

“La Revolución dentro de la Revolución:” The Cuban
Hip-Hop Movement and the State
Race, Marginality and Institutionalization

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Cuban hip-hop is unique when compared to hip-hop around the world: it is an institutionalized art form, receiving promotional support, production equipment and concert space directly from the Cuban government. In this essay I explore how and why this relationship between Cuban hip-hop artists and the Cuban government came to be. I relate the history and development of Cuban hip-hop to show how it came to be a highly politicized musical form in the Afro-Cuban community, then present the motives both Cuban rappers and government officials had for forming an alliance. I then discuss how the Cuban hip-hop movement was effected by institutionalization, considering both positive and negative effects, and concluding with an evaluation of the Cuban hip-hop movement’s current status and direction in relation to its origins as a grassroots political musical form.

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INTRODUCTION

From its humble beginnings in the housing projects of the South Bronx in the 1970s, hip-hop has grown into a globalized musical genre and culture. Alleyways in Spain explode with the cryptic lettering of graffiti, South Koreans breakdance on public plazas in Seoul, and in Paris French rappers rhyme over break beats scratched on turn tables. Hip-hop, although originally imported from the U.S.A., can no longer be considered only American music. Hip-hop aficionados often identify themselves as members of the “hip-hop nation,” a transnational global culture united by style and music. Some theories of globalization suggest that transnational cultural flows such as hip hop, which have the capability of redefining individuals’ cultural identity, “lead to increasing obsolescence of the territorially-bounded nation-state.”¹ As culture is globalized, modern citizens look less and less to the nation to which they belong to form their cultural identity, drawing from imported or transnational culture in order to define who they are. For the nation state, this can become a problem: democratic ideas in China become “threats to its own control over ideas of nationhood and peoplehood...” western lifestyles represented on television in the Middle East and Asia “completely overwhelm and undermine the rhetoric of national politics.”² According to theory then, globalization and nationalism seem to be mutually exclusive phenomena.

That being so, it is logical to assume that hip-hop would be entirely incompatible with nationalist interests. This, however, is not the case in Cuba. Cuban hip-hop defies theories of globalization by bolstering nationalism and strengthening

¹ Fernandes, Sujatha. *Cuba Represent! : Cuban arts, state power, and the making of new revolutionary cultures*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006)

² Appadurai, Arjun. “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy.” *Public Culture* 2(2): 1-24, quoted in Fernandes (2006).

Cuban solidarity in their national identity. This partly has to do with the alliance that hip-hop has been able to form with the Cuban state: hip-hop is institutionalized in Cuba, receiving logistical, technical and promotional support from the government while rappers support the aims and ideologies of the Cuban revolution in their critiques of global capitalism and consumerism. Hip-hop has its own government agency in Cuba: *la Agencia Cubana de Rap* (ACR, Cuban Agency of Rap). Heavy state involvement is surely the most unique aspect of Cuban hip-hop and has played a key role in enabling Cuban hip-hop to grow into one of the most vibrant hip-hop scenes in Latin America.

It is curious how a musical style imported from Cuba's ideological archenemy could have been assimilated so successfully into Cuban national culture and promoted by the state in such a short period of time.³ Hip-hop began to leak into the Cuban isle in the 1980s, and in the early 1990s, the first Cuban rap groups began to perform informally at house parties and on street corners in Havana. By 2002, two separate state institutions had taken hip-hop under their auspices, and Cuban rappers were performing on stages all around Cuba and Latin America.

Yet while the state provides rappers with the means to produce and perform their music, some refer to hip-hop's institutional status as a gilded cage, enabling rappers while at the same time limiting their creative license. Rap took root in Cuba in the displaced Afro-Cuban communities of Havana who felt the hardships brought on by the economic crisis of the 1990s (referred to in Cuba as the "Special Period") more acutely than most other (white) Cubans. Rap, for the Afro-Cuban community, was

³ Baker, Geoffrey. 2005. "¡Hip Hop, Revolución! Nationalizing Rap in Cuba." *Ethnomusicology* vol. 49, no. 3, Fall, 369

“resistance music” in the sense that it enabled marginalized Afro-Cubans to carve out a political niche in which they could express their frustrations with the shortcomings of the revolution and critique the gaps between government rhetoric and the lived realities of the new economic policies of the Special Period. These rapped critiques often contrasted sharply with what government officials were claiming in their public speeches, especially concerning the matter of race. Once institutionalized, however, Cuban rap’s voice of resistance would encounter clear limits. Only rappers that did not veer too far from the party line would qualify for government support—those rappers whom the government perceived as “subversive” to state ideology would find themselves denied support and would thus discover it was much more difficult to make and perform their music.

Some scholars argue that hip-hop’s institutionalization in Cuba has been a process of co-optation—or an appropriation of hip-hop’s political power—meant to benefit state interests, while others assert that institutionalization has been a natural, entirely benign occurrence, forming the next logical step in hip-hop’s growth on the island. In this paper, I intend to explore how and why Cuban hip-hop developed from its beginnings as a grassroots Afro-Cuban phenomenon into a national, institutionalized art form in Cuba. To do this I will provide an account of the historical context out of which Cuban hip-hop emerged, then describe how a marginalized class of young Afro-Cubans were able to adopt hip-hop as a means by which to re-create community, explore racial identity, revisit their cultural heritage and counteract the marginalization they were experienced in Cuban society. Hip-hop created the space for a political

forum in which the young Afro-Cuban community could critique the gaps between government rhetoric and their lived experience, thus politicizing rappers' role in Cuban communities. After establishing Cuban hip-hop's development into a popular, political form of expression, I will relate how and why the Cuban state became involved with Cuban hip-hop politically with the double intention of fostering its growth while limiting its potential to destabilize the revolution's ideological monopoly through its countervailing voice.

Historical Context: the Special Period of the 1990s

In order to make some sense of the contradictory and ambiguous relationship between the Cuban hip-hop movement and state institutions, it is important that I begin to tell Cuban hip-hop's story from the beginning. Hip-hop emerged in Cuba as a politicized musical art form amidst the drastic economic and social changes that took place on the island during the Special Period of the 1990s. Fidel Castro used the term "*Período especial en tiempo de paz*" ("Special Period in a Time of Peace") in June of 1990 to refer to the period of economic crisis and extreme hardship Cuba faced following the withdrawal of support by the Soviet Union.⁴ Trade with the USSR had accounted for nearly 80 percent of all Cuban trade, all of which virtually disappeared overnight, causing the Cuban gross domestic product to plummet by nearly one-third,

⁴ Alexander I. Gray and Antoni Kapcia, eds., *The Changing Dynamic of Cuban Civil Society*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008, 4

personal consumption and employment to decline rapidly and the black market and emigration to escalate markedly.⁵

In response to the sudden economic crisis, Cuban officials declared a state of emergency in which austerity measures were rapidly enforced so as to maintain the egalitarian division of the now scarce resources remaining on the island. Blackouts became a daily routine, rations were reduced, and public transportation service was cut down to below the third of what it was before the Special Period.⁶ Further complicating Cuba's dire situation, the United States government tightened the trade embargo in the hopes of providing the last squeeze needed to strangle Castro's weakened regime.⁷ However, Cuba endured. Life during the Special Period was very similar to wartime conditions; while the population weathered extreme scarcity the regime maintained morale by appealing to the people's sense of nationalism and revolutionary commitment while struggling to adapt to the harsh new economic climate.⁸

The Special Period did not only require that the general populace make sacrifices in order to maintain the revolution during such times of crisis. The new economy forced Cuban leaders to make ideological sacrifices in the realm of politics, putting "ideology aside while searching out immediate solutions to urgent problems."⁹ In order to survive, the Cuban state relaxed its strict socialist ideology to include a mixed economy that allowed some private entrepreneurial business, joint ventures in

⁵ Gray and Kapcia (2008), 4

⁶ Azicri, Max. *Cuba Today and Tomorrow: Reinventing Socialism*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000, 75

⁷ Eckstein, Susan. "Dollarization and its Discontents in the Post-Soviet Era" in *A Contemporary Cuba Reader* Eds. Phillip Brenner et al. (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008) 179

⁸ Azicri (2000) 75

⁹ Gray and Kapcia 2008, 4

tourism, participation in the capitalist global economy, and permitted foreign currency like the U.S. dollar to be held and exchanged as legal tender for the first time under the revolutionary government. These changes were made reluctantly, as the consequences of such shifts in policy contradicted the socialist direction towards which the previous policies were aimed. The new economic policies opened a space for increasing economic inequality in a population that was used to egalitarianism. A high-ranking government official was quoted in 1993 saying, “This will create differences among people, greater than what we have now and greater than we are used to having since the revolution... [T]he inequality or privilege that can be created are realities we must allow.”¹⁰

The most striking example of how Cuba’s new economic policy provoked inequalities to resurface in Cuban society was the legalization of the United States dollar. The Cuban government legalized the holding of foreign currency in order to bring much needed capital onto the island and resuscitate Cuba’s economy. As government rations began to thin, dollars quickly became an essential solution to solving Cubans’ daily needs. The acquisition of goods and services as well as social influence and importance hinged on Cubans’ individual purchasing power, which was directly related to their level of access to American dollars.¹¹ A rift began to divide Cuban society along a distinct dollar line: on one side, those who had access to dollars and on the other, those who did not. Those who had limited access to dollars could turn

¹⁰ Fuente, Alejandro de la. *A Nation for all: Race, Equality, and politics in twentieth century Cuba*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001) 317.

¹¹ Gray and Kaptcia (2008) 5

only to the government for support in their daily needs and saw their standard of living diminish as government resources dwindled. Increasingly, Cubans were forced to rely on the informal economy in order to satisfy any desires beyond their most basic of needs.

Alejandro de la Fuente argues that these changes in the economy have had various racially-differentiated effects as black Cubans have not had the same access as whites to the areas of the economy that see a steady flow of dollars. In many ways, the dividing line of the dollar was drawn across racial lines. One of the main ways in which Cubans acquire hard currency is through family remittances, or money that Cuban immigrants living in the United States have been able to send back to family still living on the island. Remittances accounted for about \$800 million in 1997, providing an essential boost to the Cuban economy. However, the benefits that remittances bestowed upon the Cuban economy were not distributed evenly among its citizens. According to a 1990 census, 83.5 percent of Cuban immigrants living in the United States identified themselves as white.¹² That means that, if we assume that the remittances went to the same racial group as the sender, about \$680 million out of the \$800 million that arrived on the island annually ended up in white hands.¹³ If we extrapolate these numbers to cover the Cuban population, per capita remittances would amount to about \$85 per year among whites while the comparable figure among blacks would be less than half this amount.¹⁴ Because the Cuban diaspora is predominantly white, white Cubans benefit

¹² Fuente (2001) 319.

¹³ Fuente (2001) 319

¹⁴ Fuente (2001) 319

the most from family remittances. Non-white Cubans find themselves at a distinct disadvantage from the start because they lack similar direct connections to United States dollars.

The racial inequity of family remittances occur because white Cuban immigrants make up the majority of people that can send money back to their families on the island from their homes in the United States, not because of any racially discriminatory practices or ideology. However, racist ideology would come to be a major obstacle for Afro-Cubans who attempted to access dollars by other means. Because black Cubans have such limited access to dollars through remittances, their opportunities to participate in the dollar economy are reduced to the competitive tourist sector, the most dynamic and lucrative in the Cuban economy.¹⁵ Even the highest paying jobs provided by the state were dwarfed when they are compared to the income of Cubans who have direct access to the tourist industry:

A heart surgeon paid in pesos would have a lower salary and live a more difficult life than a tourism worker... A good salary in Cuba could go as high as five hundred to six hundred pesos a month, which would be worth between fourteen and twenty-six dollars. Over a week, four or five one-dollar tips per day could match or even surpass a high pesos salary.¹⁶

Because of the economic opportunity they represented, jobs in the tourism sector became the most coveted of any in Cuba. Max Azicri notes, “Doctors, teachers, engineers, and other professionals have become bellboys and chambermaids earning dollar tips instead of working in their professions and receiving salaries in pesos.”¹⁷ De

¹⁵ Fuente (2001) 319

¹⁶ Azicri (2000) 74

¹⁷ Azicri (2000) 74.

la Fuente points out that black Cubans should have had privileged access to the tourist sector because of their formidable presence in the services sector, comprising a significant proportion of the labor force employed in hotels, restaurants, and similar services: “of those employed in ‘services,’ 38 percent, according to the 1981 census, were black or mulatto—a percentage slightly above blacks and mulattoes’ population share.”¹⁸ However, when the tourist sector began to expand during the Special Period, non-white Cubans became drastically underrepresented in the industry, finding it increasingly difficult to secure employment therein.¹⁹ Ron Howell writes that despite the new opportunities blacks benefited from since the revolution in 1959, “It is curious, then, to enter the Meliá Santiago, eastern Cuba’s first five-star hotel, and find that none of the employees in the lobby is black.”²⁰ Black and white Cubans alike received comparable education and opportunities for work in state industries, yet in the most lucrative sector of the economy they were denied access.

