

20 Cuban hip-hop

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Cuban hip-hop has stood out within contemporary global hip-hop movements. Although the elements of DJing, graffiti writing, and b-boying were never so developed as in other places, Cuban rappers developed a unique voice and culture. Being outside the orbit of American commercial culture, Cuban rappers drew on their own traditional instrumentation, lyrical development, and local inspiration. With state sponsorship, they organized yearly festivals that brought hip-hop groups from across Latin America and the world. And with few other forums for talking about problems such as racial inequality, rap music took on a unique role as a voice for young Black people on the island.

The emergence and development of Cuban rap

Cuban hip-hop is shaped by a highly specific set of social and economic conditions, including the demographic restructuring of the urban metropolis and increasing racial inequalities in the post-Soviet period. For the first five years of its evolution in Cuba up until 1992, hip-hop culture was produced and consumed within the specific social context of the local community or neighborhood. At parties, people would play music from CDs that had been brought from the USA, or music recorded from Miami radio, and they would pass on recorded cassettes from hand to hand. There would be b-boy competitions and people would rhyme in private houses, on the streets, or in parks.

The period from 1995 to the present involved the institutionalization and commercialization of Cuban hip-hop culture in several different ways. As the art form developed its own Cuban style, as it became distinctly more complex, and as it began to garner large levels of support among Cuban youth, rap music simultaneously, and on different levels, became intertwined with Cuban state institutions, transnational record companies, and underground hip-hop movements in the USA.

Hip-hop culture emerged in Cuba amid changes in demography: the relocation of large numbers of predominantly Black populations to areas on the outskirts of the city where kinship networks were weakened, and where there were fewer economic opportunities. After the revolutionary

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government came to power it embarked on a project to provide access to housing for those living in slum areas, or those without houses. In 1970, the government projected to build a large housing complex in Alamar, a suburb on the outskirts of Havana. Unlike in the large-scale relocation programs in the USA, the Cuban government built day care centers, boarding schools, theaters, sports, and healthcare facilities for the new residents of Alamar. However, projects such as Alamar were propelled by the same spirit of modernism that animated projects such as the South Bronx, with little concern for how communities would rebuild their networks and function in a vastly new environment.

The need to rebuild a sense of community and to reforge personal bonds in a new terrain underlay the popularity of hip-hop music for the young, Afro-Cuban residents of Alamar. The relatively relaxed social control compared to Havana was another reason why hip-hop was freer to flourish in Alamar. The location of Alamar outside of Havana also made it easier to gain access to Miami radio stations such as 1040 AM and 99 Jamz FM that played American hip-hop music regularly.

Rap music and hip-hop culture also grew rapidly in other urban areas occupied by mainly Black, working-class communities such as Old Havana, Central Havana, Santos Suárez, and Playa. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union, Black and working-class communities in Cuba were relatively protected from late capitalist processes of economic restructuring. However, the decline of the Soviet Union caused a severe economic crisis, leading the Cuban state to declare a “special period in times of peace” in September, 1990. The Cuban government was forced to adopt policies of austerity in order to increase the competitiveness of the Cuban economy in the global economy, which had negative impacts for Cubans.

Black Cubans were particularly affected by the economic crisis of the special period. Family remittances were an important source of income for many Cubans, and since the majority of Cubans in the diaspora tend to be white, it was white Cuban families who benefited most from remittances. In the tourism sector, Blacks tended to be excluded on the grounds that they did not have the education or proper appearance and attire to interact with tourists. Racial prejudice became increasingly visible and acceptable in the special period.

