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Confessions of a White Salsa Dancer: Appropriation, Identity and the Latin Music Craze

CONFESSIONS OF A WHITE SALSA DANCER: APPROPRIATION, IDENTITY AND THE "LATIN MUSIC CRAZE"

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I. INTRODUCTION

I first heard *salsa*² in 1993, and began learning to dance to its poly-rhythmic melodies shortly thereafter. In those days, the Latin clubs in Denver were filled primarily with Latinos/as—I met many Puerto Ricans and Newyoricans,³ Peruvians, Columbians, Mexicans, Venezuelans, a few Cubans⁴—and when I mentioned to white folks that I was “into *salsa*” they thought I was going through a Mexican cooking phase. There were definitely a few Anglos/as like myself going to Latin music nightclubs at that time, but not many. Most Anglos/as who knew *salsa* were the ballroom dance crowd, and they tended, in this area anyway, not to frequent the clubs.

Things have changed dramatically since then, however. Over the last year or two, Anglos/as have begun flooding the local *salsa* nightspots. First they came as gawkers, but eventually they ventured out onto the dance floor. And whereas, before, Denver nightclubs could rarely afford to dedicate more than one night a week to Latin music, eventually the leading spot was open on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights.⁵ At the dance classes that open the evening at most clubs, there are two to three times as many students, mostly Anglos/as, in attendance as there used to be.

1. Assoc. Prof. of Law, Univ. of Denver College of Law. This essay was originally delivered at the fifth annual LatCrit Conference, held May 4-7, 2000, in Breckenridge, Colorado. I would like to thank the other participants on the panel entitled, “Multi/Cultural Artistic Re/Presentations in Mass Media: Capitalism, Power, Privilege and Cultural Production” • Steven Bender, Dennis Greene, Pedro Malavet, Juan Velsasco, and Ruby P. Andrew—as well as the audience attending the panel for their reactions to the ideas I presented there. I am also indebted to Steven Bender, Roberto Corrada, Pedro Malavet, Charles Piot, and Sherry! N. Weston for their comments on an earlier draft of this piece, and to Kasey MacIntyre for her tireless research assistance

2. I use the word “*salsa*” here as it is sometimes used colloquially – to include a wide variety of Latin rhythms (and the dances that go with them), including *salsa*, *mambo*, *merengue*, and *cha cha cha*, among others.

3. Newyoricans is a term that many Latinos/as use to refer to children of Puerto Rican parents who were born or raised in New York.

4. Most of the people I met were not Peruvian-American, Mexican-American, etc; they were immigrants. But I don't mean to suggest here that the impressions I obtained from social encounters necessarily reflect an accurate picture of the entire the population that frequented the clubs.

5. All of the nightclubs with which I am familiar that feature Latin music in the Denver area, with the exception of one, are owned by Anglos.

Both on the dance floor and off, this new-found Anglo/a appreciation of Latin music and dance has been received with decidedly mixed emotions. Anecdotally, I can report that some Latinos/as in local Denver clubs are doing a certain amount of grousing about the change in atmosphere that they feel has resulted, in places they rightfully thought of as theirs—not to mention the number of feet that get stepped on when you fill a dance floor to capacity with a crowd full of beginners. But one also senses a certain pride to the reaction in some cases—or even a sort of acquisitiveness. Some of the young Latinos and Latinas seem to be serving themselves up for consumption by the generally more affluent Anglos/as—who themselves often seem to be seeking the hypersexuality that whites associate with both Latin music and those who dance it. This may be their ticket, some of these young Latinos/as seem to (perhaps unconsciously) feel, to status, money, legitimacy—to all that's valued by the mainstream culture.

Journalists and academicians also are having mixed reactions to the recent white fascination with Latin cultural productions.⁶ As the writings in this volume (and elsewhere)⁷ indicate, some approach it with cautious optimism, citing the increased visibility of Latin music and the economic boon to Latino/a artists and their associates that this newfound stardom represents, while others are less sanguine about the possibility of long-term good flowing from the sale of a few Latin pop CDs. Most seem to be at least wary of this gift horse with its rather large teeth. They struggle with how to tell the difference between appreciation of their cultures' artistic productions on the one hand and appropriation of those productions for profit and orientaling⁸ exploitation on the other.⁹

6. Of course, the general phenomenon of white interest in, and attempts to identify with, the cultural productions of people of color is far from new. For a nuanced, but not unproblematic, discussion of this phenomenon as it affects African-American cultural productions, see N.R. Kleinfield, *Guarding the Borders of the Hip-Hop Nation*, N.Y. TIMES, July 6, 2000, at A1.

7. See, e.g., Steven W. Bender, *Will the Wolf Survive?: Latino/a Pop Music in the Cultural Mainstream*, 78 DENV. U. L. REV. 719 (2001); Pedro A. Malavet, *The Accidental Crit II: Culture and the Looking Glass of Exile*, 78 DENV. U. L. REV. 753 (2001).

8. EDWARD SAID, *ORIENTALISM* (1978).

9. The word "appropriation" has been used in many different ways in academic literature. As will become clear below, as I use it here I mean to capture only the negative side of cultural borrowing. Thus, I use "appropriation" to include use for economic benefit, use that misunderstands or misrepresents, and use without attribution. Cf. Deborah W. Post, *Appropriation and Transculturation in the Creation of Community*, 20 B.C. THIRD WORLD L.J. 117, 140 (2000) (appropriation can be good or bad; it is good when it inverts hierarchies). For a discussion of the deployment of mainstream gender symbolism in drag performances – that is, the appropriation of dominant group imagery by *subordinated* groups, the opposite phenomenon from the one I will be discussing here – see JUDITH BUTLER, *BODIES THAT MATTER: ON THE DISCURSIVE LIMITS OF "SEX"* 133-37, 137 (1993) (concluding that the documentary on drag queens, *Paris is Burning*, "is not an appropriation of dominant culture in order to remain subordinated by its terms, but an appropriation that seeks to make over the terms of domination.").

As such mixed reactions to the “Latin music craze” illustrate, recent changes in white musical tastes (along with other not-so-recent developments such as the increased interest in “Mexican” food epitomized by the success of the Taco Bell chain and other “Mexican” restaurants) raise important issues that have implications far beyond the already-not-insignificant world of music. I would argue that, among other things, white reactions to *salsa* invite an engagement with, and critique of, the rhetoric of pluralism and tolerance for diversity by which the dominant white society defines itself. That is, these reactions raise questions about what constitutes appreciation of any “other”—about what makes a society truly pluralistic.

