

Salsa/Bhangra: Transnational Rhythm Cultures in Comparative Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The dance-music complexes known as “Salsa” and “Bhangra” have not been subjected to any comparative academic scrutiny, despite clear parallels in their respective histories as cultural processes born out of multiple ruptures and conjunctions, including European colonialism, migrations during the postcolonial period, and transnational cultural and commodity flows. While Salsa has resulted from the movement of people, music and rhythmic cultures across Africa, the Caribbean and the United States, Bhangra evinces their movement across the partitioned space of the Punjab, the United Kingdom, and the post-Partition nations of India and Pakistan. Both Salsa and Bhangra have, moreover, moved beyond original regional ambits to become cultural signifiers (albeit often contested as much as claimed) of wider Latino/a and Desi (pan-South Asian) identities respectively. Undoubtedly, it is the academic and cultural embedding of Salsa within a Hispanophone postcolonial paradigm, and of Bhangra within its Anglophone counterpart, that has prevented serious comparative work between these two musical expressive cultures which are equally but differently exemplary of the complex relationship between music and migration. Yet across the world, from Delhi to San Francisco, the two dance-music complexes increasingly meet each other in the same space, particularly that of the dance floor. Drawing on such evidence as well as on personal experience of dancing both the Salsa and the Bhangra, I will advance in this article a theoretical framework for their comparison as transnational musics, suggesting ways in which such a framework can illuminate the circuits of pleasure and politics that traverse each of these dance musics as embodied histories of a traumatic yet life-affirming postcolonial modernity.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2008, British Asian percussionist and music producer Kuljit Bhamra, Artistic Director of the Society for the Promotion of New Music, joined forces with the Anglo-Latino pianist and composer, Alex Wilson, to create “Bhangra Latina,” an ambitious musical experiment bringing together the rhythms, instrumentations and melodic signatures of the music-dance complexes we know as “bhangra” and “salsa”. Bhangra Latina resulted in a CD of original compositions, but it also toured across the UK during 2008 and 2009 as a live music-dance extravaganza. Reviewing this show in highly positive terms, Jane Cornwell (2008) commented, “music is a universal language but salsa and bhangra rarely speak. Which is silly: just as salsa emerged from the Cuban son form and united Latin America, so did bhangra — the lively music and dance of the Punjab region — reach out to the Indian diaspora, taking Bollywood and Hollywood along the way. Last night the Bhangra Latina project brought the two genres to the table and created a fabulous hybrid, an East/West fusion with a shimmy and a whirl.” This shimmying and whirling was not, however, seamless. A sense of a certain visual incongruity comes through in Cornwell’s subsequent description: “professional salsera Alessia Bonacci sizzled in a routine that saw her lifted aloft, legs akimbo; a Bhangra dancer spread his arms, shimmied his shoulders, hopped about.” Bhamra declares in his promotional material that music has to “move the head, the heart and the hips” (<http://www.pattynanmedia.com/452/473.html>)¹ but what guarantee that the hips dancing the salsa and the bhangra respectively are going to move in synchronicity? Discrepancies between bhangra, which is not a couple-dance, and salsa, which is, showed up rather glaringly whenever the be-costumed male bhangra dancer teamed up with the scantily-clad salsera; indeed, the most symptomatic distinction between them was his kitschy Punjabi folk attire as contrasted to her slinky salsa frock. This distinction was replicated in Cornwell’s comment on the fabulous “east-west” hybrid that was Bhangra Latina. For what is the “west”, which salsa’s complicated musical trajectory represents? Equally, what is the “east” represented by bhangra in its British avatar, particularly that produced by a London-based musician such as Bhamra?

An experiment such as Bhangra Latina, and this particular review of it, enables me to draw out some of the issues raised in this article. Salsa and bhangra, each the focus of considerable research, have not yet been compared through academic analysis, even though there are clear parallels in the way each is intimately linked to migration and transnationalism. Accordingly, one of the tasks of this article is to examine and assess these striking socio-historical similarities. At the same time, the similarities between salsa and bhangra are also overlaid by significant divergences in their consumption and reception. If, in Cornwell’s words, salsa and bhangra “rarely speak,” and if their encounter within academic study is even rarer, it is because of these divergences; and yet, as “Bhangra Latina” itself demonstrates, there are spaces and moments when they are doing so. Thus the second task this article sets itself is to ask: under what conditions can salsa and bhangra “speak” to each other? What does this conversation, however spontaneous or scrambled, tell us about dance, music and migration in our

¹Accessed 31 August 2010.

