

Salsa and the city: a case study on a Glaswegian ‘community’

Bethany Whiteside

Royal Conservatoire of Scotland

B.Whiteside@rcs.ac.uk

Abstract

‘Globalisation has led to the global export of salsa as a leisure pursuit’ (Skinner, 2007, p. 495), with salsa classes, clubs and congresses taking place ‘from Gothenberg (Sweden) to Sacramento’ (Skinner, 2007, p. 486). However, as Hannerz (1996) argues, cultural life continues to be heterogeneous despite the impact of globalisation, and with particular reference to social salsa dancing, ‘local particularities and individual reactions’ (Skinner, 2007, p. 485) give particular distinctions to ‘salsa communities’. Recent ethnographic case studies have interrogated the salsa scenes in London (Urquía, 2005), Los Angeles (García, 2013) and Belfast (Skinner, 2008). This paper interrogates the distinct nature of the ‘salsa community’ in the heart of the city of Glasgow, Scotland. Erving Goffman’s (1959/1990) model of dramaturgy is utilised to frame qualitative data gathered through observations and interviews, to ask: How may this ‘salsa community’, a product of globalisation, be considered as having a distinct identity?

Keywords: salsa, Goffman, globalisation, communities

Introduction

Latin American culture has spread from its sites of origin to permeate every arena of popular and recreational culture in Western society (Pietrobruno, 2006). Salsa dancing specifically, has been described as ‘a transnational practice, enjoyed by diverse classes, races and ethnicities, and cannot be easily linked to a particular group’ (Pietrobruno, 2002, p. 29). Defined as ‘practices that cross state boundaries but do not necessarily originate with state agencies or actors’, transnational practices ‘operate in three spheres, the economic, the political, and the cultural-ideological ... [-] “the global system”’ (Sklair, 1998, p. 2). García (2013) highlights Willie Colón’s description of salsa, as less of a particular music or dance genre and more of a concept: a ‘social, musical, cultural, hybrid force that has embraced jazz, folklore, pop and everything else that is relevant or could stand in its evolutionary path’ (as cited in García, 2013, p. 128).

Key literature from outside the Euro-American sphere includes the contributions of Febres (1997) and Herencia (1997) in the seminal anthology *Everynight life: culture and dance in Latin/o America*. Yet, the most relevant literature to the current study concerns ethnographic studies that link the activity and practice of salsa dancing to a particular location and explore the specific experiences that characterise it. Studies carried out have considered salsa dance in Belfast, Hamburg and Sacramento (Skinner, 2007), Belfast (Skinner, 2008), Los Angeles (García, 2008; 2013), Montreal (Pietrobruno, 2002), London (Urquía, 2005) and the US state of Illinois (Bosse, 2008). The current paper expands upon the above trend and uses Erving Goffman’s (1959/1990) model of dramaturgy and ethnographic research methods to interrogate patterns of social interaction uncovered in one salsa club in the city of Glasgow:

a macro salsa 'reality' (Goffman, 1959/1990) hallmarked by themes of technique, etiquette and exotica, both supported and challenged by the specific micro setting that is the city of Glasgow, Scotland.

The sponsored 'reality' in the salsa club

Goffman's (1959/1990) model of dramaturgy adopts the language of the stage, to explain the face-to-face acts of 'impression management' drawn upon by individuals and groups to control the nature of the social interaction(s) unfolding in any given scenario and setting. Whiteside (2013, p. 52) draws together the key concepts to explain that within Goffman's model:

[e]very individual is a "performer" who portrays themselves [sic] differently in the varying regions of "back stage" (a place of relaxation) and "front stage" (the performance space), to manage the impression that they wish to give to an "audience", which may constitute their fellow "performers". In a group setting, these individual performances can collectively join to present "team" and "sub-team" performances. Goffman (1959/1990) defines a team as "a set of individuals whose intimate cooperation is required if a given projected definition of the situation is to be maintained" (p. 108) The manner and appearance of individuals and "teams" are labelled as "personal front." Discrepant actions, including the use of "destructive information", "unmeant gestures" and "incidents" such as the committing of a "faux pas" can challenge the existence of the portrayed "reality" (Goffman 1959/1990) The central aim of "performances" given is to foster a particular "reality" (Goffman 1959/1990).

