

NEGOTIATING SALSA THROUGH GLOBAL MATRICES

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Many dances today exist as global trans-local matrices. They are found in local settings throughout the world, between which there might be variation in elements of movement, musical choices, dance culture, and conceptualization; however, they are still recognised as being part of the same phenomenon. Each local practice is connected to and interacts with others through migration of practitioners and digital media. These connected local practices create a global matrix, which is at once unified and varied across both space and time. Further, the degree of variation between local practices, in terms of movement, music, culture and conceptuality, reflect significantly upon the nature of the dance phenomenon that umbrellas the matrix. Thus, the study of dance forms as matrices is important in understanding both the dance in a particular locale, and dances as a global phenomena.

Whether we examine contemporary dance from Taiwan to Johannesburg, *salsa* from Mumbai to Dublin, *Bharatanatyam* from Los Angeles to Singapore or bellydancing from Sydney to Toronto, local practices interconnect and vary in characteristic and revealing ways. For example, there is relatively little variation in global ballet practice beyond the different traditions, which have no relation to current dance geography, since the movement form and aesthetics are relatively standardised by canonical tradition, *Bharatanatyam* as another classical dance is similar in this way. On the other hand, styles like contemporary dance, *salsa*, and bellydancing have a greater inherent flexibility through their less prescriptive aesthetics or their natures as social or improvisational forms, resulting in more variety across their global matrices, the nature and scope of which being unique in each case.

This paper will describe local practice examples from the global *salsa* matrix. It will begin by briefly establishing what defines *salsa* then examine the ways in which the dance is flexible, how it varies in different locales, and what this suggests about both the specific local practices and the form as a whole. Descriptions are based on my own dance experience, observation, discussion, and literature review. The approach is thus phenomenological, reflecting upon my experiences dancing *salsa* in different locales,

including New York, London, Hong Kong, and Spain, and with dancers from Japan, Korea, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, India, Australia, Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Columbia, Brazil, Benin, Madrid, Italy, France, Norway, New York and Los Angeles at the Hong Kong *Salsa* Festivals from 2010-2015. It is also ethnographic, utilising participant observation and drawing on my emersion in *salsa* communities in the places I have practiced, as well as in my use of teachers and dancers as informants from the countries listed above, whom I asked to reflect on their personal experiences and their discussion and dancing with other dancers. Finally, the paper will reflect on popular video sources found on social media, *salsa* blogs, and websites (those recommended by dancers and those with the most hits) -- sources frequently discussed by practitioners and a vital part of contemporary *salsa*. Practice experience, practice and video observation, and continual dialogue with dancers has allowed me to observe aspects of commonality and uniqueness, and discussion with global practitioners has enabled me to verify these observations as far as is possible.

What makes “*salsa*”?

The *salsa* matrix is at once varied and unified. At its core are certain definitive and essential movement elements from which so many variables emerge. It is the stepping pattern and resultant body movement, over and above everything else, that identify a dance as *salsa*. Movement begins from the basic stance in which the feet are in parallel, knees softened, and hips released slightly back at the waist, while the upper body is upright and the weight forward over the balls of the feet. This basic position embodies relaxed readiness and allows the freedom of movement that is necessary in the dance. *Salsa*'s characteristic body movement, often misinterpreted as a swing of the hips, is actually a result of the basic stance in coordination with the footwork. Referred to as “Cuban motion,” as the dancer steps on one foot the knee of that leg bends slightly causing the hip to push out to the other side, while the rib cage moves in opposition (figs. 1&2). The overall effect is one of swaying hips and a smaller sideways movement of the ribcage.



Figs. 1&2 Cuban motion. Pictures by Author.

The basic step which defines *sa/sa* involves a three-step pattern with two steps in place and one step “breaking” out to the front, back or side, in which the “break” can take place on the first or second step of the sequence creating a pattern of either “step-break-step” or “break-step-step”. The dance is often counted in 4/4 timing using two bar measures, with the basic step repeated in opposite directions in each bar. In most styles the steps are on 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, and 7, with the breaks on the 1 and 5 or 2 and 6, while the 4 and 8 are unmarked. Timing in most Latin and ballroom dance is referred to in terms of quick and slow steps, and this has been adopted in *sa/sa*. A quick step means that one step is taken for one beat of the music; a slow step means that a step is taken on one beat and held over the next. *Salsa* consist of two quicks and one slow, and while the pattern “quick-quick-slow” is most common it is not universal: Cuban dances often use the pattern slow-quick-quick, including some versions of Cuban *sa/sa*. This triple step with break, set to the four beat measure, with quick and slow steps, creates an array of possible rhythmic interpretations on a basic, fundamental pattern.

