

Chapter 1.

Raced Neoliberalism: Groundings for Hip Hop

To be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

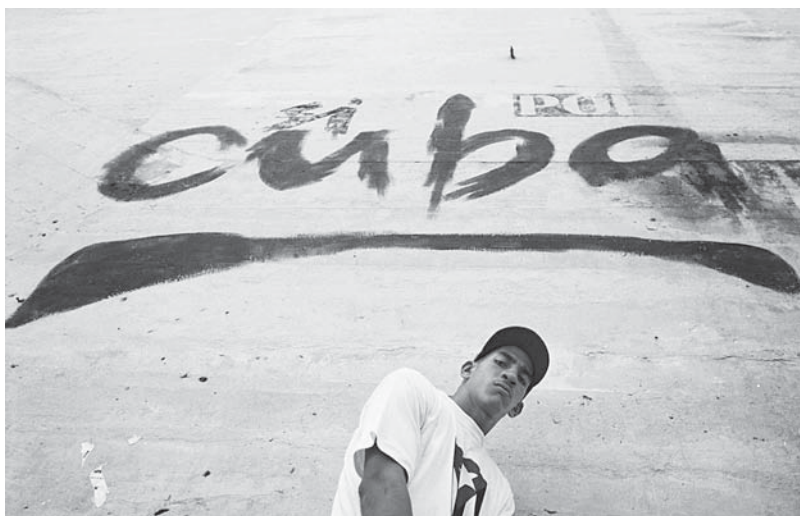
Dicen que Dios no aprieta, pero Cuba estrangula. Pero a pesar de todo, de mil modos te amo Cuba

[They say God does not squeeze, but Cuba strangles. Regardless of all, in a thousand ways I love you, Cuba]

—“Mi nación,” Los Paisanos

In the summer of 1998 I made my first trip to Havana for a Spanish-language course I had arranged through online sleuthing and e-mail exchanges. I had recently completed my MA work on Garifuna youth and performance in New York City, and having leftover research funds I decided to take the opportunity to visit Cuba while seeking to improve my Spanish skills. Raised in New York City by leftist parents—my father African American, my mother Jewish—who met through their early 1960s activism amid the U.S. civil rights movement, Cuba and its revolution were celebrated in my home as a defiant counterweight to histories of imperial capitalism.

As was the case within many black left circles of the time, the Cuban Revolution’s early commitments to racial equity and internationalist sup-



1.1. Hip hop producer Ariel Fernández Díaz, as shown on the back cover of *Cuban Hip-Hop All Stars*. Photo courtesy Steve Marcus

port for U.S. black radicals and anticolonial struggles in Africa carried particular resonance in my movement household. Fidel Castro's famed 1960 stay in Harlem and impromptu meeting with Malcolm X at the Hotel Theresa struck an especially intimate chord, occurring around the time of my father's on-air reporting on social justice issues with New York-based WBAI-Pacifica radio, work through which he had interviewed Malcolm X on a number of occasions himself. My mother, moreover, was involved in early solidarity work with the leftist Fair Play for Cuba Committee, while a close aunt visited Havana in the late 1980s as part of a delegation of U.S. health care professionals exploring the island's public health system. Given this familial history, Cuba and its revolution had long occupied a site of intrigue.

Yet while my trip to Havana that summer may have been informed by inherited nostalgias of revolutionary lore, I recognized the necessity of experiencing this mythic Cuba on my own historical terms. Cuba of 1998, of course, was not the Cuba of my parents' era and generation. It had been a decade since the collapse of the Eastern bloc and the end of Cuba's preferential trade with the Soviet Union and its allies. Since the early 1990s the island's ambivalent though ever-deepening engagement with market capitalism had introduced new social incongruencies and heightened levels

of contradiction into a once defiant revolutionary socialism. By 1998 the strains were clearly evident even to a foreign visitor such as myself. Of particular note were the ways these developments impacted the island's complexities of race and class, long foci of revolutionary Cuba's efforts to build egalitarianism under state socialism. Such fissures of race and class were also latent sites of historical tension rooted in Cuba's very inception as a modern nation.

I was, as it turns out, fortunate to have arranged an informal homestay with a Cuban family in Havana's western barrio of Playa, a short walking distance from the state-run language school where I was attending daily Spanish classes for payment in U.S. dollars. I met the family through Delmaris, an administrator at the school with whom I had initially been in contact about the program via her workplace e-mail, access to which at the time was highly coveted given Cuba's remarkably (if rather conspicuously) underdeveloped electronic communications infrastructure. Despite recent opens, Cuba has one of the lowest levels of Internet penetration in the hemisphere where private Internet access has long been restricted by the Cuban state as a means of regulating open circulation of information. Delmaris and I were nonetheless able to weave conversation through our exchanges to organize a homestay with her husband's family with whom she lived in a six-story concrete *edificio* (apartment building) dating from the early 1980s. While Delmaris's light skin, long reddish-brown hair, and distant Chinese ancestry would effectively classify her in Cuban terms as "white," her husband, Amílcar, and his family were decidedly Afro-Cuban.

From there began my time in the three-bedroom home of Lisnida. A retired geography professor, Lisnida shared her flat with her son Amílcar, a state-employed architect, his wife Delmaris, and Lisnida's five-year-old grandson Leni, whose mother, Alma, Lisnida's daughter, worked in the eastern city of Matanzas. As Afro-Cuban professionals, Lisnida and Amílcar were multigenerational beneficiaries of revolutionary Cuba's public investments in education and professional training that enabled black Cubans levels of educational access unseen in the prerevolutionary period. In the case of Lisnida, fidelities to the revolution included a dedication to watching Fidel Castro's marathon speeches on state television and her enthusiasm in sharing this living history with me, a visiting outsider.

As my initial introduction to a performing Fidel as revolutionary institution, I sat with Lisnida for the opening hour or so of one such speech. After

feeling I had put in a competent beginner's investment, I headed out for a beer with a friend, only to return a couple of hours later to find an aging Fidel still in full pontificating swing. In truth I was never fully out of Fidel's earshot that evening, as I was accompanied throughout my outing by distant echoes of his seemingly omnipresent voice weaving its way through open windows into the otherwise empty night streets. Yet while numerous households like Lisnida's had their TVs tuned to the speech, the ghostly quality of the patriarch's voice resonating across carpetless floors seemed to suggest an ever-receding presence. Though this still may indeed have been Fidel's Cuba; the question, though, seemed to be for how long.

In addition to affinities with the island's revolutionary history, Lisnida and her family also held strong identifications as black Cubans. Aware of my interest in Afro-Atlantic cultural lines, for instance, Lisnida sat me down at her kitchen table on a number of occasions to share nuances of Afro-Cuban religious life. Though not a practitioner herself, Lisnida assumed a familial intimacy as she took time identifying varying characteristics differentiating followers of Santería or Regla de Ocha-Lucumí,¹ for instance, from those of Palo Monte, and the secret fraternal society of the Abakuá.

