

# Fear of a Black Nation: Local Rappers, Transnational Crossings, and State Power in Contemporary Cuba

Sujatha Fernandes

*Princeton University*

**Abstract:** This essay analyzes the relationships between culture, power, and politics in contemporary Cuba through the lens of hip-hop. In particular, I look at the interactions between Cuban rappers, the Cuban socialist state, and diverse transnational networks in a moment of economic crisis, increasing racial disparities, and Cuba's changing global position. The essay explores how the Cuban state has harnessed the energy of the growing hip-hop movement as a way of bolstering its popularity; I highlight forms of appropriation and collaboration between transnational cultural forms and the nation-state that have generally been absent from accounts of cultural globalization. But I also suggest that Cuban rappers' participation in transnational networks allows these rappers some autonomy to continue promoting messages of racial egalitarianism and to develop alternative strategies in a moment of declining options for black youth. [Keywords: race, hip-hop, Cuban rappers, transnational networks, state power, cultural resistance]

**T**his article explores the ways in which young Afro-Cubans appropriate transnational imaginaries in order to frame local political demands and strategies. Transnational rap networks constitute a vehicle through which Afro-Cuban youth

negotiate with the state and build strategies for survival in the difficult circumstances of the contemporary “special period”<sup>1</sup> of crisis. Attracted by the black nationalist politics of certain African-American rappers who have coined the term “underground” or “conscious” rap,<sup>2</sup> Cuban rappers offer strong criticisms of neoliberal globalization and they propose the notion of Cuba as a black nation struggling for justice in an inegalitarian world order. But rappers also highlight causes of racial justice within Cuba and make demands for the inclusion of marginalized sectors in processes of economic and political change. Moreover, given the opportunities presented by increased tourism and a limited market economy, some rap groups suggest strategies such as hustling and consumerism that constitute alternative options for black youth in a period of crisis. In this essay, I analyze the relationship between the diverse strands of the Cuban hip-hop<sup>3</sup> movement, transnational forces, and the socialist state, looking at how global flows of culture provide a means for contestation over local discourses of power and race.

Scholars of cultural resistance and globalization have analyzed the potential for popular culture and transnational cultural exchanges to challenge dominant forms of power by building and sustaining a critical opposition (Scott 1985, 1990; Gilroy 1987, 1996). For instance, Paul Gilroy sees the contemporary musical forms of the African diaspora as building spaces that can “meet the oppressive power of racial capitalism” (Gilroy 1996:365) and maintain “control of a field of autonomy or independence from the system” (Gilroy 1996:366). But how can we understand the role of black cultural forms in a context where the state has taken on the project of securing the autonomy of expressive cultures from the market (Garcia-Canclini 1995), and where popular culture producers work from within state institutions? Some anthropologists (Verdery 1991, Abu-Lughod 1991, Berdahl 1999) have begun to explore the ways in which cultural resistance is enmeshed in historically changing relations of power. These theorists have provided sophisticated accounts of the many levels of critical resistance that exist and their relationship to forms of power. By addressing the role of rap music in Cuba, I build on the work of these scholars, demonstrating how cultural producers negotiate, subvert, and reproduce aspects of state power in the context of a socialist system.

In this essay, I seek to trace the complex and contradictory forms of negotiation, accommodation, and alliance between rappers and the state in the special period. On the one hand, I argue that diverse transnational rap networks facilitate the efforts of Afro-Cuban youth to contest emerging racial hierarchies, frame their demands for social justice, and create alternative strategies for survival such as hustling and consumerism. On the other hand, I suggest that the Cuban state has harnessed the oppositional force of rap music to maintain

its hegemony in the face of growing racial and economic disparities during a period of crisis. But, I argue that rappers have also been able to resist some aspects of state cooptation because of their participation in transnational rap networks of African-American rap and the global music industry.

In the first section of the paper, I outline the dynamics of race in Cuba, the changing contours of race relations in the context of the special period, and the related emergence of Cuban rap music. I look at the evolution of distinct tendencies in Cuban rap that are generally associated with the US-derived dichotomy of “underground” and “commercial” and I explore how these categories are complicated in the context of Cuba. The next section explores different strategies of cultural contestation in the special period. These strategies roughly correspond to the blocs of “underground” and “commercial” rap: those rappers who identify as underground generally seek to negotiate with the state, demanding that it fulfill socialist ideals of racial egalitarianism, while rappers who identify as commercial predominantly evoke alternative means of survival such as hustling and consumerism. In the third section, I look at the ways in which the Cuban state appropriates Cuban rappers’ counter-dominant expressions to fortify its position in a new global context. By identifying the interdependencies between transnational cultural forms and the nation-state (Ong 1999), I provide new insights for globalization theory, which has tended to focus exclusively on the ways in which nation-states are receding as points of identification (Appadurai 1990). In the final section, I look at the contradictory space of Cuban hip-hop, which is both shaped by, as it resists, capitalist consumerism. I show how a militant black nationalism coexists with strategies of consumerism and I argue that the options provided by multiple transnational networks allow rappers a degree of autonomy that was not possible for earlier musical innovations.

In the absence of any organized political movements or forms of association among Afro-Cuban youth, Cuban rap provides an avenue of expression and cultural resistance in Cuban society. In this historical, ethnographic, and semiotic study of Cuban rap music, I seek to examine how rap musicians have opened dialogue with the state about issues of race during the special period and how the state in turn has exerted influence over the direction, strategies, and politics of the Cuban hip-hop movement.

### **The Context and Emergence of Cuban Rap**

Cuban rap, as a unique musical and poetic genre, distinct from both Cuban oral traditions<sup>4</sup> and American rap, began to develop in the mid-nineties and cur-

rently comprises a fairly broad and diverse movement that spans from the urban areas of Havana to the eastern towns of Santiago de Cuba. For the first five years of its evolution in Cuba up until 1991, 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 compact discs that had been brought from the US, or music recorded from Miami radio, and they would pass on recorded cassettes from hand to hand. The period from 1991 to the present has involved the institutionalization and commercialization of Cuban hip-hop culture in several different ways. As the art form has developed its own Cuban style, as it has become distinctly more complex, and as it has begun to garner large levels of support among Cuban youth, rap music has simultaneously become intertwined with Cuban state institutions, transnational record companies, and hip-hop movements in the US. Here I explore the conditions that have given rise to the “rapper” as a social category and I identify the ways in which Cuban rap musicians interpret and recontextualize categories of “underground” and “commercial” that derive from the context of American hip-hop. From certain social, historical, and institutional locations emerge the commitments and solidarities that are crucial to the framing of political demands and the articulation of desire in Cuban rap.

Rap music in Cuba 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 special period. Rap music and hip-hop culture grew rapidly in relocative housing projects such as Alamar and other areas of high density housing, occupied by mainly black, working class communities such as Old Havana, Central Havana, Sancto Suarez, and Playa. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union, black and working class communities in Cuba were relatively protected from neoliberal processes of economic restructuring. However, the crisis of the special period forced the Cuban government to adopt policies of austerity in order to increase the competitiveness of the Cuban economy in the global economy. Although policies of austerity and restructuring have affected Cuban society as a whole, Alejandro de la Fuente (2001) argues that there have also been various racially differentiated effects. The legalization of dollars has divided Cuban society according to those who have access to dollars and those who do not. Family remittances are the most important source of hard currency for most Cubans, and since the majority of Cubans in the diaspora tend to be white, it is white Cuban families who benefit most from remittances (De la Fuente 2001:319). Other options of survival in the special period, such as opening *paladares*, or family-run restaurants, are al-

so less available to blacks who tend to be based in more densely populated housing and do not have the space to carry out entrepreneurial activities (De la Fuente 2001:321). De la Fuente (2001:326) also argues that racial prejudice has become increasingly visible and acceptable in the special period.

It is not within the scope of this article to give a detailed historical account of race relations in Cuba. However, some background is necessary to understand the changes in the contemporary period. Race relations in Cuba differ considerably from experiences of race in the North American context. In his work on race in Columbia, Peter Wade (1993) points to two processes that define race relations in Latin American and Caribbean countries. On the one hand, Latin American nationalist and revolutionary leaders in countries with significant black populations, such as Colombia, Cuba, and Brazil, have held up an image of the mestizo or mixed race nation, where nation subsumes race as the main form of identification. To talk of “Blacks” or “race” in Latin America is problematic because race relations have not been historically perceived as primary markers of identity. On the other hand, blacks in Latin America have not become dispersed into the larger community, but they maintain distinct practices of congregation and cultural forms. According to Wade (1993:3), race in Latin America is characterized by a complex interweaving of patterns of discrimination and tolerance, which cannot be understood by reference to forms of racial identity in the North American context. De la Fuente (2001:335) corroborates this account of the contradictory nature of race relations in Cuba, arguing that while discourses of racial fraternity minimized claims for justice by black populations, the more fluid understanding of race that such discourses made possible also opened avenues for the participation of blacks in mainstream cultural life. But, it is particularly in contexts of crisis such as special period Cuba that racial inequalities, stereotypes, and prejudices reemerge in ways that promote racial conflict and restrict the options open to blacks for work and advancement.

