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To cite this article: Alice Aterianus-Owanga (2023) Tactile technologies of the self: connection, hapticscape and self-development narratives in Cape Town's Afro-Latin dance scene, *Anthropology Southern Africa*, 46:3, 229-244, DOI: [10.1080/23323256.2023.2279721](https://doi.org/10.1080/23323256.2023.2279721)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23323256.2023.2279721>



Published online: 22 Dec 2023.



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Tactile technologies of the self: connection, hapticscape and self-development narratives in Cape Town’s Afro-Latin dance scene

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Drawing on ethnographic research within the salsa, bachata and kizomba (SBK) scene of Cape Town, this article examines the values and narratives of personal development that Cape Town’s adepts of Afro-Latin dance elaborate around the emic notion of “connection.” I describe how this multisensory experience is informed by an ethic of personal development and self-transformation, which at the same time reflects the influence of global neoliberal entrepreneurial paradigms — together with the hopes, values and hampered dreams of Cape Town’s post-apartheid middle classes. Narratives and descriptions of the hapticscape and multisensory knowledge built through the search for connection highlight how these encounters give shape to intimate spaces where salsa amateurs can imagine, materialise and embody the multiple injunctions they navigate and can reconfigure the boundaries of intimacy, identity and otherness in the post-apartheid city.

Com base em pesquisa etnográfica na cena da salsa, bachata e kizomba (SBK) da Cidade do Cabo, este artigo examina os valores e as narrativas de desenvolvimento pessoal que os adeptos da dança afro-latina na Cidade do Cabo elaboram em torno da noção êmica de “conexão”. Descrevo como essa experiência multissensorial é informada por uma ética do desenvolvimento pessoal e da autotransformação, que ao mesmo tempo reflete a influência dos paradigmas de empreendedorismo neoliberais globais — junto com as esperanças, valores e sonhos tolhidos das classes médias pós-apartheid da Cidade do Cabo. As narrativas e descrições da paisagem tátil e o conhecimento multissensorial construído através da busca por conexão destacam como esses encontros dão forma a espaços íntimos onde dançarinos de salsa amadores podem imaginar, materializar e incorporar as múltiplas pressões com as quais lidam e podem reconfigurar as fronteiras da intimidade, identidade e alteridade na cidade pós-apartheid.

Keywords: gender; healing; intimacy; salsa; touch; urban space

The party takes place on a Thursday evening, in a chic hotel in down-town Cape Town. With an entrance fee of ZAR 50, it offers a mix of the three music-dance genres that generally define the umbrella category of “Afro-Latin dances”: salsa, bachata and kizomba (SBK). I arrive with Janice, a friend and close neighbour of mine, around 9 pm. We step out of the lift and walk down the passage as the sound of salsa music, its Clave, Tumbao and syncopated rhythms, get louder. Round leather couches are spread around the room. Most of the people who are already sitting there are friends and acquaintances from the SBK community whom I meet every week at social events or in class. At the centre of the room, a square black and white dance floor has been set up, where half a dozen couples are already dancing. As we cross the room, we are welcomed by Jessie, a 30-year-old woman with whom I have trained for weeks in a ladies’ salsa team. She hugs me warmly as she warns that the floor is very slippery. We sit down with a group of other students at the back of the room. I put on my dancing shoes whilst joining the conversation, which mainly deals with a getaway dance weekend that will soon take place in Paarl. We are often interrupted by someone inviting one of us to dance, or by someone jumping up to catch a dancer when a new song starts. I join a dancer named Adrian on the dance floor and, as we move to the four-beat tempo of the bachata, he whispers with a meaningful wink, “There’s a new couple in the community.”

He glances to the far side of the room where two persons stand off to one side, in an embrace that suggests that they are in a relationship. When the DJ switches to a Kizomba tune, the couple's embrace becomes even closer and their movements slower: their chests touch, their arms and shoulders connect and their bodies flow lightly across the dance floor.

The party reaches its end around 11:30 pm. As Janice and I are on our way out, Jordan, a tall man with freckles and a smiling face, holds me up. I had interviewed him the day before and he now wants to add something. Our discussion had given him food for thought on his relationship with dance: "Another thing that I like in the scene is the fact of being with women. ... I mean being able to make connections and friendships with women, without something more.

The majority of people mentioned in this vignette are Capetonians, between the ages of 20 and 60. They are accountants, software developers, psychologists, hairdressers, secretaries, business entrepreneurs or students — but they do not pay attention to each other's professions. Several come from the northern or southern suburbs; others live downtown; and even others are foreigners passing through Cape Town for longer or shorter periods of time, as I am, currently spending 18 months with my family in the mother city for research. The people in this vignette have achieved different dance levels and have different family lives and religious backgrounds; they come from unequal social environments and identify themselves as coloured, white, black or indian.¹ They generally share the idea that dance is a place where race is, momentarily, no longer a meaningful category and where people only consider one another as possible dance partners: leaders or followers. They participate in what is often called the "SBK community," a group of people who meet around their passion for Afro-Latin dances and around the sensations and sociability these engender. The improvised moments of performance lived on the dance floor aim at creating a highly pleasurable interaction and harmony between one's body, the music, a partner and a crowd of other dancers — something they call "connection."

This notion is used by dancers of salsa and other Afro-Latin dances, in South Africa and beyond (McClure 2017), to describe the physical, emotional and kinetic attachment they experience with their dance partners and the music. In the words of my research participants in Cape Town, the apprenticeship to this multilayered sensorial and emotional technology was often envisaged as highly transformative. For Jordan, it was a mind-blowing reconfiguration of his interactions with his peers and with women. For others like Ibrahim, a 30-year-old man who grew up in a coloured Muslim family, it was a profoundly healing means of self-development, activated by the efforts he made to reach a good connection with his partners.

