

Chapter 5.

Racial Challenges and the State

Late one night following a local hip hop concert in the barrio of Vedado, I sat with a few friends in a nearby park reminiscing about the evening's events while sharing a few cajitas (small packaged boxes) of Los Marinos Patricruzado rum. Amid our musings, I noted my companions, Sidney Anson, DJ Alexis D'Boys, and MC Michael Oramas of Junior Clan, were adorned with an interesting collage of Afrodiasporic imagery. In succession, the trio sported T-shirt portraits of Jimi Hendrix, Bob Marley, and the Black Panther Party accompanied by an assemblage of cowry shells, an Ethiopian Coptic cross, and red-, black-, and green-beaded necklaces and wristbands. Attached to DJ Alexis's hat sat a small pin of Africa awash in the same nationalist triad of colors given celebrated form by Marcus Garvey and his call for black redemption through African repatriation. All stood in syncretic harmony with a set of mini-stereo headphones dangling around Sidney's neck (see figure 5.1). This Afro-Atlantic bricolage suggested a kind of black and expressly masculine cosmopolitanism in which these young men participated and literally stitched themselves within as contemporary Afro-Cubans. As discussed, black Cubans have long engaged transnational circuits of cultural commerce in the crafting of black social imaginaries and lines of political affinity (Acosta 2003; Brock and Castañeda Fuertes 1998a; Childs 2006; Fernández 2006; Guridy 2010; Jacques 1998; J. Moreno 2004). This, of course, is not new.



5.1. Sidney Anson, DJ Alexis D'Boys Rodríguez, and MC Michael Oramas.
Photo by the author

For my friends and many of their peers, however, hip hop offered a global expansiveness that both reflected, and was responsive to, the imperatives of a Cuban present formed at a shifting, racially imbricated confluence of history, nation, and an expanding market economy. The ways these young Cubans choose to self-identify and define themselves as black per se were rooted in social meanings fashioned in part through embodied style and musical practice. These men thus participated in their own transnational markets of racial consumption, yet ones directed toward particular affective ends. Indeed, to be negro/a in this context is not simply the result of being materially interpellated as such, but rather self-ascribed positions and politically marked possibilities from which to move and act.

The political grammars through which raperos refashion blackness in and of themselves, moreover, threaten the very stability of Cuban nonracialism long central to the island's nationalist projects both past and present. Recalling the nonracial groundings of José Martí, black Cuban identity claims with the slightest of political implications have been viewed as a counternational peril to the enshrined integrity of nation before race. Such

perceived defiance carried real political consequences in both pre- as well as post-1959 Cuba, with the 1912 state-sponsored massacre and dissolution of the Partido Independiente de Color embodying the most violent of historical expressions. One need not be familiar with rapero lyric allusions to these legacies to recognize the ways these artists evoke similar calls for full, non-self-negating inclusion and citizenship within the Cuban nation.

Raperos' explicitly modern claims to a black cosmopolitan globality, moreover, also disrupt nationally bound narratives like those of state-promoted folklore that tend to mark blackness, when recognized, as a "traditional" cultural holdover of an earlier moment—one autochthonously rooted in Cuba's racially transculturated and therefore ultimately de-raced national past. The diasporic amalgam of black signifiers that my drinking companions donned on that post-concert evening clearly superseded in the most celebratory of terms such national-temporal constraints.

Yet beyond the immediate circumstances of their making, what impacts and kinds of articulations might these practices and their broader interventions animate within wider spheres of Cuban life? Or in a more politically direct sense, what has been the revolutionary state's position vis-à-vis Cuban hip hop and its racially situated voicings? To what extent might raperos' critical affirmations of black difference complicate in both form (identity) and function (lyric-based critique) utopic claims of a Cuban postracial exceptionalism that would otherwise seek to silence social difference for the greater revolutionary and national good?

State Maneuvers

As previously noted, the revolutionary state and its institutions have occupied an ambivalent and often shifting role in relation to hip hop's development on the island. By varyingly restricting and facilitating access to U.S. popular music, while providing fragmentary support during the transitional growth of *la moña* into hip hop Cubano, the revolutionary state's early engagement can generally be seen as one of cautious tolerance. As alluded to earlier, it was the state-run Asociación Hermanos Saíz (AHS) that eventually took the lead as institutional liaison with the island's hip hop movement. The increasingly active role of AHS in successive hip hop festivals after 1999, however, signaled a strategic shift in state involvement. To recall, Grupo Uno, the hip hop collective headed by Rodolfo Rensoli that launched the

first Cuban hip hop festival in 1995, approached AHS in 1997 with the aim of securing institutional support for subsequent festivals held in Alamar's amphitheater. While this move ultimately extended Grupo Uno's organizational leadership of the festival for a few additional years, it also marked the beginning of an escalating governmental stake in the evolving space and future direction of island hip hop.

A key figure in this early confluence of interests was Roberto Zurbano, an Afro-Cuban writer, literary critic, and then vice president of Hermanos Saíz, whom Rensoli first approached regarding governmental support for the festival. In conversation with Zurbano he recalled that part of Grupo Uno's initial appeal from an institutional standpoint was the collective's proposal to expand the local festival to a province-wide event. Zurbano added that it was a subsequent invitation by Rensoli to meet with local rappers in Alamar, however, that sparked his interest in hip hop at a deeper personal level. Although he had no previous exposure to rap and had found the Alamar scene somewhat disorganized, Zurbano told me he was intrigued by what he experienced during his visit:

Right away I found that I had a strong affinity with these young people. I understood what they wanted, what they were saying. They brought some music to me and I began to hear their lyrics and their music. As a matter of principle, when I take something on I do it thoroughly, and so I wanted to inform myself about rap. So I began searching for literature on rap and read some bibliographic materials though unfortunately not much because there's very little on rap, at least here in Cuba. And then somehow I eventually became involved in the organizing committee for the event.¹

The event to which Zurbano refers was the 1997 Cuban hip hop festival in Alamar, which marked AHS's entree into hip hop as a collaborative organizer of the annual festival alongside Grupo Uno. From that point on, La Asociación—as it became known to members of Havana's hip hop community—became the principal and increasingly invested site of institutional contact between the revolutionary state and the island's evolving hip hop movement. As a key initial mediator of this engagement, Zurbano's curiosity and affective “affinity” with local rappers extended well beyond institutional concerns. Through a range of intellectual activities including scholarship (cf. Zurbano 2004a, 2004b, 2006, 2009) and eventual editorial directorship

of the state-run hip hop publication *Movimiento*,² Zurbano became a pivotal interlocutor and advocate for Havana's hip hop community, frequently acting as intermediary between the movement and varying state-run cultural institutions.

