

A CULTURAL RECKONING IN THE SOUTH BRONX AND EL BARRIO:  
INTERTWINED SOCIO-POLITICAL HISTORIES OF SALSA AND HIP HOP FROM  
LOCAL COMMUNITIES TO NATIONAL EXPANSION, 1960'S TO EARLY 2000'S

Kenia C. Rosete

May 2022

---

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Dance  
Sarah Lawrence College

## ABSTRACT

This research explores the South Bronx and its immediate neighbors such as East Harlem, also known as *El Barrio*, between the nineteen-sixties and the early two-thousands for the intersections of Salsa and Hip Hop, not only as music genres and dance forms, but, as political movements calling to the socio-political climate of state neglect and abandonment of the residents. These neighborhoods are central to the origination of both Salsa and Hip Hop, and were shaped through the diversity of their inhabitants who embodied, celebrated, protested, and lifted their communities through engagement in these art forms. Tracing the intersections amplifies the connection between the two art forms, which in turn provides more clarity on the divergence in paths that each form has taken towards commercialization. Tracking the political economy of these two social dances can shed light on potential futures of these forms as they continue to push into the contemporary.

Extensive research on each dance form exists separately, but often the information about their origins is met with brevity or excluded altogether. I was unable to unearth detailed research that placed these two art forms in dialogue with one another or traced the intersections. Therefore, it is important to situate these dance styles from their place of origin in context to one another through the socio-political climate at their births. I compiled research from scholars that utilize (i) theory supported through the embodied practice methods employed by the dance practitioners, (ii) documentaries that include visual images and interviews with residents/dancers from these neighborhoods that further support the theory, and (iii) newspaper articles from the seventies and eighties that render the discourse at the time. All of this work is situated within and in dialogue with Cultural studies, Latina/o studies, and Black studies.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to thank my family and friends for supporting me through this process, encouraging me every step of the way. I have tremendous love and admiration for the performers who collaborated with me all these years. Thank you for your trust, generosity, and friendship. And to my MFA cohort, thank you for your patience, feedback and kindness over these past few years. It has made all the difference.

To my advisor, Peggy Gould, thank you for inspiring me to follow my curiosity and continue to ask questions. Your trust in me ignited a spark of confidence that fueled this research.

To the authors, journalists, theorists, choreographers, directors, producers, musicians and dancers cited in this work. I am eternally grateful for the research, expertise, and passion you have contributed to the field.

To my husband, Rory, and my sisters, Yazmin and Sandy, thank you for accompanying me on this emotional journey, particularly in the moments when I felt I couldn't anymore. It means the world to me.

## Table of Contents

<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER I: Music Innovation .....</b>	<b>12</b>
Diverse Community .....	12
The <i>Timbal</i> .....	13
Park Jams/Block Parties .....	14
1973 .....	16
<b>CHAPTER II: Cultural Expression through Improvisation .....</b>	<b>20</b>
Salsa <i>Dura</i> .....	20
Improvisational Power .....	24
Outlaw Culture .....	25
Minoritarian Recognition .....	26
<b>CHAPTER III: Cultural Transmission.....</b>	<b>28</b>
Style and Consumption .....	28
The Internet Era .....	31
Simplification .....	33
Right or Wrong – Polarized Conversations .....	36
<b>CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Works Cited .....</b>	<b>42</b>

## INTRODUCTION

The linoleum tile against the thin, soft leather under my feet feels like skates on ice. I press my weight down grounding my energy into the floor. First, I see the microwave, then, a split second later, the refrigerator that sits on the opposite wall. Another quick breath and I am making my way back to the refrigerator when abruptly, I come to a halt. Now facing the stove, I look down at my elbow caught in an awkward position, unable to move. Start over. The late afternoon spills its light through a small window turning the seventy square foot kitchen an amber color. I do a quick mental scan to locate the place where I became entangled as the momentum wrapped around my body like a string on a yo-yo. We laugh aloud, perplexed by the outcome. Two dancers and one musician transform a college-apartment-kitchen into a movement laboratory; a place of concentration where knowledge was shared among each other. What we did not know, we pursued to figure out on that linoleum floor, self-taught by dancing at the Sevilla nightclub and from the college Salsa classes taught by Master Lou in Riverside, California. Our goal was to create new movement combinations that flowed naturally through our bodies while pushing further into the virtuosity and power that drove the movement. Music was the vehicle that impelled us into the embodied practice. This trio became responsible for bringing their college troupe to perform at various Salsa congresses (Salsa dance festivals consisting of workshops, classes, competitions, and social dancing events), nightclubs, and even professional competitions at The Mayan Nightclub in Los Angeles. At the University of California, Riverside (UCR), the Salsa club of UCR became my community and my new home.

Our kitchen-studio trio would spend hours in this choreographic practice watching other dancers in-person or via YouTube videos, then trying it ourselves to create new paths of our

own, our voice. In some ways, we shared a similar vision as Eddie Torres, a New York City based Salsa dance instructor and choreographer, often referred to as “The Mambo King,” to bring our energy, personality, and innovation to the stage. We strived to create a community within the Salsa Club of UCR. A space for dance and music enthusiasts to gather, bridging a group of students that shared love and passion for the art form. Through this community, I learned about all the great legends and innovators of Salsa music like Tito Puente, Ray Barretto, Hector Lavoe, Spanish Harlem Orchestra, El Gran Combo, and many others. This was the second time I fell in love with dance. My first, was an introduction to improvisation in the world of Hip Hop as a young teenager.

My family’s move from Tijuana, B.C., Mexico to the San Diego, California at the age of seven, brought about a feeling of loss and confusion. My sense of belonging was complicated, entangled between being in proximity to and simultaneously away from American culture, in comparison to my younger siblings’ first- and second-generation status that guaranteed them citizenship. A few years after our relocation, I discovered Hip Hop culture, providing me a space for play, curiosity, vigor and confidence. Mesmerized by the deep pulse marked by the bass and polyrhythmic sounds accompanying it, outdoor spaces transformed into a studio. A group of friends and I would practice contorting our bodies, striving to seize all nuances within the music. I felt a true sense of freedom, an experience that I would have later, through Salsa.

The debate on the origins of Salsa music and dance inherited from Cuba versus Puerto Rico continues to present day and contributes to the complexity in attempting to categorize art forms into one specific genre. Similarly, Hip Hop culture cannot be placed into a singular genre and lives in a complex structure in society. The journey from its origin towards

commercialization within and beyond the United States has spawned many variations and new subcultures for both art forms. If we approach Salsa and Hip Hop as socio-political movements from their early beginnings, we can begin to dissect the complex junction that arises from their shared birthplace in the South Bronx & East Harlem, also known as *El Barrio*. This is the framework in which I situate my thesis, focusing on the domestic intricacies of these neighborhoods in New York City. My exploration focuses on the nineteen-sixties and the early two-thousands for intersections of Salsa and Hip Hop, not only as music genres and dance forms, but, as political movements calling to the socio-political climate of state neglect and abandonment of its residents. These two neighborhoods were vital to the origination and evolution of Salsa and Hip Hop and were shaped through the diversity of their inhabitants who embodied, celebrated, and passed down their art through community engagement. Tracing the intersections amplifies multiple connections between the two art forms, which in turn provides more clarity on the divergence in paths that each form has taken towards commercialization. Tracking the political economy of these social dances can shed light on potential futures of these forms as they continue to push into the contemporary.

Chapter I examines the relationship between music and dancing as a circular energy that continuously expands each form. The term “Breaking” in Hip Hop came from the breakbeat that the disc jockeys (DJ)<sup>1</sup>, created in the music; an extended rhythmical beat that would signal the dancers gathered in a cipher (people grouped in a circle, typically with two or more dancers in

---

<sup>1</sup> DJ; DJING (aka deejay) - An abbreviation for disc jockey, DJ refers to an announcer at a radio station and also to someone who plays recorded music as a nightclub or party. Within Hip Hop, the DJ is responsible for creating the instrumental portion of the music. Aside from merely playing records, early DJs developed techniques such as **scratching** and backspinning to manipulate and/or alter the sound of recorder music. From *Encyclopedia of Rap and Hip Hop Culture* by Yvonne Bynoe (page 89).

the center) ready to battle. DJ Kool Herc, a Jamaican-American Bronx resident, was one of the early Hip Hop pioneers to take two of the same records and play them simultaneously on a turntable. Shifting back and forth between these records would allow lengthening of the original instrumental break in the song that was physically manipulated by the DJ. Through this method, scratching, manipulating a record on a turntable using the hands, emerged and is now an integral part of Hip Hop culture. B-boys/girls would physically bring (break) their bodies down to the floor in series of intricate footwork, body freezes (a position held coming out of a fast movement, typically bearing weight on hands or head with legs in the air) and spins (legs swinging around the body typically parallel to the floor bearing weight on hands or head).

