Salsa Politics:
Desirability, Marginality, and Mobility in North Carolina’s Salsa Nightclubs

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Abstract
Salsa no tiene raza ni color. The notion that salsa music has/knows neither race nor color is commonly held by salsa musicians, dancers, and avid listeners. Salsa music and dance is considered by practitioners to be a unifier—a global phenomenon that brings people from diverse backgrounds together in the same space for mutual enjoyment. In this paper, I complicate notions of salsa as strictly a unifying force by arguing that the meanings ascribed to salsa music and the way these meanings are expressed through the body within clubs in the Triangle area (Raleigh/Durham/Chapel Hill) of North Carolina also creates divisions among actors of the salsa and broader Latin music scene. Following an ethnographic exploration of salsa clubs, I argue that salsa mediates subtle forms of territoriality. Communities of dancers are constructed around the ways in which the body responds to the salsa rhythm (i.e. salsa On-1, Mambo On-2, Cuban style salsa), therefore the micro-geographies of movement allow for the mobility of bodies through particular constructed communities. This process results in what I refer to as the bifurcated salsa scene. Examining the interactions between participants within this salsa scene elucidates the power dynamics involved when staking claims to legitimacy, authenticity, expert knowledge, and social and cultural capital. I am suggesting that the meanings ascribed to salsa music and dancing shape the spaces of pleasure and inclusion for some while defining spaces of exclusion for others within the Latin music scene in the Triangle.
As I hurry across the strip mall parking lot in my flip-flops, I quickly adjust the straps on my dress and glance at my watch: 11:13 p.m.—still relatively early. I double check my bag to be sure I haven’t forgotten anything: driver’s license, lip gloss, car keys, mints, baby powder, and most importantly, a pair of well-worn silver shoes that still have a sparkle or two left on the straps. As I approach the entrance, I can faintly hear the beginning of a smooth Oscar d’ León song from inside the club. Good, I think, I haven’t missed the salsa set. I greet the bouncer at the door and present my ID (a formality at this point, really) and observe the people lingering outside the club: a couple that appears to be engaged in some sort of intense discussion, a group of three young women dressed in jeans, uncomfortable-looking high heels, and sexy satin tops standing with arms crossed or hands on their hips, and a well-dressed hipster talking loudly on a cell phone in Spanish and trying—unsucessfully—to look as if he isn’t checking out the group of young women. I enter the club lobby, turn the corner, and immediately begin looking for people I recognize, hoping that the music doesn’t change before I get a chance to dance salsa. There are people gathered around the bar holding drinks and talking to each other while their eyes perpetually scan the crowd. A few couples on the floor twirl to the music, but more people sit at tables lining the dance floor watching the dancers, talking to each other, or trying to get the attention of the waitress. The club’s patrons are well dressed, relatively young (mostly in their twenties and early thirties), predominantly male, and almost exclusively Latino. The air is heavy with the smell of cigarettes and cheap cologne. Before I have a chance to change my shoes, the music changes to a fast-paced merengue. The lighting also changes to a hectic swirling of color. Men, attempting to not look too eager, hurry over to one of the limited number of women in the club to ask for a dance. In this moment, I have stepped into a cultural world with which few North Carolinians are familiar: a salsa nightclub. By entering the club wearing flip-flops yet carrying my own bag of unspectacular dance shoes, I have inadvertently marked myself as someone who has entered the space strictly for the purpose of dancing. This scene stands in sharp contrast to a salsa social I visited the previous weekend held at a local restaurant. There, the sparkle on my silver shoes paled in comparison to the expensive professional dance shoes carried in satin bags by “serious” dancers. Women, dressed elegantly in dresses that twirled around their legs, spun skillfully around their partners. The lighting was softer with no erratic twirls of color, and the hardwood floor was clean—no beverages had been carelessly spilled. The dance area was almost entirely cigarette smoke-free, and the tables next to the dance floor were cluttered with half-empty water bottles that far outnumbered glasses once containing expensive alcoholic beverages...

**Salsa: Politics in Motion**

Salsa music and dance is considered by many practitioners to be a unifier—a global phenomenon that brings people from diverse socioeconomic, generational, and cultural backgrounds together in the same space for mutual enjoyment. Many participants enjoy listening and dancing to salsa music, but clubs carry different meanings for individuals: salsa nightclubs represent space in which one can show off
dance moves learned in a salsa class, grab a drink and relax with friends in a Spanish-language atmosphere, browse for sexual partners, or even connect with a particular individual or with collective cultural identities while listening to music and interacting with people from back home. Dance clubs are spaces of opportunity for bodies to come into close, often intimate, contact with each other, allowing not only the movement of bodies through dance steps, but also the mobility of bodies through communities.

Exploring nightclubs as spaces of leisure, however, reveals contestations over space and identity that are often concealed behind salsa's narrative of intercultural harmony. The two scenes I describe above reflect the different socio-political spaces of salsa dance in the North Carolina Triangle area. While participants enjoy similar music in both salsa clubs, the way these two clubs function for participants is radically different. In this paper, I complicate notions of salsa as a strictly unifying force by arguing that the meanings ascribed to salsa music and the way these meanings are expressed through the body within clubs in the Triangle area (Raleigh/Durham/Chapel Hill) of North Carolina also creates bodies of desirability and zones of privilege and marginality among actors of the salsa and broader Latin music scene. This process results in segmented salsa spaces. Examining the interactions between participants within this salsa scene elucidates the power dynamics involved when staking claims to the dance floor through the execution of a desirable salsa performance. I argue that communities of dancers are organized around the ways in which the body responds to the salsa rhythm: micro-geographies of movement allow for mobility of bodies through particular constructed communities, creating spaces of pleasure and inclusion for some while defining spaces of exclusion for others. Ethnicity and class are implicated in the construction and spatial manifestation of desirability.