In this essay, I use the subject of Latin music and dance, and especially my own involvement with *salsa* as a European-American, as a vehicle for exploring these broader issues of cultural ownership, cultural identity, and cultural interaction. I ultimately conclude that one should reject any impulse to interpret Anglo/a interest in Latin cultural productions as either unequivocally good or unequivocally bad. Moreover, I caution that seeing the issue as a question of appropriation versus appreciation reinforces a static and essentialized view of culture, ignoring centuries-old currents of cross-fertilization among EuroAmerican, African, and Latin American societies. Such a binary opposition also thereby constructs the dominant society’s popular culture (including its music) as white, rendering invisible the important contributions to that culture by people of color in general and Latinos/as in particular.

In Part II, then, I begin by engaging the tension between appropriation and appreciation, arguing in favor of each interpretation of the “Latin music craze” in turn, and thereby demonstrating that neither can be completely endorsed or rejected. In Part III, I struggle with my own rather negative reaction to the influx of Anglos/as into Latin clubs, interrogating my initial feelings of possessiveness about this dance form and probing the colonialist potential in such a reaction. I go on, however, to reject essentializing notions of cultural ownership that would condemn my identification with Latin music, ultimately suggesting an approach that looks for common ground in substantive (and perhaps even political) commitments that transcend identity issues by forging connections through shared respect and shared resistance to power hierarchies. In Part IV, I relate this discussion of Latin music to broader issues of multi-cultural coexistence and, in particular, to “pluralism” as a solution to group conflict in the broader society. I argue that cultural pluralism, as that term is frequently used, is a facile, feel-good concept that suggests it is possible for the privileged few to include the subordinated many simply by “accepting” them, without any commitment to the structural change and redistribution of wealth and power that are essential to any real inclusion of “others” into mainstream United States society.

II. APPROPRIATION AND APPRECIATION: SHOULD WE LIKE IT THAT THEY LIKE RICKY MARTIN?

A. Appropriation: the McDonaldization of Latin Music

In my experience, the use of the term world music is a way of dismissing artists or their music as irrelevant to one's own life. It's a way of relegating this 'thing' into the realm of something exotic and therefore cute, weird but safe, because exotica is beautiful but irrelevant; they are, by definition, not like us. Maybe that's why I hate the term. It groups everything and anything that isn't "us" into "them."

— David Byrne¹⁰

[I]n this society everything gets commodified and homogenized. There is little attention to historicizing these cultural products, understanding their connection to specific peoples and their lives and struggles. Instead, Latin dance is just the flavor of the month, a new sensation to taste and leave behind for the next thrill.

— Margaret Montoya¹¹

The Anglo/a turn to "world music" in general, and Latin music in particular, raises a number of problems. First of all, it is troubling at the economic level. Musical tastes may come and go, but unless they are translated into Latino/a ownership of record companies and high-placed Latino/a executives within the music industry, Latin music will fall back into oblivion as soon as the fad passes.¹² Singers will once again be discouraged from singing in Spanish or using horns in their music,¹³ and few influential figures will remain to be credited with leaving a long-term mark on the musical traditions of this country.

In addition to the short-lived nature of any economic benefit, there are also important questions to be raised about the representational/rhetorical impact of recent Anglo/a interest in Latin music. The most obvious negative ramification of such interest is the tendency of both media and promoters to exoticize Latin artists. As Steve Bender

10. David Byrne, "I Hate World Music," N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 3, 1999, § 2 at 1.

11. Margaret Montoya, e-mail communication (Nov. 10, 1999) (on file with author).

12. In his remarks on the "Media" panel at LatCrit V, Dennis Greene reminded the audience that this is not the first wave of infatuation with Latin music. It was also all the rage during the ballroom dance phase of the 1950s. Panel Presentation, Lat Crit V Conference, Breckenridge, Colorado, May 6, 2000. See also Bender, *supra* note 7, at 741 n.105. On the history of Latin influence on EuroAmerican musical styles, see JOHN STORM ROBERTS, THE LATIN TINGE: THE IMPACT OF LATIN AMERICAN MUSIC ON THE UNITED STATES (2d ed., 1999).

13. Bender, *supra* note 7, at 727 n.27-28.

describes in his article in this symposium issue, depictions of Latino/a performers (by both others and themselves) often invoke the familiar stereotype of the “hot Latin lover”—an erotic, promiscuous, sexually voracious figure that has long been a staple of the Anglo/a imagination.¹⁴ Such stereotypical images are disturbing for a number of reasons. At the most obvious level, they construct Latin men as animalistic (emphasizing, as they do, physicality over intellect) and Latin women as “bad girls” (thereby, among other things, potentially hampering their ability to receive vindication for rape and sexual harassment¹⁵). In addition, depictions of Latino/a recording artists as imbued with “hot Latin rhythm,” like the notion that African Americans are naturally good at basketball,¹⁶ minimize the hard work that goes into Latin recordings and performances, treating those performers’ successes as merely the natural result of innate traits.

It is important to note that this exoticization takes place simultaneously with an orientalization of Latin artists, as Bender so thoroughly and convincingly describes.¹⁷ That is, these performers are not only constructed as hypersexual, but are also constructed as “not us.” Despite the fact that many are United States citizens, they are depicted as Spanish-speaking foreigners, their music an alien art form that is invading North American soil.¹⁸ By denying their “American”-ness, media representations of Latin artists emphasize their different-ness, keeping them at a distance by treating them as an exotic “other.”

This emphasis on the performers’ foreign-ness also constructs the United States in general, and North American pop music in particular, as

14. *Id.*, at 736-37 n.74-82. This stereotype is deeply ironic, of course, given the fact that many Latinos/as view European-Americans as promiscuous. I am indebted to Pedro Malavet for this point.

15. Those charged with rape and sexual harassment often defend by claiming that the victim had actually consented to the encounter. Such defenses are more believable if the decision maker holds stereotypical preconceptions of the victim as hypersexual or “loose.” See generally, GARY D. LAFREE, RAPE AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE: THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUAL ASSAULT 100, 201-08, 217-18, 224-25 (1989).

16. See Bill Hendrick, *Racial Stereotypes Found in Sports Articles*, THE ATLANTA CONSTITUTION, Aug. 13, 1995, at A15 (reporting research results that found “African-American athletes were often described as having ‘natural’ or ‘innate’ abilities, but the skills of whites who play similar positions were attributed to ‘hard work,’ patience and intelligence.”).

17. Bender, *supra* note 7, at 734-35 n.66-72.

18. Terminology can be problematic here. I try to avoid using the term “America” unmodified, as Central and South America are part of the Americas, too. When referring to mainstream United States culture, I will use “EuroAmerican” or “North American.” Unfortunately, this phrasing not only still retains the “America” problem to some extent (there are European Americans in Argentina, for example), but also conflates the United States and Canada in ways that will not always be ideal. Nevertheless, it seems preferable to reinforcing the illusion that the U.S. is the only “America.”

