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Political Science Senior Inquiry

Space and Identity: Mexican-American Dance Halls in the Quad cities

Crystal Salazar

Over the summer I was granted an opportunity to look into the history of Mexican American Dance halls in the Quad cities. These dance halls have become a beacon in the communities in which they are situated. They serve as centers that the community flock to during celebrations or when looking to have fun during the week. The work I did was mostly in the realm of information gathering and interviewing people on experiences of said dance halls. During my investigation I saw the importance and value these places held for the Mexican American community of the Quad Cities, these places are gathering centers meant to serve a specific community and cater to their needs, a place to gather and have fun. Much has changed in the community of these dance halls with some of the oldest being sold off to different owners or closing permanently. The manner in which people spoke of these centers and the memories formed at said centers lead to the development of this question; How does the role of community space influence a person's political identity? Many of those who were regular attendants of these spaces along with the owners have become influential members of their respective communities in the Quad cities. Did the presence of these dance halls directly influence the community or was it the ability to commune with those who shared a similar struggle and identity? In this paper I will define the terms "identity" and "community space." Drawing on interviews of those who were patrons or owners of these dance halls, I will apply these concepts in order to understand their development and future involvement with the Quad Cities' Mexican-American community.

Community space has much influence in the creation and shaping of a person's identity along with serving as a reflection of their identity. An example can be found in the interactions of Mexican American dancehalls in the quad cities, there was a cyclical relationship at play with the patrons coming into a space defined by them while allowing themselves to be influenced by

that very space. The space we inhabit reflects the values we uphold and is integral to a relationship with the community. Space and identity are two important factors in understanding a person's sense of self. Who you are can be determined by your chosen surroundings

Understanding the development of a person's own identity is necessary to understand how interactions with space may influence its development in a positive or negative manner towards the formation of a political identity. Can the presence of many community gathering centers influence people to take a more active interest within the very community? Due to the communication between neighbors along with increased knowledge of the surrounding area, one would be inclined to agree on the positive outcome for the community. Determining how involvement with community issues began can be useful in understanding the importance one's cultural identity may play in such a role. Many factors need to be accounted for in order to better determine how and what involving a community space can lead someone to seek a more active role as part of their community.

Historically speaking the Quad Cities has had a deep involvement with the politics of the nation and can be said to be reflective of the greater United States. Multiple generations of Mexican-Americans have served the Quad Cities in many different capacities and have been a strong presence in its growth and continued presence in the Midwest. The Quad Cities fluctuating growth over the many decades has been due to the cyclical work cycle offered, but through that inconsistent growth many Mexican-Americans have been able to dig a presence within the community. Understanding the context for the beginnings of the community allows to understand what lead to the necessity of the creation of these dance halls along with what is it that called many to involve themselves with the affairs of the community. Community space has much influence in the creation and shaping of a person's identity along with serving as a

reflection of their identity. Space and identity are two important factors in understanding a person's sense of self. Who you are can be determined by your chosen surroundings.

Quad Cities History

The Quad Cities is home to many generations of Mexican Americans with varying involvement in the community's political needs. Multiple generations of Mexican-Americans have considered the Quad Cities a home, due to the many opportunities found for employment in the area. The geographic presence of the railroads, the Mississippi River, along with the many corporations and companies employing people, found in the area are opportunities for employment have made it an attractive location for many seeking varying opportunities. However, the many opportunities offered by the employers were not permanent, in fact a cyclical work cycle was the norm in the Quad Cities for quite some time. In the vain of the Bracero Program which began in 1942, under the shadow of World War II, the program was a work program providing Mexican Nationals opportunities to work in season on U.S. farms (Driscoll). Janet Weaver, a scholar from the University of Iowa studying Mexican-American activism, had researched the beginnings of the community in the Quad Cities, due to the need for laborers beginning with the first World War and the railroad companies offering employment throughout the years (Weaver 217). Although many of these opportunities did not offer much in terms of wages or a lasting guarantee for employment, it was still an attractive opportunity for many as the population steadily grew over the years. The Rock Island Arsenal, a military manufacturing site that began employment to the local community around the second World War became one of the largest employers within the area leading to a large history of military participation from those in the Mexican-American community (Quad Cities). Ever increasing opportunities have led to the continued growth of the Quad cities until the late 1970s. These jobs were not a permanent

position, but only temporary. This wasn't enough to be able to settle down, but it was the start to a rich history of Mexican -Americans in the quad cities.

