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- 1 Picture this : a music video opens with images of two stylishly dressed young dark-skinned men talking to each other by cell phone ; one of them is on a Manhattan rooftop, the other standing in the dark next to a chain link fence. They address each other as “homey”, “bro” and “playboy”, in language and speech patterns most viewers would instantly recognize as those associated with urban African Americans. It is clear the two men have many commonalities and are friends, as they confess their emotional vulnerability to the intense passion they feel for the women they are courting. It is not until 45 seconds into the video, when the music begins, that a crucial distinction between the two becomes apparent : one of them sings in Spanish, the other in English ; the former is a Dominican Latino¹, the other, African American. The style they are singing in is bachata.
- 2 The two singers are stars in their respective musical worlds : Anthony “Romeo” Santos, who began his career with the wildly popular urban bachata group Aventura, is the most successful Dominican bachata artist in the United States ; the other singer is the African American R&B star Usher. The song dramatized in the video, entitled “Promise”, is from Romeo’s *Formula*, vol. 1, the first solo recording he released after Aventura broke up in 2011. Romeo and Usher’s core fans would certainly recognize each artist, but someone unfamiliar with these artists seeing the video for the first time might not understand the subtleties of the inter-cultural dialogue between the Dominican American and African American singers being staged in the video. Given the easy familiarity between the two men, their shared vernacular language and fashion sense, is it an intra-racial dialogue between two black friends ? Or is it an inter-racial dialogue between individuals with entirely different understandings of race and their racial identity ? What are the implications of the images conveyed in this video to historical constructions of Dominican notions of racial identity ?

- 3 According to the United States' bipolar system of racial categorization², most Dominicans in the United States have enough visible African ancestry to be considered black. Dominicans, however, have a long history of deep ambivalence toward their African heritage, and indeed, cultural expressions with visible or audible links to Africa, such as Dominican *vodú* and the musics associated with it, had always been at best ignored but more commonly, stigmatized and rejected (Davis 1994 : 119-155). This essay addresses the extent to which the R&B and hip-hop-inflected urban bachata performed by Romeo and other musicians of his generation reveals—or elides—racial and/or cultural affinities between young New York Dominicans and African Americans. In exploring this question, I seek to shed light on the degree to which Dominicans' history of racial disavowal has limited (or not) the development of a black, or a broader diasporic identity as their communities establish themselves within multi-racial, multi-ethnic New York.
- 4 Coalescing as a distinct style in the Dominican Republic in the 1970's, bachata is characterized by its romantic lyrics and highly emotional singing style, but above all by its guitar-centered instrumentation. Dominican musician Luis Dias has proposed that bachata's unique style of guitar playing draws its rhythmic flow from traditional Afro-Dominican *salves*, songs dedicated to the Virgin Mary (Woolfe 2004), although other Afro-Caribbean influences can be heard in sub-styles of bachata such as bolero-son's livelier and more danceable Cuban-derived son rhythms (Pacini Hernandez 1995 : 19). Because class correlates so strongly with race in the Dominican Republic, the majority of bachata's marginalized practitioners and fans were dark skinned. Dominicans, however, have historically ignored their African heritage, so despite bachata's primarily dark skinned audiences and its audible links to Afro-Dominican sources, it was perceived as poor people's music rather than as black people's music. Thus, unlike other popular music styles that have emerged in other parts of the Americas, such son in Cuba, reggae in Jamaica, or R&B and hip-hop in the United States, bachata has not been considered by either its fans or its detractors to be an Afro-Dominican, Afro-Caribbean or diasporan music.
- 5 Originally performed and consumed by the Dominican Republic's poorest and least educated citizens, bachata's unadorned musical aesthetics, coupled with the unsophisticated production values of early bachata recordings, was perceived as too primitive and vulgar for dissemination on the country's mainstream mass media ; as a result, the genre acquired a highly disreputable image. Bachata's low social status and identity as poor people's music changed in the 1980s and 1990s, however, when the genre was transplanted to New York City by Dominican migrants. To nostalgic Dominican immigrants in New York, bachata's once disparaged earthy simplicity became its signature asset and the source of its appeal. As the genre was transformed into a cherished symbol of Dominican authenticity, its popularity eventually surpassed the merengue *orquestas* that for so long had been imagined as the quintessential musical symbol of Dominican-ness³. Bachata became particularly popular among second generation Dominican immigrants because it offered a powerful way to stay emotionally connected to their ancestral homeland. At the same time, however, young Dominicans born or raised in New York also embraced—with equal enthusiasm—the hip-hop and R&B that they had grown up listening to. When this bilingual and bicultural generation began recording their own bachata around the turn of the millennium, it was marked by a distinct New York flavor linked in multiple ways to R&B and hip-hop. The new style was distinguished from its Dominican antecedents by the term “urban bachata”. The meaning

of the term “urban bachata” in the context of New York’s hip-hop and R&B-dominated urban music scene will also be explored in this essay.

Dominican Racial Identity in New York

- 6 Historically, Dominicans on the island have identified with the racial and cultural *hispanidad* bequeathed to them by the island’s Spanish colonizers, reserving the term “black” for their much-maligned Haitian neighbors. The darker skin tones and other phenotypical indicators of African ancestry exhibited by most Dominicans have been linguistically camouflaged as signs of their indigenous heritage; hence the term *indio* used by dark-skinned Dominicans to identify themselves racially (Candelario 2007 : 11-13 ; Roth 2012 : 11). Migration to New York challenged Dominican immigrants’ racial self-identification as non-black *indios* : being primarily of working or lower middle class origins, and generally phenotypically darker than the nation’s more privileged classes, they found themselves involuntarily categorized within the United States’ bipolar racial system as black. Their perceived blackness was confirmed by the inner city neighborhoods in which Dominican immigrants took up residence, alongside other poor people of color, especially Puerto Ricans (many of whom were dark-skinned as well) and African Americans. As Hoffnung-Garskof has noted, Dominican children began attending inner city New York public schools at a time when, “the geographical term ‘inner city’ referred only to a subset of the children and schools actually located in the city. It meant children who were not white and not middle class and schools that were in institutional collapse” (Hoffnung-Garskof 2008 : 132).
- 7 The experiences of Dominican youth in George Washington High School, located in the upper Manhattan neighborhood where a large proportion of Dominicans immigrants settled, has been extensively analyzed by Hoffnung-Garskof. In 1970, just prior to the major influx of Dominican immigrants to New York that began in the 1980s, 30% of the students were black, 24% were Puerto Rican and 20% were “other Spanish” that included Dominicans, but by the end of the decade the school had become “Dominican territory” (*ibid.* : 133). Hoffnung-Garskof found that relationships between African Americans and Puerto Ricans, who had lived in New York for decades, were easier than with the Dominican newcomers, who were often perceived as unsophisticated hicks. In an effort to acclimatize as quickly as possible, Dominican youth emulated the cultural practices of their African American peers, who “drove the whole notion of hipness in New York City” (*ibid.* : 152). And what was hip in the 1980s and 90s, when New York’s Dominican population was exploding, was hip-hop and R&B.
- 8 As Candelario (2007 : 11) has noted, the consequences of Dominicans’ physical and cultural proximity to African Americans in New York have generated an “ongoing debate within Dominican Studies about whether and how the racial perceptions and ideologies of Dominicans change on migration. Some argue that the migration process and the experience of a racial system different from the one they were socialized into causes a shift in Dominican perceptions of self and other—and, therefore, of Dominican identity. Others argue that Dominicans’ perceptions do not change, or that they change only in that their ideological commitment to anti-Haitianism and Negrophobia is hardened”. Scholars such as Candelario, Roth, Hoffnung-Garskof and Duany, who have explored these questions in depth, have found that despite Dominicans’ realization that in the US their dark skin color rendered them black in the eyes of the wider public, they have not

necessarily embraced their blackness, at least not as it is understood in the United States. Similarly, despite young Dominicans' adoption of African American musical (and fashion) styles, they have not necessarily developed racially based affinities with their African American peers. On the contrary, what their research has shown is that when forced to choose between a black (defined by US "one-drop" rules) identity and a white identity (not available to most Dominicans), most Dominicans have instead located themselves in some sort of intermediate category with ambiguous borders (Duany 1998 ; Candelario 2007 ; Hoffnung-Garskof 2008 ; Roth 2012).

