

## 4 | Blackness and Identity

### Dominican *Merengue*

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Scholars writing about Dominican identity have often concentrated on its construction in juxtaposition to the Haitian nation and to Haitian racial identity. According to this narrative, Dominicans, a population composed mainly of people of African descent, lack a collective Black identity as a nation. They are portrayed as imagining themselves as European and Catholic in contrast to Haitians, who are considered Black and superstitious practitioners of 'Voodoo'. Studies of Dominican identity in music have likewise focused on music's role in the building of the Dominican nation as anti-Haitian and anti-Black. These studies often point to 1936, when the Dominican dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo (who governed from 1930 to 1961) instituted *merengue* as the national music to officially represent Dominicans, as this genre supposedly epitomised their 'Hispanic' or Spanish essence. But there is another side to this story. Many Dominicans accepted this dominant representation, yet also continued to identify with other music genres, which had been officially silenced or prohibited because of their real or imagined connection to Africa and Haiti.

Music played and continues to play an important role in the creation of Dominican national identity through continued elite constructions of a Hispanic nation, but also through popular and subaltern expressions of Dominican Blackness. If we were to give the relationship of Dominican popular music to identity one overarching narrative from the 1930s into the twenty-first century, we could say that while it began in an effort to claim Spanish tradition through Hispanicised *merengue*, it has gradually moved toward previously shunned Afro-Dominican genres (such as Haitian-derived *gagá*) and has borrowed Black diasporic aesthetics from genres such as hip-hop and Jamaican dancehall. These music genres are finding their way into *merengue* recordings and other forms of popular music, encouraging many Dominicans to recognise and create alternative identities and visions of race and nationhood. From our current vantage point in Dominican history, the constructed nature of the cultural and political narratives of *merengue*'s Hispanicity seems obvious. The recent characterisation of *merengue* as an eclectic genre possessing *both* European-derived and African-derived features is now a largely accepted

one. These changes therefore underscore the thrust behind several recent studies that complicate the binaries present in earlier accounts of Dominican identity (Candelario 2007; García-Peña 2016).

During the Trujillo regime, *merengue's* features were associated with an idealised Spanish-descended Dominican subject, and genres outside of *merengue* were excluded from official Dominican historical records or were stigmatised as Haitian. These genres (e.g. *gagá*, *congo*, *sarandunga*, and *cocolo* music) later became known as Afro-Dominican music and have, especially since the 1970s, become a powerful tool against the Hispanic model of Dominican identity. As Afro-Dominican music genres gain visibility, some of their musical features have been brought into *merengue* recordings, resulting in new subgenres such as *merengue de calle* (street merengue), a name that points to its contrast with the 'national' or 'Hispanic' *merengue*. This new *merengue* represents a reversal of the traditional and historical narrative. Yet, although this process would seem to indicate a historical and cultural progression toward an acceptance of an Afro-diasporic and Black identity, this narrative is not nearly so teleological; the current scene of Dominican popular music is a complicated one that reveals many sides of identity formation.

In the Dominican Republic, the borders that music and religion form between elites and the subaltern are more fluid than has often been recognised. The assumed-elite European Catholicism of the Dominican Republic has been infused with elements from popular and folk beliefs, and what is seen as Afro-Dominican is always marked with Spanish influence. To use Homi Bhabha's (1994) formulation, any nationalist narrative conveys a contradiction and a sliding ambivalence between the common basic binary of the homogeneous national elite and the heterogeneous subaltern. Rather than argue for a facile and simple binary opposition between the two, he recommends breaking away, because the nationalist agents (dominant elite), in order to survive, need the heterogeneity they also deny. The elite also needs a hierarchical social, racial, and cultural relationship with the subaltern. We can use this same argument to read *merengue* as a metaphor for Dominican identity, a metaphor not of Eurocentricity, but one through which elements of Blackness have always been a part of Dominican racial identity.

