

# UC Riverside

## UC Riverside Electronic Theses and Dissertations

### Title

Technical Pursuit: Technique and Training of Nonprofessional Dancers in Ballet, Hula, and Bachata

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0p09k93x>

### Author

Forbez, Xiomara

### Publication Date

2022

### Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

Technical Pursuit:  
Technique and Training of Nonprofessional Dancers in Ballet, Hula, and Bachata

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Critical Dance Studies

by

Xiomara Mireya Forbez

September 2022

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Anthea Kraut, Chairperson

Dr. Jose Luis Reynoso

Dr. Imani Kai Johnson

Dr. Stephen Sohn



Copyright by  
Xiomara Mireya Forbez  
2022

The Dissertation of Xiomara Mireya Forbez is approved:

---

---

---

---

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

## **Acknowledgments**

I know the saying “it takes a village” is a saying but it really does take a village to raise a child and to write a dissertation. The amount of people who have been kind to me and have helped me throughout this eight-year process is humbling. I am grateful to each and every person who has shared a meal, sent encouraging words, lent an ear or a hand, passed a tissue, watched a movie, shared a laugh, went for a drive, read a draft, helped me brainstorm, talked about anything but the diss, invited me out, dragged me out, called me out, zoomed with me, texted me to see how I was doing, believed in me, gave me a hug, encouraged me, and all the countless other ways, small, medium, and large that we hold each other through good times and bad. Thank you. Muchas gracias. Merci beaucoup. Mahalo nui loa.

Marcie Mitler, M. Ed. is the reason why I started grad school. I am forever grateful to her for helping me turn an idea into a plan and possibility. Marcie, I’m so sad you’re no longer with us but thank you for letting me be a part of Across the Ages Dance Project as a dancer and stage manager. Thank you for your encouragement and your belief me. I miss you. I wish I could call you and tell you I did it – I became a doctor of Dance.

To my qualifying exams and dissertation committee Jose L. Reynoso, Imani Kai Johnson, Stephen Sohn, and Anusha Kedhar – through reading lists, prospectus, and dissertation – thank you for your words of advice and encouragement.

Thank you to my chair, Anthea Kraut, for being on my side from start to finish. I know I didn't always make it easy, but thank you for staying the course. Thank you as well for always inspiring me with your teaching, your writing, and your scholarship.

Thank you to UCR dance faculty — Linda Tomko, Luis A Malvacías, taisha paggett, Joel Mejia Smith, Jacqueline Shea Murphy, Kelli King, María Regina Firmino-Castillo, and Wendy Rogers, Ni'Ja Whitson, and Melissa Templeton for their guidance and support in classes and beyond.

I have been lucky to meet and work with professors and post docs outside of Dance including Amalia Cabezas, Andrea Denny Brown, Padma Rangarajan, Alexander Haskell, Heidi Waltz, Susan Ossman, Priya Srinivasan, John Jennings, Juliette Levy, Derek Burrill, Ray Papica, Paul Ryer, and Michael Moses. Thank you for your kindness and support!

UCR wouldn't function without incredible staff. Thank you Hillary Jenks for providing much needed support to grad students via Grad Success. Thank you Christine Leapman for running an amazing Gluck Program. Thank you Teri Carter, Veronica Valenzuela, Alisha Staiger, Sheena Thrush, Jill Cantonwine for keeping things super oiled in UWP. Thank you Amanda Wong, Trina Elerts, Odie Jasso, Seabrook Mendoza, Katrina Oskie, Reasey Heang, Ana Puello, Mary Longtin, Lily Chan Szeto, Katharine Henshaw, Ana Puello, and Albert Fetter for keeping everything running smoothly. Thank you Mitch Boretz, Oscar Caso, Huguette Albrecht, and Ashley Beene for inviting me to join the

Engineering Preaward team. I always felt so supported by you! Thank you Maria Mendoza, Janet Moores, and Kimberly Noon for all your hard work in InterLibrary Loan.

Being at UCR for eight years means there are many cohorts in the dance department that I got to know. To those who came before me, Natalie Zervou, Adanna Kai Jones, Meghan Quinlan, Jen Albrecht, Lee Singh, Katie Nicole Stahl Kovell, Wei-Chi Wu, Casey Avant, Crystal Sepulveda, Chrissy Sahin, Denise Machin, and Alfonso Cevera - I appreciate your guidance and mentorship.

To those that came with me - my cohort – the biggest dance cohort so far – Kelly Bowker, Theresa Goldbach, Ania Nikulina, Radi Shafie, Irvin Gonzalez, Lindsay Rapport, Stephanie Jolivet Yezek, and Patty Huerta – We ALL DID IT! The cohort that could!

To those that came after me, Maiko Le Lay, Rainy Demerson, Eva Macias, Cuauhtémoc Peranda, Magnolia Yang Sao Yia, Jem Garcia, Dava Hernandez, Christina Leyva, Sophia Levine, Talia Mason, Rebeca Hernandez, Rosalia Lerner, Kendall Loyer, Preethi Ramaprasad, Sinjini Chatterjee, Colette Eloi, Johnny Castro, Al Ellison, Priscilla Marrero, and so many more - thank you for your friendship and support.

I am so grateful for fellow graduate students in various departments at UCR for keeping me afloat – Hannah Balcomb, Kristoffer Ekroll, Josh Prindle, Kai Hang Cheang, Esther Banegas Gatica, Sam Fernandez, Stef Toralba, Shelley Guyaton, Jordan Cohen, Marie Evanston, Grant Palmer, Paula Propst, Andrea Decker, Roxy DePue, Elizabeth Stela,

Elizabeth Ruano, Alan Malfavon, Marcos Damian Léon, Sarah Murray, Erin Gould, Victor Guerra, Jaymee Goh, Javier Hurtado, Jacky Wan, Ryan Sullivan (and Michael of course), and Audrey Maier.

Richard Hunt, Kirin McCrory, Ashley Beene, Max McCoy, Walter Merryman, Isabela Agosa, Paige Goodwin, Iris Blake, Stefani Cox, Shaafi Farooqi, Brian Stephens, Christina Trujillo and all the amazing Graduate Writing Center consultants – you are rock stars!!! I really appreciate your patience and willingness to think out loud with me and reflect back on what you see in my work. Steph DeMora thank you thank you thank you for helping me web scrape comments from YouTube– your kindness, patience, and faith in me were much appreciated.

James Sale, Crista Truit, James Diaz, Bob Dominguez, Bob Scarano, and Matt Wycoff – thank you for helping make UCR Rock band a success!!!!!! Even during a pandemic we persevered!

Outside of UCR I have been lucky to be supported by amazing scholars and friends - Fareed Benyoussef, Samina Gul Ali, Jay Shelat, Paige Miller, Travis Harris, Jaime Gray, Heath Pennington, Margit Galanter, and Hala Baki. Thank you for the zoom writing sessions, the accountability chats, and your support!

Thank you to my cousins for dancing with me throughout the years and for sharing their insights about dance – Sean, Eileen, Diana, Marji, little Diana, Bianca, Juni, Tati, Zyan, and Eriana. Thank you to my sister Rosavirginia for being my favorite (and only) sister

and thank you to my brother – Rodrigo Jr – and my step mom, Isa. Thank you to my uncles and aunts both with us in person and spirit, Jim, Teresa, Tirza, Heriberto, and Norberto, little Marla, and big Maria. I'm also grateful to my dad's side of the family – my cousins Jen, Steph, Alison, Christopher, DJ, Brittany, Cheyanne, and my aunts and uncles – Lucy, Al, Hermes, David, and Stella. Thank you to my dad for always having music playing when I was growing up.

Thank you Darryl, Marina, Doug, and Lianne Milton for all their support.

Thanks to everyone I danced with and who shared their time and experiences with me: Katja, Seth, Christine, Viktoria, Mary, Heidi, Hannah, Grace, Jill, Mike, Vanessa, Chi, Sherry, Gabrielle, Suzanne, Kirk, Paul, Leilany, Charlotte, Stan, Joanne, Rebecca, Pearl, Sarinah, Inoa, Yanirah, Jennifer, Lani, Gretchen, Ariel, Melissa, Lyn, Ben, Victoria, Kim, Phillipos, Jerry, and Kat.

Thank you Erika, Pam Sun, Jane Miranda, Mayela Giron, Angela Siu Wai Lee, Kendall Dunmore, Penni Ebina, Jacqueline Noborikawa, Joanna Amores, and Tressi Mehana Turkmany for being such kind hula sisters.

Thank you to my dance instructors, Kumu Kawika Alfiche, Kumu Malie Mendoza, Kumu Onie, Kumu Chang, Demetrio Rosario, Nicole Thompson, and Pete Pacheco.

Thank you to my friends outside of academia Mei-ling Rosario, Rachel Pickens, Julia Donaton, Stephanie Hyde, Kamilah Ziodeen, Sam Mirabal, and Jessica Galvez who supported me along the way and came to Exquisite Situations.

I'm also grateful to the funding I received including Chancellor's Distinguished Fellowship and seven Gluck Fellowship for the Arts in Dance. Thank you to Prof. Cliff Trafzer for helping fund field research in Japan. I am also grateful for the UCR College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences and the Center for Ideas and Society's travel grant that helped fund field research in New York as well as the Center for Ideas and Society's Dissertation Completion award.

Most of all thank you to my mom Ofelia Robinson for bringing me into this world, teaching me how to dance, and being my biggest cheerleader.

Now for some specific shout outs (in ABC order)

Adanna – thanks for bringing a bit of the Caribbean and East coast to the dry Riverside desert.

Albert Fetter – thanks for being calm, funny, and helpful like when I called and said I don't understand how projectors work. Thanks for our insightful conversations!



Amalia Cabezas – Thank you for offering me TAs in MCS, believing in me, and helping keep me accountable with weekly check-ins. Thank you for telling me not to give up! I really appreciate your mentorship and your friendship. Any bit of the Caribbean in Riverside made me feel at home – thank you for being a part of that. Abrazos!!

Amazon and Googlebook's search inside feature – the real MVPs.

Ania! You were always an inspiration with your clarity and love for theory. Thanks for the hangouts while you lived in Riverside.

Anthea, what a journey it has been. Thank you for reading draft after draft after draft and for offering clear feedback. Thank you for being more stubborn than I am in the gentlest way possible and for pushing me. Thanks for sharing your humor with me.

Anusha — Thank you for doing an independent study on performance ethnography that helped me think about things for my chapter in a different way but also let me finally explore and share my creative ideas with someone. I'm so thankful for our once a week chats. Thank you for always supporting me and for being my friend.

Audrey — I said this in my defense and I'll say it again in writing for posterity — you are the Xio whisperer. Thank you for being the only other person besides me who kept your camera on during the GWC writing intensive which was the start of our pandemic friendship. Thank you for reading countless drafts of varying degrees of "shitty" for each of my chapters and for helping to bring them into shape. Thank you for being a safe

place for my ideas. Thank you for always being so excited about my work – it gave me the extra push I needed. Thank you as well for inviting me over for DELICIOUS drinks and dinners. The universe has blessed me with two chef friends and I don't think I'll ever recover.

Bela – thank you for being sunshine and for calling me blue sky.

Benyoussef! Arigato gozaimasu for seeing, naming, and encouraging the himitsu no bossu. Thank you for sharing your insight and your stories and for asking questions and listening.

Bianca – thank you for being an awesome graphic designer! No kinder words have been said than “I see the vision.”

Bob Dominguez – thank you for teaching me how to play the drums. Thanks for your calm and steadfast belief in me and for saying I should sing because I have a nice voice.

Carole Findlay – thank you for listening to me, believing in me, and supporting me. I'll always remember your warmth and kindness.

Christine Leapman – Thank you, thank you, thank you for your support and belief in me. Can you believe we worked together for 7 years! Thank you for giving me the opportunity to grow as an instructor and as an artist. Thank you for always being open to

my ideas. Exquisite Situations was one of the highlights of my graduate career and it's thanks to you it became a reality!

Christina Leyva- thank you for bringing honey into my life.

Christina Trujillo – thank you for reading through drafts and for running with the ideas. Thanks for laughing with me and for helping me through all of the writing stages.

Darryl – the first years of grad school are tough. Thanks for your patient ear and for your support.

Doran George – thank you for helping me talk about risk, for being so supportive in a short amount of time, for caring, for introducing me to some wicked ass choreographers and dance pieces. We didn't have enough time together. Thank you for sharing your light and I hope you're resting both in power and in peace.

Eileen – thank you for holding my heart till my hands were strong enough again.

Esther – thanks love for being interested in Exquisite and for helping to make my last year at UCR one full of art making, theater shows, and friendship.

Hannah – thanks for dragging me out of my hole during Prospectus writing. Thanks for watching movies, 30 day challenging it up, and always making the best of a situation. I loved singing Metallica with you!

Heidi Waltz – thank you for offering me a linguistics TAship when I desperately needed it 4th year spring quarter and for being generally a lovely person.

Hillary – In every one of my notebooks I see multiple entries of “Meeting with Hillary.” Thank you for seeing me through years of grad school. Thank you for helping me wrangle the idea storms, helping me think out loud, and for mentoring me. Thank you for looking out for me, for being an awesome pandemic roomie, and for always playing who’s that actor with the hair and the face and winning.

Imani - Thank you for engaging fully in my reading diss care package, for reading through the early stages of an exquisite paper, and for doing a mock interview with me! Thank you for saying my work has “quiet depth.” I carry that with me, always.

Irvin, thanks for being so charming, funny, and sweet. You are love.

Jacqueline Shea Murphy – thank you for introducing me to hula and to dance studies!

James Diaz – thanks for being an awesome Taiko mentor and for always encouraging me in any and all of my musical pursuits. Thanks for checking on me when my mom was sick. Thanks for being a good friend and for making a kick ass song for me!

James and Crista thanks for dancing with me in the street to no music and for being my friends. We found home and a band in a pandemic place.

Javier and Victor – my peer mentor group – thank you for keeping me sane my first year and giving me a community to lean on. Javier – thanks for coming to Exquisite and for all your love.

Jenboo – thank you for calming me down and helping me see other sides, for letting me chatter on about all the things, for editing my prospectus, and for being a sweet friend and kind mentor.

Johnny Castro – thank you for always, always being in my corner and for believing in me with such fierceness.

Jose Reynoso – thank you for being an amazing mentor my first couple years of grad school. I'll always cherish the time we spent working in the Dance garden plot. Thank you for hosting zooms everyday during the summer 2021 and fall 2021! I really appreciated working with you.

Jubi – Thank you for transcribing voice notes even when you hated it. 😊

Kai – thank you for your constant support and faith in me and my work. You see me with such fierceness and I am humbled and encouraged.

Katie – thanks for your kindness and humor. I'm so happy we spent graduation sitting next to each other and walking up together!

Kumu Kawika – Thank you for welcoming me into your hālau, for your humor, and for your belief in me as a dancer. Thank you as well for reading over my hula chapter!

Kendall – Thank you for your humor and for your support overall but especially when my mom was sick.

Kelly – thanks for being my friend and for being one of the early readers of my diss. Thanks for always coming out to celebrate my birthdays! I'm so happy to know you, Charlie, and Mike.

Kiwi – thanks for helping me interpret Pokemon memes. Love you babe.

Kristoffer – thanks for being a great friend to me – thanks for sharing beautiful photos and for making lovely cards. You are always so positive and it keeps me from raining on my own parade. Thanks for baking bread and buns that remind me of my grandma's. Thanks especially for inviting to join in on pizza movie night. A fed Xio is a happy Xio.

Leslie Paprocki – I loved working with you in Gluck! Thanks for always being so positive and supportive and for doing my kinder and first grade dance run-throughs with such joy.

Logan Marg – thank you for helping me setup a mini research team. Thank you Arianna Passan and Bonnie Lee for transcribing interviews. Your professionalism and attention to detail were much appreciated!

Lori Barker – thank you for believing that I would finish the dissertation and for talking me through everything under the sun. Thanks for being part of my support system!

Maggie Gover – Thanks for being a great dissertation coach. You are honest, kind, and encouraging.

Maiko – merci ma belle for always opening your home to me in LA. I couldn't have finished the dissertation without this time to write and think. Thank you so much for helping me get my defense speech together - it was a mess before your clear words, suggestions, and encouragement. :) Thank you for your love and for always looking out for me.

Marcos Damian — thank you so much for all the support via kind words, funny videos, and happy emojis!

Magnolia – from mentee to friend – how lovely it has been getting to know you. Thank you for listening to me with such care and compassion. Thank you for being the BEST Co-President ever. We were the dynamic duo. Thank you for always believing in me and encouraging me. Thank you for planning an AMAZING birthday and graduation celebration. Who would have thought we would be born just a day apart. Thank you for being such a joy in my life. Love you!

Kumu Malie – thank you for being my first hula teacher. Thank you for sharing your love of hula with me.

Maria, Janet, and Kim at Interlibrary Loan - thank you for all your hard work! Thank you for being super timely and helping me get a German dissertation in microfiche and buying two books I suggested and just being rays of sunshine.

Marie Evanston – thank you so much for being so kind and for the lovely crocheted flowers! I am grateful to you and Grant for accommodating my intense writing schedule during the last quarter when I was submitting the dissertation and defending.

Marina Milton – thank you for telling me it'll be over soon and to keep going; I will always be grateful.

Marji – thanks for clubbing it up in Mexico with me and Ta! Thanks for laughing with me, dancing with me, asking me questions, and listening to me.

Meghan – thank you for being my mentor the first year of grad school! I really appreciated your encouragement and your willingness to listen.

Michael Moses – thank you for helping me to say no. Thanks for being a great mentor!



Michel, tu as toujours été comme un père pour moi. Sache que j'apprécie énormément tes appels, ton humour, et ta patience et merci de me rappeler qu'il faille profiter de la vie.

Mitch -- thank you so much for hosting a lovely graduation party for me and for always supporting me. You are an amazing human and I feel so lucky to call you a friend.

Natalie – thank you for introducing me to the world that is Dance Studies!

Kumu Onie – thank you for seeing me and for encouraging me to keep dancing.

Preethi – I still think about the time you called me “incomparable.” Thanks for being a fellow east coaster and for supporting all my challenges on insta.

Priscilla – I'm so happy we got to know each other as mentor mentee, as artists, and as friends. You brought home to the desert of Riverside. Thank you darling.

Rainy – so glad we reconnected and that you're just a text away. Thanks for your honesty and for being you. Also, thanks for taking me to urgent care and for dragging me to the vegan festival in LA that I really liked.

Ray Papica – thank you for doing everything possible to get me an online TAship fall 2019. I really appreciate you always looking out!

Rev. Tom – Thank you for letting me wiggle into your world and letting me be me. Thank you for teaching me how to play the drums - something I've always wanted to do. You are missed Rev. Tom.

Richard – thanks for helping me believe in my work when I couldn't see it and for helping me be a better writer.

Ryan – Thank you for being an amazing chef and spoiling me with delicious celebration meals and for keeping me fed during my written exams. I'm so grateful for your wisdom and patience. Thanks for lending your ear, always. Thanks for being my revisions buddy in 2022. I couldn't have gotten through it without you.

Sam – thank you for realizing I was in over my head and for coming over to my house and helping me with the diss reading care packages. Travis – thanks for supporting Exquisite! Thank you to you both for the much needed DoorDash during dissertation submission and defense!

Samina, Jay, and Paige – the accountability group that could! Thanks for keeping me accountable during the pandemic diss times (100 day challenge for the win!). Thanks for letting me vent and for listening.

Sean – thank you for copyediting this little beast of a dissertation! I really appreciate your kind words.

Sinjini – thank you darling for cooking DELICIOUS food for me and for hanging out!

Stef T – thank you for lovely discussions, amazing hugs, and some mutual sass. 😊

Stephanie Jolivet – fellow fishy how I loved our chats in the car. Thank you for having me as a dancer in your MFA performance and for being such a kind friend. Your energy is uplifting!

Steven Sohn – thank you for the pep talks, for telling me it like it is, and for looking out for me as a chair would do. Your mentorship is something I aspire to. I always feel seen and supported by you. Thanks for somehow always knowing to check in right about the time when I was starting to drown.

Talia Mason – Thanks for gifting me a desk chair! It was much needed! 😊

Tati – thank you for saying yes to Mexico, for coming to my graduation, and for being a lovely cousin and friend.

The exquisite team – Priscilla Marrero, Esther Banegas Gatica, Magnolia Yang Sao Yia, and Kali Veach! We created exquisite art together via zoom. Thank you my loves for helping to make Exquisite come to life!

Travis Harris - thank you for daily affirmations and for believing in me.

T-bird (Theresa) - I will always remember our time together in Barcelona. Thanks for being you!

Wei-chi - Thank you for being such a good and caring friend to me. Thank you for laughing with me and always looking out for me!

Thank you to my mom, Ofelia Robinson, for her help throughout graduate school, emotionally and financially. I'm also grateful to her for her help with my fieldwork. Even with "chemo brain" she was able to think of dance scenes in movies from my very vague descriptions and she patiently watched for moments of hula in Adam Sandler movies.

When my mom was working on her dissertation, she was thinking about giving up. I don't remember saying this but my mom tells me I told her, "you will finish it with hell on to you." Thank you mom for turning my words back to me.

## Dedication

To past, present, and future me for always finding ways to make our dreams come true

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Technical Pursuit:  
Technique and Training of Nonprofessional Dancers in Ballet, Hula, and Bachata

by

Xiomara Mireya Forbez

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Critical Dance Studies  
University of California, Riverside, September 2022  
Dr. Anthea Kraut, Chairperson

My research expands normative understandings of “dancer” by studying ballet (European concert dance), hula (Indigenous Hawaiian dance), and bachata (Dominican social dance). I compare how “dancer” is invoked depending on dance form and context (stage, class, ceremony, home, club) thus giving nuance to “dancer” as a category. In particular, I unpack the ways access, participation, and ideas around home construct dancer identity. To do so, I couple analysis of media representations with practice/lived experiences, utilizing movies, video advertisements, YouTube, and social media, along with social media user comments, interviews, observant participation, and autoethnography. I argue that the identity of “dancer” is not solely obtained by movement

– it is also highly contingent on social categories like race/ethnicity and age as well as access to training spaces and notions of “appropriate” participation.

I look across ballet, hula, and bachata to analyze how nonprofessional dancers train and participate in different value systems. My ballet chapter contributes to filling the gap on adult ballet scholarship, working against exclusionary and ageist mechanisms to claim adults as valued and important dancers. Because of the globalization of hula, movement and choreography are often pushed into the spotlight while important aspects such as chanting, language, histories, craft, and culture risk being marginalized. My chapter on hula focuses on the many things one must do in order to participate fully and respectfully in hula. My chapter on bachata centers home training (learning dance at home). Stereotypes around social dance as an expression of innate talent and without rigor or technique invisibilize home training and family labor. I intervene by rendering home visible and valid as a training space, family/friends as teachers, and people who learn to dance at home, as dancers. Together, these chapters highlight how nonprofessional dancers acquire technique and how they navigate cultural values. In dance, bodies are regulated by dominant value systems; analyzing who is interpolated as “dancer” allows for an analysis of how value operates. Consequently, understanding and expanding the category of “dancer” nuances how bodies come to matter in life more broadly.

## Table Of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
 <b>Chapter One</b>	
Ballet: Mind the Gap.....	26
 <b>Chapter Two</b>	
Hula: 'Ai Ha'a Down and Get Your Kaona On, Girl .....	97
 <b>Chapter Three</b>	
Bachata: Hay Dance en la Casa - We Have Dance at Home .....	160
 <b>Coda</b> .....	 220
 <b>Bibliography</b> .....	 231



## List of Figures

### Chapter One

Figure 1: Screenshot of Channing Tatum as Tyler Gage in a ballet class in the 2006 movie, <i>Step Up</i> .....	40
Figure 2: Screenshot of Lucy trying to pli� in TV show “I Love Lucy” .....	40
Figure 3: Screenshot of Cardi B in a ballet class with Debbie Allen .....	41
Figure 4: Screenshot of Free People video ad.....	46
Figure 5: Screenshot of Free People video ad .....	46
Figure 6: Screenshot showing Gittens' foot .....	47

### Chapter Two

Figure 7: Screenshot of Lucille Ball as "Bubbles" in <i>Dance, Girl, Dance</i> .....	100
Figure 8: Screenshot of Kidman and Aniston in <i>Just Go With It</i> .....	100
Figure 9: Photo of Kumu Malie's seal .....	123
Figure 10: Drawing of the hand gestures for pua.....	134
Figure 11: Photo of a K�pe'e (wrist adornment) .....	135
Figure 12: Photo of the waistband of a p�u skirt.....	137
Figure 13: Photo of elastic being pulled through the waistband.....	137
Figure 14: Photo of dancers at the Opening Ceremony.....	139
Figure 15: Photo taken while driving on the Big Island, June 2018 .....	143

### **Chapter Three**

Figure 16: Drawing of a mom dancing with her baby.....	179
Figure 17: Screenshot of Switched at Birth bachata dancing scene .....	181
Figure 18: Screenshot of Angelo turning Bay and her mom .....	181
Figure 19: Screenshot of Bay dancing between her parents .....	182
Figure 20: Screenshot of split screen - Bachata sensual and Destino.....	201
Figure 21: Screenshot of split screen – Dominican bachata and Destino.....	202

### **Coda**

Figure 22: An exquisite sentence of ballet, hula, and bachata.....	221
Figure 23: An exquisite image of ballet, hula, and bachata .....	222

## Introduction

*“In practical terms, technique provides social bedrock for imagining new ways of being together and being oneself.”<sup>1</sup> - Judith Hamera*

*“Training is and always has been a response to the problems experienced as a result of having a body and being in the world.”<sup>2</sup> - John Matthews*

The genesis of an idea is sometimes a big bright thing and other times just a gentle awareness of something that was always there. I began graduate school with the intention to study age and dance. I wanted to know how age plays a part in training and how age affects who is perceived as a dancer. I was driven by my own unmet need—to feel, be seen, and identify as a dancer—an identity I felt I was excluded from because I started late; I wasn’t a professional, and I wasn’t an amazing ballerina. While I was still ironing out my dissertation research question, I knew I wanted to focus on technique and training. I have always loved training stories and popular culture has as well. *My Fair Lady* (1964), *Rocky* (1976), *The Karate Kid* (1984, 1986, 1989, 1994), *Dirty Dancing* (1987), *Cool Runnings* (1993), *G.I. Jane* (1997), *Mulan* (1998), *Center Stage* (2000), *A Knight’s Tale* (2001), *Save the Last Dance* (2001), *Harry Potter* (2001), *Drumline* (2002), *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), *Step Up* (2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2019), *Stomp the Yard* (2007), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *Creed* (2015), *How to Train your Dragon* (2010), *Burlesque* (2010), *The King’s Speech* (2010), *Hunger Games* (2012), *Whiplash* (2014), and *Kingsman* (2014) are all training stories. Even Marvel’s *Captain America* (2011) is, in part, a training story of a man barred from military training for not having the right body but then he is finally given a chance to prove his “worth.”<sup>3</sup> Popular culture’s fascination

---

<sup>1</sup> Judith Hamera, *Dancing Communities: Performance, Difference and Connection in the Global City*, 2007th Edition (Basingstoke England ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 13.

<sup>2</sup> John Matthews, *Anatomy of Performance Training* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 164.

<sup>3</sup> I see resonances with this storyline and people who want to access dance training.

with training is perhaps a reflection of the American Dream; as long as you train and work hard, then you can achieve anything whether it's to become a superhero or to "change your stars and live a better life."<sup>4</sup> Along with these professional and fantastical depictions, everyone at some point in their lives goes through training whether in school, for a job, sports, exercise, etc.<sup>5</sup> There are many who pursue and commit to training that has nothing to do with their professions and everything to do with desire and with interest. These everyday training stories, including my training story, are just as valid and valuable as stories of major or professional transformation. As such, the gentle coming into awareness solidified the focus of my dissertation: the training of nonprofessional dancers.

I realized that integral questions to my work like "who gets to be a dancer" and "how is a dancer defined" are actually questions about access to training, the techniques taught in those spaces, and the people who are able to obtain status and power from acquiring technique. Therefore, I deploy the category of "dancer" as a lens to analyze the power dynamics involved in learning a dance form. I analyze three dance genres: ballet, hula, and bachata, all of which I have trained in or continue to train in. A different set of issues emerges in the acquisition of technique in each of these dance forms, particularly around who and what is valued within that genre and within the different spaces of training. However, what connects these dance forms (and the chapters of this dissertation) is the negotiation of hierarchies of value. I do not claim that nonprofessional

---

<sup>4</sup> Brian Helgeland, *A Knight's Tale*, Action, Adventure, Romance (Columbia Pictures, Escape Artists, Finestkind, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> As Matthews posits, "training is not something that some of us do, it is something that we all do." Matthews, *Anatomy of Performance Training*, 7.

training spaces exist outside of hierarchies<sup>6</sup>; rather, I explore the negotiations between people and power structures, particularly around access and belonging. In this dissertation, I couple analysis of media representations with lived experiences to argue that learning a dance technique requires more than movement; it is also highly contingent on social categories (like age and ethno-racial background) as well as access to training spaces and notions of respectful participation.

I look across ballet, hula, and bachata to analyze how nonprofessional dancers train and participate in different value systems. In doing so, my research also contributes to different debates specific to each form. Given the dominance of ballet within conceptions of technique and dance training, there is scholarly value in complicating our understanding of what is involved in learning ballet. Specifically, my ballet chapter contributes to filling the gap on adult ballet scholarship, working against exclusionary and ageist mechanisms to claim adults as valued and important dancers. Given the globalization of hula, movement and choreography are pushed into the spotlight while important aspects such as the chanting, language, histories, craft, and culture risk being marginalized. My chapter on hula focuses on the many things one must do (along with moving) in order to participate fully and respectfully in hula. My chapter on bachata considers home training (learning dance at home). Stereotypes around social dance as an expression of innate talent and without rigor or technique, invisibilizes home training and family labor. I intervene by rendering home training visible and valid as a training space, family/friends as teachers, and people who learn to dance at home, as dancers. Together, these chapters highlight how nonprofessional dancers acquire technique and

---

<sup>6</sup> Some hierarchies are reproduced while new ones are created.

how they navigate cultural values.<sup>7</sup> In many ways, this dissertation tracks how adults find and make “home” in dance techniques.

### **Technique, Training, Access, and Definition**

Since my work focuses on sites of training, I directly draw on and contribute to existing scholarship on technique and training. Scholarly considerations of “technique” often take sociologist Marcel Mauss’s 1934 essay, “Techniques of the Body,” as a point of departure. Mauss defines “techniques of the body” as “the ways in which from society to society men know how to use their bodies.”<sup>8</sup> He shows that techniques can differ based on culture, time, and place.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, how different people engage with knowledge depends on a person’s age, gender, sex, class, and ability.<sup>10</sup> By acknowledging technique as the many different ways one uses the body and by explaining that these ways vary across people, space, and time, Mauss disrupts the primacy of only certain skills or actions being classified as technique.

Dance scholars have taken up questions of technique by analyzing different dance forms and discussing aesthetics, social relationships, and sociopolitical effects. In dance scholar Susan Foster’s canonical 1997 text, “Dancing bodies,” she explains that “several systematic programs of instruction, known as “dance techniques,” exist for studying the perceived body, organizing the information it presents, and correlating it

---

<sup>7</sup> Much like Hamera’s *Dancing Communities*. “Dancing communities argues that both concert dance and amateur practice are laboratories for examining and revisioning the myriad complex interrelations between gender, sexuality, race, class, and culture in urban life.” Judith Hamera, *Dancing Communities: Performance, Difference and Connection in the Global City*, 2007th Edition (Basingstoke England ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 1.

<sup>8</sup> Marcel Mauss, “Techniques of the Body,” trans. Ben Brewster, *Economy and Society* 2, no. 1 (1936 1973): 70.

<sup>9</sup> Mauss, 71–73.

<sup>10</sup> Mauss, 76.

with demonstrative and ideal bodies.”<sup>11</sup> Foster argues that technique positions bodies within systems that determine worth, deciding how close or how far bodies are to an ideal. She articulates five different types of bodies (ballet, Graham, Cunningham, Contact Improvisation, and the hired body) and some of the standards, aesthetics, and subjects created and connected to these techniques. In Foster’s 2009 “Dancing Bodies, an addendum,” she discusses the ballet, industry, release, and regroove bodies.<sup>12</sup> In some ways, this dissertation adds to her catalog by unpacking dancing bodies created through hula and bachata training. I also extend the reach of Foster’s work by visibilizing nonprofessional dancing bodies, an understudied and underserved group of dancers.

Technique, as defined by dance scholar Randy Martin (1998), is about accomplishing an activity as well as “the means to regulate what is considered appropriate to that activity.”<sup>13</sup> His emphasis on technique as regulating what is valid and acceptable shows that technique is not just about “doing” but also about power relationships. Deciding how an action should take place and who should do it speaks to privilege and power. Martin unpacks the circulation of technique as part of an “economy of unequal exchange” where “the ability to appropriate what others produce” and gain capital often works more “favorably” in one direction, those with power appropriating from those without power.<sup>14</sup> Like Mauss, Martin looks at technique from a macro perspective and considers how it circulates, or doesn’t circulate, depending on class, gender, ability, race, and other social categories. Technique, then, is connected to the

---

<sup>11</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, “Dancing Bodies,” in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane C. Desmond (Duke University Press Books, 1997), 238.

<sup>12</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, “Dancing Bodies: An Addendum, 2009,” *Theater* 40, no. 1 (February 1, 2010): 25–29, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01610775-2009-016>.

<sup>13</sup> Randy Martin, *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1998), 50.

<sup>14</sup> Martin, 64.

individual but also to a community, society, and structures of power at large. My work is in line with Martin's by also tracking how ballet, hula, and bachata circulate within nonprofessional adult spaces.

Dance scholar Judith Hamera's 2006 text, *Dancing Communities* "argues that both concert dance and amateur practice are laboratories for examining and revising the myriad complex interrelations between gender, sexuality, race, class, and culture in urban life."<sup>15</sup> She theorizes dance technique as "relational infrastructure"<sup>16</sup> that makes bodies "legible and intelligible,"<sup>17</sup> meaning, technique is literally the building blocks of how people understand and interact with each other, with themselves, and with the world around them. Hamera analyzes "ballet, butoh, Khmer classical dance, Pilates training, and modern-postmodern fusion"<sup>18</sup> both in professional, semi-professional, and family spaces to discuss the different types of socialities created via technique. She also supports the argument that dance does not just disappear –it is present in "in minds and hearts, in places and in talk."<sup>19</sup> In a related argument against dance's supposed impermanence, anthropologist Sally Ann Ness (2008) asserts that technique is embedded in muscles and bones resulting in dancers as "living monuments to a given technical 'discourse.'"<sup>20</sup> She identifies "classical dance forms as inscriptive practice,"<sup>21</sup> using Balinese dance, Ballet, and Bharatanatyam as examples to demonstrate how

---

<sup>15</sup> Hamera, *Dancing Communities*, 1.

<sup>16</sup> Hamera, 19.

<sup>17</sup> Hamera, 6.

<sup>18</sup> Hamera, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Hamera, 16.

<sup>20</sup> Sally Ann Ness, "The Inscription of Gesture: Inward Migrations in Dance," in *Migrations of Gesture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 22, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/32038>.

<sup>21</sup> Ness, 13.



technique inscribes values physically and symbolically on classical dancers. I contend that values are also inscribed in, on, and through nonprofessional bodies. In effect, looking at how these values operate with nonprofessional dancers, rather than professionals, reveals how hierarchies persist and desist across dance spaces.

Although there are many different genres of dance, as dance scholar Raquel Monroe (2011) aptly explains, “in dance, we have yet to shake the ideology that informs what makes a good dancer. That is, we still adhere to European aesthetics, which value the lines of Ballet technique.”<sup>22</sup> Because of this, ballet is often incorrectly perceived as “the root of all dance,” therefore restricting how other dance forms are valued both in the body and in university and dance studio curricula. Monroe argues, “as long as Ballet and Modern dance remain the gatekeepers and valued mode of training dancers in the academy, dance educators will continue to perpetuate the racist infrastructure upon which most institutions of higher learning were built.”<sup>23</sup> In this statement, Monroe underscores the importance of access and definition as they relate to power. She highlights the issues with how technique is defined and how that affects access and desire to train in certain dance forms, re-instilling “dancer” as an exclusive and exclusionary category. Feminist Marilyn Frye theorizes access and definition as tools of power: “Total power is unconditional access; total powerlessness is being unconditionally accessible. The creation and manipulation of power is constituted on the manipulation and control of access.”<sup>24</sup> The interplay between definitions of “dancer” in

---

<sup>22</sup> Raquel L. Monroe, “‘I Don’t Want to Do African ... What about My Technique?’ Transforming Dancing Places into Spaces in the Academy,” *Journal of Pan African Studies* 4, no. 6 (September 15, 2011): 46, <https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=LitRC&sw=w&issn=08886601&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA306357798&sid=googleScholar&linkaccess=abs>.

<sup>23</sup> Monroe, 46.

<sup>24</sup> Marilyn Frye, *Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Trumansburg, N.Y: Crossing Press, 1983), 103.

ballet, hula, and bachata along with access to training in these forms unveil the ways in which dance is intimately woven with, and constructed by, power.

Thinking about technique outside of dance, performance scholars John Matthews (2011, 2014) and Ben Spatz (2015) have looked at training across practices like acting, yoga, and monastic training to understand technique and training more broadly and how these terms help theorize how bodies exist in the world. Matthews specifies that training consists of “[t]he development of talent, the transfer of knowledge and the continuation of practices ... for individuals, training may also meet a particular need and lead towards a sense of a more perfect or correct version of self.”<sup>25</sup> Training, therefore, is important to knowledge production and dissemination, but as mentioned prior, it also contributes to how people participate in value systems. Ben Spatz (2015) argues that “technique is knowledge that structures practice,”<sup>26</sup> technique offers “relatively reliable pathways” to do things.<sup>27</sup> Said differently, part of knowing how to do something is the understanding that there is a degree of reliability involved—on your body to perform, and predictability, on the thing or person to react. He defines training as “the passage of technique from one person or community to another,”<sup>28</sup> emphasizing instruction and transmission. In this definition, he also gestures towards his distinction between technique and training. For Spatz, training refers to “previously established pathways of practice” whereas technique lends itself to the novel “new pathways in materiality, newly recognized patterns and

---

<sup>25</sup> Matthews, *Anatomy of Performance Training*, 4.

<sup>26</sup> Ben Spatz, *What a Body Can Do: Technique as Knowledge, Practice as Research* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2015), 1.

<sup>27</sup> Spatz, 26.

<sup>28</sup> Spatz, 60.

forms in which one might then proceed to train.”<sup>29</sup> In other words, technique is a way of doing something and training is how one learns how to do that specific thing.

Theorizing through the dynamic between technique and training enables me to focus on the dancing body and the process of pursuing, learning, and acquiring technique. Dance is often lauded for its spectacle and performance aspect yet, as Spatz theorizes, the “politics of embodied practice” are different from “representation and spectacle.”<sup>30</sup> I contend that because the three (practice, representation, and spectacle) interact and inform each other, there is some overlap in politics. However, training is an underdeveloped space of inquiry especially training that does not result in performance or in remuneration. As dance scholar Takiyah Nur Amin (2016) writes, “central to understanding dance as fundamental to the human experience is not necessarily the act of performance, but the act of dancing.”<sup>31</sup> I deploy critical focus on training to disrupt the spatial hegemony that values what dance scholar Anthea Kraut (2020) calls the “performance arena, the screen, the stage,” spaces “historically and still so over determined by white supremacy.”<sup>32</sup> I attend to technique and training across ballet, hula, and bachata to unearth power dynamics within the forms and within their training spaces as well as the negotiations therein.

My dissertation is also in direct conversation with more recent dance scholarship, specifically the 2020 compilation, *Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies: Decolonizing Dance Discourses*. This collection was initiated by a desire to

---

<sup>29</sup> Spatz, 121.

<sup>30</sup> Spatz, 7.

<sup>31</sup> Takiyah Nur Amin, “Beyond Hierarchy,” *The Black Scholar* 46, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2015.1119634>.

<sup>32</sup> Anurima Banerji and Royona Mitra, eds., “Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies: Decolonizing Dance Discourses,” *Dance Studies Association XL* (2020): 47.

question and to aid the field in seeing problems and possibilities. Throughout this collection of text, threads and throughlines of my own dissertation weave in and out, contributing to different moments. In the introductory remarks, dance scholar Anurima Banerji discusses mastery of dance by utilizing theorizations by Julietta Singh, specifically the way in which mastery exerts control and separates “the object that is mastered from itself.” Mastery as a “process also “involves the denial of the master’s own dependency on other bodies.”<sup>33</sup> I center training to unveil the interdependence between dance, dance studies, and nonprofessional dancing bodies (as opposed to professional dancing bodies). As denoted by the organization of this 2020 collection,<sup>34</sup> dance, choreography, technique, and training, are some of the main categories and keywords that structure dance studies. Consequently, these debates, and the field itself, is activated by and innervated through dancers. While seemingly obvious, it bears repeating: dancers’ bodies are the source material of dance studies. My research positions nonprofessional dancers as vital to economies of value both within and outside dance studies. I take on Kraut’s call for “more robust theorizations of how we learn new techniques and what else is being reproduced in spaces of transmission”<sup>35</sup> by analyzing what happens in ballet, hula, and bachata training spaces, particularly around understanding how dancers maneuver power structures and dynamics.

In many instances, “dancer” is not just a person who moves in space, “dancer” enacts one’s position and value in society as dance scholar Manjulika Tarah illustrates within the context of dancers in the Bangladeshi Nation. She writes about how technique

---

<sup>33</sup> Banerji and Mitra, 32.

<sup>34</sup> The collection is separated into four sections – On Dance, On Choreography, On Technique, and On Training.

<sup>35</sup> Banerji and Mitra, “Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies: Decolonizing Dance Discourses,” 47.

acts “as a marker of middle-class morality, of signifying the subject position, personhood, and docility of a woman dancer.”<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, in her discussion on training, dance scholar Imani Kai Johnson writes, “I come from a context wherein most people danced but few if any identified as dancers,”<sup>37</sup> which she and d. Sabela grimes note “acknowledge[s] those communities for whom music and dance are embedded in practices of everyday life.”<sup>38</sup> For some, dance is a part of being human, rather than a separate identity. I read this distinction as an invitation to understand more about the politics of “dancer” identification as illustrated through different training systems.

Having discussed some of the main tenets of my work, I turn now to how my dissertation chapters respond or echo other moments in *Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies: Decolonizing Dance Discourses*. Performance and theater scholar Shanti Pillai explains that training includes “agreements” on what constitutes a form, “the institutionalization of its pedagogy and whether there are opportunities for practitioners.”<sup>39</sup> In this statement, Pillai synthesizes some of what I discuss in my first chapter on ballet; Pillai writes “when forms have a clearly articulated history, hegemonic training modes may encounter fewer challenges.”<sup>40</sup> Being an established form, ballet’s training structure has encountered some challenges and changes however; I argue ballet as a form has yet to fully incorporate adult nonprofessionals into its training structure. Dance scholar Janet O’Shea’s piece on Filipino Martial Arts Training, ends with the following statement, “an effort to truly decolonize in dance studies might mean

---

<sup>36</sup> Banerji and Mitra, 44.

<sup>37</sup> Banerji and Mitra, 44.

<sup>38</sup> Banerji and Mitra, 53.

<sup>39</sup> Banerji and Mitra, 54.

<sup>40</sup> Banerji and Mitra, 53.

looking not only to what might be held in common but also to respecting what is kept hidden, and why.”<sup>41</sup> In a similar vein, my chapter on hula takes participation discernment or respecting when one should participate and when one shouldn’t as an integral component of hula technique. In her discussion on training in b-boying and hip hop, dance scholar Imani Kai Johnson, cited earlier, offers that training “is never just about learning movement skills;” it is also “about a deeper cultural education,”<sup>42</sup> a premise I draw on in my hula chapter. Johnson also introduces “home training” as “a term in African American and African diasporic communities that generally refers to home-taught social etiquette and manners, and judgments about a lack of them.”<sup>43</sup> My third chapter on bachata, looks at home training within the Caribbean Latine<sup>44</sup> context, to identify and make visible home dance training.

This 2020 collection of dance studies discussions was created to take seriously the hierarchies inherent in anti-blackness and caste rhetoric, and to offer ways to decolonize dance studies.<sup>45</sup> Finding threads of my work throughout this collection, situates my research as a timely addition to this effort. Echoing dance scholar Jasmine Johnson’s “obess[i]on with our<sup>46</sup> basic, foundational terms,”<sup>47</sup> I conjure “dancer” as a

---

<sup>41</sup> Banerji and Mitra, 58. In the hula chapter I will discuss “kaona” which means hidden/deeper layers.

<sup>42</sup> Banerji and Mitra, 47.

<sup>43</sup> Banerji and Mitra, 52.

<sup>44</sup> I use “Latine” as a gender neutral term “because it was designed to work with the Spanish language.” Doxey Kamara, “OPINION | Latinx vs Latine • The Tulane Hullabaloo,” *The Tulane Hullabaloo* (blog), September 30, 2021, <https://tulanehullabaloo.com/57213/intersections/opinion-latinx-vs-latine/>. See also “Why Latinx/e?,” *El Centro* (blog), accessed July 22, 2022, <https://elcentro.colostate.edu/about/why-latinx/>.

<sup>45</sup> Banerji and Mitra, “Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies: Decolonizing Dance Discourses,” 4.

<sup>46</sup> Referring to dance studies

<sup>47</sup> Banerji and Mitra, “Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies: Decolonizing Dance Discourses,” 25.

term and lens vital to questioning and understanding economies of value present within dance forms and within dance studies.

### **Why ballet, hula, and bachata?**

I am invested in complicating and disrupting hierarchies that position one dance form over another. Like dance scholar Jose Reynoso, I hold that “all forms of dance corporealize distinctive aesthetic, social, and cultural values; thus all forms of dance are valid and valuable sources of knowledge in the formation of individual and collective identities (identifications).”<sup>48</sup> As such, I posit that any and all dance genres are techniques and that all training contexts are legitimate spaces of knowledge production. In order to flesh out this position, I study technique and training of nonprofessional dancers in ballet, bachata, and hula, each of which has distinct aesthetics and is transmitted in specific training spaces. My project is not an exhaustive or historical study of each form. Instead, it investigates the dynamics and economies of value involved in these dance forms and in their spaces of training.

Genre-wise, ballet, hula, and bachata seem to exist in disparate sections of the “dance universe,” containing concert, social, and ceremonial attributes, which provides different understandings of “dancer,” technique, and training. Bachata and hula are more often associated with “ethnic” dance but ballet is also an ethnic dance, as explained by anthropologist Joann Keali’inohomoku.<sup>49</sup> Consequently, studying these three forms on the same footing further renders them equally valued, thus minimizing ballet’s

---

<sup>48</sup> Jose Reynoso, Cultural Approaches to Dance Seminar Course, University of California, Riverside, Spring 2016.

<sup>49</sup> Joann Keali’inohomoku, “An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance.,” in *Moving History/Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader*, ed. Ann Dils and Ann Cooper Albright, 1st Edition (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 33–43.

hierarchical existence as an exalted “Esperanto of all dance.”<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, dance forms like bachata are labeled as “social”—however, all dance forms connect people, enact different social relations, and therefore are “social” dances, as dance scholar Yvonne Daniel theorizes.<sup>51</sup> Ballet, hula, and bachata can and should be studied together because of their differences *and* their similarities as “ethnic” and social dances.

The spaces of training for ballet, hula, and bachata can vary, ranging from hālaus (hula school), universities, dance studios, clubs, homes, or community events. These spaces dictate how technique is taught and by whom (stranger, friend, family, etc.) as well as the types of commitments expected of dancers. For instance, parents teaching their children at home will necessarily be different than a student paying for a class in a dance studio. These different spaces, instructors, and commitments to training offer multiple perspectives on what defines training, where training happens and with whom. Each dance form’s relationship to age, race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality plays a role in the meanings developed by practicing the dance forms as well as who is allowed to dance and how they are allowed to dance. Ballet’s connection to royalty/court systems and Europe, as well as its role as a homogenizing force in dance; hula’s relationship to American imperialism and tourism; and bachata’s connection to the Caribbean as a nexus of sugar, sex, and labor, all have effects on how the dance forms are practiced. Each form’s ties to specific ethno-racial identities, such as European/European American, Dominican, Caribbean, Latine, and Hawaiian, also affect why people would want to learn these dance forms, whether that may be to connect to their heritages or as a way to relate to other cultures, among other reasons. The dance

---

<sup>50</sup> Melanie Bales and Rebecca Netti-Fiol, eds., *The Body Eclectic: Evolving Practices in Dance Training* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 74.

<sup>51</sup> Yvonne Daniels, University of California, Riverside’s Festival of Social Dance Keynote address, University of California, Riverside, October 21, 2016.



forms' connections to social differences, histories, politics, and status affect what is being transmitted in the dance form. Overall, my work investigates the various kinds of knowledge transmitted via training and the power dynamics involved in accessing and using these knowledges.

### **Who I study**

I build off of Cultural Anthropologist Margot Weiss' wording, "technique-oriented community,"<sup>52</sup> to study nonprofessional adults who train in ballet, hula, and bachata. I deploy this naming to reinforce the idea that nonprofessionals, like professionals, are a part of technique-oriented communities and can be connected across difference via technique. How practitioners and dancers in each community identify themselves or make identity claims depends on the nature of each form.

I use the simplified definition of professional dancer as someone paid to dance. In ballet, the professional and nonprofessional divide is clear; training is often labeled as "pre-professional" and "professional" with professional dancers being seen as successful. In hula, the professional and nonprofessional divide differs; often those getting paid to do hula do so as part of performing in shows (tourist and otherwise). The perceived more "serious" training and dancing occurs in hālaus and in places like the Merrie Monarch Festival, the hula olympics. As historian, Adria Imada, explains, "winners at this prestigious festival do not receive cash prizes but status and public validation, which usually result in increased student enrollment for a hālau and invitations to participate in hula festivals abroad."<sup>53</sup> Bachata's relationship to professional

---

<sup>52</sup> Margot Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality* (Duke University Press, 2011), 5.

<sup>53</sup> Adria L. Imada, *Aloha America: Hula Circuits Through the U.S. Empire* (Duke University Press, 2012), 4.

nonprofessional divide is also slightly different in part because of bachata's standing as a social dance. In bachata, I associate professionals to those getting paid to teach as opposed to everyone else. Additionally, in the congress circuit, students pay to become a part of dance teams that perform on stage some with less than a year's worth of training, thus complicating seeing performance on stage as a metric of "professionalism."

These communities of technique include people from different walks of life and of different ages. I have danced with chefs, truck drivers, surgeons, lawyers, unemployed people, retired people, college students, librarians, software engineers, doctors, social workers, and fellow PhD students. People I interviewed identify with a variety of ethno-racial identities including white, Dominican, Hawaiian, Filipino, German, Mexican, Honduran, Japanese Americans, Chinese, and Black. Geographically, I met and danced with people from all over the U.S., specifically, New York (Manhattan, Queens, Brooklyn, Saratoga Springs), Boston, Los Angeles, San Diego, Chino Hills, and Hilo mostly at dance intensives, festivals, and conferences. In terms of age, I have danced with babies, toddlers, little kids, teens, adults, and elders, including strangers, family, and friends. Adults in ballet are 18+ though starting ballet at 13 is considered late. Teen and adult ballet often get lumped together and are separate from pre-professional training. In two of the hula schools I trained in, the wahine group included women ranging in age from 13-30 while makua or older women started at 31. Learning and dancing bachata at home means dancers can be of any age though in the bachata studio classes I attended, everyone was 18+.

The nonprofessional adult dancer (age 18 and up) provides a rich case study to understand how technique and training operate when not necessarily done for career advancement or for remuneration. Because professional dancers have to reach a

threshold of proficiency and meet aesthetic demands to be deemed professional, studying them as a community could prove limiting. Focusing, instead, on nonprofessional dancers entails studying people with various body shapes, ethno-racial identities, genders, ages, abilities, and other modes of difference. Dance, as a form, is deeply entrenched in what disability scholar Tobin Siebers calls “an ideology of ability,”<sup>54</sup> where ability structures a person’s value. This ideology extends to how training is perceived: the “able body has a great capacity for self-transformation. It can be trained to do almost anything.”<sup>55</sup> In some ways, professional dancers are perceived as super able and superhuman. Siebers writes, “disability creates theories of embodiment more complex than the ideology of ability allows, and these many embodiments are each crucial to the understanding of humanity and its variations, whether physical, mental, social, or historical.”<sup>56</sup> While I do not study disability, nonprofessional dancers can and often do complicate the ideology of ability by working to maintain and dismantle who is deemed worthy to be trained and consequently, who is considered and designated as a dancer.

Furthermore, Karl Marx’s *Capital*<sup>57</sup> and philosopher Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*<sup>58</sup> frame capitalism as a driving force for efficiency, unwasted time and effort (labor), progress, and desire for a product. These theories inform my analysis because

---

<sup>54</sup> Tobin Siebers, “Chapter One Introduction,” in *Disability Theory* (The University of Michigan Press), 8, accessed May 11, 2022, <https://www.press.umich.edu/pdf/9780472070398-intro.pdf>.

<sup>55</sup> Tobin Siebers, “Disability and the Theory of Complex Embodiment—For Identity Politics in a New Register,” n.d., 274.

<sup>56</sup> Tobin Siebers, “Disability and the Theory of Complex Embodiment—For Identity Politics in a New Register,” n.d., 273.

<sup>57</sup> Karl Marx and Ernest Mandel, *Capital: Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, Illustrated edition (London ; New York, N.Y: Penguin Classics, 1992).

<sup>58</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012).

many nonprofessional dancers must contend with incomprehension and derision for their decisions to pursue dance outside of the capitalist machine. However, despite not earning money or financial capital, capital still plays a role within nonprofessional spaces. Indeed, shifting the focus from remuneration elucidates the different types of labor and capital needed to become legible and valuable within a certain dance technique. Dance scholar Jose Reynoso, cited earlier, analyzes how dancers and choreographers acquire and use symbolic capital and cultural capital to further their positions as artists.<sup>59</sup> He explains that cultural capital circulates in what he calls, an “entrepreneurial artistic archive” encompassing “programs, websites, awards,” and other documents that claim, acknowledge, and show proof of the dancer and dance artists’ value.<sup>60</sup> Symbolic capital, on the other hand, is “affective,” “intangible,” and embodied in the dancer’s body: “thus, within a specific aesthetic discourse, the dancer as an artist is in part because of the body’s movement, the pleasure it generates, its relationality to others, and because of the other forms of capital it produces. He/she/they can thus feel as, and claim to be, a dancer, a dance artist.”<sup>61</sup> My work builds on this premise to understand how nonprofessional dancers with little “cultural capital” in the “entrepreneurial artistic archive” are still beholden to the same systems of value within dance. Nonprofessionals do exist in, contribute to, and sometimes resist various dance hierarchies. Through my work, I uncover how ballet, hula, and bachata are also built on the often unseen labor and bodies of nonprofessional dancers.

---

<sup>59</sup> Jose L. Reynoso, “Democracy’s Body, Neoliberalism’s Body: The Ambivalent Search for Egalitarianism Within the Contemporary Post/Modern Dance Tradition,” *Dance Research Journal* 51, no. 1 (2019): 47–65, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/723677>.

<sup>60</sup> Reynoso, 58–59.

<sup>61</sup> Reynoso, 58.

## Methodology

In their introduction to *Critical Media Studies*, Brian L. Ott and Robert L. Mack describe two types of engaging with knowledge: “somatically,” “through direct sensory perception of our environment,” and “symbolically,” through medium such as film.<sup>62</sup> In this dissertation, I deploy a mixed methods approach that incorporates the somatic via ethnography, and the symbolic via media analysis. All my chapters include both methods, though the ballet and bachata chapters’ use of media is more prominent.