transnational world, and about how ordinary people use dance, in particular, to express themselves and perform (multiple) identities? Across the world, salsa and bhangra collide in ways unpredictable, perhaps, to academia, but not unexpected within the ephemeral space of the dance floor. I draw on this evidence, as well as on my own experience of dancing salsa and bhangra, to shift the spotlight from the musicality of salsa and the multicultural politics of bhangra to their circulation as dance practices: this being the article's third objective. I conduct this comparative examination through an awareness of "how dance critically reconstitutes social practices while at the same time proposing ever new theories of body and presence" (Lepecki, 2004, pp. 1-2), which enable us to explicate the body as a site for the formation of subjectivity through the interplay of pleasure, resistance and performance. The typical analyses of subjectivity and agency under conditions of transnationalism are recast in terms of what one Caribbean critic retrieves from scholarly earnestness as "la alegría en el mundo" ("joy in the world"; Quintero Rivera, 1998, p.10). By analysing the dancing body as placed within an open field of theoretical and performative exchanges, (Lepecki, 2004, p. 9), I suggest new modes of understanding salsa and bhangra as embodied histories of traumatic yet life-affirming postcolonial modernity. This methodology also confirms the heuristic potential of examining transnationalism through the lens of dance.

SALSA AND BHANGRA: TRANSOCEANIC HISTORIES

Both music traditions with well-developed dance repertoires, salsa and bhangra were similarly born out of the multiple ruptures and conjunctions caused by European expansionism and colonialism, postcolonial diasporic migrations, and, finally, transnational conduits of production and consumption. Hybridity, dislocation and reformation, and a fluidity of terminology underlie both forms, and are embedded in their very names. "In Spanish 'salsa' literally means 'sauce,' with a culinary metaphor that evokes images of a spicy concoction — somewhat mirroring the music's own hybrid origins and infectious appeal" (Waxer, 2002a, p. 3) – and as a phrase it was coined, reputedly by a Venezuelan Disc Jockey, Phidias Danilo Escalona, to denote Latin dance music in the early 1960s (Rondón, 1980, p. 3). At the same time, the fluidity of the label, which is applied to a number of popular dance forms arising from Latin America, signals its shifting and inherently transnational nature (Waxer, 2002a, p. 5). Bhangra, too, is a polyvalent term: it can refer to the traditional male dance that developed by the late nineteenth century in the agrarian region of the Punjab, then part of British India; it can signify the folklorized form of the dance that was showcased by the Indian nation as the culture of the state (federal unit) of Punjab that fell within its territory after independence in 1947; and it definitely indicates the further development of these traditions in urban, diasporic spaces, particularly those of Britain. By the 1970s, however, "salsa had become the standard term of reference throughout Latin America, owing in large part to its use by Fania Records as a commercial label with which to market this music" (Waxer, 2002a, p. 4). So, too, has bhangra moved from being "a descriptor of Punjabi folklore" to a catch-all term for Punjabi popular music including "hybrid and diasporic forms which blend Punjabi song lyrics, the convention of call and response ("boliyaan"),

and instrumentation with Western popular musical influences, including disco, reggae, house, hip-hop, and rap--in transnational contexts” (Mooney, 2008, p. 4).

Like salsa, then, bhangra “must be read as inhabiting multiple positions both within a particular local context and across local contexts and the diasporic web of (cultural, political, historical, racial) identity it creates” (Gopinath, 1995, p. 307). What is noteworthy, however, is the deep history of migration that subtends the present-day transnational vectors of both these dance-music forms. As is well established, salsa has been created through the movement of people, music and rhythmic cultures across Africa, the Caribbean and the United States. The fusion of European couple dances and lyrical styles with African rhythms and percussive traditions brought to the Caribbean through slavery and the Middle Passage created, in Cuba, the form of dance and music called “son” (Manuel, 2006). The son fed into the dance culture of New York from the 1930s onwards, giving rise to dance crazes like the mambo, the cha-cha-cha and the boogaloo (Waxer, 2002b). During the 1960s, these different traditions were re-developed primarily by Puerto Rican immigrants in New York to create a more codified, more energetic, and more stylized dance form which began to be called “salsa”, after the new term for the music which was also rapidly becoming slicker and more commercialized (Washburne, 2008). While the African roots of salsa (both the music and the dance) can superficially seem erased through many of these developments, the fundamental dependence of the music on African polyrhythm and call and response structures means that there can be no serious ambiguity about that relationship. As Afro-Cuban bandleader Arsenio Rodríguez, a vital conduit for the movement of Cuban musical traditions to New York in the 1940s, sang: “yo nací de Africa, tal vez soy del Congo, tal vez soy del Ampanga.” (I was born in Africa, perhaps I am of the Congo, perhaps of the Ampanga (Cuban argot denoting a superlative of excess, with a phonology typical of Afro-Cuban heritage words),” Manuel, 2006, p. 291). The African roots of salsa, generated through the displacements and traumas caused by the slave trade seem to constitute a divergence rather than similarity between salsa and bhangra, whose trademark is proclaimed as being its autochthonous relationship to the Punjab. A closer look at the early history of bhangra, however, reveals that it too has been forged through forces of imperialism which intimately involved complex population movements — albeit in this case, we are concerned with Empire’s end game rather than its high noon.

