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Chapter 3

On Transculturation

Re-enacting and Remaking Latin American Dance and Music in Foreign Lands

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My first experience of Latin America was in Sydney, Australia. I was sixteen years old and visiting my aunt, who happened to take me to a place that played salsa, merengue and cumbia music and where members of local Chilean, Colombian, Peruvian and other Latin American communities gathered to dance. In retrospect, I have often thought of this evening as a kind of butterfly that changed the course of history, or at least the course of my own little life. I recall walking in from the street of a Sydney that seemed quite familiar, through a doorway and down a set of stairs into a Sydney that was exquisitely unfamiliar to all of my senses. The experience was one with many dimensions, and the recollection and description of it cannot avoid collapsing those dimensions that were felt rather than thought into a series of descriptive clichés. The air was alive with rich, rhythmic music; the atmosphere around me moved with people dancing in each other’s arms with mesmerizing jubilation and grace. The memory that stands out most is of walking into a feeling of rapture as all of this sound and movement swirled about. It is a feeling that is difficult to recapture in the absence of those elements.

The years that followed that night at the salsa in Sydney have added layers of meaning and context to the experience, such that it can no longer be what it was, in part because I am now abstracted from it and looking back at it across time, and in part because I am no longer an outsider to the social world of ‘Latin’ dance and music in Australia—or at least not in the same way that I was then, when its sounds and forms seemed so foreign to me.

Returning from that visit to Sydney to the country town where I lived as a teenager, I began to search for points of reference that would help me to place in context the sounds, movements and faces that I had encountered. Of course, these days most of us would head straight to Google for answers, but this was not an option then. Sitting on the hillside of my German...
grandfather’s banana plantation in Queensland, I told my cousin Margarethe about this dance called ‘salsa’ that I had witnessed in Sydney. Margarethe’s eyes lit up. ‘Yes, I think I just learned that one in my ballroom dancing class last week!’ she exclaimed. And with that, she stood up among the banana palms and proceeded to demonstrate the steps and movements that her ballroom dancing instructor had taught her. To which I replied, ‘No, I don’t think that’s real salsa’.

I knew of no person from Latin America living in my town. However, one boy from Brazil—a rotary exchange student from Curitiba and clearly a pioneer of his time—had recently arrived at my rural Queensland high school. Assuming that any person from the general region would have something to do with salsa, I asked him if he knew how to dance. Once he deciphered my question and nodded, I offered to help him with English in exchange for a dance lesson. He stood beside me and demonstrated a series of steps that looked even less like salsa than my cousin’s ballroom rendition on the hillside. This, I soon discovered, was called samba. After trying to teach the steps without music, my new friend promised to ask his family to post a cassette tape with samba music from Brazil.

Those were the 1990s and I was about to start university in Brisbane. It did not escape my cousin Margarethe and me that this move to the city would bring a new opportunity to ferret out some place where we could learn to dance ‘real’ salsa. The quest eventually led us to a nightclub called ‘La Luna’, run by Colombian-Australian Antonio Corral, who had migrated to Australia in 1981 and was now organizing music and dance events for the Latin American community in Brisbane. La Luna, a quaint little place with stars painted on its ceiling and a lively atmosphere, was where members of the local (at the time, principally Chilean, Salvadorian and Colombian) communities converged each weekend to dance the nights away. La Luna became the setting of my weekend social life during my undergraduate years, and these years lead on to the discovery of a world of Latin dance and music that was growing and evolving within most of Australia’s urban centres. The social worlds assembled around the practice of Latin music and dance, interconnected across Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne (and later in Rio de Janeiro, Havana, Mexico City, Bogota, San Juan and so on), became integral dimensions of my own social context and self. On the occasions that I have tried to imagine myself as a person who never came in contact with the world of Latin music and dance, I imagine a person who is barely recognizable as me.

