

Chapter 2.

Hip Hop Cubano: An Emergent Site of Black Life

While the early Cuban roots of rap music and hip hop culture can be traced back to the mid-1980s, it was not until the economic crisis of the early nineties and the island's ensuing market turn that hip hop began to take shape with apparent urgency as a self-defined movimiento. I suggest that Cuban hip hop in this sense has emerged as an organic phenomenon of a particularly acute moment of social disjuncture and transformation, one shaped at a shifting confluence of national and transnational fields of history and power. Popular narratives of hip hop's Cuban birth for their part have become something of urban lore through their telling and retelling by the initiated. Ever-growing numbers of foreign journalists, filmmakers, and academics descending on Havana in recent years have in turn contributed their own renderings to these narratives. Here I do not wish to replicate pre-existing accounts, but rather seek to foreground the instrumental role that race has played in hip hop's ascendance in Cuba—a role whose complexities have often been downplayed or obscured by chroniclers. While my work is clearly in dialogue with existing scholarship, my intervention is directed in the end at providing an ethnographically grounded and critically historicized analysis of Cuban hip hop as a multivalent site of racial practice.

Hip hop's Cuban biography inevitably begins in Alamar, a coastal municipality nine miles east of Havana popularly noted as the birthplace of island hip hop. The suburb's sprawling collection of over two thousand multi-

storied apartment blocks were built in the 1970s and early 1980s with the help of Soviet architects. Though many were constructed through the work of *microbrigadas*—volunteer civilian work crews organized to build housing with state-supplied materials—the cubical form and gridlike orientation of Alamar’s semiurban layout reflects a utilitarian functionalism of Soviet-era design. Originally raised to accommodate young couples from Havana’s overpopulated center as well as an influx of rural workers from the outlying provinces, the municipality is now home to roughly one hundred thousand residents. While some commentators have noted a black or Afro-Cuban majority in Alamar (Pacini Hernandez and Garofalo 2000; Sokol 2000), my experience suggests that although black and browner-skinned families are a marked component, the municipality’s working-class population is generally more multiracial in character.

Racial demographics aside for the moment, a key factor in Alamar’s central figuring within Cuban hip hop is simply one of geography. A principal route of rap music’s entry into Cuba in the mid-1980s was by way of South Florida radio stations whose FM signal on good days could be accessed by makeshift antennas fashioned from apartment windows or on rooftops in and around Havana. With its high-rise buildings and northern coastal location, Alamar was ideally positioned for such reception. And so it was there, the narrative continues, that a cultural space eventually identified with hip hop first took root. Building on this lore, a number of U.S. accounts have likened Alamar to a massive Cuban “housing project” (Robinson 2002; Sokol 2000), analogous in this sense to the South Bronx’s urban topographies of public housing that first gave rise to hip hop in the post-industrial 1970s. Pushing the analogy further, Alamar aligns nicely with Paris’s *banlieues* and São Paulo’s *periferias* as comparable, often racialized zones of urban marginality and corresponding global hubs of hip hop culture (McCarren 2013; Pardue 2008). While such parallels carry a certain cachet in Cuba and beyond, it is in fact difficult to pinpoint precisely where and when hip hop actually emerged in the Havana area. It is, however, unquestionable that Alamar and the broader region of Habana del Este (Eastern Havana) played a formative role in hip hop’s early Cuban ascendance.

Cubans in close proximity to the North American mainland have indeed long accessed U.S. radio broadcasts by informal means for many decades. Now in his fifties, my friend Tonel tells of his early experience in his seaside Havana barrio of Playa listening to North American Top 40 on AM radio

in the 1970s from as far away as Arkansas.¹ U.S. rock music, for example, has had a significant following in Cuba since the 1950s despite state antagonisms, including broadcast bans of English-language rock in the early 1960s for its alleged corruptive influence (Pacini Hernandez and Garofalo 2004). Spheres of U.S. popular culture have in fact long been an important, if at times discordant, resource in the making of Cuban popular culture and broader national imaginary. One need only consider Cuba's celebrated national sport of baseball—or *pelota* (ball) as it is lovingly called—which was introduced to the island as early as the 1860s. Underscoring these linkages, historian Louis Pérez (1999) suggests that the omnipresence of North American culture since the mid-nineteenth century has tied Cuban notions of national identity and modernity inextricably to those of the United States.

Emergent Blackness

Hip hop's Cuban entrée, however, not only was inspired by the proximity of the island's neighbor to the north, the genre's extranational dimensions were for many also embedded with racial meaning. Cuban youth drawn to rap music have and continue to be largely darker-skinned, urban, and relatively more marginal—a set of demographics, I suggest, that is neither coincidental nor inconsequential. As I have argued elsewhere, the participation of racially marked subaltern youth in hip hop communities across the globe frequently involves dimensions of racial difference (M. Perry 2008b). In many of these settings a semiotics of black marginality is often reworked in ways that provide cogent expression to local experience and sites of struggle. Such practices assume particular salience within the Afro-Atlantic, where African-descendant youth in an array of locales have used hip hop to fashion notions of black-self in ways that are frequently both contestive and transcendent of nationally bound racial framings (cf. Anderson 2009). In the case of black and brown Cuban youth of the late 1980s and early 1990s, I suggest, engagements with U.S. rap music and broader hip hop aesthetics signified for many a nascent form of racial politics—one involving levels of racial identification and self-meaning making.

Ariel Fernández Díaz's prodigious work as a Havana-based journalist, DJ, hip hop radio host, and music promoter long positioned him as something of an organic intellectual within the island's hip hop movement. His recollections of hip hop's early Cuban rise, in turn, offer insight into the evolving

history of the phenomenon. As evidenced by the prolific range of articles he has authored on Cuban hip hop, Ariel has substantial resources to draw upon in his accounting (cf. Fernández Díaz 2000).² And yet in a more immediate sense, Ariel's own personal narrative provides a poignant entry into the social complexities of the broader movement as a whole while providing a window into its raced nuances.

Born and raised in the outlying Havana barrio of Lawton, Ariel grew into adolescence and young adulthood as Cuba was undergoing transformative shifts in the early 1990s. With his light brownish skin and short-cropped hair more straight than curly, he would likely be broadly read as mestizo or possibly *jabao* within Cuba's graduated racial classification system. Politically speaking, however, Ariel evokes his blackness as a primary source of self-identity. As he explained to me during a conversation in 2002: "I consider myself black, sometimes I'm clearly more black, I don't know, it's a bit complicated. Everyone on my mother's side is black, and those on my father's side are white. So my black family came from Africa, and my white family came from the Canary Islands of Spain. So I think I have both cultures, both races. I'm a mix, no? But I feel more black than white. I think it's something positive."³

While such black self-understandings may appear to suggest a level of ambivalence, Ariel's evolving and deeply invested sense of black identity has found important mediation through, among other things, his ongoing engagements with hip hop. Similar things can be said of a number of black-identified raperos I have known over the years who would otherwise be classified as *mulato*, *moreno*, *trigueño*, or any additional host of terms commonplace in Cuba for degrees of nonwhiteness. Many cite their involvement in hip hop as influential in shaping black self-affirmations of racial identity.

Elaborating along these lines, Randy Acosta of the Havana-based duo Los Paisanos explained during an exchange: "Me? I'm black. Well, here in Cuba I'm *jabao*. This is what they tell me here in Cuba, *jabao*: this light brown hair and eyes more or less all the same color, and with light brown skin."⁴ When I asked how long he had identified as *negro*, Randy replied: "Not very long. It has been a short time, since I began to take the hip hop movement seriously. Hip hop is a thing that frees the mentality, it's freedom. Many people don't understand this, but for us, it's freedom. We have changed our way of thinking and we have completely opened our thinking. I don't know, it's a powerful weapon. Hip hop is a force, it's life, it's a way of

life.” Randy’s comments suggest a shifting sense of racial identity in which hip hop is viewed as instrumental at both political and ontological levels of play. Expanding on this theme, Randy and his artistic partner Jessel “El Huevo” Saladriga would later pen the song “Lo Negro” (The black) addressing racialized stigmas that in their view inhibit black self-affirmation among Cubans of African descent.⁵

In Ariel’s case, his impassioned dedication to hip hop as, in Randy’s terms, a distinctive “way of life” and focal point of self-identification seemed at times to border on the devotional. Such commitment is exemplified in Ariel’s efforts as a self-taught journalist to be the first to publish extensively on Cuban hip hop in the state-run press, his hosting of Havana’s first hip hop radio program, *La Esquina de Rap*, his rise as a DJ, and his eventual position as a coordinator of state-sponsored hip hop projects and directing editor of the government-financed hip hop magazine, *Movimiento*.