Lisnida's family's embrace of the Afro in Afro-Cuban, however, was not limited to the cultural, nor necessarily bound by the national. I recall Lisnida's son, Amílcar, sharing over dinner one evening the story of his namesake, the late Guinea-Bissauan revolutionary figure Amílcar Cabral, recounting Cabral's leadership in Guinea-Bissau's guerrilla war for independence, along with his 1973 assassination at the hands of the colonial Portuguese. Amílcar's affective ties to this history were far from abstract; Cuba's military involvements in Guinea-Bissau's anticolonial struggle played a critical role in the nation's triumph of independence in 1974. In relaying his narrative, Amílcar expressed a prideful sense of identification with Cabral and Cuba's broader history of anticolonial struggle in Africa, citing key moments from the Congo and Ethiopia to Angola. Having spent significant time in Eastern and Southern Africa myself, our dinner conversations broadened to encompass my own diasporic experiences and solidarity efforts, including media work in Cape Town, South Africa, during the waning years of apartheid.

It was clear from speaking with Amílcar that his understandings of Africa and its recent history—and ultimately his own personal baptism by it—were shaped by legacies of Cuban internationalism and solidarities with African independence movements dating back to the early years of the revo-

lution. Legacies indeed. Guillermo, Amilcar's uncle and Lisnida's brother, who frequently visited the household, served as a mechanic during Cuba's sixteen-year military engagement in Angola.² Fighting alongside the ruling MPLA in its war against UNITA rebels backed by the United States, South Africa, and Zaire, upward of ten thousand Cubans were killed during the campaign, significant numbers of whom were Afro-Cuban. While Guillermo spoke little in detail of his time in Angola during his visits—noteworthy given broader official silences around the war's national costs and collective trauma—he did share a sense of pride at having served in Angola's eventual victory. Africa was thus interwoven in the lives of Lisnida's family in complexly imbricated levels of both the personal and national.

Aside from shared ties of diasporic affinity, my relationship with Lisnida's household was clearly also a financial one. While my time with the family enabled entrée to their lives and opportunities to explore relationships, our agreed-upon payment of US\$15 per night for food and lodging helped defray, at least temporarily, the family's growing need for U.S. dollars. This informal agreement was also clandestine, given recent efforts by the Cuban state to regulate and capitalize on a growing dollar-market for residential room rentals to foreigners. Cubans were now required to pay a hefty monthly dollar-tax for official rental licenses or risk fines upward of \$1,500 and the possible threat of property confiscation.³ For Lisnida and family the risk was apparently worth it; the \$15 daily contribution was roughly equivalent to the average monthly peso salary garnered by many public sector employees.

Indeed, despite advanced education and levels of professional achievement, Lisnida's family found themselves dependent on the island's rapidly expanding dollar economy within which it was difficult for most to survive on state-regulated peso salaries. As part of the Cuban state's efforts to capture circulating dollars otherwise destined for the informal black market, basics like soap, clothing, and essential foodstuffs were increasingly restricted to dollar-only purchase in state-run stores. Aptly termed *la shopping* in Cuban vernacular, these dollar-only stores came to symbolize the early rise of a new dollar-based consumerism in a once definitely nonconsumerist socialist Cuba (see Gordy 2006).

One of the only local dollar stores at the time was, rather ironically, in close proximity to the Russian Embassy with its massive citadel-like office tower peering ominously over the leafy residential barrio of Miramar. With

its modest aisles of imported delicacies like pasta, powdered milk, and canned goods alongside cooking oil and detergent, the supermarket was conveniently located to serve Havana's diplomatic corps given the barrio's heavy concentration of foreign embassies. In relatively short order these dollar-only stores became ubiquitous throughout Havana and the broader island. By 2000 some 75–80 percent of dollar remittances by Cubans living abroad—a primary source of circulating dollars—would channel through such state-run stores and into government coffers (Eckstein 2010: 1050).

Within this new reality Lisnida and her family were struggling daily to make ends meet. With no family living abroad to remit potentially life-changing dollars to subsidize their household income, their ability—or was it a sacrificial concession—to rent a room in their cramped apartment to a dollar-paying *yuma* (foreigner) was something of a momentary windfall, one arising from the privileged work-related access Delmaris, the sole ostensibly “white” member of the household, had to foreigners such as myself. Her coveted position within the island's evolving dollar-based tourism economy was far from unique, however. It was already apparent that white Cubans were favored for hire in tourism-related employment, Cuba's fastest-growing generator of foreign currency following its recent post-Soviet-era turn toward liberalized markets. Although Lisnida and her family were clearly better off in comparison to the severe hardships they and most Cubans endured during the depths of the early 1990s economic crisis, they had clearly entered a new moment of challenge in which dimensions of race and class were reemerging as key factors shaping social opportunity and mobility on the island. Was this the utopic Cuba of my parents' revolutionary-tinged era? Did that Cuba indeed ever quite exist?

My time in Lisnida's home and broader experiences in Havana that summer triggered an urgent curiosity regarding the peculiarities and fraught tensions of a rapidly changing Cuba. Most intriguing, I had heard during my stay of an evolving local hip hop scene, one with an apparently significant level of Afro-Cuban involvement. Reared amid hip hop's urban birth and later exposed to the complexities of hip hop communities in Brazil and South Africa (M. Perry 2008b), I was fascinated by the idea of Cuban hip hop and what insights it might offer regarding the island's current condition and future trajectory. Living a thirty-minute *colectivo* (collective taxi) ride from Havana's center and well over an hour from the neighboring municipality

of Alamar, areas where much of the local hip hop activity at the time was flowering, I unfortunately had little exposure to the music during that initial trip. I did, however, leave that summer determined to return to Havana to explore Cuban hip hop as a window into what was clearly an island in historic flux.

What, then, is the backstory of hip hop's emergence on the island? In what ways might its rise speak to the particularities of Cuba's shifting economic and social terrain? Given Los Paisanos' conflicted allusion to a Cuba that "squeezes" yet remains beloved in their song "Mi nación" referenced in the chapter's opening epigraph, how might enduring tensions of race, nation, and citizenship in light of the island's unfolding neoliberal uncertainties factor into the mix? As I would come to learn, such questions were of both critical concern and daily consequence for many within Havana's hip hop community, while at the same time instrumental to the broader political nature of Cuban hip hop itself.