The racial inequity in the tourist sector was so apparent that many refer to it as the “tourist apartheid.” Certain designated “tourist zones” were off limits to Cubans who were not employed in tourism. The sanctity of such zones was enforced by Cuban police, who would exercise their power to arrest anyone who had trespassed into them. To do so, police regularly engaged in thinly veiled racial profiling based on the concept of “*peligrosidad social*” (“social dangerousness”), officially a crime in Cuba vaguely

¹⁸ Fuente (2001) 319

¹⁹ Fuente (2001) 319

²⁰ Howell, Ron. “Tourism reviving racism in Cuba.” *Chicago Tribune* May 18, 2001.
<http://www.cubanet.org/CNews/y01/may01/18e1.htm>

defined as any behavior judged to be “against the norms of socialist morality.”²¹

Alejandro de la Fuente asserts that such a “crime” was “essentially identified with the conduct of Blacks, and particularly young Blacks.”²²

It would seem then that the state also had become actively involved in racist practices and contributed directly to the ongoing marginalization that black Cubans began to face in the Special Period. Yet while the fast-growing income gap brought about by Cuba’s new economic policies polarized Cuban society and had clear racially-differentiated effects, these racial consequences were by no means the intention of the policies themselves. Fidel Castro made the goal of ending racial discrimination in Cuba one of the central pillars of the revolutionary project shortly after the success of the revolution in 1959.²³ However, despite the success of desegregating and integrating schools, public institutions, recreational centers and employment in the 1960s, the revolutionary government was unable to completely eradicate racial ideology from the island. Prejudices and racial stereotypes continued to perpetuate themselves in the private sector, influencing social relations among friends, neighbors, coworkers and family members.²⁴ When the new economic policies of the Special Period opened up the possibility for a more competitive economy made up of private entrepreneurs, the racial prejudices that had always lain just beyond the reach of Cuba’s “color-blind” government regulation began to reflect themselves in the new economy through racial

²¹ Wunderlich, Annelise. “Cuban Hip-hop: Making Space for New Voices of Dissent.” In *The Vinyl Ain’t Final: Hip Hop and the Globalization of Black Popular Culture*, ed. by Dipannita Basu and Sidney J. Lemelle (London: Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2006) 171. <http://www.cubanet.org/CNews/y01/may01/18e1.htm>

²² Fuente (2001) 320

²³ Fuente (2001) 263.

²⁴ Fuente (2001) 322.

discrimination, creating major obstacles for Afro-Cubans attempting to access the dollar economy. Alejandro de la Fuente argues that the underrepresentation of blacks in tourism can be explained by a racism prevalent in Cuba's culture, not government policy itself:

...the underrepresentation of blacks in tourism cannot be explained as a function of structural conditions. It is, rather, a function of the pervasiveness of a racial ideology that portrays blacks as lazy, inefficient, dirty, ugly, and prone to criminal activities. In times of scarcity and growing competition for resources, this racist ideology has been used to justify the exclusion of Afro-Cubans from the benefits of the most attractive sector of Cuba's economy.²⁵

Race in Cuba is defined not only by phenotypical features (skin color, facial structure) but by a number of social and cultural factors as well, such as education and class.²⁶ In popular Cuban thought, two individuals with the same skin tone but different socio-cultural and educational backgrounds could easily be placed into two distinct racial categories. These racist ideas and stereotypes had existed in Cuba since long before the revolution but did not get in the way of the socialist egalitarianism that Cuba had achieved in the 1980s. Through government regulation blacks and whites alike were given equal opportunities in the public sphere; while racist ideology persisted in the private sphere, government institutions that pervaded all sectors of public life operated according to revolutionary ideology, negating discriminatory practices by imposing institutional egalitarianism. However, as state institutions began to relax their control over the Cuban public, racism in Cuba began to make itself more apparent as capitalism

²⁵ Fuente (2001) 322

²⁶ Fuente (2001) 308

crept onto the island through the dollar economy, allowing personal prejudices once again to influence the opportunities available in the Cuban community and workforce.

The government policy and rhetoric of the time seem ironic and out of touch when placed alongside the new racial discrepancies growing in Cuban society. The fact that Afro-Cubans were disproportionately affected by the economic crisis went largely unacknowledged by the Cuban government, which had long since labeled racism and discrimination as problems “solved” by the Cuban revolution in 1959. Cuba, officials insisted, was a “color-blind” society—as early as 1962 revolutionary authorities began claiming that the revolution had succeeded in eradicating racial discrimination from the island.²⁷ In support of this claim, they pointed to the desegregated schools, hospitals, and public areas as well as the equal opportunities for employment all Cubans received. Their goal was to create a “color-blind” society, and they claimed that they had succeeded. In pursuit of that ideal, the revolution made an attempt to eliminate from the public sector all distinctions based on race. Along with the exclusive clubs of the bourgeoisie, the Cuban government shut down all black clubs, unions and press that identified themselves as such, as they were thought to highlight racial divisions.²⁸ Although the government’s intentions in doing so were in good faith according to their socialist ideals, the erasure of racial distinctions altogether would come to be a sword that cut both ways, especially during the Special Period.

By claiming that they had eliminated racial discrimination, revolutionary authorities had closed the case, so to speak, on racism in Cuba—it became a thing of the

²⁷ Fuente (2001) 279

²⁸ Fuente (2001) 373.

past. Race disappeared from public debate. Any public mention of racism that did not center on Cuba's success in the area was considered unpatriotic as it implied that the revolution had regressed. Thus, the Afro-Cubans affected by the racism that began to creep onto the island in the 1990s found themselves politically powerless to speak out about racial discrimination; for one, because of the dismantling of black institutions, they had no means by which to organize themselves in order to fight the increasing marginalization they faced economically and socially; secondly, the government considered any notion of race to be "anti-Cuban" and so would not acknowledge racially-defined voices. Officially, black Cubans did not exist. This racial blindness only led to a promulgation of racist ideologies and discrimination in Cuban society. Historian Alejandro de la Fuente writes, "the revival of racism and racially discriminatory practices in the Special Period has led to growing resentment and resistance in the black population, which suddenly finds itself in a hostile environment without the political and organizational tools to fight against it."²⁹ This frustration would find its outlet in hip-hop, an art form and culture that would enable Afro-Cubans to reclaim their cultural identity and find political voice.

Cuban Hip-Hop's Emergence and its Consolidation as a Movement

Hip-hop's emergence in Cuba was not yet another instance of a popular American trend finding its way onto the island, such as jazz, be-bop, and rock. Hip-hop music, dance and graffiti had leaked onto the island since the early 1980s, sparking the

²⁹ Fuente (2001) 329

interest of some Cubans for its novelty, yet hip-hop as a culture and movement materialized in Cuba as a “local response to experiences of displacement and relocation, as well as impoverishment and discrimination” that Afro-Cubans were subjected to during the Special Period.³⁰ Hip-hop became an avenue through which disaffected Afro-Cubans could counteract what seemed to be their growing marginalization in the revolutionary project. In the same vein, many Afro-Cubans sought ways to re-vitalize their connection to their cultural heritage through ties to the African diaspora: African religious practices such as *abakuá* and *santería*, enabled Afro-Cubans to form a community based on shared heritage and experience while counteracting the Cuban government’s attempt to erase racial distinctions. Yet while African spirituality created community space as well as formed a distinct set of shared beliefs and values for Afro-Cubans, it was hip-hop that would take back the politically assertive voice of which Afro-Cubans had been deprived. Rap would become the radical medium that would carry the voice of black Cuban youth.

The sounds of American hip-hop first arrived in Cuba over radio waves broadcast by Miami radio stations WEDR 99 Jams and WHQT Hot 105 in the 1980s.³¹ Antennas in Alamar, a housing project just outside Havana, would reach just high enough to catch the stations’ signals. Alamar would become the center for the Cuban hip-hop movement. Rap also found its way into Cuba through cassettes and vinyl that

³⁰ Fernandes (2006) 361

³¹ Olavarria, Morgot. “Rap and Revolution: Hip-Hop Comes to Cuba.” In *A Contemporary Cuba Reader: Reinventing the Revolution*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), 369.

visiting emigrés would bring back to Cuba from the United States.³² Cubans would hear artists like Run DMC, Public Enemy and KRS-One—African American artists that were openly proud of their blackness, which they would express aggressively and, especially in the case of Public Enemy, militantly. Young black Cubans identified with artists such as these whom they perceived to be part of an oppressed class of African Americans, unjustly discriminated against in the white supremacist, capitalistic American empire. Now that black Cubans themselves were beginning to feel like an oppressed class of their own, they perceived American rappers' message and aggressive posturing as expressions of their own dissent against oppression, their own frustrations with injustice and inequality.

American hip-hop artists would become role models for black Cuban youth during the Special Period. The obvious black pride of American rappers opened up a new way for Afro-Cubans to think of their skin tone; no longer was it merely a sign of inferiority and criminality but a prestigious endowment, a marker of identity that stretched far beyond Cuba's borders to include all members of the African diaspora. In the words of Chuck D of Public Enemy, "the black man can be just as intelligent as he is strong.... we're not third-world people, we're first-world people; we're the original people [of the earth]."³³ That idea of black prestige would not only appeal to impoverished and marginalized Afro-Cubans, it would light the fire under a cultural

³² Sujatha, Fernandes. "Island Paradise, Revolutionary Utopia or Hustler's Haven? Consumerism and Socialism in Contemporary Cuban Rap." In *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, Vol. 12.3 (2003) 360

³³ *Do the Right Thing*, DVD, Directed by Spike Lee. 1989, Hollywood, CA: Universal Studios.

movement of Afro-Cubans who—as a community—participated in the re-creation and redefinition of their cultural identity.

Black Cubans began to express their newfound racial pride through imitating the American artists they admired. The ‘Afro’ hairstyle as well as dreadlocks came into fashion along with baggy pants, oversized shirts, hooded sweatshirts and baseball and stocking caps. Even puffy winter jackets that rappers such as Method Man would wear on chilly New York streets found their way into Afro-Cuban fashion, despite the tropical climate. Cuban rap audiences also adopted American slang, such as “aight” and “muthufucka.”³⁴ By dressing and speaking in such a unique way, Afro-Cubans made a profound political statement: their clothing styles showed defiance to the dominant culture and highlighted their identity as black, distinguishing themselves as a group. Sujatha Fernandez writes how state officials recognized the subversive possibilities of Afro-Cubans’ style of dress:

In his article in *El Habanero*, Pita (1999) derided rappers for wearing hats, long pants and stocking caps in a hot climate not suitable to such apparel. However, more at stake than the matter of a climactic suitability, were the associations of the clothing with a culture and society forbidden to young Cubans.... young Cubans seek to break down exclusive boundaries erected by a cold war climate by dressing in the attire of the “enemy.”³⁵

The “enemy” that Fernandes refers to is of course the United States, yet black Cubans did not intend to dress like Americans; rather, they intended to dress as members of hip-hop culture, marking themselves as members of the African diaspora, of which hip-hop was a vibrant expression. The geographical location of hip-hop’s beginnings had

³⁴ Fernandes, Sujatha. “Fear of a Black Nation: Local Rappers, Transnational Crossings, and State Power in Contemporary Cuba.” *Cuba Represent!* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) 600.

³⁵ Fernandes (2006), 600

nothing to do with Afro-Cubans' adoption of hip-hop style but rather everything to do with the fact that hip-hop culture transcended national boundaries to include the oppressed and impoverished around the world, united through an artistic movement. Through imitation of the styles of African-American rappers, Afro-Cubans reclaimed pride in their identity as *Afro*-Cubans in a racist society that claimed to have transcended race.

Clothing and hairstyles were important expressions of internationalized hip-hop culture, yet it was hip-hop music that was able to bring the Afro-Cuban community together to share in a new, creative way of expressing their blackness. In the late 1980s and early 1990s Cubans would be exposed to some rap in public (government-sponsored) venues such as dance clubs or neighborhood cultural centers, which would play the occasional popular commercial hit, but hip-hop could hardly have been said to be in the mainstream in Cuba at that time.³⁶ Hip-hop music was dispersed through informal networks or, in other words, the underground. Resources were limited: because of the U.S. trade embargo, Cubans wouldn't have been able to buy rap CDs from the US even if they could have afforded it. The rap albums that circulated through Cuba were precious commodities that were pirated, copied and bootlegged. Because of its scarcity, devoted hip-hop fans would congregate in private social gatherings known as *bonches* in order to hear the latest imported rap. There in the house parties of the *bonches*, a hip-hop community began to gain momentum as hip-hop lovers would

³⁶ Hernandez, Deborah Pacini and Garofalo, Reebee. "The emergence of rap Cubano: an historical perspective." In *Music, Space and Place: Popular Music and Cultural Identity*. Ed. Bennett, Andy, Stan Hawkins, and Sheila Whiteley. (Aldershot: Ashgate Pub Co. 2005) 91.

gather to share music and share ideas. As one author puts it, “these *bonches* can be considered the seeds of today’s Cuban rap community.”³⁷

Besides acting as centers for the dissemination hip-hop music, the *bonches* acted as important social space for Afro-Cubans who had become alienated from the usual spaces for socialization such as bars and clubs after the adoption of the dollar economy in Cuba. Since the dollar had found its way into Cuban markets, many clubs and music venues shifted their attention away from ordinary local audiences so as to cater to foreign audiences or local elites who could afford the dollar-only entry fee and drink prices. Afro-Cubans who had no access to dollars simply could no longer afford to participate in Cuba’s nightlife. Ethnomusicologist Geoffrey Baker writes, “much of Havana’s nightlife takes place in venues from which most Cubans are barred by door policy or by economic constraints, and young people are often reduced to sitting on the Malecón, watching the world go by.”³⁸ The *bonches*, which were akin to house parties, became the only economically feasible option many Cubans had for socialization. The new economic climate of the Special Period had robbed the majority of Afro-Cubans of social space, yet through hip-hop they were able to recreate their own spaces for socialization, counteracting their spatial and social marginalization.