Returning to the point in the text, one of the many interesting quotes in Bender’s richly documented discussion is this one from Marc Anthony, a native of New York City: “I don’t know what we’re crossing over from or to. We’ve been here all along.” Bender, *supra* note 7, at 735n.69.

white. By emphasizing the “invasion” or “crossing over” of Latin music to “American” shores,¹⁹ media coverage of Latin artists rhetorically constructs those shores as white and EuroAmerican. The implicit message is that pop music up to this point has been exclusively white (or perhaps white and African American),²⁰ and that the infusion of Latin influence is something new. This message obscures not only the fact that many of the Latin artists are themselves United States citizens²¹ but also the many contributions that Latin musicians and forms have made to traditional “American” pop.²²

Media representations of Latino/a cultural productions are troubling not only in this tendency to exoticize and orientalize Latin artists, but also in the way that they often conflate pre-packaged, (North) Americanized versions of Latin culture with that culture itself. Just as tacos and tortilla chips have come to represent Mexican cuisine to many non-Latino/a Americans, the danger is that Ricky Martin will come to represent Latin music. Now, I do not want to be misunderstood as saying that there is some pure, superior, “true” version of Latin music to which people should be listening. What I object to is the metonymic reduction of the rich quilt of *salsa*, *merengue*, *cumbia*, *samba*, *son*, *lambada*, *mambo*, *bolero*, and many other Latin musical forms that I have yet to learn, to “Livin’ La Vida Loca.”²³ Such reductionist, monochromatic visions of Latin culture diminish its richness, thereby contributing both to its overall devaluation and to a general lack of awareness of its contributions to the mainstream culture.

But why, some might ask, is it a bad thing for European Americans to need to be introduced to whitewashed versions of other societies’ cultural productions in order to appreciate them? At least they are evincing an interest in music and food that are different from their own; at least they are trying something new. Surely their increasing openness to Latin

19. Bender, *supra* note 7, at 735 n. 69-71.

20. Thus, Bender relates Marc Anthony’s “lament that when he asks for his Spanish language albums in Times Square record stores, they direct him to the international section in the back of the store: ‘I recorded it on 47th Street! How can you get more local than that?’” *Id.* at 735 n. 68.. In fact, this New York native’s music is just as “American” as, say, John Denver’s. Moreover, the Spanish language is arguably as American as English. See JUAN GONZALEZ, *HARVEST OF EMPIRE* 211-12 (2000) (Spanish has always been an indigenous language to the U.S.). But acknowledging these facts is inconsistent with the notion that this is a white nation.

21. Bender, *supra* note 7, at 729n.42.

22. Carlos Santana’s return to prominence on the crest of the Latin music wave has highlighted the Latin roots of his music. But I still remember the surprise I felt a few years ago when I realized how many of his songs – and numerous other rock classics – used the *chachachá*-styled rhythm (e.g., *Oye Como Va*, *Black Magic Woman*). On the Latin influences on American music, see generally ROBERTS, *supra* note 12. For further discussion of the disadvantages of constructing “America” as white, see *infra* text accompanying note 57.

23. In this context, Bender’s discussion of the media’s production of a “pan-Latino/a” identity – their blurring of the cultural differences among Latino/a artists – is particularly relevant. Bender, *supra* note 7, Part II.B.

music has the potential for producing a parallel openness to Latinos/as, a new-found respect for other ethnic groups. This set of arguments raises, however, a very dangerous aspect of the mainstream society's tendency to "Americanize" unfamiliar cultural forms. The danger is that, by conflating a one-dimensional, homogenized representation of a culture's music or food with its *actual* music or food, white Americans will convince themselves that they have actually understood and appreciated some aspect of that culture. I will discuss this point further in Part IV.²⁴

B. *Appreciation: Ricky Martin as Cultural Ambassador?*

The fact that one can make the case for seeing the Anglo/a infatuation with Latin music as a fleeting and even harmful appropriation of Latino/a cultural productions does not, however, mean that such interest is purely negative. It clearly brings economic empowerment to individual performers (and often their employees and immediate families); draws positive attention to the musical artistry of Latinos/as, thereby validating their culture and its members; and provides role models for Latino/a youth.²⁵ The Anglo/a fascination with Latin music and dance can also, I would argue, work a fundamental transformation in some individuals—a transformation which effects important, although admittedly incremental, social movement towards true multicultural understanding and appreciation.

To develop this latter point more fully, it is necessary to recount a bit of my own personal history with and experience of Latin music. The irony of the discussion just presented was surely not lost on many readers. For I am, of course, one of those "white Americans" whom I have just indicted for having appropriated, commodified, and generally misunderstood Latin music. Yet my felt experience of *salsa* has been broadening, educational, even (dare I say) profound. I believe that the experiences of going to Latin nightclubs, talking with the people there,²⁶ listening to the music, and dancing have taught me many things, and left me fundamentally changed. If I am correct in that belief, then, at the individual level as well as on the economic and cultural fronts, the Latin music craze is arguably in some ways a good thing.

It is embarrassing, but nevertheless important, to admit some of the ignorance from which I suffered before my encounter with Latin music. Before beginning to dance *salsa*, I did not fully appreciate the fact that many Latinos/as are also "black"—that they are phenotypically African American and share African ancestry. The reason I say I did not "fully appreciate" this fact is that, while I certainly must have "known" (or at

24. See *infra* text accompanying notes 63-67.

25. Bender, *supra* note 7, at n.129, and accompanying text.

26. The fact that I speak Spanish (with what I can best describe as "rusty fluency") has meant that I can chat with virtually everyone I meet in the nightclubs.

least heard at some point) that slavery had existed in the Caribbean, this knowledge had not been fully integrated into my expectations and assumptions about the world. In other words, when I first saw Black people in the clubs, I would (unconsciously) assume they were African American, and would then be surprised when I learned they were from the Dominican Republic, Brazil, Cuba, Puerto Rico, etc. I had always thought of Latinos/as as lighter-skinned than that. Learning about the brown/black tensions in some of those other countries—as well as about the differences among the various countries—also helped me to appreciate the complex racial and ethnic politics of our own diverse population, and to avoid the pan-Latino image that Bender describes.²⁷

I also gained political knowledge from dancing *salsa*; the most important fact I learned was that Mexico was ruled by a very repressive, one-party system that had been in place for over 70 years.²⁸ Again, let me reiterate—the fact that I did not know this is both hugely embarrassing and extremely important. It is incredible that an educated, daily-newspaper-reading citizen of the United States would be unaware that the government of our immediate neighbor to the south, the government that agreed to open its borders to North American corporate power by signing NAFTA and GATT,²⁹ was not a democracy. Nevertheless, I strongly suspect that most Anglo/a Americans suffer from similar knowledge gaps. Moreover, this ignorance is, in some sense, understandable, for the mainstream media virtually never mentioned Mexico's dictatorship and our government virtually never condemned it.³⁰

Salsa was also, for me, an introduction to the immigrant world, and (most importantly) put a human face on “the immigrant condition.” I met a Peruvian attorney who left his country because of political repression and worked at Taco Bell, a Mexican MBA who built window blinds in a Denver factory because he could not find a job at home, an Ecuadorian

27. See *supra* note 23.

28. On Sunday, July 2, the conservative oppositional candidate for the Mexican presidency, Vicente Fox, defeated the candidate of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which had maintained its seven-decade lock on the office through electoral fraud, repression of dissent, and limitations on press freedom. See Terry L. McCoy, *Mexico's Crisis is Rooted in a Flawed Political System*, ST. PETERSBURG TIMES, Feb. 17, 1995, at A12; *World News Tonight: Vicente Fox Wins Mexican Presidential Election* (ABC television broadcast, July 3, 2000).

