

Chapter 1

Introduction

According to an often quoted anecdote, merengue originated in 1844, the year that the Dominican Republic was founded, to satirize a Dominican soldier named Tomás Torres who had abandoned his station during the Battle of Talanquera in the War of Independence. The Dominicans won the battle, and while celebrating the victory at night, soldiers mocked the cowardly Torres in the first merengue:

<i>Toma' juyó con la bandera</i>	Thomas fled with the flag.
<i>Toma' juyó de la Talanquera:</i>	Thomas fled from Talanquera;
<i>Si juera yo, yo no juyera,</i>	If it had been I, I wouldn't have fled:
<i>Toma' juyó con la bandera.</i>	Thomas Red with the Rag.'

Related by journalist Rafael Vidal to composer and folklorist Julio Alberto Hernández (1927: 6), this account first appeared in print in 1927, when merengue was beginning to gain currency as a national symbol. A melody and similar words appeared in the same year in another publication, Julio Arzeño's *Del folklóre musical dominicano*. Arzeño, however, did not consider the song a merengue, classifying it as a "patriotic song" instead (1927: 127).² The Battle of Talanquera story is clearly dubious history, but it is a powerful

myth that solidly links music and national identity in a bond that has endured through most of merengue's history.

We will probably never know with certainty the true origin of this music, but theories about it express deep-rooted feelings about Dominican identity. One theory links merengue to the Haitian mereng. Although they differ in important ways, the Dominican Republic and Haiti share many cultural characteristics. Like merengue in the Dominican Republic, mereng (in Haitian Creole; *méringue* in French) is a national symbol in Haiti. According to Jean Fouchard, mereng evolved from the fusion of slave musics such as the *chica* and *calenda* with ballroom forms related to the French *contredanse* (1988: 5–9). Mereng's name, he says, derives from the muringue music of the Bara, a Bantu people of Madagascar (1973: 110, 1988: 77–82). That few Malagasies came to the Americas renders this etymology dubious, but it is significant because it foregrounds what Fouchard, and most Haitians, consider the essentially African-derived nature of their music and national identity.' Dominican merengue, Jean Fouchard suggests, developed directly from Haitian mereng (1988: 66).

Dominicans are often disinclined to admit African and Haitian influences on their culture. As ethnomusicologist Martha Davis points out, many Dominican scholars "have, at the least, ignored African influence in Santo Domingo. At the worst, they have bent over backwards to convince themselves and their readers of the one hundred percent Hispanic content of their culture. This is not an uncommon Latin American reaction to the inferiority complex produced by centuries of Spanish colonial domination" (1976: 9). According to merengue innovator Luis Alberti, for example, merengue "has nothing to do with black or African rhythms," (1975: 71). The Dominican proclivity to deny connections with Africa is related to anti-Haitian sentiment, and relationships between the national musics of Haiti and the Dominican Republic have often been ignored or downplayed in Dominican merengue scholarship. In several standard Dominican sources that mention merengue in Puerto Rico and other countries, competent scholars neglect to acknowledge even the existence of Haitian mereng (del Castillo and García Arévalo 1989: 17; Lizardo 1978a, b; Nolasco 1956: 321–41). In fact, for Esteban Peña Morel, one of the few Dominicans to admit a connection between merengue and mereng, this link renders merengue inappropriate as a Dominican symbol; he suggests an-

other genre, the *mangulina*, as more representative of national culture (1929, sec.3:1, 3).⁴

In the 1970s, some Dominican intellectuals and artists began to challenge this Eurocentrism by celebrating the African contributions to Dominican culture and looking at connections to Haiti. The musicologist Bernarda Jorge, for instance, noted that “anti-Haitian sentiment and the tendency to hide and/or minimize the African roots of our [Dominican] culture on the part of the bourgeois intelligentsia have obstructed understanding and study not only of merengue, but of numerous forms of Dominican culture through the years” (1982b: 33).

Such views met with considerable criticism. When Dominican folklorist Fradique Lizardo discussed the African influence on Dominican culture (1979) and asserted that “merengue’s origin is in Africa,” the respected dance music composer Luis Senior described himself as “horrified by Lizardo’s assertion and claimed that it was “unpatriotic” to call merengue African (Ysálquez 1975a: 50, 1976c: 50). Lizardo’s theory of merengue’s origin resembles Fouchard’s, for he writes that the Bara of Madagascar perform a dance called “merengue,” adding that they play a drum similar to the *tambora* prominent in Dominican merengue. Lizardo suggests that Bara and other African musics were combined with a Cuban form called the *danza* to produce Caribbean merengue (1978a; also see 1978b: 11–13).⁵ However, knowing that few Malagasies came to the Americas, that drums similar to the *tambora* are distributed widely in Africa (and Asia), and that several styles of merengue (both in and out of the Dominican Republic) do not use the *tambora* weighs against Lizardo’s theory that merengue derives specifically from the Bara.