The music played in the *bonches* was primarily American rap. The hip-hop beat was infectious yet, for the majority of the crowd, the lyrics were unintelligible. However, this did not stop Cubans from memorizing entire songs in phonetic English.³⁹

³⁷ Hernandez and Garofalo 2005, 91

³⁸ Baker, Geoffrey “‘La Habana que no conoces’: Cuban rap and the social construction of urban space.” *Ethnomusicology Forum*, 15:2 (2006), 221.

³⁹ Triana, Tania, personal communication 3/18/09

Although the words themselves did not address Cuban reality (many of them were from the rising American trend of gangster rap and certainly not even remotely close to Cuban revolutionary values), the mere act of rapping itself was a political statement. It was an act of defiance to the dominant cultural norm, an expression of dissent without words, challenging the status quo.

Rap's growing popularity in the early 1990s coincided with the growing trend of "gangsta rap" in the United States. Rap artists such as 2Pac, the Notorious B.I.G., Ice Cube, Snoop Dogg and Dr. Dre were some of the most popular American imports; hip-hop fans cited the energetic, heavy beats, the rhythmic cadence of its lyrics and the assertive posture of the rappers as the most appealing aspects of the music.⁴⁰ Yet when researchers Deborah Pacini Hernandez and Reebee Garofalo commented that those very artists were among some of the most criticized for their violent messages, misogyny and materialism, their correspondents were surprised and confessed that they did not understand the lyrics.⁴¹ Cuban hip-hop artists would borrow the stylistic elements of hip-hop from their American counterparts, but would adapt the lyrical content of rap to their own purposes, which stand out in marked contrast to the direction of mainstream American hip-hop in the 1990s.

Gradually, the imitation of American styles gave way to Cubans using rap creatively as a vehicle to express their own points of view and engage with their own local realities. Informal underground shows that featured a number of groups, or *peñas*, began to sprout up around the island. These small concerts, besides providing

⁴⁰ Hernandez and Garofalo 2005, 98

⁴¹ Hernandez and Garofalo 2005, 98

opportunities for socialization, also created spaces for public debate.⁴² Baker quotes an Afro-Cuban in the mid-1990s: “We have no places to meet where we can argue and discuss these problems [principally racism]. And there’s no motivation to create a kind of center that is attractive to people and where serious topics can be discussed.”⁴³ This hole in public debate would be filled by rap; *bonches* became a public forum in which Afro-Cubans could discuss issues such as racism, police harassment, tourism, and sexual exploitation—all issues that Afro-Cubans had to deal with from day to day yet were never discussed in the public realm.

Eventually, the popularity of *bonches* outgrew the small spaces in which they began. House parties would often attract hundreds of people, spilling out into the street and attracting the attention of the police, who would sometimes use their batons to break up the parties.⁴⁴ In 1994, the then would-be DJ, Adalberto Jiménez, was able to obtain a public space for regular hip-hop gatherings, called the *local de la moña* (the place for *moña*).⁴⁵ In Cuba, *moña* is used to refer to rap in general; rappers and fans of rap alike refer to themselves as *moñeros*.⁴⁶ *La moña* would charge a small admissions fee in pesos and would sell drinks, making for an affordable social club that would cater almost exclusively to local hip-hop aficionados; *la moña* was never publicized.⁴⁷ In providing an affordable public space in which to regularly socialize, *la moña* became a

⁴² Baker 2006, 223

⁴³ Baker 2006, 234

⁴⁴ See Baker 2006, 241

⁴⁵ Hernandez, Deborah Pacini and Garofalo, Reebee. “Hip Hop in Havana: Rap, Race, and National Identity in Contemporary Cuba.” In *Journal of Popular Music Studies* Vol. 11-12, 1 August 1999, 23

⁴⁶ Hernandez and Garofalo 1999, 23

⁴⁷ Hernandez and Garofalo 1999, 23

refuge for the many Cubans marginalized by the many Havana clubs who chose to cater uniquely to those who had access to dollars.

By 1994, hip-hop had gained a substantial following in Havana, yet it remained a grassroots, underground phenomena that continued to be marginalized in the periphery of the public eye despite its devoted following. It began to outgrow the small private gatherings of its beginnings, yet there seemed little in the way of public space, equipment or logistical support needed to take Cuban hip-hop to the next level. Rodolfo Rensoli, a university trained cultural worker who had experience organizing rock concerts in the late 1980s, saw hip-hop's potential in Cuba and came up with the radical idea of organizing a rap festival in Havana. He founded a collective of rappers called Grupo Uno (Group One) with the idea of forming a nucleus for a growing mass of rappers and promoting their work wherever possible—that is, in the precious little space they had at the time.⁴⁸ A large event such as a festival would help hip-hop secure legitimate status on the island.

However, because of his experiences with rock, he realized that to ensure that the festival was a success he would have to organize the festival in such a way as to distance hip-hop from the political pitfalls that had beset rock before it.⁴⁹ Cuban rock, also an underground cultural phenomena inspired by imported American music, had been subject to censure and much criticism when it first attempted to establish itself in Cuba because of its association with what was referred to as “*diversionismo ideológico*”

⁴⁸ “Rensoli había fundado el GRUPO UNO con el propósito de nuclear una creciente masa de raperos y promover su trabajo allí donde fuera posible; es decir, en muy pocos espacios entonces.” Torres, Roberto Zurbano. 2003. Se Buscan: Textos urgentes para sonidos hambrientos (siete notas de viaje sobre el hip hop cubano en los diez años del Festival de Rap de la Habana). *Movimientos* #3

⁴⁹ Hernandez-Garofalo (1998), 95

(“ideological diversionism”); rock was thought to bring with it “capitalist influences, deviances of all sorts, physical and moral.”⁵⁰ Rock carried with it the stigma of “the enemy” of the north—it was seen as American music, and its importation into Cuba as American cultural imperialism, which earned state officials’ scorn. Rock’s general anti-authoritarian stance was perceived by the government as a threat, and its lack of a coherent message or project made it impossible to assimilate into revolutionary ideology. Hence, rock earned official denouncement because government officials perceived it as anti-revolutionary. Rock failed to participate in the Cuban revolution and represented a rebellion (however incoherent, unfocused and diverse its messages may have been) that could not be brought into step with the party line. For those reasons, Cuban officials declined to support the budding genre in any way. Between the mid-1970s and the late 1980s, Cuban rock nearly died of attrition due to a long-standing lack of institutional support.⁵¹

At first glance in the early 1990s, rap seemed as if it were in a similar situation as rock because it was an influential import of American culture, and therefore state officials eyed it with suspicion. However, hip-hop did not carry with it the same stigma as rock since Cubans associated hip-hop more closely with the oppressed class of African-Americans rather than with the United States itself. The revolutionary government had a long history of solidarity with the civil rights movement in the United States and frequently boasted that Cuban society had progressed past its American

⁵⁰ Hernandez and Garofalo (2005) 96

⁵¹ López, Humberto Manduley. “Rock in Cuba: History of a wayward son.” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Winter ’97, 96:1, 135

counterpart in eradicating institutional racism from the country.⁵² Rensoli and the other organizers of Grupo Uno could see parallels between hip-hop and revolutionary ideology; both Cuba and American hip-hop artists were rebels of a certain sense—hip-hop within American society, and Cuba a rebel at the international level. Rensoli saw Cuban rock flounder because the Cuban government had failed to find common ground with the genre; in political terms, rock was not perceived as an ally—Cuban officials labeled it an enemy and refused to support it. Without government support, rock did not have the resources it needed to survive and flourish. In a socialist society in which the government controls virtually all of the resources on the island, Rensoli knew that if hip-hop were to find its place in Cuba and fulfill its potential, a working relationship with the government would be the first thing that needed to be established.

Rensoli took the idea for a rap festival to officials from the *Asociación Hermanos Saíz* (AHS), an institution for young artistic talent in Cuba that forms a branch of the *Unión de Juventud Comunista* (Youth Communist Organization). Rensoli hoped that by establishing a tie with a government institution and securing official recognition, hip-hop would more easily achieve a legitimately visible status on the island. The AHS agreed to support the rap Festival, and granted permission for the use of the concert space while promising to supply the necessary amplification equipment as well as provide promotional and logistical support. With official endorsement, Rensoli and Grupo Uno were able to move ahead with the support they needed in order to organize a full-scale public concert in the Havana suburbs.

⁵² De la Fuente, 363

In the summer of 1995 when Cuban hip-hop's enormous potential would be realized as rappers from across Havana came together for the first *Festival de Rap Cubano* held, fittingly, in Alamar, the birthplace of Cuban hip-hop. Although officially endorsed, the promised state support turned out to be lackluster: “[Grupo Uno] was not given much to work with in terms of equipment, logistical support, or publicity. The amplification equipment made available to them was inadequate for the venue (a large concrete open-air theatre) and the festival was given little media attention.”⁵³ However, despite the lack of promotion, news of the festival was able to travel quickly through informal channels, such as word-of-mouth from *bonche* to *bonche*, and the festival was a great success. Hundreds of Cubans came from across Havana to see the festival and see Cubans take on the role of MC* that they had beforehand only admired in American rappers. For many in the audience, the Festival de Rap provided the opportunity to see, for the first time, rap coming out of the speakers in their mother-tongue, addressing issues that reflected the local realities and hardships that they could relate to.

The rap festival took the crucial first step in transforming Cuban hip-hop from its previously marginalized status as a grassroots phenomena into a legitimate, nationally recognized art form. Only after the rap festival in 1995 does it make sense to begin to talk about Cuban hip-hop as a movement. Before, the hip-hop in Cuba was largely an imitation of American styles adapted to the Cuban context. Ariel Fernandez, rap producer and founder of the Cuban hip-hop magazine entitled *Movimientos*

⁵³ Hernandez and Garofalo (2005), 96

* MC stands for “master of ceremonies,” yet is also term that has commonly been used in hip-hop to refer to rappers.

(Movements), says that up until the moment in which such a public space was provided, there was no real movement of rappers, only individuals improvising or "freestyling" in parks, on street corners or in private gatherings such as the *bonches*.⁵⁴ The Cuban rap groups writing their own music were few and far between, and many were hardly aware of each other's existence. Yet when all the hip-hop fans in Havana were able to come together in a single public venue for the first time, everything changed. The Havana festival was truly the "crystallizing moment"⁵⁵ in Cuban hip-hop: Rubén Marín of Primera Base commented, "[*En el Festival*] *nos dimos cuenta de que no estábamos solos, que existían muchos grupos de rap... se creó una relación bien fuerte con el público.*" ("[at the festival] we realized that we weren't alone, that there were in fact many rap groups... a strong relationship with the public grew [out of the experience].") The Havana festival united the many smaller pockets of hip-hop culture around Havana that had previously remained relatively isolated from one another; while only able to congregate in small private dwellings or in the small private venue of *la Moña*, hip-hop fans were never able to see the full scope of hip-hop's growing popularity in Cuba. Indeed, it was surely a powerful moment for the many Afro-Cubans who came together for the first rap festival, uniting with a group of peers who experienced the same struggles and had the same interests and passion for hip-hop as they, witnessing themselves joined by hip-hop as a cultural collective for the first time.