In a period of increasing racial tensions and racial inequalities, Afro-Cubans find themselves deprived of a political voice. Drawing on discourses of racial democracy, the Cuban revolutionary leadership attempted to eliminate racism by creating a color-blind 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 health care to the black population, the revolutionary leadership simultaneously closed down Afro-Cuban clubs and the black press (De la Fuente 2001:280). De la Fuente (2001:329) sees the possibility for racially based mobilization emerging from the contradictions of the current special period: “The revival of racism

and racially discriminatory practices under the special period has led to growing resentment and resistance in the black population, which suddenly finds itself in a hostile environment without the political and organization tools needed to fight against it.” Afro-Cuban religious forms such as santería and abacua have begun to gain popular support in this period, but 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 rap has emerged from a local, grass roots phenomenon to a state-sponsored genre with multiple transnational connections. During the 1990s, the Cuban state began to provide institutional resources for the promotion of Cuban rap. In 1991, there were organized concerts or *peñas* in the *Casas de la Cultura* (Cultural Centers) of Mónaco and 10 de Octubre. A radio program called *La Esquina de Rap* (Rap Corner) began on Radio Metropolitana and there was a space on television which started promoting international rap artists (Fernandez 2000a). In summer 1992, the *Asociación Hermanos Saiz* (Brothers Saiz Organization, AHS), the youth cultural wing of the official mass organization of Cuban youth, *Union de Jovenes Cubanos* (Union of Cuban Youth, UJC) created a space for rap in La Piragua, a large open air stage by the Malecon. In 1994 this space ceased to exist and the movement began to dissipate, until DJ Adalberto created a space in the “*local*” of Carlos III and Infanta. Rap producer, Ariel Fernandez (2000a), says that 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 US. While the early waves of hip-hop music to come to Cuba were more commercial, by the time of the first rap festival in 1995, Cubans were hearing African-American “conscious” rap music. 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.” Black August was a network established during the 1970s in the California prison system as a way

of linking up movements for resistance in the Americas and the hip-hop collective seeks to draw connections between radical black activism and hip-hop culture. In their statement of purpose, the collective defines their goals as “to support the global development of hip-hop culture by facilitating exchanges between international communities where hip-hop is a vital part of youth culture, and by promoting awareness about the social and political issues that effect [sic] these youth communities.” 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 Sense, Mos Def and Talib Kweli spoke a language of black militancy that was appealing to Cuban youth. While a black radical such as Marcus Garvey enjoyed little support among Afro-Cubans in the 1920s (Fernandez Robaina 1998:125), the black nationalist aspirations of African-American rappers have been received with considerably more enthusiasm by a population of Afro-Cuban youth increasingly feeling the effects of racial discrimination in Cuba’s special period. An analysis of the ways in which “underground” hip-hop music promotes and extends identifications based on race has been mostly absent from important scholarly attempts to address global hip-hop. In his introduction to a volume on rap and hip-hop outside the US, Tony Mitchell (2001:2) argues that global hip-hop movements are disconnected from what he homogeneously describes as an “increasingly atrophied, clichéd, and repetitive” African-American hip-hop culture and most of the cases in the volume focus on non-Black appropriations of hip-hop.<sup>5</sup> But in countries such as Cuba, Brazil, Columbia, and Venezuela, as well as in several African countries, such as Senegal, South Africa, and Mali, African and Afro-Diasporic communities draw on African-American rap music to address local issues of race and marginality, however differently those relationships may be constituted. The importance of transnational flows based on race, particularly as promoted by the more black nationalist African-American rappers, must be viewed somewhat independently of global cultural flows related to the popular music industry.

Nevertheless, 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 US started as an urban underground movement, it is now a major commercial product, distributed by five of the largest multinational music labels including Universal, Sony, BMG, EMI, and WEA (Valdés 2002). Records are

judged by their Sound-Scan numbers, or the number of records they sell in the first week, and in terms of the industry, it is sales that count more than artistic quality, creativity, or political message. According to Mimi Valdés (2002), in North American hip-hop, rappers who are getting the airplay, videos, and record sales are those who have embraced the “bling-bling formula,” using the imagery of expensive cars, clothes and exorbitant lifestyles as a demonstration of the new wealth of the hip-hop generation. In the Cuban context, the multinational labels with their promises of videos, discs, and large contracts are tempting to Cuban rappers whose resources are scarce. At times signing a deal may mean leaving the country, such as happened with the Cuban rap group Orishas, who signed with the transnational record company EMI and currently reside in France.

Cuban rap has been influenced by these diverse networks of African-American rap and transnational record companies. Fernandez (2002:43) argues that the movement of Cuban hip-hop is divided by a major polemic between those who see themselves as “underground” and those who see themselves as “commercial.” He describes “underground” groups as having two main qualities: first, “they maintain an orthodox and radical stance along the lines of the origins of the genre and they distance themselves from whatever possibility of fusion for its commercialization;” and second, “they focus much more on an integration of politically committed lyrics with the social context” (Fernandez 2002:43). “Commercial” groups are those who, “incorporate popular Cuban rhythms in order to be more accepted, achieve authenticity, and become commercially viable” (Fernandez 2002:43). In the context of Cuba, “commercial” rap groups are defined somewhat by their ability to reach larger audiences. While most “underground” rap music is limited to small *peñas* and shows, the biggest gathering being the annual rap festival attended by up to 5,000 youth in the large stadium at Alamar, a “commercial” group such as Orishas have reached the broader Cuban public, and the sounds of their latest disc entitled *A Lo Cubano* can be heard in discos, private homes, and parties, as well as blaring from cars and on the street.

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 towards those groups who attract foreign funding and attention because they are willing to dilute their political stance. In their song *El Barco* (The Boat), Los Paisanos criticize the more commercial rappers who are funded because they have compromised their politics and dedication to the purity of rap: “those without shame who say they are rappers, but



who are patronized because of their mixture of rhythm.” The rapper vents his anger against those who choose the commercial path: “I shoot words at them, I don’t kill them, but I detest them and I don’t silence the truth, but I bring it to the text.” The group Los Paisanos, which started off with three members, lost one member who left the group for a foreign deal to make more commercial sounding rap mixed with salsa, forsaking both the group and his participation in the hip-hop movement.

Groups such as Orishas, now generally seen as commercial because of their mainstream success both in Cuba and abroad, and because of the nature of their lyrics, were previously part of a group called Amenaza that was central to the evolution of the Cuban hip-hop movement and which did address local issues of race. Although Orishas maintain close ties with Cuban rappers, and have spoken about returning to Cuba to work with the hip-hop movement, they are also viewed with a degree of contempt by some Cuban rappers who feel that Orishas have abandoned their earlier political stance and “sold out.” Cuban “underground” rappers are critical of the unqualified celebration of consumerism in the lyrics of commercial rap groups such as Orishas because of what they perceive as interventions into Cuban hip-hop by foreign music labels who seek to sell Cuba to western audiences through stereotypical images of rum, tobacco, and mulatta women. Some Cuban rappers who identify as “underground” feel that those groups who relinquish their hard core politics and purity of form to attain commercial success are compromising the values and the orientation of the movement.

But even though some Cuban rappers may self-identify as “underground” or “commercial,” these labels cannot be applied unproblematically in the Cuban context. While the distinction between “underground” and “commercial” in the US derives from a perception of authenticity and commercial success as diametric opposites, Cuban cultural producers are often attributed an automatic authenticity or “underground” status by their American counterparts, particularly given Cuba’s image as a successful revolutionary government among sections of the African-American community (Gosse 1998:266). At times, Cuban rappers themselves acknowledge that the distinction is somewhat less relevant in Cuba than in the US. In a song called “I don’t criticize what is commercial,” rapper Papo Record suggests that underground and commercial are all the same in Cuba because there is no market. The label of “commercial” is also somewhat of a misnomer because not all groups that mix salsa and other instrumental forms with rap are funded by record companies, some just enjoy those styles. In Cuba, the dichotomy between authenticity and success is

further complicated by state promotion of “underground” rap. Due to the structure of cultural production within Cuba, Cuban rappers who maintain a political orientation are more likely to receive state sponsorship than the commercial rappers, disrupting the association of “underground” with exclusion from the mainstream.

Despite the problems associated with applying the labels of “underground” and “commercial” in the context of Cuba, it remains that Cuban rappers do identify with these. In the following section, I suggest that strategies of cultural resistance roughly correspond to these different tendencies within Cuban rap, although, as argued in the last section of the essay, the boundaries between them remain permeable.