Geographies of Music and Embodiment
The musical event, according to Martin Stokes (1994, 3), “evokes and organizes collective memories and present experiences of place with an intensity, power, and simplicity unmatched by any other social activity. The places constructed through music involve notions of difference and social boundary.” It is impossible to talk about dance and experience in nightclubs without talking about the dancer’s relationship to salsa music—these components are inextricably intertwined. Salsa is a genre intended for dancing; the dance component cannot be ignored (Bosse 2003). Revill (2004, 207) points out that scholars have debated the nature of musical meaning and “the extent to which sound affects the body directly without mediation.” These debates, he argues, have direct implications for understanding the relationship between music, dance and expressivity. Saldanha (2005, 719) further argues that “music defines spaces of belonging through the repetition of difference. If music is nonrepresentational, neither reflecting nor transcending but shaping social reality, especially through dance, then the geography of music is the study of the interplay of sound, embodiment, space and politics.”
Salsa music is a catalyst in the Triangle scene; the force that brings people together in the same space demands a response expressed through the body. While it is salsa music that brings people together on the dance floor, it is the politics of dance that differentiates and segregates bodies. Generally speaking, participants in the North Carolina salsa scene are dancing to the same song, just on different beats—and it is through this differentiation that communities are created. Body movement is not dictated solely by a pre-cognitive response to music: bodily responses to salsa music are often carefully constructed and deliberately performed. Dance is a language of the body—a signifying system of images and symbolic gestures that communicates information and expresses emotion. For Gottschild (2003, 11), the dancer’s “body itself is the medium, with no intervention or go-between separating the artist from the art, the dancer from the dance.” Dance is creative bodily expression, but also a medium through which skill, desirability, and desire to belong are performed and communicated. Examining dance as a medium of expression, this paper focuses on those ideals that are communicated and represented through bodily movement, but also the ways in which bodies and space are produced together. I examine the body as a primary social text (Desmond 2006) as I explore Latin nightclubs in the Triangle as embodied and fluid places coalescing around a musical event.

Dance clubs provide opportunities for bodies to intimately come together. Passionate, occasionally contentious, contacts of and between bodies often create new geographies of community, relations, and resistance. These affective spaces are shared movements and shared moments—spaces constantly (re)created and (re) shaped by bodies through motion and interaction, while simultaneously inseparable from dynamic power relations of social position and identity. Although geographers have focused much attention on the body’s experience of place since the 1970s (e.g. Tuan 1977; Seamon 1980), the body in place has attracted renewed interest since the 1990s both from geographers and from influential scholars outside the field (e.g. Butler 1990, 1993; Grosz 1994; Rodway 1994; Longhurst 2001). Recently, scholars have turned toward a rigorous examination of embodiment and the body as the most intimate, personal geography. However, literature on the body reveals tensions between conceptualizations of the body as socially and discursively constructed and calls for increased examination of the materiality of bodily categories. Judith Butler argues that gender is performative in that it is constituted through repetition. Sex, like gender, is also a constructed category whereby regulatory norms materialize sex, achieving this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms (1990, 1993). Her work on the construction of gender through relations of power challenged geographers to examine the ways in which the body is spatially constituted (Pile 1994; Bell and Valentine 1995). Social science scholarship is experiencing a corporeal turn in which the materiality of the human body is re-examined. Longhurst (2001, 23), for instance, draws attention to abject bodies claiming that, while it has opened many avenues for
geographers, “one of the downsides of social constructionism...is that it can render the body incorporeal, fleshless, fluidless, little more than a linguistic territory. The materiality of the body becomes reduced to systems of signification.”

In this paper, I draw on scholarship in Geography that discusses embodied practices of everyday life and the political relationships between bodies and space. In the first place, Nast and Pile (1998, 4) argue that bodies and place are interrelated, and constituted through relations of power: “Bodies and places are...woven together through intricate webs of social and spatial relations that are made by and make embodied subjects.” Secondly, I employ De Certeau’s (1984) elucidations of the ways in which the embodied practice of walking through the city can been seen to resist the dominant spatial order and defy visual methods of surveillance and knowledge production. Lastly, Cresswell (1996) highlights the constructed nature of normative landscapes and the relationship between the social and the spatial. Following Cresswell, the concept of transgression allows me to examine the processes by which hegemonic, commonsense worlds are contested in everyday life by bodies out-of-place.

Despite the flurry of attention in Geography to the body, it is only recently that geographers, with an interest in embodiment, non-representational theory, and performativity, and in search of alternative ways of knowing, have examined dance practices more closely (Nash 2000; Davies and Dwyer 2007). Much of the work on dance within Geography has focused on connecting dance as cultural expression to identity, nation, citizenship, and public space. (Revill 2000; Cravey 2003; Leonard 2005; Somdahl 2007; Conover 2008). Dance theorist Jane Desmond (2006, 49) argues that “so many of our most explosive and most tenacious categories of identity are mapped onto bodily difference,” therefore “we should not ignore the ways in which dance signals and enacts social identities in all their continually changing configurations.” Scholars have also argued that dance has the ability to defy, evade, and subvert oppressive power structures and categorizations (Delgado and Muñoz 1997; Law 1997; Thrift 1997, 2008). It is the potential of dance to rewrite oppressive histories and re-inscribe oppressive categorizations that incite what Delgado and Muñoz (1997, 10) call “rebellions of everynight life” through dance practices. Examining dance clubs in London, Malbon (1999) asserts that dance, as an oceanic experience, can redefine power as internal vitality. However, just as dance has the power to liberate, it also has the ability to discipline, conform, and confine (cf. Gottschild 2003; McMains 2006; Revill 2004; Cresswell 2006). Cresswell (2006) explains, for instance, how the codification of ballroom dance stances and steps in 20th century Britain molded the posture of “respectable” members of British society, and modeled appropriate behavior against degenerate forms of bodily movement. Likewise, McMains (2006) details the ways in which the body is painstakingly trained through the restriction, control, and refinement of movements in order to portray the disciplined wildness associated with the Latin dances in American DanceSport. Dance, as a movement and performance of and between bodies, creates
and is created by spaces that are fluid, multiplicitous, and political. Massey (2005) sees space as the product of interrelations, as heterogeneous—comprised of the possibility of multiplicity and constantly in process. Grosz (1998) also points out the co-constitutive nature of bodies in place. In this paper, I engage notions of dressage and performativity to examine the ways in which dancing bodies and space are relationally constructed. I combine this with literature on embodied practices of “everynight” life to argue that the politics of dance opens possibilities for embodied negotiations of space through movement.