⁵⁴ Fernandes (2003), 580

⁵⁵ Hernandez and Garofalo (2005), 96

The Festival was promoted as a contest that would showcase local talent.⁵⁶ Top honors went to Primera Base for their song “*Iguál que tú*,” an ode to Malcolm X that established a clear connection to the oppressed minority of blacks in the United States. Their song provides a poignant example of how hip-hop was able to change Afro-Cubans’ conception of blackness and reclaim pride in their cultural heritage. Primera Base express their desire to follow in the footsteps of the black leader Malcolm X:

*Quisiera ser un negro igual que tú
Con esa gran virtud
Esa gran virtud que todo exige
Quisiera ser un negro como tú
gran lider, ser grande.*

I want to be black just like you
With that great power
That great power that commands everything
A great leader, a great being.⁵⁷

The association of blackness with “great power” was not a common idea in Cuba at the time, when black skin was considered a disadvantage. Yet the inspiring historical figure Malcolm X served as a counter-example to the widespread racial ideology in Cuba that represented blacks as lazy, ugly, second-rate citizens through his demonstration that blacks were capable of affecting social change. Primera Base admire Malcolm X for fighting to defend his racial identity in a hostile, discriminatory environment—a reality that many Afro-Cubans had begun to experience during the Special Period:

⁵⁶ Pacini Hernandez and Garofalo, 95

⁵⁷ Trans. Miles Rooklyn (2009)

*Dijiste: basta ya de ser discriminado.
 Y así luchaste y tomaste la justicia por tus manos.
 Por eso hoy te sigo con gran plenitud,
 Y me honoraría ser un negro,
 Un negro igual que tú.⁵⁸*

You said: enough with being discriminated
 And so you fought and took justice into your own hands
 And so I follow you to the fullest
 And I would be honored to be a black man,
 A black man the same as you.⁵⁹

The rappers of Primera Base are inspired by Malcolm X because of his fight for racial justice. They see themselves as continuing his work by living his example. Their black skin becomes an honor because it is connected to Malcolm X's legacy— their Afro-Cuban racial identity becomes a prestigious symbol of power when connected to revolutionary black leaders such as Malcolm X. In this way, Primera Base contribute to a re-definition of Afro-Cuban identity by claiming a new, revolutionary ideal that serves as an alternative to the white public figures which had previously dominated the representation of Cuban culture. Rather than continuing as obedient, race-less citizens, Primera Base express their wish to carve out their own self-determinacy by becoming black leaders themselves. And as MCs captivating the attention of hundreds of Afro-Cubans during the first Havana rap festival, Primera Base's dream of themselves becoming influential black leaders seemed to fulfill itself; they led the way in Cuban hip-hop's first foray into a legitimate, national phenomenon that sought to reclaim black cultural identity.

⁵⁸ Primera Base. 2003. Igual que tú. *Movimientos* #3.

⁵⁹ Trans. Rooklyn (2009)

Echoing Primera Base's expression of black pride, the group Amenaza would also rap about their racial identity in the 1997 festival. However, rather than tackling the issue indirectly by praising fights against racism in the United States, Amenaza would point their lyrics at the reality of racism in Cuba. In their more direct social critique, Amenaza would be pioneers at the vanguard of the hip-hop movement: their song "Ochavón Cruzado" would be the first publicly performed song to directly discuss the matter of racial difference in Cuba.⁶⁰ The song describes the rappers' experience of being mixed-race in Cuba:

*También soy congo, también fui esclavo
 También sufro por ellos que el racismo no ha acabado
 Soy rumba Yoruba Andavo y no acabo hasta ver lo mío multiplicado
 no ves soy pinto, ochavón cruzao
 negro como el danzón y el son cubano
 negro como esta mano
 negro como mi hermano
 negro como Mumia,
 y negro como mucho blancos más ¿quién lo diría?
 y no me cuentas, desafía, raza mía
 Dijeron negro, pero a mí no me contaron
 Dijeron blanco, pero en ese clan no me aceptaron.
 Dijeron tantas cosas, soy el ser que nadie quiso,
 Lo negro con lo blanco
 ¡El grito de un mestizo!*

I am also congo, I was also a slave
 My hope also suffers for them because racism hasn't ended
 I am rumba Yoruba Andavo
 And I won't be done until I see what's mine multiplied
 Can't you see I'm colored, an octaroon mix
 Black like the Cuban danzón and the son
 Black like this hand
 Black like my brother
 Black like Mumia
 And Black like lots of whites, but who could tell?

⁶⁰ Hernandez and Garofalo (1999) 30

And you don't count me, stand up, my race
 They said black, but they didn't count me
 They said white, but their clan wouldn't accept me
 They said many things, I'm the one nobody wanted
 Black with white,
 The cry of a mestizo!⁶¹

As *mestizos*/mulattoes of varying degrees, Amenaza describes their first-person experience of being caught between black and white racial lines—an alienating, unstable space. Amenaza associate themselves with distinctly African roots, expressing their connection with Africa (“*congo*”) and the history of slavery. Here, slavery is not an abstraction that exists in some distant sphere; it is a lived experience for the rappers, for whom “racism hasn’t ended.” Indeed, this passage in its entirety adequately expresses Amenaza’s sentiment that racism is still present in Cuban society. They also compare themselves to the musical forms of *danzón* and *son*, genres celebrated as “national symbols of a harmonized, racially-transculturated Cuban cultural heritage given their syncretized fusion of African and European musical elements,”⁶² thus highlighting the blackness of their mixed racial heritage. However, despite the association with their black heritage, they are overlooked and do not find their way into any racial category. This experience of alienation defies the “hegemonic discourses of *mestizaje* as a stable, historically harmonious, race-neutral core of the Cuban social body.”⁶³ Instead, Amenaza depict Cuban society as still divided along distinct racial lines, between which the racial ideal of the *mestizo* falls unnoticed.

⁶¹ Trans. Hernandez and Garofalo (1999)

⁶² Perry, M. “Los Raperos: Rap, Race, and Social Transformation in Contemporary Cuba.” PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2004, 175

⁶³ Perry (2004) 173

Temas Sociales: Hip-hop's social responsibility

The song “*Ochavón Cruzado*” showed how the hip-hop movement could not only enable a marginalized social group to recuperate cultural space, but could truly become revolutionary as well through the political nature of its lyrical expressions. In front of thousands of fans, Amenaza addressed an issue that had been absent from official public discourse for nearly thirty years. In demanding that racism be reexamined in Cuban society, Amenaza pushed Cuban hip-hop into politics; hip-hop became a mode of protest, pointing out the gap between the Revolution’s promises and the lived realities that Cubans faced. Cuban rappers, in following Amenaza’s example, began to use their lyrical expression as an instrument for addressing and critiquing the social ills that many experienced, but few ever heard about in public.

Cuban rappers were well aware of their new social responsibility as leaders in the new political forum which hip-hop provided. Ethnomusicologists Deborah Pacini Hernandez and Reebee Garofalo write, “the rappers with whom we spoke were unanimous in expressing their belief that rap lyrics should be socially relevant and constructive.”⁶⁴ Lyrics were not to be taken lightly and were to be used for a good purpose; they were indeed a powerful means by which to convey a message. It was important that rap lyrics remain in dialogue with Cuban society, expressing local needs and conditions of the communities out of which they came. The hip-hop movement in Cuba was much more than an aesthetic revolution: rappers felt that their lyrics had the power to educate the public and initiate social change. Indeed, the social change that

⁶⁴ Hernandez and Garofalo (2001) 30

hip-hop catalyzed was immediately visible in the surge of popularity that hip-hop enjoyed after the first rap festival. Soon there appeared a following of young Afro-Cubans who related to rappers' socially conscious message which "articulated the frustrations, concerns and aspirations of black youth"⁶⁵ during the Special Period. The social change hip-hop was capable of had already begun to manifest itself in the growing crowds of Afro-Cubans in the audience at the festival all raising their fists in unison, showing their allegiance to, and participation in, the Cuban hip-hop movement.

Rapping became a political act in itself; it was much more than a means by which to escape the difficult daily struggles many Cubans faced—it was a tool Cubans could use to engage those realities and express their ideas and feelings about them within the hip-hop community. As one of Annelise Wunderlich's interviewees noted, "this music is not for dancing. It's for listening... And for Cubans, believe me, it takes a lot to keep us from dancing."⁶⁶ What keeps Cubans from dancing is the fact that the rapper on stage has something to say that is worth paying attention to, and responding to, whether that response is a shout of approval, a hand in the air, or an improvised rhyme during or after the show.

In Cuban hip-hop, the beat of the music is secondary to the message that the rapper puts forth through his or her lyrics. The importance of eloquent rap lyrics is illustrated by their contrast with the impoverished beats or baselines that would

⁶⁵ Fuente, Alejandro de la, "The New Afro-Cuban Cultural Movement and the Debate on Race in Contemporary Cuba," *Journal of Latin American Studies* no. 40 (2008), 3

⁶⁶ Wunderlich (2005) 167

accompany them. Most backing tracks were initially quite minimal due to technological constraints:

[Rappers] began to develop their craft by fashioning Cuban rhymes over primitive backing tracks recorded on cassettes, which were usually lifted off U.S. rap recordings. These background tapes, however, could be produced only at great personal and financial sacrifice, because of the scarcity of even the most basic recording equipment. For its first song, for example, one group paid a producer \$30, which represented the better part of a month's wages, for a single three-and-a-half minute backing track.⁶⁷

Under such limitations, Cuban rap had little going for it besides its message, which was all the more highlighted by the lack of “groove” in its musicality. Geoffrey Baker writes that such ‘underground’ rap is designed to block a dance response, to force listeners into an intellectual mode of reception... it is a physical stimulus to wake up to the disjunctions between appearances and reality described in lyrics—‘stop moving your ass and your mind will follow’, one might say.’⁶⁸ Here, rapper Gersom Pineda emphasizes that his lyrics are not simply empty filler, but that they carry great significance and power:

*No es bla, bla, bla,
Es labia, sentimiento y tabla
El hip hop no es el grito de la moda en tu puerta
No es un juego hermano,
Rapear no se usa como el pantalón cuatro puertas
Que satura las tiendas de nuestra isla,
Esto es sentimiento y labia de puntería,
Que acierta contra tantas realidades.*⁶⁹

It's not ‘blah, blah, blah,’
It's a sharp tongue, feeling and drums
Hip-hop is not a trendy shout at your door

⁶⁷ Hernandez and Garofalo (2005) 97

⁶⁸ Baker (2006) 240

⁶⁹ Pineda, Gersom. Sentimiento y Labia. 2003. *Movimientos* #2

It's not a game, brother
 Rap isn't used like the cargo pants
 That fill up our island's stores
 It's feeling and carefully aimed words
 That hit many realities.

Pineda defines rap as “a sharp tongue, feeling and drums” that deal with serious, concrete “realities,” as opposed to a senseless rambling that takes little skill to master. His words, he says, should not be taken lightly, for they are well aimed and hit their mark in society. Rather than the typical trivial melodrama of a salsa song describing a broken heart, rap is relevant in a whole new way; it addresses both the good and bad of Cuban reality, often in very specific, severe ways. For Pineda, rap cannot be likened to “*la moda*,” or a fashionable trend, because it is serious business, not a game. He contrasts rap with cargo pants, an American fashion trend that has invaded Cuba, to show that Cuban hip-hop is much more than an empty reproduction of an American style; rather, it deals with Cuban experience and is aimed at Cuban reality.

The stage and the microphone would become the black Cuban's podium with which he would address his public and discuss the social ills that plagued society. Rapper Pando of the group Amenaza raps about the social power that rap has given him to break out of his socially-defined role as a marginalized member of society; he also points out how rap has been able to unite the Afro-Cuban community:

*Ahora, ¿como pretendo ser un elemento menos?
 Si tengo el poder de reproducir con rimas todo lo que tengo dentro,
 Así que atento, inclusive se lo que hacer con mi palabra.
 Porque te necesito para ser quien soy
 Y tú, que necesitas lo que yo mismo te doy.*⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Amenaza, 2003. Ochavón Cruzado. *Movimientos* #3

Now, how could I expect to be another nobody?
 If I have the power to reproduce with rhymes all that I have inside,
 So listen up, I also know what to do with my words.
 Because I need you for me to be who I am
 And you, you need what I give to you.⁷¹

In the verses above, Pando illustrates how rap, because it has given him the power to express himself through rhyme, has elevated him to a status beyond that of the common “nobody.” Here, I follow Alan West-Durán's translation of the word *elemento* (in other texts) as “nobody,” as element may refer to nature’s four elements but can also carry with it a negative connotation as in “bad element.”⁷² When taken from within the context of the song in its entirety, Pando clearly refers to the experience of embodying the role of a “bad element” in society.” The status of “bad element,” of being a delinquent always under suspicion and considered inferior, is a label which Afro-Cubans had been subjected to, whether subtly or overtly, in popular Cuban ideology for years, even after the Cuban government had abolished institutional racism. Hip-hop, in giving Pando a voice, has allowed him to break out of the limitations applied to him by societal stereotypes and redefine himself as a *mestizo* on his own terms and through his own personal expression. In “Listen up, I also know what to do with my words,” Pando invites his audience to accompany him in his act of self-redefinition and acknowledges the power his lyrics carry as well as Pando’s ability to wield them; they are aimed with a purpose that includes the whole collective. His lyrical expression is aimed at the formation of a community rather than an expression of dominance over his audience or

⁷¹ Tran. Rooklyn (2009)

⁷² West-Durán, Alan. 2004. Rap’s Diasporic Dialogues Cuba’s Redefinition of Blackness. *Journal of Popular Music Studies*. 16.1: 4-39, 24

against a common enemy: “I need you for me to be who I am / And you, you need what I give to you.” The rapper sees himself as part of the Afro-Cuban community while the Afro-Cuban audience sees itself in the rapper onstage. The rapper represents and expresses the shared sentiments of the community while the audience listens to and affirms the social critiques the rapper offers, forming a reciprocal continuity between rapper and audience in which the community as a whole participates the process of redefining themselves culturally.