### **Strategies of Cultural Contestation in Cuban Rap**

#### ***Racial Egalitarianism in the Special Period***

Afro-Cuban youth have used rap music as a means of contesting racial hierarchies and demanding social justice. Gilroy (1993:83) sees the transference of black cultural forms such as hip-hop as related partly to its “inescapably political language of citizenship, racial justice, and equality,” a discourse that speaks to the realities and aspirations of black youth globally. Through their texts, performances, and styles, Cuban rappers demand the inclusion of young Afro-Cubans into the polity and they appeal to the state to live up to the value of egalitarianism enshrined in traditional socialist ideology. Cuban rappers, particularly those who identify as “underground,” point out the race blindness of official discourse and the invisibility of the experiences and problems of marginalized communities in a society that has supposedly “solved” questions of race. Given the lack of forums for young Afro-Cubans to voice their concerns, rap music provides an avenue for contestation and negotiation within Cuban society.

Rappers criticize the political leadership for ignoring questions of race in Cuban society by declaring the eradication of racism. As De la Fuente (2001:266) explains, while in the early years after the revolution Fidel Castro called for a public debate about racism involving several specially organized conferences and targeted campaigns, by 1962 all discussion of the race question had been silenced, except to praise Cuba’s achievements. Because the revolution had supposedly resolved all questions of institutional discrimination, it was considered unpatriotic to speak of race, or to identify oneself in racial terms, rather than as just a Cuban. In their song entitled *Mambí*, an identification with the

*mambíses* or Afro-Cuban fighters in the war of independence with Spain, Obsesión refer to the rhetoric which masks the silencing of questions of race:

Those winds brought these storms,	<i>Aquéllos vientos trajeron estas tempestades,</i>
It resulted this way (suddenly)	<i>resulta q' así (de pronto)</i>
my race had a mountain of	<i>un montón de cualidades cayo</i>
qualities,	<i>encima de mi raza,</i>
and many went in masses to pass a	<i>y muchos fueron en masa a pasar un</i>
course in how not to be racist,	<i>curso de cómo no ser racistas</i>
they graduated with high honors,	<i>se graduaron con honores y fiestas</i>
and up until today they remain hidden	<i>y hasta el sol de hoy permanecen escondidos</i>
behind this phrase:	<i>en la frase esta:</i>
WE ARE ALL EQUAL,	<i>SOMOS IGUALES</i>
WE ARE ALL HUMAN BEINGS	<i>TODOS LOS SERES HUMANOS</i> <sup>6</sup>

Obsesión suggest that blacks went from being at the bottom of the social hierarchy in pre-revolutionary Cuba to having “a mountain of qualities” due to their role as the new social subjects of the revolution. However, Obsesión suggest that white revolutionaries paid lip service to anti-racist ideals, going “in masses to pass a course in how not to be racist,” rather than engaging with the reality of racism in Cuban society. The song depicts the self-congratulatory manner of revolutionaries who proclaim the eradication of racism even as racial tensions and hierarchies continue to exist.

The resurgence of racism in the special period is presented in striking contrast to the post-revolutionary euphoria of Afro-Cubans who saw in the Cuban revolution the possibilities of an end to racial discrimination. In a poem written in 1964 by celebrated Afro-Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén entitled *Tengo* (I have), the poet lists the changes that the revolution has brought for blacks:

I have, let's see,	<i>Tengo, vamos a ver,</i>
that I have learnt to read,	<i>que ya aprendí a leer,</i>
to count,	<i>a contar,</i>
I have that I have learnt to write	<i>tengo que ya aprendí a escribir</i>
and to think	<i>y a pensar</i>
and to laugh.	<i>y a reír.</i>
I have that I have	<i>Tengo que ya tengo</i>
a place to work	<i>donde trabajar</i>
and earn	<i>y ganar</i>

what I need to eat.	<i>lo que me tengo que comer.</i>
I have, let's see,	<i>Tengo, vamos a ver,</i>
I have what was coming to me.	<i>tengo lo que tenía que tener.</i>

Borrowing the title and format of the Guillén poem, Hermanos de Causa describe the situation for young Afro-Cubans in the contemporary special period:

I have a dark and discriminated race,	<i>Tengo una raza oscura, y discriminada</i>
I have a work day that demands and gives nothing	<i>tengo una jornada, que me exige no da nada</i>
I have so many things that I cannot even touch	<i>tengo tantas cosas que no puedo ni tocarlas</i>
I have so many resources that I cannot even step on	<i>tengo instalaciones que no puedo ni pisarlas</i>
I have liberty between parentheses of iron	<i>tengo libertad entre parentésis de hierro</i>
I have so many benefits without rights that I imprison myself	<i>tengo tantos provechos sin derechos q' a mí encierro</i>
I have so many things without having what I had.	<i>tengo tantas cosas sin tener lo que he tenido.</i>

When they state that “I have so many things” and “I have so many resources,” Hermanos de Causa are referring to the claims of the political leadership that the revolution has provided so much for Afro-Cubans in terms of health, education and welfare, but yet the rapper doesn’t see them. The revolution has fought for a nation liberated from American neo-colonialism, yet this liberty can only be exercised within severe constraints, or “parentheses of iron.” While the revolution has given so many benefits to young Afro-Cubans, these are bestowed patronizingly, without any recognition of their rights. In contrast to Guillén’s optimism, “I have what was coming to me,” Hermanos de Causa state that “I have what I have without having what I had:” while the revolution has brought material benefits and opportunities to young, black people it has taken away their rights to speak out as a minority. As the group Junior Clan pose the question: “For blacks I keep asking the question, where is your voice?”

Cuban rap musicians use their lyrics, style, and performance to play with stereotypes of blacks as delinquents and criminals. According to de la Fuente (1998:5), racialized notions of proper conduct have continued to be enforced by the law, with *peligrosidad social* or “social dangerousness” still punishable by law. Rappers appropriate these dominant stereotypes, employing a posture of

aggression to turn fears of the “urban black threat” back upon those who have created such myths and stereotypes. Fernandez described in a personal interview how the militant pose of the rapper is a part of their performance:

You can see a rapper screaming with an ugly, bad face, but this is their artistic pose for singing. If you are singing about something that is not good, you don't sing with a smile, in no part of the world. In the moment of performance, rappers project this strong, serious, energetic, violent, and machistic image.

This posture is also a mechanism of defense against the reality of life in marginalized communities. As Trisha Rose (1994:12) argues, “the ghetto badman posture-performance is a protective shell against real unyielding and harsh social policies and physical environments.” Although the kind of harsh environment of the North American ghettos as described by Rose does not exist in Cuba, Afro-Cuban communities have been subject to forms of policing that become more severe in times of crisis. The adoption of aggressive postures serves as a form of self-defense, particularly when young black Cubans are being constantly harassed by police, and when they are viewed by broader Cuban society as criminals and drug dealers.

Rap musicians employ a direct style that addresses the authorities, the state, or those in positions of power. Cuban “underground” rappers challenge aspects of police harassment and the silencing of dissent by the Cuban state. In the song *A Veces* (At Times), Anonimo Consejo draw a picture of corruption, illicit drug trading and prostitution. However, reversing stereotypes about marginalized communities, the rapper locates the sources of these problems in the government:

Guys with money are trafficking in their offices,	<i>Los tipos con “money” trafican en sus oficinas,</i>
they shout “We resist,” and they drive around in fancy cars day and night,	<i>gritan “resistimos” y andan en carro noche y día,</i>
robbing the public like the scorpion her brood	<i>robándole al pueblo como el alacrán a su cría</i>

The rapper renders the police and the officials criminals, in an attempt to destabilize their moral authority. While the police target poor, black communities for crimes such as drug dealing and theft, the rapper shows that they

themselves are engaged in these activities. He points to the hypocrisy of government officials who use revolutionary rhetoric of resistance, but actually separate themselves off from the public in their fancy offices and cars. Cliente Supremo challenge the futile practice of asking for identity cards, asking, “In reality what will become of me when my youth is gone? Will I have to be worried about my personal documents like you all? What ID? For what?” Los Paisanos also talk about police harassment of young, black Cubans in their song *El Barco* (The Boat), and the ways in which they are constantly questioned by the police and asked to produce an identity card. When the police threaten the rapper, he shouts “*seremos como el Che*” (we will be like Che). The rapper repeats this slogan, recited daily by children in daycare centers and schools, partly as a way of invoking the youthful rebelliousness of the revolution’s founding martyr and partly as a way of inoculating himself against reprisal.

