

Nebulous Boundaries: Geographies of Identity in *El hombre del acordeón*

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Borders are never as definitive as they appear at first glance, for they create a broader zone, the borderlands, where the people, practices, and products from both sides comingle. Borderlands are sites of constant flux and movement, “ambiguous and often-unstable realms where boundaries are also crossroads, peripheries are also central places, homelands are also passing-through places, and the endpoints of empires are also forks in the road” (Hämäläinen and Truett 338). Despite boundaries’ demarcating intent, the borderlands they cross are a syncretic blend of the lands on each side, resembling a bit of each, while differing from the interior of both (Custred 265; Heyman 48). The borderland as a fictional setting therefore draws our attention not to the fixedness of boundaries, but rather to their flexibility. Set in the Dominican-Haitian borderland, Marcio Veloz Maggiolo’s *El hombre del acordeón* (‘The Accordion Man’) makes use of the dynamism of that geopolitical border to call into question other apparently definitive boundaries. The lines drawn between nations and nationalities, Catholicism and Vodou, the city and the countryside, the traditional *merengue típico* ‘typical merengue’ and *merengue de orquesta* ‘orchestra merengue,’ and even life and death become blurred. My reading of this novel argues that this imprecision challenges official religious, racial, and musical discourses of Dominicanity by demonstrating that they are not neatly defined.

Dominican nationalist parlance defines *dominicanidad* ‘Dominicanity’ in terms of the notion of *cultura* ‘culture’, which “measures who or what belongs to the Dominican Republic” (Hoffnung-Garskof 11). Sarah Radcliffe and Sallie Westwood further link such associations with what they term “geographies of identity,” that is, “the sense of belonging and subjectivities which are constituted in (and which in turn can constitute) different spaces and social sites” (27). Boundaries contribute to these imagined geographies (to use Benedict Anderson’s term), for “a nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them . . . has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations” (Anderson 7). Thus, borders play a crucial role in imagined geographies of identity for “boundaries between nations reinforce territorial segmentation at the same time as they reinforce notions of purity and sameness within the territory, and difference and impurity outside the territory” (Radcliffe and Westwood 23). Establishing and controlling boundaries is thereby linked to delimiting national territory as well as national identity (Rabinowitz 301).

Such fixed geographies of identity are not limited solely to demarcating territories; rather, they constitute those spaces, both physical and psychological,

that serve as “symbolic anchors” of belonging (Gupta and Ferguson 11). A sense of kinship to a specific geography of identity contributes to an implicit understanding of those who do not belong to it. As boundaries solidify, these perceived differences become more acute and in turn, perpetuate the notion of the Other:

Not only do communities with hard boundaries privilege their differences, they tend to develop an intolerance and suspicion toward the adoption of the Other’s practices and strive to distinguish, in some way or the other, practices that they share. Thus, communities with hard boundaries will the differences between them. (Duara 169)

Homi K. Bhabha has argued that attempts to situate cultures within rigid boundaries reduce them to essentialist claims. Bhabha opts instead for a hybrid understanding of culture built upon cultural difference rather than the categorizing effects of cultural diversity. The tendency for diversity to compare and separate reinforces the concept of fixity and thus perpetuates stereotypes as a way of identifying those supposedly essential elements of the Other. Embracing one identity while denying all ties with the Other produces patterns of differentiation that contribute to the representation of national culture as a single, long-standing, historical reality. As Bhabha points out, culture is not linear, and the act of recalling national identity “is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present” (90).

Veloz Maggiolo’s *El hombre del acordeón* portrays this folly of rigid cultural boundaries and linear imaginations of the nation and national identity, and reveals a dynamic cultural hybridity instead. The novel takes as its point of departure an effort to fix the Dominican geopolitical border—and by extension, the cultural border with Haiti—more rigidly: the 1937 government-sanctioned massacre of Haitians in the borderlands.¹ Despite this factual base, the novel presents historical fragments and explores possibilities rather than facts (Valerio-Holguín *Presencia* 34-35). As M. Keith Booker has observed, “reinscribing a work of history in an overtly fictional form . . . inherently calls attention to the kinship between the narratives of history and the narratives of fiction, suggesting that the line between the two is not as strict as we might like to believe” (79). This fictional representation emphasizes not the historical accuracy of the events, but the plausibility that they could have happened in a given context (Méndez) and questions strict definitions of historical and fictitious writings (López-Calvo 58). In this novel, the context is a specific moment of Dominican history, cloaked in the music, religions, and folklore of the border region (Estévez).

Against the backdrop of the 1937 massacre, *El hombre del acordeón* relates the story of Honorio Lora, accordionist and merengue musician of the Dominican borderlands. A former favorite of dictator and merengue enthusiast Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina, Lora becomes a threat as his music gives voice to the oppressed. Lora literally laughs himself to death after his prizewinning rooster triumphs in a cockfight in the border town of La Salada. Nevertheless, some believe that Lora has been poisoned because his merengue lyrics criticize Trujillo and the recent 1937 slaughter. The so-called *corte* (cutting or harvest) claims thousands of lives, among them two of Lora's Dominican friends who are mistaken for Haitians, and it marks the turning point of Lora's allegiances and leads to his eventual murder by poison, allegedly masterminded by Trujillo.²

The narrative voice, a journalist seeking hard facts about the incidents of Lora's death long after the events have transpired and Trujillo has been assassinated, continually faces the same imprecision of the border in the various versions he hears. His concern for the accuracy of his material reiterates the question of history versus fiction (Veloz Maggiolo 83). As the journalist meticulously pieces together the often conflicting stories, he remarks upon the multiplicity of voices and evidence: "Es como hacer una colcha con retazos de diferentes tipos de tela y de colores" (11) 'It's like making a quilt with scraps of different kinds of fabric and colors.'³ As the journalist gathers the numerous and often contradictory versions, he effectively reveals that Dominicaness is not one but many, a patchwork of identities that blend and overlap. My reading of this novel identifies the primary geographies of identity that nationalists claim mark the boundaries of Dominicaness and shows how their representation in *El hombre del acordeón* effectively razes these imprecise borders.

