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Juan Luis Guerra and the Merengue: Toward a New Dominican National Identity

Raymond Torres-Santos

CUNY Dominican Studies Institute

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**DOMINICAN
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Research Monograph

Juan Luis Guerra
and the Merengue:
Toward a New Dominican
National Identity

Raymond Torres-Santos

Dominican Studies Research Monograph Series

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Foreword

In *Juan Luis Guerra and the Merengue: Toward a New Dominican National Identity*, Raymond Torres-Santos offers a historical account about the development of merengue in the Dominican Republic from the late 1800's to the present. In its trajectory, merengue has become a cultural symbol identified with the Dominican people. During the U.S. occupation of the Dominican Republic from 1916 to 1924, merengue changed its rhythmic pace: from the fast pace of merengue típico to a slower pace that, in the author's view, could "accommodate the steps of the American tourists." The author explains that this new style of merengue was referred to as pambiche or apambichao. Similarly, during the dictatorship of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, merengue bands were molded to resemble a given image of popular music bands in the U.S.

Torres-Santos argues that the physical disappearance of Trujillo from Dominican society opened the space for the emergence of new styles of merengue. Starting with Johnny Ventura as a point of reference, and going through a repertoire that includes Wilfrido Vargas and Pochy and his Coco Band, Torres-Santos pays particular attention to Juan Luis Guerra as the ultimate expression of a type of merengue that reflects the disappearance of an epoch and the emergence of another.

The author uses his training in music to study Juan Luis Guerra's rise as a renowned merengero whose lyrics impact views on Dominican society across the board: from the political to the cultural; from the economic to the religious. Guerra's songs include different musical genres: from merengue típico, and traditional merengue to boleros and bachatas. His lyrics address social concerns such as the perils of a working-class man who struggles to make a living and the man whose heart has been broken by an uninterested woman who prefers someone else.

With *Juan Luis Guerra and the Merengue: Toward a New Dominican National Identity*, Torres-Santos makes an important contribution to the growing literature on Dominican music, particularly on merengue. His study expands the works on merengue by examining closely the contributions of a Dominican musician whose compositions have crossed continents bringing Dominican music to the most sophisticated scenarios worldwide.

Abrazos,

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Dr. Raymond Torres-Santos is a composer, conductor, educator and scholar, equally at home in both classical and popular music. His works include orchestral, electronic and vocal music for the concert hall, ballet, film, theater, television and radio. They have been performed and/or commissioned by symphony orchestras around the world, such as the London Session Orchestra, Vienna Symphony, American Composers Orchestra, National Chinese Orchestra, Warsaw Conservatory of Music Chorus and Orchestra, Soria Symphony (Spain), and the Canadian and Washington Opera Orchestras; as well as the national symphony orchestras of Vancouver, Toronto, Shanghai, Taipei, Virginia, Puerto Rico and Dominican Republic, among many others. He has also worked with the best opera and pop music performers, including: Plácido Domingo, Andrea Bocelli, Deborah Voigt, Angela Gheorghiu and Juan Luis Guerra. His compositions and arrangements have been recorded for Sony Music, OSPR and SJP record labels; published by RTS Music and ANCO; and distributed by commercial retailers.

His scholarly work focuses on music education, creativity, multiculturalism, music criticism and inter-disciplinary studies. His recent articles appear in a peer-reviewed journal from Hofstra University and in a book published by Cambridge Scholar Publishing. Currently, he is the general editor of the book *Music Education in the Caribbean and Latin America: a Comprehensive Guide*, to be published by R&L Education (a division of Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.) for the National Association of Music Education in the USA.

Dr. Torres-Santos holds a Ph.D. and M.A. from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA); completed advanced studies at Stanford University and Harvard University; and furthered his studies in Europe at the Ferienkurse für Neue Musik in Germany and at the University of Padua in Italy. He has taught at the City University of New York, at UCLA and at Rutgers University. He also held many administrative posts as Dean of the College of the Arts at the California State University, Long Beach and at William Paterson University in New Jersey; Chancellor of the Puerto Rico Conservatory of Music; Chair of the Music Department at the University of Puerto Rico; and Coordinator of the Commercial/Electronic Music Program at the California State University, San Bernardino.