In Henry Chalfant's documentary, *From Mambo to Hip Hop*, legendary percussionist and Bronx resident, Benny Bonilla explains in an interview how the *timbal*, a metal-rimmed, single headed drum, was brought to the front of a Mambo orchestra. Prior to the emergence of Salsa, in the nineteen-sixties, Mambo music legend, Tito Puente, a Puerto Rican-American Bronx resident, brought the *timbal*, to the front of the Mambo orchestra at the famous Palladium nightclub in New York City where he worked as a professional musician. Bonilla talks about the excitement of watching Puente breaking it down on the drum and how needing to lead the band as well as play caused Puente to bring the timbal with him to the front. This changed the Mambo rhythm altogether, consequently influencing the emerging Salsa culture. On the *timbales*, Puente would play a solo in a call-and-response, commonly seen in dance styles of various African countries, that would initiate the dancers to break-it-down (improvised movement) in response, and often, anticipation of the percussive beat that filled the space. These momentous musical

innovations from Salsa and Hip Hop transformed the music and dance scene in New York City, all originating from the same community between the nineteen-sixties and seventies.

Many of these innovations started at block parties held in the South Bronx. Residents would gather in parks, sidewalks, sometimes taking over entire streets to celebrate with music and dance. There is video footage in Chalfant's documentary of Tito Puente's drum solo during a block party. Chalfant captures the energy in Puente's movement and the passion from the audience as they danced to the beats of his drumming. The Fania All-Stars block party from nineteen-seventy-two featured in the documentary, *Our Latin Thing* by Leon Gast, also highlights the resident day-to-day activities and celebrations in the South Bronx and *El Barrio*. The documentary centers around a block party with the band playing on the sidewalk and the street filled with people dancing. In many ways, Tito Puente created the first instrumental break in the music lead by a drum beat, which is in close relation to the instrumental break created by the DJ's that set Breakdancing in motion. The younger generations of the nineteen-seventies and eighties grew up watching their parents participating in the Mambo era of the late-forties to fifties into the Salsa era of the sixties in these two neighborhoods. Musicians and dancers were always in continuous dialogue with one another.

Chapter II focuses on cultural expression through the social and political messages embraced in the music and dance of Salsa and Hip Hop. The lyrics in the music were a vessel for the voices of residents to speak their truth of the pain and joys of the community, a place where they exercised freedom of speech. Salsa legend, Willie Colón, a Puerto Rican-American trombonist, and Bronx native, refers to this cultural expression as "urban music." He believes that Salsa could have only happened in places like New York City because of the diversity of

musicians from Cuba, Puerto Rico, and other Afro-Caribbean countries. In the documentary, *From Mambo to Hip Hop*, Colón is interviewed stating, “Salsa, first of all, is not a rhythm. Salsa is a concept. It’s an inclusion and a reconciliation of all the things that we are here in the Bronx, and the music that we made together.” He goes on to explain the “why” of Salsa, and it being not only about making music, but about a collective movement that, “...convey[s] a social and political message and Salsa was very important for that because it was our voice. It was one of the few things that wasn’t controlled.” Colón captures the solidarity among the residents to create an identity for themselves through artistic expression.

This movement continues into the nineteen-seventies and eighties with the rise of Hip Hop culture. According to multiple sources<sup>2</sup>, by the late nineteen-sixties into the early seventies, the economic decline of the neighborhood was at its most devastating point, leading to the South Bronx burnings of the early seventies where more than three-quarters of housing was lost to fires. As a result, there was a rise in gangs that ran the neighborhood and a surge in violence crippled the city. Evelyn Gonzalez’s research reflects, “Poverty in the 1960’s was tied to race, a changing economy, urban decline, and a suburban exodus that accelerated as more blacks and Hispanics came in and as the turmoil resulting from the civil rights struggle and the activism of the sixties engulfed the city.” in her 2004 book, *The Bronx*. (Gonzalez, 119). But, in nineteen-seventy-three, a peace treaty initiated by multiple gang leaders was implemented and following, a party was thrown in celebration of its success, coordinated by Afrika Bambaataa, a South Bronx resident and DJ who became iconic to the birth of Hip Hop (see page 18 & 39 for

---

<sup>2</sup> See Evelyn Diaz Gonzalez’s 2004 book, *The Bronx* – Chapter Seven, for details on the various contributors to the decline of these neighborhoods that led to a devastating environment for the residents.

discussion on the complexities of this pivotal figure). This party changed the social atmosphere of the city, creating a space for the residents to unify. The South Bronx was saved by its community who, utilizing the limited resources available, forged a cultural expression through music and dance. Gathering in abandoned, burned-out buildings, DJ's and B-Boys/girls would collect light fixtures, furniture, speakers, extension cords, etc. that were thrown out on the street and repurposed them into their community. This became their studio, where innovation was prioritized and exercised daily. Imani Kai Johnson's essay, "Battling in the Bronx: Social Choreography and Outlaw Culture Among Early Hip-Hop Street dancers in New York City" provides an in-depth analysis tying the B-boys'/girls' embodied practice to the realities of taking residence in this neighborhood. Johnson highlights the reclaimed power and cultural expression that these artists produced through their artistic expression. During an interview in the documentary *From Mambo to Hip Hop*, DJ Grandmaster Caz captures the desperation he felt in those days, making the following statement, "... [Hip Hop] came from desperation. It came from people's basic needs for an outlet. We were either gonna start Hip Hop or start a revolution man!"

Chapter III looks at Eddie Torres' dance company for the methods used to develop a structured movement vocabulary to teach in a traditional dance studio. Juliet McMains' research in *Spinning Mambo into Salsa* points towards Torres as one of the main influencers in codifying the On2 style, where dancers step on the second and the sixth beat of an eight-count phrase, as the hierarchical way to dance this form. As Salsa continued to spread through the United States (and internationally), by the mid-nineteen-eighties to the early nineties, New York City had adopted the On2 step as an identity, supported by its commercialization into traditional dance

studios. Personal experience supports the rivalry between On1 and On2 styles (often referred to as West Coast versus East Coast respectively) within the Salsa community as I performed throughout Southern California. Dancing On2 was commonly perceived as a more refined and technically difficult technique versus On1.

I recall a time where I became focused on mastering the On2 steps to validate my skills as a professional Salsa dancer. My exposure to Salsa dancing was new, but I recognized most of the performers from that evening show at the 2003 West Coast Salsa Congress were dancing On2 on the social dance floor. What I did not understand then was that many of these dancers performing on proscenium stages were recruited from Ballet and Contemporary training backgrounds, techniques that greatly influenced their dancing. From outside of these performing groups, many social dancers began to associate fluidity and grace in Salsa dance with a vertical position in the body, straight knees elongating the legs, and multiple spins representing agility as a result of dancing a codified On2 version, pushing other styles into the outer margins.

Eddie Torres had a vision to elevate Latin dance to professional proscenium theaters to gain similar recognition that other performing dance styles had achieved. Torres and his wife (also dance partner) went to great lengths following Tito Puente's band to the different venues they played at, hoping for an introduction. Their efforts paid off. For decades, the Eddie Torres Latin Dance Company members danced onstage with Tito Puente at venues like Madison Square Garden and The Apollo Theater marketing their style to a wide, outside audience. Priscilla Renta's experience as a professional dancer in the Eddie Torres Latin Dance Company provides insight to the dance company's culture expanded in this third chapter. By the early nineteen-nineties, Salsa dance classes were being offered at many studios in New York City, marketing

the Torres On2 style. Although Torres was not the first to bring Salsa or other preceding Latin dances to popular culture, McMains' research points that, as a marketable commodity, he was one of the most successful proprietors within the emerging Salsa industry. The growth of this style was linked to the growth of Salsa studios, particularly in the New York scene, and began to segregate studio-trained versus at-home/self-taught dancers, as well as On2 versus other Salsa expressions.

In Hip Hop, the Rock Steady Crew was one of the most successful Breaking teams that formed from the mid to late seventies. By the early nineteen-eighties, the dance crew had been invited to perform at Lincoln Center and abroad in Europe, with an invitation from Queen Elizabeth to tour in London, England. Alan Feuer from *The New York Times* interviews Crazy Legs, one of the founding members of the Rock Steady Crew, in a 2002 article where he captures what life was like after Breaking went global. By then, there were no original members left, except for Crazy Legs. Various articles on the web point to the song, "It's Just Begun" by The Jimmy Castor Bunch band to represent the type of music used in the Up Rock (a new variation of Breaking that evolved in Manhattan/Brooklyn). This song appeared in the 1983 movie *Flashdance*, where the Rock Steady Crew was filmed dancing on the street with the main character, Alex Owens, watching and clapping on the side; a pivotal point in the commercialization into mainstream media of the early beginnings of Hip Hop culture.