Salsa is predominantly a couple’s dance with a leader and follower. In addition to the basic step, partnerwork is mainly made up of a number of set pieces, commonly including the “cross body lead,” “open break,” “right hand turn,” “left hand turn,” “walk under,” and “inside turn,” all of which follow the timing and breaking pattern of the basic step. In the cross body lead the leader steps out of the way as the follower travels their breaking step across in front, then turns back to face them. In the open break both dancers break backwards in opposition. The left and right hand turns are turns in place, clockwise and counterclockwise respectively. Finally, the inside turn and walk under are cross body leads combined with turns to the left and right respectively. Composition is generally made up of these patterns, combined with dips, lifts and tricks to varying degrees of complexity.

Couples also break apart to perform solo moves called “shines”, for which there are numerous recognised patterns, and where dancers can also incorporate body isolations and poses, in which there is almost total freedom to improvise, so long as the basic musicality and style of *salsa* are adhered to.

In addition to the steps, termed “styling” in *salsa*, there are distinct aesthetics to the dance. Some of these are universal, while others are shared between certain versions, and others still are more unique. *Salsa* is foremost a social improvisational dance, and a joyful, relaxed yet energised feel is fundamental, embodied in the basic stance. Body part isolation is also key, exemplified by the Cuban motion, pertaining to its Afro-Latin origins. Musicality is vital, and beyond the basic *salsa* rhythms the dancer responds to the music through their choice and execution of moves and embellishments. Styling also embodies preferred qualities such as masculinity and femininity, elevation, dynamism, elegance, sensuality, flashiness and others.

What this creates as a whole is a movement complex based around the triple step with break in a combination of one slow and two quick steps, with characteristic body movement and use of couples and apart dancing, in addition to which there are certain recognised patterns that also typify *salsa*. Beyond this, elements of musical treatment and styling allow for stylistic preferences. This creative freedom has enabled many things to be done in the name of *salsa*, while remaining part of the matrix.

The Matrix

There are almost as many different versions of *salsa* as there are dancers, and this capacity for adaptation is part of its enduring appeal. However, *salsa* has certain distinct, recognised forms, with national, local or individual preferences creating further variation within each. The main divisions came about with the development of *salsa* in the United States, in the urban centres of New York and Los Angeles, as well as in Cuba and in Cali, Colombia. In each location the dance was influenced by local elements and came to incorporate slight differences in terms of musicality and style. These different versions of *salsa* are definitively demarcated and of paramount importance literally from the first step.

The most popular form of *salsa*, globally, is “On 1” or “L.A. style”¹, in which the break is on the first step on the first beat of the 4/4 measure with a pattern of quick-quick-slow (fig. 3). This emphasis on the downbeat makes it easy for most dancers to follow, and

¹ “On 1” refers to timing, while “L.A. Style” also includes elements of styling and execution.

within the music, dancers can move to the rhythm of the cowbell and *guiro*, which play a rhythmic structure similar to the dance.

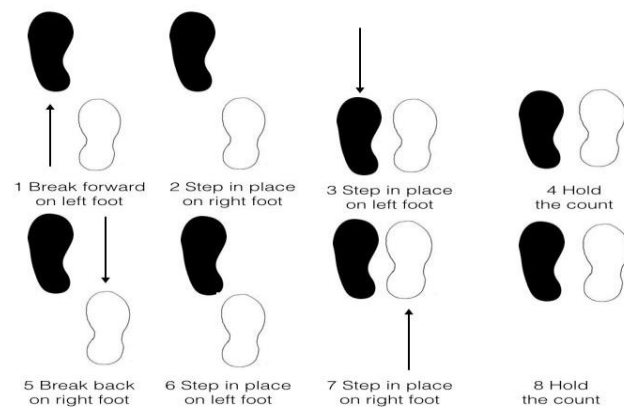


Fig. 3 Leaders step on 1. Picture by Author.

Observation and practice, including workshops with 9-times World Champion Liz Lira, reveal that L.A. style is elegant and flamboyant; it has a greater sense of elevation than other styles, with elongated lines of the body, and uses a more turns, lifts and tricks. L.A. *salsa* shows influence from Latin and ballroom dances as well as West Coast swing in its elegant nature and the use of lifts and show moves. The style dominates the global matrix, especially in the new *salsa* capitals of India, Russia, China, Europe and elsewhere.



Figs. 4,5 & 6 L.A. style elegant, elongated pose, spins and dips
 "Sydney's Best Salsa Social Finals 2013"

YouTube video, 11:16. Posted by "Steve Fernandez," upload Jul 15 2013
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oq3gUrhKTE8>

In “New York Style” *salsa*, or “*Mambo*”, the break is “On 2”.² There are four possible and two common versions, however, the most widespread is “Eddie Torres” timing, in which there is a small directional step on 1, followed by a break on 2 and return on 3 in a pattern of quick-quick-slow (fig. 7).

