

“It’s in Our Veins”: Dance Schools and the Construction and Maintenance of a Latin American Identity

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ABSTRACT

A recent influx of Latin Americans into Edmonton, Alberta, has been met with a significant rise in interest in Latin music and dance. Many Latin dance studios in Edmonton are continuing to gain popularity with people of Latin American descent and many other Canadian cultural groups. This paper focuses on one Latin dance studio in Edmonton called ETOWN SALSA. Through a narrative interview with the owner, coupled with supplementary research about cultural identity tied to Latin music, this paper provides insight into how Latin dance studios’ presence helps develop and maintain diasporic Latin American identities. For many Latin Americans, music and dance are an essential way in which they can connect to their home countries. Not only can Latin dance help new immigrants find a sense of familiarity, but dancing can also help second or third-generation immigrants reconnect with their heritage. Our findings also suggest that non-Latin Americans who regularly participate in Latin dancing can identify and connect more with Latin American communities in Edmonton.

Introduction

ETOWN SALSA Latin Dance Studios (ETOWN SALSA) is a Latin American dance studio that has gained considerable popularity and relevance in the contemporary Edmontonian milieu. After a sudden surge in widespread interest in Latin music and a significant influx of Latin Americans into Edmonton (i.e., there was a reported 22,550 individuals of Latin, Central and South American origins in Edmonton in the 2016 census (Statistics Canada, 2017)), ETOWN SALSA appears to be active every single weekend, providing Latin Americans, Canadians, and people of different origins with bits and pieces of Latin American culture. Through the medium of ETOWN SALSA, our research aims to explore whether there is a pertinent relevance in the presence of Latin American dance studios in the creation and maintenance of Latin American identities.

Methodology

This project was conducted in March of 2020 as part of a community-service learning project at the University of Alberta under the supervision of Dr. Russell Cobb. This study was divided into two correlating sections. The first revolved around an unstructured narrative interview with the owner of ETOWN SALSA Latin Dance Studios, followed by a subsequent transcription and analysis of said transcription.

We adopted an unstructured approach in the interview, as we wanted to learn about this individual’s lived experiences (Bernard, 2011, p. 158). We wanted to establish a personal rapport with our informant (Bernard, 2011, p. 158), and we felt that utilizing a structured interviewing approach would hinder this rapport. Our interview methodology, otherwise known as an ethnographic interview (Bernard, 2011, p. 157), was based on a clear plan of action (i.e., to gain insight into the lived experiences of Alejandro Rojas, the owner of ETOWN SALSA Latin Dance Studios), while establishing a minimum amount of control over his responses (Bernard, 2011, p. 157). Although the style may be called unstructured, there was still a sense of structure to the interview process. In our case, all the participating

parties (i.e., Alejandro and the researchers) were aware of what was occurring, and there was no shared feeling that we were engaging in “pleasant chitchat” (Bernard, 2011, p. 157). In other words, there was no sort of deception or trickery involved.

We specifically decided to employ an unstructured narrative interview because this method is “best for capturing the detailed stories or life experiences of a single individual or the lives of a small number of individuals” (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 210). Personal narratives are distinct forms of communication (Chase, 2018, p. 940). They are “meaning-making through the shaping of experience; a way of understanding one’s own or others’ actions; of organizing events, objects, feelings, or thoughts in relation to each other” (Chase, 2018, p. 941). Therefore, because life stories are one of the primordial ways humans organize experiences (Cortazzi, 2007, p. 384), we found it crucial to analyze Alejandro’s narratives. In other words, we created a biographical study of the owner’s life. In this way, not only did we learn of Alejandro Rojas’s life and the creation of ETOWN SALSA, but we were also able to shed some light on his identities and how he perceives himself (Creswell & Poth, 2017, p. 203).

The transcription was carried out with Express Scribe, an audio player specifically designed for typists and transcription work. In the transcription process, we carried out an orthographic approach that, overlooking any paralinguistic features, produced a document with only the words spoken by the interviewee (Jenks, 2011). We chose this approach because, for this project, we were interested only in Alejandro’s narrative. With the transcription in hand, we proceeded to extract moments in the narrative that provided us with key insights into Alejandro’s experiences and the creation of a Latin American identity through dance. It is important to note that this was an intuitive process, as we often returned to the transcripts to extract more information as we progressed in our literature review.

