

# Hip-Hop: Authenticity and Rebellion

Enrique del Risco

Writer

Cuban. Resident of the United States

As with so many other things, Cuba is the last great hope for enthusiasts of pure hip-hop in Cuba. It is the genre's Promised Land or Jurassic Park. As Sujatha Fernandes Cites: "while the distinction between underground and commercial in the United States derives from a perception of authenticity and commercial success as opposites, American rappers often accord an authenticity or underground status to their Cuban counterparts, given Cuba's image as a successful revolutionary government among sections of the African American community."<sup>1</sup>

Those who are of that mind seem to be guided by a much too literal sense of the world. Perhaps they believe that if a government proclaims itself as revolutionary, it actually devotes itself to transforming society. Or, perhaps because Cuba publishes a daily newspaper titled *Juventud Rebelde* [the Newspaper of Cuban Youth] it promotes rebelliousness among its youth. They haven't stopped to consider that the Cuban Communist Party's official newspaper of more than four decades bears the premonitory name of *Granma* [from 'Grandma'].

There are even some among those who do not appreciate the generosity of the "revolutionary government," a collection of individuals whose average age is akin to that of the slowly dying Galapagos turtles, that in Cuba they see a place untouched by commercialism, a

place that will allow this genre to avoid the contradiction of authenticity *and* money. At best, they have only a minimal idea of what authenticity is, as if a desire to become wealthier were less acceptable than just living in poverty and denouncing the situation. In considering vulgar materialism, one might say that authenticity's basic definition stems from a line of thinking, or rhetoric, more or less in keeping with the context in which it exists. For example, this definition could address the authenticity of a Cuban rapper whose work concerns itself more with racism in the United States than in his own country (which was once observed in a U.S. documentary about hip-hop in Cuba). Even so, one might have to accept that the aforementioned concern could be considered consistent with a desire to please U.S., academic tourism regarding the no less authentic anxieties of the Cuban musicians being invited up North.

Notwithstanding, many who acknowledge the Cuban regime's non-exhaustive penchant for disaster, insist that so long as money is kept out of the equation and there are reasons for protest, Cuban hip-hop is meant to (re)produce the genre's rebellious and subversive origins—which is actually expecting a great deal. The country's intolerable reality, and the absence of other forms of expression, certainly helps these rappers in their efforts to spell out what newspapers and the media

enthusiastically silence. Yet, anyone who thinks that way is ignoring that even a total absence of market does not prevent the (not just symbolic) alteration of values that take the place of money. After all, money is no more than a representation of the things that in commercial societies are equally at risk. This attitude also seems to reveal ignorance about the fact that the last twenty years of Cuban history have seen the emergence of a market that places Cuban rappers in a dilemma similar to that of their Bronx brothers, despite how ridiculous the comparison of these two markets may seem. Let us agree, then, that Cuban hip-hop is not authentic by nature or inevitably rebellious, even if the sound from every street corner seems to contradict this notion. The condescending attitude of political and cultural authorities in the early years of the rap movement did not help this issue of authenticity either. Their lack of enthusiasm for a genre of foreign and, above all, spontaneous origin, was understandable, particularly because it was so hard to control. Most already established musicians saw it as a form of disloyal competition backed by an aura of its newness that was benefiting from the airtime it was getting from transnationals.

This protectionism against imported music was not new to Cuba. Contradicting its own prohibition of foreign genres and their assimilation into native forms, which has made Cuban music one of the most influential and listened to music in the world, the Cuban regime institutionalized the traditional resistance of these new genres, which not only brought about a yet unseen level of impoverishment in Cuban music but also an increased capacity for it to absorb new influences—something that seems even more dangerous to me than the first. Notwithstanding, unlike the nearly three decades it took for Cuban rock to be tolerated by official media outlets (with rare

and noteworthy exceptions), hip-hop was officially assimilated at a much lesser rate. Well into its first decade of development, it began to receive official support. By 1999, the current Cuban Minister of Culture declared it “an authentic expression of Cuban culture.”

If the authenticity the culture minister confirmed seems suspicious, the Cuban creators of hip-hop have their own ideas about the genre’s purity. According to one of them, authentic rappers “maintain an orthodox and radical stance along the lines of the genre’s origins and distance themselves from any possibility of fusion for its commercialization.”

This sort of statement brings to mind the most successful of Cuban rap groups, the *Orishas*, whose commercial success must be attributed in good measure to a fusion of musical elements from the *son* (among other Cuban genres) and hip-hop. Yet, it might be useful to ask if the lack of authenticity of a group like the *Orishas* has more to do with the fusion of musical elements (a long-lived tradition without which it would impossible to imagine “native” genres) or its openly touristic and anachronistic representation of Cuban reality.