Less academic attention has been given to the early history of bhangra as compared to that devoted to tracing the evolution of salsa. Although “the scant body of source material pertaining to Punjabi folk culture before 1947 means that the early history of bhangra is contentious, and debates over its etymology, origins and nature are common” (Ballantyne, 2006, p. 127), it is nevertheless clear that the processes leading to bhangra’s emergence are emblematic of “Sikh cultural formations in an imperial world” (to use the title of Ballantyne, 2006). By the end of the nineteenth century, bhangra had emerged as a male harvest dance intimately linked with the social, economic and cultural rhythms of the districts of the Western Punjab (Ballantyne, 2006, p. 127). The decolonization of British India through its traumatic

Partition into India and Pakistan in 1947 directly affected the loci of bhangra's emergence. The Western Punjab became part of Pakistan, and its Sikh and Hindu populations migrated to India in a large-scale, violent transfer of population, mirrored by the movement of Muslim Punjabis from East Punjab, now in India, to the new Pakistan. Dissociated from its rural origins, bhangra was mobilized into an official post-traumatic strategy of the new Indian state of Punjab: "in the wake of Partition, bhangra assumed new importance as part of the projection of punjabiyat (Punjabi-ness) and the regional government's attempts to construct a coherent state structure that transcended the deep divisions that were laid so bare in the violence of Partition." Stage, film and school curricula, particularly inter-college dance competitions (Leante, 2004, p. 110), all became pedagogic-performative modes for "bhangra's transformation into a ubiquitous feature of the province's culture within independent India." But while bhangra was becoming "an icon of Punjab and Punjabiness" (Ballantyne, 2006, p. 128) it was also being carried to the United Kingdom through massive post-Partition diasporic movements of Punjabis — trajectories which built on their pre-Partition migrations to other parts of the British Empire, such as Canada and East Africa. Initially consonant with the "hypermasculine" (Ballantyne, 2006: 128) ethos of early migrant communities, bhangra soon became part of "the complex soundscape" (Leante, 2004, p.112) of subsequently reconstituted Punjabi families and their concomitant emphasis on community events such as weddings and rituals centred on newly built places of worship.

MIGRATION DANCE AND URBAN COMMUNITAS

Bhangra's fracturing and re-consolidation through these waves of displacement and diaspora are reminiscent of salsa's development through pan-Latino migration from the Caribbean to New York. Just as New York salsa reflects the urban diasporic experience of Latino communities, it is in Birmingham and the London suburb of Southall that bhangra develops into a genre of British Asian dance music out of the fusion of Punjabi folk heritage and new urban diasporic identities for Punjabis. Crucial in both cases were inter-generational divergences in the relationship between the city, the nation and the child of immigrant parents. Christopher Washburne (2008, p. 6) has remarked how, during the 1990s, a new generation of salseros "co-opted the music of their parents, reinventing and transforming the salsa scene with sounds and expressions that better represented their own experiences as Latino youth growing up in New York City" (Washburne, 2008, p. 6). Likewise, Ashwini Sharma (1996, p. 39) has hailed bhangra as "an *affirmative moment* (author's emphasis) in the formation of an Asian identity discourse in the early 1980s" whereby young British Asians used it to gain a sense of identity and visibility in the public domain while negotiating their ambivalent positioning within the double-edged politics of British multiculturalism. Ultimately salsa and bhangra alike have been forged out of the urban inner city experience, through resistance to hostility and racism, and as a new generation's mode of making sense of life through multiple musical inheritances. They are part of the inner city's and the barrio's fabric of "urban sounds, styles, aromas and a closeness of activity" (Dudrah, 2002, p. 342). If in Birmingham

bhangra belongs to (Dudrah, 2002, p. 342) “a range of eclectic music which vies for your attention from the sound systems in cars of predominantly young South Asian, African and Caribbean men,” in New York, salsa is “often heard but not recognized when souped-up Toyotas with tinted windows and open hatchbacks cruise down Broadway with sounds systems blasting” (Washburne, 2008, p. 9). The rhythms and sounds of an alternative soundscape form the mode whereby British Asians on the one hand, and Latinos on the other, mark specific urban spaces as their territory, and announce their presence uncompromisingly to the wider national space within which the city is located; of course, these are soundscapes constantly in dialogue with commercial interests that tend to rob them of their “alternativeness” as soon as representative acts are seen as marketable to the mainstream.

