BACHATA DANCE: SEXUALITY, AUTHENTICITY, AND COMMUNITY

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

Bachata is a genre of music and dance which originated in the Dominican Republic and became globally popular in the 1990s and early 2000s. As a social dance form, bachata provides a framework for dancers to enjoy human-to-human physical contact, show off their skills, make friends, and flirt. The techniques of bachata dance facilitate shifting relationships between people through touch, movement, power exchange, and desire. Bachata dance communities provide physical spaces and social structures that organize themselves around circulating these techniques. Drawing on participant ethnography, autoethnography, and media analysis, my project examines how bachata dancers deploy notions of sexuality, sensuality, intimacy, and cultural authenticity to promote and capitalize on their body techniques. I am interested in how techniques associated with different styles of bachata shape dancers' experiences of interpersonal connection and afford opportunities for dancers to express sexual identities and desires that are gendered and racialized. I also consider how bachata communities differentiate their aesthetic preferences and community values, both of which are rooted in dance technique, as well as the effects of COVID-19 and the George Floyd protests on individual and collective accountability practices within the bachata and greater Latin dance scenes.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In October 2019, I attended the Dallas Bachata Festival; three days of classes, performances, and parties centered around bachata dancing. Jorge Elizondo, a native Texan and an internationally-recognized bachata dancer and instructor (Juan 2021c), has organized the Dallas Bachata Festival every year since 2009 (Jorge 2021). The festival is primarily devoted to celebrating bachata dance and music, but like most major Latin dance festivals, it includes classes in multiple Afro-Latin dance genres such as salsa, kizomba, and zouk[1]. Though I attended bachata and zouk weekenders when I was living in New York City, the 2019 Dallas Bachata Festival was the first multi-day festival for which I traveled. Having moved to College Station, TX only a few months previously, I talked a salsa dancer I met at a weekly Latin dance social in Bryan, TX into driving me to Dallas. We split a cheap motel room, less than half a mile from the hotel hosting the festival, with a couple of other festival attendees I contacted through Facebook.

At the festival, I took a two-hour sensual bachata bootcamp called "Bachata Musicality in Partnerwork". The bootcamp's hundred participants formed a circle of dance pairs in the largest ballroom at the Sheraton DFW Airport Hotel. Jay, a Texan Latino man in his late thirties, led the workshop from the middle of the circle. For Jay,

[1] Kizomba originated in Angola and was commercialized by Portuguese musicians and dancers in the late 1990s (Jiménez Sedano 2020). Zouk, or Brazilian Zouk, is a dance genre that originated in Brazil in the 1990s. The dance emerged from lambada, which was very popular in Brazil during the 1980s. Brazilian zouk is danced to French Caribbean zouk music (Brazilian Zouk Dance Council 2021). Latin dancers consider bachata, kizomba, and zouk to be connection-based dances that emphasize sensuality.

musicality was all about moving with your full body, starting from the feet. He connected footwork to successful partnering: in bachata social dance, leads, typically men, improvise choreography to which follows, typically women, respond. Jay told stories about how he answers women who are dazzled by his dancing, saying, "I have a normal lead, I was just trained to lead from my feet rather than my arms" (Jay 2019). The first thirty-or-so minutes of the workshop were devoted to practicing the syncopated, side-to-side hip movement of bachata's foundational step. Noticing or perhaps anticipating some awkwardness among the male dancers, Jay told them, "Moving your hips isn't sexy, it's transferring your weight from foot to foot" (Jay 2019).

Jay's instructions on hip movement assume and produce heterosexual masculinity and reveal heterosexual masculinity's anxious and often homophobic relationship with sex appeal. Jay explicitly asserted his heterosexuality when he invited the women in the class to ask him for a dance during the social later in the evening, adding, only half-jokingly, that men should not attempt to find him on the dance floor (Jay 2019). The constructed exclusion of male hip movement from sexiness reassured the men that they would not risk becoming a sexual object of the male gaze, a position reserved for women and homosexual men. By bragging about the compliments of women, Jay drew male students into a homosocial dance world in which men gain status among each other by displaying their technical skills. The potential homoeroticism of this competitive showmanship was largely overwritten by the constant linking of dance skill to the ability to attract female admirers. Given Jay's stated pride in attracting

compliments from female dancers, perhaps "Moving your hips isn't sexy" was meant to be heard as "Moving your hips isn't sexy *in a gay way*".

As a Latino man teaching US American dancers of multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds, Jay worked to establish credibility and modulate readings of his own marginalized masculinity. Throughout the class, Jay frequently credited his kinesthetic ability to initiate movement from his feet to the time he spent training in the Dominican Republic, the birthplace of bachata music and dance. He thus positioned himself as an expert in Dominican dance techniques that would give his students an edge over other US dancers. Invoking bachata's Dominican-ness enabled Jay to sensually move his hips in a way that might otherwise be ridiculed as feminine or gay in the context of normative US performances of white masculinity. This framing temporarily inverts the marginalization of brown masculinity: in the bachata class, white men look to the Latino instructor to teach them how to perform as lead dancers and as men. In verbally asserting his heterosexuality, Jay strove to flatten the differences between culturally-specific embodiments of hegemonic masculinity. At the same time, Jay contrasted US American male discomfort with hip movement against the exotically-tinged Dominican male's wholehearted commitment to hip movement in order to sell his class as a culturally "authentic" learning opportunity for US dancers.

Jay's approach to teaching leading in partnerwork also reproduced a specific heterosexual relationship between assumed-male leads and assumed-female follows. Like many Latin dance instructors, Jay taught technique almost entirely from the perspective of the lead role, implicitly suggesting that techniques of following are simpler than and

subordinate to the techniques of leading. Jay referred to “remote control” areas that a lead can use to manipulate a follow’s body. When teaching a turn pattern, Jay recommended that leads give their follows only one clear option, joking that if you give a follow multiple options, she will probably do something that you don’t want her to do (Jay 2019). Even when Jay warned leads against accidentally hurting follows, he assumed a paternalistic, nice-guy attitude. Jay mentioned how follows get broken toenails, chipped pedicures, and bandaged toes from bad dancing, and that a lot of follows don’t trust him to dip them because “the last guy messed up their back” (Jay 2019). Here, Jay positioned himself as one of the good leads who is careful to avoid hurting follows. However, Jay’s one-option approach to leading also implicitly demands that follows allow him to move their bodies into positions that could potentially hurt them rather than giving follows more space to make adjustments based on their comfort levels and dancing abilities.

Bachata is a genre of music and dance which originated in the Dominican Republic and became globally popular in the 1990s and early 2000s. In cities around the world, studio and club-based Latin dance scenes that cater to amateur dancers have added bachata to their rotation of dances alongside mainstays like salsa and merengue. As a social dance form, bachata provides a framework for dancers to enjoy human-to-human physical contact, show off their skills, make friends, and flirt. Bachata dance communities provide physical spaces and social structures that are organized around circulating bachata techniques.

The techniques of bachata dance facilitate shifting relationships between people through touch, movement, power exchange, and desire. Like many partner dances,

bachata interpellates dancers into cisheteronormative roles in which male dancers improvise choreography for female dancers to follow. As such, bachata technique organizes interpersonal flows of intimacy that are often sexually or romantically charged. Among Latin dancers, bachata has a reputation for drawing out a heightened connection between dance partners. Additionally, in the United States and Europe, Latin dancing has often been associated with a glamorized, hypersexualized heterosexuality: think *Dirty Dancing in Havana*.

My project examines how bachata dancers deploy notions of sexuality, sensuality, intimacy, and cultural authenticity to promote and capitalize on their body techniques. I am also interested in how techniques associated with different styles of bachata shape dancers' experiences of interpersonal connection and afford opportunities for dancers to express sexual identities and desires that are gendered and racialized. I consider how bachata communities differentiate their aesthetic preferences and community values, both of which are rooted in dance technique, as well as the effects of COVID-19 and the George Floyd protests on individual and collective accountability practices within the bachata and greater Latin dance scenes. As a straight-passing, queer, Asian dancer who attempts to dance as both a lead and follow, I theorize ways in which bachata dance may produce embodiments and social relationships that exceed the bounds of heterosexuality while also problematizing bachata's overarching patriarchal and heterosexual structure. Moreover, I am invested in how bachata dance communities create spaces of intercultural encounter and navigate social pressures to address racism, homophobia, and sexual harassment.

Jay's workshop presents one example of how bachata technique can perpetuate homophobic anxieties and interpellate dancers into a specific cisheteronormative partnership. Jay grounds his approach to bachata technique in Dominican dance practices, implicitly drawing a connection between heterosexual and homophobic norms and Dominican culture. Brian "El Matatan", one of the founders of a twice-monthly New York City bachata event called BachaDura, suggests that the homophobia in bachata communities could be rooted in the influence of Dominican patriarchal culture and perhaps Latin American culture more broadly. However, Brian also notes that "the dance itself has strayed from the culture" (Brian and Young 2020). Certainly, bachata music, which traditionally features a male singer lamenting his unrequited love for a woman, is invested in the production of heterosexuality. Bachata was originally danced in the Dominican Republic at street parties in rural neighborhoods which people of all ages and genders attended. But to Brian's point, bachata now circulates globally among people who may not even be aware of bachata's Dominican history.

Bachata music emerged in the early 1960s. It comes from the tradition of *música de guitarra*, trios/quartets of guitars, maracas, claves, or güiros, or (Pacini Hernandez 1995: 5).

> Bachata musicians, however, also drew upon other genres of música de guitarra that accomplished guitarists would be familiar with, including Mexican *rancheras* and *corridos*, Cuban *son*, *guaracha*, and *guajira*, *campesino* and *pasillo* -as well as the Dominican *merengue*, which was originally guitar-based (Pacini Hernandez 1995: 5).

The term bachata originally referred to street parties involving music, dancing, and drinking (Pacini Hernandez 1995: 7). Dominican musicologists, anthropologists, and

musicians disagree about whether the term bachata also signified the particular genre of music and dance enjoyed at street parties (Pacini Hernandez 1995: 8). The first bachateros who migrated from rural areas to Santo Domingo in the early 1960s played music that was known as *bolero*, *bolero campesino*, or *música popular* (Pacini Hernandez 1995: 11). Middle class Dominicans derisively referred to it as *música de cachivache* (knickknack music) and *música de guardia* because cabarets and brothels that catered to low-status members of the military often played bachatas (Sellers 2014: 66-67). By the 1970s, bachata music consolidated as a genre separate from bolero (Pacini Hernandez 1995: 13). However, many bachata musicians resisted the name bachata, given to the music by middle-class and upper-class Dominicans, due to bachata's stigmatized associations with rural, lower-class social gatherings and the sex, drinking, and violence of bars and brothels (Pacini Hernandez 1995: 13).

The diffuse nature of the evolution of bachata makes it difficult to separate techniques that can be traced back to other Dominican dance forms (like son or bolero) from techniques that arose within a Western-centric, globalized Latin dance scene which often exotifies Latin American culture and people. Indeed, the Europeanized style of bachata known as sensual bachata tends to exaggerate the lead's control over the follow's movements in an assumed heterosexual coupling. Compulsory heterosexuality and homophobia exist in culturally-specific forms throughout the world. Identifying the nuanced differences in how particular instructional methods of bachata permit and restrict erotic possibilities is essential to understanding how urban, cosmopolitan bachata social dance communities function as multicultural communities with different values

and brands. Significantly, the values held by dance communities inform and are informed by broader perceptions and stereotypes of Latin dancing and Latin American people.

Norms of sexuality are embedded in dancers' shared knowledge of the moves and stylings of bachata dance and the structure of the social dance. Dance scholar Judith Hamera theorizes the social function of technique in building diverse city dance communities. She writes:

> Technique translates individual bodies into a common 'mother tongue' to be shared and redeployed by its participants: a discursive matrix, a vocabulary and grammar, to hold sociality together across difference and perpetuate it over time. At its most basic level, technique births new templates for sociality by rendering bodies readable, and by organizing the relationships in which these readings can occur
> (Hamera 2006: 19).

For Hamera, technique enables dancers to communicate with their moving bodies. It also enables both performers and audience members to glean meaning from these bodies. In social dance, dancers are simultaneously performers and audience members, signaling with their bodies and evaluating the bodies of their dance partners and the other dancers in the studio or club.

This is not to say that all bachata dancers recognize the same techniques or are equally fluent in technique. Missed signals, misreadings, ambiguities, or multiple meanings are often present. Drawing on Michel de Certeau's theorization of strategy and technique, Hamera considers dance technique as a system of organizing bodies that also allows for improvisation (Hamera 21). A dancer may depart from the accepted technique because they are unable or unwilling to perform a particular movement in a particular

way. Thus, the operationalization of technique is inherently bound up in processes of disciplining the body and navigating physical/social desires. Hamera argues that technique may be co-opted or subverted to nurture interpersonal intimacies or fantasies (Hamera 22). Technique provides the infrastructure for creating relationships through dance, whether by conforming to or by resisting official protocols.

Bachata technique produces gendered roles: traditionally, male leads partner with female follows. Judith Butler writes that gender identity is produced through "a *stylized repetition of acts*" (Butler 1988: 519). The public performance of culturally-specific, gendered acts by individuals explicitly manifests social gender norms. Individuals who exhibit gender non-conforming behavior often face social repercussions, but their subversive performances of gender reveal that gender "roles" are not historically consistent and do not express an essential, sex-based gender identity (Butler 1988: 526-528).

Though the partner roles and techniques of bachata are entangled with cisheteronormative patriarchy, bachata socials also create everyday, theatrical spaces in which the heightened performativity of leading and following draws attention to the performative nature of masculinity, femininity, and heterosexuality. Some queer-centered Latin dance schools, such as In Lak'ech Dance Academy in Oakland California, intentionally encourage students of all genders to experiment with different roles and movement styles. Yet even straight bachata dancers must navigate the potential disjuncture between how a dancer dances and how they experience gender identity and sexual attraction. Some of the most well-respected male bachata performers and

instructors, who have built their careers with female dance partners, are queer. In some studio dance settings, particularly those that pride themselves on attracting dancers who are committed to honing their skills, straight men can dance with each other without being perceived as queer. Additionally, the fast-paced rotation through many partner-dyads combined with the heightened seductiveness and romance of bachata music may suggest relational configurations that exceed the bounds of normative heterosexual monogamy. While arguably feeding into (mis)conceptions about Latin American culture's hypersexuality and promiscuity, these flexible interpersonal connections also enable queer forms of relationality that may move between romantic, sexual, and platonic.

Noel Dyck and Eduardo P. Archetti write about the challenge of disentangling body-mechanics interpretations from social interpretations of the movements and aesthetics in dance and sports:

> The moving bodies of performers, which could be scientifically described and categorized in kinesiological terms, are just as likely to be identified in terms of stereotypical images of gender, age, race, class, ethnicity, religion, or nationality (Dyck and Archetti 2003:16).

I find Hamera's theorization of tactic in dance technique useful in parsing the intertwined nature of kinesiological and social interpretations of technique. Hamera incorporates Michel de Certeau's discussion of "strategy" and "tactic" into her framing of technique. Strategic technique systematically structures the body in order to make bodies legible to each other (Hamera 2006: 21). Tactical technique allows for improvisation based on physical capabilities and an "opportunistic" manipulation of strengths to compensate for weaknesses (Hamera 2006: 21). Tactic and the individual,

affective relationships it generates extend beyond the proper structuring of the body even as tactic requires the common language of strategic technique (Hamera 2006: 21). Hamera writes that use of metaphor personalizes movements, relationships, and equipment/props in a dance practice (Hamera 2006: 33). Technique is "domesticated" by metaphor for instructive purposes and for the purpose of recognizing and building interpersonal dynamics and shared histories (Hamera 2006: 34). Jay's instructions on hip movement and Dominican footwork operate tactically to secure his own masculine heterosexuality, to neutralize the potential queerness of a dance technique that exists outside the bounds of Western concert dance and pedestrian movement, and to create a comfortable intercultural learning experience for his US American male students.

Hamera writes about performance dance forms. In my study of bachata as a social dance form, I found that the readability of bodies through technique is complicated by additional contextualizing factors. I argue that social dance generates a four-layer matrix of meaning-making: 1) Dancers' embodied identities, including race, ethnicity, and gender; 2) Community identities constructed by particular dance schools and regularly-hosted socials; 3) An archive of skilled, physical gestures that make up the dance, and 4) Language used to describe technique and assist in organizing interpersonal dance interactions. My observations and theorizations of bachata dance attempt to account for these four elements and the tensions they often create.

In considering sexuality and race in bachata, I hope to avoid an essentialist perspective that naturalizes certain movements as Dominican or Black/brown. At the same time, I acknowledge the economic and cultural consequences of globalization and

appropriation. I also do not wish to suggest that different styles of bachata or different groups of dancers are inherently more or less queer-friendly (and by extension, more or less progressive) due to their particular ethnic, racial, or cultural backgrounds. My understanding of bachata is framed by studio dance socials, online classes, and the occasional festival. Most of these events were designed for dancers living in the global North who primarily encounter bachata in a commercial, recreational context outside of the Dominican Republic. Resolving all of the contradictions in attributing dance techniques to specific cultural origins goes beyond the scope of my thesis. I am interested in how bachata dancers present tactical techniques relating to sexuality, gender, race, and ethnicity to justify cultural authenticity, ward off the potential scent of cultural appropriation, or align themselves with feminist and queer-friendly politics.

My personal relationship with bachata began in New York City in 2018. A few months into living in New York, I started dating Ben, a then 27-year-old working on a graduate degree in STEM. Ben introduced me to Bachata Rosa, a sensual bachata event that he attended every Friday night. For two and a half years, I participated in the New York City studio bachata scene and became familiar with many of the dance spaces, socials, and classes located in Midtown Manhattan. In dancing bachata, I reflect on how my moving body signifies race, gender, and sexual subjectivity/objectivity, especially in response to imperfect gestural executions and transgressions of my personal boundaries. I also continue to grapple with how I am positioned within and outside of the New York bachata community. I am an intermediate-level, non-white, femme-presenting follow who is romantically involved with a scene regular but never became fully absorbed by

the core of the community. My knowledge of the New York bachata scene is also limited; my experiences and personal contacts skew towards sensual bachata communities. While I leave the reconstruction of bachata's full history in New York City to other dancer-scholars, I hope that my particular experiences with the bachata scene and my academic interests in gender, race, and the body will enable me to develop a thoughtful perspective on bachata technique and the formation and maintenance of bachata dance communities.

My study of bachata focuses on the experiences, knowledge, and opinions of dance instructors in particular. Instructors play a key role in producing and disseminating technique as well as organizing dance communities around shared aesthetic affinities and social values. Additionally, without in-person classes and socials, I found it difficult to connect with beginner dancers and dancers with more casual relationships to social dance. Online classes are instructor-focused; participants generally do not interact with other students. Dancers who participate in online discussions about bachata have usually invested a good deal of time and energy in developing their craft. Often, they are also instructors and organizers. Consequently, this study of bachata dance covers a narrower range of dancers' experiences than I originally intended, primarily reflecting views from those centrally involved in educating and organizing.

I originally intended to conduct participant ethnography in New York City over the summer of 2020. Unfortunately, the global COVID-19 pandemic prevented me from conducting any in-person studies. COVID arrived in New York in early March 2020. When New York City went into a three-month long lockdown, all dance events were

cancelled, and it became clear that normal bachata social dance activities would be suspended indefinitely. My research methods necessarily shifted away from participant ethnographic research. From May 2020 to August 2020, I interviewed bachata dance instructors and event organizers in New York City and wrote autoethnographic accounts of my experiences taking online dance classes. The pandemic also presented new data-collection opportunities, allowing me to analyze new media, such as the bachata podcast *Live Discussions with Diamond*, that were created by bachata community leaders.

In interviews, I asked dancers to tell me how and why they came to dance bachata. I also asked them to speak about their position within the bachata social dance communities to which they belonged. I talked with event organizers about finding venues, publicizing and branding events, and building a loyal community of dancers. I questioned interviewees about their favorite events and instructors, as well as the relationships they formed through dance. With many of the interviewees, I also discussed topics such as sexual harassment, teaching the cultural roots of bachata, dancing during the pandemic, and the Latin dance scene's response to Black Lives Matter. In the Latin dance world, performers and instructors are known by their first names; in keeping with this convention, I refer to professional performers, instructors, educators, and event organizers by their real first names unless otherwise noted. I have assigned pseudonyms to all amateur and semi-professional dancers.

Over the summer of 2020, I attended many online bachata classes taught by instructors who were based in cities in Europe, Australia, North and South America, and the Middle East. Some classes were live-streamed over Zoom, and some were pre-

recorded. Most online classes were created after onset of COVID, though some online classes, such Areíto Arts' online classes, pre-dated COVID. Most online classes catered to solo dancers interested in practicing footwork patterns or heightened, performance-style choreographies rather than social dancing technique. Typically, I would participate in the live-streamed classes with my laptop camera turned on. I would jot down notes during the class, which I would then flesh out shortly after completing the class. For pre-recorded classes, I would pause the video to record my observations as I went along.

Chapter Two of my thesis gives an overview of bachata dance technique. This chapter is divided into six categories of technique: posture and frame, footwork, musicality, body movement and isolations, arms and hands, and partnerwork. I break down the technical, aesthetic, and cultural differences between the two main styles of bachata: Traditional (Dominican) and Sensual. An analysis of the micropolitics of bachata technique reveals how intimacy and sensuality are constructed differently within the two styles. I also consider how the hyper-heterosexual norms embedded within bachata technique might contain their own subversive possibilities through an excessive pleasure in performing cis-gendered roles.

Chapter Three focuses on bachata dancing in New York City. I give an overview of bachata dancing in New York City from the 1990s to 2021 and present three bachata dance communities as case studies. Piel Canela, a Latin Dance school, offers bachata classes and bachata practice socials for students to build confidence in social dancing. Bachata Rosa is a sensual bachata social dance community with weekly classes and social dances. BachaDura is a traditional bachata social club that hosts dances with

classes and occasionally special workshops. These dance communities differ in their aesthetic preferences, economic structures, and social values. I offer analyses of how Piel Canela, Bachata Rosa, and BachaDura prioritize different dance styles and influence the expression of dancers' sexuality. These factors shape each community's attempts to create different kinds of intercultural community within a competitive Latin social dance market.

Chapter Four examines the effects of COVID and US racial tensions, which manifested through the George Floyd protests, on bachata communities in and beyond New York City. The circumstances produced by COVID, though devastating, have also produced their own affordances for bachata dancers. The restrictions on physical contact and in-person events imposed by COVID forced dance communities and individuals to radically adjust their dance practices. Without in-person classes and socials, dance-centered friendship networks often broke down, and students became frustrated with the limits of practicing dance techniques on their own. At the same time, online classes enabled some instructors to reach students across the world, creating new temporary communities. The transition to online classes enabled queer dancers who do not have access to local queer bachata communities to dance with each other in new ways. The dancers who were most invested in maintaining their dance communities during COVID attempted to connect and engage with bachata and other Latin dances through Facebook posts, new interview-based podcasts (i.e., Live Discussions with Diamond, Café con Jen, The Journey), and Facebook live panels like the Mafia of Beats's Dancers4BLM series. I reflect on the increasingly explicit dialogue about marginalized identities within the

bachata dance community and Latin dance community more generally, discussions catalyzed by the George Floyd protests and racial inequities related to COVID.

This is not to say that COVID prompted all or most bachata dancers to take stock of their sexual, gender, racial, and cultural identities in relation to dance and the structures within bachata communities that resist or reinforce oppressive norms. Some dancers continued to dance in-person through quarantine at secret house parties, some re-emerged later in summer for outdoor socials, and others took a temporary break or walked away from the scene altogether. Bachata communities are heterogenous, decentralized, and constantly in flux, and as such they offer dancers multiple modes of participation. The timing of my research affords me the unique opportunity to examine the different strategies of resilience and adaptability deployed by individual dancers and bachata dance communities in order to sustain and reshape social relations through bachata.

My project aims to demonstrate how different bachata dance community brands stem from differences in embodied techniques. These techniques and the brands they generate in turn signal and produce particular community values, such as queer inclusivity and attentiveness to the contributions of Black Dominican artists within the bachata and Latin dance scene. In attempting to define and organize multicultural communities around individuals' shared affinities for dance, bachata dance schools and socials highlight how moving bodies generate knowledge and frameworks for collectively navigating social inequities.

CHAPTER II

BACHATA DANCE TECHNIQUE

This chapter focuses on bachata dance technique. I begin by providing background on bachata's history, an overview drawn from academic ethnomusicology sources, interviews with dancers, dance cultural education workshops, and blogs. I then describe and analyze basic bachata techniques, which I have divided into six sections: posture and frame, footwork, musicality, body movement and isolations, arms and hands, and partnerwork. Within each of the technique sections, I draw comparisons between the techniques of two of the most significant bachata styles: Traditional (Dominican) and Sensual.

Though I personally learned foundational bachata technique from in-person classes in New York City from 2018-2019, I primarily collected data on specific instructors' pedagogical approaches from the 2019 Dallas Bachata Festival and online bachata classes I took over the spring and summer of 2020. Nevertheless, I found the variety of instructional approaches represented in online classes to be consistent with those I experienced in in-person classes. I also took both in-person and online classes with several of the bachata instructors mentioned in this thesis.

I unpack bachata technique through Hamera's theorization of technique as an embodied discursive framework that enables dancers to produce and perceive meaning through movement. Different styles of bachata have different movement vocabularies. Some styles hew more closely to the traditional bachata techniques of dancers in the

Dominican Republic, while others borrow techniques freely from Western and Afro-Latin dance genres. My analyses will consider how these techniques are deployed to structure interpersonal connections within dance dyads and dance communities as a whole. I pay particular attention to the metaphors, comparative dance genre commentary, and personal anecdotes bachata instructors tactically engage to construct various dance ideals, which are inherently raced and classed, of femininity, masculinity, and heterosexual desire. I trace the ways in which instructors produce and delimit acceptable expressions of gender and sexuality through the techniques of traditional bachata and sensual bachata.

Gender and sexuality in dance are also always entangled with power imbalances in the global circulation of culturally-specific arts. Indian choreographer, dancer, and scholar Ananya Chatterjea writes, "the details of technique reveal the micropolitics of cultural dominance" (Chatterjea: 2018: 10). As an example, Chatterjea explicates the difference between the elongated ankle and flexed foot of yoga and the pointed feet of ballet. She notes that many yoga teachers and practitioners insert pointed feet into their yoga practices, reinforcing the aesthetic dominance of ballet and by extension the sociocultural and economic dominance of the global North (Chatterjea 2018: 10). The global dominance of western dance aesthetics has influenced the circulation of bachata dance; iterations of the sensual bachata style show signs of ballet, modern dance, and ballroom techniques that emphasize elegance and de-emphasize sexuality. Like salsa and tango before it, bachata is frequently simplified and re-packaged for European and US

American consumers who are drawn to the perceived sexuality and exoticism of Latin dance.

Finally, this chapter will conclude with reflections on how bachata technique facilitates different kinds of intimacy. I am interested in how techniques belonging to different styles of bachata dance create opportunities for dancers to build and express desire for sensual intimacy with other dancers. These intimate connections are bound up in multiple understandings of sexuality, gender, race, and ethnicity, as well as in narratives of authentic dance technique. Dominican culture, like many cultures, often perpetuates heteronormativity and masculine machismo[2]. Bachata's stigmatized hypersexuality can be traced back to the middle class and upper middle-class Dominicans who dismissed bachata as the music of vulgar, lascivious lower-class men[3]. As bachata dance traveled to the US and Europe, its intimacy-affording infrastructure has been additionally complicated by fetishistic projections of Latino/Latina sexiness and the online attention market for glamorous, virtuosic performances of sex appeal and sexual chemistry.

As a queer Asian femme, I am attentive to the ways in which bachata dance reproduces a commercialized cis-heterosexuality that is by turns de-sexualized and hypersexualized for European and US American markets. At the same time, I look for

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[2] For more on the relationship between Dominican masculinity and bachata music, see Lauren Perez-Bonilla's "Dominican Masculinities through the Bachata Genre" (Perez-Bonilla 2019).

[3] In 1970s Dominican Republic, the under-employment of lower-class, urban-dwelling men combined with new job opportunities for lower-class women destabilized traditional patriarchal family structures. As a result, the sexual activities and relationships of many lower-class urban Dominicans occurred outside monogamous, long term partnerships (Pacini Hernandez 1995: 156-157).

tactical approaches to bachata technique that allow for queer embodiments of intimacy working within and against the strictures of neoliberal capitalism. As Butler writes, gender is an unstable category that is continuously produced and revised by individual acts. The gestures of bachata can be repeated with variations that uphold or disrupt an assumed-heterosexual cis-gender binary. Some queer and feminist bachata dancers subvert the masculine and feminine codings of bachata by performing roles or gestures that do not traditionally correspond to their perceived gender identities. For instance, a woman might dance as a lead, or a man might execute a more feminine styling of the "hair comb", sliding his hand in an s-shape up and over his head to emphasize the outline of his face.

Writing about Latin dance from the perspective of a queer Latina femme, scholar Juana María Rodríguez argues that butches and femmes who inhabit and rework heteronormative scripts demonstrate that social associations with masculinity/femininity are constructed and not necessarily connected to anatomical sex (Rodríguez 2014: 121). Gestures in dance cannot be restricted to one particular gender identity or sexual orientation (Rodríguez 2014: 126). Rodríguez writes:

> However, when a female-bodied femme of color actively asserts the subject position of sexual servant, a sexual role that is precisely what is expected of her by dominant society, it is the force and articulation of her agency that mark her subjectivity as queer
> (Rodriguez 2014: 133).

For Rodríguez, the queer agency of dancers can transform the cisheteronormativity of partner dance. The follow's bodily submission to the guidance of the lead facilitates mutual pleasure through intersubjective, sustained attention to the lead and follow's

bodies in space, their energies, and their physical abilities (Rodríguez 2014: 111). Expanding upon Rodríguez's analysis, I argue that a dancer need not identify as queer to "queer" bachata. Engaging with the gendered power imbalances of bachata dance through a consensual, respectful partnering denaturalizes cisheteronormative patriarchy and may rehearse an intentional erotic navigation of differences in gender, race, age, class, and ability.

A Brief Genealogy of Bachata Dance

Bachata dancing took inspiration from Cuban *bolero* and *son*, two partner dances whose corresponding musical genres directly influenced bachata music (Sellers 2014: 82). Cuban bolero evolved from *danzón* and *contradanza* in the nineteenth century (Pacini Hernandez 1995: 5). Son emerged in eastern Cuba in the late nineteenth century and shares most of the instruments of bolero, adding the *tres*, a guitar with three groups of two strings (Hernandez 1995: 7). Son merges Afro-Cuban and rural Hispanic musical genres (Pacini Hernandez 1995: 6), and is often credited as a primary influence of salsa (Robbins 1990: 182). Both bolero and son were brought to the Dominican Republic in the late nineteenth century with the wave of Cuban immigrants who left Cuba during the Wars of Independence from 1895-19898 (Pacini Hernandez 1995: 5-7). The Dominican guitar-based ensembles that would come to play bachata also frequently played bolero and son (Pacini Hernandez 1995: 6).

It is difficult to say exactly when bachata dance consolidated into a discrete genre. Most existing English-language scholarship on bachata takes an ethnomusicological approach to tracing bachata's history. Dancers themselves often

focus on the history of bachata music when explaining the roots of bachata dance. I attended bachata culture workshops produced by Areíto Arts, an educational music and dance company, and In Lak'ech Dance Academy, an Oakland-based bachata and salsa school for LGBTQ dancers. Areíto Arts is co-founded by Edwin Ferreras, a Dominican-born dance researcher, educator, and performer, and his partner Dakhóta Romero, an Indigenous and Scandinavian singer-songwriter, dancer, and actor. Married dance partners Angélica Medina, who identifies as a queer chicanx, and Jahaira Fajardo, a second-generation Dominican American from New York City, co-founded In Lak'ech. Both workshops outlined the evolution of bachata music, which can be tracked through the release of specific albums. Rather than specifying dates at which different bachata dancing styles emerged, the Areíto Arts and In Lak'ech workshops referred to general trends in bachata dance. While I can speculate on the development of different styles of bachata in relation to developments in bachata music, a comprehensive history of the evolution of bachata dance is beyond the scope of this project.

Given that bolero music served as bachata music's primary influence, it makes sense that the timing and basic step of bachata dancing are most similar to those of *bolero* dancing. According to Xiomarita Perez, the first National Director of Folklore in the Dominican Republic, early bachata dancing was bolero dancing with the addition of son's sensual hip movements and tighter embrace between partners (Sellers 2014: 71). Edwin and Dakhóta created a YouTube video, "The First Bachata (Bolero Campesino

Dance)," that illustrates the link between bachata dance and bolero[4]. The description of the video states that bachata music adds a syncopated note in the baseline and replaces bolero's maracas with the güira, a metal scraper. Pacini Hernandez writes that bachateros performing live for audiences shifted from the maracas to the güira, which was used in merengue instrumental arrangements, to accommodate requests for bachatas that were more merengue-inspired (Pacini Hernandez 1995: 27). In "The First Bachata (Bolero Campesino Dance)," Edwin and Dakhóta argue that these musical alterations changed the texture of the bolero step. When Edwin and Dakhóta dance bolero, they glide between steps, often lightly dragging the toe of the non-leading foot to emphasize the slow pulse of the music. By contrast, in bachata, they take "a sharper break" between each step.

In the 1970s, many Dominicans belonging to the rural peasant sector relocated to the shantytowns of urban centers within the Dominican Republic, particularly Santo Domingo. Bachata music emerged from these socioeconomic conditions as a disparaged genre associated with low social class and poverty (Pacini Hernandez 1995: 101). Bachata's use of street language and themes of drinking, womanizing, and despair reflected the economic disenfranchisement and social marginalization experienced by formally-rural, urban-dwelling Dominicans. Songs such as "Homenaje a los borrachones," by Teodoro Reyes, paid homage to alcoholics and sex workers, rejecting the social mores of the Dominican elite (Pacini Hernandez 1995: 115). Sidewalk record

[4] Areíto Arts, "The First Bachata (Bolero Campesino Dance)," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=75VBO-UF380.

stalls, located in working-class districts in Dominican cities and towns, sold bachata records and cassettes (Pacini Hernandez 1995: 113).

Pacini Hernandez writes that son became a stronger influence in bachata "when bachata musicians began incorporating the livelier son rhythm" in the 1980s (Pacini Hernandez 1995: 7). It is not definitively known whether the quicker tempo of 1980s bachata transformed bachata into a genre of dance music, or whether the desire to dance to bachata music led musicians to increase the music's tempo (Pacini Hernandez 1995: 27). Bachata dance likely emerged as a distinct style of dance around the same time or in response to bachata music's departure from its romantic bolero roots.

The 1980s and 1990s marked the peak of Dominican migration to the United States, especially to New York City. Listening and dancing to bachata music became a way for Dominican immigrants and their US-born children to maintain a connection to their Dominican heritage and culture (Pacini Hernandez 2014: 1033). I will discuss the relationship between the Dominican diaspora and bachata dance communities further in Chapter 3. Urban bachata music emerged in the 1980s and 1990s as subgenre of bachata that spoke to the experiences and aesthetic tastes of bilingual, bicultural Dominican youth growing up in New York (Pacini Hernandez 2014: 1034). Urban bachata incorporated Spanish and English lyrics as well as elements of hip-hop and R&B, two music genres which were also highly popular with second-generation Dominican Americans (Pacini Hernandez 2014: 1034). According to In Lak'ech's Jahaira, who grew up in Washington Heights, New York City during the 1980s, the R&B feel of urban bachata inspired dancers to incorporate moves, such as turns, body rolls, and

isolations, that are not typically performed when dancing to traditional or "island style" bachata (In Lak'ech Dance Academy 2021).

A proliferation of bachata dance styles emerged in the 1990s and 2000s. Seeking to develop personal brands, many instructors and performers created and marketed their own styles of bachata. As far as I know, there are no existing academic sources on the bachata fusion dance styles developed in the twenty-first century. I have traced some of these histories through internet sources, including dance company websites, Facebook pages, and blogs. Professional Spanish salsa dancers Jorge Escalona (who goes by the name Korke) and Judith originated a style of bachata in the early 2000s that they call *Bachata Sensual* (Bachata Sensual 2021a). Bachata Sensual uses the same basic step as traditional bachata while also introducing circular movements, body waves, and stricter guiding principles for leading and following (Bachata Sensual by Korke y Judith 2016). The term sensual refers to the smooth, flowing quality of the often more sexually-suggestive movements in this style of bachata. Korke and Judith have named West Coast Swing, gymnastics, ballet, flamenco, zouk, hip-hop, and modern dance as Bachata Sensual's stylistic influences (Bachata Sensual by Korke y Judith 2016). In 2010, Korke founded BachataStars International, a worldwide improvisation competition for sensual bachata dancers (BachataStars 2021).

