BACHATA: Identity Transmission Through a Dominican Popular Music

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BACHATA: Identity Transmission Through a Dominican Popular Music

By

Sara Heaton

AN UNDERGRADUATE THESIS

In

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This thesis is special for me because it is a physical documentation that I feel symbolizes my accomplishments during my undergraduate career, but even more so, it symbolizes some of the most meaningful relationships that I have ever formed. Therefore, it would be ungrateful of me to not acknowledge these people to whom I am so indebted.

I would like to thank my academic advisor, Tim Rommen. He was an unfailing source of encouragement and always made me feel that my project was worthwhile and valuable. I cannot overstate how much his support and enthusiasm gave me the energy to keep going. I also must express my gratitude to Ramonita Marcano-Ogando of the Spanish Language Department, who generously provided me with wonderful resources from her native country, the Dominican Republic.

The idea for this thesis never would have occurred to me had I not been exposed to the Dominican Republic, for which I have to thank my parents. I must be one of the luckiest people to have parents so intent on exposing their children to new things, new people, new cultures, and new ideas. My sister shares this benefit with me, and for that reason, and many others, was the most perfect person to have as a companion for part of my time in the Dominican Republic. Her wise insight at crucial times during the whole process put me right back on track.

I save for the end of my list of thank you's my friends in the Dominican Republic. By far the most valuable part of my experience in the D.R. were the people that I met, who I am sure have no idea the extent of the impact they made on my life. Horacio Ornes, the country director of the community development organization Save the Children/FUDECO, arranged for me to work as a volunteer intern, and generously opened up his home to me. Thank you so much for giving me this unique and amazing opportunity to gain knowledge of a country, and to gain a lifelong friend. And to Margarita Rodriguez, another colleague from FUDECO and mi mamá dominicana, I thank you, your family and la comunidad de Los Indios for allowing me to be a part of your community. I want people to know how wonderful you are and how infectious your love for your unique cultural treasures is. To that end, I present La Bachata.
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I. Introduction

Drum rhythms gradually become audible as I step off the plane. The sounds of merengue waft down the hallway where tourists and native Dominicans alike enter and exit the country. Four men sit on the departure side in matching outfits, moving their feet and hips to the strong beat they create with their instruments. An American mother and daughter, freshly tanned and with heads full of tight corn-row braids, do their best to dance their way to the plane, cumbersome bags in arm. They are leaving Puerto Plata, and the last sound they hear is the local merengue band. I am arriving, and it is my first.

This is my second trip to the Dominican Republic, exactly a year after the first. I am struck by how different my attitude is this time around. I began my earlier stay with no idea of how the next four months of my life in Los Indios would be. The plan was to live in this small, rural community while volunteering with the global organization, Save the Children. In retrospect, I was rather naive and clueless as to what that would entail.

Now, it is a comfort to come back here, knowing what to expect, especially since I have a specific mission: to gather data on the popular music called bachata. One of the most poignant things I learned last year was that music is a central pleasure in the everyday lives of the people in Los Indios. For them, it establishes a sense of community and even, of national identity. It was this social role of music that intrigued me to do a closer reading of the subject.

It seems that the scene at the airport is a wonderful symbolic representation of my coming work: the band stands on the border between the Dominican and the non-Dominican, filling the sound-space with their music as if to say, “This is who we are and this is how we want you to remember us.”

A. Popular Music in the Dominican Republic

Dominican music came to prominence on the world music scene through merengue. Following a trajectory similar to other Caribbean musics, merengue hit the New York City club circuit in conjunction with Dominican and Puerto Rican immigration—although the music originates from the island of Hispaniola, Puerto Ricans have also claimed the infectious dance beat and are now counted among the most successful artists in the genre. Nonetheless, considering the strong connection between Dominican identity and merengue, Dominicans maintain that merengue’s true home is on Dominican soil. The genre now enjoys universal appeal on that land and is undoubtedly one of the most popular musics in the Dominican Republic.

Merengue’s role as a national identifier was codified and institutionalized during the reign of the dictator Rafael Trujillo (1930–1961). During this time, Trujillo managed to bring the whole country under his control. His monopoly over Dominican agricultural production, in
particular the sugar plantations, made him extremely wealthy. Nation-wide censorship limited the freedom of political and cultural expression. As part of his program of control over mass media and culture, he brought the formerly “lower class,” popular music called merengue into the elegant dance halls. His motives for doing so were undoubtedly self-glorifying; merengue bands always accompanied him on campaigns and played songs that he commissioned and which, not surprisingly, praised his leadership. Trujillo did, nevertheless, effectually succeed in entrenching merengue at the heart of Dominican national identity. And he accomplished this at multiple levels, linking merengue to the Dominican Republic not only in terms of sound but also symbolically.

The past ten years have brought a gradual change within the Dominican popular music scene; a change due in large part to the emergence of a new craze—bachata. This guitar-based music is today arguably the most rapidly growing genre in the Dominican Republic. Bachata started in poor rural communities in the mid-20th century, when the acoustic guitar became more widely distributed and accessible. The tendency for it to be played in rural brothels, however, attached a social stigma to the new musical style that kept it from becoming accepted on a national level until the last ten years. Because of this discrimination of the genre, fans of bachata, of which there were many, had to be discrete about listening to the music. “The people who liked bachata back then had to hide to listen to it because they would be ashamed if anyone heard them listening to bachata,” attests bachatero (bachata musician) Teodoro Reyes.\(^1\) It was in this sense that bachata was limited to an underground popularity for some time.

Bachata’s luck changed when a certain well-known and respected musician, Juan Luis Guerra, decided to create his own version of bachata. His bachata songs were received

\(^1\) This quotation from an interview with Teodoro Reyes in the documentary video Bachata: Música de Pueblo by Giovanni Savino, 2002. Translation mine.
tremendously well by the public, and practically single-handedly opened up the doors of popularity for bachata. Today, bachata is ubiquitous throughout the Dominican Republic. You cannot step into the street without hearing the distinctive guitar riffs and 4/4 bass beat emanating from the windows of a private home, from a nearby colmado (small road-side stores), or from a passing guaguá (local bus). In the local disco paradas (open-air discos), airtime seems to be split equally between bachata and merengue.

Bachata has clearly made its way into the aural mainstream and is now a source of identity and pride for many Dominicans. Its popularity in the international music scene is growing, and hopefully will follow in the footsteps of merengue to worldwide fame. Perhaps, even, I will arrive at the Puerto Plata airport one day and, instead of hearing a merenguero (merengue musician), I will hear a bachatero welcoming and giving farewells.

B. Personal Fieldwork Experience

My enthusiasm for bachata grew as I reflected on the experience of my first trip to the Dominican Republic. The sounds of bachata were some of the most pertinent aspects of my day-to-day life and ones that I carried with me well after returning to the United States. It also became clear that bachata was a significant means of social integration for me as an outsider. When I expressed interest in the music to almost any Dominican living in Los Indios, the village where I lived, he or she would immediately light up with pride and proceed to give me a full take on the musical style and dance. Bachata, therefore, serves a double function: it unifies social insiders and incorporates outsiders. It was this intriguing musical role of bachata, and the realization that it is still relatively understudied within the academy, that inspired me to return to the Dominican Republic to gather data for a thesis on the topic.
This thesis will examine the role of bachata as a national symbol for the Dominican and as a means through which to incorporate the outsider into Dominican society. In so doing, it will explore the themes of class consciousness, urban versus rural identity, outsider versus insider encounters, and how these contribute to identity formation. The narrative begins with an overview of the development of merengue, and its role as the antecedent to bachata within the Dominican Republic. The next section discusses the history of bachata, from its rural beginnings in the 1960s to its success in breaking social barriers during the 1990s and beyond, and illustrates similarities to the development of merengue. “Bachata Today” gives a description of the main aspects of modern bachata, the venues where it is heard, and the forms of its dissemination. The small village of Los Indios, in the Cibao region, offers a close reading of how bachata is perceived and lived by rural people. This last section provides the basis for my concluding remarks about bachata’s importance in the ongoing process of creating a Dominican identity, on both the personal and national levels.
II. Bachata's Antecedent: Merengue

A. A Musical Expression of Cultural Fusion

The roots of bachata are intricately intertwined with those of merengue, the Dominican national music. Dominicans feel passionately for merengue, which is more than just a lively and sexy popular dance music. Merengue has been an integral part of the development of a Dominican national identity. Because of its role in the general growth of the country, and because it is the musical antecedent of bachata, it is impossible to separate the two musical trajectories. Understanding bachata necessitates first an understanding of merengue’s history.

Merengue today holds a more prominent position for Dominicans than for other Caribbean peoples; however, there is some dispute as to its exact origins. The neighboring islands such as Cuba and Puerto Rico also place some claims to ownership of merengue. These claims are not unjustified, seeing that there are still forms of merengue being played in Venezuela, Colombia and Haiti (Austerlitz 1997:15). Nonetheless, Dominicans feel very strongly about its roots being in the Dominican Republic, and no one disputes the fact that the Dominican Republic was the main site for the development of the genre in the mid-20th century.

Evidence suggests a link between Dominican merengue and the Haitian dance music, the mereng, or, in French, meringue. The mereng is believed to have evolved out of the couples dance called karabiyè, which is a fusion of the European contredanse and African Kongo-influenced recreational dances (Averill 1997:33). The term meringue refers to a French pastry made of whipped egg whites and sugar. It is unclear exactly how the term came to be used for the music, but it offers a useful metaphor for the music: like the pastry, the music whipped together traditions from recently collided societies to form an unexpectedly coherent new style, albeit with a slightly different flavor. This created an independently derived music that locals
declared the national music. The *meringue* metaphor is in fact a reflection of all emerging Caribbean nations, many of which followed suit by politicizing their own national musics. “The national forms were an exercise in the symbolics of nationhood and a means of coming to terms with the multiracial character of the New World societies,” (Averill 1997:32). In the case of the Dominican Republic and Haiti, whose histories are inseparable, there can be no doubt that the cultural expressions of the two emerging nations refracted and reflected one another.

Nonetheless, this theory is a rather controversial one, and one that not many Dominican historians would espouse. Tying merengue’s roots to a Haitian musical form brings up the touchy subject of African influence on Dominican culture. There is very little public acknowledgement of any sort of Afro-Caribbean identity in the Dominican Republic, even though the African influence is clearly visible. It is audible in the rhythms of local music and even apparent in the kind of percussion instruments used. Some folk religions bear resemblances to Haitian *voudou* and Cuban *santería*, both of which fuse West African spiritual traditions with Catholicism. And most clearly, the African influence is visible in the range of skin color of Dominicans, eighty percent of whom are a mixture of African and European. Still, an attitude persists that says European is better than African—perhaps resulting from unpleasant memories of a twenty-year Haitian occupation—and so Dominicans tend to emphasize the European influences over any other. Hence, the practice of using racial categories *indio* (“Indian”) or *indio oscuro* (“dark Indian”) instead of “black,” which is equated with the term “Haitian.”

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2 The relationship between Haitians and Dominicans on a local level has improved greatly since the mid-20th century, evidenced by the number of Haitians living in the Dominican Republic relatively peacefully, and the many Haitians who receive their education from Dominican Universities. A telling fact is that the community development organization I worked with recently hired three Dominican-educated Haitians to oversee the implementation of new projects in Haiti using funding from the Dominican organization. But still, the subtle use of language reveals continuing prejudice, such as the joking manner of using “haitiano” as an insult. For instance, a friend prefaced a story by saying that she is not prejudiced, and then continued to relate how every time she sees a Haitian walking towards her, she crosses the street out of fear. The racial prejudice towards Haitians is an ongoing issue that surely will continue to evolve as the future of the two countries unfolds.
This mentality leads Dominicans to accept more readily the theory that merengue derives from European music, for which there is a good amount of evidence. As in Cuba and Puerto Rico, the English contredanse that originated in the mid-17th century seeped into the Dominican Republic through the arrival of Spanish settlers and of displaced Franco-Haitian planters, who escaped to the Dominican Republic in the wake of the black-led Haitian revolution in the 18th century. Whereas in France the contredanse was a courtly ballroom group dance, the novelty of its offspring styles in Haiti and the Dominican Republic (the mereng and merengue, respectively) was that they were danced in couples (Manuel 1995:99).

The entrance of this new style of dance into the salons and dance halls of the Dominican Republic did not occur without some disapproval. People condemned it as being lude and vulgar. To see couples dance together to such lively rhythms, not to mention the hip swaying that went on, was probably a shock. But perhaps there was also an underlying disapproval of a new music that unwittingly combined European music and the African rhythms that were “unfit” for dance halls. This was not the direction that the Euro-centric Dominicans wanted their music to go. Despite their dissatisfaction, the merengue grew in popularity among those who were more open to the Africanisms inherent in the music.

