

Juliet McMains, *Spinning Mambo Into Salsa: Caribbean Dance in Global Commerce*.
New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. xii + 409 pp. (Paper US\$ 34.77)

Spinning Mambo Into Salsa analyzes the development of the salsa industry, from the mambo craze born in New York's Palladium Ballroom during the mid-twentieth century through the professionalized salsa of the globalization era. Juliet McMains situates her work as part of a tradition of critical popular dance studies that began to emerge in the late twentieth century. Jane Desmond's call (in *Cultural Critique* no. 26, 1993–94) for scholars to study popular dance in ways that look beyond the dance object and to “examine the role of dancing bodies ... in determining, sustaining, and challenging systems of social hierarchies” led many scholars to conduct “critical dance scholarship on social and popular dance” (pp. 3–4). Julie Malnig, Marta Savigliano, Sherril Dodds, Danielle Robinson, and Sally Sommers are among the dance scholars who took up this call. McMains adopts an interdisciplinary approach that also draws on salsa scholarship in ethnomusicology, citing the work of Christopher Washburne, Lise Waxer, and Sydney Hutchinson, among many others who have contributed to an increasingly nuanced understanding of salsa as social practice in the Americas and beyond.

McMains is also inspired by Linda Tomko's historiographic model for dance history in the twenty-first century, particularly her call to “examine the economic and material conditions that enable and support a dance practice” (p. 6). Looking at multiple sites and time periods, she seeks to explain how salsa evolved in various U.S. cities, how these regional styles (dis)connect, and how the 1950s mambo era relates to today's salsa industry. This ambitious study uses a combination of ethnographic and archival research, video analysis, movement analysis, interviews, and participant-observation. Notably, McMains relies on a deeply embodied ethnographic method which privileges kinesthetic experience and bodily “traces of the past” (p. 17). She purposely privileged breadth over depth as she visited multiple field sites for periods ranging from a few days to a month over the course of three years. These sites included Havana, New York City, South Florida, Los Angeles, and Puerto Rico. Her ability to weave in and out of these spaces emerges from her decade-long involvement in salsa dancing as social and studio practice. As she explains, her body became an ethnographic site; dances with informants were “interviews in another language, one in which my whole body listens” (p. 17).

The book consists of an introduction, eight chapters (organized thematically rather than chronologically), and an epilogue. Various tensions are explored throughout. These mainly involve debates about authenticity, which form

NEW WEST INDIAN GUIDE

© JEANNELLE RAMIREZ, 2019 | DOI:10.1163/22134360-09301038
This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the prevailing CC-BY-NC license at the time of publication. of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International Public License (CC-BY-NC 4.0).

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

around generational divides, rhythm, region, movement, mediums, and cultural identity. Generational divides between mambo and salsa dancers are explored in Chapter 1 through interviews with Palladium Ballroom-era dancers, some of whom argue that salsa does not exist. New York *salseros* refer to their style as mambo/salsa, showing the strong link between mambo, the *salsa dura* of the Fania era, 1990s *salsa romantica*, and studio salsa. McMains views the popular hustle dance of the 1970s as the forgotten link between mambo and salsa, and discusses this extensively in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3, she considers the nuanced cultural tensions between “kitchen salsa” and “studio salsa,” and their relation to Latino identities. Chapter 4 explores rhythmic tensions that emerge between “on-1” dancers and “on-2” dancers. McCains shows how each side relies on particular narratives to argue that their version is more “authentic” or “natural.” Many of the chapters look at the specificity of regional styles. For example, Chapter 6 discusses the Miami/Havana casino styles, describing how they flowed from Cuba to Miami and back. Chapter 5 focuses on Los Angeles and the ways in which the demographics of the city, the dynamics of urban sprawl, and the relationship to Hollywood influenced the development of a distinct regional style characterized by large, bold movements. The final two chapters depart from this approach. Chapter 7 takes the internet as its field site, looking at how it helped create a global forum for salsa and led to the first salsa congress—the first time that dancers of different regional styles came together and had to learn to negotiate their different ways of dancing. McMains notes how websites offered an opportunity for entrepreneurial *salseras* to subvert unfavorable gender dynamics in the salsa scene. Chapter 8 discusses the professionalization of salsa dancing.

From the Palladium Ballroom and family kitchens, to the internet and salsa congresses, the popular dance that became known as salsa and the social practices that coalesced around it have evolved dramatically through space and time. McMains’s work sheds light on these processes as they played out between dancers in different historical and social contexts. Her analysis is a valuable resource for music, dance, and performance scholars, as well as Caribbean studies, and Latin/o American studies.

Jeannelle Ramirez

Butler School of Music, University of Texas at Austin

JeannelleRamirez@utexas.edu