

Consensuality

Joshua M. Hall on what social Latin dance can teach us about unwanted touch

When I accepted the invitation to write this article on sexual overtures, consent and touch in social Latin dance in the U.S., it was with a mix of excitement and hesitation. Excitement, because this issue is one that many dancing friends and I have discussed in earnest for many years. And hesitation, because as a straight (on the spectrum) white cis-gendered man, I have rarely encountered in social Latin dancing unwanted touch that is repeated, forceful, threatening or difficult to resolve in a socially-acceptable manner. Whereas most of my female dancing friends express that they continue to deal with it at virtually every dance event.

To address this (comparative) lack of first-person experience, I made a public post on social media announcing my work on this article, inviting anyone from social Latin dance communities to share (publicly or privately) their experiences and perspectives. Although only a few folks took me up on that offer, the content of their responses struck me as both helpful and relevant, so I will first discuss them, and then offer my own analyses of this issue.

For any reader unfamiliar with social Latin dancing, to get more out of the responses to my post, it might be helpful to consider two bits of background on these events. First, there are multiple types of dance represented, including an Afro-Cuban dance currently known as *salsa* (previ-

ously *mambo*, a slower, more intimate dance from the Dominican Republic called *bachata*, a faster, marching-style dance (also from DR) called *merengue*, a Columbian dance called *cumbia*, and a Latin hip-hop dance called *reggaetón*. Of these, by far the most dominant at these events in the U.S. today are salsa and bachata (which dominance is greater the closer you are to cultural “centres” of the empire, and especially here in New York City).

“A lot of women feel like they can only express their disinterest or discomfort nonverbally”

It is only in the last few years, though, that bachata has ascended to its current position of rivalling the importance of salsa – which remains a source of much controversy for many dancers in these communities. One reason why, often suggested by the dancers themselves, is that bachata is (they allege) less challenging than salsa in terms of dance technique. A second, and I suspect more important, reason is the emerging consensus is that bachata involves much more touch overall, more intense touch in

particular, and most precisely more sensually-charged touch.

This note of sensuality brings me to the second crucial bit of background on social Latin dance, namely that salsa and bachata (along with most of the other dances at these events) began as folk, or “vernacular”, dances. Enmeshed in Latinx communities, such dances are traditionally taught informally, in the home, by older generations to younger ones, as part of children’s overall socialisation, given that dance is typically a staple of ordinary parties (as common at such parties as dining, drinking, conversation, and games are at traditional Anglo-American parties). Given this intergenerational pedagogical dimension, through which habits and styles of movement are passed down from grandparents and parents to children, dances such as salsa for traditional practitioners (past and present) are not automatically associated with sensuality.

It’s a different story, clearly, in the imagination of most Anglos, however. This imaginative association with sensuality can be traced to these dances’ migration from private, familial spaces in Latinx communities (in the U.S. and beyond) to bars, clubs, and other professional and public spaces dominated by Anglo-Americans – and for two main reasons.

For one thing, these Anglo-dominated spaces were already (before Latin dances entered them) associated with younger, single adults, heavily consuming inhibition-lowering drugs such as alcohol, and in pursuit of romantic and sexual relationships. For another thing, anti-Latinx ethnoracism projected (then as now) an imagined hypersexuality onto Latinx people and their cultural practices, including salsa and bachata,

which has further intensified the already sexually-charged atmosphere of social dance spaces in the U.S.

With those two background points in mind, let’s look at the responses to my social media post about this article, which suggest that the current dynamics of unwanted touch in social Latin dance in the U.S. follow closely to those of the #MeToo movement in general.

As one female dancing friend put it in a private message response, “I don’t mind sensual bachata as long as we are only dancing. It is annoying when guys touch where they shouldn’t.” When such unwanted touch does occur, what happens next is also, unfortunately, familiar from many #MeToo narratives. In the words of a second female dancing friend, “A lot of women feel like they can only express their disinterest or discomfort nonverbally to discourage making a scene or poking at a man’s ego and making him aggressive.” This friend then elaborated further:

“...women often employ techniques we use in avoiding unwanted romantic/sexual attention like pointedly talking with friends, averting our eyes, or taking well timed bathroom or water breaks. Instead of telling someone that we aren’t comfortable with the level of touch they enacted, we plaster on tight smiles and try to manoeuvre to a more comfortable position without our partners noticing, shifting in increments or hoping he’ll notice how stiff and unresponsive we’ve become and correct himself on the next turn.”

This friend also pointed out that unwanted touch can also be caused – in addition to intentional disregard for partners’

wishes – by male “leaders” who are inexperienced with dance (which makes it harder for them to perceive cues of discomfort in their typically-female “followers”) or who have difficulty interpreting social cues in general (as is the case, for example, for many folks on the autistic spectrum).

