“Porque soy voz de la calle”
Navigating the Global and the Local in Dominican Hip Hop

by

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* “Porque soy voz de la calle” ("Because I’m the voice of the street") is a lyric from the popular rap song “Yo Soy Papa,” by the Dominican rapper Lápiz Conciente.
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Introduction

A walk down the central beach on a Saturday night in Cabarete, on the North Coast of the Dominican Republic, is a fascinating trip through a variety of sounds, movements, and people. I take in the sounds of Romeo Santos’s newest hit and watch dancing couples inside Ojo Bar fall into the swaying movements of bachata; next I’m bombarded by North American rock songs from the Canadian sports bar; I pass under the deep red lanterns that illuminate the beach outside of Onno’s Bar and squint at the mass of people inside moving recklessly to a techno remix of a U.S. pop song; and my walk ends in front of Bambú, where I pause near a group of young Dominican men shouting along in mangled English to the 1999 rap song “Party Up (Up In Here)” by DMX. The Dominicans singing along clearly do not speak English, and do not seem to have any idea what the lyrics they are trying to imitate mean. And yet they are familiar with this song, and are incredibly excited to be listening to it as they wave their arms up and down in a ubiquitous rap gesture I’ve seen in countless music videos and at dance parties in the United States. The fact that this piece of U.S. pop culture is blasting from the speakers of a Cabarete nightclub is not surprising, as I am surrounded by tourists from the United States, Canada, and Europe. But this song is playing in one of the clubs in which local Dominicans regularly outnumber tourists, and this local crowd is clearly enjoying the song immensely. During my first stay in Cabarete during the summer of 2011, such familiar interruptions into an otherwise new and foreign culture frequently caught my attention, not because of their presence in a beach town driven by tourism, but because of their obvious appeal to young people from the barrios, the poor local neighborhoods or slums in Cabarete.
The stark contrast between the poor Dominican community and the wealthy tourist presence creates a unique space of economic disparity and cultural contact. Hip hop culture has thrived in this space. In Cabarete, this culture is strongly influenced by the tourist industry, and by the direct injection of U.S. hip hop, such as the DMX song, into local Dominican communities. Yet the tourist industry offers only a partial explanation for the presence of hip hop, which has been popular across the Dominican Republic, primarily in poor urban barrios, since the 1990s. As I spent more time in Cabarete and was able to expand my experiences not only of the nightlife but also of the local barrios in which I lived and worked, I became aware of Dominican hip hop as a pervasive popular culture with its own history and development within the country. This culture draws explicitly and proudly on U.S. hip hop trends, and adapts these trends in innovative ways into something distinctly dominicano. This simultaneous copying and creating is an important aspect of Dominican hip hop, and suggests an alternative to ethnomusicological theories that describe a clear transition, studied in various communities around the world, from mimicking Western popular music forms to eventually infusing these forms with local languages and musical traditions.\(^1\) Dominican hip hop has been transcultural since its beginning. Dominican hip hop ranges from Spanish-language rap about issues in the barrios to the hyperactive beat and dance moves of a newer genre called “dembow,” which is evolving and developing in the calles (streets) and canchas (basketball courts) of Cabarete and other urban Dominican spaces. While various musical and aesthetic links to the United States are asserted in Dominican hip hop as

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status symbols, the almost exclusive use of Spanish and the highly local practices and communities of Dominican hip hop culture indicate the ways in which this culture uses U.S. influences to create new cultural products that establish connections among Dominican participants.

My own position as a U.S. hip hop fan, and as a scholar interested in global youth cultures, colonial and neo-colonial relationships, and constructed understandings of class, race, and gender, made it impossible for me not to compare the culture I knew from home with the one I listened to, danced to, and watched in Cabarete. Through my everyday experiences with Dominican hip hop and later through my focused research among Dominican hip hop participants, I found myself reevaluating most of the paradigms I had understood from my U.S. hip hop participation and from my reading of academic hip hop studies. In this ethnography of Dominican hip hop culture, I use an in-depth case study of local hip hop spaces, activities, and understandings in Cabarete as a foundation on which to build an analysis of the complex connections between hip hop culture(s) and social identity systems of class, race, and gender. Hip hop culture, in the Dominican Republic, the United States, and communities around the world, inevitably operates through these social structures. Thus this youth culture can be used as a lens through which to consider not only the everyday lives and social practices of local participants, but also the larger historical and social trends that have shaped these practices, and the ways in which national and global social and economic systems are at times resisted and at times reinforced in Dominican hip hop culture.
The Community

I first went to Cabarete during the summer of 2011 to volunteer with a summer school and day camp program run by the Dominican Republic Education and Mentoring Project (DREAM). For five weeks I stayed with some thirty other international volunteer teachers and counselors in a small residential hotel near the entrance to the Callejón de la Loma. The Callejón is the larger of the two barrios located near central Cabarete; it is the location of the DREAM Center and is where almost all of the local children and young adults who participate in DREAM programs live. In January 2012, I returned to Cabarete to work for seven months as a teacher of English and math in the program DREAM runs during the school year to supplement the public school education which falls short for most local children. During this stay, my longest by far, I lived in a small house, and later in an apartment, in the Callejón, on Calle 1 (Street 1), which is the “nicest” street in the barrio, in that it is relatively well-paved and lined with painted, cement-block houses rather than corrugated metal shacks. This street is where most of the foreign DREAM volunteers and staff live, along with a number of expatriates and working-class Dominicans who enjoy greater financial security than most Cabarete locals. During this trip, I began developing my ideas about my project, and conducted one preliminary interview with a Dominican friend. This interview provided me with some useful content, but was more valuable as a “test” of my methodology. In January of 2013, I returned for three weeks to do focused field work and interviews. During this trip I stayed with a Dominican friend and his family in Barrio Blanco, the smaller and much poorer Cabarete barrio, which is located close to the beach and the central stretch of tourist attractions.
These three trips were quite distinct and provided me with opportunities to develop and refine my observations of Dominican youth culture. During my first visit, I was impressed by how foreign everything seemed, and by how many new things there were to experience. I lived and spent much of my social time with other Americans,² but through DREAM I established connections with local children, with young Dominicans my own age who worked at DREAM, and with the Dominicans and Haitian-Dominicans who are part of the permanent DREAM staff along with Europeans and Americans. When I returned in January of 2012, I already had contacts in the community and had become somewhat accustomed to a number of

² I am aware that it is problematic to use the term “American” to refer only to people from the United States. However, the Dominicans I interacted with used this terminology and never thought about the fact that, geographically speaking, they are also “American.” Thus, while I try to specify the United States when talking about cultural movements or other national dynamics, I do at times use the term “American” to refer to people from the United States, not out of ignorance, but because this is how Dominicans conceived of my nationality in contrast to their own identity as dominicanos.
things that had at first been unfamiliar, including the lower-class, uneducated Dominican Spanish spoken in the *barrios*. I was also able to see some other parts of the country, including Santo Domingo, the capital.

During that short visit, I was able to experience Dominican hip hop on a different scale in an urban center, when my friends and I attended a street party on the Malecón (boardwalk), a central landmark in the city. Over the seven months I lived in Cabarete, I forged much closer relationships with my fellow teachers, my students, and various locals with whom I interacted on a daily basis, such as my landlord and his family. I also became friends, through DREAM connections, with a young Dominican man named Yonil, and subsequently with his network of family and friends in Barrio Blanco. This relationship shaped my final visit, and was invaluable to my research. Although I had become extremely familiar with Cabarete and with many aspects of Dominican culture during my second visit, the three weeks I spent in
Barrio Blanco with Yonil and his family provided me with an experience that was new and different in many ways. The biggest reason for this is that there are no foreigners living in Barrio Blanco, and I was therefore immersed in an intensely local, and intensely impoverished, Dominican community. This location, both geographic and social, was critical to my research. Even activities I had done before, such as going out to the beach at night, were reshaped because I approached these activities from the local space of the Barrio and experienced these activities with Yonil and his friends, instead of with other foreigners. Staying with Yonil was also useful to my research in a more concrete way, as he not only introduced me to a number of active hip hop participants with whom he thought I should talk, but also explained my project to his friends and encouraged them to talk to me.

While I spent most of my time during this final stay in Barrio Blanco or with residents of Barrio Blanco, I also utilized one of my local contacts in the Callejón to find interview subjects in that neighborhood. I met Antony during my first summer because he also worked at the DREAM summer camp; his ability to speak English greatly facilitated our friendship as I was at that point still getting used to Dominican Spanish. Antony sparked my initial interest in Dominican hip hop, as he was one of the most visible and active hip hop participants I met and was engaged in an especially wide variety of hip hop activities and behaviors. Antony was aware not only of Dominican hip hop but also U.S. hip hop, and had already thought about many of the links between these two hip hop cultures that I was so interested in investigating. Antony was also helpful because he is one of the most active presences
at La Cancha, the local basketball court in Cabarete, which I capitalize to distinguish it from the generic "cancha."

This space is infused with local hip hop cultural practices and is a central site for Dominican hip hop development and innovation in Cabarete, as canchas are in urban communities around the country. During my first summer, Antony introduced me and a number of other volunteers to La Cancha, and I was struck not only by similarities between U.S. and Dominican street-basketball culture, but also by the strong presence of hip hop that I saw and heard around me. When I returned to La Cancha with Antony this past January, he introduced me to a number of teenage boys who, like Antony, spend most of their time at La Cancha and who spoke to me about the space and about their experiences with hip hop culture in the Callejón.

The fact that my most important contacts in the Callejón and in Barrio Blanco are young men is not a coincidence, and speaks to my own position in these
communities. Being a young white American woman in Cabarete opened a lot of doors for me, but also imposed certain limitations. Because of the tourist industry in Cabarete, my presence in the Callejón did not stand out; even in Barrio Blanco, most people knew that I was friends with Yonil and accepted and often welcomed my presence. While white tourists in general are common, foreign white women in particular have a status in the community that influenced my own reception and often structured the relationships and conversations I had with Dominicans. White women are desirable for a number of reasons, not least of all because they fit into racial ideals in the Dominican Republic that favor whiteness and lightness. Foreign white women also represent certain types of sexual and economic access that make them even more desirable to Dominican men. American women on vacation are not only perceived to be more sexually open, but Dominican men also know they face very few consequences from starting a relationship with a woman who will eventually be leaving the country. In contrast, some Dominicans I spoke with talked about the more significant consequences—like social pressure to marry—that could arise from sexual relationships with Dominican women. Many Dominican men focus on classed aspects of white feminine desirability, and pursue white women explicitly because of the potential class ascension they may enjoy, whether temporarily or in the long term.³ Even Dominican men who do not consciously pursue economic gain through

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³ The most explicit manifestation of this economically-motivated relationship is the sanky panky. These are young Dominican men who are especially prevalent in touristy beach towns like Cabarete. Most sankies in Cabarete work as watersports instructors, which is the backbone of the tourist industry in Cabarete and provides access to large numbers of tourists. Based on my observations, which included knowing a number of sankies through friends and seeing them constantly out at night, sankies seemed to fall somewhere between a “player” and a sex worker: they pursued women with the specific intention of benefitting economically in some way, but these transactions were rarely as explicit as they are in traditional sex work, which is also prevalent in Cabarete.
white women are still influenced by these dynamics in their desire for white women. All of these factors facilitated my interactions with Dominican men of all ages, especially with the teenagers and young men who tend to be the most active participants in Dominican hip hop culture. This meant that I was exposed to hip hop culture very early and in a variety of ways, and that I faced almost no obstacles in meeting and speaking with male participants as I conducted my research.

This sexually and economically desirable position did not facilitate my interactions with Dominican women, however, and there were certain obstacles in building relationships with young Dominican women. This is no doubt partly because Dominican women were aware of my desirability as a foreign white female, and of the prevalent culture of infidelity that often affects their own relationships with Dominican men. Other factors also came into play. The most significant was that many Dominican women my age are already married or in long-term relationships, and many already have children as well. This not only limited their ability to leave their homes and to socialize with people outside of their barrios, but also meant there were some differences between our lifestyles that were far more concrete and apparent than those that I faced in interactions with Dominican men, who tend to be more encouraged to participate in a variety of activities and to develop interests outside of the home. This meant that female participation in Dominican hip hop was far less visible to me throughout much of my time in Cabarete. These limitations diminished somewhat, however, during my final trip to the Dominican Republic, as I was able to speak to the three young women who live with Yonil: his sister, his sister-in-law, and the girlfriend of his stepfather’s younger brother. I already knew these
women, but was now able to spend considerably more time with them; my conversations with them provided an important point of view for my research.

A Note On Sources

There is virtually no academic research devoted to Dominican hip hop culture. However, academic sources from related areas of research support my analysis and contextualize my understanding of various social, historical, and cultural dynamics that I saw playing out in Cabarete. David Howard’s comprehensive study, *Coloring the Nation: Race and Ethnicity in the Dominican Republic*, provided vital contextual information: Howard uses interviews done in three distinct Dominican communities to form his analysis not only of race relations, but also of gender and class, and of international relationships between the Dominican Republic and Haiti, and between the Dominican Republic and the United States. Kimberly Eison Simmons has also written extensively on Dominican racial understandings and naming practices; she considers the ways constructions of race shift when Dominicans move to the United States and enter into a different racial structure. Chris Girman explores homosexuality and homoeroticism in Latin masculinities and devotes a chapter of his book to the Dominican Republic, using his own homosexual experiences in the country to consider the ways in which these behaviors operate and are understood within a predominantly heterosexist society. Girman’s analysis was useful to my own observations of gender performance and of homosocial and heterosocial practices within Dominican hip hop.4

Research on youth cultures and the globalization of popular culture also contributes to my analysis, as does the extensive body of research done on U.S. hip hop culture. Historical details about the culture’s origins and the social factors that influenced its development are thoroughly described in Jeff Chang’s *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation*. Chang utilizes the definition of hip hop that also informs my research. This definition is offered in the introduction written by hip hop pioneer DJ Kool Herc: “People talk about the four hip-hop elements: DJing, B-Boying, Mcing, and Graffiti. I think that there are far more than those: the way you walk, the way you talk, the way you look, the way you communicate.”

These “four hip-hop elements” are fairly consistent with Dominican hip hop, although I replace “B-Boying” with the Dominican dance genre of dembow. (Graffiti is also absent from my analysis because, while it does appear in Dominican hip hop, it is not as significant as it has been in U.S. hip hop culture.) DJ Kool Herc’s description of a range of hip hop genres, performances, and behaviors resonated with my own perception of hip hop culture and identified the areas I was most interested in investigating in Dominican hip hop.

Sources less focused on hip hop history and more on the representational and social significance of the culture, such as Tricia Rose’s *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* and *Droppin’ Science: Critical Essays on*...

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Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture, edited by William Eric Perkins, were also crucial to my analysis. My understanding of hip hop as a global genre was enhanced by The Vinyl Ain’t Final: Hip Hop and the Globalization of Black Popular Culture, edited by Dipannita Basu and Sidney J. Lemelle, and Halifu Osumare’s article from the Journal of American and Comparative Cultures, “Beat Streets in the Global Hood: Connective Marginalities of the Hip Hop Globe.” While many of the dynamics analyzed in U.S. and global hip hop scholarship are apparent in Dominican hip hop performance as well, there are also certain points where the latter culture deviates significantly from these global trends. At these points, my research on Dominican sociological patterns intersected with my research on hip hop cultures, as I tried to place these deviations in the larger social contexts in which hip hop operates in the Dominican Republic, in the United States, and around the world.⁶

While these studies of the Dominican Republic and of hip hop culture have been crucial to my project and to my analysis, they do not discuss Dominican hip hop directly. Thus my analysis of Dominican hip hop culture in Cabarete depends primarily on my field work. In all, I conducted seven separate interviews with eighteen people, with whom I spoke individually or in small groups. All of my informants participate in Dominican hip hop in some way. I began by interviewing people I knew personally as hip hop participants, and these people suggested friends

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⁶ Paul Hodkinson and Wolfgang Deicke, eds., Youth Cultures: Scenes, Subcultures and Tribes (New York: Routledge, 2007).
or neighbors they thought I should seek out. Whether I approached potential informants or had them introduced to me, I received written consent from each of them using IRB-mandated forms, and I refer to them by pseudonyms throughout this thesis. Additionally, photographs of my informants are only printed here with explicit permission given on the consent forms. The interviews I conducted were very casual, and almost all of them took place while other people were around. This sometimes meant my interview groups grew spontaneously, as people were very interested in participating and talking about the music, dance, and artists they loved, as well as about their own contributions to the genre.

![Image 4](clockwise from left) Carlos, Luis, Vladi, Oscar, and Yarlin during our interview at La Cancha (personal photograph, January 8, 2013).

My interview subjects are all young, as are most Dominican hip hop participants, and range in age from sixteen to twenty-five, with the majority in their early twenties. All currently live in either the Callejón or Barrio Blanco, but some grew up outside of
Cabarete, while others have been in these neighborhoods their entire lives. And finally, for the reasons described above, the majority—all but three—were male.

Because of the unique dynamics in Cabarete and my own position in this community, I relied—in the absence of academic research—on popular sources to determine which of my findings would apply to other Dominican communities where hip hop is prevalent, and which are more specific to Cabarete. The most important of these sources was YouTube, a site which hosts videos uploaded by users, and which is utilized extensively by Dominican hip hop participants. I lost count of the number of YouTube videos I watched over the course of my research, but considered at least a couple hundred examples of Dominican hip hop production, from professional Dominican hip hop music videos to amateur videos of Dominicans dancing in the street. These videos allowed me to compare my own experiences with Dominican hip hop in Cabarete to depictions of the same culture in other Dominican urban communities that are not built around a tourist industry and therefore are more typical as local hip hop spaces. These videos also offer an impressive range of representations of Dominican hip hop culture and of its participants, from depictions of everyday hip hop practices to carefully constructed images of professional Dominican hip hop artists and dancers. I studied not only the hip hop performances that play out in these videos, but also the ways people dress and the attitudes they display, and the representations of class and gender that are developed even in the least “official” videos.

In addition to the various videos I found on YouTube, I also drew from popular music websites. The most prominent Dominican hip hop website mentioned
by my interview subjects was Alofokemusic.net, which I analyze as an online manifestation of a much broader Dominican hip hop community than the one I experienced personally in Cabarete. Another website, Musica.com, is a Spanish-language site that features song lyrics for “777,213 songs,” as well as biographical information and music videos for popular artists from around the world, including U.S. pop artists whose lyrics are in English. This information is posted by users of the site, and, when possible, I compared this information to social networking sites run by the artists themselves, or to blogs that discussed these artists and genres. I also drew from clips of a Dominican television talk show that features, among other segments on popular culture and Dominican hip hop, the segment “Dembow En Pinta,” which shows dembow dance performances by young Dominicans.

Central Questions and Arguments

The first chapter of my ethnography, “Access to Global Hip Hop in Cabarete,” describes and analyzes the various technologies that provide local people in Cabarete with unprecedented access to global popular culture. I consider both the global marketing forces that drive this culture into small local communities such as Cabarete, as well as the significant agency local Dominicans exercise as they use technology in intentional ways to seek out hip hop cultural products, and to adapt and innovate these influences into their own contributions to the genre. My second chapter, “Classed Connections in Dominican Rap,” describes the origins of Dominican rap and of dembow, and then moves into an analysis of the importance of rap as a genre that voices a “truth” that resonates powerfully among my interview
subjects and in lower-class urban Dominican spaces. The third chapter, “Going From Rags-to-Riches and Black-to-White in Dominican Hip Hop,” broadens this analysis of class narratives in Dominican rap and dembow, and compares the prominence of class with an apparent absence of race—or rather, of blackness—in this culture. I question the ways in which Dominican hip hop, even as it speaks out about class injustices, fits into national conceptions of race and racism that work against establishing the type of strong identification with black identity that is so important in U.S. hip hop. The fourth chapter, “Alternative Visions of the Calle in Dembow Dance Culture,” switches from the realm of Dominican rap into the music and dance genre of dembow, which is unique to Dominican hip hop but is heavily influenced by U.S. hip hop and other subcultural dance movements. Much of this chapter is devoted to a description of the genre itself, as there is no direct counterpart in U.S. hip hop. It also develops a critique of the representational project of dembow in comparison and contrast with the representations elaborated about the same spaces and people in Dominican rap. The final chapter, “Masculinities, Femininities, and Sexualities in Dominican Hip Hop,” offers a close analysis of performances of gender and sexuality in Dominican rap and in dembow. I trace a progression from an aggressive, “hard” vision of masculinity depicted in Dominican rap and in U.S. rap, to a more flexible, inclusive masculine performance that plays out in dembow. In contrast, I note the lack of a parallel flexibility and inclusivity in performances of femininity, and in the heterosexism that continues to be reinforced in Dominican hip hop culture.
My analysis of Dominican hip hop fits into a developed academic tradition of examining local manifestations of global hip hop culture, and this tradition influenced my preconceptions of what Dominican hip hop was “supposed” to accomplish in the communities where it is most important. Some of these preconceptions were supported by my field work, such as the view of hip hop as a powerful voice in severely marginalized, impoverished communities. More often, my preconceptions were seriously challenged and had to be reevaluated, as they were by my experiences with and observations of gender performance in dembow culture. And in some cases, specifically my investigation into the racialization of Dominican hip hop culture, I found myself not only dismissing these preconceptions entirely but also rethinking my own socialization in the United States and the ways in which what I had assumed were “inherent” qualities of hip hop culture are in fact historically and culturally specific. Finally, I had to rethink the tendency, in myself as well as in prominent research, to see hip hop as culturally significant primarily as a form of defiance and resistance against dominant discourses. Rather, I view Dominican hip hop as a culture that negotiates these national and international discourses, and that is therefore significant whether it subverts or supports dominant social systems. This view, strengthened by my time and research in two barrios located at a unique crossroads of international and local influence, constitutes the primary contribution of my ethnographic and analytical study of Dominican hip hop culture.
1. “La música se escucha dondequiera”
Access to Global Hip Hop in Cabarete

The explosion of technology and its increasing accessibility around the world is what makes my project both possible and significant as a local case study in the globalization of popular culture. Just three or four years before I first went to the Dominican Republic, the Callejón wasn’t even paved, and many of the back alleys still aren’t. Yet now centros de Internet (internet centers8) are scattered down the main street, and, although few people own laptops, almost everyone has a cell phone, some with internet access.

![Image 5. Two centros de Internet in the Callejón (personal photograph, January 9, 2013).]

The centrality of technology to the phenomenon of globalization is clear; its importance in the globalization of music and hip hop culture specifically has also been studied extensively. Halifu Osumare describes both of these phenomena in his work on hip hop-based subcultures in Russia, Japan, and Hawaii:

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7 “You can listen to music wherever.”
8 These centers range from small rooms with only a couple of computers and plastic chairs, to larger spaces with numerous computers as well as other services like printing and copying.
The telecommunications revolution has situated us in an Information Age that is proliferated with various high-technology media. […] A concomitant global pop culture, based in music and dance videos, simulcasts of rock concerts throughout the major metropoles, and an intensely-marketed “modern” lifestyle through all manner of brand names and symbols of consumer goods, clothes, athletic shoes, and head gear are the materiality of a global youth-oriented culture. […] African American music, dance, and style, at the epicenter of American culture, are not only part of this technology-mediated global youth culture, but are absolutely essential to it.⁹

Osumare draws attention to a number of important factors here. First, he specifies the prominent place of African American culture in these globalizing processes. African American hip hop culture in the United States, while it drew on various global influences, “was born in the ghetto,” and then expanded into the U.S. mainstream and spread across the world.¹⁰ In Cabarete, a town infused with foreign influences by, and largely for, a highly developed tourist industry, U.S. hip hop culture is one of the influences young Dominicans have embraced and worked to make their own.

Dominican rappers rhyme in Spanish about issues ranging from money, cars, and girls to complaints about the corrupt Dominican political system or the national trends of femicidios (“femicides,” or murders of women) and domestic abuse. While many of these messages are culturally specific, they also clearly participate in a globalized hip hop culture that can be heard in the rhythm and instrumentation of the tracks and in the incorporation of U.S. hip hop slang in Dominican rap lyrics, and seen in the prevalence of U.S. brands and hip hop fashion styles worn by artists and listeners.

And hip hop continues to evolve, in the Dominican Republic as in the United States. Dembow, an extremely popular and relatively recent Dominican style of music and dance, has emerged as a profoundly youth-driven culture closely linked to rap music

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¹⁰ Chang, Can’t Stop Won’t Stop, xiii.
and Puerto Rican reggaeton, and to an impressive number of U.S. hip hop dance styles and steps from breakdancing to the “dougie.”

Inseparable from the popularity and adaptation of U.S. hip hop forms among Dominican youth is the force of global cultural marketing which Osumare also notes. The agency of young people around the world in appropriating and adapting U.S. hip hop culture cannot be denied, and this dynamic forms the basis of Osumare’s field work. Nonetheless, it also cannot be denied that this culture is meant to be seen, listened to, and bought, and that there is an entire industry within the music industry devoted to its marketing and dissemination. There is not necessarily a direct line from these marketers to the young people across the world who, like those in Cabarete, end up hearing and seeing these cultural products and symbols, but the original marketing efforts are a constant influence nonetheless. In Cabarete, where Dominican residents are usually too poor to wield significant purchasing power, marketing efforts are more effective at creating demand, rather than actually supplying this culture to local consumers. For example, bootlegs of CDs and clothing brand knockoffs, which proliferate in Cabarete and essentially subvert the marketer-consumer relationship, have emerged to fulfill a local demand created by global marketing campaigns and by U.S. domestic marketing campaigns that are becoming increasingly visible through television and the internet.

Osumare’s insistence on the “youth-oriented” nature of this global hip hop culture should also be emphasized. The association of youth with hip hop is significant, as it is with many subcultures as well as with mainstream pop cultures.  

11 U.S. hip hop could arguably qualify as “subculture” and “mainstream” simultaneously. In a literal sense, there is a distinction between mainstream hip hop and “underground” hip hop, produced by
Cabarete is no exception. My oldest interview subject is only twenty-five years old. This is not to say that anyone older than twenty-five would automatically be “out of touch” with Dominican hip hop culture. But the people whom I saw participating and innovating most actively in Dominican hip hop culture were young, especially teenagers and even younger kids. Watching high school students flood out of the Callejón to catch a guagua\textsuperscript{12} to a high school in a neighboring town epitomized this youthful quality for me. School uniforms were manipulated into hip hop fashion statements by wearing the khaki pants lower; adding flat-brimmed hats, sneakers, and backpacks in matching colors; or showing off a certain haircut or hairstyle. The fact that my informants were all also young is not a coincidence. Although my own age could have been a factor, it was probably negligible, as I got to know a lot of older people during my time in Cabarete and simply did not see any of them as promising interview subjects for this project. Furthermore, over half of the people I interviewed were not people I already knew, but were introduced to me by other informants. All of the people whom I met in this way were young, which indicates that from a local perspective as well, the people who were seen to be most actively involved in hip hop culture tended to be younger.

The technological aspects of global hip hop culture that Osumare emphasizes are apparent in the usage of modern technology that I observed and discussed with people in Cabarete. Television, the internet, and cell phones are the means by which local people, especially young people, are marketed to, whether directly or indirectly.

\textsuperscript{12} One of the most common forms of public transportation in the Dominican Republic for longer distances, along with public cars, \textit{guaguas} are vans packed with as many people as possible.
These forms of technology can be thought of as facilitating the *exportation* of U.S. hip hop culture, implying the agency of the “senders” of the culture. These same technologies are also tools of *importation*, a term which I use to highlight the agency of the “receivers.” Young people in Cabarete use technology in intentional ways to experience U.S. and Dominican hip hop culture, as well as to produce their own contributions. An example of this “export-import” relationship is the video website YouTube, which allows people—anybody with internet access—to upload and watch videos. YouTube is utilized by the music industry to put out music videos, live performances, and other videos on “channels” related to specific artists or record labels. The site is also the main internet destination for the people with whom I spoke, and was the site they all immediately mentioned when I asked what they did on the internet.\(^{13}\) Because of the “open” quality of the site, local Dominicans can use YouTube not only to watch videos, but also to upload their own videos, as they do with dance videos and videos of kids *improvisando* (freestyle-rapping). So young Dominicans may spend time on YouTube watching clips of American urban dance movies like *Street Dance* (Max Giwa and Dania Pasquini, 2010), and then practice the moves and share them with their friends. Perhaps one of these kids takes a video on his or her phone of his or her friends dancing, and uploads it to YouTube under a Spanish title. Now this video, which is a very different cultural product than the

\(^{13}\) Facebook was the other site my interview subjects mentioned most, but they rarely linked the site to music. Although people do post songs or music videos on Facebook, it is not the place where they look for new music, an important distinction because awareness of the newest music was a big part of the importance of the internet to my informants. One of my subjects insisted that “*ya Facebook, ya eso no está, eso es... cuando tu te conectas a buscar música, ya no está de Facebook*” (“Facebook, that’s not the thing anymore, that’s... when you go online to look for music, it’s not on Facebook anymore”) (Interview, January 17, 2013).
original Hollywood movie clip, circulates on the same website as the video that provided its inspiration.

This example, and many others like it, have informed my reading of Osumare’s analysis of global hip hop culture as both a marketed industry and as a youth-driven subculture that is shaped and reshaped in communities all over the world. Through my research, I have come to see these competing dynamics as being closely linked, even if they often work against each other in theory, if not in practice. The marketing of any culture marks it as ideologically opposite to a youth-driven subculture. Osumare focuses his work on the subversion that hip hop can make possible: “Hip hop as a culture has interjected its own often self-empowered messages and attitudes that are not necessarily under the control of the music industry.”¹⁴ These messages are certainly part of hip hop culture in Cabarete and in the Dominican Republic as a whole, but I argue that even when young Dominicans are not working to subvert any larger system—even when they are simply watching music videos and listening to songs—they are still asserting a certain level of agency that creates the space in which hip hop culture is able to exist and flourish in Cabarete. Simply put, if so many young Dominicans like those with whom I spent time weren’t using the internet primarily to search for music videos, the music industry and their marketers could post their videos to YouTube without having any significant impact on the community. The ways in which the apparently insignificant everyday hip hop experiences of listening to songs and watching music videos function among young people in Cabarete form the first focus of my analysis.

Cell phones and the internet were the two types of technology that my interview subjects talked about the most. They both play important roles in the ways in which people experience and engage in hip hop culture as a basic part of their daily lives. I began most of my interviews by asking about how people listened to music. My informants participated in hip hop culture in different ways and to different extents; the one thing I could count on was that all of them listened to music all the time. This seemingly obvious question was an effective way to initiate conversations.

In my first interview, Yonil and his two closest friends in Cabarete, Leo and David, had a lot to say on the subject:

**Hannah:** ¿Cómo Uds. escuchan la música mayormente?

**Yonil:** En las discotecas, sonando de autos, y…. La música se escucha dondequiera porque ya desde que la música salga, las personas la toman y ya la llevan en su iPod, y ya la música está fácil para tenerla. Ya también sale en la televisión y… pero el Internet es la vía más rápida que hay por ahora, creo.

**Leo:** La suben a YouTube y así las personas que tienen un teléfono, como un iPod, la pueden descargar, y así pueden tener la música de varias artistas como reggetoneros, dembowceros, rap, y así cada gente puede escuchar la música de cada joven que no lo conoce bien pero le gusta el ritmo de la música. Puede pasarla, como, por Bluetooth [a otros teléfonos].

**David:** Sí, sí yo quiero una música, la conecto con una computadora, la bajo de YouTube, y la pongo. Bueno, mejor así escuchar música por teléfono. Porque uno puede escucharla como, todo el tiempo, entiendes, como, puede caminar, andar escuchándola. Yo pienso que es mejor.

**Hannah:** How do you all mostly listen to music?

**Yonil:** In the clubs, playing from cars, and…. You can listen to music wherever because now when it comes out, people take it and have it on their iPods, and now it’s easy to have music. It also comes out now on TV and… but the internet is the fastest way for now, I think.