**Salsa no tiene fronteras?: An Introduction to Salsa in the Triangle**

Salsa’s history is complex and hotly contested by salsa’s followers. Salsa’s development and diffusion cannot be separated from a history of migration, first of Cuban and Puerto Rican music and musicians to New York in the mid-twentieth century, then of the global circulation of the music that became known as salsa (Román-Veláquez 2002). Essentially, salsa developed in Puerto Rican communities in New York City in the 1960s and 1970s. Scholars such as Aparicio (1989/90), Sánchez González (1999), Waxer (1999), and Renta (2004) argue that salsa is a form of cultural expression born out of opposition to U.S. cultural domination and has served as an identity marker particularly for working-class Puerto Ricans living in the margins of mainstream U.S. society. Working through Foucauldian notions of power and resistance, Renta (2004, 142) claims that the cultural affirmation that salsa dancing provides Latino/as possesses a “counterhegemonic potential.” Salsa clubs, as sites of salsa performance, are spaces in which certain identities are performed and reified. Sánchez González (1999, 245-246) describes her crusade to stake out zones on salsa dance floors where she and other Puerto Ricans, “motivated...by a righteous sense of entitlement over the music,” can reclaim salsa space from an “atmosphere of elitism.”

While salsa has strong interracial roots in New York City, Puerto Rican, Latin American, Jewish, and African-American musicians have been able to incorporate rhythms and melodies from all over the world. Despite this, salsa is typically labeled as either Cuban or Puerto Rican by almost everyone from musicians to fans to academics (Waxer 1999; Román-Veláquez 2002). Salsa’s popularity spread from New York to Latin America in the 1970s and to other parts of the world in the 1980s and 1990s (and continues to spread). Waxer (1999) identifies five transnational salsa schools that have strong regional affiliation: New York, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Colombia, and Cuba. She sees these as the centers of salsa music production. In casual conversation, dancers likewise identify several centers for the production of salsa dance styles: New York, Los Angeles, Cuba, and Colombia (and Puerto Rico and Miami to a lesser extent). Much of the discourse in the academy describes salsa as a (potentially) unifying form of cultural expression. For example, Aparicio (1998) and Sánchez González (1999) focus on how salsa music articulates Puerto Rican identity. Boggs (1992) similarly focuses on
salsa and its role in Afro-Cuban roots and intercultural development while Berrios-
Miranda (1999) highlights salsa’s ability to appeal to a sense of pan-Latin pride and
cultural identity. Scholarship has also examined salsa’s global circulation as a Latino,
transnational, or multicultural product (Santos Febres 1997; Skinner 2007) in London
(Román-Velázquez 1999; Urquía 2005), Toronto (Pietrobruno 2006), and Japan
(Hosokawa 1999). I contribute to this rich literature by including discussions of the
geographical concepts of territoriality, marginality, and transgression, in order to
highlight complex processes of exclusion, negotiation, and possibilities for belonging.
Waxer (1999, 6) points out that salsa “style and meaning are contingent to local and
historical practices” and that the global flows of salsa allow for a variety of performance
and consumption practices. It is with this concept of locality in mind that I examine the
Triangle salsa scene as containing elements of particularity. However, because Triangle
participants are connected to an international network of salsa dancers, certain practices
in this story are perhaps generalizable.

The Triangle area of North Carolina encompasses Orange, Wake, and Durham
counties. The area is home to Research Triangle Park, a collection of over 160 research
development organizations as well as universities and institutions. Research Triangle
Park has attracted young, educated, middle-class, and, often, single professionals from
diverse backgrounds to work in the Triangle area. The Park’s rapid growth has also
opened up employment opportunities in construction and landscaping as well as in
the service industries, jobs that have attracted a wave of Latino migration to the area.
Between 1990 and 2002, North Carolina experienced a 394% increase in the number
of Latino residents (Torres et al. 2003). The city of Raleigh, in particular, is considered
a Hispanic “hypergrowth” city because of the measured increase of the Hispanic
population by over 900% between 1980 and 2000 (Suro and Singer 2000; Smith
and Furuseth 2004). The early stages of this migration were heavily male; therefore
the Raleigh-Durham area also boasts the most lopsided sex ratio among foreign-born
Hispanics of any metropolitan area in the United States, with over two men aged 20
to 29 for every woman of the same age (Parrado, Flippen, and McQuiston 2004), a
factor that influences social interaction during leisure activities. This substantial in-
migration of Latino migration to NC challenges the black-white binary that dominates
conversations about race relations in the South (Winders 2005).

Coinciding with—but not necessarily a result of—this rapid in-migration is
the increasing interest in salsa music among both Latinos and non-Latinos alike. It is
important here to highlight the ways in which Triangle salsa dancers view their own
scene. Interestingly, accounts of the Triangle salsa scene are varied and contradictory,
and do not seem to follow any particular racial, gendered, or class-based patterns. Some
participants told me that they perceive dancers to be cliquish and have picked up on
tensions between dance styles and schools, while others feel the community is friendly.
Some believe the Triangle has some high caliber dancers and instructors and view the
Triangle scene as one in which people are serious about learning and improving their salsa skills. Others view participants as people who dance not for the joy of dancing, but for the challenge. Interviewees from a wide variety of backgrounds unanimously cited both a love of the music and a desire for community as their reasons for dancing salsa in the first place. In locating a place to dance salsa, Shavan indicated that she is ultimately in search of a “home” and “a family.” When I asked her to elaborate, she replied: “I’m definitely looking to have that relationship with people and share a common love” (2007). Likewise, Sara, a Ph.D. student feels that dancing in general and salsa in particular is a form of self-expression…I do it because it is challenging, I do it because I love to dance. It is a great way to connect to people… it’s become a global phenomenon and you can go pretty much anywhere and connect to people by dancing salsa, and by talking about salsa…which I have found to be wonderful in terms connecting to dancing in general. You almost instantly make friends when they find out that you can move the way they can (2008).

