

Rapping Rebellion:
Hip Hop as a New Social Movement in Cuba

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In general, the countries of the global South belong to the normative classification of underdeveloped states. The condition of underdevelopment encompasses many areas of society, including, but not limited to, particular social, economic, and political factors. It is the job of politicians and development practitioners to address the rectification of these unfortunate realities, but it is the job of the citizens themselves to adapt to, live amidst, and cope with the conditions of underdevelopment. Daily life in the global South, as contrasted to the developed North, is certainly not a comfortable one, and the individual opportunities for change are limited. The societal and political infrastructure for civil action does not always exist, and citizens are forced to find other means for bettering their lives.

This paper will focus upon Cuba, where the mechanisms for change are even more limited than in other areas of Latin America. Political parties, NGO's, and even community organizations are almost always not allowed unless sanctioned by the state; the ability of the common person to affect change is severely restricted. Under nearly fifty years of Castro's control, the Cuban people have found other, more subtle, ways to voice their concerns and to bring attention to a number of unaddressed issues.

One of the ways in which Cubans' social concerns have been voiced is through music. Known as one of the most musical societies in the world, it is fair to say that music is truly a central aspect of everyday Cuban life. Even the highly regulatory government, "has recognized Cuban popular music as a part of its national heritage."¹ The *nueva trova* (known elsewhere as *nueva canción*) of the 1970s, iconised by Pablo Milanés and Silvio Rodríguez, is the most famous example of socially conscious Cuban music, although it is not always characterized as "protest music".

¹ Manuel, 163.

Cuba is the only country in which new song is not protest music and where it is recognized and institutionally supported as an art form.... The *nueva trova*'s popularity is based on more than its artistic quality and talent. The *trovadores* are seen by foreign audiences as live representatives of the Revolution, and their songs are heard as documents of the history, struggles, loves, problems, and dreams of that social process. (Benmayor, 11)

In response, musicologists often argue that these groups, while they deny an overtly political intent for their music, "...redefine the political in terms of the popular and its daily practical struggle." (Tumas-Serna, 144)

Nueva canción has since spread to other parts of Latin America, and in my opinion, has lost some of its political potency. Just as the songs of Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Pete Seeger, when taken out of the politically charged atmosphere of the 1960s and 70s, are more commonly enjoyed as American classics than as powerful protests, so does *la nueva trova* suffer in context.

First appearing in 1991, the Cuban hip-hop movement seems to be filling the artistic gap left by the aging promoters of *nueva trova*. Cuban *raperos* first started imitating North American hip-hop in the early 1990s, but the music and the artists quickly evolved into some of the most contemporary and fresh voices of the Revolution. Now being called the "rebellion within the revolution"², the social significance of hip-hop in Cuba is unique in its message, form, symbolism and context. Impacted by Marxist thought, African heritage, anti-hegemonic discourse, and the triumphs and pitfalls of the Revolution itself, the Cuban hip-hop movement is a truly singular phenomenon, the effects of which are yet to be fully understood.

² Umlauf, CNN.com

HIP-HOP CULTURE

The hip-hop movement first began in the Bronx borough of New York City in the early 1980s, and gradually became part of mainstream culture in the United States. The culture of hip-hop incorporates many aspects such as DJing, graffiti, breakdancing, and urban fashion, but it is primarily the music of hip-hop that will be discussed here. In contrast to the highly melodic sweet harmonies of European music, hip-hop (rap) music is primarily influenced by the traditional African emphasis on call and response, rhythm, and polyrhythmic layering. Elements of rap music can be clearly traced to the musical style of the griots of West Africa, Jamaican dub reggae, and the oral sounds of African-American blues music. “The heavy bass and percussion, the repetition of certain rhythmic elements, the rhythms and rhymes of the vocal line, of DJs grabbing the mike to whip up a crowd are all traits within a dynamic and powerful transnational Caribbean and Afrodiasporic dialogue.”³ Considering its roots, it is fitting that the hip-hop movement has been embraced by mostly young African-Americans in U.S. society. But, it is the double diaspora⁴ of musical traditions carried from African and the Caribbean, to the United States, and back to Cuba that makes Cuban hip-hop a truly singular phenomenon.

A quick survey of the global spread of hip-hop indicates its intentional adoption as the voice of marginalized young people around the world.⁵ Hip-hop has emerged and is growing exponentially in the *favelas* of Brazil, among Basque youth, within American Indian popular culture, as a form of activism among European Muslims, and among Cuba’s urban youth.⁶ These marginalized groups, “use the elements and messages of

³ Durán, 6.

⁴ Durán, 6.