Anónimo Consejo draw links between a history of exploitation and a present of racial inequality. According to Gilroy (1996:363), one of the core themes of African diasporic musical forms is history, a concern which “demands that the experience of slavery is also recovered and rendered vivid and immediate.” Slavery becomes a metaphor for contemporary injustice and exploitation. In *A Veces*, Anónimo Consejo connect the history of Cuban slaves with the situation of contemporary Afro-Cubans. The rapper begins with his geographical location, he identifies himself as “*el Cubano del Oriente*,” as a Cuban from the East, which is a province considered less cultured than Havana. He is lying in his “poor bed” thinking about slavery and the struggle of black people in his country, when the similarities of the present situation occur to him:

<p>You think it’s not the same today,          an official tells me, ‘You can’t go          there, much less leave this place’          In contrast they treat tourists differently,          People, is it possible that in my country          I don’t count?</p>	<p><i>Hoy parece que no es así, el oficial me dice          a mí, ‘No puede estar allá, mucho menos          salir de aquí,’          En cambio al turista se la trata diferente,          Será posible gente que en mi país yo no          cuente?</i></p>
---	---

The rapper uses the critique of racial hierarchies in the past as a way of identifying contemporary racial issues such as police harassment of young black people and the preferential treatment given to tourists over Cubans by officials. He identifies himself as “the descendent of an African,” as a *cimarron desobediente*, or disobedient, runaway slave, drawing his links to an ancestral past, rooted in a history of slavery and oppression.

The open treatment of issues of race in Cuban “underground” rap music provides a challenge to the race blindness of official discourse and claims by the political leadership that racism no longer exists in Cuban society. In an article appearing in an official organ of the state, *El Habanero*, columnist Tony Pita (1999) cautioned, “beware, the songs that deal with race could turn into a double edged sword, and we will start encouraging the recurrent obsession of creating a small ‘ghetto’ when actually the road is free of obstacles.” Just as the early post-revolutionary leadership was worried about what it considered the “divisive” effects of racial politics (Moore 1988:259), one of the official responses to rap music has also been a concern with its racially based identifications and the potential for mobilization along race lines. Afro-Cuban youth use rap music as a way of asserting their voice and presence, in contrast to attempts by state officials to play down the salience of race in Cuban society.

#### ***Hustling, Consumerism, and Morality***

While some rappers, mainly those who identify as “underground,” appropriate hip-hop as a way of framing their demands for racial equality and social justice, challenging racial stereotypes, and exploring the effects of slavery, other rappers promote alternative strategies for survival and resistance based on hustling and consumerism, particularly in a context of declining employment opportunities for black youth and increasing access to a market economy. In this section, I explore how these latter groups, generally identified as “commercial,” challenge conventional moral standards and create new spaces for expression based on hustling and consumerism.

Within more commercially oriented rap music, the practice of hustling has been presented as a political strategy to get by in the special period. Hustling has become particularly popular among unemployed black youth, who have the time to devote to the task and are also being pushed into such activities by economic need. In the difficulties of the special period, those with access to dollars are usually Cubans who have family in Miami and receive remittances, generally white Cubans and those who have been able to receive work in the new dollar economy, such as party members with good revolutionary credentials who are given employment in the mixed firms or the tourist industry. For young, black youth who fit neither of these categories, and are even on the margins of the regular workforce, survival can be difficult. The special period has seen the reemergence of activities such as hustling, one of the main ones being *jinetismo*. This is a practice whereby *jineteros* (translates as “jockeys” but used to referred to street hustlers) earn an income and acquire consumer goods

through their contact with foreigners, either befriending them or engaging in a romantic or sexual relationship with them.<sup>7</sup> In contrast to the \$7 - \$15 per month possible by working full-time in a government job, a *jinetero* can make between \$40 and \$80 per day by helping out a tourists. Robin Kelley (1997:75) has explored the ways in which marginalized African-American youth, facing high rates of joblessness or the prospect of low-wage service work, remake the realm of consumption into a site of production, blurring the distinction between “play” and “work” that is characteristic of wage work under late capitalism. Similarly, for some Afro-Cuban youth faced with declining opportunities for earning an income in socialist Cuba, play becomes a creative strategy of survival.

One of the main rap groups that addresses practices of *jinetismo* and consumerism is Orishas. In the song *Atrevido* (Daring), Orishas tell the story of a couple who manage to take advantage of tourists as a way of bringing themselves out of rural poverty. The song begins by describing the situation of the poor couple in the countryside:

<p>Once upon a time a deprived couple without money were thinking of a chronic tonic to live, to leave the black mud in which they drowned, plotting.</p>	<p><i>Había una vez una pareja desprovista poca vista sin dinero pensaban tónico tónico crónico cómo vivir, salir del negro fango que la ahogaba, tramaba.</i></p>
---	--

The couple leave the countryside and come to the city, where the husband, acting as a pimp, sets his wife up with a tourist and she begins to work the tourist for money and gifts. The song parodies the clueless tourist, who thinks that he is the one taking advantage of the woman. The rapper portrays the woman as the agent and the tourist as her helpless victim. The song continues with the following chorus:

<p>Everything that she asked for, the idiot paid out, a pretty room in the Cohiba, the idiot paid out, A dress for her, and a shirt for me, the idiot paid out, If she wanted to go to the beach, the idiot paid out, He was running out of money, but the</p>	<p><i>Todo lo que le pedía, el punto se la gastaba, una linda habitación en el Cohiba, el punto se la gastaba, un vestido pa’ ella, y una camisa pa’ mí, el punto se la gastaba, si quería ir a la playa, el punto se la gastaba, ya la cuenta no le daba, no le daba, y el</i></p>
--	---



idiot paid out, to dance at a concert with Orishas, the idiot paid out.	<i>punto se la gastaba,</i> <i>al concierto con Orishas, a bailar, y el</i> <i>punto se la gastaba.</i>
---	---

In the Orishas song, *jineterismo* is presented as a vacation for the woman who is taken to the beach, receives new clothes, and has a fancy room in the hotel Cohiba. The Orishas even write themselves into the song, saying that the woman gets the tourist to take him for an Orisha's concert, but also suggesting that the Orishas are somehow themselves *jineteros*, producing suitably exotic music for an international market. The woman tricks the tourist into buying her new clothes and giving her money. She and her husband use the money for themselves and finally the husband comes to take the *jinetera* from the hotel room and on his way out they rob the tourist of all that he has. The song concludes with the victory of the couple who have come out of poverty, and it is the tourist who has lost out. Orishas celebrate *jineterismo* as a practice that puts agency and control in the hands of the women and men who use it to rob tourists in order to support themselves. *Jineterismo* becomes a strategy by which to raise oneself up. For Orishas it is a practice that resists the objectifying intent of the tourist and turns his voyeuristic designs back on himself by making him an object of ridicule. In contrast to the traditional values of work and study put forward as a way of improving one's conditions, Orishas suggest that tricking and robbing tourists is a worthwhile means to rise from poverty.

The relative autonomy of commercial groups such as Orishas, which derives from being based outside of Cuba and funded by a transnational record label, allows them scope to broach topics such as *jineterismo* that are threatening to the Cuban socialist government in several ways. The ability of *jineteros* to hustle for dollars from tourists challenges the regimes of labor discipline the socialist state seeks to impose. The Worker's Center of Cuba (*Central de Trabajadores de Cuba*, CTC) put out documents stating that practices such as *jineterismo* encourage a decline in the labor ethic (cited in Suárez Salazar 2000:345). Many foreign construction companies, foreign agencies contracted to do infrastructural work, and even the smaller "free trade zones" opening up in various regions of Havana, require local labor. The foreign companies pay the Cuban government about \$US 8—10 per hour for each of the laborers and the laborers are paid 200 pesos (\$US 9.50) a month by the state (Corbett 2002:125). But through hustling, *jineteros* can bypass official avenues for earning an income. The values of *jineterismo* contradict socialist ideology, and disrupt the attempts of the state to justify new forms of labor discipline related to Cuba's insertion

into a global economy. As the Cuban state seeks to regulate foreign currency towards a centralized state bureaucracy, black and mulatto youth siphon off some of the dollars that have begun to enter Cuba.

Moreover, on a social level the lifestyles and values of consumerism and sexual licentiousness represented by the *jineteros* are an affront to the high moralism espoused by the revolutionary leadership. Luis Suárez Salazar (2000:344) quotes Fidel Castro as saying that tourism has “lead to various types of reproachable social behavior (such as prostitution) and an increase in delinquency...these acts point to a significant erosion in the ethical values and morals that have been promoted in the diverse formal and informal educative and ideological institutions of Cuban socialism.” Through their open celebration of consumption, sexuality, and desire in narratives dealing with *jineterismo*, commercial rappers are subverting conventional standards of morality. In some ways, Cuban commercial rap shares affinities with Jamaican cultural forms such as reggae and dancehall, which Carolyn Cooper (1995:141) argues, “represent in part a radical, underground confrontation with the patriarchal gender ideology and the pious morality of fundamentalist Jamaican society.” Groups such as Orishas, by promoting strategies of hustling and *jineterismo* as viable options for black youth, challenge and mock the conservative ideologies upon which Cuban revolutionary morality is based.