The second section of this project, the literature review, revolved around exploring some of the previous academic scholarship on dance and the development, maintenance, and dissemination of Latin American identities. Together, these two sources of information allowed us to determine: (1) the pertinence of ETOWN SALSA to Edmontonians (Latin American and other ethnicities alike); and (2) how Latin American dance studios contribute to the development and creation of Latin American identities.

ETOWN SALSA Latin Dance Studios

History

Alejandro Rojas, or Alex, the founder of ETOWN SALSA Latin Dance Studios, moved from Chile to Edmonton, Alberta, with his parents in the mid-1970s when he was just an infant. By some estimates, 200,000 Chileans fled or were forced into exile during the Pinochet years (Salinas, 2018). According to government statistics, Canada took in 7,000 Chilean and other Latin American refugees after the coup (Salinas, 2018). Among those who lobbied for the acceptance of the Chilean refugees were student groups, academic institutions, and religious organizations. In particular, the Anglican, United, and Catholic Churches lobbied the Canadian government as they maintained close relations with their fellow churches in Latin America. Given these ties to Latin America, Canadian churches, voluntary service organizations, and refugee rights advocates demanded that the Canadian government grant refugee status to Chileans (Raska, 2020).

Although Edmonton’s church community was welcoming to his family and other immigrant families, Alex recalls growing up “very humble” with his parents and younger sister. Alex’s love for music developed early in his childhood when his father threw political activist parties with live bands to collect money for families in Chile. Alex explains, “I would pretty much fall asleep with the music blaring in my ears, so maybe [it] was just [...] a given thing for me to eventually get into this.” Alex took folkloric dance lessons and played trumpet as a child, which only increased his appreciation of song and dance. He believes it was his love of music that helped him develop his math skills, which led him to pursue post-secondary education, culminating in a Bachelor of Accounting degree from NAIT. In the following excerpt, Alex describes how he first became interested in Salsa dancing:

It was 2001, and I started seeing more Salsa dancing going on at the nightclubs, and I was going there, and I was just dancing [...] what I saw my parents do; they did more of a cumbia-style version. So that's how I started salsa dancing, and then I slowly started seeing other dancers doing [...] bachata and cumbia. During my venture of seeing these dances, another school came in and started teaching. I was watching them and thinking, 'Wow, I've never seen anything like this!' I can't even copy it because [...] this was just a lot more complicated.

After seeing this new style of Salsa dancing, Alex decided to informally practice the intricate steps until a friend invited him to travel to Cuba. While in Cuba, Alex was able to explore the intricacies of Salsa music and dance. Eventually, Alex returned to Edmonton with an "urge to want to learn Salsa at a much higher level." At this point, Alex became more immersed in the local Salsa dance community, where he had a dance partner who eventually encouraged him to dance competitively. Alex recalls being quickly noticed by prominent figures after earning second place in his first competition. After the said competition, Alex was invited to attend one of the world's biggest Salsa congresses in Los Angeles in 2003. When he returned to Edmonton, he decided to start teaching salsa—to take what he had been learning and "try to cultivate a bigger scene [in Edmonton] that would be more dedicated to the dance."

New Beginnings

After participating in various Edmonton-based dance groups, such as Salsaddiction Dance Company, Alex decided to open his studio in 2008; Alex named this studio ETOWN SALSA Latin Dance Studios for an interesting reason. During the interview, Alex explained that he purposefully created a name that would have a double meaning. The "E" in ETOWN was intentionally left as an acronym to represent both words "electronic" and "Edmonton." While Alex wanted to embody the local, in the sense that he had Edmonton as part of the name, he also wanted to create a global community of Salsa dancers, or, as he explained, an "electronic town." While the company was established in 2008, it wasn't until 2011 that ETOWN SALSA acquired its first physical studio. Beforehand, ETOWN SALSA was more of an online forum, where Alex shared Salsa information, dance tips, and related articles. However, Alex decided that a physical location would be "more reputable," professional, and "more referable" to the public. Through his company's development process, Alex shared with us that he received many criticisms regarding the name and amplitude. Nevertheless, Alex refuted these criticisms, as he believed, and still believes to this day, that the end goal is a global diffusion of salsa.