⁵ The Next <http://www.thenext.org.nz/the_resource/>

⁶ Mitchell.

hip-hop to make sense of their own communities and where they fit into the dominant culture.... [Through] a unique fusion of local music, language and cultural values,...[hip-hop] signifies a movement away from maintaining ‘traditional cultures’, towards cultures reinterpreting and reorganizing in order to make sense of an increasingly globalized world.”⁷

RAP STYLE

Rap is arguably one of the most basic forms of music. The single vocal line often has very little melodic variation and is layered over a largely unvaried rhythmic pattern. The creation and performance of hip-hop requires very little formal musical training, and is most often adopted by those with little or no access to traditional (European based) music. Looking at the development and proliferation of the hip-hop culture through a Marxist lens (particularly applicable in the case of Cuba), its appeal to sub- or counter-cultures around the world becomes perfectly clear. It is a form of, “music containing in its rebelliousness a class consciousness that made it truly relevant to the working class youths [in the United States during the 1970s]. Part of this new sound was a rejection of the materialism evident in the ‘old sound’: the multi-tracked, orchestrated and processed quality of ...‘mainstream’ bands...seemed as inaccessible as Mount Olympus itself to the youngster who purchased a ‘mere’ Fender guitar and amplifier...”⁸ The making of hip-hop music can be done by anyone who can ‘flow’⁹ and has a friend to either clap a bass beat or to act as a human beatbox. This minimalism is precisely why hip-hop has been

⁷ The Next. < http://www.thenext.org.nz/the_resource/using_resource.php>

⁸ Stoller, 36.

⁹ “Flow” is a term used to describe the rhythmic, and rhyming lyrics of a rapper.

embraced by both the Cuban socialist government and the disaffected youths struggling to assert themselves in such a controlled society.

HIP-HOP'S CULTURAL ROOTS

Though hip-hop music came to Cuba from the United States, its musical traits and styling are much more Caribbean and African than European or North American. The general sound of rap music is often traced to the musical style of the griots of West Africa. A griot is a musician and preserver of tribal culture and history who accompanies the tribal rulers of West Africa. Because griots serve as cultural historians, their music is not simply for entertainment value; it is also used to preserve and recount history. Like much of African music, griot songs utilize a conversational vocal tone, detailed lyrics, heavy repetition, call and response, and a strongly layered and polyrhythmic percussion accompaniment. In contrast to the characteristic European style, rhythm and context are much more important in African music than melodic or harmonic elements.

Rap music, though it developed on another continent and under very different circumstances, retains many of the same musical traits. The genre was first brought to the Bronx by Jamaican immigrants who played reggae and dub-reggae for the New York club scene. As they began to adopt punk and disco music into their DJing techniques, hip-hop was born. “Among the pioneers of U.S. rap are performers like Afrika Bambaataa, Grandmaster Flash, and Kool DJ Herc, all from Caribbean backgrounds. Equally significant was the influence of Puerto Rican disc jockeys who were active in

rap's South Bronx emergence, as well as the extraordinary *boricua* presence in the evolution of break dancing.”¹⁰

In an almost parallel music diaspora, Cuban musicians had been blending African, Caribbean, and European (Spanish) musical elements for decades. When hip-hop finally reached Cuba, the already amalgamated genre became even more infused with the island's unique musical style.

MUSIC IN CUBA

Cuba today is heavily influenced by African culture. In 1827, at the height of the slave trade, African slaves accounted for more than 40 percent of the island's population.¹¹ In contrast to the brutal and isolating conditions of slaves in the United States, Cuban landowners allowed their slaves to retain their languages, religious practices, and traditions. On holidays, ethnic slave organizations known as *cabildos* were allowed to gather to hold traditional celebrations. This was promoted as a means to alleviate the tensions between slaves and owners, and to maintain productivity.

As a result, many aspects of African (specifically Yoruba¹²) culture exist in Cuba today. Certain African words, such as *asere* and *chevere* have become parts of Cuban Spanish, and African religious groups such as the *abakuá* (or *ñáñigos*), *regla de ocha*, and *regla de palo monte* are still active on the island. Arguably the most pervasive aspect of African heritage in Cuba is the continued practice of *santería*. The religious beliefs and deities brought by the Yoruba during slavery have so effectively incorporated

¹⁰ Durán, 6.

¹¹ Pérez, 86.

¹² In 1836, the moslem Fulani Jihad destroyed the Yoruba Oyo Empire. As a result, many Yorubas were sold into slavery by their conquerors, and wound up in Cuba.

themselves into society that practicing *santeros* today far outnumber practicing Catholics on the island. Each *orisha*, or saint presides over “the forces of nature and the endeavors of humanity,”¹³ and has their own color, food, and drumbeat. These particular drum patterns are used during religious ceremonies and are often heard in the form of a rumba. Rumba is a form of Cuban dance music that relies upon intricately layered percussion and polyrhythmic patterns played on batá drums, congas, bongos, cajones, claves, and a number of other traditional percussive instruments. The incorporation of these instruments and drum rhythms is what makes Cuban music so distinctive. In particular, the clave pattern (as opposed to the traditional European 3/3 waltz or 4/4 dance beats) separates almost all forms of Cuban dance and music apart from other global musical styles.

