

The Crossroads of Cuban Rap*

Yesenia Selier

Psychologist and essayist

Cuban. Resident of the United States

From the very beginning, the decade of the 1990s was tough for Cubans. The date alone acts upon the imaginary like a magnetic field, invoking new signifiers, and some old ones that now have new meanings: fall, collapse, zero option, Special Period, depenalization of the dollar, tourist market, self-employment (individual entrepreneurship), *botero* [car for hire], soy ground meat, camel bus, joint venture, etc. This etcetera should be in capital letters and is interminable.

According to music producer Pablo Herrera, blackouts, one of Cuba's new realities, seem to have been a determining factor in young dancers beginning to use their mouths as musical instruments, their hands to create rhythm, and for them to begin rapping. Today's rap veterans, like Irak, began to take their first steps right at the beginning of the nineties. By about 1993 was when the first groups appeared, above all in eastern Havana and, particularly, in Alamar. As the *Hermanos de Causa* rap: "you have always been and will forever be rap's capital." It is noteworthy that Alamar is precisely one of those places in Havana that most lacks recreational services, especially for youth. The rap movement's vitality inspired cultural promoter Rodolfo Rensoli to create the First Rap Festival in Alamar, in July 1995, under the auspices of the Hermanos

Saiz Association. This annual event has been a primary proving ground for Cuban hip-hop culture, from which emerged the Cuban Rap Movement.

Almost all the rappers are essentially young men who grew up during the so-called Special Period, a time that saw a very real shifting of social values, goals and expectations. Dollarization, keenly increasing consumer interests, and a perceptible depreciation of work and real wages are all things that modified the country's subjective and objective panorama. According to scholars of our national identity, Cubans emphatically distinguish between two states of being: "what we are like and how we are." This is their defensive strategy against an accumulation of attitudes that are new, unprecedented, and incompatible with traditional representations of Cubans. With the arrival of the crisis, the problems of the 1980s took on new hues. This period saw the reproduction of social classes and a natural halt in the social mobility of the lowest strata, as their reduced presence in and access to higher education dramatically demonstrated.¹ The urgent need for economic solvency led to the development of a culture of immediacy. The restructuring of the emerging economy, with its dire circumstances, and individual entrepreneurship, created a new ethos that decreased

the prestige of highly regarded professions and jobs. The final contributing factors were the unencumbered circulation of easily convertible currency and family remittances from abroad. These reconfigured Cuba's social classes and established groups that enjoy a high concentration of economic resources (which also control the most advantageous jobs, in this regard, because this emerging economic sector controls most foreign remittances) and those that don't.² These processes have brought about social heterogeneity in Cuba. Many are worried about new, very specific realities, some of which seem to multiply and complicate everyday problems. Different economic, religious, and racial attitudes: educational levels; socially binding attitudes, with their diverse interests, consumption patterns, opinions, and preferences are weaving heterogeneity into our social fabric and also occupying spaces that heretofore were highly institutionalized.³ The Cuban rap movement is a very organic element in this melting pot of transformations, newly emerging subjects, and new social actors. It is a generational modality for participating in society's debates, taking a musical genre as a form of expression. There are diverse trends and styles within the movement, with some more commercialized projects, which are *more decaffeinated*, as Borges Triana would call them. These have been most successful in getting playtime on the country's airwaves. This type of rap is entirely different from the kind one might find in places like the Parque Almendares or La Madriguera. Here one finds a kind of rap that is much more representative of most Cuban rap artists. Their lyrics display a high degree of concern over and reflection about ethical, aesthetic, and social problems. These songs serve as a conduit for talking about many contradictions in current Cuban daily life, and other critical sociocultural phenomena like *machismo* and racism. The follow-

ing excerpt from "Victima" [Victim] by Randy Acosta, is a good example of how rap serves as a conduit for contemporary Cuban social debate:

*Victims of money, that willfully manipulates us,
Now dollars are thinking, and people circulate...*

In reality, we are all victims

*It all depends on time, on when where and how
Victims of television, of the radio, of the press,
I am a victim too, but I don't care what they think.*

Victims of not wasting energy or shame

Victims of too much work and not enough pay.

One of the most crucial aspects of the Cuban rap movement is its racial composition. The Hermanos Saíz Association reports that barely 5% of rappers are white, the rest being black and *mestizo*.

