Resilient Rhythms

Constructing the Future through Salsa under Precarious Conditions in the District of Aguablanca, Cali, Colombia

Professional salsa dancer performing a show. Source: Author's archive.

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“Dance first. Think later. It’s the natural order.”

- Samuel Beckett

Abstract

Based on ethnographic fieldwork between July and December 2024, this thesis investigates how professional salsa dancers (*bailarines*) from El Distrito de Aguablanca, Cali, Colombia experience precarity and shape their hopes for the future through salsa dance. The bailarines are central to "Cali-style salsa" (*salsa caleña*) yet understudied in anthropology. Framed by practice theory and phenomenology and employing apprenticeship methodology, the study asks: *What characterizes the bailarines' quotidian experiences of precarity in El Distrito de Aguablanca, Cali, Colombia, and how do embodied salsa practices and the navigation of precarious conditions shape their hopes for the future?*

In chapter 1, the thesis uses Robert Desjarlais and Jason Throop's understanding of *lifeworld* to analyze the bailarines' quotidian experiences of precarity in Aguablanca. The thesis argues that friendship, community, and familial relationships constitute the bailarines' lifeworlds. However, precarious conditions such as violence, death, robberies, crime, shootings, and gang activities also constitute their lifeworlds. The thesis then argues that the stigma attached to Aguablanca is produced at an urban, national, and international scale, accentuating the bailarines' experiences of precarity. Furthermore, it is then shown that the bailarines navigate the precarity of their lifeworlds with a relational safety logic. This safety logic entails knowing the people in your neighborhood, staying on good terms with gang members, and not giving other people an opportunity to rob you.

In chapter 2, the thesis investigates how embodied salsa practices and the navigation of precarious conditions shape the bailarines' hopes for the future. The thesis uses Thomas Csordas' concept of *somatic modes of attention* and apprenticeship methodology to examine the bodily dimensions of learning and dancing salsa. It is argued that repeated salsa practice directs the bailarines towards future bodily becoming. The thesis then employs Henrik Vigh's concept of *social navigation* to show how the bailarines use emic logics of "rummaging" (*rebusque*) and "keep moving forward" (*salir adelante*) to navigate the precarity of Aguablanca. The thesis then uses Daniel Knight and Rebecca Bryant's *futural orientations* concept to illuminate how the lack of economic security and the anxiety around work-related injuries make it difficult, even impossible, for the bailarines to plan far into the future. Based on these analyses, the thesis develops the concept of "*trajectorial composition*," defined as structured futural directionality restored to individuals who have been robbed of a future by precarious experiences. It is argued that salsa provides the bailarines with a trajectorial

composition that includes international travel, starting a business, and building a house. Finally, the thesis draws on James Laidlaw's interpretation of Foucault's *techniques of the self* to show how dancing salsa functions as a form of self-work towards achieving "peace and quiet" (*paz y tranquilidad*) in the future. The thesis then argues that these hopes for individual peace and quiet are embedded within a larger structure of hope in Colombia – the country collectively hopes for a future of post-conflictual peace and quiet. Some salsa schools also shape the bailarines' hopes for peace and quiet by institutionalizing it in their schools, calling them "peace zones" (*zonas de paz*).

Overall, the thesis argues that the bailarines' experiences of precarity impede their ability to imagine a future, while embodied salsa practices enable them to construct hopes for the future.

The implications of this thesis are: 1) A suggestion that the Colombian government should invest in peace zones in areas affected by precarity; 2) An invitation to future researchers as part of promoting salsa caleña as "cultural heritage" (*patrimonio cultural*) to focus on the precarious conditions in which central contributors to salsa caleña live; 3) An invitation to future researchers to use the concept trajectorial composition as an analytic to investigate how hopes for the future are affected by precarity in other contexts.

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Contents

Introduction

The sweat drips from my forehead and the front of my t-shirt looks like a Rorschach chart as I make my way through the streets of San Antonio. The streets in the tourist district of Cali follow a simple grid pattern made up of low-built Spanish colonial houses. The midday sun beats down, and with the houses being so short, they offer no shade. The streets are almost empty because it is "the sluggish hours" (*la hora boba*), the time after lunch when most people take a siesta to escape the heat and to digest their food.

Salsa music is playing inside when I arrive at the hostel. Ana greets me with a friendly smile. Ana and her student hug and the student proceeds to take off her dance shoes. I give Ana one of the two cups of coffee that I have brought.

We head up to the rooftop. No people are around and the only noise we hear is from distant traffic. We have a 360-degree view of the brick and aluminum rooftops and the Cerros de Cali hillsides. The landmarks, Las Tres Cruces and Cristo Rey, tower over the city in the background. Ana finds a couch over by the empty bar and I find a chair opposite her. I turn on my recorder.

Ana describes the violence that she experienced growing up in Aguablanca. She saw the bodies of her classmates left bloodied and dead in the street. She speaks of her alcoholic father, who was in and out of rehab, but still managed to raise her and her brother, gathering recyclables on the street. Her mother left the family when she was six years old and died when she was 13.

Ana tells me that salsa has been an escape for her since she was 16 – a way to avoid thinking about personal problems:[1] "Salsa saved my life. And believe me, there are stories worse than mine behind a dancer. There are people who have gone through worse things – abuse and other stuff. That's why I say salsa saved Cali. I feel like thanks to salsa, to dancing, I didn't die. That's the truth."

During my ethnographic fieldwork with the *bailarines* ("professional salsa dancers") from El Distrito de Aguablanca they often told me stories of how salsa had saved them from violence, death, and poverty. I wanted to understand their experiences better. How did salsa save them?

[1] Parts of this vignette are published in the fall 2025 *FRA SIDEN* student journal.

What did salsa save them from? What did their everyday lives in Aguablanca look like? How did they navigate living in conditions of violence, death, and poverty? All of these questions inform this thesis.

Bailarines are integral to the production of *salsa caleña* ("Cali style salsa") – a style that the Colombian Ministry of Culture made intangible cultural heritage in Colombia in 2024 (Gobierno de Colombia, n.d.; Granados 2024; Peláez 2024; Redacción El País 2024; Ceballos 2024). Many bailarines come from the poorer areas of Cali (Ulloa 2015, 15). Despite their significance in the "World Capital of Salsa," they are underrepresented within anthropology. This thesis fills this gap by contributing with one of the first anthropological studies focusing exclusively on the bailarines of Cali. It further fills the knowledge gap on the lived experiences of those affected by precarity. Finally, this thesis contributes with one of the first studies using apprenticeship methodology to investigate embodied practices' relation to the future. It does so by examining the following problem statement from practice theoretical and phenomenological perspectives:

> *What characterizes the bailarines' quotidian experiences of precarity in El Distrito de Aguablanca, Cali, Colombia, and how do embodied salsa practices and the navigation of precarious conditions shape their hopes for the future?*

I will answer this problem statement through two analytical chapters. In chapter 1, I investigate the bailarines' everyday experiences of precarity in Aguablanca and how they navigate these experiences. In chapter 2, I examine how dancing salsa directs their bodies towards future embodiment, opportunities, and goals. I will conclude that the bailarines' experiences of precarity inhibit their ability to construct hopes for the future, while dancing salsa enables them to do so. Finally, I will suggest how the concept "*trajectorial composition*," developed in this thesis, can contribute to further research within anthropology.

Displacement, Cocaine, and Salsa: A History of Cali

From the 17th to the 19th century, Cali and the Cauca Valley region were based on a plantation system where Spanish elites profited off the agricultural work of enslaved Africans (Ulloa 2020, 303). After slavery was abolished in 1851 (Gómez 2017, 229), agricultural work continued until the early 20th century (Ulloa 2020, 303).

Between 1930 and 1950, Cali and the rest of the Cauca Valley region went through an industrialization process due to the rise in agricultural production of rice, soy, and most

significantly sugar canes (Ulloa 2020, 20). This capitalist modernization gave rise to a new agro-industrial proletariat, an urban working-class (Ulloa 2020, 20). From 1940 to 1975, rapid urbanization created about 100 new neighborhoods as thousands, largely Afro-Colombian and indigenous peoples, were internally displaced during "The Violence" (*La Violencia*) (1948-1958) and the ensuing "Armed Conflict" (*El Conflicto Armado*) from the 1960s on (Ulloa 2020, 22; Torres 2013, 155; Asher 2009, 40; Cárdenas 2018, 75). Today, roughly 15% of Colombians are displaced and the conflict still produces about 250,000 new displaced peoples yearly (Cárdenas 2018, 84).

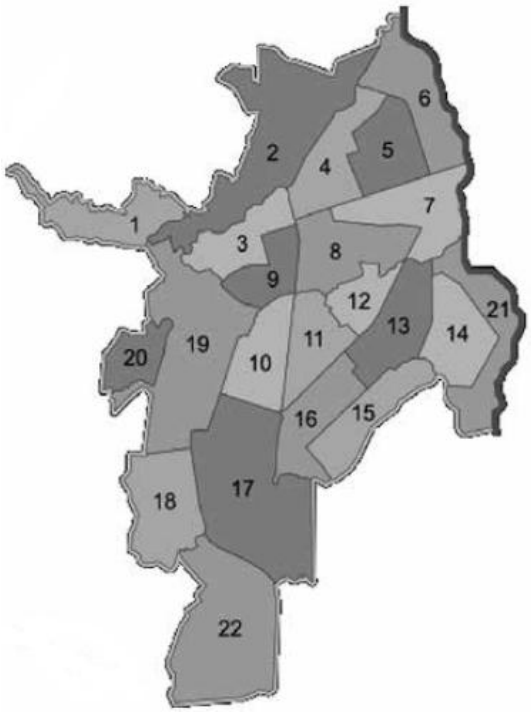
From the 1970s to the 1990s, Cali was ravaged by the cocaine trade, crime, and violence, while neoliberal policies increased inequality, unemployment, and the informal sector, producing widespread precarity for *Caleños* ("people of Cali") (Ulloa 2020, 103, 115, 121). In the 1990s, the city was considered one of the most dangerous cities in the world, reaching homicide rates over 100 per 100,000 inhabitants (ibid., 109). At one point, the cocaine market in the United States was estimated at $69,9 billion USD, about one fourth of Colombia's GDP, of which the Cali Cartel controlled 80% (Ulloa 2020, 108, 254; 2024, 185). To launder assets and gain legitimacy, the cartel invested in tourism, mobile technology, cars, agriculture, transport, infrastructure, and the city's cultural life, financing soccer teams Deportivo Cali and América de Cali and paying top salsa acts to play and record in Cali (Ulloa 2020, 111, 308, 309). Although salsa's epicenters were the Caribbean and New York, Caleños began calling the city "the salsa capital of the world" (Ulloa 2020, 37). In October 2024, salsa caleña was recognized as national cultural heritage by the Colombian Ministry of Culture (Gobierno de Colombia, n.d.; Granados 2024; Peláez 2024; Redacción El País 2024; Ceballos 2024).

Between 2019 and 2022, mass demonstrations known as "The Popular Outburst" (*El Estallido Popular*) swept Cali and Colombia, protesting a wide range of issues including corruption, crime, human rights violations, and rising food prices (Osorio-Rozo and Olarte-Cancino 2023, 138; Calvo Ortiz and Rivera Pedroza 2021; Villegas 2023; Alvarado-Salgado et al. 2023, 40). Many grievances trace back to long-term precaritization, inequality, and violence (Osorio-Rozo and Olarte-Cancino 2023). Scholars still describe Cali as one of the most violent cities in the world (Arana-Castañeda 2020, 79). In June and August 2025, unrest continued with a series of bombings striking Cali (Barber 2025; Bernat 2025).

My interlocutors come from "The District of Aguablanca" (*El Distrito de Aguablanca*). Definitions vary, but academics usually include *comunas* (an administrative district) 13, 14,

15, 21, and sometimes *comunas* 6, 7, and 16 (Villegas 2023, 92). About one third of the city lives there (ibid., 90). The area was built by displaced people seeking refuge and work (ibid.). The 2005 census records 26,2% of Cali as black ("*población negra*"), while Aguablanca is about 68-70% black (Arana-Castañeda 2020, 86; Villegas 2023, 90).[2] Julieth Villegas (2023) calls Aguablanca "a marginal urban corridor" with high rates of population density, unemployment, children out of school, domestic violence, crime, teenage pregnancy, and homicide (90).

[2] Given accusations that the 2018 census erased up to 1,3 million Afro-Colombians, I follow Arana-Castañeda in using 2005 data.



Map of Cali. Comunas *6, 7, 13, 14, 15, 16, and 21 make up the District of Aguablanca. Source: Villegas 2023, 90.*

Conceptual Clarification

I situate the key concepts of this thesis – future, hope, salsa, and precarity – within practice theory and phenomenology. The following are working definitions of these terms that the thesis leans on implicitly.

Following Sharryn Kasmir (2023), I understand precarity and precarious(ness) as "a general, pervasive ontological condition of vulnerability, displacement, and insecurity" beyond neoliberalism or class alone (1). However, class relations are part of this thesis as a contextual backdrop in the form of Colombia's socioeconomic stratification system (Pérez Fernández 2023, 511; Hurtado-Tarazona et al. 2020, 644; García 2022, 2). However, the thesis does not engage significantly with debates on working conditions or the "precariat".

I follow Francis Pine's (2014) understanding of hope's relation to the future (96). The future is a sense of temporal progress and positive change, while hope is the imagination and desire to realize that future. Hoping for the future is always shadowed by despair given its uncertainty (Pine 2014, 96).

When I mention salsa caleña, I deliberately blur Alejandro Ulloa's (2015) distinction between "Classic Caleño Style" and "Salsa Show Dance" (33-34). Classic Caleño Style incorporates elements from guaracha, mambo, pachanga, boogaloo, son montuno, and guaguancó, while Salsa Show Dance merges these elements with ballet and circus acrobatics (Ulloa 2015, 34). I use salsa caleña to refer to an amalgamation of both styles, reflecting my interlocutors' own terminology and lived experience.

I use Cali instead of Santiago de Cali and Aguablanca instead of El Distrito de Aguablanca. I use bailarín for a male dancer, bailarina for a female dancer, and bailarines for a group of dancers including at least one male. The fieldwork was in Spanish with two interviews in English. Translations from Spanish into English are mine.

Literature review: Futures, Precarity, and Salsa

My thesis situates itself within three different analytical problem areas within anthropology: 1) The anthropology of hope/future; 2) The anthropology of precarity; and 3) The anthropology of dance.

The Anthropology of Hope and Future

In the early 2000s, the anthropology of hope emerged as a burgeoning subfield with anthropologists ethnographically investigating people's hopes and their endeavors to realize them (Jansen 2021, 1). Early pioneers of this field include Vincent Crapanzano (2003), Hirokazu Miyazaki (2004), and Susan Whyte (2002). By the mid-2010s, the field had expanded significantly (Kleist and Jansen 2016, 1), leading to reviews and methodological discussions of "an anthropology of hope" and "an anthropology of the future" (Knight and Bryant 2019; Jansen 2021; Valentine and Hassoun 2019; Coleman 2017; Desjarlais and Throop 2011).

Political Economic Approaches to Hope

Political economic approaches focus on the unequal distribution of hope (Jansen 2021, 2). Scholars within this field argue that hope is not universal but is rather structured by class position, capitalism, and migration. These approaches can broadly be grouped into practice theory and phenomenology despite often overlapping.

Practice-theoretical accounts treat hope as an enacted capacity, from Pierre Bourdieu's (1963) analysis of "subjective hopes" and "objective probabilities" among Kabyle villagers (50) and Arjun Appadurai's (2013) analysis of how a "capacity to aspire" is unequally distributed when measured up against "collective horizons" in India, to Frances Pine's (2014) articulation of migration as an act of hope among Poles (103), to Henrik Vigh (2006a; 2009b; 2009a), Sebastien Bachelet (2019), and Maybritt Alpes' (2014) works on migration as social becoming in West Africa.

Phenomenological approaches gauge hope as a bodily experience. Ghassan Hage and Harry Pettit and Wiebe Ruijtenberg write about how "existential mobility," the individual's sense of moving in life, is connected to capitalism's focus on progression (Hage 2003, 13; 2009, 13, 74; Pettit and Ruijtenberg 2019, 731). Other studies foreground the embodied, affective dimensions of hope, showing how hope coexists with despair (Mattingly 2010), waiting (Elliot 2016), and uncertainty (Simonsen 2023; Lucht 2012).

This thesis contributes to this field by using practice theory and phenomenology to examine how navigating precarious conditions in Aguablanca shapes bailarines' hopes for the future.

Subjectivity, Hope, and Future

Many anthropologies of the future focus on praxis, agency, hope, self-work, embodiment, and everyday life. Daniel Knight and Rebecca Bryant (2019) and Henrik Vigh (2006b) argue that behavior in the present is informed by how the future is imagined (Vigh 2006b, 492; Knight and Bryant 2019, 2, 16). Morten Axel Pedersen (2012) and Stine Krøijer (2014) argue that hope should be understood as a collective and active future-oriented practice (Pedersen 2012, 137-138; Krøijer 2014, 75). For Krøijer, however, the embodied experience of the future affects the intensity of hopeful action (Krøijer 2014, 75). While Pedersen and Krøijer show how hope as collective practices and actions are oriented towards the future, James Laidlaw (2002), Jarrett Zigon (2007), Saba Mahmood (2001a; 2001b), and Rebecca Bryant (2005) focus on how individual and collective future orientational practices construct subjectivities.

Some of these studies address embodied practices' relation to the future, but none use apprenticeship methodology (which I will elaborate on later). This thesis aims to do so.