Facing the supposedly overwhelming appearance of reggaeton, much of the debate about Cuban rap has not yet begun. A hybrid, as its name suggests, it is hedonistic and commercial by nature. It is not concerned with any conflict between authenticity and commercialism. It has no tendency for self-reflection and does not propose returning to the purity of its origin, something it has never claimed. Neither does it seem to care about the resistance it has encountered among different political and musical entities. Its success at every level is sufficient for it to justify itself. In any event, its unlikely acquisition of a social conscience would not constitute a return to purity, which is sustained narcotrafficking support. Instead,

this would be one more step in its now unpredictable evolution.

Once it lost its aura as a new and transgressive genre—by nature—hip-hop is now going through a purging stage. The fact that reggaeton continues to block the possible commercial success of Cuban rap, it cannot help but concern itself with authenticity or the discreet commercial possibility of becoming a scholarly object of study for U.S. academics. Two facts about this: Wikipedia's English-language entry on 'Cuban hip-hop' has no Spanish equivalent, only a German-language one. Additionally, much of Wikipedia's enormous bibliography on the subject contains publications from U.S. universities. Most of those who study the genre are themselves generally creators of it who focus specifically on its wonderful rhythm. Dancing and money are a different concern.

It is no coincidence that the most impactful Cuban hip-hop groups in recent times are also those that have been most politicized. I don't mean only those who criticize different aspects of the Cuban political system but even those who support it, like Baby Lores, head of the *Clan 547*, who in his song "Creo" offers the regime and its fossilized leaders his unconditional support. The difficulties the system itself has experienced in attempting to absorb bonafide praise reveals one of the genre's most controversial virtues—a direct and unambiguous rhetoric that clashes with the "poetics" that the system has imposed for half a century. It is a culture fraught with circumlocution and ramblings that makes direct language a privilege of only the highest levels of political rhetoric.

Yet, this example, which smacks of opportunism, is not what sets the guidelines. Instead, it is the songs in opposition to the apology, the ones that are providing hip-hop with a rhetoric that pays more attention to

current circumstances, even if it is not authentic (it must be obvious by now how suspicious this term makes me). Moreover, this does not concern the genre only. Faced with duplicitous rhetoric, like an intelligent avoidance of reality, or a mere celebration of nothing (or less than that), much of current hip-hop concerns itself with freshening up the scene, calling things by the names they had prior to the last vocabulary changes. This obsession with clarity explains why a project that brought together musicians from *Los Aldeanos*, *Maikel Xtremo*, *Mano Armado*, *Escuadrón Patriota*, *MR Huevo*, *Proyecto Chardo*, *El Libre*, *Complot G*, and *Explosión Suprema*, was called *La Comisión Depuradora* [The Purifying Posse]. They resort to a direct form of poetry to create an image of real, contemporary Cuba. If not for the conviction they transmit, or because reality often exceeds it, the image that reverberates in their voices would seem to be pathetically exaggerated. Unlike early Cuban hip-hop, its lyrics no longer focus on criticizing specific phenomena like racism, internal discrimination, police brutality, corruption, new forms of inequality, growing civic violence, the exodus of Cubans, poverty, ever present repression, etc. Instead of limiting itself to pointing out these social problems, it dares to draw connections amongst them, a gesture that marks a passage from social criticism to questioning the system. This is what defines their rebelliousness: a desire to find the origin of the imbalance in a society that has been around for a while. This heresy is unpardonable for a regime like Cuba's. In this sense, Cuba's rappers have gotten much further than other artists. They have gone from mere insinuation to openly rejecting a system that time and again has failed to legitimate its rhetoric.

Essayist Roland Barthes began his text *Writing Degree Zero* in the following manner:

“Hébert [the famous Jacobin editor during the French Revolution] never began an issue of *Père Duchêne* without including some [expletives like] ‘Shit!’ or ‘Damn!’ These vulgarities meant nothing—but they were signs. To what? A revolutionary situation. This is an example of a literature whose function is no longer to communicate or express something but to make language go beyond the ordinary to be history and the position one takes in confronting it.”<sup>22</sup>

One can witness that sense of being ‘beyond language’ in “Decadencia,” a song by MC Raudel, known as *Eskuadrón Patriota* (its spelling varies). It represents a trend in recent hip-hop. “Decadencia” does not employ the brilliant vulgarity of more irreverent songs, like those by *Los Aldeanos* or *Porno para Ricardo’s* punk. Its strategy is different: to reclaim another space that is really another language. It redeploys vocabulary that is pleasing to the government’s rhetoric (e.g., revolution, resistance, nation, people, mass, justice, Cuban youth, effort, sacrifice, study, work, etc.) to actually deconstruct the very same government’s arguments.

By giving new meaning to words worn out by abuse, he seems to be uttering them for the very first time. “Decadencia” offers its listeners a naked rhetoric of impressive effects that constructs ideas of people, nation, and sovereignty at a scale human enough to take into account, for example, that *revolutions are for the people, not for those who are in power*. Going from a well defined ‘I’ to ‘We,’ the rapper does not substitute his own voice for that of the people but rather assumes it when it becomes necessary for someone to break the pact of silence. Power is not his interlocutor, as is the case in a large part of the most contestatory song of the last decade. Instead, it is the people themselves, because he identifies with

them through their shared poverty and desperation.