Drawing on ethnographic research within the SBK scene of Cape Town, this article discusses how people in Cape Town use dance connection as a means of the correlated formation of selfhood and community. My approach towards connection in the SBK scene of Cape Town expands on prior anthropological works that have excavated how human selves, social groups, values and cultural belongings are shaped, expressed and transformed through embodied and sensorial practices (Mauss [1936] 2013; Csordas 1993; Warnier 2009). Drawing from a tradition of interpretative and critical anthropology, Sherry Ortner approached subjectivity as an "ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, fear, and so forth that animate acting subjects" and insisted on "the cultural and social formations that shape, organise and provoke those modes of affect, thought and so on" (Ortner 2005, 31). Later on, phenomenological anthropology, material anthropology and sensory ethnography brought important insights pertaining to selfhood, agency and social relations (Low 2012) by showing how the production of selfhood rests upon "perceived sensations and active sense-making practices" (Waskul, Vannini and Wilson 2009, 6). Recent literature in South Africa has also proven how sensory, affective and kinetic experiences represent fruitful entry points for uncovering hidden parts of South African society (Ross 2004; Pyper 2019; Jethro 2019) and the performative production of multiculturalism and conviviality (Alhourani 2017). In sum, the domain of sensory experiences might be of crucial importance for achieving the

anthropological goal of approaching the heterogeneity of subjectivities and relationships to space, time and culture in the post-apartheid city with more subtlety (Salo 2010).

Expanding on these perspectives, my aim in this article is to highlight how the apprenticeship of dance connection in Cape Town is accompanied by the formation of ideas of selfhood, social belonging and community and puts into tension broader issues that currently underpin South African society.

In a famous essay, Michel Foucault defined “technologies of the self” as technologies

which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault 1988, 18)

Interconnected with technologies of power and governmentality, Foucault’s technologies of the self have been highly influential for anthropological theories on the efficacy of technologies on the reciprocal formation of the material/body and acting subjects (Julien and Rosselin 2005; Warnier 2009). It has also become a powerful concept for addressing the neoliberal ethos and governmentality pervading contemporary bodily practices.

In this article, I suggest the notion of “tactile technologies of the self” as a fruitful lens to analyse how the apprenticeship of Afro-Latin dances becomes a place of action on the self, perceived as the locus of broader transformations within South African society. To approach this, I deploy an ethnographic and sensory-oriented description of SBK enthusiasts’ apprenticeship of connection, whilst paying particular attention to the discourses and narratives pertaining to this emic category. The aim is to approach the complex set of influences that conflate the experience of connection and self-optimisation and to comprehend how people produce meaning through words, affects and senses, which appear as highly imbricated.

The questions I raise around the healing or self-transformative power of connection are inevitably correlated with a reflection on the sociopolitical conditions that make the efficacy of these technologies possible in the specific context of post-apartheid and neoliberal Cape Town. The moves and encounters lived by Cape Town citizens in Afro-Latin dance evoke a long history of class formation and the transgression of segregated urban spaces through music and dance in South Africa. In Johannesburg, for instance, popular theatre, music and dance were entangled in the course of the twentieth century with the “long-term process of racialised class formation ... and performance culture became an instrument of identity, competition, and self-transformation” (Coplan 2007, 7). Later on, kwaito imposed itself in the 1990s as a site of alternative performances and occupations of mediatic and urban spaces for black bodies (Livermon 2020). On top of its well-known jazz history (Martin 2013), the mother city has, for its part, hosted the emergence of different types of recreational and couple dances, which often expand on the diffusion of ballroom and Latin dances within British colonial society (Green 2009): square dance was an expression of emancipation for slaves (Layne 2019) before langarm and jazz dance conveyed the transformation of the city and the consolidation of a coloured subculture during apartheid (Holtzman 2007).

Under different aspects, the contemporary Afro-Latin dance scene has inherited this legacy of “heterotopic” spaces that simultaneously transgress ordinary social boundaries and convey a sense of emancipation, class belonging and cosmopolitanism. It emerged in Cape Town at the beginning of the 2000s at the instigation mainly of South African dancers trained in ballroom dance, with crossovers from local genres such as Cape jazz (Gibson 2008; Johnson 2011). According to earlier research, at that time, these spaces opened up “some new possibilities for interaction and awareness beyond the very divided and bounded realities that people live in Cape Town” (Gibson 2008, 121).

Many of the moves and relationships observed over my fieldwork echo these different layers of history and memory that meld in Cape Town citizens’ daily steps and encounters in the city.

Yet I argue that a focus on the emic meanings and experiences pertaining to connection reveal specific influences and configurations surrounding the practice of salsa at the time of my research, in relation to the urban transformations of recent decades. From the end of apartheid onwards, South Africa shifted from a socialist development policy to a neoliberal programme, which was facilitated by a series of measures including fiscal austerity, export-oriented production and the privatisation of public sector enterprises (Narsiah 2002, 3). This neoliberal shift translated into an entrepreneurial ethos that penetrated far beyond the domain of economics, becoming a “trans-sectoral rationality (economic, political, social, etc.) based on the naturalization of entrepreneurial values, competitiveness and competition, and the individual accountability of entrepreneurs themselves” (Morange 2011, 4). This neoliberal turn took a specific direction in the city of Cape Town, which became a touristic and global city oriented towards international trade (McDonald 2007). Racial segregation imposed by apartheid was progressively juxtaposed and mixed up with class segregation (Turok, Visagie and Scheba 2021) and a sanitisation of urban spaces for tourism, business and leisure for foreigners and the upper classes (Miraftab 2007).

