

“A Country That Ain’t Really Belong To Me”: *Dominicanyorks*, Identity and Popular Music

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I. *El Retorno de los Cadenuces*

In his 2004 rap, “American Dream,” New York-based Dominican hip-hop artist, Cruz, raps about the difficulties of living in the United States.

Trying hard just to fit in... Thinking that you know but you do not
know who you are... Stuck in this country... Trying to find a sense
of identity in a country that ain’t really belong to me.

Cruz represents a new generation of Dominicans who, while living in New York City, come to realize the complexity and ambiguity of their new social, ethnic and racial status. While Dominicans have traditionally neglected their African ancestry, in New York they undergo an increasing awareness of their racial ethnicity which leads them to a new Afro-Latino identity. Many of the issues involved in this shift are reflected by and enacted through music and music cultures, and in recent years New York Dominicans have used previously marginalized forms of music to form a new Dominican identity in both the United States and in the Dominican Republic. For example, although *merengue*, the music favored by Dominican upper classes, was the music chosen as a national symbol of the Dominican Republic,¹ in New York, Dominicans forge communities through other forms of music neglected in mainstream Dominican society: *bachata*, *merengue típico*, and varieties of Afro-Dominican music.

Until recently, “*Dominicanyorks*” (Dominicans living in New York) and their music were not fully accepted in the Dominican Republic. However, as *Dominicanyorks* have become the most important social group contributing to the national economy, formerly marginalized genres of music are becoming the mainstream music of the Dominican Republic, and, in turn, Dominicans’ search for identity in New York has influenced radical changes toward the creation of a new identity on the island. Beginning by outlining my own experiences as a *Dominicanyork* and then by looking at the genres of *bachata* and *merengue*, I will trace these movements of people and music between two countries and between two identities as they are represented and reflected in new hybrid forms of music that combine traditional Dominican music with the urban musical genres encountered in New York City.

Becoming a Dominicanyork

When I grew up during the 1970s and 80s in the Dominican Republic, social class was a strong determining factor in setting the acceptable boundaries of our behavior, in the places and events we attended, and in the music we listened to. In order to maintain our upper middle class status, we were discouraged from engaging in certain activities that were seen as beneath us: pre-marital sex, dating someone of

a lower economic class (and most likely darker skin color), listening to *bachata* and *merengue típico* (the music of the lower classes), or getting too close to Haitians, who were characterized as superstitious and evil. Middle and upper-class Dominicans had their own dance clubs, usually with American names like D'Marin, where we danced either to American music or to *merengue de orquesta*, a new "enhanced" form of *merengue* played by a big band-like ensemble featuring trumpets and saxophones, in contrast to the more folk-derived and rural *merengue típico* played with accordion, *güira* and *tambora* drum. It was this *merengue de orquesta* that became most popular and familiar to the rest of the world. During the 1970s and 80s, *merengue de orquesta* was preferred by the elite upper classes who felt it represented "Dominicanness;" other Dominicans were culturally conditioned to like it since it was ubiquitous in the media and praised internationally as a national symbol of Dominican culture.

The Dominican Republic of the 70s and 80s was a pre-globalized world; and even though upper-class Dominicans admired the American model of life, it was inaccessible to us. Not only did we not have access to the American standard of living, but we were also not exposed to progressive ideas in race and gender issues. When I was about ten years old, "our" space began to be invaded by *Dominicanyorks*, the "cancer" of our society as they were referred to. They were the working class and rural Dominican migrants who were returning from New York but had acquired the money to access American items of luxury; we perceived them as vulgar and immoral, and stereotyped them as drug traffickers and criminals. We referred to the men's way of dressing by calling them *cadenuces*, guys with a lot of gold chains. They wore sleeveless or playboy shirts, unbuttoned to show their hairy chests layered with numerous gold chains; they wore gel in their hair, and sometimes even sported an earring or two.² Their gold was a way of showing us their newly acquired financial power, and only years later did people in the Dominican Republic discover that the chains were often rented in New York before the trip home. The women were called *aviones* (airplanes), referring to their independence and their willingness to "dock in many airports" (i.e. have sex with multiple partners). *Dominicanyorks* were also considered uneducated because they talked *Spanglish* instead of "pure" Spanish.³ Their flamboyant behavior, loudness, tastes and manners were aberrant to us, and their more liberal attitudes towards race and sex were found unacceptable by the upper classes. Ironically, we did not realize that a lot of their behavior was learned from the American culture that we, upper-class Dominicans, praised and admired.

