

Chapter 4.

Critical Self-Fashionings and Their Gendering

What must whites think of the black who prides himself on his color?

—José Martí, *La cuestión racial*

El cimarrón ya no tendrás que huir en busca de nuevos horizontes.

[The cimarrón now no longer has to flee in search of new horizons.]

—Anónimo Consejo, “Cimarrón”

Although voiced a century apart, the citations above speak rather poetically to Cuba’s enduring tensions of race and national citizenship. José Martí, the celebrated late nineteenth-century criollo intellectual who gave visionary form to the island’s nonracial national foundations, poses a cautionary query to black Cubans who might foreground racial identity over the national. The consequences of such moves were soon laid bare in the infamous “Race War” of 1912 involving the island-wide massacre of thousands of Afro-Cubans in the wake of state efforts to eradicate the perceived threat of an emergent Partido Independiente de Color (Independent Party of Color) and its calls for full citizenship rights for blacks within a new Cuban republic. Echoes of this trauma abound; the Havana-based hip hop duo Anónimo Consejo offer a present-day rejoinder to this history in the redemptive figure of the African *cimarrón* (maroon), whose radical pursuit of black freedom and sovereign community is deemed no longer hollow.

As previously discussed, expressive realms such as music and the literary arts have long served as creative mediums through which Afro-Cubans imagine alternative understandings of blackness in ways that varyingly articulate with and diverge from a racially hybridized, if ultimately postracial, *cubanidad*. Afro-Cuban efforts to navigate the historical constraints of a non-racial Cuban nationhood have in turn had to grapple with a key dilemma of citizenship: how to be mutually yet non-self-negatingly both Cuban and black. Such discord evokes a certain contradictory “twoness” of Afrodiasporic condition that W. E. B. Du Bois addressed so eloquently roughly a century ago (Du Bois [1903] 1989). Although Du Bois was concerned in an immediate sense with the struggle of post-emancipatory African Americans, his reflections on black subjectivity and racialized marginality speak to the wider hemispheric ambivalences of national belonging and citizenship lived by African-descendant communities throughout the Americas.

For Afro-Cubans, mediating the enduring friction between blackness and Cubanness as discussed has included efforts to reach beyond the island’s territorial and ideological bounds in the fashioning of coherent understandings of black Cuban selfhood. As with previous moments, Cuban raperos have sought their own performative routes to such black alterity through polyphonic claims to black citizenship via both the national and the transnational. Indeed, it is precisely to these *nuevos horizontes* (new horizons) that Anónimo Consejo’s cimarrón currently turns.

Pedagogies of Black Radicality

Between 2000 and 2002, a pair of rapero-affiliated spaces emerged in differing yet complementary ways as sites of racial politicization for a number of key individuals in Havana’s hip hop community. The spaces in question were two informally organized “classes” geared toward redressing, in their respective nationalist frameworks, themes of black radical struggle and history. These venues also provided meaningful dialogue between local raperos and members of an older generation of black intellectuals, in this case one Afro-Cuban and one African American in political exile. One individual who embodied a vibrant confluence of these two spheres of black radical (re)articulation was Yosmel Sarrías (aka Sekou Messiah Umoja) of Anónimo Consejo. His involvements in both classes were very much a critical outgrowth of, as well as a significant contributing factor to, his ongoing

political, artistic, and personal maturation as a prominent and highly respected “old-school” Cuban MC.

In 2000 the African American political exile Nehanda Abiodun began holding occasional gatherings in her home in one of Habana del Este’s high-rise apartment blocks. Stemming from an initial conversation with a visiting U.S. college student friend, the gatherings grew out of a desire among some Havana-area raperos for dialogue about legacies of African American struggle and forms of radical organizing. As Nehanda described it:

That open space started out with rappers coming to me and asking me about Malcolm X, asking me about the movement in the United States, not only the Civil Rights Movement but also the Black Power Movement. “What is the Black Liberation Movement? What was the participation of white people? What was the relationship between various movements in the United States?” they asked. And they were not only interested in finding out about the history, my history, or *their* history in the United States because we are all in this together as people of African descent, but how that history pertains to them here in Cuba. And what it is that they could use to create something here on this island without being opposed to the status quo.¹

When I asked about raperos’ particular interest in the narrative of Malcolm X, Nehanda explained: “Malcolm X represents a certain militancy for the freedom of black people; it’s not only here in Cuba but it is all over the world. He talked about unity as Marcus Garvey did, but in a language that everybody could understand. He was defiant against the powers that be, and he’s a hero among many. My opinion based on my observations is that for too long Cuba has been devoid of talking about their own heroes of African descent. So youth therefore are looking for answers to certain questions.”

When I encountered these gatherings in 2001 they had become fairly regular weekly events, drawing an informal collection of two dozen or so young people composed of Cubans as well as an assortment of North American college students from various educational programs in Havana. Although these gatherings had an informal and often festive atmosphere, the meetings were used for serious discussion of issues ranging from the imprisonment of African American political activists, to the workings of patriarchy, to interracial dating and homophobia. These classes, as Nehanda referred to them, regularly drew a core group of local raperos, and were unique in

providing a regular forum for cross-cultural dialogue around questions of race, gender, and sexuality within comparative contexts of Cuba and the United States. This kind of exchange had yet to occur in any significant way elsewhere within Havana's hip hop community, and in my experience the discussions were highly engaged and often impassioned as diverse perspectives vied and were negotiated among group members.

The impetus and conceptual framing of these exchanges were shaped in an important sense by Nehanda's commitments to a nationalist tradition of radical organizing. These efforts, she explained, were simply an extension of her ongoing work as a black revolutionary. Just because she was now in Cuba, Nehanda asserted, did not mean that her dedication to transformative change ceased to be an active part of her life. When I asked if she viewed her classes as a space of politicization, she responded: "Oh, without a doubt! I mean, why would I even have bothered? [Laughs] I am very proud of those classes, not because I was involved in them but because of what the students, what those individuals within themselves created. I mean, I was just a facilitator, but they created that space and made it what it was. And not only did they take what they learned, but so many of them both here and in Cuba pursued further investigations, further studies following their involvements in the classes."

In the several gatherings I attended, MC Yosmel Sarrías of Anónimo Consejo was consistently among the most outspoken of participants, Cuban or otherwise. His engagements always struck me as especially thoughtful and self-reflective. It was through these meetings that I first got a sense of Yosmel's rather impassioned quest for personal growth and critical self-education. Nehanda was no doubt an inspirational facet of this process. Over the years she developed close relationships with both Yosmel and his artistic partner Kokino, given in part the shared proximity of their neighboring barrios in Habana del Este. Her involvement as a mentor figure was clearly significant for the artists, in meaningful conversation with their thinking, sense of black selves, and ultimately their music.

As an illustration of the mentor-like intimacy that Nehanda shared with the two young men, sometime around 2002 she presided over a neo-African ceremony in which the artists were anointed with new Afrikan-signified names; Yosmel assumed the name Sekou Messiah Umoja and Kokino adopted Adeyeme Umoja. While Kokino would continue to be known primarily by his original name, Sekou, by contrast, came to fully embrace his new iden-

tity as testament to his evolving sense of black selfhood. Marking this ontological shift on his physicality, Sekou soon added a large tattooed image of Africa to his left shoulder encircled by the prose “Mi mente mi espíritu y mi corazón vive aquí” (My mind, my spirit, and my heart live here). This professed fidelity to Africa now sat opposite the previously discussed tattoo of Che Guevara and accompanying slogan “Anónimo Consejo Revolución” that he and Kokino jointly displayed on their right shoulders.

Poetically revealing, these juxtaposing images reflected competing narratives of citizenship—one revolutionary Cuban and decidedly masculinist, the other grounded in Afrocentric claims to a racial diaspora mediated in part through a female mentor figure, Nehanda Abiodun. As such, these discursive intersections evoked a duality of nationalist lenses through which Sekou mediated his evolving self-understandings as a black Cuban man. Indeed, similar couplings of citizenship and their overlapping revolutionary belongings serve as key self-referential paradigms of black self-making for many raperos. In Sekou’s case, such alignment found performative and varyingly gendered expression through their material inscription onto the body itself.

