

¡Llora, guitarra! Cry for me, Guitar: Cathartic and Melancholic Expressions in Dominican Bachata Music and Dance

Kristina Borg¹

*Guitarra, hoy necesito tu trinar
Hoy necesito tu cantar, para llegar a ella.
Guitarra, si sabes de ella dile que
Desde aquel día que se fue,
toda esperanza se murió.
Tu sabes de mis ansias y dolor
Que he llorado por su amor,
habla por mí.*

*Guitar, today I need you to trill
Today I need you to sing, to get to her.
Guitar, if you know of her, tell her that
From the day that she left,
all hope died.
You know about my anxieties and my pain
You know that I have cried for her love,
speak for me.*

-Yoskar Sarante, “Guitarra”²

Dear reader: I invite you to open a recording of the song quoted above³, press play, then close your eyes and imagine the following scene...

The lights are dim, the smell of alcohol and sweat fills the air, and bodies are closely intertwined dancing to the sound of the *requinto* (lead guitar) as it bleeds and cries melodies of pain and *amargue* (bitterness). Alongside the guitar, the bachatero sings in a mournful voice, full of *sentimiento* (feeling), telling stories of the solitude, poverty, love, loss, and heartache he has experienced living in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. This is bachata: a guitar-based music and dance form born in contexts of poverty and social change in the years following the fall of the Trujillo dictatorship in 1961. Despite decades of marginalization due to an alleged vulgarity and its association with the poorest sectors of Dominican society, today bachata can be found in all corners of the globe, manifestly joining the ranks of other popular Latin American and Caribbean dance/music practices such as salsa and tango. In this paper, I examine accounts

¹ Kristina Borg is a PhD student in Dance Studies at York University in Toronto, Canada. Contact: klborg@yorku.ca

² Translation is my own.

³ Here is the song on Spotify:

<https://open.spotify.com/track/7sDzU4gMcOsLC9MQARddUN?si=g4NMkBAATViCwU9TJxf9qw>

of bachata by music scholars Deborah Pacini Hernandez and Julie Sellers to consider the role of bachata as an expression of class struggle and the growing pains that accompany it, such as changing ideals of gender and sexuality. I ask, what is the role of dance and music in expressing cultural and emotional pain, and how can they both work to heal that pain? To answer this, I look to my own experience as a bachata dancer and I contrast scholarship on bachata with that of the blues – a genre with which many parallels can be drawn. In “Blues and Catharsis”, Roopen Majithia seeks to explain the blues through Aristotle’s notion of catharsis. But when contrasted with bachata, the “Dominican equivalent of the blues”,⁴ Aristotle’s idea of catharsis seems inadequate to explain its essential characteristics. As a performative outlet, bachata exceeds the limits of an Aristotelian cathartic experience in which the outcome is centered on eliminating excess emotional build-up. Instead, bachata listeners and practitioners attain a visceral and communal state of harmony which helps to heal emotional pain and trauma. I argue that while bachata is a genre rooted in heartache and pain, the sharing of these experiences is, paradoxically, an expression of joy. As Ned Sublette points out, the *amargue* (bitterness) of bachata can be “a nostalgic, melancholic pain that makes you feel better, like the blues”.⁵

The music and dance of Dominican Bachata was inscribed in December 2019 as part of UNESCO’s Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.⁶ This recent development in international recognition and celebration of the genre is an important and positive step in its history, given the stigma and marginalization that coloured the early years of its development. Pacini Hernandez and Sellers help contextualize this history by tracing the social and political conditions bachata emerged from. They account for the major shifts in public

⁴ Jerry W. Carlson in Foreword to Sellers, *The Modern Bachateros*, p.1

⁵ Quoted in Sellers, *Bachata and Dominican Identity*, p. 26

⁶ <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/music-and-dance-of-dominican-bachata-01514>

attitude towards the genre as it transformed from a “musical pariah” considered “too crude, too vulgar, and too musically rustic to be allowed entrance into the mainstream musical landscape”,⁷ to a nationally and internationally celebrated symbol of Dominican identity.