When we first met in 2000 in the lobby of a Havana hotel where a delegation of U.S. hip hop artists and activists affiliated with the New York–based Black August collective were staying, Ariel was dressed in white from head to toe, marking his year-long status as an *iyawo*, or religious initiate into Ocha-Lucumí. Through our conversations over the years it became clear that Ariel’s involvement in the Afro-Cuban religion was as vital a component of his everyday life and sense of self-direction as was hip hop. Rather than competing ontologies, these differentially raced spaces—one sacred, nationally figured yet deeply resonant with lineages of Africanity, the other cosmopolitanly modern and transnationally expansive—have been mutually constitutive parts of how Ariel views and defines himself as an Afro-Cuban man.

Indeed, like a number of other hip-hop-affiliated Cubans I have known, Ariel simultaneously occupies and moves between public and more private, often sacred spheres of black meaning and communal belonging. Such black multivocality finds poetic form in Ariel’s professional nom de guerre. Having considered the stage name DJ Afro until he realized the alias had been claimed by a member of the Venezuelan fusion band Los Amigos Invisibles, Ariel eventually settled on what he considered as a more organic and personally meaningful moniker, DJ Asho. The term *asho* refers to one of the central *camínos* or sacred paths of the orisha Obatalá, his personal *santo*.⁶ Drawing parallels between Ocha-Lucumí and hip hop as coeval black cultural spheres, Ariel described DJ Asho as a syncretic way of marking his si-

multaneous belonging—characterized as “en mi sangre” (in my blood)—to both communities.

Further illustrating an overlapping fluidity of sacred and secular, Ariel spoke of receiving spiritual *consejo*, or advice, through the sacred Ifá divination tradition, suggesting his personal path was linked to his need to remain on the island to advance hip hop as a productive force in Cuban society.⁷ Such understandings appeared to have emboldened Ariel against a range of obstacles he seemed to often confront in his personal and professional life. He explained at the time that his convictions—at one time both political and spiritual—precluded the idea of immigrating to the United States. This option had become all the more tangible given Ariel’s recent participation in a month-long tour of New York City in 2001 as part of a delegation of Cuban rappers, during which time one visiting MC chose clandestinely to remain in the United States. The draw would indeed have been appealing: while there the delegation connected with various facets of New York’s hip hop community including foundational figures like DJ Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, and members of the pioneering Nuyorican breakdance troupe the Rock Steady Crew. Recalling these encounters, Ariel spoke of them at the time as fulfilling “a grand dream” of his life. That Ariel lived and breathed hip hop as a “way of life” was unquestionable. This focus, in turn, helped shape his sense of black self while informing his commitments both in Cuba and eventually beyond.

Reflecting upon hip hop’s ascendance on the island one afternoon, Ariel spoke to me of a *movimiento de soul* (soul movement) in 1970s and 1980s Havana that preceded rap music’s appearance on the island. He recalled the popularity of James Brown’s music among its adherents, as well as a group called Los Estivis (the Stevies), who gathered for a period every weekend to celebrate the music of Stevie Wonder. “Los Estivis were completely black,” Ariel explained, adding, “I mean it was really a racial space of people who followed Stevie Wonder, James Brown, and the soul music. Los Estivis was essentially a space of blacks.” With few circulating LPs coupled with a dearth of functioning turntables, the primary means of accessing this music was through audiocassettes of U.S. radio broadcasts either recorded in Havana or sent by Cuban family in the States. Such informal circulations enabled alternative soundscapes outside official channels of state-run media in ways that recall Peter Manuel’s discussion of the impacts of audiocassettes on popular culture and identity in Northern India during a similar period (Manuel 1993).

Along related lines Ariel and others recall glimpses of U.S. *Soul Train* episodes that could be tapped into under ideal weather conditions using improvised TV antennas or viewed on VHS tapes introduced by Cubans living or traveling abroad. As Ariel recounts:

People recorded the program on these cassettes and would learn how to dance from them. *Soul Train*, you know, is a dance program, and so people learned how to dance from the show as they exchanged cassettes. What helped out this movement a lot were athletes who traveled [abroad]. Almost all athletes—track and field, volleyball, baseball—are blacks, no? They liked this way, the style, the clothing, the large pants. They would buy nice radios to play in the streets, boom boxes, these kinds of things. So these people traveled and would buy records, LPs, which folks then copied onto cassettes.

Ariel's comments raise a number of salient points, including a central one that concerns the role of international travel in exposing Cubans—in this instance athletes—to African American music styles and related forms of black popular fashion from the United States. At the same time he suggests a certain racial dimension at play regarding music reception, circulation, and its redeployment.

Reflecting upon the immediacies of that period, Alexis “D’Boys” Rodríguez, an influential Havana-based Afro-Cuban DJ and producer of hip hop events, also foregrounds questions of travel regarding his early encounters with what he refers to as “la música Afro-americana” (black American music). As he explained to me: “My father was a sailor, a [Cuban] merchant marine. And he traveled a lot spending time in Canada and the United States where he heard a lot of black American music, like funk and all that stuff—he also danced a lot. I’m in this sense like a mirror of my parents. I always liked this music because it was the music I always heard. For all my life, since I was born, I remember listening to funk music, it was simply part of my culture.”⁸

Beyond simply questions of exposure, Alexis’s account underscores active identification and embodied rearticulation of African American popular music and dance by Afro-Cubans in globally conscious ways. Such practices recall the ways Afro-descendant youth in other contexts have similarly adopted African American music idioms and forms of popular fashion to mark their belonging to a cosmopolitan blackness in ways that

often complicate dominant national prescriptions (Anderson 2009; Diawara 1998; Hanchard 1999; Sansone 2003; Thomas 2004; Wade 2002). In this case, participation within a contemporary black globality—this *música Afro-americana*—offered an alternative lens to imagine and possibly embody Afro-Cuban blackness in ways that ultimately supersede the spatial and temporal bounds of Cuba’s official nationscape.

While informal access to and trafficking of U.S. media may have occurred, Ariel suggests such avenues were not necessarily sanctioned by the Cuban state. Regarding U.S. radio broadcasts of rap and R&B music during this period, Ariel recalls: “I don’t know if it happened accidentally or intentionally, but there started to be broadcasts of Cuban radio at the same frequency as broadcasts from the United States. I don’t know if it was accidental, you know, but it was very funky because they put a radio station on the same frequency as [Miami’s] 99 Jamz. They put a Cuban station with such force, you know, it was impossible to get 99 Jamz.”

Revolutionary Cuba indeed has a history of disrupting U.S. radio transmissions—the most notable involved blocking the U.S.-funded, Cuban-exile-run Radio Martí out of Miami. These jamming efforts underscore the ways radio has long been a site of ideological struggle in Cuba, including histories of state censorship of local music programming as well (Frederick 1986; Hernández-Reguant 2006). In the case of North American music, these strategies were less about blocking potentially disruptive effects of overly political forms of U.S. propaganda than about guarding against “corruptive” foreign intrusions into the Cuban revolutionary body. As with the banning of U.S. rock music in the early 1960s, the appeal of North American popular music among Cuban youth was one that the state apparently wished to ward off. Considering Ariel’s and Alexis’s recollections and understandings of the moment, it appears that the circulation of U.S. black popular music among Afro-Cuban youth actively continued despite such state efforts.

