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## Más Flow Dance Company: The Cultural Logics that Squeeze Too Tight

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**Abstract:** Following its inception in 2013, Princeton University-based Más Flow Dance Company has raised several questions of race, socio-economic status, and local belonging for its minority participants within this Ivy League institution in the U.S.A. This article tackles the student company's 'cultural logics' – a term borrowed from performance studies scholar José Muñoz (1999) – to refer to methods of reasoning as proposed by scholars for interrogating similar intersections of dance, race, and class status. Using the cultural logics fashioned by dance and performance studies academics such as Thomas DeFrantz in 'The Black Body Made Visible' (2004), Adria Imada in *Aloha America* (2012), and Yvonne Daniel in *Caribbean and Atlantic Diasporic Dance* (2011), this article seeks to conceptualise the brown and black bodies dancing in Más Flow Dance Company's first show, *Baile Sin Permiso* (2015). This ethnographic study is a culmination of a four-month period of research with Más Flow Dance Company, in which Strong was a dancer.

**Keywords:** Latin dance, Latino, ethnicity, intersectionality, Princeton University

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# Más Flow Dance Company: The Cultural Logics that Squeeze Too Tight

Tula Breann Strong

April 4<sup>th</sup> 2015, 9:20 pm. Más Flow Dance Company (Más Flow) is situated backstage for its final performance of the show *Baile Sin Permiso*, or *Dance without Permission*. Held at the Black Box Theatre of Princeton University (New Jersey, U.S.A.), this show is a showcase of seven dances choreographed by several dancers within the group. As a dancer of Más Flow, I sit on the counter facing the large well-lit mirrors of the theatre. The scene has been exactly the same for the past three nights of the performance: the faint smell of sizzling curling irons fills the room, costumes are strewn across the floor, and tables hold remnants of snacks intended to get the dancers through the show. The 15 female and 10 male dancers stand dispersed within the backstage room, waiting for their cue to enter the stage. Nevertheless, whenever good music plays loudly over the theatre speakers – *Odio* (2014) by Romeo Santos or *Un Beso* (2005) by Aventura, for example – some company members rise and dance in the limited available space, which is marked out by piles of costumes, a random drum set, and a few small coffee tables.

Que solo por un beso,  
Se puede enamorar,  
Sin necesidad de hablarse.<sup>1</sup>  
(Aventura, 2005)

Aventura's *Un Beso* is a Bachata, a style of music and dance that originates from the Dominican Republic. I look across the room to see D, a male dancer of medium stature and build, moving across the floor in order to dance. He is the first one to stand up and begin to perform an improvised solo. Aventura sings, 'Y solo por un beso'<sup>2</sup> (Aventura, 2005); D's shoulders start rippling from side to side. 'Con ella soy feliz'<sup>3</sup> (Aventura, 2005); his right foot follows, pivoting slightly to the right, beside the misplaced drum set. 'Tan solo con un besito, me llevo al infinito'<sup>4</sup> (Aventura, 2005); a shift of one leg initiates a ripple throughout D's entire body. I reconsider my position as a dancer and ethnographer here, and although observing D's fluid movements entices me to rise and start dancing myself, instead I remain seated and watch pensively as D extends his hand as an invitation to another Latina company member who joins him in this dance.

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Formed in the autumn of 2013, Más Flow Dance Company is the first Latin dance company in Princeton University's history. As explained by the company's Facebook page, Más Flow's mission is to 'bring Latino music to campus through dance in Salsa, Bachata, Merengue, and Reggaeton performances' (Más Flow Dance Company, 2015). *Baile Sin Permiso* was the group's first evening-length performance on campus since the company's inception during the previous academic year. The introduction of this company on Princeton's campus raises important questions about how to conceptualise a group of dancers that are strikingly different in race and social class from Princeton University's general population. As an official introduction of Más Flow to Princeton, *Baile Sin Permiso* created a space in which every movement performed urged the audience members, including myself, to engage in this dialogue of witnessing and defining Más Flow's identity.