As the community grew over the years many organizations arose in order to better represent the values and needs of the constantly growing Mexican-American community within the Quad Cities. The League of United Latin American Citizens, or LULAC as it is commonly referred to, has had a deep history with the Quad Cities Mexican-American community. Their mission as identified on their website as “To advance the economic condition, educational attainment, political influence, health, and civil rights of the Hispanic population of the United States.” (LULAC 10). LULAC council 10 is the Quad cities chapter founded by Henry Vargas, a first generation American and son of Mexican migrants. Vargas had regularly faced discrimination from the police, which led to him to founding an organization that would be a voice for the many people of his community, LULAC council 10 (Burnside and Babikian). Such an organization has been influential and greatly beneficial to the community by providing a variety of resources targeted at the community and serving their specific needs. Other organizations serving the Mexican-American community of the Quad cities are Mexican-American Veterans Association (MAVA), Greater Quad cities Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, and The Quad Cities Mexican-American Organization. These organizations have created a space in which they can serve the community and seek to advance their own interest for the betterment of the community. Many of the members of these organizations would have found themselves communing in gathering spaces very popular amongst the people such as community spaces that served the community. The various dance halls found in the Quad Cities, served as a casual place many people could unwind but still offered a place for connections to be made amongst the community. The interviews presented later in this paper offer a personal perspective of the

change and growth of the community along with the greater Quad Cities change that have happened over the decades. How space was used in the community and the connections formed because of the space will be explored along with defining what can be considered a community and the community space that would be inhabited.

One factor in determining how much power or influence one has within any community is the amount and quality of space one is able to use and is created with the specific needs of their community in mind. Defining the term community space and what specific use it brings about and is involved in is needed to better understand the importance it may have for these communities. In terms of The Quad Cities the community space being looked at in this paper are the Dancehalls which had an ownership of people Identifying as Mexican-American and a heavy presence of patrons identifying as Mexican-American. The Dancehalls were located within The Quad Cities area of Moline, Davenport, Rock island, East Moline and Bettendorf. The dance halls served as a gathering place for a variety of cultural events including Quinceañeras, Baptisms, Birthday celebrations, and Weddings. Involvement with these centers tended to begin at a relatively early age with many patrons. Essentially a space that would serve a need within the community that would bring about ways in which large groups of those within the community would be allowed to commune together.

Defining space

Randol Contreras and many other scholars entering in this discussion have identified many variables regarding the buildup and use of the neighborhood space. How the space itself is perceived and understood within the community itself is varied due to the circumstances which warrant the creation of this space to begin with. Outsider perceptions of the space will determine how others may interact with the same space, will it be a confrontational due to a perceived threat? Or a welcoming environment meant to bring in as many outsiders as possible? Perception

guides the interaction from outsiders and those who claim the space (Contreras 2018). The different variables that may lead to the creation of space meant to serve a specific community and address issues relating to the functionality of the community are varied from an outsider perspective and insider perspective. Randol Contreras, a sociologist, looked into the concept of belonging with men and gangs. Issues that are forced on them from outside groups, such as discrimination, lack of opportunity or open harassment, can lead for people to seek a space specifically their own. From an insider perspective spaces can be formed due to a shared history, language, or need to address a specific community issue that otherwise would be left unaddressed anywhere else.

Contreras in his article “From Nowhere: Space, Race, and Time in How Young Minority Men Understand Encounters with Gangs”, where he studies how interactions of space within gangs, Essentially the insider vs outsider perspective. In his field research Contreras looked closely into the aspects that would unify members of each gang, what connected them in order to create a shared community. His results showed a connection of race and language is what greatly lead to identifying one’s self with a certain gang, and whether or not it could lead to acceptance or at least to a certain understanding amongst to individuals. His work also showed a great importance with geographical space and the role that played out in determining where an individual could go and the likely resistance they may find. (Contreras 2018). Race, language, and geographical location are shown to be important to determining where a person can claim a space with other individuals who share the same characteristics. Contreras’ work also looked into the demographic changes that have occurred in predominantly underrepresented neighborhoods, with the various situations and outside opposition that would lead people to be very territorial of space and be weary of outsiders. The importance of this space to the young men who participated

in the study are mostly due to a sense of protection in power in claiming something they have total control over. Space in this sense is a form of both physical protection and power, as they can dictate who is welcome in their space and control the rules of the given space. That would be a form of gatekeeping to keep out danger, and undesirable figures who are not trusted by the community due to a variety of reasons.

