearsal before our partner assignments were given, Eden said to me, “Hey, partner! Let’s sign up for season 2. It’s gonna be good.” He gave me a high five. The directors sent a questionnaire through our team Facebook page asking us to select our top three choices for partners. They did not block us from seeing each other’s responses. I was able to see that Eden did *not* select me. I was not upset that he did not want to perform with me. I believed I was a stronger dancer than some of his desired partners, but he was entitled to his preference. I was angry that he lied to my face in referring to me as a partner.

At the next rehearsal after completing questionnaires, the directors announced our partners. “Eden and Mila, you are partners.” When they finished announcing our partner assignments, the room was heavy. It seems that the matchmaking was disappointing for several dancers in the group. We reconfigured ourselves on the dance floor in our new assignments. It was too hard for me to dance with Eden and with my sense of betrayal.

The tension was thick. I had to break it with the obvious elephant in our connection. I confronted him with, “Look, I know you don’t want to dance with me.” His eyes nearly fell out of his head. He was searching for a response, but instead called over our co-director Mariel Perez. She said to me, “Why do you think that?!” I wanted to reply, “I know that it is true because I can read!” I did not want to tip my hand, so instead I replied, “I just know.” Eden and Mariel neither confirmed nor denied that what I said was true. I began to calm myself and explain to Eden that the root issue for me was being lied to. He tried to clean up the situation by telling me he preferred dancing with me over another dancer. As an olive branch towards each other, we agreed to videotape ourselves running through dance with music. We would use the video as a reference for our individual practice until the next group rehearsal. Our personal relationship developed pretty smoothly from that point forward. Our performance relationship however, had a whole other set of tensions that needed attention. In this way, I found the relationships in the Boston team mirrored the complicated lattice of relationships I observed and encountered at Yamuleé in the Bronx.

By December 2017, we were ready for our debut performance at the Black Mamba social in the greater-Boston area. This location has a grand studio on the ground floor. Beyond the grand space, there is a staircase leading down to the basement with a couple of smaller studios and bathrooms, where we reviewed a few segments of choreography and changed into our royal blue and black costumes. The time came for us to surface and make our entrance to perform as Yamuleé Boston. Eden looked like a deer caught in headlights. He was nervous, but it was too late to turn back as we were already

in position waiting for the music to start. Within the first few seconds of the dance, Eden's palms started raining sweat. This extra moisture made it hard to sustain our connections. If that was not enough to impact our performance, Eden started forgetting the choreography. My performance instincts kicked in and I began back leading us. In other words, although Eden should have been leading us throughout the performance, I pulled us through the choreography. I held his hand turning myself because I did not feel his initiation for some of the spinning sequences. The ending lunge for the followers required a counter balance between the partners, but my legs were strong enough for me to hold myself. The longest two minutes of my dancing career finally ended. When I reviewed the performance video, our mistakes were not as visible as they felt from inside the experience. To my dismay, however, these disconnections continued happening during all our performances at local socials like Divinity Dance and Fuego Candela, designed to gain performance experience in preparation for our planned national debut at the Houston Salsa Congress scheduled for January 12–14, 2018.

I did not know how to compensate for Eden's nerves. At that point, I began secretly manifesting a new dance partner. Eric Telfort and I were reassigned to each other for our upcoming trip to Texas for the salsa congress. After all, Osmar would be at this major salsa event watching Yamuleé Boston perform for the very first time. I felt the pressure of meeting his expectation on our ability to learn and perform his choreography well, especially after watching how hard the professional team rehearses and performs advance level choreography since my time with them in the Bronx.

The Houston Salsa Congress and Bringing the Extended Family Together

In Chapter Two I discussed the role of salsa congresses, but it is helpful to revisit the multi-day dance event here. Ever since the first congress in Puerto Rico, such congresses or festivals have become annual events that happen all over the world. Each congress works like a small business, independent of other congresses, and is usually produced by a salsa company director from the congress' respective city. Founded in 2000 and enjoying a strong reputation, the Houston Salsa Congress is geographically positioned to attract good performers and master teachers from the United States, Central, and South America.

A salsa congress, regardless of location, is an international event. Congresses play host to instructors, performers, and attendees, many of whom travel long distances to participate. Video technology has expanded transnational connections and, in doing so, has facilitated the professional salsa community's growth. YouTube is flooded with salsa dance tutorials and performances for people to engage with salsa at all skill levels from anywhere in the world. Salsa instructors are also developing technologies and techniques for distance learning, permitting students to take classes from home via live stream.

Given the spotlight they create, performing as part of any congress is a bold commitment. Most congresses are weekend-long international events attracting dancers nationally and from around the world. Each night is filled with a mix of dance performances from kids to amateur teams to headliners. The night always ends in social dancing. Although there are phenomenal performances each night, Saturday night is the all-star night when the lineup includes top rate performances, one right after another.

Saturday night is also the night when a live band plays during the social. My team was quite aware of what performing in the Houston Congress meant on one level, but I was surprised by how effectively Osmar used this venue to reinforce the Yamuleé trinity values of consistent pedagogy, high-level performance, and community with the geographically scattered project teams.

What made many of my fellow Boston team members especially nervous was knowing that Osmar and the Yamuleé pro team would be watching during the performances. In fact, Osmar came to the Yamuleé Boston pre-performance rehearsal in Houston on Friday. The directors found an empty conference room in the hotel and scheduled an impromptu rehearsal for Osmar to join, inviting him to specifically give feedback on the formation changes. He watched a run-through then gave brief feedback to the directors. The stress of traveling, performing, and having Osmar watch was too much to bear for some of the Boston dancers, and they began to argue during the rehearsal over a misunderstanding about which night the team would to perform. In fact, we were scheduled to perform Sunday evening, but a couple of dancers had scheduled flights for Sunday morning. It was uncomfortable for Osmar to witness the bickering and unprofessionalism of some of the team members. Luckily, co-director Mariel Perez was able to move the Boston team performance from Sunday night to Saturday night, so that the team could all perform together.

“How could something so basic as a performance time be miscommunicated?” one might ask. Mariel was the team informant on all the details for the Houston Salsa Congress. Two months before the event, Mariel continued to tell us that the Houston

Congress directors had not specified if we would perform Friday, Saturday, or Sunday. As someone who likes to plan (frugally), I became frustrated with the unknown as the event weekend was rapidly approaching. We were individually responsible for our travel plans. We also had to buy congress passes, although we received a deep discount for performing at the event. I eventually decided to plan my travel to arrive midday Friday and leave on Monday. This would guarantee that I was in town for all possible performance dates. I was also eager to purchase my airline ticket before prices went up, and to reserve my hotel room before the hotel filled to capacity (which happens frequently at salsa congresses). Apparently, my teammates did not apply the same rationale as I did in their travel plans.

There were several Yamuleé Project teams meetings during the 2018 Houston Salsa Congress that I attended, including my own Boston team, as well as the teams from Seattle, Houston, San Francisco, and Oklahoma City. Attending Yamuleé workshops scheduled as part of the Congress itinerary was highly encouraged, even though there were other international salsa artists teaching throughout the weekend. All Yamuleé project teams are required to purchase a team practice shirt, which includes the Yamuleé logo. The Boston team attended the Yamuleé partnering workshops wearing these shirts. Osmar was touched when he turned around to view a massive crowd of dancers from all over the country representing the Yamuleé logo with our respective city names. Nearly speechless, all he could say was, “Woow...” as he looked into the ballroom crowded with dancers wearing the Yamuleé logo as members of the geographically extended family.

The weekend also included a mandatory meet and greet with Osmar and Oscar, the co-director who oversees all of the Yamuleé Project Teams. This event was crucial for reinforcing Yamuleé's values and standards, both in terms of performance and community expectations. Osmar thanked everyone for being a part of the Yamuleé projects. He explained that Yamuleé groups would not be allowed to perform until they are ready, and that he would only give permission to those teams that are ready. Osmar told the story of a franchise (without naming them) that had been rehearsing for over a year but was not yet ready to perform. This was not posed as a threat; rather, Osmar wanted to ensure Project Team dancers to experience pride in their performances just like the Bronx dancers. He assured the dancers that it was ok to take more time than the suggested six months if it meant feeling confident in having a positive performance experience. In fact, Osmar complimented San Francisco, who spent ten months preparing, confirming for them that it was worth extending beyond the six-month period to ensure a confident performance experience. He then went into detail about the review process. He explained to the dancers that each city's directors would send him a video of the group's process and request a video meeting, and then he would video chat with each director watching and reviewing the choreography before making a decision.

