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**The Same Old Song?: Gender, Subjectivity, and Dominican Popular Music in
Bachata del ángel caído.**

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Pedro Antonio Valdez's first novel, *Bachata del ángel caído*, earned the Dominican Republic's National Novel prize in 1998 joining a long list of late twentieth-century Caribbean novels that have garnered critical attention for their appropriation of popular music to the literary realm. However, unlike other Dominican novels that incorporate elements of popular music primarily in reference to the Trujillato, Valdez's novel engages popular music in relation to contemporary Dominican society and the popular musical form of bachata, highlighting many tensions and conflicts concerning gender and Dominican social identities. Yet, in many respects, *Bachata del ángel caído* constitutes a deeply problematic representation of the intersection of gender and Caribbean popular music, dealing in patterns of social behavior that tend to stifle the empowerment of women. Throughout Valdez's novel, bachata music serves as a leitmotif in a plot that centers on life in the poor barrio of el Riito in the Dominican city of La Vega. Valdez's lower-class characters frequently come into contact with each other at the local cabaret that doubles as a brothel with a jukebox that continually pumps out bachatas. In this essay I will draw a connection between bachata music, the emotionalism of the male characters, and the physical and psychological violence carried out against the female characters. In order to understand how the bachata functions in the novel in relation to gender and patriarchy, it is necessary to briefly outline the music's complex relationship to contemporary Dominican society and trace its transition from a sub-cultural phenomenon to a more dominant cultural form.

Bachata music was born in the urban slums of Santo Domingo in the 1960s after the fall of Trujillo's dictatorship and the mass migration to the city of rural peasants in search of work. It is with this new group of urban dwellers who contributed to the growing urban proletariat that bachata music emerges in the 1960s. With respect to its form, bachata music has never been very complex, almost always featuring a solo singer accompanied by a simple and repetitive guitar-led musical arrangement. As Carlos Velázquez and Alejandro Ureña explain in *De Santo Domingo al mundo: el merengue y la bachata* (2004), this is related to the humble origins of early bachata musicians:

bachata es la música de los cantantes de los pueblos, de los campos, que vienen y cantan lo que sienten. La forma cómo ellos sienten las cosas, cómo las piensan, como [sic] las escriben; esa es su forma de expresarse, porque no hicieron estudios de música, ni tampoco fueron a la escuela de canto. (156)

Sometimes referred to as a countrified bolero, bachata is also noted for its frequent use of vulgar double-entendres and the highly emotional singing style of the bachateros. Traditionally the great majority of bachata musicians have been male, although in recent years the number of successful female bachateras has increased.

Because of its association with lower-class migrants and its relatively rudimentary formal components, bachata music was long ostracized by mainstream Dominican society. It is important to note that it is in large part because of its association with this lower sector of society - and with their bars, brothels, and carwashes¹ - that it took the bachata over twenty years to firmly establish itself with the middle and upper classes in the Dominican Republic. Merengue music, on the other hand, continued its stronghold on Dominican culture in the period after the fall of Trujillo's dictatorship. Velázquez and Ureña assert that during this time of transformation, while merengue orchestras served as agents of socialization guiding the middle class in its role as consumer and serving as an icon of the increasingly cosmopolitan national identity, the bachata had a quite different role:

en forma contraria el papel de la bachata descansaba en introducir a sus oyentes, especialmente campesinos y anteriores campesinos, ahora residentes en zonas urbanas marginales con pocas oportunidades de participar en un mundo ostentoso representado por las orquestas modernas de merengue, en los valores urbanos que necesitan para sobrevivir aún sea bordeando esa modernidad, a la sociedad urbana dominicana. (157)

This distinction between the social roles of merengue music and bachata music in the 1960s continues to have relevance for Valdez. He feels that bachata music is in some ways still in touch with the *pueblo dominicano*, describing their anxieties and their reality, while merengue, according to Valdez, has become overly commercialized and has lost its "raíces pueblerinas" (Di Pietro 1). Since the bachata's social role in the 1960s had to do with the fact that many early bachateros were new to the city and to its slums, not surprisingly, their music commented on the economic and social hardships they faced. Bachata music began to function both as a form of social commentary emanating from the lower classes in response to life on the margins of society and as a source of consolation for its listeners. Given this function, then, it is important to consider the lyrical content of bachata songs.