At the time of this research, there were approximately ten venues for dancing to Latin music in the Triangle, although this number fluctuates as venues open and close. Of these, I specifically focus on two clubs primarily because they represent two of the most popular clubs within their categories. Because these clubs were considered hot places to dance, attracting a wide range of the area’s salsa participants at particular moments during the course of my research, the socio-spatial phenomena occurring within these clubs are indicative of interactions within the area in general. Examining Montás and George’s Garage as representative case studies illustrates not only the ways in which the dance space is created, territorialized, and politicized, but also how dancers are produced by and produce this space.

Because an examination of body politics and movement is central to my project, I use the body as an analytical tool. I define critical performance ethnography as an approach in which I examine the interconnectedness and radical spatiality of body, identity, place, and event (Hart 2004) while recognizing and narrating my role as an active participant, being influenced by and influencing the situations and people involved in this research project (Conquergood 2002; Revill 2004; Scott 2006; Livermon 2007). I first entered the salsa scene as a dancer. As a non-Latin woman of color in my twenties, I suspect that participants in the salsa scene saw me first as a fellow dancer and as a university student second. It wasn’t until recently that those participants who became informants would come to know me as a researcher, although most salsa participants probably do not necessarily see me as a researcher. In addition to my role as an observing participant, methods for this project include casual conversations and in-depth interviews with participants, former participants, owners, and DJs during the following time periods: George’s Garage from January to May 2006, and January 2007 to May 2008; Montás Lounge from September 2004 to April 2006, and January 2007 to April 2007.
Setting the Scene: Salsa and Social Segmentation

George’s Garage is located in Durham, North Carolina near Duke University. George’s is a mid-range restaurant. On the second Saturday of every month, a local salsa school holds a social there. When I asked Francisco, the organizer of the salsa, why he chose this location, he responded that the restaurant is conveniently located not only for students but also for salsa participants in the Triangle and all over North Carolina. Additionally, the organizers “needed a place that has hardwood floors and a place that would understand that salseros don’t drink a lot” (Francisco 2008). The price for the salsa social is $12 (ladies pay $8 until 11:30 pm, after which they pay the full price) and the dress code is classy. Men are not allowed to wear jeans, hats, or tennis shoes. If they dress to impress, women are rarely turned away at the door.

The type of music, relatively high admission charge, and dress code all help determine the clientele at George’s: primarily of On-2 (mambo-style) dancers taking classes at salsa schools in the area. Dancing salsa On-2 means that one dances to a different beat of the music than dancing On-1. For example, a woman dancing On-2 (if she is following) takes her first step in-place with her right foot, then steps forward on her left foot for the second beat. When dancing On-1, the follower steps back on the first beat with her right foot. In her article tracing the history of mambo On-2, Hutchinson (2004, 122) quotes Angel Rodríguez, the founder of a particular style of On-2 dancing in New York as saying “early salseros and salseras danced a basic On-1 three-step with a limited repertoire of simple turns” reflected in the basic step still performed throughout the world. While salsa On-1 is most closely associated with the Los Angeles style of dancing in the United States, a variety of other regional styles dance On-1 such as Cuban and Colombian. The focus in mambo On-2, on the other hand, is intricate footwork and complex, fast, flashy turn patterns. On-2 dancers claim a strict adherence to the clave that allows for a relaxed look because they are stepping slightly behind the beat.

Vincent, an On-2 instructor in the Triangle area further explains the differences between dancing On-1 and dancing On-2:

When you dance to the clave you dance Mambo—you dance to the 2-side of the clave. The clave has a 2-side and a 3-side. So when you are dancing to the 2-side of the clave you’re dancing On-2, when you are dancing to the 3-side of the clave, you are dancing On-1. Now people dance most on the 3-side of the clave because most of the melody to the music goes to the 3-side of the clave... So if you are dancing On-2, you are dancing to the belly of the dance—to the underbelly, and when you are dancing On-1 you are pretty much dancing to the surface of the dance (2008).

The DJ at George’s Garage is instructed to play mostly son montunos, guarachas, and mambo son. According to Vincent, these music styles from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s have strong Afro-Cuban percussion sections that are more conducive to dancing On-2. In contrast, the melody and vocals are more prevalent in recent commercial salsa music.
This seemingly minute detail in bodily movement has created a major bifurcation of the salsa scene in the Triangle. For the most part, people in the Triangle who claim that they grew up dancing salsa tend to dance On-1 (though this group is a minority given that the majority of dancers in the Triangle area have started dancing later in life). In general, in order for most men to dance with the women who prefer On-2, they must have taken On-2 classes (which range in price from $10-$15 per group class to $65 per hour for a private lesson). On-2 dancers represent a middle class and are generally overwhelmingly non-Latino individuals with a relatively even gender balance. The club space at George's tends to be divided by class and ethnicity into locations of active participation, anticipated participation for those who would like to dance, but who for whatever reason, are not currently dancing, and the locations of observation usually reserved for those who have absolutely no desire to dance. Of course, not everyone enters a club with the intention of dancing. However, for those interested in dancing, the level of active participation is determined by the body's ability to move skillfully to the second beat of the music.

