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Dancing Like a Brazilian: Negotiating Authenticity in Australian Samba Performance

The popularisation of Latin American dance genres in societies outside of Latin America has long contributed to the evolution of new styles. This research looks at such a case: the appropriation of Brazilian 'samba' in the context of Australian popular entertainment. Here we see how Australians value 'authenticity,' which is largely defined through signifiers of or proximity to 'Brazilian-ness.' These notions of authenticity are often caught up with ideas of exoticism as Australians package samba into a commercial product. Ultimately, it is samba's location in the commercial industry that drives the appropriation of samba and how it is presented in Australia. This article explores the negotiations that Australian samba practitioners make in producing an 'authentic,' yet financially viable, samba performance, where sacrificing traditions and simulating authenticity is acceptable in the name of popular performance. Lillian Jean Shaddick recently completed a Master of Arts by research with the Theatre and Performance Studies Department at Sydney University. She is interested in studying dance cultures through ethnographic research methods.

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The worst samba show I ever performed in was also my first. As a 21-year-old ballet-trained dancer, I was shocked by the reality of working in the world of commercial entertainment. I had only been training in the Brazilian dance genres *samba*, *axé* and *lambada* for a month when I was offered my first paid gig. It was at a regular venue for the company I worked for, where we were paid a measly \$70 for a 30- to 45-minute performance, consisting of the typical mix of Brazilian dance genres and performed with usually two girls and two guys.¹ That night, there were three girls, with one experienced dancer and two novices, but we were missing a third pair of gold knee-high platform boots, meaning only

two of us could perform the opening samba routines. The experienced dancer insisted we novices go on to practise. We got dressed in a tiny one by four metre curtained-off section of the restaurant by the fire escape stairwell (our glamorous stage door). It was dark and there was no mirror to see how we looked in our outrageously revealing, sparkling armour. The boys had headed out to start the drumming introduction and we had barely enough time to warm up and get focused. Stepping around the curtain to the full restaurant was a near paralysing experience. To get to the dance floor, we had to parade along a narrow aisle of patrons eating their dinner, with their faces at eye-level with our jewelled G-strings. I had never felt so unprepared for a performance, having never rehearsed specifically with this group of performers, having never seen this venue, let alone danced in it, and not even knowing which way to face with the audience surrounding the dance floor. More importantly, though, I knew I couldn't actually samba. By the end of the show I was feeling "pretty rubbish," but the experienced performers didn't seem bothered by my poor performance. The MC (master of ceremonies) said, "you gotta fake it till you make it, Lilly!" This faking went on for a long time, about six months to be exact, before I could dance the samba step correctly and feel good about my performances. I now "fake it" on a regular basis with whatever show I am asked to perform in, be it flamenco, belly dancing or the can-can.

This recollection marks the start of my disappointing introduction to the world of commercial entertainment; a world where one's dance performance is a commercial transaction, designed and altered to satisfy customers. Samba, the Brazilian dance and music genre from Brazil, is one such practice that has become increasingly popular as a form of commercial entertainment in Australia. The research I conducted on the commercial samba scene in Australia reveals the complex negotiations practitioners undertake in commercialising a dance form with strong ties to a national culture. The dancers, choreographers and business owners whom I interviewed, danced with, and watched, were acutely aware of issues of appropriation. They also held pragmatic and industry-driven sentiments about their approach to performing samba. Australian practitioners value 'authentic' samba performance but equally the value of authenticity is caught up with ideas of the exotic. Some practitioners, in accepting their inherently inauthentic practice of samba, emphasise the importance of 'making an effort' by engaging with Brazilian culture more broadly. This is one way they express a respectful engagement with the culture despite the limitations that, they feel, prevent them from presenting samba authentically. This article explores how Australian practitioners negotiate ideas of authenticity in their performance of samba, while keeping up with the demands of producing a commercial product for non-Brazilian spectators to enjoy.

Research notes

I interviewed fifteen dancers, choreographers, business owners and teachers within Australia for this research.² The sample of participants was determined by their location and by the extent of their involvement in samba. I made a particular effort to hear from Brazilian-Australian practitioners because I wanted to interview those who may feel strong cultural ties to samba. Four of the

participants were born and raised in Brazil, and now live in Australia. Their interviews provide a comparative perspective on the relocation of the dance practice to Australia. When I refer to the Australian practice of samba, these Brazilian-Australian practitioners are included in this group, unless I specifically note their differences from non-Brazilian practitioners. The Australian samba scene is largely dominated by non-Brazilians. By this I mean, dancers and practitioners who are neither born nor hold connections to Brazilian culture by way of family or upbringing. In fact, the group of participants I interviewed are a very culturally diverse group. Like the Brazilian-Australians, the non-Brazilians I interviewed do not solely feel cultural ties to Australia and this is reflective of the wider engagement of samba performers in Australia. While I do not mean to disregard their varied backgrounds, I have chosen only to distinguish those who are Brazilian-Australian from those who are non-Brazilian in this study. I have protected the identities of the participants by giving them pseudonyms, but to avoid “whitewashing” this diverse group of practitioners I chose names that were reflective of their cultural origins. These participants were interviewed in person or over the phone from Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland. The interviews were structured by a set of open-ended questions and ran for 30 to 60 minutes. Questions were only varied where participants differed in their involvement in samba, or when new topics or ideas were raised through conversation.

