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Dancing with desire: cultural embodiment in Tijuana's Nor-tec music and dance

ALEJANDRO L. MADRID

Latin American and Latino Studies, University of Illinois at Chicago, 1517 University Hall, 601 S. Morgan Street, Chicago, IL 60607-7115, USA
E-mail: Almadrid@uic.edu

Abstract

Nor-tec music was created at the Tijuana–San Diego border as a hybrid that incorporates the sounds of traditional music from the North of Mexico to computer-based styles of dance music. Through a distinct process of do-it-yourself distribution, Nor-tec quickly became a worldwide phenomenon in the underground electronic music scene. Based on extensive ethnographic work in Tijuana, Los Angeles and Chicago, this article compares different Nor-tec scenes in an attempt to identify how different transnational communities appropriate this music in order to imagine and conciliate notions of identity, modernity and tradition according to their specific social context. I focus on the relationship between discourses about Latinidad and Latino bodies, and their influence on the way different Latino communities dance and move to the Nor-tec beats.

'. . .que te puedo decir que no haya dicho el cuerpo?'
[. . .what can I tell you that the body has not said yet?]
(José Luis Martín, 'VJ Mashaka')

On the evening of 3 March 2001, a crowd of about 2000 dancing fans filled one of Tijuana's architectural landmarks, the old Jai Alai building on *Revolución* Avenue. The reason was a multidisciplinary event called 'Nortec City' that, taking as an excuse the release of the Nor-tec Collective's first commercial recording, *The Tijuana Sessions, Vol. 1*, presented the work of a group of installation and visual artists, film-makers, sculptors, writers, and fashion designers produced under the unifying spirit of Nor-tec.[1] 'Nor-tec' is a term originally coined by Roberto Mendoza 'Panóptica' to describe the heterogeneous character of a music born in Tijuana that combined the sounds of the Mexican *banda* and *norteña* traditions with the technology of European and American techno and electronica.[2] However, the artwork presented at this event loosely redefined Nor-tec as an eclectic combination of modern technology and elements usually associated with the traditions and lifestyles from the Mexican northern border. Covered by journalists from Europe and the USA, 'Nortec City' was the crowning moment of a long, unorthodox process of do-it-yourself underground marketing and distribution that quickly caught the attention and imagination of American and European critics and music labels. Before an international audience that witnessed the event as tourists, journalists, and Internet users, 'Nortec City' became a site where musicians, artists, and dancing fans from Tijuana redefined themselves and the identity of their city through a performance that negotiated niches

of identification among a complex web of transnational discourses, ideologies and desires. Nor-tec dance and music embody desires for modernity and cosmopolitism; their performance reconfigures tradition in relation to an imaginary present and future for the dancing fans that appropriate it.

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It is almost midnight when Ana's particularly appealing dance style appears on the overcrowded centre of the dance floor during a Nor-tec performance at Tijuana's Centro Bar. She heels the floor and slowly moves her body forward, making ample gestures with her arms, first the right shoulder, then the left shoulder. These movements are followed by the combination of a complicated footwork based on a tip-to-heel motion in each foot; at the same time, her hands move from the front to the sides of her body as if waving a skirt. In front of her is David, who, in a concealed posture, marches down the dance floor accompanying his steps with sudden, jerky movements of arms and head. Both Ana and David combine steps typical of ravers and clubbers in the US or Europe with movements that seem extracted from choreographies of traditional *norteño* dances: *polca* ('polka'), *chotís* ('schottische'), redowa. While traces of the former dances appear in the general cadence of the bodies and the sharp movements 'à la break dance', the latter tend to be reflected in the footwork – sometimes similar to the stylised steps of *chotís* – and, in the case of Ana, in the arms and shoulders.

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As this ethnographic description shows, dancing is an essential aspect of the Nor-tec experience. In Nor-tec, the dance floor is as important as the turntables or the computers in negotiating the identity of the scene. As Kai Fikentscher suggests, dance music scenes are defined by a 'dynamic interaction between [the DJ] in charge of the DJ booth and the dancers who, as a collective body, are in charge of the dance floor' (Fikentscher 2000, p. 8). Such characterisation is indeed true not only for the Nor-tec scene in Tijuana, but also for the diverse transnational scenes that appropriate it in cities like Los Angeles and Chicago; locally and translocally, musicians and dancers define themselves and each other in the dynamic performance of Nor-tec.

'. . . *Que te puedo decir que no haya dicho el cuerpo?*' ('. . . what can I tell you that the body has not said yet?') states José Luis Martín 'VJ Mashaka', a visual artist from Tijuana and a member of the Nor-tec Collective.[3] As his question suggests, body language anticipates spoken language in communicating our desires. We are our bodies, and our bodies function as loudspeakers for our desire. In our interpersonal relations, the body speaks out our most intimate needs and feelings: our anxieties, our fears, our calmness, our anger, our sexual desire. If then, in interpersonal relations, our bodies disclose the hidden, most personal feelings and hopes of our personal life, what do our bodies reveal about our aspirations in larger social and cultural contexts? What do the bodies of dancing Nor-tec fans say? Which desires write, inform, and are negotiated by the dancing bodies of Nor-tec fans in different, translocal dance scenes? Ana and David's heterogeneous dancing steps at Tijuana's Centro Bar show that a complex relationship between past and future, between nostalgia and desire, between tradition and modernity, is crucial in the consumption of Nor-tec through dance. It is in the phantasmatic space at the intersection between imaginaries of tradition and

