



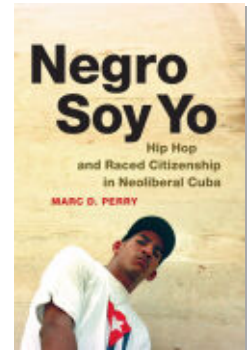
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## Chapter 3. New Revolutionary Horizons

### Published by

Perry, Marc D.  
Negro Soy Yo: Hip Hop and Raced Citizenship in Neoliberal Cuba.  
Duke University Press, 2015.  
Project MUSE. <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.64131>.



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# Chapter 3.

## New Revolutionary Horizons

I had the fortunate experience of being introduced to and initially guided through the often frenetic currents of Havana's hip hop scene through my relationship with Magia López and Alexey Rodríguez of the hip hop duo Obsesión. They were then a married couple whose artistic creativity and tireless commitment helped position them among the most productive and respected of pioneering artists in the movement.<sup>1</sup> The couple and their extended families, in turn, offered me a supportive community and an invaluable window into the broader complexities of contemporary Cuban life as a whole. As I explore in more detail, given the varying positions raperos negotiated vis-à-vis state institutions and realms of revolutionary discourse, Magia and Alexey's achievements and chosen involvements placed them at times in somewhat ambivalent terms within some circles of Havana's hip hop community.

### Obsesión

When we first met in 1999, the couple, then in their midtwenties, was living at Magia's mother's home in the central Havana barrio of Cayo Hueso. Their second-story flat sat conveniently across the street from a *casa particular* (private apartment) I wound up renting a room in and calling home for the bulk of my time in Havana, all thanks to their initial introduction to the casa's

owner, Delbis. Along with Magia's mother, Caridad, and Magia's older sister, Tamara, and her young son, Norberto, the two lived in a small *barbacoa* (improvised loft apartment) in an old five-story walk-up.

In time the couple moved to Alexey's parents' relatively more spacious rooftop apartment in Regla. A fifteen-minute ferry ride across Havana's industrialized harbor from Habana Vieja,<sup>2</sup> the municipality of Regla is known, among other things, for its enduring associations with Ocha-Lucumí and wider communities of Afro-Cuban religious practice. A living embodiment of this history can be found in La Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de Regla. This small eighteenth-century church facing Regla's harborside docks is home to La Virgen de Regla, a black-skinned Madonna who shares a syncretic form with Yemayá, the maternal orisha of the sea. Tradition holds that when traveling to Regla an offering of a Cuban penny is thrown from the *lanchita* (small ferry) into the blue harbor waters for blessings from La Virgen cum Yemayá.

Today, Regla and its neighboring barrio of Guanabacoa remain home to sizable communities of *babaláwos* and *iyas de ocha* (religious godmothers, or *madrinas*) who live among its narrow streets, while Guanabacoa's small municipal museum is dedicated to local histories of Ocha-Lucumí, and other religious traditions of Palo Monte and the Abakuá. The earliest documented fraternity of Abakuá was in fact founded in Regla in the early nineteenth century (Cabrera 1958, cited in Sublette 2007: 191), and revelers continue to visit the church of Nuestra Señora in homage to Regla's black Virgin, her maternal figure shrouded in Yemayá's oceanic blues.

Alexey was raised in a black working-class family just a few blocks from the waterfront church, and his sense of history and black-selfhood is in turn deeply meshed with that of Regla. Such historicity, however, is largely grounded in the secular rather than the sacred—neither Alexey nor his parents are practitioners of Ocha-Lucumí or other religious traditions, Afro-Cuban or otherwise. As described earlier, a portrait of Toussaint L'Ouverture poised in military garb with his foot upon a hissing snake greets those entering Alexey's home. This heroic icon of the Haitian Revolution stands in this sense in profane analogy to that of Elegguá, the orisha of the crossroads, whose figure sits in ritual guard at entryways of many *santeros'* homes. Indeed, Haiti has assumed an enduring presence in Alexey's domestic life, one finding artistic form in his composition “¿Viste?” from Obsesión's 2011 album, *El Disco Negro*. An ode of solidarity with Haitians following the devastating earthquake of 2010, the *tema* is interwoven with a solemn ex-

change between Alexey and his father, Celso, reflecting upon the traumas of the event and its historical resonances in light of Haiti's struggle for black nationhood.

Currents of Afro-hemispheric affinity within the Rodríguez household are not limited to Haiti, however. Among other visual markers displayed prominently in the Regla flat stands a black-and-white portrait of Malcolm X in iconic pose, while a large spray-painted image of an Afro-adorned man sits against an outside wall of their rooftop patio overlooking Havana's skyline across the harbor. Recalling MC Rubén Marín of Primera Base mentioned earlier, Alexey tells of how his exposure to a Spanish-language Cuban edition of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* influenced his thinking about his blackness as well as his broader membership to a black historical world.<sup>3</sup> Yet these varying figures on parade—L'Ouverture, Afro'd figure, and Malcolm X—stand in interesting tension with la Virgen de Regla not only in terms of a scared-secular divide, but also along gendered and temporally divergent lines as well. Such semiotic play, while rooted in the local, were thus more expansive and self-consciously diasporic—if decidedly modern and masculinist—in scope.

Over the years Alexey and Magia's Regla home has hosted countless gatherings of raperos and other hip-hop-affiliated folk, one of which was alluded to in the book's opening vignette. The couple's bedroom eventually doubled as a makeshift studio where Alexey, working with PC-based consumer software, produced many of the duo's background beats and vocal tracks. The room itself is adorned with hip-hop-inspired artwork and images; one of its walls is dedicated to a frenetic collage of photographs and graffitied notes from visitors, both local and foreign. During one of my own early forays to their place on a hot and muggy afternoon in the summer of 1999, I queried the two about what seemed to be a pervasiveness of black-self-affirming lyrics within local hip hop. In response, Alexey explained:

This is a stage of rap. One must first announce "I am black." And when you acknowledge this, we can then move forward from there. I think this is valuable, this is valuable today especially here in Cuba. It seems to me that black people now know more about themselves, and I think our work is contributing to establishing this. And part of what is necessary here is to know your history in a deep kind of way—to know who you are, your roots, and where you come from.<sup>4</sup>

As Alexey's comment suggests, his conception of black identity is an implicitly political one. Rather than passively given, such identity is understood within the Cuban context as a conscious and active assertion of self—"I am black"—which in turn serves as the ground upon which to "move forward," to act. Here, Alexey is not suggesting a notion of blackness as a detached marker to be chosen or rejected at whim. Blackness rather is seen as embodied and lived subjectivity, one that he claims Obsesión and other Cuban MCs have worked to make critically visible.

Years later while speaking to an undergraduate class of mine in New Orleans, Magia spoke similarly of a "process" of coming into racial self-consciousness (*auto-consciencia*) rooted in a lived experience of race through which, in her words, one "reflects," "learns," and ultimately "acts." She added that in her case such self-actualization grew from an ongoing set of conversations tied to her involvements in hip hop and wider evolving fields of Cuban racial discourse. Magia emphasized that it was through her music that such black self-consciousness and its embedded politics assumed animated form. Such racial practice has been a consistent element of Magia and Alexey's artistic vision over the years, not something eventually discarded and moved beyond (cf. Baker 2011: 277). For Magia and Alexey, whose dark complexion, hair, and facial features unequivocally mark them as *negros*, such blackness of embodied form and historical weight is largely inescapable.

During that early Regla exchange, Magia explained that in the past she had been hesitant to identify as black despite her family's strong tradition of pro-black affirmation. A striking, dark-brown-skinned woman, Magia recalled her early-school-age tendency to claim any nonwhite identifier other than *negra*. Prevailing traditions, she explained, taught her that as a young woman of color, blackness was not something to embrace. Those same raced genderings that fixed *la mulata* as the quintessence of heteromale desire and celebrated symbol of a racially transculturated nation compelled darker-skinned women to distance themselves from the term *negra* and its peripherality from normative centers of racial and gendered privilege.

It is precisely against such historical erasure that the Afro-Cuban poet Nancy Morejón's celebrated poem "Mujer negra" empathically speaks (Morejón 1979). Mapping black women's presence in the making of Cuba from Africa to enslavement to independence struggle and finally to contemporary revolutionary, Morejón's ballad of personal freedom is fused with that



3.1. MCs Magia López (left) and Alexey Rodríguez of Obsesión.  
Photo by Sahily Borrero

of national liberation as the first-person *yo* (I) evolves by poetic end into a collective celebration of *nuestros* (ours) with the arrival of the Cuban Revolution. Here Morejón offers a recuperation of a black female subject of Cuba's conjoining histories of nationhood and revolution, one analogous in this sense to Magia's own recuperative efforts of black self-reconciliation.

By 1999 Magia's outlook had indeed shifted. Her identity and performative presentation as a black woman increasingly became a central facet of her work as one of Cuba's pioneering female MCs, a role that expanded in scope over the years as one of the movement's most active and accomplished members. A key current of these labors has been Magia's efforts to challenge the raced sexualization of black and brown-skinned Cuban women, ener-

gies that arose in conversation with a broader emergence of black womanist voices within Cuban hip hop's otherwise male-centric space. As I explore in more detail in chapter 4, these female artists not only complicated hip hop's highly masculinist orientation, but often also provided critiques of the wider heteronormative workings of racialized patriarchy in the Cuban everyday.

During the many years I have known Magia and Alexey, their sense of blackness has become an ever more celebrated facet of their personal and public lives as artists. When we first met in 1999, Magia wore synthetic extensions braided into her hair, while Alexey kept his in a short-cropped fade. Within a couple of years Magia began wearing her long, reddish-brown hair combed out into a big Afro-like crown, or alternatively bound in colorful African-style wraps reminiscent at the time of the black neobohehian flair of Erykah Badu. For Alexey's part, he began grooming what became a head of mid-shoulder-length dreadlocks, a practice in dialogue with a growing number of young black urban men who, while not necessarily followers of Cuba's nascent Rastafari movement (see Hansing 2001),<sup>5</sup> embraced dreadlocks as a nonconformist, Afrocentric marker of black masculinity.

