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The Meaning of Movement: Constructions of Identities in Partner Dance

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Dance as a sport, art, and medium of self-expression is practiced in myriad ways throughout many cultures of the world. Dance can also be used to construct meanings outside of the self; one of the most salient ways of doing so is through partner dance, where two individuals dance together in a coordinated way to generate a shared experience through communication and engagement with the other. In this paper, I will explore how identities and experiences are generated through the intersections of language, identity, and partner dances, including ballroom dance, salsa, and swing. Although my work is focused primarily on U.S. contexts, these intersections are applicable to many other forms of partner dance and other states and cultures. The research questions underlying my project include: How does partner dance construct identity (using sociolinguistic frameworks)? How does partner dance embody certain identity labels, such as race, gender, and sexuality? How does language play into these constructions of identity? How do different communities of practice engage with expectations of identities? To begin finding answers, I will analyze linguistic theories from scholars like Mary Bucholtz, Kira Hall, and Roman Jakobson to apply them to dance and examine sociological and ethnographic work by scholars on partner dance specifically, as well as non-academic accounts from observers and participants in partner dance.[1]

Dance and Language: Community, Practice, and Identity

In this section, I will evaluate the means through which partner dance is used to construct identities, particularly as it compares to languaging and theories of identity described by linguists. The concept of identity itself is nebulous, so I turn to the work of Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall to discuss a theory of the notion of identity and how it is constructed through practice. First, it is important to note that identities are always plural, and the idea of the single, composite identity experienced by the individual is a myth. Bucholtz and Hall describe identities as being "partial" for this reason, as they are always context-dependent and therefore fluid, flexible, and incomplete (Bucholtz & Hall 2009: 25). Additionally, identities are viewed and constructed not only within the individual, but also projected outside of the individual and co-constructed with other actors, such that an individual's internal sense of identity can coexist (even while conflicting) with an identity situated in the external view of others. Bucholtz and Hall define identity as "the social positioning of self and other" (Bucholtz & Hall 2009: 18); the essential characteristics of identity are emergence and relationality. Just as languaging is always dependent on its context and developed through community, so too is identity a social construction that emerges from engagement with others. The notion of performativity and the concept of "doing" identity are also central to an understanding of identity as a sociocultural phenomenon (Bucholtz & Hall 2009: 19–20). Ultimately, identity is a multifaceted experience that arises through actions and interactions with the self and community, is context-dependent and ever-changing, and is influenced not only by immediate context but by broader social and cultural ideologies and phenomena.

Through this understanding of identity, we have a foundation to explore partner dance as a communicative practice that is capable of contributing to identity construction much in the way that linguistic repertoires do. This connection can be further elaborated through Roman Jakobson's work on language and

[1] For another in-depth examination of ballroom dance experiences and identity, see Picart (2006). This text is very comprehensive, and while I did not have the time to devote to it in this essay, it is a great insight from a dancer and academic into this phenomenon.

culture. Jakobson emphasizes the inherently interpersonal nature of language, calling it a "struggle against isolationism" and driven by the human need to connect with each other; by extension, it is a necessary driver of everything else humans create, including culture and the pursuits that comprise cultures (Jakobson 1985: 101–7). Dance, as one such pursuit, is thus reliant on and related to language; partner dance in particular can be seen as another expression of the human need for connection, as a type of physical engagement with others that has the power to communicate meanings. Lynn Brooks and Joellen Meglin directly compare language and dance as mediums of communication, elaborating the parallels between the two. They present the idea that many people think of dance as a "language" in itself, which is reflected in the terminology commonly used in dance instruction across different genres, such as having a "vocabulary" of steps (Brooks & Meglin 2015: 127). Both dance and language share a number of features across styles or varieties: there are "rules" of some kind shaping their usage, which may be bent and played with for artistic purposes; they possess the capacity for infinite creativity; they are governed by biological, psychological, and social factors; and they exist in great diversity throughout the world. Additionally, dance, like language, is highly contextualized by its direct environment and by its aesthetic, social, and historical foundations, which directly affect its meanings—and language, like dance, necessarily has a physical component, whether it is spoken, written, or signed (Brooks & Meglin 2017: 128–32).