29. For one argument about how such accords disadvantage Mexico, see George A. Martinez, *Dispute Resolution and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hildago: Parallels and Possible Lessons for Dispute Resolution Under NAFTA*, 5 SW. J. L. & TRADE AM. 147 (1998) (criticizing NAFTA).

30. I asked a research assistant to review all of the articles on Mexico in the *New York Times* over a twelve-month period. (I purposely did not include coverage of the recent elections, when, for the first time in recent memory, the likely dramatic result caused Mexico's political system to receive substantial attention in the press.) Her search produced 100 articles, 44 of which also mentioned the word “government.” Reading those 44 articles, she found only three in which the reporter mentioned the undemocratic nature of Mexico's political system and none in which any U.S. government official commented on that undemocratic system.

athlete who supports himself by running in international races and trains in Boulder half the year. I discovered that Mexico suffers serious unemployment and underemployment,³¹ and that, as a result, millions of Mexicans live and work here in the U.S.³² I learned how much it costs to get someone to run you across the border from Mexico and saw the fear that INS raids on local workplaces—or even a simple traffic stop, for that matter—can instill in an undocumented worker. I heard stories of such extreme bureaucratic ineptitude at the INS that it was hard not to see such ineptitude as conscious harassment. I met people who hated it here and went home to Mexico, only to return because there was simply no work to be found there. I also experienced, for the first time in my life, rude and unfair treatment by the police³³—treatment that occurred as I was leaving a Latin nightclub, and therefore, I believe, came from an officer who probably thought I was Latina.

The music and dancing themselves were also educational, and even transformative, for me. Just as many forms of dance (plus some sports and other outdoor activities) do for other people, *salsa* provided me with an important escape from my intensely cerebral, academic world. But perhaps more than some of those other activities, Latin dance also provided a new form of nonverbal human connection.³⁴ Perhaps partly because *salsa* is danced in couples who hold onto each other, in order to dance it effectively, one has to be intensely *aware* of one's partner and sensitive to slight physical movements in which he or she engages. One also often interacts with the partner on a personal level, as each responds to little miscommunications or missteps—or particularly great moves—one or the other makes. Dancing *salsa* is, in short, a *cooperative* undertaking, and successfully executing a series of moves is not only exhilarating but also often creates a sense of human connection and warmth. That nonverbal sense of connection, I want to suggest, is often missing from the competitive, hyperintellectual, and coolly cordial style

31. Twenty seven percent of the Mexican population is below the poverty line, The World Factbook 2000, <http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/mx.html>, and inflation in the country is at nine percent (although it was fifteen percent when this essay was first drafted). *Id.* The per capita gross domestic product in Mexico is \$9,100, as compared to \$36,200 in the U.S. *Id.* Thus, a Mexican worker can much more successfully support his or her family by working here and sending a big chunk of the money home.

32. Approximately seven million Mexican immigrants, or eight percent of the Mexican population, currently reside in the United States. About a third of them are undocumented. *Going North: Immigrants in the U.S.*, THE GUARDIAN, Aug. 26, 2000.

33. White privilege is alive and well.

34. It is very unnerving to try to write about this aspect of *salsa*, for I fear that most who have not experienced this different way of relating will simply dismiss what I have to say as either New Age flakiness or orientaling exoticization.

of interpersonal interaction that characterizes many (Anglo/a) professionals' lives.³⁵

Salsa not only provides an alternative, nonverbal foundation for human connection, but also offers opportunities to sever sensuality from sexuality, allowing people to experience their sensual selves in interactions free of sexual content or implications. Latin dance is, of course, very sexy. All those moving hips, all that touching and turning. But the *interaction* between two dancers need not necessarily be about *sex* at all, and wiggling one's hips is not necessarily interpreted as a come-on. There are, of course, bounds of propriety about what one does and does not do, and the respectful dancer does not cross them. But there definitely can, at times, be a disjunction between the sexy and the sexual that allows people to experience a sensual connection with another person without fearing or suggesting further sexual interaction. I would argue that the richer palette of human connection provided by this disjunction is a good thing.

In this regard, I find Patricia Williams' comment about Anglo/a reactions to the blues particularly relevant. Williams indicts white society for reducing the blues to a "mood," abstracting it out of the cultural context that generated it and thereby losing the political and human content that makes it profound.³⁶ I would suggest that, similarly, Anglo/a depictions of and reactions to *salsa* tend to reduce it to a crass form of commercialized sexiness ("hot tamale," "hot Latin rhythms," etc.) that misses the much more complex set of meanings attendant to what Latinos/as call *sabor*.³⁷

35. I first learned the sharp, competitive, humorous style of verbal interaction so common at law school faculty lunch tables and social events when I was an undergraduate student at Yale. After engaging in that form of communication – which I have come to call "witty repartee" – for a half-year or so, I, along with a number of other students in my "entryway" (a vertical dorm floor), began to realize that it was ultimately a very distancing way of relating. Eventually, we all agreed to stop doing it. Unfortunately, I had to revive my old skills when I joined a law faculty. It's unclear to me how much of this style of relating is attributable to race and how much of it is attributable to class. That is, I do not know whether professional Latinos/as communicate in this way, or, if they do, whether they are intentionally assimilating or prefer other styles of relating.

36. Patricia J. Williams, *Alchemical Notes: Reconstructing Ideals from Deconstructed Rights*, 22 HARV. C.R.-C.L.L. REV. 401, 412-13 (1987):

For blacks, describing needs has been a dismal failure as political activity. It has succeeded only as a literary achievement. The history of our need is certainly moving enough to have been called poetry, oratory and epic entertainment but it has never been treated by white institutions as a statement of political priority. Some of our greatest politicians have been forced to become ministers or blues singers. Even white descriptions of 'the blues' tend to remove the day-to-day hunger and hurt from need and abstract it into a mood. And whoever would--how ever to-- legislate against depression? Particularly something as rich, soulful and sonorously productive as black depression.

Id. (citations omitted).

37. Those reactions, as Margaret Montoya has pointed out, abstract the historical and cultural content out of the music as well. Montoya, *supra* note 11 and accompanying text.