Both Hip Hop and Salsa transformed as they moved out of the South Bronx and *El Barrio*. The audience and the new practitioners embodying the movement now included people from varying socio-economic backgrounds, sharing little in common with the economically impoverished living circumstances existing in the original neighborhoods. The cultural and

artistic expression that was created in the Bronx was changed as new dancers came into the field and brought their own interpretations of the movement, thereby creating a new culture. Jane C. Desmond and Thomas F. DeFrantz's analyses of how meaning changes depending on the performing group and audience are useful tools to implement in tracking the economy of style and consumption of these two dance forms. Desmond ties cross-class transmission into appropriation to define how financial gains from "cultural theft" benefit higher social class groups. This information is important to consider in the commercialization analysis of these two art forms further detailed in this third chapter.

We can see another intersection in the early beginnings of Salsa and Hip Hop in the way the music was not recorded, nor does much video footage exist. Partly because of lack in resources, but the larger reason being that the innovative artists from these neighborhoods were not interested in being recorded. McMains, Imani Kai Johnson and the *Hip Hop Evolution* Netflix documentary all mention in different capacities the lack of visual documentation and recorded music. McMains states in Chapter 2 of her book that the nineteen-seventies Salsa dancing was not a performance genre, while Grandmaster Caz in an interview on *Hip Hop Evolution* confirms that he was not interested in recording an album or getting his rhymes on a vinyl record. It was about the live performance with a real-time responsive audience. It is no coincidence that these two music and dance forms originating from the same place, felt similarly about performing and sharing their art.

Pairing the socio-political economy of the time, we can begin to clarify the relationship between Salsa and Hip Hop. The extensively researched work on both forms from these selected scholars seem to have a gap in relating them to one another given their place of origin,

innovative embodied practice, improvisational form, and codification in the transformation from their populist origins, to more formalized settings of studios and stages. The social and political atmosphere in the South Bronx and *El Barrio* directly impacted and influenced artists' methods of celebration and protest. Placing these selected works in dialogue with each other highlights the contribution of these neighborhoods to their respective music and dance genres, and begins to close an existing gap in the history of both forms.

## CHAPTER I: Music Innovation

### Diverse Community

The South Bronx and *El Barrio* (East Harlem) have historically been composed of a diverse community consisting largely of Cuban, Puerto Rican and African-American people, a mixture of immigrants and many first-generation-born in the United States. According to Sydney Hutchinson's research "What's in a Number? From Local Nostalgia to Global Marketability in New York's On-2 Salsa" in *Salsa World*, these communities had already been collaborating musically since World War I (Hutchinson, 29). By the time the highly syncopated rhythms of Mambo, originated in Cuba (furthered by Cuban artist Perez Prado, living in Mexico City, before the music arrived in the U.S. during the 1940's<sup>3</sup>), was introduced to New York in the nineteen-fifties, there existed a great deal of influence and fusion from various Latin and Afro-Caribbean music and dance. Prior to the trade embargo that the United States placed on Cuba in the late nineteen-fifties that banned trade and commercial activity (currently an active and more extensive economic embargo<sup>4</sup>), many Cuban musicians would travel frequently between the two countries, introducing Cuban rhythms to the rapidly growing Latin music scene in New York. As noted in the Introduction, I believe Willie Colón was accurate that Salsa music could have only happened in this community through its diversity and blending of cultures.

---

<sup>3</sup> *From Mambo to Hip Hop* – McMains describes the Mambo era in the U.S. to be 1940's and 1950's (Introduction - Pg. 1-2). Cross referenced by other sources, including Wikipedia - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mambo\\_\(music\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mambo_(music)) & [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mambo\\_\(dance\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mambo_(dance))

<sup>4</sup> Cuba Sanctions – U.S. Department of State: <https://www.state.gov/cuba-sanctions/>

## **The *Timbal***

Mambo's connection to Salsa music and dance came in various forms, with one of the biggest influences, coming from the addition of the *timbal* solo to the orchestra pioneered by Tito Puente at the famous Palladium nightclub in New York City. Tito Puente, originally from *El Barrio*, had many musicians from the South Bronx, Puerto Rico and Cuba in his band. There was a strong connection between the artists from *El Barrio* and South Bronx with only a river dividing the two. As noted earlier, Benny Bonilla explains how Tito Puente needed to lead the orchestra and play his instrument, the *timbal* - a shallow, metal-rimmed drum. The solution was to bring the *timbal*, sometimes two or more, to the front of the orchestra, allowing him to play and lead at the same time (Chalfant, *From Mambo to Hip Hop*). Puente would play solos on the *timbales*, initiating an instrumental break purposely addressing the dancers. Various sources describe Puente's awareness of the Palladium being a place where people learned to dance and, because of this, made a conscious effort to cater the music to dancers. He connected musicians and dancers in live performance through the sounds of the *timbales*, creating a circular economy among them that continuously expanded both art forms and opened the space for innovation.

The *timbal* solo played by Tito Puente feels closely related to Hip Hop's instrumental break that DJs played in terms of its functionality to connect with the audience, most of them dancers. McMains' research, as well as additional sources, describes how Puente intended to become a dancer, but due to an injury, instead, he studied conducting, orchestration and theory<sup>5</sup> at the Julliard School of Music where he furthered his proficiency in music. Watching videos of

---

<sup>5</sup> Tito Puente - <https://www.pas.org/about/hall-of-fame/tito-puente>; [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tito\\_Puente#cite\\_note-allmusicbio-4](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tito_Puente#cite_note-allmusicbio-4); <https://www.biography.com/musician/tito-puente>

Puente playing the *timbales* evidences a clear connection to both music and movement. He fluidly maneuvers the drumsticks at a speed that looks almost impossible while his facial expressions are animated, unreserved, and fully absorbed in the action. Tito Puente's effort to cater his music to dancers at the Palladium illustrates the merging of the two art forms he loved. Dance's ability to connect an active audience somatically to music helps evolve music and vice versa. As a dancer, I perceive the body as an instrument, therefore, the connection between a musician and their instrument, is in close relation to the connection between a dancer and their body. This is one of the many threads that allows for the exchange of energy, shared, reused, and recycled, between music and dance.

### **Park Jams/Block Parties**

Even though there is a gap in video documentation and recorded music in the initial stages of both Salsa and Hip Hop, detailed in the Introduction, there are a few videos with valuable documentation of block parties that took place in the South Bronx. One notable example on YouTube called, "Jam En El Barrio<sup>6</sup>," (this clip also appears in Chalfant's documentary, *From Mambo to Hip Hop*) shows Tito Puente on the *timbales* and Charlie Palmieri on the keyboard. This video footage evidences an energetic solo break by Puente on two *timbales*, two cowbells, and one cymbal - a common percussive instrument, typically in the shape of a thin, round plate. About a minute into this footage, the camera zooms into Puente's facial expressions. His energy transmits through the video and, although this was filmed decades ago, the liveliness with which he played can still be felt. This footage captures people gathered in

---

<sup>6</sup> "Jam En EL Barrio" - Tito Puente & Charlie Palmieri: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fC1\\_brYsHjQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fC1_brYsHjQ); See NPR link for Tito Puente musical bio: <https://www.npr.org/2008/12/10/98051981/tito-puente-el-rey>

a circle around three dancing bodies in the center. A sense of joy and celebration can be read in the facial expressions and body language of the dancers.

There was an obvious resemblance to the way a cipher works in Hip Hop culture with a group of people gathered around dancing bodies. Though the context of the dance is different, there is a connection in the use of energetic movement and body language to relate to one another inside the circle. Video evidence of famous Breakdance battles in the documentary *The Freshest Kids: A History of the B-boy* illustrate a dynamic audience surrounding Breakdancing crews (typically two teams) ready to battle, while the DJ and an MC, Master of Ceremonies<sup>7</sup>, amplified the audience's anticipation of the battle with their music and rhymes. Each crew member alternates stepping into the cipher to perform a solo that challenges the opposing team. Battle victories are determined by the witnesses, the energetic audience surrounding them, as they crown the most creative, masterful movers.

Another important source of live footage is the documentary, *Our Latin Thing*. Director Leon Gast captures the historic concert played in nineteen-seventy-one by the famous Fania All-Stars band at a block party in the South Bronx. Gast includes clips of the day-to-day activities from the residents, including a scene following singer and songwriter, Ismael Miranda, helping a customer at his convenience store in the South Bronx. Miranda asks about the customer's recent trip to Puerto Rico using colloquial language native to the island. Gast creates a vivid picture of the close-knit community through this interaction. Throughout the film, Gast captures residents sitting on concrete stair entrances outside of buildings, singing and playing instruments together.

---

<sup>7</sup> *Encyclopedia of Rap And Hip Hop Culture*, by Yvonne Bynoe: "MC; MCING - ...stands for Master of Ceremonies or Mic Controller... (in Hip Hop context) ...originally began as someone who worked with the DJ to motivate a crowd by saying a few lines." (Bynoe, 250). See page 250 for more details on its expansion in later years

These videos evidence the circular economy between dancers and musicians as they interact with each other; their energies converging in celebration and protest. Ray Barretto describes his hopes to spread the messages of unity and love through Salsa music in an interview, also included in this film. (*Our Latin Thing*, at 6:50). These messages that Barretto references function as a counter to the expectation of failure from an outside audience, a belief often linked to the South Bronx and *El Barrio* residents at that time.

