

Who I Am: Gender, Embodiment, and Code Switching in Bachata Dance Communities

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ABSTRACT

Bachata is a music and dance genre from the Dominican Republic that has become an increasingly diasporic and cross-cultural form of expression. The lyrics of bachata songs focus on topics of love, the loss of love, and sexual desire. The ways in which bachata musicians articulate their love brings an awareness to the elements of binary gender embedded in the music traditions and history of bachata. Bachata dance reveals the socio-cultural structures of gender within bachata dance communities, as well. The dancers fulfill clear lead or follow roles, and these roles are typically designated based on gender: males lead and females follow. The movement of bachata encourages dancers to outwardly express sensuality through the ways that they move their bodies. Additionally, bachata dance, and especially the subtype known as sensual bachata, allows dancers to create close corporeal connections. As Tomie Hahn suggests, sensorial and embodied experience enables individuals to engage with their socio-cultural understandings of self and community. Through embodiment, individuals navigate aspects of identity, including gender identity, that either aligns with or counters social expectation.

Through an analysis of sound, lyrics, and my own ethnographic research, I examine aspects of gender, embodiment, and code switching within bachata music and dance communities in Knoxville, TN and Charlotte, NC. I include my experiences as a female bachata dancer as well as interviews with dancers from these communities. I seek to uncover how bachata music and movement connect to and alter one's sense of identity, both within and outside of binary and Latin American gender stereotypes. I argue that through music and movement, embodiment, and code switching, those involved in the bachata dance community develop a unique view of self within their own gender perception that variously aligns with and challenges binary gender structures. For women in particular, bachata dance allows for an expression of sensuality that leads to an increase in empowerment and confidence. Further, due to the freedom of individual exploration, the necessity for binary gender roles within the Knoxville and Charlotte bachata dance communities shifts, and therefore leaves the dance floor as a space for open gendered expression.

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CHAPTER ONE

BACHATA DANCE

Welcome to the Dance Floor

It is a cool New Year's Eve night in 2018. I walk into Coco Cabana Restaurant in Atlanta, Georgia—they host “Salsa Sundays” every week with the hottest salsa, bachata, and cha cha songs, as well as a live band. Experienced and inexperienced dancers crowd onto a small, wood dance floor. The lights are dark but loud music fills the restaurant and regulates the movement to and from the floor. At the head of the floor, the live band stands on a raised stage, singing down upon the moving bodies. In between songs, the lead singer introduces the artists, relays a little of his own history with performing, and signals for the start of the next song. The mics are turned up so loudly that I seem engulfed in a daze of sound, unable to focus on anything but the music and the dancing. The vibrations from the sound resonate through my own body and I can feel the percussive beat thumping through my chest. The band plays a couple of high energy salsas with a non-stop percussive drive, trumpets, keyboard, and guitar. The band then decides to slow the music down a bit and I hear the familiar bongo roll as a bachata song begins. The “boom, chick, boom, boom” sound of the bass line and the metallic plucking from the melodic guitar fill the restaurant.

A man I have never met makes eye contact with me and, through a gesture, asks me to dance. With a nod, I accept, and we move hand-in-hand to the edge of the dance floor, claiming as much space as possible for our few minutes together. The repetitious four-beat rhythm of the bachata continues and, moving in close, arms around one another, my partner and I sway together for a few beats, gathering information about the way we

respond to one another. Then we begin moving in and out of the basic bachata steps, changing our feet in sync with each beat of the music in a “1-2-3, tap” pattern. As the “follow”—the partner who typically reacts to the progression of motion and does not initiate it—I respond to the movement that my partner leads and add in my own flair of an arm gesture or extra body roll. While I do not engage in a verbal conversation with this man, I do feel as if I am getting to know him as we move through several minutes of the dance.

At the start of our dance, our movement maintains standard steps, but the longer we dance, the more my partner adds in complicated sensual movement—stepping, rolling, and bending with the energy of the song fueling us. I gain his respect as I follow, catching the subtle movements as he leads with nothing more than his fingertips on my shoulder. With a glance around the room, I notice that as our sensual movement increases, more eyes from the surrounding dancers focus in on us. Increased sensuality in a dance often means a dancer is more experienced. If a lead facilitates exaggerated dips, bends, rolls, and footwork, and the follow takes those cues and executes them beyond expectation, then the dance is viewed as impressive. My display of understanding bachata and my ability to follow the movement with accentuated femininity garners me positive attention, especially from the male onlookers. When the bachata song ends, another man immediately approaches me and asks me to dance, and I experience a flow of non-stop partners for the rest of the evening. I leave that night around 2 am feeling different from when I came in. I feel more accomplished, strong, and confident as a woman due to the physicality of the dancing, my control over my own gendered performance, and the positive attention from the other dancers.

Introduction

I have had a personal interest in bachata dancing for several years. I began my dance training in college with the highly structured ballroom dance style. Scholar Joanna Bosse describes ballroom dance as a “variety of dance and music traditions, styles, and steps with ethnically, geographically, and temporally diverse origins that are ordered within multiple, embedded, and overlapping classification systems.”¹ While ballroom dance includes many different styles of dance, each form contains specific guidelines for how to perform the dance with efficiency and correctness. Ballroom dance events typically occur in a dance studio or formal dance hall with hardwood floors, wall-to-wall mirrors, and quality sound systems. In my experience, I found that those involved in ballroom dancing, and especially performance, were upper-middle class members of society who highly valued fancy clothes, flashy jewelry, and nice heels. As a college student, I intentionally saved my money so I could buy the dresses and shoes that displayed similar values and capital.

Additionally, I discovered that ballroom dance—with its well circumscribed, binary gender roles—aligned with my own conceptions of femininity and rarely challenged me to explore anything outside of what I found to be comfortable. Dancers maintained a fixed distance from one another, women wore fairly conservative dresses that showed only some skin, and the dancers expressed only an “appropriate” amount of sensuality. Further, the music that we danced to in the studio were songs that I already

¹ Joanna Bosse, *Becoming Beautiful: Ballroom Dance in the American Heartland* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 26.

knew from the radio. I learned how to move my body in set patterns and motions to songs by pop artists such as Bruno Mars, Portugal. The Man, and Michael Bublé. This level of musical and physical familiarity, as well as the technical challenges, physical freedom, and sense of community that dance brought into my life quickly shaped my love for the activity. When I moved to Knoxville, Tennessee for graduate school, I mourned leaving behind my beloved ballroom community. I left with a mission, though, to search for a dance studio in my new city as a means to meet people and to continue my dance training.

After some time, I joined an energetic and accepting Latin American dance community; together we danced salsa, merengue, cumbia, and bachata. It was in the context of this community that I learned how to move outside of structured dance forms, and noticed its profound effects on my own ideas of gender and identity. Soon I discovered that my prescribed, formal dance training did not fit in with the highly improvisatory and corporeally connected Latin American dance styles. I began to watch YouTube videos and follow dancers on Instagram who seemed to embrace their follow or lead dance roles with confidence and exaggerate their skills on a dance floor. Almost every song that played at the social dances were in Spanish, and I found myself making bachata and salsa playlists, memorizing lyrics that talked about love, sex, and heartbreak so I could sing with the songs that played at dance events.

My own conceptions of “woman” and “female” quickly expanded as I spent more time in this dance community. I learned a new framework in which body movements and actions could physically portray femininity and sensuality. I educated myself on these new ideas through my engagement with the music, movement, and

culture surrounding bachata and salsa, and relied on my new sense of embodiment to create unique interactions with my partners on the dance floor. As my dance skills and familiarity with the music increased, so did my confidence. This transformation of self was a very positive one for me. Through my years of dance, I had watched other individuals, both leads and follows, go through similar changes in the ballroom scene, and my observations for this project further reveal how the more one practices a skill, the more confidence that one develops. But the salsa and bachata dance scene, in particular, seemed to create a meaningful space for gender and self-exploration, as the community broke down social barriers and encouraged participation. This experience pushed me to explore how and why these changes of self occur, particularly in relationship to the gender ideologies and the overall participatory culture of a dance community.

This thesis employs gender as a category of analysis to demonstrate the social gender attitudes, sexual identities, and cultural diversity present within specific bachata communities. In the bachata dance community, the binary constructs of male and female gender roles remain prevalent, and these societal constructs are partially informed by Latin American stereotypes, such as the *machismo* male and sensual woman, as I discuss below. In examining Latin American and Caribbean music and dance genres within the United States, I also consider the perpetuation of Latin American gender stereotypes by those who interact with the genres, especially through gender performativity. In this way, my approach echoes that of Tomie Hahn who states, “As a window into embodied expression, fieldwork in music and dance can reveal how a community attends to the world and constructs its identity and art from shared sensibilities, shared sensual

orientations.”² Through fieldwork with bachata dancers and instructors in Charlotte, North Carolina and Knoxville, Tennessee, this thesis positions music and movement as a lens to uncover and bring attention to the gendered social structures and cultural ideologies within these communities. The research conceptualizes how these experiences in turn reflect and inform the community dynamics. I argue that through music and movement, embodiment, and code switching, participants involved in the bachata dance community develop a unique view of self within their own gender perceptions, one that variously aligns with and challenges binary gender structures.

Background and Method

Gender dynamics, elements of hybridity, globalization, and issues of representation are found through the development of bachata. Its current use within society also mirrors that of other Latin American and Caribbean music and dance genres. Latin American and Caribbean music, such as salsa, reggaetón and bachata appear in the United States popular music mainstream from many sources, including Latin American artists, crossover artists, collaborations, and remixes. The presence of Latin American styles in the United States results from diasporic flows and immigration from Latin American and Caribbean countries to the United States.³ Deborah Pacini Hernandez details the history of popular Latin American music genres in the United States and says the styles “have been resignified and transformed in the United States as their newcomer

² Tomie Hahn, *Sensational Knowledge: Embodying Culture through Japanese Dance* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), 5.

³ Deborah Pacini Hernandez, *Oye Como Va!: Hybridity and Identity in Latino Popular Music* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 80.

performers—and now their children—negotiate their lives, identities, and musical practices in an increasingly interconnected and transnational world.”⁴ She further states that the presence of these styles shows the “multiple dimensions of Latinos’ constant but ever-shifting engagements with both U.S. mainstream and Latin American culture.”⁵ This continued negotiation between place and identity as expressed through music means that as a researcher, I must be careful to acknowledge who is creating the music and how it is being used.

Bachata Background

Bachata first developed in the Dominican Republic during the 1960s. Pacini Hernandez, who authored one of the few scholarly treatments of bachata in English, describes it as a “vocal genre” with guitar, and says its lyrics relate to real-life experiences and feelings.⁶ The earliest form of bachata music started as an intensely romantic genre, stemming from the Cuban and Mexican bolero with lyrics about love, but at slower tempos than the bolero.⁷ At the onset, the genre appeared only in the slums and low-class areas of Dominican cities, often looked down upon by those in the upper classes and viewed as sexually inappropriate because of the lyrical content of the songs.⁸ Due to political turmoil during the 1960s, many Dominicans left the Dominican Republic and settled in New York.⁹ This corner of the United States was already home to a large

⁴ Pacini Hernandez, *Oye Como Va!*, 2.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Deborah Pacini Hernandez, *Bachata: A Social History of a Dominican Popular Music* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 20.

⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁸ Pacini Hernandez, *Bachata*, xiv.

⁹ Pacini Hernandez, *Oye Como Va!*, 86.

population of Puerto Ricans, whose influence (as well as Cuban influence), led to the creation of salsa, another diasporic Latin American and Caribbean music and dance style.¹⁰

Although bachata spread to the United States during the mid-20th century, the genre remained ignored in the Dominican Republic by those outside of lower-class society.¹¹ With the development of radio, though, bachata continued to increase in popularity as bachata singers received more airtime. By the end of the late-20th into the early-21st century, artists in the Dominican Republic and those in the diasporic communities gained recognition through technology—especially in a significant amount of radio time and substantial record sales; as a result, bachata music and movement became globalized.¹²

In the late-20th century, both salsa and bachata were reterritorialized into organized dance studios and dance halls, important vehicles that spread bachata music and movement throughout the United States. Anthropologist Hannah Gill describes the large presence of Latin American immigrants in the United States and says the “South and Southeast have become a new frontier for Latin Americans as migration networks

¹⁰ Pacini Hernandez, *Oye Como Va!*, 86-88.

¹¹ Pacini Hernandez, *Bachata*, 2.

¹² Ibid., 209-210. The globalization of bachata music occurred especially due to developments in technology. Other music genres from the Caribbean, such as reggae and reggaetón, also spread across the globe due to the internet and other forms of mobile media. Through this spread, the genres went through processes of mixing and hybridization that reflected the experiences of the artists who produced the genres and the locations in which they resided. See Ifeona Fulani, “Introduction,” in *Archipelagos of Sound: Transnational Caribbeanities, Women and Music*, ed. Ifeona Fulani (Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2012).

have connected Mexico and Central America to southeastern cities like Atlanta, Charlotte, and Memphis.”¹³ The presence of Latin American individuals and communities within the southeastern United States has allowed for the regional spread of cultural expressions, such as bachata. Through the performance of bachata in dance halls and the movement of dancers to the southeastern areas of the United States, bachata arrived in both Tennessee and North Carolina, the locations for my fieldwork.

Bachata, and more specifically sensual bachata, continues to increase in popularity in the United States. Sensual bachata was ostensibly first created in the early 2000s by Spanish dancer Korke Escalona, who altered Dominican bachata dance styles to include slower, full body movements.¹⁴ The music used for sensual bachata dancing more closely resembles that of the romantic boleros, as the slower tempos allow for more corporeal connection between the dance partners. A bachata song is only labelled as “sensual,” though, when it is considered in correlation to the dance. A slow bachata is just a slow bachata when it is played on the radio, for example, but it becomes a “sensual bachata” when it is used to allow dancers to move in the sensual style. My work is one of the first to acknowledge this genre of bachata music and dance. While sensual bachata continues to increase in popularity in the dance scene, the earlier Dominican versions of bachata are still practiced. Thus, speaking of bachata, both the music and dance, now often necessitates a distinction as either “Dominican” or “sensual.” In my fieldwork, the

¹³ Hannah Gill, *The Latino Migration Experience in North Carolina: New Roots in the Old North State* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 3.

¹⁴ Bachata Sensual Official Site, Bachata Sensual, n.d., <https://www.bachatasensual.com/>.

communities danced in both the Dominican and sensual styles, but the sensual style was more popular.

Bachata Community

The bachata dance community includes a group of people who gather in a shared space to participate in a common interest. This notion of community mirrors that of several other scholars' description of groups that gather for a common experience. Sarah Thornton labels groups of young people that gather in public spaces to dance and share in music and social activities as club cultures, and suggests that club cultures rely upon overlapping "tastes" in order to create a sense of community.¹⁵ Thornton says that the groups, "congregate on the basis of their shared taste in music, their consumption of common media and, most importantly, their preferences for people with similar tastes to themselves."¹⁶ Bachata communities gather due to their shared preference for Latin music and desire to interact with the music, dance, and culture that surrounds it. Often, though, members of the group still value difference and do not exclude people who may enjoy other styles of music or dance.

Due to the bachata community's reliance upon bachata music—as this dictates the central activity for the group—the dance group also mirrors Kay Shelemay's concept of musical communities. Shelemay says that these groups are "an outcome of a combination of social and musical processes, rendering those who participate in making or listening to

¹⁵ Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 2-5.

¹⁶ Ibid.

music aware of a connection among themselves.”¹⁷ To some extent, this concept applies to bachata communities; however, it defines solely music as the foundation for the community, without allowing for dance. Thus, the notion of community that I believe best describes the bachata dance community is that of “*communitas*.”

A community formed around both music and dancing proves distinctive. Such a community does not equate to what Barbara O’Connor describes as a “traditional community,” or community built upon location; rather such communities are well understood through Victor Turner’s concept of “*communitas*,” or groups built through elements of ritual and shared ideas of equality.¹⁸ O’Connor categorizes dance communities as instances of *communitas* due to the ways in which these communities enact “ritual behavior which generates a sense of togetherness, of unity and abolishes difference and distance.”¹⁹ Similarly, within the bachata dance community, bachata represents a ritual, a repeated process with a specific structure. Through the ritual of the dance, and the social and musical activities that surround dancing, people in the community grow both physically and emotionally closer and come to know one another interpersonally.

Bachata communities gather at a variety of events and in many types of spaces, depending on the city. Often, people assemble socially in local bars or restaurants for

¹⁷ Kay Kaufman Shelemay, “Musical Communities: Rethinking the Collective in Music,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 64, no. 2 (2011): 365.

¹⁸ Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 238.

¹⁹ Barbara O’Connor, “Safe Sets: Women, Dance and ‘Communitas,’” in *Dance in the City*, ed. Helen Thomas (New York: Macmillan Press, 1997), 149-172.

advertised “Latin Nights” during which a DJ plays a playlist of popular Latin American genres that includes bachata. Organized bachata groups also exist in structured, pedagogical dance studio spaces, similar to ballroom dance studios. In these spaces, dance instructors hold both dance lessons and public dance events. A given bachata community may dance in only one specific space, or a single group of people may frequent many different dance spaces in order to have the opportunity to dance more often. In the United States, people of all nationalities gather to experience bachata, both Dominican bachata and sensual bachata, and from my observations, these mixed communities uphold skill and an appreciation for bachata over racial identity—welcoming participants from all demographics.

Fieldwork

My fieldwork focuses on bachata communities that attend public dance events that occur within dance studios or other public spaces, such as bars or restaurants. Through observing those who interact with bachata, either the music, or the movement, or both (usually one accompanies the other), I found evidence of socio-cultural gender structures. These belief systems manifest themselves through attitudes toward gender, sexual identity, and cultural diversity within bachata dance communities. To examine these issues, I conducted fieldwork in two locations in the southeastern United States: Knoxville, TN and Charlotte, NC over several months in early 2020. While my fieldwork began in January 2020, I have been an active participant of both the Knoxville and Charlotte dance communities for almost three years. I thus drew upon my familiarity with the dance and context, and upon my already existing network of contacts. In both of these cities, I attended public dance events as a participant-observer, in which I alternated

between dancing as a part of the community and taking detailed fieldnotes. Since I have been dancing as a part of these communities for several years, it would have been strange for me to attend these dance events and not step out on the dance floor with the other community members. During my fieldwork, I also conducted interviews with various dancers and dance instructors.

The Latin American dance community in Knoxville thrives in public dance events that occur on a monthly basis throughout the city. The most well-attended event, Salsa Beatz, happens one Saturday a month at a local dance studio located in an urban storefront. This event draws approximately 20 to 50 participants. The studio space has hardwood floors, a disco ball as an overhead light, and wall-to-wall mirrors (a similar construction to the ballroom dance studios I used to frequent). The attendees of this event, and all of the dance events in Knoxville that I have attended, vary in ethnic backgrounds and gender identifications, and range in ages from around 21 to 65 years old. The majority of Knoxville dancers are social dancers, meaning that they dance as a hobby or for recreation, not as a profession.

In the dance studio space, speakers are attached to the ceiling at the corners of the room, which allows the music to be amplified across the dance floor. The coordinator of Salsa Beatz, Sarah (one of my informants), creates her own playlists for her events and plays them over the sound system. She plays salsa, bachata, zouk, kizomba, and cumbia songs for the dancers in attendance, but places a specific focus on bachata music, presumably because bachata is her preferred dance.

Additionally, I attended the monthly public dance socials organized by the Rodrigo and Wendy Latin Dance Company (RW) in Charlotte, North Carolina. The RW

event typically draws in over 100 dancers from around the city and includes a largely Spanish speaking community. Many of the Charlotte attendees also teach dance as a profession or have been involved in the dance community for many years as a part of dance companies or dance teams. Similar to the Knoxville community, the dancers range in age from around 18 to 65 years old. The RW events occur in a large event center with poles that mark the parameters of the spacious dance floor. Tables and chairs surround the dance space so that the dancers can easily move between dancing and socializing. Large speakers sit at the front of the room, aimed directly at the center of the dance floor. While this method of amplification guarantees that everyone on the dance floor can hear the music, it also means that the closer to the front of the room a couple dances, then the louder the music becomes. This fact may alter where or for how long a couple chooses to dance, as sometimes being too close to the speaker can hurt a dancer's ears. RW employs a DJ to provide music for their events, and while the DJs play a mix of music genres at the event, they put bachata, salsa, and kizomba songs on a heavier rotation, as this seems to be the preference of the community.

