

## **Current Problems & Methods in Dance Reconstruction: Focus on Cross-Cultural and Social Dance Reconstruction**

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*Abstract:* This roundtable began with presentations by the three conveners describing their own experience with reconstruction of social dance and/or dance in a cross-cultural context, including the French cancan of the 1820s and 1830s, American dances of the ragtime era, and New York mambo of the 1950s. Each presented methodological problems encountered and strategies employed in the face of those issues. The floor was then opened to all participants to dialogue about their own experiences in and questions about dance reconstruction in these varied contexts. Included here are summaries of each presenter's remarks, followed by their recollections of and reactions to the discussion.

### **First Kicks: Translating Early Sources on the Cancan**

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I would like to talk today about my current project, *First Kicks: translating early sources on the Cancan*, which is still in progress. Therefore, I will not be focusing on conclusions, but on the issues we are currently working through. The project has involved collaborating with a translator, Dr. Anna Davies, to identify and translate from French to English the earliest sources on the cancan. The aim is not necessarily to produce a performative reconstruction of the cancan, as the timescale and resources of the project are rather short, although this could be the aim of a later phase of the project. Rather, it focuses on translating and analysing primary sources to begin to build a picture of the early cancan.

The geographical focus of the project is Paris, and the period we are looking at is the late 1820s – the end of Bourbon Restoration, just before the Revolution of 1830. At this time, dances that would eventually be grouped under the name of the cancan emerged through the movement of dancers and dance forms between various locations in the city. The first of these locations is the *guinguettes* – numerous working-class, open-air dance venues on the outskirts of Paris. Here, working-class dancers, both male and female, began to flout the rules laid down by the dancing masters on how to perform respectable couple dances, such as the quadrille. Instead they introduced improvisations, based on a range of cross-cultural dance influences that they encountered through their participation in Parisian popular culture. For example, the popular theatres on the Boulevard du Temple presented melodramas which transported the mixed class audience through historical and exotic spectacles, including dances such as the *chica* from Saint-

Domingue, which conjured images of the Haitian Revolution. Other dance practices, such as the Spanish *fandango*, were performed at the Paris Opéra, but also at popular theatres such as the Théâtre de la Porte-Saint-Martin. At the *guinguettes*, the working-class dancers drew on these influences as they experimented with the set choreographies they had inherited from the bourgeoisie. Various names were used to describe these improvisations, as I will discuss later, but for the purposes of this presentation, I will generally refer to them as the cancan. Trying to build a picture of the cancan improvisations that emerged from the interaction of these contexts has raised a number of issues that are relevant to our discussion of dance reconstruction.

The first of these issues is the lack of imagery and movement description of the cancan in the late 1820s and 1830s. There seem to be a number of reasons for this. One may be that cancan dancers were flirting with the law, and therefore kept their practice hidden from view. Certain types of cancan improvisation were deemed 'indecent', and therefore contravened Article 330 of the Penal Code which covered offences against Public Decency. Policemen patrolled the *guinguettes* looking for 'indecent' dancing, although the definition of 'indecent' is not articulated, either in the Penal Code or in the policeman's guide of 1831. Therefore, performances of the cancan were fleeting, dodging the gaze of the authorities, and resistant to capture in image or text. Indeed, Georges Matoré, a lexicographer who wrote about the cancan in the mid-nineteenth century, noted that even the word 'cancan' was regarded as indecent. Although one of the earliest convictions for dancing the cancan was in 1826 (Barlet, 1831), the earliest definite image of the cancan I have found so far is from 1841, contained in Louis Huart's *Physiologie de l'étudiant*. This shows a student dancing with a working-class girl, a common practice at the working-class dance halls, which attracted students whose republican or Saint-Simonian politics led them to engage in working-class culture. However, the dancers whose cancan exploits are recorded in its earliest period are the working class men and women who were arrested for it, and this suggests another reason for the lack of sources.

In France in 1831 only 53% of men and 40% of women were literate (Chu, 1994, p. 169), and these men and women were predominantly in the middle and upper classes. Although the literacy of the French working class was increasing, as shown by the writings of worker-poets and worker-autobiographers of the period, the majority of the working class performers of the cancan would have been illiterate. Therefore, for writings on the early cancan we have to look to representations of the dance by others. These can be found in the numerous legal newspapers of the time that recorded the proceedings of court cases of interest to the public. There are numerous accounts of trials of men and women accused of indecent dancing. However, these accounts contain several complex layers of interpretation. Firstly, the evidence brought against the defendant often takes the form of the policeman's imitation of their dancing. This became a regular occurrence at cancan trials of both working-class and student cancan dancers, and Huart included an illustration of it in his *Physiologie de l'étudiant*. The movement descriptions in the newspaper accounts therefore consist of the journalist's attempt to describe the policeman's imitation of the defendant's dancing. These representations of representations clearly complicate the attempt to decipher the movement, but there are nevertheless some useful, if rather brief, descriptions, such as: "He takes a step back, stands before the clerk of the court, and adopting a dancing position moves forward, swaying his torso upon his hips" (Anon., 1829, p. 3). This was enough, in this case, to

earn the defendant three months in prison. The translation of the trial accounts raises another issue: the complex and fluid system of naming related dance practices in Paris at this time.