Many friends who migrated to Australia from Latin America have expressed comparable sentiments in casual reflections on their sense of self before migrating to Australia, on who they have since become, and who they might have been given another course of events. Through knowing each other, we became each other in all kinds of ways. We met as strangers and became friends, we came to understand each other’s languages, we exchanged unspoken rules of interaction, new ways of thinking about time and space changed our sense of the world, layers of indistinguishable rhythms separated into recognizable and familiar patterns, unfamiliar ways of moving and becoming became spontaneous. Nevertheless, the most common ways of describing each other’s identities have remained unchanged; fixed to our national identities: ‘He is Cuban; she is Venezuelan; she is Brazilian; I am Australian; we all met when we went to see a Cuban orchestra’. As such, while this social world is one that has become very familiar, on some level I have been conscious of a sense of having transitioned into it from the outside. The ways in which Latin music and dances are commonly conceived in Australia are as imports tied to a particular geographical regional identity (Latin America) and, more specifically, national identities (Cuban, Brazilian, Mexican and so on). My relationship with the world of Latin dance and music is therefore constituted as peripheral; not inevitable by birth or place, and not obvious to any casual observer on the street. This brings its own ambiguity and ambivalence about identity, place and belonging. There have been times when this ambivalence has become especially acute. While my involvement in Latin dance and music is usually at informal social gatherings, on a few occasions I have found myself in performance groups presenting these dances for audiences. A number of performances over the years of Cuban and Brazilian dance come to mind, most including groups with a diverse range of performers, some with Latin American backgrounds and others not. Typically the result of these dances is a hybrid product of the context and performers involved; yet the way the dance performances are ordinarily discussed and described tends to attribute them an essential, static quality tied to national identity. ‘I dance Brazilian samba’, or ‘I am learning to play Cuban music’.

At one stage, through various turns of circumstance, I ended up as member of a band that played Cuban music. On various occasions there were animated discussions among the band members (most of whom were not Cuban) about authenticity, legitimacy and cultural identity. I recall one occasion when the band had to produce a flyer to advertise one of its shows. Upon seeing the words ‘Cuban band’ written across the flyer, I felt immediately uncomfortable with the description. Could a band that plays ‘Cuban’ songs really call itself a ‘Cuban band’ if most of its members were not Cuban? How would my Cuban friends feel about this? One band member’s view was that this was a non-issue because the band had a Cuban musical director. Another member felt that the ‘Cuban’ in ‘Cuban band’ referred to the music, not the band members. On another occasion several band members rejected a proposal to include a ‘salsa’ song with English lyrics, because they wanted the band to play only ‘authentic’ Cuban music in its ‘true’ form. This essentialist
conception of Cuban music as a static form that could be transported from Cuba and perfectly reproduced in the Australian context seemed questionable, but at the same time it did not seem acceptable to ignore the question of authenticity when it was so tied up with the identities of people I knew.

From all of this arises a curiosity about this social world of Latin music and dance in which I have now spent a significant portion of my life: in particular, how do we who share this space (including people who were born in Latin American countries and people who were born in Australia or elsewhere in the world) relate to and conceive of that space and of one another, how do we approach and understand the cultural practices that have connected us, and, indeed, who, if anybody, owns these practices?

Here, the field of global studies provides fertile ground for thinking through those questions. A range of concepts in the field—including transnationalism, hybridity theory, and multiculturalism—are useful in helping us to think about the movement of people and cultural forms around the world and across national boundaries and their coming into contact with one another. In this chapter, however, I will focus in particular on the concept of transculturation, first coined by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, which provides an especially relevant framework for considering the social world surrounding Latin music and dance in Australia, and the identities tied up in it. Further, in this essay I also employ another approach, which complements the concept of transculturation and allows for a deeper consideration of the complex layering of cultural meanings and influences that permeate social life and identities in the global era. Cultural practices or forms such as dance and music continue, at one level, to be uniquely embedded in local circumstances. However, more and more, the movement of people, practices, ideas, images and sounds mean that layers of global relations frame even the most seemingly localized of examples. This requires an approach that works across all levels, from the local to the global—and back again—including but not exclusively the nation as the focus of our understandings of the identities to which they are attached. I borrow in this essay an approach of constitutive abstraction, or constitutive levels, from the work of Australian social theorist Geoff Sharp (1985, and especially 1993), and others who have continued to develop this approach, most notably the recent work of Paul James and collaborators (James 1996; James 2014; James 2015; James and Kath 2014; Grenfell 2014).