A musical genre is the musical manifestation of a particular group of people, with a specific manner of expressing themselves in the form of singing, playing a musical instrument and composing music. As a form of human expression, a musical genre is subject to constant social, technological and geographical change. This transformation creates a new modality, a *syncretic* or *hybrid* style, which retains some original elements while being exposed to new influences, thus generating a dynamic momentum, never returning to its original form. This process moves the style forward, making it accessible to the general public. Composers and performers are usually responsible for this transformation. This is precisely the case with Dominican singer-arranger-composer Juan Luis Guerra in relation to *merengue*, a distinctive music genre, which has functioned as a form of cultural expression but which, in the hands of Guerra, has become a new symbol of national identity to people from the Dominican Republic today.

Although it would be inaccurate to claim that Juan Luis Guerra is solely responsible for the current state of Dominican music, Guerra's presence during a time of great social, technological and geographical change and progress in the Dominican Republic positions him as a leader among his generation. In a relatively short span of time, he has managed to: 1) present a historical perspective on *merengue* while moving it forward in terms of melody, harmony, instrumentation and words; 2) open up a sincere dialogue on issues of race, immigration, class division and social conflict; 3) include marginalized Dominican ethnic groups and traditions in his discourse; 4) speak directly to fellow Dominican citizens in language simultaneously colloquial, sophisticated, and refined; 5) embrace other international musical trends, thus enriching Dominican culture; and 6) transcend the limits of the island and become an advocate for Latin Americans in general.

I will aim in this paper to demonstrate how his contribution has modeled a new consciousness of Dominican identity and transnational spirit, serving as a paradigm for the 21st century. First, I will examine the development of *merengue*; second, how Juan Luis Guerra came up with his own voice; and third, how he has contributed to this new cultural awareness.

Although there are many musical genres in the Dominican Republic which represent the diversity of Dominican culture-- including influences from natives and Spaniards to other Europeans and Africans -- *merengue* became strongly associated with the Dominican people. Studies have demonstrated that *merengue* was a Pan-Caribbean genre already in the nineteenth century. Haiti, Venezuela, Colombia, and Puerto Rico each developed local forms of the music (Austerlitz, Brito-Ureña, Castillo, Chalju-Mejía, Convite, Coopersmith, Davis, Encuentro, Gill, Hutchinson, Lizardo, Pacini-Hernández, Tejeda, Van Buren). With the exception of the Puerto Rican version, all forms of those *merengues* are still played today. Like another Pan-Caribbean form, *danza*, the Caribbean *merengue* fused the European *contradanse* with local, African-derived elements. Therefore, they are thus aptly called “Afro-Caribbean *contradanse* transformations” (Austerlitz 15). As we will discover, the Dominican *merengue* has been in continuous transformation since its beginnings around 1844, a process in which the previously known manifestation grew more complex, while keeping some recognizable features (Tejeda, 2002: 23).

A clear transformation could be seen in the development of the instrumentation of the *merengue*. Paul Austerlitz states that, “In the mid-19th century, the musical ensemble consisted of a combination of violin, guitar, mandolin, *tiple* and *cuatro*; the *timbal*, *tambora* o *pandereta* drums; and a scraper called the *güiro*” (23). As marching band instruments were introduced to the island, instruments such as the clarinet and baritone horn were also added. He continues, “Rural *merengue* most likely developed from its urban cousin. Each region of the Dominican Republic adapted the music to local instruments and aesthetics to create the variants performed today. For instance, *merengue Cibaeño*, or *merengue* from the Cibao region (also known as *perico ripiao*), was performed on plucked string instruments, such as the *cuatro*, and the *tambora* drum and scraped calabash (the *güiro* or *güira*). The German accordion, arriving in the region during the 1870’s, was also added” (Austerlitz 25). By the beginning of the twentieth century it was entrenched as a *típico* (that is, authentic or folk form played only by *campesinos* and those who dwelled in *barríos*). *Tamboreros*, or *tambora* players, performed the drum sideways in their lap but later started to play it with a stick in the right hand and the palm of the left hand, rather than with two sticks as they had done before. Eventually, the

calabash *güiro*, was replaced by a metal version, making it distinctive from the Puerto Rican and Cuban *güiros*. One of the major exponents of this kind of *merengue* in the 1950s was Ángel Vilorio and his *conjunto típico*. During the United States' occupation of the Dominican Republic between 1916 and 1924, a smoother *merengue* emerged to accommodate the steps of the American tourists. Inspired by a popular clothing brand of the time, Palm Beach, it was referred as *pambiche* or *apambichao*. This new modality presents one of many examples of the impact of the United States on the culture of the Dominican Republic.