- 9 Dominican ethnicity itself has become one such racially ambiguous identity: "Dominicans, as a group, became New Yorkers who, while held to be racially distinct from whites, were not simply collapsed into the existing categories of African American and Puerto Rican. Dominican became a kind of person one could be, in its own right" (Hoffnung-Garskof 2008 : 99). Dominicans have availed themselves of other identity choices as well, for example, selecting "Other" as their race on census forms, or assuming a pan-ethnic Latino/Hispanic identity⁴. Many Dominicans find the term Hispanic particularly appealing because "Hispanicity in both the United States and the Dominican Republic offers an alternative to blackness. Although 'Hispanic' is a racialized non-white category in the United States, it is also a non-black one" (Candelario 2007 : 12).
- 10 Technically the pan-ethnic terms Latino and Hispanic as used on census forms are not intended to be racially specific (respondents are given a separate box to indicate their race), although these terms have effectively been racialized by those seeking alternative ways of identifying their (mixed) racial identities. Roth, for example, has observed that Dominicans and Puerto Ricans have "helped to create a new American racial schema, moving their host society away from a dominant binary US schema—which would classify them all as White or Black, based on the one-drop rule—to a Hispanicized US schema that treats White, Black and Latino as mutually exclusive racialized groups" (Roth 2012 : 177). Roth describes the shift in Dominicans' racial identities in New York using the concept of "racial schemas", which she defines as "the bundle of racial categories and the set of rules for what they mean, how they are ordered, and how to apply them to oneself and others. Racial schemas are necessarily cognitive phenomena, because they are mental processes that shape our knowledge, but they are also cultural" (*ibid.* : 11). In short, they are fluid and malleable, and they respond to context. Some Dominican immigrants, it should be noted, especially those with higher levels of education, have developed an understanding of their African ancestry more in line with US racial schemas, as well as an appreciation for African Americans' struggles for liberation and equality (Tallaj 2006 ; Roth 2012 : 33-35), but this has not meant that they abandon their primary identity as Dominicans, or as Latinos ; as Roth (2012 : 13) has noted, "people can hold multiple racial schemas at any given time".
- 11 Candelario, who has documented the fluidity of the ways Dominicans understand and present their racial identity, has proposed that adopting a non racially-specific Dominican or Latino identity offers Dominicans the benefit of a "strategic ambiguity" flexible enough to contain the racial and cultural inconsistencies experienced by Dominican immigrants embedded in a demographically multi-racial but ideologically bi-racial society. "Conceptually, ambiguity can be understood as both elusive meaning and systematic multiplicity [...]. Ambiguity is invoked in the first place because of the various and competing ideological codes that frame blackness, whiteness, and indigeneity in the Americas [...]. Although ideologically and institutionally 'African' and 'Hispanic' have

been constructed as oppositional, at the level of Dominican identity discourses and displays such as hair culture, black and Hispanic are much more strategically ambiguous” (Candelario 2007 : 261-262). This expanded range of identity choices helps explain the decrease in the percentage of Dominicans selecting “Black” as their race in the US census, from 27.3% in 1990 to barely over 7% in 2006 (Roth 2012 : 11).

- 12 In summary, Dominicans engage in “a sort of ideological ‘codeswitching’ in which both the Dominican Republic’s and the United States’ race systems are engaged, rejected, and sustained at various historical and biographical moments” (*ibid.* : 263). Assuming a non-racially specific national identity as Dominicans, or a pan-ethnic, multi-racial identity as Hispanic/Latinos, has thus provided Dominicans with identities lying outside and beyond the US traditional black/white paradigm. Candelario and Roth’s theories of flexible racial schemas, racial ambiguity and cultural code-switching are particularly useful for scholars seeking to understand the racial and cultural implications of urban bachata’s connections to African American R&B and hip-hop. But first, some background.

Bachata : Roots and Routes

- 13 Bachata’s aesthetic origins in the Dominican Republic can be traced to the guitar-based trios and quartets long popular in the countryside, in part because the instruments used (guitars, maracas and bongos) were easily accessible to country folk, and could be used to play both slow romantic and upbeat dance tunes at any occasion. Beginning in the 1960, rural migrants seeking economic opportunity in the capital city of Santo Domingo brought with them a taste for long popular guitar-based styles such as Cuban boleros and guarachas and Mexican rancheras, as well as for the domestic guitar-based Dominican merengue. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, migrants’ guitar-based music continued to employ the emotional vocal style characteristic of its antecedent genres, but over time the degraded physical environment of Santo Domingo’s shantytowns, where most migrants ended up, indelibly marked their musical productions. Repertoires whose songs had once been vehicles for melodramatic expressions of romantic love and its sufferings were expanded with songs whose lyrics were blatantly sexual and often misogynistic. The newer style resonated with destitute urban migrants because it articulated the anxieties associated with the loss of traditional patterns of marriage, courtship and gender relationships being experienced by under- and unemployed men spending more and more time in bars and brothels rather than at home or at work.
- 14 The mainstream media and its middle and upper class audiences perceived the guitar-centered music emanating from Santo Domingo’s marginalized shantytowns to be unacceptably crude and vulgar, and they began referring to the style as bachata, a term that originally referred to any backyard party enlivened with food, drinking, music and dancing. In the 1970s the term began to be used to deliberately demean the music and its fans by associating them with vulgarity, coarseness, and lack of refinement. Moreover, bachata’s typically poor and dark skinned performers, and the highly vernacular lyrics they composed, also raised, albeit indirectly, issues of color and race that did not sit easily with Dominicans’ reluctance to acknowledge their African ancestry. As I have noted elsewhere, “the commonly used terms *negro/a*, *prieto/a*, *moreno/a*—all terms for black or dark men or women—clearly situated the singers, their mates, and by extension, their audience within an Afro-Dominican social context”, further establishing the undesirability of the genre and its practitioners (Pacini Hernandez 1995 : 135-136).

Bachata's marginalized and impoverished fans (who continued to include non-migrating rural folk as well) remained loyal to guitar-centered music, but Dominicans aspiring to upward mobility disassociated themselves from the style, preferring instead more appropriate indicators of cosmopolitan urban modernity, such as the big band merengue and salsa *orquestas* dominating the Latin music airwaves throughout urban Latin and Latino America (including New York)⁵.