Participants

I rely upon interviews with several dancers from the Knoxville and Charlotte dance communities in order to shape my discussion on bachata and gender. All of my informants remain close friends and are individuals that I continue to dance with. Per their preferences, I take extra care to employ pseudonyms as a way to protect and respect the information that they share with me. From the Knoxville community, I include conversations with Chase, Sarah, and Amy. Chase is a dancer who has been involved in the Latin dance scene in Knoxville for over five years. He is trained in many movement

and body methods and works as a gymnastics and balance coach outside of his regular full-time job. Sarah is an event coordinator in Knoxville. She is a Russian immigrant who started dancing after her divorce as a way to meet people and fill her time. She runs the Salsa Beatz dance event and spends countless hours cutting and editing playlists for her event. Amy is a recruitment officer in Knoxville who came to the Latin dance scene after watching the movie *Dirty Dancing: Havana Nights* (2004, Guy Ferland) while living in Florida. She has taken dance lessons on and off through her adulthood and views dance as a release from everyday life.

From the Charlotte dance community, I include conversations with Rodrigo and Wendy. Rodrigo and Wendy are the owners of the RW Latin Dance Company in Charlotte. While they teach many styles of dance, RW focuses on salsa and bachata instruction as they believe dancers need to be well informed about both styles in order to develop into well-rounded dancers. Renowned teachers, performers, and choreographers, Rodrigo and Wendy travel every weekend to cities around the world to teach and perform for other dancers. Through my conversations with these dancers of various backgrounds and training, I theorize how individuals navigate issues of gender and identity through embodied activity.

Ethnographic Method

For my ethnographic methods and approach, I draw upon the works of previous scholars and reflexive ethnographers. As an active dancer, and in my interactions with dance communities, I rely in part on the theories of Tomie Hahn to understand dancing to music as a multi-sensory experience of knowledge. Hahn uses her own experiences in Japanese dance to describe how culture is embodied through dance. Hahn argues that one

can gain important insights about a culture by looking at dance instruction and the dancers themselves.²⁰ My fieldwork focuses not on the teacher-to-student pedagogical process that Hahn highlights, but rather on how cultural understandings are expressed through dance structures and movements in both individual and group contexts. Hahn's discussion emphasizes the importance that dance, movement, and participation hold within the embodiment process. In my discussion of bachata, I explore embodiment by examining how multi-sensory engagement shapes the process of identity formation.

Many of my interviews occur with dancers that I already had a relationship with, as I met them while attending the ongoing dance events. Because of this previous relationship, I adopt Nicole Beaudry's "nonmodel" approach in my interviews to foster an organic conversation that reflects my friendship with my informant. The nonmodel approach suggests that an ethnographer should speak to interlocutors without fixed preconceptions and should allow conversations and interactions to unfold naturally.²¹ Beaudry further places an emphasis on listening during conversations and advocates for the importance of friendship in fieldwork, philosophies I also adopt.²²

As an active participant-observer in the community in which I am conducting fieldwork, I also rely upon the work of ethnomusicologist Aaron Fox. Fox participated as

²⁰ Hahn, *Sensational Knowledge*, 1.

²¹ Nicole Beaudry, "The Challenges of Human Ethnographic Relations in Enquiry: Examples from Arctic and Subarctic Fieldwork," in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, 2nd ed., ed. Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (New York: Oxford, 2008), 230.

²² Ibid.

a musician with the country musicians he worked with in Lockhart, TX.²³ He did not identify himself as a musician with his interlocutors at first, but once he did, Fox says his switch from observer to participant-observer, “fundamentally altered my relationship to the local community.”²⁴ Through his musical participation in the community, Fox developed relationships and observed the socio-cultural structures present in the group.²⁵ Similarly, my involvement in the bachata dance community has allowed me to deepen relationships with other dancers and learn the cultural expectations of the community. I am also influenced by the work of Michelle Kisliuk, who reflects upon her own position as a woman and makes clear her dichotomous place as both an insider and outsider throughout her writings.²⁶ As my thesis focuses on gender constructions, I also articulate my own position as a woman and an insider versus outsider in the bachata dance community, as this affects the development and understanding of my own experiences.

Gender and Performativity

The social structures among a collection of people directly influence the artistic products of those peoples. These influential social structures include gender, as the expected male and female roles within a society dictate many aspects of music production and performance. For instance, Tullia Magrini emphasizes that one must

²³ Aaron A. Fox, *Real Country: Music and Language in Working-Class Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 58.

²⁴ Ibid., 51.

²⁵ Ibid., 50-51.

²⁶ Michelle M. Kisliuk, “(Un) Doing Fieldwork: Sharing Songs, Sharing Lives,” in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology* 2nd ed., ed. Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (New York: Oxford, 2008), 187-89, 201.

acknowledge gender in a community in order to attain insights into that specific culture, and to have the ability to see the relationship of that culture among others.²⁷ Gender often dictates who may perform a specific genre, who may play what kind of instrument, or where one might perform. “Performed sounds and movement,” as Joaquina Labajo explains, may reinforce gender stereotypes, as well.²⁸ In her discussion of flamenco music, for example, Labajo explains that males are expected to have low voices throughout their performances while women are expected to include elements of sensuality in theirs.²⁹ In bachata music, Pacini Hernandez says that while not explicitly stated, bachata musicians are traditionally male.³⁰ In recent years, several female bachata artists have emerged. However, these women act only as vocalists and do not play the guitar, the primary instrument in bachata music. Thus, many gendered norms of bachata persist, reflecting specific cultural expectations and values, even as the genre becomes widely popularized.

My work is informed by the gender theories of Judith Butler, who demonstrates that gender holds a place in society because of its social context.³¹ Butler details how the binary descriptions of gender result in a “normalization” of the male and female

²⁷ Tullia Magrini, “Introduction: Studying Gender in Mediterranean Musical Cultures,” in *Music and Gender: Perspectives from the Mediterranean*, ed. Tullia Magrini (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 1.

²⁸ Joaquina Labajo, “Body and Voice: The Construction of Gender in Flamenco,” in *Music and Gender: Perspectives from the Mediterranean*, ed. Tullia Magrini (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 68.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

³⁰ Pacini Hernandez, *Bachata*, 179.

³¹ Judith Butler, “Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex,” in *Understanding Inequality: The Intersection of Race/Ethnicity, Class, and Gender*, ed. Barbara A. Arrighi (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 148.

constructs; these are repeated and reinforced by the societal structures that form the boundaries of female and male.³² At the same time, the male and female genders are not limited to a single description or identity, and this leaves the binary gender construct open to alterations or additions.³³ This space for exploration suggests that even cultures that strongly reinforce a gender binary may still allow for gendered ideas and behaviors outside of that primary construct. Ultimately I find that this is the case for the bachata communities I have studied.

Evidence of gender ideologies commonly appear in the performances and performative acts of a culture. Diana Taylor claims that, “Performances function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity.”³⁴ She continues that performances “tell us a great deal about our desire for access . . . [to a culture], and reflect the politics of our interpretations.”³⁵ Judith Butler explains performativity in direct correlation to socially constructed ideals, namely the constructs of gender. She defines performativity as “a *corporeal style*, an “act,” as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where “*performative*” suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning.”³⁶ Performativity influences the ways in which people express their own identities, including their gender identities, and this expression reveals itself through the body.

³² Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 40-43.

³³ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

³⁴ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 2.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 139.

Performance and performativity differ, though, in terms of functionality. Deborah Wong says that “the performative is a consequence of performance.”³⁷ Wong’s statement implies that performance cannot occur separately from an element of performativity: as performativity is shaped by social constructs, performance also reflects this social information. Each performance is variously re-inscribed with social meaning by recipients, observers, and listeners; in this way, the meaning of the performed action extends beyond the performer and engages with the identity of those who observe or interact with the performance, as well.³⁸ This reveals the deeply personal nature of an individual’s ability to perceive and learn social constructs, but also shows the rigid guidelines an individual must follow in order to stay within or move beyond societal expectations. Butler further argues that the cultural aspect of gender is performative, and suggests that the repetitive performance of socially constructed gender roles reinforces those gender constructs.³⁹ In the bachata dance community, dancers may perform when they move with a partner, but through the gendered performativity of their movements, especially, the dancers reveal how their bodies reflect the socio-cultural constructs of the community.

Gender performativity relates directly to music and movement genres, as gendered expectations reveal themselves through the understandings and expressions of those that engage with the genre. My thesis shows that binary gender constructions are

³⁷ Deborah Wong, *Speak it Louder: Asian Americans Making Music* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 5.

³⁸ Taylor, *Archive and the Repertoire*, 2-3.

³⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 139-140.

reinforced through Latin American and Caribbean music and dance performativity.

Women and men can alter or switch these roles within the genre, but even through such acts of possible resistance, they also reinforce gendered expectations, a situation that manifests Butler's idea that the enactment of performativity, even when challenging to the status quo, often serves to perpetuate deep-seated binary gender structures.

Bachata and Latin American Gender Stereotypes

The gender ideals found in Latin American and Caribbean genres are revealed and reinforced through the performativity of artistic forms important to these cultures. The presence of bachata and other Latin American and Caribbean genres, such as salsa and tango, in the United States mainstream often forefronts and reinforces Latin American gender stereotypes, as shown through lyrics and music videos. Latin American gender stereotypes present both problematic and developmental implications for individual performers, as well as others who interact with Latin American and Caribbean music and dance genres. Evidence of Latin American stereotypes appear in bachata, for example, through the gendered binary structure of the music and dance. These roles are diasporically perpetuated and popularized through the embodied act of bachata.

Stereotypes serve to guide individuals on how they should act within a group, often in ways that carry problematic social implications. Folklorists Sheila Bock and Katherine Borland muse, "when material objects are replaced by culturally specific bodies intent on refashioning themselves, questions of transmission and hybridization run

up against prickly issues of ethnic identity and cultural ownership.”⁴⁰ These scholars also suggest that the incorporation and performance of other cultures can lead to issues of exoticism.⁴¹ In salsa dancing, for example, often people outside of the Latin American diasporic communities expect the dance to include hyper-sexual elements because of stereotyped beliefs about Latin American sexualities. Aleysia Whitmore states, “the exotic sexuality attached to salsa because of its associations with the non-white “other” is combined with the sexual discourse surrounding Latin culture and couples dancing to create and reinforce perceptions of salsa dance as sexual.”⁴² These problematic sexual and exotic expectations feed into societal constructions about which motions fall under specifically male and specifically female roles within salsa dancing in the United States.

Many Latin American and Caribbean music genres began in the slums, brothels, and lower classes of society,⁴³ and due to these origins, the genres became associated

⁴⁰ Sheila Bock and Katherine Borland, “Exotic Identities: Dance, Difference, and Self-Fashioning,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 48, no. 1 (2011): 2.

⁴¹ Ibid. Exoticism, aligning with Ralph Locke’s definition of musical exoticism, refers to a representation of a culture or cultural elements outside of its original context and often deviated from its original meaning. Elements of exoticism within music and performances are used to create an appealing, but problematic, sense of “Otherness.” Particular sounds or visual elements portray specific “Others,” and often in an exaggerated manner. For example, exoticism occurs when the image of a sexual, curvy Latina woman is used to promote salsa dancing. See Ralph P. Locke, *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 44-48.

⁴² Aleysia Whitmore, “Bodies in Dialogue: Performing Gender and Sexuality in Salsa Dance,” in *Women and Language: Essays on Gendered Communication Across Media*, ed. Melissa Ames and Sarah Himself Burcon (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 143.

⁴³ Tango was first danced and performed in the slums and brothels of Buenos Aires. See Marilyn G. Miller, “Introduction,” in *Tango Lessons: Movement, Sound, Image, and Text in Contemporary Practice*, ed. Marilyn G. Miller (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 3. Additionally, *danzón* was first danced among the lower-class members of society but eventually progressed to spaces frequented by upper-class individuals, and therefore lost many of its negative sexual connotations. Lastly, while regeton did not

with conceptualizations of women with low virtue and high sensuality.⁴⁴ As the saying goes, “sex sells,” and creators of artistic forms perpetuate sensual stereotypes to enhance a product. Sexualized female stereotypes remain in place today, and examples of these perpetuated stereotypes appear across popular media forms. Often performers incorporate sexual elements as a part of their own presentation of identity. Scholar María Elena Cepeda, for example, acknowledges the ways in which the globally successful artist Shakira utilizes sensual dance to express her identity.⁴⁵ Cepeda describes how Shakira displays her transnational identity as a performer of Colombian and Lebanese descent through her body and use of language, and this presentation aids in the appeal of her music videos across a globalized market.⁴⁶ Other U.S.-based female popular music artists, such as Camila Cabello and Jennifer Lopez, monetize a sensual Latina identity, as shown in their music videos, to create a high-grossing niche in the popular music market. In a discussion of Lopez’s career, film scholar Priscilla Peña Ovalle argues that “Lopez maximized her commercial potential by visually emphasizing the codified sensuality of her nonwhite female body in accordance with an alleged urban style.”⁴⁷ The continual

necessarily originate in the slums, the dance is often associated with the “bad” neighborhoods within Cuba. See Jan Fairley, “Dancing Back to Front: Regeton, Sexuality, Gender and Transnationalism in Cuba,” *Popular Music* 25, no. 3 (2006): 483.

⁴⁴ Labajo, “Body and Voice,” 71.

⁴⁵ María Elena Cepeda, “When Latina Hips Make/Mark History: Music Video in the ‘New’ American Studies,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 18, no. 3 (2008): 236-239.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Priscilla Peña Ovalle, *Dance and the Hollywood Latina: Race, Sex, and Stardom* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 126.

presence of sensuality in tandem with specific female performers, and ethnic or national stereotypes, perpetuates social gendered expectations, especially in reference to women.

Evidence of masculine Latin American stereotypes likewise appears in expressions of male performativity in music and dance genres. The machismo stereotype describes a strong, dominating male who by expressing these characteristics, as Benjamin Cowan explains, “holds perpetual sway over the passive and the feminine.”⁴⁸ Cowan also argues that this performative stereotype shows an “adherence to a masculine, active, and thus powerful role.”⁴⁹ June Nash and Helen Icken Safa suggest that the perpetuation of this male figurehead comes from the increased amount of resources and “rewards of production” available to men, especially in the workplace.⁵⁰ Historically in Latin America, men received access to materials and enjoyed a higher monetary status than women, reinforcing ideas of male strength. The remnants of this tiered power construct are demonstrated by bachata artists, as male dancers tend to lead the dance, and male musicians dominate the recording industry. The continuation of male gender constructs that derive from the Dominican Republic are evidenced through bachata dancing as well as in the lyrical content of bachata songs. Pacini Hernandez explains that in the lyrics of bachata songs, male singers do not speak about domestic scenarios, but describe a desire for women as sexual partners, or express anger at a lack thereof.⁵¹ This description

⁴⁸ Benjamin A. Cowan, *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), s.v. “Machismo.”

⁴⁹ Cowan, “Machismo.”

⁵⁰ June Nash and Helen Icken Safa, “Introduction,” in *Sex and Class in Latin America*, ed. June Nash and Helen Icken Safa (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1976), xi.

⁵¹ Pacini Hernandez, *Bachata*, 166.

presents a stereotyped domineering male, one who assumes he should have control over a woman or feels he has the right to express resentment if a woman chooses to leave him.

Within the binary gender structure of bachata dancing, the male assumes the lead role and the female assumes the follow role. The male lead directs the development and pacing of the patterns and the female responds to these directions, but may do so in an expected or unexpected manner. Based upon my own observations, I find that this binary partnership remains evident even within same-sex partnership, as one dancer maintains a lead role and the other maintains a follow role often for the entirety of a dance. While this relationship constitutes the typical bachata movement structure, my subsequent discussion reveals examples of how bachata participants can challenge this binary structure, as well. For example, scholar Sydney Hutchinson describes the Dominican female gender stereotype of the *tíguere* within Dominican popular music, which she defines as “the tough, streetwise, sensual gender identity with something of the trickster thrown in.”⁵² The *tíguere* represents a woman who is sensual and yet embodies empowerment through her actions. In the lyric content of songs by female bachata singers, too, women artists present themselves as the seductress, a woman in charge of the man. For example, in the lyrics for the song “Religion” by Chantel (2018), which I discuss further in chapter four, the artist describes herself as a religion and states that if a man were to “try her,” he would be converted forever.⁵³

⁵² Sydney Hutchinson, *Tigers of a Different Stripe: Performing Gender in Dominican Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 14.

⁵³ Chantel, “Religion,” by SP Polanco and David Pinto Picasso, 2018, Collado Productions and SP Polanco, streaming.

While male and female gender roles are well delineated and in some ways may seem limiting, I argue that the context of bachata also invites self-expression, especially for women through sexualized realization of movement. These Latin American gender stereotypes appear performatively within bachata music and dance communities, and serve to inform as well as perpetuate the binary gender structures found in the United States. Again, in keeping with the theories of Judith Butler, I find that in bachata, socially constructed gender roles are perpetuated in the embodiment of gender expectations, even as the performative nature of gender opens space for the creation of identity; if we enact a gender identity, then we become it. Through becoming an identity, though, a person may also choose to alter that assumed identity. Evidence of the tíguere dichotomy of strength and sexualization, for example, appears specifically in moments of gender role switching. Women can assume a lead role in a dance partnership and direct a partner in bachata movement, and men can assume a follow role and move how his partner chooses. In these examples, a dancer performs in a role that counters traditional social expectation. Through this action, evidence of the binary remains, but the role switching also suggests a possible breaking of the binary, as discussed further in Chapter 4.

Embodiment and Dance Transmission

I am interested in gender performativity in the bachata context because bachata is both music and dance. This duality means that an engagement with bachata provides individuals with an opportunity to experience the genre with many of one's senses and sensorial behaviors. Tomie Hahn details how the senses allow a person to adopt and interpret an experience, and in this way, a person's senses act as the "vehicles of

transmission and the connection to embodied cultural expressions.”⁵⁴ Sensorial learning and knowledge provide a means for a person to develop beliefs of self and others.⁵⁵ Dance, or more generally movement, falls within this category of knowing, and it provides an outlet for individuals and communities to articulate emotion and identity. Dance invites people in because it allows one to express oneself, provides a reason for people to gather, and opens a way to interact with others. As I have found through my own participation, as well as through my interactions with my informants, in experiencing bachata dance and music, a person has the opportunity to express all of oneself.

Further, the ways in which a community moves with music reveals socio-cultural structures of that community. Hahn explains embodiment in conjunction with the concept of dance transmission.⁵⁶ For example, transmission includes the “information flow between teacher and student—the sender and receiver cycle—and embraces the personal relationships that evolve.”⁵⁷ A person can choose to remain within one’s own understanding of self, or to step outside of one’s own expectations in order to express the embodiment of a new or different understanding, as transmitted and understood through the movement. Dance, much like music making, can also serve as an outward expression of an inward feeling. As Felicia Hughes-Freeland explains, dance is embodied, which means the movement provides a depth of understanding into the social aspects of a

⁵⁴ Hahn, *Sensational Knowledge*, 3.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.

culture and acts as a form of “social production.”⁵⁸ As movement allows for self-exploration, embodiment becomes both a means and a result of the exploration. Additionally, through embodiment individuals may learn various roles within a social structure and move between these roles as a form of code switching. Hahn defines code switching as “shifting identity” and suggests that through code switching, individuals learn how to further express their own aspects of self.⁵⁹

Bachata music making and movement often overlap within dance communities, as individuals involved with dancing commonly sing as a group to popular bachata songs while dancing. This increased level of embodiment through singing occurs in tandem with bachata dancing. People of course may sing at a concert or sing along with a recording, but the act of singing while dancing arguably creates space for a heightened embodied experience. Individuals in the act of singing and dancing together engage in what can be described as a participatory activity; in particular the recorded bachata music that plays in the dance studios where I conduct my research commonly leads to a participatory response from the dancers. Thomas Turino describes participatory music as music that contains no “artist-audience distinctions,” and for which the primary goal includes having as many people take part in the experience as possible.⁶⁰ Individuals may interact with the music and add to it with sound or movement.⁶¹ These participatory dance

⁵⁸ Felicia Hughes-Freeland, *Embodied Communities: Dance Traditions and Change in Java* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), 1.