Hope in Latin America: Migration, Religion, and Uncertainty

Hope has been the object of focus in the Latin American context for studies on migration (Frank-Vitale 2020; Hagan 2012; Skov 2019; Goza 1994; Bargetto et al. 2021), Christianity (Guzman 1993; Hagan 2012; Núñez Castañeda and Taylor 2013; Maxwell 2020), and uncertainty (Silva 2024; Simas et al. 2020; Dalsgård 2014; Bellino 2019; Nuijten 2004).

Uncertainty is a general theme among anthropological works. Monique Nuijten (2004) argues that bureaucracies can produce systems of hope (228). However, most studies focus on the hopes of individuals or groups rather than systems. Erika Skov (2019), Jacqueline Maria Hagan (2012), Anne Line Dalsgård (2014), and Clarissa Simas et al. (2020) show how hope becomes a way to manage risk within uncertain conditions (Skov 2019, 2; Hagan 2012; Dalsgård 2014, 100; Simas et al. 2020, 953). What all these texts have in common is that they, in Cristhian Teófilo da Silva's (2024) words, promote "powerful cultural messages of hope […] resistance and overcoming" and "acknowledge the 'suffering helpless subjects' as epistemic hopeful agents" (555). However, none of these studies have focused on agentive hopeful practices under uncertain conditions in Colombia. This thesis will fill this gap by focusing on the bailarines as "epistemic hopeful agents."

Anthropology of Precarity

Emerging among French sociologists and economists in the 1970s, the concept of *précarité* initially referred to a social condition of poverty (Lazar and Sanchez 2019, 3). Later, it described the forms of employment outside of classic Fordist full-time permanent contracts, as well as the capital's response to the rejection of workers' demands for free time (Lazar and Sanchez 2019, 3; Neilson and Rossiter 2005, 10). However, the term started gaining prominence in the 2000s among social movements and academics (Bourdieu 1998; Wacquant 2007; 2008; Standing 2011; Neilson and Rossiter 2005; 2008; Tsianios 2007; Aguiar 2006; Bulter 2004; Butler 2016).

Sharryn Kasmir (2023) writes that economistic accounts of precarity (and related terms like precariousness and the precariat) have been criticized for locating precarity solely in neoliberal capitalism and shifting class relations, overlooking that precarity has always been a condition of the working class (1). Instead, scholars have focused on the experiential and existential dimensions of precarity as "an ontological condition of vulnerability" (ibid.). Some foundational ideas within this field are Judith Butler's (2016) distinction between universal human vulnerability ("precariousness") and politically produced precarity (38) and Brett Nielson and Ned Rossiter's (2008) framing of precarity as a socio-economic condition and an ontological experience (51, 55). Other methodological contributions include the studies of Georgina Ramsay (2020) and Martin Bak Jørgensen (2016). Building on Anna Tsing's (2015) view of precarity as pervasive (2), Ramsay (2020) theorizes displacement as temporal dispossession and proposes it as a framework linking migrants' and non-migrants' precarious experiences (385, 387-388), while Jørgensen (2016) argues that an analysis into what precarity is should be followed by an analysis into what it does (959).

Some studies from Latin America like those of Ximena Subercaseaux (2015) and Estefanía Palacios (2021) focus on economistic conceptualizations of precarity. However, most texts focus on precarity as a socioeconomic condition and ontological experience. Katherine Millar's (2014) influential Rio study links "precarious labor" and "precarious life" (35, 48, 50), a blueprint Christian Krohn-Hansen (2022) applies to wageless work in the Dominican Republic (50). Similarly, Cathy McIlwaine (2020) shows how intersectional forces shape migrants' exploitative living and working conditions (2607). In Colombia, studies have focused on how precarity intersects with migration (Álvarez 2022, 77) and race (Zeiderman 2016, 809). In Cali, scholars have investigated precarity in relation to protests (Alvarado-Salgado et al. 2023, 38–

39), rurality (Hougaard 2023, 2438), and youth (Villegas 2023, 87). Julieth Villegas identifies that research has overlooked the lived experiences of those affected by precarity (ibid.).

This study seeks to fill the gap pointed out by Villegas by focusing on the bailarines' experiences of precarity in Aguablanca. I follow Kasmir, Nielson and Rossiter, Millar, and Hougaard in treating precarity as a socioeconomic condition and ontological experience and answer Jørgensens' call to analyze not only what precarity is but what it does.

Anthropology of Dance

Hélène Kringelbach and Jonathan Skinner (2012) write that "the study of dance in anthropology is almost as old as the discipline itself" (4). In the early era of anthropology, Herbert Spencer (1857), Emilie Durkheim (1915), Alfred Radcliffe-Brown (1922), Bronislaw Malinowski (1948), and Franz Boas (1930) did not view dance as a practice to be studied in itself, but rather as a subcomponent of ritual (Kringelbach and Skinner 2012, 4). Since the 1970s, however, several authors have published reviews on the anthropology of dance (Royce 1977; Kaeppler 1978; 2000; Hanna et al. 1979; Reed 1998; Farnell 1999; Sweet 2005; Kringelbach and Skinner 2012; Wulff 2015; González 2021). Scholars have stopped coming up with universal definitions of dance and instead tend to investigate it as patterned rhythmical bodily movements for which the definition can change contextually (Wulff 1998, 17; Kringelbach and Skinner 2012, 3–4). Studies of dance develop within ethnochoreology, folklorist studies, semasiology, and anthropological studies focusing on wider themes with dance as a subcomponent (Kringelbach and Skinner 2012, 3). This study is located mostly within the latter.

Anthropologies of dance have been studied from India (Puri 2009; 2011; 2015) to Australia (Marie 2020) to transnational arenas (Grau 2010). In Latin America, scholars have focused on tango (Taylor 1998; Carozzi 2019), contemporary and classical dance (Mora 2007), ballet (Schlegel 2014; 2016), Afro-Colombian dance (Valderrama 2021; Duque 2021; Cárdenas 2019), twerk (Lucio 2023), and indigenous dances (Martínez 2006). Some of these authors and others have provided methodological contributions, promoting semiotics (Martínez 2006, 331; Jensen 2009, 24; Popa Blanariu 2013, 2), Bourdieusian practice theory (Mora 2007, 300; Csordas 1993, 139), and Merleau-Pontian phenomenology (Csordas 1993, 139). Following Mora and Csordas, this thesis adopts practice theory and phenomenology.

Salsa Anthropologies

Studies on salsa derive from ethnomusicology, e.g. Joseph Blum's (1978) work. Many of the texts mentioned in this review are thus produced at the intersection between anthropology and ethnomusicology.

The first mention of an "anthropology of salsa" I have found is in Jorge Duany's (1984) article, in which he studies Puerto Rican song and dance forms and analyzes them from a structural functionalist and symbolic approach (186). Some early significant anthropologies of salsa are Alejandro Ulloa (1988) and Ángel Quintero Rivera (1999). Many anthropological studies on salsa focus on music, e.g. Deborah Kapchan (2006), Andrés Agurto (2022), and Ángel Quintero Rivera (2011). However, this study focuses exclusively on salsa dance.

Anthropologies on salsa dance engage with identity formation (Bosse 2008, 45; García 2013a; 2013b), transnationalism (Skinner 2007, 487; Hutchinson 2014; Schneider 2010, 663; Carwile 2017, 183; Menet 2020; Kabir 2013, 183), and sensuality (Gagné 2014, 446). What these studies have in common is that they investigate hobby dancers – who Alejandro Ulloa (2014) refers to as "*bailadores*" (141). I therefore identify a gap in the literature pertaining to professional dancers – what Ulloa (2014) refers to as "*bailarines*" (ibid.). With this study, I aim to fill this gap. This aligns with Priscilla Renta's (2004) argument that salsa dance should be studied in its own right (139) and with César Vélez's (2024) argument that a gap exists regarding the lived embodied experiences of people that maintain salsa tradition, namely the dancers (22, 34-35). This study aims at filling this gap by focusing on the lived embodied experiences of professional salsa dancers (*bailarines*).

Salsa Anthropologies in Cali

In Cali, scholars have been concerned with authenticity, identity, and sociocultural history. Markus Ochse (2004) argues that salsa became popular in Cali because it provided Caleños with agency to construct their own notions of authenticity (25), while Juan Quintero (2014) argues that Caleño dancers function as central political actors, actively producing and contesting authenticity and identity via embodied practice (11). Lise Waxer's feminist, ethnomusicological, and cultural-historical studies of Cali's salsa scene (2000; 2001; 2002b; 2002a) further unpack its social and gendered dimensions.

The most extensive contributions of salsa in Cali have been provided by Alejandro Ulloa (1988; 2000; 2005; 2009; 2014; 2015; 2018; 2020; 2022; 2024; n.d.). His 2015 investigation of the

social history of "salsa outfits" (*vestuarios*) is one of the only anthropological studies that centers the bailarines as a main research object. However, the focus is not limited to bailarines, but also includes fashion designers, tailors, and merchants (Ulloa 2015, 11). With this thesis, I am to provide one of the first anthropological studies that focuses solely on the bailarines of Cali.

Identified Gaps and Positioning the Thesis

This thesis contributes to political economic approaches to hope by using practice theory and phenomenology to examine how navigating precarious conditions in Aguablanca shapes bailarines' hopes for the future. Further, within studies focusing on embodied understandings of the future, this thesis contributes with one of the first studies using apprenticeship methodology to investigate how embodied practices relate to the future. This thesis also fills a gap on hopeful agentive practices in Colombia.

This study fills a gap on lived experiences of those affected by precarity by focusing on how the precarious conditions of Aguablanca affect the bailarines. I follow understandings of precarity as lived experience, while following the suggestion that an analysis into what precarity is, should be followed by an analysis into what it does.

This study is located within anthropological studies focusing on wider themes with dance as a subcomponent. For this, it adopts approaches within practice theory and phenomenology, and it focuses exclusively on salsa dance. It further fills a gap on the lived embodied experiences of professional salsa dancers (*bailarines*) by providing one of the first anthropological studies focusing exclusively on the bailarines in Cali.

Theoretical and Analytical Framework

In this section, I present theories and concepts from practice theory and phenomenology used in the analysis. These classifications serve as heuristics, acknowledging that the theories overlap. I use practice theories from Henrik Vigh (2006a; 2009b; 2009a), Daniel Knight and Rebecca Bryant (2019), and James Laidlaw (2002), while I use phenomenological theories from Robert Desjarlais and Jason Throop (2011) and Thomas Csordas (1993).

Theoretical Framework

Practice theory

Bourdieu develops practice theory as a critique of positivistic developments within sociology (Sjørslev 2015, 77). For him, the social sciences' use of binary oppositions (materialism vs. idealism, economy vs. culture, causality vs. interpretation, objectivism vs. subjectivism) were false. This critique led him to synthesize objectivism and subjectivism in his theory of practice (Bourdieu 1987, 1; Sjørslev 2015, 78). Practice theory is a theory that incorporates the structural determinants and the agency of subjects within the same analytical framework. From this, he develops his "habitus" concept (Sjørslev 2015, 78; Wacquant 2011, 85).[3] Habitus is a system of durable, transposable dispositions that condition the individual's behavior (Bourdieu 1977, 72; Wacquant 2011, 85). Habitus is shaped by an individual's historical experience of being socialized into a particular society, through which structural norms, values, and rules become internalized as embodied dispositions (ibid.). The individual produces and reproduces these dispositions through practice (ibid.).

Another theorist who has made a significant contribution to practice theory is Henrik Vigh (2006a; 2009a; 2009b). Vigh departs from Bourdieu's synchronic "social field" model, built on assumptions of societal stability, by adding a diachronic dimension where instability causes the social field to change over time (Vigh 2009a, 426-427). Practice theory should thus focus on the "motion within motion," suggesting his concept "social navigation" as an analytic to capture this dynamic (Vigh 2009a, 431, 435). Building on Michel De Certeau's (1988) concepts of "strategies" and "tactics", Vigh (2006a; 2009a) demonstrates how young men in Guinea-Bissau use social navigation to realize their hopes for a better future within abject conditions. Vigh defines social navigation as "the action of moving tactically in relation to social forces that confine or seek to move you (…) simultaneously keep[ing] oneself free of immediate social dangers and direct one's life through an uncertain social environment, towards better possible futures and improved life chances" (Vigh 2009a, 97). From Vigh's empirical data, social navigation implies a telos for the young men in Guinea-Bissau that hope to advance from the status of an "incomplete man" (*blufo*) to a "complete man" (*homi completo*) (Vigh 2006a, 46). However, changes in the social terrain can change the telos (Vigh 2009a, 423, 425).

[3] These sentences are from my Analytical Approaches exam.

James Laidlaw (2002) extends practice theory into the study of ethics and freedom. Studying ethical freedom ethnographically entails examining how freedom is exercised through what are considered ethical practices in the ethnographic context (Laidlaw 2002, 322). Extending Foucault (1988), these ethical practices are "techniques of the self," which refer to ways that a person works on herself towards becoming a specific person or achieving a specific state (Laidlaw 2002, 322).[4]

Also drawing on practice theory, Daniel Knight and Rebecca Bryant (2019) introduce the term "futural orientations." (2). They define it as "a way of thinking about the indeterminate and open-ended teleologies of everyday life […] to make sense of the future's role in orienting quotidian action" (2019, 2). Futural orientations include hope, expectation, speculation, potentiality, as well as apathy, disillusion, and fatigue (ibid., 2, 19). These futural orientations shape individuals' actions in the present, including the act of imagining the future (ibid., 2, 16).[5]

Phenomenology

Robert Desjarlais and Jason Throop (2011) define phenomenology as "the study of things as they appear to our lived experience," offering insights into how individuals sense, comprehend, and embody the surrounding world (88-89). The body is both the site of lived experience and the methodological and analytical lens for interpreting the world (ibid.).

Building on Edmund Husserl's (1970) concept "lifeworld" (*Lebenwelt*), Desjarlais and Throop (2011) define lifeworld as, "the unquestioned, practical, historically conditioned, pretheoretical, and familiar world of our everyday lives (...) a dynamic, shifting, and intersubjectively constituted existential reality that results from the ways that we are geared into the world by means of our particular situatedness as existential, practical, and historical beings" (91-92). Furthermore, Desjarlais and Throop (2011) argue that "embodiment" explores "the bodily aspects of human beings and subjectivity" (90). Building on his argument that embodiment should function as a methodological point of departure for examining culture (Csordas 1990), Csordas develops the concept "somatic modes of attention," defined as "culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others" (Csordas 1993, 138). Csordas notes that Merleau-Ponty never fully connects his theory of "perception" to cultural-historical analysis (ibid., 137). Perception

[4] These sentences are taken from my Analytical Approaches exam.
[5] These sentences are from my Project Design exam.

is understood as a pre-reflective, bodily mode of being in the world with no clear subject-object split in place, while "attention" is an active, reflective process of turning towards an object (ibid.). Merleau-Ponty's inability to connect his theory to cultural analysis leads Csordas to combine Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological understanding of individual perception with Bourdieu's practice theory concept habitus to make phenomenological understandings of embodiment relevant for studies of social collectivities (ibid.). As noted by Csordas (1993), Merleau-Ponty (1962) describes "attention" like this: "To pay attention is (…) the active constitution of a new object which makes explicit and articulate what was until then presented as no more than an indeterminate horizon" (Merleau-Ponty in Csordas 1993, 138). For Csordas, attention names that moment in which the body reflexively engages with the perceptual field, rendering the act of attention into a socially significant and culturally specific practice.

Analytical Framework

I follow Desjarlais and Throop's understanding of lifeworld to analyze the bailarines' quotidian experiences of precarity in Aguablanca. I use Csordas' somatic modes of attention to examine the bodily dimensions of learning and dancing salsa in my experience as an apprentice. I draw on Csordas' understanding of Merleau-Ponty to show how attention directs the body toward future competence, while Bourdieu's habitus illuminates how repeated embodied salsa practice shapes the bailarines' dispositions and hopes for the future. I use Vigh's social navigation to show how the bailarines' use emic logics of "rummaging" (*rebusque*) and "keep moving forward" (*salir adelante*) to navigate the precarity of Aguablanca. I use Knight and Bryant's futural orientations concept to illuminate how the lack of economic security and the anxiety of suddenly injuring themselves in the line of work make it difficult, even impossible, for the bailarines to plan far into the future. Based on these analyses, I develop the concept "*trajectorial composition*," defined as structured futural directionality restored to individuals who have been robbed of a future by precarious experiences. Finally, I draw on Laidlaw's interpretation of Foucault's techniques of the self to show how dancing salsa for the bailarines functions as a form of self-work towards achieving "peace and quiet" (*paz y tranquilidad*) in the future.

Methodology

This thesis is based on 132 days of fieldwork in Cali, Colombia between July 24th and December 3rd, 2024. I conducted 17 semi-structured interviews, amounting to 26 hours of

recordings and 424 pages of transcriptions. Additionally, I accumulated 336 pages of fieldnotes based on participant observation, apprenticeship, and informal interviews. Photos are chosen from my archive of 1119 photos taken throughout my fieldwork.

Access, Interlocutors, and Adjustments

Inspired by stories of its famous salsa, I first visited Cali in May 2017 as a backpacker. At a hostel offering free daily beginner classes, Sara and Raúl taught me my first "steps" (*pasos*) to "Arrechera" by La Gente Pesada. I spent two weeks dancing with them, then returned in 2019–2020 to teach English and dance. Since then, I have maintained my affinity for salsa in Copenhagen and stayed in touch with Sara and Raúl.

In January 2024, I told Sara I considered fieldwork in Cali. She invited me to collaborate with her NGO, which employs bailarines from "vulnerable sectors" (*sectores vulnerables*) in Aguablanca to teach dance classes to foreigners. Sara founded the NGO in 2018 after noticing that many bailarines, despite earning well in their twenties, often returned to the same vulnerable conditions in their thirties due to injuries or lack of savings. Beyond job stability, the NGO offers education and bookkeeping to encourage investment in their future. Sara expressed frustration that many bailarines miss classes or leave without progress, incurring penalties for the NGO and undermining its mission. She asked me to examine why they struggle to invest in their future. This question became my point of departure.

