

Asheville Salsa: An Ethnography of Social Order in Dance

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Abstract

Salsa dance was popularized in the Puerto Rican barrios of New York in the 1970s and has since been commercialized and globalized. Depending on regional and cultural influences, this Latin dance has been redefined and transformed over time. In Asheville, salsa events tend to draw a Latino crowd that does not represent the white-dominated constituency of the city. This ethnography aims to capture the contextual meanings of salsa within the Asheville community, as viewed through the lens of a visibly white, female, middle-class, early-twenties participant-observer. This study followed four locations in which salsa served as a unifying social event that either fostered supportive relationships or served as a social hub. Gender dynamics and the racial breakdown influences the constituency and social ordering in the salsa community as understood by Tia DeNora, a music sociologist. By attending weekly social events to learn salsa and conducting informal interviews with dancers, normative and social expectations were explored within each community. This project explores the nuances and importance of the salsa community in Asheville, taking into account gender and racial dynamics and their impact within dance spaces.

Keywords: Salsa Dance, Gender Dynamics, Social Order

1. Introduction: Salsa in the Contemporary Sphere

Since its introduction into the United States from Latin America, salsa has developed into a variety of styles that have regional variances. Asheville is predominantly a white city, and as of April of 2010 it has a population of 83,417 persons with a constituency of 79%, 17% black or African American, and less than 4% Hispanic or Latino.¹ It is important to note how race is defined within this research. According to the United States Census Bureau, the definition of is as follows:

“The concept of race is separate from the concept of Hispanic origin. Percentages for the various race categories add to 100 percent, and should not be combined with the percent Hispanic.

White. A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa. It includes people who indicate their race as "White" or report entries such as Irish, German, Italian, Lebanese, Arab, Moroccan, or Caucasian.

White alone, not Hispanic or Latino are individuals who responded "No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino" and who reported "White" as their only entry in the race question."²

With this delineation of race in mind, the majority of the people I observed identified as either white or Latino. For the inclusivity of this research, the term ‘Latinx’ will be used for its inclusion of both the male constituency of the term Latino and the female constituency of the term Latina. Spanish is a gendered language, so the term Latinx gives respect to two widely recognized genders.

Considering that the percentage of the white population in Asheville is almost twenty times greater than that of the Latinx community, one would hypothesize that the constituency of salsa social events would reflect a similar breakdown of population. This was not the case. In fact, the majority of most environments was not perceived as white, but Latinx. Racial and cultural dynamics that differed from the Asheville norm impacted the social nature of the event, with a cultural social element influencing gender dynamics. This research explored the gender and racial dynamics within four main locations in which salsa events were held. The four are Mela Indian Restaurant, Scully's Bar & Grille, Veda Studios, and K-Lounge, each of which have a different balance of gender and a varying constituency based off of the music and accessibility to the event.

2. Historical and Cultural Background of Salsa

Understanding the basis and culture from which salsa grew is important in exploring how it has changed over time and in different spaces, Asheville included. Salsa is an Afro-Cuban dance that expanded from the Puerto Rican barrios in New York down to Colombia, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Mexico, all of which incorporated their regional identity into the dance.³ All of these styles were reintroduced back into American salsa dance culture and hybridized again upon their reintroduction. Mamadou Diouf and Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo approach salsa as a transnational phenomenon in their writing entitled "Rhythms of the Afro-Atlantic world: rituals and remembrances." They explain salsa as an urban culture, a unique pan-Caribbean mix of dances, cultures, celebrations, and hardships that has become globalized and redefined since its conception in the sixties in the barrios of New York.⁴ They explore the rise and fall of 'authentic' salsa and how the movement has changed over time as well as the meanings have taken new definitions since the fifties and sixties when it was still tied in with mambo.⁵ Mambo preceded salsa, but is very similar to salsa in the sense that the same movements and techniques are transferrable between the two dances.⁶ Salsa is a living dance, constantly expanding and changing to reflect the cultures or individual taste and/or style. While salsa may vary stylistically by location it also varies from dancer to dancer.