The *Cibao merengue* ultimately set the stage for a new era of *merengue*, a remodeled ballroom dance *merengue* as conceived by Dictator Rafael Trujillo, who ruled from 1930-1961. Trujillo, using the overwhelming political power of his regime, was the first one to give the *merengue* the status of a national symbol, or rather a populist symbol. He even set the melody for his political campaign song to this rhythm (Tejeda, 2002: 88). Suddenly, popular urban dance bands, in the fashion of the popular United States big bands era, were required by Trujillo to incorporate *merengues* into their repertoire, producing the *big-band salon merengue*. This transformation shows yet another facet of how the United States influenced the island.

A good number of orchestras emerged following the new *merengue* style. The most famous orchestra of the time was that of Luis Alberti, later named Orquesta Presidente Trujillo. Other stars of the Trujillo era included Super Orchestra San José, led by Papá Molina [Ramón Antonio Molina y Pacheco], Orchestra Santa Cecilia, Antonio Morel, Los hermanos Vázquez and El trío Reynoso. As Austerlitz notes, Peter Manuel confirms that, “These *orquestas* were heavily influenced by North American swing big-band jazz, using mambo-like sectional arrangements highlighting the trumpets and specially the saxophones, which have retained their importance until the present” (102). The basic instrumentation included four or five saxophones, and three or four trumpets. The piano replaced the original guitar. The *tambora*, the *güira* and the accordion remained in the band to provide an authentic regional sound.

During the 1950s other elements of jazz were incorporated into *merengue*. Saxophonists Tavito Vázquez and Choco de León applied bebop improvisation and small group interpretation to *merengue*, re-

spectively. Austerlitz asserts that, “Arranger Bienvenido Bustamante also played an important role of diffusing knowledge about, and enthusiasm for jazz among Dominican musicians” (Austerlitz 58-59). In addition, he maintains that “Dance-band *merengue* showed a remarkable capacity to incorporate elements of other musics” (59). Dominican bands recorded *merengue* versions of foreign hits including Mexican *rancheras* and Brazilian *sambas*. Some of these orchestras also introduced the conga. In an interview, Joséito Mateo claimed that he and Papa Molina introduced this instrument to *merengue* ((Tejeda, 2002: 93).

After the collapse of the Trujillo regime, President Joaquín Balaguer assumed the presidency in 1966. Soon urbanization and the presence of foreign capital were visible. The Dominican record industry started to emerge and local productions appeared. A most important change in music, however, was the emergence of a new and revitalized *merengue*, which managed to combine the sophistication of the *big-band salon merengue*, the raunchy intensity of *perico ripiao*, and the most popular foreign influences. The most innovative and significant singer/bandleader in the 1960s was Johnny Ventura. He broke from the “sweet” sound of salon big bands like Alberti’s, pairing down the ensemble to a lean *combo* of two saxophones and two or three other trumpets. The key instruments were the saxophones, which played crisp, staccato arpeggio patterns, interlocking percussively with the newly highlighted *tambora* to produce tight (*apretao*), machine-gun-like composite rhythms; reminding us of the skillfulness of Dominican musicians (Manuel 106). Tejeda observes that, “the modality of combos was already emerging in the Caribbean” (all translations are my own), such as Cortijo y su Combo and El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico (2002: 114).

Inspired by Elvis Presley’s Rock and Roll and soul singer James Brown’s revue, “Ventura outfitted his band’s sidemen in flashy costumes and had them dance snappy steps on the stage.” (Manuel 106). Features of *disco* music in the 1970s and early 1980s, like the bass drum, were added to execute a disco-like beat (Austerlitz 92). Manuel asserts that, “Ventura’s band managed to refashion the *merengue* as a music that combined the best of the local and international, the traditional and the modern, while becoming an embodiment of Dominican *tigueraje* (slang for feistiness, vigor)” (106). The lyrics also refer to street-life,

poor urban neighborhood type of behavior, which in fact Ventura's *merengues* incorporated. Ventura went as far as using the word combo to identify his ensemble.

In the 1980s many bands continued the practice of basing *merengue* arrangements on foreign hits. This practice was now known as *fusilamiento* (execution). Most *fusilamientos* were based on Hispanic romantic songs. Wilfrido Vargas together with his Beduinos was "a master hybridizer", revamping the *merengue* even further into the international music that it is today. He was possibly the first one to popularize the *merengue* in Europe (I witnessed his popularity during my studies in Italy in the 80s). He brought the tempo of the *merengue* to breakneck speeds and went much further than Ventura in incorporating outside musical influences, drawing from French Caribbean *zouk* and Haitian *kompa* music, Colombian *cumbia*, and eventually, American *hip hop* (Morales 240). He also was a pioneer and an influential figure in the use of synthesizers. Furthermore, his peculiar staccato singing and his showmanship as a singer, trumpeter and bandleader made him a singular Dominican entertainer.