⁵⁹ Hahn, *Sensational Knowledge*, 155-160.

⁶⁰ Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 26.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

and music activities, as exemplified through bachata, help to build social bonds between the members of the group and also create a space in which gender norms are tested, reinforced, or challenged.

In bachata dance communities, and in my observations, males and females together sing the lyrics of heartbreak, longing, and pain, imagining various roles within a love relationship, even while specifically performing either a lead or follow dance role. This participatory music making creates a sense of community, collective identity, and mutual understanding as Spanish words are enthusiastically sung by people of all linguistic backgrounds while they move in the bachata patterns. Moments of dancing and collective singing do not always occur at dance events, and from my experience, they only occur when specific popular songs play by well-known artists, such as Grupo Extra. But these unique moments of movement mixed with the sound of low and high voices, various accents, different pronunciations, and wandering pitches reveal social participation. Through moments of singing and other bachata music and movement embodiment and code switching experiences, individuals develop ideas of gender and self that align with and challenge gender constructs.

Review of Relevant Literature

My work, of course, relies in part on the research of other scholars who have addressed concepts relating to bachata, gender, embodiment, and identity through specific theorizations and case studies. Since little scholarship on bachata in the United States exists, and particularly scholarship analyzing the music and dance, my research contributes to discussions of this genre. One of the few bachata studies available comes

from anthropologist and bachata scholar Deborah Pacini Hernandez, who details the history of bachata within the Dominican Republic. She discusses the history of the music genre, the social context that led to the popularity of the genre, and its potential future status. She makes connections between bachata and other Dominican music, namely merengue, and to Dominican society more broadly in the late-20th century. Further, she reflects upon how 20th century technological developments, such as the radio and cassette tapes, influenced the popularity of the genre. My work adds to this research and looks at how continued hybridization and globalization have influenced bachata into the 21st century. In addition, Pacini Hernandez focuses only on the music of bachata and does not include an in-depth discussion of bachata dance. The increased popularity of the dance has aided in the development of sensual bachata, specifically, and my fieldwork within the southeastern United States acknowledges and interrogates this process.

My research reveals that those who engage with bachata experience a highly gendered interaction, one that, in keeping with the theories of Judith Butler, both challenges and reinforces social norms. In relation to gender, Pacini Hernandez recognizes the roles that domestic binary gender relationships held within the development of bachata music in 1980s Dominican Republic society. She explains the political scene within the country and argues that the politics in the late-20th century directly impacted the gender roles in bachata music. Due to the political turmoil at the time, women had to leave the home in order to make more money and act as secondary or even primary financial providers for the family.⁶² This shift in family dynamics removed

⁶² Pacini Hernandez, *Bachata*, 156.

men from power positions and pushed women to enter the workplace.⁶³ Pacini Hernandez discusses how this change in gender roles filtered into the lyrical content produced by bachata singers: instead of singing about romantic love, artists shifted their emphasis to express anger at women over disappointments in love.⁶⁴ As women moved into the workforce, though, the lyrics of bachata music still delineated the traditional binary gender constructions within Dominican society.

Sydney Hutchinson also employs the gender theories of Butler to describe aspects of binary gender structures in Dominican culture and focuses on how creative music and dance spaces allow for the exploration of change.⁶⁵ The author states that a society must learn how to step back from binary structures in order to include people outside of tradition, and suggests that music allows for this situation to occur.⁶⁶ Hutchinson also suggests that artists can act out the performativity of gender in ways to purposefully break expectations, and that these choices lead to gender empowerment.⁶⁷ Further, Hutchinson focuses on queer performers within her ethnography to describe modes of empowerment. I mirror some of Hutchinson's findings in my analysis of gender roles. My fieldwork highlights how bachata movement can lead to an increase in female confidence, and emphasizes the role that bachata movement plays in the formation and alteration of gender ideas in the Knoxville and Charlotte bachata communities.

⁶³ Pacini Hernandez, *Bachata*, 156.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Hutchinson, *Tigers of a Different Stripe*, 11.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 9.

Intersecting with my own fieldwork, other scholars, such as Sheila Bock and Katherine Borland, have conducted fieldwork in dance studio settings and analyzed how the dances performed in these settings reflect a dichotomy between exotic representations and gendered understandings. Bock and Borland found that the women in their fieldwork felt “the experience of dancing provides a release from restrictive notions of the female body derived from contemporary American popular culture.”⁶⁸ Borland explains how salsa in the studio dance space allows women “expressive freedom,” even though they follow a male lead.⁶⁹ However, at the same time, women who participate in salsa must portray sexiness if they hope to both attract partners and show dance competency.⁷⁰ Aleysia Whitmore also conducted fieldwork with a salsa dance community in Providence, RI, and found that those involved in the community viewed salsa as an activity that gave them the freedom to express heightened sensuality.⁷¹ Through salsa, the dancers embodied a performative, sexualized self that often differed from their everyday self.⁷²

Further, as the work of these scholars illuminates, Latin American dance within the dance studio space shows the cultural understandings of a community. The space allows women the possibility to explore notions of self and sexuality both within and beyond societal expectations. While these scholars have looked at dance and music

⁶⁸ Bock and Borland, “Exotic Identities,” 3.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 17.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 15-18.

⁷¹ Whitmore, “Bodies in Dialogue,” 142.

⁷² Ibid.

genres such as salsa, belly dancing, and tango, no work has been done on bachata within this framework.

Overview of Remaining Chapters

While bachata originated in the Dominican Republic, the genre continues to experience popularization and hybridization throughout the United States, due to technological circulation and dance studio trends. My fieldwork acknowledges the position of bachata within the southeastern United States for diverse populations and participants with a variety of gendered and sexual identities. My second chapter demonstrates how binary gender ideologies—both historical and contemporary—impact the music and movement of bachata, and how the genre perpetuates binary gender concepts. Employing the scholarship of Deborah Pacini Hernandez and other relevant accounts, I trace the development of bachata from the Dominican Republic to the United States. Here, I consider too the role of particularly influential bachata artists who were popularized both in the Dominican Republic and in the United States, such as Aventura, and how their development solidified the binary gender constructs within bachata music.

Binary gender concepts also appear within dance communities as evidenced through the scripted movements and lead and follow roles of the dance. Interviews with my informants, as well as my own experiences, show how individuals express sensuality and conceptualize their own gender identities. During the sensorial and embodied experience of dance, bachata reinforces binary ideals and at the same time creates a unique space for the exploration of other gender identities and elements of self.

As my third chapter explains, performativity and embodiment intersect physically and conceptually, which allows for those engaged with the genre to explore ideas of self and community. Through the intersections of embodiment and performativity, individuals experience the potential to engage with many of one's senses, allowing for informed decisions on how to move one's body in a gendered or sensual manner, and increasing personal awareness. Further, the context of the bachata dance community creates a safe space for individuals to express aspects of their gender and sensuality, along with other elements of identity. Through dancing, individuals, and especially women, experience an increase in confidence and empowerment. The safe space of the bachata community also encourages dancers to embody elements of identity through movement that counters social expectations for their gender.

In the fourth chapter, I argue that while binary gender roles exist, and are often perpetuated within bachata music and dance, the genre also breaks the gender binary. I discuss the music of female bachata artist Chantel, and show how the music that she creates alters the script for gender within bachata songs. Her songs place a female in a position of power over a man. A female musician in a traditionally male role exemplifies a breaking of the binary that is mirrored through the roles that dancers choose to embody within the bachata dance community. In bachata dance, role switching and same-gender dancing provides dancers with the opportunity to physically move in a manner that counters their traditional male or female role. Rodrigo and Wendy, owners of the RW Latin Dance Company in Charlotte, push their dancers to learn both the lead and follow roles, and therefore alter the expectations for binary gender constructions within their

community. Acts of role switching and same-gender dancing also provide evidence of code switching, with various indices of inclusion turned on and off by participants.

Lastly, to conclude, I review how bachata music and dance perpetuate gender stereotypes and create performative gender structures for individuals, while also providing dancers with the opportunity to express themselves through modes of personal expression, free of gender constraints. The bachata dance communities within the southeastern United States reflect bachata's broader relevance to popular and Latin American and Caribbean cultures around the world. Through interacting with bachata music and dance, individuals may engage in self-exploration and expression outside of solely binary gender structures.

CHAPTER TWO

TRADITIONS OF THE BINARY

Bachata is a fairly new genre, as it has only been recognized as part of the popular music scene for the last thirty years. Yet, despite its relatively recent development, binary gender concepts firmly underscore the genre. In addition to binary gender roles, other social roles exist within the dance community that are learned by participation in the community. Katherine Borland, based on her fieldwork in a New Jersey salsa community, explains how if one embodies the movement expectations of the Latin dance community, then one can “pass” as a Latina/o. She says, “‘Passing’ is accomplished by dancers’ identification with *Latinidad* through dance and music, and by the relationships that form as a result of participating in the salsa scene.”⁷³ Scholar Angelina Tallaj defines *Latinidad* as “pan-Latino solidarity.”⁷⁴ The dancers learn what Latin American performativity entails, through movement and social interaction, and then express that knowledge when they gather in the dance space. In turn, these dancers are accepted by their peers as embodying and occupying certain social roles. Borland’s recognition that those in a Latin dance community can and do learn how to express *Latinidad* calls for a more in-depth look into performativity within Latin American and Caribbean music and dance genres. If individuals can learn how to pass as a specific identity through their

⁷³ Sheila Bock and Katherine Borland, “Exotic Identities: Dance, Difference, and Self-Fashioning,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 48, no. 1 (2011): 17.

⁷⁴ Angelina Tallaj, “Dominican Migrants, Plural Identities, and Popular Music,” *American Music Review* 46, no. 2 (2017): 1.

expressions of cultural understanding and self, then this ability to learn and perform in a specific manner applies to gender identity, as well.

In this chapter, I argue that binary gender roles are rooted in the social construction of bachata and still remain in the music and movement today, as evidenced through gender performativity in bachata communities. I unpack Judith Butler's concept of performativity and provide specific music and dance examples of gender performativity within bachata. Additionally, I expound upon the history of bachata and its presence within the United States. Bachata's foundation as a binary genre, one that maintains specific roles for males and females, has continued even through its journey out of the Dominican Republic and into the United States. Lastly, I rely upon my own ethnographic experiences and interviews with dancers to provide evidence for the continued binary structure within the bachata dance communities in Knoxville and Charlotte.

Performativity

From its early development, evidence of binary gender stereotypes, based on traditional notions of male and female, appears in the performance conventions, the lyrical content of the songs, and the movements found in bachata music and dance. This perpetuation of the binary in bachata now shapes a social expectation, leading to instances of gender performativity within bachata. In bachata music and dance, the sounds produced and movements enacted by the individuals who sing and dance bachata utilize the body in a performative manner. In her discussion of performativity, Butler details how historically, the body socially breaks down and re-builds meaning, and this

process develops an inward and outward bodily binary.⁷⁵ While some believe that the internal and external dimensions of a self may stay completely separate, Butler argues that the two parts coincide, especially as a prolonged internal constraint leads to an uncontrollable outward release.⁷⁶ The body, therefore, reveals the inner identity and personhood of an individual.⁷⁷ If an individual experiences a challenge to the “inner self,” due to social criticism, for example, then that individual must navigate how the body expresses their inner and outer selves through the filter of social constructs. This challenge to self suggests that the revelation of inner identity leads to moments of gender performativity through what an individual shows or does not show on or through the body.⁷⁸ If the body reveals the inner understandings of an individual, then arguably one must observe and attempt to understand the gender-performative body in order to gain a full perception of that individual. A person may internally understand their body as female, for example, but due to the social construction of how a female should look or move, that person may choose to outwardly express gender in a way that aligns with or counters their internal identity. In order to try to understand both the inward and outward navigation of gender identity for an individual, then, one must take into account corporeal experiences.

The social construct of binary gender shapes the elements of performance within performativity, and these constructions often appear through both the inner and outward

⁷⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 130.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

performativity of a body. Further, for Butler, the *repetition* of action by the body through gender constructs leads to the additional regulation of binary gender ideals.⁷⁹ Butler explains that the repetition of gender, “is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation.”⁸⁰ Therefore, as Butler suggests, the “words, acts, gestures, and desire” of a body reveal performative acts of gender, and the repetition of these actions leads to a perceived development of identity.⁸¹

Through both male and female performativity, as exemplified in bachata music and movement, musicians and members of the bachata dance community display their perceptions of gender ideals. As Jane C. Desmond explains, by looking at the body in dance, one uncovers “how social identities are codified in performance styles and how the use of the body in dance is related to, duplicates, contests, amplifies, or exceeds norms of nondancer bodily expression within specific historical contexts.”⁸² Her statement suggests that one must grasp an understanding of the past in order to understand the bodily movements of the present. The movement itself reveals socio-cultural processes, transpired through history and location.⁸³

⁷⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 140.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., 135-136.

⁸² Jane C. Desmond, “Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies,” in *Everynight Life: Culture and Dance in Latin/o America*, ed. Celeste Faser Delgado and José Esteban Muñoz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 33.

⁸³ Ibid., 34.

Bachata History: Bachata and New York

When a music and dance genre moves from one cultural group to another, the history and meanings associated with that genre become complicated. Bachata maintains roots in Latin American and Caribbean culture, identity, and politics, but also garners transnational circulation and popularity. The globalization and increased popularity of the genre affected the development of the instrumentation in bachata songs, the lyrical content written by performers, and the bachata dance patterns.

Bachata musical instrumentation includes vocals, percussion, and guitar. Pacini Hernandez describes bachata as a unique style because its artists first wrote lyrics that spoke of romantic love, but later artists shifted focus to write lyrics that detailed sexualized love.⁸⁴ In its early stages, bachata resembled the romantic Cuban bolero, but as its lyrics grew more explicit and the song tempos increased, the genre no longer fit inside the romantic and “poetic” bolero genre.⁸⁵ By the 1980s, bachata artists produced songs with increased tempos that matched the speed of another popular Dominican music and dance genre: merengue. These faster songs allowed dancers to focus on footwork and high-energy connection versus intimacy with a partner. This transition in dance movement, lyrical content, and musical style altered the social reception of bachata within Dominican society. Pacini Hernandez also claims that the success of the song

⁸⁴ Deborah Pacini Hernandez, “*Cantando la cama vacía: Love, Sexuality and Gender Relationships in Dominican bachata*,” *Popular Music* 9, no. 3 (1990): 352.

⁸⁵ Deborah Pacini Hernandez, *Bachata: A Social History of a Dominican Popular Music* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 13.

“Bachata Rosa” by Juan Luis Guerra⁸⁶ altered the social reception of the music and dance genre.⁸⁷ The electronic guitar, amplified bass, and electronic string underscoring that accompany Guerra’s voice differed from the sounds of the acoustic guitar. These new sounds helped Guerra to garner international success with the song. Rodrigo, one of my informants, cites “Bachata Rosa” as the first bachata that he heard in his home country of Chile in 1991.⁸⁸

Bachata’s international reach also extended to the United States, especially due to the mass migration of Dominicans to the United States in the late-20th century. Political turmoil and economic crisis in the Dominican Republic led to high unemployment rates and financial hardship for families.⁸⁹ Dominican workers moved out of agricultural areas in search of jobs, and many chose to leave the country and immigrate to the United States.⁹⁰ By the early-21st century, over one million Dominicans had immigrated to the

⁸⁶ Juan Luis Guerra, “Bachata Rosa,” track number 8 on *Bachata Rosa*, 1990, Karen Records, KLP136, album.

⁸⁷ Pacini Hernandez, *Bachata*, 2-3.

⁸⁸ Rodrigo, interview with author, January 16, 2020.

⁸⁹ Pacini Hernandez, *Bachata*, 155-156. Rafael Trujillo was dictator of the Dominican Republic from 1930-1961. During his dictatorship, Trujillo utilized his power to create a monopoly over the country’s economy in order to garner personal wealth. After Trujillo was assassinated in 1961, the country experienced political turnover and further economic upheaval as leaders tried to determine how to distribute Trujillo’s wealth. Due to this economic instability, many Dominicans moved to urban areas within the Dominican Republic to find work, while others left the country entirely. This transition of wealth and place directly affected the production of both merengue and bachata out of the Dominican Republic. See Pacini Hernandez, *Bachata*, 36-37, 154-158. Also see Julie A. Sellers, *Merengue and Dominican Identity: Music as National Unifier* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004), 84-85, 106-134.

⁹⁰ Pacini Hernandez, *Bachata*, 156.

United States, and many settled in New York City.⁹¹ Here, in the Dominican diasporic communities of New York, Dominican and Dominican-American musicians created and produced bachata music.

Prior to the 21st century, bachata songs did not speak about place.⁹² Once bachata groups formed in the diasporic communities of New York, though, the topic of place served as an integral expression of identity within bachata songs and led to the development of a new style of bachata: urban bachata. Tallaj argues that the bachata styles that came out of New York, “have become symbols of *Latinidad* (pan-Latino solidarity) for many migrants from Latin America precisely because they blend local and global genres of music.”⁹³ Pacini Hernandez agrees with the social implications of urban bachata and notes that the hybridity of the genre extends beyond just the music and also includes “fashion, social behavior, vernacular language and linguistic inflections.”⁹⁴ Urban bachata combines elements of traditional Dominican bachata with other music styles such as R&B and hip hop, as evidenced through the lyric content and electronic beats in the songs.⁹⁵ The shift in bachata to include electronic sounds and urban influences made the genre more “danceable” and appealing to a younger generation, as well.⁹⁶ Additionally, the bachata style employs a mix of both English and Spanish lyrics.⁹⁷

⁹¹ Julie Sellers, *The Modern Bachateros: 27 Interviews* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2017), 11.

⁹² Pacini Hernandez, *Bachata*, 159.

⁹³ Tallaj, “Dominican Migrants,” 1.

⁹⁴ Pacini Hernandez, “Urban Bachata,” 1042.

⁹⁵ Tallaj, “Dominican Migrants,” 1.

⁹⁶ Sellers, *Modern Bachateros*, 8.

⁹⁷ Angelina Tallaj, “Dominican Migrants,” 1.

As Julie Sellers explains, urban bachata “reflects the multicultural and multilingual realities of Dominican migrants and their children.”⁹⁸ Urban bachata, then, reveals the intersection of diasporic and transnational relationships as the urban bachata artists utilized lyrics and musical style to reflect their own experience as Dominican immigrants in the United States or Dominican-Americans.

Urban bachata expresses the immigrant experience and yet still clings to love (both romantic and heterosexual) as a central theme to drive the storylines of the songs. Therefore, gender remains a prevalent part of urban bachatas. Aventura, a bachata group formed in the early 2000s in the Bronx, popularized urban bachata.⁹⁹ The group, consisting of Anthony “Romeo” Santos, Lenny Santos, Henry Santos Jeter, and Max “Mikie” Santos, infused their bachata songs with popular music styles from the United States. Aventura’s first hit song, “Obsesión” (2002) details a man’s longing for a woman that he cannot attain because she already has a significant other.¹⁰⁰ He declares his love for her, but she denies him saying that he does not feel love, he feels an obsession.¹⁰¹ The gender dynamics between the man and the woman in this urban bachata song, as well as other bachatas, reveal the presence of a gender binary within bachata music. The songs contain a dominate male figure who sexually desires a woman, even if he often cannot attain her. The female in the songs exists for the purpose of man and she is not able to

⁹⁸ Sellers, *Modern Bachateros*, 5.

⁹⁹ Tallaj, “Dominican Migrants,” 4-5.