Montás Lounge, which first opened in 2000, was located in a shopping center near Research Triangle Park in Durham. At the beginning of this study, the owners of Montás emphasized a Caribbean identity for the club, reflected in decorations, musical selection, and marketing. Once inside the doors, patrons were greeted with a beach towel doubling as a map of the Dominican Republic hanging in the lobby; a mural was painted on the back wall depicting both a cityscape and a tropical beach scene in bright florescent colors, and the DJ booth was draped with a large Dominican flag, although other flags from Latin American countries hung from the ceiling just above the dance floor. Montás was marketed on its website as “All things Caribbean.” Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman (1997, 7) define tropicalizations as imbuing “a particular space, geography, group, or nation with a set of traits, images, and values” that exaggerate exotic representations of latinidad. Montás employed a tropicalizing marketing tactic to sell a Caribbean identified space to a largely non-Caribbean audience. This decoration stands in stark contrast to George's Garage where there are no symbolic markers of latinidad. The musical selection at Montás remained consistent: a nearly even mix of salsa, merengue, bachata, and reggaeton, reflecting the club's Caribbean identity. The cover charge at Montás was $10 with a relaxed dress code. Originally, Montás attracted a crowd of Latinos and non-Latinos from diverse generational and socio-economic backgrounds. However, while Montás attracted a diverse crowd of people, this crowd did not always share club space at the same time. According to the owners of Montás and based on my own observations of clientele attendance, people who wanted to learn or practice salsa typically attended lessons provided early on Sunday evenings and Fridays at 9:00 p.m. This crowd was disproportionately non-Latino, middle-class, and university-educated compared to later in the evenings on Friday and Saturday nights. Typically, many of the people taking the salsa class left Montás before 11:30 p.m., when
the regular crowd of club dancers (more heavily Latino, working class, and male) began to arrive, resulting in a temporally bifurcated salsa scene.

In fall 2006, Montás underwent a process of transition both in terms of the clientele and club identity. New decorations within the club created a dark and subdued atmosphere. The music selection, however, remained an even Caribbean mix. The clientele that was originally racially, ethnically and socio-economically diverse increasingly became primarily Latino, working class, and heavily male throughout the night. This change was, in part, a result of the growing popularity of On-2 style among people learning to dance salsa in the Triangle. The unspoken designation of Montás as a space marked by untrained salsa dancers led to what some considered to be an inferior dancing experience. Montás was avoided by On-2 dancers, and those aspiring to fit in with the middle-class On-2 crowd. In a short period of time (since about 2002), the On-2 scene in the Triangle has become successful to the extent that New York style On-2 dancing has become recognized as the dominant dance style.

The Material and Discursive Construction of Desirable Salsa Bodies

These two case studies depict the ways in which the body’s response to music has spatial implications. In the Triangle salsa scene the desirable salsa body is physically and discursively constructed through training body movements, adorning the body, and debating the authenticity of one style over the other. Examining this process allows for an exploration of the dancing body as a medium of expression, communicating skill and a desire for belonging. It also allows us to understand the ways in which bodies and space are co-produced.

Judith Butler describes performativity as the means by which gender is realized through the repetition and ritual of hegemonic norms. Scholars have borrowed Butler’s description of performativity to describe the ways in which gendered identities are performed through dance (Pietrobruno 2006; see also Nash 2000). Further, employing Lefebvre’s (2004) notion of dressage to the construction of bodily desirability allows for a more flexible approach to agency, and more adequately captures the instability and openly contested natured of these categories. In describing dressage, Lefebvre (2004, 39) argues that to enter into a society or group is to accept its values and to “bend oneself” or allow oneself to be bent to the ways of the group. Through training [le dressage] and repetition, humans “break themselves in” and modify their bodies to the rites and rhythms of the group, revealing interactions that produce themselves through the need and desire for belonging. Gregson and Rose (2000, 434) argue that space also must be “thought of as brought into being through performances and as a performative articulation of power” insisting on the “complexity and uncertainty of performances and performed spaces.” In the case of the Triangle salsa scene, belonging to a “community” of salsa dancers entails training one’s body to adhere to the accepted comportment and ideals/images of that particular community.4
It is necessary to point out that regardless of what salsa style a person dances or when, where, or how that individual learns to dance, there are skills acquired to be able to bend the body to create salsa movements. As Gottschild (2003, 11) asserts, learning to style the body in the patterns of a particular dance form requires a “most intimate, inseparable relationship between process and product.” She argues that the “body may be praised for having ‘good’ feet, energy, jump, turnout, sense of rhythm, or whatever else fits the leader’s aesthetic preference; but still, it must be brought under control, must conform to an ideal” (Gottschild 2003, 11). In the Triangle area, there are tensions between “natural” salsa dancers (considered to dance On-1) and “trained” salsa dancers (considered to dance On-2) over which style of dancing is legitimate and desirable. But while these categories are often discussed by Triangle salsa dancers as fixed, homogenous entities, they are actually porous and multiplicitous. Natural salsa dancers in the Triangle area are labeled as such because they have learned to dance in more informal settings, either with family or friends in the home, or by participating in social events or venues where salsa is danced (such as parties, clubs, and festivals). In describing the way they dance, natural dancers take pride in sabor—the “Latin flavor” of their dancing—as well as level of improvisation and the diversity of dance steps and patterns in the repertoire. Perhaps because these moves have not been learned in a class, dancers feel that strict adherence to specific turn patterns and rules is not necessary. Additionally, natural dancers tend to listen to a particular instrument or the sound of the music rather than a counting the eight beats in the measure. Trained salsa dancers, in contrast, have learned to dance in class or studio environment where the focus is on specific technique. Dance moves are generally learned first without the music by drills and repetition. In these learning environments, the emphasis is often on precision: precise finger placement, toe position, weight shifting, shoulder shimmies, body rolls, hip motion, head snaps, leg flares, and arm gestures.