The media I analyze comes from a variety of sources including movies, video advertisements, YouTube videos, and social media platforms like Facebook and TikTok. How dancers are depicted and represented in media mediates how we understand dancers outside of media. In other words, what we watch in media helps us to envision what we can or can’t be. Besides film, I look at YouTube videos posted by users either of dancing they recorded or of someone discussing dancing. The former presents a different perspective from more popularly disseminated and curated dance videos. The latter helps to nuance how people read dancing bodies. In *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Popular Screen*, dance scholar Sherrill Dodds calls for more attention and analysis of audience responses to dance concerts and dance on screen.<sup>63</sup> In this vein, I also analyze comments left by users on dance videos to understand discourses around policing of whom and what constitutes a dancer.

My own methodology relies heavily on the combination of ethnography and autoethnography. Autoethnography can be defined as using “tenets of autobiography

---

<sup>62</sup> Brian L. Ott and Robert L. Mack, *Critical Media Studies: An Introduction* (John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 1.

<sup>63</sup> “Within the field of dance studies, however, comparatively little work exists that examines the dance audiences either in relation to the concert stage or in the reception of screen dance forms.” Sherril Dodds, “Values in Motion: Reflections on Popular Screen Dance,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and the Popular Screen*, ed. Melissa Blanco Borelli (Oxford University Press, 2014), 451.

and ethnography.”<sup>64</sup> I find the autobiographical aspects of autoethnography integral to my method because, rather than a tool of narcissism, because autobiography can be an act of service. Although dance scholar Ann Cooper Albright discusses autobiography as a mode of concert dance choreography, I find her theorization helpful in contextualizing the possibility of including one’s experiences via autoethnography. She writes, “autobiography [is] an act of community...Giving testimony and bearing witness by recounting one’s life experiences has helped marginalized communities hold on to the experience of their own bodies while reclaiming their history”.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, offering my own story as a dancer is a way to enact a reciprocal and transparent relationship to ensure that my research is not solely transactional. In the spirit of shared intimacy and community, I dance next to and with my interviewees; I write my words next to and with their words. As dance scholar Priya Srinivasan writes, “as a researcher, I put my body on the line while training with and otherwise engaging other dancers.”<sup>66</sup> In order to be inclusive of multiple perspectives, I include my experience, dancers’ own descriptions of their experience, and readings of other dancers’ behavior.<sup>67</sup> Documenting the stories of nonprofessional dancers is another way of creating a space of and for community.

In my research, I posit that one’s nexus of identity, including race, ethnicity, gender, age, ability, class, and occupation, affects how and what one learns and how

---

<sup>64</sup> Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, “Autoethnography: An Overview,” *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12, no. 1 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-12.1.1589>.

<sup>65</sup> Ann Cooper Albright, *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 149.

<sup>66</sup> Priya Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 18.

<sup>67</sup> In the introduction to *Anthropology of Experience*, anthropologists Edward M. Bruner distinguishes between “behavior” and “experience”- you can observe someone’s behavior but only they can share their experience. Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner, eds., *The Anthropology of Experience*, 1st edition (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 5.

that knowledge is wielded as power. Accordingly, the positionality of nonprofessional dancers including myself as an ethnographer is vital. As communication scholars Robin M. Boylorn and Mark P. Orbe state, “critical autoethnographers are invested in the ‘politics of positionality’ (Madison, 2012) that require researchers to acknowledge the inevitable privileges we experience alongside marginalization and to take responsibility for our subjective lenses through reflexivity.”<sup>68</sup> How an ethnographer has come to exist/exists in the world affects how they study what they study. Conversely, as dance scholar Juliet McMains explains in her ethnographic research on salsa, her positionality as a white non-Hispanic affects what people tell her. She cannot account for and does not know what people would have told her if she had been “a different scholar.”<sup>69</sup> One’s positionality affects how one looks at the world but also how others interact with you.

One of the major principles that guides my research is critical reflection; being reflexive of one’s own positionality, assumptions, and values is an important aspect of dance ethnography. As dance scholar Anusha Kedhar points out, “privileging touch, the haptic, and a close attention to detail, a focus on ‘critical intimacy,’ mitigates against masculinist approaches that privilege objectivity and distanced looking, and seeks to correct unacknowledged complicity in relations to power.”<sup>70</sup> As a Caribbean Afro-Latina born and raised in Miami, Florida, I come to ballet, hula, and bachata with different expectations placed on my body. Because I am not of the white majority, I am able to uncover various dynamics involved in dancing forms outside of one’s ethno-racial

---

<sup>68</sup> Robin M. Boylorn and Mark P. Orbe, eds., *Critical Autoethnography: Intersecting Cultural Identities in Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 15, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315431253>.

<sup>69</sup> Juliet McMains, *Spinning Mambo into Salsa: Caribbean Dance in Global Commerce* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 20, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199324637.001.0001>.

<sup>70</sup> Anusha Lakshmi Kedhar, “On the Move: Transnational South Asian Dancers and the ‘Flexible’ Dancing Body” (UC Riverside, 2011), 47, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6m4475v1>.

background. As is customary for many little girls in the U.S., I also took ballet when I was young but only for a short while. Most of my life however, I've taken adult classes. With my brown skin, curly hair, and flat feet I do not fit the stereotype of white, thin, long limbed ballet dancer. Yet and still, because I grew up in Miami and had Cuban teachers, I saw dancers with my name<sup>71</sup> and dancers with my skin tone. I didn't think ballet wasn't for me because of my ethnicity or race; instead, my age was the limiting factor. Bachata is one of the three dance forms along with salsa and merengue that are often used as markers of "latinidad" in the U.S. In some ways I am expected to know how to dance bachata because I am Latine. I also might be expected to know bachata because I have Dominican cousins and therefore was exposed to bachata and Dominican culture.

Hula is the newest dance form to me. I didn't really know much about it until after college when I took an online class on different dance contexts and cultures. Because the U.S. forcibly and illegally overthrew the Hawaiian monarchy and because hula was banned in Hawai'i for some time, practicing hula as a non-Hawaiian American requires care. In researching hula, both bodily through training and textually, within academic scholarship, participating respectfully emerged as integral and indelible to each, my dancing and my research. My relationships to ballet, hula, and bachata inform how I train and aid me in unearthing how various dynamics play out in each form. Because of my positionality, I am able to see how I, along with others, are complicit in maintaining value systems as well as working to change them.

---

<sup>71</sup> Xiomara Reyez was a principal dancer at American Ballet Theater.



## Chapter Outline

My dissertation is divided into three chapters: the first on ballet, the second on hula, and the third on bachata. Each chapter provides some context on the dance genre in question. My first chapter builds off of Susan Foster's assertion that dancers are constantly striving to close the gap between reality and perfection.<sup>72</sup> Additionally, because ballet is centered on youthfulness, adult ballet dancers are often conceived as incongruent with ballet. I discuss how this perception appears in popular culture and how it informs YouTube users' comments on a ballet-themed ad. These comments show that a large gap between ideal ballet dancer and actual dancer is not well tolerated, which reinforces the boundaries of ballet and regulates who is allowed to represent a dancer. The second half of the chapter focuses on the lived experiences of adults training in the studio. Many adults want to be taken seriously as dancers yet must navigate an uneven and inconsistent dance training ground that often bars access to training and to progress, resulting in further regulation of the category of ballet dancer.

After looking at a form known for "inaccessibility" couched in rigor and discipline, I turn towards a form with associations of "aloha" and tourism. Because hula is often disseminated as just a dance form, in my second chapter I counteract this by emphasizing hula as a technique that requires more than just movement. Hula demands multimedia and multimodal engagement insofar as the meaning, words, language, music, adornment, and histories of hula are just as important as the movement. A

---

<sup>72</sup> "Dancers constantly apprehend the discrepancy between what they want to do and what they can do." Susan Leigh Foster, "Dancing Bodies," in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane C. Desmond (Duke University Press Books, 1997), 237. "While the ideal body eludes the dancer with its perfection..." Foster, 238.

dancer is expected to engage in many if not all of these components. I show how deep participation in hula serves as a dance ethic or practice of respect and responsibility.

My third chapter on bachata shifts from looking at training in studios and hālaus to center home training. Bachata, as I learned it originally, occurred in home spaces with family and friends. These home spaces are not available to all and so some people must access and learn bachata in the studio. Two different styles of bachata emerge from these training spaces: bachata as practiced in homes and clubs and bachata as practiced in studios and dance festivals/congresses.<sup>73</sup> I complicate the way bachata is being seen and used as a pan-Latine form by deploying a two-part recovery: recentering the Dominican Republic and Dominican voices/bodies as well as positioning the home space as a valid and valuable training space for dancers. I close the dissertation with a coda that begins to explore what happens when ballet, hula, bachata, and their value systems come together in a singular body. Using exquisite corpse (cut and paste collage) as methodology, I unpack how bodies are composed of multiple techniques and corporealities.

While the technique and training of one dance form is valuable, so too is trying to understand how technique and training operate across forms. I invoke Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "the danger of a single story"<sup>74</sup> and refuse to reproduce the danger of a single dance. I have already experienced the repercussions of only seeing ballet as the only way to be a dancer. And so instead, I juxtapose ballet, hula, and bachata to complicate generalizations we might have about dance, technique, and

---

<sup>73</sup> In my experience, going out clubbing is different from attending a festival or congress. For example, a Dominican club is not the same as a social at a festival in a hotel (different music, different people, different movement expectations).

<sup>74</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The Danger of a Single Story*, TEDGlobal2009 (Ted Conferences, 2009), [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story).

training and to help us understand more about “dancer” as a category. In dance, bodies are regulated by dominant value systems. Analyzing who is interpolated as “dancer” allows for an analysis of how value operates. Even in nonprofessional spaces, one must contend with and work through power structures that allocate “correct” spaces of training, regulate access to training, determine “appropriate” participation in these spaces, and limit who is given the power to be seen and to identify as dancers. Consequently, using “dancer” as a lens to unpack power dynamics allows for further understanding on how bodies come to matter in life more broadly.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Ballet: Mind the Gap

*I'm really frustrated that I have to drive this far to get the type of dance education I want or just a dance education at all. Last week I took a class labeled as Adult Ballet Beginning Level 1 in a studio out in Irvine, CA. It was super intense. I've never been so sweaty. I remember being at the barre and watching as the teacher demonstrated a combination. "Any questions?," she asked. "Could you do it again, please?," I responded. "No. I only do it once," she said curtly, leaving me a bit at a loss for words other than an internal expletive. After a short pause, she added, "Now you show me what you have and I'll help you from there." "Ok," I said hesitantly and started the frappé combination. Frappé means "strike" in French – your foot "strikes" and kicks out, an abrupt, staccato movement, as one would do when you strike a match. I finished demonstrating the combination and she nodded her head; I had gotten it right...but not quite. "Was my foot flexed?," she asked. "No," I assume based on her question. I wasn't actually sure where she had her foot...I've done frappés all different types of ways. So I wrapped my pointed right foot around my lower left calf, toes curving around and behind – sur le cou de pied – around the neck of the foot. "Did I have my foot there?," she asked. "No," I said. She finally put me out of my misery, "It's just right in front of your ankle bone. Got it now?" I released the hold on my "foot neck" and placed my pointed foot near my ankle bone. "I think so," I responded.*

*Later on during center, I had my arm lower down, in low fifth so hovering right in front of my thigh. "Why is your arm down there?" she asked me a bit exasperated. "I don't know," I said. A beat passed. "Do you know what style I teach?," she asked. "No," I answered – the only other response I've given in this class so far. "It's Russian so the arms are much higher. What styles have you done?," she said. "It's been a mix," I reply. "Exactly," she says tersely, as if that explains it all.*

Mix between a memory and a voicenote I left to myself on July 14, 2018<sup>1</sup>

My initial response to this class was frustration and a bit of terror. I felt like I didn't know what I was doing, and the teacher was definitely not going to tell me. After years of taking ballet class, perhaps I didn't really know ballet. Yet, when I think back on this moment, I see a teacher taking adult ballet students seriously, training us to understand the logic of ballet and to think like ballet dancers. *"Ballet makes sense - you just have to*

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout the dissertation I will use italics to designate my memories, fieldnotes, and movement description.

*think about it,*<sup>2</sup> she said after having performed another Socratic twenty questions game with a dancer to help them figure out a center combination. After class, in the changing room, a fellow student shared that she really liked coming to this class because the teacher “*actually corrects us - not like some other adult ballet classes.*”<sup>3</sup> I agreed. Even if I found the class stressful, it was an example of a teacher implementing ballet standards for adults, something I had infrequent access to. Indeed, part of what the teacher saw in my body was my training history: inconsistent training with various teachers, in various ballet styles, and with inconsistent corrections. While a number of scholars have pointed to ballet as exemplifying how dance can serve as a disciplining force,<sup>4</sup> this chapter explores how this disciplining takes place (or not) on a usually more invisible group of dancers: adults. I ask, how is a dancer defined by their access to training?

A common complaint adult dancers voice is not being taken seriously. The title alone of *Pointe* magazine’s September 2019 article, “Why Adult Ballet Students Should Be Taken Seriously,” attests to this. The article highlights the ways society doesn’t take adults seriously either by not offering adult ballet classes or assuming adults shouldn’t be doing things like pointework.<sup>5</sup> Adults are cast as incongruent with ballet. Ballet’s inherent ageism<sup>6</sup> is in part to blame but so is the premise of ballet itself. Built on

---

<sup>2</sup> My fieldnotes, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> My fieldnotes, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Jill Green’s “Foucault and the training of docile bodies in dance education”, Jill Green “Somatic Authority and the Myth of the Ideal Body in Dance Education” 1999, “Technique and autonomy in the development of art: a case study in ballet” Sandra N Hammond and Phillip E. Hammond. Robin Lakes, “The Messages behind the Methods: The Authoritarian Pedagogical Legacy in Western Concert Dance Technique Training and Rehearsals,”

<sup>5</sup> Lindsay Martell, “Why Adult Ballet Students Should Be Taken Seriously,” *Pointe Magazine*, September 16, 2019, <https://www.pointemagazine.com/why-adult-ballet-students-should-be-taken-seriously-2640420632.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Felicity Paxton, “‘Like a Haven: Not Work, Not Home!’ Ballet as Escape Ritual for Middle Class Working Women,” in *The Emory Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life Working Paper No.20*, 2002, 2. “Even

Europeanist conceptions of perfection and a legacy of colonialism, ballet has been and often still is exclusionary to people based on race and class both in terms of theatrical representation and in terms of training. For example, many popular historical ballets showcase “national and racial stereotypes, including the orientalism of *La Bayadère*, *Le Corsaire* and *Scheherazade*, the Chinese (“Tea”) and Arabian (“Coffee”) variations in *The Nutcracker*, and the character of the Moor in *Petruška*, originally played in blackface.”<sup>7</sup> In terms of training, as dance scholar Thomas deFrantz explains, “strict segregation precluded sustained ballet study in black children before the 1960s, causing the few African American classical dancers of that era to begin their ballet training as adults.”<sup>8</sup> Because of segregation, there were also few opportunities for black ballet dancers to perform.<sup>9</sup> Even after segregation ended, black dancers were still seen as incongruent to ballet, particularly for not having the “right body type.” In dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild’s *The Black Dancing Body*, she details the different ways the black body was criticized and positioned against a ballet body ideal.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, dance scholar Carrie Gaiser has shown that “critics rhetorically constructed and essentialized the black dancer as possessing a too-stocky bone structure, protruding buttocks, and

---

the most cursory glance at the literature on dance theory and history reveals the extent to which ballet has, since its inception, flaunted its separation from real world cares and concerns and embraced a kind of romanticized “juvenescence.” A long standing feature of ballet, its artistic *raison d’être* in fact, has been its glorification of youthfulness and weightlessness, an aesthetic preoccupation that has had interesting repercussions in terms of the construction and perpetuation of gender stereotypes.”

<sup>7</sup> Lyndsey Winship, “‘Dance Is Not a Museum’: How Ballet Is Reimagining Problematic Classics,” *The Guardian*, January 9, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/jan/09/ballet-reimagining-classics-colonial-politics-dance-race-identity>. I remember watching *La Bayadere* in 2013 and wondering why the dancers had painted their skin brown. Or watching *Harlequinade* in 2019 and wondering what it meant to have a black male lead dancer play a character who is dismembered and left on the street.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas DeFrantz, “Ballet In Black: Louis Johnson and Vernacular Humor,” in *Dancing Bodies, Living Histories: New Writings about Dance and Culture*, ed. Lisa Doolittle and Anne Flynn (Banff: Banff Centre Press, 2000), 179.

<sup>9</sup> DeFrantz, 180.

<sup>10</sup> Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

feet that were too flat and too large.”<sup>11</sup> Class, too, has played a role in access to training, as dance scholar Julie A. Kerr-Berry has written.<sup>12</sup>

While ethnoracial background and socioeconomic class have historically been and continue to be primary barriers to ballet training, they are not the only barriers. I focus on the intersection between age and access to training. I do so because aging is a phenomenon that occurs to all bodies regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, or class. I acknowledge that all of these social differences are not mutually exclusive and that they operate together. However, I focus on age as a barrier because it is an underserved area of inquiry. I also center age because race and ethnicity rarely figured (at least not directly) as limits in my own pursuit for training in ballet. Growing up in Miami, Florida, I frequently saw brown ballet dancers. My favorite teacher, Maria Eugenia, had brown skin and dark curly hair, just like me. I even shared my name with a principal ballet dancer at American Ballet Theater, Xiomara Reyes. Instead, age has been more of a hindrance to my ballet journey, and as I discovered, to some of my adult peers as well. Looking for “serious” and consistent training as an adult has sometimes yielded results and other times resulted in discouragement and frustration. The adult dance training landscape fluctuates and is highly dependent on location, studio, teacher, and the adult student’s will and body. As such, this chapter explores how adults navigate this ballet training system. I argue that, despite the perception of adults as incongruent with ballet, adults do take ballet seriously and want to be taken seriously.

---

<sup>11</sup> Carrie Gaiser, “Caught Dancing: Hybridity, Stability, and Subversion in Dance Theatre of Harlem’s Creole ‘Giselle,’” *Theatre Journal* 58, no. 2 (2006): 272, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25069823>.

<sup>12</sup> Julie A. Kerr-Berry, “Dance Education in an Era of Racial Backlash: Moving Forward as We Step Backwards,” *Journal of Dance Education* 12, no. 2 (April 1, 2012): 51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15290824.2011.653735>.

## Situating Ballet

A direct result of its royal roots, ballet emphasizes hierarchy in both its training method, where students progress through different levels, and in its organization within ballet companies<sup>13</sup> that range from corps de ballet, soloists, and end at the top with principal dancers. Brenda Dixon Gottschild connects the emphasis on hierarchy to a “post-Renaissance colonialist worldview” where “like the straight, centered spine of its dancing body, Europe posited itself as the center of the world, with everything else controlled and defined by it.”<sup>14</sup> Ballet is often erroneously posited as the “center” or “root of all dance” because of the dominance of Europeanist worldviews and aesthetics, which affects how “dancer” is defined, especially in the U.S. context. Said differently, ballet is a dominant dance form and has a powerful role in determining who is typically considered a dancer. Dance scholar Susan Foster explains, “the aesthetic rationale based on the pursuit of classical beauty offers dancers no alternative conceptions of dance: inability to succeed at ballet implies failure at all dance.”<sup>15</sup> Because ballet defines itself as a dance form about a “European” idea of perfection, ballet becomes a dictating force mired in whiteness and youth.

Performance scholar Raquel Monroe<sup>16</sup> and Dance scholar Takiyah Nur Amin<sup>17</sup> look at undergraduate dance curriculum and call for diversifying dance aesthetics and values. Both scholars show how the word “technique” has been used to refer to Western genres of dance, much to the detriment of other dance forms. In response to a student

---

<sup>13</sup> Gerald Jonas, *Dancing: The Pleasure, Power, and Art of Movement* (Harry N. Abrams, 1992), 131.

<sup>14</sup> Brenda D. Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998), 8.

<sup>15</sup> Foster, “Dancing Bodies,” 243.

<sup>16</sup> Monroe, “I Don’t Want to Do African ... What about My Technique?”

<sup>17</sup> Amin, “Beyond Hierarchy.”



writing about the uneven division of dance classes and how students must pass ballet and modern regardless of their interest, Monroe writes:

The above excerpt from a student journal suggests that as long as ballet and modern dance remain the gatekeepers and valued mode of training dancers in the academy, dance educators will continue to perpetuate the racist infrastructure upon which most institutions of higher learning were built. I do not intend to dub the teachers and administrators, of which I am one, racist. Rather, I am identifying racist infrastructures, and the extent to which the construction of curriculum unconsciously reinforces them.<sup>18</sup>

My work is in line with Monroe and Amin's because it explores exclusionary mechanisms within ballet, specifically the mechanisms that limit adult participation and progress.

Although scholarship on ballet abounds, I seek to provide additional understandings of what adult nonprofessionals desire and gain from devoting themselves to learning ballet.

Historian Melissa R. Klapper identifies nonprofessional, recreational, or "extracurricular" ballet as the more common experience for Americans.<sup>19</sup> In her book *Ballet Class*, she recounts the social history of ballet classes in the U.S. with a focus on children. Similarly, dance scholar Lesley-Ann Sayers notes, "for every child who becomes a professional ballet dancer thousands will have been called to the barre," meaning that for every professional dancer there are a number of people who have tried or practiced ballet.<sup>20</sup> These examples show that there are actually more recreational and nonprofessionals dancers than there are professional dancers. While a seemingly obvious statement, I highlight this point as a contrast to the rhetoric that positions professional dancers as the only desired manifestation of dancer. Additionally, despite

---

<sup>18</sup> Raquel L. Monroe, "I Don't Want to Do African ... What about My Technique?' Transforming Dancing Places into Spaces in the Academy," *Journal of Pan African Studies* 4, no. 6 (September 15, 2011): 46, <https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=LitRC&sw=w&issn=08886601&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA306357798&sid=googleScholar&linkaccess=abs>.

<sup>19</sup> Melissa R. Klapper, *Ballet Class: An American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), xiv.

<sup>20</sup> Lesley-Anne Sayers, "Madame Smudge, Some Fossils, and Other Missing Links: Unearthing the Ballet Class," in *Dance in the City*, ed. Helen Thomas (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1997), 132, [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230379213\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230379213_8).

the number of nonprofessional and recreational dancers, a great deal more scholarship has been written on professional dancers.

While scholars like Sayers and Klapper have discussed the experience of children, and Amin and Monroe discuss higher education, scholarship on adult ballet outside the academy is limited. Dance scholars Alexandra Kolb and Sophia Kalogeropoulou's article, "In Defence of Ballet: Women, Agency and the Philosophy of Pleasure" conceptualize adult ballet practice as "a leisurely activity that exudes pleasure."<sup>21</sup> Working against scholarship on the negative and damaging effects of ballet, they posit that adults train in this form because of the pleasure gained. This aligns with dance scholar Sara Houston's work on ballet and people with Parkinson's, who feel "lovely" and "beautiful" while dancing.<sup>22</sup> Women's studies scholar Felicity Paxton's work looks at how mothers train in ballet as a way to "escape their work lives" and to access a sense of ritual.<sup>23</sup> The consensus between these works is that for many adults, learning ballet produces positive affects and effects.

My definition of adult ballet, however, does not necessitate approaching ballet as something done "leisurely," implying solely with ease or pleasure. I'm interested in exploring a wide spectrum of experiences in adult ballet, including negative and ambivalent experiences. More specifically, my chapter contributes to scholarship on adults in ballet by challenging ageism and acknowledging adults as valued and important dancers in ballet. I center adult ballet as more than just recreational, a stance

---

<sup>21</sup> Alexandra Kolb and Sophia Kalogeropoulou, "In Defence of Ballet: Women, Agency and the Philosophy of Pleasure," *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research* 30, no. 2 (2012): 107, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23326529>.

<sup>22</sup> Sara Houston's "Feeling Lovely: An Examination of the Value of Beauty for People Dancing with Parkinson's"

<sup>23</sup> Paxton, "Like a Haven: Not Work, Not Home! Ballet as Escape Ritual for Middle Class Working Women," 1.

imperative to understanding how the term “dancer” operates as a normative category and, consequently, the kinds of knowledge and power dynamics at play in learning ballet technique.

### **Incongruent Bodies**

I draw on both Susan Foster’s “perceived” and “ideal” dancing bodies and Felicity Paxton’s idea of a category mistake to unpack how adult nonprofessional ballet dancers exist as incongruent to ballet. Within the context of Western dance forms, Foster explains that training “creates two bodies: one, perceived and tangible,” and “the other aesthetically ideal.”<sup>24</sup> The “perceived body” is *perceived* by the senses of the dancer, meaning the ways they feel, see, hear, or experience their bodies. Instead of using “perceived body,” I prefer the term “actual body,” to better distinguish between real and ideal. The ideal body is an amalgamation of bodies and aesthetics, some idealized and “fantascized” and others real, including “images of other dancers’ bodies, and cinematic or video images of dancing bodies.”<sup>25</sup> Foster adds that “dancers constantly apprehend the discrepancy between what they want to do and what they can do. Even after attaining official membership in the profession, one never has confidence in the body’s reliability.”<sup>26</sup> I interpret this statement as saying that the discrepancy between actual and ideal bodies is what keeps dancers training, even professionals. Departing from Foster, I

---

<sup>24</sup> Foster, “Dancing Bodies,” 237; Sharon Rowe cites Mark Franko: “Louis XIV’s daily dance lessons culminated a long tradition of royal dancing in which “French court ballet was essential to the legitimization of the monarch in his double status as real and ideal body” (Franko 1993,4).” Sharon Māhealani Rowe, “We Dance for Knowledge,” *Dance Research Journal* 40, no. 1 (2008): 32, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20527591>.

<sup>25</sup> Foster, “Dancing Bodies,” 237.

<sup>26</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, “Dancing Bodies,” in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane C. Desmond (Duke University Press Books, 1997), 237.

activate and analyze how nonprofessional adult dancers “mind the gap” between ideal and actual, and how this gap is perceived by others.

Felicity Paxton explores the incongruence between ballet and adults in her study of “ballet moms,” not the moms who help backstage but the moms who choose to train in ballet.<sup>27</sup> As Paxton theorizes, mothers and “adult ballet dancers [more broadly] represent a ‘category mistake,’”<sup>28</sup> meaning adults are seen as not belonging in the category of dancer.<sup>29</sup> Paxton gives context for this exclusion, citing ballet’s obsession with youthfulness as a culprit: “ballet has, since its inception, flaunted its separation from real world cares and concerns and embraced a kind of romanticized “juvenescence.” A long standing feature of ballet, its artistic *raison d’être* in fact, has been its glorification of youthfulness and weightlessness...”<sup>30</sup> If ballet indexes youthfulness then anyone outside of this category, the aging especially, are seen as “deviant.”<sup>31</sup> Paxton explains further, “ballerinas do not simply perform a kind of suspended youthfulness, they often live it too. A corollary of this is that, at both the practical and aesthetic level, ballet has long been at odds not only with aging, but also with motherhood.”<sup>32</sup> On one hand, ballet moms are deemed as “deviant” because ballet is perceived as an activity that takes

---

<sup>27</sup> Felicity Paxton, “‘Like a Haven: Not Work, Not Home!’ Ballet as Escape Ritual for Middle Class Working Women,” in *The Emory Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life Working Paper No.20*, 2002, 4.

<sup>28</sup> Paxton, 3.

<sup>29</sup> Cambridge dictionary defines a category mistake as “a mistake in which something is said or believed to be in one category (= group) when in fact it belongs to another.” “Category Mistake,” in *Cambridge Dictionary*, accessed August 24, 2022, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/category-mistake>.

<sup>30</sup> Paxton, “‘Like a Haven: Not Work, Not Home!’ Ballet as Escape Ritual for Middle Class Working Women,” 2.

<sup>31</sup> Paxton, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Paxton, 2.

mothers “outside of the home,”<sup>33</sup> and therefore away from their motherly “responsibilities.” On the other hand, ballet moms are “deviant” because they do not fit into “ballet’s imaginary [which] is deeply gendered and glorifies, ‘perpetual virginity, an idealized and ethereal femininity that reaches for the sky and the domain of the gods, rather than for the earth and its associations with mothering and nature.’”<sup>34</sup> Although there are men and gender nonconforming people in ballet, this dance form has been predominantly structured around and populated by a corps of youthful female bodies. Perhaps a symptom of ballet’s Peter Pan syndrome, adults interested in training, pose a breach to ballet’s norms.

Couched in this conversation on ballet moms is a deeper discussion about reproductive politics. Dance scholar Anthea Kraut highlights the dance teacher, the demonstrative body, as “one who performs vital reproductive labor.”<sup>35</sup> Similar to the labor performed by mothers and child bearing individuals, teachers “help produce, or give birth to, the corporealities of others.”<sup>36</sup> However, in order to produce these corporealities, students must also engage in reproductive labor as African diaspora studies scholar Jasmine Johnson posits; “a guiding philosophy of any dance class is to reproduce: reproduce an instructor’s choreography, reproduce an obedience to rhythm, reproduce a social order. In a class, we dancers pay, in part, for an occasion to mime.”<sup>37</sup> While the demonstrative body (dance teacher) is able to continue performing reproductive labor

---

<sup>33</sup> Paxton, 4.

<sup>34</sup> Paxton, 2. Citing Lesley-Anne Sayers, “‘She might pirouette on a daisy and it would not bend’ Images of Femininity and Dance Appreciation.” P.166 In Helen Thomas, (ed) 1993.

<sup>35</sup> Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies – Decolonizing Dance Discourses, 47

<sup>36</sup> Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies – Decolonizing Dance Discourses, 47

<sup>37</sup> Jasmine Elizabeth Johnson, “Casualties,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 62, no. 1 (February 22, 2018): 169, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/686631>.

well into old age, adult bodies become less viable as students; they are seen as less able to reproduce ballet technique and therefore acquire a dancer corporeality.<sup>38</sup> Adults are often foreclosed from existing in the ballet dancer category because they are not young, and mothers are doubly foreclosed from “ballet dancer” because they are both not young, and not virgins.<sup>39</sup> This regulation of who can reproduce and accumulate technique speaks to a larger desire to keep ballet technique as a rare commodity.

Given that all dancers occupy the space between actual and ideal dancer with varying degrees of closeness to the ideal, it’s imperative that we understand more about this threshold, both in how others perceive dancer identity and how people self-identify as ballet dancers.<sup>40</sup> In this chapter I look at how, for some dancers, existing in the gap between actual and ideal means being perceived as a category mistake. In other words, the threshold for “allowable discrepancies” between the ideal and actual ballet body varies depending on who is dancing. The work of dance scholar Carrie Gaiser is helpful here. As she has written, artistic director Arthur Mitchell wanted the Dance Theater of Harlem (DTH), a black ballet company, to perform *Giselle*, a classic nineteenth century style ballet to prove that his dancers were “classical dancers.”<sup>41</sup> She explains that Creole *Giselle*’s change in setting from Europe to 1841 Louisiana “tended to overshadow recognition of the Dance Theater of Harlem (DTH) dancers’ mastery of classical ballet

---

<sup>38</sup> Perhaps the adult body is prohibited from reproducing too many corporealities as in reproducing humans and ballet technique is “too much.” This also could reflect the capitalist modes of value production wherein laboring bodies are the valued bodies.

<sup>39</sup> Based on Paxton citing Sayers – ballet “glorifies, ‘perpetual virginity.’” Lesley-Anne Sayers, “Madame Smudge, Some Fossils, and Other Missing Links: Unearthing the Ballet Class,” in *Dance in the City*, ed. Helen Thomas (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1997), 166, [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230379213\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230379213_8). Cited In Paxton, “‘Like a Haven: Not Work, Not Home!’ Ballet as Escape Ritual for Middle Class Working Women,” 2.

<sup>40</sup> Public perception of identity can affect how people self identify. I will discuss this later on.

<sup>41</sup> In footnote 25 of Gaiser, “Caught Dancing,” 275–76.

technique. Although the Creole Giselle's dancers performed the same choreography that other dancers in (white) ballet companies performed, this choreography was read as new when performed by black bodies."<sup>42</sup> Despite performing at a high level and therefore being close to the ideal in terms of technique, DTH's black ballet dancers were in some ways, still seen as a "category mistake." As Gaiser explains, DTH's choreography being read as hybrid "reentrenched the opposition between black body and classical ballet."<sup>43</sup>

While my focus in this chapter is not a racial analysis, I include Creole Giselle as an example to emphasize the pervasiveness of the category mistake that situates white, young, flexible dancers as the ideal dancer. Many of the issues black dancers faced stem from being perceived as incongruent with ballet because of racist assumptions. Being perceived as having the "wrong" body type and having restricted or limited access to training are not problems from the past – dancers of color and adult dancers must contend with similar issues. By combining the concept of a category mistake with Foster's theorization of the gap between "actual" and "ideal" dancer, I assert that the further from the ideal an adult dancer is, the more they are seen as outside the category of "dancer."

## **Methodology**

In what follows, I deploy ethnography, media analysis, and media reception analysis as methods for examining adult nonprofessionals in ballet. This mixed method approach also follows Foster's statement, "both [actual and ideal dancing bodies] result from the process of taking dance classes, as well as watching dance and talking about

---

<sup>42</sup> Gaiser, 270.

<sup>43</sup> Gaiser, 275.

it."<sup>44</sup> Juxtaposing media representations, audience response to media, interviews, and personal experience allows for a more nuanced analysis of how the category of ballet dancer exists both in the imaginary and in the studio. Accordingly, this chapter is divided by methodology. The first section discusses media representations of nonprofessional adult dancers and responses to media representations to illustrate how adults are perceived as incongruent with ballet. The second section attends to the actual lived and material experiences of training in ballet by drawing on interviews with adult ballet dancers as well as my own personal experience with ballet. This section uncovers how adults navigate ballet training structures, specifically studying the different levels of access to training, varying from no access to “comprehensive” access through adult ballet intensives.

---

<sup>44</sup> Foster, “Dancing Bodies,” 237.



## Section 1: Adult Dancers As Category Mistakes In Media

As Vanessa, a 34-year-old white female Canadian adult ballet dancer I interviewed, stated, “there’s not much cultural portrayal of adult ballet dancers who aren’t professionals.”<sup>45</sup> Indeed, the few media representations of adult ballet dancers often show them as awkward and sticking out because they are different in height, age, flexibility, and body shape. Adults are also showcased as being “excessive” in their attire. For example, in Season 1 Episode 19 of the TV show, *I Love Lucy* (1952), Lucy wears a tutu to her ballet class while the other women wear tights and leotards and the men wear pants and button up shirts. Lucy sticks out with her comedic attempts at dancing ballet, at one point doing the Charleston instead of tendus.<sup>46</sup> Channing Tatum in *Step Up* (2006) takes a ballet class where he is the only tall male adult in a class of little girls.<sup>47</sup> In a BuzzFeed video entitled “Bodybuilders try ballet for the first time” (2016), three male weightlifters try ballet and wear tiny colorful tutus.<sup>48</sup> Similarly, Cardi B wears a teal tutu in her ballet episode of *Cardi B tries* (2020) while the other students wear leotard and tights.<sup>49</sup> In these varied representations, *trying* ballet is positioned against being able *to do* ballet.

---

<sup>45</sup> Vanessa in conversation with author, July 2019.

<sup>46</sup> Season 1 Episode 19 “The Ballet,” *I Love Lucy* (Desilu Productions, February 18, 1952).

<sup>47</sup> *Step Up*, Crime, Drama, Music (Touchstone Pictures, Summit Entertainment, Offspring Entertainment, 2006).

<sup>48</sup> *Bodybuilders Try Ballet For The First Time*, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ooBmaKSWGuo>.

<sup>49</sup> *Cardi B - Cardi Tries Ballet | Facebook | By Cardi B | In Her Own Words, Cardi Has “Two Left Feet”. But with Legendary Choreographer Debbie Allen’s Help, Can Cardi Trade Her Twerks for Pliés?*, accessed July 18, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/therealcardib/videos/cardi-tries-ballet/109280767629291/>.



Figure 1 – Screenshot of Channing Tatum as Tyler Gage in a ballet class in the 2006 movie, *Step Up*



Figure 2 – Screenshot of Lucy trying to pli  in 1952 TV show, *I Love Lucy*



Figure 3 – Screenshot of Cardi B in a ballet class with Debbie Allen as her teacher

Though not a media representation, actor Ryan Gosling’s own personal experience is similar to the aforementioned media descriptions. He describes how, when taking ballet class in Los Angeles, the girls in his class found it awkward for him to be there and told him to leave.<sup>50</sup> The conceit of all of these examples is the nonprofessional adults not fitting in, and struggling to keep up with the “real” dancers in the room and with ballet technique itself - an iteration of adults as category mistakes.<sup>51</sup> These examples are also expected to be received as comical. Based on the “benign violation theory of humor,” these depictions of adults are funny because they violate what is perceived as “appropriate” for adults, yet they are not dangerous.<sup>52</sup> In other words, in these depictions, being a category mistake is harmless and therefore funny. Part of what makes them benign is the seemingly compulsory conclusion where participants recognize ballet as a difficult form that necessitates training and discipline. This conclusion reinforces ballet as a form to be respected and revered and in doing so,

---

<sup>50</sup> Rebecca Twomey, “Ryan Gosling Admits Secret Ballet Dancing Past,” *Marie Claire*, April 15, 2013, <https://www.marieclaire.co.uk/news/celebrity-news/ryan-gosling-admits-secret-ballet-dancing-past-125173>.

<sup>51</sup> The adults are also frequently positioned against children.

<sup>52</sup> “Something is humorous when it is simultaneously appraised as a violation (i.e. something that is wrong, bad, or threatening) and benign (i.e. something that is not to be worried about).” Marc Hye-Knudsen, “Painfully Funny: Cringe Comedy, Benign Masochism, and Not-So-Benign Violations,” *Leviathan: Interdisciplinary Journal in English* No. 2 (2018): 15.

reshapes the lines between ballet dancer and nondancer.

In sum, it is not that there is a complete dearth of adult ballet dancer portrayals, but rather, many of the portrayals denote an unsuitability between ballet and nonprofessional adults. This unsuitability is especially heightened when compared to professional adult ballet dancers who are often venerated as virtuosic and superhuman. The perception of adult ballet dancers as either professionals and perfect, or absurd and out of place, discounts a whole segment of the ballet community who are serious about their training, even if they aren't professionals.

While the media representations I just discussed showcased adults trying and training in ballet, the following media representations portray adults as professional dancers. A key difference between media representations like "Bodybuilders try ballet for the first time" and movies like *Black Swan* is that adults must contend with the limits of their bodies, while, thanks to Hollywood magic and what I'm calling actor-dancer assemblages, actors do not. Zoe Saldña in *Center Stage* (2000), Julia Stiles in *Save the Last Dance* (2001), Neve Campbell in *The Company* (2003), and Natalie Portman and Mila Kunis in *Black Swan* (2010) are actors who portrayed professional ballet dancers in movies. All except Neve Campbell (who had trained as a ballerina until fourteen),<sup>53</sup> had body doubles to do the "actual" dancing in the film. By using body doubles, the gap between the actual and ideal bodies is closed via technology and surrogate skill. While body doubling is a common practice for various acting roles that require skilled bodies and labor, controversy ensued over how much of the dancing in *Black Swan* was performed by actor, Natalie Portman, and how much was performed by

---

<sup>53</sup> Bob Thompson, "For Neve Campbell, A Painful Stretch," *Washington Post*, January 11, 2004, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/style/2004/01/11/for-neve-campbell-a-painful-stretch/853a9050-8bb6-49b9-8a54-9037b8f36ff7/>.

her dance double, Sarah Lane. In the *Wall Street Journal*, author and journalist Christopher John Farley writes “a producer on the film asked her not to give any interviews in advance of the Oscars,”<sup>54</sup> suggesting that Portman’s image and talent would be bolstered by the belief that she had done most of the dancing. Lane explains that she wanted to visibilize her role and labor as the dancer in *Black Swan* to disabuse any notions that ballet be perceived as easily achievable; she wanted to clarify “that you cannot become a professional ballet dancer in a year and a half no matter how hard you work.”<sup>55</sup> Lane adds that one needs a “strong and trained body” and that it “takes years of training your muscles and body to be something that’s not average,”<sup>56</sup> cementing dancer as a bounded category.

Particularly relevant in a movie set in a professional ballet company, the issue in the *Black Swan* controversy was over who can, who is, and who does represent a professional ballet dancer. A similar issue is raised when using ballet to market clothing as illustrated by Free People’s<sup>57</sup> 2014 video advertisement. In some ways, Free People’s ad presents an amalgam between the two types of adult ballet media representations I have introduced, adults trying ballet and adults acting as if they are ballet dancers. The model in the ad is both an adult ballet dancer and a professional in that she is technically

---

<sup>54</sup> Christopher John Farley, “Sarah Lane, Natalie Portman’s ‘Black Swan’ Dance Double, Says She Deserves More Credit - WSJ,” March 26, 2011, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-SEB-64443>.

<sup>55</sup> Farley.

<sup>56</sup> Farley.

<sup>57</sup> Free People is owned by Urban Outfitters. It is an expensive, woman’s clothing line with a “bohemian” style. Their website reads: “And that’s just who we wanted to reach: a 26-year-old girl, smart, creative, confident and comfortable in all aspects of her being, free and adventurous, sweet to tough to tomboy to romantic. A girl who likes to keep busy and push life to its limits, with traveling and hanging out and everything in between. Who loves Donovan as much as she loves The Dears, and can’t resist petting any dog that passes her by on the street.” “About Free People,” Free People, accessed June 19, 2022, <https://www.freepeople.com/help/our-story/>.

getting paid to dance.<sup>58</sup> However, unlike Saldaña, Portman, or Kunis, she was not given a body double and so her body must dance for itself. After its release, the FP ad incurred a backlash, with coverage in articles published in Huffpost,<sup>59</sup> Bustle,<sup>60</sup> Refinery29,<sup>61</sup> adweek,<sup>62</sup> and dailymail,<sup>63</sup> as well as online blogs<sup>64</sup> calling out the bad dancing in this ad. Likewise, online users took to the “media streets” and left comments on the YouTube ad and on Free People’s blog where the ad was also posted. Several YouTube users also created parody videos in response. Though Free People never directly addressed their ad or the backlash, they later partnered with Ballet Zaida,<sup>65</sup> a renowned ballet photographer, and released photos and a video with white, skilled ballet dancers.

---

<sup>58</sup> I’m using the simplified version of “professional” here as one who gets paid though I acknowledge that there are different value systems in commercial and noncommercial dance and that remuneration alone does not always determine professionalism. Nevertheless, in our capitalist society, being paid often does serve as a way to value and be valued for one’s labor.

<sup>59</sup> Katherine Brooks, “The Unconvincing Ballet Ad That Has Dancers Everywhere Fuming | HuffPost Entertainment,” Huffpost, accessed June 18, 2022, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/free-people-ballet\\_n\\_5338983](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/free-people-ballet_n_5338983).

<sup>60</sup> “Sorry, Free People, Your Ballet Ads Are Not Convincing,” Bustle, accessed March 11, 2021, <https://www.bustle.com/articles/24756-sorry-free-people-your-ballet-ads-are-not-convincing>.

<sup>61</sup> Gina Marinelli, “Free People Ballet Dance Video Backlash,” Refinery29, May 15, 2014, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2014/05/68003/free-people-ballet-video>.

<sup>62</sup> Roo Powell, “Trained Dancers Are Completely Appalled by This Ballet Ad for Free People Clothing,” Adweek, May 15, 2014, <https://www.adweek.com/creativity/trained-dancers-are-completely-appalled-ballet-ad-free-people-clothing-157682/>.

<sup>63</sup> Margot Peppers, “Free People Backlash for Ad Starring Inexperienced Dancer with ‘appalling’ Technique | Daily Mail Online,” May 16, 2014, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2630488/If-wanted-target-ballerinas-shouldve-hired-professional-Free-People-faces-backlash-ad-starring-inexperienced-dancer-appalling-technique.html>.

<sup>64</sup> Paige, “Free People vs. Trained Dancers | Paige Davis,” May 20, 2014, <https://paigedavis.com/2014/05/20/free-people-vs-trained-dancers/>; “Free People’s ‘Ballet’ Campaign - Tendusunderapalmtree.Com | Tendusunderapalmtree.Com,” accessed March 11, 2021, <https://tendusunderapalmtree.com/free-peoples-ballet-campaign/>; “The Problem with ‘Toe Shoes’--Free People’s Aggravating Ad,” *The Problem with “Toe Shoes”--Free People’s Aggravating Ad* (blog), accessed March 11, 2021, <http://jeanneteachesdance.blogspot.com/2014/05/the-problem-with-toe-shoes-free-peoples.html>; The Olive Gal, “This Is Why Dancers Are Pissed at That Free People Ballet Ad,” The Olive Gal, May 16, 2014, <http://theolivegal.com/this-is-why-dancers-are-pissed-at-that-free-people-ballet-ad/>.

<sup>65</sup> “Free People Finally Gets It Right, And Teams Up With a Real Ballerina - Dance Spirit,” accessed March 11, 2021, <https://www.dancespirit.com/free-people-finally-gets-it-right-and-teams-up-with-real-ballerinas-2493306803.html>.

While I could have analyzed a number of media representations, I chose this Free People ad because it showcases a black woman dancing ballet, a historically white dominated form and, more importantly to this chapter, it showcases an adult dancing ballet. On one hand, I understand why many dancers were upset by this ad. In a conference paper, I explained how women of color are already so little represented in dance and having a woman of color performing in what was perceived as a less than “ideal” manner did nothing for eradicating concepts of black women not being fit for ballet. In that paper, I also talked about how dangerous it was for Gittens to be dancing on pointe without proper training. I analyzed how Free People reinscribed the importance of aesthetics rather than skill, objectified women, showed a lack of respect for ballet as a profession and women as professionals, and devalued training and technique.<sup>66</sup> While these points are valid, many of the counter points also hold true. Women of color deserve to be valued at all skill levels; women of color should not have to be perfect to be valued. One can pull a muscle and injure oneself while sleeping let alone while dancing. As a dance form often regarded as inaccessible and elitist, perhaps ballet can withstand less than perfect media representations. Perhaps one can just take this ad at face value—it’s selling a “dream” lifestyle for a clothing line that is expensive and exclusive in its own right. Rather than take sides, the goal of this next section is to highlight what the responses to this ad tell us about ballet dancer as a category. The Free People ad and its accompanying discourse provides a rich site to unpack the expectations people have of ballet dancers and their training.

---

<sup>66</sup> Xiomara Forbez, “*Lou, Meadow, Ginger, Candy, Sandy, Bianca and Misty*: Selling Identities and Clothing through Ballet-themed ads.” Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association National Conference. San Diego, CA. 12 April 2017.

## The Free People Ad

*A thin, light skinned, curly haired black woman stretches and dances in a spacious and bright warehouse studio on the water. She wears a wrap top and sweatpants with an attached skirt. Cheerful piano music sounds in the background to accompany a voiceover of a woman confidently saying, “I don’t even think about it at this point. I just express myself and I let myself go...I don’t think about what I’m going to do, I just do it. I’ve been dancing since I was 3. My mother put me into it and ever since I loved it...”<sup>67</sup> She ties the light pink ribbons of her light pink pointe shoes and steps into a box of rosin. She does some rond de jambes (leg circles on the floor) at the barre. Later, she dances on pointe in front of a cathedral window shaped mirror.*

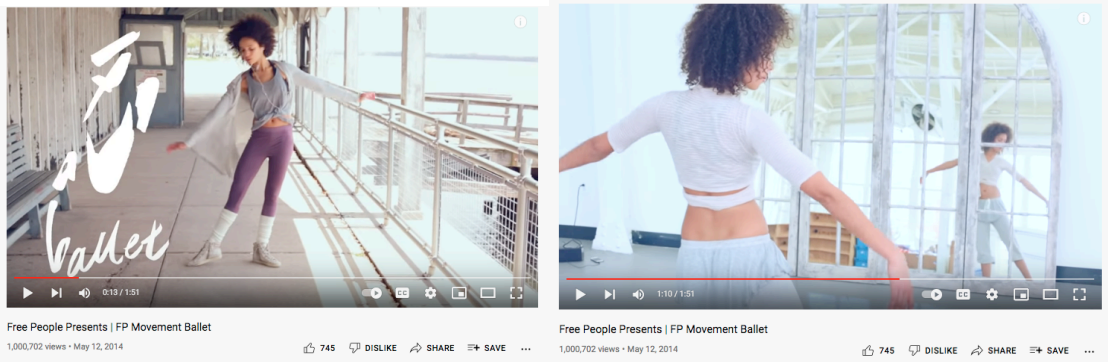


Figure 4 and Figure 5 – Screenshots of Free People video ad

I have just described the 2014<sup>68</sup> “Free People present | FP Movement<sup>69</sup> Ballet” ad<sup>70</sup> as I believe it was intended to be received, namely, the viewer should look at and admire this beautiful woman talking about ballet and wearing and doing ballet-ish things. However, on April 29, 2021, the Youtube like to dislike ratio of 734 thumbs up compared to 4,500 thumbs down shows that many people were disappointed and disgruntled by this ad. Most people took issue with Free People presenting the model, Bianca Gittens, as a dancer who has been dancing since she was 3, claiming there was no bodily

<sup>67</sup> Free People, *Free People Presents | FP Movement Ballet*, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ait1hWgXVGo>.

<sup>68</sup> released on YouTube on May 12, 2014

<sup>69</sup> In 2014 Free People introduced a new line of activewear clothing called Free People Movement.

<sup>70</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ait1hWgXVGo>



evidence to support this assertion. User Lauren Adkisson comments, "Sickled feet, ribs sticking out in gymnastics pose, no strength or flexibility in ankles, rolling in on her feet while plie, shoulders rounded and up, knees bent, free people didn't even TRY!!!!!!" This vehement assessment of Gittens' dancing gives context to other comments like, "She's not a dancer. She's not a real ballet dancer." "Why didn't they hire a professional dancer?" "She can't dance." "I'm cringing." "This is an insult." People are reading the Free People ad as a "breach" in what constitutes a ballet dancer, specifically with regards to age and proficiency. Analyzing the reception of this ad helps to uncover the discomfort produced when someone is too far away from the ideal ballet dancer.

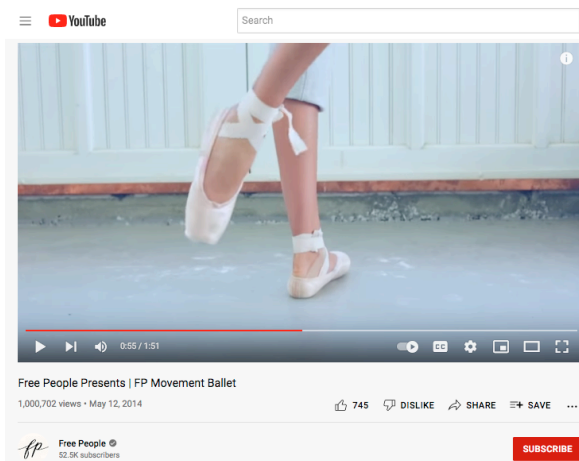


Figure 6 – Screenshot showing Gittens' foot not being pointed and untucked pointe shoe ribbon

As of May 14, 2022, the ad has over one million views and 1,366 comments.<sup>71</sup>

Dance scholar Alexandra Harlig writes, "viewer comments and response videos are sites for genre policing, the negotiation, re-imagination, and expression of generic, aesthetic,

<sup>71</sup> Down from 1,379 comments on May 4, 2021.

and ethical values.”<sup>72</sup> Comments left on the Free People ad serve as examples of policing of “ballet dancer” in a popular space. I web scraped<sup>73</sup> all of the comments posted to the YouTube ad as of November 19, 2019, forming an archive of comments with which to analyze and draw on. When I offer comparisons or a count of how many comments shared similar wording, I refer to an excel archive of 1,390 comments. As a way to assess common themes, I start my analysis by focusing on top rated comments, here defined as comments that had over 300 likes. Because these comments show agreement between users, they reveal some shared understanding on what constitutes a ballet dancer. I include the comments as they are written, including spelling errors, capitalization choices, etc. I also cite and refer to authors of the comments by their YouTube usernames.

The top comments all expressed discomfort with the gap or incongruence between the actual ballet dancer, the one showcased in the video, and the ideal perfect ballet dancer. As Harlig notes, “when one or more viewers perceive a breach of genre convention, they voice this complaint in the comments, often starting a heated discussion. These comment threads clearly reveal the edges of individual as well as communal standards about genres, as well as what is required to be considered a competent commenter.”<sup>74</sup> Within the context of the Free People ad, YouTube users read the ad as a breach in the category of ballet dancer and consequently this breach elicited comments that call out the violation, reinforce normative ballet standards, and reinforce

---

<sup>72</sup> Alexandra M. Harlig, “Social Texts, Social Audiences, Social Worlds: The Circulation of Popular Dance on YouTube” (The Ohio State University, 2019), 26, [https://etd.ohiolink.edu/apexprod/rws\\_olink/r/1501/10?clear=10&p10\\_accession\\_num=osu1557161706452516](https://etd.ohiolink.edu/apexprod/rws_olink/r/1501/10?clear=10&p10_accession_num=osu1557161706452516).

<sup>73</sup> downloaded from the YouTube page

<sup>74</sup> Harlig, 73.

users' status as dancers (as Harlig noted above).

Users responded with frustration, embarrassment, anger, and offense because a so called “beginner,” “fake ballet dancer,” or “non-dancer” was representing a “professional” dancer. The comment with the most likes (505 likes) reads, “if you’re a dancer, than (sic) it hurt to watch this,” which was posted by Xxmasha27x6. While seemingly short, this comment does many things—it establishes boundaries between dancers and nondancers, calls out Gittens as nondancer, and scripts how dancers should feel when presented with an imperfect version of ballet. More specifically, many users noted that the audio narration did not align with Gittens’ body. Recall that the audio narration of the ad states, “I’ve been dancing since I was 3. My mother put me into it. And ever since I loved it.”<sup>75</sup> In response to this, R. Oyler’s comments: “i started dance when I was 3...and stopped when I was 4.” R. Oyler’s comment acts as a correction that aligns Gittens’ body and voice. 400 people agreed with or at least liked this correction,<sup>76</sup> which shows an assessment of her training history and it also reconciles her body and her experience by adjusting her supposed time spent training. Said differently, Gittens’ dancing as an adult in this ad “makes sense” if she had started when she was three and stopped when she was four.

Whereas R. Oyler performed a logic repair based on time (the ad makes sense if we change the time frame of training it refers to), Stella Angelova reconciles the difference by calling out a contrasting ideal operating in this ad. Stella Angelova received 374 likes for her comment that attempts an aesthetic repair: “Of all the amazing dancers out there, that have trained their asses off for years... this girl here got cast because she

---

<sup>75</sup> *Free People Presents | FP Movement Ballet*, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ait1hWgXVGo>.

<sup>76</sup> R. Oyler received 400 likes for this comment.

had the right look. It's like casting a bad actor, just because she/he looks the part.... oh wait ...” In some ways, I also chose this media representation because the dancer had the “right look.” Gittens has curly hair and brown skin (like me) and she is an adult and not a perfect ballet dancer (also like me). Free People’s “look” or aesthetic is effortless boho-chic, so Stella Angelova could be referring to Gittens being a woman of color, or the bohochic vibe or both. Regardless, Stella Angelova’s comment suggests that Free People’s “look” does not necessarily line up with the stereotypical rigor and rigidity of ballet. However, Free People’s desired look presents a refreshing reversal—in a predominantly white dance form, a black dancer was the desired dancer. User thechileanpoet responds to Stella Angelova explaining further, “Oh the irony... Do you know how hard it is for black ballerinas who train their asses off all their lives, because they don't have "the right look" ( aka: White Skin) Even if this girl was an excellent ballerina, this commercial would probably be one of the only things she'd book--- <http://blackballerinadocumentary.org/>” Whether intentionally or not Free People entered into the dialogue of race in ballet. In response to thechileanpote, Trisha Leftwich writes,

And a Black girl who cannot dance is NOT a favor to us Black girls in the least! What is it showing? That even if we start dancing at 3, we still cannot dance as well as our non-black counterparts? Â Personally, I couldn't careless if she were Black, Asian, Latina, White or Arab- if she cannot dance she has no business representing dance. Period. Â She is a great model, but she is not a dancer. If you want to attract dancers to wear your brand- get a dancer. A real one. And if a "regular person" wants to aspire to be a dancer they should aspire to be like a real dancer not someone just "moving".