As one of an influential handful of Afro-Cuban intellectuals who would foster important relationships with Havana-area raperos, Zurbano's evolving institutional positionality—with AHS, the Union of Cuban Writers and Artists (UNEAC), and his former directorship of the publishing wing of Casa de las Américas—while largely respected, also drew ambivalence from some of the movement's younger, more institutionally cautious members. Such circumspection spoke of a broader ambivalence of positionality Zurbano occupied as an institutionally situated Afro-Cuban and intellectual progeny of the socialist revolution whose efforts, while potentially transcendent of institutional functionality, remained to an extent circumscribed by state interests. These tensions, as discussed in chapter 6, eventually gave rise to an episode of political fallout that once again underscored the political stakes of antiracist advocacy amid ongoing Cuban legacies of regulatory nonracialism.

Reflecting on the earlier moment of state engagement with hip hop, AHS's mission, in Zurbano's words, was aimed at integrating “new cultural forms within enduring frameworks of the nation, and national and political culture, opening up utopian possibilities and new forms of expression” (Zurbano 2009: 144). Regarding Cuban hip hop, this translated into “identifying talented rap artists, legitimizing their activities, improving their social recognition, supporting their initiatives, and incorporating them into more established cultural spaces” (Zurbano 2009: 145). To again paraphrase Fidel Castro's oft-cited “Inside the Revolution, everything. Against the Revolution, nothing,” the operational subtext of AHS's engagement with hip hop thus seemed one aimed at incorporation. Although such an agenda may indeed have been on the horizon in the late 1990s, successive hip hop festivals continued to be organized by Grupo Uno on the most meager of resources, provided in large part through local municipal sources (Hoch 1999). Hence despite AHS's official cosponsorship of the festival, state commitments to hip hop remained in practice more akin to guarded tolerance than active support. Whereas raperos would continue to struggle for official recognition and greater access to state resources and space, the revolutionary state's view of the movement generally remained that of a faddish, inorganic cultural phenomenon that would eventually fade.

A critical shift in perspective, if not implicit strategy, occurred in May 1999. Cuba's then-influential minister of culture Abel Prieto called a meeting in Havana with representatives of both *rapero* and *rockero* communities to convey the state's official recognition of rap and rock music as legitimate forms of Cuban cultural expression. One individual present at the meeting was Pablo Herrera, who remembers harboring apprehension about the shift in position. Recounting an exchange during the meeting, Pablo recalls:

What I told Abel Prieto [at the meeting] was, "Senior Ministro [laughs], you and I know that the minute you decide to stop Cuban hip hop you can, like an electrical switch, just shut it down. You can just stop the current from going there—stop the whole thing and shut it down." The president at the time of Hermanos Saíz, Fernando Rojas, said to me that I was being a bit apocalyptic. And when the minister decided to close the meeting he referred to my question and said that in the past, "We [the state] have had to power down certain things because we felt like they were not viable with the agenda that we have as a government."³

In a public ceremony held just a few weeks later, Prieto reportedly declared: "We have to support our Cuban rappers because this is the next generation of Cubans and they are saying some powerful things with this art. I am responsible for giving this generation the freedom to claim their power culturally" (Hoch 1999). From this point on the state took a conspicuously active interest in hip hop, with the Ministry of Culture under the direction of Abel Prieto serving as the central coordinator of efforts to incorporate hip hop within institutional realms of revolutionary national culture.

Another meeting later that same year involving Minister Prieto that may have also played into the state's pivot on hip hop was attended by a visiting Harry Belafonte (cf. Baker 2011; Levinson 2003). An important difference, however, was that this gathering involved Fidel Castro himself. A bit of background here. Sharing a history with Cuba predating the 1959 triumph of the revolution, Belafonte's artistic work as a performer and Caribbean-born native found fertile grounding in the vibrancies of Afro-Cuban music making.⁴ At the same time, a life of progressive activism spanning U.S. and international involvement provided Belafonte a perspective on the post-1959 period that helped frame a history of critical engagement with Cuba's revolutionary project (Belafonte and Shnayerson 2011). It was during a trip in December 1999 to attend Havana's annual International Film Festival that

Belafonte first came into contact with local raperos, an experience that apparently left a mark and shaped the terms of a subsequent conversation with Castro and Prieto.

As Belafonte recounts in his memoir, while at lunch at the stately Hotel Nacional:

I noticed a group of blacks who told me they were rappers. I said I hadn't known that Cuba had rappers. After all, rap is in your face, by definition. How could they be true to rap's spirit in Castro's Cuba? They couldn't perform in Havana's clubs, they acknowledged; to the country's elite, they didn't even exist. But they did perform underground, often for hundreds of people. That night, [my wife] Julie and I went to hear the ones we'd met. We were amazed. Of course we didn't understand every word and idiom; rap is hard enough to follow in English, much less in a second language. But a translator helped us follow the gist, and I fully appreciated the passion behind what I was hearing.

The very next day, Julie and I had lunch with Fidel, along with his minister of culture, Abel Prieto, a tall, very handsome, very Spanish-looking hippie with long hair and blue eyes. We started talking about blacks in Cuban culture, which gave me the opportunity to bring up the black rappers we'd heard the night before and what a pity it was that they could only perform underground. I could see that Castro had only the vaguest idea of what rap and hip-hop were, so I gave him a crash course in how they'd swept the planet, how they not only dominated the international music industry but had so much to say about the social and political issues of the day. For Castro to be unaware of how much Cuban rappers were adding to that conversation was truly a pity—not least because I could see how a U.S.-Cuban cultural exchange in rap and hip-hop might start a dialogue between the two countries. Fidel turned in some bafflement to the minister of culture. “Why are these artists afraid to perform in Havana?”

Prieto had to admit he didn't know much about rap or Cuban rappers, let alone black ones. To Fidel, free speech wasn't so much the issue as racism; if black artists in Cuba were being repressed, that undermined Castro's no-prejudice policy. Lunch was over, so we stood up to take our leave. “Where are you going?” Fidel demanded. I suggested we might head back to our protocol house. “No, no, no. I want you to come with

me and tell me more about these rappers.” (Belafonte and Shnayerson 2011: 360–61)

In Belafonte’s understanding, questions of race were front and center in the exchange as well as a potential factor in a political disconnect between Cuba’s leadership and local raperos. Reflecting similarly on the episode, Nehanda Abiodun recalls:

The first thing [Belafonte] did was meet with them in the Hotel Nacional, and it was an open forum—all rappers were invited, it wasn’t a select group. [This was 1999?] Yes, this was ’99 in December. And to the credit of the rappers they didn’t hold back. And Harry just listened, he just listened to it all. The next thing he did was attend this small concert and party that was held just for him. But after Harry listened to the music of the hip hoppers he had a meeting with Fidel. And he said that what started out to be just a lunch with Fidel turned out to be a ten-hour meeting, and a large part of the discussion was on hip hop. [Ten hours?] Yes, ten hours!⁵

In a subsequent return to Havana in 2002 Belafonte again met with local MCs, though this time the assemblage was hosted by the newly inaugurated state-run Agencia Cubana de Rap (ACR). Parts of this exchange are documented in a 2004 article, “Encuentro entre amigos,” published in the Agency’s *Movimiento* magazine, where themes of race and blackness serve as central points of national and generational translation between Belafonte and a score of Afro-Cuban raperos. Thus an official shift did indeed appear to occur yet one involving multiple players, but let us avoid getting too far afield.