Such stylized body practice was not free of potential costs, however. There is history of Cuban police harassment of black men with dreadlocks for their perceived associations with Rastafarians and marijuana use, a raced and largely gendered form of social regulation—again tied to racialized framings of criminality—to which I will return (see chapter 6). Despite, or precisely in spite of, such racially coded antagonism, Alexey held his locks as performatively integral to his sense of black-self, yet one clearly in dialogue with wider global circuits of black corporal practice and aesthetics of style (cf. Diawara 1998; Kelley 2012). Magia and Alexey would eventually set the politics of black hair to music in their tema “Los pelos” (The hair),<sup>6</sup> in which the duo addresses the restrictions as well as the celebratory possibilities of black hair. As Magia riffs:

Pelo suelto carretera, no hay desriz  
y me di cuenta que pa' que si yo no nací así  
El hombre que me quiere me acepta como soy,  
Africana! Adonde quiera que voy seguro!  
Mi naturaleza rompe patrón de belleza no me vengán con que  
pa' luciese más fina . . .  
Pa'riba los pelos y que crezcan los dreadlocks

Hair loose on the street, there's no relaxer  
and I realized that I was not born like that  
The man that would accept me as I am,  
an African woman! Wherever I go, for sure!  
My natural beauty breaks standards of beauty; so don't tell me  
to look more refined . . .  
To the top with hair and let the dreadlocks grow

A body-centered poetics of black style, however, extends beyond hair. When performing, Magia often appears in West African-inspired gowns and headwraps. While periodically garbing his thin frame in African prints, Alexey is more often draped in classic rapero attire of oversized baggy pants, U.S. footwear, and long, loose-fitting tops—a fashion grammar globally synonymous with hip hop. Regardless of attire, for many years the two never hit the streets without a set of dark wooden amulets about their necks. Fashioned by Alexey as symbols of the couple's bond, these amulets bore carved faces with strong African features and were spoken of as carrying protective spiritual significance.

Such crafting skills drew upon Alexey's former employment in the early 1990s in a state-run workshop of tourist crafts. This early space of tourism commerce is where the artists first met—Magia was then making clay figurines. As Magia recalls, "This was during the Special Period, and people were losing jobs, payrolls were reduced. I was the first to lose my job, and then they closed the entire workshop and Ale lost his job."<sup>7</sup> Magia eventually found employment in a dollar-only tourist shop, while assisting Alexey with the sporadic work he found carving small wood sculptures for the informal tourist trade. Alexey later worked briefly in a printing house, a job that his father, Celso, helped him obtain.

None of this, however, provided much by way of income. Alexey was at one point compelled to take a job collecting street trash and mowing lawns for a monthly state salary of 40 Cuban pesos (roughly equivalent to US\$2). While their ability to move between their respective family homes helped manage costs, like nearly all Cubans during this period Magia and Alexey were struggling to make basic ends meet on state-regulated peso salaries. Rather cogently, a common Cuban refrain from the late 1990s mused, "El gobierno pretende pagarnos, y nosotros pretendemos trabajar" (The government pretends to pay us, and we pretend to work).



Forms of public-sector employment that had long provided stable income for the vast majority of Cubans during the revolutionary period were ever increasingly less viable by the mid to late 1990s. As Magia's and Alexey's narratives testify, early state schemes tied to an emerging tourism market did not provide much by way of a living (let alone competitive) peso salary vis-à-vis a rapidly expanding dollar economy. These shifts and their injurious effects were felt acutely by young Cubans like Magia and Alexey entering the workforce, a generational demographic worth noting from which the first wave of raperos was drawn. Indeed, it was amid such fluidity that Magia and Alexey got married in 1996 and, significantly, formed Obsesión as a trio initially with comrade-in-arms DJ Roger Martínez.<sup>8</sup> From that point they began performing informally in small venues as their music became increasingly central to their personal, artistic, and ultimately political lives.

Along similar lines mentioned earlier, Alexey explains that his early exposure to hip hop came from FM radio broadcasts from southern Florida in the 1980s. With the help of an improvised wire antenna fashioned outside his bedroom window, his parents' rooftop apartment in Regla afforded ideal access to these otherwise elusive radio waves. Alexey soon took to Havana's emerging b-boy scene. With the coming of the economic crisis in the early 1990s, however, Alexey had to curtail his street dancing to preserve his lone pair of shoes or risk, as he put it, "corriendo descalzo por la calle" (running barefoot in the streets). Thus, in tune with broader trends within Cuba's evolving hip hop scene, Alexey's pivot from dance to music making marked a shift in artistic direction amid a backdrop of economic and related social flux.

Transnational dimensions being what they were, Magia and Alexey nevertheless understood their blackness as deeply rooted in Cuban narratives of history, nationhood, and revolution—renderings that find poetic form in their music. One of Obsesión's early signature temas, "Mambí," offers a vivid illustration of such interwoven autochthony. Released in 2000 on the artists' debut album and awash in historical references, "Mambí" draws its name from *los mambises*, the machete-wielding largely black and formerly enslaved regiments of soldiers who fought among others under the famed mulato general Antonio Maceo during Cuba's late nineteenth-century wars of independence. Rather than a historical recounting, the composition's first-person narrative likens Obsesión's members to modern-day mambí.

When asked about the song's thematic significance, Magia put it simply: "Somos mambises, luchando lo mismo" (We are mambises, we are fighting the same struggle). Below is the opening salvo of "Mambí."

Pa' el pueblo aquí estoy yo  
[coro]: Yo estoy aquí diciendo  
Obsesión Mambí pinchando  
Que nadie espere ningún tipo de chance  
Si Quintín Bandera nunca dio masaje,  
¿por que yo entonces?  
¡A fajarse!  
Que la manigua está gritando: Yo soy yo  
Y es por mí por quien doblan las campanas,  
no metan forros  
El morro sabe que al combate corro y corro junto a los Bayameses  
¡Cuba, orgullosa de mí!  
No le temo a una muerte gloriosa  
Estense quietos que insurrecto y prieto es un lío ¡Rebambarambara! . . .

For the people, here I am  
[chorus]: I am here speaking  
Obsesión Mambí in the battle  
Nobody should wait for chance  
If Quintín Bandera never gave up,<sup>9</sup>  
then why should I?  
Let's fight!  
The manigua is screaming: I am me  
and it's for me for whom the bells toll,  
don't tell lies<sup>10</sup>  
The Cuban fortress knows that in combat I run and run together with  
the Bayameses  
Cuba, proud of me!  
I don't fear a heroic death  
To be a rebel and black is still trouble. Making hell! . . .<sup>11</sup>

The tema's allusions operate on various overlapping levels. In an immediate sense, foregrounding the racial significance of los mambises underscores the historical instrumentality of blacks in Cuba's national liberation

struggle. The intimacies of such history are marked through figures like the mambí leader Quintín Bandera,<sup>12</sup> a celebrated black general of the independence wars who served directly under Antonio Maceo, and the legendary Manigua Brigade of mambí fighters from Cuba's eastern Oriente region. These references stand in tension with enduring, largely race-neutral(ized) renderings of Cuba's early national beginnings (Ferrer 1998b; Helg 1995). In line with postracial framings previously discussed, los mambises are framed in official revolutionary discourse as liberators of the Cuban nation in ways that often supersede if not mask their historical agency as Afro-Cubans.

Historical recuperations of this kind are further evoked by *Obsesión* through their self-fashioning as present-day mambí, situating themselves and their work within counternarratives of black struggle elemental to the modern forging of Cuba itself. Indeed, in running “with the Bayameses,” the artists index Cuba's national anthem, “La Bayamesa,” and its opening call “¡Al combate, corre, Bayameses!” (Run to battle, men of Bayamo!) as a marker of national legitimacy—one through which antiracist struggle is held intrinsic to Cuba's own national liberation and birth. Sacrifice in the nation's wars of independence—Cuba's “first” revolution in the discursive teleology of the post-1959 revolutionary period—therefore warrants a historical national indebtedness to black Cubans, tying Afro-Cubans inseparably to national-revolutionary citizenship. Temporal imbrications of black citizenship and revolutionary virtue in this sense provide a rhetorical bridge between revolutionary past and present. “Yo estoy aquí diciendo . . . pinchando . . . corro y corro junto a los bayamese . . . ¡Cuba orgullosa de mí! . . . insurrecto y prieto es un lío ¡Rebambarambara!” declares in essence: “I am black, and Cuban, and revolutionary, recognize me, hear me speak!”

It is, however, noteworthy that “Mambí” opens with a dedication to the African American imprisoned radical Mumia Abu-Jamal, expanding political claims and forms of citizenship into realms of the contemporary outer-national. Revolutionary articulations do nonetheless appear to grow first and foremost from an organics of Cuba's own history. As the two explained to me early on:

**Alexey:** We are rapping from the perspective of a socialist society, from a point of view of socialism, and we engage it from a positive position.

**Magia:** Our role [as raperos] within the society is well defined within socialism, and this is independent of whether we communicate, cri-

tique, or denounce certain things in society. Our position is well defined in this sense.

**MP:** Well, do you then consider your music somehow connected to the revolution?

**Alexey:** Yes, we cannot separate one from the other. I cannot make music by putting aside what is significant about the revolution for me. I can make a song that is critical of something, but never against the revolution. Never against the revolution, because it is not like this, not for Obsesión.

**Magia:** Since I was little my mother always told me, “Gracias por la revolución” (thanks to the revolution), because black folks have had more possibilities under the revolution. I get annoyed, though, when a black person makes a lot of noise criticizing the revolution. Before the triumph of the revolution my mother told me that even light-skinned [black] women could only get work as maids. The revolution allowed black folks to study, to work, to be who we are today. From here on it’s us who have to work double, triple, whatever it takes to arrive at who we are to become. It depends on us.<sup>13</sup>

In comparison to many of their peers, Magia and Alexey were among some of the more adamantly self-identified and vocal supporters of the Cuban Revolution and, by relative extension, the Cuban state. I recall numerous discussions with the two regarding current tensions in Cuban society in which my critical readings as an “outsider” were often met with fervent defenses of “the revolution.” Here I mark the (Cuban) Revolution with quotations not only to reiterate the artists’ use of the term but also to underscore the tendency within post-1959 discourse to conflate *la revolución* with *el estado*, and ultimately *el pueblo* (the revolution, the state, and the people/nation). Within this secularized trinity where one-is-all, as all-are-one, perceived challenges to one are deemed antagonistic affronts to all. While such framing might serve the ends of curbing public critique, it can take on additional charged significance when critique is leveled from *afuera*, or the outside. Such dynamics informed the tone of some of our more animated exchanges around Cuba’s shifting landscape, with Magia in particular frequently impassioned in her positions.