Within this article, I aim to expound this discourse by reflecting upon the work of scholars whose writings conceptualise the identities of brown and black bodies, similar to the ones found in Más Flow. I apply the readings of dance and performance studies scholars such as Thomas DeFrantz in 'The Black Body Made Visible' (2004), Adria Imada in *Aloha America* (2012), and Yvonne Daniel in *Caribbean and Atlantic Diasporic Dance* (2011) to the dancing bodies in *Baile Sin Permiso*. I 'try on' these scholars' 'cultural logics' – a concept borrowed from performance studies scholar José Muñoz (1999) and re-imagined in this article to refer to each scholar's specific way of reasoning and understanding bodies of colour. Like costumes being tried on by the dancers for the show, each logic becomes a separate filter through which I can conceptualise the intersecting racial and socio-economic identities of the Más Flow dancers. Since these logics have been fashioned for bodies similar to those in Más Flow, they appear to frame the dancers perfectly; however, I am unable to reference these cultural logics without being forced to expose the tangles, knots, and complications that arise when they are placed onto the bodies in question.

I seek to demonstrate that these previously fashioned cultural logics do not provide enough space for the particular dancing brown and black bodies of Más Flow to move comfortably. In this article, I contend that cultural logics must be re-fashioned in order to give minority bodies the opportunity to breathe; providing these dancers with a type of agency that their specific bodies of colour may not have been afforded amongst racialised histories of discrimination. I must declare that the task of arguing against established logics and creating entirely new ways of reasoning is difficult; so instead I draw upon José Muñoz's concept of 'reinvesting older logics with new life' (1999:13). Thus, this essay becomes a trial concerning a reinvestment in established logics with 'new' information; perhaps one that might fail, but an effort towards deeper comprehension nonetheless.

### *Una introducción*

In order to conceptualise the Más Flow dancers, a task that is presented by *Baile Sin Permiso*, I must first introduce the black and brown members of the group. The Más Flow dancers are visibly different from the majority of students at Princeton University. The brown and black faces that comprise Más Flow also represent a

plethora of ethnic minorities; members who identify as Latina/o share heritages through various hispanophone and lusophone countries such as Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Mexico, Colombia, and Portugal. This group is also sprinkled with members of African, Canadian, Middle-Eastern, and Asian descent, and so, in an institution in which 60% of the undergraduate population is Caucasian (Princeton University, 2014), the Más Flow dancers are visible minorities.

As Michael Omi and Howard Winant note, race is a ‘socio-historical’ concept in which ‘racial categories and the meaning of race are given concrete expression by the specific social relations and historical contexts in which they are embedded’ (1994:11). Within the context of Princeton, race is far from insignificant. Similar to other institutions in the United States, Princeton has an irremovable history of segregation and discrimination. A letter written by a member of the Princeton class of 1928 notes Princeton as ‘the one eastern school which does not enroll Negroes’, and similarly, Princeton became the last Ivy League institution to integrate white and coloured students (Jerome & Taylor, 2005:22). Within the history of this institution, as in the United States, the black body has been marked as an ‘other’ – a term originally coined by Edward Said (1978) and further expounded by scholars such as Ernesto Laclau (1990). Here the word ‘other’ is able to articulate how black bodies were not only perceived as different to white ones, but also as socially unequal. As black bodies cross the constructed races of African American and Latino, this history becomes particularly potent for the members of Más Flow. The coloured bodies within Más Flow are therefore not just visibly different, but bodies that reflect these wounded histories of discrimination in the U.S.A. (Daniel, 2011).

Furthermore, there is another less visible way in which the dancers are strikingly different from the Princeton student body. The majority of the 25 members of Más Flow are the first from their families to attend a university, and they self-identify as students from lower socio-economic backgrounds or as directly benefiting from the university’s financial aid policy, which enables students from households earning less than \$65,000 per year to have 100% of their financial needs met.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, the dancers take pride that their Latin dance steps are derived from watching older brothers, cousins, aunts and uncles at parties, and not through paid dance classes.

Similarly to race, we must think of class as being embedded in the historical and social context of Princeton. With a high cost of attendance and a financial aid policy that was only implemented in 2001, the university was not a widely open space for students of our particular social class less than 20 years ago (Jerome & Taylor, 2005). This fact is not separated from the previous discussion of race; drawing upon Kimberlee Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality, these identities of race and class are far from mutually exclusive, but instead work together to reflect their historical and social contexts (Crenshaw, 1995; African American Policy Forum, 2016). Accordingly, it must be acknowledged that the Más Flow dancers cannot be asked to articulate their race and class identities separately. Therefore, in discussing Más Flow’s black and brown bodies, I not only refer to the colour of their skin but also the constructs of race and socio-economic status that affect the overarching conceptualisation of the group.