Nations and Nationalities

It is not surprising that Dominican identity has long looked across its geopolitical border with Haiti to contrast itself with its neighbor as the Other (Valerio-Holguín "Primitive" 76), given the nations' physical proximity, two Haitian occupations of Dominican soil (1801-1802 and 1822-1844), and subsequent attempts to reinstate Haitian rule in the nineteenth century. Official discourses posit *dominicanidad* as a counterpoint to all things Haitian, especially in terms of race, language, and religion. In the nineteenth century, Dominican nationalists associated blackness with Haiti, embracing a Hispanic, Spanish-speaking, Catholic identity, as diametrically opposed to the black, Krèyol-speaking, Vodouisants of Haiti (Valerio-Holguín "Primitive" 76; Brendbekken 33).⁴

In addition to race, questions of labor, culture, health, and sanitation figure in the so-called "Haitian problem," which attributes the blame for the Dominican

national ills to Haiti's proximity and presence on Dominican soil (Manuel 98). Racial mixing is acknowledged in the Dominican Republic, and racial classification is intricately specific. Racial categories were specified as early as 1549 to identify racial mixing more precisely (Guzmán 4-5). Daysi Josefina Guzmán's research in the 1970s found that the vocabulary Santiago residents used to define race and racial characteristics was so precise that participants were able to point to fifteen different hair texture categories, nine varying hair colors, six body types, five skin tones, and ten facial features (6). Still, none of these racial categories refer to Dominicans as black; that is a category reserved for Haitians (*Mirrors of the Heart*).

Modern racial classifications have their roots in the nation's colonial history, when persons of mixed race were recognized as Hispanic to boost dwindling official counts of citizens (Wucker 75). This contributed to a flexible and fluid understanding of race. By the time of Haiti's independence from France and establishment as the world's first black republic (1801), some seventy-five percent of the residents in Spanish Santo Domingo were mulattoes or free blacks who lived by subsistence farming. These individuals considered themselves Creoles rather than black because they were free (Candelario 99; Torres Saillant "Tribulations" [2000] 1095). Although visions of *dominicanidad* recognize racial mixing, the three ethnicities present—indigenous, Spanish, and African—have been re-ordered. Thus, Spanish influence is deemed to be greatest, with African heritage being seen as minimal. The indigenous influences of the Taíno people, almost entirely decimated in the early years of colonialism, present a sort of middle ground, "a category typified by non-whiteness as well as non-blackness" (Torres-Saillant "Tribulations" [2000] 1104). In the 1920s, the term *indio* 'Indian' began to be used as an inoffensive identifier of people of color, and was modified by a variety of differentiating descriptors (Derby 200; Valerio-Holguín "Primitive" 79). Dominican poet and essayist Blas Jiménez notes that even those Dominicans who wished to self-identify as black on official documents were instead recorded as some variation of *indio*, such as *indio oscuro* 'dark Indian' (*Mirrors of the Heart*).

Trujillo's government actively propagated these constructed identities to contribute to a sense of nationalism. Richard Lee Turits has observed that, contrary to revisionist history, the official anti-Haitianism and racism did not precede the massacre, but instead followed it as justification of the grisly acts (628). The oral histories of those who lived in that region illustrate the transnational nature of the borderlands and peaceful interethnic realities prior to the slaughter (593, 612). The government's main objective in ordering the massacre was not ethnic cleansing so much as the solidification of the border (629).⁵ Politicians, historians, and scribes worked diligently following the 1937 massacre to produce so-called research and scholarship that vilified Haiti and

exonerated the gruesome events aimed at strengthening divisions between the two countries (Torres-Saillant “Tribulations” [2000] 1093; Turits 634). This official position firmly established the Haitian as Other, for as Freud has aptly noted, “‘it is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left to receive the manifestation of their aggressiveness’” (qtd. in Bhabha 214). Modern understandings of Dominicaness privilege the border as a dividing line that separates both nations and races, thus reflecting the perceived connection between place and race (Valerio-Holguín “Primitive” 78; Radcliffe and Westwood 33).⁶

El hombre del acordeón calls into question the supposed rigidity of the nation’s border with Haiti and mocks efforts to define both it and Dominicaness. The journalist’s primary source, the aged Vetemit Alzaga, is the government’s official historian and informant in La Salada at the time of the events. One of Alzaga’s primary duties is to Dominicanize and define the border by inventing Hispanic surnames for Dominican *rayanos* ‘frontiersmen’: “inventé nombres y heredades cuando me encargaron, por órdenes del Brigadier, ya Presidente, recuperar la historia de los pueblos fronterizos. Entonces la frontera de Santo Domingo y Haití no estaba tan delineada” (Veloz Maggiolo 14) ‘I invented names and heredities when, by order of the Brigadier who was now President, I was entrusted with reclaiming the border towns’ history. Then, the border between Santo Domingo and Haiti was not so well-defined.’ This renaming was not limited to surnames in the Dominican Republic of those years, as Turits notes, for “dozens of Haitian and French names of frontier towns, rivers, and even streams” were also changed (608) to invent a history worthy of the lineage Trujillo envisioned. In the novel, Alzaga sees the results of this imagined identity as positive: “la gente queda muy convencida de un pasado rico y de una identidad nueva que antes era rayana y falta de nacionalismo” (69) ‘the people are very convinced of their rich past and a new identity, which before was a border identity without a sense of nationalism.’