Having settled down in a physical studio in 2011, ETOWN SALSA Latin Dance Studios became the first all-Latin dance academy in Edmonton. To this day, ETOWN SALSA has been based out of the same physical location, with the difference that now, instead of one dance studio, it possesses two; one of these is for casual lessons and group classes, while the other is reserved for competitive Salsa teams.

When speaking of ETOWN SALSA's origins, it is essential to note the communal aspect behind this company and Alex's vision. From its conception, ETOWN SALSA has worked cooperatively with other Latin companies and bands in Edmonton. For example, ETOWN SALSA often partnered with local bands like ¡BOMBA! or the X Band in its early days. Alex reminisced about his first Halloween event in the interview, which took place in Alex Taylor School, where he, alongside ETOWN SALSA and ¡BOMBA! hosted an incredible event for the growing Latin American community.

Community Connections

Alex explained that when he first opened up ETOWN SALSA, very few Latin Americans attended his classes. He believes that this may have been because "Latinos are very proud" of their heritage, which he vividly experiences. Due to the intense pride in his own Chileno heritage, when he was younger, Alex felt that taking dance lessons for

salsa from a non-Latino person was less comfortable or authentic than taking classes from a Latin American. Additionally, he thought that he learned more quickly than others because of his Latino heritage, as he could apply a “Latin perspective” to his dancing.

According to Alex, there has been a more significant influx of Latinos into Edmonton in recent years. He says that many Latinos in Edmonton feel that they have lost their heritage and culture and are looking to reconnect to their roots. Alex believes that this is why many Latin American people are coming to ETOWN SALSA to learn how to dance or further their dancing skills. He explains that, especially in younger generations, many Latinos seem to feel shy or embarrassed that they do not know how to dance. This shyness and embarrassment, then, is why they take his classes—to learn this new skill. Alex believes that due to his background and experiences with Latino culture and music, he can provide education to Latinos beyond merely the footwork in salsa. According to Alex, “there is so much more to this dance” than they realize. Furthermore, he feels fortunate that he was able to incorporate his Canadian upbringing into his Salsa instruction:

Latinos don't like to count. They don't want to dance like 1, 2, 3... 5, 6, 7... etc. They just feel it. We feel the rhythm, we know it. We know our clave, we know our conga drum, we can feel the beat. But, [...] you need to have a measuring tool. You need to know how to time the music. That's my Canadian side that I learned. And because of that, it just helped me to grasp that side easier than most Latinos that don't take music classes.

In our interview, Alex emphasized the importance of communicating in Spanish because it connects him to Latinos in Edmonton, especially those uncomfortable with their English communication skills. He also believes that teaching and learning dances with proper Spanish terms is vital to understanding and contextualizing the dances themselves.

ETOWN SALSA in Contemporaneity

ETOWN SALSA currently offers a variety of classes in their studios to fit various dancers' needs. The dance styles taught include Salsa, Bachata, Merengue, Latin Line Dancing, Mambo, Cumbia, and Cha-cha-cha. ETOWN SALSA provides private lessons and group lessons for single dancers and couples, and they even teach dancing outside of their studios at local schools and corporate events. Apart from hosting dance lessons, ETOWN SALSA can be found performing around Edmonton in venues such as The Orange Hub, Sherbrooke Hall, Mezza Luna Nightclub, Azucar Latin Nightclub, and countless more. Additionally, ETOWN SALSA collaborates frequently with a local band, Rumba Caliente: Edmonton's Latin Beat, to host Latin dance and music events in Edmonton at venues like The Rec Room at South Edmonton Common. Since 2015, ETOWN SALSA has hosted a Latin-themed New Year's Eve Party at the Renaissance Hotel attached to the Edmonton International Airport. This event includes dance lessons, a live band, Latin-inspired cuisine, multiple DJs, and ample room for dancing. Since this event started, it has grown in popularity every year, as more Canadians and Latinos are drawn to the festive celebration.