Judith and Korke have essentially franchised Bachata Sensual over the last two decades. Bachata instructors may send an audition video to be selected for a 14-hour, official Bachata Sensual instructor certification course. The course, which costs 600€ (approximately $700), covers "the 10 basic techniques" and teaching methodology of

Bachata Sensual. Upon successful completion of the course, instructors may join the ProClub, a private online community for sharing teaching tips and paid opportunities (Bachata Sensual 2021b). Dedicated amateur students may sign up for official Bachata Sensual performance teams taught by Judith and Korke or their star instructors (Sensual Teams 2021). Judith and Korke also sell official Bachata Sensual t-shirts and sweat-shirts (Bachata Sensual 2021c). The professionalization and commoditization of Bachata Sensual through international competitions, instructor certifications, and performance teams has helped to popularize and legitimize Bachata Sensual as a style of bachata dance.

Other dancers also experimented with new bachata techniques that allowed them to interpret the electronic, pop sound of bachata music in the 2000s. For example, in 2009, Juan Ruiz developed a style of dancing he calls *Bachata Moderna* (Juan 2021b). Juan is an Ecuadorian dancer who lived in the United States before moving to Australia and founding the Sydney International Bachata in 2008 (Juan 2021a). Bachata Moderna was designed to be danced to urban bachata bands such as Aventura and Domenic Marte (Juan 2021b). The style involves more intricate turn patterns and more traveling across the dance floor than in traditional bachata (Juan 2021b). Juan was inspired to create new bachata techniques when he met Spanish bachata/salsa instructor Inake Fernandez at the Malaysia Salsa Festival in 2008. Inake introduced tango-like crosses into his version of bachata dance, crossing one foot in front or behind the other while maintaining the basic timing of bachata steps (Juan 2009). Juan incorporated these crosses, which he refers to as “Bachata Madrid Style”, into Bachata Moderna (Juan 2021b).

While Korke and Judith are widely recognized as the founders of Bachata Sensual, colloquially, dancers use the term *sensual bachata* to refer to many bachata dance styles that borrow moves and techniques from salsa, Brazilian zouk, tango, hip hop, and other dance genres. "Sensual" links sensual bachata to other Afro-Latin dance forms that dancers perceive as prioritizing intimate partner connection, like kizomba and zouk. Sensuality as a dance concept extends beyond specifically sensual bachata; some dancers dislike the umbrella term sensual bachata because it implies that traditional bachata is not sensual. Zouk and west coast swing dancer Laura Riva defines sensual as "A (generally desirable) state of deep connection and trust between partners that is flirtatious, romantic, etc. AND 'proper' according to the dance's etiquette" (Riva 2014). Notably, Riva's definition distances sensual from sexual, which she characterizes as, "A (generally undesirable) state of expressing sexuality on the dance floor" (Riva 2014).

Dance scholar Anthony Shay describes a two-phase process of "slumming" and "shaming" that allows the upper- and middle-classes to embrace Latin dances that were formerly considered salacious, like tango and samba. Slumming involves seeking out an "authentic" dance experience, often involving contact with lower class individuals, as a form of exotic escapism (Shay 2008: 182-183). Taming involves the stripping away of a dance's overt sexuality in alignment with mainstream US American mores (Shay 2008: 184). Thus, the notion of sensuality can be understood as a mechanism by which bachata and other Latin dances have been tamed: sensuality channels sexual and romantic feelings within a dance structure that renders these feelings socially-appropriate for cosmopolitan US American and European contexts.

It is clear that bachata dance evolved as bachata music spread through the Dominican diaspora and the subgenre of urban bachata music emerged. However, it is often difficult to draw hard distinctions between different versions of bachata fusion styles. A dancer might choose to interpret an urban bachata song with pop-and-lock, hip-hop influenced styling or with flowier, Brazilian-zouk influenced styling. Additionally, terminology usage is inconsistent among dancers. For example, some online bachata blogs refer to sensual bachata and modern bachata as separate styles, while others conflate the two[5].

Bachata dance has also been impacted by the rise of social media platforms[6] and the organization of bachata festivals in cities around the world beginning around 2008 and 2009[7]. Sensual bachata in particular has exploded in popularity over the last five to ten years. Daniel Sanchez Berlanga and Desirée Guidonet Esteve, two sensual dancers from Seville, Spain, perhaps best exemplify new trends in sensual bachata. Daniel and Desirée's splashy entrance onto the global bachata scene coincided with increased access to bachata festivals and online sharing of dance videos through YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. They launched their careers as sensual bachata dancers by winning the 2010

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[5]Blogs on the websites Go! Latin Dance and Dancingfever.co.uk, which advertise classes and events, distinguish bachata moderna from sensual bachata (Go! Latin Dance 2021 and Dancing Fever 2021). Toronto Dance Salsa, a Canadian Latin dance school, refers to modern/moderna style bachata and neglects to mention sensual bachata at all (Toronto Dance Salsa 2021). WebDanceTV.com, a website which sells online pre-recorded dance classes, only includes Dominican style and Sensual style as bachata subcategories (WebDanceTV 2021).

[6] Facebook and Instagram were founded in 2004 and 2012 (Facebook 2021). YouTube launched in 2005 (Asmelash 2020).

[7] The first USA Bachata Festival was held in Reno in 2009. It was organized by Rodney Aquino, Juan Ruiz, and Jorge Elizondo in 2009 (Dallas Bachata Festival 2020).

BachataStars competition (Love Sensual Festival 2020). They went on to win the first World Bachata Masters in 2012, a competition hosted by bachatea.net, a Facebook page that is devoted to multimedia bachata content (bachatea.net 2012). Since winning their titles, Daniel and Desirée have toured as professional performers and instructors. In 2016, they started a YouTube channel. A dozen of their videos have over 1 million views; their most popular video has 30 million views (Daniel y Desirée 2021). Consequently, their style of sensual bachata, which emphasizes frequent full body contact between partners and dramatic body rolls and dips, continues to heavily influence the styles of other sensual bachata dancers.

For the purposes of this thesis, I will use the term traditional bachata to refer to the styles of bachata dance taught in studio settings between 2018-2021 that draw upon the timings and figures of Dominican bachata dancing, also referred to as "island style". Provinces in the Dominican Republic have their own specific bachata dance styles.[8] However, most traditional bachata instructors who teach in New York City or online during COVID do not focus on teaching regional styles, so I am unable to recognize and write about the differences between these styles. I will use sensual bachata as an umbrella term that refers to 1) styles of bachata dance that were popular between 2018-2021 and emphasize body rolls, turn patterns, and frequent close embrace, and 2) styles of bachata that are set in opposition to traditional/Dominican bachata and which are

[8] For an overview of some of the different bachata styles in the Dominican Republic, see Areíto Arts' YouTube Video, "Bachata Regional Styles -Dominican Swag" (Areíto Arts 2018a).

sometimes considered too different from traditional/Dominican bachata to count as "authentic" bachata.

Posture and Frame

Traditional bachata's notably grounded quality of movement is achieved through a combination of posture and footwork. Joe Burgos, the Dominican American founder of Piel Canela New York Latin Dance School, instructs his students to align the balls of their feet, their hips, and their shoulders (Piel Canela 2020a). This alignment shifts the dancer's weight into the balls of their feet and introduces a subtle forward lean in the torso. In their pre-recorded, subscription-based online classes on bachata, Edwin and Dakhóta tell students that their upper bodies should move with their steps. A grounded physicality is achieved by letting the shoulders follow the hips, which follow the feet (Areíto Arts Online Classes 2020d). They also remind students to roll their shoulders back and down (Areíto Arts Online Classes 2020d).

Ofir and Ofri, an Israeli sensual bachata couple who teach and perform internationally, use a similar posture in their own teaching practice. During a class that was part of the Crazy Lion Online Bachata Festival: 5th Edition, Ofri broke down correct posture into three elements: the dancer pushes their chest out while drawing their shoulders back and down and keeping their ribcage "inside". In other words, rather than lifting the rib cage and arching the back, the dancer uses the shoulder and back muscles to draw the shoulders back. Ideally, the body is held "in one line". Ofri noted that students might have difficulty breathing when first learning to hold this position (Ofir and Ofri 2020b).

Leo and Jomantae, bachata artists from the US and Lithuania respectively, also call for a straight-backed posture. They have christened their ballroom-inflected style of dancing *Bachata Elegancia*. In explaining the posture of Bachata Elegancia, Leo said that students should avoid the forward lean of traditional bachata. To demonstrate the ideal posture, Leo assumed the rigid straight back and rolled-back shoulders of a ballroom stance and then exhaled to relax into the Bachata Elegancia stance (Leo and Jomante 2020).

In bachata, couples communicate their movements through points of contact, typically along the hands, arms, shoulders, and shoulder blades. Dancers may dance in open position or closed position. In open position, dancers stand facing each other with their arms outstretched, a slight bend in the elbow. A hand-to-hand connection is the only point of contact between partners. There are many different hand positions[9]. In one of the most common positions, the lead presents the backs of their hands to the follow. The lead keeps their thumbs pointed up towards the ceiling and their other fingers loosely held together and curved in towards their palm. The follow rests their hands on top of the lead's hands, the follow's palms placed perpendicularly against the back of the lead's fingers. Some leads use their thumbs to press down on the follow's hands, though

[9] Other Latin dance hand positions include the "pistol grip", in which the lead's palms face inward, thumbs up, index extended to form an L-shape with the thumb. The lead's middle, ring, and pinky fingers, on which the follow's hands rest, are held at a ninety-degree angle to the index finger. (Bachata Dance Academy 2021). Another position involves the lead extending their palms toward the follow, thumbs pointing in towards each other and fingers pointing up. The follow wraps their fingers over the lead's thumbs, and the lead places their own fingers on top of the follow's hands (La Suerte Dance School 2021).

some instructors, like Edwin, advise against this because it can be uncomfortable for the follow (Howcast 2013).

In closed position, the lead and follow stand slightly off-center from each other so that the lead's right foot is aligned with the space between the follow's feet. This prevents the dancers from stepping on each other's feet when dancing in close proximity. Maintaining a bend in their arms, the lead wraps their right-hand around the follow's left side, bringing their hand to rest on the follow's shoulder blade. The follow rests their left arm on top of the lead's right arm, applying enough weight to feel a connection without dragging the lead down. The more the dancers bend their arms, the closer their bodies will be. The follow may place their left hand on front of the lead's shoulder, which allows the follow to control the distance between their body and the lead by pushing against the lead's shoulder.

Alternatively, the follow may wrap their hand around the lead's side to cup the lead's' right shoulder blade. Often, there is a hand-to-hand connection between the lead's left hand and the follow's right hand that is similar to the hand positions mentioned in open-position. For a more intimate option, the lead may place their left hand on the follow's right shoulder blade with the follow's right hand on the lead's left shoulder or shoulder blade. The follow may also place their right hand against the lead's chest, leaving the lead's left arm free, or the follow may wrap their arms around the lead's neck so that there is full contact between the front of the lead and follow's bodies. Typically, these more intimate positions are held for sustained periods of time in sensual bachata. In traditional bachata, dancers keep more distance between their bodies,

spending more time in open position and coming into the closest iterations of closed position for 10-15 seconds before allowing the distance between their bodies to grow once more.

Dance frame is the technique by which a dancer connects their arms and hands to their torso, and by extension, to the rest of their body. This technique is used in many other partnered-dance forms from salsa to ballroom. Good posture is the basis for good frame. Aligning the hips, shoulders, and head, as well as drawing the shoulders in towards the spine and down, stabilizes the spine (Dance Dojo 2015). Dancers also use their back muscles to hold their arms extended out in front of their bodies with softly bent elbows. A dancer with a stable spine and core and relaxed arms can easily direct or respond to the movements of their partner. Stiff arms or a tight hand grip can make a dancer feel like they have to muscle their partner into position (or conversely, that they are being forcibly manhandled). However, a dancer must put enough tension into their arms to offer sufficient resistance. For example, if a lead attempts to direct a follow to walk backwards by applying increased pressure to the follow's hands, a follow with limp "spaghetti" arms will likely bend and retract their arms without changing the trajectory of their body. If both partners have solid frames, a dancer can lead a follow through a backward step simply by taking a step forward.

When I first learned to dance bachata in 2018, my posture was more similar to the posture described by Joe Burgos and Edwin and Dakhóta. I remember bringing my weight into the balls of my feet, hinging slightly at the waist, and keeping my center of mass in my pelvis. I did not think about rolling my shoulders down or activating my

back muscles, though I do remember learning to offer resistance with my arms when dancing with a partner. Especially in my early days of dancing primarily as a follow, my partners likely compensated for my lack of spine stabilization by more assertively moving my body into position. My imprecise posture and dance frame technique reflected my beginner status and the settings in which I was learning to dance. I began dancing bachata at a sensual bachata dance party which offered beginner classes before the open social. I do not remember specifically learning about posture during these classes. Even if not technically correct within the sensual bachata style, leaning forward and holding my weight over the balls of my feet allowed me to move in a relaxed and fluid way that is suited to the improvisation required in social (non-choreographed) dancing. Additionally, about four months after I began dancing bachata, I took a month of unlimited classes at Piel Canela where Joe's teachings may have overwritten any of my pre-existing knowledge about proper bachata posture.

Every dance instructor has their own personal stylistic preferences. While Leo and Jomante explicitly identified forward-leaning alignment as a traditional bachata posture, my observations of a handful of dance classes do not necessarily confirm that all traditional dancers lean forward while all sensual dancers maintain a straight back. However, it is notable that the traditional bachata instructors all emphasized the importance of weight and feet in assuming the correct posture. As I will discuss in the next section, footwork is particularly important to traditional style bachata and to defining which dance styles may be recognized as bachata. The sensual bachata instructors were more concerned with the upper body and did not mention feet in

relation to posture at all. The importance they ascribed to straight posture resonates with the "clean lines" and upward energy of ballet and ballroom aesthetics that are associated with performance as opposed to social dancing.

Footwork

Bachata music is in four-four time, meaning that there are four quarter note beats to a measure (Pacini Hernandez 1995: 5). While Dominican dancers often derive the timing of their steps by listening to particular instrumental lines, such as the bongos or the güira, for the purposes of this thesis, it is helpful to break the steps into a 4-count.

1	2	3	4	1(5)	2(6)	3(7)	4(8)
L	R	L	r	R	L	R	l

L= step with left foot
R= step with right foot

*Uppercase letters signify a full weight transfer, while lowercase letters signify a non-weight bearing "break"

**When dancing with a partner, the lead typically starts on their left foot while the follow starts on their right foot.

Figure 1: Bachata Step

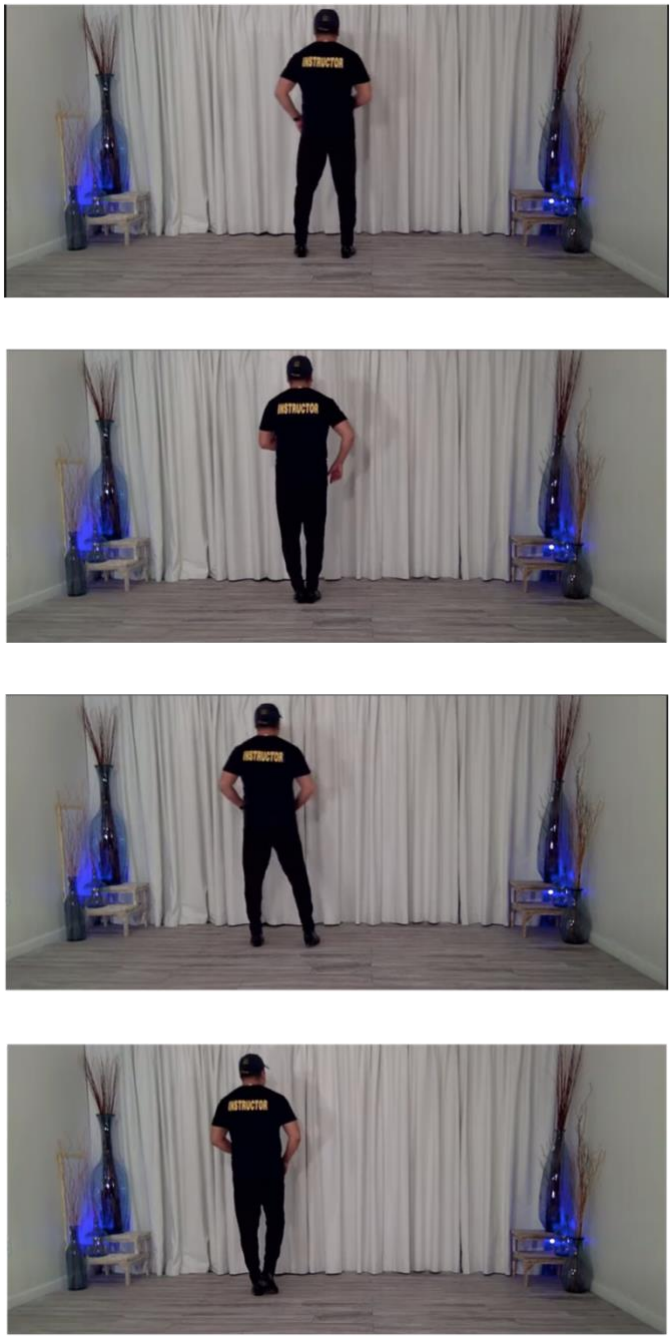

Figure 2: Screenshots of Joe Burgos Demonstrating the Bachata Basic Step in Piel Canela's "Bachata: Level 1: Series 1: Part 1 of 3: Bachata Basic Step" YouTube video

In the basic bachata step, the dancer marks each beat with the movement of their feet. The first three steps involve full weight transfers, while the fourth count is often marked with a heel tap, toe tap, kick, or hip check. This prepares the dancer to transfer their weight to the foot with which they tapped (Sellers 2014: 83). This step pattern is applied to both locomotor and non-locomotor movements, meaning that a dancer may travel through space or dance in place.

Many of the online classes I took over the summer of 2020 focused on footwork because many dancers found themselves quarantining alone during the COVID pandemic and footwork can be practiced solo. However, footwork has always been a central focus of traditional bachata classes. Piel Canela's Level 1, Series 1 YouTube series is devoted entirely to teaching the basic step, left and right turns, and footwork combinations that include pivots as well as stomping and dragging the foot against the floor. Areíto Arts Online, Edwin and Dakhóta's online series, includes twenty-one videos divided into three levels that teach students the basic step and a variety of increasingly complex turns, footwork combinations, and methods of counting steps.

To take a step in traditional bachata, a dancer lifts one foot from the ground and replaces it in a new location, shifting their weight into the foot they just lifted (Piel Canela Dancers 2020a). Edwin tells students to shift weight into the foot beginning with the ball of the foot and then moving the weight back down to the heel (Areíto Arts Online Classes 2020a), while Joe instructs students to keep the heels lifted with their weight in the ball of the foot. Joe also advises students against taking steps that are too big (Piel Canela Dancers 2020a). This technique gives the bachata step a grounded

quality, which Dakhóta describes as “tak[ing] energy from the ground” (Areíto Arts Online Classes 2020a). By shifting weight with each step, the dancer actively presses into the ground with their feet.

Lateral hip movement in traditional bachata is a byproduct of footwork and weight shifts. Jay, the Dominican-trained bachata instructor I encountered at the Dallas Bachata Festival, said as much in his framing of masculine hip movement as the unsexy moving of feet. Joe and Edwin and Dakhóta do not explicitly mention hip movement, and their hip pronouncements are fairly restrained throughout their videos. Other dancers prefer a more exaggerated hip movement. Young, a Korean traditional bachata organizer and DJ living in New York City, recalls learning to bounce her hip and exaggerate the tap on the break in the early 2010s. Young believes that this hip movement was inspired by Ataca y La Alemana, a bachata dance couple whose YouTube choreographies went viral around 2010 (Brian and Young 2020). Ivonne, a New York City-based Argentinian performer and instructor, incorporates what she calls “kizomba hips” into her bachata fusion style. In her online class, she showed students how to shift their weight from foot to foot by bringing the knees and pelvis forward and then lifting the hip up and back (Ivonne 2020). I will return to hip movement in sensual bachata in the section on body movement.

As studio-based bachata evolves further and further away from bachata as it is danced today in the bars and clubs of the Dominican Republic, the basic bachata step has become the key technique which anchors sensual bachata styles to the genre of bachata dance. Sensual bachata footwork is similar to traditional bachata footwork. Sensual

bachata instructors Ofir and Ofri instruct students to take steps with their toes pointed out in a V-shape, maintain forward-facing hips, and take small steps (Ofir and Ofri 2020a), all of which is consistent with traditional technique. However, the way in which the bachata basic step is currently taught by traditional and sensual instructors differs. Traditional bachata instructors often teach students to step in place to a four-count (step, step, step, break). They might then challenge students to perform the same step pattern while traveling in a box-like figure or while rotating at various around a fixed point (Areíto Arts Online Classes 2020a). Sensual instructors typically teach students a side-to-side basic set to an eight-count, four counts of stepping to the left, and then four counts of stepping to the right. This is a hold-over from the eight-count salsa basic step which salsa instructors in New York City and other cities outside of the Dominican Republic adapted for teaching bachata (Brian and Young 2020). While sensual bachata dancers also use the basic step to travel backwards and forwards around the dance floor, the box-figure of traditional bachata is far less common in sensual bachata.

When I learned the bachata basic, I learned the eight-count, side-to-side pattern. The dancer takes a sideways step with their left foot, brings their right foot next to their left foot on the second step, takes another sideways step with their left foot, and then taps their right toe next to their left foot. The pattern is then performed in the reverse direction. In this formulation of the basic step, it can be easy to rush through the non-locomotor "together" step, which occurs on the second and sixth count, into the third count and seventh count locomotor steps. In refreshing my basic side-to-side step for this thesis, Joe's reminders to take small steps and shift my full body weight with each step

helped me to properly ground all of my steps. Even though my step pattern and counts remained the same, I felt a stronger awareness of the güira's beat. I also felt more connected to the bouncy, vibrant energy of the bongos and the requinto (lead) guitar.

The bachata basic step is deceptively simple. The first time I danced bachata with Ben, I was able to follow his lead after he gave me a five-minute footwork tutorial in his living room. But it took me at least six months of regularly dancing to stop counting steps in my head as I danced, and probably about a year before I could fall into the basic step in time to the music without consciously having to think about it. Connecting with the ground was harder than I expected; my ankles sometimes wobbled when I rolled my weight from ball to heel. Now, I find myself shuffling through a side-to-side basic while I wait in line for groceries or a COVID test. My technique may not be perfect, but over the last three years, the bachata basic has worked its way into my pedestrian movement vocabulary.

Musicality

As I discussed in the introduction to this chapter, traditional bachata and sensual bachata dance styles were developed in response to different styles of bachata music. According to Edwin and Dakhóta, Dominican dancers dance "on all four beats", meaning that they may choose to begin the basic step pattern on the first, second, third, or fourth beat of a given measure in a bachata song (Areíto Arts Online Classes 2020g). While it is possible for a dancer to dance on different beats by counting in their head, Edwin and Dakhóta explained that Dominican dancers set the timing of their steps in relation to different instrumental lines in the bachata music (Areíto Arts Online Classes

2020g). To teach students to dance on different beats, Edwin broke down the instrumentation of the song he and Dakhóta were using for their advanced online classes[10]. In this song, the bongo's highest pitches fall on the first through third counts and its lowest pitch falls on the fourth count. A dancer who wants to dance on 1 aligns their break, which is the fourth step in the bachata basic step pattern, with the lowest pitch of the bongo (Areíto Arts Online Classes 2020g). A dancer who wants to dance on 2 starts their basic on the second beat of the bachata, which means that they take their break on the first beat of the following measure (Areíto Arts Online Classes 2020h). In this song, the highest note of the requinto guitar line lands on the first count, so the dancer can align their break with the high note. Finally, the bass line of the song provides cues for dancing on 3 and 4 (Areíto Arts Online Classes 2020i/j).

Sensual bachata dancers typically stick to dancing on 1. They still use footwork to interpret the music. In their online class, Ofir and Ofri stressed that emphasizing the strong notes in a song when performing a footwork pattern will make the steps look good and effortless (Ofir and Ofri 2020a). But sensual bachata dancers express musicality primarily through other techniques: body rolls and waves, arm movements, hand gestures. Though I am less familiar with dance styles that developed in response to urban bachata music with strong hip-hop influences, I believe that urban bachata dancers also use a combination of techniques to interpret the music. Carlos and Chloe, two

[10] According to iASO Records, a bachata-centric record label located in New York, "The low bongo usually plays on the 4th beat. The voice accents the 1st beat – often that means that vocal phrases end on the first beat rather than start on it. The bass tends to play on the 3rd, 4th, and 1st beats – but this can change" (iASO 2021b).

Australian bachata instructors who identified as fusion bachata artists, incorporated a widened stance and a "hesitation"[11] when teaching a choreography set to an urban bachata song (Carlos and Chloe 2020).

These techniques are directly connected to differences between styles of bachata music. Like many musical traditions with African roots, bachata includes syncopation, or "uneven" rhythms, as well as polyrhythms, a complex interweaving of the different rhythmic patterns (Maultsby 2014: 13-14). For a dancer who is not familiar with traditional bachata music or a dancer who is used to Western, melody-driven music, it is difficult to identify and interpret individual instrumental lines and their repeating patterns in bachata music. While I was mostly able to follow Edwin and Dakhóta's classes on dancing on all four beats, I would not be able to distinguish and respond to the different instruments during a social dance. In my experience, sensual bachata dancers tend to respond to the melodic line (usually the vocals or requinto guitar) when dancing. This makes sense especially when dancing to bachata re-mixes of US American pop songs or to contemporary bachata songs that de-emphasize the bachata instruments in favor of a vocal-centric, smooth sound.

[11] According to Chloe and Carlos, a hesitation is a hip-hop move in which a dancer bends the knee of their standing leg while sliding the other leg out and dipping the shoulder that corresponds with the sliding leg (Carlos and Chloe 2020).

Body Movement and Isolations

Isolations, body rolls, and side waves are the fundamental moves used to express musicality in sensual bachata. These moves fall under the category of body movement. While bachata instructors and dancers talk frequently about the importance of body movement, few specify exactly which techniques and body parts are involved in "body movement". I will use the definition Rithika, a sensual bachata instructor and performer who is based in Mumbai, provided during her online class: body movement refers to movements of the torso, hips, and shoulders (Connect ConRi 2020). This section will examine the techniques involved in producing isolations, body rolls, and body waves, as well as their gendered significations.

Lateral Hip and Chest Movement

In the early 2010s, when the global bachata scene was picking up traction, an emphasis on side-to-side hip movement was not necessarily associated with traditional or sensual bachata because the division between the two styles had not yet consolidated (Brian and Young 2020). By the late 2010s, however, pronounced hip movements became characteristic of many styles of sensual bachata. JMichael[12], a sensual bachata performer and instructor based in the Bay Area, teaches that pronounced hip movement

[12] Most of my body movement explanations are drawn from JMichael's workshops at the 2019 and 2020 Dallas Bachata Festivals. JMichael and his partner Marina have developed a "Sensual Bachata Master Series, a complete Bachata Sensual system that breaks down the style into core shapes and presents theory aimed at truly leading and following the most complex movements. Featuring 8 core movements that combine like building blocks to make up most bachata sensual shapes and flow" (JMichael and Marina 2020). JMichael's framework for explain body movement makes sense to me as someone whose early movement vocabularies (ballet, Chinese folk dance) had little to no isolations or rotational body movements.

is achieved through a combination of stepping and contracting the core and obliques so that the hip of the standing leg pushes out, the hip of the stepping leg tilts down, and the shoulders remain level (JMichael and Marina 2019). Lateral hip movement requires the dancer to isolate their hip movement from their chest movement. If a dancer pushes out their right hip, they must simultaneously pull down their right shoulder and pull up their left shoulder by activating their obliques in order to keep their shoulders in the same horizontal plane. Conversely, if a dancer pushes out their left hip, they must pull down their left shoulder and pull up their right shoulder. This isolated oppositional movement is called contramotion.

Contramotion is used in traditional bachata too; Edwin and Dakhóta, Joe, and Jahaira and Angélica deploy contramotion in their dancing to various degrees. In my experience, traditional bachata dance instructors invite students (or at least beginner students) to add lateral hip and chest isolations and contramotion without necessarily breaking the moves down on a granular, biomechanical level. Traditional dancers may also accent their dancing with an occasional hip roll or body roll, but rolls are not considered part of the core traditional bachata movement vocabulary. On the other hand, sensual bachata instructors treat isolations as the bread and butter of sensual bachata technique because a dancer needs to be able to isolate their upper body movement from their lower body movement in order to perform hip and chest rotations, side waves, and body rolls.

Side waves exaggerate this contramotion. In the basic sensual bachata step with lateral hip and chest movement, the center of the abdomen and the center of the chest

remain roughly aligned. In a side wave, this alignment is broken to create an S-shaped wave. Side waves can be executed starting with the right or left side of the body. JMichael instructs students to begin a right-side wave by tilting their head to the right, raising their left shoulder up, and then sliding their ribcage over to the right while dropping their left shoulder so that it joins the right shoulder on the same horizontal plane. At this point, the dancer begins to shift their weight into their right leg, pushing their left hip out. Bending their right knee and then their left knee, the dancer swings their hips to the right, dropping their full weight into the right leg. They then swing their hips back to the left and roll back up, reversing each step (JMichael and Marina 2020).

Isolations: Hip and Chest Rotations

Hip and chest rotations apply the same isolation techniques in three dimensions: instead of moving side-to-side and up and down in the same vertical plane, the dancer also moves their body forward and backwards. According to JMichael, a dancer begins a hip rotation by tilting their pelvis forward, pulling their shoulders down, and pulling their abdominal floor up, creating a crunch in their lower abdominal muscles. The dancer then pushes a hip to the side, contracting their obliques as in the lateral hip isolation. Next, the dancer tilts their pelvis back and contracts their back to draw their shoulders towards lower back. Lastly, the dancer completes the rotation by pushing their other hip out to the side and contracting their corresponding oblique (JMichael and Marina 2019).

JMichael's hip rotation involves the simultaneous visible rotation of hips and chest. The same movements and muscles can be used to rotate just the hips, by concentrating the movement in the lower abs and lower obliques, or just the chest, by

concentrating the movement in the upper abs and upper obliques. Rotation can be executed at varying speeds and circumferences to interpret the music. Rapid rotations are typically tighter, while bigger rotations (usually hip rolls, also known as booty rolls), are typically slower and involve shifting weight from one foot to the other (Ofir and Ofir 2020).

Body Rolls

Body rolls are difficult, and most dancers have to drill them in order to perform them fluidly with musicality. JMichael describes body rolls as moving between two c-curves, which he refers to as "Position 1" and "Position 2". He was inspired to break body rolls down into these two positions by the contraction and expansion exercises of ballet and modern dance (JMichael and Marina 2020). To assume Position 1, the dancer stands with their left forward and their right foot back with approximately a hip's distance between them. The dancer crunches their shoulders and tilts their pelvis up and forward by contracting their abs and tucking their glutes. They bend their right knee, leaning back and shifting their weight into their right leg, which is primarily stabilized by the right quad and hip flexor. In Position 2, the dancer's weight remains in their right leg as they arch their back, pushing their chest forward and their buttocks back. As the dancer flows from Position 1 to Position 2, their chest and hips oscillate forward and backward in space: hips forward, chest back; chest forward, hips back.

JMichael also demonstrated how to perform body rolls to the side, or "carousels", in which a dancer draws a circle with their torso within a vertical plane. Rather than moving between contracting and expanding the front of the body (Positions

1 and 2), side rolls involve moving between contracting the left side and then the right side of the body.

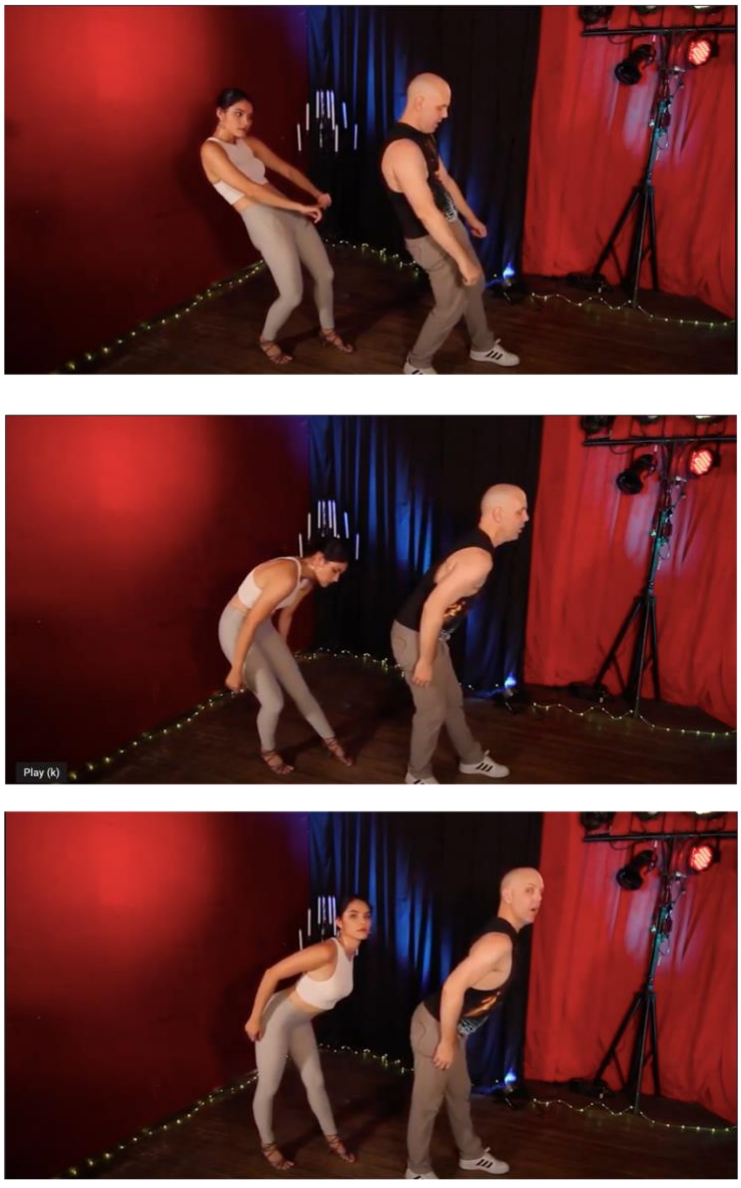

Figure 3: Screenshots of JMichael and Marina demonstrating a Body Roll in the Sensual Bachata Master Series Workshop for the 2020 Free Online International Edition of the Dallas Bachata

Gendering and Sexualizing Isolations

The heavy use of hip rotations, chest rotations, and body rolls contributes to sensual bachata's reputation for heightened sexiness and the objectification/sexual harassment of women. These rolls and rotations draw attention to the dancer's chest and buttocks, parts of the body which are sexualized. Men and women perform rotations and body rolls in sensual bachata, but the majority of rotations and rolls are performed by follows, who are usually women. Leads often initiate rolls by placing their hands on the sides of the follow's ribs or hips; unscrupulous leads might take advantage of this positioning to graze the follow's breasts and buttocks. Techniques are gendered, typically by de-emphasizing sexualized male body parts (the buttocks) and emphasizing sexualized female body parts (the buttocks and breasts). For example, when teaching a hip roll in an online fusion class, Chloe said, "Boys, even though the bum is going down, you can bend with your knees. Girls, arch your backs" (Carlos and Chloe 2020). Similarly, when Argentinian New Yorker Ivonne and her partner Nick taught a hip roll in an online sensual bachata class, Ivonne arched her lower back while Nick leaned his chest forward. Both stylings emphasize the buttocks, but Nick's technique offers a more masculine alternative to the feminized/sexualized back arch (Nick and Ivonne 2020). When Indian sensual bachata instructors Rithika and Cornel taught a body roll in an online bachata class, Cornel led the body roll with his shoulder, while Rithika led with her chest. Rithika explicitly referred to her version of the body roll as a styling option for women (Cornel and Rithika 2020).

The focus on body isolations in sensual bachata elevates a particular feminine body type: full breasts and buttocks, wide hips, and a narrow waist. This curvy figure is often associated with Black and Latina women as well as white women who are perceived as ethnically-ambiguous (think Kim Kardashian). Cultural critic Jia Tolentino writes about the racial ambiguity of "Instagram face", an ideal of feminine beauty that "favor[s] white women capable of manufacturing a look of rootless exoticism" (Tolentino 2019). Female bachata dance artists, particularly sensual bachata artists, self-promote on Instagram; like other female social media influencers, they benefit from conforming to Instagram beauty norms. Many of the most successful female sensual bachata performers are Latina women with more European features and European women with darker-complexions and full, hourglass figures. Rithika is ethnically Indian but also curvy. Ivonne, who I perceive as a white-passing, Latina woman with slender hourglass proportions, told her students to "move like you have curves" (Ivonne 2020). She gestured to her own body to signal its purported lack of curves and then performed a sideways hip thrust to demonstrate how to tactically deploy a body isolation to create the illusion of the ideal curvy bachatera body.

Despite the pervasive sexualized gendering of body movements, some instructors invite their students to try different stylings that may not align with their typical gender presentation. After Rithika demonstrated her feminine styling for a body roll, Cornel said, "Boys, you can try the styling if you like it" (Cornel and Rithika 2020). Maycheal, a Lebanese sensual bachata instructor who teaches with his partner Mayra, encouraged female students to try masculine stylings, saying "It's not wrong to learn it even if

you're wearing heels" (Maycheal and Mayra 2020). While these comments invoke binary gender and gender stereotypes, betraying an anxiety about gender non-conforming behavior, they also offer students more options for gender expression. Queer Boston-based dancers, Tina Cavicchio and her partner Kyla, host bachata classes in which they teach basic choreography with both feminine and masculine styling. They encourage students, regardless of gender, to do whatever gestures feel most comfortable to them (Morgan 2020). This tactical queering of styling decouples femininity from following and masculinity from leading. It also offers dancers the possibility of intermingling feminine and masculine stylings to create a styling that produces gender queerness.

