

Chapter 6.

Whither Hip Hop Cubano?

This is my life, my life is hip hop, hip hop's my culture, I am hip hop! This is my culture, the culture of my family and culture of all my brothers. And for all the brothers who are ready to fight for hip hop, I'm at your side. Hip hop's my life, wherever I am, until I die. Hip hop will continue here in Cuba. And they'll kill me for saying it but hip hop here in Cuba will never die.¹

—DJ Alexis D'Boys

Robin Moore has documented the ways Cuba's *nueva trova* movement of the late 1960s and 1970s underwent transformation from a youth-centered music steeped in social commentary to a prominent state-sanctioned symbol of national revolutionary culture. In ways analogous to raperos albeit of an earlier generation, *trovadores* were inheritors of a revolutionary history and culture who, while embracing many of the ideals of state socialism, questioned the ways and extent to which such ideals were addressed during the early revolutionary period. Initially the Cuban state was not particularly receptive to such query, launching a period of intimidation directed at a number of the movement's key figures, including Pablo Milanés and Silvio Rodríguez (R. Moore 2006b).

By the early 1970s, however, a shift occurred that culminated in the formation of the Movimiento Nacional de la Trova (The National Trova Movement) under the Ministry of Culture in an effort to integrate a previously

autonomous artistic movement within institutional folds of the state. While such developments provided nuevos trovadores much-needed access to state-controlled resources like performance venues, studio time, and distribution networks, Moore notes that the arrangement impacted the movement's independence of voice. Artists' work was now under tighter scrutiny; if one did not tread lightly one faced the possibility of losing state favor. As Moore explains, "*Trovadores* thus walked an ever more delicate line between fidelity to a government that now supported them and fidelity to themselves and their own points of view" (R. Moore 2006b: 157). The example of nueva trova hence begs the question as to whether raperos faced similar challenges regarding their evolving relationship with the Cuban state and its institutions. When considering such comparisons, two interwoven factors distinguish hip hop in historically significant ways. Unlike nueva trova of the previous moment, raperos' mediations of state power were complicated by the ascendancy of the Cuban marketplace as well as the (related) political salience of race among many leading artists.

In a pioneering 2000 article, "¿Poesía urbana? O la nueva trova de los noventa" (Urban poetry? or The nueva trova of the nineties), published in Cuba's youth-oriented periodical *El Caimán Barbudo*, Ariel Fernández Díaz similarly evokes parallels between hip hop and nueva trova. In the piece, Ariel offers a spirited defense of the cultural legitimacy of hip hop in Cuba, while underscoring raperos' revolutionary engaged role—like nuevos trovadores before—as critical commentators on the complexities and ambiguities of Cuba at the millennium's turn. While in his words raperos "make revolution with their texts, and educate with their poetry," they remain "misunderstood, censored despite carrying the truth in their hands" (A. Fernández Díaz 2000).²

In advocating for official space and recognition for hip hop, Ariel may not have foreseen the range of implications such moves ultimately engendered. What did become clear for many early on, however, was that a patronage-based relationship with the state required compromises and degrees of dependency that threatened autonomous music making and artistic control. In reality, what limited resources the Cuban state and its institutions did provide were far from adequate for meeting raperos' most basic production and performance needs. Given the limitations at both the political and material levels, many Cuban MCs sought entrepreneurial means to develop alternative, non-state-related strategies for production, performance, and distribution of their music. The crafting of background beats and voice

tracks in makeshift home studios became increasingly possible through the proliferation of personal computers and an evolving range of consumer-based production software like Pro Tools, Cakewalk, and Fruity Loops. Such technological developments were critical given the lack of access to state-run recording studios and the prohibitive cost of private or quasi-private facilities such as Silvio Rodríguez's Abdala Studios in Havana. Coupling these home studios with CD-burning capacity, growing numbers of raperos were able to distribute music through informal channels at concerts and eventually the Internet. Collaborative projects were pursued as well. In 2005 a hip hop collective dubbed El Cartel, composed of a handful of Havana's most celebrated "underground" artists, released an independent CD project produced by Pablo Herrera.³

Obsesión's Magia López and Alexey Rodríguez along with their then-producer Yelandy Blaya collaborated with the duo Doble Filo in an independent venture labeled La Fabri-K. Ventures undertaken under the moniker included a 2002 CD release, a series of domestic and international tours,⁴ and the 2005 launching of an annual multiday Hip Hop Symposium that combined workshops with nightly performances by MCs from both Cuba and abroad. Although the creative impetus and organizational energy behind La Fabri-K was largely independent, a number of early projects under its auspices remained dependent to some degree on state resources or institutional collaborations.

By 2004, however, it was apparent that the Cuban state's expansion of support for hip hop after 1999 was clearly on the wane. An early indication of this move was the abrupt postponement by the state-run Asociación Hermanos Saíz (AHS) of the tenth annual hip hop festival just a few days prior to its August start. The western portion of the island had recently suffered heavy damages from Hurricane Charley, and all public resources were said to be directed toward the recovery effort. While the postponement may have been justified under these circumstances, many within the hip hop community cried foul, sensing politics rather than material circumstances as the underlying rationale. Such sentiments found voice in the 2006 documentary *East of Havana* by the U.S. filmmakers Jauretsi Saizarbitoria and Emilia Menocal, which focused on the lives of three Cuban MCs in preparation for, and ultimate resentment over, the canceled August festival.⁵ The film vividly captured a growing moment of disillusionment and frustration these and other artists felt regarding the Cuban state and its declining support for hip hop.



6.1. DJ and events producer Alexis D'Boys Rodríguez. Photo by the author

While the festival was eventually held that November, the shift in timing and resources led to a marked reduction compared to past levels of organization, attendance, and participation among Cuban MCs and invited artists from abroad. Again breaking from the long-standing August tradition, the 2005 festival, held again in November, also paled in comparison in size and scope with previous years. More significantly, the 2005 festival represented the final year of the state's support for the annual event. The anticipated festival for 2006 was abruptly canceled, again with oblique references to resource limitations due to seasonal hurricanes, and no alternative plans in the end were offered. Many read this move as a definitive signal that the Cuban government was no longer invested—to the extent and under the terms it had been—in a patron-based relationship with Cuban hip hop.

It was during this period that another effort emerged to carve out alternative space for island hip hop in a small open-air amphitheater in Parque Almendares—a lush green oasis on the sleepy banks of the Almendares River dividing Havana's barrios of Vedado and Miramar. Initially launched in 2003, project Almendares Vivo (Almendares Live) was hosted by DJ Alexis "D'Boys" Rodríguez, who, along with the venerated Afro-Cuban musician

Gerardo Alfonso, conceived the venture as an alternative festival for local MCs denied competitive entrance to the larger state-run festival.⁶ By 2006 the multiday event drawing local MCs and a small collection of foreign artists ran in lieu of the canceled state-run festival, and was billed as an “autonomous” (that is, authentic) expression of hip hop’s underground talent on the island. While the project initially operated with the nominal support of the Cuban Ministry of Culture, a significant part of the event’s funding was provided by sources external to the island. As DJ Alexis explained in 2006 while in preparation for the upcoming festival:

The institutions don’t provide funds for this kind of event, they’re not interested in supporting us so we have to do for ourselves. They do not want hip hop culture nor do they have any interest in hip hop culture. What they want is to eliminate it. You know it’s like being treated like a child; they say “you cannot do this.”

So what we are doing here is to show them that we have discipline, that we are not undisciplined, that we have awareness and knowledge of music, culture, and respect for humanity. We are not, as they say, “la calle” [the street]. We are of the street, but people with respect and discipline, and they have to recognize this and eventually pay attention. So we’re fighting and everything planned for the upcoming festival will happen. And for those who say, “There isn’t going to be a Havana hip hop festival because there is no hip hop,” forget about it! This will happen! My work this year has been about showing there’s indeed a hip hop movement and that hip hop here in Cuba is very disciplined. Forget about it, my brother, *pa’lante!* [forward!], we can no longer sleep. You can try to shut the mouths of people but we will not allow hip hop culture here in Cuba to be exterminated, that’s impossible! What we have to do we’ll do, brother. We will continue fighting and this will not stop.