Osmar reiterated that he wanted all the performance team members to feel good about their respective performances. This was one of the reasons that teams must be cleared to perform by him or Oscar. By implementing this permission system, Osmar and Oscar give themselves the final say in a team's readiness to perform, thereby establishing some checks and balances for Yamuleé's representation and reputation. Of course, Osmar

wanted to protect his brand, but he also wanted to Project Team dancers to continue building their dance skills through rehearsing and performing Yamuleé choreography.

Two months prior to this meet and greet, Osmar had invited Yamuleé Boston to perform at the Yamuleé social in the Bronx. The rest of us realized that he must have given his blessing for us to perform in Houston directly to the Boston directors at that time. The Boston team was very committed to emulating the Bronx dancers. A majority of the Boston team members voluntarily traveled to New York to take class. They also studied YouTube videos of other project teams to assist them in learning the choreography. The Boston dancers with Bronx studio experience had a shared understanding of Yamuleé's training culture.

Osmar continued by explaining to the teams who were at the meet and greet that he had felt bad about not allowing a group to perform in 2016, but explained that he had been worried about the dancers' potential disappointment that might have stemmed from not being ready and messing up on stage. He said, "if you can't perform in front of me as one person, what will happen when you perform in front of 2,000 at a congress?" My partner Eric Telfort shouted, "Osmar, you are 5,000 people." We all laughed in agreement. What Eric so accurately captured is the weight and significance dancers in the Yamuleé community feel under Osmar's observant eye.

Osmar then talked to the teams about the rehearsal process the company refers to as "one by ones." In this process, which usually involves a team of multiple couples, each couple will take turns performing sections of the choreography for the other teammates. This acclimates performers to dealing with performance stress. Directors can give direct

corrections to dancers. By cleaning each couple, the entire team gets cleaned. Osmar turned to the Boston team sitting in the corner, explaining to the other teams that we had witnessed this rehearsal method in the Bronx and had successfully implemented this rehearsal strategy. By replicating the Bronx, the Boston team made the necessary progress and preparedness for performance.

Osmar also told all of us that another reason he wanted project teams to be clean was because he hoped to encourage more collaborative team performances: Oklahoma with Houston with San Francisco, etc. He told us that doing this would give the company an opportunity to present an extended Yamuleé community. He shared an ideal vision with all of us: a scenario in which each team would know the routine so well that each collaborative show should only need an hour or so of rehearsal in order to perform, mostly for configuring formation changes and transitions. Such performances would allow Osmar to extend brand recognition by staging community through signature Yamuleé choreography.

Performing at the Houston Salsa Congress had a significant impact on Yamuleé Boston. Individual members seemed to be drawn closer from working through the miscommunications and challenges of preparing for performance. Members also expressed pride in proud delivering a respectable performance at the Congress. Celebratory rituals took form as group photos in front of the event step and repeat and social dancing with each other after the performance.

Boston: Season Two

For season two, Yamuleé Boston learned *Cuca*, performed to “Cuca La Loca” by singer Willie Rosario. This choreography is considered an advanced routine. As with *Aprende*, *Cuca* requires partnering skills and spinning ability; however, the choreography is more complicated and thus makes more demands on these skills. In *Cuca*, for example, the men lead the women into a triple spin counter clockwise and immediately into four spins clockwise. This choreography requires many of the skills taught in Yamuleé’s partnering classes. *Cuca* also requires three major stunts: a split drop; a turning lift landing in a lunge; and a finale stunt with three components including an over the shoulder toss, lunge to the left, and then multiple spins to a right-side lunge. In performing such a detailed and dense amount of complex choreography in two and half minutes, there is no room for error.

Yamuleé Boston was scheduled to perform both *Aprende* and *Cuca* at the August 2018 debut of the Boston Salsa Festival. In the months leading into the event, however, the group experienced inconsistent attendance and significant costume delivery delays. Instead of performing two routines at the Boston Salsa Festival, Yamuleé Boston focused its energies into creating a strong performance of *Aprende*. Boston was the only project team performing at this event; thus, it was the only representation of Yamuleé.

The fate of Yamuleé Boston became tenuous after that performance for a variety of reasons. Many of our male leaders discontinued participation, leaving a gender imbalance for partnering. Our co-director Kristian Santos was starting to feel the tension between rehearsing a team in Boston and running his own studio with classes and

performance teams forty-five minutes away in Worcester, Massachusetts. The gap from the dissolution of Yamuleé Boston was filled by a new venture, Yamuleé Ladies.

Yamuleé Ladies and Yamuladies Boston

Osmar and Oscar devised a new idea for extending Yamuleé's unique style and performance experiences. Yamuleé Ladies was started to meet the high demand for Yamuleé's version of ladies styling. The aesthetic in these Yamuleé classes can be described as having more length in the arms and more overall flow compared to the salsa taught by other companies. Yamuleé's ladies styling is a unique and significant style element that separates the company from other salsa dance companies. The project is also known as Yamuladies and utilizes the skills and creativity of Gabriela "Gaby" Avedaño, a member of Yamuleé's professional team and the primary teacher of Yamuleé's ladies styling class in the Bronx. Currently there are Yamuladies teams in Houston, Washington DC, Seattle, and Boston. The Yamuladies teams do not have to concern themselves with the gender imbalances that are sometimes problematic for performance teams.

There was enough interest in Massachusetts to start a Yamuleé Ladies Boston team. I joined the first season of Yamuladies Boston to extend my experience in Yamuleé-style choreography. Moreover, as a salsa who was especially enamored by Gaby Avedaño's choreography, I was eager to participate. I was out of the country when Mariel Perez held auditions for Yamuladies Boston in late July 2018 and instead joined the group during the second weekly rehearsal in August of the same year. Like the first day at a new school, I was excited but nervous to meet the new dancers and was eager to learn what the group dynamic would be.

To my surprise and honor, Mariel appointed me Assistant Director of Yamuladies. She and I had developed a familial friendship from working together in Yamuleé Boston, and she began confiding in me about concerns with running the Yamuladies team. Mariel shared the team expenses with me. It was operating at a loss. I continued paying dues and contributing to the group's fiscal health by donating space for nearly the entire season, which helped us break even. Mariel was unable to attend some rehearsals early in our season and asked me to run rehearsals in her absence. I believe I would have taken this action without being named assistant director because I was committed to the success of Yamuladies and I was excited to perform this choreography. The Yamuleé community had become important to me. The title of assistant director was helpful because it lent me some authority with the other dancers to assume Mariel's directorial responsibilities in her absence, which was critical because I did not know the others before we joined Yamuladies.

Being a member of the Yamuleé Ladies Boston team was the experience that made me most consciously conflicted about my participant observer role in my research. We experienced a lot of conflict during our season. Ultimately, all of the minor disagreements seemed to stem from one fundamental difference: our reasons for joining the team. For some members the team was an opportunity to perform. For other members, the priority was to have fun while deepening homo-social relationships. I was aware of my frustrations when dancers missed rehearsals or declined to perform even when they were attending the events at which we were supposed to perform. I was excited to perform Yamuleé choreography. As I reflected on what the other dancers were

expressing about their participation, I was able to understand their frustrations too. We needed a common experience to create some fun and adventure to bring some cohesion to the group. We also needed to collectively realize the weight of Yamuleé's reputation for excellence and the hard work and necessary criticism that goes into bearing that weight of that reputation in performance. Taking advantage of our proximity to New York, Perez and I organized a Yamuleé field trip for the Boston ladies team. We traveled to New York for a private rehearsal with Avedaño, followed by the regularly scheduled ladies workshop. The goal was to create a shared direct experience in the Bronx that could highlight both the social nature and technical rigor associated with Yamuleé.