Whatever their differences, almost all of the origin theories point to connections between merengue and European-derived ballroom dance musics such as the *danza* (Fouchard 1988: 15–21; Hernández 1969: 65; Lizardo 1978a; Nolasco 1939: 60, 1948: 164–65, 1956: 322; Rueda 1990b). Flérida de Nolasco believes that merengue’s association with these forms indicates that its origins are in Europe (1948: 164–65). Although Manuel Rueda acknowledges the possibility of some African influence on merengue, he also believes that its European influences demonstrate merengue’s Euro-American nature, and he discredits the idea that merengue is Afro-Caribbean (1990b). Julio Hernández, however, points out that European-derived musics came

under African influence in the Americas, arguing that while merengue developed from European forms, it is a syncretic, Afro-Hispanic genre (1969: 53). Singer Joséto Mateo, the “king of merengue,” concurs; he pointed out to me in an interview that racial amalgamation naturally produces syncretic music: “Dominican whites and blacks [originally] had their own musics, just as in the United States the blacks have their own music. But gradually, what is called a fusion of the two races came about, the blacks and the whites. And so, a *música mestiza* was formed; that is, a mixed music. The white contributes his part, and the black contributes his drums.”

For most Dominicans, then, to discuss merengue’s origin is to discuss Dominican national and racial identity, Eurocentric thinkers emphasize merengue’s European elements, Afrocentric scholars emphasize its African elements, and those who celebrate racial amalgamation point to its syncretic nature. Yet while they may disagree on the nature of Dominicanity, all come together on one point: Merengue expresses Dominican identity.

A Mired-Race Community

With a population estimated at 80 percent mixed African and European, 15 percent black, and 5 percent white, the Dominican Republic has aptly been termed a “*comunidad mulata*,” or mixed-race community (Perez-Cabral 1967: 75).⁶ The African-derived element in this mix is considerable: According to Martha Davis, among others, the country, “without doubt, should be considered an Afro-American nation—that is, a New World nation in which the African cultural influence figures prominently, if not predominantly” (1976: 2). The European element in Dominican culture is far from negligible; however; the upper classes, as well as the *campesinos*—the country people, or peasants—in certain regions, are of predominantly Spanish origin. Still, the racial line is fuzzy, for Spaniards and Africans were not strangers when they met in the Americas; Spain had come into a great deal of contact with Africa during the seven hundred years Moors had occupied the Iberian peninsula. As Fernando Ortiz reminds us, the forces occupying Spain came from as far away as Timbuktu (1952–55, 3: 64), and, as Philip Curtin notes, many Spanish entrants to the Caribbean were “free settlers of partial African

descent" (1969: 31). The line between Spaniard and African was further blurred because, as Juan Bosch suggests, economic conditions in colonial Santo Domingo may have produced the "de facto, if not *de jure*, liberation of the slaves, to the extent that they might already have behaved as free men in 1659, although they were not free legally" (1988: 121). By the end of the eighteenth century, black and mixed-race freedmen outnumbered both whites and slaves in Spanish Santo Domingo.

Poised between Old World civilizations, Dominicans brewed a unique culture steeped in both African and Spanish traditions. Its myriad musics include a wealth of African-derived styles such as *palos*, *congos*, and sarandunga drumming, which are performed by Afro-Dominican religious brotherhoods; European-influenced forms such as *chuínes*, which draws on Canary Islands music; and many styles, such as merengue and mangulina, that fuse African and European elements (see Davis 1976, 1981; Lizardo 1975).

Mountainous terrain and poor roads have kept the five primary areas of the Dominican Republic relatively isolated from each other; regionalism has been central to both music and politics in the country (see the map)? *El Sur* (The South), the largely arid southwestern portion of the country, contains large cattle ranches and Santo Domingo, the capital of the Republic, while sugar cultivation as well as ranching dominate *El Este* (The East). The lush northeastern Samaná peninsula was settled by black entrants from Haiti, the English-speaking Caribbean, and the United States. The fertile, rolling mountains of the country's most densely populated central region, El Cihao, have been used mainly for small-scale fruit, vegetable, tobacco, and coffee cultivation. The region shares many cultural characteristics with *La Línea Noroeste* (northwest border).