Elaborating on the festival’s organizational nature, Alexis added:

Many thanks to all international artists and activists who are coming to participate and help us not only in terms of money, but also with materials to support the movement here in Havana and to make this event an educational expression of hip hop. For it is not only a marathon of MC performances—we have conferences, workshops, and documentaries. This is not just a festival but more an educational encounter. Anyone

interested in knowing about graffiti, you will see a space for them, the history of graffiti. Anyone who wants to know how to be a DJ, you'll see a person who teaches DJ workshops and the history of DJ culture. This is a big project, so big it's going to last for four days from August 17 to 20. But all the background, all the help and labor has been from Toronto, the United States, San Francisco, Venezuela, and Europe.⁷

Thus in the absence of state support—at one time both circumstantial and likely strategic—Alexis underscores the instrumentality of extranational resources in enabling Almendares to operate, enterprisingly so, as autonomous space of Cuban cultural production. These comments bring again to focus those global circuits of cultural and material exchange so vital to raperos' crafting of alternative modes of both identity and maneuver. Yet Alexis's remarks also speak to a disparaging paternalism he attributes to institutions and the broader Cuban state in their dealings with hip hop. His reference to a pejorative labeling of raperos as “la calle” (the street) again indexes racialized discourses of *marginalidad* that have long positioned black Cubans outside the normative parameters of a modern euro- or racially transculturated Cuba. Such claims as discussed are often hinged to enduring notions of cultural primitivism and urban criminality mapped onto Afro-Cuban bodies, and subsequent calls for rehabilitative intervention by the revolutionary state (see chapter 1). For DJ Alexis, the realms of music making provided a critical means and space through which to mediate such institutionally translated materialities of race.

Indeed, in conversation one afternoon following a hip hop rehearsal at Parque Almendares, Alexis recalled his introduction to the violin as a young Afro-adorned boy by his great uncle, Rafael Lay Apesteguía, bandleader of Cuba's famed Orquesta Aragón. Enamored with the instrument, Alexis pursued it with such fervor that he eventually gained entrance to Havana's prestigious Escuela Nacional de Arte (ENA, or National School of Art). Alexis explained that during his training one of his (white) violin instructors advised him to switch to percussion because, as he was told, “violins were for white people, while blacks were naturally better at percussion.” Alexis cites this incident along with others at ENA as experiences that eventually pushed him away from the violin and into hip hop's fold as a break-dancer, then DJ, and ultimately an events producer.

It was, however, another more recent encounter at the convergence of

race and music that appeared to carry additional painful costs for Alexis. During the closing day of a 2003 reggae festival in Parque Almendares celebrating Bob Marley's birthday that drew large numbers of Cuban Rasta, uniformed police and undercover officers raided the crowd for alleged marijuana use. Scores of young black men were arrested, many targeted for wearing dreadlocks. During the melee police reportedly mocked and taunted attendees with racially charged language (Fontanar 2003). While tied to a wider state government crackdown on marijuana use in 2003,⁸ the raid aligned more broadly with market openings and expanded state efforts to police and regulate its citizenry in often racialized ways amid the flux. In the raid's immediate aftermath Alexis, who was one of the organizers of the festival, and a number of other young black men sheared off their dreadlocks to avoid future bouts of racial targeting. The fact that one of Alexis's close peers, the brother of a prominent raper, was picked up in the raid and imprisoned for an extended period carried particularly charged resonance for both him and Havana's wider raper community.

As discussed, the recent cultivation of dreadlocks by young black men and more limited numbers of black women was used as a style practice to mark and performatively embody Cuban blackness in new globally conversant and indeed Afrocentric ways. Regimens of state policing sought to regulate such black self-fashionings by reining them back within secure national bounds of racial conformity. Although emotionally distressing, Alexis explained that the cutting of his and others' dreadlocks was tactically necessary given the heightened moment of racial surveillance and targeting. Resonances abound; this episode recalled a previous moment of racial regulation in the 1960s when the Cuban state banned Afro hairstyles (C. Moore 1989), the era's celebrated aesthetic of black power and beauty made globally conversant—rather ironically in Cuba's case—by the likes of Angela Davis and others.

It is therefore not surprising that early encounters like those of his schooling and ongoing grievances of raced policing informed a distrust Alexis held for the Cuban state and its institutions, one that no doubt found expression through his commitments to hip hop. In this light, Alexis's repeated call for the need to demonstrate raperos' disciplined character operates on at least two overlapping levels of vindictive defiance. In an immediate sense, asserting raperos' capacity to move in an autonomously organized fashion legitimizes it as a viable, self-sustaining cultural movement in the face of

what Alexis describes as state attempts to exterminate it. Yet at a broader discursive level, raperos' ability to organize apart from state institutions challenges those claims and related state paternalisms that relegated black Cubans to the margins as uncultured wards of a grand Cuba in need of intervention and guidance (cf. de la Fuente and Glasco 1997; de la Fuente 2001). For Alexis and others, Almendares promised not only an autonomous space for hip hop's creative self-fashioning but also emancipatory possibilities for a vindicated black alterity.

Rise of Reggaetón

By 2006 an additional unease voiced by Alexis and others in relation to retreats of state support coupled with the island's ongoing marketization involved an emerging, and increasingly competitive, space of music making, reggaetón.⁹ While I had been familiar with the broader Spanish-Caribbean phenomenon for some time (see Rivera, Marshall, and Pacini Hernandez 2009),¹⁰ it was in Santiago de Cuba in the eastern province of Oriente that I first encountered Cuba's emerging reggaetón scene in 2001. I had been spending time at the Ateneo Cultural Antonio Bravo Correoso, a municipal cultural center on Calle Felix Peña near Santiago's popular (and touristed) Parque Céspedes. Ateneo's open-air patio hosted a weekly peña in which local MCs performed before a modest audience of devoted hip hop heads. A small equipment room doubling as a rehearsal space and video screening room served as a central gathering point for area raperos. The project was overseen by Luis Gonzales, who, while not an MC himself, was an instrumental figure in Santiago's hip hop community, one smaller and significantly more resource strapped in comparison to Havana's given its distance from centers of tourism and circuits of capital and cultural trade. As was the case with hip hop's early formation in Havana, Santiago's hip hop scene evolved out of local *rectos* competitions, an improvised street-level variation of U.S. breakdancing (César Jiménez and Tissert 2004).

A central concern resonating through the Ateneo at the time related to the recent rise of reggaetón artists who were accused, rather resentfully, of siphoning away what limited resources and fan-base local raperos had struggled to build. Historically indebted to the Afro-Caribbean by way of circulatory labor immigration and commerce between Haiti, Jamaica, and Barbados (Carr 1998), the port of Santiago and the broader Oriente region

have long been celebrated (or alternately scorned) as the more *caribeño*—read darker—region of the island. Given this, it is no surprise that reggaetón’s Caribbean arc first found receptive grounding in Santiago. Exemplified in the work of pioneering *santiaguero* raperos such as Café Mezclado, Regimiento, and Chucho SHS, reggae-infused rhythms and vocal styling were a common facet of Santiago hip hop, marking a regional sound distinct from that of Havana to the west. Many artists grew up with reggae as an everyday staple of their musical landscape, its presence fed by AM radio broadcasts from neighboring Jamaica given Santiago’s relative proximity.

One pioneering group of note that embraced such *caribeñida* was the trio Crazy Man. Formed in the late 1990s, Crazy Man’s MCs fused the frenetic lyricism of Rubén Cuesta Palomo with the beat-box skills of Omar Planos Cordoví, alongside Aristey Guibert, whose *raggamuffin*¹¹ vocal style and lyric sprinklings of English reflected his familial roots in Jamaica by way of Guantánamo. As Aristey mused in conversation, “Cuba y Jamaica, Jamaica y Cuba, es lo mismo” (Cuba and Jamaica, Jamaica and Cuba, it is all the same).¹² In something of a coup, in 1999 Crazy Man were the first hip hop artists to perform in Santiago’s otherwise folklore-centered Festival del Caribe (also known as Festival del Fuego). A narrow and ultimately exclusionary focus on Afro-folkloric music, dance, and religious practice within the state-run festival was in fact a long-standing grievance among Santiago raperos. Reflecting on this disparity, Crazy Man’s Rubén explained: “Here in Santiago rap is not considered part of our tradition, and it seems [the institutions] don’t want to stray from tradition. But time passes, music changes, and young people don’t want to be limited to tradition. In the end, though, the government wants to restrict the influence of what they see as foreign music.”

Within an institutional privileging of “traditional” formulations of Afro-Cuban expressive culture, hip hop’s extranational claims to a black global cosmopolitanism are indeed disruptive of such nationally framed, temporally delineated constraints. Yet for Rubén it was ultimately by way of reggaetón—that hybridized Spanish-Caribbean melding of reggae and hip hop—that such regulatory prescriptions were eclipsed.

Around 2001 MC Rubén left Crazy Man to launch a solo career under the name Candyman, playing a pioneering role in what would become Cuba’s reggaetón explosion that soon swept west toward Havana. Responding to those who would argue that his sound was somehow foreign or inorganic to the island, Rubén early on countered: “Listen, reggae is part of the culture of

Oriente. I've been listening to reggae since I was very young. I'm Cuban and I have my own message. And I like to deliver my message with melody, with swing [*con swing*]. And because of this I choose to express myself through reggae, the message for me is more direct with reggae.”

