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The Case for Hip-Hop Diplomacy

Mark Katz, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

“I love America—I dream of going to America!” Exclamations like this greeted me over and again from the Algerians and Tunisians I had just met. Their warmth and good will surprised me. It was February 2017, hardly two weeks since President Trump had issued Executive Order 13769, widely criticized as a “Muslim Ban.” Ostensibly intended to protect the United States from foreign terrorists, the order was seen as part of a broader pattern of xenophobic policies and rhetoric coming out of our country.¹ Given such palpable hostility, why would people of these Muslim-majority nations so admire the US, why did they yearn to visit its shores?

The answer is American culture.

During my North African trip I interacted with dozens of young, working-class Muslim men and women. They were passionate about the United States, but not because of our government; many expressed deep concern about our new president and his administration. (Several times I heard variations of this statement: “I love America—but your president is crazy!”) They love our culture and the ideals of freedom and opportunity that it embodies. And for so many of the young people I met, hip-hop is at the center of American culture. “I fell in love with the music, the way they dress, the way they dance, the way they speak, the way they do their thing,” a twenty-five-year-old Tunisian DJ named Rami told me. Hip-hop, he said, has “played an important role in my life.”²

It is this deep connection to hip-hop, one felt by youth all over the world, that brought me to Algeria and Tunisia, and has spurred my work in more than a dozen other countries over the past three years. I direct Next Level, a program funded by the US Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs and administered by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Meridian International Center. A direct descendent of the “Jazz Ambassadors” tours that sent Louis Armstrong, Dave Brubeck, Duke



Rami Mhazres (aka DJ Superflava) performs at an outdoor jam that brought together Tunisian and American hip-hop artists through the Next Level cultural diplomacy program. Tunis, Tunisia, 12 February 2017
Photo by the author

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Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, and Benny Goodman around the world during the Cold War, Next Level is a form of people-to-people diplomacy, where citizens of different countries work together to promote mutual understanding and cooperation.³ Rather than sponsoring concert tours, however, Next Level offers workshops, led by US hip-hop artists and educators, for young people in underserved communities. These intensive workshops are designed to develop skills in beat making, dancing, DJing, and rapping, and are intended to promote constructive self-expression, entrepreneurship, and conflict reduction. Between May 2014 and May 2017, Next Level has held one- to two-week residencies in nineteen different countries on five continents, and has brought young artists from each of those countries to the United States for artistic and professional development workshops; its current funding, subject to annual renewal, runs until September 2018.

On my last day in Algiers, as I was watching American hip-hop artists make music and develop friendships with young Muslims, a group of North Carolinians met in a Kernersville restaurant—not far from where I live and teach—to discuss what they believed was a Muslim plot to take over the United States. One of the participants remarked, chillingly, “My only recommendation is to start killing the hell out of them.”⁴ I imagine that this group, and those who sympathize with their concerns and impulses, would object to the government-funded hip-hop workshops taking place 4500 miles to the east. But this ignorance, suspicion, and hatred—mirrored back at them by their equally narrow-minded and uninformed anti-American counterparts around the

world—is exactly why we need the kind of exchange that Next Level fosters.

According to the State Department, the objective of Next Level is to “increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and other countries, by emphasizing shared social and cultural values.” The program, moreover, is designed “to stimulate dialogue and promote cross-cultural collaboration through multidisciplinary hip hop workshops and performances, while simultaneously reaching out to young audiences and transferring entrepreneurial skills. [...] Participating US artists and foreign communities will strengthen connections and establish lasting relationships through the mutual engagement fostered by the overseas projects, performances, and US-based workshop.”⁵

But why should fostering such mutual understanding and engagement be a goal of the State Department? We can find an answer in the Department’s broader mission statement: “to shape and sustain a peaceful, prosperous, just, and democratic world and foster conditions for stability and progress for the benefit of the American people and people everywhere.”⁶ If a group of

Americans and a group of Algerians—or Brazilians or Croats or Zimbabweans, for that matter—share a love of hip-hop, they have at least one thing in common. And from that shared passion arises at least the potential for mutual understanding, engagement, and sympathy. The hope, then, is that this goodwill provides a bulwark against anti-American sentiment and action, and in doing so enhances the security of



Samuel Henrique da Silveira Lima (aka B-boy Samuka) stands outside his home in Ceilândia, Brazil, near the capital Brasília. 15 March 2017. Samuel participated in Next Level’s Brazil residency. Photo by the author

The Case for Hip-Hop Diplomacy (cont.)

Americans abroad and at home.

I would offer three broad observations about this diplomatic calculus. The first is that for the State Department, teaching and performing hip-hop is never an end in itself. It may be a tool for promoting peace and understanding, but it is a tool nonetheless, a potentially problematic reality that every hip-hop artist that participates in a State Department program must contend with. A second observation is that because State's mission is to promote a peaceful, prosperous, just, and democratic world, the success of hip-hop diplomacy is difficult to measure, or even observe. There are simply too many contingencies to allow for the kind of metrics that would conclusively demonstrate its long-term efficacy. Third, given that the United States is one of the world's richest, most influential countries, an asymmetrical power relationship colors nearly every act of diplomatic engagement abroad, including hip-hop programs.

Operating within a context of palpable, inescapable tensions and unresolvable ambiguity, hip-hop diplomacy is a fraught enterprise.⁷ However, if carried out with a sensitivity to these ambiguities and tensions, it has the potential to do a great deal of good. In the three years I've directed the Next Level program, I have seen people who share neither language, nor ethnicity, nor history—who share nothing *but* hip-hop—develop lasting relationships after making music together. I have seen young people who feel powerless and voiceless express themselves in constructive and cathartic ways. I have seen hip-hop bring together opposing factions within a community, and I have seen participants in our workshops gain the respect of their families because of their association with a US government-sponsored program. I have seen the communities we visit continue to benefit from the Next Level residencies, whether by replicating our workshops in different communities or by using the equipment we donate to teach more than could have ever attended our workshops. These may not be easily quantifiable metrics, but they are observable,

substantial measures of success.

Hip-hop, I would suggest, can facilitate these kinds of relationships and outcomes for three reasons: its popularity, its accessibility, and its appealing mythos. Hip-hop is known and practiced all over the world, which means that wherever Next Level goes, hip-hop already exists, or is at least known. We thus use it as a bridge, a means to connect people who would have little reason to interact otherwise. Having hip-hop in common does not eliminate difference, but it provides a starting point for finding common cause. As Rami, the Tunisian DJ—and a Muslim—said, “Hip-hop has no boundaries. When I can sit with you and I know that you're Christian, atheist, Jewish I have no problem with that. We can communicate, we can build something, we can work together. Why should I fight you? We are brothers.”⁸

Hip-hop's accessibility is also a powerful asset. One can rap or dance with nothing more than one's voice and one's body. DJing and beat making require equipment, but laptops, software, and other gear have only gotten cheaper over the past decade. Hip-hop can also be accessible to those with disabilities, and in my work with Next Level I have encountered amazingly talented individuals who find ways to accommodate hip-hop to their bodies and needs, rather than the other way around. Brazilian B-boy Samuka, for example, lost his leg to cancer as a child, and told me that excelling as a dancer was a way for him to feel “normal” as a teenager, “equal” to his peers.⁹

Hip-hop's accessibility is at the core of its mythos, which accounts for a large part of its appeal to young people globally. Hip-hop has a powerful origin story: in the 1970s, talented and industrious African American and Latinx teenagers in the Bronx, New York, facing crime, poverty, and neglect, developed a new art form and culture, one that went on to become a globally influential industry and way of life.¹⁰ As GrandWizzard Theodore, the pioneering Bronx DJ who introduced the world to scratching, explained, “Hip-hop came from nothing. The people that created hip-hop had nothing. And what they