¹⁰⁰ Aventura, “Obsesión,” track number 1 on *We Broke the Rules*, 2002, Premium Latin Music, CD.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

avoid his attentions. The sounds, lyrics, and instrumentation of bachata songs further reflect the perpetuation of the gender binary within bachata music.

The Bachata Binary: Music

Sound, the setting of sound, and the significance of sound all shape a soundscape. R. Murray Schafer defines soundscape as “the sonic environment” and describes how the meanings and location of sound affects the formation of the soundscape.¹⁰² Brandon LaBelle suggests that listening and sound “offers a compelling structure for elaborating what is already in play.”¹⁰³ Further, he states, “Sound is *promiscuous*. It exists as a network that teaches us how to belong, to find place, as well as how not to belong, to drift.”¹⁰⁴ LaBelle’s statements imply that sound does more than just provide something to listen to, but rather acts as a mode of educating, situating, and correcting those who create or listen to sound; sound relates to culture, and culture relates to sound. Therefore, sound acts as a “network” that utilizes the aural in order to shape a person or people group’s socio-cultural understanding of a soundscape.

From the vocalists to the musicians, males shape the soundscape that comprises the bachata genre. Susan McClary suggests, “music does not just passively reflect society; it also serves as a public forum within which various models of gender organization (along with many other aspects of social life) are asserted, adopted, contested, and

¹⁰² R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1994), Kindle edition, loc. 5065-5072.

¹⁰³ Brandon LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life* (New York: Continuum, 2010), xvii.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, xviii.

negotiated.”¹⁰⁵ When speaking with my informants, many of them refer to bachatas and bachata artists with masculine pronouns, a gendered expectation that stems from the music. Also, when I asked my informants to list their favorite bachata artists, all of them listed solely male artists. This fulfilled my pre-existing expectations, as I would have been surprised if someone mentioned a female bachata singer—it simply is not the norm. My informants’ preferences for male bachata performers do not reflect an inherent gender bias on their part, but rather exemplifies the male-centric construction of the bachata music industry.

Instrumentation

Every element of bachata music arguably shows the binary, masculine-dominant nature of the genre. Bachata songs typically begin with a short introduction and then follow a verse-chorus-verse-instrumental interlude-chorus structure (or a similar variation of this). The aural makeup of the music includes the sounds of percussion, guitar, electronic beats, and voice (described further below). The percussion instruments, including most markedly the bongos and güira, define a four-beat structure by clearly accenting the “1-2-3-4” of each beat, which clearly emphasizes the rhythm of the song. Each beat is individually marked and accounted for by a percussive tap or scrape. This sort of percussive clarity represents what McClary describes as a masculine style of music.¹⁰⁶ This masculine style differs from what McClary defines as a feminine ending,

¹⁰⁵ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 8.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

meaning an ending that “refuses the hegemonic control of the barline.”¹⁰⁷ The rhythmic structure, therefore, maintains an aural regulation of binary gender construction, as the backbone of each song contains a masculine, direct, and repeated four-beat pattern.

The introduction of a bachata song often includes a bongo roll and several marked beats, or a melodic riff by the guitar player or singer accompanied by the bongos. Some of the more contemporary urban bachatas have electronic tracks that fill this introductory portion of the song, but the songs still typically rely upon a bongo roll to lead into the official start of the verse. Throughout the song, bongo players utilize both the upper and lower head of the instrument. Based on my observations and listening, the first three beats may employ both the upper and lower tones, while the lower bongo head marks the fourth beat, which provides an aural preparation for the restart of the four-beat structure. This tonal aural emphasis pairs with the tap of the hip by those dancing, and especially the exaggerated hip of the female dancer, who may swing her hip upward deliberately on the fourth beat. Often, the bongo player performs rolls or other improvisational rhythms between the main beats, but again, the fourth beat, marked on the lower head, restarts the four-beat pattern. The percussion adds an aural element of improvisation that dancers visually mimic through the movement of the dance (although the dancers move to the rhythm of the lead guitar more often). Dancers can tap the toes or heels of their feet or take a step on each beat of the elaborated rhythms, for example. The bachata soundscape also includes the güira, which helps to fill out the four beat pattern. The güira player does not always add improvisatory rhythmic embellishment, but the instrument bolsters the

¹⁰⁷ McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 11.

sound with a high-pitched, metallic attack and rub at the start of each beat. Overall, the rhythm in bachata songs holds a distinct purpose; the rhythm leads the structure of the piece and clearly marks the different sections and cadence points of the music; these aspects of rhythm and instrumentation help to create a masculine framework for the songs.

Historically the guitar, and in particular the electric guitar, has been a male-dominated instrument and carries masculine implications.¹⁰⁸ Steve Waksman suggests that the electric guitar, “is used to invest the body of the performer with meaning.”¹⁰⁹ I agree with this statement and add that the instrument also inscribes gendered meaning into the sound of the bachata songs, in addition to the (assumed) male musician.

Traditionally, a male musician plays the guitar. In my research, I have yet to come across a female musician who plays lead *requinto* guitar. This lack of female musicianship means that a male musician remains featured in almost every bachata song, and the songs routinely rely upon a male figure and his musical expertise. Waksman also recognizes the problematic racial and sexual tensions in the history of the electric guitar; white men attempted to adopt the perceived “sexual excess” of African American performers and therefore shaped the masculine stereotypes of “white power” now associated with the instrument.¹¹⁰ These issues of race and sexuality arguably reveal themselves within bachata music, as well, especially in regard to male sexuality. The male guitar player

¹⁰⁸ Steve Waksman, *Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 4-5.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

plays the heartfelt melodies that the vocalist sings, aurally detailing issues of love on the instrument, while maintaining an element of power in his storytelling. The male musician and the guitar are supposed to exude authority while also expressing feeling.

The guitar remains as important if not more important than the voice within bachata music. Bachata songs employ two guitars, a lead and a second guitar, along with a bass guitar, doubling the masculine assertion of the sound. The timbre of the guitars in bachata songs have a metallic and twangy edge, distinctive from the bleeding, reverberating sound that an electronic guitar can create. The guitarists often utilize a quick vibrato and plucking style that emphasizes the initial attack of a note, which then dies away quickly to allow for the next pitch to be heard clearly. The lead guitar, requinto, plays melodic material and always performs a solo in the song. During this solo, the guitar player outlines the melody but also adds new, improvisational ideas with many embellishments that wander into high and low melodic ranges that exceed the vocalist's range. While this ornamental function of the guitar, for McClary, might suggest a more feminine element,¹¹¹ the integral presence of the instrument's sound, the central role that the guitar plays in the songs, and the male musicians who invariably play it place the instrument in a clearly masculine role.

Voice

The vocal singing style of bachata expresses and relays emotion. Male voices dominate the bachata recording industry, and therefore the masculine vocal timbre sets the standard for how the expression of love, pain, and desire should sound. Pacini

¹¹¹ McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 11.

Hernandez says that the early bachata artists produced songs “sung in an unpolished, over-emotional, almost sobbing style.”¹¹² Julie Sellers describes the tone as employing *sentimiento*, meaning “feeling” or “resentment.”¹¹³ While the unpolished nature of the style has changed somewhat in recent years due to technology and digital mixing, the emotional and sobbing elements of the voice remain an expected and essential element of bachata music. Importantly, the yearning, hurting timbre of a male voice, while he shares his pain about a woman, aurally marks the genre as binarily gendered. These male bachata artists assume characteristics typically associated with femininity in mainstream U.S. cultures, such as high-range singing, and wailing emotion.¹¹⁴ In their original Dominican contexts, these singers are perceived as possessing masculine traits, namely due to their lyrical content, and this has carried into bachatas produced in the United States, as well.¹¹⁵

Bachateros (male bachata singers) often sing in a high tenor voice; a baritone singer rarely performs a bachata song, unless he is a collaborator. Nina Sun Eidsheim describes how men remain capable of maintaining their masculine identity even while singing in a higher vocal range through the use of “timbral scare quotes.”¹¹⁶ A man may sing in any range of his voice; as long as he embodies masculine characteristics (as

¹¹² Pacini Hernandez, *Bachata*, 3.

¹¹³ Sellers, *Modern Bachateros*, 6.

¹¹⁴ This type of singing style contrasts the male singing style of other Latin American and Caribbean genres. In other genres, such as reggaetón or canción ranchera, male singers utilize the lower ranges of their voices, and while they may use vibrato, they do not do so in an excessive, emotional way.

¹¹⁵ Pacini Hernandez, *Bachata*, 158-59.

¹¹⁶ Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 105-10.

portrayed through the song lyrics in bachata songs) and timbrally distinguishes between his upper and chest ranges, then he maintains his full level of masculinity.¹¹⁷

Additionally, many male singers employ quick vibrato to add an aural element of emotionality or instability in the sound. This change in timbre relays pain or longing and adds an element of verisimilitude to the story expressed through the lyrics.

Bachata male singers rarely enter their head voice, but sing out in their chest voice. This means that as the male singers reach for the notes that sit along the outer realm of their range, they often sound strained or pinched. When a male singer does choose to sing in his altissimo, as the popular R&B artist Usher does in the bilingual, collaborative song “Promise” with Romeo Santos (2012), his upper range remains marked as different through the change in vocal timbre.¹¹⁸ As Eidsheim explains, “by enlisting falsetto, a vocal technique and recognizable timbral shift, male performers can utilize larger portions of their voices while maintaining an image of masculinity.”¹¹⁹ As Usher sings out to his lover, asking her to touch and hold him, he moves into his falsetto voice, aurally communicating his true longing—but a *masculine* sexual longing. Female voices maintain an alternate gendered agency within bachata, as Chapter 4 reveals, since the vocal timbre of *bachateras* (female bachata singers) directly counter the masculine-dominated aural soundscape.

¹¹⁷ Eidsheim, *Race of Sound*, 105-110.

¹¹⁸ Romeo Santos, “Promise,” track number 6 on *Fórmula Vol. 1*, 2012, by Pierre Medor, Rico Love, and Romeo Santos, Sony Music Entertainment, CD.

¹¹⁹ Eidsheim, *Race of Sound*, 107.

Lyrics

The majority of bachata music focuses on topics of romantic and heteronormative love, seduction, and heartbreak; therefore, a discussion of these topics as voiced by men through lyrics reflects the gendered understandings and perspectives of those who create and consume the music. In bachata lyrics, male singers speak about their desire for an often unattainable woman. Jacques Lacan, as explained by feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz, argues that an individual experiences a conflict, stemming from the mirror stage of development, of the self versus the other.¹²⁰ A split develops between what someone desires and the means through which they can obtain that desire.¹²¹ By using language to explain the desire outside of oneself, an individual may learn to obtain that which is desirable.¹²² This desire for an Other outside of and separate from oneself, as if looking in a mirror, appears in the lyrical content of bachata songs. The songs depict a heterosexual male who suffers, due to pain inflicted by a woman. Sometimes the males recognize their own part in the discord, but the story centers around their own love and desire. Typically, the woman in the song remains unnamed but is referred to in the lyrics through pet names, bodily descriptions, or situational descriptions. The women in bachata songs represent generic, desired Others.

Members of the bachata community also recognize the binarily gendered tradition of bachata songs. Sarah, one of my informants, explains the “drama” within bachata

¹²⁰ Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1990), 40-43.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

lyrics and says that they “are not happy lyrics but are just about the lady, always, that the lady has left or cheated.”¹²³ And when she asks her “male Latino friends” if these stories represent real life, they tell her, “Yes! The women are so hot and are very sexually active that they just go out and cheat!”¹²⁴ Here again, the expectations for masculine dominance and feminine guilt resonate for those who listen to bachata music. In the 2017 hit “Me Emborracharé” (“I Will Get Drunk”) by Grupo Extra, the singer explains how he has to get drunk in order to get over his heartache.¹²⁵ The singer admits fault for the loss of the woman, but focuses on her unfulfilled promises.

¹²³ Sarah, interview with author, January 25, 2020.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Grupo Extra, “Me Emborracharé,” track number 1 on *Colores*, 2017, Urban Latin Records, 190181, streaming.

Me emborracharé,	I will get drunk,
Me emborracharé	I will get drunk
Por tu culpa, por tu culpa	Because of you, because of you
Me emborracharé,	I will get drunk,
Me emborracharé	I will get drunk
Es mi culpa, es mi culpa	It is my fault, it is my fault
Me emborracharé por ti	I will get drunk for you,
Mami	Mommy
Ay Dios, Grupo Extra	Oh my God, Grupo Extra
Solo sin tu amor	Alone without your love
Perdido entre licor	Lost between drinks
Lloro tu traición	I cry your betrayal
Los promesas que hiciste	The promises that that you made
El viento se las llevó	The wind took them away

Excerpt from “Me Emborracharé”¹²⁶

The male singer never refers to the woman by name but calls her “Mami,” and later refers to her as the more general “mujer,” or woman, thus suggesting that the role she fulfills as a woman or object of desire is more important than her individual personhood. The chorus of the song sounds as if it is a live recording because a mass of voices yells out the lyrics with the male singer, seeming to sympathize with the male’s pain. This addition of

¹²⁶ Excerpt from “Me Emborracharé,” Grupo Extra (2015), my translation.

voices does not accompany the verses, though, where the singer remains solitary. While the singer expresses extreme pain, the fact that this pain is caused by an unnamed woman shows the superficial nature of his attachment to the subject. Any woman could presumably fill the role of “Mami,” and this common scenario sets a binary expectation that a man feels pain, while a woman causes the pain.

In Prince Royce’s first song, a successful bilingual bachata cover of the popular Ben E. King song, “Stand by Me” (2010), the male narrator pleads with his partner to stay by him.¹²⁷ Royce sings “darlin’, darlin,’” indicating again an unnamed or generic woman.¹²⁸ A female vocalist harmonizes with Royce in the song, but she never takes a lead role in the music. Specifically, the woman’s voice only sounds when Royce sings “by me,” emphasizing his own self-absorption more than his interest in her as an individual. The man’s desire is the most important statement to be recognized.

Finally, Romeo Santos describes a scene of infidelity of his song “Propuesta Indecente” (“Indecent Proposal”) (2013).¹²⁹ In the song, he longs for a woman who already has a partner, but he still fantasizes about sexual encounters they could have or how she would respond if he were to suggest one to her.

¹²⁷ Prince Royce, “Stand by Me,” track number 1 on *Prince Royce*, 2010, Top Stop Music, 85547300203, CD.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Romeo Santos, “Propuesta Indecente,” track number 12 on *Fórmula Vol. 2*, 2014, by Iván and Chévere and Romeo Santos, Sony Music Entertainment, CD.

Hola, me llaman Romeo	Hi, they call me Romeo
Es un placer conocerla	It is a pleasure to meet you
Que bien teves	How well you look
Te adelanto	I move toward you,
No me importa quién sea él	I do not care who he is
Dígame usted	You tell me
Si ha hecho algo travieso alguna	If you've ever done anything
Vez	Naughty
Una aventura es más divertida	An adventure is more fun
Si huele a peligro	If you smell danger
Si te invito a una copa	If I invite you to a drink
Y me acerco a tu boca	And I approach your mouth
Si te robo un bestito	If I steal a little kiss
A ver, Te enojas	Let's see, will you get mad
Conmigo?	At me?

Excerpt from "Propuesta Indecente"¹³⁰

Romeo wants to test the woman, to see how far he can push her before she says no or leaves him. He does not ask for her permission for each action in his fantasies but muses about how the woman might respond if he just acted. His high range, airy timbre with unsteady vibrato accentuates the sound of his desire. Romeo says his own name in the

¹³⁰ Excerpt from "Propuesta Indecente," Romeo Santos (2014), my translation.

lyrics, and at the end of the song, he defines himself as a bad boy. Contrary to this self-recognition, he never provides a specific description or name for the woman he so deeply desires to intimately encounter.

The instruments, voices, and lyrics that make up bachata songs reflect the presence of binary gender constructions within bachata music. The set rhythmic structure of bachata songs provides the songs with clarity and form. The electric guitar, a traditionally male instrument played by male musicians and a symbol of modernity, holds a primary role in the melodic construction of bachata songs. Male bachata singers portray emotion in bachata songs but maintain their masculinity through timbral scare quotes.¹³¹ These masculine musical elements encompass the vast majority of bachata songs and thus create the social expectation for a masculine bachata soundscape. Additionally, the lyrics of bachata songs show how males describe their sexual desire for a woman, the unnamed Other. Sexuality and sensuality within bachata music, then, further reveals the presence of the gender binary within bachata music.

Sensuality

Since bachata is a genre that centers on the topics of love (both sexual and romantic) and the loss of love, the music and dance portray heightened elements of sensuality and sexual tension. The song lyrics, as discussed previously in this chapter, reveal the inner longings of men toward women in ways that articulate heteronormative expectations for desire. Additionally, as with other Latin American and Caribbean

¹³¹ Eidsheim, *Race of Sound*, 105-10.

dances, such as Cuban reggaeton and tango, the element of sensuality holds a prevalent role in the movement of bachata.¹³² As Whitmore explains, many people join Latin American dance communities as a way to express their own sexuality.¹³³ Desmond furthers this statement, saying that Latin dance provides a “socially protected and proscribed way” to express sensuality.¹³⁴ The expectation for sensuality directly ties into the gendered identity of those who interact with the music and dance styles. Sensuality, thus, becomes one of the performative elements that both musicians and dancers express, and this provides insight into their gendered understandings of themselves and others. Bachata offers a socially acceptable container in which to act out or perform sexual desire and sexual roles. Bachata dancers may even feel turned on or sexually charged by the dance, and can enact these feelings without crossing a social line.

Historically, bachata music and dance have undergone significant transformations, especially surrounding the central themes of love and sensuality. Desmond explains how the history of many dance forms typically involves a move from a low-class, distasteful dance to a “refined” or “desexualized” dance.¹³⁵ The “desexualization” may appear in specific movements of the dance, particularly in the regulation of hip and pelvic movement, in the distance between partners, or in specific

¹³² The lyrics of popular Cuban reggaeton songs explicitly detail sex or sexual encounters. Additionally, in the dance, women stand in front of men and move their pelvises in a circular motion, and can even, as one of Fairley’s informants shares, engage in sex while on a dance floor. See Fairley, “Dancing Back to Front,” 476-480.

¹³³ Aleysia Whitmore, “Bodies in Dialogue: Performing Gender and Sexuality in Salsa Dance,” in *Women and Language: Essays on Gendered Communication Across Media*, ed. Melissa Ames and Sarah Himself Burcon (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 142.

¹³⁴ Desmond, “Embodying Difference,” 48.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

male and female roles.¹³⁶ These types of alterations invite consideration of issues of representation, appropriation, and exoticism, which arise when others take a genre and change it to fit within a different context than it was originally intended. This type of desexualization also brings up the problematic question of who, in terms of ethnicity and nationality, is doing the alterations of the dance and who is doing the dancing. Bachata dance involves reinterpretation through desexualization category somewhat, as bachata appears in various formats, including formalized ballroom dance franchises. This formal version of bachata minimizes the sexualized nature of the dance and focuses more on arm framework and specific movement patterns.

Re-learning Bachata and My Own Sensuality: Scene I

While I was a ballroom dance student, I learned how to dance many Latin dances, such as salsa, mambo, cha cha, and bolero. I always enjoyed performing Latin dances, mostly because of the high-energy music and quick movements, but also because I got to wear a shorter skirt (not too short, though, so as to maintain propriety). My teachers taught me how to move my hips in “Cuban motion” which helped me to extend my hips further to the back or to the sides with each step that I took. This type of motion was viewed as feminine, and once I learned how to successfully employ the motion in my own dancing, I felt like I was on my way to becoming a credible female Latin dancer.

In the ballroom community, which typically includes predominantly upper-middle class members, bachata is labeled as “auxiliary,” meaning that it is not a part of the core set of dances to learn. Often, students do not learn auxiliary dances until later in their

¹³⁶ Desmond, “Embodying Difference,” 39-40.

instruction, after they have gained a solid understanding of the standard dances, such as the waltz or rumba. This ranking system problematically places bachata (as well as other Latin American dances like Argentine Tango) in a distinctly lower and “Othered” position. These dances do not *have* to be learned and are not upheld as an integral part of the standard dance repertoire. But, if a person wants to explore something *new* or *out of the ordinary*, then they can learn an auxiliary dance.