Dance and Latin American Identities

The Maintenance of Identities

Immigration to a new community involves a dramatic change that can affect nearly every relationship, structure, or value in an individual's life. Disconnection from one's home country or society can cause feelings of loss and isolation. Although individually felt, these feelings may be connected to a “socially oriented necessity, connected to an urge to construct the immigrant community” (Knudsen, 2011, p. 71). Immigrants seeking to fulfill the need for connection to their home life and familiar traditions can achieve this through engagement in socio-cultural activities and art forms.

Participating in dance forms from one's home country "offers compensation for the life one has had to leave behind; it is a symbolic activity with the capability of representing everything one misses from the home country. It evokes particular personal memories as well as collective national sentiments" (Knudsen, 2011, p. 75). Studies conducted on students who participated in folk dances from their Latin American home countries demonstrated that participation in these cultural activities helped them develop their own ethnic identity and awareness of their role in their non-Latino communities (Meeker, 2016). Latin Americans who danced at ETOWN SALSA often expressed to Alex that they felt a stronger connection to their home countries while dancing in his studio. Many of these participants admittedly sought out the dance studio to maintain some similarity to their lives before moving to Canada.

During the 1970s, after the Chilean coup, more than one million Chileans left their country under the Pinochet regime, which continued into the 1990s (Knudsen, 2011). There are currently so many Chileans living abroad that even though Chile only has 13 official regions, there exists a virtual 14th region, called "*el exterior*" or "*el reencontro*," that comprises all the Chileans living in different communities around the world (Knudsen, 2011). The Canadian government opened its borders to approximately 6,000 Chileans seeking asylum following the coup (Simalchik, 2004). This influx of Chileans brought Chilean cultural experiences and values that shaped Canada for decades to come. Cafes opened to showcase Chilean music, soccer leagues were created, Latin dance groups were formed, and Chilean murals were painted on several buildings across the country (Simalchik, 2004). These contributions, and more, added to Canada's current multiculturalism and served as a way for incoming Chilean and other Latin American immigrants to feel more at home. For Chileans living abroad, music and dance have been a popular and effective way to reconnect to the country they left behind. As was explained by Alex Rojas, through his exploration of Salsa dancing and Salsa music, he reconnected to his Chilean identity and his Spanish mother tongue. This experience is undoubtedly similar to the experiences of many Chileans and other Latin Americans living abroad from their home countries.

The Development of Identities

Latin Identities

In the literature, dance has been proven to be a way to develop a foreign identity. It is a well-known fact that participation in socio-cultural activities can develop Latin American identities outside of Latin America (Meeker, 2016, p. 119). For example, in a video provided by Indiana University Bloomington, an individual explains that it was, in fact, through dance that they were able to fully come to grips with their Latino identity (2015, 1:18). Furthermore, this same social practice created the atmosphere of a Latin fraternity amidst a non-Latin milieu. In this same video, another individual can be seen expounding that these events made them feel like their family would always be there for them, as a new family through dance was conceived (2015, 1:33). Returning to one's roots or invoking a Latin fraternity in a foreign setting is not as far-fetched as it seems. As explained by Flippin, learning to dance "is not only a matter of gaining knowledge (i.e., learning the basic principles of salsa and the names of the steps) and learning a skill (i.e., the specific steps and movements) but also of understanding norms and shared attitudes (i.e., salsa etiquette, gendered roles)" (2013, p. 85). This learning and understanding of norms and shared attitudes, more so than the dance or the music itself, creates this foreign but local fraternity.

In the lives of first, second, and even third-generation Latin American immigrants, identity reaffirming traditions are vital, as a symptom of living in foreign countries is substantial acculturative stress. This acculturative stress derives from exposure to other cultural values, practices, and languages that differ from one's 'home culture' (Meeker, 2016, p. 123). Socio-cultural traditions, such as dance and music, are crucial because they reaffirm one's home culture. Furthermore, they allow underrepresented groups to enact their identity in places where their cultures are typically silenced by a dominant group or where they experience discrimination (Meeker, 2016, p. 124).