**Leo:** They upload it to YouTube, and then people that have phones, like with an iPod, they can download it, and that way they can have the music of lots of artists like reggaetoneros, dembowceros (reggaeton and dembow artists, respectively), rap, and then everyone can listen to every kid’s music, like they don’t know him well but they like the rhythm of the music. You can send the music, like, with Bluetooth, [to other phones].

**David:** Yeah, if I want a song, I connect to a computer, download the song from YouTube, and put it on my phone. Well, it’s better to listen to music on cell phones like that. Because you can listen like, all the time, you know, like, you can walk, go around listening to it. I think that’s better.¹⁵

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¹⁵ Interview conducted and voice-recorded by the researcher, January 3, 2013. English translation by the researcher. In some places, clarifying questions asked by the researcher have been included; in others they have been left out so as not to disrupt the speaker’s comment.
In this case, the internet—specifically YouTube—provides the initial means of access to songs, but the ultimate purpose of using the internet in this way is to make these songs readily playable on a cell phone. Leo and David describe an extremely common phenomenon among young Dominicans. It seems as if every jovén (young person) is accompanied by his or her own soundtrack as s/he walks down the street, as even very basic cell phones usually have the capacity to store and play music, and it is a capacity people value highly when they purchase cell phones. Although Yonil and Leo reference iPods, these and other mp3 players are uncommon. Furthermore, despite Leo’s comparison between downloading music to iPods and downloading it to cell phones, there is a significant difference in how this music is ultimately heard. Listening to music on an iPod is a highly individual listening experience. In the United States, the term “plugged in” is increasingly used to refer to people listening to music and is apt because of our use of headphones when listening to music or watching videos on iPods, smart phones, tablets, and laptops: we are often literally connected to whatever technology we may be using. It is strange, even taboo in many spaces, to use these technologies without headphones. Music in Cabarete, on the other hand, is almost never a personal experience. Its firm place in the public sphere is well expressed in Yonil’s claim that “you can listen to music wherever.” The public quality of music in the Dominican Republic predates the existence of cell phones, and, as Yonil’s comments suggest, music is played publicly not only on cell phones but also in nightclubs and through speakers in cars, homes, and local stores.

16 Given the context of the interview and the increased involvement Yonil had in my project, I am certain that Yonil’s comment about iPods arose from the various times when he borrowed my iPod, and not from a practice that was actually common in Cabarete. As Leo and David’s explanations suggest, cell phones take the place of iPods as the personal music player of choice in Cabarete.
The relatively new technology of the cell phone is used in ways that complement, rather than challenge, this public musical culture. Leo highlights the communal aspect of listening when he mentions the possibility, thanks to cell phones, of listening to anyone else’s music, based not on one’s familiarity with that person, but on the appeal of the music itself. Despite the inherently individual quality of cell phones, they have not made Dominican musical culture any more private. Rather, they have become yet another way to hear music and to allow it to be heard by whoever might be passing by. If anything, the mobility epitomized by the cell phone has simply expanded the potential networks of listeners, whether friends, family, or strangers.

The internet is not simply a means by which to transfer music onto a more personal gadget like a cell phone. It is also an important destination for people who wish to listen to, watch, and share various types of media. Many people I spoke with did not have constant or even daily internet access, and therefore most of their daily music listening and video watching happened at the discotecas, in the streets, on television, and of course on cell phones. But the internet was a significant technology for everyone I spoke with, even if they rarely were able to use it in reality. The internet represented access not simply to music, of which people had more than enough, but to the newest music, whether that music was Dominican or American.

Antony, Endi, and Yefri highlighted the importance of being in touch with music as soon as it comes out:

*Antony:* Allí es cómo se encuentra la música nueva, la nueva que sacan, no la vieja: en el Internet, en YouTube. Como cada música nueva que han sacado en Estados Unidos, como de Chris Brown, Tyga, 50 Cent, 50 Cent, 50 Cent

*Antony:* That’s where you find the new music, the new music they put out, not the old music: on the internet, on YouTube. Like all the new music they’ve released in the United States, like Chris Brown, Tyga, 50 Cent, 50 Cent, 50 Cent
The close connection between the internet and new music is obvious in these comments. The internet has provided people with a way to find new music faster, perhaps before other people have heard about it, which allows listeners to claim a certain status as hip hop participants who are “in the know” (a claim that is valued in the United States as well as in the Dominican Republic). The internet also provides locals with a way to access music from other countries like the United States, which in the case of hip hop music is the most important foreign country to young Dominicans. But this new music is not “just there” whenever Antony, Yefri, or Endi turns on a computer: they need to know how to find it. Antony, who knows English and who has had more contact with North Americans and other foreigners in Cabarete because of his English fluency, is familiar with more American hip hop artists than Yefri or Endi. He is able to use YouTube to find those artists, while Yefri and Endi

17 Antony used the word “whatever” in English during this interview, as shown in the lack of italics in the Spanish transcription. Antony was the only person I spoke with who is fluent in English. But almost everyone I spoke with used English words at times, and I view this use as an important aspect of the hybrid nature of Dominican hip hop culture. Some of these words were used consciously in English, as “whatever” is in Antony’s comments above; others are English words, especially slang English words associated with U.S. hip hop culture, that have become part of Dominican hip hop culture and slang. I have left these words in English to draw attention to this crossover. Likewise, I have left most Dominican slang words in Spanish, with notes explaining the meaning, because the use of slang in Spanish is also an important part of Dominican hip hop culture and can be seen as a signal of Dominican contributions to and adaptations of hip hop culture.
rattle off the names of a number of Dominican rappers, and know exactly which
terms to search for to find these artists’ newest hits. The American songs Antony
references are not necessarily sought out in the same ways that Yefri and Endi
describe seeking out Dominican songs. Antony’s increased and intentional awareness
of American hip hop make Antony a different type of participant in the Dominican
hip hop community, precisely because he is not so restricted to it.

For Antony, the internet is a tool that he can use to access U.S. hip hop
culture, but it is his preexisting knowledge of this culture that allows him to take
advantage of this resource for that purpose. Yefri and Endi, who list only Dominican
rappers when I ask what they look for on YouTube, use YouTube to find songs by
these rappers, and the terms they search for—terms like “Lápiz Conciente lo más
nuevo” (“Lápiz Conciente newest”)—will provide them with results from within the
Dominican hip hop community. These searches turn up a lot of results uploaded by
“ordinary,” non-professional YouTube users, as well as the more official results from
record labels, artists, and DJs. There is a kind of communication here between
Dominican uploaders and their local viewers that creates a loose community on
YouTube of Dominicans who all value the same thing: hip hop music. Yes, anyone
can find and view these videos. But the fact that so many of these videos use the
same phrases in their titles reveals something that goes beyond random internet
searches or even specific searches for song names and artists. These searches are
open-ended, and only “work” because the searchers can be certain that other people,
usually people very much like them, are using these phrases in the titles of their
videos. (And of course, amateur uploaders use these phrases because they know that
these are the “catch phrases” that their intended audience is searching for.) Antony branches out from this Dominican YouTube “community” because he can search for foreign artists and thereby gain access to very different results, both marketed as well as unprofessional YouTube uploads. He does not rely solely on the community of Dominican uploaders to find the music he wants to hear. Yefri and Endi, and many other young Dominicans, use the internet to participate in an online Dominican hip hop community with a common language and a common understanding between uploaders and downloaders.

A more explicit manifestation of this online Dominican hip hop community comes in the form of Dominican websites devoted to posting new Dominican, and sometimes Puerto Rican and mainland U.S., hip hop-related videos. The website my interviewees (and many other people I have met) mentioned the most was Alofokemusic.net, which is run by a production company, Alofoke Music, that also puts out videos and mixtapes (largely online through their site and through YouTube), and has a radio show on a Dominican station.18 David, Leo, and Yonil explain the appeal of this website over other ways of finding new music:

David: Uno alquila una hora [en un centro de Internet] y, bueno, puede ver videos,

18 The word “alofoke,” I was told, means something like “really good” or “really cool” and refers to things within hip hop culture. Looking at the word from a Spanish point of view, and based on how I have heard people use and describe it, I think the word can be understood as “a lo foke,” “to the foke,” and I think an appropriate English slang equivalent would be “off the chain,” a term that is also used in a hip hop context to refer to something that is unbelievably cool, fun, or crazy, like a music video or a party. I also think it is extremely likely, given the pronunciation of the word—“Ah-loh-foh-kay”—and the use by the production company of the English word “music,” that the name of the company is a distortion of the English phrase “I love fucking music,” revealing another important hidden example of English use in Dominican hip hop slang. UrbanDictionary.com, the only site on which I found any definition of the word alofoke, defines it differently: “Dominican slang for doing something on the fly or spontaneously. Como hacerlo ‘a lo “fuck it”’” (urbandictionary.com). The people I spoke with did not define the word this way, but the Urban Dictionary example is useful nonetheless because it supports the idea that the word comes from collapsing “a,” “lo,” and a Dominican distortion of the English curse “fuck.”
bajarlos por YouTube.

Hannah: ¿Por YouTube mayormente los miran?

Leo: Sí, allí por YouTube y puedes mirar cualquier tipo de video.

David: Y también Alofokemusic, la página.

Leo: Sí, hay páginas dominicanas aquí también que tú puedes escuchar música y descargar música.

David: Sí, Alofokemusic, es dominicana.

Hannah: ¿Les gusta más verlo por esa página? ¿O por YouTube?

David: Me gusta por esa página.

Leo: A mí me gusta verla en esa página porque allí descargan los videos y la música mejores, que tienen un buen sonido, un buen mensaje para la gente. Sí, por eso me gusta escucharla primero de allí [...].

Yonil: Lo bueno de esa página es que es la que trae la mejor música que hay en la República ahora. Los mejores cantantes que hay, como, están con esa página porque es la que da más publicidad.

download them from YouTube.

Hannah: You all mostly watch them on YouTube?

Leo: Yeah, on YouTube, and you can watch any kind of video.

David: And also Alofokemusic, the website.

Leo: Yeah, there are Dominican websites here, too, where you can listen to music and download music.

David: Yeah, Alofokemusic, it’s Dominican.

Hannah: Do you guys like watching videos more on that website? Or on YouTube?

David: I like that website.

Leo: I like to watch [videos] on that website because there they download the best videos and music, that have a good sound, a good message for people. Yeah, that’s why I like to listen to it there first […].

Yonil: The good thing about that website is that it’s the site that has the best music there is in the Republic now. The best singers there are, like, they’re with that website because it’s the site that gives the most publicity.

The importance of this website here is twofold. First, for my interview subjects, the site is an easy way to get access to new, quality music that belongs to the hip hop genre and therefore appeals to the Dominican hip hop community specifically. The site chooses the best music, and the videos they post have good sound and good content, “a good message.” On the other hand, the site is also important from a marketing perspective, as Yonil points out. It is an effective way for new Dominican hip hop artists to get publicity, so they also support the site and advertise themselves through it, in order to reach people. Yonil looks at this phenomenon from the point of view of users like himself and his friends: they know the site is going to have the best new music because the best new artists trust the site to give them good publicity. But the fact that the site is used by artists as well is important. The website is both a

19 Interview, January 3, 2013.
powerful marketing tool for artists in the Dominican hip hop music industry and an
important space in which hip hop fans are able to create a community, by
commenting on videos and articles, by communicating with each other in the chat
room, or simply by watching the various videos posted on the site. The fact that the
site features so much good music makes it the one of the most attractive online hip
hop destinations for my interview subjects, and for hundreds of thousands of young
people like them. And the fact that so many people frequent the site makes it an even
more appealing marketing tool for Dominican hip hop artists. Looking more closely
at the specifics of the website sheds some light on how this online community
functions.

The website’s Facebook page states that the site is the “Pagina numero 1 de
musica urbana en republica dominicana [sic]” (“Number 1 page for urban music in
dominican republic [sic]”). Under “mission” is the following: “Dar a conocer de
manera nacional e internacional la musica urbana hecha en republica dominicana
[sic]” (“Release urban music made in dominican republic nationally and
internationally [sic]”). The website itself has created an extremely comprehensive
online destination and community in order to fulfill this mission. The initial page
features videos posted by Alofoke Music, on which users can comment. Sixteen
videos were posted on February 3rd, 2013, alone, which seems like a consistent rate of
posting: at the bottom of the page a navigation bar indicates that there are 586 pages
of these video posts; each page has about fifty videos posted. Many of these videos
are official music videos that have just been released. Videos produced by Alofoke

20 “Alofokemusic.net,” Facebook, accessed February 2, 2013,
https://www.facebook.com/WWW.ALOFOKEMUSIC.NET.
Music are promoted at the top of the page. Other videos include clips of Dominican hip hop artists freestyling or giving interviews, live shows, news and gossip items about these artists, and clips of the Alofoke Music radio show. These posts are surrounded by advertisements for specific artists and links to still more music videos. At the top of the page there is a box titled “En La Mira” (“In Sight”) where more posts are featured in a continuous updating scroll. Below that is a chat room window with the caption: “Usuarios frecos de Alofokemusic.net en cura!!!”21 Users’ comments come up in real time and range from music-related comments—Elfreketirapulla writes, “Pasanme un rap duro, no importa de que pais sea, pero que sea en espanol [sic]” (“Give me a good [literally “hard”] rap, it doesn’t matter what country it’s from, just that it’s in spanish [sic]”—to comments that are more “fresco” or simply unrelated to the page’s content, occasionally in conversations that begin between users.22

The various types of videos and the high level of user participation on the site both point to the community aspects of this website. YouTube is an international sensation full of incredibly varied video content, which is used extensively by fans of Dominican hip hop. Alofokemusic.net is explicitly for these fans. It is not that these sites are not closely connected: the videos on Alofokemusic.net are all YouTube videos, and Alofoke Music has a YouTube channel. But watching these videos on Alofokemusic.net provides a very different experience from searching for those same videos on YouTube.

21 “Fresco” is slang for “fresh” in the sense of someone being fresh, talking back, etc., used here with a more playful and positive connotation; and “cura” (literally “cure”) is slang used to refer to something funny or to talk about playing around, doing something funny, and making oneself feel better (“curing oneself”). Here the chat room line would translate to something like “Fresh Alofokemusic.net users having a good time/being funny!”
videos on a site that hosts millions of other videos. Alofoko Music has already done
the hard work, by choosing the best and newest videos to feature on the site. Visitors
to the Dominican site have access to a lot of material they might never encounter on
YouTube alone, because they no longer need to rely on conducting a search in order
to find these videos.

Although the Alofoko Music mission on the Facebook page is strictly musical,
and Alofokemusic.net is very successful in getting Dominican hip hop music “out
there,” the website goes beyond these musical goals. There is a section on the
website, for example, devoted to “Moda Urbana” (Urban Fashion), and even a
personals section called “Cupido” (Cupid). The explanation on the Cupido page
explains a lot about the website as a whole:

\[
\text{Alofokemusic.net ya no es solamente una pagina donde encuentras noticias,}
\text{musica urbana, y chismes actualizados, en estos momentos}
\text{“Alofokemusic.net” se ha convertido en una comunidad, en una familia y}
\text{debido a esto hemos decididos abrir una seccion que llevara por nombre}
\text{“Cupido.” “Cupido” es una nueva seccion en donde podras encontrar}
\text{amigos y parejas en Alofokemusic.net [sic].}
\]

Alofokemusic.net is no longer just a website where you can find news, urban
music, and current gossip, now “Alofokemusic.net” has become a
community, a family, and for this reason we have decided to open a section
that will be called “Cupid.” “Cupid” is a new section where you will be able
to find friends and [romantic] partners on Alofokemusic.net.\footnote{“Cupido:’ La Nueva Seccion de Alofokemusic.net!!! (Apoyala).” Alofokemusic.net, accessed
seccion-de-alofokemusicnet-apoyala/.
}

The people I interviewed did not, to my knowledge, participate in these purely social
aspects of the site, likely because of their more limited internet access and the
subsequent lack of the type of internet-infused culture conducive to online dating and
chat room use. But the site as a whole is inherently social, in that it provides a space
for fans of Dominican hip hop to gain access to this culture and to communicate with
each other and with the people who run the site, whether directly in the chat room, by posting comments on the videos uploaded by the site, or through the site’s Facebook page; or indirectly, by simply watching the website’s videos, reading the short articles that accompany them, and by sharing the videos with other people through social media sites or by word of mouth.

The Dominican hip hop community operates through a number of technologies that have transformed the global cultural marketplace and have brought small, impoverished communities like Cabarete into close contact with these international pop-culture dynamics. Cell phones and the internet, as well as older technologies like television and sound systems, have facilitated and expanded a participatory musical culture that has long been an important facet of Dominican culture. These technologies have been especially important within the genre of hip hop in the Dominican Republic, as young people use these technologies to expand their knowledge of the genre, and to produce their own hip hop cultural products. These products draw heavily on the U.S. influences young Dominicans seek out and absorb readily, and these influences are displayed proudly by Dominican hip hop participants who value the economic and cultural wealth symbolized by the United States for many in the Dominican Republic. And yet these U.S.-based musical and stylistic forms become something entirely new as they are re-produced and redefined by Dominican kids trying out dance moves in the street, by students improvisando with their friends as they walk to school, or by the professional Dominican raperos and dembowceros who build on the genre within a growing Dominican hip hop industry.
2. “Tú escribes lo que vives”24

Classed Connections in Dominican Rap

The technologies that facilitate access to Dominican and U.S. hip hop culture for young locals were only a small part of the story people told me about their experiences with hip hop. For many of these people, questions about how they listened to music or watched music videos seemed simple and obvious, as they were everyday activities for my interview subjects and for most people in their communities. People thought a lot harder and had a lot more to say about issues of content—what exactly were they listening to on their cell phones? Which music videos really caught their attention on YouTube or on AlofokeMusic.net? And, the hardest question, why? While people with whom I spoke had answers that were almost identical for questions about their access to hip hop culture, the conversations we had about the content of Dominican hip hop culture were far more varied. As in any subculture, participants had different preferences, and they experienced and understood hip hop culture in different ways. Amidst these various points of view, however, my conversations clarified the powerful links that exist between my interview subjects based on their marginalized position in Dominican society and on their shared passion for a popular culture that attempts to resist this marginalization.

Origins of Dominican Hip Hop Genres

In the Dominican Republic, hip hop music is commonly referred to as música urbana (urban music), and this category, like “hip hop” in the United States, refers to a

24 “You write what you live.”
number of musical genres and implies an accompanying lifestyle (or lifestyles) associated with urban spaces. From my experiences in the Dominican Republic and from my conversations with my informants, I would divide hip hop music in the Dominican Republic into three genres: rap, reggaeton, and dembow.\textsuperscript{25} Popular rap in the Dominican Republic can be further divided between the songs produced by Dominican artists and those produced by U.S. artists. Likewise, reggaeton can be divided between Puerto Rican and Dominican \textit{reggaetoneros}, although the style is heavily dominated by the former and is very much identified as a Puerto Rican style on both islands (and globally). David explains succinctly that “[de] aquí viene rap dominicano, y el dembow. [De] Puerto Rico viene el reggaeton” (“Dominican rap and dembow are from here. Reggaeton is from Puerto Rico”).\textsuperscript{26} Reggaeton was therefore a grey area during some of my interviews, as various subjects were unsure whether or not it “counted” as something they could talk about. I include it here, despite the fact that my interview subjects did not speak about it extensively, because of its importance to Dominicans in relation to the presence and evolution of hip hop on the island, and because of its importance to dembow. Dembow, which refers to a dance style as well as to the music that accompanies this dance, is the only “purely” Dominican hip hop style. While the dance and musical styles that influence dembow are primarily foreign, \textit{dembow dominicano} is a distinct genre that does not exist

\textsuperscript{25} There are other styles of music that are part of Dominican hip hop culture, for example, more melodic songs by famous Dominican rappers, and various U.S. hip hop/pop (an increasingly blurry distinction) songs like those by Chris Brown, a popular artist among my interview subjects. The latter case, however, can be categorized as hip hop largely based on other signals, like the identification of the artist with certain demographic groups or with other artists, the clothing style of the artist, the dance style associated with the music or with the artist, etc. Those aspects of hip hop culture will be discussed later. I limit the musical categories here because these—especially rap and dembow—are the most prominent in the Dominican music industry and were the most important to my interview subjects.

\textsuperscript{26} Interview, January 3, 2013.
anywhere else (with the exception of Dominican immigrant communities\textsuperscript{27}). More importantly, dembow is perceived by participants as especially Dominican, more so even than Dominican rap, and a certain amount of pride is expressed in these assertions, even when the speaker remains a fan of foreign artists or styles like reggaeton or U.S. rap.

My interview subjects discussed the origins of these three genres, and the “histories” they related to me often linked each musical style to specific artists and songs. These stories were not always “true” in a verifiable sense; details such as chronology were often debated during my interviews and some claims were completely contradicted by my subsequent research. Regardless of the factual accuracy of these narratives, however, they are useful because, in addition to their general, if not specific, correctness, they provide an account of the origins of Dominican hip hop as a visible genre, focusing on the most popular artists and songs that were crucial to the expansion of the genre. In the case of Dominican rap, the artist most strongly associated with the genre in my interviews was Lápiz Conciente, who is still a prolific and extremely popular rapper today.\textsuperscript{28} David, Leo, and Yonil talk about why he is their favorite rapper:

\textbf{David:} Para mí, Lápiz Conciente. Fue que armó todo. Lápiz fue que cantó primero que todo el mundo, él fue que cantó rap primero que todo el mundo.
\textbf{Leo:} Cantó dembow primero—
\textbf{David:} Cantó dembow primero que todo el

\textbf{David:} For me, Lápiz Conciente. He was the one who started [literally, “armed”] everything. Lápiz was the one who sang before anyone else, he was the one who rapped before anyone else.
\textbf{Leo:} He sang dembow first—

\textsuperscript{27}My research does not focus on these communities, but I have never heard about or encountered dembow in the United States except in situations that involved Dominican immigrants in some way. While exceptions may certainly exist, it is clear that dembow has not gained international recognition in any significant way, and I am confident that non-Dominicans who know about the genre have almost certainly learned about it through contact with Dominicans and/or Dominican Americans.

\textsuperscript{28}Often called “El Lápiz,” the full name means “the conscious pencil;” it is one of the few Dominican rapper names that obviously connects to the genre.
mundo, abrió la puerta, y después fue que siguió, como, Black Point, ese tipo Monkey Black, después fue que empezaron todos [...].

Yonil: “El papá.”

David: Es el papá de aquí, de rap. A él no le gusta dembow. Él canta dembow, sí, pero no le gusta dembow, él dice que odia dembow. No hay dembow [se ríe].

Leo: Lápiz Conciente puede hacer cualquier tipo de música. Porque tiene talento y porque él sabe lo que puede hacer, porque puede hacer dembow, y yo he escuchado su dembow. Su dembow... cuando él sacó su dembow fue muy bueno, tuvo mucho éxito. Y puede cantar romántico, puede cantar rap, cualquier tipo de música. Yo pienso que él tiene todo.


The fact that Lápiz Conciente “started everything” is crucial to his popularity for David and his friends. David begins by talking about his favorite rapper, but ends up talking about the trajectory of Dominican rap and its close link to the trajectory of Lápiz Conciente’s career. Lápiz Conciente is still one of the most popular rappers and he came up in almost all of my interviews. For many of my interview subjects, like David, telling his story meant telling the story of Dominican hip hop.

Many of my informants estimated that Dominican rap, and Lápiz Conciente’s career, started in the early 2000s. In fact, the genre began in the mid-1990s, around 1995. Vico C. is an American rapper of Puerto Rican descent. He was born in New York and there became interested in rap, and he began his own career in the 1980s. His early songs combined rap with merengue. He is thought of as a “Puerto Rican hip hop pioneer,” and he is generally characterized more as a rapper than as a reggaeton artist, but he is closely associated with reggaeton and he collaborated with many reggaeton artists as the genre developed (Raquel Z. Rivera, Wayne Marshall, and Deborah Pacini Hernandez, eds., Reggaeton [Durham: Duke University Press, 2009], 5).
the time that U.S. rap was gaining mainstream and international attention and Puerto Rican rap and reggaeton were creating a space for Spanish-language *música urbana* in Puerto Rico, the mainland United States, and the Dominican Republic. El Lápiz and other Dominican rappers such as Toxic Crow, who is also still active, started releasing rap songs in collaborations that were organized by new Dominican production companies which aimed to promote these young artists and the Dominican brand of the rap genre. While El Lápiz was not, therefore, the first Dominican rapper, he was *one* of the first, and he is arguably the most popular of those pioneers today.

Based on the conversations I had with my interview subjects about El Lápiz, and on my own knowledge of his lyrics and videos, I would argue that he has become known as *el papá* of Dominican rap not only because of the specific details of his rap career or of the genre’s history, but because he has managed to express many themes and narratives crucial to the rap genre and to the lives of his listeners in the *barrios* of the Dominican Republic.

Some of my interview subjects, like Leo, claimed that Lápiz Conciente was also the artist who started the genre of dembow. Others argued that Los Pepes, the nickname of the duo Doble T & El Crok, in fact started the genre, and Los Pepes are more commonly thought of as the artists who launched dembow into the Dominican urban music limelight and initiated the huge popularity the genre currently enjoys. In fact, neither El Lápiz nor Los Pepes was the first to produce dembow, but they all did release dembow tracks as the genre was beginning to gain recognition as a new, unique style and they were therefore important to its development. Although dembow has certainly made its mark in the Dominican record industry and is not an
“underground” genre by any means—many of my interview subjects expressed the sentiment that “everyone listens to dembow now”—neither has it fully emerged from the communities where it has its roots. My impression, supported by my interview subjects (for whom “everyone” generally referred to the urban poor), is that even within the Dominican Republic, dembow remains a genre that is more popular among the lower classes and in urban *barrio* settings. While my and my interview subjects’ perspectives may be limited, given their class position and my own position living in a lower class space, this perception is nonetheless based on reality, even if there are, as always, exceptions. In my experience, the spaces that were dominated by dembow music and dancing were occupied by young Dominicans from the *barrios* who identified with a lower class urban aesthetic, a style wealthier Dominicans (unlike many middle- and upper-class people in the United States) do not tend to choose. 30 This was true even in the case of the Malecón, which is a central feature of Santo Domingo and which is therefore only temporarily a dembow space: during the weekly nighttime street parties, the space, which would otherwise be empty at night, is taken over by youth from the *barrios*.

30 Many of the wealthy Dominicans I knew identified with a more elite, “Latin” aesthetic that is influenced by European styles and that is common across Latin America. Others, especially those who were younger and went to international schools, had lived abroad, or had parents who were not Dominican, identified with North American/European youth culture trends like surfer/skater styles, punk or “hipster” styles, or mainstream styles found in the United States and dominated by U.S. and international designer brands. While a number of these young people who identified with styles that were “less Dominican” were very involved in U.S. rap and hip hop, the aesthetic was markedly different from that of the lower class Dominicans involved in Dominican hip hop. The most obvious differences were that the young wealthy Dominicans or expats I met listened to rap in English and rapped in English themselves, and did not participate in the clothing styles valued by the lower class Dominicans I met. These wealthier young people can better be compared to middle-class white Americans who participate in U.S. hip hop culture, which is not meant to devalue their participation, but is meant to distinguish it from the Dominican hip hop culture I experienced and talked about with people in the *barrios*. 
Because dembow has neither gained international recognition nor been appropriated by Dominican elites, finding an accurate history of the genre is difficult; there are no reliable official or academic sources that discuss it. Thus I relied on more “popular” sources, like blogs, social networking sites run by artists or record companies, and websites like Musica.com. The popular internet sources I looked at were usually written by Dominican (or sometimes Puerto Rican or Dominican American) hip hop participants who, unlike my interview subjects, had more access to resources and were invested in knowing about these urban genres and artists. These sites provided information that was usually more complete and more consistent than the information I got from my interviews. Yet, while the contributors on these websites are probably not quite as poor or as uneducated as the people with whom I spoke, they are by no means academics or “experts.” The lack of “official” information about the genre of dembow says a lot about its classed, subcultural status. Based on these sites, however, and on comments my interview subjects made, I was able to piece together certain elements of the origin of the musical genre of dembow.31

One thing that all of the internet sources I found agreed upon is that the name “dembow” refers to the *pista* (beat32) that is the foundation of the musical style and

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31 As distinct from the dance genre. While dembow dancing is always done to dembow music, and therefore the movement and the music are both equally “dembow” and are inextricable from each other, the origins and influences of the dance style don’t have anything to do with the origins or influences present in the music. Here I will outline some of the basic musical origins of the genre; a more in-depth analysis of the genre, with a stronger focus on the dance and social aspects of the style, is the subject of Chapter 4.

32 “Beat,” as used in hip hop, refers to the entire instrumental track of a hip hop song. Producers make these tracks for rappers or other hip hop artists to vocalize over, and usually a single producer will make beats for various rappers. In dembow, the same *pistas* are used in various songs with little variation, a trend which is common with Jamaican dancehall “riddims” (the Jamaican term for “beat”) as well.
makes the genre so distinctive and recognizable. This pista has its origins in Jamaican dancehall, the same musical culture that heavily influenced U.S. rap and Puerto Rican reggaeton. The dembow pista can be traced to a specific riddim from a song called “Dem Bow,” which was produced by Bobby “Digital” Dixon and released in 1990 by Shabba Ranks, who performed the vocals on the track. Wayne Marshall’s 2010 article from the online magazine Norient (“Network for Local and Global Sounds and Media Culture”) on the origins of Puerto Rican reggaeton (a genre far more established in the world of music criticism and academic ethnomusicology) traces the use of this pista:

In Puerto Rico, where rappers such as Vico C had pioneered Spanish-language hip-hop, these Jamaican-inflected “translations” of popular dancehall songs had wide appeal. Dancehall reggae had already established a strong following in Puerto Rico in its own right by the early '90s, as popular songs by Jamaican deejays such as Shabba Ranks, Cutty Ranks, and Chaka Demus & Pliers helped to redefine the sound of contemporary club music. It was, in fact, a Shabba Ranks song, “Dem Bow,” produced by Bobby Digital, which would lay the foundation for what became known as reggaeton. The underlying instrumental — i.e., riddim — for “Dem Bow,” a minimalist production with catchy percussion, became an overwhelming favorite in Puerto Rican freestyle sessions, to the point where, for a time, Spanish-language reggae in Puerto Rico was simply called Dembow. Vocalists drew on a variety of styles, borrowing from dancehall, hip-hop, and various Latin musical traditions and creating a distinctive synthesis.

This passage effectively describes the transformation of Jamaican riddims into the pistas that continue to form the backbone of Puerto Rican reggaeton. Subsequent manipulations of these pistas form the foundation of Dominican dembow songs, and while the Jamaican and Puerto Rican influences are recognizable, distinct

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arrangements of this beat have given rise to *dembow dominicano* as a new hip hop genre.

One blog called “Dembow” provides a thorough description of the genre and of its history, incorporating some of the same facts described in the “Rise of Reggaeton” article, but focusing on Dominican dembow’s simultaneous development. This description featured elements of many of the different popular sources I found that discussed dembow, but was considerably more in depth:

Dominican dembow is the rhythm that is currently playing in the DR, and it’s nothing more than a variation of urban music that’s become very popular because it has a very catchy, danceable rhythm. And although this type of music has recently had an incredible boom, its origins are as remote as Jamaican reggae, with influences of raggamuffin [an electronic version of reggae] and dancehall. But it was in the 1990s that dembow fever was loosed in Puerto Rico [with the mixtapes] “The Noise” and “Playero,” that [featured] reggae beats played with rap instrumentals. And while the Puerto Ricans were blowing up [i.e. popularizing] their reggaeton, in the Dominican Republic they had just started working in this genre of music with artists like: Manuelito, MC Pay, MC Vi, and MC Curdy (better known as Pitufo), who in ’95 recorded the dembow song “El poco tiempo” [“The Short Time”] under the name Grupo Unido [“United Group”] [...].