2.1 Positions, Steps, And Style Of Salsa

To understand the interplay of gender dynamics within the community, it is valuable to have a basic knowledge of the dance itself and how physical interactions can be manipulated. The basic steps of salsa involve male-female partnering that require very little upper body movement and a large amount of hip swaying. The top half of the body serves as a signal receptor - pressure on the upper back from one's partner signals a step forward, a raise of the arm and the pressure of fingers on the palm of the hand signal a turn - so the dancers want their top halves to remain as still as possible to receive the most accurate physical information. The bottom half of the body is reserved for greater range of movement and footwork; a skilled dancer will use fewer basic steps and replace them with more complex sequences of movement, however, this depends on the level of expertise of the lead. Lead dancers are often men, while following dancers are often women. There is rarely a switching of dance roles, placing the movement decisions in the hands of the man/lead dancer and reinforcing a power structure between the two dancers. The male is traditionally the lead and the female is traditionally the follow, but in the Asheville community there is some blurring between who is allowed to lead when it comes to gender. However, either position may be used no matter who is leading and following.

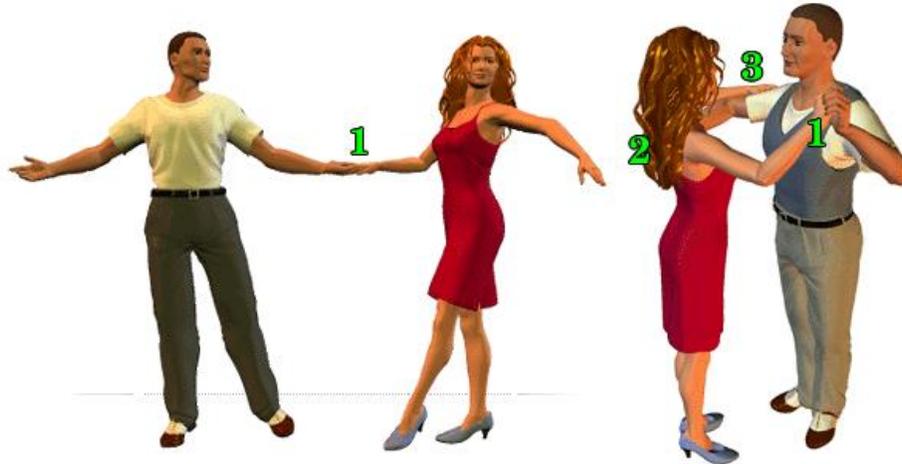


Figure 1. Open position (left) and closed position (right)⁷

When it comes to the dance itself, there are two common types of partner embraces: open and closed positions.⁸ Depending on the intimacy, familiarity, and expertise of the lead, the body positions of each dancer varies. This is valuable social information since it signals what kind of relationship the lead or follow wants with, or expects from, their partner. Open position involves partners facing each other and holding hands and closed position requires that the leader of the partner dance puts their right arm on the back of the follow and their left arm out to hold the follow's right hand. Open position tends to be geared towards partners who enjoy advanced techniques - in this position they can maneuver their partner with ease and engage in dynamic movements. Closed position also varies between intimate and expert. If there is little to no space in between the bodies of the two dancers then the dance immediately becomes more sexualized; if there is substantial space in between the chests and hips of the two bodies, then this alludes to a more advanced nature of dance. The extra space allows for advanced movements to take place. However, the meanings of these positions varies from person to person, so the social information gleaned from each individual interaction varies in meaning depending on the context in which it was performed.

In addition to verbal communication and acts of service committed for members of the group, nonverbal communication on the dance floor is important as well. Judith Lynne Hanna is dedicated to understanding nonverbal communication across global cultures, but a specific portion of her work explores the language-like features of dance, which involve a memory bank and creativity and how this language encourages social relationships.⁹ Individuals and social groups encode meaning in dance, and can be considered playful depending on the context and the meaning for the specific dance.¹⁰ Though she focuses on the Ubakala Igbo of the Eastern region of Nigeria, Hanna's comments on the greater social pattern of dance are useful in this salsa setting. The concept of cybernetic potential, which refers to a system of communication which alters as messages are sent and received, is much like body language and human interactions vary depending on the signals we give and receive.³⁴ There is a sense of playfulness in dance since there are many different steps and sequences to choose from and execute, but they are always improvised in a different order depending on who is dancing, their skill level, and their level of comfort with their partner.¹¹ Depending on the space in which salsa is held, eye contact and a close embrace contain different messages. Generally, a closed position (close embrace) indicates interest, so eye contact is not a factor in determining what is being communicated.