What are the variables that led to blacks being highly represented in this movement? Scholars believe that the galvanizing criterion for consumers and followers of hip-hop is not racial but generational. Outside the contours of the United States, ethically conscious groups at the rock bottom of the social pyramid have distinguished themselves by recreating the commercial image of U.S. rap, of the consumer values it promotes, to send out an empowering message to subjects and classes. Evidence of this can be found in the impact it has had on Brazilian *favela* dwellers, Turkish guest workers in Germany, and African immigrants in France. There is a sense of head-on collision in this transnational process, against historical constructions of race and miscegenation, particularly regarding the "advantages" of *mestizos* in South Africa or Brazil.⁴ The racially defined nature of many of those who follow rap is obvious in Cuban hip-hop culture, and shapes the notably racial sense of

its rhetoric, as the following excerpt from the duo *Los Paisanos*, and their rap “De veinte mil maneras” [In twenty thousand ways], shows:

*Hip-hop is all of us together like an iron fist
And basically Hip-hop means black
And no to racism, or yes, however you want it
Hip-hop is for my peeps in 20 thousand ways
Just like they say that
Lawn tennis is a sport for whites
Ashé e, Ashé e, Hip-hop forever,
Ashé e, Ashé e, Hip-hop, on to victory, always
Ashé e, Ashé e, Hip-hop, twenty thousand ways,
Ashé e, Ashé e, Hip-hop until I die.*

To question the race problem is organically linked to the structural changes that have occurred in Cuban society, as well as to growing perceptions about these changes and their racial implications. For example, in a study in 2000 about the racial identity of blacks in Havana, 87.5% of those surveyed believed that their status was worse than that of whites, 94% believed there was racial discrimination, and 81% shared their personal experiences with it.⁵ After the egalitarian ideals of our long revolutionary process were shattered, daily reality and experiences were enough to break the taboo on talking about these problems.

Even the social mobility of the revolution's first decades was not able to break the connection between class and race that was so intrinsic in much of Cuba's development as a nation. Havana neighborhoods like Alamar, El Cotorro, Centro Habana, and Santos Suárez are excellent breeding grounds for the rap movement. These are marginal areas or ghettos chronically lacking sufficient housing for the size of their populations, with few general and recreational service networks. The crisis (of the nineties) and the polarization of resources, in particular, made an obvious impact on racial



Los Paisanos

stratification. The following variation on Nicolás Guillén's famous poem “Tengo” [I Have] by *Hermanos de Causa* reveals some reflections on the race issue:

*I have a dark and discriminated race
I have a job that makes demands of me and
gives nothing
I have so many things that I can't even touch
them
I have facilities I can't even enter
I have freedom within iron parentheses
I have so many rights I can't exercise I lock
myself up
I have what I have without having what I've had
I have to reflect on and assimilate the content
I have behavior that has been shattered by people
I'm made of substance, I have a conscience
I have a foundation with many antecedents
I have my talent and that is more than enough*

That is how the deep mutations that have taken place in Cuban society are framed, seen from the perspective of common citizens, particularly blacks: it signals their place within a framework of increasing social and economic differentiation.

Recent years have seen a discussion of the social history of blacks in Cuba gain ground. Heretofore, it was minimized or omitted from our national narrative, particularly in schoolbooks. Cuban and foreign scholars are shedding new light on the memory of this social group, and on its role in the creation of Cuba. Cuban rap socializes and translates many of these ideas into the language of contemporary youth. It also generates new ideas and questions, as well as new dialogues with the past, and the present, and communication between them both, as the following excerpt from the duo *Obsesión*'s "Drume Negrita" [Go to Sleep My Little [Black] Girl] illustrates:

*The fury within my throat shoots off fireworks
Since it found out that it too deserves leading
roles,*

*The archipelago gives me more pain than I need
To be who I am...*

*Plunged in this blackness I ask, who are you to
question my origin?*

*Who are you to question my decency, my
integrity and appearance?*

*Who are you to doubt my ability and deny my
abundant virtues?*

*It turns out that suddenly a load of qualities
befell my race,*

*And many went out, en masse, to all pass a
course on how not to be racist.*

*They graduated with honors and celebrations
and to this day,*

*They remain hidden within the phrase: ALL
HUMAN BEINGS ARE EQUAL*

*Dear so-and-so, if white hands and black hands
are not the same,*

Consider yourself invited to my dark concert.

Listen to this, Nicolás!