- 15 Bachata's low social status began changing in the wake of two phenomena. One was the release in 1990 of a massively successful, Grammywinning recording by Juan Luis Guerra—one of the Dominican Republic's most well established musicians who had built his career on sophisticated combinations of jazz and merengue. Entitled *Bachata Rosa*, the recording contained a few songs expressing Guerra's delicate interpretations of bachata's rustic aesthetics, foregrounding the genre's guitar-based sonority and melodramatic singing style, but that were far more sophisticated than their grass-roots counterparts. Coming from such a highly regarded musician, Guerra's bachatas opened the doors to wider social acceptance of the previously disreputable genre. The other, far more significant event influencing the transformation of bachata's social status, was the massive migration of Dominicans to the United States that peaked in the 1980s and 1990s, expanding the Dominican population in the US by nearly 73% between 1990 and 2008 (Caro-López & Limonic 2010 : 4). While some Dominicans settled in Northeastern cities such as Boston and Lawrence, Massachusetts and Providence, Rhode Island, the majority of them put their roots down in New York City, where by 1990 they constituted 18.7% of New York's Latino population (Flores 2000 : 143). In New York, nostalgic Dominican immigrants, especially those of working class backgrounds, could openly embrace bachata's melodramatic expressions of loss and longing, and its lyrics' uniquely Dominican form of sexual humor, without fear of social approbation. Moreover, in a city with an increasingly diverse Latino population, bachata's signature guitar based sounds, so easily distinguishable from other "Latin" musics⁶, had the power to signify something authentically Dominican, a feature attractive to both immigrants as well as to their US-born children. I should note, however, that the nostalgia invoked by the sounds of bachata among New York Dominicans was not for the Dominican Republic's urban shantytowns and their cultural practices, but rather for more abstract ideas about homeland, heritage and community.
- 16 Initially bachata's circulation in New York was limited to recordings imported from the Dominican Republic, but as bachata was transformed into a cherished, if still rustic, symbol of home, New York also became a central axis of bachata performance. Transplanted and touring Dominican bachateros such as Joe Veras, Raulín Rodríguez, and Luis Vargas found they could make good money—indeed, much better money than in the Dominican Republic—performing in neighborhood clubs throughout New York, as well as other cities with Dominican communities along the Northeastern corridor. Until the new millennium, however, bachata's popularity remained largely confined to homesick Dominican immigrants attracted to its compelling associations with the Dominican homeland. As Ned Sublette noted in 2001, "Bachateros are huge [...]. The stars stay in New York two months at a time, working doubles and triples a night. But they don't play anywhere the hip people go. It's strictly the hard-core Dominican circuit" (Ross 2001).
- 17 Despite bachata's growing appeal to Dominican immigrants and its active New-York-based performance scene, the music continued to be produced primarily on the island, and as a result, it did not—it could not— reflect the experiences of second generation

bilingual and bicultural Dominicans growing up in a sonic landscape marked equally by the Dominican and Spanish Caribbean popular music their parents played at home, and by the hip-hop and R&B they heard constantly at school and on the street. It was inevitable that young Dominicans born or raised in New York would synthesize the two aesthetics in ways that would simultaneously express their identities as urban New Yorkers and as the children of Dominican immigrants.

- 18 The first bachata group to find commercial success by combining Dominican and New York musical sensibilities was Aventura, which formed in the mid-1990s. Three of the band members were born in the Bronx: Anthony “Romeo” Santos (born of a Dominican father and a Puerto Rican mother), and the siblings Lenny and Max Santos (no relation to Anthony); the fourth member, Henry Santos (Romeo’s cousin), was born in the Dominican Republic but raised in the Bronx. Their debut album, *Generation Next* released in 1999, was titled in English, and the album cover image presented the group posed in front of a New York City apartment building in what their intended fans would easily understand as an urban attitude, conveying emphatically that this group was not from the island but from New York, and that it was offering something different from its Dominican antecedents. The songs’ instrumentation and vocal style were clearly bachata, but they had a subtle R&B feel to them. One song in particular helped to launch the group’s career, “Cuando Volverás”, which appeared in a Spanish and a Spanglish version—a first in bachata—both of which could be heard blaring from car and radio speakers throughout Latino New York.
- 19 Aventura’s aesthetic connections to R&B and hip-hop became even more explicit in their 2002 recording *We Broke the Rules*, whose hit song “Obsesión”, was included in both a Spanish and an English remix version. The video for the Spanish version locates Romeo phoning his love interest from a beach in the Dominican Republic, but the language of the song, which included terms such as “you know he’s kind of wack” and “I didn’t have your digits and your girl just kept on dissin” clearly located the singer’s life in New York. Bachata record producer and promoter Marti Cuevas observed that “this record was the first that really went down the road of urban bachata. If you listen to those arrangements and Lenny’s guitar playing and the bass playing you can really hear the influence of the hip-hop generation and R&B [...]. They grew up in the hip-hop generation, and the way Lenny Santos uses his guitar has some of those influences from sampled electronic music. He really revolutionized the style of guitar playing. To me, one of the signatures of urban bachata is the influence of Lenny Santos, and of course the R&B and the total influence of American music, and singing in English, Spanish and Spanglish [...]. In every musical aspect it’s a shade different than playing traditional bachata” (telephone interview, January 14, 2013)⁷.
- 20 Incorporating urban influences into bachata music came naturally to Aventura’s musicians; as Romeo noted in an interview, “I was born and raised in the Bronx, and one of the great things growing up there is that I was exposed to many different genres [...]. You would go down the block, and on one corner you would hear bachata, on another some salsa, and of course there was hip-hop and R&B all over the place. So for me it is very organic to have these combinations, to be speaking in Spanglish” (Rohter 2011). Yet if it is true that Aventura included the sounds and images of R&B and hip-hop and added new instruments such as keyboards to the bachata ensemble, they also retained bachata’s quintessential guitar and bongo drum-based aesthetic, romantic lyrics, and a highly emotional vocal style, indicating that they were engaged in a delicate balancing act

between innovation and tradition. They also used Spanglish and English in all their subsequent recordings, although never in equal proportions. Indeed, Linda Flores Ohlson has quantified Aventura's use of English, Spanish and Spanglish in the four recordings they released between 2000 and 2005, and found that despite some exceptions, such as some mixed language verses (as in "Cuando Volverás"), some interjected exclamations in English, and occasional English language, R&B style songs such as "Please Don't Waste My Time" (from their 2003 recording *Love and Hate*), the great majority of Aventura's songs throughout the ascent of their career were in Spanish (Ohlson 2007). In other words, although their English and Spanglish lyrics established Aventura's credentials as New York Dominicans' "generation next", these New York-based, fully bilingual musicians used English and Spanglish sparingly enough to avoid disrupting their primary identity as Spanish speaking Dominicans.

- 21 Similarly, Aventura's romantic lyrics simultaneously connected urban bachata to both traditional Dominican bachata and to R&B and hip-hop, although they differentiated them from each as well. Their signature highly emotional vocals, for example, retained the genre's interest in the themes of love, longing and loss, but they refrained from the more unfiltered, "vulgar" lyrics that had made earlier bachata so disreputable in the Dominican Republic. Aventura also addressed controversial themes relevant to their young US based audiences but that had not been not characteristic of traditional bachata, such as single motherhood ("Amor de Madre"), abortion ("El Aborto"), and child sex abuse ("La Niña"). They avoided, however, the edgier narratives characteristic of hip-hop lyrics celebrating the harsher aspects of street culture such as drug use, violence, and promiscuous sex.
- 22 Women in particular were drawn to Romeo's emotionally vulnerable vocal style, attracting feminine audiences in numbers that traditional Dominican bachata had never enjoyed. Over the next decade Aventura's popularity spread beyond their Dominican fan base, first to New York Puerto Ricans, then to Latinos throughout the US, and subsequently beyond to Latin America. By the time Aventura broke up in 2011, they had released five studio and three live recordings, each exceeding the last one in terms of sales and positions on the Latin charts : *Love and Hate* sold a million copies in 2003 ; their 2007 Aventura's live concert recording of their sold out Madison Square Garden show, *Kings of Bachata Live at Madison Square Garden*, sold 8 million copies. In 2010 they sold out four Madison Square Garden concerts—triple the number of tickets sold for a Lady Gaga concert opening at the same time. More notably, their recordings began crossing over from the Latin charts to the Billboard 200, first in 2005, with *God's Project*, which charted at #133, and 2009's *The Last*, which charted #5 on the Billboard 200.
- 23 Aventura's musical sensibilities were shared by other bilingual and bicultural bachata artists who launched careers in the early aughts, among them Bachata Heightz, Prince Royce, Toby Love and Xtreme, who had similarly grown up listening to urban music and considered it their own. As Nir Seroussi, President of Sony Music US Latin, explained, "if you are a creative person, an artist, when you sit down to do music, if you are doing any sort of Latin rhythms you are going to incorporate knowingly or not knowingly some influences from the other side. What's uncommon about a kid like Royce or Anthony Santos is that they incorporated influences into bachata that happened to be an urban influence, and therefore you have that association of the word 'urban' with bachata" (telephone interview, February 5, 2013).