Following this progression, I was exposed to bachata after I had been ballroom dancing for a few years. I felt confident about my own capabilities as a dancer and thought I could easily learn this new Latin dance. When I started to dance bachata, I moved with my partner in the “side-together-side-tap” pattern and lightly shifted my hips from side to side, as I knew how to from my Cuban motion training. One of my hands closed around my partner’s and the other rested on his back, but no other parts of our bodies touched. The music that we danced to had a fairly quick tempo. I learned various turn patterns and steps, but my movements were not particularly sensual or exaggerated in any way. While I did not dance bachata often, I thought I understood what the dance entailed and how to move in the patterns well; I found bachata easy and viewed it as another Latin dance that was fun to engage in sometimes. The fact that I—a white, female, middle-class ballroom dancer—assumed that I understood this style of dance due to my formal training reveals my own participation in issues of entitlement and representation that arise when a dance style is taken from its original context and altered for another use. I had no real knowledge of the background or history of the music and dance, or the people who created it, and yet I assumed that I knew bachata.

When I started attending the Latin dance events in Knoxville, I soon learned that my ballroom understanding of bachata dance differed greatly from this community's expectations for bachata dance. In the Knoxville community, partners moved in a very close position, and often a couple's arms, chest, pelvis, and legs would touch. Dancers, and especially women, incorporated head rolls, body rolls, and arm movements that exuded sensuality. The bachatas that played on the playlists were slower, too, which allowed the dancers to exaggerate their movements and press into their partners even more. Further, women wore clothes that intentionally showed more skin. Early on when I first joined the community, many leads would say comments to me such as "Loosen up!" or "You're too tight!" I quickly realized that I had to re-learn everything about bachata, both the music (especially the style of sensual bachata) and the dance. I had to uncover what sensual bachata movement was and what it looked like as expressed through my own body; I discovered how to dance with partners so closely that I could feel their breath on my neck; I newly explored how to be a sensual female dancer. I soon realized that the ways I moved my body and connected with my partner as a female dancer were missing a major component: sensuality. Due to this discovery, I chose to re-learn how to express myself as a female dancer in a way that aligned with the expectations of the Knoxville community, not within my previously desexualized, privileged ballroom expectations.

Sensuality Versus Sexuality in Bachata Dance

The continued globalization and popularity of bachata, and more specifically sensual bachata, is fueled by the sexual aspects of the music and dance. In many American dance communities, DJs tend to play slower, urban bachatas or remixed

popular songs with a bachata beat. These tracks provide the dancers with extra time to move in a sensual, exaggerated manner with one's partner. Many dancers choose to learn bachata dance because of the opportunity it creates for close corporeal connection, as many of my informants reveal. The opportunity for sensual expression within bachata highlights the gendered nature of the dance and pushes individuals to navigate gender constructs in order to express sensuality through the body.

The concepts of sensuality, sexuality, and even sex all tie into the ways that people act, perceive, and describe bachata music and dance. The specific expression and expectation of sensuality within bachata differs depending on the individuals who interact with the genre. As my conversations with bachata community members reveal, the terms "sensuality" and "sexuality" often mix and interchange as synonyms when utilized as descriptive words. Even though the words seemingly carry the same meaning, many individuals still place differing value judgements on these words. I argue that generally, the bachata dancers I have observed are being sexual, even though some dancers prefer to refer to their actions as sensual. Following the pattern of my informants, I interchange the words "sexual" and sensual," but detail the potential differentiations below.

Several of my informants compare the action of expressing sensuality within bachata dance to the act of sex. One female dancer states that her own dance movements mimic those of intercourse saying,

I don't act that way [sexually] when I'm cooking and when I'm with the kids. I might if I am in an intimate situation . . . I would express that femininity, that amount of sensuality. So, when I am dancing bachata, I'm just doing it . . . I guess in public . . . that's basically it. Just showing my sensual side in public.¹³⁷

Alternately, some individuals attempt to make a distinction between sensuality and sexuality, as sensuality seems more appropriate or acceptable. In her description of the emotional and corporeal connectivity of bachata, one of my informants, Sarah, says,

I don't want to say that we are all dirty, we're not. But we just like to be connected with different people because there's certain things we like about every single one of those people. And we connect with him in that dance in a sensual way and it feels good. And then the next dance we [connect] with another guy or girl.¹³⁸

She continues to articulate that she believes that a difference exists between dancing in a vulgar manner versus moving in a sensual and classy way. Vulgar movement is unattractive while sensual movement (with greater refinement) remains respectable. Others feel that bachata can only be described as either distinctly sensual or sexual, but

¹³⁷ Anonymous, interview with author, n.d.

¹³⁸ Sarah, interview with author, January 25, 2020.

not both, since the words can hold different connotations. Another informant, Chase, explains,

That's where people mix up [the terms]. They classify sensual with sexuality or sexual. No, it's not. They're two separate things. In my eyes, the sensual part is just like what they call foreplay. Foreplay is something that enhances the senses like no other. People can do that for hours and you're just super in [it] . . . and whereas just kind of diving right into things [sex], you're not going to get to that high of a feeling if sensuality wasn't there.¹³⁹

In this description, Chase distinguishes between sexuality and bachata, as in his opinion, “sexual” refers to the act of sex and defies the slow, sensuous nature of bachata. Instead, he argues that sensuality remains the correct term to describe the dancing experience. As the terms sensuality and sexuality carry cultural meanings, the intersections of these constructed concepts reveal various possibilities and tensions within the bachata context, which allows a person to express themselves in a sensual manner, often with another person. One must navigate their own feelings on sensuality in order to embody it and express it through their own gendered performance.

¹³⁹ Chase, interview with author, January 12, 2020.

The Bachata Binary: Dance

Scripted binary gender roles appear in bachata dance. Female dancers show more sensuality in their body, especially through movements that involve the hips and arms. Men, on the other hand, tend to add more movements through their footwork and shoulders. In her discussion of sensuality and salsa within the United States, Aleyesia Whitmore says, “being able to dance sensually is considered a good dancing skill, especially for women, as not only is salsa associated with an exotic sexuality, but this is one way in which women are able to improvise, add embellishments, and express individuality as they follow their partners, as men cannot lead their partners in these movements.”¹⁴⁰ Bachata dance also contains a binary expectation for female sensual movement that exceeds male expressions of sensuality. Repeated acts of gendered performance reflect performative understandings within the community. Women may choose how much and in what ways they desire to express their own gender, and as Chapter 3 reveals, this can lead to feelings of empowerment for the women.

During my time in the bachata community, I have always understood my role as a woman. I know that since I am a female, I will (usually) dance with a male partner and follow the movements that he leads. As a woman, I have permission to move my body in a sensual or even explicitly sexual way and know that others will accept that movement within the dance space. Through conversations with many informants, I find that my own experiences run parallel to the experiences of others within the bachata dance

¹⁴⁰ Whitmore, “Bodies in Dialogue,” 146-47.

community. I rely upon my own experience as well as my conversations with my informants to describe the binary gendered movement of bachata dance.

The basic step of the partner bachata dance aligns with the four-beat rhythm of bachata songs. Each beat of the bongos translates to a step by the dancers. When a couple dances bachata, the partners stand in front of each other and mirror their bodies by facing one another. The partners physically touch through holding hands, and this connection enables the lead to direct the motion of the dance. The dancers may also shorten the distance that separates them by adopting a “closed” position. They move in chest to chest and interlock one hand with their partner’s while placing the other hand on their partner’s back. In an even more intimate connection, the partners can place both hands on their partner’s shoulders or back, allowing their bodies to touch from top to bottom. The connection between partners varies depending on the level of comfort between the dancers. The dancers move first to the lead’s left side in a side-together-side-tap motion for four beats. They then repeat this motion to the right side, in a complete eight-count pattern. A sidestep to the right raises the left hip above the horizontal plane created by hips while at rest. The dancer’s feet come together, and the hip swings back to uptick on the left, and one final step moves the hip back out to the right. The four-beat pattern concludes with a tap from the left foot accompanied with an even more exaggerated hip pop. Dancers may also employ other movements in their chest, feet, and legs, but the addition of these movements often varies depending on a dancer’s gender, dance role, and skill level.

Lead

In a dance partnership, the lead, traditionally fulfilled by a male dancer, directs the movement of the dance. A male lead, as Joanna Bosse explains, directs the movements for his female partner, reads and responds to her level of skill, and navigates the floor space so the couple does not hit anything.¹⁴¹ The male dancer, then, maintains control over the dance, since his actions shape how, when, and where a dance unfolds for the couple. To be a good lead, Chase also says that the lead must provide room in the dance to allow the follow to express themselves.¹⁴²

Male leads typically enact movements that exude strength and control. Men can shift or shimmy their chest and shoulders in order to show musical embellishment through their bodies. Also, extra motion in the chest and shoulders can direct a follow in a body roll or other sensual movement, especially if the couple moves in a closed position. Further, a male dancer typically keeps his arms at his sides and rarely moves his arms above his head unless he leads his partner in a turn, which requires him to lift his arm to signal this movement. Lastly, males often press into the ground by bending their knees and incorporate footwork that mimics the sounds of the melodies within the bachata songs. When the men bend their knees, this allows them more flexibility to extend their legs and feet in front of them or to move quickly in a stepping pattern. If the guitar player plays a run of sixteenth notes, for example, the male dancers can tap with their toes or heels or take a step to each one of the sixteenth notes. Members of the

¹⁴¹ Joanna Bosse, *Becoming Beautiful: Ballroom Dance in the American Heartland* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 80.

¹⁴² Chase, interview with author, January 12, 2020.

bachata dance community recognize these movements as masculine, and male dancers move in this manner in order to lead a follow or express their own masculinity.

Follow

The follow role, traditionally fulfilled by a female dancer, responds to the movement of the lead in a dance partnership. Amy, who identifies as a follow, describes the role as “somebody that is interpreting what the lead is trying to communicate . . . you’re interpreting and then kind of just releasing yourself to it [the lead’s motion] and submitting yourself to it, just working with it.”¹⁴³ Her description mirrors what many of my informants describe for the follow role; the follow does what the lead directs. The movements enacted by the follow, though, differ from those of the male lead. The women may utilize their whole body in bachata dance, and the more they do so, the more they can show their own sensuality. A woman can wave her whole body from head to toe in a body roll, move her head in a circle in a head roll, or move her hips in a crescent shape for a hip roll. Further, a woman may move her arms above her head or extend her arms out to her side while flaring her fingers or flipping her wrist. Lastly, a woman may bend her body at the waist to bend down and snap up in a sensual way that accentuates her backside. These movements conform to, and create ongoing expectation for, sensuality within the follow role.

The majority of the movement in sensual bachata, especially, stems from the hips, and therefore the hips become a visual and physical point of focus for both dancers and onlookers. In bachata dance, the hips of a woman are seen as a site of enticement. With

¹⁴³ Amy, interview with author, January 17, 2020.

each step that a female dancer takes in sync with the rhythm of the bongos, she swings her hip out and back in, once her feet close together. This pendulum hip motion is maximized by the potential for an even larger hip motion at the end of the four-beat rhythm: side, together, side, TAP. At the final tap of the movement, the woman puts her body weight on one leg and taps with her other weightless leg. The mobility of the free leg creates the opportunity for an extended upward hip motion with the corresponding hip. A woman who has more mobility in her hips especially has the potential to show femininity or sensuality through her body. In a related example, Tomie Hahn describes the traditional Japanese dance *nihon buyo*, and explains how the use of the fan in the dance allows a dancer to convey feelings or other intangible elements of movement.¹⁴⁴ The fan thereby creates a “lure” and shapes an exoticized stereotype in the dance tradition.¹⁴⁵ A woman’s hips act similarly to this “fan” within bachata dance. Unique to bachata, though, the hips are also a potential point of physical connection between a woman and her partner. If the dancers move in close, their hips touch and swing in tandem from side to side. The more flexibility that a woman exudes with the control and swing of her hips, the more enticing she becomes to other dancers and onlookers; her hips show that she has the skills not only to show sensuality through her body, but also to create an intimate corporeal connection.

Within the bachata dance community, some dancers choose to switch periodically the role that they fulfill in the dance partnership: follows become leaders and leaders

¹⁴⁴ Tomie Hahn, *Sensational Knowledge: Embodying Culture Through Japanese Dance* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), 14.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

become follows. Within this type of exchange, though, the movements of the dancers who switch their position in the dance partnership physically change to express the gendered expectations of that role. During my fieldwork, for example, I witnessed several occasions when a man chose to dance with another man. When this occurred, the male who stepped into the follow role completely changed character. He opened his chest, he swung his hips more drastically (at least he tried to), his arm styling reached up above his head, and he often traced his hands around his face and body. Alternately, during my fieldwork, I also witnessed women who chose to step into a lead role. When this switch unfolded, the women also changed their movement. The women stayed grounded and did not improvise as much: they only moved their arms above their heads if they were leading a movement for their partner, and utilized more of their shoulders than their hips. As these examples reveal, even when dancers try to break the gender binary through role switching, they do not fundamentally change the established roles, since their movements continue to reflect their performative understandings of the typically male lead and female follow positions. Dancers enact the specific movements regulated to the lead or follow role when they embody that role. The dancers' conventional movements thus exemplify Butler's concept of performativity and reveal the continued presence of the gender binary within bachata dance. As Chapter 4 reveals, though, in certain instances, role switching may erode or subvert the binary in the dance community through the use of code switching.

Conclusion

Binary gender roles remain embedded in the historical and continued development of bachata music and dance. Evidence of masculine dominance appears through the instrumentation and aural sphere of bachata music. This masculine dominance further exists through the lyrics of bachata songs as male vocalists sing of their own sexual desire and pain and describe women as an unnamed Other. In bachata dance, the regulation of movement and gender roles exemplifies the traditional binary gender roles in the bachata dance community. Woman may exaggerate their own sensuality and femininity through the use of arm stylings, hip motion, and body rolls; men may express masculinity through their lead of the dance, grounded motions, and shoulder mobility.

The ways in which men and women both create or dance bachata music reflects a social understanding of male and female roles. The repetition of these gender roles, as Butler argues, explains the lingering presence of the performative structures within bachata music and dance. The presence of binary gender within bachata, though, also provides a framework for musicians and dancers to explore alternate constructions of gender. Returning to Butler's idea of an inner and outer bodily binary, if a person knows what is expected of them externally, then they can navigate their internal self to externally fulfill that role or explore outside of it. As this thesis later reveals, important challenges and alterations to the binary structure also appear within bachata communities and show more flexible social understandings of gender within the genre. In this way, a bachata community proves to be a space where people can gather to express their

gendered identities and explore their gendered selves, particularly through the corporeal connections and possibilities for sensual expression that bachata provides.

CHAPTER THREE

PERSONAL GROWTH AND PERSONAL EXPLORATION

In the Knoxville dance community, the lead dancers vary in their years of dance experience and level of comfort with their partners. Due to this variance, each lead dancer in the community connects to the follows in a unique manner both corporeally and interpersonally. I value every opportunity that I get to move with a different lead, but, I do admittedly have my favorites. When I dance with my favorite leads, our bodies become like a unit, shifting and moving in perfect synchronism. One of the leads who creates this type of experience every time that I dance with him is Chase. Chase, with his experience as a dancer and gymnastic instructor, carries an intense awareness of both his and his partner's body. He holds eye contact and quickly picks up on the particular ways that his partner moves, and then shapes his lead based on what his partner's body naturally does. He never tries to outshine his partner, but instead works to create a memorable corporeal (and emotional) experience.

In my interview with Chase, he described one of his own first memorable dance experiences. Early in his dancing career, when he labelled himself as not the "best" dancer, he attended a dance event with his then girlfriend.¹⁴⁶ While at the party, he watched as other men did impressive moves, such as a 720 degree turn (two full spins), but when the men who could complete these feats asked his girlfriend to dance, she turned them down.¹⁴⁷ This shocked Chase, as he thought his girlfriend, as well as the

¹⁴⁶ Chase, interview with author, January 12, 2020.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

other women at the party, cared most about the dance ability of their partners.¹⁴⁸ He soon found that his assumption was incorrect. He discovered himself to be one of the most desired partners of the evening, and all because of one thing: his ability to create connection.¹⁴⁹ He could perform the basic steps of the dances, but more importantly, he fostered a strong connection with his female partners through eye contact, physical responses, and creative movement patterns. More than the technical skill of his dancing, it was his ability to lead a meaningful, sensorial experience that drew in his partners. Further, Chase's memory again exemplifies the powerful presence of the gender binary within bachata dance. As a heterosexual man who desires to dance with female partners, Chase draws on his abilities to create connections with women in order to gain their favor.

Chase's story presents another key element within the constructed social dynamics of the dance community: sensorial connection. Through dance movement, touch with his partner, and eye connection, Chase created moments on the dance floor that made his partners want to dance with him. The women he led felt comfortable with him and willingly opened themselves to a sensual, corporeal, interpersonal, and embodied experience. While once Chase applied this dynamic to attracting female dance partners, Chase said that now as a dancer, he will dance with anyone.¹⁵⁰ He loves to dance and will choose to create that connection with any person, no matter their gender, age, or skill

¹⁴⁸ Chase, interview with author, January 12, 2020.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

level.¹⁵¹ Chase's desire for connection suggests that through sensorial and embodied experience, a person may alter their own desire, broadening their expectations and reliance on social convention.

Within the bachata community, binary gender roles remain the norm, but when sensorial elements combine with embodied experience, individuals may move past tradition and instead focus on interpersonal development and individual meaning. Such change allows for an exploration and expression of self. Also, as my informants reveal, the bachata community offers a safe space for self-exploration, within structured interpersonal relationships. In this chapter, I argue that the multi-sensory experiences with bachata music and dance make possible for the participants the articulation and exploration of gender and self through various performance modalities. This exploration also creates space for female empowerment, personal growth, and social connection.

Embodiment

In the bachata dance community, dancers hear the bachata music, learn the movement, and internalize these sensorial signals within their body. Of the interactions between dance and the body, Tomie Hahn says, "the body simultaneously exists as the art object for performance, as the direct transmitter of the art, and as an individual self. Touch is personal. The encounter negotiates the very boundaries of our physical self."¹⁵² As I suggested earlier, by hearing sound and engaging in touch, bachata dancers embody

¹⁵¹ Chase, interview with author, January 12, 2020.

¹⁵² Tomie Hahn, *Sensational Knowledge: Embodying Culture Through Japanese Dance* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), 101.

socially constructed knowledge and personally respond to it through the sounds and dances they enact. Through looking at the embodiment of those within the bachata dance community, then, one may uncover how the community understands cultural concepts, such as gender.

Embodiment also leads to a transmission of knowledge. Hahn argues that examining how people acquire and share embodied experience shows “how the senses shape our understanding of what exists outside the body (and its relationship to the interior body), and can foster the construction of sensible worlds of shared cultural meaning.”¹⁵³ Hahn suggests that information may be shared in dance through avenues of the “visual, tactile, oral/aural, and media.”¹⁵⁴ In the bachata dance community, members interact with all of these modalities. Dancers see the movement of other dancers, touch one another while dancing, speak or sing, and can see and hear recordings or live streams of these experiences in other parts of the world through media. Through these sensorial elements, bachata dancers learn and share embodied experience.

The act of embodiment requires sensorial learning over time with a community in order to develop.¹⁵⁵ Hahn explains, “it is believed that regular practice of prescribed dance poses and movements reinforces artistic skills in the habitual body, and as movements become embodied, an experience of freedom and realization may occur.”¹⁵⁶ As she details, in Japanese dance traditions, dancers believe that the longer that one

¹⁵³ Hahn, *Sensational Knowledge*, 4.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

embodies and repeats a set structure of movement, then the more freedom that individual experiences to gain knowledge through the movement.¹⁵⁷ The more that dancers come to know a role, then the less they have to think about how to perform that role, and that in turn provides them with the freedom to explore outside of it. Through embodiment and understanding of a dance, one may move past socially constructed forms of expression to other forms of personal expression.