In addition to the guitar, güira, tambora drum, and marimba of the early merengue ensemble, salon-style merengue incorporated more instruments into the ensemble, including flutes and violins. The War of Restoration, starting in 1863, brought with it the marching band and its instruments, of which the clarinet and baritone horn would also make their way into the salons (Austerlitz 1997:23). In the 1870s, a fundamental transformation of the merengue ensemble occurred when the button accordion began to enter the country. The accordion replaced

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3 A güira (also güiro) is a gourd or metal scraper common in the merengue and in other Caribbean musical genres.
4 A marimba is a bass instrument consisting of plucked metal keys mounted in a wooden box (Manuel 1995:252).
the string instruments and became a staple of Dominican merengue. Even today it is one of the most characteristic elements of the typical merengue style.

The infectious new music spread out from the urban realm into the rural sector, which made up more than three quarters of the Dominican population in 1935 (Austerlitz 1997:62). In the rural Dominican Republic, the merengue took on regional variations according to the instruments, rhythms and melodies particular to that region (Austerlitz 1997:25). The style that developed in the Cibao region of the country went on to become the most influential.\(^5\) The merengue from the Cibao, called *merengue típico*, is the most classic style of Dominican merengue. This style features the accordion, which interjects fast, syncopated phrases that add to the rhythmic complexity of the music. As with all merengues, the incessant rhythmic pulse emphasizes every beat, in contrast to other Caribbean beats whose syncopation emphasizes certain beats over others. This style of *merengue típico cibaeño* acquired the nickname *perico ripiao* in acknowledgement of a local tavern/brothel where merengue was often performed, and developed into what would soon become a national symbol of unity.\(^6\)

**B. Merengue and Nationalism**

By the early twentieth century, *merengue típico’s* home was in rural and barrio Dominican Republic, far removed from the city salons where it had started. For that reason, it seems unlikely that the merengue would eventually emerge as *the* symbol of nationalism—a symbol that even the middle and upper classes supported. A closer look at the turn of events that

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\(^5\) The Cibao is the valley region in the middle of the country that has historically been the most lucrative because of the rich soil that yields the majority of the country’s agricultural products. Its main city and provincial capital, Santiago de los Caballeros, is traditionally home to the country’s elite (i.e. Spanish descendants), implied by the city’s name (*caballeros* = gentlemen). Please refer to Maps 1 and 2.

\(^6\) For a musical example of the *perico ripiao*, refer to Track 1 on accompanying CD, “Canto de hecha,” included on *Caribbean Island Music*. 
led to this cultural assimilation, however, illustrates that previous class associations with the music were insignificant when compared to the threat of outsiders taking over. In light of the struggle between Dominican and non-Dominican national domination, the conflicts that previously had prohibited merengue from certain social sectors gave way to the need for a common social expression.

This process started in 1916 when, at the order of President Roosevelt, US marines arrived in the Dominican Republic. European creditors were making their way into the country to settle debts after a period of financial instability and the US saw this as a threat to their Caribbean/Central American interests, particularly in Panama (Austerlitz 1997:30). The US occupation, which lasted for eight years, was meant to help the Dominican Republic avoid financial ruin, but it also had the effect of engendering a patriotic anti-American sentiment among Dominicans. Merengue often served as a forum to express this discontent, starting a tradition of political commentary through music that is not uncommon in other Caribbean genres, such as Trinidadian calypso and Jamaican reggae.\(^7\)

In opposition to the American invasion, Dominicans, especially upper class Dominicans, started a cultural movement that embraced native art forms. Whereas before, they shunned merengue, deeming it vulgar and unsophisticated, now it appeared authentically Dominican. In contrast to the music infiltrating from the US, merengue was a good candidate for the position of musical ambassador in the face of unwanted occupiers. Dance bands incorporated merengue into the sets that they played at elite salons in Santiago, which patrons soon came to accept with patriotic pride. “Significantly, Dominican cultural nationalism took shape only in the Cibao, the traditional home of many upper-class Dominicans, who rejected merengue until their country was stripped of sovereignty, when they embraced it as a national symbol. While not yet viewed

\(^7\) For a lyrical example, refer to “La Protesta” in the Appendix.
that way by the rest of the country, merengue at the end of the 1920s was poised to play an influential role in national politics,” (Austerlitz 1997:50). It is important to note that the merengue style the elite chose for their political agenda was the more “elegant,” big band style. It is no coincidence that this type of merengue was the least rustic and the most urban-sounding, but still authentic enough to be Dominican.

C. Trujillo’s Musical Politics

Merengue may have been heading in this direction anyway, but the process of taking on that influential role in politics was greatly speeded at the hands of Trujillo. He strategically used the merengue as a part of his political campaign to obtain complete power over Dominican economy and social life. His goals were aimed at securing the Dominican borderlands, gaining more control over his territory, and developing Dominican nationalism. Part of the strategy for achieving these goals was to institutionalize a policy of anti-Haitianism, which often took on a violent form, most tragically in the massacre of an estimated 20,000 Haitians living on the Dominican side of the border in 1937.\(^8\) Trujillo never officially stated his direct involvement in ordering the massacre, but did allude to the event in his contributions to settling the Dominican boundary, once and for all, through his official project entitled the “Dominicanization of the border” (Austerlitz 1997:64).

Connected to the anti-Haitian theme in Trujillo’s dictatorship was the championing of the Republic’s European roots. Anti-Haitian went hand-in-hand with anti-African, and so he outlawed traditional practices, such as religious ones, that derived from African culture. For that reason, it is no coincidence that Trujillo’s proclaimed music of choice was the merengue from the Cibao region—the region with predominantly white ethnicity, little obvious presence of

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\(^8\) Edwidge Danticat offers a compelling story about this tragic event in her novel *The Farming of Bones.*
African influence, and the highest standing in terms of regional hierarchy. Unlike the elite of the 1920s, however, Trujillo opted for the típico merengue sound—a style that, at that point, was still associated with the rural and barrio culture (read low class) of the Cibao region.

Trujillo himself was not from the Cibao, but from the South, where he grew up in a humble family. The conscious decision to make the merengue típico cibaeño a part of his political weaponry simultaneously allied his persona with the general character of the Cibao region and turned the tables on the elite who had previously rejected him. Given his power as dictator, he could decree that his music of choice be played in elite salons where it had previously not been admitted. The patrons had no choice but to comply. Trujillo’s reign thus encompassed all social classes through the merengue. By declaring the merengue típico the national music by decree in 1936 he appealed to the masses, who were already fans of the genre. Forcing the merengue into elite salons created the illusion that it was also a part of the upper class identity and that the rural music had made its mark on the elite.

The effect that Trujillo had on the development of the merengue is arguably unparalleled by any other cultural event in Dominican history. By taking the típico cibaeño style under his political wing, he homogenized the regional variations of merengue that previously flourished. Important in the spread of this style was Luis Alberti’s group, renamed the “Orquesta Presidente Trujillo.” Trujillo commissioned the band to be his personal dance band and follow him on his campaigns throughout the country. He also ordered composers to write songs exalting his rule—songs that were then subsequently popularized by Alberti’s group and other prominent bands from Santo Domingo. Examples of names of these songs include “Trujillo es grande e inmortal” (Trujillo is great and immortal) and “Trujillo el gran arquitecto” (Trujillo, the great architect) (Austerlitz 1997:60). Influenced by jazz, Trujillo’s band started an innovation in merengue, later
called *orquesta merengue*, which consisted of new arrangements that highlighted brass instruments such as the trumpet and saxophone. The popularity of this style continued to increase throughout Trujillo’s reign and even through to today.⁹

### D. Musical Developments in the Post-Trujillo Era

Even after Trujillo’s death, the genre continued to develop and mature into what eventually became the sleek, professional sound of the merengue *conjuntos* (bands) of today. Following the assassination of Trujillo in 1961, the Dominican Republic started down a tumultuous road of transformation. The Balaguer regime, headed by Trujillo’s former right-hand man and backed by the US, controlled the nation with a forceful and sometimes violent, yet stable, government until 1996 (Austerlitz 1997:91). This regime differed greatly from Trujillo’s in that it opened the country up to foreign investors. Doing so affected both monetary and cultural exposure. The rock music from the US that Trujillo had banned started making its way into Dominican clubs and soon was very popular among Dominican youth. In addition, *baladas* and salsa began to circulate, the latter of which was the most threatening to the indigenous merengue. It was hard for merengue to compete with these foreign musics that had the advantage of high-quality recordings backed by aggressive promoters.

The survival of merengue during this period of intense competition is largely attributable to Johnny Ventura. Starting in the 1960s, this bandleader revitalized the sound of merengue by fusing the influences of salon merengue, *merengue típico*, and rock. The key characteristic of these new ensembles was the inclusion of two saxophones that played crisp, melodic patterns, providing for a more sophisticated sound than the *típico* accordion-based ensemble (Manuel

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⁹ For a musical example of *orquesta merengue*, refer to Track 2 on accompanying CD, “San Cristóbal” by Antonio Morel y su Orquesta, included on *Merengue: Dominican Music and Dominican Identity*. 

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The rhythm section also tightened up, providing a complex percussive groove that could compete with the intensely rhythmic salsas by the likes of Tito Puente and others from New York City. Finally, the new merengue group commercialized itself as a package by spiffing up the performance, complete with matching outfits and choreography.

In the wake of these changes, merengue has gone on to enjoy worldwide fame. The massive Dominican emigration to New York City helped the cause of merengue greatly. During and since the 1970s, Dominicans took their music north, providing quite a scare for the salseros who previously did not have to share the Latin music fanbase of New York with any other genre. Now, each genre seems to have found its niche, both with loyal, and partly overlapping, aficionados. Merengue continues to be the number one popular music in the Dominican Republic and for Dominicans overseas. But its popularity extends beyond Dominicans, proven by the extent to which merengue is heard in dance clubs all over the world, especially in Europe and South America.

The development of merengue in the Dominican Republic is typical of many musical creations in the Caribbean. The unique situation of the formation of the Caribbean allowed established traditions from all over the world to blend together, giving birth to new traditions. It is tempting to conceptualize these new traditions in terms of where they came from, i.e. tracing certain characteristics back to the musics of Europe, Africa or Asia. However, in this case, the originality of Caribbean musical creations suggests starting theorizations from a blank slate. We should go back to this blank drawing board, so to speak, while keeping in mind the hundreds of times we have already erased it. The implication here is that the mélange, or mezcla (to keep with the Spanish theme), of the Caribbean presents a theoretical problem in that we cannot define

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10 Refer to Track 3 on accompanying CD for Johnny Ventura’s “La muerte de Martin.”
it and its cultural products only in terms of things already defined. Discussing the Caribbean requires shaking off an attachment to past traditions.

In this light, it is useful to consider, when discussing the history and development of merengue, the consequences of diaspora and the challenges involved in creating a shared identity in a diasporic community. For merengue, its participation in the journey toward a national identity can be thought of as passing through two levels: the international level of insider versus outsider, and the domestic level of social class. When faced with the threat of foreign intrusion in the 1920s, merengue was a boundary marker between us and them—a use to which it is still applied, evidenced by the merengue band at the Puerto Plata airport. Merengue could easily solidify and institutionalize a sense of Dominican-ness in opposition to the force of non-Dominican. However, unifying on a domestic level was (and is) not so easy. In this forum, the associations between social class and musical tastes becomes a clear theme. Trujillo fought against this fact by forcing a low class-associated style into upper class arenas. The legacy of his efforts show that he was in fact quite successful in at least opening the door toward universal social acceptance for merengue. Its history illustrates how powerful sound can be in communicating identity. In the following description of bachata’s history, similar themes will become clear.
III. The Rise of Bachata

Twenty years ago, only the visitor with a keen ear would have heard about bachata in the Dominican Republic. At that point, bachata was still relegated to the underground scene, not yet "refined" enough for the mainstream. Bachata had in fact been around for quite a while already, but the social stigma associated with it prevented its dissemination in the mainstream media, despite its widespread popularity. The road bachata took to its present-day status followed a similar route as did merengue, confronting and ultimately overcoming the already well-worn issues of urban versus rural, and upper versus lower class acceptance. Foreshadowing the course of bachata's emergence in the mainstream, Hernandez eloquently states that, "Changes in the social status and mass dissemination of genres rooted in the musical practices of the poor, however, always reflect transformations in the larger social context, although they are usually launched by individuals who are able to successfully translate these class-bound musics to broader mass audiences by providing them with a veneer of social respectability," (Hernandez 1995:2). The following pages illustrate the ways through which bachata navigated these social transformations, and how it acquired a permanent and prominent place within the Dominican soundscape.