Hands and Arms Styling

Traditional bachata styling does not focus much on the arms and hands. Areíto Arts Online Classes do not discuss styling the upper body until an intermediate level class that demonstrates combining simple moves. The combinations included several different hand and arm gestures, most of which served to accent shifting points of contact between Edwin and Dakhóta. Transitioning from a single hand-to-hand connection, Edwin passed Dakhóta's arm behind her back and transferred her hand so that he could lead with his other hand. Later, when moving from open position to closed position, Edwin draped Dakhóta's hand over his head and around his neck (Areíto Arts Online Classes 2020f).

I should note that in Edwin and Dakhóta's performance showcases of traditional bachata, bolero, merengue, and son, they use more heightened arm and hand gestures

that are not related to transitioning between positions. For instance, Dakhóta may dramatically sweep both arms outward, her fingers elegantly separated, or trace the sides of her body with her hands (Areíto Arts 2021). These gestures fit the aesthetic of Edwin and Dakhóta's costumed performances, which have involved props and often suggest a humorous, flirtatious narrative. Primarily ornamental stylings may also be used in traditional bachata social dancing. For example, in the previously mentioned online class, Dakhóta performed a hair comb, running a hand over the top of her head and down through her hair (Areíto Arts Online Classes 2020f). Generally, however, sensual bachata dancers pay more attention to these types of ornamental hand stylings. While Edwin and Dakhóta present some examples of hand and arm stylings, they do not spend class time verbally explaining them.

By contrast, sensual bachata classes often include very specific instructions about arm and hand movements because they are essential to sensual bachata's fluid, graceful aesthetic. Rithika taught an arm and hand styling sequence in which she raises her straightened, parallel arms in front of her body, palms face up, to shoulder level. She then bends her arms at the elbows so that her hands hover above her shoulders while her elbows remain pointed forward. Keeping her arms in this bent position, Rithika draws her elbows back 90 degrees so that they remain at shoulder level, forming a T-shape with her body in which her face is framed by the backs of her hands. She then raises her arms above her head, extending her arms straight as she rotates her wrists away from her body. In the final position, Rithika's shoulders are rolled back and down while her arms extend in a Y-shape above her head, wrists slightly bent, palms facing away from each

other, fingers elegantly separated. This styling sequence occurs in approximately one second. Rithika told students to be sure to keep their wrists "gentle and relaxed" and their elbows pointed out rather than down during the face-framing part of the sequence. She also reminded them to raise their hands first and then their elbows when transitioning from the T-shape to the Y-shape (ConRi 2020).

The above-the-head arm raises of sensual bachata are most frequently performed by follows. Instructors often use language to describe these movements that suggests the graceful, straight lines of ballet. Mayra, the Argentinian instructor, described the up and down movements of her arms as being similar to those of a bird or ballerina (Maycheal and Mayra 2020). She also said that follows' hands should look soft and weightless. Israeli sensual bachata instructor Ofri said, "We take the hand straight and beautiful" (Ofir and Ofri 2020b). Ofri also stressed the importance of engaging the back muscles to keep the shoulders down while lifting the arms overhead rather than using the muscles in the forearm and stiffening the hands (Ofir and Ofri 2020b). Jomante, whose Bachata Elegancia brand combines bachata and ballroom techniques, also straightened her arms when raising or performing sweeping side-to-side gestures. She spoke about putting energy into the "arm extension" (Leo and Jomante 2020).

The illusion of weightlessness in ballet is achieved through arm and leg extensions, jumps, partner work lifts, and dancing on pointe. Sensual bachata incorporates the Western aesthetic of airy extensions primarily through arm styling. Even though sensual bachata does not focus on grounded footwork as much as traditional bachata, sensual bachata still maintains the step patterns of traditional

bachata. Additionally, improvised jumps and lifts are not easily executed on a crowded dance floor, though sensual bachata dancers often perform complex lifts in choreographed performances.

The arm and hand styling of sensual bachata are also feminized and racialized. Beauty, softness, and ballet itself are linked to white femininity. Ballet remains a predominately white dance genre and the ballet "classical aesthetic" is historically associated with slender, delicate-featured (white) women (Klapper 2020: 145). Twentieth century dance critics frequently stated or implied that Black dancers lacked the natural body shape for ballet (Klapper 2020: 145). Many white, middle-class women in the United States and Europe have had at least some childhood exposure to ballet classes. Additionally, aspiring to graceful weightlessness aligns well with ideal traditional characteristics of Western femininity: be beautiful, polite, and take up minimal space. Ivonne explicitly tied sensual bachata hand gestures to everyday performances of femininity when she described a move in which students dramatically swept their hands over their faces as "removing our makeup" or "removing our lipstick" (Ivonne 2020).

Furthermore, arm and hand stylings modulate expressions of sexuality. Many of the hand-stylings for sensual bachata follows involve running the hands along the outlines of the body, which serves to emphasize the chest, hips, and buttocks. In class, Rithika encouraged her students to get more comfortable touching their own bodies. The sexual-overtness of feminine-coded arm and hand stylings range from relatively demure arm extensions to tracing the hands up the front of the thighs, over the hips, and around

to the buttocks while performing a simultaneous hip and chest roll. US Americans and Europeans also often perceive gestures from the dance cultures of the global South as more sexually aggressive, leading them to view Black and brown dancers as naturally sexy and sexual. The variation in arm and hand stylings in sensual bachata exemplifies how sensual bachata instructors cater to different client populations who are not predominately Dominican/Latino/Latina, leaning into either desexualized Western dance aesthetics or the Western-projected, lustful exoticism of Latin dance.

Arm and hand styling can also be masculine. In their fusion class, Chloe and Carlos told students to punch both fists out in front of their chests while performing a body roll to look more "gangster" (Carlos and Chloe 2020). Carlos and Chloe also referred to students as "you gangster bachateros" (Carlos and Chloe 2020). I understood the use of the term gangster in this context as encouraging students to step into /appropriate an attitude associated with Black masculinity in hip hop. Nick, who co-taught a sensual bachata class with his partner Ivonne, also used closed fists to distinguish his hand styling from Ivonne's open hands. Nick's styling of the class choreography differed somewhat from Ivonne's; he pushed out and away from his body with his arms and hands while Ivonne more often drew her arms and hands in and up along the sides of her body. Still, Nick also traced the sides of his body while performing a body roll (Nick and Ivonne 2020).

While all dancers execute footwork and hand and arm stylings, many dancers believe that hand and arm styling is primarily for women. In Cornel and Rithika's co-ed online class, Rithika stated that the class would not include "strict hand movements for

the ladies" because she and Cornel wanted to focus on teaching students to move the full body (Cornel and Rithika 2020). During Nick and Ivonne's co-taught class, Nick interrupted Ivonne while she was demonstrating a feminine arm styling to say that styling was also important for men. He said he was "standing up for the guys" (Nick and Ivonne 2020), which I took as a joke that inverts the male presumption that styling is only for women. I sensed that Nick felt some anxiety about performing feminine styling. When Ivonne teased Nick about copying her styling of a turn, Nick deflected by claiming that the technique of "collecting your foot"[13] at the end of a turn also applied to men (Nick and Ivonne 2020). This echoes Jay's defense of masculine hip movement. While styling is perceived as inherently feminine, footwork is perceived as gender-neutral and more important. When I went to the Dallas Bachata Festival in 2019, four footwork-centric classes were held in the Grand Ballroom[14]. None of the styling classes, many of which included "Ladies Styling" in their titles, were held in the Grand Ballroom. While the instructor of the ladies' styling class that I attended in the smaller, colder Ballroom 4 stressed that styling was for everyone, only one masculine-presenting person took the class.

Dancers' perceptions of styling as feminine, performance-oriented, and often sexualized contribute to sensual bachata's overall reputation for being more appearance-

[13] Collecting your foot refers to returning a non-weight bearing foot to rest next to a weight-bearing foot. For example, you might collect your foot after sliding a foot out from under your center of gravity or spinning on a single foot.

[14] The 2019 Dallas Bachata Festival typically ran four or five simultaneous classes from 10am to 7pm. More than one styling class was offered, though none were offered in the central room (the Grand Ballroom). Most of the classes offered in the main room (the Grand Ballroom) were for partnerwork.

focused than traditional bachata. Certainly, sensual bachata has flashier dips and body rolls. But I would argue that the distinctions between sensual and traditional arm and hand styling reveal the perceived philosophical difference between sensual and traditional bachata. In traditional bachata, arm and hand styling facilitates and accents shifts in points of bodily contact between dancers. By contrast, ornamental arm and hand stylings are central to sensual bachata technique, particularly for follows. In her blog post "Honing Different Dance Skills Part III: Bachata," dance enthusiast and Theology & Religion scholar Stefani Ruper writes, "I find ladies styling in sensual bachata to be a bit narcissistic, which I find obnoxious. But if you want to learn how to flaunt your own body and moves, sensual bachata has plenty of material for you to work with" (Ruper 2016). Ruper interprets female dancers showing off their bodies as egotistic and shallow. I believe it is fair to criticize sensual bachata styling for sometimes facilitating the fetishization of women's bodies and Black and brown bodies: dancers may drag a follow's hands over and around her chest while staring down her shirt or perform hand stylings meant to vaguely suggest gang hand signals. However, at least some of the derision directed toward sensual bachata stems from a devaluation of highly performative, feminine expressions of sexuality.

Partnerwork: Leading and Following

Different approaches to techniques for leading and following, as well as general etiquette for dancing with partners, further illuminate how dancers view the primary purpose of bachata dancing and frame their preferences for one style of bachata over the other. In a bachata social dance at a studio or club, dancers will pair off to dance with

each other for a song or two. Dancers will typically dance with multiple partners over the course of an event, though some dancers may prefer to dance solely with their romantic partner or a preferred dance partner. Traditionally, female dancers follow while male dancers lead, though dancers may also switch roles or dance primarily as the "opposite" role depending on the norms of their particular dance environment.

Having a good frame allows dancers to lead and follow effectively. The lead transmits the movement of their body through their arms and hands, which the follow then receives as pressure and direction through their own arms and hands. As Edwin said in his Howcast Dance Bachata YouTube series, with good frame, the lead moves their torso in order to move the follow's torso (Howcast 2013). Sensual bachata instructors also echo this basic idea. Israeli sensual bachata instructors Ofir and Ofri told students during their online class that having a good frame enables the lead to bend their knees in order to make the follow bend their knees. They instructed leads not to push follows down by the shoulders; Ofri specifically told students "If guys try this, you don't have to do anything" (Ofir and Ofri 2020). Ofir also demonstrated how to lead a change in direction by blocking Ofri's forward movement with his forearm and then moving his whole body and frame in the opposite direction to move her body (Ofir and Ofri 2020). Similarly, Maycheal, a Lebanese sensual bachata instructor, told students that men should learn body movements so that leads can direct follows through the lead's own movements and frame instead of using their arms and hands to drag follows through body movements (Maycheal and Mayra 2020).

Traditional and sensual bachata instructors frame the dynamic between lead and follow differently. Bachata scholar Julie Sellers writes that though contemporary bachata dancing in the Dominican Republic remains male-dominated, women frequently decide to initiate their own turns (Sellers 2014: 86). She also notes that couples typically dance while holding hands rather than in close embrace (Sellers 2014: 86), which gives the follow more space to determine their own movements. Edwin and Dakhóta, who are friends with Sellers and intend to collaborate with her on an educational initiative about bachata, incorporate this more equal approach to partnerwork in their teachings. For example, in Edwin and Dakhóta's online dance series, Edwin explained that turns are led by the lead dropping one of the follow's hands, raising the follow's other hand, and applying pressure to the follow's raised hand to indicate the direction and speed of the turn. He said that leads can guide the direction and speed of the full turn, indicate a direction and allow the follow to determine the timing of the turn, or simply raise a hand and allow the follow to turn however they want (Areíto Arts Online Classes 2020fb.

Additionally, Edwin and Dakhóta highlighted how dance partners can use different types of breaks, including a toe tap, a heel tap, a triple syncopated step, a foot lift, or crossing the foot behind the standing leg and tapping with the toe, as long as they dance on the same timing (Areíto Arts Online Classes 2020c). Leads cannot force follows to perform a particular footwork pattern, but in a social setting, a lead might demonstrate a footwork pattern and then repeat it, inviting the follow to mirror the footwork pattern if they so choose. During an Areíto Arts workshop at the 2019 Dallas Bachata Festival, Edwin told students that leads in the Dominican Republic often look at

the follow's feet to figure out what to do (Edwin and Dakhóta 2019). Since footwork technique in traditional bachata is particularly prized, recognizing the possibility for follows to generate footwork allows for a significant shift in power between lead and follow.

I would also note that the traditional bachata classes and communities I have encountered in the US studio dance scene have also consistently supported female leads, male follows, and dancers of all genders who choose to dance both roles. When I didn't have a partner during one of Edwin's classes at the 2019 Dallas Bachata Festival, Edwin asked if I was a lead or follow so that he could help me find a partner. He also made an announcement to the class that a dancer's role should not be assumed on the basis of their gender. The female founders of BachaDura and In Lak'ech Dance Academy, two dance communities which focus on traditional bachata and traditional bachata/ salsa respectively, also model leading as female dancers and have created different class and community structures that refuse correlations between gender and dance role. I will discuss BachaDura and In Lak'ech further in Chapters 3 and 4.

The greater selection of sensual bachata classes available to me in New York City studio dance settings and online classes has allowed me to identify some of the nuanced variances in leading and following techniques within the sensual bachata scene. JMichael, the sensual bachata dancer from San Francisco, emphasized "light leading" (JMichael and Marina 2019). In this style of leading, JMichael explained that the lead cues the follow to perform a particular move rather than physically manipulating the follow's body. Light leading can be achieved through training a dancer's frame and

responsiveness to touch. However, leading by cues is also more dependent on the lead and follow sharing the same dance language. Tina, the previously mentioned instructor for queer salsa/bachata classes in Boston, illustrated the difference between leading and cuing for me (Tina 2019). She tapped the center of my forehead with two fingers pointed like a finger gun, which she explained was meant to cue me to look up. Since tapping my forehead does not tilt my head back, as a follow, I would only understand how to respond to this cue if I had been previously taught it. By contrast, Tina said that when a lead applies some gentle upward pressure to the back of the neck, a follow who understands the general principle of responding to resistance from a lead would recognize that they should tilt their head back. Thus, leading through cues often works best for pre-choreographed dance performances. It may also serve as a successful social dancing technique if both partners have similar performance training.

Sensual bachata leading tends to maximize visual drama. In his 2019 Dallas Bachata Festival class, JMichael explained that the lead creates a "frame" for the follow's picture, which suggests a perpetual awareness of creating a moving image for others to watch. It also presents the follow's body as the primary focal point for observers. Intertwined with this image-consciousness is the intentional building of sexual chemistry. JMichael and his dance partner Marina performed a final choreography demonstration in their class which ended with a slowed-down body roll and an intense gaze between the two of them. JMichael referred to this moment as a "soap opera moment" (JMichael and Marina 2019), which I interpreted as a deliberately

heightened display of sexual tension. After the dance, JMichael shook Marina's hand, marking the end of the dance and the romantic/sensual exchange that occurred within it.

Sensual bachata also often affords leads significant control over the movements of follows. Isolations typically involve close bodily proximity between the lead and follows. Complex improvised choreography requires the follow to permit the lead to touch the follow's torso and hips and to precisely direct the movements of these body parts. In her dance blog, Ruper writes about the popularity of "foot sweeps", a move in which the lead moves the follow's foot by kicking it out from under them (Ruper 2016). To successfully execute a foot sweep, the follow must be comfortable balancing on one foot while relying on the steadying support of the lead.

Dancers who participate in multiple Latin dance scenes often critique sensual bachata dancers for their prioritization of visual spectacle over interpersonal connection. Pervasive lack of connection and a collective drive to impress others by looking cool negatively affects a social dance environment. Dancers may be pushed to perform moves that they feel are too sexual or do not know how to perform without potentially injuring themselves, to which Ruper attests in her blog post "Why I don't dance bachata anymore (or, the real problems with sensual bachata)" (Ruper 2017). I have danced with leads who are too focused on showing off their ability to spin me in multiple, quick consecutive circles to realize that I am dizzy and not in control of my own balance.

These experiences point to a culture of machismo and sexism on the dance floor, but they might also be interpreted as evidence of how technique is integral to facilitating connection in bachata social dance. On one hand, sensual bachata follows often

complain that sensual bachata leads are rough (Ruper 2017). On the other hand, a woman I led during a workshop at the 2019 Dallas Bachata Festival told me that she needed me to be more forceful so that she knew where I was placing her. I can relate. Especially as a beginner follow, strong directions from leads reassured me that I was "doing things right" and that my partners were not secretly frustrated by my ineptitude. For inexperienced follows and leads, communicating movement in close embrace can be easier because there are more points of body contact in this position. It is difficult to lead a hip roll solely through frame and body movement, so dancers often adopt tactical shortcuts. On the dance floor, leads frequently lead a hip roll by pushing their leg against the inside of the follow's leg or simply by dragging the follow's hips in a circle with their hands. Such close proximity can easily result in the crossing of an individual's physical boundaries, whether by accident or by design.

Dance technique enables partners to negotiate each other's bodies without verbal language; when technique breaks down, dancers might resort to giving verbal instructions. I have asked leads to adjust their grip on my hands and have asked for feedback as a beginner lead. While verbal feedback may to improve both partners' dance experiences, male leads dancing with female follows often give feedback to assert their expertise at the expense of the follow's knowledge and skills. Rather than owning an ineffectively-executed leading technique, leads may "correct" follows for failing to recognize and act upon their cues. The dominant and submissive lead-follow dynamic in sensual bachata allows leads (usually men) to control the dance scripts. As such, leads

are positioned to dictate how follows' bodies should move while follows attempt to fulfill the lead's expectations.

This section has so far focused on leading, which reflects a general bias towards lead-centric instruction. The majority of bachata partnerwork classes that I have taken both in-person and online have been taught by dancers who primarily lead. Classes frequently break down leading techniques on a granular level but may or may not address the process of following. As someone who learned to dance bachata as a follow and still dances as a follow most of the time, I want to highlight some of the skills that follows bring to the table. Crucially, follows must be able to interpret their partners' visual and sensory signals, such as recognizing that a raised hand creates open space for a turn or a cross step. Follows ideally are aware of their own physical boundaries and feel comfortable enforcing those boundaries by making adjustments, offering resistance, or walking away from partners who continuously transgress those boundaries. Follows add texture to a dance by improvising styling and footwork. In sensual bachata in particular, a charismatic follow has the opportunity to fill the space of the dance: it is the follow who performs the most sweeping body rolls and isolations, the signature moves of sensual. A good follow also pays attention to their partner as a person, not just a lead. Leads balance attending to their partners while also improvising choreography and managing their locomotor movement in relation to all the other dancers around them. While follows have opportunities to improvise and should also maintain a degree of spatial awareness for their own safety, they can focus more of their attention on the lead, which in turn helps the lead stay present in the dance. Lastly, follows can respond

generously to mistakes and more inexperienced leading. In a social, a technically-adept follow might be able to correctly interpret a poorly-led move or substitute their own move instead. Additionally, a follow can maintain the same level of attention and respect when dancing with a beginner lead, even if the lead's improvised choreography is very basic.

Conclusion: Styling Intimacy

From the very beginning, bachata dance technique has consisted of a fusion of techniques from pre-existing dance genres adapted in service of an embodied interpretation of bachata music. In the sixty years since bachata's birth, different dancers situated in different geographic and cultural locations have continued to alter bachata dance technique through processes of innovation, translation, and forgetting. As a comparatively new genre of Latin dance[15], bachata dance is still consolidating and standardizing its techniques.

Having outlined some of the fundamental techniques of bachata dance, I return to Hamera to unpack the ways in which traditional and sensual bachata techniques enable intimate connections between dancers. As a social dance, one of bachata's primary functions is to facilitate and structure relationships between dancers. A longing for connection is embedded within bachata, whether that longing is manifested at a street party held by an impoverished rural Dominican community, a seedy bar full of single,

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[15] US Americans began dancing Argentine tango at the turn of the twentieth century. Argentine tango rose to mainstream popularity in the United State in the 1980s (Shay 2008: 171). Salsa music and dance, drawing on Cuban and Puerto Rican music genres and Latin jazz, emerged in New York City in the 1960s. Many of the musicians who created salsa were first generation Puerto Rican Americans (Hutchinson 2013: 4).

lower-class men in 1970s Santo Domingo, an impromptu intergenerational dance in the living room of a Washington Heights apartment, or a club catering to twenty and thirty-somethings seeking friends and dates.

Tactically framing technique as more or less sexualized enables bachata instructors to cater to different client populations. Within the sensual bachata umbrella category, some instructors choose to emphasize ballet-like arm and leg extensions that are associated with grace and elegance more than raw passion. Other instructors incorporate body waves, hip rolls, chest rolls, and elements of hip hop –techniques that tap into white middle-class US American and European fetishization of the hypersexual Latin dancer or the edgy Black/brown "gangster". Attempting to resist these commercialized and exotified visions of Afro-Latin sexuality, some traditional bachata instructors work to highlight traditional bachata's sensual possibilities. At the same time, traditional bachata instructors may gain US American and European students who feel uncomfortable coming into close sensual contact with others and are drawn to traditional bachata's safely restrained eroticism.

In the global context of Latin dance scene, traditional bachata is perceived as fairly reserved. To non-Spanish speaking, Western dancers, energetic, high-tempo bachata songs do not necessarily feel romantic, especially without the context of the Spanish lyrics. Traditional bachata's more modest body contact and focus on footwork, which is based in individually-performed techniques that are relatively gender neutral, are not inherently embedded in sensual interpersonal connection the way that guided body isolations are. Additionally, traditional bachata is associated with dancers who are

invested in traditional bachata music and Dominican culture, such as Edwin and Dakhóta, Jahaira and Angelica, and BachaDura's Brian and Young. Traditional bachata sits somewhere on the spectrum between cosmopolitan social dance and performance-oriented folkloric dance; while traditional bachata is danced socially within the studio scene, it is frequently intertwined with intercultural education efforts. This educational context may further desexualize traditional bachata.

Traditional bachata's focus on footwork over more erotically-stylized hand and arm gestures and isolations locates intimacy in a heightened, mutual awareness of nuanced changes in the music and each partner's movements. Young, who runs BachaDura and prefers dancing traditional bachata, said:

> There's a lot going on that you can't see. Again, I can say that to any partner dance or any dance, but I think especially with bachata, there's something that only you understand when you're in that moment, that very subtle connection and shift of energy… that's a very small movement, but the satisfaction is very rewarding
> (Brian and Young 2020).

Young's understanding of connection in bachata focuses on the proprioceptive experience of social dance; how the dance feels as opposed to how the dance looks. She also implicitly highlights the training needed to register and respond to the subtle movements and different energies a given partner brings to a dance. Similarly, Jahaira's overview of the different bachata rhythms in In Lak'ech's back-to-basics workshop and Edwin and Dakhóta's lessons on dancing on 2, 3, and 4 mention some of the ways in which dancers respond to music through footwork and energetic presence. Intimacy between dance partners also stems from the process of collaboratively interpreting the music, showing off your ability to creatively and intuitively translate music into

movement, and admiring the skill and personality your partner brings to their embodied interpretations of the music.

Sensual bachata is known in the global Latin dance scene as one of the most intimate genres of dance. Sensual bachata is danced to smooth, romantic bachata songs and remixes that incorporate electronic instruments, hip hop, R&B, and US American pop influences. Dancers prefer closed position, and points of connection may include thigh-to-thigh, torso-to-torso, and face-to-face. Movements are flowy, with frequently gendered arm and hand stylings and body isolations. Leads often exercise precise control over follows' movements. While many dancers are drawn to the promise of romantically- and sexually-charged intimacy in sensual bachata, sensual bachata dancers also have a reputation within the Latin dance scene as self-aggrandizing amateurs with bad technique who just want to show off and hook up.

Sensual bachata dance teachers and performers have benefitted from fusing elements of traditional bachata dance with Western dance aesthetics, and by extension, Western conceptions and fantasies of sexuality and intimacy. The smoothness of sensual bachata aligns with (and might even be indirectly inspired by) the relaxed body of contemporary dance[16]. The flowy quality of sensual dancing may belie the follow's technical work, as well as the ongoing and potentially conflicting emotional, social, and physical negotiations involved in one partner ceding large amounts of bodily control to

[16] Albright writes that release techniques in contemporary dance view tension as counterproductive in comparison to the body's "natural" relaxed state (Albright 2017: 3).

the other. Fluidity allows unequal heteronormative partnerships, which are explicitly the norm in sensual bachata, to appear natural and effortless.

Additionally, sensual bachata's heightened cisheteronormative gender styling and substantial power differential between lead and follow may allow global North dancers to temporarily indulge in the fraught pleasures of hypersexual traditional gender roles which they associate with brown bodies and Latin American cultures. Sensual bachata's ties to the circulation of online bachata videos also suggests that intimacy, or at least sensuality, is achieved by attempting to embody an idealized image of heterosexual romance through virtuosic performances that are raced and classed.

This is not to say that sensual bachata does not utilize proprioceptive connection or that traditional bachata dancers are indifferent to impressing spectators and cultivating sexual tension. However, traditional bachata as danced in the studio scene is less closely linked to internationally famous, professional dancers who market their dance skills by developing something akin to a lifestyle brand. Daniel and Desiree, Cornel and Rithika, Mayra and Maycheal, and Ofir and Ofri are real-life couples who are perceived as attractive within Western conceptions of cisheteronormative beauty. Professional bachata couples promote themselves by posting sexy, stylized photoshoots alongside photos of idyllic family life with their young children. The most successful performers and instructors travel internationally, allowing them to film casual dance clips on beautiful resort beaches and against scenic, recognizable city backdrops.

It is easy to see how sensual bachata's fetishization of images of exotified and privileged sensuality combined with a greater power disparity between lead and follow

can invite nonconsensual sexual objectification. Still, power exchange in and of itself is not necessarily harmful if undertaken with care and intentionality. From a queer perspective, sensual bachata offers an under-recognized opportunity to grapple with problematic identifications and desires. As Juana María Rodríguez discusses in her chapter on mambo in *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*, the potential for erotic play always exists across differences of race, class, ethnicity, age, gender, and ability (Rodríguez 2014: 131). All couplings, straight or queer, must navigate differences in power across multiple axes of identity and structural oppression. Many find pleasure in sliding ambiguously between conforming to and subverting stereotypes of gender, sexuality, and race.

Of course, in my experience, most sensual bachata dancers (and most social dancers generally, for that matter) do not consciously unpack their social positionality on the dance floor. But dancing sensual bachata has given me a framework to work through my relationship to gender, race, and sexuality with my body. I am an Asian femme, which adds a dimension of Asian submissiveness on top of sensual bachata's sexily malleable, ethnically-ambiguous ideal of femininity, an ideal which I cannot achieve because I lack the technical expertise and body type. When I dance with Ben, my white male partner who has more dance experience than I do, I struggle with feeling inadequately attractive, guilty for enjoying an often white-washed and Westernized dance style, and complicit in the hypersexualization of Latina/Latino people and my own disempowerment. However, Ben can also help me move in a way that I can't on my own. He can make me feel safe and attended to, and free to enjoy the physical

experience of the dance without needing to plan my next steps or keep track of our location in space. When I am able to accept Ben's leading as an act of service intended to facilitate my pleasure, I become the powerful one.

This subversive reframing does not cancel out the frequently extractive professionalization and commodification of bachata within the sensual bachata scene. The erasure of traditional bachata in the global circulation of bachata has real economic and psychological ramifications for Dominicans and the Dominican diaspora. Even when applying a queer performance lens to sensual bachata, I am uncomfortable with sensual bachata's potentially inherent complicity in the sexual fetishization of brown bodies. If I exaggerate my hip movements because I am applying a technique developed by Spanish dancers who interpreted traditional bachata gestures, am I not still on some subconscious level attempting to transform my body into the body of an exotic Latina woman? That being said, sensual bachata's exaggerated power dynamics and visual sensibilities lend themselves to asking questions that address the complexities of interpersonal power exchange through lived, embodied experience. How can I accommodate, respect, and share space with someone who has less power than me? How can I advocate for my comfort and pleasure within a creative exchange in which I am a key collaborator but not the primary decision maker?

CHAPTER III

BACHATA DANCING IN NEW YORK CITY

This chapter focuses on bachata dance communities in New York City. I begin by giving a historical overview of Dominican politics in the 20th century and Dominican migration to New York City. I describe the importance of bachata music within the Dominican diaspora. I also examine how salsa-focused Latin dance schools founded during the 1990s and early 2000s mambo craze eventually expanded their class offerings to include bachata dance in the mid-2000s. The commercialization of Latin dance in the 2000s and 2010s led to the establishment of multiple bachata schools and socials that seek to create different kinds of dance communities. I highlight three dance communities in particular: Piel Canela, a Latin dance school that offers classes in a wide range of Latin dance genres; Bachata Rosa, a weekly sensual bachata social; and BachaDura, a traditional bachata social that holds events once a month. I take each as a case study in how bachata communities attempt to position themselves as intercultural, inclusive communities while also navigating market pressures and intercommunity competition.

To reconstruct the development of the New York City Latin dance scene and the bachata scene in particular, I conducted interviews with dancers who founded schools or socials. I also relied on interviews with dancers who participated in the New York City Latin dance scene in the 1990s. These interviews were conducted by Diamond Rivera, a Latino New Yorker who hosts a podcast on Latin dance entitled *Live Discussions with Diamond*. For information on Piel Canela, Bachata Rosa, and BachaDura, I drew upon

interviews with their organizers and attendees as well as my personal experiences. Lastly, I turned to business websites, Facebook, and Instagram for records on dance venues and salsa/bachata dance companies. The evolution of the New York City Latin dance scene and bachata scene from the 1990s to the present coincides with the growth of widespread internet access and social media. Facebook event pages provide information about venues, special performers, and ticket prices. Former organizers who have left New York can be traced through tags on old Happy Birthday posts or thank you posts commemorating a social's anniversary. Instagram is a particularly useful archive of promotional fliers and short videos of old events.

Bachata and the Dominican Diaspora in New York City

Bachata's origins and global spread are inextricably entangled with Dominican national politics and international migration. General Rafael Leónidas Trujillo, backed by the Dominican military, installed himself as president of the Dominican Republic in 1930. Trujillo oversaw a corrupt and violent regime from 1930 until his assassination in 1961 (Torres-Saillant 1998: 7). He was known for imprisoning and executing those he perceived as the opposition. Many Dominicans who immigrated to the United States before the 1960s were political refugees. Living in exile in New York City, some Dominicans organized anti-Trujillo campaigns, most notably the Partido Revolucionario Dominicano (PRD). Trujillo continued to persecute resistance members living outside of the Dominican Republic. From the 1930s through the 1950s, the Trujillo government arranged for a series of political murders in New York City (Torres-Saillant 1998: 110).

During the four years following Trujillo's death, civil war broke out as left-wing and right-wing forces struggled for power. Trujillo's puppet president, Joaquín Balaguer, took over as president in 1961, offering superficial support for a Dominican democracy (Torres-Saillant 1998: 7). After being forced to flee the Dominican Republic in 1962, Balaguer regained the Dominican presidency in 1966 with the support of the US government, Trujillo's military elite, the Dominican oligarchy, and the Catholic Church (Torres-Saillant: 1998: 7). Balaguer remained a powerful political force through the 1990s. He welcomed foreign investments and passed economic policies that favored the development of industry and commerce (Torres-Saillant 1998: 38). He also incarcerated and assassinated political dissidents (Torres-Saillant 1998: 39).

Starting in the early 1960s, a wave of Dominicans immigrated to Europe, the United States, and other countries in the Caribbean (Torres-Saillant 1998: 7). In an attempt to bolster agricultural and industrial production, Trujillo had imposed extremely restrictive emigration policies designed to maintain a robust population of workers. (Torres-Saillant 1998: 33-37). Reversing course, Balaguer actively encouraged emigration, with the tacit cooperation of the US government, in order to reduce surplus labor and resistance to his government (Torres-Saillant 1998: 40). From 1962 -1972, an average of 11,445 Dominicans annually immigrated to the United States. In the 1970s, the average increased to more than 16,000; by the 1980s, it was over 30,000 (Torres-Saillant 1998: 34). Dominican immigrants were heterogenous: middle class, working class, urban, rural, educated, and formally uneducated (Torres-Saillant 1998: 36). More than 65% of Dominicans who became permanent residents in the United States moved to

New York state, the vast majority of whom settled in New York City (Torres-Saillant 1998: 61-63). Many, though not all, Dominican immigrants found employment as "unskilled" workers due to their limited English fluency and lack of educational credentials (Torres-Saillant 1998: 72).

The Dominican diaspora brought bachata to New York City. Dominican immigrants embraced bachata as "a symbol of Dominican authenticity" that fed an emotional connection to their Dominican heritage (Pacini Hernandez 2014: 1029). The distinctive guitar of bachata appealed to Dominican immigrants as a sonic marker of Dominican identity that was distinct from other Latin music genres and the New York City Latino populations they represented (Pacini Hernandez 14: 1033-1034). Dominican youth growing up in New York City listened to bachata as well as hip hop and R&B, two genres that were popular with their Black peers. Bilingual, hip hop- and R&B-infused, urban bachata was created by this bicultural generation of Dominican Americans in the 1990s and early 2000s (Pacini Hernandez 2014: 1029).

To my knowledge, little research has been done on the circulation of bachata dancing in Dominican immigrant communities New York City during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Several Latin dancers who founded dance schools belong to the generation of Dominican Americans who came of age during the 1980s and 1990s. While many Dominican Americans and other Latinos/Latinas who fall roughly within this age bracket grew up listening to bachata, salsa, merengue, and cumbia, those I interviewed did not grow up regularly dancing Latin dances.

Joe Burgos, who founded Piel Canela Dance School in New York City, told me that there were no Latin social dancing parties in Astoria, Queens during his childhood. When Joe was 11 or 12, his parents decided to move back to the Dominican Republic to take advantage of the Dominican's more rigorous primary education system (Joe 2020a). Joe recalled going to a middle school dance in the Dominican Republic and realizing that dancing bachata and other Latin dances was integral to socializing with girls. He said, "…the first thing I did when I got home is I told my mom, 'Okay, you've got to teach me the basics at least so I know how to integrate myself into society'" (Joe 2020a). He continued to learn salsa, bachata, and merengue in the Dominican Republic without any formal class training.

Jahaira, one of the co-founders of In Lak'ech Dance Academy, grew up in Washington Heights, Manhattan during the 1980s and 1990s. She was part of the techno rave scene in the early 1990s, which is how she realized that she felt comfortable moving as a dancer (Jahaira 2021). Jahaira took her first bachata class in Oakland, California when she was almost forty. Oakland generally lacks a large Dominican presence, so Jahaira makes an effort to go to anything in Oakland related to Dominican culture (Jahaira 2021).

Edwin of Areíto Arts was born in the Dominican Republic. During his interview on *Live Discussions with Diamond*, Edwin said that his mother listened to merengue when she was pregnant with him. She told him that when he was a baby, he would try to dance whenever he heard merengue, holding on to whatever was around him for support (Edwin 2020b). Before Edwin turned five, his mom moved to Washington Heights

where he continued to absorb Latin music through his environment. As an adolescent in the 1990s, Edwin became a B-boy. Through breakdancing, Edwin joined a community of Black people, including Nigerians, Ethiopians, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and African Americans (Edwin 2020b). Edwin incorporated salsa moves into his breakdancing, but he did not participate in the Latin dance scene until 2003 or 2004 when he began taking salsa lessons from Joe at City College (Edwin 2020b).

These conversations with Joe, Jahaira, and Edwin, indicate that bachata dancing and bachata music did not necessarily circulate through the Dominican Diaspora together. Dominican parents and grandparents casually passed down dance knowledge to their American-born (or American-raised) children; Joe mentioned learning dance basics from his mother. However, Joe's proactive interest in learning Latin dance from a young age specifically stemmed from exposure to social dance culture in the Dominican Republic. Jahaira and Edwin's anecdotes suggest that in 1980s and 1990s, Dominican American youth who liked dancing gravitated towards dances that emerged from genres of music with Black roots, like techno and hip hop. Other Latino teenagers also preferred hip hop. Ismael Otero, a Puerto Rican/Honduran salsa dancer and founder of the Caribbean Soul Dance Company, said that he thought "salsa was for old people" who kept listening to the same songs year after year (Ismael 2020). As a B-boy in the 1980s and 1990s, Ismael preferred dancing to new hip hop songs that would come out every few months (Ismael 2020). I suspect that many Dominican Americans, especially those who did not return to the Dominican Republic for an extended period of time during their adolescence, associated bachata dance with spontaneous neighborhood gatherings,

block parties, and intergenerational family bonding experiences. They likely did not think of bachata dance as a serious dance hobby.