2.2 Salseros And Stylistic Variances

A salsero is a male dancer, but the definition of 'salsero' is twofold: in translation from Spanish to English it means 'male salsa dancer,' but there is a culture that accompanies this title. A salsero is a respectful male salsa dancer who wants to include everyone in the dance, even people who are a shy or inexperienced, such as women who do not know how to dance and are sitting or standing on the side of the room and out of the spotlight.¹³ Salseros have a chivalric code that demands that they will never get a woman drunk since there is a level of respect for their partners.¹⁴ A good salsero will make his partner look as though she is more experienced than she is, essentially drawing attention to her with his own skill.¹⁵ For example, he will not attempt advanced movements if he knows his partner is a beginner and will make his physical cues as apparent as possible for changes in movement. The goal of this action is so that other men will want to dance with her but also recognize that he is a skilled dancer, earning him respect in the community.¹⁶

The informant I spoke with claims that there is no competition between salseros, that men encourage each other and recognize each other's smooth or advanced "tricks."¹⁷

Style varies depending on the background the salsero. Cindy Garcia is a professor of Theatre Arts and Dance at the University of Minnesota and has a saturated background in critical dance studies, as shown in her ethnography "Salsa Crossings: Dancing Latinidad in Los Angeles."¹⁸ She offers insight into the rigorous salsa culture in Los Angeles, finding differences between those who dance ballroom salsa and those who dance it in the clubs.¹⁹ She unpacks the signals that dancers use to communicate with each other, how they are perceived by others, and what they mean once they are broken down. Although her study is in L.A., there are similarities between Asheville and L.A. in the sense that there is a hierarchy of talent and acceptance dependent on level of skill and appearance.²⁰ Two locations in this research mirrored this ballroom-club dynamic, creating a divide between those who were trained and those who learned outside of a studio. Veda Studios is a dance studio that encourages all levels of dancers to participate, while Mela Indian Restaurant was primarily a social scene only. There were specific physical cues that were learned in the classroom that were not evident in the social dances, as well as a difference in dress and general attitude towards the culture of salsa dancing. Ballroom dancers (also referred to as 'academy' dancers) consider themselves more prestigious dancers over club dancers (also referred to as 'street dancers'), thus creating a hierarchy of acceptable dance.

Not only are there varieties of salsa, but there tend to be four additional dances that are performed in the community as well: bachata, cumbia, merengue, and reggaeton. Hierarchy is reflected in these dances as well as the music in these four types of dance. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of high class and low class applies to the music choices specifically: salsa, bachata, and cha-cha are considered high class because it takes time and effort to learn how to lead and follow moves with precision and grace.²¹ The goal is to make advanced movements look effortless while enjoying one's self. Reggaeton and cumbia are considered low class since they do not incorporate moves that are considered advanced - complex footwork is not necessary, but matching the rhythm of one's partner is more important. Cumbia is a Mexican dance and involves a lot of push and pull to wind and unwind the following partner from the lead partner, but is not a favorite among the academy dancers for its lack of technique and higher risk of injury. Merengue and reggaeton are very similar in the sense that the movements involve small steps from side to side rather than any movements that are particularly advanced, however, one can take movements from salsa and incorporate them into either of these dances for variety. Bachata is less complex than salsa since it is counted evenly, whereas there are two slight pauses in the basic salsa step that can be difficult to account for. An element of synchronicity is important in all partner dance so that partners do not collide and injure one another, but when it comes to advanced movements there is much less variety available to these dancers.