TRANSCLUTURATION AND THE QUEST FOR CULTURAL AUTHENTICITY

Processes of ‘acculturation’ became the subject of intense interest among Anglo-American anthropologists at least from the 1930s onwards as ways of understanding the transformations occurring at the borders between Western modernity and its cultural others (Trostanova 2012: 9). Within the prevailing functionalist framework, acculturation focused on cultural contact and the resulting transformation of culture as a linear process of disadjusting from one cultural context (deculturation) and adjusting to a new cultural context (acculturation). In his landmark publication, Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar, Cuban anthropologist and ethnomusicologist Fernando Ortiz overturned these prevailing linear theories by introducing the concept of transculturation. It is worth revisiting Ortiz’s text at length:

I have chosen the word transculturation to express the highly varied phenomena that have come about in Cuba as a result of the extremely complex transmutations of culture that have taken place here, and without a knowledge of which it is impossible to understand the evolution of the Cuban folk, either in the economic or in the institutional, legal, ethical, religious, artistic, linguistic, psychological, sexual, or other aspects of its life. The real history of Cuba is the history of its intermittently transculturated. First came the transculturation of the paleolithic Indian to the neolithic, and the disappearance of the latter because of his inability to adjust himself to the culture brought in by the Spaniards. Then the transculturation of an unbroken stream of white immigrants. They were Spaniards, but representatives of different cultures and themselves torn loose, to use the phrase of the time, from the Iberian Peninsula groups and transplanted to a New World, where everything was new to them, nature and people, and where they had to readjust themselves to a new syncretism of cultures. At the same time there was going on the transculturation of a steady human stream of African Negroes coming from all the coastal regions of Africa along the Atlantic, from Senegal, Guinea, the Congo, and Angola and as far away as Mozambique on the opposite shore of that continent. All of them snatched from their original social groups, their own cultures destroyed and crushed under the weight of the cultures in existence here, like sugar cane ground in the rollers of the mill. And still other immigrant cultures of the most varying origins arrived, either in sporadic waves or a continuous flow, always exerting an influence and being influenced in turn: Indians from the mainland, Jews, Portuguese, Anglo-Saxons, French, North Americans, even yellow Mongoloids from Macao, Canton, and other regions of the sometime Celestial Kingdom. And each of them torn from his native moorings, faced with the problem of disadjustment and readjustment, of deculturation and acculturation—in a word, of transculturation. (Ortiz 1995 [1940]: 98)

Introducing the concept of ‘transculturation’ was a significant intervention in that it acknowledged the mutually influential relationships between cultures, and the diverse, nonlinear and multidirectional processes of cultural identity formation. Culture also became historical, every cultural form (material or otherwise) being tied to countless interactions between diverse
cultural elements over countless years. This was an important departure from
the prevailing functionalist approach to culture (as in Malinowski 1922) to
an acknowledgement of culture and cultural forms as ephemeral, always
unstable and incomplete, always coming into contact with diverse new ele-
ments, and constantly transmuting across time and space. Ortiz wrote not
only about cultural identities and subjectivities but also about cultural forms
and commodities, material or otherwise. His theory of transculturation was
essentially a theory of globalization, long before the intensified and self-
consciously global era in which we now live. As cultural theorist Medina
Tlстойova observes, ‘Ortiz could not have known that, but today his book
can be seen as a prehistory of globalization written from the perspective of
colonial difference’ (2012: 11; see also Rojas 2004).

Ortiz’s theory of transculturation continues to be broadly applicable in
thinking through the global movement of and interaction between people,
objects, meanings and cultural practices. In relation to the world of Latin
dance and music in multicultural, postcolonial Australia, the concept is
clearly relevant. Moreover, one of the reasons why I find it to be especially
interesting is that it problematizes many of the common ways in which these
dance and music forms are conceived and discussed in the everyday interac-
tions of people who practice them (including by me as I was growing up).
In particular, the theme of cultural authenticity, one that frequently arises
directly or indirectly in conversations and interactions in the world of Latin
dance and music, is one that transculturation calls into question. In short, if
culture and cultural practices are by their very nature always hybrid, re-
configuring and transmuting, how can there be ‘authentic’ culture?