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did was, they created something from nothing.”¹¹ To the young hip-hop artists I’ve encountered around the world, “The Bronx” is a name uttered with great reverence, and the concept of creating something from nothing resonates deeply. When I asked twenty-year-old Iva, a Croatian dancer, what appealed to her about connecting with Americans through hip-hop, she immediately invoked the Bronx, and cited the pioneering dance group, Rock Steady Crew, as inspiration. “[Hip-hop] began in the Bronx. Zagreb is the farthest from the Bronx. But right now, OK, with the economy and our situation politically we feel the same they felt in the early ‘80s and ‘70s. It’s really hard to find a job. It’s really hard to live as an artist. You really have to bleed for that status. Rock Steady didn’t have money. They didn’t have studios. They just had their own imaginations that got them through dark times. And that’s how we feel here.”¹²

Given hip-hop’s popularity, accessibility, and mythos, the promise of programs like Next Level is clear. If the goal of diplomacy is to foster mutual understanding and respect among citizens of different nations, then it only makes sense to bring them together around a shared passion. The future of hip-hop diplomacy as a State Department-sponsored enterprise, however, is unclear. The Trump administration has targeted State for deep budget cuts and a radical restructuring, one in which counterterrorism—more traditionally the province of the Department of Defense, the CIA, and the FBI—would become more of a focal point. In January 2017, a representative of the then newly-inaugurated President declared, “A lot of the stuff that State does, like promoting the arts and minority groups ... is just pandering to Democratic Party domestic constituencies in the United States. It’s not about serving any identifiable American interest.”¹³ Since the early 20th century, “promoting the arts and minority groups” has been a modestly-funded but important part of the Department’s enterprise, from the international tours of renowned jazz artists to the hip-



Iva Hadina (third from left), participates in a Next Level beatboxing workshop led by American hip-hop artist and educator Baba Israel. Zagreb, Croatia, 11 May 2017

hop diplomats of today.¹⁴ Reducing or eliminating this important work is exactly the wrong move. Cultural diplomacy, in fact, is more important than ever. Hip-hop, an American-born art form that has become a voice of struggle and celebration worldwide, has the power to build global community at time when it is so desperately needed.

NOTES

1. Executive Order 13769, “Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States,” 27 January 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/01/27/executive-order-protecting-nation-foreign-terrorist-entry-united-states>. For an assessment of the Executive Order as a “Muslim Ban,” see Garrett Epps, “Is President Trump’s Immigration Order a ‘Muslim Ban?’” *Atlantic* 30 January 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/01/is-president-trumps-immigration-order-a-muslim-ban/514989/>.
2. Rami Mhazres, interview with the author, 12 February 2017, Tunis, Tunisia.
3. For a history of American jazz diplomacy, see Penny M. Von

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- Eschen, *Satchmo Blows up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Harvard University Press, 2004).
- Jordan Green, "Local Conservative Activists Prepare for Violent Confrontation with Islam," *Triad City Beat*, 17 February 2017, <https://triad-city-beat.com/2017/02/local-conservative-activists-prepare-violent-confrontation-islam/>.
 - "Project Objectives, Goals, and Implementation (POGI), FY 2016 Hip Hop Collaboration," https://eca.state.gov/files/bureau/pogi_next_level.pdf. This document was created as Next Level was entering its third overlapping two-year cycle under the administration of UNC-Chapel Hill. The original 2013 POGI, "Project Objectives, Goals, and Implementation (POGI), Creative Arts Exchange: Arts in Collaboration ECA/PE/C/CU-13-26," can be found at https://eca.state.gov/files/bureau/2_pogi_cae_arts_in_collaboration.pdf.
 - "What is the Mission of the U.S. Department of State?," <https://diplomacy.state.gov/discoverdiplomacy/diplomacy101/issues/170606.htm>.
 - Hip-hop diplomacy is far from the only form of people-to-people diplomacy sponsored by the State Department—there are programs in sports diplomacy as well as initiatives that engage literature and a variety of visual and performing arts. For descriptions of other cultural diplomacy programs, see <https://eca.state.gov/programs-initiatives/cultural-diplomacy>; for more on sports diplomacy, see <https://eca.state.gov/programs-initiatives/sports-diplomacy>.
 - Mhazres, interview with the author.
 - Samuel Henrique da Silveira Lima, aka B-boy Samuka, interview with the author, Ceilândia, Brazil, 15 March 2017. For a short feature on B-Boy Samuka filmed during Next Level's Brazil residency, see "Samuel's Next Level Story," 3 April 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QU-Ucc-GLs9U>
 - For more on the origins of hip-hop, see Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (Picador, 2005) and Katz, "The Breaks and The Bronx: 1973–1975," in *Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip-Hop DJ* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 14–42.
 - GrandWizzard Theodore, telephone interview with the author, 19 December 2006. Quoted in Katz, *Groove Music*, 147.
 - Iva Hadina, interview with the author, Zagreb, Croatia, 11 May 2017.
 - Nahal Toosi and Josh Dawsey, "Trump's Team Weighs Retooling State to Focus on Terror," *Politico*, 18 January 2017. <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/01/trump-terror-state-department-233733>.
 - For an excellent study of earlier forms of musical diplomacy, see Danielle Fosler-Lussier, *Music in America's Cold War Diplomacy* (University of California Press, 2015).

Institute News

As I write this, in the wake of tragic events in London, President Trump has renewed his efforts to impose a “travel ban” on immigrants from several predominantly Muslim countries. Nativist rhetoric has reached fever pitch in the US and abroad, and when I look out at my Brooklyn College classes of students from all over the globe, many the children of first-generation immigrants, I feel both pride in their courage and foreboding about their future. Our current administration has played to the worst of America’s fears through its daily assaults on our nation’s commitment to diversity and social justice; but it has also brought out the best in us, as millions have pushed back with fervent calls for inclusivity and a celebration of the diverse cultural traditions that they believe are our greatest strength. This special issue of *American Music Review* was inspired by two concerns currently at the forefront of much social and political debate: how this country treats immigrants and immigrant communities, and where we stand on the global stage. Any student of American musical history is aware of the cultural richness brought to these shores by legions of artists and musicians from around the globe. In this issue we offer a modest look at the ways such immigrant communities continue to enrich the musical life of the US, as well as how music can help frustrate the xenophobic wall-building of those in power.

Social justice in the Trump era became a central issue during a recent visit by author, philosopher, and activist **Dr. Cornel West**. On 17 May 2017 the Hitchcock Institute sponsored a series of events to celebrate this remarkable and controversial voice. A special podcast featured several groups of students in dialogue with Dr. West about topics ranging from immigration to Black Lives Matter. As Brooklyn College enjoyed a gorgeous spring day, Dr. West had opportunities throughout the afternoon to engage with students who instantly recognized him as he crossed campus, sharing insights with a typical mixture of warmth and humor. In the evening, I facilitated a talk with Dr. West and **Arturo O’Farrill** for an enthusiastic audience of students and members of the community. O’Farrill



*Cornel West and Livio Almeida
Courtesy of the Brooklyn College Television Center*

then lead a concert by the Brooklyn College Big Band that concluded with the Brooklyn premiere of his *Cornel West Concerto*, featuring West’s oration (riffing on statements by W.E.B. Du Bois) and improvised interactions with band members, all backed by a stirring score. The concert also featured O’Farrill’s *A Still, Small Voice*, which highlighted the Brooklyn College Conservatory Singers under the direction of **Malcolm J. Merriweather**. The entire event was filmed by the Brooklyn College Department of TV and Radio, and will be available soon at www.hisam.org.

Dr. West’s visit capped a term of wide-ranging events. On 21 March, **Angela Piva**, a member of the audio and music production staff and faculty at the Brooklyn College’s new Feirstein Graduate School of Cinema, gave insights from a long career as a studio engineer and producer for artists such as Mary J. Blige and Michael Jackson; on 30 April **Lucie Vágnerová** presented on the experimental vocalist **Pamela Z** and her work with a biofeedback system called the BodySynth; and on 2 May, **Noriko Manabe** spoke on “The Sounds of Post-Inauguration Protests: Memory, Circulation, Innovation,” delving into the music and chants heard at recent rallies and marches.