Fortunately, there is one more analogy to the #MeToo movement to be found at this juncture, as community-wide strategies for dealing with unwanted touch at social Latin dance events have very recently emerged. A third female dancing friend posted the following story as a comment on my original post.

“Lately a bunch of women (and men) wrote about a slime-ball salsa dancer in New York who used dancing as an ex-

cuse to do gross things and hold women too close, even trap us. He once tried that with me and pulled me into a hold from behind. I escaped and finished the dance. But then I told all my friends, ‘don’t dance with that guy.’ Well someone took a picture of him and posted it on Facebook. In no time, there were about 50-100 posts of corroboration. I have not seen that guy out dancing since! The #MeToo movement is happening in Salsa too! ;-)”

Another social media-deploying strategy is illustrated by the image below, sent to me by a fourth female dancing friend, Viktoria Havasi:

Introducing this image was a brief commentary (by a Facebook friend of my



Anonymous public post on Facebook 2018

friend): "This poster at your NYE extravaganza means the world to the women in the dance scene", she writes. "I know of 2 other promoters following in your footsteps and I hope that this will start an avalanche of awareness and change."

"Don't dance with that guy"

Lest the reader wrongly conclude that social Latin dancing is poised to enter a post-#MeToo utopia, I should note that not all the responses to my social media post were positive. One male dancer, rehearsing familiar themes from the backlash against the #MeToo movement, offered multiple objections to this (anticipated) article, as well as to the above-mentioned positive responses (all from female dancers). Considering his objections provides a natural transition to my own view of what social Latin dance can illuminate about unwanted touch and consent – on and off the dance floor.

First, the male dancer asserted that consent is a one-time, all-or-nothing affair, and that it's automatically implied when you show up to a dance event and agree to dance with a partner. From his perspective, if a follower shows up (and to repeat, at present-day events most followers are female), she's committing to whatever might happen to her, one song at a time. No matter how uncomfortable she might be, he insisted that she must finish that dance with that partner. And if she ever agrees to dance with the same partner again, then she's also consenting to a repetition of more experiences like the first dance, for better or worse. Finally,

this objector claimed that the (presumed male) leader should be granted significant leeway, in order to "teach" his (presumed female) follower, and that any perceived resistance should thus be interpreted as the sometimes-unavoidable friction of her accommodating to his unfamiliar and challenging forms of touch.

Beginning with this last point, I argue that merely being a man (or "leader") does not entitle you to "teach" a partner. In fact, my first ballroom instructor insisted that you should never even attempt to teach a partner a new formal move during a social dance event, because it puts your partner in the awkward position of looking and feeling inferior to you, and under your control, without any justification. Contrary to the objector's claim (that resistance comes from women's lack of experience with unfamiliar and challenging touch), I suspect that the real source of their resistance is that many women do not readily consent to unfamiliar and challenging forms of touch in dance that isn't coming from someone (such as a teacher or choreographer) to whom they've granted the institutionalised authority to adjust their bodies in unfamiliar ways (in pursuit of allegedly proper dance movement).

Consent is an ongoing process

As for the objector's prior point, namely that showing up and dancing with a partner imply consent to any and all touch that might transpire during one song, the socio-historical context of Latin dances seems to

be crucial. Salsa, for example, derives from multiple West African dance traditions, for all of which improvisation is central and touch is forbidden. These traditions were then blended, in a Caribbean context, with European folk-dance traditions, for which (in a perfect reversal of the West African dances) improvisation is generally forbidden, while some degree of touch between partners is near-constant. As the lovechild of these traditions from two continents, salsa is thus a community art form that improvises touch, and in ways that promote mutual creative freedom.

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In other words, my view is that a social Latin dancer should improvise each dance—not only as an individual, with separate formal moves – but also as a partner supporting the co-creation of mutual new movement, including through touch. This approach only works, however, if both partners are free to invite, accept and reject new movements. And that requires, finally, ongoing consent to touch that is wanted by both partners.

To borrow the rhetoric of tango, a dancer can “invite” a partner to perform a more

sensual movement, or to share the dance space together differently. The dancer (leader or follower) makes a gentle gesture, then pays careful attention to how their partner responds. If the partner enthusiastically joins the new movement, or at least gives no indication of discomfort, that can be interpreted as a tentative acceptance of the invitation (for the time being). But if the partner responds negatively – either verbally, or with body language indicating discomfort – that should be interpreted as the invitation being declined, which means that the dancer needs to return to the way they were moving before extending the invitation. Or, if the response is ambiguous, the dancer can extend the invitation again. Finally, if the dancer has extended so many invitations that it’s undermining their contribution to the artwork of the dance, such invitations should probably cease for the remainder of that dance.