Here a number of examples can help to consider this subject. In early
2015, as part of an undergraduate course I teach on Latin American culture
and politics, a talented and experienced Cuban born dancer who now lives in
Melbourne, Alejandro Espinosa, visited the class to talk about Cuban dance
and give a short dance class to the students. He danced to the sounds of tra-
ditional Batá drums played by the Australian academic sitting beside him,
Adrian Hearn, who had learned to play when he was living and researching
in Cuba. At various intervals the two would stop and provide explanations
by way of providing meaning and context around the music and dance steps.
This included PowerPoint slides, recorded music and YouTube videos. Inter-
woven through these explanations were many personal memories of Cuba,
including Alejandro’s memories of how he had observed people practic-
ing dance and music in everyday life in Havana when he was growing up.
Naturally, these stories and the dance class that followed were tailored for an
audience made up of Australian university students most of whom had little
experience of these dance/music forms. As I listened and watched on that
day, I realized that I was witnessing a cultural form in the process of changing
hands and transforming itself. Within this particular social context, at this
particular place, in this particular historical moment, a form of dance and
music was being practiced that could not have manifested quite the same
way in any other context or place or at any other time. The telling of those
stories, the way they were framed, the knowledge assumed and not assumed,
the speed and order in which the dance steps were demonstrated, the way
people moved when trying to copy the dance steps, the questions that were
asked, the response given, and the language spoken—none of these were like
anything I had ever witnessed in Havana. The events in that classroom were
born of layers of social context, local and global. They were produced authen-
tically through the bodies and minds of those in the room, each conditioned
by their own histories. The dance form transmuted a little, and those practic-
ing it transmuted a little too.

Performances of ‘Brazilian samba’ in Australia provide another interesting
case. Many of the groups that perform the dance in the Australian context
do not have any Brazilian performers. There are also many non-Brazilian
people teaching Brazilian samba in Australia, and these teachers inevitably
interpret the dance through their own cultural lenses. Many performers of
the dance have never visited Brazil; therefore, they have relied entirely on
abstraction sources of information to construct the forms and meanings of the
dance. Regardless, the dancers’ conversations and the language used to pro-
mote their performances often reflect a veneration of cultural authenticity as
tied to Brazilian national identity. Historically, the coverage of Brazil in the
Australian media has been limited. However, Carnaval is the one period of
the year when Brazil is guaranteed a news slot on television here and across
the globe. The effect is that images of this annual tradition have come to
represent Brazil and have constructed stereotypes of Brazilians in the global
imagination as flamboyant, free-spirited, unwaveringly joyful and scantily
clad (Kath 2014; Kath and Knijnik 2015).

As Brazilian anthropologist Roberto da Matta once observed, ‘It was
not Brazil that invented Carnaval; on the contrary, it was Carnaval that
invented Brazil’ (1984: 245 in Sheriff 1999: 3). Brazilian samba shows in
Australia, many performed by non-Brazilians, reflect many of the features
of these stereotypical representations. As such they could be said to be
performances of ‘Brazilianisms’ as filtered through Australian perspectives.
Whether intentionally or not, the performances manifest the context in
which they are presented. Most, for example, feature stylized, synchronized
choreographies that are not typical of carnival dancing in Brazil but are a
common format of Anglo-Australian dance performances. In Australia, the
dances are performed at any time of year, and are not specifically tied to
any pre-Lent carnival period. While the vast majority of paraders in Rio’s
Carnaval wear large heavy costumes covering the entire body, the costumes
Typically worn in Australian ‘Brazilian samba’ performances almost always emulate those of the scantily clad drum queens whose images circulate endlessly through the global media at Carnival time each year. The descriptions of Australian Brazilian samba performances that appear in promotional materials regularly reflect and reproduce these stereotypes, using words like ‘sexy’, ‘sensual’, ‘spicy’ and ‘hot’. I have also seen these same adjectives used on many occasions by Latin American dance instructors and performers to promote their classes and events, presumably exaggerating and emphasizing those stereotypes that they anticipate as appealing to Australian audiences.

In the quest for authenticity, it is common for students of the various popular Latin dance and music styles in Australia to travel to the country of origin that corresponds with whichever dance or music style they are learning in order to experience the ‘real’ art form and to learn from the ‘source’. Those who undertake these cultural pilgrimages often return expressing a newfound sense of having witnessed and captured the true essence of the art form (thereby possessing greater authenticity themselves). However, just as researchers inevitably carry their own subjectivities into the field, so do cultural pilgrims.