## Performing Race

It is commonly acknowledged that *merengue* has been one of the most powerful vehicles through which the Dominican Hispanic imaginary has

been conceptualised (Austerlitz 1997; Sellers 2004). Narratives of *merengue*'s allegedly exclusive Spanish origins were created during the Trujillo regime by authors such as Flérida de Nolasco, in the process, obfuscating its African-derived influences and aesthetics. The music itself was also adapted to match this origin story. Among other elements, we can point to the Europeanisation of *merengue*'s original folk style and instruments into big-band arrangements and ensembles. On the other hand, as Paul Austerlitz argues, it is possible that *merengue* was successful 'as a national symbol precisely *because* its syncretic quality appeals to the prevailing African-derived aesthetic without offending the prevailing Hispanophilism' (1997, 149). Thus, what appeared to be a celebration of European values simultaneously presented a counter-narrative for embodied Blackness that would exist in the shadows of mainstream *merengue* for generations and emerge in alternative forms and genres of folk and popular music.

As Peter Wade points out in his analysis of Colombian music, 'people experience popular music and dance in an embodied way that evokes racialised elements' (2003, 265), which would suggest that the Blackness in Dominican *merengue* was never erased from the music or its perception and embodiment. Because these signifiers survived in the music, Dominicans were able to find their mixed heritage, which contains Blackness, enacted through *merengue*. This awareness is more than a simple reversal of binary organisation. In 'Rethinking Mestizaje: Ideology and Lived Experience', Wade (2005) explains how *mestizaje*,<sup>1</sup> like Bhabha's characterisation of the nation, carries a tension between sameness and difference. For the idea of mixture to exist, its original elements must also remain intact to a degree; thus, *mestizaje* need not erase the original parts once constituted. Wade's model of a *mestizo* person as a mosaic is a useful concept; we might think of each person as an enactor of multiple identities that also allows for re-combinations of elements (252). The mosaic metaphor can then be applied to our reading of the label *indio*, employed historically to homogenise the Dominican population. Most Dominicans would say that they are not Black but *indio*, a label instituted from above to erase Blackness. By contrast, reinterpreted from below, *indio* allows for different combinations and articulations of racial elements and practices. While the term *indio* was intended by those in power to conceal Blackness, on the ground many Dominicans interpreted

<sup>1</sup> Here *mestizaje*, or 'mixture', refers to biological and cultural blending taking place among diverse populations, especially in Latin America.

it as referring to the continuum of skin colour among Dominicans, which includes shades of Blackness. In other words, *indio* is a fluid label, epitomising ‘mixedness’, while leaving intact the presence of Blackness in Dominican national identity.

In recent decades, new ways of engaging with music connect Dominican identity with its Black Atlantic relatives and its African heritage. While *merengue* represents Dominican identity at the national level, many other music genres enjoy equal or greater significance as indicators of other identities, which Dominicans display in certain locations and situations. For folklorist Iván Domínguez, ‘*Merengue* is the music by which people identify Dominicans, but not the only one by which all Dominicans identify themselves’ (personal communication). In the twenty-first century, genres such as *dembow* – a spin-off from dancehall and *reggaeton* – have taken the country by storm. Rap music has also become popular among Dominican youth, especially its darker-skinned demographics. However, this embrace of Afro-diasporic musics should not simply be read as ‘new’, since, in many ways, it has not changed the ways Dominicans have historically produced popular meanings of Blackness. Dominican identity, specifically its Blackness, continues to be expressed, not discursively, but embodied in cultural traditions. This lack of an explicitly expressed Black identity need not be equated with rejection/denial of Blackness, as many studies of Dominican identity have suggested. As the music and aesthetics of previously marginalised Black communities find their way into the national popular music, and as urban musicians embrace influences from genres of the Black Atlantic, there is a need for more studies that scrutinise the current darkening of Dominican genres.

### Historicising the Blackness in *Merengue*

If we pursue this against-the-grain reading of *merengue*, we can find Dominicans existing within a ‘relational network’ (Gilroy 2000, 13) among different Black communities worldwide. Dominican *merengueros* (*merengue* musicians) have consistently borrowed from Afro-diasporic genres,<sup>2</sup> proudly sported Afros,<sup>3</sup> and, in recent decades, continued to

<sup>2</sup> Wilfrido Vargas, one of the most popular *merengue* bandleaders of the 1970s and 1980s, incorporated into *merengue* a diverse array of music styles, from French Caribbean *zouk* and *konpa* to Colombian *cumbia*, hip-hop, and jazz. See ‘El jardinero’ for rap influences, and ‘El Calor’ for influences from the Charleston.