Another individual whose memories of this period offer insight along these lines is Pablo Herrera, a pioneering Afro-Cuban hip hop producer whose work within Havana’s hip hop community has been equally prodigious. Reflecting on his early experiences with North American music, Pablo explained:

I listened throughout high school to a lot of [U.S.] FM music. I listened to everything they used to play on the Top 40, and I used to write down

the Billboard listings. A lot of the mainstream music from the eighties, though, was mostly white music. The minute I found black music I forgot about all the rest of it. I was like, 'I'm not fucking with that shit, this just does not speak to me. This other music speaks to me.' This is what I'm saying, I wanted to gain a cultural connection that may have to do with being African, Africans in the diaspora, and our discourses musically and culturally are what draws us to each other. It made it feel like wow, I dig your shit forever, I love this shit!⁹

Pablo's comments speak vividly to the ethnomusicologist Steven Feld's notion of music listening as a participatory act, one that Feld suggests "brings out a special kind of 'feelingful' activity and engagement on the part of the listener" in the making of social meaning (Feld 1984: 13). Pablo's involvement with North American music in this sense was both active and deliberate, assuming his own affective structures of feeling (R. Williams 1977) involving levels of racial identification and resignification. Such sensibilities, moreover, evoke Josh Kun's discussion of the African American jazz virtuoso Rahsaan Roland Kirk's iconoclastic celebration of "blacknuss" as a "musical language that exploits and articulates the aurality of race" (Kun 2005: 133). While Roland Kirk's blacknuss may have been imbued with a certain aesthetic depth of black historical life, in Pablo's reading such affects are rendered racially audible in a diasporic sense. Recalling Michael Hanchard's (1998) discussion of Brazil's Black Soul movement of the 1970s that similarly drew on currents of African American popular music in framing cosmopolitan notions of blackness, the interplay between consuming and redeploying racial self-meaning has the potential to shape local identities while laying ground for racially conversant forms of social practice as well.

Indeed, a shift from active listening to artistic crafting occurred as Cuban interest in hip hop spread from the radio waves to *la calle* by the mid-1980s. During this period a cultural space began to take shape as increasing numbers of youth, almost exclusively darker-skinned and largely male, began gathering in both private and public settings. Informal parties called *los bonches* began springing up in homes, parks, and on street corners where young people gathered to listen, dance, and otherwise participate in the collective making of *la moña*—a term coined to refer to U.S. rap and R&B music and the social space that evolved around the following. Musicologists Deborah Pacini Hernandez and Reebee Garofalo (2000) provide insightful

documentation of the early contours of la moña as a cultural precursor to the rise of hip hop on the island. Where my account diverges, however, concerns questions of racial identification and their transnational dimensions.

Recalling los bonches, local lore tells of a park in Ariel's home barrio of Lawton, known as Parque de los Policías due to its proximity to the local police station, where in the early to mid-1980s informal la moña parties were held on weekends. In Ariel's recounting, moñeros would gather around makeshift DJ tables, "a piece of wood placed over boxes," with rudimentary amplifiers and speakers to party to U.S. rap, R&B, and "funky soul." During our conversation I told Ariel his description sounded remarkably reminiscent of the local street jams of the mid-1970s I had attended as a child on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Aware of Ariel's sensibility as an astute student of U.S. hip hop, I wondered if his description might have been informed by an awareness of hip hop's lore-laden origins and, if so, whether it might be an effort to position himself and Cuba more broadly within hip hop's now globally disseminated lineage.

Ariel's personal details notwithstanding, I have heard from others of Parque de los Policías' famed reputation for los bonches de calle, a central component of which was a local form of breakdancing. Popular accounts of this period describe informal competitions known as los retos de breakdance in which dancers challenged one another to the play of la moña music. DJ Alexis D'Boys, one of those early street dancers, explained that, given the scarcity of cassette players, dancers often resorted to the use of improvised chants as background beats upon whose rhythmic tempo moñeros danced. One of the more legendary of these chants etched in collective lore is "la caja, he, he, la caja," referencing a percussive play upon boxes (*cajas*) to mimic the cadence of hip hop beats.

In contrast to suggestions that this participatory space of music and dance had a largely multiracial character (Baker 2011: 268), DJ Alexis recalls Parque de los Policías as a primarily black space:

El Parque de los Policías was a completely black movement, one that started in a barrio where the population was 90 percent black. This barrio Lawton was one of the marginal barrios. Before the triumph of the revolution it was a barrio of the upper class, and many blacks worked in houses of the rich; this was a wealthy zone. But when the owners of these houses fled to the U.S. after the triumph, the domestic workers moved

into these houses and this became a marginal barrio. This park, Parque de los Policías, where you had b-boys, they were all black. You might find a white [blanquito], but it was fundamentally black.¹⁰

Pablo Herrera's reflections of the moment echo similar lines: "Communal cultural efforts like la moña and el bonche exist in Cuba sort of like secret societies just to take the music. These were completely black spaces, full-on black. This was nothing but black. So what I'm saying here is that if there existed any previous understanding of, or any prelude to, hip hop in Cuba, it comes from el bonche."

Offering possible nuance to the point, Ariel adds in reference to Parque de los Policías and the broader space of los bonches:

I always say that the prominent color and the strongest presence of people were black and mestizos, you know what I mean, so there may have been some white people, yes, but that wouldn't make it interracial, because the commentary is really coming from the black folks. The leadership is coming from black folks, and the main figures, the major dancers, the people who made a reputation and were most famous at the time were basically blacks. Like the big names, the biggest breakdancers—they were black—so I would say the leadership of those spaces came from blacks and people of color, you understand me?¹¹

Beyond simple demographics, realms of racial identification were apparently also active within these emerging spaces. Among early bonche members, Ariel suggests:

There was a language of acceptance that was definitely tied to where we knew we came from—we share a local experience and we share a story. And this was conscious but not exactly spoken about, you know what I mean? But we knew the connection we had between each other locally here in Cuba was also a connection we had with black music in America, because we're black and we feel connected with those black folks. We never felt like we were distant from those black people. And we accepted and embraced this music because we feel we are part of it, and that we can be accepted there. It is something we could assimilate easily, you know what I mean? It's something we can connect with easily, something that we feel beyond words, you know what I mean?¹²

While the crowds and attendant identifications may indeed have engaged vocabularies of blackness, los retos de breakdance were primarily male-centered celebrations of music, body, and movement, the masculine character of which is reflected in DJ Alexis's alias, "D'Boys" (pronounced "da-boyz"). As Alexis elaborates: "When I started, the first element of hip hop culture I became involved in was as a b-boy,¹³ which is why I go by 'D'Boys' after the guys who I started dancing with. We became friends and formed a group of b-boys and worked on our choreography, and people wound up naming us 'da-boyz.' I got my name because I was the most active in the group, and I was crazy for those battles."

Evocative of Alexis's personal account, early moñeros fashioned a largely homosocial space of male performativity reminiscent of New York City's early b-boy culture of the 1970s and 1980s. The competitive masculinist posturing central to these b-boy battles grew in part out of urban gang culture from which some young black and Puerto Rican men, who comprised much of the pioneering ranks of New York's breaking crews, drew (Chang 2005; Rivera 2003). While histories of structural violence and racialized class marginalization particular to postindustrial urban America were not inherent to revolutionary Cuba, there nonetheless seemed to be a gendered dimension of cultural translation and embodied identification among moñeros who first took up hip hop music and dance. Indeed, such masculine groundings, as will be explored, continued to be a central (though not necessarily definitive) social contour of Cuba's evolving hip hop phenomenon.

Transnational Complications

Dance and body-centered musicality have of course been enduring facets of Afro-Cuban cultural life in realms of both the secular and sacred. Yvonne Daniel's allusion to rumba as a holistic "complex" of "combined music/dance activity" (Daniel 1995) speaks in this sense more expansively to fields of Afro-Cuban expressive practice writ large. Traditions of Afro-Cuban music making have at the same time long engaged Afro-Atlantic routes of cultural dialogue and interchange in many politically resonant moments and ways. Echoing drumming patterns introduced by relocated Saint-Dominguean slaves following the outbreak of the Haitian Revolution, Eastern Cuba's *tumba francesa* owes an important part of its history to semi-independent *cabildos*¹⁴ and the more transgressive *palenques* (maroon com-

munities) of the former enslaved who formed autonomous communities of black radical freedom. Some more recent histories of the black dialogic kind are recalled through the work of Leonardo Acosta and Ned Sublette regarding cross-fertilizations between Cuban popular music and U.S. jazz via trans-Caribbean currents of exchange between Cuba, Haiti, and New Orleans (Acosta 2003; Sublette 2007). An important chapter here, Acosta suggests, occurred during the first U.S. occupation of Cuba (1898–1902) when African American battalions introduced local Cubans to early jazz, elaborating upon conversations initiated in the late nineteenth century by Cuban migrants to New Orleans—among them musicians who contributed creative form to Jelly Roll Morton’s celebrated ode to early jazz’s “Spanish tinge.”