In this article, I describe the Australian performance and commercialisation of Brazilian samba as a form of cultural appropriation as theorised by Richard Rogers. While Rogers recognises the negative implications for groups and individuals subject to appropriation, he also acknowledges that there are varying conditions, perspectives and participants to consider in individual cases. He states that while “[c]ultural appropriation is inescapable, [...] that is not to say all acts of appropriation are equal.”³ I acknowledge that the appropriation of Brazilian culture by Australians for commercial purposes, where the dance and those dancing are exoticised and marketed as a product, reinforces cultural stereotypes. However, I aim to offer a more nuanced examination. Samba practitioners in Australia bring their own, culturally and commercially designed dispositions and tastes to their understanding of what it means to practice samba in this Australian context. Like Ian Maxwell who studied Hip-Hop in the western Suburbs of Sydney during the early 1990s, I am “not interested in adjudicating the relative ‘authenticity’ of an Australian ‘take’ on,” in his case, “Hip Hop” and, in my case, samba.⁴ Like Maxwell, I seek neither to excuse nor justify the practices of the Australian samba scene, nor do I seek to condemn those who practise with no regard to authenticity. Rather, I offer a critical analysis of the negotiations samba practitioners in Australia make in their approach to and understanding of authenticity. This research reveals the ambivalence these practitioners have with defining and valuing what it means to practice samba authentically, focusing as much on their assessment of their engagement as my analytical unpacking of the commercial and historical surroundings of this scene. As Sherril Dodds explains, practitioners of popular dance have “the capacity to negotiate and re-imagine the values they encounter through their dancing bodies.”⁵

The Brazilian context

In comparison with Brazil, the samba scene in Australia is very narrow, in terms of dance, music, and, more significantly, culture. Women in Australia engage with samba as a dance practice in the contexts of leisure activity and business venture, and as a form of casual employment. Furthermore, Australians predominantly dance the style of samba from Rio de Janeiro which is performed by women in carnival parades. These performers are called *passistas*, professional samba dancers who have achieved a particular status in their samba school due to their dedication and skill in the form. In Australia, some dancers have begun to identify their style of samba as ‘*passista* style’ or ‘Rio style.’ When focusing on samba as a dance, the repetition of one particular step is what dancers tend to refer to. This step has its roots in the Afro-Brazilian practice of the *samba de roda*, a social circle in which individuals or couples alternate at entering the circle and dancing. Here one finds the origins of a particular samba footwork to which individuals add their own style, as well as incorporating various other moves. The practice is a creative and expressive outlet that dates back to the hard times suffered by Afro-Brazilians during the era of slavery. After the abolition of slavery in 1888, the practice developed into the various styles of samba, particularly as the Portuguese began to accept Afro-Brazilian cultural practices.⁶

While I learnt the extent to which samba performance in Australia was heavily commercialised, I also learnt that within Brazil and, specifically, Rio de Janeiro, samba has long been used by governments in Brazil to promote tourism and national identity; the dance has been heavily promoted within Brazilian music, film and entertainment as a form of national pride.⁷ Samba soon became, “intrinsically associated with *brasilidade*” (Brazilian-ness), as Charles Perrone and Christopher Dunn explain.⁸ Not only were samba musical compositions paid royalties by law, but *escolas de samba* (samba schools), often comprising individuals from the lower socio-economic neighbourhoods in Rio, received funding for their year-round preparations to participate in carnival parades, provided they abided by governmental regulations and represented government ideals.⁹ Today, the Rio carnival is a multimillion-dollar cultural industry and continues to be the dominant stage for samba music and dance.¹⁰ The carnival dominates the international view of Brazilian culture, heavily promoted as a tourist attraction that celebrates what some scholars would call an imagined racial democracy.¹¹

Despite the extent to which samba is commercialised in the national interests of Brazil, it remains a powerful outlet of expression and a cherished form of spiritual and community bonding for many of those dedicated to its practice. Dancer and scholar Barbara Browning has written an extensive historical, cultural and choreographic analysis of samba and related Brazilian practices that provides an in-depth understanding of samba in the Brazilian context.¹² For many Afro-Brazilians, samba is deeply rooted in Brazil’s history of slavery. It is a symbol of resistance to oppression and a way of coping with the misery oppression creates.