Alzaga also claims economic motives for the government’s efforts to Dominicanize the borderlands. Still, trade across the border goes in both directions, and people and products move fluidly across it. Although Alzaga claims that Haitian currency is overtaking the country (Veloz Maggiolo 75), Dominicans also spend their pesos on Haitian contraband, one of the region’s primary sources of income (17). This movement is so uninhibited that many businessmen have friends and lovers on both sides of the border (17-18). The fluidity along the border in the novel reflects the pre-massacre reality of the area (Turits 630) and reiterates how the “fiction of cultures as discrete, object-like phenomena occupying discrete spaces becomes implausible for those who inhabit the borderlands” (Gupta and Ferguson 7).

When the journalist turns to Alzaga for information, the journalist finds that the former informant continues to accept the regime's official story. Alzaga insists that the Haitian presence was reaching farther and farther inland (Veloz Maggiolo 13-14), a peaceful occupation in direct conflict with Trujillo's whitening agenda (44). Alzaga's view of the borderlands is contradictory, however. Although he parrots nationalist arguments, Alzaga describes the *rayanos* as "campesinos pobres, rayanos mezcla mulata de negros y blancos, dominicanos negros" (17) 'poor peasants, mulatto frontiersmen comprised of a mix of blacks and whites, and black Dominicans.' Further, Alzaga admits that he hid during the massacre because, as a mulatto, he feared being mistaken for Haitian (17).

These murky national divisions are evident historically in the deaths of those Dominicans mistaken for Haitians in the massacre (Turits). In fact, in the novel it is Honorio Lora's criticism of the slaughter, and specifically, the deaths of his Dominican friends Tocay and Ma Misién, that cost Lora his own life. Lora's merengue gives voice to the murder weapon, the machete, which cries out for pity: "*que no lo maten poi Dio, / son también dominicano*" (42) 'don't kill them, for God's sake, / they're Dominicans, too.' As the journalist reports, Lora's critical lyrics reference these deaths and reflect the widespread belief that Haitians "dañaban la raza dominicana y además se habían metido en el territorio [dominicano]" (Veloz Maggiolo 42) 'damaged the Dominican race and had encroached upon the [Dominican] territory.' These cases of mistaken identity in the novel underscore the similarities among border dwellers on both sides.

Catholicism and Vodou

Dominican nationalism points to religion as an essential defining element of Dominicanness, as contrasted with the Vodouisants of Haiti (Brendbekken 33). Joaquín Balaguer, Trujillo's eventual successor and Dominican president for decades, emphasized religious differences in *La isla al revés* ('The Backwards Island'), a propagandistic treatise published shortly after the massacre. According to Balaguer, "[e]l único prejuicio que ha existido en Santo Domingo es de carácter religioso" (96) '[t]he only prejudice that has existed in Santo Domingo is of a religious nature.' Still, Dominican popular beliefs embrace elements prohibited by the universal Catholic Church such as sorcery, curses, and the evil eye (Estévez 12). Nevertheless, those Dominicans who practice forms of magic and Vodou still tend to self-identify as Catholic, and "the state-funded guardians of the official culture . . . have rigorously rejected the grace of any 'pagan' forms of worship in Dominican society . . . [T]hey have ascribed that predilection to unwelcome foreign influence" (Torres-Saillant, "Tribulations" [1998] 130).

In *El hombre del acordeón*, the journalist's research into Honorio Lora's death reveals that the religious reality of the borderlands is different: "rayanos al fin, creen en ambas religiones" (Veloz Maggiolo 84) 'frontiersmen after all, they believe in both religions.' As the narrator observes, the similarities prevail, and "el vudú era un sustituto pleno, porque sus santos, con otros nombres, eran los mismos del curato" (28) 'Vodou was a full substitute, since its saints, with different names, were the same as those of the parish.' This delicate balance is not limited to the border region, and Dominicans' own form of Vodou reaches across class and regions (Torres-Saillant, "Tribulations" [1998] 130).⁷ The imprecise lines in the novel between the official religion and the body of practical rites speaks to conditions of the largely rural population of the time, for "[w]hat the faithful ask of their gods is not so much riches and happiness but more the removal of the miseries which assail them from every quarter" (Métraux 60).

Veloz Maggiolo's representation of Honorio Lora's life and death reflects the syncretic practices of the borderlands. Lora's empathy for all lost lives ultimately provides him with the opportunity to seek justice. Although revenge is prohibited by Church doctrine, Lora is able to avenge his own murder and the theft of his accordion through the Vodou ritual of *dessounin*. By this practice, the spirit of the deceased is separated from his body, its energy is returned to the cosmos, and balance is restored (Rodríguez). Step by step, Lora's spirit directs his revenge and by the eve of a local celebration, the air palpitates with the presence of the forces at work: "Luego de velaciones, rituales de vudú dominicano en donde las legiones del más allá tenían nombres de caciques, personajes de la colonia y de viejos campesinos, la noche se puso densa" (Veloz Maggiolo 127) 'The night grew dense following vigils and Dominican Vodou rituals in which the legions from the other side had names of caciques, colonial figures, and former peasants.' Despite Catholic doctrine, this fictional celebration depicts religious syncretism as an outgrowth of historical encounters.