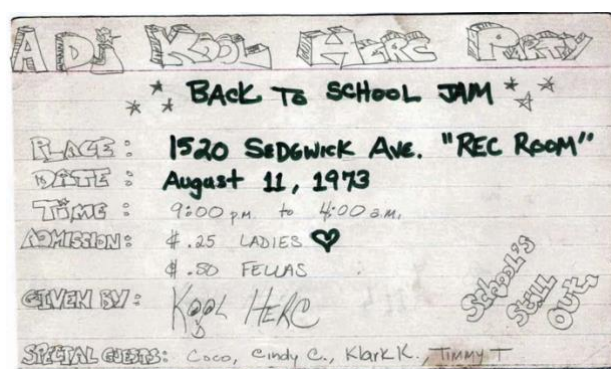
### **1973**

The month of August in nineteen-seventy-three holds two historic moments for both Salsa and Hip Hop cultures in a grand culmination of one art form and the birth of a new cultural expression. On August 24<sup>th</sup>, 1973, the Fania All-Stars held a concert at Yankee Stadium that brought together more than forty-thousand fans to celebrate Salsa music and dance. The concert consisted of the biggest musicians and artists of the Salsa movement at that point in time, most of whom lived or grew up in the South Bronx and *El Barrio*, close to the stadium, and had already achieved a level of stardom nationally and internationally. It was a grand culmination of the movement that rose out of the innovations that started in Mambo music and continued into the Salsa movement that addressed the economic decline the Bronx was experiencing at that moment. Salsa music at this time placed a specific emphasis on rhythm, the drumbeat break connecting the dancer and drummer, as expressed by Benny Bonilla in Chalfant's documentary. Since the South Bronx was experiencing some of the worst problems out of the economic crisis, suffering from high unemployment rates and, additionally, the middle-class people moving to the suburbs sent the city into further chaos that led to the closure of many dance halls and eventually the thriving Latin music scene. It quickly turned into an abandoned city run by a multitude of

gangs. (Chalfant, *From Mambo to Hip Hop* & Evelyn Diaz Gonzalez, *The Bronx* – Chapter Seven).

Thirteen days prior to the historic concert in the Latin music world, DJ Kool Herc threw a party for his sister at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue that, for many, marked the beginning of the Hip Hop timeline.

Fig. 1 – Flyer for DJ Kool Herc’s “Back to School Jam” at 1520 Sedgwick Avenue<sup>8</sup>



This party was possible because in nineteen-seventy-one, the leaders of the Bronx gangs gathered to sign a peace treaty that established a truce among all the gangs. These residents/gang members recognized the problem crippling the city and decided to change it for the betterment of the community. In Chalfant’s documentary, an unidentified gang member is captured giving an emotional speech during this meeting, “...the whities don’t come down here, man! And live in the fucked-up housing, man! The whities don’t come down here, man! And have all the fucked-up, no heat in the fuckin’ winter time! WE do Jack!! So, therefore, WE got to make it a better place to live!” (Chalfant, *From Mambo to Hip Hop*). His words enfold the desperation that the residents were experiencing during this economic crisis and a recognition that it was up to them

<sup>8</sup> DJ Kool Herc’s “Back to School Jam” Flyer: <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20130809-the-party-where-hip-hop-was-born>

to bring about the change needed. While the South Bronx continued to grapple with a lack of infrastructure and support, the youth began creating a community through gatherings inspired by DJ Kool Herc's party in the re-purposed, abandoned buildings turned mini-dancehalls as noted earlier. Hip Hop shifted the energy of the community towards a positive outlet that empowered people through music and dance, alleviating gang violence.

Two figures considered to be most influential to the beginning of Hip Hop are DJ Kool Herc, who is known as the father of Hip Hop, and Afrika Bambaataa, referred to as the godfather of Hip Hop. (Bynoe, Pg. 4 & 96). These two DJ's played music on turntables in recreational parks and schools, making music and dance accessible to everyone in the community, in similar fashion to the block parties Salsa musicians had thrown in prior years. It is important to address the serious allegations of child-abuse against Bambaataa that surfaced within the past five to ten years. These allegations are extensively covered by various credible sources such as *The Guardian*, *Billboard*, *Vice* and *The Rolling Stone* magazine as recently as September 2021. Afrika Bambaataa's innovative contribution to Hip Hop culture and electronic music is unparalleled. However, this proximity to violence spotlights issues of hyper-heterosexuality, homophobia, and the brutality of a systemic racist structure that exists, not only within the Hip Hop community, but in our society in general. Tricia Rose's book, *Hip Hop Wars*, provides a thorough analysis on this matter, stressing how Hip Hop culture did not invent these ideas of masculinity heavily portrayed in the culture. They have long existed in our society. Yet, both DJ Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa paved the way for many other innovators that followed in pursuit. For example, DJ Charlie Chase became one of first and most successful DJ's outside of Black and African-American communities. Carlos Mendes, known as DJ Charlie Chase, is a Puerto Rican DJ who initiated the Latino influence in the South Bronx's early Hip Hop culture.

DJ Charlie Chase explains in an interview how his family could not understand why he did not play Salsa music instead. (Chalfant, *From Mambo to Hip Hop*).

DJ Charlie Chase's family's lack of knowledge about Hip Hop resonates with my experience growing up. As described in the Introduction, my family's move from Mexico to the United States was a difficult transition for me as a child. In Junior High School, a classmate introduced me to Hip Hop, unlocking a space to connect to others and permitting my self-expression. Gathered in a backyard in our own cipher with a stereo/CD player boombox and a stack of digital compact discs - CD's, I learned first by watching others, then trying moves on my own. Understanding that innovation in rhythm play was highly prized within this culture, it became a place where I could indulge in my own creativity, fueled by the energy of the music and surrounding dancing bodies. Hip Hop was my first introduction to dance outside of family gatherings where the typical music played was Cumbia, Salsa and Rancheras, a traditional genre of music evolved from Jalisco, Mexico. Echoing DJ Chase's experience, my family did not share the same connection as I did with Hip Hop, however, they understood the importance of it in my life and made their best effort to support it.

## CHAPTER II: Cultural Expression through Improvisation

The instrumental break in both Salsa and Hip Hop music established a direct line of communication between dancers and musicians through improvisation. Musicians often played by ear, taking turns breaking into various solos on their instruments, while dancers responded to the music with their movement in space. This collective energy resulted in innovation and collaboration between the musicians and dancing practitioners in both art forms. Although Chapter I provides extensive detail on the musical aspects of both Hip Hop and Salsa, the more intricate aspect lies in the relationship with improvisation that was cultivated in the early beginnings of each art form as they were transformed into movements for the residents in the South Bronx and *El Barrio* (East Harlem). It was through these methods of improvisation that opened a space for cultural expression and solidarity between these residents, and eventually, beyond the borders of the origins.

### **Salsa Dura**

There is a grand difference between Salsa's initial stages in the nineteen-sixties and seventies and its development later in the nineteen-eighties and nineties in terms of music, dance steps and the environments in which it was practiced by both dancers and musicians. The early Salsa style danced at block parties and park jams is often referred to as *Salsa Dura*. The word "dura/o" means "hard" in Spanish and is used to describe the raw composition in which the music was created and played. Many musicians (and dancers), particularly from the South Bronx and *El Barrio*, were self-taught and therefore had the tendency to stretch the musical notes and vocals in ways often considered by professional musicians to be unpolished and harsh. This brassy style was intentional and further amplified with the addition of more trombones and

trumpets in Salsa bands. Salsa *Dura* was built in an environment of play, flow, and collaboration that greeted the dancers in a call-and-response bond. Therefore, the anatomical movement of the dancers took after the same playful qualities of the music.

Another considerable difference of *Salsa Dura*, in comparison to *Salsa Romántica* (meaning romantic; like a ballad, adapted to Salsa music) that developed later, is the emphasis on the instrumentals as opposed to lyrics. This is not to say that the lyrics were less important. On the contrary, lyrics in *Salsa Dura* are action-driven and packed with messages that speak towards unity, celebration, and protest. However, the lyrics are poetically arranged to be concise and, most importantly, composed in a variety of colloquial Spanish languages from various Spanish speaking countries and territories like Puerto Rico, Cuba, Colombia, Mexico, etc. The heavy percussion and *clave*-driven rhythms<sup>9</sup>, coupled with long instrumental breaks between succinct lyrics, invoked improvisation between dancers and musicians. The use of colloquial language was key to articulating the residents' lived experiences in these neighborhoods in the nineteen-sixties and seventies and instrumental in preserving the diverse culture that had formed in these areas, leading also to its unique identity.