When I entered the field in July 2024, a dispute between Sara and her business partner led her bailarines to leave and my original plan to follow them at the partner's hostel became unfeasible. I therefore shifted to studying bailarines of Aguablanca more broadly, including former bailarines of the NGO and others not affiliated with the NGO – all with diverse sexual, racial, and gender identities. Sara facilitated contact with Angélica, Jesús, Claudia, and Pedro. Pedro connected me to Yonatan. A friend connected me with Daniel, who then connected me with María. I recruited Ana, Abuelo Josué, Luz, Diamante, and Issa at salsa events – the latter three are not bailarines from Aguablanca but still provided relevant data.

In late September 2024, Ana told me that salsa had saved her and other bailarines' lives from trauma. It was at that moment that I understood salsa's significance to the bailarines. Moreover, many bailarines spoke of *salir adelante*, the struggle to keep moving forward through salsa. These stories combined with my original focus on the bailarines' futures informed the analytical interests of this thesis.

Interviews

Kathleen DeWalt and Billie DeWalt (2010) describe informal interviews as asking questions during ongoing events while participating in them without being intrusive (139). I used informal interviews when attending salsa classes, observing Raúl, Daniel, and Yonatan's salsa classes, and going out dancing with Raúl, Daniel, Angélica, Luz, and Diamante. In my salsa classes and observing my interlocutors' classes, I asked the bailarines questions about didactics. When dancing at clubs, I generally asked my interlocutors questions about things that happened or were said in order to obtain greater cultural understanding. DeWalt and DeWalt caution that this method may yield inconsistent answers, which should be followed up later in a semi-structured interview (DeWalt and DeWalt 2010, 141). I followed this advice with the bailarines, especially regarding emic terms like *no dar papaya* ("do not give someone a reason to rob you"), *rebusque* ("rummaging"), *salir adelante* ("moving forward"), and *paz y tranqulidad* ("peace and quiet").

Mikkel Rytter and Karen Fog Olwig (2018) note that semi-structured interviews use prepared questions and themes to guide conversation with interlocutors (183). I conducted 17 semi-structured interviews with 11 different interlocutors, mostly in their homes, neighborhoods, or dance schools. These interviews focused on their life stories of becoming bailarines, growing up in Aguablanca, and hopes for the future. The life story interview highlights how personal narratives facilitate meaning-making and reveal the ways a life is constructed and reconstructed through its telling (Atkinson in Gubrium et al. 2012, 115–16). It relies on sensitivity and respect for the storyteller (ibid.). I reminded them before the interview that they would remain anonymous and could request to delete or omit any part of the interview at any time. They never did. However, to show sensitivity, I decided not to include details on sexual abuse in this thesis.

Three interviews were held on Zoom. Débora Antunes and Alexander Dhoest (2019) argue the social barriers of face-to-face communication are diminished in online interviews, generating a more intimate interaction (12, 13). I personally felt more moved in physical interviews when my interlocutors told me about their experiences of violence, e.g. I felt moved when Ana told me that she finally obtained "peace and quiet" (*paz y tranquilidad*) in her life. This moment made me pursue "peace and quiet" as a central part of my analysis.

Participant Observation

Participant observation allows the ethnographer to engage in interlocutors' everyday practices while strategically observing them (Overgaard Mogensen and Dalsgård 2018, 166–67). Participant observation consists of various degrees of participation ranging from high to low (Spradley 1980, 58–60; DeWalt and DeWalt 2010, 19, 23).

I conducted participant observation with low degree of participation by making short visits by taxi to the homes of the bailarines. Here, I visited their homes and dance schools or walked around their neighborhood with them. I did so to investigate the bailarines' everyday experiences of precarity in Aguablanca. I also followed and observed the bailarines in their everyday lives when they taught students, performed their salsa shows, and rehearsed. Weekly, I observed Yonatan and Pedro's rehearsal group preparing for the World Salsa Championship, Daniel's group classes, and Raúl's private classes.

I conducted participant observation with a high degree of participation, too. I lived in San Cayetano in the western part of the city to be close to the many salsa schools and clubs. I attended salsa social events at clubs four to five nights a week to observe dancers, practice what I learned in class, and experience the salsa scene: Sundays, I went to El Mulato Cabaret; Mondays and Wednesdays, I went to La Topa Tolondra; Thursdays, I went to El Rincón de Heberth. Other days, I either explored new clubs or relaxed. I did so to investigate how salsa affected the daily lives of the bailarines and obtain firsthand experience of salsa dance.

Autoethnography and Apprenticeship

Yvonne Daniels (1995) argues that typical participant observation is not sufficient when studying dance because it is only by "dancing that one can fully understand dance" (20).

Autoethnography has gained prominence across disciplines like anthropology, communication, education, counseling, art, sociology, and performance studies (Adams et al. 2017, 8). Adams et al. (2017) define it as a "research method that uses personal experience ("auto") to describe and interpret ("graphy") cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices ("ethno")" (1). Scholars investigating embodied knowledge have further developed autoethnography into apprenticeship approaches. Downey, Dalidowicz, and Mason (2015) define apprenticeship as, "the process of developing from novice to proficiency under the guidance of a skilled expert," which reveals the mechanisms of enculturation and how gaining competence shapes individuals (183). Helle Bundgaard (2010) argues that apprenticeship allows ethnographers to

gain access to the epistemologies of interlocutors by engaging in their practices (54–55, 64–65). Loïc Wacquant (2011) advances Bourdieu's habitus from analytic to method, arguing that the researcher's apprenticeship is a methodological mirror of the research subjects' apprenticeship (81). It allows ethnographers to obtain some of the same bodily dispositions as their interlocutors (ibid.). Apprenticeship therefore functions as an epistemological and methodological tool for gaining embodied knowledge of sociocultural practices.

In my fieldwork, establishing an apprenticeship meant taking salsa caleña classes from beginner to advanced level. I first took the beginner level classes in two different salsa schools. Later, I took intermediate and advanced level courses at a third school. I also took private classes with my main interlocutor, Raúl, with whom I performed a show. I did so to investigate the bodily dimensions of salsa and how they inform the bailarines' thoughts on the future. I took salsa classes four to five times a week for most of my fieldwork. In preparing for my show, I rehearsed with Raúl every day for the last two weeks of my stay.

Apprenticeship-based ethnography has received criticism for weakening the ethnographic authority through excessive self-reference, shifting the work from rigorous analysis of others' practices into mere autobiography (Downey, Dalidowicz, and Mason 2015, 195). With apprenticeship-based ethnography, the researcher must balance using their own embodied experiences as a tool for understanding another culture without turning their personal journey into the central object of the study (ibid.). Here, this entailed an acknowledgment of my experiential limitations – dancing four and a half months in Cali only provided me with a fraction of the experiential knowledge that bailarines have from dancing for decades. Also, I exclusively danced salsa caleña, while the bailarines also take classes in circus acrobatics and ballet.

Roger Sanjek (2019) writes that ethnographies should not be judged by reliability (replicability of findings by other researchers), but should rather be judged by validity (capturing the phenomenon the study claims to investigate) (394-395). Uwe Flick (2007) argues that one way to control validity threats and ensure quality in qualitative research is to "triangulate" between methods (49, 51). Using apprenticeship (or any other method) alone would therefore threaten the validity of my study. It is the triangulation between semi-structured interviews, informal interviews, participant observation with high and low participation, and apprenticeship that ensures the validity of the results in this thesis.

Ethnographic Text

Anna Bloom-Christen and Hendrikje Grunow (2024) write that a vignette is an epistemically valuable piece of writing that emphasizes showing over telling and "thick description" (Geertz 1973) to affectively engage its audience on the uniquely particular (Bloom-Christen and Grunow 2024, 15-16). I use vignettes, especially to convey precarity in Aguablanca. Bloom-Christen and Grunow further write the power of vignettes emerge in situations where theory and analytical writing come up short (ibid., 15). I use one vignette in chapter 2 to show the bodily experience of performing a salsa show to help my reader understand the knowledge gained through apprenticeship. Literary effects such as contrasts, sense stimulation, reality effects, pauses, and tempo (Bundgaard and Dalsgård 2023, 24, 54, 171, 191) are used in the vignettes.

Alejandro Ulloa's (2020) "life stories" (*historias de vida*) inform my writing, too. Ulloa explains that life stories offer a lens through which to explore lived experience and understand how knowledge is formed within networks of relationships (Ulloa 2020, 346). I use vignettes and life stories to show how emic language emerges from everyday situations. I present emic terms like *no dar papaya*, *rebusque*, *salir adelante*, and *paz y tranqulidad* in vignettes and subsequently bring them into the analysis.

I follow Helle Bundgaard and Anne Line Dalsgård's (2023) thoughts on writing about places and people (117, 133). Bundgaard and Dalsgård stress that atmosphere and setting descriptions ground the ethnography in the world (ibid.). In my ethnographic descriptions relating to place, I emphasize exhaustion, nerves, sweat, danger, and exhilaration relating to dancing salsa, Cali's heat, and the precarity of Aguablanca. The book *¡Que viva la música!* (1977) by the legendary Cali-author Andrés Caicedo inspired my use of salsa songs and sites throughout the thesis to provide a sense of the city and its soundscape.[6]

Bundgaard and Dalsgård describe a "round character" as a well-rounded, complex protagonist who drives the narrative forward (Bundgaard and Dalsgård 2023, 133-134). I chose Raúl as the round character because I spent most time with him. His experiences drive the thesis from past

[6] If the reader is interested in exploring the soundscape of the city, the following link (Godkin, n.d.) accesses a Spotify playlist I compiled in Cali: https://open.spotify.com/playlist/2OMFKnXFLFGYRk4s0vNIEQ?si=p7Ys9dHmRUqyt5JcDjFT8Q&pi=-JnP8Y2qRje3_&nd=1&dlsi=590c237e39e84bd6.

and present experiences of precarity in chapter one to hopes for the future in chapter two, illustrating the bailarines' life trajectories central to my analysis.

Kristen Ghodsee (2016) writes that writing dialogue that focuses on body language, facial expressions, cadence, and voice is a great way to set a scene, familiarize the reader with the informants, and set up an analytical point (68). Most of the quotes of this thesis are written in dialogue. Bundgaard and Dalsgård recommend trimming long quotations into fragments (Bundgaard and Dalsgård 2023, 163). Most quotes are shortened accordingly, but I retain longer passages when bailarines describe precarity in Aguablanca to give readers a direct view into their lifeworlds without excessive literary effects.

Positionality

My position as a white, European, middle-class, educated, and cisgendered man had several implications for the knowledge produced in this thesis.

Regarding access, my privileged position meant that I could easily obtain a three-month visa with additional visa extensions. While most of my interlocutors did not have a university degree, my position as a white researcher from Europe made it easy for me to secure interviews with famous bailarines.

My relative privilege meant I usually had more money than my interlocutors. My monthly student grant of $1,000 USD would only cover housing and groceries in Denmark, but combined with $2,500 in other grants and a $150 monthly rent, I lived comfortably in Cali. As a result, I was often expected to pay for taxis or drinks. Occasionally, I felt exploited too. Going out one night with some dancers, Diamante left her wallet at home and expected me, as a male foreigner, to cover transport, entrance, and drinks. I paid but told her to cover it next time.

Ulloa (2014) distinguishes the *bailador*, who dances as a hobby from the *bailarín*, the professional (141). After five years of leisure salsa in Copenhagen I positioned myself as a bailador, which limited my epistemological access to the full experience of the bailarines. DeWalt and DeWalt (2010) call this "active membership" versus "full membership" (25). Similarly, my accented Spanish prevented me from being regarded as a full member of Caleño, Colombian, or Latin American communities.

Jöhncke (2018) writes about the necessity for the anthropologist to build rapport with interlocutors (126). Being a bailador and speaking proficient Spanish helped me build rapport with my interlocutors because I could participate in dance activities and follow conversations.

Being able to dance facilitated trust too. In one instance, I was invited by Abuelo Josué to attend a rehearsal for a theatrical play made by some of the "icons" (*íconos*) of salsa. When I arrived, one of the women took my hand and demanded that I showed her that I could dance. After that moment, I did not face further skepticism about my presence.

Challenging the belief that isolation and indifference are central to producing scientific knowledge, Meritxell Ramírez-i-Ollé (2019) argues that befriending research subjects is ethical – it fosters trust, complicity, and mutuality while preserving the constructiveness of dissent and differentiation between researcher and interlocutor (299, 314). I consider Sara and Raúl friends. Sara eased recruitment of interlocutors and shaped my analytical focus on precarity and the future. Without Sara's early insight, this project would have been very different. Raúl granted access to his daily life, including family, work, leisure, and business negotiations.

Ethics

Laura Navne and Lotte Segal (2018) define "ethnographic diplomacy" as a practical ethics emphasizing ongoing process-oriented reflection and adaptation to a given situation, rather than as an overarching morality (39–40, 45–46). Guided by this approach, I stressed openness, cocreation, and collaboration with my interlocutors, asking in interviews what they considered most important to know about the bailarines of Aguablanca. The project began with Sara's collaboration issues but, as circumstances changed, I kept an analytical focus on the bailarines' visions for the future, shifting the question from why they did not think about the future to how salsa and precarity shape their hopes for the future.

The American Anthropological Association (AAA) requires weighing ethical obligations among affected parties and maintaining professional relationships (AAA, n.d.). Rivalries among interlocutors required careful navigation of social boundaries, e.g. after a falling out between Raúl and Sara, I stopped discussing interlocutors with others.

Entering Aguablanca also posed security risks. Following AAA's principle of do no harm (AAA, n.d.), I decided that that if any situation threatened the safety of my interlocutors or me, I would prioritize our well-being over completing the project and, if necessary, revise the research design.

Informed Consent and Anonymity

I followed AAA's professional responsibility principle of obtaining informed consent as a dynamic, continuous, and reflexive process (AAA, n.d.). I obtained verbal consent from all

interlocutors before interviews and recorded those statements, secured consent from the three salsa schools where I took classes to write about my dancing experience, and renegotiated consent when novel circumstances arose, e.g. the police stop vignette in chapter 1. I also contacted people after relevant informal conversations, e.g. Issa, an unnamed person, and two taxi drivers in chapter 1. I have one written and three verbal consents from these individuals. All are anonymized.

Steffen Jöhncke (2018) writes that collaborative fieldwork should focus on the relationship between interlocutors and ethnographer, including ongoing communication regarding ethical concerns (128). I kept up continuous discussion about anonymity with interlocutors. Some, like Raúl, wanted exposure, but I told everyone upon interviewing them that they would be anonymized. Anonymization mattered because interlocutors confided highly sensitive details. For example, Ana had not even told her friends about her experiences of violence in Aguablanca. To protect people like her, I anonymized all participants, following AAA guidelines of weighing competing interests (AAA, n.d.). I mentioned my interlocutors' real Aguablanca neighborhoods for authenticity but to ensure further anonymity I interchanged them. Finally, I anonymized the salsa schools and the NGOs since none of the bailarines will receive direct promotion.

A local academic in Cali advised me that using real salsa club names and photographs posed no legal issues, so I used them to provide authentic description and visual representation of the salsa scene.

Participant Intoxication

Magnus Fiskesjö (2010) develops "participant intoxication" from his Wa fieldwork, where outsiders are those who refuse to join homemade rice beer drinking (111). Aside from a few studies (Salemink 2014, 246; Baird 2025, 186), alcohol in fieldwork is understudied. Sin and Yang (2020) argue that researchers render drinking invisible by not writing about it (1030). I address this gap as dancing salsa and drinking often overlaps in Cali. I would mostly abstain from drinking when going to clubs like El Rincón de Heberth and La Topa Tolondra. However, on Sundays at El Mulato Cabaret, alcohol consumption was a weekly occurrence. Entrance required a table minimum and Raúl, who worked there as a promoter, often let me in for free if I joined the table in buying rum. Evenings ran until 3 a.m. and sometimes continued outside the city in Menga until 6 to 7 a.m. These nights offered insights into bailarines' work and leisure and, during a police stop while Luz, Diamante, Angélica, and I were intoxicated, I gained a

deeper understanding of their experiences of precarity. I reached out to each one of them when they were sober to obtain informed consent about including the vignette in my thesis.

Sharing rum at El Mulato Cabaret. Source: Author's archive.

Reciprocity

Giving back to the field has been an established anthropological practice since the 1980s (Navne and Segal 2018, 45). This can take many forms, from sharing interview testimonies to offering practical assistance (ibid.).

According to Sara, our collaboration will facilitate the conversion of her NGO into an entity with the legal authority to offer certified education. In legal terms, this is called an "institute of education" (*institución educativa*) (Trujillo 2006).

After conducting a semi-structured interview with my interlocutor Ana about personal experiences with violence, I apologized for the three hours it took, explaining that I usually try to keep it around an hour. Ana's response to this was: "For me talking with you is like a catharsis. I have long-time friends that don't know anything about my personal life." Given my focus on experiences of precarity, some of my interlocutors like Ana thanked me for providing a space for them to vent about these experiences.

Some bailarines wanted recognition. With their consent, I included their real names in the acknowledgments section. This approach ensured full anonymity for those who preferred to remain unnamed, while giving credit to those who wished to be identified. This was a way for me to weigh competing interests in the field (AAA, n.d.). I also paid Raúl for private classes leading up to our show.