Finally, congratulations to Senior Research Associate **Ray Allen**, who has been named a Distinguished CUNY Research Fellow with the Advanced Research

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Collaboration (ARC) at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He will spend the Fall 2017 semester completing his book project *Jump Up! Caribbean Carnival Music in New York* that is scheduled for publication by Oxford University Press.

--J.T.

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Three Romanian-American Musicians

Ben Dumbauld, Hunter College, CUNY

I write as a witness to a new era. Promises of a globalized egalitarian future now seem farther upon the horizon; assurances of a world capable of being managed “objectively,” “realistically,” and without ideology lingers on only as anachronism, anemically proclaimed in bad faith. A new reality has arrived in America, one narrated by a cadre of story tellers, full of fury, whose ultranationalist myths are fed by fear, anger, and despair.

It is of little use to self-righteously locate the hypocrisies and duplicities of this new regime and its ideology—such assertions bear little consequence to myth-making. Rather, we might acknowledge that our own myth entails generosity and courage over cowardice and hate. We would do well to remember the myth of the New Colossus, envisioned by poet Emma Lazarus and engraved at the feet of the Statue of Liberty. Her words remind us that true American strength is not born of military might or economic prestige, but rather by our collective treatment of the tired, the poor, the “huddled masses yearning to breathe free ... the homeless, tempest-tost.”

Critics may argue that the three immigrants I present here, each a professional Romanian-American musician, are figures far removed from such an image of poor, huddled masses. Indeed, there is no doubt that this group of symphony instrumentalists, conservatory educated in socialist Romania and endowed with more status and privilege than most, is at a distance from the desperate immigrant laborer searching for a better life. As a European, Christian community from a nation barely registering in American politics or popular culture, Romanians slip easily into the mainstream, perhaps even half-blind to the regular barriers those immigrants endowed with the wrong national origin or the wrong relationship with God may face in the United States. Yet, placed in another light, these musicians illustrate the very ideals of the archetypal immigrant conjured by American consciousness. Feeling stifled by the economic and political realities of Romanian president Nicolae Ceaușescu’s draconian

version of state socialism in the 1970s and 1980s, they dreamed of a place that would support them in reaching the full potential of their artistic capabilities. An immigrant community of the poor and homeless? Perhaps not. But yearning to breathe free? Surely.

But besides: I offer these stories not as an example of immigrant drive and talent, but as a testament to the American goodwill that encourages immigrant drive and talent to flourish.

Cristina*

I first met Cristina in the Pittsburgh foothills. In her well-manicured home, I dined on *sarmale* cabbage rolls, and began my interview complimenting her career and talent. She diverted such accolades, defining her career as simply carrying the legacy of her past teachers. She placed particular emphasis on her first teacher, Sofia Cosma, a “Russian Jew saved from Auschwitz by Romanian soldiers.” Our conversations around Cosma soon splintered off into other areas, before finally settling on an account of Cristina’s life as a pianist, one which spanned decades and borders. “I had a very good career in Romania for ten years,” she told me. “I played concerts, solos with orchestras, chamber music. A very beautiful social life.” She went on: “except when I had contracts to play outside of Romania. ... I would never get the passport. I was an only child, and they knew I would defect, so I was never allowed out.” Even with a burgeoning career she became



“Constructing the Statue of Liberty, 1882”
Photo by Albert Fernique

Three Romanian-American Musicians (cont.)

increasingly frustrated by this circumstance, and felt that her inability to perform outside of the country hampered her potential to progress as an artist. “The last few years I just couldn’t take that anymore,” she explained. “Romania is small, I was top there, but wanted to see my value internationally.”

During this period, the Ceaușescu regime would allow the emigration of Romanian Jews to Israel in return for a fee, paid by Israel, that “reimbursed” the country’s investment into that citizen’s education and upbringing. Cristina didn’t consider this path out an option, though, as it never occurred to her she might be Jewish. But at the behest of her friends, she decided to look into her heritage, and discovered that her grandparents were not only Jewish, but also quite wealthy before the Ion Antonescu dictatorship of the 1940s stripped them of their lands and placed them in camps. They survived (the Romanian camps were “not like Auschwitz, not like Poland,” Cristina assured me), but in a desire to protect their children and grandchildren, neither spoke of nor practiced their Judaism. Cristina soon procured documents proving her Jewish heritage, and in 1985 she emigrated to Israel with her mother and cat. The very act of filing the declaration to emigrate stripped Cristina of her position. All of her concerts were immediately cancelled, and it was only through a carefully placed gift of cigarettes and whiskey that she was able to leave the country with her piano.

Within a month of her arrival, she began working as a pianist for an opera company, and soon attained a position as an accompanist at a local conservatory. Yet her time in Israel was a means to an end. “I always dreamt about America,” she told me, “but no hope. So, Israel was good to get out.” At the immigration center, she became friends with a young couple of mathematicians from Bucharest who shared her infatuation with the United States. The couple managed to immigrate to the U.S. within a year of their arrival in Israel, and from there continued to correspond with Cristina.

“They kept calling me and sending me letters: ‘Come to America! It’s a great country, you must come to America!’ Of course it was my dream, and I said ‘how?’ ‘Well, apply for a doctorate.’ Doctorate in piano? I’ve never heard of that!” Intrigued by the possibility of attaining a doctorate, Cristina went to the American embassy and compiled a list of promising universities. She then recorded an audition cassette tape and applied to eight schools. She was accepted to them all.

“Then it was a matter of money,” Cristina continued. “Of course being an immigrant there I had nothing.” She needed a full ride, which she received from one school, West Virginia University. “Now that’s another story!” she exclaimed. “The professor there was a Jewish survivor from Latvia. They were from the same town [the professor and Sofia Cosma]. He was sent to Auschwitz, all his family, *kaput*, but because he had extremely good mechanical skills ... he survived.” She continued: “and apparently my cassette made a big wave. They really wanted me.” At thirty-six, she again arrived in a new land, “with one big suitcase and fifty dollars in my pocket.” Waiting for her was the director of graduate studies, along with a student who volunteered to share her house with Cristina.

In West Virginia, Cristina soon got a position at a local church. Parishioners volunteered to pick her up and drop her off every Sunday before she was able to procure her first car. With a growing reputation and, in due time, a car and the ability to travel, Cristina received new opportunities to perform throughout the area. Soon she landed a position with the Pittsburgh Symphony and moved to the city, where she remains today.

Cristina concluded her story with a mixture of regret and triumph. “Unfortunately, I never made it that big to perform with the Pittsburgh symphony as a soloist. I came too late, and time went by” she lamented. Then she remembered, and I saw her smile: “But my student has! I have a prodigy student who is living the life I would have lived if I had been in America from

Three Romanian-American Musicians (cont.)

the beginning. She came here as a child of nine years old with her parents, from Korea. She is now the next life of me,” carrying on her teacher’s legacy.

Ana

During Ana’s final year at conservatory in Romania, her piano instructor disappeared. As she told me over the phone:

I remember he drove me home, and opened the car door for me, and gave me a big hug. You know, I didn’t really think that much of it but then when he was supposed to come back home [from a concert abroad], I called and he wasn’t there. And I called and he wasn’t there. And a week later somebody else answered the phone with a very rough voice. And I knew something was terribly wrong, and he wasn’t ever going to come back. I was basically on my own from then on.

The defection of her piano instructor was one of a series of events that year that led Ana to the realization that her career as a promising pianist was irrevocably tied to the insular politics of the late Ceaușescu era. She chuckled:

It was a very bad year for me. After my teacher left, they offered me a few concerts in Budapest. And I knew I was in huge trouble because the concerts were coming up, were coming up, were coming up, and I wouldn’t get my passport. And I would go every day and ask about it. They finally released my passport three days after the last concert was over. And the real horrible part about it was I couldn’t even call and say I can’t come. Because that would have been something I said against the government.