Social dance historians often encounter the problem of inconsistency in the naming of dances, particularly in moments of transition from one nomenclature to another. This problem is exacerbated in the case of the cancan, whose mere name was regarded as indecent. The cancan improvisations were therefore sometimes referred to using the names of their predecessors, the quadrille or *contredanse*; sometimes they were identified as a French version of one of their influences, such as the *fandango* or *cachucha*; the improvisations were sometimes subsumed under the term used for a particular variation, such as the *Robert-Macaire* or the *Saint-Simoniennes*; sometimes they were called the cancan, a word meaning ‘gossip’ or ‘pamphlet’; and sometimes, if the speaker wanted to emphasise the indecency and working class origins of the dance, the word *chahut*, meaning uproar, was used. These last two terms were, indeed, the source of much debate in the early trials of indecent dancers. Although the policeman’s guide of 1831 identified both the cancan and the *chahut* as indecent dances, the magistrates distinguished between the acceptable cancan and the indecent *chahut*. The trials, therefore, focused on ascertaining whether the defendant was dancing the cancan or the *chahut*. The problem of distinguishing movement that the magistrates faced is precisely the problem faced by the dance historian. In an improvised dance practice such as this, the cancan can at any moment shift into the *chahut*, and back again, all in the blink of a policeman’s eye. How does a dance historian, or a policeman, reconstruct a dance that shifted with the time of day, the composition of the crowd, and the melodrama that happened to be playing on the Boulevard du Temple that evening?

I have attempted to deal with the challenge of researching improvised dancing by focusing on the repertoire of movements from which the dancers drew in their improvisations. This repertoire is still in the process of construction, but involves dances such as the *chica*, *fandango*, *cachucha*, *tarantella* and *saltarello*. The early cancan dancers would not have been taught these movements, but observed them, remembered fragments, selected, merged and embodied them, recombining the elements in response to shifting circumstances. While the exact movements performed may be impossible to recapture, we can attempt to reconstruct the daily encounters with dance practices of other classes and nations, through social dancing, reading and theatre going, which encouraged working-class dancers to experiment with the ways their bodies could move. This is not the reconstruction of a dance, but the reconstruction of a dance landscape, shaped by shifting class politics, the policing of dancing bodies, and a growing popular culture fed by a hunger for the exotic. This landscape created the conditions for the emergence of a dance form whose elusive origins seem to compel the subsequent generations to a perpetual cycle of remembrance, revival and reconstruction, that leads to my attempt to reconstruct the dance 120 years later.

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## Acknowledgements

Many thanks are due to my research assistant on this project, Dr. Anna Davies, for her detailed translations of the primary sources, stimulating discussion of our discoveries, and feedback on this paper.

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## Reconstructing Ragtime

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When I first began my research on early 20<sup>th</sup> century social dancing over ten years ago, I actually believed there was such a thing as ragtime dance and that if I looked hard enough, I could find it. After a year spent in New York City's numerous archives—from the Schomberg to the Dance Collection and from the Historical Society to the Municipal Archives—I now know different. What I encountered in these spaces was a dazzling array of different dance practices—all done to music that was often, but not always, called ragtime—that were deeply connected with particular dance communities. The challenge for me, then, was to find a way to preserve the differences within ragtime dance practices—as this seemed to be a more accurate representation of the evidence I found.

At first I turned to dance reconstruction as a means of embodying my primary sources, but quickly found that it was not well suited to my project without significant alteration. Owing to its traditional emphasis on performance, dance reconstruction often calls for precise choreographies and steps.<sup>1</sup> But, how could I choose one version of a Turkey Trot over another, for example, when I was invested in the differences within ragtime dancing? Clearly many of the conventions of reconstruction did not fit well with my approach. Nonetheless, I didn't want to let go of reconstruction's body-based methods. I wanted to understand ragtime as a bodily social practice, not a text, and I wanted to maintain its improvisational qualities in order to avoid homogenizing it into a theatrical form.

Thus, I had to approach my primary source materials in a fundamentally different way than other dance reconstructors. Rather than seeking out and privileging the most "correct" evidence in order to create a representative performance of ragtime dance, I chose to embrace the plethora of movement information I found as a way to construct the range of ragtime's movement possibilities and eventually its improvisational structures. In this way, I aimed to learn ragtime movement practice much like a social dancer of this period—developing, drawing on, and varying an arsenal of moves while dancing.