By appropriating a basic attribute of Cuba’s power elite—the ability to directly address the people in their own name—one gains full access to a rebellious rhetoric whose national tradition can be found in the best known of models—the *Himno de Bayamo* [the Bayamo Anthem], but without appealing to violence. By inverting the national anthem’s reasoning, it describes Cuban reality like a deaf war between an omnipotent state and a people who are subjugated to its manipulations whose greatest aspiration is to be left alone.

The song’s devastating and fleeting freedom can’t help but move us as we hear it on YouTube. More than once, my father asked me as he watches the video, “And, that was made in Cuba?” It is no wonder that so much freedom seemed incompatible to him with the song’s place of origin, because that elusive sense of our freedom in songs like “Decadencia” reveals its contradictory nature: its authenticity is much greater precisely because it was created in the most unthinkable place. It is exactly in this paradox where its authenticity lies: it is convincing precisely because it broadens the limits of the possible, giving voice to that which cannot be said. This is why Raudel is satisfied with announcing “freedom is near” because in being able to pronounce those words—by simply appropriating and employing them—they become a fact: freedom is never nearer than when it is exercised.

“Decadencia” (Excerpts)  
*Eskuadrón Patriota*

*It’s as if we were frozen in time  
As though we couldn’t care about anything  
Our people’s hope? Eskuadrón  
I believe that this message people need to hear*

With much love for all of my brothers. Fugitive, Bye - Me  
 I retreat into myself just when the need's embracin' me  
 Caught up in so much decadence that the system be disguisin'  
 My words take on their shape and latch on to my poetry  
 My spirit is flowin', my words immortalizin'  
 I'm once again transformed into the mouthpiece of a great mass  
 Headless, it is empty, and it moves in silence  
 It got tired of its cryin' and of its soul bleedin'  
 While it asks itself 'Who's the hope controlin'?'  
 And they wrench because it hurts  
 And the wound bleeds,  
 They think they're dyin'  
 They wanna scream out their pain  
 But they're failin'  
 'Cause the terror that's imposed leaves 'em nothin'  
 For justice they're askin' but never see it  
 Why do they repress those who want freedom?  
 From their offices they can't smell reality  
 They cannot understand the sadness of this country  
 Just like my people don't know how to solve it  
 You work a whole year and can't even get free  
 Given it all up to get back nothin', just total slavery  
 That's how they control ya, then say you're a conspirator  
 My message is goin' out by the second, my faith is growin'  
 Abusive laws they invent, you're at their mercy  
 Our opinions they're not hearin'  
 Forgettin' that revolutions are for the people,  
 Not for those who are in power  
 And the decadence shakes our conscience  
 And yet the people don't awaken, they're all acceptin'  
 People not believin', they just don't see it,  
 People are just dragged down by inertia  
 They'd rather put up and not the chain be breakin'  
 Decadence  
 So much destruction, so much frustration, so much sadness  
 Decadence  
 Such a need to scream, to demand, the fear our hearts is fillin'  
 Decadence  
 All of us like zombies take our brainwashin'  
 Decadence  
 We want answers for our children, the family and the generations  
 Decadence  
 They took it all from us, but not resistance



*Eskuadrón Patriota (Raudel)*

*We have strong words*  
*Decadence*  
*Brothers, get on up,*  
*There's nothin' quite as stunning as a nation, when it awakens*  
*Decadence*  
*Don't want no blood, no one to die, but lift our heads up*  
*Decadence*  
*Like Victor Jara tellin' people how near their freedom was*  
*Brother, let's raise our fists and join our hands*  
*Let's shout for freedom, let's shout for freedom, 'cause power is with the people*  
*We are the masters of our destiny*  
*Of our own freedom, strength, resistance,*  
*We can't take it anymore, we can't take it anymore*  
*In the name of all these generations*  
*In the name of Cuba's youth*  
*In the name of all who study and work,*  
*Who make an effort 'n are sacrificin' for this island*  
*No more decadence, evolution, satisfaction, happiness*  
*Let's have basic social freedom for our people*  
*Decadence*  
*No more, brothers, no more, no more*  
*Decadence*  
*Let's see the end of this story in peace and with our own*  
*Decadence*  
*Eskuadrón, Eskuadrón Me*  
*Decadence*  
*One more time, my mission, freedom is near.*

Notes:

- 1- Gosse, Van. "The African-American Press Greets the Cuban Revolution." In Lisa Brock and Digna Castañeda Fuertes (eds). *Between Race and Empire: African-Americans and Cubans before the Cuban Revolution*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998: 266-280) quoted in Fernandes, Sujatha. "Fear of a Black Nation: Local Rappers, Transnational Crossings, and State Power in Contemporary Cuba," *Anthropological Quarterly* 76: 4 (Fall 2003): 266.
- 2- Barthes, Roland. *Writing Degree Zero* (N.Y.: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977): 1.