Variants of merengue developed in several regions of the country, but only the Cibao version gained national prominence, perhaps because of the region's high status. The country's oligarchy was long concentrated in the Cibao's largest city, Santiago de los Caballeros (literally, "Santiago of the Gentlemen"). And while Dominicans of both African and European descent live in all areas of the Republic, the Cibao's people claim the highest proportion of European ancestry (although parts of the South also have populations of largely European descent). Racially speaking, in general "the South and East of the country became true centers of mulatos . . . [while] several areas of the Cibao maintained a preponderance of white population more or

less devoid of African physical characteristics" (Pérez-Cabral 1967: 132–33).⁸ This high concentration of European blood, of oligarchs, and of the population in general precipitated what H. Hoetink terms a "hierarchy of regions, in which the Cibao had always been dominant" (1982: 50).

Syncretism and Articulation

A Dominican friend told me on several occasions that she would like to view some of my videotapes of rural Dominican festivals, but only tapes that "do not involve the saints or the dead"; the worship of saints and religious homage to ancestors in the Dominican Republic are associated with African-derived beliefs that my friend considered taboo. Because most Dominican rural festivals are, in fact, held in honor of saints or deceased community members, it was difficult for me to find tapes that she could view,

The gap between the Dominican Republic's dominant, Hispanocentric ideology and its cultural reality causes mixed feelings similar to the "socialized ambivalence" that Melville Herskovits noted in Haiti. Melville Herskovits wrote that this predicament manifests itself in a Haitian's "possession by the gods of his [African] ancestors . . . despite his strict Catholic upbringing," and that his "desire to understand and worship the gods of his ancestors" is followed by "utter remorse after having done this" (1937: 295–96).

Many Dominicans reveal similar mixed feelings about local music and national identity. Like my friend, many in the urban middle and upper classes who find the rural arts intriguing symbolic expressions of national character eschew them in practice because most Dominican musics are associated with African-derived religious practices. Most Dominicans thus prefer to think of the Cibao variant of merengue as representative of their traditional culture. Davis, who has conducted extensive research on Afro-Dominican drumming, relates that when she says she studies "folk music, Dominicans on the whole say, 'Oh, you mean the [Cibao-style] merengue.' Long drum and other strongly African influenced types of music are not perceived as "folklore" (1976 10). At least, they are not perceived as *presentable* folklore. Ironically, merengue is often performed as a recreational component of the very African-influenced rituals that Eurocentric Dominicans eschew.

Erika Bourguignon noted a relationship between mixed feelings and syncretism, arguing that while the latter “helps to present a complete picture of the universe, . . . ambivalence is essentially disruptive not only to a harmonious world-view, but even to successful self-identification” (1951: 173; also see 1969). But judgments that rest on rigid compartmentalizations don’t do justice to life’s complexity; as Renato Rosaldo writes, many cultural phenomena “escape analysis because they fail to conform with standard expectations” (1988: 79). Explicating his influential notion of “double-consciousness” in 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois noted that mixed feelings cut both ways, sometimes widening rather than limiting people’s horizons: Although the African-American “ever feels, . . . two warring ideals in one dark body,” which may “seem like the absence of power, . . . it is not weakness,—it is the contradiction of double aims” ([1903] 1989: 3). Far from being a flaw, the predicament that Herskovits describes in Haiti is a natural outgrowth of the colonial encounter, a result of the inculcation of hegemonic values? The reality would seem to be that, as Frantz Fanon writes, ambivalence is “inherent [in] the colonial situation” (1983: 67; also see Ferrán 1985; Smith 1983: 93–95; Wilcken 1992). Out of such complex feelings springs a rich and multifaceted creativity; through the years, Dominican musicians have adapted with remarkable finesse to changing realities by incorporating non-Dominican elements into merengue. Particularly in changing times, this wealth of signification has lent the music special aesthetic relevance.