Yet as Magia implies, the artists’ strong identifications with the revolution were shaped in important part by their close relationships with

their parents, who, like many of their generational peers, share deep-felt attachments to the island's revolutionary history. Such familial affinity is reflected with comic flair in Alexey's 2011 tema "Esta es mi mamá" (This is my mother), dedicated to his mother, Maria. Shot against the domestic backdrop of their Regla home, the song's YouTube video centers on a playful back-and-forth exchange between son and mother, with Maria spiritedly contributing her own rapping to camera.<sup>14</sup> Recalling numerous conversations with Alexey's father, Celso, and Magia's mother, Caridad, I was often moved by their fervent faith in both the principles and the achievements of Cuban socialism. Yes, there may have been *errores*, mistakes, but the revolution had worked and was continually working to correct them.

While widespread disillusionment and cynicism regarding hardships of Cuban life were commonplace among *habaneros* (Havana residents), with the phrase "no es fácil" (it's not easy) assuming mantra status since the onset of the Special Period, I often found Celso's and Caridad's perspectives refreshing given the conflicted assessments one commonly hears and lives in Havana. Celso and Caridad are in this sense among that generation of Afro-Cubans who share a lived memory of what Cuba was for poor and working-class blacks *before* the revolution, as well as the hard-won transformations achieved *through* it.

In Celso's case, as a retired engineer he owes much of his education and professional training to revolutionary openings of Cuba's long racially exclusionary educational system—a similar generational narrative of black professionalism shared with Lisnida and with Pablo Herrera's parents. Celso's fidelity to socialism as it turns out dates back to early adulthood when he won a poetry contest dedicated to the Russian Revolution, an award that afforded him a trip to the Soviet Union in 1970. He later traveled to Czechoslovakia for a course in cartographic design, during which he also briefly visited Bulgaria. Circuits of Cuban internationalism also brought Celso to Ethiopia, where he spent two years during Cuba's military involvement in the Ogaden War of the late 1970s. For Magia, recollections of her mother's account of social mobility under the revolution—Caridad having been a domestic worker herself—are illustrative of the affective power of this narrative in Magia's own life.

Legacies of mobility notwithstanding, like many of their hip hop peers neither Magia nor Alexey attended university, and as described they spent most of their young adulthoods scrambling to make ends meet until even-

tually devoting themselves full-time to their music. As one of the more accomplished of Cuban *raperos* groups, the duo have been fortunate to have garnered income, as inconsistent as it may have been, through local performances and national tours, informal sales of their two recorded albums, and eventually artistic tours abroad. They are relatively exceptional in this sense—most *raperos* have not been as consistently productive in translating talent into income. While the majority are generally unemployed in a formal sense, like large numbers of young Cubans many have found resourceful ways of getting by, or in Cuban terms *inventar y resolver* (to creatively invent and/or resolve) by one means or another.

Magia's recollection of her mother's account of the prerevolutionary limits of black women's opportunities for employment also underscores gendered dimensions of racial regulation, a theme with which she is intimately familiar in her own life. Revisiting Obsesión's "Mambí," Magia gives voice to her own raced gendering in her opening volley:

¿Como e'? Yo soy niche  
Mi intención no es salir como negrita linda  
en los afiches  
Y si me ven así es porque  
sé que todavía hay  
quien quisiera ser mayoral  
Pa' verme trabajando sin descanso  
en los trapiches  
Eso lo he sufrido, lo he visto . . .

What's that? I'm black  
My intention is not to be a pretty black girl in the posters  
And if they see me this way it's because  
I know that there are still those  
who would like to be an overseer  
So they can see me working without rest  
in the sugar mills  
I have suffered that, I have seen it . . .

Here Magia evokes her blackness through the expression *niche*, a vernacular Cuban term for blacks long inscribed with a racially derisive, if not overtly racist, meaning. The phrase has, however, worked its way into the

parlance of Afro-Cuban youth and, reminiscent of African American inversions of “nigger” (i.e., nigga), is frequently employed as a marker of pro-black unity and self-affirmation. Indeed, the Santos Suárez–based trio of 100% Original give flamboyant expression to such verbiage in their tema “Pa’ mis niches” (For ma’ niggaz), which proclaims: “Nígga, niche abre tus ojos / Si hoy hemos sobrevivimos porque en el ayer luchamos para juntos hoy estar unidos” (Nigga, niche open your eyes / If today we have survived it’s because we fought for our unity in the past).

For both Magia and 100% Original, the term *niche* evokes legacies of racial subjugation as well as liberatory possibilities. Yet in contrast to 100%’s masculine rendering centering “hombre negro” (black brother) as cardinal protagonist, Magia’s niche is decidedly female, one unwilling to conform to normative prescriptions that would fix her body—“a pretty black girl”—as an object of heteropatriarchal gaze and consumption. Magia alternatively historicizes such raced genderings by invoking the memory of enslavement: “I know that there are still those who would like to be an overseer / So they can see me working without rest in the sugar mills.” By proclaiming “I have suffered that, I have seen it,” Magia marks a historical link with racial slavery, while testifying to its everyday vestiges in the life of black women. Though Magia too declares “somos Mambíses, luchando lo mismo,” her gendered positionality would in fact become an increasingly vocal part of her artistic voice and identity as a performer.

Obsesión nonetheless represents something of an enduring older-guard within Havana’s hip hop community, most of whom have tended to range between their late teens and early twenties during their music-making years in comparison to the duo’s thirties (and eventually beyond)—an age difference that often translated into having relatively younger parents. This contrast may in part account for Obsesión’s relatively less conflicted identifications with the Cuban state and its institutions in comparison to many of their peers. As I discuss shortly, forms of revolutionary affinity are often a central and defining component among many Cuban MCs. A key distinction, however, lies in raperos’ varying mediations in that space between the Revolution with a capital R and alternative revolutionary conceptions vis-à-vis dimensions of identity and political positioning. Magia and Alexey’s comments do nonetheless underscore the tendency among many Cuban raperos during this period of viewing their work as critically engaged from *within*—rather than *against*—the Cuban Revolution.

It is also clear that in addition to a range of autonomous, self-financed projects, Magia and Alexey share a long history of working collaboratively with state institutions—a history at times generating ambivalence among more institutionally wary members of Havana’s hip hop community. In 2000, for instance, Obsesión was among four hip hop groups to join the state-run *empresa* (venture/project) Benny Moré established to promote performance opportunities nationally for Cuban musicians—the first such institutional inclusion of raperos. Magia explained that their involvement came about through months of struggle that, in the end, bore little fruit given limited resources and an organizational inexperience regarding the needs of hip hop artists. Obsesión’s debut album, *Obsesión*, produced that same year, nevertheless remains the one commercial hip hop album released on Cuba’s state-run music label EGREM.<sup>15</sup> Further along, Obsesión was one of the first of the coveted few hip hop groups to join the newly formed Agencia Cubana de Rap (ACR, or Cuban Rap Agency) in 2002—a state organ set up specifically for the commercial development and promotion of Cuban hip hop with an eye toward both domestic and international markets. Magia would in fact eventually assume leadership of the ACR, a complicated tenure to which I will later return.

While such involvements may not necessarily imply compromise, they did mark both a dexterity and an ideological (if at some level strategic) willingness to engage institutionally with the revolutionary state. Magia and Alexey were indeed often adamant in conversation that institutional collaborations in no way menaced their artistic vision or craft, and if this were to arise, they argued, they would cease to participate. Though Obsesión’s temas were often critically attuned to thorny questions of race and moved from antiracist positions, unlike some of Havana’s more outspoken hip hop artists, they generally avoided launching direct critiques at the Cuban state and its institutions. While degrees of *autocensura*, or self-censorship, were frequently part of the negotiated politics of artistic production in Cuba (cf. Fernandes 2006), given the duo’s strong inherited identification with the Cuban Revolution—and possibly by extension the Cuban state—they seemed in my experience less concerned with these tensions than others.



## Elaborating Spaces

During my early foray into Havana's hip hop community I developed relationships with a set of individuals who either were or soon became key players within the local hip hop scene. In addition to the likes of Magia and Alexey, and later Pablo Herrera, Rodolfo Rensoli, and Ariel Fernández Díaz, I befriended a dynamic crew of hip-hop-affiliated folks in el Vedado, where DJ Alexis D'Boys among others was active. This seaside barrio with its tree-lined streets was one of the more affluent (and whiter) of Havana's neighborhoods prior to 1959. With the onset of the Cuban Revolution, however, many residents joined the exodus of wealthy and middle-class Cubans, given the threat—both real and perceived—the revolution posed to established lines of racial-class privilege. Vedado today nonetheless remains home to some of Havana's relatively more well-off residents, many residual family of those who emigrated during the "white flight" of the early 1960s.

In addition to benefiting from racially skewed patterns of foreign remittance that privilege such lighter-skinned Cubans, Vedado residents live in some of Havana's most coveted real estate, which in today's foreign-currency-driven tourist economy translates into marketable capital. As one of the barrios with the highest concentration of *casas particulares* that rent rooms (both legally and illicitly) to tourists, Vedado benefits disproportionately from this niche of Cuba's new economy. The barrio does, however, have pockets of black and darker-skinned Cubans, some of whom acquired housing vacated by fleeing employers in ways similar to those mentioned previously by DJ Alexis D'Boys in the context of barrio Lawton. Analogous in this sense to the multi-unit *solares* of Central Havana, many of the onetime palatial single-family homes in Vedado accommodate multiple households among now-partitioned units.

One such site and surrounding black pocket centers around the intersection of Tenth and Nineteenth Streets, known locally as Diez y Diecinueve, where Deno, a dark-skinned early-twenty-something dreadlocked black man, lived with his extended family. Deno's home and adjoining patio, part of a formerly grand two-story house now in need of significant restorative work, became a communal center for the EPG&B crew (the Executive Plan Ghetto and Barbito).<sup>16</sup> Founded in the union of Grandes Ligas, a local hip hop duo out of Vedado; Junior Clan, a duo from the adjoining Central Havana barrio of Cerro; and a spoken-word circle known as Jóvenes Rebeldes, EPG&B



3.2. Producer Pablo Herrera (left) and DJ Alexis “D’Boys” Rodríguez.  
Photo by Sahily Borrero

celebrated themselves as among the more subversively “underground” MCs in the Havana area.<sup>17</sup> Increasingly graffiti-adorned, the patio beside Deno’s house became something of a local hip hop institution where, beginning in 2001, a series of EPG&B street concerts were held, involving guest appearances by many of Havana’s established raperos.