The summer before the school year, Ana received a full scholarship to the prestigious Banff Center summer music program thanks to an audition tape she

smuggled out of the country. However, the official invitation was predictably intercepted by the Romanian government who, as she told me, “had the balls to say to the people at Banff that they would send their own. Not me, someone else. So they wouldn’t let me go, they refused.”

Yet, this was also the year Ana met her future husband, an American musician on a short tour in Romania. They met sharing the concert stage together, and quickly fell in love despite a significant language gap. Before his tour ended, they were secretly married, but shortly after were separated with his return to the United States. Still in Romania, Ana began the process of applying for a foreign marriage license, which the government made nearly impossible: “You could only apply one day of the month, in Bucharest, and there was a window open for only three hours,” she explained to me. In the process of applying, the government pulled all of Ana’s concerts and took her recordings taken off the radio. Her colleagues, for fear the government would hurt their career trajectories as musicians, dissociated from her. Such alienation was compounded by her continual concern that she was being watched and followed by the secret police. “Every night I woke up,” she recalled, “I was scared to death that they would come and get us, that my parents would be thrown in jail.”

In the United States, Ana’s husband spent three months “going around to politicians and putting in every kind of human rights request.” His efforts ultimately paid off, as Ana’s name was included on a list created for US Secretary of State George Shultz, who leveraged diplomatic relations with Romania in order to get the pianist, among others, out of the country.

In love and barely able to speak English, Ana moved from a small town in Transylvania to a small town in Texas. There, the community embraced her. She received part-time employment at a nearby college, and despite her aversion to singing, was “roped in,” so she told me, to the choir at a local Methodist Church. Six months after her arrival, she arranged her

Three Romanian-American Musicians (cont.)



Romania Day at the New York World's Fair, 1939-1940
Photographer unknown

first concert at the college. For her debut, members of the church presented Ana with a gown. “It was the most beautiful gown I’ve ever seen. I’ve played most of my big debut concerts in it,” she told me.

Ana and her husband eventually moved to the East Coast, and continue to collaborate on music projects, having become known as advocates for the promotion and performance of lesser known American music. “I’m attracted to finding gems,” she told me, “finding something truly wonderful that people have missed.”

Vasile

As I continued speaking with Romanian-American musicians across the country, the uniqueness of Cristina’s and Ana’s stories became increasingly pronounced. Most musicians I spoke with did not or could not find effective means to leave Romania’s closely held borders. Rather, they waited, doing the best they could as artists in the circumstances that were before them, closing themselves off to the possibility of leaving the country. For these musicians, a desire to immigrate to the United States only became re-ignited after the Romanian Revolution in 1989, when the borders opened. But leaving in these new circumstances presented different challenges.

“Somehow I got an LP, it was the Chicago Symphony. And that sound, to me, just the American brass sound, was so nice,” trombonist Vasile explained to

me. “Whenever I would hear an American orchestra, the brass had this dark, round, big sound, with a lot of character.” Upon this first exposure to the “American brass sound,” Vasile developed an overwhelming desire to leave behind his life as a professional musician in Romania and immigrate to the United States. But as a citizen of socialist Romania, the opportunity to learn the American brass sound was almost entirely unavailable to him. He told me:

The risk of being killed was like close to ninety percent. If you were lucky, the guards shooting (at the border) miss, and you make your way out. So leaving was not an option, not because you don’t want to, but because it is impossible. The only way you could get out was, you know, if you had some family outside. We had nobody. I did not have the chance of going outside of Romania before 1989. If that would have happened, that would have given me all the courage in the world. I would have defected in a second.

Shortly after Vasile attained a position at the prestigious Bucharest National Radio Orchestra, the Romanian Revolution came to the capital. Marching with others in the streets, he was shot at, and he witnessed Ceaușescu’s ultimately futile helicopter escape from the roof of the Central Committee Headquarters. He explained that postsocialist Romania “was such a new concept for all of us, the freedom and being able to say what you think and go where you want. It was like a virus that spread.” Sensing that the opportunity was now possible to immigrate to America, Vasile went to the American embassy library in Bucharest and began researching and applying American music schools. “I told myself the first school that answered I would go to, out of loyalty,” he remembered.

Vasile’s thrill at receiving acceptance into Carnegie Mellon University, however, was quickly diminished upon realizing the financial requirements he needed to meet to attend. “They offered me a full ride, but I had to prove I had money for living expenses,

Three Romanian-American Musicians (cont.)



"The Romanian Revolution, 1989"
Photo By Jérôme Fritel

and of course I didn't." He spent the rest of that year trying to save as much money as he could so that he would be able to immigrate. During tours with the orchestra he took along suitcases of canned food so he could save his per diem. But the gap between the American economy and the fledgling Romanian economy of the 1990s was too great: after a year of effort, he was only able to put aside \$700.

With a heavy heart, Vasile informed the university that he was unable to procure the needed funds to attend the school. The response from the school surprised him: rather than relinquishing Vasile's scholarship, the department, urged by trombone professor Byron McCulloh, continued to wait. The university waited four years, holding Vasile's scholarship until 1994, when he was awarded additional funding from the George Soros Foundation. "I left basically everything behind," Vasile concluded his story, "I left the best job you could have [in Romania]. I had a beautiful apartment, all good friends, and connections." Vasile went from being a top orchestra musician in Romania to setting up chairs and stands for music rehearsals at the university—something his colleagues in Romania could not believe. His time setting up chairs, however, was limited: shortly after graduating from the University, he received a job with the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra. Always interested in developing as an artist, Vasile has returned to school part-time to learn electronic music production and recording.

Coda

Cristina, Ana, and Vasile each dreamed of the United States as a place that would give them the opportunity to fulfill their potential. Each overcame great struggles in order to arrive: not only did they negotiate the bureaucratic nightmare of emigrating out of Romania, but faced alienation, austere living circumstance and, for Ana, the continual fear of imprisonment. Each chose to kill their musical livelihoods and start again, all in the hope that they might be resurrected as greater artists in a foreign land. And all succeeded.

Yet, in truth, the stars of these stories are not the musicians themselves. The crux of these narratives lies in the fact that Cristina, Ana, and Vasile bore witness to an American generosity that allowed them to immigrate and succeed. They flourished with the help of Americans, great and small, that took the myth of the New Colossus to heart, and lived in accordance with it. Ultimately, this was the story of George Shultz, who found enough merit in a young pianist in love to include her as part of his diplomatic mission. It was the story of Byron McCulloh, who, seeing the drive and talent in Vasile, convinced his music department to wait four years until his arrival. It was the story of the Auschwitz survivor in West Virginia who saw enough in Cristina to offer her a full scholarship, and of the graduate admissions officer and student from the university that greeted her at the airport. It is the story of the church congregation in West Virginia that both gave Cristina a job and volunteered to commute her there every Sunday; and the Methodists in Texas who gifted Ana with a concert gown. While the narratives of these Romanian-American musicians may represent Lazarus's ideal immigrant, it was these seeming side characters that offer something even greater: a testament to a tradition of American generosity towards strangers. It is these stories that bear repeating, proclaiming, and defending, under the shadow of any wall erected to separate and isolate.

NOTE

* The names and some minor details of the three Romanian-American musicians discussed have been altered.

Dominican Migrants, Plural Identities, and Popular Music

Angelina Tallaj, Guttman Community College, CUNY

In an age of globalization marked by proliferating population movements, ever-faster communication, and cultural exchanges across nations, diasporic communities strive, often through music, to maintain connection to a homeland identity. In doing so they create new styles in adapting to their new host society, and offer musical experiences that complicate the home/host binary positions. Dominican-American music, while influenced by American genres such as R&B, house, and hip hop, also features specifically Dominican Spanish lyrics and distinctive local Dominican rhythms to assure a continuity with Dominicans' identity as Latinos or Hispanics. Dominican genres in New York, especially merengue and bachata, have become symbols of *Latinidad* (pan-Latino solidarity) for many migrants from Latin America precisely because they blend local and global genres of music. These genres mix rural Latin American cultural references with urban elements from New York City in ways that Spanish-speaking groups, who also experience newly fluid racial and ethnic identities away from their homeland, can identify with. Experiencing these Dominican-American genres is a way for migrants to reimagine new and more porous borders of geography, race, and history. They combine past and present, rural

and urban, and home and host countries in ways that create new and more plural models of identities.