Dembow lyrics are characterized by their reliance on rhyme in order to make sure the song is catchy and easy to identify. This rhyme style is also inspired by raggamuffin and Jamaican dancehall, although primarily by rap.35

These musical origins (as well as the dance origins discussed later) place dembow firmly within the realm of hip hop, as *dembow dominicano* shares the same musical influences and “translations” that form the foundation of both U.S. rap and Puerto Rican reggaeton. The song “El Poco Tiempo” further solidifies these connections, and its release date in 1995 indicates that the genre was in fact getting started at the same time as reggaeton, and as Puerto Rican and Dominican rap. However, the genre of dembow did not immediately achieve the same level of popularity as reggaeton,

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which remained the primary hip hop dance style in the Dominican Republic until Los Pepes and other artists started releasing dembow tracks more than a decade later. None of my interview subjects, who were very young (if alive at all) when “El Poco Tiempo” was released, mentioned that song when they talked about the start of the dembow genre. If they heard the track, they would probably recognize it from a more recent remake of the song done by the Dominican hip hop artist Vakero. Thus, while dembow dominicano had its beginnings at the start of Spanish-language hip hop, the hugely popular genre as it exists today and as it exists for my interview subjects is in many ways a much younger style that has undergone its most significant developments more recently than reggaeton and rap.

Given their different origins, these three música urbana genres fulfill different “purposes” within Dominican hip hop culture and they were therefore understood differently by my interview subjects. Some of my subjects preferred rap, some dembow, and while a number of my interview subjects really liked specific reggaeton artists, none spoke about that genre with the same passion. People usually spoke about reggaeton as a genre that had always been part of hip hop culture in the Dominican Republic, but that is now losing out (along with rap) to the dembow craze. For my informants, the main purpose of reggaeton was to be bailable (“danceable”), a quality that is central to the genre of dembow and has allowed dembow to replace reggaeton as the most popular hip hop dance genre. Rap, on the other hand, which is not meant to be danced to, is more important for its content; it’s good for saying something. David explains: “No se baila el rap y el dembow se baila. Eso es la diferencia [...]. El rap no se baila, el rap dominicano se escucha” (“You don’t dance
to rap and you dance to dembow. That’s the difference [...]. You don’t dance to rap, you listen to Dominican rap”). People generally agreed with this distinction, although they had different opinions about which genre they preferred.

Among my interview subjects were a number of young men who wrote and performed and, more rarely, recorded their own rap or dembow songs. On the last morning of my research trip to Cabarete, I was woken up suddenly when Yonil burst through the door to tell me that, at last, he had found Miguel. Miguel, aside from being one of Yonil’s friends in the Barrio, is also one of the most serious amateur cantantes (rappers\(^37\)) whom I was able to interview. He has recorded three songs with other local amateur rappers and DJs. He gave an extensive explanation of how he saw the difference between rap and dembow, and despite his obvious preference for rap, his comments align with what most of my interview subjects expressed:

\[\text{Mira, hay una diferencia. La música de rap mayormente, como la que Lápiz hace, entiendes, ya... muchas personas la cogen. Pero no es igual, no llama igual. Porque el dembow mayormente ahora mismo es que más llama la atención. Casi todo el mundo escucha el dembow. Pero para mi el rap es un poco mejor porque tiene un poco más de sentido, porque el dembow solamente trata de dos palabras y ya tú haces un dembow. Pero para hacer un rap tienes que escribir mucho, tienes que pensar bien lo quecribes, lo que dices, por eso me gusta más el rap. Pero el dembow ahora mismo llama más la atención a las personas [...]}. \]

Look, there’s a difference. Rap music mostly, like the music Lápiz makes, you know... a lot of people take it [i.e. listen to it, download it, etc.]. But it’s not the same, it doesn’t attract people the same way. Because right now dembow is mostly what attracts attention. Almost everyone listens to dembow. But for me rap is a little better because it has a little more meaning, because dembow is just two words and you’ve already got a dembow song. But to make a rap you have to write a lot, you have to think hard about what you write, what you say. That’s why I like rap more. But right now dembow attracts people’s attention more [...]}. Because lately people aren’t interested anymore in listening to what [songs] say, what you write, what you say. Mostly people like the craziness that’s [...] in dembow, that the music is danceable. Now

\[^36\] Interview, January 3, 2013.  
\[^37\] Literally “singer” but people used the word to refer to any vocal artist, including rappers and dembow artists. People also used the more specific words rapero and dembowcero, as well as the general term artista.

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Las personas mayormente ya quieren escuchar música por—que sea un ritmo bailable. People mostly listen to music because—if it has a danceable rhythm.38

Many of my interview subjects agreed with this distinction between rap and dembow; they also agreed that dembow has become the most popular genre of Dominican hip hop music. And yet all of my interview subjects, including those who said they preferred dembow, spoke extensively about the lyrics and messages that they liked and “felt” in rap music and about their favorite rappers. This is perhaps not surprising, as rap and dembow, far from being mutually exclusive tastes, in fact complement each other in a lot of ways and emerged out of the same vocal and instrumental traditions. The fact that so many people continue to connect deeply to rap shows how the genre has maintained its importance for young Dominicans in the barrios, even if it may not be the style filling DJ’s playlists or blasting from sound systems in the streets at night.39 In other words, despite Miguel’s lament that “people aren’t interested anymore,” many young Dominicans are still listening very closely.

**Hearing Truth in Dominican Rap**

When my interview subjects spoke about rap, they tended to focus on two things: *el flow*, a direct usage of the English word “flow,” which, in the context of hip hop, can be defined as “a rapper’s ability to vocalize a rhythmic yet complex string [of]

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38 Interview, January 17, 2013.
39 It should be pointed out that the place Dominican rap has maintained is not the place of a genre that, while no longer being produced, continues to be listened to. Dominican rap is still a significant part of the Dominican music industry, and popular rappers continue to release new songs, albums, and videos. Although one of my interview subjects suggested that, “there are still [rap] artists, but people don’t like them,” I would question that assessment considering the fact that all of my interview subjects, including the one who made that statement, spoke about numerous active Dominican rappers and recently-released Dominican rap songs.
rhymes that fit together in a logical and seamless manner, and the actual content of these rhymes. Flow, beyond the actual ability to rhyme, also suggests something about the attitude of the rapper, his or her confidence in rhyming, and the “swagger” s/he exudes. Bryan, another kid from the Barrio whom I interviewed with his friend Wilson (with Yonil chiming in occasionally), talks about why he likes Lápiz Conciente, one of his favorite rappers:

Porque él dice muchas cosas que son verídicas, buenas, en el rap. Como una cosa verídica es cuando es obvia, verdadera. Cuando él canta el rap él dice que "Yo soy papá," que mucha gente lo trataba mal y ahora que tiene dinero lo trata diferente. Por eso a mí—sabes, yo la escucho esa canción y me gusta porque él dice las cosas verídicas. Sabes, me gusta como él canta, el flow de él, es muy bueno, que dice "Yo soy papá," pero lo dice con orgullo.

Bryan’s comments capture the equal importance of what the rapper is saying and how he (or she) says it. The lyric itself is quite basic. But it stands out in Bryan’s mind because of how El Lápiz delivers the line, with a proud tone of voice that Bryan imitates as he repeats the lyric to me. In this case, the tone—the flow—is what makes the line important, and those three words end up capturing, for Bryan, the more complex lyrics and messages Lápiz puts in his songs, for example about the different treatment he has faced because of his changed socioeconomic position.

Flow became especially crucial when my interview subjects talked about U.S. rappers they liked. One of the most popular U.S. rappers among all of my interview subjects was 50 Cent. This is interesting because 50 Cent, while still active today, is

41 Interview, January 9, 2013.
no longer at the forefront of rap music in the United States. His most popular albums, *Get Rich or Die Tryin’* and *The Massacre*, were released in 2003 and 2005, respectively. I was a big fan of 50 Cent at the time, and purchased both albums, but his subsequent albums were not as popular among anyone I knew and did not receive much play on the radio, as other artists were emerging and the hardcore, violent themes 50 Cent focused on became less popular. Both 50 Cent’s timing and his *duro* (hard) persona probably contribute to his popularity among young Dominicans, as does the more concrete fact that, during his most successful years, he was one of the most famous and recognizable U.S. rappers and released a number of incredibly popular and catchy hits that reached an international audience. None of my interview subjects, except for Antony, could understand most of 50 Cent’s lyrics. Therefore, flow became the most important factor. Wilson talks about how he can tell that 50 Cent is a good rapper:

No, yo no entiendo la letra, pero la letra llega. Buenas rimas, su rima a tiempo. Sin yo entender lo que él dice, yo noto que él es bueno solamente con su voz y su ritmo.

No, I don’t understand the lyrics, but I get the lyrics [literally, “the lyrics arrive”]. Good rhymes, his rhymes are in time. Without understanding what he’s saying, I can tell he’s good just from his voice and his rhythm.\(^\text{42}\)

While the increased importance of flow in these situations is obvious, as there is simply no other criteria to judge without understanding the lyrics, the fact that flow can achieve this importance is significant. Despite the fact that rap’s primary purpose is to say something, the content of English-language rap was not entirely lost on my monolingual Spanish-speaking informants because a rapper’s flow can be strong enough to convey at least some of what they are trying to express. The fact that my

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\(^{42}\) Interview, January 9, 2013.
interview subjects could talk passionately about why they liked U.S. rappers they couldn’t understand in any literal sense highlights the importance of flow not only to rap performances, but to the entire presence of the genre in the Dominican Republic. The lyrical content of rap is certainly crucial, and is what makes the genre so significant in hip hop culture and among marginalized communities. But flow has contributed significantly to the popularity of the genre around the world, as it is not specific to any language. Dominican rappers, therefore, can channel the same flow even as they rap in their own language about their own experiences, to their own audience.

One of the most important aspects of rap content, as Bryan’s assessment of Lápiz Conciente suggests, is that it is true. This conception of truth is based on the classed position of my interview subjects, and of the rappers they listen to. Many of my interview subjects spoke about the things rappers said that resonated with them because they were “true,” or because they “happen to everyone.” A number of these issues, like Bryan’s example of the changing attitudes El Lápiz has dealt with since becoming famous, are not issues my interview subjects have personally experienced. The “truth” these raps exude may therefore also be linked to the flow with which they are delivered: these lyrics are expressed convincingly enough to be understood as truthful. But a lot of this understanding of truth is also rooted in the socio-economic situation of my interview subjects, which is similar to the situation in which most rappers started out and which is a prominent subject in Dominican rap as it is in the United States.
In Cabarete class was by far the most important factor that my interview subjects identified with Dominican rap music. The people I spoke to all live in very poor neighborhoods. There is some variation between them in how much money they or their families have, but regardless of these small differences, all of my interview subjects identified strongly with their barrios and with a more general barrio lifestyle. This lifestyle is comparable to the ghetto lifestyle so important in U.S. rap music. The importance of Dominican rap to my interview subjects lies in their ability to identify completely with Dominican rap artists, and to claim these artists and the genre as something that belongs to them, to the people in the barrios and in the calles (streets). While these ideas were discussed in all of my interviews, three conversations provided especially important insight into the important theme of class narratives in Dominican rap. The three passages that follow express similar ideas, but there are important differences that can be analyzed to form a more complete understanding of how class operates in the daily lives of my interview subjects and in the genre of Dominican rap. The first conversation comes from the interview I did with Miguel. This interview took place in the room I was staying in in the house next to Yonil’s family’s home, and at some point Yonil wandered in, followed a while later by his sister-in-law, Daniela, and her one-year-old daughter. I was asking Miguel about the relationship between class and rap, and Yonil and Daniela both ended up contributing:

**Miguel:** Sobre rap y las relaciones sociales, sí tienen mucha influencia, porque….

**Yonil:** La relación que tiene es que de la [clase] social, como tú dices—es que, [de allí] sale el rap, porque el rap se hace, es basado en cosas que pasan [...]. Entonces si en la sociedad—ejemplo, aquí pasa algo, Miguel: Rap and social relations, yeah they have a lot of influence, because….

**Yonil:** The relationship they have is that social [class], like you say—rap comes [from class], because rap is made, is based on things that happen. So if in society—for example, something happens here, like Lápiz
Como dice Lápiz Conciente, la basura, y hospitales, y cosas así, ya de allí se hace un rap, y eso es el tipo de relación que tiene [con la clase].

Miguel: Sí, algo así.

Yonil: [El rap] se relaciona con las cosas que pasan.

Hannah: ¿Qué pasan a quién?

Yonil: A las personas, y comunidades, pueblos, ciudades....

Daniela: Mayormente les pasan a las mujeres.

Yonil: A las mujeres también.

Daniela: A las familias pobres mayormente. [...]

Si, a la gente pobre.

Conci ente says, the garbage, and hospitals, and things like that, that’s where rap comes from, and that’s the type of relationship it has [with class].

Miguel: Yeah, something like that.

Yonil: [Rap] relates to things that happen.

Hannah: That happen to whom?

Yonil: To people, and communities, towns, cities....

Daniela: Mostly they happen to women.

Yonil: To women, too.

Daniela: To poor families mostly. [...] Yeah, to poor people.43

This conversation connects to the idea Bryan mentioned, that the events and messages expressed in rap are “obvious.” Miguel does understand that there is a relationship of some kind between social class and rap music, but he pauses for a moment as he tries to find the right words to express this connection. Yonil picks up the slack and explains a little more, but he doesn’t specifically describe a connection between rap and the lower class. To him, that connection doesn’t need to be made explicit because he has always been part of the lower class and he is accustomed to this lifestyle. The problems that come with it—the garbage that covers the streets, the overcrowded public hospitals—are simply “things that happen,” rather than “things that happen to the poor” or “things that happen in the barrios.” It isn’t that Yonil isn’t aware of these problems, or of the fact that these problems disproportionately afflict his community and other barrios. But Yonil does not have the same distance Lápiz Conciente and other rappers have gained by leaving these barrios and their lower class status, and it is this distance which not only allows these rappers to see these issues in a different way, but also provides them with a voice with which to

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43 Interview, January 17, 2013.
express their critique. Yonil and almost everyone he knows are part of the
disadvantaged segment that suffers most from these societal problems, and when
Yonil hears Lápiz Conciente rapping about these issues, he hears a Dominican man
who has (or had) a lot in common with Yonil himself, speaking about things Yonil
experiences every day.

Daniela, who was not initially part of the interview, picks up on my question
about who suffers from these social problems. Daniela, in the interview I conducted
with her alone, was quite vocal about issues Dominican women face; here she first
points out that many of these problems affect women and “poor families.” These
comments are closely linked to her own position as a very young woman with a lot of
responsibilities in an extremely poor family, with Yonil’s younger brother and their
two daughters. But Daniela expands her comment to include all “poor people.”
Daniela’s father, who, as far as I know, is no longer involved in Daniela’s life, is a
doctor who lives in a larger nearby city, and Daniela herself graduated from high
school, which means she is more highly educated than a lot of the people in Yonil’s
family and in Barrio Blanco in general. I do not believe it is a coincidence that
Daniela, a young woman with connections to a middle-class Dominican lifestyle, was
the person to point out that these “things that happen” do not, in fact, happen to
everybody.

My conversation with Antony, Endi, and Yefri also dealt with class divisions,
and with the ways rap narratives appeal—or don’t appeal—to people of different
classes. Their comments were similar in many ways to Yonil’s and Daniela’s
comments, but they were quicker to point to the fundamental differences they saw
between the upper and lower classes, between “them” and “us.” They begin the conversation by answering my questions about what rappers write about:

**Endi:** De lo que pasa, lo que viven al diario, trabajos que pasan, cómo hacen para llegar dónde están.

**Yefri:** Ellos algunas veces dicen la verdad, como hay una canción también que dice, dique, cuando [el rapper] estaba chiquito, dique, el Poeta Callejero y—¿quién era el otro?—y otro cantante allí, que ellos dicen todo que pasaron cuando chiquitos, y también es de verdad porque los muchachos también hacen eso, todo lo que dicen.

**Antony:** Ellos dicen muchas cosas que uno ha vivido también.

**Endi:** Ellos dicen cosas que en realidad a uno le pasa, o le está pasando, y por eso es que las canciones de realidad le gustan a uno. [...] Entonces cuando te pasa o ya te ha pasado, la canción más te gusta.

**Hannah:** Entonces tú piensas que, para la gente a que quizás no le hayan pasado esas cosas, como para mí por ejemplo, o para otra gente en este país también que no vive en los barrios por ejemplo, ¿tú piensas que están escuchando la misma música?

**Antony:** Quizás no entienden la canción.

**Endi:** No, no le gusta la canción.

**Antony:** Yo te enseño la música que les gusta a los riquitos. Yo tengo todo aquí, chequea, para los riquitos, dique una música así, escuchan música romántica, mayormente. [Pone dos canciones en su teléfono: una romántica, y una bachata.] Nosotros, nosotros escuchamos esto, [pone una canción de dembow] porque ésta es vacana.

The boys, like my other interview subjects, like rap songs more when they have personally experienced the issues narrated in the song. Yefri, who is only sixteen

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44 A Dominican rapper, the name means “Street Poet.”
45 *Vacano/a* is one of the most common Dominican slang words. It means “cool” and in my experience was always used in a hip hop context. For example, Antony does not and would not use the word “vacano” to describe the romantic or bachata songs he played for me.

Interview, January 8, 2013.
years old and was my youngest interview subject, describes a song about a rapper’s childhood. This connection is twofold. On the one hand, it was generally during childhood that rappers, who have “made it” as adults, were living in the barrios and dealing with the same things that their listeners continue to experience. On a more basic level, Yefri is connecting with lyrics that are about people who are close to his own age. He chooses this song out of all of the songs he knows because it is about the experiences of two rappers when they were chiquito (little, younger). The daily life they describe in this song resonates with the daily life Yefri experiences as a teenager growing up in a barrio in the Dominican Republic.

This conversation shifts as Antony and Endi consider the differences that exist between the upper and lower classes in the Dominican Republic. Antony and Endi inform me with certainty that rich people don’t understand or like rap songs. While Daniela, during Miguel’s interview, talks about why rap lyrics resonate with poorer populations, Antony and Endi speak in more negative terms: rich people are not a part of Dominican hip hop culture because they can’t understand what this culture tries to express. The fact that the issues rappers talk about are only understood by people in the barrios becomes a matter of pride for Antony and Endi; this music belongs to them, and members of the higher classes—to whom much of Dominican mainstream culture “belongs”—are explicitly excluded from such ownership. This shift from political complaint to proud claim may have to do with the fact that, while the issues Yonil, Miguel, and Daniela discuss as being part of rap content are serious hardships for the lower classes, Antony, Yefri, and Endi talk about rap songs that deal with life in the barrio in more general, and more benign, terms. The “things that happen” that
Endi refers to at the start of the conversation are not necessarily bad things, and they are therefore easier to speak about with pride. But this type of pride also illuminates one of the most important aspects of rap music as a global genre, which is its ability to provide marginalized young people with a cultural form that speaks to them and about them, and which they can claim as their own. Antony’s somewhat mocking demonstration of the different types of music listened to by “los riquitos” (literally, “the little rich people”), rather than by “nosotros” (“us,” i.e. poor Dominicans), is a performance of this pride. He others the upper classes by excluding them from the important musical phenomenon of Dominican hip hop, which in this case he represents with a popular dembow song. He tells me, over the hyperactive dembow beat that crackles out of his phone speakers, “We listen to this, because this is cool.” This comment suggests that the societal problems that afflict the barrios and the lower classes in the Dominican Republic can become less burdensome because they also build the space in which this genre of music—this coolness—can develop.

The conversation I had with Bryan and Wilson also contributed to my understanding of how class narratives operate between rappers and listeners in Dominican rap. Wilson is another relatively successful cantante from Barrio Blanco, who has, like Miguel, recorded some songs with groups of people. Bryan has written some songs, and likes improvisando (freestyling) in the street with other Barrio jovenes. Bryan and Wilson both tell me they like dembow the most right now, and really want to be making dembow songs. Thus their comments provided a good example of how rap maintains its importance even as dembow gains popularity.
Yonil, who was again hanging out during the interview, and Wilson delve into a different side of rap’s class narratives:

**Yonil:** Lo que pasa con el rap es que tú escribes lo que vives. Cualquier rapero pasa mucho [tiempo] en la calle y, como, peleas, vendederas, y mujeres, romo, y como todo lo que pasa por años, ellos lo escriben… cómo se buscan su dinero [es decir, ilegalmente]. Entonces cuando buscan el dinero así, como hacen música, lo dicen en una canción. Trata sobre sus historias. Viene de la calle, sí.

**Wilson:** Prácticamente, el rap es pa’ gente de la calle, pa’ gente del barrio. Gente de clase alta no escucha rap, aquí no. Sólo el tíguere escucha rap. [...] A veces [las personas de la clase alta] escuchan rap, pero no siempre. Sólo el tíguere escucha rap, rap de la calle.

Again, Yonil and Wilson talk about how rappers write about things that happen every day, and about “what you live.” In this case, the “you” is clearly poor, living in the *barrio* and spending his—for this is certainly a masculine “you”—time in the street.

But these “things that happen” are very different from the more political issues that came up in the conversation I had with Miguel. In that interview, the messages my subjects related to in rap songs were societal problems that affected them because

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46 Tíguere is a term that would translate to the U.S. hip hop slang term “hustler,” defined by Urban Dictionary as “a person who works […] to make fast money however they can. A hustler’s work is usually dishonest and/or illegal” (“Hustler,” urbandictionary.com, http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=hustler). Wilson himself defines the term for me as, “la gente que busca su dinero en la calle, la gente que no trabaja [legalmente]” (“people who look for their money in the street, people who don’t work [legally]”). Like “hustler,” tíguere can be used positively or negatively without significantly changing the definition, depending on the point of view of the person who uses the word, and whether he includes himself in the category (the rarer feminine form is tíguera). There is some academic scholarship on the tíguere: Chris Girman, in his study of Latin American male homoeroticism and homosexuality, claims (following Dominican anthropological works) that el tíguere has become the current “hegemonic masculinity” in Dominican culture through processes of urbanization and economic inequality. He quotes the definition of Dominican sociologist Lipe Collado: “An individual whose primary features, principal law, is to emerge well from each situation, by whatever methods.” (Girman, Mucho Macho, 145.) Interview, January 9, 2013.
they belong to the large class of impoverished people in the Dominican Republic.

The issues Yonil and Wilson talk about here are very different. Poverty and the accompanying crime, especially revolving around drugs, are not less political or widespread than are the issues of pollution and failing hospitals. But the latter issues are seen as political problems that are caused by the government—by “them”—while the drug trade (although influenced by larger political forces as well) is seen as a local issue that local people—“we”—participate in. Young Dominican men standing in the street, selling drugs, hitting on women, and drinking rum, are part of everyday life in Barrio Blanco, a neighborhood that is known by many, from Cabarete expats to the national police, for its drug trade. Drugs and violence are extremely real for residents of many Dominican barrios, and these issues are therefore more complex for these poor Dominicans. People in Barrio Blanco can’t help but see the tígueres and the drug trade “up close,” because they all know people who participate in it, and many have participated in it themselves. Bryan, for example, is a close relative of the capo, the head of the Barrio Blanco drug operation, and while I do not know what Bryan’s personal involvement is, he is clearly very close to the issue and it is likely that he and his family benefit from the money the Barrio Blanco drug trade produces.

Despite the more complex understanding that arises because of Barrio residents’ proximity to the issues of the drug trade and other poverty-induced criminal activities, my interview subjects did not generally condone drug trafficking or tigueraje (dishonest activities associated with tígueres; “hustling”). Both Yonil and Wilson, like many of my interview subjects, talk about drugs and other criminal activities as issues that are simply part of their everyday lives rather than as lifestyles
to which they aspire. This attitude usually extended to perceptions of Dominican rap, a genre which often intersects with tigueraje in very real ways. One of my interview subjects explained (based largely on themes he heard in rap) that many successful rappers started out very poor and had to perform less glorious, and less legal, jobs in order to make the money and the connections that would propel them into the rap world.47 Again, these crimes are treated as a harsh aspect of reality, rather than as an ideal way to live.

Many of my interview subjects saw Dominican rap as a genre that spoke about drugs and violence in order to deter people in the barrios from following those paths. One of my informants, Emilio, explains that,

Hay unas músicas que tienen, tú sabes, como, palabras de vagabundería, algunas, sí. Pero algunas músicas tienen mucho sentido, y llaman mucho la atención a uno por los mensajes que escriben y cantan.  

There are songs that have, you know, like, words about vagabunderia48, some, yeah. But some songs make a lot of sense, and attract a lot of attention because of the messages [the rappers] write and sing.

This idea that rap songs have a valuable message is echoed in the comments made by the teenaged boys I spoke to at La Cancha:

Carlos: Para cada música su tema, un ejemplo, hasta las drogas, la calle, la casa, cosas así. Un ejemplo, hay artistas que cantan música de amor, unos que cantan música de calle, o de drogas.

Yarlin: Hay cantantes que usan canciones de drogas, eso pa’ que se aleje de eso, sabes. Como mensajes.

Luis: Expresan lo que le ha pasado ya y cuál es camino malo y cuál es bueno.

Carlos: Every song has its theme, for example, even drugs, the street, the home, things like that. For example, there are artists that sing love songs, some that sing songs about the street, or about drugs.  

Yarlin: There are rappers that use songs about drugs, that’s so that people distance themselves from that, you know. Like messages.

Luis: They express what’s happened to them already and which is the bad path and which is the good one.49

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48 Literally would translate to “vagabondism,” from vagabundo, “vagabond;” a more “correct” word would be vagancia (vagrancy).
49 Interview, January 8, 2013.
These boys, who were some of the youngest people I interviewed, talk about a message that resonates with them because of their personal closeness to the decision between the “bad path” and the “good path.” At another point in this interview, some of them mentioned friends who no longer come to La Cancha to play basketball because they chose the “bad path” and now spend their time in the calle. All of my interview subjects appreciated the prevalence of these types of messages in Dominican rap, and consistently highlighted this use of the genre over the vagabundería that is also pervasive.

**Speaking Truth in Dominican Rap**

The importance of the “true” or “lived” content found in Dominican rap became even more explicit in my conversations with young people who rapped themselves, whether they had recorded songs like Miguel and Wilson, just wrote songs to record “someday,” or preferred improvisando, like Bryan. While the rap themes many of my interview subjects mentioned when they spoke about professional raps were often more political or serious, the themes they rapped about themselves were sometimes serious, sometimes funny or insulting, or sometimes fairly meaningless. Miguel describes some of the rap songs he and a friend of his have made as the duo La Realidad (Reality):

**Miguel:** El segundo rap que nosotros sacamos, que lo grabamos, nos inspiramos sobre la policía, sobre la corrupción que ellos tienen. Sobre eso hablamos. Porque una noche venía uno de allá, donde David [vive], en la plaza. […] Y la policía entró, y nos agarra y nos para. Me pregunta por la cédula, yo la paso la cédula y él dice, “Ah, no, que comoquiera Uds. van preso porque…

**Miguel:** The second rap we released, that we recorded, we were inspired by the police, by their corruption. That’s what we talked about. Because one night a policeman came from over there, where David [lives], in the plaza. […] And the policeman came in, and he grabs us and stops us. He asks me for my ID, I give him my ID and he says, “Ah, no, you guys are going to jail anyway because…
Uds. viven en Barrio Blanco.” Entonces allá estamos preso y mi amigo comienza, “‘Ta bueno sacar una canción a ellos.” Y comenzamos con la idea y de allí sacamos la canción. Y a las personas les gustó cómo la sacamos. […] Tenemos otras canciones también que… a mi amigo se le fue la esposa [se ríe], […] y comenzamos con esa idea y hicimos una, pero no la grabamos, la tenemos sólo escrita. Fue así: que se le fue la esposa y comencé yo el relajo con él, y de allí sacamos la canción […].

Hannah: ¿Hay otras canciones?

Miguel’s experiences as a rapper include a variety of creative processes that lead to a variety of themes. The songs he is able to speak about in most detail are those that are based on actual events that he has lived through. The first song he describes, one which they managed to record and which “people liked,” deals with a specific encounter Miguel had with the police. It is unsurprising that this is one of his more popular songs. It is based on something that he is able to recount to me in considerable detail, and this kind of personal connection to the content of the rap is important for the quality of the lyrics and the flow with which those lyrics are delivered. The story he tells is also one that many people in Barrio Blanco know well. His story may have specific details that make it especially believable, but the
real reason people will listen to his rap and hear it as “truth” is because they are familiar with police corruption, and—especially for young male listeners—they have likely experienced some form of it themselves. The song about his friend’s wife leaving him contains a similar mix of personal detail and general truth, which are crucial qualities in a genre that is about expressing oneself, on the one hand, and about speaking for an entire, often voiceless, group, on the other. The former song, considering its emphasis on political issues tinged with violence that are specific to the barrio and the calle, probably fits better within the “traditional” array of rap themes. But Dominican rap often features romantic narratives, especially when tinged with loss or betrayal, as Miguel’s song is.

Miguel’s other songs are supposedly “not based on anything,” although a more accurate assessment would be that, instead of being based on specific personal experiences, they are based on more general common themes, like sex. This is not meant to suggest that these rhymes are simply copies of rap songs that already exist. Personal experience, and personal flow, inevitably shape even those raps that are not as specific to the rapper’s own life. In the same way that my informants connected to a variety of “true” narratives that professional artists rapped about, whether or not they had lived them personally, the amateur rappers I spoke with could express themes beyond events that had affected them directly.

While Miguel’s descriptions of his own music cover a range of themes, he never mentions writing raps that fall under the important category of tiraera. Una tiraera (sometimes spelled tiradera) is a rap that is aimed at a rival rapper—the word comes from the verb tirar, “to throw”—and it is essentially an elaborate insult. The
word can also refer to an ongoing series of raps between rivals. David and Leo give examples:

**David:** “*Tiraera*” significa “Yo soy mejor que tú, yo escribo más que tú, tengo más dinero que tú.” **Leo:** “*Tengo carro, tengo chicas, tengo prendas, tengo esto, tú no tienes nada.*”

David: “*Tiraera*” means “I’m better than you, I write more than you, I have more money than you.”

Leo: “I have a car, I have girls, I have bling, I have this, you don’t have anything.”

Bryan, who says he writes some raps and dembow songs but for now mostly freestyles, gave a good example of a *tiraera* during the interview I did with him and Wilson. Yonil was also present. This *tiraera* is far less elaborate than those produced by famous rappers, and isn’t meant to represent the entire style, especially because it is *improvisado* (freestyled). These freestyles usually happen in groups of kids in public places like basketball courts, schools, or the street. They are often full of *tiraeras* because freestyles tend to turn into informal competitions between a few kids, as their peers—the audience—provide reactions that indicate which *improvisador* (freestyler) is doing better. The freestyle Bryan tiró (threw) for me is far removed from this setting, as Wilson, Yonil, and I were the only “audience” present, but Bryan still immediately draws upon the same *tiraera* style, directing his freestyle at Yonil, who owed Bryan money at the time:

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50 These back-and-forth *tiraeras*, which also exist in Puerto Rican reggaeton, are extremely common among even famous, established rappers. These raps are generally less official than the songs that get sold on rap albums and released with music videos. They provide another prime example of internet use and listener participation in rap, as these rap “beefs” (the equivalent term in U.S. hip hop, although the English word can have a more physically violent connotation, while the Spanish word is restricted to the raps themselves) are often released on YouTube, usually in “videos” (simply audio accompanied by photographs) that present one rap from each artist. There are often a number of these videos between the same two artists; the videos are organized in rondas (rounds), and people comment below the video on which rapper they think is the best. A prominent *tiraera* on YouTube exists between the rappers Black Point and Mozart La Para, who have very different rap aesthetics and different identities as artists; apparently this does not make the rivalry any less viable. Yefri explains that “*la gente siempre vota por YouTube, Facebook*” (“people always vote on YouTube, Facebook”) and that people vote based on “*quién tenga la mejor letra, y él que tire mejor*” (“who has the better lyrics, and who raps better [literally, “throws it better”]”) (Interview, January 8, 2013).