- 24 In part, urban bachateros' use of English, Spanish and Spanglish was the natural product of a bilingual and bicultural upbringing, but as professional musicians, their ability to move between languages has also given them opportunities for increasing their audiences beyond their Dominican base. The Massachusetts-born Domenic Marte, for example, whose experiments with what would become urban bachata in the mid 1990s were influenced by R&B groups such as Boyz II Men, explains why he began incorporating English language songs in his repertoire: "We wanted to cater not just to Latinos, but to the universal language of English. So that's what we did, we did a lot of Spanglish songs, they were successful, and we were able to captivate" (telephone interview, January 28, 2013)⁸. Marte did not, however, always captivate his more traditional Dominican audiences: "If you sing in Spanish, you are still trying to cater to the Latinos. Unfortunately it was very hard with the styles I was doing, it was very tough, because not everyone is ready for a certain change. There were times when we went to perform and there were people screaming and lashing out words that were really rough and tough to hear."
- 25 The combination of bachata rhythms and sound textures, multilingual lyrics, and R&B/hip-hop aesthetics also pushed the music of these New York based bachata groups well beyond the traditional boundaries of what was considered to be tropical Latin music by the music industry⁹. At the same time, bachata instrumentation, rhythms, and Spanish language lyrics did not fit well into the industry's urban category that had been synonymous with African American R&B and hip-hop. The boundaries between urban and tropical Latin music were further destabilized in the mid-aughts, when another audibly urban "Latin" style began making waves throughout the US: reggaeton, whose multiple roots in Jamaican dancehall, Panamanian *reggae en español* and English and Spanish-language hip-hop had converged in Puerto Rico in the late 1990s¹⁰. Reggaeton's aggressively urban and masculinist sensibilities were clearly indebted to hip-hop and its abovementioned circum-Caribbean variants, but like the new urban style of bachata making itself heard in New York in the same period, reggaeton's Spanish lyrics and increasingly frequent use of Spanish Caribbean rhythms distinguished it from English language hip-hop. When Daddy Yankee's song "Gasolina" became a smash hit in 2004, reggaeton began receiving airplay on English language radio stations that previously had played only hip-hop and R&B. Although reggaeton's crossover popularity among non-Spanish speakers did not last as long as its supporters hoped, it demonstrated that hip-hop sensibilities could provide a bridge between Spanish and Englishspeaking audiences.

"Urban" Music : Origins and Implications

- 26 As the sounds of Puerto Rican reggaeton and New York bachata began spreading beyond their formerly ethnically-defined fan bases, the terms "urban Latin" and "urban bachata" emerged to distinguish these styles from other, more "traditional" Spanish Caribbean styles in the tropical Latin music category. There was a logic to this new nomenclature, because reggaeton and urban bachata were both clearly products and expressions of contemporary urban life, but more specifically because of their audible connections to hip-hop and R&B, two styles that for decades had been collectively been referred to as "urban music". Terms such as "urban," "Latin," and "tropical" are music industry categories intended to facilitate marketing, and they never map seamlessly onto the musical preferences of the social groups they are presumed to represent. Nonetheless,

despite their imprecisions, changes in the meanings of such musical categories at particular points in time can indicate shifts in the collective popular imagination. Moreover, broad terms such as “rock” or “soul” or “R&B” have always been used as shorthand ways to affirm or communicate individuals’ musical preferences (what they listen to) and by extension, their identities (who they are).

- 27 The term urban technically refers to cities—the inhabitants and cultures associated with densely built environments—not to the race of their inhabitants, so in principle any music produced in cities is urban. Most contemporary popular music is produced in urban contexts; inexorably, as the United States’ urban and suburban populations continue to grow at the expense of its rural population, it is more widely consumed in cities as well. Urban, meaning “from the city”, then, is usually simply assumed when speaking of contemporary popular music, making it unnecessary to specify that, say, pop, rock or techno, are urban musics. In contrast, music styles whose production and consumption are associated with rural origins and culture generally require explicit identification, as in “country music”, or its equivalent in Latin music, “regional Mexican”.
- 28 In the United States, however, the meaning of the term urban, when referring to popular music, has moved beyond simple association with city life and culture, and often refers specifically to the music styles produced by and for urban African Americans. Urban music is a shortened form of the term “urban contemporary”, a term originally developed in the 1970s by African American radio deejay Frankie Crocker (Williams 2000). In an attempt to attract a wider, multi-racial range of listeners, Crocker, who had established his reputation as a black music deejay, changed his allblack music programming, moving beyond styles primarily made by and for African Americans—which at the time included soul, funk and disco—adopting a more eclectic format that included white disco and R&B artists as well. Crocker’s intention in employing the concept of “urban contemporary” was to render his radio formatting more racially ambiguous than the term “black music” (Ward 1998 : 448) although demographic realities continued to link the idea of city and street culture to black popular music styles at a time when most African Americans were, in fact, urban. The “white flight” to the suburbs that had begun in the post-World War II period had left behind decaying urban cores, commonly referred to as “inner cities”, populated mostly by poor black and Latino populations¹¹. The disco, soul and funk music that remained the core of Crocker’s programming all originated in cities with large African American populations such as New York, Los Angeles, Memphis and Detroit—as did the hip-hop and R&B music that came after them a decade later. In ordinary parlance, the shortened term “urban” has continued to serve as a shorthand way of referring to contemporary African American popular music.
- 29 It is important to emphasize that equating the term “urban” with contemporary African American styles is neither historically or technically accurate, as it overlooks multiple nuances, exceptions and variations, such as Puerto Rican contributions to early New York hip-hop, and white R&B artists such as Hall and Oates. Nonetheless, like other similarly slippery terms—including the terms black and Latino themselves—the term urban is still widely used and understood to refer to African American R&B and hip-hop by journalists as well as by ordinary people concerned more with economy of language than with historical accuracy. In my home city of Boston, to take one random example, a “Boston Urban Music Festival” was described in a press release as featuring “the best of Hip-Hop, R&B, Funk and Soul”. Another similarly random but telling example is a 2012 *Village Voice* blog post analyzing sales of R&B and hip-hop music, in which the author uses the terms

black and urban interchangeably, as in the following sentences : “Black music, in its various forms, is in a commercial funk [...]. More than three years after Top 40 radio took a hard right toward dancepop, urban music has been left to founder” (Molanphy 2012).

- 30 Not everyone employs the term urban in this routine and unreflective way to refer to R&B and hip-hop ; in 2012, for example, *Billboard* employed the terms R&B and/or hip-hop to categorize its sales charts of contemporary African American styles. Furthermore, some definitions of what constitutes “urban” or “urban contemporary” music are more capacious, and include Caribbean as well as African American styles. When I did an internet search for “urban music”, for example, the following definition from Wikipedia illustrates that the category can also imply a broader diasporic dimension : “Urban contemporary radio stations feature a playlist made up entirely of hip hop, R&B, electronic dance music such as dubstep and drum and bass (often with hip hop vocalists or rappers) and Caribbean music such as reggae, reggaeton, zouk, and sometimes soca [in Toronto, London, New York City, Boston and Miami]. Urban contemporary was developed through the characteristics of genres such as R&B and soul)” (accessed March 2013). Employing the term “urban” to refer to musical styles performed and consumed by bilingual and bicultural Latinos, however, effectively unmoored the term from its original anchoring in English language, primarily African American R&B and hip-hop, and shifted it towards a more generic definition related to urban life and culture shared by both African Americans and Latinos.