### **‘We don’t tame ourselves’: the racialized and classed knots of sensuality**

Que solo por un beso,  
Se puede enamorar,  
Sin necesidad de hablarse.<sup>6</sup>  
(Aventura, 2005)

On the second night of the Más Flow performance, a few of the members shared their friends’ reactions to the movements performed the night before. H, a senior (fourth year) undergraduate student and female company dancer of African American descent, began to describe the response of her friend Jo, a male of African-American descent and a hip-hop dancer from another performance group at Princeton. H smiled as she described how Jo thought the show was incredibly sexy. She laughed as she repeated his words, indicating slight concern, ‘Are parents coming to the show? Are you going to tame it down?’ The company members who were listening laughed. H responded quickly to Jo, ‘Yes they’re coming, and no, of course not!’ The company members immediately began to express their excitement; we either smiled or laughed at her declaration. I snapped my fingers in approval, whilst another dancer jokingly added, ‘We don’t tame ourselves for no one’.

Upon the conclusion of the show we received many comments in a similar vein; the show was considered ‘hot’, ‘sexy’, and ‘seductive’. Within the company’s electronic message thread, GroupMe, we started a running list of comments from audience members: ‘Hot as hell, yo’ or ‘Everyone needs to go to Más Flow to learn about sensuality – those guys know how to grab their girls’. We interpreted the comments of sensuality and Jo’s brief expression of concern as compliments. The company embraced this concept of ‘sexy’ wholeheartedly. We responded to all these commentaries with excitement and approval: the ‘Yesssss!!!’ and ‘LOL’ written as responses in our group chat were replicated in the mood amongst the entire company.

These movements, noted as sensual, become an attempt to articulate Más Flow through their intersecting identities of race and class. In this sense, a cultural logic proposed by performance studies scholar Thomas DeFrantz fits our situation perfectly and provides a way of reasoning and understanding their black and brown bodies. DeFrantz quotes anthropologist Roger Abraham’s extension of W.E.B. Du Bois’s argument of double consciousness: ‘Black performers constantly recognize that the very performance that is conventional within the black community will be seen as strange, as pleasurable exotic to the hipster’ (Abrahams cited in DeFrantz, 2004:64). DeFrantz articulates the hipster within a larger framework of an immobile white audience as one who does not move in the same way as the performers and, resultantly, is uninformed about the messages that the movements communicate. This logic fits well here: even whilst hearing the audience’s comments, I did not consider our movements to be sensual. I actually found them to be considerably tame; our Bachatas and Merengues, two dance forms that originate from the Dominican Republic, were not danced as close as they could be. The hips of the dancing partners on the stage were not pressed so tightly together that their legs needed to be intertwined like pretzels in order to

move. Exactly along the lines of DeFrantz's argument, there becomes two types of understandings occurring within the Más Flow performance: one for our 'immobile audience' (2004:65), the audience which does not perform these movements and resultantly views them as being sensual, and one for ourselves, the members of the company, who understand that the movements are rather conventional to the genre; a movement is not intended to be read as a direct communication of sensuality.

This disconnect in considering movements as 'conventional' versus 'sensual' makes the reasoning of double consciousness fit like a glove for our situation. This specific logic becomes most striking to me when placed against literary scholar Mayra Santos Febres's example, whereby she exposes the *blanquito*<sup>7</sup> of Puerto Rican descent who missed the coded message within the music of Salseros:

What this blanquito does not understand is precisely that the codes of the street are a closed signifying system only understandable for those who are 'entendidos.'<sup>8</sup> ... Salsa language sings of street philosophy, prototypes of el barrio, and about music itself as an act of signifying through a code, a clave that is unrecognizable to those who do not inhabit the spaces delimited by salsa music.

(1997:184)

Within this passage, the definition of who can assert an uninformed gaze becomes a little more expansive, as Febres applies this gaze to a Puerto Rican writer. Although white, or *blanquito*, this writer still belongs to the Latino identity, and therefore his misunderstanding is significant. With this perspective, I can fully conceptualise Jo and the other brown and black bodies within our audience who likewise saw our movements as 'sexy'. Incorporating Febres's logic that being an *entendido* comes from inhabiting the spaces where Latin movements are practiced, the state of being uninformed can easily cross racial boundaries.