modernity upon which the collective and individual desires of dancing people from scenes in Tijuana, as well as Los Angeles, and Chicago is projected. For these fans, Nor-tec is a fantasy that reconstitutes tradition according to present desires for a type of future modernity. It is a fantasy that ameliorates the ethnic, racial, gender roles, and class conditions that contradict these desires while at the same time contesting them, providing a site for their performative reconfiguration. The consumption of Nor-tec and the styles of dancing in each of these scenes respond to the dancer's understanding of their place within the specific social and cultural circumstances of those scenes. Dance styles developed under these conditions are, therefore, screens for the projection of social representation and self-identification as desire. The three Nor-tec dance scenes explored in this article (Tijuana, Los Angeles and Chicago) provide examples of completely different projections which necessarily respond to the objects of desire made available to the dancers in their communities. The intention is to understand these objects of desire and their implicit contradictions to explore their role in the reproduction of social and cultural discourses of representation, identity politics, and also in the performance of alternative avenues of self-identification.

Tijuana is a city that, due to its geographic location at the border between Mexico and the United States, has become the depository of innumerable myths, legends, and urban tales of both American and Mexican origin. Most notably, Tijuana is represented as the perennial sinful town: a city whose economy revolves around drug dealing, illegal immigrant smuggling, and sexual tourism. In turn, based on the centre-periphery dichotomy that has dominated interrelationships among Mexicans throughout the country's history, *chilangos* from Mexico City depict *tijuanenses* as sell-outs who speak an odd mix of Spanish and English, buy their groceries in San Diego, and watch and hear American TV and radio stations.[4] However, there is an ambiguity to the symbiotic relationship that many Mexicans see between Tijuana and San Diego; indeed, they see in the borderline the end of the nation and its traditions, but its fluidity provides an access to modernity denied to most of the country. In fact, Tijuana is a space where the contradictions and shortcomings of the nationalist Mexican project are evident, and as such, it becomes both an object of vilification and an object of desire for the rest of the country.

Norteña and *banda*, the traditional music of the northern border, were for many decades considered *naco* music by the centralised Mexican media, an opinion that reflected the general sentiment towards *norteño* culture in the country.[5] However, the current overwhelming presence of *norteño*, *banda* and *grupero* musicians like Los Tigres del Norte, Banda El Recodo, Gigante de América – formerly known as Bronco – in Mexican (and Mexican-American) radio and TV airwaves responds among other things to a shifting relationship between the centre and the margins of the country.[6] The success of *norteño* music throughout Mexico also reflects shifting objects of desire for the Mexican people. These are only a few of the contradictory discourses of representation that *tijuanenses* are forced to negotiate, and the launching of Nor-tec music in 1999 provided a site for this process to take place.

Nor-tec dancing in Tijuana

Ursula, a native *tijuananse*, first heard Nor-tec music during the 'Nortec City' party and recalls her experience as follows:

> Once I heard [the Nor-tec collective] I got hooked [. . .] What happens to me is that I can't believe I am seeing people from Tijuana on the stage, creating something as real . . . something as true

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as this music. It is very emotional to know that finally you can touch or perceive something that is being created here in Tijuana [. . .] What I like the best is to feel that we are experiencing something that does not come to us from the centre [of the country], but something that is from here. (Personal interview)[7]

The sense of local pride expressed by Ursula is central to the successful reception of Nor-tec in Tijuana. As I mentioned earlier, 'Nortec City' was the first Nor-tec event that captured the attention of the international media. It would have been impossible for this event to achieve that without the energy produced by the active participation (the productive consumption) of the proud local fans that filled the Jai Alai building that night. By the time 'Nortec City' took place, the musicians from the collective had been struggling already for about two years to win local ravers and clubbers over to the Nor-tec cause. Many young *tijuanenses* were already familiar with the unlikely combination at the core of Nor-tec, the articulation of the local (*norteña* and *banda*) by the global (techno); on the evening of 3 March 2001, these *tijuanenses* were willing to play their part in the performance. Bruno Ruiz, a journalist from Tijuana, described 'Nortec City' as a party

where it looks like everybody is wearing sunglasses, where women are into the *onda vaquera* [cowboy trend]. Hats, jeans, boots. [. . .] Everybody is drinking beer. *Cerveza Tijuana.* Out there, a musician wearing a *lucha libre* [Mexican wrestling] mask plays a synthesizer. Inside, at midnight, there are stands of Nortec t-shirts and other things. *Birria* [goat stew] and *chicharrón* [fried pork skin] vendors. [. . .] Deeper inside [the building], there is another area where other people dance, and they dance very well. They move very well. They jump and jump because a few trumpetists play with the DJs [*sic*]. These trumpet players wear cowboy hats and mix [their sound] with the [DJs'] music, making it into something sublime and perfect that tastes like Nortec. (Ruiz 2001)

Ruiz's chronicle tells the story of the projection of the local onto the global. *Chicharrón*, *birria*, *lucha libre* and *norteño* culture (the *onda vaquera*) are re-articulated in the modernity of technology (synthesizers, deejays, computers, and electronic music). How is this hybrid, glocal project embodied by dancing fans?[8] Ruiz states that they dance and move 'very well'. By which criteria does Ruiz rate these dancers? What do these Nor-tec dance steps look like? How does their dance 'taste like Nor-tec'?

Nina Garin's perceptive review of 'Nortec City' recognises the body as an instrument that defines the scene, and also notices that music, food, clothing, and other paraphernalia play a fundamental role in uniting the city's dance community. However, she points out that 'the music wasn't easy to dance to – it does not have the ecstatic beats of house music. Nortec is more repetitive, it's more relaxed, it takes a while to feel the groove' (Garin 2001). On 10 May 2003 I was able to witness in person the style of people dancing to the Nor-tec sounds mentioned by Garin, a distinctive style that I had seen in video recordings of parties like 'Nor-tec City' and 'Maquiladora de Sueños'.