Market Transitions

It is unquestionable that the 1990s marked a distinctive juncture in Cuba's history, one largely defined by rupture and dissolution following the collapse of the Eastern bloc and the subsequent suspension of Soviet subsidies upon which the Cuban economy and wider revolutionary project had long been dependent. As a consequence, Cuba fell into a severe economic crisis between 1989 and 1993 resulting in a crippling 40 percent reduction in GDP (Jatar-Hausmann 1999: 46). It was during a now infamous 1991 speech before the Congress of the Federation of Cuban Women that Fidel Castro declared *el período especial en tiempos de paz*, a "special period in peacetime," demanding acute austerity measures aimed at reducing national consumption and expenditure.

While signs of recovery from this special period would begin to emerge after 1996, the resulting and evolving character of Cuban society had unquestionably taken a historic turn. I've heard Cubans painfully recall the early 1990s as *el tiempo de los flacos* (time of the skinny ones), a period in which acute scarcities of produce, shelved goods, and meat of any kind contributed to endemic nationwide levels of undernourishment.⁴ Exacerbating if not strategically exploiting the scenario, the United States tightened its trade

embargo during this period, resulting in an estimated \$67 billion loss to the Cuban economy by decade's close in addition to an accompanying range of social costs (Hidalgo and Martínez 2000).⁵

By 1993 urgent intervention was needed to stem the deepening economic and ensuing social crisis, compelling Cuba's ambivalent dance with global capital and attending openings to neoliberal market forces. I underscore ambivalent here to speak to the complexly fraught nature of Cuba's recent engagements with neoliberalism. Unlike much of the Global South obligated to accommodate neoliberal reforms by way of international lending and regulatory agencies or regional free-trade agreements such as NAFTA, Cuba's socialist leadership adamantly eschewed any participation within such frameworks. Revolutionary Cuba has indeed been a vehement critic of global free trade, assuming, for instance, vocal membership as a founding partner in the anti-neoliberal bloc ALBA (Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América), formally led by Venezuela's late Hugo Chávez.

Such efforts notwithstanding, it is clear that more informal modes of accommodation were undertaken by the Cuban state in ways that clearly resonate with neoliberal monetization. It was the 1993 legalization of the U.S. dollar and the subsequent creation of a dual dollar/Cuban peso economy that most cogently signified a turn toward a market-driven, dollar-intensive economy and implicit erosion of state socialism. While the introduction of *pesos convertibles* (convertible pesos, or CUCs) in 2004 as official tender sought to remedy the incongruencies of dollar-based exchange, foreign currency dependence continues as Cubans remain reliant on foreign exchange in order to purchase the globally pegged CUCs now vital to daily life.

Dollar legalization was quickly followed by a series of deregulatory reforms involving the limited sanctioning of privately owned small businesses and cooperatives, the breakup of state farms and creation of private farmers' markets, and openings to foreign investment and joint ventures.⁶ Market-aligned shifts have accelerated under Raúl Castro, who has overseen radical reductions to public sector payrolls and state subsidies, as well as authorizing private home ownership alongside private real estate and car markets. The recent \$900 million revamping of the port of Mariel—long infamous for the 1980 boatlift of ten thousand Cubans to the United States during an acute moment of revolutionary crisis—into an expansive internationally financed and operated economic free-trade zone stands as a particularly cogent marker of this neoliberal turn.⁷ Given ongoing moves toward nor-

malizing U.S.-Cuban relations, the pace and scope of such marketizations are certain to accelerate and broaden.

On the social front, the once essential state-issued *libreta* (little book) long guaranteeing families basic monthly levels of subsidized food would eventually provide so little it became a sardonic brunt of Cuban humor.⁸ The island's celebrated national health care system has in turn become strained due to the contracting out of tens of thousands of Cuban medical personnel to Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa for hard currency remuneration and other forms of economic exchange.⁹ While Cuba provided urgent medical expertise during international crises like the recent West African Ebola epidemic, the broader leasing of professional personnel like doctors and engineers abroad accounted for almost half of Cuba's hard currency earnings by 2006, more than double the revenue generated by tourism (Sánchez-Egozcue 2007: 7, cited in Eckstein 2010: 1049). The concurrent growth of a "medical tourism" industry catering to foreign-currency-paying elites from Latin America and the Caribbean, moreover, speaks further to a monetization of Cuba's public health care system in the face of a withering socialist state.

Here I turn again to Aihwa Ong's notion of neoliberalism "as exception" regarding the selective introduction of market strategies and intertwined modes of social governance as aberrations to established governing practices in order to more effectively compete in the global economy (Ong 2006). In the case of Cuba, neoliberal rationales and their market-friendly effects have increasingly permeated Cuban society as exceptions to dominant socialist rule, engendering a deep ambivalence of national condition and identity. While the Cuban state continues (ever anemically) to claim state socialism as its guiding principle and mode of governance, its efforts to not only mediate but in the end actively facilitate market reforms suggest a discordant slide toward embrace of a neoliberal state (cf. Hardt and Negri 2004; Wacquant 2012).¹⁰

In Ong's reading, such incongruencies tend to produce graduated zones of exclusion under which rights associated with citizenship are increasingly afforded along lines of entrepreneurial ability rather than national belonging. In Cuban form, one sees these logics embodied in the rise of *cuentapropismo*, an evolving state-sponsored self-employment scheme that, while ostensibly regulated, places responsibility for employment on the individual alone, thus resonating with a broader turn toward private sector

employment and individuated market competition (cf. Burnett 2011). This shift echoes Alexei Yurchak's discussion of the rise of an entrepreneurial ethic in postsocialist Russia, displacing previous modes of collectivist organization and social practice (Yurchak 2003). Such "creative destruction," to borrow from David Harvey (2007), resonates with the ways neoliberal marketization has similarly encouraged entrepreneurial—and ultimately elite capitalist—class formations in settings like China and India. As in these and other global examples (W. Brown 2003; Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Vrasti 2011), the rise of the market over the state as abettor of social well-being requires each to refashion oneself as rationally minded *homo oeconomicus* (economic human) (Foucault 1979) in competitive pursuit of individual gain. From doorstep peddling of "street pizzas" to renting rooms to foreign tourists, enterprising strategies to creatively resolve (*resolver*) daily hardships in light of Cuba's diminished capacities for social welfare indeed speak poignantly to the island's neoliberal turn.

Raced Economies

As Lisnida's family's experience suggests, the ways Cubans have come to navigate and compete within the island's new economy have been significantly impacted by dimensions of race. Regarding foreign remittances—long the greatest single source of dollars and other foreign-currency income for most Cubans—smaller numbers of black Cubans living abroad and the tendency for migrants of Afro-Cuban descent to be less financially secure have contributed to marked remittance disparities between white and darker-skinned Cubans.¹¹ In addition to enabling higher standards of living in an immediate sense, remitted monies may also be invested in small entrepreneurial projects providing additional financial benefits. With limited recourse to remittances and their entrepreneurial effects, black and darker-skinned Cubans are ostensibly left with tourism-related commerce—Cuba's other emergent site of foreign exchange—as a potential source of dollars and CUCs. Yet as Delmaris's case suggests, tourism carries its own raced logics and spheres of exclusion.