MUSICAL ANALYSIS

For the purposes of this paper, a set of musical examples will be discussed, all of which are included on the accompanying disc. Track 1 is a traditional West African piece entitled Sala Kpa Kpa that comes from the Kpelle people of modern Liberia. A number of similarities between this piece and contemporary Cuban hip-hop can be clearly heard. There is a relatively basic repeated percussion rhythm that introduces the piece which quickly evolves into a very intricately layered and polyrhythmic drum pattern. This same idea can be clearly heard in the repeated staccato pattern that begins the Orishas’ *Habana* (Track 2) as well as the percussive guitar introduction to *Desaparecidos* (Track 3).

¹³ Orishanet.org <<http://www.orishanet.org/ocha.html>>

Track 4 is a traditional Cuban *santería* piece performed by Grupo Ache Iya. This tribute to Eleguá is a good example of the transculturation of music from the West African tradition to Cuba. It is characterized by an aesthetically simple, yet intricate and layered percussion bass beat. The vocal line can be distinguished by its clarity, repetition and almost conversational tone. *Tengo* (Track 5) by Hermanos de Causa is a particularly comparative Cuban hip-hop piece. Its accompanying instrumental beat is very clear, but rather syncopated and composed of many layered percussive sounds. The lyrics are very precise and clearly heard. Like the tribute to Eleguá, *Tengo* uses a call and response technique, rhyme, and a repetitive “catchy” refrain. Similarly, the Eleguá Blessing (track 6) also employs the characteristic call and response form, and the use of this form in the Orishas’ *Desaparecidos* only increases its aural appeal.

Perhaps the element that most musically distinguishes Cuban hip-hop from its North American counterpart is its unique rhythmic pattern and instrumentation. Rap music in the United States is almost always organized into a 4/4 time signature. The musical beats and vocal lyrics are separated into sets of two or four and the rhythmic emphasis can be heard as almost march-like. While this organization of musical beats is also present in Cuba, the rhythm most often heard in typical Cuban music is that of the clave. The clave beat is separated into groups of 3 and 2 (or 2-3) and is most often heard in the musical genres guaguancó, rumba, and the older styles of rumba Colombia and abaquá. The latter two often employ a version known as the 6/8 clave which derives itself from the West African cowbell 12/8 timeline.¹⁴

¹⁴ Wikipedia. < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clave_%28rhythm%29>



3-2 “son clave” rhythm

This clave beat can be clearly heard in the song *Compositor Confundido* (Track 6), popularized by Ibrahim Ferrer and the Buena Vista Social Club. The piece opens with a tres¹⁵ and clave introduction. The claves¹⁶ clearly set up the syncopated 2-3 clave beat for the entire piece. Instinto’s *Kirino con su tres* (Track 7) is also organized by the clave pattern, but uses the more traditional 3-2 beat.

Cuban popular music is also tied to the nation’s cultural heritage by its instrumentation. This roots emphasis was first noted in the salsa explosion of the 1950s. “The use of traditional instruments such as *congas*, *maracas*, *güiros*, *bongos*, the piano, plus trumpets and trombones – which were emphasized to translate the sound of the *barrio* – was retained as an ideological affirmation of the Caribbean heritage.”¹⁷ Cuban *raperos* today often incorporate *batás*, *congas*, live drums, guitar bass, traditional religious chants and imagery into their music. Additionally, some hip-hop groups use aspects of familiar rumba, mambo, and other traditionally Afro-Cuban genres in their own pieces. In contrast to the overtly sexual demeanor and dress of American female artists, their Cuban counterparts will often dress in loose fitting African-style clothing during performances in opposition to the female stereotype. Whether or not the lyrics of

¹⁵ The tres is a small guitar that is used in traditional Cuban music.

¹⁶ The claves are an instrument that consists of two hardwood sticks that are banged together to produce a piercing rhythmic pattern usually used in Latin music.

¹⁷ Janson Pérez, 151.

a particular song have a political or Afro-Cuban theme, the statement made by the instrumentation and/or presentation of the piece can speak just as loudly.

PROTEST STRATEGIES

According to Fidel Castro's famous 1963 edict "within the Revolution everything, against the Revolution nothing", the opportunities for political contestation are severely limited. Virtually all forms of civil society organizations are either sponsored by or approved of by the state, and the strongest opposition group (CANF) exists outside of the country and has very little impact within Cuba. Realistically, the only safe forms of protest must be conducted "within the Revolution".

While the Cuban government clearly does not tolerate traditional forms of political opposition, its position on culture and music is quite favorable. Orthodox Marxism leaves no room for manifestations of nationalism, but being a former colony, a large part of the Cuban socialist identity is tied to its nationalist pride. Ché Guevara himself proclaimed that Cuba would construct 'socialism with pachanga'; it is clear that the country's strong cultural heritage has created a truly unique forum for artistic expression.