<sup>3</sup> Examples include *merengueros* Johnny Ventura, Fausto Rey, and Wilfrido Vargas.

adopt urban styles of fashion and music. *Merengueros* have historically been well versed in the popular music tastes of the African diaspora, and many adapted Afro-diasporic hits to *merengue* rhythms. For example, one of the most popular *merengues* of all time, the 1980's 'La Medicina' by Wilfrido Vargas, is a cover of the international hit 'Zouk la sé sèl mèdikaman nou ni' by the French Caribbean group Kassav'.<sup>4</sup> Other adaptations of Afro-diasporic hits include 'Skokkian' (a South African song) by Los Magos del Ritmo and Johnny Ventura's acclaimed 'Bobiné', which is originally by Los Diplomáticos de Haiti, a Dominican-based Haitian group. Examples of Afro-diasporic interactions are numerous, but adapting Wade's analysis of Colombia's *música tropical*, one can say that until recently, Blackness in *merengue* did not disappear but was diluted stylistically; its meaning was re-articulated while other musics became the expressions of Blackness (2000, 10–11). In other words, in *merengue de orquesta* (the national *merengue*), the African contribution – syncopated rhythms, percussion instruments – provided excitement and danceable qualities, but this Blackness was kept at a safe distance from the elites and their nation project. In recordings of the traditional *merengue*, especially during the Trujillo era, percussion was kept to a minimum and was buried deep in the recording mix, a repressed sonic Blackness that was felt more than heard, but that would emerge in later generations of the music.

In contrast to its perceived Eurocentric roots, *merengue* instead performed a dialectical relationship between ideology and everyday practice, between the macro-level structural anti-Black ideologies and the micro-level human action that dramatised an intimacy with Black genres and Afro-diasporic communities. In recent years, through creative new genres of music, this connection with the larger African diaspora has been even further enacted.<sup>5</sup> George Lipsitz comments on this aspect of *merengue*, writing that 'the music [*merengue*] that once emblematised the ideal of a unified and racially homogeneous nation-state now reveals the

<sup>4</sup> The all-female *merengue* band popular in the 1980s, Las Chicán, had already used the 'Zamina Waka Waka' that Shakira used for the World Cup 2010 theme for their song 'El Negro no puede'. 'El africano' by Wilfrido Vargas was originally by Colombian composer Calixto Ochoa and 'El jardinero' was based on the Haitian *konpa* tune 'Barie' by DP Express.

<sup>5</sup> Today, *merengueros de calle* record with major international figures such as Daddy Yankee, Shakira, and Pitbull (see for example 'Qué tengo que hacer' recorded by Daddy Yankee and Omega, 'Mi alma se muere' by Omega and Pitbull, and 'Rabiosa' and 'Addicted to You' by Shakira and El Cata). But most importantly, current urban Dominican artists are in tune with R&B and hip-hop and borrow from these genres. For example, one of the most well-known *merengues* by Omega, 'Tú si quiere, tú no quiere', is from 'You Don't Want It' by R&B artist Akon. 'Porque tú no "ta pa mi"' is based on Akon's 'Sorry, Blame It on Me'.

multiracial character of the country and registers the inexorable interconnectedness of contemporary culture and commerce in a transnational frame' (2007, 151). *Merengue*, as it stands today, reveals the complexity of the nation and dramatises the fact that it is 'more connected to other nations than the old nationalist *merengues* could ever admit' (151). For example, it is easy now to see and hear the connection of today's *merengue* with rap music and its associations with Spain are becoming increasingly harder to identify.

A development in recent decades is that *merengue* and other forms of Dominican popular music have abandoned many of the melodic and harmonic qualities associated with European music; *merengueros* have instead emphasised grooves and minimalist rhythmic aesthetics, locating *merengue* closer to what is understood worldwide as Black music. These connections create a strong counter-discourse to previously hegemonic monolithic views of identity. The pre-1990 *merengue* and the current *merengue de calle* can be contrasted by the fact that Blackness in the latter is not sonically re-signified according to elite aesthetics and polite culture. The new *merengue* emphasises street carnivalesque aesthetics where transgression is in order, upsetting previously unwritten codes of respectability that have been historically connected to the elites and Dominicaness.