This conversation highlights that the aesthetic of ballet has been dominated by whiteness, making it harder to close the gap between ideal and actual dancer for people of color.

Another way commenters make sense of the Free People ad is to read it as a “joke” or as a violation of what one expects ballet should be. Mistral Hay received 368 likes for their comment, “Free People, please fire your casting director ASAP. This was painful to watch and offensive to anyone who has taken more than one dance class in their life. Thanks for the hilariously entertaining video, though.” While fewer than four other users said the phrase “this is funny,” Mistral Hay’s 368 likes implies that other people might have also found the ad “hilariously entertaining.” The word “joke” appears in the comments at least 30 times, whether to ask if this ad was a joke<sup>77</sup> or to express the view that Free People was taking dancers and ballet as a joke. While media representations like *I Love Lucy* are read as funny and benign, for some, the Free People ad isn’t read as harmless since, rather than solely induce humor, the ad produces negative affects like pain and offense. Along with claiming their status as a dancer and scripting how dancers should feel about this ad, Mistral Hay’s comment also blames Free People for not effectively policing ballet dancing bodies and for not choosing a “better” dancer.<sup>78</sup>

Like R. Oyler’s comment above, Gaby Itzel Quiros’ comment (which received 360 likes) also points out that Gittens’ bodily ability does not line up with how much training she is purported to have:

It's so obvious that she hasn't been dancing since three.. I doubt she's even trained for a year. I'm cringing, and I'm sure dancers all around the world are too. Why couldn't you just hire an actual dancer? They needn't be professional, there's tons of amazing talented ballet students from schools like School of American Ballet, The Rock School, San Francisco Ballet school.. it's beyond me how you think it's okay to put someone who has no strength in her ankles or technique in pointe shoes when she can break bones, lose toenails, and develop

---

<sup>77</sup> Users are reading Gittens’ dancing as a violation that should only occur as a joke.

<sup>78</sup> The blog *TheDanceGrad* (no longer available online) analyzes The Free People ad as a “stroke of genius” because of all the publicity the anger and general “uproar” caused.

malformations for the sake of a shitty ad.

Gaby Itzel Quiros, along with at least 50 other users, mentioned “cringe” in their comments. Users cringing at the Free People ad indicates that Gittens is violating aesthetic ballet norms and the result is feelings of embarrassment and pain for spectators. Many users also cringed because of fear of Gittens getting hurt. In asking “Why couldn't you just hire an actual dancer?” Gaby Itzel Quiros is calling out Gittens as not an “actual dancer.” “Actual dancer” is used at least 29 times in the comments while the synonym “real dancer,”<sup>79</sup> appears at least 50 times. Both of these terms indicate that many users question Gittens as a dancer. Gaby Itzel Quiros’ comment qualifies that an “actual dancer” has “amazing talent,” and in doing so, conflates “actual” dancers with the “ideal” perfect dancer, reinforcing limits on who can be an “actual dancer.” Despite saying that an “actual dancer” “needn’t be professional,” the schools Gaby mentions are all top tier, expensive, and prime training grounds for professional dancers. In effect, this comment polices Gittens as a dancer and designates “appropriate” ballet training spaces.

With 326 likes, Kylie Casino’s comment follows a similar logic as Gaby Itzel Quiros’, yet here, Kylie Casino outright blames Gittens’ dancing on poor training.

Has she been TRAINED????? Her feet are TERRIBLE, her lines are TERRIBLE... I could go on. This is OFFENSIVE to dancers out there. You went and decided to cast some local "ballet dancer" because she had your look. Shame on you, there are plenty of professionals out there that would have looked stunning in this.

Kylie Casino's comment asserts that violations of ballet norms in the form of Gittens' "terrible feet" and "terrible lines" must have been caused by a lack of training, or at best

---

<sup>79</sup> For example, JusBlazeWifey1000's comment, “Hey free people: STOP THIS BULLSHIT. YOURE INSULTING THE BALLET WORLD. STOP, EDUCATE YOURSELF AND USE REAL DANCERS.)”

improper training. The word “local” stands out as does the use of quotation marks for the term “ballet dancer,” implying the deficiency of “local ballet school” training and placing Gittens outside the ballet dancer category. While this comment may be elitist, it acknowledges that not all training is the same and that the type of training available affects the type of dancer one will become.

Moving away from top comments, I will now discuss several comments that either reiterate discussions from above or identify important threads. In her critique of small studios, Jenna Evyn’s comment acknowledges the possibility that training from age 3 doesn’t necessarily mean successful or well trained dancer: “I think the problem is that many people, even if they have been dancing since early in their childhood, may not be any good.” Therefore, not all ballet dancers who train will be professionals or will perform ballet perfectly. Jenna Evyn’s comment identifies a tension within training that can exacerbate the gap between the actual and ideal dancer. YouTube users who commented on Gittens not having trained in ballet or having insufficient training imply that training always amounts to good dancers. Yet as Jenna Evyn and TheVegasbabyg<sup>80</sup> point out, it is possible to be trained poorly in ballet. The gap between actual and ideal training is in part blame for the wide gap between actual and ideal dancers. Indeed, “actual” dancers include dancers of a variety of bodies, ages, ethnoracial backgrounds, and skill levels.

The Free People ad comments are a testament to the different ways people make claims on, and stake claims to, the category of dancer. Amanda Li’s comment

---

<sup>80</sup> User TheVegasbabyg reiterates that Gittens’ teacher should have addressed certain problems areas: “I kinda feel sorry for this young woman because she’s getting ripped for her “horrible” technique ( her feet...something that a dance teacher should have addressed when she started her “training” at 3). It was awkward because it’s evident she’s had some dance training but the quality may not have been up to par, which unfortunately I’ve seen ALOT from folks who call themselves professional dancers. Sickled feet on supposedly trained dancers...seen it way too often. Clearly the training wasn’t ballet focused or that wouldn’t be an issue.”

below exemplifies how specific the category of dancer is. This comment makes it clear that simply looking like a dancer does not suffice:

You can't just put someone in pointe shoes (her pointe work is borderline dangerous here) and dance wear, and call them a dancer. It's not even just about her technique, I wouldn't complain if her ballet or dance skills weren't perfect; however, her technique and execution is so bad, it's clearly not the work of anyone with proper dance training since the age of three. Us dancers we work to gain the right to call dance our passion and our lives and ourselves dancers, no one should be able to do that, even if it's for a commercial.

By Amanda Li's definition, claiming dance as a passion and naming oneself a dancer is a "right" that must be earned. A dancer is not simply someone who dances or someone who dresses like one, but instead it is someone who must labor in order to even access the opportunity to "call dance [their] passion." Amanda Li adds further, "it is a right one works for to say that dance is life," emphasizing dance as a privileged "life" available to those who work hard, yet this isn't always the case as I'll discuss more in Section 2 of this chapter.

The "right" training along with the right length of time and sacrifice is needed to be "accepted" as a dancer. User Analia Alegre-Fermenias writes, "I want a comment from Free People apologizing to dancers for making our craft look like just anybody could do it," reiterating the underlying logic that ballet is not for everyone and that only a select few<sup>81</sup> should do it. Another user, Lay's, comments: "What I get from all the comments is that apparently, if you haven't been trained to be a dancer since 3, you're not allowed to start training (or enjoy it) later in life or you might get berated?," demonstrating the catch-22 experienced by some adults. The only "valid" ballet training story is having started since youth, excluding beginning adult ballet students from

---

<sup>81</sup> Ostensibly, those who work hard and/or match the ideal standard.



training and from the category of ballet dancer.

Another response to the Free People ad was redirecting people to an ad users like Jessica, felt showed “what a dancer campaign should look like.”<sup>82</sup> Under Armor’s “I Will What I Want” campaign<sup>83</sup> stars professional black ballet dancer Misty Copeland.<sup>84</sup> As the voiceover narrates Misty’s struggle with not having the “right body” for ballet and for starting training late, the ad shows her dancing in a studio and ends with her dancing on stage with text naming her as Misty Copeland Soloist at American Ballet Theater. Despite Under Armor’s ad being lauded for using a “real” dancer, they are still selling a fantasy. Misty Copeland’s success is an exception, not the rule. The odds of starting ballet late and becoming a professional ballet dancer are rare no matter how hard you will it, want it, and work for it. As many of the comments left on the Free People ad show, even the category of ballet dancer, which should, in theory, include professional and nonprofessional dancers, is often bounded and restricted.<sup>85</sup>

While I have focused on comments that were displeased with the ad, there were, of course, positive comments and comments more understanding towards Gittens. I include in my analysis comments left on the Free People ad posted on Free People’s blog.<sup>86</sup> Anonymous<sup>87</sup> writes, “as an unprofessional ballet dancer, it’s nice to see a

---

<sup>82</sup> Comment left on Free People’s blog post.

<sup>83</sup> This ad was also released in 2014, just a couple of months after Free People’s ad. Under Armor sells performance apparel for sports and fitness.

<sup>84</sup> In 2015, Copeland became a principal dancer, the first black female principal in ABT’s 75 year history.

<sup>85</sup> The Free People ad and the Under Armor ad showcase black adult women dancing ballet, one is employed as a model and one is employed as a professional ballet dancer. They both were paid to dance and model clothes for clothing companies. They have different bodies and different skill levels in ballet. Thinking of these ads side by side, I wonder about my own ballet dancing body and where it exists in this spectrum created between Gittens and Copeland, between adult ballet dancer and professional ballet dancer.

<sup>86</sup> Several comments stuck out to me as helping to nuance this discussion on who gets to be a ballet dancer.

woman like me who loves dance, clearly, but isn't some technical super star. Dance is for everyone. Not just the women who can do 32 fouettes." Although this person's use of "unprofessional" instead of "nonprofessional" is interesting, and I think, unintentional, they found pleasure in Gittens imperfections because they were able to see themselves in Gittens, emphasizing that this portrayal of dancer is not necessarily unrealistic or unfounded. Tilly comments, "just like [Free People's] bohemian clothes are inspired by the gypsies and boho babes of the world who find vintage clothes and make them cool, so is this campaign about taking that inspiration and making it for everyone. Their other models aren't really painters or musicians or girls who live in ashrams. they're models, that's how these things work." Tilly sees this ad as a reflection of Free People's boho aesthetic which is marketed for "everyone" and not just people active in these professions or lifestyles. "Everyone" is debatable since Free People is expensive, as users noted saying that real dancers couldn't even afford FreePeople. A possible reading of this ad is that clothing and dance is for everyone that can afford it, regardless of skill level.

Blog commenters A-non and John acknowledge the financial cost of training and that bodies, while similar, are inherently different. A-non writes "Geeze. SO many judgmental comments. Not everyone has had the chance to be in ballet classes their entire life. Maybe she never had an opportunity. Maybe she learned her passion late in life. Who knows!" A-non gestures towards the cost of training for a "lifetime" and that it requires opportunity and resources along with desire. A-non's comments remind me of Christine, a 38 year old white female dancer living in Virginia<sup>88</sup> who I met at a dance

---

<sup>87</sup> Unlike on YouTube, users can leave anonymous comments on Free People's blog.

<sup>88</sup> I use age, gender, race/ethnicity, and location as identified by the interviewee. Age indicates the age of the dancer at the time of the interview.

intensive. During our interview she said her family couldn't afford ballet training so she had to wait till she was older and could pay for it herself. John's comment on the Free People ad reads, "This young woman could have actually had a problem with her legs or muscles that forced her to have that form that all of you object to. Don't be a hater and find fault in what's not the norm. Be open to change." Here, John is explaining Gittens' dancing as potentially a result of bodily differences. This comment, in turn, reminds me of two other ballet dancers I've trained with. I remember Gabrielle, a 50 year old Northern European/Middle Eastern woman living in San Diego, whose arms always had slightly sharp angles because of her mild cerebral palsy, or how Sherry, a 35 year old multiracial Hispanic dancer living in San Diego, mentioned previous studios kicking her out for "slightly different" behavior (Sherry is autistic). Regardless of whether A-non's and John's statements are true for Free People's model, Bianca Gittens, they help to elucidate that reaching for the ideal ballet dancer requires passion, time, effort, money, and resources—both bodily and material—which are not accessible or available equally to everyone. Defenders of the ad are, in effect, defending the reality that not everyone is or will be a perfect ballerina.

## Section 2: What Happens and Doesn't Happen In The Studio

*I was working the desk, checking people in for the evening adult ballet class at a ballet studio in Cambridge, MA. I had applied to do a work study so I could get "free" ballet classes. The rub was that they wanted me to work during the adult ballet classes I could actually attend. I remember M, the teacher for the adult beginning class, stopping by the desk. I'm not sure if I was the bearer of bad news or what, but turns out there was no pianist for the beginner adult ballet class. There was a pianist for the adult advanced class though. M got frustrated and grabbed the portable stereo system and said something to the effect of, "The beginners matter too. They're paying the same amount for class - they should have a pianist." - my memory from sometime in 2013*

As I discussed in Section 1 of this chapter, the comments to the Free People ad show how invested people are in policing the representation of "ballet dancer." Yet the vehement regulation of who is accepted as a ballet dancer and who gets to dance in pointe shoes sits at odds with what actually happens in the studio. Adult ballet dancers must navigate a system with many structural limits that was not created for them. Sherry explains, "I think many in the ballet community don't know that adult students exist or they don't take us seriously. Many dance schools who claim to have programs for all ages, including adults, have 1 or 2 all levels welcome adult classes a week that are only an hour long and intermediate on up level adult students need and want more than that..."<sup>89</sup> While many of the comments in the Free People ad wanted Free People and Gittens herself to take ballet seriously; this section looks at how adults strive to be taken seriously. Sometimes adults are able to access the type of training they want and sometimes they are not. In what follows, I study experiences in the ballet studio to explore what knowledge can be gained from listening to adult dancers rather than laughing at or dismissing them. Their training experiences help to elucidate more about ballet training in general, particularly the power dynamics around access to training as

---

<sup>89</sup> Sherry in discussion with the author October 2019.

well as rigor and discipline within training.

### **Setting the Stage – Situating the Adult Dancers**

*One of things I had never been taught in a ballet class was how to do the ballet walk you see dancers doing on stage - sometimes as part of an entrance or exit. We had a guest teacher today, L, a company member. I asked him, "How do you walk pretty?" He responded, "It's hard and I'm still working on it." He then demonstrated for us on demi-pointe. He extended his arms out, with his chest and heart center open, and walked across the studio and back around to the front again. "Make sure you don't turn your head right away and give your back to the audience," he said. So I tried it, I extended my arms out to the diagonals and began to walk. After a few moments, he stopped me and said "Look what you just did." He demonstrated, walking and quickly turning his back to the audience. Oops. I tried again, this time with a huge goofy smile on my face as I walked on the balls of my feet, letting my legs lead, keeping my torso back. This time I made sure to face the audience for as long as I could, keeping my face trained on the mirror with my teacher, two other dancers, and my own reflection as audience. As I watched myself walk, it almost did look like I was actually on a stage, dance walking. "Better," he said.<sup>90</sup>*

I met all of the adult ballet dancers I interviewed by dancing alongside them in adult ballet intensives, a week or more of intense and focused ballet training. We bonded over a shared love of ballet and a desire to improve our technique. From 2018 through 2021, I conducted nineteen interviews with these dancers: twelve over email, two phone call interviews, and five video call interviews (three on Skype, one on FaceTime, and one on Facebook video). Phone or video interviews lasted about an hour. Email interviews started with a list of questions and then often continued with several back and forths.

The dancers' professions or past professions (since some adults were retired) ranged from science, humanities, service, and medical fields including software engineer, business owner, pilates instructor, ballet teacher, optometrist, tax auditor,

---

<sup>90</sup> My fieldnotes, 2018.

physician, editor, physical therapist assistant, artist, biomedical engineering graduate student, postdoc in humanities, part time nanny, pharmaceutical manufacturing, science communications, neurosurgeon, and a parish priest. While varied, these professions suggest that most adults had enough disposable income and flexibility to take time off and pay for the related costs such as tuition, flight, food, etc.

Everyone interviewed was over the age of eighteen, with at least one dancer in each decade from 20s to 70s. More specifically, I interviewed one person in their late 20s, six people in their 30s, three in their 40s, four in their 50s, two in their 60s, and one in their 70s. I was in my twenties and early thirties while attending these adult ballet intensives. In terms of gender, four of my interviewees were men, while the rest (myself included) identified as women. Because adults had to travel via plane or car to the ballet intensives, dancers are from different locations. Location helps to contextualize people's experiences; relative to more rural areas, adult training seems more available in metropolitan areas. Dancers came from all around the U.S., including Illinois, Massachusetts, California, Tennessee, Minnesota, Virginia, New York, and Pennsylvania. Five dancers were international, one from Taiwan, two from Canada, one from Ireland and one from Scotland. One dancer identified as African American, one as Korean, one as Hispanic and "Multi-racial," one as Taiwanese, and ten as White or Caucasian. One person wrote down "Human" for race and "Northern European/Middle Eastern" for ethnicity while another wrote "200m run" for race and "Irish and Icelandic" for ethnicity.

These demographics seem to align with the commonly held notion that ballet is a mostly white upper class female pursuit. Yet the wide range in ages is a testament to the interest adults have in ballet. While the normalized reason for studying ballet is to

become professional dancers, adults have many motivations. Seth, a Canadian Asian male in his thirties, in fact, does want to dance ballet professionally.<sup>91</sup> Suzanne, a 58 year old Caucasian female living in San Diego chose ballet because it would be good for her training in ballroom dance.<sup>92</sup> Gabrielle mentions how her mother started her in dance (modern) when she was young to help with her cerebral palsy; she took jazz and then ballet. She continues to take ballet today because she likes it as a form of exercise and “it is where [she] feels whole.”<sup>93</sup> Many people encouraged Vanessa, a 34 year old white Canadian woman, to try ballet because she had the body for it. When she did try ballet at age twenty-one, she liked the “discipline and black and white nature of ballet,” meaning “there’s only one right way to do things and you’re always working towards that.”<sup>94</sup> Grace, a 65 year old Caucasian woman living in Newton, Massachusetts, started ballet in her late thirties when her daughter was in ballet. She mentions that at one point she continued to train in ballet because it became, as she calls it, an “addiction.” “even though I made so many mistakes and felt so down on myself, there was always next time when maybe I could finally do whatever it was I couldn’t do the first hundred times I tried it.”<sup>95</sup> Now she continues in ballet because she likes the music, it’s a good form of exercise, and because of the community.

Both Vanessa and Grace gesture towards the ever present specter of the actual and ideal dancer gap. Vanessa acknowledging that one is always working towards the

---

<sup>91</sup> Seth (pseudonym used to respect interviewee’s wishes for anonymity) in discussion with author, October 2019.

<sup>92</sup> Suzanne in discussion with author, October 2019.

<sup>93</sup> Gabrielle, in discussion with author, May/October 2019.

<sup>94</sup> Vanessa, in discussion with author, July 2019.

<sup>95</sup> Grace, in discussion with author, July 2019.

right way of dancing could be interpreted as reaching for the ideal of perfection. Grace being motivated to keep dancing to finally achieve what she hadn't been able to do prior is another instance of wanting to close the gap. As dance scholar Randy Martin explains, "the prospect of progress is instantiated in every gesture, every exercise, every class attended."<sup>96</sup> The gap between ideal and actual dancer serves, like Foster theorized, as a motivator for professionals and, by Vanessa and Grace's admissions, nonprofessionals, alike.

### Situating Myself

As the story goes for many young girls, and as the Free People ad narrates, I started ballet when I was young (early 1990s) because "my mother put me into it."<sup>97</sup> I don't know how long I stayed in classes but I was there long enough to perform in a recital. I have a picture of myself in a yellow sequined leotard, pink tights, pink ballet slippers, and a soft smile with an outstretched cupped hand. Why it was cupped more like Martha Graham is beyond me, but the picture is cute. Although missing in the photo, an additional component to this costume was a sequined lion mane-like thing that wrapped from the top of my head down and around my chin and back up. I kept pulling at the elastic under my chin and my Mom told me, "Xio, just wait till the show is done and then you can take it off." I don't remember this next part but my Mom tells me that in the middle of the performance, I saw some girls doing the choreography wrong so I decided to stop dancing and teach it to them on stage. I was a fearless little lion.

After moving to a new apartment in a different part of Miami, my mom asked if I

---

<sup>96</sup> Randy Martin, *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1998), 440–41.

<sup>97</sup> Free People, *Free People Presents | FP Movement Ballet*.



wanted to continue taking ballet classes, possibly at a new studio. Little six-year-old Xio said no. I've always regretted that no. The story I tell myself is that since we hadn't started the "real" ballet classes (it was most likely a creative expression dance class), I was bored and didn't want to continue. In eighth grade, when the ballet bug hit again, I enrolled in classes at a local studio. At the ripe age of 13/14, I was enrolled in Teen/Adult ballet, already too late to join the "pre-professional" track. Regardless, I did have an amazing teacher, Maria Eugenia Lorenzo, Cuban born and trained.<sup>98</sup> I appreciated how strict and rigorous she was with us. I learned so much and so quickly in her classes. When we had a new student, she'd place them behind me at the barre, so they could follow me. I like to think if I had trained with her consecutively for longer, I could have reached a higher level, but alas, the responsibilities of school took over.

Going to college in Boston, I continued taking ballet classes at my university as well as at local studios. Like Grace, I became infatuated with the idea that one day I could eventually be "good" at ballet - I just needed to find the right studio, the right teacher. For the next 10 years, I took adult ballet classes on and off, in various studios in Boston, Cambridge, Framingham, Rhode Island, Miami, Philadelphia, Riverside, and San Diego. I really wanted a curriculum, a plan to progress that I would be held accountable to and so would my instructors. I wanted to know that after x years, I will have acquired y skills. I got lucky and was allowed to train in a studio that specializes in the Royal Academy of Dance syllabus where I took class with students in middle school and high school. The distance, cost, and inconsistent training ended my stint at this school and I went back to adult ballet classes. I still wasn't satisfied and I'm not sure that I ever will be, at least not in ballet.

---

<sup>98</sup> Her daughter was a dancer in New York City Ballet.

## Situating Ballet Culture

*Want to know why we need to turnout in ballet? To please our king, King Louis XIV who is credited with creating ballet. Our entire bodies must face the king with maximal frontal rotation. I'm surprised he didn't find a way to make you show him your back and front at the same time. Like a monarchy, our bodies must be controlled by a strong center with movement emanating from this center which is why we must suck in our stomachs and lengthen our lower backs. I'm loving this online dance contexts and cultures class so far but it is really making me question my ballet motivation. Ballet is seen as being "European," as reflecting Christian values, as encouraging the mind-body split. Is that the type of dance I want to be doing? Is ballet just another way of colonizing? I've often heard ballet to be the root of all dance. Is that just a way of saying that whiter is better? Is that why I felt uncomfortable wearing my pink tights?*

*I have many things to ponder and even more things to research and learn.  
– my blog post on July 8, 2013*

Heidi, the director of Sun King Dance Adult Dance Camp, is a 52-year-old Caucasian woman living in Richmond, Virginia. She correlates why people train in ballet to ballet's origins and how in the court system, pursuing music and dance was a "celebration and a striving to be like God" and therefore, "being the best human being possible."<sup>99</sup> Ballet "connects us to something on the inside of us that's really deep and really important," she shares and adds that ballet teaches correct behavior, teaching one how to be "kind," "how to be gentleman and ladies," "how to fly," and how "to walk through our lives with elegance."<sup>100</sup> Based on this, ballet technique is deeply intertwined with ballet's roots in European court systems and European values of personhood. This is reiterated by Katja, a 34-year-old African American woman living in Chicago, Illinois when she mentions her preference for ballet because she "liked feeling like [she] was a little more refined," more refined meaning "prim, proper, British most likely and royalty

---

<sup>99</sup> Heidi in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>100</sup> Heidi in discussion with author, July 2018.

yea, a lot of money, upper crust, a little snooty.”<sup>101</sup> While my focus on this chapter is not necessarily the racial dimensions of ballet, I note these connections to the history and culture of ballet as significant. Mary, a 27-year-old white woman living in Chattanooga, Tennessee, explains that learning more about the history of ballet helped to contextualize her participation in ballet: “[I’m] thankful for the opportunities that I have to be a part of this rich history of dance that dates back to royal court. Not everybody, not every little girl that wants to has the opportunity to take ballet class.”<sup>102</sup> In this reflection, Mary highlights ballet as not accessible to all.

Jill, a 40-year-old Caucasian woman living in Weatherly, Pennsylvania, also took dance history classes and notes that she “should use this more with her [ballet] students.”<sup>103</sup> When I asked her “how do you connect to ballet’s history or culture (court system, royalty, etc.), she responded, “I connect to the discipline of ballet more than thinking about its court system roots.”<sup>104</sup> The discipline of ballet is tied to its origins in the court, yet Jill’s statement gestures towards ballet’s success at transcending its cultural ties. Ballet is often perceived as “acultural.”<sup>105</sup> When I asked Chi, an international folk dancer, if ballet is practiced in folk dancing communities, she responded, some do, yet “some [dancers] don’t like it because they think it’s too structured and too strict. They also think that it has lost the specialty of regional cultures (this is also why some folk dancers don’t like standard ballroom dancing. They said that those don’t have features

---

<sup>101</sup> Katja in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>102</sup> Mary in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>103</sup> Jill in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>104</sup> Jill in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>105</sup> Joann Keali’inohomoku, “An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance.,” in *Moving History/Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader*, ed. Ann Dils and Ann Cooper Albright, 1st Edition (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 41.

of folk.)”<sup>106</sup> Ballet’s supposed separation from culture, allows it to traffic as an elitist technique. However, ballet is inseparable from European and Christian ideals.

Anthropologist Joann Keali’inohomoku describes the “ethnicity of ballet” as:

stylized Western customs enacted on the stage, such as the mannerisms from the age of chivalry, courting, weddings, christenings, burial, and mourning customs. Think of how our world view is revealed in the oft recurring themes of unrequited love, sorcery, self-sacrifice through long suffering, mistaken identity, and misunderstandings which have tragic consequences. Think how our religious heritage is revealed through pre-Christian customs such as Walpurgisnacht, through the use of biblical themes, Christian holidays such as Christmas, and the beliefs in life after death. Our cultural heritage is revealed also in the roles which appear repeatedly in our ballets such as humans transformed into animals, fairies, witches, gnomes, performers of evil magic, villains and seductresses in black, evil step parents, royalty and peasants, and especially, beautiful pure young women and their consorts.<sup>107</sup>

I cite Keali’inohomoku in length to further her aim in making visible ballet as an ethnic form. A deeper and more direct analysis of the connections between ballet, whiteness, European culture, and adults training in ballet is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, what I have discussed here helps to set the scene for how adults are navigating ballet with these present but veiled cultural apparatus at play.

### **Claiming the Name “Dancer”**

The ways that Youtube users called out Gittens as not a “legitimate” dancer echo the difficulty some adult ballet dancers have taking on the name of “dancer.” On one end of the spectrum, some people refuse to call themselves dancers at all. For instance, although Hannah, a 50-year-old Korean American woman living in Pennsylvania, acknowledges how far she’s come in learning ballet, she would call herself a

---

<sup>106</sup> Chi in discussion with author, July 2019.

<sup>107</sup> Keali’inohomoku, “An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance.,” 40.

“wannabe.”<sup>108</sup> Katja also expressed some hesitancy claiming “dancer.” During our interview, Katja didn’t call herself a dancer because she didn’t “feel like one.”<sup>109</sup> She explains further, “I think it’s more like a lifestyle... I don’t think you can really truly do it half assed. ... Ballet kind of demands that you put in effort. You have to put in effort. Some things you can do like 10%. Ballet isn’t one of them- you have to be really in it.”<sup>110</sup> She identifies discipline and effort as part of what defines a ballet dancer. While she says she has the attributes of a dancer, she doesn’t quite feel like one, noting the importance of affect in claiming “dancer.”

On the other hand, Seth’s definition of dancer implies a certain level or skill; he writes “a ballet dancer to me is on a kind of continuum of where they are in terms of technique and understanding.”<sup>111</sup> In terms of himself, he notes, “I guess I think of myself as a ballet dancer but with lots to work on.”<sup>112</sup> The “I guess,” and “lots to work on” modify his claim to “dancer” as does saying “I think of myself as.” “Thinking of yourself as” is not quite the same as asserting that one is something. Jill ascribes “dancer” as a term only for professionals; she writes, “I do not call myself a dancer, as I hold that title to professionals. I define myself as a lifelong ballet student,”<sup>113</sup> placing herself in a position of perpetual training, as all dancers are, even professionals. In our discussion, Mary,

---

<sup>108</sup> Hannah (pseudonym used to respect interviewee’s wishes of anonymity) in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>109</sup> Katja in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>110</sup> Katja in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>111</sup> Seth in discussion with author, April 2022.

<sup>112</sup> Seth in discussion with author, April 2022.

<sup>113</sup> Jill in discussion with author, July 2018.

shares that in the past she would say “I dance,”<sup>114</sup> claiming the verb (action), rather than the noun (name/being). Personally, I distanced myself even further from “dance” and “dancer,” often saying “I take ballet classes.”

Mary stresses the importance and weight of the term “dancer,” explaining, “dance is such a... competitive environment that it's hard to take a compliment. I feel like that is a very big compliment that you are not just a student but you are a dancer. And it's not so much that I don't feel like I deserve it. It's just that it's different when somebody else says it rather than you saying it about yourself.”<sup>115</sup> Here, “dancer” is more than a noun describing what one does. “Dancer” is an accomplishment, an acknowledgement of having achieved a certain level of dance. Mary's distinction between naming herself dancer and having someone else bestow the title speaks to the need for validation, legibility, and community acceptance as a dancer.

To many people, “dancer” is a privileged position. Christine says that for a long time she didn't call herself a dancer because “I didn't do it professionally or as a child.”<sup>116</sup> Yet her relationship to naming herself “dancer” changed when, after a dance hiatus, she took a ballet class and her experience affirmed that ballet was a part of her: “I was able to just walk in and do 75% of the things because they were so programmed into my body. And that was the point where I said I don't think I can ever get over being a dancer. It's not that I was a dancer. I am a dancer because I can still walk in and do this. It's a part of me that doesn't go away.” Even outside the studio, Christine muses on how ballet figures into her way of moving: “I feel like I would probably still use the term dancer

---

<sup>114</sup> Mary in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>115</sup> Mary in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>116</sup> Christine in discussion with author, July 2018.

to some extent because I feel like there are times I even make a hand gesture and I realize that my fingers are in a ballet position.”<sup>117</sup> Seeing and experiencing ballet in her body made it clear for her that ballet was in her body – it solidified ballet as integral to her body, and therefore also enabled a different connection to claiming “dancer.”

Like Christine, I have also struggled with calling myself a dancer because I wasn’t a professional dancer. While dancer as a profession isn’t necessarily as lauded as jobs like doctor or engineer, thanks to capitalism, remuneration serves to validate what one does with one’s time. I remember presenting at a conference and arguing that “a nonprofessional dancer is a valid present and future for a person interested in dance.”<sup>118</sup> The person in charge of reflecting back on the different conference presentations responded to my piece with, “I, too, am a failed dancer.” An exceptional title for a book, this statement also reiterated how difficult it is to unmoor professionalism from success and from definitions of “dancer.”

Viktoria, a 44-year-old white woman living in Minnesota shares that “anybody can be a ballet dancer... That’s one of the joys of being at a studio in the middle of nowhere. We see all sorts of people who want to be dancers, who are dancers. Girls, boys, skinny people, chunky people, tall people, short people anybody.”<sup>119</sup> In her description of a ballet dancer, she also acknowledges the gap between ideal and actual: “ballet is an art form in which you never ever ever reach perfection. Nobody is ever great. Yes there are great dancers in the world but they still screw up too. Most artists regardless of the

---

<sup>117</sup> Christine in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>118</sup> Xiomara Forbez, “Alternative Tomorrows for the Nonprofessional Dancer: Queer Theory, Affect, and Excentric Orientations.” (presentation, Queer Futurities Conference. University of California, Riverside. Riverside, CA. 20 May 2016.)

<sup>119</sup> Viktoria in discussion with author, July 2018.

artform know that you're never going to reach perfection but you're always trying for it and always striving for it.... But yea anybody can be a dancer."<sup>120</sup> I interpret this comment as anyone can be a ballet dancer because everyone is inevitably in the gap between actual and ideal dancer. When I asked Viktoria how she would define herself, she began with "it's funny because I always say you know I'm a mom. That's my number one job in the world," and later added, "I'm an optometrist and I have a passion for ballet. I love to dance. I definitely identify as a dancer.... but there are so many things that define me but it's definitely my passion."<sup>121</sup> Viktoria uses "am" when describing herself as a mom and as an optometrist yet for "dancer," she uses "identify." "Identify" implies a choice and "being" implies something you can't separate yourself from. While Viktoria does affirm her identity as a dancer, there is some hesitancy, which tells us that ascribing "dancer" to one's personhood is not as clear cut or simple.

An additional issue that adult dancers must deal with is difficulty explaining their passion and pursuit for ballet. Paul is a 66-year-old white British man living in Scotland and a retired parish priest; he notes, "ballet certainly helped with my conducting of services but there was an element in the parish that resented my pursuing a passion that was not them."<sup>122</sup> Seth talks about how his mother thinks his pursuit of ballet "is ridiculous."<sup>123</sup> He explains, "as an Asian person I understood that the expectations of my parents were to" "do good in school and get a job in an acceptable profession which is either engineer, doctor, or lawyer and I was going completely off the path."<sup>124</sup> Christine

---

<sup>120</sup> Viktoria in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>121</sup> Viktoria in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>122</sup> Paul in discussion with author, June 2021.

<sup>123</sup> Seth in discussion with author, July 2019.

<sup>124</sup> Seth in discussion with author, July 2019.



shares that her commitment to ballet caused some tension or at least incomprehension from her coworkers and her ex-husband.<sup>125</sup> She notes that her ex-husband was really resentful of the time she didn't spend with him while pursuing ballet. She adds, "some people have seen it as a little bit of an obsession, out of balance of how they thought my life should be as an adult or something I should have grown out of as a kid."<sup>126</sup> I also faced similar struggles with explaining to my family, friends, and boss why I wanted to take unpaid time off from my job in Research Administration to attend a ballet intensive. I was either chastised for not taking work seriously or questioned about what I would get out of attending the ballet intensive. While some of the Free People comments suggest that adults do not sacrifice enough effort and time for their training, stories like these prove otherwise.

### **Accessing the studio**

I feel like adult ballet classes are sort of their own world almost. The numbers don't mean anything. The class description doesn't mean anything. You just have to show up and see for yourself. Who knows what you're going to get? Should you move up or down? It's kind of up to you. My bottom line is that if you want to grow and improve you have to take classes elsewhere [not adult ballet]. There's so much material that isn't there and is missing. It's really an institutional problem and necessarily a teacher problem. - Seth<sup>127</sup>

The boundaries of what constitutes adult ballet are constructed by what is allowed and disallowed in the studio. As Seth describes, adult ballet for many is a "wild west"

---

<sup>125</sup> Christine in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>126</sup> Christine in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>127</sup> Seth in discussion with author, May 2019.

where training is based on luck, location, teacher, and one's own will and body. In some ways, the Free People comments that questioned and judged Gittens' training were unintentionally discussing the possible outcomes and realities of inconsistent adult ballet training. Some adults cannot acquire training at all, while others have various degrees of access. Therefore, in some ways, Gittens was being policed for things that the ballet training system inhibits and limits, particularly around access to rigorous training. In this section, I explore the ways adults are both granted and barred access to training in the studio.

### **Accessing the barre**

*I feel much stronger this week but Natalie kept trying to get my body in line. Literally. Unsway my slight sway back. Don't sit in my abs. Engage the glute muscles. "Are they supposed to be on all the time?" I asked her. "Yes," she said, adding that she's had teachers tell her really graphic things in the past but she'll spare us. After a beat, she relented, sharing that one of her teachers told her, "you have to squeeze your butthole." Natalie exclaims, "I was a little kid," shaking her head. I, on the other hand, was less scandalized by this suggestion, appreciated the minutia, and said to myself "Ok. I can do that."<sup>128</sup>*

While every studio has a different ethos and attitude towards adult ballet, a pattern emerged from the people I interviewed: they wanted more, more opportunities to train and more opportunities to progress. It can be argued that a studio offering adult classes is investing in adults by providing space, time, and training. Yet, the investment is sometimes superficial, limited, or a catchall as seen by the limited number of classes available and little to no corrections in class.

Depending on the area, adult ballet classes can be limited or nonexistent - presenting a gap in training, literally. Both Jill, a dancer from Pennsylvania, and Viktoria,

---

<sup>128</sup> My fieldnotes, 2018.

a dancer from Minnesota, discuss how there are no adult ballet classes in their area. Jill accounts for this gap as a reflection of adults not being “strong revenue builders.”<sup>129</sup> Viktoria’s studio in rural Minnesota didn’t have classes for adults so she takes pre-professional classes with teens.<sup>130</sup> On one hand, this is positive because she is accessing “serious” and “pre-professional” training.<sup>131</sup> On the other hand, adults are sometimes ignored in these spaces.<sup>132</sup>

If adults are able to access classes, often, access to the beginning stages of training is an issue. Being able to start something “from the beginning” is a privilege. Grace mentions, “there were no beginner classes at BBS<sup>133</sup> in those days, so I had to push through elementary class and pick up what I could—really difficult and often humiliating,”<sup>134</sup> showing how trying it is both physically and emotionally to start training midway. While “elementary ballet class” does not sound like an advanced level, if you have little to no ballet knowledge, it can be intimidating.

Hannah, an adult ballet dancer from Pennsylvania, tried to take ballet classes in several different places and felt similar frustration because classes titled, “beginning,” weren’t actually beginning:<sup>135</sup> “They don’t start at the beginning, and then I just get

---

<sup>129</sup> Jill in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>130</sup> Viktoria in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>131</sup> It is important to note that in some cases, being allowed to train with younger students can be considered a privilege. I remember calling several studios in Boston trying to enroll in a pre-professional program and being denied because of my age.

<sup>132</sup> I will come back to this later on in this chapter.

<sup>133</sup> Boston Ballet School

<sup>134</sup> Grace in discussion with author, July 2019.

<sup>135</sup> I also experienced this and decided to always take the lowest level offered at a ballet studio to make sure I wasn’t in over my head.

disappointed. It's all a joke."<sup>136</sup> Hannah repeated "joke" five times in our interview, mostly in terms of the adult classes she was able to find, and once about adults being considered a joke when trying on pointe shoes. Hannah goes on to say, "so then I got discouraged, and I thought 'Kiddo, this should teach you a lesson. It's not meant to be. You're way too late, and there is no one who actually does beginning."<sup>137</sup> Here Hannah is connecting the difficulty in finding an actual beginning ballet class as a testament to her showing up to ballet too late and, therefore, too late to access the beginning. Her comment makes it seem as if adult ballet beginner dancers are "not meant to be," and that their pursuit for training holds little possibility or future. Hannah did eventually find training to suit her needs and she continued to study ballet.<sup>138</sup> What I want to highlight from her story is the ways in which "all level" classes can serve as both catchalls for anyone outside of the regular bounds of ballet as well as a sieve.

Besides feeling intimidated or having to figure it out on one's own, not starting from the beginning can have other downsides. Mike, a 70-year-old man living in New York who identified ethnically as Irish and Icelandic, explains, "right now my principal teacher is taking me back to rock bottom basics of position and alignment. This is particularly exciting for me because I have never had a right-from-the-start beginner class, and thus have an endless supply of bad habits."<sup>139</sup> Mike connects these bad habits to missing out on the beginning of ballet training. Not starting training from the beginning affects how people feel about accessing ballet but also can affect how their

---

<sup>136</sup> Hannah in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>137</sup> Hannah in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>138</sup> Hannah in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>139</sup> Mike in discussion with author, July 2018.

bodies move. Adults often have to relearn basics several times because they might not have learned it “properly” the first time or at all, since there wasn’t really a first time. Seth reiterates, saying, “it’s rare to find a program for adults that starts at the beginning. So you never learn stuff like placement, alignment or even how to stand right.”<sup>140</sup> The skills Seth mentions are basic training, the building blocks of how to be a ballet dancer.

Not having access to basic training limits adults’ abilities to be read as dancers. Mary talks about her first day at the adult ballet intensive and how she too had some habits to correct: “It was like I’ve been dancing for ten years and now they tell me I’m doing this wrong. The first day was just almost so overwhelming.”<sup>141</sup> Dancers can go through many years of their life with bad habits and incorrect technique, possibly resulting in difficulty progressing. While learning, unlearning, and relearning are a normal part of any training process, they can be compounded by limited access to the beginning stages of training.

### Accessing Progress

*On Sunday during class, I felt like “fuck turn out. Why can’t we just not? Or like, hey, why can’t we use third position instead of fifth. Is it really so different to stand with heel touching the arch versus heels touching toes? Like really. Why? I feel like my thighs are getting in the way. Though it turns out, I’m not holding my turn out muscles - like ever. Natalie told me my feet were turning in when in second position. Squeezing my lower abs and shifting my butt under takes a LOT of effort. Was I ever pulling in like that unconsciously? How is one to breathe while holding everything in?*

*On the plus side, last week I felt like I had finally accessed pli , like I was really feeling what it means to have a juicy pli ... not that it looked juicy, but it felt that way. For years, people have been telling me to pli  more and I tried, but it just didn’t happen. Now, even though my heels are coming up a tiny bit, I can feel myself trying to actually use the energy from bending and pushing off the floor.*

---

<sup>140</sup> Seth in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>141</sup> Mary in discussion with author, July 2018.

Lack of a clear beginning can also result in an unclear path to move forward. The fundamental purpose of a dance class is “technical accumulation”<sup>142</sup> or acquiring and learning dance technique. The term, “technical accumulation,” invokes the accumulation of capital—in this case being able to learn technique is a way of building capital and displaying status and power. For many of the dancers I interviewed, being taken seriously as an adult dancer is connected to acquiring ballet technique and to progressing in that technique. Yet Christine and Kirk, a 40-year-old Irish Caucasian man, both note that progression in ballet is slow and requires lots of time and hard work.<sup>143</sup>

Christine provides some context on the difficulties of progressing in ballet in general, explaining, “as a female dancer with an imperfect body type for ballet there’s a lot less opportunities to progress.”<sup>144</sup> She tells me of the time when she was 18/19 and asked her teacher “what can I do to move from one company level to the next” and her teacher responded, “no one is ever going to pay to see you in a tutu.” She tells me that since there are so many more women in ballet,<sup>145</sup> working hard and “wanting it [haven’t] always been enough.”<sup>146</sup> If it’s onerous for young ballet dancers with “imperfect bodies” to meet idealized body goals, the challenge is compounded for adults, limiting their abilities to progress.

---

<sup>142</sup> Martin, *Critical Moves*, 416.

<sup>143</sup> Christine in discussion with author, July 2018; Kirk in discussion with author, February 2021.

<sup>144</sup> Christine in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>145</sup> She also mentioned seeing men with “sketchy technique” but because there are less men in ballet, they are needed.

<sup>146</sup> Christine in discussion with author, July 2018.

While some adults struggle to obtain training in general, even when they do access the studio, adults might also struggle with access to training via the teacher's attention. In the studio, two mechanisms are operating on bodies simultaneously. The first is disciplining the body via corrections and the second is regulating who is worth disciplining via lack of corrections. Attention through correction and praise are ways to directly interpolate individual bodies in a dance class and distinguish them as notable and valuable. In our email exchange, Mike writes, "WHEN THE TEACHER CORRECTS ME I CONSIDER IT AN HONOR-- I FIGURE THE TEACHER WOULD SAVE HIS OR HER BREATH IF I LOOKED HOPELESS."<sup>147</sup> Viktoria agrees, saying, "Corrections... I love them! From anyone. When the teacher corrects me it shows that he is paying attention to me and thinks I'm worth it."<sup>148</sup> Corrections equate to attention, which means that the teacher believes in the potential of that student. Recalling the training reproductive labor cycle,<sup>149</sup> if the teacher is not correcting an adult, the cycle may be inhibited, making it more difficult for the student to learn the technique.

Some teachers ignore students or don't offer them corrections as a weeding out process. Bodies that do not receive attention eventually realize that they are not valued. As Graham company member David Wood explains,

---

<sup>147</sup> Caps are his. Mike in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>148</sup> Viktoria in discussion with author, July 2019.

<sup>149</sup> Combining Kraut's demonstrative body + Johnson's student – both performing reproductive labor.

I once asked a ballet teacher as to why she did not give more explanations and corrections. She answered that she felt that there were always too many people attempting to dance and with this method of teaching ballet, the untalented eliminated themselves in short order while the talented became stronger because of being forced to rely on their own resources.<sup>150</sup>

The teacher's remark that "there were always too many people attempting to dance" reveals a privileged perception of ballet, that not everyone can or should attempt to dance it. Viktoria shares that one of the teachers she has "pretty much ignores the adults in the class." Likewise, one of the students in the 2009 documentary *Adult Beginner Ballet* by Michelle Ortega remarks that she appreciated Kathy Mata's adult ballet classes because she had been ignored in other classes.<sup>151</sup> Being ignored shows that while adults are allowed in training spaces, they are not always seen as viable students. Adult dancer's inability to access their teacher's attention underscores how adults are not taken seriously, thus potentially hindering their progress in ballet. Nevertheless, Viktoria notes that when she doesn't get corrections, she learns by watching,<sup>152</sup> reiterating the importance of sheer will and preservation needed in adult ballet training.

While some teachers intentionally ignore adults, not being corrected can also stem from a perceived difference in investment. Jill states, "adult students are not pushed as much as younger students. The instructor knows that a professional career is not realistic and does not expect as much from the adult, even though they might be just as dedicated and serious," diagnosing why teachers might not be invested in adults in the same way they are with nonadults.<sup>153</sup> Seth ascribes the lack of "curriculum in adult

---

<sup>150</sup> Quoted in Robin Lakes, "The Messages behind the Methods: The Authoritarian Pedagogical Legacy in Western Concert Dance Technique Training and Rehearsals," *Arts Education Policy Review* 106, no. 5 (May 1, 2005): 12, <https://doi.org/10.3200/AEPR.106.5.3-20>.

<sup>151</sup> *Adult Beginner Ballet*, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VtuGVjmmAs>.

<sup>152</sup> Viktoria in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>153</sup> Jill in discussion with author, July 2018.



classes” as the cause for the difference between (lack of) corrections in adult ballet classes and corrections in what he calls “normal ballet classes.”<sup>154</sup> Because there is no curriculum or end goal in mind, some corrections aren’t thought of or deemed as necessary. He shares, “broadly speaking in adult classes you aren’t corrected for musicality if you did the step but the timing was wrong. I don’t think you’re corrected for coordination. I don’t think alignment is really taught either.”<sup>155</sup> Based on Seth’s statement, if adults aren’t corrected for musicality, timing, coordination, or alignment, it’s unclear what adults actually get corrected on. The lack of corrections results in part from teachers’ desire to keep classes “fun.” Viktoria recounts, “there was one year that the “open” class had a different teacher. I went 12 weeks without a single correction. I hated it. I think the teacher was just in the mindset of ‘adults take ballet ‘for fun’ rather than to get better,’ but it still really sucked.”<sup>156</sup> “Fun” is highly subjective. As Viktoria and I discussed, we would have more fun, if we were corrected. However, sometimes fun gets interpreted as being lenient and not having structure or rules which can, and often does, affect and inhibit technical accumulation in ballet.

In addition to corrections, being held to a high standard is a way to help adults progress. Sherry describes that being taken seriously as an adult ballet student “involves instructors who are tough on us just like they are on the pre-professional students.”<sup>157</sup> The examples she uses to define what “tough” means, demonstrate teachers holding adults to a higher standard. For example, Sherry specifies, “instructors like Natalie who

---

<sup>154</sup> Seth in conversation with author, July 2018.

<sup>155</sup> Seth in discussion with author, May 2019.

<sup>156</sup> Viktoria in discussion with author, July 2019.

<sup>157</sup> Sherry in discussion with author, October 2019.

start the music over before the end of the first 8 counts because we are not doing the combination to her standard which is the same for us as for the pre-professional students in the same school.”<sup>158</sup> Sherry has clearly found teachers and training that suits her needs and desires, specifically because she is being treated seriously, like pre-professional ballet students. The desire to be held against a high standard reiterates the inculcation of a hierarchy within ballet and within training structures. Wanting to be held to a high standard and to be able to reproduce these high standards reflect ballet’s focus on the perfect ideal.

### **Accessing Comprehensive Training**

*The floor to ceiling windows let in so much beautiful light. I wish the studio overlooked the ocean though. I really liked this teacher. When it was time to do across the floor exercises, she broke down soutenu turns. Plie, right foot goes front, right foot side, left foot cross in front of right foot, THEN turn. It’s not right foot front-side and turn. She said there should be a pause and that once you get it slow- it’ll look better when going faster. - Memory of an adult ballet class at Miami City Ballet.*

Along with corrections, an aspect of progress in ballet is acquiring advanced skills. In an interview with Heidi, a ballet teacher and director of Sun King Adult Ballet Camp, she talks about how adult ballet training isn’t always comprehensive. Heidi is able to compare and contrast multiple perspectives because she trained professionally as a ballet dancer and is now both teaching adults and receiving training as an adult dancer. She shares, “I really want a professional class. ... there are a lot of ballet steps that we just don’t do [that] adults don’t get. ... and I find it hard to then teach them because I

---

<sup>158</sup> Sherry in discussion with author, October 2019.

haven't done them in 20 years. So, you forget.”<sup>159</sup> From this description, a professional class is one in which advanced skills are accessible and expected, which differs from adult ballet classes.

Recalling Viktoria and Jill's explanation for why some teachers keep class fun and don't push adults, Heidi adds, “[teachers] don't want to take the time to stop and teach a new step,” which would affect the “simple,” “enjoyable,” and “fast paced” mode of adult ballet classes.<sup>160</sup> Inasmuch as teachers want to keep class moving, they also want adults to be safe, both emotionally and physically, as Heidi notes. When I asked her why some teachers don't correct adult students, Heidi mentions that teachers are often worried about hurting adults' feelings.<sup>161</sup> She also mentioned that teachers are “being careful about the bodies;” adult bodies have “a lot of issues;” they do “not have the flexibility that children have or young people have and so teachers take that into account as well. What's gonna be safe.”<sup>162</sup> While I concede that adult bodies are different from young bodies, ballet isn't ostensibly “safe” for anyone. It may well be true that the less training a person has, the more prone to injury they might be, yet professionals get injured all the time. In spite of this, adult ballet dancers are not given as much opportunity to be injured by ballet. Because injury and pain for remunerated work is more accepted in our society, many nonprofessional adult dancers suffer the consequences of not being able to be injured in pursuit of technique and in pursuit of narrowing the gap between actual and ideal dancer. In other words, ballet doesn't want to hurt nonprofessional adult feelings or bodies and as a result, the goal in many adult

---

<sup>159</sup> Heidi in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>160</sup> Heidi in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>161</sup> Heidi in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>162</sup> Heidi in discussion with author, July 2018.

classes is not progression.

Comprehensive training includes complex movements but also advanced skills such as pas de deux (partnering), pointe work, and men's training. Some adults do have access to this advanced training, yet in my experience, it's harder to find. Both Christine and I agreed, one of the best parts of the adult ballet intensive we attended was the pas de deux classes. As Christine describes, "[there are] so few opportunities to have that as an adult unless you may be the one or two people in adult classes considered good enough for that."<sup>163</sup> Whether intentionally or not, limited access to these skills acts as a way of limiting technical accumulation.

Adults are often precluded from pointe work despite not having the same sorts of concerns as children. Viktoria explains,

One thing which is advantageous about adults is that just physically speaking we don't have the same risk of injury, ankle injury and things like that as young people do. Assum[ing] that the ankles are strong enough to be on pointe they are not growing anymore, the bones aren't changing.... But I think a lot of teachers don't realize that either because they don't have that background into adults and into adult physiology.<sup>164</sup>

Similarly, Christine, who is also a ballet teacher, pointed out that adults don't need to be barred from pointework because "they're stronger and they don't have growing bones to damage so to some extent they can start working in those shoes a lot earlier. As long as they're not going to twist an ankle or fall off of them,"<sup>165</sup> reiterating that adults can do pointe. Part of the issue with why not as many adults are en pointe is, in part, because of the perceived potential of injury but also because "a lot of them don't ask or don't realize

---

<sup>163</sup> Christine in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>164</sup> Viktoria in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>165</sup> Christine in discussion with author, July 2018.

it's an option.”<sup>166</sup> Some adults feel like pointe isn't for them. Additionally, having to ask to do pointe, having to ask to train in a certain skill, can be interpreted as another limit in training. Adults often have to take responsibility for their training; while this has both positive and negative consequences, it does require adults to be knowledgeable about ballet and to feel comfortable managing their training. The lack of built in pointe training for adults work means only some will access it. This gap in training also indicates that adults are not taken seriously enough to plan for them to be training en pointe. Not having access to pointe training as an adult ensures even more distance from the “ideal ballet dancer” who dances in pointe shoes.

For my own ballet journey, I was under the impression that your teacher would tell you when you are ready for pointe or that you would move into a level that does pointe, which, invariably, means that you are ready for it. However, in adult ballet class, that never happened to me. During college, while I was studying abroad in France, I mustered up the courage to ask if I could do pointe and I was allowed to. However, there was no beginning pointe class. I was just told to get pointe shoes and wear them during the barre exercises in my regular ballet class. The teacher would come around on occasion and give me some pointers but, essentially, I was left to my own devices - and pointe shoes. I remember not knowing how to tie my shoes and doing my best. The pointed stares of my classmates clued me into my improperly tied shoes but my teacher never uttered a word. As Christine notes, some teachers, “they kind of expect you to figure it out. They agree to let you put on pointe shoes but they don't really teach you.”<sup>167</sup>

---

<sup>166</sup> Christine in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>167</sup> Christine in discussion with author, July 2018.

While I finally had access to the revered pointe shoes, I still did not have access to the training.

Seth compares pointe training to male training, noting that both indicate an advanced skill level:

It'd be weird if you went to a school that taught ballet that didn't do pointe. Like if you were a girl and you went to school that didn't teach pointe for example you'd have to leave like eventually. No matter how good the teachers are. No matter how much you like the people there, you'd have to leave. You'd have to. Because if you don't do pointe you're going to be bad at pointe and it's going to limit you. During audition you have to do pointe. Guy training is kinda the same way but it's just not as available.<sup>168</sup>

In essence, if there was no pointe training, there'd be no point training. For many, pointe training is necessary for a ballet dancer's progression. According to Seth, the issue is the same with men's training in ballet. Male training is necessary to progress, yet as Seth attests, male training "live[s] in pre-professional programs,"<sup>169</sup> and not necessarily in adult classes. Recalling what Heidi said about some adults never learning how to do certain movements, Seth shares that because of the type of training available to him, there are some ballet movements he has not learned or mastered because the classes he takes do not offer them or spend time working on them.<sup>170</sup> If a class only has one or two male students, and the rest are women, it might take too much time away from the class to focus on male specific technique. When thinking about the gender composition of her studio, Mary notes that there are very few men and boys, which she reflects, could affect male participation: "I feel like I may not have been as interested and probably

---

<sup>168</sup> Seth in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>169</sup> Seth in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>170</sup> Seth in discussion with author, July 2019.

would not have been afforded as many opportunities if I had been male.”<sup>171</sup>

While there is no end to ballet training, even for professionals, there are stages that can indicate a certain level of acquired technique. Seth notes that one of his goals is “to finish my training,” which, he elaborated, could mean “finish[ing] your advance 2 exam or ... completing your last level.”<sup>172</sup> This seems like a normal, understandable goal, since it follows the K-12 school model: you finish a level or grade and progress to the next one and at some point you finish your schooling. However, ballet does not set adults up for this type of “finishing.” Without a curriculum, multiple levels of training, or comprehensive training, progress is harder to discern.