Urban Bachata and Dominican Identity in the New Millennium

- 31 In 2007 *Billboard* Latin music analyst Leila Cobo defined urban bachata as “a style that mixes traditional Dominican bachata beats with R&B sensibility and vocalizing [...] [B]achata, with its slower beat and use of the acoustic guitars and gentle percussion, invites the romantic lyrics and vocalizing associated with R&B ballads” (Cobo 2007). She supported her emphasis on urban bachata’s connections to R&B by citing other Latin music industry executives : one noted, “They’re using a lot of Americanflavored R&B lyrics in it. It’s very melodic”. Another executive cited by Cobo elaborated further on the definition of urban bachata, implicitly conflating urban with African American styles : “A genre that blends tropical and urban rhythms will necessarily develop here [...]. In any party with young Latinos, you play music and they begin to dance. But these younger generations are obviously also very influenced by urban music” (*ibid.*)¹². Indeed, it was precisely urban bachata’s visual and audible links to African American R&B and hip-hop—musical styles synonymous with urban cosmopolitanism—that made it so attractive to young Dominicans. When asked about the meaning of urban bachata, one of my students at Tufts University explained that “urban means R&B and rap”, and went on to note that he and his friends enjoyed listening to urban bachata because “We don’t listen to non-urban music”¹³.
- 32 As its popularity continued to grow, urban bachata’s engagement with African American styles grew more extensive and explicit. In 2010 the Bronx-born Prince Royce (Geoffrey Royce Rojas), for example, released a bilingual cover version, in bachata rhythm, of Ben E. King’s classic 1961 hit “Stand by Me”, which went to number 1 on the *Billboard* Latin and Tropical charts, and at the Latin Grammys that year Prince Royce performed a duet of the song with Ben E. King himself, introducing (or re-introducing) millions of Latino viewers to the venerable African American rhythm and blues singer. The following year Anthony

Santos—who by then was going by the single name, Romeo—released his first solo album, *Formula Vol. 1*, the centerpiece of which was clearly his duet with the African American R&B superstar Usher on the song “Promise”. In 2012, the New York-born Dominican Leslie Grace scored a major hit with a bilingual bachata version of another African American R&B classic, to which she added a contemporary twist to the Shirelles’ original 1960 title : “Will U Love Me Tomorrow”.

- 33 Urban bachateros also drew from the experience—and the professional networks—of African American producers. Romeo’s video for “Promise”, for example, was directed by Anthony Mandler, well known for the videos he had made for prominent R&B and hip-hop artists such as Rihanna, Jay-Z and Kanye West, which opened up the doors to radio and television programs that normally do not play “Latin” music, including MTV. Domenic Marte has been managed by an African American, and Marte describes the benefits of working with him as follows : “He comes from a hip hop background, managing many artists from back in the day and working for hip hop labels. That’s one of the things that he always gets on me, ‘we need to be different with this new album, let’s give a little bit of R&B, hip-hop.
- 34 Let’s also focus on the African American community’. That’s one of the things he has done when it comes to us [bachateros], he’s one of the guys that pushes us to that” (telephone interview, January 28, 2013).
- 35 The urban markers of New York bachata were not solely about musical aesthetics, they where also about bachata musicians and fans’ non-musical forms of cultural expression that included fashion, social behavior, vernacular language and linguistic inflections—what Ginetta Candelario has called “identity displays”—“material representations of a sense of self that is manifested in various ways : discursively, symbolically, and bodily” (Candelario 2007 : 6). In an interview, Nir Seroussi underscored the importance of nonmusical signs of urban identity : “I think bachata is being associated with urban because of the audience, and [...] at the end of the day, music is a reflection of the culture. You can look at artists like Romeo and Prince Royce and Xtreme, their upbringing was more an urban and their influences span from general market, and tending to be more R&B and urban influenced, mixed with Latin culture [...]. Like with Romeo, a lot of what he does musically is not really urban, but it is him as a persona, it’s who he’s speaking to that makes it urban more than the actual music” (telephone interview, February 5, 2013).
- 36 Yet, if urban bachata speaks to musicians and fans’ identity as urban cosmopolitans, they continue to foreground their Dominican cultural heritage in ways that explicitly distinguish them from African Americans as well as from other Latinos. Leslie Grace, for example, expressed her dual desire to express her urban upbringing and her Dominican heritage at the same time : “Bachata is something that comes from my culture, my parents are Dominican. I was born and raised in New York, it’s something that I’ve heard all my life. So being able to give it a new twist with part of the influences that I’ve received from my surroundings, I can give it a little R&B and still keep my culture at the same time” (Bolaño 2012). The experience of Domenic Marte provides another example of how urban bachateros try to negotiate their urban and their island-oriented identities. Marte credits his African American producers and band members with helping him to reach non-Latino audiences, but Marte has insisted on maintaining bachata’s core sonorities : “My director, who’s a mean guitar player, he’s American, he’s not even Latino. My second guitar player, he comes from that urban world of music as well. My programmer, he only knows hip-hop [...]. What you do bring in, is you want a real, pure

Dominican from the Dominican Republic, that came here and would know how to play bongos, or the güira, all the percussion. That has to be from the Dominican Republic because you want to get that true, true feel” (telephone interview, January 28, 2013).

- 37 Marte and other urban bachateros, whose primary audiences are young Latinos with similar urban backgrounds, retain these audible bachata sonorities because they know it’s what their core fan base wants to hear. One Dominican American student I interviewed at Tufts emphasized the importance of being able to hear bachata aesthetics in urban bachata: “If it loses its bachata, it’s just crappy R&B”. Another Tufts student who had lived in the Dominican Republic as a child but came of age in New York listening to R&B, loved bachata, both urban and traditional, because of its ability to invoke both experiences: “R&B styles don’t appeal to my emotions like bachateros like Raulín Rodríguez. I was listening to those songs the other day and they took me back to the Dominican Republic where I grew up, and I can’t think of a song in R&B style that does the same for me.”
- 38 The way urban bachateros employ bachata’s signature sonorities to explicitly foreground their Dominican identity stands in marked contrast to the elusiveness with which they display their racial identity. The sounds and images of Romeo’s aforementioned “Promise” video illustrate this ambiguity nicely; indeed, ambiguity is central to the video’s narrative approach. Romeo and Usher’s vernacular banter, clothing and hairstyles are such commonly recognized markers of black urban culture that viewers could easily perceive both men as African American. Romeo may look and talk like his African American friend Usher, but it soon becomes clear that they are different as the video proceeds to construct subtle cultural distinctions. A fleeting scene early in the video, for example, shows Romeo dancing with his girlfriend in the street, next to some older men playing Dominoes—a quintessential visual tableaux of Dominican street life that any Dominican would recognize; in the background is a wall mural depicting the Dominican flag. When Romeo and Usher begin alternating verses, the guitar and bongo-centered bachata style they are singing along to is clearly “Latin”, although the emotional intensity of the singing is close enough to R&B’s that the transitions between verses is seamless, underscoring the aesthetic and cultural connections between bachata and R&B. Yet, if Romeo’s racial identity seems purposely vague in this video, the fully bilingual Romeo most conspicuously displays his Dominican-ness by singing only in Spanish, while Usher sings in English. In short, bachata’s signature musical aesthetics, the acoustic guitar arpeggios and bongo drum rhythms are essential ways of displaying difference, but language, even when the musical aesthetics are heavily indebted to R&B and hip-hop, is clearly an equally powerful way of constructing distinctions—and dividing lines—between Latin and non-Latin urban music and culture. Usher may be able to accompany Romeo in a duet similar to bachata in style, but he doesn’t sing in Spanish.
- 39 Statements by Leslie Grace provide a different kind of example of how Dominican urban bachateros employ racial ambiguity alongside cultural clarity when they present themselves to the public. In a 2012 Spanish language interview for Univisión, the US’s largest Spanish language television network, the *café-au-lait* colored Grace accentuates her whiteness, but cheerfully notes that she was “darkened” when she visited the island and engaged in Dominican cultural practices such as eating a traditional plantain-based dish: “I still have my childhood nickname, which was Casper the Friendly Ghost, because I was so white, so white! After the first time they took me to Santo Domingo I started taking on some color, after I started eating my *mangú* and all that, it’s like it made me

take on my homeland a bit more” (Bolaño 2012)¹⁴. In short, Grace maintains an ambiguous racial identity while using language and culture to underscore her ethnic identity as Dominican.