Many Dominican Americans born or raised in New York City discovered bachata later on as young(ish) adults seeking to cultivate a sense of Dominican or Latino/a identity. Edwin started dancing salsa as a college student, which eventually led him to bachata. Jahaira began dancing bachata more than a decade after moving to the Bay Area for grad school and making a new home for herself far from the Dominican immigrant communities of New York City. Max, a half-Dominican, half-Peruvian Latin dancer who grew up in the South Bronx, began dancing salsa, bachata, rumba, and samba when he joined his university's Latin American Student Association (Max 2020). As educational institutions that offer recreational dance classes and student cultural organizations, universities create opportunities for Dominican American students to access Latin dance classes and to connect with other Latino/Latina students. Bachata dance and other Latin dances serve as embodied practices that enable Dominican Americans to explore and share Dominican American, Dominican, and Latina/Latino cultural identities.

Salsa, Bachata, and the Latin Dance School Industrial Complex

The circulation of bachata dance in New York City also depended upon the Latin dance school infrastructure that was built up by salsa dancers in New York City and New Jersey during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Dance schools serve as multifaceted organizational hubs for Latin dancing, and they often have links to other institutions: nightclubs, hotel-based dance festivals, universities, and lately, big tech corporations,

like Google, that provide recreational classes for their employees. Instructors, performers, and students flow through an interconnected web mediated by dance schools. Instructors guest teach classes at the beginning of Latin nights at the club and enjoy participating in nightlife as social dancers. Dancers who want to get better at social dancing turn to dance schools for classes and might eventually become instructors themselves. Schools also host social dancing events, often in dance studios, for students who feel too shy to try out their newly-minted moves in the club and for dancers who prefer the alcohol-free atmosphere of the studio setting. Dance schools provide performance opportunities for dancers with a range of levels of experience: some performance teams are designed to help students improve their skills, while professional performance teams rehearse multiple times per week and are booked for paid performances by dance festivals, sports teams, and universities. Some dance schools even organize their own festivals, bringing instructors and performers from out of town together to share knowledge, celebrate each other's work, and socialize.

Taking social dance classes was initially an unfamiliar concept for Latino/Latina young people in the 1980s and 1990s. According to Ismael, there were no B-boy classes. Dancers picked up breakdancing by watching others and practicing at home. Ismael said that B-boys believed that dancing came naturally to some people, and "you either had it or you didn't" (Ismael 2020). For a long time, Ismael resisted his mother's attempts to goad him into going to a family friend's Manhattan dance studio because he thought his friends would make fun of him. He finally started salsa classes when a pretty girl asked

him to accompany her. After a while, the girl stopped coming to class, but Ismael kept going. He was hooked. (Ismael 2020).

For some, dance schools offered financial and travel incentives as well as the kind of guidance provided by youth development programs. Diamond Rivera, a Latino Bronx native, started dancing salsa at the age of five in 1996. He attended classes at Starlite Dance Academy in the Bronx, a dance school focused on teaching young people salsa[17]. He told me that Starlite "…was my second home. I grew, matured, I learned lessons. I was able to travel… I was seeing kids, inner city kids, performing, doing something positive" (Diamond 2020). Diamond danced with Starlite Dance Academy until he was sixteen or seventeen. As a teenager, Diamond joined the Heartbreak Boyz, Starlite's all-male, youth salsa performance team which performed in cities throughout the United States and toured in Japan. Discussing the Heartbreak Boyz with salsa dancer Mario B Gonzalez, Diamond said that the Heartbreak Boyz were like a boyband, training three times a week for eight hours a day (Mario B 2020). Diamond also emphasized how Starlite's founder, David Melendez, consciously reached out to students who were getting into fights and struggling at school, offering them financial help and facilitating mentorship relationships between older and younger dancers (Mario B 2020).

Ismael, Diamond, and Mario B were part of the 1990s mambo resurgence in New York City. Mambo, also known as "salsa on 2", is a style of salsa dancing that was particularly popular during New York City's peak salsa music production in the 1950s

[17] In 2015, Starlite Dance Academy closed their Bronx location and re-opened in Puerto Rico (Camacho 2015).

(Navarro 2000). In the late 1990s and early 2000s, mambo dancers gained a reputation for being flashy and studio-trained. Mambo dancers preferred mambo because they found it to be more challenging than dancing "on 1" or felt that it was a more authentic interpretation of salsa's African beats (Navarro 2000). Mambo dancers would go to Nell's, a nightclub located at the intersection of West 14th St and 8th Ave, for Wednesday night salsa, or Club Paradise in New Jersey (Mario B 2020). Steve Shaw created a website called "salsanewyork.com" in 1998, which listed mambo events, instructors, and performers (Shaw 1998).

This new generation of salsa dancers established some of the most respected mambo schools with the best performance teams in the tristate area. Tomas Guerrero founded a dance school at a studio in Harlem in 1995. The company was called Santo Rico, so named because half of the dancers were Puerto Rican and half were Dominicans from Santo Domingo (Santo Rico 2021). In Jersey City, Ismael opened the Caribbean Soul Dance Company in 1997, and Mario B founded the Salsa Fever on 2 Dance Academy in 2000 (Ismael 2020, Mario B 2020). Santo Rico has since set up shop in Orlando Florida, but Caribbean Soul and Salsa Fever on 2 are still in operation in New Jersey. Additionally, in 2001, David Melendez of Starlite Dance Academy organized the first New York International Salsa Congress, which was inspired by the 1998 Puerto Rico Salsa Congress. For the first two years, the congress was held in the Catskills before it was relocated to Midtown Manhattan (David 2003). Now in its 20th year, the New York International Salsa Congress has sponsorships from NYU, Chipotle, and T Mobile (New York International Salsa 2021).

Bachata began to creep into salsa schools in the mid 2000s. In an interview with Diamond on *Live Discussions with Diamond*, Edwin said, "Every bachata instructor back then was teaching salsa, and bachata was kind of like 'Let's see if it works out'" (Edwin 2020b). According to Edwin, the eight-count basic step, developed by Eddie Torres for teaching salsa, was copied by the bachata community. Edwin credits George and Marisol Ramirez for introducing bachata in their Brooklyn salsa school, Latin Fever On2, and Steve Shaw for including bachata listings on the SalsaNewYork website. Caribbean Soul Dance Company also taught bachata, as well as mambo, merengue and hip hop (Caribbean Soul 2013). Not everyone in the salsa scene was quick to embrace bachata. Four big salsa studio owners turned Edwin down when he asked them if he could start a bachata class, which Edwin believes was due to the historical stigmatization of bachata music (Edwin 2020b). Still, salsa had an oversized impact on who danced bachata and how it was danced; Brian told me that dancers derogatively referred to New York bachata dancing in the early days as "salchata" (Brian and Young 2020).

Salsa party promoters also played a substantial role in building the New York City bachata social dance scene. Alejandro Bouza runs LatinParty.com, a company that organizes multiple salsa, bachata, kizomba, and mixed Latin dance parties in New York City and Washington, DC (LatinParty.com 2021). LatinParty.com hosts Bachatateame Mamá!, a Friday night bachata social at a nightclub near Union Square called Club Caché. BACHATuesdays, which is held at Kaña Tapas Bar in SoHo, is also organized by LatinParty.com. Diamond told me that DJ Alex "El Maestro" introduced bachata dance rooms into his weekly Salsamania Saturdays party in the early days of the New

York City bachata scene (Diamond 2020). Salsamania, which is held at the Arthur Murray Manhattan dance studio in Koreatown, now advertises itself as a salsa and bachata event (Salsamania Saturdays 2021). These parties brought together dancers who went on to create new bachata schools and socials in the mid 2010s, at which point the split between traditional and sensual dancers began to emerge.

Piel Canela Dance Academy

When I started dancing bachata with Ben, he recommended that I check out classes at Piel Canela. Ben had taken multiple classes per week at Piel Canela when he first moved to New York City, and he told me that most Latin dancers he met while social dancing in New York City had gotten their feet wet at Piel Canela. He also tipped me off to Piel Canela's annual offering of a month-long free trial membership with unlimited classes. The unlimited membership was very popular, so Piel Canela's classes tended to be big. In the most popular classes, there could be up eighty students with a single instructor. During my 1-month free trial in the summer of 2018, I took a mixture of bachata, salsa on 2, Cuban rueda, zouk, reggaeton, and dips and lifts classes.

Joe Burgos founded Piel Canela in 2001. The school changed locations several times over the last two decades, but its last location was Pearl Studios NYC in Midtown, a few avenues away from the Empire State Building. Joe was drawn to the Manhattan studio because of its central location. He wanted to catch people just after they left work; in Midtown, people can walk straight from the office to Piel Canela and get a few hours of dancing in before heading home (Joe 2020a). Pearl Studios also contains multiple

floors of different-sized dance studios, which gave Joe the room to program multiple classes simultaneously.

Figure 4: Screenshot of Google Maps Street View of Pearl Studios NYC in Midtown Manhattan

Before Piel Canela, Joe was a stockbroker. He worked for ten years on Wall Street and went dancing to let off steam at the end of his 90-hour work weeks. On Sundays, Joe would watch football with his friends in New Jersey. During halftime, he taught a 20-minute salsa or merengue class as a treat for his friends' girlfriends. Over time, more and more people started coming to his unofficial dance class; at one point, Joe claims that he had 170 people in his house (Joe 2020a).

When 9/11 happened, Joe decided to leave finance and turn his dance hobby into a career. At first, he began teaching at Ballet Hispánico. Ballet Hispánico is a Latinx

dance school that primarily teaches ballet, modern, and flamenco to young people. Joe started a salsa class to keep parents occupied while they waited for their children to finish their dance classes. Joe's class was a success, and after a while, Joe rented studio space at Manhattan Motion and began teaching multiple classes per week.

Joe told me that Piel Canela's curriculum helped the school stand out from other Latin dance schools that were popping up around the turn of the millennium. He developed salsa classes with a progression of levels that required students to test out of a level before advancing to the next one. He also tried to break down dance technique over a series of classes so that even slow learners could be successful.

Eventually, he expanded his class offerings from salsa to bachata, merengue, and cha cha. Joe claims that Piel Canela was one of the first Latin dance schools to bring bachata into a classroom setting in New York City. He believes that introducing bachata helped Piel Canela grow its client base, "Because if you wanted to learn how to do this new kind of dance that was slowly emerging, the place to go was Piel Canela" (Joe 2020a). He also hired instructors to teach dance genres in which he lacked expertise, like samba, tango, and hip hop, handling the marketing and curriculum development for instructors who lacked business management skills. Soon, Joe's salsa school grew into a multi-genre Latin dance community. According to Joe, Piel Canela offered 174 classes per week up until it temporarily closed due to COVID (Joe 2020a). The unlimited class membership, which cost $185/month in 2019, enabled students to take multiple classes on multiple days per week at a relatively affordable cost.

Joe views Piel Canela as a multicultural dance community that strives to integrate students who are less familiar with Latin music and dance. He believes that Piel Canela's Manhattan location has attracted students with a wider range of ethnic backgrounds than schools in Washington Heights or Queens. He spoke proudly of how Piel Canela's professional dance team included an Indian and a Japanese salsa dancer when most other dance companies are entirely Latino. He told me an anecdote about Japanese students who felt uncomfortable making eye contact while they were dancing because eye contact is often considered impolite in Japanese culture. Joe said to the students, "So maybe outside of the dance floor, you continue being, you know, whatever upbringing you've had. But on the dance floor, you have to follow Latin dance rules…" (Joe 2020a). In both of Joe's examples, the presence of Asian students and particularly Japanese-born foreign students, denotes Piel Canela's multicultural inclusivity. Piel Canela also began offering Spanish classes when Joe realized that students who could not understand the music's lyrics often struggled to connect with the music in their dancing. Piel Canela teaches strictly traditional bachata. When I asked Joe about how he manages the expectations of students who are more familiar with sensual bachata, he said that Piel Canela has established a strong brand which effectively assimilates students.

Ultimately, Joe wants Piel Canela to keep growing. Before the pandemic, he hoped to find corporate sponsors to fund Piel Canela's own studio and expand into other boroughs and states. He cited Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater as an aspirational model:

> Alvin Ailey, twenty, thirty years ago they were a little rinky-dink studio on the Upper West Side. It's different now. They own their own building and their companies internationally were known and they're getting sponsors and donors (Joe 2020a).

Alvin Ailey was a Black modern dancer who formed a dance company with a group of other Black dancers in 1958 (Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater 2021). The Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation states that their "performing arts community plays a crucial role, using the beauty and humanity of African-American heritage and other cultures to unite people of all races, ages and backgrounds" (Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater 2021). Joe dreams of creating a similarly inclusive community centered around Latin American dance and culture. He also wants the Western dance world to take salsa, bachata, and other Latin dances as seriously as modern dance and ballet. It bothers him that college students can earn credits for ballet classes but not the salsa classes he teaches at universities (Joe 2020a). Building Piel Canela into an internationally-recognized franchise is part of this greater project of championing Latin dance as a high art with Latin American roots that can be enjoyed by everyone.

Bachata Rosa

I had my first experience of dancing bachata in New York at Bachata Rosa. Ben, my partner, brought me there for our third date in late February 2018. Over the course of our relationship, we went dancing semi-regularly at Bachata Rosa, Las Chicas Locas, Sensual Movement, and Solas. But Rosa was our standard. It was Ben's favorite dance event, and it was the primary place where I learned to dance sensual bachata. Going to Rosa became part of our weekly routine. On Fridays, we'd debate in the early evening whether we were too tired to dance or too stressed from work and school not to dance. If

we decided to go, getting there was usually a rushed affair. I would change into a cropped top and high-waisted pants and wait for Ben to shower, shave, slick back his hair, and assemble his dance bag (water bottle, clean hand towel, dance shoes). We would take the subway into Midtown and sprint from the 23rd Street metro station to the studio, arriving breathless at the check-in table at 9:58pm. I would take the beginner dance lesson (later the intermediate lessons and a few advanced ones), while Ben would take the advanced class or chat with his dance friends in the waiting room or at the edge of the dance floor. Sometimes we'd arrive at 10pm, pay the $10 early entry fee, and then skip class to get $2.50 margherita pizza slices at the pizzeria three blocks away. During the dance social, we'd check in with each other every so often, but we mostly dancing separately. We each had our favorite dancers. We would stay until 12:30am or 1am on a bad night, 2am or 3am on a great night.

Bachata Rosa is a staple in New York City's sensual bachata scene, known by dancers for consistently hosting Friday night socials (Henry 2020). Founded in November 2016 by Dore Kalmar and David Pilcha, Bachata Rosa is one of the two earliest New York City sensual bachata communities. Dancers of multiple ethnic and racial backgrounds who are typically between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five, along with a handful of men in their fifties, turn out for Bachata Rosa's socials and pre-social classes. Group dance lessons begin at around 10pm, and the floor opens to social dancing at 11pm. Tickets, which include entry to the classes and the social, are $10 if you arrive by 10pm, $15 if you arrive later. On busy nights, Bachata Rosa sees 200 dancers and doesn't close its doors until 3am.

Regular Bachata Rosa events take place at a dance studio in Midtown Manhattan about a block from Madison Square Park. The area is full of bars and restaurants; the studio, Stepping Out Studios, shares a block with an elegant jazz lounge, a minimalist Korean restaurant, and a Southern-style roadhouse.

Figure 5: Screenshot of Google Maps Street View of Stepping Out Studios in Midtown Manhattan

Stepping Out offers dance lessons, space rentals, and performers for hire, and the studio has deep roots in ballroom dancing. It was founded in 1985 by dancer, instructor, and choreographer Diane Lachtrupp and teacher Stephen Stroud. They were assisted by US Standard (now referred to as Ballroom) champion Bill Davies who passed on his mailing list to them when he closed his own studio (Stepping Out Studios 2021a). George Giao, a Chinese-born businessman who attended ballroom classes at Stepping

Out Studios, took over as President and CEO when Lachtrupp decided to sell the studio in 2005 (Stepping Out Studios 2021a). The studio's star-studded client list includes Beyonce, Chelsea Clinton, Iced T, and Meryl Streep (Stepping Out Studios 2021a); the lounge area is decorated with autographed photos.

Still, for all of its glamorous connections, Stepping Out Studios feels like a dance school where anyone could take lessons or rent space. The studio hosts about a dozen different dance socials each month, including tango, salsa, zouk, and ballroom. Before I started dancing at Bachata Rosa, I attended a Friday night blues dance held in one of Stepping Out's smaller studios. And for those outside the professional dance world, Stepping Out, with its hard wood floors, mirrored walls, and lightly padded chairs placed at the edges of the dance floor, looks much like any other New York City dance studio.

To get to Stepping Out Studios, you take an elevator to the 9th floor of a building that houses a mix of commercial and residential units. The elevator opens onto a reception desk, with a lounge area to the left and the Grand Ballroom directly behind it. Bachata Rosa sets up a table in front of the door to their rented studio that is staffed by one or two people taking money and handing out wristbands. Dancers typically stash their jackets in a coat room located within view of the check-in table; unlike many other dance spaces, Bachata Rosa does not charge a coat or bag fee. The coat room is not very secure, but everyone is relatively trusting.

According to Dore, his co-founder David talked to George Giao to arrange for Bachata Rosa to rent space at Stepping Out (Dore 2020a). Stepping Out Studio's website lists tiered rental fees for studios based on the rental time. Bachata Rosa's late Friday

night time slot falls in the "prime time" tier. The prime time fee for Bachata Rosa's space is listed on the website as $148 per hour (Stepping Out Studios 2021b), though it is likely that Bachata Rosa pays a discounted fee as a regularly-scheduled Friday night event. Bachata Rosa rents a studio that is 22' by 75' which can be separated into two rooms with a collapsible partition. One of the long sides of the studio is lined with mirrors, while the other is lined with windows looking out onto the street. The studio is lit with two decorative, beaded chandeliers and a fluorescent lighting strip that runs the length of both studios. In summer, the organizers open the windows and turn on two giant fans in an attempt to cool the sweaty crowds. For special events that are likely to be busy and last until the early morning, male dancers sometimes bring an extra shirt to change into when their first shirt soaks through with sweat. Ben tucks a small hand towel into his back pocket whenever he goes dancing, while I usually resign myself to accumulating dampness.

Bachata Rosa also occasionally occupies other spaces for special events: for example, on Halloween in 2018, Bachata Rosa ran a Brazilian zouk room in one of the smaller studios. The main Bachata Rosa studio is directly connected to the Grand Ballroom, a windowless 44' by 55' space that is outfitted with the same mirrors and chandeliers. On the first and third Friday of every month, Friday Night Fever, a Mixed Ballroom/Latin Social, occupies the Grand Ballroom from 8:30pm to 11:30pm. Bachata Rosa's pre-social classes usually run until around 11:15pm with the social starting around 11:30pm, so on busy nights, the bachata dancers take over the Grand Ballroom as the ballroom dancers begin to dwindle. The ballroom dancers sometimes have a table

with a water cooler and a cheese and fruit spread which is supposed to be exclusively for their event, but the table is located near the bathrooms, so in practice, anyone can surreptitiously grab a snack as they pass by. It is also relatively easy for dancers from one social to sneak into another social; most experienced dancers can dance a variety of styles, and I have caught a few Bachata Rosa dancers dropping into the Grand Ballroom for a salsa or two.

The atmosphere of a dance studio suits Bachata Rosa's air of casual comfortability and its investment in prioritizing dance skill. In his interview with Diamond Rivera on the October 23, 2020 podcast episode of *Live Discussions with Diamond*, Dore contrasts Bachata Rosa with the glitz of salsa dancing in New York:

> In the salsa scene, all the good dancers got to the fancy events, like if you go to Taj or you go to Alex Gonzales' events at DanceSport. But it's like, everyone's dressing fancy and you have booze and this and that. And Rosa was like, you're not allowed to have drinks. People were drinking, but we didn't have a bar. I was wearing like a black shirt and jeans, and it wasn't like, you know, prestige… (Dore 2020b).

Socials held in studio spaces blur the lines between dance school and nightlife. Bachata Rosa is particularly invested in dance education. Dore told me in an interview that Bachata Rosa was one of the first dance socials in New York City to offer three pre-social classes at beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels (Dore 2020a). The pre-social classes are included in the price of admission to the social and the pricing scheme encourages dancers to take the classes; attending a Bachata Rosa event is less expensive if you arrive in time to take the 10pm classes. Additionally, the casual dress code of Bachata Rosa allows newcomers to blend in more comfortably without needing to invest in a dance-specific wardrobe. Ben likes to dress up in a brightly colored button-down,

but most men wear t-shirts and jeans. Women generally wear jeans or leggings with form-fitting tops. Maybe one or two wear a unitard. Many serious dancers bring their dance shoes, which look like men's dress shoes or heels with suede bottoms that enable dancers to spin quickly on hardwood floors. However, plenty of dancers wear sneakers and other street shoes.

By 10pm, a few dozen dancers will have gathered in the lounge or around the chairs in the studio. Regulars greet their friends and invite each other for a short pre-social dance. Dore starts the group warm-up soon after. Dancers form a series of rows the length of the studio, facing the mirrored wall, and copy Dore as he runs through a cycle of side turns, grape vines, body rolls, and syncopated steps. Then Dore introduces the teachers for the night. Each class has two teachers, one of whom is on Bachata Rosa's staff and one of whom may be a teacher trainee or an experienced regular who receives a comp ticket for helping out with the lessons. Dore teaches the advanced class unless Bachata Rosa has brought in a guest instructor. The other teachers rotate between levels. Beginner level is for true beginners who have never danced bachata before. It covers posture and frame, the basic bachata step, and the technique for leading and following a simple turn. The intermediate level addresses the more advanced foundational techniques of sensual bachata, focusing on body rolls and isolations as well as partnerwork. The advanced level class is structured around a choreography sequence that combines foundational techniques and adds more intricate turn patterns, dips, and stylings of the arms and hands.

All classes take place in the same long dance studio. The beginner class usually has about five to ten dancers, the intermediate class has about ten to fourteen, and the advanced class may have up to thirty or forty. About halfway through the lessons, the DJ will periodically play songs so that students can practice whatever moves they are learning in class. At the end of the lessons, the lead instructor for the advanced class will showcase the class's choreography sequence with another instructor or a competent advanced student.

Unless an instructor has entered a franchise deal with a celebrity bachata dance artist, instructors are expected to create their own choreographies for classes. During the demonstration, instructors will typically repeat the choreography sequence multiple times, improvising an introduction, transitions, and an emotionally and aesthetically satisfying ending. These improvisational moments allow both dance partners to show off their individual styles and skills; they also provide opportunities to dramatize a flirtatious frisson between the performers. In the Latin studio dance scene, end-of-class demonstrations feed into a circulating online archive of video recordings of dance performances. Students often film the demonstrations on their phones so they can review the choreography at a later date. Typically, instructors allow students to post the videos on social media and encourage students to tag them in their posts. Demonstration videos, even those that are unprofessionally shot, can go viral on YouTube, receiving millions of views.

The demonstration marks a transition from class time to the open social. Dore used to ask advanced students to dance with a beginner student at the start of the social,

but I am uncertain as to how much this happened in practice. Classes allow dancers, especially newcomers, to make connections with people at a similar dance level before the social. This goes some way towards assuaging fears about failing to find dance partners. In classes, everyone dances with everyone, and over time, you begin to recognize the same people.

Bachata Rosa plays primarily sensual bachata music, with some urban and more traditional songs thrown into the mix. I remember dancing to Prince Royce, Romeo Santos, and JR, along with bachata remixes of Sia's "Chandelier" and Camilla Cabello's "Havana". Ben liked "Sábanas Blancas" by Omi Hernández and Leoni Torres, "Cancioncitas de Amor" by Romeo Santos, and Dario Vitulli's bachata remix of "Photograph" by Ed Sheeran; slow, smooth songs that invite close contact between dance partners. Urban and sensual bachata standards were interspersed with the season's bachata hits; in the summer of 2018, "Kiss Me" by Lola Jean was in high demand. Music selection can be contentious within the Bachata Rosa community. Diamond, one of Dore's friends and the creator of the podcast *Live Discussions with Diamond*, was drawn to sensual bachata because he enjoys bachata remixes of English language songs which allow him to hear "a different element of music or a different rendition of it" (Diamond 2020).

On the other hand, Henry a bachata performer and emerging instructor who regularly attended Bachata Rosa events, complained that Dore's music choices became predictable when David went back to Israel and Dore took over DJing entirely. "After four, five months, you heard all the songs on repeat. You knew exactly what song was

coming after what" (Henry 2020). And Morgan, a salsa and traditional bachata dancer who occasionally attends Bachata Rosa, likes the environment of Bachata Rosa but doesn't like the "very modern and sensual" music Dore plays during socials (Morgan 2020). Ben told me that Bachata Rosa has gone through several DJing phases. In 2018, DJ Coronel joined the Bachata Rosa team as Dore's co-DJ, shifting the music in a more urban/traditional direction and away from the flowier songs that Ben prefers.

Bachata Rosa dancers often dance bachata in a sensual style even when the DJ plays Dominican style music. As sensual bachata becomes increasingly mainstream, at least in New York City, more dancers begin their Latin dance explorations with sensual bachata and thus are stronger at dancing sensual bachata than any other Latin dance genre. Pop songs arranged with a bachata track are popular because dancers who did not study or grow up listening to Latin music often connect more easily to songs with English lyrics and familiar melodies. At the end of the night, the DJ might play some salsa or reggaeton. Humoring the DJ, some dancers will take a break from bachata to dance a salsa or a sloppy reggaeton, playfully grinding up against each other; many Bachata Rosa dancers also dance salsa while relatively few dance reggaeton with any proficiency. For the majority of the night, though, bachata rules the dance floor.

I should note that my memories of the music of Bachata Rosa are skewed as a non-Spanish speaker who lacks a deep connection to Latin music. While I would recognize many bachata songs if I heard them in a club, I often do not know song titles and artists. In my experience, even though sensual bachata dancers may be deeply familiar with the texture and arc of every song on the DJ's playlist, they rarely remember

or discuss specific songs by name. Ben kept a YouTube playlist of his favorites, and whenever he heard the first few seconds of a well-loved song, he would scramble to find a partner with whom he had already established a strong and flirtatious dance connection so as not to "waste" the song. Lily, one of Ben's favorite dancers, once left an unsatisfactory partner on the dance floor to find Ben because the song was too good. After several hours of non-stop dancing, Ben would skip a song or two to rest and chat with friends, typically sitting out the more energetic, traditional songs. Though I also savored slow dances the most, upbeat songs have their perks. Faster tempo music is better for showing off quick, flashy moves, and the bounciness of bachata music allows dancers to introduce humor into their styling. Max, who was one of my favorite Bachata Rosa regulars, would improvise little sequences of shoulder shrugs and finger trills in time to musical flourishes that I would attempt to copy, much to the amusement of us both.

Bachata Rosa: History

The music selection, pre-social class structure, and casual and consistent atmosphere of Bachata Rosa all bear the stamp of Dore Kalmar, an Israeli Latin Jazz musician who moved to New York in 2016. I remember seeing Dore and his organizing partner David at events. Dore, tall and broad, dressed in jeans and t-shirts with flat, no-lace shoes, led the pre-class warm-up and taught the advanced class. David and his signature long red beard would step in to assist instructors, joining a class's rotating circle of couples as a lead or follow to ensure that every student could be matched up

with a practice partner. David has since returned to Israel, leaving Dore as the primary organizer.

Dore's Latin dance career began in Israel while he was completing his mandatory military service. On Dore's twentieth birthday, a friend brought him to a salsa club. Dore told me that before he danced regularly, he was "very shy, and very timid," but that first night, he met a girl he liked (Dore 2020a). He returned to the club two weeks later to try to see her again. They never reconnected, but Dore found himself falling in love with Cuban salsa and making new friends. He joined a dance team, took private lessons, and eventually enrolled in a nine-month instructor course for three different salsa styles: Cuban, LA Style, and On 2. During the instructor course, Dore took a sensual bachata workshop with Alon Goshen, who Dore credits for bringing sensual bachata to Israel. Dore said that sensual bachata arrived in Israel years before traditional bachata. By 2013, Dore was regularly dancing sensual bachata at socials and learning from Lital Weiss, another early Israeli bachata performer and instructor. In 2014, Dore finished his military service and enrolled as a student of the Center for Jazz Studies (CJS) at the Israel Conservatory of Music. He began teaching bachata at Havana Club, a major salsa club in Tel Aviv. Havana Club eventually asked him to develop a bachata curriculum and an in-house instructor team.

The New School, which has a partnership with CJS, brought Dore to New York City in 2016. Alon Goshen put Dore in touch with David, another Israeli bachata dancer who was already living in New York. At the time, the only dance school offering sensual bachata classes was Sensual Bachata, a six-month-old company started by

Russian-born broker Anna Sime. Anna began dancing bachata while attending the University of Utah. When she moved to New York, she went dancing at Club Caché every Friday but was ultimately dissatisfied by what she perceived as its traditional bachata leanings. As an organizer, Anna enjoys cultivating talented instructors and creating luxurious dance events with fancy venues, expensive drinks, and well-dressed, beautiful people. Sensual Movement hosted a weekly "Roofchata" event at a rooftop nightclub near Times Square (New York Sensual Movement 2019b). They also have organized bachata cruises on the Hudson River with dancing until 2AM on the open rooftop of the boat (New York Sensual Movement 2019a).

Before collaborating with Dore on Bachata Rosa, David was part of the Sensual Movement bachata community (Dore 2020a). When a teacher pulled out of a Sensual Movement class at La Marina, an upscale restaurant on the Hudson River, Anna asked Dore to substitute. The class was a success, and Dore began teaching for Sensual Movement on Sundays and making connections with other bachata dancers.

Three months after Dore moved to New York, David and Dore decided to host their own bachata events. They named their community Bachata Rosa. Dore claims that this was not intentionally an homage to Juan Luis Guerra's famous album[18]. Rather, he and Dore wanted to create a brand that was casual, easy, and relatable, like McDonalds or Apple (Dore 2020b). Dore said that regulars typically refer to the community as just

[18] Juan Luis Guerra, a conservatory-educated, middle-class Dominican musician, released the album *Bachata rosa* in 1990. *Bachata rosa* presented bachata songs with poetic lyrics and a more polished sound than the bachatas originally created by lower class Dominican musicians. The album served to dissolve some of the longstanding stigmatization of bachata, bringing the genre into mainstream, international popularity (Pacini Hernandez 1995: 15).

"Rosa" and wonders whether he and David should have gone with the shortened version of the name from the beginning (Dore 2020b). Eighty people showed up to the opening night having heard about Bachata Rosa through word of mouth (Dore 2020a). Still, it took time to build a consistent client base. David and Dore brought in guest instructors like David Collins, who received an official bachata sensual instructor certification through a training program developed by Bachata Sensual's founders, Korke and Judith. The certification allows David Collins to market himself as an instructor who teaches authentic Bachata Sensual techniques derived directly from Judith and Korke's pedagogical methodology.

Bachata Rosa: Pedagogy and Community

Dore was motivated to start Bachata Rosa because he believed that his experiences learning and teaching salsa and bachata in Israel could benefit the still-nascent New York City bachata scene. He wanted to copy the Israeli social dance school template with "closed groups, where instructors build a group and just run with them" (Dore 2020a). Rather than students progressing individually through different class levels, the closed groups advanced together. Dore recalled how the closed groups created tight-knit clusters of dancers within the Israeli salsa community. He said, "When I started dancing, I would go five days a week because of fear of missing out. Because I knew that everybody was going dancing… [Dance] became my social group" (Dore 2020a). Dore found that the closed group model did not work for New York City because an insufficient number of dancers committed to coming each week. Ultimately, he adapted the Israeli school template into three open pre-social classes, combining

multi-level, inexpensive dance classes with social dancing. Dore told me that after Bachata Rosa's COVID hiatus, he hopes to introduce a new intermediate level between the current intermediate level (which would become the advanced beginner level) and the advanced level. He is also revising the overall curriculum while indoor dance socials remain unsafe and illegal (Dore 2020a).

Dore's vision of the ideal Bachata Rosa learning environment is informed by his experience of learning to dance in Israel where students would line up after dance lessons to ask instructors questions. Dore told me that he would also come to his instructors before class with questions about the dance techniques he learned in previous lessons. He hypothesizes that the importance of community in Israeli culture motivates people to work hard at learning dances. Dore recalled that when he initially learned salsa in Israel, "It wasn't even me going to learn salsa. I was going there for the people in my close group. I went for them, and the salsa was like the extra thing" (Dore 2020a). Dore told me that he was initially drawn to Cuban salsa because it was danced in a *rueda,* or a circle, with a group of dancers. He compared salsa rueda to an Israeli circle dance in which dancers hold hands and perform a series of steps while walking around in a circle (Dore 2020a). Dore implied that the social drive behind a common form of Israeli dance primed him and other Israeli dancers to find salsa rueda deeply satisfying. Dore's desire to keep up with other students in his salsa group so that he could maintain those social relationships drove his focused and committed approach to learning dance technique.

By contrast, Dore views Bachata Rosa dancers as more individualistic and less invested in striving for technical mastery. He said:

> Why are people not bugging me on the lesson after the lesson? It's baffling to me. I'm doing hard things, it's not like I'm teaching really simple things. I see that they need to ask questions. But that's the thing that I think that this scene needs to work on, just like, being curious, being like, thirsty for knowledge (Dore 2020a).

Dore feels that Bachata Rosa's dancers are less likely to form close bonds with other dancers. He sees this as symptomatic of the New York City transplant experience. College students and recent grads who have moved to New York City for work or a partner make up a substantial portion of Dore's target clientele; twenty- and thirty-somethings with limited financial resources who want to try a new hobby and meet people. Dore said that New York social dancers are less likely to consistently attend classes or practice technique on their own time because they are busy. He empathizes with other "New York Immigrants" who, like him, must juggle school or work with making ends meet in an extremely expensive city.

I would note that most Bachata Rosa dancers are not necessarily non-native New Yorkers: Diamond, Max, and Henry all grew up in New York City. And there are dancers, like Max and Caleb, a Chinese American former Bachata Rosa regular, who crave structured and rigorous dance education. Still, Dore's generalization suggests that he thinks of Bachata Rosa as a community whose identity is rooted in the cosmopolitan, perpetually-hustling, transient environment of New York City. It further suggests that Bachata Rosa's brand of multicultural inclusiveness is not particularly invested in reaching out to established New York Dominican and Latino immigrant communities that dance bachata outside of the studio setting.

Bachata Rosa also invited Sensual Movement dancers as dance floor guests and supported Sensual Movement's events, at least until their relationship soured. When I interviewed Anna, she spoke about scene "drama" and the difficulty of developing and maintaining partnerships with star instructors.

> [Instructors] kinda become known because we promoted them, you know. We put them in different congresses. Then they feel like they don't need you anymore and they kinda leave and start their own thing and they contact all your students and try to steal, basically, take all your people
> (Anna 2020).

Anna's comment expresses a desire to foster brand loyalty among her instructors and the dancers who attend her events. Dore did not provide details on Bachata Rosa's fall out with Sensual Movement, but I imagine that competition for clients, instructors, and the best weekly social times inevitably produced tensions. In describing Bachata Rosa's particular niche in the sensual bachata community, Dore said:

> …it wasn't fancy, but that's where all the good dancers were going. And I don't know why that happened, but I do think that it's because we didn't care. We didn't care about the fancy; we didn't care about the glamor. We didn't put lights all over. I was putting a playlist [together] at the beginning. The idea was that we were coming for the dance. And I'm sure that most of the good dancers, that's what they were looking for. They were looking for a place where they could shed all of the glamor, shed all of the pressure of dressing nice and looking fabulous, and just relax
> (Dore Kalmar 2020b).

Both Anna and Dore claim that their events attract the best sensual bachata dancers in New York City. The intentionally informal, homey aesthetic of Bachata Rosa distinguishes Bachata Rosa from both the more glamorous salsa scene and Sensual Movement's luxury brand. Sensual Movement's events seek to match the grandeur of New York City nightlife at its finest, catering to young professionals with enough

disposable income to shell out extra cash for prime venues. By sticking to the dance studio, Bachata Rosa ensures that they always have a Friday-night venue and keeps entry fees friendly for university student budgets. The studio location also gives Bachata Rosa enough space to hold three simultaneous pre-social lessons, which aligns with Bachata Rosa's emphasis on teaching sensual bachata technique. Dore markets Bachata Rosa as the place to go for sensual bachata dancers who don't need bells and whistles to have a good dance.