It was great to see familiar faces from my field time with the Bronx company. Leah and Laurianne were teaching the young ones. De Jesus was finally public about dating Laurianne, which had been one of the worst open secrets during my field time the prior summer. They joked that the young ones were actually the Yamubabies pro-team because they performed with such confidence and sass (*guaperia*). It turns out that de Jesus is a cousin to the two sisters on the Boston team, Liz and Rachel.

Everyone was deeply engaged during the private rehearsal with Gaby Avedaño. She was extremely efficient despite clarifying so many details, not only about the choreography, but also how to physically execute the steps. In the Yamuleé Ladies choreography, Gaby mixed and matched elements across the African diaspora to evolve her choreographic choices into a fluid presentation of African aesthetics in salsa performance. Many of us were learning the explicit Afro-diasporic influence verbally uttered for the first time. In rehearsal, she talked about the origin/inspiration for some of

the movements. She took a body roll from the Angolan-derived *kizomba* dance, which tends to be small. She clarified that the pachanga steps she choreographed are a longer version than the original to accentuate the musicality. Gaby decorated this step with “Afro” arm styling.¹⁶ Gaby also acknowledged taking inspiration from Afro to ground some of the choreography with flexed limbs and weighted steps. She also talked about taking a step from professional dancer and instructor, Juan Matos, who studied with Osmar before Yamuleé’s inception. She encouraged us performers in this Yamuladies routine to individually stylize that step. It mimics an older person, as the torso is hinged forward to reduce verticality, feet are wide in stance as one takes small steps forward while shaking one’s hips. Although Gaby did not remember the name of this dance step, she confidently told us that the dance move came from Cuba. My additional research confirmed this as the *guachineo*.

In addition to discussing where the movements came from, Gaby also worked on salsa technique. She talked, for example, about finding tension in the back, not the arms, to enable styling and spinning. We drilled turning with the lower body, bringing the feet together in parallel to complete the turn. Eventually we added the arms. Gaby was clear to say that the arms were for balance and not for momentum.

¹⁶ In the salsa community, “Afro” refers to African (usually Afro-Cuban) derived dance elements. This genre label can refer to any folkloric movements traceable to the West African influence on Cuban dance. Kizomba is a sensual Cape Verdean dance with roots in Angola.

Gaby was gracious to Mariel as our director. She esteemed Mariel publicly by saying, “Mariel works very hard” on the team’s behalf and that we should be grateful. She also thanked us for traveling to NYC to work with her. The private lesson was meant to be ninety minutes but we went an additional fifteen minutes longer. Avedaño rehearsed us thoroughly, reviewing every moment of choreography with such detail and clarity. This common experience helped to defuse some of the immediate tensions in the group. We all realized we were part of a larger dancing community and legacy.

Prior to our New York trip, a few Boston team dancers had protested the way Mariel critiqued and corrected us in rehearsals. After visiting Yamuleé in the Bronx, however, we had a collective and tangible understanding of the pressure on Mariel to produce a quality performance out of all of us. I suspect that Gaby was aware that Mariel had received criticism for her manner of directing the group. Gaby publicly praised Mariel for her commitment and dedication to the group. She mentioned that Mariel made frequent trips to New York to learn the Yamuleé technique and bring that knowledge back to us in Boston.

We debuted *Quinto Mayor* at the February 2019 social produced by Black Mamba, which took place just outside of Boston, with six of the seven team members. The tense rehearsals and disagreements were long forgotten; all focus was on the performance. I was delayed because I had to park my rented car in a very tight space shared with an enormous pile of snow, and while there might have been a time where that caused upset among the team, it did not this time. When I walked in, my teammates were “beating their faces.” We were determined to perfect our performance makeup. Mariel

gave us a regimented tutorial for creating a cat eye: black eyeliner applied impeccably extended beyond the upper eyelid. We carefully groomed each other, checking and priming each other in a nurtured frenzy. After we applied our makeup, we went up for a few social dances to feel the floor in our performance shoes, wearing casual clothes fit for a salsa social. We used this opportunity to test the floor. For example, if the floor was sticky we knew we would need to compensate by rubbing our shoes in a little baby powder, making it easier to turn. If we found the floor was too slippery, then we would rub our shoes in a tiny bit of water to prevent falling. We left the dance floor about thirty minutes before the performance to change into our costumes. We checked for side parts, exposed bra straps, and shared bobby pins and safety pins as needed to create a unified look and to help each other feel as comfortable as possible in the costumes.

We were united in our performance anxiety. Some dancers kept rehearsing and asking for clarification on well-rehearsed sections of choreography. Some dancers kept checking their costumes. Some dancers kept questioning whether or not they had to use the bathroom (if so, this would entail dismantling the costumes that took so long to get into). Finally, we left the basement changing spaces and went upstairs to wait with the other performance teams just outside the entrance to the grand dance space. Yamuleé Ladies was the finale because we were debuting. This is a highlight for salsa social promoters because a debut performance attracts more people.

During the performance before ours, Mariel went to speak with DJ. When she returned, she told us that she instructed him to give us some entrance music. She was so calm and directorial. Just before being announced, we circled holding hands and took in a

few breaths to calm our nerves. We heard our team name announced over the microphone. Then we heard the club anthem “Maniqui” by Chimbala summon us to the performance area. We stepped in time with the rhythm (mostly) with our left hands on our hips and heads held high. Our right arms and hips swayed to the Caribbean music. The flashing lights oscillated between red, pink, and purple.

The music faded as we settled into our starting positions facing a wall of mirrors. Performing this choreography feels like waiting for the gunshot to start a race that lasts two adventurous minutes. With only one beat of music to cue our choreography, we were hyper aware at the beginning. There are many turns and changes of direction throughout the choreography. In a darker performance space like the Black Mamba social, we were all at risk of becoming disoriented. The music started and we turned to face the audience which stretched the entire length of the generous dance floor. Some spectators sat on the floor to create levels, making dancers visible from many perspectives. In the palpable seconds between the entrance music fading and our performance music starting, we heard cheers, screams, whistles, and encouraging messages like, “Okay, ladies!”

The music started and we were in motion. Like a roller coaster ride, we were committed to feeling all the fears and exhilaration of the choreography. The music was so enticingly fast that the crowd began clapping along for a bit, starting about thirty seconds into the routine. Halfway through the choreography we served some *guachineo*, and the crowd went wild. When our performance was over, we received enthusiastic applause with audible cheers. We left the dance space and returned to the dressing area. We congratulated each other with smiles and hugs. We were especially proud of Liz, as this

was her first performance. Her boyfriend Kyle followed us down to the changing area and acted as our photographer. We took a lot of pictures to commemorate our debut. We celebrated Mariel's pride in us and in each other (see fig. 6).



Figure 6. Yamuladies Boston Pictured left to right: Chelsea Toner, Rachel Brown Gomez, Elizabeth Brown, Mariel Perez, Catiria Gomez, Geena Márquez, and the author.

Four Boston members performed at the 2019 Boston Salsa Festival in August. Maryana Paniagua, Yamuleé Ladies DC member and former Boston salsera, became a fifth dancer for the performance. Maryana is a friend of Boston member Chelsea Toner. The rest of us met Maryana for the first time an hour before our tech rehearsal. She had performance experience with the routine with her DC team, making her a member of the

Yamuleé community just like us, even though we had never met. Although there were subtle differences in style between the DC and Boston version, the choreography, grounded in a common Yamuleé pedagogy, served as a common language, and we were able to perform with confidence that evening. The interchangeability of team members is possible in a fixed but dispersed repertoire (as Osmar had discussed at the 2017 Houston congress) and this opportunity had other benefits. For Maryana it was an exciting homecoming to the Boston Salsa Festival. Her presence also resolved the original tension within the Boston group. This was a homo-social highlight for Chelsea to have her friend join in the performance. With half the Boston team choosing not to perform even though they attended the Festival, Maryana's participation helped fill the stage and maintain most of the Boston team's original choreographic spacing and formations.

