Dancing Samba in Tight Places

Barbara Browning

1. At its core, improvisation demands an ongoing interaction with shifting tight places, whether created by power relations, social norms, aesthetic traditions, or physical technique. Improvised dance literally involves giving shape to oneself and deciding how to move in relation to an unsteady landscape. (Danielle Goldman, *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*, 146)

De fato, tanto no *jazz* quanto no *samba*, atua de modo especial a síncopa, incitando o ouvinte a preencher o tempo vazio com a marcação corporal — palmas, meneios, balanços, dança. É o corpo que [. . .] falta — no apelo da síncopa [. . .] aquele mesmo que a escravatura procurava violentar e reprimir [. . .] o corpo do negro. (Muniz Sodré, *Samba, o dono do corpo*, 251)

Danielle Goldman’s groundbreaking study of improvisational dance, *I Want to Be Ready*, examines a range of contexts—all of them U.S.-based—in which movers negotiate, in the moment, “tight places.” Goldman takes this term from Houston Baker, who in turn borrowed it from a late nineteenth-century white farmer who observed to Booker T. Washington that in attempting to address simultaneously a mixed audience of Northerners and Southerners, black and white, Washington had got himself “into a tight place” (17). Baker suggests that attending to “tight places”—the social spaces within which power and identity are negotiated—should lead us to a fundamental question: “Who moves? Who doesn’t?” (19). Goldman takes this question very literally. What is it that dance—and specifically improvised dance—can tell us about political restrictions, not only of race, but also of class, gender, sexuality, and aesthetic tradition and time itself?

Muniz Sodré’s now classic essay on the social significance of samba as a musical and choreographic form also invokes constraint in thinking through the political restrictions negotiated through dance. But it is precisely the constriction of those musical places—the momentary ruptures in rhythm—that call on the body to fill the tight space. Sodré, like Goldman, attends to the history of racialized political constraints in analyzing both the musical and choreographic performances that press against their own containment.

Sodré also notes that syncopated and polyrhythmic musical and choreographic forms—characteristic of the African diaspora—resonate with and reactivate other historical moments and social contexts. Even seemingly attenuated versions of the samba (such as bossa nova) that would appear to diminish its political relevance reverberate with that history. That means that even in minimalist performances of samba’s most basic syncopated structure, there’s a lot of repercussion going on.

If you listen carefully to those silences, it can get pretty crowded.

It’s a very tight place.

2.

One of the strangest and most wonderful developments for performance scholars in recent years has been the advent of YouTube. It is difficult to convey the degree to which this forum has shifted the ways in which observers of dance (academics, enthusiasts, practitioners, and even stalkers) access and exchange documented performances.

While many popular dance forms have proliferated on YouTube, there’s a relative dearth of casual documentation of samba, properly speaking. There are instructional and competition videos of ballroom-style “samba” that bear little resemblance to popular versions. There are also tourist videos of folklore shows or party scenes in Rio and Salvador. But there are not a lot of home videos documenting everyday expressions of the form in non-professional spaces. There is of course the famous “Diapered baby, Luis
Otavio, dances samba” clip, which went viral and then appeared on CNN (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QMcoljRODwE). Some Brazilian commentators noted wryly that Luis was actually performing a dance style more properly designated “axé.” Similarly, the primary school teacher in Salvador who appeared momentarily to scandalize the country by performing the “dança todo enfiado” (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eppUVQEyRc4) was not technically dancing the samba, and the YouTube video that rocketed her to infamy didn’t really make an international mark. Then there is a smattering of borderline soft-core videos of “gostosa sambando” or “loirinha mandando ver” that YouTube designates appropriate for viewers 18-and-up (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-BmZQvxWvB8).