Merengue's rhythmic structure, often the determinant of defining a music genre, was changed so much by Wilfrido Vargas that Cheché Abreu, the leader of the group Cheché Abreu and his Colosos, coined the term *mangue*, also known as *maco* beat, a new beat inspired by the Puerto Rican *plena* previously made popular by Cortijo y su Combo. Ed Morales acknowledges that, "The rolling four-beat rhythm of the *Cibao*-oriented style of *merengue* was replaced by the two-beat rhythm of the more primal African *maco* beat", a new African influence now coming from a fellow Caribbean country at the end of the 20th century (242). With the *maco* beat, which was also parallel to the marching disco beat, *merengue* seemed to be easier to dance to. *Merengue* became a staple of dance floors from Santo Domingo to Miami to New York. The stars of this new *maco* movement were Pochi y su Coco Band, Jossie Esteban y la Patrulla 15, and Los Hermanos Rosario" (242). This *merengue* penetrated further in Western Europe, especially Spain.

Within this music context, singer, arranger and composer Juan Luis Guerra emerges as the most innovative presence in *merengue* in the late 1980s and 1990s. Guerra appears as a deviation from the *maco*

beat, but more importantly yet, as a conscientious visionary and revivalist with the right professional credentials and intellectual suavity to intentionally place his artistry within a conscious historical, social and technological perspective. Morales has described it as, “He turns away from the speeded-up, mass-market versions of *merengue* and celebrates its more folkloric roots...” (242). He took full advantage of his awareness of the old rural interpretation.

In 1984, Guerra formed his band 440 with Maridalia Hernández, Mariela Mercado and Roger Zayas-Bazán to record his music for advertising. The 440, representing his backup group of vocalists, refers to the number of cycles per seconds derived from the standard tuning pitch of the A note (Morales 242). The 440 name was given by Guerra’s brother after noticing the importance to Juan Luis Guerra of achieving a well tuned vocal ensemble. His backup singers, unlike Johnny Ventura’s sidemen, helped Guerra fuse the harmonic perfection of four-part vocal harmonies reminiscent of the jazz group The Manhattan Transfer (Morales 243).

After performing in their own country and nightclubs in Washington Heights, the Dominican neighborhood in New York City, the group took stages from Broadway to Tokyo, Asunción and Moscow by surprise (Tejeda, 1993: 9). But the driving force behind the group was without a doubt Juan Luis Guerra. His talent and musical knowledge enabled him to create an organic relationship between musical and verbal language (Haidar 318).

Musically speaking, Guerra was raised as a guitarist. Musicians from his early days in the Dominican Republic remember him as a fine, well-rounded musician with a wide knowledge of music of other cultures and styles (Cruz; Van Der Holst; Cabrera). As such, he reintroduces the guitar in his compositions, an instrument which important *merengue* exponents, like Johnny Ventura and Wilfrido Vargas, had replaced with harmonies from the piano (Marceles 14). Aside from Dominican traditional music, he was also influenced by *boleros*, Chilean *nueva canción*, Cuban *nueva trova* movement and Brazilian music. Trained at the prestigious Berklee School of Music in Boston, his American influences included not only the big band jazz already explored by others, but also rock, folk and R&B.

Guerra shows an unprecedented knowledge of literary influences from Neruda to García Lorca. Julieta Haidar recognizes that, “Through his lyrics he is able to transform the ordinary into an aesthetical experience of great artistic quality” (320). Yet he uses a lexicon commonly shared in the Dominican Republic by borrowing popular idioms and other forms of oral language, creating a brilliant fusion - as many great poets of Spanish/Latin American culture have done during the 20th century. The principal themes of his songs include love and hate as well as social, economic and political problems. More than slogans, they are emblems made in a metaphoric and rhetorical manner. His love songs are hymns to love, breaking the taboo against discussing sex by treating it within an erotic-sensual dimension (Haidar 323). Marta Madina adds that “[t]he final product reaches out to the public in general, since it is anchored in the Dominican reality” (60). However, there are those who affirm that his *merengue* is bourgeois and his words too mawkish to reflect the cruel reality of working people, who have always been consumers per excellence of a much rougher *merengue* (quoted in Madina 62). Even if that were true, at least Guerra, coming from the middle class, is opening lines of communication among the social classes, while showing a sincere sympathy for and commitment to his fellow citizens.