Even death is unable to silence Lora's voice. Unearthly merengue sounds throughout the region, revealing that his soul is not at peace. For Lora, accordion and spirit are one (85), and to leave the instrument at the service of the regime's supporters would be to die for naught. The two great loves of Lora's life, Nacha and Remigia, are initiated as assistants to the *mambo* (Vodou priestess) Polysona and are instrumental in Lora's revenge. They exhume Lora's body and take it across the border where Polysona completes the *dessounin*, freeing Lora's spirit to direct his revenge. Lora chooses Polysona as his horse and carries out his plan through his possession of her.⁸

Lora's vengeance ultimately falls to his illegitimate son, Acedonio Fernández, who must confront the accordion's new owner, Trujillo's current favorite, La Postalita. Acedonio's body takes on his father's appearance, mannerisms, and unparalleled musical abilities (Veloz Maggiolo 111). Acedonio

feels Lora's presence as he battles La Postalita in the merengue duel: "sintió unas manos entre sus manos, unos dedos que dirigían sus dedos" (143) 'he felt hands among his hands, fingers that guided his fingers.' Remigia and Acedonio fall instantly in love, thereby perpetuating Lora's romance with Nacha, which has long served as his inspiration. These curious events reiterate the blurry lines between life and death: "Es como si el pasado tuviera un forro, como si voltease para comenzar" (Veloz Maggiolo 121) 'It's as if the past had a lining, as if it turned around to start over.' Before leaving to avenge Lora's death, Acedonio discovers a bag full of small bones—the remains of Lora's first cockfighting rooster, Primogénito. Later, the bones are resuscitated and fuse with the latest champion from Lora's flock, just in time to win a showdown cockfight with Atilio Alomá, the mayor and very man who knowingly purchases Lora's accordion.

Acedonio completes the rest of his merengue trio with Tocay and Tocaya, the twin children of his murdered friends. This deliberate inclusion of twins is significant, given the supernatural powers Vodou attributes to them (Métraux 146). They also symbolize the relationship between the Dominican Republic and Haiti: two nations with much in common, despite the border that separates them. Similarly, Vodou beliefs recognize that twins hold animosity toward one another and often, one twin will deliberately harm or even kill the other. In fact, "[s]uch is the power of twins that no one will take any steps against one twin who causes the death of the other; indeed, people will even take care not to show him the slightest resentment" (Métraux 150). Certainly, the minimal retribution Haiti sought from the Dominican government following the massacre reflects such a relationship among twins and others' hesitance to intervene. As twins, Tocay and Tocaya also represent the "power of rebirth and regrowth" (Tann, ch. 4), and they foreshadow the ultimate reestablishment of order. The *Lwa* (spirits) of Lora's former musicians, Tantán and Enemesio, possess the twins during the musical showdown, guiding their hands as they play (Veloz Maggiolo 130).

Once the *dessounin* is completed and Lora's spirit is freed, Remigia and Nacha rebury his body. Later, Lora is interred for a third and final time with the parish priest's blessing as the first in La Salada's new cemetery, becoming *Barón Samedi* for Vodouisants and Saint Elias among Catholic believers (Veloz Maggiolo 145). As Remigia observes, this final interment takes Honorio out of the spiritual Vodou homeland of Gine, "convirtiéndolo en mitad cristiano y mitad vudú" (145) 'making him half Christian, half Vodouisant.'⁹ The strange events surrounding Lora's revenge also result in the only known miracle of the fictionalized borderlands when Acedonio's cheap accordion, riddled with bullets after the showdown and stored for safekeeping in the church, is miraculously restored and takes on the appearance of Lora's instrument (146). It is this instrument, and not Lora's famed accordion, that Trujillo orders taken to the capital and displayed in the National Museum (145), thus calling into question the

veracity of all official accounts of both Lora's death and the massacre. Together, the elements of Honorio Lora's revenge dismantle the definitive boundaries between life and death, and by extension, Haitian Vodou and Dominican Catholicism, portraying instead a much more fluid religious reality.

The City and the Countryside

In addition to its efforts to define the national border, the Trujillo regime embraced an aggressive plan of progress and modernization, and with it, a longstanding view of two spaces within the nation: the countryside, where the majority of the nation's population resided, and the city. While nationalists painted Haiti as an external Other, these two contrasting spaces within the nation established the rural *campesino* 'peasant' as a type of interior Other (Valerio-Holguín "Tres" 276). The Dominican *campesino* conventionally has been represented both as the city dweller's backwards cousin and as the purest representation of all things Dominican. The latter results from the large degree of independence enjoyed by peasants who lived off the land well into the 1800s. *Campesinos'* ties to the land were symbolic of an essentialism that situated Dominicans in a nebulous space between the black slave of Haiti and the Spanish conquistador (Hoffnung-Garskof 23).

The peasants were undoubtedly poor, and their lifestyle and traditions as subsistence farmers seemed as foreign to urban residents as did those of neighboring Haiti. By the time of Dominican independence from Haiti (1844), the nation's primary economic activities included raising cattle and subsistence agriculture, both of which occurred on communally owned lands (Betances 11). These trends highlight the conflicting priorities of urban elites and rural peasantry (Brendbekken 31). While 19th-century nationalists dreamed of centralizing Dominican politics and the military, and the development and growth of an export economy, peasants were concerned with survival. By the 1900s, these differences resulted in the urbanites' disdain for what they considered "the backwardness and barbarism of their rural countrymen" (Hoffnung-Garskof 19). This view aptly portrays how the perceived self of a nation may be threatened not only by other nations, but also by its internal fissures (Bhabha 212).

Rural customs were a blend of traditions inherited from the three cultures that comprise Dominicaness (Hoffnung-Garskof 17). The urban elites, with their preference for European, and later, North American goods and influences (Derby), saw peasants' customs and subsistence agriculture as impediments to *progreso* 'progress' (Hoffnung-Garskof 11). Progressive thinkers embraced attempts to "civilize" the peasants (Derby 34-35). Some liberal nationalists held firm to their assurance that education could refine and enlighten the peasantry,

while others considered peasants hopelessly incapable of learning (Hoffnung-Garskof 19-20; Derby 34).