I came to New York to study piano in 1991. I knew New York was full of *cadenuces*, but somehow I expected not to interact with them since I was "whiter" and "more educated" than they were. I was wrong. Coming to the United States with no money, green card or relatives, I had only two choices: go back to the island or live with my fellow Dominicans in Washington Heights who were, to my surprise, not drug dealers and criminals but, for the most part, hard-working and stimulatingly progressive in their ideas and tastes. I underwent a kind of racial trauma because,

for the first time, I came to feel that I was a person of color, a member of a minority that was discriminated against. In other words, with my heavy accent and "ghetto" clothes, I was black; I was the "Haitian" here in the United States. While overcoming my racial trauma, I realized that I had previously been in an unrealistic world, not realizing my privileged middle-class status. I also realized that *merengue de orquesta* was not the music that represented Dominicanness to all Dominicans, and in New York, *Dominicanyorks* listened more to *bachata* and *merengue típico* than to *merengue de orquesta*. Listening to this music was, for me, the beginning of a new awareness of my own culture.

In 1994, after three years in New York City, I visited the Dominican Republic for the first time. When my mother saw me, she screamed: "Ah, you look like a *Dominicanyork*." She and others from my social class complained about my clothing and about my vulgar manners and ideas. Apparently, I dressed differently than my family and friends; I brought new ideas about social equality, race, sex, and most of all, I praised *Dominicanyorks*. Also, it was easier for me to say some words in English than in Spanish. They were shocked by the fact that while living in the United States, I had come to dislike some aspects of the American culture I had been taught to revere, and that I questioned the social system that gave my family a privileged and elevated status by virtue of our birth and lighter skin color. My tastes in music had changed as well; *bachata* and *merengue típico* were now my preferred music styles of popular music. This moment of return was my second post-New York trauma because not only was I a second-class citizen in the United States, but now also in the Dominican Republic. As Luis Guarnizo pointed out in 1994, "*Dominicanyorks* have become a group whose territory is a borderless, transnational space. They are here, and there and in between. Yet, they are perceived as foreigners in both locations" (78). At the moment of my first return trip home, I became stuck in between two worlds, at home in neither.

A Shift in Identity

Living in the United States for fifteen years has altered my understanding of my own race, ethnicity and culture. After confronting the black versus white polarities in the United States, I no longer identify with the white upper classes but with the lower classes with whom I shared common challenges in New York. My experience is not atypical for Dominicans or other Latino immigrants. In an influential essay, "*Qué assimilated brother, yo soy asimilao*": The Structuring of Puerto Rican Identity," Juan Flores developed specific transnational phases of the immigrant Puerto Rican experience. These four "definitive moments" in the "awakening" of a "Nuyorican cultural consciousness," that, while perhaps too neatly distinguished, provide a taxonomy for the New York Dominican experience as well. The four moments, which Flores is careful to insist do not necessarily constitute sequential stages, are: 1). The "here-and-now," or the initial perception of isolation, abandonment and cultural absence that Puerto Ricans experience when they arrive to New York; and 2). The "Puerto Rican background," or the romantic and idealized

view of Puerto Rico that ignores the forces that made migration desirable. This second moment also involves a construction of a new identity through the "validation of Spanish" and, even more importantly for my purposes, "the racism encountered in the U.S. which impels the Nuyorican even more resolutely toward the Taíno and Afro-Caribbean background, " the major thematic" reference point of Puerto Rican culture in the U.S." (1993: 188). 3). The third stage is the moment of "reentry," which is characterized by a "deliberate self-insertion into the urban landscape" (189), and an awareness of the enriching potential of bilingualism. 4). The last stage involves a "branching out" or a "selective connection to and interaction with the surrounding North American society" (191). While there are significant parallels between his taxonomy and the Dominican experience that I am discussing, there are also some clear differences. Due to various factors, economical, cultural, and technological, there is a stronger and more complex connection between the island and New York in the Dominican experience which blurs the lines of separation in the four stages, rendering, in some ways, four simultaneous sides of a more compressed experience.

Many of these differences are no doubt due to the relatively late migration of Dominicans to New York. By the start of the migration, in the 1970s, technology had made it easier for island Dominicans and *Dominicanyorks* to communicate more often and faster than earlier Latin American migrants. The ease of transmission has allowed *Dominicanyorks* not only to go through Flores' stages at a faster pace, but also and more importantly to bring back to the Dominican Republic their new ideas of culture, race and ethnicity learned in the United States. As New York-based Dominican recording executive Rufino Santos says, "Every CD that sells here has an impact there, not the other way around" (personal interview).