Taking on the flavor of a festival block party, these informal concerts regularly drew hundreds of overwhelmingly darker-skinned youth into the adjacent cobblestone streets in an otherwise sedate, predominantly white Vedado. Claiming space at levels of both the material and the sonic, these public spectacles often drew the attention of the police, who on numerous occasions shut the events down. This eventually changed, however, as the revolutionary state, through the conduit of the Asociación Hermanos Saíz, began lending support to these events in the early 2000s by supplying audio equipment and arranging greater police tolerance. Such moves illustrated a gradual shift in the state’s approach from one of cautious suspicion to institutional incorporation—a strategy I return to in detail in chapter 5.

While Grandes Ligas and Junior Clan members had close associations in 1999, EPG&B as a collective had yet to be formed. It was during this early

period, however, that I developed many of my connections with these artists and their extended Diez y Diecinueve posse. Many contacts grew out of regular visits to La Pampa, a small cabaret-style club down the street from my flat in Cayo Hueso. Sitting rather apropos in the shadow of General Antonio Maceo's statue at the corner of Parque Maceo and the seaside thoroughfare of El Malecón, La Pampa was the latest local incarnation of la moña where Adalberto Jiménez held court as resident DJ. Here on any given Thursday through Saturday night, well into the morning, an animated crowd of black youth could be found extending into the street. While many lacked the 20 peso entrance fee (the equivalent of US\$1), others preferred the cooler night air to the stifling heat within. Given that the club's beats often resonated well beyond its doors, the adjoining street was indeed integral to La Pampa's social space and party.

Regarding attire, many young women attending wore tight-fitting tops and some fluorescent spandex tights that were au courant across a notably wide generational range of Havana women at that fashion juncture. Young men donned baggy pants, loose jerseys (including a small number of NBA and NFL jerseys), U.S. baseball caps, and for a privileged few FUBU and Eckô designer gear—among the latest in hip-hop-aligned youth style. These style practices were often informed by dog-eared U.S. rap magazines and videocassettes of hip hop videos that found their way to Cuba via visiting family members, friends, and tourists from the United States. They also spoke broadly to expanding circuits of transnational exchange and a growing culture of consumerism in a once definitely anti-consumerist Cuba.

Inside La Pampa's small, sweltering, barely lit space, DJ Adalberto Jiménez played U.S. hip hop and R&B with intermittent microphone shout-outs before a moving mass of sweat-soaked bodies. Rather than LPs or the later proliferation of CDs, Adalberto's music was "spun" from second-generation audiocassettes over a dilapidated speaker system at deafening levels. The sound quality though never seemed much of a concern to those gathered in celebratory communion with and *through* the music. To my half-attuned ear at the time, many beats often seemed slightly dated given the lag time it took most North American music to make its way to the island.

Over subsequent years, however, such lag was less the case as consumption habits evolved, fed in large part by the increased trafficking of North Americans with linkages to Havana's hip hop community. It was in fact not long before many were as abreast with the most recent beats as any pro-

fessed hip hop head in the United States. Indeed, upon my repeated returns to Havana I frequently found myself schooled on the latest U.S. tracks by my rapero friends, many of whom had a particularly strong command of music out of New York City and the Oakland, California, area due to established bicoastal ties with local hip hop communities. The eventual access to computer-based CD-burning technology dramatically increased the pace and range of new-music dissemination within Havana's tight-knit networks of hip hop devotees.

Regardless of how relatively current a track may have been on any given La Pampa night, scores of dancing revelers, hands aloft, could be found singing along with the lyrics though most spoke little if any English. Hip hop for these young people was more than simply music; it was an active and deeply lived facet of social life and identity. As DJ Alexis D'Boys, whom I first met at La Pampa, once put it: "My life is hip hop, hip hop is my culture, I am hip hop. Hip hop is my life wherever I am until I die."<sup>18</sup> Though it was one of the only Havana-area locations at the time where the hip hop devout could commune, La Pampa's dance-only format precluded live performances. Local MCs had to rely on Thursday or Friday night open-mic events held a half-hour bus ride away in Alamar's amphitheater as the only semi-reliable performance venue. This, however, was 1999.

By 2000 another local hip hop *peña* (event party) emerged at a small venue, Club Las Vegas, located just a few blocks from La Pampa on Infanta Avenue at the border of barrios Cayo Hueso and Vedado. Prior to its hip hop christening, I had visited the club to catch a small revue-style cabaret that turned out to be a nostalgic retro-pastiche of a classic *teatro bufo* performance complete with the archetypical trio of *el negrito*, *la mulata*, and *el gallego* caricatures. I recall the largely Cuban audience at the club being highly amused with the buffoonish exploits of *el negrito*—the "little black man" played in blackface opposite the gallantly masculine "Spanish" gallego figure—as he ran around farcically trying to win the affection of the alluring mulata adorned with her prerequisite long flowing hair and complementary fishnet stockings. As Jill Lane's work (2005) illustrates, Cuba's comedic *teatro bufo* tradition offered a popular blackface casting of dominant racial, gendered, and class scriptings in the early framing of Cuba's racially triangulated national imaginary—one apparently alive or *revived* in the contemporary moment.

A decidedly different shade of Cuban blackness emerged Wednesday af-

ternoons, however, when Las Vegas transformed into a weekly performance space for local raperos and their fans. Descending into a sunken windowless space on a given afternoon, one refreshingly cool thanks to its privileged air-conditioning, groups like Anónimo Consejo, 100% Original, Junior Clan, Raperos Crazy de Alamar, Grandes Ligas, and Obsesión performed original material over prerecorded background tapes. The overwhelmingly black, early to midtwenties crowd collected around cocktail tables beside the floor-level stage came out religiously to indulge in music and drink while rooting on local MCs.

Reflecting the expanding growth and sophistication of local hip hop, a subsequent and in many ways intuitively significant site for Havana-area MCs emerged in 2001, *Café Cantante*. A comparatively glitzy nightclub at the crossroads of Vedado and Cerro barrios famed for salsa performances, *Café Cantante* was located in the basement of the Teatro Nacional (National Theater) overlooking Havana's storied Plaza de la Revolución. With its towering monument to Jose Martí and iconic building-side portrait of Che Guevara, the normally empty square is home to Havana's mass rallies, including Fidel Castro's legendary May Day speeches. It was thus notable that hip hop established a niche at the foot of such a sanctified space (and in the institutional bowels of the National Theater), access to which was afforded by the state-run Asociación Hermanos Saíz (AHS) in conjunction with the Instituto Cubano de la Música (Cuban Institute of Music).

While Pablo Herrera recalls encountering the pioneering hip hop crew Amenaza during a show in *Café Cantante* in the mid-1990s,<sup>19</sup> my first experience of the locale was in 2001 during recently instituted Saturday afternoon matinees devoted to local hip hop performances. By this time Pablo and Ariel Fernández Díaz (aka DJ Asho) were cohosting the afternoon hip hop event under the auspices of AHS involving a mix of U.S. hip hop music and live performances. From this moment on the café emerged as the pre-eminent weekly showcase for Havana-area raperos. By 2002 the venue was incorporated into an expanded multiday Cuban hip hop festival, reflecting again the Cuban state's growing institutional investment in hip hop during this period.

One final site instrumental to hip hop's ascendance in Havana at this formative juncture was *La Madriguera*. A small compound located on the dilapidated grounds of Parque Quinta de los Molinos in Central Havana,<sup>20</sup> *La Madriguera* had long served as a central administrative point for AHS's

involvements with Havana raperos. Here Rodolfo Rensoli's Grupo Uno, through the institutional sponsorship of AHS, organized a number of Havana's early hip hop festivals, including annual MC auditions for festival entry. By 2003 La Madriguera began organizing regular nighttime peñas hosted by DJ Ariel Fernández Díaz, now institutionally positioned within AHS as the principal liaison between the revolutionary state and the island's hip hop movement.<sup>21</sup> Far from the earlier days of Adelberto's pirated audio-cassettes, Ariel held court with state-of-the-art CD-based electronic mixing-tables broadcast over high-end mobile speakers.<sup>22</sup> Some of the latest East Coast beats were spun before an energized local crowd of young, demonstratively black and darker-skinned hip hop heads. While La Madriguera's peñas made occasional space for impromptu free-style sessions among local MCs, the spot was primarily one dedicated to body-centered celebrations of U.S. hip hop. To gain broader perspective on the evolving dimensions of rapero performance, however, one needs to revisit Cuba's annual hip hop festival as a cumulative marker and apogee of creative innovation among Havana-area artists.

### **Performing Blackness at the 2000 Festival**

In the summer of 2000 I returned to Havana after a few months' absence just a week or so prior to the sixth annual Cuban hip hop festival, customarily held during the sweltering month of August. Part of the logic behind the August scheduling was to hold the festival during the summer recess when school-age youth, who comprised a sizable component of Alamar's hip hop fan base, would be free to attend evening performances that often ran late into the night. Another key consideration was that Black August, a New York-based hip hop collective that participated in the two previous festivals, was set to partake again in 2000. The collective traditionally organized events in August in remembrance of the August 1971 murder of Black Panther George Jackson<sup>23</sup> and preceding August histories of black resistance dating back to Nat Turner's 1831 slave rebellion. Through modest donations to Havana's rapero community and, most significantly, the shepherding of U.S. hip hop artists to the island for annual performances, Black August had become an integral facet of the festival since 1998. Unlike the previous year, when I had failed to attend, I recognized in 2000 that I could ill afford to miss another year's festival.