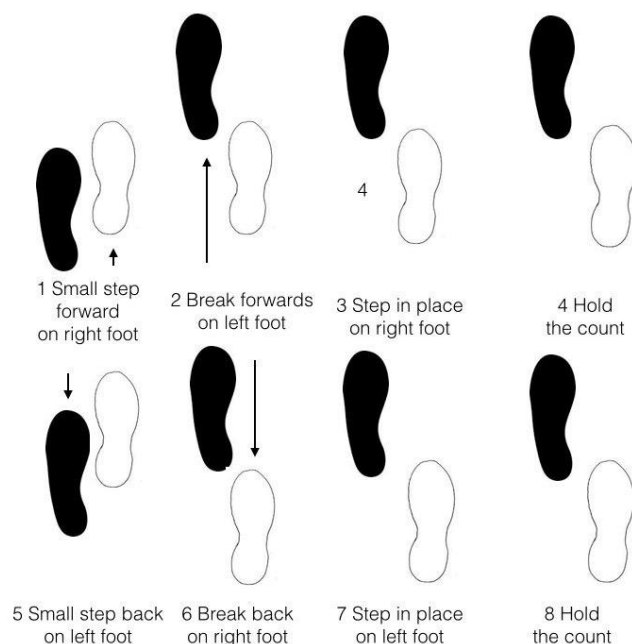


Fig. 7 Leader’s step Eddie Torres Timing On 2. Picture by Author.

“On 2” timing is danced to the *tumbao* pattern, played on the *conga* drums and described verbally as “cu, cum... pa...”, with dancers breaking on the emphatic “cum”, falling near the 2, described as dancing “*a contratiempo*”.

New York *Salsa* is characterised by a smooth flowing style with complex, fast, tightly woven patterns, and an emphasis on solo shines (figs. 8&9). The dance shows influences from breakdancing, Puerto Rican salsa, a other Latin American dances such as *chacha* and *pachanga*, as well as East Coast swing. Less universal than “on 1”, salsa “on 2” is popular in Japan and Korea, but many “on 1” dancers worldwide also dance “on 2”.

² Again these terms reference style and timing, or timing exclusively.



Figs. 8 & 9. Smooth body movement and tight patterns.
 “3º Peru Salsa Congress 2013 - Social Dance Frankie Martinez 2”
 YouTube video, 1:56. Posted by “Andy Contreras,” upload Feb 24 2013.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xnN7ieQoJ4Q>

In Cuban *salsa* the break is usually on the first or third step of the sequence, although in practice the concept of the breaking step is more flexible, and I have observed dancers breaking on any beat, depending on the pattern they are executing. However, the most important distinction in Cuban *salsa* is that partners circle one another, rather than dancing in a linear fashion (fig. 10). This means, for example, in a cross body lead, instead of the leader stepping backwards as the follower passes in a straight line, the leader guides the follower around him in a circle. In addition, the style of execution has a lower body-weight orientation, a forwards lean of the torso, and greater bend in the knees. Dancers from Mexico told me all of these features are common across much of Latin America, and that they found the strict breaking patterns and linear floor work of an “On 1” workshop extremely challenging.



Fig. 10 Cuban *salsa* dancers circling one another.
 “Salsa, Rueda de casino “Casa de la Trova” Santiago de Cuba.Feb.2011”
 YouTube video, 4:35. Posted by “Wicoiye,” upload Apr 11 2011.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xpiG-mV5qc>

Cuban music and dance, including *salsa*, is centred around the rhythm of the *claves*, of which there are four types: the 3-2 and 2-3 *son claves*, and the 3-2 and 2-3 *rumba claves*.³ The 3-2 *clave* patterns are counted 1-2-3, 1-2 and the 2-3 counted 1-2, 1-2-3. Most *salsa* music uses one of the *son claves*, though a *rumba clave* is occasionally used in *rumba* sections. These patterns cover two 4/4 measures: for example, in the 3-2 *son clave* the first 1-2-3 are played near the 1, the "and" after the 2, and the 4, and the second 1-2 near counts 6 and 7. Thus, if a dancer is "in *clave*" then their steps will vary between being on beat and syncopated. However, there are different ways of matching the steps to the *clave*: in the 3-2 pattern dancers can break on the 1, step in place on the 2 and 3, break again before the second part, and step in place on the 1-2, effectively dancing "on 1". Alternatively, dancers sometimes step in place on the 1-2 and break on the 3 of the first part, step in place on the 1-2 of the second, then break again between cycles, seemingly breaking "on 3", similar to the dancing pattern of Cuban *son*. As an expert, I have also been taught and seen Cuban *salsa* danced using 4/4 timing on the counts of 1,2,3 or 2,3,4, sometimes with toe tap on the unmarked beat. With its complex stepping and rhythmic patterns, outside of Cuba, this style of *salsa* is limited to the larger capitals such as London and Sydney, but is also popular in Spain.