Bachata was born in the years following the 1961 assassination of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina, who led a thirty-one-year dictatorship in the Dominican Republic (1930-1961). Beginning in the 1950s there was a large influx of rural-urban migration in the country, triggered by Trujillo’s expropriation of land during his regime, as well as the unstable social and political conditions in the decades following his death. Pacini Hernandez writes that by 1980 “over half the country’s population was living in urban areas, a quarter of them in the city of Santo Domingo. The majority of the country’s population, whether rural [or] urban, was poor, uneducated and ill prepared to participate in the rapid modernization and expansion of the Dominican economy that occurred after the death of Trujillo in 1961”.⁸ Since the existing infrastructure of the city could not support them, rural migrants to Santo Domingo set up shantytowns on the outskirts of the city, bringing with them their taste in guitar-based music. A particular culture emerged in these marginalized shantytowns, of which bachata was a part. In its early years bachata music and the sensual, romantic, and playful dance that accompanied it were restricted to spaces such as cabarets, brothels, and neighbourhood *colmados* (corner stores). The changing social conditions of the time were very much reflected in bachata lyrics, for example in relation to gender roles. Women commonly found work more easily than men since they were paid a lower wage, and many men subsequently relied on women for subsistence. In veritable sexist fashion, male bachateros (there were very few bachateras) often complained in their songs of the deception and treachery caused by the women in their lives, who were simply (and

⁷ Pacini Hernandez, *Bachata*, p. 1

⁸ Pacini Hernandez, *Bachata*, pp.62-63

rightfully) asserting their independence in new ways in these changing circumstances.⁹ Generally speaking, bachata was highly stigmatized and excluded from the mainstream Dominican music industry, and for several decades bachata recordings were only sold in makeshift booths along city sidewalks, and circulated via the first and for a long time the only radio station that would play bachata: Radio Guarachita.

Bachata is derived from several other guitar-based musical genres, most notably the Cuban bolero. In fact, what is now considered the first bachata recording, “*Qué será de mí*” (what will become of me) by José Manuel Calderón (1962), was not called bachata at the time. It was instead included in the broad grouping of pan-Latin *música de guitarra* (guitar music), *bolero campesino* (peasant bolero), and *bolero de guitarra* (guitar bolero). While bolero music was generally characterized by a warm and romantic feeling, what distinguished bachata as it developed was the raw and varied emotional qualities it possessed, especially its plaintive, bitter tones and themes. Susana Silfa describes bachata as “something that comes from deep within, full of emotion, a natural, uncontrollable response... [it is] the ‘campesino’s cry’ that sings precisely what one experiences”.¹⁰ The basic instrumentation of the music helped to distinguish bachata as a genre of its own as well: in addition to its distinctive vocals, bachata was and still is characterized by five core instruments which were relatively inexpensive for self-taught *bachateros* to purchase: the *requinto/ primera guitarra* (lead guitar), the *segunda* (second/rhythm guitar), the bongos, the *güira* (a percussion instrument played with a metal scraper), and the bass guitar. This combination of instruments is a much simpler arrangement than that of large merengue bands, which played an important and competing role in the musical landscape of

⁹ Pacini Hernandez, *Bachata*, pp. 155-172

¹⁰ Quoted in Sellers, *Bachata and Dominican Identity*, p.23. *Campesino* translates to farmer or peasant.

the Dominican Republic both during and after the Trujillo regime.¹¹

Etymologically, the word *bachata* is of West African origin, and is derived from *cumbancha / cumbanchata* which means “spree, revelry, messy and noisy fun”.¹² Prior to its use as the name for a genre of music and dance, the word *bachata* referred to an informal party or gathering taking place in rural settings and later in marginalized urban neighbourhoods. There are clear class implications here: *bachatas* were not parties hosted by members of the middle and upper classes. The naming of the emerging genre as *bachata* was in fact an insult from the elite minority of the Dominican population who diminished the music as unrefined, poor-quality music of the poor. In 1969, a well-known musician (unnamed in the interview cited here) described the new type of music on a popular television show called *Show del mediodía* (Midday show) as “‘una bachata’, something of little worth, a music ‘of peasants, of people without cultura who have no manners’”.¹³ For some time, in attempts to escape the stigma of the word *bachata*, the musicians creating and playing this music instead called the genre *amargue* or *música de amargue*, meaning (music of) bitterness. However, *bachata* is the name that stuck in the long run, and it no longer carries the stigma it once did.

Bachata continued to evolve and grow in popularity throughout the 1970s and 1980s, while likewise continuing to be scorned and stigmatized by the middle and upper classes who were especially appalled by the wave of racy ‘double-entendre’ *bachatas* typical of this period. It was not until the early 1990s that *bachata* reached a major breakthrough in acceptance and

¹¹ Merengue is another national music of the Dominican Republic which at the time of *bachata*’s emergence held higher class associations having been elevated/promoted by the Trujillo regime and even used as a tool of propaganda. See Pacini Hernandez pp. 35-63 for more on the relationships between music and dictatorship in the Dominican Republic.