Through this article, I aim to apprehend how these shifts, paradigms and policies inform the undertakings of self-transformation and healing via the dance performed by my research participants and the affects raised by connection. How does the global circulation of the ideal of self-optimisation come to make sense in this context, echoing the desires of nurturing social ties affected by the superposition of colonial, apartheid and neoliberal governance of urban life (Besteman 2008)?

In the first section, I offer some brief insight into the positionality I adopted to conduct my ethnographic research within the SBK community, whilst providing glimpses of the urban network cemented by the practice of Afro-Latin dances. I then address the emic meaning of connection and its inscription in a complex web of relationships between human beings’ “energies,” sound, touch and emotions. In the third section, I draw on narratives of Afro-Latin dance enthusiasts to discuss how this tactile technology of the self is informed by a highly gendered ethic of personal development steeped in a neoliberal therapy culture shared by middle classes as much as in a desire to exist as a social being beyond racial and gendered assignments. In the last section, my work finally argues that an ethnographic account of the emic notion of connection helps reconcile different readings that could be brought to bear on multisensory practices of self-development, between phenomenological and critical lenses: indeed, ethnography highlights how SBK music and dance are at the same time sites for the implementation of neoliberal fashioning and paradigms as they are spaces for the materialisation of the utopias of post-apartheid transformation: two sides of the same coin that meld in the use of connection as a tactile technology of the self.

Doing participant and sensory-engaged ethnography

I think the salsa world is more representative of what the country should look like. Because, I mean, you go to the [dance] class and it is like an awesome mix of people, you know? I actually have close white friends now because of salsa. Like this guy, he can message me and say: “Hey, where the fuck are you? Come dance!” Or they come and touch my bum, you know, or whatever. I would never have thought that I would have had white friends that would be so friendly with me, you know what I’m saying? (Elliott, Cape Town, November 2021)

This is how Elliott, a dancer who grew up in a coloured family from Athlone and who has been dancing for more than ten years, describes how salsa profoundly changed his way of interacting with people who were identified as belonging to other races during apartheid. For him, salsa represents a unique place of contradiction in regard to Cape Town’s reputation for being a “cliqey” city, where it is seen as difficult to socialise beyond your usual circles, especially when you are not white, not a Capetonian or not from a well-off family.

When I first arrived in Cape Town for a six-month research period in 2016, I shared this impression that the social groups in the city were still very segregated. It was this that pushed me

to spend most of my evenings and leisure time in the salsa scene. As a French anthropologist who had lived in Gabon for many years and as part of a mixed couple and transnational family (with my Gabonese husband and our children raised between Gabon, France and Switzerland), I was soon disturbed by the lack of locations in Cape Town where people from different social classes and people identified as different in terms of race, ethnicity or nationality could interact. With their regular moments of friendly and intimate encounter, salsa dance floors offered a place where one could ephemerally help evade the reality of persistent inequalities and divisions lived in Cape Town and where the dream of the “rainbow nation” could materialise. This initial impression partly informed the problematics of a research project I proposed to conduct on the (un)making of race, class and gender boundaries in the SBK scene and I returned to Cape Town in 2021 for an 18-month research period.

Over that time, my ethnographic and participative research was unavoidably influenced by my own positionality in the field and the privileges I benefitted from. I could say that my perception as a white foreign woman in my 30s, identified as middle class — with a much higher income than a huge majority of Cape Town suburbanites, but lower than some of the people I met in salsa — had its impact on the intersubjective relationships that constituted the texture of my fieldwork, since the variables of class, gender, race/ethnicity and citizenship represent transversal parameters of social differentiation. However, as highlighted by prior research in South Africa (Becker, Boonzaier and Owen 2005, 132), anthropologists’ identification in the field transcends boundaries of “race,” ethnicity or nationality and is highly fluid, situated and specific to place and group. Here my fieldwork was, for instance, tinged by specific forms of differentiation that shape people’s perception of themselves and others in the practice of dance.

My participant observation engaged me in weekly (or very regular) classes in three different dance schools and with one performing team. This immersion and participation in dance activities led me to create bonds with classmates, students and instructors and shaped ordinary moments that represented the main substance of my ethnography.² At the same time, the affiliations I cultivated with some members of the scene partly limited the possibility of accessing other dance schools, for both the practical reason of time limitations and because belonging to a certain dance group and its symbolic “family” was not compatible with a deep immersion in others. As part of a dance team called Imara, which focuses on Afro-rooted and mambo salsa styles, I was certainly able to follow other classes, interview leaders of other schools and meet up with their members at social events, but I was soon labelled as a member of one “clique” in the competitive landscape of dance schools.

As a complement to this, the spatial distribution of dance classes and socials in the city also contributed to bringing me closer to some spheres and further away from others. Salsa courses and socials remain mostly located in downtown Cape Town, on the Atlantic seaboard or in neighbourhoods historically associated with the residential or gentrified sides of Cape Town (Claremont, Tygervalley, Woodstock and Observatory). Depending on their place of residence, people often shared a lift to salsa venues, thus experiencing privileged moments of closeness. Living in Sea Point and going to dance classes in Observatory, Woodstock and on the Atlantic seaboard, I was more regularly in contact with people who attended these same schools, were invited to their events and shared regular recreational moments. Moreover, as a foreigner regularly teased by my dance mates for my French accent, I obviously did not share the same deep, long-term bonds developed by some people in the scene who have known each other (and Cape Town) for years. But I could benefit from the fact of my relatively long stay, from the curiosity people had for my research and from the effects of regular meetings in dance classes, rehearsals and socials to build some thick relationships and make deep observations.