Beyond questions of style, Rubén's departure from Crazy Man—and in essence from hip hop more broadly—marked in his words an end of an era, one signaled in important part by a shift in performative focus. Unlike the self-consciously political language of social critique central to many of his rapero peers, Candyman's entrée to Santiago's nascent reggaetón scene drew heavily on themes of sexual play and heteromasculinist grammars of pleasure centering on body and dance. I recall hearing of local authorities' efforts to regulate Candyman's public performances, which were attracting growing numbers of highly enthused dancing teenagers, for his perceived lewd and lascivious content. It is not surprising that once he broached the space of state-run television, Rubén is reported to have altered his lyrics for broadcast (González Bello, Casanella Cué, and Hernández Baguer n.d.), a negotiation not unfamiliar to many a rapero (cf. Fernandes 2006). Articulating with gendered lines first laid and globally popularized by Puerto Rican reggaetón artists (Jiménez 2009; A. Moreno 2009), sexualized celebrations of the heteromasculine thus emerged as a key performative facet of Cuban reggaetón from inception.

While signaling an apparent shift from hip hop's more overt emphasis on politically centered lyricism, appeals by Candyman and other early *reggaetoneros* to the sexualized body were not necessarily devoid of embedded critique. The ethnomusicologist Geoffrey Baker suggests that reggaetoneros' attention to body-centered pleasure and celebrations of the material can be read in part as a generational counterpoint to eroding socialist ideals of labor and productive citizenship, ones reflective of a broader disenchantment with revolutionary ideology among Cuban youth in light of expanding market conditions (Baker 2011). Somewhat similar claims, as discussed in preceding chapters, have been made in relation to Cuban timba regarding the music's exaltation of black heteromasculine prowess by way of a phallogocentric eroticism and material flamboyance (cf. Hernández-Reguant 2005; Perna 2005; Vaughan 2012). Yet as potentially contestive of revolutionary convention, such performances as I have suggested may in the end reproduce rather than undermine dominant representations and hierarchies of gendered and racial difference.

Analytic tensions aside, or possibly precisely through them, it is clear that reggaetón tapped into a particular resonance among large numbers of Cuban youth at the millennial turn, the vast majority of whom were incidentally black and brown. The music's emphasis on dance rhythms and the moving body was undoubtedly an important facet of its youthful appeal, one channeled largely through sexualized modes of corporal pleasure. As scholars of the Afrodiasporic condition have noted, the play and politics of pleasure have been central to the ways Afro-descendant communities have sought transcendent celebration of human resilience and freedom, both through and ultimately beyond the body (Cooper 2004; Davis 1999; Gilroy 1990; Kelley 1997; Reed 1998, cf. Lorde 1984). At the same time it is unquestionable that market logics were also key to the rise and rapid spread of reggaetón on the island.

Shortly after my return to Havana from Santiago in 2001, I had a conversation with Osmel Francis, a business savvy forty-something Afro-Cuban who had recently returned to Havana after living in Spain for many years. Osmel was the creative force behind the recently formed *Cubanos en la Red*, a commercially minded hip hop group in which he, flanked by a collection of significantly younger MCs, performed a somewhat comic self-parody as an elder rapero. Osmel expressed excitement at the time about the idea of bringing Rubén, or Candyman, to Havana for a series of performances as a way to introduce habaneros to the energy of Santiago reggaetón. His entrepreneurial read was that the music would explode in Havana's larger music-crazed market, and he wanted to be sure to be part of it. It was shortly thereafter that Candyman made his first wildly received tour of Havana, launching him as one of Cuba's most successful and enduring reggaetoneros. His music, however, had preceded him by informal routes of circulating CDs and audio cassettes that had found their way to Havana.

It was a relatively short time before Santiago reggaetón worked its way into the fabric of Havana's streets, enabled in part by the city's enterprising networks of *bicitaxis* (three-wheeled bicycle taxis) whose strapped-on boom boxes eventually carried reggaetón throughout Havana's urban interior (see Baker 2011; González Bello, Casanella Cué, and Hernández Bager n.d.). In this sense reggaetón's westward march echoed early waves of lore emanating westward from Oriente—the celebrated launching point of both Cuba's nineteenth-century independence struggle as well as its revolutionary *Movimiento 26 de Julio* led by the Castro brothers and others. Some

within Havana's hip hop scene had already experimented with reggaetón-esque fusions. S.B.S (Sensational Boys of the Street), an early commercially oriented, internationally marketed trio with a party-centered vibe, were possibly the first to do so. Numerous others in Oriente's wake would follow.

Splintering off the pioneering hip hop trio *Primera Base* in 2002, *Cubanitos 20.02* embraced the reggaetón wave and rode it to relative commercial gain with their 2003 album *Soy Cubanito*. Not surprisingly, *Cubanos en la Red* also adopted a reggaetón-focused sound around the same period. Both *Cubanitos* and *Cubanos en la Red* were, moreover, among the initial artists incorporated into the newly formed state-run *Agencia Cubana de Rap (ACR)*, charged with the commercial promotion of Cuban hip hop domestically and abroad (see chapter 5). Among the ten original members of ACR, three sets of hip hop artists—Eddy-K, Alto Voltaje, and intermittently MC *Papo Record*—shifted their focus (or, in the minds of some, “jumped ship”) toward the increasingly popular and ultimately more commercially lucrative reggaetón. Eddy-K emerged as one of the island's preeminent reggaetón groups, frequently performing abroad in Mexico and Europe with the crew's lead MC, Eduardo Mora, and DJ José Antonio Suarez eventually leaving Cuba to settle in Miami.

Although this pivot toward reggaetón was by no means limited to members of ACR,¹³ this did not preclude the play of strategic interests on the part of the Cuban state. While it may indeed be true that the state viewed reggaetón, as it once did hip hop, with uneasiness as a music genre culturally antagonistic to revolutionary ideals (cf. Baker 2009; González Bello, Casanella Cué, and Hernández Baguer n.d.), reggaetoneros did eventually gain visible institutional footholds in state-run radio and television. For its part, ACR, long viewed by many a *rapero* with varying degrees of caution, was by 2006 commonly perceived as abandoning hip hop altogether in favor of the more commercially promising—and possibly less politically menacing—reggaetón. Sanctioned space and resources once occupied by hip hop, limited as they might have been, now seemed to shift in the direction of reggaetón in ways that aligned with the island's broader market turn.

In the wake of such developments, DJ Alexis D'Boys offered this analysis of the state's swing:

Folkloric music and culture have become a commercial trade, and the [state] institutions themselves have become commercial. They provide

space, but these spaces are in commercial places. As a result this culture has lost a lot of its roots, at least here in Havana much has been lost. And now the same thing is happening to hip hop. The [Cuban Rap] Agency has participated in this and I always knew it intended to exterminate hip hop by commercializing it. And that's what's happening now to hip hop in Cuba. It's not dead, but it's missing a lot of talent, and it's lost the cohesion it once had in the '90s until, say, 2002 because of this institution, and it's partly to blame for this. Many raperos are now doing reggaetón because of the Cuban Rap Agency, so they're destroying the culture of hip hop by commercializing it.

When I asked specifically what he thought of reggaetón's rise in Havana, Alexis offered:

Compadre, look, for me, I'm not against reggaetón. For me reggaetón is dance music, a popular music for dancing. Reggaetón is a music that's now in fashion, it's for people to dance, to forget problems, prejudices, and things, and think a bit more about materialism—it's made for this. They [reggaetoneros] are people who have no interest in changing the world. The problem here in Cuba is that reggaetón is a product of the despair of hip hop artists who have neither space nor attention, they aren't respected as musicians. So what's happened is that they have gone for the easy way, for reggaetón, where they're given space. The music is commercial and they're not talking about political issues or situations. What they talk about is "the party," and people have gone for that because the institutions have opened their doors and they're paying people to perform in those places.

The Cuban Rap Agency has ten groups that used to do hip hop, but only two now remain. My respect to them, Anónimo Consejo and Obsesión, but all of the other groups are doing reggaetón. They're sent to work outside Havana in tourist and commercial places and are paid for it. That's their salary, they benefit from this. For me, it's a reggaetón agency, not a rap agency, at least that's the way I see it, and my respect goes to Anónimo Consejo and Obsesión, who, though involved, are struggling.¹⁴

Alexis's reading offers a cogent critique of state moves toward reggaetón as those tied to the market and aligned interests to undermine the salience of hip hop on the island. In particular, he suggests that an articulation of

state and commercial forces engendered new economies of exchange (e.g., tourism, commercial zones) within which long-excluded raperos could now participate by way of reggaetón. To a dedicated hip hop purist, such commercialization represented a fragmentizing anathema to a collective sense of revolutionary commitment long sacred to many within the hip hop movement. To Alexis the ultimate goal of this seemingly calculated state strategy was the dissolution of hip hop all together.