While Nehanda’s gatherings contributed to one nationalist current of black self-fashioning within Havana’s hip hop community, another pedagogic space emerged during the same period intended to redress the “other side,” so to speak, of Sekou’s revolutionary shoulder. In 2002 Tomás Fernández Robaina, a bibliographic archivist and pioneering scholar of Afro-Cuban history at Havana’s Biblioteca Nacional de José Martí, initiated an informal weekly class at the Biblioteca on themes of Afro-Cuban history. Although he had offered similar courses in the past, this most recent class evolved in dialogue with raperos themselves. Tomás’s first introduction to Cuban hip hop occurred in New York City when, during an academic stint as a visiting scholar in 2001, he connected with the previously mentioned group of touring raperos composed of Pablo Herrera, Ariel Fernández Díaz, Magia López and Alexey Rodríguez of Obsesión, RCA’s Julio Cardenas, and (the then) Yosmel Sarriás and Kokino Entenza of Anónimo Consejo. As Tomás explains:

In New York City I had an invitation to meet with these raperos and got a sense of their music. I realized that something good was going on—I didn’t know exactly what, but I knew something was happening. When I

came back to Cuba, I began to attend hip hop concerts and pay attention to the lyrics of the songs and I realized that they were doing something that none of us who have been trying to expand the idea of the black identity were able to do, or do it in the way they were doing it. They were showing that blackness is something important, and that we can organize and defend blackness and our black ancestors.²

Among an older generation of Afro-Cuban intellectuals who had fought for critical recognition of black culture and histories of struggle in Cuba, Tomás eventually embraced hip hop as part of an ongoing continuum of black political expression on the island. Rather, apropos, it was during a 2001 Havana roundtable held at the Unión Nacional de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba (UNEAC) on the Partido Independiente de Color that drew a collection of raperos and local Rastafari that Tomás decided to revive his course on Afro-Cuban history at the Biblioteca.

While Tomás's work *El negro en Cuba, 1902–1958* (1990) represented a pioneering scholarly treatment of the Partido during the revolutionary period, renewed discussion of its significance among black intellectual circles at the time was sparked by a 2000 Cuban publication of a Spanish translation of historian Aline Helg's *Our Rightful Share* (1995) chronicling the party's rise and the ensuing 1912 massacre. Helg later collaborated with the Afro-Cuban filmmaker Gloria Rolando on Rolando's independent film *Raíces de mi corazón* (Roots of my heart) (2001), which represented the first major filmic treatment of the Partido in Cuba. All told, these efforts sought to restore the Partido from an obscured national memory while gesturing toward the party's long-silenced call for an inclusive citizenship both for and as black Cubans. Such reclamation would in turn find creative resonance among many a rapero.

Among those present that day at the Partido roundtable was Ariel Fernández Díaz, who, Tomás recalls, promised to encourage a number of friends to attend the class. Regarding the subsequent involvement of raperos, Tomás explained:

They were doing certain things already, but they hadn't realized that there were many others who had done these kinds of things before. Many black intellectuals and organizations in the past had done similar social critiques about racism and social inequality. But raperos and Rastafarians

in Cuba didn't know about this. So I identify with the movement through my involvement in teaching them about other black intellectuals who've done what they're doing now. And by working with these people I was trying little by little to encourage those who could teach other people.

The class, open to all, was held in an open-air corner of the Biblioteca Nacional's second-floor reading room. As small and informal as it was, the fact that a class of this kind was held in a public institution like the Biblioteca—a towering edifice abutting Havana's celebrated Plaza de la Revolución—reflected the Cuban state's recent opening to more public discussions of racial themes within institutional spheres. Similar conversations were occurring in places like UNEAC, where a well-attended symposium organized around Nicolás Guillén's poetic theme "Color Cubano" occurred that same year. On an average day Tomás's class drew roughly a dozen or so participants, the vast majority of whom were young men and women, almost exclusively black or darker skinned. The core among those classes I attended were graduate students, politically oriented artists, and a number of Rasta and hip-hop-affiliated individuals, among whom Ariel, Sekou, and Magia López and Alexey Rodríguez of *Obsesión* were among the most consistent. Predicated on Tomás's similarly titled work, the class "El negro en Cuba" centered on black antiracist and antidiscriminatory activism during the twentieth century prior to 1959,³ and sought to expand on his text's central thesis: Afro-Cuban mediations of the island's historic tensions of race and nationhood. Here the fundamental struggle framed by Tomás was one tied to Afro-Cuban efforts to attain full citizenship rights within a Martí-envisioned nonracial Cuba.

Foregrounding raced agencies in the making of Cuban national history in this manner represented something of a revisionist undertaking aimed at redressing historical omissions of Afro-Cubans as critical subjects from Cuba's official past (Ferrer 1998a; Kapcia 2000; cf. Trouillot 1995). I underscore critical here to foreground a distinction between Afro-Cubans as positioned actors rather than consumable objects of historical processes as they have all too often been cast within prevailing national scripts, be they incorporative grammars of transculturation or folklore. Tomás's class offered a space for precisely this kind of recuperative intervention, albeit a notably male-centered one. Antonio Maceo, the Partido Independiente de Color, the Afro-Cuban journalist Gustavo Urrutia, and more recent figures

such as the author-activists Juan René Betancourt and Walterio Carbonell figured centrally within discussion, while narratives of black women's contributions remained largely absent.

Gendering notwithstanding, Magia of Obsesión reflected on her experience of attending Tomás's class:

Back in technical school I got into arguments with my teachers and the principal because they used racist expressions, but I only started to develop race consciousness through hip hop culture, especially after a workshop given by Tomás Robaina sometime between late 2001 and early 2002. He talked about the 1912 Race War in Cuba, the black leader Evaristo Estenoz [founding member of the Partido Independiente de Color], the black massacre—it was a shock. I remember Alexey and I going away feeling angry. (Rodríguez 2011)

Echoing similar understandings, Randy Acosta of the hip hop duo Los Paisanos recalled the following about his participation in Tomás's class: "As I started to attend the class I soon realized I was learning things I didn't know about myself. I found a bit I didn't know, and I kept going. I came to know things I wouldn't even remotely have known, things my family did not know. One day we were asked if we knew anything about Evaristo Estenoz, and no one knew who he was." When I asked why this was important, Randy responded:

This is our history! It's the history here in Cuba that has to do with me, one that I identify with. It's part of the [national] struggle and it's that black part of me that fought and gave its part to the Cuban Revolution. They always talk about [General] Máximo Gómez⁴—all the things he did in developing war strategies and combat. But where is Antonio Maceo? Where is the Partido Independiente de Color? Why not talk about these people? They were people in Cuba's history and you know nothing of their story. That's what we were talking about in class.⁵

As a partial outgrowth of such conversations, Randy and his artistic partner Jessel Saladriga Fernández aka El Huevo composed "Lo Negro" (The Black). The song aimed at addressing stigmas attached to blackness viewed as inhibiting affirmations of black identity among many Cubans of African descent. As Randy explained, "Lo Negro" was intended as "a warning to

blacks who don't want to be black due to long histories of disinformation." Such concerns held personal resonance for Randy, who, as discussed earlier, moved through hip hop to embrace a political sense of black identity despite his light-brown color of skin. Indeed, as if to add exclamation to the point, the duo riff in the chorus to "Lo Negro": "Negro, es mi pensamiento / Negro, son mis movimientos / Negro, es como me siento / Negro, por fuera y por dentro" (Black, is my thought / Black, are my movements / Black, is how I feel / Black, outside and inside).

While reclaiming histories of black radicality may have been of mutual interest to those in Tomás's class, interpretations of these narratives were not necessarily always aligned. One dynamic that emerged involved subtle differences in positionality between Tomás and some of the younger participants in the course. For example, one afternoon Tomás turned to Antonio Maceo's celebrated quote "Nunca pedir como negro, sólo como cubano" (Never ask as a black, only as a Cuban) to underscore the ways Afro-Cuban struggle has long been predicated on citizenship claims within a nonracial national logic as opposed to calls for racial autonomy (cf. de la Fuente 1999; Ferrer 1999). While speaking with Sekou after class, he told me he took issue with Tomás's suggestion, drawn from Maceo's statement, that Afro-Cubans were implicitly Cubans before they were black. In contrast, Sekou responded definitely, "Soy africano antes de todo" (I'm African [first] before all). In later conversation along similar lines, Alexey Rodríguez of Obse-sión suggested he too considered himself a *negro* before his Cubanness—something I found a bit surprising at the time, given Alexey's strong identification with and fidelity to the nationalist ideals of the Cuban Revolution. In both cases these statements suggested evolving forms of self-identification, if not multiple citizenship claims, rooted in notions of racial diaspora that transcended both the territorial and discursive bounds of Cuban nationhood.