### Embracing Black Aesthetics through the Carnavalesque

The most popular new style of *merengue* was labelled *merengue de calle* during the 1990s. What makes *merengue de calle* such a significant intervention into the narrative of music and racial identity is that it is largely informed by two Afro-Dominican genres of music that have historically been discredited as too Black and too foreign: *cocolo* (or its derivative *Alí Babá*) and *gagá* music. These two genres were imported to the Dominican Republic by Afro-Caribbean communities (*cocolo* music was brought by English-speaking Caribbean migrants, and *gagá* is derived from Haitian *Rara*<sup>6</sup>), but have long formed part of Dominican culture and, since the 1970s, Dominican carnival. Scholars often represent carnival as a reversal of society's order, or as Bakhtin would say 'the suspension of all hierarchical precedence' (1984, 10). Since the 1970s, Dominican carnival has been an arena where Black and other repressed communities have been integrated. Because of its carnival connection, this new *merengue* has facilitated

<sup>6</sup> A religious-carnavalesque ritual of Haitian Vodou.

the visibility of identities once relegated to working-class neighbourhoods and carnival.

The carnivalesque transgression of *merengue de calle* (and other current urban music genres) is most obviously present in the lyrics. Traditional *merengue* lyrics, although many times portraying the life of the working and darker-skinned classes, featured clever sexual double entendre, but did so in a humorous and non-confrontational manner that did not upset the behavioural codes associated with Dominican elite culture.<sup>7</sup> Instead, the new *merengue* uses street chants and vulgar lyrics that are sexually graphic and are quite common in – and sometimes taken from – *gagá*. In *gagá*, there are revellers and dancers following the musicians and dancers shouting sexual chants such as: ‘Qué es lo que tú quieres que te diga? Mamaguevo!’ (What is it that you want to be called? Cocksucker!). This same chant can be heard in Kike Mangú’s *merengue de calle* ‘Qué tú quieres que te diga’, to name just one example. *Merengue de calle* differs musically from the national *merengue* in many aspects, and, although often understood as an issue of class, the musical dialectic between the two genres forms a debate over racial identity that is part of a long national conversation about Blackness. The musical form of traditional *merengue* consists of a short introduction or *paseo* and two other longer sections, the *merengue* and the *jaleo*. The *merengue* section features the European-influenced melody, while the *jaleo* consists of a two-measure repeating pattern based on dominant and tonic harmonies exhibiting more African-derived features than the previous sections. The *jaleo* has historically been the most dynamic, upbeat, and virtuosic part of the *merengue* genre. What emerges in *merengue de calle* is an emphasis on the *jaleo* festive section, sometimes even dropping all of the other more Europeanised sections. The emphasis on this music is often given to its catchy, cathartic, and humorous qualities (what Dominicans call *chercha*). *Merengues de calle* tend to be repetitive,<sup>8</sup> consist mainly of short rhythmic ostinato patterns with street chants, are many times rapped more than sung (e.g. ‘La vecina’ by Toxic Crow),<sup>9</sup> and emphasise groove rather than melodic and harmonic variety, all which point more toward music of the African diaspora than of Europe.

<sup>7</sup> I remember listening to the *merengue* ‘Plátano maduro no vuelve a verde’ and not realising until I was sixteen years old that it referred to the fact that an old penis is not the same as a young one. Nowadays the language is so graphic that it cannot be missed.

<sup>8</sup> See ‘El huevo’ by Tito Swing, ‘Vamo a majar cacao’ by Ala Jaza, ‘El camarón’ and ‘El tomate’ by Silvio Mora, ‘Paleta’ by Omega, ‘El hot dog’ by Toño Rosario, and ‘El guallo’ by Amarfis.

<sup>9</sup> Also see ‘El coño’ by Oro sólido, ‘El café’ by Tito Swing, ‘La vaca’ by Mala Fe, ‘El bembé’ by Banda soberbia, as well as ‘El camarón’ and ‘El carrito rojo’ by Silvio Mora.



In addition to changes in the compositional form, *merengue de calle* also varies in its rhythm, although sometimes not as much as one would think when listening to elitist criticism of the genre. Most *merengues de calle* include the familiar *maco*<sup>10</sup> rhythm in combination with other rhythms derived from *gagá* and *Alí Babá*. In some *merengues de calle*, the *conga* drum contains a rhythmic pattern very similar to the main drum in *gagá (tambú)*,<sup>11</sup> and, sometimes, patterns of the *catalié gagá* drum get transposed to the *tambora* (double-headed drum always used in *merengue*) or *conga* drums in *merengue*. *Merengue de calle* uses a muted bass and drum instead of the open drum sound of the national *merengue*. This muted drum, which is played on the beat, according to many musicians, comes from *gagá* music as well. Finally, the *güira* player scratches on every beat, resembling the scraper instrument in *gagá*.