In a period of increasing racial tensions and inequalities, Afro-Cubans found themselves deprived of a political voice. Drawing on discourses of racial democracy, Castro’s revolutionary leadership attempted to eliminate racism by creating a colorblind society, where equality between Blacks and whites would render the need for racial identifications obsolete. While desegregating schools, parks, and recreational facilities and offering housing, education, and healthcare to the Black population, the revolutionary

leadership simultaneously closed down Afro-Cuban clubs and the Black press. Rap music has taken on a more politically assertive and radical stance as the voice of Black Cuban youth. Although some older Black Cubans cannot relate to the militant assertion of Black identity in Cuban rap, it is becoming increasingly relevant to Cuba's youth, who did not live through the early period of revolutionary triumph, and are hardest hit by the failure of the institutions established under the revolution to provide racial equality in the special period.

Cuban hip-hop emerged as a local response to experiences of displacement and relocation, as well as impoverishment and discrimination. However, it has grown and developed with the support of state and commercial institutions. The main form of institutional support for Cuban rap came from the Cuban state. In summer 1992, the Asociación Hermanos Saiz (Brothers Saiz Organization, AHS), the youth cultural wing of the official mass organization of Cuban youth, Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas (Communist Youth League, UJC), created a venue for rap in La Piragua, a large open air stage by the Malecón. In 1994, this space ceased to exist. Then, the rap entrepreneur DJ Adalberto created another venue in the "local" of Carlos III and Infanta. Up until this moment there was no real movement of rappers, only individuals improvising or "freestyling." From the local emerged the pioneers of Cuban rap: SBS, Primera Base, Triple A, Al Corte, and Amenaza. An association of rappers called Grupo Uno (Group One), relatively autonomous from AHS, was created by a promoter known as Redolfo Rensoli, and this network went on to organize the first festival of rap in June 1995.

North American rap music is the original source of Cuban rap music, and from the early days Cuban rappers have maintained close ties with rappers in the USA. While in the early 1990s, young Cubans were building antennas out of wire coat hangers to listen to 2 Live Crew and Naughty by Nature on Miami's 99 Jamz, by the time of the first rap festival in 1995, Cubans were hearing African American "conscious" rappers such as Paris and Common. The visits of these African American rappers were crucial to the formation of Cuban hip-hop, particularly through a network known as the "Black August Hip-Hop Collective," in which these artists and others such as dead prez and Talib Kweli participated. Black August concerts held in New York raised money for the Cuban hip-hop movement, including funding for an annual hip-hop concert, attended by American rappers.

Like the African American activists who visited Cuba during the 1960s and 1970s from Stokely Carmichael through to Angela Davis and Assata Shakur, who is currently in exile in Cuba, African American rappers such as Paris, Common, Mos Def, and Talib Kweli spoke a language of Black militancy that was appealing to Cuban youth.

The global market, via multinational record companies, has also been an important avenue of transnational participation in Cuban hip-hop. While hip-hop in the USA started as an urban underground movement, it is now a major commercial product, distributed by the three multinational music labels (or “Major labels”): Sony Music Entertainment, Universal, and Warner Music Group. In the Cuban context, the multinational labels with their promises of videos, discs, and large contracts were tempting to Cuban rappers whose resources were scarce. At times, signing a deal meant leaving the country, such as happened with the Cuban rap group Orishas who signed with the transnational record company EMI and now reside in France.¹

Cuban rap has been influenced by these diverse networks of African American rap and transnational record companies. Underground groups maintained a politically committed message in their lyrics and distanced themselves from commercial rappers, who sought to integrate popular Cuban rhythms in order to become commercially viable. Although there is no private music industry in Cuba, categories of “underground” and “commercial” have some resonance in the context of Cuba because they reflect real contests over access to resources and diverging ideological positions. For some Cuban rap groups who self-identify as underground, there is hostility toward those groups who attract foreign funding and attention because they are willing to dilute their political stance.