The gendered nature of contestations over consumption and morality are particularly notable in Cuban rap. As Gina Ulysse (1999:158) observes in her study of Jamaican dancehall, the black female body becomes a primary site of exhibition and commentary within black popular culture. For the Cuban state, the female body represents the moral purity of the revolution that must be defended against consumerism as a form of spiritual disease that is infecting the body politic. In the Orisha’s song the *jinetera* is objectified by the pimp who uses her to revenge himself against the tourist; the female body constitutes a form of what Ulysse (1999:159) refers to as “the ultimate cultural capital.” Given the historical conception of women as objects that are traded between men as a way of constructing their masculinity (Rubin 1975), it is not surprising that the female body would again become a site of contestation, a means by which black working class males assert their masculinity in a context where they are increasingly being disempowered.

Rap music facilitates varying strategies of cultural resistance for Afro-Cuban youth. Those who generally identify as “underground” utilize rap music as a vehicle to criticize the silencing of race issues in post-revolutionary society. Cuban “underground” rappers talk about increasing racial inequalities in the special pe-

riod, they challenge stereotypes of blacks as criminals and delinquents, and they talk about the repercussions of slavery in the contemporary period. Others who are usually identified as “commercial” draw on rap as a means of promoting alternative strategies of survival such as consumerism and hustling, thereby challenging new regimes of labor discipline and standards of revolutionary morality. Both “commercial” and “underground” rappers use rap as a means of cultural contestation in a period of increasing racial inequalities and declining opportunities for black youth.

### **Rap Musicians and the Cuban State**

Building on the cultural resistance literature, the previous sections have looked at the opportunities that black expressive forms offer for a renegotiation of racial politics in Cuba. But while Cuban rap may play a contestatory role in Cuban society, various sectors of the movement have also been harnessed by the Cuban state as a way of recapturing popular support in the special period. Some recent anthropological accounts have demonstrated the ways in which cultural politics can be drawn into hegemonic strategies by political elites. Katherine Verdery (1991:314), in her study of Romanian intellectuals under Ceausescu’s rule, describes how the discourse of the nation, deployed in counter-hegemonic ways by intellectuals, was adopted by the socialist state “in order to overcome it, incorporate it, and profit from its strength.” Following Verdery, I argue that the discourses and strategies that may provide opportunities for the voicing of a critical resistance can also become absorbed by dominant groups. This account of alliances and interpenetrations between Cuban rappers and the state also contributes to the literature on globalization, by suggesting new ways of conceptualizing the relationships between transnational and national forces. I propose that we need to theorize the ways in which transnational practices such as rap may actually reinforce the hegemony of postcolonial nation-states in the contemporary period.

The Cuban state has had an ambivalent relationship to the different tendencies of Cuban rap, 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 towards different political ends. In the early days, state disc enterprises such as EGREM chose to promote commercial sounding rap music as representative of the movement. According to Fernandez (2000a), while the discs of the more politically engaged groups such as Obsesión and Primera Base lay gathering dust on the shelves of music stores,

without airplay, the more commercial disc of SBS with its dance oriented salsa-rap mixture was heavily marketed. He argues that the SBS disc was “much more promoted because of its popular and commercial character, because it had nothing dangerous in its texts and it made the people dance” (Fernandez 2000a). Initially, commercially oriented rap was promoted by the Cuban state as a way of diluting the radical potential of the genre. The global marketing of the disc brought in a large wave of foreign producers who “came with money in hand trying to buy Cuban talent with their low prices, suggesting the fusion of rap with Afro-Cuban music, with son, with salsa and timba” (Fernandez 2000a). The more commercial rap was also 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 over whether or not to “sell out.”

Those rap groups that did not sign deals or change their music continued to build the Cuban hip-hop movement, through the help of producers Ariel Fernandez and Pablo Herrera who brought rap groups from the US and from all over the world for the festivals. Particularly in the last few years, the Cuban state has 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. Fernandez emphasized to me that the state has to recognize the rap movement “politically, culturally, and musically, because imagine if this whole mass of young people were in opposition to the revolution, if all of these people did not feel empowered by the revolution, how would they feel?” The political leadership has prioritized 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 enterprise, and he pledged ongoing support for Cuban rap. In a personal interview following the meeting, Prieto told me that he was impressed by the young rappers, “with the level of commitment they have to this country and the seriousness and rigor with which they take on real problems, at the same time rejecting commercialism.” While initially the Cuban state attempted to sideline the “underground” rappers by supporting the commercial elements, the state is increasingly relating to the former, praising them for their rejection of commercialism.

But the political leadership does not only relate to the “underground” rappers because of their increasing influence in Cuban society and as a way of

alienating the more commercial rappers; the Cuban state also realizes that it can harness the energy of these rappers as a way of bolstering the image of Cuba as a mixed race nation with African roots. Forms of Afro-Cuban cultural expression have historically been appropriated by the state as a way of fostering national cohesiveness, particularly during times of crisis and transformation. For instance, in his study of *afrocubanismo*, a movement of Afro-Cuban literary, musical, and artistic forms in the 1930s, Robin Moore (1997:220) describes how performers, politicians, and intellectuals constructed Cuba as a mestizo nation, as a way of creating ideological unity during a moment of sharp racial antagonisms. In the post-revolutionary period, racial identifications have also been an important source of national unity. De la Fuente (2001:307) argues that the identification of post-revolutionary Cuba with the independence struggles taking place in Africa, the anti-apartheid movement, and the civil rights movements of African-Americans inscribed the imagery of Africa into the revolutionary project, helping to construct internal unity. In post-revolutionary Cuba, race has served the additional purpose of being a “formidable ideological weapon against the United States” and “a source of domestic and international political support” (De la Fuente 2001:18). Given the increasing racial disparities in special period Cuba, and the growing cynicism among Afro-Cubans about the ability of the revolution to continue addressing their needs, the state draws on expressions of blackness in Afro-Cuban cultural expression in an attempt to reconstruct national unity and to regain popularity.

The political leadership, along with media and cultural institutions, identify 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<sup>th</sup> attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, Fidel Castro argued that the global economic crisis was “a consequence of the resounding and irreversible failure of an economic and political conception imposed on the world: neoliberalism and neoliberal globalization.”<sup>8</sup> Taking a stance of moral authority, Fidel claimed that it is the path being forged by the Cuban nation that will 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.”<sup>9</sup> Various social and political actors associate Cuban rap with these ideas of Cuba as a rebel nation, forging a more just alternative to neoliberalism. For instance, music journalist Elena Oumano argued 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 bas-

tion of Marxism, so there's more of an allegiance between the government and hip-hop" (cited in *Global Hit for Friday*, August 27, 1999). Like with tropes of blackness, images of rebellion and resistance in Cuban rap can also be drawn into hegemonic strategies by the Cuban socialist state.

The image of Cuba as a black nation rebelling against neoliberalism is evoked by rappers themselves, partly because it is attractive to them and partly because it can be deployed strategically as a way of gaining official recognition for the genre. Drawing on official representations of the nation, Cuban rappers construct the nation as black. For instance, in their song *Pa' Mis Negros* (For My Blacks), Cien Porciento Original propose, "Let us help one another for a nation of blacks more sensible, for a nation of blacks more stable." Rappers associate the Cuban nation with the condition of "underground," and its connotations of political awareness and rebellion. In their song *Juventud Rebelde* (Rebellious Youth), Alto Voltaje claim that "Like a cross I go, raising the 'underground' banner for the whole nation," and in *Mi Patria Caray* (My Country, Damn!), Explosión Suprema state, "We are the Cuban 'underground,' almost without possibilities, but with the little that we have we are not dissenters."<sup>10</sup> Rappers identify their movement with statements by the political leadership about justice and socialism in the international arena. The appropriation of the message of "underground" rappers by the Cuban state is not only an act of cooptation, it can also involve the agency of local actors who comply with official narratives in strategic and self-conscious ways.

This account of the collaborations of Cuban rappers with the state makes us question some of the assumptions of globalization theories, which suggest that the growth of transnational cultural flows based on alternate social imaginaries such as race lead to the increasing obsolescence of the territorially-bounded nation-state. Arjun Appadurai (1990:14) argues that global cultural flows constitute a danger to the nation-state: the flows of ideas about democracy in China become "threats to its own control over ideas of nationhood and peoplehood;" and the lifestyles represented on international TV in the Middle East and Asia "completely overwhelm and undermine the rhetoric of national politics." Gilroy (1987:158) also suggests in somewhat essentializing terms that "the African diaspora's consciousness of itself has been defined in and against constricting national boundaries." What these accounts of transnational cultural forms ignore are the potential alliances between transnational and national bodies. As Aihwa Ong (1999:15) has argued, "there are diverse forms of interdependencies and entanglements between transnational phenomena and the nation-states." The potential for transnational cultural practices to reinforce the hegemony of the

Cuban socialist state lies in the attractiveness of ideologies of egalitarianism and sovereignty in a world system marked by increasing inequality and dependency, as engendered by free trade agreements such as NAFTA. While Cuban rappers build networks with US rappers based on race and marginality that transcend affiliations of nation, they simultaneously generate a critique of global capitalism that allows them to collaborate with the Cuban socialist state.