Jamie Callahan and Jonathon Marion evaluate these ideas in the contexts of West Coast Swing (WCS) and ballroom dance respectively, providing insight as to how specific forms of partner dance enact these concepts to construct identities. These authors provide two definitions of dance that I find especially relevant to this analysis: Callahan calls dance "a focal point for celebration and ritual without exchange value" that constitutes a cultural representation of the larger communities it is embedded in (Callahan 2006: 7), and Marion refers to these communities of practice as "social arenas in which community and identity are confirmed", where individuals have the opportunity to construct identities through engagement with others (Marion 2006: 8). Callahan's study of competitive WCS dancers provides significant examples of the notion that, for dancers, dance is very much like language; there is a consistently repeated view that WCS is like a conversation, a language in and of itself, and an important medium of communication and expression for self and others (Callahan 2006: 3, 16–8). One participant likened competence with the shared repertoire of the community of practice to a "secret language", allowing for communication with others who also "speak" it (Callahan 2006: 16). This communication is also directed inwards, providing self-awareness for dancers. The nature of improvised partner dance, Callahan argues, allows dancers to construct and recreate their own concepts of self and identity, and the participants in her study recognized changes in themselves and their self-perception (Callahan 2006: 20). A major part of WCS's ability to provide a space for internal change is the emphasis it places on individual expression. A number of dancers, primarily followers and including the author herself, noted the freedom given to followers to make their own creative choices, especially in contrast to other styles of dance like ballroom (Callahan 2006: 12–3). Callahan concludes her argument on the functions of swing dance with a statement also applicable to other forms of partner dance: "It is about finding a commonality with a partner and with a larger group of individuals and learning nuances of communication that improve awareness of self and others" (Callahan 2006: 21).

Marion also highlights the importance of the shared repertoire for partner dance, this time within the field of dancesport. The steps performed in International ballroom dance are, as the name implies, practiced all over the world; as a result, dancers from different countries and linguistic backgrounds can dance with each other without needing to speak a common language. On top of this, dancesport communities develop their own jargon, codes, and hierarchies that are intelligible to members of the community of practice, but less so to those outside of it (Marion 2006: 8). Supporting Callahan's argument and the linkage of dance to language as mediums of interpersonal relations, Marion describes dance as a type of "collective involvement" (Marion 2006:

9), much in the way that language is a collective pursuit; in this way, and through its relationship to culture, dance becomes significant in constructing not only individual but also community and national identities (Marion 2006: 9). Marion grounds this discussion in the notion of embodiment, emphasizing the interconnection of body and mind and the inevitability of changes in one affecting the other. Because the use of the body necessarily affects the mind, physical movement—especially something like partner dance, which involves the interaction of multiple bodies at once—affects the construction of identity and the way individuals experience and portray their ideas of self (Marion 2006: 9). Identity and meaning, he argues, cannot be fully understood without incorporating activity and performance, both of which are highlighted to an extreme in ballroom dance (Marion 2006: 13).

From Dancesport to Salsa: Race, Nation, and Marginalization

In this section, I will evaluate constructions and portrayals of racial, ethnic, and national identities within partner dance communities. I will begin with two analyses of ballroom dance communities examining the performed hierarchization of whiteness and the exoticized Other, from Juliet McMains and Joanna Bosse. McMains, a long-time dancesport competitor, discusses what she labels a practice of brownface within dancesport as part of constructing a "Latin" identity. There is an implicit requirement for serious competitors in the Latin dances to tan or darken their skin, although many in the industry reject a racial reading of this practice and instead refer to it as a signifier of health and wealth (McMains 2002: 54). This practice of brownface is only one factor in a system that separates these dances from their historical cultural roots while claiming ethnocultural authenticity, contributing to the idea of a "multinational, multiethnic melting pot" that disguises a white-centric hierarchy (McMains 2002: 55). The very concept of "Latin" dance relies on stereotypes of Latin Americans and groups together dances from extremely disparate cultures as one unified idea, against which the white, European, aristocratic ideal of the Standard dances can be contrasted. The performance of whiteness subsequently emerges from the contrast against the racialized Other, which itself reveals more about Western beliefs than about actual practices of Latino communities (McMains 2002: 56). Latin dances are contrasted by explicit sexuality in costuming, choreography, and narrative, making them appear simultaneously more expressive and more "primitive" in relation to what McMains calls the "romantic fairy tale of civilized Western culture" presented by Standard dances (McMains 2002: 57). Additionally, the brownface performed in dancesport separates competitors from Latino dancers outside the ballroom even as it exoticizes their appearance, because these competitors are still recognizable as white and can simply return to their original skin color at any time. McMains compares this practice to the history of minstrel shows in the United States and how both reveal white beliefs about the cultures of racialized groups (McMains 2002: 57–9).