A. First Sounds of Bachata: Rural Beginnings

The popular merengue of the mid-twentieth century completely excluded the guitar from its ensemble, having adopted the accordion as its main instrument. Little known to the public, though, guitar had not been left by the wayside in Dominican music. A small group of amateur musicians continued playing the guitar in informal settings, mostly in rural areas, in a style that would eventually evolve into the characteristic lead guitar patterns of bachata.
Opinions differ about the exact nature of this early música de guitarra, how and where it continued, and why it increased in popularity. According to Pacini Hernandez, the guitar was the instrument of choice for rural musicians by default because of its accessibility (1995:11). Guitars were relatively cheap and easy to make from local wood. It is also no surprise that Dominicans would opt for making music with guitars, considering that the guitar had already been important in the original merengue sound, and that guitar-based music was a staple in Caribbean and Latin American music. Mexico had its rancheras and corridos, Puerto Rico its plena and jíbaro music, the pasillo from South America, and the Cuban son and bolero, which would be the most influential for early bachata.

The Cuban bclero is one of that country’s more European-derived genres, stemming from the highly lyrical bel canto singing tradition from Italy. This slow dance rhythm came around at the beginning of the twentieth century, and by the 1920s, was popular throughout Latin America, and especially in Mexico. Characteristic of this style is the voice and guitar ensemble, sometimes with vocal duets or trios, in which the singer speaks of unrequited love and other woes of heartbreak, a sentimentality that becomes a theme later on in bachata (Manuel 1995:35). Another influential characteristic of bolero is the four-four time signature with its typical bass-line, consisting of half note, quarter, quarter—a rhythm that has become a staple in bachata. (Román en Feb. 12, 2004: class lecture).

B. Urban Relocation

Cuban migrants brought their bolero with them to the Dominican Republic near the turn of the century, particularly to the Cibao region of the country (Hernandez 1995:5). In a manner not dissimilar to the parallel developments of merengue típico and merengue orquesta, the bolero
found two homes, one in elegant salons and the other in mainly rural contexts. The former developed into a more “sophisticated” night club sound, including pianos and stringed instruments, while the rural version maintained its guitar-based roots. Amateur, rural musicians built on this guitar bolero style, eventually producing a standardized genre that would only later be known as bachata. Not surprisingly, the urban-rural split of the genre foreshadows the discrimination that would later impede the success of the rural, guitar style.

These amateur musicians started recording in the 1960s at a time when the nation was experiencing a massive rural-to-urban migration. In the immediate post-Trujillo years, an influx of rural peasants caused shantytowns to crop up on the outskirts of major cities, particularly Santo Domingo, where people hoped to find work opportunities. Many of the rural traditions persisted in these new locations. One such tradition was the informal, all-night social gathering, called *bachata*. Self-taught musicians would play *música de guitarra*, imitative of the bolero and other styles previously mentioned, while community members would drink and dance. It was probably at one of these *bachata* parties that Margarita Rodriguez remembers hearing guitar music for the first time in Los Indios:

The first *bachata* party I went to, over there, I already had my first child, Altagracia [now in her late 30s]. There was guitar music, a guira, a tambora [drum], and they played merengue, guaracha, and that night they played *bachata*. The people started to dance *bachata*. The guy who lives over there, named Sérgio, had the guitar and so we began dancing *bachata*. I remember very well—that we started with that man having little parties and singing *bachata*. And after, with the radio and the jukebox, I learned [to dance the *bachata*]. (Personal interview Jan. 7, 2004, translation mine)

These gatherings provided a place for the popularization of the imitative guitar styles that Dominican musicians were perfecting.

Upon coming to the city, some of these musicians learned how to adapt and take advantage of recording opportunities. These early recordings document the extent to which the bolero and other styles influenced early guitar music in the Dominican Republic. Compositions
by one early bachatero, José Manuel Calderón, the first to record in the post-Trujillo era, are true to the bolero ensemble (guitar, güira, maracas), and have similar plaintive, romantic lyrics and singing style. The following is from a 1962 recording and is typical of the melodramatic narrative of heartbreak (sited in Hernandez 1995:84):

\textit{Lágrimas de sangre} (Tears of blood)

\begin{align*}
Aun te llevo dentro & \quad \text{I still carry you inside} \\
Tú me has hecho llorar & \quad \text{You’ve made me cry} \\
Lágrimas de sangre & \quad \text{Tears of blood} \\
Te sigo esperando & \quad \text{I’m still waiting for you} \\
Te sigo queriendo & \quad \text{I’m still loving you} \\
Igual que ayer & \quad \text{As much as yesterday} \\
Tú ya no me quieres & \quad \text{You don’t love me anymore} \\
Pero eso no importa & \quad \text{But that doesn’t matter} \\
Y si tú me odias & \quad \text{If you hate me} \\
Yo te quiero más & \quad \text{I’ll love you more}
\end{align*}

Catering to already established musical tastes, however, did not win him and his contemporaries much favor with certain sectors of society: “Their first recordings were perceived by the middle and upper classes as little more than crude imitations of the stylish Cuban bolero by ignorant peasants who could not do any better,” (Hernandez 1995:11). Such harsh judgements toward this yet-unnamed genre of music may reflect the general atmosphere of contempt for the shantytown dwellers who made a sudden and significant impact on the economy and atmosphere of city life.

Entrepreneurs in radio and the recording industry soon realized the potential for marketing the Dominican-made guitar-based music. A large majority of the residents of the newly-developed shantytown communities were bachata fans, offering a ready-made music market that did not exist when fans were spread out across rural areas. Cuco Valoy recognized this probable venture and began a radio station in Santo Domingo called Radio Tropical (Hernandez 1995:85). By programming local guitar musicians, most of whom had come from
rural towns, he could win the appeal of the barrio residents of the city who were, in turn, potential consumers of the records he produced in his studio.

Other radio stations began to follow suit, and some record producers covered the recording costs for these rural musicians. However, the most prominent force in this industry was Radhames Aracena and his station, Radio Guarachita. Aracena was an astute businessman who had the foresight to see economic gain in gearing his station toward the poor classes in the Dominican Republic, both urban and rural. He noticed the high frequency of bachata on his colleagues’ playlists and so decided to discard his first idea to form a station mainly for playing imported music, turning instead toward local guitar music. Aracena built intrigue about his new station by playing hours of non-stop music—a mixture of local guitar musicians and similar styles from Mexico, Puerto Rico and Columbia—without any commercials. He carefully chose the band 690 AM so as to not interfere with foreign stations at night, a prime radio listening time, and so that it would reach nationwide. By the time he revealed the station’s name in 1965, Radio Guarachita already had a loyal following from among the rural and recently immigrated poor classes.

Well thought-out business tactics that catered to its particular socio-economic group audience helped Radio Guarachita become one of the nation’s most successful stations. In a time of dramatic lifestyle transition for the urban immigrants, the station offered services that simultaneously aided in maintaining rural connections while also easing them into modern urban life. With the free public service announcements, servicios públicos, anyone could request that a message be aired. This turned out to be a more efficient and reliable way to communicate important information to faraway relatives, since the postal service was still rather unreliable. Similarly, listeners could wait their turn to give a message personally on the programa de
saludos (greeting program). Especially in the rural culture, greeting people with "¡Saludo!" and a handshake is an important way of establishing an open relationship in a friendly tone with strangers and friends alike. Hernandez suggests that transferring this firmly established social custom to the radio was significant "because it transformed a rural oral tradition in which greetings were personally delivered and received into a new kind of urban-centered, mass-mediated communicative event," (Hernandez 1995:93). Thus, Radio Guarachita provided a familial outlet that may have mitigated the overwhelming feeling of displacement in a new environment.\textsuperscript{11}

Subsidized commercials for consumer products brought in a substantial profit for Aracena, but not as much as his record production and distribution. Aracena used tight management to control his self-sufficient music production business. He auditioned and recorded musicians in his home. He made artistic decisions about the music and the bachatero's image, even enforcing correct grammar in the lyrics, for which he personally provided the corrections. The records he produced were played only on his station and sold only in his Guarachita record stores. Given the popularity of the station, this setup guaranteed high economic yield from the monopolized market of record distribution. While Aracena can be credited with launching the careers of dozens of bachateros and opening the market for bachata music, at least in the lower class sector, he was all about personal gain and ruthlessly exploited musicians, such as Luis Segura and others (Hernandez 1995:97-101).

Motivated by the success of these musicians in the 1960s, many more people took a stab at making it big in bachata in the following decade. With the support of Aracena, established artists continued to come out with records, and dozens of other emerging musicians started

\textsuperscript{11}For more information on Radio Guarachita and the development of other radio stations in the 1960s, please refer to Chapter Three of Hernandez's \textit{Bachata}. 
getting recognition, notably, Blas Durán, Bolívar Peralta and Leonardo Paniagua (Hernández 1995:115). By the 1970s, the style that today characterizes the genre had already taken shape. What had then, in the early 1960s, been an attempt at stylistic imitation had developed into a distinctive music authentic to the Dominican Republic.

Partly due to the expansion of the genre, but perhaps also in response to harsh conditions for the social class from which most bachata musicians came, the language and content of bachata lyrics took on a less refined character during the 1970s. Singers increasingly concerned themselves with drinking and womanizing, as exhibited in the following text by Teodoro Reyes (sited in Hernandez 1995:115):

**Homenaje a los borrachones** (Homage to drunks)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traigo homenaje a todos los borrachones</td>
<td>I pay homage to all the drunks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los que beben por tercio, por litro o por galones</td>
<td>Those who drink by pints, by liters, or by gallons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tonto es él que no bebe</td>
<td>Foolish is he who doesn’t drink</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nada más para que diga</td>
<td>Just so he can say</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Que es bueno con su mujer</td>
<td>He’s good to his woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De veinte pesos que se gcanen en el día</td>
<td>Of twenty pesos they earn in a day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dejan cinco en la casa y quince para la bebida</td>
<td>They leave five at home and fifteen for drinks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y las hembras de la barra</td>
<td>And the barmmaids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Que a ellas nunca se les olvida</td>
<td>May they never be forgotten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Que vivan todos los hombres borrachones</td>
<td>Long live all the drunken men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y que vivan las mujeres de la barra</td>
<td>And long live the barmmaids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yo no veo las razones</td>
<td>I don’t see the reasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>De que las estén criticando</td>
<td>That some people criticize them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y diciendo que son mala</td>
<td>And say they are bad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¡Ay ‘manito! Que vivan todas las mujeres de la barra</td>
<td>Brother, long live the barmmaids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y todos los hombres borrachones</td>
<td>And all the drunken men</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The tendency for bachata lyrics to focus on vulgarity only gave the upper and middle classes more reason to berate it as an uncultured, low-status genre unfit for mainstream audiences or media attention. This trend, as we shall see, further impeded the general social acceptance of bachata.
C. What's in a name?

Part of the difficulty in gaining acceptance came from the controversy surrounding the label assigned to the genre—bachata. Bachata musicians generally agree that the music they made in the 1970s was not “bachata” but rather música de guitarra (“guitar music”), música de amargue (“music of bitterness,” alluding to the stinging emotions typically found in the lyrics), música popular (“popular music”), or romantic bolero songs. “While bachata was indeed being consolidated as a style in the 1970s, in this instance the music was named not by bachata musicians or fans themselves, nor even by music industry people seeking marketing terms, but by the country’s middle and upper classes, whose intentions were not to acknowledge a new style of music, but to trivialize and stigmatize it,” (Hernandez 1995:13). Attaching the label “bachata” to this particular style of guitar music, then, had the effect of stigmatizing the music with negative connotations of backwardness and vulgarity.

The term originally had another meaning. Hernandez points out that bachata parties were a tradition that belonged to rural, low-class Dominicans. They were spontaneous gatherings that took place in living rooms or backyards. A bachata would always include informal music, dancing, drinking, and general merrymaking. People of the upper class generally deemed these events unsophisticated, raucous and disorderly. One such man writing in 1927 described a bachata as “a center of attraction for all the men, where the social classes of those who attend them are leveled and where the coarsest and libertarian forms of democracy predominate. The most elegant figures of the barrio are there, daring and audacious. The setting of these dissolute pleasures is a small living room impregnated by odors that seem conjured to challenge decency,” (Hernandez 1995:8).
A recently published article about the history of bachata in one of the country’s most widely-read newspapers, Hoy, ties the origins of the word “bachata” to the African slave culture that existed from 1520 until 1822 (Moya Pons 1998:40,124):

The word bachata is an Africanism. The slaves used this word to refer to their outdoor parties that, on their days off (which were many), took place in the barns or dwellings, far from the watchful eye of the boss... It is obvious that the bachata has its origins in the subculture of the less intellectualized strata of society. Even today it has maintained this inherent characteristic even though it now seems to be establishing itself as an identifying expression for society as a whole. (Casado 2004: Seccion Sabatina. Translation mine.)