In addition to training the body to perform appropriate movements, the desirable salsa dancing body is also constructed through the development of a salsa body image. The body is adorned with artifacts recognizable to the other members of the salsa community including special shoes, clothing that will display movement, hair products, jewelry, and make-up. While the construction of the ideal salsa body is primarily (and more easily) achieved through adornment, the material body is also manipulated to reproduce and represent a desirable image particularly in social settings in which salsa is seen by participates as a challenge or a form of exercise. This manipulation is achieved through weight loss, “salsa booty” workout classes, push-up bras, and shoe lifts (the latter two used clandestinely to alter the appearance of the body). While both communities construct an ideal salsa body through image and movement, this practice is intensified in the On-2 scene in the Triangle. The construction of a desirable salsa body is more blatantly encouraged and actively pursued in the On-2 scene for several reasons. First, several of the On-2 schools in the Triangle area have professional
performance teams with regional, and in some cases, international reputations in the salsa world. For the most part, the goal of the team is to produce a performance product the quality of which is often assessed not only by the intricacy of the turn patterns and the difficulty of tricks, but also (importantly) through the uniformity of bodies in motion. A performance is often considered successful if bodies are moving in the exact same way at the exact same time. One extreme example of this pursuit of uniformity is the utilization of spray-on tans and hair dye in addition to the typical accoutrements of dance team costumes (such as false eye lashes, fingernail polish, and hair pieces) to create illusion of sameness. Second, the On-2 social events, like the parties at George's Garage, are venues for the presentation and performance not only of the ability of salsa bodies, but also the look, particularly through the emphasis on classy attire. Finally, salsa instructors in the On-2 scene become known for a personal style of dancing that is taught to and performed through their students. Salsa students are thus transformed into dancing advertisements for the skills and services of On-2 instructors and schools.

In addition to the material construction of a desirable dancing body, the salsa body is also discursively produced, a process most noticeable in authenticity debates among salsa practitioners between those who prefer to dance On-1 and those who prefer to dance On-2. The authenticity debate is difficult to untangle because of the complex history and contested origins of salsa music itself among those very musicians linked to the foundations of salsa music. The majority of dancers in the Triangle area did not grow up dancing either salsa On-1 or On-2, and narratives claiming salsa style become as complex and intricately woven as turn patterns on the dance floor. This debate over authenticity in the Triangle (which is indicative of arguments in other locations as salsa becomes globally popular) is a political project, essentially about legitimacy, and is meant to determine who has a right to the social and economic spaces that salsa dancing provides. In casual conversations with participants in the Triangle salsa scene, salsa On-1 is constructed as natural, untrained, “street,” and fun, while mambo On-2 is constructed as professional, “hardcore,” and skilled. These categories are relationally constituted; each one is defined against the other such that in accusing a natural (On-1) dancer of being a wild and unpredictable lead, a trained (On-2) dancer is actually praising his or her own precise body movement and consistent lead. In describing a trained dancer as rigid and formulaic, the natural dancer is claiming a smooth, sexy, and spontaneously creative dance style. The most vociferous proponents of these debates and categorizations mold and discipline their own bodies to strive to adhere to these ideals. Because the majority of natural On-1 dancers are Latinos who have learned salsa outside of the Triangle area, On-1 becomes associated with a Latino category. McMains (2006, 167) illustrates how this constructed dichotomy of the studio dancer (representing technique) and the street dance (representing sabor) reinforces dangerous racial stereotypes of Latinos as “primitive, untrained, and natural.” While On-1 is casually associated with a Latin category in the Triangle, On-2 is not necessarily racially
coded; it is determined by privilege and desirability that is not particularly linked to \textit{latinidad}. Instead, access to spaces of privilege is awarded to those who can master the desired look and movement of the salsa body. Theoretically, anyone—regardless of background—can achieve this look. Yet it is more easily accessed for those with adequate financial resources and leisure time available to dedicate to lessons, outfits, travel, and cover charges. The “trained” On-2 community tends to therefore be more middle-class, international, racially and ethnically mixed, and gender balanced than the “natural” On-1 salsa scene.

Regardless of dance style, the desirable salsa dancing body is painstakingly constructed and communicates the achievement of this desirability through presentation and performance. Although the narrative of what counts as aesthetically pleasing differs between salsa communities, all salsa dancers attempt to move their bodies in ways considered to be attractive by these specific groups. The dancing body communicates skill—an embodied understanding of the accepted or established salsa dancer. In this performance, the dancer is powerfully motivated by a desire for belonging, whether to a community or in a space. In the next section, I outline how the power structures and negotiations that operate to determine desirable salsa bodies can also regulate salsa social space. Zones of marginality are created that can exclude individuals whose look does not align with these notions of desirability. Belonging in space is, however, continuously negotiated and contested.

\textbf{Embodied Negotiations of Space and Power}

The construction of desirable salsa bodies and debates over authenticity have spatial implications. The interaction of these differently and relationally constructed salsa bodies politicize the dance club, creating dance spaces that are territorialized and negotiated and where dominant ideals of desirability are contested through movement and interaction of bodies in place. Dance club spaces also influence the ways in which salsa bodies interact and perform, therefore the relationship between body and space is co-constitutive. De Certeau (1984, 98) describes the everyday practices of walkers in the city as annunciation: an embodied declaration, “a spatial acting out of place.” By walking through the city, the pedestrian not only follows paths provided by a system of spatial order, but also creates new paths, thereby opening new possibilities for movement through space. Walking is “a process of appropriation of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian” (de Certeau 1984, 98). Building on de Certeau’s essay, Tovi Fenster (2005) examines everyday walking practices in London and Jerusalem as a way of marking territory and appropriating space. She argues that belonging and attachment are established on the basis of “knowledge, memory, and intimate corporal experiences of everyday walking” (2005, 243). It is through the ritualized and repetitious use of space that individuals develop an attachment and belonging to space and the creation of territory. Extended to dance and the political interrelationship not only between bodies
in space, but also between space and the body, these arguments show how the dancing body appropriates space and communicates a desire to belong to a salsa community by performing the embodied ideals of that community. Embedded in spaces of leisure, desire, and pleasure are power structures that create zones of inclusion and exclusion that are often racialized and class-based. Importantly, these spaces of belonging are not static—they are constantly and often subtly contested and negotiated.