Whiteside and Kelly (2015, p. 3) further explain that

[r]oles are performed in conjunction with three interconnected elements: the physical environment ("setting"); the appearance and manner of the performer ("personal front"); and the collective, situational expectation ("front"). Collective expectations ("fronts") become institutionalized to the extent that performers and onlookers ("audience") are familiar with patterns and obligations and "can place the situation in a broad category around which it is easy for him [sic] to mobilise his [sic] past experience and stereotypical thinking" (in Goffman 1959/1990, p. 36)

Data was gained through attending and participating in the salsa club on a weekly basis over a period of two months, and through the hosting of semi-structured interviews and the subsequent actions of analysing and coding interview transcripts and field notes. Having basic skills in Cuban and New York styles of salsa dancing, I adopted the dual roles of researcher and dancer in the club. This case study was undertaken as part of a series of six micro studies exploring a range of participatory dance activities and practices within the city of Glasgow, through framing ethnographic data within Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model, as part of a sociology of dance PhD. As the largest and most diverse multicultural city in the nation, Glasgow was selected as the location for the study. Ethical approval was given by the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland's Research Degrees Committee for the

fieldwork to be undertaken. The use of pseudonyms ensures that anonymity in this paper is maintained.

This paper interrogates the collective actions, 'appearance', behaviours, 'manner' and motivations to reveal the nature of the sponsored 'reality', or salsa experience in one club, as evidenced through those intersections where '[a] macro choreographed performance (the dances and dancing) merge with micro individual [social] performances' (Whiteside, 2013, pp. 52–53). The overarching finding is as follows: a serious ('authentic' and embodied) salsa experience from the perception of the attending dancers is the 'reality' aimed for in the salsa club, and one that is both supported and challenged by the dance and social performances given, heavily shaped by the close-knit community of the club. The motivation for supporting a particular salsa 'reality' is linked to the designation of salsa dancing as both a 'global' and 'glocal' practice (Skinner, 2007). Salsa dancing is 'a global phenomenon' (Skinner, 2007, p. 486): its geographical spread is world-wide. Yet, where 'global processes intersect at the local level' (Skinner, 2007, p. 496), 'glocalisation' occurs (Holton cited in Skinner, 2007, p. 496). Salsa dance practice in Glasgow is shaped by cultural, economic and social systems pertinent to the location.

According to García (2013) and Urquía (2005), non-Latinas/os perform salsa as a means to consciously or unconsciously communicate a sense of worldliness and so become imbued with cultural and social status. The globalisation of salsa dancing not only explains how the dancers in the club were able to access the activity in Glasgow, outside its sites of origin, but explains its appeal as a dance form that is non-Western, and of the 'other'; exotic and glamorous. Bosse (2008) discusses the need felt by Western salsa dancers to access a Latin soul, and as Janet (a participant in the present study) explained:

Salsa speaks to my non-Western soul. Like it's my outlet. Because I'm not like, I'm not white. I am obviously but sometimes I feel like I really am Latina, all of these non-Western cultures are just so attractive ... I love colours. I love all of that popping hotness, so I feel like for me it is a little bit exotic and non-white. That's sort of my secret side or something.

Dance 'performances' and 'realities': conflicting salsa styles

Stepping into the salsa club space, I was immediately assailed by a riot of colour, movement and noise. Couples were so close together that at first glance, the dance floor was a seething uniformed mass of limbs. A second look revealed that each couple were dancing in their own particular fashion; there were variations of style, standard and speed (observation field notes).