Once back in Havana I immediately headed out to reconnect with people, finding everyone feverishly in preparation for the upcoming festival. A common complaint in rapero circles at the time concerned the disorganization on the part of the festival's lead coordinator, Grupo Uno. In attending subsequent festivals it was indeed my experience that there was often confusion over the details of the event's preparation, necessary resources were rarely in place, and schedules were habitually in flux. It is also worth noting in retrospect that this 2000 edition of the festival would be the last year that Rensoli and Grupo Uno would be coordinating the event. Since 1999, the Cuban state had become increasingly active in the festival's organizational structure, a development reflecting increased efforts to incorporate hip hop within institutional folds of the state. For the immediate moment Rensoli and company were still the lead organizing force behind the festival's four nights of performances.

The afternoon of the festival's opening night, I headed out to Alamar's amphitheater to attend the evening's sound check and to retrieve a promised credential tag that would allow me backstage access during the festival. On that muggy August afternoon in front of Havana's stately Capitolio building, I boarded a 20-peso *máquina*—one of the old, often ramshackle pre-1959 American cars that operate as privately run collective taxis—for a twenty-minute ride east to the coastal municipality of Alamar. Between the colossal Capitolio, the prerevolutionary seat of Cuba's legislature styled after the U.S. Capitol that looms over Havana's skyline, and the antiquated fume-engulfed *máquina*, I was reminded of the everyday intimacies of U.S. imperial legacies and the improvisational nature of their transformation on the island. Might Cuban hip hop, I mused, be yet another variation on this proverbial theme? Or, now in hindsight, in what ways might the unfolding hip hop festival reveal neoliberal countercurrents of empire and revolution at the millennial turn?

Following the ride and an additional fifteen-minute walk down from the main road past countless rows of high-rise apartment buildings, I arrived at Alamar's amphitheater. Atop descending concrete tiers of empty seats leading to a large stage below, the festival's organizer, Rodolfo Rensoli, was in the control area scrambling to pull together final details for the opening night's performances. While waiting to speak to him about my credential tag, I joined in on a *cajita* lunch provided to all working the festival prep. Named for the small brown paper boxes stuffed with fried pork, *conгри* (rice with a

sprinkling of red beans), and raw cabbage—long a Havana street staple—these lunches represented a limited, though at the time much appreciated, gesture of governmental support for an otherwise resource-strapped festival.

While absorbed in my cajita, I listened in as the MC trio of Alexei, Am-aury, Ransel of Reyes de las Calles rehearsed their tema “El mundo va a acabarse” (The world is coming to an end). The track’s instrumental built upon a sample riff from the classic 1974 hit “La Habana Joven” (Young Havana) by the immortal Los Van Van, Cuba’s premier dance band since the early 1970s. I later found out the track was produced by Pablo Herrera, who often spoke of the need to create an “authentic” Cuban sound behind Cuban MCs rather than relying on U.S.-produced background beats.<sup>24</sup> In marked contrast to the buoyant Van Van original, however, Reyes de las Calles offered a markedly different rendering of a “young Havana.”

Though deceptively playful in delivery, the song painted a grim portrait of the social hypocrisy of the Cuban everyday. Thick with liturgical allusion, “La Habana Joven” evoked the wrathful coming of a black God to a society riddled with racism and duplicity, taking retribution against racists under whose weight blacks have been perpetually “squeezed.” Like many raperos, Reyes employed metaphor and *doble sentido* (double meaning) to veil more overt forms of critique, while further masking the bite through a stylized use of humor and satirical play. For further effect, the artists went on to perform the track during the festival equipped with a small blow-up raft and plastic oars in a thinly disguised reference to los balseros, the thousands of disillusioned Cubans who fled in rafts to the United States following the onset of the economic crisis (see chapter 2). It was as if the trio were abandoning a torn and sinking Cuba while testifying to its demise. “El mundo va a acabarse,” as it turns out, was the opening performance that first night of the festival.

I returned to Alamar later that evening with Magia and Alexey of Obsesión, who were scheduled to perform later in the festival’s multiday run. Within a few blocks of the amphitheater we could feel the reverberations of bass-heavy beats echoing off buildings, ever intensifying as we drew closer. The music was of U.S. rather than Cuban origin, suggesting that the evening’s performances had yet to start despite our late arrival. The organizers were evidently priming the crowd with recent tracks by Common and the Roots, two favorites of local hip hop followers who had or would soon perform in Cuba. As we made our way toward the entrance flooded with



attendees purchasing tickets at five Cuban pesos apiece (roughly US\$0.25), we encountered a few police officers at the doorway who allowed us passage after viewing our credential tags.

Once inside we were met by a descending sea of roughly three thousand young people milling about in energized anticipation of the festival's first night of music. Surveying the scene, it was a significantly darker-skinned audience in comparison to the multiracial range of Cuba's broader population. Also notable was the apparent youth of those attending; the median age could not have been much beyond seventeen. This was clearly a younger following in comparison to those I had encountered at smaller hip hop events throughout Havana, where, in line with most artists, the audience generally ranged between their early twenties and early thirties.

A key difference was that the majority of these young people were drawn locally from Alamar, as the distance and scarcity of reliable night transport for return to Havana made it difficult for many outsiders to attend. This, however, did not deter the most devoted who managed by one form or another to make it out to each of the festival's four nights of performances. Much like La Pampa's patrons but thirty times its multitude, many of the young men donned baggy pants and tops, baseball caps and skullies (skull caps), and athletic team jerseys, while a few flaunted hip-hop-associated U.S. attire like FUBU. Among the young women, spandex tights and shorts along with form-fitting tops were again standard fare. Yet draped squarely behind the stage below sat a towering Cuban flag basking in the multicolored stage lighting as if to remind all: "This is Cuba, be there no confusion!"

Once the evening's performances began, all attention was directed to the onstage spectacle below. In addition to Reyes de las Calles, groups performing that opening night included Raperos Crazy de Alamar (RCA), Pasi3n Oscura, and the female trio of Instinto. Waves of call-and-response moved through the crowd, while in classic hip hop fashion a sea of arms bobbed in rhythmic call with the music as energies rose. With performances wrapping up around 1:30 AM, the crowd filed out into Alamar's darkened, now quiet streets, heading home in anticipation of the following night's performances. For some of us the night was far from over. The public buses and máquinas that brought many to Alamar from Havana earlier were now nowhere to be found. Sweat-soaked, dehydrated, and exhausted, we dragged ourselves up to the main road to wait for a passing bus carrying early morn-

ing commuters, eventually arriving back to Havana by 4 AM, only to do it all again the next night.

The following evening Alamar had a notably different energy, however. On approaching the amphitheater one could immediately sense a heightened buzz and nervous tension among the milling crowd as scores of blue-clad police stood in front of the entrance overseeing crowd control. Inside, additional stern-faced columns of police were positioned in front of and beside the stage below. These numbers were in marked contrast to the relatively sparse police presence on the festival's previous night. A key distinction was that in addition to a list of Cuban groups slated to perform, the hip hop duo of Dead Prez and the DJ-cum-MC Tony Touch—all from New York City—were topping the bill that night. This was Black August's (aka Augusto Negro's) night at this year's festival.

Upon entering the amphitheater, members of Black August's New York contingent handed out flyers in Spanish introducing the collective. The flyer was adorned with a graphic composite of Afro-adorned images of George Jackson beside Assata Shakur, the onetime Black Panther member and Cuba's most renowned African American political exile. The two profiles were framed by a large five-point Cuban-style star. Inscribed below in large block letters read:

BLACK AUGUST 3RD ANNUAL BENEFIT CONCERT 2000  
DEDICATED TO ASSATA SHAKUR AND VIEQUES, PUERTO RICO

The eight-page handout in Spanish opened with the question “¿Por que el agosto negro?” (Why Black August?), followed by a brief history of events that began:

The Tradition of Black August was established during the 70s in the Californian penal system by men and women of the Black/New Afrikan liberation movement as a way to remember and investigate a heritage of resistance in the Americas.

This preface was followed by an outline of the collective's central principles, which included:

- The global development of hip hop culture as a means of facilitating international interchange between communities of youth with the intention of promoting greater consciousness around social and political issues.

- Collective opposition to the criminalization of youth and youth culture.
- Organizing against the international prison industrial complex and the escalated incarceration of political prisoners in the U.S.
- Fighting the persistence of white-supremacist propaganda and violations of human rights.

The text closed with the following statement:

Through a powerful union of hip hop culture and political information, Black August promotes our own hip hop aesthetic which emphasizes sincere self-expression, creativity, and the sense of responsibility to the community.

The remaining six pages were devoted to Spanish translations of song lyrics by Dead Prez and Tony Touch.

As is evident from this material, Black August organized around a set of political commitments in dialogue with recent histories of U.S. black radical thought and practice. Drawing upon an earlier prison movement of the same name aimed at political education among African American inmates, Black August formed in the late 1990s in New York City as a project-offshoot of the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (MXGM), a youth-centered activist collective grounded in a black nationalist orientation and human rights advocacy. While in conversation with an earlier moment of radical organizing, Black August's program reflected cultural priorities of a younger generation of activists who invoked hip hop as a global medium of political mobilization and youth outreach. Beyond Cuba, such transnational bearings led to Black August projects involving U.S.-based hip hop artists' and activists' tours to South Africa, Brazil, Tanzania, and Venezuela. In the case of South Africa, the 2001 tour was coordinated to coincide with the UN's World Conference against Racism in Durban, with artists performing at the adjoining NGO antiracism forum.<sup>25</sup>

Internationalist orientations being what they were, Black August's ideological groundings—along with its mother organization, MXGM—remained significantly shaped by nationalist traditions of U.S. black radicalism.<sup>26</sup> Black August's use of the term *New Afrikan* in its literature to refer to Afro-descendant populations marked an alignment with a particular post-1960s vein of black-left nationalism along those of the Black Liberation Army (BLA) and the New Afrikan People's Organization (NAPO), members of

which have been imprisoned or, as in the case of a few including Assata Shakur and Nehanda Abiodun, forced into exile. Black August's support for an older cohort of imprisoned radicals and broader anti-prison focus grew in important part out of intergenerational networks of solidarity with this history. Hip hop in this light is viewed as a temporal bridge through which political sensibilities sought translation into a new era of social activism.