Returning to that 1999 juncture, Hermanos Saíz eventually assumed full administrative control of the Cuban hip hop festival, usurping the previous leadership of Rensoli and others in Grupo Uno. While there were reported charges of financial improprieties on the part of Rensoli and Grupo Uno as the basis for their state-sanctioned removal as festival organizers, it seemed fairly apparent to many at the time that the driving motivation behind AHS’s administrative takeover of the festival was political. By 2001 a new public face of the festival emerged during a high-profile press conference held in a swanky lounge bar atop the Teatro Nacional (National Theater).

On the podium, bookended by Pablo Herrera and Ariel Fernández Díaz,

sat a collection of institutional figures including Hermanos Saíz's then vice president Fernando León Jacomino. As La Asociación's key liaison with Havana's hip hop community at the time, Jacomino had established a fairly respectable reputation among many MCs. Fairly quickly, though, Jacomino disappeared from the scene. His position was filled by Alpidio Alonso, Hermanos Saíz's new national president, who had recently been transferred to Havana from the eastern city of Santa Clara. The shifting of responsibility from the vice presidential to presidential rank of AHS represented a further ratcheting up of the state's engagement with hip hop, one now led by a unfamiliar outsider. Assuming a direct and fairly aggressive hands-on approach, Alpidio eventually established working relationships with a number of key figures in Havana's hip hop community. In the end, however, many of these associations were marked by tension if not distrust.

When I asked about the evolving role of the state with regard to Cuban hip hop, Alpidio explained that the responsibility of Hermanos Saíz was to help incorporate raperos and their work within institutional structures that would support and channel their creative energy more directly within the revolutionary process. He spoke of raperos as among *la vanguardia* (the vanguard) of the revolution, explaining that hip hop was in many ways "in front of the institutions" in terms of their social vision regarding Cuba's current challenges. As such, he concluded, the institutions—and by extension the revolutionary state—needed to pay greater attention to what raperos were voicing through their music. Somewhat echoing this position, in response to an interview query as to whether AHS saw itself as providing official space for hip hop, Alpidio responded: "I would prefer if the question was asked directly to the raperos themselves. But yes, Cuban rap has found through AHS a space to speak, to be part of the Revolution. And it spreads a revolutionary message and committed one, because their texts express it this way" (Mantienzo 2004: 1). Despite Alpidio's expressed concern about not speaking for raperos, it became apparent that Hermanos Saíz's newfound interest in hip hop was tied to managing the public face—if not the organizational character—of the movement. The official press conference for the 2002 hip hop festival stands here as a vivid case in point.

Held in Havana's International Press Center in the commercial heart of the thoroughfare of Calle 23, a small collection of middle-aged white men—once again sandwiched between the younger and darker Pablo Herrera and Ariel Fernández Díaz at either end—sat on the stage before

a packed audience. At the center, Alpidio directed the proceedings while Pablo and Ariel appeared less as active participants than perfunctory window dressing for the event. The dozen or so MCs who showed up for the press conference lined the back wall, looking on rather detached at the unfolding spectacle onstage. This disconnect was later noted by Pablo, who commented on how telling it was that one of the purported authorities on hip hop, an older white man whom no one seemed to recognize, repeatedly mispronounced the names of the artists slated to participate in the upcoming festival. Following the press conference, Ariel put it to me this way: “black music, white people, same ol’ shit.” Apparent inconsistencies between these statements and Pablo and Ariel’s actual participation (or at least the official semblance of such) in the press conference spoke again to a certain tenuousness they now maneuvered as members of Havana’s hip hop community with institutional access. As I explore momentarily, Ariel’s evolving positionality as one betwixt and between the movement and the state carried a particularly charged set of complexities.

A tone of paternalism presided over much of the press conference in which Alpidio and company seemed set on conveying the message “These are our Cuban youth [as silent(ced) as they are], and the state is here to provide.” In line with moves that denied autonomous voice to Cuban MCs, any mention of race was conspicuously absent from the press conference. Such omissions became standard practice in practically all official references to hip hop by the Cuban state and its institutions. An incorporative discourse of “our youth” was deployed strategically in state pronouncements, thus avoiding any public acknowledgment of the racial currents that underpinned much of the movement. To do so would expose the present urgencies of race and Cuban nationhood, a subject the revolutionary leadership remained reluctant to openly address. Official couchings of raperos as “our youth,” moreover, were reminiscent of state paternalism directed at black Cubans during the earlier revolutionary period (cf. de la Fuente 2001). Here the post-1959 canonization of Nicolás Guillén’s poem, “Tengo,” as a celebrated ode of indebted black gratitude to the revolution assumes added levels of resonance—ones nonetheless challenged by *Hermanos de Causa*’s revisionist interpretations (see chapter 4).

The state’s institutional ante vis-à-vis hip hop was raised considerably, however, with the establishment of the *Agencia Cubana de Rap* (ACR) under the Ministry of Culture in late 2002. Prior to this moment the only in-

stitutional outlet available to a select few raperos was membership in the previously mentioned state-run empresa Benny Moré, an “auto-financed” agency designed to promote and provide a minimal wage to performing artists associated with popular dance music (cf. R. Moore 2006b: 91–92). As one of the few MCs associated with ACR, Magia López of Obsesión recalled her early experience with the empresa:

So in 2000 after many battles, four [rap] groups managed to enter the empresa Benny Moré and were recognized as professional. But in reality we were without work and wages for a long time, because this empresa did not know how to promote or market our work. They had over twenty years of marketing primarily popular and traditional music and we [raperos] were basically a quite different thing.⁶

Dedicated explicitly to hip hop, La Agencia, as it became known within rapero ranks, assumed the responsibility of representing a select number of hand-picked rap groups with whom it coordinated performance activities such as concerts and tours. The initial ten groups incorporated into ACR’s portfolio were Alto Voltaje, Anónimo Consejo, Cubanos en la Red, Cubanitos, Doble Filo, Eddy-K, Free Hole Negro, Obsesión, Papo Record, and Primera Base. Appointed to head ACR was Susana García Amorós, a black woman in her early forties who had previously worked as an institution-based researcher with a specialization in Afro-Cuban literature. Although her appointment as a black woman appeared strategic, many noted that she had no background in music administration, let alone familiarity with hip hop. In this light Susana was viewed by some as not much more than a *funcionaria* or state functionary within Cuba’s larger bureaucratic apparatus. As Ariel Fernández Díaz mused in conversation: “I mean, you need to ask where did Susana come from, the communist party. So when Susana had a decision on the table that needed to be made, something that required she’d have to choose between the hip hop movement and the communist party, she would choose the communist party.”⁷