This author’s emphasis on the African origins of bachata parties may be well-founded. After all, there was an enormous African slave population and, in all likelihood, they did have celebrations that may or may not have been called bachatas. Given the fact that the majority of lower class Dominicans descends from these African slaves, it is quite probable that the bachatas Hernandez describes originate from African slave celebratory traditions. However, considering that the author stresses elsewhere in the article the insignificance of African influences on modern Dominican culture in comparison to Spanish and aboriginal influences, it seems that, even today, African equates negative associations. Therefore, the word bachata was already loaded with a wealth of negative cultural perceptions before any attachment to the music. For the Dominicans who thought of themselves as European descendants, “bachata” signified the embarrassing aspects of their cultural heritage: the importation of Africans for slavery, and subsequently their incorporation into Dominican society.

The use of the word “bachata” in reference to the guitar-based music of the 1970s, therefore, branded the music as something culturally inappropriate for members of the middle and upper classes. It may not have been a conscious decision on their part to label the genre in this way. More likely, attaching the word to the music was a natural association between linguistic subtleties and perceptions of social identity. Members of the middle or upper class
would instinctually want to disassociate themselves from a musical genre that in sound, lyrics, and image was discordant with the perception of their own Dominican identity—a musical genre that did not symbolize the ideals of sophistication, intellect and European influence. Therefore, using a word that symbolized everything they were not—African, rowdy, low class—in reference to the genre made clear the feeling that the music was not, and should not be, a part of their cultural heritage.

For some time, guitar musicians could continue to insist that their music was not “bachata.” But as the style evolved, the former labels became inaccurate descriptions of the music they were making. It seemed contradictory to call the music “bolero,” since the more upbeat tempo was characteristic of dance music and not love songs. Calling it “amargue” escaped the negative connotations with “bachata,” but brought to mind a certain melancholy. Also, “amargue” was not a term that very easily incorporated the more light-hearted guitar-based songs. By the 1980s, the popularity of the genre merited it having its own name, but musicians would continue to struggle with finding one that was musically appropriate and connotatively neutral.

**D. Bachata in the ‘80s**

The 1980s brought more changes in bachata, but these were more musical than lyrical. The key player in this transition was Blas Durán, who had started his career during the 1970s. Durán had previously sung in merengue ensembles, an experience which may have contributed to his decision to include more merengue in his own group’s repertoire (Hernandez 1995:230). He was not the only person to play guitar-based merengues during the 1980s in order to liven up the performance; several other groups were doing the same thing. This was especially strategic
during the 1980s, the era when merengue ensembles incorporated more foreign influences into their sound. As merengue became more “sophisticated” and moved farther away from its roots, the merengue that bachata ensembles offered pointed listeners to a more Dominican-sounding dance music.

It was through this avenue that bachatero Durán won his fame. In 1987, his guitar-based merengue, “Consejo a las mujeres,”\(^{12}\) took the country by storm, selling over 100,000 copies in the Dominican Republic. His album was one of the best-selling records of the decade (Hernandez 1995:200). Durán brought a unique sound to merengue by incorporating electric instruments. The electric bass replaced the marimba, and güiras became more common than the more rustic-sounding maracas. The fact that the general public responded well to the electrified, guitar merengue meant that they may also find appealing another guitar-based genre—the bachata.

Durán used the new sound to liven up his bachatas as well, giving it a more popular sound and danceable beat, which helped to bring it into the dance scene that is so vital to the social lives of Dominicans. Durán’s electrification of bachata proved to be a huge success within the genre. Later bachateros emulated his style so that now, electric instruments are the standard in bachata ensembles. This boom for bachata meant that the mainstream audience could not ignore its popularity, and so bachata began to appear in radio charts and on television shows with more frequency. However, the lower social class associations continued to be a part of the general image of bachata, until an unlikely supporter took bachata under his wing to bring it into the limelight.

\(^{12}\) Refer to Track 4 on accompanying CD.
an *a cappella* group based on the sound of the Manhattan Transfer (Manuel 1995:115). He used his musical training to write complex arrangements that were more intriguing than the standard style that was being recorded at the time. His background in literature as well as his poetic sensibility allowed him to write compelling lyrics that spoke to Dominican society. The success of his merengue recordings with 4:40 won him high accolades and an undisputed reputation as a respected musician.

It was with this reputation in hand that Guerra embarked on his next project, *Bachata Rosa*, “Rosy Bachata.” Perhaps influenced by the ethics of nueva canción composers, he looked to local music for inspiration. The “Rough Guide to World Music” summarizes his journey as follows: [Guerra] “took a fresh look at Dominican roots, bringing into [his] music a back country rhythm known as bachata” that in its home country “was pulled out only at three or four in the morning amid communal inebriated stupors” (Broughton 1999:417). This description clearly underestimates the already-existing development and standardization of bachata by 1990, and plays into the stereotypes promulgated by Dominican elites. But it does suggest the important point that, even given the respect he held, it was a risky venture for Guerra to compose bachata songs.

Four tracks on the album *Bachata Rosa* truly fit in the bachata idiom, leaning more towards the romantic bachata side. The arrangements include the characteristic lead guitar, with synthesizers, bongos and maracas in the background. Guerra sang in the quintessential bachata style, but his lyrics were “rosier,” in comparison to their predecessors—filled with sweet, harmless, romantic images of love:

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14 The nueva canción movement was initiated by progressive musicians and artists in the ’70s who were concerned with political consciousness and social change. Many musicians in this movement sought out Dominican folk musics as vehicles for political expression.
Estrellitas y duendes (Little stars and fairies)

Viviré en tu recuerdo
Como un simple aguacero
De estrellitas y duendes
Vagaré por tu vientre
Mordiendo cada ilusión.

Vivirás en mis sueños
Como tinta indeleble
Como mancha de acero
No se olvida el idioma
Cuando dos hacen amor.

Me tosté en tus mejillas
Como el sol en la tarde
Se desgarra mi cuerpo
Y no vivo un segundo
Para decirte que sin ti, muero.

I will live in your memory
Like a simple downpour
Of little stars and fairies
I will wander in your belly
Nibbling on every illusion.

You will live in my dreams
Like an indelible ink
Like a branding mark
Language is not forgotten
When two make love.

I tanned in your cheeks
Like the sun in the afternoon
It shatters, my body
And I won’t live another second
To tell you that without you, I die.

Only one track contained some of the double entendres reminiscent of other bachatas:

Burbujas de Amor (Bubbles of Love)

Tengo un corazón
Mutilado de esperanza y de razón
Tengo un corazón que madruga dondequiera

¡ay!

Y este corazón
Se desnuda de impaciencia
Ante tu voz,
Pobre corazón
Que no atrapa su cordura

Quisiera ser un pez,
Para tocar mi nariz en tu pecera
Y hacer burbujas de amor por dondequiera
Pasar la noche en vela
Mojado de ti

I have a heart
Mutilated by hope and reason
I have a heart that awakens anywhere it chooses

Ah!

And this heart
Undresses with impatience
In the presence of your voice
Poor heart
That loses its sanity.

If only I could be a fish
So that I could poke my nose in your goldfish bowl
And make bubbles of love anywhere
And have a sleepless night
Drenched by you.

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15 Sited in liner notes of Bachata Rosa. Translation mine. Complete lyrics in the Appendix. Track 5 on accompanying CD.
16 Sited in liner notes of Bachata Rosa. Translation mine. Complete lyrics in the Appendix. Track 6 on accompanying CD.
style. By calling it “bachata rosa,” however, there is an ironic implication that his bachata is sweeter than the music that mainstream audiences previously referred to in a derogatory way.

The bachata songs that turned into nationwide hits tended to be the ones with more refined, less sexually explicit lyrics. One emerging artist, Raulín Rodríguez, who comes from a town in the countryside near Los Indios, enjoys an immense popularity partly due to his “wholesome” lyrics that are more appealing to middle-class audiences, or other fans, who found the double entendres of other bachateros offensive. Luis Segura, now called the “Father of Bachata,” is another artist who has had a great deal of success and who has a reputation for clean, romantic lyrics.

The efforts of mainstream musicians such as Guerra, and some of his friends from the nueva canción movement like Víctor Víctor and Sonia Silvestre, undoubtedly made possible the nationwide and classwide acceptance of bachata as an authentic Dominican music. However, their entrance into a world of musicians that previously was almost completely on an amateur level caused a bit of animosity. One bachata producer stated, “Bachata had meant low category, but when Bachata rosa came out, the ugly name became a nice name, because someone of his international category helped... But they didn’t do it thinking of helping bachata, they did it thinking commercially... They took advantage of the strength that bachata was gaining to raid it themselves” (Hernández 1995:211). Some bachateros may have shared these sentiments, but there were certainly those that also appreciated the change in attitude that Guerra’s success prompted. A joint concert in 1993 between the street-level bachateros, and Guerra and his musical colleagues suggests that the different groups of bachata-playing musicians are at least attempting to cooperate and collaborate.
 Nonetheless, it is hard not to notice the difference in economic advantage and the difference of performance venue between the two. Guerra just toured the US, playing in Miami and New York, and even sang one of his first bachata hits with Plácido Domingo.\textsuperscript{18} It would be very hard to find a similar playbill for the more street-level bachateros. Furthermore, the concert halls that Guerra performs in are a far cry from the disco paradas where street-level musicians perform.

Another telling fact about the discrepancies in acknowledgement and image of bachata musicians is that, even though bachata is a standard part of his repertoire, Guerra does not consider himself a bachatero, and he makes a point to distinguish himself from them:

I believe that Bachata Rosa opened the door for the genre called bachata. After that, it was much easier for other bachateros. It is an honor to have helped open that door, which was very important. But I want to make clear that I can dabble in many things—in merengue, salsa, bachata, baladas—without being specifically a representative of that genre. There are many other representatives more genuine and typical [than myself].\textsuperscript{19}

This comment is a double-edged sword that, on the one hand, is a humble commendation of \textit{true} bachata artists. But on the other hand, Guerra clearly indicates that he should not be grouped with bachateros—a point that perpetuates the idea that bachata is not just a music, it is also an image. So while Guerra may dabble in bachata "the sound," he will never be a part of bachata "the reputation." Ironically, though, Guerra still seems to gain more international fame and monetary success through bachata than do its "authentic" performers. As bachata continues to evolve, its \textit{true} bachateros will gather more respect and recognition—hopefully accompanied by the economic benefits they deserve. This seems inevitable, given the place that bachata has already won in the hearts of many Dominicans. The following section outlines the stylistic characteristics for which modern bachata is known and loved.

\textsuperscript{18} This information found on Juan Luis Guerra’s website, http://www.guavaberry.net/principal.html.
\textsuperscript{19} This quotation from an interview with Juan Luis Guerra in the documentary video \textit{Bachata: Música de Pueblo} by Giovanni Savino, 2002. Translation mine.
IV. Bachata Today

“A mí me encanta la bachata porque la bachata es un conjunto de canciones que le cantan el amor, y éso lleva a la gente sentirse con mucha armonía en el baile y por eso me gusta mucho.”

“I love the bachata because the bachata is a collection of songs that sing about love, and that make people feel so much harmony while dancing, and for that reason I love the bachata so much.”


A. Bachata the Music

Bachata is the Dominican music of the soul. It tells of love, heartbreak, lust, nostalgia and suffering, hence, its nickname música de amargue ("music of bitterness"). Many Dominicans seem to have a special place in their hearts for bachata precisely because of its lyrical sentimentality. Whereas the Dominican merengue provides a space for social and political commentary, bachata texts generally focus more on romantic musings, often with a dramatic flare.

_Todavía me amas_ (You still love me)^20_

Singer: Aventura

*Explicame porque razón no me miras la cara,*
_Será que no quieres que note que sigues enamorada._

*Tus ojos demuestran pasión y falsos sentimientos,*
_Por el hecho de tu rechasarme mientras te mueres por dentro._

*Sabes bien que no puedes olvidarme y mucho meno engañarme,*
_Todavía no ha nacido otro hombre que pueda enamorarte,*
_Si antes de inventarse el amor ya yo te estaba amando,*
_Ni el amor de Romeo y Julieta llegó a ser tan grande._

*Explain to me the reason why you don’t look at my face,*
_Maybe you don’t want me to notice that you’re still in love,*
_[But] your eyes show the passion and false emotions,*
_You’re dying inside because you left me._

*You know well that you can’t forget me or deceive me,*
_There isn’t any other man you can love,*
_[Because] even before love was invented I was already in love with you,*
_And not even the love of Romeo and Juliet was as great._

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The trite reference to Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet is typical of bachata’s exaggerated romanticism—a romanticism appealing for its immediacy, but not pretending to offer profound ideas about love.

Bachata is also famous for the many double entendres found in the lyrics.

**Guerra de amor** (War of Love)\(^{21}\)
Singer: Yoskar Sarante

*Mi cuerpo me pide caricias que sean de ti,*  
No puedo negarle el deseo, le diré que sí.  
Lucharé con las armas que sean para conquistarte,  
Desde hoy te declaro la guerra,  
Sé como ganarte.