Singing and Dancing as Embodiment

Through movement and dance participation, the body engages in both visual and aural expression, and in order to be a good instrument, one must embody musicality, individuality, and expression. As Chase says, “Your body is the instrument.”¹⁵⁸ Often in the bachata community, people combine all of the senses and utilize their body literally as an instrument by engaging in singing while dancing at a social dance event. Many do this just as an outward expression of their preference for the song, while others do this as a way to further connect with their partner. Chase often sings to his partners as a way of serenading them, but he also explains how singing the lyrics and understanding what is being said enhances his overall experience in the moment.¹⁵⁹ Amy explains how she intentionally invests time in learning the lyrics of bachata songs that she feels especially drawn to.¹⁶⁰ She Googles the lyrics and learns the pronunciations outside of the dance

¹⁵⁷ Hahn, *Sensational Knowledge*, 44.

¹⁵⁸ Chase, interview with author, January 12, 2020.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Amy, interview with author, January 17, 2020.

event so that she can sing along to the chorus of a song during a dance social.¹⁶¹ By singing and dancing, dancers may share an increased interpersonal experience with their partner or other dancers if the dancers sing together. Additionally, by learning song lyrics and singing, a dancer interacts more personally with the sound of the bachata songs.

The act of singing and dancing bachata creates an embodied experience that allows sound to resonate through the body. Deborah Kapchan suggests that sounds and the body intertwine to create a sound body, “a resonant body that is porous, that transforms according to the vibrations of its environment, and correspondingly transforms that environment.”¹⁶² In keeping with Kapchan’s premises, I find that through the incorporation of sound and body in singing and dance, bachata members transform both themselves and their environment, as they arguably interact differently with their partner when singing. For example, if Chase leads a female dancer and pulls her in close to sing in her ear, then the female may feel as well as hear this song, experiencing vibrations from the sound system as well as vibrations from Chase’s voice as they resonate through his chest to hers. This experience furthers the creation of interpersonal connection and intimacy since the couple shares the physicality of dance and sound.

The sound that occurs during moments of singing and dancing incorporates dislocated sounds, or sounds that occur away from their original source. R. Murray Schafer discusses the idea of schizophonia, or the concept of sound that separates from its

¹⁶¹ Amy, interview with author, January 17, 2020.

¹⁶² Deborah Kapchan, “Body,” in *Keywords in Sound*, ed. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 38.

original source, often through electronic means.¹⁶³ Recorded bachata songs are schizophrenic in that the recordings circulate, sound, and are consumed separately (on a global scale) from the musicians who created them. Also, in a social dance setting, people often hear sounds without seeing the source of that sound. For example, a person may hear a recorded bachata song but not see the speaker that distributes the sound. The dislocation of sound from its source creates a sense of instability for listeners, as they cannot fully understand the origin of the sound or the nature of its separation from its source. Maintaining sound within the body, however, presents a way to reattach a dislocated sound to a source. The dancing body responds to the disembodied song, while the singing body vocally reattaches the sound to a body. A sound, even a schizophrenic sound, resonates within the sound body and provides a physical understanding and acknowledgement of that sound. This suggests that the act of singing and dancing creates a reverse of schizophrenia by taking an unsourced sound and making it embodied, thus realizing the sound again.

The song, “Me Emborracharé” (“I Will Get Drunk”) by Grupo Extra plays at many social dance events in Knoxville and Charlotte and around the world. The group intentionally creates their music in a way that encourages people to participate with the music. As Tony, a member of the group, details in an interview with Julie Sellers, “we put a chorus in our songs so people can sing it along with us and be happy.”¹⁶⁴ Whenever

¹⁶³ R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1994), Kindle edition, loc. 1750.

¹⁶⁴ Julie Sellers, *The Modern Bachateros: 27 Interviews* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2017), 157.

the song plays at a dance social, it creates an embodied experience, as many dancers know and sing the chorus while dancing. The sound of the dance space then fills with the recorded sounds of Grupo Extra and mixes with the live voices of the male and female dancers. The vibrations from the sound system enter the body and cross with the vibrations from the vocalizations of the singing dancers. This interlocking of sound and body directs the way that the dancer moves, and if that dancer moves with a partner, then their embodied experiences also affect one another. I, personally, have sung and danced to this song many times with a partner at dance events. Whenever this occurs, I experience an exhilarating burst of energy, as I feel the resonance from the music, hear the sounds of my partner's voice and others around the room, and feel the movement of our bodily response to the music. Without fail, this shared physical and aural experience makes the dance stand out for me as one of my favorites in my lineup of dances for the evening.

Sensual Bachata and Building Trust

Many of my informants attribute their preference for bachata over other Latin American dances to the fact that the dance allows for an increased level of both physical and emotional connection between partners. Relevant here is the thinking of Hahn, who states, “during a tactile experience, the boundaries of one body and another conjoin.”¹⁶⁵ She continues, “the skin not only contains the physical boundary of each individual; it locates the body *within* a context, *as* a context (a sense of the body's interior versus

¹⁶⁵ Hahn, *Sensational Knowledge*, 101.

exterior).”¹⁶⁶ Hahn’s suggestion of an interior and exterior body mirrors Butler’s concept of an inner and outer bodily binary, discussed in Chapter 2.¹⁶⁷ A person’s inner identity and conception of the self reflects outwardly on the body. Specifically, through sensual bachata, members of the bachata community experience the closest corporeal connection. As Rodrigo, the co-owner of RW Latin Dance Company in Charlotte, explains,

When we tell our students about sensual bachata, more people would think that sensual bachata is like sexual bachata, you have to be sexual. But in sensual bachata, [it means] of the senses of the body, that you use more parts of the body to lead, so you get closer to the partner . . . creating that connection to be more intense.¹⁶⁸

Rodrigo continues,

One thing that attracts people into bachata, sensual bachata, is because they get to hug somebody, you know, and have that touch and that feel . . . even if they don’t know the person . . . So for a lot of people that is new, or they never had that before, they never experienced that before. So, because they’re experiencing that

¹⁶⁶ Hahn, *Sensational Knowledge*, 101.

¹⁶⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 134-135.

¹⁶⁸ Rodrigo, interview with author, January 16, 2020.

now, there is something that is addictive because they want to have and continue having that feel and connection for another person.¹⁶⁹

Rodrigo suggests that people long for connection, and that bachata allows people to connect corporeally and emotionally, due to the structure of the music and dance. Dance therapist Yona Shahar-Levy presents the idea of emotorics, “a theoretical model of the role of emotive movement as a central (though not the only) agent of psychophysical healthy functioning and development.”¹⁷⁰ In this theory, she suggests that feeling through movement leads to positive personal change. I see emotorics as pertaining to bachata, particularly in the feelings and personal exploration that occurs through being a part of the community: these experiences lead to healthy personal and relational development in an exploration of the self, especially in gender exploration. As a part of the emotorics theory, Shahar-Levy further explains that through dance, individuals experience an “interpersonal gravitation” that pulls an individual horizontally toward or away from themselves or a partner.¹⁷¹ She suggests that the “face, chest, arms, and legs are anatomically built to enable interactions among the horizontal axes.”¹⁷² In sensual bachata, dancers experience a literal pull towards each other, as the movements of the dance often draw the partners so close that their face, chest, arms, and legs touch. As the

¹⁶⁹ Rodrigo, interview with author, January 16, 2020.

¹⁷⁰ Yona Shahar-Levy, “Emotorics: A Psychomotor Model for the Analysis and Interpretation of Emotive Motor Behavior,” in *The Art and Science of Dance/Movement Therapy: Life Is Dance*, 2nd ed., ed. Sharon Chaiklin and Hilda Wengrower (New York: Routledge, 2016), 287.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 290.

¹⁷² Ibid.

couple moves from left to right, they physically move along a horizontal axis as they internally interpret the connection between one another. Through this repeated pattern, the dancers build a level of trust for both themselves and their partner.

Since sensual bachata includes a closer connection and more sexualized movements than many other social dances, the development of trust between the dancers becomes imperative in order to move and express sensuality. Shahar-Levy says, “trust involves predictability in the domains of comfort-discomfort and approach-withdrawal regulation.”¹⁷³ As trust increases among members of a community, and a safe space forms, individuals increasingly feel the freedom to explore and perform elements of identity, including sensualized expressions of gender identity.

Safe Space

Community, trust, and belonging shape the explorative space of gender within a bachata community. Through the creation of a close community, individuals experience a level of comfort that is specific to that community. As detailed previously, I describe the bachata dance community as a “*communitas*,” which is a group that utilizes ritual and repeated acts to bond with one another.¹⁷⁴ The shared action creates a sense of togetherness and draws people closer together interpersonally. Due to this social comfort, individuals then experience the freedom to explore and express themselves, as they

¹⁷³ Shahar-Levy, “Emotorics,” 267.

¹⁷⁴ Barbara O’Connor, “Safe Sets: Women, Dance and ‘Communitas,’” in *Dance in the City*, ed. Helen Thomas (New York: Macmillan Press, 1997), 149-72.

acknowledge the bachata community as a safe space. While some people try out gender roles, others might explore identity in different ways.

The need for a safe space becomes even more important when individuals express sensuality. Anthropologist Jonathan Skinner describes how in his ethnographic work with a salsa social dance community in Belfast, many of the women viewed the social dance gatherings as safe spaces to have a sexual connection with another person.¹⁷⁵ Similarly, in my interviews with my informants, many of the dancers describe how they enact their own sexuality or connect through their sexuality with their dance partners while social dancing. This type of interaction occurs because the dancers feel comfortable and do not fear sharing a sensual experience with another person on the dance floor. Amy describes how she views bachata as a safe place to share her body with a partner in a sensual way without giving too much of herself to her partner.¹⁷⁶ She says,

I mean us women, we love to feel like we're just you know, sexy. And it [dancing sensual bachata] is just like this other connection . . . it's just something [where] you can kind of experience the sensual side of yourself without having to necessarily give your body away . . . so it's a safer way to go about it.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁵ Jonathan Skinner, "Women Dancing Back—and Forth: Resistance and Self-Regulation in Belfast Salsa," *Dance Research Journal* 40, no. 1 (2008): 73.

¹⁷⁶ Amy, interview with author, January 17, 2020.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

Sarah also describes how when she dances bachata, she expresses the most intimate side of her femininity even while in a public setting.¹⁷⁸ She feels she can do this because she understands her own boundaries of public sensual expression, and expects her partners to respect those boundaries.¹⁷⁹

Community and Connection

The ways that a person explores self within a group often leads to change for that individual outside of the group, as well. Thomas Turino describes how a person's identity within a group is influenced by how one aligns with and differs from that group.¹⁸⁰ He states, "group identities are the recognition, selection, and sometimes conscious creation of common habits among varying numbers of individuals."¹⁸¹ Thus, an interdependent relationship forms between an individual's identity and the identity of their chosen social group. Further, Turino explains that habits underlie the formation of identity, alluding to the fact that habits take time to form and even longer to break.¹⁸² He says that habits are "real, existing forces both at the level of the individual and society. The flip side is that habits can and do continually change . . . because of conscious effort . . . or more or less gradually through new experience."¹⁸³ Using this framework of habits, Turino suggests that the repetition of action can both construct and deconstruct a person's identity, and

¹⁷⁸ Sarah, interview with author, January 25, 2020.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Thomas Turino, "Introduction: Identity and the Arts in Diaspora Communities," in *Identity and the Arts in Diaspora Communities*, ed. Thomas Turino and James Lea (Warren, MI: Harmonie Park Press, 2004), 8.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Ibid., 9.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

especially within a group. This idea of repetition mirrors Butler's idea of repetition in the creation of cultural conceptions, and particularly in the formation of gender, as discussed in Chapter 2.¹⁸⁴ While Butler doubts that cultural constructions may change or be eliminated due to their repetitious nature, Turino suggests that repetition can lead to change in the formation of personal and group identity.

In the dance community, I suggest, individuals learn a skill that is repeated and built upon or altered, much like a habit. The embodiment and repetition of a shared experience through bachata dance, then, allows individuals to navigate their understanding of self inwardly, and then express that identity. Within bachata communities, the social aspect of bachata dance often leads to personal change through the exploration of gender roles, but also through elements of confidence, sensuality, and empowerment.

Personal Growth: Confidence

Through dance, people must navigate personal and social aspects of life in a new way. We see these processes in action, for example, when a new male dancer walks up to a group of experienced female dancers and has to ask one of them to dance; when a woman dances with a man she has never met and has to trust his lead; when a student processes critique by her instructor on her movement; when a person receives a compliment from another dancer on a skill; and when a male dancer falls on the dance floor, perhaps with his ego bruised. Wendy, the co-owner of RW Latin Dance Company, says that when people join their dance studio, they must work on themselves, whether

¹⁸⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 140.

they acknowledge that personal process or not. She explains, “even though people may think that they’re working on just dance issues, in reality, they’re also working on the back-burner issues.”¹⁸⁵ By navigating these various experiences, whether positive or negative, people grow and change. As all of my informants suggest, the biggest change that stems from their involvement in the dance community manifests in their confidence.

The reasons that a person experiences an increase in confidence varies from person to person. Psychologist Peter Lovatt describes confidence as a combination of both “self-concept” and “self-esteem,” or how a person perceives themselves and their feelings associated with that perception.¹⁸⁶ He suggests that dance confidence, specifically, “is an indicator of how someone feels about themselves in relation to their recreational/social dancing ability.”¹⁸⁷ A person’s formation of dance confidence may be shaped by how the individual experiences the opinions of others in response to their own dancing.¹⁸⁸ In a study conducted by Lovatt with male and female dancers from ages 16 to 65, he found that the amount of dance confidence a person experiences can vary based on age and gender.¹⁸⁹ However, overall, as a person’s dance skill increases, their confidence also increases. This increase in confidence includes an individual’s social and personal confidence. By social confidence, I mean an increase of confidence in the ways a person communicates with others or invests in a group.

¹⁸⁵ Wendy, interview with author, January 16, 2020.

¹⁸⁶ Peter Lovatt, “Dance Confidence, Age and Gender,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 50 (2011): 668.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 668-669.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 668.

As an individual's social confidence grows, they often gain the courage to place more time and energy into their community. As a Russian immigrant, Sarah describes how her participation in the dance community increased her understanding of American culture and allowed her to feel more skilled in carrying on conversations with other dancers.¹⁹⁰ Chase describes how his time in the dance community increased his comfort in interacting with others, and especially women.¹⁹¹

Additionally, social confidence positively correlates with an individual's personal confidence. Rodrigo explains how at their studio, they often gain new dancers with a history of a negative personal experience, such as a divorce. Through being in the community and dancing, though, they begin to change in a positive manner. Rodrigo says, "they [new dancers] come in and start working on their self-esteem, their confidence: they start meeting new people, and doing activities and things like that. And we see the transformation."¹⁹² For Chase, his increased feeling of confidence stems from his ability to express sensuality when dancing bachata.¹⁹³ He feels desired, wanted, and sexy when he leads bachata, and his act of dancing then serves as a type of ego boost.¹⁹⁴ Amy describes how she feels special when she can share with others that she dances, since not many people dance, and therefore her skill sets her apart.¹⁹⁵ Her skill is a way that she promotes herself and this makes her feel unique.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁰ Sarah, interview with author, January 25, 2020.

¹⁹¹ Chase, interview with author, January 12, 2020.

¹⁹² Rodrigo, interview with author, January 16, 2020.

¹⁹³ Chase, interview with author, January 12, 2020.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Amy, interview with author, January 17, 2020.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

Personal confidence can also impact the way that a person views their own body. One dancer told me, “confidence is a huge thing. Also being comfortable in my own skin, because when you’re a dancer you literally have to be aware of everything. And if there’s something you don’t like, you either change it or you learn to accept it.”¹⁹⁷ In particular, women view their bodies differently because of their involvement in the bachata community. Chase says that many women enter the dance space and negatively compare their bodies and dance skill to those of other women.¹⁹⁸ Sarah also details how comparison among women in the dance community can negatively affect a woman’s self-confidence.¹⁹⁹ Chase suggests, though, that “those women that feel that way, after they start dancing for a few months, I can see a big difference. They think they’re sexy now, which is good. They should feel that way!”²⁰⁰ I agree with Chase’s observation of such transformation. I watch women of all ages start to dance bachata, and when they begin, they seem timid, reserved, or insecure. They make small movements, they do not want to step too close to their partner, and their faces often display a furrowed brow. As they learn how to move their body to the rhythm and become comfortable with the dance, though, the energy and strength that they exude completely changes. The women open up their movements to include more hip swings, they move in close to their partners without inhibition, and they often smile or show intensity in their eyes. These physical changes

¹⁹⁷ Anonymous, interview with author, n.d.

¹⁹⁸ Chase, interview with author, January 12, 2020.

¹⁹⁹ Sarah, interview with author, January 25, 2020.

²⁰⁰ Chase, interview with author, January 12, 2020.

suggest that through bachata dance, women can move from an internal place of insecurity to strength.

Personal Growth: Sensuality and Empowerment

Through bachata, members of the community engage in agreed upon expressions of sensuality, in ways that reflect the interpersonal connections between the dancers. The safe space allows these sensual expressions to continue and grow among individuals and the group as a whole. In her description of sensual bachata, Sarah emphasizes how the sensuality between the dance partners enables them to enact a type of romance within each dance.²⁰¹ She says, “So we like our partners and it doesn’t mean that we’re like, you know . . . cheating with everybody, we are not, we are not involved physically. But emotionally at that point [when dancing] we are connected and it’s like a mini romance, it’s like a love dance.”²⁰² Amy likewise explains that when dancing sensual bachata,

It [bachata] just kind of brings out another side of yourself. And it helps you connect more with other people, especially if you’re not being creepy, you can really create a good connection. But I also think everyone wants to feel sexy, men and women both. And they want to feel like they’ve got this prowess or this moxie . . . and dance just enhances that.²⁰³

²⁰¹ Sarah, interview with author, January 25, 2020.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Amy, interview with author, January 17, 2020.

In bachata dancing, women experience empowerment through the expression of their sexuality and their agency within a dance. Similarly, in his ethnographic work on salsa dancing in Belfast, Skinner details how several of his informants felt that through salsa dancing, they gained an increased awareness of their own sexuality and ability to express that sexuality.²⁰⁴ Through an increased sexual awareness, the women then felt that they learned more about their own strength.²⁰⁵ Within bachata partner work, women maintain the ability to dictate how their sensuality unfolds and to what level their sensuality is expressed, despite normally occupying the “follow” role. Chase says that he reads the ways in which his partners respond to the sensual moves that he employs, and this directly affects how he progresses in the dance.²⁰⁶ He details, “I play in the sense that I see her body language and what she’s enjoying, and then I do more of that and enhance it as the dance goes on.”²⁰⁷ Through sexual movement, women reclaim strength and agency through their actions, and affect the actions of their partners, which result in feelings of empowerment.²⁰⁸

Women who experience empowerment through dance often carry that empowerment outside of the dance space, as well. As Skinner explains, “it is not just on the dance floor then, that empowerment is manifest and desire, sexuality, and the body intersect. The dancing can encourage and facilitate these changes which can then extend

²⁰⁴ Skinner, “Women Dancing Back—and Forth,” 70-71.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Chase, interview with author, January 12, 2020.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Whitmore, “Bodies in Dialogue,” 147.

off the dance floor back into her everyday living as a woman.”²⁰⁹ Through bachata dancing, as practiced in safe communal spaces, women create the habits, learn skills, and explore themselves in ways that change them both on and off of the dance floor.

Conclusion

As many of my informants describe, when a person dances bachata, they experience such an embodied experience that it takes them beyond themselves, due to the combination of sensuality, connection, strength, and individuality. Most dancers describe this as an addictive, positive experience, and one that ties them to the dance and the community. Amy describes the experience of dancing as a type of drug.²¹⁰ She says, “It’s my personal drug-free opium . . . It’s something else. It’s almost like you’re taken to this other dimension . . . Almost like this out of body experience.”²¹¹ Turino applies the concept of flow, as proposed by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, to describe an “optimal experience” that an individual can experience through an activity.²¹² He says that while in flow, “the experience actually leads to a feeling of timelessness, of being out of normal time, and to feelings of transcending one’s normal self.”²¹³ Turino suggests that when people engage in an activity that both pushes them and allows them to succeed, then flow may occur, and this is a positive experience.²¹⁴ Arguably, what Amy describes

²⁰⁹ Skinner, “Women Dancing Back—and Forth,” 72.