Closer historically, a long lineage of Afro-Cuban musicians, from Frank “Machito” Grillo, Mario Bauzá, Luciano “Chano” Pozo, and Arsenio Rodríguez to later artists like Mongo Santamaria and Chucho Valdés, were instrumental in the development of Afro-Latin jazz forms through artistic repartee with African American musicians. Here, vocabularies of racial affinity were undoubtedly active in the creative mix (see J. Moreno 2004). Indeed, Dizzy Gillespie’s oft-cited reference to Chano Pozo’s claim that their collaborations worked from a shared sense that “we both speak African” (Gillespie 1979: 318) suggests a racial transcendence of nation via diasporically envisioned notions of black musicality.¹⁵ The life narratives of bandleaders Mario Bauzá and Arsenio Rodríguez, moreover, speak to the ways jazz cosmopolitanisms enabled artistic mediations of black-self in the space between Cuban and U.S. racial landscapes.¹⁶ Similar translational dimensions can be seen in the work of the mulato poet Nicolás Guillén, whose literary meditations on *afrocubanidad* arose in conversation with fellow *poesía negra* writers like Puerto Rico’s Luis Palés Matos and the Dominican Republic’s Manuel del Cabral, as well as decades of correspondence with the African American poet Langston Hughes (Ellis 1998; Kaup 2000).

What marks more recent lines of diasporic interchange is that their routes of dialogue are more often than not electronically mediated. Recalling Ariel’s reference to the ways young people drew upon *Soul Train* videos in emulating popular styles of African American dance, DJ Alexis speaks with wisps of nostalgia of a video of the classic U.S. breakdancing film *Beat Street* (1984) acquired by his father as his first exposure to b-boying: “From his travels to Canada he brought me a video of the film *Beat Street* along with

music. From this I first learned how to dance. I lent this video out to many people, who recorded it and copied the music and used it to learn how to dance. And this is how we first learned how to breakdance and about the hip hop culture.”¹⁷

With its colorful portrayal of the South Bronx’s early hip hop scene awash with the bravado of breakdance battles, the majority of the b-boys portrayed in *Beat Street* are Nuyorican, reflecting, in turn, the instrumental role of Puerto Ricans in the development of breakdance as an urban art form. As Raquel Rivera has argued, Puerto Rican participation in the early shaping of New York City’s hip hop culture involved mediations of blackness and *latinidad* via creative exchange with African Americans grounded in shared Afro-descendancy and local histories of racial subjugation (Rivera 2003). Such diasporic complexities and their raced understandings were not lost on Alexis, an impassioned student of hip hop. Situating breakdance within narratives of Afro-Atlantic cultural synthesis and resistance, Alexis explained to me:

Look, the research that I have done on hip hop is that its culture comes from Africa, its roots are African. For example, black Africans [los *negros Africanos*] who practiced capoeira used a move, a dance that was at the same time a form of defense against whites coming to exploit them.¹⁸ By coming to Cuba, Brazil, Puerto Rico, and Jamaica they transformed it into a dance, though one used for defense. But at the same time the dance evolved and became breakdance. In terms of its evolution and arrival in the United States, many Africans of course were also brought to the United States, but it was Puerto Rican immigrants there in the States who developed this dance and evolved it into breakdancing.

Alexis then added: “Take DJ’ing, for example, it comes from Jamaica. DJ Kool Herc came to the United States from Jamaica and established DJ culture and MC’ing as well. And graffiti, some of the first graffiti artists were Puerto Rican, you understand. This is why I say hip hop is of Afro-Caribbean (*afrocaribeño*) origin, this is the study I have done. Coming from Africa and the Caribbean and then to the United States it became a big movement, a community of hip hop.”

Evoking notions of Afro-Caribbean cultural ownership, Alexis’s account imbues hip hop with a certain black authenticity while simultaneously grounding Cuba within its embryonic arc. In the case of breakdance,



2.1. MC Alexis “el Pelón” Cantero of Hermanos de Causa. Photo by the author

Puerto Ricans’ Afrodiasporicity offers a creative vehicle through which Afro-Brazilian capoeira—as syncretic bridge between Africa and the diaspora—is transformed into modern breakdancing. In Alexis’s formulation, hip hop emerges as a kind of black “changing same,” to borrow from Paul Gilroy’s elaboration upon Amiri Baraka (Gilroy 1993: cf. Baraka 1966), through which an expression of African historical roots and transnational routes of cultural synthesis mark an evolving black historicity that implicates Cuba’s participation and membership along with Puerto Rico, Brazil, and Jamaica.

Alexis’s and other moñeros’ early involvements with hip hop music and dance thus demonstrated an active embodiment of such diasporic intimacy. Alexis’s fluency in hip hop’s coming-of-age narrative helps lay further claim to his own membership within this lineage. Like their black and Latino peers in New York City, moñeros similarly appropriated public space in the making of *la moña* as a racially marked site of cultural (self-)production. And if we consider anecdotal accounts of frequent police breakups of *los bonches* (Hoch 1999), these emergent spaces were not in turn necessarily well received by the Cuban state.

Frictions of Street and State

Official efforts to regulate public space and the airwaves notwithstanding, it would be inaccurate to portray the Cuban government's position regarding *la moña's* rise as strictly oppositional. State institutions, in fact, appear to have played a role in introducing Cuban youth to U.S. popular music through various public channels.¹⁹ One such early source was 1980s television programming dedicated to popular music from Cuba and abroad. Both Alexis and Ariel, for instance, recall seeing Herbie Hancock's futurist 1983 "Rockit" video on Cuban television. As Alexis describes it, the video with its hip-hop-inspired scratching techniques and young, track-suit-adorned men b-boying was his first awakening to breakdancing.

Of yet possible greater impact on *la moña's* early growth was the establishment of state-sponsored parties and spaces in the early 1990s where youth, primarily black and darker-skinned, gathered to listen and dance to African American popular music. Premier among these was *La Piragua*—an open-air performance space on the seafront Malecón adjacent to the storied Hotel Nacional, where weekend *la moña* parties were organized during summer school breaks (Pacini Hernandez and Garofalo 2000).²⁰ Along with other open-air music gatherings in Havana, *La Piragua* was organized by the Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas (UJC, or Union of Young Communists), which, as the youth wing of the Cuban Communist Party, is charged with promoting socialist ideals and political participation among Cuban youth.

In addition to these larger state-sponsored events, smaller *bonches* would continue to be organized informally in private homes and public sites like parks. While these developments marked the growth of a cultural movement in the making, they also underscore the beginning of the Cuban government's various efforts to engage, if not institutionally incorporate, this emergent racially implicated space of youth activity. Indeed, this play between street and state remains an enduring and ever defining tension within the evolving narrative of Cuban hip hop.

One likely rationale for these state-sponsored parties was to channel young peoples' energies during the long summer vacation months. Such interests would appear to take on added urgency considering that these spaces were organized in the early 1990s at the onset of the economic crisis of the Special Period, a time when scarcities of food, electricity, and medicine and the collapse of socialist rewards pushed Cuban society toward des-

perate ends. This is not to suggest a reductive reading of state intentions, but rather to emphasize the multivalence of possible interests that played into institutional actions during this period. It would make sense that the socialist state would want to offer outlets for Havana youth during the hot and extended summer break from state-run schools. Yet such priorities could also dovetail with interests in maintaining effective levels of governmental control amid a time of particular societal stress.