*Tomaré tu cuerpo de repente, para sorprenderte,*  
Apresaré tu cuerpo a mi cuerpo,  
Y verás lo que sientes.

My body asks me for caresses from you,  
I can’t deny it this desire, I’ll tell it yes,  
I will fight with the weapons that are for conquering you,  
Today I declare war with you,  
I know how to win you.

I will take your body all of a sudden to surprise you,  
I will press your body to mine,  
And you will see what you feel.

Here the singer is obviously using the metaphor of war to talk about “body warfare,” or physical intercourse, and the game of a man winning a woman over with force, love, and sweet talk.

According to Pacini Hernandez’s stylistic description, modern-day bachata can be thought of as a “vocal genre.” There are no instrumental bachatas, and in fact, it is the singing style and lyrical content that are perhaps the main markers of the genre. A lead singer fronts the band, singing romantic, bolero-like melodies in a characteristic style of heightened emotion. The vocal line is usually in a high register for the male singer, adding to the intensity of the sound. Melodies also tend to move around quite a bit, as opposed to relying on long, sustained notes, and often feature trill-like embellishments at the ends of phrases. In light of these stylistic

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practices, it is possible to speak of an aesthetics of bachata singing—an aesthetics grounded in a tense, throaty, nasal sound, and the use of fast, tight vibrato.

The vocal line is supported by an almost equally distinctive marker in bachata—the guitar. The lead guitar plays an important role as the most prominent melodic line after the vocal line. In fact, the bachata song is a constant interplay of the voice and guitar, the two playing off of each other. The second guitar provides harmonic and rhythmic accompaniment throughout. A bachata ensemble typically includes two guitars, bongos, maracas or the güira, and an electric bass. Earlier ensembles consisted of only acoustic guitars and drums, but now electronic instruments are the norm, and the bass lines seem to have become an idiom that strongly characterizes modern bachata songs.

Bachata encompasses many sub-styles, however some representative qualities of the currently popular bachatas can be extrapolated. Most songs open with an instrumental introduction that features the lead guitar's fingerpicking motif. The bass line defines the 4/4 rhythm with the typical half-quarter-quarter note pattern, or variation, quite often in a melodic line following scale tones 1 – 5 – 5 (octave down) – 1. The maracas or güira provide the rhythmic foundation with a constant eighth-note beat, while the bongos improvise over this steady rhythm.

Bachata usually has a symmetrical song structure. Most commonly, the vocal line comes in after four measures, followed by four repetitions of the four-measure phrase before arriving at the second section of the song. Throughout the singing sections, the lead guitar adds to the rhythmic drive and flow of the song by accompanying the vocal line with arpeggios. The second section, which could be called a chorus, has a different rhythmic feel, accentuated by syncopation in the bass line and a more driving rhythm in the bongos. Some ensembles have a
backup chorus, who sing a short, repeating melodic line in homophony with the solo voice during the chorus section. Also, backup singers often add tight harmonies to the main melody at certain phrase endings throughout the song. After the chorus section, there may be a short guitar interlude before returning back to the original rhythmic pattern and verse songline. Often, singers intersperse spoken exclamations throughout the song, overlapping with the guitar solos. These may include dialogues that relate to the song text, or single words, such as “bachata” or the singer’s name. In Luis Vargas’ “Tranquila,”22 the dialogue during the guitar interlude says, “Eh, Luis Vargas! Va, canta en latino americá y por el mundo!” (“Hey, Luis Vargas! Go, sing in Latin America and all over the world!”)

B. On the Air: The Dissemination of Bachata

Bachata music is a constant part of the soundscape in the Dominican Republic, especially in rural towns. This rural lifestyle is an outdoor one, creating a very open sound environment that can be thought of as communal, as opposed to private. The open structure of houses facilitates a continuous flow of sound from inside to outside. The effect is that if someone is listening to the radio inside the house, chances are that any passerby will also be able to hear the music. Conversely, people sitting inside or around a house located along the main road are inundated by the music from passing cars and buses. The same can be said for the local colmados, the small grocery/convenience stores, where the radio is almost always on, tuned to broadcasts of Dominican music favorites. In urban shantytown communities, where many of the rural traditions persist, sound and listening to music undoubtedly are important aspects of daily life as well. However, technicalities such as building and neighborhood layout plans cause the

22 Track 9 on accompanying CD.
soundscape to take a slightly different form. The sense of communal listening and sound that is essential to rural life may be reduced to a more private scale in an urban setting.

Common to both rural and urban life, however, is the prevalence of the radio. Practically every family owns a radio that is turned on throughout the day, providing background music to daily activities. The radio is also generally on in both private and public vehicles. Radio stations play a fair share of bachata, along with merengue, baladas, salsa, and music from the United States. While in Sosúa (near Puerto Plata), on January 5, 2004, I sampled through the available radio stations, of which there were twenty, and found the following data (see Figure 1):

**Figure 1: Sampling of music being played on 20 different radio stations**

![Bar Graph Showing Music Types by Radio Station]

This data implies that radio listeners prefer bachata and merengue over any other type of music. However, on a website[^webpage] that lists all the radio and television frequencies in the Dominican Republic, only seven out of the fifty Santo Domingo-area FM radio stations

[^webpage]: http://www.tvradioworld.com/region/dom/Radio_Tv_Frequencies.asp?m=&pos=100

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specifically state that they play bachata. While this number is not very high, I suggest that jus: a few years earlier, bachata would have been less heavily represented on this list.

In addition to radio programming, the noon-time television programs, *El Show de Mediodía* or *La Opción de las Doce*, feature live studio performances of bachata and merengue *conjuntos* (bands) everyday. The nationwide broadcast of this program makes visible to every Dominican these flashy performances, with the band members wearing matching suits and often executing choreographed dance routines. Also popular are the televised afternoon bachata dance competitions. A panel of judges, some of them professional bachata dancers, score each couple on the short routine they perform to recorded bachata music. Each couple is introduced with reference to the town that they come from. The couple that scores the highest out of thirty wins a monetary prize. The contestants usually come from the lower classes, evidenced by their hometowns, style of dress, and the mere fact that they are participating in a bachata competition. This being the case, the show’s target audience is probably also the lower class. While these shows were an everyday staple in my life while with my country friends, CNN and the BBC programs were more the norm while staying at my upper class friend’s house in Sosúa.

The circulation of bachata recordings has also contributed to its popularity. Most *bachateros* now make relatively high quality recordings at studios in New York City and Santo Domingo. In fact, they may make more of a name for themselves through these recordings than by touring. Record sales are much higher in New York than in the Dominican Republic, partly due to the high occurrence and accessibility of pirated CDs in the Dominican Republic.24 Numerous street vendors selling burned CDs in standard CD cases with photocopied covers populate every Dominican city’s shopping districts. With so many of these vendors around, and

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24 Peter Manuel’s *Cassette Cultures: Popular Music and Technology in North India* provides an example of how music technology can transform the dissemination of and consumption patterns for popular music.
the possibility of drastically lowering the prices through bargaining, it is hard to justify buying original copies. The same may be true in New York City, judging by the comment of one music store worker who attributed lower CD sales to higher prices of original copies. Interestingly enough, in his explanation of bachata CD sales now compared to ten years ago he mentioned nothing of the social stigma attached to the genre.  

Marketing and commercialization undoubtedly helped bring bachata to the place of prominence it now holds in Dominican life, but not single-handedly. I continue to believe that the music industry, in spite of its negative reputation for manipulating the markets, reflects in some part the actual likes and dislikes of listeners. In the case of bachata, its appeal goes beyond commercialism, and even beyond the appeal of fun dance music. The lyrics are especially personal and intimate for Dominicans because of their use of colloquial language and the accessibility of subject matter. In addition, bachata musicians usually come from poor, rural communities. Friends in Los Indios often reminded me of the many famous bachateros who came from that region and who still own houses in nearby towns. They speak of these men with a great deal of pride, happy to have grown up in the same neighborhood, and offer their stories of humble beginnings as inspiration and hope for other’s aspirations.

The bulk of the bachata fanbase may be from the Dominican lower class, but the listening space for the music is not restricted in the way it used to be. Bachata music is now strongly present in the media mainstream through nationwide television and radio broadcasts. It seems that bachata “the sound” has free access to all parts of the Dominican soundscape. Bachata “the dance,” however, does not enjoy such freedom.

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25 This information from a conversation with a store clerk at Frank and Richie Records Corp, 3581 Broadway Ave., New York, NY, 10031.
C. ¡Baila esa bachata!

It is not unreasonable to suggest that dancing is the most popular form of entertainment in the Dominican Republic, and over the past few years, bachata has taken the lead on Dominican dance floors. From personal experience at disco paradas, it seemed that DJs played merengue and bachata in about equal amounts, both accounting for far more play-time than salsa or baladas combined. Bachata is a couples dance in which the man and woman dance quite close, but not quite as close as in merengue. This may be because there is more footwork involved. The merengue step is basically right-left-right-left, exactly in time with the strong and straightforward beat. This is embellished with elaborate hip movements placed between the beats. Hips are just as important in bachata, but it requires a more open dance position with more movement across the floor. The basic step is: right-left-right-tap, left-right-left-tap, and this pattern can start on either the downbeat of the measure, or on beat two.

The disco paradas are the Dominican dance clubs, and they dot the countryside from Haiti all the way to the Bay of Samaná. They are open-air terraces, usually with a tin roof. For people in the rural areas of the country, the disco paradas are the main site for nighttime outings. Even small villages may have two or three disco paradas to choose from, each with its own reputation and clientele. Customers may spend hours at one disco parada, alternating between dancing, and sitting with friends and chatting, all the while never letting their cup of beer, rum or whiskey sit empty for too long. When driving along the main roads in the country with the windows down, the presence of a disco parada is announced by the blaring music that can be heard for miles. Most have a few large speakers (not usually very good quality) that blast the music as loudly as possible, so that talking to the person sitting next to you can be a challenge.
Sometimes a disco parada will host live music, events for which cardboard flyers are posted all around the town weeks in advance.

The cities also have disco paradas, but the more informal ones tend to be on the outskirts of the city. Also common are “Car Washes,” which do serve as car washes, but also as places to relax with friends, have a beer, and dance. A knowledgeable friend, Horacio Ornes, told me that these are businesses opened by Dominicans who lived in the United States. They imported the “car wash” business idea and then added to it an indigenous character by making it a community entertainment hotspot. In the bigger cities like Santiago and Santo Domingo the variety of clubs is remarkable, including everything from “car washes” to posh venues à la New York City. Significantly, however, it would be hard to hear a bachata at one of these upscale clubs, although you might hear a merengue or two thrown in with the American and British pop music. The public dancing space for bachata, then, remains firmly entrenched in the local disco paradas, and therefore in the lower class. Living in Los Indios allowed me to experience with great frequency this space for bachata “the dance,” as well as the space for bachata in everyday life.
V. Case Study: Bachata in Los Indios

I realized today, after living here for three months, that this is starting to feel like home. I love the fact that landmarks and faces in town are now familiar. Every time an acquaintance yells, “¡Saludo!” to me from across the street it once again impresses me how easily people have let me become a part of their community. Certainly one of the most amazing characteristics of the people here is the calm with which they welcome outsiders. No wonder that so many visits here by foreigners end up turning into permanent residencies.

As the world gets smaller, in the metaphorical sense, people are forced to confront and acknowledge other cultures. This situation makes the practice of cross-cultural sharing that much more necessary. The emphasis that colleges now put on studying abroad is much greater than in past generations, attesting to the importance of having a worldwide consciousness. There is no better way to come to understand the world than to live in other cultures. My time spent in the village of Los Indios in the Dominican Republic helped me learn not only about Dominican rural culture, but also more about my own culture through comparison and exposure to other perspectives.

A. Los Indios

Los Indios is a community in the municipality of Partido, in the Province of Dajabón. It lies in the Cibao region, but more locally is part of the area referred to as la frontera, the border. Los Indios is about 15 kilometers away from the city of Dajabón, the biggest border city with Haiti. The bridge spanning the Río Masacre daily bears the weight of thousands of pedestrians trafficking between the countries, especially on Mondays and Fridays when the international markets are open.

It was several weeks after I came to Los Indios that I first ventured to one of these market events. I had been forewarned about the locura (“craziness”) that is the mercado, and so was a bit hesitant to go. However, it turned out to be a fascinating experience that I revisited many
times. My sister, who spent a great deal of time in Kenyan rural areas, commented upon visiting the market that the bustling, hectic, and persistent atmosphere seemed right out of Africa. On these days, Haitians set up stands throughout the streets of Dajabón to sell foodstuffs, cleaning supplies, cookware, clothes, shoes, and countless other items to Dominicans who come from all over the region to take advantage of the cheap prices.