An important nuance of difference between Tomás and his younger class participants was generational. Now in his sixties, Tomás is from an earlier generation of Afro-Cuban intellectuals socialized and trained during the height of the Cuban Revolution. As such, his identity as an intellectual and as a black man is deeply intertwined with the rise of the revolutionary project in complexly lived ways. As a gay-identified, light-brown-skinned man who would commonly be read as *mestizo*, Tomás often spoke of his

long fight for recognition as a gay black man within exclusionary circles that might otherwise deny him entry on both grounds. Full inclusion and acceptance of his multiply queer subjectivity—that is, black and gay—within the prevailing frames that have long rendered these markers of difference ideologically incoherent with the revolutionary project (Allen 2011; Arenas 1993; Bejel 2001; de la Fuente 2001; González Pagés 2004; Lumsden 1996; Saunders 2009; Sawyer 2005) was thus a committed facet of Tomás’s intellectual politics and scholarship (cf. Fernández Robaina 1996).

Among Sekou, Alexey, and others, however, such nationally moored commitments to inclusion did not necessarily articulate in the same kinds of ways as those of an older generation. In the immediate sense, these young people are coming of age at a moment in which the grammars of racial materiality have assumed new levels, if not pernicious forms of lived exclusion and disenfranchisement vis-à-vis an evolving neoliberal landscape. Within an increasingly market-oriented Cuba where ambivalences of race and nationhood are arguably at their highest level in revolutionary memory, there may indeed be a greater urgency for racially grounded languages of identity that contest and ultimately supersede national parameters of nonracialism that tend to obfuscate and/or deny antiracist forms of redress. These young people therefore can be seen as seeking new, transnationally expansive social imaginaries—whether through hip hop or Rastafarianism—in ways that clearly translate into alternatively structured kinds of affective feeling. Generational differences being what they were, it was also clear that class participants were accessing historical material to which they otherwise had little other recourse. Such archival reclamations in this sense helped shape present-day black claims to citizenship within a now-expanded historical frame of Cuban nationhood.

In an effort to address such recuperations, Sekou soon composed a new *tema* titled “Afrocubano,” which quickly assumed a privileged position in Anónimo Consejo’s performance repertoire. The song builds on an innovative background track composed by Nicolas Nocchi (aka Miko Niko), a Paris-based producer with a working history with Cuban raperos⁶ that fused Afro-Cuban percussive elements with somber harmonies and choral lines. Lyrically, the *tema* sweeps through a largely male-centered homage to black resistance figures and narratives of Cuba’s history and beyond. Opening with the cause and following demise of the Partido Independiente de Color,

“Afrocubano” locates the duo as spiritual inheritors of an ancestral legacy of black struggle.

“Afrocubano”

Benny Moré, ibaé
Zoila Gálvez, ibaé
Evaristo Estenoz, ibaé
Gustavo Urrutia, ibaé
Aponte, ibaé
Antonio Maceo, ibaé
A nuestro mártires del Partido Independiente de Color, ibaé
Pedro Ivonnet, ibaé, yo con usted
Por la justa causa moriré . . .

Benny Moré, ibaé
Zoila Gálvez, ibaé
Evaristo Estenoz, ibaé
Gustavo Urrutia, ibaé
Aponte, ibaé
Antonio Maceo, ibaé
To our martyrs of the Independent
Party of Color, ibaé
Pedro Ivonnet, ibaé, I’m with you,
I will die for a just cause . . .

The *tema* launches with a ritualized evocation of black historical figures starting with the immortal Benny Moré, Cuba’s famed vocalist of popular song. Moré is followed by Zoila Gálvez, a soprano vocalist of classic training from the early twentieth century who, daughter of a mambí colonel under Antonio Maceo, was denied full recognition and professional success in Cuba due to her brownness of skin. With this segue, Anónimo Consejo turn to a string of resistant figures including José Antonio Aponte, alleged conspirator of the early nineteenth-century slave rebellion, Antonio Maceo and the leaders of the Partido Independiente de Color, Pedro Ivonnet, and Evaristo Estenoz—all key historical focal points of Tomás’s class. Each name is followed in turn by the ritualized refrain *ibaé*, a truncation of the Yoruba-derived phrase *ibaé bayé tonú* uttered at the start of Ocha-Lucumí ceremonies

to invoke the presence and participation of ancestral spirits. A connection with the present is then marked through the duo's professed fraternity with Ivonnet's commitments and heroic martyrdom in dying "for a just cause." Within this narrative, moreover, Antonio Maceo's racial subjectivity is recuperated from dominant Cuban frames that have sought its historical erasure or hybridized assimilation into a multiracial and ultimately nonracial national body.

While Ivonnet and his compadres are referenced in nationalist terms as "our martyrs," this same history—and by extension that of Sekou and Kokino—is grounded within broader diasporic narratives of black liberatory struggle through these figures' evocation as "guerreros de África" (warriors of Africa). References to Zumbi and Ganga Zumba, leaders of Brazil's famed seventeenth-century maroon community Quilombo dos Palmares, in turn provide subsequent linkages to Afro-hemispheric histories of resistance beyond Cuba's territorial bounds. Repeated allusion to Rastafari imagery have a similar diasporic impact. Although, as mentioned, some raperos began during this period to wear dreadlocks as body-centered markers of black cosmopolitanism, Sekou's growth of locks and attention to a more vegetarian-centered "ire" lifestyle stemmed from direct involvement with the island's Rasta community (cf. Hansing 2001) and reflected a growing influence of Rastafarianism in his life and sense of black selfhood.⁷ The refrain "Erguidos ante la policía / Dreadlocks p'arriba / Orgullo fortalece nuestra fila" (Standing [tall] before the police / Dreadlocks raised up / Pride fortifies our position) is emblematic of such extranational symbolism as defensive posture.

Yet as the song's title implies and as is reiterated throughout the chorus line "Afrocubano soy yo, soy yo" (Afro-Cuban I am, I am), Anónimo Consejo's central claim to identity and historical rootedness is as Afro-Cubans. Indeed, to bring closure, the *tema* concludes with "shout-out" tributes to a number of contemporary black Cuban figures such as the eminent cultural historian Rogelio Martínez Furé, the filmmaker Gloria Rolando, and Tomás Fernández Robaina himself. In a cadence similar to the song's opening salvo, each name is followed by chants of "aché!"—a Yoruba phrase tied to divine productive force of the orishas—with declarations of "Sekou and Adeyeme!" and "Anónimo Consejo!" bringing the *tema* to conclusion. In choral chants proclaiming, "La lucha continúa / Hoy, micrófono cultura / Anónimo defiende, los ancestros acentúan!" (The fight continues / Today,

microphone culture / Anónimo defends and the ancestors reinforce us!), Anónimo Consejo assert their claim to this continuum of Afro-Cuban radicality within broader Afro-hemispheric fields of emancipatory struggle.

Thus while Tomás's class may have been an informative experience in Sekou's penning of "Afrocubano," the transnational dimensions that undergird the tema's revisionist renderings of Afro-Cuban subjectivity and historical experience clearly also draw inspiration from other diasporic sites of black life and meaning. As previously discussed in the case of Obse-sión, who claim a mantle as modern-day mambises and heirs of the fighting force's liberatory tradition, critical recuperations of Afro-Cuban historicity vis-à-vis legacies of racial disenfranchisement find thematic recurrence within lyrical realms of Cuban hip hop.

When considering the artistic scope of innovation along such lines, the work of Hermanos de Causa demands rightful attention. Drawn from the adjoining barrios of Cojimar and Alamar, respectively, the duo of Soandres del Río and Alexis "el Pelón" Cantero were long recognized among the most poetically sophisticated and politically uncompromising of old-school rappers. A key trope employed by Hermanos de Causa as alluded to in the introductory opening involves the satirical resignification of blackness as social commentary on Cuba's current incongruities of race and national belonging. Although garnering scholarly attention elsewhere (Fernandes 2006; M. Perry 2004; West-Durán 2004), one of Hermanos de Causa's lauded temas that warrants brief mention here is "Tengo" (I have).

First performed around 2000,⁸ "Tengo" plays upon venerated Afro-Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén's famed 1964 poem of the same title celebrating black social gains under the revolution's early efforts to address Cuba's legacies of racial inequality. Guillén's "Tengo" offers a rhythmic refrain of gratitude for all "I (now) have" (tengo) as an Afro-Cuban thanks to the revolution, a parable collectively etched in Cubans' imagination through the poem's canonic teaching in state-run primary schools. Working transgressively with these parameters, Hermanos de Causa offer a subversive inversion of Guillén's "Tengo" by foregrounding the limitations of rights and access that Afro-Cubans currently hold within the island's new monetized realms of racial exclusion. In the duo's rendering, Guillén's "I have" is figuratively transposed to "I lack" as testament to the lived constraints of black Cuban citizenship at the millennium's turn.

