

## **Performing Identity: Bachata and Developing *Dominicanidad*** **Elly Veloria**

During my semester abroad in Santiago de los Caballeros in the Dominican Republic, I experienced the many aspects of culture that give Dominican life such a distinct texture. From honking car horns, to sweaty and sticky dancing bodies, and bachata blasting in the clubs and local convenience stores (aka *los colmados*). Whenever I met Dominicans, they asked me if I liked to dance and, if so, what kind of music was my favorite. “Bachata,” I would say, definitively, which would earn me an appreciative nod or raised eyebrows. “But you *know* how to dance?” they inquired, and I would pause.

As a student in professor Adanna Jones’ Dancing Histories course, I began my studies of the role of bachata in Dominican forms of resistance against Trujillo—a past dictator whose legacy of racist and xenophobic policies still continue to shape the country today. In general, dance, especially in the Caribbean, illustrates how bodies interact with one another and shows how history is embodied and passed down. Studying dance is an intensive form of practicing phenomenology – of acknowledging how experience influences the way individuals perceive the world around them. In turn, while I was researching in the Dominican Republic, I was capable of understanding the nuanced and integrative roles that dance plays within the Dominican context. With that said, writing and analyzing dance as an observer not only “others” a population, but fails to reveal the complexity and lived experience of dancing and moving bodies. In hopes of addressing this, my project focused on contextualizing a “body of knowledge” as the practices which shape how bodies move throughout space, particularly using practiced and transmitted movement.

In my work, I utilized dance ethnography as my primary method of research. Drawing on the core tenants of ethnography, including formal/informal interviews, participant-observation, and analyzing place and space, I incorporated the practice of actually dancing with subjects to gain an intimate understanding of the particular practice of bachata. Rather than taking formal lessons, which are readily available to tourists in the Dominican Republic, I learned the way my informants did: I just did it. My informants, mainly friends of Dominican friends, accompanied me to local *discotecas*, where we discussed how they learned to dance, what dance meant to them, and what dance means for Dominicans.

As I continued to work with my informants, however, I realized that my intention to study only bachata was obscuring the larger goal of seeing how dance contributes to contemporary Dominican identity. The young crowd of Dominicans I worked with associated bachata with their grandparents, or “*los viejitos*,” the generation who lived through Trujillo and taught their grandchildren how to dance bachata. As I spoke and went out with my Dominican peers, I learned the language they utilized to speak about dance: new phrases, like *pegado* emerged, as well as relevant popular genres of music in the Caribbean, such as *dembow* and *reggaetón*. My research in Santiago de los Caballeros suggests that although bachata holds a different meaning for young Dominicans, bachata continues to remain an important symbol of Dominican identity and genealogy alongside contemporary popular dances.

My research encouraged me to think outside of Western dichotomies and to be as responsive and flexible as possible. Most importantly, however, when my Spanish occasionally failed me or I could not articulate the exact word I wanted to use, I discovered how powerful body language can actually be. I am excited to continue thinking about: how place is curated, how bodies learn and pass along knowledge, and to keep thinking critically about culture and tradition as malleable within the disciplines of Dance and Anthropology. Next semester, I am considering an Independent Study on performativity, race, and gender identity within a Caribbean context, and I look forward to further analyzing my preliminary research data.

**Adanna Kai Jones, Ph.D.**

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