The uninformed perceptions that accompany Febres's *blanquito* and DeFrantz's 'immobile audience' can be linked to concepts formulated by ethnographer Dwight Conquergood and presented in his model 'Moral Mapping of Performative Stances Towards the Other' (1985). Conquergood constructs five states that define a person's interaction with another culture. The position of the audience within *Baile Sin Permiso* – including the Black and Hispanic audience members – can be likened to Conquergood's warning about the state of 'The Curator's Exhibitionism', or one who exhibits a 'tourist stare' (1985:5) upon the dancers' movements. Conquergood describes this further by noting that this person's 'approach to performance grows out of a fascination with the exotic, primitive, culturally remote' (1985:5). In noting that the performer is then perceived as a 'Noble Savage' (1985:5), quite similar to Christopher Columbus's perception and treatment of the Native Americans, Conquergood declares this state, or way of thinking, to be highly unfavourable. As he recalls the European colonisers' gross mistreatment of Native Americans, it should be noted that this tourist stare becomes particularly harmful when the tourist holds similar power, agency, or privilege over the people being observed. Drawing again upon the ideas of Febres and DeFrantz, this particular uniformed (or tourist) stare allows these

dancers to be seen and treated as 'less than', particularly due to their 'othered' identities with regard to race and class.

In addition to noting this process of othering, the eroticisation highlighted in Adria Imada's *Aloha America* (2012) can be reenacted here. Whilst describing the development of the traditional Hawaiian dance form Hula, historian Imada argues that foreign and uninformed eyes have not only deemed the dance form as sensual and erotic, but have also etched these characteristics into the bodies that performed them (2012). Although we did not intend to produce 'sensuality', it became a concept clearly read upon our bodies. Revisiting the vignette from the beginning of this article, I look again at the movement of D and his female partner. In watching D initiate the sway of his partner's torso, I think of a statement made by Brenda Dixon Gottschild that the ideal performer of Africanist cultures moves with a 'suppleness and flexibility', privileging those elements over 'perfect torso alignment' (Gottschild, 1996:16). The back of D's female partner similarly sways freely from right to left as an opposing complement to the hips that move below her. I further recall the African-descended rumba dancer that scholar Yvonne Daniel describes: 'Torso division allowed the lower pelvis area and the upper abdomen and chest area to move forward and backward, side to side, and around in clockwise or counterclockwise directions' (2011:99).<sup>9</sup> These descriptions are close to D and his dance partner's backstage freestyle; the movement of their chests was layered onto hips that moved either in small circles, figure eights, or side-to-side with the four step of the Bachata.

It is, however, impossible to view the dancers' movements without conjuring up the wounding history of colonisation and discrimination that accompanies it, or as Conquergood (1985) notes, of the perception of these dancers as savages. As Daniel (2011:99) mentions, the sensual movements of the African-descended rumba dancer were regarded as 'uncivilized', 'barbaric', and 'improper' to the eyes of the European colonisers, and so I am forced to consider the possibility that our audience at the Más Flow show was simply replicating history by etching the same characteristics of 'improper' and 'uncivilized' onto our brown and black bodies, as an inferred commentary concerning our sensuality.

I do not mean to speak on behalf of the audience members who observed Más Flow, nor of their levels of knowledge or even privilege; however, the texts crafted by Imada, DeFrantz, Daniel, and Febres speak quite thoroughly about the uninformed and perhaps misguided gazes of similar audiences throughout modern history. What I can address is how the company members of Más Flow view themselves, since if our audience members are engaging in 'The Curator's Exhibitionism' (Conquergood, 1985:5), what might it mean for us to have appreciated and embraced their comments? Does this mean that we instinctively ignore the historical connotations that tell us these viewpoints are misguided or negative? Can we still accept them? If we do so, do we ultimately ignore that we have become 'othered' or 'eroticised' by those watching, who do not typically move the same way that we do? Do we become complicit to a history that was hurtful to brown and black bodies similar to our own? How can we truly justify doing anything other than correcting these misguided gazes? The answers to these questions according to the logics proposed by scholars like DeFrantz, Imada and Febres seem to place the members of Más Flow into a social position that we do

not quite occupy; one in which we fully take on the misrepresentation and eroticism found within the strangers' gazes and act accordingly. We smile, laugh, cheer, encourage, and embrace the perceptions of these 'foreign' gazes, and yet, we are far from ignorant of the histories attached to the black and brown bodies that came before us.