Lastly, "Cali" or "Colombian style" *salsa* has a small breaking step on 1, and is characterised by its exceptionally fast pace, tight steps and turns, extremely close partner work, and sometimes acrobatics (figs. 11&12). The dance is executed with a slight bounce that some dancers compare to riding a horse, which can be heard in the music. While this is influenced by local music and dance, *cumbia*, it is the crowded dance floors, fast music and local tastes that have tightened up the footwork and brought couples closer together. Stylistic difficulty means this style has less of a following, but is growing in popularity worldwide.

³ Dancer and ethnographer Yvonne Daniel identifies the *clave* as intrinsic to the Cuban dance (1995 & 2011). Musician Frankie Malabe said: "[Cubans] do *mambo* [...] dancing on the *clave* [...] they play the *clave* with their feet within the dance itself. It's in there within the steps." (in Boggs 2002: 108).



Figs. 11 &12 Small breaking steps and tight turns in Cali style *salsa*
 “Colombian Style Salsa at a Club in Cali, Colombia- Original Video”
 YouTube video, 2:35. Posted by “JustimberFlake,” upload Sep 17 2007.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEuhOR_Arh8

The Musical Matrix

Salsa musical preferences influence specific dance examples. Beyond the rhythmic features, musical feeling created by tempo and instrumentation, amongst other factors, elicit different qualities in the dance. Different types of *salsa* music suit different styles of dancing, and *salsa* music can be categorised as “*salsa tipico*,” characterised by the traditional big band sound with lyrics and balanced instrumentation, which is arguably the most flexible style for dancing; “*salsa dura*,” with a prominent *tumbao* ideal for dancing “On 2”, and an emphasis on percussion and brass sections, suited to dynamic, fast and poly-rhythmic dancing; “*salsa romantica*,” with melodic and lyrical emphases and subtle rhythms, as well as a sometimes a clear cowbell that makes it ideal for dancing “On 1”, suited to close partner work since the feeling of the music is romantic; and “Colombian *salsa*,” with a driving bouncing rhythm suited to its frenetic movement (figs. 13-18).



Figs. 13-15 *Salsa Dura* movement and poses
 “Salsa Dura Festival Edwin & Daniela Social Dancing”
 YouTube video, 1:08. Posted by “LFX Dancers,” upload Jul 18 2013.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dPK1bSiEtR4>



Figs. 16-18 Sensual dancing to *salsa romantica*
 “Marc Antony “Valio le Pena” (Salsa Version)”

YouTube video, 4:52. Posted by “marcanthonyVEVO,” upload Oct 2 2009.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ns9YYSqlxvI>

For some dancers I have met and observed, these genres are binding, while others dance any style of *salsa* to any *salsa* music, interpreting it accordingly, arguing that musicality pertains to expressing the feeling of the music. In fact, for others, it does not matter if you are dancing to *salsa* music at all: if the rhythm can accommodate the basic three step pattern you can *salsa* to almost anything. Thus, the openness of *salsa* allows for a variety of music-dance relationships within the basic structural and movement elements of the form.

Examples from the Trans-Local Matrix

It is only in local contexts that we can begin to understand the ramifications of *salsa*'s spread to different parts of the world.

Lise Waxer (2002: 15)

Salsa is a global social dance, found in *salsa* communities around the world: from the parties, homes, streets and patios of Latin America and Latin diaspora, to studio classes and specialist club nights in locations around the world. With easy access to music and dance examples via the internet, as well as numerous *salsa* conferences with international representation worldwide, each version of *salsa* is in almost continuous communication with diverse others. The trans-local matrix is a vital part of *salsa*, and has meant that *salsa* has come to mean many different things to many different people, and to incorporate a variety of local influences.

Salsa today is more than a Latin/o American dance replicated elsewhere. Even within the Latin American region *salsa* has spread and diversified into unique local forms.⁴ Lise Waxer observed:

The dance styles of Puerto Ricans, Colombians, Cubans and Venezuelans all vary. [...] while observing people from Cali [...] I noticed a little jump in the way they dance [that] comes directly from *cumbia*, Colombia's national dance. [...] In

⁴ See Sloat 2005 and Sublette 2007.

Venezuela I noticed [...] similarities in the way Venezuelans dance *salsa* and the way they dance Afro-Venezuelan music. Dancing parallels music in that it is localized or domesticated- although there is a common basic step in the *salsa* dance, there is quite a lot of variety in how people from different nations and regions interpret the step. Both dance and musical interrelation may therefore include markers of a national or local character, which enable people in different Latin countries to regard this music as their own. (Waxer 2002: 44)

This flexibility of ownership, due to the flexibility within the form, is key in enabling *salsa* to become both wide-spread and heterogeneous.