The purpose of attending the club was not to learn salsa, but to dance salsa; existing technical knowledge and skill is a necessity. However, as reflected in the literature highlighted above (i.e. Bosse, 2008; García, 2013; Pietrobruno, 2002; Urquía, 2005), several competing styles of salsa are in existence, and Cuban, New York, and a hybrid form fusing salsa with ballroom, jazz and hip-hop were all performed simultaneously in the setting observed. The majority of dancers in the club do not originate from Glasgow; some are students studying in Scotland, others are

migrants. Pietrobruno (2002) illustrates that the globalisation of salsa has led to the existence of a profusion of salsa styles and arguably, there is no single 'authentic' salsa dance style in existence. However, as she emphasises: 'The exotic appeal of salsa outside of its sites of "origin" is, nonetheless, founded on the truth—or perhaps the illusion—that a genuine dance can be reproduced' (Pietrobruno, 2002, p. 23). In parallel with conclusions drawn from previous studies (Bosse, 2008; García, 2013; Pietrobruno, 2002; Urquía, 2005), there were underlying tensions between each style of salsa in the club, which were the result of differing factors drawn upon to validate the style in question. This was most obviously illustrated in the projected belief that Cuban salsa is given additional legitimacy through its link to an original site of salsa and New York salsa achieving a similar boost to the regard in which it is held through its focus on technical performance.

Within this Glasgow salsa club, the existence of competing salsa styles served to fragment a cohesive 'reality': dancers of each salsa style constituted a 'sub-team'. Although Goffman (1959/1990, p. 195) states that when conflicting 'teams enter social interaction, we can identify one as having lower general prestige', the key point here, is that the dancers attached to each particular style, believe in, and presented, their salsa performance as attracting the greatest prestige. Janet is a New York salsa dancer and defined this style as 'better' because

it's harder, because it is on the offbeat and so it's an extra challenge. But there is also a subtlety to it and it's less obvious. Like when you go back to dancing on 'one', it feels like you're going back to kindergarten, you know, after you've been in uni.

Yet, the challenging nature of New York style led Maggie, a Cuban dancer, to describe it as a 'really different dance. It's really difficult. I hate it. I don't like it'. She prefers Cuban because

I think there's more support ... in terms of how the guy holds you or how you're moving, but as with LA style, the women's often kind of out here doing like a spinny (sic) thing or something fancy, and the guy's back there.

A third style of salsa, the hybrid fusion attracted derision from both Janet and Maggie, because technically, and therefore visually, it 'stands out' from the more accepted styles and is a greater challenge for followers to contribute to a good dance performance. 'My friend Ryan, he sort of performs a performance type of salsa in a social setting, and so it's a little bit too flashy' (Janet). 'He's got his own style, but he yeah, you just want a basic step. Not to be thrown about all over the place' (Maggie). Maggie and Janet's discomfort with Ryan's approach reflects Goffman's comments on the need to maintain a cohesive 'reality': 'members of the team must not... present their own show' (Goffman, 1959/1990, p. 208).

However, the presence and actions of Jasper, an ex-champion ballroom salsa dancer and thus 'a performer [with] a higher status' (Goffman, 1959/1990, p. 67), garnered a very different response from the female dancers. His style of dancing is one that merges advanced technique with humour:

Jasper was swinging his leg up around the waist of his female partner, making his female partner take bigger steps than the other guys and performing snazzy moves, lifting and swinging his partner around. He crossed his arms and held his partner's arms low as he attempted to jump over them. He held his partner close in a classic ballroom hold whenever they were together, before turning them one, two, three, four times. The couple really stood out. Nobody else was dancing like them (observation field notes).