While rappers certainly contributed to a redefinition of Afro-Cuban identity by expressing themselves before their audiences, that redefinition was not a one-dimensional affair—performances would rarely consist entirely of monologues. Rather, rap *peñas* were performances in which the lines dividing performer and audience were constantly blurred, bridged by constant interchange and dialogue. While one group would perform, the other groups in the line-up would participate as members of the audience or collaborate with another group on stage. In this way, at each concert a variety of different points of view would be expressed and heard. Baker describes how the improvisational aspect of hip-hop contributed to making rap concerts into discussions:

This blurring of the performer/audience distinction is increased by the freestyling that often occurs during or after performances, allowing those who have not played a part in the formal concert to join in, rather like a jazz jam session. Rappers talk to each other and to the audience between songs, during change-overs between groups, in freestyles both on and off the stage, and in conversations before, during and after the performance. Concerts are thus places of extensive multi-directional communication: it is precisely [a place] to discuss, rather than simply to listen...⁷³

⁷³ Baker (2006) 223-4

Rap venues provided a much needed social space for the Afro-Cuban community that was not only a place to hear social criticism and calls for political redress from the rappers on stage but was also a place to express oneself and discuss such issues with neighbors, friends and countrymen regardless of whether one was a rapper or not. The hip-hop community centered around the social critiques that rappers espoused, inspiring politically charged debate that moved beyond the stage.

Through the participatory community dialogue that rap fostered in Cuba, Hip-hop became much more than simply an art form: Cubans used hip-hop to create a forum in which frustrated citizens could speak out against public ills and hear the frustrations of others as well. In this way, by creating a public symposium for expressing ideas and critiques, Cuban hip-hop began to discover its political edge. In discussing Cuban hip-hop's political function, Alan West-Durán writes, "Chuck D [once commented] that 'Rap is black people's CNN.' In Cuba, where the media is state controlled and heavily censored, rap... is not only African-Cubans' CNN, but every Cuban's CNN."⁷⁴ Hip-hop circumvented state propaganda and would speak directly with the public, addressing realities that would never make the news or find their way into politicians' speeches. Much more than a musical genre, it was a source of information, a sounding board for social commentary that flowed freely through the streets of marginalized housing projects.

As one member of the rap group Obsesión noted, "the important thing about rap is communicating. The art is in how to say something—well said—that the world

⁷⁴ West-Durán (2004) 14

needs.”⁷⁵ For these reasons, hip-hop fans in Cuba were willing to lend rappers a careful ear as they actively addressed the ills that plagued Cuban society, such as prostitution, rising individualism, the negative effects of tourism, and racial discrimination. As an example of a group of rappers whose lyrics embody the idea of social themes, the all female, self-defined feminist group, Las Krudas, use their lyrics to critique the machismo and misogyny prevalent in Cuba, unwaveringly seeking to advance “a feminist agenda in which they seek to politicize the social and economic reality of being black and female in Cuba.”⁷⁶ In their song “*Vamo’ a vencer la dificultad*,” (“We are going to overcome the difficulty”) Las Krudas make clear their political intentions:

*sexo femenino, siempre relegado
pero las Krudas el molde han quebrado
vamo’ a vencer la dificultad*⁷⁷

Feminine sex, always relegated
but the Krudas have broken the mold
we are going to overcome the difficulty⁷⁸

Like their male rapper counterparts, Las Krudas have claimed their position as the vanguards of a movement towards social change, claiming that they have “broken the mold” and have the capability to lead women to victory over injustice. The Krudas center their lyrical expression around the experience of the black woman and seek to raise awareness about sexism and gender discrimination in Cuba. Their name, Las Krudas, means in English “the raw ones.” Their name has a double meaning: it was

⁷⁵ Pacini-Hernandez and Garofalo (1999), 30

⁷⁶ Armstead, Ronni. 2007. “Growing the Size of the Black Woman: Feminist Activism in Havana Hip Hop.” *NWSA Journal* 19 (1): 106-117

⁷⁷ Las Krudas. 2003. *Cubensi. Movimientos #2*

⁷⁸ Trans. Rooklyn (2009)

initially chosen to signify the group's adherence to vegetarianism,⁷⁹ yet it also refers to their unadulterated, direct, "raw" style of conveying their message which "refuses conform to patriarchal gendered prescriptions of Cuban women as passive, male-gaze oriented objects."⁸⁰ In the following excerpt from the song "*Eres bella*" (You are Beautiful), their direct style of social critique is illustrated clearly:

*Maldita y machista sociedad que contamina
No hay racismo?
Y, coño,
Y nosotras qué punto? En el mismo escalón
No hay verdadera revolución sin mujeres.*

Wicked and macho society that corrupts
Is there no racism?
And, shit,
What about us? Still on the same rung
There is no real revolution without women.⁸¹

Las Krudas pull no punches as they critique the sexist society in which they live. Their lyrics embody social critiques and are meant to inspire revolution against social oppression and play a crucial part in bringing women into the fold of the hip-hop movement, not merely to form another part of it but to use hip-hop as a means to advance their own feminist agenda.

Through providing a platform for marginalized communities to voice social grievances and social critiques, hip-hop enabled those groups which beforehand had existed in the periphery of island politics to carve out a niche for themselves in a political climate that had previously tried to deny the fact that they existed as a

⁷⁹ Perry (2004), 264

⁸⁰ Perry (2004), 264

⁸¹ Trans. Marc Perry (2004)

constituency. This was particularly true for young Afro-Cubans, who made up the majority of hip-hop fans. The “color-blind” government rhetoric had sought to erase all racial distinctions following the revolution, abolishing all black institutions and organizations with the intention of eliminating all public racial distinctions and differences. However, such racial egalitarian policy had come to exist only bureaucratically in state institutions and prevented the government from acknowledging the racism that had resurfaced in Cuban society during the Special Period. Racist ideology still persisted in Cuban society, yet the Afro-Cubans who were its victims had few means to demand civil justice and rectify their situation; since race had been deemed “irrelevant” in Cuba, the Cuban state saw no reason to acknowledge blacks as a group that was affected differently than any other Cuban. The hip-hop movement was largely a reaction to the lack of political representation to which Afro-Cubans were condemned. Here, Rodolfo Rensoli speaks of the essentially Afro-Cuban nature of the hip-hop movement:

*Basicamente es un movimiento de los marginados, en sentido general. Pero es también un movimiento negro. ¿Porqué te digo esto? No es un secreto para nadie, popularmente, que hay muy pocas figuras negras que representan socialmente al ser Cubano—tanto en las funciones políticas como las funciones artísticas... En ese sentido es un movimiento negro.*⁸²

Basically, it is a movement of the marginalized, in a general sense. But it is also a black movement. Why do I say this? It is not a secret among the public that there are very few black public figures that represent the Cuban people—whether in political offices as in arts administration... In that sense, it is a black movement.⁸³

⁸² Bacallao, Ricardo, and Elvira Rodríguez Puerto. 2006. *Short radiography of hip hop in Cuba ; The maji-maji readings. The black perspective*, v. 1. [s. l.]: Bacallao en Puerto Films.

⁸³ Trans. Rooklyn (2009)

The Cuban hip-hop movement created its own leaders that would represent the part of Cuba that had been condemned to public invisibility, that is, black Cuba. Hip-hop culture became a movement in Cuba as the Afro-Cuban community came together to counteract their increasing marginalization in the public sphere and reclaim cultural space through forging their own cultural representatives in Cuban rappers.

Amenaza's "*Ochavón Cruzado*" stirred up a significant amount of controversy after it was performed at the Rap festival in 1997 as it had openly challenged the official claim that racial differences were non-existent in Cuba.⁸⁴ While race and racism were surely topics brought up in private discussions, they were conspicuously absent, and even discouraged from finding their way into public discourse. And so, while it was one thing for a Cuban youth of mixed-race to write the line "[*soy*] negro como *Mumía*," it is a different matter to stand on stage before three thousand of his peers and proclaim over a microphone "[*soy*] negro como *Mumía*!"⁸⁵ Here, the ability of hip-hop to serve as a medium of political expression becomes evident.

In "*Ochavón Cruzado*," Amenaza paved the way for other rappers to begin more directly to approach the delicate issue of race relations in Cuba. The most illustrative example of how Cuban rappers have been able to use their lyrics to express the disjunction between the revolutionary government's egalitarian ideal and the actual lived realities of those affected by racism's prevalence on the island, is the song "*Tengo*" ("I have"), by Hermanos de Causa. Alejandro de la Fuente notes that "*Tengo*" is "one of the best-known and most important songs produced by the whole rap

⁸⁴ Hernandez and Garofalo (1999) 35

⁸⁵ Perry (2004) 177

movement on the island since its creation.”⁸⁶ This was most likely because the song was extremely effective in communicating young Afro-Cubans’ visceral reaction to the revolutionary government’s claim to have eradicated racism from the island. The song is a play on Nicolás Guillén’s poem of the same title, which was written in 1964.

Guillén’s poem expresses the euphoria and optimism felt by the Afro-Cuban population following the desegregation of Cuban institutions and public spaces. Through the abundant repetition of the word “*tengo*” (“I have”), Guillén lists the achievements that the revolution made in striving towards racial equality:

*Tengo, vamos a ver,
Que ya aprendí a leer,
a contar,
Tengo que ya aprendí a escribir
Y a pensar
Y a reír.
Tengo que ya tengo
Donde trabajar y ganar
Lo que me tengo que comer
Tengo, vamos a ver,
Tengo lo que tenía que tener.*

I have, let’s see,
That I have learnt to read,
To count,
I have that I have learnt to write
And to think
And to laugh
I have that I have
A place to work
And earn
What I need to eat
I have, let’s see,
What was coming to me.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Fuente (2008) 3

⁸⁷ Trans. Sujatha Fernandes (2006)

Through the repetition of *tengo* (“I have”), Guillén optimistically compares the accomplishments of the revolution with what came before it. It is a simple and illustrative example of the Revolution’s success. It is also required reading in Cuban secondary schools. Hermanos de Causa borrow Guillén’s title and sample his use of “*tengo*,” yet do not share his optimistic appraisal of the revolution. As part of a young generation of Cubans, Hermanos de Causa do not remember the momentous changes of the 1960s and find it difficult to relate to Guillén’s optimism when faced with the realities of the Special Period. Nearly forty years later, Hermanos de Causa recycle Guillén’s poem to create an ironic, anachronistic juxtaposition that starkly highlights the dissonance between the promises of full citizenship in an egalitarian socialist polity and the lived frustrations of the revolution’s unacknowledged shortcomings. In contrast to the positive tone of Guillén’s “*Tengo*,” Hermanos de Causa use the repetition of the title ironically to refer to what they *do not* have or, rather, what they have in theory yet see none of for themselves.⁸⁸

*Tengo una bandera, un escudo, un tocororo
También una palmera, un mapa sin tesoro
Tengo aspiraciones sin tener lo que hace falta
Tengo más o menos la medida exacta
Crónica compacta
Polémica que impacta
Pasan los años y la situación sigue intacta
El tiempo no perdona
Pregúntale a La Habana
Que ahorita está en la lona
A nadie le importa nada
Tengo una raza oscura y discriminada
Tengo una jornada que me exige y no me da nada
Tengo tantas cosas que no puedo ni tocarlas*

⁸⁸ West-Durán (2004) 21

*Tengo instalaciones que no puedo ni pisarlas
 Tengo libertad entre parentesis de hierro
 Tengo tantos derechos sin provechos que me encierro
 Tengo lo que tengo sin tener lo que he tenido*

Got a flag, coat of arms, a *tocororo*
 Got a palm tree, a map without treasure
 Got aspirations without having what I need
 I have (more or less) the true measure
 Compact chronicle
 Polemics that impact
 Years go by, things still the same
 Time shows no mercy or shame
 Just ask Havana, again
 Against the ropes in pain
 Nobody cares about jack
 Discriminated 'cause I'm black
 Got a job with big demands and no pay
 Got so much that I can't touch
 Got all these places I can't go in
 Got freedom in a parenthesis of steel
 Got so many rights I don't enjoy that I'm better off alone
 Got what I have without having what I have⁸⁹

In the first line, rapper Zoandris of Hermanos de Causa sets the context of the song by referring to the national symbols of Cuba: the flag, the coat of arms, the national bird and a palm tree. These symbols take on an empty quality in the song, for their charm is negated by the fact that the map does not lead to treasure. Poetically, the lack of treasure can be read as a lack of hope, and adds to Zoandris' disillusioned tone. In the third line, "*tengo aspiraciones sin tener lo que hace falta*" ("Got aspirations without having what I need") Zoandris expresses his frustrations at the limitations and shortcomings he faces in Cuban society, which is portrayed throughout the rest of the verse in an increasingly pessimistic light. Zoandris' sense of disillusionment with the

⁸⁹ Trans. Alan West-Durán (2004)

Cuban state is most clear in the lines “*polémica que impacta / pasan los años y la situación sigue intacta*” (“polemics that impact, the years pass and things still the same”) which point to the hypocrisy of government rhetoric that seeks to reinforce the idea that the revolution has progressed and continues to improve society for the better. Zoandris does not see any cause for optimism regarding revolutionary advancement. Rather, he portrays Havana as “against the ropes in pain” and relates to a litany of Cuba’s problems: racism, hard work poorly compensated, consumer goods and venues beyond the budget of Cubans but available to tourists, and the theoretical possession of rights but little chance to exercise their benefits.⁹⁰ One line sums up Hermanos de Causa’s appraisal of their citizenship: “*Tengo libertad entre parentesis de hierro*” (“I’ve got freedom in a parenthesis of steel”). The freedom that the artists believe themselves due is cut short by societal limitations that transform the idea of “*libertad*” into a parenthetical abstraction that is uttered as an aside—a whisper almost—made as a tangential reference to the concept, removed from Hermanos de Causa’s lived experience. The “freedom” provided by the revolution is merely a new form of imprisonment.