For example, with the Turkey Trot, I found several different written descriptions—many of which had little to do with each other. A 1912 newspaper article described a turkey trotting couple as taking a little step and a hop much like a turkey might be expected to do and then hopping, skipping, jumping, and half-running along, while snuggled up close, with the man behind the woman.<sup>2</sup> Another description, written by a dance professional one year later, told dancers to begin by taking the waltz side position. After four graceful Boston steps forward and backward with an outstretched rear leg, the couple is directed to take another four steps to each side, "swaying the shoulders and body."<sup>3</sup> A final example from a 1914 dance manual simplifies the Turkey Trot into a trotting step, on the balls of the feet, that involves absolutely no hip or shoulder movements whatsoever.<sup>4</sup> Combining these very different representations of the Turkey Trot together, I surmised that it was not a whole dance, but rather a cluster of steps that could be inserted into other dances as a variation. It likely involved at minimum small trotting steps, but could also include hops, sways, and especially close contact between dancers—depending on the dancers involved and the dance space.

As part of my reconstruction practices, I also took the liberty to read against and beyond the "truth" of each dance manual and article I read, which invariably told readers how and how not to dance. In fact, I often found the sections on how not to dance more interesting than the sections on how to dance—they offered me a window into communities of practice that did not adhere to the same values as the author. Otherwise, why would a dance writer tell someone not to move a certain way, unless that was exactly what many dancers were doing?

To return to the Turkey Trot example, this dance is also mentioned in several manuals as the epitome of what not to do on the dance floor. "The Castle House Suggestions for Correct Dancing" that appear on the last page of Vernon and Irene Castle's 1914 manual tell readers to not wriggle the shoulders, shake the hips, twist the body, flounce the elbows, pump the arms, or hop—and then, to drop the Turkey Trot and the other animal dances.<sup>5</sup> Reading against the author's intent, the writing suggests that these exact moves were part of the ragtime repertory for some dancers and were likely connected with the

Turkey Trot itself. Looking at sources in this way, I was able to broaden even further my sense of what a Turkey Trot might have looked and felt like. Maybe dancers wriggled their shoulders while swaying or shook their hips while trotting? Flouncing the elbows and pumping the arms could easily fit with turkey-like movement, of course.

This methodology helped me see ragtime in a much more fluid and flexible way than before, one that I hope is more in keeping with its historical social practice. Social dancers do encounter genres, steps, norms, social expectations, and tacit rules on the dance floor, but they also find opportunities for choice making, playful rule breaking, and genre mixing. When reading period sources, it may seem as if discrete dances and steps simply exist and everyone does them the same way. In practice, though, social dancers recombine, adapt, appropriate and transform dance moves every moment they are on the dance floor. I believe this was especially true of ragtime dancers who, according to indignant observers at the time, valued irreverence and playfulness over “proper dancing”.

My non-traditional reconstruction strategies eventually led me to shift my focus from the dancing to the dancers themselves and their experiences—not as star performers, but as community members and culture bearers. Through my archival work, I sought to find out which groups of people were dancing to ragtime music and how were they moving differently from one another. This shift also allowed me to explore more than just movement; it facilitated my explorations into how ragtime dancing meant very different things to the people involved. Once I starting exploring the ragtime dancing practices of different people—European immigrants, dance professionals, and black migrants in one particular place (Manhattan)—my project certainly became more chaotic, but also much more interesting to me and more relevant to disciplines beyond Dance Studies.

With this shift from a more universalizing vision of ragtime to one that was intensely local, I found that some of the communities I studied were easier than others to research, in part owing to their stronger presence in archival records. In addition, I discovered my own Western dance training and biases facilitated my connection with some groups of dancers and not others. In this way, the difference I located and celebrated within ragtime also meant that I had to develop different approaches to studying each community.

For example, in order to reconstruct the ragtime dancing of black migrants in New York, I had to profoundly shift my assumptions about dance, dance history, and dance reconstruction. First and foremost, I had to stop being tied to precise terminology and quit calling what I was looking for “ragtime dancing”. Yes, there was dancing happening to what I would call ragtime music in this community, yet that same dancing accompanied drags, blues, and stomps—all important music genres that were related to ragtime but not the same. Thus, I construed it was a shared attitude towards timing that generated the dancing of this period, not just a single genre of music.

I also had to relax my temporal boundaries—the hallmark of a rigorous historical researcher. I found that I could still be focused on the period from 1900 to 1920, but in order to understand references to dancing from this time, I actually had to kinaesthetically connect with 19<sup>th</sup> century African-American dancing at ring shouts, cakewalks, jook houses, and barn dances. This case study taught me that while specific steps come and go and often come back again, African diasporic dance forms in particular had long shelf

lives during this period and that their histories remained very present within the movement practices.