The ease of transportation and communication between Dominicans in both countries is what has made scholars consider Dominicans as the prime example of a transnational community. Peggy Levitt writes that

The fact that immigrants adapt their home-country traditions to life in the United States is not new. What is different is that ease of transport. New technology, sending-state policies, and increasing economic and political interdependence means that some immigrants communicate these adapted practices back to their homelands... Today's migrants do not sever ties with their home-country communities. Instead, people, goods, money and information constantly circulate between countries of origin and destination. Over time, the lives of migrants and non-migrants become transnationalized (1998: 76).

Also, as globalization reaches even the farthest corners of the Dominican Republic and *Dominicanyorks* support the country economically, changes in behavior and attitude not only close the gap between "*los de aquí*" (Dominicans on the island), and

"*los de allá*" (Dominicans in the US), but also between lower and upper-class Dominicans. Although a thorough study of the socio-economic class of the migrants has not been done, a socio-economic profile published by CUNY Dominican Studies Institute in 2003 shows that only 17.3% of Dominicans in the United States have managerial, professional and technical occupations (6) which might suggest that migrants are mostly from lower socio-economic status, but once earning US dollars, migrants have a purchasing power comparable to middle-class Dominicans, and their families in the Dominican Republic are able to live a middle-class lifestyle.

Remittances to the Dominican Republic have reached the equivalent of 12.4 percent of its GDP which is the fourth-highest in Latin America (*Business Chronicle* 2005: 3), but in addition to economic progress, Dominican migrants bring ideas, cultural values, and fashion and style as well as taste in popular music. Most importantly, as in Flores's second moment of the Nuyorican experience, *Dominicanyorks* bring a new identification with their Afro-Caribbean background which, even for the darkest Dominicans, was always hidden in favor of a Spanish past. (For example, *merengue* represented Dominicanity because the African influences in *merengue* were usually denied; even artists and academics would have said until recently that *merengue* was exclusively of Spanish origin. *Merengue* was considered Dominican just as Dominicans were Spanish; the more African-derived forms of Dominican music—*palos* and *gagá* among others—were considered Haitian infiltrations rather than Dominican.)

For Flores, the Nuyorican racial situation is altered in New York and their experiences bring them a new social consciousness (189). Likewise, Dominicans in New York undergo a shifting racial awareness which, even though it might not quite be stated as "black and proud," reflects a new openness towards the African heritage in Dominican culture. As Ninna Sorensen writes

While migration has helped relieve social pressures within the Dominican Republic, there can be no doubt that the enormous sums of money Dominican transmigrants annually send home to their families, and—maybe even more important—the new and multifaceted world views they bring with them when they travel, have contributed to more than a preservation of an island on the margins. It has also produced links to feminist, social, political, and racial movements all over the world.... Involvement with the diaspora movements in New York and elsewhere may have enlarged the cultural and racial identity repertoire from which national and transnational identities can be constructed (1998: 263).

Nowhere is this racial awareness better expressed and transmitted than through popular culture and especially through music. In the rap, "American Dream," that opened this essay, Cruz echoes Sorensen's point when he recounts how Dominicans come to New York and immediately realize that for mainstream

American society they are black. Then, he continues, although initially a process of self-discrimination happens, Dominicans learn from the example of African-Americans to be proud of whom they are as Afro-Latinos: "Realizing in my roots, that is my pride." Cruz alludes to the fact that first he tried to fit in by "playing Negro," but African-Americans would not accept him either because he was an immigrant. In other words, while back in the island he knew who he was, in New York City he had to re-think his identity: "Thinking that you know but you do not know who you are. . . Stuck in this country . . . Trying to find a sense of identity in a country that ain't really belongs to me." Cruz concludes with a bilingual shout-out to his Latin and Dominican roots: "DR, PR, *Méjico*, *Suramérica*, all my latinos around the world, *del corazón*."