There is a concentrated, constant exchange of goods and a flow of people between the two nations in this area, making for an interesting dynamic that is not as intense in the inland cities. On market days more than others, I often saw Haitian men and women riding the local busses. On one occasion, I witnessed a Dominican policeman force two Haitian men off the bus, supposedly because their papers were unsuitable for travel in the Dominican Republic. To me, it seemed a clear example of the hostile relations between Dominicans and Haitians in the border area. Also exemplary of this were the many conversations I had with Dominicans during which they expressed negativity about Haitians working in the Dominican Republic. Dominicans held the view that Haitians were very hard workers and would perform labor for a much lower wage, making them a threat to Dominican employment.

The landscape around Los Indios is mostly pasture, with some areas of woods. The amount of open land allows most families enough room to own cows, chickens and other animals that are either sold or kept for their own consumption. The production of tobacco used to be an important industry in the region but is now greatly reduced, perhaps because of the slackening in the industry worldwide. People seem to have turned to other smaller-scale business plans, such as roadside stands with fresh produce, candies, or homemade domestic products like brooms and woven baskets. Almost any male who owns a motorcycle will use it as a motoconcho and transport people around the area for a small fee. Not many people have cars, and, given the
distances between towns, it is a convenient way to get around. I had a friend who did not use his motorcycle to give rides, but drove around the area selling ice cream. This type of mobile vendor is very common. Along with motorcycles, many trucks drive along the main roads selling various household goods or produce, using loud speakers to announce the items for sale.

Established businesses are an important part of the rural landscape. My friend Margarita, commonly known as Margó, owns a family-run business called La Nueva Ruta, “The new route.” The actual structure is an open-air terrace that has a cement floor and tin roof and sits right next to her family’s house. They serve lunch and dinner everyday to anyone who stops by, these patrons usually being friends or acquaintances who have been there many times before. If patrons are around as it gets into the late afternoon, they will start serving beer, rum and whiskey, and put on some music. Some nights, this continues until two or three in the morning. Places like La Nueva Ruta dot the highway every few kilometers or so, each with its own reputation and type of clientele.

Also dotting the highway are the colmados, the small kiosk-type stands that carry common items such as drinks, candies, random food staples, and many other sundries. Children often make trips there after school to get a snack, or are sent by their mothers to pick up necessary ingredients for lunch. Sometimes I witnessed public buses pulling over to a colmado and the passengers ordering drinks through the window, finishing the whole transaction without even stepping off the vehicle. In general, though, the colmado is a casual place where people go to chat with the store owner and other people who happen to be hanging around.

These establishments and the casual employment mentioned earlier account for most of Los Indios’ workspace, but it is also important to mention outside employers, particularly FUDECO. FUDECO is an acronym for the Fundación para el Desarrollo Comunitario
("Foundation for Community Development") and is the Dominican counterpart to the worldwide organization Save the Children. It has been in existence for over twenty years as a non-profit community development organization. The main office is in Santo Domingo, where the director, Horacio Ornes, one of my good friends and facilitator of my research, and other employees organize in-country projects and coordinate overseas administration and donations. They implement the projects in two areas: the southwestern region of Las Matas de Farfán and north of there in Loma de Cabrera, including Los Indios. Each area has an office that employs six to twelve local workers, depending on availability of funds. In the Loma de Cabrera office, these employees have degrees in areas of specialty such as carpentry or engineering, and are in charge of different departments, depending on their skills. The ongoing projects in this area include reforestation, distribution of basic medication, outreach/education for adolescents, construction of clinics/latrines/schools, and conservation of natural resources.²⁶

In Los Indios in particular there is a FUDECO-run center called the Centro de Agricultura Orgánica y Tecnología Apropiada de la Comunidad (Center of Organic Agriculture and Appropriate Technology for the Community), commonly called CAOTACO. Originally, it was a training center open to people in the surrounding area to learn about organic agricultural practices, but now it increasingly hosts workshops for adolescents. To maintain the facilities and organize for guests, CAOTACO employs a few members of the community of Los Indios, one of whom is Margó. The house I lived in was technically part of CAOTACO but was surrounded by other residential units unaffiliated with FUDECO.

²⁶ For more information on FUDECO, please refer to their website: http://www.savethechildren.net/dominican_republic/english/main.html
B. A Typical Day

The informal atmosphere and work system dictate the lifestyle in Los Indios. Unlike the employees of the FUDECO office, who go to work (almost) everyday, for most people the day revolves around the home, especially for those people who run a business out of their residence. In my immediate surroundings in Los Indios, this home-centeredness was a female operation. Out of the fourteen closest neighboring houses to mine, only six of them had working male residents. Of those six, one couple had both parents working, one was an older couple who stayed around the home together most of the time, one was a single man who worked informally, and three households had just the man working. This illustrates that even in male-female households, the domestic area and its upkeep is a feminized space.

The daily routine in the home has clear phases, mostly marked by mealtimes. People use the morning to prepare for the rest of the day, for example, by going into town to shop for the day’s meals, setting up tables at the restaurant, or running other errands. By the time most of these things have been done, it is time to cook, and then eat lunch. Lunchtime marks a period of rest, since most of the household chores have been done.

Post-lunch is also a relaxed time when many people take naps, children do homework or play, and adults visit with friends or chat with neighbors. Sitting and chatting is the default activity when no other responsibilities call. When driving along the main road through these small country towns, it is common to see groups of people sitting in front of their houses, talking and watching the vehicles pass by. Country life is very much centered on group and community experience. It was in fact a challenge for me to get used to spending so much time socializing with a group of people and sacrificing the privacy that is more common to college life in the United States. Part of this outdoor, open lifestyle has to due with the fact that it makes more
sense to spend most of the day out-of-doors in an environment with dry, comfortable weather. Yards in the rural Dominican Republic are like living rooms in the northeastern United States—they are the focal point of social interaction. The lack of boundaries within this space, and its physical openness, create a metaphoric sense of openness in which the communication between neighbors, whether it be spoken or visual or perceptual, is constant and expected.

C. The Musical Soundtrack

One thing I’ve noticed about this country is the noise. Maybe I have a low tolerance for noise, or maybe I’m just not used to it, but it is definitely noisier here than back home. Starting at dawn, there are the roosters crowing outside my window. At 7, I hear my next-door neighbor revving his car motor to warm the engine. That’s when I know it’s time for me to get up. From the other side of the house, the sound of the laboring engines of buses, trucks, cars and motorcycles that are way too old to still be working come through the uninsulated windows to add to the cacophony. And then there’s the radio. There’s always a radio turned on somewhere nearby, often with an enthusiastic listener singing along.

The out-of-doors lifestyle in Los Indios, and probably most rural communities in the Dominican Republic, puts a different kind of emphasis on the sense of sound than it is accorded in urban settings. Since houses are situated rather close to one another, an understanding of the soundscape around you provides knowledge of where and what your neighbors are doing. I sensed that this knowledge was extremely important for the people living around me because it gives a certain feeling of security. They can know the comings and goings of their neighbors without specifically having to ask, therefore not seeming to pry, but they nonetheless have a sense of the moving social group around them.

It did not take me long to become part of this social soundscape. Hearing the same sounds day after day keyed me into the routines of my neighbors, the schedule of the buses, the games that the local kids like to play outside my house, and the musical tastes of my neighbor, Larielis, who always sings along with the radio when she sweeps the floors. As I was the newcomer in the neighborhood, people took notice of the sounds that I made, too. In a non-
chalant kind of way, a young boy who lived next door once commented, “You were listening to some funny music the other day, with the singer going [and then he made some rather incoherent singing noises].” It occurred to me at that moment that whatever I did behind the closed doors of my private house was audible to the people around me, and that they would notice it, especially when it was something as unusual as Ella Fitzgerald.

It probably seemed strange to them that I kept the doors to my house closed when I was inside. I did it to keep the bugs out. Having a bug-free house was a possibility for me, since I had screens on my windows, as long as I also kept the door closed. But for the locals who do not have screens on their windows, it makes no difference with the bugs to have the doors opened or closed, so they always keep the doors open during the day. An open door is also a symbolic gesture of welcome to people around. In trying to overcome this curious practice on my part, it seemed that people relied even more than usual on their sense of sound to understand my doings and whereabouts. The same boy often made other comments about what time I had gotten home the night before, explaining that my front door always made a loud bang when it closed. Comments like these clued me into how important sound is for a sense of social consciousness in a small, integrated and intimate community like Los Indios. A keen sense of aural interpretation adds another dimension to your social connectedness.

Music has a prominent place in this aural landscape because it often is the background sound for daily activities. Like Larielis, many people listen to the radio while cleaning or cooking. Playing the radio or cassettes is also important while in transport. I cannot remember riding in a private or public vehicle (except for motorcycles) without an accompanying soundtrack of music, even while having a conversation with the driver. In the public sphere as well, music provides a backdrop of sound that helps to create that sense of “vibrancy” for which
the Caribbean is known (i.e. how it is advertised in TV commercials and travel brochures). Whether it is at a colmado, a bus stop, market, or even at cockfights, Dominican music is almost always audible. And perhaps most importantly, music is an essential part of the social scene at discos or casual restaurants, where even one loudspeaker is enough to provide the accompanying soundtrack.

This soundtrack includes, almost without exception, merengue, bachata and baladas. I unwittingly became familiar with all the current hits in those three genres just by listening to what was going on around me in the aural landscape. Judging by the music that my neighbors and friends listened to, there is not a wide variety of music in terms of genre or the songs within those genres. After four months of living there, it was uncommon to hear a song that I had not heard before.

If we think of sound as an abstract dimension to the Los Indios community, it seems that there are defined boundaries to this dimension. It is simply the listening repertoire of the people of Los Indios that sets these boundaries. By staying inside these boundaries, i.e. by listening to the songs that everyone else listens to, you participate in the sound community and therefore assert your group membership. In retrospect, it is obvious why my listening to “funny music” like Ella Fitzgerald would have been noteworthy: I was listening to a music that was far outside the sound repertoire of the boy next-door, therefore affirming my different-ness.

An interesting case in a similar vein is that of Joel, Margó’s grandson. The only time I heard music in English while in Los Indios was when he was around, because of his love for American rap music. In fact, I felt a bit embarrassed on several occasions because his knowledge of American pop music and movies far exceeds mine. He is about seventeen and is a baseball player with a lot of potential. He was a star pitcher for his local team and currently attends a
baseball training school in Mao. The hope for him is that, after a few years of training, he will get a contract with a professional American team.

He is quite close with his siblings and cousins, but I never noticed that they share his interest in American music or pop culture. He would often play music by “50 cent” or other rap artists on the main sound system in Margó’s restaurant in the morning when there were not any customers around. He liked to sing along and dance, but no one else seemed to react to the music in any way. His listening outside of the common repertoire seemed to set him apart in a subtle way, perhaps as a sign of his potential for leaving the community and relocating in the United States. Joel’s public display of his musical tastes conveyed a certain identity to the other members in his sound space that situated him with one foot outside of Dominican-ness. Similar to the merengue band at the Puerto Plata airport, Joel, perhaps unconsciously, used music to define his relationship with the Dominican identity, playing on the practice of aural/musical communication that is intrinsic to rural life.

D. Entertainment: The Nightlife in Los Indios

Tonight was my first experience with merengue and bachata. We went to Loma de Cabrera for the last of the nine nights of celebration for the town’s saint, the Virgen Altgracia. Pedro Maria’s band, Los Broncos de la Bachata, played at a discoteca where I learned how to dance merengue and bachata. I’m not quite sure about the protocol for dancing at places like this, but I imagine I’ll learn over time. It’s obvious that dancing is a pastime Dominicans are passionate about and that I’ll have many opportunities to practice and learn.

1. Live Performances

Live performances of music are events that people look forward to, since they do not happen all that often in rural areas like Los Indios. As with all live music, the vibe is far more exciting than listening to recordings, no matter how loud, and therefore makes dancing more enjoyable. My friends were especially looking forward to one live performance that I attended
because their friend/collleague’s band was the main act. Pedro Maria, an employee of FUDECO who specializes in organic agriculture, plays lead guitar for Los Broncos de la Bachata, the band that I saw play in Loma de Cabrera in January of 2003.

Pedro Maria’s experience as a musician is probably not dissimilar to that of many musicians in the Dominican Republic who play bachata. He grew up in the area around Loma de Cabrera and never had formal musical training. Basically a self-taught guitarist, he played with friends in different bands while getting his degree in organic agriculture. About seven years ago, he started Los Broncos de la Bachata with the intention to form a band that plays more typical bachata and merengue, in comparison to the hits being played on the radio. They play at gatherings and events in the area around Loma de Cabrera, but never tour in the cities. There are only a few musicians who ever make it to the national level of popularity. In fact, several of the famous bachateros came from Loma de Cabrera. For example, Raulín Rodríguez, like Pedro Maria, came from Loma de Cabrera and was not trained in music, but a mixture of talent and luck helped him build a successful career.