Reflecting back on the moment from a distance, Ariel Fernández Díaz echoed a similar understanding regarding the state's shift toward reggaetón, explaining: "Reggaetón exploded in this country and came into a Cuban social narrative that had nothing to do with it. But people felt motivated to make more easy music—not to talk about social issues, you know what I mean?" When I asked if he thought the state played a part in the equation, Ariel responded: "Definitely, I mean it was completely orchestrated. If the government needed to choose between a movement that talks about issues we have here in the country, the social issues and social difference that we have, or people who talk about 'shake yo ass'? It's easier and more comfortable for the government to deal with people who care about making money and shaking booties. There're people who're trying to challenge the status quo and intellectually challenge the government policies and political party, you know what I mean?"

Regarding the commercial nature of the Agencia Cubana de Rap in particular, Ariel added:

One of the policies of the groups [in the ACR] is to make money. They have to reach a certain amount of productivity and success, especially financially; if not you can't be a member of la Agencia—you need to make money and entertain people. So la Agencia was not trying to create space to promote or spend resources on you because you're addressing issues that need to be addressed. No, they're really not going to promote what we were talking about because it was not in support of the policies or politics of the revolution that they wanted people to have access to.¹⁵

Beyond simply an outcome of state interests, however, both Alexis and Ariel suggest that artists harbored their own motives in gravitating toward reggaetón, ones also tied, in short, to "making money." Such moves were accompanied in their view by a depoliticization of the music and broader

movement as a whole in ways concurrent with the shifting focus of both the state and the national economy. Amid this commercial flux, “the party” has seemingly displaced “the revolution” as a central driving motif. Moreover, as Geoffrey Baker notes, in the artistic turn toward reggaetón many former raperos “deprioritized their own blackness by eliminating explicit racial discourse and aligning themselves with a broader musical culture in which latinidad overshadows negritud” (Baker 2011: 281). Yet rather than a corrective restoration of a purported nonracial orientation as suggested, might such realignments and political deprioritizations of blackness articulate with evolving conjunctures of the state and marketplace? Is the exalted underground that many raperos often spoke of indeed now in peril?

Deferring questions of race for the moment, to couch raperos’ tack toward reggaetón purely in terms of economic exigency or as the result of manipulated guidance from state institutions may fail to capture the range of strategies some artists have fashioned within an economy of shifting opportunities. Many may undoubtedly have made rational decisions in light of new markets for popular Cuban music and the performative black body itself.¹⁶ Scenarios of this kind evoke a certain neoliberal rationale of self-directed individualism moving in entrepreneurial pursuit of personal gain, analogous to the concurrent rise of state-promoted *cuentapropismo* (self-employment schemes) amid an ever-receding socialist state. As Wendy Brown aptly suggests, neoliberal forms of governance tend to figure “individuals as entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life,” engendering them “as rational, calculating creatures whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for ‘self-care’” (Brown 2003: 15).

In this light, raperos’ prioritization of individuated market pursuit stands in juxtaposition to more collaborative modes of political cohesion and solidarity, precisely the kind of nostalgic loss Alexis laments with the rise of reggaetón. Such self-invested individualism similarly emerges in tension with a collective ethos of racial affinity and antiracist contest long instrumental among Havana raperos and their self-defined movimiento. Indeed, if one can in essence individually “opt out” of the structural limitations brought by racial positionality through market maneuver, then why not?

Departures to Diaspora

Flights to a more commercially viable reggaetón were not the only individualized strategy available to enterprising raperos. Another factor impacting social cohesion, and ultimately racial orientation, of Havana's hip hop community from the mid-2000s was a growing exodus abroad of many foundational members. Among Cuba's rich spectrum of artistic and athletic talent there has long been a draw to leave the island in search of greater, more lucrative professional possibilities *afuera*. This has increasingly been the case since the economic shifts of the early 1990s. Consider for one the rash of Cuban baseball players (or similarly, professional ballet dancers) who in recent years have defected to the United States. In the case of hip hop, the morphing of Havana's pioneering hip hop troupe Amenaza into the international commercial sensation Orishas after members' relocation to France in the late 1990s stands as a particularly poignant example of such early moves among raperos. It was, however, the decision by MC Julio Cardenas of Raperos Crazy de Alamar (RCA) not to return following a 2001 tour to New York City that seemed to resonate most deeply within Havana's tight-knit rapero circles (see chapter 2). I recall many at times conflicted conversations regarding the incident, ranging from criticism of Julio's decision as a self-interested move that could complicate future tours, to those empathizing with his move.

By the mid-2000s, mounting frustration and disillusionment with waning state support coupled with the broader deterioration of economic conditions led to truncated artistic and social aspirations for many in the hip hop community. Like many of their generational peers in Cuba, they too imagined and sought the promise of new opportunities that life afield might offer. One was Yaimir "Pitit" Jiménez of Grandes Ligas and EPG&B fame, who in 2003 immigrated to Sweden, where he continues his artistic career as a commercial MC. It was by way of a foreign fiancé visa that Pitit managed (and likely financed) his emigration. As mentioned, fiancé visas were the primary means by which male hip hop artists in particular were able to leave the island, a reality often linked to wider monetizations and corresponding strategies of racially informed exchange (see chapter 1).

One of the biggest blows during this period was Ariel Fernández Díaz's decision to immigrate to New York City in 2005. To recall, Ariel, aka DJ Asho, rose to prominence as one of the most influential members of Cuba's

hip hop community, eventually garnering a position as official hip hop liaison within the state-run Asociación Hermanos Saíz. A committed fighter for Cuban hip hop by way of radio, journalism, and events promotion, Ariel's decision caught many by surprise. In a conversation shortly after his move, Ariel's tone was sharp as he spoke critically about what he viewed as the Cuban state's manipulative dealings with the movement. His position had thus evolved and shifted significantly since his earlier involvements, as ambivalent as they may have become, with Hermanos Saíz (see chapter 5).

In short order a growing list of key Havana artists followed in exodus, including Los Paisanos, Las Krudas, Pablo Herrera, and Alexis D'Boys, to name a few. Rather than signaling an end to their artistic commitments, many have continued to pursue their music and broader engagements with Cuban-centered hip hop in often enterprising ways. Many have also managed to maintain active connections with MCs on the island while developing vibrant networks of hip hop community in the diaspora. In addition, among movements of artists between Cuba and abroad as well as among those living within the United States, Canada, and Europe, electronic technology has played an important role in enabling artistic exchange and virtual networks across spatial divides.

Artists have been particularly resourceful in mobilizing the Internet and social media as a modes of organization in dispersal. There is an ever-growing plethora of media sites like YouTube, SoundCloud, and Facebook where raperos and their increasingly global supporters maintain ongoing dialogue via trafficking of videos, images, and digitized music. Such creative use of information technology is analogous to a kind of diasporic "bridge building" championed at an earlier literary moment by a group of Cuban writers (Behar 1996), whereby the global reach of electronic media is now employed plank by cybernetic plank in forging transnational dialogue and community. A difference here, however, is that rather than efforts to mend long-standing cleavages between mainland and Cuban American *exilio* communities, these current *puentes* are about diaspora in-formation enabled in important part through subjectivities of hip hop. In light of descriptive gazings by academics, journalists, and a growing host of foreign-produced documentaries,¹⁷ many artists now employ digital technology to globally circulate their own work and self-imagery.

Émigré life of course was far from struggle free. As with most global South-North migrations, many found the transition to new lives fraught

with challenges. Notions that working-class Afro-Cuban MCs could simply rely on their artistic talents in the commercial markets of the United States, Canada, and Europe were quickly dispelled. The realities of being poor, racialized immigrants with often limited resources, levels of formal education, and English-language skills meant that many had to work at low-wage jobs to make ends meet. For instance, MC Julio Cardenas, formerly of RCA, found employment as a restaurant delivery person in New York City while honing his acting skills and developing a play drawn from his experiences in Cuba. Former Obsesión member Roger Martínez, who immigrated to the Los Angeles area in 2002, eventually attained trade skills as an electrician while building a small in-home recording studio in his labored pursuit as a hip hop producer and performer. The challenge often pitted dreams of artistic success against the market-driven competitiveness of the North.

Ariel Fernández Díaz struggled for a number of years in search of gainful music-related employment following his arrival in the New York City area, despite a depth of experience and extensive contacts within local hip hop and Latino music and activist circles. In the end Ariel has been successful in piecing together an enterprising range of projects under the moniker Asho Productions, including giving academic-targeted talks on Cuban hip hop, hosting monthly music events at the Bronx Museum, having ongoing Afro-Cuban-centered DJ gigs, and most recently helping coordinate U.S.-based Afro-Cuban-focused cultural tours to Havana.¹⁸ Alternatively, Cuba's vanguard hip hop producer Pablo Herrera left the island for Scotland in 2005 on a scholarship to pursue a master's degree in sound design at the University of Edinburgh. Despite distance, Pablo has sought to remain in dialogue with Cuban hip hop via his academic work and blogging, including collaborative work with Cuban artists in the diaspora such as the Madrid-based fusion band Habana Aberita, as well as MC Randy Acosta, formerly of Los Paisanos, who now resides in Barcelona pursuing an active performing career. Pablo has also maintained spiritual ties to Cuba, a connection perhaps carrying added significance given the unfortunate recent passing of both his parents. This connectivity, Pablo shared, is fed through his recent mentioned initiation into the sacred rites of Ifá divination during repeated trips to Cuba.