In describing the objective of ACR, Susana explained that the agency was formed to promote and commercialize hip hop talent within its portfolio. It was generally understood that a key criterion used in identifying artists for inclusion was tied to their perceived commercial viability, a mandate read critically by some. As a designated *auto-financiado* (self-financed) state organ, ACR was designed to draw on the potential revenue of its talent pool to finance

its operational costs. As Pablo Herrera suggested to me at the time, the formation of ACR in his view was ultimately linked to state interests in farming out Cuban hip hop to an international marketplace. He likened such moves to state efforts to “pimp” hip hop for commercial gain. Arrangements of the kind had already occurred with the ever-growing numbers of Cuban musicians now traveling abroad in the wake of an international boom in Cuban music since the mid-1990s following the Buena Vista Social Club phenomenon. In some of these early scenarios the Cuban state was reported to have garnered upward of 50 percent of artists’ overseas earnings (Watrous 1997).

Those in decision-making positions were, moreover, no doubt aware of the commercial potential of Cuban hip hop given the international success of Orishas, a French-produced rap group of Havana expatriates, including two former members of the pioneering hip hop trio Amenaza, whose debut album *A lo cubano* (2000 Universal Latino) surpassed the platinum mark in Europe and sold over 50,000 copies in the United States.⁸ The collaborative brainchild of the Paris-based hip hop producer Nicolas “Miko” Nocchi and the Cuban MC Flaco Pro Nuñez, a key factor in the album’s international appeal was the astute coupling of identifiably “Cuban” musical elements such as son, rumba, and traditional Cuban vocal styles with rap lyricism and hip-hop-informed beats. In dialogue with au courant packagings of Cuban blackness, however, economies of race were also central to the project’s commercial branding from inception. From the savvy choice of “Orishas” (gods), to the stylized incorporation of Yoruba-derived chants of Ocha-Lucumí and Afro-Cuban percussive lines, to a graphic darkening of the artists’ portraits on the album cover, a cultivated “Cuban” aesthetics of blackness was integral to the group’s international marketing strategy.

An ubiquitous sonic presence in the streets of Havana immediately following the album’s debut, Orishas returned to Cuba in December 2000 and January 2001 for a series of sold-out concerts. The explosive nature of the events and broader commercial possibilities of Cuban hip hop no doubt caught the attention of the revolutionary leadership. While most Havana-based raperos I know were generally critical of what they viewed as Orishas’s overtly commercial nature, many also respected, if not envied, the high-end production qualities of their music. Some, moreover, acknowledged that Orishas’s commercial success may have opened new commercial prospects for them both at home and abroad.

When I spoke with the ACR director Susana García Amorós about the

significance of hip hop in Cuba, she made the repeated point to distinguish island hip hop from its originating cousin in the United States. Susana emphasized that raperos had begun developing their own style of dress, gestures, and textual thematics that reflect a distinctly Cuban sensibility. Throughout she referred to raperos as *los jóvenes* (the youth) who, she suggested, were contributing to a deepening of understanding of Cuban society, “pero,” she added, “en una forma constructiva” (but, in a constructive way) within the revolutionary process. When asked about racial dynamics within the movement, Susana responded: “Here in Cuba you can speak about pigmentation or coloration, but you cannot talk about ‘the races’ because in reality we are all mixed.”⁹ Her response seemed to me a bit incongruous at the time given her previous research background in Afro-Cuban literary themes.

Susana then qualified that in terms of skin color, yes, the majority of raperos are darker skinned but, she emphasized, there are also those “*más claro*” (lighter skinned). I added that in my own experience with the community, race appeared to factor into hip hop beyond simply questions of skin color, pointing out the salience of black racial identity themes and self-practice within the movement. At that she let the issue rest without further comment. While Susana may have had cause to be cautious with me as a yuma (foreigner) and a Yankee at that, her avoidance of racial complexities seemed telling. Thus in noted contrast with the commercial packaging of Orishas, race seemed largely expunged from La Agencia’s official discourse on hip hop.

One of the early projects Susana undertook in her new role as director of ACR was to accompany Magia López and Alexey Rodríguez of Obsesión along with MC Edgar González of the hip hop duo Doble Filo during a 2003 U.S. tour. Doble Filo’s other artistic half, MC Yrak Saenz, was denied the required permission to travel by Cuban immigration. While no official reason was given, one possible factor may have been a concern that the artist might refuse to return to Cuba at the conclusion of the tour. Such anxieties were heightened given the previously mentioned rapero “defection” episode during a 2001 tour to New York City. Although the 2003 tour was organized and funded entirely through a collaboration of Miami- and New York-based arts organizations,¹⁰ the Cuban Ministry of Culture negotiated Susana’s inclusion as official state chaperone. Susana’s addition did indeed put an official face to (and within) the tour, while establishing a new degree of institutional coordination of hip hop as a whole.