### **The stage as training**

What I have convinced myself of which I hope is true [laughs] is that it's not me and there's absolutely nothing that I can do about it. I can't try harder. I can't work harder. No matter what I would do, for some reason they are fixated on the fact that I am 44 years old. I can't change that. There's nothing I can do to change that. It's a true case of it's not me it's them. [laughs] I do think I'm stuck in the spot you know. The past 3 years I have been the only one, the only adult who has wanted to perform. Has been busy having two babies ... she's been taking a little bit of barre...certainly not going to perform when you're nine months pregnant...It's been just me. It's really really hard not to take that personally but at the same time, I have to tell myself it's not me.<sup>173</sup> - Viktoria

Performing is often separated from practice, yet I include it here as part of comprehensive training. Performing requires specific skills such as presence, thinking on your feet, and overcoming nerves. It is also often considered a sign of accomplishment and an indication that one is ready to showcase their skills. As Viktoria details above,

---

<sup>171</sup> Mary in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>172</sup> Seth in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>173</sup> Viktoria in discussion with author, July 2018.

performing opportunities can be limited for adults. Being “stuck in the spot” reiterates feeling unable to progress. Despite Katja saying performing isn’t “vital,” she notes that only going to class can be “monotonous” and that performing changes it up.<sup>174</sup> She acknowledges that performing is like an “achievement,” a way to “level up,”<sup>175</sup> and therefore to progress, something that many adult ballet students are striving to do.

I myself was never really interested in performing (or I convinced myself not to be). I just wanted to train and become “good” at ballet— I didn’t necessarily need to show it to anyone. Some adults, however, do want and need to perform. When asked “how important do you think performance is to ballet to training,” both Christine and Viktoria responded by naming ballet as a performance art and, therefore, a defining feature of ballet. For Christine, not performing relegates ballet to “exercise” and “athletics” – “the artistry is lost.”<sup>176</sup> While “performance” plays a role in athletics and using a broader definition of “performance” could mean that adults are performing in their classes, having a designated time and place to perform in front of a live audience is a different experience. Viktoria compares dancing ballet to acting saying “what’s the point of acting if you’re not going to be on stage. Ballet is performing. It’s not just doing it in the studio. It’s not just practicing.”<sup>177</sup> Unfortunately, as she explains, her studio has limited performance opportunities for adults. She mentions party parents and walk-on roles as the extent of their options. In her studio’s production of *Swan Lake*, Viktoria was the queen, a generally understood position of power; however, in the context of

---

<sup>174</sup> Katja in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>175</sup> Katja in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>176</sup> Christine in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>177</sup> Viktoria in discussion with author, July 2018.



performing, the queen walks— she does not have a “dancing role.”<sup>178</sup> Viktoria shares, “when I’ve been told yea you’re not going to be able to perform again other than as an adult in the party scene.... You’re not going to be able to dance again. ... That really really really hurt a lot,”<sup>179</sup> showing that simply being on stage does not suffice and reiterating adults as outside the category of ballet dancer.

Besides expressing his desire to be and experience what it’s like to be in a professional company, Seth’s biggest desire is to actually dance ballet on stage. He has performed as a party parent, lamplighter, toreador, and magician’s assistant but they aren’t “really dance,” he notes.<sup>180</sup> These roles are more akin to extras in a movie; while important for the general feel of the production, these roles do not always require a great deal of ballet skill. One could argue that they require acting or character work, which is a skill, but not the one that adult dancers like Viktoria and Seth want to perform. Indeed, some of these character actors or supernumeraries echo back to how adults are portrayed in media. In popular culture, adults taking ballet are seen as jokes; on stage, they’re either nonexistent, extras, or performing as characters meant to be laughed at.

Nevertheless, some adults I interviewed shared fulfilling performing experiences. Mike fondly remembers performing as an Ugly Stepsister in Cinderella.<sup>181</sup> Kirk’s most memorable ballet moment was “dancing the Rat King in front of 3,000 people.”<sup>182</sup> One of the male dancers I met at the ballet intensive auditioned and was accepted as a

---

<sup>178</sup> Viktoria in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>179</sup> Viktoria in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>180</sup> Seth in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>181</sup> Mike in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>182</sup> Kirk in discussion with author, February 2021.

supernumerary for a performance by the renowned Paris Opera Ballet.<sup>183</sup> Depending on one's goals as an adult dancer, performance can either help someone feel like they're progressing or it can help reinforce that they aren't really welcome to fully inhabit ballet.

### **Adult Ballet Intensives as Comprehensive But Temporary Access**

*I had never in the 10+ years of taking ballet classes, danced with a partner. While all we were all a bit apprehensive, they had hired a couple of men to partner us and offset the uneven numbers. As usual, there's never enough men to dance with. I remember learning or attempting to learn a simple carry. I wasn't doing it quite right with my partner. I was too low on his back and the way our bodies were positioned was hindering the hinge/lever motion we were striving for. So the teacher partnered me. I remember standing behind him on demi-pointe, wrapping my arms around his neck. He grabbed hold of my arms and started to lean forward. And hinge, we did! I finally had gotten high enough on his back so that it felt effortless on both our parts. After he stood back up, we released hold of each other and I wiggled around, smiling profusely in surprise elation. My teacher laughed kind heartedly at my excitement. My solitary pas d'un ballet journey became a pas de deux thanks to this adult ballet intensive. - my memory*

As we've seen thus far, adults have to navigate an inconsistent ballet training system. In many ways, a ballet intensive is the omega for nonprofessional adults in terms of access to ballet training because it can offer concentrated training that they might not have access to otherwise. A ballet intensive is what it sounds like: an intensive study of ballet where students take various ballet technique classes a day, for a week or more. Often, intensives will culminate in a performance or showing of some sort. I've been to two different types of adult ballet intensives, full-time versus part-time. The full time intensive lasted a week and started in the morning and ended in the afternoon each day. The part-time intensives lasted two weeks or more with classes after work hours in the evening and during the weekends.

---

<sup>183</sup> It is interesting to note that all of these examples are from the male dancers I interviewed. A more in-depth gender analysis of adult ballet dancers' experiences would be fruitful.

Mary and I shared similar experiences in searching for ballet intensives. Many required you to be under a certain age (21) and required certain proficiency in ballet. Finding Sun King Adult Ballet camp was a dream come true. As Mary describes, this camp<sup>184</sup> welcomed adult dancers “where they are,” as people who do ballet as a hobby but also want to progress, regardless of their age or current ballet ability.<sup>185</sup> This is a stark contrast to other intensives that cater their training to people who have already obtained a high level of ballet ability. To be clear, there is nothing wrong with having ballet intensives designed for high skill leveled dancers. Instead, I am emphasizing that the lack of intensives open to adults, age wise, coupled with the lack of options for beginning and intermediate adult dancers, reinforces the perception that adults do not belong in the category of dancer.

The variety of classes offered at some ballet intensives is a chance to help adults get more robust training. Jill, a 40-year-old adult ballet dancer from Pennsylvania, describes

Dance camp was the serious training I have been looking for...it included all aspects of total dance immersion (pilates/EBAS, technique levels, repertory, variations, partnering, stretching/restorative, pointe, character classes). At home, I'm lucky if I can find a teacher with a true understanding of a technique class and what it includes.<sup>186</sup>

Words like “serious,” “immersion,” and “total” emphasize the type of training in a ballet intensive. For Jill and for many other adults, an adult ballet intensive might be the only time they can access options and varied training in ballet. As Jill describes, not only are there various technique levels to accommodate for different capacities, there are also

---

<sup>184</sup> This camp had several iterations. I attended camp in Richmond, VA and Saratoga Springs, NY.

<sup>185</sup> Mary in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>186</sup> Jill in discussion with author, July 2018.

classes like pilates and stretching/restorative to help strengthen and recondition the body. Adults learn specific choreography (repertory, variations, and character) and they learn advanced or less common skills like partnering and pointe.

The intensive is also often an opportunity to perform. Mary notes “getting to do a big performance like that made you feel like you were a real professional dancer and not just someone on vacation.”<sup>187</sup> Katja expresses a similar sentiment. She explains that during the intensive, she would sit in an ice bath to help with swelling. When I asked her what the ice bath felt like she described it as “cold,” “relaxing,” “nice,” and “kinda cool you know you feel like you’re a professional. I have to go sit in the ice bath. I have to get my salad ready. I have to go to bed early because you know I have performance practice tomorrow. You know you feel like hoitty toitty and important.”<sup>188</sup> In this example, she’s not shying away from the possibility of pain, but seems happy about the opportunity to be “like a professional,” both in tending to the body and in preparing for and having a performance.

Besides immersive training, intensives can also provide community for adult dancers. Christine talks about how the dance camp experience creates specific friendships.<sup>189</sup> Despite the camps themselves being transient, the communities created endure. I have taken plenty of open classes, yet the vast majority of my ballet friends come from the adult ballet intensives and from keeping in touch via social media. Viktoria, Mike, and Christine all mention the friendships and community created through

---

<sup>187</sup> Mary in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>188</sup> Katja in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>189</sup> Christine in discussion with author, July 2018.

intensives.<sup>190</sup> This community is important because it helps adult dancers feel supported in their pursuit for training and it helps dispel the notion that adult ballet dancers are singularities.

Although the ballet intensive training space offers opportunities to offset the limitations of “regular” adult training, this space is not without its problems. Being able to take time off from work, travel, and pay for the intensive including hotel and meals means that intensives are for those with the time and resources. This training space is also a temporary space. Being taken seriously for a couple of weeks a year might not necessarily make up for the rest of the year. Likewise, the training received at the intensive might still not live up to adult ballet dancers’ desires. For example, Viktoria felt disappointed when, at the start of the ballet intensive, she was placed in one level by a teacher and then was later on “demoted” to a lower level.<sup>191</sup> That memory resonates with me since we were “demoted” together. While I remember feeling the initial sting, I ended up being happy with the lower level. Viktoria, however, didn’t feel like she “got as much out of it as [she] wanted to.”<sup>192</sup> This wasn’t necessarily because of the intensive but because of the lack of training she has at home: “I come from the middle of nowhere and we have very very limited opportunity for ballet particularly in the early summer.... No dancing a month before I got [to camp].”<sup>193</sup> Not having sufficient training before the intensive, for some, means not being able to access higher levels of training. Even in ballet intensives, a space that provides access to a fuller range of ballet training,

---

<sup>190</sup> Viktoria in discussion with author, July 2018; Mike in discussion with author, July 2018; Christine in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>191</sup> Viktoria in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>192</sup> Viktoria in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>193</sup> Viktoria in discussion with author, July 2018.

including class frequency, different levels, and advanced skills, adult ballet dancers must still contend with the limits of their home training.

## Conclusion

Viktoria shared her frustration with her current dancing predicament: her studio is beginning to offer adult specific classes, which is promising and limiting. Adding adult specific training means training tailored for adults in general yet for Viktoria, it means another “demotion” since, for the last several years, she’s been training at a higher level with pre-professional ballet students.<sup>194</sup> Viktoria explains that for her, working towards achieving technical goals in class keeps her motivated as does working on technique and choreography for a performance. Yet, because her studio does not allow adults to perform on stage, she’s had to content herself with her work in the studio. Now that her studio is offering adult classes, Viktoria is going to be “stuck” with a beginner level class that won’t provide as much of a challenge for her.<sup>195</sup> Viktoria is again “stuck in place” because she feels barred from progress. Now that she does not have access to advanced technique in class or performance opportunities, Viktoria has<sup>196</sup> begrudgingly and sadly decided to take a break from ballet all together.<sup>197</sup> I am also currently “on break” with ballet but feel ok about it, at least for now.

While ballet is exclusionary on many fronts, particularly around issues of body type and race, ageism is a strong force that adults must navigate. In spite of a natural incongruence between actual and ideal ballet dancers, the space between is best kept very, very small. Adult dancers are often perceived as both in the gap between actual and ideal as well as not within the category of dancer at all – category mistakes. As many of the Free People comments show, the gap between Gittens’ dancing and what

---

<sup>194</sup> Viktoria in discussion with author, July 2019.

<sup>195</sup> Viktoria in discussion with author, July 2019.

<sup>196</sup> at least at the time of our email correspondence

<sup>197</sup> Viktoria in discussion with author, July 2019.

ballet is supposed to look like is too great, and therefore, is called out and policed. Commenters attempted to make sense of this incongruence in different ways, including by asking if the ad was a joke and/or by blaming Gittens, blaming Free People, and/or blaming Gittens' training. Though I do not believe it was Free People's intention to showcase an adult beginner ballet dancer, I analyzed this ad as a representation of an adult ballet dancer and one that requires more careful consideration than "she is not a dancer" and "who cares, this is just an ad." While I am not saying that all adult ballet dancers look the same or have the same level of skill, I stress that a ballet dancer includes dancers of many skill levels. As we saw in section two of this chapter, accessing adult training isn't as simple or straightforward. Many adults do want to accumulate ballet technique; many adults do want to progress and may have varying difficulty and success in doing so. However, there is still much work to be done with adult ballet training. Some adults, like Viktoria and myself, take breaks from ballet. Some give it up altogether while others, like Seth and Kirk, continue to strive and work to learn ballet technique.

While I have focused on age as a barrier to access for adults in ballet, other barriers abound. Both Hannah, Chi, and Seth talk about mixed levels of family support because their Asian parents didn't want them to pursue ballet. Kirk talks about having to hide his participation in ballet since as he explains, "in Ireland there is significant stigma associated with being a male ballet dancer. Ballet is seen as effeminate and a pursuit only for girls."<sup>198</sup> Christine talks about how at the ballet intensive she likes taking men's ballet class, since she's "always been a strong, powerful jumper and that movement fits [her] more" yet she worries about asking to do the men's role in pas de deux classes in

---

<sup>198</sup> Kirk in discussion with author, March 2021.



the event others are less “accepting” of this switch.<sup>199</sup> Katja, a black ballet dancer, was not so much concerned about her race than she was the size of her body. While the scope of my work could not encapsulate all these important aspects of access to training, I mention them here both to acknowledge the intersectional complexities in this work and to provide opportunities for future study.

In the next chapter, I turn my attention to hula, a Native Hawaiian dance form. Dance scholar Sharon Rowe writes about the similarities between ballet and hula, beginning with both dance forms origins as court dances performed for and by royalty.<sup>200</sup> She likens ballet’s plié to hula’s ‘ai ha’a where both are a bending of the knees yet ballet bends in service to reach up, lifted, and hula bends to stay down, grounded.<sup>201</sup> Despite similar royal origins, ballet is perceived as an elite form while hula is often erroneously conceived of as an easily accessed dance form. Shifting from how adults navigate the structural limits of ballet, I will now look at how adult hula dancers navigate participatory limits and expectations.

*We stand in first position, the heels of our feet touching with our toes out to the sides. Left hands rest on the barre and right hands are down to our sides with a slight curve from armpit to wrist – as if the armpit is holding a small bubble. The classical piano music begins to play. I slowly bend my knees about half way, a demi-plié, as my right hand moves from next to my thigh, gently out to the side, and back in as I straighten my legs. I demi-plie again and my right hand moves forward, rising to stomach level and then out to the side as I straighten my legs. My hand travels down as I start my grand plié. Keeping my torso straight, I bend my knees and descend all the way to the ground, letting my heels come up. The piano notes are soft and gentle. As I continue the combination, I start to hear a bass beat, from the studio next door. I rise up to relevé, legs straight and stretched, pushing into the balls of my feet. I come back down. The piano music*

---

<sup>199</sup> Christine in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>200</sup> Sharon Rowe, “A Haole in a Hālau: Situating Identity, Practicing Learning,” *Educational Perspectives - Journal of the College of Education* 46, no. Numbers 1 and 2 (2013): 25, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1088288.pdf>.

<sup>201</sup> Rowe, 25.

*continues and so does the reggaeton - an overlay of music. My body starts to resonate to the Caribbean beats. What if I paused in this pli ? What if I want to be in a get down stance? What if I want to be in 'ai ha'a? I want to dance. I want to dance. I want to dance... something else.*

## CHAPTER TWO

### Hula: “Ai ha’a Down and Get Your Kaona On, Girl”

#### Hula Ka’i

*“Mākaukau- are you ready?”*

*We respond by placing our closed fists on our hips and chant,*

*“Ae ho’omākaukau”*

**te te** sounds the ipu

*We shoot our arms straight up into the air, into a high diagonal, reminiscent of a swimmer right before they dive. Both hands meet in the middle, with the sides of our index fingers touching*

*“Ae ho’opuka e ka lā ma ka hikina”*

**te te** sounds the ipu

*We mili twice, our hands making two small waves as the right arm travels down extending to 3 o’clock and the left arm elbows 9 o’clock.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, we bend our knees and slowly ground ourselves.*

*“You all need to ‘ai ha’a - not just physically, energetically. And mentally as well. You need to dive into it. Look at your hands. Be in it,” Kumu remarks.<sup>2</sup>*

The very first thing I learned about hula is that your knees should always be bent. During basics when our kumu (teacher) wants us to bend our knees even more, he says “ai ha’a.” The Hawaiian dictionary defines “ai ha’a” as an intransitive noun verb, a “hula step danced with bended knees; the chanting for this dance is usually bombastic and emphatic (UL 266);<sup>3</sup> to dance thus. *Lit.*,<sup>4</sup> low style.”<sup>5</sup> Because Hawaiian language often uses compound words, breaking down “ai ha’a” into parts provides further context. “Ai” means dancing style/type. “Ha’a” means “low” and “a dance with bent knees; dancing (1 Sam. 18.6); called hula after mid 1800s.” ‘Ai ha’a, as a word, is about getting “low” and

---

<sup>1</sup> Both hands are flat, palms down. The fingertips of the left hand are in front of the midline of the body.

<sup>2</sup> My fieldnotes, January 2022.

<sup>3</sup> referencing Nathaniel Emerson’s *Unwritten literature of Hawaii : the sacred songs of the hula* as noted in glossary. “Wehe<sup>2</sup>wiki<sup>2</sup> Hawaiian Language Dictionaries,” Wehewehe Wikiwiki, accessed August 26, 2022, <https://hilo.hawaii.edu/wehe/glossary.php>.

<sup>4</sup> “Literally translated as ...” as noted in “Wehe<sup>2</sup>wiki<sup>2</sup> Hawaiian Language Dictionaries.”

<sup>5</sup> “ai ha’a,” in *Nā Puke Wehewehe ‘Ōlelo Hawai’i*, n.d., Ulukau - the Hawaiian Electronic Library, <https://wehewehe.org/gsd12.85/cgi-bin/hdict?a=d&d=D396&l=en>.

connecting to the ground as well as to the roots of hula.<sup>6</sup> As dance scholar Sharon Mahealani Rowe writes, "This connection to the earth links 'ai ha'a to a proper way of being, and relates it to the virtue, ha'aha'a (humility)."<sup>7</sup> Therefore, 'ai ha'a is a physical movement aesthetic, a value, and, as the opening vignette highlights, an invocation for deep, engaged participation.

One of the popular misconceptions of hula is that it "is some ha-ha shake-your-booty anything-goes free-for-all while wearing grass skirts and coconut bras,"<sup>8</sup> as musicologist Amy Ku'uleialoha Stillman writes. This is seen most prominently in popular media depictions of hula. For example, in separate 1932<sup>9</sup> and 1933<sup>10</sup> Betty Boop cartoons, Bimbo and Popeye "become" hula dancers by putting on "grass skirts"<sup>11</sup> and then mimicking Betty Boop's movements, rotoscoped from dancer Lotamuru.<sup>12</sup> Lucille Ball as Bubbles in the 1940 movie *Dance, Girl, Dance* wins the hula girl audition by being sexy and alluring despite having gangly awkward arms and not actually moving

---

<sup>6</sup> Monika Lilleike writes, "a historical link" - "the link between ha'a and hula understood here as an ongoing stream of performance tradition." Monika Lilleike, *Hawaiian Hula 'Olapa: Stylized Embodiment, Percussion, and Chanted Oral Poetry* (Bielefeld, GERMANY: transcript, 2016), 162, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucr/detail.action?docID=4772679>.

<sup>7</sup> Sharon Rowe, "A Haole in a Hālau: Situating Identity, Practicing Learning," *Educational Perspectives - Journal of the College of Education* 46, no. Numbers 1 and 2 (2013): 25, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1088288.pdf>. The dictionary entry for ha'a also mentions the related word, "ho'o.ha'a To lower; humble."

<sup>8</sup> Brian Short, "Hula Down the Hall | U-M LSA U-M College of LSA," University of Michigan College of Literature, Science, and the Arts, accessed July 31, 2021, <https://lsa.umich.edu/lsa/news-events/all-news/search-news/hula-down-the-hall.html>.

<sup>9</sup> "Betty Boop's Bamboo Isle," *Betty Boop* (Fleischer Studios, September 23, 1932).

<sup>10</sup> "Popeye the Sailor," *Betty Boop* (Fleischer Studios, July 14, 1933).

<sup>11</sup> In "Bamboo Isle," Bimbo steals a skirt from another character and dances. In "Popeye the Sailor," Popeye puts on the bearded lady's beard and uses it as a hula skirt.

<sup>12</sup> "Lotamuru," BETTY BOOP Wiki, accessed July 25, 2021, <https://bettyboop.fandom.com/wiki/Lotamuru>.

her body that much.<sup>13</sup> Jennifer Aniston as Katherine and Nicole Kidman as Devlin compete for best hula dancer in the 2011 film *Just Go With It*.<sup>14</sup> As their competition progresses, their hula dancing transforms from hip circles to any body movement, including the charleston.<sup>15</sup> The audience is asked to “just go with it” and accept it as hula dancing. These media depictions of predominantly white women accessing hula are also depictions of white women accessing exoticism and eroticism. Indeed the hula girl and, by extension, hula, has been used to further the colonial and tourist agenda of Hawai‘i as welcoming and available.<sup>16</sup> Despite the stereotype of hula being “anything-goes free-for-all,” hula is an intricate multi-media cultural form that requires respectful and deep participation, as this chapter will elucidate.

---

<sup>13</sup> *Dance, Girl, Dance*, Comedy, Drama, Music (RKO Radio Pictures, 1940).

<sup>14</sup> *Just Go with It*, Comedy, Romance (Columbia Pictures, Happy Madison Productions, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, in the *I Love Lucy* ballet episode (mentioned in Chapter 1), Lucy also does the Charleston while she is dancing ballet. “The Ballet,” *I Love Lucy* (Desilu Productions, February 18, 1952).

<sup>16</sup> As historian Adria Imada writes, “Live hula circuits established what I call an “imagined intimacy” between the United States and Hawai‘i, a potent fantasy that enabled Americans to possess their island colony physically and figuratively.” ... “Hula performances dangled the promise of intimacy between Hawaiians and Americans, animating an imperial metaphor of aloha or love.” Adria L. Imada, *Aloha America: Hula Circuits Through the U.S. Empire* (Duke University Press, 2012), 11.11



Figure 7 – Screenshot of Lucille Ball as "Bubbles" in *Dance, Girl, Dance*

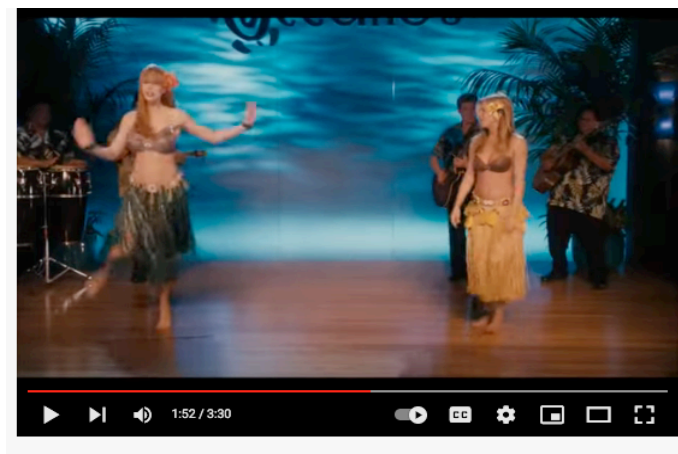


Figure 8 – Screenshot Nicole Kidman and Jennifer Aniston in *Just Go With It*

In the previous chapter on ballet, I discussed aspects of the adult ballet training terrain and how adults are both working towards reaching a perfect ideal and stuck being seen as a category mistake. One of the main concerns in ballet was obstacles to access to training as an adult. In hula, the concerns change, in part because the training spaces have changed. One can learn hula as a tourist at a hotel, in a hālau (hula school), in a hui (hula club), in some universities, at a lū'au (barbecue), and online. Hula dancers

include people of all ages from keiki (kids) to kūpuna (elders). Whereas starting ballet at thirteen is late, one could start hula at thirteen or, like me, in her mid twenties or, like some of my interviewees, in their fifties. While I have only performed ballet at ballet intensives, in hula I have performed on stage in hō'ike, festivals, and even in a music video. In addition to being different dance forms with different ethnoracial histories and associations, ballet and hula construct different conceptions of “dancer.” Rather than focusing on access to training, what’s at stake in hula is *how* one engages and participates in hula technique.

Executive Director of the Edith Kanaka’ole Foundation Dr. Huihui Kanahele-Mossman writes, “the Hula or its archaic label, the Ha’a, should not be entered into lightly. There is more than just what's seen on stage involved in this artform. Those that choose the path of traditional Hula must be prepared to be more than just a dancer.”<sup>17</sup> As such, in this chapter, I acknowledge and make visible “the more than just dance” that constitutes hula technique. I do so by analyzing how definitions and understandings of “dancer” are related to modes and depth of participation within the practice of hula. By studying how and when a dancer participates in hula, I also explore the various levels of hula knowing. Sometimes being a hula dancer is about what you know and how you behave, not just your ability to dance. Other times being a dancer is about choosing not to participate. I argue that participating deeply in hula acts as a dance ethic or practice of respect.

---

<sup>17</sup> Huihui Kanahele-Mossman, *The Ha'a Condition: The Health of the Kino Hula* (Edith Kanaka'ole Foundation Kanaka'ole Publishing LLC, 2020), 4.

## Situating Hula

Hula is a Native Hawaiian cultural form that combines culture, music, dance, and story. Kanahele-Mossman explains, “hula is the abstract form of water cycles, volcanic cycles, energy transfer, and reproduction. The responsibility of a hula dancer is reciprocation to these natural processes in the form of dance and adornment.”<sup>18</sup> Hula is a way of maintaining and sharing knowledge about Hawaiian history, Hawaiian land, and Hawaiian people.

Historian Adria Imada writes, “prior to Western contact and continuing through the late nineteenth century, hula was a highly venerated, selective, and restricted form of religious and political praxis.”<sup>19</sup> Hula has gone through iterations of forced decline and resurgence. Hawaiian studies scholar Momi Kamahale explains,

Nineteenth century American compatriots demanded that my ancestors convert to a haole Christian god, tread at the heels of a haole capitalist system, and adapt to haole patterns of behavior. Ho’ohaole- to behave and ape the white person-meant repudiation of Native customs from the hula, to Hawaiian sexual practices, to forms of dress.<sup>20</sup>

Hula was banned for many reasons including religion, sexual “propriety,” and “colonial capitalism,” all in service of controlling the bodies and “labor of the Kanaka Maoli.”<sup>21</sup> In spite of this, hula “continued, in part underground.”<sup>22</sup> King Kalakaua kick-started the first main resurgence of hula in the late 1800s by showcasing hula performances in his

---

<sup>18</sup> Kanahele-Mossman, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Imada, *Aloha America*, 11.

<sup>20</sup> Momi Kamahale, “Hula as Resistance,” in *Forward Motion Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders: Changing Realities, Revolutionary Perspectives*, no. 3, vol. Vol. 11 (Jamaica Plain, MA: Red Sun Press, 1992), 43, <http://hegemonystudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Kamehele-Hula-as-Resistance.pdf>.

<sup>21</sup> Noenoe K Silva, “He Kanawai E Ho’opau I Na Hula Kuolo Hawai’i: The Political Economy of Banning the Hula,” *The Hawaiian Journal of History* 34 (2000): 46.

<sup>22</sup> Jane C. Desmond, *Staging Tourism: Bodies on Display from Waikiki to Sea World* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 61–62, <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/S/bo3643382.html>.



coronation celebration and jubilee ceremonies.<sup>23</sup> Another hula resurgence, referred to as the Hawaiian Renaissance, occurred in the 1970s. It was “an explosion of interest in Hawaiian music, dance, language, and cultural practices, nurtured by the rise of ‘ethnic pride’ movements on the mainland.”<sup>24</sup> The Merrie Monarch<sup>25</sup> Festival began in 1963 as a tourist attraction but later developed into a platform to support Hawaiian culture and is now commonly referred to as the Hula Olympics.<sup>26</sup>

In general, there are many different types of hula, including tourist hula performed predominantly in hotels and other tourist spaces by paid dancers, as well as hula kahiko (ancient style) and hula ‘auana (modern style) that are often performed in competitions like Merrie Monarch. Although it can be danced alone, hula is often performed in a group, with a focus on community. By participating in hula, one is learning and dancing about Hawaiian history, deities, beliefs, and land, and therefore, Hawaiian ways of being in the world. Training in hālau follows a “master-disciple” method.<sup>27</sup> Being part of a hālau and performing in Merrie Monarch can indicate a high level of skill and technique. While it still means being paid to dance, “professional” dancer in hula has a slightly different connotation from ballet. As Merrie Monarch Miss Aloha Hula 2016 winner Kayli Ka’iulani Carr explains in the short documentary “What It Takes To Be A Hula Champion,” “there is a difference between dancing hula in a hālau

---

<sup>23</sup> Desmond, 62.

<sup>24</sup> Desmond, 135.

<sup>25</sup> It was named after King Kalakaua.

<sup>26</sup> “First Merrie Monarch Hula Competition - Hawaii History - Short Stories,” HawaiiHistory.org, accessed July 28, 2022, <http://www.hawaiihistory.org/index.cfm?PageID=346>.

<sup>27</sup> Monika Lilleike, *Hawaiian Hula ‘Olapa: Stylized Embodiment, Percussion, and Chanted Oral Poetry* (Bielefeld, GERMANY: transcript, 2016), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucr/detail.action?docID=4772679>.

and dancing hula professionally. Dancing for the tourists is like American Chinese and not the authentic Chinese food.”<sup>28</sup> Many professional hula dancers also dance in hālau and, like Carr, may compete in Merrie Monarch. My focus on nonprofessional dancers in hula means I am working with dancers who do not get paid to dance and who predominantly train in hālau.

Hula scholarship has looked at hula and competitions/festivals,<sup>29</sup> hula and tourism,<sup>30</sup> hula and imperialism,<sup>31</sup> hula on stage,<sup>32</sup> the image of the hula girl/hula dancer,<sup>33</sup> and hula training.<sup>34</sup> Imada explains that hula kahiko or ancient hula “has become highly valorized for its ostensibly ‘authentic’ connection to indigenous Hawaiian values and practices. Acculturated hula, in contrast, is seen as tainted by tourist markets and removed from Native self-determination and nationalist causes.”<sup>35</sup> Although all

---

<sup>28</sup> *What It Takes to Be a Hula Champion*, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-NhPqimnr3o>.

<sup>29</sup> Amy Ku‘uleialoha Stillman, “Hawaiian Hula Competitions: Event, Repertoire, Performance, Tradition,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 109, no. 434 (1996): 357–80, <https://doi.org/10.2307/541181>. Adrienne L. Kaeppler, “Festivals of Pacific Arts: Venues for Rituals of Identity,” *Pacific Arts*, no. 25 (2002): 5–19, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23411389>.

<sup>30</sup> Desmond, *Staging Tourism*.

<sup>31</sup> Imada, *Aloha America*.

<sup>32</sup> Angeline Shaka, “Hula ‘Ōlapa and the ‘Hula Girl’: Contemporary Hula Choreographies of the Concert Stage” (Ph.D., United States -- California, University of California, Los Angeles, 2011), <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations/docview/923293560/abstract/489293544CF4451EPQ/2>.

<sup>33</sup> Aeko Sereno, *Images of the Hula Dancer and “Hula Girl”: 1778-1960* (University of Hawaii, 1990); Shaka, “Hula ‘Ōlapa and the ‘Hula Girl’”; Desmond, *Staging Tourism*. Christine Emi Chan, “Beyond Colonization, Commodification, and Reclamation: Hula and Hawaiian Identity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Ethnicity*, by Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellers-Young, 2013, <https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/41357/chapter/352550131>.

<sup>34</sup> Dorothy B. Barrère, Mary Kawena Pukui, and Marion Kelly, *Hula, Historical Perspectives* (Department of Anthropology, Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, 1980); John M. Frias IV., “Ritualizing the Flame: A Heuristic Investigation into the Haki Kino, Body Breaking Exercise of Hālau O Kekuhi - ProQuest” (Union Institute and University, 2004), <https://www.proquest.com/openview/2b8ef1d8c9c708c1f2c27804a0ce248b/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>; Rowe, “A Haole in a Hālau: Situating Identity, Practicing Learning”; Lilleike, *Hawaiian Hula ‘Olapa*; Mai Misaki, “Colonial Rupture and Native Continuity in Indigenous Cultural Representations: Through Hawaiian Ancient Dance Kahiko,” *Dance Research Journal* 53, no. 1 (April 2021): 44–60, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0149767721000024>.

<sup>35</sup> Imada, *Aloha America*, 20.

dance forms can be said to embody the histories, politics, and beliefs of a culture, for Hawaiians, practicing hula can serve specifically as a decolonizing practice; it is a reclaiming<sup>36</sup> of indigenous knowledges, practices, and rights. As Momi Kamahale asserts, “the hula as practiced then and now is a form of resistance against an oppression imposed upon my people by an all-haole, English speaking American government and economic power base.”<sup>37</sup>

Imada’s *Aloha America*,<sup>38</sup> dance scholar Jane Desmond’s “Invoking ‘The Native’: Body Politics in Contemporary Hawaiian Tourist Shows,”<sup>39</sup> and Hawaiian activist Haunani-Kay Trask’s “Lovely Hands: Corporate Tourism and the Prostitution of Hawaiian Culture”<sup>40</sup> all discuss hula performance and training in tourism circuits. My work, on the other hand, is in line with scholarship that looks at training outside of main tourist spaces, such as dance scholar Angeline Shaka’s work on hula on the concert stage. She notes that “there is not one authentic representation of the hula or of the hula ‘olapa” and that “a plethora of authentic representations have actually begun to effect the decolonization of the “hula girl” and tourist hula practices.”<sup>41</sup> Shaka analyzes representations of hula dancers as warriors, goddesses, and sex and gender fluid to

---

<sup>36</sup> Kamahale identifies how participation in hula is a choice with political consequences: “To assert that things Hawaiian have great significance is to politicize them. And that is what the Renaissance idea did not always acknowledge. The resurgence of the Hawaiian culture was a political act that signaled to everyone in Hawai’i that the hula and its cultural wardrobe would no longer strut solely before gaping tourists.” Momi Kamahale, “Hula as Resistance,” in *Forward Motion Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders: Changing Realities, Revolutionary Perspectives*, no. 3, vol. Vol. 11 (Jaimaca Plain, MA: Red Sun Press, 1992), 42, <http://hegemonystudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Kamehele-Hula-as-Resistance.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> Kamahale, 42.

<sup>38</sup> Imada, *Aloha America*.

<sup>39</sup> Jane C. Desmond, “Invoking ‘The Native’: Body Politics in Contemporary Hawaiian Tourist Shows,” *TDR (1988-)* 41, no. 4 (1997): 83–109, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1146662>.

<sup>40</sup> Haunani-Kay Trask, “Lovely Hula Lands: Corporate Tourism and the Prostitution of Hawaiian Culture,” *Border/Lines*, no. 23 (1991), <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/bl/article/view/24958>.

<sup>41</sup> Shaka, “Hula `Ōlapa and the ‘Hula Girl,’” 254.

expand how hula is represented. She notes that these representations have always already been integral to hula. However, they have not been as easily accessed because of the colonizing figure of the tourist “hula girl.”<sup>42</sup> While the Merrie Monarch Festival’s hula competition has served as a space for reclamation of hula, Shaka’s work focuses on how hula ‘olapa is being reclaimed on the concert stage. My research follows in kind and looks at participation of hula dancers in training spaces at various levels of expertise.

In hula scholar Sharon Rowe’s 2013 article, “A Haole in a Hālau: Situating Identity, Practicing Learning,” she discusses what she has learned about hula, knowledge, and herself via training as a haole—a white person—in a hālau. She focuses on “the practices of hō’ike (testing by showing what one knows), ‘ai ha’a (getting grounded), pa’a ka waha/ ho’olohe (hold the mouth/listen), and learning without palapala (paper).”<sup>43</sup> Acknowledging that she is not Hawaiian situates her identity as part of her learning process. Rowe writes,

I will never ‘think Hawaiian.’ My identity is too strongly embedded in the ways of knowing of my root culture. My default mode is to think like a haole. But what I learned in hālau changed me. It added immensely to the range of what I draw upon as a student, an educator, and a human being. I have a clearer sense of what it means to learn, and I recognize a broader range of dispositions that support learning.<sup>44</sup>

Rowe emphasizes that hula taught her how to respect and care for knowledge;

“knowledge is a gift, which, while it can be given widely, is only learned by those ready to

---

<sup>42</sup> “Furthermore, the choreographic embodiments they cultivate, of hula Goddess, mahu, and Hawaiian warrior, also produce an expanded repertoire of subjectivities that are already present, but that have not been valued in hula performance because of the “hula girl’s” insistent colonizing dance.” Shaka, 228.

<sup>43</sup> Rowe, “A Haole in a Hālau: Situating Identity, Practicing Learning,” 23.

<sup>44</sup> Rowe, 30.

receive it, those who care for it and bring it deeply into their being, with a respect that nurtures it at its roots."<sup>45</sup> My work is an extension of Rowe's in that I, as a woman of color, am also working towards participating deeply and respectfully in hula.

The racial asymmetry<sup>46</sup> between dancer and dance form can offer valuable discussion and analysis.<sup>47</sup> While I do discuss race and ethnicity at different points in this chapter, I center, as Rowe does, the ways in which nonprofessionals, Hawaiians and non-Hawaiian dancers alike, learn to participate in hula and Hawaiian culture with care and respect. There are ethical ways to participate in hula that require a different engagement from just a mastery of steps. As such, this chapter is an exploration of what participation in hula entails. I begin by discussing the different ways respect structures participation in hula. I then introduce some of the other aspects of hula besides movement and end with how participation is taught via Hawaiian sources of knowledge, Hawai'i and hālau.

### **Framing Participation through 'Ai Ha'a and Kaona**

'Ai ha'a is central to hula as a dance form and to this chapter. The act of bending, lowering, grounding, and deepening oneself via 'ai ha'a is connected to the other important frame for my work: kaona. Kaona is defined as "hidden meaning, as in Hawaiian poetry; concealed reference, as to a person, thing, or place; words with double

---

<sup>45</sup> Rowe, 30.

<sup>46</sup> Term from Asian American literature scholar Stephen Sohn's monograph *Racial Asymmetries*. Stephen Hong Sohn, *Racial Asymmetries: Asian American Fictional Worlds* (New York: NYU Press, 2014).

<sup>47</sup> For example Yutian Wong, "Introduction: Issues in Asian American Dance Studies," in *Contemporary Directions in Asian American Dance*, ed. Yutian Wong (University of Wisconsin Press, 2016), 3–28.; Anela Tanigawa, "The Hula Industry: Understanding the Commodification of Hula in Japan and Culturally Grounded Hula" ([Honolulu] : [University of Hawaii at Manoa], [May 2016], 2016), <http://hdl.handle.net/10125/51299>.

meanings that might bring good or bad fortune.”<sup>48</sup> Understanding kaona requires having cultural and historical knowledge. Therefore, in order to access kaona, one must ‘ai ha‘a. In my experience, kaona is often discussed when learning a hula. The kumu hula may offer an English translation of the mele and explain the surface meaning of the song and then if appropriate, proceed to sharing the kaona, or deeper meanings of the song. While kaona is often referred to in relation to poetry or song, I extend the idea of kaona to a dancer—a dancer who has kaona expresses a depth of knowledge.<sup>49</sup>

My work in this chapter is in conversation with Candace Galla, Louise Galla, Dennis Keawe, and Larry Kimura’s 2015 article, “Perpetuating hula: globalization and the traditional art.” They use an island as a metaphor to unpack the complexity of hula knowledge and to understand how knowledge is spatialized.<sup>50</sup> I see this metaphor as an extension and elaboration of kaona because surface knowledge (an island’s surface) contrasts with deep knowledge (the underwater land mass of the island). They write,

Going along with a Hawaiian representation, an island is used to represent typical, common aspects of hula that most people from outside the Hawaiian culture and community would know, whereas the island mass below the ocean surface signifies embedded, underlying, restricted, hidden, or least understood components of hula culture; thus revealing difficulties in perpetuating hula

<sup>48</sup> “kaona,” in *Nā Puke Wehewehe ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i*, n.d., Ulukau - the Hawaiian Electronic Library, <https://wehewehe.org/gsd/2.85/cgi-bin/hdict?e=q-11000-00---off-0hdict--00-1----0-10-0---0---0direct-10-DW--4--textpukuieibert%2ctextmamaka%2ctextandrew%2ctextparker%2ctextpeplace%2ctextclark%2ctextchd%2ctexthllt----0-11--11-haw-Zz-1---Zz-1-home-kaona--00-4-1-00-0--4----0-0-11-00-0utfZz-8-00&a=d&d=D7005#hero-bottom-banner>.

<sup>49</sup> A parallel concept is dance scholar Imani Kai Johnson’s use of “soulfulness” in her article on b-boying. Soulfulness is “being good” at the dance but also “includes a perpetual state of learning about moves, music, the body, politics, and histories to enrich one’s soul in the culture and ultimately the soul of the culture.” Imani Kai Johnson and كاي جونسن إيماني, “B-Boying and Battling in a Global Context: The Discursive Life of Difference in Hip Hop Dance / هوب الهيب رقص في للاختلاف بالخطاب الحياة: العولمي السياق في صراعاً بوصفه الرقص / *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, no. 31 (2011): 191, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23216052>. Johnson explains that “soulfulness is not a genetic quality. It is earned over time through the work of dance.” Johnson and جونسن, 186.

<sup>50</sup> Candace Galla et al., “Perpetuating Hula: Globalization and the Traditional Art,” *Pacific Arts* 14 (November 17, 2015): 129–40.

knowledge. Dependent on the ebb tide and flow, elevation of pu'u (hills) and mauna (mountains), time of year, location on the island, and expansion of land, there will be unquestionably variability of what is known about hula per individual.<sup>51</sup>

This metaphor spatializes knowledge in three ways. First, it recognizes an island as literally replete with knowledge. Second, the metaphor introduces a spectrum of knowledge with various levels. Third, it spatializes knowledge in terms of breadth and variability by implying that knowledge can vary by person, place, and time. Galla, Galla, Keawe, and Kimura give examples of “surface understanding” and “deep understanding” of hula.<sup>52</sup> Surface understanding of hula includes “hula ‘auana (modern hula), lei (physical representation), common words, vocabulary, string instruments (i.e. ‘ukulele, guitar), hapa haole hula (a Hawaiian type song with English words and a few Hawaiian words).”<sup>53</sup> Deep understanding, on the other hand, includes things like “flowers, metaphor, oli (chanting), ho’okupu (offering), pule (prayer), ‘ōlelo no’eau (traditional Hawaiian sayings), protocol, kaona (hidden meaning), crafting of hula implements, mele kāhea (chant for admittance)” and more.<sup>54</sup> Depending on your access and training in hula, your knowledge will vary which can affect how you participate. While, Galla, Galla, Keawe, and Kimura list “kaona” under the hidden portion of the island diagram, I highlight kaona as a foundational concept within this metaphor. Kaona (hidden meaning/depth) is a synecdoche for the island metaphor since structurally the metaphor relies on hidden depths.

---

<sup>51</sup> Galla et al., 2.

<sup>52</sup> Galla et al., 3.

<sup>53</sup> Galla et al., 3.

<sup>54</sup> Galla et al., 3.

I extend kaona and the island metaphor to gender and ethnic studies scholar Hōkūlani Aikau and American studies scholar Vernadette Vicuña Gonzalez's theorization of aloha (welcome) and 'a'ole (refusal). Aikau and Vicuña write, "behind the image of the smiling, gentle, seductively beckon-ing icon of the hula girl—meant to invite, reassure, welcome—is a Hawai'i that has always been clear about its expressions of aloha 'āina (love for our lands) and 'a'ole (refusal)."<sup>55</sup> Their distinction between aloha and 'a'ole marks a clear call for respecting Hawaiian land, culture, and people by not assuming open access to Hawai'i. This contrasts with the tourist depiction of Hawai'i and Hawaiians as completely accessible. In juxtaposing the island metaphor with aloha and 'a'ole, the tourist version of Hawai'i (stereotyped via aloha) refers to the surface of the island and the deeper levels of Hawaiian life and knowledge are the unseen and in many cases restricted ('a'ole) underwater land mass of the island. Aikau and Gonzalez state, "thus, an important underlying assumption of this book is that not all knowledge, information, or access to places is open and available to everyone. We understand that within a touristic frame-work, this is a radically audacious idea. But we ask that you proceed with caution and restraint."<sup>56</sup> I invoke this ethic of caution and restraint to analyze dancers' participation in hula. Sometimes, access to hula isn't freely granted and participation isn't desired. Other times, one must respect that even if one has access to something, it might be better to choose not to participate. How deeply one participates is based on your knowledge of hula, which then affects how one is seen and named (or not) as a hula dancer or hula participant.

---

<sup>55</sup> Hōkūlani K. Aikau and Vernadette Vicuña Gonzalez, eds., *Detours: A Decolonial Guide to Hawai'i* (Duke University Press: Durham, 2019), 9.

<sup>56</sup> Aikau and Gonzalez, 2.



## **Methodology**

In this chapter I use ethnography including participant observation and interviews with hula dancers. My participant observation takes the form of field notes and memories from attending hula classes in California, New York, Hawai'i, and Japan, as well as my own notes from attending lectures or panels on hula at hula conferences. I conducted fourteen interviews overall, including seven email interviews, six phone interviews, and one interview over Skype. I met three out of fourteen dancers I interviewed while taking dance classes in California. I met eleven out of fourteen dancers at the Ka 'Aha Hula Hālauaola hula conference in Hilo, Hawaii on June 14-23, 2018. Kumu Malie Mendoza told me about the conference and invited me to attend with her and her Washington hālau. This conference was started by the Lālākea foundation whose mission is to “perpetuate Native Hawaiian arts and spiritual practices, including hula, chant and attendant art forms.”<sup>57</sup>

## **Situating Hula Participants**

At the time of interview, my participants ranged in age from their twenties to their sixties. Thirteen of my participants identify as female and one as male. In terms of ethnicity, one dancer identifies as Hawaiian German Chinese, another as Black Hawaiian. One participant is Pacific Islander and another is Tongan. Four dancers identify as Caucasian; one dancer identifies as a third generation Japanese American, and one as a mixed race dancer. In terms of their professions, my interviewees include three teachers, a retired person, construction worker, mechanical engineer, environmentalist, scientist, registered nurse, a person in human resources, retired

---

<sup>57</sup> “About – Lālākea Foundation,” accessed September 4, 2021, <https://lalakea.org/about/>.

director of finance, postdoc, and student affairs administrator.

Family and desire are two of the primary motivations for participating in hula. Ariel and Lani both practice hula to stay connected to their Hawaiian identities. Lani, a 64-year-old Hawaiian, German, Chinese woman living in Washington state, explains that practicing hula keeps her connected to Hawai'i as home.<sup>58</sup> Ariel, a 34-year-old multiracial Black Hawaiian woman living in California, shares that it keeps her connected to her Mom, who passed away, and to her future children: "hula is in memory of her and is my way of reaffirming that I am Hawaiian. And it's something that, if I do have kids, I can pass along to them so they don't forget her or their history."<sup>59</sup> Similarly, Stan is Tongan but his mother passed away when he was very young. Later in life, he went to hula class as a way to get closer to his heritage saying, "well maybe there might be some correlation between Hawaiian and Tongan yea so that's how I got started."<sup>60</sup>

Other dancers started hula because of friends or family. Sarinah, a 25-year-old mixed race woman living in California, shares that her neighbors growing up were Hawaiian and so she "grew up going to lū'au and shows and listening to them practice... started watching them and I fell in love with the dance."<sup>61</sup> Yanirah, a 41-year-old woman from and living in Mexico, recounts starting hula so that her young daughter, who loved to dance, could follow her since there was no keiki (children) class in her area. Yanirah's kumu (teacher) was her mother-in-law, the only teacher of Polynesian dance in the area.<sup>62</sup> For other dancers, visiting Hawai'i is what inspired them to practice. Gretchen,

---

<sup>58</sup> Lani, in discussion with author, May 2019.

<sup>59</sup> Ariel, in discussion with author, June 2019.

<sup>60</sup> Stan in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>61</sup> Sarinah in discussion with author, October 2018.

<sup>62</sup> Yanirah in discussion with author, September 2018.

Charlotte, Rebecca, and Jennifer all mention first going to Hawai'i, being exposed to hula, and then deciding to pursue and learn hula.<sup>63</sup>

In terms of terminology, many of the people I interviewed identified as “hula dancers,” though “hula practitioner” and “hula people” are other terms that came up in my research. I offer here a small discussion on these terms as a way to further contextualize my interviewees’ participation and to set the groundwork for this chapter’s exploration of deep participation. Gretchen, a 64-year-old Caucasian woman living in Washington state, writes, “I started as a student<sup>64</sup> of hula and graduated to olapa or hula dancer. I am only a dancer.”<sup>65</sup> Lani, who is in the same hālau as Gretchen, shares,

I consider myself a dancer, not a hula practitioner. What is the difference? The practitioner digs deeper into the Hawaiian culture. Such as when we enter the forest, to ask for permission. When you take from nature, you ask for permission, they are more ceremonial. I don’t know if it would be correct to say that they practice the spiritual aspect of hula.<sup>66</sup>

From this description, to be a hula practitioner requires deeper participation than “hula dancer.” Gretchen and Jennifer, a 44-year-old Caucasian woman living in Washington state, refer to a hula practitioner as a teacher - kumu;<sup>67</sup> Jennifer writes, kumu hula “know, understand, and live the Hawaiian hula culture.”<sup>68</sup>

Initially, Rebecca, a 36-year-old woman from and living in Germany, tentatively identified as a “hula dancer, maybe.” Later on, Rebecca identified with the term “hula

---

<sup>63</sup> Gretchen in discussion with author, July 2018; Charlotte in discussion with author, September 2018; Rebecca in discussion with author, September 2018; Jennifer in discussion with author, August 2018.

<sup>64</sup> Rowe writes, “I was, and still am, a hula haumana, a student of hula.” Rowe, “A Haole in a Hālau: Situating Identity, Practicing Learning,” 23.

<sup>65</sup> Gretchen in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>66</sup> Lani in discussion with author, May 2019.

<sup>67</sup> Gretchen in discussion with author, July 2018; Jennifer in discussion with author, August 2018.

<sup>68</sup> Jennifer in discussion with author, August 2018.

people" because it reflects the relationship between her life and hula, demonstrating that her commitment to hula goes beyond the studio or her identity as a "dancer."<sup>69</sup> The term hula dancer tells us the type of dancer you are whereas a hula person tells us the type of person you are—a person of hula. Joanne, a 69.5-year-old Japanese American woman, adds, "for some people, hula becomes their life, as opposed to a smaller part you know. And you've got every gradation."<sup>70</sup>

When I asked Pearl, a 59-year-old white woman, what the differences were between these terms, she responded: "I don't know that there always are differences...[b]ut I think that...most of the time they're kind of all the same even though they have different levels of expertise they know more songs or less songs or you know they're better at these steps."<sup>71</sup> I analyze Pearl's claim that the terms are all "kind of the same" as an acknowledgement that participating in hula respectfully *always already* (or at least should) includes deep participation. The terms "hula dancer," "hula practitioner," and "hula person" help to distinguish the levels of participation in terms of commitment and knowledge.

### Situating myself

Lineage, a tracing of connections, is important in Hawaiian epistemology.<sup>72</sup> In tracing connections, one is also tracing responsibility and paying respect. I include my

---

<sup>69</sup> Rebecca in discussion with author, September 2018.

<sup>70</sup> Joanne in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>71</sup> Pearl in discussion with author, September 2018.

<sup>72</sup> "Knowledge, for Native Hawaiians, is grounded in the natural environment and in the ancestral line of family.... This is a spiritual concept." Manulani Aluli Meyer, *Ho'oulu: Our Time of Becoming: Collected Early Writings of Manulani Meyer* ('Ai Pōhaku Press, 2018), 93.

own hula genealogy to contextualize my participation and to respect and honor those that have been a part of my hula journey.

Representations of hula girls abounded in popular media throughout my childhood. While I cannot remember the first hula girl who danced across my screen, I do know I saw cartoons like *Betty Boop* and *Popeye* and movies like *Dirty Dancing* (1987),<sup>73</sup> *The Lion King* (1994),<sup>74</sup> and *Lilo and Stitch* (2002),<sup>75</sup> all of which have hula girls. In 2012, when I was volunteering for Dr. Stefanie Shattuck Hufnagel, a linguist at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, she told me about the “old hula” she had seen when she went to Hawai‘i. I’m not sure why we were talking about hula, but I remember her saying it was different from the tourist hula and that she hoped I could check it out one day. In 2013, I took an online dance contexts and culture class with Prof. Jacqueline Shea Murphy through University of California Online. The class had a section on hula and this was my first introduction to hula as a Native Hawaiian cultural form. The first hula I fell in love with was Patrick Makuane’s hula noho [seated hula dance] in his piece, “The Natives are Restless.” I got chills listening to the women chanting<sup>76</sup> - I wanted to dance like them; I wanted to be like them.

My first year as a PhD student at UCR (2014), I began training in hula at UCR’s recreation center. I took the class with Kumu Maria Malie Mendoza. At that time she wasn’t a kumu (master teacher) but she had gotten permission from her Kumu Aunty

---

<sup>73</sup> We see Baby’s sister rehearsing a hula dance.

<sup>74</sup> Timon and Pumba perform a hula to distract the hyenas.

<sup>75</sup> Adam Sandler has a series of movies filmed in Hawai‘i like *Punch Drunk Love* (2002), *50 First Dates* (2004), and *Just Go With It* (2011). Hula appears on the edges in *Punch Drunk Love* and *50 First Dates*. In *Just Go With It*, a tourist hula competition between Jennifer Aniston and Nicole Kidman takes front stage.

<sup>76</sup> Angeline Shaka discusses this piece in her dissertation. “The mele they hula to, “Maika‘i Ka ‘Oiwī, is a love song that describes the physical beauty of Mt. Ka‘ala’s peaks and valleys on O‘ahu, likening them to a loved one.” Shaka, “Hula ‘Ōlapa and the ‘Hula Girl,” 34.

Onie Kamakahiwaokalani Huihui Rendall of Hālau Kamakahiwaokalani in the Tri-Cities Washington area, to teach classes at UCR. She also had a separate group, more involved than the rec class, that I joined later on. After having passed her kumu hula test, Malie became an official kumu, and Hālau Makahawai—Riverside Hālau—was born. Here I learned hula basics and important stories like Pele and Hi'iaka's journey.<sup>77</sup> I learned hula like "Pearly Shells," "Hukilau," "Kaho'olawe," "Mai Kuhi Mai," and "Hopoe."

I have also trained in two other hālau, Kumu Hula Keoni Napueokia'iolehuakuikalani Chang's hālau, Hālau Nā Pua Lehua I Ka Ua Noe. Kumu Chang was/is mentored by Kumu Hula Nahokuokalani Gaspang, who was under Uncle<sup>78</sup> George Lanakilakekiahiali'i Na'ope. In this hālau I deepened my hula knowledge and technique thanks to Auntie Iris and Auntie Rho. My favorite hula I learned and eventually performed on stage was a hula pahu,<sup>79</sup> "A Ko'olau." My current kumu is Kumu Kawika Keikiali'i Alfiche of Hālau o Keikiali'i, based in San Francisco. He was 'ūniki as kumu under Kumu Hula Rae Kahikilaulani Fonseca of Hilo, Hawai'i who was trained by Uncle George Lanakilakekiahiali'i Na'ope. An upside to the global pandemic was my ability to train with Kumu Kawika despite not living in San Francisco. I continue to hone my craft as a dancer through Zoom classes. It is with deep honor and gratitude that I continue my hula journey as a dancer and as a scholar thanks to these kumus and the people I have met and danced with. Now I turn to an examination of respect as integral to participation in hula, especially for non-Hawaiians.