In traditional *merengue*, the bass usually plays on the beat. *Merengues de calle*, on the contrary, use a new style of playing bass.<sup>12</sup> The player hits the strings on the beat, mimicking the muted bass drum of *gagá*.<sup>13</sup> Notes emphasising the second half of the beat imitate attacks in the *fututos (vaksins)*, the single-note bamboo trumpets characteristic in *gagá* music. Although not every *merengue de calle* uses this style throughout the piece, it is yet another stylistic addition to *merengue* that came via *gagá* music. The *tambora* rhythm has often been claimed as the defining aspect of the national *merengue*. One regularly reads in newspapers, or hears on television and in conversations with musicians and elite Dominicans that *merengue de calle* has a 'different' rhythm than *merengue*, and should therefore not be considered *merengue* at all. These comments reflect the concerns of middle- and upper-class Dominicans, who resist being represented by a *merengue* that many see as vulgar and often unpolished.

The influences from Afro-Dominican and Afro-diasporic genres on *merengue de calle* extend to its melodic and harmonic qualities as well. *Merengue de calle* has short, rapped, and repetitive melodies, as opposed to the long melodies of the national *merengue*.<sup>14</sup> Short melodic ostinatos resembling the *fututos* in *gagá* get transposed to the bass or the saxophones.<sup>15</sup> These riffs often start on the second half of the beat, which lends a *gagá* feel. Yet another aspect of

<sup>10</sup> The most common *merengue* rhythm since the 1970s.

<sup>11</sup> See 'Traigo fuego' by La Banda Gorda.

<sup>12</sup> 'El botao' by José Duluc, a fusion musician, is an example of how a passage moving from minor to major tonality and the bass from off-beat to on the beat can help the piece lean toward sounding as *gagá* or *merengue*.

<sup>13</sup> For example, 'Alante alante' by Omega and 'Traigo fuego' by La Banda Gorda.

<sup>14</sup> For example, Omega's vocals (e.g. 'El mambo del drink' and 'El rabo del Lechón'). For another example, see 'El concón' by Amarfis y la Banda de Atakke.

<sup>15</sup> See 'El rabo del lechón' by Omega, in which *vaksin* lines are transported to the saxophones.



*merengue de calle* that resembles *gagá* is a preference for minor keys. Although many dismissive comments about *merengue de calle* point to its harmonic simplicity, some songs are harmonically complex: many times what is misunderstood as lack of musical ability or playing out of tune is due to the ways that *merengue de calle* has intentionally incorporated dissonances found in genres such as *gagá* that do not conform to European tonal models.<sup>16</sup> As Gage Averill states, *Rara* tonality ‘can support juxtapositions of pitches in the song melody and *vaksin* accompaniment that would be considered quite dissonant in most Euro-American musics . . . pitch relationships in *Rara* are not expected to be precise; it’s more important to sustain a solid groove’ (1999, 159).

In ‘Mamboteo’, the popular *merengue*, Omega’s use of unconventional harmonies for *merengue* has been misinterpreted as a product of the *merengue*’s lack of musical training. Instead of traditional European harmonies, Omega uses harmonies derived from *gagá* music. ‘Mamboteo’ is built with a recurring melodic ostinato on the bass (with notes G, A, C, D, F). Together with the bass ostinato, a treble guitar-like instrument consistently repeats the syncopated pitches D, C, and F. In some places throughout the piece, a third motif is introduced in the trumpets with the notes Bb, C, Bb, Ab, and a fourth one with Eb-F. Together, the pitches of the trumpet motifs make up a minor pentatonic scale starting on F (F, Ab, Bb, C, Eb). In turn, this pentatonic scale is superimposed with a minor pentatonic scale formed by the bass pitches (A, C, D, F, G). The use of a pentatonic scale is uncommon in *merengue*, and this superimposition of harmonies creates an overall resonant dissonant harmony common in *gagá*.

The dissonance in ‘Mamboteo’ is further enhanced by the fact that an overall G minor chord with an added 7th and 9th results from the combining of the most prominent pitches in all the motifs (G, Bb, D, F, Ab). *Merengues de calle* like ‘Mamboteo’ show us that through music and dance, multiple racial and national identities can be freed from the confines of working-class neighbourhoods and marginalised communities. The new popularity of this music makes visible the constituencies of society previously relegated to carnival, sugarcane fields, and hidden religious rituals.