Stylistic variances within all dance depend on the individual background and origins. People with similar backgrounds often gather at similar events and locations. Each location played slightly different styles of music, which drew specific constituencies to the event. Some dancers wanted to dance Mexican salsa and others Colombian salsa, though some steered clear of both Mexican salsa and traditionally Mexican music because they did not enjoy it. Mexican salsa is looked down upon since it is closely tied with Banda, another Latin dance that is native to Mexico with similar music but different movements.²² It is considered more club-oriented and lower class than pristine and upper class. The class distinctions and rifts that Garcia finds within the community in L.A. are important to take into account in reference to Asheville's community since a strikingly similar community has been created.²³ There has been dialogue about street dancers vs. upper-class salsa dancers and the stigma of street dancers being much less refined, sophisticated, and respectful of women within the salsa community.²⁴

3. Methodology

In this ethnography, qualitative data was collected through participant observation in addition to interviews to create a well-rounded understanding of the salsa dance community in the city of Asheville, North Carolina. This data relied heavily on personal interactions and conversations with dancers at each of the salsa events and locations; this is where the majority of the qualitative data was collected. A large part of this study included interviews, both conducted outside of the social event and informally conducted at the event itself. Formal interviews lasted roughly an hour over tea or a meal in downtown Asheville, and informal interviews lasted roughly fifteen minutes and were conducted during the salsa events on the sidelines. Formal interviews were set up with dancers that I developed a friendship with and would not consider my interview a romantic advance, resulting in a greater number of women than men. Questions included asking where the individual lived (whether they were in Asheville city limits or not), how long they had been dancing salsa, if they knew other kinds of dance and if that impacted how they understood the parameters of salsa, if they

learned salsa in a studio, if they spoke another language, if they were from the United States, if they had friends within the salsa community, if they felt safe in the salsa community, if they felt comfortable leading or following (dependent on gender), and if there were certain behaviours that were unacceptable in dance spaces, among other questions that were geared towards specific individuals (such as interviewing an instructor versus a student). I conducted ten formal interviews outside of the salsa environment and an estimated thirty interviews at the events themselves. I met most dancers by dancing with them and talking to them during and after the dance and contacted potential interviewees through social media or set up interview times at the salsa events. At each salsa event I tried to interact with someone I did not know or had not spoken to before, but built rapport with a network of dancers who consistently encouraged and supported my research in their community.

In addition to these individual conversations, I kept a field journal of observations and notes about the group dynamics and behaviour I encountered at each of these salsa locations. Four locations that hosted salsa in Asheville were highlighted in this research. While this information varied within each of the four locations studied, patterns and similarities emerged across all four salsa locations, which allowed me to narrow my focus on gender dynamics and racial constituencies, which impacted and contextualized the social interactions visible to me as the outsider. Since this population is majority Latinx, I wanted to keep these dances a safe space for them (especially if any were undocumented), so only first names are used when referencing the interviewed in this research.

I acknowledge that I am impacting the community by being present. It is virtually impossible to conduct an ethnography without impacting the community studied. As a white, cisgender, middle class, female, blonde college student, I noticed gender dynamics through this lens as they impacted me and other females within the salsa environment. My appearance and presence influenced interactions I had with individuals within the community, especially in small settings.

4. Observational data for research locations

Each of the four locations had a slightly different set-up and attracted a different group of people. Detailed below is the setting of each of the four locations, the entry fee if applicable, a short description of the gender balances and racial constituency, and an experience that reflects the atmosphere of the location.

4.1 Observational Data for Research Location: Mela

Mela Indian Restaurant was the first salsa event I attended in my research. Normally an Indian cuisine restaurant, every Friday night the tables are cleared from the wooden floor and pushed towards the side of the space to create a large dance floor. There is a wall of large glass windows that allow passersby to see inside the venue; inside is dimly lit with colorful laser lights illuminating the dancers and drawing attention to the number of people inside.

The entry fee was \$10 for men and \$7 for women - an attempt to keep the genders balanced since the constituency of Mela is primarily young Latinx men. The majority of the constituency is male and heteronormative, so men rarely dance with one another to avoid weakening their masculinity. Women may dance with each other, but often for the male gaze instead of to practice dance technique. There are male onlookers who gather by the bar and watch the center of the room where the couples dance, rarely conversing with each other. When I asked other women about the group of men gathered in this space, they referred to them as 'creepy,' giving unwanted attention to dancers on the floor as spectators. The end of each song was mixed into the beginning of another, which made it difficult to disengage with some partners because they wanted to keep dancing and would not let go of me willingly. Issues of consent were present in this regard.