51 Interview, January 3, 2013.
En esta vaina, manito, vamos a improvisarse
Yonil no me paga esta vaina, yo le voy a matar
Yonil me debe un chele, tengo que cogerlo
Si eso pasa con nosotros en la calle lo voy a coger
Si se pasa en el coro o vamos a billar
Y yo no voy a improvisar porque estoy asusta’o
Tú sabes es una tontería
Pa’ que lo grabe de aquel la’o
Yo cantaba reggaeton pero me pasé en la cárcel
Me pasan el jabón
Eso fue Yonil, era maricón
Yo tenía los calizos y eran, decían, Billabong
De Billabong somos to’
Estoy cogiendo el lio improvisa’o

We’re going to freestyle this thing, brother
If Yonil doesn’t pay me, I’m gonna kill him
Yonil owes me a penny, I need to catch him
If that happens in the street, I’m gonna catch him
If it happens hanging out or when we go to the poolhall
And I’m not going to freestyle ‘cause I’m scared
You know it’s just a stupid freestyle
So that thing over there can record it
I sang reggaeton but I went to jail
They passed me the soap
That was Yonil, he was a faggot
I had some flip-flops, they say they were Billabong [an Australian surf brand]
We’re all about Billabong
I’m making a freestyled mess

This is not the strongest freestyle, but it still provides a good example of certain elements of freestyling and tiraera, and rap more generally. First, the inspiration comes directly from Bryan’s real life, which, although consistent with rap in general, is more explicit during a freestyle because the inspiration often comes from the improvisador’s immediate surroundings, and, especially for less experienced freestylers, is rarely expressed metaphorically as it may be in written raps. In this case, Bryan’s immediate surroundings include Yonil, so he begins his freestyle by complaining about the money Yonil owes him. Bryan also mentions my presence as I record him from “over there,” and at the end, when his freestyle turns into a “mess,” he even references the brand of his flip-flops. Amidst these concrete references, however, Bryan slips in a line about reggaeton, and about being in jail. To my knowledge, Bryan has never actually been to jail, and the line probably comes from his experience listening to rap and reggaeton lyrics, rather than from personal

\[52\] A translation of a freestyle can’t really do the original justice because of the extensive use of slang and the importance of flow and rhyme. The content is essentially expressed in the English as well, but it is a lot “cooler” in the original Spanish.
Interview, January 9, 2013.
experience. These lines expand his content far beyond the room where we conducted the interview. They indicate the importance of certain tropes in rap music, the same “things that happen” that my interview subjects connected with in rap whether or not they had actually experienced those “things” personally. Bryan’s real experiences place him in the same classed space from which Dominican rap emerged. This classed position is what allows Bryan, and young Dominicans like him, to claim rapper’s experiences as truth, and to utilize these same tropes in their own raps.

The centrality of class in Dominican hip hop is constructed both by artists and by listeners who have shared experiences in the poor urban barrios where hip hop is most active. Narratives that revolve around these experiences form the backbone of Dominican rap and are crucial to its appeal as an expression of “truth” that connects Dominican hip hop participants through their shared belief in this truth. The emphasis on class as the determining factor in shaping these experiences is significant in Dominican hip hop, especially when this emphasis is contrasted to the visibility of race in U.S. hip hop. The different ways in which the marginalization of “hip hop communities” in the Dominican Republic and in the United States is perceived and expressed in hip hop culture is crucial not only to the understanding of these respective “hip hops,” but to the understanding of social structures of race and class in both countries.
In my conversations about Dominican hip hop culture, socioeconomic class was the most significant social factor that was linked to Dominican rap and dembow. Images and narratives of urban poverty were clear not only in my interviews, but also in the lyrics of rap songs, the settings of music videos, and nearly all expressions of Dominican hip hop. While many of these expressions look similar to and are clearly inspired by U.S. hip hop culture, Dominicans experience and understand hip hop within a social system that is particular to their own country. This system is very different in many ways from the U.S. social structures that provide the frame of reference in which hip hop is understood in the United States and by Americans like myself who experience foreign hip hop cultures. The most significant societal difference in relation to hip hop culture has to do with each country’s construct of race as a social category. While in the United States hip hop culture has been understood primarily as a black cultural form since its beginning, no one I spoke to in the Dominican Republic attached a color to hip hop. Instead, class is the most important social construction linked to Dominican hip hop. In the United States, the fact that hip hop is extremely racialized does not exempt it from being equally classed, as well as gendered. But blackness itself is classed in the United States, which means that the “classing” of U.S. hip hop is inextricably linked to its racialization. In the Dominican Republic, that link is not explicit: race is never mentioned in Dominican rap as a political racial claim within the genre, and only

53 “Here it doesn’t work the same way.”
appears as a basic and supposedly neutral descriptor that fits within dominant Dominican racial constructs. Consequently, my interview subjects almost never mentioned race, and when they did, it was often because I asked them about it explicitly. In these instances, the ways people spoke about race were distinct from the ways people speak about race in U.S. hip hop. These differences are directly linked to the larger national conceptions and constructions of race that have been historically produced in each country. Dominican hip hop and the ways my interview subjects understood and discussed it provide an important context for analyzing race and class relationships in the Dominican Republic and for clarifying the importance of these social constructions in global hip hop culture.

Class Aspirations and Negotiations in Dominican Hip Hop

The young Dominicans I spoke with about hip hop were most interested in discussing classed narratives in rap music. As described in the previous chapter, many of my interview subjects felt they could relate to Dominican rappers because they had shared experiences as poor young people in urban neighborhoods. This relationship between listener and rapper becomes more complicated when rap narratives involve not simply stories of life in the barrio, but the rags-to-riches stories that are common in rap in both the Dominican Republic and in the United States. Expressions of class mobility, instead of interrupting the connection between currently poor listeners and currently wealthy rappers, provided my interview subjects with an ideal ending to the class narratives they see themselves currently living. Miguel’s comments were echoed by almost all of my interview subjects:

¿Qué es llegar para mí? Llegar para mí es  What’s “making it” [literally “arriving”] for
The “truth” that young Dominicans hear in rap lyrics extends to the images of wealth and fame that they adopt as their own sueños (dreams). Wealth in Dominican hip hop is almost never expressed without reference to a previously poor state, whether this connection is made explicit in the lyrics, or conveyed in music videos in the juxtaposition of a poor urban aesthetic or street setting with symbols of wealth such as luxury cars or excessive amounts of expensive alcohol. The fact that rappers never let their listeners forget where they came from maintains the classed bond that hip hop culture builds, and even reinforces it by providing listeners with a “happy ending” that is supposedly within their reach.

“Papa Dios Me Dijo” ("God the Father Told Me"), one of the most popular songs during my time in the Dominican Republic by one of the most popular dembowceros, Secreto El Famoso Biberon, accomplishes this expression of wealth while simultaneously referencing poor origins, as shown in the opening verses and chorus of the song:

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54 Interview, January 17, 2013.
55 Also referred to as simply Secreto El Biberon, or Secreto. Secreto means “secret” but the word functions as his first name. “Biberon” (technically biberón, with an accent—because I have never seen an accent used in his name, I do not use it here) literally means “bottle,” usually a baby’s bottle, but in this case it refers to someone who is really cool, really vacano. I rarely heard the word, and it wasn’t a common enough slang word to come up online in any searches, so it is possible that Secreto started using the word in this sense. At the very least, he is responsible for popularizing it. While Secreto El Biberon is a dembowcero, and all but one of my informants categorized him as such, he utilizes rap in his songs more than most dembow artists. The pista is undoubtedly dembow; his lyric style and his content are undeniably rap. His songs are simultaneously “danceable” hits and packed with actual verses (instead of just repeated words or phrases) and a lot of flow. He is incredibly popular nationally and internationally (if primarily in Dominican immigrant communities) in a way that most dembowceros have not yet achieved.
**Papa Dios me dijo que en la calle hay mucha maldad**  
Que muchos me van a subir, otros me van a bajar  
Que los que me rodean se van a virar  
Hasta matarme van a intentar

Siempre me presino cuando salgo por ahí  
Porque me di cuenta que es verdad que ‘tan pa’ mí  
Siempre le pido al Señor cuando salgo por ahí  
Que me proteja porque ‘tan pa’ mí

Ahora soy un difunto, un muerto que canta  
Soy un fantasma que cuando cae solo se levanta  
Muchos quieren matarme, mandar mí cuerpo pa’l hueco  
Nadie me dio comida cuando mi barriga tenía ese eco

Dando vergüenza en la calle, con los labios secos  
Yo cogí mucha lucha, to’ lo que tengo me lo merezco (Yo me lo merezco)

[Coro:]  
‘Tan esperando que me quite el chaleco  
Pa’ darme plomo  
Me tienen envidia  
To’ esos palomos (2x)

1987 nació Secreto El Biberon  
Un chamaquito criado en un barrio, que salió de un callejón  
2010, 2012, el chamaquito ya es famoso  
Pero tiene que andar con cuida’o porque en la calle está el envidioso

This song expresses a specific point of view about the poor-to-rich hip hop trajectory.

Many Dominican hip hop artists focus only on their current upper class position, far

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56 Chaleco: vest, in this case referring to a bulletproof vest; Palomo: literally a pigeon, a very common Dominican slang word that means “loser,” often with homosexual implications, but often used among friends in a mocking but non-aggressive way; callejón is literally “alley” but is used as another word for barrio.

removed from the dangers of the street, even if they mention a period of time in the past when they had to face those dangers. Secreto El Biberon, however, has intentionally constructed himself as an artist who is still immersed in these dangers, who is still callejero (street, as an adjective), and who can therefore assert a type of credibility that is recognized by listeners who have not yet “escaped” the street or its violence. He describes his path to success as a violent one: no one helped him when he had nothing, so he has had to fight for everything he has. And although he has gained a lot in this way, his wealth has not brought him security; instead, he must always be ready to fight the envidiosos (jealous people) and the false supporters who surround him. Secreto’s narrative, instead of distinguishing between an impoverished childhood and a wealthy adulthood, integrates both class positions together seamlessly in a single gangster image that emphasizes the violence of Secreto’s lifestyle as a mark of his success.

Secreto’s lyrics are important because they succeed in establishing a balance between wealthy and impoverished class positions, and therefore express a “truth” that is especially convincing to young, poor Dominican listeners. The image of wealth that Secreto elaborates in “Papa Dios Me Dijo,” and in a number of his other hits, is not a comfortable one by any means. And yet most of my interview subjects connected to his songs and named him as their favorite dembowcero, if not their favorite Dominican hip hop artist across genres. Secreto is saying something that is very “real” to my interview subjects and to other young Dominicans, not because they have personally experienced these envidiosos trying to kill them in the calle, but because they “know” that, were they to strike it rich in the hip hop game (or in the
drug game), they would have to deal with the same issues. Whether or not these
lyrics reflect Secreto’s actual life as a dembow superstar—and it is likely that they do
not—Secreto’s image is a powerful one, and his performance is one that has existed
in one form or another in hip hop culture since its beginning.

Robin D. G. Kelley, in his analysis of gangsta rap in Los Angeles in the early
1990s, writes:

L.A. might be the self-proclaimed home of gangsta rap, but black Angelenos
didn’t put the gangsta into hip hop. Gangsta lyrics and style were part of the
whole hip hop scene from the very beginning. If you never hung out at the
Hevalo Club on 173rd or at Cedar Part in the Bronx during the mid-1970s,
just check out Charlie Ahearn’s classic 1982 film Wild Style documenting the
early graffiti and rap scene in New York. When Double Trouble steps on
stage with the fly routine, they’re decked out in white “pimp-style” suits,
matching hats, and guns galore. Others are strapped as well, waving real
guns as part of the act. […] We need to go back to the blues, to the
baadman tales of the late nineteenth century, and to the age-old tradition of
“signifying” if we want to discover the roots of the gangsta aesthetic in hip
hop.\(^{57}\)

This passage traces the image of the “gangsta,” as it has been conceived in hip hop
culture, back to early African American cultural and musical movements such as
“signifyin(g).”\(^{58}\) This passage is also relevant for its emphasis on the performative
quality of the gangsta image. The gangsta Kelley describes has very little to do with
gangs, an idea he reiterates later in the essay when he asserts that “Gang bangin’ itself
has never even been a central theme in the music. Many of the violent lyrics are not
intended literally.”\(^{59}\) Instead, Kelley describes a gangsta who is represented through

\(^{57}\) Robin D. G. Kelley, “Kickin’ Reality, Kickin’ Ballistics: Gangsta Rap and Postindustrial Los
Angeles,” in Droppin’ Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture, ed. William Eric

\(^{58}\) “Signifyin has been described as a means to encode messages or meanings in natural conversations,
usually involving an element of indirection” (“Signifyin and bustin (bussin),” in Language in the USA:
University Press, 2004], 403). This term and the practice are elements of black American culture and
speech.

\(^{59}\) Kelley, “Kickin’ Reality,” 121.
clothes and the *possession*, not necessarily the use, of weapons. The perceived authenticity of a gangsta *image* is often more important in hip hop than the reality of a gangsta lifestyle. This image is described and elaborated in the lyrics, but it is made most convincing by the clothing of the artist, by his\(^{60}\) flow, and by the type of gun-toting performance Kelley describes above. Secreto’s lyrics clearly convey this gangsta persona, and his lyrics are strengthened by images of him wearing a *chaleco* over his otherwise typical hip hop-style clothing. Music videos are a primary space in which this image is developed. I was surprised to find that no official video has been released for “Papa Dios Me Dijo,” but a video for another of Secreto’s songs, “El Que No Aguanta La Presión” (“If You Can’t Handle the Pressure”\(^{61}\)), which expresses the same message, follows Secreto, again in a *chaleco* and wearing a huge chain around his neck, through the streets with his crew, as they fight with a rival group and ultimately “win” when they make off with a large backpack full of money.

**Hip Hop Style and Class Performance**

Style of dress, such as the “pimp-style suits” and “matching hats” Kelley mentions, is crucial to any identity performance, and the class negotiations that happen in Dominican hip hop culture often revolve around clothing, accessories, and,

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\(^{60}\) I use the masculine pronoun intentionally because gangsta rap, out of all hip hop styles, is perhaps coded most explicitly and exclusively as masculine. This is not to say there have never been women who have participated in the style, but is to say that the few women who have succeeded in this style have participated in non-traditional feminine or masculine performances (see Jason D. Haugen, “‘Unladylike Divas’: Language, Gender, and Female Gangsta Rappers,” *Popular Music and Society* 26 (2003): 429-444, accessed February 25, 2013, doi:10.1080/0300776032000144904).

\(^{61}\) This is not a literal translation, as this song title would sound overly formal in English, but it is the best interpretation of the title based on the way the phrase is used in the song. “Secreto El Famoso Biberon – El Que No Aguanta La Presión (Video Oficial HD),” YouTube.com, uploaded by PapaSecreto1 April 25, 2012, accessed February 23, 2013, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnwU4Uj0Hr8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnwU4Uj0Hr8).
especially, brand names. Dominicans look to U.S. hip hop styles and value U.S. brands, especially in *tenis* (sneakers)—Nike, Jordan, Creative Recreation—and in *gorras* (baseball hats)—New Era 59Fifty. Dominicans are influenced by U.S. hip hop style in a number of ways. Many Dominicans on the island have relatives or friends who live in cities like New York or Boston, and these people often live in lower-class neighborhoods where hip hop style dominates. Dominicans also see these styles in U.S. music videos and movies, and U.S. brands are sold and advertised in the Dominican Republic, especially in bigger cities.

![Image 6](image_url) (from left) Antony, Yefri, and Endi show off Antony’s new shirts. He tells me the phrase on the black shirt (“Don’t Get High On Your Own Supply”) is a lyric from a song; he couldn’t remember which one, possibly because versions of this lyric have been used in a number of U.S. hip hop songs, including the 1997 song “Ten Crack Commandments” by The Notorious B.I.G. (personal photograph, January 8, 2013).

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62 *Gorra* is a generic Spanish term for “cap,” but within Dominican hip hop culture it refers specifically to the flat-brimmed baseball cap style which is popular in U.S. hip hop as well. Even more specifically, it refers to the New Era 59Fifty make: New Era is a general brand, 59Fifty is the name of their fitted cap model. 59Fifty is also the official hat worn by Major League Baseball players. In the United States and in the Dominican Republic, the hats are extremely popular and have considerable brand value: people in both countries often leave the distinctive 59Fifty sticker on the brim of their hats to show that they are originals and to flaunt the valued brand name. Yonil’s brother actually has the New Era logo and brand name tattooed on his chest, which is an extreme example, but does demonstrate how recognizable and highly valued the brand is in the barrios.
In smaller, poorer areas like Cabarete, these brands are just as popular, but less available; the international brands that are sold in Cabarete are usually surf or water-sports brands marketed to tourists and irrelevant to hip hop culture. To buy original products made by hip hop brands, people need to go to nearby cities—in the case of Cabarete, people usually go all the way to Puerto Plata, the province’s capital, about an hour away by public transportation. More often, Cabarete locals buy copias (copies or bootlegs) that are manufactured in Dominican factories (sometimes no more than one person working in his or her home) and sold at a lower price in stores and by vendors who walk through the streets carrying a variety of products. My interview subjects were all very aware of the distinction between copias and originales; this was a crucial factor in their own style choices, and in their judgments of others.

Image 7. (left to right) Bryan, a friend, Wilson, and Yonil show off their tenis originales; all of these brands—Adidas, Nike, and Creative Recreation—are recognizable U.S. hip hop brands (personal photograph, January 13, 2013).
Wilson and Bryan (who sported a Miami Dolphins baseball hat and a Hollister polo shirt during our interview) discuss this dynamic:

**Bryan:** ¿La marca de los tenis? Sí importa. Si uno hace de cantante, un ejemplo, todo el mundo lo conoce; tú te pones unos tenis malos, que no sean originales, todo el mundo dice, "Mira, un cantante, con unos tenis que no son originales." Por eso ahora hay cantantes que les gusta ponerse gorra original, todo original, para que nadie le diga nada. Hay que buscar el original ya [...].

**Yonil:** Sí, ésta es una copia [indicando su gorra]. Pues claro que se nota, mira ésta: copia [...].

**Wilson:** Con la mirada se nota cuando un chico anda carabelita, o cuando anda original. [...] No tiene dinero para comprar originales, por eso compra carabelita. [...] Sí, que tener original muestra que tiene dinero.

**Bryan:** [Se ríe, indicando su gorra original] Yo no tengo dinero....

**Wilson:** Ahora el chico dominicano no puede tener dinero y puede tener tenis originales, sólo por hacer bulto. Bulto: aparenta lo que no tiene. Sólo con la ropa aparenta que tiene dinero, pero no tiene nada. [...] Él hace pequeño fuerza trabajando para comprarse unos tenis, él sale para la calle, la gente dice que tiene dinero pero él no tiene, sólo trabajo. [...] Sólo para hacer bulto en la calle.

**Bryan:** The brand of your sneakers? Yeah it matters. If you become a cantante, for example, everyone knows you; you put on some bad sneakers that aren’t original, everyone will say, “Look, a cantante, with some sneakers that aren’t original.” That’s why now singers like to wear original gorras, original everything, so no one says anything to them. You have to look for the originals.

**Yonil:** Yeah, this is a copia [indicating his hat]. Well of course you can tell, look at this: copia [...].

**Wilson:** You can tell just from looking when a kid is going around carabelita, or when he’s going around original. [...] He doesn’t have money to buy originals, so he buys carabelita. [...] Yeah, having originals shows you have money.

**Bryan:** [Laughs, indicating his hat, which is original] I don’t have money....

**Wilson:** Now Dominican kids can have no money and can have original sneakers, just to hacer bulto. Bulto: to pretend to have what you don’t have. You can pretend to have money just with your clothes, but you don’t have anything. [...] The kid applies himself just a little to his work to buy himself some sneakers, he goes out in the street, people say he has money but he doesn’t, just a job. [...] He works just to hacer bulto in the calle.

The importance of brand names to Wilson and Bryan, and to my other interview subjects, is highly classed. Wearing original brands, especially U.S. brands, is an effective way to appear to have money, which is crucial in a neighborhood where so

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63 *Carabelita* is a term that I learned from this interview; it refers to something that is cheap, like a *copia*. *Anda carabelita/anda original* (going around *carabelita/original*) refers to people who are out in the street wearing clothes that are obviously cheap copies, as opposed to those who are wearing higher-quality originals.

64 *Bulto* is the Dominican slang word for “bullshit;” *hacer bulto* would be “to bullshit.” Wilson explains the word as it pertains specifically to this situation.

Interview, January 9, 2013.
few people actually have money. Hip hop style is of course itself a classed style, and, to outsiders used to more traditional or upper-class styles, hip hop trends always suggest a lower-class status, regardless of how expensive the articles of clothing are. But within hip hop style, these distinctions are very important, and very obvious. Even if most young people in Barrio Blanco have roughly the same amount of money at their disposal, those who anda carabelita will appear far poorer, and will therefore suffer a loss in status compared to those who anda original.

The link between money and looking vacano became even more explicit in the conversation I had with Yonil’s sister Marbeli and Emilio’s girlfriend Rebeca. Marbeli explained:

Para ser vacano, se necesita… vea, si, un ejemplo, Rebeca tiene unos tenis rojos, una blusa amarilla [Rebeca se ríe], un pantalón azul, no es vacana, no es vacana. Para ella ser vacana necesita, si los tenis son rojos, un polóche rojo, y un pantalón jean, o un pantalón que combina. Si anda bien combinaita, con sus aretes de plata u oro, plata u oro, plata u oro [indicando su cuello y sus muñecas], bien peinadita jevi, y con cuarto en el bolsillo, eso es vacana. Pero si no tienes cuarto en el bolsillo, tienes un teléfono malo, y andas descombinada, no hay vida.

To be vacano, you need… look, if, for example, Rebeca has some red sneakers, a yellow shirt [Rebeca laughs], blue pants, that’s not vacana, that’s not vacana. In order for her to be vacana she needs, if her sneakers are red, a red t-shirt, and jeans, or some pants that match. If she goes out matching well, with earrings that are silver or gold, silver or gold, silver or gold [indicating her neck and her wrists], with her hair done, and with money in her pocket, that’s vacana. But if you don’t have money in your pocket, you have a crappy cell phone, and you’re not matching, you’ve got nothing.65

Marbeli’s reference to the importance of matching the colors of your clothing and accessories highlights an important aspect of hip hop style in both the United States and the Dominican Republic, and everyone I spoke with stressed this need to be bien combinado/a (matching well). But Marbeli’s more interesting point comes later in her comments, as she starts talking about silver and gold jewelry, and about having

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65 Interview, January 11, 2013.
“money in your pocket.” Marbeli includes money in this ideal outfit in a literal way, so that it functions as an accessory in itself. While Wilson talks about clothing as something that has the power to suggest that the wearer has money, Marbeli brings actual cash and other symbols of wealth like jewelry and a cell phone into her description of a vacano outfit. And yet the idea of bulto still emerges in Marbeli’s description as well. For Marbeli, having money in one’s pocket allows one to make the bulto more convincing by adding actions, such as buying drinks for friends, to the classed “costume” of brand-name clothes and gold or silver jewelry. The swaggering street criminal that Kelley describes and Secreto performs is different from the less-violent vacanismo (coolness) my interview subjects stressed in their own style and admired in their peers. But both “characters” are deeply rooted in hip hop culture. Both images are inevitably classed by their association with this lower-class urban culture, but hip hop participants who perform these styles think carefully about how they negotiate this class position by buying certain brands, adding certain accessories, and flaunting these material aspects in certain ways.

**Racial Understandings and Hip Hop in the United States and the Dominican Republic**

Another detail from Kelley’s description that is important to analyze is the reference to the “blackness” of the gangsta image. Kelley makes the association with blackness explicit in the first line of the passage when he mentions “black Angelenos,” and it continues to emerge implicitly throughout the passage in references to the blues and to the practice of signifyin’, both prominent African American traditions. The
mention of blackness is unsurprising; it would be impossible to analyze U.S. hip hop culture without at least mentioning blackness, and most scholarly work on the culture treats blackness as a central theme. U.S. hip hop culture is by no means only thought of as a “black thing,” but the other important connotations that it carries, primarily those of a poor urban lifestyle, of youth, and of masculinity and aggression, are themselves consistently racialized in the United States as black. The imagined U.S. hip hop “character” (a figure of popular imagination but also a “real” character who is often the intended audience for hip hop artists and who usually occupies the spaces where hip hop culture is developed) is a young black male living in the ghetto. This is a stereotype, as women and non-African Americans also produce hip hop, and are extremely present in the culture as listeners and consumers. Furthermore, the hip hop character’s “blackness” includes the wide range of skin colors that are associated with African Americans in the United States. Regardless of these exceptions and variations, blackness is invariably linked to the U.S. hip hop aesthetic and black hip hop artists (whether dark-skinned or light) remain a majority.66

In Dominican hip hop, the apparent lack of such a racial association is notable, especially because Dominican hip hop shares so many other associations with U.S. hip hop. Class—specifically urban poverty—youth, and masculinity are all prominent in Dominican hip hop cultural texts and performances. Blackness, however, is not part of what Dominican hip hop means to artists or to listeners and consumers. This is by far the most significant difference between U.S. and Dominican hip hop. My own position as someone who has grown up in the United

States and learned to see race in a certain way strongly influenced my perception of Dominican hip hop, and of Dominicans in general. Although very few Dominicans I met ever identified as “black,” it took a long time, and a lot of research and conversations, for me to step back from my tendency to see them as such. As I began my research, therefore, even after spending so much time in the country, I was still surprised by the fact that none of my interview subjects connected hip hop to blackness. As I delved deeper into this issue during my conversations, however, I was able to see that although blackness may not be discussed in the same way, racial understandings still emerge in hip hop culture. Race operates very differently in the Dominican Republic than it does in the United States, and the relationship between race and popular cultures is therefore also different. National and historical Dominican constructs of race influence the ways people see (or don’t see) and discuss (or don’t discuss) this relationship.

Race almost never came up in my interviews, and when I asked about it explicitly, or talked about how race is so inextricably linked to U.S. hip hop culture, people rarely had much to say. In all of my interviews, there were only two instances where race and hip hop were spoken about together. The first time this happened was during the first interview I conducted with Yonil at the end of my seven-month stay in 2012. I did not bring up the topic of skin color first in this conversation. Instead, we were talking about the different signals that indicate to Yonil that an artist is successful and vacano. Yonil’s discussion of hip hop music videos and displays of wealth begins as a discussion of class performance and follows the common class
theme that came up in all of my interviews; but this time, skin color enters the conversation:

[Si] ellos tienen muchas cosas como vehículos en los videos, como yo puedo ver en su ropa, yo miro en su personal, como si quizás…. Porque las personas cambian, las personas cuando tienen dinero cambian. Como, naturalmente, él que está empezando, siempre está un poco quemado del sol. [...] Cuando las personas no están tomando mucho sol, están en la casa, [...], su piel cambia, se limpia un poco mas. [...] Naturalmente [el color de piel] no tiene que ver con la música, tiene que ver con sus pertenencias, con lo que tienen. Ejemplo, si es una persona que está comenzando en la música, no está teniendo todo. Personas que tienen dinero están comiendo bien, comiendo fruta bien, comiendo en tiempo, no están tomando mucho sol, están tranquilo, están bien saludable. [...] Sí, se blanquean, porque ellos toman un tiempo ya tranquilo, no están luchando tanto en la calle, trabajando para tener, para poder hacer la música… No se embasa en que él mejor va a ponerse mas blanco. Se embasa en que, no importa si él sea blanco o sea negro, es como cambias tu cutis, [...] como que te limpias mas. Dejas de tomar sol—tú entiendes sobre si tú tomas el sol, tu cutis está como quemado del sol naturalmente. Pero cuando ya tú tienes dinero, ya tú tienes tú firma, ya tú tienes tú música, solamente tú tienes que cantar, y luego que tú cantas, luego tú vas a tu apartamento, tú no tienes que estar caminando mucho afuera, tú cuerpo se ve saludable ya, porque cambias: ya tienes dinero.

[If] they have lots of things like cars in their videos, like I can see it in their clothes, I look at their personal style, like if maybe…. Because people change, people change when they have money. Like, of course, the guy who’s starting out, he’s always a little sunburnt [i.e. his skin is darker]. [...] When people aren’t getting a lot of sun, they’re at home, [...] their skin changes, it gets a little cleaner. [...] Of course, [skin color] doesn’t have to do with music, it has to do with their belongings, with what they have. For example, with a person who’s starting out in the music industry, he doesn’t have everything. People that have money are eating well, eating fruit, eating on time [i.e. three times a day], they’re not getting a lot of sun, they’re relaxed, they’re really healthy. [...] Yeah, they get whiter, because they already have some time to relax, they’re not fighting so much in the street, working to have what they need, or working to be able to make music…. It’s not that the best [artist] will get whiter. It’s that, it doesn’t matter if he’s white or black, it’s like your complexion changes, [...] like you get cleaner. You stop getting so much sun—you understand about how if you get sun, your complexion is like obviously sunburnt. But when you already have money, you’re already signed [to a record label], you already have your music, you just have to sing, and then after you sing, then you go to your apartment, you don’t have to be walking a lot outside, your body looks healthy now, because you change: now you have money.67

Yonil’s comments are problematic, and may seem especially strange to a reader (or interviewer) who has “learned race” in the United States. But his comments, such as the equation of “whiter” with “cleaner” and the concern about getting darker from

67 Interview, August 8, 2012.
spending time in the sun, convey a number of racial ideas that are widespread in the Dominican Republic.

Months after this interview took place, while watching television with Yonil and one of his friends, we stumbled across a Dominican music video channel. A new video by Lápiz Conciente came on, and Yonil exclaimed, “Wow! He used to be flaco [skinny] and morenito [dark-skinned] like me, but now look at him, he’s gordo [fat] and blanquito [light-skinned].” I took this comment with a grain of salt at the time, but as I began watching as many Dominican hip hop videos as I could find on YouTube, I had to admit, Yonil was right. In videos from the start of El Lápiz’s career, the rapper is noticeably skinnier, and noticeably darker-skinned, than he is today; it took me a few videos to even recognize that it was the same person (admittedly he is also more than ten years younger in the early videos, which of course contributes to his changed physical appearance). Most Dominican hip hop artists, including those with careers as long as El Lápiz’s, have not transformed so dramatically. But Yonil, even though he uses El Lápiz as his primary example, understands this transformation as one that would always happen: “Of course, the guy who’s starting out, he’s always a little sunburnt.” Yonil even directs the narrative at me when he starts to use the second person: “You understand about how if you get sun, your complexion is like obviously sunburnt.” In this case, even the word “sunburnt” is racialized, as my understanding of the concept is in fact very different than Yonil’s. For Yonil, getting sunburnt signifies a racial shift, while for me, it only means a few days of discomfort. Yonil is able to treat this “racialized sunburn” as an issue that everyone has to deal with because his understanding of race is one that has
been naturalized in the Dominican Republic, just as a very different understanding has been naturalized in the United States.