Celia Cruz, an iconic Cuban-American singer, regularly performed her signature song, “Bemba Colorá<sup>10</sup>” which was written by Cuban composer and trombonist, José Claro Fumero<sup>11</sup>. The title “Bemba Colorá” has a deeper meaning than the literal translation of big red lips/mouth; it alludes to the prejudiced descriptions commonly addressed to the Black, Afro-Caribbean and African-American people. The song opens with, “Pa’ mi, tú no eres na’, Tú tienes la Bemba

---

<sup>9</sup> The *Clave* – two hardwood sticks struck together to make sound. The specific rhythm or pattern in which they are struck/played is used to keep time in many Latin and Afro-Caribbean music. See Rebecca Mauleón’s publications on the *Clave*: [https://www.shermusic.com/new/sample\\_pages/0961470194-47-48.pdf](https://www.shermusic.com/new/sample_pages/0961470194-47-48.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> “Bemba Colora” by Celia Cruz - lyrics: <https://www.musixmatch.com/lyrics/Celia-Cruz/Bemba-Colora-2>

<sup>11</sup> José Claro Fumero: <https://secondhandsongs.com/artist/140019>

Colorá...,” which can translate to, “For me, you are nothin’, you have ‘Bemba Colorá’” (big red mouth). The lyrics are composed entirely in a Spanish dialect with references to race, inequality, and including a few lines that address domestic abuse. Celia Cruz performed these words at the 1973 Fania All-Stars Concert in Yankee Stadium<sup>12</sup> that included over forty-thousand attendees, the largest Salsa celebration at the time. There were attempts to expand Salsa into English lyrics. Ray Barreto, a member of the Fania All-Stars, released an album in 1968 called *Acid*, where four out of the eight songs were in English. There are songs in this album that transcended decades with many folks, including myself, continuing to dance to them today at Salsa nightclubs. Those iconic songs were not created in English. The English versions do not carry the same identity or movement that Salsa was founded on and therefore did not see the same success among dancing practitioners.

Salsa dancers form one of the largest audiences of Salsa music and therefore directly contribute to its popularity and spread. In the commercialization section of her book, *Spinning Mambo into Salsa: Caribbean Dance in Global Commerce*, McMains describes this relationship as, “Rather than killing salsa music, the salsa dance industry nurtured and educated a community that loved and cared for salsa music when commercial and government forces were kicking it to the curbside, ultimately bringing back to musicians a larger and more diverse audience than ever would have been possible without the intervention of the dance industry.” (McMains, 105). McMains refers to the beginning of digital music sharing that, enabled by the internet, changed the recording industry. She describes the commercial business of Salsa dance thriving during this time. Unfortunately, Salsa music did not adapt as easily, but once the Salsa dance industry was

---

<sup>12</sup> Jerry Masucci Presents Salsa, Fania All-Stars Live at Yankee Stadium, 1973:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yaG\\_8tFlwIk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yaG_8tFlwIk)

established, McMains research identifies that, "...[in the 2000's] dancers actually helped to revive the salsa music industry, especially the older *salsa dura* sound." (McMains, 105). This statement resonated because prior to joining the Salsa community at UC Riverside in two-thousand-three, my musical knowledge was limited to a few popular Salsa *Romántica* songs. My family prioritized Rancheras, Cumbias, as well as Disco, and Rock in our household. I learned about Tito Puente, Celia Cruz, Willie Colón, Héctor Lavoe, El Gran Combo, Spanish Harlem Orchestra, and many other artists through Salsa dancing in the early two-thousands. Similar to my love for Hip Hop, I was immediately captivated and found another space for self-expression.

Salsa dance was embodied with notable differences between its origin and its translation into commercialization. McMains thoroughly researches the techniques in which Salsa was danced in the nineteen-sixties versus the nineteen-nineties during its global expansion in her book, *Spinning Mambo into Salsa....* She explains in detail how, by the late nineteen-nineties, the dance adopted a more vertical alignment in the posture of the body, favoring a multiplicity in turns. McMains draws parallels in these movements to a variety of Eurocentric techniques. For example, many Balletic aesthetics were adopted as the dance moved to formal dance studios and proscenium stages around the world. Rather than adopting the mold that valued the anatomical body in the upright position and highlighting straight lines in the arms and legs, Salsa's early movement physically (and politically) favored self-expression, placing a high priority on improvisation in both solo and partner-work that integrated bent knees, closely related to dance techniques from the African diaspora. This self-expression was supported in a virtuosic atmosphere that constantly navigated fluidity and tension in the body, generated by the call-and-response actions between dancers and musicians. This is true of Hip Hop's initial stages as well.

## **Improvisational Power**

Imani Kai Johnson introduces Andrew Hewitt's concept of "Social Choreography" in her essay, "Battling in the Bronx: Social Choreography and Outlaw Culture Among Early Hip-Hop Street dancers in New York City." Johnson draws connections between everyday life in the Bronx and its effects on the residents who turned to Hip Hop culture, a culture they created as a "...counter to an expectation of their invisibility." (Johnson, 64). Johnson uses "Social Choreography" as, "...the ways the people of a given society are trained to move (both physically and spatially) and to contort and comport their bodies in keeping with and in (counter) production to a given social order." (Johnson, 63). She makes clear how social choreography connects the importance of understanding everyday life to understanding street and/or social dances in places of marginalization like the South Bronx. Thus, the act of choreography, according to Johnson's adaptation from Andrew Hewitt's concept, is a method to enact social possibilities for the marginalized group, or, at the very least, fantasize alternate utopias. Johnson proposes that choreography be thought of as improvisation. She states, "Their [the mid-1970's to 1980's youth in the South Bronx] social choreography illuminates a culturally meaningful sensibility behind the spectacles created in battles." (Johnson, 64).

Throughout my graduate studies in Dance, I witnessed a multitude of improvisational tools, particularly in Contemporary and Postmodern techniques, used by instructors within the academic institution. Under this umbrella, often, there exists a separation between the execution of fine art versus art linked to social activities, where the latter tends to live in informal spaces that prioritize a dynamic social environment. Sources like Johnson, McMains, and Thomas F. DeFrantz call attention to improvisation and the power it yields specifically to social dances.

Leveraging experience in both academic and social dancing spaces, I examined what I believe to be core principles of improvisation and surveyed my list with a classmate who utilizes improvisation to access movement and expression in her work rooted in Postmodern techniques. During our conversation we both agreed that improvisation permits connection, collaboration, innovation, and liberation with the self and its surroundings. It has the potential to access something deep in the mind and body through listening and responding; the “state of listening” as my classmate described. It has become clear in this research that improvisation can successfully connect theory and practice, which was one of the compelling highlights of B-boys/B-girls’ Breakdancing from the late seventies into the early eighties.

### **Outlaw Culture**

Imani Kai Johnson’s essay foregrounds outlaw cultural values, which she also explains are Hip Hop cultural values, into four categories that, “...indicate distinct qualities of a sensibility about life and living in urban spaces such as the South Bronx.” (Johnson, 66). This sensibility that Johnson describes fueled Breakdancing’s improvisation, not just within the cipher battles, but also in daily navigation of precarious situations that were a constant occurrence during this period in the South Bronx. B-boy/B-girl improvisation (or social choreography) in Johnson’s essay is described using similar core principles identified in my analysis: innovation, connection, collaboration, and liberation captured in this sentence: “The first generations of breakers and New York-based poppers who grew up in the South Bronx contributed to the creation of a culture that basked in its own invention, celebrated its own practitioners, and valued the sensibilities that perpetuated their worlds.” (Johnson, 72).

The repurposed spaces carved out by the youth, permitted them to practice their art (breakdancing, mixing, and writing – also referred to as *graffiti*), exhibiting these skills in battles that connected a marginalized community simultaneously in celebration and protest. Dancers encouraged each other to perform movement that sought to defy gravity, bending their bodies in ways that seemed impossible. These acts of defiance in performance embodied the harsh circumstances they faced on a daily basis in the South Bronx and *El Barrio*. Utilizing legal scholar, Monica Evans, and Hip-Hop scholar, Imani Perry’s discourse of “outlaw culture,” Johnson describes, “...a culture cultivated at the outskirts of mainstream values and social expectations because of racialized and classed subordination.” (Johnson, 66). Monica Evans’ analysis points to this marginality operating as a strategy to carve out spaces of resistance, shifting in and out of an identity in response to the dominant culture. (Johnson, 66). Hip Hop culture was a direct counter to the marginalization that the residents of the South Bronx experienced. B-boys/B-girls’ actions on the dance floor reflect the protest, not only through their ability to survive the violence imposed on them by the state’s neglect, but also by exceeding the expectation of victimhood through self-expression seen in the strategy of battling. In agreement with Johnson, these battles are more than a simple juvenile rivalry between various groups, and serve as “... aesthetic expressions of a marginalized sensibility made beautiful.” (Johnson, 72).