Yamuleé Challenge

As part of the salsa congress experience, established Latin dance choreographers and companies, like Yamuleé, sometimes offer a "challenge" experience. In addition to the congress fees, participants can pay to take part in a performance challenge. The challenge experience for Osmar becomes a short intense period for creating new choreography for dancers who pay for the experience of rehearsing with him. Challenge rehearsals are scheduled for four to six hours a day, and often conflict with other congress workshops. Dancers learn choreography and rehearse all weekend, for a total of approximately eight to twelve hours, and then perform the last night of the congress. Yamuleé's congress challenge routines are often added to the repertoire of the Yamuleé Project Teams.

In May 2018, I performed with Yamuleé Boston at the New York B.I.G. Salsa Festival. Eric Telfort and I were one of three couples who performed on behalf of the Boston team, sharing the stage with co-directors Mariel Perez and Kristian Santos, and Mariel Cuevas and Eury Ortiz. Additionally, I registered for the Yamuleé Challenge experience offered during this festival. I was eager to learn more about this process as an ethnographer trying to have experiences in as many Yamuleé ventures as possible. As a dancer, I was equally excited to learn choreography directly from Osmar and to perform another Yamuleé routine.

At the festival, Melany Mercedes, the Yamuleé performance member and well-respected New York salsa instructor we met at the opening of Chapters One and Six, assisted Osmar with teaching and coaching *Yo Quisiera* throughout the challenge process. She gave very helpful tips for followers while we learned the complicated choreography. I had researched previous challenge routines to try and gauge my probability for successfully completing the challenge, and believed that the routine would be at the intermediate level. To my surprise, this choreography was advanced. Despite all my mental and physical preparation, I was not ready for some of the demands of participating. My feet ached beyond belief. I was so desperate to ease my pain that I tried to make blister cushions out of a maxi pad. I stretched a lot and refrained from social dancing later in the evening to support my physical recovery. The second day of rehearsal was just as intense. We did not take a break for the entire three hours, unlike the first day when we were given a ten-minute break approximately two hours into rehearsal. What's more, Osmar added an assisted aerial into a split as the final move, a highly advanced

stunt that left most couples struggling. Then came the audition. Yamuleé Challenge participants could earn the opportunity to perform the newly learned choreography at the B.I.G. Salsa Festival on Sunday night. Just like the weekly studio performance challenge classes, our fate resided in the small shift of Osmar's index finger.

My partner and I did not make the cut. I was disappointed to not have the opportunity to perform the choreography during the Congress. I really enjoyed the challenge of it because it made me feel alive. However, my partner and I did not have a successful audition performance. We could not recover as a couple from several missed connections during our audition. Afterwards, I thanked Osmar for the opportunity to learn the choreography. For the first time he hugged me *con cariño y simpática* (with affection and sympathy)—something I had not experienced before from him. I am not sure what he wanted to express to me in that moment, but what I received from him was an acknowledgement and recognition of how intense my effort and commitment to learning and performing the choreography had been. I thanked Melany also for her teaching and coaching. She complimented my work over the weekend and reminded me that I could practice this dance anytime I wanted using the music track and rehearsal videos.

The routine entered into the Yamuleé Project Teams performance repertory in late 2018. Yamuleé Project Houston selected *Yo Quisiera* to perform at the Las Vegas Salsa Bachata Super Festival. Less than a year later, Yamuleé Project Oklahoma joined the Houston project team on stage, performing the same dance at the Houston Salsa Congress. In this way, choreography acts as a vehicle for reflexive promotion between the Yamuleé Challenge and Yamuleé Project Teams. Dancers interested in a project team

make a short commitment of one weekend learning choreography through the challenge experience to assess whether or not they want to make a six-month commitment in their respective home cities. Project team members who participate in the challenge get to work directly with Osmar to learn his choreography and get a preview of choreography before it enters into the Project Team performance repertory.

Other Outreach Models: Congresses (Again!), Retreats, and Cruises

This discussion of salsa congresses has underscored how they are important gathering points for the dispersed members of the Yamuleé family to come together through Project Teams, Yamuladies, and Challenges. Congresses are also a way to reach new potential members. Teachers from the Bronx studio and members of the professional company, for example, are frequently featured guests at both national and international salsa congresses. In a typical congress weekend, the company will teach at least two workshops and perform twice. This means that their classes will be experienced by seventy to one hundred people per workshop and their performances seen by over 2,000. For many salsa dancers this is their first exposure to Yamuleé, but not their last.

Yamuleé has appeared in salsa congresses world-wide. The professional team has a performance record in Asia, Europe, and South America. The company toured throughout Japan in 2013. They were featured in the India Festival Latina in 2014. Their South American destinations include Peru, Chile, Venezuela, and Colombia. The company has also performed in Canada, Costa Rica, Guadeloupe, Mexico, England, Poland, Switzerland, Belgium, The Netherlands, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain, France, and Russia.

Yamuleé’s international performances make a strong impression, even with rare performance mishaps. During the 2009 Marseille Salsa Congress, Yamuleé performed to *Tumba La Cana* by Celia Cruz. The women’s costume was a sequin covered black bra and with a black, sheer fabric that covered the right breast, right arm, and neckline. The bottom half was an asymmetrical black skirt. In less than one minute into the three-minute performance, Destiny Garcia’s bra strap broke suddenly, leaving her left breast barely covered and in danger of public view (:49). Miraculously, Garcia delivered a nearly seamless performance with her partner José Dias, inclusive of all the stunts, without ever exposing her breast. Ho Joey’s YouTube comment reads, “The amount of technique and poise she has to pull the routine off in spite of the wardrobe malfunction is just incredible. Respect, respect and more respect!!” Karina Ramiere writes, “Que profesional la bailarina!!! Increibleeeee!! siguio toda la coreo sin perderse ni desconcentrarse. GENIA TOTAL!” (What a professional dancer. Incredible! She followed the choreography without getting lost or losing her concentration. Total genius!)¹⁷ Additional YouTube users commend the dancer’s heroic performance and the company’s impeccable level of professionalism.¹⁸

We have also already seen how the experience of performing at congresses can reinforce the village ties within Yamuleé. However, the social dancing portion of the

¹⁷ My translation

¹⁸ YouTube video of Tumba La Caña performed at the 2009 Marseille Salsa Congress
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2wPuHnvCwZI>

Yamuleé trinity can also help with outreach to new potential members. The social dancing that follows the evening performances at any congress is also a vehicle of global transmission for Yamuleé. The dance company is grateful for their warm, international reception of their dancing, especially as representatives of New York style salsa. Social dancing at congresses underlines the fact that there is an international community of people who are all potential members of the extended Yamuleé family. Valenzuela recalls his first salsa trip to Russia,

I went to Moscow last year. And I was so excited. First time going to Moscow and looking at another culture, another country. All I ever knew about Russia was the Soviet Union. That's all you learn in high school and college. But when I went there...we were the only four dark-skinned people there and maybe one Mexican. And everyone danced, and everyone was good. And I was just like, "Is this real? Seriously?" ...Some of my friends don't even know what I do. They just wonder why I travel. And seeing, all over the world, the amount of people from there or close by, different countries close by, that danced, whether it's from Singapore, Belgium, Amsterdam, all these countries that are not Latino at all dancing, I feel proud. I feel proud. I'm like, "Yes. Latinos are doing something in this world [laughter]." (Raul Valenzuela, pers.comm.)

Raul pride in being part of Yamuleé's and the company's participation in salsa's global reach and international engagement is clear.

During congresses, salsa dancing affords Yamuleé dancers opportunities to establish relationships with other dancers they would not have otherwise, which presents

another opportunity to welcome people into the Yamuleé village. For example, during the 2017 Berlin Salsa Congress, Yamuleé dancer Francheska Vargas shared an improvised and intimate dance with Abu Dhabi-based dancer Dez Salsero. In a video recording of their spontaneous duet, Dez translates the music's percussion break in his torso (1:45). Francheska takes a similar musical opportunity to relate her hips to the drums (:42). In two minutes, this dancing pair established enough trust that Dez partners Francheska in a spontaneous lift (2:18) and safely returns her to her feet. The dance video ends in a modest dip and magnanimous smile shared between the two. Their corporeal relationship to the music and to one another is as important to the intimate reading of this dance as is their playful nature between each other because it demonstrates the depth of physical communication made possible through salsa.