While the dismantling of the island's Batista-era tourism industry was a celebrated early achievement of the revolution, in line with similar neoliberal strategies in the region (Desforges 2000; Gregory 2006; Klak and Myers 1998; Scher 2011), tourism was designated as a strategic sector shortly after

1989 and provided more than 40 percent of the island's hard currency income by 2001 (Associated Press 2001).¹² In Cuba's European-oriented hotels and related tour services, however, there is wide acknowledgment of preferential hiring for lighter-skinned Cubans (de la Fuente 2001; Roland 2010; Sawyer 2005). Although these workers receive salaries in Cuban pesos, their incomes are often augmented exponentially by tips and other transactions in foreign currencies and/or CUCs circulating within these contained tourist spaces. For a long time, the only darker-skinned employees visible were male security personnel stationed at hotel entrances vigilantly guarding these privileged currency zones from the public space of *la calle* (the street).

One rationale offered for these whitened spaces is that many tourist hotels are often jointly owned and/or operated by European hotel conglomerates who exercise foreign racial preferences when making hiring decisions. An alternative explanation offered is that the tourist industry is simply responding to the island's predominantly white European and North American clientele who prefer to be served by people who "look like them."¹³ Either scenario presents dilemmas for revolutionary Cuba and its embedded ideals of racial equality. They also suggest a certain abdication of sovereignty and full rights of citizenship in which economic livelihood is no longer ensured or arbitrated by the state, but rather allocated by the market along lines of racial difference.

The experiences of Mario, a dark-brown-skinned Afro-Cuban friend from the working-class *barrio* of Jesús María in central Havana, testifies to the lived realities of such raced exclusion. While not a particularly invested hip hop "head," Mario was not unlike many I later met in Havana's rapero community: that is, young, largely unemployed—at least formally—black men from working-class backgrounds. With his customary jeans, well-worn athletic shoes, and New York Yankees cap he had acquired by way of a cousin in New Jersey, Mario assumed a stylized flair similar to many local followers of hip hop. When we first met in 1998, Mario, then in his early twenties, frequently complained of his inability to acquire work with a state-run tourism company despite his university education and coveted English fluency. While passing his finger along the inside of his left forearm in the common Cuban gesture indicating color or race (i.e., "the blood"), he explained, "Por supuesto, es el color de piel que me impide este trabajo" (Of course, it's the color of my skin that keeps me from this work). Given legacies of Afro-Cuban support for the revolution stemming from histories of expansion

in areas like public education, urban housing, and universal health care, Mario expressed a sense of disillusionment (if not a hint of betrayal) about the current Cuban moment. Frustrations of this kind eventually played into his decision to immigrate to France in 2000 through a foreign fiancé visa acquired by way of his French girlfriend, now his wife, with whom he now shares two children in Nantes.

Mario's departure from Cuba can be seen as a fairly strategic one in this light, fashioned in response to an increasingly monetized everyday in which his racial status constrained his range of opportunity and social mobility. Emigration would indeed become ever more common among young black Cubans, including, as I later explore, many key members of Havana's hip hop community. Yet by immigrating to France in an effort to circumvent such limitations, Mario was compelled in the end to forfeit his legal status as a Cuban citizen. Cubans living or traveling abroad for extended periods are obligated to relinquish citizenship, and upon return must request official permission to visit the island on a temporary basis.¹⁴ Although once abroad Mario eventually became certified as an electrician through a local polytechnic, for a number of years he worked part-time in Nantes as a salsa DJ and dance instructor—tapping in this way into global markets of Cuban cultural trade. Thus while a concession of formal rights with emigration may have been unavoidable, cultural realms of Cuban citizenship remained for Mario not only accessible but relatively viable in a commercial sense.

Interplays of race, citizenship, and economies of exchange have in fact become commonplace in Cuba, where racially marked space and signs of blackness have emerged as sites of tourism-related commerce. Anyone familiar with the island over the last decade or so is aware of a strong tourist trade in Afro-Cuban cultural expression in a wide array of forms, many of which draw upon notions of black "otherness" steeped in exotic and/or erotic kinds of desire. This trade and its packaging has been mediated in important part through an enduring trope of Cuban folklore that, through recent market alignments, has helped facilitate a trafficking of black cultural markers as exploitable assets for tourist revenue (see Ayorinde 2004; Delgado 2009; Hagedorn 2001; R. Moore 2006a).

Rooted, as Robin Moore (1997) has detailed, in nationalist efforts among early twentieth-century artistic movements to imagine a racially syncretic, postcolonial ideal of Cuban nationhood, and intellectually codified by the

celebrated ethnologist Fernando Ortiz, the trope of folklore has assumed an implicitly raced meaning in its nearly exclusive application to Afro-Cuban cultural forms. Reminiscent of similar projects in the Caribbean and broader Latin American region (Canclini 1995; Godreau 2006; Guss 2000; Thomas 2004), the labeling of Afro-Cuban expressive realms such as music, dance, and religious community as folkloric has worked to contain these forms (and by extension those who practice them) firmly within the trans-culturated bounds of a Cuban national patrimony (Ortiz [1940] 1963; cf. Yelvington 2001). Such folkloric representations—be they objects of study or appropriated national spectacle—are ultimately resignified and statically assimilated within a race-neutral(izing) discourse of *lo popular*, obscuring these forms' historical specificity and dynamism as ongoing expressions of Afro-Cuban life and cultural agency.

Building upon this legacy, various cultural institutions formed during the early revolutionary period sought to document and institutionally situate Afro-Cuban folklore within the revolutionary scope of national culture.¹⁵ Although these efforts were in keeping with a broader cultural policy aimed at fostering revolutionary-infused arts and culture by way of state promotion and guidance (Hart Dávalos 1990;¹⁶ cf. R. Moore 2006b), the emphasis has been on institutional representations of *afrocubanidad* (Afro-Cubanness) as performed national spectacle. Through national stagings of both sacred and secular forms of Afro-Cuban music and dance, Cuba's Conjunto Folklórico Nacional has, since its founding in 1962, been an exemplar of state-sponsored efforts (see Daniel 1995; Hagedorn 2001).

While the Conjunto owes some of its creative impetus to Afro-Cuban demands for inclusion within the revolutionary project and draws heavily upon black artistic leadership, its performative repertoire implicitly builds upon an Ortizian legacy positing Afro-Cuban cultural realms juxtaposed to that of modernity (see Bronfman 2002; R. Moore 1994).¹⁷ Such framings tend to reproduce renderings of Afro-Cuban cultural forms—in particular those associated with African-derived religious systems—as primitive, antediluvian counterpoles to modern socialism (see de la Fuente 2001; Palmié 2002). The language of folklore in this sense engenders a fossilizing stasis of black Cuban cultural forms as bounded sites affixed to, and ultimately contained within, a nonracial Cuban national imaginary. Afro-Cuban cultural spheres are therefore relegated to an unchanging national past, effectively

fixing black Cubans within static representations of the “traditional” rather than recognizing the dynamic ever-changing nature of Afro-Cuban cultural practice, subjectivity, and experience.