Among Cuban MCs, Las Krudas have been particularly resourceful in translating and expanding their work abroad. Long based in Austin, Texas, following a circuitous route through Russia, the all-female trio has astutely



6.2. MCs Randy Acosta and Jessel “El Huevo” Saladriga of Los Paisanos.
Photo by Sahily Borrero

tapped into womanist, LGBT, and college performance circuits across the United States, Puerto Rico, and Latin America. Krudas have been especially savvy in using social media, video, community radio, and informal media such as hand-printed T-shirts as promotional vehicles for their music and broader queer-feminist advocacy. In addition to collaborative projects with other Cuban MCs in the United States, the artists have maintained a level of involvement with islandside raperos by way of hip hop colloquia, workshops, and performance events in Havana. Regarding émigré communities, Oakland, California, emerged as something of a hub for emigrating raperos. One notable figure in the mix is Leidis Freire, who has established herself as a dance-music DJ with a strong hip hop and internationalist flair. Leidis has also been instrumental in helping organize Bay Area performances for touring island artists including Obsesión. Also among Oakland’s scene are MC Magyori “La Llave” Martínez of Omega Kilay and MC Miki Flow (aka Michel Hermida Martínez), formerly of Alamar’s Explosion Suprema, who has remained a relatively active performer. The operative term here is relative. With the possible exception of the French-produced Orishas, no Cuban hip

hop artist to my knowledge has yet to sign with a commercial music label or secure much by way of a lucrative career as a performer. A select few who made the crossover to reggaetón long ago, such as Eddy-K now in Miami, also stand here as anomalies. In a word, the *lucha* (struggle/hustle) remains a defining facet of life for many émigré MCs.

Raperos' diasporic terrain is far from limited to the United States. Free of U.S. travel restrictions, Canada has long been an important interlocutor with the island's hip hop community, with Montreal and Toronto serving as key nodes of intersection. One pioneer along these lines has been the Montreal-based hip hop collective *Nomadic Massive*, whose multiracial/lingual collection of MCs and musicians hailing from immigrant backgrounds reflects Montreal's *mélange* of new multiculturalism.¹⁹ The collective's Cuba connection stems from the founding member MC Lou "Piensa" Dufleaux, who befriended *Obsesión* members Magia López and Alexey Rodríguez while living in Havana in the late 1990s. Piensa's artistic directions as a MC and hip hop producer are in turn deeply indebted to his engagements with Havana-area raperos. Performing first alongside *Obsesión* during the 2000 Cuban hip hop festival, Piensa returned to the 2004 festival with a group of Montreal artists including Haitian Canadian MC Vox Sambu. This second foray provided the creative impetus to the founding of *Nomadic Massive*, and the collective has subsequently made repeated trips to Havana to perform alongside Cuban MCs in addition to organizing a series of Canadian tours for *Obsesión* and others.

Concerning routes of emigration, however, rapero émigrés have tended to favor Toronto, which boasts Canada's largest concentration of migrant Cubans. Histories of artistic exchange with Toronto-based artists such as Jamaican-born spoken-word artist Debbie Young, moreover, have helped Cuban MCs find a receptive home within the city's music scene and broader Afro-Caribbean topography. A key individual amid the vibrancy has been Alexis D'Boys Rodríguez, who emigrated from Havana in 2007. Alongside a day job at a computer recycling center, Alexis remains active as a DJ and music promoter specializing in hip hop. Settled in a neighborhood near the intersection of Oakwood and St. Clair Avenues long associated with immigrant communities of Italians, Jamaicans, and more recently Latinos, Alexis tells of his early years in an apartment block he playfully baptized "Hotel de Cuba" given the stream of Cubans cycling through over the years. Among those sharing early domicile was Telmary Díaz, rapera and spoken-word art-

ist formerly, as mentioned, of the innovative fusion bands Free Hole Negros and Interactivo. A native of Alexis's Vedado barrio, Telmary has had noted success as a solo recording artist and touring performer across Canada, Europe, and more recently the United States.

In addition to periodic peñas with local artists, Alexis participated in the 2011 Toronto leg of the commercially oriented Havana Cultura Tour. Launched in 2009 as the brainchild of the British DJ Gilles Peterson and sponsored by Cuba's quasi-corporate rum distillery Havana Club,²⁰ the international touring project involving young Cuban musicians served as a global marketing venture for Cuban culture and tourism. The project's glitzy English-language website, billing itself as "a global initiative to promote contemporary Cuban culture,"²¹ offers flashy videos and profiles of numerous Cuban artists, including a collection of raperos such as Anónimo Consejo, Obsesión, Doble Filo, and Telmary Díaz. Along with an assemblage of reggaetoneros, many of these artists are featured in a 2009 *Havana Cultura* CD compilation recorded in Havana's state-run EGREM studios and a subsequent 2011 *Havana Cultura: Remixed* album.

Globally attuned commercial interests in Cuban hip hop were not limited to domestic state-private ventures, however. For a number of years Havana hosted a national freestyle hip hop competition, the Batalla de los Gallos (Cock fight), sponsored by the energy drink giant Red Bull. The Australian-based company, which has built a multibillion-dollar global brand through sponsorship of spectacular youth-centered competitions like extreme sports and urban music contests,²² apparently recognized the potential marketing value of Cuban MCs. With the winner to represent Cuba in Red Bull's crowning Batalla of finalists from Latin America and Spain, a number of old-school raperos served as judges with Doble Filo's Edgaro González playing lead host. In addition to their advertising worth, videos of the lavishly staged one-on-one battles have garnered tens of thousands of hits on YouTube, helping to promote individual artists (and Cuban hip hop) within the global marketplace. Thus despite potential posturing otherwise, a confluence of state and market interests aligned in ways that continued to claim hip hop, at least in part, as a globally trafficable form of Cuban cultural capital—an economy within which Alexis and other hip-hop-affiliated Cubans, both home and abroad, were apparently actively conversant if not adept.

Los Aldeanos

In what ways has the flight of so many established raperos alongside Cuba's monetization and the competing rise of reggaetón impacted the character and vitality of Havana's hip hop scene? Some pioneering old-school artists like Anónimo Consejo, Obsesión, and Hermanos de Causa's Soandres del Río²³—despite the loss of his artistic partner Alexis “el Pelón” Cantero to Spain—long “held it down” or continue to do so in Havana while taking advantage of occasional opportunities to perform aboard. The moment, however, has clearly given rise to a new generation of artists who fashion themselves as inheritors of Cuban hip hop's underground urgency. Front and center among these are artists Bian “El B” Oscar Rodríguez Gala and Aldo “El Aldeano” Roberto Rodríguez Baquero of the highly provocative duo Los Aldeanos (The Villagers). Since forming in Havana in 2003, Los Aldeanos have built a reputation via live performance and a prolific range of independently produced albums and videos as among the most critically outspoken of MCs on the island. Such efforts have involved collaborative work with allied artists such as the hard-edged rapero-cum-hip hop producer Papá Humbertico (see chapter 1), who, through his home-based studio known locally as Real 70, has helped produce a number of the duo's albums.

Yet unlike an earlier generation of artists who often chose more mediated tones of critique, Los Aldeanos have embraced (and very much celebrate) a more cynical and ideologically adversarial tone vis-à-vis the Cuban state. Claiming a mantle as “revolutionaries,” they view the revolutionary state largely in irreverent terms as an autocratic, often-repressive regime and principal progenitor of a range of social hypocrisies that mark the current Cuban everyday. In one of their signature temas, “El rap es guerra” (Rap is war), Los Aldeanos declare: “Always on the offensive / In defense of the lives that nest wounded / Rap is war / The fight is not lost / Free the captive truth / Do not stand idle / Rap is war / They want us to fill our demos with upbeat songs / But they forget that rap is war.”²⁴ This combative ethos finds visual form in a matching set of large tattoos reading “El rap es guerra” that adorn the forearms of both heavily tatted MCs. To further effect, in their tema “Libertad” (Liberty), Aldeanos evoke enslavement as a metaphor for contemporary life and citizenship in Cuba where all are beholden to the state as master. Under such a regime, one is held a “slave to your nationality,

identity, and issues . . . a slave of a fucked and slow agony . . . a slave of your duties, a slave of your rights,” and ultimately “a slave struggling endlessly without finding happiness.”²⁵

Not surprisingly, Aldeanos’ provocations—and an additional set of eventual circumstances, to which I will return—drew government attention. The Cuban state’s approach to the artists had generally been one of apprehension, variously restricting their access to state media, performance space, and international travel. One particularly notable incident occurred in 2009 when police reportedly entered the home of MC Aldo, briefly arresting him and confiscating his computer along with its trove of music compositions. The official charge for the seizure was lack of ownership papers, a circumstance common to most computer owners in Cuba. Yet the episode contributed to the duo’s already-celebrated status among some circles as a new voice of generational dissonance challenging state censorship and restrictions on public speech, issues the artists themselves address critically in their music. For one, the ever-vocal Havana-based journalist Yoani Sánchez closely chronicled and championed Los Aldeanos’ cause in her multilingual blog “Generación Y” (see Sánchez 2009).