In an insightful essay on his time living in a religious house in Havana, Cuban-Haitian Adrian Hearn describes the layers of social agendas that frame the teaching and learning of Afro-Cuban traditions between Cubans and foreigners (2003). The expansion of a tourism industry in Cuba during the economic crisis of the 1990s saw a dramatic expansion of interest globally in Cuban dance and music, including Santería and other Cuban cultural and religious traditions. For many Cubans struggling on meagre state salaries, the influx of tourists brought attractive economic opportunities, and this period saw the proliferation of theatrical renditions of sacred rituals in hotels and cabarets, and of teachers offering to impart Afro-Cuban cultural practices to inquisitive foreigners for a fee. These flourishing commercial opportunities saw many people who were not previously teachers or practitioners of these practices fashioning themselves as such for the economic return. In the words of a Santería priest named Miguel with whom Hearn lived for 12 months while learning Afro-Cuban percussion, ‘There are people who hardly know how to sing or play, yet they give music and dance classes to foreigners’ (2003: 58). For traditional practitioners, the new commercial opportunities regularly came into conflict with community and religious obligations, including religious duties regarding the protection of sacred and historically secret knowledge. Such conflicts led practitioners to adopt inventive pragmatic ways to protect sacred traditions while making the most of commercial opportunities. In an excerpt from his personal diary, Hearn describes an incident involving his teacher, Miguel:

Today, the English film crew made Miguel the feature of their documentary. He did an interview in full ceremonial regalia plus a mock consultation with Orula (the Santería deity of divination). After his performance I asked Miguel what other babalawo might say if they saw the film, which involved killing a pigeon for Orula. ‘Don’t worry, it’s all an act!’ he said. . . . Any babalawo who sees this on TV will laugh and say, ‘Oh, that Miguel is a cabrón!’ And besides, anyone would do the same for $200 US. (Hearn: 2003: 60)

Hearn also calls upon Ortiz’s concept of transculturation as a way of understanding these cultural permutations that he witnessed occurring through the overlapping of multiple agendas in Havana. His narrative provides a revealing illustration of ways in which cultural tourists in the pursuit of ‘authentic’ cultural practices inevitably transform those practices. Their presence, along with the processes through which they seek and acquire cultural knowledge, becomes a cultural phenomenon in itself.

The concept of transculturation, considered in relation to the practice of Latin dance and music in Australia, problematizes some of the commonly held notions of cultural purity and authenticity, and of cultural practices as static commodities that can be transported to and reproduced in the Australian context. As illustrated, Latin dance and music practices performed in the Australian context can no longer be the same in form or meaning as they were in the Latin American context. That said, the idea of authenticity cannot be dismissed altogether. Constructs of authenticity around music and dance have a powerful popular appeal and, as such, should not be discounted (Jones 2010). Moreover, these are related to the construction of Latin American identity in Australia in ways that have very tangible implications (for livelihoods, status, and acceptance) (see Bendrups 2011).

EXTENDED FORMS OF THE SOCIAL AND LATIN AMERICAN AUSTRALIAN IDENTITY

I have called upon the concept of ‘transculturation’ to illustrate that no cultural practice can ever be transported across time and space without being transformed by that passage, and no cultural practice can change hands between one person and the next without changing its form. By extension, I have argued that Latin music and dance practices in Australia are not static cultural imports. Rather, these practices—in both the forms that they take and the social meanings attributed to them—are inextricable from and unique to the social context of multicultural Australia. From this we might say that Latin American–influenced dance and music exists in Australia (Cuban influenced, Brazilian influenced and so on), but not ‘Latin American’ dance and music per se. However, the practice and performance of Latin dance and
music have special significance for Latin American people in Australia and for the construction of Latin American identity in the Australian context. Moreover, the processes through which Latin music and dance construct Latin American identity in Australia are not only locally embedded but also simultaneously tied to places other than Australia. Transculturation tells us something important about how culture transforms in multidirectional ways, including that Latin American people who migrate to Australia do not simply ‘acculturate’ into the Australian context, but they influence and are influenced by their new context. As people change, their environment also changes as a result, and so do the cultural practices tied up in this process.