Yamuleé teaches workshops during congresses, and these pedagogical moments also serve as an important form of outreach. The most common workshop is a combination of footwork and partnering. These classes are usually packed with people trying to retain their complex choreography sequences. Osmar and the assistant teachers also review the combinations at the end of the workshop so that participants can record the movement material. Always dressed in Yamuleé logo shirts, these dancers are New York salsa ambassadors to the world.

During my time at the Yamuleé studio, I met dancers who moved to the Bronx (permanently and semi-permanently) from California, Texas, Ecuador, Mexico, and Belgium. Molly Hagan, a Swedish native shared her first memory of learning about Yamuleé in her home country's studio.

I think the first time I saw them (Yamuleé) was on our TV in the lobby when you enter the dance studio. We have a little TV in the waiting room where different salsa videos are constantly rolling on the screen. And then there was a show with Yamuleé performing *Severa* in Luxembourg [Salsa Festival]. (Molly Hagman, pers.comm.)

Hagan eventually made her way to New York and began training and performing with Yamuleé. However, before she made that decision, she recalls how further global encounters with Yamuleé's community influenced her move,

But I really got to get into Yamuleé when I went to my congresses in Berlin. I took their workshop for two, three years or so in a row. And then I really felt like they were the team that was giving me the most challenge and really, in terms of just taking their workshops where you really feel like, "Wow. This is amazing." And then I went to New York [with] my dance studio for a dance trip in 2012.... And then it wasn't as hard to take salsa classes because it was with the whole dance school, so it was more going to Broadway Dance Center and doing other stuff. But then, on my little free time, I went up to the Bronx and took classes with Yamuleé a few days. And, I've kept on doing that since 2012. Whenever I've been at a congress in Europe and they've been there, I've been taking their workshops. I've been studying a lot. I love also Karel, like her lady styling videos [online] and just trying to always work on the material I've been given at workshops like studying the videos and trying to learn more and more. And then I came to New York again to stay, basically 2016, when I started my program at Broadway

Dance Center. And that's when I really became a part of Yamuleé. (Molly Hagman, pers.comm.)

Molly is an example of how encountering Yamuleé through their performances and classes at international congresses develops a long-term investment in their style and can even draw people from elsewhere to the Bronx, temporarily or permanently.

Yamuleé started producing their own congress in New York as part of the B.I.G. Salsa Festival series. Osmar was inspired after attending the 2012 B.I.G. Salsa Festival in Houston. Yamuleé was invited as an artist to the first festival B.I.G. event in San Antonio. Two years later, Osmar had his first significant meeting with Oscar Martinez, the event producer and Houston-based salsa professional who now coordinates Yamuleé Project Teams. The two ended up talking business at a Yankees baseball game in the Bronx where they decided to collaborate on the idea to produce a festival. In 2014, Osmar joined forces with Martinez to produce the first B.I.G. Festival in New York in 2015. San Diego added its own B.I.G Festival in 2018, joining the established festivals in San Antonio, Houston, and New York. Becoming congress producers give Yamuleé even more control in creating community than when they are headliners for events produced by other promoters.

Yamuleé also sponsors retreats. Yamuleé Retreats are primarily for Yamuleé project members, but open to all. The first Yamuleé Retreat was held in 2016. In the second year, it was moved to Cancun, Mexico. As Yamuleé Project Team Directors, Oscar Martinez and Osmar wanted to bring Yamuleé dancers together from their respective cities. These extended weekends focus on dance training, replicating their

Bronx training methods, but in an exotic destination. Workshops include spins, partner work, footwork, ladies styling, tricks, Yamuleé Project routines, technique, flexibility, rumba, afro, and many more courses designed to build dance skills for performing Yamuleé choreography. There are no performances, just training by day and social dancing by night. The nightly socials during the four-night, five-day stay, are meant to be a relaxing dance break from the daily rigor of training. These socials provide a vehicle for social connection and building community. These retreats thus replicate the tight reciprocity between pedagogy and social dancing that is such a central feature of the culture at the Bronx studio and spread those Yamuleé values in the extended community.

Yamuleé is consistently featured on the annual Aventura Dance Cruise that started in 2005. Passengers embark from Miami and cruise for seven days. This party at sea has traditional congress elements of workshops, socials, and performances. This cruise schedules day trips, including a private island, beach parties, and dancing against sunset backgrounds. Yamuleé's participation in events like these keep than relevant in salsa's international appeal.

Osmar is diversifying his assets beyond the Bronx studio. He is expanding the Yamuleé brand by performing on national and international stages. He is also creating multiple streams of income by participating in behind the scenes as a producer. Without knowing for certain how the work load is distributed between Osmar and Martinez, one can still speculate how their assets complement each other. Martinez has experience in producing and promoting large scale events. It is through these various avenues in

addition to the ones discussed above that Yamuleé Dance Company summons salsa fans from around the globe in search of learning from them.

These franchises and creative business models do more for Yamuleé Dance Company than just generate income, however. They are also models for transmitting aesthetics rooted in Afro-diasporic movement. These business models also germinate new Yamuleé dancers around the world through their training methods, and techniques full of Afro-diasporic choreography and styling.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION: THE YAMULEÉ EFFECT

As an ethnographer engaged in critical inquiry, I have sought throughout this study to intervene in popular misrepresentations of salsa. To that end, I began by tracing salsa's genealogy, which makes visible the erasure of African aesthetics in popularized salsa while locating Yamuleé Dance Company as a place where the salsa's African history is maintained. The rest of this dissertation aimed to identify the pedagogical practices that Yamuleé Dance Company utilizes to interpret, transpose, and transcribe salsa from its social dance context to staged performances.

I used a circular approach and an ethnographic lens to highlight three aspects of the dance that have not previously been privileged. First, and most importantly, a close examination of Yamuleé Dance Company reveals the deep bonds intertwining social dance, pedagogy, and performance: the Yamuleé Effect. Although the dancers' levels of participation in each part of this trinity may vary, at Yamuleé, dancers circulate among these three different strategies for participation in salsa. Through my experience as a performer with the Boston Yamuleé Project Team and Yamuladies, I learned that the Yamuleé Effect expands and extends to dancers beyond the Bronx, even as they remain tied to the Bronx studio as a second home. Second, this research establishes Yamuleé as a repository for New York style salsa's Africanist aesthetics and history. My analysis of the

studio's pedagogy and choreography demonstrates that their practices maintain and build on a kinetic language that enables physical fluency for participating salsa dancers. Third, my work, unlike much of the previous scholarship on salsa, privileges Black and Brown bodies and highlights the fundamental Dominicanidad of the Yamuleé community. Acknowledging this is a moral obligation in the academy, as it is to include multiple histories, dances, and people who are often undocumented in the academy from their own perspectives, especially communities of color. My chosen ethnographic approach is one of the most effective ways to tell these stories. Indeed, the function of ethnography does not rest at just bringing forward marginalized voices. The power of such a story is that when people share their stories their lived experiences can be honored.

Using this approach also reveals the exciting possibility of a new "economic" way of viewing a dance company. I do not mean economic in its capitalistic sense, but "economic" in a way that harkens back to a broader, more ancient conception. The prefix "eco" is a derivative of the Greek *oikos*, meaning an extended family unit that consists of the house, family members, servants, farmland, and all property. The suffix *-nomy* is derived from the Greek *nomos*, and means management, law, or principle. Thus, the word economy comes from the Greek word meaning household management (Thorup 2016). This way of viewing the company is also very compatible with my characterization of Yamuleé as a village.

Applying this economic concept to my study of Yamuleé has encouraged me to be particularly attentive to the way the company includes human and cultural capital among its material resources to be managed. For example, Yamuleé places great value on

the familial relationship inside its community. Therefore, the Yamuleé village economy encompasses Osmar, the various skill leveled dancers, the choreography, the social practices, and the various ways each member contributes to the community's sustainable ecosystem. Their sustainability requires financial currency, which is why, as noted in the previous chapter, the company takes advantage of the salsa congress structure to build and extend the "brand," but their community is built on much more, including the shared recognition of history and tradition described earlier in this chapter and throughout the work as a whole. The Yamuleé economy rides on a currency made fundable by family and salsa technique.