For many Dominicans, New York is just another Dominican city: we call upper Manhattan *Quisqueya* Heights, citing the Taíno Native Indian name for the island of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The 2010 US census estimated the Dominican-American

population at 1,414,703,¹ almost half living in New York City.² In the last three decades, Dominican migrants and their culture have progressively moved from the margins to the mainstream across multiple industries, from baseball to politics to Hollywood. Dominicans are known for their beauty salons, bodegas, restaurants, and taxi companies, and now for Pulitzer prize winning novelist Junot Díaz, actress Zoe Saldña (the main character in the 2009 film *Avatar*), and the recent election of Tom Pérez as the Chair of the Democratic National Committee. Yankee stadium hosts wildly popular merengue nights, which shows not only how established the Dominican

community is in New York City, but how much we are identified with our music.

According to musicologist Paul Austerlitz, the arrival of merengue on the global stage can be traced to a 1967 merengue concert at Madison Square Garden with merengueros Primitivo Santos, Joseito Mateo, and Alberto Beltrán.³ By the 1980s, merengue rivaled salsa as the preferred Latin music in the city. In recent



Figure 1: Poster from bachata competition in Hungary

Dominican Migrants, Plural Identities, and Popular Music (cont.)

decades, it is bachata that has surpassed other Latin music in popularity in the United States and that more effectively reflects the bicultural identity of many Dominican migrants as well as migrants from other countries of Latin America or young people born in New York from Hispanic parents. Bachata music was played for President Obama at the White House and is danced all over Europe in world competitions (see figure 1). It is important to note that both merengue and bachata became transnational in New York City before becoming popular across the world, in large part because the identity negotiations that Dominicans have gone through in the United States appeal to other migrating groups who have similar experiences and plural identifications. When New York-based merengue singer Millie Quezada sings “Volvió Juanita” or “Querido Emigrante,” she is not just addressing Dominicans, but communicating to all immigrants the experiences of alienation experienced in the host country: “You leave searching for a dream/You will find new horizons/Taking with you only memories/You swear that you will come back/Dear immigrant/Your homeland will wait for you.” When the popular

Dominican-American bachata group Aventura sang in Spanglish, they used syntax construction understood by the youth that grew up speaking Spanish at home and English at school. I taught in Lancaster, Pennsylvania in 2014-15, and I was impressed at the degree to which my Latino students identified with Aventura. One LA-born student told me, “My family is from El Salvador, but it is bachata music that makes me feel like I belong to a larger Hispanic-American population. Aventura’s music speaks to me even when I am not Dominican.”

Most Dominican Americans feel primarily Dominican, but they come to also identify as American, Hispanic, and Latino. They grow up speaking Spanish at home, but English in school. Some grow up listening to Black American genres of music such as R&B and hip hop, but most are attached to the bachata and merengue of their parents. Despite a growing identification with African American culture, most migrants from Spanish-speaking countries and their descendants still prefer to identify themselves within mixed and ambiguous categories, such as Hispanic or Latinos, over mutually exclusive ones such as Black.⁴



Figure 2: CD cover for Aventura’s Kings of Bachata: Sold Out at Madison Square Garden (2007). Note the hip hop fashion



Figure 3: CD cover for Aventura’s K.O.B Live (2006). Note the R&B and Beatles influence in Aventura’s members’ fashion style

Dominican Migrants, Plural Identities, and Popular Music (cont.)



Figure 4: Still photo from *Aventura's* video for the song "Obsesión" (2002)

As Wendy Roth stated, Dominicans (and Puerto Ricans) have "helped to create a new American racial schema moving their host society away from a dominant binary US schema—which would classify them all as White or Black, based on the one-drop rule—to a Hispanicized US schema that treat White, Black and Latino as mutually exclusive racialized groups."⁵ These Latinos feel they belong to two countries, which exist in different temporalities, and feel they belong in the liminal space between black and white racial categories in the United States. Groups like *Aventura* have also expanded the definition of urban music in the United States to include Spanish-language music, which reinforces an identity that is neither black nor white. Because of their use of R&B and hip hop influences and their similarities to African Americans in attitude and fashion styles, they get played in urban radio stations (see figures 2 and 3). However, *Aventura's* appeal is not just to an "urban" music audience. Their fashion sense, traditional bachata rhythms, and vernacular language also strongly suggest a rural humble Dominican aesthetic (see figure 4).

As Stuart Hall has observed, fractured migration communities of the Global South "are not and will never be *unified* culturally in the old sense, because they are inevitably the products of several interlocking histories and cultures, belonging at the same time to several 'homes'—and thus to no one particular home.

... They are the product of a diasporic consciousness."⁶ First-generation Americans of Hispanic parents inherit this "diasporic consciousness" from their parents and struggle to navigate and negotiate their multiple cultural languages and identities, a struggle reflected in their music genres and tastes. Hall explains that the migrants' identity "always moves into the future through a symbolic detour through the past."⁷ Dominican music in New York balances tradition and innovation through mixing traditional rhythms with electronic beats and R&B vocals, Dominican slang and Spanish with English hooks, and traditional melodic riffs with rapped lyrics. These sounds and words simultaneously remind migrants of their "roots" past and enact their present cosmopolitan identities.

An early example of this fusion of styles is the Dominican-American band *Proyecto Uno* who has fused merengue music with techno, dancehall reggae, house, and rap since 1989 (see figure 5). They situate their music within the Dominican Republic and Dominican styles by keeping the humor, double entendres, and machismo common in Dominican music even as they use urban American beats, language, and slang. In "Brinca," they mix traditional folk phrases such as "sana, sana, culito de rana" (heal, heal, tail of a frog) with house-influenced beats and English phrases such as "I wanna get in your pants." In "Esta Pegao" they sing: "Nací en Nueva York, pero no me digas gringo" (I was born in New York, but do not call me gringo. See link 1). In "Latinos," they praise the ways Latinos move the crowd and say that they will choose to be Latinos until they die ("Latinos hasta la muerte"). Each of these songs points to both the past and present identities of Latino migrants. While perhaps this initial identification with Latinos for early Dominican-American groups might have been motivated to reach a larger US market, these music genres help create new communities and identities based on

Dominican Migrants, Plural Identities, and Popular Music (cont.)

the memory and pride in their past, but also in their new hybrid urban identities.

The New York-based group Fulanito, founded in 1996, looked forward and back, straddling host and home countries as they blend house and hip hop with merengue styles, especially the traditional *merengue típico* style. They picked a name that would only make sense to Dominicans, as it is a humorous way of saying John Doe or “what-his-name.” However, their influences were equal parts classic *merengeros* from the 1980s and Run DMC, and in their music, they used many traditional Dominican phrases such as “Tranquilo, Bobby, tranquilo” (Do not lose your cool Bobby) and “Ahora si es verdad que la puerca retorció el rabo” (Now it is true that the pig got her tail twisted), which served as nostalgic tropes of the homeland. This ubiquitous use of so many Dominicanism references only really happens in Dominican-American music as this kind of geographical folksiness pulls the listener back to what is specifically Dominican in their memories of a country they or their parents have left. Fulanito used the rural slang and accent of people from the Cibao region (home to *merengue típico*), cited areas in the Dominican Republic as well as celebrity figures such as Iris Chacón and Nelson Ned that likely only Dominicans (or perhaps other Latinos) would know, paid tribute to major Dominican musical figures such as accordionist Arsenio de la Rosa, and used excerpts from famous Dominican songs as in “Cómetela Ripiá” (from Blas Durán) and “La Novela.” Like Proyecto Uno, Fulanito’s songs are also full of Dominican humor,

double entendre, clever phrasing, and Dominican slang, but their music is not traditional *merengue típico* and instead incorporate rapping and other influences taken from their experience in the United States (see link 2). The mix of Dominican and New York influences as the epitome of rural vs. modern perceptions is apparent in the CD cover for their 1997 production *El Hombre Más Famoso de la Tierra* where they appear in Run DMC attire on one side while depicting *merengue típico* Dominican folk figures on the other (see figures 6 and 7).