Peasants fiercely embraced regional identities, lending their support to regional caudillos (strongmen) with their own personal armies. As 19th-century Dominican history shows, an undercurrent of constant instability marked politics through caudillo-led uprisings. These conflicts contributed to regional identities at the cost of national identity and supported the urban notion of the peasant as barbaric and uncivilized. Nationalist Américo Lugo summed up this view, calling *campesinos* “an ignorant race that vegetate without hygiene, prisoners of the most repugnant sicknesses, that due to their lack of foresight, their violence and their duplicity, are generally incestuous, gamblers, alcoholics, thieves and murderers” (qtd. and translated in Derby 30). Together, liberal understandings of the peasantry identified the rural population as the principal stumbling block to plans for a democratic, centralized, educated nation (Hoffnung-Garskof 18-19; Derby 30).

The eight-year occupation (1916-1924) by the United States Marines contributed to the idealization of the *campesino* as the essence of Dominicaness, as contrasted with the North American aggressors. During this time, the elite saw *campesinos* as “clever and honorable yet duped by crafty and rapacious Yankees” (Derby 35), imagining *campesinos* as the repository of a Hispanic Dominican identity (Hoffnung-Garskof 24). Although nationalists had rejected associations with Hispanic origins following Dominican reannexation to Spain (1861-1865), the US occupation marked a return to Hispanicism and folkloric elements of Dominican culture (Hoffnung-Garskof 24). Cultural resistance movements among the elite now scorned the introduction of US goods and culture. As a result of the upper class’s loss of political power, social distinctions became increasingly important, resulting in a cultural elitism that underscored consumer power and practices (Derby 37).

Progreso already had strong roots by the time Trujillo rose to power in 1930 and intensified his progressive agenda. The dictator also embodied *progreso* through his impeccable dress and appearance based on European and North American models, including a plumed bicorn hat, countless medals—many created merely to be bestowed upon him—and makeup to whiten his skin (Derby 197; Wucker 51). So intent was Trujillo upon the nation’s progress that he outlawed peasants’ migration to the cities without proper authorization from local authorities (Hoffnung-Garskof 29).

Veloz Maggiolo’s work portrays these two spheres, the city and the countryside, as “espacios alternativos de la historia oficial” (Valerio-Holguín “Tres” 265) ‘alternative spaces of official history’ within the nation. The city and progreso are ever present in the figure and threat of the dictator. In *El hombre del acordeón*, Vetemit Alzaga recalls Trujillo’s imposing image in their first

interview: “vi las botas altas de cuero del Brigadier, sus espuelas de plata, la fusta de piel brillando en la mano” (Veloz Maggiolo 16) ‘I saw the Brigadier’s high, leather boots, his silver spurs, his leather riding crop shining in his hand.’ The dictator’s impeccable, urban image becomes a required decoration in public spaces across the nation, including the town cockpit in rural La Salada, where his photograph hangs as a reminder to all of the government’s reach (133) and the supposed differences between the city and the countryside.

Still, the local caudillo heritage remains strong in the fictionalized borderlands. Unidentified gunmen create their own justice with a mysterious .44 Magnum, rumored to have belonged to either Desiderio Arias or Demeterio Rodríguez, former caudillos of the region.¹⁰ When the local sergeant in La Salada is murdered after the massacre, the author of the crime leaves a .44 Magnum casing, and local memory is quick to recall that the former caudillos were known to carry that weapon. Nevertheless, they believe that Honorio Lora, Arias’s faithful follower who unabashedly sings a banned merengue in his honor, is likely responsible for avenging his friends’ death (95). Later, this same revolver appears in Honorio Leonidas’s hands at the cockfight and merengue duel as a reminder of those who have resisted Trujillo. These references to Arias also reiterate the barbarism of the city, as represented by a central government that decapitates not only the purported enemies of the nation, but its own people as well, as in Arias’s case. The novel thus reveals that those of the countryside and the city perform equally uncivilized acts of violence.

El hombre del acordeón portrays the deep-rooted rural tradition of the cockfight and the centrality of the cockpit as a social space. The peasants of Honorio Lora’s world gather in the cockpit to watch cockfights, drink moonshine, and dance to merengue. In La Salada, the cockpit serves as the heart of community happenings, “un escenario para la festividad, la religión y la muerte” (Veloz Maggiolo 59) ‘the setting for celebration, religion, and death.’ The arena is also a space of confrontation, since cockfighting allows for symbolic interpersonal aggression among men as played out through their fighting birds (Wucker 9). As anthropologist Clifford Geertz observes, the sport fuses opposites in a single act, converting them into pure aggression: “‘In the cockfight, man and beast, good and evil, ego and id, the creative power of aroused masculinity and the destructive power of loosened animality fuse in a bloody drama of hatred, cruelty, violence, and death’” (qtd. in Wucker 9).¹¹ The cockpit provides the backdrop for Honorio Lora’s popular merengue, his suspicious death, and eventually, his revenge. Thus, the ring is the site where men’s honor is determined through the spurs of their fighting birds and the talent of their own strutting feet in the merengue dancing that follows.

Merengue Típico and Merengue de Orquesta

The urban and rural settings of *El hombre del acordeón* are partly defined by their distinct musical versions of Dominicaness, one refined and the other folkloric. *Merengue típico* remains the countryside's social music along with other religious folk genres (Veloz Maggiolo 61-62). There, lives beat in time to merengue, which defines "los límites del tiempo" (19) 'the boundaries of time.' The atmosphere in Santiago, the nation's second-largest city, is punctuated by guitar-based *mangulinas* with metallic scrapers as contrasted with the borderlands' accordion-based merengue highlighted by the gourd güiro (scraper). The drum, of African heritage, plays a subdued role in the city as well (78-79). In contrast, Saturnino Jáquez, owner of the Santiago pawnshop where Enemesio and Tantán pawn Lora's accordion, plays opera on his gramophone to establish his refinement (79). Still, the musical divisions cannot be as strict as they may appear, for Jáquez eagerly accepts Lora's accordion, knowing that its reputation will fetch a handsome price.