Importantly, McMains also makes clear the divisions between dancesport and social dance, and how the two communities of practice function differently in their methods and goals; she argues that much of the communication and expression that takes place in dancesport is directed at the audience and judges, rather than having an emphasis on "conversation" within the partnership (McMains 2002: 60). Another significant difference is the fact that ballroom dance and particularly dancesport, as opposed to other styles of more socially-focused dance, are marketed primarily towards upper-class individuals. The ideology of authentic cultural portrayal cultivated by the Latin dances allows their explicit sexuality to be performed without being considered too scandalous or low-class, in contrast to the implicit sexuality performed in Standard dances. This issue is further complicated by the extreme class disparity that exists within the dancesport world, where hobbyists tend to be far higher class than dancesport professionals who rely on the industry for income, which typically goes unacknowledged (McMains 2002: 60–2). McMains concludes her argument by pointing out the fact that the Latin dances also have a variety of African roots, which have also been obscured during the process

of “cleaning up” these dances, in which they have been standardized, whitened, and Westernized to be included in the sphere of ballroom and divorced from the practices of social dances (McMains 2002: 63). At the time of writing, she notes, there were few Black dancesport competitors, with many more Asian participants and a growing Latino community—but despite the racial hierarchies and marginalization present within the scene, some high-level competitors saw hope and increased diversity both in demographics and physical techniques (McMains 2002: 66).

Bosse presents a similar view of racialization and the construction of whiteness through an ethnographic study of dancers at the Regent Ballroom in Savoy, Illinois (Bosse 2007: 22). Dancers in her study connected metaphorical racial identity to dance ability within a structure where whiteness is rendered as normative (literally called Standard) and the racial Other is marked as exotic, with these classifications being constructed—and internalized—through performance (Bosse 2007: 19–21). The demographics of the study also paralleled McMains’s conclusions; the dancers were relatively representative of the racial demographics of Savoy, which meant they were mostly white, and few were working-class, with most being upper-class elites (Bosse 2007: 23–5). Over the seven years of the author’s research, she only met six Black ballroom dancers and fewer Latino or South Asian dancers; East Asians and Asian-Americans comprised the largest minority group. Additionally, the lower-class dancers noted the financial burden and limitations on participation (Bosse 2007: 28); this further underscores the fact that ballroom dance as a hobby is primarily aimed at an upper-class audience.

In conjunction with the idea that identities and meanings are constructed and communicated through performance, Bosse argues, like McMains, that the Standard dances create an ideal of whiteness connected to “Europeanness” (fictional though it may be) and upper-class sophistication, which exists in opposition to the racialized Other of Latin dances (Bosse 2007: 30). Bosse provides evidence of this contrast in the form of the language used by dancers to describe the dances: Standard dances were most commonly referred to as “elegant”, “classic”, “beautiful”, and “graceful”, while Latin dances were described as “sexy”, “hot”, “fun”, and “sensual” (Bosse 2007: 30–2, 38). Latin dances are also often marked by Spanish-language songs in competition, which further highlights the divide from most of the Standard dances (Bosse 2007: 33). The notions of grace and beauty in the Standard dances are embedded in white, upper-class European ideals, but disguised as being allegedly universal judgments; this ideology cannot exist without the counterbalance of the exoticized Latin dances. The Latin dances evoked constant references to metaphorical Latin “blood” from dancers in a way that Standard dances did not, as well as essentialist terms like “organic” and “natural”. Latin dances are also heavily associated with sexuality, and Bosse concludes that Latin dances are seen as an opportunity to explore sexuality in an “acceptable” context (Bosse 2007: 37–9). Bosse ultimately argues that the racialized divisions of whiteness and exoticized Others that the hierarchy of ballroom dance relies on, while extremely problematic, also create a space for transformation and exploration of identity across racial and cultural boundaries (Bosse 2007: 40).