Through explorations of Montás and George’s Garage, it is clear that the salsa scene is territorialized, and an inside is created for dancers who can adequately perform the proper body movements and footsteps and who can appropriately present their adorned bodies. Each scene creates its own spaces of belonging (inside) and constructs its own sense of desirability against the other, and noticeable territories are carved out in each club for desirable salsa bodies. When Montás closed for financial reasons not entirely linked to the club’s popularity (mismanagement), debates over authenticity and struggles for territory became more prevalent and vociferous.

Montás Lounge closed down during the summer of 2007. In the following months, the crowd at George’s Garage had a far larger representation of Latino men than in previous months. This group of Latinos, while not considered by George’s Garage regulars as salseros (and would probably not identify themselves as such), had fewer choices of salsa music venues in the area after Montás closed. These men were considered by some to be transgressors in the On-2 world of salsa. Several members of the regular George’s crowd commented to me about a lack of space on the dance floor (crowded dance floors make elaborate styling and turn patterns difficult) and one woman complained that although there were a lot of men present, she was having a hard time finding men with whom she felt she could dance. In November 2007, the organizers of the salsa nights at George’s Garage opened a music and dance venue next door called G-Loft where the DJ would be spinning merengue, bachata, commercial salsa, and reggaetón. The venue managed to divert some of the non-salsa dancers from George’s Garage to G-Loft, relieving some of the pressure on the dance floor and reinstating the bifurcated salsa scene. The G-Loft, on the other hand, served as a space for those who did not necessarily belong in George’s Garage. Whether originally designed for this purpose or not, G-Loft attracted those who might otherwise have contaminated the site of salsa elite, the site of desirability, the inside. George’s Garage became an understood venue for the salsa elite—those who have been able to meticulously train their bodies in classes to perform a number of intricate movements conveying specific notions of femininity and masculinity, and appropriate sensuality. Salsa classes therefore became avenues for the construction of a specific desired body while George’s Garage became a venue for the presentation of this desired body, the designated space to allow for an adequate presentation of this desired body. This designated space was policed to privilege this desirability not only through cover charges and dress code enforcement, but also through protocols that include the ways in which dancers decide how to request and
accept dances. Eventually, G-Loft transitioned away from Latin music, making George's Garage the premier location for salsa music on the second Saturday of the month. The dance floor became divided into spaces of privilege and marginalization that typically align with social class, technical skill, national origin, and desirability. On-2 dancers occupied the edges next to the tables and to the entrance so that they were well lit and well positioned while performing under the gaze of spectators. Elite dancers always are aware of the ever-present possibility of this gaze (and in some cases they seek it out). This panoptic spectatorship is one way in which space produces salsa bodies: salsa dancers, while not always sure if they are being watched or not, perform for the possibility of this spectatorship. On-1 dancers are often relegated to dancing in the middle of the floor or in the darker back corner.

The privileges of "center stage" in the Triangle's salsa clubs are fluid and contested. Participants in the salsa scene engage in a variety of subtle and not-so-subtle struggles for positioning, legitimacy, and belonging-in-space. Because mambo On-2 has become the dominant style of dancing, the organizers of salsa events at George's Garage, the founders of one of the On-2 schools in the area, control access to this social space. Control is achieved most obviously by charging a cover for entry and implementing a dress code. However, control of space is established in other ways as well. By training salsa bodies in On-2 classes, instructors are able to reproduce an embodied image of desirability. Salsa participants who have not managed to master this specific look and movement of desirability generally to not get asked to dance as often, nor are their requests for dances accepted as frequently (or if dances are accepted, women will lead men who they consider to be less desirable dancers to marginal areas of the dance floor so as not to be seen). Likewise, dancers who have not achieved this particular level of desirability are generally maneuvered to the sidelines by the elaborate moves of the salsa elite. However, dominant representations of desirability are fluid and constantly shifting, and these spatialities are porous and negotiated.

Dancers and participants challenge the control of On-2 spaces by the salsa elite by transgressing these spaces through dance. Tim Cresswell (1996) uses transgression to examine the intertwined relationship between the body, place, and socio-cultural power and ideology. For Cresswell, whether intentionally political or not, a transgressive act induces “reactions that reveal that which was previously considered natural and commonsense” (1996, 10). Cresswell’s work on transgression “suggests that those that do not know the routine will appear clumsy and ‘out-of-place’ simply through the non-conformity of their bodily practice” (1996, 34). The most blatant example of intentional transgressive acts are perhaps carried out by a school of Cuban-style salsa dancers (most of whom are not of Cuban descent) who openly criticize “American-style” salsa dancing (they include both On-1 and On-2 under this label) as less authentic, less “raw” than Cuban style, which they argue is closer to its African roots. For the most part, this school sticks to dancing at its own studio where it prefers to play timba music (as opposed to
mambo preferred by On-2 dancers) for its students. However, a goal of the dancers is to “shake things up,” to make their presence known in the Triangle area by demonstrating their style in public. Juan, one of the organizers of the Cuban-style group, is annoyed with the ways in which salsa has been presented in the Triangle and is actively engaged in “trying to make some changes in the way salsa is perceived.” During a live music event, this Cuban school chose to make their presence felt—quite literally—on the dance floor. After dancing mambo next to a group of Cuban-style dancers, I left the dance floor with bruised limbs from the physical bumping that took place during the dance. Dancers in general have developed an effective method of physical positioning that involves subtly elbowing and kicking dancing neighbors (or in-the-way spectators). The practices of this Cuban-style school are indicative of intentional transgression in an attempt to claim territory and provide a counter-narrative of authenticity against what they perceive to be the dominant practice and understanding of salsa and salsa bodies in the area. Of course, transgressive acts are not always intentional. Former Montás clientele began dancing at George’s Garage, and while this group went to George’s Garage for a variety of reasons, they were often seen as transgressors of the On-2 scene because they were taking up space on the dance floor and their moves were out-of-sync with the established norm.