In essence, Guerra created a *merengue* which he qualifies as music for the feet as much as for the head; that is, a *merengue* for dancing but also for listening and thinking (quoted in Marceles 14). He was capable of analyzing, synthesizing and re-creating the wide variety of music developed in the Dominican Republic, the rest of the Caribbean and Latin America, thus breaking geographical, cultural and historical frontiers (Haidar 316; 317). This breakthrough is achieved in large measure through Guerra’s broad musical and literary learning, which are evident in his singing, performing, arranging, songwriting and producing. Tejada describes him as a “synthesis,” in his blurring of the limits between what it is considered traditional and modern as well as popular and traditional, and as a “nationalist” as evidenced by his musical production. He adds that he is “a footprint of the Dominican culture at the end of the 20th century: a culture looking north, toward the United States, as a point of international reference...; a product of two cultures” (the city with the second highest number of Dominicans is New York City) (Tejada, 2002: 155-56). Let us then examine some examples which demonstrate his influences and transformations.

Juan Luis Guerra's first album, *Soplando*, released in 1985, featured jazz-influenced *merengues* and inspired saxophone improvisation. It included a jazz-tinged arrangement of "Jardinera," the Joséito Mateo *ranchera-merengue* hit of the 1950s (Austerlitz 106). Francis Rodríguez points out that, "*Soplando* recalls *Los Solmeños*, an unforgettable group, which at the end of Trujillo dictatorship, and at the beginning of democracy was a musical breakthrough in the Dominican creative music world" (Rodríguez, 1994: 5). For their next efforts, *Mudanza y Acarreo* (1985) and *Mientras más lo pienso...tu* (1987), Guerra and 440 began adding lightning-quick riffs of *perico ripiao* (Brennan). "His 'A pedir su mano' contains a brilliant and eclectic orchestration and searing chorus (Manuel 116). The piece combines a melody taken from a Central African *soukous* song with vocal arrangements marked by African and Afro-Dominican images (Austerlitz 111). In his neoclassical version of the venerable standard "Mal de amor," he "tips his hat" to the 1950s bands of Luis Alberti and Papá Molina and reinterprets the song in an idiosyncratically modern fashion (Manuel 116).

With the release of his recording *Bachata Rosa* (1991), he took another musical genre associated with poor people, *bachata* (a hybrid guitar-based genre, which is related to the Cuban son/bolero and the *ranchera* singing whine introduced by the Mexican cinema in this Antillean Island, particularly in the slum bars, but now with a distinctive *guira* rhythm and dancing) and introduced it to a wider audience (Pacini Hernández 2). Tejada reminds us that *bachata* was influenced by the accelerated boleros cultivated by Julita Roos, Bienvenido Granda, Olimpo Cárdenas, as well as the Ecuadorian Julio Jaramillo and the Puerto Rican *El Jibarito de Lares* -Odilio González- (Tejada, 2002: 132). Contrary to the simplicity of *bachatas* by non-formally trained contemporary musicians like Tony Santos and Blas Durán, Guerra's *bachatas* were full of sophisticated musical creativity and poetic imagery (Pacini Hernández 3). Moreover, Guerra's *techno-bachatas* added synthesizers to sophisticated arrangements, while retaining the guitar-bongo-maraca-muted trumpet instrumentation (228). Indeed, his *bachatas* remind us how close this music genre is to the Cuban *son* and the Mexican *rancheras* and *trío* music. In the song "Burbujas de amor" metaphors of love reach the highest degree of creativity by majestically combining music and language (Haidar 325).

Areíto (1992) presented a new, more self-conscious, direction. The disc was inspired by Guerra's interest in the *Taino* Indians, indigenous inhabitants of the Caribbean, and named after their word for collective worship. Coinciding with the 500th anniversary of Columbus's arrival in the Americas, *Areíto* paid tribute to this first nation, which was virtually extinguished by the Spanish settlers. Guerra simulated a *Taino* chant in the title track, one of the disc's high points. Since none of the *Tainos'* original songs or instruments have survived, he created an imaginary version, using synthesizers and modern recording techniques. Here, too, he is pushing the envelope of *merengue* (Leonard). In "Mal de amor", Guerra introduces a *merengue* in the style of the great big band orchestras from the 1950s, like those by Papá Molina, Luis Alberti and Antonio Morel. "Si saliera petroleo" is a *guangancó* with lyrics of social content, which relates to those by Panamanian singer/songwriter Rubén Blades. In the *bachata*, "Coronita de flores" reveals a strong influence from The Beatles. Héctor Gutiérrez argues that, "The incursions into other music genres liberate JLG and 440 from the pigeonholing suffered by *merengueros* and convert them into more complete artists"(8). Juan Luis Guerra also experimented with his sentimental side with a symphony orchestra conducted by the Dominican arranger/conductor José Antonio Molina in two versions of "Cuando te beso." The work serves as a deserved tribute to pianist-composer Rafael Solano (Gutiérrez 9).

