

Las Krudas: Those Quasi-Paradigmatic Black Cuban Rappers

María I. Faguaga Iglesias
 Anthropologist and historian
 Havana, Cuba

*Against evil we continue, unsubmitive, on our way
 respecting each land not just where we were born...*

*against the system's power I rebel,
 against the lack of life I rebel,
 against all injustice I rebel,
 I rebel, I rebel!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
 Olivia Prendes, "I Rebel"
 Krudas Cubensi*

Emergence on the scene

They are a captivating combination of our most obstinately Cuban east and west. Two women who harmonize their differences to show us that it is possible for diversity to be lived and expressed as wealth. Two Cuban women for whom this island's physical space, which in not a few metaphors written by its greatest poets—one white, the other black—insists on repeating itself or, like a cork, floating. Yes, Cuba got too small for them and they emigrated, just like so many of their female compatriots throughout history did, once they were allowed to on their own. Two black, Cuban, female artists who turned the nature of their sex into a stage for freedom. They have made their lives as women a form of ac-

tive militancy on behalf of sexual diversity, and their blackness a formidable stronghold of struggle for equality in our ethno-racial diversity.

Odaymara Cuesta and Olivia (Pelusa) Prendes are officially known as *Las Krudas Cubensi* or, to their serious followers and fans, just *Las Krudas*, nothing more, because they have become quasi-paradigmatic exponents of Cuban hip-hop culture. Creators of a deliciously digestible art that delights the senses of those who advocate for the respectful and inclusive acknowledgment of diversity. They are cultivators of a useful art for those of us who support the need for horizontality in all spaces where human life unfolds; of an efficient art for those who do not yet have that degree of consciousness, but are prepared to listen carefully to alternative discussions of the matter.

Opening other doors

Leaving one's homeland does not necessarily and irremediably mean forgetting it; one can need it more from a distance. Thus, national and local identity is established in the migrant subject's multiple identities. He or she may have it close at hand; it may also



Las Krudas

contain a great deal of the place of origin, even at a geographic distance.

Pelusa has experience with this; she is the woman from Guantanamo who is now experiencing her second, great migration: one that for centuries has taken Cubans to its neighbor to the north, to the United States that Martí described to us as “disheveled and brutal,” where so many of us find a place and acceptance, friends and family, community, hope for economic improvement, and other kinds of personal fulfillment.

Odaymara’s interventions are practical and resolute: “If they won’t open the door to me in my own home, then I’ll go knocking on others.” This is an affirmation that invokes us “to win out over difficulty,”¹ like in the old and contemporary spirituals of our grandmothers, mothers, of our own, and those of our daughters. When they understood that too many doors were closed to them in their homeland, that that gig stilt walking in the capital’s historic district was over for them, that Cuban rap was losing its countercultural, “revolutionary and sharp” edge, that it was dying “because it didn’t sell” (Olivia), they took it upon themselves to persist in their resistance, and try to resist other ways, too.

Yet, they, once in a while, like so many other emigrants, go back home. We find ourselves here, at the port, in the popular and populous San Isidro neighborhood of Havana that is the birthplace of black Cuban artists of worth and renown. It is the night before their departure to their new and distant home. They are tense, nervous, want to extend their stay, and make the most, when possible, of their last Havana night—their last night in Cuba. They had agreed to the interview; they, themselves, set the date, time and place. The clock was ticking. After presentations of and introductions to each of them,

the planned interview turns into a friendly chat by black Cuban women who can identify with each other on certain, essential points of their existence. Finally, the roles get reversed, and Pelusa assumes that the interviewer has become the interviewee: all three agree. That was the beginning of a night during which they momentarily decided to leave aside words and move their bodies: they would go out and dance, by way of a goodbye.

Breaking molds

In breaking the molds of a patriarchal and *machista* society not devoid of misogyny, these and other young women erupted on the island’s ninety year-old music scene not to bemoan their suffering or cloy peoples’ ears with melodious tones, or to request condescendence, or seduce them with their bodies’ rhythmic and sensual movements.

These young, female exponents of hip-hop culture—rappers—as they are known, mostly black and from marginalized neighborhoods, almost all lack university or academic training. They arrived on the scene to unplug ears and stimulate neurons, by singing about the truth of Cuban women forced to remain in their subalternity. This a truth—denied, hidden, distorted—that political and academic speeches had made commonplace till then, but that all the State actions and governmental social organizations had not eliminated.