In my ten years of teaching experience at the Gregorio Luperón High School in Washington Heights, a school open only to new migrants from the Dominican Republic, I have observed that these stages of cultural adjustment happen more rapidly now that the *Dominicanyorks'* influence has worked on peoples' identities on the island for several decades. This seems to suggest that slowly but surely Dominicans are acquiring a better sense of their African heritage and, like money and material goods, it is to a large extent acquired through the back and forth travels of *Dominicanyorks*. The current scene of Dominican popular music reflects *Dominicanyorks'* new attitudes towards racial and class issues. The previously marginalized musics of the lower classes—*merengue típico*, *bachata* and Afro-Dominican music⁴—benefited from the market that Dominican migrants have created in New York⁵ and eventually became mainstream music in the Dominican Republic. Recently, second-generation Dominicans have created hybrid forms of music where *bachata*, *merengue* and *merengue típico* are mixed with urban Black music: R&B, hip-hop, house and others. These hybrid forms of music are the most popular among the youngest island Dominicans, and reflect Flores's third moment where bilingualism gets transformed from a predicament to a sign of potential enrichment and advantage. The hybrid genres of second-generation Dominicans demonstrate equal fluency in Spanish, English and *Spanglish*. And while ten years ago *Dominicanyorks* were discriminated against for their use of *Spanglish*, nowadays their music is embraced partly because of its bilingual appeal. As in the Nuyoric experience, "it is on that basis, as a lingually, racially and culturally distinctive national group, that Nuyoricans [*Dominicanyorks*] define their identity in the United States..." (Flores 1993: 191). It is uncommon to find a Dominican family that has not been impacted economically and culturally, in some way or another, by migration, and these changes are revealed in the words, sounds, and trends of recent popular music.

II. Show Me the Money: *Dominicanyorks* and Their Music Gain Respect in the Dominican Republic

From the early 1960s through the 1980s, the Dominican Republic's economy shifted from mostly agricultural to a service economy, including free trade zone and

tourism. Following the shift in the productive process, migration from rural communities to urban centers took place. Often migrants went straight from rural Dominican Republic to New York City. During President Balaguer's terms (1966-1978 and 1986-1996), such emigrants were called unofficially and derogatively *Dominicanyorks*, but officially "*dominicanos ausentes*" (absent Dominicans). Their absence also manifested itself as a presence however, as *Dominicanyorks*, physically absent and not welcomed since they were a threat to upper-class Dominicans, nevertheless continued to send remittances home, eventually becoming the main economic support of the island.

The acceptance of *Dominicanyorks* began during the presidency of Leonel Fernández (1996-2000 and 2004-present). Fernández, who himself had lived in New York during his adolescence, started a pro-diaspora campaign by visiting New York City frequently and including *Dominicanyorks* in his political agenda. Some critics claimed that due to President Fernández's fears of a massive exodus back to the island, he encouraged *Dominicanyorks* to get the American citizenship while granting them dual citizenship and the right to vote from New York City. Whatever his reasons for including and giving privileges to the diaspora, during his first presidency, the Dominican media tended to change their image of *Dominicanyorks* from drug traffickers to successful entrepreneurs, and *Dominicanyorks* began to be granted participation in cultural and intellectual events in the Dominican Republic. According to the current Dominican Secretary of Culture, President Fernández's main focus in this current term is to involve the diaspora in every sector of his government, and his government is very concerned with the high education that *Dominicanyorks* are getting abroad that is not being transmitted to island Dominicans (personal interview). The socio-economic profile published by the Dominican Studies Institute at City College demonstrates a very low educational level in Dominican migrants and a considerably higher level for the second-generation Dominicans in the United States. In the year 2000, close to 60 percent of all Dominicans born in the United States that were 25 years of age or older had received some college education with 21.9 percent completing a degree (2003: 7). Even though these statistics are low when compared to the rest of the United States population, the Dominican New York community now contains many educated people who could contribute to the advancement of the Dominican Republic.

As the government's and the media's attitudes change, the attitudes of the people towards *Dominicanyorks* are changing as well. *Dominicanyorks* are now recognized for overcoming the difficulties of migrating to a foreign country through strength and hard work, and for their increased economic power, especially their economic contribution to the Dominican Republic. The term *Dominicanyork* has lost its pejorative connotation, and people instead talk about the "*brillo*" or shine of the *Dominicanyorks*, meaning that they get prettier in New York and have the latest fashion and styles in dressing. When asking upper-class Dominicans of their impressions about the way of dressing of the wildly successful *Dominicanyork bachata* group, Aventura, whose look resembles the formerly rejected

Dominicanyork dress code, the typical answer is that they dress like "*los de allá*" but that it does not matter.

Dominican migration is still very young and far from finished. The movement so far has been towards multiple and plural identities, a Dominican identity that is New York and the Dominican Republic, Spanish and *Spanglish*, Dominican and Afro-Latino. About all that is certain is that future movements will continue to be influenced by and reflected in forms of popular music.