As another poignant illustration of Hermanos de Causa's satirical play



4.1. MC Soandres del Río of Hermanos de Causa. Photo by Sahily Borrero

on blackness, I return to their “Lágrimas negras” (Black tears), cited in the introduction. Signifying on a classic bolero-son of the same title popularized in the 1930s by the *trova* bandleader Miguel Matamoros of Trío Matamoros, Hermanos de Causa’s translation of “Lágrimas negras” turns from the original composition’s ode of romantic sorrow to offer a stinging commentary on the quotidian contours of racism in present-day Cuba. The *tema* opens with an upbeat sample clip of a popular mid-1980 version of “Lágrimas negras” by the venerated salsa band Conjunto Rumbavana. The tone abruptly shifts as a brassy salsa tempo gives way to a relaxed hip hop beat accompanied by a sparse melody accented with percussive conga riffs. Unhurried, Soandres’s voice eventually chimes in to reframe the terms of “Lágrimas negras” by placing black life amid Cuba’s current social malaise at the narrative center.

Opening with “¡Yo! Yo de frente, todo el tiempo realista / No digas que no hay racismo donde hay un racista” (Yo! I’m in front, all the time a realist / Don’t say there isn’t racism when there is a racist), Hermanos de Causa claim a position as truth tellers deconstructing the lived “ironies” of race in

Cuba. Testifying “No me niegues que hay oculto un prejuicio racial que nos condena y nos valora a todos por igual / No te dejes engañar los ojos de par en par, no te dejes engañar” (Don’t deny that there’s a hidden racial prejudice that condemns us and values us all as equal / Don’t be fooled, eyes wide open, don’t be deceived), the duo take aim at the intrinsic contradictions of racial life versus nonracial fictions.

Thus juxtaposed to the romantic melancholy expressed in the original “Lágrimas” composition, *Hermanos de Causa* speak of the “black tears” of racial marginalization, criminalizing gazes, and a dichotomous invisibility and hypervisibility of Afro-Cubans within an increasingly monetized Cuba. Here the narrative pivots from blackness as the site of racialized fear—“Black delinquent, legendary concept / Seen as the adversary in whatever hour”—to blackness as an active field of subjectivity, one “heavy armed, thick caliber, high precision / Strongly impacting white targets with my vocation.”⁹ In doing so the artists offer an unapologetic resignification of blackness in ways that unmask the current incongruity of race and Cuban citizenship while foregrounding blackness itself as a consequent site of social agency and contest, one in this sense “demostrando como siempre lo que hay” (demonstrating as usual, what’s going on).

Fraternal Elaborations

Yet as *Hermanos de Causa*’s gender-marked name and masculinist posture reminds us, the prism through which race is lived, imagined, and performatively expressed through hip hop is often a highly gendered one. In the case of *Anónimo Consejo* and others, reclaiming a black radical past is frequently predicated on appeals to masculinist narratives of heroic valor as groundings for reimagining the terms of afrocubanidad in male form. Such recuperations are thus intimately tied to performing a black masculine present. Although conversant with the outer-national, these masculinist framings are deeply meshed with those of Cuba’s broader male-centric traditions of national identity and citizenship.

As alluded to earlier, from their very inception ideals of Cuban nationhood and citizenship have been heavily rooted in masculine tropes of armed struggle for national redemption (Ferrer 1999; González Pagés 2004), a tradition fervently elaborated during the post-’59 period. Under revolutionary formulations from José Martí to Fidel Castro, the citizen-as-soldier is cast

as the quintessential Cuban subject vis-à-vis a continuum of anti-imperialist struggle aimed at remasculinizing an otherwise emasculated prerevolutionary Cuba (cf. Schwartz 1999). For his part Martí was compelled in the end to affirm the very valor of his citizenship by taking up arms during the independence struggle, only to be killed (and posthumously elevated to martyrdom) amid his initial foray into combat. As Emilio Bejel (2001) among others has argued, masculinist language and imagery were embedded in Martí's nationalist writings as the rhetorical basis for a redemptively liberated cubanidad.

This mythification of the guerrilla-as-national-subject, to borrow from Antoni Kapcia (2000), finds an ever-enduring form in the masculine image of Ernesto "Che" Guevara and his celebrated ideal of the "new man" as the über-revolutionary protagonist (Guevara [1965] 1970, cf. Saldaña-Portillo 2003). Elaborating on cultures of machismo long integral to Cuba and the broader Spanish Caribbean (de Moya 2004), this institutionalization of the masculine was therefore instrumental to the revolutionary imagination, one emphatically heteronormative if not homophobic in practice (Allen 2011; Arenas 1993; Bejel 2001; Fowler 1998; González Pagés 2004; Lumsden 1996; Saunders 2009). Revolutionary efforts to increase women's participation in the workforce coupled with broader gender equality promotion through institutions like the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (FMC) and the 1975 Family Code (aimed at equitable labor in the domestic sphere) notwithstanding, male privilege and swaggering machismo remain durable fixtures of Cuban life.

While raperos' pursuits of self-crafting circulate within economies of the Cuban heteromasculine, it is notable that male MCs often differentiate themselves from other currents of black masculine performance conspicuous in Cuban popular music and culture. Surfacing during the 1980s and 1990s, Cuba's salsa-derived dance music *timba* emerged as another important site of racially charged music making and popular commentary amid Cuba's evolving neoliberal ambivalence (Perna 2005; Vaughan 2012). Eclipsing hip hop's fan base and rates of commercial production and revenue, *timba*'s driving, often-frenetic cadence has long been dominated by black male artists who frequently appeal to sexualized play and lyric innuendo heavily centered on the gazed female body.

Echoing similar lines posed by U.S. black feminist critiques (cf. hooks 2003; Wallace 1979), Ariana Hernández-Reguant suggests such celebrations of hetero-virility offer symbolic currency through which young Afro-Cuban

men exercise masculinist notions of power within a public sphere that otherwise affords few alternatives (Hernandez-Reguant 2005). Yet while these projections might contest revolutionary prescriptions of normative sexuality on some levels, they also reinscribe heteronormative privileging of Cuban *machismo*. Indeed, when articulated with race, such lines of practice may also reinforce enduring representations of Afro-Cubans—in both male and female form—as nonnormative sites of a primal hypersexuality (cf. Allen 2011; González Pagés 2004). The more recent phenomenon of Cuban reggaetón—to which I will return—that eventually usurped significant space and artistic talent previously occupied by hip hop as well as timba, draws on similar modes of black heteromascularity channeled in important part through a sexualized bracketing of women’s bodies (cf. Baker 2011).

By contrast, the spectrum of black masculinity displayed by many Havana-area raperos has tended to shy away from explicitly sexualized performance and lyric content. One possible mediating factor lies in varying sites of dialogue among artists that complicate monolithic claims of a black heteronormative male as the privileged subject of Cuban hip hop. Tomás Fernández Robaina and the literary critic Roberto Zurbarano—long two of the most actively engaged of an older generation of Afro-Cuban interlocutors vis-à-vis local raperos—are either queer identified or queer conversant black men. The largely male ranks of Havana’s MCs have therefore had to reckon with alternative frames of black masculinity that these men have brought to bear on notions of and conversations about afrocubanidad. In related conversation, the assumed stability of the heteromasculine within rapero circles was further disrupted when rumors circulated in 2003 that one highly respected old-school Havana MC was bisexual.¹⁰ While potentially shattering a veneer of heteronormativity, in Tomás’s view the episode failed to redress underlying homophobic currents within Cuba’s hip hop community. As he explained to me on the heels of the rumor:

I would like to hear one rapero who’s not gay, a man singing about the rights of gays, that they have the equal right to share space too. I think they all know that I’m gay, they accept and respect me, and that is something. But I don’t know if the audience or gay raperos are prepared to speak publicly about their sexual orientation. That would be something important for the movement; it would be something that could really enrich the movement.

Tomás's scholarship on gender and sexuality via realms of Afro-Cuban religiosity is informative here regarding the privileging of the heteromascu- line within broader Afro-Cuban vernacular spheres (Fernández Robaina 1996, 2005). Concerning gendered prescriptions within many Afro-Cuban religious communities, heterosexual men are often licensed within social hierarchies and ritual practice in ways that supersede if not exclude women and homosexual men altogether.