Authentically Brazilian

In the samba scene in Australia, being authentic is associated with ‘Brazilian-ness’: if you are Brazilian, socialise with Brazilians, look like a Brazilian, and/or dance like a Brazilian. For the most part, samba dancers, choreographers, and company owners in Australia are not Brazilian. Rather, the Brazilian presence in samba shows is provided by male percussionists, who accompany the dancers by playing the drums, and also often double as *capoeira* performers.¹³ Many of the participants in my research mentioned how highly they value these male percussionists in the show, commenting on their energy and skill. As Indira, an experienced performer and dance teacher of a variety of genres, said: “The incredible thing now is we have got an entire crew of drummers, the majority of which are straight from Bahia, and there is a very particular vibe that comes from Bahia and an energy as well that is created.” Or, as Palma, a dancer specialising in samba, noticed when that Brazilian energy and skill is missing: “When I was in [my last group] the drummers just did not [...] feel authentic to me at all [...], you kind-of need to have Brazilians [...] because they just naturally have that energy.” Annie Gibson, a samba scholar who danced with the New Orleans-based samba group, Casa Samba, notes that her group leader found that performing with Brazilian performers gave the group a sense of authenticity. Or as Gibson puts it, “allying himself and his group with Brazilian performers has been a way to provide legitimacy to his organization.”¹⁴

In Australia, the presence of Brazilian women in samba is significantly lower. When I asked my research participants about this disproportion, some reasoned that Brazilian women in Australia could not dance in the manner desired for commercial entertainment. That is to say, they are not able to perform set choreography, even though they know how to samba. For example, despite Indira conceding that Brazilians possess a unique performance energy—“it’s easy to find Brazilians that can samba like crazy”—she acknowledged the dominant aesthetic in the Australian scene: “but hard to find those who do chore[ography] too, because, as far as I know, [ours] is a very western appropriation of [samba].” Although Australian dancers may feel it unnecessary, or perhaps too challenging, to have Brazilian women dancing in their show, Brazilians remain highly valued as dancers. Indira’s sentiment of injustice in an Australian samba competition reveals the extent to which one’s samba performance quality is tightly knitted to being Brazilian. She exclaimed that “one incredible girl lost points because she had an issue with her headpiece [and] she was actually Brazilian!” Aline, a Brazilian dancer, teacher and business owner, who initially trained in ballet in Brazil, struggled to find work as a ballet teacher in Australia but was offered work as a samba teacher, even though she had never danced samba before. Being Brazilian proved an asset, but having a dance background in ballet, or as previously indicated, having the ability to perform choreography, may have been just as important.

Other dancers expressed the value they placed on the authenticity of being Brazilian. They understood that, as they had not grown up learning to samba and samba had not been a part of their tradition and culture, they were not and could not be wholly authentic in their performance. Fay, a samba dancer and leader of a

dance group, expressed this sentiment: “Obviously, we don’t grow up with the music. [...] Even though we love it, I must say it’s not our life. [...] We do our best with what we can do.” Having said that, Fay still expressed the positive associations of authenticity about dancers who are Brazilian: “She’s great! She’s an actual Brazilian and she knows the differences in the music.” Brittany, another dance company and studio owner, made positive associations between Brazilian-ness, one’s samba abilities and their authenticity: “[She’s] from Rio and so authentic, so I did a couple of her workshops.” Like Fay, however, Brittany believed that authenticity cannot be fully achieved if one is not Brazilian: “it’s clear [that] if you are not Brazilian [then the samba is] not 100% authentic. I have been [to Brazil] four times to train, and I don’t say I’m a *sambista* or *passista*.”

The question of authenticity extends to the way dancers name themselves as professional samba dancers. In the samba scene in Australia, there has been much tension regarding whether one can call oneself a *sambista* (meaning a musician or dancer that specialises in samba) or a *passista* (a professional samba dancer). The Brazilian terms carry much more kudos than ‘professional samba dancer.’ However, many Australian dancers believe that being Brazilian is a requisite in describing oneself with the Brazilian terms. Conversely, with the recent increase in Australians travelling to Brazil to participate in the Rio carnival parades, some maintain that in achieving placement in a *passista ala* (wing) of a parade one can technically acquire this name. Norman Urquía has recognised similar contestation and negotiation of authenticity in his study of the London salsa scene. He describes dancers as competing to define what is considered authentic, legitimate and correct in their practice of salsa.¹⁵

(Re)producing the exotic

Equally, ‘becoming’ Brazilian—learning to look, dance, and be like a Brazilian—is important in samba scenes outside of Brazil. Juliet McMains, a ballroom dancer with extensive experience in dance-sport, sees this appropriation of ‘Latin-ness’ as a caricature and calls it “brown-face.”¹⁶ She refers to the lathering of fake tan that competitors apply for the Latin dance genres in competitions, and to the characterisation created through their physical performance of the most desirable exotic traits associated with Latin American cultures.¹⁷ Many of the dancers in my study associated stereotypical Latin American physical features with looking authentically Brazilian, which ultimately enhanced the authenticity of one’s performance of samba. Palma confirmed that Brazilian looks were important in the company she worked for, and especially valuable when seeking bookings for shows: “Yea looks [are] like a big thing here [...], like Lani [...] she gets booked so much [...], she’s dark, she’s got a big butt, she’s got really nice curly long hair, and she just looks [Brazilian].” Some dance groups encourage, or even require, the female dancers to tan up—real or fake. As Palma expressed: “we get told we have to get tanned, you can’t go out ‘white’—they won’t pick you.” I heard similar comments from another dancer who revealed that the company she worked for “would never hire blondes.” Physical attributes seem to be important in creating an authentic Brazilian look. “I need my cocoa,” I heard one dance company owner exclaim, where the mix of skin colours or presence of at least one dark skinned dancer creates an illusion of Brazilian authenticity. Or as