The most significant difference between racial systems in the United States and the Dominican Republic is that in the United States, race is perceived as a binary opposition between “white” and “black,” while in the Dominican Republic, race is understood as a spectrum that utilizes various raced and colored terms to describe people’s complexions. David Howard, in his comprehensive analysis of race, ethnicity, and nationality in the Dominican Republic, explains this theoretical difference:

Skin color, Banton (1991, 125) argues, “is a feature which varies along a continuous scale when measured by a light meter, but in social life it is used either as a discontinuous or a continuous variable in ordering social relations.” Discontinuous categories are the semi-fixed ‘racial’ groupings of, for example, black, brown or white. Continuous categories assign color a place on a scale of social status.68

The United States has developed a discontinuous racial binary; the Dominican Republic has constructed a continuous racial scale. In the United States, this binary developed in large part out of the institution of slavery, which invented and manipulated various legal definitions of race in order to justify owning and selling other humans. Customs and laws such as the “one-drop rule” worked to classify anyone with even a “drop” of African blood as “black,” and therefore eligible to be enslaved or otherwise discriminated against. This rule continues to determine the U.S. racial structure: “For the current generation, light-skinned black people have been defined as black in the United States. The ‘one-drop rule’ makes the United States unique in its racialization process, naming practices, and black-community

68 David Howard, Coloring the Nation: Race and Ethnicity in the Dominican Republic (Oxford: Signal Books Limited, 2001), 54.
This “unique racialization process” affects cultural developments as well as individuals. Black American culture, including many prominent musical traditions like hip hop, has developed over a long period of time in response to various historical moments and factors, and has been shaped by a variety of influences. But much of the reason that these cultures have consistently been defined as explicitly “black,” by both insiders and outsiders, is because of the ways in which Americans have been taught to see and define blackness in opposition to whiteness, with very little officially recognized space in between.

Simmons explains that “while the United States emphasized the idea that blackness resulted from the presence of ‘any’ African ancestry, the Dominican Republic focused on defining mixture.” This focus on mixture arose from specific historical processes in the Dominican Republic, or more accurately, on the island of Hispaniola. Dominicans define race on a continuous scale and emphasizes mixedness in order to downplay blackness, which is relegated to Haiti and to Haitians. The word negro/a (black) is often used only to describe Haitians, while “Dominicans describe race [for themselves] with a plethora of color-coded terms, ranging from coffee,

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70 Simmons, “Navigating the Racial Terrain,” 78.

71 Occasionally, negro/a may be used with a diminutive (negrito/a) as an affectionate term for Dominicans, especially for Dominican children (and especially if these children happen to be darker-skinned than their siblings), but moreno/a (brown) and morenito/a were more common in my experience. Skin-color terms are also used with diminutives when referring to adults, but in this case the diminutive makes the color itself “smaller.” For example, blanco/a describes a white foreigner or a fully white (often elite) Dominican, while blanquito/a is the term to describe a light-skinned Dominican of any class; moreno/a suggests a darker brown complexion than does morenito/a. Negrito/a also “softens the blow” of being called “black” and makes it a more “appropriate” term for Dominicans. Negro/a, however, suggests a darker, African blackness and is almost exclusively used to describe Haitians, to the extent that when I used the word negro/a as a translation of my U.S.-based understanding of “black” as a category that would include brown- and light-skinned Afro-Americans, Dominicans were often confused or would simply assume I was only talking about Haitians.
chocolate, cinamon and wheat, to the adoption of indio/a, a device which avoids using mulato/a or negro/a.” Thus while negro/a racializes the national difference between Haitians and Dominicans, lighter skin-color terms are used among Dominicans to describe variations within a Dominican national identity. The real and imagined tensions that exist between the Dominican Republic and Haiti have been some of the most significant factors in determining the current racial structure in the Dominican Republic, just as the history of slavery in the United States contributed to its racial structure. Considering the way that “Dominican mixedness is constructed vis-à-vis Haitian blackness,” Yonil’s comments become considerably easier to understand.

In the United States, it is impossible to separate blackness from hip hop culture because whites and blacks alike have long participated in a racial system that defines all African Americans, and other phenotypically similar groups (such as dark-skinned Dominican immigrants, for example), as “black.” Thus the marginalization of the U.S. ghettos in which hip hop has its origins is understood largely in terms of racial difference and injustice. In the Dominican Republic, however, where blackness is rarely claimed, let alone asserted, the marginalization of the barrios in which Dominican hip hop culture has developed is understood in terms of class, instead of race. Furthermore, the class ascension that is often glorified in hip hop culture implies a possible racial “ascension” in the Dominican Republic that is entirely

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72 *Indio/a* literally means “Indian” or “indigenous,” and while it is used in the Dominican Republic to refer to a similar mixed-race identity as *mulato/a*, the former term emphasizes an indigenous heritage instead of an African one. This emphasis exists in the terminology and in its historicized implications even when individual Dominicans may include African heritage in their definition of the term *indio/a*. Howard, *Coloring the Nation*, 3.

absent in the United States. Yonil suggests that becoming a successful hip hop artist provides the means to *blanquearse* (whiten oneself). This idea extends far beyond Dominican hip hop: “the saying that ‘money lightens’ holds true throughout the Caribbean region.”

This saying, rather than being a metaphorical or cynical critique of an institutionalized preference for lighter-skinned people, functions literally to describe a process that people perceive as real and often hope to experience themselves. In the United States, however, hip hop artists never “lose” their blackness as they ascend the socioeconomic ladder, because the U.S. racial system establishes blackness as a fixed “reality” that can not diminish with wealth. Thus when these artists speak out against the marginalization that has affected them and continues to affect many of their fans (or at least, the hip hop “character” they rap to/for), they do so in racialized terms that claim a black identity. In the Dominican Republic blackness is doubly distanced from hip hop culture, first through the national refusal of blackness and its association with Haitians, and then through the perceived ability to “better” one’s race by bettering one’s class. The former concept leads to an emphasis on class marginalization in the *barrios*, without any consideration of racial marginalization because Dominicans, by not being “black”—i.e. Haitian—are able to see themselves as immune to racial oppression. The latter further limits the presence of blackness in Dominican hip hop as it conforms to the idealization of whitening that persists throughout the country, and positions hip hop itself as a means to approach this ideal racial status. While U.S. hip hop can not help but be “black,” Dominican hip hop can not help but avoid being “black.”

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74 Howard, *Coloring the Nation*, 54.
The other time that race and hip hop were discussed together occurred in one of the last interviews I conducted, with Miguel. In this case, I initiated the conversation about race and hip hop culture. Miguel’s responses present a narrative of race that is important as a description of racial attitudes in the Dominican Republic:

Aquí no funciona igual, aquí no se mira la distinción, no se mira la diferencia de cómo tú eres, de dónde eres, no. Aquí mayormente las personas se tratan como si fueran dos personas iguales. No como [...] en muchos países. En muchos países la música se trata diferente en el sentido de dónde tú eres, de cómo eres, quién eres. Mayormente en esos países de afuera siempre hay mucho racismo. Si tú eres de color, no les gustas, no tratan de hablar contigo, o te tratan diferente. [...] Aquí no, aquí todo es igual. Aquí no me importa si tú eres blanca o negra, no importa. Aquí, lo que me importa en la música es que la música salga bien, que les gusta a las demás personas. [...] Aquí no hay discriminación en el país. Aquí no fijamos sobre tu color de piel, sobre quién tú eres. Nos fijamos de cómo tú eres, cómo es tu forma de ser, y cómo tú trabajas sobre la música. No tenemos distinciones, no, para nosotros no. No hay racismo, no nos molesta cómo tú eres. Hay algunas personas que sí, algunas que pueden tener problemas con eso, pero aquí mayormente es muy difícil, no se escucha eso.

Here it doesn’t work the same way, here people don’t see that distinction, we don’t see that difference in how you are, where you’re from, no. Here mostly people are treated like they’re two equal people. Not like [...] in a lot of countries. In many countries music is treated differently based on where you’re from, how you are, who you are. Mostly in those countries overseas there’s always a lot of racism. If you’re colored, people don’t like you, they don’t try to talk to you, or they treat you differently. [...] Here no, here everything’s equal. Here it doesn’t matter to me if you’re white or black, it doesn’t matter. Here, what matters to me about music is that the songs sound good, that other people like them. [...] Here there’s no discrimination in this country. Here we don’t focus on your skin color, or on who you are [i.e. racially/ethnically]. We focus on how you are, what you’re like, and how you work on your music. We don’t have distinctions, no, for us. There’s no racism, it doesn’t bother us how you are. There are some people that, yeah, some people might have problems with that, but here that’s mostly very difficult, you don’t hear that.75

When I pushed Miguel to talk about how these claims might not hold up when discussing Dominican-Haitian relations, he responded:

Te voy a decir sobre eso. Aquí mayormente tienen problemas con los haitianos. Y no es porque ellos sean haitianos. A las personas no les molesta que ellos sean haitianos, sino que ellos vienen de su país a trabajar, y si I’ll tell you about that. Here mostly people have problems with Haitians. And it’s not because they’re Haitian. It doesn’t bother people that they’re Haitian, but that they come from their country to work, and if you

75 Interview, January 17, 2013.
aquí tú haces un trabajo y tú eres profesional, y vas a buscar un trabajo, el trabajo quizás paga, o cuesta, 10,000 pesos. Ellos vienen, simplemente, […] ellos vienen y hacen el trabajo para la mitad. Por eso es que mayormente hay los problemas con ellos.

These comments are fairly typical of a “colorblind” national ideology, similar to the types of discourse used in Brazil that construct the country as a “racial democracy.”

Miguel claims quite explicitly that “here there is no racism,” although he admits that “some people might have problems with [race].” Perhaps the most notable “colorblindness” appears in Miguel’s confusing language. He rarely mentions skin color, instead using phrases like “how you are,” “what you’re like,” and “where you’re from.” At times, he uses these phrases to euphemize racial difference—“No nos molesta cómo tú eres” (“It doesn’t bother us how you are”)—while at other times he uses them to speak about personality as a more valid way of judging a person—“Nos fijamos de cómo tú eres” (“We focus on how you are”). Miguel’s language, by avoiding any specific mention of skin color or race, obscures what racism would even look like, were it to exist in the Dominican Republic.

Miguel also uses a very common economic argument to avoid talking about racial problems between Dominicans and Haitians. He transforms the racial issues between the two nations into purely economic issues of immigration and labor; an identical argument is pervasive in the United States and has been directed towards various immigrant groups at different times. In both countries, the argument falls very short. The threat Haitians pose to poor Dominicans as cheap laborers is not

76 Interview, January 17, 2013.
purely imagined, but, as in the United States, Dominicans are in many ways complicit in the exploitation of Haitian immigrant labor. The Dominican government has often encouraged at least temporary Haitian immigration to meet a demand for cheap labor, especially on the sugar cane plantations where Haitians live in migrant communities called *bateyes* “under conditions that have been equated with slavery.” Racial attitudes, as well as the actual conditions, make this type of labor undesirable for Dominican workers. A prevalent argument exists that “the Haitian physiology [is] more suitable to working outdoors than the lighter-skinned Dominican population.” This idea, which is closely related to Yonil’s theories about the sun’s effects on skin (and to frequent warnings to Dominican children that spending too much time in the sun will “turn them Haitian”), forces one to remember that Haitian immigrants very rarely “steal” desirable jobs from Dominicans. The jobs they do are undesirable not only because of the miserable conditions and terrible pay, but also because most Dominicans do not want to “lower” themselves—or “blacken” themselves—with this type of work. Of course, the stigmatization of Haitian labor does not necessarily mean that very poor Dominicans do not find themselves competing with Haitian immigrants for these jobs, as Miguel suggests. The example Miguel uses, however, is that of a Dominican “professional” who is after a job that would pay “10,000 pesos,” a significant amount of money. This far less likely scenario suggests a malicious Haitian who immigrates in order to take profitable jobs from Dominicans who can do the work better and deserve the jobs more. Finally, on a very basic level, Miguel’s comment that Haitians come from “their country” to steal Dominican jobs dismisses

78 Howard, *Coloring the Nation*, 34.
79 Howard, *Coloring the Nation*, 37.
the significant number of Haitians born and raised in the Dominican Republic, whose families may have been in the Dominican Republic for generations, or who may be of mixed Dominican and Haitian heritage.

Miguel’s comments, while problematic and largely inaccurate in a literal sense, are not simply “ignorant.” Miguel is very aware that racism exists, if not in the Dominican Republic, then in “those countries overseas” (the word he uses, afuera, literally means “outside”). At least in a basic way, Miguel is also aware of how racism works: “If you’re colored, people don’t like you, […] they treat you differently.” This awareness is important because it indicates that he has a solid frame of reference within which he makes his own declarations about the lack of racism in the Dominican Republic. Miguel is incorrect to claim that there is no racism in the Dominican Republic, but he is picking up, if unintentionally, on an important point: racism in the Dominican Republic may not work the same way as it does in some other countries such as the United States.  

Miguel’s comments point to “inferential racism,” a concept Howard defines, citing Stuart Hall: “Inferential racism describes apparently naturalized or allegedly neutral representations of race based on the premise of unquestioned assumptions (Hall 1990, 12-13). […] Overt racism is the elaboration of an openly racist argument.” Both forms of racism exist in the United States.  

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80 I mention the United States here because the United States is the “country outside” that my interview subjects are most aware of, whether this awareness consists of real knowledge or semi-imagined narratives and stereotypes. While my interview subjects were aware of certain aspects of European culture, such as techno music, and most knew Europeans who live or spend time in Cabarete, the awareness of black U.S. culture, and of black people in the United States, seemed to be more significant among my interview subjects. My informants tended only to know about Europe because of the tourists whom they met (or in one case because he had visited Germany), but they knew about the United States both from tourists, who were usually white, and from Dominicans they knew or heard about who had immigrated to the United States. These contacts provide a very different image of the country than that given by the tourists in Cabarete.  

81 Howard, Coloring the Nation, 7.
Dominican Republic, as they do in the United States and in many countries. Yonil’s narrative of racialization processes that “happen to everyone” and are supposedly obvious, as well as Miguel’s more direct comments about the invisibility of race in the Dominican Republic, are both perfect examples of how inferential racism works. Yonil, Miguel, and most of the people I met in the Callejón and in Barrio Blanco have learned these same racial attitudes (and many may have learned more overtly racist attitudes as well, especially towards Haitians). Miguel’s lack of awareness of the racism that does unfortunately exist in very concrete and material ways in the Dominican Republic indicates the ways in which racism has hidden itself in narratives that claim to be common sense.

The second reason Miguel’s comments are not simply “ignorant,” despite the fact that they do betray an ignorance of racism, is that in Miguel’s community, race really isn’t a significant factor in determining how people are treated, at least among the Dominican residents. Miguel is not simply reciting a national narrative that he does not think about; he sees this narrative playing out around him everyday, and believes it to be true in the country as a whole. While racism is fairly obvious when looking at national trends that include all levels of society, it works differently within a small community where everyone is united not by race or skin color, but by class. In the United States, on the other hand, ghettos are usually racially marked as much as they are marked by class. The fact that Dominican neighborhoods are less likely to be racialized may stem from actual demographic differences between urban poor communities in the United States and the Dominican Republic, but it is likely also strongly influenced by the tendency in the United States to name various skin colors
as “black,” a tendency which does not exist in the Dominican Republic. The skin colors of Barrio Blanco residents vary considerably and are identified using different racial terms, but many of these complexions would “qualify” as “black” in the United States. However, since few Dominicans would ever group all of these colors together into one racial category, the community lacks a racial marking. The presence of a significant number of Haitians, many of whom appeared to be even poorer than the Dominicans in the neighborhood, contributes to this, as divisions among Dominicans become less significant when Haitians are present to fill the role of “Other.” Miguel dismisses these racial differences as well, however, by focusing on the national differences and on perceived economic tensions that arise due to Haitian immigration. Miguel’s comments, therefore, describe his community fairly accurately, and describe a truth that applies within, if not between, many classed neighborhoods. 82

The different racial constructions that have developed historically in the United States and in the Dominican Republic are illuminated in the stark contrast between racial attitudes towards hip hop culture in both countries. While hip hop culture emerged as part of a long tradition of black American culture in the United States, its position in the Dominican Republic is classed, instead of raced. This difference directly stems from the tendency in the United States to categorize anyone with a “drop” of African blood as “black,” while in the Dominican Republic, the way race functions as a category of social differentiation is often obscured or erased by emphasizing mixedness in racial naming and identification. Since blackness is not associated with Dominicanness, it is not associated with Dominican hip hop culture.

82 Howard, Coloring the Nation, 65.
The themes of urban poverty that *accompany* blackness in U.S. hip hop virtually supplant blackness in Dominican hip hop. The association of poverty with darker skin tones is recognized, but not treated as an immutably fixed social category. Thus, while race is far more visible in U.S. hip hop, the *lack* of a racial association with Dominican hip hop still signals national conceptions of race and color in the Dominican Republic.
4. “Tienes que tener la energía”

Alternative Visions of the Calle in Dembow Dance Culture

While rap continues to speak to, and for, an entire class of poor Dominicans, the hip hop style that is “taking over” in the Dominican Republic is dembow. Dembow is a genre that includes dance as well as music, and while the musical style has roots in Jamaican dancehall and Puerto Rican reggaeton, dembow dance moves are closely linked to U.S. hip hop dance performance and to African American culture. The music is a distinctive and important aspect of dembow, but the overall purpose of the genre, as my interview subjects repeated again and again, is to be bailable (danceable). This purpose, quite different from the more content-based purpose of rap, drives and determines dembow’s aesthetic. As Yarlin, one of the boys I met at La Cancha, told me, “dembow es para curarse, como burlarse, riéndose” (“dembow is to curarse [have a good time, feel better], like joking and making fun, laughing”). Although some specific artists, such as Secreto El Famoso Biberon, may deviate from this playful mood in their lyrics and performance, the accuracy of Yarlin’s statement in general cannot be overstated. Dembow is, simply put, fun. Puns and jokes fill dembow song lyrics, and dancers pack their performances with comical, and often sexual, stunts and gestures. The social nature of this dance culture is obvious whether a single dancer is performing in front of a group of friends or an organized equipo de baile (dance team) competes in front of a large, rowdy audience. The genre is dominated by young men and boys, and is often practiced and developed in the same

83 “You have to have that energy.”
84 Interview, January 8, 2013.
spaces—primarily the *calle* (street) and the *cancha* (basketball court)—in which Dominican masculinity is practiced and developed. Dembow is a growing subculture within Dominican hip hop that provides a new type of expressive outlet for young Dominicans in the *barrio*, and offers them alternative ways of seeing and representing themselves and the spaces in which they live and play.

**Practicing and Performing Hip Hop at La Cancha**

My experiences with rap in the United States meant that I recognized Dominican rap immediately, but I became aware of dembow much more gradually, as this genre has no clear counterpart in the United States. My entire first summer, although dembow songs were playing everywhere, I was entirely ignorant of the genre, and I only realized much later that the songs I had been hearing belonged to this style of music. When I returned in January of 2012, I began to hear more about this new genre, which had been steadily gaining popularity since my first summer. While dembow would play occasionally at the nightclubs in Cabarete, my first real experience with dembow as a complete cultural movement happened on the Malecón in Santo Domingo, over Dominican Independence Day weekend at the end of February. The street party that my friends and I stumbled upon one night exposed me to a whole new idea of what the word “dembow” meant, and what I observed there was far more exciting than anything I had seen in Cabarete. Everywhere, there were small groups of young Dominicans, especially young Dominican males, dancing together. While the party that night was especially large due to the holiday, I learned that the Malecón, a central “downtown” space filled with tourists and business people during
the day, is “taken over” every Saturday night by young Dominicans from the poorer barrios on the outskirts of the city: a long stretch of the Malecón is lined with cars blasting music, usually dembow, and surrounded by people drinking, talking, and dancing.

A couple months later, I found myself immersed in dembow culture once again, at a competencia de dembow (dembow competition) that occurred at La Cancha in the Callejón. This competencia attracted a huge and diverse, though almost entirely Dominican, crowd. While the majority of the dancers who competed were male, the audience was balanced in terms of gender. And while the competitors tended to be teenagers and young men and women, people of all ages were there watching them; although the competencia didn’t start until around 10 that night, it was definitely a family event. The three rounds of this competencia took place on three Saturday nights, during which dembow dance teams from all over the province of Puerto Plata performed and were judged officially by a panel, and unofficially by the audience. The event that I attended at La Cancha is typical of competencias that happen all across the country. These events are almost always locally organized and held at a neighborhood cancha, and they provide some of the most important and visible opportunities for dembow participants and observers to experience the culture.

La Cancha, or rather, canchas in general, offer a natural location for these competencias, as they are already important spaces for hip hop participation in Cabarete. Basketball courts and basketball culture are closely tied to the development of hip hop in the United States as well. Todd Boyd explores the relationship between basketball and U.S. hip hop, and their shared connotations of urban poverty,
masculinity, youth, and blackness. Basketball, from the personas of the players to the style of play itself, has been influenced in recent decades by a hip hop aesthetic that stresses an ostentatious, aggressive version of masculinity. And hip hop, in its turn, has been influenced by basketball, most visibly in the realm of fashion.\textsuperscript{85} While in the United States, the links between basketball and hip hop are strengthened because both have provided black men\textsuperscript{86} with “unique opportunities for wealth and social mobility,”\textsuperscript{87} in the Dominican Republic basketball provides almost no real opportunities to young Dominicans of any racial background. While there is a professional basketball league, it is small and loses out to baseball in terms of popularity. Even the Dominicans I knew who loved playing basketball locally at La Cancha never talked about Dominican professional basketball teams, although many followed Dominican baseball teams at least casually. Nonetheless, aesthetic links between hip hop culture and basketball are still strong in local canchas. Antony describes one of the most apparent examples of these links, the overlap between basketball and hip hop fashion that is also prevalent in the United States:

\textit{Para mí, los tenis que se usan mayormente para jugar basketball y salir: Nike, y Jordan. Solamente, los que se usan mayormente. Yo tengo estos Nikes, yo voy a La Cancha con ellos; tengo otros Nikes allí adentro que son de salir. Tengo unos Reebok también. Si tú no vas a salir, esos no se tocan.}

For me, the sneakers I mostly use to play basketball and to go out at night: Nike, and Jordan\textsuperscript{s}. Just, those are the ones I mostly use. I have these Nikes, I go to La Cancha in these; I have other Nikes inside that are for going out. I have some Reeboks, too. If you’re not going out, you don’t touch those.\textsuperscript{88}

\textsuperscript{85} Todd Boyd, \textit{Young, Black, Rich, and Famous: The Rise of the NBA, the Hip Hop Invasion, and the Transformation of American Culture} (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003).
\textsuperscript{86} While black women have succeeded in both of these areas as well, I would argue that neither professional athletics nor hip hop culture provide black women with opportunities as they do for black men. The women who have succeeded in these areas have had to work very hard within male-dominated spaces in order to seize these opportunities, and even those women who do become successful are less likely than black men to become a cultural symbol, especially in sports.
\textsuperscript{87} Boyd, \textit{Young, Black, Rich, and Famous}, 13.
\textsuperscript{88} Interview, January 8, 2013.
As in U.S. hip hop culture, the sneakers that people wear to play basketball and to go out at night—an occasion for which men and women alike choose their clothing with care—are the same brands and fall within the same athletic, vacano (or “fresh,” in the United States) style. The only significant difference between the sneakers worn to play basketball and those worn out at night is that the former pairs are broken-in and dirty from use at the cancha, while the latter pairs are tucked away and frequently cleaned so they always look new and expensive.

La Cancha in the Callejón is representative of most canchas around the country (although the tourists and foreign volunteers who occasionally go there to play or to watch are not so typical). The space is used predominantly by young males who live in the Callejón, and while some girls will occasionally go to watch, or far more rarely to play, the space is definitively masculine. Antony and Endi, both regulars at La Cancha (while Yefri spends his time playing pelota [baseball] at the play), explain the ways in which basketball and hip hop are constantly being mixed in different ways at La Cancha:

**Antony:** En La Cancha hacemos de todo. Tú sabes, como “And One.” [...] Eso es basketball, pero que es callejero, tú sabes. Que se juega, pero es como bailando, siempre trucos con la bola, [...] y con música puesta y vaina. Entonces juegos vacanamente, [bailando] y jugando al mismo tiempo [...].

**Endi:** La Cancha—yo pienso, para mí, que es lo mejor que hay para diversión. Aquí no hay un parque de diversión, no hay algo donde uno puede ir para recargarse un poco. A La Cancha nos vámanos [...] y jugamos, discutimos, bailamos....

**Antony:** Venezamos. Hagamos de todo. Hasta la noche lo usan los muchachos. [...] Pero tú sabes, no jugamos corrido: nos paramos, relajamos, bailamos, [...]

**Antony:** We do everything at La Cancha. You know, like “And One.” [...] That’s basketball, but it’s callejero [street], you know. You play it, but it’s like dancing, always doing tricks with the ball, [...] and with music playing and stuff. So you play it vacanamente [“cool-ly”], [dancing] and playing at the same time.

**Endi:** La Cancha—I think, for me, that it’s the best thing there is for having fun. Here there aren’t any playgrounds, there aren’t any places where you can go to recharge a little. We go to La Cancha [...], and we play, we argue, we dance....

**Antony:** We yell. We do everything. Those kids are even there at night. [...] But you know, we don’t play straight through the whole time: we stop, we joke around, we
For both Antony and Endi, dancing is a significant activity at La Cancha, whether their time is devoted just to dancing—mostly breakdancing and dembow—or whether their dancing is incorporated directly into their basketball playing. The other activities—arguing, yelling, joking, and fighting—that interrupt dancing and ball playing are secondary and unplanned, but they are still important to the development of masculinity that happens at La Cancha, and to the construction of the space as masculine. This loud, active masculinity is consistent with hip hop and basketball culture in the United States as well.

The fact that La Cancha is already so infused with hip hop culture and with social performances of young Dominican masculinity made it a natural location for the competencia de dembow. When I arrived on the night of the first round of the competencia, La Cancha had been effectively transformed. Huge stadium lights had been brought in, along with a stage, a sound system, and DJ equipment. The perpetually-locked bathrooms had been opened, and a bar had been set up nearby. And the place was packed, not with guys in faded basketball jerseys, but with what seemed like the entire population of the Callejón, in all their nighttime finery. This was my first experience with dembow as an organized, team-based performance culture, rather than a spontaneous, improvised dance style. Each equipo that competed sported matching outfits, and had choreographed their own dance routines, although the style of dembow means it never quite loses its spontaneous vibe. The humor inherent in the genre came out in full force, as teams performed comical stunts and skits to excite the crowd. Watching these teams perform one after another, I

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89 Interview, January 8, 2013.
began to really consider the significance of dembow culture to this community, and to lower-class urban Dominicans across the country.

**The Origins and Aesthetics of the Dembow Dance Style**

Given the fact that dembow music, in order to build a danceable beat, is often quite repetitive, participants really exhibit the creative force of the genre through dance. While the dance style as a whole is unique, its various elements are heavily influenced by numerous U.S. hip hop moves. Antony, who dances dembow but also has a knowledge of U.S. dance trends that was unique among my interview subjects, explained to me that:

*Los Estados Unidos sacó el “jerk,” y el “dougie,” y aquí sacamos el dembow. Nosotros lo copiamos y hacemos las canciones de dembow. El dembow está copiando el baile de “jerk” y el “dougie.”* In the United States, they released the “jerk” and the “dougie,” and here we released dembow. We copy U.S. styles and we make dembow songs. Dembow is copying the “jerk” and the “dougie.”

The jerk and the dougie are both recent U.S. dance fads that are linked to specific songs, “You’re A Jerk,” by the New Boyz, and “Teach Me How To Dougie,” by Cali Swag District, both released in 2009. Although Antony’s recognition of these influences is accurate and both dances are obvious in dembow, Antony’s comments simplifies dembow in a number of ways. First, Antony fails to mention the extensive variety of other U.S. hip hop dance steps and styles that are prominent in dembow. Some of these steps are adapted and incorporated into the dembow dance itself, as is the case for moves like the “heel-toe,” an intricate footwork move; “gliding,” which

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90 Interview, January 8, 2013.
91 The first song that popularized the dougie was actually “My Dougie,” by Lil’ Wil, released in 2007, and the dance was being developed in local communities before either song came out. I mention the 2009 song here because it launched the dougie into the mainstream and turned it into a widespread dance fad. I also mention it because it played in the clubs in Cabarete, and is definitely the song Dominicans were aware of when they referenced the dougie.
can be thought of as an evolved moonwalk; and “popping,” which involves precise movements of individual body parts to create a robotic effect that’s difficult to accomplish and therefore very impressive and popular. Other styles are transported more directly into dembow performances and remain more or less unchanged from the original moves. Seamless switching among different dance styles within a single dembow performance is a characteristic of choreographed dance team performances, which are done to a mix of dembow songs rather than to a single continuous track; these mixes allow for clips of songs from different genres like rap or techno to be used as well. A prominent dance style that appears “intact” in dembow performances is breakdancing, which is popular in itself among young Dominicans. Other examples include “tutting,” which is a movement that involves intricate geometrical movements of the arms, hands, and fingers, and “flexing” or “bone breaking,” in which the dancer twists and contorts his or her arms and wrists behind the back and above the head, often by dislocating or appearing to dislocate the shoulders and elbows.92 Dembow dance is a performance that is evolving incredibly rapidly, as the dance aspect of dembow culture is a relatively recent development in the genre and is already more complex than it appears in the earliest music videos featuring dembow dancers. Much of this rapid evolution is due to its incredible openness to improvising and incorporating dance moves from a wide variety of international music and dance genres.

92 Flexing is a Brooklyn-based dance movement worthy of study in itself. Dominican dembow dancers use some basic moves from this style, but flexing goes far beyond these movements and has its own subcultural importance. While it appears in dembow, I do not want to equate it with the other dance moves I mention, which are established hip hop dance moves that have become more mainstream and are used in a variety of hip hop and pop dance styles (“Bone Flexing in Brooklyn’s Battle Fest – New York Post,” YouTube.com, uploaded by NYPost October 22, 2009, accessed February 28, 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GqSoEt3m17c).
Antony’s more problematic simplification of dembow, however, is not that he fails to cite every dance influence that exists in the genre, but rather that he describes dembow as a “copy” of foreign moves. Endi works to rectify this when he responds to Antony’s comments with a firm, “Pero se hace diferente aquí” (“But here it’s done differently”). This is absolutely the case. Dembow, like most popular dance cultures, is influenced by a variety of other dance styles, but these influences do not make dembow less distinct as a new and innovative dance movement. Performances are held together by a highly recognizable “backbone” of fundamental dembow moves that combine specifically with dembow music. This “backbone,” which is deliberately open to improvisation, revolves around energetic footwork that, at its most basic, involves a stationary bouncing step done with alternating feet. Dancers vary and complicate this step with crossovers, jumps, and rotations. While these more intricate moves are carried out below the waist, upper body movements, including, primarily, a shoulder shake that exudes “swag,” are also aesthetically important. Facial expressions, as well as dance steps, are a crucial part of dembow, and the playful qualities Yarlin mentions are communicated most effectively through these expressions. Dancers try to exude a particular brand of vacanismo (coolness) that stems not from the “badass” or “hard” attitude often found in rap, but from a sly cockiness infused with sexual innuendo. Dancers may be simply grinning; often they use exaggerated, comical facial expressions that react to other dancers or that highlight their own moves. Finally, one of the most exciting aspects of dembow performance is the use of various physical stunts, often performed by pairs of
dancers. Popular types of stunts involve lifts, balancing acts, flips, moves reminiscent of swing moves, and throwing dancers into the air.