* * *

As a fundraising for the video documentary project *Que suene la calle* ('Let the street sound'), DJ Mr. Ejival, DJ Max, and former Nor-tec Collective musicians Ignacio Chávez Uranga 'Plankton Man', and Fernando Corona 'Terrestre' play at Tijuana's Centro Bar, a simple, small rectangular room located in an annex of the Jai Alai building which holds around 200 people. The stage is made out of two tables and two loudspeakers located at floor level at the right end of the room. On the opposite side a bartender serves drinks and a few groups of friends await the right moment to start

Figure 1. Fan from Tijuana playing his part at the 'Nortec City' performance. Photo courtesy of Gerardo Yépiz 'Acamonchi'.

dancing. Around 11 o'clock, Plankton Man takes over the booth from DJ Max, and introduces the Nor-tec sound with his computer and samplings of accordion, snare drums, guitars, and even the voices of street musicians. The voice of Teodoro Pacheco, a *norteño* musician sampled in Plankton Man's 'Recinto Portuario' compels people to take the dance floor. '*Yo me llamo Teodoro Pacheco/Yo me dedico a la música desde hace cuarenta años*' ('My name is Teodoro Pacheco/I have dedicated myself to music for forty years') is the repeated sentence, the loop that, as the sounds of trumpets, synthesizers, drums, and vinyl scratches are incorporated, becomes more and more distorted.

Taking over from DJ Max, the pace of Plankton Man's music starts at 138 and slowly settles into 133 beats per minute (bpm). Most people dance by themselves or as members of groups of friends whose composition and size changes continuously. There are no fixed couples, dancers do not touch each other, and they move back and forth fluidly from conversation and beer drinking to lively showing of their individual dance skills. People on the sides of the room dance and observe the action at the centre of the dance floor. Two of these individual dancers are notable for the distinctive character of their movements. Pedro dances with very slow movements, eyes closed, his downward-inclined head keeping the beat with a slight forward motion. Suddenly, he changes his dancing style, now he keeps his arms open on the sides of his body – as if trying to fly – moving according to the vigorous shift of his body from right to left, jumping on one leg while kicking with the other. A few feet away, Teresa bends her legs, lowers her body and powerfully lifts herself into the air in jumpy,

broken motions, while waving her arms above and around her head, only to return to their initial position. Swiftly, she stands up, her hands together over her head, and keeping her upper body still, starts moving her hips in a quick, sharp circular motion.

* * *

Improvisational open dance work – such as Pedro and Teresa's – is all about individual expression. The dance moves embody the person's uniqueness and show the dancer's creativity as an imaginary codification of the body. Many times, however, these codifying exercises intertwine creativity and discourse in seemingly contradictory fashion. While there is an obvious personal connection between music and dancers expressed in the autonomy of the dancing bodies, there is also a larger communal experience that is represented in the reterritorialisation of the dance floor and in the introduction of dance steps that articulate tradition and discourse in a new and novel way. The choice of clothing and paraphernalia makes it clear that the dancers are aware that this is ultimately a collective performance. The movements of many of the dancers at the centre of the dance floor uncover tellingly the issues at stake in their performance.

* * *

On one of the corners of the dance floor, near the DJ booth, Antonio dances by himself; he keeps his hands together in front of his body while grabbing his belt buckle. His upper body, rather rigid, moves from right to left in a restricted fashion while walking forward and backwards every four beats. Antonio's movements look like a modern variation of traditional polka line dancing and Piporro's *taconazo* style.[9] As if triggered by the snare drum rolls in Terrestre's 'El palomar', Antonio's dancing style changes. He shifts from restricted motions to ample arm gestures. His hands leave the belt, his fingers move as if playing 'air bass', and his hands play percussion on his body.

* * *

Antonio, just like Ana and David, the dancers who combined steps from *polca*, *chotís* and redowa with break dance movements earlier in the concert, is in his late twenties or early thirties. They all grew up in the 1970s and early 1980s.[10] Many of the improvised steps in their dancing style reveal a common source: they are typical stylistic features of ballet *folclórico* choreographies as they were taught in art classes at elementary schools throughout Mexico up to the 1980s. As a kid educated in elementary schools in the northern Mexican states of Tamaulipas and Sonora, I was a participant in these types of dance performance. Year after year we spent a few hours a week learning stylised versions of *polca* dancing (and other *danzas folclóricas*) as part of large choreographies to be staged on Mother's Day or *Día de la Bandera* ('National Flag Day'). For many years during our childhood in Reynosa, my sister spent countless hours in *clases de baile folclórico* ('folk dance lessons') where she learned incredible embellished choreographies of, among other dances, *chotís* – which, to my amazement, she is able to reproduce to perfection more than twenty years later. Nevertheless, neither the stylised *polca* dance steps I learned in school, nor the embellished footwork my sister mastered in dance lessons were ever present at the parties and *carne asadas* where friends and family gathered every other weekend.