Other research into the importance of space and the significance attached to it has been done in terms of historical significance and overall relevance for the current times. Research has also shown the importance of space for minority communities in terms of dictating themselves and their values within this very space. Susan Mleck a scholar from Australia looking into the community building of aboriginal communities and the circumstances for their creation. Introduces many concepts of community and sustainability into this discussion in with her article “Decolonizing Methodologies to Counter ‘Minority’ Spaces.”. The author focuses on key topics of displacement, marginality, and borderland spaces. Borderland spaces are contested land that have many sovereign nations contesting ownership of the land, with that being the case there is always the issue of marginality. To occupy space, one may displace those that came before leading to marginalization and displacement, which comes with many claims of land ownership. Mleck understands that issue and addresses that within her work along with the intersection of space and culture. The level to which both are interconnected, leads to a greater understanding of the value of physical land and claims over said land. “Discussions of place and identity often raise questions of marginality and the occupation of borderland spaces. These represent ‘a place of incommensurable contradictions’ that does not indicate ‘a fixed topographical site between two other fixed locales (nations, societies, cultures), but an interstitial zone of displacement and deterritorialization that shapes the identity of people’... who find themselves on the margins.”

During the beginnings of the creation of the Quad Cities there was of course much displacement within the area specifically with the Native American owners of the land and there continued to be a history of displacement within the Quad Cities due to it being a transportation hub within the Midwest. Those seeking work and then being immediately laid off from their work far from home were essentially in a limbo area in relation to their space, they had no real claim to any space but continued with the creation of space formed from people in similar situations.

Defining Identity

To try and form a community on contested land can be difficult due to the displacement of those that came before in order to support one's own community, to recognize that issue leads into a more complicated understanding of space and the history that it carries especially if it is in constant motion. The people of which Mlcek spoke of in their lack of power and displacement from their space, which lead to the formation of these societies and spaces meant to address and serve the needs that would not be recognized in any other space, to serve their needs and have a place in which to exercise their own power of establishing their own values within this space.

The question of how does community space influence and effect a person's political identity, has been a greatly studied question from a variety of different nuanced perspectives that each answer the question in a variety of different ways. Due to differing schools of thought on the matter along with a difference of perspective there are routes for a person to take in order to begin answering this question. I will begin with the definition of community space and political identity, then explain the intersections of the two in the following pages. The community this research is focusing on, patrons of Mexican owned dance halls in the Quad Cities, steers the research into a direction of one's own cultural and ethnic identity and the crossroads that will happen with community space and political identity.

The interaction of identity and community space can be understood from a youthful perspective with Kirsi Pauliina Kallio in "Political Presence and the Politics of Noise.", Kallio describes ways in which youth specifically interact with community and the political consequence of the interaction, describing in their work the influence that childhood experience has in later involvement within different political spheres (Kallio 2012). How the themes of politics within community spheres, are introduced into the lives of those within the community is vital to understanding what to seek within the investigation and how to process a variety of community of interactions and the deeper meanings that are intertwined in them. Context is needed to understand how one became a part of a certain community along with when certain ideas or values came into to play within the community itself. Whether it may be from more established or older member of a community that can lead to heavily influencing others' views on their own identity or as a response to any outside events makes a difference in understanding the formation of identities that have happened.

In an article Grimalda discussing the effects of globalization on a person's social identity there is a section dedicated to defining social identity, the result being, "that part of the individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Grimalda). The researchers go into a variety of specifics about social identity and the intersection of globalization that may affect each other in many variable ways. The key concept that can be taken from this definition of social identity, which is one of many, is the necessity of other individuals or groups and the vital importance that they help in determining a sense of self. To determine a person's identity, interaction with others and the attachments that grow from such an interaction. The authors mention the concept of "outgroup" and "ingroup" which are

categories that allow for a recognition of the individual within the group. (Grimalda) This ties in with previous research that Contreras had done with the concept of the “other” in terms of his research of community, of social identity being only a part into understanding the concept of a person’s identity. Defining self-identity will be the next part into understanding identity as a concept.

In scholarly articles looking into the role that physical space has on a person's identity many different variables are considered in relation to the history of the space itself that is being inhabited along with the position of power held by those who decided to use the space. Why it was needed? The intention of space along with the changes made to reflect the new ownership or inhabitants of space are considerations that have to be taken into account. Joshua Sbicca and Robert Todd Perdue’s “Protest Through Presence: Spatial Citizenship and Identity Formation in Contestations of Neoliberal Crises.” seeks a sociological understanding of “Spatial citizenship” an intersection of understanding of “space, citizenship and identity.” In their article Sbicca and Perdue describe how they view the different intersections in the formation of citizenship, “we attend to new forms of collective identity premised on the development of spatial citizenship and mutually constituted by the distinct exploitative and dominating spaces of neoliberalization.” (Sbicca, Perdue 2014) A more holistic process to identity formation is looked at leading to complexities in movements and community formations.