It should be noted that the relative ease with which I integrated into the field resulted partly from the configuration of this scene, whose courses and activities are designed to easily include foreigners passing through Cape Town. For many members of the scene, encounters with people from abroad are seen to be an added value that they access thanks to the experience of dancing. Yet,

this positive appreciation of foreignness is subdivided by distinctions of age, race, class, prettiness, dance level and fame and seems to particularly favour foreigners with European or American passports. At the opposite end of the spectrum, interviews I had with black and (South) African women in the scene underlined the existence of invisible forms of exclusion they experience, as here described by Lusanda:

In the however many years that I've been in the scene, I've seen so many especially black girls come into the scene and leave [again] because they don't feel welcomed. Or, you know, they'll go to classes, come to a social and, for the whole six hours, only one person asked them to dance. You know what I mean? (Lusanda, June 2022, Cape Town)

In this context of selective inclusiveness, the perception of my class, race, citizenship and level of dancing all awarded me considerable privileges for becoming immersed in the scene.

Finally, it might be relevant to highlight how my socialisation and embodied ways of interacting, moving and connecting on the dance floor influenced the perception my research participants had of me, at least at first sight. I am a non-professional dancer, initially trained in African dances, and have practiced salsa as a leisure activity for ten years overall, including some years of dancing “salsa on 2.” This is another name for New York-style salsa, which is opposed to “salsa on 1.” Built on the mambo dance, it refers to “on 2” because dancers take their break step on the second beat of the measure and not on the first, as in salsa on 1. It has recently experienced a rise in popularity in international salsa networks and, from 2018 onwards, several salsa schools in Cape Town have switched their courses from on 1 to on 2. This shift gives proof of the attachment that some instructors have to conventions and trends at play in Europe and the United States (US), sometimes to the detriment of more local practices. In Cape Town, as in some other salsa scenes, the ability to dance on 2 is considered a skill possessed by advanced dancers or people with international experience. This hierarchy is criticised by other local dancers who reject the elitist approach of salsa and give preference to crossovers with local genres such as Cape jazz.

One day, over the course of a long interview, a research participant (beginner dancer) confided that she initially found me a “snob” because of my body posture and the fact that I dance on 2. I discovered that day that years of salsa practice had probably conquered a bit of my rural manners, or at least influenced the image people have of me. Indeed, having grown up in a French village in a family with a small income (although much less precarious than what many people in Cape Town experience), I suppose that my apprenticeship in salsa was unconsciously a way of getting closer to the image of the cool, cosmopolitan and urban middle class I met when I arrived in Cape Town — and that this turned out to look “snobbish” to other dancers or outsiders. Luckily for my research, this snobbish image was not systematic but relative to my interlocutors' own perception of class/level intricacies. Other dancers noticed the “rawness” in my execution of some moves. This term could have either pejorative or rewarding meanings, relating either to a lack of femininity or to a valued way of grounding body moves in the more Afro-rooted type of salsa. Both perceptions (raw and snobbish) did not radically transform the bonds I made with several members of the scene, yet they are interesting in that they highlight how ordinary lines of distinction, which shape difference and belonging within the scene, entangle with class, gender, race and level distinctions.

It could be added that the tightness of the SBK network in Cape Town renders these spaces not as strongly semi-anonymous as they appear to be in other cities (Törnqvist 2018). Many students see each other almost every week: they go out for dinner, organise getaway weekends, travel together by car to attend events away from the suburbs where they live and have sometimes known each other for years. For example, over the 18 months of my research, I made short dance trips to Paarl, Tulbagh and Stellenbosch; went out for hikes, brunches and drinks with dance colleagues; celebrated birthdays and baby showers; shot dance videos in Cape Town's famous spots; and spent hours dancing, embracing and sharing the exhilarating communion generated by the experience of moving together.

In terms of social profile, the majority of students I met in the scene belonged to what we could call the middle or upper-middle class, a nebulous category whose role and definition in the new South Africa generated a number of discussions in the social sciences in the 2010s (Visagie and Posel 2013; Southall 2016; Khunou 2015).³ Depending on the preference given to one or the other indicator surrounding its definition (Burger et al. 2015), members of the salsa scene could be associated with different strata over the spectrum of social positions. Yet, in a nutshell, they generally benefitted from having enough income to pay for dance classes, attend Afro-Latin dance parties in the city centre and afford the entrance fees (or, for those more comfortably off, getaway weekends and festivals), although they sometimes came from less well-off families and had different levels of income. As I show in the next section, this community is bound by an apprenticeship in a set of sensory skills that provide the foundations for a “hapticscape” and a web of affects reconfiguring their relationships with self, space and their peers.

Hapticscape, touch and connection in the salsa scene

Members of the SBK community are held together by an apprenticeship in the embodied skills of reaching control over one’s body, playfully syncing movement to the music and reaching a kinaesthetic symbiosis with the dance partner, the rhythm and the crowd of dancers. This apprenticeship is highly gendered: on the one side are the “leads” (as they are called in the salsa scene), often men,⁴ who have to learn how to hold their frame, control space and move someone else’s body with clarity and intentionality whilst feeling and adapting to their partner’s skills, personality and expectations. On the other side are the “follows,” generally women, who learn an embodied skill that is mainly conceived in terms of attention, as a way to respond to the lead’s messages and to “let go” by not anticipating the moves.