Partly as a result of the appropriation of rap music by the Cuban state, rappers have succeeded in winning greater visibility in Cuban society. After the 2001 rap festival, a session of the nationally broadcast television talk show *Dialoga Abierta* (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 and the rap group Obsesión was nominated for an award. The increasing visibility of Cuban rap has facilitated a shift to an acceptance by political leaders that racial discrimination exists in Cuban society. In my interview with the Minister of Culture, he acknowledged that: "We are supporting this movement because the message of Cuban rap profoundly reflects our contradictions, the problems of our society, the theme of racial discrimination, and it strongly highlights the dramas of marginalized *barrios*." In contrast to earlier criticisms of rap music for its racial content, the Cuban state now praises rap for addressing issues of race.

The state has also given more institutional support to rap music in recent years. After the 2000 festival, *Grupo Uno*, the somewhat independent organization of rappers, was disbanded by AHS, so that now AHS directly organizes concerts and activities related to rap music, and co-ordinates the yearly rap festival. Since 1998 rap groups have been organized under a system of *empresas*, or enterprises related to music, which are run by the Ministry of Culture. Rappers belong to four enterprises, the *Beny Moré Empresa* dedicated to popular music, the *Ignacio Piñero Empresa*, the *Adolfo Guzman Empresa* dedicated to soloists and singers, and the *Empresa Nacional de Espectáculo* (National Show Enterprise) that organizes rappers and rock musicians. While the latter three enterprises are less involved in promoting rappers and do not pay a salary, the Beny Moré Empresa is the most innovative in its promotion of rap, and pays rappers a commission based on the numbers of performances they do. There are ten groups affiliated with Beny Moré, including Obsesión, Anónimo Consejo, Doble Filo, Instincto, Problema, HEL, Eddy K, Papo Record, Reyes de la Calle and Alto Voltaje. Nearly all of these groups were introduced to the enterprise through AHS,

as the enterprises still have little experience with rap music. Mercedes Ferrer, a commercial specialist at Beny Moré, said that they count on AHS to make the selection of rappers to enter the enterprise. The enterprise then decides which groups can produce compact discs; until the present only two groups, Obsesión and Primera Base, have released compact discs through the enterprises.

But the institutional support given to Cuban “underground” rappers and the greater profile for their demands for social justice and racial equality has come at the cost of a part of their autonomy. Fernando Jacomino, the Vice-President of AHS, said that the function of AHS is to “create a cultural and political leadership among the rappers, who are able to pressure the institutions to give them support so that they can make their concerts.” Rather than giving the rap movement cultural and political autonomy, AHS seeks to encourage a relationship of dependency, whereby rappers must appeal to state institutions for the funds and permission to do their work. The paternalistic relationship that exists between rappers and institutions such as AHS was displayed through the pedagogy of the provincial meeting of musicians belonging to AHS, held at the University of Havana prior to the national meeting projected for November 2001. During this meeting, attended by the leadership of AHS and about fifty young musicians from different genres including rap, rock, and nueva trova, the young musicians sat in a hall, while the panel of leaders sat above them on a raised platform. The musicians put forward their complaints to the leadership, such as the need for more publicity, more funds to produce compact discs, larger spaces for performance, and payment for promoters. The leadership did not deny the validity of their claims, but encouraged them to talk more about these things, in effect naturalizing the authority of AHS as the only source of appeal for rappers and the consequent dependency of rappers on AHS.

“Commercial” rap has not been appropriated by the Cuban state in the same way as “underground” rap, partly because of the ability of the more commercial rappers to draw on outside funding, and partly due to their celebration of values and strategies of consumerism and individuality that are less easily identified with the socialist state. But even “commercial” rappers find certain points of correspondence and accommodation with the socialist state, particularly given the trajectory of the Cuban revolution itself towards a mixed-market economy based on new modes of consumption, desire, and leisure. As the Cuban state embraces market reforms and ideologies, the strategy of *jinetismo* may in some ways coincide with strategies of the Cuban state itself. Like the *jinetero*, who sees his or her activities as a way of robbing from wealthy tourists to support themselves and their families, the state sees tourism as a way of



maintaining the social structures and welfare mechanisms of the revolution, using tourist money to fund a set of institutions such as schools, hospitals, and child care centers. On a practical level, *jinetismo* may actually be useful to the state, as *jinetes* direct foreigners towards state tourist venues and encourage them to spend money. Moreover, in the global marketing of Cuba to attract tourism, the Cuban state relies on stereotypes of “tropical” sexuality and female promiscuity as promoted in “commercial” rap, even though these may contradict revolutionary morality. These correspondences between the commercial sectors and the evolving Cuban state point to possible future alliances, especially as these groups begin to garner greater international recognition.

### **The Contradictory Space of Cuban Hip-Hop**

The politics of transnational rap networks coincide in some ways with the agenda of the Cuban socialist state and the state harnesses the oppositional potential of “underground” rappers to maintain its hegemony in the crisis of the special period, but the continued participation of these “underground” rappers in multiple networks of African-American rap and the global music industry actually allows them to resist some aspects of state cooptation. Although previous sections focused on consumerism and black nationalism as distinct strategies in Cuban hip-hop, in reality these two strategies overlap in multiple ways, as those who identify as “underground” fuse activism with consumerist desire, style with politics, and hard-edged critique with a celebration of black culture. Transnational networks do not map neatly onto distinct groups of rappers, rather they infiltrate and constitute Cuban hip-hop in ways that prevent the reduction of rap music to any one political agenda and allow rappers to define a somewhat independent, but collaborative, role within the Cuban socialist system.

Even though some “underground” rappers oppose the commercial tendencies and consumerist inclinations of groups such as Orishas, the “underground” hip-hop movement within Cuba is located in a contradictory space that is shaped by, even as it resists, capitalist consumerism. The hip-hop movement in Cuba reflects trends within American hip-hop such as conspicuous consumption, and the use of American clothing has also been used to make certain political statements. It is undeniable that the wearing of designer label clothes such as Fubu and Tommy Hilfiger that forms part of hip-hop movement in the US has also become incorporated into Cuban hip-hop. The majority of audiences at a *peña* or during the festival are attired in baggy pants, sweatshirts and baseball caps or stocking caps brought by relatives in Miami or from tourists. Moreover, this style

is not simply an adoption of American styles and capitalist culture, it is also a gesture of defiance that signals a refusal to conform to the dominant society. In his work on the meaning of style in working class subcultures such as punk in post-war Britain, Dick Hebdige (1979:3) suggests that styles have a double meaning:

On the one hand, they warn the “straight” world in advance of a sinister presence—the presence of difference—and draw down upon themselves vague suspicions, uneasy laughter, “white and dumb rages.” On the other hand, for those who erect them into icons, who use them as words or curses, these objects become signs of forbidden identity, sources of value.

Cuban rap audiences use their clothing, and their adoption of American slang such as “aight” and “mothafuka” as a way of distinguishing themselves as a group, and of highlighting their identity as young, black Cubans. Their style has not gone unacknowledged by state officials either, who recognize the subversive potential in their form of dress. In his article in *El Habanero*, Pita (1999) derided rappers for wearing hats, long pants and stocking caps in a hot climate not suited to such apparel. However, more at stake than the matter of climactic suitability, were the associations of the clothing with a culture and society forbidden to young Cubans. Just as punks in post-war Britain used the symbol of the swastika, not to identify with the Nazi regime, but rather to disrupt its associations of evil and enemy, so too young Cubans seek to break down exclusive boundaries erected by a cold war climate by dressing in the attire of the “enemy.”<sup>11</sup>

Some of the more black nationalist Cuban rappers wear handprinted African shirts, Dreadlocks, or natural “Afro” hair-styles, and others wear handcrocheted caps, and t-shirts with images of cannabis, Bob Marley, or Selassie, associated with the subculture of reggae. Kobena Mercer (1990:259) describes how in the absence of an organized direction of black politics and excluded from official channels of representation in the 1940s, African-Americans announced their politics through black styles such as the conk hair-style, the zoot suit, and jive talk, which “reinforced the terms of shared experience—blackness—and thus a sense of solidarity among a subaltern social bloc.” Similarly in Cuba, black styles signify an embracing of African and Afro-Diasporic identity, an assertive stance for rappers to take in the present climate. Carlos Moore (1988:259) reports that in the 1960s, the Cuban state was suspicious of Afro-Cubans who donned African dashikis and wore their hair in an Afro, as these were seen as provocative and deviant acts. The tensions between the desire of the revolutionary leadership to align with the black power movement in the US, and

their reservations about the “divisive” effects of black cultural politics (Moore 1988:259) were apparent in confrontations over style. For Cuban rappers, these styles are also a way of exhibiting their cross-national identifications, which give them a degree of autonomy to assert a collective sense of black identity in contrast to the racially integrative program of the Cuban state.<sup>12</sup>

Female rappers also use style to project a political message, and indicate their individuality, presence, and identity as black women. Female rapper Magia from Obsesión and the all-female rap group Instinto seek to project alternative images of women through their styles. While women in salsa music and in popular Cuban dance music dress with short skirts, makeup, and high heels, Magia usually wears a head wrap and an African gown, or a long baggy shirt and pants. The confident and non-sexualized styles of Cuban female rappers challenge the imagery of the scantily clad Tropicana dancer and the *ron mulata* symbol as representative of Cuban popular culture.