Bachata Rosa's curriculum does not include lessons on Dominican culture and the evolution of bachata dance, but Dore expressed two reasons he believes that dancers should learn more about bachata's history. "You gotta… just understand why [bachata] is so political. And why people might be upset," he told me (Dore 2020a). Dore is aware of conversations about cultural appropriation that have arisen in multiple social dance communities. Referencing Urban Kiz, a fusion partner dance created by European dancers who were inspired by Kizomba[19], Dore acknowledges that some people might be upset that sensual bachata dancers call their dance bachata despite its departures from the style and forms of traditional bachata dance. But he also seems to reject the

[19] In the 1950s and 1960s, Angolans would hold "kizombadas", backyard parties with dancing that were similar to the original Dominican bachata street parties. The music and dance enjoyed at kizombadas consolidated in the 1980s into a genre known as Kizomba (Thomaz 2020: 60). During this time period, many Angolans immigrated to Portugal due to the Angolan Civil War (Thomaz 2020: 61). In Europe, Kizomba mixed with R&B, rap, hip hop, electronic dance, and zouk, which resulted in the birth of a new dance genre called Urban Kiz (Thomaz 2020: 61). Like bachata, Kizomba has been marketed within Europe as exotic and sexy (Thomaz 2020: 61). Dore told me that dancers created the term "Urban Kiz" to acknowledge the significant differences between the partner fusion dance form and traditional kizomba (Dore 2020a).

possibility that one could arrive at a static definition of bachata by breaking bachata down into its essential components. He compares bachata to jazz:

> What is jazz music? Can you describe what jazz music is? No. Is it swing? Is it the chord changes? Is it… it's a vibe. It's a story. It's so much more than just like, you know, the instrumentation. There's so much more to what bachata is. Now bachata today is more like urban bachata or sensual bachata (Dore 2020a).

For Dore, sensual bachata is part of the natural evolution of bachata music, which ties into the second reason Dore believes dancers should learn about bachata's history and cultural context. Understanding and appreciating how bachata has taken on different musical and dance influences as its circulation has grown over the last sixty years justifies the existence of sensual bachata, the pleasure of dancing sensual bachata, and the money sensual bachata organizers and instructors make. Acknowledging how upper and middle-class Dominicans and white US Americans and Europeans have appropriated bachata from lower class, dark-skinned Dominican musicians goes some way to mitigate the harms of consuming Europeanized, commercialized forms of bachata dance and music. Dore said, "If you embrace the change, but at the same time, you respect the origins, I think everybody can enjoy everything" (Dore 2020a). This affirmation seems to offer a tidy absolution of responsibility for cultural appropriation as a project of colonization.

Though Dore mostly dances sensual, he says that he appreciates both sensual and traditional bachata dancing. He thinks that dancers cannot properly dance sensual bachata without learning the "body movement" of traditional bachata, which I interpreted as referring to a combination of posture, frame, and contramotion between

hips and shoulders (Dore 2020a). He also believes that bachata dancers should understand bachata's history as a street music genre and know the key bachata artists. When I interviewed him, Dore gushed about Juan Luis Guerra's innovative take on bachata and merengue and spent ten minutes trying to find an original recording of his first album on Spotify to play for me. Dore told me that he only plays original bachatas during Bachata Rosa classes. "If someone comes to take basic class, the first song they hear in class is Hector Acosta," he said (Dore 2020a). While Bachata Rosa socials foreground sensual bachata music rather than older bachatas, Dore does not think that pop song remixes are really bachata. He said that he avoids playing remixes when DJing dance socials unless they are exceptionally well-made (Dore 2020a).

Dore considers himself open to all types of bachata, contrasting his approach with that of "hardcore bachata Dominico/Dominican Nazis" and dancers who are "only sensual and nothing else" (Dore 2020a). The harsher language Dore uses to describe those who insist on traditional dancing suggests a defensiveness about sensual bachata that Dore attempts to mask by taking an all-inclusive position. To me, Dore's reference to Dominican Nazis echoes the pejorative tone of the term "social justice warrior", implying that some traditional-only dancers are too wrapped up in their holier-than-thou attitudes to acknowledge the fusion inherent in the evolution of all music and dance genres. When I asked Dore about the cultural makeup of Bachata Rosa's dancers, he told me that Rosa has "a lot of everything" and mentioned that he has a Dominican friend who prefers sensual bachata to traditional bachata. While Dore respects the history of bachata music and dance and is conscious of discourses about cultural appropriation in

social dance, he appears to view differences in style as a matter of individual taste and individual cultural sensitivities. Under this live-and-let-live philosophy of dance, exclusively traditional dancers have no right to police the dance practices of those who enjoy sensual bachata, a dance style which reflects the rising global popularity of bachata and Latin fusion music.

Bachata Rosa: Gender, Sexuality, and Dance Roles

New York bachata studio dancing has grown increasingly more accepting of queer and gender non-conforming dancers, and Bachata Rosa is no exception. Though Dore estimates that 90% of dancers prefer to stick to the dance role that is traditionally associated with their perceived gender identity, he thinks that dancers should be able to dance whatever role they choose. He told me:

> I don't see people having a problem with it. I don't care if you don't want to follow -if you're a guy -doesn't bother me. It bothers me if you see someone else do that and that bothers you. That bothers me. But I don't encounter that. I feel that, uh, people feel comfortable to dance whatever role they want
> (Dore 2020a).

Morgan, a white cis-woman who identifies as a lesbian and dances salsa and traditional bachata, said:

> [Dore] has always been really supportive of me as a leader! He even asked me to lead him. Like, socially. And for a guy to be seen following on the social dance floor is a really great precedent
> (Morgan 2020).

Leading by example is important. Generally, good dancers like Dore are more easily able to break with gendered conventions because others respect their skills and versatility. I would also argue that Bachata Rosa's studio setting and reputation for attracting technically skilled, committed amateurs help create an environment in which

role switching and same-sex dancing are socially acceptable. Cross-gender dancing often signals that a dancer is committed to expanding and honing their technical knowledge. Though homophobia and sexism exist within every dance community, events that prioritize dance education and social dancing are often safer for queer and gender nonconforming dancers than events geared towards finding hookups at bars and restaurants. I remember Ben dancing with Caleb on the first night I went to Bachata Rosa, switching back and forth between lead and follow roles throughout the song. They danced with more distance between their bodies than either might have danced with a female-presenting partner, but they did not appear particularly concerned that observers would harass or disparage them. With one or two exceptions, most male leads had no problem dancing with Ben when he took the advanced pre-social classes as a follow.

I started taking classes as a lead while I was still learning advanced beginner skills as a follow. I felt that I would have a less passive understanding of the dance if I learned to follow, and I was sick of only talking to men at socials. I also saw that being able to dance as a lead would give me more control over selecting my dance partners and setting my physical boundaries. I frequently experienced various kinds of sexual harassment while dancing as a beginner follow. One lead brushed his lips against mine, as if by accident, when we were dancing cheek-to-cheek. We never spoke of it, complicating my enjoyment of our historically fun and flirty chemistry. Every night, I encountered men who pulled me into close position before I had even asked their names, jerking my body through waves and grinding up against my hip. Multiple men kissed me on the neck at the end of our dance without my consent. When I politely told one of

them that he should not kiss people on the dance floor, he laughed and shrugged me off. I regularly left socials early in a disassociated haze.

The most egregious of these incidents did not happen at Bachata Rosa, but enough did. When I asked Dore about whether Bachata Rosa teaches dance etiquette and consent, he said that he teaches students how to ask someone to dance and stresses that not every dance has to be in close position. He tries to keep these reminders light, not wanting to scare women away. He also encouraged dancers to report incidents to Bachata Rosa staff.

> People should always feel comfortable to say something…Ninety percent of my instructors are female, so go talk to them if you don't feel comfortable talking to me. And measures will be taken. They will be sent home
> (Dore 2020a).

Dore acknowledged that he received complaints about sexual harassment "more times that I would care to admit," but he still feels that Bachata Rosa, which does not serve alcohol, has fewer cases of sexual harassment and assault than other dance events. I was not close enough to the core Bachata Rosa dancers to know exactly who was sent home and how often incidents occurred, but in my personal experience, the availability of alcohol at socials correlated with increased harassment. I also never reported anyone at Bachata Rosa because I was anxious about making a scene over comparatively "minor" instances of consent violations. Within the heightened power dynamic of sensual leading and following, I often felt unsure of whether leads were deliberately manhandling me or simply failing to register my subtle adjustments and withdrawal of emotional connection. I was afraid of being judged as overly sensitive and ashamed of being too meek to enforce my own boundaries. Over time, I learned to stiffen my arms to prevent

leads from getting too close and turned down dancers who previously harassed me. If I became overwhelmed by a series of rough and invasive dances, I would find Ben, and he would sit with me for a few songs or take me home.

The Bachata Rosa instructors were happy to have me take classes as a lead, and I do not recall any women refusing to practice with me during class. Still, social dancing as a female-presenting beginner lead was nerve-wracking. Only one other femme-presenting dancer besides me took the pre-social classes as a lead, and she was a far better dancer than I was. I felt pressure to ensure that my partners were not too bored. I struggled to simultaneously execute choreography with good technique, pay attention to my partner's body language, and maintain spatial awareness as we moved among other dancers. Most female-presenting dancers who lead have typically danced for several years and are already highly-skilled follows. People who saw me lead often assumed that I was a very serious dancer, ignoring the possibility that I wanted to lead because I wanted to dance with women. I felt frustrated that I could not get away with being a mediocre lead like all the men I danced with as a follow in the beginner classes. I also worried about introducing an explicitly flirtatious vibe in my dances with women; I did not know which dancers, if any, identified as queer, and I did not want to make anyone uncomfortable.

On the other hand, the assumed-heterosexuality of Bachata Rosa provided cover for me to create a privately queer experience on the dance floor. Ben and I are non-monogamous, and he used to date another dancer, Stephanie. At the time, I was exploring a potential relationship with my friend, Tanya, a bisexual Dominican

American woman. One evening, Ben and I had separate dinner dates with Stephanie and Tanya and then brought them both to Bachata Rosa. I took the beginner class with Tanya, who knew the basics of bachata from dancing at home with her family but was new to sensual bachata. When the social started, we danced together clumsily, switching turns as lead and enjoying each other's touch. Later in the night, I left Tanya for several songs so that I could dance with a few of my favorite regulars. Ben danced with Tanya; it was his first time meeting her. There was something thrilling about pulling off a clandestine queer, polyamorous date unbeknownst to any other dancers. Tanya and I are both femme-presenting, so our dancing did not broadcast queerness so much as a close female friendship. The standard social dance practice of rotating between dance partners enabled Ben, Tanya, Stephanie and me to publicly act on our desires without needing to manage the disapproval or voyeuristic fascination of others.

BachaDura

I attended my first and only BachaDura event just before COVID-19 hit New York. It was called "Rhythm and Roots", and it featured a special presentation on the history of bachata and the culture of the Dominican Republic. Areíto Arts' Edwin facilitated the presentation; he is friends Young and Brian, BachaDura's organizers. Ben and I arrived at Dardo and Galletto Studios, which is located near Times Square, around 8:15pm for the event. The studio has hardwood floors with long windows on one end of the room and mirrors on the other. Near the windows, there is a bar set up with brushed chrome panels on the front and high bar stools. There were no alcoholic drinks for sale at the event, but dancers could bring their own drinks or snacks.

BachaDura caters to those who prefer Dominican style bachata, though the DJs also play urban bachata, merengue, and salsa. The name BachaDura is a twist on salsa dura, which refers to the energetic, instrumental-focused style of salsa in the 1960s and 1970s that preceded the lighter, slower salsa romantica of the 1980s (Hutchinson 2004: 112). BachaDura, a shortened version of "bachata dura", similarly highlights bachata songs that heavily feature instruments and have "a little more hype" than romantic, ballad-like bachata (Brian and Young 2020).

The frequency of BachaDura's events has varied: the BachaDura Facebook About description states, "We host Bachata parties every first, third, and fifth Saturday of the month!" (BachaDura 2015), but based on the past calendar of events, the frequency of events has decreased to once-a-month since at least early 2018. In their interview, Brian and Young both mentioned struggling to secure a consistent venue for BachaDura, which may have led to less frequent events. Dardo and Galletto Studios, an Argentine Tango studio located near Times Square, serves as BachaDura's primary venue (BachaDura 2015). According to Young and Brian, BachaDura attracts an older crowd than sensual bachata parties do, with some dancers in their forties, fifties, and sixties. Like many bachata socials in New York City, the typical BachaDura event begins with a dance lesson and then opens up into a social. BachaDura also hosts live bands and workshops with well-respected Dominican-style bachata instructors like Edwin.

Figure 6: Screenshot of Google Maps Street View of Dardo and Galletto Studios in Midtown Manhattan

The night Ben and I attended Edwin's presentation at BachaDura, we checked in at a fold-up table set up near the entrance of the studio. We used the hand sanitizer that BachaDura provided. We were not overly concerned about COVID; health officials had identified a handful of COVID cases in New York City by this time, but nothing had shut down yet. We did not know if we wanted to stay for the social because Ben had just come back from an overnight in Philadelphia, so we only paid for the presentation. We found seats in a semi-circle of chairs that BachaDura had set up around a projector screen with a PowerPoint. I counted approximately thirty people in attendance.

Edwin's talk was seemingly informed by his dance research and by his role as an official cultural ambassador for the Dominican Republic. The first slide displayed a tree graphic which illustrated the genealogy of bachata, tracing the influences of son, merengue, bolero, and danzón. The tree's roots went all the way back to 'Folk Dance,

Africa 6000s B.C.E." (Edwin 2020a). This was followed by a section on Dominican society and culture, which included slides on sports, music, indigenous art, food and drinks, and industries. Edwin discussed Dominican "customs and idioms," such as always celebrating and running late. He warned the presentation attendees that they should never show up on time to a party in the Dominican Republic because Dominican parties always start at least a couple of hours late.

The presentation then moved on to a more detailed overview of Dominican music and dance. Interestingly, there was a graphic on "social dance connection" with the self at the center, surrounded by two rings. The innermost ring included feeling, energy, timing, and etiquette, referring to the physical act of dancing and elements of dance technique. The outermost ring included setting, partner, music, and culture. I understood "culture" as Dominican culture and "setting" as the more immediate dance context. The graphic proposed a model for dancing as an individual in relation to these other elements. Edwin also spoke about the five key instruments in bachata and notable bachata musicians, with particular attention to underrecognized female bachata artists.

At the very end of the presentation, Edwin noted that the largest population of Dominicans outside of the Dominican Republic resides in New York City's Washington Heights neighborhood. He then asked some questions about sensual bachata' impact on traditional bachata. The last slide read:

> …is the remix process [in bachata music] influencing the dance? What are some of the pros and cons with the rise of the widely popular 'Sensual Bachata'?... Will remixes and fusion dance-styles have an effect on the culture and its traditions?... Are you in a relationship with bachata?
> (Edwin 2020a).

Edwin read these questions, which gently skirt around the issue of cultural appropriation, aloud to the audience. Even though he was speaking to a self-selected crowd that chose to attend a talk about the cultural roots of bachata, Edwin avoided engaging in a public conversation about sensual bachata. His final questions asked the audience to think about bachata in larger collective terms on their own time. The last slide of the presentation, which encouraged audience members to do their own research, included a list of people who do scholarly and educational work on bachata.

We then transitioned to the dance practice portion of the presentation. Edwin instructed everyone to find a person they didn't know and introduce themselves, encouraging attendees to intermingle. After a solo dance warm up, participants paired up to practice some relatively simple dance patterns, rotating partners every few minutes.

Ben and I decided to stay for the social. We were curious about the live music, which was provided courtesy of Academia de Bachata, a music program based in Cabarete in the Dominican Republic. Academia de Bachata trains children in grades K-12 to play bachata and merengue. It is the product of a collaboration between iASO Records, which records bachata and merengue music live (iASO Records 2021a), and The DREAM Project, an NGO that provides educational opportunities for at-risk youth in the Dominican Republic. BachaDura hosted Academia de Bachata's touring student ensemble made up of three guitar players, one bongos player, one güira player, one singer, and one extra student who danced while the others sang and played. They were a mixed-gender group with three young women and four young men. The students all appeared to be Afro Latino/Latina and wore long-sleeved "Academia de Bachata" shirts

and jeans. A Dominican flag hung on the mirror. Ben and I were impressed by their voices and instrumental skills. Ben took a video of their rendition of "ileso," a song from the album *Utopía* by Romeo Santos.

During the social, there were perhaps 10 couples dancing, filling most of the studio space. Dancers appeared to be racially diverse and mostly in their twenties or thirties, though a few looked a bit older. Most wore t-shirts and sneakers or other types of flat shoes. Only one woman was in a body suit. Another ten or twelve people remained seated or standing by the side of the dance floor. The event felt like a cultural dance at a university or high school with unexpectedly enthusiastic participation. The overhead lights were dimmed, and by the bar area, there were some flashing multi-colored lights and a small chandelier. I danced a few songs even though I was tired. A thin Latino man in his twenties asked me, "You're a sensual dancer, right?" I told him that I was and he said that he didn't usually dance sensual, but that he would try to incorporate a few moves. I also led Ben for a dance, showing off some of the new techniques I had learned while living in Texas. I do not remember seeing other femme-presenting leads or same-sex couples dancing.

BachaDura: History

Brian "El Matatan", Young "Young Maestra", and Milton Sandoval began BachaDura in 2015. Brian and Young met through BACHATuesdays, a dance party for which Brian DJed. Young, having previous DJed hip hop, told Brian that she was interested in DJing bachata, so Brian invited her to DJ at BACHATuesdays from time to time. Brian met Milton through a dance meetup group that Milton had organized (Brian

and Young 2020). Based on the people tags in BachaDura's Facebook history, it appears that Milton was most involved in BachaDura from 2015-2017 and has since taken a step back from actively running events. As of 2021, Brian and Young are still the primary organizers of BachaDura (Brian and Young 2020).

Brian identifies as a dancer, DJ, promoter, and organizer in the Latin dance scene (Brian and Young 2020). His parents are from Grenada and Aruba, and he grew up in New York listening to music from the Caribbean and going to parties where he would see people dancing salsa, bachata, and merengue (Brian and Young 2020). The first time Brian danced bachata was during a visit to the Dominican Republic:

> I was in a place where people are dancing and just kind of watching what they're doing. Someone asked me to dance, invited me to dance, and so I went with it. Of course, I was a little afraid of looking silly, but I enjoyed it, and it pretty much took off from there
> (Brian and Young 2020).

Brian was introduced to Latin dancing outside of a studio or school in a less-formally organized setting. His interest in dancing stemmed from long term exposure to music and dance practices through his family and New York City community of West Indian immigrants. He eventually joined the studio scene, starting with Piel Canela's classes and dance teams. From 2010-2012, Brian had a monthly unlimited membership at Piel Canela and went to classes two to three times a week. A few months after starting lessons, he also joined Piel Canela's dance team. Later he would join LFX, Edwin's former dance company (Brian and Young 2020).

Young's dance journey began with hip hop and house street dancing in South Korea, where she grew up (Brian and Young 2020). Young started dancing and DJing at

electronic music clubs during college (Brian and Young 2020). When she moved to New York, Young became involved in the New York breakdancing community, which introduced her to hustle, a US American partner dance that originated in the 1970s and is inspired by disco music (Echols 2010: xxiv). Young said that many New York City break dancers danced multiple genres, and so once she got into hustle, they encouraged her go to Latin dance parties and dance salsa (Brian and Young 2020). She also spoke of learning to dance different genres while traveling:

> I travel alone a lot [in South America, the Caribbean, and Central America] … as a female… I'm perceived as naturally a follow… [A]s long as I'm willing, the locals would just engage me and we would start dancing right away because they would lead the whole dance
> (Brian and Young 2020).

This decentralized, informal way of learning to dance as an outsider to Dominican/ Caribbean communities was accessible to Young because she was committed to seeking out local dance parties. It likely helped that she is a young woman; men often invite pretty girls to dance even if they lack experience. In contrast to Brian, Young says that she predominately learned Latin dancing at parties. She found the classes at Piel Canela to be too crowded; she was often unable to see the instructor (Brian and Young 2020). Most of the time, Young arrived at dance socials after the pre-social lessons had finished, so she learned on the dance floor through trial and error (Brian and Young 2020). Noting that for a while there were no consistent places to learn bachata, Young talked about slowly finding instructors and seeking out their classes, especially when she began learning to lead. She eventually joined a few performance teams as a form of "personal training" to improve her dance skills and become a performer. She also

traveled to a festival in the Dominican Republic where she learned more about the bachata instruments and regional styles of bachata within the Dominican Republic (Brian and Young 2020).

When I asked Brian how he became hooked on bachata, he recalled falling in love with the music first:

> I remember ["Mi Corazoncito" by Aventura] coming on the radio as I was driving. I'm at a stoplight, and I just blanked out. I'm listening to the music, I'm not fluent in Spanish, but I was still able to feel the music and able to understand some of it. Light turns green, I'm just still sitting there, listening to the song while people are honking
> (Brian and Young 2020).

Brian compared bachata's themes of unrequited love and sensual emotion to US American R&B and country music. Celebrated urban bachata group Aventura released "Mi Corazoncito" on their 2006 album K.O.B. Live. In the song, vocalists Romeo and Henry Santos beg an unnamed woman "No le digas a nadie/ Lo mucho que te quiero… (*Déjenme soñar*) Que el corazoncito es mío-mío, mío, mío, mío". This translates to, "Don't tell anybody/ How much I love you… (*Let me dream*) that your little heart is mine, mine, mine, mine, mine" (Aventura 2021). Connecting with the song's secret, wistful expression of love made bachata feel relatable to Brian. The "Mi Corazoncito" incident launched him into an exploration of Aventura and other bachata artists, which eventually inspired Brian to learn bachata dance. Brian views bachata organizing and DJing as ways of expressing sensual feelings and sharing knowledge about bachata music, dance, and Dominican culture with others (Brian and Young 2020).

Bachata was one of the later partner dances that Young picked up. At the beginning of her exposure to Latin dance in New York City, she primarily went to salsa

parties where DJs would play the occasional bachata song. Young said that she did not recognize the distinctions between Latin dance genres at first, but she came to appreciate the specific connection she feels bachata facilitates. For Young, Dominican bachata affords intimacy through a connection between dance partners that is not intended to impress or please onlookers who may not register the nuances of the partner connection. Young also noted that the simplicity of bachata music in comparison to salsa music makes it easier for her to express herself through dancing bachata (Brian and Young 2020). She said that bachata songs do not change much over the course of a song and that she feels able to clearly identify the different instrumental components and respond to them when dancing (Brian and Young 2020).

The idea for BachaDura grew out of Brian's experiences DJing for Piel Canela's dance socials in 2012. During that time, Brian attended a lot of parties in the Latin dance scene, sometimes as a guest DJ, but also as a social dancer (Brian and Young 2020). DJing allowed Brian to familiarize himself with the behind-the-scenes work of organizing dance parties. He began taking notes on particular elements he would include in an event if he were to run one himself (Brian and Young 2020). In the summer of 2014, Brian started scoping out potential venues, stopping at different Midtown bars and lounges on the way home from work to find out whether they hosted parties and what kind of clientele they catered to.

In 2015, Brian told Young and Milton that he wanted to launch a new event. Previously, Young had enjoyed making use of her large living space to throw break dancing parties, a common practice within the New York City dance break dancing

community (Brian and Young 2020). As she became more involved in the Latin dance scene, she began throwing house parties and organize events for the Latin scene as well. BachaDura formalized and extended Young's interest in community building within the dance scene and made use of Milton's experience with promoting dance events online. In 2015, the three of them held the first BachaDura event at "a rustic bar in Midtown" where Young had previously hosted a Latin dance fundraiser for the Nepal earthquake in April 2015 (Brian and Young 2020).

According to Young, there were relatively few bachata events at the time of BachaDura's founding, so they originally played music from a range of styles and eras (Brian and Young 2020). BachaDura was always more heavily weighted in favor of Dominican bachata, but as sensual bachata became more popular in the ensuing years and dancers established new sensual-centric events like Sensual Movement and Bachata Rosa, Young and Brian focused more specifically on introducing dancers to the roots of Dominican bachata (Brian and Young 2020).

BachaDura: Pedagogy and Community

Brian and Young implicitly frame BachaDura as a cross-cultural collaboration that aims to educate dancers about Dominican culture. Speaking about his enthusiasm for working with Young, Brian said:

> Young especially, in terms of DJing, I was excited for, you know, like *yess*, someone else who now I can promote and say 'Hey, hey, everybody, look, I know this DJ Young, person of color, Asian female, and she can play as well as me? Like come on. [*Brian laughs]*
> (Brian and Young 2020).

As a DJ for Piel Canela and BACHATuesdays, Brian intentionally wanted to support the development of a talented woman of color. Young and Brian have carved out a space for BachaDura in the New York City bachata scene as an event that translates Dominican bachata for dancers with varying degrees of familiarity with Latin dancing, Dominican culture, and Dominican/Latino communities in New York City. Neither Brian nor Young belong to the Dominican diaspora. Brian grew up in a predominately West-Indian neighborhood in New York City and participated in the shared culture of an immigrant community (Brian and Young 2020). Young is a South Korean immigrant (Brian and Young 2020). I have not spoken to Milton Sandoval directly; based on his public online Facebook presence, he appears to be a Latino man who has lived in the New York City area for many years. BachaDura thus began as a collaboration between three people of color working to build a community of dancers in New York City who dance Dominican bachata but are not solely Dominican or Latina/Latino. Young observes that many young Dominican New Yorkers are more attracted to newer urban bachata music and dance styles than traditional bachata (Brian and Young 2020). Brian's comment about Young suggests that he and Young are aware of how their personal gender and racial identities inform their relationships to bachata, and that they actively want to recognize and create opportunities for women and people of color to contribute to the Dominican bachata scene in New York City.

For Young and Brian, an important component of cross-cultural education involves bringing studio and non-studio dancers into contact (Brian and Young 2020).

Brian distinguishes dancers who dance within "the dance scene" from dancers who dance more casually in domestic spaces. He said:

> The dance scene is where people primarily want to dance, with some socializing, and they want to meet people. Outside of the dance scene, I would say a lot of it is just you're having a fun time, you're socializing with people. Dance is a byproduct of that… it's more of a relaxed thing. It's something you learn in your household. You learn it from your family, from relatives, from your parents. You don't necessarily go to learn different types of footwork and different types of partnerwork
> (Brian and Young 2020).

Brian is likely conscious of this divide because he has experienced dancing bachata at family/community parties and in the studio setting of Piel Canela dance classes and teams. Even though Young did not learn to dance through the cultural life of her native community, her experiences learning Latin dances involved engaging with local non-studio dance communities during her travels.

BachaDura facilitates a two-way intercultural exchange. Brian and Young want to help non-studio dancers, who are still the minority of dancers at BachaDura events, acclimate to studio-style dancing. Brian believes that organizers and instructors are responsible for creating a welcoming environment for non-studio dancers, particularly during pre-social classes (Brian and Young 2020). Brian notes that dancers who grew up dancing bachata at home learned to dance bachata in an entirely different way from studio dancers who dance Dominican bachata (Brian and Young 2020). Classes give new, non-studio dancers an opportunity to mingle with other new, non-studio dancers and observe studio dancers with more experience (Brian and Young 2020).

Brian also seeks out local bachata musicians, like Grupo Aurora, Valerio, and Señorito, to play live music for BachaDura events (Brian and Young 2020). This creates

new economic opportunities for musicians who play Dominican bachata and may be unaware that a studio bachata dance scene exists (Brian and Young 2020). Additionally, DJs are far more common at Latin dance parties than bands; many studio dancers have never encountered a live bachata band (Brian and Young 2020). Hosting bands sets BachaDura's parties apart from other parties held in studios and also creates an opportunity to teach studio dancers about bachata instrumentation (Brian and Young 2020).

While BachaDura offers non-studio dancers the option to explore studio dancing, Brian and Young do not feel that non-studio dancers must adapt to studio dancing (Brian and Young 2020). They place the onus on studio dancers, who frequently occupy positions of greater economic, social, and racial power than non-studio dancers, to recognize that bachata originated in the Dominican Republic and is danced outside of the Midtown studio circuit. Young says, "I actually think if you're a studio dancer, you should be able to adapt to both [studio dancing and non-studio dancing]" (Brian and Young 2020). Brian hopes that dancers who are originally drawn to bachata because they think it "looks cool" take the initiative to explore the cultural history of bachata as they invest more time and money into learning the dance (Brian and Young 2020). Some of BachaDura's programming, such as the "Rhythm & Roots" presentation, Areíto Arts' Bolero workshop, and a Cuban Son – Bachata performance, teaches students about the dance genres that have influenced bachata. BachaDura also invites guest instructors who are known for supporting dance cultural education efforts such as Jonathan and Jennifer Isabel from JSquared as well as Ace and Ciara.

Additionally, Young wanted BachaDura to explicitly permit dancers of all genders to dance whatever role(s) they prefer (BachaDura Interview, 19). Young became interested in leading because she wanted to be able to dance with more people, citing occasions when there are too few leads at a dance or when she doesn't want to dance with the available leads. She told me that the Latin community is "very machismo" and that her desire to lead has been met with a mixed, though increasingly accepting, reception from both male- and female-presenting dancers. Classroom structures can be used to enforce normative gender roles. Young said:

> Let's say there wasn't enough follows in the classroom. And they would pressure me to be a follow. Even the teacher would pressure me to be a follow. I'm like, that's not what I paid you money for. I'm here as a lead, and you want me to follow. You wouldn't force that on any other man. Right?
> (Brian and Young 2020).

Young feels that the leading and following are rooted in patriarchal gender norms (Brian and Young 2020). She attempts to redress this as an organizer by offering preferred language guidelines. She asks guest instructors to refer to "leads" and "follows" instead of "ladies" and "gentlemen" and refrain from describing certain moves as "sexy" or "not manly". Aside from resisting sexist tropes, she feels that sexualizing and gendering particular gestures can produce "misinformation" and bad technique (Brian and Young 2020). I understood this to mean that certain gestures, like exaggerated hip movements, may gain popularity because they are associated with ideas of sexuality associated with Latin dance and culture even if those gestures are not part of Dominican bachata technique.

Brian supports Young's efforts as the default teacher for BachaDura's pre-social classes. He described how he approaches introducing new dancers to the concept of leading and following. He asks leads to stand on one side of the room and follows to stand on the other side of the room. Then he asks new students to choose which side they would like to join. He tells students, "You can try one and then the other… as you can see, most of the leads are male, most of the follows are female, but you can do either side. Whichever you want" (Brian and Young 2020). For Brian, it is important to communicate that students should be free to make whatever choices are most comfortable for them without "banging them over the head" about gender politics or proper dance etiquette (Brian and Young 2020). Like many dance instructors I interviewed, Brian feels that students are liable to tune out lectures. Rather than giving a formal etiquette lesson, Brian might ask his class to generate a few ideas about how to nicely ask someone to dance. There is no in-class discussion of what leading and following each afford in terms of gender and sexual expression or power dynamics; in this sense, BachaDura minimizes the gendering of the two roles rather than posing them as tropes to be embraced or subverted.

Like Bachata Rosa, BachaDura is not an explicitly queer space, though Young believes that more queer dancers came to BachaDura after BachaDura's workshop with Ace and Ciara, two performers who used to work together as an openly queer bachata dance couple (Brian and Young 2020). Neither Brian nor Young identified themselves as queer to me. The desire for technical versatility more than the desire to act on queer impulses seems to motivate Young's investment in fostering an environment in which

people can lead and follow regardless of their gender. Young is indignant that teachers refuse to teach female students to lead or pressure students to dance in a role that is more convenient for the class (Brian and Young 2020). She affirms individuals' rights to determine how they dance, particularly in situations in which they are paying clients. Young does not mind when individual dancers turn down her invitations to dance based on her perceived gender and their personal comfort levels. She observes that she is more frequently rejected by women than by men, and she hypothesizes that some women feel uncomfortable dancing with other women because they view bachata as an inherently romantic/sensual dance and would prefer partners to whom they are sexually attracted (Brian and Young 2020). By contrast, Young's interest in leading seems to come from a place of prioritizing dancing "for the sake of dance" over dancing as a mode for organizing sexual desires and relations.

Allowing for dance partnerships that do not necessarily align with individual sexual orientations or attractions opens up the possibility for other forms of physically-based connection. According to Brian, new students at BachaDura, regardless of their perceived gender, often will take up whichever role (lead or follow) has been chosen by the fewest dancers (Brian and Young 2020). I have not attended enough BachaDura events to know firsthand whether Brian's observation generally holds true. Still, it is notable how careful language choice can create an environment in which gender is not automatically equated with a particular dance role, potentially opening the dance floor to queer forms of self-expression and relationality.

At the same time, BachaDura stops short of promoting a celebration of fluid, transient, expansively erotic forms of connection. The classroom context brings with it an assumed set of values: for instance, that learning technique is more important than trying to flirt with people and that individual students have a responsibility to support each other's learning processes. Perhaps new BachaDura students choose to dance as a lead or follow because they want to contribute to a smoother learning experience for other students by equalizing the number of follows and leads. Typically, students rotate through different partners during classes, so an imbalance between leads and follows means that students dancing the role with a surplus will have to spend some of the lesson dancing without a partner. An extreme imbalance generally decreases the quality of the class because learning a choreography sequence is more difficult without a partner.

The "do what you want" model does not explicitly address how erotic affects, which are informed by sexuality, gender, and race, are generated by occupying different roles within the dance. In fact, it implies that motives for dancing particular roles should be kept private in a classroom setting where the focus should be on the educational process of dancing[20]. In making decisions about embodying a particular role or performing with a masculine or feminine styling, dancers must always negotiate individual self-expressive impulses and social interests that may be in conflict with each other. For instance, while I enjoy following more than leading, I choose to learn to lead

[20] Most dancers I know who choose to sometimes assume a dance role that is not traditionally associated with their perceived gender are cis-passing, including myself. Despite the bachata dance scene's increased acceptance of female leads, male follows, and same-sex dancing, the scene still seems to be quite hostile towards people who are visibly gender non-conforming or trans.

because I want to be able to dance with women who as a group are often more comfortable dancing as follows. Of course, people's personal boundaries should be respected; no one should be forced to dance with someone. At the same time, a more actively queer framework rather than a private, individualistic one would invite dancers to consider why they feel uncomfortable dancing with people of the same gender as them and might encourage dancers to explore different types of intimacy with different people.

That said, Brian and Young have tried to implement organizational structures intended to protect people with marginalized identities. In January of 2020, BachaDura published a code of conduct on their Facebook page. The Code of Conduct defines harassment as:

> Offensive verbal comments related to gender, age, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance, body size, race, religion, sexual images in public spaces, deliberate intimidation, stalking, following, harassing photography or recording, sustained disruption of workshops or other events, inappropriate physical contact, and unwelcome sexual attention
> (BachaDura Social Club 2020b).

The code of conduct indicates that anyone who experiences harassment should seek assistance from event staff who may address harassment by issuing a verbal warning, expelling offenders from the event, or involving law enforcement (BachaDura Social Club 2020b). Young based BachaDura's code of conduct on resources compiled by the swing dance community, which she said has a longer track record of addressing issues of

sexual harassment and gender norms than the Latin scene (Brian and Young 2020)[21]. Young also recognizes the need to create more concrete systems for dealing with harassment incidents, ideally developed in consultation with experienced mediators (Brian and Young 2020).

Some dance communities have proactively attempted to cultivate policies and plans: Young participated in a discussion with mediators and dance organizers from the blues and swing community to discuss strategies for addressing safety concerns and establishing anti-oppressive dance etiquette. Other dance organizers have offered more resistance. One of Young's friends attempted to convince other Latin dance communities to adopt BachaDura's code of conduct, but all of the organizers she approached declined (Brian and Young 2020). With the suspension of in-person events due to COVID, BachaDura has yet to adopt formal protocols for dealing with harassment (Brian and Young 2020). However, the conversations around creating safe, inclusive spaces for women, people of color, people with disabilities, and queer people continue online as dancers talk about changes they would like to see when social events eventually resume. Developments in community accountability will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

Conclusion: Coexistence, Competition, and Branding

Piel Canela, Bachata Rosa, and BachaDura have each staked out territory within the New York City Latin dance scene. Piel Canela stands out from other Latin dance

[21] Young hypothesizes that swing and blues have more developed language and infrastructure for addressing harassment because swing and particularly blues communities normalize switching between lead/follow role for dancers of all genders and typically have more queer dancers (Brian and Young 2020).

schools that emerged in the early 2000s due to its scale. To my knowledge, no other Latin dance school hosts as many classes. While Piel Canela is not strictly a bachata dance school, it hosts several bachata classes per week that follow a scaffolded, multi-level curriculum. Bachata Rosa and BachaDura are part of the second wave of specifically bachata-centric New York City Latin dance socials. They cropped up in the mid 2010s, marking the split within the bachata scene between traditional and sensual dancers. This division has solidified further over the past five years. These communities also signify their values through the techniques they choose to teach and how they choose to teach them, often balancing their investment in cultural and political identities against the economic realities of competing with other dance communities for students and customers.

The global studio-based bachata scene has long taken a positive view of different dance communities coexisting within the scene. In an interview released on YouTube as part of the 2020 Free Online International Edition of the Dallas Bachata Festival, Juan Ruiz, Rodney Aquino, and Jorge Elizondo reminisced about their efforts to create the first US Bachata Festival in Reno, Nevada in 2009. Jorge recalled how in the early days of bachata's rise in the US, instructors would fight over the correct way to dance and teach bachata, jostling with each other for social capital within an emerging dance scene. At Reno, the organizers sat all the instructors down and told them that they needed to support each other's different approaches to dancing bachata. Juan, Rodney, and Jorge believe that a multi-style, international bachata scene has flourished because everyone has been allowed to "grow in their own way" (Jorge 2018).