Finally, the *salsa* world also offers an interesting alternative model of female attractiveness. It is unnecessary to reiterate here feminist critiques of the fixation on physical attractiveness and reduction of women to their bodies that characterize both EuroAmerican and Latin cultures. What is of interest to me is the challenge to that fixation which Latin dance can implicitly provide (at least to Anglos/as like myself). As a result of years of frequenting Latin clubs, I have found my own notions of sexiness have broadened, so that they now include how someone *moves* rather than just his or her still-photo features. In contrast to (white?) notions of female sexiness that focus principally on physical appearance (with the magazine model—or, depending on your sensibilities, the Playboy centerfold—as the prototype), *salsa* sensibilities³⁸ provide a notion of sexiness that stems as much from how a woman dances as from how she would appear in a magazine ad.³⁹ I find this more dynamic, action-oriented model of female attractiveness a useful contrast to more static, passive standards of beauty.⁴⁰

In acknowledging these positive effects that Latin dance has had on me, I do not mean to minimize or trivialize the serious gender inequalities that characterize Latin societies and communities, or to romanticize Latinos/as by attributing to them an idealized, “natural” sexuality untainted by culture, artifice, or power. My point is simply that dancing *salsa*—like living in an integrated neighborhood or working in an integrated workplace—provides the opportunity for a meaningful and educational cross-cultural experience. Anglo/a interest in Latin dance does not *guarantee* that experience, but makes it a possibility.⁴¹ The Latin music craze opens up viable avenues of valuable multicultural exchange; it

38. By “*salsa* sensibilities” I simply mean impressions that can be gained from dancing *salsa*. I do not mean to equate “*salsa* sensibilities” with “Latino/a sensibilities.” Nor do I mean to suggest that the notion of sexiness I am attempting to describe is more common among Latinos/as than Anglos/as. In fact, the better line to draw here, as opposed to Latino/Anglo, might be dancer/non-dancer.

39. I do not mean here to minimize the patriarchal aspects of Latin cultures, or to trivialize the harm produced by gender hierarchy within Latin communities. See ANA CASTILLO, MASSACRE OF THE DREAMERS 63-84 (1994). But I feel it is also important to point out the benefits that an Anglo can derive from this cultural contrast, especially given the Anglo/a society’s tendency to stigmatize Latin cultures as hyper-patriarchal through their association with “machismo.” GLORIA ANZALDUA, BORDERLANDS/ LA FRONTERA: THE NEW MESTIZA 83 (1987).

40. Anecdotally, I know at least one large white woman who, after having had a very limited social life in the Anglo/a world, felt much more accepted at the Latin clubs – and eventually found a Latin partner. But again, this experience may have more to do with the sensibilities of dancers.

41. Of course, it remains an open question whether and in what way the influx of white patrons into Latin clubs will change the atmosphere in those clubs. One need only consider the “drunken escapism” (Steve Bender’s term) of the Spring Break scene in Mexican resort cities (the extreme end of the continuum, of course) to recognize that Latin dance clubs could, over time, become places where such valuable interactions are much less likely to occur. While I doubt that the Anglo/a influx will ever have such an extreme impact, it could nevertheless significantly change the current “feel” of the Latin nightspots.

has the potential to change individual lives in ways that are clearly beneficial to the project of developing a truly multicultural society.

III. MOVING BEYOND THE BINARIES: WHOSE CULTURE IS IT ANYWAY?

A. *The Inevitability of Both Appropriation and Appreciation*

The preceding discussion of the appropriation/appreciation debate (along with other discussions in this volume) raises a number of related questions. Is it possible for subordinated groups to use media exposure and popular culture to challenge their subordination, or do the commodifying, homogenizing impulses of North American mass media make that project futile? Is it possible to value and promote Latino/a cultural productions without essentializing Latinos/as, or does the identification of a distinctly Latin artistic sensibility inevitably confine and stereotype individuals? Or, to put this second point differently, is it possible to condemn representations of Latino/a culture as inaccurate or orientaling without implicitly constructing a canon of "authentic" Latin music or art that is just as problematic as the stereotype one is challenging?

The appropriation/appreciation debate, in short, raises issues of cultural identity and cultural membership. All identity groups struggle with how to define the group, and grapple with the disintegrative implications of intersectionality analysis and postmodernism. All such groups struggle with what Martha Minow has called the "dilemma of difference."⁴² They try to eliminate stigma by valorizing their particular traits, and attempt to protect themselves from supposedly universal white norms by emphasizing that those norms do not apply to them. But in focusing on their difference, they risk re-essentializing the group and erasing differences within it. In a similar vein, the increased attention given to Latin musical artists can both challenge and reinforce stereotypes. It can emphasize their difference in a way that exoticizes and stereotypes, or that valorizes and destigmatizes. It is not possible to pick one of these outcomes as the likely or principal one. There are no pat answers here.

Thus, I would argue that the answer to each question posed above is "both/and" (both "yes" and "no"). Cultural productions always contain both liberatory and subordinating possibilities. Like all other sites of social interaction, they provide opportunities for resistance to dominant

42. Martha Minow, *Learning to Live with the Dilemma of Difference: Bilingual and Special Education*, 48 L. & CONTEMP. PROBS. 157,159 (1985), cited in, Lucinda M. Finley, *Transcending Equality Theory: A Way Out of the Maternity and the Workplace Debate*, 86 COLUM. L. REV. 1118, 1153 (1986) ("[T]he recognition of difference can serve as a justification for existing inequities. On the other hand, to hide the fact of difference...means being treated according to a 'faulty neutrality,' or a standard that, because it was not created with the difference in mind, advances the dominant group to the detriment of those who are not, in fact, like it.") (cites omitted).

power structures but also present the risk of reinforcing those very structures. Thus, the important question is not whether it is good or bad that the Anglo/a society again has become interested in Latin music. Rather, the question is how subordinated groups take advantage of that interest to reinforce its good sides and critique its down sides,⁴³ and how Anglos/as react to that critique.⁴⁴ Those factors will determine where, between the two unlikely ends of the continuum—savior and disaster—the “Latin music craze” will fall.

B. *Problematizing the Notion of Culture*

But there are a number of reasons to move beyond the appropriation/appreciation debate besides the fact that it is unsatisfying and ultimately irresolvable. That debate also implicitly relies upon a problematic conceptualization of what a “culture” is that is more harmful than helpful. As the discussion above makes clear, the notion of “appropriation” contains within it the idea that there is a legitimate possessor of a cultural production and an illegitimate one. That is, it assumes that there are, on the one hand, certain people (assumedly, the members of the particular group in question) who know what the production means and should be its principal beneficiaries (in both economic and non-economic terms), and, on the other hand, certain people (non-members) who do not necessarily understand its meaning and should not be its principal beneficiaries. In other words, the appropriation/appreciation binary raises questions of cultural membership and cultural ownership. Who “owns” Latin culture and Latin cultural productions? Against whose reality should media interpretations of those productions be measured? Or, to apply the question to the explicit context of this article: how can an Anglo/a possibly have the chutzpah to imply that she knows the “right” way to interpret or appreciate Latin music? My ultimate answer to these questions will be to problematize and challenge the unitary vision of culture that I believe they presume. But before I turn to that critique, let me first engage the last, and obviously most charged, of the questions I have posed.