Salsa Caleña – Living Patrimony

Resolution 367 of 2024 registered salsa caleña as Colombian national intangible cultural heritage (Gobierno de Colombia, n.d.; Granados 2024; Peláez 2024; Redacción El País 2024; Ceballos 2024). Its implementation includes a five-year safeguarding plan, PES,[7] organized around seven dimensions to develop, maintain, and promote salsa caleña (Echeverri and Arango 2022; Arango and Echeverri 2021; Echeverri Bucheli 2012; Cuero et al. 2024). The first dimension aims at developing knowledge, documenting, researching, and disseminating the history, practices, and cultural significance of salsa caleña (Cuero et al. 2024). This thesis contributes to that work. I will disseminate my findings to academics and policy makers in Cali in 2026. As one of the first anthropological studies on the bailarines of Cali, I aim to represent my interlocutors in scholarly and policy debates.

[7] "Special Safeguarding Plan for the Musical and Dance Complex of Cali-style Salsa" (*Plan Especial de Salvaguardia del Complejo musical dancístico de la salsa caleña*).

Chapter 1

Community and Violence: Experiencing Precarity in Aguablanca

> El Mulato Cabaret closes for the evening, so I leave with Luz and Diamante in a taxi for an afterparty in Menga outside Cali. On the outskirts of the city, we are stopped at a police checkpoint. The officers ask for my ID. I hand over a photocopy of my passport, explaining that my original is at home due to past thefts. They compare it with Luz's ID and return both without much issue.
>
> Diamante refuses to hand over her ID, claiming she does not have it. The lead officer snaps, "Why do you people always make this so unnecessarily difficult?" Sweat beads on my forehead. The officer presses his walkie talkie, "We need an extra squad car. Noncompliant individual." Luz pleads with Diamante to cooperate, but Diamante doubles down, "No, I don't have an ID." Luz yells, "They don't care that you are trans. Show them your ID, so we can leave." Diamante finally produces her ID. As she hands it over, one of the officers says, "You still need to cooperate regardless of your identity." They allow us to leave.
>
> It is 4:30 a.m. Inside the club, drunken partygoers surround us, and a mix of merengue, salsa, bachata, and reggaetón blasts. Angélica is waiting for us. Despite the noise, I hear Angélica yelling at Diamante. "Don't you know how dangerous that is? You could have put yourself and Luz in serious danger!" Raising her right hand above her head and pointing an index finger with a long nail, Angélica screams, "Haven't you heard what happens when they take women to the station? Assaults, rapes, they don't care!" Diamante initially defends herself, her voice shaky but defiant. She cries.
>
> After about half an hour of fiery exchanges, the tension wanes. Angélica offers Diamante a glass of *Ron de Caldaz* rum with Coca-Cola. She takes a sip, looks at me, and asks, "Do you want to dance?"

This vignette shows that police violence and gender-based violence threaten the everyday safety and security of the bailarines of Aguablanca. It additionally raises the question: What

else characterizes the bailarines' everyday experiences of precarity in Aguablanca? In this chapter, I will investigate this question through the lens of Desjarlais and Throop's (2011) "lifeworld" concept defined as, "the unquestioned, practical, historically conditioned, pretheoretical, and familiar world of our everyday lives (...) a dynamic, shifting, and intersubjectively constituted existential reality that results from the ways that we are geared into the world by means of our particular situatedness as existential, practical, and historical beings" (91-92). I will argue that friendship, community, familial relationships, violence, death, robberies, crime, shootings, and gang activities constitute the bailarines' lifeworlds. I will then argue that the stigma of Aguablanca is produced on an urban, national, and international scale, accentuating the bailarines' experiences of precarity. Furthermore, I will show that the bailarines navigate the precarity of Aguablanca with a relational safety logic. This entails knowing the people in your neighborhood, staying on good terms with gang members, and refraining from giving others an opportunity to rob you.

Friendship, Community, and Family

With a lean build, upright posture, and a constant smile, bailarines like Raúl are always aware of "transmitting a feeling" (*transmitiendo un sentimiento*) to their surroundings. At El Rincón de Heberth every Thursday and El Mulato Cabaret every Sunday, he is often the only man dancing as a follower in high heels. His tight pants, crop top, and rainbow sunglasses complete his outfit. On the weekends, he works as a promoter, bringing foreigners to clubs. He teaches salsa to foreigners six to ten hours six days a week. He always arrives on his black scooter, in shark-shaped slippers, carrying a colorful electrolyte drink. His classes are full of laughter, teasing, and physical play, and he yells "Thaaat's it, honey [*esooo, mami*]" when his students complete the correct "step" (*paso*). Raúl and his mostly female European and North American clients often grope each other. "I would never let you do that if you weren't gay," I hear countless students laugh when Raúl touches their breasts. After class, he hugs his students tightly and says, "I love you [*te amo*]." They usually reciprocate. Raúl also began saying "I love you [*te amo*]" to me, which made me uncomfortable. First, I ignored it, but eventually I decided to soften my response to "I care for you too, friend [*te quiero tambien, amigo*]."

On a quiet Tuesday in October, I go with Raúl and his family to Pance. At the edge of Cali, surrounded by lush, forested mountains and foothills, Pance's cooling river is an attractive nature area for Caleños to escape the city's hustle and bustle (*ajetreo*). Only the intermittently

passing cars, birdsong, and gushing water are audible. It is a weekday, so almost no people are around except for a couple of food stalls with sizzling corn bread (*arepas*) and roasted chicken.

The Pance River. Source: Author's archive.

I plunge into the river, feeling the weight of the city's heat and dust instantly leave my body. Raúl's family sits at the edge of the bank, eating rice and chicken brought from home, while his nieces splash and skip rocks. I exit the water, grab myself a plate, and sit next to Raúl. "Do you have areas like Pance in Aguablanca?" Raúl, with food in his mouth, chuckles and then coughs. He takes a sip of water while he shakes his head, "When it rained and the neighborhood started to inundate, we would bathe in the brown water. Everyone had inflated rubber rings to play and float with. Cockroaches and all of that. Catching and throwing rats at people that yelled at us. In moments like that, it was magical." I stare at Raúl, visibly confused, "To me, that doesn't sound magical at all." Raúl laughs and continues,

> "For me, it was magical living in a poor 'neighborhood' [*barrio*] and living with people that live from day to day, who just survive and see life as a way of living in the present. It was good because you know people that are true friends. You feel familial support and unity. It's 'cool' [*chévere*] to feel that you have friends whose doors are always open to you. They always treat you like you are part of the family. The neighborhood provides total unity to its people, friendship, and support. I loved living and growing up there because I got a lot of good friends. I encountered salsa there, too."

What is particularly striking is Raúl's emphasis on friendship, community, and familial bonds in Aguablanca. Scholarly investigations of Aguablanca tend to focus on social issues (Villegas 2023; Arana-Castañeda 2020; Martínez 2019; Alves and Vergara-Figueroa 2018; Wade 2008, 13; Barbary et al. 2004, 113) with little attention to friendships, community, and familial relationships. In my conversations, access to help and emotional support through family, friends, and community was a recurring theme. As Raúl's quote indicates, these relationships provide emotional aid to the inhabitants of Aguablanca, helping them cope with difficult situations, e.g. flooding.[8] Many recalled pleasant childhoods playing with marbles, hide and seek, street sports, and encountering salsa through friends, dance schools, or salsa home parties on Sundays called *Agualulos*.

María, a multi-time champion of the competition "World Salsa Festival Cali" (*Festival Mundial de Salsa Cali*) and other international dance competitions, tells me, "Life in 'the neighborhood' [*el barrio*] has been very happy." She still lives with her family in Ciudad Córdoba in

[8] Hugo Sarmiento (2025) shows that Cali in general does have issues with flooding and especially Afro-Colombian communities are vulnerable to these (327-333).

Aguablanca and manages a foundation that trains local children to become professional bailarines. Parkinson and Lauzon (2008) show that inhabitants of Aguablanca rely heavily on family and friends for economic support and educational investments (30). Here, philanthropic dance school projects can play an important role in children's education. While I interviewed María, residents repeatedly stopped to hug and greet her, indicating that successful bailarines who give back to their community enjoy local recognition and prestige.

By the river in Pance, Raúl also tells me that he enjoyed, "the parties, being young, doing crazy things" in his neighborhood of El Retiro in Aguablanca. "What crazy things did you do?" I ask, finishing my plate. "Walking around at four in the morning with a group of friends, playing, going from door to door, running around together, sharing a 2000 COP [$0,5 USD] piece of bread and soda at a bakery. These small moments are so real and in these moments you don't worry about anything." Raúl, who identifies as gay, also tells me that he has never had issues regarding his sexual identity in Aguablanca. He found good friends who respected him for who he was.

Even though Raúl's statements are clearly influenced by nostalgia, it is clear from these examples that friendship, community, and family are important elements in the lifeworlds of the bailarines in Aguablanca. However, unlike Raúl, another gay bailarín, Daniel, felt oppressed in Aguablanca because of his sexual identity. Daniel had nothing positive to say about his experience.

"A Dangerous Neighborhood"

I let Daniel into my apartment in San Cayetano at 10 p.m. His skin is glistening with sweat. "I'm tired. I've been busy all day working on a choreography," he says. "I have chicken, beans, and rice. Are you hungry?" I have tried to organize this interview with Daniel for a couple of months, so I want to make it worth his while. We sit on my balcony. From the hillside, we can see the lights radiating from the whole city. I fumble around in my notebook, looking for my prepared interview questions. I still feel insecure about my role as a researcher. Daniel continues to eat. I find the page. "Here it is! Daniel, can you describe your experience of growing up in Aguablanca?"

> "It's a real macho place. For some people, it's colorful. For me, it's full of violence. I have memories of the first body in the street with the brain outside and blood everywhere. I was almost four. It stays with you. I remember seeing

> a guy being shot. We grew up with a lot of shit, a lot of violence. It's not only about the music or dancing. It's completely not a place for anybody. The politicians and administration don't pay attention to those places because they don't care."

Living in Aguablanca, Daniel's experience of violence has been more prevalent than his experience of music and dance – features that Aguablanca is also known for. Daniel recalls being bullied for being gay and generally does not have positive memories from Aguablanca. This shows that some of the bailarines associate Aguablanca more with violence than community, friendship, and family.

In recent years, residents of Aguablanca and Cali have shown their discontent with the political neglect that contributes to the precarity of areas like Aguablanca (Alvarado-Salgado et al. 2023, 38–39). However, despite protests and the Colombian Peace Treaty of 2016 aimed at ending the armed conflict, Dáire McGill et al. (2024) argue that security generally has not improved for Colombians (18).

I speak with Angélica, a bailarina from Aguablanca, on Zoom. She characterizes her neighborhood, El Retiro, where she grew up as, "a complicated neighborhood" (*un barrio complicado*). I ask her, "What do you mean by complicated?" The connection is choppy and delayed, so my sudden question turns into an awkward interjection. A few seconds pass, "A dangerous neighborhood. They get together to rob people's houses. Sometimes they get together to kill someone in another neighborhood."

With "they", she refers to the gangs. From the conversation I had with the bailarines, it is clear that gangs are ubiquitous in their lifeworlds, contributing to much of the experiences of precarity in Aguablanca.

The Law of the Invisible Borders

Daniel tells me that the only safe way for me to visit Aguablanca is to know someone in the neighborhood. After taking a taxi with Daniel straight to María's address, the three of us go for a walk around María's neighborhood Ciudad Córdoba. Loud music blasts from different directions. On our walk, María mentions that many of the issues in her neighborhood are tied to "the conflicts of 'the invisible borders' [*las fronteras invisibles*]." We stop to buy a corn and pineapple beverage, called *champús*, and an empanada. "What are the invisible borders?" I ask her. María takes a sip of her cold *champús* and elaborates, "The invisible borders are borders

within or between neighborhoods where you cannot pass from one side to the other because of the gangs. You live on this side and the other gang lives on the other side and you can't cross, otherwise they will assassinate you."

The bailarines with whom I spoke, without exception, mentioned the invisible borders as an ever-looming presence in Aguablanca. Some bailarines told me stories about gangs patrolling the neighborhood, looking for people who do not belong. Angélica told me that she was verbally reprimanded by gang members in her neighborhood because she brought friends from her salsa school into the neighborhood. After that, she never brought friends again. Carlos Arana-Castañeda (2020) writes that the invisible borders in Aguablanca are one of the main contributors to the danger of the area (96).

On a rooftop in San Antonio, the tourist district of Cali, I meet Ana, a bailarina from Comuneros II in Aguablanca. Her next salsa student arrives in a couple of hours, so we have time for a chat. Ana tells me that she often crossed the invisible borders to go to and from salsa practice:

> "When I was 17, three girls stopped me on my way home from dance practice saying that I was 'Asia'. It was midnight and I was crossing a bridge that everyone knew was dangerous. It was between borders, but because of my love of dance I had to cross. I told them I wasn't. The girls wanted to stab me with a knife. Asia was well known around these parts because she had a lot of problems. I'm curly haired, but I was straightening it back then, so that made us look alike physically. Ultimately, they believed I wasn't Asia, but they still robbed all my stuff."

What is striking here is that salsa was important enough for Ana that she chose to cross the invisible borders every day to go to practice. This shows the importance of salsa in the lifeworlds of bailarines like Ana. Many expressed that salsa was their only mental break from neighborhood violence. However, the quote also shows the consequences of not adhering to the law of the invisible borders. You become an easy target for violence or robbery. All my interlocutors had been robbed at some point, usually for phones and money, often at knifepoint or gunpoint.

The invisible borders are key to the bailarines' lifeworlds, generating the precarity they experience in Aguablanca.

Robberies, Shootings, and Crime

Back on the rooftop in San Antonio, my conversation with Ana enters its second hour. I check if my recording equipment still works. Ana tells me of another instance with a gang in her neighborhood of Comuneros II when she was ten years old:

> "There was this gang that would arrive in the early mornings to kick in people's doors. They would rob everything you had. Our area was a 'red zone' [*zona roja*], which meant that it was too dangerous for the police to enter. We had heard them knocking down the doors of our neighbors the past nights, so we were ready. My dad had a stick that he had sharpened. He poked it at them when the door opened. Imagine, my dad, my brother, and me holding the door, and every time it opened my dad would poke them with the stick until we finally managed to shut the door."

What is clear from Ana's story is that robberies are not limited to the streets or crossing the invisible borders. Gangs also break into people's homes. The story highlights that there are no domains of the bailarines' lifeworlds that are safe from robberies.

On a separate occasion, Ana declined to show me her neighborhood Comuneros II because of a recently established *olla* (literately meaning "cauldron" – a location to produce cocaine), leading to shootings. Shootings were mentioned by all of the bailarines with whom I spoke.

One day, I take a taxi to República de Israel in Aguablanca to speak with the former bailarín, now dance school owner and choreographer, Yonatan, at his dance school. When I arrive, he finishes a rehearsal with a group participating in the World Salsa Championship. We go into a separate room, where he tells me about his early life:

> "I grew up right next to a 'squatter settlement' [*invasión*]. '*Estrato 1*' [lowest socioeconomic classification in Colombia]. We shared a main street with them. When we woke up there would sometimes be bodies in the street. So finally, my parents decided to move because it was extremely dangerous. In December, they throw a lot of fireworks in the city, but it was used to hide the fact that they were shooting. Up until my twenties, I was still unsure whether the sounds were from fireworks or from shootings."

With *estrato* 1, Yonatan refers to "the socioeconomic stratification system" (*estratificación socioeconómica*). The neighborhoods inside Cali (and other Colombian cities) are categorized

according to their socioeconomic configuration (Pérez Fernández 2023, 511; Hurtado-Tarazona et al. 2020, 644; García 2022, 2). The categories of this system are called *estratos* and range from 1 to 6 (1 being the lowest) (Pérez Fernández 2023, 511). El Distrito de Aguablanca is categorized primarily as *estrato* 1, 2, and to a lesser degree 3 (Alcaldía Municipal de Santiago de Cali, n.d.; Alonso et al. 2007). Ulloa (2015) has even referred to Caleños living in *estrato* 1-3 neighborhoods as "subaltern" (15). Yonatan still lives in Aguablanca, but in an *estrato* 2 or 3. Yonatan's story shows that socioeconomic stratification affects the intensity of precarious experiences in Aguablanca. His story also shows that shootings are so regular in the lifeworlds of residents living in the lowest socioeconomic areas that it is hard to distinguish between gunshots and fireworks.

I visit Abuelo Josué at his office. He is a former bailarín in his sixties or seventies who owns one of the oldest salsa schools in Cali and has worked with many bailarines throughout the years. I ask him what the biggest challenge has been in his work with the bailarines from Aguablanca. Abuelo Josué responds, "Taking the youth from the 'hitmen' [*sicarios*]. Every area specializes in a type of crime. In our area it was the hitmen." Diana Martínez (2019) corroborates this from her study, arguing that the most socioeconomic disadvantaged areas in Cali are fertile grounds "for the recruitment of young people by criminal gangs" (158). This is what Abuelo Josué and his salsa school have fought since the school's opening in the 1970s. In Abuelo Josué's neighborhood, the gangs are in the business of creating hitmen, while in a neighborhood like Ana's, they focus on cocaine production.

From Ana, Yonatan, and Abuelo Josué's stories, it is clear that the robberies, shootings, gang violence, and crime are part of the lifeworlds of the bailarines and contribute to their experiences of precarity in Aguablanca. It is also clear that experiences of precarity are not a monolith within Agublanca. The severity of precarity depends on the socioeconomic stratification.