Washburne’s comment that “salsa’s alterity has been fundamental from its inception” (2008, p. 8) is also applicable to bhangra, though later in this article we shall consider in detail how this alterity is differently perceived for each form. Here I simply wish to note that these complexities of diaspora have enabled both salsa and bhangra to function as contested, multiple-claimed signifiers of wider Latino and pan-South Asian (“desi”) identities respectively. Salsa is widely understood “as an ‘inter-Latino’ and ‘trans-Caribbean’ music, regardless of the fact that it emerged from the cultural climate of New York City, owes much of its stylistic particularities to African American expressions (jazz and R’n’B in particular) and Cuban music practices as performed in New York in the 1940s and 1950s, and has maintained a vital presence on the musical landscape in the United States for more than forty years” (Washburne 2008, p. 9). The loosening of salsa’s connection with Cuba is already signified in its massive Puerto Rican investment, which was complemented by Cuba’s musical and cultural isolation precisely during the period salsa was being (re)formed in New York. Furthermore, alongside Puerto Rico, Venezuela and Colombia are also closely intertwined with the history of salsa’s development. Although Cuban music developed along its own trajectory from the 1970s onwards, whereby it began incorporating elements from hip-hop, reggae, dancehall and jazz, Cuban musicians and dancers continue to exit from, or enter into “salsa” in keeping with their personal politics and predilections. Contemporary bhangra, similarly, is simultaneously appreciated as being born in the British inner city (although here too there is contestation over whether this birthplace was Southall or Birmingham), organically expressive of Punjabi-ness, and open to consumption by other desis. Undoubtedly, bhangra’s connection to not merely Punjabi, but Sikh, culture complicates its adoption by other diasporic groups: Punjabi Muslims who re-articulate their South Asian affiliations as Pakistani rather than Punjabi, or South Asians with no connection to the Punjab. Whenever this move occurs, as for example when Bangladeshi-British musician Habib remixes Bhangra antiphonal shouts into Sylheti folk music, it forges new cultural affiliations and political alignments. Scholarly commentators may wrangle over whether or not “British bhangra holds equal attraction for all South Asian groups” (Dudrah, 2002, p. 365), but they equally acknowledge British bhangra “as constituted of a musical dialogue with other black dance music genres that offer possibilities for the non-exhaustive identifications of

“British and black” and “Asian” as politically available to Asian youth” (Dudrah, 2002, p. 366).

The multivalent appropriation of salsa and bhangra is facilitated by what we may term two continua: the linguistic and the rhythmic. By linguistic continuum I signal the language of the music’s lyrics, which remains for both forms a strong ethnic signifier. The Spanish language, shared between different Hispano-American national identities that competitively claim the music, widens salsa’s ambit to encompass a pan-Latino *communitas*. For bhangra, in contrast, the Punjabi language can close the music’s affective circuit within a distinctively vernacular world of Punjabiness; yet, here the concept of a continuum reveals its worth. For speakers of related languages, notably Hindi and Urdu, but even of those languages further afield geographically from Punjabi, such as Gujarati and Bengali, it is not difficult to follow the key words within bhangra lyrics, eg “aaja nachh lai” (come, let’s dance) variants of which exist in all these languages. Meanwhile, more locale-specific phrases such as “chak de phatte” (lift up the floorboards) or “bol hadippa” (say bravo) have become meta-signifiers of desi-ness via Bollywood, which cannibalizes bhangra’s music, dance motifs and phrasal assemblages in a complex give-and-take with “punjabiyat” (Mitra Das, 2006); here, it is apposite to note the commonplace contrasting of “punjabiyat”, or the celebration of Punjabi culture as joyous, boisterous, and aggressively expressive to an ultra-refined Anglophone culture of a section of (post)colonial elite, and that this binary, first propagated within Bollywood by Punjabi cultural actors displaced to India by the Partition, has now become available to all Indians for a new vernacular self-fashioning through Bollywood leitmotifs. The Bollywood connection highlights the sibling rivalry between British and Indian bhangra, both the Bollywood and the State-sanctioned, folkloric kinds. Such rivalry notwithstanding, non-Punjabi South Asians in the diaspora, in India and also in Pakistan, all dance to bhangra in intuitive response to the beat: for, in using one of South Asian music’s most popular eight-beat *taal*s (rhythm cycles), bhangra is firmly located within a distinctive South Asian rhythmic continuum. This concept of a rhythmic continuum also explains how, for salsa dancers of different styles, and for the music styles that have evolved in tandem with them, the basic grammar remains “pa-pa-PA...pa-pa-PA” rhythm for the moving feet, interpreted by Puerto Rican dance styles numerically as “one-two-three/five-six-seven”; while the more immersed dancers and musicians can also recognize the hidden son clave that structures salsa’s sonic architecture. The rhythmic continuum is a criss-crossing line of affection and competition connecting salsa to Cuban developments of a shared musical heritage, and British bhangra to its Indian counterparts. For salsa and for bhangra, underlying the *communitas* forged through a recognisable language is the connective tissue of rhythm that survives diaspora and transnationalism to recreate modes of self-expression and enjoyment.