One-sided theoretical frameworks for considering merengue are thus inadequate. Theodor Adorno believes that popular culture promotes the interests of the ruling class (1976), while commentators such as John Fiske argue that it belongs to “subordinated and disempowered” elements of society (1989: 4). Calling attention to the deficiencies of both views, Jim McGuigan calls for a “critical populism” to replace the sometimes naively celebratory tone of “cultural populist” scholarship on one hand and Adorno’s position on the other (1992: 5). As Stuart Hall explains, “Popular culture is neither, in a ‘pure’ sense, the popular traditions of resistance . . . nor is it the forms that are superimposed on and over them. It is the ground on which the transformations are worked (1981: 228, quoted in Middleton 1990: 7). He thus proposes that we look at popular culture in terms of *articulation*, because this term “carries the sense of languageing, of expressing,” but more importantly, because “in England . . . we also speak of an articulated lorry (truck), a lorry

where the front (cab) and back (trailer) can, but need not necessarily, be connected to one another. . . . So the so-called 'unity' of a discourse is really the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be rearticulated in different ways because they have no necessary 'belongingness'" (Grossberg and Hall 1986 53).

Thus, syncretic, multivalent, and fluid, merengue has endured as a symbol of Dominican identity for its very success in articulating the contradictory forces at play in Dominican life.

Prologue to the Dominican Nation, 1493–1844

The Dominican Republic shares with Haiti a West Indian island situated between Cuba and Puerto Rico; it was called Quisqueya by its native inhabitants, a name Dominicans still use (see the map). Christening it *La Española* (Hispaniola in English), Columbus claimed it for the Spanish crown and founded the first permanent European settlement in the Americas, Santo Domingo de Guzmán, on its southern coast in 1493. Santo Domingo eventually became the capital of the Dominican Republic.¹⁰ Only a century after Columbus's arrival, virtually all the native Tainos and Caribs had perished, and enslaved Africans comprised the majority of the island's inhabitants. As Spain colonized more lucrative areas of the Americas, such as gold-rich Mexico and Peru, Hispaniola became a neglected part of the empire. Frenchmen, many of them buccaneers, took advantage of Spain's disinterest and in the seventeenth century began to settle the western part of the island, an area ceded to France under the Peace of Ryswick in 1697. The Spanish colony remained Santo Domingo, and the French settlement became Saint-Domingue. While the French possession was soon home to a large population, mostly enslaved Africans, inhabitants of the sparsely settled Spanish area were for the most part a rich racial mix.

Over the half-century from 1795 to 1845, the island saw one war after another. Slave revolts shook Saint-Domingue in the late eighteenth century; Spain and England supported the slaves, hoping to destabilize France's most important colony. In a bid for the favor of Saint-Domingue's masses, revolutionary France abolished slavery, and the black leader Toussaint L'Ouverture

defeated the Spanish and English in the name of France in 1795. As a result, Spanish Santo Domingo was ceded to France under the Treaty of Basil. Occupied with its own revolution, France did not take possession until 1801, when L'Ouverture entered the territory, abolishing slavery as his first official act. Meanwhile, Napoleon Bonaparte had decided to reinstitute slavery on Hispaniola and use the island as headquarters for a new French empire in the Americas. His forces wrested control of Hispaniola in 1802, capturing L'Ouverture and sending him to France. While France secured the Spanish side of the island, former slaves on the Saint-Domingue side, now led by Jean Jacques Dessalines, refused to submit to their former French masters and expelled Napoleon's forces. In 1804 these free people founded the Republic of Haiti, the world's first black republic and the second independent state in the Americas."

Hoping to banish slavery and European domination from the entire island once and for all, Haitian president Dessalines invaded Spanish-speaking Santo Domingo in 1805 but could not oust the French. Although many Dominicans of color had sided with him, the Haitian leader felt betrayed and committed abuses while retreating; according to Frank Moya Pons, he killed over four hundred people in the towns of Moca and Santiago (1986: 130). Stressed in Dominican historiography, this massacre played a tractable role in the formation of a Dominican national identity that has often been defined by its opposition to Haiti.

The French enacted policies that put them out of favor with the Spanish-speaking Dominican elite. With help from Spain and England, the Dominicans expelled the French in 1809, and their territory was returned to the Spanish Crown. Many Dominicans had mixed feelings about living under colonial rule when much of Latin America was seeking independence, and this period came to be known as the era of *España boba* (foolish Spain). After little more than a decade, a group of Dominicans led by Jose Nuñez de Cáceres overthrew the Spanish colonial government, establishing El Estado Independiente del Haiti Español (The Independent State of Spanish Haiti) in 1821 in alliance with Simón Bolívar's Colombia Federation. Haitian president Jean Pierre Boyer was haunted by the possibility that the French would return and reinstitute slavery. Boyer's forces met little resistance when they entered Santo Domingo in 1822, and the island was unified under the Haitian flag. Haiti emancipated the

slaves, although they were tied to the land they worked, and according to Davis, a “cultural renaissance” followed, as islanders could practice African-derived customs without fear of persecution by the colonial authorities (1976: 17).