One only needs to recall the summer *huelgas* (riots) of 1994 when hundreds of Central Havana residents—large numbers of whom were young, black, and male—took angrily to the streets, targeting storefront windows displaying dollar merchandise only foreign tourists and a few well-positioned Cubans at the time could afford. In addition to Fidel Castro famously joining the fray to calm the protesters, the state dispatched young members of the Blas Roca worker brigade as a bulwark to help quell the unrest. The brigade's deployment against largely darker-skinned rioters carried a certain irony given that the group was named in honor of Blas Roca Calderío, a venerated black Communist Party committee member. Cuba's leadership in fact was reportedly acutely aware of the racial undercurrents and potential menace of the moment (de la Fuente and Glasco 1997).

Triggered by the hijacking of a Havana ferry in an effort to flee the island,²¹ this previously unimaginable expression of post-1959 unrest was a critical link in a chain of events that coalesced in that summer's *balseros* crisis. In response to the *huelgas* and in an effort to alleviate mounting social pressures of the Special Period, the Cuban leadership allowed some thirty thousand Cubans, many of them poor and darker-complected, to take flight on makeshift rafts (*balsas*) heading north to the U.S. mainland. For roughly a month, a carnivalesque environment ensued in greater Havana as individuals, groups, and families scrambled for materials and resources to construct improvised rafts out of inner tubes and scrap wood.²² The exodus represented the first time since the 1980 Mariel boatlift that Cubans were granted temporary liberty to leave the island en masse, an episode that also involved significant participation of darker and poor Cubans. Occurring one year following the legalization of the U.S. dollar, the summer of 1994 represented a critical point of crisis and reckoning for the Cuban state, the revolution, and Cubans as a whole.

It was amid the uncertainties of this period that an aspiring DJ, Adalberto Jiménez, acquired a small space in Central Havana at the busy intersection

of Avenues Infanta and Carlos Tercero, dubbed *el local*, where he began organizing weekend *la moña* parties (Fernández Díaz 2000). Similar gatherings centered around the music of Adalberto and other early DJs intermittently proliferated through the mid-1990s in a number of state-run Casas de la Cultura (neighborhood cultural centers) in Central Havana.²³ Falling under the auspices of Cuba's Ministry of Culture, the introduction of *la moña* parties within local Casas de la Cultura indicated a level of institutional state support. Beyond these sanctioned spaces, other *la moña* parties are reported to have been frequently broken up by police given their association with foreign cultural influence and alleged antisocial (i.e., deviant) behavior (Olavarria 2002; Sokol 2000)—experiences echoed in DJ Alexis's personal accounts of the period. Taken in tandem, all would seem to suggest an ambivalence on the part of the Cuban state regarding its dealings with an emerging U.S.-inspired youth culture, at one time seeking to regulate through official avenues while policing extra-institutional expressions.

As Pacini Hernandez and Garofalo (2000, 2004) suggest, such state anxieties appear to have hinged on long-standing claims of *diversionismo ideológico* (ideological diversionism) from revolutionary precepts, a charge previously leveled against Cuba's rock movement. Formulated in the early 1970s amid debates concerning the ideological role of culture in forging revolutionary ideals and citizenry (cf. Hart Dávalos 1990), *diversionismo ideológico* spoke of the need to create a bulwark against counterrevolutionary tendencies (or manipulations) of Western capitalist culture—particularly those emanating from the United States—that could potentially undermine the socialist project (cf. R. Castro 1974). In line with post-'59 conceptions of revolution and nationhood, capitalist-infused cultural forms deemed “foreign” to the Cuban Revolution were therefore not only antithetical to socialism but incongruous with an otherwise autochthonous Cuban cultural patrimony. Such forms were therefore “ideologically diversionary” from the socialist path as well as officially sanctioned narratives of *cubanidad*.

While hip hop may have been implicated in such early scriptings, its politically infused associations with blackness—both off and increasingly on the island—posed additional complications to the ideological saliency of a racially transculturated Cuba and subsequent revolutionary investments in a postracial nationalism. The labeling of largely black *la moña* gatherings as sites of antisocial(ist) potential, moreover, resonates once again with the enduring coupling of black Cubans with pathologized deviance that render

Afro-Cubans ever discordant with the transformist project of revolutionary socialism. Indeed, hip hop's racially disruptive tendencies and state efforts to regulate (if not mitigate and contain) them became a central site of friction between this emerging cultural phenomenon and a wary Cuban state.

Evolving Spaces

State cautions being what they were, the establishment of el local and subsequent gatherings in neighborhood Casas de la Cultura marked a new phase in the development of la moña as an evolving cultural space, one that coincided with an active shift in focus from moñeros to raperos. While small numbers of youth in the Havana area may have started experimenting with rapping by the late eighties, it was not until 1995 that a more formal convergence of what would become Cuban hip hop began to come into focus. That year Rodolfo Rensoli, a late-twenty-something university-educated cultural worker and poet, along with Balesy Rivero founded a small arts collective known as Grupo Uno through which they began organizing local rap competitions in their municipality of Bahía in the Habana del Este zone.

Prior to his involvement in hip hop, Rensoli had been active in Havana's rock scene as a promoter of music-related events. When I first met him and Balesy in 1999 amid preparations for the fifth annual hip hop festival, Rensoli's ebony brown skin and tight-knit Afro made it difficult to imagine him partaking in the frenetic head-banging customary by many long-haired *rockeros* (rock devotees) at Cuban rock shows. When I mentioned this, Rensoli told me that the common labeling of rock as "white" music in Cuba was a false one, explaining, "If you know the history you know that almost everything that comprises rock music in the first place was invented by black people."²⁴ Rensoli added that though he considered himself a *rockero* during his involvement with Cuba's rock scene, he was also influenced by the island's growing reggae movement, with which he eventually came to identify as well. Rensoli's involvements in these music making spaces appear to have been motivated in important part by an intellectual commitment to avant-garde forms of cultural expression through the promotion of what he termed *músicas alternativas* (alternative music). While his participation in the early shaping of Cuban hip hop may have been inspired along similar lines, questions of race did in fact occupy a meaningful place in Rensoli's understandings of hip hop's significance on the island.

As Rensoli described it, what first drew his attention to this new youth culture in the making was breakdancing, an increasingly visible presence in the streets of his East Havana barrio by 1995. Rensoli recalls his intellectual curiosity deepening after he attended a local folkloric presentation where, reminiscent of DJ Alexis's account, a discussion of the African roots of the dance style occurred. Around this time young men began gathering informally at a local patio to freestyle rap,²⁵ and while attending a neighborhood "soul party" Rensoli shared a conversation with a group of raperos who were complaining about the lack of available performance spaces. It was at that point, Rensoli explains, that he and Balsey decided to explore the idea of an event to showcase what they recognized as an emergent moment of island hip hop, forming the collective Grupo Uno to undertake the project. In the summer of 1995 Grupo Uno organized three days of local rap competitions in Bahia, drawing MCs from the neighboring East Havana barrios of Alamar, Cojimar, Regla, and Guanabacoa. The following June a similar competition was held across town in a local cultural center in the leafy Havana barrio of Vedado. Organized by the director of the hosting *casa de la cultura* plaza, the event dubbed "Rap Plaza 96" was noted in the state-run *Granma* newspaper as the first festival dedicated exclusively to hip hop.

Although these were all small shoestring events showcasing a handful of local rap groups, they marked the birth and unfolding complexities of what would become Cuba's annual hip hop festival. The events' crosstown locations, moreover, underscored the rise of two potentially competing centers of early rapero activity, one clustered around Havana's eastern suburbs and the other located in its central urban zone. It was in 1997, however, that Rensoli approached the state-run Asociación Hermanos Saíz (AHS) seeking institutional support as a co-organizer for a proposed expanded competition to be held that summer in the eastern municipality of Alamar.²⁶ With few alternatives outside the all-providing socialist state, the costs of a proposed Havana-wide festival would indeed require greater levels of government support. As the cultural arm of the Union of Young Communists (UJC) charged with promoting (and channeling) music and artistic energies among Cubans under thirty-five, Hermanos Saíz would have been an obvious option.