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Despite growing interest in Caribbean music throughout the second half of the twentieth century, Dominican folk and popular music have been under-researched especially by English language scholars. Three scholars in the 1990s who begin to change this situation were Martha Ellen Davis with her works on Afro-Dominican traditions, Deborah Pacini on *bachata* and Paul Austerlitz on *merengue*. Since the publication of works by these scholars, there have been radical changes in all these musical genres which reflect the rapidly changing economical, political, racial and cultural climate of the Dominican Republic. A more recent contributor is Sydney Hutchinson who has examined transnational migration and the consequent class restructuring in contemporary Dominican society and also how a "modernized"⁶ *merengue típico* of the last decade reflects and negotiates a new transnational identity for young Dominicans in Santiago and in New York. She points out that "the labels modern and traditional are applied to the two competing styles as a means of showing support for either a transnational blended identity or one that relies on locality and old-fashioned rural culture as central elements of Dominicanness" (2006: 41). Hutchinson's writing is important because she considers a transnational Dominican society; an element that due to the pervasiveness of migration, cannot be left out, and that was not examined deeply by previous writers. Previously, *merengue típico* was usually studied only as a predecessor to *merengue* and not as a unique genre with its own unique features and identity. However, these issues need to be examined from several angles. The relationship between island Dominicans and *Dominicanyorks* is very complex; the same *Spanglish* and fashion trends as well as the North American habits of consumption with which *Dominicanyorks* have been stereotyped are nowadays, as much as they might be resisted by native Dominicans, found and celebrated among the youngest island Dominicans. While it is hard to speculate if *Dominicanyorks* are accepted because of their music or viceversa, I believe that *Dominicanyorks* and their plural Dominican identity are now found on the island partly because of their music which, with its bilingualism and urban features, manifests a more open conception of Dominicanness.

Today, the most popular musical genres in the Dominican Republic are the former music of the working class, *bachata* and *merengue típico* as well as the hybrid and urbanized forms of *Dominicanyorks*, which were first most popular among New York Dominicans. When flipping through radio stations in the Dominican Republic,

one finds little *merengue de orquesta* with prominence given to *merengue típico*, *reggaeton* and most of all, *bachata*. Record executive Alexis Méndez claims that many CD stores would disappear if it wasn't for the *bachata* sales (Baldera 2005: 44).

Merengue de orquesta's popularity has declined to the extent that the government has instituted Nov. 26th as the day of *merengue*, an act of remembrance for the glory that *merengue* no longer has. Lately, there have been numerous newspaper articles encouraging people not to forget what *merengue de orquesta* represented to Dominicans and not to forget the great decade of *merengue*, the 80s. Even though this form of *merengue* has not disappeared completely, defining rhythmic elements that were present in the *merengues* of the 1980s are changing. Some of these structural changes are in part due to the openness to the African aspects of Dominican culture that New York Dominicans have initiated. The openness towards Afro-Dominican music in New York has encouraged many *merengue* artists to include musical elements from Dominican voodoo in their *merengues*.

It is also already possible to talk about a New York school of *merengue típico* in which New York-based groups like Fulanito and Aguakate blend *típico* with hip-hop. Starting with the South Bronx group Aventura, a New York school of *bachata* was also initiated. Aventura has created a *bachata* with a transnational flavor using *Spanglish* lyrics and combining influences from R&B, rock, hip-hop and *reggaeton*. Also in New York, new genres such as *merengue-house* and *merengue-rap* have been created. For a variety of reasons both economic and social, it has been in New York that Dominicans felt that they did not have to try *not* to be black—a freedom that opened them up to both hip-hop trends and Afro-Dominican religious and musical traditions. As Flores reminds us, it is in embracing their root traditions that the Nuyorican, and the *Dominicanyork*, can retain and extend their inherited cultures and form their new identity within the confines of the United States. It is precisely "the colonized within the colony whom the Nuyorican [and the *Dominicanyork*] identify as their real forebears in the national tradition" (188). The *bachata*, *merengue* and *merengue típico* of New York reflects a real identification with the lower classes, rural Dominican traditions as well as Afro-diasporic cultures from both the Dominican Republic and the United States.