*I am rapping to the rhythm of my nap, my flat
nose, my big lips, my genealogical tree,*

*My history, my customs, my religion and way of
thinking.*



*I know the tribunal is observing me, but I too
am watching it.*

*My grandfather told me: "Son, you can't hesi-
tate when it's time to deactivate bombs."*

*That's why I willfully dance conga in front of
the whole damn jury,*

Because I know my motives have prevailed.

*I have witnesses that give their blood to what I
say,*

Now, bring on the sentence!

"Drume negrita" reveals the surprise felt by these youth upon coming face to face with their social history, and the impact it has had on their self-esteem in a context that implicitly or explicitly denies their aesthetic and cognitive equality. It also reveals the counter-ideological weight of the revolution, which made expressions of racism invisible without making them disappear. *Obsesión* acknowledges how justified denouncement is, despite the fact current reality cannot understand this.

The group *Anónimo Consejo* [Anonymous Council], with its "Homenaje al Partido Independiente de Color" [Tribute to the Independent Party of Color], offers yet another example of this sort of dialogue and resonance with history that makes explicit claims against this denial of and refusal to teach historical reality, particularly as it concerns the

history of this black Cuban group: a massacre of between 3,000 and 8,000 blacks and *mestizos* in 1912:

*After Independence, they were thrown in a heap
Independent Party of Color
Men women children, La Maya, Holguín, Santa Clara
Killing, massacre, unarmed in combat, who
were hidden from History
The memory of them attacks once again, today,
Free Cuba!
I rely on what it reveals to say what needs to be said
Pedro Ivonet, not in marble, or in bronze
In our hearts and minds since then, 1912.*

Religious consciousness also seems linked to racial identity; it can be sensed in the musicality of rap, through its chants, prayers, concepts, and drums from the arsenal of Afro-Cuban culture. The following lyric by *Anónimo Consejo*, for example, celebrates the depenalization of religious expression while trying to rescue the figure of the maroon, a recurring theme in the lyrics Cuban rappers, as well as other symbols associated with slavery, like shackles. All the while, this collection of things is an invitation to bring back cultural, religious and aesthetic resistance:

Chorus

*Scrublands and machetes, we ain't slaves no more;
Scrublands and machetes, they ain't no more shackles
The Iyaloshas are headed for the hills; The Babaloshas are headed for the hills*

Soloist

*Maroon out in the scrubland, fighting so you can live
Don't let the shackles suffocate your energy
What's wrong, don't hold back, get goin'*

*The dogs are catchin' up, this is a lifelong struggle
Your home is in the scrublands, your nose, your nap
And for the cruel one who snatches things away from me
My blessing and my thanks
Get your hide to the palenque, the stocks the shackles,
No more slaves, scrubland and machete.*

Despite the fact the rap movement is a mostly male participatory space, the quality of the lyrics written by women is outstanding. Their rhetoric covers many themes ranging from traditional topics concerning Cuban women to proposals that imply a complete commitment to renewing women's place in society, as the following excerpt from rapper Magia MC's "Un montón de cosas" [A Bunch of Things], demonstrates:

*Everyone knows that I'm not just any girl
This is for sure 'cause of my dark brown skin
I'm a white flag wrapped in the sound of Rap for the warriors
Got no man, I'm single. Don't need no Clan or gangsters
Even Malanga found out how things are goin' down
And if there's a duel, it ain't just among the gents
I'm here too, doin' my part, follow me. We're on our way up, gangsta girls,
You gotta count me in for this party
Fresh and alert with Orishas behind my door
Makin' a direct attack, no shit
This is courage and color first, no dope
Bustin' what I'm bustin'.
Africa pulsing when I color my voice
White sheets hang from my balcony
But my condition is black in search of others.*



Las Krudas

One can variously perceive a sense of reaffirmation, first within the rapper movement itself, where there are few women, and then within the broader context of black women, and as representatives of an alternative culture.

