

Conflict and Transgression: Feminist Discourse in Cuban Hip-Hop

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Cuban hip-hop culture has seen the rise of a particularly novel trend, one that is not foreign to the rap phenomenon within the island, or any less distanced from national issues. I am referring to the emergence of a feminist discourse that continues to astound and draw attention as an artistic product created by black, young women. One can appreciate this sense in the following excerpt¹ from las *Las Krudas*:

*You are beautiful as you are, flowering ebony,
black light*

*You are beautiful as you are, curves are not your
only virtue*

*You are beautiful as you are, intelligence is your
virtue.*

An examination of the evolution of how women have been presented in Cuban music reveals that its rhetoric has been essentially masculine, a reflection of the nineteenth-century's heterosexual, white, male's position, despite the fact that women have occupied a place of distinction in Cuban music as well. Irrespective of important, twentieth-century figures like Ernestina Lecuona, María Teresa Vera, and Isolina Carrillo, the regular lack of a feminine and particularly racial identity in this music, glares by its absence. Predominant, hegemonic rhetoric has impacted musical com-

position: this is a reflection of the generalized pattern of our collective consciousness. A *history-can't-fool-me-anymore* attitude now counters this rhetoric, as Yudicet sings in the *Alzar la voz* [Raise your Voice] album:

*You can't talk about peace or war
Without mentioning my ovaries
Because my ovaries were the answer.*

The disdain of dominant, power circles, and their desire to conceal things, made invisible the conflicts black women faced in a society that was founded upon a twentieth-century legacy of slavery's nineteenth-century violence. If Cuba's racial discrimination took care of putting blacks and *mestizos* at the very center of social contingencies, it became incumbent upon black and *mestizo* women to bear the greatest and most harmful of exclusionary tactics and sophisticated insults. Magia López makes this emancipatory perspective more than clear:

*As always, I'm here!
And a song is not enough
There are so many things yet to say.
I bought my utopias
By selling my thinking
And today my twenty-four hours
Have their reason for being.*

A white, male, heterosexual minority with homophobic and misogynistic tendencies imposed its view of black and *mestiza* women, thus constructing a denigrating, stereotyped image of them that threatened morality and “proper behavior,” and generated violence, scandal, sexual promiscuity, and marginalization. Unlike the roles assigned to white women, who were frequently cloistered at home and responsible for the education of their children, the image that was cast of black women focused on the sexuality of their bodies, and on them as subjects and objects of the passion of dominant white males.

Recent years have brought about a kind of rhetoric about black women produced by young, black and *mestiza* rappers. The importance of what they have to say is that it goes beyond any gender-based limits. It demands to be acknowledged within its own place within new Cuban music:

*I'll not leave the road for a path
In my struggle I'll never give up
Even if friends disappoint me
I'll rise up through my own effort
Come what may.*
(Dayana, from the *Amazona* group.)

It should not surprise us that the hip-hop movement contains overt references to still existing racial discrimination, and it is no less true that it is men who create this discourse. hip-hop offered young men an opportunity to display their transgressive and dialogical rhetoric about our society's problems. Yet, that conflictive nature was not unknown in female hip hop either. Black women rappers have a very special way of speaking out against violence in all its forms: domestic, social, sexual, etc.

The rhetoric of these black women breaks down the barriers that attempt to hide them, silence them, and domesticate them. Raps by *La Dama*, *Las Krudas*, *Unión Perfecta*, *Magia López*, *Amazona*, the *Omega* duo, and other rappers, are extremely personal expressions of *barrio* voices that use orality as a vehicle by which to claim their place in society.

This new, fresh, informal, and transgressive rhetoric is evidenced in its critical language, which totally disregards patriarchal models, and also because of its positive reevaluation of black feminine identity, which discards the collective imaginary's prevailing, conformist perspective. One little example can be found in the following fragment from the song “High demand,” in which Yanelis (Nono), from the group *Omega Q-light*, raps:

*Who told you I can't be an MC?
Who told you that I can't do graffiti?
Who told you that I can't be a DJ?
Who told you that I can't be Bgirls?
I am not a vase, bastard.*

From the perspective of Cuban women today, the voices of black, female rappers stand out because they tackle racial discrimination as well as patriarchal oppression at the heart of Cuban family and society. They also defend sexual diversity and facing everyday life's difficulties in a society that is essentially *machista*.

Note:

1- All the song excerpts presented in this article were borrowed from lyrics that were compiled and published in the journal *Movimiento 7* (Cuban Rap Agency).