Ylva Svensson does research focusing on identity formations based around ethnicity. The how and whys of the formations along with research on the effects of others perception on the ethnic identity. Due to the community attending these dance halls being predominantly of Latinx identifying persons the role of a person's ethnic identity is also an important facet that needs to be understood, especially when one considers the intersections of power.

How the existence of specific communities inhabited by people came to be in terms of serving a specific need or creating space to express solidarity amongst one another is an aspect that is further explained by Jones, et. al. in “The Politics of Hiding, Invisibility, and Silence: Between Absence and Presence” which, also brings about important considerations into this investigation in terms of understanding the various systems of power that are at play in and outside the community itself. “At the heart of these considerations are questions about who is acknowledged, as present and, subsequently, as belonging and having a voice.” (Jones 2016). This leads into the second argument that gives more context to this investigation that of the systems of power at play that both lead to the formation of the micro community within the town and region. A micro community can be described along the lines of a neighborhood, although there is an intentionality in deciding to live and communicate with neighbors. It is a more cooperative neighborhood with a system of leadership and rules for their members. Along with needing to understand the systems of power that play in intercommunity interactions and the effects on the community itself, interactions outside of the community are important factors to consider as well.

The formation of identity centered around a community is the aspect being looked at in this investigation. Identity is a complex idea to both understand and investigate due to the many factors that have been vital in the formation of one’s own understanding of their identity and that of others. The key factors that will be looked at is the formation of identity through community and space the concept of community space having been defined earlier in this investigation. Racial identity is an important aspect of what will be investigated along with the perceptions of racial identity, as it is a factor in determining belonging within the community as shown in

Contreras' research. All of this will be looked at to gain a broader understanding of the intersections in between community, space, and identity.

Defining identity will be looked at under certain factors that essential to understanding the intersection with community. First, is to define identity, the concept in which it relates to the individual and a broad overview into the formation of identity. Second, is the understanding of change of identity some of which has been lightly touched upon within the previous pages, looking into what factors can lead to a person changing in the values which they hold dear or even greatly reaffirm said values is important. The level in which one can go about looking into the effects of the environment and the effects in helping develop and shape the identity of individuals.

Interviews Owners and Patrons of Quad Cities dancehalls

For the interviews I would ask them the following questions, as well as follow up or clarifications for any of their stories that they were telling me.

1. Why did you decide to invest into the creation of a dancehall?
2. Who would go to these dancehalls?
3. Why did you go to these dancehalls?
4. What events would be hosted at these dancehalls?
5. Was there any trouble that your dancehall ever encountered? (City, Police, Patrons, criminal activity)
6. Who goes now?
7. Would you host live performances and if yes who?
8. How far would people travel to these Dancehalls?
9. Is there an event or person who attended that you found memorable to the dancehall?
10. Would there be a charge to attend?

The dancehalls that have a focus on this paper are The Colosseum, The VFW, The Moline Community Center, La Talampa, The LULAC Center, and The Eagle's Nest. The dancehalls had Mexican-American ownership at one point along with being mentioned in the interviews. The people interviewed were owners of these places and self-identified as Mexican-American, the patrons interviewed were recommended from previous interviews and again identified

themselves as Mexican-American. Most of the individuals involved had become involved in community projects and promoting political action within their own communities.

Over discussions at Palomares social justice center, I had met Maryanne, a passionate volunteer at the center and a Quad Cities local. She had in many of our conversations talked about the changes in the cities or the history of the neighborhood, her fondness for different bars and many of the various different places around the Quad Cities. Being one of the first people I would interview for this research I would learn much from her perspective and understanding regarding the importance of the dancehalls, and for the passion she has for the community. She described one of the places she would go to the VFW located in East Moline a small local with a lot of character. “The VFW, I used to go there in the 70s and 80s and shoot pool there were two tables I’d let the sharks have their table and I’d put my quarter in mine, a really small place” Maryanne had a lot of memories from the place and even though it was a small location she recommended her friend to host her wedding celebration there. “I says lets go to VFW, all colors would rent there. People bring their food have to move tables to dance it’s a place its close”. She described how the wedding was a memorable one for her friends. “Decorated like a million dollars wouldn’t want any place but this place.” The small gathering place was close for her and her friends they made a ritual out of their gatherings, with a set date each week to go and visit. Small place to reminisce on old stories and fond memories it served a small few loyal guests from the community. Willing to accommodate an intimate wedding for their friends. Maryanne focused very much on the welcoming environment describing who all would rent the place and the sense of comfort she felt there. For older patrons there serves a place catering to their likes as many other places tended to target a younger audience. Not many would go out of their way to visit the VFW its pretty small and cramped, the décor is not the most appealing, but it is filled with

memories for the owners and the patrons. They don't see that many new faces coming in, Maryanne was saying how many of the regulars had passed away in the recent years, pointing to pictures on the wall of those who had passed away. "we had some fun times here". People can come and go to these places and leave a part of themselves through the time that they were here, giving some fond memories to those they left.