Beyond the physical elements of the dance, dembow performance is characterized by its communal, participatory, and youthful aesthetic. These qualities mark dembow, perhaps even more strongly than its dance influences, as hip hop. While hip hop culture in general is often connected to young people and to youth culture, dembow is “youthful” in the Dominican Republic in a way that Dominican rap is not. This is largely because rap itself is an older genre. When Dominican rap was first beginning, artists like Lápiz Conciente and Toxic Crow were certainly as young as many dembowceros are today; now these rappers are in their thirties, which is “old” in hip hop, and is certainly much older than most dembow participants. Thus the “youth” who listen to rap belong to a more broadly defined generational group; adults are not necessarily beyond this term or the aesthetic it represents. In dembow, however, “youth” is defined more narrowly. While young adults like those I interviewed are also fans of dembow and may participate as dancers, most dancers are even younger. One is more likely to see a five-year-old dancing dembow than to see a twenty-five year old dancing. Many of the strongest, most serious dancers—those who are most likely to perform as part of a dance team—are teenagers, and most popular dembowceros are in their twenties or younger. I have seen, both in person and on the internet, teams of much younger dancers and teams that feature one especially young dancer because of the excitement this generates.

Part of the reason dembow participants are so young relates to the fact that dembow is “purely” Dominican. Although dembow is influenced by a variety of
musical and dance styles, the genre emerged in the very same urban spaces in which it continues to be most popular, and its dancers are also its creators. The kids and teenagers who are growing up in these barrios begin experiencing dembow at a very young age and become the most visible participants in the culture. These kids bring their own experiences to their performances, and this in turn influences and even determines the aesthetic of the genre as a whole. One example of this is the tendency for kids to wear backpacks while they dance, a trend which even appears in organized dembow performances. Dancing in the street in school uniforms (which are the same in public elementary and high schools nationwide) is also not uncommon. But the youthful aesthetic goes far beyond these concrete clothing trends. Yonil, in a phone conversation after I returned from my field work this past winter, told me that

[Dembow] tiene que ver mucho con la juventud, el movimiento de dembow tiene que ver con la juventud. El movimiento es agresivo, agitado, porque la juventud son los que tienen los movimientos agitados, movimientos duros y rápidos y con tiempo. El reggaeton, cualquier persona puede bailarlo, pero el dembow, tienes que tener la energía.

The dance moves that Antony describes and that I observed are all executed with an “agitated” energy that signals that this style “has to do with youth.” This energy is a major factor in the style’s appeal. While this appeal reaches “older” people like Yonil (who is only twenty-five), it seems to call loudest to younger people who not only enjoy listening to the style and watching and cheering on dancers, but who often start dancing themselves.

93 Personal communication.
Considerable research has been done on the importance of participation and communality in African, Afro-Caribbean, and U.S. African American music and dance cultures.\(^9^4\) In hip hop, much of this participation plays out in a street setting. The street dance circle is crucial to dembow, as it is to many dance styles with lower-class, popular origins. Dance circles are a primary way in which young Dominicans with no “official” connection to the style—who are neither members of a dance team nor professional *dembowceros*—participate in the dance. More experienced dancers can show off their moves, and other dancers can imitate these and practice their own moves. Showmanship—whether of specific dance skills or simply of *vacanismo*—is crucial to these circles, which often have a competitive air. The circle provides an audience as well, which is necessary for a dance style that relies on popular reactions and *ánimo* (excitement). Dembow audiences, whether in a casual setting like a dance circle, or at organized dembow competitions and concerts, are never simply observers. Audience members participate fully, even if they never enter the circle or climb onstage themselves, by cheering, catcalling, heckling, whistling, and laughing. Audience members are constantly reacting physically as well, as they clap and move to the music, and even mimic the dancers they are watching.

Beyond the dance circle, on stages or in front of the cameras, dembow retains the communal feel that ties it to its street origins. Dembow is a team dance, and it is rare to see someone dancing dembow completely alone. In the dance circles, where there are no official teams, audience members are constantly entering the circle and

becoming dancers, then returning to the outside of the circle when the next dancer enters. Often two dancers enter the circle simultaneously, either competing against each other, or collaborating on certain moves. More serious dancers form organized equipos de baile. Dembow teams coordinate their appearance either by wearing identical outfits, which is especially common, or by wearing the same color combinations. Sometimes dembow teams consist of just one pair of dancers; often they have at least three dancers, and some even have more than ten. These teams may dance together only in their own barrios, with audiences of their friends. Many, probably most, teams participate in competencias de dembow like the one held at La Cancha. These competitions often feature cash prizes, and there is also the potential for especially successful teams to be featured in music videos or on television shows.

The Calle in Visual Representations of Dembow Dance Performance

Given the huge number of equipos in the country, being recognized by a dembowcero or being featured on television is not a likely result of competing at a local competencia. Instead, depending on the resources available, many dancers make their own videos and post them to YouTube in order to achieve recognition and reach a wider audience. These videos vastly outnumber professional dembow music videos on YouTube, and therefore contribute significantly to the body of representations of dembow that I use to analyze the genre’s aesthetic project. I have divided the most common videos—amateur and professional—that I was shown by Dominican friends and students and that came up in my own searches on YouTube into four relatively distinct categories. At the “lowest” end of this spectrum are videos shot on cell
phones or personal digital cameras by observers of dembow performances. These videos are not planned in advance, and reflect dembow as it is performed and consumed on a daily basis. These videos often depict kids congregating in public spaces to dance, or show parts of local competencias as seen from the point of view of a spectator.

Image 8. “Los Piratas del Dembow” (The Dembow Pirates, left) and “Los Geniales” (The Cool Kids) at two different local competencias.95

These videos were especially important during my research as a way for me to expand and compare my own experiences with dembow in Cabarete with other larger or more typical Dominican urban communities less shaped by foreign tourist and expat populations. These videos are also unique for the attention they give to dembow audiences, as well as performers. Because the person filming is almost always a part of this audience, whether on the outskirts of a dance circle or in a mass of people at a cancha, other audience members inevitably appear, and their shouts and comments can often be heard along with the music.

While the other three categories may show audiences as well or even “cast” audiences, in the case of professional music videos, they are inevitably silent observers in the background, rather than a highly visible and audible part of the video.

The next category consists of dance team videos. These videos are also amateur videos, and almost all of them also take place in the street, in a basketball court, or in a public park or plaza. But these videos are planned ahead of time, and are edited afterwards. While some of the videos are visually edited as well, all of these videos have sound editing, so that the music the teams are dancing to, instead of coming from the video recording itself, is edited in as if it were a music video. This means none of the surrounding, non-musical sounds recorded in the video are audible,

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as they are in videos from the first category. The dancers have prepared themselves for this video shoot: they perform practiced routines instead of improvised moves, and they often wear coordinated or matching outfits, as they would during a competition. While audiences may be present, the teams perform primarily for the internet audience they are planning to reach, rather than for the people who inevitably gather around them to watch.

These videos were useful to me in analyzing the dance style of dembow itself, and the wide variety of improvisations and of foreign influences in the performances. The

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purpose of these videos is to promote the dance teams, and the focus of the videos is therefore on the dancers themselves and on the moves they perform. These videos depict the widest range of dance moves, as teams are constantly trying to impress audiences with new adaptations of dembow moves, or with new foreign dance trends with which audiences may not have as much experience.

The third category bridges the gap between these amateur dance videos and professionally produced music videos. It features dembow mixes produced by DJs and released with an official, music-video quality dance video. This category is dominated by DJ Scuff, a prominent Dominican DJ and producer of rap and dembow. His thirteen volumes of “Dembow Mix” are “mash-ups” of the most currently popular dembow songs, and these mixes go back to when the genre was first becoming popular with Doble T & El Crok. The most recent volumes—Volumes 10 through 13—have accompanying videos. These videos feature a team of young male dancers who perform as a typical equipo. The video quality is much higher than that of the previous two categories; similarly, the clothing worn by the dancers is clearly new and more expensive than most amateur dancers’ outfits, and the spontaneous audiences are absent (although one of these videos does include a staged audience). Volume 10 takes place in an abandoned, ruined building; 11 features the dancers in a blank white space; 12 throws them into a boxing ring (and features La Nueva Escuela, a dembow group whose hit single is in this mix); and 13 shows the team dancing in a city street in front of a crowd of people, in an organized, intentional dance circle.
While this video category is highly specific and includes far fewer videos than the other three categories, it merits analysis nonetheless. These videos are produced by a DJ who is very well known in Dominican hip hop, and these videos are especially sought out and therefore receive a higher viewership. This type of video does not fit in any of the other categories because it has important elements of both amateur, dance-focused videos, and professional, music-focused music videos. These mixes utilize the same street-dance performance style, but bring this performance into the official space of the Dominican hip hop industry. These videos therefore draw

attention to the connection that exists between young dancers in the barrio and professional producers and performers.

The videos released by these professionals make up the final category of dembow videos. These videos are the highest-budget and highest-quality, and they circulate not only on YouTube but are shown on television as well. The most significant difference between this category and the three previous categories is that music videos are not only about dembow dancing, but are also, even primarily, about the music and the artist who sings it. In the professional videos I have seen—not all of them by any means, but a sizeable number that includes the popular songs I heard or heard about, as well as dozens more that I found on my own—I have yet to see a dembowcero who dances dembow himself or herself in a music video. Most dembowceros simply make gestures that can be found in almost any rap or hip hop music video around the world. While the artists themselves may not be dancers, however, most videos still feature dembow dancers or dance teams. The song “Con Lo Pie” (“With Your Feet”) is an early dembow song by the now prolific dembow performer-producer Chimbala, and the song and video are explicitly linked with dembow as a dance style, rather than just a style of music. The title of the song makes this link clear, and the phrase is often used by Dominicans to refer to the dance side of the dembow genre as bailando con lo’ pie’ (dancing with your feet). The emphasis on dance is also clear in the lyrics. The song features incessant repetitions, which are characteristic of dembow as these repetitions contribute to the beat and to the danceability of the song. To clarify the lyrics, therefore, I have written out only the phrases of the “chorus” (these phrases in fact make up most of the song; there are
only two brief—and similarly repetitious—rapped verses amidst these phrases).

These three lines fully capture the “message” of the song:

Así que baila con lo pie, con lo pie
Dale una pata’ [patada]
Rómpeme esa chapa, que ese fuyín es mio
So dance with your feet, with your feet
Give a kick
Break that chapa for me, ‘cause that fuyín is mine

The video that accompanies this song further emphasizes the importance of dance.

Although it is an officially produced video, it could be confused with, if not the lowest-budget dance videos, then certainly the organized dance team videos. The quality is very low, especially when compared to more recent dembow videos, but it is in the content that the similarities with the amateur videos really emerge. The music video takes place in a city street, and a large number of young kids sit on a nearby wall, watching the dancers and the dembowceros.

The only thing that visibly distinguishes this video from an amateur video, in fact, is the presence of Chimbala and another dembowcero rapping amidst the dance teams.

Another difference, which is not necessarily apparent in the video itself, is the fact


that this is a video for an original song, rather than a video of people dancing to a song they did not themselves produce. The music video for “Con Lo Pie” is similar in content and aesthetic to many professionally produced dembow videos. Often videos that follow this “plot” place the _dembowceros_ and their crew in a street setting filled with dancers and casual audience members who appear to be—and may actually be—residents of the _barrio_ in which the video is being shot.

![Image 13. El Alfa, “Agárrate Que Te Solté” (left) and Wilo D’New, “Menea Tu Chapa.”](image)

Dembow’s street-dance aesthetic, which is in many ways inevitable in the amateur videos because the dancers are already always in those streets, is perpetuated and legitimized in official music videos as an important aspect of this dance culture.

In rap videos, the street setting is often used to highlight the roots of the rapper and the various troubles that afflict the people he or she continues to represent. Dembow videos, whether amateur or professional, portray the street in a very different way. The “dembow street” may be located in the same urban poor space as the “rap street,” but the former is shown to be a place of diversion, entertainment,

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youth, and undeniable self-confidence. Successful dembowceros and their music video production teams have enough resources available that they are not actually restricted to the street, as amateur dancers usually are. This makes the high number of dembow music videos set in the street especially significant, as they reflect an intentional stylistic choice, rather than an economic necessity. While the street and the surrounding buildings in dembow videos often look run down, the dancers and artists sport new, brand-name hats, shirts, and sneakers, and dembowceros often have chains and watches as well.

Image 14. El Alfa in his video for “Agárrate Que Te Solte;” here his elevated class status is clearly demonstrated even in the same street setting.

The aspiration to riches in dembow is less complicated than the similar narrative that exists in rap. In rap, a wealthy present is rarely expressed without reference to a much harder past. In dembow, however, material wealth is often flaunted in the street without any of the conflict that is suggested in similar shots in rap videos. Because the “dembow street” is a fun place, class tension fades behind the humor and exuberance of the artists and dancers. These performers are not interested in critiquing or problematizing either lower-class or upper-class lifestyles, and dembow
music videos often seem to suggest that both lifestyles can easily coexist. This is a problematic representation that ignores many of the realities that face the urban poor and are anything but “fun.” Yet this more optimistic vision represents an image of the street—and especially of the young dembow participants who are the driving force behind the genre—that is just as “real” as the hardships expressed in rap music.

Young Dominicans are not being “taught” by these videos that the street is only a place for dancing and partying. Rather, young Dominicans themselves construct this representation of this space, of their space. This vision of the calle is alternative in its own way. It may be tempting to dismiss these “fun” street representations as ignorant or uncomplicated, but I would argue that they accomplish a form of resistance in their own right by asserting images of the calle that do not conform to dominant representations of this poor urban space as a location of violence and crime supposedly inherent to the lower-class people who live there.
5. “A la mujer no le dan la misma libertad”

Masculinities, Femininities, and Sexualities in Dominican Hip Hop

As in hip hop culture in the United States, Dominican hip hop culture is an important space in which gender is learned and performed. And as in U.S. hip hop culture, gender performances in Dominican hip hop are complex and often problematic. Both Dominican rap and dembow are predominantly masculine cultural forms. They are primarily developed in the local masculine spaces of the cancha and the calle, rather than in the feminine space of the casa (home). The vast majority of raperos,

102 “They don’t give women the same freedom.”
103 I am drawing on Judith Butler’s theory of gender performance throughout this section. Butler theorizes that drag performances—such as those that I will discuss in dembow culture—are not imitating any “original” gender that “belongs” to a certain sex, but in fact reveal that gender is always a performance, regardless of whether the performance conforms to heterosexual norms (i.e. female=feminine, male=masculine), or subverts these norms. There is a tension, however, between this theoretical framework and the actual understanding of gender that I encountered among my interview subjects and other Dominican hip hop participants. People did subscribe to heterosexual norms, and saw femininity as an inherent quality of femaleness, as they saw masculinity as the equivalent of maleness. Thus, while I am conscious of the distinction between sex and gender terminology and naming practices, my interview subjects rarely were, and they used these terms interchangeably. This was facilitated by the fact that all of the Dominican hip hop participants I spoke with or interacted with identified with heteronormative gender performances, and assumed others would do the same. My use of gender terms throughout this section is intentional, even when I discuss apparently subversive gender performances, because these gender “subversions” never signaled an actual identification by the performer with a subversive gender or sexual identity.


104 In the poor neighborhoods I spent time in, the calle and the casa often overlapped spatially, but were distinguished by the gendered activities that were associated with the two spaces. (La Cancha was uniquely separate, and has actual physical boundaries that define its small but definitively masculine space.) Women I knew who didn’t have paying jobs outside of the home were often in the calle in a literal sense, but their activities were almost always motivated by their responsibilities to other people, whether to a novio (boyfriend) or esposo (husband), or to a larger extended family. Women often spend time in the calle running errands to the comados (local markets), and watching (or trying to find) their children or friends’ children. These activities were also often social, and women interacted both with other women in similar positions and with men who worked in the barrio or who were unemployed (a significant number). While using the word casa to refer to this network of people and activities is somewhat simplistic, I use the term to distinguish this space and its strong feminine connotations from the masculine calle as it operates within hip hop culture. This calle, while spatially the same as the feminine calle, implies a “harder” lifestyle, often associated with drugs and violence, that my male interview subjects saw themselves—and male hip hop artists—as being fully a
*dembowcero*, and *dembow* dancers are male, and all of my interview subjects, male and female, described very different roles and abilities for men and women within the genres of Dominican hip hop. While certain fundamentals of gender construction remain consistent, gender in rap works differently in many ways than gender in *dembow*. Given the predominance of male actors in both genres, these differences are far more significant in the realm of masculinity. Dominican rap projects an image of masculinity that is very familiar to those who have any experience with U.S. rap music. This masculinity is aggressive and often violent. Even when rappers do not express these themes explicitly in their songs, they work to maintain a clear connection between themselves and the struggles and hardships of the *calle*. Not only are these struggles and the *calle* space denoted as masculine, but the awareness and anger required to speak out about such struggles are also both perceived as masculine qualities. This masculinity is often reinforced through misogynistic lyrics and performances. In *dembow*, specifically in the dance side of this culture, masculinity looks very different and is considerably more flexible than in rap. *Dembow* dance performances are inevitably spaces of gender performance, and the playfulness of the dance style is as much about playing with gender as it is about exuding energy and cracking jokes. The sexual themes so prevalent in male dancers’ *dembow* performances, especially in choreographed team routines, often revolve around the homoerotic and the homosexual, whether this emerges in sexual stunts and innuendo, or in the common practice of cross-dressing and dancing as a “woman” with other male team members. The expanded space for masculine gender performance that

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part of, whether through active participation or simply through understanding, while they saw women as “protected” or simply excluded from this space.
male dembow participants create only partially extends to female participants. In local dembow performances girls and women show some agency in their gender performances, but the “official” representations of dembow in music videos feature portrayals of women that are consistent with the limited, hyper-sexualized role that continues to dominate feminine performances in hip hop. Such sexualized feminine roles prevail in every genre of Dominican hip hop, as they do in many genres of hip hop around the world. The transformation of masculinity in dembow is a productive move, but the fact that this transformation is almost entirely restricted to men serves as a reminder that in hip hop culture, men continue to shape and dictate not only masculine performances, but feminine performances as well.

**Gendered Fashions in Dominican Rap and Dembow**

One of the most visible aspects of gender performance in Dominican hip hop lies in the realm of clothing and fashion. In this section, I consider the ways in which shifts in hip hop fashion trends parallel my analysis of broader shifts in gender performance in Dominican hip hop. The transition from a “harder” masculinity in Dominican rap to a more flexible dembow masculinity is especially obvious in men’s hip hop clothing styles. Many of my interview subjects talked about how “before,” hip hop trends depicted in rap videos and followed by hip hop participants featured ropa ancha (baggy clothing). Now, clothing is pegada (tight, literally “stuck,” clothing). My interview subjects rarely claimed that hip hop styles originated in the Dominican Republic, but they did associate these two styles with different genres of Dominican hip hop, and not with foreign musical cultures. *Ropa ancha* is linked to Dominican
rap, while *ropa pegada* is associated with dembow. These links are partly chronological: *ropa ancha* is a dated hip hop style, and rap is an older hip hop genre; the opposite is true for *ropa pegada* and dembow. But these stylistic connections are strengthened through music videos that depict artists sporting and therefore popularizing each style. The *ropa ancha* style, which has been controversial in the United States for its association with a racialized criminal masculinity, exudes the classed criminal masculinity associated with Dominican *barrios* and expressed in Dominican rap. The bigger clothing projects a bigger, stronger, “manlier” man. This masculinity is emphasized further by the stark contrast between *ropa ancha* and the much tighter clothing often worn by women in rap videos and in everyday Dominican hip hop style. While individuals may deviate from the styles associated with their sex, there is no overlap in the styles themselves, which reinforces the strict gender roles in the rap genre, and which makes any crossover more blatant and therefore more deviant.

The *ropa pegada* style so strongly linked to dembow is most visible in dance team performances. While most if not all of the specific elements of this style are inspired by U.S. hip hop trends, it is often exaggerated in dembow performances and thus becomes something new within the genre. This exaggeration makes sense since the general aesthetic of dembow as a dance genre is all about exaggerated movements and facial expressions. The *pantalones tubitos* (skinny jeans) dancers wear onstage are tighter and the colors brighter. And dembow dancers incorporate elements from outside hip hop culture, like neckties and glasses, if these elements contribute to their show and to a cohesive team look. Most young Dominicans sport this style in a more
“neutral” way by wearing jeans that are fitted but not as tight as those worn by dance teams. However, especially when going out at night, young men often lean towards the more exaggerated performance style, and these tighter, brighter elements are increasingly common in everyday displays of Dominican hip hop style. These elements provide a significant visible manifestation of the changing performance of masculinity that is prominent in dembow. The contrast between this style and the ropa ancha style associated with rap is quite obvious. The contrast between masculine and feminine dembow fashion is considerably less significant. The clothing dembow dance teams and other young Dominicans wear complements the performative elements of the genre that are more effeminate than rap. While the majority of my interview subjects participated in dembow style, Emilio voiced a negative opinion about the gender and sexual deviance suggestion he saw in these clothing trends:

Te voy a decir la realidad: estos hombres que andan con los pantalones en el medio de las nalgas, no me hable de eso porque ellos son todos maricones. Es una moda, pero esa moda.... Mira, tú vas [...] con un pantalón entre medio de las nalgas, dime tú qué puede llamarte la atención.

I’ll tell you the truth: these guys that go around with their pants in the middle of their nalgas [buttocks], don’t talk to me about that because they’re all maricones [faggots]. It’s a trend, but that trend…. Look, you go out [...] with your pants in the middle of your nalgas, you tell me what’s attracting attention.  

While Emilio was the only one of my interview subjects who expressed this particular opinion, it is an opinion very likely shared by many people like Emilio who don’t participate in dembow style. Given the pervasive intolerance of homosexuality in the Dominican Republic, the effeminacy of these popular clothing trends is notable, but it is equally notable that very few people within dembow culture associate these trends

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105 Interview, January 17, 2013.
with an effeminate or homosexual style. Since these trends emerged out of a gradual shift in hip hop fashion, and do not represent an abrupt break with style norms, they are not seen as any less masculine than the more aggressive ropa ancha styles of the 1990s and early 2000s. All of my interview subjects (with the exception of Emilio, whom I interviewed more for his musical knowledge than for any obvious participation in hip hop fashion) have been following hip hop trends for a long time, because of their prominence in their barrios. They spoke about ropa ancha without attaching any special significance to the distinction between that style and current trends: when ropa ancha was popular, they wore ropa ancha; now they wear clothing that is more pegada. Since ropa pegada styles are worn by the majority of men and boys who participate in dembow culture, they are accepted by most in this community as the dominant masculine trends in Dominican hip hop today, rather than viewed as an indication that the wearer is a maricón, as Emilio claims.

These transitions in masculine hip hop styles have also affected women’s and girls’ participation in hip hop fashion. The dominant trends look a lot more like what girls and women were wearing before dembow emerged; pantalones tubitos are the most obvious example of this. Women’s hip hop style has changed less dramatically than that of men in the transition from rap to dembow, but the fact that masculine styles have changed so much means that feminine styles are understood differently. Before, when masculine styles were so distinct from feminine ones, it was less acceptable in Dominican hip hop for women to participate in the masculine dominant hip hop trends because this required abandoning their femininity and their (hetero)sexuality. While there are examples in U.S. hip hop of successful female
rappers who adopted masculine trends, I have seen no instance of this in Dominican hip hop, which is in any case a genre with far fewer female artists. In dembow, however, women follow the same trends as men and even incorporate more “traditional” masculine hip hop elements like tenis and gorras without being perceived as any less feminine, or any less sexual. Dembow has allowed girls to be vacana, and not simply sexy. Rebeca and Marbeli discussed the specifics of this distinction in the context of hairstyles, an important part of Dominican femininity and fashion:

**Rebeca:** A mí me gusta pelo lacio, suelto.
**Marbeli:** A mí me gusta riso, sí suelto.
**Rebeca:** Trenza sí, también. Con tenis, así es bonita. [...] Con poloche o una franela.
**Marbeli:** Un Hollister negro con pantalón jean claro, y unos Jordan negros, y esas trenzas, ya tú sabes. Un par de prenditas vacanas.
**Rebeca:** Un ejemplo, para vestido, [el pelo] es bueno lacio. Para tenis, cosas así, es bueno trenza, así. [...] Si, y el riso también con eso.
**Marbeli:** Cuando una mujer se pone unos tenis, un pantalón tubito, y un poloche, y se hace trenza, es que se quiere ver vacana. Entonces cuando se pone un vestido, zapatilla taco’ alto, y pelo lacio, se quiere ver sexy. Son dos cosas diferentes: vacano, y sexy.

**Rebeca:** I like straight hair, worn loose.
**Marbeli:** I like curly hair, also loose.
**Rebeca:** Yeah, also braids. With sneakers, that’s pretty. [...] With a poloche [t-shirt] or franela [tank top].
**Marbeli:** A black Hollister [polo] with light-blue jeans, and some black Jordans, and those braids, you already know. A couple prenditas vacanas.
**Rebeca:** For example, with a dress, [your hair] looks good straight. For sneakers, things like that, it’s good in braids. [...] Yeah, and curls go well with that, too.
**Marbeli:** When a woman puts on some sneakers, un pantalón tubito, and a poloche, and she does her hair in braids, it’s that she wants to look vacana. But when she puts on a dress, some high-heeled shoes, and wears her hair straight, she wants to look sexy. Those are two different things: vacana and sexy.

The comment on hairstyles in this conversation is important, as hair in Dominican feminine culture is a topic that has been researched extensively. This research usually

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106 “Prenditas vacanas” would be “cool jewelry,” but prenda is often a slang term and refers to “bling,” which is particularly ostentatious jewelry associated with hip hop culture in the United States as well.
Interview, January 12.
focuses on the connection between hairstyles and racial attitudes. Marbeli and Rebeca did not discuss race in their interview, however, and when I asked them about it they didn’t connect particular hairstyles with any specific race or skin color. But they did see hairstyles as having different gendered qualities, despite the fact that they all are styles used by women and girls. Clothing styles that are farthest from masculine clothing trends—in the above example, a dress and heels—are paired with hairstyles considered more feminine, in this case straight hair worn loose, which contributes to a “softer” aesthetic. Jeans and sneakers, they agreed, look better with hairstyles that are less soft, and therefore less feminine. The curly and braided hairstyles they paired with jeans and sneakers are worn by men as well, while a man straightening his hair is rare.

The masculine clothing styles Rebeca and Marbeli mentioned were the same trends that my male interview subjects talked about wearing themselves. In clothing, vacano and vacana are both represented by the same basic combination of gorra + polos + pantalón tubitó + tenis. Regardless of the gendered ending when vacana is

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108 In my experience, it was more common to see Haitian women with their hair braided and to see Dominican women with their hair straightened, and sometimes naturally straight. This is consistent with the pelo bueno/pelo malo (good hair/bad hair) dichotomy that is prevalent in Dominican culture and is highly racialized (Candelario, “Hair Race-ing,” 137). Braids are far more common among women who have “pelo malo,” while women with “pelo bueno” rarely if ever braid their hair. In the case of women who straighten their hair to achieve pelo bueno, a very common practice at all levels of Dominican society, they may braid their hair when it is at its least “done” and is closer to its natural texture. While pelo malo is a pervasive concept, braids themselves were not perceived negatively in my experience or in my interviews because of any association with Haitian women or with blackness more broadly. During Semana Santa (Holy Week, a significant celebration in the Dominican Republic), everyone—including men if their hair is long enough—braids their hair for the festivities. Despite the fact that women I spoke to did not link hairstyles to race, and among lower-class women there did not appear to be any “consequences” linked to any of these hairstyles, the fact that Marbeli and Rebeca describe straight hair—pelo bueno—as more feminine, and curls and braids—pelo malo—as more masculine, is not a coincidence, as race is closely tied to Dominican gender ideals, and vice-versa.
used to describe a woman, *vacanismo* (coolness) in Dominican hip hop style is a masculine quality that is more “naturally” exuded by men and boys; it requires a certain adoption of masculine traits and trends for a woman to be considered “cool.” In dembow, while the masculinity of coolness persists, masculine clothing styles are considerably closer to the feminine, which means women are able to participate in this style without sacrificing femininity and sexuality. Women and men do not wear precisely the same things in dembow style, and they certainly are not both performing a neutral, flexible gender that falls between masculine and feminine; the styles are distinct. But both the masculine and feminine styles are built upon the same elements; this allows women to participate in feminine performance and dembow performance simultaneously. Such participation, however, is more limited in dembow music videos, in which women continue to be highly sexualized. In dembow videos women’s clothes are consistently more revealing; in fact, many women in these videos wear *sexy* styles that are not specific to dembow culture. This sexualization is consistent with representations of women in Dominican rap videos, which reflects the fact that in the dominant media, women have not enjoyed the stylistic change that men have adopted or that women wear when they participate within local spaces.

**La Cancha as a Gendered Hip Hop Space**

Many of the local spaces in which hip hop is developed, while they may be “open” to women under certain conditions, are highly masculinized in practice. The space of La Cancha is the most clearly defined of these spaces, which intensifies both its hip
hop practices and its gender practices. While the limits of *calle* and *casa* may be flexible and overlapping, there is no doubt about where La Cancha begins and ends: the bounds are quite literally marked on the ground, and the entire space is surrounded by bleachers and tall fences and walls. Antony and Endi, who go to La Cancha every day, talked about the limited feminine presence:

*Antony:* [*Chicas van a La Cancha*] muy pocas veces. Si yo las llevo [se rie].

*Endi:* A las chicas no les gusta jugar basketball siempre [...].

*Antony:* Las chicas van a veces para ver. Van muchos turistas para ver también. Y la mayoría del tiempo hay una que juega, una extranjera. Ella tiene cédula dominicana pero es de los Estados Unidos.

*Endi:* A las mujeres dominicanas no les gusta jugar.

*Antony:* A las mujeres dominicanas les gusta el sazón namás.

*Endi:* Sin relajo.

*Antony* [a Endi]: Ella fue, la pájara de La Ciénaga, ella jugó allá. Y ella [es] dominicana.

*Endi:* Sí.

*Yefri:* Sí, ella juega.

*Antony:* Ella sola namás va a jugar allá.

*Hannah:* ¿Quién es ella?


*Antony:* [Girls go to La Cancha] very rarely. If I bring them [laughs].

*Endi:* Girls don’t like to play basketball all the time […].

*Antony:* Sometimes girls go to watch. A lot of tourists go to watch, too. And most of the time there’s one girl that plays, a foreigner. She has a Dominican ID but she’s from the United States.

*Endi:* Dominican women don’t like to play.

*Antony:* Dominican women just like seasoning [i.e. cooking].

*Endi:* Seriously.

*Antony* [to Endi]: She was, the *pájara* from La Ciénaga [another *barrio*], she played there. And she’s Dominican.

*Endi:* Yeah.

*Yefri:* Yeah, she plays.

*Antony:* Only her, that’s it, she goes to play there.

*Hannah:* Who is she?

*Antony:* A lesbian from La Ciénaga. She came to play here. Here in this country, [basketball] is a masculine thing. [But] the U.S. has teams of women, they would even have teams of pájaros [laughs].  

The gendered boundaries of La Cancha are very clear in these comments. Feminine presence is largely restricted to the outskirts, literally out of bounds of the court, and girls’ primary role is that of spectator. Those who have managed to cross these

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109 **Pájaro** literally means “bird,” but in the Dominican Republic it refers to homosexuals and is the equivalent of the English slur “faggot,” although it is less-vulgar than the other word for “faggot,” *maricón*. While Antony uses the feminine version of the word here to speak about a lesbian woman, the word is more often directed at males, and, like the term “faggot,” it is commonly used to mock or insult heterosexual males’ manhood.

*Interview, January 9, 2013.*
boundaries have transgressed other boundaries first; in the examples above, these boundaries are national and sexual. One girl who regularly plays basketball at La Cancha is not Dominican, and the fact that she comes from the United States makes her presence acceptable because she belongs to a different set of gender rules. Antony, like most Dominicans with whom I spoke, is aware that things work differently in the United States, a difference that is expressed in his recognition that in the United States, women (and even pájaros, who are also feminized) can play professional basketball. The easy acceptance of these differences reveals the ways gender roles have been naturalized in Dominican culture. No one I spoke with ever talked about whether or not women should or shouldn’t be playing basketball or participating in other masculine activities in hip hop culture; instead, they talked about how “women can’t,” “women don’t like to,” or simply “women don’t.” Such apparently non-judgmental statements may be technically true in many cases, but they reflect a truth that has been constructed by various social expectations and limitations. If my interview subjects had had a moral issue with women playing basketball, they would not have accepted a foreign female player as easily as they have. But because this girl is not Dominican, she is permitted the possibility of liking and wanting to play basketball, and this deviance from the Dominican norm is accepted.