Amid these converging currents of black radicalism, revolutionary internationalism, and hip hop itself, post-1959 Cuba has played its own historical part. Building upon legacies of support for African American radicals dating back to Fidel Castro's impromptu 1960 meeting with Malcolm X in Harlem, the U.S. black left has shared a long, if at times ambivalent, history of solidarity with revolutionary Cuba (Joseph 2002; Reitan 1999). Concurrent with Cuba's anticolonial involvements in Africa, a stream of prominent figures including Black Panthers Eldridge Cleaver and Huey Newton, and others like Stokely Carmichael and Angela Davis, visited or spent time in exile in Cuba during the 1960s and 1970s. As one of the first African Americans to receive asylum, the radical iconoclast Robert Williams hosted a Havana-based AM radio program, *Radio Free Dixie*, whose 1961–65 broadcast mingling music, news, and political commentary targeted black communities along the southeastern United States. Yet Williams, like a number of subsequent African Americans, left Cuba disillusioned about the perceived shortcomings of the Revolution's antiracist commitments (cf. Clytus and Rieker 1970). There have been related suggestions that Cuban support for U.S. black radicals not only served as a proxy challenge to U.S. imperialism, but also offered a popular means of deflecting domestic attention from Cuba's own incongruences of race (C. Moore 1988).

Tensions notwithstanding, such histories have engendered their own structures of feeling and forms of social memory in Cuba. Tapping into a moment of this history, I recall my friend Rita reminiscing about her school-age experience singing the popular solidarity song “¡Por Angela!” calling for the freeing of Angela Davis from imprisonment in the United States during the early 1970s.<sup>27</sup> As Rita shared the song, clenched fist raised high, she began to cry as emotionally laden memories of the period returned to her. Although she was not Afro-Cuban herself, Rita's nostalgias were rooted in an affective sense of political solidarity that she, as a child of the Cuban Revolution, shared with African Americans in their labors for social justice.

A more immediate set of conversations began with the arrival of Assata Shakur, who, following a prison escape and period of underground activity in the United States, was granted political asylum in Cuba in the mid-1980s. A former Panther long active in black radical circles in the New York area, Shakur was also the godmother of the late hip hop artist turned global icon Tupac Shakur, an association not lost on many hip hop devotees in both the United States and Cuba. Indeed, given narrative form in her 2001 autobiography, *Assata*, Shakur's life of radicalism has attracted popular support among a younger generation of politically minded U.S. hip hop artists and affiliated activists, their ranks comprising much of the energy behind a 2005 "Hands Off Assata" campaign organized in response to a U.S. Justice Department's \$1 million bounty for her capture.<sup>28</sup> Black August's co-dedication of the 2000 festival to Shakur reflects these solidarities.

Black August's conjoining of Cuban hip hop and the lives of African American political exiles was held as part and parcel of the same project. To these ends Black August hosted a series of annual benefit concerts in New York City with the dual purpose of raising funds in support of imprisoned African American radicals and their families, while providing modest material assistance to Cuba's hip hop community. With 1998 marking the project's inaugural year and initial Cuban foray, artists Mos Def (aka Yasiin Bey) and Talib Kweli, then of the duo Black Star, alongside MCs Sticman and M1 of Dead Prez, performed under Black August's umbrella at the festival. Mergings of music and politics endured the following year as the Chicago-born artist Common interrupted his festival performance to read a letter of solidarity addressed to the audience from Dr. Mutulu Shakur—a former NAPO member and stepfather of Tupac Shakur currently imprisoned in the United States. Provoking a stir among Cuban higher-ups, the impromptu presentation was prompted by Nehanda Abiodun, who I am told provided the letter and encouraged its reading.<sup>29</sup> Common later released the track "A Song for Assata," likely evolving out of his time in Cuba, on his album *Like Water for Chocolate* (2000), which recounted Shakur's experience of imprisonment in the United States.<sup>30</sup>

Black August's political affinities were not limited to nationalist claims of blackness, however. The collective's 2000 co-dedication to Vieques, Puerto Rico, underscored a transnational frame of social justice that, reminiscent of internationalist orientations of earlier moments, recognized the often imbricated linkages between antiracist and anti-imperialist struggle. Black

August's attention to Vieques also reflected the New York–based collective's sensitivity to histories of Puerto Rican radicalism and labors for national independence, legacies of which found current expression in the campaign to free the island of Vieques from over sixty years of U.S. military occupation, an effort in which mainland Puerto Ricans played a vocal role.

A number of Nuyorican cultural activists were in fact integral to Black August's formation and inaugural Cuban launching. Key among these was Clyde Valentine, cofounder and editor of the now defunct hip hop magazine *Stress* and a founding member of Black August. Another who shares enduring connections with Havana raperos is Marinieves Alba, a Nuyorican activist, writer, and events producer who helped organize a 2003 U.S. tour of Havana-based artists culminating in a concert in Harlem's historic Apollo Theater alongside the Roots. The Oakland, California, area brothers Kahlil and Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi are two other enduring Puerto Rican supporters of Havana's hip hop community, with Eli's 2003 film *Inventos: Hip Hop Cubano* marking one of the earliest documentary treatments of Cuban hip hop. The New York–based journalist Cristina Verán, moreover, was one of the first in the United States to document Cuba's emerging hip hop scene (Verán 1998), while the Bronx-born performance artist Caridad De La Luz, aka La Bruja, accompanied the bill during the 2001 hip hop festival.

These collaborative involvements, once more, elaborated upon legacies of Spanish colonial and U.S. imperial antagonism shared between the island nations of Cuba and Puerto Rico. Such communion finds poetic form in the celebrated verse “Cuba y Puerto Rico son de un pájaro las dos alas, reciben flores y balas, sobre el mismo corazón” (Cuba and Puerto Rico are a bird's two wings, receiving flowers and bullets in the same heart), penned in 1863 by the Puerto Rican abolitionist and *independista* poet Lola Rodríguez de Tió and later memorialized in Cuba by Pablo Milanés in his 1978 ballad “Son de Cuba a Puerto Rico.” Yet his moment also built upon a rich history of Nuyorican participation in hip hop dating back to its artistic birth in the mid-1970s. Hip hop's early development is indebted to the cultural interchange and political affinity-making between African American, West Indian, and Puerto Rican youth in New York City (see Chang 2005). Such intimacies, Raquel Rivera argues, were grounded in Nuyoricans' shared experiences of racial marginalization and histories of Afrodiasporic belonging forged, as mentioned, through overlapping lines of blackness and *latinidad* (Rivera 2003). Black August's Cuban project can therefore be seen as elaborating

on such interwoven affinities of race, diaspora, and hip hop via circulatory solidarities of U.S.-Cuban exchange.

Black August's involvements with Cuban hip hop ran in close conversation with efforts of another noted New Yorker, Danny Hoch. As a Jewish hip-hop-identified performance artist, playwright, and cultural activist raised in Queens, Hoch has long been an active interlocutor with Havana's hip hop community. Building upon a network of relationships developed with local MCs and others involved in Havana's scene since the mid-1990s, Hoch organized a number of collaborative projects including the previously mentioned 2001 tour of Havana-based raperos to New York City. Hoch has also incorporated lines of his Cuban experience into a number of his performance pieces, including the previously mentioned *Jails, Hospitals & Hip-Hop* and later *Till the Break of Dawn* (2007). As Nehanda Abiodun recalls, Hoch, along with the venerable early hip hop notable Fab 5 Freddy (aka Fred Brathwaite), hosted the first installment of Black August's Havana concerts during the 1998 festival.<sup>31</sup>

Returning to that August festival night, a heightened energy of excitement was ever tangible as the audience milled about in anticipation of the evening's performance. Though both Dead Prez and the Nuyorican DJ turned music producer Tony Touch were headlining the bill, it was Dead Prez's Afrocentric duo of Mr and Sticman who set the night's tone. In a build-up to the artists' entrance, their support crew projected images of Nelson Mandela, armed African soldiers, and black shackled fists raised aloft on two giant screens that framed the Cuban flag at stage rear. When Dead Prez finally arrived, the crowd roared with excitement, many of them possibly recalling their initial festival foray two years earlier. The duo opened with their nationalist ode "I'm a African" from their 2000 debut album, *Let's Get Free*. The scene was spectacular. The two dreadlocked artists, surrounded by a stoic cordon of Cuban police below, rallied close to three thousand darker-skinned youth in unison: "I'm a African, I'm a African / And I know what's happenin'! / You a African, You a African / Do you know what's happenin'?" English proficiency was apparently not necessary for shared intelligibility, one that seemed to be conveyed at least in part along lines of racial identification. Directly following Dead Prez's lead, Tony Touch received a notably cooler response from the crowd, this despite his efforts at Nuyorican Spanish and self-billing as Tony Toca (Tony "Touch").

Dead Prez spoke not a word of Spanish, yet they appeared to turn the house out.

I recall Obsesión's Alexey Rodríguez, with whom I had traveled to the festival that evening, commenting on how impressed he was with Dead Prez's performance, noting, "Su mensaje tenía tremenda fuerza" (Their message had tremendous force). Although Alexey had little fluency in English, he was quite familiar with Dead Prez and the politically charged nature of their music, relying like others on translation assistance from English-speaking friends like myself. He expressed concern, however, about one of the duo's songs that evening, "They Schools," which offered a blistering rebuke of the U.S. public education system. Alexey felt Dead Prez's indignation was way over the top, taking particular issue with the line "All my high school teachers can suck my dick, telling me white-ass lies and bullshit," which he felt was excessively disrespectful. I shared with him my reading of the song as a critique of a corrupt and racist education system, rather than a personal attack on teachers per se—one systemic rather than individual in nature. Alexey was not particularly swayed by my interpretation. I wondered at the time if our disconnect might relate to long-standing tendencies in revolutionary Cuba to privilege understandings of individual over structural expressions of racism, often obfuscating broader systemic workings of racialized power and privilege. In a more immediate sense it was likely that Alexey, as an Afro-Cuban, simply had difficulty identifying with Dead Prez's level of black anger and societal alienation.

This discord reminded me of a distinction rappers often made between their music and much of the more commercially oriented hip hop in the United States. Gangsta thuggery, hyper-materialized bling, and virulent misogyny, so ubiquitous in corporately promoted U.S. hip hop, were conspicuously (and often self-consciously) absent from Cuban hip hop. While hyperbolic in their seemingly endless commercial reproduction, such masculinist tropes nonetheless emerge in conversation with histories of structural violence painfully endemic to postindustrial U.S. black urban life. Thus while lines of racial affinity may have been in play that festival evening, Cuba and by extension Cuban hip hop were in this sense indeed different.