Despite Fidel's strong position 'within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing', "...in many cases, the guideline has proved too general to apply to music, whose inherent ideology may be difficult to decode; ...Cuban cultural policy, far from being monolithic and inflexible, has generally been responsive to the diversity of tastes and attitudes within Cuba."¹⁸ Part of this acceptance could arguably be due to the

¹⁸ Manuel, 163.

sheer difficulty of regulating music and many forms of art. Some of the most integral forms of artistic expression rely upon metaphor and ironic plays on words which are often challenging to correctly or fully decipher, even by trained academics. A researcher who focuses on cultural ideologies, Maurice Bloch asserts that, “you can’t argue with a song, because it involves abandonment of the freedom of natural discourse, and no argument or reasoning can be communicated.”¹⁹ Perhaps this is how popular timba group Charanga Habanera’s piece *El Mango* has been allowed to become so popular. In an obvious allusion to Castro, the lyrics translate “Hey, you mango, we all loved you when you were green. Now that you are yellow and old, isn’t it time to fall from the tree?”²⁰

In the 1960s, inspired by the style and image of American protest music, Silvio Rodríguez, Pablo Milanés and their contemporaries pioneered the *nueva trova* movement. While it does address socio-political issues, unlike the *nueva canción* movement in many other parts of Latin America, *nueva trova* does not classify itself as protest music. A more apt title might be socially conscious music. *Nueva trova* was one of the first manifestations of political and social contestation within the Revolution.

The elements of innovation and contestation were both a self-conscious part of most participants’ music. Players strove from the outset to create a different sort of art, to challenge the past musically and textually, to interpret and express the revolutionary experience in personal terms of their own choosing.²¹ The entire lifestyle and persona of the protest singer represented a testing of boundaries. By growing long hair, wearing torn “hippie” clothing, performing on sidewalks or other nonstandard venues, and participating in other forms of nonconformity in addition to song writing, artists implicitly challenged social and artistic norms on multiple fronts.²²

¹⁹ Bloch 1974, pp. 71, 62. Quoted from Janson Pérez, 158.

²⁰ Miller & Kenedi, 213.

²¹ Benmayor, 13. Quoted from Moore, 142.

²² Moore, 142.

Yet, this same nonconformity can also be viewed as a rejection of the commercialism in the music industry. “It rejects the star syndrome, night club-style performances, glitter and show. The singers appear on stage in street clothes, in a natural, honest fashion.”²³ Nevertheless, as Ché Guevara declared that revolutionary art should be revolutionary in form as well as content, *nueva trova* was embraced by the Cuban government and received state support (and some might say, also received state control).

Thirty years later, hip-hop has come to fill the space for musical contestation left by *nueva trova*. One journalist called it the ‘rebellion within the revolution’, saying that “...these rebels use lyrics, not guns, and they dance instead of march. [This rebellion’s] soldiers are Cuban rappers, (*raperos*). Their missions are poverty and racism.”²⁴ Though Cuban hip-hop groups do not openly engage in traditional-style protest, their messages and concerns definitely challenge the status quo. “Given the lack of forums for young Afro-Cubans to voice their concerns, rap music provides an avenue for contestation and negotiation within Cuban society...[and a means for building] strategies for survival in the difficult circumstances of the contemporary ‘special period’ of crisis.”²⁵ These groups walk a fine line between creating (R)evolutionary art, and becoming political and/or societal subversives.

BLACKS IN CUBA

As in the United States, racism and societal prejudices were the defining characteristics of post-slavery Cuba. In the years between the Spanish-American War (1898) and the triumph of the Cuban Revolution (1959), American presence dominated

²³ Benmayor, 14. Quoted from Manuel, 174.

²⁴ Umlauf, CNN.com

²⁵ Fernandes, 584, 576.

the island. U.S. tourists, politics, and gangsters imported their culture, ideologies, and vices. Blacks were treated as second-class citizens and relegated to the worst housing, neighborhoods, and jobs. The Revolution all but expelled these northern influences, and continues to strive to eradicate the issue of race from the country.

Until 1986, Cuban policy operated under the orthodox Marxist position that racism and class distinctions would wither away under socialism. But, “at the Third Congress of the Communist Party, in 1986, it was acknowledged that racial discrimination and racism had not been eliminated.”²⁶ A distinct effort was made to more fully incorporate Afro-Cubans into the upper echelons of society, and to place a heavier emphasis on the eradication of racism. Unfortunately, the onset of the Special Period compromised many of these goals.