Shortly before *Areíto*, the Dominican musician Manuel Tejada, a close friend of Juan Luis Guerra, released *La música de Juan Luis Guerra* (1992). This album compiled fifteen of Guerra's most popular hits up to that point as a tribute to him. It was recorded with the Santo Domingo Philharmonic Orchestra and several musicians and backup singers who had previously worked in the 440 Group. This was not the first time *merengue* was performed by a symphony orchestra. Dominican classical composers, like Bienvenido Bustamante and others, had incorporated the *merengue* in their orchestral works. However, this production reached a much larger audience than the usual classical music concertgoers because of the familiarity and popularity of the songs included in it.

In *Fogaraté* (1994) Guerra's first single was "La cosquillita," a fast beat *perico ripiao merengue* with the collaboration of the Dominican accordionist and *perico ripiao* group leader Francisco Ulloa. His particular interest in Afro-Dominican ritual drumming led him to mix *merengue* with South African soukous *rhythms* (in "Fogaraté" and "El beso de la ciguatera") accompanied by Diblo Dibala, the famous guitarist from Zaire (Austerlitz 110). This rather eclectic production also introduced Guerra's first attempt at singing completely in English with "July 19th." It is interesting to note that for all the Dominican music genres explored by Guerra and other crossover musicians, there are others which are yet to be explored, such as: *mangulina*, *carabiné*, *sarandunga*, *pripri*, *criolla* and *palo*.

As previously mentioned, aside from his penchant for including Dominican and international music genres in his music, Guerra possesses the unprecedented ability to "speak" directly to his fellow Dominican citizens with his poetic lyrics. Through them, he challenges Dominicans, but also other Latin Americans, on pressing social issues. He particularly challenges conservative Dominicans' attitudes toward race, which have been basically Eurocentric. In this manner, he continues the dialogue about African influence and Hispanic influence in the Dominican heritage; bringing into focus an Afrophobic tendency observed in most Dominican conservative social sectors since the times of Trujillo.

His lyrics are full of a "journalistic tone" (Morales 243). In his "Carta de amor," he pleads with an estranged lover: "As you can see I think only of you/I'm not interested in perestroika/nor basketball/nor Larry Bird." Guerra's socially conscious lyrics and musical innovation on albums like *Fogaraté* (1994) and *Ni es lo mismo ni es igual* (1998) are in the tradition of the Cuban *nueva trova* of Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanés (Morales 244). On the other hand, his *bachata* "Frío, frío" draws from themes characteristic of Spanish poet Federico García Lorca. His "Visa para un sueño" is a poignant portrayal of the desperate aspirations of visa applicants at Santo Domingo's United States embassy (Manuel 16). He emphasizes the dramatic character of the immigrant, highlighting shades of hope in a messianic manner (Haidar 324). He speaks deeply to those who survived traveling on a boat, while making others aware of this reality (Cabrera). Guerra himself has stated that, "it was one thing to read about cases of sunken boats or illegal immigrants deported; but it

was another when I arrived in Puerto Rico and I was around those same people who came to me and thanked me for the vision I had portrayed of them, which was as heroes. It was then that I asked myself what my real role as a songwriter was” (quoted in Madina 58).

The album *Ojalá que llueva café* (1989) placed Guerra in the international arena and marked the solidification of what would be his recognized signature -- a ‘merengue with a message’, sophisticated harmonies and lush arrangements (Levin). McLane adds that, it is an album “full of nostalgia for a Caribbean past, frustrations with current social and economic limitations, and hope for a better future (McLane). The title song became an anthem for marginalized Dominicans wanting to do better and dreaming about higher aspirations as it promoted family values and attitudes. Even those in the countryside would go to sleep hoping for a better tomorrow (Cabrera).