Encounters with Death

I speak with Sara on a choppy Zoom-connection. She is in Germany with her husband and two children, while I sit at a desk in my bedroom in Cali, trying to cool down in front of a fan. We discuss her experiences from when she lived in Mojica II in Aguablanca. Sara usually emphasizes the community aspects of her life in Aguablanca, talking about her happy childhood and close familial relationships, so it surprises me when she suddenly opens up about her first experience of seeing a dead body:

> "One day around one in the afternoon, I was going to visit my grandma with my mom. On the border of the neighborhood, we saw a guy thrown on the ground. I remember clearly that he had a green jacket and a white T-shirt on that were now red with blood. He had been stabbed a couple of times in the chest and some yellow foam was coming out of his mouth. I was young. I looked at all this stuff coming out of his mouth, but I wasn't shocked."

Encounters with death recurred in my conversations with the bailarines. Carlos Arana-Castañeda (2020) links high homicide rates to gang activities, the invisible borders, and local drug dealing, referred to as "micro-trafficking [*microtráfico*]," making Cali one of the world's most dangerous cities (96). Consequently, most bailarines I spoke with had experienced deaths in their neighborhoods. Death shapes the precarity of Aguablanca and forms part of the bailarines' lifeworlds.

Back on the rooftop in San Antonio, I take a sip of water, while I continue to listen to Ana's stories. Two and a half hours have now passed. Ana is talkative, so most of our conversation consists of her telling stories while I sit and listen. Ana tells me that she has seen countless bodies in the street where she grew up in Comuneros II, but one experience sticks out in her memory:

> "It was a guy from my school. There was an alley close to my house that had large heavy stones of concrete that people usually would sit on while having drinks. On this day, I was walking with my best friend to her house right next to the alley. We were in our pajamas. We heard everything. Right when we were there at the alley, we heard gunshot sounds. They killed the guy first with gunshots and then they lifted a stone and dropped it on his head. This was the first time that I saw a dead person up close."

Ana's voice is monotonously nonchalant. I rub my eyes and turn my head away for a moment, feeling viscerally affected by her story. Ana continues:

> "One thing traumatized me a lot, the whole neighborhood was scared. There was a famous guy, Index. I was very afraid of Index. You knew that if Index stopped in the corner of the neighborhood, it was because a shooting was about to happen. Everyone would run inside. I remember one day I was going out and a crowd was forming in the street. I ran to the crowd to see what had happened.

> When I found out that he had been killed, I felt 'such calmness' [*tranquila en la vida*]. My God, he was the aegis of many problems."

When she finishes her story, I sit silent for a moment. I think of words to say. "Do you feel affected by these experiences today?" I mumble. "It was normal for me to know that they had killed people. It was normal for us to hear shootings. We would look at the confrontations through the window. The next day we would see a dead person in the street. This would repeat itself." I think back on the situation where the gang tried to knock-in her door and her father poked at them with a stick. "Did you feel affected by the gang breaking into your home?" Ana continues, her voice still unchanged, "In the moment, my brother and I found it funny. Our reaction was to laugh. I mean, thank God, but there wasn't anything in our house to rob."

Ana's account exposes the severity of violence bailarines face in Aguablanca. Death, gang violence, robberies, and shootings became normalized for her. She even felt relief when a gang member was killed because the immediate source of violence momentarily disappeared. Reacting with laughter during a break-in shows one way for the bailarines to cope with the normalized violence of their lifeworlds. Julieth Villegas (2023) argues that telling stories of violence shows it is not normalized, and that violence becomes normalized only when it disappears from people's narratives (94). Many bailarines, however, told me they did not perceive their neighborhoods as dangerous while living there and only recognized the violence after moving away. This challenges Villegas' argument by suggesting that violence is normalized for at least some residents in Aguablanca.

These very graphic accounts by Ana and Sara show the gravity of the violence and death in the lifeworlds of the bailarines. Violence and death produce experiences of precarity in Aguablanca.

"They Stigmatize the People"

I pay the taxi and step onto the curb in Valle Grande. Two-story apartment buildings, each with a locked gate, line the street. Jesús unlocks his gate, "Hi Emilio." I shut the door to the taxi, "How are you doing, Jesús?" He opens the gate and we proceed up to his second-floor unit. Claudia, his partner, sits in the small living room. Jesús sits down beside her. I sit down in an antique chair opposite them and take out my recording equipment. Jesús and Claudia proceed to tell me that they both have 25 years of experience as bailarines teaching and competing in national and international competitions. After telling me about their strong sense of community

from living in Aguablanca, Jesús suddenly says, “Someone can say that Aguablanca is dangerous, but people only say this. They don’t live it. They only have it from the news saying that it’s dangerous here. You really don’t know until you have lived the experience of it.” I focus on Jesús, “So the news isn’t correct?” Claudia interjects, “The people from the north of the city think that Aguablanca is the worst of the worst. If you enter you will be robbed, they will take all your stuff, but no, it’s not like that. No need to go to the extreme. In some areas it’s not all good of course, but not in all. Unfortunately, they stigmatize the people.”

Jesús and Claudia explicitly reject the stigma attached to Aguablanca. The bailarines often brought up this stigma, but I also encountered it among mostly white or mestizo bailadores at my dance school. Before a class, a fellow student told me people in Aguablanca were “savages” with a different mentality and behavior.

Diana Martínez (2019) argues that discourses linking class, race, and urban space produce racialized geographies that facilitate gang recruitment (158). The state and society portray areas like Aguablanca as dangerous, poor, and black, reinforcing expected violence and justifying neglect and repression (ibid., 180). Despite real issues of violence, robberies, crime, and death in the area, the discourse of stigma accentuates the precarious conditions by justifying the state’s further neglect of Aguablanca. It is from this perspective that I understand the bailarines’ distaste for the stigma attached to Aguablanca.

The stigmatization of Afro-Colombians has deep historical roots (Wade 1993; Appelbaum 2013). Nancy Applebaum (2013) writes that areas that are associated with Afro-Colombians are historically imagined by the Colombians to be inferior (392). These ideas have contributed to the historical and contemporary suppression and neglect of this population (ibid.). In this perspective, the stigma associated with Aguablanca, a majority Afro-Colombian area, in the urban scale of Cali is embedded within a larger national structure of stigma.

The stigma is not exclusively racialized or class-based within an urban or national scale. Alejandro Ulloa (2020) calls the negative reputation Cali acquired during the years of the Cali Cartel a “global stigma” (251). Before starting fieldwork, I encountered this stigma through comments like: “Isn’t Colombia dangerous because of narcotrafficking?” Further, I was advised to check safety with locals and academics, who said crime had risen after recent protests. I consulted the Danish Foreign Ministry because large parts of Valle de Cauca were classified as orange on its website (Udenrigsministeriet, n.d.), and my Department of Anthropology required clarification since only projects in green or yellow areas would be

accepted. After weeks, an official replied and I was cleared to advance. Such foreign ministry classifications therefore shape whether projects can materialize and, I argue, act as an unintentional, residual source of stigma for residents of the classified cartographies.

The stigma of Aguablanca operates at multiple scales. Imaginaries of narcotrafficking and classifications by state governments' foreign ministries stigmatize Cali on a global scale. Further, Afro-Colombian areas like Aguablanca are stigmatized on a national scale. Finally, within Cali, Aguablanca is perceived as dangerous, stigmatizing it on an urban scale. Together these scales of stigma reinforce state neglect and facilitate gang recruitment, accentuating the precarity in the lifeworlds of the bailarines. This raises the question: How do bailarines navigate their experiences of precarity?

Alternative Safety Logics of Aguablanca

Sitting in my usual spot on a plastic stool by the dance floor at El Rincón de Heberth with Raúl, I spot Daniel. Daniel is busy with his business, teaching people of all genders how to dance in high heels, so I do not often see him at dance events anymore. Daniel waves as I maneuver the labyrinth of dancing bodies between us.

Thursday evening at El Rincón de Heberth. Source: Author's archive.

“How are you doing, Daniel?” We hug. “Exhausted, but good. How’s your project going?” “Rebelión” by Joe Arroyo comes on through the speaker. I lean in and talk closer to Daniel’s ear. “Good. I’ve been going in and out of Aguablanca.” Daniel leans in towards my ear, too. “Really? What have you learned?” I switch back to his ear, “Well, an interesting thing is that in Ciudad Córdoba, they say, ‘No, it’s not dangerous here – danger is over there,’ pointing in the direction of the next neighborhood. In Valle Grande and República de Israel, they say the same.” Daniel switches back to my ear. “That makes sense because of the invisible borders. They know that they’re protected because the gangs don’t do anything against people in their community. They do it against people outside of the community. So inside people ‘turn a blind eye’ [*hace la vista gorda*] to the gang members.”

Daniel’s statement shows that bailarines of Aguablanca operate with a communitarian and relational safety logic. Global, national, and urban stigmatization frame danger and safety as cartographical – as something you can see on a map. However, inside Aguablanca safety is intensely relational. Bailarines often point to the next neighborhood when identifying where the danger exists. Jesús and Claudia tell me that they are leaving Valle Grande (mostly *estrato* 2) because they have bought a house in an *estrato* 3 neighborhood in Jamundí. In Valle Grande, they know everyone on their street and even two streets down, which makes their area feel safe. They are anxious to move to Jamundí because they do not know the people of that area and thus do not trust them. Though Jamundí seems intuitively safer from a cartographical perspective, it feels less safe to them because they do not know its people. Jesús and Claudia’s sense of safety is tied to the community that takes care of them. Safety turns into danger when crossing into another neighborhood where they do not know the people.

This local relational safety logic is prevalent in Aguablanca and offers an alternative way of thinking about safety and danger. It breaks with and challenges cartographical safety logics. Safety is not areas on global, national, regional, and urban maps. Safety is where you trust and know the people you live among. Safety is relational.

“We Make Sure to Keep Things Clear”

I exit the taxi and enter the large square in front of a school in República de Israel, surrounded by two-story red brick buildings. The smell of fried food fills the air and the sound of traffic can be heard as the blue public bus, *El MIO*, drives by. The salsa song “Apreita el Tumbao” by Nelson Y Sus Estrellas substitutes the traffic noises as I walk closer to the dancers, rehearsing for the World Salsa Championship. I sit down in the middle of the square. A constant breeze

brushes over the plaza, drying my always damp t-shirt. The 17 dancers are drenched. In one break, Pedro, the bailarín who invited me, sits next to me. I was hesitant to meet Pedro here because Daniel told me that it would not be safe. Sensing my nervousness, Pedro says, "[República de Israel] isn't one of the *barrios calientes*, what we call dangerous neighborhoods here. It has had some ugly times and [the gangs] kill each other. We talk and say hi to them, but we've never been on the street corner with them. Besides being friendly, 'we make sure to keep things clear' [*tenemos claras las cosas*]." I wipe some dust off my calf. "What do you mean?" Pedro stands up to get ready for the rehearsal to continue. "I don't appreciate the shootings in the middle of the block or their involvement with drugs. I've lost friends to drugs. But me and my family have never had any problems with the gangs."

Pedro is saying that although his family does not support gang actions, they keep civil relations and avoid hanging out with gang members to show they are not involved. I encountered a similar logic from other bailarines, too. Most bailarines tell me they must stay on good terms with neighborhood gang members because disputes can lead to violence or death. The bailarines also tell me that most often if you do not involve yourself in gang activities, you will not have any issues. Making sure to keep things clear by avoiding becoming enemies with gang members and refraining from involving oneself in the gang's activities are common safety logics expressed by the bailarines. Julieth Villegas (2023) argues that a key element that characterizes the experience of young people in Aguablanca is, "the construction of strategies to domesticate uncertainty" (95). For the bailarines, refraining from gang activities and ensuring friendly ties with the gang members are strategies to manage precarity.

So far, I have shown that the bailarines navigate their experiences of precarity with a relational safety logic. This relational safety logic entails knowing the people in your neighborhood, avoiding becoming enemies with gang members, and refraining from the gangs' activities. I will now elaborate on the last dimension of this relational safety logic.

No Dar Papaya

Blackberries. Two bananas. Unsweetened yogurt. I turn on the blender. Loud mechanical noises penetrate every alcove of the apartment in San Cayetano. Around the kitchen, pictures are hanging with references to famous Cali-centric salsa songs: "Me Voy Pa'Cali" by Oscar D'León, "Cali Panchanguero" by Grupo Niche, and "Oiga Mire, Vea" by Guayacán Orquesta. I switch off the blender and hear a door to one of the rooms open. Rodrigo, my roommate, walks out, rubbing his eyes. "Good morning, dude [*parce*]!" I blurt out with a surplus of energy

that only a person who has already had his morning coffee is capable of. Rodrigo continues to rub his eyes. “Good morning” he yawns, smiling to compensate for his lack of energy. “How was last night?” I ask. Rodrigo proceeds to open the fridge. He takes out some eggs. “Very nice, but I’m a bit exhausted today.” He cooks his breakfast with his back turned towards me. “What are your plans today, dude [*parcero*]” Rodrigo asks. “I’m conducting an interview in Ciudad Córdoba in Aguablanca.” Rodrigo turns around rapidly. He looks at me with a fixed unblinking gaze, his eyebrows tense and lips pressed into a firm line, “If you do that, just remember *no dar papaya* [‘don’t give anyone an opportunity to rob you’]”

No dar papaya literally translates into “to not give papaya.” It is a Colombian emic term (Albarello 2014, 148; Fidalgo et al. 2010, 130; Rivas 2006, 37; Rodríguez and Ramírez 2019, 302). In general, the literature on *no dar papaya* is scarce. There are several bachelor level projects that include the colloquialism as part of their empirical data, mentioned by interviewees (Ramírez 2016, 285; Algarra Gutiérrez and Torres Cardozo 2016, 15; Sánchez and Alejandro 2020, 75; Casas Echeverry 2020, 68; Lis Pabón 2024, 88). However, none of these works really discuss the term in depth. Of the works defining or discussing it in depth, Albarello (2014), Rivas (2006), and Rodríguez and Ramírez (2019) discuss the term in the context of Bogotá, while Fidalgo et al. (2010) discuss the term but do not work ethnographically. I identify a lack of studies investigating this term ethnographically in Cali, leaving a demand for me to explore the term here. I will now provide two additional examples of the term’s use to further elucidate it.

Going from my dance class in San Cayetano to República de Israel in Aguablanca, the taxi driver tells me about an experience he had a couple of weeks prior. A client of his was shopping for clothes in the city center, which she carried around with her, clear for everybody around her to see. When she entered the taxi, a motorcycle gang robbed her at gunpoint, taking all her clothes and her purse containing 1.500.000 COP ($373 USD). In his words, “she was *dando mucha papaya* (‘giving a huge opportunity to get robbed’).”

Daniel and I go to El Bolivar del Oriente, a promenade in the middle of Aguablanca. We walk past a rap battle, so I pull out my phone to take pictures. Right away, Daniel shouts to me, “no, no, no, this is not the place to *dar papaya* [‘give someone the opportunity to rob you’]!” I put my phone back in my pocket. “I’ve heard this expression a couple of times now. What does *no dar papaya* mean?” We continue to walk down the windy path, passing food and drink stands, “*No dar papaya* means to not give someone the opportunity to rob you. If you’re on the street,

please don't show your phone. When you have the phone, everybody's gonna say, 'Oh please don't give papaya.' Otherwise, you're gonna get robbed."

Most bailarines defined *no dar papaya* as "not giving someone the opportunity to rob you," often adding that taking out your phone invites theft. They linked this to *la hora boba* ("the sluggish hours"), roughly 12 p.m. to 3 p.m., when robberies concentrate. As Raúl told me before one of our classes on a rooftop in San Cayetano, during *la hora boba* most Caleños have a siesta after lunch and hide from the sun. "If somebody yells 'help', people are like, 'Oh, it's not my problem right now.' So, if you are out doing stuff during *la hora boba*, it's 'a way of giving people an opportunity to rob you' [*dando papaya*]."[9]

After dance class one evening, I speak with my fellow student, Issa, who is originally from Bogotá. Issa often shows interest in my project, so I tell her about *la hora boba*. Issa weighs in:

> "I had never heard of *la hora boba* before I came to Cali. It's a Cali thing. I'm from Bogotá and we also have dangerous areas, but I haven't experienced this obsession with security there or in the rest of Colombia. It's extreme here in Cali. When crossing the street and the small park close to La Tertulia museum, I've even had people tell me that I must be careful and take a taxi to the other side instead."

Here, Issa refers to a small park in between two roads close to the La Tertulia museum in the *estrato* 6 neighborhood of El Peñon. Her point is that even in the richest neighborhoods in Cali, people are concerned with *la hora boba* and safety. The reason why *la hora boba* and *no dar papaya* would come up recurringly for me was because: 1) I made frequent visits to Aguablanca; 2) I stand out in public as an 185 cm white man from Denmark; and 3) Colombians assume that I am relatively wealthy.

One specific *no dar papaya* precaution I implemented regarded my cell phone. During my stay in Cali in 2019, I went to the Salsodromo-parade for La Feria de Cali – the world's largest salsa festival. Walking among the crowd, suddenly someone shot foam into my eyes and snatched my cell phone out of my pocket. Learning from this experience, I decided to start leaving my

[9] The only written corroboration I found is a 2012 El País article reporting that 40 percent of robberies in Cali occur between 1 p.m. and 5 p.m. (Ospina 2012).

main cell phone at home and instead bring a cheap cell phone with me when I went out. Later, I learned Daniel, Rodrigo, and many others take the same precaution, too.