Despite differences in their roles, leads and follows are taught the common notion that underpins the whole philosophy transmitted in dance classes: connection, a pivotal and omnipresent idea (for instance, when dancers explain they have “a good connection” with certain partners and instructors insist on the importance of connecting to their partner before initiating any figure). Present in global salsa scenes and other dance genres (Ericksen 2011), connection is described by dance scholars as “a highly intersubjective form of embodiment” developed through the practice of dancing and drawing on particular “modes of awareness and ... embodied sense-making, specifically kinaesthetic, tactile and musical” (McClure 2017, 131). In the SBK community of Cape Town, connection has at least two interrelated meanings that echo more or less directly with this definition. One is physical or technical and is used by instructors to describe the level of tension and resistance between the arms of the lead, which are required to lead, and those of the follow, which are required to be led. Depending on the dance genre, connection does not rely on the same body parts and senses. In kizomba, for instance, the embrace is closer and the moves are slower than in salsa — forming a connection that is often described as a meditation. Dancers connect their upper body (torso and shoulders) in order to send or receive the kinaesthetic messages and move together as a whole. Follows hardly require sight to be connected and attentive to their partners, sometimes even dancing with their eyes closed. Salsa, on the other hand, consists of a much faster and distant connection that functions mainly through hands, arms and gazes. It requires light tension in wrist and elbows and permanent visual attention so that leads and follows can catch each other’s hands and maintain the flow along turns and spins.

If we look at people’s understanding of connection, their definition is much more metaphysical and relates to a certain idea of energy matching and alignment between music, the self and the partner:

I think keeping physical touch connection and even looking at the girl comes after you actually connect with some kind of energy. So, first, if your connection with energy isn’t there, everything else will not be there either. So the fact that I’m getting this and the touch better, shows that I’m connecting better. (Ibrahim, June 2021)

It is this responsibility you feel for somebody else; it's not just yourself you're dancing for. This is that philosophy I was speaking about: I've always believed that if you're not connected with yourself, with the music and with your partner, you're not dancing. ... And it's about energy. This is what the connection is, this is energy and the matching of energy and adjusting somewhat with the music in this. (Gavin, April 2022)

As these testimonies highlight, connection is a technology for creating something more than just dance through a distribution of energy and readjustment of the multiple affective ties linking the self, sensory agents and human surroundings. It is not a mechanical phenomenon but a fragile experience looked for by dancers; it exists through one's own body, through the couple that becomes a new entity by moving together and through the energy of the crowd and the music.

The importance of connection in the knowledge acquired by amateur dancers echoes with previous scholars' observations regarding the type of knowledge built through touch, skin and sensory contact. Although the haptic realm was long undervalued by Western social sciences due to a persistent "ocularcentrism," pioneering works such as that of Constance Classen (2012) contributed to opening new fields of research around touch, whilst others proved the "inseparability of different modalities of sensory experience in processes of perception" (Pink 2006, 45). Later, David Howes (2018, 225) talked of "skin knowledge" to mention "the knowledge of the world one acquires through one's skin, through the feel of the sun, the wind, the rain and the forest." Finally, building on J. Douglas Porteous's (1985) notion of smellscape, recent research has suggested the idea of hapticscape to refer to a relation to the environment that "is formed by the sense of touch, which is underpinned by the kinaesthetic and cutaneous subsenses" (Buzova, Sanz-Blas and Cervera-Taulet 2021, 2).

In the practice of salsa, connection represents a pivotal part of a specific hapticscape activated through the apprenticeship of the dance. This sensescape is highly tactile but is also interrelated with sound and the resonance of music in bodily movement, proprioception and, in some cases, with visual attention to the partner. The patient and demanding process required to learn this competence through years of dance classes and participation in social events comes along with the capacity to co-construct a sense of closeness and a way to touch one another that transgresses ordinary interactions in the city, thus creating ephemeral alternative urban spaces, or "kinetopias" (Hutchinson 2015). By dancing together weekly, often for years, members of this community of practice know one another through touch; they get used to each partner's specific way of leading, initiating a turn, holding their frame, being light or heavy, looking, smiling and hugging.⁵ It is this experience of connection that a number of my research participants presented as deeply transformative in discourses that mix the conception of Afro-Latin dances as therapy for self-development with hopes of resolving broader social failures.

"Becoming the best version of ourselves": self-optimisation and its neoliberal discontents

In April 2023, a dance school at which I did part of my fieldwork shared a short advertising video on its Instagram page in which it enumerated the various benefits of learning salsa and Afro-Latin dances. The video combined short footage taken with a smartphone during salsa classes, where dancing couples practice basic salsa steps and figures, whilst the instructor (a female dancer named Candice Potts) gives explanations that the online audience cannot hear as the original sound is replaced by a separate soundtrack. The images are complemented by short sentences that are blended in:

We don't just teach dance. We teach you how to be intentional.
 We teach how to communicate effectively.
 We teach how to embrace the unknown and go with the flow.
 We teach how to lead and be led. How to treat yourself and others.
 We use dance to create better versions of ourselves.

As in this video, most salsa schools elaborate a discourse proclaiming that dance not only provides a healthy leisure activity, a cosmopolitan art form and a fun space of sociability to meet other townies but also transmits skills leading to happiness, better efficiency, self-fulfilment and the healing of mental and physical malaise. As claimed in the video's text, dance promises, all at once, to improve students' skills at communication and the expression of intentions, to build their self-confidence and to better their attention to the feelings of others.

These discourses and calls for "becoming better versions of ourselves" represent interesting evocations of current discussions developed in the social sciences in regard to the plural forms of self-optimisation that pervade our daily lives in contemporary societies. Born in the cradle of economics, before infusing the domain of psychology, the craving for perfection and rational means to achieve the optimal body has infiltrated various domains (for example, health, ageing, alimentation, aesthetic surgery, self-help literature, fitness). This rhetoric has been criticised by the social sciences as an expression of the biopolitics of neoliberal governmentality, rooted in a society based on competition, fallacious meritocracy and chimeric strivings for perfection (Bröckling 2016; King, Gerisch and Rosa 2018). Nevertheless, recent anthropological research has insisted on the importance of apprehending the processual nature of self-optimisation and its contextual appropriation (Nehring and Röcke 2023): as a set of discourses and practices, it "can also take the form of a political discourse of liberation when it is presented as a way of taking back control over one's body and one's daily life" (Dalgarrondo and Fournier 2019, iv). According to this approach, techniques of the self represent a "site of friction between a normative space (and its technologies of domination) and the possibilities of resistance and emancipation" (Dalgarrondo and Fournier 2019, iv).