Some songs directly express dismay with socio-economic and political conditions, but most of the social commentary comes within the framework of the over-arching theme of love. Romantic relationships are undoubtedly the subject of the vast majority of bachatas. In particular, the songs almost always tell tales of love gone wrong, often times involving an unrequited or betrayed love. In this way bachata is quite similar to other musical genres like the bolero, and, not surprisingly, Valdez includes references to bolero lyrics and famous *boleristas* in the novel. However, the bachata differs from the bolero in that its thematic obsession with love took a turn in the 1980s. In her 1995 study *Bachata: A Social History of a Dominican Popular Music*, Deborah Pacini Hernández notes that in the 1980s bachata lyrics became increasingly more bawdy and disparaging towards women. She states:

In the late 1970s and 1980s, the worsening social and economic conditions of bachata's urban and rural poor constituency were clearly reflected in bachata. The instrumentation remained the same, but the tempo had become noticeably faster, and the formerly ultra-romantic lyrics inspired by the bolero became more and more concerned with drinking, womanizing, and male bragadoccio; and increasingly it began to express *desprecio* (disparagement) toward women. As bachata's popularity with the country's poorest citizens grew, the term *bachata*, which earlier had suggested rural backwardness and low social status, became loaded with a more complicated set of socially unacceptable features that included illicit sex, violence, heavy alcohol use, and disreputable social contexts such as seedy bars and brothels. (12-13)

Pacini Hernández explains that as a result of the economic crisis, many women were forced to enter the workforce, frequently as maids and even prostitutes, throwing the social position of men into confusion as well (156). In part because of this social transition, women are increasingly portrayed in bachata music as scheming opportunists or as unfaithful lovers. In general, the women inflict pain and the men are the suffering victims. These kinds of gendered stereotypes depicted in the songs, and that Valdez takes up in the novel, have become more pervasive in Dominican society as bachata music has garnered a larger audience. García Cuevas affirms bachata's popularity saying:

Pero la bachata se rebela y se escapa de las vellonerasⁱⁱ, le regatea oídos (no movimiento al merengue malcriado) y ya a mediados de los 80 la encontramos diseminada por los barrios, urbanizaciones, salones de baile y hasta discotecas con luces que vienen y van, propia de la música disco. La bachata reclama voces y contagia incluso a cantantes establecidos que no pueden resistir la tentación de pasarla por sus gargantas. Ahora se le escucha hasta en los carros. Los cantores y consumidores de bachatas salieron del closet, han invadido las calles. (1)

Indeed, over the last fifteen years or so, bachata music has become increasingly more popular in the Dominican Republic and in the last several years it has found enormous mainstream success. In fact, today it rivals merengue as the most widely listened to music in the Dominican Republic, with its sensual dance contributing to its popularityⁱⁱⁱ. However, despite the bachata's popularity and mainstream success in the Dominican Republic, and increasingly throughout Latin America and the United States, it retains a lingering association with the lower classes, which is a source of embarrassment for some of its upper-class aficionados. Yet, as Stuart Hall would remind us, it is precisely because bachata is a cultural form in continuing tension with the dominant Dominican culture that it is able to offer us valuable insight into how Dominican social identities are constructed. I will proceed to analyze the way in which Valdez appropriates the gendered subject positions typically represented in bachata music to construct a kind of masculine subjectivity characterized by an exaggerated romanticism and emotionalism that ultimately silences the more stoic female characters. One aspect of the novel to keep in mind here is the fact that many of the characters can be considered *tipos*, representing more a certain type of Dominican than a specific individual. For instance, "el Machote"

represents the typical machista whose name corresponds to how he envisions himself; “el Gua” represents the local Don Juan; “Caridad” represents the woman who must graciously suffer her husband’s infidelities; and “la China” is given the role of exotic prostitute who is sought after because of her sexual prowess. Other characters are given names that simply correspond to their profession, such as “el enterrador” and “el sacristan.” Thus, Valdez’s manipulation of the gender stereotypes in bachata music is heightened by the fact that the characters already represent certain types of Dominican social identities.

The importance of bachata music as a thematic and stylistic component in *Bachata del ángel caído* is immediately detected as bachata lyrics constitute one of the opening epigraphs to the novel. In fact, the novel is divided into five parts each beginning with epigraphs consisting of bachata lyrics from different singers. The first page of the novel also contains a recommendation from the author to the reader that says, “este deplorable autor recomienda leer teniendo de fondo musical un casete de bachatas, e implora comprensión y paciencia, si no le es mucho pedir” (11). Thus, from the start the bachata is invoked in a tone similar to that of a pleading *bachatero*. Sentimentality is an expected quality of a bachata singer, and it is one that Valdez engages in the novel. One example of the stereotype of the sentimental male at work in the novel is with the young church sacristan who is hopelessly in love with Liberata, the incredibly ugly and pious *beata* who works at the church and has absolutely no intention of reciprocating his love. After naively proposing to her and being firmly rejected, the sacristan responds in a highly emotional way. The following passage describes his reaction to Liberata’s rejection:

Al llegar a su casa se echó a llorar. Lloró al oír *La tarde, tú y yo* de Radio Santa María^v. Lloró al desgarrar el muñeco de peluche que pensara regalarle para san Valentín. Lloró al destrozar el elepé de Lucho Gatica^v. Lloró amargamente viendo su presencia multiplicada en el abismo interminable de aquellas noches de insomnio y durante mucho tiempo la seguiría llorando, puntual, inagotable, con el inexplicable placer de los rituales. (113)

It is obvious that he is vulnerable to the sentimentality expressed in the songs and that he sees himself as the victim in this situation. In connecting this behavior to the gender roles offered in bachata music, it should be noted that although the bachata is melodramatic, it can be distinguished from the usual sense of melodrama associated with the musical genre of the bolero (referenced in the above quote) in that the bachata is more gritty and less romantic in the traditional sense. The rudimentary quality of the music contributes to this, which we see in its instrumentation and most notably in its lack of poetic language. Thus, with the character of the sacristan we are first exposed to the connection between popular music and the highly emotional male.

The idea expressed in bachata music of men as those who suffer emotionally and women as more indifferent to hardship is seen most vividly with the character of el Machote who demonstrates a problematic understanding of romance coupled with extremely volatile behavior. El Machote is married to Caridad, but he frequents Luis Canarios’s bar and brags about the number of women he has had, priding himself on being able to please

them all. However, it is revealed by the prostitutes (or *cueros*) that his own wife is unsatisfied and is having an affair with el Gua, who is also a frequent customer of the *cueros* at Luis Canario's. One night, coming home from the cabaret, el Machote suddenly realizes that perhaps he has been mistreating his wife and, "Recordó la bachata que dice que el amor se alimenta de vino y rosas" (95). So, in the name of romance, he buys a rose and a bottle of wine, wakes his sleeping wife at three in the morning, and, despite her protests, forces her to drink and have intercourse with him. Again, like the sacristan with Liberata, el Machote seems unaware of Caridad's feelings, and is thus surprised when he arrives one night to find her with her bag packed and ready to leave for New York with el Gua. In an attack of rage he proceeds to brutally murder her. This is a particularly graphic example of the problematic relationship between bachata music and gender and, more specifically, of how the music intersects with misogynistic behavior by the male characters. The combination of male emotionalism and violence towards women and its relationship to bachata music is similar to the cultural dynamic that operates with the bolero and masculine identity in Latin America. With respect to the bolero, Frances R. Aparicio explains:

Two contradictory values in gender politics dovetail here. While the affective and emotional language of the bolero allows men to communicate and express themselves in the affective domain, becoming a liberatory value in the context of social boundaries, the construction of the male as woman's victim dangerously positions women as the object of male aggression, revenge, or violence, converging, in fact, with the more overtly misogynist discourse of salsa and other forms of popular music. (137)

Thus the bachata in the Dominican Republic, similar to other popular music in Latin America, provides a forum for men to express their emotions that does not threaten their sense of masculinity and may, in fact, foster a hyper-macho aggressiveness that finds an outlet in the oppression of women. This notion is compounded by the fact that the bachata, even more than other music such as the bolero, is considered a male musical genre. Velázquez and Ureña affirm this when they say, "La bachata, por sus propios orígenes, parece ser esencialmente masculina. A través de ella los hombres de los más humildes estratos expresan las amarguras e imposibilidades amorosas" (187). Given this dynamic, then, it is not surprising that in the novel the bachata is almost always linked to the expression of suffering by men. Also significant here is the fact that it is men of low social status whose pain is voiced in the bachata, creating a kind of lower-class aesthetics of emotional expression and aggression.

The aspect of bachata music that portrays men as the victims in romantic relationships and prone to highly emotional responses finds a correlation in the novel with the cultivation of the idea that women have a way of deliberately inciting impulsive and uncontrollable behavior in men. We can see an implication of this idea in the epigraph to the fourth part of the novel which is a bachata that says: "De ti me separo porque ya no puedo soportar / la angustia, saber que te quiero. / Tu amor es como una de esas cosas raras / que nublan la mente y agitan el alma." One example of this uncontrollable behavior caused by women can be seen with the character of Padre Ruperto, the local