---

<sup>77</sup> Pele tasks her sister, Hi'iaka, to travel from the Big island to Kau'i to bring Pele's lover back.

<sup>78</sup> Uncle and Auntie are used to show respect to elders.

<sup>79</sup> Hula with large drums (pahu drums). Master carver 'Etua describes pahu drums as "The pahu is a mouth piece to communicate with the ancestors, past and present.... The sounds created when you pa'i the drum resonates like ripples in the water." Quoted in Ho'okahua Cultural Vibrancy Group, "Pahu Hula: A Resounding Legacy," May 11, 2021, <https://www.ksbe.edu/article/pahu-hula-a-resounding-legacy/>.

## Section 1: Respect as Integral to Hula

There's nothing wrong with non-Hawaiians dancing hula. Everyone is so mixed now that hula remains purely Hawaiian. It's the thing that connects us to our/the Hawaiian ancestors. So for those who aren't from Hawai'i but want to learn and dance hula should understand it's more than movements. It's a language. It's the mode to tell the history, beliefs and traditions of a people gone and still very alive. As long as people come in respecting that and understanding it's more than just dance, I think it's completely fine.<sup>80</sup> - Ariel, 34-year-old multiracial Black Hawaiian woman living in California

When Pearl and I discussed her participation in hula as a white woman, she shares, "sometimes um we feel a little uncomfortable. More when we were in Hawai'i than anywhere else. And it's been real hard to learn to not feel uncomfortable. Because you kinda feel like maybe people think you're like a poser, and that you don't have the right."<sup>81</sup> Her comment speaks to how belonging structures what one can participate in. For some people, if you aren't Hawaiian, then hula isn't for you. When I asked Rebecca if she had experienced any challenges being non-Hawaiian and doing hula she responded: "Well I can't recall a situation in which someone was telling me oh you're not Hawaiian you can't do this. The only thing I remember is just listening to an interview with a [kumu] and I remember she was saying you know [hula] it's something Hawaiian. Only Hawaiians should do it. It's not for other people. She was very um strict about that."<sup>82</sup> This is one of the tensions of practicing hula as a non-Hawaiian person: respecting that some spaces are open to non-Hawaiian participation and some are not.

As a black woman, Kumu hula Māhealani Uchiyama experienced both moments of "welcoming" and moments of questioning when she first started learning hula. She

---

<sup>80</sup> Ariel in discussion with author, June 2019.

<sup>81</sup> Pearl in discussion with author, September 2018.

<sup>82</sup> Rebecca in discussion with author, September 2018.

shares, “there were also those who were like, “what are you doing speaking Hawaiian?” There were some who couldn’t get past the misconceptions of what they thought my phenotype represented.”<sup>83</sup> In the beginning it was difficult for her to navigate not being Hawaiian yet being invested in and committed to hula. Yet she also understood why there was ambivalence towards non-Hawaiian participating in hula. She writes,

I began to understand that when you’ve had something taken from you, or almost taken from you, you get very possessive about what you have of it left. So, I get why some Hawaiians are quick to express caution toward people of other backgrounds who say they want to explore (but also possibly appropriate and exploit) that which is sacred to them. Encountering that attitude before I had developed an understanding of it was very rough and painful for me, but I get it now. Certainly we too, as black people, have had much taken from us.<sup>84</sup>

In making connections between the cultural, land, and bodily theft of Hawaiian and Black people, Uchiyama makes sense of both the attitudes against non-Hawaiian participation and her own participation in hula. Sarinah, a 25-year-old mixed race woman living in California, also reflects on how her own positionality affects her participation in hula. She notes,

Being a person of color I think is slightly different like it doesnt give you anymore ownership over it than like your white counterpart or white people in your class but I just think there’s like more understanding or at least more like automatic engrained intuitive understanding of culture of another’s culture especially when yours has probably been persecuted. I’m not going to say that thats true for everyone because everyone is different. But I think there is something to sharing culture among POCs versus someone who is historically coming from a colonial background. So like trying not to fall into that colonizer mentality even if you are a POC. You know living that culture that you are studying under, the same respect that you would expect if someone were doing that it to your own culture. I think that kind of comes with the territory. Definitely with me but I think also among POC dancers.<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>83</sup> Māhealani Uchiyama and Sima Belmar, *In Practice: Mahealani Uchiyama*, Published by In Dance, September 1, 2018, <https://dancersgroup.org/2018/09/practice-mahealani-uchiyama/>.

<sup>84</sup> Uchiyama and Belmar.

<sup>85</sup> Sarinah in discussion with author, October 2018.



Both Uchiyama and Sarinah express feeling sensitive to the politics of participation in hula as non-Hawaiians. I also feel similarly. I do not want to participate in hula in a way that would exploit the culture. I want to do my best to participate in hula as respectfully as possible, which explains the driving force of this chapter, respectful participation in hula as non-Hawaiians.

Recalling the exploitation and appropriation Uchiyama gestured to, Sarinah adds “there’s so many ways to botch a culture and to be appropriative and if you don’t have permission then you shouldn’t be doing it.”<sup>86</sup> While a culture can technically be “botched” by anyone, much of past botching has been done by or because of non-Hawaiian participants. In discussing non-Hawaiian participation in hula, what became apparent are the ways one must behave in order to participate. As Sarinah notes, permission is integral to participating in hula - it is one of the primary ways to show respect. In hula, there are chants to ask permission to enter spaces like class, stage, forests, and islands themselves. One can only enter if you are given a response of permission. Aikau and Gonzalez tell the story of the goddess Hi’iaka traveling from island to island and having to chant for permission to enter. They explain, “what we want to highlight from this story of Hi’iaka’s journey is that everyone—even a deity—must follow the understood protocols of each place and request permission to enter before passing through.”<sup>87</sup> The same is expected of a person wanting to learn hula: they must request and obtain permission.

---

<sup>86</sup> Sarinah in discussion with author, October 2018.

<sup>87</sup> Aikau and Gonzalez, *Detours*, 12.

Centering permission and following protocol inculcate hula as knowledge meant to be revered and respected. Along with asking for permission, respect is also embodied and expressed in other actions. Jennifer acknowledges that since she's not Hawaiian, she wants to respect the culture and make sure she's not doing it "haphazardly or without thought."<sup>88</sup> This awareness and intentionality is an ethic of participation in hula in general, but especially for non-Hawaiians. Rebecca mentions "stick[ing] to the rules" and "respect[ing] the culture" as practices that have allowed her to participate in hula.<sup>89</sup> Sarinah tells me about one of her kumu's family members who has a hālau in Hawai'i and that "he keeps it open to non-Hawaiians but he also demands the respect. He demands the time commitment. It's not just like, oh we are gonna do this dance and we're not gonna know what it means or know anything about the culture."<sup>90</sup> Here, respect is about showing up and participating deeply, doing the work to understand the meaning in the songs and movements, as well as in one's participation. Gretchen shares, "I have learned that by immersing myself in the culture, respecting the culture and dancing from my heart, I am accepted with open arms."<sup>91</sup> Dancing from the heart connotes being present. Intentional immersion in the culture is a reference to 'ai ha'a - diving deeper into the culture and knowledge of hula. Together, dancing from the heart and intentional immersion resonate with nonsuperficial, deep participation (kaona) in hula and as such, they are ways to show respect. They also resonate with the opening quote to this section. Recalling Ariel's words, to participate in hula as a non-Hawaiian

---

<sup>88</sup> Jennifer in discussion with author, August 2018.

<sup>89</sup> Rebecca in discussion with author, September 2018.

<sup>90</sup> Sarinah in discussion with author, October 2018.

<sup>91</sup> Gretchen in discussion with author, July 2018.

means to “respect” and “understand” that hula is vitally important for Hawaiians and Hawaiian culture and that it is “more than just dance.”<sup>92</sup>

---

<sup>92</sup> Ariel in discussion with author, June 2019.

## Section 2: Hula as More Than Just Dance

*Arms down to our sides, we stand in five lines at the edge of the right side of the dance studio. We all face the left side of the room, waiting to start Ho'opuka, a hula ka'i (an entrance dance). K looks at us from the floor at the front of the room. She has her ipu heke (gourd) in her hands and is ready to drum and chant. "If you bring the fire, I'll bring the heat," her strong, no nonsense voice tells us.*

**u te**

*I'm facing the mirror. My left arm extends out to 12 o'clock and my right arm is bent, elbowing 3 o'clock. My hands are flat, palms down. My right foot kicks back*

**u tete**

*and as I step the foot down, I bend both knees to squat down as much as I can while maintaining my torso straight. As I stand back up, my left arm whips around taking my*

**u te**

*body, step, step with it to face the back wall. Switching arms, right arm 12 o'clock, left arm elbowing 9 o'clock. My left foot hitches back and I lower my body down and then rise up, step, step, slicing*

**u tete**

*my right arm across to lead the rest of my body around to face the mirror. The ipu heke continues **u te u tete** and there's a pull, a sense of attack, of purpose - we are carving space with our bodies. As we holohuki, we move in every direction, up, down, circling to the right and to the left. No space is left untouched.<sup>93</sup>*

*"Ae ho'opuka i kai ka lā o Unulau" "The sun rises over the sea of Unulau"<sup>94</sup>*

"Ho'opuka" has many meanings. One is "to emerge to light, as from darkness"<sup>95</sup> - a sun rising. Another meaning of ho'opuka is "to perforate, make a hole or opening."<sup>96</sup> Earlier K had explained that ho'opuka are a way of introducing yourself into the space and claiming space. She asked us to put fire into the dancing and the chanting, invoking

---

<sup>93</sup> My fieldnotes, March 2018.

<sup>94</sup> "Ho'opuka I Kai Ka La - Hula Kai," Huapala - Hawaiian Music and Hula Archives, accessed July 28, 2022, [https://www.huapala.org/Chants/Hoopuka\\_I\\_Kai.html](https://www.huapala.org/Chants/Hoopuka_I_Kai.html).

<sup>95</sup> "puka," in *Nā Puke Wehewehe 'Ōlelo Hawai'i*, n.d., Ulukau - the Hawaiian Electronic Library, <https://wehewehe.org/gsd/2.85/cgi-bin/hdict?e=q-11000-00---off-0hdict--00-1----0-10-0---0---0direct-10-DW--4--textpukuielbert%2ctextmamaka%2ctextandrew%2ctextparker%2ctextpeplace%2ctextclark%2ctextchd%2ctextxthllt----0-1l-11-haw-Zz-1---Zz-1-home-puka--00-4-1-00-0-4----0-0-11-00-0utfZz-8-00&a=d&d=D19058#hero-bottom-banner>.

<sup>96</sup> "puka."

us to deeply participate, in this case, to put our all into the movements, the chanting, and into our intention in dancing.

I juxtapose this moment with a memory from my hula training with Malie. It was right after our class had ended, Pam, my hula sister, and I were talking to Kumu Malie, who had just gotten back from completing and passing her kumu hula test. Kumu Malie passes me a wooden circle a little smaller than the size of my palm. On it is the seal for our hālau - Hālau Makahawi or Riverside hālau. Two mountains are drawn in black in the center with three horizontal lines on the top and bottom and two curved lines on either side. Kumu Malie tells us how she designed the seal—it has two rivers, one for Riverside and one for Washington. She then brings out a cream colored sash with a larger, more complicated design hand stamped in dark rust red ink. It's Kumu Malie's seal combined with her kumu, Kumu Ka maka hiwa o ka lani (Aunty Onie)'s seal to show and respect lineage. I hold the seal in my hand and place it against the sash, wood on cloth, rivers and mountains, a dancing lineage. Pam remarks something to the effect of, "this is technical," and in doing so, names hula technique as more than just dance.



Figure 9 – Picture of Kumu Malie's seal

I highlight these two moments with K and Kumu Malie as a way to introduce the technique of hula and what it requires of its participants, including dancing, chanting, intention, craft, lineage, and land. It is important to acknowledge and recognize that hula is more than movements because it respects and grounds hula as a multi-faceted cultural form. Recalling the introduction to this chapter, the kaona or deeper layers of hula technique include aspects like chanting and crafting. To ‘ai ha‘a is to deepen one’s participation, both physically in space as well as by engaging in some of these deeper elements. In an article for *Hana Hou! The Magazine of Hawaiian Airlines*, Liza Simon writes, “at a landmark hula conference in 2000, older kūpuna [elders] grumbled that new hula enthusiasts were learning only choreography—just the form and nothing else. The kūpuna who’d gathered resolved to build an awareness of hula as one of the world’s sacred dances.”<sup>97</sup> I underscore the concern that hula was only being transmitted as choreography and not as a deeply rich, vital, and complex cultural practice. Referencing the island metaphor, only the surface of hula was being valued. I remember Kumu Kawika mentioning that many hula workshops around the world are only focused on choreography, and because of this, he has to do comprehensive basics workshops all the time. Both the kūpuna concern and my kumu’s comment emphasize a downside to the globalization of hula: choreography, perhaps the easier aspect to disseminate, is taking over what hula as a technique indexes.

While the following description refers specifically to Kumu Kawika’s hālau, all of these aspects are a part of hula technique.<sup>98</sup> Hālau o Keikiali‘i website reads: “Our

---

<sup>97</sup> Liza Simon, “Hula U.,” *Hana Hou!*, accessed September 4, 2021, <https://hanahou.com/15.5/hula-u>.

<sup>98</sup> “Hula practitioners need to know a lot more than just the movements of a hula. Studying and speaking ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i provides a great foundation for understanding mele. Knowledge of Hawaiian history is also

primary focus is on cultural traditions, including hula kahiko (ancient dance), hula ‘auana (modern dance), oli (chant), mele (traditional songs), hīmeni (modern songs), nā mea hula (arts, crafts, implements), lole hula (hula attire), ‘ōlelo (language), and mo‘olelo (stories).”<sup>99</sup> The structure of Kumu Kawika’s hula basics workshop loosely follows this breakdown. The first workshop I went to was in 2018 in Manhattan. The class started with a pule (prayer), then we worked on language by learning the Hawaiian alphabet. The *a e i o u ke pe la mu nu ‘okina* became *aaaaaaaa, eeeeeee, iiiiii, oooooo, uuuuu* as we moved on to chanting. Years of thinking I was tone deaf have made me shy and ashamed when singing but Kumu tells us to sing from our gut. We chant a song together. We then learned to pa’i the ipu drum—learning the different drumming rhythms used in hula. He teaches us kūkū, pā, and kāhela, the three basic beats that Kumu hula George Na‘ope, (my kumu’s kumu’s kumu - my great grand kumu, if you will), taught his students many moons ago.<sup>100</sup> We raise the ipu a couple inches off the ground with our left hand and gently, though assertively, pound it down, making a **thump** against the floor. Then we hit the side of the ipu with the flat of our right fingers twice, **swack swack**. **Thump swack swack** or “**u tete**” as noted in *Nā mele hula* by Nona Beamer.<sup>101</sup>

After we had covered the aural parts of hula (language and music), Kumu Kawika worked on hula movement basics like kāholo, ‘uwehe, hela, and holohuki. As he drums,

---

very important. Dancers often are asked to make their own implements, so knowledge of construction methods and materials is necessary.” “Hula,” Kumukahi, accessed December 30, 2020, [http://www.kumukahi.org/units/ke\\_ao\\_akua/mana/hula](http://www.kumukahi.org/units/ke_ao_akua/mana/hula).

<sup>99</sup> “About Us,” Hālau O Keikialii, accessed May 16, 2022, <https://www.keikialii.com/more-about-us>.

<sup>100</sup> Etua Lopes and Simon, “Aloha, Uncle,” Hana Hou!, May 13, 2010, <https://hanahou.com/13.2/aloha-uncle>.

<sup>101</sup> Nona Beamer, *Na Mele Hula: A Collection of Hawaiian Hula Chants* (Lā‘ie, Hawai‘i: Honolulu, Hawaii: Brigham Young Univ Inst Polynesian, 1987), 3. quoted in Renee Pualani Louis, “Hawaiian Place Names: Storied Symbols in Hawaiian Performance Cartographies” (University of Hawai‘i, 2008), 166, <https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/84d1f791-21c9-4e95-9152-52e88b76789d/content://www.hulapreservation.org/hulatyp.asp?ID=20>

**u u u tete**, we kāholo to the right. Our knees stay bent the entire time, with our feet flat on the ground as we step towards the right wall - right foot, left foot, right foot, left foot taps next to right and then we do the same moving towards the left wall. Our feet match the ipu beats - **u u step step u tete step foot taps**. Having incorporated movement into our lesson, we move on to the last part of the workshop—learning the story, meaning, and movements of the hula, “He Mele no Keikiali’i Ka’iulani.” Kumu Kawika Alfiche wrote, composed, and choreographed this hula in honor of Princess Ka’iulani.<sup>102</sup> This scaffolded and multilayered workshop meant that the various parts of hula were being put on equal footing and taught together. It also gave us students the opportunity to participate in all aspects of hula, enabling us to start seeing and practicing hula as a multidimensional cultural practice.

### **Hula’s Multimedia/Multimodalities**

Respect for hula also manifests as a call to respect the technique as a multi-layered cultural form. As historian Jennifer Shennan describes, “throughout Oceania, the most characteristic dance forms are, to use a contemporary phrase, “multi-media.” Dance is integrated with poetry and music...”<sup>103</sup> Hula is not just multimedia in that the dance, text, and music function together; the dancers are also expected to perform these various types of knowledge, often simultaneously. For example, depending on the hula, one might be called to chant, dance, and play an instrument at the same time.

---

<sup>102</sup> My fieldnotes, July 2018.

<sup>103</sup> Jennifer Shennan, “Approaches to the Study of Dance in Oceania: Is the Dancer Carrying an Umbrella or Not?,” *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 90, no. 2 (1981): 194, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20705557>.



Performing multimodally, therefore, is a part of hula technique, and what can make hula difficult:

The skill required to perform in several modes at once is very considerable and, in heightened performance, such a composition is rendered with concentration and intensity of movement. The structure of such a dance form is held by the constraints of relating one part to another; one element cannot freely be developed beyond another.<sup>104</sup>

The dancer and the dancing do not exist separate from the other elements of hula. Instead, the dancer helps to weave these media together, emphasizing hula as multilayered and multimodal.

Lani exemplifies hula's multimodality when she discusses good and bad hula dancing from the perspective of the dancer rather than an audience member. Lani's description focuses on her body as a nexus of connections. She describes bad hula dancing as feeling like: "when I don't know the mana'o (meaning) of the song. I can't get connected with the melody. My heart is not in it. I am out of sync with everyone."<sup>105</sup> In this description, bad hula dancing is equated with feeling disconnected at various bodily and sensual (of the senses) levels. Not knowing the meaning of the song also implies not knowing the kaona (hidden meaning) of the song either, indicating a disconnect in understanding. Along with being disconnected from the music, the audience, and the dancers, another sensual disconnect Lani mentions is a misplaced or absent heart. We can understand this as not being fully present or engaged in the moment, and therefore, not being able to fully participate or access what I'm calling body kaona, or the hidden depths of one's being. For Lani, bad dancing seems superficial, literally, in that there is difficulty making connections (there are too many disconnects).

---

<sup>104</sup> Shennan, 195.

<sup>105</sup> Lani in discussion with author, May 2019.

Good dancing, on the other hand, is experienced as compounding connections. Lani describes good dancing as “when I am able to feel the poetry and melody of the song come together through my dancing. When my rhythm with the music is effortless, it just flows together,”<sup>106</sup> indicating that hula as a multi-media cultural form, is being experienced as one. In other words, the poetry, meaning, music, and movement are connecting and fueling each other; they are woven together in the body. Although Lani did not label this experience as an instance of ‘ai ha’a or kaona, I invoke both of these terms to assert that when all of these elements come together, the dancers’ experience is deepened. Indeed, the more points of connection to something, the stronger the bond. While good and bad dancing are subjective, I analyze Lani’s description here because it helps to elucidate the complexity of hula as a technique. Besides movement and physical dexterity, it requires intricate management of mediums, connections, and senses in service of attaining synergy, some of which I’ll elaborate on in the upcoming sections.

Hula as a multimedia and multimodal form further manifests in how the body expresses knowledge. Part of respecting hula is committing to full-bodied participation meaning different body parts are responsible for multiple actions and skills, some visible while dancing and others not. The hips, feet, and hands are not the only body parts expected to produce movement or knowledge. The mouth is expected to chant and speak Hawaiian. The hands are expected to both make the gesture of a pua (flower) on stage and to pick and gather flowers and other plants in order to weave and make them into adornments for ankles, wrists, necks, and heads. Hands are also expected to sew clothing, to craft implements, and to play implements. The face is expected to emote as

---

<sup>106</sup> Lani in discussion with author, May 2019.

well as to convey understanding. Many body parts are expected to participate in hula at various levels of complexity and depth.

## **Waha - Mouth**

The mouth in hula does not stay quiet as it does in other dance forms. Dancers participate verbally by chanting or singing either for the duration of the hula or as part of call and response with the ho'opa'a (drummers and chanters) and kumu. For example, while the kumu and ho'opa'a sing and chant the first stanza, the dancers might sing along for the repetition of the stanza.<sup>107</sup> Dancers are also responsible for the kāhea or the "recital of the first lines of a stanza by the dancer as a cue to the chanter,"<sup>108</sup> an aural connection between dancers and musicians. Sometimes, in class when we are practicing a hula, our kumu will say, "I don't see or hear you chanting," reminding us that the choreography alone does not suffice. Part of chanting involves the intricate and delicate choreography of tongue, palate, teeth, and lips.<sup>109</sup> For non-Hawaiian language speakers, learning correct pronunciation is a part of hula technique as is learning various

---

<sup>107</sup> In many hula, each stanza is performed twice before moving to the next one.

<sup>108</sup> "kāhea," in *Nā Puke Wehewehe 'Ōlelo Hawai'i*, n.d., Ulukau - the Hawaiian Electronic Library, <https://wehewehe.org/gsd/2.85/cgi-bin/hdict?e=q-11000-00---off-0hdict--00-1----0-10-0---0---0direct-10-DW--4--textpukuiebert-----0-1l--11-haw-Zz-1---Zz-1-home-kahea--00-4-1-00-0--4-----0-0-11-00-0utfZz-8-00&a=d&d=D5897#hero-bottom-banner>.

<sup>109</sup> "Hula people are quick to say that language is the foundation of dance. Hula, we say, is language-driven. The words come first. You can't have hula without language. And so on. If we are to do more than pay lip service to this principle, we must pay more careful attention to what we are chanting and how we are chanting it. If we can spend hundreds of dollars on costumes and lei, if we can spend hundreds of hours on the mechanics of hands and feet, then we should be willing to give at least equal attention to our mother tongue. Otherwise, we'll continue to reside harmoniously in the nose." KThei de Silva, "Noho Pono i Ka Ihu – Tips from a Hawaiian Language Judge - Ka'iwakīloumoku - Hawaiian Cultural Center," Ka'iwakīloumoku Pacific Indigenous Insitute, accessed July 29, 2022, <https://kaiwakiloumoku.ksbe.edu/article/essays-noho-pono-i-ka-ihu-tips-from-a-hawaiian-language-judge>.

styles of chanting.<sup>110</sup>

The physical production of chanting is important because it centers the language and stories of hula. The 'ōlelo no'eau (Hawaiian proverb), I le'a ka hula i ka ho'opa'a can be translated as "the hula is pleasing because of the drummer."<sup>111</sup> Another way of understanding this 'ōlelo no'eau is as, "the lesser details that one pays little attention to are just as important as the major ones. Although the attention is given to the dancer, the drummer and chanter play an important role in the dance."<sup>112</sup> This 'ōlelo no'eau emphasizes that hula is more than movement and solidifies the role of chanting. The chanter and drummer are integral parts of hula, not only because they provide the music or sound with which to dance to, but also because they provide the words and meaning through which the dancing is made possible. The mo'olelo and mele or story and song of the hula is the heart of hula. Kumu hula Keali'i Reichel explains:

The modern thought about hula is that it tells a story, but it really doesn't. It's one of the few dances in the world in which you have to have the words of the text in order for the dance to exist. Without words, you really can't tell what the dancers are saying. As our people became less fluent in their own language over the years, the hula became more full of gestures, and the shift of the focus went away from the poetry of the particular song or chant, and went onto the movement of the dancers.<sup>113</sup>

Recognizing the importance of mo'olelo and mele is part of understanding and respecting the depths of hula. Understanding here serves as part of hula technique. Lani describes the ideal hula dancer as "one who is dedicated to learn the mo'olelo (story, meaning) of the hula... is not just in it to perform." Participating to engage in the culture

---

<sup>110</sup> See <https://amykstillman.wordpress.com/2009/11/24/oli-five-genres/> for more information

<sup>111</sup> olelooftheday, "Le'a Joy, Pleasure, Happiness," Tumblr, '*Ōlelo of the Day* (blog), accessed July 28, 2022, <https://olelooftheday.tumblr.com/post/20857421387/lea>. From '*Ōlelo No'eau* by Mary Kawena Pukui

<sup>112</sup> olelooftheday.

<sup>113</sup> "INTERVIEW: Keali i Reichel on Maui, Hula & Hawaiian Culture," *Green Global Travel* (blog), December 3, 2010, <https://greenglobaltravel.com/interview-keali-i-reichel-hula/>.

versus participating for spectacle connotes participating deeply.

### **Na'au - Gut<sup>114</sup>**

Pronouncing and understanding the stories of hula are a part of a hula dancer's kuleana (responsibility). Sarinah shares, "I respect my kumu and therefore I want to show respect for the culture and language. I want to learn the language. I don't want to just recite the language. I try to study it... and know what I'm saying when I'm saying it."<sup>115</sup> Sarinah distinguishes between "reciting" or repeating the words superficially and "knowing" the language which involves feeling and understanding. Although words and songs leave the body through the mouth, understanding is focalized in a different body part. In Hawaiian epistemology, "emotions and intellect were traditionally associated with the gut,"<sup>116</sup> which connects the gut to understanding what one is speaking about. Sarinah notes that one must "learn" and "study," marking some of the hidden labor required in hula technique particularly for those who do not speak Hawaiian. One must make an effort, inside and outside of class, to imbue one's body with the language.

In addition to understanding, the gut is also responsible for physical initiation of chanting. A correction kumu would give us is to chant from our guts, not our throats. This is difficult because it requires committing to being vulnerable. One must 'ai ha'a (ground/dig) within yourself, accessing the hidden layers of feeling. Chanting from the gut expresses understanding, emotion, and meaning. During our interview, Sarinah and I

---

<sup>114</sup> "Aloha is the life force found in [Native Hawaiian] na'au [gut], the place where intelligence thrives." Meyer, *Ho'oulu*, 9. quoted in Imada, *Aloha America*, 9.

<sup>115</sup> Sarinah in discussion with author, October 2018.

<sup>116</sup> Mary Kawena Pukui, E. W. Haertig, and Catherine A. Lee, *Nānā i Ke Kumu* (Hui Hanai, 1972), 188. quoted in Meyer, *Ho'oulu*, 125.

discussed finding your chanting voice. Sarinah notes, that many people "when trying it for the first time they're really embarrassed. You really are putting yourself out there... Finding your voice. Mine is really deep and full and it feels... you just feel it. Once you find it, you just feel it."<sup>117</sup> When I'm able to initiate from my gut, the chanting does sound and feel different. Sometimes I get goosebumps or I feel a general tingling sense of awareness, of having actually tapped into my body's kaona (hidden levels). Sarinah shares, "the way my kumu explained it to us was like finding that mana in your gut. It's this powerful... its not something pretty. It's your energy coming out. You're asking to be invited to come on to stage. It's a really powerful thing...respect for the dance, respect for the procedure"<sup>118</sup> Sarinah is referring to protocol here. In hula, in order to enter a variety of spaces, including class and stage, one must request permission by performing a chant. This request must be performed deeply (with 'ai ha'a), with effort, care, and intention. If the chant is not performed well enough, you are not allowed entrance and must repeat the chant until the kumu is satisfied. Chanting from the depths of one's body both physically and affectively—the gut—enables one to express this request for permission. In other words, chanting deeply is a way to participate respectfully.

## **Maka - Eyes**

Dancers communicate not only their level of commitment but also their level of understanding of hula via chanting and dancing. In the "Perspectives of Pele Panel" at the Hālauaola conference, Mehanaokalā Hind notes: "when someone is dancing about

---

<sup>117</sup> Sarinah in discussion with author, October 2018.

<sup>118</sup> Sarinah in discussion with author, October 2018.

the pele you can see, oh ok they understand Pele and Hi'iaka this way... it showcases their knowledge and how connected they are. [It tells us] how intimate they are with knowing the variations between the deital forms."<sup>119</sup> This statement shows that understanding of hula is legible to others—if you're dancing superficially, people can tell.

One way understanding is read by others is via the dancers' eyes. In my fieldnotes, I recount the way J, a hula dancer I met at Hālaauola, shares a moment where expressing understanding took precedence over performing the movements.

*J went to a hula research presentation and said it was super good. The presenter had been a judge at the Merrie Monarch festival and was sharing an experience where she was judging a dance. Another judge was super impressed with this one group who was really synchronized and dressed well. Yet the presenter said "Look at their eyes. Nothing there." She followed up by saying it's important to know the mele.*<sup>120</sup>

The second judge was pointing out that one needed to look beyond the choreography (movement) and costuming (aesthetics) to attend to how the dancers were connecting to the mele and expressing their understanding via their expression, their eyes in particular.<sup>121</sup> In this moment, dancer kaona or deep participation is invoked as necessary and discernible.

Similarly, as communications scholar Hikaru Yoshizumi writes, "many kumu hula from Hawai'i commented that facial expression shows if a dancer understands what he/she is dancing about. Some of them also noted that the look of the eyes is also an

---

<sup>119</sup> *Perspectives of Pele Panel at the Ka 'Aha Hula 'O Hālaauola*, Office of Hawaiian Affairs on Facebook Watch (Facebook), accessed September 5, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/officeofhawaiianaffairs/videos/perspectives-of-pele-panel-at-the-ka-%CA%BBaha-hula-%CA%BBo-h%C4%81lauaolathe-office-of-hawaiia/2216925958334050/>.

<sup>120</sup> My fieldnotes, June 2018.

<sup>121</sup> To clarify, I am not asserting that correct execution of movements and choreography of hula is not important; rather, I am reiterating that hula requires more than just physical ability, it requires depth of participation, as this chapter seeks to underscore.

important component when one's dancing."<sup>122</sup> The dancers' regard serves as an indication if they are "just going through the motions" or if they are expressing connection and understanding of the story. As part of her answer, Kumu Hula Snowbird Bento mentions the 'ōlelo no'eau, "Huli (sic) no ka lima, hele no ka maka ... where the hands turn and go, the eyes follow."<sup>123</sup> I always understood this 'ōlelo no'eau as a general rule in hula; the dancers' eyes are in charge of cueing audience members. For instance, dancers look at their hands while dancing to tell the audience that they too should focus their attention on this movement. When taking into account the ocular responsibility of conveying understanding with the eyes, another meaning to this 'ōlelo no'eau became apparent. If the eyes should follow the hands, and the hands take part in telling the story of a hula, the eyes must also follow suit, and contribute in telling the story of the hula.

### Lima – Hands



Figure 10 – Drawing of the hand gestures for pua<sup>124</sup>

---

<sup>122</sup> Hikaru Yoshizumi, "Views of Authenticity of the Hawaiian Hula Within Hawai'i and Japan" (UNIVERSITY OF Hawai'i, 2008), 51.

<sup>123</sup> Yoshizumi, 52.

<sup>124</sup> Drawing by author.



The hands in hula are very active while dancing; hands often make gestures mimicking actions like picking up a flower or using fluttering fingers to indicate a light rain. Along with being a heavily choreographed body part, the hands in hula also serve as tools for craft. As part of my training, I have sawed off the top of a gourd and cleaned it out to make an ipu heke. I have learned different ways to braid and make cording.<sup>125</sup> I have scrubbed and washed leaves to prepare them for weaving. I have sewed pā'ū skirts and tops, all in service of participating and deepening my knowledge of hula technique.



Figure 11 – Kūpe'e (wrist adornment) - leaves woven together using a cloth

In a workshop I took with Kumu Kawika Alfiche, he offered two sections, choreography and craft. I opted to take both. In the craft workshop we learned how to make a kūpe'e, a wrist adornment made from woven leaves. At the beginning of the

---

<sup>125</sup> Kaula and Knots with Umi Kai

workshop, *“the kumu thanked all of us and said we were serious hula people/dancers and that it's 2018, it's time that people know how to make their own things.”*<sup>126</sup> Knowing how to make a kūpe'e or another adornment means becoming self-reliant and increasing one's knowledge of hula technique. Kumu Kawika was highlighting the importance of being able to make the different implements and accoutrements necessary in hula, thereby deepening our ability to participate in hula.

Besides needing to know the technical aspect of craft, the act of making and using one's hands is a transfer of energy. During the Hālauaola hula conference, I stayed in a house with my kumu's original hālau. When we were working on the offering for the opening ceremony<sup>127</sup> altar (using kukui leaves), it was important that each of us participated by weaving some of the leaves so that our 'mana' or energy would be in the offering. This is one way of participating: by including one's presence and energy by laboring. Similarly, at the same hula conference in Hawai'i, Inoa's hālau was asked to help finish making ipu heke (double gourd instruments) for a Japanese hālau who hadn't completed the implements needed to perform in the opening ceremony. Instead of completely finishing the ipu heke, Inoa's hālau made sure to leave a couple of things for the Japanese dancers to do so that the ipu heke had their mana in it, so that they'd belong to them. Making one's own implements, adornments, and clothing is a vital part of hula technique. By creating and crafting, one imbues their mana into the adornments and instruments in a similar way that one fuels energy and life force into movement for dancing and into the gut for chanting.

It is important to note that sometimes it takes time for the desire for deeper

---

<sup>126</sup> My fieldnotes, September 2018.

<sup>127</sup> Ceremony that opened the conference. Conference organizers sent instructors to different islands and different parts of the U.S. to train dancers in the chants and dances for this ceremony.

participation to grow. My roommate at Hālauaola shared that, in the beginning of her hula practice, her hula sisters made her pā'ū skirt and other implements that were needed. After sustained study in hula, she began to want to make the things herself. I had a similar experience where, in the beginning of my training, I didn't want to participate in "craft day" and my kumu and hula sister had to finish my pā'ū skirt. Yet, a few years later, I made my own pā'ū skirt, undergarments, and top for a performance. It took some time, but I started to understand the various levels of hula—craft being one of them. I learned that to show my commitment to hula and to respect hula, I needed to deepen my "handiwork" and diversify the technique of my hands.



Figure 12 – Making the waistband of a pā'ū skirt by pushing a safety pin attached to the elastic



Figure 13 – Pulling elastic through with the help of a friend

### Choosing not to participate as a sign of respect

While not participating can sometimes stem from inexperience and a lack of understanding, other times choosing not to participate can be an act of respect. In our conversation, Leilany, a 27-year-old woman from and living in Mexico, shares that after the hula conference, she watched some of the videos that were taken of the opening ceremony and noticed some people not performing well. She compares this to her own experience deciding to participate in ceremony. Although she had learned the dances for the sunrise ceremony, held in the middle of the hula conference, she had not learned the chants and, because of this, opted not to participate.<sup>128</sup> In choosing not to participate, Leilany emphasizes that the chants are just as important as the choreography—not knowing the chants means not being able to participate fully or completely. Leilany notes, “we didn't want to be in the group dancing if we didn't know it correctly. Because we are respectful of it,” and adds, “I think that because it's not my culture that I have to do it—even if it was my culture—you have to do it with respect.”<sup>129</sup> For Leilany, part of respecting any culture is “doing it right” and doing it fully. Putting the ceremony first, before one’s own desire to “be there,” means respecting the protocol and requirements of the ceremony. Leilany adds, “it’s something that people should know,”<sup>130</sup> demonstrating that part of her training as a hula dancer entails knowing when to participate and when not to participate. Later on, Leilany mentions that it’s possible that people are not as aware of what they can or can’t do. She explains, “before ceremony in Kaua’i, they gave a list of things we were not allowed to do. You can’t sit in this position.

---

<sup>128</sup> Leilany in discussion with author, September 2018.

<sup>129</sup> Leilany in discussion with author, September 2018.

<sup>130</sup> Leilany in discussion with author, September 2018.

You have to be like this. Don't move a lot. They didn't say anything about that this time. Maybe people didn't really know what they were supposed to do.”<sup>131</sup> It is hard to follow protocol if one does not know what the protocol is, which emphasizes the importance of keen observation, as well as putting in the work and time to learn how to participate in hula and Hawaiian culture.

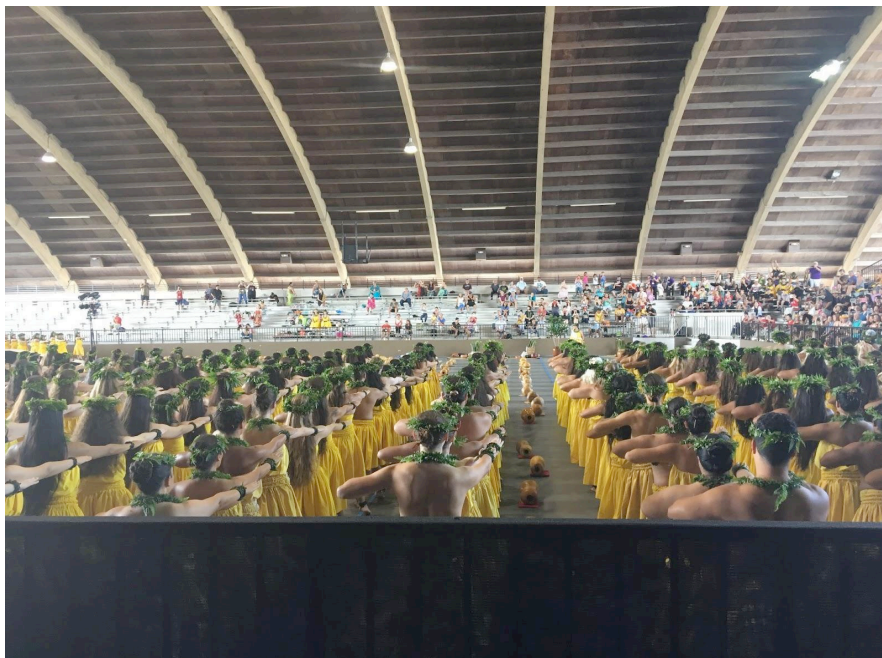


Figure 14 – Dancers at the Opening Ceremony of Hālaauaola in Hilo, Hawai‘i June 2018<sup>132</sup>

When I attended the training for the opening ceremony of Hālaauaola, I was nervous, intimidated, and scared that I wasn't good enough. The person tasked with training us, K, was very clear with her expectations. We only had two days to learn all the dances and the chants. When we came to practice the next day not really knowing

---

<sup>131</sup> Leilany in discussion with author, September 2018.

<sup>132</sup> I took this picture from the audience. I include photos here because the ceremony was open to the public and because it was documented and recorded online. Otherwise, I would not have included photos.

what we had learned the day before, she expressed her disappointment and clarified her expectations. It was clear that we had a *lot* to get through and she needed us to fully commit. Part of the choreography required us to go from standing to kneeling and she made it clear that if you could not do that, you wouldn't be able to participate in the actual ceremony. The level of rigor expected exemplified the importance of the ceremony. Knowing that I wouldn't be able to practice enough to achieve the required standard in the two months before June, I decided not to take part. Joanne felt similarly. For the hula conference held in Kaua'i, she "learned the dances and one of the chants" but she chose not to go: "I didn't go. I wasn't part of it early enough to actually be a participant."<sup>133</sup> Pearl notes that for the Maui conference, she attended but she didn't participate in the ceremonies because she "hadn't been dancing long enough."<sup>134</sup> These examples demonstrate dancers assessing their own abilities and commitment in order to determine if they should participate. The onus here is on respecting the ceremony by putting the needs of the ceremony before one's own desire to participate. In the context of the hālau, Rowe writes, "knowledge had priority over the learner because the primary purpose of our hālau was to preserve knowledge."<sup>135</sup> I see a similar positioning occurring in ceremony—in both situations respect for the knowledge comes first.

Deciding not to participate is not just a decision made with respect to ceremony. Charlotte, a white woman in her mid-forties living in Arizona, talks about how she spent years of her life looking for a place to learn hula. Besides scheduling conflicts and difficulty finding class information, Charlotte shares that one of her concerns was "where

---

<sup>133</sup> Joanne in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>134</sup> Pearl in discussion with author, September 2018.

<sup>135</sup> Rowe, "A Haole in a Hālau: Situating Identity, Practicing Learning," 28.

does the white girl dance?”<sup>136</sup> Her question suggests an understanding of the potential tension of her practicing hula as a white woman and that some places might not want her to participate. Although she didn’t name “permission,” I interpret Charlotte’s search as choosing not to participate until she found the right place for her to dance and to participate respectfully.

Similarly, in searching for a hula class, Sarinah wanted to make sure she was being trained in the culture and history of hula as well. Sarinah recounts, “I was in college... I took a class and I didn’t like the... I hated it. It didn’t really go into the culture. I didn’t feel like it was a cultural, like well-rounded cultural experience. I felt like it was kind of a knockoff of what hula actually was so I never went back.”<sup>137</sup> She read this training space as a “knock-off” of hula because it was, as she described, “tacky,” “plastic,” “over the top nonsense,” and “pretty much appropriative.”<sup>138</sup> Sarinah’s decision to not participate in this group shows that she desired training steeped in culture. It was her decision not to participate that shows her investment and her respect for hula as a cultural experience.

---

<sup>136</sup> Charlotte in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>137</sup> Sarinah in discussion with author, October 2018.

<sup>138</sup> Sarinah in discussion with author, October 2018.

### Section 3: The kumu of hula - Hawai'i and Hālau

Showing respect for hula includes honoring the different sources of hula—both geographic and genealogic. Kanaka Maoli philosopher Manulani Aluli Meyer explains, "knowledge, for Native Hawaiians, is grounded in the natural environment and in the ancestral line of family... This is a spiritual concept. Hawaiians valued and solicited understanding of their world from their ancestors, both alive and dead, and from elements of the natural world."<sup>139</sup> Connecting this to Rowe's understanding of hula inculcating a "respect for knowledge,"<sup>140</sup> part of the technique of hula is respect for the land as well as ancestors/elders/teachers.

#### Hawai'i

The islands of Hawai'i are integral to hula since many hula are about navigating and living in Hawai'i. Knowing the meaning of the mele includes understanding the words and ideally, knowing the land, both of which provide depth and more opportunity for connection. When I asked Leilany what goes through her head when dancing, she talks about how difficult it is for her to dance hula because of language and land barriers, which limit the connection forged between the dancer, music, movement, and meaning.<sup>141</sup> As Leilany describes, dancing about places that she's already been is easier because she can "feel the connection."<sup>142</sup> When she hasn't been to a place in Hawai'i, Leilany researches the places she's dancing about.<sup>143</sup> A seemingly small thing, this

---

<sup>139</sup> Manulani Aluli Meyer, *Ho'oulu: Our Time of Becoming : Collected Early Writings of Manulani Meyer* (ʻAi Pōhaku Press, 2018), 93.

<sup>140</sup> Rowe, "A Haole in a Hālau: Situating Identity, Practicing Learning," 28.

<sup>141</sup> Leilany in discussion with author, September 2018.

<sup>142</sup> Leilany in discussion with author, September 2018.

<sup>143</sup> Leilany in discussion with author, September 2018.



online labor outside of the studio is an act of respect because it enables Leilany to participate more deeply. It also shows that she understands that hula is inseparable from Hawaiian culture, land, and knowledge. In a similar way that Sarinah wanted to know the words, Leilany wants to know the land.



Figure 15 – Photo taken while driving around the Big Island, June 2018

The hula conference Ka‘aha Hālauaola works as a way to instill hula as more than choreography and as vital to Hawaiian knowledge. This conference was created with the intent to enrich and deepen participants' engagement and understanding of hula as a cultural form. Following the path of Hi‘iaka, the conference began in 2001 on the Big Island, and every four years was hosted by a different island: Maui in 2005, O‘ahu in 2009, Kaua‘i in 2014, and it arrived back on the Big Island in 2018.<sup>144</sup> Meant to “elevate the practice of hula in Hawai‘i and everywhere,” the director of Lālākea Foundation, Dr. Noe Noe Wong Wilson, explains that the conference includes “experiencing high level

---

<sup>144</sup> Big Island Video News, *Ka ‘Aha Hula ‘O Hālauaola Opens (Jun. 17, 2018)*, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5h2v6InOkM>.

quality learning through workshops, presentations, and hula activities.”<sup>145</sup> Kumu hula Nathan Kalama adds, “it also includes na pono hula, which is intensive hands-on opportunity to spend time with masters of a given craft.”<sup>146</sup>

By highlighting the importance of Hawai‘i and by refocusing hula as more than choreography, hula is being reterritorialized, re-homed both in the islands of Hawai‘i and as a technique. Said differently, Hālauaola was a way to bring hula back to Hawai‘i and to bring practitioners from around the world to the source, the foundation of hula. At a panel discussion during the hula conference in Hilo, one of the founding members of the conference and famous kumu hula, Hokulani Holt-Padilla said,

The reason Hālauaola was created was to bring the world to Hawai‘i. As hula people, all of our mele is of Hawai‘i. Hālauaola was created to bring, in the words of Edward Kanahēle, the world to the nexus of hula. ikō pau. You have come here to learn about this so that you can relate it to you wherever you are. We are here to give you us. You are here to learn and relate it to you. We don’t do that for you. You do that for you. So welcome to the nexus of hula.<sup>147</sup>

In some ways, this conference takes part in dance tourism<sup>148</sup> discourse and the tension between tourism as an industry at once exploitative and damaging as well as economically necessary. This, however, does not negate the importance of Hālauaola, which was initiated not as a way to earn money but as a way to correct and reclaim hula, re-configuring power back to the sources of hula. As the ‘ōlelo no’eau states, “Nānā i ke Kumu,” “look to the source,” which can be understood as “seek answers” from elders or

---

<sup>145</sup> Big Island Video News.

<sup>146</sup> Aikane Alapai, *Ka ‘Aha Hula ‘O Hālauaola 2014*, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HwjKZByJ0hk>.

<sup>147</sup> *Perspectives of Pele Panel at the Ka ‘Aha Hula ‘O Hālauaola*.

<sup>148</sup> Jasmine Johnson’s work on “homecoming” trips to West Africa has some echoes with these trips to Hawai‘i. Jasmine Elizabeth Johnson, “Dancing Africa, Making Diaspora” (UC Berkeley, 2012), 11, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/85t825hq>.

from teachers.<sup>149</sup> In Hawaiian understanding, Hawai'i is itself an ancestor and as such respecting Hawai'i is vital. As explained by Ka 'Imi Na'auao O Hawai'i Nei Institute, the proverb, Nānā i ke kumu, "also contains a more profound admonition not to lose sight of hula's roots (kumu) in the ancient protocols of Hawai'i and Polynesia. If it loses this connection, hula can indeed become just one more style of dancing. How po'e hula (hula people) cope with this challenge will determine how hula develops in this century and centuries to come."<sup>150</sup>

This admonition speaks to hula's spread across the globe and it also gives more context to Kumu hula Holt-Padilla's words. Holt-Padilla's response was prompted by an audience member asking how non-Hawaiians should connect to hula. Padilla notes that it is the responsibility of the participants to "relate" to hula and make connections to their own lives. The conference and hula itself are offering ways to understand the world via hula and Hawaiian knowledge, as Holt-Padilla states, "we are here to give you us."<sup>151</sup> In other words, the conference is there to highlight the roots of hula in Hawai'i, not necessarily to translate the hula for others. As Kaumakaiwa Kanaka'ole states, when practicing hula one is "functioning in the modality of hula," one is being exposed to a "hula perspective" and "hula vernacular."<sup>152</sup>

Hawai'i is the "nexus of hula,"<sup>153</sup> meaning it is both what fuels hula and also a place where one is tested. The island metaphor for knowledge, introduced earlier in this

---

<sup>149</sup> Charles Kauluwehi Maxwell, "NANA I KE KUMU - Look to the Source," moolelo.com, accessed July 29, 2022, <https://www.moolelo.com/nana.html>.

<sup>150</sup> "History of Hula | Ka'Imi Na'auao O Hawai'i Nei Institute," accessed August 30, 2021, <https://kaimi.org/education/history-of-hula/>.

<sup>151</sup> *Perspectives of Pele Panel at the Ka 'Aha Hula 'O Hālauiola.*

<sup>152</sup> *Perspectives of Pele Panel at the Ka 'Aha Hula 'O Hālauiola.*

<sup>153</sup> Hokulani Holt in *Perspectives of Pele Panel at the Ka 'Aha Hula 'O Hālauiola.*

chapter, exists in its literal form in that the islands of Hawai'i are replete with knowledge. Many hula are about how to “survive in an island ecosystem”<sup>154</sup> as Kaumakaiwa explains.<sup>155</sup> During the hula conference, “surviving in Hawai'i” took on another dimension in that participating in the hula conference was a way to assess and test one's<sup>156</sup> hula knowledge as well as one's commitment to hula. These “tests” help clarify one's own connection to Hawai'i and help to determine one's future participation. For example, Leilany recalls one of the dancers in her hālau going to Hālauaola and realizing that hula “wasn't her thing;” she stopped attending classes after returning from Hawai'i.<sup>157</sup> On the other hand, Yanirah shares, “now that we are back and dancing at our Hālau, I feel more motivated, I want to learn more and more.”<sup>158</sup>

For Rebecca and Leilany, going to Hawai'i helped to confirm their understanding of themselves as dancers. Rebecca shares initially being concerned that her knowledge of hula might not be sufficient because she lives and trains in Germany.<sup>159</sup> Being asked to perform “protocol in Hawai'i” was intimidating because one's knowledge of protocol is being tested at the source. Despite her concerns, Rebecca realized that she was able to keep up.<sup>160</sup> Leilany shares that before going to Hawai'i she wouldn't have called herself a dancer, but “after those trips to Hawai'i, I kind of feel like I'm doing this right. Like I

---

<sup>154</sup> *Perspectives of Pele Panel at the Ka 'Aha Hula 'O Hālauaola.*

<sup>155</sup> For example, one of the hula I learned was about finding water on Kaho'olawe.

<sup>156</sup> Rowe describes, “testing in hālau was always a matter of hō'ike.” Hō'ike is “showing what one knows.” Rowe, “A Haole in a Hālau: Situating Identity, Practicing Learning,” 24. Perhaps the “ultimate” hō'ike is participating in hula in Hawai'i.

<sup>157</sup> Leilany in discussion with author, September 2018.

<sup>158</sup> Yanirah in discussion with author, September 2018.

<sup>159</sup> Rebecca in discussion with author, September 2018.

<sup>160</sup> Rebecca in discussion with author, September 2018.

haven't felt out of place or something so I would identify myself as a hula dancer."<sup>161</sup>

Going to Hawai'i allowed Leilany to see that she was doing hula "right," not just in how she was executing movements but also that she was in the "right place." She explains, "I was in the place I had to be for dancing. You know. I think about this mountain and I can see it right there. So I know I am at the right place."<sup>162</sup> Leilany felt 'in place' being in Hawai'i and 'in place' with her knowledge. Leilany didn't stick out as "other" but rather she felt like she belonged: "I felt like I was just from another hālau."<sup>163</sup> Being and dancing in Hawai'i made her feel integrated and connected, and therefore allowed her to affirm herself as a hula dancer.

Furthermore, being in Hawai'i allowed Leilany to develop some geographic familiarity, connection, and knowledge. She didn't have to do online research to create a spatial connection because she was in Hawai'i—she could live it. Living it is important because it engenders experience. Meyer calls experience, "the most important aspect of a Hawaiian knowledge structure."<sup>164</sup> She elaborates,

It is as most mentors reminded me: practice culture, experience culture, live culture. It is no longer enough simply to learn the history or language in an academic setting- one must teach how to fish in the language, how to weave lauhala in the language, how to mālama 'āina (taking care of the land) via language. It is a call to practice.<sup>165</sup>

Being and dancing in Hawai'i and attending Hālauaola allowed participants from around the world to experience and work in the modality of hula.

---

<sup>161</sup> Leilany in discussion with author, September 2018.

<sup>162</sup> Leilany in discussion with author, September 2018.

<sup>163</sup> Leilany in discussion with author, September 2018.

<sup>164</sup> Meyer, *Ho'oulu*, 159.

<sup>165</sup> Meyer, 159.

## Kumu and Hālau

“Kumu” means source in Hawaiian language<sup>166</sup> and while Hawai‘i is the kumu of hula, kumu hula are hula teachers or hula sources who lead hālau (hula schools). When knowledge of Hawai‘i is not available, the kumu hula and hālau serve, even more so, as access points to Hawaiian knowledge. Both Stan and Jennifer note the difference between practicing in Hawai‘i and outside of Hawai‘i. Stan mentions being able to interact with the land, water, and air of Hawai‘i. He describes processing lauhala (cleaning and getting the leaves of the hala tree ready to be used for crafts) in the ocean and in community with others in Hawai‘i versus doing it inside in his workroom when he’s in Washington state.<sup>167</sup> Jennifer explains, “it is different because you are there in the islands and you have all the mana from the ‘āina seeping into you. When you learn on the Mainland, you are displaced from that and so even though you are absorbing the mana from those around you, it’s not in the land.”<sup>168</sup> In absence of Hawai‘i, the kumu becomes Hawai‘i land and culture embodied, emphasizing the importance of the kumu<sup>169</sup> and the hālau as sources of knowledge.

---

<sup>166</sup> “Kumu,” in *Nā Puke Wehewehe ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i*, Ulukau - the Hawaiian Electronic Library, accessed July 29, 2022, <https://wehewehe.org/gsd/2.85/cgi-bin/hdict?e=q-11000-00---off-0hdict--00-1----0-10-0---0---0direct-10-DW--4--textpukuielbert%2ctextmamaka%2ctextandrew%2ctextparker%2ctextpeplace%2ctextclark%2ctextchd%2ctextxthllt----0-1l--11-haw-Zz-1---Zz-1-home-kumu--00-4-1-00-0--4----0-0-11-00-0utfZz-8-00&a=d&d=D9786#hero-bottom-banner>.

<sup>167</sup> Stan in discussion with author, July 2018.

<sup>168</sup> Jennifer in discussion with author, August 2018.

<sup>169</sup> Huamakāhikina Kumu Hula Coalition composed The Huamakāhikina Declaration of the Integrity, Stewardship, & Protection of Hula “to protect and advance the practice of hula, and to prevent it’s continued economic exploitation and appropriation.” “Hula Declaration,” Huamakāhikina, accessed July 29, 2022, <https://www.huamakāhikina.org>.

The hālau acts as a vital place of learning. Philosopher Felip Martí-Jufresa theorizes, “home is where you know how,”<sup>170</sup> thus equating home to knowing. The hālau teaches many aspects of hula technique like movement and chanting; it also teaches students how to know and how to be—how to participate. Specifically, the kumu of a hālau helps to structure how people participate. For example, Charlotte’s kumu helps her students to participate in hula by bridging a potential dissonance in belief. Charlotte explains, “my kumu is also not of that religion or cultural background. Like her family is from Hawai’i but they are originally Filipino...So she understands that awkward feeling that some of us have with kahiko and so she will pick the kahiko dances that are dancing and chanting about, not chanting to.”<sup>171</sup> Charlotte notes not wanting to “betray” herself or be a “hypocrite” by chanting something she doesn’t believe in; chanting about Hawaiian gods alleviates some of the tension that comes with participating in a different cultural belief system. The change in preposition from “about” to “to” is a change in intention—from supplication to information, which, for some people, helps them to participate more fully.