Finally, to reconstruct these dance practices well, I had to let go of my implicit expectations of black authenticity and no longer be frustrated by migrant dancers' occasional interest in the modified, indeed, whitened versions of ragtime taught by dance professionals. Just because dance history is often written in black and white doesn't mean that dancers hesitated to cross social divides when there was interesting dancing to be had on the other side. Ragtime dancing, with its amalgamation of European and African dance practices, in fact, stands as a testament that at least some border crossing occurred on the dance floors of this era.

With the conceptual shifts I had to make during my research and writing, I learned, the hard way, that our terms, methods, and assumptions must emanate from our subject of study each and every time—even in dance reconstruction. Clearly, homogenization is the easier choice, but it risks the distortion and erasure of vibrant dance communities. In the case of ragtime, a universalized ballroom version has, for decades, stood in for the diversity of ragtime dancing—effectively erasing its practice among poor European immigrants and black migrants in the process.

Almost 30 years ago, at an SDHS conference in 1983, Susan Foster pointed out the dangers of universalizing “dancing” into “the dance.” She wrote, “The gerund allows for similarities and differences; the noun absorbs differences into a fundamental similarity...when dancing is something different people are doing, then there are endless histories to be written, from varying perspectives.”<sup>6</sup> What I am suggesting today, with the help of Foster's wisdom, is that it is possible that our dance reconstruction practices could benefit from finding a way to embrace the differences present in each practice we study. Dance reconstruction can mean more than performance and using our bodies to process primary sources; it can also mean honouring the opportunities for creative choice making that dancers had at the time and / or acknowledging that there were different communities of practice involved. In so doing, I believe we can better access the multiple meanings, pleasures, and intrinsic power of the dancing we study.

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## Notes

1. Linda Tomko, “Reconstruction: Beyond Notation,” *International Encyclopedia of Dance*, vol. 5 (New York: Oxford U P, 2003) 326–327.
2. “The Turkey Trot, Grizzly Bear and Other Naughty Diversions: Whether Objectionable or Not, They Are Neither Pretty Nor Artistic—Originated in Far Western Mining Camps and Found Their Way to the Stage,” *New Bedford Sunday Standard* (4 Feb. 1912).
3. Alfonso Josephs Sheafe, *The Fascinating Boston; How to Dance and How to Teach the Popular New Social Favorite* (Boston: The Boston Music Company, 1913) 27.
4. Albert W. Newman, *Dances of To-Day* (Philadelphia: Penn, 1914 and 1921) 70.
5. Vernon and Irene Castle, *Modern Dancing* (New York: World Syndicate Co., 1914) 177.
6. Susan Foster, “On Dancing and the Dance: Two Visions of Dance's History,” *Proceedings of the Society of Dance History Scholars* (1983) 140.

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## Call of the Clave: Reconstructing Palladium Era Mambo

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The goal of the reconstruction project about which I will speak today was to embody mambo as it was danced at the Palladium in the 1950s as a tool for analyzing how mambo evolved into salsa. My project was similar to that of Clare and Danielle in several ways. First, mambo was also a social dance practice in which there was no single performance or choreography I could strive to replicate. Secondly, improvisation and variation in personal style also figured prominently in the dance. Finally, my goal was primarily to use reconstruction as a research method for doing historical analysis that would result in a written text. There were also some key points on which my project differed from theirs. Most significantly, some of the people who performed mambo were still alive when I was doing my research, so I was able to use living people as sources in my research, whereas Clare and Danielle had to rely on written documents and visual artifacts. In addition, I have staged performances based on this research.

Before I go into the specific challenges of my project, I'd like to give you some brief background on Palladium Mambo. The Palladium was a dance hall on 53<sup>rd</sup> St. and Broadway in Manhattan that was the most important center for the co-development of Latin music and dance in the 1950s. Known as “the home of the mambo,” the Palladium hosted the “big three” mambo bands on a regular basis: Machito and his Afro-Cubans, Tito Puente, and Tito Rodriguez. As the musicians in these bands were laying down some intense new rhythmic combinations, the patrons at the Palladium were responding with similar innovations on the dance floor. The Palladium was not the only dance hall in New York where Latin music and dance evolved during the 1950s, but the Palladium was important because of the diversity of patrons it attracted—immigrants from Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the West Indies, second and third generation Italian, Irish, and Jewish immigrants, African Americans, rich, poor, working class and celebrities all shimmied up against one another on its dance floor, enabling unique social and cultural integration that gave birth to the mambo.<sup>1</sup>

### Sources

The sources I used in my reconstruction included:

**1) Film footage:** such as that you just saw which, although an invaluable source of information, invites many inaccurate assumptions. For example, it is tempting to assume that these few extant film fragments are characteristic of dancing at the Palladium, thus

inflating the importance of the steps and styles we see represented in these films and ignoring those that were not captured on film.<sup>2</sup>

**2) Photographs:** In some ways I found these stills helped to draw out similarities in body position that I might not have noticed when bodies were in motion, like for example the importance of the delicate position of the fingers to frame the body as illustrated in these images (see figure 1).