The song “El costo de la vida” manifested the harsh conditions which most Latin American countries are going through. Among the social-criticism based songs are “Si de aquí saliera petróleo,” on which, not surprising, Rubén Blades participated, a mixture of *salsa* [the urban Cuban/Puerto Rican music genre] and *merengue*. Levin argues that “[c]alling the Dominican Republic by the *Taino* name *Quisqueya*, the song speaks about the long history of difficult and sometimes violent life on the island. In a mambo section at the end, Guerra responds to his people’s self-pity and fatalism, asking, ‘And if we struck oil, like they did in Kuwait, would we be any better off?’” (Levin). “Mal de amor” was composed by Haiti’s Nemours Jean Baptiste. Dominicans are often contemptuous of Haitians, with whom they share the island, often far from amicably. Leonard believes that, “In selecting this song Guerra is clearly advocating better relations between the two peoples” (Leonard). On the other hand, Austerlitz contends that, “Guerra expressed his enlightened view of the relationship between Dominican and African cultures in both the music and the video produced to promote his hit, ‘A pedir su mano.’ The video implies that while African arts can be admired in museums, they are better appreciated as living part of the Dominican culture” (Austerlitz 111).

Guerra celebrates the truly Caribbean nature of Dominicaness, versus the view of it as solely Hispanic, in his song, *Guavaberry*. In this

song he “speaks of the regional customs of *cocolos*, the Dominicans of Anglophone Caribbean descent who live in and around the city of San Pedro de Macorís in the East. With their dark skin, non-Hispanic roots, and working class roles, *cocolos* had remained on the margins of Dominicanness for quite a long time since their arrival in the country in the nineteenth century. The song’s bilingual text acknowledges the *cocolos*’ Anglophone background” (Austerlitz 110).

After a self-imposed semi-retirement period, in August of 2004 Guerra presented the first all-studio record he had produced in six years. The album, completely dedicated to God in a thankful manner for everything the author had received after his religious conversion in 1996, sold over half a million copies. *Billboard* also granted it many awards. It was also awarded two Latin Grammys for “Best Tropical song” and “Best Christian album” due to the hit single “Las avispas”. In this manner, Guerra’s legacy reached out to another sector of the public; thus ensuring that his message and legacy be further heard and appreciated.

In 2006, Guerra sang at the opening of the Rolling Stones’ concert in San Juan, Puerto Rico and during a concert at Los Altos de Chavón in the Dominican Republic he sang a duet with Sting. He went to Viñas del Mar in Chile for the second time and brought home the prize, “Antorcha de oro” (Rodríguez, 2007: 31). He closed the year singing together with Argentine Diego Torres, in the song “Abriendo caminos” and with Mexican band Maná with the song “Bendita tu luz” (Galán 32).

A new chapter in his career began in 2007 with the release of *La llave de mi corazón*, a record which the singer describes as the most romantic work in his career. Guerra himself states that this record is related to previous productions. It contains *merengue*, *salsa* and *bachata*, but is different since it also introduces new elements like a blend of blues, *mambo*, and hip hop (quoted in Rodríguez 31). The title song is about “an American caller to a romantic-advice radio show, who wonders how to court a Dominican woman he met online” (Kugel). The album includes two songs in English: “Something good,” in a duet with Italian singer Chiara Civello, and “Medicine for my soul.” In the song “Como yo” (As I), he confirms his wealth of cultural awareness by mentioning artworks by Monet, Van Gogh, Picasso and Cezanne; music works by Verdi, Beethoven and Bach; and opera singer Plácido Domingo.

After a number of appearances as guest artist in records by other singers, such as Nelly Furtado's "Mi lluvia" (2009), and live performances around the world, Juan Luis Guerra's 2010 album, *Asondeguerra*, presents yet another summation of his previous interests and intentions. It is a well-balanced offering of secular and religious songs, with music genres ranging from *merengue*, *bachata*, *cumbia*, *vallenato*, *son* and *salsa* to *mambo*, *soukus*, *reggae*, *reguetón*, rock, jazz and ballad; different *merengue* styles; electric guitar playing; lush big band arrangements; different languages; references to other parts of the world; collaborations with other artists; and social connotations. "Apage y vámonos" and "La guagua," with a Colombian *cumbia* beat (and sometimes *Regueton* feel), are full of social content; and "No aparecen" and "Mi bendición" are romantic songs. He goes back to his rock and jazz roots respectively in "La calle," in a duet with Colombia singer Juanes, and "Cayo arena," with a skillful 1950s *big band salon apambichao merengue* arrangement. He again explores the territory of *salsa* and *mambo* respectively in "Arregla los papeles" and "Lola's Mambo," in English and featuring American trumpeter Chris Botti. "Caribbean Blues" is also in English, while "Son del rey" is dedicated to Jesus. "Bachata en Fukuoka" reveals his experiences in that Japanese city as well as other countries like France and Russia.