This cultural divide resonated with an experience I later had following a screening of the documentary film *One Dollar: El precio de la vida* during the Havana Film Festival in 2002. Directed by the Panamanian American film-



maker Héctor Herrera, *One Dollar* chronicles the aftereffects of the 1989 U.S. invasion of Panama on poor working-class Afro-Panamanians in Panama City, depicting in brutal fashion the subsequent intensification of violence, guns, and drug trafficking within these communities. Having attended the screening with a handful of friends, I asked MC Michael Oramas of the hip hop crew Junior Clan about his thoughts on the film. Michael responded incredulously, “Todo lo que presentó no puede ser real—algunos son falsos, fabricados. Era demasiado” (Everything they presented cannot be real—some are false, made up. It was too much). As critically minded and self-declared “underground” as Michael considered himself, he found it difficult to imagine such a violently desperate set of circumstances plaguing black folks. While the dollar was also rapidly transforming the lived everyday in Cuba, there were still few if any Caribbean, Latin American, or for that matter U.S. cities as relatively free of drugs, guns, and violent crime as Havana. Cuba and its revolutionary history remained (if for the current moment) notably different in this sense, a distinction that defied simple intraracial translation while underscoring divergent historical positions vis-à-vis the destructive tendencies of global capital and legacies of U.S. hegemony.

That said, there did appear to be salient connections that festival evening between Dead Prez’s racially charged message and their young Cuban audience. A shared sense of social belonging and/or common vocabulary seemed to resonate. Reflecting on the internationalist dimensions of the moment, the festival’s coordinator Rodolfo Rensoli cited Black August’s participation and hip hop as enabling dialogue between Cuban and U.S. MCs by way of diasporic currents of black identification. Regarding such workings, Rensoli explained:

I used this idea of diaspora to help understand how blacks in the United States, or blacks in the Caribbean, or blacks in other parts of the Americas are all brothers. Part of our family went here, another part went there, and for a long time we’ve hardly looked into each other’s faces. All these reflections came to me after my own experience with the festival, after the level of communication between North American and Cuban rappers helped me realize that there was a lot more in common between us.<sup>32</sup>

Reflecting further on the moment’s dialogic possibilities, Ariel Fernández Díaz recalls:

The racial identity in the hip hop movement was there, the connection with Black August just helped frame it, you know what I mean, to give it better form and a better way to articulate itself. Because we definitely needed and we definitely didn't have the intellectual and conceptual understanding of what we were trying to express. So we're not saying that they taught us what we need to be addressing or talking about—we knew that we needed to talk about—we were doing it way before. I mean, look at “Ochavon cruzao” from '96 way before Black August.<sup>33</sup> We were talking about race before Black August.

So when Black August came we felt like someone had our backs. We had support and another platform to validate the points that we were already making. Black people have helped create the history of this country, and black people who have fought in the independence war and the revolution have not been fully recognized by the state, which is mostly dominated by white people. And with the denial of any kind of black racial identity with this thing “we are all Cuban” and “there is no thing as black or white Cubans,” you don't have anything to grab onto or gravitate to. So suddenly you had people who helped us understand better what we were trying to talk about and give it better intellectual form.<sup>34</sup>

Echoing similar lines, Pablo Herrera adds:

When Black August started coming to Cuba we found that we could identify with them, the same way they could identify with us. It wasn't that they brought the politics to us, that they made us understand what race meant, this is false. . . . That was a beautiful moment to be part of a major moment of Pan-Africanism and solidarity between the people of the United States and Cuba, African Americans and Afro-Cubans. Becoming aware of the resources and the political activism that they were doing in New York and San Francisco gave us tools to try and understand how to deal with the shit here. We need to deal with the shit here in a radical way. So I think something that is really important to talk about here is how cosmopolitan Cuba became through Black August.<sup>35</sup>

While diasporic affinities and appeals to a black cosmopolitanism may indeed have been instrumental during that and subsequent festivals, there did appear to be limitations in their practice. I recall frustrations arising during the 2000 festival over the limited degree of contact between local

raperos and Black August's New York entourage. In the case of Dead Prez, the only opportunity most Cuban MCs had to engage the duo was a few fleeting minutes backstage just prior to their festival performance. Given their connectedness, Pablo and Ariel were considerably more adroit in accessing the visiting artists. Pablo in particular, with his English fluency and local position as a Black August liaison, appeared to spend significant time during the festival in the company of artists and other Black August members. For others, handshakes, embraces, and autographs were plentiful, but often not much else. For many in the Black August delegation, the priority of the Cuban trip appeared more centered on connecting with African American political exiles on the island rather than intentional structured time for *intercambio* (exchange) with Havana's hip hop community.

The afternoon following Black August's festival program I attended a meeting in an Alamar cultural center as part of the festival's *coloquio* (colloquium) series. In a dimly lit room with a handful of metal chairs and small desks, roughly a dozen raperos and a few supporting cast members engaged in a freewheeling discussion around issues, concerns, and grievances affecting the hip hop community. One complaint concerned a lack of access to visiting U.S. artists. Some members of the Diez y Diecinueve crew, for instance, complained of their efforts to visit the Black August delegation in their Vedado hotel only to be denied entrance beyond the lobby by hotel security. I had myself spent time with the Black August entourage during the festival, and in most cases these spaces largely conformed to the logics of Cuba's new apartheid economy that tended to segregate Cubans from dollar-paying foreign tourists and their restricted zones of consumption. Revolutionary appeals to solidarity notwithstanding, global hierarchies of social difference did not in the end appear to dissolve.

Another key issue raised at that afternoon's exchange concerned the festival's large police presence. Veteran MC Yrak Saenz of Doble Filo, for one, was incensed by what he felt was the disrespectful treatment from police the night before. Yrak recounted how he was harassed and questioned as he tried to move about the stage—behavior that in his mind amounted to “¡una falta de respeto en mi propia casa!” (a lack of respect in my own house!). While sharing his account he rubbed his finger along the underside of his forearm, invoking the everyday Cuban gesture for blackness (i.e., “it's in the blood”) to underscore the raced significance of his encounter. During the ensuing discussion there were complaints that hip hop shows seemed to

always draw more attention from the police than salsa concerts, which they claimed were notorious for drunken spats of violence. Others chimed in about rock shows, whose gatherings of mostly “white” youth rarely, if ever, garnered the police attention with which hip hop had to contend.

The difference, they claimed, was hip hop’s association with black youth, whom Cuban police often indexed, again in a historically resonant sense, with antisocial behavior aligned with violence and criminality. Many pointed out that in fact fights rarely if ever occurred at hip hop events in Cuba. In my experience this was indeed largely the case, remarkably refreshing given the history of hip hop concerts in the United States where one often had to be on guard against the looming specter of violent confrontation. By contrast, my forays into Havana’s hip hop spaces often exhibited a camaraderie and absence of animosity among audience members. Havana’s hip hop community was not free of internal tensions and interpersonal grievances—far from it. Yet violence, criminality, and other so-called antisocial(ist) tendencies in my experience were largely absent from hip hop followings in Havana. Nonetheless, the large police presence (and by extension the Cuban state) appeared to think and act otherwise, perpetuating a long-standing Cuban practice of policing black bodies and spaces.

### **Anónimo Consejo**

The energy set in motion by Dead Prez and company that second festival evening continued to build throughout the night as local Cuban groups passed the torch. Closing out the show was the duo Yosmel Sarriás (aka Sekou Messiah Umoja) and Maigel “Kokino” Entenza of Anónimo Consejo (Anonymous Advice). Donned in a collage of Vietnamese-style straw hats, oversized Che Guevara T-shirts, and amply baggy jeans with a single pant leg hoisted aloft in au courant hip hop fashion, the duo hit the stage to a ruckus reception. Although I had been aware of Anónimo Consejo and their reputation as two of the most dynamic and lyrically provocative MCs in Cuba, I had yet to see them perform.

Natives of the neighboring seaside municipality of Cojimar, Anónimo Consejo were among the local favorites, and it showed. Working the crowd through a series of call-and-response riffs, the duo had the riled-up audience singing in animated harmony with many of their songs. The most exuberant response seemed to arrive with their performance of “Las apa-



3.3. MCs Sekou Umoja (left) and Kokino Entenza of Anónimo Consejo.  
Photo by Sahily Borrero

riencias engañan” (Appearances can deceive). Couched in tones of indignation, the tema offered entry into the hardships of black youth navigating the island’s new dollarized geographies, and the Cuban state’s often raced efforts to police and regulate these marked spaces of exclusionary privilege. An extended excerpt of the tema follows:

**“Las apariencias engañan”**

¡Anónimo Consejo Revolución!  
¡Yosmel y Kokino Revolución!  
No me la aprietes más  
que yo sigo aquí  
No me la aprietes más, déjame vivir  
Por mí Cuba lo doy todo soy feliz  
Y tú sigues reprendía en mí,  
suéltame a mí  
No te confundas con la arena que pisas  
Dos pasos más y se te recuerda  
que estas en área divisa, Varadero

Todo no es como lo pintan  
y yo sigo aquí de frente a los problemas  
Aguantando con mi mano el hierro caliente  
Sin pasarme por la mente coger una balsa  
Y probar suerte en  
otra orilla—a 90 millas

Todo no es como lo pintan  
y yo sigo aquí  
Cada paso en la calle es una preocupación  
Extranjero en busca de comunicación  
Con la población,  
5 minutos de conversación  
Policía en acción sin explicación  
Andando pa' la estación  
Trabajos o no trabajos,  
ellos no pueden creer  
Que estés hablando de cualquier otra cosa

...

Entonces te vas a reprender en mí  
Yo que vivo y muero aquí  
Yo que nací con el concepto y el ideal de  
José Martí  
Déjate de abuso  
Coge mi coro cubano que dice  
Yo sigo aquí, jamando el mismo cable que tú  
Yo sigo aquí, preparando el mismo vaso de agua con azúcar que  
bebes tú  
Yo sigo aquí, cogiendo el mismo camello insoportable que coges tú  
Yo sigo aquí, con el mismo pan de la  
libreta que te comes tú  
Con el apagón que molesta  
Piénsalo antes de arrestarme  
Justifica tu pregunta, yo tengo mi respuesta

...