From the examples above, I see two distinct uses of *no dar papaya*. The first use is as a precaution that you should not give people an opportunity to rob you *a priori* to being robbed, e.g. reminding someone not to flaunt valuables in public. This provides the individual with a sense of control to not be robbed as long as the individual does not show her valuables in public. The second use is to explain *a posteriori* to being robbed that the reason why the robbery occurred was because an individual was giving others an opportunity to rob them. In this scenario, *no dar papaya* becomes a form of victim-blaming. The example of the taxi driver's client who was robbed and Raúl's mention of going out during *la hora boba* are both examples of *no dar papaya* as victim-blaming. An individual blaming a victim of robbery is a way of reproducing a sense of control over potentially becoming a victim oneself. Both *no dar papaya* as a precaution and *no dar papaya* as victim-blaming are coping mechanisms that provide the bailarines, and more generally the people from Aguablanca, with a sense of control over the precarity of their lifeworlds. It is a way of domesticating the uncertainties caused by precarity. Considering the precautionary and the victim-blaming aspects, I present the etic translation of *no dar papaya* as: *The onus is on the subject to not provide an opportunity to another subject to rob them. If the subject is not careful and something unwanted happens to the subject, it is the subject's own fault.* I argue that *no dar papaya* functions as a coping mechanism for subjects experiencing precarity, allowing them to assert agency, produce a sense of control, and navigate the precarity of their lifeworlds.

Concluding Remarks on Chapter 1

In this chapter, I investigated what characterizes the bailarines' quotidian experiences of precarity in Aguablanca. First, I argued that friendship, community, and familial relationships constitute the bailarines' lifeworlds. I then argued that death, robbery, invisible borders, crime, drug abuse, cocaine production, gang violence, gang recruitment, and stigma also constitute their lifeworlds. I further argued that the stigma attached to Aguablanca exists at an urban, national, and global scale, accentuating the bailarines' experiences of precarity. Furthermore, I showed how precarity produces an agentive relational safety logic that the bailarines use to navigate the conditions of Aguablanca. This safety logic is comprised of knowing the people of one's neighborhood, staying on good terms with gang members, avoiding involvement in gang activities, reminding each other to be careful in public, the idea of *la hora boba*, and *no*

dar papaya. The relational safety logic structures the way bailarines experience and inhabit the world, and thus forms a component of their lifeworlds.

In the next chapter, I will investigate how embodied salsa practices and the navigation of precarious conditions shape the bailarines' hopes for the future.

Chapter 2

Dancing Your Way Out

It is September in Cali. A month-long heat wave continues its grasp on the city. In taxis, restaurants, and my salsa classes, the heat is the topic of conversation. I am told stories about water rationing around the country as far away as in Ecuador.

We are in a courtyard of a house in San Antonio, the Spanish colonial area of Cali. The courtyard is converted into a dance studio, equipped with speakers, smooth tiles, a lean-to gazebo, and a large mirror. It is 6 p.m. and the sun is setting. The cooling breeze, *la brisa caleña*, descends from the Farallones de Cali mountains in Colombia's Western Cordillera to the Cauca Valley. 35 degrees turns 25. The breeze feels refreshing on my wet skin. I am drenched in my own sweat and exhausted from observing Raúl's classes all day.

Raúl's last student yells, "See you later!" The door slams. Raúl's always joyful smile turns into a firm line, lips pressed together. He looks at me, but evades eye contact, looking instead at the ground behind me. "My student, who was supposed to take a class with me today, canceled because she fell off the back of a motorcycle." I grit my teeth and close my eyes for a moment, "I'm sorry to hear that." He tells me that he fell from his scooter before the pandemic, too. He was unable to teach for two weeks. "I haven't thought about that fall until today. It made me think, 'what if something happens to my body?' I have no plan B to make up for any economic loss," he sighs. "Are you going to shift away from dancing then?" Raúl tells me that he recently saw an ad on social media for online education in industrial engineering, "In the future, I would like to have a remote, flexible, and stable job. My partner and I also take care of his little brother, my mom, and my sister and her kids. I feel a responsibility to them, too."

Raúl's anxiety of losing income due to an injury and his hope for a future with more stability is common among the bailarines. They all think about their futures and have hopes for the future as to how to improve their lives. In this chapter, I examine how embodied salsa practices

and the navigation of precarious conditions shape the bailarines' hopes for the future. I argue that their experiences of precarity impede their ability to imagine a future, while embodied salsa practices enable them to articulate and actualize their hopes for the future.

Learning to See the Future Through Salsa

> I arrive at El Rincón de Heberth in a taxi around 10:30 p.m., the driver offering advice for my nerves: "give it your all [*con perrenque*]." The words echo in my head as I step out, jittery and sweaty. My stomach churns again, despite already having been to the restroom more times than I can count. At the gate, my mind fumbles as I pay the entry fee, handing over the wrong amount. It feels like my brain is disconnected, focused somewhere else entirely.
>
> Guayacán Orquesta's "Oiga, Mire, Vea" blasts. The sound system vibrates through my chest, bouncing off the metal walls of the garage, making the structure rumble. I look around the outdoor garage-like space. A patio in the center forms "the dance floor" (*la pista*). It's packed! Bailadores are "whipping the floor tiles" (*azotando baldosa*). Plastic chairs and tables stretch down the length of the space, enclosed by a tall fence. The walls of the garage are decorated with murals of Cali's landmarks: El Gato del Río, Cristo Rey, Cerro de las Tres Cruces, La Ermita church. Faces of salsa legends like Héctor Lavoe and Piper Pimienta stare back, painted in bold strokes. The club's enigmatic founder is seated next to the dance floor, like a king surveying his realm. His all-white outfit, cane in hand, and silent presence add an almost mythical gravity to the space.

Paintings of Héctor Lavoe at El Rincón de Heberth. Source: Author's archive.

Raúl and I claim our usual spot near the dance floor. The plastic soles of the chairs creak as we sit. I change into my "penguin-colored salsa shoes" (*los Pingüinos*). Trying to distract myself from my nerves, I ask the nearest person for a dance. Raúl looks at me, furrowing his eyebrows, "Don't use up too much energy!" But I can't stop thinking: What if I forget the steps?

At 11:43 p.m., it's time to get ready. Upstairs, I change into my outfit – a red blazer with sequins and plastic multi-colored jewels, and matching pants that squeeze uncomfortably at the waist. The outfit is flashy, sexy, and screamingly bold – everything I don't feel. I chew gum, sip water, and pace in circles, trying to mitigate my hyperventilation.

Below me, the music changes to "La Más Linda" by Take Two Bros, then Bobby Valentín's "Todo el Mundo Escucha." The echoes from the garage make it feel like the sound is pressing in on me. I look down on the dance floor. 150, maybe 200 people are packed shoulder-to-shoulder. The lights are low, swirling in green, red, and yellow patterns. Raúl practices his steps, no smile. I try to practice mine too, but my mind is racing. My eyes wander to the murals again – Cali's iconography staring back at me. It is grounding, but only for a moment.

The club's owner announces Raúl and Jenny over the speakers. The crowd roars and the spotlight snaps on, blindingly bright. The pair parts the sea of people, like Moses leaving Egypt, to reach the dance floor. Raúl and Jenny's show song "Quitate la Máscara" by Ray Baretto starts playing. The crowd lets out claps and roars. My turn is coming up next. I chew my gum and walk around in circles even more frantically than before.

Raúl returns, looking at me with a big smile. "It's going to be fine," he says. I take a deep breath and think to myself that I hope he is right. He changes into his heels. A few minutes pass. I clutch his hand as we descend the stairs. Ray Pérez's "Santa" fills the air, its rhythm both comforting and suffocating. Standing at the edge of the dance floor, the melancholy hits me. This is likely my last time here for a while. My fieldwork is concluding in four days. The thought lingers as the spotlight blinds me again. Raúl leads the way, and I follow. We step onto the floor to a roar of applause.

For a moment, time slows. “Tres Pata” by La Ritmo Tropical starts playing. My body moves instinctively. The fear and the nerves are gone. I am dancing. Smiling. The crowd’s cheers fuel me, their energy carrying me through. By the end, I barely remember what happened. Just the heat, the lights, and the overwhelming sound of applause.

After the performance, Ana and Daniel, come up to me, wish me congratulations, and say “welcome” (bienvenido).[10]

[10] This vignette is published in the fall 2025 *FRA SIDEN* student journal.

The final pose from Raúl and my show. Source: Author's archive.

Ana and Daniel's "welcome" felt like an acknowledgement that I accomplished something integral to becoming a bailarín – performing a salsa show in front of an audience. Participating in rehearsals for this show, as well as going to salsa parties and classes, provided me with bodily and experiential insights into the bailarines' lifeworlds. So, how and what did I learn?

I used countless hours as a salsa apprentice emulating the salsa teacher with the goal of assimilating the teacher's bodily knowledge and dispositions. These classes always follow the same scheme: 1) I stand behind the teacher where it is visually possible to see the teacher's dance steps, posture, and weight-shifting; 2) I look at the front of the teacher through the mirror to see the teacher's bodily and facial expressions. I was told that I needed to repeat the choreography until "it felt right," which meant to do it comfortably without using the mirror as a scaffold. Synthesizing Merleau-Ponty's theory of "perception" and Bourdieu's theory of "habitus", Thomas Csordas develops the concept "somatic modes of attention," defined as "culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others" (Csordas 1993, 138). Following Merleau-Ponty (1962), Csordas argues that "attention" names the moment in which the body reflexively engages with an object within the perceptual field, rendering the act of attention into a socially significant and culturally specific practice (Csordas 1993, 138). Seen through the lens of Csordas, as a salsa apprentice, my attention was directed towards the object, in this case the future where the bodily dispositions and knowledge would be successfully embodied. Over time, this repetition reconfigures my habitus – defined as a system of durable, transposable dispositions that condition the individual's behavior (Bourdieu 1977, 72) – to be directed towards continually acquiring future not-yet embodied salsa dispositions. What did this teach me about the bailarines?

Many of the bailarines are still children or teenagers in their first lesson, learning their first salsa "step" (*paso*). Following Csordas, they do this through their attention, which triangulates between themselves in the mirror, the front of the teacher through the mirror, and the back of the teacher. For each attempt at completing the steps, the bailarines repeat this triangulated attention, while simultaneously sensing if the step feels right. This process repeats itself each time the bailarines attempt to learn a new step, thus gradually conditioning their habitus. When learning a "turn" (*vuelta*) with a partner, the attention also shifts to the partner – self in the mirror, front of the teacher in mirror, back of the teacher, and the partner. When the bailarínes are able to put together multiple steps and turns, they are able to dance salsa socially at a bar

or a club. The next stage is to learn a choreography to perform at a show – this is what I did in the aforementioned vignette. The subsequent stage is to perform a choreography at a competition. Each time, the same method is repeated and each time, the attention of the bailarín is directed towards embodying the future not-yet embodied dispositions. Integrating further into the world of salsa, the bailarines realize that their future possibilities are not limited to bodily self-improvement. They learn that these future possibilities include earning money teaching, performing in shows, and competing in salsa competitions. Later, they also learn that these possibilities include international travel, starting a business, and buying a home.

Using Csordas' somatic modes of attention, I argue that repeated salsa practice directs the bailarines towards not-yet obtained future bodily becoming. Dancing salsa becomes a process from which bailarines, through practices of embodiment, learn to articulate and actualize their possible futures.

"The Law of *Rebusque*"

I open the door to the taxi. "Sorry, I was delayed because of all the *tránsitos* out tonight," the driver huffs. I sit down in the passenger seat and close the door. "What do you mean *tránsitos*?" The driver looks me straight in the face, "Oh, you're not from here." I laugh. "No. I'm from Denmark." "Well, the *tránsitos* are the people who direct traffic." During my time in Cali, I saw a lot of homeless people directing traffic, so I ask the driver if that is what he is referring to. "No, I'm talking about people in the yellow jackets that direct traffic. But you are right. The 'homeless people' [*habitantes de la calle*] also do it sometimes. They are called *rebusques* ['rummagers']." We turn onto Fifth Street. "What are *rebusques*?" This was the first time I encountered this word. "I'm from Baranquilla where it rains a lot. When the streets flood, you have *rebusques*. Homeless people show up with pieces of wood that they place from one sidewalk to another, so people can cross the street without getting their feet wet. Then people give them money."

The bailarines used the word *rebusque* ("rummage") frequently, but it is also a word used in other contexts of Colombia. Multiple studies connect *rebusque* (including its verb form *rebuscar*/*rebuscarse*) to work in the informal economy mostly within the Colombian context (González 2008; Tubb and Sivaramakrishnan 2020; Jaramillo 2020; Alves 2019b; Álvarez Velasco and Liberona Concha 2025; Alves 2019a; Muñoz-Zapata et al. 2023; Santanilla and Morales 2022; Porras 2019; Hurtado and Mornan 2015; Mendoza 2011; Ruiz et al. 2024; Castelao-Huerta 2023a; 2023b; 2024). An estimated 47-60% of the total workforce in

Colombia work in the informal sector (Oviedo et al. 2025, 1), and Jaime Alves (2019a) calls jobs classified as *rebusque* "extremely precarious" (658).

Raúl's class ends. I tie the laces of my dance shoes. We are on a rooftop in San Cayetano preparing for our show. I take a sip of my "corn drink" (*mazamorra*), "What does *rebusque* mean?" Raúl looks at me and laughs, "Where did you learn that word?" I smile back. "*Rebusque* is to look for how to do classes, how to do shows, and go out to parties to find clients. Looking for whatever to earn some cash to buy dance shoes, dance outfits, or to save up money." Raúl's definition of the term echoes other existing studies, defining it as "rummaging through" (Montes et al. 2024, 59, 68), "searching for hidden opportunities in the scattered rocks" (Jaramillo 2020, 64), and a survival strategy characterized by informal, improvisational, and often extralegal practices, reflecting a pragmatic and sometimes distrustful relationship to institutions and law (González 2008, 261). The most appropriate translation for the case of the bailarines is, I argue, Tubb and Sivaramakrishnan's (2020) definition of the term among miners in the Chocó region of Colombia as "a creative strategy and an attempt to make a little cash" (106).

The bailarines gave many examples of *rebusque* as supplemental or substitute income: Sara sold chocolates at school; Pedro worked for years in a bakery earning one dollar an hour; Claudia, sidelined for four years by an injury, worked as a sales assistant in a clothing store; and Jesús did food delivery during COVID-19 and earlier raised money for salsa attire by holding neighborhood raffles.

Sitting across from me behind his small desk covered in documents at the headquarters of the NGO where he works, Abuelo Josué elaborates on *rebusque*, "They go to Italy and Spain where they teach workshops, and outside of this they have their own businesses. This is the theme of the Colombian – 'the law of *rebusque*' [*la ley de rebusque*]. They [the bailarines] become warriors of this 'thing' [*vaina*]." Abuelo Josué's statement shows that what he calls "the law of *rebusque*" is a prevalent strategy for getting ahead economically for the bailarines.

Henrik Vigh defines "social navigation" as "the action of moving tactically in relation to social forces that confine or seek to move you (…) simultaneously keep[ing] oneself free of immediate social dangers and direct one's life through an uncertain social environment, towards better possible futures and improved life chances" (Vigh 2009a, 97). Growing up under precarious conditions in Aguablanca confronts the bailarines with violence, poverty, and death. Using Vigh's idea of social navigation, *rebusque* appears as a tactical form of agency that lets

bailarines maneuver these forces to stay economically afloat. However, *rebusque* focuses on the short-term immediate future rather than the long-term, as the following exchange shows.

One evening, I sit on my balcony with Daniel. From the hillside of the western part of the city, the bright lights from the city center dim as they move closer to Aguablanca in the east. "What is *rebusque*?" I ask. Daniel has his mouth full of fried chicken and beans, so he reaches for a glass of water to swallow it faster and a napkin to cover his mouth, "It's something that we romanticize in Colombia, romanticizing the action of surviving." I pause for a moment, "How is it romantic?" Daniel continues, "For me it overrepresents the stress and sadness a lot. I never use that word. You're looking for the day-to-day. You're not going to have a plan." I nod, "Why do you feel like you have to distance yourself from the word." Daniel responds promptly, "Because it's a translation of looking for little things. It's keeping your mind in the short-term. It's keeping a lack-of-mentality."

Here, Daniel criticizes the short-term aspect embedded in *rebusque*. Vigh's work with former militia members in Guinea-Bissau describes social navigation as *dubriagem*, "to find one's life," where young men seize opportunities to fund emigration to Europe (Vigh 2006a, 51). With money from Europe, they hope to buy a house and transform status from an "unrespectable man" (*blufo*) into a "complete man" (*homi completo*) (ibid., 46). Social navigation thus blends long-term strategies and short-term tactics. By contrast, *rebusque* is a quotidian, short-term improvisational survival tactic within precarious conditions, focusing on immediate economic opportunism, and lacking the status transitional, future oriented ambitions of *dubriagem*.