The trio *Las Krudas* raps another kind of valuable rhetoric. In their song “Iroko,” they pray to a deity of the Lucumi culture that is represented by a Ceiba tree. Yet, they employ the grandeur and frondosity of the Ceiba as an analogy for the female condition, because of its ability to endure and flourish despite difficulties. Through their rhetorical articulation of different kinds of cultural resistance, they are calling for humanity to grow, and for the freedom of all women:

*Ta ni kinche iworo: Tough resurgence, is urgent
I am black Kruda, ripened fruit
Root of my feelings, trunk of my thinking
My great fortitude is natural, my beauty, unbelievable
Mama, watch over my creations
Stir my emotions, true Ceiba of my black relations
Let my big mouth speak freely: Iroko is born,
grows
Trembles, night or day
Whispering melody: active female freedom*

*Tough tradition, black female Iroko
Revolution
Long live Kruda Africa
Vibrate to the beat of the drum
Blooming beaten by the sun. Peace.*

Rap is often discussed as a diffuse combination of voices that jumbles together commercial rappers and reggaetoners who have managed to get beyond isolating limits and forcefully made it into the mainstream media. Island followers of this music, and its creators, see those who infuse their songs with the stuff of daily Cuban life as “real.” They see as essential an ethical commitment to straight out rhyming about the truths being experienced by society. In this category are those rappers who have made Cuban rap have so far a reach, because it is an informal conduit for expressing and debating the most pressing problems within Cuban society.

The work of real Cuban rappers functions within a social order and framework that has brainwashed the country’s citizens into believing that the State gives them everything and solves all their problems, and that those that persist, or are of lesser importance, or have no solution, are caused by the empire’s blockade. In any event, reforms in Cuba come about vertically, from the top down, but the voices mentioned in this article are the claims and demands of “the underdogs.” The appropriateness of their words explicitly or implicitly comes from their use of a tremendous, symbolic arsenal of rhymes that include the language of the streets, of the marginalized, to make overt their breach of cultural norms, while also disrupting political consensus.

Like never before, this movement is pitching its collective rhetoric, born from within its subjective and experiential context, to the highest levels of society. It has also simultaneously created a platform for the individual and

collective affirmation of people who feel marginalized in the current situation: women, homosexuals, people of color, and those belonging to the poorest classes. They have

been acknowledging, identifying, and guiding their followers to become aware of and take responsibility for their social environment and its problems.

*This research was made possible by a 2003 CLASCO-ASDI "Poder y nuevas experiencias democráticas en América Latina y el Caribe" [Power and New Democratic Experiences in Latin America and the Caribbean] grant.

Notes:

- 1- Perera, Marisela. "Sobre la subjetividad cotidiana." *Primer Taller Cubano acerca de las Implicaciones Filosóficas, Epistemológicas y Metodológicas de la Teoría de la Complejidad* (La Habana: Centro Juan Marinello, 2003).
- 2- Rodríguez, Pablo et al. "Relaciones raciales en la esfera laboral." Research report. (La Habana: Centro de Antropología, 1999).
- 3- Martínez Heredia, Fernando. *El corrimiento hacia el rojo* (La Habana: Letras Cubanas, 2001): 53.
- 4- Perry, Marc. "Global Hip Hop and the Transnational Politics of Black Difference." Manuscript. Austin: University of Texas Department of Anthropology (2003).
- 5- Selier, Yesenia and Penélope Hernández. *De la Negritud y otros demonios: estudio de identidad racial en negros habaneros, afiliados y no afiliados a grupos culturales de ascendencia africana*. Undergraduate Thesis. La Habana: Facultad de Psicología (2000). By the same authors, also see "Identidad racial de 'gente sin historia,'" in *Caminos* 24-25 (2002): 84-90.

To better understand Cuban hip-hop:

- Acosta, Leonardo. "Interinfluencias y confluencias en la música popular de Cuba y de los Estados Unidos," in *Culturas encontradas: Cuba y los Estados Unidos* (La Habana: Centro Juan Marinello, 2001).
- Basso, Alexandra. "¿Rap por amor al arte?" in *El Caimán Barbudo* (2001): 303.
- Cordero, Tatiana. "Incitación al reto: una mirada sociopsicológica al fenómeno del rap en Cuba," *Revista de Hip Hop Cubana Movimiento* (2003).
- Fernández, Ariel. "Rap Cubano, ¿poesía urbana o la nueva trova de los noventa?" in *El Caimán Barbudo* (2000): 296.
- Hip hop.cu* (Boletín del Festival de Rap).
- Perry Marc D. "El rap en Cuba: una nueva expresión de la cultura e identidad afrocubana," in *Coloquio de Teóricos de Rap* (La Habana, 2002).
- West-Durán, Alan: *Rap's diasporic dialogues: Cuba's redefinition of blackness* [Diálogos de los raps en diáspora: redefinición de la negritud en Cuba], Ponencia al Coloquio Teórico del Festival de Rap Habana *Hip-Hop*, 2003.