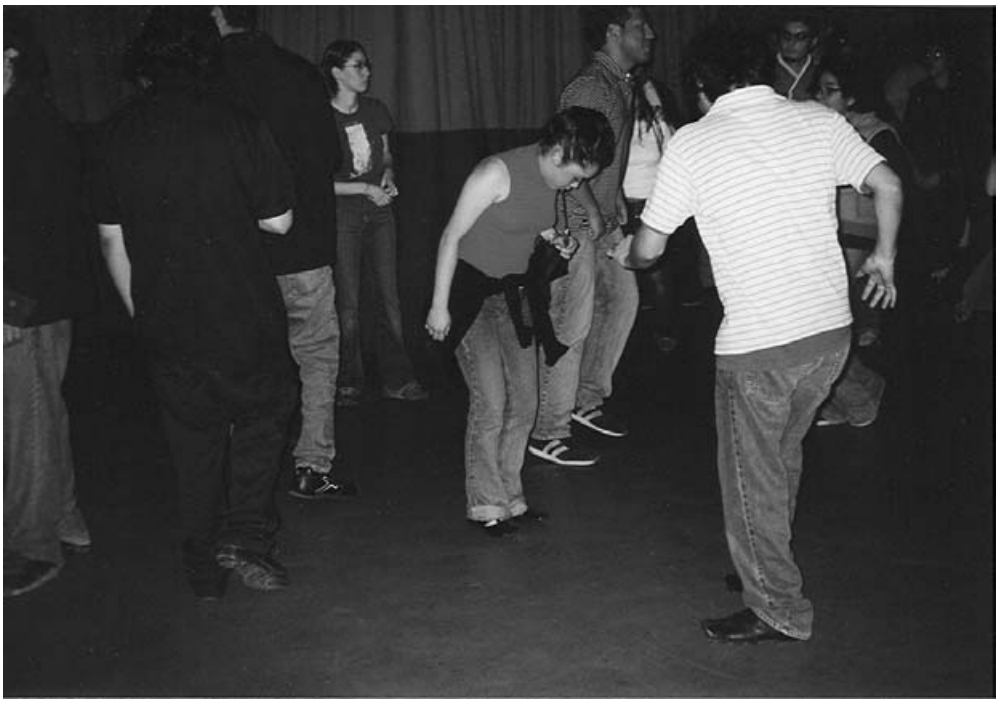

Figure 2. Ana and David dancing at Tijuana's Centro Bar. Photo by the author.

Although *norteño* music was played at these get-togethers and the rest of the kids and I were encouraged to dance over improvised *tablados* consisting of old wood doors lying on the floor, the complicated and choreographed steps learned at the *clases* were never part of these weekly experiences. It was tacitly understood that these learned steps belonged to a different performance, one reserved for the yearly festivals at school or at the auditorium in McAllen, Texas (where my sister's class would perform), where these dances were public showcases of 'tradition' and local 'heritage' in the manner of a tourist attraction. It is telling that these literally learned steps would surface in the performance of Nor-tec.[11]

The presence of these steps – embodied in the bodies of northern people through cultured tradition – as part of Nor-tec dance reveals important aspects of the power of this dance scene: as individual, creative, imaginary codification, and as communal, choreographic, symbolic re-codification. The *tijuanense* writer Rafa Saavedra 'Rafadro' states that almost every aspect in the development of the Nor-tec scene has been registered by the local, national or international media in one way or the other. Through video recordings, written reviews and chronicles, photographic articles, and of course music recordings, the presence of both an underground and a mainstream media has always been part of the Nor-tec experience (personal interview, 5 December 2003). Dance fans know they are being observed continuously and willingly take part in the performance by adopting the heterogeneous clothing and dance styles that I have described above, styles that betray their desire for modernity and at the same time rewrite tradition – the institutionalising desire – through their bodies. These are styles that embody and mix an impossible combination, the modern and the traditional, and resignify both in the performative act of dancing. This performance does

not take place only at the individual level; also fundamental are the distribution of these individual bodies on the dance floor, their interaction with the musicians and the rest of the dancers, and especially their individual awareness of being part of a larger communal performance. They know they are being observed and are aware that their dancing group image is the image of a Tijuana mediated by the modernity of the Nor-tec musical and visual experience. A perfect metaphor for this situation is VJ Mashaka's *El guachaman* ('the watching man'), one of the images projected onto the screen during a typical Nor-tec performance. Here, an individual filmed by the camera suddenly takes out a set of binoculars and looks back at the camera through them. *El guachaman*, the subject of our gaze, aware that we are looking through the camera, reverses the situation and forces us to look at ourselves as objects of his gaze as he takes an active role that emphasises his awareness of the situation. Just as *El guachaman* reverses the situation by identifying our intruding gaze, Nor-tec dance fans, recognising the presence of the outsider's gaze, become a tourist attraction that elicits traditional tourist practices, rearticulating them in light of their desire for modernity. Thus, tourism is decontextualised and re-codified locally because of the validating power of the outsider's gaze, making the Tijuana Nor-tec dancing experience a truly glocal phenomenon.

In contrast to the traditional *norteño* and *banda* closed work dance styles which emphasise the male's leading role, Nor-tec dance style in Tijuana creates opportunity for women to express themselves by reconfiguring these roles into improvisational open dance work. The submissive attitude expected from women in a macho-oriented culture like that of northern Mexico is reflected and reproduced in the steps of traditional *polca*, *chotís* and redowa, where the female's role is to follow the male's lead; moreover, this role is further radicalised in contemporary *norteño* dance genres such as *quebradita*, where the female body actually becomes an object at the service of the male's bravado dance display. This is one of the ways tradition and heritage function as mechanisms which institutionalise the female body and make it an object of desire. However, female dancing bodies are also subjects of desire, and in Tijuana, the female desire for modernity as expressed in the Nor-tec dancing style is a site for the subversion of the institutionalised body's desire. In the heterogeneous forms of Nor-tec dance, *tijuanense* women consume basic elements of the dancing discourse of *norteño* tradition to transform the discourse itself into imaginaries of modernity through individual experience and expression.