They spoke to us about their frustrations and desires; about anti-black, racial discrimination as a palpable reality in today’s Cuban society; about how healthy *machismo* was throughout their society and about its manifestations by creators of the very same musical genre, and in their very own cultural and racial space. They unabashedly faced the reality of prostitution and spoke of single

motherhood; of their terrible lives in so many crumbling tenement houses and hovels. They rapped about the limitless difficulties of their everyday lives; their pride for what they are, and spoke about the inspiration they had found in their Afro-religious practices for dealing with so much hardship, and committing themselves to the challenge of keeping up the struggle for equity.

No other musicalized, social chronicle has so shaken the island's cultural panorama. Even if this musical style has not permeated our entire society, it has reached every corner of the island.

First, they created a scandal; then they began to worry a bit. Soon music would be institutionalized, as a counterattack on political culture. The rappers disoriented those who spied on them. They did not use traditional political rhetoric, but were political—in their own way. They narrated how they were forced to keep living their lives and openly affirming how they were discriminated against because of it. They and their male, musical counterparts were rebuking a society that was going through a revolution. Yet, these rappers, among them Odaymara and Olivia, *Las Krudas*, revealed their open wounds as young black women condemned to marginalized neighborhoods, all the while assuming a confident and prideful, Afro-inspired aesthetic that included going natural with their hair. What had happened with the promised opportunities and equality? Where were they? What were their limits? Why? The truths they spoke were as moving as the honesty and mix of pain and anger with which they spoke them.

Las Krudas were part of the vanguard's generational drive forward, and of counter-cultural resistance. Their rhetoric is not at all indulgent with hegemony, and proclaims with sincerity the imposed misfortunes and social

impediments to their fulfillment, and that of their kind. They publicly declared they were lesbians; highlighted the authenticity of the black beauty without allowing themselves to be trapped by socially forced attempts at whitening; used African *batá* drums for accompaniment; and rebelled against mediocrity and forced institutionalization, advocating for independence in keeping creative control over their work. They intellectually, emotionally and artistically grew, and knew themselves to be feminists, which they fearlessly proclaimed. They opened up to the world and began to receive from it exactly what they needed. They learned to face accusations and distortions about the absoluteness of their positions.

In Olivia and Odaymara, everything seems to point to the coherence of lives that seem aggressive, contradictory, chaotic...and *strange* to others, which is what those who have publicly assumed their notorious differences are called here by those who don't always understand them. Thus, they are made polemical, despite the lucid and assured way in which they have assumed their social roles, and the clarity of their solid positioning. This may be the price that forces them to pay for breaking molds and freeing themselves from enduring, malicious stereotypes.

*Rap and Reggaeton: two languages;
two worldviews contrasted in one nation*

In exercising their most basic citizens' rights, *Las Krudas* refuse to allow themselves to be alienated by the rhetoric of anyone unaware of the realities through which they have lived, or still live. Wherever they go, they make their critical voices heard. One of their most recent texts says: "Dissident/Anywhere you find me/I am my own president." They are never indulgent with those in power or the sta-

tus quo. Their words are always judgmental, and invariably question reality. They always question the arbitrary nature of any kind of intransigent and outrageous established regulation, because they are convinced that it is “time to change the very system.”²

These two, black, Cuban women show themselves to be absorbed in their earned freedoms, but concerned by the patriarchal enslavement that other women endure. This despite the fact they are out in the world, true to their essence, and actively participating in its construction, as it emerges from the age-old ruins of arbitrariness. It is a world that has not progressed enough towards its expansion and consolidation, but is trying to do so little by little. At this time, they are leaving Cuba while concerned about the pseudo-artistic propagation of models that restrict women’s roles in favor of traditional male sexuality. This is why they criticize the worst of reggaeton, whose lyrics and videos denigrate women.

In her analysis of what has happened in that genre in contemporary Cuba, Olivia comparatively states that “it is also the case that hip-hop is being displaced by more sexually attractive genres, internationally.” What is precisely at play here is conscience versus economics, plain and simple, she says, arguing that this genre’s ability to draw the largest amount of money also spreads “stupidity,” because it is far more promoted when compared to other musical genres.

They arrive home and compare what is happening artistically in 2000 with what happened in the nineties. They cannot be silent about this; they are alarmed by what they see. The time of rap was a time for using words “to fight, to convince” (Odaymara), because “rap is protest.” With this focus and motivation—mixing into its poetry topics

like raciality and musical accompaniment—it came to represent “an infallible weapon for defending the topic of race, gender, class” and “greatly supported a great deal of the conscientious thinking of the (young) generation at the time” (Olivia).