- 40 As the aesthetic boundaries between urban African American styles and urban Latino styles were destabilized by artists such as Romeo, Prince Royce, Toby Love and Leslie Grace, there was no public vocabulary available to distinguish between them. Terms such as “American” and “American street”, and “English” appeared in press stories in which urban African American styles were being discussed in conjunction with (or in opposition to) urban Latino styles—even though Latinos are also American citizens, English speaking, and inhabitants of “the street”. But Latinos themselves also employed these same terms. Clearly, the crucial distinction was not location of residence (both groups were urban New Yorkers), nor race (both were Afrodescendants), but rather, language, as a proxy for culture. To me, the most unexpected way of distinguishing between language groups was the use of the term “Anglo” to refer to non-Latino English-speakers, regardless of race. In a fascinating remark at the 2010 Billboard Latin Music Conference, Romeo declared that he wanted to reach out to mainstream acts like Usher and Justin Timberlake because “There’s something missing, and that’s putting these artists from the Anglo market into my bachata world” (Cobo 2011). Even before Romeo had invited Usher to participate in the “Promise” duet, he had indicated to the press that “I’ll have an artist from the Anglo industry sing bachata [on my album]. Maybe a superstar like Usher” (Blanco, January 20, 2012). I’m reasonably sure Usher was not accustomed to being referred to as an Anglo, but most Latinos would understand perfectly what Romeo was saying and why: in the US English-only mainstream popular music landscape, the most challenging barrier to bilingual and bicultural Latino artists has been language. Hence, Romeo understood the best way to reach R&B/hip-hop audiences was to perform with a major English-speaking artist. Usher himself recognized this language barrier in an interview that English-speaking fans were unlikely to accept music in Spanish, observing that it’s harder for monolinguals to enjoy a Spanish-speaking song “[...] but when you listen to [Romeo], you’re not put off by it” (*ibid*).
- 41 Romeo has recorded duets with other African American hip-hop and R&B artists such as P. Diddy and Lil Wayne, as well as with the Cuban American rapper Pitbull, with mixed success, but the dialogues taking place between urban African American artists and urban bachateros have not been unfolding on an equal playing field. Nir Seroussi has noted that Latinos are much more likely to be expected to accommodate to non-Latino audiences than vice versa: “What happens is that these general market artists are looking at the Hispanic market and seeing its importance for them. A guy like Lil Wayne feels like, ‘man, if doing something with Romeo adds to my fan base, it’s a strategic move that touches on perhaps an audience that I don’t have but I can relate to’. But it doesn’t really work backwards, that’s the difficulty of bachata, it’s so Latino. When you talk about crossover, bachata artists are looking at how they can musically modify their foundation for the general market, versus bringing the Americans to bachata, they are looking at the other way around: how do I become more general market friendly musically, and hence go more pop, or more urban, for that audience to identify with that music? That’s been the biggest barrier, that bachata is very Latino [...]. It’s not the content of the songs, and they are doing bilingual stuff, and for some of them English is their first language. The issue is the music, the foundation of bachata, that’s the hard part to cross over, what we haven’t

been able to do, to lure non-Latinos to this style. It's our biggest challenge" (telephone interview, February 5, 2013)¹⁵.

Demographics, Race, Language and Identity

- 42 Despite the complexities of being bilingual in a largely monolingual nation, second generation Dominicans' ability to construct identities rooted simultaneously in their homeland and in New York has been facilitated by the growing numbers of Dominicans in New York, and further encouraged by the exploding Latino population at the national level. The numbers of Dominicans arriving in the United States rose dramatically in the latter decades of the 20th century, increasing from only 11,883 in 1960, to 537,120 by 1993, and rising even further in 2006, to 1,217,160 (Hoffnung-Garskof 2008 : 149 ; Roth 2012 : 10). Dominicans are also projected to outnumber Puerto Ricans in New York within a decade (Caro-López & Limonic 2010 : 4).
- 43 As for Latinos nationally, by the early 2010s their numbers had surpassed 50 million, and the majority of those 18 and under were US-born, bilingual and bicultural. Music industry personnel have taken note. In 2012, for example, an article in *Billboard* summarized a 2011 Nielsen report on the "State of the Hispanic Consumer" : "If that population segment was contained in its own country, its buying power would make it one of the top 20 economies in the world [...]. Latinos are a fundamental component to business success and not a passing niche on the sideline" (Cobo 2012).
- 44 These demographic changes are altering the dynamics of the popular music landscape in which young Dominicans have been embedded for decades : being urban no longer has to mean being black, it can also mean being Latino. With Latinos surpassing African Americans as the nation's largest minority group (Clemetson 2003), it is becoming possible to use the term "urban" without regard for its previous African American specificity. For example, Alberto Vasallo, editor of Boston's Spanish Language newspaper *El Mundo* noted that previously, "urban meant African American because over the years the demographics were that—inner city meant you were talking about a largely African American community. Now, with the whole minority/majority nation and with the Latino influx and the sons and daughters of Latinos who now make up two thirds of Latinos in the US, urban is a much more diverse term. So when I hear 'urban bachata' I don't hear African American, I think of these young kids born in Washington Heights, who live in the Northeast corridor, who are Latino" (Interview, January 22, 2013). For this reason, in 2011 the online site LatinRapper.com was able to describe the Bronx-born bachatero Toby Love as simply an "urban artist" rather than having to specify him as an urban Latin or urban bachata artist. Moreover, R&B and hip-hop are becoming musics that Dominican and other Latino children of the city are simply claiming as their own. As Toby Love explained to the abovementioned LatinRapper (2011) interviewer, "To me, Bachata is like R&B, Rhythm and Blues. It wasn't really that hard for me to incorporate *my music* (emphasis mine) into Bachata, 'cause I was raised around that".
- 45 Bilingual urban bachata has already proved to be a bridge between bachata and R&B and hip-hop fans, but the burgeoning numbers of Latinos suggest that the pressure to "cross over" to either white or black audiences in order to succeed (by selling music) may be destabilizing the lop-sided dynamics of cross-cultural musical exchanges in which Latinos have always been expected to perform in English and to downplay the "Latin-ness" of their music if they are to succeed¹⁶. Romeo's decision, at the height of his popularity, *not*

to sing in English in his consequential duet with Usher—which he knew would get airplay with monolingual R&B audiences—indicates his desire to reverse the direction of crossing. Indeed, in interviews he has challenged the assumptions that crossing over must by definition be a one way street : “I never liked the term crossover [...]. I just felt like that if I’m going to cross over, why not have the English audience cross over too, to my world ?” (Rohter 2011). Usher, commenting on why he chose to record with Romeo, indicates that he understands the implications of the changing cultural dynamics : “(Bachata is) a cultural movement that I wanted to be associated with. It was a new experience for my fans as well as for (Romeo’s)” (Mallenbaum 2012).