So popular and coveted is Jasper that as Janet informed me, 'he is never without a partner'. In blatant disregard of the accepted etiquette that sees the male leaders ask the female followers to dance, Jasper 'is generally an "askee"'. Lots of women ask him to dance' (Janet). In Goffmanian terms, Jasper's status is quite different to Ryan's: other dancers react to him with 'wonderment and chagrin rather than hostility' (Goffman, 1959/1990, p. 67), owing to the opportunity to interact with a dancer of markedly higher dance status. Jasper is not threatening, because he constitutes a 'team' of one and his presence increases the worth of the salsa 'reality' not only with his artistic and technical brilliance but with his humour. He is so secure within his role as an ex-champion ballroom dancer, that he is able to laugh at the role himself, whilst continuing the technical performance. He is not an 'imposter', pretending to be someone that he is not (Goffman, 1959/1990). As Goffman (1959/1990, p. 66) states: 'The audience [is] more concerned with whether or not the performer is authorised to give the performance than of the actual performance itself'. Jasper's impressive background, dance performance and dramaturgical (social) 'performance', is idealised and in lieu of an authority figure in the setting, viewed as a role model to admire and the 'perfect' partner to dance with. However, as a dancer who was previously part of a professional scene, and is now combining technical skill with humour and play-dancing, through throwing 'himself into his part with an affective enthusiasm that is at once exaggerated and precise, but so close to what the audience expects', the possibility exists 'that fun is being made of them' (Goffman, 1959/1990, p. 185).

A common element across all three styles concerns 'know-how'; skill and knowledge manifested on the dance floor. This was startlingly obvious when a couple from 'outside' the salsa club who did not belong to this 'front stage' space, found their way onto the dance floor, an event that constituted an 'inopportune intrusion' (Goffman, 1959/1990).

One couple on the dance floor, 'townies' (Janet) seemed quite drunk and they and their dancing really stood out on the dance floor. They were dressed in more loose-fitting clothing. Janet said that they would have wandered into the space by accident, or heard the music and followed it. Their dancing was more overtly sexual—she was rubbing her bum and breasts and walking away and towards him, and he was egging her on. The salsa dancers seemed to 'up' their technical performances in response to their presence (observation field notes).

The dance performance presented by these 'performers' was a '*faux pas*' (Goffman, 1959); a source 'of embarrassment and dissonance ... typically unintended by the person who is responsible for making them and which would be avoided were the

individual to know in advance the consequences of his [sic] activity' (p. 205). Through drawing upon dominant connotations associated with salsa—exotica and sexiness—the intruders thought that their dance performance was a valid one, but created an 'incident' through their lack of understanding of the need for technical skill. Goffman (1959/1990, p. 187) states, '[w]hen two teams establish an official working consensus as a guarantee for safe social interaction, we may usually detect an unofficial line of communication which each team directs at the other'. This collusion between the 'sub-team' members of various salsa styles was evident in their reaction to the '*faux pas*' (Goffman, 1959/1990).

Social 'performances' and 'realities': significance of regular partners

With such a small community engaging in an activity that is physically intimate and one that relies on certain dance performances in relation to style and standard, sociability plays a crucial part in maintaining friendly relations:

It becomes like a really tight-knit community, so it's its own little circle and it has its own kind of agenda and politics within it as well. In Glasgow it is a community, and I think you have to be willing to get involved in terms of the social side. I mean you don't have to be best friends with everybody, some people are, but it's not really what it's there for, but you do have to be interacting I think, and that also helps in terms of the dancing, like then people will want to dance with you and see you as part of the whole thing (Maggie).

The salsa club is populated with regular dancers who generally only engaged with one another in this setting and the 'reality' of serious salsa is both supported and undermined by the existing close-knit nature. One key consequence of the wished-for dance 'reality' and existing social 'reality' clashing was expressed through the frustration experienced in only being able to attain a limited technical progression and experience:

I wouldn't say I do it to improve my dancing. I do it to kind of keep it up, because if you don't keep going it atrophies sort of. I don't think it's going to get you to an improved level. It's just kind of like more maintenance I think. Like, I might be quite good on the dance floor here, but I go home to New York and I suck ... because you're just surrounded by all these people who can dance so amazingly and you're just like "wow, I want to dance like that". And that's kind of how I felt after the salsa congress also, like after Edinburgh. I was just completely like, not disillusioned, but I was totally uninspired to go back after that (Janet).