The majority of the first night I danced with a man who looked to be in his early 40s, was bearded with ear gauges and tattoos peeking out from his shirt collar who asked me to dance with him repeatedly. Another man, very tall, likely mid to late twenties, asked me to dance as I was trying to get past him and when I gave him consent, he shoved the two drinks in his hands to his friends as quickly as he could and then danced with me. In general, both of the men I danced with the first night had very gentle touches as leads - there was never any grabbing or clothes groping, however one did turn me around and place his hands on my hips to press his pelvis into my back and thrust forward, which I deemed to be a display of sexual dominance and interest. In subsequent visits to this location, I found that it was fairly consistent that men promiscuously danced with women rather than focusing on the intricate steps of salsa.

4.2 Observational data for research location: K-Lounge

K-Lounge is a Korean Barbeque House by day and a popular nightclub on Saturday nights. Similar to Mela, people gather by the bar or at the side of the space to watch the dancers or chat with their friends. The DJ is next to the bar, slightly out of the way of the dancers, but close enough to converse with the bartender for company. Depending on when one arrives, there is either no cover charge or a cover charge of \$5. In this venue there are fewer onlookers and more dancers, as well as a more even gender balance. K-Lounge is considered more upscale and shares constituencies with Veda Studios. It is uncommon for men to dance with men in this venue, although women dancing with women is not uncommon to see.

There was a salsa event at K-Lounge for Halloween, though few people showed up to this event in costume - if they did, it looked to be thrown together last minute. The majority of women dressed in black and drew cat whiskers on their faces to appear festive. Interesting costumes for women included dressing up as a sugar skull and another woman wore a corset and a mask. One man dressed as a red M&M, another man dressed up as Dracula, and yet another in all camouflage with a skull bandana. Most women dressed to accentuate their bodies, wearing a typical sexy costume on Halloween. There were more unfamiliar faces at this particular dance, most likely because there was more foot traffic downtown with people roaming the streets to find something to do. They did not actively participate in dancing, but they did gather by the bar and the sides of the area to watch the dancers dance.

4.3 Observational data for research location: Veda Studios

Veda Studios provides a space for people to explore dance through community building with a focus on healing and wellness. The dance studios are on the second floor of the studio; when one walks in the space, the studio is directly ahead, with an area to the right with couches for socializing and tables for any food people want to contribute to make the final social more of a party-like atmosphere. There are cubbies in the far right corner for people to put their bags and coats, which people consider safe even though it is out of sight of the dance space. Some people who are less confident in their abilities gather towards the wall of the dance space, waiting for someone to ask them to dance or watch the couples dance on the floor.

Every Wednesday, Veda Studios has two back to back salsa classes as part of their six-week salsa class; one for beginners and then one for intermediate salsa dancers. Each class is \$10 to drop in, but is less expensive if one pays for the full six week course. Class privilege plays a large role in this setting since it is relatively expensive to consistently spend money on dance classes. The constituency of this group is largely middle aged white men and women, however there are some Hispanic students and teachers who attend every week. Since it is relatively early in the evening (start time is 7:30pm), people who have children require childcare to attend these classes, or partners who are willing to stay home with children.

At the end of each of the six week classes, there is a salsa social as a celebration and opportunity to practice salsa. At salsa socials, it is not uncommon to see women practicing their lead on women or men, but men leading other men is rarer. Since this is an environment dedicated to learning instead of nightclub life, there is more leniency when it comes to determining who the lead is and who is the follow; there is less stigma for a woman to lead a man if it is in a learning environment. Lots of older women, "blue-haired" as one informant deemed them, attended the social, but not many were asked to dance and they did not dance with each other. I was told that they were not attractive and were too rigid in their dance technique to be entertaining dancers. With a comment like this, I realize that I am treated differently in this community because I am tall, long-armed, blonde, white, and have a background in partner dance experience, which makes me a dancer that men want to dance with.

4.4 Observational data for research location: Scully's

Scully's is a bar with space carved out for salsa in the back. Salsa, bachata, merengue, and cumbia are commonly played. Many tourists stumble in there, but there is often a mix of new faces with no prior dance knowledge and experienced dancers from salsa classes at Asheville's Veda Studios. The dances at Scully's started around the same time as my research began, so I attended each Thursday night to the point that my absence became noticed and my presence at smaller events was appreciated. There is no fee to attend an evening of dance at Scully's.