Within today’s cultural marketplace, folkloric framings have also enabled the packaging of black cultural forms as exploitable resources for tourist dollars and other exchange. These moves are tied in a broader sense to what Ruth Behar (1999) once referred to as Cuba’s “buena-vistaization” in allusion to *The Buena Vista Social Club*, the 1997 album of classic *son* music produced by Ry Cooder and the subsequent Wim Wenders’s documentary of the same title that launched a global frenzy for Cuban music and culture. This commercial wave is embedded in nostalgic yearnings for an old Cuba—a prerevolutionary Cuba of vintage pre-1959 American cars, historic urban architecture, and “traditional” forms of expressive culture and tropical exoticism. Reminiscent of Renato Rosaldo’s notion of imperialist nostalgia (1989), buena-vistaization thus speaks to the ways Cuban cultural markers have been reconfigured, packaged, and marketed for Western consumption via appeals to imperialist-laden desires for an untainted prerevolutionary past. As Tanya Hernandez suggests, such ahistoricizing nostalgias are often coupled with quests for an authentically “pure” Afro-Cuban subject and attending musicality rooted in preverbal longings for noble savagery (Hernandez 2002).

There are, for example, numerous locales in Havana where tourists regularly flock to consume and bodily experience Afro-Cuban cultural practices such as rumba music and dance. One such widely attended event is held along Callejón de Hamel. On any given Sunday this small narrow street in the Central Havana neighborhood of Cayo Hueso draws large gatherings of local as well as foreign tourists, numbers of whom may arrive via tour buses that sit just outside the street’s ornate entrance.¹⁸ Colorfully awash with Afro-Cuban religious motifs and murals as well as a few ritual altars, the Callejón’s aesthetics are largely the creative invention of the Cuban artist Salvador González Escalona, whose gallery sits conveniently adjacent to the space dedicated to the weekly rumba performances. Living only a few blocks from the Callejón, I attended the rumba innumerable times between 1999 and 2006.

I recall one particular Sunday, however, when the artist González Escalona, a mestizo who often performed the role of microphone-wielding host of the rumba’s festive play of dance and song—though he participates

directly in neither—welcomed the crowd by alluding to the rumba as “nuestro folklore” (our folklore). At that point a dark-skinned black woman who appeared to be in her late thirties shouted definitively from the audience “¡Este no es el folklore, esta es nuestra cultura!” (This is not folklore, this is our culture!), followed by affirmations from some in the crowd. Her remarks laid bare tensions between the performance of rumba as a folkloric spectacle, framed in this instant for tourist consumption, and its lived embodiment as a cultural space of enacted community (cf. Daniel 1995). Such discord draws attention to the market-driven commodification of Afro-Cuban cultural forms and signs of blackness within Cuba’s tourist economy, one significantly enabled through the language of folklore.

The Cuban state for its part has played its own role in the commercial marketing and packaging of folklorized blackness. Departing from earlier histories of suppression (Hagedorn 2001; C. Moore 1989), the state has assumed an increasingly active role in the public promotion of Ocha-Lucumí and other Afro-Cuban religious systems as generators of tourist-related income. One notable example is Havana’s Museo de los Orishas, housed in the headquarters of the state-sanctioned Asociación Cultural Yoruba de Cuba. For a fee of CUC\$10 (equivalent to US\$10, roughly half a month’s average peso salary), visitors can view upward of thirty religiously adorned, life-size figures of various *orishas* (deities) of the Ocha-Lucumí pantheon and other religious paraphernalia. Yet farther afield, state-run religio-commerce has evolved to offer not only excursions to designated Ocha houses but, reportedly, government-sponsored tours through which paying customers can participate in rites of initiation into the Lucumí religion itself (Hagedorn 2001). Rogelio Martínez Furé, a prominent Afro-Cuban intellectual and founding member of the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional, refers to such practices as “pseudo-folklore,” akin in his view to a prostitution or pimping of traditional religious systems (Martínez Furé 2000: 159).

Folkloric packaging, moreover, often involve gendered and sexualized dimensions as well. In large craft markets in Havana and other tourist areas, one can find a bountiful collection of racialized caricatures of black Cubans for sale. Often venturing into the absurd, many figurines and printed T-shirts adopt racially ascribed stereotypes such as grossly enlarged lips framing big toothy smiles. One variation involves a dark-skinned head with vulgarly exaggerated red lips stretched to form an ashtray to accommodate one’s favorite Cuban cigar. Many others play upon gendered specific no-

tions of a black primal hypersexuality. In male form, this can translate into a smiling black figurine with a protruding erect penis complete with pink tip.

More common are tables of brown painted female figurines topped with colorful head-wraps invoking “Mammy” or “Aunt Jemima” figures of the U.S. antebellum South. Yet unlike their sexually neutered correlates to the North, these figurines index a raced economy of erotic desire; their absurdly large breasts (sometimes with protruding nipples) and correspondingly ample backside command a sexualized gaze. Articulating upon enduring representations of the mixed-raced *mulata* as an oversexed temptress (Arrizón 2002; Kutzinski 1993), this motif is often accompanied by a large phallic cigar projecting from a provocative wide grin. As Jill Lane’s work on nineteenth-century *bufo* theater has shown, similar gendered forms of black sexualized caricature were formative in the early shaping of Cuba’s national imaginary (Lane 2005). These tropes, however, are also clearly in historical dialogue with other North and Latin American variants of racist antiblack caricature (cf. Lott 1993; Rivero 2005). One can, for instance, find strikingly similar figurines circulating in tourist markets in the Dominican Republic.

When I spoke informally with market vendors in Havana (many of whom were not black) about the figures’ physical attributes and sexual explicitness, a number told me that these images were simply drawn from Cuban folklore. These responses brought to mind the ways racial fictions continue to operate at a deeply embedded commonsensical level within much of Cuba’s popular imaginary. One vendor in fact claimed these figures and their grossly exaggerated body parts actually resemble black Cubans themselves. My suggestion that such depictions might be infused with racist meanings was often met with adamant denials of any racist content or intent. What is clearly less debatable is that such imagery and attendant discourses align with prerevolutionary black caricatures and broader hemispheric narratives of antiblack racism. These forms, once more, are intentionally reproduced for foreign tourist consumption, a practice that comes into focus when considering that many vendors claimed that these figurines were fabricated foremost to meet foreign tourists’ own notions and consumer tastes for iconic representations of Cuba and its “culture.” Blackness in a neoliberal Cuba apparently sells.