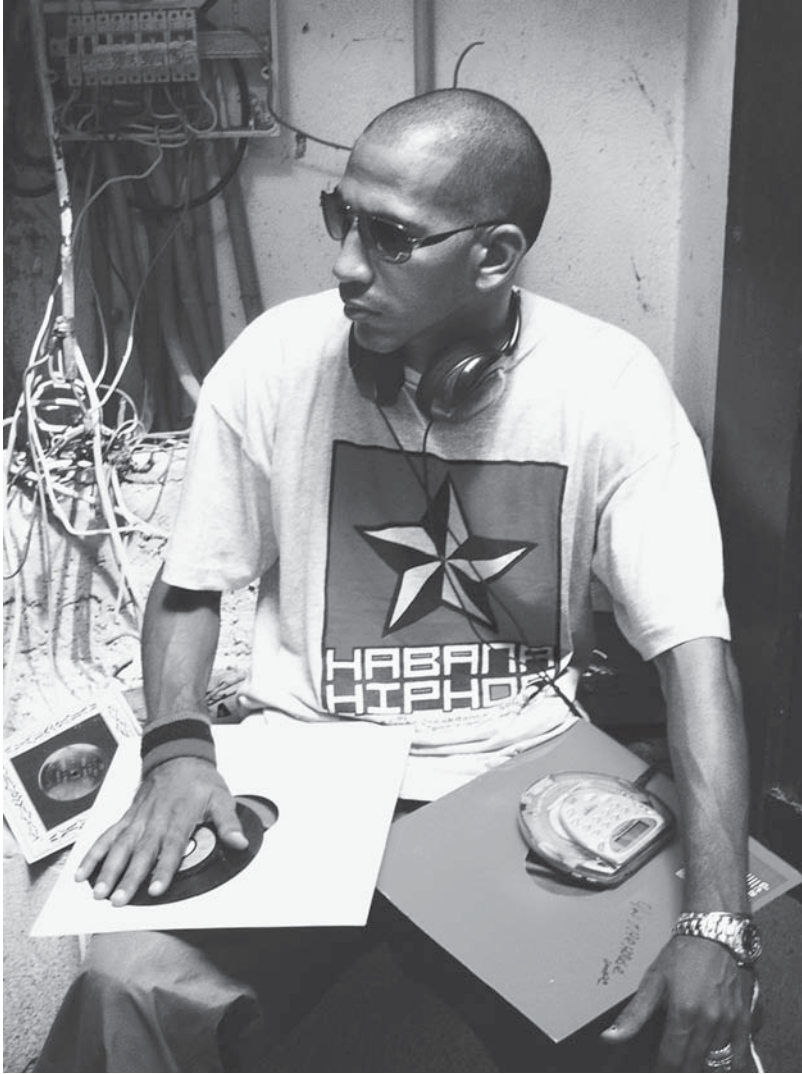
While *Obsesión* as one of the most accomplished of Cuban hip hop groups was officially represented by La Agencia, many other talented, more critically postured groups in Havana conspicuously were not. I recall one exchange in particular that exposed some related tensions around ACR's operational nature. During a discussion at a public colloquium organized in 2003 as part of the now state-run Cuban hip hop festival, MC Soandres del Río of *Hermanos de Causa* took the floor to challenge what he saw as ACR's exclusionary nature. The critique was directed at Alpidio Alonso, who earlier that day had defended La Agencia against other charges given Susana's noted absence from the colloquium, the first held during her new tenure as director. Alpidio responded by arguing that it was impossible for the agency to represent all groups, suggesting it was ultimately a question of resources. Soandres countered by asking Alpidio if he knew his name or to what group he belonged, which Alpidio conceded he did not. At this, Soandres concluded that institutional claims to "represent and support" hip hop were at best woefully out of touch, if not in the end implicitly suspect. Soandres's charge reflected a broader disillusionment and distrust shared by many in the community toward the new rap agency and broader institutional efforts to engage island hip hop. Even *Magia* and *Alexey*, who were among the celebrated "stars" of La Agencia, soon grew critical of the office's workings.

In truth, the revolutionary state and its institutions held resources that raperos long sought, resulting in something of a paternal relationship (if episodic and largely strategic) between the Cuban state and hip hop artists. In the immediate years following its establishment, ACR, in conjunction with *Hermanos Saíz* and the Instituto Cubano de la Música, organized a range of hip hop concerts throughout Havana alongside the first national hip hop tour involving *Obsesión* and *Doble Filo* in 2004. During this period raperos and their music, long invisible in state-run media, began appearing—albeit within certain constraints—on television, radio, in print, and on the Internet. Under *Hermanos Saíz* auspices, between 1999 and 2003 the annual hip hop festival expanded from a three-night event in Alamar to a five-day, multisited program throughout greater Havana involving colloquia and art exhibitions in addition to music performances. The concurrent rise of weekly shows at *Café Cantante* and *La Madriguera* marked a further expansion of Havana-based raperos' access to officially sanctioned space and resources.

An increasingly central player in this elevated state engagement was Ariel Fernández Díaz. In addition to holding court alongside Pablo Herrera as DJ Asho at Café Cantante's Saturday afternoon showcases and evening peñas at La Madriguera—both under AHS's auspices—Ariel assumed a position within Hermanos Saíz in 2000 as hip hop events coordinator and official state liaison with the movement.¹¹ Although bringing a minimal peso salary, this move catapulted Ariel, already something of an organic intellectual figure within the hip hop community, into an official state capacity. Ariel later described his new position as a move from “the margins to the center,” one broadly analogous in this sense to state incorporations of Cuban hip hop as a whole. Among his new responsibilities, Ariel became the lead person for leasing state-owned audio equipment for hip-hop-related music events.

One case in point in late 2001 involved the informal Vedado street venue of Diez y Diecinueve, during which the hip hop collective EP&B organized an afternoon concert with a local assortment of invited artists. As the man of the hour, Ariel coordinated the event's audio needs, which in classic Cuban fashion arrived a couple of hours late. Yet unlike previous times when police forced the street crowds converging at this intersection to disband, officers were conspicuously absent amid the public spectacle of black bodies and music. This scenario reflected a new level of state tolerance and material support for hip hop, a development in which Ariel now played an informative role.

In addition to promoting music-related events including those in his role as DJ Asho, Ariel's institutional position afforded him new intellectual outlets and resources as an impassioned advocate for hip hop in Cuba. A major undertaking along these lines was his editorial directorship of *Movimiento*, a glitzy state-financed magazine dedicated to Cuban hip hop published under the auspices of ACR and the Instituto Cubano de la Música. Launched in 2003, the project pulled together an eclectic array of hip-hop-affiliated individuals, the vast majority of whom were Afro-Cuban. Among those involved were journalists, photographers, intellectuals, graphic designers, and hip hop artists who collectively exercised fairly open editorial control over the magazine's content.¹² Under Ariel's directorship through 2005, *Movimiento* published four issues encompassing a wide range of articles and imagery relating to island hip hop. As a journalist, Ariel also contributed a broad selection of articles and other material to the magazine. The project as such



5.2. Journalist, DJ, and events producer Ariel Fernández Díaz.
Photo courtesy of Ariel Fernández Díaz

represented an important moment of critical triangulation between the hip hop movement, Afro-Cuban intellectuals and artists, and state resources via an institutionally facilitated medium.

In conversation about his new position with Hermanos Saíz, Ariel acknowledged that his thinking had recently shifted with regard to his longstanding distance from the state and “the revolution.” Now, he implied, he saw things somewhat differently. When I asked whether he shared a greater level of identification with the state given his new involvement, Ariel responded:

Of course, completely. [*What changed?*] I don’t know, my thinking is deeper, my struggle is deeper, my political understanding is more profound. Before, when I started, the only thing important was that rap could be in Cuba, that it could be heard in Cuba. Now I’m interested in what role rap can have in the political life of the country, no? . . . Many people complain about the state but there are things that the state does that may harm five or six people, but benefit many. It’s very complicated, understand? It’s very complicated to understand.¹³

During the years I knew Ariel, his thinking and positionality seemed to be constantly evolving in ways that often involved wrestling with conflicting tensions. In describing his newfound responsibilities working with Hermanos Saíz, the internal seeds of some of this discord were apparent.

My mission is to be an artist, to be human—think for it, work for it. This is the same mission of the movement itself. I am fighting to be a messenger between the Cuban institutions and the artists, understand? I arrived at the Cuban institutions—the Minister of Culture, Asociación Hermanos Saíz—because raperos wanted that. I am there to fight because raperos want concerts, discs—for these kinds of things. [*Like a bridge?*] Yes, like a bridge. I do not desire that people create an identity for me apart from the movement, no. I think that people intend for me to have a role *within* the movement. I don’t want people to think that I want to be a “mogul” like Russell Simons. Sincerely, if I’m a leader or the face of the movement about many things, I always have to respond to what the movement itself wants.