Even though “underground” rappers may seek to insulate Cuban hip-hop from the market, they are forced to face the reality of its associations with consumerism. Rap producer, Pablo Herrera, related to me that after he was interviewed by Vibe magazine, an American producer came to Cuba and offered him clothing by the Edge label. Herrera felt conflicted over whether to accept it, because he said that on the one hand he felt it was a symbol of multinational capitalism, and he recognized the attempt of the producer to take advantage of a present opening in Cuban society to market the Edge label in Cuba. But on the other hand, Herrera felt that the clothing was very fashionable, and he added that it is difficult to find good clothing in Cuba. Networks of fashion labels and transnational record companies, as well as cultural exchanges such as Black August, provide multiple options for Cuban rappers to draw on outside of the state, and alleviate the difficulty of their current circumstances. Like African-American rappers who may see hip-hop, as well as sport, as an activity that “embodies dreams of success and possible escape from the ghetto” (Kelley 1997:53), Cuban rappers also see rap as an activity that can lead to economic prosperity, or a way to *resolver* (solve) their current problems without recourse to the state. In the song *Prosperaré* (I Will Prosper) by Papo Record, he suggests that the current poverty of Cuban rappers will eventually be rewarded by material success:

Today I sing in a small concert,	<i>Hoy te canto en una peña, mañana</i>
tomorrow I'll travel around the country,	<i>doy una gira,</i>
and the day after tomorrow I want	<i>pasado quiero viajar.</i>
to travel abroad.	

Today some hundreds for a song,            *Hoy unos cientos por un tema, mañana*  
tomorrow some thousands for a disc.       *unos miles por un disco.*

In Cuba of the special period where foreign travel is an impossibility for many, and rappers barely receive a subsistence income, rap music provides the fantasy of wealth and stability. It is undeniable that materialistic desires that have shaped the movement in the west also inform the movement in Cuba. A range of diverse, often contradictory, practices constitute fallback options in a period of uncertainty. In the song *El Barco*, Los Paisanos point to the dire situation of rap musicians in Cuba:

The situation of Cuban rap in this era       *La situación de rap Cubano en esta*  
does not prosper,                                 *era no prospera,*  
the money that my imagination produces   *el dinero que producen mi imaginación*  
does not materialize in my wallet.           *no hace estancia en mi billetera.*

Rappers are not convinced that if they join the AHS and work through the enterprise system that they will be able to make a career as a rapper. Working through AHS may be the only way for rappers to practically organize their concerts and get paid for their work. Yet the young, marginalized rapper has a vision of larger fame and glory beyond state institutions.

The fantasy of wealth as represented by American commercial rap music is not a realistic strategy for survival as are hustling or *jineterismo*. Few Cuban rappers are likely to amass large fortunes through their music. Valdés (2002) argues that as hip-hop in the US has become big business, contracts look more like loan agreements, as expenses that used to be paid by the label are being passed on to the artist. If artists do not sell large numbers of discs and constantly tour, they will never make enough money to keep the lavish lifestyles that are represented in the hip-hop videos. Even Orishas suggest that in their encounters with transnational record label EMI they are little more than workers: “There is a labor necessity because there is a company that has invested in you, you are a worker. You have to extract the maximum from yourself because this is going to have repercussions for your future” (cited in Fernandez 2000b:7). In contrast to the notions of Cuban rappers that through rap music they can make lots of money and tour the world, Orishas suggest that commercial fame does not guarantee wealth and even artists who have been able to create top-selling albums have a constant pressure to sell more. The pressure to sell and perform is a new element for Cuban artists, most of whom are accustomed to operating

within a system where appealing to a mass audience is less important than political connections, and “who you know.”

But while fantasies of wealth and prosperity do not constitute realistic options for young Cubans, they are part of the process by which diverse logics come to flourish against the homogenizing visions of a singular socialist utopia. In a period of economic uncertainty and stagnation, Cuban rappers devise multiple strategies by which to revitalize utopian promises and express their needs and desires. The focus on consumerism as a new vehicle for black youth to define and express their individuality by theorists of cultural resistance such as Manthia Diawara (1998:273) may be applicable even in contexts such as Cuba, where neoliberal globalization produces new possibilities at the same time as it closes older options. But the assumption by Diawara and other theorists of global hip-hop that consumerism is *the new activism*, and the most transportable global element, misrepresents the diversity of hip-hop movements outside of the US. In contrast to Diawara’s (1998:276) claim that “Black nationalists, especially, have seen their values labeled archaic by the transnational hip-hop culture,” I have shown that young Cubans are strongly attracted by the black nationalist politics of African-American rap.

Cuban rappers are able to combine a politics of race, style, consumerism, nationalism, and anti-capitalism into a multi-faceted movement that reinforces local and global forms of power, while also providing a voice of resistance. Even though “underground” rap may be drawn into hegemonic strategies by the Cuban state, the participation of these rappers in transnational networks simultaneously gives them the opportunity to *resist* the institutionalization of dissent that has occurred with other cultural forms. The appropriation of clothing styles, whether American designer, Afrocentric, or Rastafarian; the adoption of American slang; as well as the fantasy and reality of foreign travel, cultural exchanges, and contracts with foreign labels allow rappers to carve out a somewhat autonomous role for hip-hop, even as they operate partly from within state institutions. The very transnational nature of forms such as hip-hop provides a means of pluralizing the movement in Cuba and sustaining multiple and diverse voices and strategies within the context of the Cuban socialist system.

### **Conclusion**

Through a study of the complex and often contradictory nature of the relationship between Cuban rappers, the Cuban socialist state, and transnational networks, I have come up with three main conclusions. The first is that Afro-

Cuban youth appropriate rap music in order to make their criticisms of the Cuban state, highlight issues of racial discrimination and social justice, develop alternative strategies for economic survival, and explore avenues of pleasure and desire. A second conclusion of this essay is that the socialist state has been able to harness the creative energy and visions of Cuban “underground” rappers as a way of maintaining its hegemony in a period of increasing social disunity and economic instability. The third consists of my observation that despite the incorporation of Cuban rap musicians into state institutions, their continuing participation in transnational networks of both African-American “underground” rap and transnational record companies avails rappers of alternative options and possibilities that prevent their wholesale co-optation by the state.

The interdependencies between rappers and the Cuban socialist state that I have demonstrated in this essay challenge some of the assumptions of globalization theory. Theorists of globalization assert that we are witnessing the emergence of a new “postnational order,” whereby the globalization of commerce and the growth of cross-national solidarities based on race and ethnicity, has led to a gradual undermining of national sovereignty (Appadurai 1990, 1996; Bhabha 1990; Gilroy 1987). Yet in Cuba, the extension of transnational cultural flows and the evolving parallel solidarities based on race and marginality have been harnessed by the socialist state to bolster its own position in the contemporary period. My account of Cuban rap can help us appreciate how transnational cultural flows may be appropriated by and/or identified with the nation-state in various ways.