Bernadete Beserra's Chicago-based participant explained: "First you must know how to dance! And secondly, I'm looking for people who have some kind of skin pigmentation to blend in easier."¹⁸

Such superficial, stereotypical representations of Brazilian-ness extend beyond physical and visual identification. Many dancers, myself included, have been identified as Brazilian. However, the mistake is easy to make: we are advertised, booked and introduced as Brazilian samba dancers. Some samba shows receive an introduction from an MC: "Make some noise for the beautiful ladies straight from Rio de Janeiro!" or "Are you ready to be taken all the way to Brrraaziil?" I have performed in many shows with an MC who enjoyed making up Latin-sounding names for the dancers as he introduces us at the end of our show: "Give it up for the beautiful Carrmen!" or "Make some noise for the sexy Patrrricia!" Features of the exotic can be imagined when one is labelled as exotic. In the same way that white Anglo-Australian women may be considered exotic in the context of dancing in a Brazilian show in Australia, so too, white upper-middle-class Brazilians who migrate to Australia may be surprised to find they are regarded in Australia as not white.¹⁹

Associations of Brazil with the exotic prevail in Australia regardless of ethnicity. Such exoticisation has long occurred in entertainment establishments around the world. John Emile Hirsch reveals an array of exotic references in popular performance in Europe and the United States from the early 20th century, with acts that featured various countries and regions around the world through costume, setting and music.²⁰ In these acts, eroticisation of the exotic also occurred, transforming dances from different cultures into striptease, hence the synonymy of 'exotic dancer' with 'stripper.'²¹ In Australia, exotic performances were a common feature of circus, variety, and revue-style shows in the 19th and 20th centuries.²² Many of the acts and performers in these productions were from overseas, making these performances exotic in the imported sense, and many performed with non-Anglo-Australian identities that exoticised their routines. One such performer was 'Margo, the Z-Bomb' whom Frank Van Straten describes as "an exotic, over-energetic under-dressed twenty-four-year-old Puerto Rican dancer and singer" whose exotic performance was slotted into a revue show with showgirls dancing around her.²³ Jonathan Bollen presents, through the examples of many productions touring during the 1950s and 1960s, the historical trend of Australian interest in the exotic. He states:

Audiences in Australia were attracted to depictions of national distinction [...] These desires for international variety in entertainment reflect a 'fascination' with 'others' defined by their 'exotic' difference from British and Anglo-American sources of western capitalism that dominated cultural production and social life in Australia.²⁴

When I asked Australian samba practitioners what they thought it was about samba performance that appealed to Australian audiences, the majority of answers revealed the extent to which samba is appreciated here for its cultural difference or exoticism. Their answers particularly drew on elements of the performance that are considered to have high entertainment value. Tabani said,

“You’re not paying too much money and you are getting a really good show, like high energy. [...] For entertainment, you want something fun, but not boring. It’s festive and that’s also the Latin culture.” Brittany explained, “[It’s] so fun getting dressed up—you can’t beat the visual aspect of samba. [...] Australians just wanna be entertained by something spectacular.” “I think it’s the colours, the feathers and the carnival kind of atmosphere. [...] You are after something different [...] and it is a really cultural dance too. [...] They want a bit of that culture at their event,” said Kaitlyn. These practitioners readily identified the elements that made samba so entertaining, drawing attention to the visual appeal of the samba costumes, the “high-energy” of the performance and its positive associations with Brazilian carnival. In emphasising the entertainment value of samba as well as its cultural differences, the participants confirm an appreciation of the exotic in Australian dance entertainment that is very much alive.

Samba dance entertainment in Australia today caters for an ongoing fascination with and replication of cultural practices. Those who hire samba performers in Australia are seeking an ‘exotic fantasy.’ Further muddling of the exotic and the authentic in Australian samba occurs as we look at the way groups and companies market and package their samba shows for Australian audiences. In commercialising samba for profit, companies not only tap into the market for exotic entertainment, but also alter the practice to make the show profitable as well as palatable in the commercial entertainment scene.

The flexible packaged product

Samba shows in Australia are packaged according to the requirements of the venue, the event, the expectations of the client, and, most importantly, how much the client is willing to pay.²⁵ This packaging of a samba show in a cabaret format is directly informed by ‘tourist shows’ produced in Brazil. These shows run separately from carnival, offering tourists a slice of Brazilian carnival culture all year round. They began as early as the 1970s and contributed to the international profile and status of Brazil over the decades since. Franco Fontana’s *Oba Oba* show, starring Brazilian performers, was produced for the first time in Rome in 1984. This show toured Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand throughout the 1980s and 1990s, presenting what they describe as “a spectacular stage show that celebrates the culture of Brazil.”²⁶ These shows, both those that toured internationally and those created for tourists in Brazil, heavily inspired the earliest samba shows in Australia. By the early 1990s, several companies had entered the Australian entertainment market offering similar spectacles for festivals and events.