1. Who “Owns” Cultural Productions?

As I mentioned above,⁴⁵ my initial reaction to the influx of Anglos/as into the Latin dance nightclubs in Denver was rather negative. I saw their interest in *salsa* as largely uninformed, exoticizing, and inva-

43. For instance, Marc Anthony has been very critical of media representations of him. He has noted the irony in a Newyorican like himself being called a “hot tamale” and has objected that he is not part of the “Latin music explosion,” but rather is just an American pop artist. Bender, *supra* note 7, at n.55 and accompanying text.

44. I find Gayatri Spivak’s notion of “strategic essentialism” helpful here. Identity groups can deploy essentializing images of their groups when it is useful to do so without necessarily forgetting that things are really much more complicated. GAYATRI SPIVAK, *IN OTHER WORLDS: ESSAYS IN CULTURAL POLITICS* 205-06 (1987).

45. See *supra* Part I.

sive. I resented their intrusion into this multicultural enclave I had found in my mostly white world. I realized, of course, that this was a rather problematic attitude, since I myself was arguably just such an interloper. But I distinguished myself from the recent wave of Anglo/a immigrants into the Latin scene, reasoning that since I had come in ahead of the curve my interest was more genuine: I not only appreciated Latin music; I *understood* it.

I realized even then, as I do now, that this was a very problematic assumption. The potential for hubris in such an attitude is undeniable, the risk of re-colonization great. I struggle with whether this way of looking at the situation is legitimate, and I have discussed these ideas with many people, as well as interrogated them by myself for many hours. In feeling this sense of possessiveness about Latin music and dance, am I embodying the very act of appropriation that I propose to condemn in others? Am I fooling myself in thinking that I have any more ability to understand this music than any other Anglo/a? Am I trying to possess this cultural production like a cute doll—as my special little something that I do not want to share with other whites? Is my behavior any different from (although clearly on a much smaller scale than) the efforts of colonial powers to protect “their” lands from other white aggressors? And, fundamentally, how does one distinguish the exhilaration of true multicultural exchange and personal growth through real human connection from the exhilaration of acquisitive possession and conquest?

In struggling with these questions, I have found it instructive to think about a hypothetical Latina who, in contrast to myself, does not dance *salsa* or speak Spanish.⁴⁶ Is *salsa* nevertheless “her” music? Is it appropriate for her to feel possessive about Latin dance or the Spanish language? Is it legitimate for her to be angered by “English only” policies or posters advertising “hot” Latin music? It seems to me that the answers to these questions clearly are (depending, of course, on the particular person) yes, yes, and yes.⁴⁷

A number of reasons explain why it seems that such an individual could rightfully feel proprietary about Latino/a cultural productions and resentful of their misuse by Anglos/as. First of all, she might have a vivid sense of the role of Latin music and dance, as well as of the Spanish language, in her culture.⁴⁸ While she does not dance *salsa* or speak Spanish, her parents might have, and she might appreciate the role that the music or language played in their lives. Similarly, she might have relatives who

46. I am indebted to Lisa Iglesias for posing the question in this way.

47. To put this differently, litmus tests do not work in either direction. Just as speaking Spanish and dancing *salsa* do not guarantee an absence of colonialism in my attitudes or behavior, so a Latina's inability to do either does not delegitimize her identification with Latinos/as.

48. I recognize that *salsa* is not danced in all Latin American societies, but some form of dance seems to be important in each of them.

spoke only Spanish, or she might have heard stories about music and dance that make them part of her cultural identity. And of course, she is affected by stereotypes of Latinas that Anglo/a language policies and Anglo/a (mis)representations of Latin music help reproduce, even if she cannot roll her “r”s or dance a lick.

This discussion suggests that the answer to the question about “ownership” of cultural productions (and hence, the question of group membership as well) is substantive and/or political—that it turns on the particular life experiences of the individual, and on the particular substantive relationships to such productions generated by those experiences. In this sense, then, my feeling of possessiveness towards Latin music may be just as legitimate as that of the Latina who does not dance, and for the same reason. The legitimacy of my reaction turns on the substantive attitudes that I have towards Latin music, artists, cultures, and people, rather than on whether I can claim any ethnic or racial identity to validate it.^{49,50} Just as there can be male feminists, so there can be white antiracists—and white *salseras*. There can also, of course, be white “LatCritters.”⁵¹

2. Rejecting the Notion of a Pure, Homogeneous, Static Culture

The fact that the appropriation/appreciation binary suggests a formalistic and biological definition of group membership, rather than a substantive and political one, is not the only thing that makes it unhelpful. The appropriation/appreciation binary also implicitly relies upon a notion of culture that creates false conflicts between identity groups,

49. This is not to deny that there are likely to be some problematic aspects of my own reaction – that there is probably a kernel of truth in the questions I posed to myself above – which I must continue to interrogate.

50. In a similar argument, Deborah Post, *supra* note 9, at 141, argues that appropriation that symbolically inverts the status quo is good, and appropriation that supports the status quo is bad. Although I hesitate to use that precise definition, I nevertheless believe that Post’s position is consistent with my notion that political or substantive commitments define group membership for the purpose of assessing the legitimacy of a critique such as the critique of Anglo/a appropriation of Latin music that I present here.

Post presents her views in the context of a discussion of people she calls “wiggers” – whites who identify as African American. I must say that, while I found her discussion illuminating, I find the term (which is not hers, I realize), with its close resemblance to the extremely offensive racial epithet, a rather distasteful one to use. (But then, that may be the point. The term may mean to subject whites both to the overt racism that Blacks experience through the use of such a racial epithet and to the sense of familial connection that comes from their appropriation of that term for use amongst themselves.)

51. “LatCritters” is a term coined by Celina Romany at the LatCrit IV annual conference, to describe those who write LatCrit theory and engage in LatCrit praxis. As my comment in the text suggests, the issues raised by current media representations of Latin music and dance implicate broader questions of cultural ownership, identity, and interaction. Thus, the same questions I have raised about my engagement with Latin dance can also be raised about Anglo/a participation in the LatCrit enterprise. In fact, it is that parallel which helped me to clarify my thinking about my relationship to *salsa*, and reaffirmed my conviction that we must reject essentialized and formalistic definitions of identity in favor of political and substantive ones.

erases Latino/a contributions to Anglo/a culture, and essentializes identity.