Although on the surface these remarks may suggest otherwise, Ariel’s comments betray an ambivalence that he occupied as a middleman caught

between hip hop and the state. Ariel's need to repeatedly assert his fidelity to the movement reflected the potentially compromising position he now occupied. While Ariel and, to a lesser degree, Pablo Herrera have served varyingly as intermediaries between the state and the hip hop movement, their positionality as advocates and artistic producers grew organically out of long-term engagements within Havana's hip hop community. Most rappers I knew highly respected Ariel and his tireless, if at times seemingly obsessive, efforts over the years to promote the cause of island hip hop. This, however, did not mean that Ariel's (or for that matter Pablo's) relationship with Cuban MCs and others affiliated with the movement was free from complexities and tensions.¹⁴

While many recognized the instrumental role Ariel played in securing needed state-related resources, this did not translate to unguarded trust of the Cuban state and its institutions. Ariel in turn seemed cognizant of how he, as an employee of Hermanos Saíz, might be implicated by concerns regarding state modes of intervention. Indeed, one well-positioned person within the movement once playfully likened Ariel to "a house negro" in Hermanos Saíz. In truth, over time Ariel grew increasingly conflicted about his position. He often complained about the frequent arguments he would wage with the Hermanos Saíz's leadership over the direction of his work and the movement itself. Ariel eventually expressed frustration and mounting misgivings about continuing his involvement (i.e., employment) within AHS, including his desire to break from Hermanos Saíz and organize his own hip-hop-related projects independent of the state. The challenge, of course, was how and with what resources. Although he gradually created distance between himself and AHS and would eventually resign from his position, for that moment in the early to mid-2000s Ariel was caught at the epicenter of an ongoing dance between hip hop and the state as both grappled with a rapidly changing Cuba.

Shapings of a Black Public Sphere

It is important to consider the interplay between Cuban hip hop and the revolutionary state in light of a set of confluences beginning in the 1990s that gave rise to an *apertura* or "opening" on the part of the Cuban state to a wider public range of social and artistic expression along with broader recognitions of social difference (cf. Dilla Alfonso 2002). The revolutionary

state's relatively more tolerant position on homosexuality, though clearly with limitations (see Saunders 2010), stands as one example of such openings during this period (Bejel 2001). Many cite the Third Congress of Cuba's Communist Party in 1986 as something of a watershed event in this direction (de la Fuente 2001; N. Fernandez 2001).¹⁵ Signaling a measured reopening of public discussion of race after long silencings,¹⁶ Fidel Castro acknowledged the persistence of racial discrimination during the congress's closing, pointing to the scarcity of blacks, women, and youth within the party's leadership. His call for redress eventually gave rise to a two-fold increase of nonwhite membership in the party's Central Committee following a purge of older committee members (de la Fuente 2001; Dilla Alfonso 2002; C. Moore 1989).¹⁷

The party's Fifth Congress in 1997 drew renewed attention to the continued scarcity of blacks in the party's ranks, again raising questions of racial exclusion within Cuba's political structures (Pérez Sarduy and Stubbs 2000). Although a decade apart, these declarations occurred during significant periods of economic anxiety, the first involving a national effort to "rectify" recent market reforms and their social impacts,¹⁸ and the second amid an ambivalence regarding neoliberal expansion and the very moment and circumstances under which the Cuban hip hop movement was finding its footing.

Recalling state broachings of the topic of racism in the early years of the revolutionary period, Alejandro de la Fuente observes that black intellectuals played an important role in pushing public terms of debate on the issue (de la Fuente 2001: 260). Within this more recent historical frame, I suggest that raperos played a similar contributing role in reopening public dialogues on race and blackness in the early 2000s. Here a dialectic play of sorts occurred between hip hop as a new space of racial articulation in both form (racial subjectivity) and practice (race-based critique), and the Cuban state in its efforts to manage the terms of such expansive contest. What then in a more explicit sense were the working dimensions of this interface, and in what ways might raperos' and other aligned actors' efforts align with periodic openings and subsequent retreats of state-sanctioned space (cf. Cabezas 2009; Corrales 2004)?

I suggest that black and darker-skinned raperos were in fact active in shaping a nascent black counterpublic at the millennial turn rooted in a black political difference and antiracist advocacy within an otherwise non-

racial national imaginary. Taking a lead from Michael Dawson (1995), I draw on Nancy Fraser's notion of subaltern counterpublics as competing sites of social and political expression vis-à-vis the often marginalizing effects of official public spheres. For Fraser, such counterpublics frequently challenge "exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech" (Fraser 1990: 61). While conventional notions of a public sphere associated with liberal democratic societies (Habermas 1989) may not operate as such within revolutionary Cuba, where domains of public engagement have been largely channeled and regulated by state-run institutions, this does not mean that alternative modes of public expression and dialogue do not exist. Indeed, the recent rise of a relatively cantankerous Cuban blogosphere is illustrative of such expanding alterities to state-mediated realms of public discourse (see Duong 2013). Efforts to give Cuban voice to an emergent black counterpublic have similarly required alternative, nonformal means of public engagement and redress.¹⁹

Integral to this new moment of Afro-Cuban parlance, Cuban hip hop can be seen as operating precisely in this sense as an alternative site of black public enunciation. Here raperos' voicings and attending modes of black self-crafting have been instrumental in pushing critical discussions of race and class into realms of Cuban public discourse. Where else in revolutionary Cuba, for instance, might one stand before upward of three thousand black youth and engage publicly in critiques of racial exclusion and racially directed police harassment? Perhaps Cuban timba and more recent reggaetón, whose artists and fan bases also draw heavily from Afro-Cuban youth, may also offer public sites of social critique via realms of popular music (cf. Baker 2011; Hernández-Reguant 2004; Perna 2005; Vaughn 2012). While these genres represent vibrant locales within an expanding field of racially inflected expression—ones in varying conversation with hip hop themselves—neither timba nor reggaetón articulate the explicit racial claims or antiracist advocacy found in hip hop.

Black-identified raperos as such maneuvered in somewhat vanguardist terms vis-à-vis Cuba's spectrum of racial politics at the millennial turn, occupying critical ground within a broader unfolding present of Afro-Cuban political articulation. The evolving lines of this confluence have been noted by others (Fernandes and Stanyek 2007; M. Perry 2004; Saunders 2009), including historian Alejandro de la Fuente, who, citing raperos among

key agents, has likened such developments to a “new Afro-Cuban cultural movement” that encompasses “musicians, visual artists, writers, academics and activists shar[ing] common grievances about racism and its social effects” (de la Fuente 2008: 697; see also de la Fuente 2010).