Entonces porque ¡coño! Te reprendes en mí  
Yo que sigo aquí junto a ti  
Sal de mí no me la aprietes más

¡Déjame vivir!

Esto no es pa' que te erices

Esto no es pa' que me caces la pelea

Esto es para que entiendas de una vez y por todas

Que todos los jóvenes no somos basura

Porque la divisa ha cambiado la forma de pensar de mucha gente

Y mucha de esa gente no somos nosotros,

los jóvenes cubanos, quienes apoyamos

la idea de lo que es revolución en todos los momentos

Anónimo Consejo Revolution!

Yosmel and Kokino Revolution!

Don't squeeze me anymore

because I'm still here

Don't squeeze me anymore, let me live

For my Cuba I give all, I am happy

And you continue to hassle me

let me go

Don't confuse yourself with the sand you step on

Two more steps and you'll be reminded

that you are in a dollar zone, Varadero<sup>36</sup>

Everything is not how it is painted

and I am still here confronting problems

Holding with my hand the hot iron

Without considering taking a raft

And trying my luck on

another shore—90 miles away

Everything is not how it is painted

and I am still here

Every step in the street is a preoccupation

Foreigner looking for communication

With the population,

5 minutes of conversation

Police in action without explanation

Going to the station

Whether you work or don't work,

they can't believe

That you're talking of other things

...

So then you're going to hassle me

I that live and die here

I was born with the concept and the ideal of

José Martí

Drop this abuse

Take my Cuban chorus that says

I'm still here, in the same situation as you

I'm still here, preparing the same glass of water with sugar that you  
drink

I'm still here, taking the same horrible bus  
that you take

I am still here, with the same bread from the  
libreta [ration book] that you eat

With the same annoying [electrical] blackouts

Think about it before arresting me

Justify your questions, I have my answer

...

Then why the fuck do you hassle me

I who am still here together with you

Leave me alone, don't squeeze me anymore

Let me live!

This is not to make your skin crawl

This is not to make you fight with me

This is so you can understand once and for all

That not all the young people are garbage

Because the dollar has changed many peoples'  
way of thinking

And many of those people aren't us,

the young Cubans who support

the idea of what revolution is at all moments

This selection is an exemplar of Anónimo Consejo's contestive brand of music making that long positioned them as two of the most respected MCs in the movement. It also vividly illustrates the political character and highly poetic use of social critique in rapero lyricism. Most immediately,



“Las apariencias” voices in bold undiluted fashion the frustration and social anger experienced by black youth, while introducing a key set of problematics around questions of citizenship recurrent in Cuban hip hop. A central concern addressed here is the systemics of police harassment within Cuba’s new monetized economy. Although not explicitly sited, race and racialized profiling are integral in the tema’s critique. Allusions to being “squeezed,” “reprimanded,” and arrested by police for simply speaking with foreigners evokes the experience of darker-skinned youth as discussed of being racially marked as *jineteros/as* when in the company of foreigners.

Citing the sands of Cuba’s famed tourist district Varadero—“en área *divisa*” (a dollar zone) and one largely off-limits at the time to Cubans—underscores the limitations of Cuban citizenship within the island’s new market-driven landscape. Rather than “*coger una balsa*” and flee to the United States like so many from their seaside *barrio*, including one of Yosmel’s older brothers during the 1994 *balsero* crisis, Anónimo Consejo proclaim their determination to remain faithful to Cuba through the struggles of everyday life—the same struggles, they point out, faced by their compatriots, the police. While “the dollar has changed the way of thinking of many,” they have stood fast in their support and belief in “the idea” of revolution. Here, the duo’s claim “I was born with the concept and the ideal of José Martí” is ripe with significance. The statement moors their demands for fair and equal treatment by the police (and state) as black Cubans squarely within the island’s grounding narrative of nationhood. Such assertions of citizenship—to be both black and Cuban—are in this sense implicit in the very historical inception of *cubanidad* (Cubanness). Yet the emphasis here is one centered on the “ideal” (rather than the “appearance”) of Martí’s vision and the ensuing “idea” of revolution “at all [its various] moments” to which Anónimo Consejo remain committed.

Overlapping frames of race and revolution, as discussed, have occupied an important place among many black-identified members of Cuba’s hip hop community. Such framings, however, are often predicated on implicit (or not so implicit) critiques of contemporary Cuban society and, by extension to varying degrees, the Cuban state itself. The emphasis here is on the nationally imbricated *ideals* of racial equality and revolutionary struggle—ideals understood as unrealized, if not significantly compromised, within the current Cuban moment. The key tension lies then between the principled claims of a postracial revolutionary society and the quotidian reali-

ties of race as presently lived. Cuban hip hop thus emerges precisely amid these incongruencies of race, nation, and revolution, while engaging those same incongruencies from a vantage point of a racially positioned critique. Within this context, discourses of revolution take on a marked racial significance; there is no “revolution” without racial equality and justice, the two intrinsically joined at the hip (hop), so to speak.

Yosmel and Kokino’s signature chant “¡Anónimo Consejo Revolución!” which both opens and closes “Las apariencias,” is emblematic of their flamboyant use of revolutionary discourse and imagery in their music. This same phrase, encircling an iconic image of Che Guevara’s star-capped portrait, is inscribed in the form of matching tattoos on the duo’s right shoulders as markers of their fidelity to, and embodied membership within, the revolutionary nation. This discursive play on revolution finds further expression in Anónimo Consejo’s celebrated mantra “Hip Hop Revolution,” a motto that assumed collective resonance among many local raperos.

When asked about this call to revolution, Yosmel and Kokino explained that their invocations of “revolution” were not in fact reducible to the Cuban Revolution, at least not directly so. Rather, they directed me to the term’s dictionary definition referring to radical, progressively directed social change. Such positions appear to differ from more explicit forms of Cuban revolutionary identification voiced, for instance, by *Magia* and *Alexey of Obsesión*. This is not to suggest that *Obsesión* did not share in the movement’s articulations with broader notions of revolutionary struggle. In the case of Yosmel and Kokino, however, the emphasis seemed placed on alternative revolutionary horizons, ones not necessarily beholden to national proscriptive frames.

### **Internal Revolutions?**

One potentially productive way to consider how raperos and their followers view their relationship to overlapping discourses of revolution is via the oft-touted analogy of Cuban hip hop as a “revolution within a revolution.” The implication here is that hip hop is organic to, and ultimately operates within, the broader terrain of revolutionary society—the struggle and efforts of change therefore emanating from “inside” rather than “outside.” Such posturing is in line with refrains long voiced by many raperos that their work is by no means positioned *against* the revolutionary project. Claims

of this kind undoubtedly carry a certain tactical currency given the Cuban state's general intolerance for public forms of dissent that might undermine the holy trinity of *la Revolución*, *el estado*, and *el pueblo*—one given embodied authority in Fidel Castro's famed declaration “*Dentro de la Revolución, todo; contra la Revolución, nada*” (Within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing) (see Castro 1961).

Yet on another level, as I have suggested, many raperos held genuine degrees of identification with the ideals and principles of the Cuban Revolution, many of which they were devoted to fight for and defend. Indeed, these youth represent a generation of socially engaged artists shaped by socialist-derived notions of egalitarianism embedded in revolutionary Cuban society. Many saw their public role in this light as internal, socially productive agents of change. Their stance resonates in this sense with strategies mediated by critically positioned intellectuals during the revolutionary period. The Cuban cultural critic Desiderio Navarro argues, for instance, that such intellectual currents are vital to the revolutionary process itself, suggesting that their intervention,

far from being a threat to socialism, is its “oxygen,” its “motor”: a necessity for the survival and well-being of the revolutionary process. The critical intellectuals believe that social criticism can constitute a threat only when it is silenced or even met with reprisals, when it is confined to a closed guild or institutional enclave, when it is placed in a communicational vacuum under a bell jar, or—and this above all else—when it goes unanswered or when, recognized as correct, it is not taken into account in political practice. (Navarro 2002: 201)

One finds a similar analysis echoed in the words of Kokino, who qualified: “Our critique or our protest is constructive. The idea of Anónimo Consejo is not to throw the revolution to the floor. It is rather to make a revolution within the revolution. It is to criticize the things, or to protest the things, that are not well within the Cuban Revolution. But our objective is not to harass or be destructive, but it is to make a new Cuba for young people.”<sup>37</sup>

For many raperos like Kokino, demands for a socially and racially just Cuba and broader world stem first and foremost from the principles embodied within the promise of Cuban socialism. Their task, as expressed by many, is to reveal and critique the limitations, contradictions, and at times hypocrisy rooted in the chasm between the enduring claims and lived reali-

ties of Cuba's neoliberalized landscape, all toward the end of strengthening Cuban society. The commonly expressed sentiment "somos constructivos, no destructivos" (we are constructive, not *destructive*) resonant in Kokino's response above speaks directly to this sense of social responsibility. Ariel Fernández Díaz similarly elaborated along these lines:

I think that hip hop takes on the necessary critique in our country to educate. I always say that the best way to be a revolutionary is to be critical, you understand? The best form of art is the one that says what is good, what is bad, what is harmful, or what is missing, this is valued, this is critical, you understand? The position most revolutionary is to speak the truth. Art has to say what is good and what is bad. If you hide your problems, or if you escape from them, nothing will be resolved. . . . Rap is a music of resistance—it is fighting for rights that the revolution notes but that society has not delivered.<sup>38</sup>

Among raperos and their followers, however, Cuba was not the sole source of revolutionary inspiration. Over the years Yosmel and Kokino have, for example, invoked the lives and struggles of African American radicals such as Malcolm X, Mumia Abu-Jamal, and Shaka Sankofa (Gary Graham), as well as Nelson Mandela in their music. When I asked what sources impacted their awareness of such black radicalism, the two cited Black August's participation in previous festivals as a significant influence. As I will discuss shortly, Black August was for the artists but one transnational route of engagement with U.S. black radical traditions of discourse. As I came to know Yosmel and Kokino, their music and evolving political sense of self were also significantly informed by a more immediate locus of black radical inspiration, Nehanda Abiodun. This was especially the case with Yosmel, who, under Nehanda's tutelage, eventually took on the African-signified name Sekou as an expression of his continued, ever-evolving efforts toward critical black self-fashioning.