The fall of the Soviet Union immediately crippled the Cuban economy. Food and other resources were tightly rationed, structures fell into even further disrepair, and the lack of subsidized oil brought transportation to a virtual standstill. Those who fared the best during this period were those who, either from the tourist industry or through remittances, had access to U.S. dollars; this favored group consisted largely of whites. Black Cubans receive only a tiny portion of the remittances sent from Miami, as those who emigrated were typically of the white upper class. One of the main political strategies to bring in external funds was a heavy emphasis on the development of the Cuban tourism sector. Many foreign companies and individuals have invested on the island, but due to foreign prejudices, blacks are also often excluded from jobs in the tourist sector. Furthermore, they rarely have the resources to earn tourist dollars through

²⁶ Saney, 106.

the operation of a *casa particular* or a *paladar*.²⁷ As a result, a new form of racial inequality has emerged that is being largely ignored by the Cuban government.

ALAMAR

With Soviet support, in the 1970s the Cuban government built a number of housing projects around Havana to alleviate the issue of overcrowding in the city. One of these projects, a set of high rises in the suburb of Alamar, is home to 300,000 Cubans. “It was here that in the 1980s young residents would construct antennas to put out on their balconies to capture the sounds of “la moña,” r&b and rap music from Miami radio stations WEDR 99 Jams and WHQT Hot 105. That is how the sounds of U.S. hip-hop arrived on the island.”²⁸ At first, young Cubans would simply imitate the sounds and gangster imagery of the genre, but soon began to incorporate distinctly Cuban aspects into the music.

MUSIC IN A MARXIST SOCIETY

The creation, performance, and proliferation of music in a socialist society are fundamentally different from its capitalist counterpart.

In capitalist countries the course of popular music is influenced primarily by the market, in the broadest sense of the word. In socialist Cuba, aspects of the ‘market’ – for example, supply and demand – remain fundamentally influential, but the ‘demand’, including taste, may naturally be strongly affected by the class revolution, while aspects of the ‘supply’ – especially, the diffusion of music – may be largely determined by official cultural policy.²⁹

²⁷ Cubans who occupied large homes pre-Revolution have tended to maintain their residency. This largely excluded blacks. Fernandes, 578-9.

²⁸ Olavarria, 2002.

²⁹ Manuel, 161.

To counter the over-commercialization of Cuba by Americans in the 1950s, one of the first actions of the Revolutionary government was the nationalization of nightclubs, recording companies, radio stations, and concert venues. “In accordance with Marxist ideology, the state has upheld the democratization of access to culture [music and the arts] as a fundamental goal.”³⁰ Music education through the professional level is free and accessible to all Cubans, and most concerts and festivals are held free of or at very little cost.

One interpretation of Marxist thought promotes the revolutionary nature of socialist art as exposing injustices and calling the people to action. “From this view, art and politics have the same goals: the betterment of society, the establishment of moral guidelines, and the regulation of civic activity.”³¹ At the First Congress of Culture and Education in 1971, Castro himself remarked that, “We valorize most those cultural and artistic creations that serve a utilitarian function for the people, for humanity, that support the revindication and liberation of humanity.”³² Because of these previously formulated views and public statements, it would be obviously hypocritical for the Cuban government to place an outright ban on music deemed to be politically or socially disruptive. To a certain extent, this has occurred (for many years it was illegal for radio stations to air the music of Cuban nationals, and certain groups have been placed under a sort of probationary ban from performing when their songs are deemed too counterrevolutionary), but the most common strategy to control potentially subversive music is to bring it under state control. Both *nueva trova* and Cuban hip-hop have been “embraced” by the state and incorporated into official artistic structures. “The political

³⁰ Manuel, 162.

³¹ Moore, 13.

³² Castro en Leal 1982, 242. Quoted from Moore, 14.

leadership, along with media and cultural institutions, identify the egalitarian ideals of Cuban rappers with calls for equality and justice between nations made by Cuban leaders such as Fidel Castro in the international arena.”³³

Because of the socialist mindset of the Cuban populace, it has been argued that the music created tends to be very pure and visceral. “Ultimately, the desire to “make it in *music*’ is exclusionary and bourgeois.”³⁴ Without the lure of economic gain, “[t]he artist then will paint, will sing, will dance, the writer will write, the musician will compose operas, the philosopher will build systems...not to gain money, to receive a salary, but to deserve applause, to win laurel wreaths, like the conquerors of the Olympic games, to satisfy their artistic and scientific passion.”³⁵ Some of the most important topics in Cuban hip-hop are racial discrimination, *machismo*, and the material failures of the Revolution. In contrast, those groups that have left the country to market their music in a capitalist economy have changed their message.³⁶

The Cuban government itself has tried to use this capitalist temptation to temper the lyrics of hip-hop musicians. “The more commercial rap was also exploited by the Cuban state for its revenue-earning potential, as part of a larger push to attract foreign funding through Cuban music and arts. The promises of money and promotion by the foreign producers did cause several Cuban rap groups to change their music and become more commercial, or to break up as members disagreed over whether or not to ‘sell out’.”³⁷ Just as gangster rap that glorifies gangs and sex and drugs has been more

³³ Fernandes, 595.

³⁴ Stoller, 38.

³⁵ Lafargue, 102-3. Quoted from Moore, 11.