A New York Bachata: The Phenomenon of Aventura

Aventura burst upon the scene in 2002, and for the first time a *bachata* group succeeded beyond the boundaries of a limited Latin American market. Aventura is part of the current explosion of Latin urban genres, and is currently among the most popular *bachata* groups in the Dominican Republic, appealing across the social classes. In the first years of the 21st century, they became the only *bachata* group featured on the influential New York urban music station 105.9. Aventura's success is due to their ability to create local Dominican music with a transnational flavor. The group combines typical aspects of mainstream DR-based *bachata* with other genres in songs that are eclectic and innovative, many of which involve specific references to urban New York City. Aventura counts among the

many *Dominicanyorks* who reached for the music of their roots in order to create an identity for New York second-generation Dominicans. On the other hand, their access to fashionable hip-hop, R&B, rock and reggaeton has given Aventura a new way of creating their Dominicanness: a quintessential *bachata* sound with a hip urban African-American flavor.

There are many features of Aventura's music which establish their *bachata* as authentically Dominican music with roots in the folk and the rural. Their songs deal with quintessential *bachata* themes: prostitution, obsession with women, abandonment of the man by the female lover ("*Volvió la traicionera*"), and the concern over someone changing after migrating to New York. In "*Mi niña cambió*," the group sings about how in New York even the skin of the people changes, and the singer encourages the *niña* (girl) to not forget the "*campo*" (rural D.R.) where she was born. They add that the girl was more humble before migrating because she would only speak Spanish ("*Antes eras humilde y solo hablabas español*"), lyrics suggesting the superiority of those who can speak English, while at the same time lamenting it because by speaking Spanish the girl honors her roots and maintains her innocence. This tension reflects the ambivalences and mixed reactions over issues of identity which Dominicans continually grapple with and work out through their music.

Even though all of Aventura's members are from New York, Aventura's songs show a thorough knowledge of the Dominican Republic and an embracing not only of New York but also of the Dominican Republic. In "*Pueblo por pueblo*" they sing about their homeland, not the U.S. but *Quisqueya*.⁷ "*Quisqueya, soy tu hijo con orgullo y con cariño*" (Dominican Republic, I am your son with pride and love). They also show familiarity with the geography of the Dominican Republic as they narrate a journey from town to town looking for a loved one, citing details that only a local native would recognize. They describe these towns, their modes of transportation, and mention important people from each of them. The use of Dominican slang is another one of Aventura's local Dominican features; words like "*parigüayo*," "*bachatú*," and "*mayimbe*"⁸ among others give their music a rural Dominican feel. In Aventura's CD *God's Project*, the member's mothers—using characteristically Dominican words such as *holla* and *habichuela* and speaking in a regional *Cibao* accent—comment on the success of their sons.

Aventura's international popularity is due in part to their taking *bachata* in a fresh direction, using musical elements which have already been made transnational by other genres. The group has collaborated with well-known urban artists such as Nina Sky and reggaeton vocalists Don Omar ("*Ella y yo*") and Tego Calderón ("*Envidia*"). They incorporate elements of flamenco rumba ("*Un beso*"), Middle Eastern singing ("*La Boda*"), hip-hop and R&B. The R&B influence can be heard in their falsetto singing styles⁹ and acknowledged through their Latin flavored covers of R&B hits. Aventura has also extended the harmonic vocabulary found in traditional *bachata*. They use riffs and harmonies which, although rudimentary when compared to what rock guitarists employ, are far beyond what other *bachateros* have used.

Aventura has also broken the verse structure typical in *bachata* and have employed in many of their songs, including their biggest hit "*Obsesión*," the composed lyrics characteristic of rap. The instrumental aspects of their *bachatas* are more elaborately structured and arranged than traditional *bachata* which is more rustic and improvisational.

Although Aventura is a New York Dominican group, Dominicans on the island generally make no fundamental distinction between them and local *bachata* groups, a distinction that perhaps ten years ago would have made them unsuccessful in the Dominican Republic. Nowadays, according to my informants, part of the local appeal of Aventura is that they are seen as *Dominicanyorks* who have proudly embraced their Dominican roots, and achieved money and success. Aventura's CD cover for *We Broke the Rule* shows the artists in the subway station of the Bronx wearing the sleeveless shirts, playboy designs and gold chains so criticized by island Dominicans in previous decades. Nowadays Aventura is heard literally everywhere in the Dominican republic, from car washes and blasting car speakers to discos and restaurants, and ironically they are even more popular among Dominicans.

With Aventura, a New York school of *bachata* was born and there are already imitation groups such as Xtreme and Domenick Martin. This music is another example of how the Dominican New York community is bringing modernity to island Dominicans, expanding Dominican culture and creating a new sense of Dominican nationalism. Aventura's *bachata* represents the current plural nature of Dominicans: Dominican and African, local and transnational, high and low class, urban and rural, and folk and hip.