In the opinion of Pablo Herrera, then manager of the Vedado-based rap group Amenaza, Rensoli may have also been interested in reclaiming and securing Grupo Uno's hold on the festival and Eastern Havana's prominence

within the developing trajectory of Cuban hip hop.²⁷ Regardless of motives, it is clear that by 1997 increased institutional involvement was strategically essential for organizing and securing subsequent festivals, a reality that also marked an escalated governmental stake in the evolving space and future direction of hip hop Cubano.

For those in the Cuban leadership who viewed hip hop with suspicion as a nonindigenous foreign import, there may have been grounds, at least ostensibly, for such concerns. Given early scarcities of production-related resources, the vast majority of island hip hop throughout the mid-1990s involved live performances over prerecorded “background” cassettes from the United States and Europe. This meant Cuban MCs often composed lyrics to foreign instrumental tracks, sometimes rapping over beats from a popular repertoire of commercial hip hop from the States. Accounts of the period also suggest that early raperos tended to mimic performance and fashion styles of African American artists, often donning hooded jackets, skull caps, boots, and imitation gold chains (Fernández Díaz 2000; Smith 1998). While transnationally indebted, such style practice may not have been devoid of political meaning making, however.

Drawing upon his work with young Garifuna men in Honduras, Central America, Mark Anderson suggests that similar displays of African American fashion style often involve the negotiation of contemporary forms of Garifuna identity, offering “a diasporic resource for the performance of a Black cosmopolitanism that sits uneasily alongside images of Garifuna tradition commonly produced by the state, the media, and Garifuna organizations” (Anderson 2009: 175). Rather than passive consumers of U.S. cultural exports, Anderson suggests, these young men tap into stylized dimensions of African American commercial culture in crafting alternative, cosmopolitanly modern notions of black Garifuna-ness in ways that may challenge otherwise dominant, nationally bound representations. Comparable practices have been noted by Steven Gregory (2006) among Haitian immigrants in the Dominican Republic and have been similarly sited by Deborah Thomas (2004) in shaping transnational understandings of black modernity in Jamaica (see also Diawara 1998; Hanchard 1998).

In the case of early raperos, plays upon black-identified U.S. music and style forms may also be seen as efforts to negotiate new grammars of Afro-Cuban-ness as a means of marking racial difference while expanding the terms of Cuban blackness itself. Indeed, for many darker-skinned youth

who first took to hip hop, everyday levels and modes of racialized experience as discussed assumed an increasingly charged, transnationally inflected significance amid Cuba's market turn of the 1990s. Governing lines within which blackness had been historically configured and channeled—as folkloric, autochthonously rooted, spatially and temporally bound—were in this sense creatively redrawn via hip hop's globally conversant, racially coded aesthetics. Early raperos can in this light be seen as participating in their own kinds of racial entrepreneurialism, yet ones involving resignifications of style as self-representational practice (cf. Hebdige 1979). If we consider Stuart Hall's suggestion that “it is only through the way in which we represent and imagine ourselves that we come to know how we are constituted and who we are” (Hall 1992: 30), the performative possibilities of black popular style encourages attention to the representational force of style in its capacity to enunciate, rather than simply reflect, identities of blackness and ways of being.

Performing Blackness

In step with the rise of hip hop on the island, Cuba's annual hip hop festival continued to grow in size and artistic sophistication through the early 2000s. Despite limited resources, the festival expanded from an event involving a small collection of East Havana-based raperos in 1995 to a multiday program encompassing an island-wide diversity of groups and an assortment of international artists. Based on my attendance from 2000 to 2003, the event represented not only a culmination of a year's worth of artistic development but also an annual opportunity for many raperos to push their music creatively on multiple levels. Held since 1997 in Alamar's open-air *anfiteatro* before some three thousand predominantly black and brown-skinned youth, the festival was the largest single stage for Cuban hip hop and recognized by many MCs as the pinnacle occasion to showcase their music and talent. The festival's stature was all the more significant given that limited production resources and commercial markets have long grounded island hip hop—like most vernacular traditions of Cuban music making—in the intimacies of live performance.

From the festival's inaugural year the social contours that have come to define Cuban hip hop began to take shape. Key among these were raperos'



2.2. MC Magyori “La Llave” Martínez (foreground) and DJ Yary Collia.
Photo by the author

emphasis on social themes drawn from experiences of a young, largely darker-skinned generation of Cubans as they navigated the daily, often fraught tensions of a Cuba in historical flux—one posed between revolutionary socialism and ever-evolving market realities. Given the centrality of social commentary and critique, raperos referred to their lyric-driven compositions as *temas sociales* or simply *temas* (social themes or themes) rather than the more prosaic *canciones* (songs). The rhetorical significance of *temas*, moreover, marked raperos’ textual emphasis on the social message, or *mensaje*, of their lyrics. Although resonances were surely present before, the third annual festival—1997, Alamar’s first—marked a move toward more overt incorporations of social motifs, particularly regarding dimensions of race and racial identity.

One related episode etched in the collective memory of raperos and foreign chroniclers alike occurred during the 1997 festival. *Primera Base*, a pioneering rap trio and the first to record a commercially produced rap album in Cuba,²⁸ performed their *tema* “Igual que tú” (The same as you) in tribute to Malcolm X. In prefacing the song’s performance, one of the MCs explained

to the amassed Alamar crowd, “This is a homage to Malcolm X, because he is our brother and we relate to black people all over the world, even in the United States, and we feel sorry for our black brothers in the United States who have to live the way they do. They have it the worst of the worst” (quoted in Hoch 1999: 194). Evoking themes of resistance and self-determination, the song drew inspiration from the life story and black masculine imagery of Malcolm X. When it came to the chorus refrain, members of Primera Base chanted in Spanish, “Malcolm, we wanna be just like you nigger, a nigger like you.”

A handful of North Americans present at the event were reportedly dismayed by the seemingly flippant, decontextualized manner in which the term *nigger* was affixed to Malcolm X. Among this group was Nehanda Abiodun, a prominent African American political exile living in Cuba who would develop a long-standing relationship with Havana-area raperos. Although clearly fraught, Abiodun speaks of the incident as provoking her interest in the emerging scene, suggesting in turn that the resource-strapped artists were in need of critical engagement.²⁹ Reflecting on the moment, one of the group’s members, Rubén Marín, later recounted: “Everyone here sort of felt the echo of Malcolm mania after Spike Lee’s movie, so I read his Autobiography to try to get to the truth of what he was really about. The point I am trying to get across in the song is if a great man like Malcolm X is considered a nigger, then I want to be a nigger too like him” (Verán 1998: 133).

While a sensitivity to the historical violence embedded in the term *nigger* may have been obscured for members of Primera Base, an identification with Malcolm X as a black liberatory figure apparently was not. Rubén’s comments attest once more to the capacity and global reach of U.S. media in conveying images and discursive notions of blackness. Yet rather than being an object of unreflective consumption, Spike Lee’s filmic portrait of Malcolm X was drawn upon by these young men, two of them black, in mobilizing alternative narratives of blackness in ways quite similar to those I have discussed in the context of Afro-Brazilian hip hop (M. Perry 2008b). As Rodolfo Rensoli, then the festival’s organizer, recalled of the episode:

Never in Cuba has there been a song that expressed anything like “we blacks are equal to you” like Primera Base’s tema about Malcolm X. I think that this song marked a new period for Cuban music. After this there was

a series of songs in rap where there was a self-affirmation of blackness. I haven't analyzed it thoroughly, but if you were to examine Cuban music the image of blacks is almost always one of drunkards. It is not the image of blacks as social thinkers, or as cultural thinkers. Rap marks in this way an overturning [*vuelco*] in the thinking of the black individual. It is in part a self-reconciliation [*auto-reconciliación*] as black people.³⁰

Rensoli's notion of black self-reconciliation does indeed appear to have been a recurring theme during the 1997 festival. A poignant case in point involved Amenaza (Menace) and their performance of "Ochavon cruzao" (roughly, Mixed-up octoroon).³¹ In this tema the group's three members of variously mixed-race backgrounds address the lived ambivalences of racial identity in contemporary Cuba. In doing so, the artists both complicate and implicitly contest dominant narratives that present *mestizaje* as a historically stable and harmonious race-neutral core of the Cuban social body. Awarded first prize for best composition during the 1997 hip hop festival,³² a lyric excerpt of "Ochavon cruzao" follows:

También soy congo,
también fui esclavo,
también mi esperanza sufre para aquellos
que el racismo no ha acabado
Soy rumba Yoruba Andavo
y no acabo hasta ver lo
mío multiplicado
No ves soy pinto, ochavon cruzao
negro como el danzón y el son cubano
negro como esta mano
negro como mi hermano
negro como Mumia
y negro como muchos blancos, mas quien lo diría, y no me cuentas
Mesafía raza mía.
Dijeron negro pero a mi no me contaron
Dijeron blanco pero en esta clan no me aceptaron
Dijeron tantas cosas
Soy el ser que nadie quiso,
lo negro con lo blanco, el grito de un mestizo

I too am Congo,
 I too was a slave,
 and so too has my hope suffered for them because racism has not
 ended
 I am rumba Yoruba Andavo
 and I won't be done until I see what's
 mine multiplied
 Can't you see I am mixed, mixed octoroon
 black like the Cuban danzón and the son
 black like this hand
 black like my brother
 black like Mumia
 and black like lots of whites, but who could tell, so you don't count me
 My race defies.
 They said black but they didn't count me
 They said white but that clan didn't
 accept me
 They said so many things
 I'm the one that no one wanted,
 the black with the white, the cry of a mestizo³³

While this passage offers poetic voice regarding struggles over racial self-meaning, it also represents an early foregrounding of the movement's quest for forms of black identification transcendent of Cuba's prevailing racial continuum and its lived ambiguities. By exposing the internal dissonance embodied in the celebrated national figure of the mestizo, the song's first-person narrative undermines a foundational symbol of Cuba's historical profession as a racially transculturated (i.e., racially neutral[ized]) nation. The tema's mestizo subject seeks to rectify, or in Rensoli's terms self-reconcile, this dissonance by making its own historical claims to blackness. Such affirmations are voiced at one moment through the invocation "soy rumba," whose Afro-historicity is further grounded through association with Havana's acclaimed Afro-Cuban rumba troupe Yoruba Andavo. Amenaza's marking of the *danzon* and *son* as "black" music forms, moreover, recuperates these historical genres—long-acclaimed national symbols of a harmonized, racially hybrid Cuban patrimony—as part of an Afro-Cuban cultural lineage asserting, in turn, a black Cuban presence and historical le-

gitimacy. Amenaza's interventions along these lines thus literally "menace" Cuba's nonracial glorifications.

Significantly, "Ochavon cruzao" also invokes the social memory of Africa (congo) as well as the racial terror of slavery, two historical loci central to the shaping of black racial consciousness in the Afro-Atlantic world (Gilroy 1993). And yet it is an enduring racism "that has not ended," which links the living present to that of the past. Thus regardless of one's marked rendering as mestizo, one's nonwhite self in this testimonial ode remains ever subject to raced forms of history and power.

Although struggles over racial self-meaning are framed within the space of Cuban nationhood, recourses to blackness are not necessarily so bound. Here, the tema's brief though pointed reference to the radical figure of imprisoned African American journalist Mumia Abu-Jamal is poignant.³⁴ Mumia's invocation presents an alternative, outer-national site of black identification—one that transcends conflictive tensions between a racial ideal and the raced realities of being nonwhite amid Cuba's fluidities of the 1990s. Unlike the historical figure of Malcolm X, the immediacy of Mumia's black radicalism lends an urgency to such identifications. While Abu-Jamal became a common lyric refrain alongside an assortment of "Free Mumia" T-shirts by the early 2000s,³⁵ "Ochavon cruzao" initiated this link within rapero circles. As I discuss in greater detail in the following chapter, engagements with currents of U.S. black radicalism have been critical to the making and moving of black self-understanding within Cuban hip hop. As Amenaza's poetic "cry of a mestizo" suggests, however, despite such self-affirmations, the ontological condition of being racially mixed remained one of marked ambivalence. At least such was the case in 1997.

Lyric-centered analyses of the like might invite concerns regarding the limitations of purely textual readings of social orientation and practice. It is therefore important to foreground the ethnographic context of performance within which raperos' lyrical expression arises. Possibly more than any other contemporary Western music genre's, hip hop's aesthetic form is predicated on the centrality of the spoken word as *performed text*. Among Cuban hip hop artists, such textual prioritizations are reflected in their vernacular use of the phrase *los textos* (the texts) in reference to their lyric compositions.

Yet within Cuban hip hop's live-performance-driven settings, the signifying weight of *los textos* takes on an additional level of embodied sig-

nificance. Beyond the initial composition when textual meanings are first shaped, it is through Cuban MCs' public performance of their temas that such textuality assumes self-actualizing force. It is of course the "rap" through which the rapero artistically defines him/herself, marking in the most tangible of terms that movement from textual realms of discourse to those of corporal practice. While it is indeed one thing for a Cuban youth of mixed race to compose the lyric line "[soy] negro como Mumia" (I'm black like Mumia), it is a whole other ritualized undertaking to mount a stage before three thousand peers and verbally proclaim over a microphone "¡[soy] negro como Mumia!" Here it is less about performing a text than the performative embodiment of the text as self-representational practice. Rather than reflecting a preexistent subject a priori, raperos' public performances in this sense seek to enunciate or socially enact that very subject into being.

As public spectacle, then, the performative dimensions of blackness in "Ochavon cruzao" are hence twofold. A blackness of self-meaning is signified in an immediate sense through announcing itself *as such*—a form of performative utterance or speech act (Austin 1976). Yet in the same breath this act is performative in that its enactment is ultimately productive of something subjectively *different and new* (cf. J. Butler 1990). Amenaza's "cry of a mestizo" thus invokes blackness as spectacle by asserting and making conspicuous a black subject otherwise obscured by Cuba's nonracial scripts. Similar to the mimetic adoption of black style previously discussed, raperos' extranational use of racial markers is translated in ways that assume their own locally situated meanings and structures of feeling. And while such black self-reconciliations—to again evoke Rensoli's term—are imbued with autochthonous national claims, they continue to index a modern black globality with which they actively converse.

This discussion runs somewhat counter to previous accounts of the period suggesting early Cuban rap artists tended not to foreground transnational connections with other African descendant populations, thus displaying a conspicuous absence of Afrodiasporic lines of identification (Pacini Hernandez and Garofalo 2000). Here, appeals to an international cosmopolitanism over those of racial diaspora are seen as primary (cf. Baker 2011). While these observations capture salient features of the early hip hop scene, I suggest further exploration might yield additional complexities.



2.3. Cuban Hip-Hop All Stars CD. Cover artwork © 2000 by Steve Marcus

Arguments along these lines are drawn in part from an interview with the producer Pablo Herrera, who suggested that contemporary Africa held little attention among raperos as a source of identification and inspiration. As I discuss in greater detail later, Africa would in fact become an important point of reference for many Cuban MCs via the ways they imagine, bodily mark, and performatively enact meanings of blackness. Yet beyond appeals to an African historical rootedness per se, to what extent might contemporary articulations with other Afro-Atlantic sites and histories provide more immediate recourse to an Afro-globality, one self-consciously modern and indeed cosmopolitan in scope?

Black Assemblages

As I myself have come to know Pablo Herrera, there seems little ambivalence regarding his own understandings of and participation within extra-national routes of blackness by way of hip hop. Pablo and I first met at the studios of Conjunto Folklórico Nacional in the summer of 1999 while he was doing translation work for a group of North American participants during a dance workshop hosted by the Conjunto.³⁶ Workshop members had gathered that day for a screening of the Afro-Cuban filmmaker Gloria Rolando's recent work *Eyes of the Rainbow* (1997), a documentary celebrating the life of African American political exile Assata Shakur, who has lived in Cuba since the mid-1980s. Noting Pablo's seemingly flawless U.S. accent and the fluidity of his engagement with visiting students, I mistakenly assumed the brother was from the States. It was not until we spoke after the screening that I realized he was not only Cuban but a key contact suggested to me by a mutual acquaintance in New York City. Our exchanges from that point on were almost exclusively in English, sprinkled with an African American vernacular affecting a sense of a black fraternity, which I came to understand as part of Pablo's facile charisma and charm.