Another way that kumus help to facilitate participation is through talk story. Pearl recounts an experience at the first hula conference she went to on Maui where she was able to show the depth of her knowledge because of her training. At a bus stop, a woman from Hawai’i asked Pearl and her hula sister about some of things she didn’t understand about the opening ceremony. The woman had participated in the ceremony as had Pearl’s hula sister; Pearl had not participated because she hadn’t been dancing

---

<sup>170</sup> Felip Martí-Jufresa, “Petite Logique De L’exil/Little Logics of Exile” (Serial Migrants and Identity/The Arts of Migration Conference/Exhibition/Performance, The Center for Ideas and Society at the University of California, Riverside, Riverside, CA, 2016).

<sup>171</sup> Charlotte in discussion with author, July 2018.

long enough. Yet and still, Pearl was able to explain what happened during the ceremony. When the woman asked, “how do you know that,” Pearl responded:

Because they explained it to us. They explained the whole process, I think it was the ‘awa ceremony, I don't remember what it was. But here I've been dancing for less of a year but because of the people we have parenting us in hula we actually knew what was going on. And when I was telling her you know we talk story every night and we discuss these things and they explain things to us and stuff. She's like Oh gosh I wish our hālau did that they don't ever discuss things or explain things and so she didn't know that.<sup>172</sup>

Akin to oral history,<sup>173</sup> storytelling, and conversation, talk story is a way of sharing and imparting knowledge in Hawaiian culture. In Pearl's hālau, it is used as a way to help inculcate dancers in Hawaiian culture and to teach protocol and etiquette. Talk story is a way to help dancers become more engaged in Hawaiian culture, to help them gain understanding.

Shifting the focus from kumu to student, observation is an important facet of participation in a Hawaiian learning environment, especially a hālau. Meyer explains, “the fact that ‘ike means ‘to see’ and also ‘to know’ brings us to how vision educates, how looking teaches, how watching informs.”<sup>174</sup> The eyes are an integral part to obtaining knowledge or learning. The ‘ōlelo no‘eau sums it up: “Pa‘a ka waha, nānā ka maka; hana ka lima. Shut the mouth; observe with the eyes; work with the hands. (One learns by listening, observing and doing).”<sup>175</sup> The reproductive labor of learning is placed on the eyes and hands for observing and doing whereas the mouth is asked to be

---

<sup>172</sup> Pearl in discussion with author, September 2018.

<sup>173</sup> “Talk Story Festival,” City and County of Honolulu, accessed July 29, 2022, <https://www.honolulu.gov/parks/program/182-site-dpr-cat/1692-talk-story-festival.html>.

<sup>174</sup> Meyer, *Ho‘oulu*, 162.

<sup>175</sup> POV, “On Language:,” *POV | American Documentary Inc.* (blog), January 17, 2004, <http://archive.pov.org/americanaloha/on-language>.



quiet.<sup>176</sup> As Pearl explains, “we are taught if you want to know something, ask. But in Hawai’i they don’t ask. If you want to know something, you listen or you watch.”<sup>177</sup> Asking questions and observing are two different learning *and* participation styles. I remember during one of the dance workshops at Hālaauaola, the kumu had gone over the choreography and ran it with us a couple of times. He stopped and asked if we had any questions. No one raised their hand and he said something like, “No one has questions? You’ve been trained well.” He then assured us that we could ask a question if we had any.<sup>178</sup> He was commenting and, in some ways, commending us on knowing that questions weren’t the Hawaiian way of learning, preferring observation.

To reiterate, ideal participation in hula settings manifests as fully engaging the eyes, ears, and the rest of the body to notice and glean as much information as possible. This places responsibility on the student for their learning and situates learning as a fully embodied experience. Joanne shares,

Too many people have gotten to the point where they expect to be taught things. And they don’t realize how much they can learn on their own. And so what they do. You abdicate responsibility. And you give it to someone else. So it’s up to them to tell you what to do and whatever else. That’s one of the good things about hula where you’re supposed to keep your two eyes open and your one mouth more on the quiet side. Using your two ears to see and hear and absorb whatever and use your brain to help yourself get to where you want to go.<sup>179</sup>

This is not to say that one should learn hula by themselves. Rather, it is a call for developing and honing observation skills so that the weight of responsibility does not fall

---

<sup>176</sup> This is a different perception from Western spaces where people are encouraged to speak up and ask questions.

<sup>177</sup> Pearl in discussion with author, September 2018.

<sup>178</sup> My fieldnotes, June 2018.

<sup>179</sup> Joanne in discussion with author, July 2018.

solely on the teacher or on having knowledge dictated.<sup>180</sup> It means one has to work at becoming more sensitive and able to notice nuances. As Meyer theorizes, "the art of paying attention is indeed a culturally specific 'deep internalized knowledge.' It is shaped by a culture with a particular moral posture and achieved only through practice,"<sup>181</sup> reinforcing observation as knowledge as well as an instance of deep participation and of respect. Hula and Hawaiian culture values learning from nature and the environment, and this knowledge can only be gleaned through observation. One cannot necessarily ask questions and get direct answers from the sun or the ocean. Therefore, observational learning situates humans within nature and structures their participation.

#### Class as Mini Ceremony - an Organizing Principle of Participation

*We just officially started working on 'uwehes a couple of weeks ago. Kumu asks us to 'uwehe so we do a few as he watches us through the screen. "You can't 'uwehe standing straight up. You have to bend your knees. Let's do it again." We try a few more times. On my laptop screen I check my position against my door frame. My head lines up with the top of the door frame and when I bend my knees, my head drops under the door frame. "Ok let's try this." Kumu begins to demonstrate as he speaks. "Stand up straight. Hands at your chest. Bend your knees. Without moving anything else, lift your heels up. Now hold it."*

*My ankles start to shake and tremble as if I'm anxiously waiting for something - bouncing updownupdownupdown, a basketball dribbling frenetically. "This is what we're calling punishment. Your thighs should be shaking." Kumu says. My thigh agrees, convulsing quickly. I keep my eyes straight ahead, looking at my kumu on the screen who is also holding this position, seemingly without difficulty. "Don't get up. Stay in this position." I'm so focused on willing my body to hold that I don't notice what the other dancers are doing in their Zoom squares. I guess by his statement (telling us to stay in position) that the discomfort got to someone. My legs continue to strain when all of a sudden the convulsions stop. My legs and ankle are still, calm. It's as if the jolty, involuntary cries for help were never there. I marvel at how abrupt the change is and wonder if my legs 'freaking out'*

---

<sup>180</sup> As Rowe explains, "Far from signaling eagerness, attentiveness, and worthiness to be taught more, the quick question was interpreted as impatience and an expectation that knowledge would be easily handed to me. It pre-empted the kumu's position to know when a student was ready to receive the next level of knowledge." Rowe, "A Haole in a Hālau: Situating Identity, Practicing Learning," 26.

<sup>181</sup> Meyer, *Ho'oulu*, 165.

*was my body trying to figure out the mechanics of this position or if this is what it feels like to build strength and endurance. That's when the burning starts - warm aching in my thighs. I try to put more weight forward, sending weight to my knees in an attempt to give my thighs a break. The burning continues and I wonder when Kumu will say stop. 'You can do it,' I tell myself. Just hold it.*

*Kumu's voice cuts through my internal peptalk, "Ok you can get up. What was that...30 seconds? We would have had to hold it for 5 minutes and got hit with something," he says as I stand up and take deep breaths. He adds, "if you're not giving, you're taking. You already sacrificed your time and effort to be here - so actually sacrifice to be here. Not bending your knees is not respecting Laka."<sup>182</sup>*

Although Kumu Kawika named holding this position as punishment, it is also a moment of training the body to do an 'uwehe and training us how to participate. Kumu is asking us to participate fully, deeply; it's not enough to just "show up." He asserts that, medical conditions or limitations aside, we need to sacrifice. Your energy is your power and how you choose to use your energy is your participation and your offering. I remember one time in class, the kumu got frustrated because there were people who weren't fully engaged—they had shown up to class but they weren't really invested. The kumu called them "mana suckers" because they were taking up space and energy but not giving anything in return; this is not the ideal way to participate.

Pearl mentioned that when she started hula, a few other women started at the same time, but they didn't stay because some people "just want a dance class." Pearl elaborates, "they just want to learn a dance and they want to go home. She [Pearl's kumu] focuses on the language and the culture...so much that I think it's just not for everyone."<sup>183</sup> Her distinction between a "dance class" and a hula class speaks to a difference between exercising the body for exercise's sake and becoming deeply involved in a class and in a culture. When I asked Pearl, 'how does it feel knowing so

---

<sup>182</sup> My fieldnotes, October 2021.

<sup>183</sup> Pearl in discussion with author, September 2018.

much about hula and language and the culture?’ she responded:

It gives a fullness to it because if it was just a dance class, it would be fun but it wouldn't be like part of me. It just gives a fullness. A richness to it. You know. You know more. You know more why. You understand kaona. You understand things like that. You don't just. You feel what you need to feel not because of the words, because of what the song means.<sup>184</sup>

For Pearl, investing and committing to hula brought hula more deeply into her life and into her body (body kaona).

Along with being more than a dance class, a hula class can also be thought of as “a mini ceremony,” as Kumu Kawika says, meaning “how you participate matters.” By comparing class to ceremony, Kumu Kawika assigns similar standards, such as full bodily effort and deep participation, to the class space. The cultural stakes in ceremony are high, and so standards for participation in ceremony are also high. Lani mentions the particular state of mind needed to participate in ceremony:

Performing for Ceremony is a different state of mind than just performing for say, a birthday party. You have to put your head and body into the right spiritual mindset. You need to be respectful of the beliefs of our ancestors and their teachings. Whether it be dawning, giving thanks to the gods, you need to purify yourself before the ceremony. Clear your thoughts, leave all your pilikia (trouble) behind.<sup>185</sup>

Participating in ceremony, therefore, requires specific intention, respect, mindset, and bodyset. If class is like a mini ceremony then some of these tenets from ceremony also apply. Kanahale-Mossman writes, “the hula dancer’s role in a ceremony is the ho’okupu or the offering itself which is a combination of the dancer, a mele to audible the intention, and a lei as a representation of the forest.”<sup>186</sup> In likening hula class to ceremony, participants are being asked to embody this ethos of offering, thereby showing respect

---

<sup>184</sup> Pearl in discussion with author, September 2018.

<sup>185</sup> Lani in discussion with author, May 2019.

<sup>186</sup> Kanahale-Mossman, *The Ha’a Condition: The Health of the Kino Hula*, 8.

by participating more deeply. My roommate in Hālaauaola, Erika, told me once that our sweat is an offering to Laka—both a material offering but also an offering of our effort and intention. In sweating, my labor is embodied in water that I can offer back. While class is not necessarily a full ceremony, class is still an act of reciprocity and relationality.

Moreover, in correlating class and ceremony, a broader sense of “connectedness”<sup>187</sup> and participation is also being invoked. Kanahele-Mossman explains that a hula dancer’s responsibility is “reciprocation to these natural processes” through ceremony that allows for “recognition and connection of and to the natural world.”<sup>188</sup> Sarinah notes that one must appreciate “all the context involved in hula” which is in large part its connections to the natural world. Sarinah shares, “[standing in front of the ocean] I feel so connected. It makes me feel really powerful but also really small and gentle and humble. All these things involved in hula... understanding the force behind the natural elements...the time it takes a tree to grow or the power of ocean... lava creating life and land...”<sup>189</sup> Hula can tap into different threads of life; this connection is empowering but also humbling, emphasizing groundedness and humility—‘ai ha‘a. To dance hula, one must dance in ‘ai ha‘a, bending the knees to ground and humble oneself. Dancing hula is also a way to be humbled in face of the cosmos.<sup>190</sup> Kumu hula Māhealani Uchiyama

---

<sup>187</sup> Meyer writes, "Hawaiian spirituality is not represented by a set of dogmatic religious principles. It is, rather, a way of discussing the organic and cultural mediation of experience, and hence knowledge, and should not be expected to conform to religious structure. ... It is not a separate "thing" to be studied, but a deeply embedded notion of the connectedness of things, gods, people and land (Pukui, Haertig, Lee, 1972; Handy and Handy, 1972; Kame-elehiwa, 1992)." Meyer, *Ho‘oulu*, 93.

<sup>188</sup> Kanahele-Mossman, *The Ha‘a Condition: The Health of the Kino Hula*, 6.

<sup>189</sup> Sarinah in discussion with author, October 2018.

<sup>190</sup> In her article on Nigerian and South African contemporary dance artists, dance scholar Rainy Demerson writes, "Mother of African Contemporary Dance, Germaine Acogny states, 'African dance is dancing with the cosmos.'" (Acogny, Germaine, Pattie Mackenzie, and Billie Mahoney. *Dance On. Germaine Acogny*.

states, “hula is a reminder that we are part of something big, and a spiritual recognition of our place in the world. ... The realization that we are connected to each other and to everything in the environment leads to a greater sense of the importance of caring for each other and for the world.” Hula speaks to participation not just in Hawai’i but also on Earth and in life. The kaona of participation in hula, the heart of this chapter, is a call for understanding how to participate in hula and in life, more broadly.

---

Electronic resource. Insight Media, 2008) She uses this notion to explain how and why her modern dance technique aligns body parts to celestial bodies and to note the framework of relationality that her contemporary technique embodies.” I see this as akin to the relationality being created through hula. Rainy Demerson, “World Making: African Mothers in Contemporary Dance,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Black Dance*, ed. Thomas F. DeFrantz, forthcoming.

## Conclusion

I was in the changing tent and my kumu was in there and this other kumu came over or somebody that knew hula, somebody that she really respected - that my kumu really respected - came in and she had said to my kumu, you know what, your dancers are not perfect but I can tell that they get it. So a lot of times you get tested and you need to- the test is not how perfect of a dancer you are. The test is do you, do you get it. So just remember that. Always proceed - act like in the way that you would expect a hula dancer to behave. That's the most important thing. That's what you get tested on. How you act.<sup>191</sup> - Pearl

Pearl's last words during our interview make specific claims for how a hula dancer should behave. It's not just about the dancing, but about how one participates, how one shows their knowledge. "Getting it" refers to displaying understanding and kaona, or hidden and deeper meaning— it is an invocation for nonsuperficial and deep participation in hula. This chapter departed from focusing on dancing as it's traditionally understood - movement in space – to uncover the other ways one must participate as a dancer. The kaona of "dancer" is that one must do more than move; because hula is a multidimensional form, it requires participation in music, chant, story, craft, among many other aspects. I argue for deep participation as a dance ethic or practice of care and responsibility.

As I briefly discussed in the introduction to this chapter, hula can serve as a decolonizing practice for Native Hawaiians. While I am not Native Hawaiian, I realized that hula served as a decolonizing practice for me in terms of my understanding of "dancer." In many ways, ballet had colonized my understanding of what constitutes dance and who is considered a dancer. By learning more about hula and practicing hula, my conception of "dancer" expanded and was no longer solely beholden to Europeanist standards via the ballet ideal. I acknowledge the tension of hula serving this role for me because this act could be read as a replication of historically white dancers using

---

<sup>191</sup> Pearl in discussion with author, September 2018.

Indigenous dance forms to “free” themselves and express themselves differently. However, I am neither Native Hawaiian nor am I white. Therefore, the power dynamics involved demand nuance. Recalling Sarinah’s words that “there is something to sharing culture among POCs,”<sup>192</sup> I deploy folklorists Sheila Bock and Katherine Borland’s distinction between assimilation, appropriation, and “another form of embodied othering whereby participants copy those they perceive to be neither inferior or superior. They 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.”<sup>193</sup> It is thanks to hula that I started to fully invest in the idea that there is more than one way to be a dancer. It is thanks to hula that I started to envision a future for myself in dance.

Kumu hula George Na’ope talked about how he spent a lot of time teaching hula all around the world, particularly in Japan because “they are very interested in the culture.”<sup>194</sup> He says, “I’ve been telling them, though, that while it’s wonderful that all these non-Hawaiians are learning Hawaiian culture, they need to remember to learn their own culture as well. When we [Hawaiians] became part of America most of our people forgot our ancient dances.”<sup>195</sup> I take Kumu Na’ope’s words to heart. By practicing and learning hula, I was also encouraged to learn more about myself and my heritage. I started to notice resonances between the history and relationship of Hawai’i and the U.S. and my Mom’s island of Providencia, Colombia. I remember being in the Osaka airport with

---

<sup>192</sup> Sarinah in discussion with author, October 2018.

<sup>193</sup> Sheila Bock and Katherine Borland, “Exotic Identities: Dance, Difference, and Self-Fashioning,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 48, no. 1 (2011): 5, <https://doi.org/10.2979/jfolkrese.48.1.1>.

<sup>194</sup> “George Na’ope,” accessed August 30, 2021, <https://www.arts.gov/honors/heritage/george-naope>.

<sup>195</sup> “George Na’ope.”



Kumu Kawika. We were riding the escalator and he asked me where my family is from and I said “We’re Colombian but really Caribbean because Colombia owns islands in the Caribbean,” I tell him and add, “My grandma speaks patois.” He immediately asks, “Do most people speak that?” “Not as much anymore. It’s Spanish now,” I say. He responds, “oh so you guys are native.”<sup>196</sup> An island in the Caribbean is connected to an archipelago in the Pacific by more than just breadfruit. Wanting to honor my own lineage, I turn home. The focus of chapter three is bachata, a Dominican social partner dance. While bachata is not from my home in Miami nor from my mother’s home in Providencia, my exploration of bachata is centered on how home defines a dancer.

## Hula Ho’i

*It’s 10:15am and the light through my window is diffused, tinted a dirty yellow gray and gloomy. It’s going to rain today - a rare occurrence in Riverside, California - almost desert. My ipad sits against the window and shows my kumu in his dance studio in Northern California. The little Zoom squares on the side show me with a red long sleeved shirt and an orange pā’ū skirt. More little squares show my fellow dancers from Italy, the UK, and other parts of the U.S. We are in an open enrollment class that started in Feb 2021. We are learning ho’i - the exit dance.*

*“Ho’i e, ho’i la, ho’i e ka ‘ohu e - They return, return The mists return once again.”<sup>197</sup>*

*We holohuki back in space, then face the right and holohuki forward. We turn back to the front and complete steps forward, then step step back and put our arms out. The ipu sounds **te te**, hands quickly go to our waist, **te te**, we turn to our right and walk off. Kumu explains that you can’t just leave the space abruptly - you must, in essence, exit a few times, showing reverence and closing out your offering.*

---

<sup>196</sup> My fieldnotes, September 2018.

<sup>197</sup> “Oli Ho’i - Traditional,” Huapala - Hawaiian Music and Hula Archives, accessed July 29, 2022, [https://www.huapala.org/Chants/Oli\\_Hoi.html](https://www.huapala.org/Chants/Oli_Hoi.html).

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Bachata: Hay Dance en la Casa - We Have Dance at Home

♪“Son las cinco de la mañana y yo no he dormido nada. Pensando en tu belleza...”<sup>1</sup>

*As Romeo Santos croons in our ears, I grab hold of my cousin Eileen’s hands, palms touching. Facing each other I wait till she picks up the beat and starts to move and then I follow. Moving towards the couch, I step right, left, right, left foot tap and then to the other side, left, right, left, right foot tap. My hips go sway, sway, sway, hip bump/tut left sway, sway, sway, hip tut right. I use the foot tap to accentuate my hip tut out to the side. We keep our weight grounded and our knees bent. Our hands and shoulders stay calm. Every now and then one of us turns the other, lifting a hand up. Eileen does some cool footwork, pushing her foot out in front of her and moving her knee from side to side, as I watch and dance, keeping the beat. I feel like our bodies fit because they’re familiar bodies. They’re familial bodies. Some parts of her are parts of me.*

I was born and raised in Miami, a Caribbean enclave, with Cuban, Puerto Rican, Jamaican, and Guyanese friends. While my family is from Providencia, an island in the Caribbean owned by Colombia, my aunts and uncles married Puerto Ricans and Dominicans. By virtue of friend and “cousinland,”<sup>2</sup> my exposure to the Caribbean grew. As such, my access to and participation in Latin and Caribbean dance forms looked different than they did for ballet and hula. Ballet and hula are both dance forms that I sought out and paid for training. In contrast, bachata, a Dominican social dance, is a form I learned when I was younger, at home. Rather than going to a dance studio or hālau (hula school), I learned in living rooms, backyards, kitchens, and eventually clubs. The teachers were family, friends, and strangers and the training spaces were all home and social spaces. Participation, more often than not, was expected and required. Despite the important training I received at home, I was so caught up in the desire to be

---

<sup>1</sup> Aventura, “Obsesión,” track 1 on We Broke The Rules, Premium Latin Music, 2002, compact disc.

<sup>2</sup> I coin this term, adapted from fatherland and motherland, as a way to acknowledge the social and learning space one gets exposed to by being cousins.

a ballet dancer, that I had dismissed and ignored all the time I spent dancing with friends and families at home and in clubs.

In the previous chapter on hula, I looked at the many ways one can participate respectfully in hula as a non-Hawaiian participant. While it is common for people to train in a hālau, some people learn hula at home. In this chapter on bachata, I recenter home by asking how a dancer is defined by aspects of home. I analyze how home serves as a training space and how the concept of home is invoked via aspects such as familiarity and connection. I do so in part by recovering my own dancing history, which in turn actively recuperates home as a training space for dancers. I also recover Caribbeanness and blackness as a part of bachata and visibilize the geographic home of bachata, the Dominican Republic. Additionally, I analyze how aspects of “home” are invoked in bachata studio classes and on the social dance floor. Coupling home training and studio training is necessary because home training, while important, is not accessible to all. For some, dance never happened at home and for others, home is no longer accessible because of time and distance. In many ways, studio classes become or replace home spaces. I use “home” to refer to a person’s home (family dwelling) as well as metaphorically to refer to home as an affective space of learning and action.<sup>3</sup> This chapter theorizes how home defines a dancer, both by extending common perceptions of where a dancer is trained and also exploring what it means to be “at home” in bachata.

---

<sup>3</sup> I acknowledge that home is not always or inherently a “positive” space. I aim to complicate ideas of home.

## Background on Bachata

Bachata is a Latin social partner dance from the Dominican Republic. Musically, it is “a guitar-centered ensemble”<sup>4</sup> consisting of “bass guitar, rhythm guitar, requinto (lead guitar),” “bongó, [and] güira (in older bachatas maracas).”<sup>5</sup> In a 1990 article, anthropologist Deborah Pacini Hernandez describes bachata music as “written about women, but by and for men,” with themes varying from courtship, heartbreak, love, desire, and sex.<sup>6</sup> Bachata began as a musical genre in the 1960s in poor neighborhoods.<sup>7</sup> As Hernandez explains, “the term *bachata* originally referred to an informal gathering in a backyard or patio, enlivened by food, drink, music and dance.”<sup>8</sup> Bachata comes from the people most marginalized by race, class, and profession.<sup>9</sup> These musicians did not have formal music training; they were farmers, laborers, guards, and were depicted as ignorant.<sup>10</sup> Hernandez clarifies that early bachata was mostly associated with class rather than race because of “Dominicans’ longstanding ways of understanding race and their nation’s racial identity: dark skinned Dominicans have historically been referred to as *indios* rather than black; only Haitians are

---

<sup>4</sup> Deborah Pacini Hernandez, “Cantando La Cama Vacía: Love, Sexuality and Gender Relationships in Dominican Bachata,” *Popular Music* 9, no. 3 (October 1990): 351, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026114300000413X>.

<sup>5</sup> “Bachata Breakdown En Vivo | IASO Records,” iASO Records, accessed January 12, 2022, <https://www.iasorecords.com/release/bachata-breakdown-en-vivo>.

<sup>6</sup> Hernandez, “Cantando La Cama Vacía,” 351.

<sup>7</sup> Hernandez, 351.

<sup>8</sup> Deborah Pacini Hernandez, “Dominican Bachata,” *ReVista*, accessed November 10, 2021, <https://revista.drclas.harvard.edu/dominican-bachata/>.

<sup>9</sup> Julie A. Sellers, *Bachata and Dominican Identity / La bachata y la identidad dominicana* (McFarland, 2014), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Sellers, 4.

considered *negros*.”<sup>11</sup> As noted in a United Nations special procedure statement in 2007, anti-blackness and racism have been and continues to be a problem in the Dominican Republic.<sup>12</sup> Despite this, bachata is tied to blackness. As Pierson explains, “bachata music was formed across the rural Dominican Republic through the imitation of traditional African drumbeats on string guitars. It consolidated into a formal genre as rural populations of African (and often Haitian) decent [sic] migrated to Santo Domingo in the 1970s.”<sup>13</sup> On their webpage, iASO records writes, “despite tense relations between the countries, Haitian immigrants to the Dominican Republic have played an important role in Bachata’s development and are among its most ardent fans.”<sup>14</sup>

Bachata was initially looked down upon because of associations with lower classes, bars, and brothels.<sup>15</sup> It did not become mainstream until the 1980s and gained particular acclaim when Juan Luis Guerra won a Grammy for his album *Bachata Rosa* in

---

<sup>11</sup> Hernandez, “Dominican Bachata.”

<sup>12</sup> “Two UN Experts on racism and minorities have noted in their preliminary views that, while there is no official government policy of discrimination, there is nevertheless a profound and entrenched problem of racism and discrimination against such groups as Haitians, Dominicans of Haitian descent, and more generally against blacks within Dominican society.” “United Nations Experts on Racism and Minority Issues Call for Recognition, Dialogue and Policy to Combat the Reality of Racial Discrimination in the Dominican Republic,” United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, October 29, 2007, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2009/10/united-nations-experts-racism-and-minority-issues-call-recognition-dialogue-and>. See also: “Dominican Republic’s Enduring History of Racism against Haitians Explored in ‘Stateless,’” NBC News, accessed July 22, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/dominican-republic-s-enduring-history-racism-against-haitians-explored-stateless-n1270499>. “Dominican Republic Institute on Race, Equality and Human Rights,” Race and Equality, accessed July 28, 2022, <https://raceandequality.org/dominican-republic/>.

<sup>13</sup> Laura Pierson, “Kings of Bachata : Aventura, Migration and Dominican Nationalism in a Transnational Context” (University of Washington, 2009), 2, <https://digital.lib.washington.edu/researchworks/bitstream/handle/1773/15917/laura%20pierson.pdf?sequence=1>.

<sup>14</sup> “Bachata Haiti | iASO Records,” iASO Records, accessed July 28, 2022, <https://www.iasorecords.com/artists/bachata-haiti>.

<sup>15</sup> Hernandez, “Cantando La Cama Vacía,” 353.

1992.<sup>16</sup> More and more today, bachata is being acknowledged as a black musical and dance genre.<sup>17</sup> Bachata is now widely practiced around the world in different styles including Dominican bachata, urban bachata, bachata digital, and sensual bachata. Bachata can be found in nightclubs, classes, at family parties and gatherings, as well as on stage and in bachata congresses and festivals. Training in this form occurs in the home, in the studio, and in the club.

Academic scholarship on bachata is limited. Anthropologist Deborah Pacini Hernandez,<sup>18</sup> Spanish studies scholar Julie A. Sellers,<sup>19</sup> and Caribbean studies scholar Darío Tejeda<sup>20</sup> are among the few who have published monographs on bachata, mostly connecting it to Dominican identity with a focus on the music rather than the dancing. Sellers discusses how the fourth beat allows for creativity and for identifying where dancers come from, e.g., distinguishing between more ballroom-style bachata and street-style bachata.<sup>21</sup> She also notes that, as long as the dancer keeps the four beat structure, there is a lot of room to play in this dance form, adding arm stylings or borrowing from cha-cha and salsa.<sup>22</sup> Holly Tumblin's 2020 Master of Music thesis focuses on sensual bachata in the U.S. and on how gender roles are contested and

---

<sup>16</sup> Deborah Pacini Hernandez, *Bachata: A Social History of Dominican Popular Music* (Temple University Press, 1995), 2.

<sup>17</sup> To be discussed further in section 3.

<sup>18</sup> Deborah Pacini Hernandez, *Bachata: A Social History of Dominican Popular Music* (Temple University Press, 1995).

<sup>19</sup> Julie A. Sellers, *Bachata and Dominican Identity / La bachata y la identidad dominicana* (McFarland, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> Darío Tejeda, *Bachata : its origin, story, and legends* (Ediciones ARITSA, 2003).

<sup>21</sup> Sellers, *Bachata and Dominican Identity / La bachata y la identidad dominicana*, 27.

<sup>22</sup> Sellers, 27.

expanded via sensual bachata.<sup>23</sup> Mia Katrine Tvette's 2007 Social Anthropology master's thesis looks at the "negotiation of Dominican and Haitian identity through musical expressions of bachata, and how music is used in the mobilization of these social identities" in the Dominican Republic.<sup>24</sup>

Analysis that is more dance specific, particularly around studio classes, performance, and the festival circuit, can be found primarily in online blogs such as *The Dancing Grapevine*, *Dancers' notes*, *The Perfect Follow*, and *Bachateame, Maria*. *The Dancing Grapevine* is written by Laura Riva, who has been dancing since 2008 and practices many forms including bachata, Brazilian zouk, and West coast swing. She is also a teacher, performer, and congress organizer.<sup>25</sup> *The Perfect Follow* blog is written by Dr. Stefani Ruper, who has also danced many styles including bachata, ballet, salsa, kizomba, etc.<sup>26</sup> *Dancers' Notes* is a website with many different contributors centering on three main tenets: "respectful dancing," "equality on the dance floor," and "making the dance community better through conversation."<sup>27</sup> These blogs theorize social dancing via various lenses such as gender, cultural appropriation, community, race, respect, and safety. They also theorize the dancing itself, offering thoughts on "dance touch and

---

<sup>23</sup> Holly Tumblin, "Who I Am: Gender, Embodiment, and Code Switching in Bachata Dance Communities" (The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 2020).

<sup>24</sup> Mia Katrine Tvette, "Bachata Life. Social Identity in the Dominican Republic through the Lens of a Musical Tradition" (Norway, University of Bergen, 2007), 8.

<sup>25</sup> Laura Riva, "About the Author," *The Dancing Grapevine* (blog), accessed March 20, 2022, <https://danceplace.com/grapevine/about-the-author/>.

<sup>26</sup> Stefani Ruper, "About – The Perfect Follow," *The Perfect Follow* (blog), accessed March 20, 2022, <http://theperfectfollow.com/about/>.

<sup>27</sup> Tanya Hayley Karen, "Who Are We?," *Dancers' Notes* (blog), accessed March 20, 2022, <https://dancersnotes.com/about-us/>.

nondance touch”,<sup>28</sup> body language,<sup>29</sup> performing on stage versus social dancing,<sup>30</sup> musicality, tactics for leading and following,<sup>31</sup> among others. It is here, in the spaces of the internet, that I found the most intricate and dance-rich material on bachata, studio classes, and other social dances. Contrasting the dearth of academic scholarship on bachata with the wealth of knowledge available online, I visibilize and value these blogs as indispensable sites for dance knowledge production.

Drawing on and extending the knowledge contained in both academic and online discourses, this chapter offers one of the first dance-focused scholarly analyses that considers Dominican bachata and sensual bachata in the U.S. context to center home training. In doing so, my work starts to fill a significant gap in bachata scholarship and in dance studies.

### **Framing home**

To explore how “home” figures in the practice of bachata, I deploy home as a metaphor for a place of knowing. As philosopher Felip Martí-Jufresa theorizes, “home is where you know how;”<sup>32</sup> home is “is the name given to any situation of knowledge or

---

<sup>28</sup> Laura Riva, “Dance-Touch vs. Non-Dance Touch,” *The Dancing Grapevine* (blog), accessed March 20, 2022, <https://danceplace.com/grapevine/dance-touch-vs-non-dance-touch/>.

<sup>29</sup> Laura Riva, “The (Mostly) Complete Guide to Dance Body Language ‘Hints,’” *The Dancing Grapevine* (blog), May 9, 2016, <https://danceplace.com/grapevine/the-mostly-complete-guide-to-dance-body-language-hints/>.

<sup>30</sup> Stefani Ruper, “The Social Dancing Mistakes You Might Make If You’re on a Performance Team – The Perfect Follow,” *The Perfect Follow* (blog), accessed June 6, 2020, <http://theperfectfollow.com/the-social-dancing-mistakes-you-might-make-if-youre-on-a-performance-team/>.

<sup>31</sup> Tanya Hayley Karen, “The Myth of ‘Just Follow’—And Why It’s Wrong,” *Dancers’ Notes* (blog), July 3, 2020, <https://dancersnotes.com/the-myth-of-just-follow-and-why-its-wrong/>.

<sup>32</sup> Martí-Jufresa, “Petite Logique De L’exil/Little Logics of Exile.”



mastery.”<sup>33</sup> Anthropologist Mary Douglas theorizes the home as a space that “anticipates needs.”<sup>34</sup> Dance scholar Hodel Ophir uses Douglas in her examination of how ballet studios serve as home for adult women.<sup>35</sup> I build on Ophir’s theory of home as a space for action and participation rather than rest to identify the home as a valuable dance training space. Home does not have the same affect for everyone nor does it always provide a safe learning environment.<sup>36</sup> Home can be many places outside the family dwelling. When I write “home,” I am referring to home as an affective space which is sometimes embodied in a family or friend’s house and other times in dance studios.<sup>37</sup>

As part of my exploration of “home,” I build on Raquel Monroe’s work in order to extend the definition of technique. Technique has been used to reinforce racist hierarchies in dance education. Monroe’s article “I Don’t Want to do African...What About My Technique?” describes how university curricula center dance forms like ballet and modern while devaluing techniques learned in other spaces.<sup>38</sup> She states that the

---

<sup>33</sup> Felip Martí-Jufresa, “The Exile of Knowledge,” *Transfer: Journal of Contemporary Culture*, Institut Ramon Llull, no. 6 (2011): 49–55.

<sup>34</sup> Pg 295 Mary Douglas, “The Idea of a Home: A Kind of Space,” *Social Research* Spring 1991, Vol. 58, no. No. 1 (n.d.): 22, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40970644>.

<sup>35</sup> Hodel Ophir, “‘When I Enter the Studio I Am Coming Home’: Challenging Conceptions of Home through Body and Dance” (Feminisms, Leeds, UK, 2012).

<sup>36</sup> As Ophir points out, for many feminists home was seen “to be a restricting and oppressive site for women.” Hodel Ophir, “‘When I Enter the Studio I Am Coming Home’: Challenging Conceptions of Home through Body and Dance” (Leeds, UK, 2012).

<sup>37</sup> Here are some scholars that have theorized on home: Marlon Bailey, “Structures of Kinship in Ballroom Culture,” *Architectural Review*, March 16, 2021, <https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/gender-and-sexuality/structures-of-kinship-in-ballroom-culture>.; Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, “Home as a Site of Theory: A Fragment,” *International Review of Qualitative Research* 1, no. 2 (2008): 119–24, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/irqr.2008.1.2.119>; Ariel Handel, “What’s in a Home? Toward a Critical Theory of Housing/Dwelling,” *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 37, no. 6 (September 1, 2019): 1045–62, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2399654418819104>; Stephen Vider, *The Queerness of Home: Gender, Sexuality, and the Politics of Domesticity after World War II* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2022), <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/Q/bo116106772.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Raquel L Monroe, “‘I Don’t Want to Do African . . . What About My Technique?’ Transforming Dancing Places into Spaces in the Academy,” 2011, 18.

disciplining and training that goes on in the studio “communicates that the movement practices [students] entered with are somehow invalid”<sup>39</sup> –a sentiment I myself shared. Monroe adds that even students who train in the sanctioned spaces of the dance studio still “rehearse their skills in their bedrooms, at weddings, concerts, parties, or church fashion and talent shows,”<sup>40</sup> acknowledging that dance training occurs in social and home spaces. Monroe calls for specificity when referring to “technique” and I take on that charge by unpacking the technique of bachata and visibilizing its various training spaces.

I am also in conversation with scholars whose work discusses learning dance as a form of socialization. In her essay “Awkward Moves,” historian Mayra McQuirter recognizes the existence and importance of “awkwardness” within dancing, specifically in 1940s America.<sup>41</sup> Her work is vital in demystifying the stereotype that “all black people are natural dancers” and does so by acknowledging awkward black bodies in the process of training in a new dance form.<sup>42</sup> McQuirter visibilizes training spaces like army camps and homes that included “same sex partnering” where comrades, friends, and family members served as teachers.<sup>43</sup> Likewise, ethnomusicologist Kyra Gaunt’s *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop*<sup>44</sup> and

---

<sup>39</sup> Monroe, 48.

<sup>40</sup> Monroe, 48.

<sup>41</sup> Marya Annette McQuirter, “Awkward Moves: Dance Lessons from the 1940s,” in *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations In African American Dance*, by Thomas F. DeFrantz (University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/8476>.

<sup>42</sup> McQuirter, 95.

<sup>43</sup> McQuirter, 95.

<sup>44</sup> Kyra D. Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop* (New York: NYU Press, 2006).

sociologist Maxine Leeds Craig's *Sorry I Don't Dance: Why Men Refuse to Move*<sup>45</sup> also showcase moments of home training between family members.<sup>46</sup> I build on this scholarship by highlighting the training occurring in Latine homes, specifically Dominican and Caribbean Latine home spaces.

Since bachata is a Latin social dance, I am also in dialogue with social dance scholars. Cindy Garcia's *Salsa Crossings* focuses on salsa in Los Angeles. She notes that "indirect evaluations of citizenship status, class, and nation [are] hidden under the language of 'technique.'"# In this dance scene, "socializing" denotes lower working-class non-Americans, whereas dancing to "shine" or impress, connects to Hollywood and a higher class. While I do not study salsa, I do complicate how 'technique' is understood by analyzing how bachata technique is transmitted, particularly for social reasons. I also build off of Juliet McMains' *Spinning Mambo into Salsa* where she introduces different types of salsa in places like Miami, New York City, Los Angeles, Cuba, and Puerto Rico. In her third chapter in particular, she discusses differences between learning in "academies" and learning in "kitchens," showing how for some, "dance skill was learned through observation and practice in community, either with friends at clubs or at home with family."<sup>47</sup> Ethnomusicologist Sydney Hutchinson also notes that many musicians of merengue típico (a Latin social dance from the Dominican Republic) learned the music

---

<sup>45</sup> Maxine Leeds Craig, *Sorry I Don't Dance: Why Men Refuse to Move*, 1 edition (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>46</sup> I will discuss these instances with more detail later on in this chapter.

<sup>47</sup> Juliet McMains, *Spinning Mambo into Salsa: Caribbean Dance in Global Commerce* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 121, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199324637.001.0001>.

at home.<sup>48</sup> I reinforce these mentions of home by sharing examples of how bachata is learned in home spaces.

## **Methodology**

When I chose to research home, I decided to start with my own home but that proved a little difficult. Even though I learned to dance at home—in Miami and in New York—my home spaces changed, as many homes do, because of moving, divorces, deaths, jobs, and growing responsibilities. As time goes on, there's less time spent with family. In many ways, the home space I grew up with no longer exists and so, for me, the idea of home is infused with comfort and connection as well as loss and sadness. To combat the disappearance and elusiveness of home, I expanded my search of home by following bachata as it travels through physical pathways, in homes, clubs, dance studios, festivals, and universities, as well as virtual pathways, including blogs, YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok. I see all of these spaces as training spaces that determine and disseminate information about how bachata is defined, how one should dance it, where and with whom one should dance, and who should be teaching it.

As such, I use an ethnographic approach to reconstruct and analyze the home space(s) of bachata. I deploy personal ethnography via interviews with my family, as well as autoethnography by incorporating my memories and experiences (appearing in italics). Coupling my memories with family interviews helps to reconstruct my own home space and access my cousins' home spaces. I chose this familial and 'personal' approach to combat the academic sensibility that researching the personal is an act of

---

<sup>48</sup> Sydney Hutchinson, *Tigers of a Different Stripe: Performing Gender in Dominican Music*, Illustrated edition (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 50.

“navel gazing.” I also counter academic practices that value distance and objectivity. My work necessitates being up close, physically and emotionally.

To visibilize the knowledge cultivated through the home, I do so first via my own home. I interviewed seven family members: my mom and six cousins. My five female cousins and one male cousin are in their twenties and thirties and live in New York, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut, but they all grew up in New York. Bianca is Puerto Rican on her mom’s side. My cousin Sean is a “double cousin”, meaning two sisters from one family married two brothers from another family—both sides from the Caribbean island of Providencia, owned by Colombia. Big Diana,<sup>49</sup> Eileen, Marji, and little Diana are Dominican through their maternal line—their experiences help to recenter Dominican voices in bachata narratives.

Racially, all my cousins identify differently—white, non-white, Afro-Latine<sup>50</sup>, Latine, Hispanic, and “all things, we just don’t know;” this last response in part explains the mixed responses. Pacini Hernandez provides some context with respect to Dominicans: “many Dominicans find the term Hispanic particularly appealing because ‘Hispanicity in both the United States and the Dominican Republic offers an alternative to blackness. Although ‘Hispanic’ is a racialized non-white category in the United States, it is also a non-black one.”<sup>51</sup> She also quotes Wendy Roth in saying that Dominicans and

---

<sup>49</sup> Big and little is used here to refer to age.

<sup>50</sup> Throughout this chapter, I use “Latine” as a gender neutral term “because it was designed to work with the Spanish language.” Doxey Kamara, “OPINION | Latinx vs Latine • The Tulane Hullabaloo,” *The Tulane Hullabaloo* (blog), September 30, 2021, <https://tulanehullabaloo.com/57213/intersections/opinion-latinx-vs-latine/>. See also “Why Latinx/e?,” *El Centro* (blog), accessed July 22, 2022, <https://elcentro.colostate.edu/about/why-latinx/>.

<sup>51</sup> Ginetta E. B. Candelario, *Black behind the Ears: Dominican Racial Identity from Museums to Beauty Shops*, Illustrated edition (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2007), 12., quoted in Deborah Pacini Hernandez, “Urban Bachata and Dominican Racial Identity in New York,” *Cahiers detudes africaines* 216, no. 4 (2014): 1031, [https://www.cairn-int.info/abstract-E\\_CEA\\_216\\_1027--urban-bachata-and-dominican-racial.htm](https://www.cairn-int.info/abstract-E_CEA_216_1027--urban-bachata-and-dominican-racial.htm).

Puerto Ricans have “helped to create” “a Hispanicized U.S. schema that treats White, Black and Latino as mutually exclusive racialized groups.”<sup>52</sup> Personally, I’ve been using Afro-Latina or Caribbean American, but I still select “other” when asked for my race, a practice deployed by other Caribbeans as well.<sup>53</sup> These different identifications even within the same family reflect the complexity of home and the racial politics of identifications. They also reflect the legacies of anti-blackness in Latine communities, which factors into how and when people acknowledge bachata’s roots and its connection to blackness.

In addition to family ethnography, I interviewed eight people with whom I took bachata studio classes in Los Angeles, five women and three men ranging in age from their twenties to their forties. They include two African American men, one Vietnamese American woman, four Latine women, and one Latine man.<sup>54</sup> The five Latine dancers identify as Mexican, Mexican/Puerto Rican, Guatemalan, and Honduran. Juxtaposing interviews of people who primarily learned bachata at home with interviews from people who learned in studio classes in addition to people with and without connections to the Caribbean are important parts of understanding how bachata is being transmitted as it moves in the diaspora. It also aids in unpacking how different spaces train people to be at home in bachata.

---

<sup>52</sup> Wendy Roth, *Race Migrations: Latinos and the Cultural Transformation of Race*, 1st edition (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012), 177., quoted in Hernandez, “Urban Bachata and Dominican Racial Identity in New York,” 1031.

<sup>53</sup> Pacini Hernandez explains, “like Dominicans, Puerto Ricans are a multi-racial people whose racial schemas have conflicted with the United States’ one-drop rule, and they too have availed themselves of the “Other” category when forced to identify themselves racially by the US census (Roth 2012: 11).” Hernandez, “Urban Bachata and Dominican Racial Identity in New York,” 1048.

<sup>54</sup> While interviewees did not use this term, I use “Latine” here as a gender neutral term.

Along with traveling through physical and remembered bodies, bachata also circulates online through videos and text, particularly in social media, blogs, and in comments accompanying videos and blog posts. My incorporation of online resources and media provides a vital way to access the home spaces of others, bridging my experiences and my family's experiences with a larger community. The comments section of YouTube videos is one of the first online spaces where I found people who had danced bachata when they were younger as part of family or school spaces. TikTok's short form, informal video sharing platform was another place that allowed me access to others' home spaces. Almost like sharing "home videos" with a camcorder, many TikToks showcase dance training in one form or another. Even though the videos are made for the camera and a social media audience, they are performed at home, often with friends and family.

Rather than separate ethnographic and media analyses, I weave together video, interview, memory, and text sources to trace and account for home. This chapter is divided into three sections. The first recuperates home training by visibilizing and analyzing how learning happens at home. The second section focuses on training in bachata studio classes and recovers moments of home training. In the final section, I recenter the Dominican Republic as the home of Dominican bachata alongside new homes of bachata like the U.S. and Spain.

## Section 1: Recovering Home Training

Sean and I had our interview sitting on the couch in my Grandma's living room in Richmond Hill, Queens, New York City in November 2019. We had just been discussing the way "you have to feel the beat" and how you have to learn which beat to pay attention to. I had told him it's hard for me to hear what people are actually dancing to with salsa so he decided we should listen to music and figure it out together. The bright and fast opening accordion notes of Juan Luis Guerra's "El Farolito" play and we listen and vibe to the merengue. "I'm listening to the drums," I remark. "For me," Sean says, "it's the accordion and the drums." He starts the salsa song next. The congas play and we hear "En los años mil seiscientos" and I automatically respond to the call with, "PUM. PUM. PUM," as Joe Arroyo's "Rebellion" plays on. Sean says, "That's what I dance to. The trumpet. Mixture of trumpet and drums." I reply, "No. You're doing the cowbell with your head." He pauses to consider. "I think I'm listening to...it's everything," he says. "Exactly," I respond.

Anthony Santos's bachata song "Anoche yo soñe con ella" starts and I note, "this is slow." Sean adds, "This is why I don't like bachata. Because you have to learn how to dance all tempos of bachata. And this is how I learned." The guitar plays a riff as Santos' voice rings out full of bittersweet sadness and pleading. We both listen and I ask. "1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4 is that what you're doing?" Sean pauses, thinking. "See the problem is I'm counting too much so I lose the beat." I follow up, "Are you counting in your head? Count out loud for me so I can hear what you're hearing." Sean starts counting, "1 2 3 hip 1 2 3 hip 1 2 3 hip. See and then. I'm not... I'm not." When trying to discern what he is listening to, Sean lost the beat. While seemingly contradictory, counting too much made him lose the beat, which means he also lost the feeling in the music.



During our interview, my Mom was doing Mom things in the kitchen and dining room, and had on occasion been throwing in small comments here and there, especially when we were playing the salsa song. While Sean was struggling to talk about bachata, my Mom had enough of being on the side lines and walked into the living room. “Can I interject?” she asked. “Yes, Mom,” I concede. “You see the whole idea of when you learn to dance from when you’re very young. It just comes naturally. So you’re asking us to dissect this this thing and when do you step in. We don’t know. We dance,” she explained with a loud, frustrated voice. “You see-” Sean attempts to jump in but we talk over him. “I’m not asking you to dissect. I’m saying I want to listen to what you’re listening to. I’m asking you to give me your ears,” I say, but she continues. “You know. It’s part of who you are as a dancer. And we don’t know. Go back to that movie we saw with Chayanne and Vanessa Williams<sup>55</sup> you know and it’s like ok 1 2 3 and he’s like what the fuck what do you do. You should watch that movie again. He said I don’t do that. I listen to the music and I dance,” my Mom says with a bit of admonishment and lots of hand gestures. Sean is finally able to chime in, “Yea, you just feel it.”<sup>56</sup>

My Mom is emphasizing how integrated and ingrained the connection to the music is for her and for people who learned how to dance when they were young. The music and the dancing becomes a part of you and it is home within you so that it feels natural, organic. My desire and request for a breakdown of my Mom’s connection between the music and her body is difficult because she’s never had to verbalize or “dissect” that connection. Self proclaimed Bachata Ambassador Vesa explains a similar thought in reference to Dominicans. He writes, “Dominicans carry ‘bachata in their

---

<sup>55</sup> Randa Haines, *Dance with Me*, Drama, Music, Romance (Mandalay Entertainment, Ballroom Dancer, 1998).

<sup>56</sup> Sean and Ofelia in discussion with author, November 2019.

blood', which means they have listened and danced bachata their whole life. ... Listening and dancing has given them the sensitivity to understand the energy changes in the music. ... Unfortunately they are not bachata instructors being able to break down and explain all these invisible details."<sup>57</sup> Increasing sensitivity means increasing the ability to be attuned to the music and to a partner. Sean explains that on top of not liking bachata as much as other styles, he didn't learn bachata till he was older so it doesn't come as naturally. He says "It's too cerebral for me," meaning he has to think about it too much and it gets in the way of him feeling the music. He hasn't built up the sensitivity to bachata and as such it doesn't feel as at home in his body.

As my Mom and Vesa gesture to, the "dance in my blood" rhetoric actually refers to dancing that has become so much a part of a person that it becomes integral and integrated. User Ana left the following comment on the BuzzFeed video "Americans Try Bachata Dancing."<sup>58</sup>

Latinos don't have dancing in their blood - you have it in your culture, in your upbringing, in your environment. It's a part of your everyday life experience from a very young age, so you learn it organically, the same way you learn how to speak your first language. Learning any form of dance as an adult is a very different matter. I have Hispanic students who never danced before, and they follow the same learning curve as everyone else. Sorry to break it to you, but it's not in your DNA - it's an acquired skill.

This comment clarifies the type of learning that occurs at home over many years.

Melissa, a 39-year-old Mexican American mother and bachata instructor, agrees, saying that in the Dominican Republic, bachata is infused in the environment both at home and in the streets, "and so growing up it just stays with you and it becomes natural so

---

<sup>57</sup> Vesa Parkkari, "AUTHENTIC BACHATA MUSICALITY BY BACHATA AMBASSADOR," DR12 bachata Festival December 10-18, 2018, accessed December 16, 2021, <https://www.domibachata.com/ins/melody/musicality.html>.

<sup>58</sup> BuzzFeedVideo, *Americans Try Bachata Dancing*, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INE9G23f2Sk>.

dancing bachata for them is like walking, it's like talking."<sup>59</sup> Both Ana and Melissa equate dancing to naturalized functions that are learned at home, thus correlating dance as a skill equal in value. User Ana points out that native language speakers learn language differently than second language speakers and the same applies to dance learning. It is a different challenge (though doable) to learn a language and a dance form at an older age. However, placing value on children learning to dance foregrounds dance as a skill and on family training as a primary means to teach that skill.

### **Family Training Made Visible**

*We were outside for a barbecue and there was music playing. I can't quite remember whose baby my uncle was holding though it must have been a cousin. Of the three male children my grandmother had, only one of them could dance—this was not that uncle. And so he started to dance with the baby, moving his shoulders and torso awkwardly, bobbing around—not dancing to the beat. My Mom, seeing this, quickly exclaimed, "STOP. You're going to give the baby bad rhythm."- my memory*

Dance training happens early on at home as a natural extension of family time. As recalled in this memory, training has begun even before a baby has learned to walk. Training to dance at home is a part of everyday life for many, especially in Latine households. In comments to the BuzzFeed video, "Americans Try Bachata Dancing," some people brought up the strangeness of learning bachata in a class because of the primacy of learning in home spaces. A user with the handle Ship bitterness comments, "Lmao who learns bachata in a class most of us latinas learn it as kids watching or relatives have the time of their lives." Alewrites agrees, "You definitely don't learn bachata with an instructor. You learn through family partays and by watching your tia be pro on the dance floor." Both comments decenter studio classes and center watching

---

<sup>59</sup> Melissa in discussion with author, November 2018.

adults dance at family functions as part of learning. musigirl11 brings up mothers as valued teachers: “They should get a Dominican mom to come in and teach them the old fashioned way.” User zully adds, “my mom always grabbed me when she was cooking and listening to music to dance thats how i learned how to dance bachata lmfaol,” showing that anytime is a good time for a dance lesson, even while laboring. In my interview with Marji, she agrees with these comments, noting her mom’s influence on her dancing and asserting that anytime spent dancing is a dance class.

These comments center the home as a training space and family members as teachers, contradicting common conceptions of the academy or studio as the only sanctioned spaces of dance learning. As Raquel Monroe theorizes, despite dance studios being conceived “as the appropriate ‘place’” for dance learning, dancing occurs in many different locations.<sup>60</sup> The continual dancing and dance training happening in Latine living rooms, kitchens, bedrooms, backyards, banquet halls, clubs, and other spaces makes these spaces “appropriate places” to dance and to learn to dance.

### **Learning to find the beat - to find home**

Along with highlighting the home space as a training space and reinforcing the importance of rhythm, my Mom’s direction to my uncle not to “give the baby bad rhythm” also introduces a method of teaching rhythm. It is very common for parents to dance with their babies—in doing so, rhythm is being taught bodily. In other words, rhythm is taught by feeling it on someone else’s body. Ethnomusicologist Kyra Gaunt shares, “I vividly remembered my four-year-old feet struggling to stay afloat on my mother’s Lindy-

---

<sup>60</sup> “Over time, if dancing repeatedly happens in a random space, a static location, such as a living room, hotel lobby, McDonald’s parking lot, or any of the kind, that space habitually used for the practicing of dance becomes a place delineated for dancing.” Monroe, “‘I Don’t Want to Do African . . . What About My Technique?’ Transforming Dancing Places into Spaces in the Academy,” 47.

hopping toes. But I had no idea it was because I didn't have rhythm"<sup>61</sup> While Gaunt thought she was learning specific movements by dancing on her mom's feet, her mom was teaching her how to have rhythm.<sup>62</sup> I, too, remember dancing on my Mom and Dad's feet when I was little. It is a way of sharing weight and physicality so that the parents' way of dancing is ideally, and momentarily, the way the child is dancing. Whether one is dancing with a child in their arms, with a child on their feet, or through joined hands, the teacher's body is acting as what I refer to as a "homing beacon," physically amplifying and emphasizing the beat. It's transferring a response to music and, therefore, training someone to feel the pulse, the home in the music.

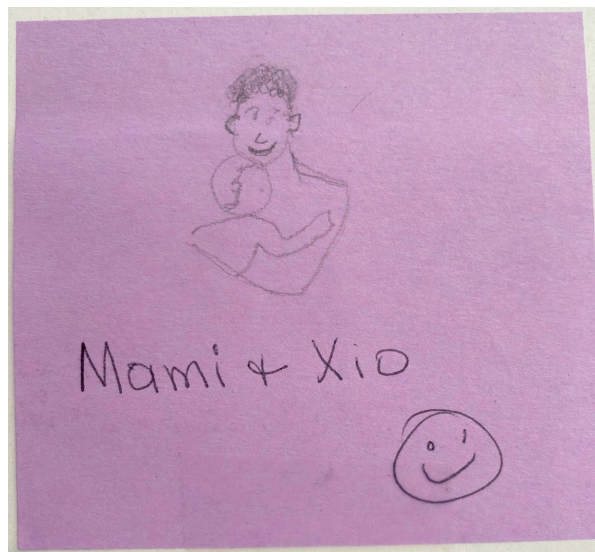


Figure 16 – Drawing of a mom dancing with a baby<sup>63</sup>

Finding the beat can also be taught by verbally counting. In a comment to the BuzzFeed video, "Americans Try Bachata Dancing," user Marerlyn Estefany writes,

---

<sup>61</sup> Kyra D. Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 47.

<sup>62</sup> Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play*, 47.

<sup>63</sup> Drawn by mom

“Another way to teach it would be 1, 2, 3 step! Hahahaha thats how i learned in my family lol.” User lia ana comments, “My Dominicans, when you were to learn batchata from your parents did they say, "Uno, dos, tres, pan." or was it just me...” These two moments recall memories of training and memories of instilling the beat of bachata verbally. Rhythm that is taught bodily or verbally disabuses the notion that people naturally have rhythm. Furthermore, these comments that mention parents and family reiterate the home space as a training space and family and friends as teachers.