In Nor-tec dance, the desired bodies of these women are reconstituted into desiring bodies which demand equality and independence, desires that are enunciated in the performance itself. Just as the music of Plankton Man rearticulates ideas about modernity and tradition ('*Yo me dedico a la música desde hace cuarenta años*') and validates one with the other, the Tijuana Nor-tec dancing style embodies imaginaries of modernity while performatively reconfiguring tradition in relation to an imaginary present and future. To dance Nor-tec music is to re-imagine tradition and modernity through the body.

Nor-tec dancing in Los Angeles

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On the evening of 16 September 2003, The Echo – a small, underground Los Angeles dance-bar known as Nayarit in better days – houses the last concert of La Leche, an

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electronic music tour organised by the British label, Sonic 360. On the stage, Panóptica, Pepe Mogt from Fussible, and Ramón Amezcua 'Bostich' operate their laptops and combine their sounds and talents to produce the hypnotic beats of a live Nor-tec music performance; Panóptica loops a borrowed bass line from the well-known symphonic arrangement of Rubén Fuentes' *ranchera* song 'Que bonita es mi tierra' and blasts it out of the loudspeakers of the club. On the dance floor, about twenty fans, mostly Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, but also some Anglos and African-Americans, are intrigued by the transfiguration of the words and sounds of Fuentes' song ('*Ay caray, caray/Que bonita es mi tierra, que bonita/Que linda es*' ['How beautiful is my land, how beautiful/How nice it is']) into modernist sounds through Panóptica's crafty computer manipulation. A down tempo style of approximately 102 bpm steadily attracts more and more fans to the dance floor transforming it from a talking space to one of dancing. A few minutes later, the music makes a transition from the raw-sounding *tarolas* ('snare drums') of Bostich's 'Unicornio' and 'Rumba' to the disco-sounding analogue synthesizers of Fussible's 'Allegretto per signora, Nortec Mix' and 'Odyssea' and the pace of the music increases first to 107 then to 127 bpm. The dance floor is already crowded, making it almost impossible to walk among the dancers. Those standing on the sides and the back of the dance floor watch the dancers and the musicians but avoid dancing themselves. Although among the dancers there are a few boy-girl and some girl-girl couples who dance holding each other, improvisational open dance work dominates. As in Tijuana, this open work informs us of a desire for modernity that is reflected in the incorporation of movements and steps typical of the international rave scene – jumping-while-kicking motion, movements 'à la break dance', and sudden changes of style and body motion centre. Among women, the dancing style varies from that of Tijuana fans in one basic and fundamental area: while motion among *tijuanenses* tends to be mono-centred, motion among L.A. dancing fans is mostly poly-centred.

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Poly-centred dancing suggests a variety of body centres for the production of movement. Effective poly-centred dancing stresses the equality of all body parts as synchronic centres of motion over the dominance of one centre over the other. Thus, dancing style among L.A. female fans emphasises a synchronic 'polyphony' of movements that usually consists of independent-but-coordinated hip, shoulders, and feet motion, while *tijuanense*'s dancing style highlights instead a diachronic juxtaposition of movements, each of which might emphasise different body centres. The importance of this fundamental difference at the core of Nor-tec dance styles lies in the fact that they reflect different institutionalised discourses of the body and account for different desired bodies. Therefore, since these two dancing styles respond to different discourses of representation, they also inform us of different desiring subjects in as much as the subjects' desire triggers a process of negotiation between discursive and individual experiential bodies that informs their construction of self- and collective identity.

According to Jennifer Mañón, event coordinator for Sonic 360, the cities and venues for the La Leche tour were chosen in line with the sponsor's (Heineken) interest in reaching out to Latino consumers in the US. The tour was presented in the major Latino cities in the country (New York, Chicago, Miami, Los Angeles, Houston, San Francisco), advertisement was done through major Latino radio stations, and the

actual venues tended to be located in Latino neighbourhoods (Personal interview 2003). For that reason, the majority of the attendees at the La Leche events were Latinos and the discourses of representation reflected in their appropriation of Nor-tec were the powerful ideologies of Latino and Pan-Latino identity that pervade the United States. Mañón, a Latina from Wisconsin, addressed this issue in relation to Sonic 360's interest in promoting Nor-tec:

> [. . .] they [Sonic 360's executives] thought it was really cool to introduce it [Nor-tec] to other Latinos because it's so new and people were all listening to the same stuff, and we were so sick of that mentality so we wanted to push it to show Latinos that there's other stuff to listen to [. . .] A lot of Latinos seem stuck in their ways, and are stereotyped as wanting to keep their own ways, and radio stations are a number one way of brainwashing, saying: 'stick with it, 'cus it keeps everyone together'. (Personal interview 2003)

The stereotypes Mañón refers to are the essentialist notions about the identity of Latin America and Latin Americans that American media have produced, reproduced and re-created throughout the twentieth century. These are discourses that, in an attempt to create a unified Latin American Other against which to identify a homogenised Anglo-Saxon Protestant American identity, have themselves homogenised Latin American cultures and the diversity of Latin American experiences in the United States. 'Latino' is a label that refers to a series of processes of Latinisation by which individuals of Latin American descent are represented as sharing one common identity. The early ties of the Latino advertising industry to the Puerto Rican and Cuban immigration to the US in the 1950s and 1960s is clearly evident in the discourses, practices and materials that came to identify Latino music culture, for example, salsa, rumba, bongos, congas, maracas, carnivals, poly-centred dancing, and highly sexualised bodies. However, as Arlene Dávila states, these processes of Latinisation 'stem from the contrary involvement of and negotiations between dominant, imposed, and self-generated interests' (Dávila 2001, p. 17). In fact, the adoption of this homogenising representational discourse allows a variety of communities of different Latin American origins to access positions of power within the American political system that would otherwise be difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, such representation as a performative discourse enacts what it enunciates, and it is at the level of individual bodies that the consequences of this performative discourse need to be re-negotiated.