Groups such as Orishas who have enjoyed mainstream success both in Cuba and abroad, were previously part of a group called Amenaza who were central to the evolution of the Cuban hip-hop movement. Although Orishas maintained close ties with Cuban rappers, they were also viewed with a degree of contempt by some artists who felt that Orishas had abandoned their earlier political stance to appeal to commercial interests. In their album *A Lo Cubano* (The Cuban Way), released in 2000, Orishas popularized the pre-revolutionary iconography of Cuban life such as rum, tobacco, and 1930s Chevys and Oldsmobiles. Like the internationally marketed film and album of the Cuban group Buena Vista Social Club, the Orishas represent Cuba as a nostalgic fantasy that has been preserved intact from the 1950s. Given the marketing of Afro-Cuban culture as an export commodity and a fetishized object within the tourist industry, rap musicians themselves seek to exploit local and international markets by reproducing certain representations of blackness that are commercially successful.

Rap musicians and the Cuban state

The Cuban state has had an ambivalent relationship to Cuban rappers, as certain sectors in different levels of state institutions build allegiances to distinct networks and as those in official positions seek to appropriate

various transnational agencies toward different political ends. In the early days, state disc companies such as EGREM (Empresa de Grabaciones y Ediciones Musicales/Company for Recordings and Musical Editions) chose to promote commercial sounding rap music as representative of Cuban rap. Initially, commercially oriented rap was promoted by the Cuban state as a way of diluting the radical potential of the genre. The more commercial rap was exploited by the Cuban state for its revenue-earning potential, as part of a larger push to attract foreign funding through Cuban music and arts. The promises of money and promotion by the foreign producers did cause several Cuban rap groups to change their music and become more commercial, or to break up as members disagreed about how to proceed.

Those rap groups who did not sign deals or change their music continued to build the Cuban hip-hop movement through the help of producers Ariel Fernández and Pablo Herrera who brought rap groups from the USA and all over the world for the festivals. Since the early millennium, the Cuban state realized the need to relate more to the “underground” rappers, partly because of the increasing appeal of their radical message to large sectors of Black youth in Cuba. The political leadership began to prioritize the creation of a leadership of rappers loyal to the revolution. In July 2001, the Minister of Culture Abel Prieto held a meeting with leading Cuban rap groups, where he discussed provisions of resources for rappers, such as studio space, airtime, and their own music agency, and he pledged ongoing support for Cuban rap. While initially the Cuban state attempted to sideline the underground rappers by supporting the commercial elements, the state increasingly related to the former, praising them for their rejection of commercialism.

Journalists and cultural critics equated the egalitarian ideals of Cuban rappers with calls for equality and justice between nations made by Cuban leaders such as Fidel Castro in the international arena. In a speech following the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, Fidel Castro argued that given the global economic crisis of neo-liberalism, the alternative path being forged by the Cuban nation would provide a solution to the crisis: “The fundamental role has been played and will continue to be played by the immense human capital of our people.”² The music journalist Elena Oumano associated these sentiments with Cuban rappers, arguing that,

The government here is a major power in the rest of the world, so when hip-hop is rebelling . . . they’re really rebelling against the status quo worldwide, the new world order . . . Cuba itself is kind of the underdog and the rebel in terms of the world scene, it’s the last bastion of Marxism, so there’s more of an allegiance between the government and hip-hop.³

Images of rebellion and resistance in Cuban rap are drawn into broader geopolitical strategies of Black cultural opposition; these are identified with the Cuban revolution and by extension the Cuban government as the lone voice contesting neo-liberalism in a largely capitalist world order.

The image of Cuba as the Black nation rebelling against neo-liberalism was evoked by rappers themselves,⁴ partly because it was attractive to them and partly because it could be deployed strategically as a way of gaining official recognition for the genre. Rappers associated the Cuban nation with the condition of “underground,” and its connotations of political awareness and rebellion. In their song “Juventud Rebelde (Rebellious Youth),” the name of the official youth newspaper, rappers Alto Voltaje claimed that “Like a cross I go, raising the ‘underground’ banner for the whole nation.” Rappers identified their movement with statements by the political leadership about justice and sovereignty in the international arena. In his post-9/11 speech, Castro had urged the American government to exercise restraint: “We would advise the leaders of the powerful empire to keep their composure, to act calmly, not to be carried away by a fit of rage or hatred and not to start hunting people down, dropping bombs just anywhere.”⁵ In their song “No More War!,” the group Anonimo Consejo drew on this speech, rapping, “No more war, no more deaths, talkin’ ‘bout something real, this ain’t a game. Prepare yourself for what’s coming. I know what it is, stay calm, I take action.”