Social relations were complicated further by the fact that as 'leaders', the male dancers are adopting the role of the 'authority figure'. As Janet explained, 'the leader is the one who is like running the whole show', the intertwined dance and social performances. However, with certain partners, dancers knew that the dancing was paramount: 'So people that I know really, really well and I'm really comfortable with, we know each other and we know there's nothing inappropriate intended, then it's totally fine and safe and the physical closeness is a nice thing' (Janet). Dancing with

the same 'performers' regularly, gives individuals the chance to learn their particular dance style which improves the technical performance given together:

If you're dancing with them for a while, then you get to know their way of moving or you get to learn the subtleties of their dances which is really nice. And they get to learn how you dance as well, so that it becomes a partnership, like a relationship, not with everyone, but with people that you build up over time ... if they put their hand in a certain place, it means they want you to do something, so over time you would then realize that really quickly and then that would be specific to that one person and you react to it (Maggie).

With certain partners, 'chemistry' is shared, and if they are not present at one of the nights, it is defined as an 'off-day' (Janet), and a salsa night that is less enjoyable. Dancers also seek out particular partners for specific dances: 'When Batacha began to play, Janet looked out for Matt—"He's good at this one"' (observation field notes). Similarly, certain partners are avoided and due to the heteronormative nature of salsa dancing, it is usually certain male partners who need to be avoided, most often as a result of previous 'sleazy' performances and personality, unsafe practices, or more broadly, a boring experience.

Strategies employed to warn other female dancers to try and avoid certain male dancers, and to warn off the unwanted male dancers directly, included the use of 'un-complimentary terms of reference' (Goffman, 1959/1990, p. 173) and 'shop talk' (Goffman, 1959/1990).

As we walked up onto the platform, a guy in a striped shirt walked past us and gave Janet the thumbs up, mouthing the words, "we'll have to dance". Janet quickly smiled at him, turned and shook her head at me with a warning expression on her face before whispering, "He is so boring to dance with" (observation field notes).

Janet and Maggie pointed out what they termed as 'well-known grinders', to other female dancers. 'Informal cues or "high signs"' (Goffman, 1959/1990, p. 178) were adopted to 'initiate a phase in a performance' (Goffman, 1959/1990, p. 178); most notably, to subtly communicate to the male leader that they were not enjoying the dance, but without dramatically impacting upon the existing 'reality':

I mean if he's really pushing you close or something, well my first, the first sign that I'm not enjoying a dance is that I am not making eye contact with a guy. Strictly speaking, you should be having eye contact with your partner, like the entire time, because especially for the girl, you have to be focused on the guy because they are leading the dance, but the first cue that I am not enjoying myself is that I am like turned away and not making any eye contact with my partner (Janet).

Other, more violent actions on the part of the male leader, garner a more overt response: 'There have been maybe like one or two occasions, when I've actually had to say "look, this is really painful". They're either being inappropriate or hurting me' (Maggie). Janet told me, 'I had a friend who said "yeah, if you say 'no' enough times,

to a guy you have to say 'no' to, they'll stop asking you eventually". The sub-'reality' that is being fractured is in part one characterised by the heteronormative roles and actions adopted, and an etiquette that can be viewed as old-fashioned courtesy and romance. Female followers expressed the enjoyment felt in the simple gesture of being 'chosen' and asked to dance in an environment where this action is the norm, and therefore 'safe'. As Janet shared,

[o]ne of my favourite things is when a guy comes and asks you to dance and then takes your hand and leads you to a spot on the floor. I wouldn't hold hands with some guy that I met at a club. No way. That's way too intimate, you know. But in a salsa club, I really like that gesture a lot.