Departing Scully's one night, I made it a point to say goodbye to people I have danced with. All of the men hugged me goodbye, wished me well, kissed me on the cheek, and one man even stopped in the middle of his dance to say goodbye to me. However, my presence as a female dancer encouraged men to interact with me, but it put a strain on

my relationships with the women in the community. One middle-aged woman told me that I am “young, pretty, blonde, and skilled” in the dance community, which deters men from dancing with older women since I am a more attractive option.

5. Meanings and the building of social order through salsa

Gender dynamics and racial constituencies played a large role determining the interactions within each of the four locations studied. The social nature of dance allowed for learning and connection across race, gender, and experience, however there are inherent power dynamics when it comes to gender and race/class divides.

5.1 Connecting Through Gender Dynamics

Being a white female in this space made a distinct difference in how I was treated by men. There is a visible performance of gender and sexuality within the salsa community; unequal gender relations are apparent in every salsa location I studied. The selection of dance partners is frequently based on looks rather than expertise; a middle-aged woman told my roommate, who attended these events with me, that we should be grateful for our youth because the men ask us to dance. There are expectations from both male and female dancers to communicate sexiness and attractiveness in different ways; one man told me that the woman’s job is to look attractive when dancing, while the man’s is to make the woman look sexy.

The men of salsa are particularly intriguing to my research, or rather the roles of leading and following - who has the power? Male-dominated dance of salsa has a definite gender-biased dynamic. In my experience, the vast majority of salsa music reinforces patriarchal standards, focusing on sexual conquest and dominance over a woman. Even in the dancing itself the lead is in a position of power, controlling the follow to a degree. Leading up to the dance as well, dominance is exerted in the form of forced invitation. Several men have grabbed my arm and pulled me towards the dance floor with no verbal consent on my part. Later in my research, I learned that it is acceptable to deny men a dance. One woman I interviewed, Mickey, who helped encourage the salsa community in Asheville, attested to the reputations of some of the men in the community and assured me that there were good people within the community and bad people. Women have the power to say no, however, oftentimes men will grab a woman’s arm or hand and pull her onto the dance floor without any verbal consent. There is a sense of male entitlement to a woman’s body and time in this community, although this depends on the background and cultural acceptance of this behavior. When I complained about this behavior to one of the middle-aged female dancers, she told us that all the men wanted to dance with me because I was young, white, long-haired, and beautiful. One woman I spoke to wears cocktail dresses and heels to every salsa event and commented on my attire one night: “There are beautiful women who sit on the sides every time at these events, not that you’re not beautiful, but a girl like you comes in and all of them want to dance with you. It makes me wonder if we should all just dress in jeans to get noticed.” By emphasizing her femininity she hoped to be noticed by potential partners in dance; men in this community respond more readily to the way a woman is dressed than to her actual level of skill.

The gender dynamics at K-lounge are less pronounced than at Mela, however one night I attended K-Lounge with a friend from out of town - the very one who introduced me to the salsa community earlier that year. As she and I left the establishment after hours of dancing, a man approached us and told us that we were great dancers, but we needed to dress the part. We were wearing jeans and tank tops to this particular event; an outfit that this man said did not reflect our worth as dancers. Apparently women are supposed to dress to accentuate their bodies and appear as sexual beings to be noticed. I verified this later with a salsa instructor; there is a competitive aspect to salsa, you want to look the best in your movement as well as your dress - it is a visual art.

The most common question I encountered during my time there, after asking for my name and where I was from, was whether or not I had a boyfriend, which leads me to believe that this is a space in which men and women come to find potential romantic and sexual partners. One man asked my friend and me to dance with him and his friend - perhaps part of the courtesy of being a man in this space is to get a dance partner for your friends as well as yourself. White women tend to be the target of this kind of behavior since they are often passing through the community and never stop to learn the steps. Mickey’s favorite part of salsa is the connection with one’s self and with another person, as well as the music. To match movement to music alone and with someone else is a valuable skill to learn and very rewarding once one has the knowledge.