This philosophy of tolerance also plays out within communities on the level of individual dancers. I believe that Piel Canela, Bachata Rosa, and BachaDura would all agree that anyone who respects others and appreciates dancing should be able to participate in the scene freely, regardless of their cultural background, race, role preferences, gender presentation, and sexuality. That being said, organizational support for collectively engaging with bachata's history and cultural context or resisting the reification of traditional gender roles and heterosexual patterns of interaction remains limited. Bachata Rosa largely lets individual dancers figure out how to grow into bachata on their own, and BachaDura's advocacy for non-gendered roles still hinges on the argument that individual dancers should be allowed to dance however they want rather than challenging dancers to collectively hold space for more fluid forms of interpersonal intimacy.

The ideal of community coexistence often clashes with concerns about competition. While salsa dance schools and parties and their bachata outgrowths emerged from Latino immigrant communities in Queens, the Bronx, Brooklyn, and New Jersey, the sensual bachata organizations founded in the latter half of the 2010s are often detached from those communities. New York City's sensual bachata scene, which is still quite new relative to the sensual bachata scenes in Spain and other parts of Europe, initially evolved from the organizing efforts of two European (or European-adjacent) immigrants: Bachata Rosa's Dore and Sensual Movement's Anna. Sensual bachata has come to dominate the studio-based bachata dance scene in New York City. Many dancers of Dominican descent and dancers who like traditional bachata take issue with

instructors, performers, and event organizers building a bachata market that excludes traditional bachata dance and music artists and sometimes fails to acknowledge bachata's Dominican roots.

The rise of sensual bachata is part of a general trend of commercializing and franchising Latin dances, particularly in salsa. In the early 2000s, there were only three salsa congresses each year that were held in Puerto Rico, New York City, and Los Angeles (Mario B 2020). Now, at least before COVID, there are multiple bachata and salsa congresses in different cities around the world each month. In an interview on *Live Discussions with Diamond*, Mario B, the founder of Salsa Fever On 2 Dance Academy, observed that beginner salsa and bachata dancers today want to jump straight into performing and may start teaching their own classes after only a few months of training. Dance schools manipulate these ambitions for profit, charging students hundreds of dollars to join a performance team or an instructor certification course. Dance festivals program forty, fifty performances in a weekend because they can charge non-professional performance teams fees to perform. Mario B believes that commercialized, performance-driven dance culture produces dancers who can only repeat choreographies and lack the technique to improvise well in social dance settings (Mario B 2020). The performance arena can also be more restrictive than social dancing in terms of policing gender and sexual norms. Angélica and Jahaira had to petition the World Latin Dance Cup to create a separate division for them to compete because the World Latin Dance Cup organizers defined "couple" as a man and a woman (Angélica and Jahaira 2021).

Piel Canela, Bachata Rosa, and BachaDura each have their own strategies for navigating an increasingly competitive and commercial dance market. As a Dominican dancer with a finance background, Joe has embraced the commercialization of Latin dance within the framework of his own values: he wants to make Latin dancing affordable and easy to learn through a standardized curriculum. Piel Canela tries to strike a balance between playing into performance economies and supporting lower income dancers. They have several performance teams, ranging from student to pro-level. Their students have performed in high profile venues like Madison Square Gardens for a WNBA halftime show. Piel Canela's $185/month unlimited membership costs a little more than a monthly membership to a Manhattan yoga studio and likely targets young professionals living and working in Midtown neighborhoods that are predominately white. Committed dancers with lesser means might decide that taking forty classes per month at less than $5/class is a worthwhile investment in learning a new skill and potentially being able to perform. At the same time, Piel Canela offers a work-study option, runs frequent discount sales and free trials like the one that I tried, and has a community outreach initiative in which they teach Latin dance classes in high schools for free (Joe and Bianca 2018). For Joe, showing that a Latin dance school can be profitable and accessible to dancers of all cultural backgrounds while also producing high-caliber performers is perhaps the best way of recognizing the cultural contributions of Latin American music and dance within the United States.

Dore, an Israeli Latin Jazz musician who came to the US for grad school, formed Bachata Rosa with the intention of cultivating a sensual bachata scene patterned on the

scene he left behind in Israel. Bachata Rosa succeeds in attracting and incorporating newcomers into a growing sensual bachata scene through affordable pricing, a convenient location, and a coherent, scaffolded dance curriculum. Bachata Rosa fosters community among young New York City locals and transplants from multiple cultural backgrounds. Bachata Rosa's Friday night time slot and Midtown location are attractive to a young professional crowd that can afford to pre-game at bars with $18 cocktails before heading over to the studio around 11pm. But Bachata Rosa's low entrance fee also makes their events accessible to college students, service workers, and more casual dancers who are happy to pick up sensual bachata by taking one class every few weeks over many months. Bachata Rosa also has a performance team which serves as an additional income stream for the organization and provides students with a more intensive supplement to Bachata Rosa's once-weekly pre-social classes. They also occasionally organize weekenders with special guest instructors and performers.

BachaDura began as a dance community for dancers with an affinity for Dominican style dancing, whether or not they identify as Dominican. A collaboration between Young, a South Korean immigrant, and Brian, a native New Yorker born to Caribbean parents, BachaDura attempts to create a studio dance environment that welcomes non-studio dancers and provides intercultural appreciation training for studio dancers. Bachata's educational efforts and outreach to non-studio dancers serve as an intervention within a dance scene that increasingly celebrates European bachata dancers and undervalues Dominican style dancing. A more niche bachata community with less frequent, slightly pricier events, BachaDura markets itself to Latino/Latina non-studio

dancers and liberal, educated, middle class dancers who are drawn to BachaDura's particular sensitivity to issues of sexism, cultural appropriation, and homophobia. Of the three communities featured in this chapter, BachaDura is most successful at resisting profit maximization through performance; as a "social club," they have no performance teams and to my knowledge have never organized a dance festival. Traditional bachata dancers do perform, like Angélica and Jahaira and Edwin and Dakhóta, however students who are primarily motivated to perform are more likely to be drawn to the flashy moves of sensual bachata or salsa than traditional bachata. Thus, dance style and technique meld with BachaDura's inclusive priorities to create a subcultural brand within the studio-based bachata dance scene.

CHAPTER IV

DEFINING DANCE COMMUNITIES: COVID, RACIAL JUSTICE, AND BACHATA

When I set out to study bachata dance, I planned to conduct an ethnographic study of classes and events run by Piel Canela, Bachata Rosa, and BachaDura in New York City. Classes and socials operate in a feedback loop: some take classes for the purpose of learning the techniques needed to participate in a social dance setting, others might try a dance class as a form of exercise or a novel experience and become drawn into the social dance scene through the technique and relationships they acquire in the classroom. I intended to observe instructor-student relationships in classes and workshops, as well as the interpersonal dynamics of student-oriented "practicas" (practice events for those who want to build up their confidence before venturing out into the club or social events with more experienced dancers) and special events involving outdoor locations, live music, and/or performance teams.

Through participant observation, I wanted to understand how strategic and tactical techniques of bachata dance circulated among instructors, students, and social dancers. I intended to observe how dancers selected partners and attempted to communicate their own desirability as dance partners in a social setting. Rather than primarily foregrounding the experiences and opinions of instructors, event organizers, and well-established scene regulars, I also wanted to explore how dancers at the margins navigated the space: the second-generation Dominican who is used to dancing bachata in their living room or the gender-nonconforming dancer giving bachata a shot at the behest

of a co-worker. Additionally, in my past dance experiences, I found that dancers often avoided discussing sensitive political topics relating to race, gender, and cultural appropriation. I had hoped that my participation in classes and socials over a period of several months would enable me to build enough trust with dancers and instructors to start conversations about these topics.

Unfortunately, the arrival of COVID-19 in New York City severely circumscribed possibilities for researching in-person dance events. New York City was one of the first epicenters of the COVID pandemic in the United States. The first laboratory-confirmed case of COVID-19 in New York City was identified on February 29, 2020. In the following three months, accelerated spread of COVID resulted in 203,000 cases and 18,600 deaths (Thompson 2020: 1725). The last in-person dance event I attended was on March 7, 2020. Physical distancing orders were enacted on March 22, 2020 (Thompson 2020: 1725), and to my knowledge, most New York City dance schools and communities stopped holding in-person events by mid-March. While instructors and organizers transitioned dance classes to Zoom with some success, the pleasures of social dancing in a crowded room with friends and strangers resisted online replication. Over the summer and fall months, discretely-organized, primarily outdoor socials returned, to the consternation of the more COVID-conscious members of the bachata dance scene. Winter weather pushed many dancers back inside; some stayed home while others risked in-door socials. At the time of writing this chapter in May 2021, Piel Canela, BachaDura, and Bachata Rosa remain on hiatus, even as other key players have begun to officially re-open in-person classes and socials.

Needless to say, the closure of in-person dance classes and events forced me to adjust my research methods and the focus of my study. Through participation in online bachata classes, I was still able to track instructors' language choices in describing movements and to observe how instructors demonstrated particular movements. Online classes also provided an opportunity for me to reflect on the process of learning bachata technique in my own straight-passing, Asian femme body. However, the by-and-large elimination of social dance events inhibited my ability to develop personal relationships with instructors and dancers over time. As a result, I relied upon more formally-structured interviews than participant ethnography. I primarily interviewed instructors, organizers, and social dancers with whom I took online classes or had befriended in pre-pandemic times. I also drew upon Facebook discussions, Instagram posts, podcasts, and livestreamed panels produced within the New York City bachata dance community, in which the voices of instructors, organizers, and committed hobbyists were also overrepresented. Bachata dance communities were already using social media to advertise events and classes prior to the pandemic. However, COVID intensified the degree to which instructors and students relied on Facebook and Instagram to find classes and participate in community-wide discussions.

This fourth chapter unpacks the effects of COVID on bachata dance communities based on interviews with dancers, autoethnographic reflections on online classes, and media analysis of Facebook event promotion posts, podcasts, and panels. The first section revisits the three New York City communities at the heart of Chapter 3. I describe the strategies Piel Canela, Bachata Rosa, and BachaDura have taken to adapt to

the social distancing demands of COVID, as well as the interconnected shifts in the New York City dance venue landscape. I also provide an overview of a range of different individual dancers' reflections on how COVID has impacted their personal dance practices. In the second section, I detail my experiences taking online bachata classes with international instructors as well as instructors based in New York City. I consider how COVID created new opportunities for instructors to access students (and vice versa) while also revealing the ever-present economic disparities within the global bachata dance scene. The last section of this chapter returns to New York City to discuss dancers' debates about collective responsibility and community values in the wake of both COVID and the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020. I conclude the chapter with an examination Diamond Rivera's podcast, *Live Discussions with Diamond*, which creates a virtual space and digital archive for conversations about history, politics, and identity within a local-global bachata dance scene. I argue that Diamond's podcast attempts to model an open-minded, community ethos that alternately unsettles and reinforces a depoliticized, multicultural ideology.

New York City

Piel Canela, Bachata Rosa, BachaDura

Piel Canela announced that they would switch to limited classes on March 12 and March 13, 2020. They postponed the social which they had scheduled for March 13 and created an Instagram Story Highlight to save Instagram stories related to COVID updates. Piel Canela also encouraged students to check their website for links to the New York governor's website, the Red Cross, and other sources of information about COVID

(Joe 2020a). On March 14 and 15, Piel Canela cancelled classes. Following announcements from the Center for Disease Control and New York City's decision to close entertainment venues beginning March 17, Piel Canela told their students that all in-person classes would be cancelled. Joe Burgos, the founder of Piel Canela, hosted an online Q&A session over Instagram and YouTube to address students' concerns about COVID and Piel Canela's future operations. He followed the Q&A session with a series of daily, 30-minute long, livestreamed videos that were part Q&A and part DJ mix set to maintain communication with the Piel Canela Community. Joe continued to stream daily Q&A sessions through May 23, 2020.

Like many dance schools, Piel Canela pivoted to online classes. When I spoke with Joe on December 11, 2020, he told me that online Piel Canela Classes were already in the works long before the onset of the pandemic. From October 2019 to March 2020, Piel Canela staff were learning about video production. They planned to create online classes over the summer, a time when the student population tends to dwindle, which would have prepared Piel Canela to release their first online classes in October 2020. When COVID hit New York City in March, Joe thought that Piel Canela's fortuitous earlier explorations into online classes would give them an advantage:

> And within a month and a half, we had a whole platform. We had everything set up for students to come in and they could see and watch. We had Zoom classes, we had classes that were pre-recorded
> (Joe 2020a).

Piel Canela set up a page on their website for students to book live online classes in a variety of genres, including salsa, bachata, dembow, flamenco, hip hop, and reggaeton. They also offered a few "fitness classes" like yoga and Pilates. Initially, these classes

cost $5 each and included a class video recording that would be made available to students after the class; prices increased to $7 for live classes on July 6, 2020 (Joe 2020b). Joe and Bianca, Piel Canela's Chief Operating Officer who is also married to Joe, released a combination of free livestreamed and pre-recorded YouTube classes. These classes were mostly geared towards beginners and covered merengue, bachata, cha cha, and salsa on 2. Joe and Bianca also tried to engage students with classes taught live from Puerto Rico, including a free salsa and bachata choreography challenge. They invited students to film themselves dancing the choreography and planned to incorporate these videos into a final edited video of all the challenge participants (Joe 2020c).

Unfortunately, the online classes did not generate enough student attendance and subsequent income to keep Piel Canela afloat. In May 2020, a group of students organized a GoFundMe for Piel Canela, which has raised $11,969 as of May 28, 2021 (Yook 2020). In September 2020, Piel Canela began offering private online classes with Joe or Bianca (Joe 2020d). Joe has told students with yearly or monthly memberships that Piel Canela plans to offer them class credit when school is able to reopen, but the school has no savings to give out refunds. He said that Piel Canela is running out of funds to pay for their barebones infrastructure, including subscriptions and accounting and legal services (Joe 2020a).

COVID has taken a toll on Joe's personal finances too. Joe told me that in the first four months of the pandemic, he put everything into trying to save Piel Canela, falling behind on his personal rent for four or five months. Around September or October 2020, Joe realized that he needed to set aside his efforts to sustain Piel Canela

until he was able to make enough money to cover his own bills and expenses. Piel Canela streamed a holiday performance in December 2020, but quietly phased out their online classes.

Of the three New York City bachata communities I followed for this thesis, Piel Canela is the only community that has publicly shared their plans to re-open. On April 18, 2021, Piel Canela's Instagram notified community members about the launch of Piel Canela's new website and the reactivation of Joe's company email (pielcaneladancers 2021a). In a series of Instagram videos released in May 2021, Joe announced that the school would return to in-person and online classes on June 14, 2021. Piel Canela's initial class offerings will be limited to three classes per night on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays. Each class will cost $20, and students who previously held monthly or annual passes will have the option to use their unlimited class credit immediately or may wait until Piel Canela is able to rebuild their class selection (pielcaneladancers 2021c) Joe and Bianca, the only remaining full-time Piel Canela staff, have also resumed taking bookings for in-person private lessons in May (pielcaneladancers 2021b).

Bachata Rosa announced that they were cancelling all future dance events on March 13, 2020. The Bachata Rosa Facebook posted the following message:

> …with overgrowing concern, the people have spoken, and we hear you. Maybe it took us a bit too long, but we are canceling tonights [sic] event! We will let you know when we come back…
> (Bachata Rosa 2020b).

From March 20 to April 24, 2020, Bachata Research streamed bachata music on Friday evenings through Facebook. Most of the online Bachata Rosa events were DJed by Dore,

Bachata Rosa's founder, from his bedroom. These DJ sessions did not continue into the summer, likely due to relatively low views and an increase in outdoor dancing opportunities hosted by other dancers in the bachata scene.

In my conversation with Dore on July 21, 2020, Dore told me that the Bachata Rosa team has decided to wait before planning any big future events. He did not want to give anyone "false hope" for a quick return to dancing (Dore 2020a). He joked that unless someone convinces him to start a speakeasy bachata social, he intends to take his cues from the CDC. While Dore said that he was committed to waiting for socializing to be approved by the CDC before bringing Bachata Rosa back, he also expressed anxiety about other would-be organizers filling the gap Bachata Rosa left behind. He said:

> And hopefully nobody takes my spot. Cos, at the end of the day, I'm trying to be responsible, but I know that people are gonna think about their pockets. Including the studio owner. I understand that he will offer the place to whoever will take it. But I want to be responsible, so I'm not pushing it (Dore 2020a).

Dore's "spot" is his regular venue and timeslot: 10pm to 2am Friday nights at Stepping Out Studios. Friday and Saturday night events attract more dancers who are able to stay out longer without worrying about being work-ready in the morning. To my knowledge, Bachata Rosa was the only sensual bachata event consistently held on Friday nights in New York City since Bachata Rosa's inaugural event in 2016. If another sensual bachata dance event establishes itself as the new Friday night social, Bachata Rosa could stand to lose a significant portion of its regulars.

As of May 2021, no other organizers have attempted to organize regular Friday night sensual socials. However, as more New Yorkers receive the vaccine and the

weather warms, I imagine that Dore will begin to feel the pressure to restart Bachata Rosa in some fashion. In the meantime, Dore has updated the Bachata Rosa Facebook page every few months, once to advertise his appearance on the podcast *Live Discussions with Diamond*, and twice to commemorate the anniversaries of Bachata Rosa's first social and last pre-pandemic social. On April 1 (April Fool's Day), the Bachata Rosa Facebook page posted a "Super Special Bachata Party" event to be held on the rooftop of the Empire State Building. The event banner featured a photoshopped collage of bachata musicians and dancers, referring to Judith and Korke as "Special Guests: OG Couple from Spain" and Romeo Santos as "Ultra Special Guest: Super Famous Singer (Not Juliet)" (Bachata Rosa 2021a). Clearly legible to members of the Bachata Rosa community as a joke, Dore's post uses humor to let dancers know that Bachata Rosa is not ready to re-open without engaging directly in more pointed debates about when and how New York City dance socials might be safely revived. His post might also be interpreted as a dig at other organizers who began advertising festivals at the end of March 2021.

BachaDura held their last event, which I attended, on March 7, 2020. BachaDura staff stamped the hands of dancers at the door to mark those who had paid the entrance fee, a common practice at many dance socials. However, to minimize potential skin-to-skin virus transmission via stamping, staff only stamped the hands of dancers who planned to attend the workshop and leave before the dance. BachaDura also provided hand sanitizer and encouraged attendees to wash their hands. The day of the event, BachaDura posted a safety announcement on Facebook asking attendees to replace

handshakes and hugs with elbow bumps, avoid touching anyone's face, cough/sneeze into a tissue or elbow, and avoid sharing drinks (BachaDura Facebook March 7 2020).

On March 12, 2020, BachaDura announced the suspension of all further events. Their Facebook post read:

> Announcement: In an effort to help slow down the contagion of COVID-19, starting immediately with upcoming April, our monthly socials & events will be postponed until further notice. By doing so at small, we will be protecting our local community here in NYC and those who are most vulnerable around us. By large, it will help pace the healthcare system from being overwhelmed by overflowing patients in order to give everyone a surviving chance – to prevent grave damage in our society. Please take care by practicing proper hygiene, keeping a healthy lifestyle and hopefully with high spirit. We encourage postponing of any gatherings of large number of people as to maximize our collective effort…
> (BachaDura 2020a).

BachaDura's statement about the pandemic explicitly links shutting down socials to the public health repercussions of individual choices. BachaDura invoked a sense of responsibility both to the social dance community and to the greater New York City community and advised against large gatherings (of the social dance variety or otherwise). In an interview on August 16, 2020, Young said that BachaDura would not come back until a COVID vaccine became widely-available (Brian and Young 2020).

BachaDura has maintained a consistent Facebook presence while on hiatus. They reshare articles about significant figures in the bachata music and dance world, as well as dance and music videos made by peer bachata instructors and organizers. Brian also participated in multiple livestream DJ events which are publicized on BachaDura's Facebook feed.

New York City Venues

COVID has also affected the venues available for hosting bachata classes and socials. Dance studios struggle to survive an expensive Manhattan real estate market at the best of times. As non-essential businesses, dance studios necessarily closed in March 2020 and were unable to re-open through most of July. The resulting loss of revenue led to the perhaps permanent closures of some dance studios which will have lasting effects on the dance scene post-pandemic.

DanceSport, a Manhattan-based dance school that first opened more than twenty years ago, rented out studio space to many dance events. I knew DanceSport's Koreatown studio from the mixed Latin-dance party, Las Chicas Locas, which DanceSport hosted every Sunday evening. Around June 2019, rent and real estate tax increases due to new construction in Midtown forced DanceSport to close their studio. They relocated to a new studio on West 39th Street only to close down again in June 2020 after New York City's lockdown drained their financial resources (DanceSport 2020). In a Facebook post, DanceSport called this a temporary closure and referred to plans to digitize DanceSport's classes. As of May 2021, however, there has been no news of a new studio or online classes (DanceSport 2020).

Stepping Out Studios, Bachata Rosa's regular Friday-night venue, temporarily closed in October 2020 (Stepping Out Studios 2020). In their Facebook announcement, Stepping Out stated that they intend to re-open "when there's an effective vaccine" (Stepping Out 2020). The post acknowledged the possibility that Stepping Out might

have to relocate to a different building. As of April 20201, the studio remains closed and has released no other Facebook updates.

Copacabana Nightclub, a historic nightclub formerly located near Times Square, closed in May 2020 (Goldberg 2020). Copacabana hosted a variety of Latin dance nights, including Las Chicas Locas, which switched to Copacabana when DanceSport lost their studio in June 2019. Copacabana has moved four times since it opened in 1940. A staffer reportedly told the NY Daily News that while Copacabana closed to due to COVID, a move was already in the works and the nightclub intends to reopen in 2021 (Goldberg 2020). Copacabana has not released any updates about their new location, and they have allowed their website domains to expire as of May 2021.

Other studios remain. As of August 2020, Brian told me in an interview that Dardo Galletto Studios, a Times Square- adjacent Argentine tango school and BachaDura's regular venue, was still open (Brian and Young 2020). When I spoke to Joe in December 2020, he said that Pearl Studios NYC continues to survive after minimizing the amount of space they occupied. "They call me every week, telling me, 'Hey, we still have you in our thoughts. We want you to come back,'" Joe said, noting that the business arrangement between Piel Canela and Pearl Studios had been mutually profitable before COVID (Joe 2020a). As of May 2021, Pearl Studios appears to still be closed due to COVID. Piel Canela's June classes will be held at Nex Gen Studios, a company that rents spaces for classes, rehearsals and auditions and is located across the street from Pearl Studios (pielcanela 2021b). Ripley-Grier Studios, which specializes in renting rehearsal studio space in the Garment District, Hell's Kitchen, and the Upper

West Side, re-opened on July 1, 2020 at 50% capacity (Ripley-Grier 2021). To the best of my knowledge, no Latin dance socials regularly met at Ripley-Grier, which has more connections to theatre than Latin Dance: the Ripley-Grier website homepage bears the tagline, "Broadway Begins Here!". Still, I attended a few bachata weekend-long festivals at Ripley-Grier Studios, and Bachata Rosa would occasionally schedule special workshops or performance team auditions at Ripley-Grier. In April 2021, Sensual Movement, the other well-known New York City sensual bachata school, began holding classes at Ripley-Grier Studios and Open Jar Studios, another Midtown-based studio offering theatrical rehearsal spaces.

Lastly, COVID-related studio suspensions and closures have created opportunities for other dancers to establish themselves in the New York City dance school and studio landscape. Sensual bachata instructors Steven Halim and Kasia Brozynska announced the opening of "K Town Dance Studio", which they claim is the "First Official Bachata Studio in the heart of New York City!!" (Art of Sensual Bachata 2021). Steven and Kasia are well-known in the New York City sensual scene; both used to teach classes for Bachata Rosa and Steven directed Daniel and Desirée's New York City performance team for three years (Sensual Bachata NYC 2021). They held a grand opening event for their new studio on Saturday March 27, 2021 (masks required), which they intend to develop into a new regular sensual bachata social (Art of Sensual Bachata 2021). They charge $15 in advance and $20 at the door, a $5 increase on Bachata Rosa's former entry fee. The decision to launch a Saturday night social suggests that Steven and

Kasia do not wish to compete directly with Bachata Rosa[22]. With no clear timeline for Bachata Rosa's return, the K-Town Dance Studio social might effectively replace Bachata Rosa. Ben and Henry have gone to the new social, and they report seeing many former Bachata Rosa dancers there. It seems that Steven and Kasia may even have Dore's blessing as old friends and future collaborators: on May 8, Bachata Rosa's Facebook promoted Steven's birthday dance event at K-Town Dance Studio (Bachata Rosa 2021b).

Individual Approaches

When interviewing New York City dancers during Summer 2020, I found that dancers varied in their approaches to dancing during COVID. Some dancers stopped dancing altogether, while others took online classes, only attended outdoor events, or wore masks and frequently sanitized their hands. Other dancers largely ignored the risks of COVID, choosing to dance inside and without masks. Out of concern for my own health and in compliance with IRB regulations, I did not attend any in-person dances. Still, my interviews with individual dancers revealed many of the strategies that dancers implemented to manage the risks of COVID in relation to dancing.

Caleb, a Chinese American and native New Yorker in his late twenties, was among the most cautious of the dancers I spoke to. Caleb began dancing Cuban salsa in 2016 at Piel Canela. He picked up bachata classes because he wanted to get the most out of his unlimited class membership at Piel Canela. He began dancing at Bachata Rosa in

[22] While Bachata Rosa has consistently held socials on Fridays, Sensual Movement's events have shifted between Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays, and Wednesdays over the last three years.

2017 or 2018, which is where I first met him. At Bachata Rosa, Caleb belonged to a small group of dance friends that included Ben. Caleb said that he only socialized with these friends at dance events. In 2018, Caleb also began dancing Zouk because he wanted a new challenge. He now considers Zouk his primary dance.

Caleb told me in July 2020 that he stopped dancing when New York City went into lockdown. He felt uncomfortable doing online classes at home because he shared an apartment with his sister, who does not dance and "Probably thinks I'm in a cult" (Caleb 2020). Caleb said that he did not miss dancing. He expressed a sense of guilt about developing his dance skills over several years, fearing that he wasted his time on a hobby that he gave up relatively easily.

In their August 2020 interview, Brian and Young told me that they were personally refraining from dancing during the pandemic. "I really want to dance, I'm dying to dance, but I'm not willing to die to dance," Brian said (Brian and Young 2020). He mentioned teaching a livestream class with his dance partner, but found that he missed being in the same room with his students. Brian continued to participate in the bachata dance scene primarily through livestreamed DJ events twice a week, which he found a little easier to adapt for online platforms. He appreciated receiving feedback from dancers in the form of comments and seeing dancers dance in front of their computer cameras, even though "it's not the same as having a dance floor and actually seeing the people dance" (Brian and Young 2020). Young spoke about taking social distancing very seriously. "I didn't touch a person for three months or get near one for that matter," she said. "I still don't really touch anyone" (Brian and Young 2020). Young

did not mention whether she continued to practice dancing on her own, though she did say that COVID interrupted her efforts to learn how to lead in salsa.

Some dancers eschewed large social dance gatherings but met up with dance partners one-on-one. Bachata Rosa's Dore told me, "I've had a secret dance partner that I've been dancing with, with all the proper measures" (Dore 2020a). He also mentioned rehearsing and teaching an online dance lesson with Carla, another Bachata Rosa dance instructor who is not his live-in romantic partner, though perhaps they shared the same quarantine bubble[23]. Henry, a Korean American, long term resident of New York City in his late twenties, told me that he would occasionally meet up with other dancers. "Once in a while, I'll meet up with people that I know who've been quarantined, or you know, test free of coronavirus" (Henry 2020). Henry stressed that he took a COVID test every two or three weeks for work and always cancelled meet ups if he felt the slightest symptoms of a cold. Both Dore and Henry chose not to name their dance partners, though Dore acknowledged that he had already "outted" Carla (Dore 2020a). Four months into New York City's battle with COVID, Dore and Henry both seemed nervous about potentially exposing their dance partners to unwanted judgment for taking limited risks in dancing.

Henry also told me that he spent a lot of time practicing bachata alone. With the shutdown of social events, his focus shifted to choreographing dances and preparing for competitions. Every day, he would practice his basic step to at least two songs. Henry

[23] Quarantine bubbles were a recommended social-distancing strategy in which individuals limited their socializing to a closed group of 4-6 friends.

practiced on his own rather than attending online classes because his consistently late work hours conflicted with the times at which many dance classes were held.

Of the dancers I interviewed, Max was the least risk-averse. Max is in his early thirties and grew up in New York City. The eldest child of Peruvian and Dominican immigrants, Max moved around a lot, from Florida to Puerto Rico. He began dancing salsa, bachata, merengue when he joined the performance team run by his university's Latin American Students Association. After gaining some performance and teaching experience in university, Max moved back to New York City to concentrate on improving his dance skills. He went dancing every night and trained with rigorous performance teams. Like Caleb, Max now favors Zouk because he feels that the average Zouk dancer is more serious about developing their technique and connecting with their dance partners.

In his interview, Max contrasted the New York City Zouk community's response to COVID with that of the New York City bachata scene. He said that Zouk dancers have largely condemned public dancing, called for dancers to support online classes, and limited socials to small in-person meetups. According to Max, bachata dancers have been far less careful:

> Now, bachata, they don't care no more. I went to a social two days ago. It's in 79th St and Park. And like…we're all dancing. Like 40 people. I wore my mask and I danced, but I danced Dominican, so it wasn't even really that close. But it kinda felt a little weird because there were a lot of people who just weren't wearing masks
> (Max 2020).

He told me that the bachata social made him realize how many dancers have been holding house parties since March. Max hypothesized that Zouk dancers are generally more cautious than bachata dancers because more of them are activists, vegans, and generally more politically aware. Implicitly, this reinforces bachata's reputation for attracting dancers who are self-absorbed, apolitical, and focused on hanging out and hooking up above all else.

Some dancers were pre-emptively defensive when determining whether to disclose their pandemic dancing practices. When I interviewed Anna and Patrick, Sensual Movement's founder and manager, Patrick brought up the topic of COVID without any prompting from me and asked me directly whether I had gone dancing during the pandemic. I responded that I had not gone dancing because I planned to visit my middle-aged and immunocompromised parents, and that the current IRB guidelines prohibited in-person social research. Patrick and Anna affirmed my decision, but pointedly did not elaborate on their personal dancing practices during the pandemic.

Online Dance Classes

In response to COVID, I redefined the scope of my ethnographic research on bachata to center online classes. Between May and August 2020, I attended livestreamed online classes taught by instructors in New York City and other parts of the world. I also tried different pre-recorded classes designed to be experienced asynchronously, and from January 2021 to March 2021, I joined an online choreography performance team**.**

Areíto Arts Online Classes

Areíto Arts launched their online class platform, AreitoArtsOnline.com, on Instagram on February 27, 2020 (areitoarts 2020). Classes are offered on a subscription basis at $19.95/ month. The classes are divided into three levels. The Beginner level includes five videos, and the Intermediate and Advanced levels each have eight videos. The videos are less than three minutes long. The editing is simple but clean; the videos are comprised of different segments that are cut together though the framing of the shots is similar throughout. The sound is well-mixed; I can hear Edwin and Dakhóta's instructions over the music. Edwin and Dakhóta teach all of the classes in a dance studio. They are dressed casually in jeans and sneakers, with t-shirts or sweatshirts that advertise Areíto Arts.

The classes are marketed as all-levels and provide a foundational movement vocabulary and tools for differentiating and kinesthetically interpreting the instrumental lines of bachata. Except for the lessons on syncopation, I found the patterns and instructions straightforward and easy to execute. I was surprised that the online classes did not reference the history of bachata at all, given that the in-person Areíto Arts classes I attended frequently highlighted bachata's Dominican context. Perhaps Edwin and Dakhóta felt that the three-minute video format was not suited to discussing bachata's history and the politics of cultural appropriation.

Piel Canela YouTube Videos

Joe Burgos uploaded a series of bachata lessons on YouTube from March 2020 to June 2020. Videos ranged in length from nine minutes to twenty-nine minutes, with the average video coming in around twenty-four minutes. Joe taught all of the classes with some assistance from Bianca, his wife and business partner. I sampled three of the classes: Bachata: Level 1: Series 1: Part 1 of 3: Bachata Basic Step; Bachata level 1: Series 1: Part 2 of 3: Basic, Right and Left Turns, and Footwork (a); and Bachata level 1: Series 1: Part 2 of 3: Basic, Right and Left Turns, and Footwork (b). The videos were originally streamed live on March 30 and April 1, 2020. I took the classes in August, at which point the most popular of the three videos had 483 views (Piel Canela Dancers 2020a). I understood the "Bachata Basic Step" video to be intended for viewers who had no previous bachata dance experience. The second video, which introduced turns and footwork combinations, was significantly more difficult than the first video.

These YouTube classes were designed to drum up interest for Piel Canela's live online classes while also providing access to dance material for students without the means to pay for dance classes due to the financial stress of the pandemic. After a week or two of offering free YouTube classes, Piel Canela launched their live online class schedule through their website. Unfortunately, I found the layout of their website and class sign-up system unintuitive. Piel Canela published a new class schedule every week, which meant that students had to check their website every Monday to book classes for the rest of the week. The schedules changed considerably from week to week, which made it difficult to plan to attend a class in a specific genre that was taught by a specific

instructor. Even though some classes were repeated each week at the same time, students could not sign up for the class as a series and would need to re-register each week. Piel Canela's Facebook page also offered a different interface for online class sign-ups which sometimes did not match the class offerings listed on their website. While I wanted to try at least one of Piel Canela's live online classes, I ultimately chose class options that were more easily accessible.

Crazy Lion Online Bachata Festivals

I found out about the Crazy Lion Events, a bachata and kizomba event organizer, through Facebook advertisements for their third online bachata festival. To the best of my knowledge, Crazy Lion was at the forefront of digitizing dance bachata festivals; their first online festival was held on March 28-29, 2020 (Crazy Lion Events 2020). Sorush León Alikhani, a Swedish dancer, started Crazy Lion Events. Sorush had been toying with the idea of organizing an online festival for a while. When the pandemic arrived, he saw organizing an online festival as an opportunity to continue working with instructors/performers and reaching out to the larger dance community (Sorush 2020). He was also aware that many dance artists lost their sources of income during the pandemic, and he wanted to provide a platform for them to teach classes and earn money (Sorush 2020).

I attended the third, fourth, and fifth Crazy Lion online festivals. Festival classes started at noon or 1pm GMT +2 because Sorush lives in Sweden. The festivals included classes by instructors who identified as Italian, Lithuanian, US American, Argentinian, Lebanese, Israeli, British, Italian, Brazilian, Indian, and Australian. Sorush also said that

online festival attendees came from "pretty much all over the world" except Africa, which speaks both to the international solidarity event branding and to the conspicuous absence of African dancers in the imagined global cosmopolitan bachata dance scene (Sorush 2020). The third festival was split between partner classes and solo classes, so I bought a half-pass for € 22 (approximately $26.16) to take four livestreamed solo classes. I bought full passes to the fourth and fifth festivals, which were entirely geared towards solo dancers. The full passes cost € 27 ($32.11) for six livestreamed classes and three video-recorded classes and € 32 ($38.06) for ten live streamed classes, respectively. Attendance varied from class to class, with some students dropping in late or leaving early depending on the popularity of the instructor. Classes during the third festival fluctuated between 21-24 students, the fourth festival's classes had 14-16, and the fifth festival's classes had 7-8. Sorush edited and released video recordings of the third and fourth festivals' classes on Dropbox for attendees to keep after the festivals finished. For the fifth festival, Sorush created a private Facebook group to host unedited recordings of the livestreamed classes.

Ivonne's Bachata Fusion Ladies Styling Bootcamp

I attended one of Ivonne Pronovich's classes on June 14, 2020 at 7-8pm. The class was entitled "Bachata Fusion Ladies Styling Bootcamp". Ben recommended the class to me because Ivonne was part of the original group of Bachata Rosa instructors and is one of Ben's favorite New York City instructors; he praised her clear instructions and credits her with helping him to perfect a smooth body roll. Ivonne marketed the class as an open-level intensive focusing on the fundamentals of bachata sensual, such as

hip movements, spinning technique, and body isolations (Ivonne Pronovich 2020b). There was no formal class registration form and the Facebook event page for the class did not list a recommended donation rate. I simply messaged Ivonne over Facebook to get the Zoom link and sent her $15 over PayPal.

There were nine students at the beginning of Ivonne's class. Class attendance peaked around 19 students but was more or less always in flux as students arrived late or left early. Most of the students were femme-presenting, but there was at least student who presented as male. Several of the femme-presenting dancers were middle-aged. Additionally, at least 5 participants joined the class from Argentina. Ivonne taught the class primarily in English, but she would also speak Spanish from time to time. As students arrived, Ivonne greeted them by name. She remarked that "almost everybody knows me". Students participated more in the Zoom chat than they had during the Crazy Lion Online Festival classes. They seemed comfortable asking Ivonne for clarifications and generally commenting on the class, likely because many of them were long-term, returning students. The chatty, friendly, multigenerational cohort of students created an environment in which heightened performances of femininity felt joyful and relaxed despite the difficulty of the dramatic, technically-challenging moves.