African Anyway: The Two Merengues

Aventura's openness to the Afro-diasporic musics of urban New York is characteristic of *Dominicanyorks* who, more than islanders try to, free themselves of the class and race prejudices found in the Dominican Republic. This openness is most apparent in their changes in attitudes towards Afro-Dominican music: These genres characterized by singing and drumming and related to Dominican voodoo (or *vudú*) rituals, was until recently denied by the government, written out of history and dismissed as a "Haitian" superstition even though it has perhaps been the most common form of folk music throughout the Dominican Republic since colonial times. Nevertheless, a revival of interest and openness to Afro-Dominican culture has taken on a special and conspicuous prominence in New York City for several reasons. First of all, the migrants appear to be mostly Dominicans who in the Dominican Republic tend to be the practitioners of these religious traditions. In New York, they feel more freedom from island class prejudices and from the "being black" stigma, a freedom learned partly through their contact with other Afro-Latino groups who practice their religious traditions (for example *santería*) in a more open way. Also, New York Dominicans feel a very strong sense of nostalgia and a need to go back to

their roots in order to reassert their Dominican identity. This openness to their African heritage is evident in current trends in music.

In 1997 the Centro Cultural Bayahonda released a CD album which included Afro-Dominican forms of music, especially *palo* and *gagá*.¹⁰ This CD began to be played in the Dominican discos of New York City as a form of popular music starting a "craze" which extended to the Dominican Republic. Since then the scene of Afro-Dominican music has not been the same. Today this music is commonly danced to at clubs in both New York and the Dominican Republic, and the religious traditions associated with these musics are increasingly being considered part of the Dominican identity. Through the influence of *Dominicanyorks*, an awareness of Africaness is developing in the Dominican Republic, and even the most popular *balada* group in the Dominican Republic is called "Negros," and use the slogan "Like our color." Due to this African awareness and *Dominicanyorks*' sympathy with the dispossessed, formerly marginalized forms of Afro-Dominican music are finding their way into *merengue* recordings and other forms of popular music. *Merengue* is going through rapid changes; changes where its rhythmic base is taken from Afro-Dominican music or else from African-American hip-hop urban culture. The changes are creating controversies as to the authenticity of the new *merengues*. There are those who claim that this music should receive a different name and those who claim that this is just one more step in the evolution of *merengue*, debates that show resistance towards current changes in Dominicans' perception of themselves.

DR-based Kinito Méndez was among the first *merengue* artists to use Afro-Dominican music in his groundbreaking production called "*A Palo Limpio*" (straight ahead *palo*). Another Dominican band which uses Afro-Dominican music is Tulile. The band uses a combination of snare drums and flutes, instruments not of the traditional *merengue*, but of the folk music of the *cocolo* immigrants in the Dominican Republic. *Cocolos*, as they were derogatively called, were Black immigrants from the Lesser Antilles colonized by the British who came to the Dominican Republic to work on the sugar industry at the end of the 19th century. Their music and dance is still a living tradition in the Dominican Republic although until recent decades not considered "Dominican." While Tulile's music is eclectic, drawing inspiration from sources ranging from Middle Eastern singing to Frank Sinatra, a lot of their pieces use the snare drum and many times substitute the traditional *merengue jaleos* or riffs with single-pitched figurations which come from *gagá* music and ceremonies. Nowadays, many *merengues* use the single pitch figurations of *gagá*, the snare drums of the *cocolos* or incorporate a *palo* music rhythmic base. While Méndez, Tulile and other groups are based in the Dominican Republic, one can not forget that the main market for Dominican music is in New York since piracy in the Dominican Republic forces groups to market themselves abroad. The use of Afro-Dominican elements in their music show the current acceptance of these traditions which started in New York and spread to the Dominican Republic.

A New York group which has based many of their *merengues* on Afro-Dominican music is the band *Amarfis y la banda de Attake*. *Amarfis* uses *gagá* in

their *merengues*, for their rhythmic base and in their choruses and lyrics (for example, "Yemayá," "El pollero," "El concón" and "El platanero"). In "To' la mujere rapan," Amarfis even includes a traditional *gagá* chorus in Haitian Creole which shows an openness to the most discriminated ethnic group in the Dominican Republic, an openness which is not surprising in the New York Dominican community. The current acceptance of Afro-Dominican religion and music can be observed in the lyrics of many current *merengues* which often talk about the advice of "*brujos*,"¹¹ or of deities of Dominican *vudú* such as *Yemayá*, *Papá Candelo* and *Anaísa* (counterpart of St. Ann in Dominican *vudú*).¹² Other types of *merengue* which were created by *Dominicanyorks* are the *meren-house* and *merengue-rap* and *merengues* which consist of a technologically-produced beat with rap-like vocals on top. These are the most popular *merengues* among the youngest island Dominicans. Many are in *Spanglish* rather than just Spanish representing how younger Dominicans now speak. The *Spanglish* that cost *Dominicanyorks* so much discrimination is now a symbol of progress.¹³