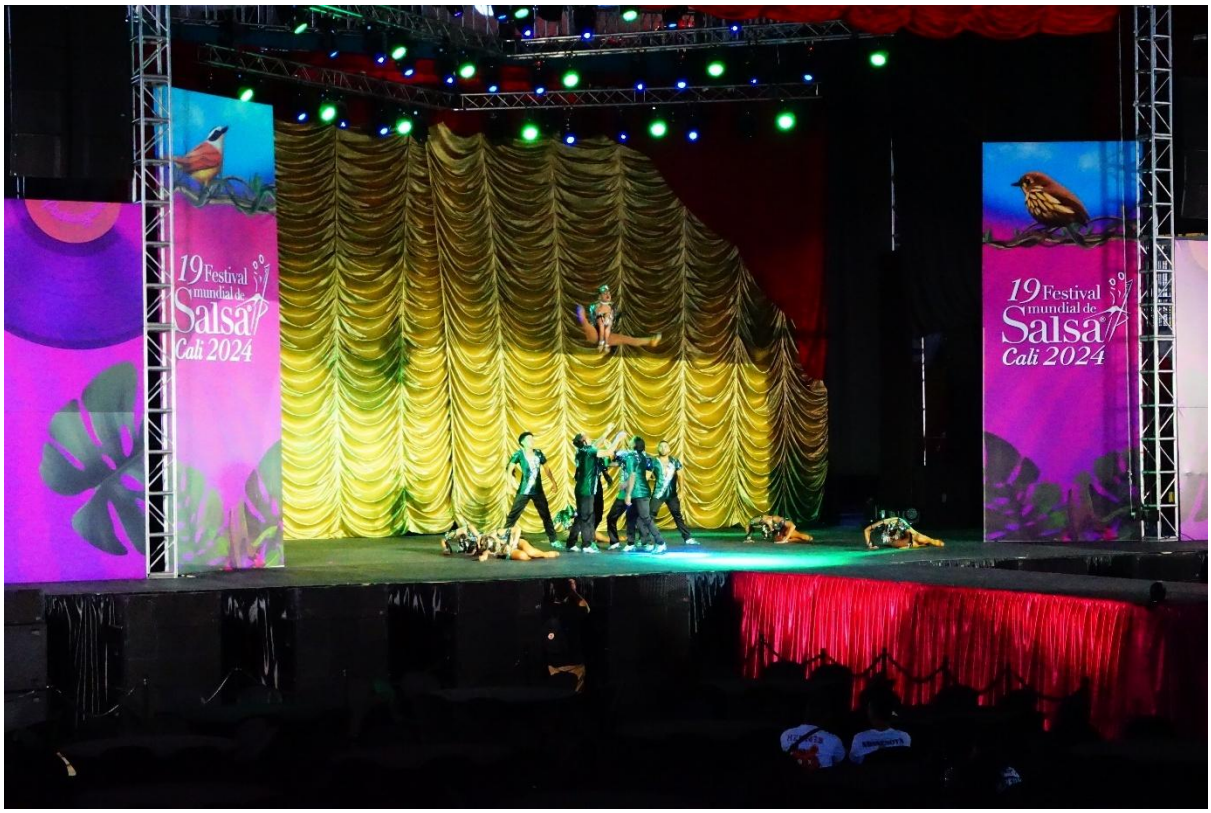
Difficult for a Dancer to Think Long-Term

Back on the balcony, Daniel finishes his meal, "As a bailarín, sometimes it's really difficult to plan for the next two years." Daniel proceeds to tell me that he still has not obtained economic security through his work as a bailarín and salsa business, teaching students how to dance in high heels. I take a sip of water while Daniel continues, "As long as I don't know how to pay the rent or what I am going to eat tomorrow, I'm still struggling. So, I have no plans for the next two years. It's horrible. My plan right now is to have the opportunity to create plans. If you don't have the basic needs covered, it's impossible to have dreams."

According to Daniel, the opportunity to plan for the future is a privilege reserved for those that have economic security. Daniel Knight and Rebecca Bryant (2019) define the term "futural orientations" as "a way of thinking about the indeterminate and open-ended teleologies of

everyday life (…) to make sense of the future's role in orienting quotidian action" (2019, 2). Economic precarity produces fatigue and disillusion that narrows the bailarines' orientation towards the future. For Daniel, economic precarity prevents him from imagining a long-term future until he has more resources, forcing him to rely on short-term *rebusque*. This challenges Knight and Bryant's assumption that some degree of futural orientation is always ethnographically available. Futural orientation may be a materially unevenly distributed structural privilege, absent for those affected by precarity. Further research should examine whether futural orientation is universal or contingent on material conditions.

Sitting on a chair at the dining table in the small living room of her apartment in República de Israel, Claudia rocks her and Jesús' baby girl in her arms. I sit opposite her in an antique chair made of vintage fabric. Claudia circles back to a question I asked her earlier in the day, "You asked me how I see myself in ten years. But ten years for me is a future far away. Maybe how I see myself in five years, or how I see myself in two years. In dancing, things are a lot closer." The chair creaks as I adjust my position, "What do you mean? How are things closer?" Claudia looks down at her daughter, "Because in two years your body tires physically." She continues, "Within only a few months or a year many things can happen. Your body can be worn out. You can fracture it in an 'aerial salsa jump' [*acrobacia*]. You can injure yourself. Your life can change."



Bailarina performing an "acrobacia" *at the World Salsa Championship in October 2024. Source: Author's archive.*

Injuries are a central concern for the bailarines. Claudia was sidelined for four years and worked in retail to get by, and Raúl stopped participating in larger salsa shows after fracturing his spine during a lift in Turkey. Arana, Valencia, and Ortiz' (2013) conclude that the physical and energetic demands placed on dancers by dance companies are unsustainable and can cause injury (15). Observing this through the futural orientation lens, I see that the demand put on bailarines leading to injuries limits the bailarines' abilities to imagine long-term futures. The risk of injury forces the bailarines to orient themselves towards the short-term.

Back in the living room in Valle Grande, Claudia tells me that her and Jesús are learning English but recently had to reduce the number of classes. "Why did you stop taking classes?" Claudia sighs, "It isn't necessary. One has one's life. In your life you have necessities and priorities. Your priorities in your day-to-day is to eat lunch and dinner. If you don't, your body will no longer be here. Yes, one has a list with many goals. Learning English is... a luxury, you could say. And you need to pay for it."

Economic precarity affects the priorities that a person has. Immediate survival concerns are addressed first, while nebulous skills that may be relevant long-term are deprioritized. The bailarines consider the lack of economic security and the anxiety of suddenly injuring themselves in the line of work as factors that make it difficult, even impossible, for them to plan far into the future.

Keep Moving Forward: "We're Fucking Resilient"

Back in Claudia and Jesús's apartment in Valle Grande, Claudia hands over her daughter to Jesús who then walks into the bedroom through the beaded curtains separating the two rooms. Claudia takes a sip of water, as I continue to ask her what the most important thing I should know about the bailarines of Aguablanca. Before I finish my question, Claudia exclaims, "The fight to *salir adelante* ['keep moving forward']!" How to always look for a better life. Everyone is in pursuit of this, especially here in Aguablanca. We want to improve our living conditions." I jot down *salir adelante* in my notebook. Claudia continues, "They are 'young people' [*pelados*] that want to move forward in life [*salir adelante*]. That can't find a way to develop, so they find it through dancing. They have a complicated life, a complicated family, but they want to become better people, so they see dancing as a medium, because dancing helps one grow spiritually, emotionally, and personally." I adjust myself in the antique chair and continue to scribble in my notebook. The chair creaks. I look up at Claudia. She continues,

> "*salir adelante* is when you've faced obstacles – when you've fallen, struggled, taken hits – but you keep going. It's about taking the bad things that have happened and not letting them defeat you but instead pushing forward even harder. Because even in bad situations, there's always a glimmer of hope. If one door closes, I'll knock on another. Maybe somewhere else, there's a door open for me. That's why I say that in life, you have to keep going, no matter the difficult moments you go through. You can't let those things define you because if you do, that's when you really fall. And if you don't learn to pick yourself up, who will help you? No one."

The phrase "salir adelante" was ubiquitous during my time in Cali, appearing in everyday conversations, NGO mission statements, theatrical plays, and salsa songs. María, multi-time salsa champion and owner of a salsa NGO that provides free classes for disadvantaged children, told me that the mission of her NGO is to enable the kids to "keep moving forward in life [*salir adelante*]" by professionalizing them in salsa. I also observed bailarines from "the old guard" (*la viejaguardia*) of salsa, also known as the "iconos" (*íconos*), perform a play about a man forced to sell his family's house "to move forward" (*salir adelante*). Another example, is the famous salsa artist Tito Puentes' (1970) song called "Pa'lante" with the lyrics "always moving forward to dance, keep moving forward" [*siempre pa'lante pa'bailar, echar pa'lante*].

One day in September, I am in a taxi with Daniel on our way to meet María in Ciudad Córdoba. It is hot, so we quench our thirst with the cold juice of a local fruit called *borojo*. I heard different renditions of *seguir adelante*, *echa pa'lante*, *salir adelante*, *pa'lante*, and *seguir hacia adelante*, so I ask Daniel about the difference, "They mean something similar. I think it's the resilience of Latin American people because we're fucking resilient!" The taxi driver exclaims, "That's right [*eso*]!" Daniel and I laugh. "The bailarines of Aguablanca are moved by passion. The dreams move us and the desire 'to keep going' (*salir para adelante*), 'to throw yourself forward' (*echar para adelante*)." Daniel continues while I take another sip of my *borojo* juice, "We use that. Like 'go forward.' I think it's a translation for the tenacity of people. Always 'keep going' ['*pa'lante*']. For me, it is the only way. Otherwise, you stay behind. A lot of people also use it as an expression to do things bigger."

Literature engaging with *salir adelante* usually describes how marginalized people navigate their circumstances. Some authors write on this in the context of Latin American immigrants in the USA (Lee 2008; Garcia 2019; Bloom 2023; Carroll et al. 2025; 2025; Hanna and Ortega

2016; Saenz et al. 2025; Scott 2023), indigenous people around Latin America (Gajardo 2021; Levitan and Johnson 2020; Messing 2007), or people in other difficult circumstances (Carter and Cordero 2022; Cortés 2023; Ospina-Alvarado et al. 2022). Semantically, some of these texts provide similar translations to English as what this thesis provides, e.g. "moving forward" (Garcia 2019, 576; Bloom 2023, 66; Carroll et al. 2025, 5). However, etic translations vary a lot. Some frame it with a strong economic emphasis like "do well for themselves" (Lee 2008), "the desire to escape from poverty" (Gajardo 2021, 172), "to get ahead (usually with financial or professional connotation)" (Levitan and Johnson 2020, 211), and "improving one's socioeconomic position" (Messing 2007, 555). Others emphasize it as a struggle for a better life like the "struggle to get ahead" (Scott 2023, 3492) and "to attain stable, safe, and enjoyable lives" (Bloom 2023, 66). Others emphasize it as an attitude of resilience like "an ethos of perseverance regardless of the hurdles faced" (Carroll et al. 2025, 5), "strength and willingness to overcome a difficult situation within a difficult context" (Cortés 2023, 79), "to persevere or better oneself or one's family situation" (Hanna and Ortega 2016, 47), and "personal resiliency in the face of challenges" (Carter and Cordero 2022, 10). Economic aspects are certainly part of the bailarines' understanding of *salir adelante*, but I see the attitude of resilience and the struggle for a better life as quintessential to their use of the term.

One of the few Colombian studies treating *salir adelante* as a central concept is Ospina-Alvarado, Luna, and Alvarado (2022) who – studying children of families affected by "the armed conflict" (*El Conflicto Armado*) – describe *salir adelante* as a turn towards relational bonds that counters the effects of violence, enacts resistance and re-existence, and helps constitute subjectivities. This matters for the bailarines because Aguablanca was largely built by internally displaced people fleeing the conflict, thus linking *salir adelante* to their lifeworlds. Based on my fieldwork in Cali, Ospina-Alvarado, Luna, and Alvarado's conceptualization of the concept within a Colombian context, and the aforementioned texts' focus on resilience, I suggest *salir adelante* to be understood as an attitude of resilience to overcome the challenges of life shaped by historical processes of struggle, violence, and displacement.

Seen through Vigh's concept of social navigation, *salir adelante* is a long-term social navigational attitude. While *rebusque* is a short-term, economic, opportunistic survival tactic, *salir adelante* denotes resilient forward movement without a fixed endpoint. Unlike social navigation, which implies teleological advancement between statuses (Vigh 2006a, 46), *salir adelante* lacks a specific telos but nevertheless involves sustained directionality. Therefore, I

treat *salir adelante* as a long-term social navigational attitude that emphasizes resilient forward motion without a clear destination rather than status transition. However, this resilience and feeling of forward movement can also be curbed by structural barriers like competition as exemplified in the following vignette.

One day, I speak with the bailarina, Angélica. Angélica is visiting her boyfriend in Israel, so we call on Zoom. Angélica tells me that she eventually wants to leave Colombia again because the competition among bailarines affects her ability to *salir adelante*, "I don't see other alternatives than to leave the country. I would love to live in Colombia. My dream is to live and stay in my country, but my country doesn't have many opportunities. Work is bad and money is extremely bad. I don't have the opportunity to grow and *salir adelante*." She continues, "My work in Cali is very common because Cali is full of dance schools. Cali is the capital of dance here in Colombia, so in what I'm doing currently it is complicated to grow because Cali has a lot of competition. Here you need 'connections' [*palanca*]."

The competition among bailarines in Cali affects Angélica's feeling of forward movement in her life. Other bailarines have brought the issue of competition to my attention too, and the fact that the supply of dancers in Cali seems to outweigh the demand. On a tour I did in September 2024, the Museum of Salsa in the Obrero neighborhood of Cali estimated around 170 salsa schools and 320 clubs in the city. At the 25th Festival Mundial de Salsa in October 2024, Corfecali[11] officials estimated 130 schools. These figures of 130–170 schools and 320 clubs contextualize Angélica's concerns about competition. Angélica continues, "For example, in Europe there are some schools but not many specializing in salsa caleña. It doesn't seem like there's much competition like here in Cali and Colombia, so one can grow more doing this in Europe. Many people that I know are in Europe giving classes and it is going better for them now than when they were here in Cali."

Competition among dancers in Cali affects the bailarines' *salir adelante* attitude of resilience. The competition among bailarines in Cali curbs their feeling of forward movement. To feel the forward movement in their lives, some of the bailarines plan to leave the country – either for good like Angélica or for a period. I will now present the general trajectories of bailarines from the perspective of former bailarines that are now owners of salsa schools instrumental in the development of bourgeoning bailarines.

[11] The organizer of the festival.

Trajectorial Composition

I exit the taxi and climb up the stairs to the dance school above a billiard bar in República de Israel, Aguablanca. I hear the music rumble as I enter. Inside, fifteen bailarines move across a brown tile floor. A toddler, no older than three, weaves through their steps. He is dressed in a tight black sequined shirt, red pants trimmed with glitter, and tiny black shoes. Countless trophies rest around the room. Mirrors stretch across the walls, doubling everything. By the entrance, black letters spell out mottos like "without sacrifice, no success" (*sin sacrificio no hay éxito*), "God", "salsa", and "Cali". A mural fills one wall showing five couples in pink and white mid-spin, the Colombian and Turkish flags waving behind them. Yonatan, the teacher and owner of the school, and I enter a small side room and close the door behind us. I sit in a red plastic chair across from Yonatan. After talking about Yonatan's own story as a former bailarín, I ask him, "What goals and dreams do your students usually have?" Yonatan rises from his chair, switches on the large fan on the wall, and sits down again, "To sum up the stories, they want to travel, to study, and to have their own business." Yonatan continues, "If I speak with a group of 20 kids, 15 of them want to be bailarines. They tell me 'I want to be a bailarín, I want to be like Camilo Diago, Cristian Campaz, El Mulato, I want to be like Evelyn Laurido.'[12] Older kids tell me that they want to travel to Turkey to work and explore. The majority want to live off dancing."

Other dance school owners and teachers also mentioned travel, study, and starting a business as common goals for the bailarines. As children, most want to become professional bailarines, following the footsteps of their role models. In their late teens and twenties, they hope to work abroad for two or three years, dancing at resorts and hotels in China and Turkey, learn a new language, earn money to start businesses for their families, and eventually buy a home.

Knight and Bryant's futural orientations could aptly illuminate this dynamic. Initially, living in precarious conditions in Aguablanca obstructs the bailarines' futural orientations. When the bailarines start dancing, they gradually start to understand the future possibilities that salsa offers. Engaging in embodied salsa practices activates their futural orientations. Although many of the bailarines continue to live in precarious conditions in Aguablanca for their entire lives, salsa enables their ability to imagine long-term within conditions that otherwise inhibit this. Salsa provides the bailarines with what I call a "*trajectorial composition*" for their lives. I

[12] All of whom are or have been famous professional bailarines, salsa champions, and/or salsa entrepreneurs.

define the term as a structured futural directionality restored to individuals who have been robbed of a future by precarious experiences. I will now show how the trajectorial composition is enacted by focusing on three main points: travel, business, and building a home. This provides a blueprint for how trajectorial compositions could be applied by future scholars studying precarity and futures.

Travel

While in the taxi on my way to visit Pedro, a bailarín, in República de Israel, a message pops up on my phone. The text is from Pedro asking me to send my live location. This is likely out of concern for my safety, especially considering a previous visit when a fight broke out right next to us in the street. I arrive near the address located on a dimly lit street next to a fenced-off electrical facility. Pedro meets me at the taxi and leads me through a narrow passage between rows of tightly packed houses, each with several floors, iron gates, and scooters parked in front.

Housing block in Aguablanca similar to where Pedro lives. Source: Author's archive.

Pedro locks the iron gate to the house as we enter. Shining red, green, and white lights from the Christmas decor in the living room replace the darkness outside. Pedro and I sit down across from each other in two chairs in the living room between two massive floor-to-ceiling speakers. Pedro tells me about his travels to Turkey, Georgia, and Egypt. He tells me that he started dreaming of traveling when he saw pictures and videos of fellow bailarines exploring other countries through dance. "I was like 'I'm going abroad! Everything's paid, and they will even pay me to dance'." Despite Pedro's always calm demeanor, I sense excitement in his statement. "What was your favorite experience abroad?" I ask. Pedro smiles and looks out into the living room:

> "The satisfaction that you feel when a show stops and they start applauding you. It's very 'cool' [*chévere*] bringing your art somewhere and people applaud you for it. This is the sensation that impassions an artist. The sensation when you exit the stage and when kids and adults look at how you move your feet and how you do 'lifts' [*cargadas*]."

Pedro's economic and artistic motives for travel are typical of the bailarines. Many also want to learn languages and experience new cultures, and describe international travel, often beginning in their teens, as enabled by salsa. Although they wish to continue touring abroad, most imagine long-term futures rooted in Colombia. As teenagers, many plan to emigrate permanently. In their twenties, this plan shifts to building a life in Cali while going abroad intermittently to teach or perform. In this way, their hopes and dreams for their future change over time.