Although some groups in Australia still follow the format of these original shows, others have developed and shaped to suit new trends in the entertainment scene. Australian samba shows today have increasingly narrowed their focus by shifting away from presenting a cultural extravaganza towards a mostly female performance of samba, catering to the market for popular entertainment in Australia with its desire for female spectacle. This kind of female spectacle in popular entertainment dates back to the mid-twentieth century, where, as

Jonathan Bollen notes, “opportunities for spectators to see female flesh in performance were widespread.”²⁷

The most commonly requested show is one that includes live drumming, samba dancers and capoeira performers. These performances vary between 15 to 30 minutes in length, with longer shows extending to 40 minutes. The longer the show, the more performers are used for different routines, and the more expensive the show becomes for those hiring the entertainment. While these shows are designed and rehearsed to be performed multiple times, they are rarely performed more than once for the same client or at the same venue. Aside from the rare contract with a Brazilian restaurant that offers entertainment for their guests on their busiest evenings, most shows are performed at weddings and corporate events, with the occasional special event at clubs or festivals. Consequently, companies and groups are in a perpetual state of promoting and marketing their shows to secure these one-off gigs. Companies create packaged shows to entice future clients, where they list the show options clients can choose from as “Package 1/2/3” or use exotic imagery in naming the shows, such as “Brazilian Dream,” “Fiesta Package,” or “Rio Carnival Extravaganza.” Package descriptions often draw on the joyful and festive connotations of Brazilian carnival, as well as emphasising the presence of the exotic – “Brazilian drums” and “Brazilian Samba girls.” Even where the show is not exclusively a Brazilian performance, they emphasise to the buyer that the samba dancers are wearing “traditional/full Brazilian costume/feathers,” clarifying to the potential client that such a spectacle will be at their show.²⁸ These packages reveal the commercial nature of samba’s presence in Australia, where shows are organised to attract potential clients.

Such shows will also often mix other Latin American dances into their performance, providing audiences with an array of dance genres not specific to Brazil. While such ‘Latin-mix’ shows are equally common and acceptable in Latin American communities in Australia, the commercial purpose of mixing genres into one show is to provide customisation and flexibility, rather than bringing communities together as achieved at non-commercial events.²⁹ In offering a range of different dance genres, companies hope to cater to wider audiences and thereby find more opportunities for work. These efforts to remain flexible extend to their choice of the number of dancers, routines, show length and various extras including photo opportunities and specialist performers. While most dance companies that perform samba offer such flexibility and customisation, not all display their package options; rather, the client is prompted to enquire with the company and describe what kind of show they desire, and only then will they negotiate the specifics of the show. Furthermore, groups remain flexible and open to alternative ways of profiting from their practice, inventing and offering a variety of occasions for clients to experience samba, including corporate team-building sessions and “Hens’ Night” entertainment, where companies adjust their practice to be viable for another potential market.³⁰

While companies are stretching the limits of samba to accommodate other occasions and markets, an inherent issue is that elements that were once essential to the Brazilian practice are lost or deemed unnecessary. A Brazilian musician

expressed his frustration about this. Discussing the music used in Australian samba, he confirmed that the rhythm favoured in Australia, known as *Olodum*, is also the name of a *bloco-afro* (community music group) from Salvador, Bahia. The music they play is a style distinctive to the Bahian state called samba-reggae which, despite being a style of samba music, is nonetheless unique in its rhythms, and therefore different from the style of samba music popular in Rio de Janeiro. More importantly, Brazilians move differently to this music and do not dance the same samba step to it. Samba practitioners in Australia are performing a samba dance style from Rio de Janeiro to a Bahian samba-reggae style of music. This musician thought it was fine if Australians play the music, but if they are going to dance to it, they should not be dancing samba. He then got up to show me the way people dance to samba-reggae, moving side-to-side, in a swaying groove-like motion. Indira also mentioned this discrepancy: “Brazilians don’t dance samba to *Olodum* [...], but here everybody starts *samberying*. [...] You are doing a samba step to different music, which is fine but don’t call it samba.” Despite performers knowing the incompatibility of the music with the dance, this rhythm is still widely used in Australian samba shows, even by those groups who regard authenticity to be of the highest importance in their samba performances. In part, this is due to the way in which companies and groups package their performances for their clients.³¹ It is difficult to achieve the distinctive sound of samba with so few instruments, but many shows in the Australian samba scene have a small group of percussionists, typically three drummers. Adding another musician would raise the show’s price by \$100-\$200. In offering smaller, less expensive shows, troupes can be booked multiple times in one evening, with the performers spread out across venues and often travelling from one show to the next in the same night. This Australian case is reflected in Beserra’s study of the samba scene in Chicago where performers were negotiating their samba identities and adjusting their performances to work within a new environment.³²