- 46 In a popular music landscape increasingly marked by the presence and preferences of Latinos, bilingualism has, in fact, become a distinct advantage to Dominican urban bachateros, because they have the linguistic skills to appeal to multiple audiences in ways inaccessible to their monolingual peers. Furthermore, some bachateros are taking advantage of the United States’ changing demographics by performing songs intended for Latino fans who may not even be fans of urban music. In addition to his duets with Usher and Lil Wayne, and two duets with well-known traditional island-based bachateros, Romeo’s *Formula Vol. 1* features Mexican American comedian George Lopez in the spoken narrative introduction ; a duet with Mexican pop singer Mario Domm ; and collaborations with Spanish hip-hop singer La Mala Rodríguez and flamenco artist Tomatito—not all of whom would be of interest to non-Latino urban music fans. Similarly, Prince Royce has performed a duet, “Te Perdiste Mi Amor”, with Mexican pop star, Thalía, and urban bachata pioneer Domenic Marte has recorded a duet, “Muero de Celos”, with Mexican singer-songwriter Luz Ríos. Marte has made even more deliberate moves towards appealing to broader Latino audiences in the video for his song “Deseos de Amarte”, in which he visually locates himself in the Southwestern scrublands and dunes of Nevada’s Armagosa Valley, within a landscape that would resonate well with Mexican Americans, but not with urban New Yorkers. Marte refers to his nonurban material as “pop bachata”, which he distinguishes not only from urban bachata but from traditional bachata as well : “The chord progressions and the guitars we use [for these songs] are very different, they have nothing to do with bachata, and we’ve never used any guitars that any traditional bachata has used. And we don’t use a lot of the synths that urban bachata would use” (telephone interview, January 28, 2013).
- 47 The emergence of a more pop-oriented bilingual and cosmopolitan bachata that does not necessarily depend on R&B and hip-hop influences for its appeal, does not suggest that urban bachata’s popularity will decline ; on the contrary, given the continuing importance of those genres in the US soundscape in which Dominicans and other Latino youth are embedded, the visually and audibly urban bachata performed by the likes of Romeo, Prince Royce and Toby Love will continue to thrive, as will other urban Latin styles such as reggaeton. Moreover, some Latino youth will continue to embrace more traditional styles from their parents’ homeland, even if they have never themselves been there, because they invoke a national identity that distinguishes them ethnically from Latinos of other nationalities. Contemporary urban bachateros thus enjoy numerically larger, more culturally diverse, and more geographically dispersed Latino audiences than they had at the turn of the millenium, and in seeking to appeal to them, they have a wider range of aesthetic and cultural—and identity—choices at their disposal.
- 48 Bilingual and bicultural Dominican musicians will thus continue to employ urban aesthetics in strategic ways, performing the sort of cultural code-switching described by

Candelario, in which language will continue to play an important role in distinguishing urban bachata from R&B and hip-hop. As Marti Cuevas noted of US-born Dominicans, “I think they feel affinity with black culture, with hip hop culture, but I think that the relationship of being in the Spanish club is stronger than that”. She goes on, however, to note—astutely, given the internal diversity within Latino communities (and even within Latino families)—that “it’s impossible to generalize, everybody comes at it from a different point of view [...] when the younger kids go to school here, they learn to speak English. Some of them retain their orientation for their *hispanidad*, while others go more towards the Afro-American culture, musically and otherwise” (telephone interview, January 14, 2013).

- 49 In this regard, Dominicans are much like other Afro-Latin American immigrants, but especially Puerto Ricans, who have similarly had to (re)negotiate their racial identities when they arrive in the United States. Like Dominicans, Puerto Ricans are a multi-racial people whose racial schemas have conflicted with the United States’ one-drop rule, and they too have availed themselves of the “Other” category when forced to identify themselves racially by the US census (Roth 2012 : 11). Hoffnung-Garskof (2008 : 115) has underlined New York Dominicans’ “close practical association with Puerto Ricans [...] the group Dominicans most depended on in New York before they had institutions of their own [...]. When Dominicans acculturated in New York, they did so in large part by sharing the social space and the fate of their Puerto Rican neighbors”. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, when Dominicans were pouring into New York, their longerestablished Puerto Rican peers were well accustomed to interacting in the same socio-cultural spaces and practices as African Americans, and had long engaged in musical exchanges with African Americans, embracing whatever new styles were in fashion, but at the same time, retaining their cultural distinctiveness as Puerto Ricans.
- 50 The close, if sometimes vexed, musical interactions between African Americans and Puerto Ricans goes back decades : Ruth Glasser (1995), for example, has documented how black Puerto Rican musicians excluded from New York’s whites-only venues in the era between World Wars I and II ended up playing with African American bands ; even musicians who didn’t join African American bands were expected to know how to play the jazz and swing music popularized by African American bands. Raquel Rivera (2003) has described New York Puerto Ricans’ participation in the nascent hip-hop movement emerging from the same crumbling neighborhoods inhabited by their African American peers in the late 1970s. Such cultural exchanges were extensive enough that Juan Flores (1985) observed that young Puerto Ricans in the 1980s were assimilating laterally, into African American culture, rather than vertically, into mainstream white culture, which he attributed in part to the African-derived musical sensibilities shared by Puerto Ricans’ and African Americans.
- 51 Second-generation Dominicans engaging in African American styles were, in effect, following in Puerto Ricans’ footsteps, but with the crucial distinction that when urban bachateros began developing their innovative R&B and hip-hop inflected styles, the rapidly growing population of bicultural Latinos throughout the United States provided them with a fan base large and supportive enough to sustain—even to encourage—their deliberately bilingual careers. Puerto Rican reggaeton, in contrast, which was coalescing in Puerto Rico at around the same time as urban bachata was emerging in New York, remains a primarily Spanish language genre. Furthermore, unlike urban bachata, reggaeton, which is heavily indebted to hip-hop as well as to Jamaican reggae, was

explicitly defined, at least initially, by its mostly Afro-Puerto Rican practitioners and fans as a *black* Puerto Rican music (Marshall 2009 : 36)¹⁷.

52 ❖

53 If bachata's originally low class associations improved when the genre was transplanted to New York, its racial implications remained the same as they had been in the Dominican Republic : present, but unspoken. The archival research and interviews with bachata musicians, producers and fans cited above clearly demonstrate that young New York Dominicans may indeed feel a strong affinity with African American music and culture, but urban bachata, defined more by its Spanish lyrics and signature instrumentation and rhythms than by its R&B and hip-hop sensibilities, is perceived by its producers and fans to be distinctively Dominican. I found no evidence that urban bachata, unlike reggaeton, has been considered a black music. I was also unable to find urban bachata lyrics that engage with issues of race or racism—unlike hip-hop and reggaeton, both of which frequently address these themes.

54 New York Dominicans' reluctance to consider urban bachata, or themselves, as being a part of black culture, even in a larger, diasporan sense (as reggaeton musicians have) is in part the legacy of their island homeland's long and well-documented history of denying its African heritage. But just as importantly, it expresses their resistance to the United States' inflexible black/white-only racial structure that does not recognize or create space for racial mixture. It also reflects how Dominicans in the United States understand the distinctions between "black" as a (presumably) biological term and as a cultural term. Emphasizing the distinctiveness of Dominican music and culture over a shared diasporan identity can be interpreted as a sort of sonic flag-waving, in which Dominicans assert their cultural distinctiveness within an English language popular music landscape dominated by African American styles—while at the same time, distinguishing themselves from other Latinos and their musics.

55 In summary, I return to the questions I posed at the beginning of this essay regarding urban bachata's racial implications. If bachata is considered by its performers and fans (no matter what their skin tone might be) to be an urban music (*i.e.* the product of inner city culture) or as a Latin music, but not a black music, should it be considered a diasporan music ? As a scholar with long research interests in Spanish Caribbean cultural history, I would argue that technically the answer is yes because most of the style's original creators were Afro-descendants, and because among the musical resources they drew on were Afro-Dominican and Afro-Caribbean styles such as *salve*, *guaracha* and *son*. Furthermore, what distinguishes urban bachata from its Dominican antecedents are precisely its R&B and hip-hop aesthetics, developed by African Americans. Indeed, hip-hop itself been deeply influenced by diasporan sources from throughout the Spanish and English Caribbean (Rivera 2003 : 36-43).

56 Yet, if Dominicans do not often foreground their racial affiliations with other Afro-descendants, it is also true that the racially ambiguous pan-ethnic Latino category that they do identify with does not exclude Afro-Latino people and culture¹⁸. Moreover, the racially and aesthetically ambiguous category of Latin music—which urban bachata will remain a part of as long as bachateros continue to sing in Spanish—includes many styles of African derivation. Indeed, for many people in the United States, the category of Latin music is still practically (if inaccurately) synonymous with Afro-Caribbean dance musics such as mambo, salsa and merengue¹⁹. Most US-based Dominicans will probably continue

to identify themselves, and bachata, in racially ambiguous ways, especially given the advantages of pan-ethnic (and linguistic) solidarity offered by the United States' rapidly expanding Latino/Hispanic population. But as urban bachata continues to deepen its connections to R&B and hip-hop aesthetics, performers and producers, its lack of an *explicitly* black identity should not be equated with an unreflexive rejection of blackness, but rather, understood as Dominican immigrants' particular way of understanding and negotiating their identities within an inflexible bipolar racial system.