Outside of the ballroom dance community, racial and cultural hierarchies are navigated in other ways. Cindy García’s ethnographic research on salsa practices in the Los Angeles area evaluates how hierarchies within Latino communities are produced through dance practices, where L.A. salsa dancers practice a specific style of dance that distances them from stigmatized “Mexican-ness” (García 2019). Within this community, salsa steps and practices from Mexico or other places in Central America are seen as “wrong”—despite the fact that a significant portion of L.A. Latinas/os belong to those communities as well. García discusses how dance is used to negotiate which bodies and identities belong and matter most, and how the physical spaces in her study where dancing occurs delineate not only skill, but also racial and class designations (García 2019).

Much like in the dancesport world, judgments of certain stylistic practices in salsa are often discussed as matters of taste, which hides the fact that what is often being criticized is race, class, or nationality. One such identifiable practice is the bounce of Mexican cumbia, whereas L.A. salsa is “smooth”; dancing too slowly or

socializing too much instead of dancing will also lead others to judge a dancer as being Mexican, but more explicitly target them for being unsophisticated to hide the real criticism taking place (García 2019). Many dancers thus deliberately attempt to eliminate Mexican-associated practices from their repertoire, even if they themselves are not Mexican or Central American (García 2019). This is further complicated by the fact that L.A. salsa itself is a reaction to a hierarchy privileging New York Latinas/os, where N.Y. mambo dancers associated themselves with Puerto Rico and distanced themselves from Mexican-ness as well (García 2019). A number of Latinas/os are critical of the L.A. salsa scene, seeing it as a "dilution" that reflects American ideas of Latinidad and rejects existing cultural connections and histories. Salsa dancers must also contend with a conflict against whiteness, where dancing with too much ballroom technique is seen as "too white", while "street" techniques are "refined" while maintaining an "exotic" image. The result is that "correct" L.A. salsa practice is deterritorialized from any specific Latino identity (García 2019). The hierarchization process that occurs within the L.A. salsa community is a social process, where one's place is determined by the judgments of others, and those higher up rely on the existence of those they consider less sophisticated—and thus associated with specific marginalized identities—in order to be contrasted (García 2019).

Not all stories of partner dance are ones of division and hierarchization, however. Kimmy Yam of NBC reports on how ballroom dance has become a safe haven for Asian-Americans and Asian immigrants to the United States, as well as an integral social practice for older members of the community (Yam 2023). Ballroom dance functions as a creative outlet, opportunity for performance, and chance to show off the self, which gives individuals a space to explore their identities and express what they want to the world while engaging in an interactional, community-building practice. This is especially salient in communities with histories affected by trauma and fracturing of identities, such as the challenge of migration to a new country and culture (Yam 2023). Even while dance communities may reify racial and cultural hierarchies, dance practices can, at the same time, offer the ability to create identities outside the boundaries of what might be traditionally and restrictively enforced in other areas of society.

Liberation or Antiquation? Sex, Gender, and Sexuality

In this section, I will examine perspectives on the construction and performance of sex and gender roles as well as views of sexuality within the world of partner dance. Robert Bulman and Jonathan Marion both provide an excellent foundation from which to begin this analysis. Bulman, as a non-dancer reviewing the 2005 San Francisco Open DanceSport Championships, gives us a glimpse into how identities and narratives are projected to audiences observing partner dance. He expresses surprise at the fact that USA Dance had five times as many members as it did in 1990, despite what he describes as "retro formality" and "rigid, traditional gender divisions" (Bulman 2006: 61). This is likely to surprise many outside observers in a world of increasingly progressive views on the experience and performance of gender; however, as I will discuss later in this section, individual gender identities in partner dance are often constructed and experienced very differently from how they are performed. Bulman paints a vivid image of how these portrayals are constructed through costuming and appearance by dancers, using succinct descriptions that serve as a good basic image for outsiders without requiring an in-depth discussion of costuming regulations: in the Smooth and Standard dances, men sport "white shirts, bow ties, and black tuxedos with tails … [they] are immaculately groomed; they have short hair and clean-cut looks", and women wear "unique, eye-catching, and colorful gowns festooned with rhinestones and glitter"; by way of contrast, the Rhythm and Latin dances feature "open-chested shirts and … scanty, skin-revealing, sequined outfits with high-slit skirts and tops that show bare midriffs and cleavage" (Bulman 2006: 62). He also highlights the division addressed by authors writing on the racialized contrast between Standard and Latin dances, where Latin/Rhythm dancers "...playfully flaunt their sexuality … a dramatic shift from the