The supposed lines between *merengue típico* and the dictator-commissioned *merengue de orquesta* are likewise imprecise. Trujillo decreed merengue the national music, making it synonymous with Dominicaness, but its precise origins are unknown. A number of similar dances existed throughout the Caribbean, and Puerto Rico, Haiti, and Cuba have all claimed to be merengue's birthplace (Sellers 63). Still, Dominicans insist upon the genre's Dominican origins. Emilio Rodríguez Demorizi specifically denies any ties with Haiti, claiming that such an "oscura procedencia" (125) 'dark origin' would have undermined its popularity. In fact, one legend of origin ties merengue to Dominican independence from Haiti in 1844.¹² According to this myth, Dominicans sang the first merengue on the eve of their victory in the Battle of Talanquera to commemorate the events of the day (Henríquez Ureña 147; Arzeno 127). This legend reinforces the notion of boundaries by linking merengue with Dominican opposition to and victory over Haiti. Nevertheless, the journalist's probe in the novel reveals a different reality: that *merengue típico* runs as a crucial thread throughout the fabric of life on both sides of the border (Veloz Maggiolo 17).¹³

Local topics and happenings were often the subjects of merengue lyrics, and they served as an oral tradition to relate noteworthy and infamous deeds. The *merengero* was more than an entertainer, for "[e]l músico rural se convirtió también en cronista de su época, presenciaba un suceso o se enteraba de alguna ocurrencia, ponía en acción su talento, se echaba su instrumento a cuesta, y salía a contársela a la gente" (Chaljub Mejía 168) '[t]he rural musician also became the chronicler of his time. He witnessed a happening or found out about some occurrence, put his talent into action, tossed his instrument on his back, and went

to tell people about it.' This tendency to narrate current events made merengue entertaining yet dangerous.

Merengue's capacity for criticism and social control infused it with both danger and potential. Political strategist Rafael Vidal appreciated these very characteristics when he proposed that Trujillo have a *merengue típico* group accompany him on the campaign trail (Batista Matos ii). One of the most famous of these accordionists was Francisco "Ñico" Lora, known not only for his musical ability, but also his talent for improvising lyrics (Chaljub Mejía 166). While Ñico Lora remained in the dictator's good graces, the fictional character who shares his surname, Honorio Lora, distances himself from the despot following the 1937 massacre.¹⁴

Once elected, Trujillo left nothing to chance as he tightened his despotic grip on the nation. Real and threatened violence silenced opposition, and a pervasive fear of being accused as an enemy of the regime ran as an undercurrent throughout all aspects of life.¹⁵ Merengue became one of the regime's numerous mechanisms of control and propaganda. As John Fiske observes, "[a]nything out of control is always a potential threat, and always calls up moral, legal, and aesthetic powers to discipline it... The signs of the subordinate out of control terrify the forces of order...for they constitute a constant reminder of both how fragile social control is and how it is resented" (69). Trujillo's acceptance of merengue won him popularity with the masses and his selection of the version from the Cibao, the nation's whitest region, helped appease the elite. Trujillo hired Luis Alberti and his band as his personal ensemble in 1935, and musicians rushed to compose merengues in Trujillo's honor.¹⁶ In a day when much of the country was without radio or newspaper and many still could not read, merengue served as a constant source of praise and propaganda for Trujillo's greatness (Sellers 99-102).

Alberti brought several innovations to merengue, such as replacing the accordion or guitar with the saxophone, trumpet or clarinet, to make its sound more cosmopolitan and by extension, more appealing to the elite (del Castillo and García Arévalo 82). These alterations, adopted by other musicians, resulted in a perceived division between the *merengue típico* and *merengue de orquesta*. Still, both styles of merengue were often heard in outdoor public concerts, events that provided a space of convergence for different social classes. These communal spaces contributed to a shared sense of Dominicaness and underline merengue's ability to unite people across differences (Sellers 97).

The novel's account of the events surrounding Honorio Lora's death and revenge illustrate that the supposed boundaries between the two merengues were not truly strict. Although the historical Trujillo had driven the innovations to create *merengue de orquesta*, the fictional dictator gifts Lora's famous accordion to him in the novel, assuring Lora's fame and making him the envy of other

accordionists (Veloz Maggiolo 28). According to Vetemit Alzaga, popular belief holds that it was Lora who taught Trujillo how to dance merengue and instilled in him a taste for the genre (24). Whether or not this was the case—and the journalist is doubtful of the aged storyteller’s trustworthiness—the fictional Trujillo is a fan of Lora’s music. Even as late as one month before the musician’s death, the dictator offers Lora the opportunity to move to the capital and play in a merengue orchestra, attempting to co-opt a potential threat (92). By this point, Lora has become critical of the regime because of the gruesome events of 1937, and he declines. Lora’s decision is the equivalent to suicide in a nation where no one refuses orders from Trujillo, since the dictator “que donaba y regalaba acordeones, manejaba la muerte a su antojo” (35) ‘who donated and gifted accordions had death wrapped around his little finger.’