One salient expression of such scriptings is that of the Abakuá, a religious fraternal society with roots among black dockworkers in the ports of Havana, Matanzas, and Cardenas whose linguistic lineage can be traced back to similar all-male sacred societies among the Èfik and Efu-speaking peoples of the Cross River delta region of Nigeria (Miller 2005; cf. Cabrera 1958; Ortiz 1950, 1951).¹¹ The Abakuá are noted to shun any expression of the effeminate among initiates, and homosexuality is largely prohibited (Fernández Robaina 1996, 2005; cf. Sublette 2007). Yet Tomás's work in the area suggests degrees of fluidity; sexual contact between Abakuá and other men may be cautiously permissible as long as the Abakuá maintains the dominant or active top position (Fernández Robaina 1996: 205).¹² Such flexibility resonates with Jafari Allen's discussion of the "macho" dominant self-designation among some same-gender-loving Afro-Cuban men who do not necessarily self-identify as homosexual (Allen 2011). In both cases, however, the performative semblance of the heteromascu- line nonetheless remains largely intact.

Drawn from poor and working-class urban barrios, the Abakuá are often associated in the popular Cuban imagination with malevolent realms of *marginalidad* and appending claims of violent criminality grounded in enduring conceptions of an afro-primal (Ortiz [1906] 1973; cf. Maguire 2011; Miller 2005). Although highly secretive in ritual practice, the Abakuá do nonetheless garner degrees of admiration, if at times guarded, within urban realms of Afro-Cuban life, particularly with regard to working-class paradigms of respectable masculinity. Among such currents the Abakuá hold a notable resonance within cultural spheres of Cuban hip hop. At the everyday level of the vernacular, the expression "asere" that rapero men commonly use to greet and mutually mark one another is drawn from an Abakuá expression similarly used as a ritual salutation between initiates.¹³ For instance, the now well-worn expression "¿Qué bola asere?" (roughly, What's up, brother?) has assumed proverbial status through its iconic association with rapero-speak. While such mimetics suggest an intimacy of Afro-Cuban literacy

shared by male raperos vis-à-vis the Abakuá and conjoined scripts of black working-class masculinity, the quotidian use of the address also engenders its own meanings of homosocial fraternity among Cuban MCs.

Rapero affinities with the Abakuá may articulate at more immediate levels as well. While in conversation a friend mentioned in passing that a mutual hip-hop-affiliated friend was an initiate of the Abakuá. While I had known this person for a number of years, I had never heard any reference to his membership by him or anyone else. Given the fraternal society's insular nature, I was not sure if it was appropriate to inquire about the rumor. In a later conversation I did in fact ask my friend if there was any truth to the claim. Without much hesitation, he affirmed, "Si asere, yo soy Abakuá, soy obonekué," intermingling the everyday Abakuá-cum-rapero address *asere* alongside the more esoteric *obonekué* for Abakuá initiates. When I asked how comfortable he would be if I commented on his membership, he responded that it would be fine, clarifying that while the society's sacred rites were indeed secret, one's individual membership as a *ñáñigo*—using a more widely used term for fraternal members—was not necessarily so.¹⁴

DJ Alexis D'Boys explained that although his family was not particularly religious, he had long felt pulled toward the realms of the sacred. It was, however, during a conversation amid a religious consultation with a *babaláwo* that sparked his curiosity regarding the Abakuá, leading him to seek out more information about the fraternity. Alexis recalled a particularly meaningful trip during this period to the municipality of Regla to attend a ceremonial funeral for a recently deceased Abakuá member. Describing his experience, Alexis explained:

I went to the ceremony and saw a tremendous amount of discipline and closeness between all the brothers there. And I was like "wow," these brothers are very serious! For me this planted the idea of joining this community. But there are a number of things that must be shared about you before you can become part of the religion. So one day I presented myself to a group [of members] and said I wanted to become part of this secret community. They then took a year inquiring about me including visiting my family, because if your family doesn't agree you cannot become part of this religion. So they visited my grandfather's house and asked my grandmother about my family, because one of the requirements is that you have to come from a family with a good father.

We say “*Buen padre, buen hijo, buen hermano y buen amigo!*” (Good father, good son, good brother, good friend). Being a good father and a good son is fundamental, this is very important in this religion. . . . So they came to my house to meet my family and my parents were a bit nervous. They had heard that this religion was violent, that they killed and murdered people, what have you. When my grandmother asked me if I was sure I wanted to be part of this religion, I said, “Yes, I’m sure,” and I was eventually invited to join. So I along with fourteen other brothers were initiated on December 4, 1994—a date I will never forget.¹⁵

Despite family concerns, the Abakuá’s promise of sacred fellowship, fraternal discipline, and embedded ideals of respectable masculinity apparently resonated with Alexis’s own yearnings for belonging as a young Afro-Cuban man. Similar echoes of admiration find artistic form in “Abakuá,” a composition by Obsesión’s Alexey Rodríguez released on the group’s 2011 album, *El Disco Negro*. Something of a tribute to the Abakuá and by extension Alexey’s home barrio of Regla as a central locale, as mentioned, of Abakuá tradition since the mid-nineteenth century, the track opens with a sample of an iconic Abakuá *enkame* or ritual call-and-response chant. For an interesting and indeed resonant comparative note, interpretations of this same *enkame* are performed by Dizzy Gillespie in the opening to his classic “Swing Low, Sweet Cadillac” (1967), the diasporic syncretics of which grew from Gillespie’s collaborative history with Afro-Cuban *rumbero* and Abakuá member Chano Pozo.

In Obsesión’s rendering, the opening *enkame* melds into a background of melodic hip hop beats inflected with a sparse fusion of conga phases and Cuban guitar chords, as Alexey riffs:

“Abakuá”

Una de las mayores virtudes que puede tener un hombre es la descripción . . .

Pero Abakuá es q’ manda, oye!

Siempre será una buena oportunidad para ofrecerle mi respeto y no ofenderle a Abakuá

En Regla se fundó la primera sociedad, cosa de la que estoy orgulloso, yo soy de allá!

Muchos tabúes y alrededor de esta linda religión, primero invito a
conocer antes
de dar opinión
Buen padre, buen hijo, buen esposo, buen
amigo!
Esto es pa' lo que la llevan de verdad, los que no distorsionan su
verdadera esencia . . .
El Abakuá no es malo, lo hacen malo
las personas
Respetar para que te respeten . . .

One of the greatest virtues that a man can have is how he defines
himself . . .
But Abakuá is in charge, hey!
It will always be a good opportunity to offer my respect and not offend
the Abakuá
In Regla the first society was founded, something that I'm proud of,
I'm from there!
A lot of taboos surround this beautiful religion, first I invite you to
know it before you offer your opinions
Good father, good son, good husband, good friend!
This is for those who truly carry the truth, not the ones who distort its
true essence . . .
The Abakuá are not bad, it's people who make it bad
Respect so they'll respect you . . .

Amid a tone of veneration and repeated calls for “respect,” Alexey offers redress to what is viewed as distorted popular understandings of the Abakuá. Countervailing odes to the fraternal society as disciplined exemplars of a respectable masculinity resonate throughout.

Cultural layerings between raperos and the Abakuá need, however, to be viewed within broader histories of Abakuá interface within realms of Cuban popular music (León 1991; R. Moore 1997), a particularly intimate expression of such being Afro-Cuban rumba (Acosta 2003; Miller 2000; Sublette 2007). In addition to syncretic inflections of Abakuá drumming, dance, and vocal styles, rumba traditions reflect a highly heterogendered performance structure that similarly privilege men as *congueros* (drummers)

and broader practitioners of rumba song and dance (Knauer 2008). Drawing on such legacies, artists such as Chano Pozo, Arsenio Rodríguez, and Ignacio Piñero¹⁶—all translational figures of Afro-Cuban musicality into the wider Afro-Atlantic—were notably also initiators of the Abakuá. Might rappers then be elaborating on similarly gendered histories and musically articulated routes of the Afro-Cuban? Clearly, currents of black working-class heteromascularity that resonate at the levels of music making and everyday social practice are integral elements of a fraternalism that undergirds much of the social fabric of Havana’s hip hop community. Or at least this may appear to be the case for those who are male and performatively straight.