Connect ConRi

Cornel and Rithika are sensual bachata instructors based in Mumbai, India. I knew them from their viral YouTube videos; a video from 2016 of Cornel and Rithika's end-of-class demonstration to a DJ Tronky remix of Conor Maynard's cover of Elastic Heart and Love Me Like You Do by Sia has 29 million views (dance space008 2016).

On April 27, 2020, Cornel and Rithika posted on Facebook about a new online class series, independent of any festival platform, called "Connect ConRi". I took two of the intermediate ladies' styling classes on May 23 and May 24, 2020. The classes were taught solely by Rithika and were held at 8:30pm IST (11am EST). Similar to Ivonne's classes, there was no formal registration page or comprehensive class schedule available online. I paid a total of $26.30 for both classes via PayPal and sent a screenshot of the payment through WhatsApp. I was then added to a WhatsApp group specifically for my class. There were about ten to twelve students, all of whom were femme-presenting. They appeared to be from a variety of locations; two students commented that they were joining the class Texas and at least two students were in India. Rithika shared the Zoom link for the class and short video recordings of the class choreographies through the WhatsApp.

After the second class, a student suggested that we all connect through Instagram in order to make a collaborative dance video. Most of the students enthusiastically agreed and began sharing links on Instagram. I do not use Instagram frequently and could not figure out how to share the link to my own Instagram, so I followed everyone else's accounts. No dance video ever materialized, but almost a year later, I still see dance videos in my Instagram feed from one of the Indian women I followed, a digital trace of the temporary community brought into being through Rithika's class.

In Lak'ech Dance Academy's Hybrid Bachata Choreography Team

In January 2021, I decided to join In Lak'ech Dance Academy's hybrid online/in-person bachata choreography team. The team met once a week for three months, during

which Jahaira and Angélica taught students a three-minute choreography to the song "Yo Tengo un Amigo" by Memin El Sucesor. Most of the rehearsals were conducted over Zoom, which enabled students like me who were not in Oakland to participate. In Lak'ech requested that choreography team members pay monthly dues on a sliding scale of $85-$100. Each student was required to pay for one private lesson with either Angélica or Jahaira for $50. Students were also asked to spend at least one hour per week practicing the choreography on their own. The performance team culminated with a professionally-filmed video recording of the choreography, which In Lak'ech shared on their social media. Most of the students who opted to participate in the video resided in Oakland, but two filmed themselves dancing at home and were edited into parts of the video.

I found it difficult to remotely integrate into the In Lak'ech community; many of the students already knew each other from before the pandemic, and I missed several classes due to health issues. Still, I was surprised how relieved I felt to be dancing with other queer dancers and learning from queer instructors. Angélica and Jahaira gave detailed, clear instructions and avoided using language that encouraged dancers to move in a sexy, feminine, or masculine way. I was impressed by how many questions the In Lak'ech students had; they asked for technique clarifications on how to precisely angle their bodies or when to shift their weight from one foot to another. I sensed that students trusted Angélica and Jahaira to be patient with them and to give thoughtful, respectful answers to their questions.

Online Dance Classes: General Themes

The experience of learning and teaching bachata online differs significantly from the experience of learning and teaching bachata in-person. Online classes enabled students to connect with instructors and other students from all over the world. At the same time, many dancers remained physically-isolated, either living alone or living without a willing-dance partner. The partnerwork classes I took on my own, such as Areíto Arts Online classes, attempted to verbally explain the processes of leading and following, but I found it challenging to understand how to execute the techniques without kinesthetic feedback from an in-person partner. I noticed that Crazy Lion Events and other instructors shifted away from the partnerwork classes they offered at the beginning of the pandemic to focus on solo footwork, shines, and styling classes. Consequently, single-gender classes rose in popularity, as styling classes are typically marketed either to men or women.

All of the live online dance classes I attended were hosted on Zoom, the videocall platform which skyrocketed in popularity as COVID necessitated a transition to online learning and work. The ubiquity of Zoom during the pandemic has noticeably increased opportunities for people to participate in institutions that were previously unwilling to provide accommodations for a variety of physical and mental disabilities. However, online learning and work has generated a host of other accessibility issues rooted in inequitable internet access.

These contradictions also played out in the dance community. The convention of making Zoom video recordings available after classes have streamed allowed me to take

classes that I would otherwise have missed due to scheduling conflicts. Class recordings also enable students who struggled to follow along during the livestream to rewatch difficult portions of the class and keep practicing on their own. But video streams are not created equal. This was especially evident in the Crazy Lion Bachata Online festivals, in which the difference between instructors' internet speeds was often very noticeable. The first time I took a class with Mayra and Maycheal, who were teaching from Argentina, their sound quality was so soft it was often difficult to hear the music or understand what they were saying. Their video frequently lagged and cutout. Cornel and Rithika, who were teaching from Mumbai, also had video issues a couple of times. Instructors calling in from wealthier, European nations were not immune to connection issues. Sorush, who was teaching from Sweden, had one class that crashed multiple times. Still, the variance in the severity of technical issues reminded me that the relatively privileged world of global, studio-based, sensual bachata contains its own economic and political power dynamics.

Furthermore, the international classes enabled by Zoom underscored the economic power of the English-speaking client base. All of the classes were taught in English, and several of the instructors expressed anxieties about not speaking English. When I attended a class taught by Israeli instructors Ofir and Ofri, I noticed that Ofir did most of the explaining. Male leads often talk more than their female follow co-teachers, so at the time, I assumed they subscribed to a gendered division of labor. Later, when I interviewed Ofir and Ofri, Ofri told me that she felt self-conscious about her English and that she might need some help from Ofir (Ofir and Ofri 2020). Mariana Angeles, a

Brazilian instructor, said, “I don’t know English and I speak a lot” (M. Angeles 2020), which I interpreted as her feeling the need to apologize for taking up class time by speaking in Portuguese or less-than-perfect English. Rithika apologized for saying “theek hai”, which she explained means “okay” (Connect ConRi 2020).

Teaching online intensifies the demand on instructors to always be aware of their performing bodies. In an in-person class setting, there are often periods during which students practice with each other and the instructor watches or circulates throughout the classroom to offer corrections. On Zoom, the students are always watching the instructor. Similarly, pre-recorded video classes focus entirely on the instructor. Some instructors acknowledge the camera with more ease than others. Ofir and Ofri were notably good at making their teaching style feel dynamic for a video format. For example, during a Zoom class warm-up that involved oscillating between forward and backward steps, Ofir and Ofri would lean down towards the camera while coming forward and blow kisses to their students. Piel Canela’s YouTube videos have a no-frills camera set-up that is serviceable but static; Joe mostly dances in the middle-far ground, which makes his presence less engaging.

Instructors were sometimes anxious about whether their bodies appeared awkward or overly-sexualized on camera. When Mariana Angeles turned away from the camera to demonstrate a move, she said, “I’m going to have my bum in your face. Sorry!” (M. Angeles 2020). Maycheal warned Mayra not to get too close to the camera because there were a lot of guys in the class, the implication being that the male students would be able to look down the front of her shirt. Maycheal also pretended to see a

comment in the Zoom chat that asked, “How old are you?”, a troubling joke about sexual harassment made at the expense of his co-teacher and, going by Instagram, romantic partner (Maycheal and Mayra 2020).

Online classes complicated the mirroring relationship between the instructor and students’ bodies. Typically, students learn choreography by mimicking the movements of the instructor. The instructor usually approaches mirroring in one of two ways: either they teach facing away from the students, in which case the student’s left and right sides align with the instructor’s left and right sides, or they teach facing towards the students, in which case the instructor’s left side aligns with the student’s right side. Cornel and Rithika took the former approach, teaching the steps facing away from the camera and then turning around to demonstrate arm stylings. JMichael and Marina from the Dallas Bachata Festival took the latter approach. To avoid confusing students, JMichael and Marina performed the inverse choreography, which is to say that when they told students to take a step to the right, JMichael and Marina took a step to the left to preserve the mirroring relationship.

In online classes, I occasionally had difficulty translating the instructor’s movements with my body because the flatness of a computer screen made it more difficult for me to process spatial information. For example, in one class, Sorush taught facing the camera without performing the inverse choreography, so I mirrored his movements and ignored any instructions he gave relating to directions. Halfway through the class, a student asked Sorush to mirror us, so he started to dance facing away from the camera. This switch threw me off entirely. In the end, I stopped looking at the laptop

screen and attempted to move through the choreography from memory, assisted by Sorush's verbal counting.

Overall, I felt that online classes did not provide adequate substitutes for the elements of social dancing that I love the most. I am a primarily social dancer with more sensual than traditional bachata experience. Footwork and shine-based classes adapted best to the solo Zoom class format. While I appreciated being forced to work on my footwork technique, I struggled to keep up with the fast-paced traditional-style choreography for the In Lak'ech performance team. I have accumulated exercises for drilling body isolations and rolls, but I have not yet figured out how to improve my ability to improvise footwork without memorizing combinations. I suspect that I would need to improve my ability to parse and interpret bachata music in order to incorporate more clever syncopation in my shines.

Additionally, though learning choreographies can serve as a good exercise for improving technique, many of the more sensual style performance-oriented moves taught in online classes are not feasibly executable in a social dance setting. Windmilling your arms while executing a series of backward sliding steps on the dance floor is likely to create a multi-dancer collision. I intended to rewatch the video recordings of the classes I took to practice the choreographies, but after attempting to learn seven or eight different choreographies, it occurred to me that drilling specific techniques like body waves or balancing while spinning would be more effective for my goals as a social dancer than memorizing multiple movement sequences. In the end, with all of my

academic and social life occurring on Zoom, I grew tired of attending additional Zoom classes for dance.

Before COVID-19, dancing was a semi-regular social activity for me, an excuse to dress up, leave my house, and enter a world clearly marked as separate from my everyday life. Taking online classes from home blurred the distinction between escapist fun and mundanity. Sometimes I changed into dance shoes or socks so that I could spin more easily on the uneven, occasionally splintery floor of my apartment. Other times, I danced barefoot because it was more comfortable. While the rush of flowing from partner to partner in a dance social can take my mind off sore, blistering feet, online dance classes proved to be insufficiently distracting from the pain of wearing strappy dance heels for several hours. I put on yoga pants, a sports bra, and a loose-fitting shirt when I was planning to do several hour-long classes in a row. I kept my day clothes on for shorter, pre-recorded classes and for the In Lak'ech performance team rehearsals, which started at 10pm EST.

I took most of the classes in the living room of an economically-sized, one-bedroom apartment. After moving half of the dining table chairs into the kitchen and pushing the coffee table up against the couch, I had a clear space of roughly 6ft by 9ft. My partner Ben was sometimes working in the background at his desk while I danced. To watch the classes, I either placed my laptop on top of the television stand or connected my laptop to the computer monitor I propped up on an Amazon delivery box as part of my makeshift workstation on the kitchen table. The computer monitor was bigger than my laptop screen, so I was able to follow the instructors more easily from a

distance. I could not position my laptop such that I could easily see the class while allowing the instructor to see my whole body. At night, I was often backlit because of the position of the living room lamp, which further obscured my body.

Judith Hamera talks about the emotional and physical intimacy between dance instructor and student that can sometimes exceed the bounds of a purely transactional relationship (Hamera 2006: 35). Zoom-mediated interactions with instructors often felt stilted or surprisingly high-stakes. Even though I knew that my video was only a small square among many small squares on the instructor's screen, I often felt embarrassed to be dancing on camera, by myself, for instructors I admired. Many instructors set up two computers or screens so that they could watch themselves in one screen and observe students on the other; if a class was co-taught, one instructor might teach while the other watched the secondary screen. Some instructors had a single-computer setup, which meant that students had to dance while watching the instructor sit at their computer, watching us. I found this deeply uncomfortable. Many students, including myself, turned their cameras off during class, especially for very difficult classes. Unfortunately, this prevented instructors from offering meaningful feedback. Students were more likely to leave their cameras on if they had a previously-established relationship with an instructor like Ivonne. Participants in the In Lak'ech performance team also left their cameras on because corrections were integral to the process of preparing the choreography for a professional video recording.

Still, there is a particular kind of vulnerability in allowing strangers to view the inside of your home over Zoom. Ivonne remarked in her bootcamp class, the class in

which she seemed to have longstanding relationships with many of her students, that she enjoyed seeing her students' rooms. In a typical class lecture or business meeting over Zoom, you can use an artificial background, sit against a blank wall, or carefully orient your camera to avoid showcasing any potentially embarrassing or overly-personal objects. With a dance class, you are more exposed. Ideally, instructors should be able to see students' full bodies in order to give comprehensive feedback. While some students called in from large living rooms or dance studios, most were taking online classes from their bedrooms or other relatively crowded, domestic spaces. Instructors taught from a similar mix of spaces, revealing something of the economic disparities among instructors that are typically masked by the professional studio space. Some instructors owned their own dance studios, or at least had access to dance studios, while others appeared to be teaching in their own homes.

Oddly enough, some semblance of the connection I feel in in-person dancing was most poignantly evoked by a moment in one of Piel Canela's recorded YouTube classes. At the end of the Bachata Basic Step video, Joe says that he'll play one more song. During this last song, Joe starts dancing in profile. He then turns towards the camera, saying, "I'll face you guys! Hold my hands." He laughs and says, "I can hold you tighter," switching to close embrace (Piel Canela Dancers 2020a). He does a few steps and then a small sideways body wave, movements that he did not teach in the class, letting the structure of the online class drop away. When I watched the recording of the class, I had not danced with anyone in four months, which in August 2020 felt like a lifetime ago. Like a brief and somewhat generic flashback, Joe's virtual partnering made

me keenly miss dancing at Bachata Rosa and the simple pleasure of sharing space with other people.

Staying in Community

I return now to the New York City Latin dance scene to explore how COVID and the George Floyd protests activated dancers across multiple bachata dance communities. COVID and ongoing racial tensions in the United States, which resurfaced in the wake of George Floyd's murder, forced dance organizers to model good citizenship for dancers in their communities or at least pay lip service to notions of accountability. Conversations within the Latin dance scene coalesced around the topics of COVID health precautions and Black Lives Matter anti-racist initiatives, catalyzing discussions about how dancers and dance communities should take responsibility for issues regarding public health, racism, cultural appropriation, and sexual harassment within the Latin dance scene.

COVID

There are many opinions among New York City bachata dancers regarding dancing safely during the pandemic. Members of the bachata scene have also had different experiences with COVID. Sensual Movement's Anna told me in an August 10, 2020 interview:

> There are two types of people in the dance scene right now; the ones that totally ignore COVID and don't believe in it and make fun of it… and the ones that believe in it and have people who've died in their families and friends, so they take it very seriously
> (Anna Sime and Patrick "DJ Selphi" 2020).

While bachata dancers exist along the spectrum from extremely cautious to COVID-deniers, Anna's comment illustrates how some New Yorkers made it through the first few months of the pandemic relatively unscathed, while others, particularly those belonging to Black and brown communities, contracted COVID at higher rates and often experienced personal losses during the pandemic (Mays 2020). In an interview on Diamond's bachata podcast, *Live Discussions with Diamond*, Areíto Arts' Edwin shared that he lost eleven people to COVID, including Billy, the bass player for Edwin and Dakhóta's music company (Edwin 2020b). Diamond, who became involved in the New York City Latin dance scene in 1996 and identifies as "Puerto Rican, African American, Polish, and Hungarian" (Diamond 2020), also spoke about the effect of COVID on the Latin dance community:

> Because again, unfortunately, I think I know of one or two people, in our dance community that are unfortunately no longer here. That have passed from this disease. And I think we need to give more respect to those people that we've lost, and also the people like Dave Paris [a well-known salsa/aerial acrobatics performer and instructor] who…has recovered but he was in the hospital for months. His health is recuperating, but it's not the same. We have to think, again, take a step back as a community and realize like hey, you know, we're not gonna have in- if we have indoor events, um, I really hope it's as safe as possible (Edwin Ferreras 2020b).

Here, Diamond used his podcast as a platform to encourage dancers to take COVID seriously. He also raised the question of whether it is possible or advisable to have indoor dance classes and socials, a topic which the bachata scene has hotly debated throughout 2020 and now into 20201. Everyone I interviewed considered their own risk-mitigation practices to be sufficient, but many people mentioned secret house parties and complained about the irresponsible behavior of other dancers. Henry, the Korean

American bachata instructor and performer I interviewed on July 20, 2020, told me that he knows an organizer who claims to have survived contracting COVID twice but still posts live videos on Facebook of herself dancing without a mask at the outdoor socials she hosts (Henry 2020).

Can in-person bachata dancing really be safe during a pandemic? COVID revealed that dancers balance social responsibility and the realities of running a dance school or event as a small business differently. For Diamond and Henry, outdoor dancing can be relatively safe if dancers remain properly spaced out, wear masks, and are provided with hand sanitizer (Diamond 2020, Henry 2020). In the summer of 2020, In Lak'ech held outdoor dance classes in Oakland with mandatory masks and social distancing until state regulations shut them down (Angélica and Jahaira 2020). As we head into spring 2021, some organizers have begun hosting indoor events. Steven and Kasia's weekly sensual bachata social, which started on March 27, 2021, is held indoors in their new studio, but masks are required (Art of Sensual Bachata 2021). Anna organized a weekender event from March 4 – 8, 2021 in Orlando Florida, in which all participants were required to get rapid-tested for COVID each day. Masks were not required (New York Sensual Movement 2021).

Other instructors have remained wary of any in-person events. Piel Canela's Joe Burgos told me that he investigated possible locations in central Florida to hold outdoor classes. He understands why dancers who own their studios have to re-open in order to pay rent but says that his situation is different: Pearl Studios has not charged Piel Canela rent since they stopped holding classes. Ultimately, Joe decided that he did not want to

be responsible for anyone getting sick. “If [a student] got sick and it was my fault, I would mentally break down,” he said. “I don’t think I could handle that, so I’d rather not even try” (Joe 2020a).

As the co-organizer of BachaDura, Young feels that organizers have a responsibility to take care of the dancers in their community. She observed that some organizers “only shut down because they were mandated by law. And that to me just means that you’re not concerned about your people, the people who are supporting your business, your passion” (Brian and Young 2020). Young’s perspective as a South Korean likely informs the community-oriented framing of BachaDura’s closing announcement. During our interview, Young told me that organizers in the South Korean Latin dance scene collectively agreed to cancel all socials and classes. She said, “If a breakout happens in Korea, you’ll get destroyed. Socially. And if there was a huge breakout in a certain group, you lose a lot in terms of reputation and the community” (Brian and Young 2020). Young observed that in the United States, there is more confusion about best disease prevention practices and less social pressure on individuals to comply with centralized public health guidelines. She began receiving messages in May and June asking when BachaDura would host in-person events again, and she mentioned being aware of several discretely-hosted bachata and salsa parties. “But that’s not something that we will do,” she said (Brian and Young 2020).

Henry expressed a position similar to Young’s. Noting that some organizers have taught classes and promoted social dances where people do not wear masks, Henry said, “It’s embarrassing. It’s harming the community. Right. Long term, what happens if they

all get sick? If they all catch the coronavirus? What's gonna happen? Our community is gonna die out" (Henry 2020). Henry's comment highlights the health risks COVID poses to members of the bachata dance scene and expresses a sense of shame about the lack of safety precautions taken by some dancers. This suggests that Henry at least is thinking about the bachata scene's reputation among people who are not bachata dancers; possibly dancers who belong to adjacent Latin dance scenes or the greater New York City community.

Brian, BachaDura's other co-founder, also raised concerns about the potential for scapegoating organizers if their dance events lead to a COVID outbreak. He said:

> There are people saying on social media for example, 'Oh people can make their own decisions. They're adults. Let them decide, you know, if they want to attend these things or whatever'. But my thing is, the minute something happens, if there is an outbreak, and it's traced to like an actual dance event, people are gonna point fingers at the organizer
> (Brian and Young 2020).

Here, Brian suggests that the individualistic, live-and-let-live philosophy that has enabled the proliferation of different dance styles, teaching methodologies, and communities within the bachata dance scene has practical limitations. He noted that the government has penalized restaurants and bars for flouting COVID restrictions, not individual patrons. Brian expressed concern that the government might step in to shut down dance organizations if dance socials became super-spreader events.

Sensual Movement's Anna acknowledged her responsibility to support bachata dancers by organizing a GoFundMe for "full time dance instructors, DJs, organizers" (Anna Sime 202a). She posted about the fundraiser on Facebook, tagging 38 people she intended to include as equal-share recipients of any funds raised, and called on others to

tag those in need. Her Facebook post received many likes and comments, including many thankyous from nominated recipients. As of May 2021, the fundraiser has raised $1,710 and is still open (Anna Sime 2020b). As far as I can tell, Anna has given no further updates about the status of the fundraiser since March 23, 2020.

On January 31, 2021, Anna also launched a Facebook fundraiser to finance travel visas for Daniel and Desirée, one of the most successful sensual bachata couples in the world. In her Facebook post, Anna explained that she and three other colleagues or friends spent more than $10,000 on filing Daniel and Desirée's visas a year ago, and that the pandemic resulted in additional immigration fees totaling more than $5,000. The visa fundraiser raised only $33 and is now closed (Anna Sime 2020c). I expect that it was unsuccessful because bringing Daniel and Desirée to the United States as special guest instructors boosts event ticket sales for Sensual Movement. For example, Sensual Movement marketed their March 2021 festival in Orlando, Florida as "Daniel and Desiree Sensual Bachata weekender in Orlando," even though Daniel and Desirée gave a single three-hour virtual class and were not physically present in Orlando (New York Sensual Movement 2021). Neither Anna, who has a career in finance, nor Daniel and Desirée, who are cream-of-the-crop celebrities in the sensual bachata world, are at risk of financial ruin. Given that other people within and outside of the dance community continue to struggle due to loss of employment, perhaps dancers perceived Sensual Movement's request for help with paying for the visas as insensitive and self-serving.

For Anna, who is economically-privileged in comparison to organizers who work in the arts full-time, COVID opened up new business opportunities. She told me that

now that all the instructors and performers are stuck at home, she has been able to plan collaborations with people who used to be too busy to return her calls for weeks. Anna strikes me as someone who thrives on the hustle of the bachata dance landscape even as she laments about increased competition from other organizers. She said:

> For us, [COVID has] been kind of good, I guess. We were able to lock down some nice venues and kind of get back. I don't want to say that I want to have a monopoly. Like Patrick said, competition is healthy if they're being fair and supportive… I feel like when this whole corona thing is over, [we have] a few projects that are kind of going to bring us back to the top. Not saying that we are not [already the top], but with all this competition, it's kind of like everybody for themselves. But I want us to be like, 'Oh, I'm in New York, I know the place to go: Sensual Movement.' I want to go back to those times when we were the only ones
> (Anna Sime and Patrick "DJ Selphi" 2020).

Anna contradicts herself; she believes competition is good, but she is deeply nostalgic for the days when Sensual Movement had no competition. She also attends more to building relationships with glamorous venues, European sensual bachata instructors, and the students, typically young professionals with a good amount of disposable income, who are attracted to the prestige associated with international dance artists.

Not all sensual bachata instructors or organizers approached COVID as opportunistically as Anna, and not all traditional bachata dancers advocate for the strictest COVID precautions. Similarly, I cannot say that POC dancers were unilaterally more aware of and responsive to the risks of COVID than white dancers. However, I found that dancers who spoke about collective responsibility and community tended to be traditional bachata dancers who have belonged to the New York City Latin dance community for more than a decade. Diamond, Edwin, and Brian each have connections to Afro Caribbean diaspora communities in New York City and expressed a sense of

accountability to Black and brown communities that have experienced more COVID-related deaths. Anna does not have these particular loyalties, and her client base does not depend on maintaining a good reputation within a network of social justice-oriented instructors or dancers. She correctly intuits that her business model will allow her to ride out the pandemic and potentially come back stronger than ever. The mapping of stylistic divides onto racial divides is even more clearly reflected in the bachata scene's navigation of Black Lives Matter, which I will discuss in the next section of this chapter.

COVID has led to a lot of discussions within the bachata scene about leadership and accountability. Many dancers feel that instructors and event organizers should model and enforce safe dance practices, even if they disagree about what exactly constitutes safe dance practices. Henry, Young, Diamond, and Edwin all spoke about the importance of holding other community members accountable for their behavior. Diamond told me that he has privately talked to dancers and organizers who he feels are dancing unsafely (Diamond 2020). Henry stressed to me that while he wants to encourage dancers to be safe, he does not want to condemn or publicly shame anyone. He said:

> I post things online and specifically who I want to praise, while the ones who I wanna call out, I don't really directly call them out, because I want them to be able to learn without being shamed. Right, because I, I mean, none of us really want to be shamed. Right. Or at least in public
> (Henry 2020).

Unfortunately, neither direct private communication nor vague online critiques seem to be particularly effective at changing people's behavior. Diamond said that many of the organizers he has messaged responded that all of the dancers who choose to attend their

events are adults who can decide for themselves what risks they are willing to take (Diamond 2020). BachaDura's Young told me, "I try to approach and talk to people who are doing this and they, they pretty much don't want to talk" (Brian and Young 2020). She said that she doesn't know what else to do besides continuing to tell people that there should be no socials. She also intends to avoid future collaborations with organizers and instructors who flagrantly flouted COVID precautions (Brian and Young 2020).

I have seen Facebook call outs circulating within the New York City bachata scene, often referring to an unnamed aggravator as "you know who you are". These call outs are posted by dancers who are angry with dancers who are dancing unsafely, as well as by dancers who are angry about being called out. Facebook call out posts usually receive likes and sympathetic comments from people who already agree with the position voiced in the call out, suggesting that these call outs primarily function a way of signaling the poster's views to likeminded people. In the years following Trump's triumph in the 2016 presidential elections, much has been made about cultural silos and the lack of good-faith debate on social media. Bachata social media networks are no exception.

I noticed a lot of anxiety about passing judgment and being judged when I talked with dancers about navigating the ethics of dancing during COVID. Many dancers called for masking and hand sanitization as methods for making dance socials safe, but did not acknowledge that organizers, through no fault of their own, lacked the information necessary to ensure the safety of any in-person dancing. In the first few months of New

York's battle with COVID, much about COVID remained unknown and federal governmental guidelines were often inconsistent and scientifically unsound. After COVID cases in New York continued to decline over the summer in spite of mass Black Lives Matter protests, more dancers seemed to feel that masked outdoor dancing must be safe. Max, the Dominican-Peruvian New Yorker who pivoted from salsa and bachata to zouk, told me that when none of his friends who had been dancing for months contracted COVID, he also started to go out dancing (Max 2020).

Additionally, while many dancers expressed concern or disapproval, most refused to name specific dancers even in one-on-one conversations with me for my thesis, a document which interviewees understood would not circulate widely within the bachata scene. I do not belong to the network of professional and semi-professional bachata organizers and instructors in New York City, so it is entirely possible that dancers would have been more forthcoming with an insider interviewer. However, I sense that publicly calling out specific dancers online, even if they hold leadership positions, violates an unspoken community norm that disagreements should be settled privately to avoid "creating drama" in the scene.

Henry's denouncement of public shaming points to the reality that the subjects of online call out posts are often unable to move beyond feelings of guilt and defensiveness to consider changing their behavior. Even if critiques are offered constructively and compassionately, call outs may be interpreted as reducing a person's identity solely to their morally-objectionable actions. Max talked to me about the relief he and others felt in the company of dancers who decided participate in dance socials during the pandemic:

> A lot of people are, I guess, in a weird space where they like feel like the bad people? But then at the same time, they're like, "I feel so much better with myself." I had a conversation with everybody. And they all were just like, "I think they all avoided the conversation" … And I was like, "Yeah, man, like how do you feel?" … They're breaking down their feelings, and everybody just feels very alone. And so they're feeling a normalcy for the first time (Max 2020).

Ben, my partner, has expressed similar sentiments to me, saying that social dancing helps him manage the anxiety of pandemic life. As people who have experienced mental health struggles, Max and Ben position social dancing as a disability accommodation that carries the same or greater weight as the needs of immunocompromised people whose lives continue to be at risk as the pandemic drags on. Max's statement suggests that judgmental members of the scene are unfairly painting dancers who choose to attend socials as "bad people", when in fact those dancers are merely meeting their needs for social companionship. To me, this argument selfishly recasts unsafe dance practices as self-care. But it also speaks to the way in which individuals and community leaders felt pressured to take moral stances related to both COVID and increasingly mainstream conversations around racial justice, policing, and mass incarceration.

Like many communities during the summer of 2020, the bachata scene faced the challenge of developing processes and spaces for meaningfully tackling issues of public health, racism, sexism, and ableism with nuance, generosity, and accountability. The New York City bachata scene can be unforgiving when it comes to publicly acknowledging and working through problems and conflicts in community-wide discourse. Some call outs focus on behavior and are offered in good faith while others brand those who imperfectly form and execute their values as intentionally malicious.

The New York City studio-based bachata scene is relatively young, and many instructors and organizers used to work with and for each other before parting ways to start their own companies. These intertwined histories combined with a relatively limited pool of students and social dancers results in a bachata scene that is small enough in scale for gossip and rumors to circulate easily. Gossip has a useful social function; word-of-mouth instructor recommendations or warnings about dancers who have previously exhibited sexually-predatory behavior enable dancers to have better experiences at dance classes and socials. Yet slim profit margins and inherent competition between organizers and between instructors raises the stakes of gossip. The line between a call out and trashing someone's reputation is often blurred, and negative buzz about a particular instructor or event has the potential to hurt people's livelihoods

Black Lives Matter

Anxieties about expressing (or at least appearing to express) the right political views in the right manner, which were already surfacing as the bachata scene strove to negotiate COVID risk factors, reached new peaks during the global George Floyd protests in May and June of 2020. On May 25, 2020, Minneapolis police killed George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man. Video taken by bystanders showed that Floyd repeatedly said he could not breathe as Derek Chauvin, a white police officer, pinned him to the ground with a knee on the back of his neck. The following night, protesters took to the streets in Minneapolis. Protests quickly spread to other cities within the United States, including New York City. Former President Donald Trump characterized the Minneapolis protesters as "thugs" and threatened military armed force against

protestors (Taylor 2021). In New York City, as in many other US cities, police responded to protesters with an excessive show of force, resulting in the injuries and arrests of many protesters. Though the huge crowds who joined in the New York City protests in May and June diminished as the summer wore on, activists continue to organize protests up through the time of writing this thesis in May 2021. Derek Chauvin's trial began on March 29, 2021, and on April 21, 2021, he was convicted of second-degree murder, third-degree murder, and second-degree manslaughter (The New York Times 2021). Chauvin will be sentenced on June 15, 2021. Almost a year out from George Floyd's murder, anger over the extrajudicial killings of Black people by police and questions about how to dismantle and rebuild racist institutions remain in the air.

In support of the George Floyd protests, many people, including some New York City bachata dancers, posted black squares on their social media, educational resources on racism, and donation links to Black Lives Matter and other organizations and individuals committed to anti-racist works. More than ever before, companies across industrial sectors publicly voiced support for Black Americans. Spotify, Apple, TikTok, and many large record companies participated in #BlackoutTuesday on June 2, 2020. This initiative was originally organized under the hashtag #TheShowMustBePaused by Jamila Thomas and Brianna Agyemang, two Black women in music marketing (Coscarelli 2020). Many bachata dance schools and event organizers in New York City joined #BlackoutTuesday, boycotting social media posting and livestreams for a day to draw attention to the contributions of Black artists. Some dancers applauded instructors and organizers for speaking up about police violence and racism, some argued that

#AllLivesMatter and decried the destruction of property that occurred during the protests, while others chose to disengage from these conversations entirely.

Like the majority of people, most community leaders in the bachata scene do not have prior experience organizing for Black Lives Matter or the abolition of the prison-industrial complex. The George Floyd protests introduced many to ongoing anti-racist abolition activism for the first time. As such, it is unsurprising that organizers and instructors in the bachata scene who genuinely wanted to help the movement felt nervous about doing or saying the wrong thing. It is equally unsurprising that some of the ways in which dancers attempted to bring together dancing and activism were flawed, leading to complex intracommunity conversations about how the Latin dance scene should best fight white supremacy and anti-blackness.

What follows is my analysis of an online discussion about compensating artists of color for their labor and cultural appropriation in the Latin dance scene. The discussion emerged in response to an online dance festival that was conceived as a fundraiser for Black Lives Matter. Julia, a white female dance instructor in her early twenties, organized the fundraiser using the online Facebook page and branding of a bachata social dance event that is held regularly in New York City, which I will refer to as USBG[24]. Julia is on staff for this event and helps teach the pre-social classes. When I

[24] Consistent with the rest of this thesis, I have assigned pseudonyms to all of the dancers who are not professional dance instructors, performers, or community organizers. While the bachata social and organizer in question are well-known in the New York City scene, after some reflection, I decided against naming them. Issues with white allyship and non-black POC allyship are common throughout the bachata dance scene. I do not want to single out the mistakes of one particular organization. My critique of this organization's handling of this specific online discussion could be applied to many communities within the bachata social dance scene and the Latin dance scene more generally.

interviewed USBG's organizer, Alex, who is white, they told me, "[The fundraiser] was Julia's idea, I just offered the platform to her… That's why it was under the [USBG] umbrella, but it was all her" (Alex 2020). Although Alex minimized their role in organizing the fundraiser, they told me that they believe in Black Lives Matter. "Once the opportunity presented itself to support them, I took it," they said (Alex 2020). When I asked Alex whether they believed that dancers had a moral obligation to initiate conversations about racism, they said that no one should be required to say anything they do not want to. Still, they felt that there could be consequences for not speaking up, especially for famous dancers or community leaders. They said:

> People might look up to what you're going to say, they're going to expect you to say something. And again, if you don't want to say anything, that's your right to not say anything. But be ready for whatever may come your way (Alex 2020).

Based on these comments, it seems that Alex supported Julia's fundraiser because they genuinely wanted to help the Black Lives Matter movement and because they are aware that consumers, including dancers, increasingly expect the businesses and creators they patronize to perform good politics.

USBG advertised the Black Lives Matter fundraiser in a Facebook post which was released on USBG's Facebook page. The post stated:

> …we would like to align our community to help the Black Lives Matter Movement. In support, [USBG] is collaborating with a variety of artists to offer a series of virtual dance classes the weekend of June 19th-21st. All proceeds will be donated to the Black Lives Matter Foundation – New York Chapter (USBG 2020a).

The post requested a minimum donation of $10/class. Classes, which were streamed over Zoom, each lasted an hour. They included lessons in Latin fusion styling, hip hop

fusion, reggaeton, sensual bachata, and non-specific body movement techniques. Based on the photographs featured in the fundraiser poster, three of the twelve instructors involved in the fundraiser appeared to be Black and several others appeared to be Latino/Latina (Julia 2020).

I only attended one of the fundraiser classes. To sign up for the class, I sent a Facebook message to Alex and told them which class I wanted to take. After I forwarded Alex a screenshot of my GoFundMe donation, they sent me the Zoom link for the class. The class was designed to drill body isolations. It was taught by Aimee, a Black woman. I do not know Aimee personally, but I knew she and Morgan, the lesbian Latin dance lead I interviewed, organized small salsa and bachata socials in the past for dancers who wanted learn to lead and follow regardless of their gender (Morgan 2020). There were about 24 people in Aimee's class, including Julia and Alex. Most of the students were white, femme-presenting, and in their twenties or thirties, which falls within the typical age bracket for this bachata social dance event (Alex 2020). Ultimately, the fundraiser raised a total of $1,600, meeting the GoFundMe goal (USBG 2020b).

A few days before the beginning of the fundraiser class series, Hana, an Asian woman, began a line of questioning about compensating artists and cultural appropriation on the official Facebook event page for the Black Lives Matter fundraiser. To the best of my knowledge, Hana has never been affiliated with USBG as an instructor, but she seems to have attended USBG events in the past. She also appears to be on at least friendly-acquaintance terms with Aimee. I recognized Hana from a Facebook post Morgan shared about a queer dance event she attended in the summer of

2019. According Morgan, Hana inspired her as a woman-lead in the Latin dance scene. The post was accompanied by a photo of Hana, Morgan, and Aimee posing together. In the comments below the post, Hana mentions that Aimee introduced her and Morgan.

In her first comment on the Black Lives Matter fundraiser page, Hana asked, "Are the artists being paid for this work? Does 100% proceeds mean gross or net?". USBG's Facebook account replied, "It's all voluntary". Hana pushed back, arguing that "a white-led group using free labor of black/POC/'artists who are most certainly currently out of jobs to collect BLM donations in their own name just doesn't make sense". Neither Julia nor USBG's account responded to this comment. Instead, Aimee, the only Black female instructor participating in the fundraiser, replied, "I did not feel in any way forced to do this event. It is a use of my skills in a way that I can lend to a movement I believe in". Aimee also offered to discuss the situation further with Hana. Aimee's comment was liked by seven people, including USBG's account and Hana.