The other woman who has played basketball at La Cancha is Dominican, but she has transgressed boundaries of gender and sexuality by being a lesbian. This crossing of sexual boundaries functions much the same way as the national boundary crossing in the previous example. The primary difference is the fact that being from the United States is in many ways a positive attribute, while being lesbian and out in
the Dominican Republic is uncommon and often leads to explicit discrimination. Nonetheless, in this case the fact that this girl has broken out of the acceptable heterosexual feminine roles allows her to occupy the masculine space of La Cancha and participate in a masculine activity. This woman is already masculinized by her sexual choices; this certainly has its negative consequences in Dominican culture, but it also makes certain choices that she may make, like the choice to play basketball and spend her time socializing with boys and men, easier to understand and to accept. The fact that both the American woman and the Dominican lesbian who are accepted as basketball players at La Cancha do not conform to local and cultural Dominican standards of femininity ultimately reinforces the masculinity of the space.

**Women’s Place(s) in Dominican Rap**

The strict gender roles in the genre of Dominican rap are developed through both visual and auditory elements of the genre. While men project their aggressive brand of masculinity, women, when they appear in videos at all, are usually dancers and are highly sexualized. But women are often entirely absent from rap videos, and when they are featured as vocalists in rap songs, the songs are often closer to pop or club music—they are more “danceable” songs. This absence is problematic, and is closely linked to the emphasis on “hard” masculinity in the rap genre. But the fact that rap is supposed to express a message means the genre can actually provide a space in which women can be talked about in a more serious way. The example that came up in almost all of my interviews was the song “No La Maltrates” (“Don’t Mistreat Her”), recently released by Secreto El Famoso Biberon. While Secreto usually uses a
dembow beat behind his raps, the synthesized violins and piano on the instrumental track of this song are more similar to a romantic song mixed with a basic hip hop beat. The song begins with a brief clip, probably recorded for the song, of a tearful woman’s voice calling into a radio station to ask what she should do about the relationship she is in with a man who abuses her but whom she still loves and doesn’t want to lose. Secreto sings the chorus and raps the verses:

_Ella llora, y él sólo piensa en cama_  
She cries, and he only thinks of bed [i.e. sex]

_La engaña, pero así lo ama_  
He cheats on her, but she loves him anyway

_[Coro, cantado] No la maltrates, valórala_  
[Chorus, sung] Don’t mistreat her, value her

_Demuéstrale que la quieres_  
Show her that you love her

_Y no la haga llorar [2x]_  
And don’t make her cry [2x]

_Ella ama a un hombre que sólo piensa en cama_  
She loves a man who only thinks of sex

_Que le da el valor de un perro, no el valor de una dama_  
Who values her like a dog, not like a lady

_Se ‘ta ahogando con sus sentimientos_  
She’s drowning in her feelings

_Porque es muy fuerte el dolor que lleva por dentro_  
Because the pain she carries inside is very strong

_Lo siente, y palpita su corazón_  
She feels it, and her heart beats fast

_Se tranca en su habitación, la sorprenden con un trompón_  
She’s stuck in her bedroom, they surprise her with a beating

_Ya ella no aguanta un golpe más en su cara_  
She can’t take another blow to her face

_Y así lo ama, así lo ama_  
And she loves him that way, loves him that way

_Ella sufre, llora, de noche y de día_  
She suffers, cries, night and day

_En su cara ya no hay alegría_  
There’s no more happiness in her face

_Se siente sola, triste y vacía_  
She feels alone, sad and empty

_Pero todo hasta un día_  
But everything ends someday

_[Cantado] Y va a ser tarde_  
[Sung] And it will be too late

_Cuando tú quieras abrazarla_  
When you want to hold her

_Tarde_  
Too late

_Cuando tú quieras tocarla_  
When you want to touch her

_Muy tarde_  
Very late

_Cuando tú quieras besarla_  
When you want to kiss her

_Después no digas que ella es mala_  
Afterwards don’t say she’s the bad one

_[…]_  
[…]

_[Voz de una reportera] “Sí, muy buenos días amigos telediarios. Ante la alta taza de feminicidios registrada en lo que va de año en República Dominicana, se hizo imperiosa la necesidad de elaborar este reporte a fin de_  
[A woman reporter’s voice] “Yes, good morning viewers. In the face of the high level of femicides [murders of women] registered for this year in the Dominican Republic, it became necessary to conduct this report so that men realize that a woman is not
This song is not typical of the ways rappers sing about women, and is certainly not typical of Secreto himself, whose other songs are usually about violence and masculinity and never mention women. But it was a song that almost all of my interview subjects mentioned when they talked about gender, and even when they were talking about messages in rap in general. The song, reproduced in its entirety above, accomplishes a number of different things. It is a significant break from the norm that an already-famous and very popular Dominican male hip hop artist is putting out a message like this. Unlike in the United States, where a critique of sexism in hip hop emerged early on and where feminism in general has a long and prominent history, conversations about abuse towards women are rare and reach a smaller audience in the Dominican Republic, an audience which even more rarely includes the poor, less educated communities where hip hop is most popular. The fact that a hip hop song speaks so explicitly against violence towards women is

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therefore an important step. This song brings the issue of abuse against women into popular discourse and has been effective in starting conversations about this topic in communities where domestic abuse is both a constant and often accepted reality.

That being said, the song is certainly not unproblematic. This song is very much a message from one man to other men, and thus reinforces the skewed power dynamic that exists in the Dominican gender system, the same power dynamic behind the abusive relationships the song condemns. This dynamic surfaced in an argument between Daniela and Emilio when I asked Daniela if she thought the song, which she brought up in the interview, was about an issue that spoke more to women than to men:

**Daniela:** Sí, mayormente [llama la atención] más a las mujeres.
**Emilio:** No. Negativo, porque mayormente a los hombres tiene que llegar más porque, tú sabes que eso es un mensaje para los hombres.
**Daniela:** No, yo digo que ahora mayormente lo que está pasando aquí es que los hombres están matando a sus mujeres.
**Emilio:** Sí, por eso.
**Daniela:** Entonces llega más a las mujeres porque—
**Emilio:** Esas canciones tienen que llegar más a los hombres, entienden, porque mayormente es un mensaje que les están dando [...] a los hombres.
**Daniela:** Sí.

Emilio sees the message delivered in this song as one that is more important for men to hear and understand than for women. Emilio’s assessment, not that men also need to hear this message but that only men need to hear this message, virtually excludes women from the audience and from the issue of domestic violence itself. This power

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111 Interview, January 17, 2013.
dynamic emerges during the argument, as Emilio interrupts Daniela and speaks over her. Daniela’s opinion is ignored despite the fact that she offers an understanding of this song and of the issue of domestic violence in general that Emilio has clearly never considered. Throughout Secreto’s song, women are similarly silenced and dismissed.

The woman character Secreto raps and sings about is powerless: she is “drowning in her feelings,” and she continues to love her abuser. There is only one role for the woman to occupy in this song, and that is the role of the “damsel in distress.” It follows, therefore, that she needs a man to rescue her. Men are given two options of roles to play in this song: that of the abuser or that of the savior. The roles are closely linked—they function in contrast to each other, and in relation to the damsel. Whether the man goes down the path of the abuser or chooses to become the savior, he still has the power to determine the damsel’s fate. At the end of the song, the imagined abuser and the male audience are deterred from mistreating women not only, or even primarily, because of the damage this does to the woman, but because of the threat of other men who might play the savior role and take the woman away. This is meant to be a powerful argument discouraging men from abusing their women; it relies on a threat directed towards the abuser’s masculinity, measured by his ability to keep his woman and to “win” against other men who attempt to take her.

The argument assumes that the only thing the abuser needs to worry about is other men, and not the woman herself, which makes sense in the context of the song,

112 From my time spent with Daniela and her family I know that she has personally experienced domestic violence. Because she did not talk about it directly to me, and because I don’t know many details, I do not include it as a subject of analysis. But Daniela was the most vocal of my interview subjects on this issue and her personal experiences are relevant to that fact, which is why I mention them here. It also highlights how problematic it is that her voice is silenced in this argument.
because this woman is certainly not going anywhere on her own. The issue of abuse towards women is completely detached from the woman herself, and the woman becomes an object that will change hands from one man to another, to do with what he will. Both abuser and savior express their masculinity physically on the woman’s body: one will “violate her;” the other will “make love to her.” There is of course a significant difference between these actions, but in this song the woman’s agency and independence are not considered any more in the actions of the savior than they are in the actions of the abuser.

The news clip in the middle of the song is the only moment that suggests the possibility of a woman making her own choices about her relationships. Aside from the voice recording at the beginning of the song, which introduces the damsel in distress character through a plea for help, the news clip is the only time during the song that a woman’s voice is heard. In this clip, the female reporter first directs her comments towards men, before recommending that women end “bad” relationships early before it’s “too late.” The reporter assumes that women have agency but ignores the various complications—for example, the tendency for women to continue to love their abusers, as the woman in this song does—that often get in the way of following this basic advice. It is interesting, despite the rather unhelpful content, that a news clip is used in the song at all. Violence against women is an issue that has emerged in the mainstream media in the Dominican Republic, and the country participates in global campaigns such as the Día Internacional de la Eliminación de la Violencia Contra la Mujer (International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women). This increased coverage of the issue has contributed to awareness
among people I spoke with, an awareness that has increased even further since the release of “No La Maltrates.” Daniela told me that:

_Ahora mismo, la violencia contra la mujer es mayormente lo que está pasando._ [...] _[Me llama la atención en canciones] porque es una cosa real que pasa. Es lo que mayormente está pasando, lo que más le llega a la gente. En el país, es mayormente eso._

Right now, violence against women is what’s happening the most. [...] [It catches my attention in songs] because it’s a real thing that happens. It’s what’s happening the most, it’s what affects people the most. In this country, it’s mostly that.

Whether or not this is statistically accurate, it is true that violence against women is a topic that is being discussed a lot in the mainstream media, if not more than other issues, then certainly more than domestic abuse has been talked about in the past. This has created a space in which a rapper like Secreto can release a song about this topic and expect a level of success that may not have been possible in the early years of Dominican hip hop. This is certainly important progress. But the emphasis on obvious physical violence against women—on _femicidios_—also leaves a space in which hyper-sexualized images of women continue to circulate. Physical abuse and violence against women receive virtually all of the mainstream attention that is devoted to gender, and hyper-sexualized images are not seen as harmful. Looking at and being excited by sexual images of women is compatible with the masculine character of the savior, who appreciates a woman’s body instead of breaking it. Between these two alternatives, sexual desire is preferable to sexual violence.

Unfortunately, the dichotomy is never actually this simple, and this brand of sexual desire that places all agency with the male observer fits into the same ideological structures that contribute to blatant domestic violence. The sexual images circulated in and promoted by Dominican hip hop culture contribute to the construction of

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113 Interview, January 17, 2013.
Dominican women as nothing more than bodies available for men to look at and touch. Even when these images do not promote physical violence, this construction and the images that work to produce it are harmful in themselves, as they leave few alternatives for how women can be represented or represent themselves.

The strength of these representations of women in Dominican rap becomes clear in an examination of Dominican women who have succeeded as Dominican hip hop artists. These examples are very few and the women who have “made it” in Dominican hip hop have done so largely by inserting themselves into this masculinist genre, rather than by critiquing or subverting it. Furthermore, those moments when these artists do work to construct alternative representations and narratives tend to be ignored or forgotten, both by the music industry and by Dominican hip hop consumers like those with whom I spoke. Putting the work accomplished by two women hip hop artists in conversation with the interviews I conducted in Cabarete contributes to a more complete understanding of how gender functions in Dominican hip hop culture and in the urban lower-class communities where this culture has become most popular.

There were only two artists that all of my interview subjects mentioned when I asked them about Dominican female hip hop artists: Milka La Mas Dura [sic] (Milka The Hardest or The Toughest) and La Materialista (The Materialist), also known as “La Reyna del Hip Hop” [sic]. Both of these women have produced rap songs, as well as a number of songs outside of the rap genre, especially dance music including techno, pop merengue and, in the case of Milka, dembow. Both women have had fairly prolific solo careers, and have collaborated on songs with most of the
leading male Dominican hip hop artists. They are very much a part of the Dominican hip hop industry and are generally taken seriously by male rappers in their collaborations. Among the people I spoke with, however, neither artist was very popular, and none of my interview subjects seemed to know more than one or two songs by each artist. Neither woman was mentioned in any of my interviews until I asked specifically about female hip hop artists; when I did ask, the responses tended to diminish these women’s success and place their status as artists far below that of male hip hop artists.

David talked about his perception of how these women rappers have managed to defy the odds and become “a little famous” in the rap genre:

Oye, lo que pasó con [La Materialista] fue que ella grabó con unos artistas pegados. Como de Lápiz Conciente que estaba sonando, ella grabó con él. Ella era novia de Lápiz Conciente, es famoso, [ella] grabó con él y por eso ella tuvo éxito. [...] Por eso ella se hizo un poco famosa. Pero si ella salió sola, yo dudo que iba a estar allí. Porque a la gente no le gusta las canciones de chicas en el rap. [...] Yo mejor escucho a el Lápiz que escucharle a ella, pero si ella cantó con el Lápiz, una canción buena, yo les escucho a los dos. [...] Pero si una chica sale sola no se pega, lo dudo. No he visto ni una en la República Dominicana que salió sola. La Materialista salió con el Lápiz, y Milka, más nadie.

Listen, what happened with [La Materialista] was that she recorded with some artists pegados [literally “stuck,” i.e. popular]. Like Lápiz Conciente who was being played, she recorded with him. She was Lápiz Conciente’s girlfriend, he’s famous, she recorded with him and that’s why she was successful. [...] That’s why she became a little famous. But if she started solo, I doubt she’d be famous. Because people don’t like songs by girls in rap. [...] I’d rather listen to Lápiz than listen to her, but if she sang with Lápiz, a good song, I’ll listen to both of them. [...] But if a girl starts solo she doesn’t catch on, I doubt she would. I haven’t seen even one [woman] in the Dominican Republic who started solo. La Materialista started with Lápiz, and Milka, no one else.114

David’s comments are not entirely accurate but he is correct that both La Materialista and Milka started out doing collaborations (although Milka did not start with El...

114 Interview, January 3, 2013.
La Materialista did gain her place in the rap genre through a song and music video she released with Lápiz Conciente called “Los Protagonistas” (“The Protagonists”).

There is no indication that she was ever his girlfriend, as David claims, and it is interesting that David assumes that there must have been a romantic, and presumably sexual, relationship between El Lápiz and La Materialista for her to have gained the kind of access required to release a song and music video with him. Regardless, the song did jumpstart La Materialista’s career. The lyrics mostly consist of both El Lápiz and La Materialista bragging about themselves as better and more authentic rappers than the rest, a theme that is common in the rap genre. The video is shot in a street, and the two rappers are standing by new luxury cars that are a clear symbol of wealth. La Materialista also flaunts her wealth, and is dressed in very tight, revealing clothing in a style I would describe as “urban-glam,” sporting a lot of gold jewelry and large sunglasses. The camera only occasionally focuses on her chest and on her

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115 Because of the lack of reliable information about the earlier songs in both of these women’s careers, it was difficult to tell which songs were actually their firsts. I am confident, however, that the songs and videos I discuss here were the first that gained recognition, and I have not found any indication that they released earlier solo songs; if they did, they were not popular enough or official enough to end up on the internet.

rear end, but her presentation is still a sexualized one. The song is not sexual in content, however, and is split evenly between the two rappers. La Materialista is presented on the same level as El Lápiz as a rapper (and not, for example, as an accompanying singer), but she is also presented sexually through her clothing, makeup, and hair, which she wears straight in the softer, more feminine style Rebeca and Marbeli link to a “sexy” look.

La Materialista has released two solo rap videos since the “Los Protagonistas” video, and has appeared in a number of collaborations with other rappers, some of which are more explicitly sexual; recently she has transitioned completely away from rap to pop-merengue dance songs.

Milka La Mas Dura has released or appeared on about twice as many songs as La Materialista, but she has far fewer videos, and her most popular hits—the songs that have had videos released with them—have been dembow or dance songs rather than rap songs. Her first video, however, was a rap video, and it was the video that

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placed her within the rap genre, as “Los Protagonistas” did for La Materialista. This video is for a song called “Capea El Dough All Star” which is a new version of an older song, “Capea El Dough.” The original was a single released on Lápiz Conciente’s first solo album in 2006 that featured Toxic Crow and two other rappers. The “All Star” version released by Toxic Crow two years later features a large group of less-well known artists rapping over the same pista. Since then many other versions have been produced, including some featuring rappers from different Spanish speaking countries. This “series” fits into a practice in Dominican hip hop—a practice that is common with Jamaican riddims and Puerto Rican reggaeton pistas as well—of featuring the same beats, done by a producer, on a number of songs by different vocal artists who perform different lyrics. In the case of “Capea El Dough,” the versions are linked explicitly by the use not only of the same track but the same title as well; each new version gains status from its connection to the popular original. Thus Milka’s entrance into the rap genre was quite different from La Materialista’s.

In the “Capea El Dough All Star” video, which is extremely basic and features

the rappers in front of a black background, Milka is dressed in tight but very basic
clothing with some jewelry and her straightened hair dyed red in a style that is
common among Dominican women. La Materialista was clearly “dressed up” and
flaunted her wealth as well as her sexuality, but Milka is dressed and made-up like
any woman you might see in the barrio; she also portrays her sexuality, but it is not
exaggerated to the extent sexuality is in La Materialista’s video. The lack of a set in
the video contributes to a bare aesthetic that means the rappers must literally speak
for themselves. Because of the large number of rappers on the “Capea El Dough All
Star” track, Milka is not highlighted the way La Materialista was. But “Capea El
Dough” itself is already a famous track, and most popular Dominican rappers have
been featured on one of the versions of this song, whether before or after becoming
famous solo artists. Milka therefore emerges into the genre with a lot of “cred” from
the male rappers who preceded her on the original track, and from those who
surround her in the “All Star” version. La Materialista enters the genre as a woman
rapper, but Milka, while there is no doubt about her gender, puts far more emphasis
on her role as a rapper among many rappers, and not on her role as a woman among
many men.

The conversations I had about these female rappers and about women’s
potential as rappers in general were usually framed around the two main elements of
rap: flow and content. Arguments about flow were concerned with masculinity as a
performance expressed through vocal quality and “hardness,” while the arguments
about content treated masculinity as something that was lived and experienced by
males and only very rarely by females. These two arguments are closely connected
but analyzing the differences between them builds a more complete understanding of what masculinity looks like in rap, and how women are able or unable to navigate these “requirements.” Antony, Endi, and Yefri talk about some of the different performative elements that women need to master in order to be taken seriously:

**Endi:** Milka…
**Antony:** La Materialista. Esas dos, dominicanamente. En los EEUU, Beyoncé…. De rap? Nicki Minaj, ésta otra Rihanna. Están buenas allá [se rien]. […] Mayormente las mujeres [aquí] no se dedican a eso.
**Hannah:** Pero ¿porqué piensan que es así?
**Antony:** Creo que les gusta la cocina mejor [se rien]. Es la verdad. Todos los hombres tienen que trabajar […].
**Endi:** Las mujeres no tienen la voz para raperar, sino para las cosas románticas, porque tienen la voz sencilla. Por eso es que en realidad ellas no están en eso. […] Pero hay mujeres que tienen la voz agresiva también. Que lo hacen bien.
**Antony:** ¿Tú te imagina una mujer que canta como un hombre? Lo haría mal.
**Hannah:** Pero ¿porqué piensan que es así?
**Antony:** Creo que les gusta la cocina mejor [se rien]. Es la verdad. Todos los hombres tienen que trabajar […].
**Endi:** Women don’t have the right voice for rapping; they have a voice for romantic stuff, because they have a simple voice. That’s really why women aren’t in rap as much. […] But there are women that have an aggressive voice, too. That do it well.
**Antony:** Can you imagine a woman singing like a man? She would do it badly.
**Hannah:** But you said you like Nicki Minaj. She doesn’t sound exactly like a man but she has an aggressive voice, right?
**Antony:** I like Nicki Minaj, sure, but for a lot of reasons [indicates a woman’s body with his hands; they laugh]. She’s vacana.
**Hannah:** How do you think they got started in rap if it’s a genre with so few women?
**Endi:** […] [People] can see that [the girls] have talent, and they help them go forward.
**Hannah:** And what kind of talent would it be that [these people] see in the girls?
**Endi:** A voice that’s a little more aggressive. Really, I like Milka’s voice, to [rap] like a man. Because she does it aggressively like that, and she does it better than a lot of men.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ **Buenas** literally means “good,” but when used with the verb estar to refer to women it implies that they are “good” physically, that they’re sexy, or that they’re good at being sexy, i.e. good at sex itself, or good at presenting an image (for example through their dancing or other body movements) that suggests they are.

¹²⁰ Interview, January 9, 2013.
Antony and Endi have very different opinions about women rappers, and Endi clearly took them much more seriously as rappers than Antony did. While Endi agreed that there are various, supposedly natural, differences between men and women—specifically in their voices—that make men better rappers than women, he was completely open to the possibility that some women would be able to accomplish a masculine vocal quality and even do this “better than a lot of men.” This is a significant statement, especially amidst the constant sexual jokes Antony made that reduced women rappers to their bodies. Antony consistently brought the conversation back to the sex appeal of these artists, whether American or Dominican. And when Endi talked about women rappers needing a more aggressive voice, Antony seemed slightly repulsed by this idea. Apparently, the main reason Antony likes female rappers like Nicki Minaj is because of their hyper-feminine, hyper-sexualized bodies, which compensate for their masculine vocal performance. Antony’s statements were all delivered humorously; he was not making hard-line sexist statements and it is very possible that the casual setting for the conversation and the fact that he was speaking to me along with two of his male friends influenced his comments. But the consistently sexual nature of his jokes during our conversation about female rappers is significant. Women were not a serious enough subject for Antony to refrain from making jokes, even when I questioned his statements and tried to get a more serious response. Endi, whom I had not known previously, took the conversation and the women rappers he spoke about more seriously. His comments were more typical in
that they were thoughtful but also revealed many naturalized concepts about gender
performance in Dominican hip hop.

The issue of vocal quality that Endi mentioned came up consistently in my
interviews; it was both one of the most important elements of flow that was discussed
and one of the most significant examples of a perceived natural difference between
men and women. The naturalization of this and other differences works to obscure
the numerous societal restrictions that limit women’s participation in Dominican rap.
The women I spoke with agreed that vocal quality was important, and that men had a
better voice for rapping:

Marbeli: Bueno, a mí me gusta más la [canción] de los hombres, pero la de las
mujeres también es bonita. Porque es más vacano [de los hombres]. Sí, los hombres
tienen más flow para cantar, como que cantan mejor.
Rebeca: Sí, porque, cómo te digo, que las mujeres quieren subir mucho la voz en la
canción. Como aumentan la voz. Tú ves, como que suben mucho la voz, y las
canciones están muy altas. Tú la subes mucho, mucho, el volumen, y se escucha mal.
Hannah: ¿Porque están como gritando, más que los hombres?
Rebeca: [Se ríe] Sí.

Marbeli: Well, I like men’s [songs] more, but women’s songs are also pretty. Because
[men’s songs] are more vacano. Yeah, men have more flow for rapping, like they rap
better.
Rebeca: Yeah, because, how do I put this, that women want to raise their voice a lot in
the song. Like they increase their voice. See, like they raise their voice a lot, and the
songs are very loud. You turn the volume up a lot, and it sounds bad.
Hannah: Because they’re like yelling, more than men?
Rebeca: [Laughing] Yeah.121

Marbeli’s use of the word bonita (pretty, beautiful) to describe women’s raps and
vacano to describe men’s raps is a clear indication of the importance of gender in the
hip hop genre. Although Marbeli and Rebeca both see women as being able to be
vacana in their clothing choices, the raps produced by female artists are still
described in feminized terms, based largely on their perceived lack of flow. Rebeca’s
comments focus on the specific effort she hears women rappers making to change

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121 Interview, January 12, 2013.
their voices into the more “aggressive” voice Endi describes as ideal for rap.

Rebeca’s description assumes a natural difference between men’s and women’s voices. There is no consideration of the possibility that men are also “raising” and “increasing” their voices when they rap in order to build up their performance of the duro (hard) masculinity that rappers are expected to portray. More aggressive voices are automatically associated with males, and males are automatically associated with masculinity without any recognition of the performance required whether the rapper is male or female. Females, linked to feminine traits like a more “simple” voice, are the only ones who are perceived as needing to change their “nature” in order to sound like a rapper, or more precisely, to sound like the masculinized ideal of a rapper.

The other important element of the rap genre is the content of rap songs, and my interview subjects saw this content in highly gendered terms as well. Yonil, David, and Leo had a long conversation about the influence of gendered spaces and activities on rap lyrics:

David: [Las raperas féneminas] cantan para las mujeres. Así como [Milka] canta esto como, “Dale ven, ven que yo quiero comerte, yo sé que yo te gusto, que yo quiero comerte.” Ella cantó esa cosa como diciéndoles a los chicos que vengan pa’ dónde ella. Entonces a las mujeres les gusta mucho la canción. Y a los chicos que la escuchan, les gusta la canción porque ella los excita, cantando. Por eso ya ella es un poco famosa […].

Yonil: Las mujeres no tienen tanto de que hablar en el rap porque las mujeres no están como siempre los hombres en la esquina. O como los hombres siempre dicen muchísimas cosas, como tienen mucho de qué escribir. […] Bueno, algunas sí pueden hacer un rapeo, porque tienen algo de qué escribir. Por ahora yo solamente entiendo esa parte de que las mujeres no están metidas mucho

David: [Women rappers] sing for women. Like how [Milka] raps this like, “Come on, come here, I want to eat you, I know you like me, I want to eat you.” She sings that part like telling boys to come to where she is. So women like that song a lot. And boys that hear the song like it because she excites them, singing. That’s why she’s a little famous […].

Yonil: Women don’t have as much to say in rap because women aren’t always out on the corner like men. Or like men always say a lot of things about the street, like they have a lot to write about. […] Well, some women can rap, because they have something to write about. But for now I just understand that women aren’t really out as much on the bloques ("blocks," i.e. the criminal street spaces) […].

Hannah: So where are the women then?
en los bloques [...].

**Hannah:** Y las mujeres, ¿dónde están entonces?

**Yonil:** Bueno, muchas mujeres sí también están [en la calle]. Pero naturalmente, como ahora Milka y esas mujeres que están sonando más aquí, yo no escucho que ellas hacen música como hablando sobre la calle, tiro, y drogas, y todo eso. Entonces como dice David, ellas hablan de su sexualidad... ellas hablan de “sex.”

David’s first statement is complicated. He claims that “female rappers sing for women,” but means something very different by this statement than I initially thought. Instead of suggesting that women rappers produce raps that appeal to women listeners, David means that women rappers sing as the woman in a sexual conversation with a man who is sometimes present as a collaborator on the track, or is sometimes only present in the audience. A more accurate statement would be that “female rappers sing for men,” as they evoke a type of sexual fantasy for male listeners that is common in raps done by men. According to David, there is no other subject matter for women rappers. His recitation of the lyrics of Milka’s song “Dale Ven Ven” (“Come on Come Come”) are also interesting, largely because he misremembers them. The actual lyrics of the chorus are:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Dale ven, ven si tú quieres cogerme} & \quad \text{Come on, come, come if you want to fuck me} \\
(\text{Tú eres el delincuente que me pone demente}) & \quad (\text{You’re the delinquent}^{124} \text{ that makes me crazy}) \\
\text{Dale ven, ven si tú quieres cogerme} & \quad \text{Come on, come, come if you want to fuck me}
\end{align*}
\]

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122 Interview, January 3, 2013.
123 The verb *venir* (to come) has a double meaning, as the same verb has in English, so that the song title and the chorus both beckon to a man—“come here, come here”—and encourage him to ejaculate—“come, come.”
124 The word “delinquent” (*delincuente*) in Dominican hip hop is usually a positive term, and is common in hip hop songs. It evokes a young Dominican man with a lot of “swagger” and implies that he is sexually attractive and sexually successful. The word suggests troublemaking, rather than the actual criminal activity evoked by the English word, and by the Dominican “tíguere.”

(Yo se que yo te gusto que tú quieres comerme)

There is not a big difference between David’s version and the actual lyrics, but even this slight difference is significant. In David’s version, Milka is beckoning a man so that she can give him pleasure, but in the actual version, Milka is beckoning a man so that he can give her pleasure and she makes it clear that if he wants her, he needs to come get her. The song is highly sexual, and like many expressions of aggressive female sexuality it operates in a space where agency is not always clear, as women claim and assert their own sexuality while simultaneously playing into long-standing hyper-sexual representations of women that men, especially in the hip hop genre, have created and promoted. This ambivalence makes the difference in wording especially important; in David’s version, Milka’s agency is considerably diminished, while in her version, she is in charge of her self, her desires, and of the man she addresses.

It is not surprising that out of all of Milka’s songs the lyrics David (mis)remembers are from “Dale Ven Ven.” This track was one of her first solo successes and is still one of her best known songs. It is actually a dembow song, but it has an early dembow pista that is not as fast as the more recent, dance-focused dembow songs and therefore sounds different from the dembow songs currently dominating the genre. The single was released on her first solo album La Recopilación (The Collaboration), which is almost entirely a rap album and which features collaborations with a number of famous male rappers like Toxic Crow and Black Point. In most of the rap songs on the album Milka’s rapping is entirely non-sexual, as in the track with Black Point called “Si Quieren Guerra” (“If They Want
“War”), an aggressive song threatening people who “want problems.” Other songs contain only a few sexual references. But the only song from this album that got much publicity as a single was “Dale Ven Ven,” an entirely sexual song that lacks the “hard” masculine rapping of the rest of the album.

This issue of popular reception is quite telling. Yonil and David both agree that women rappers only rap about sex, because this is something—perhaps the only thing—women know about; they aren’t in the streets, and they aren’t participating in the lifestyle required for rap. These statements are actually completely false, especially in the case of Milka and this rap album. La Materialista’s solo rap songs are also non-sexual, but while Milka presents herself as an actor in the calle, La Materialista tends to treat the problems of the calle in the context of a lament about political issues in the country and in the world, rather than as problems that affect her personally. However, given that the songs Yonil and David have heard by women

rappers are the songs that have become most famous, the “truth” of their comments is easier to understand. It is not the case that women can’t perform the right voice for rapping, or that they don’t have anything other than sex to rap about. But it does seem to be the case that very few people will listen to these women if they deviate from their sexual role within hip hop culture, and therefore the songs that are promoted and publicized are usually sexual in nature. The tendency for sexual songs to get more publicity reinforces the perception that women can’t rap like men, and that their only worth as rappers is a sexual one.

In most of my conversations about women in Dominican hip hop, my interview subjects described differences between men and women that they perceived to be “true” and “natural,” as shown in the comments above. There was only one moment in all of my interviews when some of the structural issues that limit women’s participation in hip hop were mentioned. This moment came at La Cancha, as I interviewed the group of boys who often play basketball there. The conversation began like most I had about women rappers:

Yarlin: Algunas mujeres no tienen talento.
Luis: No, es que [...] para uno hacer rap, tiene que vivir mucho en la calle [...], y entonces ellas no están [en el género de rap].
Vladi: Lo que pasa es que a la mujer no le dan la misma libertad que le dan a los hombres. No les dejan salir pa’ donde ellas quieran, si son menores: a las menores cuidan. Pero los hombres—un muchacho puede salir pa’ dondequiera.