An important marker of hip hop’s weight in this dialogic mix involved a growing interest in raperos and their art by a small but active Havana circle of Afro-Cuban intellectuals, a particular current of which was composed by an older generation. The filmmaker Gloria Rolando was among such interlocutors who, in addition to other involvements, collaborated with Anónimo Consejo in developing her film *Raíces de mi corazón* (Roots of my heart) and its exploration of the Partido Independiente de Color. The social psychologist Norma Guillard Limonta, whose research centers on black women via overlapping dimensions of race, gender, and sexuality, also shares an important history of engagement with hip hop. Guillard Limonta has been particularly interested in the role of women within the movement and has published scholarly articles along these lines including a piece in *Movimiento* magazine (Guillard Limonta 2005). The ethnomusicologist Grizel Hernández Baguer, with the Cuban Center for Investigation and Development of Music (CIDMUC), has similarly taken a long-term scholarly interest in island hip hop (Hernández Baguer, Casanella Cué, and González Bello 2004), as has the journalist Joaquín Borges-Triana (2004). The Afro-Cuban poet and literary figure Victor Fowler, for his part, has also made frequent contributions to *Movimiento* in the form of brief reviews of recent Cuban publications on racial issues (Fowler 2004a, 2004b). *Movimiento* in this sense was instrumental not only as a forum for documenting hip hop’s Cuban rise, but also as an emergent space for Cuban conversations on race through the organizing frame of hip hop itself.

A more intimate level of intergenerational engagement involved Tomás Fernández Robaina and Roberto Zurbano, who, in addition to their collaborative involvements with the movement, have published scholarly commentary on island hip hop (Fernández Robaina 2002; Zurbano 2004a, 2004b, 2006, 2009). Sharing some thoughts amid a conversation about hip hop’s Cuban relevance in 2006, Zurbano elaborated:

Issues of race, gender, class, and notions of sexuality are being reflected in hip hop here in Cuba in terms of making a series of projections, not only in the fields of aesthetics and the arts, but also in the ideological

field. . . . Hip hop is subverting ideas, critiquing a way of life in which a new Cuban economy creates a lot of marginal subjects and spaces—a new economy where there are mutually exclusive terms, excluding spaces, excluded subjects. In this sense they are producing discourses that are not only artistic but also social. They have taken a social discourse and rearticulated revolutionary values within which they have been trained and educated.

These are the utopic horizons for possible rescue that they are fighting for. And in this sense I find they are a vanguard not only because of the social critique embedded in the text of their songs, but also how they live a discourse that is a critique of the social ills of today, Cuba today—a global society. The most interesting thing is that the social criticism that they are making is shared by many who feel oppressed in other parts of the world such as other black people, the poor, the oppressed, those crushed under the culture of neoliberal capitalism.²⁰

Zurbano's comments underscore an appreciation for hip hop's vanguardist possibilities not only in terms of seeking "rescue" of the revolutionary promise in the face of the exclusionary challenges of the neoliberal moment, but possibly more so regarding raperos' globally expansive revisionings of utopic possibility.

Another individual of note echoing similar lines of appraisal is Gisela Arandia, a prominent Afro-Cuban researcher and journalistically trained scholar of contemporary black issues affiliated with the Union of Cuban Artists and Writers (UNEAC). Gisela was instrumental in launching UNEAC's previously mentioned "Color Cubano" project in 2001 as a forum for writers and artists—the majority of whom were Afro-Cuban—to reflect upon and debate issues of racism, black media representation, and the role of Afro-Cubans in revolutionary society. The project drew its name from Nicolás Guillén's famed yearning for a postracial Cuban future embodied in the celebrated verse "Algún día se dirá: 'color cubano'" (One day it [Cubanness] will be known as: "Cuban Color") from his 1931 poem "Songoro cosongo." In revisiting the theme, the forum was illustrative of recent institutional openings to relatively more public discussions of race,²¹ openings in which Afro-Cuban intellectuals again played an active role. Reflecting on hip hop and its relevance to broader conversations on race in Cuba, Gisela explained to me:

In this sense debating the issue [of race] is where we are at this moment. This means we have to advance the issue beyond the taboo—the subject starts to speak and voices begin to emerge. In this context the rap movement is extremely important because it allows us to look at very specific things and recognize the problems. If you were always told before, “Here there is no racism,” and then a rap song tells the story of police in the streets asking you 15,000 times for your ID card while not stopping some other white boy, right then and there the specifics are condemning.

Now, what is important is that raperos make alliances with people and seek a broad spectrum. Of course they elect their own leaders and I’m not pretending to be incorporated into the movement because, of course, there is a tremendous distance between us, principally generational and intellectually. But of course they deserve support because they are a front in the fight against racism. This is important because in essence they introduce an antiracist discourse.²²

For Gisela, a key space of exchange with raperos and others around hip hop occurred during a series of annual colloquiums organized as part of Hermanos Saíz’s expansion of Cuba’s hip hop festival. Unlike earlier years when the event drew an informal gathering of no more than a handful of raperos, since 2000, when I first participated, the colloquium grew into a multiday program drawing Cubans and foreigners alike around commentary and analysis of hip hop as a new Cuban phenomenon. In addition to Hermanos Saíz, participating state organs included UNEAC and El Museo de la Música (The Museum of Music), reflecting increased institutional recognition of hip hop as well as ongoing efforts to frame its official terms of debate. These public forums were often charged grounds for exchange around issues like racism, identity, and questions of citizenship—all read against the social backdrop of hip hop. Whether intentional or not, the colloquium’s shift toward a more formal academic exchange in the end tended to marginalize raperos as participants. While MCs filled the seats listening to others, including myself, pontificate about *them* and *their* music, they were rarely if ever on the podium themselves. This did not, however, inhibit many from making their voices heard.

During a panel organized as part of the 2002 colloquium, Ariel Fernández Díaz—who himself played a key role in organizing the colloquium in his official capacity with AHS—offered a rather blistering critique of racial

representation used in print advertising packaged for the foreign tourist market. Using imagery culled from this media, Ariel underscored the invisibility of black Cubans within much of the promotional literature or, when present, framed in racialized caricatures reproductive of folkloric or “colonial” portraiture. In juxtaposition, Ariel offered a collection of Cuban rap lyrics exemplary of the movement’s black political currents. His tone was unapologetic and represented something of a milestone at the time in its public voicing of hip hop’s racial orientation. In spite (or precisely by way) of his institutional capacity, Ariel contributed to a shattering of the official silence around hip hop’s racial dimensionality, an issue that at the time still remained largely outside sanctioned state discourse and acknowledgment.

Discussions of this kind provoked an interesting set of exchanges. At one point a middle-aged black man from the audience addressed a panel, complaining about what he viewed as a misguided emphasis by raperos on issues of racial identity and racism. He suggested that Cuban MCs were merely, and uncritically, reproducing discourses prevalent in U.S. hip hop that were largely inorganic to Cuba. His concerns, however, failed to resonate with the audience, the majority of whom were themselves raperos who had long affirmed their Cubanness as artists.