Beyond their anchoring in the Western history of neoliberal ethos, secularisation and the massification of asceticism, self-development and optimisation ideals have spread in postcolonial societies through an array of different channels, ranging from gym clubs to food stores and coaching to self-help literature (Nehring and Kerrigan 2018). In Cape Town, the importance of self-development as a road to happiness appears through a number of mediums and practices that my interlocutors consume alongside dance classes and that contribute to the spread of self-optimisation values: self-help books, coaching workshops on business, a balance between life and work, health, and websites devoted to masculinities. To go deeper into a micro-level understanding of the local grammars of the self created around this ethos of personal development, the next part of this article draws on life stories and narratives of dance amateurs I met in my fieldwork. We begin with Lydia, a South African woman who offers an evocative example of the paradigm of the "safe space" felt by women through dance connection.

Lydia: safe space and "intimacy without threat"

Lydia, a white woman who was in her 50s at the time of our conversations, describes salsa as more of an obsession than a hobby and explains that for the last 15 years she has spent several days a week dancing almost compulsively. She is a senior executive at a company and lives in a well-off area of the city, although she comes from a lower-class family. Salsa appeared in her adulthood as a space to challenge her impression of not fitting into the divided landscape of early post-apartheid South Africa and to meet with people from social groups that transgressed the boundaries in which she had grown up. Like several women I met over the age of 40, she came into salsa after her divorce and found in it a sensory intimacy that broke with the rest of her condition:

I needed a space that was not like wife and mother, a space for myself. And I was the sort of person who always stayed quiet ... gave people what they wanted. ... I had flexible boundaries. So I wouldn't say no to people. And the first time I said no to somebody was when I started dancing and they asked me to do something and I said, "I can't because I'm going dancing." And it was like a permission to have a space for myself. ... But I was feeling guilty about enjoying myself, about having this thing that was just pleasure, nothing else. (Lydia, May 2021, Cape Town)

To understand what is described here, it is not uninteresting to recall some historical elements regarding the gendered politics of the apartheid period during which Lydia grew up and that still partly pervades understandings of feminine moralities. Meghan Healy-Clancy recalled how the policies of the ruling Afrikaner Nationalist Party engaged disparate family planning policies for white women — who were encouraged to have children — and black women — whose family sizes were to be limited. Meanwhile, “puritanical, DRC [Dutch Reformed Church]-influenced ideas of women’s chastity discouraged the pursuit of sexual pleasure and agency for all women” (Healy-Clancy 2017). As wives, they were “subject to the authority of their husbands and as mothers, charged with the essential responsibility of raising a new generation of workers and patriots” (Healy-Clancy 2017). Although this era had been over for more than a decade when Lydia began her journey in salsa, gender inequalities, patriarchy and masculine violence were no less pervasive in media and public discourse through the gloomy statistics of femicide and rape and public discussions that contributed to a fabrication of female fear (Gqola 2022). As demonstrated by other anthropological works conducted on women’s daily space/time mobilities in the Cape Flats (Salo 2010), past values of female respectability and duties remain present in everyday lives through embodied memories, moralities and the representations of certain spaces, people and practices from which women are expected to stay distant in order to preserve respectability.

For the women I met, the representation of salsa as a healing practice and as a way to embody a womanliness emancipated from family constraints was correlated with a description of the dance floor as a “safe space,” a notion that spanned different scales. First, this idea of “safe space” echoes a very concrete organisation of dance sites in Cape Town: restaurants, bars, nightclubs or dance floors where salsa is practised are protected by a number of entry codes (an entrance fee, the officious control of attendees by organisers or a guest-only entrance for private events). Although open to any people keen to learn and already able to dance (without explicit restrictions of class, age, origin or status), these spaces reserve entrance to people who have been trained in the etiquette, morals and values shared within this community of practice.

A second understanding of dance as a safe space relates to the experience of connection itself, presented as a dyadic intimacy that would be protected from the gender violence observed in the rest of the South African society:

I always thought the dancing was almost ... it’s like intimacy with anti-intimacy. It’s a very constrained intimacy. So it’s not threatening. And I think that’s why a lot of women like it. Because it’s contact without threat and how often do we get that in our lives? So you dance with somebody — and I’ve danced with guys whose names I don’t even know — and you have this amazing sensual experience and after[wards], you say thank you and you walk away. And that’s why guys who cross those boundaries are so shocking because your sense of safety disappears. ... We should have our safe spaces. (Lydia, May 2021, Cape Town)

In her study of ballroom and connection in the US, Julia Ericksen (2011, 224) described how amateur and professional ballroom dancers “learn to integrate a capacity for instant intimacy into their identities.” This skill allows individuals “to create both the appearance and the reality of an emotional connection that arises quickly and that satisfies the need for romance” (Ericksen, 2011, 224). In the US, this situation results from a context where adults increasingly live alone and intimacy has become an explicit commodity, purchased through different means.

In Cape Town, connection also results in the production of a form of “instant intimacy” that enchants women’s lives by creating spaces of letting go, sensuous interaction and intimacy whilst suspending the corollary danger associated with gendered encounters in public spaces. For Julia, a 60-year-old woman who went through grief and divorce and carried heavy responsibilities in her family, at work and in her daily life, salsa was also described as a rare moment of surrendering, in contrast with the high level of control and responsibility she had to manage in her daily life as mother, grandmother and employee. Paradoxically, these dances, which are described as paroxysmic performances of heterosexual desire and patriarchy (Aparicio 2010), become spaces

of evasion and emancipation from a daily life where women encounter both high responsibilities and threats and thus shape a fugitive, troubling and safe moment of sensuous, romantic experience.