These customisations and alterations do not stop at the mixing of samba styles. The samba scene in Australia is part of a field where it is a standard practice for dancers to move between, hybridize, borrow, and connect various dance genres. This is often done with genres that practitioners are more familiar with as a way of creating a point of difference in their particular performance. Within this scene one can find a “bolly-samba,” “belly-samba,” and “samburlesque” show, where practitioners mix samba with Bollywood, Belly dancing and Burlesque.³³ Such adjustments and appropriations of dance cultures is no new practice in Australian popular entertainment, as Amanda Card suggests:

Throughout its history dance on the popular stage [in Australia] has been a great hybrid. It has constantly borrowed from what ever happened to be available. Other dance genres have been its bread and butter; nothing has been off limits. Movement has been borrowed from the classical, the ethnic, the erotic, the exotic, the social and the nostalgic.³⁴

Throughout the twentieth century, popular entertainment in Australia featured many cross-cultural music and dance groups. The performers rarely hailed directly from the places where music and dance genres originated; instead, they arrived from Great Britain, North America and Europe. John Whiteoak

describes the tango as entering Australian entertainment in a dance craze at the end of 1913, and notes that there was “little understanding of the cultural origins or significance of the tango or, for that matter, later popular Latin-American music or dances.”³⁵ This is reflected in the hybrid shows of the early 20th century, including the “Tivoli Tango Teas” program of 1914, which featured a performance of the “Mexican Maxixe,” and describes a combination of Brazilian and Mexican dance genres and the “Honolulu Tango,” an Argentinian-Hawaiian dance mix.³⁶

For the Australian samba scene today, waiving traditional aspects of performance and altering pre-rehearsed shows is normal when accommodating a paying client. The sacrifices, adjustments and appropriations that make samba performances in Australia more profitable and popular are, at least to some performers, essential when competing for work in commercial entertainment.

Appropriating samba and ‘Making an Effort’

The ease in adjusting the Brazilian practice of samba for performance in Australia lies in the fact that many people are not familiar with samba. Audiences hire samba performers for its exoticism and difference. The authenticity of differentiating samba styles is not a concern for those booking samba shows. Most spectators would fail to notice any inauthenticity. They see the signifiers of Brazilian-ness—women wearing feathered headdresses, dancing with frenetic hip movement, men beating drums—and they accept the group’s performance for what it is. Kaitlyn, a dance company owner, admitted how the audience’s naivety shapes the construction and choreography of her samba shows, which incorporate more synchronised choreography from other dance genres including showgirl, burlesque and jazz. She said that audiences “don’t actually know [if] what you’re doing is authentic or not. [...] [We] insert non-traditional moves because they don’t know, and it’s still spectacular to them anyway.” Olivia, an experienced dancer, expressed how often she did not feel authentic in her samba performances, but concluded that “we are so multicultural here, so they [audiences] just get excited anyway.”

Most of the Brazilian-Australian dancers I interviewed expressed disappointment in this aspect of samba in Australia, considering it to be disrespectful. Even though they complimented Australians on their samba dancing, they were still unhappy being part of an inaccurate representation of Brazilian samba. This made me wary of my position as a samba dancer and researcher, and potentially caused the dancers to hold back or soften the blow of some of their less agreeable views regarding the state of samba in Australia. However, Tiago, a highly experienced teacher of Brazilian and various Latin American dance genres, felt no need to sweeten his critique in claiming that the groups were unaware of what authentic samba is:

I think they probably believe it’s authentic. The groups tend to have [...] Brazilians playing percussion, maybe one Brazilian girl [in the troupe] [...] and they are reproducing what they see in some tourist clubs in Brazil. I think they just don’t know.

When I pressed him further on this issue he added that Australian samba groups “are looking for people who they can teach some steps [...] because they can move, [...] they look like they are doing samba, and the clients don’t know better anyway. [...] People keep making money out of a culture.”

The non-Brazilian samba practitioners were also relatively aware of these issues. Despite little expectation of authenticity, at least from audiences, there is an ambivalence at the heart of an Australian performer’s relationship with samba. There is a commercial imperative, but authenticity is still valuable. Participants expressed this through their emphasis on the importance of “making an effort,” where a lack of authenticity is excused as long as practitioners were trying to be authentic. Brazilian practitioners in Australia also suggested that such efforts were necessary for performing samba both better and correctly. These Brazilian dancers suggested that Australians should try to respect the culture and perform samba the best they can. They encouraged group leaders to go to Brazil, not only to take samba lessons there, but also to keep up with the trends in samba styles and fashion. In making an effort, Australians could be considered more authentic, or at least less disrespectful. In line with the views expressed by Fay and Brittany quoted earlier in this article, Danielle explained that she could never perform samba like a Brazilian, stating that Australians come with a different intention and cannot relate to samba in the way Brazilians do where they grow up with the genre. She was also conscious of the criticism that non-Brazilian samba dancers receive.

There’s a lot of public outcry lately from Brazilians around the world that foreigners dancing and performing samba are not being true to the roots. That they are just putting on feathers and bikinis and jumping around and don’t even under the music [...], the lyrics, don’t speak any Portuguese, have never been to Brazil, have never performed in carnival. [...] To a certain extent, I do agree that there are some groups out there doing that, but then there are also groups who have put in the time and effort to study, to go to Brazil, to train to respect the roots and the origins of samba.