priest, who seduces Liberata. Earlier he had discouraged the sacristan from pursuing Liberata telling him that women are inherently evil, but soon after their conversation he himself successfully seduces Liberata saying, “¿Por qué caminas de esa manera frente a mí? ¿Ya olvidaste de lo que te dije sobre las tentaciones? Tú eres tremenda, muchachita . . . ¿Qué ganas intentando seducirme?” (133). He turns the tables on the naïve Liberata, blaming his passion on her feminine charm, thus excusing his behavior as that of the victimized in this situation. The character of el Gua provides us with another example of the kind of uncontrollable, bad behavior that women incite. Although perhaps more aware of what the women around him are feeling than the other male characters, his method of dealing with them is to lie, because “quizás la mentira era su único recurso para hacerle feliz a una mujer” (116). Accepting the relationship, then, between bachata music and the emotionalism, aggression, and impulsivity of the male characters brings us to an important question: what are the implications of all this for the women in the novel?

In turning to feminine subjectivity in *Bachata del ángel caído*, we can see that the female characters seem to uphold the typical image of women in bachatas: cold, calculating forces of emotional and social disorder and unfaithful and uncaring in love. For instance, Caridad is cheating on el Machote and hopes to move to New York with el Gua to find a better life for herself. Another example is la China who mechanically carries out her job as a prostitute, lacking any emotional attachments. We also see emotional detachment with the character of Liberata, the church holy woman. She was never taken in by the sacristan’s sentimental attempts at wooing her, and when she later succumbs to Father Ruperto, she tells herself that it is more out of a sense of her Christian duty than anything else. This idea of women as more pragmatic, and in a certain sense more realistic than men, can also be seen with the character of Morgana. In comparison to her male counterparts, Geofredo and Santiago, Morgana seems to be the most obvious example of the contrast that Valdez sets up between a sort of masculine romantic idealism and feminine pragmatism. The three of them are involved in a mystical search for the Holy Grail, but she is the only one that takes any concrete action to aid their search. They need to acquire the *cédulas* of various people to decode a secret message that will tell them the location of the Holy Grail, and Morgana effectively uses her connections throughout the barrio to slyly come up with these documents. If it weren’t for Morgana they would not have progressed at all in their search because not only were they under the effects of hallucinogens, but they were also obsessed with the idea of being chosen by a higher power to carry out this quest.

Taking the previous examples of the male and female characters into consideration, it would seem that Valdez is affirming the gender stereotypes of bachata music in which women are forces of social disorder and tend to be more practical and less sentimental while the men are the romantic, idealistic victims who end up suffering emotionally. However, the affirmation of these stereotypes is undermined by the fact that most of the men are revealed to be unaware of the feelings of the people they interact with and ignorant of important aspects of their own realities. All of the women in the novel, who come across as more astute in regard to personal relationships and who tend to see the reality of their lives more clearly, end up paying for the self-obsession of the men. For example, Caridad is misled by el Gua and murdered by her unfaithful husband; la China

remains working at Luis Canario's cabaret, waiting for el Gua – her supposed fiancé - who never shows up; Morgana's two male counterparts commit suicide when the Holy Grail turns out to be a hoax, leaving her as the lone thief in their jewel smuggling ring; and Liberata is left alone and out of work at the end of the novel, tearfully contemplating the rain, after both of her male suitors abandon her as well as the tenets of the religion she has dedicated her life to.

The miserable condition of these women at the end of the novel is presented in correlation with the highly emotional, often oppressive, actions of the men; and, in connecting the one with the other, Valdez implicitly questions the concept of romantic love that these men have as well as the behavior it encourages, indirectly criticizing the ideas expressed in much bachata music. After all, the behavior of the men in the novel is consistent with the street philosophy expressed in a typical bachata. Di Pietro describes this philosophy in the following way:

En la bachata el pueblo marginado de la sociedad dominicana da expresión a su angustia existencial. La mujer, la traición, la pobreza, el desarraigo, el machismo elemental, en breve, la vida como es vivida en ese peldaño de la sociedad dominicana – esos son los temas y el elemento básico de la bachata” (1).

Valdez engages this kind of expressive aesthetics of the lower class in the novel, but whether or not he moves beyond a mere repetition of the negative stereotypes and social behaviors propagated in bachata music is questionable. In one sense, the sympathetic portrayal of the women in the novel in conjunction with their unfortunate outcomes can be understood as an implicit critique of the aforementioned street philosophy. However, the problem lies precisely in the fact that his critique remains implicit, offering no alternative for these women other than that of stoically accepting the physical and emotional abuse inflicted on them by their male counterparts. Valdez does, however, articulate his understanding of the powerful role of popular music in Dominican society in part by revealing the dangers of the identities typically embodied in the bachata. And although he may not go far enough in combating the negative subjectivities constructed in bachata music, he does effectively recognize the power of the bachata to interpellate a Dominican audience.