*Figure 1: (from left to right) Unidentified dancer at the Palladium, photo by Harry A. Fine; Chino Romano studio publicity shot; Jackie Danois (aka Jackie Dee), studio publicity shot. Images courtesy of Jackie Danois.*

**3) Eye Witness Accounts:** I also relied on descriptions from live witnesses to dancing at Palladium, like the those written by jazz historian Mura Dehn. Tucked away in boxes of her unpublished papers archived at the NYPL are 5 pages of poetic description like this:

The dance structure of Mambo is in the undulating hips from side to side and an undulating upper torso. Small subtle shocks traverse the body. At times a rapid twist of intertwining feet and knees makes the body tremble like a shred of cloth blown in the wind.<sup>3</sup>

**4) Interviews:** I also drew from dozens of interviews with dancers from the Palladium Era, both interviews I conducted and those conducted by other scholars

**5) Fieldwork:** The source I'd like to focus on today is the fieldwork I conducted with old-time Palladium dancers.

It turns out that even though the Palladium closed its doors in 1966, its patrons didn't stop dancing. I was able to find two venues where old-time Palladium dancers, now in their 70s and 80s, convene for mambo dancing—Gold Coast Ballroom in Ft. Lauderdale, FL and the Julia de Burgos Center on Lexington and 105<sup>th</sup> St. in Spanish Harlem, NY. I

began to attend the Sunday afternoon Florida dance and the Wednesday evening NY dance and the as often as I could to learn by watching and dancing with the old-timers (Figure 2).



*Figure 2: On left, Judy Friend and Carl Lee dancing at Gold Coast Ballroom, 2007. On right, Carlos Arroyo dancing at Julia de Burgos Center, 2008. Photos by Juliet McMains.*

I believe my methodology is difficult to categorize because I was using ethnographic fieldwork not as a means of understanding the community I was in, but as a means of understanding the 50-year-old community they were trying to recapture each week through their nostalgic gatherings. Although interviews and observation were central to my research, I believe I learned the most about how the Latin dance styles changed through my body's own experiences.

My fluency in several contemporary styles of salsa dancing proved to be both a liability and an asset in my research. I had to be careful not to allow the ease with which I could dance with the old timers using my knowledge of contemporary New York Salsa to hinder my ability to discern the substantial differences between the dance styles. Just because we could communicate didn't mean we were speaking the same dialect. More often, however, my existing knowledge of salsa proved to be tremendously helpful in enabling me to analyze how it differed from mambo. Because my body knew so well how it felt to dance salsa, I was able to compare all the foreign feelings of dancing mambo against my deep embodied knowledge of salsa to discern differences in spatial patterns, rhythm, syntax, connection, and vocabulary. For example, I could immediately feel how the more circular movement of mambo contrasted with the slotted, linear style of salsa (demo).



*Figure 3: Jerry Dolinka and the author dancing mambo at Gold Coast Ballroom, 2008. Photo by Sean Wilson.*

The more I hung out at these venues, my skill at Palladium Era mambo increased. I was learning the same way they had, not in classes as contemporary salsa dancers learn, but through “deep hanging out.” Because it was primarily through my body’s execution of this nearly-extinct dance style that I was able to answer historical questions about the evolution a dance, I believe I was doing reconstruction, although hearing whether or not others agree is certainly something I’d like to return to during our discussion.

### **Challenges**

One of the challenges I faced was determining how much the age of my informants (primarily in their 70s and 80s) had compromised their dancing. They were likely a bit slower, had less stamina, and some of them could no longer dance at all. But for many, their dancing was so much more playful and witty than any I saw of dancers half their age, that it was hard to believe their age was anything but an asset on the dance floor. Even if they had modified particular moves due to the limitations of their aging bodies, I grew to believe that the essence of the dance remained, its structure and more importantly in its relationship to the music, which turned out to be one of the central defining aspects that distinguished it from modern salsa.

Another challenge I faced was earning trust of women and dancers of color. Because I danced primarily with the men, who would quickly open up to me after I had proved myself with them on the dance floor, I had to work much harder to earn interviews with the women. Early on, most of my interviews were with men, and predominantly white men. Although I did eventually gain access to several dancers of color, this also required a much greater investment of time in fostering the relationships. I think this was partly due to my own skin color that invoked a history of white appropriation of black culture. I also think continued racial inequality contributed. Most of the white dancers I

interviewed were retired and had free schedules. All of the black dancers I interviewed were still working, even in their 70s and 80s, making finding time for an interview more difficult.