The show given by Los Broncos de la Bachata in Loma de Cabrera was at an indoor nightclub that had a stage with a dance floor in front of it. Around the stage were many tables that, by eleven o’clock, were completely full. Since the performance was part of the town festival, it drew a large audience. The band had two guitarists, a singer, a keyboardist, an electric bass, drum set, and güira. They played a collection of merengue and bachata that drew crowds of people onto the dance floor. The dancing was lively and energetic, with everyone obviously excited about the celebration. Being early on in my stay, that night was a formative experience for me in learning how important “party time” is for rural Dominicans. When given the
opportunity, going out, dancing, and listening to music are welcome releases from the responsibility and order that come first in the normal daily routine.

2. The Joy of Dancing

Nothing pleased Margó more than to talk with me about merengue and bachata. She would light up when she sensed my enthusiasm for these dances that are authentically Dominican. She especially took pride in telling people that I danced “como una dominicana” (“like a Dominican woman”), implying that my acquisition of the Dominican dancing style affirmed my love for the country and the music that were part of her identity.

Margó is not alone in her enthusiasm for dance. Almost everyone I talked with is fiercely proud of their musical heritage and passionate about enjoying it through dance. A certain excitement often accompanies dusk as people prepare for that time of day when the music starts playing loudly, to which dancing soon begins. That is not to say that every night is a party. There are probably some people who go out every night, driving from one disco to another. But for most of my friends, going out to a popular disco is a treat. This is especially true for young, unmarried girls who have protective guardians. Margó’s granddaughters, who are a bit younger than I, are not allowed to go to a disco unless they have an appropriate male accompanying them, perhaps a brother or good friend known to the family.

The two most popular nighttime destinations for the residents of Los Indios are the Parada Caraballo and La Roca, named for the large rock at its entrance. These discos are both in Partido, the closest town that is about a mile away from Los Indios village. They are across the street from each other, and differ mostly by ownership and clientele. Both have the typical structure of a cement dance floor with a tin roof and no side walls. Tables and chairs line the
edges of the floor, creating a dance space in the center. Tucked away in the corner is the bar that carries beer (almost exclusively the Dominican *Presidente* brand), various types of Dominican-made rum, whiskey, and bottled non-alcoholic drinks. Right at the entrance to both dance halls is a food stand that sells the typical fair of *pica pollo* (fried chicken) and fried plantain chips.

The music sets the atmosphere at these discos. It plays through the large, freestanding speakers, usually loud enough so that it is difficult to have a conversation with the person sitting next to you. At the beginning of the evening, the DJ may play baladas as background music while guests arrive. As the night continues, the playlist includes more merengue and bachata, until it consists of dance music exclusively. Every so often I heard a salsa, but friends told me it is not as popular because most people, especially men, do not know how to dance to salsa music.

The table that you choose upon arrival is your table for the night. As a woman, I found that it was expected of me to dance with the men seated at my table, unless someone from another table specifically asked me to dance, sometimes waiting until he had permission from my tablemates. I did not feel comfortable, however, getting up from one table and taking a seat at another. I did so on one occasion because I had some friends that I wanted to greet at a table other than the one I was seated at originally. I had intended to return to the first table, but conversations held me up. It did not occur to me that my actions were noteworthy until someone from the first table jokingly chided me for “ditching” him and his friends. This protocol for tables sometimes put me in awkward situations in which I was assigned to a table where I felt uncomfortable but was unsure of how to excuse myself.27

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27 The subtleties involved in interpreting and navigating social circumstances like this puzzled me in terms of expectations and acceptable ways of acting. I often felt caught in between the desire to act appropriately by local standards and my instinct: that, as an individual, I should be able to socialize freely without being confined by what I believed to be subservient expectations for women.
The customers at these nighttime locales usually vary in age from young children to older adults. At the Parada Caraballo, it was not unusual to see families come together, but this was not as frequent an occurrence at La Roca. More often, groups of couples would come for an evening of fun. One night I went to the Parada Caraballo with one of Margó’s sons, who was a knowledgeable person to talk to about customs at disco paradas. When a rowdy group of young women and older men arrived, he told me that the women were prostitutes who worked at a nearby brothel. During the course of the evening, he would often make comments about the women, for example, that you could tell they were prostitutes from the more overtly sexual way of moving their hips.

Bachata is now widespread enough that its beginning reputation as being the music of the brothels no longer holds. However, this scene at the Parada Caraballo shows that bachata “the dance” and the social realm of prostitutes maintain some associations. Bachata dancing is a vehicle through which these women can express their sexuality in a public way. For bachata “the sound,” the lyrics may have cleaned up so that it is no longer considered offensive or vulgar and therefore is socially acceptable. But that is separate from the use of bachata “the dance.” Prostitutes dancing to bachata may be part of the reason why the dance is still problematic in mainstream society acceptance.

E. Urban Nightlife

The comparison of the dance scene in rural versus urban settings illustrates this issue. In the one experience I had with the city nightlife in Santo Domingo, it struck me how far removed the two cultural spheres are, especially in the circumstances in which I saw them. Los Indios is a rural village whose residents are probably in the lowest economic and class level in the country.
As in many Latin American countries, the gap between economic classes is huge, and it tends to be that the bulk of the wealth of the country belongs to a small, elite group. In Santo Domingo, I was introduced to that group of people. I spent an evening with college-aged Dominicans, all of whom come from the wealthiest parts of the city. They all attended bi-lingual schools in Santo Domingo, and many went to university in the United States. I was impressed that all of them speak English flawlessly, many without a trace of an accent. It was fascinating to hear how they incorporate certain English words into their conversations amongst themselves. Sometimes they use filler words or phrases, like “anyway” or “you know what I mean,” but I also heard trendy words used, like “chill” and “flip out.” This was obviously something I had never heard in Los Indios, where no one speaks English.

During the evening I spent with these friends in Santo Domingo, we went to several elite dance clubs that could have been in New York City. All charge a cover fee upon entrance and then extra for drinks, which are quite expensive. The physical space right away signals a difference in social class from the discos in the countryside. The clubs are indoors, usually with low ceilings and dim lighting. All have plush decoration, from the intimate seating areas with couches and wooden coffee tables, to the sleek bar that have two or three well-dressed male bartenders behind it. Another obvious visual difference is the clientele. The fact that most patrons of rural discos have dark skin, whereas all the guests in the city clubs are white, attests that social stratification in the Dominican Republic clearly runs along racial lines.

Like in rural discos, music plays constantly at the city clubs. People are very enthusiastic about the dancing, and there is never an empty dance floor. However, the type of music and style of dancing is much more similar to that of an American or European club than a rural Dominican one. The playlist includes American or British pop/rock, Latin hits by singers such as Julio
Iglesias, Shakira, or Ricky Martin, and a few modernized *merengue de orquesta*. I never heard *merengue típico* or bachata at a city club of this sort. In fact, a friend informed me that none of "those kids" even know how to dance the bachata. An amusing anecdote is that this group of friends could not believe that I, a foreigner who was presumably of their class, had learned how to dance merengue and bachata. Only when I told them I had been living in "la frontera," a part of the country that most of them had never visited, did a look of comprehension cross their faces. This reaction suggests to me that they associate these typical Dominican dances with countrylife. The fact that they could not understand why I would want to live "out there," as opposed to in the city, also suggests that it is a lifestyle they think of negatively. So, while the bachata and *merengue típico* are definitely in the mainstream and are vibrant, accessible art forms, there are still class associations about the musics that mirror the social stratification of the country.
VI. Conclusion

Now back in the United States, one of the first things I notice is the difference in body language. I can’t help but think it a shame how awkward most Americans are in comparison to Dominicans and people from other Latin American countries. It is beautiful the way Dominicans hold themselves with grace and confidence. And I truly believe that this is directly related to how intrinsic music and dance are to Dominican culture. Kids grow up watching their elders take pure joy out of dancing and thus learn that coordinating their bodies to move in rhythm with music is a natural and valuable part of life. Even little Juan Carlo, only two, knows how to dance the bachata and merengue. Wouldn’t it be great if in the US we had something so basic to our daily routine that automatically gave us an outlet for carefree, exciting, and pure communal fun.

In a glorified sense, the history of bachata is a rags-to-riches kind of story. Bachata went from being ignored and shunned in the public musical world to hitting the tops of the charts, even reaching the Grammy-winning category. In the one academic book written on the subject so far, Pacini Hernandez emphasizes this point about bachata’s triumph. The research used to prove the point is commendable and thorough, however, it seems simplistic to conclude that bachata “made it” in the realm of popular music.

To focus on the success-story of bachata and its popularity today is to skim over the still-salient issues of bachata’s perception and dissemination that will powerfully influence further development of the genre. Despite the quantitative measurements of bachata’s popularity—record sales, frequency on radio programs, appearance on television, concerts, etc.—the fact remains that bachata fans are mostly from a specific sector of Dominican society, only those people actually dance bachata, and they dance it only in certain types of dance clubs. Bachata is still very much a class-specific musical genre. It may be a given in the everyday lives of people in Los Indios and other rural towns, but the reaction of my well-to-do friends from Santo Domingo shows that there is an apparent sense of prejudice toward bachata among the upper classes. Even my friend Horacio, who is more open to and in touch with other parts of Dominican society hurriedly told me, “I don’t know how to dance bachata,” and only when pressured finally admitted, “Well, I could [dance bachata]. But I don’t really know it.” Even for
Dominicans who do not go out dancing, it is easy for them to pick up on how to dance bachata, given how much it is seen in public—at roadside stores or discos, in television programs and commercials. Yet, Horacio’s comment seems to imply embarrassment for having knowledge about bachata dancing, as if having the knowledge reflects negatively on his own classiness. Bachata dancing obviously belongs in the set of common cultural knowledge. It is a *Dominican* thing, but for Horacio, it is not *his* Dominican thing. Bachata is not part of his identity as a Dominican.

This example demonstrates the theory that music is part of a person’s constructed identity. In many cultures, there are stereotypes that go along with certain genres of music. Therefore, people may make assumptions about a person’s character based on the kind of music that he or she listens to. Los Indios is an extreme example of this musical symbolism and of how sound in general is a socialcommunicator. The aural perceptiveness of my neighbor and his subsequent deductions regarding my whereabouts and personality (see Case Study) are perfect examples for how people in Los Indios use sound as a way socially to place themselves and others in the community. Given this practice, bachata, or any musical genre for that matter, is in the prime position to act as a social marker for any publicly proclaimed fan. For a member of the Los Indios community, blasting bachata on the radio signals to anyone within earshot a conformance to local musical tastes, therefore asserting membership in the community. However, for someone like Horacio to do the same thing would be a symbolic discordance between the aurally communicated associations of bachata music and the expected actions of a person in his social group.

Perhaps the reason why bachata “the sound” so strongly implies such social meanings is because the sound works as a memory for bachata as lived experience, i.e. bachata dancing.
Bachata “the dance” only happens in particular places; unlike the music, the ethereal nature of which precludes it from having strict boundaries, it is easy to confine bachata dancing to certain venues, namely the disco paradas in rural areas and the more low class clubs on the outskirts of the cities. The layers upon layers of social connotations associated with these places—rural life, the brothel scene, prostitutes, traces of Haitian and therefore African influences—firmly roots them in the lower class of the Dominican Republic. The physical connection between bachata dancing and these places, together with the aural connection between bachata music and the social reputation of bachata, make it a genre that is also rooted in that part of Dominican society. No matter the “popularity” of bachata, its unilateral incorporation into all levels of Dominican society is unlikely, at least for the time being—as long as music and sound are factors of social identity formation and symbolism. Realistically, it may be many years before I am greeted by a bachatero at the Puerto Plata airport.

The history of merengue, however, offers a remarkable trajectory of the development of a popular music and its interaction with identity formation that might also be possible for bachata. In the case of merengue, the conflicts associated with the genre in terms of social identity that were influential in its domestic acceptance could be overlooked when the nation was in need of a symbol of national identity. The dichotomies involved in forming an in-country identity, encompassing urban/rural, middle and upper class/lower class, and European/African-Haitian juxtapositions, all gave way to a more pressing call for a boundary marker between Dominican and non-Dominican in the face of foreign threats. If a similar situation arises, bachata is in the position to take on that role of the national symbol of Dominican-ness. In today’s world, where intimate encounters between cultures occur with increasing frequency, the possibility of such a situation is quite high.
On a small scale, my experience in Los Indios was an example of this type of encounter. From my perspective—as an outsider at first unaware of the deep-seated social connotations of bachata—the music symbolized something authentically Dominican in that it is so unlike anything I associate with any other culture. I also sensed that my friends in Los Indios presented it to me as such. They were obviously proud of bachata and flattered that someone from outside their culture took an interest in it. In that way, bachata facilitated a cross-cultural communication between them, “insiders,” and me, an “outsider,” that broadened our mutual understanding of respective identities and self-perceptions. Bachata, therefore, was and is a powerful force in identity transmission within and without Dominican society. In my experience, bachata enabled me to become a part of the Los Indios community in a deeper and more fundamental way that may have been possible from purely verbal interactions. Furthermore, it helped make my re-entrance into the community one year later a smooth transition—an act of social incorporation unhindered by labored words trying to make up for lost conversation, and instead communicated through a physicality common to us all: bachata dancing.