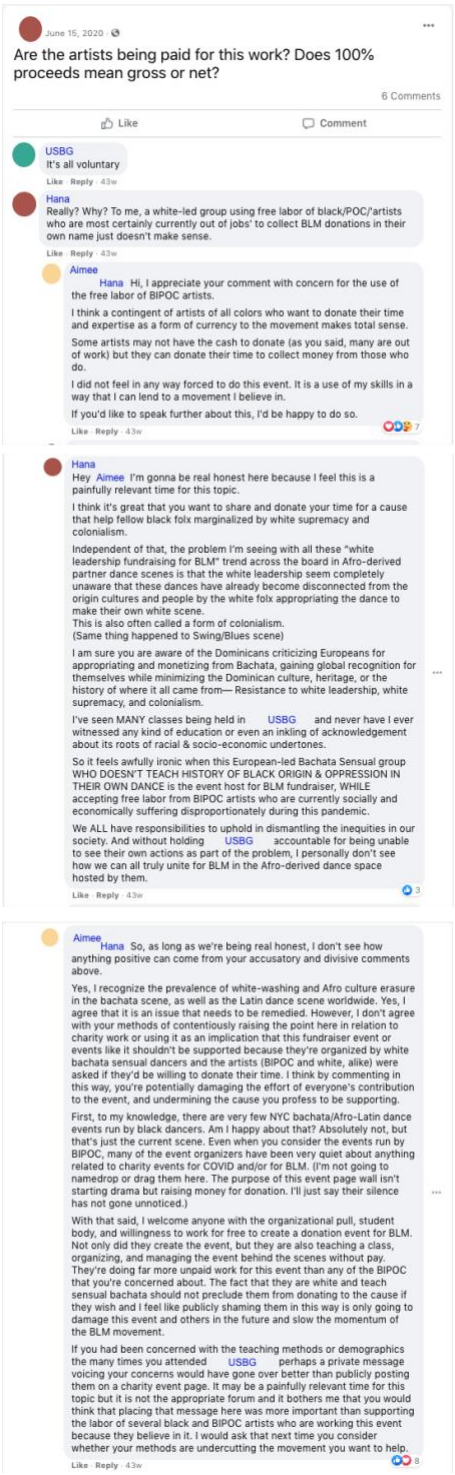

Figure 7: Screenshots of Hana's Post on USBG's Black Lives Matter Fundraiser Facebook Event Page (Hana 2020)

The following day, Hana wrote a long reply to Aimee's comment. In it, Hana said, "I think it's great that you want to share and donate your time for a cause that help [sic] fellow black folx marginalized by white supremacy and colonialism." Hana went on to critique white social dance organizers for hosting fundraisers for Black Lives Matter without recognizing the cultural appropriation of Afro-Latin dances, including bachata, blues, and swing. Hana said:

> I've seen MANY classes being held in [USBG] and never have I ever witnessed any kind of education or even an inkling of acknowledgement about its roots of racial & socio-economic undertones. So it feels awfully ironic when this European-led Bachata Sensual group WHO DEOSN'T TEACH HISTORY OF BLACK ORIGIN & OPPRESSION IN THEIR OWN DANCE is the event host for BLM fundraiser, WHILE accepting free labor from BIPOC artists who are currently socially and economically suffering disproportionately during this pandemic. We ALL have responsibilities to uphold in dismantling the inequities in our society. And without holding [USBG] accountable for being unable to see their own actions as part of the problem, I personally don't see how we can all truly unite for BLM in the Afro-derived dance space hosted by them.

In response, Aimee wrote:

> …I don't see how anything positive can come from your accusatory and divisive comments above. Yes, I recognize the prevalence of white-washing and Afro culture erasure in the bachata scene, as well as the Latin dance scene worldwide. Yes, I agree that it is an issue that needs to be remedied. However, I don't agree with your methods of contentiously raising the point here in relation to charity work or using it as an implication that this fundraiser event or events like it shouldn't be supported because they're organized by white bachata sensual dancers and the artists (BIPOC and white, alike) were asked if they'd be willing to donate their time.

Aimee observed that there are few bachata and Afro-Latin dance events in New York City that are led by black dancers, and that many event organizers of color have not fundraised for COVID or Black Lives Matter. "I'm not going to namedrop or drag them here," Aimee added. "The purpose of this event page wall isn't starting drama but

raising money for donation". She emphasized the labor that Julia and Alex put into creating the fundraiser and expressed concern that "publicly shaming them in this way is only going to damage this event and others in the future and slow the momentum of the BLM Movement". Aimee concluded:

> If you had been concerned with the teaching methods or demographics the many times you attended [USBG], perhaps a private message voicing your concerns would have gone over better than publicly posting them on a charity event page. It may be a painfully relevant time for this topic but it is not the appropriate forum and it bothers me that you would think that placing that message here was more important than supporting the labor of several black and BIPOC artists who are working this event because they believe in it. I would ask that next time you consider whether your methods are undercutting the movement you want to help.

In summary, Hana objected to the hypocrisy of white-led dance organizations fundraising for Black Lives Matter to gain woke points without addressing their complicity in the economically-exploitative whitewashing of dances that evolved within the African diaspora. Aimee in turn objected to Hana's aggressive public criticism of the fundraiser and the bachata social dance group which sponsored it. For Aimee, the priority should have been to encourage as many people to raise money in support of Black Lives Matter as possible. Aimee also seems to be more invested than Hana in preserving the unity of the bachata scene against "divisive comments" and "drama".

As two women of color who care deeply about racial and gender equity in dance, Hana and Aimee touched on many complex topics in their discussion, including cultural appropriation, economic inequity, the messy relationship between charity and activism, image-consciousness, and institutional accountability. For the most part, they seemed to be attempting an online exchange of ideas in good faith. Conflict based in different experiences and different approaches to enacting shared values is healthy and often

productive. Hana and Aimee's argument had heat but remained respectful. Hana liked Aimee's final rebuttal, suggesting that she harbored no ill-will towards Aimee. Given that Hana and Aimee have a pre-existing relationship, perhaps they continued their conversation privately.

Hana and Aimee's Facebook exchange illuminates some of the ways in which publicly discussing politically-sensitive issues and community values in the bachata scene can be extremely difficult and prone to communication misfires. Generally, Hana comes off as a bit condescending and argumentative. Her assumption that the POC instructors participating in the fundraiser are "most certainly currently out of jobs" lumps all POC instructors together in an overstatement that reinforces stereotypical associations of Blackness (and brownness) with economic precarity. While Hana initially addressed her questions to the fundraiser's sponsors, when she switched to directly addressing Aimee, Hana seemingly implied that the unchecked extractive nature of USBG's internal structures overrides the consent Aimee gave to work the fundraiser for free. I can understand why Aimee bristled at this suggestion and might have rolled her eyes at a non-Black POC explaining the phenomena of white supremacy, colonialism, and cultural appropriation to her.

Moreover, I interpret Hana's rhetorical strategy as belonging within a particular social justice framework that is not typically invoked within the Latin dance scene. Hana used terms like "white supremacy", "colonialism", and "folx" that I read as signaling a holistically anti-oppressive worldview informed by scholarship and activism. Aimee used less-imposing terms like "white-washing" to talk about the same issues. Dancers in

the USBG community who are not already comfortable with academic-activist language might have gotten the impression that Hana believes she is smarter and better than they are. In short, Hana's alienating tone might have prevented other dancers from fully considering the merits of her argument.

Aimee's interpreted Hana's comments within the framework of "cancel culture". Aimee believes that Hana brought up the issue of cultural appropriation on the fundraiser event page to publicly shame the fundraiser's organizers and discourage other socially-conscious dancers from supporting the fundraiser. Aimee also seems suspicious of Hana's shift from talking about artists' compensation to talking about cultural appropriation. Aimee implied that Hana used cultural appropriation to deflect from Hana's real, less-defensible point: that white bachata sensual dancers should not organize fundraisers for Black Lives Matter. Aimee then refuted this perceived argument by highlighting the labor the white organizers performed for the fundraiser and by appealing to the great importance of the Black Lives Matter movement's mission. For Aimee, an all-hands-on-deck approach does more good than squabbling about who has the right to offer help.

I interpreted Hana's goals more generously than Aimee. Hana did not say that dancers should boycott the fundraiser. She said that without addressing issues of cultural appropriation within USBG, "I personally don't see how we can all truly unite for BLM in the Afro-derived dance space hosted by them". In her response to Aimee's initial comment, Hana applauded Aimee for wanting to donate her time to raise money for Black Lives Matter. To me, Hana's primary goal was not to stop the fundraiser

organizers from holding a fundraiser but rather to pressure them into also revising their culturally appropriative practices. I would argue that Hana was attempting a "call in" by inviting the event organizers to recognize and correct their harmful behaviors while remaining valued members of the bachata dance community. However, given the moral panic over cancel culture in the media, Hana's tone and language, and the fact that Hana did not explicitly state that she was calling for additional action USBG's part rather than a boycott, I understand how her comments were perceived as hostile and punitive.

Aimee also took issue with the way Hana voiced her complaints on the public forum of a charity event Facebook page. Aimee told Hana that she should have messaged USBG's organizing team privately. This raises the question of how community issues can be collectively addressed within bachata communities. While comments on the page of a public Facebook event are likely not the best forum for engaging in honest, hard conversations, private messaging a community leader prevents the community at large from being involved in those conversations unless the community leader decides to open the conversation to the public. Given pervasive concerns about splitting the scene over "drama" as well as the pressures of inter-community competition, it seems likely that most organizers would be reluctant to initiate public conversations about cultural appropriation themselves.

Ultimately, I am most frustrated with how the fundraiser organizers handled Aimee and Hana's conversation. Aside from liking both of Aimee's comments and stating that the instructors voluntarily donated their labor, the USBG account did not engage in the discussion at all. Neither Julia nor Alex commented on the discussion from

their personal accounts, though they might have reached out in private messages. I expect that as white people, they were worried about saying the wrong thing. But letting the only Black woman involved in the fundraiser take on all the labor of publicly defending the fundraiser and USBG is poor allyship. Julia and Alex's silence made Aimee the token Black person vouching for the good intentions of her white collaborators. Hana was forced to argue her case against a Black woman rather than the white organizers she was attempting to hold accountable, and the uncomfortable optics of the situation may have discouraged other community members from joining the discussion.

Troublingly, the fundraiser's organizers were also unwilling to respond to racist comments. When Julia promoted the fundraiser on her personal Facebook account, an Asian man left a multi-paragraph comment in which he argued that "Donating to BLM today is to indirectly donate to Joe Biden's 2020 campaign" (Julia 2020). He also expressed some anti-black sentiments about George Floyd, "black-on-black crime", and black crime against Asians and other non-black people. Given a very clear example of racist rhetoric, neither Julia nor Alex offered any public rebuttal. Granted, to my knowledge, neither Alex nor Julia has previous experience in social justice organizing. Most sensual bachata communities of which I am aware are not used to engaging with online conversations about social issues. I also understand why Julia, a young woman, might have been hesitant to engage with an aggressive male stranger on Facebook. Perhaps she was concerned that deleting the comment would only escalate the situation.

Even though Hana's abrasively pitched critique may have caused Julia and Alex some public embarrassment, the substance of her critique is valid. Like many sensual bachata events, USBG offers no historical or political context in their classes. As far as I am aware, they have never had a Black instructor on staff, and they have never hired a Black guest instructor or a Black DJ. To the best of my memory, their events are attended by relatively few Black dancers even though the events have no problem attracting Asian and Latino/Latina dancers. I attended this social's events for several years and was able to recognize many of the regulars, but only one of the leads with whom I regularly danced was Black. Some clear-eyed acknowledgment of the white supremacist and colonialist projects unintentionally upheld by USBG's organizational structure is much needed. While I agree with Aimee that there is a pragmatic reason to encourage even flawed allies to raise money, fundraising without addressing the systemic issues within the community does not feel like solidarity.

To be clear, these shortcomings do not make USBG uniquely horrible; most predominately white organizations, however well-intentioned, have similar failings. I too have experienced paralysis and made mistakes in my attempts to confront internalized white supremacy and participate in anti-racist work. What bothers me is how Alex and Julia made no public effort to respond to a person of color's constructive criticism. In the almost year that has passed since the Black Lives Matter fundraiser, USBG has not made any public statements about addressing cultural appropriation or anti-blackness within the bachata social. Moving through discomfort to respond to criticism and shut down

racist statements should have been considered part of the necessary labor of organizing a Black Lives Matter fundraiser.

As a dancer who frequented USBG, I feel discouraged by the way in which Alex and other USBG staff handled Hana's public criticisms. I am not a well-known dancer, an instructor, or an organizer. While I can recognize many of the social's regulars, I am not close to USBG's staff and their friends. Hana appears to be a prominent dancer in the Latin scene who has networked with instructors and organizers like Aimee. If Alex and other USBG-affiliated instructors refuse to publicly engage with criticism from a dancer with some degree of clout within the scene, why would they listen to me? If I posted a public critique about cultural appropriation or ineffective anti-harassment procedures in the hope that other dancers would back me up, someone would accuse me of trying to cancel USBG. If I shared my concerns privately with Alex and they were amenable to my suggestions, I would become the primary person holding them accountable, which requires a large investment of time and energy for potentially disappointing results.

Other dance schools have developed more collective accountability mechanisms. In the immediate aftermath of George Floyd's murder and the first wave of protests, Fusion Dance NYC, a dance community that combines multiple partner dance genres, initially shared reading lists and Facebook accounts that centered Black perspectives. Several weeks later, they actively solicited feedback from Black and POC dancers who attended their monthly socials or might be interested in attending their socials in the future. They created a google form that enabled dancers to anonymously share pros and cons about their past experiences at Fusion Dance NYC socials. The google form also

allowed dancers to comment on Fusion Dance NYC's Anti-Racism statement and proposed initiatives for building relationships with Black and POC dancers. Dancers who completed the survey received a free pass to the next in-person Fusion Dance NYC event (Fusion Dance NYC 2020).

In Lak'ech Dance Academy has a student leadership team that serves as an advisory board. Jahaira and Angélica invited six or seven students with a variety of identities and skills to serve on the leadership team. Jahaira told me, "We're very intentional and always look for folks who can bring a perspective where we can learn and see and, you know, maybe catch our blind spots. That's really what it's about" (Angélica and Jahaira 2020). Angélica added that the leadership team "Help[s] us slow down when we're like go, go, go mode. They'll be like, 'Okay, let's take a deep breath'. Okay! I didn't even know I needed that" (Angélica and Jahaira 2020). They mentioned that the leadership team actively took part in difficult conversations Jahaira and Angélica felt they needed to have about homophobia and transphobia with particular students.

Bachata: Where Have We Been, Where Are We Going?

Bachata is a relatively new genre within the Latin social dance scene, which perhaps explains why many bachata communities lack the shared language, frameworks, and processes to address racism, homophobia, transphobia, and consent. Neither Fusion Dance NYC nor In Lak'ech are bachata-centric dance organizations. Fusion dance has ties to the blues and swing communities, which tend to be more progressive, and In Lak'ech teaches a mix of bachata and salsa. While bachata organizers, instructors, and dancers certainly discuss these issues privately or semi-privately, to my knowledge,

these conversations were not documented or made generally accessible to the bachata scene. This changed with the arrival of COVID and the closure of most dance schools and socials. Suddenly, community leaders had a lot more time on their hands and needed to find new ways to stay connected to their communities.

2020 saw the emergence of podcasts and livestreamed panels designed to spotlight key figures and topical concerns in the bachata and greater Latin dance scenes. Edwin created *The Journey,* a series of Facebook livestreamed interviews with prominent BIPOC and LGBTQ+ dancers in the Latin dance scene (Edwin 2020b). Jennifer Isabel, a bachata instructor and performer based in New York City, started the podcast *Café con Jen* in which she interviewed Latin dancers and business owners (Jennifer Isabel 2021). A private Facebook community called The MOB Dancers (Mafia of Beats), which is organized by Damian Guzman and Muñeca Nieves, held multiple livestreamed panels on Black Lives Matter and COVID (The MOB Dancers 2015). The forced shift from embodied practices of connecting through dance to recorded longform verbal exchanges between dancers catalyzed the creation of new spaces for celebrating the history and diversity of the bachata scene while acknowledging and addressing the scene's fallibilities.

Arguably the most successful interview-based Latin dance podcast to come out of the pandemic is Diamond Rivera's *Live Discussions with Diamond*. Diamond began the podcast in June 2020 and has produced over 100 episodes in the year since the podcast's launch (Diamond Drfilmz Rivera 2021). Episodes are available on Spotify, YouTube and through the public Facebook group Diamond created for the podcast. In

December 2020, Diamond became a managing partner at "Tu Bachata Radio", an online radio station dedicated to bachata music (Diamond Drfilmz Rivera 2020). Tu Bachata Radio has streamed all of Diamond's interviews since then and hosts video recordings of the interviews on the Tu Bachata Radio Facebook page.

Live Discussions with Diamond is not strictly a bachata podcast; Diamond interviews "artists, entrepreneurs, social activists, and more" who dance salsa, bachata, zouk and kizomba (Diamond Rivera 2021). The podcast bears similarities to the interviews produced by GWEPA, an online platform that celebrates Latin culture through music and dance (GWEPA 2021). In 2018, GWEPA ran interviews with key players in the bachata scene, including Edwin, Joe and Bianca, Jahaira and Angélica, Korke, Carlos Cinta, and Ataca y La Alemana[25]. Several of these guests have also appeared on Diamond's podcast.

Still, it is significant that *Live Discussions with Diamond* is hosted by a dancer who is currently active within the New York City bachata scene. Prior to the pandemic, most of the online blogs I found on bachata were written by dancers who mainly danced zouk or salsa[26]. Additionally, a lot of blogs focused on critiquing sensual bachata

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[25] GWEPA aired the following interviews on Facebook: February 28, 2018, Edwin; July 2018 Joe and Bianca; January 2018 Korke live Q&A; April 2018 Jahaira and Angélica; Apr 25, 2018 Carlos Cinta; September 2018, Ataca y La Alemana.

[26] Examples include: Laura Riva's Dance Place blog, Stefani Ruper's The Perfect Follow blog, Michael Hořejše's blog post "What is Happening to Bachata?" (https://blog.horejsek.com/what-is-happening-to-bachata/), and the interview with Shaka Gonzalez Brown at the Capital Congress Latin Dance Festival on Anwar Dunbar's blog (https://bigwordsarepowerful.com/tag/bachata/).

dancers for oversexualizing women and appropriating traditional bachata and elements of Brazilian zouk. On an episode of *Live Discussions with Diamond*, Edwin told an anecdote about attending a meet-and-greet at a festival in LA in which attendees directed their questions about bachata's history to the salsa and urban/sensual bachata instructors rather than the artists who dance and have researched Dominican bachata[27] (Edwin 2020b). Edwin has called for more of his peers who joined the traditional bachata scene around 2003-2004 to "have more conversations about who paved the way [during the nineties]" (Edwin 2020b).

Diamond is perhaps uniquely suited to facilitate conversations which bridge the divisions within Latin dance and bachata communities. An Afro-Latino native New Yorker, Diamond has deep roots in the New York City Latin dance scene (Diamond 2020). In 1996 at the age of five, Diamond started dancing at the Starlite Dance Studio in the Bronx. Crucially, though Diamond has danced for over two decades, he does not organize dance events. He mostly danced salsa until 2015 when he decided to see what "this new dance scene or new Bachata craze [was] all about" (Diamond 2020). Diamond told me that he was drawn to bachata remixes of English-language songs and sensual bachata dancers' dedication to training:

> The dancers I met from New York would literally travel to places like Italy or travel to places in Europe and Spain to train with Korke and Judith, who were considered the pioneers of sensual bachata… That really struck a chord with me

[27] Here, Edwin refers to himself, Dakhóta, Carlos Cinta, and Adam Taub, who were all present at this meet-and-greet. Carlos Cinta is a Chicago-based Dominican bachata instructor who was a major player in building the bachata scene in the mid-2000s (https://www.ccbachata.com/). Adam Taub is a documentary filmmaker who made *The Duke of Bachata*, a documentary film on bachatero Joan Soriano. Adam also teaches workshops on bachata history and Dominican culture (https://www.bachataclass.com/).

> because in New York, when it comes to salsa, most people are just going to a class in another borough or around the corner from their house (Diamond 2020).

Diamond credits Bachatamania, an event organized by DJ and salsa organizer Alex "El Maestro", and Bachata Rosa for showing him that "there is really something to this new scene" (Diamond 2020). While today, committed dance enthusiasts like Caleb and Max complain about the lack rigor sensual bachata dancers bring to their dance practices, in 2015-2016, sensual bachata was an up-and-coming dance in the Latin scene. At the time, sensual bachata would have attracted salsa dancers who were serious enough about dancing to pick up a new, relatively-niche dance, similar to how Brazilian zouk currently circulates among New York City's more advanced Latin dancers.

Live Discussions with Diamond pitches itself to a multicultural, global Latin dance scene. While most of Diamond's guests have been from the United States, he told me that he has received comments from people living in Australia and Russia as well as US listeners who would like to learn more about non-US American dancers. He plans to include more international guests in the future, "because, again, with our dance community, it's a global thing. It's not just a national thing" (Diamond 2020). While Diamond posited that studio dancers from around the world belong to one dance community, he also stressed that the dance community is not homogenous. He said, "We all don't think the same. We all don't act the same" (Diamond 2020). Diamond attempts to validate everyone's beliefs and experiences on his podcast. "I need to give people a voice and not shut people out just because they don't have the same beliefs as me," he said (Diamond 2020). He told me that having to socialize with people who were "totally

on a different wavelength" in the military prepared him to listen to podcast guests with an open mind.

Diamond linked the creation of *Live Discussions with Diamond* to the isolating conditions of the pandemic. He said:

> I've created a podcast now that I'm allowing the voices of our community to be heard. Being able to share their voices and share their experiences and share their journeys is very important. Especially during times of COVID when everybody's kind of stuck at home. I believe more than ever that, you know, it's important to figure out the stories or understand the people behind the stage (Diamond 2020).

Diamond's strongly-held belief in the importance of interpersonal connection stems from losing a close friend to suicide in 2012. His friend "always said he never felt that anyone would listen to him" (Diamond 2020). Diamond implied that feeling isolated, particularly during COVID, may exacerbate depression and suicidal feelings. He offers his podcast as a way for the dance community to remain in relation to each other through the uncertainties and hardships of pandemic life.

Diamond also views COVID as an opportunity to work through some of the ongoing issues in the Latin dance scene. He told me:

> I don't want our scene to come back in the future and still be in the same place that it is. I think with this quarantine and having these talks and having these discussions is opening people's eyes and telling them, 'Hey, yeah, let's change things.' We believe the same thing, and we see what's wrong. Let's not so much nip it in the bud but let's really find the best solution… (Diamond 2020).

Diamond named colorism, sexism, discrimination, and sexual assault as ongoing problems in the Latin dance scene. He critiqued what he perceives as a tendency within the dance community to focus solely on the positives of dancing. Diamond intends to

leverage the personal relationships he developed over his long tenure in the Latin dance community to inspire honest, respectful conversations among dancers. He also wants to showcase the wide range of experiences, interests, and beliefs among dancers:

> I've talked to dancers in LGBTQ+ community from Oakland. Soon I'm gonna be talking to social activists…and a person who has actually transitioned from a male to a female and has been in this dance community and understanding their life. Understanding their struggle, but also shedding a light on that in our community, our dance community, there is so many walks of life and we have to appreciate that
> (Diamond 2020).

Diamond also mentioned interviewing DC dance organizers Sierra Morales and Raven Sutton about creating community for deaf and hard-of-hearing dancers. *Live Discussions with Diamond* contributes to a general cultural wave, spurred by #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, of strategically mobilizing around personal experiences of oppression to call for systemic change. During his podcast interview with Edwin, Diamond asked people to listen to the posts of women coming forward about sexual assault and harassment in the scene (Edwin Ferreras 2020b). Diamond and Edwin also recognized that sporadically-shared personal anecdotes and individual apologies are just the beginning of confronting sexism, homophobia, racism, and ableism in the Latin dance scene. They spoke about encouraging dancers, particularly men, to listen better, self-reflect, and seek guidance from people with expertise in developing inclusive community agreements with actionable enforcement plans.

At the same time, Diamond's mission to create a virtual space for all dancers inevitably sometimes conflicts with his desire to support marginalized dancers. When I

asked him how listeners responded to conversations about politicized identities and issues of sexual assault, he said:

> To be honest with you, I haven't yet had a really negative response, and I think it's really due to the humility and the respect that I'm showing my guests. There have been guests that we don't agree on an issue, but I treat our discussion without bias. I treat our discussion as a neutral ground, as a safe space… (Diamond 2020).

Diamond's interest in making his guests comfortable and allowing them to voice opinions that he does not necessarily share has likely contributed to his success in arranging interviews with a wide range of dancers. Many of his interviewees, such as Rodney "Rodchata" Aquino, Carlos Cinta, and Ataca y La Alemana, are well-known and much respected within the global Latin dance scene. The celebrity interview-format does not lend itself to political debates. However, it is impossible to hold a truly neutral conversation. Diamond mentioned to me that he interviewed dancers from Florida "who just politically have different beliefs" (Diamond 2020). He did not elaborate on what those political beliefs were, but I interpreted his choice of "Florida" as a signifier for a conservative, Republican, or perhaps pro-Trump worldview. Holding a safe space for dancers to express racist beliefs, or transphobic beliefs, or beliefs about COVID and the 2020 US presidential election that are factually incorrect, inherently makes the space unsafe for others.

Live Discussions with Diamond's philosophy of inclusivity mirrors Diamond's approach to social dancing. He said:

> …I think the most important thing in our dance community...especially in social dancing, is just being social. Being open to new styles, being open to new experiences, being open to traveling, when things get better. And opening and creating new relationships with dancers all over the world. For me, I've realized

> over the years of being able to travel that you can learn so much. From learning then you can help others with their own experiences.
> (Diamond 2020).

Diamond's podcast allows dancers to virtually experience the geographic and human diversity of the Latin dance scene. As he does in social dancing, Diamond prioritizes building and maintaining low-conflict relationships with the dancers he interviews. Unlike a discussion that takes place in the comments of a Facebook post, interviews conducted over Zoom allow Diamond to talk face-to-face with dancers over an extended period of time: his interviews are typically at least an hour long and sometimes last for over two hours. Diamond embraces the new knowledge that comes from encountering different people and does not attempt to convince interviewees to agree with him. Like an attentive dance partner who enable their partner to move or connect with their own body in new ways, Diamond helps his interviewees to share and better understand their own experiences.

Conclusion: Is There a Bachata Dance Community?

COVID, Black Lives Matter, and dancing foreground the vulnerabilities and pleasures of the body in interrelated ways. COVID has driven people to both fear and long for the physical presence of others. Living in isolation with a perpetual awareness of sickness and death sits in the body, often creating stress, tension, and pain. The George Floyd protests brought international attention to the ever-present risk of bodily violence for Black people in the United States. Mass protests, for many the first and only experience of being in a crowd during the pandemic, invited people to put their bodies on the line to demand structural change, creating choreographies that were by turns

traumatic, joyful, enraged, and resilient. Dancing, particularly dancing a dance as intimate as bachata, opens dancers to objectification and abuse on a smaller scale. COVID will likely have long term effects on the embodied experience of dancing bachata. Even after widespread vaccination, dancers might wear masks, attend smaller socials with trusted friends, or hold their partners less closely. Grabbing someone to dance without asking for their consent was never acceptable behavior, but doing it without a mask introduces a new element of potential boundary violation.

In grappling with COVID and anti-blackness, bachata dance communities and the greater Latin dance scene underwent a process of evaluating and revising what it means to be a dance community. With whom do we make community? Whose voices need to be heard? How do we offer and respond to critique in good faith? How can we structurally reshape our communities without replicating the oppressive systems that we seek to dismantle? COVID and the George Floyd protests ruptured everyday life for New York City dancers, forcing people to consider their ethical obligations to others on a local and global scale.

In the absence of in-person socials and classes, bachata dancers found new ways to connect: simultaneously moving through a class choreography with dancers living on different continents, organizing online events, and listening to podcasts to learn more about the landscape of the Latin dance scene. Many dancers felt a duty to take a stance in support of COVID public health restrictions and Black Lives Matter. COVID in particular challenged individualistic notions of social responsibility within the bachata scene and the greater Latin dance scene; often, dancers called upon instructors and

organizers to model risk mitigation and put the health of the community above their profits. The politicization of in-person social dancing and a renewed attention to cultural appropriation generated conflicting opinions about safe and inclusive dance policies. Conversations highlighting racism and colorism in the dance scene also brought renewed attention to persistent issues with sexual harassment and assault.

The tension between inclusivity and the necessarily exclusive nature of "safe spaces", as well as the tension between protecting people from harm and resisting carceral logic, run through Diamond's podcast and the project of creating community within the Latin dance scene. Diamond views his podcast as a way of sharing information about dancers' concerns with dance organizers so that dance organizers cannot claim ignorance about problems in the scene (Diamond 2020). He said:

> And a lot of people can create situations and create unfortunate experiences that definitely need to be combated. Definitely needs to be curbed and definitely needs to be brought to light so we can then get rid of those negative vibes from our scene. Those negative people, the people that are harming our scene (Diamond Interview).

His references to "negative people" and "get[ting] rid" of negative vibes suggests that some dancers should be banned from events because their hurtful behavior makes other dancers feel unsafe. Organizers often take this approach when dealing with dancers who have sexually harassed or assaulted other dancers. BachaDura has a list of "known offenders" who are not allowed to attend their events (Brian and Young 2020). Dore has sent people home from Bachata Rosa and banned some from attending future events (Dore 2020a). Anna has also banned dancers from Sensual Movement socials and fired one of her instructors for sexually harassing dancers (Anna 2020).

But the practice of banning is inconsistently administered and perpetuates harm in other ways. For most of the bachata dance communities I researched, inclusivity and accountability are works in progress. While many organizers condemn their peers for ignoring incidents of harassment and assault, they often feel uncomfortable stepping into the position of judge/ punisher. BachaDura's Young said that famous and popular dancers often face no consequences for their actions because their versions of events are taken more seriously than those of their accusers. Young would like Latin dance community leaders to work with experienced mediators to develop systems for dealing with incidents (Brian and Young 2020). Dore acknowledged that "it's really hard for me to say banned for life" and said that he notifies dancers who were harmed before a banned dancer returns (Dore 2020a). Henry, the Korean American bachata dancer I met at Bachata Rosa, alleged that Bachata Rosa mishandled some cases of harassment (Henry 2020). Anna told me that she might give a banned dancer a second chance depending on the scenario, but that they would need to apologize and explain what happened to the person they hurt (Anna 2020). In Lak'ech's Angélica wants to develop a restorative justice process for working with dancers who have caused harm, and she and Jahaira plan to invite an outside expert to facilitate allyship trainings for their academy (Angélica and Jahaira 2020). Without transparent communication between dance communities and shared values and processes for addressing harmful behavior, banning simply pushes perpetrators into other events run by organizers who do not prioritize protecting dancers from harassment.

COVID and renewed attention to structural racism in the United States also highlighted the challenges the bachata scene faces in conceiving of itself as a community. *Live Discussions with Diamond* imagines an international bachata dance community within the virtual space of a podcast that is unaffiliated with any particular dance school or social. The success of the podcast indicates that dancers enjoy participating in a global dance scene by listening to the stories of prominent instructors and organizers. At the same time, virtual communities under COVID often have fleeting existences. It is difficult to build long term bonds within a Zoom class of people who will likely go back to local in-person dances as soon as COVID sufficiently abates. Whether *Live Discussions with Diamond* will continue to thrive as the pandemic gradually winds down in the United States remains to be seen.

Even within the relatively limited geographic scope of New York City, it is not clear to me that dancers understand themselves as belonging to a united, singular bachata scene. Membership to the bachata scene or to a particular dance community is informal and largely self-defined. From school founders to one-time drop-ins, dancers have wildly different levels of investment in sustaining the organizing structures of the New York City bachata scene. This leads to a lack of consensus about whose voices matter within the scene. Should dance communities be accountable to the dancers who attend their specific socials? All the dancers in the bachata scene? The greater New York City population? Additionally, COVID has led to the formation of underground dance socials, communities that could perhaps be defined by their refusal of any collective accountability: every dancer for themselves. For the communities which manage to

weather the pandemic, statements and structural changes made in relation to COVID and BLM will be incorporated into each communities' identity and brand moving forward.

In particular, the financial hardships of COVID have highlighted the fiercely competitive nature of the Latin dance market, which inherently limits the degree to which dance communities are able to collaborate. Instructors and organizers with the cushion of savings or lucrative day jobs have capitalized on lower studio rents and the increased availability of venues. Meanwhile, seasoned studios have been forced to close and some instructors and organizers have sought other sources of employment. Edwin took a job in music production and moved to the Dominican Republic, though he reassured his Facebook followers that he does not intend to retire from dance (Edwin 2020a). Joe was also evaluating his options when I interviewed him in December 2020. Given how artists and businesses have struggled to survive within the scene, it is unsurprising that dance communities are reluctant to invest in centralized structures that might help them to address scene-wide issues such as racism and sexual harassment.

CHAPTER V

FINAL CONCLUSIONS

Judith Butler's concept of gender performance both liberates and entraps the individual. On one hand, you have the power to refuse or reshape gender norms through your everyday actions: what you wear, how you move, how you speak. On the other hand, it is impossible for individuals to consciously attend to the vast multitude of mundane acts entangled in reproducing cisheteronormative gender. As a result, it is difficult to truly "degender" most acts. Those of us who would prefer not to identify within the gender binary find ourselves reproducing the gender binary, or at least being perceived as reproducing the gender binary, all of the time.

In examining the formulation of sexuality and intercultural community within bachata dancing, I have attempted to unpack how bachata dancing navigates the tension between individual embodied agency and the social networks of meaning within which individuals are rendered legible. Dancers attempt to control how their racialized and gendered bodies are read through tactical deployments of dance technique. They might also formulate a social identity within the bachata scene by attending or shunning particular dance communities and by verbalizing their experiences and opinions in online Facebook discussions or the comments of a live broadcast interview. But there are limits to which individual dancers can modify their bodies, align themselves with communities that mostly reflect their values, or effectively express themselves in online dance scene debates.

Dance communities provide the physical spaces and social structures within which dancers' bodies are read. They incorporate and produce dancers capable of properly interpreting each other's bodies by providing classes that teach dance technique and etiquette. Just as significantly however, dance communities tacitly communicate their values and target audiences through their geographic location, choice of venue, music selection, entrance fees, and social media usage. Competition for venues, weekly time slots, and dancers also places restrictions on how dance communities are able to self-determine their identities and organizational structures.

Community norms and values are inherently exclusionary. In bachata dance, evergreen issues of sexual harassment and cultural appropriation (as well as racism and colonialism) are at the forefront of debates about marking and enforcing community boundaries. Is it possible to create a restorative justice process for sexual predators within the bachata scene? What ethical obligations do sensual bachata communities have towards Dominican bachata artists? The bachata dance scene, globally and in New York City, has grown very quickly over the last five to ten years. Inbuilt competition and a growing disjuncture between sensual bachata and the traditional bachata/salsa scene prevents new community leaders from learning from the accumulated knowledge of past community leaders.

What I find most compelling about bachata dance is how clearly it links personal, embodied decisions to the social framework within which a dancer operates. Choosing to participate in a dance community as a lead or follow enables dancers to communicate something about their gender, sexuality, personal boundaries, and/or momentary mood

through the way in which they interact with other people. Encountering difference and attempting to express or act on personal desires within a dance community can challenge dancers to reflect on the ways in which their choices are given meaning by their social relationships and the many contexts embedded within the dance itself.

Several additional theses could be written on bachata dance technique within the Dominican Republic, the origins of sensual bachata in Europe, the circulation of bachata dance within New York City outside of studio settings, or the relationship between Asian dancers and notions of multiculturalism in the bachata scene. As a non-Spanish speaker, I feel that researchers other than me are better positioned to cover the historical evolution of bachata dance. I initially decided to focus on studio-based, sensual bachata dancing in New York City because of my particular dance experiences investments. The unforeseen obstruction of COVID resulted in a considerable expansion of the scale of this thesis to include online communities outside of New York City as well as COVID's effect on New York City dance communities. I look forward to rereading this thesis years from now as a reflection on COVID as experienced by myself and several interrelated dance communities.

I regret that I was unable to develop deeper relationships with dancers in the bachata scene, particularly traditional bachata dancers, female dancers, and dancers of color. Had I been able to conduct several months of participant ethnography, I would have attempted to involve more members of the community in reviewing and shaping the scope of my research. During the process of scheduling interviews with dancers during COVID, I felt guilty about repeatedly contacting professional dance instructors

and performers who were struggling to keep their businesses afloat. Many of them never replied to me. The organizers and instructors who made time to talk with me were often personal acquaintances or dancers with the privileges of whiteness and alternative forms of financial security.

Dance communities all like to claim that they have technically accomplished dancers who treat each other like a family. I would argue that for most dance communities, technique is subordinate to interpersonal relationships, or interpersonal relationships are subordinate to technique. While most of my bachata dance experience is in the sensual style, I now have a greater appreciation for the anti-oppressive values and efforts of dancers within the traditional bachata scene. No scene is perfect, and sensual bachata is often unfairly singled out for incidents of sexual harassment that occur in every scene. That being said, I have observed a strong correlation between dance communities that have engaged with issues of consent and sexual assault on a more structural level and dance communities that advocated for extra COVID precautions and are invested in building communal knowledge about social justice allyship and cultural appreciation of bachata dance. The class and social dance structures of these communities also tend to be more open to fluid, potentially queer forms of intimacy, allowing the technique of bachata to subtly transform the ways in which dancers allow themselves to relate to one another.

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