controlled, cool, and carefully sculpted routines of the European dances" (Bulman 2006: 62). Most importantly, however, this is a performance that seems to differ from what dancers themselves internally experience; even facial expressions are choreographed, and happy smiles and apparently effortless movements on the floor mask aching muscles, rivers of sweat, and often frustration and disappointment. He refers to the elaborately constructed gender roles as a "fantasy" of male dominance, where the narrative painted by dance performances hides conflicting gender roles and expectations, given the traditionally feminine stereotype of dance in Western society (Bulman 2006: 61–3).

Marion, meanwhile, establishes an embodiment-focused perspective for how both internalized and externalized meanings and identities can emerge from partner dance. Because dance is a deeply physical, body-based medium of conveying meanings, it lends itself strongly to constructing sexual and gendered identities (Marion 2006: 9). Ballroom dance—as well as many other forms of partner dance—has a strongly gendered division of leading and following, where men are expected to lead and women to follow. This institutional standard has an impact on every dancer, whether they choose to conform to these roles or not; restrictive gender standards are the norm and deviations stand out starkly. The experience of confronting these standards, which render explicit many ideas less openly discussed in other areas of society, makes one more aware of their own gender identity as it conforms or conflicts with them (Marion 2006: 10). This is further emphasized through the costuming norms described by Bulman, which construct different pictures of masculinity and femininity in the Smooth/Standard and the Latin/Rhythm dances, resulting in multiple forms of identity for dancers to contend with, especially as one's skill in the dancesport world is often linked to how well they conform to these appearances (Marion 2006: 11–2).

Valentin Meneau and Niall Richardson explore how this battleground of identities creates conflicts in the performance of masculinity. Meneau argues that dancesport performance reinscribes rape culture in its gender narratives, glorifying violence and the objectification of women to uphold the fantasy of male dominance (Meneau 2020: 962–3). Gender is performative, and the issue for dancers is that the narrative they are expected to construct clashes with what the performance necessitates of them, as they cross the boundaries of what is traditionally expected of each binarized gender into the other. As one adjudicator argues, stereotypically gendered characteristics "constitute a social order that must not be reversed"; as a result, gender becomes over-performed and exaggerated by dancers to maintain this image, and though some may read this as camp, Meneau argues it is not deliberately subversive (Meneau 2020: 964–5). Masculinity in particular is challenged as male ballroom dancers appear feminized as objects to be observed, as well as through the act of creative bodily expression; to make up for this, their movement must become overly masculine through aggressiveness and speed, and they are paired with overly feminized and sexualized women to contrast them (Meneau 2020: 966). The performance of masculinity occurs in relation to others, relying on a relationship to women and to other men, much in the way that the concept of whiteness is constructed in contrast to a racialized Other. Female dancers embody the image of contrast through choreography, which presents an ideological dichotomy between what Meneau identifies as the hesitant virgin and the seductive femme fatale, expressed through distance between bodies, intimate holds, and sudden changes of direction, often through obvious manipulation of the woman's body by the man (Meneau 2020: 967). However, the physical reality within the couple is that both partners are equally active and important, and both transgress gendered expectations; male leads must be receptive to their partner's needs, and female follows must be decisive and active in their behaviors. As Meneau argues, "If the practice of DanceSport must be egalitarian, the representation it produces is far from it. The balanced dance mechanisms are used to construct an illusion of masculine dominance and female subordination" (Meneau 2020: 967–8). Male dancers are choreographically encouraged not only to physically manipulate their partner's body (which they must do as the lead), but to do so in ways that dramatically demonstrate possession

and power for the audience, which is seen as the norm and ideal within dancesport. In Meneau's view, the public-facing discourse of dancesport thus ultimately depicts women as objects and men as entitled to their bodies (Meneau 2020: 978).