The efforts of rap artists to raise awareness about the realities of racism in Cuba have not been without results. Indeed, rappers, alongside other artists and intellectuals, have proved quite successful in raising awareness about the existing problems of racism in Cuban society. Today in Cuba, government officials have acknowledged rappers’ critiques and have again begun to debate and discuss the racial disparities that exist in

⁹⁰ West-Durán (2004) 23

Cuban society. Even Fidel Castro himself has reversed his stance on the issue to admit that racial differences still characterize Cuban society.⁹¹ De la Fuente writes, “In a country where this problem did not officially exist just a few years ago—as late as 1997 Fidel Castro was still saying publicly that ‘the Revolution [had] officially eliminated racial discrimination’ from the island—this is no small achievement.”⁹²

Nationalization of the Hip-Hop Movement

Under a political regime that does not guarantee freedom of expression or association, one may wonder how such critical debate could be allowed in the art of the public sphere. While certainly not all criticism is tolerated, constructive criticism is encouraged. For Cuba, the revolution is not a fixed project, but an open one, a participatory process that is open to creativity and suggestion. Fidel Castro has repeated the maxim “within the revolution, everything goes,”⁹³ meaning that projects, while perhaps critical, can still be considered valuable as long as they contribute to the ongoing project of the Cuban state—building a socialist, utopian society. Abel Prieto, the Minister of Culture in Cuba, has said that “if you eliminate spaces of discussion, people begin a double life. Discussion and debate always clear the atmosphere, even though there have not been answers for all the questions.”⁹⁴ Artists as well as the public can then participate actively and critically in the Cuban revolutionary project without having to conform blindly to a strict ideal. However, if one’s project does not include

⁹¹ Fuente (2008), 10

⁹² Fuente (2008), 9

⁹³ Castro, Fidel. “Palabras a los intelectuales.” Speech, Havana, Cuba, June 30, 1961.

⁹⁴ Fernandes (2006), 41

the specific socialist utopia that the government aims for, or seems, by the government, to criticize the project itself rather than constructively point out its deficiencies, artists can be subject to censure. Geoffrey Baker writes, “Cuban rappers, too, expose the gap between official discourses and lived experience: broadly speaking, this criticism is acceptable as long as it is the *gap* that is criticized rather than the discourses themselves.”⁹⁵ The key word in Fidel’s maxim is “*within* the revolution, everything.” Castro finishes his sentence: “against the revolution, nothing.”⁹⁶ Voices shouting from the outside represent a threat to the revolution’s ideological stability and need either to be brought into line with the revolution or silenced in order to preserve solidarity on the island, and, in any case, could not be tolerated.

Annelise Wunderlich describes the lyrics of a popular, politically outspoken group, Anónimo Consejo, as “edgy, [but notes] getting too edgy could end their careers.”⁹⁷ There are indeed very serious limits to what can and cannot be said. Another politically oriented group, Mano Armada (Armed Hand) took their social criticisms too far in the 2003 rap festival when one of their members mounted the stage with a bed sheet displaying the words “*denuncia social*” (“social denouncement”), prefacing a performance that would push the envelope of what could be considered “constructive criticism.” In the song he then performed, Papa Humbertico directly addressed the police present at the show:

*Oye tío, contigo mismo, contigo,
Que en paz no me dejas un instante, no te tengo miedo,*

⁹⁵ Baker (2005) 377

⁹⁶ Castro (1961)

⁹⁷ Wunderlich (2005) 168

*No me intimida tu vestimenta azul ni el cargo que tengas,
Para mí no dejas de ser un ignorante, adelante, estoy a tu disposición,
Aprieta todo lo que quieras mis manos con tus esposas,
Móntame en tu jodido camión que yo, yo no me callaré!*

....

*Policía, policía, tú no eres mi amigo,
Para la juventud cubana eres el peor castigo*⁹⁸

Hey you, with you yourself, with you
You don't give me an instant of peace, [but] I'm not afraid of you
Your green uniform doesn't intimidate me nor the authority you have
To me you're still an ignoramus, come on, I'm at your disposition.
Squeeze my hands with your cuffs all you want,
Load me in your fucking truck but I, I will not shut up.

...

Policeman, policeman, you are not my friend,
For Cuban youth you're the worst punishment.

For so openly challenging state authority figures, Papa Humbertico earned himself a dangerous reputation: “I think I'm one of the rappers heading the black list,” said Papa Humbertico in an interview AFP journalist Laura Bonilla.⁹⁹ He has since been banned from several Havana clubs and radio stations, who told him, quotes Papa Humbertico, “*no puedo poner esto porque me botan, porque me meto en candela (problemas)*”¹⁰⁰ (“I can't play this because they'll kick me out, because I will get in trouble.”) Government support has been contingent upon a project's adherence to revolutionary ideology and principles; club owners did not wish to be affiliated with the dissident voice that Papa Humbertico came to represent. The Cuban government also

⁹⁸ Vincent, Mouricio. 2002. “El ‘rap cubano sabe a descontento.” *El País*. 21 Aug.
http://www.elpais.com/articulo/opinion/CUBA/RAP/CUBANO/SABE/DESCONTENTO/elpepiopi/20020821elpepiopi_8/Tes/

⁹⁹ Bonilla, Laura. 2007. “Hip hop, medio para hacer ‘la revolución dentro de la revolución’ en Cuba.” *La Jornada* 14 Jan.
<http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2007/01/14/index.php?section=espectaculos&article=a10n1esp>

¹⁰⁰ Quoted in Bonilla (2007)

wishes to allay Papa Humbertico's association with Cuba: many foreign journalists who attended the event in 2003 later described Papa Humbertico's message as "anti-revolutionary" and used Papa Humbertico as their example to describe Cuban hip-hop as "new vanguard of anti-government protest in socialist Cuba."¹⁰¹ Papa Humbertico flatly denied that he was an *anti-revolucionario* (anti-revolutionary) and felt that the press had misrepresented his relationship to the Cuban government after the concert in 2003 for, later in the song, he raps, "*Amo mi bandera, aquí nací y aquí me van a enterrar / seguro puedes estar de que tengo bien claro el concepto de la revolución cubana / estoy con esto, pero no contigo, [policía]*" ("I love my flag, I was born here and here I will be buried / you can be sure that I know quite well the concept of the Cuban revolution / I'm with it, but not with you, [policeman]"). Nevertheless, Cuban government officials did not want to attract the type of publicity that would show the Cuban people to be anything but united in their revolutionary aim and make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for groups like Mano Armada to perform their act on international stages. Papa Humbertico was invited to perform in Mexico at an annual competition in 2005 yet, at the last minute, his exit visa was lifted without explanation.¹⁰² By so openly denouncing the Cuban police—a very clear representation of Cuban state authority—Papa Humbertico's performance epitomized rap's potential to form a defiant, dissident voice in Cuban society. Government officials did not want Humbertico's raps to come to represent the Cuban hip-hop movement as contrary to the revolution and so denied him support.

¹⁰¹ Perry (2004) 2

¹⁰² See Bonilla (2007)

Cuban state officials recognized that hip-hop had the potential to form a very real threat to the state's monopoly on public discourse and ideology. Cuban hip-hop culture, De la Fuente explains, was "a politicization and mobilization that [was] not tied to the state or party ideology" and functioned as a countervailing voice.¹⁰³ Officials representing the one-party Cuban government wished to maintain exclusive control of Cuban politics and so began to draw Cuban rappers in from "the outside" in order to maintain a unified polity. Ariel Fernandez affirms that the Cuban state had to recognize the Cuban rap movement "politically, culturally, and musically, because imagine if this whole mass of young people were in opposition to the revolution, if all of these people did not feel empowered by the revolution, how would they feel?"¹⁰⁴ For Fernandez, the government brought hip-hop into the fold because in not receiving government support, they felt abandoned and disempowered by the state. The state had turned a blind eye to the resurgence of racist practices in Cuban society and declined to address the grave issue until they were forced to by Cuban rappers, who brought such problems out of their state of invisibility. Marginalized Afro-Cubans indeed felt empowered by the hip-hop revolution, which won them back cultural space and political clout while reevaluating and redefining their racial identity in Cuba. State officials sought to tap into the enthusiasm rap inspired so as to convert Cuban hip-hop's potentially destabilizing energy into political fuel that would benefit the state.

¹⁰³ Fuente (2008) 17

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Fernandes (2006) 594

Officials recognized rap as a “roadmap to the hearts and minds of a young generation of Cubans”¹⁰⁵ which had become increasingly disenchanted with the revolution and its promises. While the Cuban state initially regarded hip-hop as an imported fad, the socially relevant lyrics that rappers began to perform on public stages led Minister of Culture Abel Prieto, in 1999, to declare rap to be “an authentic expression of Cubanness,” adding, “it’s time we nationalize rap,” meaning that Cuban rappers should come under the auspices of state representation, the same as other professional Cuban musicians (all of whom are employed by the state).¹⁰⁶ The *Asociación Hermanos Saíz* (AHS), the youth organization that had helped sponsor the first rap festival in 1995, became the central institution to which rappers would go to request concert space, lighting, audio and publicity for the shows they wished to perform. Under the direction of AHS official Ariel Fernandez, twelve rap groups were able to come together in Havana and record the first compilation of Cuban rap for overseas distribution, *The Cuban Hip Hop Allstars Vol. 1*.¹⁰⁷ Rap gained more visibility in Cuba due to state representation and support and the three years following rap’s nationalization were a boom time for the genre. The state responded by allotting more funds to the annual hip-hop festival, opening up more public venues for regular hip-hop performances and, in 2002, founding the *Agencia Cubana de Rap* (ACR, Agency of Cuban Rap) as well as creating a magazine dedicated to chronicling and

¹⁰⁵ Wunderlich (2005) 168

¹⁰⁶ Hernandez and Garofalo (2000) 42

¹⁰⁷ Baker (2005) 370

promoting Cuban hip-hop entitled *Movimientos: La Revista Cubana de Hip Hop* (Movement: the Cuban Hip Hop Magazine).¹⁰⁸

Nationalization secured rap's legitimacy on the island, and many proponents of the hip-hop movement felt that the hip-hop revolution had taken a great step forward. Indeed, many rappers who received institutional backing were more than happy to accept the technical and promotional support the institutions offered them. Rubén Marín of Primera Base said, "*La Agencia fue algo que deseamos siempre los raperos, un sueño hecho realidad*" ("The Agency was something us rappers always wished for, a dream come true.")¹⁰⁹ One of the main aims of the ACR was "to commercialize the groups in its catalogue."¹¹⁰ Although the commercial aim of the ACR seems to contradict many rappers' anti-consumerist message, Geoffrey Baker points out that the Agency was "the outcome of negotiations in which leading rap groups, in many cases frustrated at their lack of commercial success, played a key role."¹¹¹ Leading rap groups wanted a chance to show the world their music, and a government institution dedicated to that end was founded. In 2002 the ACR took on an elite group of rappers as professional employees with the intention of promoting their music commercially for the international market.¹¹² The precious few groups who have been able to sign with the ACR have been given the chance to showcase their abilities professionally, working

¹⁰⁸ Baker (2005) 370

¹⁰⁹ Cordero, Tania. 2003. "Persistir en Primera Base." *Movimientos* #3, trans. Miles Rooklyn (2009)

¹¹⁰ Baker (2005) 394, quoted from *Movimientos* 1, back cover.

¹¹¹ Baker (2005) 393

with professional production equipment, and traveling to shows both within and outside of Cuba's borders.