The transnational dimensions of such animus have been complicated. During a 2010 Miami performance tour with the allied MC Silvito “El Libro” Rodríguez, the artists were inundated by local journalists angling for public denunciations of the Castro leadership and broader revolutionary government (Hanken 2010). A similar scenario played out in 2002 during a Miami tour involving members of Obsesión and Doble Filo, yet in both cases the artists were fairly adroit at sidestepping incitement. Aldeanos’ Miami reception nonetheless remained couched by some within the Cuban exilio-attuned media along lines exemplified by a *Miami New Times* journalist who wrote: “In the face of Cuba’s pathetic, failed socialist experiment is a new revolution, a cultural one, led by the youth of the island. It’s nonviolent, it’s artistic, and a rap group called Los Aldeanos stands at the forefront” (Katel 2010).

While the duo have been vocal in their criticism of Cuban reggaetón for its viewed commercial frivolousness and lack of political engagement (Baker 2011), like many of their reggaetonero peers the artists come from an emerging Cuban generation disillusioned with the incongruencies of the revolutionary project at this expanding neoliberal moment. The degree of irreverence that Aldeanos hold for state authority can be seen as reflective

of growing cynicism with the revolutionary state in its efforts to police and regulate, in often autocratic ways, a new Cuban reality shaped evermore by the terms of global capital. While Aldeanos may stake out a radically juxtaposed position vis-à-vis reggaetoneros, both can be seen as generational manifestations of the same historical juncture. Indeed, though the duo has long contended with (and in many ways capitalized on) their outlaw status with regard to limits of artistic freedom, reggaetón artists have also been subject to state bannings from radio and television in apparent response to a deemed offensiveness of sexually explicit lyrics (de la Hoz 2012). Ambiguities linger. Despite Aldeanos' acclaimed dissonance, for instance, they long remained coveted marketing tender of the state-private promotion venture Havana Cultura.

A counterfoil to Los Aldeanos' antiestablishment posture can be seen in the example of Magia López of Obsesión, who assumed directorship of the Agencia Cubana de Rap (ACR) in 2007.²⁶ To recall, under the leadership of the former director Susana García Amorós, the ACR had acquired a poor reputation among many raperos due in part to the expansion of reggaetón artists within its fold. In conversation with Magia two years into her tenure as director, she echoed Ariel Fernández Díaz's earlier read in underscoring that part of ACR's shift toward reggaetón was tied to the agency's auto-financiado (self-financed) nature, which obliged it to raise much of its operational budget via the more commercial route of reggaetón.²⁷ In line with a broader neoliberal turn, such entrepreneurial strategies spoke again to the quasi-privatization of Cuba's public institutions in light of a withering socialist state. Similar scenarios had long been in place for many state-run research centers that sought alternative revenue streams through mandated affiliation fees for foreign researchers like myself. More immediately, this shift again underscores the linkages between economic expediciencies and political contingencies regarding the Cuban state's divergent dealings with hip hop and more commercial, presumably less contestatory reggaetón.

Noting that there were currently only three reggaetón groups on the agency's roster, Magia explained that one of her priorities as ACR director was to recenter the institution's focus on and promotion of hip hop. To such ends, she sought to push the agency toward a more participatory model akin to her previous work under the collaborative umbrella project La Fabri-K. Through the now-official auspices of ACR, Magia expanded in both scope and institutional form the annual Hip Hop Symposium that she

and her artistic partner Alexey Rodríguez launched under La Fabri-K around 2001. Occurring in a number of subsequent years through 2011, the retitled “Simposio Internacional de Hip Hop Cubano,” involving local and foreign participants, continued to offer evening performances along with daytime workshops, discussions, and audiovisual presentations. The challenge here, Magia acknowledged, was walking an often tricky line between independent and institutional parameters.

When in 2011 I asked whether her relationship with folks in that wider hip hop community had changed since her institutional move, Magia replied, “Claro!” She explained that there were many expectations about what she could and/or should do in the position, as well as presumptions that much could be accomplished immediately. “*Pero no es posible*” (But it’s not possible), she offered, adding that an institution cannot easily be turned around after five years under someone else’s direction. Magia confessed that she was having a challenging time getting things done administratively, finding the institutional workings “terribly rigid and structurally inflexible,” and concluded, “*Es una lucha*” (It’s a struggle).²⁸ Indeed.

When asked about the rise of Los Aldeanos, Magia underscored that the artists represented a new generation of raperos, implying that they drew from a different historical moment within the movement. While acknowledging the duo as highly talented and critically voiced MCs, Magia pointed out that the two reside in the relatively affluent barrio of Nuevo Vedado, suggesting that the artists were relatively more privileged than many within the movement, affording them greater access to resources. Los Aldeanos have indeed been remarkably savvy in terms of music and video production, much of which now circulates globally on the Internet by way of YouTube, Facebook, and a range of web pages and sites. An extensive selection of the duo’s music can now be downloaded commercially on iTunes and amazon.com.

This global exposure, and ultimately commercial marketing, of Aldeanos’ music and particular brand of posturing has brought significant international attention along with a notable following abroad. El B’s famed freestyle skills receive worldwide attention via YouTube videos of his bouts as Cuba’s two-time national champion of Red Bull’s Batalla de los Gallos competition. Aldeanos’ renegade status was in turn enhanced by reports that El B’s travel permission to attend the international finals of the Batalla was twice denied by the Cuban state. These events were captured in the widely circulated 2009 biographical documentary *Revolution* by the Havana-

based filmmaker Mayckell Pedrero. A subsequent documentary, *Viva Cuba Libre: Rap Is War* (2013), by the Los Angeles–based Jesse Acevedo, also profiles Los Aldeanos with a notably more sensationalist and unabashedly anti-Castro flair. A third documentary, by the Havana-based filmmaker Alejandro “Iskander” Moya, who similarly characterizes the duo as “virulently antigovernment and explicitly anti-Fidel” (Katel 2010), is reportedly in production as well. Such efforts have undoubtedly helped amplify Aldeanos’ international stature and popular draw as flamboyant young voices of Cuban discord. A prominent figure in Aldeanos’ mix of global promotion has been Melissa Riviere of Emetrece Productions, an audiovisual production and entertainment company run between Minneapolis and San Juan, Puerto Rico. A PhD graduate in anthropology from the University of Minnesota whose dissertation research dealt comparatively with Cuban and Puerto Rican hip hop, Riviere had been until fairly recently an early and key advocate in championing the duo internationally through a range of media projects.

In conversation, Magia López questioned the level of international attention bestowed on Los Aldeanos, citing Riviere’s involvement in particular as an example of the duo’s external networks of patronage. Her query seemed twofold. The degree of foreign support for the artists on both political and material levels raised questions for Magia as to the extent of Aldeanos’ claimed marginality within Cuban society as the grounding for their critical posture. At another level, she wondered about the extent to which their foreign support might itself be feeding—in provocative if not potentially manipulative ways—the duo’s adversarial stance toward the Cuban state. This second concern no doubt carried its own implicative challenge for Magia, given her recently assumed role as director of the state-run ACR. For Magia, Los Aldeanos’ claim to the critical underground stood in tension with their artistic practice, one she ultimately positioned as “*buen comercial*” (solidly commercial). Yet at the same time Magia’s own position as a rapera-cum-head of a state institution charged with the commercial promotion of island hip hop was clearly fraught with its own loaded set of complications.

In hindsight, however, these conversations may have had unexpected foresight. Recent revelations reported by the Associated Press suggest that the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) during this period engaged in covert provocateur efforts within Havana’s hip hop

movement as part of a broader program to actively support and implicitly encourage dissonant elements within Cuban society (D. Butler et al. 2014b).²⁹ In addition to a Serbian contractor working through a Panamanian front company,³⁰ those implicated in the scheme were in fact Los Aldeanos, who reportedly received resources and forms of support. Regardless of the details of the circumstances, the duo were eventually pressured to leave Cuba and now reside in South Florida.

Whither Race?