TENSIONS, CONTESTATIONS, DIVERGENCES, RACE

Through bhangra as much as salsa, then, “tensions of ethnic and national differences play out in fascinating ways as the music serves as an arena for contestations concerning ownership, authenticity and representation” (Washburne, 2008, p. 7). Given these similarities, there seems much to be gained by comparing bhangra and

salsa as transnational dance-music complexes formed through intricate transactions that create a webbed connection of “elsewheres” within which the music and its embodied practices circulate. Why then have they hitherto escaped comparative scrutiny? The simple answer is that salsa and bhangra belong to different postcolonial language worlds. Bhangra, having developed through interactions between South Asia and its British diasporas, is embedded within an Anglophone postcolonial world, while salsa, created through the intra-Caribbean and pan-American movement of cultures and peoples, is embedded within its Hispanophone counterpart. Unsurprisingly, those who study bhangra are overwhelmingly situated in the Anglo-American academy, while those who study salsa, largely within the Hispano-Americas. Scholarship on each circulates in separate spheres, governed by specific epistemological and political exigencies whose non-congruence enacts “the problematic relationship between Latin American cultural studies and postcolonial theory” (Martínez-San Miguel, 2009, p. 189). Furthermore, these colonial genealogies have resulted in salsa and bhangra being differently globalized and differently accessible to “outsiders”. Salsa dancing is serious business across Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Americas: every ethnicity dances, or wants to dance salsa, and the music’s lyrics parade this global appeal: “salsa no tiene fronteras” (salsa has no borders) sings Japan’s Orquesta de la Luz (Waxer, 2002b, p. 289). Bhangra, in contrast, is a desi scene, hermetic and esoteric, an insider world that only the initiated can penetrate. “Although there have been a few notable success stories,” (Talvin Singh is a useful example) notes Hyder, “during the height of the bhangra boom in the 80s and the 90’s the genre failed to achieve its potential” (2004, p. 72). The speculation that bhangra’s Punjabi lyrics have been “a significant stumbling block to gaining widespread appeal” (Hyder, 2004, p. 72) only reminds us that salsa, despite its Spanish lyrics, has gained precisely such appeal. What “bolsters the appearance of bhangra as an alien cultural form in the UK” (Hyder, 2004, p. 72) then, are the deeper politics of multiculturalism which Hispanic and Anglophone colonial histories have respectively generated. I now substantiate this claim by recounting my own experiences of being an observer-participant of salsa and bhangra as dance practices within urban British settings.

Friday nights I am often at Copacabana, Manchester’s most popular salsa club. Here, Eastern European, French, West African, white British, Chinese/Singaporean, Turkish, Afro-Caribbean, and North African and Latino clientele throng the floor, dancing to high quality salsa music punctuated by merengue, bachata and reggaeton tracks. The style of dancing is largely “Cuban salsa”: a more relaxed, self-consciously “natural” dancing style that retains several elements from Cuban son and Afro-Cuban folkloric forms such as rumba, and which eschews the rather rigid stylistics and frequent, high-speed spins associated with Puerto Rican/ Nuyorican salsa styles. While there is a discernible core of dancers united by a dedication to Cuban style, there are others who have not learnt any kind of salsa but dance instinctively. In the case of the West Africans, who recognize the underlying polyrhythms with ease, this instinctive response works; in the case of the lone Indian man, trying vainly to summon South Asian dance styles, including bhangra, to his cause, it does not. Indeed this difficulty of translating South Asian *taala* (rhythm cycle) to polyrhythm

is possibly why there are relatively few South Asian dancers to be seen in Copacabana; I know from personal experience that this is no smooth transition. Because of this rarity, I am very often aggressively questioned by South Asian men at Copacabana, who watch rather than dance, as to why I, an Indian woman, choose to dance salsa, and why I would usually choose not to dance with them in couple-hold. It is mostly British Asian men who approach me thus; the few Indian men from India who are there are dancers rather than voyeurs, keen to polish their cosmopolitanism and not interested in dancing with another visibly Indian woman. The layered dynamics of race, location and genealogies of affiliation that underwrite these tense encounters on an otherwise racially variegated dance floor may be contrasted with my experience of dancing bhangra in specifically desi venues in England. These have been ad hoc occasions that long predate my interest in salsa, but as a non-Punjabi and someone who self-identifies as Indian rather than British Asian, I am perhaps less of an insider within these spaces than I am now within a club such as Copacabana. This is a question of what movements the body has inherited and what it subsequently learns, as well as the various contexts within which such learning takes place.