The dancing fans at The Echo in L.A. reflect these discourses in their stylised moves. Nevertheless, this style is also a site for a reconciliation of these discourses and the dancers' own desire for individual modern identities. The presence of couples dancing in each other's arms in male-led closed work and the prevalence of poly-centred body motion reveal that dancers at The Echo are responding in part to the embodiment of the Latino culture discourse. On the other hand, the large presence of improvisational open work suggests that the fans' appropriation of Nor-tec music also provides a site for personal expression, wherein is seen the imagination of a new relationship between the discourse of traditional Latinidad and their desire for modernity.

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On the crowded dance floor of The Echo, Diana and Leticia dance together; as Fussible's music increases the speed of its beat they slowly start to move from the right to the left side of the dance floor. Making their way from one side of the crowded

Figure 3. Dancing fans at The Echo. Photo by the author.

dance floor to the other, they begin to interact with other dancers who cross their path. The freedom and fluidity of these interactions is particularly patent in Diana's case. At one moment she is dancing with Leticia; the next moment she seductively approaches a male dancing alone in the middle of the room. Diana's movements are slow and provocative as she nears the guy; her arms lift and hands run through her long black hair before she reaches out towards him. They dance together for several minutes, exchange a few words and go their separate ways without talking to each other for the rest of the night.

* * *

Diana's dance style is a site that contests her expected role in traditional Latino dancing. Not only does she not wait for the male to take the initiative but she actually initiates the encounter, remaining in complete control of the situation, and ending it when she chooses. Dancing to Nor-tec becomes for Diana an activity of gender empowerment which would not be possible in traditional Latin dancing; it is a liberating experience which allows her to express her sexuality without being institutionalised as a sexual object. By participating in the Nor-tec performance, she re-negotiates for herself the problematic designation of women as desired bodies – her poly-centred dancing reveals her exposure to this discourse – and performs herself instead as a desiring subject in search of independence, power and equality.

As Jennifer Mañón argues, Nor-tec shows these Latinos that 'there is other stuff to listen to' besides the stereotypes of Latino culture emphasised by mainstream

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media. Thus, consuming Nor-tec provides an avenue for a performance of the self that engages dominant discourses of Latino representation but defies their totalising control.

Nor-tec dancing in Chicago

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Around ten o'clock, 23 October 2003, Bostich and Fussible, beers in hand, take the stage at Chicago's Hot House. The music fills the air and an array of quickly changing modernist images of Tijuana projected by VJ CBrown rhythmically bounce on screens behind the musicians. But while the visuals dance and provide a perfect Nor-tec counterpoint to Bostich's 'Autobanda', the dance floor remains empty. Bostich tries unsuccessfully to capture the attention of the Chicago clubbers (predominantly Latinos) sitting at the tables around the dance floor. Although he increases the pace of the music from 103 to 107 bpm, throws some of the best samples of his crudest, most personal Nor-tec style, and the loud, edgy, unprocessed sound of *tarola* playing fills the room with incredible rhythmic patterns, the clubbers remain in their seats, seemingly unaffected by Bostich's virtuosic display. After fifteen minutes of fruitless effort, Bostich and Pepe Mogt change their strategy; instead of the raw *norteño* sounds of *tarola*, the *cumbia* rhythms, and the fragmented *banda* brassy melodies of 'Rumba' and 'Tijuana Bass', the musicians shift towards a combination that might be more familiar to US Latinos: conga and bongo drums, in fast Latin disco and Afro-Caribbean styles that quickly reach 129 bpm. The clubbers immediately start dancing, first in the aisles then slowly moving towards the centre of the dance floor. Once the dance floor is occupied, Bostich slowly re-introduces his hardcore, *tarola*-driven Nor-tec style to a now willing, ecstatic dancing crowd which goes crazy with the percussive sound of 'Polaris', responding with loud whistles, screams and excitement which is manifested in more energetic twists, turns and jumps.

Most people dance in couples, many following the traditional closed work of salsa and Afro-Caribbean dance styles where the male holds the female's hand while she turns around only to return to his arms and continue to be led by her partner. Some others show more interest in disco styles, combining closed and open work. The left side corner of the dance floor has been appropriated by a group of four friends dancing in couples. One of the boys performs robot-like jerky motions with his arms, on the side of his body, alternatively moving up and down from the elbows. His partner keeps the beat as her head shakes back and forth, her arms move freely on the sides of her body and she moves forward and backward throughout the small area, reclaiming it with ample leg movements. The other couple hold each other, his left hand on her waist as her left hand takes his right hand up in the air; their body balance shifts from right to left and their knees remain slightly bent; suddenly, she lets herself fall back, he catches her and moves her around while keeping the right-left shifting balance going according to the beat of the music; it is a difficult movement borrowed from *quebradita* dancing. This group of friends is a perfect microcosm of the dance floor: a dancer performing 'retro' 1980s disco movements reminiscent of Michael Jackson at his prime, another one claiming ownership of the floor through poly-centred dance work typical of Afro-Caribbean dancing, and a couple reinventing *norteño* dances: *polca* and *quebradita*.

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Figure 4. Dancing fans at the Hot House. Photo by the author.