As we saw earlier, Valdez has stated that for him the bachata is a musical form closely connected to the common Dominican people, describing their anxieties and their reality. However, his use of the bachata in the novel also capitalizes on its unique relationship to mainstream society. We can more fully understand how Valdez negotiates this cultural dynamic by returning to what was mentioned earlier about bachata's changing relationship to contemporary Dominican society. Pacini Hernández points out how bachata has always been “an expression of a subculture in transition, struggling to create new cultural coherences and to attain form, autonomy, and legitimacy within a hostile society” (34). It is bachata's unique position within dominant popular culture, specifically the fact that it retains an association with the lower classes despite its mainstream popularity, that makes it such a powerful tool in Valdez's literary construction of Dominican social identities.

Here it is important to remember what Simon Frith says about music and identity:

What I want to suggest, in other words, is not that social groups agree on values which are then expressed in their cultural activities [...] but that they only get to know themselves *as groups* (as a particular organization of individual and social interests, of sameness and difference) *through* cultural activity, through aesthetic judgment. Making music isn't a way of expressing ideas; it is a way of living them. (111)

As such, when we consider the implications of how Valdez uses this musical genre in his novel, we must recognize the bachata's relationship to the Dominican lower class and its role in the creation of a kind of class-consciousness. Speaking specifically of the bachata's function in Dominican society, Di Pietro asserts:

Como el canto que es, la bachata hace posible que el hombre amargado siga viviendo. No le resuelve sus problemas; sólo los describe, los saca fuera de su sistema por un tiempo. ¿Ilusión? Claro que lo es. [...] ¿Vivimos al margen? Bueno, la bachata es lo que le brinda un mínimo de sentido a esta vida. (1)

Valdez seems to share this understanding of bachata music in *Bachata del ángel caído*. It is the song of the poor, anguished Dominican just trying to get by. Yet, it is because Valdez does not dismiss bachata as a form of creating social identities that its incorporation into written culture complicates his representation of socially marginalized men and women. By deliberately appropriating the typical associations of bachata music – illicit sex, violence, and drunkenness – Valdez exposes the dangerous notions circulating in the popular imaginary concerning gender. And although the men in the novel are more vocal, it is the women who are the more sympathetic characters, ironically primarily because the reader is aware of their suffering and recognizes its legitimacy. By undermining that which is loudly voiced by the male characters, Valdez at least prompts us to take a closer look at the subjectivities operating in bachata music. In the end, however, Valdez does not offer an alternative model of masculine or feminine subjectivity. Ultimately, his use of the bachata in relation to a kind of lower-class aesthetics is detrimental to the development of the characters, who remain stereotypes, and limits their capacity to address the tensions and conflicts concerning popular culture, gender, and Dominican social identity.

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ⁱ As Velázquez and Ureña explain, “Antes de alcanzar la posibilidad de presentarse en lugares de espectáculos de la clase media en Santo Domingo, la bachata encontró un espacio para promoverse en los Carwash. Estos establecimientos empezaron a popularizarse en los principales centros urbanos, en especial

en los barrios periféricos de la ciudad de Santo Domingo a finales de los años 70” (157). Apart from facilities for washing cars, these places were also equipped with tables and chairs and often sold beer. On weekends, they also frequently held performances by bachateros.

ⁱⁱ It is important to note that because of the places where it could be found and its association with bachata music, the *vellonera*, or jukebox, was itself often considered scandalous. We see this in *Bachata del ángel caído* when the narrator explains how the people of El Riito were astonished to find that Luis Canario’s establishment had gone from being a small grocery store to being a brothel: “Vieron las puertas reducidas a la mitad, la jovencita multiplicada en una banda de cueros y el radio sencillito transfigurado en una escandalosa vellonera” (116).

ⁱⁱⁱ This is evidenced by Velázquez and Ureña who state, “En julio del año 2003 los autores de este trabajo hicimos un viaje a Portillo. Mientras regresábamos, pusimos nuestra atención en la música proveniente de los bares a lo largo de la carretera y en los pueblos por los que íbamos pasando, encontrando que de cada diez lugares, por lo menos en ocho tocaban bachata y en los restantes merengues. Muestra simple del avance de la bachata sobre el merengue” (167).

^{iv} Radio Santa Maria is a radio station in the Dominican Republic that was established by the Catholic Church in 1964 that broadcasts, among other things, Dominican popular music.

^v Lucho Gatica is a bolero singer whose popularity in Latin America has endured throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Born in Chile in 1928, he is known for his velvety voice and is often referred to as “el rey del bolero.”

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