Although I have neither learnt bhangra nor inherited its specific moves, as someone who has grown up in South Asian rhythm culture – I revert to my earlier point about the rhythmic continuum – I recognize the rhythm cycles and melodic patterns underlying bhangra compositions and interpret them with a pan-Indian bodily “accent” (analogous to West African interpreters of salsa moves). I can imitate bhangra movements without too much difficulty and follow the Punjabi lyrics through my knowledge of Hindi. However, as confirmed by a recent visit to the Chi Lounge, a bhangra club in the centre of Birmingham, race is the crucial badge of identity to feeling at home within these spaces. My being desi is what counted here; barring my “native interpreter”, who, ironically, was an Italian anthropologist specializing in British Pakistani communities, everyone was brown and of South Asian descent. Moreover, nearly everyone (apart from us) appeared to be Punjabi. This homogeneity was iterated in the dress and deportment of the club-goers, who, whether male or female, emulated an R’n’B, “bling-bling” aesthetics. Black denim, off-the-shoulder tops and black stilettos marked the women; men replaced the turban with a bandana. This demographic contrast between Copacabana and the Chi Lounge confirms patterns of aspiration we see within society at large. While salsa lessons can be found anywhere in the UK with ease, it is not so easy to learn bhangra—a contrast that seems paradoxical when considered against the established British bhangra music industry. I attribute salsa’s comparative accessibility to its foundational fusing of African rhythms with European forms of cultural expression—most notably, the formation of the dancing couple. It is this language that, as with other European-derived “universalisms”, aids salsa’s apparent openness to non-Latino enthusiasts. Moreover, the mestizaje element within Latin American cultures has ensured a space for visible racial diversity, which is emphatically not the norm in South Asian ones. The latter’s tendency towards racial exclusivity has been replicated in diasporic communities which have to contend with the politics of race disguised thinly as multiculturalism, compounded by the post-imperial relationship between a

(White) British public and South Asian heritage cultural production. The special appeal of Caribbean cultures to the European imaginary, particularly their associations with sensuality and sexual expressiveness, add to the reasons why the white British person turns to curry for gastronomic escape, but to salsa for social self-fashioning.

DANCE AS DECODER OF MULTICULTURAL POLITICS

These politics of multiculturalism, themselves tangled up with European imperial adventures in the New World and Old, must therefore enter a consideration of the differential appeal of these dance forms deriving from those worlds. This point becomes inescapable when we consider the collisions between salsa and bhangra that are occurring in, for instance, the American West Coast- as evinced by Manish Vij, a prolific desi blogger:

“My lightness-of-being is so much fun... You attract people when you smile. An Egyptian woman left the scent of her shoulder blades on my fingertips. We figured out the teacher is not Latina but Lebanese, and she kept staring at my partner trying to figure out her ethnicity. The desi woman, usually insecure, turned out a serious dancer, part of a bhangra troupe and sister of a friend.

We four took over a corner of the salsa floor, late, when not so many were there, and did bhangra in a circular rueda-style pattern, the East Asian guy, a good sport, asking, ‘so what are we dancing again?’ The Indians had arrived, we’d planted our flag firmly in the corner, and these girls were serious dancers.

You trust such people more when you connect instantly; I leaned back, way back, and she supported me, all five feet four of pint-sized her, though we’d just met—her sister is my buddy’s fiancée, the Punjabi connection, the bhangra connection, the dance connection, instant trust. The Egyptian danced all night with another Asian. Cultures mixed freely, I’m not European... Arabic trance is stunning, Cheb Faudel did one with a salsa backbone and an Arabic heart, an odd song but it works. The Shakira-lookalike bar waitress smiled at me for the first time, there was a fabulous mambo show where half the troupe was white...” (Vij, 2002).

Vij’s blog entries on salsa and bhangra have generated long chains of responses about why, how and to what extent desi girls and desi boys dance salsa. These conversations make clear the reliance of Californian desis on their ability to pass as Latino/a, the power gained by the consequent identity confusions, and the emergent appeal of salsa as a passport to cosmopolitanism. The same association of salsa and an international cosmopolitanism underlies the burgeoning salsa scene in India, roughly coincident with the liberalisation of the economy that since the 1990s enabled India to participate in globalising processes of consumption and leisure.

Post-liberalisation India provides ample opportunities for salsa and bhangra to converse, as my experience of dancing salsa at Delhi’s Urban Pind club (pind: Punjabi “village”) exemplified. Together with a friend, herself a diasporic Punjabi who passed as a Latina in New York clubs, I danced while observing a packed floor of

well-dressed Delhi-ites dancing salsa mostly competently and frequently joyfully. Here, salsa was the badge of an aspirational cosmopolitanism; it was what people wanted to now learn in order to be citizens of the world. Around midnight, the music decisively changed to pulsating Bollywood/bhangra. Instantaneously, the crowd was transformed. Freed from counting to salsa time and remaining conscious of the rules for leading and following, everyone relaxed. Hips were thrust and shoulders were shaken, but in Indian rather than Latino modes. The couples broke up and reorganized themselves into groups, often same-sex, dancing alongside each other. At the Chi Lounge, I was reminded of that collective change in inner tempo. In keeping with the crowd's sartorial emulations of Black street culture, the DJ at the Chi Lounge warmed up the floor with at least an hour of R'n'B music, to which the British Asian dancers moved with consummate ease. This familiarity with Black youth music culminated with the dancers' ecstatic reception of a recent Bhangra hit, "Amplifier," by Imran Khan, a Punjabi musician of Dutch-Pakistani heritage. The song, sung in Punjabi, with some recognizable South Asian melodic lifts, nevertheless sounds almost totally like an R'n'B track- an alignment confirmed by the singer's self-presentation in the video. From about midnight the music switched to British bhangra and the dancing bodies shifted in style to its upward thrusting dance movements rather than R'n'B's "getting down and dirty" moves. In keeping with South Asian dance styles, men and women did not dance in couples but in single-sex groups with the possibility of breaching those boundaries to instigate momentary heterosexual encounters. The overall atmosphere was joyous and celebratory; lines and boundaries were drawn and maintained. Yet clearly the clientele of Chi were there to dress up, dance, see and be seen. The erotic charge lay in maintaining distance, in looking and longing without approaching.