If Osmar is the "manager of Yamuleé's house, and salsa is built on African diasporic practices; then I can also make the assertion that Osmar is also managing ancient West African knowledge. His correct and responsible manage of this knowledge is a significant factor in the Yamuleé Effect. In francophone West Africa, a griot is a tribe member who is responsible for maintaining oral histories through poetry, storytelling, and music. The Yoruba term for this important societal role is *arokin*. This role in the community is not only to serve as historian, but also as steward of the tribe's customs, ethics, and traditions (Traoré, Mobolanle, and Akinloyé 2016).

Osmar is a salsa dancing griot. He travels far and wide, spreading the historical embodiment of New York Salsa and his training methodology for developing dancers. Osmar preserves embodied genealogies and traditions for New York style salsa. He enables dancers to use salsa to subvert the hierarchy of the written word with music and dance. Additionally, salsa subverts the need for linguistic translation in using the body as

the primary mode of communication in a local and global dancing community. In fact, Yamuleé dancer Raul described salsa as a universal language (Raul Valenzuela, pers.comm.).

Osmar is a visionary. He develops professional teachers, dancers, and choreographers from within the company. They grow wings and fly away from their nest, but are also welcomed to return. Take for instance, Carlos Hernandez, with whom Osmar had a huge public fight post performance several years ago. Still, Carlos' company Zafire performs at Yamuleé events. Yamuleé dancers fight. They forgive. They keep dancing. Osmar incorporates the priceless contributions of the community. Yamuleé style is the result of all the people who have been part of the company. Osmar shares the recognition and accolades with his mentors, his comrades, and his students.

Osmar integrates salsa dancing skills and its historical context with his personal knowledge as a professional athlete. Osmar was a baseball player, and this experience significantly influenced his ability to develop good dancers. According to Osmar, one of his greatest compliments came from living dance legend Eddie Torres who declared Yamuleé as the “evolution of mambo.” As a griot and a visionary, Osmar has built and sustains a globally influential salsa academy. He has laid a foundation of salsa techniques, floors of history and innovation. The dancers decorate this edifice with their personal stylings and sense of family. Their sweat equity insulates and protects their precious space.

Quarantine Connections

The culminating phase of writing my dissertation occurred during the 2020 coronavirus global pandemic and shelter-in-place orders across the United States. On March 16, 2020, the Yamuleé Dance Company closed its doors indefinitely to be in compliance with New York City and State protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social media became the way to connect and make announcements without the benefit of the physical space. On April 4, they changed their Facebook cover photo to a screenshot of twenty-eight Yamuleé dancers meeting up for a weekly chat via Zoom. While many dancers in the salsa community are offering sliding scale classes on social media, Osmar's response was to host an Instagram live Q & A on April 8, 2020.

More than five thousand people tuned in to listen and learn to Osmar as he talked about Yamuleé's practices. The Instagram followers' check-ins read like a global roll call. Osmar stayed online for more than two hours, drinking a glass of red wine next to his co-host, Yamuleé dancer Barbara Aquino, answering questions from dancers around the world. One of the most frequently asked questions was if and when he would offer classes online. Osmar declined. He explained that he prefers working with students in the same room and in real time.

Osmar's suggestion that his teaching philosophy is rooted in an old school, low tech approach to teaching seemed a little ironic, given he was simultaneously using such a current technological platform like Instagram; he was connecting with dancers around the world in real time, but in a virtual space. His comments should also not be taken to mean that he rejects technology entirely; as we have seen in previous chapters, Yamuleé

takes advantage of YouTube and other social media to show highlights of performances, possibly as a way to advertise and extend the community. As we know from Chapter Seven, he also uses technology to help Project Teams prepare for performances. Indeed, two days after he made this statement, advertisements for Yamuleé's B.I.G. Salsa Festival, which would be held online, went live. In line with what Osmar himself had said about teaching online, when the final workshop schedule was updated days before the event, Yamuleé was listed as participating but Osmar did not teach that weekend. As with anyone who has been part of a community, one feels a sense of obligation to open doors for other members. I suspect that Osmar was presented with and extended this teaching opportunity to other Yamuleé dancers to earn some income and recognition during the studio closing.

In a moment when the traditional artistic platforms are collapsing, Osmar is creating models for connection that are, on the one hand, new, but, on the other hand, simply an extension of the values Yamuleé has embodied since opening. Rather than teach classes online, Osmar created an open forum for the global salsa community in his question and answer session on Instagram. While a one-hour class online will teach dance technique, Osmar's Instagram session dove deep into history, technique, methodology and philosophy—in other words, it reflected a lot of the pedagogical ideas we have seen in Yamuleé classes. He is protecting the value of his brand and his studio's community by building new opportunities and not immediately jumping on the Zoom teaching bandwagon with his contemporaries. Osmar's approach to the crisis of quarantine is consistent with many of the aspects of Yamuleé that I have described throughout this

work. Osmar has adopted this approach because he sees Yamuleé as both historicizing and innovating possibilities in salsa dancing as well as the value of creating community.

While articulating this new model and this more detailed and sophisticated understanding of a dance company as a dance economy mark perhaps the two most significant contributions of this work, I also established the African and social genealogies of New York style salsa and situated Yamuleé as part of this rich legacy. In Chapter Four, I established how Yamuleé functions like a family, full of various relationships that build cultural wealth. Chapter Five drew out the embodied tensions that develop salsa dancing skills, and enables deeper social bonds among dancers. In Chapter Six, I performed a choreographic reading to make evident the Africanist aesthetics embedded within Yamuleé choreography and performance. In Chapter Seven I engaged an auto-ethnographic approach to show how Yamuleé circulates choreography and performance globally through performance teams, congresses, and other structures beyond the Bronx studio. Throughout, Yamuleé's focus on creating a community where history, language, and innovation circulate like forms of currency through social dance, pedagogy, and performance—what dancers affectionately call the “Yamuleé effect”—shines through.

Limitations of the Research and Future Directions

Although my work does make many important contributions, like all research, it has some limitations. In order to do the important work of focusing on race, I was unable to focus on gender roles and heteronormativity. Although this was beyond the scope of my research questions for this project, it is a topic that deserves substantial examination.

Gender roles and heteronormative class participation and performance are part of Yamuleé's culture (note their frequent use of "Ladies" and the assumption that leaders are men), and are of course also common in the greater salsa community. Same sex dance partners do not necessarily correlate to one's sexual orientation. Sometimes dancers want to become better in their preferred dance roles by experiencing the other. Sometimes there are not enough male leaders or female followers, so dancers experiment in other roles. Sometimes dancers switch roles. Ana Tinajero, refers to this as "liquid leading," a term which describes the act of dancers switching between leading and following roles inside of one improvised salsa dance. Qualitative research using case study or qualitative interviewing methods would yield rich data for understanding this phenomenon.

The cultural expression of what it means to be Latino and all its linguistic and identity shifts (e.g., Latin@, Latinx, etc) rarely surfaced in my data. I thought I would encounter this cultural label more frequently than I did. The terms Hispanic and Latino, and all their variations, stem from the US government's attempt to categorize American residents of Mexican, Cuban, and Puerto Rican descent for the national census. Since many of my participants were born and/or raised outside of the United States, perhaps they do not associate with that word. Instead of a broader identity term like Latino, I more frequently encountered expressions of pride in being Dominican and/or living in the Bronx. Thus, while I had an expectation that my research might contribute to the discourse on Latinidad, I found instead people to be much more specific in their terms, while also emphasizing that the Yamuleé family was open to all.