²¹⁰ Amy, interview with author, January 17, 2020.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 4.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

and what many other dances describe, is flow—the perfect combination of challenge and skill with the perfect partner leads to the optimal experience. Further, as dance therapist Joan Chodorow describes, the body and the mind combine to form positive feelings. She says, “joyful play and imagination tend to put us in touch with material that is ordinarily repressed . . . imagination creates symbolic images and stories that somehow make the unbearable bearable.”²¹⁵ The sensorial and embodied experience of bachata dancing creates an experience for individuals that allows them to reach flow, connect with themselves, and interact with others in a way that varies from their normal, everyday experience.

As this chapter suggests, bachata communities provide individuals with a safe social space in which to explore themselves and to express elements of their own individuality in ways that they could not outside of the dance space. Through dance, the members of these communities gain more confidence in their interactions with other individuals. They can speak to others in a social setting, gain a positive view of their bodies, and improve upon a skill that not all people possess. In this personal transition, the dancers also learn how to express their own sensuality and engage in that sensual expression with another individual. The ways that the dancers interact, and a person’s agency in that interaction, allows both partners, and especially women, to experience a type of gendered empowerment. Further, the ability for an individual to explore notions

²¹⁵ Joan Chodorow, “Dance Therapy: Motion and Emotion,” *The Art and Science of Dance/Movement Therapy: Life Is Dance*, 2nd ed., ed. Sharon Chaiklin and Hilda Wengrower (New York: Routledge, 2016), 61.

of self in the dance community also often means that dance becomes a space where people express parts of the self that variously align with or counter social expectations.

CHAPTER FOUR

BREAKING THE BINARY

Salsa Beatz is a monthly Latin dance social in Knoxville that occurs in a local dance studio. People gather at the studio on the third week of the month and drop in and out of the social from around 8 p.m. to 1 a.m. When you enter the dance studio space, the door opens to a long foyer where a woman greets you and takes your fee to enter the social. The studio contains two rooms: one room holds the dance floor and the other doubles as a kitchen and lounge space for socializing. I rarely spend time in the lounge area, since I dance as much as possible at socials, but typically a group just talks there for a majority of the evening. The people who attend the social represent a diverse population. The demographic includes those of Russian, Indian, Latin American, Caribbean, and English ethnicities. While dancers mainly speak English, I often overhear bursts of Spanish and Russian, depending on the attendees. The dancers who frequent Salsa Beatz range in age from 21 to 65, with a majority residing in the 20s to 40s age range. Most of the dancers come to the dance event for the recreational and social benefits.

In my opinion, Salsa Beatz is the best social dance in Knoxville because it is typically well-attended, and the organizer, Sarah, puts a lot of time into creating and shaping the playlists for the evening. While the music playlist for this event includes a mix of salsa, bachata, cumbia, zouk, and merengue, Sarah places a heavy emphasis on bachata music, and therefore those who attend the event dance bachata more than the other genres. The organizer also employs many remixed bachatas, meaning English-language pop songs remixed by a DJ to include a bachata beat. Due to this, the bachatas

that play at the event typically include English or Spanish lyrics, and feature both male and female singers. Sarah says she intentionally includes a mix of bachata styles as a way to relate to the diverse dance population. She explains,

There is an English-speaking audience here that comes to this dance . . . They don't know Spanish and they maybe cannot even relate [to the lyrics]. But if they hear the songs that they know, the American hit, and they can actually dance bachata to it, for them, it's great! So I started incorporating the pop bachata, the Dominican style, and the English [language] bachata remixes.²¹⁶

This variety of bachata music mirrors the bachata dancing that unfolds at Salsa Beatz. As the previous chapter reveals, the bachata dance community provides a safe space for individuals to explore aspects of their identity. At Salsa Beatz, the dancers move to the male and female voices heard in the bachata songs as they shift between, and sometimes contradict, the traditional male and female roles found in the dance community. By moving between and outside of these gender roles, the dancers propose an embodied breaking of the traditional gender binary.

Salsa Beatz: Scene I

I arrive at Salsa Beatz on a cool evening in January. I walk into the studio right at the start time, which means I am one of the first attendees to arrive; most people typically start to show up at least thirty minutes after the advertised start time. As the dancers

²¹⁶ Sarah, interview with author, January 25, 2020.

trickle in, a majority of the attendees move directly to the back room and start socializing, making small talk and catching up on life, with the music from the dance room as a background ambience to their conversations. People eventually put on their dance shoes, though, and start to move back and forth to the dance room, and the dancing picks up.

At one point during the middle of the evening, Sarah announces that it is time for the birthday dance. Each month, the organizer makes a point to play a special song for anyone whose birthday occurs in the month of the social. For a birthday dance, the person celebrating stands in the middle of the dance floor, and the dance attendees of the opposite gender circle around that individual. As the song plays (almost always a bachata song), the partners move around the birthday dancer in a step-touch motion, and take turns stepping into the middle of the circle to dance with the birthday dancer. This creates a visual focus on the partners within the middle of the circle together. As a new dancer steps into the center of the circle, the current partner steps away from the birthday dancer and rejoins the outer circle. This partner rotation lasts for the duration of a single song.

The birthday dance typically reinforces the binary gender roles present within bachata social dancing. When the birthday dance occurs, if a male has a birthday, then the women gather around him and vice versa. If both a male and a female have a birthday to celebrate, then two separate circles form—a male circle for the woman and a female circle for the man. The birthday dance that occurs on this late January evening at Salsa Beatz, however, reflects an alternative to the binary gender script. When Sarah makes the announcement for the birthday dance, one male dancer reluctantly moves out to the center of the floor (despite being a great dancer, this lead is very shy and does not like to hold the center of attention). Once he finally takes his place in the middle of the dance

floor, to my surprise, both women *and* men move to circle around him. When I see this event unfolding, I intentionally choose not to join the circle but rather to sit on the side and watch as the female and male dancers take turns moving with the birthday dancer. Notably, the males who step into the circle to dance with the birthday dancer take on the follow role. As the males move with the birthday lead, they exaggerate their hip movements, bending their knees in order to create a wider pendulum that swings from left to right.

When the male follows embody and enact this hip motion, the women love it. Each time a male dancer slides into the circle to dance with the birthday dancer, the female dancers (and myself) cheer audibly, as this uncommon male-to-male interaction seems humorous and draws more attention than the traditional male-female partnership. As the male assumes and embodies an alternate, normally feminized role, he presents a different possibility for a male's role in the bachata space. Butler's theory of gender performativity would suggest that because the male follow enacts feminine movements (namely the exaggerated hip movements), only while in the follow role, he reinforces the gender binary through his performativity of that role.²¹⁷ Importantly, though, in this ethnographic snapshot, when the male enacts the traditionally female role, he receives substantial positive social reception to this role reversal. A male may move in a "female" manner and garner support from the community for that action. This alternate gender and social possibility then reduces the necessity for applying strict female and male labels to

²¹⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 140.

specific movements; it instead suggests a new social construction with the potential for repetition.

Salsa Beatz: Scene II

The number of attendees at a dance social often impacts the gender roles that dancers choose to embody while dancing bachata. As the Salsa Beatz evening progresses, only a few dancers stay for the final hours of the party. The small number of dancers means that the dance floor remains sparsely used for the latter duration of the evening. On the other hand, this also opens the way for more creative dance expressions in terms of lead and follow roles between dancers. At one moment in the evening, a song ends and a moment of silence passes before the next song begins. During this silent moment, a male follow approaches me and asks me to dance. I say yes, but as the quick rhythm of a Dominican bachata begins, he grimaces and decides he no longer wants to dance to the song, as it is not his favorite style. This leaves me suddenly abandoned on the already sparse dance floor without a partner. Coming to my aid, Sarah swoops in and says she will lead me in the Dominican bachata style. Dominican bachata songs are much faster than sensual bachata songs, and often emphasize footwork rather than full-body movement, as the quicker tempo restricts the amount of time that a dancer has to enact a body or head roll. Even with the faster tempos, though, dancers can still portray sensuality in the Dominican style.

As Sarah and I move further out on the middle of the floor, I look over and see several men sitting along the outer edge of the dance floor, staring right at us, ready to take in whatever Sarah and I express. Sarah and I, fueled by the energy of an audience and the quick bongo rhythm, move our hips in an exaggerated pendulum motion from

side to side. The more we move our hips, the more of a vocal response we receive from our male onlookers. At one point we sway our hips back and forth while we dip low to the floor. Our audience whoops and hollers in response, seemingly overcome by this expression of femininity shown by two women in motion. Apart from the birthday dance, this is the loudest and most responsive moment of the whole evening.

After my experience at the Salsa Beatz social dance, I began to wonder: why did the two moments in which dancers chose to switch gender roles garner more enthusiastic responses from those within the community? How is bachata an experience in which the gender binary can both exist, and be effectively challenged? In her discussion of bachata and dancehall space, Sydney Hutchinson says the spaces “are certainly homophobic, and yet have provided space for performances of gender that push the boundaries of conventional masculinity and femininity.”²¹⁸ I agree with Hutchinson’s statement, and argue that while the gender binary exists within bachata music and dance, the genre and the communities who interact with it also present opportunities for the binary to be broken.

Breaking the Binary

Traditionally within bachata music and dance, binary gender roles are established and reinforced through the specific lyrics, musicians, instruments, and dance movements enacted by those involved with the genre. Within the 21st century, evidence of a change in tradition appears in both bachata music and dance. The bachata binary in music and

²¹⁸ Sydney Hutchinson, *Focus: Music of the Caribbean* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 127.

dance was first displaced through diaspora and then re-rooted in different communities in the United States (starting in New York) and around the world. When the bachata binary is displaced and replanted, it takes root in the new given community and it draws people in through transnational appeal and the sensual possibility of its expression. When community members combine expression with community building, as Chapter 3 detailed, then their social understanding of bachata shifts towards their own values and creates an opportunity for self-realization. This in turn leads to a breakdown of gender roles, and situations in which traditional gender roles cease to hold social meaning. As discussed in Chapter 2, Butler argues that binary gender constructs cannot be broken due to the repetition and social perpetuation of the male and female roles.²¹⁹ But, as this chapter shows through bachata music examples and ethnographic moments in Knoxville and Charlotte, the binary gender constructions found within bachata music and dance can sometimes be broken.

Breaking the Binary: Music

In recent years, *bachateras*, or female bachata artists, have started to produce bachata songs. Susan McClary explains that when “stylistic change” occurs in music, these changes are often “expressed in terms of sexual identity.”²²⁰ In bachata music featuring a female singer, the idea of stylistic change applies most readily to the voice, not the instrumental or musical structure of the songs. The sound of a female voice, with

²¹⁹ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 40-43.

²²⁰ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 17.

a higher range and distinctive timbre, opposes the traditionally masculine soundscape and alters the sexual identity associated with the music. Unlike male artists, female singers are not restricted by a need to reaffirm masculinity through a specific range or timbral sound, such as Eidsheim's "timbral scare quotes," nor do they need to mark a difference between their chest and head ranges.²²¹ Therefore, the bachatas produced by female artists have more timbral and melodic variety than those produced by men. *Bachateras* can sing in the upper or lower ranges of their voices and express emotion through their voices as well as their lyrics.

The lyrics sung by bachateras also suggest an alternative to the binary gender script found in bachata lyrics sung by males. McClary describes the idea of narrative and gender within music. She says that often in Western classical music, a male serves as the protagonist, who then conquers the "Other," typically the female character.²²² A similar dynamic applies to bachata songs, as described in Chapter 2, in which a male narrator seeks to obtain and conquer a female object of desire. However, in the bachatas by female artists, these gender-narrative norms are directly challenged. The "Other" no longer refers to a female, but often to a male figure or to a specific romantic situation. The song "Religion" by bachatera Chantel, provides an example of a new script for a female's role in bachata music outside of the traditional binary construction.

In "Religion," Chantel uses religious metaphors to describe her role as a woman in her relationship with a man; she does so in ways that counter traditional femininity and

²²¹ Eidsheim, *Race of Sound*, 105-110.

²²² McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 14.

female roles.²²³ In bachata lyrics, metaphors are employed to relate to issues of daily life, particularly surrounding an individual's love life and sense of identity. Similarly, bachata songs produced by *bachateros* in the Dominican Republic during the late-20th century often used double entendres to include sexual meanings in their songs.²²⁴ As economic hardships impacted Dominican society in the late-20th century, the lyrics of bachata songs turned towards a negative, raw, and emotional description of women and relationships.²²⁵ The type of love detailed in the lyrics of the music shifted from romantic love to what Pacini Hernandez labels as “casual sex with no pretense to longevity.”²²⁶ While the colorful language utilized through double entendres was not respected in the more “sophisticated” bachata songs, such wordplay often relied upon imagery of common items (such as fruit or cars) to refer to sexual topics.²²⁷ This use of dual meanings and imagery still appears today in the lyrics of bachata songs, especially through the use of direct metaphors, as Chantel's song reveals.

Canadian-born artist Chantel was encouraged in her artistic endeavors by her Dominican father from a young age.²²⁸ Her song credits feature the influence of her father and her brother. In Chantel's own biography, she acknowledges the rarity of successful female bachata artists, but claims that she sees her role as a “*reto*” or challenge, and

²²³ Chantel, “Religion,” by SP Polanco and David Pinto Picasso, 2018, Collado Productions and SP Polanco, streaming.

²²⁴ Pacini Hernandez, *Bachata*, 3.

²²⁵ Ibid., 158-59.

²²⁶ Deborah Pacini Hernandez, “*Cantando la cama vacía: Love, Sexuality and Gender Relationships in Dominican Bachata*,” *Popular Music* 9, no. 3 (1990): 351.

²²⁷ Pacini Hernandez, *Bachata*, 175.

²²⁸ Chantel Collado, “About,” accessed October 15, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/pg/chantelcolladoficial/about/?ref=page_internal.

believes that with hard work, she can achieve success in the genre.²²⁹ The twenty-two-year-old singer released the single “Religion” in 2018. The song, written by David Pinto and Pedro Polanco and produced by Collado Productions, incorporates both English and Spanish lyrics, often switching in the middle of a sentence. While the song title is not publicized with an accent over the “o” of “Religion,” the music video boldly displays the title of the project as “Religión,” which further exemplifies Chantel’s bilingual reach. The music video has received over 200,000 views on YouTube, where its presence on the streaming channel, as well as the bilingual lyrical content, provides this emerging artist with a way to reach a broad audience. As John McDowell explains, YouTube holds an important function for many Latin American artists, providing a way to create and share videos that are meant to express cultural meaning.²³⁰

The “Religion” song and music video present an alternate script to the binary gender roles typically portrayed within bachata songs. Leslie Gay states that “technologies and their social reconfigurations offer a means for undermining stereotypes and changing alignments of power.”²³¹ “Religion,” through its aural and media forms, presents an empowered configuration of femininity through a bachata song. Instead of singing about sexual longing or heartbreak, Chantel claims that she is the one in control of love; she is the ultimate lover and gives the man more than what he could imagine, but

²²⁹ Chantel, “Description,” accessed September 1, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/user/chantelcollado/about>.

²³⁰ John H. McDowell, “‘Surfing the Tube’ for Latin American Song: The Blessings (and Curses) of YouTube,” *Journal of American Folklore* 128, no. 509 (2015): 264.

²³¹ Leslie Gay, “Acting Up and Talking Tech: New York Rock Musicians and Their Metaphors of Technology,” *Ethnomusicology* 42, no. 1 (1998): 90.

her love comes with conditions. The suggestion of a commitment, even a forced or unexpected one, directly counters traditional bachata lyrics, because as Pacini Hernandez explains, male bachateros never sing about familial responsibilities.²³² In the lyrics for “Religion,” Chantel presents herself as both a commanding subject and an object of desire. She tells her love interest that he has no idea how addictive she is, and that with only a small taste of her, he will be under her spell forever. While the man may believe that he has agency in the relationship, her power will bewitch him and force him to commit to her, like a religion.²³³ By identifying herself *as* a religion, Chantel holds a position of power; she is the one who demands religious devotion, obedience, and sacrifice.

The chorus of “Religion,” repeated many times throughout the song, exemplifies the strength that a woman can hold in a romantic relationship. The chorus of the song states,

Ahora seré tu religión	I’ll be your religion
Cae de rodillas	He falls on his knees
Me ofrecerás tu corazón	You’ll offer me your heart
Lo que yo pida	You’ll do what I ask

Excerpt from “Religion”²³⁴

²³² Pacini Hernandez, “*Cantando la cama vacía*,” 354.

²³³ Chantel, “Religion,” by SP Polanco and David Pinto Picasso, 2018, Collado Productions and SP Polanco, streaming.

²³⁴ Excerpt from “Religion,” Chantel (2018), my translation.

Instead of being submissive or motherly, Chantel sings that the man will willingly submit to her. This language directly counters the typical description and position of females in bachata music. Bachateros sing about their sexual desire for women or anger at the loss of a woman, but here the woman asserts herself as the powerful figure. Her sexuality becomes a mode of strength.

In the “Religión” music video, Chantel visually serves as both the subject and object, just as her lyrics suggest; she is the object of the audience’s gaze while maintaining an active role in her own sexual and religious rites through settings, movements, and costumes. Chantel visually represents herself as a seductress and embodies a powerful goddess of the Earth.²³⁵ In a video detailing the making of the music video, Chantel describes the location of the “Religión” shoot as being “in heaven.”²³⁶ The physical setting of the music video thus portrays the location where Chantel’s mystical religious power resides. The video features panoramic shots of Chantel on a cliff that overlooks a large body of water. The lyrics of the song, in tandem with the shot of Chantel looming over a vast waterscape, suggests that Chantel is in control not only of her own femininity, but also the land. When she is not on a cliff, the singer is physically in water or on a beach, interacting with the natural elements as she sings. This perception of women as wet or portraying “wetness” in association with nature heightens the

²³⁵ Chantel, “Chantel – Religion (Official Video) – Bachata Nueva Octubre 2018,” produced by Freddy Loons, September 15, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gePDdSG-HBU>.

²³⁶ Chantel, “Chantel – Religion (Behind the Scenes) – Bachata Nueva 2018,” produced by Freddy Loons, November 8, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eu6UHNWIA-4>.

portrayal of a woman's sexuality or sexual readiness. Historically, as evidenced through feminist movements in the 20th and 21st centuries, the image of a woman in association with nature, especially as a "Mother Earth" or nature goddess highlights a woman's power and agency, both over her body and sexuality.²³⁷

Chantel's physical position in her surroundings suggests that the land does not control her, but that the scenery instead enhances her own religious control, sensuality, and femininity. While in these aquatic locations, the singer wears low-cut bathing suits that highlight her shapely figure. When singing the lyrics, Chantel moves her body in a sensual manner by lying on the ground and arching her back and even eating from a clump of grapes. At moments, the singer moves in the basic "1, 2, 3, tap" of a bachata or sways in place as she strokes her hands sensually along herself to showcase her face and body. She enacts embellished and direct movements with her arms, specifically, as they move from up in the air above her head, out to her sides, and down her body.

As a female singer, Chantel's ongoing production of bachatas further solidifies her role as a bachatera who ignites social change. In her songs, she frequently says her own name, as many of her male counterparts do in their songs. By speaking her name, Chantel gives herself a specific personhood within her music, an element that bachateros often leave out when speaking of women. Also, the flexibility of Chantel's voice—in her vocal range, use of vibrato, and lyrical content—differentiates her from male singers. Chantel labels her own style of bachata as "*bachata nueva*" or "new bachata." Her music

²³⁷ Jayne Wark, *Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), 63-65.

is novel in that it demonstrates a female artist who successfully produces her own music in a male-dominated genre. And in her own songs, Chantel alters the script of how women are portrayed. She exemplifies a new form of empowered femininity, one that allows a woman to absorb both the female role and the male role, through combined strength and sexuality.