However, in the global era where the proliferation of communication technologies now brings us into daily, real-time contact with images, sounds, ideas, and practices from around the world, it is not enough to focus only on the uniqueness of the local, even taking into account its diverse historical influences. Even in the few decades that I have been involved in Latin dance and music communities, that social world has qualitatively changed in ways that transculturation alone does not explain.

In the history of migration of Latin American people to Australia two main ‘waves’ of migration can be identified: the first spanning the late 1960s to the late 1980s, and the second spanning the 1990s until the present. Most people who arrived during the first wave were refugees fleeing the violent dictatorships that swept Latin America during those years (predominantly from Chile, Argentina and Uruguay in the 1970s and then Peru, Colombia, Guatemala and El Salvador in the 1980s) (Bendrups 2011; Dio 2010). These new migrants arrived to a country which had little connection with their own countries and where people knew little about the context or circumstances from which they had come. Most had limited English-language skills, limited economic resources, and limited or no opportunity to communicate with home or return home (Del Rio 2014). In this context, two main forces drove the production of Latin music and dance: the need to build new forms of community where there were none, and the need to earn a living (Bendrups 2011: 196–200; Dio 2010: 66–70). People who would never have met in their homelands joined together and became a community, united through common language and some degree of shared culture. As such, in a sense the transition to Australia meant that these migrants left behind their national identities and became ‘Latin Americans’. Music provided connection and community, but it also provided commercial opportunities, requiring music and dance to be adapted in anticipation of what Australian audiences might recognize and like. The period since the end of the 1980s has seen drastic change in the circumstances within which Latin Americans are migrating to Australia, and their experiences upon arrival. Being Latin American in Australia is now qualitatively different from what it was, in part due to the path paved by earlier migrants but also, importantly, because of the proliferation of new technologies. Latin American migrants are now more connected to their original homelands than ever before, and processes through which Latin American culture circulates in the Australian context has also drastically changed.

Here Geoff Sharp’s theorizations around ‘constitutive levels’ or ‘extended forms of the social’ provide a valuable framework for thinking about how cultural practices and identities are constructed in the global era. Sharp’s work theorizes an historical shift from pre-modernity through to post-modernity through which new forms of technologically extended social integration came to dominate through the rapid proliferation of abstracted modes of intellectual exchange (from writing through to telecommunications) (Sharp 1993). Following in this vein, Paul James (1996, 2006a) identifies four levels of social integration: the face-to-face, the object extended, the agency-extended, and the disembodied. Face-to-face integrative relations are the realm of tangible, embodied coexistence and of identity. Such relations thus signify more than just instances of face-to-face interaction. Tribal and customary societies have been predominantly structured around face-to-face integration, involving a sense of being directly and tangibly present with and connected to others, even in their immediate absence. As the primordial form of social integration, the face-to-face underpins and is embedded in more abstract modes of integration, which make constant reference back to it. Object extension emphasizes the way in which objects come to draw relations between people across time and space. Relevant to the current discussion, these objects can be personal, sacred or commodified. The Bata drums, discussed earlier, for example, may have begun their life in a situation bound by localized face-to-face relations, but by being commodified (sold outside those relations) in this case they enter a circuit of meaning that draws subjectivity on that embodied depth: while abstracting it into an objectively global set of relations. The Bata drums come to be layered signifiers of Cuban music that carry another world of presence with them in a way, for example, that PowerPoint slides usually fail to do. Agency-extended integration is that which is extended and mediated through institutions; it renders relations between people more universalized but nevertheless still bounded by extensions of the body. Through institutions (such as the state or the church), people can be bound together conceptually without necessarily knowing each other at the face-to-face level. The increasing dominance of these modes of institutionalized integration marked the transition to modernity and to the rise of the nation-state. In describing the nation as an imagined material construct, James observes that ‘members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion’ (1996: 6). The fourth modality of social integration, the disembodied, is that which is made possible through technology that allows engagement with the world in a way that is disconnected from the face-to-face, thereby bringing a profound reconstitution of social
relations. Importantly, these different modes of integration are not distinct from one another, but are woven across one another to form the fabric of the contemporary social world (James 1996; see also Cooper 2003). It is through these more abstract forms of integration that being Latin American can be objectively lifted out of place, while still subjectively tied back to those more embodied relations that are said to constitute ‘authenticity’.