¹² Dominican musicologist Tommy García in “Music and Dance of Dominican *Bachata*”, published by UNESCO, *YouTube*, 1:22 -1:48, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_UkJ3meWII .

¹³ Interview with Edilio Paredes, quoted in Sellers *Bachata and Dominican Identity*, p. 22. *Cultura* is the Spanish word for culture.

recognition in both the Dominican Republic and abroad. Part of this breakthrough was the 1991 release of the album entitled *Bachata rosa*, by Juan Luis Guerra and his vocal group 4:40.¹⁴ In addition, musicians in the Dominican diaspora (especially those based in New York City) had a major impact on popularizing bachata internationally throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. This new rendition of the music, called both ‘modern’ and ‘urban’ bachata was/is a “blend of bachata, hip-hop, R&B, rap, and other genres, as well as English and Spanish ... [offering] an intimate representation of what it means to be Dominican within a transnational context”.¹⁵

Bachata’s trajectory from a genre that was rife with stigma and discrimination to the celebrated symbol of Dominican identity it is today speaks powerfully of its perseverant ability to speak *for* and *through* the people it represents. There is something about bachata that hits deep down in the soul: its emotional resonance is tangible and viscerally felt. Dancing to bachata brings this to an entirely different level, as the emotions expressed in the lyrics and instrumentation extend throughout the body in motion, and bodies moving together in a communally held sensation. What is this ‘something’, this deep emotional power of bachata that seems to draw its fans in so powerfully? One explanation may be that bachata listeners, dancers, and musicians experience a form of catharsis, a release of excess emotion that subsequently returns them to a healthy mental state. Some of Sellers’ interviewees point to the cathartic effects of bachata,¹⁶ but she does not explore this concept in depth. Therefore, I turn to a consideration of the cathartic potential of another emotionally powerful music/dance genre: the blues.

¹⁴ Pacini Hernandez, *Bachata*, p.3. It is worth noting that despite its name, only four of the ten tracks on this album are bachatas, and as Sellers argues, the themes of these songs are “refined and sanitized – the mineral water setting of ‘Bachata rosa’ and not the interior of a seedy bar, a red-light district brothel, or the bottom of a bottle” (*Bachata and Dominican Identity*, p.65). Although Guerra’s interpretation of bachata was not necessarily representative of the communities bachata originated in, this recording certainly played a key role in bachata’s entrance onto the global stage, as well as in releasing it from its chains of social stigma and exclusion from the mainstream music industry within the Dominican Republic.

¹⁵ Sellers, *The Modern Bachateros*, p.5

¹⁶ Sellers, *Bachata and Dominican Identity*, p.26

This approach is fitting as bachata is considered by some the “Dominican equivalent of the blues”.¹⁷

Roopen Majithia’s chapter “Blues and Catharsis” applies concepts from Aristotelian philosophy to a study of blues dance and music. The purpose of his study is to offer an explanation for the “universality” of the blues, that is: the ways in which the blues, a genre which speaks “from and to the difficult experiences of a marginalized community”, can speak to those outside this community as well.¹⁸ The blues, Majithia reminds us, is a creative expression born among African-American populations in the post-slavery South of the United States, particularly Mississippi and Tennessee. The blues emerged during this time as a combination between West African derived music and Western influences (e.g. Gospel music of the church), and its lyrics and moods reflect the challenging socioeconomic conditions of its creators. The parallels between the blues and bachata are easy to see: they are both genres born in times of shifting circumstances among marginalized communities, whose dominant lyrical themes address sadness, hardship, and loss of varying natures, and which both have the capacity to deeply affect and express the emotions of their listeners and practitioners.