Richardson further analyzes how the complex issue of masculinity functions within partner dance through a discussion of effeminophobia and its pervasiveness in the world of ballroom (Richardson 2016: 208). While dance is identified as a safe space for gay men, with many professional ballroom dancers identifying as gay, same-gender dance couples have been publicly critiqued on dance shows by judges for "effeminate dancing", with the judges claiming their comments have nothing to do with homophobia (Richardson 2016: 207–8, 211). The problem for the dance world, Richardson argues, is that male effeminacy disrupts biologically essentialist views of gender roles and highlights how masculinity is a performance; because this performance is enacted through choreography, ballroom may suggest that gender is deliberately learned and rehearsed (Richardson 2016: 209, 212). This is a threat to a world order where women, and thus femininity, are viewed as inferior, and where dance is already typically gendered as feminine in Western discourse.

Because the "traditional" gender dynamics depicted in ballroom dance are created through exaggerated performativity, it has the potential to be read as camp, but high-level dancers support Meneau's assertion that it is not deliberately so (Meneau 2020: 965); rather, they support essentialist ideologies underpinning these roles (Richardson 2016: 213). Non-dancers may, however, view ballroom as camp or as inherently feminine; subsequently, male dancers must synthesize a visual ideal of masculine dominance with stereotypically feminine performativity. This conflict is more relevant for male dancers because women are not as expected to incorporate masculinity into their performance—in fact, they must actively suppress visible displays of "masculine" strength (Richardson 2016: 212–4). To help construct this image, we return to the idea that the male dancer's masculinity is reinforced by the contrast of the excessively feminized partner. Thus, critique of same-gender partnerships can be read as less about homophobia and more about the necessity of a female partner to protect an image of masculinity, as same-gender male couples draw attention to how ballroom plays with and performs gender roles while rendering the precarity of constructed masculinity visible to the outside world (Richardson 2016: 214–6).

Women in partner dance communities also have to contend with complex and multifaceted portrayals and experiences of femininity and womanhood. Laura Flippin analyzes the intersection of gender, language, and culture within a university salsa club in Philadelphia, connecting the development of identity as a salsa dancer with increasingly fluid concepts of cultures and identities more broadly (Flippin 2013: 77–8). Learning dance, in this case salsa, is not just about learning in isolation, but also about immersion in a new culture and community. As identities are performed and constructed within a community setting, becoming a salsa dancer involves embodying a new identity in addition to learning movement techniques (Flippin 2013: 79–80). The club in Flippin's study was predominantly white and Asian, with a much smaller minority of Latina/o students present (Flippin 2013: 81), suggesting cross-cultural engagement and development may have been a central factor for many of the students involved. Within the club's activities, the instructor's language reflected broader ideologies about gender roles in the dance community. She asked "ladies" to grab a "gentleman" or vice versa, rather than using lead/follow terminology; similarly to high-level dancesport, lead and follow are specifically gendered terms in both the classroom and the broader community (Flippin 2013: 84, 87–8). The gender ideologies reflected by this language use are also more broadly applied to ideas about each partner's role within the dance: "The man's role is to provide a framework and the woman's is to make it 'amazing'" (Flippin 2013: 88). Because salsa has different styling techniques typically attributed to women and men, performing specific gendered identities is part of being recognized as a salsa dancer. These identities may feel restrictive, regressive,

or at odds with the internal identities of individuals; one female participant expressed feeling dominated and an inability to make decisions because of the gender dynamic (Flippin 2013: 87, 89).