Black Feminist Queerings

Cuban hip hop’s masculinist leanings are of course far from free of gendered complications. The participation of women within, and in close conversation with, the movement has worked in various ways to decenter and ultimately queer the community’s otherwise male-centric focus (cf. Fernandes 2006, 2007; Saunders 2009). As cited earlier, the all-female trio of *Instinto* were among the key pioneers of women’s involvement in Havana hip hop. Although the group’s members, Doricel Agramonte, Yudith Porto, and Yanet Díaz, moved to Spain around 2002 and later disbanded, I recall their music fusing harder-edged riffs over R&B-styled background vocals. While placing black-women-centered narratives at the heart of their temas (see Pacini Hernandez and Garofalo 2000; West-Durán 2004), *Instinto* often employed sexualized play and innuendo as featured theatrical tropes. Often donning formfitting outfits for shows, the trio used sexual provocation as a mode of social commentary and critique along intersecting lines of race and gender. Yet such stagecraft seemed in the end to conform to, rather than complicate, conventional Cuban representations of heteronormative female sexuality.

With the increased participation of Cuban women in hip hop over the years, the performative style and range of female voices expanded as well. An important marker of this growth was the proliferation by the early 2000s of concerts and other events in Havana dedicated to the evolving vitality of raperas (female rappers) within the movement. In addition to female soloists such as MCs Yula and Mariana,¹⁷ a number of all-female groups arose during this period including *Explosión Femenina*, *Sexto Sentido*, and *La Positiva*, many of them evocative of *Instinto*’s sexualized play though with

a seemingly more deliberate eye toward a commercial draw. The spoken-word vocalist Telmary Díaz, formerly of the hip-hop-fusion band Free Hole Negro, and later Interactivo collective, also emerged amid this period as a dynamic performer both within and beyond Cuban hip hop. A few pioneering women, moreover, eventually ventured into DJing, key among whom was DJ Leidis Freire, a longstanding member of the Vedado-based Diez y Diecinueve crew.

One individual active in supporting the growth and development of female artists was the African American political exile Nehanda Abiodun. With firm commitment and intellectual grounding in U.S. black feminist thought and practice, Nehanda often sought to foreground dimensions of gender and sexuality through her engagements with artists and Havana's broader hip hop community. Interminglings of gender and sexuality via wider frames of black liberatory struggle were, for instance, recurring themes of discussion during her informal class gatherings. Although less intimately involved, her fellow exile Assata Shakur has also long been a present and highly admired figure within raperos circles. These women provide living exemplars of black radicality rooted in female subjectivity and broader black womanist traditions of revolutionary activism. Nehanda and Assata have in this sense helped expand and varyingly decenter the largely male-focused vistas of black radical imagination among Havana-area raperos.

Such gendered queerings assumed important resonance among many female MCs. One evolving current among some artists involved interwoven critiques of gendered, sexualized, and racial forms of power in ways that challenged hip hop's otherwise masculinist orientation, while confronting broader domains of raced patriarchy in the Cuban everyday. Yet rather than simply reflecting forms of consciousness and ways of being *sui generis*, such voicings emerge in conversation with black womanist subjectivities that found animated evolving form through the expressive space of hip hop. Commenting on an apparent shift among female artists away from earlier, more conventional displays of female sexuality, Nehanda explained: "What has evolved since then are women who haven't negated their sexuality but are very sexy in their own right. I mean they are not pumping with sex. These are beautiful women, not sexy but beautiful women who are very secure in their ability to handle their own and not falling into the trap of being, you know, the ultra-sexy rapper, but real women who are rappers and saying, 'We have something to say as well!'"

Indeed, when considering women's space and intervention within rapero circles, a pioneering artist who deserves important recognition is Magia López of Obsesión. As mentioned, Magia's subjectivity as a black woman became an increasingly vocal and politicized component of her music and public persona. While her artistic partner Alexey has been long the primary scribe and producer of many of Obsesión's temas, Magia has over the years assumed a more active role in asserting her creativity within the duo's music-making process while critically developing her own artistic voice as a woman. Here a central and elaborating theme in Magia's work targets racialized frames of gendered discourse and practice historically ascribed to black and darker-skinned Cuban women. By way of Afrocentric clothing and flamboyantly natural hairstyling, Magia celebrates an unapologetically black womanhood in her own terms. In doing so, she offers a performative counterpole to prevailing norms that privilege the lighter-skinned mulata as the celebrated and highly sexualized object of a racially transculturated Cuba.

Yet wider economies of sexuality as interstitially lived with those of race, gender, and class remain critical concerns of redress. Magia's artistic growth along these lines finds eloquent expression in her solo tema "La llaman puta" (They call her a whore), in which she gives an impassioned account of the struggles of young women involved in Cuba's tourist-driven sex trade. Although race is not referenced explicitly, it is evoked allegorically as Magia interweaves her narrative with choral chants in ritualized Yoruba to Ochún, the female orisha most strongly associated with feminine sexuality. Sung to the polyrhythmic play of the sacred *batá* drums of Ocha-Lucumí ceremony used to invoke the orishas, the tema opens as follows:

"La llaman puta"

La llaman puta
 para todos no es más
 que una mujerzuela
 disfrutando el hecho de ser bonita
 ¡Loca! Carne que invita
 que provoca . . .
 ¡Cuántas no van por ese camino!
 Y entonces la llaman puta . . .

They call her whore
for everyone she is no more
than a loose woman
enjoying the fact of being pretty
Crazy woman! Flesh that invites
that often provokes . . .
How many don't take this road!
So for that they call her whore . . .
Forced to do what you don't want to
you avoid the idea,
But misery has an ugly face even if you don't believe it . . .
Your body assumes the responsibility and
they call her whore . . .
Society throws the hook and you
bite the bait . . .

Magia's empathy with the narrative's protagonist and circumstance is poignant. The bleak scenario painted here of female sex work is largely one of structural victimhood in which women are not only "forced to do what you don't want to," but are shunned for doing so. With few other alternatives, the body is seen as an exploitable resource within globally inflected markets of sexual consumption. While the suggestion "society throws the hook and [they] bite the bait" could be read as undervaluing questions of agency, Magia is singing against more dominant Cuban representations of *jineteras* (female sex workers) as joy-seeking materialists whose participation in sex work is steeped in pathologies of moral compromise (cf. Cabeza 2004; Fusco 1998). Alternatively, Magia offers an image of these women as social casualties of Cuba's neoliberal turn afforded few other means through which to access the island's life-essential, globally pinned currency.

While melancholic refrains to *Ochún* are employed to call on the orisha's feminine presence and aid in defense of these women, the intimacy of Magia's appeal to *Ochún* is mediated through her own subjectivity as a black woman. Although Magia is not herself a practitioner of *Ocha-Lucumí*, she chooses to invoke the female orisha in liturgical Yoruba to ground her woman-centered narrative within a language of Afro-Cuban sacred life. Magia's performative affinity with both female sex workers and *Ochún* is

thus rooted in a confluence of gendered, racial, and class constraints that bind all within and against broader fields of patriarchal power.

As one of the most active and accomplished MCs transcendent of gender lines, Magia's tenacious work over the years has garnered considerable, if at times complicated, respect within Havana's hip hop community and broader island-wide movement. Yet despite an increasingly independent voice and organizational autonomy, as one long identified with her artistic partner (and now former husband) Alexey Rodríguez, Magia has had to negotiate perceptions of her artistic identity as one indebted to a male-female coupling.

Following on the heels of Magia, a later generation of all-women groups and female soloists arose during the early 2000s whose collective efforts have further intervened within hip hop Cubano's fraternal space. One influential set of female voices to emerge and representing a relatively radical challenge in this regard was Las Krudas. Garnering significant scholarly attention over the years (Armstead 2007; Fernandes 2006, 2007; Guillard Limonta 2005; M. Perry 2004; Saunders 2009, 2010; West-Durán 2004),¹⁸ Las Krudas, or "the raw ones," are a lesbian trio of Afrocentric vegetarian feminists who entered Havana's hip hop scene around 2001. Prior to their involvement in hip hop, the highly creative trio of Olivia "Pelusa" Prendes and sisters Odaymara "Pasa" and Odalys "Wanda" Cuesta were active in street theater, most notably as members of a colorful troupe of stilt walkers who regularly performed in the heavily touristed area of Havana Vieja. Within a few months after Krudas made their hip hop debut, Pasa described the group's orientation to me in this way: "We're a female trio of new hip hop with a new consciousness, a new understanding about the role of women within this movement of hip hop. We classify our music as superground. So I am here with Pelusa and Wanda fighting, writing, and working to have our music heard to help, to open the mentality and the consciousness of this movement. We feel it's very important that they listen to our words."¹⁹

Pasa's reference to the trio's music as "superground" plays upon the U.S.-derived expression "underground" commonly used by raperos to distinguish between what is viewed as commercially compromised pop hip hop that predominates U.S. markets and the less adulterated, politically oriented forms that remain true to hip hop's socially committed roots. Less accessible or popular, the latter is thus deemed underground. The expression has in fact been central to ideological debates within rapero circles



4.2. MC Odaymara "Pasa" Cuesta of Las Krudas. Photo by the author

regarding the evolving challenges and future directions of Cuban hip hop writ large (cf. Fernandes 2006). The pivotal issue revolves around whether individual artists—if not ultimately the movement as a whole—would “sell out” their political convictions to an ever-encroaching Cuban marketplace.