CONCLUSION

In light of these modes of social integration, I would like to reflect back upon the anecdotes that I have touched upon in the essay, returning first to the dance class in the university classroom. On that day in Melbourne, far removed from the home of his childhood, a dancer from Havana called upon memories of that distant place that he carried in his mind and body, and he translated those memories for the students in the room. Through Sharp’s and James’s theorizations, we begin to see that the social reality within that classroom was one where different cultural histories converged, and also that many layers of integration constituted that convergence. On this occasion, the participants were all co-present; the dancer met the students in face-to-face interaction with some integrative relations. However, this dimension alone does not capture the multiplicity of people, places and things interwoven through the occasion. For the dancer, migrating to Australia had created a layer of abstraction from the embodied context in which he learned to dance. Removed from that context, the dancer still conceived of himself as connected to that place through relations of kinship (his family) and immediately extended family and through identification with the construct of the nation (‘Cuba’). He called upon memories of face-to-face and extended relations from that distant place, bringing those memories into the new context before him. With their imaginations, the students in the room also pictured this place called ‘Cuba’ and coloured it with images drawn from the stories that the dancer, Alejandro, told. Later, the group watched videos of people in Cuba dancing and playing music; by technological extension, non-present people were transported across time and space and into the room.

With consideration of transculturation and of these extended forms of the social, I now reflect upon my experiences of playing in the Cuban band, and of watching and participating in samba dance performance and others, not so much with my previous preoccupations with who those practices belong to or don’t belong to, but with new sense of the complex entanglement of social relations that constitutes them. Transculturation is one way of theorizing those experiences. However, in the light of Sharp’s and James’s works, we might more meaningfully think of their phenomenon as layers of transculturation, each being constituted not only of diverse cultural elements but also of elements that are layered on top of one another through various interwoven levels of abstraction. In other words, in a global era it no longer makes sense to focus only on the cultural transformations that occur in borderlands (the embodied places where different cultures meet). In a world where images, ideas, sounds and other abstracted cultural forms fly around the globe faster than people ever could, we can no longer consider transculturation only in the context of the face-to-face encounters and mutual influences between different cultures. In order to understand how the contemporary social world is constituted, and how contemporary identities are constructed, we also need to consider the layers of abstracted influences that are interwoven through that which is embodied.

Last Sunday I found myself in Fitzroy watching one of Melbourne’s most popular Latin dance bands—the Quarter Street Orchestra. I was with two Brazilian friends, one accompanied by her British-Australian boyfriend and another by her mother, who was in town for the month on a visit from Paraná. To the band’s mixture of Puerto Rican, Colombian and New York influenced ‘salsa’, performed by Chilean, Uruguayan, Colombian and Anglo-Australian musicians, my Brazilian friends practiced their salsa dance steps, copying from a Cuban friend who was dancing nearby. One person on the far end of the stage was filming the band with an iPhone in an attempt to capture the moment and presumably to show it to friends at another time in another place, or to upload it to YouTube for others not present to watch. As I gazed across the crowded floor, I noticed the usual diverse mixture of dance styles: some were the awkward, nervous steps of those just starting to learn, but even they had discernibly started to incorporate the style of whichever local teacher they had found. Others danced confidently, with a range of movements carrying influences from the streets of Cali, Havana, Caracas, Los Angeles. When the band stopped, a DJ played recorded songs from Cuba, Colombia, Brazil and New York. As I watched, I felt at once more ambivalent about this space and more at home here than ever. The reality before me was one that was unique to those of us in the room, and one that none of us would ever experience anywhere else in the world. Yet at the same time the moment was layered with sounds and movements and memories of so many faraway people and so many faraway places.

NOTES

1. Even to a completely untrained eye (as were my eyes on that day), there exists little resemblance between the Latin street or social dance styles that I would have seen in Sydney and those performed by ballroom dancers. Elements of Latin
American dances appropriated by white ballroom dancers throughout the twentieth century and beyond resulted in a range of ballroom dances with names of Latin American dances (such as ‘samba’, ‘tango’, ‘rumba’ and ‘salsa’) but which are so distant in movement, rhythm and musical accompaniment from the social styles they imitated that they could be considered entirely different dances (Bosse 2008). Many a joke has been told in Latin American–Australian communities about the newly arrived migrant from Cuba or Brazil who sees a sign advertising ‘rumba’ or ‘samba’ on a local Australian dance studio and, expecting a lively social community gathering with drums and spontaneous dancing, turns up to find a few primly poised couples in sparkling costumes and shiny dance shoes prancing their stylized performance choreographies across polished wooden floors to recorded music.