However, salsa also offers the opportunity for women to construct and develop identities for themselves in more positive ways. Sheila Bock and Katherine Borland's work on how women construct identities through different forms of dance and engagement with other cultures provides insight into how physical movement can allow women to escape limiting ideas about the female body in American culture. While views of exoticized Others are often delegitimizing in nature, the authors argue for a form of othering where participants are looking outside the bounds of their own culture for new ways to define the self, hybridizing their own identity with the "movement vocabulary" of another group (Bock & Borland 2011: 5). By 2006, about 60% of dancers in the New Jersey studio salsa scene identified as Latino; Borland notes that many second-generation Latinas/os join salsa studios as a way to connect with their cultural heritage (Bock & Borland 2011: 14–5). Because studio salsa is a diverse community of practice, instructors contend with ideologies of authenticity and essentialism like those found in L.A. salsa and dancesport. They challenge essentialist ideas about dance, both telling non-Latinos that they can become skilled at salsa regardless of their background and telling Latino dancers that they are not naturally gifted because of their ethnicity (Bock & Borland 2011: 14). However, skilled dancing is still often conflated with Latin heritage, and those who engage heavily and skillfully with the dance may be identified as Latino by others, even if they are not. Despite attempts at challenging these essentialist ideologies, the popularity and "authenticity" of the salsa scene still relies on essentialist ideas of culture and Latin heritage (Bock & Borland 2011: 16–7).

Part of the culture portrayed in the studio setting is a particular view of femininity and sexuality expressed by the dance. This studio salsa, Borland says, emphasizes the idea that salsa is not about masculine power, but rather about women's pleasure (Bock & Borland 2011: 15). The feminine beauty ideal in the salsa world is petite, curvy, and nonwhite, in contrast to Eurocentric beauty standards; yet despite this ideal, dance skill is ultimately privileged over appearance. A great diversity of body types exist in the salsa world, with Borland claiming thin dancers are in fact a minority (Bock & Borland 2011: 15–6, 20). Borland also offers an alternative claim to those made in other analyses of dancesport and salsa: that despite the appearance of heavily gendered roles within most forms of partner dance, female salsa dancers are given extensive freedom of expression in their role as followers (Bock & Borland 2011: 17, 27). One dancer articulates this more egalitarian view, in which the dance is a form of communication where both partners work together to construct a shared experience and meaning (Bock & Borland 2011: 17). Crucially, the sexuality of salsa is also depicted as a positive aspect for female dancers; Borland calls it "a substitute for rather than a prelude to sex", with the studio constructing an environment where women can express and engage with their sexuality in a way that feels safe and supported (Bock & Borland 2011: 18–9). In this world, dance allows women to celebrate femininity and womanhood in a way of their choosing through embodied, physical knowledge while negotiating disparate ideologies of femininity. Salsa is a way to engage with Latin culture for people of all backgrounds, and participants gain more interest in the culture and diversity of the dance scene, opening it up as a space for exchange and appreciation rather than purely exoticization and appropriation (Bock & Borland 2011: 23–5).

Partner dance is thus a space where both masculine and feminine identities are constructed and negotiated in complex ways for men and women alike. Allison Yamanashi Leib and Robert Bulman's study on the gender complexity of ballroom dancers in the San Francisco Bay Area examines how this identity work relates to the conflict between politically progressive participant beliefs and the image of traditional gender roles performed through the dances. Overall, they found that participants had very complex gender identities and senses of self in relation to the gender roles expressed by ballroom dance (Yamanashi Leib & Bulman 2009: 605). Many of the dancers considered themselves very progressive and transgressed gender roles off the dance

floor, even while adhering to them on it; both women and men performed gender roles in both traditional and nontraditional ways (Yamanashi Leib & Bulman 2009: 605–6). 77% of women studied strongly preferred following, but 23%, a significant minority, did not and were more fluid. Many lesbians within the community particularly demonstrated fluidity between lead and follow roles (Yamanashi Leib & Bulman 2009: 607). These women who intensively participated in ballroom put a significant deal of energy and material resources into constructing complex feminine identities. For many, the typically feminine gestures of the follow are an opportunity to demonstrate physical strength and technique; however, for some women who do not align themselves with progressive views, the ideologically regressive traditional femininity reinforced by ballroom is desirable (Yamanashi Leib & Bulman 2009: 608–11).