As a discourse of authenticity, to remain underground implies a resistance to processes of commercial cooptation viewed as corruptive of hip hop’s utopic promise. Such positions are hence implicitly rooted in critiques of consumer capitalism. Indeed, working from the figure of Mickey Mouse as a metaphor for the social vacuousness and commercialism associated with U.S. popular culture, many Cuban MCs express derision for what they see as the “miki miki” (i.e., Mickey Mouse) tendencies in much of commercial hip hop in the United States. As I discuss in the following chapter, such critiques and their underlying anxieties unfold with a particular urgency as hip hop artists have had to compete with the rise of Cuban reggaetón.

Reminiscent of linguistic word-play strategies that Jamaican Rastafari employ to subvert standard English phrasing (Pollard 2000), Pasa’s allusion to Krudas as superground further underscores the overtly political, in-your-face nature of their feminist-directed intervention, an intervention

targeted at expanding the movement's largely male-centered "mentality and consciousness." Commenting further on the group's inspiration, Pasa continues:

This is my race, this is my color, this is my people, and yet the movement greatly lacks female representation. The community is made up of both black women and black men, and so we have to represent black women.²⁰ So we're supporting the movement, particularly the women because we share different realities. Some [in the movement] may think that we are all the same, no. There are different realities, different truths, different experiences that women have given their sex and their gender.

Pasa's concern over a dearth of black women's representation within Cuban hip hop recalls similar challenges leveled by U.S. black feminists regarding the male-centric leadership and masculinist character of the U.S. black freedom movements of the 1960s and early 1970s (E. Brown 1993; Wallace 1979). By foregrounding the particularities of black female subjectivity and experience through the differentiated ways that racial oppression is both gendered and sexualized, Pasa, like black feminists before, contests the heteromasculinist claims of a unified subject of struggle on which Cuban hip hop—if not the Cuban revolutionary and broader national project itself—is largely predicated. Conversant with an analytics of intersectionality (Collins 1990), Pasa explained: "I feel that it is an impossibility to talk about racism without talking about machismo. [In the past] machismo was a facet of slavery, understand? It's also a form of oppression. And so our temas talk about these things."

Claiming a black lesbian-feminist vocality within the movement's largely masculinist and heteronormative lines in this way renders critically audible questions of sexuality and homophobia in addition to those of race and gender. Such interventions evoke earlier challenges by black lesbians and other feminists of color in the United States who worked to decenter both black liberation and white feminist movements through a radical, often sexualized politics of difference (cf. Combahee River Collective 1986; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981).

A queering poetics of identity is itself signified in the very name the trio have chosen for themselves. As the artists described it, the name *Krudas*—again, the female "raw ones"—was initially chosen to mark the group's adherence to vegetarianism (i.e., raw food), which they view as an important

political facet of their alterity as raperas. At the same time, the artists refer to an unadulterated female “rawness” that they and their lyrics embody; theirs is an assertive in-your-face performance style that refuses to conform to patriarchal framings of Cuban women as objects of heteromale gaze. Pasa explains: “I think we also call ourselves Las Krudas because our image is a bit difficult to qualify under established classifications. Within the culture of hip hop it seems that our image is very powerful. Because in reality women that I have seen tend to be delicate, very refined, and passive—women for men, as usual, understand? So we are another type of thing. We are not niki, chiki, nor miki.”

Indeed, Krudas, with their dreadlock-adorned full-figured bodies, uncompromising women-centered lyrics, and highly theatrical performances, represented a fairly radical departure from the dominant images of the Cuban feminine—“women for men, as usual”—as well as the standard masculinist hip hop fare. Afrocentric adornments of black womanist identity, moreover, are performatively inscribed by the women in the form of tattooed images of West African cowrie shells and renderings of the Egyptian ankh symbol associated with creative female energy, all of which stand in bold contrast to conventional racial and sexually normative gendered practice by way of “niki, chiki, [or] miki.”

Pelusa recalls that Krudas’ early performances were often greeted by fellow raperos and attending audiences with silence, mouths wide, eyes glazed. There did indeed seem to be an initial coolness among many male MCs I knew toward the trio when they first began performing in the early 2000s. When asked about Krudas, one prominent rapero commented along the lines, “Ellas no tienen ningún tipo de flow” (They don’t have any type of flow), referencing the all-important verbal dexterity or “flow” that MCs exhibit in performance. It was notable that rather than citing lyric content, attention was paid to Krudas’ supposed lack of technical proficiency or “skills” as the means of dismissing their artistic if not broader political significance as performers.

Yet there clearly was no avoiding Las Krudas’ spectacular stage presence and provocative, womanist-centered message propelled through theatrical plays of music and performance style. As illustration, one of Krudas’ signature temas, “Eres bella” (You are beautiful), recorded on their debut 2001 CD, *Cubensi*, offers a biting assessment of sexualized gender oppression vis-à-vis Cuba’s neoliberal malaise. The tema opens with the following salvo:

“Eres bella”

Cantarte, tema dedicación
Dedicado a todas las mujeres del mundo
A todas las mujeres que como nosotras
están luchando
A todas las guerreras campesinas urbanas
A todas las hermanas
Especialmente a las más negras
Especialmente a las más pobres
Especialmente a las más gordas . . .
Artificios de risas y postizos son
Continuación del cuento colonialista
No te cojas pa’ eso
Deja esa falsa vista . . .
¿Qué nos queda?
Prostitución, seducción
Esto es sólo una costumbre de edad para
Ayudar a nuestras gente económicamente
En este mundo tan material
No somos nalgas y pechos solamente
Tenemos cerebro, mujer
Siente, siente . . .

Sing, dedication song
Dedicated to all the women in the world
To all the women like us who
are fighting
To all the urban peasant guerrilla women
To all the sisters
Especially to the most black
Especially to the most poor
Especially to the most fat . . .
Fake laughs and implants are
a continuation of the colonialist tale
Don’t buy it
Move away from that false point of view . . .

What is left for us?
Prostitution, seduction
This is only a tradition of our times
to help our people economically
In this very material world
We are not only breasts and ass
We have brains, woman
Feel, feel . . .

The *tema* thus begins in celebratory homage to a universal notion of women's militancy and struggle within which the trio locate themselves. Promptly, however, a more immediate affinity is claimed with those women black, poor, and, yes, fat. Herein lies a central line of critique within the song's text—the patriarchal objectification and normative conditioning of black Cuban women's bodies and forms of subjectivity (cf. J. Butler 1993). While the refrain “Fake laughs and implants are a continuation of the colonialist tale / Don't buy it” speaks to such disciplinary effects, it draws lines of articulation between these practices and fields of colonial governmentality in ways that historicize black female subjugation via broader histories of anticolonial/anti-imperialist struggle—narratives on which the Cuban revolutionary national project is itself grounded.

Such maneuvers evoke radical black feminist Jacqui Alexander's call for critical “pedagogies” aimed at deconstructing historical linkages between colonialism, citizenship, and intersecting realms of gender and sexualized oppression (Alexander 2006). Yet Krudas' cautionary “Don't buy it” implicates a certain market rationale within these economies of power as currently lived. Krudas, in turn, call for a rejection of such self-objectifying gendered prescriptions, celebrating alternatively their full-figured bodies in oppositional stance as a key performative facet of their queering interventions. The trio's later composition “La gorda” (Fat girl) takes on female body aesthetics front and center as a queer(ing)-feminist salutation to non-normative fatness, one that triumphantly declares in its chorus hook, “¡La gorda ha llegado!” (The fat woman has arrived!).