In providing the opportunity to move beyond bootlegged cassette deck backing tracks and record in a professional studio, the ACR opened a new door of possibility for Cuban rappers: by showing their professional ability in the studio they could attract the attention of a foreign record label and “make it big” by landing a record deal. ACR rapper Papo Record alludes to that dream:

*Hoy te canto una peña, mañana doy una gira
Pasado quiero viajar.
Hoy unos cientos por un tema, mañana
Unos miles por un disco.*

Today I sing in a *peña*, tomorrow I'll
travel around the country,
and the day after tomorrow I want to travel abroad.
Today a few hundred for a song
Tomorrow several thousand for a record.¹¹³

For talented artists, rap provided not only a means by which to engage the difficult world around them but also the fantasy of escaping it all together as well. The group Amenaza, which would later change its name to Los Orishas (The Spirits), was signed by a French record label in 1999 and moved off the island to Paris to make their first record, *A lo Cubano*, which was an international hit. Many rappers regard the Orishas as one of Cuban rap's great success stories, while others criticize them for compromising their socially conscious raps for commercial interests and “selling out.” But regardless of one's perspective on the Orishas' commercial success, the promotional support now available to rappers through the state since 2002 set many an

¹¹³ Fernandes (2006) 601

imagination alight with dreams of signing the deal that would take one to a new life outside of impoverished Cuba.

Those dreams were nourished by the support Cuban institutions provided to rappers, which was instrumental in the development and solidification of hip-hop as a legitimate art form on the island. The rap scene in Cuba by far outstrips that in other Latin American countries, and the state must be given at least some credit for this.¹¹⁴ State institutions provided concert space, promotional support and production equipment to early Cuban rappers, enabling them to begin their careers. The government also sponsored the first rap festival in Havana, *el Festival de Rap Cubano*, which effectively catalyzed Cuban hip-hop's crystallization as a movement. Cuban hip-hop owes a great debt to the institutions that have lent them resources and promotion, for the vibrant scene that hip-hoppers enjoy today in Cuba would not exist without government backing.

Yet although institutional support met the needs of many rappers and helped the Cuban hip-hop movement take huge strides in its development, the institutionalization of the genre was also intended to meet the political needs of the Cuban state itself. Cuban officials recognized the political power that hip-hop displayed and feared that the movement would veer onto a course divergent with revolutionary ideology and weaken the state's political hegemony. Cuban officials knew that it is easier to impress conformity when there are no competing points of view—hip-hop was increasingly beginning to open Cubans' eyes to alternative ways of assessing Cuban society and the

¹¹⁴ Baker (2005) 372

revolution during the Special Period. The state institutions served as a way to guide the development of the hip-hop movement in a direction most beneficial to the state. They sought to accomplish this through prioritizing “the creation of a leadership of rappers loyal to the revolution.”¹¹⁵ Officials desired that the rest of the rap community would follow an elite group of institutionalized leaders who would support the government by creating constructive criticism in their raps rather than dismantling critiques. In this way, the institutions dedicated to hip-hop could exercise a subtle form of censorship through selecting to promote only artists loyal to the revolution while letting those that have the potential of rocking the boat fall by the wayside. Such a leadership of rappers was intended to inspire a form of self-censorship in which rappers would tailor their lyrics to fit what the ACR was looking for, avoiding topics or styles that they knew would offend and negate their chances at receiving airtime, or a spot at an upcoming show. Success was clearly defined as a possibility only achievable through adherence to the Cuban revolution.

The AHS took control of the annual rap festival in Alamar in 2000 and completely replaced the festival’s leadership with its own representatives, dissolving Grupo Uno, the group responsible for founding the event.¹¹⁶ The AHS would have the unique power to decide who got to perform in the festivals and who did not. One of the main critiques leveled at the AHS is the perceived lack of democracy in the selection process. By consolidating the power to approve which performances would appear in public, the AHS introduced direct state censorship into the hip-hop movement’s

¹¹⁵ Fernandes (2005) 594

¹¹⁶ Bacallao (2006)

equation. For example, when competing for a spot in the lineup at the 2000 festival, the group Free Hole Negro was asked to explain the meaning of their name in a television interview:

They said that besides the obvious pun (free hole = frijol = black bean), it was calling for a space where all black people could be free. This got a little too close to the sensitive issue of racism in a context where revolutionary discourse has declared it to be a non-issue. Free Hole Negro was not part of the line-up of artists featured in the festival that year.¹¹⁷

Cuba already was supposedly (officially) a place where all black people could be free. By pointing out that this goal had yet to be achieved, Free Hole Negro rocked the boat, so to speak, and earned the dismissal of those selecting the artists for the festival. Their message was seen as potentially subversive, and it was not given the opportunity to be performed.

Cuban rappers were well aware that there were lines that could not be crossed. To step too far over the party line would be to offend the institution that has enabled them to perform, so rappers were careful to remind their audience, amid their social critiques, that they were not against the revolution. To return to the example of Hermanos de Causa's "*Tengo*," when he recycled Guillén's poem of the same title—an iconic representation of the revolution's success—into a critique of the supposed gains of the revolution, they create a powerful statement that called into question much of what had been assumed about racism in Cuba. It would seem at first glance that such a song could be considered anti-revolutionary. However, in the second verse of the song, Hermanos de Causa reaffirm their loyalty to the central tenets of the Cuban state's anti-

¹¹⁷ Olavarria (2007) 371

consumerist philosophy by critiquing material values, consumerism, and social indifference.¹¹⁸

*El hecho de que tengas más no te hace ser mejor que yo
 El recurso—te da posibilidades
 No confundas tener más con tener cualidades
 [...]
 Mas que suficiente sientes que no tienes más
 Mas que muchos tienes pero quieres más y más
 Mientras más tienes más quieres y siempre más querrás
 Mientras más tú tengas más ridículo serás.
 Jamás entenderás que tener no es cuestión de ser
 Sino cuestión de una gestión que tienes un nivel
 No tengo tanto pero implanto fe en mi proceder
 Porque yo tengo lo que tenía que tener.*

The fact that you have more doesn't make you better than me
 The resource—it gives you possibilities
 Don't confuse having more with having qualities
 [...]
 More than enough you feel you don't have more
 You have more than many but you want more and more
 The more you have the more you want and you'll always want more
 The more you have the more ridiculous you'll be
 You'll never understand that having is not the same as being
 But rather an effort to show that you have a class
 I don't have much but I instill faith in my actions
 Because I have what I had to have had.¹¹⁹

Geoffrey Baker argues that “hip-hop was allowed to prosper in Cuba because it could be talked about ‘productively.’”¹²⁰ By aligning themselves with state ideology, Hermanos de Causa assure that their raps would be politically “productive” and deserve to be supported and heard. This is not to say that their espousal of government rhetoric is a purely diplomatic move, for Hermanos de Causa as well as many other rap groups

¹¹⁸ West-Durán (2004) 23

¹¹⁹ Trans. Rooklyn (2009)

¹²⁰ Baker (2005) 382

are sincere when they critique global capitalism and praise the Cuban revolution. However, the decision to mix critique with praise was an intentional one. *Hermanos de Causa* did not wish to set themselves at odds with the government completely but instead chose to point out the deficiencies in government policy and appeal to the state to live up to the egalitarianism promised by its socialist ideology, while reaffirming their allegiance to the tenets of the revolution. In this way, they remind state officials whose side they are on (and so avoid forms of direct censorship).

State censorship took on many forms in relation to hip-hop, yet rarely was exerted in a direct, antagonistic fashion. Rather, censorship was exercised more subtly through institutional decisions about how rappers were selected and supported. These decisions were directly related to the perceived political “productivity” of rappers’ messages, and by now, have constrained the freedom of rappers to choose their own political direction as well as that of the movement. The institutional support that has allowed hip-hop to flourish in Cuba has come at the price of a part of the movement’s autonomy. Rappers have been enabled by state institutions at the same time as they have been limited by them. Sujatha Fernandes writes, “Rather than giving the rap movement cultural and political autonomy, the AHS seeks to encourage a relationship of dependency, whereby rappers must appeal to state institutions for the funds and permission to do their work.”¹²¹ If the only way rappers can make their music is to appeal to the state for the necessary support, then state institutions can effectively define Cuban hip-hop through choosing to support only that which serves the state; they have

¹²¹ Fernandes (2006) 598

the final word on what gets produced and what does not. Success on the island is a state-concocted phenomenon. After its institutionalization, the Cuban hip-hop movement lost much of its ability to define itself politically because its dependency upon state institutions limited its ability to step outside of the lines defined by state interest.

Nevertheless, the presence of the AHS or ACR has rarely been considered a purely manipulative, controlling presence. Instead, one of Cuban rappers' main complaints regarding the institutions have been pointed at the failure of the institutions to live up to their expectations in terms of promotion and organization.¹²² AHS's self-defined goal is "to encourage the media to make it their first priority to promote the best Cuban rap today,"¹²³ yet rap has hardly found its way into the mainstream Cuban media. When it does show up on Cuban news networks it is usually always casted in a controversial light, and rarely as a legitimate Cuban art form.¹²⁴ In 2003, a year after the ACR's inception, only two of the ten artists employed therein had been able to release compact discs.¹²⁵ Also, in organizing the 2003 festival of rap, organizers decided to split the festival between two different venues: "the first is 25 minutes east of Havana; the second is in the extreme West part of the city. Given the transportation problems in Cuba, this represents a major obstacle for most Cubans."¹²⁶ Needless to say, such logistical problems had a negative effect on the public perception of the most important rap concert of the year. Although the Cuban state has accepted hip-hop, such

¹²² Baker (2005) 393

¹²³ Interview with Alpidio Alonso, Bacallao (2006)

¹²⁴ Fernandes (2006) 593

¹²⁵ Fernandes (2006) 594

¹²⁶ West-Durán (2004) 10

logistical constraints and lag in expected performance standards seem to indicate “acceptance with an undercurrent of containment, of making sure that things do not grow much.”¹²⁷

The most drastic change that institutionalization has brought about in Cuban rap—and the most criticized—is the creation of a rift that cuts through a rap scene previously united in its homogeneity of opportunity (or lack thereof). Rapper Papo Record commented in an interview, “*Creo que la unidad entre los raperos es enormemente pobre. Esta es la limitación más grande y dañina del rap cubano*”¹²⁸ (I believe that the unity between rappers is enormously poor. This is the greatest and most damaging limitation of Cuban rap”). The ACR divided a previously unified hip-hop scene into two camps: the professional, state employed rappers and the amateur, “underground” rappers. Ariel Fernandez elucidates the main differences between “underground” and “commercial” rap below:

[Underground rappers] maintain an orthodox and radical stance along the lines of the origins of the genre and they distance themselves from whatever possibility of fusion for its commercialization; [and second,] they focus much more on an integration of politically committed lyrics with the social context... [Commercial groups] incorporate popular Cuban rhythms in order to be more accepted, achieve authenticity, and become commercially viable.¹²⁹

For underground rappers, rap is in a musical category of its own—to cross over with other genres such as traditional Cuban music would be to contaminate its essential political function of engaging social realities through *temas sociales*. Commercially oriented rappers consider rap to be on par with other genres of popular music and

¹²⁷ West-Durán (2004) 11

¹²⁸ Petinuad, Jorge. 2003. Interview with Papo Record, “*Yo no critico al que es comercial*,” *Movimientos* #4

¹²⁹ Quoted in Fernandes, (2006) 582

consider the political content of their lyrics to be merely part of the aesthetic and not the defining feature. Many commercial rappers have begun to cross over to what has long been considered the darkside in underground hip-hop circles: *reggaetón*, a genre ubiquitous in Latin America characterized by its heavy dance beat and its lyrics celebrating sex and partying, that is, the polar opposite of underground rap in Cuba. *Reggaetón*, however, is much more commercially viable than hip-hop and more easily sold to young listeners. Rappers who have begun to experiment with the genre attract the derision of nearly every underground rapper, who accuse them of selling out, watering down their social criticism in order to make themselves more available to the international market.

Commercial rap draws upon other genres besides *reggaetón* in order to reach larger audiences and make their music more popularly successful. The Orishas were the first group to begin mixing their music with Cuban salsa and are still the most commercially successful group to come out of Cuba. This commercial adaptation of rap has not been limited only to Cuban rap's musicality, but has also included rap's political message as well. Geoffrey Baker points out that the group Anónimo Consejo epitomizes the "formula for success" in Cuban hip-hop with their characteristic slogan "Hip hop, Revolución!" "in that it appeals in equal measures to government officials and to foreign hip hop aficionados."¹³⁰ Many rappers have attempted to copy the successful formula because they know it will increase their chances of being noticed and supported by the state, which in turn would increase their chances of international

¹³⁰ Baker (2005) 381

recognition. Many criticize the ACR for inspiring a commercialization of rap's political message –increasingly, rappers began to compromise their direct social critiques in order to sell their music. Political rap became trendy, losing much of its significance: one member of Anónimo Consejo remarks, “many of them today keep saying ‘Hip hop, Revolución!’ yet they can’t read a book by Che or Malcolm X.”¹³¹ The insubstantial reproduction of Cuban hip-hop’s political edge is limiting the Cuban hip-hop movement’s ability to define itself politically; hip-hop’s political aspect became, for many rappers, something to be sold to the government rather than a politically assertive statement. Some rappers, such as the group SBS (Sensational Boys of the Street) have eschewed politically oriented lyrics altogether to gravitate towards music strictly made for dancing, winning them wide popularity and commercial success on the island (and the scorn of countless underground groups).