Racial Entrepreneurialisms and Their Regulation

Amid this raced marketplace some darker-skinned Cubans have in turn found enterprising ways to mobilize markers of blackness within an evolving economy from which they are otherwise largely excluded. While such strategies coincide with broader Cuban trends toward entrepreneurial life-ways, they are in this instance both shaped by and traffic within racialized circuits of desire and its trade. Maneuvers of the kind thus suggest in effect a kind of raced *homo oeconomicus* in their flexible adaption to Cuba's expanding market rationales.

Recall again Callejón de Hamel's weekly rumba. Among its other attributes, the rumba has long been a noted space for the hustling of tourist women by young black men cognizant of the spectacle's racial draw. Here I am reminded of Oscar, a stylish dark-skinned man in his late twenties whom I periodically ran into at the Callejón often in the company of young foreign women. One afternoon over a shared bottle of rum in plastic cups, Oscar explained in essence that he was aware of an economy of racialized desire within which he, as a young black man, operated vis-à-vis Cuba's tourist trade. In speaking of his experiences, Oscar noted unapologetically: "Oye, me gusta cuando las mujeres blancas me persiguen, cuando puedo decirle que tienen que esperar un poco. Imagínalo, en la cara de todo ese rascimo que siempre ha llamado mi piel sucia, sin valor, imagina!" (Listen, I love it when white women chase me, when I can tell them they have to wait some. Imagine it, in the face of all the racism that has always called my skin dirty, worthless, imagine!).

Oscar juxtaposed this experience against the hardships of working in a metal workshop where he claimed some of his white colleagues resented his position of relative seniority. Within the public domain of *la calle*, he expressed a sense of redemptive gratification in his ability to use his blackness of skin as a mode of social capital, enabling him entrée to privileged spaces and potential opportunities that he might not otherwise have in today's Cuba. I have no idea whether Oscar eventually joined the ranks of young black and darker-skinned men I have known since the late 1990s who, like Mario and ultimately many *rapero* friends, left the island on foreign fiancé visas with hopes of better lives in Europe, Canada, or the United States.¹⁹ If he did, though, I would not be surprised.

While romantic scenarios of this kind clearly do not preclude mutually loving relationships, it would be difficult to assume they fully operate outside broader spheres of raced desire that permeate Cuba's tourism sector in ways similarly noted in other Caribbean settings (Brennan 2004; de Albuquerque 2000; Gregory 2006; Kempadoo 2004; Sánchez Taylor 2001). Economic inequalities are also frequently salient in these contexts. Given the often prohibitive application costs of Cuban passport and visa fees that ran well into multiple hundreds of U.S. dollars by the late 1990s,²⁰ foreign women in these scenarios frequently offset such expenditure. Over the years I have known North American women of varying ages involved in such relationships, and it is not uncommon for them to provide additional financial support to their Cuban partners—and often, by extension, their families—during the extended months of bureaucratic processing. While these women clearly exercise agency within these situations, dimensions of race, class, gender, nationhood, and sexuality and their interwoven economies of power are unavoidable within such transnational romances.

An eroticized market for blackness has also been an active component of the island's illicit foreign-based sex trade, which evolve alongside the growth of tourism and the dollar economy.²¹ Racial difference in this context emerged as a currency of exchange between largely darker-skinned Cubans and their predominantly white foreign patrons in heterosexual as well as same-gendered spheres of sexual desire and commerce (Allen 2011; Lumsden 1996; cf. Alexander 2006). Offering historical scope, Anne McClintock notes that women of color have long been sites of masculinist conquest through the conjuring of colonial territories as “porno-tropics” in the Euro-imperial imagination (McClintock 1995, cf. Stoler 1995). Here, nonwhite women are frequently figured as fetishized objects by male travelers who project imperialist claims as parcel of broader feminizations of non-Western societies.²²

Building upon these legacies, European magazines and tour operators have long exploited such language and imagery to promote Cuba as a travel destination for sex tourism (Clancy 2002). Along these lines there are annals of Internet sites targeting hetero-male sex travelers that cite Cuba as a top sex tourism destination. As a descriptive example, on one English-language site, cuba-sex.com, I encountered the following anonymous posting: “Cuban prostitutes are called jineteras, or ‘jockeys.’ Wild, untamed, uninhib-

ited women, they love to get on top and ride a man *hard*. Often displaying Afro-Cuban features, these dusky, scantily-clad native girls with fine asses are very passionate and may cling tightly and fondle you after sex” (italics in original).²³

This brief passage illustrates in no uncertain terms a racially fetishized objectification of female sex workers circulating globally on sex tourism websites. Indeed, similar sites and language have been documented in relation to the Dominican Republic’s foreign-tourist-directed sex trade (Gregory 2006). Not only do such narratives reproduce hypersexualized imagery of black and darker-skinned Cuban women through an electronically disseminated tourist gaze, but they further situate such eroticized representations squarely within fictive bounds of a primal black bestiality. Yet amid such racialized trade there may clearly be more at play.

The expression *jinetera*, derived from *jinete*, the Spanish term for a horse jockey, suggests degrees of social maneuvering regarding the women’s “riding”—both literal and figurative—of tourists for economic remuneration or other conferred social privileges. Thus implicit in this allegorical play is the question of who in the end may be pimping whom. Here I do not wish to elide the varying structural inequalities between darker-skinned Cuban sex workers and their foreign johns (or janes); nor do I seek romanticized degrees of social agency. Rather, I seek to underscore that while a sexualized commodification of blackness may operate globally as a site of consumptive desire, it may simultaneously allow some darker-skinned Cubans spaces and gendered modalities of labor within a market economy in which Afro-Cubans are often structurally marginal.

Further to the point, the wider phenomenon of *jineterismo* is not reducible to sexualized markets of exchange, but rather speaks more broadly to the rise of informal, often racially associated street hustling for tourist income via an array of nonsanctioned (that is, illicit) services to foreigners. Consider again Oscar’s scenario. Although Oscar is state employed, his ostensible leisure visits to touristed rumba spaces moved him within informal economies of tourist trade and hustle. *Jineterismo* practices, in their strategic application within spaces of tourist trade, are therefore part and parcel of a wider entrepreneurial range of strategies developed in accordance with Cuba’s new neoliberally inclined markets of exchange, markets that are often raced, gendered, and potentially sexualized in particular kinds of ways.

Jineterismo's entrepreneurisms in this sense prefigured the formal advent of state-sanctioned *cuentapropismo*, which, like its illicit cousin, is also predicated on individuated forms of market hustle.