## Conclusion

Although one can argue for the unique nature of the Dominican Republic’s view of race, in some ways my position can also be seen as linking the

<sup>16</sup> For example, see ‘Mamboteo’ by Omega and ‘Dame un besito’ by Moreno Negrón.

Dominican Republic with other Latin American countries that have experienced similar discourses of mixedness or *mestizaje*. Latin American countries, as was the Dominican Republic, were early on confronted with issues of what we might call the ‘problems’ of a ‘multiculturalist’ society. The consolidation of independent republics – after the removal of Spanish and Portuguese direct colonial rule – required a direct involvement with issues of how to solidify and define an emerging and newly independent ‘highly mixed society’ (Wade 1993, 8). In Cuba, the fight for independence necessitated the participation of free people of colour, thus leading to the formulation of a national discourse of ‘racelessness’ and racial brotherhood that would persuade them to join in the struggle for independence (Ferrer 1999; De la Fuente 2001). In post-independence Brazil, unlike Cuba, the standard narrative characterised its national discourse as a *democracia racial* (racial democracy) defined by racial mixture, but most importantly, as a racial ‘paradise’ resulting from the seamless and unproblematic mixture of the various races (European, Indigenous, and African) found in Brazilian colonial society.

The Dominican Republic was particularly susceptible to nationalist discourse that subscribed to a privileging of Whiteness, resulting in a preoccupation with the racial composition of its population and with publicly distinguishing itself from its Haitian neighbours. Like Peter Wade (1995) who asks us to challenge ideas of racial democracy that erased Blackness and Indianness in the Colombian context, I have argued that, although ‘pure’ Blackness was relegated to Haiti (and Haitians) in the Dominican context, Blackness has been present as lived experienced and embodied practice, as we can see in *merengue de calle*.<sup>17</sup> Because of the large Haitian population living in the Dominican Republic, Dominicans can locate Blackness in a space imaginatively both inside and outside of the country. It is this distinction, of sharing an island with another nation with which it has had such a complex and intermingled history, that sets the Dominican Republic apart from the rest of Latin American nations. This desire for a distinction from Haitian racial identity is still relevant in Dominicans today. Haitian culture is woven into the texture of Dominicanity in ways that are not so obvious, but apparent when we look at cultural productions such as music. In this way, for example,

<sup>17</sup> We can compare this context to Puerto Rico where, as Isar Godreau (2006) argues, Blackness has been relegated to a particular geographical location within the country, while the nation continues to be defined as non-Black.

*merengue de calle* carries within it many elements from Haitian-derived *gagá*. Dominican Blackness is paradoxically both self and other.

Popular and folk cultures, especially music, provide an entry point to read Blackness and identities outside of political and historical discourse; they also provide a useful lens for understanding not only the top-down hegemonic forces at play (in this case anti-Haitianism and anti-Black policies), but also the compromises and continuous dialogue that emerge from the bottom up. Music has been fertile ground for a popular enactment of a multidimensional definition of Dominicanity, one that often oscillates between a formulation or assertion of Blackness and a more ambiguous inclusion of Blackness within definitions of Dominican identity. We learn two things from these musical histories: that elements of Blackness have always existed within Dominicanity, and that the movement of Afro-Dominican music into more public forums forces old identities to coexist in tension with these newly acquired racial embodiments in music. Dominicans may not have adopted a verbal discourse of Black pride, but that does not mean the opposite either – that they are in total denial of their Black heritage and identity. *Merengue de calle*, as well as rap and *dembow* and other recent urban genres, are produced by the marginalised for the marginalised, yet consumed by the mainstream. These new genres are changing how we see, hear, and imagine the Dominican Republic. They go against elite notions of proper culture and comportment and away from the perceived otherness of Haiti and Blackness. Through these new genres, issues of race and ethnicity are brought out of the margins into the broader society, helping unsettle deep-seated cultural traditions. *Merengueros de calle* have pushed their notion of culture into the public discourse. The adoption of sounds from Afro-Dominican and Afro-diasporic musics has helped liberate *merengue* and change the direction of its history, and with that, the paths of Dominican identity.

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