A unique Latin American version of *salsa* is Cuban *Rueda de Casino*, practiced elsewhere as a Cuban export. In *Casino* couples dance in a circle coordinated by a caller (fig. 10). Calls come in rapid succession, and followers are passed around the circle so partners are constantly exchanged, creating an exciting dynamic with a sense of community. Many steps are similar to those of other styles of *salsa* but have different names, for example the Cuban basic or “*Guapea*”⁵ is called an “open break” elsewhere. Other steps are unique to this style, some borrowing from Cuban dances such as *son* and *rumba*. Over time and in different locations *Casino* has also developed specific local moves: in Miami a step called “*Balsero*” mimics the movements of the waves as a *balsero* is someone who comes to the U.S. by *balsa* or raft. Moves can be created on the spot by the caller, who demonstrates them at the first execution: at the Hong Kong *Salsa* Festival in 2013, Cuban teacher Alberto Romay called “Skippy” and hopped round his partner like a kangaroo in reference to the number of Australians in attendance. Elements of mimesis and humour might be inherited from Afro-Cuban dances such as *rumba*: for example in *rumba yambu* dancers respectfully mimic the elderly and in *rumbas guaguanco* and *columbia* moves can comically replicate daily activities like cleaning and work. In Cuba social dancing is commonplace, and Romay told me this includes *salsa*, *son*, *rumba*, and *danza*, as well as forms from elsewhere, creating a dialogue between styles. In this context, *Casino*’s dancing community embodies the joy of everyday community life.

Salsa originally crystallised in the Latin barrio in New York, which remains a nexus of the global *salsa* matrix, as a reference point for standards among dancers. The majority of the Latin community there is Puerto Rican, and as in other similar Latin urban centres, issues of Puerto Rican and Latino identities often effect the conceptualisation of *salsa*. While some Nuyoricans I met discussed dancing purely for fun, others considered it an act of performing and affirming identity, which can be observed in their dancing which

⁵ Slang- “chill out”

retains certain Puerto Rican elements of style in the continuous, smooth movements of all parts of the body (figs. 18-19).



Figs. 18-19 Smooth, flowing movements

“Griselle Agosto y Reniel Hernández (Salsa- Puerto Rican Style)”

YouTube video, 6:43. Posted by “Griselle M. Agosto Rodriguez”, upload 22 Sep 2013

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sqo3VrQkswU>

For some Nuyoricans, *salsa* is “their” music and dance, and issues of ownership are central to their identification with the form: they have an expression “*La salsa es de aqui como el coqui*” [*Salsa* is as Puerto Rican as the *coqui* (a toad found only on the island)]. Puerto Rican scholar, Lisa Sanchez Gonzalez, identifies with *salsa* “as a ‘native’ born and raised within the working-class Puerto Rican diaspora” in which *salsa* “prompts and re-articulates [our] embodied [...] knowledge and desire” (2010: 237). For these dancers, *salsa* is felt to incorporate and represent Nuyoricans reality.

Yet Latin American communities in New York and elsewhere are not made up exclusively of Puerto Ricans, and a similar experience is described by others who consider *salsa* to be “(pan) Latin”. In fact, “Latin” musics and dances like *salsa* are mixed forms, with *salsa* having Cuban, Puerto Rican and African American ingredients, amongst others. The concept of “Latin/o” is, itself, a North American construct and the “Latino community” to which *salsa* belongs a broad, plural immigrant group. As such the term “Latin” can be widely appealing, encompassing a variety of common experiences among Latin American immigrants: their similar economic, political, and social situations, and common linguistic or cultural backgrounds, as well as speaking of sub-culture and immigrant struggle. Identifying *salsa* as “Latin music” gives it a sense of shared identity and culture,⁶ so that *salsa* dance in New York shapes this pan-Latin identity, and Latinos shape *salsa* dance as embodied knowledge in a way similar to that for Puerto Ricans described above. Much of this “Latin” identity culture surrounding and embodied in *salsa* pertains to ideas of both

⁶ See Rondon 2008 and Washburne 2008.

nostalgia and contemporary urban reality, which are evident in the dance. Nostalgia can be identified in the emphasis on Latin rhythms, the style of body movement, and simply in continuing to perform this old Latin social dance. However, the dance is also urban and contemporary, notably in the incorporation of elements of hip-hop, reflecting North American urban trends.

Globally too, *salsa* dancers recognise their choice of dance as “Latino,”⁷ an exoticisation in which Latinos are perceived as “exciting” as well as “authentic”. This exotic nature is part of the appeal of *salsa* in the global market place. I have asked dancers from around the world why they and others they know dance *salsa*, and the response almost universally pertains to feelings of escape and excitement; the idea of something glamorous and exotic, which they connect with through the Latin rhythms and body movement at the core of the dance. These ideas effect styling choices, so that, for example, those aspiring to glamour might favour elongation and elegance, while those seeking something more authentic might favour a lower Afro-Cuban body orientation. The dance in these global *salsa* communities is thus the embodiment of a conceptualisation that combines joy with escape in an identification with something that is both local and exotic.