The mercurial rise (and subsequent fall) of Los Aldeanos is reflective of another more recent shift within Cuba's broader hip hop movement, one characterized by a marked decentering of race and black racial subjectivity once pivotal to the work and lives of many pioneering raperos. To recall, the British ethnomusicologist Geoffrey Baker has suggested that black racial currents within Cuban hip hop were chiefly expressions of foreign, particularly U.S., cultural influences and political interventions by U.S. hip-hop-affiliated individuals, academics, and resident African American exiles (Baker 2011). Key here is Baker's contention that with the 2003 close of the U.S.-based Black August collective's annual participation in Havana's hip hop festival, an implicitly inorganic grounding of black identity and discourse among Havana-area raperos waned as well.

While I have addressed the role of Black August as well as the salience of racial orientation in hip hop prior to the collective's Cuban involvement (see chapter 3), it is largely true that black identity expression and accompanying antiracist challenges long integral to hip hop's rise in Cuba have receded since the mid-2000s. As the most visible of today's new face of Cuban MCs, El B and El Aldeano of Los Aldeanos—who would phenotypically speaking fall respectively between mestizo and white racial categories in Cuba—do not in fact foreground racial identity, analyses, or themes in their music. The same can be said of MC Silvito Rodríguez, son of composer Silvio Rodríguez and another leading figure within Havana's new generation of hip hop artists.

An undeniable factor informing this shift has been the mentioned outflow of so many pioneering figures of Havana's hip hop community abroad, many if not most of whom centered black subjectivity and antiracist inter-

vention in their music and artistic lives. Regarding his experience working with Los Aldeanos during his *Almendares Vivo* project and production of the related 2004 *L3Y8* compilation disc,³¹ DJ Alexis D’Boys recalls:

Los Aldeanos were part of a project of mine because they had tremendous talent, and I had invited them to hold a concert in Almendares. I had a lot of interest in them, I gave them a lot of attention, and we did a lot of business together. And they understood a lot about black culture and its presence here in Havana. But after I left Cuba, everything fell apart. They started to do their thing apart from that movement—they believed more in themselves and less in the hip hop movement. In the end it became a movement of *raperos blancos* [little white rappers], and this affected the rest of the hip hop movement. . . . After I left Cuba everything changed; today the movement is completely white. After 2006 all the black artists left Cuba, and now all the raperos are white. These people are not aware of the roots of this culture in Cuba.³²

In a conversation with Obsesión’s Magia López and Alexey Rodríguez, they echoed a similar theme regarding what they view as an ideological disjuncture that emerged between a now largely émigré cohort of pioneering MCs and a new generation of artists who arose in the vacuum. With this break in discursive continuity, they argued, the torch failed to be passed. Speaking to what he described as “this generation’s disconnect with Cuba’s history, including Angola,” the producer Pablo Herrera characterized the shift as one akin to a de-racializing slide from “Afro-Cuban hip hop to Cuban hip hop.”³³

Some have suggested that there may have been additional factors in the mix informing hip hop’s waning black origination, in particular those involving state interests. Recalling the moment from his then home in Newark, New Jersey, Ariel Fernández Díaz implied that there was a deliberate effort on the part of the Cuban state to undermine the movement’s black leadership, claiming that some were in fact pushed out of positions, if not ultimately out of Cuba itself:

The truth behind why black identity discourse has slowed down and been stifled within hip hop is that it was a designed attack on the black leadership within the movement to cut off this thing that was going on—it was the attack on Rensoli,³⁴ the attack on me, the attack on Pablo. So there’s

a certain way the leadership of the movement or the intellectual leadership of the movement—Rensoli, Pablo, me—were completely cut out of the equation, you’re not going to have the presence of those individuals pushing for discussion and debate within the movement. . . . So the truth is that it was an institutional plan and an organized attack precisely to cut out this element within hip hop. I also think the coordination of the Cuban Rap Agency (ACR) helped with that; I mean, you’re trying to make the leadership look to the commercial aspect of the music and not the social-political aspect of the music, you know what I mean?³⁵

Here again Ariel alludes to the promotion of reggaetón through the ACR as an illustration of the linkages between commercial expediency and the Cuban state’s interest in defusing the political salience of race within hip hop. Commenting on his and others’ departures from Cuba, Ariel added: “We were pushed to leave the island. I never wanted to leave Cuba. I wanted to live in Cuba but I could not live without support. And the basic institutional strategy was to shoot me down and destroy the moral space, and whatever respect I earned through the years of my work here was really put in danger with different political and institutional tactics used to try to set the movement against me, you know what I mean?”

Reflecting on the period in conversation from his home in Edinburgh, Pablo Herrera ultimately questioned the strategic wisdom of those in the hip hop community claiming status as a movimiento. As artists, Pablo argued, raperos never had a clear or unified project or strategy when dealing with the Cuban state, and as such pitted themselves against an institutional apparatus with whom they were woefully unprepared and outmatched. Using the metaphor of a ball game, Pablo mused, “I think a lot of people who wanted to make hip hop into a movement have basically committed suicide, have basically thrown [hip hip] against the wall and basically killed it,” adding:

The minute we said that we’re a movement—I take responsibility for that as well—the minute people said that we’re a movement then they said, “We have to get you guys out, ok, you guys are out,” and that was it, you know what I mean? The minute we asked for that much power, we were speaking the language of the government, the language of cultural policy, of cultural politics. And as soon as we started speaking to that we were completely out of bounds with being able to know what we were

doing. Because we were playing with tools that are not natural to us as artists. Now we are in their court, they have the ball, you know what I mean? They have the rap of exactly how to play us. From being players we became a ball. And they knew exactly how to play it, so they could shut down what we were doing.³⁶

During the exchange Pablo repeatedly professed in a reflective tone of certitude, “I’m a person that’s about cultural longevity, not political martyrdom.”

Among those cited by Ariel and Pablo as being forced out of leadership was Magia López, who left her post as ACR’s director amid controversy in 2012. As a result of mounting tensions between her and an assortment of old and new Havana raperos, including Los Aldeanos, a letter was submitted to Cuba’s Minister of Culture Abel Prieto in late 2011 while Magia and Alexey were abroad touring Canada and the United States. The letter listed grievances about Magia’s directorship including allegations of self-promotion and reported financial mismanagement, ultimately requesting that she be removed from her position. A version of the letter, signed by a prominent (all-male) collection of older-school MCs, found its way to the blog *Penúltimo días* run by the Barcelona-based dissident writer Ernesto Hernández Busto, who, among other accolades, has been celebrated by the George W. Bush Institute’s “Freedom Collection” as a “recognized authority on technology and democracy.”³⁷ Under duress, Magia was forced to vacate her directorship and was replaced by her longtime artistic colleague Roberto Rosell Justiz of the hip hop duo Hermanazos. Obsesión subsequently departed from ACR’s artistic portfolio.

While the incident brings to focus a complicated set of converging factors, a central and persistent element in the mix relates to long-standing internal tensions and fragmentation within Havana’s hip hop community. It had certainly been my experience over the years that, despite the artistic depth and politically charged focus of much of the music, the rapero community often seemed beleaguered by internal antagonisms and competitive, at times ego-centered politics that hindered possibilities for more unified organizational efforts. All said, citing concerns beginning with Rodolfo Rensoli’s 1999 removal as lead organizer of the annual hip hop festival and running through Magia’s 2012 forced exit from ACR, both Ariel and Pablo suggested the hand of a divide-and-rule strategy by the Cuban state. In Pablo’s words, folks had their “tops blown off as a result of people not knowing

how to play the system, or play within that system. This is what I meant by being a ball rather than a player. Someone else is holding the racket. You're not in your court."

Although the extent to which Cuban institutions may have fanned or possibly exploited fractional dynamics is difficult to ascertain, Pablo's critique of the community's strategic shortcomings (or naïveté?) in dealings with state apparatuses may hold some validity. On his role during the period, Ariel confessed in hindsight:

I definitely feel that I didn't succeed at what I wanted to, we didn't succeed. I mean my idea of the hip hop movement was to create a type of coalition. My idea was to create a type of Abakuá society, a really tight brotherhood-sisterhood. That didn't happen because of us [leaders], it happened because people within the movement didn't want to come into this view, or the egos didn't allow them to do so. I might have made mistakes in the process, definitely. But I think I can prove that I took different actions and steps to try to bring everybody to the table, and tried to really put everybody on the same page. . . . Through the work that I did with the movement, through writing articles, creating *Café Cantante*, creating the [Movimiento] magazine, I really wanted to create a sociocultural coalition because I thought that was what the movement was calling for. It didn't make sense to me to talk for ten years about how police treat you without coming to the point when it's time to take action that goes beyond the stage.³⁸

Recognizing such limitations does not, however, deny the significance of hip hop's rise as a critical lens into, and an active player within, Cuba's evolving fields of racial articulation and life during a period of historic flux. While hip hop's racial orientation and politically directed focus may have undergone change, the terms, struggles, and potential consequences of black antiracist expression and activism in Cuba clearly continue.