I soon learned that Pablo earned an advanced degree in English and Russian translation at the University of Havana, where he completed a thesis on the poetics of African American culture. This background made Pablo fairly exceptional within Havana's hip hop community where the vast majority of raperos and their largely black working-class followers did not attend university, let alone pursue advanced degrees. Pablo later spent a number of months in the late 1990s living in Brooklyn, N.Y., where he gained a deeper appreciation for African American life and racial history. Pablo's cultural fluency in black American-ness was indeed so well-tuned that I heard of his ability to pass in Havana's streets and tourist hotel lobbies as a yuma (foreigner), a notable feat for a young dark-skinned black man in Cuba. Such skill found comic display in the 2000 film *Jails, Hospitals & Hip-Hop* by the New York-based performance artist Danny Hoch in which Pablo, for ironic effect, plays a monolingual camera-toting African American opposite Hoch's street-hustling (and presumably Afro-Cuban) jinetero character.³⁷

This dexterity undoubtedly contributed to Pablo's ability to maneuver fluidly in a space between Cuban and U.S. cultural landscapes, one in which hip hop served as an important medium of translation. Building on an

evolving network of North American contacts, Pablo eventually compiled an improvised music studio in his rooftop apartment in Havana's outlying barrio of Santos Suárez. His mother, a reputable Afro-Cuban architect who helped instill within Pablo a grounded sense of black pride and respect for Cuban socialism, designed the apartment-cum-music-studio that sat atop her home. Pablo's rudimentary production equipment, including a digital beat machine, electronic keyboard, and monitor speakers donated by a New York City contact, came by way of Ariel Fernández Díaz, who approached him around 1999 about assembling a compilation disc of local hip hop. The project culminated in the 2001 CD *Cuban Hip-Hop All Stars, Vol. 1*, which represented the first commercial compilation of Cuban hip hop artists.³⁸ Crafting some of Cuba's earliest background beats, Pablo's home studio became something of a hip hop mecca among established artists seeking music production, including Anónimo Consejo, 100% Original, Obsesión, Grandes Ligas, Las Krudas, Explosión Suprema, and Los Paisanos, to name a few. Until the proliferation of personal computers and music production software enabling a wider range of artists to produce background beats, Pablo held important (though not necessarily uncomplicated) sway within Havana's hip hop community as one of its premier producers.

As Pablo describes it, his sense of black selfhood was first and foremost rooted in his family history and cultural fluency as an Afro-Cuban. Pablo's mother, as mentioned, was a respected architect, while his father, a former director of the radio and electronics section of Cuba's Naval Academy, was the first Afro-Cuban to receive a PhD in his field. Among the first generation of black professionals trained during the revolutionary period, their professional and personal life trajectories were deeply tied and in many ways indebted to the revolutionary project. For Pablo's mother, Daysi Veitia, such fidelity found early expression as a teenage volunteer among the roughly 250,000 Cubans who participated in Cuba's massive National Literacy Campaign of 1961, an experience recounted by Daysi in Catherine Murphy's 2012 documentary film *Maestra*. Daysi's later training and professional development as an architect took shape amid Cuba's rising internationalism, a period that involved her in Cuban-sponsored construction projects as far afield as Vietnam, Cambodia, and Bolivia.

Yet it was his parents' experiences working in Angola during the war period that Pablo claims carried particular salience: "If you talk about the generation of Afro-Cubans who went and fought in Angola in the end of the

eighties and in the beginning of the nineties, the ways that they understood Angolan culture and African people, or black people in Africa, the way they talk about them was special. My parents had important experiences and made important relationships with Angolans while there.”³⁹ Though memories of the war’s trauma remained present, Pablo recounts, his parents’ involvements helped reconcile the human costs of the conflict by foregrounding Cuba’s broader “victory” in helping Angola win the war and postcolonial independence. Speaking of his parents’ pride in partaking in this history, he added: “The experience of having traveled to Africa and having been part of something so grand as the liberation of a country in Africa was huge in that sense. . . . I wanted to go to Angola when it was my chance, I wanted to go to Angola to be part of that. Angola was seen as victory big time. I mean the war had been won, and the Angolan people were free!”

Thus part of a generational narrative similar to that shared by Lisnida’s household,⁴⁰ understandings of afrocubanidad were for Pablo and his family intimately entwined with Cuba’s revolutionary past, one in which contemporary Africa served as a poignantly lived referent. The singularity of history, Pablo suggests, positions Afro-Cubans uniquely in diaspora vis-à-vis engagements with modern Africa.

As Pablo has made clear in the course of our conversations, familial recourses to a Cuban Africanity were also grounded in spaces of the sacred. Pablo traces such lines back to his paternal grandfather, whom he described as a craftsman of African drums and shekeres used in Afro-Cuban religious ceremony, as well as his mother, a longtime *hija* or initiated daughter, of the orisha Yemanyá. These lineages extend to Pablo’s own spiritual involvement in Ocha-Lucumí as an *hijo* of Changó and his more recent initiation into the sacred divinization pathways of Ifá.⁴¹ As he describes it, such commitments are rooted in a deep Afrocentric resolve among Afro-Cubans that has endured in his words as “a sacred space of victory that is untouched by anything, and nothing can fuck with that.”

Although Pablo’s self-understandings drew upon autochthonous readings of Afro-Cuban experience in realms of both the sacred and the profane, hip hop seemed to offer an additionally meaningful site of black belonging. As Pablo recounts, his involvement with hip hop began during a teaching stint at the University of Havana in the mid-1990s when he incorporated Cuban rap lyrics into course material. It was around this period that he came

into contact with Amenaza, eventually developing a relationship with the artists that evolved into a managerial role. Pablo recalls initially harboring some concern about what he felt was the trio's lack of political awareness, particularly in relation to dimensions of race. Shortcomings of this kind, he suggests, contributed to a dismissive attitude among local raperos, some of whom viewed Amenaza as superficial "pretty boys" in relation to the more politically charged range of early island hip hop. As manager, Pablo claims he encouraged Joel "Pando" Heredia, the creative head of Amenaza, to engage more explicitly with questions of race and racial identity. This intervention, he contends, helped initiate Amenaza's eventual turn toward "Ochavon Cruzao," a tema that as discussed marked a new moment of racial self-reflexivity within Havana's budding hip hop movement.

When I queried him about the tema's self-referential appeal to Mumia Abu-Jamal, Pablo offered it was he who first introduced Amenaza to Mumia's story. It is indeed worth noting that earlier the same year that "Ochavon Cruzao" was composed, Pablo had connected with a group of African American activists from New York City during an international youth festival in East Havana.⁴² A number of these individuals were active members of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (MXGM), a youth-oriented collective centered on human rights advocacy and political mobilization among communities of African descent. These contacts eventually led Pablo to Brooklyn the following year.

It was this same period of transnational exchange that gave rise to the launching of Black August, a hip-hop-centered offshoot of MXGM with a strong Cuban focus. Black August in turn became an influential interlocutor with Havana-area raperos through running participation in a number of Cuban hip hop festivals beginning in 1998. A related organizational facet of Black August entailed support for an older generation of imprisoned U.S. black radicals and, by extension, a small circle of African American political exiles residing in Cuba. A key figure among these intergenerational networks was Nehanda Abiodun, mentioned above. A native Harlemitte now in her early sixties who has been in asylum in Cuba since the early 1990s, Abiodun shares a tradition of black-left organizing with fellow radical-in-exile Assata Shakur, and has maintained U.S. connections through in part active membership in MXGM.

I will return to a more detailed discussion of Abiodun and Black August's

legacy in Cuba; what is worth alluding to here is the instrumental role Black August played in facilitating Afro-dialogic alliances between Cuba and the United States via a transnational vocality of hip hop. Among those key in this conversation was Pablo Herrera, who, along with Abiodun, served as one of Black August's founding Cuban members. Extranational affinities of blackness and their political inflections therefore do appear to have been present from inception in hip hop's Cuban rise.