At a personal level, Guerra has shown a sincere persona concerned with the same social, economic and political issues he tackles in his music. Today he has become an entrepreneur with Mango TV dedicated to entertainment for the family. When asked about how he sees the Dominican Republic, Guerra replied, "I see my country through my faithful eyes. I always see it in good standing. They say love covers all faults; of course we do have a lot of problems. Nevertheless, I have great expectancy and faith that we shall overcome those problems." He continues, "I'm worried about education. I would like us Dominicans to give examples of correctness and good behavior, wherever we go." He adds, "I'm also worried about health, especially child health services." He ends, "another issue is the abuse of deforestation; we should make people conscious about saving the trees and the rivers. (quoted in Rodríguez, 2007: 31). Expanding upon his concern with his country, he also founded the 440 Foundation, which has helped to save hundreds of poor Dominicans lacking medical care (Madina 63). Obviously, his vision and interests are reflected in his music.

Moreover, Guerra advocates for loving all human beings and maintaining strong family values. Guerra has confessed that “going to church, traveling, contacting and experimenting new cultures and spending time with his family are activities he enjoys.” Guerra has also stated that, “the direct contact with the public and the fact of seeing thousands of happy faces [...] listening to him sing, is really marvelous.” When talking about the songs that have become social emblems and love-themed classics throughout Latin America through the years, Guerra has stated that, “he feels greatly honored” (quoted in Rodríguez, 2007: 31).

It is evident that humility is just a distinctive sign of Guerra’s greatness. When asked why people love him so much, Guerra replies that he believes “Dominicans relate to my songs, because those songs are already part of their lives and they tend to see me as part of their families.” It is not surprising that he has become a prophet in his own land (Jiménez 17). He has become more famous than the President of the Republic. When asked if he would consider running for a political position he added, “I am clear what I was born for” (quoted in Soldevilla 60-61). Seth Kugel asserts that Guerra himself has expressed that “while diplomats speak through interpreters, books are translated, movies are subtitled, music breaks barriers more awkwardly, and world music is in most cases shorthand for music whose lyrics we can’t understand.”

To summarize, Guerra’s success derives from his musical talent, education, refined and sensitive lyrics, complex vocal arrangements, inventive melodic and rhythmic arrangements, social criticism and philosophical depth. But his mass appeal can be attributed to his tuneful melodies, diversity of themes, and the taste and intelligence of his music as much as his poetry. This eclecticism as well as the strength and richness of Guerra’s music illustrates how Dominican music has come of age, becoming an international musical genre in its own right, while retaining its earthy folk roots. Through Guerra’s music, Dominican music, once given a secondary role to Cuban and Puerto Rican music, now resounds throughout the dance floors of the world and achieves recognition at awards events like the Grammys.

Guerra's work also illustrates another important aspect of Dominican culture: the existing potential within it, i.e., the creative contribution Dominicans can offer when the right combination of access to a broad education, personal talent and an intense artistic vocation comes into play. Guerra's achievements and accomplishments, beyond exceptionality, point to a largely untapped potential for collective wealth, still restrained by social, economic, and political inequalities.

A more gifted and sophisticated singer/arranger/composer than many previous performers, Guerra has the uncommon ability to appeal to all: Dominican peasants, urban elites, transnational migrants, North American tourists, Puerto Ricans on the island and the United States mainland, and European fans. In essence, he has done what no politician or public figure has been able to achieve in the history of the Dominican Republic. He speaks directly and meaningfully not just to all Dominicans, but to all Latin Americans.

Guerra's sincere social commentaries and celebrations of Dominican culture in all of its heterogeneity address issues at the core of Dominican life in the twenty-first century. His contribution to the history of *merengue* is indeed an artistic milestone, helping Dominicans embrace their past and appreciate who they are. Without a doubt, in Juan Luis Guerra, Dominicans have encountered a role model worth emulating; someone who has transcended the shores of the Dominican Republic to become an international ambassador of its music, of all that defines the higher values of Dominicans. In that sense, he has shown the path to a new Dominican national identity. Moreover, aside from being deeply interested in and curious about his own national culture, he is also an advocate of the Americas, an international icon, a receptor of influences from around the world, a free spirit and an intellectual. Equally for Dominicans and Latin Americans, he offers simply "una visa para un sueño" (A Visa for a Dream): a permit to dream about the future of a new identity in the new century, while facing the past with pride and appreciation.

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