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NOTES

1. In the United States the term Latino refers to people with some degree of Latin American ancestry who live in the United States. US Latinos can be of any race and of any national origin in the Spanish (or Portuguese) speaking Americas, so in principle Latino is an ethnic rather than a racial category—although there is considerable evidence suggesting that it is becoming racialized (ROTH 2012 : 176-199). Latinos' ability to speak Spanish is widely assumed, but not all of them do, and it is not (officially at least) a defining characteristic.
2. The bi-polar system of racial categorization, also referred to as the “one-drop rule”, consigns an individual with a single drop of African ancestry to the black category, no matter how light-skinned he or she may be.
3. For more on merengue and its relationship to Dominican identity see Paul AUSTERLITZ (1997).
4. ROTH (2012 : 10) notes that the percentage of Dominicans choosing the “Other” category rose from 43% in 1990 to 63.9% in 2006.
5. Merengue was also initially associated with darker skinned performers and audiences but was “lightened” as it was nationalized by the dictator Rafael Trujillo prior to the 1960s ; see P. AUSTERLITZ (1997).
6. As I have written elsewhere, the term “Latin music” has been used for decades by the music industry, as well as in common parlance, for all popular music of Latin American origin, whose lyrics, if they have them, are in Spanish or Portuguese. While technically the category includes styles as diverse as Mexican rancheras, Colombian vallenatos and Dominican bachata, the “hot” rhythmic sounds of styles such as rumba, mambo, salsa and merengue have made the idea of Latin music practically synonymous with Spanish Caribbean styles (PACINI HERNANDEZ 2007).
7. A clarifying note on methodology. This essay on urban bachata in the United States was intended to expand upon and update the ethnographic research I had originally conducted on bachata in the Dominican Republic between 1986 and 1994 that resulted in my book (PACINI HERNANDEZ 1995). Unfortunately, as I was poised to undertake fieldwork on New York Dominican urban bachata while on sabbatical from teaching at Tufts University in early 2013, I developed a medical condition that prevented me from travelling. As a result, some of my interviews were necessarily conducted by telephone.
8. Marte's experiments with R&B influences were concurrent with Aventura's, and while he has developed an active career in urban bachata, he has yet to achieve Aventura's phenomenal level of success.
9. The marketing term “tropical” Latin music primarily refers to dance music from the Spanish Caribbean and its diaspora (*e.g.* salsa, merengue, cumbia, and more recently, bachata). For a more comprehensive analysis of how the Latin music industry's organizes its multiple marketing categories according to genre, *e.g.* salsa, rock, and/or region of origin, *e.g.* regional Mexican, tropical, see PACINI HERNANDEZ (2010 : chap. 2, 7).
10. For a comprehensive discussion of reggaeton's roots and routes, see Wayne MARSHALL (2009).

11. Marshall BERMAN's (1999) essay "View from the Burning Bridge" is a particularly powerful description of what happened to New York's inner city neighborhoods in the 1970s.

12. L. Cobo's first quote is from George Zamora, president of Univision Music Groups' La Calle Records ; the second is from Universal Music Latino president John Echeverria.

13. Many thanks to the Tufts students who shared their thoughts about urban bachata with me : Yorman García, Kelvin Pérez, Jeselin Castillo, Kenia Estevez, Ariela Westlake and Leticia López-Benítez.

14. "*Tengo el nombre de mi infancia, siempre me decían Casper the Friendly Ghost porque era tan blanquita, tan blanquita ! Despues de la primera vez que me llevaron a Santo Domingo, despues cogí mi colorcito, ya cuando comí my mangú y todo, como que cogí la patria un poco mas*" (translation mine) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PS_4V4NbLZM>.

15. Latino hip-hop musicians with aspirations to access the more lucrative mainstream English language market have sometimes—and understandably—been reluctant to identify themselves ethnically (i.e. as Latino, Puerto Rican or Chicano rappers), preferring to identify themselves simply as rappers, because they understand that an ethnic identity could marginalize them in the eyes of music industry personnel and hip-hop fans. See, for example, Raquel RIVERA's discussion (2003 : 19) on New York Rican rappers, in which she notes : "For the Puerto Ricans who participate in core' New York hip hop music, ethnic identity is not necessarily foregrounded in their hip hop-related activities [...]. One reason for this is that Puerto Ricans who stress their Puerto Rican identity too intensely can be left out of the hip hop common territory shared by African Americans."

16. The pressure for Latinos to downplay their Latino-ness is reminiscent of similar pressures on African Americans decades ago to downplay their blackness.

17. As the title of Marshall's comprehensive essay, "Música Negra to Reggaeton Latino : The Cultural Politics of Migration, Nation and Commercialization" indicates, reggaeton's aesthetics and its social identity changed from being perceived as black music to a pan-Latino genre.

18. For an excellent discussion of Afro-Latinidad in the United States, see Juan FLORES and Miriam JIMÉNEZ ROMÁN (2010).

19. As I have written elsewhere (PACINI HERNANDEZ 2007), the term Latin music also includes genres, such as Mexican regional, with little African influence. Even though Mexican regional styles now outsell the dance-oriented tropical styles once synonymous with Latin music, for many people the term still brings to mind rhythmically "hot" Afro Caribbean sonorities.

ABSTRACTS

Bachata is a guitar-centered style characterized by romantic lyrics and a highly emotional singing style that coalesced as a style in the Dominican Republic in the 1970s. Bachata's fans and practitioners were primarily of African descent, but due to the Dominican Republic's history of

repudiating its African heritage, bachata was considered poor people's music rather than a form of black music. Bachata's social profile began to change when it was transplanted in New York City by Dominican immigrants in the 1980s and 1990s : in New York, bachata shed its low class identity as it became a powerful sonic symbol of the Dominican homeland. At the same time, young New York Dominicans also embraced the hip-hop and R&B dominating the city's musical landscape, so when they began producing their own bachata, it was notably inflected with R&B and hip-hop aesthetics. The new style was distinguished from its island-based antecedents with the term "urban bachata". This essay addresses the extent to which urban bachata's R&B and hip-hop aesthetics reveal—or elide— racial and/or cultural affinities between New York Dominicans and African Americans. It also questions the degree to which Dominicans' history of racial disavowal has influenced the development of a broader diasporic identity.

La bachata est un style musical centré sur la guitare, caractérisé par ses paroles romantiques et ses chants aux fortes tonalités émotionnelles, qui s'est créé en République dominicaine dans les années 1970. Alors que les fans et les musiciens de bachata étaient initialement de descendance africaine, en raison de l'histoire de répudiation de l'origine africaine de la République dominicaine, la bachata fut considérée comme la musique des classes pauvres plutôt que comme une forme de musique noire. L'identification sociale de la bachata commença à se modifier dans les années 1980 et 1990, quand elle fut transplantée par les migrants dominicains dans la ville de New York où elle s'est débarrassée de son identité de classe pour devenir un puissant symbole sonore de la patrie dominicaine. Dans le même temps, les jeunes Dominicains de New York ont embrassé les musiques hip-hop et R&B qui dominaient le paysage musical urbain, et lorsqu'ils ont commencé à développer leur propre bachata, celle-ci a été influencée de manière notoire par les esthétiques R&B et hip-hop. Ce nouveau style a été distingué de ses antécédents sur l'île par le terme « urban bachata ».

Cet article aborde la manière dont les esthétiques R&B et hip-hop de la bachata révèlent — ou éludent — des affinités raciales et/ou culturelles entre les Dominicains de New York et les Afro-Américains. Il interroge également l'influence qu'a exercé le désaveu de la question raciale dans l'histoire dominicaine sur le développement d'une plus large identité diasporique.

INDEX

Keywords: Dominicans, US Latinos, Bachata, Ethnic Identity, Racial Identity

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