Salsa's capacity for openness, variety and adaptability in form and conceptualisation has given it an appeal to many people around the world who have chosen to identify with it. Most dancers worldwide dance “on 1”, often imitating the aesthetics of L.A. style *salsa*; while “on 2” dancers internationally tend to emulate the New York qualities. However, in some locale the outcomes have been more varied, with dancers being innovative, exploiting the freedoms inherent in the form to create their own unique style. *Salsa* is relatively new to the Asia Pacific region, and practice there has been generally conservative, however according to Joseph Ennin, organiser of the Hong Kong *Salsa* Festival and World Championships, as the scene is evolving certain locale are developing their own *salsa* cultures and identities, some of which already incorporate distinctly local flavours, blending their own dances with the fundamentals of *salsa*.

In Hong Kong the majority of *salsa* dancers dance “on 1,” favouring L.A. styling, the elegance of which suits the glamorous aspirational identity of Hong Kong culture in general. The style of *salsa* in Hong Kong is conservative, using standard patterns with little innovation, possibly because the scene is dominated by intermediate level dancers who have been dancing regularly for several years and have learnt from the same few

⁷ “Latin” dance is part of the international ballroom circuit, which does not include any of the dances discussed here.

teachers. In addition, dance is not part of Hong Kong cultural life in general, with the majority of the population rarely exposed to dancing, and dance sub-cultures being specialist and rarely intersecting with one another. For *salsa*, this means that there is little creativity in terms of new ingredients added on the dance floor. Visiting teachers have told me that this type of *salsa* community is common in other places where the dance is a minority pursuit, such as locations throughout Asia and Russia and in smaller towns across Europe. However, *salsa* dancers in Hong Kong are no less passionate about their dance as an exciting release from their daily lives. Dancers there discuss being drawn to the excitement and joy of the dance, enjoying the "sexy" Latin feel, as well as the glamour, while issues of identity politics are unimportant, or even unknown.

Conversely, one very distinctive style of *salsa* is the Indian version of the dance. Indian *salsa* is predominantly danced "on 1" and, emerging out of Mumbai, there are clear parallels with L.A. as movie capitals with glamorous aspirational identities. However, Indian *salsa* has developed its own individual style. Indian *salsa guru* Lourd Vijay explained: "People in India love music and dance; our zest and passion for dance is incomparable to any other culture. We dance for every part of our life. So adding our inherent passion to *Salsa* makes the dance vibrant and unique in India" (email, 6th April, 2014). This ubiquitousness and love of local dance has led to a distinct Indian version of *salsa*. Taking the basic *salsa* footwork and hold, Indian dancers have used the opportunities provided by shines and styling to break away from *salsa* traditions and add their own, with hands forming traditional *mudras* (hand gestures) common in all forms of Indian dance, incorporating poses from classical Indian dances and yoga, and elements from popular dances like Bollywood. An example of this can be seen the choreography "Indian *Salsa Sutra*", during which Indian poses can be seen at moments throughout, while the female styling maintains a distinctly Indian element in the hands, which are almost always held in either *hamsasya* (swan) or *alapadma* (lotus) *mudras* (figs. 20&21). At one point in the piece the *salsa* dancing pauses at the end of a cross body lead with the follower in a position from yoga called *vrksasana*, or tree pose, executed with a dynamic lean and one arm raised above the head with the hand in *hamsasya mudra*, while the other hand was held by the leader who provides a counterbalance (fig. 22). Lourd Vijay, who choreographed the dance, told me: "*Salsa* in India is surely innovative. [...] Considering India has 1000s of classical, folk and tribal dance forms and arts, it's imperative that dancers would infuse these styles in to their *salsa* styling" (email, 4th April, 2014).

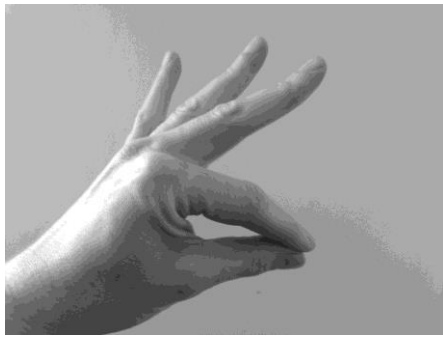


Fig. 20 *Hamsasya mudra*.



Fig. 21. *Alapadma mudra*. Photos by Author.



Fig. 22 Yoga pose with lean.