Ballroom both disrupts and reinforces traditional masculine gender roles as well, allowing gender expressions outside the bounds of traditional masculinity to be constructed. Many men in the study simultaneously engaged with traditional and non-traditional forms of masculinity; the former was expressed in presentations of heterosexuality and preferring to lead, but some men indicated a desire to switch between leading and following (Yamanashi Leib & Bulman 2009: 612–4). Additionally, they all actively valued and wanted to foster emotionality and creativity through dancing, and disagreed with the ideological standard of traditional masculinity when asked; some explicitly liked ballroom for its defiance of stereotypical masculinity (Yamanashi Leib & Bulman 2009: 614–5, 617). There were also a number of gay male couples who danced together and were embraced and supported by the community, defying typical norms of the lead/follow roles and heterosexual narratives (Yamanashi Leib & Bulman 2009: 616). Ultimately, the authors concluded that because ballroom dance is a leisure activity that people choose to engage in voluntarily, it is an important space for creating identities. They conjecture that the increased popularity of ballroom is because it fosters the emergence of complex and fluid gender identities as an arena where people can play with and blend gender roles (Yamanashi Leib & Bulman 2009: 608, 610, 618).

The performativity and potential fluidity of the identities constructed through ballroom dance has made it an avenue for queer self-expression, despite homophobia and effeminophobia within the scene. J. Ellen Gainor, writing for The Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide, presents an intriguing insight into the world of same-gender ballroom dance (Gainor 2006: 17). Gainor accepts that ballroom is traditionally a symbol of heterosexuality, but leans into the camp perspective, saying that it "demands an externalized, exaggerated performance of gender roles, a mastery of highly stylized sartorial and gestural codes, and an understanding of conventionalized sociosexual narratives conveyed choreographically" (Gainor 2006: 17). She accurately notes that both lead and follow, regardless of gender, must control the partnership in different ways, and both are responsible at different times for initiating movements around the space of the dancefloor (Gainor 2006: 18). Same-gender couples may choose (or even be expected, in certain competitions) to "switch the lead", swapping roles between the partners; this action signifies resistance to the established gendered notions that are traditional in ballroom and represents a fluid partnership of equals. This fluidity is also reflected in the wide variety of costuming, including the adoption of typically feminine costume elements by male follows and masculine elements for female leads, but this is not exclusive to those roles (Gainor 2006: 18). In recent years, there has been a growth in same-gender partnerships, and both the National Dance Council of America and USA Dance explicitly allow gender-neutral couples, where anyone may occupy either role; the World DanceSport Federation, however, still does not (I Love Dance Shoes 2021).

Towards the Evolution of Partner Dance: Conclusions and Future Directions

Ultimately, much like language, partner dance comprises an interplay of learned and structured yet dynamic forms from which meanings emerge, and exists within partnerships and groups; even when partner

dance steps are performed solo, they arise from a communally developed context with a relationship between multiple users in mind. Because partner dance is not a solitary practice and dancers exist in multiple contexts and communities of practice, it can be used to construct identities in a very similar way to language. These identities are sometimes in conflict with one another; outside observers may interpret partner dance narratives as ones of heterosexual, misogynist domination, while participants may internally experience a balanced dynamic that synthesizes both masculine and feminine qualities and requires the crossing of boundaries. The racial, cultural, and gendered hierarchies generated by different forms of partner dance and different communities of practice vary widely and have different impacts upon the participants, which results in the construction of fluid and complex identities, expressed both through physical movement and through language.

I propose that more studies of partner dance communities should be undertaken in order to examine the demographics and experiences of dancers today. This topic is of vital importance to the dance community because of the regressive attitudes still present about race, gender, and sexuality across contexts, which more than likely has serious ramifications for active dancers and prevents others from participating. A 2015 forum post on Reddit received a significant number of responses from dancers stating that their communities were majority white and had minimal involvement from LGBTQ dancers; while this is hardly definitive empirical evidence, it suggests a pattern that could be investigated to determine its prevalence across the country (R/ballroom 2015). Dance, and dancing with others, is a profound world of meanings and identities that can bring immense joy and self-acceptance to those participating in it; to make that world open to everyone, we must investigate and address the damaging and essentialist practices within our communities that render them inaccessible.

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