On another colloquium day, Sekou Umoja of Anónimo Consejo addressed the colloquium from the floor, complaining that the enduring invisibility of Afro-Cuban figures compelled black youth to look elsewhere for “our heroes,” citing the examples of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. In Sekou’s view, blackness had in essence been disenfranchised from Cuba’s national narrative. Building on themes of racial disenfranchisement, Sekou continued by citing his inability as a “Cuban” to travel freely “dentro mi propio país” (in my own country) following the recent implementation of travel restrictions to regulate internal migration on the island.²³ While these laws were primarily designed to limit in-migration to Havana from eastern provinces at a time of growing regional inequality, such regulation often involved racially coded surveillance and policing of darker-skinned *palestinos* (or others filling the bill), as immigrants from the eastern Oriente region are commonly termed. Shortly after his remarks, Sekou was pulled aside by the president of Hermanos Saíz, Alpidio Alonso, who chastised him for his comments. During their exchange, Alpidio could be heard reminding Sekou not to forget the heroics of José Martí and Antonio Maceo and their mar-

tyred struggles for a nonracial Cuba, the tone of which seemed to suggest that Sekou should simply be thankful.

Additional voices active during this period of expanding dialogue included a small group of young Afro-Cuban intellectuals and artists, some of whom first came into contact with raperos while attending Tomás Fernández Robaina's "El Negro en Cuba" class in the Biblioteca Nacional. Coming of age amid the same ambiguities and frictions of the period, many among this emerging generation of thinkers and cultural producers shared with their rapero peers a similar set of critical perspectives on race and social power as lived in the current everyday.

One such member of this generational cohort was Yesenia Sélíer, a thirty-something social psychology-trained researcher from Havana's Centro Juan Marinello whose work at the time centered on race and racial identity in Cuba. A key focus of Yesenia's scholarship—and one in conversation with Sekou's challenge above—addressed absences of historical memory vis-à-vis race on the part of both Afro-Cubans and Cuba's broader national imaginary. She suggests that such gaps, far from being incidental, are actively produced through the ideological workings of national discourse (see Sélíer 2002). Not surprisingly, Yesenia's work eventually drew her to hip hop. Rather than a detached researcher, Yesenia's involvement with Havana's rapero community ranged from coauthoring an academic article with Pablo Herrera on hip hop for the prestigious Casa de Las Américas (Herrera and Sélíer 2003), to performing poetry alongside a collection of female MCs during a Havana hip hop concert in 2003.²⁴ On more overtly artistic grounds, the photographers Diamela "Ife" Fernández, Ariel Arias Jiménez, and Javier Machado Leyva have all shared relationships with Havana-area raperos. Their involvement in documenting moments and broader ongoing elaborations of island hip hop have included contributions of images and production skills to *Movimiento* magazine.

Among this peer group of hip-hop-conversant intellectuals and artists, Roberto Diago Durruthy, known professionally as Diago, stands as a particularly high-profile figure.²⁵ As a relatively young, internationally renowned Afro-Cuban painter who has exhibited extensively in Cuba and abroad, much of Diago's work explores contemporary themes of race, racial identity, and racism, often fusing Afro-Cuban religious motifs and racially marked text in ways some have likened stylistically to Jean-Michel Basquiat (Mateo 2003).

Diago had been a key figure in the groundbreaking 1997 group show *Keloids*, organized at Havana's Casa de Africa by the visual artist Alexis Esquivel, examining Cuban themes of race and racism. Building on subsequent *Keloids* shows in 1999 and 2010, an updated rendering of the exhibition that also included Diago's work *Queloides/Keloids: Race and Racism in Cuban Contemporary Art*, curated by Alejandro de la Fuente and Elio Rodríguez Valdez, traveled to the United States accompanied by a handsome, essay-laden catalogue (de la Fuente 2010). Underscoring the resonance of hip hop in the dialogue, Hermanos de Causa's Soandres del Rio was invited to perform during the exhibition's 2010 U.S. opening in Pittsburgh.²⁶

My first introduction to Diago was in Tomás's class, where he was often a highly engaged participant in discussions. Like Yesenia Sélier, it was in this setting that Diago initially came into dialogue with raperos. Although never coming to full fruition, there was talk at the time between himself, raperos, and others in class about organizing a collaborative presentation around the course's racial thematics. When later interviewed by a Cuban journalist regarding the centrality of racial critique in his work—which was framed by the journalist as exemplary of a new generation of black intellectuals—Diago responded by drawing parallels between himself and raperos in terms of a “carga agresiva” (aggressive charge) that characterized the kind of in-your-face challenges and unapologetic claims to black racial subjectivity central to both locales of artistic work (Mateo 2003: 25).

At the same time, Diago became something of a celebrated son of Cuba's new openness to overtly “black” forms of artistic expression, securing a highly coveted solo show in 2002 at Havana's new, relatively palatial state-run Museo Bellas Artes. In conjunction with the show, a well-attended symposium was coordinated around his work's racial thematics, drawing a high-profile assemblage of Afro-Cuban intellectuals including eminent cultural historian Rogelio Martínez Furé and celebrated poet Nancy Morejón. The symposium was officiated by the then cultural minister Abel Prieto, who, among a new generation of institutionally groomed intelligentsia arising in the 1990s,²⁷ had been something of an early advocate for greater state openness to more plural, antidogmatic forms of cultural production (see Davies 2000). Strategic as it may have been, this policy apparently extended to raperos, given Prieto's key role in mediating the state's institutional shift regarding hip hop.

Yet overtures to a relatively more tolerant climate toward cultural ex-

pression and the arts again corresponded with an increasingly commodity-driven national landscape, one heavily dependent on the commercial packaging of identifiably “Cuban” (and often racially marked) cultural forms and bodies. Diago’s rise and accompanying state responsiveness may in this sense speak to an articulation of global markets, emergent sites and forms of black social expression, and the Cuban state’s seemingly strategic recognition and institutional opening to both.

In the case of hip hop, the widening of institutional space and resources within which raperos operated after 1999 did not occur simply through a benevolence of state paternalism. Rather, these openings emerged within an evolving confluence of factors, including raperos’ own labors to win space within an elaborating moment of Afro-Cuban enunciation coupled with market expansions that carried their own assimilative logics. By accommodating the critical arts, the Cuban state may have sought to manage potential challenges to the nonracial status quo by incorporating hip hop within the structural and discursive folds of revolutionary national culture while at the same time hedging on possibilities of its commercial draw. Although such efforts may have had restrictive effects, it is also evident that raperos along with allies were able to exploit openings to pose critiques and expose contradictions in both discursive and material realms of everyday Cuban life. Yet how sustainable, in the strategic end, was this negotiated balance?