One need only consider the recent controversy surrounding Roberto Zurbarano, the Afro-Cuban intellectual and long-standing interlocutor with Havana-area rappers who assumed directorship of the state-financed *Movimiento* magazine following Ariel Fernández Díaz's 2005 departure from Cuba. In the wake of a 2013 *New York Times* op-ed piece published in English translation that addressed the persistent and evolving nature of racial inequality in Cuba (Zurbarano 2013a), Zurbarano found himself demoted from his

position as director of Casa de las Américas' literary press. For Zurbano, a key issue in the mix was his charge that the *New York Times* had manipulated the tone of his essay through a (deliberate) mistranslation of his original title, "El país que viene: ¿Y mi Cuba negra?" (The country to come: And my black Cuba?), to "For Blacks in Cuba, the Revolution Hasn't Begun." A broader concern for Zurbano, however, was his subsequent state censorship for broaching Cuba's current dilemmas of race within a highly visible international (and in particular a U.S.-based) forum. In his defense, Zurbano penned an open online response titled "Mañana será tarde: Escucho, aprendo y sigo en la pelea" (Tomorrow is too late: I listen, I learn, and I'm still in the fight), which opened:

If a conservative left in and outside of Cuba thinks that a black Cuban revolutionary shouldn't make critiques of the Revolution, they do not understand the role blacks have played in this [Revolution], nor what a truly revolutionary process is. At the core, at the heart, in the base and on the shores of this process has been black support. We claim the moral right to criticize it as a duty to defend it, because what we have achieved is still insufficient in terms of what we have done and deserve. To renounce this critique is to renounce bettering the Revolution and embodying it more as our own.

Combating racism is one of the major tasks of the century. This scourge did not arise in a particular country, but in a global context involving various nations and cultures marked by the colonial desire to divide the world and establish economic and political hierarchies that survive today. Contemporary racism is also a global phenomenon and the struggle against this goes beyond all boundaries. Renouncing the international debate is to reduce its impact to old nationalist concepts and disregard the process of unequal exchange generated by tourism, new information technologies, migration, and transnational culture. It is a debate about the persistence of racism in Cuba [and] on the paternalistic and sophisticated ways this degradation is reproduced or renewed and, especially, regarding how to recognize and address them in a new context. (Zurbano 2013b)

Zurbano's charge brings into pithy focus a similar range of Cuban tensions that many raperos have long confronted in their music. From validating a critical black subject of national and revolutionary history, to chal-

lenging the limitations of nonracial national formulations that deny such historicity, to the global fold of racialized power via the current market dimensions of racial inequality, struggles over Cuban complexities of race and national citizenship remain at urgent center. As discussed, the analytical lines of such appraisal arose in dialogue with raperos and can be seen as part of an emergent black counterpublic seeking to challenge a silencing of black antiracist struggle and attending forms of political subjectivity. To evoke Pablo Herrera's language, might Zurbano's dismissal from the directorship of Casa de las Américas' press be yet another instance of a prominent "top being blown off" by the state?

Amid such developments, Obsesión's Magia López and Alexey Rodríguez were among those who continued to pursue hip-hop-related projects, international travel, and local engagements organized around antiracist themes. Key among these has been their participation in the founding of a local Cuban chapter of the regional antiracist alliance *Articulación Regional de Afrodescendientes de Latinoamérica y el Caribe* (ARAC, or Regional Coordination of African Descendants in Latin America and the Caribbean). It was through correspondence with Magia in late 2012 that I first became aware of ARAC's evolving development in Havana.

Building on a decade of global antiracist forums, a group of activists from Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Venezuela along with an assemblage of Afro-Cuban intellectuals and others convened in Havana under the auspices of ARAC in September 2012. The gathering was organized to discuss collaborative efforts to address racism and racial discrimination against Afro-descendant communities in the region. As an outgrowth of the meeting, a Cuban chapter was launched in 2013. Claiming institutional autonomy as an organ of a nascent Cuban civil society while distancing itself from being viewed as a dissident organization,³⁹ ARAC's stated objectives sought to combat racism and racial inequality through dialogue with Cuban institutions and the national media (Companioni 2013). Among those Afro-Cuban intellectuals taking lead roles in ARAC's organizational impetus were Gisela Arandia, Tomás Fernández Robaina, and Roberto Zurbano—all of whom shared active histories of support and engagement with Havana-area raperos.

Quite timely, one of the early challenges faced by the newly formed collaborative was Roberto Zurbano's dismissal as head of Casa de las Améri-

cas's press. In response, ARAC issued a statement with a series of points, opening excerpts of which read, in English translation:

Regarding the recent controversy in the national and international media concerning the problem of race in Cuba today, we wish to express the following:

- The project of our civil society is still under construction and [we] recognize that radical antiracism is part of the very essence and the most genuine popular element of the Cuban revolutionary process.
- [We] urge Cuba to eradicate all vestiges of racism, racial discrimination, colonialism, exclusion, social inequality and lack of respect for differences.
- ARAC strongly supports and will continue to support the free expression of ideas for all of its activists, as part of the fundamental freedom of expression in our society as a whole.
- ARAC thus opposes any institutional or individual process or method of an obstructive or repressive nature against any participant involved in such controversies who has elected to express his or her opinion or views.
- We believe the deepening of controversy around issues that concern us is a good sign of our society's ability to solve challenges independently as actors in solidarity and with respect for diversity without interference from external powers. (ARAC 2013)

Adding a personal voice to the debate, ARAC member Gisela Arandia wrote an online response to the Zurbano affair, arguing that it exposed the “virulence” of Cuban racism to the world. She then went on to identify three obstacles to resolving racial inequality in Cuba—an absence of political will on the part of the state, enduring ideological claims that the revolution had resolved the “racial problem,” and a lack of strategic unity among black Cubans themselves (Arandia 2013). A key concern voiced by Gisela was her contention that antiracist critique is often delegitimized in Cuba by bounded nationalist discourses that claim such orientations are inorganically influenced by the United States, in particular African American approaches to antiracism. Indeed, similar accusations as discussed undergird dismissals of racial critique and related subjectivity among Cuban rappers in light of transnational histories of engagement with North American

interlocutors (cf. Baker 2011). ARAC's Cuban formation, Gisela counters, "is trying to challenge the myth of racism in a new political and economic reality by exposing the historical polarization of racism-poverty. In recent years this reality has unfortunately increased the gaps of access to better living conditions for large parts of the black Cuban population who remain in positions of great poverty and limited upward mobility. . . . By weakening the myth of silence there may creatively arise multiple collective proposals that carry the legitimacy that the matter requires" (Arandia 2013).

While the broader resonance and organizational longevity of ARAC and its interventions may be difficult to gauge at this point, the impetus for its formation are the same historical urgencies and tensions that helped shape the rise and critical voicings of Cuban hip hop. At the center of both are efforts to readdress Cuba's historically fought, and indeed complexly lived, ambiguities of race, national citizenship, and legacies of revolution amid unfolding uncertainties of the neoliberal present. The challenge thus raised concerns how to effectively both mediate and ground a sense of black revolutionary Cubanness in non-self-negating and meaningfully active ways through such flux. In what ways might struggles to expand the future Cuban terms of a nascent civil society via emergent claims to a black counterpublic in this sense occur in dialogue with broader global conversations and attending political affinities? While the arc of such inquiry may be in fluid play, it is clear that Cuban raperos have occupied a particularly animated role within this evolving moment, lending both artistic expression and popularly embodied voices to the charge.

For Havana's now-expansive émigré community of raperos and their affiliates in the diaspora, one might consider the life and work of the late, great Celia Cruz for generational comparison. A native of Pablo Herrera's barrio of Santos Suárez, during an international tour in 1960 Cruz refused to return to Cuba in defiance of the revolution's recent *triumfo*, settling in New Jersey and ultimately assuming U.S. citizenship. An enduring vocal critic of Fidel Castro and the socialist project, Cruz has long been considered a *persona non grata* by the revolutionary state. While her life's music and mention were effectively banned from official Cuban media, her voice remains ever resonant at the popular level of *la calle* through songs like the rather apropos "La vida es un carnaval." Yet during the span of her artistic career Cruz continued to celebrate her fidelity to Cuba by drawing heavily—as

did Chano Pozo, Arsenio Rodríguez, and others—on Afro-Cuban secular and sacred currents of musical practice. Capturing the nostalgic complexity of her ambivalence, Cruz’s “Por si acaso no regreso” (In case I don’t return) laments: “Although time has passed with pride and dignity, I have taken your name; to the whole world over, I have told your truth” (Aunque el tiempo haya pasado, con orgullo y dignidad, tu nombre lo he llevado; a todo mundo entero, le he contado tu verdad). Indeed, many a *rapero afuera* could testify similarly.