Such queering alterity recalls what José Esteban Muñoz has termed a politics of disidentification employed by U.S. queer performers of color as a means of decentering heteronormative economies of aesthetic value and desire. As a “phobic object,” to borrow from Muñoz's discussion of the per-

formance artist Marga Gomez's use of feminine masculinity, fatness in this sense is "reconfigured as sexy and glamorous, and not as the pathetic and abject spectacle that it appears to be in the dominant eyes of heteronormative culture" (Muñoz 1999: 3). Krudas' efforts in this sense seek to performatively disidentify with and thus transgressively challenge normative truth claims rooted in both whiteness and heteronormativity through an alternative "worldmaking" as black lesbians (Muñoz 1999: 200). The temas' rhetorical query as to whether racism operates within a "maldita y machista sociedad" (wicked and macho society) underscores those articulations of racism and sexism as subjectively lived by Afro-Cuban women. In declaring "No hay verdadera revolución sin mujeres" (There is no real revolution without women), emancipatory projects—including those of national revolutionary struggle—are deemed hollow without the critical recognition and active participation of black women.

As narrative foil, "Eres bella" evokes the condition of Cuba's female sex workers, who represent some of the most acutely targeted subjects of racially imbricated forms of sexual objectification in a monetized Cuba. Possibly more directly than Magia's "La llaman puta," Krudas' identification with these women and their circumstances is grounded in the first person: "Yo también como tú he hecho cosas mezquina / Yo también como tú he fregado por dos pesos que sonaban en cualquier esquina / Yo también como tú he sido forzada y llevada sin mi voluntad a fornicación" (I like you have paced street corners for two pesos / I like you have been forced and taken against my will to fornicate). Such are the material conditions in which a raced female sexuality becomes a key if not sole source of exploitable capital for these women.

"What is left for us?" they ask. "This is the only tradition of our times / To help our people economically in this very material world." Departing from such market-driven interpolations, black women's self-redemption lies in the recognition that "We are not only breast and ass / We have brains." Indeed, rather than corporal sites of phallogentric consumption, Las Krudas call on women to simply "feel" who they are for themselves, melding otherwise juxtaposed realms of affect and intellect in an embodied realization of female subjectivity.

When asked about their openness about their sexuality when they first entered the hip hop scene, Pelusa explained that although they harbored some caution regarding public identification as lesbians, it was apparent

from the very start that they were queer. While the trio may have experienced some coolness from other artists at the onset, their vigorous involvement and evolving presence ultimately garnered them space and significant respect among many quarters of Havana's hip hop community. Indeed, Las Krudas eventually collaborated with and/or shared performances with a range of Havana's most established male artists. Their first album *Cubensi* (2007), moreover, involved artistic partnerings with producer Pablo Herrera and MCs Michael Oramas and Andy Yensy Oruña of Junior Clan. Collaborative exchanges of the kind suggest lines described by U.S. cultural critic Mark Anthony Neal in his call for new hip-hop-informed scriptings of black masculinity that both confront and move beyond heteropatriarchal privilegings (Neal 2005).

Such transgressive aspirations have resonance beyond hip hop. Drawing on extensive work with Las Krudas and broader realms of black lesbian life in Havana, the U.S. sociologist Tanya Saunders suggests that despite recent openings by the Cuban state and its institutions to more public recognitions of nonnormative sexualities, Cuban lesbians of color struggle for public space and affirmation while negotiating added challenges of racial and gendered marginalization (Saunders 2010). Such limitations, Saunders argues, tend in the end to (re)produce queer privileges along male and white-racial lines, while reinforcing heteronormative modes of femininity and accompanying lines of sexual morality. Las Krudas' asserted visibility and vocality thus seek to engage and expand upon nonnormative spheres of race, gender, and sexuality within Cuba's wider everyday.

Krudas' feminist-centered queerings did not always resonate uncomplicatedly with other female artists, however. I recall tension, for instance, arising during a 2006 workshop on women in hip hop as part of a hip hop symposium organized by Magia López and Alexey Rodríguez of Obsesión. During one exchange, Pasa suggested that the domestic sphere of child-rearing and heterosexual partnering constrained the liberatory possibilities of straight women as both artists and activists. Implicit in her charge was a privileging of queer female subjects as agents of more radical kinds of creative undertaking. At this juncture Magia chimed in, voicing discomfort with the idea that straight female artists were in effect compromised politically by their sexuality. Pasa responded by affirming her respect for Magia and her work as a central figure and pioneering woman in the movement. She did, however, add that as a performer partnered with her then-

husband, Alexey, Magia could not be seen as occupying a fully autonomous position as a female artist.

Although I had been aware of tensions arising between Magia and Las Krudas in the past, I was also mindful that Magia and Alexey's success (and strategic agility) in navigating institutional state-run structures and resources engendered political costs among some in the hip hop community who were more wary of state collaborations. While there may indeed have been additional issues informing this particular exchange, a queer critique of heteronormative confines was clearly at the center of Pasa's commentary.

Another related set of intrafemale dialogues occurred around 2005. As part of Las Krudas' ongoing work within Havana's hip hop community, the trio were instrumental in helping form a performance collaborative of female hip hop artists dubbed Omega Kilay, aimed at promoting women's participation and visibility within island hip hop.²¹ In addition to Krudas, the collective included the long-active member of EPG&B MC Magyori "La Llave" Martínez, the graffiti artist Yanelis "Nono" Valdez, and DJs Leidis and Yaribey "Yary" Collia. As DJ Yary explained, it was during an all-female concert amid an annual state-sponsored Cubadisco Awards that a consensus emerged among performing artists to "shoot for something new, something more powerful, a union of strength. So we decided to focus in one direction and say, 'Let's create a project among us women who rap underground, because there're already others who do commercial fusion music.' As we were the most prominent underground artists, we decided to join together. We defended more or less the same interests, the same rights; we had the same aspirations and everything was good and flowing well and solid."²²

Along these lines, a summary of Omega's stated goals involved calls to:

- reflect the sociopolitical experiences of "Third World" Latinas;
- encourage the development of Cuban women;
- search for peaceful ways to liberate women; defend women's rights; and eradicate machismo, domestic violence, and social, sexual, and racial forms of discrimination;
- promote the development of festivals and events dedicated to Latin American female rappers;
- promote the expansion of hip hop in Cuba and throughout the world;
- educate the public on themes of sexuality; and
- obtain greater incorporation of women within Cuban hip hop.²³

While advocating a kind of Third World feminist praxis and transnational citizenship (Alexander 2006; Mohanty 2003; Uma 1997) by way of hip hop activism, there may have been some divergences among Omega members around more individuated levels of difference. During a 2006 interview with MCs Magyori and Nono and DJ Yary, who were performing largely as a trio at the time, the artists expressed some ambivalence regarding the centrality of gender and feminist critique in relation to their work and self-identity as artists. As Nono elaborated: “Our songs reflect everything, not just feminism, it is not so important. What’s important is to give our mission to our music. Each one of us has our own message, but the main message is for us to be seen as artists, equal to all, not just women artists, but like a normal artist—we are all equal.”

Magyori added that she had a long history of working closely with male artists as the sole female member of EPG&B, a space in which she claimed to have felt neither compromised nor constrained artistically as a woman. DJ Yary clarified in turn that she did not consider herself a feminist, implying that such a belief would invoke a separatist position she claimed not to embrace. All three women stressed the notion that they had garnered respect from their male peers and broader public through hard work, dedication, and artistic talent rather than as women *per se*. Speaking of the collective’s membership, Yary explained:

The fact that we all belong to Omega Kilay shows that we are all here together and agree in many respects. The very fact that we were all together means that there is a tie between all of us as artists and that we all respect each other. Our purposes and intentions are largely similar though the only difference is that Las Krudas are inclined toward the stronger side of feminism here in Cuba. Being Third World, black, and overweight has influenced them and they have fought hard. My story would not be that, right? I talk about other things because, well, I have not suffered the same ways as they have. Everyone has experienced different things, each one has our own experience and we always translate them into positive messages.

Though not referenced directly, Yary’s comments suggest varying locations among Omega’s members along differential lines of sexuality. Embedded, for instance, in the commentary above of Yary and the other women is an apparent tendency to associate feminism with a lesbian subject position,

from which all three women seem to distance themselves. While offering a possible misreading of feminist epistemology, these women nonetheless illuminate an evolving range of self-reflexive conversation both about and through questions of gender and sexual difference—ones that no doubt owe much to Las Krudas' work. Krudas' interventions in this sense have been productive in introducing vocabularies of nonnormativity into spheres of Cuban hip hop otherwise largely devoid of such critical grammar. Their ability to forge alliances with both male and other female artists across lines of gender and sexuality testifies to the queering effects of their work—precisely the kind of disruptive intervention that Tomás Fernández Robaina advocates above. It is hence through multivocal claims to inclusive citizenship at overlapping levels of the national and transnational that new, critical understandings and ways of being Afro-Cuban come into active focus. Hip hop is in this sense instrumental in aiding such self-refractive undertakings.