Like other *merengeros*, the fictional Honorio Lora is well practiced in the art of composing vindictive lyrics, a skill that eventually leads to his demise. When another man catcalls Nacha in the years of her romance with Lora, she warns him to tread lightly: “[N]o te busques vainas con Honorio, porque te quita la fama con sólo hablar de ti en un merengue,’ y así fue...Fueron entonces enemigos mortales, y se dice que también él era de los que llevaba noticias a las autoridades sobre las letras de Honorio, que en sus finales iban contra la autoridad establecida” (61) “[D]on’t go looking for trouble with Honorio, because he can ruin your reputation just by mentioning you in a merengue,” and that’s how it was...Then, they became mortal enemies, and it’s been said that he was among those who carried rumors to the authorities about Honorio’s lyrics, which in the end, went against the established authority.’ Vetemit Alzaga also feels the sting of Lora’s criticism when the accordionist composes a merengue poking fun at his invented Hispanic surnames. As a result, Lora finds a bitter enemy in the government’s official historian (73). Later, Alzaga proves his loyalty to Trujillo by gathering up the subversive lyrics to “limpiar verdaderamente la región de alimañas musicales como ésas” (70) ‘truly cleanse the region of such musical vermin.’

Given merengue’s potential to spread criticism in the lyrics of a talented accordionist and to the beat of popular dance music, both musician and instrument become dangerous weapons for the dictator as well as those who oppose him in the novel. For Lora, his accordion is his weapon of choice in both amorous and political contests (Veloz Maggiolo 33). As Lora’s political opposition grows, his instrument becomes increasingly perilous: “Acordeón que en lo político se iría transformando casi en una carabina calibre 30-30, o en un revólver Mágnum 44” (29) ‘An accordion that, in politics, would almost be transformed into a .30-30 rifle or a .44 Magnum revolver.’ When Lora’s accordion ends up in the hands of his nemesis and the regime’s new favorite, La Postalita, she brandishes it like a rifle as she prepares to duel with Acedonio (137). Likewise, an accordion metes

out justice upon Mayor Atilio Alomá for his association with the dictatorship and his purchase of Lora's stolen accordion. In a rage over La Postalita's loss in the duel, Atilio attacks the instrument, and a bullet ricochets off it into his body, ending his life (144).

Merengue is therefore a weapon that serves as both an instrument of control at the service of the dictatorship and as a nonconformist criticism in the marginalized voices of the rural poor. While *merengue de orquesta* sings Trujillo's praises, Honorio Lora appears as an armed caudillo of the opposition to threaten that omnipresent control (Rodríguez): "Hombre, caballo y acordeón eran un todo" (Veloz Maggiolo 28) 'Man, horse, and accordion were one.' The political caudillo and the musical strongman are mirror reflections, and those around them must stay in step. Their control determines the rhythm of the nation and the dance, and all others must adjust: "Honorio Lora se esmera en sacarle melodías novedosas a su acordeón, que se acelera y se desacelera como el baile mismo, y entonces la tambora y la güira tienen la nueva obligación de perseguir la melodía y de ajustarse al tono, a la nueva armonía" (23) 'Honorio Lora takes pains to draw novel melodies from his accordion, which accelerates and decelerates like the dance itself, and then the drum and scraper have a new obligation to follow the melody and to adjust to the tone and to the new harmony.' The deaths of Lora's traitorous friends, Tantán and Enemesio, at the hands of Lora's son, Honorio Leonidas, and by Arias's .44 Magnum, reiterate these caudillo similarities. Named after both his father and the dictator, Honorio Leonidas leaves an ambiguous message on their cadavers: "Aparecieron con un letrero sobre el pecho...El letrero, político totalmente, decía 'traicionaron al Jefe'. Pero algunos pensaron que se refería al Jefe musical y no al entonces Jefe de la nación" (128) 'They appeared with a sign on their chests...The sign, completely political, said "they betrayed the Chief." But some people thought that it referred to the musical Chief and not to the current Chief of the nation.'

The two forms of merengue run along the same continuum, yet diverge in the novel. *Merengue típico* arises as a form of rebellion even as its younger sibling, *merengue de orquesta*, remains a form of forced compliance. Indeed, the accordion duel between Acedonio and La Postalita becomes a symbolic victory for the border dwellers since "Ya no había otra manera de vérselas con el General que venciendo a sus seguidores" (Veloz Maggiolo 137) 'There was no longer any way to confront the General than by defeating his followers.' When human justice fails in the world of the living, the only recourse is to seek supernatural justice from beyond the grave. In this way, evil is checked and balance is restored to an orderly universe (Tann, ch. 2).

Conclusion

Although Trujillo remains in power at the conclusion of *El hombre del acordeón*, Honorio Lora completes his revenge, and those associated with the despot pay for their loyalty. The contradictory realities that challenge the state-sponsored identities actively propagated following the massacre still speak through Lora's story and the syncretic lives along the border. As the journalist gathers his data and renders his account of the events surrounding Honorio Lora's death, the imprecise, conflicting, otherworldly, and often questionable happenings force him to accept the ambiguous middle ground of this magical reality: "A veces hasta los que nos creemos más lógicos no tenemos explicación para muchos hechos, y nos damos cuenta de que creer en ellos, sin analizarlos, es más fácil que negarlos" (Veloz Maggiolo 89) 'Sometimes even those of us who believe ourselves to be the most logical have no other explanation for many things that happen, and we realize that believing in them without analyzing them is easier than rejecting them.' The journalist recognizes that the pre-massacre realities were less defined than the claims made by official Dominican identity discourses, and that the imposed forgetfulness of the nation allows nationalists to imagine new symbols of identity (Bhabha 230).

Ultimately, Veloz Maggiolo's novel reflects how these hybrid national narratives—race, religion, national spaces, and music—undermine the fixity of rigid boundaries (Bhabha 213). Much like the aforementioned quilt of facts the narrator attempts to stitch together, *dominicanidad* is not one but many realities: not wholly white or black, Catholic or Vodouisant, urban or rural, modern or folk, but rather "scraps, patches and rags of daily life" that "must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a coherent national culture" (Bhabha 209). The borderland setting of *El hombre del acordeón* challenges purportedly self-contained geographies of identity by portraying the hybridity, dynamism, and fluidity not only of the geopolitical border, but also of other imagined boundaries. Merengue plays across these imprecise divisions as an accompaniment to life, giving voice to the multiplicity of identities and realities in the borderlands and the Dominican nation.