Non-Latin Latin Identities

Interestingly, Latino identities of non-Latinos can develop through dance and the experience and embodiment of Latin music. As recent research on salsa and the transformation of style demonstrate, "the performance of Latin dances

helped non-Latinos remake themselves anew through the internalization of favourable aspects of Latin American ethnicity” (Bosse, 2008, p. 60). What is most interesting is that this “internalization was not discussed as something new, but rather as an excavation of something that pre-existed in the self” (Bosse, 2008, p. 60). This sentiment was mirrored in a study in Japan, where it is explained that “it is through an alleged *sabor latino* [...] that they seek to construct a universal (or at least ‘translocally’ Latino) fraternity” (Hosokawa, 1999, p. 514). While this idea may seem far-fetched, possibly even encroaching on the extremities of cultural appropriation, a more in-depth analysis demonstrates the considerable effects that engaging in socio-cultural traditions can have on one’s identity. As Flippin shows in her work, “Salsa Remixed,” the remixing of language with a culture not only blurs the noticeable lines between the different languages and cultural traditions but also the difference between our notions of identity (2013). Music, or dance, is often used as a metaphor of socio-cultural processes, meaning that the learning of a culture’s music or dance styles implies not only a relation to said activities, but it also “implies becoming a full participant, a member, or a type of person” (Flippin, 2013, p. 82). There are numerous dancers at ETOWN SALSA who are not of Latin American origins, but who still enjoy Latin dance styles. As Alex mentioned, these dancers frequently attend other Latin American-centred events around the city because of the opportunity to practice their Latin dancing. Dancing has integrated many of these individuals into communities they would otherwise not have had access to. In this way, non-Latin American dancers were able to develop an identity within the Latin American community in Edmonton. In other words, “learning [the dance] [...] is not only about familiarizing oneself with a new style of music and dance, but [it] also requires immersing oneself in [the] culture and community” (Flippin, 2013, p. 78).

Summary

Cultural activities and traditions can serve to connect to one’s heritage while abroad in a new community. For many Latin Americans, music and dance are two of the key mediums through which they can feel a stronger connection to their home countries. Not only can dance help new immigrants find a sense of familiarity and belonging, but it can also help second or third-generation immigrants get back in touch with a heritage that they may find otherwise difficult to access. Dance is not only a form of physical activity; it encompasses cultural histories, traditions and values. Therefore, in learning how to dance, one becomes aware of more about that particular group’s cultural aspects than is often realized.

Furthermore, non-Latin Americans who participate in cultural traditions such as Salsa dancing can identify more with Latin American communities. To immerse oneself in these activities is to radically transform one’s identity, leading to a better understanding of cultural values outside of one’s own. ETOWN SALSA encourages Canadians with no Latin dancing experience to learn more about Latino heritage while enjoying the culture. This sharing of cultural traditions leads to a more culturally aware space in Edmonton, where the dominant culture is actively taking the time to understand more about groups that would otherwise not be in the spotlight. After conducting research on this matter and seeing the influence that ETOWN SALSA has on dancers of all ethnicities, we feel that it is essential to support cultural activities provided by minority groups. This support can help immigrants feel more welcomed and at home in a new community while also encouraging locals to learn more about their new neighbours.

Limitations

Due to the qualitative nature of this research, we focused on one dance studio to gather an in-depth narrative from a member of the Latin-American dance community in Edmonton. We initially planned to interview participants and other instructors at ETOWN SALSA but could not do so because of the Covid-19 safety measures put in place in March of 2020. This paper’s purpose is to illustrate our research findings by comparing them to some of the previous academic work that has been conducted on the matters of dance and identity production. As such, our research should be considered a case study rather than a comprehensive overview of Latin-American identities and how they relate to

dance. Future studies should be conducted on various Latin-American dance schools in North America to gain further insight into this topic.

Implications

This study indicates that cultural activities such as dance can connect individuals to their heritage. Cultural dance classes can provide new immigrants with a shared community while also allowing second or third-generation immigrants to reconnect to their heritage in a meaningful way. Others who join these cultural activities without having a pre-existing connection to the culture can also empathize more with people of a different ethnic background, further contributing to an overall sense of community. The belonging that these individuals feel is vital to their well-being. Therefore, programs that promote connection to a particular culture should be encouraged. All individuals should have the opportunity to participate in cultural activities.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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