This research has opened doors for me to other people, groups, and potential future areas of research. In 2019, for example, I was approached by bachata dance artists who requested to be interviewed and participate in a discussion on bachata similar to the one I had initiated through Yamuleé on salsa's history. Many *bachateros* (bachata dancers) are also highly skilled salsa dancers, and bachata has become a substantial part of salsa congresses, so much so that salsa congresses have added bachata workshops and performances to the schedule. Many cities with congress style events have even begun to include bachata in their titles. New York, Atlanta, Chicago, and San Diego, Salt Lake City, and New Orleans are a few examples. Research on bachata would significantly expand the current scholarly literature.

Yamuleé's values are practiced through dance and through social relationships. Their dancers have a pronounced work ethic and dedication to becoming exceptional salsa dancers in social and performative contexts. They maintain a strong and distinct aesthetic, even as they are neither acknowledged nor reflected in commercial representation.

As heirs to New York style salsa, Yamuleé dancers have strong reactions to televised salsa performances meant for a mainstream audience. Yamuleé director Osmar Perrones points out that these performances are not "high level." When she saw shows like *Dancing with the Stars* or *So You Think You Can Dance*, Francheska Vargas thought to herself, "I don't dance like that." Other dancers, including Molly Hagman described these versions as "fake" and more like ballroom than salsa. Carlos De Jesus, director of the semi-professional Yamuleé performance team had the following reaction,

I don't even consider it salsa, to me. It's just not me. I'm from the Bronx. I'm Puerto Rican. And it's not grounded. Yamuleé, it's considered like school salsa, or salon, or class salsa, but it keeps a core of the street in here. One of the things I don't like about ballroom dancing or those dancing— like the shows that you were speaking about, like So You Think You Can Dance or whatever, is that they're too fancy. They're too delicate when they dance. And I feel like even our cultures reflected in our salsa, and guys don't dance like that. Guys in my culture, or just in the Bronx, or in the Hispanic culture, don't dance like that. So when I see that, it's like— I felt like they took salsa from the streets. They put it into ballroom. They put it in a blender. (Carlos De Jesus, pers.comm.)

What DeJesus clearly points out is his belief that the salsa community in which he participates represents his urban Latinidad reality, a history that can be traced decades back in New York. This reality does not translate to television for him and other Yamuleé dancers. Raul Valenzuela further critiques these performances,

I don't think you can compare it to what we do. And I'm not taking away their professionalism because they're training when it comes to ballet and all sorts, everything, in general, is ridiculously insane, and I wish I had half of what they have. But when it comes to the core salsa, or if you're going into Afro roots, sometimes I feel like it's a little goofy. (Raul Valenzuela, pers. comm.)

All these dancers share in common an inability to see televised versions of salsa as reflective of their participation in salsa. As previously mentioned in Chapter One, counter-narrative is Critical Race Theoretical employed to contradict misrepresentation

of race, people, and culture. Yamuleé dancers are not a counter-narrative as much as they are a corrective narrative to salsa's performed aesthetic. While commercial salsa, of which *So You Think You Can Dance* is just one example, erases the Africanist roots of salsa, Yamuleé embraces and promotes salsa's Africanist aesthetics through salsa performance and social dancing. Popularized representations of salsa have shaped familiar stereotypes of this Latin dance form as well as of the people who participate in it.

Instead, Yamuleé Dance Company is a counterstory to the commercial salsa narrative. They place great value on the social relationships that are woven with their participation in salsa dancing. Yamuleé continues a unique legacy with social dance, pedagogy, and performance as a salsa holy trinity. Yamuleé functions to build kinship and kinetic memory among its multigenerational students and to nurture a collective cultural wealth rooted in Afro-Cuban and African diasporic movement and Dominicanidad. Yamuleé Dance Company is not just important to salsa's history but also to its evolution.

WORKS CITED

- Alvarez, Levi. Phone interview by author. Boston, May 29, 2020.
- Ardila, Uriel. 2017. "La real historia de Yamulemao, el éxito de Joe Arroyo." Candela Stereo. July 26, 2017. Accessed April 5, 2020. <https://www.candelaestereo.com/curiosidades/la-real-historia-yamulemao-exito-joe-arroyo>
- American Experience, The. 2004. "Fidel Castro." <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/castro-fidel-castro/>
- Allah, Maulud Sadiq. 2016. "'Salsa' is More African Than All Black-American Musical Forms..." Medium. Accessed February 18, 2020. <https://medium.com/the-brothers/salsa-is-more-african-than-all-black-american-musical-forms-99ac5a8025ea>
- Aparicio, Frances R. 1998. *Listening to Salsa: Gender, Latin Popular Music, and Puerto Rican Cultures*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Aparicio, Frances R. "Jennifer as Selena: Rethinking Latinidad in media and popular culture." *Latino Studies* 1, no. 1 (2003): 90-105.
- Agawu, Kofi. 2014. *Representing African Music: Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions*. New York: Routledge.
- Avedaño, Gabriela. Interview with author. The Bronx, August 21, 2017.
- Baila Society. 2012. "Cuban Rumba, History/Culture." Online Salsa Academy. www.bailasociety.tv/public/439.cfm/

- Bastian, Brock, Jolanda Jetten, and Laura J. Ferris. 2014. "Pain as Social Glue: Shared Pain Increases Cooperation." *Psychological Science* 25 (11): 2079–2085.
- Bell Jr, Derrick A. 1979. "Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma." *Harvard Law Review* 93: 518–533.
- . 1992. *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*. New York: Basic Books.
- Beltrán, Cristina. 2010. *The Trouble with Unity: Latino Politics and the Creation of Identity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bosse, Joanna. "Salsa dance as cosmopolitan formation: cooperation, conflict and commerce in the Midwest United States." In *Ethnomusicology Forum*, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 210-231. Taylor & Francis Group, 2013.
- Chasteen, John Charles. 2004. *National Rhythms, African Roots: The Deep History of Latin American Popular Dance*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Chang, I-Wen. *Flirting with Global Citizenship: The Construction of Gender, Class, and National Identity in Taiwanese Salsa Practice*. University of California, Los Angeles, 2015.
- Crenshaw, Kimberle. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43(6): 1241–1299.
- Creswell, John W. 2013. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Daniel, Yvonne. 1996. *Rumba: Dance and social change in contemporary Cuba*. Indiana University Press.

Danzon and Cuban Music. 2016. "History of Popular Cuban Music."

<http://www.danzon.com/eng/history/cuban-music.htm>

Decker, Todd. 2011. *Music Makes Me: Fred Astaire and Jazz*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

DeFrantz, Thomas F., and Anita Gonzalez, eds. 2014. *Black Performance Theory*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

De Jesus, Carlos. Interview with author. The Bronx, August 8, 2017.

DJ Dangerous. Interview by Ben Dandridge-Lemco. October 9, 2018.

Delgado, Celeste Fraser, and José Esteban Muñoz. 1997. *Everynight life: Culture and dance in Latin/o America*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Espinoza, Andres. 2014. "Una sola casa: Salsa consciente and the poetics of the meta-barrio." (Doctoral Dissertation.

Foster, Susan Leigh. 1986. *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Galindo, Luis Gildardo Rivera. 2002. "La Religión Yoruba-Lucumi y Su Presencia en la Música Afrocaribeña." *Ensayos: Revista de la Facultad de Educación de Albacete* 17: 93-116.

García, Cindy. 2013. *Salsa Crossings: Dancing Latinidad in Los Angeles*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

García, David. 2006. *Arsenio Rodríguez and the Transnational Flows of Latin Popular Music*. Vol. 30. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

García-Peña, Lorgia. 2015. "Translating Blackness: Dominicans Negotiating Race and Belonging." *The Black Scholar* 45 (2): 10–20.