The cultural milieux of Delhi and the Bay Area permit spontaneous encounter between bhangra and salsa in ways that do not happen in Britain, but we cannot ignore the Chi Lounge crowd's relationship to Black music cultures and aesthetics. This relationship is founded on the journeys made by different rhythm cultures in "Creole time and space" (Critchlow, 2009, pp. 41-71), and the interactions that continue to happen in such time-spaces, for instance, in the Indo-Caribbean. Thus Steven Kapoor, alias Apache Indian, a Birmingham Punjabi, rose to stardom by fusing bhangra and reggae and singing about arranged marriages, roti and curry, and good Indian girls. These moves made his music homologous to popular music from the Indo-Caribbean— a joke surely anticipated by his very *nom-de-plume*; indeed, his appeal worked multi-directionally between Black and Asian communities in the UK as well as the Caribbean and India. While these points have often been made about Apache Indian's music, little has been said about the dancing body as a site for multiple layered rhythms that music such as his predicates. If "outside tight communities of dancers, the dancing black body routinely arouses extraordinary wariness and fascination" (Defrantz, 2004, p. 64) what happens when the watching audience is not white, but brown, and when that audience begins emulating black dance styles? Does this relation alter "the transcripts of both "public" and "private" meaning" contained in "black social dancing" (Defrantz, 2004, p. 64)? Once I danced with a Jamaican *salsero* who destabilized me by counting in Hindi while

moving his upper body bhangra-style. This moment encapsulated “the playfulness of dance... as gratuitous, free, noncumulative, rule-bound yet difficult to control”—all characteristics that, arguably, also explain dance’s “neglect in the social sciences and humanities” (Nash, 2000, p. 656). Dance “hint[s] at different experiential frames, different ways of being that cannot be written or spoken” (Nash, 2000, p. 655). It is true that “dance, like music, is a cultural form and practice especially susceptible to essentialist readings of “natural” rhythm and instinctive aptitude” (Desmond, 1997, p. 41); nevertheless, if analyzed strategically, as within my attempt to locate the spaces and modes of rhythmic encounter, dance can subvert the attribution of “essential and authentic “cultural features” to South Asians in contrast to blacks who are defined solely in terms of race,” as well as redress the fact that, while “black popular music [is] a prominent part of any cultural studies inventory... Asian popular music [is] relatively neglected” (Kalra, 2000, p. 81).

TRANSNATIONALISM AND DANCE IN THE GLOBAL CITY

The comparison between salsa and bhangra has revealed similarities, divergences, and chance encounters. From the similarities we can extrapolate, first, that a feature of modernity has been to disperse rhythm cultures, as we may now usefully label these dance-music complexes, across trajectories of population movements determined primarily by imperial forces- slavery, decolonization, the continuing relationship between post-imperial metropolises and ex-colonies; neo-colonial migrations from Latin America and the Caribbean to the USA. Transposed to new urban locations, these rhythm cultures never develop in isolation, especially if we examine their histories over the *longue durée*; rather, the complex vectors of their transmission, cannibalisation and enjoyment thoroughly confound the putative separation between “homeland” and “diaspora”. They necessitate new models for the circulation and reception of culture that move beyond “diaspora space” – however multi-layered this space may be conceived of as being (Brah 1996, p. 209) – to the greater multi-directionality, for instance, of concepts such as “transnational social fields” and “transnational hubs” (*e.g.*, Kiwan and Meinhof, 2011, Introduction; and the articles by Kiwan and Meinhof, and Glick-Schiller and Meinhof in this volume). The divergences between salsa and bhangra, which are mostly those of their reception and consumption in the metropolis, offer a useful lens through which to focus on the different legacies of postcolonialism as these lend shape to wider practices of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism. In the UK, the relationship of bhangra to the white public sphere is more fraught and difficult to negotiate than the adaptation of salsa by that same public sphere, while salsa in the USA remains an equally fraught terrain marked by the complex hemispheric relationship between Latin(o) and Anglo cultures. Indeed, the parallel histories of salsa’s and bhangra’s transoceanic formations point towards the imbrication of these rhythm cultures within a relational modernity striated by multiple strategic essentialisms: what would have been the impact of Bhangra Latina, one wonders, if Kuljit Bhamra had dressed his bhangra dancers in R’n’B gear rather than Punjabi folk costume? What is at stake at staging bhangra’s non-modernity for an outside audience in spite of bhangra’s resolutely, even impeccably modern history? (Ballantyne, 2006, p. 122; Mooney, 2008, p. 7).