2. Samba, now Brazil’s national dance, emerged in the state of Bahia in communities of African people enslaved by Portuguese land owners. The form of samba now most recognized across the world is that which circulates through images of the annual spectacle of Carnaval now virtually synonymous with ‘Brazil’ in the imagination of global audiences (see Kath and Knijnik 2015). Carnaval samba dancing was born in the late nineteenth century on the hillsides of Rio de Janeiro where freed slaves settled in informal ‘favela’ communities. Samba, like all cultural forms, is not the static, organic form that its label suggests but a disparate and ever-transforming hybrid of other forms. Its social meanings have changed too, especially in its journey from the social margins to the mainstream. In contemporary Brazil many variations of samba circulate, under many labelled sub-categories, including gafieira, frevo, samba-enredo, samba reggae, and pagode. Italians do not typically dance ‘salsa’. However, samba shares some common cultural ancestry with salsa, noticeable, for example, in similarities in the circular interactions and arrangements of samba-enredo (circular samba) and Cuban rumba (an antecedent of son and of casino, which later came to be danced along with the ‘salsa’ music that was born in Latino communities of New York). The merging in Cuba of ‘salsa’ music with the steps of casino became what is now widely known as ‘Cuban salsa’. According to Cuban dance historian Graciela Chau Carbonero, casino dance predates salsa music (Chau Carbonero 2006).

3. After having lost touch with Antonio over a decade ago, I recently called to interview him about the history of La Luna. After a while of joyful reminiscing about old times spent there, he explained that the venue, which opened on 4 May 1996, was the culmination of much support and effort by the local Colombian, Chilean, Salvadoran and other Latin American communities to establish a dedicated night spot for Latin music and dance, not only for the communities themselves but also to promote Latin American music and dance to other Australians; in Antonio’s words, ‘We also wanted to show the wider community of Brisbane how beautiful Latin American music is’. La Luna was the first dedicated Latin American nightclub in Brisbane (phone interview with Antonio Coral, 12 April 2015).

4. Especially within tourism literature, commoditization of culture has been the subject of much scholarly attention, with theorists pointing to the paradoxical dynamics through which the ‘staging’ or sale of culture at once constructs and undermines authenticity (Jones 2010: 182; Cohen 1988; Dicks 2003: 30–32; MacCannell 1973).

5. While a cabrón is literally a male goat, colloquially it means ‘scoundrel’, ‘bastard’, or ‘sly bastard’.

6. Music and dance have long played a fundamental role in the construction of Latin American identity. Cushman notes, for example, that modern Cuban identity is intimately tied to the production of music, and that from the 1920s onwards Cuba established itself in the globe through the export of ‘sounds sweeter than its sugar’ (2005: 164).

7. For Australia, Latin America has long been a blind spot, a reality explicitly highlighted in a 1992 report by the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade that described the Australia–Latin America relationship as one of ‘mutual ignorance’ and recommended drastic changes in Australia’s approach to the region, including a strategic effort to raising Australian public awareness of its social, cultural, political and economic development and of the vast but overlooked opportunities for extending trade, political, cultural and other relations. Not until very recently have these recommendations gained noticeable traction in Australia. In recent years, significant changes in the global order force us to reconsider Latin America in the global context, including its relevance to the Asia-Pacific.

8. Through a discussion of Petrarch’s letters and poetry and the metaphor of Petrarch ascending a mountain and looking back upon Italia, Paul James discusses the ambivalences and tensions experienced where there is a simultaneous dislocating from one place and re-embedding of identity in a new place. Here, various material processes of abstraction such as writing, exile, travelling, and leaving behind one’s birthplace ‘lift’ a person out of grounded place—the old and the new place coexist in an ambivalent relationship as part of the individual’s identity (James 2014: 84).
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