However, the expectation is then created that 'correct' behaviour having been instigated (and performed by both male leaders and female followers), will continue on to the dance floor. When 'other' behaviour is presented, female dancers react by creating a 'scene' (Goffman, 1959/1990): 'an individual acts in such a way as to destroy or seriously threaten the polite appearance of consensus' (Goffman, 1959/1990, p. 205) and 'a new scene is created by such disruptions' (Goffman, 1959/1990, p. 205). In part, the 'scene' is created because of friction felt on the part of the modern female salsa dancer who would not want to be attributed the label of 'follower' outside of the salsa club, as they realise that 'from an outsider's perspective, an outside point of view, you could look at it and see how traditional it is and how gendered it is' (Janet). Correct etiquette needs to be maintained in the salsa club for these existing tensions to be minimised. '[S]cenes occur when team-mates can no longer countenance each other's inept performance and blurt out immediate public criticism of the very individuals with whom they ought to be in dramaturgical cooperation' (Goffman, 1959/1990, p. 205). As explained above, Janet and Maggie 'screwed up [their] social courage and decide[d] to "have it out"' (Goffman, 1959/1990, p. 205). Although these actions go against the largely unspoken of normative etiquette adhered to in the club, and thus against the desired 'authentic' reality; arguably, the need to preserve the dance experience is paramount, because the visual and kinaesthetic element of the experience contributes most to this sponsored 'reality'.

Conclusion

Goffman's (1959/1990) dramaturgical framework reveals the social workings of the salsa club where dance performances (salsa style and standard) and social etiquette intersect. Suggestion is made that the 'reality' being predominantly sponsored by the salsa dancers, is one characterised by a sense of 'authenticity'; the sense of exotica and glamour intrinsic to the global salsa experience outside its sites of origin, rooted in a technical dance performance and adoption of a particular 'personal front' (physical appearance and social manner), giving participants the chance to adopt [an]'other' identity. The use of different spaces within the salsa club assisted the sponsored 'reality'; the activity was not well-advertised within and immediately outside the building, and the majority of salsa dancers that I spoke to stressed that they do not socialise with other attendees 'outside' and therefore the salsa 'reality' within is easier to maintain.

Key dance and social challenges reflecting the close-knit Glasgow setting of the club, to the sponsored 'reality', include the promotion and practice of conflicting salsa styles constituting the existence of 'sub-teams', varying standards of dance, departure from the agreed etiquette on the part of both male and female dancers (for example, abusing the role of leader, stopping dances), limited chances for technical progression and the constant need to be, or to appear to be, sociable. Existing kinaesthetic, social and visual tensions revealed within the collective 'team' of salsa club dancers, necessitated the adoption of various strategies including the transmission of 'informal cues' and a willingness to engage in other salsa styles.

The usefulness of this study may be viewed in two ways; primarily, as a contribution to the interdisciplinary field, sociology of dance, or to salsa dance scholarship. Given the ethnographic limitations of the research, it may be more useful to view this study as contributing an alternative framework to ethnographic studies that adopt particular sociological frameworks using models and concepts from Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault to consider ballet and contemporary dance practices (Whiteside, 2013). This case study also gives a flavour of salsa dance practice in a location not previously considered, that is, the city of Glasgow and in comparison with the ethnographic case studies previously cited, for example, García (2013 and Skinner (2008), the framing of data within Goffman's (1959/1990) model of dramaturgy, draws upon micro sociological tradition to reveal the dance and social 'realities' in existence. Given Goffman's focus on the face-to-face context, the potential exists for the sociologist's dramaturgical model to be employed to undertake comparative case studies. What could cohesive use of the concepts of 'personal front', 'front', 'performer', 'team', 'back stage' and 'front stage' to name a few, reveal about the micro 'realities' of other salsa clubs operating in the Western world?

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Biography

In 2011, **Bethany Whiteside** embarked on an ESRC CASE Studentship in the sociology of dance at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and the University of St Andrews, sponsored by Creative Scotland. Bethany has published in a range of peer-reviewed publications, presented at national and international conferences, is a guest lecturer at the University of Edinburgh and was a founding Co-Editor of the *Scottish Journal of Performance* (www.scottishjournalofperformance.org). In 2014, Bethany was a Visiting Research Scholar at the dance department of Temple University, Philadelphia, funded by the ESRC as an Overseas Institutional Visit.