Despite the emergence of a commercial trend in Cuban hip-hop, many groups remained uncompromisingly “underground,” favoring “*rap duro*,” rap with pointed social critiques that dare to push the envelop of the acceptable. The more fundamentalist, “underground” rappers reject commercialism and prefer to stay true to their role as the mouthpieces of the marginalized in Cuban society, pointing out the injustices they see on the island. In the verses below, the group Los Aldeanos (the Villagers) responds to the growing tide of political/commercial groups that choose to adopt Anónimo Consejo’s slogan of “hip-hop, revolución!”

*Aquí no todo es “hip hop, revolución” como parece
Con los MCs que se creen duros que están mas flojos que SBS*

¹³¹ Quoted in Baker (2005) 382

[...]
Muchos son los que sin razón gritan “revolución”
En cada canción, ignoran su profesión verdadera

Here it's not all “hip hop, revolution” like it seems
 With those MCs who think they're tough but who're limper than SBS¹³²
 [...]
 There are many who for no reason cry “revolution”
 In every song, but they don't know their true profession¹³³

By “true profession,” Los Aldeanos refer to the original status rappers held as the representatives of the marginalized. That role now seems increasingly displaced by commercial rap, overshadowed in the public consciousness by the visibility of commercialized rappers.

Although not on the ACR's roster, Los Aldeanos continue to produce their *rap duro* out of their homes, distributing their music by hand on homemade CD's.¹³⁴ To organize performances, they appeal to the AHS, the institution which takes under its wing the groups that do not comprise the list of elite rappers supported by the ACR, providing logistical support for organizing concerts yet lacking the funding to provide rappers with salaries or production equipment. While the aim of the ACR is to commercialize the groups that comprise its roster, the AHS defines a different role for itself: “*explorar los niveles más audaces y revolucionarios de un arte de vanguardia*”¹³⁵ (to explore the most audacious and revolutionary levels of a vanguard art). Claudia Espósito, an AHS official explains further, “[*la AHS promueve*] *un arte dentro de la*

¹³² SBS is a commercially oriented hip-hop group that was one of the first to mix hip-hop with traditional Cuban music.

¹³³ Baker (2005) 381

¹³⁴ Neil, Morgan. 2007. “Cuban rapper: Fight the injustice.” *CNN* April 11.

<http://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/americas/04/11/cuba.rapper/index.html?iref=newssearch>

¹³⁵ Bonilla (2007)

revolución, dentro de sus postulados políticos”¹³⁶ ([the AHS promotes] an art within the revolution, within its political principles”). The AHS recognizes hip-hop’s political function as a vanguard art, and supports socially conscious rappers in their efforts to participate in the revolution, promoting critical reflection on Cuban social reality and protecting rap from commercializing influences while the ACR retains commercialization as its main goal.

Some writers have depicted the institutionalization of Cuban hip-hop as an effort to “exert [state] influence over rap.”¹³⁷ Indeed, the Cuban state has appropriated much of the Cuban rap movement’s ability to define itself by usurping the movement’s leadership positions, attempting to establish rappers’ dependency upon it as the sole provider of materials and concert space, and exercising subtle forms of censorship. However, state co-optation cannot be reduced to a story of elite manipulation. Firstly, nationalization was necessary for the movement to grow and was nothing out of the ordinary (“all culture is nationalized in Cuba”¹³⁸). Many rappers within the movement welcomed nationalization for they knew that it would lead to greater opportunities to produce and perform their music, as well as to legitimize the genre. In this way, state involvement was advocated for from the beginning, rather than simply imposed from the top down. Also, the idea of an intentional state co-optation is problematic given the fact that the institutions charged with the overseeing of rap have widely divergent agendas regarding the direction of the genre. The ACR seeks to promote rap as a

¹³⁶ Bonilla (2007)

¹³⁷ Neill (2007)

¹³⁸ Baker (2005) 396

commercial venture while the AHS supports rappers' anti-commercial stance and seeks to protect them from commercial influences. These disparate intentions regarding rap make it impossible to talk about state co-optation as a process carried out intentionally by a monolithic state. Nevertheless, the incorporation of rap artists into state institutions took away much of Cuban hip-hop's political edge, for it ceased to have a political voice of its own that could set itself at odds with official discourses. The political voice that Cuban hip-hop displayed in the late 1990s was undermined by the appropriation of the Cuban hip-hop movement's leadership positions by government appointees as well as the formation of a division within the hip-hop community between commercial and amateur rappers. No longer of a unified community, the Cuban hip-hop movement struggles to formulate a coherent definition of itself. Ruben Marín of Primera Base says, "*todavía no somos un género, porque nos fajamos demasiado entre nosotros mismos y eso nos debilita*"¹³⁹ ("we are still not a genre because we fight too much amongst ourselves and this weakens us"). Indeed, "the official announcement of the 2005 festival states that 'the central objective of the competition will be the search for a national identity for the movement.'"¹⁴⁰ According to journalist Marc Lacey, the 2005 festival was a flop and was cancelled the following year without an explanation. It would seem then that the Cuban hip-hop movement has begun to eschew notions of leadership since the Cuban government began to meddle in the genre. The group Anónimo Consejo, one of the most popular hip-hop groups in Cuba, display a banner that proclaims "*¡Anarquía verde ya!*" ("green anarchy now!") Perhaps now that

¹³⁹ Cordero (2003), interview with Primera Base.

¹⁴⁰ Baker (2005) 374

leadership is changing hands at the highest level of Cuban government, Cuban hip-hop's political voice will once again find itself in the foreground as new ideas fill public debate.

After its institutionalization, it is difficult to continue to talk about Cuban hip-hop as a “movement.” Movement implies unified direction and coherent vision, both of which are now lacking in Cuban hip-hop. Hip-hop continues to be a vehicle for social critique for many rappers, most of which are underground, yet the original politically assertive, radical stance that electrified the crowd at the first Havana rap festival in 1995 has been packaged and sold both to the institutions which support rappers on the island and to the international market abroad. Radical social critiques are still abundant at underground hip-hop shows, yet Baker points out that “observations directed internally towards the rap movement tend to engage audiences’ attention as much as externally directed social critiques.”¹⁴¹ The hip-hop movement, now lacking unity, has turned to infighting—no one seems able to agree upon what the Cuban hip-hop movement is, or in what direction it is going.

It would seem then that the co-optation of Cuban hip-hop is complete. The movement has been stripped of its independent leadership, divided into two fundamentally disagreeing camps, and obliged to supplicate government institutions for the permission and support needed to perform their music. However, Cuban hip-hop artists do not define themselves as government employees, nor are they completely dependent on government institutions to support them in their quest to get their music

¹⁴¹ Baker (2006) 226

heard. Cuban hip-hop artists are able to reach beyond Cuba's borders in order to acquire the equipment, funding, and inspiration that in Cuba they find lacking. Such transnational ties have been present in Cuban hip-hop since its beginnings on the island. DJ Adalberto, the founder of the *local de la Moña*, took advantage of his connections abroad to garner "the most extensive and up-to date rap collection in Havana,"¹⁴² which he shared with all the patrons of his club. Cuban hip-hop's beginnings, of course, were the product of those transnational ties. The best example of a tie that Cuban hip-hop has been able to establish with the world beyond Cuba's shores is its connection with the Black August collective, an organization that seeks to "draw connections between radical black activism and hip-hop culture."¹⁴³ Black August has organized fundraising concerts in New York, the benefits of which have been distributed to Cuban hip-hop artists so that they may be able to continue to make their activist music even while the government has declined to offer them support. In this way, Cuban hip-hop artists are able to take advantage of alternative possibilities presented by transnational connections and avoid wholesale co-optation by the Cuban state.¹⁴⁴

Conclusions

Rap is distinguished in Cuba from other popular art forms by its political assertive stance. Hip-hop emerged in Cuba as a response to experiences of displacement and marginalization felt in the Afro-Cuban community during the Special Period. Afro-Cubans were more acutely affected by the drastic economic changes that took place on

¹⁴² Hernandez and Garofalo (1999) 23

¹⁴³ Fernandes (2006) 581

¹⁴⁴ Fernandes (2006) 604

the island in the early 1990s, yet found themselves deprived of a political voice that they could have used to speak out and draw attention to their dire situation, which was largely ignored by government officials. The Afro-Cuban community found their political voice through hip-hop. Hip-hop became a gravitational center for marginalized Afro-Cubans, providing an alternative to popular (negative) Cuban conceptions of blackness, thereby creating affordable spaces for socialization, and a forum to discuss social ills and injustices prevalent in Cuban society. In coming together within the Afro-Cuban community, hip-hop artists were successful in raising public awareness about the unacknowledged racism that continued to plague the island. Through hip-hop, the Afro-Cuban community mobilized itself politically, independently from the Cuban state—the Cuban hip-hop movement was its own entity and did not necessarily align itself with government ideology. Hip-hop was the tool with which marginalized Afro-Cubans were able to carve out their own political niche in Cuba when previously they had been ignored as a constituency.

Cuban state officials recognized the political potential that the hip-hop movement had displayed, and responded by reaching out to the movement through promises of institutional support. Institutional support accomplished two things: one, it enabled Cuban hip-hop to develop into the most vibrant hip-hop scene in Latin America and, two, it brought the Cuban hip-hop movement into the government fold; rappers, no longer only independent artists, became dependent on government institutions for the capacity to produce and perform their music. Now with state officials occupying the positions of leadership within the hip-hop movement such as event organizers and

spokespeople, the Cuban hip-hop movement no longer has the agency to identify itself politically on its own terms: successful and popular rappers are selected by the state, and these rappers are only those who were deemed by state officials to be positive proponents of the Cuban revolution. Those rappers who were deemed subversive to government ideology often find their attempts to perform their music—both locally and internationally—undermined by state officials. However, Cuban hip-hop has resisted complete state co-optation by maintaining ties to international hip-hop culture, which has allowed it the autonomy to transcend the confines of the government standard.

Looking to the future, Cuban hip-hop may find itself at the edge of yet another major change in the course of its development. There has recently been speculation that the austere, unfriendly relations between Cuba and the United States are at a political turning point. Recently, Vice President Joe Biden affirmed that “over the next decade and sooner there is likely to be, and needs to be, changes in the relationship between Cuba and the United States.”¹⁴⁵ President Barack Obama has already lifted traveling restrictions that previously denied Cuban emigrées the rights to travel to see their families more than once a year. If the long-standing political enmity between the United States and Cuba continues to thaw, it is possible that we may soon see the harsh economic restrictions that have been in place since the Cold War loosen. This could lead to expanded access to Cuba for American tourists and American business interests, as well as new market possibilities for rappers who wish to become professionals by

¹⁴⁵ Cave, D and E. Schmidt, (2009) “Obama to Loosen Restrictionson Policy with Cuba.” April 7, 2009, *The New York Times*, Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/05/world/americas/05cuba.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=obama%20cuban%20embargo&st=cse

selling their music. It is difficult to predict exactly what will happen to the direction of Cuban hip-hop if Americans should be granted access to the island, but it is very possible that Cuban hip-hop could experience a resurgence in popularity as rappers begin to find other avenues of support in American companies, thus able to reach larger audiences. This could lead to a greater commercialization of rap music in Cuba, but it will also loosen rappers from the political limitations they faced under the Cuban censure they are subject to as members of state institutions. No longer dependent on Cuban institutions for support, their critiques could become more pointed without having to worry about losing their spot on an island record label's roster; an expansion of foreign interests in Cuba could lead to expanded political freedoms for rappers, even while commercial viability becomes the main aim of their projects. Whatever the case, Cuban hip-hop continues to be shaped by the social and economic circumstances that surround it. Should these circumstances change in the coming years, Cuban hip-hop will take on a new direction as it finds new ways to engage social reality both inside Cuba and beyond its borders, carrying the Cuban hip-hop revolution's voice into the globalized 21st century. In the words of Obsesión,

*Que se sepan de Tokio hasta La Habana,
Esta es mi forma de hacer música cubana.*¹⁴⁶

Know it from Tokyo to Havana,
This is how I make Cuban music.

¹⁴⁶ Obsesión. "Un montón de cosas". EGREM, 2000. Full lyrics available at: http://www.lajiribilla.cubaweb.cu/2002/n67_agosto/1608_67.html Trans. M. Rooklyn (2009)

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