### **Pausing to reinvest**

I pause from fully addressing the aforementioned questions to redirect us to the task of articulating Más Flow's intersectional identity. In discussing these dancers, one must acknowledge the intersecting identities of first generation, lower-income, immigrant and ethnic minority dancers that characterise the company. I must note that, alongside many other members of the group, I found Más Flow to be a safe haven within an institution that was not always accommodating of students of our particular intersecting racial and socio-economic identities. One can easily recognise that the creation of Más Flow occurred directly alongside iconic campus campaigns, protests, and social activism led primarily by students of colour, which highlighted the experiences and challenges that students of colour were facing and are currently facing on Princeton's campus.<sup>10</sup> All of these particular experiences permit the cultural logic of double consciousness offered by DeFrantz (2004) and Febres (1997), and of wounded histories offered by Daniel (2011) and Imada (2012) to frame the bodies of the Más Flow dancers incredibly well.

The social experiences of race and class previously mentioned only articulate a portion of Más Flow's identity, and to demonstrate this I draw upon Stuart Hall's conceptualisation that 'identities are never unified ... never singular, but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions' (1996:4). Within Hall's framework, identities then become an articulation of how we might represent ourselves across multiple boundaries over time. Although Más Flow does articulate itself through identities of race and class, it likewise expresses the dancers' experience of positive visibility and enjoyment. We cannot conceptualise the company's full identity without also acknowledging that this dance company locates pride in what may be considered 'uncivilized', 'untamed', and 'sensual' (Daniel, 2011:99; Imada, 2012). Whereas the cultural logics of the scholars encountered within this article do articulate the dancers' social and socio-economic identities, they overlook a part of the dancers' identities that are represented through their smiles, laughter, and cheers in response to audiences. Therefore, to wear these logics on our bodies for too long becomes uncomfortable. They are too constricting for us to find power, agency, or simply a way to live comfortably therein. It is this fact that makes me argue for another way of reasoning – another cultural logic.

### ***Una conclusión***

The fact that Más Flow does not quite fit the logics made for black and brown bodies leads me to believe that radical new logics are needed in order to progress;

yet without finding sufficient ways to do this, I am halted, frustrated. In hindsight, my initial attempt to disregard the older logics completely was a misguided effort. Jose Muñoz (1999) offers another idea that I believe fits the circumstances better. In his concept of ‘disidentification’, Muñoz notes that minorities work ‘on and against’ a prior cultural logic in order to transform it and ‘invest it with new life’ (1999:13). Again, I acknowledge that I do not have all the tools to articulate fully how Más Flow can invest these constricting logics with new life. Nevertheless, I do know that investing these theories with new life would mean acknowledging an experience of joy within the articulation of race and class. In referencing my previous questions surrounding ethnicised sensuality and its historical implications, the reinvested logic would allow the dancers in Más Flow to acknowledge the history wherein ‘barbaric’ and ‘improper’ accompanies the perception of coloured bodies, whilst simultaneously allowing the dancers to claim the concept of sensuality as a source of pride.

As Más Flow’s black and brown bodies are not unique to history, I am reminded that this task of reinvesting in cultural logics is applicable to any black and brown body that is struggling to articulate intersecting experiences of race, class, and joy. Although this article cannot provide a linear answer to what a reinvested logic might look like, it can indeed serve as the initiation of the conceptual discourse through which existing logics can be argued as needing re-fashioning, in order to permit minority bodies a way of articulating their full intersectional identities in society.

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## Notes

1. Lyrics translate into English as: ‘With only a kiss, you can fall in love. There’s no need for talking’ (Aventura, 2005).
2. ‘And only for a kiss’ (Aventura, 2005).
3. ‘With her I am happy’ (Aventura, 2005).
4. ‘With only a little kiss, I’m taken to infinity’ (Aventura, 2005).
5. The \$65,000 threshold was introduced in the 2015/16 academic year (Princeton University, 2014).
6. ‘With only a kiss, you can fall in love. There’s no need for talking’ (Aventura, 2005).
7. ‘Little white man’ (1997:184).
8. Those in the know.
9. Rumba is a style of dance that originates from Cuba and is derived from African movement practices (Febres, 1997).
10. One of the founders of the company can be seen photographed in attendance at the 2014 *I, Too, Am Princeton* campaign, which strives ‘to inspire and motivate other marginalized peoples in all communities to push through invisible boundaries and make their voices heard’ (I, Too, Am Princeton, 2014). Other Más Flow company members can be found either pursuing activism in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement (2014), which followed the deaths of African-American men Eric Garner and Michael Brown, or advocating for the rights of undocumented immigrants in the U.S.A.

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