Despite the inherent inability to be genuinely authentic as a non-Brazilian samba dancer, Danielle notes that through particular efforts one can get closer to what is authentic: “I am adding my own flavour, bringing in my own dance experience but trying to keep it as authentic as possible to Brazilian samba.” These ideas were shared by many other Australian samba dancers I interviewed. Kaitlyn saw her choreographic choices, which reflected the Brazilian practice, as making the show more authentic: “I mean our choreography is quite ‘sambery,’ say we freestyle for a Brazilian themed show, that would obviously be quite Brazilian. [...] I think we try to keep it pretty traditional.” Indira, too, expressed that it was the efforts of her group leader that re-invigorated her enjoyment for dancing samba: “I think [she] has really made the effort, she’s gone to Brazil, [...] she is up with the fashions in Brazil.” Tabani too felt that there “really needs to be some sort of standard” in the samba community regarding dance ability and authenticity and pressed on me that her group leader “goes to Brazil a lot and makes an effort.” In this scene, authenticity cannot be gained merely through practising samba.

Evidence of engagement with Brazilian culture or efforts to do so are essential if one is to be considered an authentic samba dancer in Australia.

Samba as a product

Commercialising and packaging samba makes it a product. The form is manipulated by companies and dancers who strive to produce profitable dance performances that meet audience expectations. We know this, not only by the way these practitioners related the appeal of samba to that of a commercially viable and enjoyable show, but also through the online marketing choices of presenting the form and the structural organisation of the shows. What has not been addressed is the extent to which the form is also physically altered as a dance, through particularities of movement and choreography. That subject would require its own article.

Authentic samba is defined in Australia through Brazilian signifiers—the proximity to or evidence of Brazilian-ness often relayed to naïve audiences through tanned skin, women in revealing costumes, and men playing the drums. Furthermore, authenticity is achieved through efforts made to connect with samba and Brazilian culture, efforts which are recognised mostly by other samba practitioners. A more detailed analysis of the specific efforts that practitioners make could reveal how and by what means these efforts result in a more respectful and authentic approach to samba performance.

Samba practitioners in Australia negotiate their position in a commercial entertainment industry, which is, at times, unapologetically inappropriate and driven by profit and demand. Equally, with the commercialisation of samba within Brazil and through international touring shows, the authenticity of samba has already been transformed through the promotion of Brazilian nationalism and culture. Samba practitioners in Australia are negotiating and attempting to balance their commercial desires with the authenticity of a dance practice that has undergone substantial alteration in the name of commercialisation.

¹ Currency figures are in Australian dollars.

² This research project, including the interviewing of fifteen participants, was approved by the University of Sydney Human Ethics Committee under the project number 2016/527.

³ Richard Rogers, "From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation," *Communication Theory* 16, no. 4 (November 2006): 499, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2006.00277.x>.

⁴ Ian Maxwell, *Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes: Hip Hop Down Under Comin' Upper* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 47.

⁵ Sherril Dodds, *Dancing on the Canon: Embodiments of Value in Popular Dance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 4.

⁶ UNESCO, "The Samba de Roda of Recôncavo of Bahia," *YouTube*, uploaded 26 September, 2009, video, 3:16, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIN-ElS4VzE>.

⁷ Darién Davis, *White Face, Black Mask: Africaneity and the Early Social History of Popular Music in Brazil* (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2009), 31; Claus Schreiner, *Musica Brasileira: A History of Popular Music and the People of Brazil*, (New York and London: Marion Boyars, 2002), 109, 113, 130.