5.2 Racial dynamics and appearance

A large portion of dancers commute from Hendersonville and Brevard, as well as smaller cities just outside of Asheville limits. Class privilege in this setting allows for those who have access to transportation, money, and time (no night-shift workers can make these events) to be present and participate in these events. In conversation with several people at these bars, there have been times when they lamented working the night shift because they could not attend salsa nights and “wind down” from a long week. K-Lounge puts slightly more emphasis on presentation than the other three salsa locations, which requires that one be relatively economically stable to buy better quality clothing and have a job that does not ask time on weekends. When I asked a dance instructor about image and if there was proper attire to wear, she claimed that there was no particular image that anyone was trying to strive for except when it comes to competitive salsa since the professional image mattered at that level. She said that “A dance space should be filled with happiness and freedom” instead of concern about how one looks.³⁶

Normally Mela venue is at capacity with over sixty people in attendance each week with a largely Mexican constituency. Since there is such a large population of Mexican dancers, reggaeton and cumbia are popular dances in this space since they appeal to the cultural background. Three years ago the salsa nights closed down and reopened after a brief hiatus, but upon the return of these salsa nights the music choices differed and drew a different crowd of people. The organizer of the salsa nights realized that he could make more profit if he appealed to primarily Mexican dancers rather than a wider group of people. With that in mind, he started playing more cumbia and reggaeton - popular, simple dances that are popular in Mexico. The class dancers attended Mela less and less, and now the constituency has changed to nearly all Mexican. However, one man I interviewed was from Colombia and told me that when he came to the States he was a metalhead, but when he started to miss his country he started listening to Latin music.³⁷ Salsa music and dance became a cultural placeholder for him in this sense; it was a way for him to hold his values, history, and country close to him even if he was not at home.

Every location I discovered after Mela’s was encountered through word-of-mouth advertising. Apparently Mela is ‘club salsa,’ which the salseros steer away from due to its bad reputation for avoiding proper technique and taking advantage of women. Everyone has a slightly different style, and if one chooses to have an ongoing relationship that is fairly close with one of these men it will mean something different than if they are a stranger. But again and again I heard people say that “Serious dancers don’t like it [club salsa].” Many prefer to learn more about body awareness through dance instead of putting themselves in a situation that may prove to be uncomfortable.

I learned that kisses on the cheeks are customary when greeting or disengaging with someone. Some might read this behavior as inappropriate or unwanted; while it is a custom that few Americans abide by, it is a sign of respect and endearment. Early in this research, a man I had been dancing with asked if he could walk my friends and I to our cars, and when we declined he said that that was okay, but he wanted us to be safe. I said that we could make the trip on our own, so he did not walk with us. However, he did catch our attention as we were walking away and told us that he was not following us, but that he was walking in the same direction to go back to his car. The fact that he felt like he needed to specify this was likely due to his position in society: a Hispanic older man following two 20 year old white women raises eyebrows, but since he made himself known and clear about his intentions he disseminated any suspicion or fear.

5.3 Music As A Building Block Of Social Order

Dance is an important social event with complex layers of social order that are present in the salsa community within Asheville; each dancer has a slightly different framework through which they understand the salsa community. Despite these varying frameworks, the members within the salsa community rely on each other for support and have made a network of people as well as a solid sense of self. Friendships and stronger communal bonds are formed in this environment that is rich with music and dance.

Tia DeNora is a university professor in the field of Music Sociology, and in her book “Music in Everyday Life” she explores how people respond and react to music.²⁵ Denora touches on concepts such as homeostasis, entrainment, regularity, security, and social organization as well as music and dance as a cultural placeholder in which multiple frameworks are at play depending on the individual and social context.²⁶ Music influences social order from large communal events to interpersonal occasions, all of which impact the community.²⁷ In the small community of Asheville, any friendships or relationships that are strengthened within or outside of the community make people more likely to attend these events, especially if their friends will be in attendance. The broader the friend group, the more

likely the community will be enjoyable for each the individual dancers, creating a community of inclusion and acceptance. DeNora reminds us that “One of the key mechanisms for establishing homeostasis is entrainment, the alignment or integration of bodily features with some recurrent features in the environment,” which means that the more familiar one is with the environment, people, music, and behavioral expectations, the more relaxed comfortable it is to be a part of the environment.²⁸