Chantel's portrayal of herself in a position of feminine power, actualized in bodily desire, even resulting in religious devotion, suggests an alternate social reality for both the artist and those who engage with bachata music. McClary details how "music is a powerful social and political practice precisely because in drawing on metaphors of physicality, it can cause listeners to experience their bodies in new ways."²³⁸ Through the musical and visual elements of the "Religión" video, Chantel expresses a femininity that shows sexuality and strength, directly opposing the confines of conservative religious expectation. And as McClary suggests, if individuals watch and listen to such musical portrayals of a social and physical construction of empowered femininity, then they too have the opportunity to embrace a new reality for themselves.

Breaking the Binary: Code Switching and Gender Neutral Space

Members of the bachata dance community employ code switching through the ways that they embody and perform both lead and follow roles. Through specific movements and gestures, dancers can shift between various identities, depending on the context or choice of self-presentation. Code switching within dance may be both

²³⁸ McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 25.

conscious and subconscious: conscious at first, as the dancer seeks to embody established codes; then unconscious as the dancer learns to navigate between identities.

Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio describes how a person's brain utilizes social, personal, and sensorial information to create mind maps as a way to "inform" the self.²³⁹ These organized maps of understanding then guide the ways that people move and act in a conscious or unconscious way.²⁴⁰ Similar to Damasio's concept of "mind maps," through code switching in dance, individuals learn a corporeal way of being that they then can choose to perform at moments of personal or social activity. Once individuals learn these codes, the learned knowledge can become an unconscious part of a person's way of being, depending on how the person processes and utilizes the information in relation to their own understanding of the self.

The concept of code switching within academia typically refers to linguistics and a person's ability to communicate through the use of multiple languages.²⁴¹ A person's understanding of these languages and their specific meanings through smaller language "codes" often stems from socio-cultural experience.²⁴² Following the work of Tomie Hahn, the concept of code switching also applies to dance in the ways that individuals move between identities while dancing. Hahn, therefore, defines code switching as

²³⁹ Antonio Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain* (New York: Random House, 2010), 63.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

²⁴¹ Peter Auer, "Introduction: Bilingual Conversation Revisited," in *Code-Switching in Conversation: Language, Interaction, and Identity*, ed. Peter Auer (New York: Routledge, 1998), 17.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

“shifting identity,” a fluidity between the self and elements outside of the self that are then embodied through dance.²⁴³

While some scholars argue that learning a specific role removes individuality, Hahn counters this by arguing that in learning a set dance role, individuals have the freedom to learn more about themselves.²⁴⁴ By embodying various roles, dancers increase their knowledge, through movement or gesture, of how to potentially express their own aspects of identity.²⁴⁵ Additionally, by knowing oneself, a dancer can place those aspects of self into a specific role. Hahn explains how her teacher of *nihon buyo*, a Japanese traditional dance, told her that she must have an understanding of herself before being able to explore a different identity through dance.²⁴⁶ Bock and Borland suggest that through “embodied othering” people choose to take on various roles explicitly because they want to explore elements of the self.²⁴⁷ The authors state that people choose to explore other ways of being and “are propelled to do so by a desire to explore dimensions of the self that remain dormant, unrecognized or delegitimated by dominant identity categories ascribed to them within their own cultures.”²⁴⁸ As this chapter details, many dancers in the bachata communities learn the specific codes of movement that create the various identities tied to gender, which members then can shift between. These identities

²⁴³ Tomie Hahn, *Sensational Knowledge: Embodying Culture Through Japanese Dance* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), 155.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 160.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁶ Hahn, *Sensational Knowledge*, 154.

²⁴⁷ Sheila Bock and Katherine Borland, “Exotic Identities: Dance, Difference, and Self-fashioning,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 48, no. 1 (2011): 5.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

include the lead and follow roles, as well as the roles of a masculine male and a sensual female. Through learning and navigating between these roles, I suggest, dancers do not experience restriction of the self, but rather find the ability to navigate their own notions of identity, and often experience a change in their understanding of their gendered self or selves.

RW Latin Dance Company

Rodrigo and Wendy run the RW Latin Dance company located in Charlotte, North Carolina. This school and dance company provides weekly Monday and Wednesday-night salsa and bachata lessons to the community in Charlotte, NC. Additionally, Rodrigo and Wendy form student and semi-professional dance teams that learn choreography to perform at salsa and bachata congresses around the country. RW trains their own staff team to work for their company and to prepare them for professional careers as artists. Studios and congresses around the world hire Rodrigo and Wendy to teach and perform at their events, so the couple travels to a different location almost every weekend. The couple's local and international reputation allows them to exert a strong influence on the bachata community, both in the southeastern United States and around the world.

Rodrigo and Wendy design their school as inclusive, from the style of bachatas that they play to the ways in which they portray gender roles within dance. For their classes, Wendy says, "one of the main things that we're trying to push is that it is not about male and female roles. It's about the roles that you play."²⁴⁹ And Rodrigo

²⁴⁹ Wendy, interview with author, January 16, 2020.

emphasizes, “So it’s not about gender, it’s about the roles.”²⁵⁰ The couple avoids gendered language in their classes and instead utilizes the words “lead” and “follow” (instead of male and female). Words prove a decisive way to attempt to break the gender binary, as Butler details, since language has historically been a reinforcing technique for the binary.²⁵¹

Similarly, in the bachata dance community, when the dancers embody roles that counter their own binary gender expectations, they must consider gender differently. Dance scholar Judith Lynne Hannah explains, “When moving images created by dancers violate expected male and female roles and their conventional expressions, the novel signs onstage charge the atmosphere and stimulate performers and observers to confront the possibility of altered life styles.”²⁵² At their studio, Rodrigo and Wendy often push their students to switch roles, from lead to follow or vice versa, in order to become a well-rounded dancer. The dancers learn the lead and follow roles, and then navigate between these roles as a form of code switching. As Wendy says, as instructors, “It’s always been very important to have strong individuals. And we play a part in that. And so we want to make sure that our girls feel empowered. And our guys feel also good, but respectful.”²⁵³ RW focuses on individual dancers by pushing them to switch between lead and follow roles, and this choice eliminates many stigmas and rigid expectations that

²⁵⁰ Rodrigo, interview with author, January 16, 2020.

²⁵¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 13-15.

²⁵² Judith Lynne Hannah, *Dance, Sex and Gender: Signs of Identity, Dominance, Defiance, and Desire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), xiii.

²⁵³ Wendy, interview with author, January 16, 2020.

surround a specific gender staying within just one role. When RW forces their students to explore the opposite role, dancers learn about their own conceptions of gender.

Same-gender dancing, as well as role switching, provides members of the bachata community with ways to step outside of and beyond the binaries of male and female or lead and follow. The act of breaking the binary pushes dancers to reconsider how their body may move or respond outside of an identification with gender, thus creating a gender-neutral space of being. The space is gender neutral not because gender ceases to exist, but rather because gender can exist outside of the narrow expectation that males must behave in masculine, and females in feminine, manners. Wendy suggests that the ability for their dancers to perform either the male or female role is what enables and fosters the same-gender dancing that now occurs in their studio.²⁵⁴ As Joan Chodorow says, “When encountering something new, it is part of human nature to be curious, to want to explore it. With exploration, the novel experience at some point becomes familiar and we begin to play with it and weave fantasies of who we are around it.”²⁵⁵ By creating a gender neutral space, the bachata community encourages alternate gender experiences for dancers and breaks the gender binary, creating the opportunity for new expressions of gender through movement.

²⁵⁴ Wendy, interview with author, January 16, 2020.

²⁵⁵ Joan Chodorow, “Dance Therapy: Motion and Emotion,” in *The Art and Science of Dance/Movement Therapy: Life Is Dance*, 2nd ed., ed. Sharon Chaiklin and Hilda Wengrower (New York: Routledge, 2016), 63.

Breaking the Binary: Dance

Role Switching

Within the last few years, the bachata community experienced an increase in role switching among its members. Role switching occurs when women assume the lead role or men assume the follow role. Hannah says, “Dance is an eye-catching, riveting way for humans to identify themselves and maintain or erase their boundaries.”²⁵⁶ On the bachata dance floor, people gain the freedom to explore, express, and change, especially through role switching. As Hahn’s concept of code switching in dance also suggests, by role switching, dancers then learn a role that equips them with movements and gestures by which to express their own identity.²⁵⁷

Within the bachata dance community, role switching is becoming an expected skill, especially for experienced dancers. As several of my informants detail, at bachata congresses around the country today, the new trend is to switch roles while dancing with a partner.²⁵⁸ A dancer may start a dance with a partner as a lead or follow, and then halfway through the song, the dancers switch roles. This role fluidity challenges gender expectations as they relate to dance roles: both male and female dancers must act both as lead and follow. One of my informants, an active dancer and performer, explains that role switching typically occurs more often at the larger congresses in the United States and not as much at small social dance gatherings.²⁵⁹ I, personally, have only been asked to

²⁵⁶ Hannah, *Dance, Sex and Gender*, xiii.

²⁵⁷ Hahn, *Sensational Knowledge*, 160.

²⁵⁸ A dance congress is a large, formal gathering of dancers that typically lasts several days and includes classes and dance socials.

²⁵⁹ Anonymous, interview with author, n.d.

perform this type of role reversal a few times, and this only unfolded as a fun experiment with some of my more experienced partners. Regardless of the frequency, the capability and expectation for a dancer to fulfill a role without regard to their gender reveals a shift in the binary expectations within the bachata community.

While role reversal occurs in the bachata community, women still rarely lead men on the dance floor. A major explanation for this stems from physical constraints, as Wendy explains,²⁶⁰ but the sparsity of these reversals, in which females lead and males follow, reveals that perceptions towards gender roles still have room to change and expand in the future. Chase suggests that the average man is not willing to allow a woman to lead him due to self-pride, but also states that he does not place himself in this category.²⁶¹ He says, “some like myself would [allow a woman to lead us], but we’re not the norm . . . this is not the norm. I’m not a norm.”²⁶² Chase believes that his own drive as a dancer, as well as his ability to acknowledge both his masculine and feminine side, sets him apart as a male dancer and opens him to embrace any type of dance experience.²⁶³ Historically, in dance and as exemplified through bachata dance history, as well, males maintain dominance through movement.²⁶⁴ Chase’s belief that typical men do not permit women to lead them shows that the tradition of male dominance persists within dance communities; a man who does not allow a woman to lead him reveals that he feels the need to retain some element of control or to occupy traditional performative roles.

²⁶⁰ Wendy, interview with author, January 16, 2020.

²⁶¹ Chase, interview with author, January 12, 2020.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Hannah, *Dance, Sex and Gender*, xiv.

Alternately, though, Chase positions himself as different from the average man, capable and willing to fulfill any role within a dance, even if that removes his position of “authority.” Chase’s openness to lead or follow and his presence within the dance community, then, provides an example of breaking the binary.

During my fieldwork in the Knoxville and Charlotte dance communities, I found that Chase was right in that he was not the norm—few male dancers choose to navigate between both lead and follow roles. But, Chase is not the *only* man willing to do so. While in Charlotte, I watched several men move through bachata patterns together, often only to practice a specific move, but these men did so without hesitation. Same-gender dancing means that one half of the dance partnership remains within the binary (either a woman follows or a man leads), but many dancers engage in same-gender dancing as another way to break the binary and experience a personal role reversal.

Same Gender Dancing

Wendy explains how same-gender dancing continues to gain popularity around the world, through congresses and social media.²⁶⁵ With these changes, female-to-female dancing occurs more frequently than male-to-male dancing. She says,

²⁶⁵ Wendy, interview with author, January 16, 2020.

For some reason, it's impressive when you see two guys dancing. And it's sweet when you see two females dancing . . . So I think that's what society thinks, because males show strength even when they're playing the following role . . . and then two females, I mean [we] just find them more sensual, I think.²⁶⁶

Chase also validates that same-gender dancing continues to increase in popularity within social dance communities, but he says that this occurs more frequently between two women dancing than two men dancing together. Chase posits that more women choose to dance together because women are “naturally sensual” and more prone to touch one another than men are.²⁶⁷ Chase again, however, does not view himself according to gendered norms, as he refers to himself as a highly sensual dancer and values that expression in all of his dances.²⁶⁸

As Wendy and Chase's explanations reveal, same-gender dancing still carries a social meaning and gendered expectation as two male dancers are commonly understood to portray strength while two female dancers portray sensuality. But, if a man exudes strength while in a follow role and a female shows sensuality in a lead role, then again, the authority of a gender binary within dance roles begins to shift. A male or female lead may express strength or sensuality, and these expressions are not restricted to a specific gender or dance role. Further, many dancers state that even if they change their role while at a social dance, they feel that they maintain aspects of their gender identity. Sarah says,

²⁶⁶ Wendy, interview with author, January 16, 2020.

²⁶⁷ Chase, interview with author, January 12, 2020.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

Even when I lead, I'm still a girl. I'm a little firmer because I have to be, and I am a little more in control. But I don't think it's masculinity. It's just being a leader. But I can be a woman or man and be a leader. So it doesn't really matter, it's not really tied to being masculine or feminine.²⁶⁹

By reconceptualizing the lingering presence of male and female binary roles in the bachata dance community as various codes (as Hahn suggests), these roles can become positive additions in the exploration of gender. By learning the masculine lead role and the feminine follow role, men and women discover how to move and exude masculinity and femininity as it is prescribed in the bachata community. Then, when they switch roles, they possess an embodied knowledge expressed through sensorial experience, and present their own gender in an even more personal manner. A woman can move her hips or roll her body as she experiences newfound strength and confidence through that experience. Men can learn how to lead a partner through their own movements and gain courage to interact with all types of people. Both men and women have the freedom to step out of their gender roles and explore alternate gender possibilities with their movement. Through role switching and same-gender dancing, members of the bachata dance community remove the necessity for traditional binary gender roles and thus break the binary. Their actions create a gender-neutral space that supports male, female, and alternate expressions of gender.

²⁶⁹ Sarah, interview with author, January 25, 2020.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION: BACHATA AND BEYOND

Through music, movement, embodiment, and code switching, participants involved in the bachata dance community develop a unique view of self within their own gender perceptions, one that variously aligns with and challenges binary gender structures. As I show in Chapter 2, binary gender roles exist within bachata music and the bachata dance community. Historically, bachateros dominate the bachata sound. Male vocalists sing about their sexual desire for a female figure and the instrumentation of bachata music also structures a clear, masculine soundscape. The binary also appears within bachata dance as male dancers typically embody the lead role in the dance partnership and females assume the follow role. Specific movements in the lead and follow roles register as distinctly masculine or feminine and regulate the body in keeping with a specific gender role. The embodied experience of bachata dance, though, also creates a social space for individuals to navigate their own gendered identities.

In Chapter 3, I demonstrated how the bachata dance communities in Knoxville and Charlotte create a safe space on the dance floor where people can feel the freedom to express sensuality and to move between or outside of traditional gender roles. Through sensorial embodiment, the dancers experience personal and interpersonal change. Often this process is evident in an increase of confidence or sensual empowerment, especially for women.

While bachata exemplifies the lingering presence of binary gender roles, it simultaneously provides a creative form through which to break the binary, as Chapter 4 argues. The music produced by bachateras, such as Chantel, shows how women break the

gender binary by creating music in a male-dominated genre. I predict, along with other musicians and scholars, that women will continue to hold a more dominant role within bachata music, in particular. For example, popular artist sP Polanco, in an interview with Sellers, says that he thinks that women “have a lot of future in this bachata.”²⁷⁰ Through the use of their voices and song lyrics, bachateras present an empowered femininity within the bachata soundscape. Songs by both bachateros and bachateras aurally represent the embodied navigation of gender roles, sensuality, and empowerment that also unfolds on the bachata dance floor.

In the bachata dance community, moments of role switching and same-gender dancing suggest challenges to a gender binary. Further, by reconsidering the presence of the binary within bachata communities as code switching, I suggest that in negotiating the gender binary, dancers gain embodied knowledge of gender codes, as attained through sensorial experience. With this knowledge, dancers may present their own gender through their bodies in a distinctly personal manner.

Continued Research

This thesis analyzes both bachata music and dance, but further work remains to be done on the intersections of the music and dance. Bachata is often placed under the broad genre of “Latin Dance,” and accordingly, bachata mixes with Latin American and Afro-Latin music and dance genres to create hybrid forms of bachata that now appear in dance communities around the world. These hybrid bachata forms, such as “zoukchata” (zouk

²⁷⁰ Sellers, *Modern Bachateros*, 74.

and bachata), and “bachatango” (tango and bachata, a form RW specializes in), and even more urban versions of sensual bachata each portray a unique way that bachata music shapes the dance and vice versa. While my fieldwork attests to the development and impact of sensual bachata, further work is required in order to fully assess how these hybrid forms alter not only the music and dance, but also the community elements of sensuality and connection.

Bachata continues to hold an important place within multicultural communities in the United States and around the world. This thesis looks at a small instance of bachata’s globalization in the southeastern United States, but a further examination of other cities within the United States will provide more insight into the social and cultural implications of the genre within specific geographical and cultural contexts. Further, the mass globalization of the genre calls for a renewed examination of bachata within the Dominican Republic. How has the globalization of the genre affected the reception of bachata within the Dominican Republic today? How do Dominicans perceive the hybrid forms of the genre? Additionally, as the Knoxville community exemplifies especially, the bachata community draws in individuals of various cultural and ethnic backgrounds. I briefly discuss the impact of Latin American stereotypes within bachata communities, but much work remains to be done on interrelated aspects of exoticism, whiteness, or dominance that appear within these communities. These social issues remain an important part of the history and current development of the genre within its current globalized position and should be considered further.

This thesis includes ethnographic work over a few months, but a long-term study of a dance community would offer further insights into how gender construction,

community, and bachata inform and influence one another. The perceptions and opinions of gender constructs around the country continue to shift, as evidenced through a variety of bachata dance communities. Similar ethnographic work should be executed in other parts of the United States and outside of the United States to see how the gendered movements and ideologies within bachata communities vary from country to country. As gender attitudes continue to shift, so too will bachata music and dance expressions change.

The Final Dance

As my informants remind me, bachata is about connection, to others and to oneself. The music, sung by both bachateros and bachateras, speaks about love and heartbreak in a manner that draws the listener in, to share the pain. The dance allows for an intimate physical experience with another human being that, through a couple of minutes together, creates space for personal expression and gender exploration. The music and dance communities show how the personal and social construction of gender changes as men and women break the binary mold through embodied experience. Bachata song and dance, as experienced by individuals through sensorial embodiment, creates a safe space on the dance floor—a space that challenges binary gender structures and simultaneously enables individuals to navigate their own identities through movement and corporeal connection. This type of experience remains integral in the development of individuals and supportive communities.

Wendy says, “Dance . . . it doesn’t have gender. Movement doesn’t have gender, you know? So whatever men can do, women can do.”²⁷¹ While evidence of this idealistic, gender-free attitude toward dance appears within my own fieldwork, in many areas, bachata dance remains binarily gendered. When the existing binary, however, is re-framed as code switching, people find alternative narratives and ways to move outside of the binary. The binary gender roles form clear gender perceptions within the community, but these binary roles also provide a corporeal means through which to break the binary. Therefore, the bachata dance community provides a space in which a person is encouraged to just *express*, whether that expression falls distinctly into a binary gender role or outside of it. When people know who they are or who they can be within a community, and are able to express that through an art form, that is when real social change can happen; that is when inclusivity can increase, when expectations can change, or when new ideas are accepted. In the bachata dance community, the ways that individuals can express themselves both within and outside of binary gender roles leads to larger social change. This change is personal (in terms of a person’s own gender understanding, sensuality, or confidence), but the change is also communal in the shifting ways that the group views stereotypes that shape binary gender roles. And for that purpose, may the dancing continue.

²⁷¹ Wendy, interview with author, January 16, 2020.

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VITA

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