To explain the “universal power” of the blues and the capacity of this music to channel such emotions, Majithia turns to Aristotle. Aristotle’s conception of catharsis (that is, the purging of excessive emotional buildup to return one to a healthy psychological state), argues Majithia, is a plausible explanation for the blues experience since it allows one to pleurably rid oneself of painful feelings rather than simply “wallowing” in such emotions while listening to sad or angry music.¹⁹ Majithia cites the following passage from Aristotle’s discussion of musical

¹⁷ Jerry W. Carlson in Foreword to Sellers, *The Modern Bachateros*, p.1

¹⁸ Majithia, “Blues and Catharsis”, p.87

¹⁹ Majithia, “Blues and Catharsis”, p.89

performance and education in his *Politics*, which I will include here as well:

Some persons fall into a religious frenzy, whom we see as a result of the sacred melodies – when they have used the melodies that excite the soul to mystic frenzy – restored as though they had found healing and purgation [*catharsis*]. Those who are influenced by pity or fear, and every emotional nature, must have a like experience, and others in so far as each is perceptible to such emotions, and all are in a manner purged and their souls lightened and delighted. The purgative melodies likewise give an innocent pleasure to mankind.²⁰

In his analysis of this passage and Aristotle more broadly, Majithia considers the importance of dance/movement as a part of the cathartic experience, but his arguments do not adequately account for the contradictions inherent in dancing or moving in a joyous/celebratory (or “frenzied”) manner to music that is otherwise dominated by negative themes. Majithia uses catharsis to explain the therapeutic effect of the blues as a purifying/ expelling of unwanted emotion. Here, catharsis is indistinguishable from the exorcism of an evil spirit in which the baby is quite literally thrown out with the bathwater. According to Majithia, the whole impetus for the blues, whether musical or dance, is an erasure of the conditions that give expression to it – namely, feeling blue. The problem, evidently, is that the solution seems to undermine the problem. Rather than engaging and dialoging with the trauma in an understanding, it is evacuated, ignored, and repressed.²¹ This repression, I conjecture, mirrors the aforementioned socioeconomic climate of oppression and stigmatization. A more productive approach therefore

²⁰ Aristotle, *Politics*, VIII.7 (1342a7-16), quoted in Majithia “Blues and Catharsis”, p.89

²¹ For a contrasting and productive analysis of the blues in relation to emotional trauma and therapy, see Robert D. Stolorow and Benjamin A. Stolorow, “Blues and Emotional Trauma”, *Clinical Social Work Journal*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2013, pp. 5–10.

is one that does not seek to evacuate, ignore and repress but to dialogue, share, and to acknowledge the relations at play. This is something perfectly displayed by bachata's cultural history in which we can see a full acknowledgement and celebration of the differences and contradictions that make it up. Yes it is *bitter*, yes there is *suffering* but as they are shared through artistic expression there is a joy that celebrates that very bitterness and suffering. Bachateros do not seek to ignore this apparent contradiction. Rather, it is what seems to characterize bachata as what it is. In this way, we can clearly see why catharsis is a wholly inadequate concept through which to understand bachata (and maybe even the blues).

What then, do we learn about bachata in knowing that catharsis cannot explain its history or experience? Well, it is clear that the emotional energies that characterize bachata cannot be repressed or purged without purging the expression itself. That just as political regimes inevitably fail to repress deviations from traditional signifiers of gender, class, or genre, the very essence of bachata seems to exist on the fringe between the abject and the conventional. Where this margin is reduced to one side or the other, the identity of the genre itself is lost. Bachata is a genre defined by its resilience and its resistance to oppressive and limiting categorizations. It has continuously escaped the stigma of those who have sought to diminish it. If bachata is too crude, too vulgar, too sexually explicit, too musically rustic, or meant for people with "no culture", this is only from a repressive perspective that seeks to assign inflexible values. Rather, it is an open, vulnerable expression of *the people* – the *vulgus* –²² who find in bachata a sense of support and "messy, noisy fun".²³ Bachata is best experienced in social dance halls, where music and the movement of a room full of bodies are in dialogue. I can attest that it often feels as though all

²² While the English word vulgar connotes crudeness, bad taste, lack of refinement and indecency, it is derived from the Latin 'vulgus' meaning 'the common people/the public'.

²³ I return here to the etymology of the word bachata (Tommy García, see footnote 12 for full citation).

those in such a space are sharing a heartbeat, as the vibration of the bass tones in the music travel from the speakers to one's body, and in turn to the direct connection one has with another body via partnered touch. In such conditions, bachateros, that is – bachata aficionados and practitioners, celebrate the *amargue* of bachata and the Dominican nostalgia and pride it evokes. *Sentimiento!* Such feeling. Even those who don't understand the language of the lyrics can appreciate the music's powerful emotional affect. And, while bachata lyrics may speak of pain and deceit, those playing, listening, or dancing to it are not limited to expressing or residing in such emotions. That is the beauty, the joy, and the paradox of bachata. In pleading with the guitar – *llora*, cry for me – bachateros collectively name and heal their pain.

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