All that said, anthropological research sometimes omits a fundamental element of the cultural significance of music and dance: the element of fun. Margó and others I spoke with communicated that they love bachata because of how happy the lyrics and music make them feel. They love bachata dancing because it is physically fun, and because those times of the day when they dance are the best times of the day. They are times of intense socializing, when all generations of the family and all members of the surrounding community can participate in the vibrant form of conversation that can be at once exciting, amusing and comforting. These times are when they live the most.
MAPS

Map No. 1: The Island of Hispaniola
Map No. 2: The Cibao Region in the Northwest of the Dominican Republic
Map No. 2: The Cibao Region in the Northwest of the Dominican Republic
APPENDIX

Song Lyrics

1. La Protesta (The Protest)\textsuperscript{28}
   Singer: Nico Lora

   \textit{Primera Parte}
   \begin{flushleft}
   En el año diez y seis llegan los americanos,
   Pisoteando con sus botas, el suelo dominicano.
   \end{flushleft}
   \textit{Part One}
   \begin{flushleft}
   The Americans came in 1916,
   Trampling Dominican soil with their boots.
   \end{flushleft}

   \begin{flushright}
   Francisco Henríquez Carvajal, defendiendo la bandera,
   Dijo, "¡No pueden mandar los yanquis en nuestra tierra!"
   \end{flushright}
   \begin{flushright}
   Defending the flag, Francisco Henríquez Carvajal
   Proclaimed that "Yankees cannot rule our land!"
   \end{flushright}

   \textit{Segunda Parte}
   \begin{flushleft}
   El americano, como se entromete [repite];
   Los haremos ir, dándole machetes [repite].
   Los haremos ir, con fuerza y valor [repite];
   El americano, por abusador [repite].
   En tierra de Duarte, no pueden mandar [repite];
   Los americanos, dijo Carvajal [repite].
   \end{flushleft}
   \textit{Second Part}
   \begin{flushleft}
   We'll attack them with machetes, we'll make them leave [repeat];
   The Americans, the intruders [repeat].
   \end{flushleft}
   \begin{flushright}
   With power and courage, we'll make them leave [repeat];
   The Americans, the abusers [repeat].
   \end{flushright}
   \begin{flushright}
   Carvajal said that Americans [repeat]
   Cannot rule the land of Duarte [repeat].
   \end{flushright}

2. Estrellitas y duendes (Little stars and fairies)\textsuperscript{29}
   Singer: Juan Luis Guerra/4:40

   \begin{flushleft}
   Viviré en tu recuerdo
   Como un simple aguacero
   De estrellitas y duendes
   Vagaré por tu vientre
   Mordiendo cada ilusión.
   \end{flushleft}

   \begin{flushleft}
   I will live in your memory
   Like a simple downpour
   Of little stars and fairies
   I will wander in your belly
   Nibbling on every illusion.
   \end{flushleft}

   \begin{flushleft}
   Vivirás en mis sueños
   Como tinta indeleble
   Como mancha de acero
   No se olvida el idioma
   Cuando dos hacen amor.
   \end{flushleft}

   \begin{flushleft}
   You will live in my dreams
   Like an indelible ink
   Like a branding mark
   Language is not forgotten
   When two make love.
   \end{flushleft}

   \begin{flushleft}
   Me tosté en tus mejillas
   Como el sol en la tarde
   Se desgarra mi cuerpo
   Y no vivo un segundo
   Para decirte que sin ti, muero.
   \end{flushleft}

   \begin{flushleft}
   I tanned in your cheeks
   Like the sun in the afternoon
   It shatters, my body
   And I won't live another second
   To tell you that without you, I die.
   \end{flushleft}

\textsuperscript{28} Spanish lyrics and translation sited in Austerlitz 1997:37.
\textsuperscript{29} Spanish lyrics sited in liner notes of Bachata Rosa, Juan Luis Guerra/4:40, Santo Domingo: Karen records, 1990, 10793 0136-2. Translation mine.
Me quedé en tus pupilas
Ya no cierro los ojos
Me tiré a lo más hondo
Y me ahogo en los mares de tu partida.

Andaré sin saberlo
Calzaré de tu cuerpo
Como huellas en hierro
Comeré lo que sobre
Dentro de tu corazón.

Y seré un mar desierto
Una frase silente
La elegía de un beso
Un planeta de celos,
Esculpiendo una canción.

I remained in your pupils
I still haven’t closed my eyes
I threw myself to the deepest depths
And I drown in the seas of your farewell.

I will walk without knowing
I will step into your body
Like footsteps in iron
I will eat what is left over
Inside your heart.

I will be a deserted sea
A silent phrase
The elegy of a kiss
A planet of jealousy,
Sculpting a song.

3. Burbujas de amor (Bubbles of love)30
Singer: Juan Luis Guerra/4:40

Tengo un corazón
Mutilado de esperanza y de razón
Tengo un corazón que madruga dondequiera
¡ay!

Y este corazón
Se desnuda de impaciencia
Ante tu voz,
Pobre corazón
Que no atrapa su cordura

Quisiera ser un pez
Para tocar mi nariz en tu pecera
Y hacer burbujas de amor por dondequiera
Pasar la noche en vela
Mojado de ti

Un pez
Para bordar de corales (rayenaz) tu cintura
Y hacer siluetas de amor bajo la luna
Saciár esta locura
Mojado en ti

Canta corazón
Con un ancla imprescindible de ilusión
Sueña corazón
No te nubles de amargura

I have a heart
Mutilated by hope and reason
I have a heart that awakens anywhere it chooses

Ah!

And this heart
Undresses with impatience
In the presence of your voice
Poor heart
That loses its sanity.

If only I could be a fish
So that I could poke my nose in your goldfish bowl
And make bubbles of love anywhere
And have a sleepless night
Drenched by you.

A fish
So that I could embroider corals in your waist
And make silhouettes of love under the moon
To satiate this craziness
Drenched in you.

Sing, heart
With a vital anchor of hope
Dream, heart
Don’t cloud over with bitterness.

Una noche
Para hundirnos hasta el fin
Cara a cara
Beso a beso
Y vivir
Por siempre
Mojado en ti

One night,
For us to sink to the end
Face to face
Kiss to kiss
And to live
Forever
Drenched in you.

4. Todavía me amas (You still love me)\(^{31}\)
Singer: Aventura

Let me find out

Explicame porque razón no me miras la cara,
Será que no quieres que note que sigues enamorada,
Tus ojos demuestran pasión y falsos sentimientos,
Por el hecho de tu rechazarme mientras te mueres por dentro.

Let me find out

You know well that you can’t forget me or deceive me,

Explain to me the reason why you don’t look at my face,
Maybe you don’t want me to notice that you’re still in love,
[But] your eyes show the passion and false emotions,
You’re dying inside because you left me.

Sabes bien que no puedes olvidarme y mucho meno engañarme,
Todavía no ha nacido otro hombre que pueda enamorarte,
Si antes de inventarse el amor ya yo te estaba amando,
Ni el amor de Romeo y Julieta llegó a ser tan grande.

There isn’t any other man you can love,

[Because] even before love was invented I was already in love with you,
And not even the love of Romeo and Juliet was as great.

Te voy a ser sincero y confieso, no te miento, te extraño,
Y a pensar que transcurrió tanto tiempo aún guardo tu retrato.

I’m going to be honest and confess, I won’t lie to you, I miss you,
And even though it happened so long ago I still keep your picture.

Y adónde irá este amor, sodita la ilusión,
Me preguntó a cada instante,
Yo sé que yo falle, pero te orgullo y tu actitud,

And where will this love go, all the thrill,
I ask myself at every instant,
I know that I made a mistake, but your pride and your attitude,

Me impiden recuperarte,
Niega sentir amor, ocultas la pasión,
Y también me rechazas,
Conmigo no podrás, te conozco demasiado,
Tu todavía me amas.
No importa que hoy te alejes de mí,
Me extrañarás mañana.

Keep me from getting you back,
You deny feeling love, you hide your passion,
And you rebuff me,
With me you can’t do that, I know you too well,
You still love me.
It doesn’t matter that today you leave me,
[Because] you’ll miss me tomorrow.

You won’t forget Romeo, uh-uh,
Too strong

Hoy disfrazas lo que por mí sientes y vienes dispuesta a vencer,
Incluso dices que me odias y que el amor se te fue.

Today you disguise what you feel for me and come ready to win,
You even say that you hate me and that the love is gone,

Mira mis ojos, convénceme que ya tu no me amas,
Entonces si no te haré más canciones,
No diré más palabras.

Dístumas al decir que no me amas, que eso fue en el pasado,
Pero el amor no se puede olvidar, siempre queda grabado,
En tu diario se conserva la historia de dos enamorados,
Las novelas y poesías de amor las viviré a tu lado.

Recuerda cuando te hice mujer en aquella madrugada,
Cuando te cantaba con mi guitarra y luego tu me besabas
(kiss sound),
Ay mi amor, ya no te hagas ese daño sabiendo que me amas.

Look me in the eyes, convince me that you don’t love me anymore,
Only then, I won’t sing you any more songs,
And I won’t tell you any more words.

You deceive by saying that you don’t love me, that all that was in the past,
But you can’t forget love, it will always be recorded,

In your diary remains the history of two lovers,
In those novels and poems of love I will live at your side.

Remember when I made you a woman that dawn,
When I sang to you with my guitar and later you kissed me (kiss sound),
Oh, my love, why do you hurt yourself like this when you know you still love me?

5. Guerra de amor (War of love)32
Singer: Yoskar Sarante

Mi cuerpo me pide caricias que sean de ti,
No puedo negarle el deseo, le diré que sí.
Lucharé con las armas que sean para conquistarte,
Desde hoy te declaro la guerra.
Sé como ganarte.

Tomará tu cuerpo de repente, para sorprenderte,
Apresuraré mi cuerpo a tu cuerpo,
Y verás lo que sientes.

Ametraré tu piel con más caricias,
Bombardando tu corazón con palabras bonitas,
Dispararé balas de clavé en misiles de rosas,
Venceré y verás que al final,
Tú serás mi esposa.

My body asks me for caresses from you,
I can’t deny it this desire, I’ll tell it yes,
I will fight with the weapons that are for conquering you,
Today I declare war with you,
I know how to win you.

I will take your body all of a sudden to surprise you,
I will press your body to mine,
And you will see what you feel.

I will shoot [overwhelm] your skin with my caresses,
Bombarding your heart with sweet words,
I will fire carnation bullets and rose missiles,
I will triumph and you will see in the end,
You will be my wife.

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Tejada, Héctor (producer). Merengue Exitos de los 80’s Vol. 2. MR. IMPERIO. MRI-1018.
Regardless of the comparatively subtle sexual innuendos in “Burbujas de amor,” Guerra’s bachatas were regarded as lyrically and musically sophisticated, and were immensely popular across all class boundaries (Hernandez 1995:207). The album *Bachata Rosa* won a Grammy for Best Tropical Album and had two tracks at numbers 1 and 2 on the *Billboard* Latin charts in 1991. Record and concert sales were tremendous in the Dominican Republic and abroad. Perhaps fortunately, the international audience had no knowledge of the controversy surrounding bachata. On an album that contained a mix of merengue, salsa, bolero, and nueva canción selections, the bachata tracks appeared as nothing more than guitar-based love songs.

Guerra’s success with bachata opened a whole new horizon for the genre. With a respected musician such as Guerra celebrating and promoting bachata, it could no longer be shunned by mainstream society. In a manner reflective of Herzfeld’s theory about cultural intimacy, however, outside recognition of a cultural product brings greater domestic acceptance. Through its embrace of bachata, the international audience unwittingly broke down barriers for Dominicans previously unconvinced of bachata’s values.

Once these barriers were down, a flood of bachata fans and musicians came to the fore. Uninhibited by social restrictions, people started buying many more recordings, causing sales of bachata hits to rise from a range of 20,000 to 30,000 copies sold in the 1980s to 60,000 to 100,000 in the 1990s (Hernandez 1995:210). Bachata producers started paying more attention to the quality of recordings. As the quality of recordings went up, FM radio stations were more willing to play them on the air. Most importantly, musicians and fans started calling the music “bachata” free of negative associations. Whether intentionally or not, by using “bachata” in his album’s title, Guerra demonstrated that the word could describe a refined and valuable musical

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17 For a full discussion of this theory, please refer to his book *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State.*