When I asked a Nor-tec fan why people would not dance as Bostich's music resounded all over the club, he plainly answered: 'They do not know how to dance to this music'. His answer is simple and obvious as it forces us to observe Nor-tec as an empty space, a blank screen upon which a landscape will be invented and a desire will be projected. Void, empty spaces trigger creativity as our interaction with them compels us to fill them with meaning. Nor-tec is thus a site whose meaning is constructed and negotiated in practice and consumption as much as in production and distribution. Celeste Fraser Delgado and José Muñoz have stated that '[d]ance sets politics in motion, bringing people together in rhythmic affinity where identification takes the form of histories written on the body through gesture. The body dancing to Latin rhythms analyses and articulates the conflicts that have crossed Latin/o American identity' (Delgado and Muñoz 1997, p. 9). The Nor-tec dancing experience at Chicago's Hot House proves Delgado and Muñoz's statements correct. The heterogeneous forms and styles of Nor-tec dancing observed at the Hot House speak of the complex cultural negotiation taking place between the unbalanced powers that inform the identity of Latinos in the US. In order to negotiate identity niches, Latinos must engage the discourses of representation on Latinidad mentioned earlier and at the same time they must resolve the contradictions that arise when those discourses clash with larger discourses on American modernity, equality, independence, opportunity and individuality. Furthermore, Latinos need to resolve issues of identity politics within their own communities as well as understand their own relation to their parents' heritage and tradition while dealing with mainstream pressure for assimilation. As Delgado and Muñoz suggest, the dancing body is a place for Latinos to articulate and analyse these conflicts, and

to project their individual desires as they sort through these complex maps for themselves.

Nor-tec is a modernist cultural manifestation that engages the mainstream but is also critical of it. It is an aesthetic that rewrites tradition while confronting a variety of local and global alienating discourses and is a perfect site for Latinos to resolve the conflicts they face in both these discourses. Latino embodiment of Nor-tec through dance challenges the mainstream Latino identity discourse and exhibits its contradictions. The multiplicity of cultures embodied by individuals of Latin American descent is reflected in the variety of poly-centred and mono-centred as well as of open and closed dancing styles. Latinos do not share one identity; the Latin American experience in the US is multicultural, and if there is something to be shared, it is the racial and cultural discrimination embodied in a performative discourse that has attempted to erase these differences. This conflictive history of racism and cultural erasure is articulated in the Latino dancing bodies at the Hot House. However, these dancing bodies also reflect their exposure to the contradictory discourse of equality, modernity, and overall homogenisation that Americans are subjected to through the media in their everyday lives. The notion of 'retro' and kitsch aesthetics that has been pushed by American media during the last decade is also present in the disco and break dance steps that combine in the dance floor. Remembering Michael Jackson's dance style and combining it with Piporro's *taco-nazo* style tell us of the desires of modernity produced and reproduced by mainstream media, of the desire to confront conflicting ideas of tradition reproduced by Latino and American media, and of the desire to incorporate their unique experiences into the construction of a multicultural identity within an already multicultural society.

Dancing with desire

I have discussed the particular features that characterise Nor-tec dancing in three different scenes. My intention was to show that dancing bodies mediate among a variety of ideological discourses that inform the fans' everyday life, offering a performative solution to the cultural contradictions those representations entail. I have suggested that the dancing fans are at the same time desired objects and desiring subjects whose movements reflect both the culture they have embodied and the aspirations they have imagined. Fans in all three scenes share the free, improvisational open work of disco and rave dancing, representing both a liberating potential to overcome the limitations of the institutionalised body through individual expression as well as the homogenising danger which is inherent in globalisation. However, Nor-tec provides dancers with a site for the re-articulation of local culture within a global phenomenon, thus allowing for a momentary subversion of the homogenising nature of globalisation. In this context, as Sally Ann Allen Ness states, a thorough examination of dance culture should not only focus on what dancers do, but also on what they do not do (Allen Ness 2004, p. 135). Focusing on this 'negativity of movement' is crucial to recognise the translocal limitations of many of the discourses dancers confront and conciliate in their dance.

The overall absence of poly-centred dance styles among dancing fans in Tijuana, while disregarding the extended presence of Afro-Caribbean rhythms in Nor-tec music (especially cumbia), reveals some of the shortcomings of the pan-

Latin discourse of American media: first, not all Afro-Caribbean music is able to enter this discourse; second, the discourse is not necessarily as meaningful to Mexican audiences as it is for Latinos in the US. Furthermore, the middle-class *tijuanenses* who follow Nor-tec actually engage local discourses that have for decades identified cumbia and cumbia dancing with the lower classes. Indeed, *La Estrella*, a documentary on a local cumbia club produced by Itzel Martínez, shows that most of the regulars of the Tijuana club are working-class individuals, especially migrants from southern cities in the country. Since Nor-tec is a screen for the projection of middle-class *tijuanense*'s desire for modernity, a site for the imagination of new identities, the working-class-tinged cumbia (much like *norteño* and *banda* music and their links to Mexican older generations) can be part of these imaginary identities through a reconstitution that would liberate it from these 'undesirable' cultural associations. This takes place by way of a process that views cumbia, *banda* and *norteña* through a kitsch perspective that reterritorialises discourses about these genres from the perspective of individuals aspiring to find a place for themselves in the imagined modern global community. Therefore, the absence of poly-centred styles in Tijuana's Nor-tec dance shows us a community that embodies a complex and contradictory cultural history with respect to African-influenced cultural practices. On the one hand, it is a hegemonic culture that has, for the most part, erased discursively most African traces from everyday life; and on the other hand, this culture embraces these manifestations when they are presented in the seductive modern clothes of the 'American dream', wishing simultaneously to differentiate itself from the 'lower-class' rhythms of cumbia music. Problematic issues of race and class are brought to the front of the Nor-tec dance experience when contradictions between production (cumbia-based music) and consumption (mono-centred dance), when the contradictions between presences and absences are examined.