* * *

Because of their economic power, their enhanced self-consciousness as a group, and their exposure to new musical and cultural phenomena, diasporic communities exert great and incommensurate cultural influence, even in their homelands. Although, as we have seen, the Dominican Republic, its New York diasporic community, and the popular musics that come out of the resulting cultural juxtapositions share certain characteristics with other Latin American communities, the Dominican Republic is unique because of a concurrent rise and combining of certain "roots" elements (Afro-Dominican music, rural-derived *bachata*, and *merengue típico*) with cosmopolitan New York acquired elements (hip-hop and rap). It is not a simple case of locating how the influence of New York culture and music influences traditional Dominican music, giving it a more techno edge or a more eclectic flavor, although that trend is certainly discernable. What is more interesting, and endlessly more complex, is how this process occurs alongside a roots revival, a revival that is inevitably changed by the new experiences of *Dominicanyorks*, by the new way of seeing themselves, a view clearly heard in their new musical forms.

End Notes

1. During the dictatorship of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo (1930-1961), *merengue's* status was elevated in an attempt to raise nationalist spirits.

2. As a teenager I dated a guy who wore an earring. No man from my social class would wear an earring, so my family immediately knew that he was a *Dominicanyork* and disapproved of the relationship because they assumed he was a "drug-trafficker."

3. US-returned Puerto Ricans have also been regarded with similar ambivalence and disparaged for speaking "bad Spanish."

4. *Bachata* became mainstream in the early 90s, *merengue típico* in the last 5 years and Afro-Dominican music while still not mainstream, is not hidden anymore. Even upper-class Dominicans who would not have heard of *palo* music 10 years ago, nowadays consider it a part of Dominican identity.

5. Dominican artists are always appealing to *Dominicanyorks* because piracy in the Dominican Republic

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means that artists sell very few records there. Here in New York, they sell more CD's and also get paid more for tours and concerts.

6. According to Hutchinson, the modern style is based in mambos and uses new instruments and rhythms as well as influences from North American and other foreign musics.

7. *Quisqueya* is the name that the Native Indians gave to the Dominican Republic. Only Dominicans would use that term, so the fact that Aventura is using it denotes a thorough knowledge of the Dominican Republic.

8. These three terms have very distinct meanings for Dominicans. *Parigüayos* are those who let other people take advantage of them and it can refer to a man who falls in love with a woman and lets her fool him. *Bachatú* is a *bachata* musician, and *mayimbe* is a colloquial name for a guy which gives him status. For example, the great *merengue* singer Fernandito Villalona is known as *El mayimbe*.

9. This manner of singing is highly criticized by some traditional *bachateros* who consider this manner of singing "too gay" for the traditional machismo of the genre. Again here, as in Hutchinson's article on *merengue típico*, we see debates over tradition and modernity.

10. The two main traditional forms of Afro-Dominican music are *palo* music and *gagá*. *Palo* is a generic term for the music of Dominican *vudú* which includes *salves* accompanied by the *palo* drums and the music for Afro-Dominican religious brotherhoods. *Gagá* is essentially the Dominican version of the Haitian *rara*, the music that accompanies a carnivalesque ritual intimately related to Haitian voodoo.

11. Mediums in Dominican *vudú*

12. Some examples of this inclusion of religious themes can be found in "Yemayá" by Amarfis, "El Brujo" by Jossie Esteban, and "El muerto" by Tulile. Other bands which have been influenced by Afro-Dominican music are La Banda Gorda ("Déjalo ahí"), Diómedes y el Grupo Mío ("Esto se Encendió"), and Krisspy ("El llorón").

13. Some of these *Dominicanyorks merengue* artists are Moreno Negrón ("El pájaro malo", "Cúrate conmigo" and "Gallo loco" among others), Magic Juan and Proyecto Uno ("La pera", "Brinca", "El duro" and their biggest success "Tiburón"), Ilegales ("La Morena"), and Papi Sánchez ("Dilemma," "Mano pa' arriba," and "Mi primera dama").

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