Many want to work in Turkey because it is one of the few places where bailarines are paid to dance at hotels and resorts. Dancers and school owners estimated earnings at about $4,000 USD for six months in Turkey and $1,000-1,500 USD per month in China. Problems arise when some spend their money on clothes, liquor, and other things and return with no savings. None of my interlocutors admitted to doing this themselves. Instead, it was always someone they knew. These cases serve as cautionary tales. Those who follow salsa's trajectorial composition stay on course towards the desired future, while those who lose sight of it are castigated for giving in to their vices.

Travel is an early goal in the bailarines' trajectorial composition. It teaches them to save up money for long-term planning. Young dancers often hope to emigrate, but most end up working abroad intermittently while keeping Cali as the base for their long-term plans.

Business

I pass the large Hotel Intercontinental in El Peñon, an *estrato* 6 neighborhood of Cali. The hotel and the tall buildings around me provide shade from the midday sun. I take off my sweaty cap, wipe my scalp, and look for the address. “This must be the right place,” I think to myself.

The border between San Antonio and El Peñon. Hotel Intercontinental is the tall building in the back. Source: Author's archive.

I stand in front of a large glass door. I see a guard sitting behind a desk in the lobby. I knock. "Who are you here to see?" "Angélica," I answer. He opens the door. I climb four flights of stairs and knock. Angélica opens the door, "We have one hour before my next client." I sit down on one of the two chairs. A curtain separates her bedroom from the empty living room, devoid of furniture, that she uses as a dance studio. Angélica sits down in the other chair. She tells me how she started dancing salsa. I look at the time, "What do you want to be doing in a couple of years?"

> "I want to continue doing what I am doing now, continue dancing and teaching the 'Cali-rhythm' (*ritmo Caleña*) to people. The Cali-rhythm almost isn't known, so I want to continue showing people that there is a city called Cali in Colombia with a craze for dancing. This is my dream – to have a dance school. But I don't know in which country I would like to have it. It's a question of what opportunities there are in the future."

Caleños embrace the slogan "Cali, world capital of salsa" (Ulloa 2014, 140), leading Alejandro Ulloa (2014) to argue that identity can be danced (ibid.). Angélica hopes to practice that identity wherever she goes. In general, the bailarines hope to dance for the rest of their lives. Few expect to teach forever, but it is common that they hope to hobby dance as long as they are physically able.

Unsure where she hopes to build her dance school, Angélica proceeds to talk about Israel, the country where her boyfriend is from, "Right now, my plan isn't to live in Israel because Israel is complicated. Having to hide every time an alarm sounds, not sure if I want that for my life." I look at the time again, "Where does your boyfriend want to live?" We hear a knock at the door. "Coming!" Angélica yells. She gets out of her chair, "My boyfriend doesn't want to live there either because it will always have problems with its wars."

Angélica wants to find a place abroad for her salsa school where she can continue practicing her identity and feeling pride for her culture. However, she wants to do this in a place with less uncertainty and more stability than Colombia and Israel. Salsa's trajectorial composition informs the bailarines dreams of entrepreneurship. Some, like Claudia, dream of opening sportswear shops, while others envision creating ventures within the world of salsa, proud of their craft and their identity as Caleños. That pride fuels Daniel's dreams of creating a queer salsa cabaret, and Sara's dream of turning her NGO into an influential educational institution.

Across all these dreams runs a shared desire for a future with less uncertainty, where the bailarines can provide for their families and always stay connected to salsa and to Cali. Establishing a business is thus the second major goal of salsa's trajectorial composition.

Building a House

Raúl invites me to his place in the north of the city for a barbecue with his family. The neighborhood is quiet, middle-class, maybe an *estrato* 3 or 4. I enter through a *pasarela*, a shared garden walkway between two-story compact housing units stacked side by side. Inside, the first floor opens into a living room with a large couch, TV, dining table, and kitchen. Cali slogans and posters from the famous print shop La Linterna color the walls. A half-spiral staircase leads up to two bedrooms – one for Raúl and his partner, the other for his partner's younger brother. Another flight brings me up to the rooftop. There, a fenced-in chicken pecks near a grill.

Ten of us sit comfortably in the open air, salsa music drifting through the night. Raúl's mother brings out marinated pork, grilled potatoes, sausages, and chunky guacamole in a bowl beside a fresh, tangy pico de gallo. After eating, Raúl and I stand by the railing. "Where do you see yourself in a couple of years?" Raúl looks down into the dark walkway garden below,

> "I want to, in two years, be where I am right now, continuing to work, saving up money. In five years, I will have two small cars and some nice savings for my house. In ten years, I need to be in the countryside in a *finca* ['estate']. I am going to buy a plot of land and live from the earth. You can sell potatoes and yuca. You can sell everything."

Raúl points at his chicken, "animals are my passion. I want to have a lot of chickens, many ducks, and live my life." I take a sip of my beer from the Cali based brewery *Poker*. Raúl proceeds to tell me that he hopes to lend out pieces of his land to coffee farmers, so he can generate a passive income. Raúl continues, "So when I'm 40 or 45 years old I see myself in a *finca* raising animals, being 'tranquil' [*tranquilo*] in my house until the end."

Plans to buy or build a home are common among the bailarines. Many imagine futures centered on family, education, and housing: Constructing homes to live with children, teaching salsa while studying, adding floors for rental income, or expanding parents' houses before buying their own. Building a house is thus the third major goal in salsa's trajectorial composition.

However, as indicated by Raúl, this is something the bailarines plan on realizing in their 40s. What are they looking for after?

Peace and Quiet

> Ana and I sit across from each other in the empty bar on the hostel rooftop in San Antonio. Our conversation enters its third hour. I take a sip of water and check the battery of my recorder. Ana looks off into the distance towards Cristo Rey and Las Tres Cruces on the hillsides.
>
> I ask Ana about her future – where she sees herself in one, two, or ten years. Ana sighs, breaks eye contact, and looks to the hillsides before continuing: "I was a bailarina because that's what people liked. When you have emotional voids, you seek that love elsewhere. That lack of love, the lack of things and I found it in salsa." Ana proceeds to mention that despite all the personal success she has achieved as a teacher, business owner, and salsa champion, deep down she was never happy because her father was absent. "I reached the conclusion that my ultimate goal was to have a family... you get me? I'm going to cry." Ana's voice trembles, then breaks. I see her dark eyes become glassy, although not enough for tears to run. I swallow a lump in my throat. "Now I have a family. I have a house now. I have my sister, my nephew. I have my dog, my cat. These are things I always wanted to have. The most important moment – the peak of my life – was knowing I had time to walk my dog, to give him a good quality of life… when I was with my therapist, I told her I didn't have any goals. She said, 'Your goal was always to have *paz y tranquilidad* ['peace and quiet'], and you've given that to yourself.' And I was like, that's it!" Ana straightens her posture and locks eye contact with me again. Her eyes aren't glassy anymore. "At this point, I don't have any goals except to keep my home in order."[13]

Paz y tranquilidad, literally translates into "peace and quiet," was a recurring theme when the bailarines spoke to me about their desired futures. Ana understands peace and quiet as the antithesis to the violence that she grew up around in Aguablanca. Peace and quiet for her is taking care of her house and spending time with her sister, nephew, and pets. In Lima, Peru, Martha Vera (2007) finds that older adults value "peace and quiet" (*paz y tranquilidad*) as

[13] This vignette is published in the fall 2025 *FRA SIDEN* student journal.

central to quality of life, linking it to family protection, love, respect, and the ability to express themselves and make decisions (284, 288–89). For Ana, peace and quiet similarly refers to an everyday quality of life long denied to her by her experiences of precarity in Aguablanca. The bailarines also tie this vision to economic stability. A life of *paz y tranquilidad* is not just quiet and peaceful, but also secure – a life with steady income, a nice house, and a car.

Besides quotidian quality of life and economic stability, some bailarines refer to "peace and quiet" as something that does not exist in Aguablanca, not because of violence and death, but because of loud music. They point out how disturbances, parties, and neighbors competing over the volume of their sound systems at all hours every day of the week make it difficult to rest. People speak of feeling worn down, unable to recover their energy, and some even choose to leave the neighborhood altogether in search of peace and quiet. In this sense, the noise transforms the neighborhood into a place that, for many, feels incompatible with achieving peace and quiet. Despite referring to the noise of Aguablanca, the bailarines generally refer to peace and quiet as achieving economic security and quality of life free from violence, death, and the threat of being robbed.

Peace and quiet is not widely theorized in academic literature, but it is mentioned. Some connect the term to a feeling of inner spiritual peace related to Christian doctrine (Nieto 2019, 723; Recalde et al. 2017, 182), while others connect it to experiences that can be obtained in nature (Coral and Aguilar 2015, 59; Medina-Vargas et al. 2019, 74, 80; García-Ángel et al. 2022, 20). In Colombia, many authors write about *paz y tranquilidad* as a post-conflict desired state in relation to "the Armed Conflict" (*El Conflicto Armado*) (Alvarado Pacheco 2022, 137; Cárdenas Ruiz 2015, 47; Fernández-Osorio et al. 2022, 77; Carvajal 2022, 6; Camacho Zambrano 2005, 55, 89; Pinzón 2017, 30; Giha Tobar et al. 1999, 164; Hernández and Morcote 2019, 201). In her study of fundamental rights under the 1991 Colombian constitution, Andrea Carvajal (2022) explains that the Constitutional Court recognized the right to live in "conditions of peace and quiet" as a fundamental unnamed right (6). This was affirmed in *Sentencia T 226 de 1995*, which held that people have the right to live free from disturbances that threaten dignity and peaceful existence (ibid., 6). From this view, the bailarines hope for peace and quiet forms part of a broader national structure of hope, where individual hopes connect to national hopes for peace in a future post-conflict Colombia. Peace and quiet is codified in law as a fundamental right the state is obliged to guarantee, yet the precarious conditions of Aguablanca reveal that the state has failed to provide the bailarines and other residents with such conditions. They face violence, death, addiction, robbery, and gang activity

– the antithesis of peace and quiet under the constitution. In response, the bailarines turn to *rebusque*, *salir adelante*, and salsa to create their own path to peace and quiet.

This raises questions of self-work and ethics. Building on Michel Foucault (1988), James Laidlaw (2002) argues that ethics can be studied through investigating individuals' practices of self-work, or "techniques of the self," that is, the ways that individuals work on themselves towards becoming specific persons or achieving specific states (Laidlaw 2002, 322). Following Laidlaw, dancing salsa in Cali can be seen as a form of ethics. Here, dancing salsa can be understood as a technique of the self that the bailarines employ as a means to obtain a state of peace and quiet. When the bailarines take salsa classes, work on their choreography for a show or a competition, travel, start their business, or engage in other salsa related practices it should be seen as self-work with the overarching goal of achieving a state of peace and quiet. The bailarines' individual self-work should be seen within the greater context of Colombian society where the country as a whole hopes to achieve the ontological state of post-conflict. However, as long as this remains merely a hope, the bailarines from Aguablanca are forced to continue their individual self-work towards realizing their own personal peace and quiet.

While *rebusque* and *salir adelante* do not have particular endpoints in themselves, the bailarines combine these social navigation tactics and strategies with the telos of peace and quiet to have directionality for their feeling of forward movement. While social navigation for Vigh refers to climbing a hierarchy and advancing from one status to another to achieve more social recognition from one's peers (2006a, 46), the telos of the bailarines' social navigational journey is to arrive at an ontological state of peace and quiet – free from violence, war, and disorder. Vigh further theorizes that the social navigational journey is not teleologically linear because the social terrain in which individuals are moving is also moving, affecting individuals' original goals and the opportunities they can obtain (Vigh 2009a, 423, 425). For the bailarines, this is true to a degree. Their *rebusque* tactics change according to what opportunities the social terrain provides them with. However, their original goal of peace and quiet does not change. The bailarines have a clearly defined telos because firstly, this is a telos informed by the national level of Colombia, and secondly, this telos is shaped by being the antithesis to the precarious conditions in which they grew up.

Emphasizing individual resilience risks romanticizing the bailarines' agency. I followed those who stayed afloat in Cali's competitive salsa world, leaving out dancers who succumbed to Aguablanca's difficulties. This focus makes their trajectories appear more linear towards peace

and quiet than they actually are, since many journeys involve setbacks, readjustments, dead ends, stagnation, and worsening conditions.

Peace Zones

Abuelo Josué sits in front of me behind his cluttered desk. We are in the NGO where he works, keeping young people off the street by providing them with facilities to explore their interests in music, dance, and art. Abuelo Josué closes the album containing photos of his dance school's early days, looks at me, and tells me that the core mission of what he is doing is to create, "'homes of peace' [*hogares de paz*], substitute homes, to reestablish the rights to the boys, girls, and youth." After an hour and a half cramped in front of Abuelo Josué's desk, I shift in my chair, "What do you mean by homes of peace?" Abuelo Josué elaborates, "Before they become bailarines, they become persons. In these distressed sectors, this allows them to have a small space to breathe. We turn these sites into spaces for social gathering because the areas they come from have invisible borders, where you can be murdered if you cross from one side to another. So, the schools are like 'peace zones' [*zonas de paz*]."

Abuelo Josué refers to the constitutional right to live in peace and quiet, which bailarines in Aguablanca lack. He seeks to reestablish this right through peace zones, where the dance school and NGO offer temporary experiences of peace and quiet, though these vanish once bailarines return to Aguablanca's precarious conditions. This is significant to Abuelo Josué because he views himself as shaping his students into people as well as dancers. In Laidlawian terms, Abuelo Josué's dance school and others like it provide an ethical model. By enabling the bailarines to obtain momentary peace and quiet, the schools instill in them hope for achieving it as a lasting state with salsa as the means to reach it. From this view, salsa schools and NGOs institutionalize peace and quiet in response to the state's failure to uphold the bailarines' constitutional rights.

Of course, not all schools or NGOs promote these missions like the organizations that I have spoken with. I have come across multiple stories of exploitative salsa schools as well, including some who do not pay their bailarines appropriately. Despite these unfortunate stories, many of the bailarines express that the salsa schools were a central place to experience peace and quiet during their youth.

Conclusion

This thesis investigated what characterized the bailarines' quotidian experiences of precarity in Aguablanca, and how their experiences of precarity and embodied salsa practices shaped their hopes for the future. It did so through practice theoretical and phenomenological perspectives. Overall, it argued that the bailarines' experiences of precarity impede their ability to imagine a future, while embodied salsa practices enable them to construct hopes for the future.

In chapter 1, I investigated what characterized the bailarines' quotidian experiences of precarity. I argued that the bailarines' lifeworlds are constituted by friendship, community, and familial relationships. Their lifeworlds are also constituted by precarious conditions such as violence, death, robberies, crime, shootings, and gang activities. I then argued that the stigma of Aguablanca is produced at an urban, national, and international scale, accentuating the precarious conditions of the area. Furthermore, I showed that the bailarines navigated the precarious conditions of Aguablanca with a relational safety logic. This safety logic entailed knowing the people in your neighborhood, staying on good terms with gang members, and refraining from giving someone an opportunity to rob you.

In chapter 2, I investigated how embodied salsa practices and the navigation of precarious conditions shaped the bailarines' hopes for the future. It is argued that repeated salsa practice directs the bailarines towards future bodily becoming. I then showed how the bailarines use emic logics of "rummaging" (*rebusque*) and "keep moving forward" (*salir adelante*) to navigate the precarity of Aguablanca: *Rebusque* is a quotidian short-term improvisational survival tactic focusing on economic opportunism, while *salir adelante* is a long-term social navigational attitude that emphasizes the feeling of forward movement in life. I then showed how the lack of economic security and the anxiety of suddenly injuring themselves in the line of work make it difficult, even impossible, for the bailarines to plan far into the future. Based on these analyses, the thesis developed the concept of "*trajectorial composition*," defined as structured futural directionality restored to individuals who have been robbed of a future by precarious experiences. I argued that salsa provides the bailarines with a trajectorial composition that includes international travel, starting a business, and building a house. Finally, I showed how dancing salsa functions as a form of self-work towards achieving a future of "peace and quiet" (*paz y tranquilidad*). These hopes for individual peace and quiet are embedded within a larger structure of hope in Colombia – the country collectively hopes for a future of post-conflictual peace and quiet. Some salsa schools also shape the bailarines' hopes

for peace and quiet by institutionalizing it in their schools, calling them “peace zones” (*zonas de paz*).

Implications

The thesis suggests that the Colombian state has failed to secure the bailarines with their constitutional right to peace and quiet, leaving them to pursue their own version of it through salsa. Salsa schools function as peace zones, offering students moments of peace and quiet. This model could inspire Colombian policy to support similar organizations and institutions. Instead of leaving the responsibility to communities alone, the state and local governments could help ensure peace and quiet by providing financial support to the communities.

Another implication relates to this thesis being one of the first anthropological studies of Cali’s bailarines. The five-year safeguarding project following salsa caleña’s national cultural heritage recognition will potentially lead to an exponential growth in academic research. I therefore urge future researchers to focus as much on the people as on salsa. We need to promote salsa, but we also need to document the precarious conditions under which people involved in the salsa culture live, so we can discuss and eventually work to ameliorate these conditions.

A final implication concerns generalizability. The thesis shows that salsa provides bailarines with a trajectorial composition, challenging precarity’s short-term orientation by enabling long-term imagination. This finding invites comparative research on whether popular sports or art produce similar trajectorial compositions in other precarious contexts. How are trajectorial compositions configurated and produced among young soccer players in the favelas of Brazil? How are they configurated in the ghettos of the USA among young basketball, baseball, and football players? How do trajectorial compositions affect these communities? How do sports (or art) in general affect long-term future orientation among youth living in precarious conditions? These questions open productive avenues for future research.

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