³⁶ Examples are SBS, who completely refuse to address political or social issues, and the Orishas, who after leaving Cuba have denied outright any political connotations in their music.

³⁷ Fernandes, 594.

commercially successful in the United States than the more grassroots social commentary music, groups like the Orishas and SBS have found more international success by shedding themselves of politically controversial messages.

In 1992, the *Asociación Hermanos Saiz* (Brothers Saiz Organization, AHS), the youth cultural wing of the official mass organization of Cuban youth, *Unión de Jovenes Cubanos* (Union of Cuban Youth, UJC) created a space for rap musicians. They organize concerts, enable recording opportunities, and act as a link between rap musicians and the state. According to Fernando Jacomino, the vice-president of AHS, their function is to “create a cultural and political leadership among the rappers, who are able to pressure the institutions to give them support so that they can make their concerts.”³⁸ But, those who take a more pessimistic view argue that, “[r]ather than giving the rap movement cultural and political autonomy, AHS seeks to encourage a relationship of dependency, whereby rappers must appeal to state institutions for the funds and permission to do their work.”³⁹ Given this suspicious view, AHS has had limited participation from Cuban rap groups. At present only two groups, Obsesión and Primera Base, have released records through AHS enterprises.

LYRICAL ANALYSIS

While its musical traits make Cuban hip-hop unique, it is the lyrics that make it truly revolutionary. “The Spanish language lends itself to rapping, with its ingenious word play and emphasis on rhyme.”⁴⁰ Cuban rappers use their own language and culture to their advantage to create some of the most powerful Revolutionary art to date. Some

³⁸ Fernandes, 598.

³⁹ Fernandes, 598.

⁴⁰ Durán, 7.

of the most influential rap songs in Cuba are based on the poems of the country's national poet, Nicolás Guillén. Guillén was an Afro-Cuban poet whose "poems and statements have achieved canonical status in Cuba from a literary, racial, and political point of view."⁴¹ His works are taught in every Cuban school, and are well known throughout the island.

Instinto, an all-female rap group, became most popular for their song "Kirino" (Track 7) which deals with issues of gender and *machismo*. The text is based on the Guillén poem "Quirino con Su Tres" and the Emilio Grenet/Mercedes Valdez song of the same title.

Quirino con Su Tres
por/by Nicolás Guillén

¡ Quirino con su tres! La bamba grande, la pasa dura, Suelos los pies Y una mulata que se derrite de sabrosura...	Quirino with his tres! This lips, nappy hair, With good moves And a mulatta melting from his charms
¡Quirino con su tres! Luna redonda que lo vigila cuando regresa Dando traspiés Jipi en la chola, camisa fresca...	Quirino with his tres! Round moon looks over him As he wobbles on home Panama hat on his head, bright red shirt.
¡Quirino con su tres! Tibia accesorio para lacita; La madre – negra Paula Valdés – Suda, envejece, busca la frita...	Quirion with his tres! His black mother, Paula Valdés, Cool accessory for the scene, She sweats, grows old, looks for grub...
¡Quirino con su tres!	Quirino with his tres!

(Guillén, 1974: 46; translation, Alan West-Durán)

⁴¹ Durán, 8.

In contrast, Instinto creates a feminist version of the song that takes the emphasis away from Quirino, and places it onto Mercedes Valdez.

Kirino
por/by Instinto

<p>Caballero que ha pasado El tiempo corre y no le han cantado Kirino que han gozado Con ese ritmo inigualado La han escuchado en todo lado En las Mercedes y hasta en Santiago Interpretado por Mercedes Con su pañuelo en la cabecita ¡Qué mujercita en aquellos tiempos! Con su frescura y su movimiento Esta cadencia que estás escuchando Es distinto porque Instinto lo está cantando ¡Quirino con su tres! (3x) [...] Y aprovecho y pido ya Unos aplausos que sean verdá Por Mercedes efún beyá Que si no es por ella no canto ná, etc.</p>	<p>Guys, what's happened? Time's gone by, and no song to him Kirino and those who enjoyed him With that unbeatable rhythm Heard all over, In Mercedes and Santiago Sung by Mercedes Kerchief on her head Some kinda woman for those times! All so fresh, moving real fine. This cadence that you're hearing Is distinct because Instinct is singing it Kirino with his tres! [...] So let's ask for applause Straight from the heart For Mercedes and her art, Efún beyá If not for her, I wouldn't be singing at all.</p>
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*(Instinto, in Various Groups, Cuban Hip Hop All Stars – Volume 1, track no. 13;
translation Alan West-Durán)*

Researcher Alan West-Durán analyzes this text by indicating that, “clearly, as an all-woman rap group, Instinto is rejecting the attributes of physicality of the poem, reflecting a feminist consciousness that is against images that objectify women (sexually and racially) through a metonymic exaggeration of the body.”⁴² He also notes the new emphasis on Mercedes Valdez, calling her a “fountain of creativity and inspiration for the group’s trio of women” and ends with the statement, “so what was originally a sketch

⁴² Durán, 22.

of *solar* (tenement) life by Guillén has become with *Instinto* a tribute, an intertextual reworking, as well as a statement of women's creativity as emblem of Cuba."⁴³

Hermanos de Causa is another group who has taken a work by Guillén and rewritten it to reflect social dissatisfaction.