Perhaps the most well-known and popular group worldwide to come out of the New York Dominican community was the South Bronx bachata group Aventura that appeared on the scene in 2004. The group disbanded in 2011, but lead singer Romeo Santos went on to become the most followed Dominican-American artist of all time (figure 8). Romeo was the first Latin artist to headline at Yankee Stadium and filled Madison Square Garden four times in a row during 2012, making headlines in many newspapers for being more popular than Lady Gaga, Madonna, and Bruce Springsteen.⁸ Leila Cobo,

executive director of Latin content and programming for *Billboard*, said that because of demographics changes in the United States where nearly a quarter of American youths are Latino, these youngsters want “musicians who grew up comfortably in a bilingual, bicultural world.”⁹ It is important to note that neither Aventura nor Romeo, in contrast to previous Spanish-speaking artists like Ricky Martin and Shakira, have had to crossover by singing



Figure 5: CD cover for Proyecto Uno's *Exitos de Proyecto Uno* (2007)

Dominican Migrants, Plural Identities, and Popular Music (cont.)

in English, but their Spanglish and plural influences are responsible for their overwhelming popularity. Prior to Aventura there had not been a boy band that represented the new growing mixed working class youth population of the United States. Previous Latin artists such as Gloria Estefan, Ricky Martin, and Enrique Iglesias were light-skinned and presented as educated and middle or upper class. As evident in the video of Aventura's first big hit from 2004, "Obsesión," Aventura members are of mixed background and wore fashion styles that in the Dominican Republic are associated with the working class: twisted eyebrows, sleeveless or colorful shirts, braided or gelled hair, earrings, tattoos, and rosaries (see link 3).

Similarly to Fulanito, Aventura (and later Romeo Santos) created eclectic music and spread bachata globally by making it a symbol of pan-ethnic Latino identity. They kept the quintessential bachata rhythm (um pa pa pa um pa) and include the use of Dominican slang with words like *parigüayo*, *holla*, and *mayimbe*, but use harmonies, effects, and riffs from global genres such as tango ("Propuesta Indecente" by Romeo), and flamenco ("Un Beso" by Aventura). A

Hip Hop influence is found in the sampling of Middle Eastern-inflected singing as a trope for female sexuality, as in "Por un Segundo" and "La Boda." Aventura retains the traditional bachata theme of the man's suffering through unrequited love or abandonment by a woman (e.g. "Volvió la traicionera"), but their high-register vocal quality is R&B inflected as opposed to the lower sobbing voice of traditional bachateros.¹⁰

Aventura crafted video clips in which they juxtapose references to rural Dominican Republic with New York modern scenes of fancy clubs, drinks, and cars, female models, fashionable attire, and a glamour not accessible by more traditional bachateros. When Aventura became an established group, they collaborated with well-known urban artists such as Nina Sky and reggaetón vocalists Don Omar ("Ella y yo") and Tego Calderón ("Envidia"). In his productions *Formula Vol. 1* (2011) and *Vol. 2* (2014), Romeo worked with an array of artists, and by his choices we can note his extensive list of both African American, traditional bachatero, and Latino influences. I read these productions as tributes to his multiple influences, but he makes the conscious decision to continue to sing



Figure 6: Front cover of Fulanito's CD
El Hombre Más Famoso de la Tierra (1997)



Figure 7: Back cover of Fulanito's CD
El Hombre Más Famoso de la Tierra (1997)

Dominican Migrants, Plural Identities, and Popular Music (cont.)

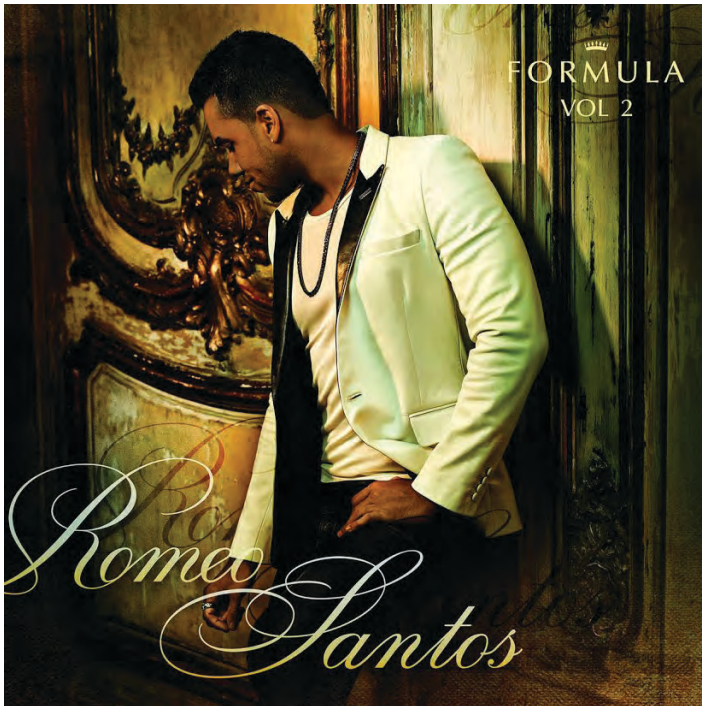


Figure 8: CD cover for Romeo's Formula Vol. 2 (2014)

in Spanish. He includes well-known bachateros such as Antony Santos and Luis Vargas (“Debate de 4”), well-known rappers such as Nicki Minaj (“Animales”), Drake (“Odio”), and Lil Wayne (“All Aboard”), rock figure Carlos Santana (“Necio”), R&B singers Usher (“Promise”), and salsa star Marc Anthony (“Yo también”). These collaborations show how well placed Romeo is in the international music market, but also how his music is bicultural and unapologetically Latin. In the video for “Animales,” he sings in Spanish while Minaj adopts Spanglish and even craves a Dominican brand of beer: “Dame Beso/ Yo Necesito/ Dominicana/ Puerto Rico/ Sign me up where is warm/ Hace frío ... Imma need a big sweet Presidente” (see link 4). Romeo’s music is both a force of assimilation and multiculturalism that represents new directions in the American cultural and political landscape.

Aventura’s story is an immigrant story of working-class South Bronx sons of immigrants who decided to make music and went from regular jobs to successful careers. When comparing their first videos (“Obsesión,” 2004) to what Romeo Santos has recently

produced (“Propuesta Indecente,” 2013), the path is one of increasing access to resources, luxury, major artists, and expensive clothing. Nevertheless, they still make aesthetic choices that align with the many sons and daughters of Latino working class in New York. Proyecto Uno, Fulanito, Aventura, and Romeo Santos all migrated to New York or were the children of working class Dominicans. Today they and their music represent the new modernity and economic power aspired to and acquired in New York at the same time that they constantly introduce details that contribute to the creation of an imaginary homeland rooted in the past and a kind of transgenerational memory. As Dominican American Osmery Fermín puts it, “Romeo’s music is something that I can share with my friends because it has verses in English. ... When I hear him is like a window towards a culture which I know really well, but the distance makes you feel alienated, either because you do not live there or because you were not born there.”¹¹ Dominican Americans like Osmery represent the new generation of Americans, *que tienen un pie aquí y otro allá* (who have one foot here and one there). She is clearly a New Yorker, but still feels the need to belong to the homeland of her parents. The music gives her something unique to share with her English-speaking non-Dominican friends and makes her feel less alienated from this distant and yet familiar home that she calls the Dominican Republic.