Conclusion
Geographers have used music and dance to examine the relationship between bodies, space, and power. In outlining Non-Representational Theory (nrt), Thrift (1997) uses dance to illustrate the possibilities for alternate notions of resistance through the embodied practices of play, and play has the possibility to elude power rather than confronting it. Saldanha (2005, 717) argues that this approach is useful in engaging the “directness of the sensory experience,” but “gives scant attention to the differentiations between bodies, and therefore to the actual politics that arise in spaces like those of dance.” He further argues that “music is always bound up in power struggles” and that it is music’s ability to affect/effect the body that makes it political. Music “acts as an operator arranging bodies and things—weaving some bodies together, and excludes others” (Saldanha 2005, 708). In the salsa scene in the Triangle area of North Carolina power structures are embedded in salsa practices and communities. These struggles are manifested on the body (in the form of bruises), through the body (in the ways in which salsa is danced), and within the nightclubs (in the division of space to privilege desired dancing bodies). Spaces are policed and self-regulated to privilege desirability; bodily movement indicates struggles for legitimacy, territory, and belonging is negotiated among salsa dancers in the Triangle. The dancing event as a social activity creates its own power and power structures, its own rules, its own inside and outside. In the Triangle salsa scene, these power structures take the form of dominant constructions of desirable salsa bodies and the ways in which these bodies create, control, and shape
dance club space. Power, however, is as flexible and fluid as the dancing body itself—it is carried through the body, between bodies, and in the relationship between dancing bodies and space. The practices of everyday life demonstrate that the politics of dance open possibilities for embodied negotiations of space through movement.

Salsa clubs can be examined as microcosms of broader societal interactions. The divisions occurring in the Triangle scene are not unique to North Carolina, but occur in other areas as well (Bloom 2007). Acrimonious debates about the legitimacy of mambo On-2 or salsa On-1 are emblazoned across salsa T-shirts, waged on salsa websites, and at salsa congresses and competitions world-wide. However, North Carolina and the U.S. South is a context in which social interactions have been traditionally framed in terms of a black/white binary. This dualism has been complicated by a recent, substantial wave of Latino migration representing a population that does not necessarily fall into or buy into typical notions of race in the South (Winders 2005). Salsa scenes are stages for the interrogation of both social practices rooted in the movement and aesthetics of the body, as well as for those categories that are written on the body. While class and ethnicity play a role in constructions of desired salsa bodies and spaces, there is a distinct need to not simply boil this interaction down to a class or cultural conflict. The desired look, while influenced by race, class, and ethnicity, is not determined exclusively by these. Mambo On 2, for instance, has in many ways been delinked from a Latino category in the Triangle context. However, inferiority is ascribed to people who dance in a particular style as well as to the spaces that foster the practitioners of particular dances styles. As in the case of Montás, salsa dancing is implicated in the subtle processes of racialized territorialization. The North Carolina salsa scene illuminates the fluidity of categories and opens possibilities for interrogating complex and often subtle processes of racialization and resistance.

This has been a story of salsa as experienced through the micro-geographies of bodily movement and through place. Dance is corporeally rooted, an embodied expression of emotions and desire inspired not only by the music, but by interactions in space as well. Dance is communication, interaction, negotiation—politics in motion. This story is not simply about dancing to a different beat of the music; rather, it is about being out-of-sync and feeling out-of-place. The interaction of relationally constructed salsa bodies politicize the dance club, creating dance space that is territorialized and negotiated where dominant ideals of desirability are contested through movement and interaction of bodies in space. Dance club spaces also influence the ways in which salsa bodies interact and perform, therefore the relationship between body and space is co-constitutive.

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**Endnotes**

1 The term Latin music often has multiple meanings. Waxer (2002a) applied the term to Cuban and Puerto Rican music of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, but mentions that Latin music also occasionally includes South American genres such as the Argentine tango and the Brazilian samba and bossa nova. In using the term Latin Music, I am referring to the music mostly commonly played in North Carolina’s Latin music clubs: salsa, mambo, merengue, bachata, reggaetón. This combination of music genres is also often referred to as the Caribbean Mix by DJs and club owners.

2 For nuances of the debate on the origins of salsa or whether or not it is even a genre at all, see Boggs (1992), Manuel (1994), Aparicio (1998), Sanchez-Gonzales (1999), Berrios-Miranda (1999, 2002), and Acosta (2004).

3 All names have been changed to protect the identity of participants in this project.

4 This is determined in part by area instructors, but also by media images, youtube videos, and salsa congresses.

5 Juliet McMains (2006) provides an interesting discussion of the use of ‘brown face’ in Dance Sport to create the illusion of a “Latin” body.

6 Dance scholars have recognized that dance moves learned socially or in the home also requires a particular learned skill and technique, yet this technique is not commonly recognized in casual conversations with salsa dancers in the Triangle.

7 Juliet McMains (2006; 2009) highlights a similar distinction between the Latin dances in the DanceSport and salsa. The ballroom Latin dancer is often described as possessing technique derived from years of rigorous training and intense discipline. The salsa dancer, in contrast, is characterized as dancing with sabor—meaning ‘flavor’ or ‘soul’—a distinction based primarily on the improvisational and poly-rhythmic character of the movement. I am arguing that this dichotomy also exists within the salsa industry, and is expressed in the distinction between salsa On 1 and mambo On 2.

8 For examples of websites and online discussions, see salsacity.com, salsavancouver.net, pasofinopro.com, and thisbusinessofdanceandmusic.com. Many of websites have also published John Johnson’s essay on this debate.

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