“Salsa from India, SIFS 2007”

YouTube video, 3:38. Posted by “Ivy Chan”, upload 4 Mar 2008.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8GNXEYDEUKU>

While “Indian *Salsa Sutra*” is a staged fusion, these features have carried through onto the dance floor. At the Hong Kong *Salsa* Festival in 2010 I witnessed an Indian couple complete a basic step and cross body lead, after which the leader spun his partner in so that her back was to his chest, a standard *salsa* combination, however, here the female dancer paused with one knee bent and turned out with only the ball of the foot on the floor, and her left hand held just above her eyes in *hamsasya mudra*. She was then spun back out and pulled into another cross body lead, at the end of which she leant outwards, with her legs in *vrksasana* as described above, but her free arm reaching out to the side with the hand in *alapadma mudra*. Thus, the couple created a sequence that included standard *salsa* movements and footwork with Indian poses and embellishments.

Thus, in the Indian-L.A. Style *salsa* fusion dancers either alternate between the two cultural influences through movement and postures, or have some parts of the body following the former (often the hands) and others the latter (usually the feet and torso). These preferences might be influenced by the natures of the original dances: *salsa* is defined by its steps and body movement, while Indian dance and yoga are postural, and

the hands are a focal point in dance. Each dance style thus contributes its most distinctive and defining elements to create something new.

A different type of fusion is taking place in Australia. There, like Hong Kong, dancers do not identify any local dance cultures as intersecting with salsa, however, the scene is more heterogeneous, with more dancers practicing a range of dances, including salsa on 1 and 2, Cuban and Cali styles, *merengue*, *bachata*, *chacha* and others. Jaime Jesus told me that this creates very flexible dancers, whose style is not necessarily similar to those of New York or L.A., but who create their own preferred qualities and blends.

Across the globe other salsa communities and individual dancers have embraced the possibility for adaptation, and there has been much crossing-over of other forms into *salsa*. Eddie Torres, the “Mambo King” famously uses smooth *pachanga* body movement to create the same feel in his *salsa shines*. Cuban dancer Alberto Romay combines elements of *salsa* and tap with Afro Cuban rhythms, while Argentine Jose Salas mixes *salsa* with *flamenco*. Brazilian dancer Alex Lima performs *salsa shines* to pop, hip-hop and R’n’B, combining the fundamentals of *salsa* with steps, body movement and styling from hip-hop. The attitude embodied by Lima can be seen in social dancers who will dance *salsa* to other types of music, adapting their style accordingly. Songs from other genres are sometimes remixed as *salsa* tracks, and when DJing at *salsa* nights in Hong Kong Joseph Ennin sometimes plays *salsa* rhythms over different songs to surprise dancers, encouraging them to respond by giving their dance different flavours. Lourd Vijay told me “Many styling elements can be imbibed and fused from other dance styles that already exist the world over. Dancers get influenced by other dances, acrobatics, etc. As long as technique is respected and maintained, I think everything else can go into a state of evolution” (email, March 3rd, 2014).

Hong Kong Salsa Festival 2014

As a final example, the Hong Kong *Salsa Festival* is typical of the type of event that facilitates the global *salsa* matrix, with workshops, competitions, performances and parties attended by artists, teachers and dancers from around the world. Workshops take place during the day time and are divided stylistically (“On 1”, “On 2” etc.), between partnerwork, shines and styling, and by level, with a huge preferential interest in partnerwork “On 1” for experienced dancers. “On 1” teachers came from international urban centres around the globe, illustrating the wide-spread popularity of this style, while “On 2” teachers came from places like Korea and Japan in which it is preferred, or others like Australia where dancers are more widely accomplished, and the Cuban and Cali style teachers were exclusively

Cuban and Colombian. Interestingly, the choice of music for all workshops was *salsa típico*, seeming to gear the outcome towards universality, transferability, and again flexibility. Across the board, it was interesting to note how the material and ideas were at times similar and different, so that while almost every workshop included sequences using the same basic steps, other elements converged and diverged for various reasons, all recognised within the *sa/sa* matrix.

Liz Lira from L.A. taught three workshops on “Ladies’ Styling,” all of which were extremely popular. Liz’s style is the epitome of elegance and her workshops focused on smoothness, elongation, and “finish”. However, Liz also adds notes of surprise to the dance: small, sudden flicks, directional changes or jumps, such as a small leap added when travelling in partner work, which she describes as her signature move. As a dance made up of set moves it is easy for *sa/sa* to become predictable, and much social dancing is so, particularly in places such as Hong Kong. Liz’s idea of surprise is a reminder that *sa/sa* worldwide is a highly flexible and innovative form in which there is still huge room for improvisation and creativity. In the other ladies’ styling workshops, and when elements of styling were referred to in partnerwork and shines workshops for “on 1” dancing, there were common emphases on elegance through elongation and sensuality through smoothness of movement, which thus seem universal in this, the most common version of *sa/sa*.