LINKS

1. Proyecto Uno’s “Esta Pegao”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LTg8i2E07y4>
2. Fulanito’s “Guayando”: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UV_BQn_kX4M
3. Aventura’s “Obsesión”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFCprl7MawQ>
4. Romeo’s “Animales” (with Nicki Minaj): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v0y3-uk6oSE>

Dominican Migrants, Plural Identities, and Popular Music (cont.)

NOTES

1. U.S. Census Bureau. May 2011. *The Hispanic Population: 2010*. <https://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-04.pdf>. Retrieved April 12, 2017.
2. Greene, Leonard, "Dominicans now Outnumber Puerto Ricans in NYC," *New York Post* 13 November 2014. Accessed 14 April 2017.
3. Paul Austerlitz, *Merengue: Dominican Music and Dominican Identity* (Temple University Press, 1997), 125.
4. In 2012, an article from Fox News Latino reported that Dominicans were President Obama's most enthusiastic Latino voters because they felt an affinity towards Obama's mixed race background. (<http://latino.foxnews.com/latino/politics/2012/11/02/dominicans-are-obama-most-enthusiastic-latino-voters>). Accessed 12 September 2014.
5. Quoted in Deborah Pacini-Hernández. "Urban Bachata and Dominican Racial Identity in New York," *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 4, 216 (2014): 1031.
6. Stuart Hall, "Culture, Community, Nation," *Cultural Studies* 7, 3 (1993), 362.
7. Ibid.
8. See "Aventura's Huge Homestand at Madison Square," *Newsday*, 13 January, 2010. Accessed 12 April 2017.
9. Quoted in Laura Wides-Muñoz, "Pitbull, Prince Royce, Romeo Santos and more U.S. Born Latin Artists Win Fans in Spanglish," cnsnews.com, 26 April 2012. Accessed 12 April 2017.
10. Most Dominican-American bachateros navigate comfortably in the R&B and bilingual market by performing Latin-flavored R&B bilingual covers ("Stand by Me" by Ben E. King, covered by Prince Royce) although Aventura also covered well-known Latin American songs ("Lágrimas" by José José).
11. Osmerly Fermin, interview with author, 14 April 2017.

The *Fandango* and Shared Music Making among Mexican Immigrants in the *Son Jarocho* Community of New York City

Emily Williamson, The Graduate Center, CUNY

The number of Mexican immigrants in New York City has grown rapidly in recent decades. According to a report from the Latino Data Project, the population has increased from roughly 100,000 in 1990 to over 600,000 by 2010.¹ These numbers undercount the overall Mexican population because they may exclude undocumented people, and they show that Mexicans are the fastest growing Latino group in the New York City area. Unlike many Mexican populations in major cities in the United States, which tend to be concentrated in specific neighborhoods—like Pilsen, Chicago—Mexicans in New York are dispersed across all five boroughs. In the city, Mexican communities have integrated with other immigrant neighborhoods, and many live in Spanish-speaking neighborhoods. The areas with higher concentrations of Mexican immigrants include Sunset Park and Bushwick, Brooklyn; East Harlem and Washington Heights, Manhattan; Crotona and Jackson Heights, Queens; and Mott Haven, Bronx.

Despite the dispersed nature of the Mexican population, there have been efforts to create social networks and encourage cultural activity across the city. For instance, the Mexican Consulate supports social organizations such as soccer clubs that provide men and women team networks and access to competition and organized games.² For musical activity, the Ballet Folklórico Mexicano de Nueva York and the Mariachi Academy of New York have been educating and entertaining Mexican New Yorkers for decades. Aside from mariachi and ballet folklórico, which are closely connected to the Mexican state's national canon, there are also active commercial scenes of Mexican music ranging from DJ parties that feature *cumbia* to *norteña* and *banda* concerts. However, because of the dispersed nature of New York's Mexican population, the limited reach of institutions like the Mexican Consulate, and the current hostile political climate toward immigrants, some Mexicans have sought alternative musical



Fandango at El Kallejon Lounge in East Harlem
Photo by Author

and communitarian experiences for social support.

Since the early 2000s, *son jarocho* has been integrated into New York's Mexican musical *mélange*. By 2011, a cohesive community of professional and amateur *son jarocho* musicians emerged through organized weekly music workshops, monthly community gatherings called *fandangos*, and annual celebrations. All the musical workshops and gatherings for the community are held in different locations across the city and are low cost (about \$10-15 per lesson) or free, allowing for maximum access across social classes.

Son jarocho is a music, dance, and poetic tradition originally from a cultural region called the Sotavento that spans the modern Mexican states of Veracruz, Tabasco, and Oaxaca. It is a string-based music with guitar-like instruments in a variety of sizes. *Son* is the Spanish word that can be loosely translated to "sound," but that hardly encapsulates its entire meaning. *Son* is closer to an aesthetic practice rather than a distinct sound or individual song. Each *son* has a harmonic and rhythmic structure and carries with it a poetic repertoire.

The principle instruments of *son jarocho* include the *jarana*, *requinto*, and *zapateado* on the *tarima*. The

The Fandango and Shared Music Making (cont.)

strummed *jarana* is an eight-stringed chordophone with five courses. The three, center courses are double-stringed. The *jarana* is strummed up and down with the nails of the fingers and thumb and is part of the harmonic and rhythmic foundation of the music. The *requinto* typically has four strings in single courses and is plucked with a plectrum that is usually carved from animal bone or horn. This melodic instrument begins a *son*. Aside from the rhythm of the *jarana*, *son jarocho* includes a dance tradition called *zapateado* that is performed on top of a *tarima*, or wooden platform, where dancers execute rhythms with their heels.

The traditional setting for *son jarocho* is the *fandango*, which is a musical celebration or *fiesta* rooted in participatory music making. The *fandango* illustrates a principle of *son jarocho* known as *convivencia*—participation, coexistence, and shared experience. Members of the *son jarocho* community feel strongly that this shared experience of music making subverts and allows them an escape from an alienating, consumer-driven society. They are creating music and meaningful relationships in an environment that respects and values Mexican culture.

Since 1978 musicians and intellectuals of *son jarocho* have been reviving the traditional *fandango* practices, which had dwindled by the middle of the twentieth century. The revival—called the *movimiento jaranero*—has disseminated *son jarocho* from its homeland in the Sotavento region to urban areas in Mexico and internationally to major cities in the United States by the 2000s.³ Inspired by the *movimiento's* commitment to rescuing the *fandango*, the *jaraneros* of New York continue to practice the *fandango* with the guiding principle of *convivencia*.

The *son jarocho* community in New York City comprises men, women, and children, ranging in ages from ten to seventy-five years old. Most community members are Mexican immigrants, but there are also Mexican Americans and non-Mexicans of Latin American descent, as well as Anglos. The members of the community also come from diverse educational

and class backgrounds, but they gather in the *son jarocho* community out of a desire to play music together, embracing the idea of sharing musical experiences.

At a typical *fandango* in New York City, members of the community form a circle around the *tarima*. Participants face inward, able to see each other to communicate and musically interact. A *fandango* begins with an opening *son*, “Siquisirí.” The *requinto* declares the *son* by playing an introductory phrase. Next, the *jaranas* join and provide a rhythmic base and harmony. After several rounds of the harmonic and rhythmic cycle, someone from the circle spontaneously calls out and sings a *verso* (verse). In the opening “Siquisirí” [link 1], the singer will commonly offer an introductory verse, imploring the verses to begin:

Al fin voy a comenzar

Finally I will begin

Que a ver si puedo o no puedo

To see if I can or cannot

Que a ver si puedo o no puedo

To see if I can or cannot

Al fin voy a comenzar

Finally I will begin

Next, another participant from the circle must respond by repeating back the verse the first caller sang. After the response, the caller will sing the final part of the verse and the responder repeats the same:

A ver si puedo trovar

To see if I can versify

O a medio verso me quedo

Or half a verse remains with me

O a medio verso me quedo

Or half a verse remains with me

Sin poderlo declarar

Without being able to declare it

The two participants exchange in call-and-response until they finish the verse and *estribillo*

The Fandango and Shared Music Making (cont.)