Season 2 Episode 12<sup>64</sup> of the TV show *Switched at Birth* (2011-2017)<sup>65</sup> shows a scene where two parents teach their biological teenage daughter, Bay, bachata. This is the first time I’ve seen a fictionalized depiction of a bachata home training scene, thereby visibilizing and valuing dancing at home for a wide, potentially unfamiliar audience. *Switched at Birth*, as the title suggests, is about two teenagers who were switched at birth; the deaf white baby grows up in lower class Latine family and the hearing Latine baby grows up in a rich white family. In the episode “Distorted House,” the bachata scene begins in the living room after dinner with the mother and father dancing together doing the bachata basic step (three steps and a tap) and the daughter watching. Bay asks what they’re dancing. As the father turns the mother with one hand, he responds “It’s bachata. It’s from the Dominican Republic.” He reaches his other hand out to Bay and says “you have to do it.” Even though she responds with “I didn’t inherit the dance gene” and exhibits some hesitation, Bay joins. As she attempts to follow, her mother encourages Bay saying, “You’re doing great.” Joined by clasped hands and standing next to each, the father explains “it’s all in the hips. Forget about your feet.” Bay

---

<sup>64</sup> air date June 17, 2013

<sup>65</sup> *Switched at Birth*, Drama, Family, Romance (ABC Signature, Pirates’ Cove Entertainment, 2011).

rightfully balks at this, exclaiming, “what are you talking about, you’re moving your feet.” A few moments pass and he starts to count, “1 2 3 pop” “1 2 3 pop.”<sup>66</sup> Bay looks at and mimics her parents. The joining of their hands and this moment of learning and dancing together solidifies them as a family unit, something they had been striving to do as a newly reunited family.



Figure 17 – Screenshot of Bay, her dad, and mom dance bachata in the living room



Figure 18 – Screenshot of Angelo (Bay's dad) begins to turn them both

---

<sup>66</sup> Fred Gerber, “Distorted House,” *Switched at Birth*, June 17, 2013.



Figure 19 – Screenshot of Bay in the middle dancing between her parents

Along with reinforcing familial ties, this scene also reinforces the home space as a training space. In a review posted on *Hispanic Houston*, Sandra Fernandez describes this scene in “Switched at Birth” as “a family moment we’ve seen at every *quinceañera*, *boda*, and *fiesta de familia*.”<sup>67</sup> Fernandez associates this living room teaching moment with similar moments shared in other family functions—birthdays, weddings, and family parties:

It was all very poignant, very sweet and, for many of us, very commonplace. I did this myself with my niece and nephew, pulling them onto a dance floor and trying to teach them the steps to different kinds of music: cumbias, corridas, merengues, etc. Sometimes I just watched as their parents or other tías and tíos did the honors. But, just the same, I recognized the moment as something that has happened dozens upon dozens of times in my own family, and I smiled.<sup>68</sup>

The repetition Fernandez mentions emphasizes the ‘commonplaceness’ of the dance floor as a training space but also the amount of practice and training in home spaces. In

<sup>67</sup> Sandra Fernandez, “A Bachata Moment on ‘Switched at Birth,’” *Hispanic Houston* (blog), July 15, 2013, <https://hispanichouston.com/a-bachata-moment-on-switched-at-birth/>.

<sup>68</sup> Fernandez.



addition to being exposed to dancing at a young age, many Latines are continuously given opportunities to dance.

The hesitancy Bay expressed to dance is also relevant because sometimes children don't want to practice their dancing or aren't as interested in dancing. For example, during our interview, Victoria volunteered that she wasn't as interested in dancing when she was young.<sup>69</sup> Two of my cousins also shared that at first they didn't want to dance, but their parents and family members would force them until eventually they wanted to dance and enjoyed doing it. Forcing kids to dance is a way of enforcing dancing as a value, meaning dancing is an important skill meant to be learned. In other words, part of what is also being trained into the body, besides rhythm, is a bodily response: when there is music, we dance. I was also under the impression that I had always liked dancing or been a good dancer, but my Mom tells me that she had to force me to dance when I was small: "You didn't want to dance but I made you because I didn't want you to not know how to dance." My Mom made sure to instill in me the importance and necessity of dance. She, along with many Latine families, was anticipating the skills I would need<sup>70</sup> to socialize and form social bonds, both familial and extrafamilial.

### **Rigor in the Home Space**

The repeated references to home training and the breadth of what it entails dispel assumptions that people dance based solely on natural ability. Likewise,

---

<sup>69</sup> Victoria in discussion with author, March 2019.

<sup>70</sup> Anticipating needs is another virtue of homes as Douglas explains in reference to homes as buildings - "Storage implies a capacity to plan, to allocate materials between now and the future, to anticipate needs." Mary Douglas, "The Idea of a Home: A Kind of Space," *Social Research* Spring 1991, Vol. 58, no. No. 1 (n.d.): 295, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40970644>.

visibilizing home training acknowledges the labor of family members and friends who serve as teachers. Learning dance at home does not mean it is easy or without rigor. As dance scholar Hodel Ophir argues, “while widespread notions of home portray it as a sanctuary or safe haven which allows relaxation and rest,” home can also be “a space of action,” with a focus of “doing, shaping, managing and participating.”<sup>71</sup> Although Ophir is analyzing studio dance practices, her theorization of home as a space of action is also helpful in thinking about how bachata dance training happens at home. Eileen says, “ugh Latinos are so...at least Dominicans—they’re very like judgmental on your dancing. Like any little thing they criticize so it’s like from a small age like being critiqued every little step. Any little thing .... Let’s say you moved your shoulders—you’re not moving your hips enough.”<sup>72</sup> Even as small children, learning correct technique is important and children do and will get corrected. Sean also experienced getting corrected when he was younger:

Uncle Jim had played a bachata. This was way before I knew how to dance bachata. I must have been like I don't know 10 11, maybe 12 years old and I was dancing it like one would dance merengue. And he was like ‘You need to stop dancing. That's not bachata.’ He was like ‘You don’t know how you dance that.’ He and Angela got up and they were like ‘Let us show you.’<sup>73</sup>

Sean was corrected because he was doing merengue steps to bachata. Merengue is a continuous two step while bachata is a three step with a pause on the fourth beat. My uncle and aunt corrected him so that he would know the difference and be able to dance correctly. Sean explains, “some dances you can move to the rhythm of it and just enjoy yourself. But there’s certain dances that have particular steps and if you don’t know how

---

<sup>71</sup> Ophir, “‘When I Enter the Studio I Am Coming Home’: Challenging Conceptions of Home through Body and Dance.”

<sup>72</sup> Eileen in discussion with author, November 2019.

<sup>73</sup> Sean in discussion with author, November 2019.

to do them then that's bad dancing. Because those steps mean something.”<sup>74</sup> Besides helping to identify the dance, knowing the movements also shows the dancers’ knowledge of and respect for the dance form. In this moment, my uncle and aunt were also teaching dancer humility—just because you know one dance doesn’t mean you know them all.

Moreover, rigor is trained into young bodies via informal dance competitions. In home training, watching and dancing with adults is supplemented by dancing with people your own age. All of my Dominican cousins, Eileen, Marji, little Diana, and big Diana,<sup>75</sup> participated in dance competitions at home. The parents would make the kids dance and compete against each other in pairs or solo. Winners would get anything from money (\$2.00) to food, and all received bragging rights.<sup>76</sup> Little Diana remembers winning and the general fun and excitement of these competitions: “Everyone chanting. Ohhh Go go. Dance dance. Or having the shy ones get to dance with you and you’d be surprised.”<sup>77</sup> She describes other adults and other kids as being the “hype” people.<sup>78</sup> Part of the value of these competitions is, as Marji states, to “hype up the younger generation”<sup>79</sup> and keep them dancing but also to maintain certain standards. I remember Eileen recounting the story of how her sister, big Diana, was competing in a competition while their dad was a judge. When she didn’t win, Diana exclaimed “Daddy, you didn’t

---

<sup>74</sup> Sean in discussion with author, November 2019.

<sup>75</sup> Little and Big used to distinguish age.

<sup>76</sup> Little Diana in discussion with author, November 2019; Marji in discussion with author, November 2019.

<sup>77</sup> Little Diana in discussion with author, November 2019.

<sup>78</sup> Little Diana in discussion with author, November 2019.

<sup>79</sup> Marji in discussion with author, November 2019.

vote for me” and he responded, “She was better, baby,” emphasizing how these competitions, while fun, were also about honestly assessing the kids’ skills.

I consider these adult-hosted dance competitions to be precursors to the dance training that happens among cousins, friends, and peers in later years. Marji explained that she was around 6 or 7 during the competitions and that “we don’t do competitions now. I’m too old.”<sup>80</sup> While I don’t remember ever taking part in one of these adult-hosted home dance competitions, they remind me of the ways my cousins and I danced in the basement of my Grandma’s house in St. Albans, Queens, New York City or my aunt’s<sup>81</sup> house in Teaneck, New Jersey. They remind me of how my friends and I would dance in circles at parties in patios, living rooms, backyards, and school functions in Miami. As sociologist Maxine Leeds-Craig describes of her own home training, dancing together meant working through good and bad dancing and maintaining standards to acquire what she describes as “fluency.”<sup>82</sup> All of these training moments are instances of practice and of maintaining standards. As Craig theorizes, dance training at home is not just for fun but also about creating “competent dancers.”<sup>83</sup>

A more formalized way of training and maintaining rigor is via quinceañeras (quinces). Comments left on the BuzzFeed video “Americans Try bachata Dancing” mention quinceañeras as a space of learning. User Eeve.melissa writes, “This reminds

---

<sup>80</sup> Marji in discussion with author, November 2019.

<sup>81</sup> From my dad’s side

<sup>82</sup> The opening to Maxine Leeds Craig’s book starts with her reminiscing about her own home training in Brooklyn with her cousins: “When I was a young girl in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, I spent many weekends in the basement of my cousins’ brownstone house listening to records and practicing dancing. We trained ourselves in the art of looking good while moving to music, and we practiced perfect parodies of bad dancing.” Although Craig isn’t referring to bachata, I highlight her practicing in the basement with her cousins. Maxine Leeds Craig, *Sorry I Don’t Dance: Why Men Refuse to Move*, 1 edition (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.

<sup>83</sup> Craig, *Sorry I Don’t Dance*, 3.

me of my quince practices how we were all trying to learn the dance lol,” and Erika Solis adds, “All the Hispanics in my city learned dances like this at the sweet fifteens and sixteens because everyone there is Hispanic lol.” A commenter with the handle, Ruphay is bae oml, writes, “Once you're in 10 quinces, you teach yourself to dance bachata,” and user Elizabeth Caine recounts, “When I was in sixth grade I had to learn this for my friends quince it was really fun but kind of awkward at least I got one of the hot older guys for my partner and at least I can dance well now.” The two quinces I was a part of had similar training structures. In the weekly practices, the court would learn the choreographies and rehearse. In both instances, the choreographer was the quiniñera’s family member or a family member of a friend.

Eileen marks the training she received for a sweet 16 as instrumental to her dancing because of the standard of dancing expected.

My god sister Tepi for her sweet 16 - it was like this big deal. They were partnering up everybody and like it was like once you had your partner like you had to dance in front of everybody. We're just practicing. They would critique ohh you need to move your hips more. You guys need to go at the same pace. It's like. It's like. It shatters your fucking like confidence. Damn every little thing. In sync you need to get in sync. They'll show you how they want it to look. That's where I really learned how to make my dancing better. Sweet 16. because like one of the uncles.. he was so like no one wanted him to critique them. You know you're like scared so let me move the shit out of my hips.<sup>84</sup>

As Eileen mentions, even though they were “just practicing,” they had to meet a high standard of dancing that included lots of hip movement and being in sync with partners and the other couples. They would critique “every little thing” because “every little thing” is important. Despite Eileen saying that the rigor can “shatter confidence,” it also improved her dancing. The mention of a strict uncle who everyone wanted to please out of fear, was both a motivator and regulator of a good dancing standard. In this moment,

---

<sup>84</sup> Eileen in discussion with author, November 2019.

he became everyone's uncle and everyone's dance teacher. Quinceañeras and sweet 16s are a type of familial performance, and practices for these events are taken seriously, reinforcing the rigor of home training.

### **An Expectation to Dance**

Additionally, part of the rigor and discipline involved in home training is the expectation to dance as we see in the "Switched at Birth" scene with Bay's reluctance to dance and her father's insistence that she will. Mary Douglas asserts, "perhaps the most subversive attack on the home is to be present physically without joining in its multiple coordinations."<sup>85</sup> I extend this to the dance context, asserting that rigor includes being expected to dance as I recall in the following memory.

*It was Eileen and Diana's joint sweet 16 and elegant 18. They had a big party at a banquet hall with beautiful white dresses. I, on the other hand, was 16 and badly dressed, wearing big loose pants that I think belonged to my aunt and a cream lace spaghetti strap top. A boy my age, Eileen's cousin on her mom's side, asked me to dance and I said yes. Midway through our dance, I was starting to feel antisocial, so I said, "I want to go sit back down" and he responded, "Hold on till the song ends because I can't be seen not dancing." (my memory)*

Either he just really wanted to dance with me or he knew that he should be dancing, especially in the space of a party. The implications of his not dancing could be read as not wanting to participate in celebrating and/or it could be read as not responding to the call of the music.

The expectation to dance is further seen when nondancers are present. None of my exes have been dancers. The few times I brought a significant other to family functions, I was charged with teaching them how to dance—very reminiscent to what my

---

<sup>85</sup> Douglas, "The Idea of a Home: A Kind of Space," 301.

cousin Marji experiences with her high school sweetheart, Angel, who is Puerto Rican but doesn't dance. She recounts, "cuz my aunts are relentless. They're like 'Teach him how to dance Marji. Sacalo! Sacalo!' Angel is like attacked. I feel so bad. He hates how when you walk into a party you have to say hi to every single person. I told him it's a sign of respect. He wants to just wave his hand."<sup>86</sup> Unlike when you're a child, family can't force a grown man to dance, at least not in the same way. Marji's aunts' relentlessness, however, shows that sitting out is not an option. Marji juxtaposes dancing with saying hi at a party, reflecting sociality standards and expectations. For some families, saying hi to everyone by giving them a kiss on the cheek is respectful and acknowledges not only everyone in the room but awareness and understanding of your connection to them. The same goes for dancing. Dancing is a sign of respect in this space and of bonding.<sup>87</sup>

Marji explains further, "especially when it's a couple. My aunts see la couple dancing...for them, it solidifies their connection to the family or their vow to the other person. I feel that's how it is. That's why Angel feels so pressured... They give him this look – um you better go dance with her or she's going to dance with someone else."<sup>88</sup> Refusing to participate, to provide bodily labor via dance, is a way to be discounted. Telling Marji "to bring him out to dance" and to "teach him" are imperatives for her to help him participate, as well as indirect imperatives for him to join the dancing and solidify the bond he has with my cousin and her family. Part of why dancing is established as a

---

<sup>86</sup> Marji in discussion with author, November 2019.

<sup>87</sup> McQuirter writes, "As children danced with each other, parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents, their lessons included not only how to dance but how to create a physical and psychic intimacy that was often more difficult in other settings," reiterating the the intimacies and socialities created via learning and dancing. Marya Annette McQuirter, "Awkward Moves: Dance Lessons from the 1940s," in *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations In African American Dance*, by Thomas F. DeFrantz (University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 95, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/8476>.

<sup>88</sup> Marji in discussion with author, November 2019.

value and why some homes are rigorous in their dance training is because dance plays a vital role in creating and maintaining social bonds.

Furthermore, not dancing is a reflection of refusing to be in the moment. Citing historian Walter Ong, ethnomusicologist Tomie Hahn notes that “Sound and vision... have different orienting effects: ‘Sound situates man in the middle of actuality and in simultaneity, whereas vision situates man in the front of things and in sequentiality.’”<sup>89</sup> Not dancing and just watching separates oneself from the dancers. One of my cousin’s fiancés refuses to dance. In the past, I have pulled him up from the couch onto the living room floor to dance but he still refused, shutting down and running away. His refusal to even try to dance with us would infuriate me. After reflecting on it, I realized I was frustrated because his choice not to dance makes things awkward. Whether intentionally or not, his not dancing turns our dancing into a show for him. Echoing Douglas, being physically present but not “joining in” is an “attack on the home.”<sup>90</sup> Here, the attack comes in the form of refusing to connect and bond as a family.

---

<sup>89</sup> Walter J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*, 1st Edition (Yale University Press, 1967), 128., quoted in Tomie Hahn, *Sensational Knowledge: Embodying Culture through Japanese Dance* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), 115.

<sup>90</sup> Douglas, “The Idea of a Home: A Kind of Space,” 301.



## **Section 2: Finding Home In Bachata Studio Classes**

As mentioned above, Marji's boyfriend Angel is Puerto Rican but he didn't grow up dancing. When I asked Marji if she's taken bachata classes in a studio before she said, "No. But I want to. For Angel."<sup>91</sup> I was surprised at this because Marji is arguably the best dancer of our family so I assumed she would teach Angel herself. She added, "I think he needs someone else besides me." Dancing and teaching dance are two different skills, something I posit Marji is implicitly acknowledging in her statement. While I have been arguing that home spaces are integral to learning bachata for many people, I also acknowledge that the home space is not available to everyone, and also, not always enough. To clarify, my intention is not to position the home space as a "dance training panacea," where dancing at home is a cure all, but rather to validate home training as a dance training space akin to other more visible and conventionally acknowledged places. However, because some people do not have access to dancing home spaces, the access point to bachata changes to studio classes, dance socials, festivals, and congresses. Said differently, when the home space is no longer available or was never available, studio classes and festivals/congresses act as surrogate homes and provide places to learn.

### **Bachata Studio Classes - Styles and Why?**

In Bachata Dance Academy's YouTube video, bachata instructors Demetrio and Nicole characterize the differences between Dominican, sensual, and urban/modern bachata movement styles. Dominican/Traditional bachata has "more footwork," "syncopations," with a focus on "musicality," "less turn patterns," and "no body

---

<sup>91</sup> Marji in discussion with author, November 2019.

rolls/dips.”<sup>92</sup> He describes sensual bachata as “slow, smooth, fluid,” “flashy stuff,” “continuous movement” with “body rolls, waves, and dips.” He also mentions that other dance forms like salsa and zouk are often incorporated into sensual bachata.<sup>93</sup> He attributes sensual bachata to a man named Korke and notes that it started in Europe and includes a lot of the latin song remixes.<sup>94</sup> Urban/modern bachata has “more partnerwork” and “turn patterns;” body rolls can also be used but urban/modern bachata has less emphasis on “fluidity” than sensual bachata, he explains.<sup>95</sup> Demetrio cites Romeo Santos, Tony Love, and Prince Royce as examples of urban/modern bachata musicians.<sup>96</sup> In her 2014 article, Pacini Hernandez writes that urban bachata comes from Dominicans born and raised in New York and incorporates “R&B and hip hop aesthetics.”<sup>97</sup> The bachata classes I took in dance studios were often labeled as “bachata,” which could mean a variation or mix of urban/modern and/or sensual. Dominican or traditional bachata were labeled as such.

The dancers I met while taking bachata dance classes often came to bachata at an older age and most hadn’t been previously exposed to bachata. The majority of them mention being introduced to bachata by a friend, while three or four found bachata because they were familiar with salsa. They all made an effort to find a studio to learn bachata. Despite not learning at home, they found home in these new spaces. For

---

<sup>92</sup> *Different Styles of Bachata - Sensual/Dominican/Urban - Demetrio & Nicole* | *Bachata Dance Academy*, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jyxYc45XDJ4>.

<sup>93</sup> *Different Styles of Bachata - Sensual/Dominican/Urban - Demetrio & Nicole* | *Bachata Dance Academy*.

<sup>94</sup> *Different Styles of Bachata - Sensual/Dominican/Urban - Demetrio & Nicole* | *Bachata Dance Academy*.

<sup>95</sup> *Different Styles of Bachata - Sensual/Dominican/Urban - Demetrio & Nicole* | *Bachata Dance Academy*.

<sup>96</sup> *Different Styles of Bachata - Sensual/Dominican/Urban - Demetrio & Nicole* | *Bachata Dance Academy*.

<sup>97</sup> Hernandez, “Urban Bachata and Dominican Racial Identity in New York,” 1054.

example, Jerry, a 44-year-old Mexican man, immerses himself in bachata—he takes classes four times a week and he listens to the music in his car, at work, and at home. He explains, “I fell in love with it, where like I'm taking classes, and I'm interested. I'm interested in being good at it. It's not just, you know, something you do when you're doing probably cause you're in a club. It's just—it's a daily struggle. You do it everyday.”<sup>98</sup> While I think clubbing is a perfectly good reason to learn to dance, Jerry's distinction speaks to his choice to make a concerted and dedicated commitment to bachata.

Phillippos, a 35-year-old Ethiopian African American male, grew up knowing of (though not dancing) salsa and when he went to a studio to take salsa classes as an adult, he was exposed to bachata and liked the bass and drums of the music. He does capoeira, an Afro-Brazilian folkloric dance, and found familiarity in the bachata basic step.<sup>99</sup> Likewise, Victoria, a 33-year-old Latina/Guatemalan woman, feels “corporeally connected” to bachata; she's “drawn” to the dance form.<sup>100</sup> She also likes the sensuality and slowness of bachata and how it lets her explore her feminine side.<sup>101</sup> Kim, a 30-year-old Latina woman, makes connections between bachata and her culture, “I mean as a Latina, for me I feel like dancing bachata, you know what, it makes me embrace a little of my culture, like the Honduran culture, we don't have—we don't dance bachata, we dance Punta, but it's letting me able to dance something else besides that.”<sup>102</sup> Learning bachata has extended her repertoire of Latine dances.

---

<sup>98</sup> Jerry in discussion with author, March 2019.

<sup>99</sup> Phillippos in discussion with author, March 2019.

<sup>100</sup> Victoria in discussion with author, March 2019.

<sup>101</sup> Victoria in discussion with author, March 2019.

<sup>102</sup> Kim in discussion with author, March 2019.

Despite dancing not being a part of his upbringing, Ben, a 24-year-old African American man, always wanted to dance. Because of this, he shares feeling like a contradiction: “I don't know how to dance, and I'm taking these classes to learn how to dance, which is a stereotype for a black person, which is not a thing, but yeah. You're not born dancing, right? ... and as a male, you're not born to lead anyone, right?”<sup>103</sup> Dancing and leading are both skills that must be learned. While some might learn these skills at home, some learn them in studio classes and via social dancing.

### **Borrowing from Home Training**

Even in dance studio spaces, aspects of home get reconstructed, retooled, and reused. Home spaces are both to learn and to socialize, often at the same time; this means that what you learn at home can be used to dance with family and friends as well as with strangers in clubs. The latin social dance scene replicates this setup by creating a self-sustaining bachata ecosystem where the class space spatially and physically feeds the social dance space. Bachata festivals and congresses are an example of this ecosystem at work. The typical structure of a bachata festival or congress includes classes and workshops during the day, performances in the early evening, and social dancing till the wee hours of the morning. This three part structure designates different functions: classes are for learning, performances to showcase, and social dancing to practice and socialize via dancing. A similar ecosystem happens in many dance studios. In the majority of classes I took, the dance studio served as the space for the class and the proceeding social dance. In both joint bachata classes and socials as well as in

---

<sup>103</sup> Ben in discussion with author, March 2019.

congresses/festivals, people new to the scene can, in theory, easily join by staying in the same space, which provides access to learn, observe, and practice bachata.

While each teacher and studio approaches teaching differently, there are some similarities. For instance, a general class structure starts with the class dancing all together facing the same direction, practicing basic steps and then the group separates into couples and works on learning specific combinations or a skill. Most of the time in classes is spent switching partners and practicing. The goal of studio classes, like home training, is for dancers to be at home with the music, the movement, and with partnering. I argue that this is accomplished by importing training techniques from home spaces into bachata studio classes.

### **Teaching Home In Music**

While I took bachata classes in different places in Southern California, I spent most of my fieldwork taking classes at Bachata Dance Academy (BDA) in Commerce, Los Angeles. I was drawn to it because it is the only studio that teaches only bachata; many other studios teach a combination of dance forms. BDA focuses on a combination of urban and sensual bachata though they also offer Dominican bachata. BDA offers classes four times a week and at least two socials a week. A social is basically just a dance party, kind of like a club but it doesn't have to happen in a nightclub. BDA classes and events are held in a large restaurant—Steven's Steakhouse. I interpret this choice both as cost effective for the instructor (space, food, alcohol, all under one roof) but also as an invocation of the home space. Through its food, a restaurant acts as a home space—it's a place of gathering and nurturing. During happy hour, right before class, Steven's offers a small free food buffet. Because Steven's also has a large

banquet/event section, it made it easy for the class space to turn into a social space with a dance floor, lights, a stage, and our teacher as DJ. In the six months I trained at Steven's, we danced everywhere in that restaurant: in the banquet space, in the upstairs small private room, and in the downstairs area in front of and in between the restaurant tables. This is very reminiscent of the home space, where any space can be a space for dancing. Victoria ascribes the "chill, friendly" space of Steven's to instructors Demetrio<sup>104</sup> and Nicole since, as she explains, teachers "create an ambiance" and for Victoria it made her feel like she found "a second home."<sup>105</sup> This home is particularly suited for dance training because of the frequency of classes, meaning there were plenty of opportunities to practice and continue training bachata to feel at home in the body.

I took both the open classes at Steven's (taught by Pete, Demetrio, and Nicole) and I enrolled in the three month master class. One of the first exercises Demetrio had us do during the master class<sup>106</sup> was to pick a bachata song that we would work with the entire three months and listen to it on repeat, each time only focusing on one instrument. I chose a classic I have always loved and still love, Monchy y Alexandra's 1999 "Hoja en Blanco." I grew up with my dad playing the Colombian vallenato version<sup>107</sup> of this song so when they made the bachata version, it felt familiar. Listening and focusing on one instrument at a time and tracking it from song start to song finish was much harder than I expected. Once you try to isolate and only listen to one instrument, all the other

---

<sup>104</sup> Demetrio is "a dancer and instructor of Dominican descent based out of Los Angeles, California." "Demetrio Rosario | Bachata Instructor, DJ and Performer," Udemy, accessed July 14, 2022, <https://www.udemy.com/user/demetrio-rosario/>.

<sup>105</sup> Victoria in discussion with author, March 2019.

<sup>106</sup> In this context, a master class is a private class for a small group of students that met once a week to focus on more of the details of the technique not able to be covered in the open classes.

<sup>107</sup> 1997 Omar Geles

instruments somehow become louder. My fieldnotes read, “*I finally heard the bass guitar: it 1 \_ 341 \_ 341. It’s really faint and you gotta listen for it but I heard it.*”<sup>108</sup> I had never thought to intentionally listen to music in this way. My response to music has been, like my family said about their own experiences, more organic. I would feel the music but not necessarily actively think ‘oh that drum beat is amazing’ or ‘I really like what the guitar is doing.’ I had only ever really paid intentional attention to the lyrics.

The point of Demetrio’s listening exercise was to start training our ears—to make us more sensitive to the different parts of the music. He also explained that songs are in cycles and that you can predict/expect what’s coming next and use that to your advantage. For instance, leads could plan to dip their partners so that the dip accents the music. This listening exercise started us off with the value of music and set up music as a home that we needed to know our way around. Likewise, I remember Demetrio telling us, “*you should be counting the music all the time so that eventually you won’t need to consciously count it, it’ll be in your body*” (loose paraphrase based on memory). He re-emphasizes the need for the beat to be and feel at home in a dancer’s body. I liken these exercises to the more osmosis-like<sup>109</sup> training that occurs in home spaces. After listening and dancing to music for years, one starts to develop a similar type of sensitivity that these exercises are creating.

### **Teaching Home In Movement**

In studio classes, ingraining the bachata basic step at home took the form of repetition. My first ever studio bachata class was through University of California Riverside’s rec center. What I remember most about this class is Melissa instructing us

---

<sup>108</sup> My fieldnotes, January 2019.

<sup>109</sup> In our discussion, Marji also used the word “osmosis” to describe her learning to dance at home.

to keep the bachata basic no matter what. If you're turning, still do your 1 2 3 hip. If you're walking forward, 1 2 3 hip, walking diagonal 1 2 3 hip - just keep the bachata basic step going and you'll be fine. This instruction ingrained the beat and movement of bachata as being 1 2 3 hip. It ingrained the musical and movement home of bachata and ensured that no matter the type of fancy turn pattern, you wouldn't get lost. It also helps the lead—in the event they lose the beat, they can regroup themselves in their partner's movement. I liken this to the repetition that goes on in home spaces where the bachata basic step is the “bread and butter” of many dancing interactions.

Likewise, one of my favorite bachata workshops taught grounded hip movement by using a strategy from home training in the studio. D.C. based bachata instructors Ace and Ciara<sup>110</sup> started off their bachata workshop by having us pretend to hold two cups full of water and to do the bachata basic step without letting any water spill. In order to do this, the movement must be initiated from the hips down, not from the top half of your body. This exercise is a direct import from home training. Dancing with a drink in your hand is very much present in parties, clubs, barbecues, etc. and obviously the onus would be to not spill said liquor/liquid. This exercise teaches students how to ground themselves in the hip movement.

### **Teaching Home In Partnering**

Establishing familiarity is another tactic drawn on from home training. One of the common spatial arrangements of a bachata class is to have two large circles with leads on the outside circle and follows on the inside (or vice versa) with the instructors demonstrating in the middle. This setup allows for the instructors to always be seen as a

---

<sup>110</sup> As of 2020 they are no longer dancing or teaching as partners but I refer to them as Ace and Ciara in my work to respect their brand at the time of research.



reference point. As in home training, watching others dance and mimicking is important. This “circle time” is the core learning section of the class where watching, trial and error, clarifying, tweaking, repeating, and rotating with new partners helps keep the flow of energy and information moving in the room. Each dance with a new partner acts as an opportunity to learn something, to practice. In home training spaces (practicing with uncles, aunts, cousins of different ages) and in going out clubbing (dancing with strangers), one is able to practice with different bodies and really hone the skills of partnering and of dancing more broadly. While switching partners in a bachata studio class engenders practicing with new bodies, it also aids in establishing familiarity between dancers. Depending on how many people are in the class, you may get to dance with every person at least once, if not twice. While not the same as dancing with your cousin whom you’ve known all your life, dancing with someone in a class setting encourages some familiarity.

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, in many studios the class space physically feeds the social dance space. The class-then-social structure builds and nurtures common ground both in terms of dance movement and familiarity between dancers, thus creating a training loop as well as a rapport/familiarity cycle. Taking class and then participating in the social dance afterwards can help people feel at home in the space because the bodies are familiar and there is a shared understanding of movements.

### Section 3: Dominican bachata vs sensual bachata

Lyn, a 24-year-old Vietnamese American woman I met at the LA Bachata Festival, shares that when she started learning Dominican bachata, her dream was to “go to where it originated, and do it there.”<sup>111</sup> The desire to go to the Dominican Republic changed when Lyn’s dancing interests changed: “Because I gravitated towards salsa for a little while, and then I started gravitating toward sensual bachata. So it was just my style started mixing up.”<sup>112</sup> During our interview, Lyn shared excitement about attending an exclusive<sup>113</sup> sensual bachata training in Spain.<sup>114</sup> Lyn’s change of “dance heart” helps introduce other national players involved in bachata. The Dominican Republic, Haiti, the U.S., and Spain are all a part of bachata’s story, as are many other countries that participate in the circulation of bachata. Because of this movement, there are many different types of bachata and many different types of people dancing bachata. I continue to theorize and complicate “home” in bachata, which references spaces like family homes and dance studios, as well as the D.R., the U.S., and now Spain. In this section I focus on the ways changes in bachata and the addition of bachata “homes” across the world can marginalize bachata’s initial home in the D.R.

In a YouTube video entitled “Bachata Dominicana vs sensual bachata | Aprende a bailar bachata,” a Dominican man named Destino<sup>115</sup> discusses the differences

---

<sup>111</sup> Lyn in discussion with author, March 2019.

<sup>112</sup> Lyn in discussion with author, March 2019.

<sup>113</sup> One must apply to attend Sensual Week: “You can apply by filling out the form and submitting a video (of yourself dancing a Bachata Sensual improvisation with a partner) from March 29 at 9PM CEST onwards, so be ready! We’ll evaluate your application and offer you an option to sign up for the track we think is best suited for you to grow as a dancer.” Organizers are Korke, Judith, Yenny & Andreas. “Sensual Week,” accessed July 28, 2022, <https://www.sensualweek.com/>.

<sup>114</sup> Lyn in discussion with author, March 2019.

<sup>115</sup> He competed in Dancing with the Stars Costa Rica in 2019.

between Dominican and sensual bachata and how Dominicans are losing ownership and connection to bachata.<sup>116</sup> His video is a split screen: on the left is a video of two dancers dancing sensual bachata and on the right is Destino in what looks like a bedroom, talking in Spanish<sup>117</sup> while facing the camera. Twenty three seconds into the clip, the video on the left switches from showing sensual bachata to a video of a couple dancing Dominican bachata. The rest of the three minute and twenty four second video stays in this split, with a couple dancing Dominican bachata on the left, and Destino talking on the right. Destino does not directly address the dance videos as they play, yet they serve as a comparison for the viewer. The division of time spent with the Dominican bachata couple literally and figuratively recenters and emphasizes Dominican bachata.

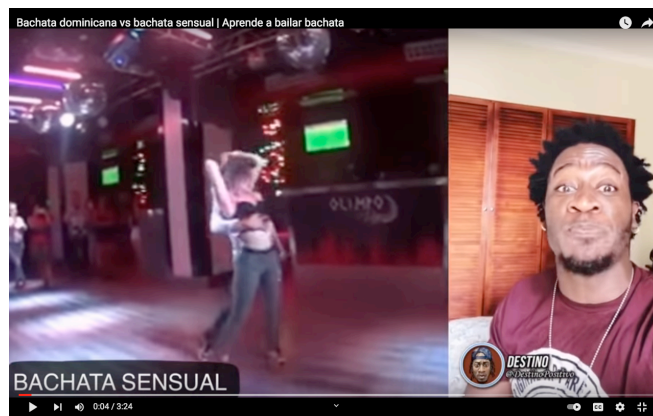


Figure 20 – Screenshot of split screen with Bachata sensual on left, Destino on right

---

<sup>116</sup> DESTINO POSITIVO, *Bachata Dominicana vs Bachata Sensual | Aprende a Bailar Bachata*, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_qLMre0IsIA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_qLMre0IsIA).

<sup>117</sup> I include my own translations throughout.



Figure 21 – Screenshot of split screen with Dominican bachata on left, Destino on right

The location, dress, and movement differ in each of the videos. The sensual bachata video takes place in a club in Spain and the dancers are Xurxo y Reyes, teachers from Spain. Her dyed gray/platinum hair is loose and contrasts against her white skin. She wears heels, tight jeans, and a black lacy bra top while her partner wears jeans and a button down. They dance on a large hardwood dance floor in front of a DJ booth. There are at least eight people on the edges of the dance floor, watching and recording the couple dancing with their phones. Xurxo y Reyes' dance includes body rolls, booty rolls, and turns. For instance, at one point, Reyes leads her into a movement where she bends forward into a table top position and then undulates her torso back up. Their dancing is much more focused on being sexy and sensual.

On the other hand, the Dominican bachata video<sup>118</sup> seems to take place in more of a home setting—there are at least sixteen people watching, some standing and others sitting on white plastic chairs surrounding the couple dancing on a white tiled floor. She has her dark brown hair in a bun, and she wears fitted jeans, a loose bright yellow top,

---

<sup>118</sup> original video entitled 'Bachata Bonao'

and flat sandals. He wears jeans, a red short sleeved dress shirt, a shiny belt, and dress shoes. Their dancing is more focused on hip movement and footwork, adding a double step in the bachata basic, touching their toes back on the diagonal then side. Her hips move like a fast pendulum. They do a few turns here and there. Everyone in the room is a person of color. The original YouTube video, entitled “bachata Bonao,” includes a description reading, “Así es como se baila bachata en la región del cibao de República Dominicana”<sup>119</sup> - this is bachata as danced in the Cibao region of the Dominican Republic. We assume then that everyone in the room, or at the very least, the two dancers, are Dominicans.

Destino starts by explaining his specific desire to “make it clear to those who have been deceived” — sensual bachata is not bachata.<sup>120</sup> Destino repeats “the Dominican Republic” or “Dominican” at least ten times in the first twenty seconds. He reinforces bachata’s connection to the D.R. by saying it’s a dance form that was “born,” “invented,” and “seasoned” in the D.R. and that all bachata singers are Dominican.<sup>121</sup> He staunchly asserts that bachata is 100% Dominican and shouldn’t be confused with sensual bachata, which was invented in Europe “porque los europea no tienen la habilidad, la rapidez de bailar la bachata Dominicano”<sup>122</sup> [because Europeans don’t have the ability or the speed to dance Dominican bachata]. Destino’s take on the origins of sensual bachata reflects the ways dances change when danced by different people. In particular, I connect his discussion to anthropologist Greg Downey’s work on capoeira.

---

<sup>119</sup> bachatabonao1, *Bachata Bonao*, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WnZDJ68DhP8>.

<sup>120</sup> DESTINO POSITIVO, *Bachata Dominicana vs Bachata Sensual | Aprende a Bailar Bachata*. My translation

<sup>121</sup> DESTINO POSITIVO. My translation.

<sup>122</sup> DESTINO POSITIVO.

Downey suggests that changes to capoeira were done to suit the middle-class, more educated people who might have been more interested in the power moves and self defense aspects of capoeira than in less “spectacular” movements, folklore, or more culturally specific traditions.<sup>123</sup> He also posits that the “whitening” changes that occurred to capoeira act as a “solution to movement problems,”<sup>124</sup> meaning the changes might occur to meet aesthetic values and to provide opportunities for “unfamiliar” bodies to succeed in the form. Destino seems to gesture towards differences in body and movement with his analysis of sensual bachata, ascribing the differences in sensual bachata as catering to competition and to “elegance.”<sup>125</sup>

To dance Dominican bachata, according to Destino, one needs energy, heart, speed, and desire (in the following excerpt movement descriptions are in brackets),

La bachata Dominicana se baile con energía [*hits chest with hand and looks up*<sup>126</sup>] con el corazón [*flings out arm, moves it around wildly*] como te da tu gana - pie pa'ca pa'ya [*raises leg and seems to kick it out*]. Tu la bailas como te da tu gana. porque así fue que nosotros lo inventamos. y así que nosotros la vivimos. y así que nosotros la disfrutamos.<sup>127</sup>

His “pie pa'ca pa'ya” [feet here, feet there] emphasizes the importance of footwork but also of improvising and of feeling the music. He then explains that people have been deceived to think that sensual bachata “es la verdadera bachata” [is the real bachata].<sup>128</sup>

---

<sup>123</sup> Greg Downey, *Learning Capoeira: Lessons in Cunning from an Afro-Brazilian Art* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 176.

<sup>124</sup> “discussions of ‘whitening’ highlight the challenges that cultivating new habits and unfamiliar styles of moving pose for the novice. “Whitened” capoeira appears to be a solution to movement problems, not merely a dilution of the art’s “African” nature” Downey, 170.

<sup>125</sup> *Bachata Dominicana vs Bachata Sensual | Aprende a Bailar Bachata*, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_qLMre0IsIA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_qLMre0IsIA).

<sup>126</sup> Movement description is included within the brackets.

<sup>127</sup> DESTINO POSITIVO.

<sup>128</sup> DESTINO POSITIVO.

Destino is flagging another occurrence where dances from minoritized people are “taken up” by majoritarian groups and “‘refined,’ ‘polished,’ and often desexualized.”<sup>129</sup>

Desmond gives the example of tango and how it started in lower class neighborhoods in Buenos Aires, then went to Paris and came back to Buenos Aires as a “respectable” form practiced by upper class Argentinians (33). While bachata seems to have gotten more sensual or sexualized in its sensual bachata form, the national and racial politics bear mentioning: bachata, a dance form from the D.R., a former colony of Spain, gets taken up by Spaniards and Europeans, changed, and in some ways starts to eclipse Dominican bachata.

Destino adds that Dominicans are in part to blame for sensual bachata taking over Dominican bachata because they have “let people from other nationalities commercialize our music to their own style.”<sup>130</sup> Destino asserts that Dominicans are losing their connection to bachata both in terms of their ability to make money off of bachata but also in how Dominican dancing bodies are being read. As perceptions of what constitutes bachata have changed, so have expectations of who is considered a bachata dancing body. Destino states, “we have made it so that when others see us dancing outside [the D.R.], they see us, as Dominicans, as strange. ‘Oh he doesn’t know how to dance.’ Because now it’s us Dominicans, that when we dance bachata, we look strange dancing bachata.”<sup>131</sup> Outside of the D.R., Dominicans’ cultural authority is being questioned. Bachata is becoming deterritorialized both from the land of the D.R. and

---

<sup>129</sup> “dance forms originating in lower-class or nondominant populations present a trajectory of “upward mobility” in which the dances are “refined,” “polished,” and often desexualized.” Jane C. Desmond, “Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 26 (1993): 34, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354455>.

<sup>130</sup> DESTINO POSITIVO. My translation.

<sup>131</sup> DESTINO POSITIVO. My translation.

from the body of Dominicans. Another example of this comes up in a comment left on *The Perfect Follow's* blog post entitled "Why I don't dance bachata anymore (or the real problems with sensual bachata)."<sup>132</sup> DturPato, who identifies as a Dominican woman (cite blog post), writes,

I wish I could go to a bachata event, enjoy myself and not have a guy say to me that I indeed need to be more sensual-when clearly the songs isn't calling for it....I am not looking at my dance partner as the man of my dreams etc. I just want to dance and I do not want to have to fit my Dominican bachata into what now people interpret as the "right way to" "sensual bachata"

DturPato's Dominican style of dancing is not being received as bachata. Sensual bachata is being portrayed as the "correct" bachata, as a result, DturPato is getting "corrected" and is expected to do more "sensual" movements.

The issue of corrections came up several times in my research. I remember in a bachata musicality class at the 2019 LA Bachata Festival, Edwin, a Dominican teacher, specifically told us not to go to the Dominican Republic and correct people on their timing: my fieldnotes read, *"Don't go to the Caribbean and correct someone saying its 1 2 3 tap since in Dominican bachata, in the Caribbean, bachata is 3 steps and a tap but it can be 1 tap 3 4, tap 2 3 4, 1 2 tap 4. In the DR, people are responding to the music and might be listening to the bass and that's why they might be tapping on something else."*<sup>133</sup> On Facebook, Josué Joseph, dance teacher, professional musician,<sup>134</sup> and son of renowned musician Alfonso Panamá,<sup>135</sup> says he was inspired to post a video and

---

<sup>132</sup> Stefani Ruper, "Why I Don't Dance Bachata Anymore (or, the Real Problems with Sensual Bachata)," *The Perfect Follow* (blog), accessed March 20, 2022, <http://theperfectfollow.com/why-i-dont-dance-bachata-anymore/>.

<sup>133</sup> My fieldnotes, February 2019.

<sup>134</sup> He won a grammy for his work in Salsa and has partnered with famous bachatero, Joan Soriano. Josué Joseph, "Bio - La Época," accessed March 20, 2022, <http://laepocafilm.com/bio/>.

<sup>135</sup> Bassist and vocalist who worked with legends like Celia Cruz and Tito Puente "Biography of Alfonso Panamá," *La Época* (blog), accessed March 22, 2022, <http://laepocafilm.com/alfonso/>.



commentary on the sensual bachata/Dominican bachata debate because two dancers from Romania reached out to him after having traveled to the D.R. Josué recounts,

they called me on Facebook video-chat and said that they were trying to dance Bachata in the Dominican Republic but "we can't dance with them because they're not dancing Bachata" - and I smiled and responded, "Actually - they ARE dancing Bachata - but YOU are not because YOU are dancing what has been taught to you as 'Bachata-Sensual' which is a commercialized, diluted version of 'Bachata.'"<sup>136</sup>

People questioning and doubting if Dominicans in the D.R. are dancing bachata reiterates the increasing prominence of sensual bachata and how sensual bachata is in some ways, separating bachata from Dominican bodies.

Josué explains that it is not an “attack” to call out sensual bachata as not being bachata.<sup>137</sup> Instead, it is a clarification. “Proper labeling,” as he calls it, could clear up confusions like the one described above.<sup>138</sup> In other words, proper labeling would allow people to distinguish between Dominican bachata and sensual bachata and they would not expect to be able to dance them interchangeably. Additionally, proper labeling “could be beneficial to show respect to the roots—it's not ‘cultural appropriation’—it's just remembering the roots”.<sup>139</sup> Respecting and remembering the roots means respecting and remembering the home of bachata in the Dominican Republic. Josué is adamant that he does not have a problem with dances evolving or fusing, rather he’s passionate about correct classification: “it's simply raising a question: does 'bachata-sensual' have

---

<sup>136</sup> Josué Joseph, “Bachata-Sensual Is Brazilian-Zouk: Musicality Around the World,” *Facebook*, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/la.epoca/videos/1802852953276419/>.

<sup>137</sup> Joseph.

<sup>138</sup> Joseph.

<sup>139</sup> Joseph.

enough 'bachata' in it that remembers where it came from?"<sup>140</sup> In this question, naming is connected to roots, to a concept of home. In response to Josué Joseph or La Epoca's video, Spanish instructors Korke and Judith—Korke (Jorge Escalone) and Judith Cordero are commonly associated with being the "inventors" of sensual bachata—<sup>141</sup> responded to the "disputing [of] the originality and name of Bachata Sensual."<sup>142</sup> They are very clear that "in Bachata Sensual, the basic bachata 8-count step is the very fundamental on top of which everything else is built."<sup>143</sup> The bachata basic, even if it's not seen, is the connection they are making between bachata and sensual bachata.

My intention in discussing this divide is to not to position Dominican bachata as better than sensual or vice versa. My intention is to visibilize Dominican bachata and to visibilize the repercussions of conflating Dominican and sensual bachata, namely that sensual bachata begins to overshadow Dominican bachata. While salsa and bachata are different dance forms, they share similarities in their trajectory into commercialized, globalized, and industrialized dance forms. As McMains explains in her work on salsa, a division between studio dancers and home dancers can result in "academy" or studio dancers being positioned above the home dancers,<sup>144</sup> affecting who is read as a dancer. For instance, McMains writes that "deeper understanding of salsa history could help

---

<sup>140</sup> Joseph.

<sup>141</sup> "Korke y Judith Official Site – Bachata Sensual Creators," accessed March 20, 2022, <https://korkeyjudith.com/>. "History of Bachata Sensual – Bachata Sensual," accessed July 28, 2022, <https://www.bachatasensual.com/historia-bs/>.

<sup>142</sup> Korke y Judith, "Bachata Sensual by Korke y Judith - About Bachata Sensual.," *Facebook*, accessed June 30, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/bachatasensual/photos/a.463893020295822/1225133530838430/>.

<sup>143</sup> Korke y Judith.

<sup>144</sup> "As young dancers who had no personal experience of or education about the politics of 1970s salsa entered the commercialized salsa dance scene in the 1990s, many failed to recognize or respect older traditions of salsa. With no awareness of salsa's history, studio salsa dancers would often look down on family 'kitchen' style salsa as unsophisticated and inferior." McMains, *Spinning Mambo into Salsa*, 131.

academy dancers recognize that executing balanced triple turns is not a necessary condition to being able to lay claim to the identity of salsa dancer,<sup>145</sup> showing that certain dance skills favored in one style of salsa start to outweigh and even invalidate other types of movement. Similarly, McMains shares a story of a Latino man who “is troubled...by the degree to which salsa has been disconnected from Latin American culture such that a Japanese woman will assume a Latino man in a salsa club doesn’t know how to dance because she hasn’t seen him perform on stage.”<sup>146</sup> This example expresses both how the globalization of a dance form can separate the cultural aspects of a dance technique (as we saw in the hula chapter) and how this can affect who is read as a dancer. Here, performing on stage is seen as a validation and confirmation of dance skill and knowledge, and therefore as an indicator of who can claim “dancer.” Some of these similar concerns noted in salsa are becoming more and more prevalent in bachata, both in terms of sensual bachata being privileged over Dominican bachata and in home learning being eclipsed by studio classes.

### **Bachata Teachers as Home - Losing Home Field Advantage**

As Destino points out above, there are financial consequences involved with sensual bachata taking over bachata. He asserts, “póngase pilas República Dominicana. Comercializamos nuestra música - como se baila. Porque nosotros si somos Dominicanos y debemos mostrar al mundo como se baila la bachata - a nuestra manera.”<sup>147</sup> Destino calls for the D.R. to “step up” and commercialize both bachata music and the Dominican style of dancing because “we are Dominicans and we should

---

<sup>145</sup> McMains, 131.

<sup>146</sup> McMains, 130.

<sup>147</sup> DESTINO POSITIVO, *Bachata Dominicana vs Bachata Sensual | Aprende a Bailar Bachata*.

show the world how to dance bachata, our way.”<sup>148</sup> Along with less money in dance tourism for the D.R., other repercussions ensue from less credibility and less demand for Dominican dance teachers. If Dominicans are being seen as “not knowing how to dance,”<sup>149</sup> it lessens the likelihood that Dominicans will find employment as dance teachers.<sup>150</sup> In my fieldwork, I did not find as many Dominican bachata instructors in studio classes. Melissa, a bachata instructor in the LA area, also noticed this lack. She explains that in her experience, there are more non-Dominicans teaching bachata than Dominicans and she also agreed with my observation that there is a severe gender disparity, with teachers being predominantly men.<sup>151</sup> What this means is that non-Dominican men are increasingly the norm among bachata teachers, a position of power. Teachers have an important role in the dissemination of knowledge about bachata and are responsible for how people respond and dance to bachata. If “home is where you know how,”<sup>152</sup> then teachers can be said to help students train until the dance becomes home. To clarify, I am not claiming that bachata should only be taught by Dominicans. Instead, I am calling attention to how the small number of Dominican bachata teachers reiterates the decentering of Dominican bodies as dancers and now as teachers.

---

<sup>148</sup> DESTINO POSITIVO. My translation.

<sup>149</sup> DESTINO POSITIVO. My translation.

<sup>150</sup> Dominican teachers of bachata, arguably “body homes” for bachata, are also losing their cultural and dancer capital.

<sup>151</sup> Melissa in discussion with author, November 2018.

<sup>152</sup> Felip Martí-Jufresa, “Petite Logique De L’exil/Little Logics of Exile” (Serial Migrants and Identity/The Arts of Migration Conference/Exhibition/Performance, The Center for Ideas and Society at the University of California, Riverside, Riverside, CA, 2016).

## **Bachata, Home, and Pan-latinidad**

In my field notes from the 2019 Los Angeles Bachata Festival, I wrote about how the Dominican instructor Edwin<sup>153</sup> mentioned “*the difference you can see from people in the Caribbean versus people everywhere else is that they're more grounded - they let the hips happen from the feet - not from the hips themselves - they're not lifted.*”<sup>154</sup> As the word suggests, being grounded shows a connection to the ground and, as dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild theorizes,<sup>155</sup> it is a valued Africanist dance aesthetic. Dancing in a “get down”<sup>156</sup> stance and connecting to the earth are physical connections to the ground as home.

When I asked my Dominican and Colombian cousin Marji what it was like dancing in the D.R., she shared that dancing on both her mother’s land and in bachata’s home strengthened her connection to the dance and to the Dominican Republic; “it solidified the bond” she felt to bachata. She specifies the importance of dancing “on the soil” “in a place where [bachata] originated,” though she adds, “I’m pretty sure it has” “roots in Africa.”<sup>157</sup> In doing so, she grounds bachata by acknowledging and recovering its roots in Africa and in blackness. Paralleling the place of Hawai’i for hula, this grounding of home, the ground as home, manifests both as a geographic imperative and as a movement quality.

---

<sup>153</sup> Please see Arefto Arts’ website for more information on Edwin Ferreras and Dakhóta Romero

<sup>154</sup> My fieldnotes, February 2019.

<sup>155</sup> “A plainly visible marker in Africanist dance aesthetics from Africa to the Caribbean and South America, to the streets of North Philadelphia: a preference for dancing with the knees bent, torso slightly pitched forward from the hips, butt out, feet making total contact with the ground, in what art historian Robert Farris Thompson termed a ‘get-down’ posture.” Brenda Dixon Gottschild, “The Diaspora Dance Boom (Dance in the World and The World in Dance),” n.d., 3.

<sup>156</sup> Gottschild, 3.

<sup>157</sup> Marji in discussion with author, November 2019.

Being grounded in one's dancing is grounding oneself in home. Marji notes that "leaning into," "grounding," and "swaying" indicate a connection between the music and Dominican culture more broadly:

I think one problem that a lot of people have is that they don't lean into their steps...they don't ground into it. ... I think that's bad bachata. Like when you don't get into the music. You don't feel the history behind the music. That's my peoples. The history is like gathering in the campo making sancocho, dancing just cuz you can with no one watching - that kind of thing. ... When you're learning you're focused on the steps more. It stops...from appreciating it. So when someone dances but doesn't appreciate or feel the music, that's bad dancing.<sup>158</sup>

Marji highlights being grounded as a valued and desired movement quality as well as a possible indicator of feeling the music. Her description resonates with the original meaning of the term 'bachata' as "an informal gathering in a backyard or patio, enlivened by food, drink, music, and dance."<sup>159</sup> This resonance recovers and emphasizes the home and history of bachata. For Marji, feeling the music is also about connecting to the Dominican Republic.

Part of the effort to visibilize and acknowledge the roots of bachata comes in the form of "official" recognition of national belonging. In 2019, the United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture (UNESCO) officially recognized Dominican bachata as an intangible cultural heritage of the Dominican Republic.<sup>160</sup> Merengue was officially recognized in 2016.<sup>161</sup> Having these music and dance forms labeled as intangible cultural heritage is a way of "safeguarding" them. The UNESCO

---

<sup>158</sup> Marji in discussion with author, November 2019.

<sup>159</sup> Hernandez, "Dominican Bachata."

<sup>160</sup> "UNESCO - Music and Dance of Dominican Bachata," accessed December 22, 2021, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/music-and-dance-of-dominican-bachata-01514>.

<sup>161</sup> "UNESCO - Music and Dance of the Merengue in the Dominican Republic," accessed March 20, 2022, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/music-and-dance-of-the-merengue-in-the-dominican-republic-01162>.

site reads, “a country may also receive financial assistance and expert advice from the World Heritage Committee to support activities for the preservation of its sites.”<sup>162</sup> The Dominican Republic’s desire to register their dance forms could imply that there was a concern and a need to protect their culture and stake claims to merengue and bachata. It could also be a way to garner future funding and tourism.

Regardless of the UNESCO recognition, as bachata becomes more and more distanced from the island, it must contend with the effects of globalization both in being connected to sensual bachata and Spain as well as being subsumed into pan-latinidad. Being able to dance is important to many Dominicans and to many Latines more broadly. Indeed, many people make claims to Latinidad based on the dance forms they dance, particularly salsa, merengue, and bachata. On TikTok, a popular trend was the 2020 #latinodancecheck challenge, where dancers would dance the basic steps for salsa, merengue, and bachata to “prove” they’re Latines. All three of these dance forms are Caribbean: salsa has connections to Cuba and Puerto Rico, while merengue and bachata are connected to the Dominican Republic. However, even in the Latine community, these Caribbean relations are sometimes unknown or ignored. A comment left on the BuzzFeed video “Americans Try Bachata Dancing”<sup>163</sup> reads, “bachata started in D.R.? Wow never would've thought cause I'm Mexican and I've danced it since I was little...ehh learn something new everyday.” This YouTube user, stargaxer threehune, thought bachata was Mexican because it was a dance form they grew up with and so they associated bachata with their own heritage. User Richie Rich observes a similar pattern: “I noticed that in the comment section people are acting like its mexican music

---

<sup>162</sup> UNESCO World Heritage Centre, “What Does It Mean for a Site to Be Inscribed on the World Heritage List? - Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ),” UNESCO World Heritage Center, accessed December 23, 2021, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/faq/20>.