Conversely, Nari San from Seoul ran a workshop on *mambo* (“on 2”) styling, open to both men and women, in which the aesthetics were completely different. Nari’s movements had a greater feeling of power, sharper dynamics and more rhythmic execution. While some moves were differentiated for men and women, either entirely or in quality of execution, others remained the same, and this was similar in other “on 2” workshops. All used shoulder punches and rolls, slicing and pushing movements of the hands and arms, rhythmic body part isolation and knee twists and dips in the men’s and women’s dances, while female dancers made greater use of body rolls, hip circles, elongated arms and head rolls. This commonality again reflects a fairly typified style of “on 2” dancing seen and described by dancers across the *sa/sa* matrix.

The three lifts and tricks classes were well attended, and are not part of the repertoire of any resident Hong Kong teachers. The instructors were all professional performers competing or performing at the festival, and the popularity of the workshops and stage performances undoubtedly fuelled one another. In reality, there is little opportunity for stage style lifts and tricks on the dance floor, so while some taught

performance moves, others downsized their tricks for practical use. The class by Oscar and Tania from Australia aimed at introducing small, easily applicable lifts into familiar dance sequences. One such move involved the leader stopping the follower as she passed him so that they were side by side, facing opposite directions. He then shot out the leg nearest to her, sliding her feet out from under her, and supporting her weight on his leg and the side of his torso, lifting her momentarily. The move was fairly simple, but added an element of surprise and interest to the dance, and other moves in this workshop were of a similar level and to a similar end.

In addition to the *salsa* and *mambo* workshops were classes in other styles, including popular Latino-influenced forms such as *bachata*, *merengue*, *chacha* and *kizomba*, and others that have stylistic or historical affinity with *salsa*. Alberto Romay from Cuba taught workshops in *son* and Afro-Cuban *rumba*; Juan Carlos from Colombia taught Latin boogaloo, Gupson Pierre from Haiti taught *pachanga*, Mau Mau from Columbia taught swing *criollo* (*cumbia*), Jose Salas taught *flamenco*, and Dr. Salsa from Benin taught African folkloric. Throughout these workshops teachers described how elements of their dances have been and can be used in *salsa*.

Performances at the festival took the form of competitions and showcases, featuring individual, couple and group numbers. Most, especially those from Hong Kong, China and Russia, involved standard turn patterns and combinations, executed with a greater degree of virtuosity, including faster pace, increased numbers of turns, and highly polished embellishments and styling. However, there were one or two notable moments throughout the performances, and routines including elements of different dance styles, from more typical *rumba* sections in a group performance from Japan, to more surprising *flamenco* sequences from Jose Salas, performed to a *flamenco* interlude remixed into a *salsa* track, and the inclusion of *yoga*, hip-hop, classical Indian dance and acrobatics in a performance by Madden from Lourd Vijay's studio in Mumbai. The most popular performances, and the competition winners, were from Cali, indicative of the popular appeal of speed and acrobatics. In fact, all performances were fast and at times acrobatic, suggesting that both factors have become necessary in the staged dance. However, when one Chinese performer executed an acrobatic floor sequence a Colombian dancer commented "*Eso no es salsa*", indicating that such elements but must be in keeping with the style and musicality inherent in the form.

Across both the workshops and the shows, from practitioners all over the globe, what seemed to be universal were both an appreciation for the core of the form: the steps,

timing, musicality and styling; and the need keep *salsa* innovative, exciting, surprising and fun, values seemingly as important as the basics of the dance.

Conclusions

Across the globe, many things are happening in the name of “*salsa*”: in Cuba, New York, Colombia and India, where strong and distinct popular dance forms exist, *salsa* has been adapted to local tastes and embodies local identities, while in other places versions of the dance have been adopted because of its exotic and exciting appeal. For those for whom it is their own, the dance can embody issues of identity politics, while for those for whom it is foreign embodiment pertains to negotiating elements of the exotic with themselves. For all, however, *salsa* is a form of leisure, release, relaxation, and fun. From the conservative, to the innovative and fusion, if there are three steps and a break in the *salsa* style people are doing it and calling it *salsa*, able to say that they are dancing “their” *salsa*, because they are doing the moves and making them their own. They can do this not only because the current global dance scene has embraced innovation, but also because the form itself is the product of a history of creativity and fusion. In terms of the future of these local varieties, the nature of *salsa* as a matrix of both movement forms and cultures means that the possibilities are numerous.

By examining *salsa* in this way we can understand the form as a complex of particular common and varied factors. Where and how the dance can and cannot be adapted pertains to the definitive core of the form, and this is where inclusion of time as well as space in the matrix is insightful in revealing how the form crystallised.⁸ Each unique example of *salsa* is in constant negotiation with the matrix and cannot be regarded as separate from it. Further, by overviewing a range of negotiations insight can be gained into the specific terms of each. By viewing *salsa* as a matrix we come to appreciate it as a flexible form in both movement and conceptualisation with a fairly small yet dominant definitive core.

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⁸ See O’Brien 2015

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