We must also understand the absence of dance at Chicago's Hot House during the performance of Bostich's most hardcore Nor-tec music with the negative logic of this analysis. In the US, the media plays a fundamental role in the definition of a 'hip' Latino identity and in the creation of institutionalised desires for Latinos. A complex economy, disguised as a tool for identity cohesion ('stick with it, 'cus it keeps everyone together', as Jennifer Mañón expressed), is at stake in the reproduction of these desires. The successful American representation of Latin America as a homogenous 'tropical' culture resonated with the nascent Latino advertising industry in the 1950s and 1960s as it became oriented towards Puerto Ricans and Cubans. The relationship between Latino and mainstream American media in the US is a symbiotic one, as both sides feed and reproduce each other's myths and desires. For the American media, the manufacture of a Latino identity was also the creation of a product of consumption. Concurrently, Latino media, by emphasising some of the ideas that constitute this media product – that 'Latino women are *candela pura* [pure fire]', the image of the *caliente* [hot] Latin lover – reproduces the stereotypes of American media. However, this strategy allows Latino media two things: to share the benefits of the commodification of everything Latino, and to adopt the dreams that American media offers to Latinos. The music of Mexican-Americans and northern Mexicans, which was considered unsophisticated not only by non-Mexicans but also by Central and Southern Mexicans, remained marginal in mainstream Latino culture until very recently.[12]The current shift experienced in Latino media is partly the result of the *banda* craze that swept Los Angeles in the mid 1990s, a phenomenon that forced

the media to face the reality of the enormous economic power of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans (who are the largest [but most under-represented in the media] portion of Latinos in the US). Suddenly, *norteña* and *banda* were also *caliente* music, and *quebradita* dancers were *candela pura*.

Thus, Latinos are border subjects who are themselves epistemological contact zones, the in-between space where Latin American and American cultures interact, and where the tensions between the different Latino communities are conciliated. Their bodies are the border between subjectivity and social discourses, and Chicago clubbers clearly exemplify the issues at stake in their everyday conciliation of these circumstances. The fact that they first found it difficult to dance to a music dominated by the rhythms and timbres of cumbia and the loud tubas of *banda* – one of them told me they would not know how to dance to it – informs us of the fact that the sources of Nor-tec music were not part of their desire for modernity. If dancing to techno music embodied a separation from the unsophisticated part of their heritage, then their first encounter with Nor-tec became a contradiction because the same sounds they wanted to escape from were welcoming them into the party. The absence of dancing illustrated a problem, which Bostich and Pepe Mogt were able to identify quickly. Their solution, to shift away from the *norteño* towards a more Afro-Caribbean style based on salsa rather than cumbia, shows their awareness of the problems of representation among Latinos in the US. However, Nor-tec also became that empty screen upon which Latinos were able to project a re-evaluation of *norteño* culture through music. The musicians' reintroduction of *norteño* elements once the dance floor was occupied allowed the dancing bodies to perform themselves in relation to these elements and their desire for modernity.

Endnotes

1. In the literature produced by Nor-tec artists the term appears indistinctively as 'nor-tec' or 'nortec'. I chose to use the hyphenated version since it was used in the earlier, more underground productions of the collective. However, the non-hyphenated version also appears in this article whenever I quote a printed source that spells it that way.
2. *Banda* and *norteña* are the typical music traditions from the north of Mexico. For in-depth studies of their transnational character as the musics of Mexican migrants and Mexican-Americans from the American Southwest, see Manuel Peña, *The Texas-Mexican Conjunto. History of a Working-Class Music* (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1985) and Helena Simonett, *Banda. Mexican Musical Life across Borders* (Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 2001).
3. José Luis Martín 'VJ Mashaka,' Yo digo . . . (http://mashaka.blogspot.com). Posted on 11 December 2002.
4. *Chilango* is a native from Mexico City.{s94*Naco* is a popular Mexican term used to describe bad taste, lack of sophistication, lowbrow, etc.
5. *Gruperos* refers to a music trend that surged in Mexico during the 1970s. These musicians combine elements borrowed from *norteña* music, cumbia, and romantic ballad. Some of the pioneers of this trend include northern musicians like Rigo Tovar y su Costa Azul and the Chilean-formed, Mexican-based band Los Ángeles Negros.
6. The names of the interviewees and dance participants have been changed in order to protect their anonymity.
7. Glocal refers to a phenomenon where local issues are reflected and negotiated on a global context. See Néstor García Canclini, *Consumers and Citizens. Globalization and Multicultural Conflicts*, translated by George Yúdice (Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 2001), pp. 58–60.
8. 'El taconazo' is one of the most famous songs of the late *norteño* singer and icon Eulalio González 'Piporro'.
9. Although the younger generation of Tijuana clubbers are truly interested in Nor-tec, many of the first supporters of the collective, the core of Nor-tec fans, are in their late twenties and early thirties. They belong to the same generation of the musicians of the Nor-tec collective and have followed them long before the Nor-tec idea ignited.
10. I use the term 'learned' here to describe an educated and cultured practice.
11. Another aspect that undoubtedly played a role in the exclusion of many of these musical practices from Latino media was that the economic

power of Mexican immigrants – whose predominantly illegal immigration status saddled them with the poorest paid jobs in the country – was always believed to be lesser than that of the largely middle- and upper-class Cuban migration (especially that of the 1960s, during the first decade of the Cuban Revolution).

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