Interestingly, the private, domestic samba video as a genre doesn’t begin to approach the ubiquity of Caribbean “winin’” or US “bootyshake” videos. “dawergirl88,” who appears to reside in the US but whose samba is unmistakably Brazilian, did post one video about four years ago which expresses the uncanny combination of intimacy and public display that YouTube affords (www.youtube.com/watch?v=vQy9TCTA2h8). The markedly soft-core clips arrived relatively late in the YouTube game, and they carry with them not only the discomfiting sense of sexual exploitation but also the weirder and more existential melancholy that haunts many “bootyshake” clips. Part of that melancholy, of course, has to do with the “tight places” in which these dances are performed and filmed. That is, they’re literally filmed in physically constraining spaces—small, cluttered living rooms or bedrooms in visibly modest urban apartments—but they also take place in the tightness of a political history in which sexual exploitation was and is inseparable from other forms of exploitation reverberating in the choreographic forms themselves. Of course, they also take place in the extremely tight place of the miniature frame of the YouTube aesthetic—a tiny frame for peering into individual expressivity.

3.

The video artist Dennis Knopf has explored this aesthetic and the role of “bootyshake” clips in the tight place that is YouTube. As one blogger noted about the project,

Knopf hijacks the ubiquitous bootyshake video but removes the dancer by making a version that loops the moment between when the dancer turns on the camera and when he/she comes into the frame. The effect is often the same blaring music but this time it plays to an empty room. By retaining the same title and tags he diverts many of the hits the original would have gotten, giving the video a sort of nick-rolling effect, and thwarting viewers in search of the real booty. From a dance perspective, we’re left to contemplate the intimacy of being allowed into someone’s bedroom without the distraction of the intended act – the bootyshake – an ostentatious display of skill and sexuality. What does Knopf’s video reveal about the similarity between these moments? Between the mini-genre of these videos? About the dancers themselves? Is it a transgression of personal space to amplify unintended focal points? And for myself, why do I feel slightly guilty for watching what was hidden in plain sight? (http://pentacleblogs.org/movetheframe/2010/09/weekly-webdance-98-bootyclipse/)

Indeed, it is a disconcerting maneuver that forces the viewer to confront just how tight these places are.

But “dawergirl88”’s domestic samba has for me a different spatial sense from that represented in the typical “bootyshake” genre, in the “loirinha mandando ver” videos, or, for that matter, in the also discomfiting clip of the “professora fazendo a dança todo enfiado.” “dawergirl88” appears in a tight place, but one has the distinct sense that her improvisational expressivity in that dance is pressing up against its constrictions in precisely the sense that Goldman has suggested: “giving shape to oneself and deciding how to move in relation to an unsteady landscape” (146).

I say this in part out of a sense of recognition. A couple of years ago, I too posted a YouTube video of myself dancing samba in the constrained space of my living room. I’d just returned from the first “silent rave” held in Union Square, near my home here in New York. At the rave, the assembled crowd listened to their own varied playlists on their iPods. My son had taken me along, and I’d listened to samba, dancing enthusiastically by myself in the company of others, all dancing to the beat of different drums. When I got home, I wondered what my own dance had looked like, so I filmed myself, and later put the video online (www.youtube.com/watch?v=X9J-93zi0A). What struck me when I watched it was not, in fact, what it looked like, but what it felt like—which was precisely that overwhelming desire to, in Sodré’s terms, “preencher o tempo vazio com a marcação corporal” (25). Indeed, despite the ostensible “silence” of the iPod, my feet and lungs produced an entirely audible score that repercussed resoundingly in that tiny space.
By tiny space, I mean of course not only my small New York City living room, but also that tiny screen holding the resonances of so much history in that over-determined choreographic form.

Improvised samba, danced in all kinds of tight places—some of which are radically attenuated and displaced—still holds the capacity, if not always realized, to fill and press up against its constraints.

Notes

1 “In fact, in jazz as in samba, syncopation performs a special function, inciting the listener to fill the empty time with an embodied rhythm—clapping, shaking, rocking, dancing. It is the body that [. . .] is missing—in the call of syncopation [. . .] that same body that slavery sought to violate and repress [. . .] the black body.”

2 “Axé” is a style of music and dance associated with the Bahian carnival.

3 “Gostosa sambando” is a difficult-to-translate phrase whose closest approximation in English might be “hottie dancing samba.”

4 “Lorinha mandando ver,” again, has no exact equivalent in English, but might be best rendered as “blonde girl showing how it’s done.”

5 “Professora fazendo a dança todo enfiado” can be rendered as “the professor doing the ‘right up the crack’ dance.”

6 “To fill the empty time with an embodied rhythm.”

Works Cited