(refrain). In the *estribillo* of “Siquisiri,” the responder sings different lines from the caller that create a playful exchange between the singers, to warm up the *fandango*, and invite more verses to be sung:

Caller:

Ay que sí válgame Dios

Ay, oh my God

Lloré no había cantado

I cried I hadn't sung

Responder:

Pues anda a Dios para hacerlo hablar

Well, go to God to make him speak

Caller:

Porque le tenía vergüenza

Because I had shame

Responder:

De hacerlo hablar que risa me da

To make him speak, what a laugh it gives me

Caller:

Porque estoy acostumbrado

Because I am accustomed to it

Responder:

De risa me da, ya se me quitó

The laugh it gives me, just left me

Caller:

Primero a pedir licencia (x2)

First by asking for permission

Donde quiera que he llegado

Wherever I have arrived

(link 1)

After the *verso-estribillo* finishes, the instruments increase in volume. Then, in the instrumental section, dancers step on to the *tarima* and execute rhythms with the heels of their shoes. This instrumental section continues at maximum volume until another participant calls out a new verse, restarting the cycle of call-and-response. Again, the moment a participant begins to sing a verse, the instruments soften and dancers switch from sounded steps to *mudanzas*

(quiet movements). If players and dancers do not quiet their sound, the voices are not likely to be heard over the loud *fandango* circle. And importantly, dancers can only exchange places with another dancer during instrumental sections to not further disrupt the singing voices.

This ebb and flow of alternating dynamics between voices, instruments, and *zapateado* steps repeats over the internal harmonic and rhythmic cycle that also repeats ad finitum. As the *son* progresses from twenty minutes to over an hour, participants create a groove with each other, reinforcing the sociality of the music. The highly social exchange reveals the community's social structure and the principle of mutual participation—or *convivencia*—that is at the core of the *fandango* and the social life of the *son jarocho* community. As a *fandango* develops through different *sones*, the participants feel increasingly connected to the groove and to each other.

Finally, after perhaps hours and hours of playing through many *sones*, the *fandango* culminates in the final, closing *son* “La bamba.” It is the same “La bamba” interpreted and made famous by Ritchie Valens in his 1958 rock arrangement. In *son jarocho*, “La bamba” does not have a call-and-response structure in its verses, so participants individually sing verses and *estribillos*.

On 5 March 2017, members of the *son jarocho* community gathered at the East Harlem restaurant and bar El Kallejon Lounge to participate in the monthly *fandango*. Several visitors also came from Philadelphia, Maine, and Washington, D.C. The frequent regional visitors in attendance at the *fandango* demonstrate the supportive and sharing nature of the community—anyone can join, the more the merrier. The *fandango* was well-attended with about thirty people, most of whom directly participated in the music making. The event began around 4:00 pm and lasted until about 7:00 pm. The restaurant is a small space, not much more than twenty feet wide, typical of many New York City bars and restaurants. When a *fandango*

The Fandango and Shared Music Making (cont.)

occurs in this space, most of the restaurant is occupied, leaving little room for other patrons. Nestor, the owner of Kallejon is generous to donate his restaurant space for the community's revelry. Originally from Mexico City, Nestor loves art, music, and culture, so he sees his contribution as a way to support Mexican music and the community.

The regulars and the visitors made the *fandango* successful throughout the evening, ending with an explosive "La bamba." During the closing "La bamba," men and women were lining up and competing to dance on the *tarima*. "La bamba" is a *son de pareja* (partner *son*, where men and women dance in pairs). At one point, the energy from the *fandango* circle inspired a garland of verses, connected by themes of love. In this moment, Calvin, who was playing *requinto*, sang a verse:

Ojos verdes y azules (x2)

Green and blue eyes

Mala pintura

Bad painting

Donde no hay ojos negros (x2)

Where there are no black eyes

No hay hermosura

There is no beauty

Common "La bamba" *estribillo*:

Ay arriba, arriba

Higher and higher

Yo no soy marinero

I'm not a sailor

Por ti seré (x2)

For you I will be

While Calvin sang, Quetzal, an eleven-year old child in the community, and Ximena, a musician from Philadelphia, were partnered on the *tarima*. As they performed *mudanzas* during Calvin's verse, others in the circle were gathering closer to the *tarima* to have their chance at dancing. Once Calvin finished his verse, members from the circle attempted to tap

Quetzal and Ximena's shoulders to exchange places, but unexpectedly, Juan Carlos (from the New York City professional group, Radio Jarocho) called out another verse seamlessly after Calvin's. Because dancers cannot exchange places on the *tarima* while someone is singing, the rest of the circle had to wait for this verse to end. At this point, Ximena laughed because she too, expected to exit the *tarima*.

Juan Carlos's verse:

Preso estoy en la cárcel (x2)

I'm imprisoned in jail

Por tus querereres

For your love

No saldré de este sitio (x2)

I will not leave this place

Si no me quieres

If you don't love me

(Estribillo)

Then, as Juan Carlos's verse ended and the *fandango* participants tried again to exchange places with Quetzal and Ximena, another player added a verse to the ending of Juan Carlos's. Alfredo, from Washington, D.C. and the *son jarocho* collective Cosita Seria, sang another verse, further spoiling others' hopes of stepping on to the *tarima* and replacing Quetzal and Ximena. In this playful moment, participants in



Fandango in Central Park
Photo by author

The Fandango and Shared Music Making (cont.)

the circle smiled and laughed with each other, acknowledging the unexpected burst of creativity in the series of sung verses.

Alfredo's verse:

El amor y el dinero (x2)

Love and money

Que yo no sueño

That I do not dream

Ya que ninguno tengo (x2)

Since I don't have either

Y lo bien que duermo

And how well I sleep

(Estribillo)

By the time Alfredo finished his verse, finally, two other dancers, Sinuhé (a professional musician, jarana teacher, and lead organizer for the New York City community) and Elie exchanged places with Ximena and Quetzal. After the string of verses, which was a spontaneous and welcomed surprise contribution of voices, the *fandango* circle swelled in volume, and the dancers pounded the *tarima*. Sinuhé is an advanced dancer and his aggressive style on the *tarima* injected the fandango with more energy. Their dance on the *tarima* increased the intensity of the closing *son* "La bamba." This intensity lasted until the last verse, which in *fandango* tradition, the entire circle sings together to close the *fandango*:

¡Ay, te pido, te pido!

I ask you, I beg you!

Te pido de corazón

I ask you from the heart

Se acaba la bamba (x2)

May la bamba finish

Y venga otra son

And let another son come

¡Ay, arriba arriba!

Higher and higher!

Yo no soy marinero

I am not a sailor

Por ti seré (x2)

For you I will be

The intensity and excitement at the March event was emblematic of a successful *fandango*. Ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino has identified such musical practices as "participatory performances," ones in which the roles of artist and audience are dissolved, thereby intensifying the degree of social interaction and bonding.⁴ New York's *son jarocho fandangos* fit this model perfectly, revealing how music can forge new relationships, empower individuals, and foster a deep sense of community. In the sublime moments of performance that unfold during *fandango*, community members engage together in music and dance that can subvert divisive social hierarchies and unite them around their common heritage and shared immigrant experiences.

LINK

1. "Siquisiri" by Son de Madera (*Son de Madera*, 1997) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LQCGUXzwANA>

NOTES

1. Bergad, Laird. "Demographic, Economic and Social Transformations in the Mexican-origin Population of the New York City Metropolitan Area 1990-2010," from the Center for Latin American, Caribbean, and Latino Studies at the City University of New York (2013): 11.
2. Smith, Robert C. "Mexicans in New York: Membership and Incorporation in a New Immigrant Community" in *Latinos in New York: Communities in Transition*, edited by Gabriel Haslip-Viera and Sherrie L. Baver (University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 57-103.
3. *Movimiento Jaranero* literally translates as *son jarocho* movement. *Jaranero* is a term that describes people who play *son jarocho*, coming from the instrument *jarana*.
4. Turino, Thomas. *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 28-51.