They acknowledge that despite their cultural, social and political importance, “almost no one managed to make a living with that music.” Once again, historical, operative *machismo* began to gain ground in the lyrics that accompanied a large part of Cuban music, even *son* and *timba*. This, together with the economy’s asymmetries, made reggaeton attractive for many Cuban artists; so many rappers gravitated towards its way of making and doing. They understand that reggaeton, which is controversial, “has economically saved various generations” (Odaymara).

Women, youth, and using music as a way to approach generational problems: some of the topics in which they are interested

Odaymara adds that this music’s excessive dissemination in Cuba is closely linked to State centralization. In her dismay, she reiterates that the most popular reggaeton lyrics in Cuba are the worst; they are generally filled with vulgarity. The violence expressed in that language is contradictory, for example, to the revolution’s literacy campaign. This is why Odaymara clarifies that reggaeton “has served as an escape valve for the reality that this is a hypocritical society that continues to sell women,” and that “this is a twist to any political rhetoric kept up until now.” The thing is that those lyrics contain an “unmasking of everything Cuban society is, in reality” and that is “maintained on our [feminine] bodies” (Olivia).

The crystal clear sobriety of their rhetoric is concomitant with the directness with which they approach each subject and offer their arguments. Nothing seems foreign to them. It seems there is nothing they know that is beyond their interest. They are always rigorous, but also measured. There is energy and strength in their words, no cruelty or bitterness, but conviction and confidence. They are 'not down with' coldness. Instead, they are all about passion, although it seems a bit distant in Odaymara's performances. It is more 'out there' in Olivia, who started out studying and practicing acting.

Their obstinate concern for social problems leads them to carefully examine Cuban youth. Of this, Olivia says: "Conscientious Cuban music has educated a generation that wanted to be educated." Running the risk of generalizing, she adds, perhaps through a quick study, and from a very definite and committed position as a social subject speaking from a multiple identity: "The new generation is escaping," moving "towards metrosexuality, desperate sex, and whitening."

Notwithstanding, she considers that this attitude offers an efficiency that "unmasked reality for a generation aware of the fact that it has wanted to question everything," forcing it to ask itself: "I? What will I achieve?" or "My generation? What has so much sorrow gotten it?" In an honest exercise of introspection—one it may have already undergone, even on its own—it answers its own questions: what we got was "pain, division, sorrow," and does not stop to think that such terrible results were caused by factors outside their generation. The generational challenge leads it to want "to see a reappropriation of that rhetoric (that of male and female rappers who are their contemporaries, of "conscience" artists of any gender) by anyone with a conscience."

It shows confidence upon affirming that "it is up to young women to do something more constructive with reggeaton."

Both of these artists seem intensely agitated by the increased interest in whitening so present in younger generations that have been purposely (mis)educated by the truly anti-black, racial stereotypes commonly projected in the national media. They are pained and alarmed by the contradictory propagation of those stereotypes, generated as patterns of behavior that should not exist in a sociopolitical regime of equality and benefits for traditionally excluded population groups, among which blacks have been counted since the violent, modern origins that colonialist Europe imposed on America.

Gender as militancy

As confessed lesbians, Odaymara and Olivia embody the construction of their gender with naturalness, individual freedom and active political militancy. They did so to the degree it was possible in their own country, and now do it worldwide. In order to not get trapped by the will of others, they have economic autonomy, the only way to be totally responsible for their actions. For themselves, they prefer being "banished, exiled, but never mistreated."³ As one of them said, "if they don't want to open the door for me in my own home, I'll go knocking on other doors."

That's exactly what they did. This allowed them to come into contact with the world of sexual diversity beyond the island's shores. Ever since they established themselves outside of Cuba, they split their time between musical artistic creation, performance, plastic arts, and the selling of their art, which includes performances at diametrically different places, Internet sales, updating their daily

blog, and active participation in feminist and sexual diversity forums.

They don't believe that individual autonomy and social integration are incompatible, and promote a need for establishing alliances and achieving unity to make real any utopia. They consider it an advantage to have carefully seen and participated in the heterogeneity of the global, lesbian-feminist movement that reaches out to the poor, and are also negatively impressed by the position taken by Latin American, lesbian feminists who oppose the presence in their rank and file of transgendered people, or display classically elitist tendencies.