Partly as a result of the appropriation of rap music by the Cuban state, rappers succeeded in winning greater visibility in Cuban society. After the 2001 rap festival, a session of the nationally broadcast television talk show *Dialoga Abierto* (Open Dialogue) featured a discussion with several rap promoters and Cuban artists about Cuban rap, showing footage of performances from the rap festival. During the 2001 Cubadisco music festival, attended by producers and recording labels from around the world, rappers and rock musicians were given their own stage in Playa. Magia López and Alexey Rodríguez of the husband–wife rap duo Obsesión were nominated for an award. The increasing visibility of Cuban rap facilitated a shift to an acceptance by some political leaders that racial discrimination existed in Cuban society. In contrast to earlier criticisms of rap music for its racial content, the Cuban state began to praise rap for addressing issues of race.

The state also gave more institutional support to rap music in the early millennium. After the 2000 festival, Grupo Uno was disbanded by AHS, and AHS took over the coordination of the festivals and concerts. Following the 2001 meeting with Prieto, the state created a rap agency in order to group rap artists together and various rappers were selected to enter the agency.

The institutional support given to Cuban underground rappers and the greater profile for their demands for social justice and racial equality came

at the cost of a part of their autonomy. Increasing institutionalization of rap music also meant that the state could exercise greater censorship over the activities of rappers. Those in official bureaucratic positions had more control over aspects of the artistic process. Rappers were aware of the control being exerted over the rap movement as it became more integrated into state institutions. One of the responses to this was to make increased use of digital technology and the internet. The underground rap group Los Aldeanos was given little airplay on Cuban radio, but they began to use Youtube and other digital media to build an international following. Rappers also began to produce and distribute their own mixtape CDs. Another response was to migrate abroad in search of more opportunities.

The emergence of new transnational spaces

Since 2005, there has been a large exodus of Cuban rappers to different parts of the world. Orishas was the first to leave Cuba – in 1999, they moved to Paris and signed with the record label EMI. In September 2001, Julio Cardenas from RCA stayed behind after a tour of New York City. Since then, various other rappers have also emigrated from Cuba. Promoter and DJ Ariel Fernández left Cuba in 2005 to live in New York City.

But given the strong connection between rap music and place, what value does Cuban hip-hop have outside of this geographical space? Made in Cuba, and made for Cubans, how can this music speak to a public that does not share its same context? How can Cuban rappers reconnect in the diaspora? It has been difficult for rappers, as new immigrants, to pursue their art, given the demands for everyday survival. They are often separated from their group members, making it necessary to reinvent themselves as solo artists or move into other fields.

In the contemporary moment, it is probably most accurate to speak of Cuban rap as a diasporic movement given that a considerable amount of musical production is taking place outside the geographical boundaries of the island. Cuban rap is no longer physically anchored in Cuba, although many groups continue to reside on the island and the island itself still provides inspiration for much diasporic music.

Further reading

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Notes

1 EMI was the fourth major label of the “Big Four” before the music branch was sold to Universal Music Group and its publishing sold to a Sony/ATV consortium in November 2011 (after being sold to Citigroup in February 2011).

2 Fidel Castro, September 11, 2011. Available at www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/2001/ing/f110901i.html (accessed 1 June, 2014).

3 Elena Oumano, *Global Hit for Friday*, August 27, 1999.

4 As many white Cubans fled after the revolution, the Cuban government made alliances with both Black revolutionary groups in the US and decolonization struggles in Africa, thus consciously attempting to represent Cuba as a “Black nation.”

5 Castro, September 11.