Tengo
por/by Nicolás Guillén

Cuando me veo y toco
yo, Juan sin Nada no más ayer,
y hoy Juan con Todo,
y hoy con todo,
vuelvo los ojos, miro,
me veo y toco
y me pregunto cómo ha podido ser.

When I see and touch myself,
I, Juan with Nothing only yesterday,
and Juan with Everything today,
and today with everything,
I turn my eyes and look,
I see and touch myself,
and ask myself, how this could have been.

Tengo, vamos a ver,
tengo el gusto de andar por mi país,
dueño de cuanto hay en él,
'mirando bien de cerca lo que antes
no tuve ni podía tener.
Zafra puedo decir,
monte puedo decir,
ciudad puedo decir,
ejercito decir,
ya míos para siempre y tuyos, nuestros,
y un ancho resplandor
de rayo, estrella, flor.

I have, let's see,
I have the pleasure of going about my
country,
owner of all there is in it,
looking closely at what
I did not or could not have before.
I can say cane,
I can say mountain,
I can say city,
say army,
now forever mine and yours, ours,
and the vast splendor of
the sunbeam, star, flower.

Tengo, vamos a ver,
tengo el gusto de ir
yo, campesino, obrero, gente simple,
tengo el gusto de ir
(es un ejemplo)
a un banco y hablar con el administrador,
no en inglés,
no en señor,
sino decirle compañero como se dice en
español.

I have, let's see,
I have the pleasure of going,
me, a farmer, a worker, a simple man,
I have the pleasure of going
(just an example)
to a bank and speak to the manager,
not in English,
not in "Sir," but in *compañero* as we say in
Spanish.

Tengo, vamos a ver,
que siendo un negro

I have, let's see,
that being Black

⁴³ Durán, 23.

nadie me puede detener
 a la puerta de un dancing o de un bar.
 O bien en la carpeta de un hotel
 gritarme que no hay pieza,
 una mínima pieza y no una pieza colossal,
 una pequeña pieza donde yo pueda
 descansar.

Tengo, vamos a ver,
 que no hay guardia rural
 que me agarre y me encierre en un cuartel,
 ni me arranque y me arroje de mi tierra
 al medio del camino real.

Tengo que como tengo la tierra tengo el
 mar,
 no country, no jailáif,
 no tennis y no yacht,
 sino de playa en playa y ola en ola,
 gigante azul abierto democrático:
 en fin, el mar.

Tengo, vamos a ver,
 que ya aprendí a leer,
 a contar,
 tengo que ya aprendí a escribir
 y a pensar
 y a reir.
 Tengo que ya tengo
 donde trabajar
 y ganar
 lo que me tengo que comer.
 Tengo, vamos a ver,
 tengo lo que tenía que tener.

no one can stop meat the door of a dance
 hall or bar.

Or even on the rug of a hotel
 scream at me that there are no rooms,
 a small room and not a colossal one,
 a tiny room where I can rest.

I have, let's see,
 that there are no rural police
 to seize me and lock me in a precinct jail,
 or tear me from my land and cast me
 in the middle of the highway.

I have that having the land I have the sea,
 no country clubs,
 no high life,
 no tennis and no yachts,
 but, from beach to beach and wave on
 wave,
 gigantic blue open democratic:
 in short, the sea.

I have, let's see,
 that I have learned to read,
 to count,
 I have that I have learned to write,
 and to think,
 and to laugh.
 I have... that now I have
 a place to work
 and earn
 what I have to eat.
 I have, let's see,
 I have what I had to have.

(Guillén, 1964; translation, J.A. Sierra)

The hip-hop version (Track 5) of this poem makes use of the 'tengo' refrain, yet creates a theme that is completely contradictory to the message of Guillén's original work. Instead of celebrating the advantages and gains of the Revolution, Hermanos de Causa lament the negative effects brought on by the Special Period.