The final challenge I'd like to mention is the limitations of being a woman without a male partner equally invested in the project. I could only experience the dance from the woman's role, dancing with men. I did occasionally dance with women in these settings, but generally I did not want to offend my informants by challenging the established gender roles.

### **Successes**

Because I engaged in ongoing social dancing with multiple partners, I think I was able to avoid the danger of reducing mambo dancing to single set of steps, and I was able to reconstruct mambo as a flexible practice with considerable variation in individual style. I feel as if I learned enough about the movement style, aesthetic, techniques, and improvisational priorities to do extensive analysis and write vivid comparisons of Palladium mambo to contemporary salsa style, which was after all my goal.

### **Limitations**

Even though I feel as if I can dance a passable rendition of Palladium Era mambo when dancing with a Palladium Era dancer, my body is still reliant on the physical and energetic cues from these old-timers, which does not bode well for my ability to pass on the knowledge when they are no longer alive. Much of this has to do with my position as a woman who reacts to the structure created by the man. Even when executing solo steps, however, I feel as if there is much lost in the generational translation. For example, I will show you an excerpt of me and a partner performing in the style of the Mambo Aces, a two-man side-by-side dance team. We were not attempting to reconstruct a particular choreography, but to create original choreography in their style. The performance included audio clips from an interview with Mike Vázquez (pictured on the left in the slide), who danced briefly as one of the Mambo Aces, and their image projected on the wall. In the corner appears a video (not part of the performance) of another one of the Mambo Aces (pictured on the right in the slide), Aníbal Vázquez, dancing with his nephew and band leader Roberto Roena.<sup>4</sup>

The distortion is even greater when I teach these Palladium steps to my students. Without any experience of the cultural and social context in which these steps were created, their execution of vocabulary that I learned directly from Mambo Era dancers becomes something else entirely, infused with the students' own bodily knowledge. I will show you a video excerpt from choreography I created for my students in the Palladium style. I was not attempting to replicate any specific performance from the Palladium, but to create a new work inspired by Palladium Era vocabulary and sensibilities. The clip includes a comparison video clip of Palladium Era dancing by Cuban Pete, Millie Donay and Tito Rodríguez.<sup>5</sup>

So far, I feel as if my writing is more successful than my performed choreography at faithfully communicating to others what my body has learned through physical dialogue with Palladium Era dancers. Thus, I wonder if writing may in fact be more useful than performance as a tool for preserving the spirit of an improvisational, personally idiosyncratic dance form.

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## Notes

1. Steven Loza, *Tito Puente and the Making of Latin Music* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Max Salazar, *Mambo Kingdom: Latin Music in New York* (New York: Shirmer Trade Books, 2002); Robert Farris Thompson, "Teaching People to Triumph over Time: Notes from the World of Mambo," *Caribbean Dance from Abakua to Zouk: How Movement Shapes Identity*, ed. Susanna Sloat (University Press of Florida, 2002) 336–344.
2. There are two main film sources of footage that represents Palladium style dancing: *Mambo Madness* directed by Courtney Hafela (Universal International Productions, 1955); and *The Spirit Moves: A History of Black Social Dance on Film, 1900-1986*, directed by Mura Dehn (Dancetime Publications, 1987).
3. Mura Dehn, "The Spirit Moves" (Unpublished manuscript, "Papers on Afro-American social dance, ca. 1869-1987," Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library).
4. This piece, *Fragments of a Salsa History*, choreographed by Juliet McMains and Sean Wilson, was performed at the 2007 University of Washington Faculty Dance Concert in 2007. The clip can be viewed at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gG5imWowup4>.
5. This piece, *Ritmos de posibilidad*, choreographed by Juliet McMains, was performed at the 2009 University of Washington Faculty Dance Concert. The clip can be viewed at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c8WyBqZwgpw>.

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## Discussion

*Since the goal of our roundtable was to generate dialogue around the issues we raised in our short presentations, we have included below the questions we asked the audience to stimulate discussion, followed by our own reactions to the discussion that followed.*

**Q: How do we expand the notion of reconstruction to include projects that do not result in performance?**

JM: I was thrilled to see so many established dance historians in the room who have used reconstruction to inform their own historical inquiry and writing, and they seemed to think that this work had already been accomplished. I felt validated to hear them say this, as I often feel like an outlier in my use of the term reconstruction since so much of the

literature on reconstruction focuses on performance-oriented work. I felt we made great strides in expanding the definition of dance reconstruction just by having so many respected scholars in the room nod their heads in agreement that reconstruction includes the process of dancing in the archive or in your office as you pore over primary source documents in order to write a vivid description of what a cancan or a Turkey Trot might have looked like in 1820 or 1910.