They believe in the need, significance and meaning of feminist leadership and equally confide in the use of new technologies that allow real-time connections between the most distant places on earth, making visible problems and conflicts that capture the interest of Olivia and Odaymara. Technology operates as a source for their professional and civic actions, even if it often reduces the complexity of situations, issues, problems, facts and opinions. They are connected to the Afro-Caribbean Network and likeminded, similar organizations in Guatemala, El Salvador, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Haiti, Belize, Colombia and the United States. They have taken their art and civic actions to many of these countries. They also remain open to taking them wherever they are invited.

In their country, despite their many admirers and followers of any generation and gender affiliation, *Las Krudas* are seen as polemical. This might be the price exacted from them for showing themselves to be who and what they are, for revolutionarily transgressing against a deceptive and small-minded patriarchal order. In its own time, and structurally, this power—under the protection of

arbitrary laws—condemned a difference in sexual and religious preference. It still condemns political difference and even discrepancy.

For those whose compatriots still think and express themselves in that fashion—in their homeland—whether or not they do it fraudulently or puritanically, Pelusa's accentuated, feminine appearance, and the notoriety of the tattoos on Odaymara's black skin, can end up being violently transgressive of what others—in their ignorance—think lesbianism is, and what they consider socially correct, tolerable and allowable. Yet, there is nothing unusual about women who have already thought about all of this—parodying another mulatto from Santiago who also breaks molds, aesthetically. They are known for their consciousness, performance planning and nature; these all work together because they are integral to the women they essentially are now. Theirs is a continuity that through its more or less superficial discontinuities—regarding form more than content—has led them down a road that allows them to explore, grow and improve artistically and humanly, and go from *La Comarca del Rap* [The Rap Zone] (1996) to creating *Las Krudas Cubensi* (2000) as a professional trio currently operating as a duo.

Not posing, but rather with aesthetic reserve, Pelusa does not allow herself to be photographed the night of our chat, because she does not have on sufficient makeup, and is not adequately dressed to be recorded in images. Yet, she helps out by offering iconographic support from *Las Krudas'* personal archive, which made her co-interviewee quite happy.

Odaymara goes into minutiae about the meaning of her many tattoos—"protections"—that ends up being considered the mystical, syncretic decoration of a

voluminous body that has become a receptacle for her most intimate beliefs. Signs of the Oriental Ying and Yang, African cowries, sharks, elephants, hibiscus flowers, and others signs, converge in perfect communion with buildings from geographic locations to which they have been, and now form part of their affective memory. Her body serves as an artistic canvas, as a mural that wants to reveal parts of her history and feelings towards those of us who are carefully looking. It is all a visual homage to the memory of the multiplicity of her inherited identities, and the incorporation of others.

Odaymara and Olivia—*Las Krudas*—are women from this time; from other, earlier ones; and those yet to come. Women who resist via the firm dynamism of their thought and actions; women in transit towards that symmetrical future that will surprise us, that they and others—women and men—miraculously allow us to see now, at least in them, their rhetoric, and in their professional creation and civic militancy. They are women who are like barometers and clocks, announcers of the temperature of the future harmony of a time that will someday happen to us. They leave nothing to chance. Instead, they intervene by helping that chance become a reality; they program their words and deeds with geometrical precision, not succumbing to inertia. This is why the apprehension they can still inspire in some of their compatriots astonishes them.

In their baggage, now ready to return to their chosen home, now goes an unfortunately unprecedented book about Cuba. It is titled *Afrocubanas* (2011) and is a compilation of articles and essays by more than thirty black Cuban writers from the end of the nineteenth till the present time. *Las Krudas*, who have emphatically rapped for all the men and women willing to hear them, clarifying for them

that “the Cuban women/doesn’t only know how to move in bed,”⁴ mention this book with pride, considering it an achievement for their black, Cuban, female compatriots—and for them. As they are about to depart, they expect more to come from these writers. They urge their visitor to prepare a book “about topics having to do with us,” black, Cuban women, since “there is so much to say! So much to say!”

After the lively chat, when we are saying goodbye, we arranged for a next meeting, soon; a virtual one. Anxious and insistent upon enjoying what is theirs, they go out to enjoy their last night of play in Havana... till their next personal return to a country whose children are desperately awaiting for it to be truly of and for all men and women.

Notes:

- 1-Odaymara, Olivia y Wanda. “Vamo a vencé.” CD *Cubensi Hip Hop* (2003).
- 2-Danay, Olivia y Odaymara. “Tiempos.” CD *Pa’ mi gente* (2009).
- 3-Olivia. “Desterradas.” CD *Levántate* (2011).
- 4-Odaymara, Olivia y Wanda. “Madre natura.” CD *Cubensi Hip Hop* (2003).