Within an unfolding economy where racial status is increasingly tied to social inequality by way of global currency flows, illicit strategies for economic gain have in turn become heavily policed by the Cuban state. The escalation of police activity in the streets of Havana since the Special Period offers a poignant expression of the raced nature of such market-inscribed governance. In a speech in January 1999 commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the National Revolutionary Police, Fidel Castro addressed the rise in illicit activities like street crime, prostitution, and drugs that followed the introduction of the U.S. dollar. In response, he argued, the streets must in effect be taken back. Almost overnight, roughly six thousand additional police were assigned to the streets of Havana (Fernández Tabío 1999, cited in Trumbull 2001: 312). During this period police officers could be found on virtually every odd corner in many central areas of the city. A central focus of this crackdown was petty street crime and underground black market activity upon which large numbers of Afro-Cubans (and many Cubans more generally) had become dependent given limited entrée to sanctioned forms of hard-currency acquisition.

This crackdown disproportionately affected young black men, who are often racially marked and targeted by Cuban police as *delincuentes* (delinquents). Within this scenario preexisting laws under the rubric of *peligrosidad* (dangerousness, or risk of criminal behavior) were expanded into stop and frisk-like practices commonly directed at young black men (see Ayorinde 2004: 142). During a conversation with my friend Rodrigo, a darker-skinned Afro-Cuban intellectual in his early forties, about his repeated experiences with police and similar challenges at hotel entrances, he spoke of a candid exchange he had one evening with a police officer. The officer, he said, confided that Cuban police were instructed to be vigilant of black youth, particularly at night, given a claimed propensity toward crime. Such practices, Rodrigo added, were “sintomático, parte del pensamiento institucional que tiene sus raíces en las instituciones políticas” (symptomatic, part of the institutional thinking that has its roots in political institutions).

While it may be difficult to substantiate Rodrigo's claim, associations of black Cubans with criminalized pathologies via a racially coded language of *marginalidad* (social marginality), to which I will return, have a long his-

tory in Cuba, grounded intellectually, once again, in the early work of Fernando Ortiz ([1906] 1973; cf. Arandia 2001; Maguire 2011; R. Moore 1994). An alternative explanation for the targeting I have heard cited by Cubans is that large numbers of Havana's police are drawn from outlying provinces so as to minimize affinities with the local population. The purported provinciality of these officers, it is suggested, lends itself to biases that inform racial profiling. Whether a cultural manifestation, a product of intentional design, or perhaps a combination of both, the historical weight of raced policing is compounded by the fact that darker-skinned Cubans reportedly comprise a disproportionate percentage, if not a majority, of Cuba's incarcerated (Ayorinde 2004; Pérez Sarduy and Stubbs 2000; Sawyer 2005).

In a quotidian sense commonplace in the streets of Havana by 1999, young blacks were routinely stopped by questioning police and asked for their *carnets de identidad* (national ID cards). Officers could then radio in the individual's information to check for previous criminal activity; any discrepancies or prior offenses noted might result in arrest. As I mentioned earlier, my experience as a brown-skinned man of being frequently stopped by police in my central Havana neighborhood conditioned my habitual carrying of a tattered photocopy of my U.S. passport that, upon presentation, usually enabled me passage without further consequence. In one particular experience, however, I found myself inadvertently enabling such policing.

I had joined two friends, Mario's older brother Ernesto and his friend Luis, for a beer one afternoon in the Plaza de la Catedral, one of the touristic and thus highly policed sections of the historic, commercially rehabbed Habana Vieja. As we shared a few cans of Cristal amid tourists weaving busily about restaurants abutting the plaza, we noted a blue-clad police officer within a few paces of us surveying the activity. As we continued in conversation the officer abruptly turned and asked Ernesto and Luis to stand and present their *carnets*, the information of which he began conferring via radio to some disembodied bureaucracy on the other end. Within short order both men were handcuffed and carted away in a small Russian-made Lada police car despite my protests and unanswered queries as to the reason for their arrest. Once informed of their destination, a regional police station located rather aptly on Avenida Dragones (Dragons Avenue), I followed on foot and sat outside the building awaiting their release. After it eventually became clear that neither Ernesto nor Luis was coming out anytime soon, I returned home discouraged.

The next morning I called Ernesto and found him home; he and Luis were evidently released late the night before. Ernesto explained that the official rationale given for their detainment was the officer's claim that the two men were *jineteros* who had been harassing me, a foreigner. Given his close proximity the officer was well within earshot of our conversation, one clearly between friends—albeit apparently differentiated by way of accents and levels of Cuban Spanish fluency. When I asked Ernesto about how he made sense of this, he responded almost casually, “Oye, estamos acostumbrados a esta mierda. Para los negros, esto es normal” (Listen, we are used to this shit. For blacks, this is normal).

Raced forms of state policing are of course not limited to men. There are corresponding histories of young black and darker-skinned women in highly touristic areas being racially marked as *jineteras*, particularly when in the company of foreign men. I recall my friend Yaneli, a dark-skinned woman in her early thirties, complaining about being repeatedly stopped by police who suspected her of working a *tamba*, or foreign john, while with her German husband. African American anthropologist Kaifa Roland has similarly documented personal experiences of being racially interpellated as a sex worker by tourist hotel security staff (Roland 2010), while Amalia Cabezas has analyzed the broader racialized projections of such gendered criminalization endemic to the island's tourist zones (Cabezas 2009).

Some critics have alternatively argued that the Cuban state has tacitly encouraged prostitution as a means of generating tourist revenue, while suggesting that periodic crackdowns have occurred only after drawing negative international attention to the expanding sex trade.²⁴ Addressing this tension, Mette Louise Berg asserts the revolutionary state has been complicit in marketing Cuba as a locale of black female sensuality, while simultaneously seeking to police darker-skinned women's economic agency as sex workers (Berg 2004). Such complexities underscore the interstitial workings of race, gender, and sexuality vis-à-vis a dialectics of criminalization and governmental regulation (and tacit packagings) within Cuba's new monetized nationscape.

In response to the broader systemics of such raced policing, young men in a couple of poorer, predominantly black barrios in Central Havana began around 2001 wearing their *carnets de identidad* dangling from their necks as a form of symbolic protest. As markers of citizenship as well as foci of racialized surveillance, these public displays spoke to the mounting tensions

around race and the rights of national belonging for young blacks within Cuba's new economy. One noted neighborhood where these protestive performances of nationhood took place was Mario's barrio of Jesús María.

Abutting the heavily touristed Havana Vieja, Jesús María has long been branded as one of the more infamous of Havana's *barrios marginales* (socially marginal neighborhoods), an expression, as mentioned, embedded with racially inscribed notions of black pathological criminality rooted in narratives of Afro-Cubans as primitive, atavistic outliers of a modern Cuban citizenry.²⁵ Revolutionary efforts to rehabilitate such raced zones of temporal-national deviancy are given poetic form in the opening montage of the 1977 film *De cierta manera* (One way or another) by the late Afro-Cuban filmmaker Sara Gómez.²⁶ In this sequence, black-and-white images of a wrecking ball demolishing dilapidated urban housing are juxtaposed with those depicting the construction of modern apartment blocks in allusion to Cuba's transformist socialist march toward forging Ernesto "Che" Guevara's mythic "new man" of revolutionary lore ([1965] 2007). In the current moment one might consider Havana Vieja's extensive tourist-related commercial reconstruction and related residential displacement as a neoliberal variant of such rehabilitative renewal.