However, more than a market of intimacy that would lead to the emergence of a professional group of male dancers (as described by Ericksen 2011), the SBK community includes both men and women amateurs in search of a similar (albeit contrasted) redefinition of their gendered role in society. In the final section, I examine how men understand the experience of connection and the other spaces it creates as a way to redefine their masculinity and how it can, in some cases, be manipulated to recreate a form of masculine domination, annihilating this same sense of safety described for women.

Reconnecting men: confidence, control and masculinities

October 2021, I go to a kizomba class that I regularly attend. Our instructor explains that, on this day, he wants to focus on several of the fundamentals of dance, such as posture, thus “where everything starts and where you have to go back to [so you can] do all that you want to.” He shows female dancers how to reinforce their core strength to be more reactive to the lead’s impulses and remind the leads of the importance of maintaining a solid frame so that their arms and shoulders can connect properly. After that, he teaches the group a new dance pattern. I dance with a lead who seems to be attending for the first time: his gestures are sharp, he does not finish his moves and does not follow the beats; his tense posture betrays what I interpret as the discomfort of a beginner. But we swap partners regularly and I am soon dancing with Scotty, a dancer in his 50s with whom I often dance in class and at social.

At the end of the class, whilst we put on our casual shoes, we talk about a dancer who was absent that day. Scotty exclaims: “He is finally coming out of the closet!” With this he means that this student, who used to be very shy and introvert, finally seems to open himself up through salsa. Scotty gives me a lift home and we share our impressions of the class. He notes that hanging out with advanced dancers and learning salsa teaches shy and unconfident male dancers about life and how to be “real men.”

Several of the men with whom I talked described the apprenticeship of leading as a hard but life-changing process that recreates a sense of self-confidence and communication with women through a medium that is an alternative to couple or sexual relationships. The process of learning salsa is generally described as a highly demanding effort, forcing men to go through the initial fear (and regular experience) of rejection and the uncomfortable feeling of a beginner’s awkwardness. Later it becomes a highly rewarding experience that allows men to access a cool and “soft masculinity” (Gunner 2014) whilst getting in contact with women in a free, playful and gratifying way. They feel pride in experiencing this secure space of connection and fun. Murray, a 30-year-old white man from Cape Town, felt that, through salsa, he had finally found a place where “there is something good about being a man,” contradicting a landscape of critics of men’s toxic behaviours and violence. Therefore, the experience of learning a cool, smooth and attentive way to touch women is often infused with the ideal of creating an alternative way to gain confidence, control and a means of communication with women that differs from that of other men in South Africa.

Guys want power, right? But there’s ways to get that where you can beat up a woman: and there is your power; you will have power! Or you can show her that you’re someone to trust on the dance floor. There’s your power. It’s a way in which I would form power because it’s a voluntary power. ... We have a lot of stupid people that just get drunk because they believe that the only thing you do with a woman is to buy them drinks and take them to bed. I haven’t felt like that for a long time. And I hate feeling that way. (George, August 2021, Cape Town)

Raewyn Connell (1995) famously demonstrated that masculinities are not only built against representations of femininity but also against other models of masculinities. Her notion of hegemonic masculinities led to important conversations amongst scholars in South Africa that

adapted and redefined the idea of multiple and competing masculinities, describing how men variously cope with vulnerability, violence and intense transformation in their role models (Morrell 1998; Mfecane 2020; Reihling 2020). Beyond scholarly debates, the issue of a masculinity crisis pervades the media and public space and constitutes an important force surrounding the call for self-optimisation, healing or development offered around dance. Rather than a theoretical set of precepts as promoted in masculinist websites or in some men's groups, the transformation proposed in dance classes draws on a tangible, interactional and embodied experience, which my interlocutors presented as more "real" than other masculinities. In dance classes, leads are frequently pushed through challenging exercises to feel and adapt to the energy, arm tension and reactivity of their partners. Ibrahim, the dance student quoted in my introduction, explains the difficulties he went through to reach awareness and shift his way of connecting:

The first thing I noticed was that I had a lot of tension, so I was grabbing the girl's hand very hard. And when I turned the girl, I was like ... I will put a lot of energy and force into it. And they didn't like that, so no one liked dancing with me. ... And in the relationships in my life, I couldn't spot these things. If you go on a date with a girl and it doesn't go well, she doesn't call you back and give you a review of what you did right and what you did wrong, you understand? But in salsa it was so different. ... When you get the technique wrong in salsa, there are professionals standing to correct your salsa. (Ibrahim, June 2021, Cape Town)

Men's self-narratives related to the demanding apprenticeship of salsa expressed a hope of shaping a healthier and pacified sense of being a man, in response to the context of a "masculinity crisis" and the absence of positive role models.

Nevertheless, beyond an often-idyllic representation of dance practices as conducive to "soft masculinities," salsa could also be a way to reinvent "masculine domination" (Bourdieu 1990) by elaborating subtle forms of control and cleverly playing on the troubling emotions generated by the discovery of connection and its sensuous effects. During my fieldwork research, some men influenced by online masculinist spheres created a group to share strategies and goals to become better "alpha males," including through certain uses of dance that other performers soon denounced as toxic and misogynistic. Beyond this exceptional case, expert dancers also recognise that the surrendering and disturbing effects of connection are powerful instruments and weapons that skilful masters can use to abuse newcomers and manipulate students dazzled by the enchantment of the moment.