CP: I agree with Juliet that it was very liberating to have non-performance-orientated reconstruction validated in such a positive way. This allows reconstruction to be a means as well as/rather than an end – a tool available to all dance historians rather than a particular kind of historical product. I like the idea that through spontaneous reconstructions in the office or archive, knowledge can flow rapidly between archival documents, the body, and the written word, perhaps traversing these media several times before emerging at a new level of understanding. I think this would be a great skill to teach in the classroom: not necessarily the mounting of a full-scale reconstruction project (although that also has pedagogical value), but reconstruction as one of an arsenal of historical tools that students can employ to dance their way into/through history.

**Q: Does such a research methodology merit a different name (e.g., reinvention, embodied research, ethnographic reconstruction)?**

DR: In this conversation, I advocated for retaining the term reconstruction for two important political reasons. One is that dance reconstruction is one of the very few research methodologies designed for dance. I want to validate Dance Studies by using a dance-specific research tool whenever possible. Secondly, reconstruction is a methodology recognized and respected outside of dance studies. If we want readers and listeners outside of dance to understand our methods, using this term could provide a bridge into our work. I can certainly see why the use of a new term is appealing—to signal a shift in research practice. Nonetheless, for now, I think it is more important to keep the old term and innovate within the practice.

JM: When my graduate students and I read Ann Cooper Albright's article "Tracing the Past: Writing History Through the Body" in which she illustrates how she made use of her own physicality to do historical research on Loie Fuller, we wanted her to have proposed a new term for this research method. Since her work inspired me to question the politics of naming this methodology, I was grateful that Ann was in the room. She did not, to my surprise, advocate for a sexy new term to describe this kind of research, but seemed to be in agreement with the majority of those gathered, who concluded that reconstruction was the appropriate name for the kinds of projects we described. There were, however, a few people who seemed to prefer the term reinvention, particularly for the kind of choreography I showed in which my goal was to create something new in the style of the mambo dancers I had interviewed. I think I'd probably use the term reinvention myself when describing that process if I had enough time to define and explain the word, but it really depends on who you're talking to. When you're writing a grant application and you don't know who will be reading it, I feel like it can be more useful to go with the more recognized term.

**Q: How do we account for improvisational and stylistic variation when attempting to reconstruct dance forms in which these qualities are defining characteristics of the dance?**

CP: In my paper I suggested that my goal was not so much to reconstruct the cancan as a dance, but as a dance landscape. This is intended to acknowledge the impossibility of reconstructing a dance that was defined by its flouting of the rules of set choreographies, and therefore by its fleeting, unique, inventive improvisations. Despite bourgeois complaints throughout the nineteenth century that these improvisations were wild and uncontrolled, I have found it important to remember that all improvisations, however apparently free from codified movement, happen within a body shaped by experience, identity and history. Therefore, my aim has been to reconstruct the movement universe within which these dancers improvised, including dances they saw being performed by the bourgeoisie, remembered performing in the provinces, read about (or heard read to them) in the newspapers, and watched in the popular theatres. This has helped me to begin to construct a movement repertoire from which movements could be selected, fragmented, distorted and recombined to form cancan improvisations. Any particular reconstruction of the cancan, including my own, is therefore only one possible permutation of possibilities within the cancan repertoire. It will draw on choices made by previous reconstructors, as well as shaping the landscape for future reconstructors.

JM: I found Clare's response to this discussion particularly useful for me to keep in mind with reference to my own work. By stressing how her reconstruction of the cancan is just one of many iterations in a continually evolving dance, she reminded me to think of my own reconstruction of mambo as only one point in the evolution of mambo rather than an endpoint in a quest to recover Palladium mambo.

**Q: How does the goal of a reconstruction project shape its methodology?**

CP: When reconstruction has the goal of historical understanding which is disseminated through writing rather than performance, my experience has been that the reconstruction can be more open-ended. It results in a series of impromptu experiments that inform a growing body of physical and historical knowledge that is then translated into writing, rather than a definite performance version. The gaps in this knowledge do not necessarily have to be filled in – the lacunae can be left, and perhaps acknowledged, in the writing. Looked at from another angle, however, the way that the body fills in these lacunae in our knowledge of past dances, might add to our physical and historical understanding of a dance form, regardless of whether contemporary bodies accomplish these transitions in the same way as in the past. This technique of forcing the body to come up with solutions to historical problems is a particular advantage of performance-orientated reconstructions.