To suggest that Anglo/a culture appropriates Latino/a cultural productions is to construct Latino and Anglo/a cultures as discrete and separate entities, with fixed and impermeable boundaries. It is also to construct each culture as internally consistent and invariable (in short, homogeneous), and as static and unchanging. But none of these images accurately captures either culture.⁵² To return to music as an example, neither Latin music nor EuroAmerican pop music⁵³ is a pure and unadulterated expression of its particular group's "culture." Rather, the history of both bodies of music is replete with instances of cross-cultural borrowing.⁵⁴

Thus, as I noted above,⁵⁵ to treat mainstream (white) North American pop music as separate and distinct from Latin music is to construct the former as pure and white, thereby erasing the Latin influences upon it. In the same way that placing Marc Anthony's CDs in the "world music" section of the music store erases his North American citizenry and constructs the United States as white (and English-speaking),⁵⁶ indicting the Anglo/a society for appropriating Latin music implies that, before the act of appropriation, mainstream North American music was purely the product of white musicians.

Posing the issue as one of appropriation versus appreciation thus constructs North American culture as homogeneous. To suggest that white "America" should not appropriate (or should be careful in how it appropriates) Latin musical forms is to suggest that those forms have not always been a part of the white musical scene in the United States. Rather than recognizing the multiple strains of influence within supposedly "white" North American music, the appropriation argument instead sets up a dichotomy between "American" music, which is assumed to be white, and "Latin" music, which in turn is assumed to be produced by non-white South- or Central-Americans. It reinforces, in other words, the

52. See JAMES CLIFFORD, *THE PREDICAMENT OF CULTURE: 20th CENTURY ETHNOGRAPHY, LITERATURE, & ART* 92 (1988); RENATO ROSALDO, *CULTURE & TRUTH: THE REMAKING OF SOCIAL ANALYSIS* 26 (1989).

53. By "EuroAmerican pop music," I mean pop music that white Americans listen to and that is usually thought of as having been produced by white artists.

54. ROBERTS, *supra* note 12. Such borrowings have also, of course, occurred between Latinos/as and African Americans, *id.* at 40, and between African Americans and European Americans. See e.g. John Philips, *The African Heritage of White America*, in, *AFRICANISMS IN AMERICAN CULTURE* (J. Holloway ed., 1990).

55. See *supra* Part I.

56. See *supra* note 20.

“othering” of Latin American artists and, hence, of Latinos/as in general.⁵⁷

Moreover, the idea that cultures are homogeneous and distinct in turn lends support to the notion that identity groups’ interests often conflict, and that there are inevitable tensions within a progressive position committed to gender, sexual, racial and ethnic equality. Leti Volpp, in her excellent work on the cultural defense,⁵⁸ vividly illustrates the flaws in such an analysis. Volpp describes how cultural defense cases are often seen as requiring a choice between protecting women from abuse or forced marriage and protecting patriarchal cultures from ethnocentric imposition of “American” values. In short, such cases seem to pose a conflict between feminism and multiculturalism. Volpp criticizes this understanding, however, pointing out that it reduces the allegedly sexist “culture” at issue to its male members, rendering invisible women of that culture who oppose patriarchal practices within it. It simultaneously, she contends, constructs United States culture as egalitarian, ignoring the numerous patriarchal practices within our own society.⁵⁹ To the extent that the appropriation/appreciation binary reinforces the notion that cultures are homogeneous, I suggest, it facilitates the same type of thinking that Volpp indicts.

Finally, the focus on the appropriation/appreciation binary also tends to reinforce a view of cultures as static and unchanging. In so doing, it misses the extent to which culture is always and ever being *negotiated*, just as identity is.⁶⁰ A culture is not a static, concrete *thing*, but rather a living and changing set of practices and interactions—in short, a process. Like any particular social practice, a culture is a site of political struggle—over both material resources and rhetorical meaning-making. It is not so much something that a group *possesses*, but rather something that it *performs*.⁶¹ In this sense, appropriation is always occurring, and it

57. Deborah Post has argued that the long history of intra-cultural borrowing suggests that appropriation is neither new nor inherently problematic. In an interesting, though somewhat different, argument from the one I make here, she contends that, just as Latinos/as have been drawing on Anglo/a culture for years (becoming culturally bilingual in a way that actually helps them to challenge white power), so they should not be surprised (or necessarily resentful) when North American actors make use of Latin cultures. Post, *supra* note 9, at 136–40.

58. Leti Volpp, *Blaming Culture for Bad Behavior*, 12 *YALE J. L. & HUMAN.* 89, 90 (2000); see also Leti Volpp, *(Mis)Identifying Culture: Asian Women and the “Cultural Defense,”* 17 *HARV. WOMEN’S L.J.* 57 (1993).

59. Volpp, *Blaming Culture for Bad Behavior*, *supra* note 58, at 104, 111.

60. Cf. Devon W. Carbado & Mitu Gulati, *Working Identity*, 85 *CORNELL L. REV.* 1259, 1278 (2000) (discussing how racial identity at work is performed, as part of a strategy – both conscious and unconscious – for responding to racial stereotypes held by employers and coworkers).

61. See, HOMI K. BHABA, *THE LOCATION OF CULTURE* (1994); JUDITH P. BUTLER, *GENDER TROUBLE: FEMINISM AND THE SUBVERSION OF IDENTITY* (10th ed. 1999); BUTLER, *supra* note 9.

is the *nature* of the particular appropriation, what generates it and what it leads to, that matters.⁶²

The Latin music craze creates opportunities for social transformation and retrenchment, for exploitation and resistance. It constitutes yet another social interaction through which groups negotiate their relationships to one another—and through which they construct their own identities. The important thing is not to label it categorically good or bad, but to engage with it, to participate in it, to write about it.

IV. WHY I HATE PLURALISM: EUROAMERICAN LIP-SERVICE TO CULTURAL TOLERANCE

Mainstream United States society prides itself on its cultural eclecticism and cosmopolitanism. We do not have a national cuisine, it is often said; instead, we eat a wide variety of other cultures' foods: Italian, Chinese, French, Japanese—even Ethiopian, Vietnamese, Thai, Peruvian. We are increasingly eclectic in our holidays as well, with whites going to Kwanzaa celebrations, Cinco de Mayo festivals, Brazilian Carnival parties, and so on. Recent years have seen a move away from the assimilationist melting pot ideology towards the notion that we can and should all live peacefully together, appreciating each other's differences.⁶³ This is a noble ideal, but one that is too often oversimplified—as if all that we need to do to overcome the problems of inequality in this society is to like each other's food and music. Like the North American tendency to reduce discrimination to individual bad acts, the new pluralism implicitly attributes the problems of inequality in this society to individual intolerance, and suggests that the solution lies in changing attitudes, rather than in redistributing wealth and power.