### **Minoritarian Recognition**

Improvisation is a method of actionable counter to a dominant culture from a marginalized position. For both Hip Hop and Salsa movements, these counters are anchored in outlaw cultural values. This discourse can be strengthened with the “minoritarian recognition” concept from Jose Esteban Muñoz’s book, *The Sense of Brown*. In Chapter Five, “Chico, What

Does It Feel Like to Be a Problem?” Muñoz ties African American studies theories of double-voiced discourse, and DuBois’ discourse on double consciousness, to emerging Latina/o studies. Through this lens, he theorizes that feeling apart or separate from the dominant culture is about feeling like a problem, and within this context, the group that formulates outside of the dominant culture create a sense of belonging by recognizing this position (being a problem). Muñoz states, “...one can also ruminate on the ways in which feeling like a problem is also a mode of belonging, a belonging through recognition. Thus, feeling like a problem is a mode of minoritarian recognition.” (Muñoz, 37).

A “minoritarian recognition” exists in the spaces that the residents from the South Bronx and *El Barrio* carved out to cultivate a self-expressive culture. On a large scale, the Fania All-Stars concert held at Yankee Stadium in 1973, manifested Muñoz’s theory. Over forty-thousand Salsa fans danced in celebration to lyrics of protest from artists integral to the early Salsa movement. Similarly, the block parties thrown by Afrika Bambaataa and DJ Kool Herc uniting the neighborhood to celebrate Hip Hop culture, brings in a minoritarian recognition. Whether they function as “...performative acts of social possibility...,” (Johnson, 64), or embody an opening as Muñoz declares, “...thinking about the problem of feeling like a problem as not simply an im-passe but, instead, an opening.” (Muñoz, 37), these spaces of self-expression allow a marginalized group like the South Bronx and *El Barrio* residents to counter this position as a collective force. As the graduate studies classmate stated during our conversation, improvisation allows us to always find our “...way back to each other through empathy, shared experience, and trust.” (Conversation with classmate, Feb. 10<sup>th</sup>, 2022).

### **CHAPTER III: Cultural Transmission**

Innovation was the driving force that fueled the cultural expressions of the South Bronx and *El Barrio*; the soil that nourished an embodied practice formulating connections among the residents through music and dance. These improvisational methods provided a space for expression that unfurled messages of solidarity among both dance and music practitioners. Imani Kai Johnson examines in detail the improvisatory nature of Breakdancing and the power it brought to the Hip Hop community, “Hip Hop was explicitly experienced as a counter to the crucible of state neglect and marginalization of the South Bronx.” (Johnson, 67). Johnson interviewed residents/dancers that described their first-hand experience of the unpredictable nature of living in the South Bronx during that time. The choice to take these circumstances of lack and create something positive and empowering grew into a larger movement that began to attract attention from the “outside” world. The introduction of the internet and cable television, and the emergence of influential power wielded by large corporations helped push the process of commercialization of both Hip Hop and Salsa, impacting the dissemination of music and dance to audiences outside of their origins.

#### **Style and Consumption**

In her essay, “Tracking the Political Economy of Dance,” Jane C. Desmond proposes analyzing the, “politics of style and consumption as dances move from their communities of origin and communities of practice to the stage.” (Desmond, 29). By tracking this, Desmond believes it can provide insight into the complicated process of transferal and translation as a dance style moves between dissimilar audiences. Tracking a dance style and its transfer outside its origin is a complicated undertaking due to its immaterial nature in comparison to tracking a

more material item like a computer chip. However, Desmond's vision of embodied practice as a commodity argues that physical practice as inscribed in the body has more materiality than a digital rendition of a song. She expresses, "...we must add the components of physical rendition and apperception as embodied modes of knowledge, and the complexities of production and proliferation, when there is, often, no authoritative 'text' of an original." (Desmond, 34). Despite this challenge, Desmond's efforts to track the politics of style and consumption in dance can shed light on the "refashioning and rearticulation" of Salsa and Hip Hop as they move across "communities of producers, consumers, and commentators..." (Desmond, 34). Tracking these developments highlights the diverging paths of commercialization that Salsa and Hip Hop took as they moved from their social environments in the South Bronx and *El Barrio* to studios, concert stages, proscenium theaters, film and television.

Imani Kai Johnson's "Battling in the Bronx: Social Choreography and Outlaw Culture Among Early Hip-Hop Streetdancers in New York City" situates Breakdancing's embodied practice as kinetic theory that reflects a social choreography, or the methods people in the South Bronx had to move, in a constant state of flux between being in-line or in-counter to the people in power or dominant culture. Tracking the actions of B-boys/girls in battles reveals an awareness of the sensibilities to their marginalized position as a community. Thomas DeFrantz's, "The Black Beat Made Visible: Hip Hop Dance and Body Power," also addresses Black culture and dance. He states, "For me, the capacity to embody patterns of black life is simultaneously kinetic and theoretical, and constantly negotiated by a kinetic and intellectual understanding of its formal properties." (DeFrantz, 67). Embodied practice in dance has the capacity to hold and theorize a multitude of sensibilities informed by its environment. DeFrantz also brings the dual-audience component into the discussion that changes the way a style is consumed, depending on

the audience's position inside or outside of the culture. He makes evident the “transcript of protest” as “private,” meaning its only access is from the inside or by a participatory audience, often seen in cipher battles. The lyrics in the song “Bemba Colorá” described in Chapter II (see page 21) are a great example of DeFrantz’s analysis. The audience must be familiar with those specific words, colloquial Spanish, in order to understand the message. Knowledge of formal Spanish language would not help to comprehend or appreciate the lyrics.

Discussing the politics of style and consumption, Desmond offers a useful definition of appropriation quoted from the cultural studies analysis at the University of Birmingham - United Kingdom that refers it to a form of “cultural theft.” She expresses, “Something of value has been taken from one group – stolen, not given – and its benefits, especially monetary, now accrue to the ‘thief’.” (Desmond, 31). Desmond’s research points to this model of cultural diffusion as a “historically specific political practice” and associates cross-class transmission with appropriation in the methods that financial gains most often benefit groups in the higher social class. (Desmond, 31). This is important to note as we analyze the commercialization of both Salsa and Hip Hop cultures outside of their place of origin. These communities, largely made up of working-class and poor residents, were experiencing devastating economic hardships during the periods in which both Salsa and Hip Hop began. Tricia Rose in, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, references the rupture in postindustrial New York and how, “...hip hop emerges from the deindustrialization meltdown where social alienation, prophetic imagination, and yearning intersect.” (Rose, 21). Other sources confirm this devastation and, documentaries like Henry Chalfant’s, *From Mambo to Hip Hop*, and Leon Gast’s, *Our Latin Thing*, provide visual images and interviews of residents recounting their experiences with these hardships in the South Bronx during this era. Evelyn Diaz Gonzalez’s

research also describes, “The city itself was disorderly during the sixties and seventies. Race riots erupted sporadically from 1964 on, as blacks and Puerto Ricans angrily demanded jobs, welfare, housing, and equal rights.” (Gonzalez, 121).

### **The Internet Era**

McMains’ research points to the internet as a platform that propelled the Salsa dance industry into a booming business, even though Salsa music did not have the same adaptability or success. In fact, the Salsa music industry began to suffer due to the advancements of digital technology that gave the public access to thousands of inexpensive and portable songs with “a click of a finger.” (McMains, 105). The cost-effective result of hiring an individual to play digital recordings of Salsa songs versus an entire band contributed to the disappearance of many dancehalls and professional Salsa bands. Sadly, this change severed the connection and improvisational environment between dancers and musicians. The minor variation in recorded music allowed dancers to anticipate beats and rhythms through previous exposure to and memorization of songs.

The thriving Salsa dance industry as a business brought paid-teaching jobs to many dance professionals that included travelling internationally. In the late nineteen-nineties and early two-thousands, the internet became a popular marketing platform for professionals (and non-professionals) to upload, not only performance footage, but instructional dance videos. The opening paragraph of the Introduction describes myself and two other dancers scrubbing (moving the cursor manually in the timeline of a film) through an instructional video to learn an intricate partner-turn combination. I was a part of this early two-thousands Salsa culture that utilized videos, digital recordings of songs, and Salsa congresses (see page 1) to advance my

knowledge and consumption of the dance style. Being a college student with limited resources further encouraged my use of free and inexpensive methods of learning. Salsa dance professionals were able to establish themselves as independent, self-marketing businesses, offering lessons and forming dance companies that performed all over the world.