These questions lead me to my final point, which returns to encounters between salsa and bhangra. Given that these occur emblematically in urban spaces, what might a focus on dance tell us about transnationalism interstitially located in the city? “Transnational space is complex, multi-dimensional and multiply inhabited,” declare Jackson, Crang and Dwyer (2004, p. 3), and “a spatial focus usefully foregrounds the contextual specificity of transnational forms”. The body dancing in the urban club, or moving to the beat as it cruises the street, is traversing a specific rhythm continuum that is moulded by, and moulds, urban space. On the one hand, this body can challenge the commonplace critical practice of viewing it as either an exclusively racialized entity, or an abstraction whose materiality is evaporated by too textual a reading (see Gilroy, 1995, p. 36). On the other, rhythm cultures reinsert within the remit of transnationalism “ordinary people” and the academic necessity of “appreciating, and valorising, the skills and knowledges they get from being embodied beings” but which that same necessity often devalorizes by forcing them within the analytical grids of the “contemplative” life (Nash, 1997, p. 126). “Dance has the potential (at least momentarily) to recast gender relationships, express sensuality in unsettling ways, and uncouple the body from the social, cultural and religious strictures that govern it” (Ballantyne, 2006, p.155). Focusing on rhythm thus returns analysis to “a resistant recognition of the “scandalous” and power-laden histories of its travels and styles” (Nash 1997, p. 660). Resistance here lies in returning dance to the located body, and the embodied locale, and being, in the process, more attentive to the spatial politics of transnationalism. Speaking of the transnationality of cities” Glick-Schiller (2011, p. 183) advocates that “cities serve not as bounded units of analysis but as analytical entry points from which to examine transnational processes”, an approach “that highlights the role of differential urban opportunity structures in fostering differential migrant pathways of incorporation.” So do moments of transcultural encounters in rhythm function as differential social(ising) opportunities that foster similar pathways?

While discussing the oral-literate-oral continuum of street culture in Accra, Ghana, Ato Quayson (2010, p. 426) enumerates the methodological shifts this material necessitates: “First is the necessary modulation from an exclusively literary perspective to incorporate ethnographic fieldwork methods from anthropology. Second is how to differentiate the various categories of persons and groups that traverse the street and to isolate them as sociologically meaningful. And third is how to properly assemble their reading practice(s) and...to show that they are co-produced by the vehicular urban scripts we have already identified.” Borrowing the term “vehicular” as used in a metaphoric sense by Deleuze and Guattari, Quayson returns to it a literal level of meaning by hermeneutically privileging the slogans routinely borne on trucks in Accra, that in “facilitat[ing] the physical transition from place to place... also spatialize and accrue to themselves *the idea of mobility and transition*” (2010, p. 426). This sense of mobility impacts diverse regimes of the body, as Quayson discovered in the course of his fieldwork in Accra’s gyms. Quayson’s observations on “ordinary people” of the street and their agentive relationship to modernity through the seepage of vehicular scripts through their daily lives offer an apposite note on which to end my own attempt to compare the rhythm cultures of salsa and bhangra. Their

entangled histories can be explicated in terms of the movement from “vernacular, maternal, or territorial language, used in rural communities or rural in its origins” to “vehicular, urban, governmental, even worldwide language, a language of businesses, commercial exchange, bureaucratic transmission, and so on, a language of the first sort of deterritorialization,” whereby “vernacular language is *here*; vehicular language is *everywhere*” (Quayson, 2010, p. 427).

The vehicular languages of the dance floor, vectors of knowledges both public and secret, permit alignments that are difficult elsewhere. Dialogue between dance forms is at best cacophonous, broken, stuttered and unequal in the directions of flow. But today, they are *everywhere*. If we want to understand our shared yet striated modern world, we must try and listen, and try and move together. These encounters may seem to be limited to the ephemeral space of the dance floor, with no immediate effect on the quotidian relationships that exist between migrants with different histories, class, racial and ethnic affiliations who inhabit the transnational city outside that dance floor. Yet, from another perspective, that space of mixing is suspended within the transnational city. Not only does it bring together people who otherwise may not interact with each other, it does so in unexpected ways for moments of collective, somatic pleasure. The dancing, moving body inserts a splinter into the socio-economic, market-driven hegemonies that largely characterize the “transnational” world. This splinter is the entry point for rhizomatic and unpredictable trajectories of desire and pleasure that interrupt and intercept more concrete and differentiated pathways of migrant incorporation. The utopian moment of being “lost in music” generates energies that do not entirely dissipate when the dancing body emerges out into the street to resume the rhythms of daily life.

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