<sup>163</sup> BuzzFeedVideo, *Americans Try Bachata Dancing*.

when in the beginning of the video it clearly says its Dominican lmao,” possibly implying that this mis-association is not just common, but also potentially so ingrained that some people didn’t even notice or acknowledge the video’s clear written statement of provenance. Not knowing that bachata is Dominican can be interpreted as another instance of bachata being separated from home.

Like stargaxer threehune, two other YouTube users connect bachata to their heritage: Alejandra Mia comments, “My family dances bachata all the time ðŸ˜¸, (im mexican its in our blood).” That Awkward Girl Gamer You Know writes, “bachata is too easy. Well, probably because I was born in Cuba, and it’s like a tradition, but still. It’s easy.” While stargaxer threehune’s comment is the only one that directly states not knowing that bachata was from the D.R., all three of these comments associate bachata with other Latine nationalities. Invoking “tradition” and “blood” as Cubans and Mexicans means that bachata has become a part of pan-Latine heritage and Latine identity claims. While I am Caribbean and have Dominican family members, I am not Dominican; yet I still consider bachata as part of my dance bildungsroman - “bildungstanzen”—or coming of age in dance/formative dance education. While learning bachata at home can give a sense of heritage/connection, the pan-Latinization of bachata also runs the risk of invisibilizing Dominican culture and blackness. During our interview, Phillipos, an African American dancer, explains that while he can’t have as much of a say because he’s not Latine, he does question if “people claiming bachata just because of their Latin heritage...is correct.”<sup>164</sup> He explains that bachata is from the D.R., not from Central or South America and that it’s important to “recogniz[e] that and respect the culture that it

---

<sup>164</sup> Phillipos in discussion with author, March 2019.



came from. If you like it you should know a little bit about the history, you know?”<sup>165</sup>

Phillippos is calling for respecting and not erasing the home of bachata.

Part of what is at stake in collapsing bachata into pan-Latinidad are the racial and political implications. The Caribbean in general has historically been unjustly and violently tasked with maintaining economies of labor and sex through slavery, sugar,<sup>166</sup> and sex trade. Here again, the labor of Dominican culture, in the form of music and dance, is being used to sustain a pan-Latine identity. There are repercussions to claiming Latinidad through originally Caribbean dance forms, in particular, when what is being erased is blackness. TikTok user @hotgirlmidsommar420 posted a TikTok on May 25, 2021 that has received 249 hearts (as of Feb 15 2021). She explains,

No cuz I'm so tired of non-Caribbean Latinx opening their fucking mouths. Cuz especially the use of this sound down below a bachata song which is a Black Dominican. Genre. By the way. It's getting used as a latinx thing. Ummm. I see so many non-Caribbean Latinx saying 'oh i hate it when nonLatinos dance bachata.' Y'all don't know how to dance bachata either. What the fuck is you talking about? Cuz last time I checked y'all shit on our accents, you're antiblack towards us, and you're xenophobic. Yet. You want to bump our music and then coopt our music that we made - as a latinx thing. No no no. ... bachata will always be a Black Genre.<sup>167</sup>

@hotgirlmidsommar420 is bringing up not just the invisibilization of Dominicans but also the colorism and antiblackness in the Latine community. The Mix(ed) Tape Podcast with Bright Candle entitled “The black roots of bachata”<sup>168</sup> also clearly states that bachata is a

---

<sup>165</sup> Phillippos in discussion with author, March 2019.

<sup>166</sup> Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power* (Penguin Random House, 1986).

<sup>167</sup> (@hotgirlmidsommar420). 2021. “bachata is not latinx, it is very much a BLACK CARIBEÑO GENRE #fyp.” TikTok, May 25, 2021. [https://www.tiktok.com/@hotgirlmidsommar420/video/6966335236607118597?\\_t=8UMvzy9whZ4&\\_r=1](https://www.tiktok.com/@hotgirlmidsommar420/video/6966335236607118597?_t=8UMvzy9whZ4&_r=1)

<sup>168</sup> October 14, 2021 live on Instagram and Facebook. <https://nep.facebook.com/mixedtape.podcast/videos/live-with-bright-black-candle-mixedtape-pocast/577625410219007/>

black genre. Similar to what Brenda Dixon Gottschild explains as the invisibilization of black influence in American culture,<sup>169</sup> these comments speak to an invisibilization of blackness in bachata and in Latine communities. In Pacini Hernandez's 2014 article, "Urban Bachata and Dominican Racial Identity," she explains that Dominicans have "historically ignored their African heritage" and that "bachata has not been considered by either its fans or its detractors to be an Afro-Dominican, Afro-Caribbean or diasporan music."<sup>170</sup> That bachata is being named a black form is a big deal. Acknowledging that bachata is an Afro-Caribbean and black form reclaims blackness as an aspect of bachata's "home." It is also a start to visibilizing Haitian and Haitian Dominican influences in bachata.<sup>171</sup>

In light of the murders of black people by police and other civil unrest in the U.S. historically and in 2020, the Latin social dance industry was also brought to task over not committing to anti-racist work. As comparative literature scholar Chiara Giovanni explains, one way to do this is to "recognize the processes of whitening, commodification, and standardization we help to perpetuate every time we teach or take a class, or promote a dance form stripped of its historical and social context."<sup>172</sup> Knowing and acknowledging the history and politics of bachata is a form of recovery and reparation against erasure. Acknowledging the roots of bachata goes further than an appeal for clarity, it is an act of anti-racist work. In this instance, part of recovering home

---

<sup>169</sup> Brenda D. Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998), 1–2.

<sup>170</sup> Hernandez, "Urban Bachata and Dominican Racial Identity in New York," 1028.

<sup>171</sup> "Some Haitian-Dominican bachateros, most notable Felix Cumbe, have asserted their Haitian identity, celebrating it as part of their image. But most, for fear of persecution, have been careful to avoid any direct association with Haiti; all the while cultivating a following among both Haitians and Dominicans in the slums and plantations that dot the Dominican side of Hispaniola." "Bachata Haiti | IASO Records."

<sup>172</sup> Chiara Giovanni, "Beyond Aesthetics: Bachata, Politics, Praxis," September 24, 2021, <https://dancersgroup.org/2021/09/beyond-aesthetics-bachata-politics-praxis/>.

is also recovering blackness. To reiterate, I am not arguing that only Dominicans should dance bachata or that people should only dance the dance forms from their home country. Instead, I am acknowledging and working through the contradictions and repercussions of finding connection and identity within the imagined community of pan-Latinidad. While home can be capacious and welcoming, it can also marginalize and erase. It is home's ability to make familiar that can aid in learning and it is that same ease that can also aid in invisibilizing and covering over complex racial politics.

## Conclusion

My Mom and I watched seven videos of me dancing bachata with different partners and in different spaces. Some were social dances, others were me assisting different bachata teachers in demonstrating combinations for class. My Mom's favorite video was of me dancing at a house party in LA with a man I had danced with in class and in socials. She said, "you felt at home with this person" and later, "it seems like you guys have been dancing for a while because you're doing so well." As I watch Guillermo and myself dance, I see myself enjoying and connecting to the music. I see myself feeling comfortable enough with him to really dance, swaying my hips from side to side sometimes with a slow juicy quality, lingering in the dip before the fourth beat. My Mom said she couldn't tell if I made any mistakes because we were so in sync. I, on the other hand, noticed one or two awkward moments but they were short lived and woven into the dance—we were in sync with each other and continued to dance. I also remember Guillermo commenting, "everytime we dance, 'nos sale bien'" – it always works out.

My Mom's statement, "you felt at home with this person" is a call to understand what feeling at home means and consequently, how home defines a dancer. In tracing home throughout the many spaces of bachata, I worked on a three part recovery, recuperating home training as valid and valuable, the aspects of home training that reoccur in bachata studio classes, and recovering the home of bachata—the Dominican Republic. My work builds on home as an affectual space both of knowing and of action, while still taking into account the limits and tensions of home. This chapter aids in nuancing the question who gets to be a dancer by visibilizing and valuing people who become dancers through home training alongside those who become dancers through studio training.

*It's Christmastime. Everyone is in the living room. My cousin Sean and I are dancing bachata. I'm wearing a loose gray jumpsuit and seafoam green Old Navy flip flops and Sean is wearing khaki pants and a grey button down. The music plays - "No es amor. Lo que tu sientes se llama obsession. Una ilusion." Hip tut. My Mom is standing in the dining room watching us. In the background, Marji yells out "Uncle!" Uncle laughs. Hip tut. Bianca says something to Juni. Marji is talking to someone, encouraging them. As Sean and I continue dancing the bachata basic, Sean looks over his shoulder and says to my cousin's fiancé, "This is a one two three. It's really easy." "I need a one," the fiancé responds, obstinately glued to the couch. Uncle and Bianca laugh and I shake my head. Someone says "Grandma." Sean turns me. Hip tut. I hear but can't quite make out my Grandma, a lilt in her voice of island and old age.*

## **CODA**

y todo comenzó/continuó/terminará bailando....

# The pointed body

*fluidly*

hip tuts the grounded home.

Figure 22 – an exquisite sentence of ballet, hula, and bachata

*This exquisite<sup>1</sup> sentence brings together different values that come up in ballet, bachata, and hula. Emphasis on feet being “pointed” from ballet, movements being “fluid” and “grounded” from hula, while bachata is about “hip tuts,” “home,” and “groundedness.” “The pointed body fluidly” seems like it contradicts itself since “pointed” denotes intense energy going in a vertical direction, whereas “fluid” evokes water, waves, and constant moving. Is this what ballet and hula feel like in my body: rigid and wavy energies combining or combatting? The adverb “fluidly” acts like the torso – a fluid torso is an Africanist aesthetic. “Hip tuts the grounded home,” means home is where the hips are and what the hips are doing. Whenever I see swaying hip movement in bachata, it reminds me of home, of dancing with my Caribbean cousins.*

*As a whole, the sentence evokes an image of a body stretching up but also grounded down with pointed feet and moving hips. This image reminds me of being at the barre in ballet class and hearing the zumba music from the class next door. Although I was supposed to be doing slow, measured pliés to classical piano music, my body was being called on by the reggaeton bass beat. It was a gut response – a hip responding. It was my Latin social dancing body resonating, making itself known and not forgotten.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Exquisite here refers to the surrealist game, exquisite corpse, which I will explain in more detail later in this coda.

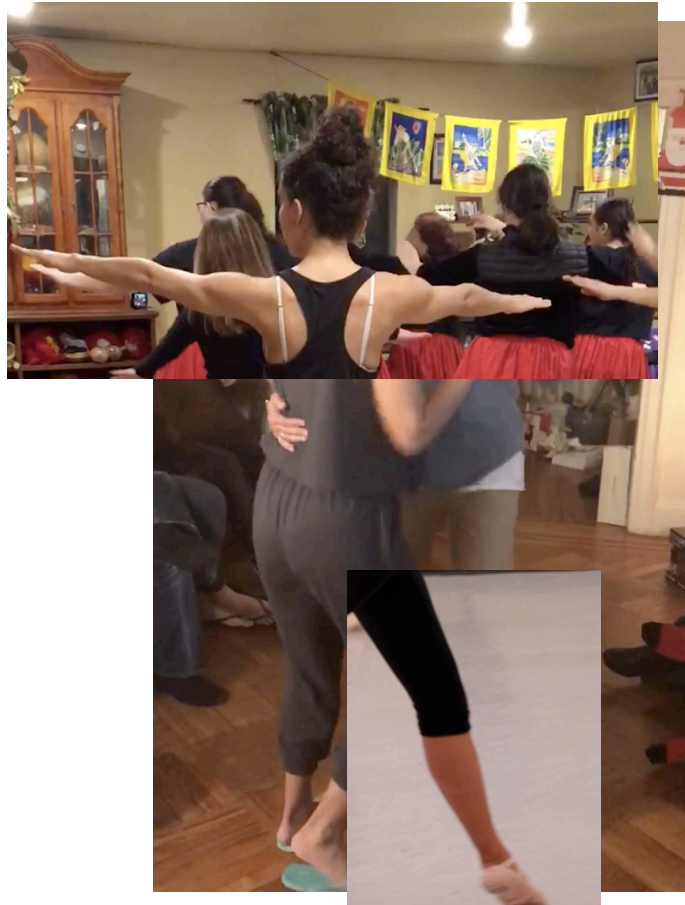


Figure 23 – An Exquisite Image of ballet, hula, and bachata

*I am between places in Southern California, Queens, NY, and upstate NY and between spaces, in a hālau, at home, and in a ballet studio. I am between times in 2019, 2017, and 2012. I am between dance forms, between hula, bachata, and ballet. I dance with a group, with my cousin, and alone. I am barefoot, wearing flip flops and ballet soft shoes. I am mid turn, mid hip tut, and mid jump. Both grounded and suspended mid air. This is my dancing body caught in moments and in forms.*

*I had “forgotten” that I was a dancer because I could only see how ballet defines “dancer” and I wasn’t perfect, flexible, long limbed, or young. But I had been dancing all along. I had been dancing in living rooms, clubs, cafeterias, at barbecues, and on stage. I had been dancing reggaeton, bachata, salsa, dancehall, Colombian cumbia, merengue, and hip hop and I had started dancing hula. From this dancing past and present, I could forge a dancing future. I am a product of diaspora - my body has many centers and dances to many rhythms.*

*Ballerina. Bachatera. ‘Ōlapa. Call me by my name - dancer.*



In this dissertation, I divested dancer of its connections to “frivolous” movement in space and uncovered economies of value that structure, organize, and limit dancer identity. A dancer is not just an ideal perfect ballerina; an adult taking ballet seriously by showing up to class and putting in the work is a dancer. A dancer is not just someone who performs choreography; a dancer is also someone who participates deeply and respectfully. A hula dancer is someone who learns about Hawaiian culture, who chants, crafts, makes implements, and knows and understands the stories hula tells. A dancer is not just someone who trains in a studio or academy. A bachata dancer can be someone who trained at home with friends and family.

After having looked individually at ballet, bachata, and hula, I now turn to the possibilities of analyzing multiple forms at the same time via what I call “exquisite analysis.” “Exquisite” refers to the surrealist game exquisite corpse, a “method by which words or images are collectively assembled by a group of collaborators; each participant adding to a composition in sequence until the work is complete.”<sup>2</sup> The term “exquisite corpse” itself comes from the first time the game was played and the following sentence was generated: “le cadavre exquis boira le vin nouveau” or “the exquisite corpse will drink the new wine.”<sup>3</sup> I interpret the term “corpse” as a play on “corps” in French, meaning body, and “corpus,” meaning collection, compilation, or collage.

I am particularly interested in how this exquisite mode of inquiry can help to understand diasporic dancing bodies. Dances themselves are in diaspora, as in moving between bodies, spaces, and times. Dance shifts the shapes of others but it also shifts its own shape. In addition to dance itself being a diasporic subject, dance creates

---

<sup>2</sup> “Exquisite Corpse,” Minnie Muse, accessed February 24, 2022, <https://www.minniemuse.com/articles/parallel-practices/exquisite-corpse>.

<sup>3</sup> Tate, “Cadavre Exquis (Exquisite Corpse) – Art Term,” Tate, accessed February 9, 2022, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/c/cadavre-exquis-exquisite-corpse>.

diasporic subjects. In other words, dance is both the subject of traveling and the action of traveling. Dance scholar Jasmine Johnson pushes for expanding the definition of “diasporic travel” from people “crossing geopolitical boundaries” to “people, who, through dance engage ideas of dispersal and connectedness that characterize the African diaspora.”<sup>4</sup> By dancing, then, one is engaging in “diasporic travel” and becoming a part of a dance diaspora.

Diaspora comes from leaving and losing home. To travel one must leave. Diaspora is, in part, about loss—things can get lost or altered in transit(ion). Besides loss of land or “home” diaspora can be loss of “know how.”<sup>5</sup> Johnson states “the proof of diaspora is where the body fails, does differently, or does extra.”<sup>6</sup> “Failing,” “doing differently,” or “doing extra” are what Johnson calls “casualties”<sup>7</sup> and they occur because dance is moving through body, time, and space. However, diaspora is also, in part, about what is found. I argue that many diasporic bodies must maneuver multiple techniques in the same body, a condition integral to dancers. In other words, besides learning a specific way of moving, dance technique also includes the regulation and negotiation of multiple techniques, or as Martin describes it “a technique for regularizing techniques”<sup>8</sup> and what dance scholar Megan Quinlan calls a “metatechnique.”<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Jasmine Elizabeth Johnson, “Dancing Africa, Making Diaspora” (UC Berkeley, 2012), 2, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/85t825hq>.

<sup>5</sup> This is connected to Felip Martí Jufresa’s “Home is where you know how” in the context of exile. Felip Martí-Jufresa, “Petite Logique De L’exil/Little Logics of Exile” (The Center for Ideas and Society at the University of California, Riverside, Riverside, CA, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Jasmine Elizabeth Johnson, “Casualties,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 62, no. 1 (February 22, 2018): 171, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/686631>.

<sup>7</sup> Johnson, 170.

<sup>8</sup> Randy Martin, *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1998), 175.

Several dance scholars have theorized how multiple techniques operate in a body. Susan Foster's "hired body" is a "homogenized" version focused on being hired,<sup>10</sup> while Randy Martin's composite body is a "multicultural body" and one that is "fundamentally diverse in that they are formed by different sorts of cultural processes."<sup>11</sup> Thomas DeFrantz builds on Martin's composite body; he notes that working well between dance styles aided companies like Dance Theater of Harlem<sup>12</sup> and Alvin Ailey<sup>13</sup> to succeed. Melanie Bales and Rebecca Nettle-Fiol discuss how training in the twenty-first century requires dancers to be versatile rather than committed to one technique.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Anusha Kedhar argues that "flexibility is not just a political strategy to negotiate

---

<sup>9</sup> Meghan Quinlan, "Training Neoliberal Dancers: Metatechniques and Marketability," in *Energy and Forces as Aesthetic Interventions: Politics of Bodily Scenarios*, ed. Barbara Gronau and Sabine Huschka (Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag, 2019), 138.

<sup>10</sup> "[the hired body] does not display its skills as a collage of discrete styles but, rather, homogenizes all styles and vocabularies beneath a sleek, impenetrable surface. Uncommitted to any specific aesthetic vision, it is a body for hire: it trains in order to make a living at dancing." Susan Leigh Foster, "Dancing Bodies," in *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane C. Desmond (Duke University Press Books, 1997), 255.

<sup>11</sup> Martin, *Critical Moves*, 19.

<sup>12</sup> "The consummate versatility achieved by Dance Theater of Harlem is of course directly related to the articulation of "black classicism." Because African American dancers were denied access to sustained study of dance technique, they excelled in choreography that embraced a continuum of idioms as a compositional strategy, in work that explored the spaces between modern dance, social dance, and ballet technique. I suggest that dancing well "in between" idioms became a hallmark of African American achievement in ballet and a recognizable standard of black classicism." Thomas DeFrantz, "Ballet In Black: Louis Johnson and Vernacular Humor," in *Dancing Bodies, Living Histories: New Writings about Dance and Culture*, ed. Lisa Doolittle and Anne Flynn (Banff: Banff Centre Press, 2000), 183.

<sup>13</sup> DeFrantz uses the word "composite" to refer to the Ailey company's repertoire and dancers; he states, "Ailey and his dancers proved mastery of several dance idioms, as they allowed individual black selves to emerge in the staging of a vast repertoire built from emphatically varied movement grammars. In this continuation of diverse performance personae available to an ever-expanding cohort of black dancers, the Ailey company reveals a shifting, vibrating black self constantly in the process of becoming manifest through performance." Thomas F. DeFrantz, "Composite Bodies of Dance: The Repertory of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater," *Theatre Journal* 57, no. 4 (2005): 678, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25069735>.

<sup>14</sup> "learning how to negotiate conflicting technical demands has become an inevitable component of formal dance training in the twenty first century. Forty years-ago Graham centered modern dance programs trained for commitment and consistency. Now the key principle underlying many eclectic curricula has become versatility" Melanie Bales and Rebecca Nettle-Fiol, eds., *The Body Eclectic: Evolving Practices in Dance Training* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 61.

capital; it is an embodied response to the contradictions and unevenness of globalization and a bodily tactic that allows racialized bodies to accumulate power and capital.”<sup>15</sup>

Meghan Quinlan’s work on Gaga also makes connections between the demands of neoliberalism and the negotiation of multiple techniques in the body. She theorizes that while “Gaga is a class designed to impart metacognitive skills about choice making,”<sup>16</sup> and therefore deciding how and when to use the different techniques of a body; “the structure of Gaga as a metatechnique falls in line with neoliberal values of efficiency that require laborers to be skilled in multiple rather than specialized tasks.”<sup>17</sup>

All of these scholars point to the importance of flexibility and versatility in dancers. DeFrantz and Kedhar’s<sup>18</sup> work in particular shows how diasporic dancing bodies become flexible and versatile in order to survive financially and artistically.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, Lisa Lowe’s theorization of hybridity in Asian American communities helps to contextualize the function of multiple techniques in a body. Lowe, as scholar Carrie Gaiser has written, “remarks that hybridity is not merely a technique of assimilation but a ‘history of survival,’ hybridity records instances of ‘making do’ within a dramatically

---

<sup>15</sup> Anusha Kedhar, “Flexibility and Its Bodily Limits: Transnational South Asian Dancers in an Age of Neoliberalism,” *Dance Research Journal* 46, no. 1 (July 9, 2014): 24, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/548985>.

<sup>16</sup> Quinlan, “Training Neoliberal Dancers: Metatechniques and Marketability,” 147.

<sup>17</sup> Quinlan, 148.

<sup>18</sup> “South Asian dancers in Britain, for example, have become increasingly mobile and flexible in their movements and dance practices in order to gain access to mainstream funding, venues, audiences, resources, and touring circuits, which have historically marginalized South Asian dance practices. Being flexible has allowed them to retain their cultural capital as ethnically “authentic” and “diverse” (important currency in a multicultural dance market that commodifies difference), while also enabling them to secure limited state funding, attract mainstream British audiences, and sustain long, thriving careers.” Kedhar, “Flexibility and Its Bodily Limits,” 24.

<sup>19</sup> Accessing funding and audiences means claiming space and acquiring recognition and exposure as and for dancers.

uneven playing field.”<sup>20</sup> I cite Gaiser’s reformulation of Lowe’s work because it succinctly captures the idea of hybridity as a survival technique, one that keeps track of how diasporic bodies negotiate.

I theorize “dancer” as an exquisite corpse, specifically as a way to understand metatechnique or how multiple techniques operate in one body. I remember during my second year of graduate school, my professor, Dr. Jose Reynoso presented a “talk-performance” for our dance colloquium series. *As he gathered his materials, wooden beams, nails, power tools, and strapped on his tool belt, he built a stage on stage.* “Dancing is a labor of the privileged,” he said, or something thereabouts.<sup>21</sup> In her recollection of this piece, my professor, Dr. Imani Kai Johnson, writes, “he highlighted the embodied knowledge and sequenced movement (choreography) of manual labor (in that case carpentry).”<sup>22</sup> She was reading this moment as dance and not dance. Johnson connected Reynoso’s talk-performance to my research, saying that my work “hints at the capacity to apply the term dancer as a way of recognizing the multiple, hybridized ways that all bodies carry knowledge through their movement practices, whether those practices are identified as dance or not.”<sup>23</sup> Everyone, regardless if they are a dancer or not, deploys metatechnique. I take seriously Martin’s call to understand more about how multiple techniques operate in one body: “examining how disparate technical sensibilities are embodied in the same dancer could be of assistance in imagining the larger question

---

<sup>20</sup> Carrie Gaiser, “Caught Dancing: Hybridity, Stability, and Subversion in Dance Theatre of Harlem’s Creole ‘Giselle,’” *Theatre Journal* 58, no. 2 (2006): 279, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25069823>.

<sup>21</sup> Jose Reynoso, “The Laboring Dance Studies Body: Race Class, Nationality and Other Disciplinary Choreographies,” UCR Dance Studies Colloquium, December 2, 2014.

<sup>22</sup> Imani Kai Johnson, comment on my seminar paper, 12/14/2015.

<sup>23</sup> Imani Kai Johnson, comment on my seminar paper, 12/14/2015.

of how any body gets multiply composed, when this multiplicity nonetheless allows for a practical continuity in that person's movement."<sup>24</sup>

My research for this dissertation has led to a second project, which will be a multi-medium exploration, incorporating interviews, media analysis, autoethnography, academic theory, performance art, and visual art. I specifically deploy exquisite corpse as a method to acknowledge and visibilize diasporic sensibilities. By nature of traveling, diasporic bodies can be polycentric and polyrhythmic; they can be flexible; they can be paradoxical. Artists and scholars John Jennings and Clint Fluker explain that "historically people from the African diaspora have always been sampling, remixing, re-codifying, exploring technology, and creating new ones. This process occurs from necessity, these processes are about escaping systems of aggressive oppression."<sup>25</sup> Diasporic bodies have *always already* been "sampling and remixing" or cutting and pasting and assembling as means of surviving and innovating—as I do using exquisite corpse as method.

I have started exploring the bounds of exquisite corpse both as an epistemological frame and as a flexible method that utilizes collaboration and randomness. In my pedagogy, I incorporated exquisite methodology by introducing different dance techniques and different methods of learning technique. My students were introduced to 18<sup>th</sup> century ballroom dance via Feuillet's dance notation system.<sup>26</sup> They learned a section of de Keersmaecker's Rosas danzt rosas, a modern dance

---

<sup>24</sup> Martin, *Critical Moves*, 446.

<sup>25</sup> John Jennings and Clinton Fluker, "Forms of Future/Past: Black Kirby Afrofuturism and the Visual Technologies of Resistance," in *The Black Speculative Arts Movement: Black Futurity, Art+Design*, ed. Reynaldo Anderson and Clinton Fluker, 60, accessed September 9, 2020, <https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781498510547/The-Black-Speculative-Arts-Movement-Black-Futurity-ArtDesign>.

<sup>26</sup> Thank you to dance scholar Linda Tomko for her wonderful 18<sup>th</sup> century dance class at UCR.

choreography, via video that was released by the choreographer.<sup>27</sup> They were also introduced to Hula, Vogueing, and Fight Choreography via various instructors. The last component to the class was that the students were asked to teach each other a dance technique they knew well. For example, one student chose to teach Caballo dorado, a Mexican line dance. With respect to method of learning dance, many students noted that learning from another person was easier because they had someone to correct them whereas learning from a video required them to do more self-guided work in learning and correcting themselves. This collage of dance forms and learning styles was a way to help introduce students to the variety of dance.

In terms of my own artistic practice, thanks to Christine Leapman and funding from the Gluck Fellows Program of the Arts, I directed and produced a series of dance and theater collaborations for Zoom. Together, Priscilla Marrero (performing artista), Esther Banegas Gatica (playwright and actor), and I created twelve “exquisite situations,” or short vignettes (each around two minutes long) that combined movement and story snippets. In the last performance, the audience helped create two exquisite situations and my Mom joined Priscilla and Esther in performing.<sup>28</sup> With the help of Kali Veach (video editor), we also created an exquisite film. This series helped to expand my exquisite methodology by incorporating different forms, people, and ideas within the frame of an online performance. Because Priscilla, Esther, and I were born, raised or lived in Miami, Florida, in some ways, Exquisite Situations was an exploration of leaving home. I look forward to expanding this project in its many possible kaleidoscopic configurations.

---

<sup>27</sup> *Re:Rosas! / Movements*, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2LyQono6rk>.

<sup>28</sup> Thanks to Magnolia Yang Sao Yia for her support as Tech Host.

Exquisite corpses both cohere with and flout social norms, presenting combinations that have yet to exist, yet to be acknowledged, and/or yet to be valued. Visual culture scholar Elza Adamowicz argues, “the collage process lends itself to this dual activity of subversion and production. By cutting up classical figures the surrealists challenge norms from within the system by pushing forms to their limit and displaying assemblage techniques. By pasting together disparate elements they produce the hybrid, monstrous or fantasized body.”<sup>29</sup> Despite exquisite corpses often being rendered as monstrous or fantastical, I propose that they offer productive depictions of diasporic bodies that are inherently dismembered,<sup>30</sup> re-membered, layered, fluid, fluctuating, and composite.

---

<sup>29</sup> Elza Adamowicz, *Surrealist Collage in Text and Image: Dissecting the Exquisite Corpse* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 173.

<sup>30</sup> Building off of Tiffany Barber’s work. Tiffany Barber, “Cyborg Grammar? Reading Wangechi Mutu’s *Non Je Ne Regrette Rien* through *Kindred*,” in *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astroblackness*, ed. Anderson Reynaldo and Charles Jones (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016).



## Bibliography

- Adamowicz, Elza. *Surrealist Collage in Text and Image: Dissecting the Exquisite Corpse*. Cambridge, U.K. ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Adult Beginner Ballet*, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VtuGVjmmmAs>.
- “ai ha’a.” In *Nā Puke Wehewehe ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i*, n.d. Ulukau - the Hawaiian Electronic Library. <https://wehewehe.org/gsd12.85/cgi-bin/hdict?a=d&d=D396&l=en>.
- Albright, Ann Cooper. *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/223>.
- Bachata Dominicana vs Bachata Sensual | Aprende a Bailar Bachata*, 2019. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_qLMre0IsIA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_qLMre0IsIA).
- Bailey, Marlon. “Structures of Kinship in Ballroom Culture.” *Architectural Review*, March 16, 2021. <https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/gender-and-sexuality/structures-of-kinship-in-ballroom-culture>.
- Bales, Melanie, and Rebecca Netti-Fiol, eds. *The Body Eclectic: Evolving Practices in Dance Training*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008.
- Banerji, Anurima, and Royona Mitra, eds. “Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies: Decolonizing Dance Discourses.” *Dance Studies Association XL* (2020).
- Barber, Tiffany. “Cyborg Grammar? Reading Wangechi Mutu’s Non Je Ne Regrette Rien through Kindred.” In *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astroblackness*, edited by Anderson Reynaldo and Charles Jones. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016.
- Barrère, Dorothy B., Mary Kawena Pukui, and Marion Kelly. *Hula, Historical Perspectives*. Department of Anthropology, Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, 1980.
- Beamer, Nona. *Na Mele Hula: A Collection of Hawaiian Hula Chants*. Lā‘ie, Hawai‘i : Honolulu, Hawaii: Brigham Young Univ Inst Polynesian, 1987.
- “Betty Boop’s Bamboo Isle.” *Betty Boop*. Fleischer Studios, September 23, 1932.
- Bock, Sheila, and Katherine Borland. “Exotic Identities: Dance, Difference, and Self-Fashioning.” *Journal of Folklore Research* 48, no. 1 (2011): 1–36. <https://doi.org/10.2979/jfolkrese.48.1.1>.

- Bodybuilders Try Ballet For The First Time*, 2016.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ooBmaKSWGuo>.
- Boylorn, Robin M., and Mark P. Orbe, eds. *Critical Autoethnography: Intersecting Cultural Identities in Everyday Life*. New York: Routledge, 2016.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315431253>.
- Brooks, Katherine. "The Unconvincing Ballet Ad That Has Dancers Everywhere Fuming | HuffPost Entertainment." Huffpost. Accessed June 18, 2022.  
[https://www.huffpost.com/entry/free-people-ballet\\_n\\_5338983](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/free-people-ballet_n_5338983).
- Bustle. "Sorry, Free People, Your Ballet Ads Are Not Convincing." Accessed March 11, 2021. <https://www.bustle.com/articles/24756-sorry-free-people-your-ballet-ads-are-not-convincing>.
- Candelario, Ginetta E. B. *Black behind the Ears: Dominican Racial Identity from Museums to Beauty Shops*. Illustrated edition. Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2007.
- Cardi B - Cardi Tries Ballet | Facebook | By Cardi B | In Her Own Words, Cardi Has "Two Left Feet". But with Legendary Choreographer Debbie Allen's Help, Can Cardi Trade Her Twerks for Pliés?* Accessed July 18, 2022.  
<https://www.facebook.com/therealcardib/videos/cardi-tries-ballet/109280767629291/>.
- Chan, Christine Emi. "Beyond Colonization, Commodification, and Reclamation: Hula and Hawaiian Identity." In *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Ethnicity*, by Anthony Shay and Barbara Sellers-Young, 2013.  
<https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/41357/chapter/352550131>.
- City and County of Honolulu. "Talk Story Festival." Accessed July 29, 2022.  
<https://www.honolulu.gov/parks/program/182-site-dpr-cat/1692-talk-story-festival.html>.
- Craig, Maxine Leeds. *Sorry I Don't Dance: Why Men Refuse to Move*. 1 edition. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Dance, Girl, Dance*. Comedy, Drama, Music. RKO Radio Pictures, 1940.
- de Silva, Kīhei. "Noho Pono i Ka Ihu – Tips from a Hawaiian Language Judge - Ka'iwakīloumoku - Hawaiian Cultural Center." Ka'iwakīloumoku Pacific Indigenous Insitute. Accessed July 29, 2022.  
<https://kaiwakiloumoku.ksbe.edu/article/essays-noho-pono-i-ka-ihu-tips-from-a-hawaiian-language-judge>.

- DeFrantz, Thomas. "Ballet In Black: Louis Johnson and Vernacular Humor." In *Dancing Bodies, Living Histories: New Writings about Dance and Culture*, edited by Lisa Doolittle and Anne Flynn, 178–95. Banff: Banff Centre Press, 2000.
- DeFrantz, Thomas F. "Composite Bodies of Dance: The Repertory of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater." *Theatre Journal* 57, no. 4 (2005): 659–78. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25069735>.
- Demerson, Rainy. "World Making: African Mothers in Contemporary Dance." In *The Oxford Handbook of Black Dance*, edited by Thomas F. DeFrantz, forthcoming.
- Desmond, Jane C. "Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies." *Cultural Critique*, no. 26 (1993): 33–63. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354455>.
- . "Invoking 'The Native': Body Politics in Contemporary Hawaiian Tourist Shows." *TDR (1988-)* 41, no. 4 (1997): 83–109. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1146662>.
- . *Staging Tourism: Bodies on Display from Waikiki to Sea World*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001. <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/S/bo3643382.html>.
- Different Styles of Bachata - Sensual/Dominican/Urban - Demetrio & Nicole* | *Bachata Dance Academy*, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jyxYc45XDJ4>.
- Dodds, Sherril. "Values in Motion: Reflections on Popular Screen Dance." In *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and the Popular Screen*, edited by Melissa Blanco Borelli, 445–54. Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Douglas, Mary. "The Idea of a Home: A Kind of Space." *Social Research* Spring 1991, Vol. 58, no. No. 1 (n.d.): 22. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40970644>.
- Downey, Greg. *Learning Capoeira: Lessons in Cunning from an Afro-Brazilian Art*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- El Centro. "Why Latinx/e?" Accessed July 22, 2022. <https://elcentro.colostate.edu/about/why-latinx/>.
- Ellis, Carolyn, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner. "Autoethnography: An Overview." *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12, no. 1 (2011). <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-12.1.1589>.
- Forbez, Xiomara. "Alternative Tomorrows for the Nonprofessional Dancer: Queer Theory, Affect, and Excentric Orientations," presentation, Queer Futurities Conference. University of California, Riverside. Riverside, CA. 20 May 2016.
- . Forbez, Xiomara. "Lou, Meadow, Ginger, Candy, Sandy, Bianca and Misty: Selling Identities and Clothing through Ballet-themed ads." *Popular Culture*

Association/American Culture Association National Conference. San Diego, CA. 12 April 2017.

Foster, Susan Leigh. "Dancing Bodies." In *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, edited by Jane C. Desmond, 233–57. Duke University Press Books, 1997.

———. "Dancing Bodies: An Addendum, 2009." *Theater* 40, no. 1 (February 1, 2010): 25–29. <https://doi.org/10.1215/01610775-2009-016>.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012.

*Free People Presents | FP Movement Ballet*, 2014.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ait1hWgXVGo>.

"Free People's 'Ballet' Campaign - Tendusunderapalmtree.Com | Tendusunderapalmtree.Com." Accessed March 11, 2021.  
<https://tendusunderapalmtree.com/free-peoples-ballet-campaign/>.

Frias, John M., IV. "Ritualizing the Flame: A Heuristic Investigation into the Haki Kino, Body Breaking Exercise of Hālau O Kekuhi - ProQuest." Union Institute and University, 2004.  
<https://www.proquest.com/openview/2b8ef1d8c9c708c1f2c27804a0ce248b/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>.

Gaiser, Carrie. "Caught Dancing: Hybridity, Stability, and Subversion in Dance Theatre of Harlem's Creole 'Giselle.'" *Theatre Journal* 58, no. 2 (2006): 269–89. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25069823>.

Gal, The Olive. "This Is Why Dancers Are Pissed at That Free People Ballet Ad." The Olive Gal, May 16, 2014. <http://theolivegal.com/this-is-why-dancers-are-pissed-at-that-free-people-ballet-ad/>.

Galla, Candace, Louise Galla, Dennis Keawe, and Larry Kimura. "Perpetuating Hula: Globalization and the Traditional Art." *Pacific Arts* 14 (November 17, 2015): 129–40.

Gottschild, Brenda Dixon. *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

HawaiiHistory.org. "First Merrie Monarch Hula Competition - Hawaii History - Short Stories." Accessed July 28, 2022.  
<http://www.hawaiihistory.org/index.cfm?PageID=346>.

Hamera, Judith. *Dancing Communities: Performance, Difference and Connection in the Global City*. 2007th Edition. Basingstoke England ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

- Handel, Ariel. "What's in a Home? Toward a Critical Theory of Housing/Dwelling." *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 37, no. 6 (September 1, 2019): 1045–62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2399654418819104>.
- Hernandez, Deborah Pacini. *Bachata: A Social History of Dominican Popular Music*. Temple University Press, 1995.
- . "Urban Bachata and Dominican Racial Identity in New York." *Cahiers detudes africaines* 216, no. 4 (2014): 1027–54. [https://www.cairn-int.info/abstract-E\\_CEA\\_216\\_1027--urban-bachata-and-dominican-racial.htm](https://www.cairn-int.info/abstract-E_CEA_216_1027--urban-bachata-and-dominican-racial.htm).
- "History of Bachata Sensual – Bachata Sensual." Accessed July 28, 2022. <https://www.bachatasensual.com/historia-bs/>.
- Huapala - Hawaiian Music and Hula Archives. "Ho`opuka I Kai Ka La - Hula Kai." Accessed July 28, 2022. [https://www.huapala.org/Chants/Hoopuka\\_I\\_Kai.html](https://www.huapala.org/Chants/Hoopuka_I_Kai.html).
- Huapala - Hawaiian Music and Hula Archives. "Oli Ho`i - Traditional." Accessed July 29, 2022. [https://www.huapala.org/Chants/Oli\\_Hoi.html](https://www.huapala.org/Chants/Oli_Hoi.html).
- Hutchinson, Sydney. *Tigers of a Different Stripe: Performing Gender in Dominican Music*, Illustrated edition Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2016.
- Ho'okahua Cultural Vibrancy Group. "Pahu Hula: A Resounding Legacy," May 11, 2021. <https://www.ksbe.edu/article/pahu-hula-a-resounding-legacy/>.
- Kumukahi. "Hula." Accessed December 30, 2020. [http://www.kumukahi.org/units/ke\\_ao\\_akua/mana/hula](http://www.kumukahi.org/units/ke_ao_akua/mana/hula).
- Huamakahikina. "Hula Declaration." Accessed July 29, 2022. <https://www.huamakahikina.org>.
- iASO Records. "Bachata Haiti | IASO Records." Accessed July 28, 2022. <https://www.iasorecords.com/artists/bachata-haiti>.
- Imada, Adria L. *Aloha America: Hula Circuits Through the U.S. Empire*. Duke University Press, 2012.
- Johnson, Imani Kai, and كاي جونسون إيماني. "B-Boying and Battling in a Global Context: The Discursive Life of Difference in Hip Hop Dance / السياق في صراعاً بوصفه الرقص / هوب الهيب رقص في للاختلاف الخطابية الحياة: العولمي Poetics, no. 31 (2011): 173–95. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23216052>.
- Johnson, Jasmine Elizabeth. "Casualties." *TDR: The Drama Review* 62, no. 1 (February 22, 2018): 169–71. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/686631>.
- . "Dancing Africa, Making Diaspora." UC Berkeley, 2012. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/85t825hq>.

- Jonas, Gerald. *Dancing: The Pleasure, Power, and Art of Movement*. Harry N. Abrams, 1992.
- Joseph, Josué. "Bachata-Sensual Is Brazilian-Zouk: Musicality Around the World." *Facebook*. Accessed March 20, 2022. <https://www.facebook.com/la.epoca/videos/1802852953276419/>.
- Just Go with It*. Comedy, Romance. Columbia Pictures, Happy Madison Productions, 2011.
- Kaepler, Adrienne L. "Festivals of Pacific Arts: Venues for Rituals of Identity." *Pacific Arts*, no. 25 (2002): 5–19. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23411389>.
- "kāhea." In *Nā Puke Wehewehe 'Ōlelo Hawai'i*, n.d. Ulukau - the Hawaiian Electronic Library. <https://wehewehe.org/gsd12.85/cgi-bin/hdict?e=q-11000-00---off-0hdict--00-1----0-10-0---0---0direct-10-DW--4--textpukuiebert-----0-1l--11-haw-Zz-1---Zz-1-home-kahea--00-4-1-00-0--4----0-0-11-00-0utfZz-8-00&a=d&d=D5897#hero-bottom-banner>.
- Kamahele, Momi. "Hula as Resistance." In *Forward Motion Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders : Changing Realities, Revolutionary Perspectives*, No. 3., Vol. 11:40–46. Jaimaca Plain, MA: Red Sun Press, 1992. <http://hegemonystudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Kamehele-Hula-as-Resistance.pdf>.
- Kamara, Doxey. "OPINION | Latinx vs Latine • The Tulane Hullabaloo." *The Tulane Hullabaloo* (blog), September 30, 2021. <https://tulanehullabaloo.com/57213/intersections/opinion-latinx-vs-latine/>.
- "kaona." In *Nā Puke Wehewehe 'Ōlelo Hawai'i*, n.d. Ulukau - the Hawaiian Electronic Library. <https://wehewehe.org/gsd12.85/cgi-bin/hdict?e=q-11000-00---off-0hdict--00-1----0-10-0---0---0direct-10-DW--4--textpukuiebert%2ctextmamaka%2ctextandrew%2ctextparker%2ctextpeplace%2ctextclark%2ctextchd%2ctexthllt-----0-1l--11-haw-Zz-1---Zz-1-home-kaona--00-4-1-00-0--4----0-0-11-00-0utfZz-8-00&a=d&d=D7005#hero-bottom-banner>.
- Keali'inohomoku, Joann. "An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance." In *Moving History/Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader*, edited by Ann Dils and Ann Cooper Albright, 1st Edition., 33–43. Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2001.
- Kedhar, Anusha. "Flexibility and Its Bodily Limits: Transnational South Asian Dancers in an Age of Neoliberalism." *Dance Research Journal* 46, no. 1 (July 9, 2014): 23–40. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/548985>.

- Kedhar, Anusha Lakshmi. "On the Move: Transnational South Asian Dancers and the 'Flexible' Dancing Body." UC Riverside, 2011.  
<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6m4475v1>.
- Kerr-Berry, Julie A. "Dance Education in an Era of Racial Backlash: Moving Forward as We Step Backwards." *Journal of Dance Education* 12, no. 2 (April 1, 2012): 48–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15290824.2011.653735>.
- Korkey Judith. "Bachata Sensual by Korkey Judith - About Bachata Sensual." *Facebook*. Accessed June 30, 2022.  
<https://www.facebook.com/bachatasensual/photos/a.463893020295822/1225133530838430/>.
- "Korkey Judith Official Site – Bachata Sensual Creators." Accessed March 20, 2022.  
<https://korkeyjudith.com/>.
- "Kumu." In *Nā Puke Wehewehe 'Ōlelo Hawai'i*. Ulukau - the Hawaiian Electronic Library. Accessed July 29, 2022. <https://wehewehe.org/gsd/2.85/cgi-bin/hdict?e=q-11000-00---off-0hdict--00-1----0-10-0---0---0direct-10-DW--4--textpukuielbert%2ctextmamaka%2ctextandrew%2ctextparker%2ctextpeplace%2ctextclark%2ctextchd%2ctexthlt-----0-1l--11-haw-Zz-1---Zz-1-home-kumu-00-4-1-00-0--4---0-0-11-00-0utfZz-8-00&a=d&d=D9786#hero-bottom-banner>.
- Lilleike, Monika. *Hawaiian Hula 'Olapa: Stylized Embodiment, Percussion, and Chanted Oral Poetry*. Bielefeld, GERMANY: transcript, 2016.  
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucr/detail.action?docID=4772679>.
- Louis, Renee Pualani. "Hawaiian Place Names: Storied Symbols in Hawaiian Performance Cartographies." University of Hawai'i, 2008.  
<https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/84d1f791-21c9-4e95-9152-52e88b76789d/content>.
- Marinelli, Gina. "Free People Ballet Dance Video Backlash." *Refinery29*, May 15, 2014. <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2014/05/68003/free-people-ballet-video>.
- Martí-Jufresa, Felip. "Petite Logique De L'exil/Little Logics of Exile." The Center for Ideas and Society at the University of California, Riverside, Riverside, CA, 2016.
- . "The Exile of Knowledge." *Transfer: Journal of Contemporary Culture*, Institut Ramon Llull, no. 6 (2011): 49–55.
- Martin, Randy. *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1998.

- Marx, Karl, and Ernest Mandel. *Capital: Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by Ben Fowkes. Illustrated edition. London ; New York, N.Y: Penguin Classics, 1992.
- Mauss, Marcel. "Techniques of the Body." Translated by Ben Brewster. *Economy and Society* 2, no. 1 (1936 1973): 70=88.
- Maxwell, Charles Kauluwehi. "NANA I KE KUMU - Look to the Source." mooloelo.com. Accessed July 29, 2022. <https://www.mooloelo.com/nana.html>.
- McMains, Juliet. *Spinning Mambo into Salsa: Caribbean Dance in Global Commerce*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199324637.001.0001>.
- McQuirter, Marya Annette. "Awkward Moves: Dance Lessons from the 1940s." In *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations In African American Dance*, by Thomas F. Defrantz. University of Wisconsin Press, 2002. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/8476>.
- Meyer, Manulani Aluli. *Ho'oulu: Our Time of Becoming : Collected Early Writings of Manulani Meyer*. 'Ai Pōhaku Press, 2018.
- Mintz, Sidney W. *Sweetness and Power*. Penguin Random House, 1986.
- Misaki, Mai. "Colonial Rupture and Native Continuity in Indigenous Cultural Representations: Through Hawaiian Ancient Dance Kahiko." *Dance Research Journal* 53, no. 1 (April 2021): 44–60. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0149767721000024>.
- Monroe, Raquel L. "I Don't Want to Do African ... What about My Technique? Transforming Dancing Places into Spaces in the Academy." *Journal of Pan African Studies* 4, no. 6 (September 15, 2011): 38–56. <https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=LitRC&sw=w&issn=08886601&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA306357798&sid=googleScholar&linkaccess=abs>.
- NBC News. "Dominican Republic's Enduring History of Racism against Haitians Explored in 'Stateless.'" Accessed July 22, 2022. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/dominican-republic-s-enduring-history-racism-against-haitians-explored-stateless-n1270499>.
- Ness, Sally Ann. "The Inscription of Gesture: Inward Migrations in Dance." In *Migrations of Gesture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/32038>.
- olelooftheday. "Le'a Joy, Pleasure, Happiness." Tumblr. 'Ōlelo of the Day (blog). Accessed July 28, 2022. <https://olelooftheday.tumblr.com/post/20857421387/lea>.



- Ong, Walter J. *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History*. 1st Edition. Yale University Press, 1967.
- Ophir, Hodel. “‘When I Enter the Studio I Am Coming Home’: Challenging Conceptions of Home through Body and Dance.” Leeds, UK, 2012.
- Paige. “Free People vs. Trained Dancers | Paige Davis,” May 20, 2014. <https://paigedavis.com/2014/05/20/free-people-vs-trained-dancers/>.
- Paxton, Felicity. “‘Like a Haven: Not Work, Not Home!’ Ballet as Escape Ritual for Middle Class Working Women.” In *The Emory Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life Working Paper No.20*, 2002.
- Peppers, Margot. “Free People Backlash for Ad Starring Inexperienced Dancer with ‘appalling’ Technique | Daily Mail Online,” May 16, 2014. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2630488/If-wanted-target-ballerinas-shouldve-hired-professional-Free-People-faces-backlash-ad-starring-inexperienced-dancer-appalling-technique.html>.
- Perspectives of Pele Panel at the Ka ‘Aha Hula ‘O Hālaualoa*. Office of Hawaiian Affairs on Facebook Watch. Facebook. Accessed September 5, 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/officeofhawaiianaffairs/videos/perspectives-of-pele-panel-at-the-ka-%CA%BBaha-hula-%CA%BBo-h%C4%81lauaolathe-office-of-hawaiia/2216925958334050/>.
- Pierre, Elizabeth Adams St. “Home as a Site of Theory: A Fragment.” *International Review of Qualitative Research* 1, no. 2 (2008): 119–24. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/irqr.2008.1.2.119>.
- “Popeye the Sailor.” *Betty Boop*. Fleischer Studios, July 14, 1933.
- Powell, Roo. “Trained Dancers Are Completely Appalled by This Ballet Ad for Free People Clothing.” *Adweek*, May 15, 2014. <https://www.adweek.com/creativity/trained-dancers-are-completely-appalled-ballet-ad-free-people-clothing-157682/>.
- “puka.” In *Nā Puke Wehewehe ‘Ōlelo Hawai‘i*, n.d. Ulukau - the Hawaiian Electronic Library. <https://wehewehe.org/gsd/2.85/cgi-bin/hdict?e=q-11000-00---off-0hdict--00-1----0-10-0---0---0direct-10-DW--4--textpukuielbert%2ctextmamaka%2ctextandrew%2ctextparker%2ctextpeplace%2ctextclark%2ctextchd%2ctexthllt----0-1l--11-haw-Zz-1---Zz-1-home-puka--00-4-1-00-0--4----0-0-11-00-0utfZz-8-00&a=d&d=D19058#hero-bottom-banner>.
- Pukui, Mary Kawena, E. W. Haertig, and Catherine A. Lee. *Nānā i Ke Kumu*. Hui Hanai, 1972.

- Quinlan, Meghan. "Training Neoliberal Dancers: Metatechniques and Marketability." In *Energy and Forces as Aesthetic Interventions: Politics of Bodily Scenarios*, edited by Barbara Gronau and Sabine Huschka. Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag, 2019.
- Race and Equality. "Dominican Republic Institute on Race, Equality and Human Rights." Accessed July 28, 2022. <https://raceandequality.org/dominican-republic/>.
- Re:Rosas! / Movements*, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2LyQono6rk>.
- Reynoso, Jose L. "Democracy's Body, Neoliberalism's Body: The Ambivalent Search for Egalitarianism Within the Contemporary Post/Modern Dance Tradition." *Dance Research Journal* 51, no. 1 (2019): 47–65. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/723677>.
- Roth, Wendy. *Race Migrations: Latinos and the Cultural Transformation of Race*. 1st edition. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012.
- Rowe, Sharon. "A Haole in a Hālau: Situating Identity, Practicing Learning." *Educational Perspectives - Journal of the College of Education* 46, no. Numbers 1 and 2 (2013): 23–30. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1088288.pdf>.
- Sellers, Julie A. *Bachata and Dominican Identity / La bachata y la identidad dominicana*. McFarland, 2014.
- "Sensual Week." Accessed July 28, 2022. <https://www.sensualweek.com/>.
- Sereno, Aeko. *Images of the Hula Dancer and "Hula Girl": 1778-1960*. University of Hawaii, 1990.
- Shaka, Angeline. "Hula `Ōlapa and the 'Hula Girl': Contemporary Hula Choreographies of the Concert Stage." Ph.D., University of California, Los Angeles, 2011. <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations/docview/923293560/abstract/489293544CF4451EPQ/2>.
- Shennan, Jennifer. "Approaches to the Study of Dance in Oceania: Is the Dancer Carrying an Umbrella or Not?," *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 90, no. 2 (1981): 194, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20705557>.
- Short, Brian. "Hula Down the Hall | U-M LSA U-M College of LSA." University of Michigan College of Literature, Science, and the Arts. Accessed July 31, 2021. <https://lsa.umich.edu/lsa/news-events/all-news/search-news/hula-down-the-hall.html>.

- Siebers, Tobin. "Disability and the Theory of Complex Embodiment—For Identity Politics in a New Register," n.d., 20.
- Silva, Noenoe K. "He Kanawai E Ho'opau I Na Hula Kuolo Hawai'i: The Political Economy of Banning the Hula." *The Hawaiian Journal of History* 34 (2000): 29–48.
- Simon, Liza. "Hula U." Hana Hou! Accessed September 4, 2021. <https://hanahou.com/15.5/hula-u>.
- Sohn, Stephen Hong. *Racial Asymmetries: Asian American Fictional Worlds*. New York: NYU Press, 2014.
- Srinivasan, Priya. *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011.
- Step Up*. Crime, Drama, Music. Touchstone Pictures, Summit Entertainment, Offspring Entertainment, 2006.
- Stillman, Amy Ku'uleialoha. "Hawaiian Hula Competitions: Event, Repertoire, Performance, Tradition." *The Journal of American Folklore* 109, no. 434 (1996): 357–80. <https://doi.org/10.2307/541181>.
- Tanigawa, Anela. "The Hula Industry: Understanding the Commodification of Hula in Japan and Culturally Grounded Hula." [Honolulu] : [University of Hawaii at Manoa], [May 2016], 2016. <http://hdl.handle.net/10125/51299>.
- "The Ballet." *I Love Lucy*. Desilu Productions, February 18, 1952.
- The Danger of a Single Story*. TEDGlobal2009. Ted Conferences, 2009. [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story).
- "The Problem with 'Toe Shoes'--Free People's Aggravating Ad." Accessed March 11, 2021. <http://jeanneteachesdance.blogspot.com/2014/05/the-problem-with-toe-shoes-free-peoples.html>.
- Trask, Haunani-Kay. "Lovely Hula Lands: Corporate Tourism and the Prostitution of Hawaiian Culture." *Border/Lines*, no. 23 (1991). <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/bl/article/view/24958>.
- Turner, Victor W., and Edward M. Bruner, eds. *The Anthropology of Experience*. 1st edition. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001.
- Uchiyama, Mahealani, and Sima Belmar. In Practice: Mahealani Uchiyama. Published by In Dance, September 1, 2018. <https://dancersgroup.org/2018/09/practice-mahealani-uchi-yama/>.

Udemy. "Demetrio Rosario | Bachata Instructor, DJ and Performer." Accessed July 14, 2022. <https://www.udemy.com/user/demetrio-rosario/>.

United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. "United Nations Experts on Racism and Minority Issues Call for Recognition, Dialogue and Policy to Combat the Reality of Racial Discrimination in the Dominican Republic," October 29, 2007. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2009/10/united-nations-experts-racism-and-minority-issues-call-recognition-dialogue-and>.

Vider, Stephen. *The Queerness of Home: Gender, Sexuality, and the Politics of Domesticity after World War II*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2022. <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/Q/bo116106772.html>.

*What It Takes to Be a Hula Champion*, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-NhPqimnr3o>.

Winship, Lyndsey. "'Dance Is Not a Museum': How Ballet Is Reimagining Problematic Classics." *The Guardian*, January 9, 2020, sec. Stage. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/jan/09/ballet-reimagining-classics-colonial-politics-dance-race-identity>.

Wong, Yutian. "Introduction: Issues in Asian American Dance Studies." In *Contemporary Directions in Asian American Dance*, edited by Yutian Wong, 3–28. University of Wisconsin Press, 2016.