Priscilla Renta shares her experience as a former dancer with the Eddie Torres Latin Dance Company in her essay, “The Global Commercialization of Salsa Dancing and *Sabor* (Puerto Rico)” published in the book, *Salsa World*, by Sydney Hutchinson in 2015. The Spanish term “*sabor*” means flavor and is often associated in Salsa dance with a person’s stylistic expression. One can either dance with *sabor* or lack it, in regards to their interpretation and connection to Salsa music. Both Renta and McMains discuss the emergence of organizations like the World Salsa Federation (WSF), Salsa World Championships, World Salsa Summit (WSS), and many others, whose existence was vastly facilitated by the development of the internet. Renta provides insight into her experience with competitions held by these organizations and the methods in which they promoted merchandise. For example, she quotes the United States Dance Foundation’s marketing statement for an instructional video recounting, “...the WSF promotes its DVD *Latin Body Rhythms* as ‘a must if you want to dance Salsa with the maximum body action and SABOR!’” (Renta, 128). In this instance, culture become a commodity that could be purchased and consumed through an instructional dance video, promoted via the internet.

For Hip Hop, technological advancements in the internet and electronic-sound producing equipment “brought significantly expanded access to mixing, dubbing, and copying equipment for consumers and black market retailers...[and] provided aspiring musicians with greater access to recording and copying equipment at less expense.” (Rose, 7). Tricia Rose’s book *Black Noise*, explores the “social, cultural, and political implications of hip hop culture” and centers Rap

music as a “black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America.” (Rose, 2). Her book includes the eruption of Cable television and with it, the birth of music videos. Rose states, “The emergence of rap music videos has also opened up a previously nonexistent creative arena for black visual artists...Before music video production for black musicians, these training grounds, however exploitative, were virtually inaccessible to black technicians.” (Rose, 9).

While some opportunities opened for working-class and poor communities, the mixing and recording advancements also led to a rise in large corporate record companies that recognized the ability to capitalize on Hip Hop culture through Rap music. While most Rappers (a person who performs rap music) initially belonged to smaller independent record labels, the larger, corporate-level record companies recognized the ability to profit from this new genre. Tricia Rose states, “...the major labels developed a new strategy: buy the independent labels, allow them to function relatively autonomously, and provide them with production resources and access to major retail distribution.” (Rose, 7). Many artists found it beneficial to have access to major record companies and retailers to carry their product. However, the major labels began controlling the circulation of Rap music (and Hip Hop culture, including Breakdancing) into the mainstream media (Rose, 7).

### **Simplification**

A common business strategy in commercial dance studios often involves a standardized technique, packaged, and labeled to facilitate, not only a marketing need, but also a teaching standard. The New York based Eddie Torres Latin Dance Company is one of the most referenced dance companies in proscenium stage Salsa performance. Eddie Torres, mentioned earlier for

codifying the On2 dance style, was able to successfully bring his dance company to some of the largest proscenium stages around the world. Torres was not the first, but was certainly one of the most successful at arranging Salsa dance steps into repeatable patterns to be taught in a traditional studio environment.

McMains' Chapter Three, "Refashioning Latino Cultural Identities: Academies or Kitchens," describes Eddie Torres' studio teaching style as, "... (turn patterns) increased exponentially in complexity and speed inside salsa studios. Spatial relationships became more predictable as teachers insisted their students dance in a slot, which was often described as dancing in the shape of a diving board..." (McMains, 125). Students were encouraged to contain their movement to a tight-fitting space that prioritized moving forward and back, utilizing a codified basic step pattern. Priscilla Renta's first-hand experience of Eddie Torres' choreographic practice in the dance company provides insight into her training. She studied in the studio with Torres and Ismael Otero (another prominent choreographer in the Salsa industry from New Jersey) prior to joining the Eddie Torres Latin Dance Company. This training aimed to fine tune a technical ability that prioritized long lines, multiple turn patterns, and flexibility in line with Ballet aesthetics, similarly echoed by McMains' research.

As it relates to Hip Hop, Breakdancing was reduced or simplified through absorption into popular culture. When speaking about this dance form, many sources initially viewed it as a fad, a short-lived trend that was expected to vanish as quickly as it was introduced to the world outside of the South Bronx. The reduction to a trend decreased the opportunity for deep, comprehensive engagement with the style from new audience members and practitioners. Consequently, the cultural and political significance that Imani Kai Johnson's research now illuminated had been largely obscured.

The most common descriptions of the dance style from people outside of the South Bronx were mostly related to acrobatics and juvenile sexuality. In a 1981 *Village Voice* article, Sally Banes describes the dance as “...a celebration of the flexibility and budding sexuality of the gangly male adolescent body.” (*Village Voice*, April 1981-Pg. 31). In this article, she briefly mentions the moves being “...packed with action and meaning...,” however, never goes into any detail on what those meanings are. Instead, Banes continues to reference the display of physicality, virtuosity, and masculine innuendos, and even states it being a “codified dance form cum warfare that cracks open to flaunt personal inventiveness.” (*Village Voice*, April 1981-Pg. 31). Banes does successfully capture the importance of inscribing the dancer’s identity on the streets, parks, etc. But taking DeFrantz’s dual audience theory from “The Black Beat Made Visible”, we can understand Banes’ position as an outside audience unable to read all the inscription in the dance. DeFrantz poses a great question, “How is the power of the body or of the dance diminished in this transference? If the audience doesn’t know how to ‘read’ the dance, can the dance speak?” (DeFrantz, 75).

Even as DeFrantz situates Black and African-American social dances, including Hip Hop as a contemporary form, in relation to the African diaspora, in this article, he describes Breakdancing as a “strange, short-lived popularity” and uses words like “sensational movements” that continuously reference combat or a descendance of *Capoeira*, a Brazilian martial art form disguised as dance. (DeFrantz, 74-75). His research understands the importance of victory being determined by the participating audience members. But here, DeFrantz does not unpack the embodied theory and practice that Breakdancing was founded upon nor the benefits it offered its practitioners. At the time of publication, DeFrantz’s article, like Sally Banes, reflects

the mainstream media discourse that persisted into the early two-thousands on what was considered a relatively new dance form.

### **Right or Wrong – Polarized Conversations**

The addition of cultures outside of Afro-Caribbean ethnicities provides opportunities to continue expanding Salsa dance as an art form. This style originated in the South Bronx and *El Barrio* through the fusion of Cuban, Puerto Rican, and other Afro-Caribbean cultures, therefore, was founded on the principles of inclusion and expansion. However, this quickly changed as the dance transferred to audiences outside its original community. By the mid-two-thousands, the push for a codified On2 Salsa dance style was so dominant that it began to isolate itself from other Salsa dance styles and expressions. The message for unity and solidarity took a back seat to arguments over authenticity, authorship, and dancing the “right way.”

Globalization can become problematic under a capitalistic structure where culture and authenticity become commodities to be traded and sold. It pushes the priority for technical competence over cultural knowledge, and diminishes the parts of a culture that do not serve a commercial market. This is how the origins from the South Bronx and *El Barrio* were obscured from Salsa’s historical timeline and how Breakdancing (as well as other parts of Hip Hop culture) was overshadowed by what Tricia Rose refers to as the “commercial trinity,” the Gangsta, Pimp, and Ho in her 2008 book, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop – And Why It Matters*. Rose elaborates how, “Debates about hip hop have become a means for defining poor, young black people and thus for interpreting the context and reasons for their clearly disadvantaged lives.” (Rose, 5). Gonzalez similarly references, “Unsurprisingly, many white New Yorkers blamed blacks and Puerto Ricans for these worsening

conditions [poverty, overcrowded housing, etc.].” (Gonzalez, 114). This polarized discourse enforces a binary right or wrong, and, as Rose affirms, not only condemns Black and African-American youth for precarious living situations in places like the South Bronx, but also bypasses conversations that speak to the innovative qualities produced by these inhabitants discussed in Chapter II of this thesis.

Describing Breakdancing as a “trend” disregarded its culture and facilitated its re-articulation into popular culture as exemplified in music videos and concert performances by popular artists such as Madonna, Michael Jackson, Janet Jackson, and many others. Even though the book focuses on Rap music, Tricia Rose’s 1994 book *Black Noise* mentions Breakdancing’s impermanence and confirms the re-articulation of the form into popular culture; “By 1986, when commercial outlets seemed to have exhausted breakdancing as a ‘fad,’ breakdancers as mainstream press copy all but disappeared. Yet, the form is still heavily practiced, particularly alongside rap artists and other dance music genres.” (Rose, 50). Rose draws a connection to this Breakdancing and popular culture in her reference to the Public Broadcasting System’s 1991 dance special “Everybody Dance Now!” and how the show reflected “stylistic continuities between the moves executed by early break-dancers...” (Rose, 51). Breakdancing was absorbed into popular culture by repurposing and re-articulating the physical aesthetics that solely satisfied mainstream media consumption.