While recent developments may carry historical resonances, forms of raced regulation and enabling discourses of black criminality have clearly been elaborated upon and emboldened within Cuba's shifting economy. Although the revolutionary project may have expanded realms of national inclusion through a utopic promise of a socially equitable nonracial Cuba, these commitments have been significantly undermined by the growing dominance of market competition and its uneven effects along racial and class lines. With the rise of a new commerce in blackness, however, this terrain has also proved fertile ground for some black and darker-skinned Cubans to fashion creative strategies to tap into traffickings of racial difference.

Such racial entrepreneurialism recalls Robin Kelley's discussion of self-commodification strategies among African American youth seeking to capitalize on today's increasingly global market for black popular culture and creative expression (Kelley 1997). Kelley suggests markers of blackness in this sense are commercially leveraged by young African Americans as cultural assets within a postindustrial economy in which they are otherwise structurally disenfranchised. It is precisely these kinds of globally attuned,



1.2. Rapero performing at Havana Peña. Photo by the author

market-oriented racializations from below, to borrow from Leith Mullings (2004), that can be seen in active Cuban motion today.

Enter Hip Hop

Regarding the rise of island hip hop, it is also worthwhile to consider the productive tensions between racial exclusion and circuits of raced consumption as a space of maneuver for Cuban raperos. As a recent social phenomenon with a pronounced presence of black and darker-skinned Cubans, hip hop found its grounding amid a fluid moment of national uncertainty in which race has emerged as a particularly fraught site of social difference. Arguably the most widely disseminated conduit of “black” popular imagery globally, and one largely conveyed through a masculine persona of urban marginality, to what extent might hip hop afford in Cuban terms a language of political critique and identity by way of expansive vocabularies and extranational notions of black affinity? Pushed yet further, in a landscape where rights and equitable access to resources long mediated by the state are now increasingly arbitrated by the market, might hip hop

offer enterprisingly “flexible” forms of alterative belonging and/or notions of citizenship (Ong 1999) for some black and darker-skinned Cuban youth in the neoliberal era?

In dialogue with the protestive display of national identity cards, one central and enduring concern voiced by raperos—many of them also young, darker-skinned, male, and drawn from similar barrios—involved the quotidian realities of raced policing since the late 1990s. From Hermanos de Causa’s composition “Lágrimas negras” to Anónimo Consejo’s “Las apariencias engañan,” Papo Record’s “Revolución,” and Los Paisanos’ “Mi nación,” to name but a few, Cuban MCs have long critiqued the targeting of darker-skinned youth by Cuban police alongside an ascendant market economy. Like their carnet-donning peers in Jesús María, they too call attention through public spectacle to the raced limits of Cuban citizenship as they are currently embodied and lived.

One of the more infamous challenges along these lines involved a performance of MC Papá Humbertico during Cuba’s eighth annual hip hop festival in Havana’s outlying municipality of Alamar. That hot August night in 2002, Humbertico walked onstage accompanied by two others carrying a rolled bed sheet. Before an audience of some three thousand mostly darker-skinned youth and an assemblage of international press, the bed sheet was unfurled to expose in large block letters “Denuncia Social” (Social denunciation). Humbertico asked the crowd if they knew the meaning of the expression before lapsing into a series of songs rapped in a fluid Cuban cadence over hard-edged hip hop beats. His lyrics recounted the daily lives and struggles of people in his working-class, predominately black barrio of Guanabacoa, touching on themes of poverty, crime, imprisonment, and prostitution. A sea of hands could be seen waving in the air as the crowd sounded off in spirited agreement whenever the MC hit a particularly salient chord. As energies peaked, however, Humbertico took aim at Cuban police, their blue ranks visible alongside the stage. Citing the frequent harassment of black youth, he rified:

Oye tú, contigo mismo, contigo que en paz no me dejas un instante, no te tengo miedo, no me intimida tu vestimenta azul ni el cargo que tengas, para mí no dejas de ser un ignorante, adelante, estoy a tu disposición . . . móntame en tu jodido camión que yo, yo no me callaré.

Hey you over there, you don't leave me in peace for a minute, I have no fear of you,
your blue uniform doesn't intimidate me, nor the position you hold, for me you're still
ignorant, go ahead, I'm at your disposal . . .
throw me in your fucking truck because I
will not be silenced.

Rounding out his challenge amid a din of catcalls, Humbertico concluded:

Amo mi bandera, aquí nací y aquí me van a enterrar, seguro puedes estar de que tengo bien claro el concepto de la revolución cubana. Estoy con esto, pero no contigo . . .
Esto es contigo, loco, esto es contigo: Policía, policía, tú no eres mi amigo, para la juventud cubana eres el peor castigo . . . tú eres el delincuente!

I love my flag, here I was born and here I will be buried, you can be sure I have a clear understanding of the Cuban Revolution.
I'm with this, but not with you . . .
This is for you, crazy, this is for you: Police, police, you're not my friend, for Cuba's youth are the worst punishment . . . you are the delinquent!²⁷

Standing among the crowd atop one of the endless rows of concrete benches ringing the stage below, I turned to my friends Alexey Rodríguez and Lou “Piensa” Dufleaux—two MCs from Havana and Montreal respectively who were scheduled to perform in the festival's coming nights—in shared surprise. In the numerous annual festivals we had collectively attended, none of us had witnessed so blunt a challenge by a Cuban MC, let alone one launched the opening night of the festival, the premier event of its kind drawing ample national and international attention. My companions and I wondered out loud how this all was going to play out. Although Humbertico was ultimately penalized by Cuban authorities with a temporary ban from public performance, the proverbial cat so to speak was already out of the bag. In testifying, “I love my flag / here I was born and here I will be buried / you can be sure I have a clear understanding of the Cuban Revolution / I'm with this, but not with you,” Humbertico marks his inherent claim to Cuban

citizenship while underscoring the disjuncture between the ideals of the revolution he affirms and its lived contradictions.

Might such frictions be part and parcel of the “exceptional” nature of neoliberal governance Ong’s work points us toward? Amid an evolving marketplace in which blackness itself is imbued with ambivalent kinds of social capital, might some Cuban raperos be engaged in their own forms of racial entrepreneurialism? If so, transnational circuits of consumption in this instance may in the end open up rather than restrict plays of racial alterity and, ultimately, spheres of citizenship. How then might we locate such raced maneuvers amid the narrative lines of hip hop’s Cuban emergence?