Notes

1. Official justification of the massacre claimed that Dominican peasants had revolted in the face of cattle rustling by Haitians. To add credibility to this claim, Dominican soldiers were ordered to carry out their work using machetes, knives, and shovels instead of guns (Turits 615).

2. The exact number of Haitian lives claimed in the massacre is unknown. Some 18,000 deaths were reported along the border alone, but this number does not take into account the deaths farther inland where the massacre spread. Miguel Aquino estimates that approximately 20,000 to 25,000 Haitians were killed (134-35).

3. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

4. As Silvio Torres-Saillant has pointed out, the War of Restoration (1863-1865) against Spain provided yet another point of departure for Dominican identity processes by contributing to Dominicans' understandings of themselves as different from white Spanish soldiers. This tendency was further strengthened by the US Marines' eight-year occupation (1916-1924) ("Tribulations" [2000] 1092-93).

5. Through the years, Dominican rulers made various efforts to reinforce the border and define it more clearly. In the eighteenth century, French colonists of the western lands so outnumbered Spanish settlers of the eastern side that marking the border by force was impossible. Instead, Spanish authorities undertook a campaign to repopulate the borderlands with settlers from the Canary Islands. The two nations had contested the border for over two centuries before finally resolving the conflict in 1936 (Turits 610). This imprecision contributed to what Fernando Valerio-Holguín has called "floating borders" where "there are no fixed categories from a racial, linguistic, or cultural point of view" ("Primitive" 770). The 1937 massacre was intended to define the floating border once and for all.

6. Dominican soldiers singled out Haitians from dark-skinned Dominicans with a test that required the pronunciation of the word *perejil*, Spanish for parsley (Turits 616). The Haitians were unable to pronounce the Spanish flipped *r* in the word. Still, not all dark-skinned Dominicans had the opportunity to prove themselves, and lost their lives, mistaken for Haitians.

7. Despite Vodou's roots in the African religions of slaves forcibly brought to Hispaniola, it is "not really a body of *beliefs*, but a body of *practices* that illustrate particular beliefs. It is not a religion so much as a way of life" (Tann, part 1). History contributed to the blurry lines between Catholicism and Vodou when the majority of Catholic clergy fled the country following independence. From that time until the Haitian government and Church were reconciled in the Concordat of 1860, Haiti was no longer bound to Rome or the workings of the Church. This separation strengthened and extended Vodou's influence (Métraux), and lent itself to the intermingling of Christian and Vodou practices. Rather than a syncretic blend, Desmangles argues that the Haitian reality is more a symbiosis, "the

juxtaposition of two religions who do not fuse with one another...coexistence without conflation, commensalism without union” (7).

8. Vodouisants believe that a Lwa can ride a person who serves as the spirit’s *chwal* ‘horse’ during the possession (Tann, ch. 3). In contrast to metempsychosis, the doctrine of the transmigration of souls, this is not a question of reincarnation, but rather, is a temporary inhabiting of the *chwal*’s body.

9. Gine, which derives from “Guinea” in reference to Africa, is similar to the understanding of heaven in Christian theology (McGee 31).

10. Arias, who led an uprising shortly after Trujillo took power, escaped several government-ordered attempts on his life before he was finally murdered and decapitated, upon Trujillo’s orders.

11. Michelle Wucker has proposed that the cockfight is likewise an appropriate metaphor for the historically violent and confrontational Dominican-Haitian relationship (26).

12. Dominicans celebrate February 27, 1844 as their Independence Day, despite the fact that it was not the last time they would be forced to win their independence. The Dominican government actively sought reannexation to Spain (1861-1865), fearing another Haitian invasion in the face of the crumbling Dominican economy. Dominican leaders preferred a return to a European colonial power over the possibility of being ruled by their Haitian neighbors.

13. Merengue had a faithful following, especially in the country’s rural regions where African cultural traditions were most prevalent and the majority of Dominicans lived at the time of its birth (Moya Pons 213). Due in part to these rural associations, merengue did not make inroads into the tastes of the urban upper class until the early 20th century when it formed part of a cultural resistance movement to the US Marine occupation. This campaign celebrated all things Dominican in the face of encroaching North American culture. As part of these patriotic efforts, nationalists embraced the Cibao region’s version of merengue as a symbol of *dominicanidad* (Austerlitz 30). The syncretic merengue situated these elites in an ambiguous middle ground, at a safe distance from both the blackness of Haiti and the whiteness of their North American invaders. Nevertheless, merengue fell out of vogue again among the elite following the Marine evacuation in 1924.

14. This choice of surname sets up an intentional reference, immediately recognizable for Dominicans, to the famous Ñico Lora. While the fictional Honorio Lora possesses all of Ñico Lora's musical ability, his political resistance contrasts with that revered historical figure.

15. Trujillo established a group of thugs, *La 42*, named after the 42nd Marine Company, as part of his first campaign. These terrorists traveled the country in a red Packard that became known as the "death car" and sought out all real and alleged enemies of the regime. Later, the *Servicio de Inteligencia Militar* (Military Intelligence Service) or SIM was formed as a spy network. Secret agents known as *caliés* reported on all real or imagined anti-Trujillo activities and sentiments. The SIM's reaches were so deep that even domestic servants formed part of their network and informed on their employers. No one knew when even an innocent comment might be mistaken or misinterpreted as criticism of the government (Aquino 74).

16. Merengues composed in Trujillo's honor numbered in the hundreds. Luis Rivera González's *Antología musical de la era de Trujillo, 1930-1960* alone contains approximately three hundred.

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