- ⁸ Charles A. Perrone and Christopher Dunn, *Brazilian Popular Music and Globalization* (New York and London: Routledge 2001), 11.
- ⁹ Davis, *White Face, Black Mask*, 31.
- ¹⁰ Cristina Magaldi, "Brazil," in *Musics of Latin America*, ed. Robin Moore and Walter Aaron Clark (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012), 246.
- ¹¹ Natasha Pravaz, "Hybridity Brazilian Style: Samba, Carnival, and the Myth of 'Racial Democracy' in Rio de Janeiro," *Identities* 15, no. 1 (February 2008): 90.
- ¹² Barbara Browning, *Samba: Resistance in Motion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).
- ¹³ *Capoeira* is a Brazilian practice combining dance, martial art, and game. It was created by Afro-Brazilians in Bahia during slavery in Brazil. While capoeira has its own place as a practice in Australia, it often features as a performance number in Brazilian entertainment shows. Cristina Wulfhorst, Cristina Rocha, and George Morgan, "Intimate Multiculturalism: Transnationalism and Belonging amongst Capoeiristas in Australia," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 40, no. 11 (March 2014): 1798-1816, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2014.894875>. Barbara Browning also writes about *capoeira* and the importance of the performance circle across many Afro-Brazilian practices including samba, capoeira and candomblé (*Resistance in Motion*, 185).
- ¹⁴ Annie McNeill Gibson, "Parading Brazil through New Orleans: Brazilian Immigrant Interaction with Casa Samba," *Latin American Music Review* 34, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2013): 21, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43282540>.
- ¹⁵ Norman Urquía, "The Re-Branding of Salsa in London's Dance Clubs: How an Ethnicised Form of Cultural Capital was Institutionalised," *Leisure Studies* 24, no. 4 (August 2005): 385-397, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02614360500200698>.
- ¹⁶ Juliet McMains, "Brownface: Representations of Latin-Ness in Dancesport," *Dance Research Journal* 33, no. 2 (Winter 2001): 54-71, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1477804>.
- ¹⁷ 'Latin American' dance in this context refers to practices from cultures across Central and South America. While I acknowledge that the term is problematic when grouping often highly different cultures and dance styles together, there remains an inclination to do so, not only in the Australian entertainment scene, but within communities of families identifying as Latin American. Furthermore, these groups will abbreviate Latin American to simply 'Latin' and, in the entertainment scene, music and dance from Portugal and Spain are often included in this 'Latin' category.
- ¹⁸ Bernadete Beserra, "Brazilian Dancers and Samba in Chicago: In the Limits of the Others Expectations," *Raximhai* 10, no. 1 (June 2014): 48; own translation.
- ¹⁹ Cristina Wulfhorst, "The Other Brazilians: Community Ambivalences among Brazilians in Sydney," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 35, no. 5 (October 2014): 480.
- ²⁰ John E. Hirsch, "Glorifying the American Showgirl: A History of Revue Costume in the United States from 1866 to the Present" (PhD diss., New York University, 1985), 63.
- ²¹ Lucinda Jarrett, *Stripping in Time: A History of Erotic Dancing* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1997), 166.
- ²² Mark St Leon, *Circus: The Australian Story* (Melbourne: Melbourne Books, 2011).
- ²³ Frank Van Straten, *Tivoli* (Melbourne: Lothian, 2003), 212.
- ²⁴ Jonathan Bollen, "Here from There – Travel, Television and Touring Revues: Internationalism as Entertainment in the 1950s and 1960s," *Popular Entertainment Studies* 4, no. 1 (2013): 74.
- ²⁵ In this commercial industry there is a difference between the performers' client and their audience. While their audience is who they actually perform for, their client is who pays or who selects the performers for entertainment. Although it is important to please the audience by putting on an entertaining show, ultimately it is the client who the performers need to impress.
- ²⁶ "Franco Fontana and his Collaborators," Oba Oba Show, viewed April 21, 2018, <http://www.obaobashow.com/pagine/fontana.html>
- ²⁷ Jonathan Bollen, "Don't Give Up the Strip!: Erotic Performance as Live Entertainment in Mid-Twentieth Century Australia," *Journal of Australian Studies* 34, no. 2 (April 2010): 127.
- ²⁸ "Samba and Latin Dance Shows," Latin Dance Australia, viewed October 10, 2018, <http://latindance.com.au/event-entertainment-sydney/#show-packages>; "Entertainment Packages," Sambaliscious, viewed May 6, 2018, <http://sambaliscious.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Sambaliscious-Show-Packs.pdf>; "Soul Brazil Packages," Soul Brazil, viewed May 9, 2018, <http://www.soulbrazil.com.au/packages-soul-brazil/>.

²⁹ It was somewhat normal for Palma to perform in commercial 'Latin Mix' shows when she started dancing professionally, as this was what she had previously done at Latin Festivals which she attended and performed in with her family and community.

³⁰ "Corporate Classes and Team Building," Latin dance Australia, viewed October 10, 2018, <http://www.latindance.com.au/corporate>; "Brazilian Carnival Samba Hens Night Package," Red Velvet Cabaret, viewed April 21, 2018, <https://ladyvelvetcabaret.com.au/hens-night-packages/brazilian-carnival-samba/>.

³¹ Many of the drummers in Australian shows originate from Bahia rather than Rio de Janeiro. They are more familiar with samba-reggae rhythms than the rhythms of samba from Rio de Janeiro.

³² Beserra "Brazilian Dancers and Samba in Chicago," 41, 45.

³³ "Bolly-Samba Shows," The Show masters Co., viewed October 10, 2018, <http://www.theshowmastersco.com/bollysamba-shows/>; "Belly Samba - Brazilian Samba Fusion," The Belly Dance Queen, viewed October 10, 2018, <http://www.bellydancequeen.com.au/bellydance-fusion/>; "Act No: 138 - Samburlesque," Just Wedding Entertainment, viewed October 10, 2018, <http://justweddingentertainment.com.au/samburlesque>.

³⁴ Amanda Card, "Dance on the Popular Stage" in *Currency Companion to Music and Dance in Australia*, ed. John Whiteoak and Aline Scott-Maxwell (Sydney: Currency Press, 2003), 218.

³⁵ John Whiteoak, "Latin-American Influences" in *Companion to Music and Dance in Australia*, ed. John Whiteoak and A Scott-Maxwell *Currency* (Sydney: Currency Press Pty Ltd, 2003), 393.

³⁶ Van Straten, *Tivoli*, 41.