- Gates, Henry Louis. 2011. *Black in Latin America*. New York: New York University Press.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture*. New York: Persius Books.
- Goldman, Jonathan. 2014. "The Rise of Salsa and the Decline of Boogaloo". *The Paris Review*. October 9. Accessed April 1, 2020. <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2014/10/09/cha-cha-with-a-backbeat/>
- Hagman, Molly. Phone interview with the author. Boston, August 1, 2019.
- Hagood, Thomas K. 2000. *A History of Dance in American Higher Education: Dance and the American University*. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Hernandez, Deborah Pacini. 1998. "Dancing with the enemy: Cuban Popular Music, Race, Authenticity, and the World-Music Landscape." *Latin American Perspectives* 25 (3):110–125.
- Hoey, Brian A. 2014. "A Simple Introduction to the Practice of Ethnography and Guide to Ethnographic Fieldnotes." *Marshall University Digital Scholar* (2014): 1–10.
- Hull, Christopher. 2013. *British Diplomacy and US Hegemony in Cuba, 1898–1964*. New York: Springer.
- Jacobsen, Thomas W. 2011. *Traditional New Orleans Jazz: Conversations with the Men Who Make the Music*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- Jiménez, Máximo. 2017. "“El boogaloo Está En Algo’, 50 Años Después”. *Listin Diario*. Accessed April 1, 2020. <https://listindiario.com/entretenimiento/2017/11/17/490956/el-boogaloo-esta-en-algo-50-anos-despues>

- Kammen, Michael. 2012. *American Culture, American Tastes: Social change and the 20th Century*. New York: Knopf.
- Ladson-Billings, Gloria, and William Tate IV. 1997. "Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education." *The Teachers College Record* 97(1): 47–68.
- Latin Music USA*, 2009. Directed by Daniel McCabe and Pamela Aguilar. Boston: WGBH/Public Broadcasting Service, DVD.
- Lester, Neal. Radio interview by Joel Goldberg. National Public Radio, July 30, 2016.
- Madison, D. Soyini. 2011. *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Madrid, Alejandro L., and Robin D. Moore. 2013. *Danzón: Circum-Caribbean Dialogues in Music and Dance*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Manuel, Peter. 1994. "Puerto Rican Music and Cultural Identity: Creative Appropriation of Cuban Sources from Danza to Salsa." *Ethnomusicology* 38(2): 249-280.
- . 2009. *Creolizing Contradance in the Caribbean*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- McMains, Juliet E. 2001. "Brownface: Representations of Latin-ness in Dancesport." *Dance Research Journal* 33(2): 54-71.
- . 2013. "Hot Latin Dance: Ethnic Identity and Stereotype." In, *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Ethnicity*. Anthony Shay (ed.), Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2015. *Spinning Mambo into Salsa: Caribbean Dance in Global Commerce*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Merriam, Sharan B. 2014. *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and*

- Implementation*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Our Latin Thing, Nuestra Cosa* 1972. Directed by Leon Gast.
- Painter, Elizabeth. 2014. "On Machismo in Cuban Casino." *Dance, Place, Festival*. 2014: 139–144.
- Perez, Mariel. Phone interview with the author. Boston, April 10, 2019.
- Perrones, Osmar. Interview by author. The Bronx, July 30, 2017.
- Picart, Caroline Joan. 2012. *From Ballroom to Dancesport: Aesthetics, Athletics, and Body Culture*. Albany, NY: State University New York Press.
- Pietrobruno, Sheenagh. 2006. *Salsa and its Transnational Moves*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Renta, Priscilla. 2004. "Salsa Dance: Latino/a History in Motion." *Centro Journal* 16(2): 138–157.
- Roberts, John Storm. 1999. *Latin Jazz*. New York: Schirmer Books.
- . 1999. *The Latin Tinge: the impact of Latin American music on the United States*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Robbins, James. 1990. "The Cuban "Son" as Form, Genre, and Symbol." *Latin American music review/Revista de Música Latinoamericana* 11(2): 182–200.
- Román-Velázquez, Patria. 1999. "The Embodiment of Salsa: Musicians, Instruments and the Performance of a Latin style and identity." *Popular Music* 18(1): 115–131.
- Rondón, César Miguel. 2008. *The Book of Salsa: A Chronicle of Urban Music from the Caribbean to New York City*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Rubin, Herbert J., and Irene S. Rubin. 2011. *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing*

- Data*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Schneider, Britta. "Multilingual cosmopolitanism and monolingual commodification: Language ideologies in transnational Salsa communities." *Language in Society* (2010): 647–668.
- Shay, Anthony. 2008. *Dancing Across Borders: The American Fascination with Exotic Dance Forms*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishing.
- Saldaña, Johnny. 2015. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Sandoval, Mercedes Cros. 2007. *Worldview, the Orichas, and Santeria: Africa to Cuba and Beyond*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.
- Selier, Yesenia Fernandez. Phone interview by author. Boston, February 29, 2020.
- Shain, Richard M. 2018. *Roots in Reverse: Senegalese Afro-Cuban Music and Tropical Cosmopolitanism*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Short, Sederick. Blommestijn. Super Salsa YouTube upload October 30, 2019
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pkOEJ5IPP_Y
- Solórzano, Daniel G., and Tara J. Yosso. 2002. "A Critical Race Counterstory of Race, Racism, and Affirmative Action." *Equity & Excellence in Education* 35(2): 155–168.
- Tatum, Beverly Daniel. 1994. "Teaching White Students About Racism: The Search for White Allies and the Restoration of Hope." *Teachers College Record* 95(4): 462–476.
- Thorup, Mikkel, ed. 2016. *Intellectual History of Economic Normativities*. New York: Springer.
- Traoré, Karim, Mobolanle Sotunsa, and Akinloyè Ojó, eds. 2016. *Expressions of Indigenous and Local Knowledge in Africa and its Diaspora*. Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

- Tucker, Spencer. 2009. *The Encyclopedia of the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars: a Political, Social, and Military History*. Vol. 1. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.
- Urquía, Norman. 2005. "The re-branding of salsa in London's dance clubs: how an ethnicised form of cultural capital was institutionalised." *Leisure Studies* 24, no. 4: 385-397.
- Valenzuela, Raul. Interview with the author. The Bronx, August 23, 2017.
- Vargas, Francheska. Interview with author. The Bronx, August 20, 2017.
- Waxer, Lise. 2001. "Las Caleñas son Como las Flores: The Rise of All-Women Salsa bands in Cali, Colombia." *Ethnomusicology* 45(2): 228–259.
- We Like it Like That*, 2015. Directed by Mathew Ramirez Warren. DVD.
- White, Michelle. "Timba vs. timbaton or is it all just son?" Salsa Forum. October 12, 2014. Accessed April 7, 2020 <https://www.salsaforums.com/threads/timba-vs-timbaton-or-is-it-all-just-son.24677/>
- Yosso, Tara J. 2005. "Whose Culture Has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth." *Race Ethnicity and Education* 8(1): 69-91.
- Young, Michelle. 2015. "Palladium Ballroom." In, *12 of NYC's Historic Ballrooms, Grand Entertainment Venues of Another Era*. www.untappedcities.com/2015/04/02/12-of-nycs-historic-ballrooms-grand-entertainment-venues-of-another-era/4/.

APPENDIX A

Professional Dancers Who Trained at Yamuléé

Ahmad Zakaria

Andrew Avila

Anthony Oneyesis, Framboyan

April Genovese de la Rosa

Arlette Guerra, Zafire

Carlos Hernandez, Zafire

Delia Madera, Zuberi

Denisse Cambria, Iroko

Ernesto Bulnes, Iroko

José Diaz, Euphoria Dance Company

Joshua Lopez

Karel Flores, KF World Teams

Melany Crystal Mercedes

Michelle Morales

Roberto Rosario, Codari

Timothy Lewis

APPENDIX B

IRB Approval Letter



Institutional Review Board
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
P.O. Box 425619, Denton, TX 76204-5619
940-898-3378
email: IRB@twu.edu
<https://www.twu.edu/institutional-review-board-irb/>

DATE: May 29, 2020

TO: Ms. Mila Thigpen
Dance

FROM: Institutional Review Board - Denton

Re: File Closed for Salsa Pedagogies Towards Performance (Protocol #: 19528)

The TWU Institutional Review Board (IRB) has received the materials necessary to complete the file for the above referenced study. As applicable, agency approval letter(s), the final report, and signatures of the participants have been placed on file. As of this date, the protocol file has been closed.

IRB records will be stored for three (3) years from this file closed date.

cc. Dr. Mary Williford-Shade, Dance
Dr. Rosemary Candelario, Dance