For that reason, connection is lived, sensed and conceived in the SBK community, and particularly by experienced dancers, as an ambivalent instrument; its healing power could turn into an addictive, poisonous, heady technique that might distort a person's judgement and drive them out of their ordinary religious morals or boundaries. It is perceived as a tool that must be carefully managed, to preserve the pleasurable enchantment of dance and keep in check the songs of its sirens and skilful masters.

Conclusion: becoming better citizens?

Rhetorics of self-help, therapeutic healing and psychology have often been criticised for their extreme individualisation of responsibility in social processes, normative conception of progress, social stratification and the "cold intimacy" to which they lead (Illouz 2007). In Cape Town, the entrepreneurial, therapeutic and optimising rhetoric raised around salsa dancing surely reproduces a language of self-control, efficiency and optimisation, participating in the shaping of a middle-class culture pervaded by neoliberal values. Nevertheless, the angles of observation adopted in my article confirm that the "cultural map" (Illouz 2008, 23) created around self-development takes profoundly contrastive contours and answers to local utopias, regimes of affects and fantasies anchored in Cape Town's past and present lives. Attempts at self-transformation happen to be disturbingly colluded in the experience of dance connection with social ideals, hopes and obsessions steeped in middle-class representations. It resonates with deep inner fantasies of fixing

broader social issues, as we saw with the realm of gendered interactions in the public and the intimate sphere.

Moreover, part of the quest for becoming better humans through dance in Cape Town is influenced by the wish to “become more diverse persons and welcome other cultures” — to quote a young woman dancer from an Afrikaans upbringing — by attending and co-creating a place of friendship and intimacy beyond the racial divisions of apartheid. In a sense, the description of salsa as a radically transformative way to touch and feel close to people who used to be considered “other” confirms how the categorisation of people as different or as “my people” occurs through affective and sensory mediums (Erasmus 2017) for which touch, kinaesthesia and their correlated affects play a crucial role. From another angle, the hope of representing “the rainbow nation on the dance floor” resembles a “postracial” (Goldberg 2015) chimaera, negating the persistence and renewal of unconscious class/race discriminations within the dance space and the deep mental and sensory remnants of race. Testimonies of invisible discrimination experienced by black women in the scene and the preference long given to dance genres and moves associated with European markets rather than Afro-rooted practices (Afro-Cuban salsa or Angolan kizomba) bear witness to Cape Town’s maintenance as a more Europe-oriented urban environment whose African components are kept on the outskirts of the city. The entrepreneurial ethos that pervades undertakings of self-transformation through dance also tends to keep the illusion of an individual responsibility and capability of changing one’s destiny, then concealing the existence of structural inequalities preventing a huge number of people from accessing these spaces of self-transformation and collective healing.

For all that, SBK performances not only reflect immanent and unchanged structures of power and inequality but also actively contribute to the dynamics of transformation. The campaign of some dancers to promote more Afro-oriented practices in recent years and the involvement of some instructors in lessons in the townships prove how the scene hosts identity and social justice struggles in the backstage, behind the image of glamour and striving for perfection. Similarly for gender, discussions have been ongoing from the time of my fieldwork to the present on how to render the scene more inclusive for LGBTQ+ people and how to deconstruct masculinist attitudes, demonstrating ways in which the scene is making tangible and touchable some of the latent issues that divide urban city dwellers.

In sum, whilst providing efficient technologies of the self that reflect Cape Town’s neoliberal transformation, the hapticscape built around SBK connections forge original “potential spaces” similar to those that have been conceptualised in the nightlife and recreational dance sites of other African cities, which shape “an intermediate zone of experience, located between the inner life of the subject and the reality that surrounds them” (Fouquet 2017, 85). If we take seriously the idea that societies and social groups are, at least partly, the product of an imaginary institution (Castoriadis 1998) translated into regimes of affect, sense and thought, then connection undeniably constitutes a powerful locus of social (re)production as an interstitial space of sensory and affective emancipation bridging the hampered dreams of Cape Town’s citizens with their daily experience.

Acknowledgments

This article draws on research developed within the framework of a Marie Skłodowska-Curie research project called “Dancetopias” (ERC project-H2020-890972). The project was hosted by the Anthropology Department at the University of Cape Town and was approved by the department’s Ethics in Anthropological Research Committee. All research participants were informed of my research and consented to contribute to the project; I warmly thank all of them for their contribution. I have changed the names of those mentioned in this article and have purposefully clouded elements of their personal stories to protect their anonymity. I also address my gratitude to the anonymous reviewers of this article and Leah Junk for their inspiring suggestions. However, I take full responsibility for the analysis offered.

Notes

1. In accordance with a large part of South African literature, I do not capitalise words used for racial categories in this article. I understand these categories, such as coloured, white and black, as social and historical products of the specific context of South Africa, whose fluid and evolutive boundaries have to be understood situationally, as entangled in politics and power relationships. In this article, I thus have followed my interlocutors' way of defining themselves.
2. I also conducted 43 semi-structured interviews with dance instructors and students.
3. Middle-class studies underlined the plural indicators, the distinction between subjective and objective notions of social class and the dynamic nature of class position (Khunou 2015), all variations that are complicated by the historical overlapping between race and class in South Africa (Posel 1983).
4. At the moment of my research, a number of women learnt to lead to counter the weak number of male leads in the scene. Several instructors also opted for talking in terms of "leads" and "follows" rather than "men" and "women" to take into account and adapt to this growing separation between gender binarism and dance roles. There were almost no non-binary or queer individuals in the scene.
5. Crucial in the technique taught in dance classes, touch also transpires outside of the dance floor through the specific sense of closeness expressed in hugging and kissing (for some Capetonians who express their attachment to close friends or relatives by kissing on the lips).

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