Music is active and dynamic, defining time and acceptable spatial relations as well as fostering personal relationships between dancers.²⁹ Every interaction must be contextualized and depends largely on the environment and external factors at play between the two dancers. The length of a song (roughly three to four minutes) is the allotted amount of time generally acceptable to dance with an individual. There are times when this is not always the case if two people are romantically interested in each other, but it is the norm. Once dancers have internalized the rhythm of the music, the body becomes entrained. Musical entrainment is when the body mimics a cadence or rhythm in music.³⁰ The most basic form would be simple rhythms, like a children’s rhyme or a march,³¹ but more complex rhythms are found in salsa. The regularity of the rhythm offers security in its predictable nature, but also freedom to move outside of the basic steps and into more complex movements. Stylistic differences come into play when musical rhythms and the body’s response to such rhythms are consciously altered. Perception of an individual can be altered depending on the social context of their movements. Everyone has a different style, but the general muscle memory and common language provides a basic vocabulary that all dancers can understand. DeNora writes that “How one moves one’s body - and the connotations that one ascribes to those movements (‘funky’ or ‘graceful’) - is a resource that, once generated, can be used in turn to clarify or constitute the connotations of the merchandise displayed and its ‘desirability’ - cool versus uncool, sexy versus cheap, for example,” which directly relates to the nature of salsa.³² The way different dancers move their bodies sends different signals to their partners and to the bystanders; messages that may lay claim on a partner, or messages that they are not enjoying the dance and need to escape the situation.

Salsa’s rhythm is important to recognize because “music is a device of social occasioning, how it can be used to regulate and structure social encounters” depends on the interaction of dancer and music.³³ Music and dance “provides a means for the regulation of feeling, mood, concentration and energy level,” and in the context of salsa this makes sense since it is a way to foster community and enjoyment between people.³⁴ Many people have said that salsa is therapeutic for them and that it brings them joy to come and salsa dance at least once a week, whether it is through class or at a social event on the weekend. In conjunction with the music, the “body actually engages in movements that are organized in relation to, and in some way homologous with, music’s properties, its ways of happening, such as tempo, rhythm or gestural devices, and so become entrained with the music. Certainly, no music will reliably move all listeners,” but music can provide common ground for people to communicate physically with each other.³⁵

Josh Kun, in his book “Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America,” explores the concept of popular music in relation to racial and ethnic identities. He explores how music offers solace and community to various voices within the United States since there is such a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds. The United States is not a melting pot or an average of multiple voices, but a distinct mosaic of different cultures and lived experiences existing with the same nation.³⁶ The voices within this salsa community are concerned with their immediate members: recently there was a woman who fell into a coma, and the salsa events at both Mela’s and K-Lounge held fundraisers for her medical bills. Even though there may be slight language barriers and a world of difference in background, the care and compassion is ever present.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

My influence in the Asheville salas community was frequent enough to the point that my absence was noticed. I did not seamlessly integrate into this community, but for ten weeks I became a part of this unique set of cultures and patterned rhythms, dancing alongside dancers from all different backgrounds. Salsa runs rampant in the city of Asheville. It is a place in which cohesive community thrives, whether it is for the street dancers or the academy dancers, there is a place for everyone who enters this arena of dance. Cultural connections are easily formed in this community, each individual feeling that their dance style is the superior since it often relates back to their regional identity. Many friendships have been built through salsa since it contains within it a way to express one’s self, as well as grow friendships. Mickey, the dance instructor, calls these people her salsa family: “They are trustworthy, good people. Dancing gets inside of you, and it creates community.”³⁷ The social order pertains to what kind of music is played, how genders interact with each other and what invisible hierarchies and expectations are in place, and how meaningful salsa is to people who use it as a cultural placeholder. Gender roles play a key role in how one is perceived in each salsa setting, and they vary depending on the community values and biases. Depending on the cultural

background and individual's history with partner dancing, the social context and meaning of salsa varies from dance to dance, partner to partner, and location to location. Racial divides are more prevalent in some locations over others, and may result in racism depending on whether an individual considers dance learned in a classroom setting to be better than dance learned outside of the classroom.

Ethnographic research is ongoing, and though I managed to reach a wide variety of people and gain a great amount of insight by interacting with informants on and off the dance floor, there is always more to discover due to the multivocality of the community.

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