I worry that the turn to world music in general, and the Latin music craze in particular, encourage this disturbing tendency. To make this point differently, it is not enough to examine how the Latin music craze constructs Latinos and Latinas—to look at the positive and negative images of them that it creates. It is important as well to look at the cultural capital that it produces for the dominant white society—at how it constructs Anglos/as.⁶⁴ As I discussed above, the versions of Latino/a cultural productions that tend to gain entry into the mainstream (white) “American” consciousness are often the more whitewashed ones. The

62. Cf. Post, *supra* note 9, at 141.

63. I recognize that not all segments of U.S. society have changed their ideas in this way. Many people still believe, for example, that immigrants should assimilate, dropping their native languages and adopting “American” practices and tastes. Nevertheless, those who see themselves as more politically liberal and enlightened have rejected such attitudes. It is to this latter group that I intend to address this discussion.

64. See EDWARD SAID, CULTURE AND IMPERIALISM (1993).

danger, then, is that European Americans' appreciation of such productions will lead them to conclude that they have fundamentally changed their ideas and attitudes about cultures with which those works are associated. Confusion of the whitewashed representation with the original (i.e., with the full complement of cultural productions of a particular society) reinforces the conceit that the United States is a uniquely pluralistic and inclusive country. The practice of producing and consuming "Americanized" cultural productions constructs the dominant white society as uniquely tolerant of difference.⁶⁵

Thus, the recent fascination with Latin dance not only puts dollars in the pockets of white recording companies and reproduces stereotypical images of Latin music and musicians. It also reinforces a self-congratulatory image of the national culture that is widely held in the United States—an image that, by constructing EuroAmerican society as open-minded, pluralistic, and tolerant of diversity, obscures the structural and distributive inequalities (as well as the ignorant and intolerant treatment) that mark the lived realities of many racial minorities in the United States, and that color the country's interactions with other nations as well.

Some readers might perceive an apparent inconsistency in the discussion that I have presented thus far. On the one hand, I seem to be indicting popular representations that construct Latin musicians as different, as other, when in fact they are often United States citizens and have always contributed to North American music. On the other hand, I seem to be saying that popular representations tend to "Americanize" Latin music, and hence to minimize its uniqueness, richness, and value. Nevertheless, I would argue that these positions are not inconsistent, but rather accurately describe the complex and contradictory nature of mainstream North American cultural identity and ideology.

As the discussion in the preceding section suggests, EuroAmerica needs people of color in general and Latinos/as in particular to define itself. National cultural identities, like individual and group identities within particular societies, are relationally constructed.⁶⁶ EuroAmerican society defines itself to itself by what it is not; it is the contrast between

65. In so doing, it also reduces the differences between cultures to the differences between tortilla chips and potato chips, thereby suggesting that the wide gulf between EuroAmerican culture and other cultures is in fact merely a crack. This minimizing of differences in turn facilitates the white society's tendency to confuse its own particular cultural traits with the universal human condition, for it is the invisibility of differences that leads powerful groups to misconceive their particular perspective as an objective or universal one.

66. PATRICIA HILL COLLINS, *BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT* 68 (1990) (regarding group identities); CHARLES PIOT, *REMOТЕLY GLOBAL: VILLAGE MODERNITY IN WEST AFRICA* 17-19 (1999) (regarding individuals); SAID, *supra* note 64 (regarding cultural identities); Nancy Ehrenreich, *The Colonization of the Womb*, 43 *DUKE L.J.* 492, 581-82 (1993) (regarding group identities).

ourselves and other cultures that confirms our own self-perception. Thus, it is crucial for EuroAmerican self-identity that there continue to be cultural “others”—and that those “others” continue to be defined as different, and inferior, to “us.” At the same time, white “American” society’s self-perception simultaneously requires that it see itself as pluralistic, inclusive, and uniquely tolerant of cultural diversity.

I would suggest that the paradoxical messages conveyed by media representations of Latin music, which simultaneously imply that it is very different and yet that it has been understood and accepted by the EuroAmerican public, ingeniously negotiate this complex set of cultural needs. Whitewashing the music that is labeled as Latin makes it easier for European Americans to accept it; constructing it as foreign and other reinforces their belief that, in so doing, they are fully appreciating and tolerantly accepting a very different and inferior culture from their own. These complex messages reinforce American exceptionalism (the idea that the United States is different and better) at the same time as they reinforce American pluralism (the idea that the United States doesn’t think of itself as different and better). It is no wonder this ideology remains so opaque—and so powerful.⁶⁷

V. CONCLUSION

The different parts of this essay are in tension in another way as well. The initial discussion of the appropriation/appreciation debate implicitly assumes that it is meaningful to talk about cultural ownership and group identity, while the subsequent discussion of intracultural diversity and cross-cultural borrowing challenges the notion of discrete, identifiable cultures and impermeable cultural boundaries. Yet, again, I would suggest that these tensions are inevitable, and hence unavoidable. Just as the notion of identity is both problematic and useful, so is the notion of culture. It is appropriate to assume *both* that cultures have coherent identities *and* that they are overlapping and fraught with internal conflict.

Thus, in writing this essay, I have sought to avoid reifying and universalizing either Latino/a cultures or EuroAmerican culture(s), while still acknowledging that differences nevertheless exist between peoples and places. It is crucially important to recognize the diversity *within* in-

67. As this discussion suggests, I think LatCrit scholarship is valuable not only when it points out the material and ideological effect of legal policies on Latinos/as, but also when it explores what those policies say about Anglos/as. That is, legal rules and practices affecting people of color are not simply the product of prejudices or acts of political self-interest by white power-holders. They are also strikes in a rhetorical war in which the foundational components of white identity are being challenged by minority demands for meaningful, not merely superficial, inclusion. Understanding legal policies as desperate attempts to shore up a particular national identity may increase our comprehension of the strong emotions that often attend legal policy debates, as well as the challenges in our attempts to make that identity a reality.

dividual cultures, and the exclusions that are worked when such diversity is ignored. Yet, at the same time, it is equally important to acknowledge the extent to which cultures differ. To conclude that “we are all the same,” that all cultures are really a mishmash of everything (or perhaps variations on the same theme), is to lose the ability to challenge global power structures that disparately disadvantage certain societies (and certain groups within societies).⁶⁸ Just as the category “woman” is a useful heuristic device to use for the limited purpose of strategically challenging gender-based inequalities (recall Spivak’s “strategic essentialism”⁶⁹), so the category “Latino/a” is useful in articulating a critique of worldwide EuroAmerican hegemony. Yet it is also important to remember that such “EuroAmerican” hegemony is *itself* opposed not only by those beyond the borders of the United States but also by some within those borders. In that sense, dancing *salsa* is not simply a purely physical pastime; sometimes it is an act of resistance as well.

68. It also risks a return to invisibility – a return to the (unstated and assumed-to-be-universal) white norm.

69. SPIVAK, *supra* note 44, at 205.