DR: I have used dance reconstruction in numerous teaching situations to offer students an opportunity to learn about a historical period and practice, as well as historical research methods and issues. I don't teach students steps though, but instead give them primary

source materials to investigate in small groups. Together they animate the bodily traces found within sheet music, dance manuals, magazines, etc. and then share their findings with the class. The point is not for the class to look like ragtime dancers, but rather for them to experience the affects of ragtime within their own bodies in order to discuss its sociocultural effects on dancers and audiences. My larger goals are for them to recognize the possibility of multiple truths, respect bodily intelligence, and begin to trust themselves as dance researchers. Upon reflection, I think my approach here is connected with Mark Franko's model for reconstruction (1993), which involves focusing on the impact of the historical dancing on audiences rather than attempting to recreate a historically (in)accurate performance.

JM: I loved hearing Danielle explain how she brings in primary source materials on ragtime dancing to her undergraduate classes and had them attempt to reconstruct ragtime dancing. She pointed out that although the students' dances didn't look much like ragtime, they actually learned about some of the key qualities of ragtime dancing through the experience. It was a great reminder that a reconstruction doesn't need to visually resemble an earlier version in order to have its intended impact, especially if the goal is to experience what it might feel like to rag a dance rather than to see what it might look like.

*In addition to the questions we presented to our audience, they posed some provocative questions to us, some of which we've paraphrased below.*

**Q: How does your own socio-cultural position affect your reconstruction practice?**

CP: How can a white, female, middle-class, British (-Guyanese) academic in the early twenty-first century re-embodiment the improvised movement of French, male and female, working-class, recreational dancers in the late 1820s, who were in turn influenced both by bourgeois French dancing and by the Haitian, Spanish and Italian movements they had seen on the stages of the Parisian popular theatres? This question implies not just the apparent physical impossibility of such a performance, but also the difficult political issues that arise in a postcolonial context from the attempt to represent an 'other'. However, the self/other distinction becomes rather problematic in the case of the cancan. The complex improvisations of the early cancan allowed dancers to demonstrate both a desire for and rejection of bourgeois status, while simultaneously performing an affinity with and distinction from the colonial and European dance forms they drew upon. These foreign dances were often already hybridised mixtures of French and foreign movement styles, further complicated by the adjustments of the French choreographers and performers who presented them in the theatres of the Boulevard du Temple. Who are the 'others' in this convoluted web of appropriations?

DR: To take Clare's ideas one step further, aren't we always outsiders to our research topic even if it is a contemporary study and we are part of the dance community being researched? By bringing our academic research tools to bear on the project, we effectively other ourselves. In terms of historical research, the passage of time separates us as well. And, let's not forget the class difference that we seldom like to acknowledge, because it forces us to recognize our own privilege. And, given our (degrees of)

difference from our research topic, we have a responsibility to always do our homework—i.e. know deeply the social, cultural, political, and physical environments in which the dancing took place—and not rely on superficial similarities of appearance. All of us come to our research with varying degrees of inside and outside knowledge—all of which is valuable—as well as lacks of knowledge that need to be addressed in order to make our work rigorous. The challenge is to recognize our unique positioning and represent that in our work, as it is integral to our findings.

JM: I've already acknowledged some of the ways in which my gender and my race limited the ways in which I was able to interact with my informants. I think it's important to recognize such biases, but we can never escape them. I think one way to address these limitations is to collaborate with people whose backgrounds invite different kinds of interactions with the subject matter. For example, I did some of my fieldwork in conjunction with a black man, who was instrumental in helping me to gain trust of other black men in particular.

**Q: How do broader historical and cultural contexts shape reconstruction practices?**

CP: My reconstruction takes place in an academic context, and responds to a postmodern impulse to both re-embody and critique, connect with and reject, the modernist past. The revival of the early cancan in the 1890s, by contrast, took place in the commercial context of increasing mass production and consumption in a modernising, industrialising France, and attempted to appropriate the marginal bohemian liberalism of the 1830s for the purposes of republican nationalism in the Third Republic. As Walter Benjamin (1973) recognised, our vision of the past is continually refracted through the lens of the present. Therefore, reconstruction is always provisional, contingent upon historical and cultural contexts that are in constant flux.

DR: I feel that the changing position of Dance Studies within the academy has influenced why dance reconstruction has expanded over time. Initially dance was able to strengthen its position in universities in part through strategic linkages with “high art” and especially high art performance. This shift away from an emphasis on performance in dance reconstruction speaks to the ways in which dance researchers have been able to make important connections within the Humanities in recent decades. Theatrical performance is not the only way we validate our presence in universities today. Now, we are helping others—including scholars outside of the arts—to see the body as a valuable research site and tool in many kinds of projects. This new wave of dance reconstruction work, which includes ours, applies this notion specifically to historical research in dance.

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