Economic problems fomented discontent on both the French and Spanish sides of the island, and both launched plots to depose the Haitian president. On the Dominican side, liberal intellectuals founded a secret society, *La Trinitaria* (The Trinity), headed by Juan Pablo Duarte, which strove to establish a new sovereign state independent from Haiti. The overthrow of Boyer in Haiti in 1843 created conditions favorable to *La Trinitaria*’s plan, and after a short war of independence, the Dominican Republic was founded on 27 February 1844.

Race, Nation, and *Music*

Behind merengue’s link to Dominican national identity lies a century and a half of racial, class, and ethnic discomfort. The white Dominican elite, for example, found itself unallied with both black Dominicans and Europeans. Many Dominicans of color, did not consider Haitian president Boyer an outside aggressor when he took control of Spanish Santo Domingo in 1822. As Frank Moya Pons affirms, the Haitian leader offered the Dominican masses more than the Euro-Dominican ruling class did: “[T]he majority of the population was mulatto, and many were favorably disposed to the unification with Haiti. To them, the Haitian government promised land, the abolition of taxes, and the liberation of the few remaining slaves” (1995: 123).

The white Dominican elite found being subsumed into a black republic unacceptable. Because Spain was less than forthcoming with support for this constituency, many privileged Dominicans believed that the best way to preserve their social position was to break away from Europe (see Royce 1982: 89–90). Benedict Anderson shows that many Latin American independence movements arose in response to threats of black or indigenous uprisings; Simón Bolívar himself once said that a slave revolt was “a thousand times worse than a Spanish invasion” (in Anderson 1991: 49). These were the sentiments of the Dominican ruling class, which gained independence from Haiti rather than from colonial Spain.

The demographics of the Dominican state founded in 1844 were clearly at odds with the Eurocentric worldview of its leaders. At about this same time, the idea that nations or ethnicities are linked to sovereign states and bounded territories became prevalent in western Europe and the Americas—the term *nation* originally applied to any group of people with a shared history, what today we call an ethnic group (Hobsbawm 1990: 14–17).¹² As Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Szanton Blanc write, the development of national identity is a “hegemonic process” that invokes—or invents—a shared historical past that advances the interests of a country’s dominant classes (1994: 36). While the resulting sense of national identity may be flavored by preexisting ethnic feelings, it is essentially a social construct—to borrow Etienne Balibar’s term, a “fictive ethnicity” (1991: 96). This term is particularly apt for the Hispanic sense of self that developed in the Dominican Republic, whose culture owes so much to Africa.

In terms of music, then, what is more natural than for the urbane, Eurocentric Dominican cultural nationalists to be attracted to the syncretic merengue rather than to Afro-Dominican drumming? As propagated by Johann Gottfried Herder, Central European romantic nationalism, taught that nations express their essences and highest manifestations in language and artistic expression (see Wilson 1973). Although the New World patriots espoused Enlightenment ideas rather than romantic nationalism, the latter influenced the arts in the Americas during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see Béhague 1979: 96). Upper-class and bourgeois composers may have enlisted local rural musics as national symbols, but they embraced only those forms consonant with the dominant worldview. Singling out merengue for canonization allowed a “*selective tradition*” to be “passed off as *the tradition*” (Williams 1991: 414).

While its rise to prominence was originally linked to the agenda of the ruling class, Dominicans of all social classes eventually came to consider merengue an authentic expression of nationhood. The music remained central not only to national identity as outside influences inundated the Republic in the late twentieth century, but also to the transnational identity that developed as many Dominicans sought work abroad. Like other migrants of this era, they have adapted differently than earlier migrants. While developing allegiances to their new countries, these “transmigrants” also remain loyal to their homelands, forging multiple identities that subtly resist political and

economic domination (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994: 7). Dominicans have created social, economic, political, and artistic networks to extend their home culture into transnational spaces, and merengue has had a high profile in this “transnational nation-state” (Basch, Click Schiller, and Szanton Blanc 1994). The music’s visibility outside of the Republic gained it new, non-Dominican audiences, and today Dominican merengue is integral to the soundscape of Latinos in all of the Americas,