Tengo
por/by Hermanos de Causa

Tengo una bandera, un escudo, un tocororo	Got a flag, coat of arms, a tocororo
También una palmera, un mapa sin tesoro	Got a palm tree, a map without a treasure
Tengo aspiraciones sin tener lo que hace falta	Got aspirations without having what I need
Tengo más o menos la medida exacta	I have (more or less) the true measure
Crónica que compacta	Chronicle that tightens
Polémica que impacta	Polemics that frighten
Pasan los años y la situación sigue intacta	Years go by, things still the same
El tiempo no perdona	Time shows no mercy or shame
Pregúntale a La Habana	Just ask Havana, again
Que ahorita está en la lona	Against the ropes in pain
A nadie le importa nada	Nobody cares about jack
Tengo una raza oscura y discriminada	Discriminated 'cause I'm black
Tengo una jornada que me exige y no me da nada	Got a job with big demands and no pay
Tengo libertad entre un paréntesis de hierro	Got freedom in a parenthesis of steel
Tengo tantos derechos sin provechos que me encierro	Got so many rights I don't enjoy that I'm better off alone
Tengo lo que tengo sin tener lo que he tenido	Got what I have without having what I've had
Tienes que reflexionar y asimilar en contenido	Got to think, take in the content
Tengo una conducta fracturada por la gente	Got a demeanor filtered through so many
Tengo de elemento, tengo de conciencia	Got some funky elements, but I don't scare I'm politically aware,
Tengo el fundamento sin tener antecedentes	I got the initiation Got the foundation, got no citations,
Tengo mi talento y eso es más que suficiente	Got my talent, and that's more than good enough.

(Hermanos de Causa in Various Groups, Cuban Hip Hop All Stars – Volume 1, track no. 3; translation, Alan West-Durán)

In this piece, not only does Hermanos de Causa clearly criticize the failings of the Cuban state, but they actually reaffirm the socialist aversion to consumerism and capitalist culture. Within the same song they both critique and support the Revolution. West-Durán indicates the criticisms of material values, consumerism, and social indifference, and points out philosophical, psychological, and religious elements in the piece. He

states that, “Cuban rap’s social and political context, the education level of its creators, and the musical and linguistic ingenuity of its practitioners show that it is a deeply textured cultural ensemble of relations conversant with both Cuban and non-Cuban history, culture, and music.”⁴⁴

West-Durán also identifies another critical cultural aspect of *Tengo* – that of signifying. “Signifying refers to an improvisational ability of rhyme, rhythm, and verbal play, deeply embedded in Afrodiasporic traditions, also known as rifting, specifying, or the dozens in African-American culture, or talking nonsense in the West Indies.”⁴⁵ In addition to the importance of heritage in this idea, signifying has its own Cuban counterpart.

Cuba’s equivalent to signifying is *choteo*, an irreverent humor that mocks everything, where nothing is sacred. Like signifying, it is imbued with a democratic spirit in trying to equalize the powerful and the powerless through humor and mockery. But *choteo* expresses a powerful disenchantment with leaders and institutions, stripping away any pretense at public legitimacy. This negative aspect of *choteo* led Jorge Mañach to write his famous *Indagación del choteo* (An Inquiry on Choteo, 1928), saying that it had eroded all faith in public life in Cuba. Unlike Mañach, then one could say that Cuban raperos practice “choteo con conciencia” (“choteo with social consciousness”).⁴⁶

This unique tie to both African and Afro-Caribbean influences again emphasizes the transculturation of Cuban hip-hop’s musical style. While the actual lyrical messages are traditionally thought to have the most social power, the unique musical elements of the genre can sometimes say even more. Musical groups have been known to be censored and/or banned in Cuba for their demonstrations and controversial lyrics, but the distinct musical nuances that these groups incorporate into their art are much more subtle and

⁴⁴ Durán, 19.

⁴⁵ Durán, 15.

⁴⁶ Durán, 15-16.

harder to identify. Simply by the intentional effort of hip-hop artists to blend certain sounds, rhythms, and styles of Cuban and/or Afro-Cuban music with the essentially prefabricated format of North American hip-hop, their political-social statement is being made.

CONCLUSION

The issue of civil society in Cuba is particularly unique. The most accepted and promoted form of political and social participation is within the officially sanctioned mass organizations. Yet, the mark of a true Revolutionary is one who seeks out and addresses lacking or unaddressed societal injustices. Political protestors and citizens who do not work with and within the system are reprimanded and assigned to a social worker for rehabilitation. On the other hand, music and Cuban artistic culture (especially in the face of the disheartening conditions of the Special Period) are touted as almost the ‘new vanguards of the Revolution’.

If Revolutionary art is to be revolutionary in form as well as content, hip-hop is fulfilling both of these roles. Its highly evolved literary and musical characteristics are continually advancing the movement as one of the strongest social movements in the country. With the fall of the Soviet Union, social reality and political ideology and planning in Cuba drastically changed. Because there is no ‘model’ or Marxist literature that can describe the transition the island is facing, nor the increasingly globalized world in which it exists, new ideas and opinions arise every day. The stronghold the Cuban government once had on its society is quickly eroding and its citizens are organizing and more loudly asserting their social concerns.

Because of music's truly integral nature to every aspect of Cuban life, it is only fitting that the new era of the Revolution will be sung (or rapped). Though the hip-hop movement may first appear discordant with the ideals of the Revolution, considering the sweeping changes occurring in Cuba and the increasing globalization and democratization of the country, it can be assured that the current tensions between hip-hop and the state will soon incite more positive changes for the Cuban people.

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