The different dancehalls were spread throughout the Quad Cities many travelling great distances in the middle of some pretty awful weather to go to dances or events and meet up with friends. An anecdote given to me by an older woman recounts how she would walk, if she couldn't find a ride to The Colosseum. She lived in Silvis which is around a 30-minute drive to Davenport, one moment she was particularly proud of is the walk she made in the middle of a snow storm to The Colosseum. When asked why she would endure such weather to go to the dance hall, she said it was to meet up with a boy she was talking to at the moment. He did not show up that night. There is no doubt these places were important. Given the effort people took to visiting them on a regular basis rain or shine. Coming to dance and relax was a highlight of the week for many where they can meet up with many new and old friends. "you came to break bread", was a sentiment found amongst many of the people interviewed.

The presence of gangs at the time had an impact on the dance halls who came, and from where they came was important for many, especially those involved in gang activity. Many of the dance halls hired police to be bouncers to ensure the protection of the people inside and as a deterrence against gang fighting. Safety provided an environment in which it was easier to people to be comfortable and want to come back. "You couldn't be found talking to the wrong people", Described Mateo, a resident of the Floreciente neighborhood. "Couldn't even look at them or their girls, but they didn't want trouble with the police either...You kept your distance

and be smart about it and you'd have a nice time, that's it." Many of the gang affiliations were local neighborhood gangs such as the 10th street gang or cooks point gang, groups of young men from their respective neighborhoods who were very territorial. Violence was an issue in the area then in the 50s as Mateo would recount. "Gangs can't see eye to eye for nothing they got together and they fought they hated each other and couldn't keep it to their parts. It was always coming here and bothering us. I was tired." Due to the conflicts between gangs there was a segregation between neighborhoods along designated gang territory, as well as an uncertainty over security and safety. Moving into more local spaces and smaller dance halls, provided them with a safer option to go out with friends.

Benny was a friend of Maryanne who had always wanted to do something for the neighborhood. He had purchased a space in Moline to start The Moline Community Center in the 90s, it had previously been a dance hall earlier. Location was important a factor into Benny wanting to open his own dancehall was to accommodate those who couldn't cross the river and bring a place closer to home. He had great plans for his center wanting to make it into a community space much like the Martin Luther King Center on the other side of town where the needs of the community could be served. He used his space for the community when he could "When the City of Moline closed down Palomares, he opened his doors to let us meet there 150 people came and we marched with the mayor" Maryanne also mentioned how Benny would allow Casa Guanajuato, an immigrant advocacy group in the Quad Cities, to hold their informational forums there. He operated his center for as long as he could before selling it in 2007. Benny spoke of how the first meeting for the Quad Cities Hispanic Chamber of commerce was held at the Moline Community Center stating how proud he was of being apart of Quad Cities history. He spoke of the first gathering how it started, the growth had been extremely

beneficial for the community promoting local businesses and becoming a major part of Quad Cities growth.

The evolution of these spaces leads them to becoming more family oriented in with baptisms, wedding celebrations, and many birthday celebrations being held in these spaces. The importance of family can not be stated enough a charity foundation not allowing children was a not received well, these spaces have become inclusive to the entire family and are an escape for all involved. Children learn from this space and form connections from others their age, along with the adults.

In conclusion we create space in reflection of ourselves. These dancehalls serve as a mirror to the communities that they inhabit by showing what their values are. From being a space where a person can bring their entire family and feel at ease to a place that hosts the commencement of an organization prominent within their community. These spaces are integral in evaluating the emergent sense identity of the community. People leave a part of themselves in the spaces they inhabit. Space is not just a physical location, but a cradle for a person's identity. To respect the space is to respect the people and their memory, ideas, values, and future can be found in places such as the dancehalls. Protection and companionship further the narrative of belonging in these spaces. The Quad Cities' Mexican American history is found in these dancehalls since their creation and continued use show the lasting importance for the community and the continued growth in the QC. Future generations discover their past and they add new elements to the usage of the space.

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