This idea of wanted touch brings me to my central point. The Oxford English Dictionary explains that the word “consent” originally derives from the “Latin *consentire* to feel together, agree, accord harmonize”, further broken down into “*con-* together + *sentire* to feel, think, judge, etc.” Thus, consent is originally a matter of mutual activity and receptivity, specifically a co-creating co-creation based on share, ongoing feeling. What this seems to imply – and this is certainly always been true in my experiences with social Latin dance – is that consent is not a static thing, not an object or product that has been definitively produced and recorded.

Instead, consent is an ongoing process, a reciprocating experiencing that is crucially both beyond one individual dancer, and also

simultaneously active and receptive. Altogether, then, consent in social Latin dance emerges as a process of doing and undergoing together. Thus, if the connection of dancing consent is broken, for example if one partner shifts from the acting/receiving balance to a state of exclusive acting (with no receiving), then consent is no longer transpiring, which greatly increases the risk of unwanted touch beginning and continuing.

Put simply, wanted touch is consensual touch, and consensual touch is touch that is supported by an ongoing activity and receptivity of consent. Wanted touch in dance is thus analogous to a “closed” electrical circuit. (In fact, at the cellular level of a dancer’s body this truth is literal rather than merely analogous, given the neurochemical dimension of the body’s activities). A closed circuit, in this technical sense, refers to a circuit in which there is no break in the path (for example between a device and an outlet), an unbrokenness that sustains a live current in the circuit. By contrast, *unwanted* touch in social Latin dance is like an open circuit, involving a break in the path between the partners, which entails the absence of the necessary current of consent.

The advantage of this reframing of consent in social Latin dance is that it helps move us away from the dangerous popular model of consent as a contractual thing. That is, the conception of consent-as-closed-circuit recognises the fact that separation – not contact – is the default status for a given/random part of a social Latin dancer’s body. (In the case of salsa, among other Latin dances, this may be a partial inheritance from the West African half of its parentage, given the latter’s forbidding part-

ner touch). More precisely, the touching in social Latin dance is limited to the parts of the dancers’ bodies that are actively being brought together by the ongoing movements of mutual activity and receptivity, in which dancers are not merely “feeling” their partners, but “feeling-with” each other.

When this feeling-with does occur, the wondrous experience that I’m going to call “consensuality” can arise. A mutual sensuality of consensual togetherness, this consensuality is helpfully illustrated by the lovely bachata embrace in this photo:



© Rob Tapp 2018

*A bachata between partners and spouses
Kristin Lewis and Israel Saucedo,
in Birmingham, Alabama*

I’ve enjoyed watching and dancing with the couple in this photo for many years now, and in my view, our unofficial Birmingham

social Latin dance photographer has artfully preserved one such moment of consensuality in their dancing. This is the kind of wanted touch and sensuality that are desirable in social Latin dancing. Not an ethnoracist projection onto objectified Latinx bodies, nor a forceful imposition by a leader onto a follower. A mutually-arising action and receptivity of two well-attuned dancers, co-creating the artwork of a dance within the community artwork of a dance event.

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To wrap up, consensuality, as a closing of the electrical circuit of consent, has the potential to simultaneously reduce unwanted touch and empower wanted touch in all of the latter's joyful artistry. To put this as a recommendation: if you are currently touching your partner, but you feel no energy from them sustaining that touch – or if you're so detached from any awareness of their movements that you've no idea whether such energy is present – then you should reattune your awareness in search of that energy. And if you still can't find it, be aware that you're potentially engaging (unintentionally) in touch that is unwanted by your partner, the unwanted-ness of which they may feel unable to safely and comfortably express to you. Consequently, you should consider lowering the intensity and/or extensity of your current touch, until you feel an energy from them that is mutually sufficient (along with your own energy) to

sustain that intensity/extensity of touch.

If this guideline were widely adopted, perhaps unwanted touch, which is both aesthetically displeasing and ethically objectionable, could be significantly reduced (if not completely removed) from social Latin dance events. In this light, it also appears that this consensuality guideline might be relevant beyond just social Latin dance, applicable to any dances involving touch, along with other social interactions where unwanted touch is likely.

In any event, consent to wanted touch can be helpfully understood as an energetic (not static) phenomenon, affirmable (ethically and aesthetically) only through all partners' ongoing, mutual activity and receptivity – a dance-like feeling-with in pursuit of flourishing consensuality.

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