Yarlin: Some women don’t have talent.
Luis: No, it’s that […] for someone to rap, they need to live a lot in the calle […] , so then [women] aren’t [in the rap genre].
Vladi: What happens is that they don’t give women the same freedom as they give to men. They don’t let girls go out where they want, if they’re minors: they watch the [female] minors. But men—a guy can go out wherever he wants.126

Vladi’s comment was the only time any of my interview subjects, male or female, mentioned any social restrictions placed on women and not on men. Vladi and the

126 Interview, January 9, 2013.
other boys in this interview were some of the youngest people with whom I spoke, which suggests that such restrictions may be especially visible to them. Vladi notes that the women whom the unspecified adults are protecting are menores (minors). These restrictions may relax when women become adults, marry, and then have responsibilities to their families that often require them to be quite active in their neighborhoods and perhaps to have paying jobs outside of the home. But girls around Vladi’s age are still being protected. Although adult women may not be “protected” in the same way that girls are, there are still clear expectations about where they should be and what they should be doing. Boys like Vladi, and even boys much younger than Vladi, never experience the explicit restrictions that are placed on girls of their same age: they can “go out wherever they want.” Vladi’s comment is important not only because it refers to an actual social restriction that directly affects girls and young women and has real consequences in the hip hop genre, but also because of what it reveals about the social norms in his community that dictate how boys and girls should be treated. Vladi’s comment describes a gendered social practice, but it is also a generalization; in reality girls face varying levels of protection, especially in poorer communities like the Callejón and Barrio Blanco where two-parent families are not the norm. The strength of hip hop culture in these communities means that the streets are an alluring space for young people of both genders. Despite the fact that gendered social controls may not function as well in practice as they do in theory, the theory is still crucial to the perception of women in hip hop culture. Women like Milka La Mas Dura and La Materialista who become rappers have escaped these restrictions and broken out of their “place.” They are seen
as deviations from an important norm, while male rappers are seen—especially by men and women of the lower class communities from which rap music emerged—as embodying a masculine ideal. Milka and La Materialista have therefore been most successful in collaborations with male rappers who function as an endorsement for their “cred.” By emphasizing their (hetero)sexuality they place themselves within the acceptable bounds of hip hop femininity.

**Innovations and Limitations: Dembow as Gendered Performance**

Dembow, unlike rap, revolves primarily around physical movement and dance performance. The exaggerated qualities of dembow performance invite exaggerated performances of gender and sexual identities. The most significant differences between rap and dembow appear in performances of masculinity. The masculinity that dominates in dembow culture is far less aggressive than the hard, sometimes violent masculinity performed and expressed in rap music, and it often incorporates effeminate and homoerotic elements. Despite the more flexible masculinity that is performed on the dembow “stage” (whether that stage be a street corner or the set of a music video), it is difficult to know whether these gender performances denote actual ideological shifts about gender and sexuality.  

While I noted a number of elements

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127 I do not want to entirely dismiss the possibility of an ideological shift in Dominican youth culture in general. My analysis questions this shift because it did not emerge in my work among young Dominicans in Cabarete, and because of the heterosexism that continues to dominate mainstream Dominican hip hop media. There are some exceptions however, most significantly the homosexual male dembow artist La Delfi (also spelled La Delfy). La Delfi performs in videos both as an effeminate male homosexual, and in drag as a woman (which is the reason I refrain from using gender pronouns here, as La Delfi seems to identify at times as a homosexual man, and at times as a trans woman). La Delfi’s lyrics and music videos are highly sexually explicit and objectify men as the object of this sexual desire. La Delfi was featured on a popular song that I heard in nightclubs in Cabarete, but none of my interview subjects mentioned La Delfi. La Delfi has worked with prominent Dominican producers and with popular hip hop artists, and La Delfi has released a number of songs
of dembow dance performance that indicate a more inclusive definition of masculine performance, my interview subjects rarely saw these performative elements as anything more than humorous, theatrical moments in dembow dance shows, and many of the elements I noticed weren’t explicitly connected to gender or to homosexuality in my interviews at all. The most significant limitation to this gender flexibility emerges, however, when feminine performances in dembow are considered. Dembow culture is as much a male-dominated culture as Dominican rap. While male dembow performances may be less aggressively masculine, feminine performances continue to be hyper-sexualized. This hyper-sexualization is most obvious in the images of women in dembow music videos, which often correspond to highly sexual lyrics. Performances by female dancers, a minority even in local spaces where their participation increases, consistently revolve around sexual moves at the expense of the more technical moves that define dembow and distinguish it from other Latin/o hip hop dances like reggaeton. The paradigmatic Dominican relationship between masculinity and femininity, therefore, remains largely unchanged in dembow culture. The space for flexibility in gender performance is almost entirely restricted to masculine performances. Masculine performances and their shift towards the effeminate and the homoerotic deserve considerable attention and analysis, as this shift is not insignificant. But it is important that focusing on these performances not obscure the considerable limitations on female dembow dancers and artists that remain and are even reinforced in various aspects of dembow and videos, but because no one I spoke with seemed aware of La Delfi’s existence, my own assessment of La Delfi’s significance in Dominican hip hop is also limited. I do not want to dismiss La Delfi’s work or the possibility that La Delfi in fact does mark a shift in heterosexist attitudes, but this shift did not arise in my field work in Cabarete.
The effeminate and homoerotic elements hinted at in the tighter, brighter clothing trends popular among dembow dancers appear more obviously in dembow dance movements themselves. These elements appear at all levels of dembow performance, but vary in terms of how intentionally and self-consciously they are performed by the dancers and understood by the audience. The fact that the majority of dembow teams are entirely male heightens the potential for homoerotic tensions to arise, as the homoerotic is a constant presence in homosocial spaces, especially in spaces where claiming a homosexual identity is rarely an acceptable option. Many of the moves and stunts male dancers perform together reveal this homoerotic element. The dance style of dembow features many movements that have been performed predominantly by women in other hip hop styles, namely those that are focused around the culo or chapas (“ass” and “buttocks,” respectively). These slang terms convey the attitude toward these moves; there is no doubt about which body part is meant to be attracting attention, and the attention it is meant to receive is always sexual. Female dembow dancers perform these moves more often, and usually perform variations of these moves that are more sexual and more difficult, but

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128 Chris Girman offers a thorough ethnographical and sociological analysis of these dynamics among Latin American men in general and in the figure of the Dominican tíguere specifically. His analysis supported and expanded upon many of my own experiences in the Dominican Republic. In my own observations of dembow and of male homosocial spaces and behaviors, there was a notable lack of concern about homoerotic behaviors or performances. These behaviors could take place despite the consistent condemnation of actually “being” a maricón or a pájaro because participating in homoerotic and even homosexual acts does not necessarily mean one “is” homosexual in the Dominican Republic, or in Latin America more generally, as Girman shows. Girman writes, “If the tíguere’s biggest success is fulfilling his own wants, his own desires, then the tíguere who desires some type of (homo)erotic encounter is more likely to listen to the dictates of his most intimate desires than any societal proscription. […]. Dominican men, then, have control of their own sexual legitimacy.” For the tíguere, asserting his sexual desires on another body, or achieving sexual pleasure from/with another body (an acceptance of a “passive” sexual role which is rare in other Latin American heterosexual masculinities), conforms with the tíguere’s image whether the other body is male or female (Girman, Mucho Macho, 153).
the basic versions have become staples in male dembow performances as well. There are also various dembow steps that are effeminate not because they reference a move usually performed by women, but because they reference homosexual male performances. One common step, for example, is clearly intended to reference the stereotypical, exaggerated walk of a homosexual male or, more accurately given that this dance step is clearly a mocking one and not an expression of homosexual identity, of a pájaro or maricón. This step looks very similar to certain dance movements used in the U.S. dance style of vogue, which originated in the African American and Latino LGBT community in the 1980s. While no one I spoke with seemed to be aware of vogue, the aesthetic similarity in these moves is striking and clarifies the reference in dembow to certain homosexual male performances.

Dembow stunts are also often sexual in some way, and usually create some of the most explicitly sexual moments in a performance. There are a number of very common and popular stunts that position two or more male dancers in sexual positions, such as with one dancer straddling another, or with one dancer’s head between another’s legs. Many of these moves are performed as non-sexual stunts, with no acknowledgement by the dancers that the position is potentially sexual. The audiences I have been in and witnessed in videos respond in a similarly non-sexual way when the stunts are performed “innocently,” and cheer the stunt without any added sexual excitement. If these sexual positions were more rare, or were never acknowledged by dancers or by audience members, their link to the homoerotic would be tenuous. But acknowledging these sexual positions and inserting a second

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meaning into the dance performance is a prominent feature of dembow performance.

The attitudes expressed by the dancers as they perform are crucial to the reception and understanding of the moves and stunts they execute. Dembow is a dance culture that encourages exaggeration and excess, and highlighting sexual moments that could have been ignored is a very common way to emphasize this theatrical quality. The dancers themselves therefore determine when and how the sexual subtext emerges in their performances. Most of the time, this subtext becomes clear through a facial expression that a dancer directs at the audience while performing a move that may or may not be overtly sexual. In one dance team video, for example, two dancers begin to perform a challenging, popular stunt that features both dancers with their heads between their partner’s thighs throughout the entire stunt. At the beginning of the stunt, the dancer who is standing upright, holding his partner upside-down in front of him, looks directly at the camera from between his partner’s legs and sticks his tongue out at the audience.

[Image 19. Two members of the dembow team “El Combo de los 15.”](130)

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This “wink” at the audience cues the recognition of a sexual element in the stunt, as it draws attention away from the stunt as a whole, which is a truly impressive physical feat that involves the dancers’ entire bodies, and specifically focuses the audience’s attention on the dancer’s mouth and its proximity to his partner’s genitals and backside. The dancers I watched in person and online consistently utilized such gestures to control the dynamic of their show. Dembow dance teams draw from the same repertoire of stunts, but audiences respond differently when a stunt becomes sexually charged through a dancer’s facial expression. Conversely, audiences rarely respond in this sexually-charged way when the same stunt is performed without any reference to its potential sexuality. The tendency for dancers to draw out sexual innuendos in their performances, and the fact that dancers are able to dictate the visibility of this sexual element to the audience, clarifies the link between homoerotic behavior and dembow performance and brings it out of the realm of the coincidental.

While dembow performances are full of these subtle sexual innuendos, dance performances often feature explicitly sexual stunts and jokes as well. Some of these stunts revolve around sexual acts such as felatio and masturbation, and usually feature one dancer using his arm to stand in for the penis of another dancer. A move from the official music video for El Alfa’s song “Agárrate Que Te Solté,” which features dancers in a non-choreographed street setting, involves one dancer spitting water from between the legs of his partner, who sticks his tongue out, to simulate ejaculation.
These stunts are created and performed solely as sexual jokes, instead of as an impressive trick that happens to feature potentially sexual elements. The humorous quality of these stunts makes them an acceptable expression of sexuality and elicits a positive reaction from the audience, which is crucial to dembow performance. While in music videos audiences may not be physically present, the primary spaces of dembow dance performance are local and the reactions of the local audience determine the success of an individual dancer or of a dance team. This relationship is more explicit at the competencias, where audiences strongly influence the scoring of the judges, a fact of which dembow teams are very aware. This necessitates the use by dancers and dance teams of stunts that are ever more physically impressive, ever more humorous, and ever more shocking and exciting to the audience. Sexual content is usually the most effective way to incorporate both humor and shock-value in a performance, whether this sexuality is incorporated into a physical stunt, or highlighted in a purely sexual moment.

The most obvious and explicit examples of gender play and homoerotic and
effeminate behavior are the cross-dressing skits that occur in male dembow dance team performances. 131 These skits are most common in choreographed dembow routines, especially in competencias de dembow, when eliciting a reaction from the audience is especially important. The first time I witnessed cross-dressing as a part of dembow culture was at the competencia de dembow at La Cancha in Cabarete; it also appears in almost all of the videos I watched of other local competencias and in a number of acts done by dembow teams as part of “Dembow En Pinta,” which is a segment of the Dominican television program “Aquí Se Habla Español” (“Spanish Spoken Here”). “Dembow En Pinta” is essentially a televised competencia with a live audience and a number of judges, often including Dominican dembowceros and other hip hop artists as well as the program hosts. While this competencia is more official than the local ones that take place in canchas, it largely follows the same structure, with the primary difference (apart from the setting and the access to a larger audience) being that competitors only perform in pairs, instead of in larger teams. The fact that these cross-dressing skits, as well as less-explicit sexual stunts and effeminate dance moves, are performed in televised dembow acts speaks both to their prominence in the genre, and to their acceptability among audiences.

These skits feature one or two male dancers who dress up as a “woman,” a term I place in quotes because it is never intended to be a believable performance. Usually the dancers pull a skirt over their jeans, and a cheap wig onto their heads.

131 I have never observed—personally or on the internet—any female dembow dance teams performing a cross-dressing skit. At the competencia at La Cancha, one team included male and female dancers. They performed a cross-dressing skit, but only the male dancers were involved; despite the fact that there was a female dancer on the team, a male dancer still played the woman in the skit. The all-female team that performed that night also had a skit, but it was not sexual. That being said, female dembow teams may incorporate masculine clothing trends into their outfits.
Occasionally dancers wear an entire dress over their clothing, or roll up their t-shirts to reveal their stomachs and make the costume more “feminine.” The skits either open a dance performance or interrupt it, and are almost always accompanied by bachata, merengue, or romantic music, instead of dembow. The musical shift is an important aspect of the performance. The abrupt switch to a more traditional and widely accessible musical style creates space for the entrance of a “feminine” character onstage, as the more romantic content evokes a feminine aesthetic or at least an aesthetic that is not exclusively masculine. Often, especially when the singers of these songs are female, the lyrics dictate the plotline of the skit. The skits are short and enact a basic romantic storyline that is highly exaggerated, as plots often are in romantic songs. The feminine character, lacking any convincing visual presentation as a woman, is conveyed through various stereotypes. One prominent example is the abusadora (literally “abuser;” “heartbreaker”).

![Image 21. The cross-dressing skit from Los Piratas’ performance: the “woman,” performing the role of the abusadora, pushes the begging masculine character away from “her.”](image)

This character is a popular one in Latin hip hop and in Latin music more generally:
she is an object of desire, but she plays with or scorns the affection of a masculine “hero” (usually the singer), which of course only makes her more desirable. She may also be violent towards men. While not every skit features an abusadora character, most skits that I’ve seen do highlight a violent side of the feminine character: in an example I saw performed at La Cancha, one dancer was fought over by two “women” who have apparently discovered that the masculine character has been cheating on them both.

The presence of this masculine character complicates cross-dressing performances. The fact that the feminine character remains so obviously male is meant to highlight the locura (craziness) and humor of the skit, and ensures that the cross-dressing is not an actual representation of a “deviant” sexual identity that might not be so readily accepted by the audience. But the blatant maleness of the feminine character also highlights the homoerotic dynamic that emerges in the drama that plays out between the male dancers onstage. The main humor of these skits lies in their exaggerated depiction of heterosexual relationships, but the romantic and sexual elements of these relationships are performed by dancers who are all clearly male, and who all clearly identify as men/boys despite the fact that some may be humorously wearing women’s clothing. Many of the skits, such as those that feature an abusadora character, depict the masculine character showing his devotion to the

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132 A prominent example of this character in the dembow genre is in the extremely popular dembow song “El Teke Teke,” by the duo Crazy Design & Carlitos Wey. The song begins with a man’s voice crying “¡Abusadora! ¡Mata hombre! ¡No me de, no me de tantas golpes mujer! ¡Ay, mi madre!” (“Abuser/heartbreaker! Man-killer! Don’t hit me so much, woman! Ay, my mother [a common exclamation]!”). The video is comical and full of slapstick humor, and depicts a woman chasing and beating her man (Crazy Design’s character).

133 It should be noted that even in this case, when the man has wronged the women characters, he remains the “hero” and is a more sympathetic figure than the aggressive women who attack him. This demonstrates clearly that these skits are never meant to be serious, or taken seriously.
feminine character, for example by throwing himself at “her” feet and clinging to “her” arms or legs, or even by kissing, or miming kissing, “her” hands. Almost all of the skits, even those that feature the abusadora character, enact moments where this heterosexual relationship “succeeds,” and the “woman” is united with the man (or boy) in some way, usually by dancing together. The dance style the characters participate in may be bachata or merengue, or may be the more explicitly sexual style of “grinding,” a ubiquitous type of dance in urban youth cultures that features a girl dancing in front of a boy with her buttocks against his crotch. Regardless of the style, the dancers are always pegao (pegados, literally “stuck,” dancing close together), and in the case of grinding, they are dancing in a position that explicitly suggests and often even mimes rear-entry intercourse. This sexual position can of course be enacted in heterosexual or homosexual relationships, and it is performed onstage as a dance move by a “heterosexual” couple, but its obvious connection to male homosexual intercourse can not be entirely obscured by the fact that one dancer is wearing a skirt.

And yet, that very basic “cross-dressing” did in fact seem to be all that was required for the audience, and for the dembow participants I interviewed, to view these skits simply as humorous interludes in each performance. Yefri and Endi explained to me the reasoning they saw behind these cross-dressing performances:

**Yefri:** [Es] por el público. Algunas veces [los equipos que hacen esos shows] ganan más. Que están bailando, pueden saber bailar, y si no tienen público—que no tienen gente que admire lo que ellos hacen—por eso mismo, si no tienen público—

**Endi:** Se visten de hembras más para llamar la atención.

**Yefri:** Para llamar la atención, pa’ que ellos

**Yefri:** [It’s] for the crowd. Sometimes [the teams that perform those skits] win more. They’re dancing, they can know how to dance, but if they don’t have an audience—if they don’t have people that admire what they do—that’s exactly why, if they don’t have an audience—

**Endi:** They dress like women more to attract attention.
Yefri and Endi gave an accurate description of how these skits are received by the audience, as they always trigger laughs and cheers. In my experience, the more effeminate the “woman” acted, or the more close-contact there was between the “woman” and the other dancers, the more enthusiastic and excited—sexually and/or non-sexually—the response from the audience. A paradox emerges in the perception of these skits as just a way “to attract attention” and to make people laugh. On the one hand, the fact that one of the dancers is dressed as a woman makes the close contact “she” shares with another male dancer more acceptable, so that it can be taken as “just” a joke, rather than as an actual performance of deviant sexual identities. On the other hand, the skit is humorous precisely because the maleness of both performers, and the homoerotic element of their performance, is so obvious.

The “excitement” Endi mentions is not necessarily a sexual one: he uses the verb emocionar instead of the more overtly sexual excitar. But this idea of excitement came up later in the day when I spoke to the boys at La Cancha who also participate in dembow:

**Yarlin:** Ve que pasa: si ponen una mujer, los hombres se emocionan; cuando vean a una mujer, tú sabes, se emocionan, es lo que pasa... con una muchacha bailando dembow.

**Hannah:** Pero, ¿cuando es un chico que se

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134 Interview, January 9, 2013.
These boys talked more directly about who is getting excited, and by what, and although they also use the verb emocionar, their description of this dynamic clarifies the sexual nature of this excitement. When I ask these boys about the practice of cross-dressing in dembow performances, Yarlin explains this by talking about the excitement men feel when women dance dembow onstage. He is talking about females, not about the boys who dress as women in their skits. His assumption of heterosexuality is quite obvious: “when [men] see a woman, you know, they get excited, it’s what happens.” For Yarlin, this dynamic of heterosexual desire works towards explaining why men dress as women onstage. If it is logical that women are what men want to see, then placing a woman onstage, even if this woman is obviously a boy, will still please the audience. And yet, Yarlin’s assertion that heterosexual desire is natural is destabilized by his and his friends’ subsequent comments. When I ask why, if seeing a woman onstage will excite a man in the audience, dance teams don’t just feature a female in their performances, Luis tells me

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135 I use the word “real” in Spanish because given the circumstances of the conversation, and the lack of any concept of gender as a performance among my interview subjects, “real woman” (or “real man”) was an effective and non-confusing way to refer to the possibility of a female performing the feminine role in these skits.

136 Interview, January 9, 2013.
that, in fact, the audience gets more animated (or excited) by the sight of a boy
dressed as a girl, an assertion with which Yarlin agrees. The humor of it is an
important element, and this humor is closely tied to the sex/gender confusion that
arises in the image of “the body of a man dressed as a woman.” This humor is also
based on the original assumption that men will get excited when they see women
dancing onstage; the humorous excitement they feel when they see a boy dressed as a
woman is closely linked to and confused with the sexual excitement of seeing a
female dancing. The boys ultimately come to the conclusion, however, that, while
“some people” like seeing a woman onstage, “many don’t.” Carlos’s last statement
contradicts Yarlin’s initial comments, despite the fact that I am certain that all of
these boys, like the rest of my interview subjects, would agree with the
heteronormative dynamic Yarlin describes. These skits, and dembow more generally,
provide a space in which heterosexual desire and heteronormative gender
performances can be subverted even as the “truths” of heterosexuality are maintained
and reinforced.

The strength of heterosexual norms is most apparent in the comparison
between male and female participation in dembow culture. While masculine
performances have in many ways progressed from the narrow vision of manhood
portrayed in Dominican rap, feminine performances have become even more limited
and even more sexual in dembow culture. This sexuality is expressed most explicitly
through the dance moves that are associated with female dembow dancers, which
Yefri, Antony, and Endi describe:

Yefri: Las mujeres siempre—hay algunas veces que sacan unos pasos y bailan así, pero los hombres son los que más están

Yefri: Women always—sometimes they dance some steps and dance like that, but men are the ones who are mostly starting
Endi: Porque el baile de dembow en realidad no es para hembra. Porque la hembra no tiene esa emoción.

Antony: Sí, esas muchachas bailan....


Hannah: Pero si están en la discoteca, como bailando dembow o algo así, ¿no están bailando igual?

Yefri: No, ellas lo bailan como un ritmo—

Antony: Sexualmente, sexualmente digo.

Yefri: —que se llama “Menea Tu Chapa:” eso es lo que bailan ellas.

Endi excludes hembras (females/women) from the genre entirely by first joking that they should be dancing ballet, and then telling me seriously that they usually dance Latin dance styles, which are more widespread in the Dominican Republic and more “respectable” than hip hop dance. When the idea of women dancing dembow is considered, everyone agrees that women dance more sexually. Yefri cites a song that they dance to that is highly sexual and objectifying, and Antony states explicitly that they dance “sexualmente” (sexually). This divide in dance moves is clear in almost all dembow performances. But Yefri also mentions another important divide: although girls do sometimes “dance some steps,” boys and men are the ones responsible for innovating the genre of dembow. This is an extremely important distinction that I observed throughout my time in Cabarete, as well as in the videos I watched of dembow performances, and it clarifies the heterosexist limitations of the genre. Even when girls or women do participate in the genre in a non-sexual way,

137 The words hembra (female) and varón (male) are very common in the Dominican Republic (and I believe in Spanish in general) and do not have the same formal/scientific connotation that they do in English. In my experience, hembra was used interchangeably with gender terms like mujer (woman) or muchacha (girl), and there was no distinction between biological sex and gender in this language use.

138 Interview, January 9, 2013.
they are following steps and performing tricks that have already been innovated and established by male performers, and even then they rarely perform the physical stunts that are so exciting in male dembow shows.

While this distinction does limit the agency of female dancers even when they break out of the sexual moves that dominate the genre for women, it is important to note the spaces in which these less-sexual performances are possible. Local spaces provide women and girls with considerably more choice in how they participate in and perform dembow. Audiences in these spaces tend to react positively whether girls dance sexually or not, although their responses are obviously more or less sexually-charged as a result of the dancer’s decision. Many times, in local spaces, female dancers perform the same sexualized moves they see in music videos, but the fact that they do so when they have a real choice not to is important. My most direct experience with this type of space and choice for female dembow dancers was at the competencia de dembow at La Cancha. There were twelve teams competing, and among those one team had one girl on it, and one team was entirely female. Yefri told me that “el grupo de mujeres, solamente de hembras […] ganó en tercer lugar” (“the group of women, just of females […] won third place”).139 When I saw this team perform, it was clear that these girls were taking full advantage of their time onstage to perform a routine that could compete with the all-male teams without showcasing their sexuality. The girls on this team performed in tight “wifebeaters” with baggier cargo pants and boxers. At one point, one of the girls on the team removed these pants; she had on tight black jeans underneath, an interesting reversal of the “cross-dressing” male dancers perform. The girls were able to maintain a

139 Interview, January 9, 2013.
clearly feminine appearance while still asserting a “hardness”—through the baggier pants—that ensured their reception as dembow dancers, and not just as women dancers shaking their culo onstage. This gender performance and their dance performance as a whole were clearly received positively by the crowd and by the judges, as this team came in third place at the end of the competition. This reception by the audience indicates the openness of this local space and the people who occupy it to less-sexual dembow performances by women and girls.

Such performances, however, are rare in mainstream dembow media. In official music videos, women almost never appear dancing dembow; when they are featured as dancers, the sexual moves they perform are common to other dance cultures such as reggaeton and are therefore only connected to dembow by the music.

There is some middle-ground, specifically in DJ Scuff’s Dembow Mix videos and in clips of the televised competencia “Dembow En Pinta.” In these videos, women participate as dancers who execute footwork and even some basic stunts, but they also find ways to project their sexuality through tight, revealing outfits.

In DJ Scuff’s videos, which feature camera shots and angles that are more intentional than those on the television show, women’s dembow dance moves are further
sexualized by the tendency to focus on only their rear ends or mid-sections, rather than on non-sexual body parts, such as heads or feet, that are focused on for the male dancers (Image 22). In official music videos, this sexualization is even more explicit, and more complete, as women dancers in professional music videos almost never perform dembow itself. The video for “Menea Tu Chapa,” the extremely popular hit Yefri mentions, takes place at a car wash, where an all-male team dances dembow while a number of women wash cars and dance sexually, drawing attention only to their very revealed chapas.

Image 23. Two stills of the female in Wilo D’New, “Menea Tu Chapa,” in contrast to the male dancers from the same video who are shown in Image 13.

The lyrics of this song function as a guide that directs women how to dance to the song, and the video demonstrates the styles male and female dancers should—and in my experience, do—perform to the song.

These music videos, which are becoming more visible as the genre grows and gains popularity, both reflect and reinforce a divide between male and female participation in dembow dance performance. Dembow is a sexual genre, and this sexuality emerges in the movements and styles of dancers of both genders, but the significance of this sexuality is quite different. When boys and young men perform sexually suggestive stunts and entertain the audience with humorous cross-dressing
skits, the homoeroticism that infuses their performance signals a break from more limited, aggressive masculinities such as those promoted in the genre of Dominican rap. When girls and women structure their dance routines around sexually explicit movements, however, they do so within a representational framework that asserts these objectifying images as the primary form of femininity within Dominican hip hop culture. The dance-driven atmosphere of dembow has almost entirely erased the small space that exists in Dominican rap in which women can be treated in serious, if problematic, ways, and in which they are occasionally able to speak for themselves without emphasizing their sexuality. The few Dominican women who have been able to break into the male-dominated industry of Dominican hip hop have had to navigate, rather than defy, expectations about their femininity and sexuality. The moments of defiance these women have been able to assert, in Milka’s hardcore rap songs and, to a lesser extent, in La Materialista’s socially conscious rap songs, rather than challenging these expectations, are largely obscured, while sexually-focused songs and videos are promoted and gain popularity among consumers. Thus, while women and girls in local spaces and even in the Dominican hip hop industry do break out of this sexual norm in various ways, professionally-produced Dominican hip hop media in both genres diminish the impact of these breaks.
Afterword

On my last night in Cabarete, I’m sitting outside in Barrio Blanco with Yonil, David, and Leo. As usual, they have insisted I take the only chair; Yonil and David are perched on part of the half-built house next to us. I try to follow the argument they’re having—something about whether or not cigarettes are cheaper in the United States—but am distracted by Leo, who stands in the street, practicing his pitching form and rapping under his breath. After so many months spent in Barrio Blanco and in the Callejón, I’ve become accustomed to hip hop as a constant presence, but tonight, I can’t help but dwell on how much of what I’ve discussed and discovered seems to be embodied in this moment. I look towards David and Yonil, the former in pantalones tubitos and a dark blue NewEra hat; the latter more casual in dusty flip flops and long basketball shorts, sporting his St. Louis Cardinals cap—a copia—instead of the original Boston Red Sox hat he keeps safe in a plastic bag in his room. I think about my own place next to them, privileged not only because I’m in the only chair but also because I am the only woman in the street, which has become, after dark, an entirely masculine space; we share the street only with some older men drinking rum by the colmado, and the tígueres near the Barrio entrance watching for the police. All of these things remind me of my conversations about the activities that play out in this calle, and their importance not only in my informants’ everyday lives but in the music they listen to and often create themselves. And in David’s and Yonil’s clothing choices, I see some of the material ways in which they use hip hop culture, with its emphasis on wealth even in such an obviously impoverished calle, to navigate their own classed status. What catches my attention most, however, is the juxtaposition of
Leo’s performance of the “Great American Pastime” with his recitation of lyrics influenced by another “American” pastime. The masculinity of both activities—one athletic, the other vocal—is clear. But the fact that the lyrics Leo mumbles are in his own language, expressing something from his own classed world, reveals the complex cultural negotiations hip hop culture has undergone in this Barrio and in thousands like it across the country.

While various economic and global dynamics have been bringing U.S. hip hop culture to the Dominican Republic at an increasingly rapid pace with the expanding access to technology, these dynamics cannot fully explain why this culture, out of so many being uploaded and shared on sites like YouTube and Facebook, has caught on and developed the way hip hop has. Much of this appeal lies in hip hop’s capacity to speak to—and speak for—young, marginalized populations. In Dominican barrios distinguished from the rest of Dominican society by their poverty, hip hop—especially rap—has been utilized and adapted to express the hardships and the hopes residents live with, from the political corruption, crime, and neglect that are features of daily life in these communities to dreams of “making it” through music. While Dominican rap continues to play a central role in these barrios, this space has now become the site of a very different and even more explicitly Dominican form of hip hop expression, the genre of dembow. Dembow is noticeably absent in the Barrio at this time of night, but during the day it comes out in full force, as it does in calles and canchas across the country. Dembow, besides providing considerable entertainment and amusement to participants and observers alike, works to construct an alternative representation of the calle, as a place not only
of crime and violence but of diversion and exuberant cultural creativity.

Simultaneously, dembow works to deconstruct, if only marginally, the excessive masculinity of rap. Perhaps someday soon the mainstream Dominican hip hop media will make space for the women and girls that have also been participating in rap and dembow in local spaces.

Young people in the barrios like David, Leo, and Yonil are the fundamental source of Dominican hip hop creativity, whether they llegar a ser famoso (become famous) or remain in their barrios, participating as listeners and consumers, as cantantes and improvisadores, and as dancers and trendsetters. This important process of “dominicanization,” apparent in content as well as in style, has not been accompanied by a break from the cultural influence of U.S. hip hop; young Dominicans continue to draw on the U.S. videos and performances available to them as technologically savvy and connected participants in a globalized youth culture.

Even though the Barrio is mostly quiet at this hour, and Leo’s low voice stands out as the only audible performance of hip hop music in this moment in this familiar street, I know that just a few hundred yards away, where the narrow Barrio entrance opens onto the main tourist stretch of Cabarete, that hyper dembow beat will be bouncing out of the Dominican poolhall, perhaps accompanied by Secreto’s aggressive flow, getting confused amidst the techno bass and the merengue accordion coming from the nightclubs on the beach, and maybe even with the English lyrics of 50 Cent or DMX. The dialogue that plays out between the musical mix coming from the beach and the dembow coming from the poolhall captures the agency asserted by the calle in constructing Dominican hip hop culture within a globalized space.
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