This study also presents new insights for ethnographers of cultural resistance, who have tended towards what Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) calls “romanticizing resistance,” by reading all forms of cultural contestation as a challenge to systems of power (Scott 1985, de Certeau 1984). By upholding consumerism as a new strategy of cultural resistance in a moment of globalization, immigration, and new technologies of information, theorists of black popular culture also fall into this problem of romanticizing resistance (Gilroy 1996, Diawara 1998). Although the literature on cultural resistance has opened up new ways of conceptualizing black political activism in a markedly changed environment to the civil rights era, there is a need to theorize the contradictions of cultural resistance. This study of Cuban rap suggests how cultural resistance plays into old and new modalities of power, as it asserts radically new ways of being.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The material in this essay is based on ethnographic field research carried out over a total of nine months in Havana, Cuba between 1999 and 2002, as well as a pre-fieldwork visit of three months in 1998. My initial fieldwork in Cuba was supported by a summer research grant from the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Chicago and the main stint of research was supported by a Social Sciences Research Council (SSRC) Dissertation Fellowship on the Arts and Social Sciences. Earlier versions of this essay were presented at the “Locations of Africa in the Black Atlantic” conference, hosted by the Anthropology Department at the University of Chicago and at a joint Caribbean Studies Workshop and Workshop for the Anthropology of Latin America at the University of Chicago. I thank the organizers and the audiences of those seminars for their useful comments. I thank also John Beverley, Yasmin A. Dawood, Kenya Dworkin, Susanne Rudolph, Priya Srinivasan, Susan Stokes, Lisa Wedeen, and the three anonymous reviewers at AQ for their invaluable feedback and advice on various drafts.

## ENDNOTES

\*Portions of this article are taken from another piece of mine entitled, “Island Paradise, Revolutionary Utopia or Hustler’s Haven: Consumerism and Socialism in Contemporary Cuban Rap,” forthcoming in *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*.

<sup>1</sup>The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 prompted the Cuban state to declare a “special period in times of peace” in September 1990, in an attempt to rebuild the Cuban economy through policies promoting self-sufficiency in food, the reintroduction of wide-scale rationing, the earning of hard currency through tourism, and the re-entry of Cuba into a global economy.

<sup>2</sup>While “conscious” rap refers to socially aware rap musicians who generally adopt a black nationalist politics, “underground” refers to a certain style that is usually adopted by conscious rappers. In “underground” rap, certain rappers form an allegiance to each other and the movement as a whole in an effort to keep their form pure and untainted by commercial dictates, or even by mixture with other musical forms. In the US, “underground” rappers do not always identify as “conscious,” but in Cuba, rappers who adopt the English word “underground” generally use it to define both a political orientation and a musical style.

<sup>3</sup>Hip-hop is a movement that includes breakdancing, graffiti writing, djaying and the verbal component known as rapping. Djaying and graffiti writing have been difficult in Cuba because of the lack of turntables, records, spray cans, and the other resources necessary for these practices, although some Cuban djays have managed to improvise with cassettes. But breakdancing and rapping became much more popular in the context of Cuba.

<sup>4</sup>These include Cuban folk practices such as *rumba*, a musical form that combines storytelling and chanting with drumming and dance; and *repentistas*, singers in a traditional folk art where participants rhyme fast using spoken lyrics to deride their opponent.

<sup>5</sup>This is especially glaring in the case of Australia where a vibrant Aboriginal hip-hop culture that draws consistently on tropes of blackness from American hip-hop gets short shrift.

<sup>6</sup>During field research trips in Cuba, I collected and transcribed the rap songs used in this essay: in some cases groups gave me their lyrics directly, and in other cases I transcribed songs recorded from live performances or compact discs, usually with the assistance of the rappers themselves. I translated the lyrics myself, with some help from Hilda Torres and Kenya Dworkin.

<sup>7</sup>*Jineterismo* has evolved from a spontaneous activity into an organized system, divided into established zones, with *puntos* (point of contact) who buy off the police in order to establish their territory (Elinson 1999:5). However, it is still a fairly undefined activity that can include romances between Cubans and tourists.

<sup>8</sup>Televised presentation by Commander in Chief Fidel Castro Ruz, President of the Republic of Cuba, on the present international situation, the economic and world crisis and its impact on Cuba, Havana, November 2, 2001.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Here they use the word “*gusano*,” literally ‘worm,’ which is the term given by the Cuban state to those who have dissented openly to the Cuban revolution, and who have left the country for places such as Miami.

<sup>11</sup>Rappers in the US also draw on associations with the enemy as a way of talking back to the state. During the 1991 Gulf War, American rapper Paris claimed in one of his songs that, “Iraq never called me ‘nigger.’”

<sup>12</sup>Scholars have addressed the contradictory relationship between American black nationalists and the revolutionary government in Cuba (Moore 1988, De la Fuente 2001). These authors point out that although Fidel Castro and other leaders sought to build alliances with the black power movement in the US, the racialized discourse of leaders such as Stokely Carmichael who spoke of a “white power structure” was alien to the Cuban political leadership, many of whom themselves were “white” Cubans (Moore 1988:261). Although these tensions have not emerged strongly in the interactions between African-American rappers and the Cuban state, the cultural nationalism of Cuban rappers, developed through participation in cross-national networks with African-American rappers, meets with some official resistance.

## REFERENCES

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 1991. “The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power Through Bedouin Women.” *American Ethnologist* 17(1):41-55.
- Appadurai, Arjun. 1990. “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy.” *Public Culture* 2(2):1-24.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1996. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Berdahl, Daphne. 1999. *Where the World Ended: Re-Unification and Identity in the German Borderland*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bhabha, Homi. 1990. “Introduction.” In *Homi Bhabha, ed. Nation and Narration*, pp. 1-7. New York: Routledge.
- Cooper, Carolyn. 1995. *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender, and the “Vulgar” Body of Jamaican Popular Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Corbett, Ben. 2002. *This is Cuba: An Outlaw Culture Survives*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Westview Press.
- De Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Randall. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- De la Fuente, Alejandro. 2001. *A Nation For All: Race, Inequality and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Diawara, Manthia. 1998. *In Search of Africa*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Díaz Pérez, Clara. 1994. *Sobre la Guitarra, La Voz: Una Historia de la Nueva Trova Cubana*. La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas.
- Elinson, Hannah. 1999. “Cuba’s *Jinetes*: Youth Culture and Revolutionary Ideology.” *Cuba Briefing Series Papers* 20. Georgetown University: Center for Latin American Studies.
- Fernandez, Ariel. 2000a. “¿Poesía Urbana? o la Nueva Trova de los Noventa.” *El Caimán Barbudo* 296: 4-14.



- \_\_\_\_\_. 2000b. "Orishas: El aché a través del hip-hop." *El Caimán Barbudo* 296: 6-9.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2002. "SBS. ¿Timba con Rap? El hip hop de la polémica." *Revista Salsa Cubana*, 5(17): 43-45.
- Fernández Robaina, Tomás. 1998. "Marcus Garvey in Cuba: Urrutia, Cubans, and Black Nationalism." In *Lisa Brock and Digna Castañeda Fuertes, eds. Between Race and Empire: African-Americans and Cubans before the Cuban Revolution*, pp. 120-128. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- García Canclini, Nestor. 1995. *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Leaving and Entering Modernity*. Translated by Christopher L. Chippiani and Silvia L. López. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gilroy, Paul. 1987. *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*. London: Routledge.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1996. "One Nation Under a Groove: The Cultural Politics of 'Race' and Racism in Britain." In *Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny, eds. Becoming National: A Reader*, pp. 352-370. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gosse, Van. 1998. "The African-American Press Greet the Cuban Revolution." In *Lisa Brock and Digna Castañeda Fuertes, eds. Between Race and Empire: African-Americans and Cubans before the Cuban Revolution*, pp. 266-280. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Hebdige, Dick. 1979. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London and New York: Methuen.
- Kelley, Robin. 1997. *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Mercer, Kobena. 1990. "Black Hair/Style Politics." In *Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cornel West, eds. Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, pp. 247-264. New York, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press.
- Mitchell, Tony. 2001. "Introduction: Another Root—Hip-Hop Outside the USA." In *Tony Mitchell, ed. Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the USA*, pp. 1-38. Middletown, Ct: Wesleyan University Press.
- Moore, Carlos. 1998. *Castro, the Blacks, and Africa*. Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies.
- Moore, Robin. 1997. *Nationalizing Blackness: Afrocubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920-1940*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Ong, Aihwa. 1999. *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Pita, Tony. 1999. "Rap, Tiramamos la Primera Piedra." *El Habanero*, 3 August 1999.
- Rose, Tricia. 1994. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press.
- Rubin, Gayle. 1975. "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex." In *Rayna Reiter, ed. Toward an Anthropology of Women's Liberation*, pp. 157-210. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Scott, James. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1990. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Suárez Salazar, Luis. 2000. *El Siglo XXI: Posibilidades y Desafíos Para la Revolución Cubana*. Havana: Editorial De Ciencias Sociales.
- Ulysse, Gina. 1999. "Uptown Ladies and Downtown Women: Female Representations of Class and Color in Jamaica." In *Jean Muteba Rahier, ed. Representations of Blackness and the Performance of Identities*, pp. 147-172. Westport, Ct: Bergin and Garvey.

- Valdés, Mimi. 2002. "The Big Payback." *Vibe*, February 2, 2002.
- Verdery, Katherine. 1991. *National Ideology Under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu's Romania*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Wade, Peter. 1993. *Blackness and Race Mixture: The Dynamics of Racial Identity in Colombia*. Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press.