*Black Performance Theory*, co-authored between Thomas F. DeFrantz & Anita Gonzalez, has a compelling analysis of Hip Hop culture (Chapter Fourteen) that dives deeper into the theory behind the embodied practice, in ways that I found were missing from DeFrantz’s earlier article, “The Black Beat Made Visible.” He speaks about the complex position that Hip Hop culture is situated on, “...hip-hop straddles, often uncomfortably, its own capacities as resistant

and compliant practices that allow its practitioners to work within and without normalizing narrative of social order.” (DeFrantz, 237). Rose and Johnson also speak about this complexity embedded in the politics of this form. DeFrantz beautifully captures the effect of commercialization as this dance style transfers to the public outside, “In the mainstream, though, hip-hop might be more of a strategy to corral black performance towards its minoritarian boundaries...,” he continues, “Over time, hip-hop dance, like jazz musicianship, has become a nearly empty referent to politicized expression that thrives without access to the politicized implication that originally created the form. The aesthetic structures survive, honed by exposure and engagement with ever-expanding publics, but with their relationship to social expression limited by the commercial sphere.” (DeFrantz, 237). This description from DeFrantz resonates, particularly with my first-hand experience of attending Hip Hop dance classes in both a commercial and academic setting.

With the help of record companies and mainstream media marketing, Hip Hop culture in its entirety is diminished to the categories outlined in Tricia Rose’s *Gangsta, Pimp and Ho*. Of particular interest is that these images and portrayals of Black and African-American people feed both arguments for pro and anti-Hip Hop factions. In Chapter Eleven of *Hip Hop Wars*, Rose analyzes the arguments from both sides locating six beliefs shared between them: low-defining standards of creativity, disregard for sexism as a problem, ignoring record industry’s involvement in the construction of Rap, little outrage over the poor conditions many Black and African-American communities continue to face, colorblindness in the consumption of music by white fans, and hyper-heterosexuality supporting homophobia (Rose, 217-240). These beliefs she attributes to making Hip Hop culture ill, jeopardizing its creative future. Rose states, “The powerful possibility of meaningful, gender-equal, and collaborative cross-racial exchanges

through music and culture is squandered, and progressive values are pushed to the margins, while the myths of black dysfunctionality remain profitable and perilous for black people and for America as a whole.” (Rose, 240).

Sharing Rose’s viewpoint, ideas of masculinity were not constructed by, nor particular to, Hip Hop culture. These are systemic structures that have pervaded our society for decades, and as a result, continue to charge in violent ways. Through this lens, there is an opportunity to address Afrika Bambaataa’s allegations of sexually abusing young boys under his tutelage as a leader of The Zulu Nation organization<sup>13</sup> that surfaced in the mid-two-thousands and go as far back as the nineteen-seventies. There is no excuse for a person inflicting harm on another human being in these violent acts, and Bambaataa should be held accountable for his actions. Simultaneously, we can and should pay attention to the ways this systemic, racially biased structure we live in fosters unacceptable behaviors. An informed observer can see the brutality experienced regularly in marginalized communities through this system reflected in the brutality of the perpetrated actions. Reducing these conversations to a binary right or wrong discourse risks the opportunity to reflect on the complex structure that Hip Hop culture straddles, both resisting and cooperating with the dominant popular culture.

Between *Black Noise* (1994) and *Hip Hop Wars* (2008), Rose tracks the politics of style and consumption of Hip Hop culture. These six-beliefs identified by Tricia Rose open important dialogue that can help us understand the myths and truths about Hip Hop culture. In the closing chapter of *Hip Hop Wars*, she offers six guiding principles to revive the progressive, creative side that Hip Hop was originally founded on in the South Bronx. McMains’ *Spinning Mambo*

---

<sup>13</sup> The Zulu Nation is a Hip Hop awareness group currently active, now operating as Universal Zulu Nation - <https://www.zulunation.com/>

*into Salsa* voices a similar sentiment in providing context to practitioners and aficionados of the form in order to make informed decisions on the future of the dance. We can dismantle the mainstream media haze that convolutes discourse around these social practices to bring back the power in the political movement that both Salsa and Hip Hop afforded the residents of the South Bronx and *El Barrio* (East Harlem) as prototypical.

## CONCLUSION

Tracking the origins of Salsa and Hip Hop in the South Bronx and *El Barrio* highlights the marginalized, disadvantaged position that the residents faced and provides a reflection on how those systemic pressures fueled the birth of these art forms and translated them into socio-political movements. Salsa and Hip Hop are powerful examples of dance's potentiality to formulate spaces of resistance and survival through cultural expression. Their embodied practice both theorizes and ignites action through a collective force.

My personal connection to both Salsa and Hip Hop was no coincidence. Tracing their intersections makes evident the principles of self-expression, innovation, celebration, and protest that both art forms embody. This research seeks to place them in dialogue with each other while tracing their evolution into commercialization to audiences outside of their origins. In the translation to the "outside" world, what is gained and what is lost? Circling back to DeFrantz's question, "How is the power of the body or of the dance diminished in this transference? If the audience doesn't know how to 'read' the dance, can the dance speak?" (DeFrantz, 75). These questions provide a framework to continue analyzing Salsa and Hip Hop's trajectories, particularly as they move into academic settings.

## Works Cited

- Banes, Sally, "Physical Graffiti: Breaking Is Hard To Do." *The Village Voice*, 22 April 1981, Pg. 31 - (from the archives: <https://www.villagevoice.com/2020/04/19/physical-graffiti-breaking-is-hard-to-do/>)
- Bosse, Joanna. "Salsa Dance and the Transformation of Style: An Ethnographic Study of Movement and Meaning in a Cross-Cultural Context." *Dance Research Journal*, vol. 40, no. 1, Congress on Research in Dance, Summer 2008, pp. 45-64
- DeFrantz, Thomas. "The Black Beat Made Visible." *Of the Presence of the Body: Essays on Dance and Performance Theory LK*. edited by André Lepecki, Wesleyan University Press, 2004, pp. 64-81
- DeFrantz, Thomas & Gonzalez, Anita. *Black Performance Theory*. Duke University Press, 2014, Introduction, pp. 115-25 & 223-242
- Desmond, Jane C. "Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies." *Cultural Critique*, no. 26, 1993, pp. 33–63. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/1354455](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1354455).
- Desmond, Jane C. "Tracking the Political Economy of Dance." *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Politics*: Oxford University Press, 2017, 29-49.
- Dyer, Richard. "The notion of entertainment" and "Entertainment and utopia" in *Only Entertainment*. Routledge. pp1-34. New York, 1992.
- Feuer, Alan, "Breaking Out Of the Bronx: A Look Back; A Pioneering Dancer Is the Last of His Breed." *The New York Times*, 27 August 2002, Section B, Pg. 1 - (<https://www.nytimes.com/2002/08/27/nyregion/breaking-bronx-look-back-pioneering-dancer-last-his-breed.html>)
- From Mambo to Hip Hop - A South Bronx Tale*. Henry Chalfant, City Lore, New York City, 2006. YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iyp4uakQfAY&t=2990s>
- Gonzalez, Evelyn Diaz. *The Bronx*. Columbia University Press, 2004. Chapter 7
- Hewitt, Andrew. *Social Choreography: Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement*. Duke University Press, 2005. Introduction and pp. 1-36
- Hutchinson, Sydney. *Salsa World: A Global Dance In Local Contexts*. Temple University Press, 2013. Chapters 2, 3 & 7.
- Jackson, Jonathan David. "Improvisation in African-American Vernacular Dancing." *Dance Research Journal*, vol. 33, no. 2, Congress on Research in Dance, Winter 2001, pp. 40-53

Johnson, Imani Kai. "Battling in the Bronx: Social Choreography and Outlaw Culture among Early Hip-Hop Streetdancers in New York City." *Dance Research Journal*, vol. 50, no. 2, Cambridge University Press, Aug. 2018, pp. 62–75

Mauleón, Rebeca. "The Clave: It's Transformation and Development." *Salsa Guidebook for Piano & Ensemble*. Sher Music Co, 2005. Chapter 3.

McMains, Juliet E. *Spinning Mambo into Salsa: Caribbean Dance in Global Commerce*. Oxford University Press, 2015.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *The Sense of Brown*. Duke University Press, 2020. Introduction, Chapters 1 & 5.

Osumare, Halifu. "Global Breakdancing and the Intercultural Body." *Dance Research Journal*, vol. 34, no.2, Congress on Research in Dance, Winter 2002, pp. 30–45

*Our Latin Thing (Nuestra Cosa)*. Leon Gast, Fania Records, New York City, 1972. YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W5LAEYGuERo>

Rose, Tricia. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Wesleyan University Press, 1994.

Rose, Tricia. *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop – And Why It Matters*. Basic Books, 2008.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Originally published in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Cary Nelson & Lawrence Grossberg (Editors), Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988.

Tate, Greg, "Hiphop Nation: It's Like This Yall." *The Village Voice*, 19 January 1988, Pg. 21 - (from the archives: <https://www.villagevoice.com/2019/04/02/hiphop-nation-its-like-this-yall/>)

*The Freshest Kids - A History of the B-boy*. Israel, QD3 Entertainment, New York City, 2002. Amazon Prime Video.

"The Underground to the Mainstream." *Hip Hop Evolution*, presented by Shad K, directed by Darby Wheeler and Rodrigo Bascunan, HBO Canada, Season 1, Canada, 2020. (a Netflix Series)