



August 4, 2016

WHERE HIP HOP FITS IN CUBA'S ANTI-RACIST CURRICULUM



The country's education leaders confront deep-seated discrimination in the classroom through rap. [Erik Gleiberman argues in this article for *The Atlantic*](#). Here are some excerpts. Follow [this link](#) to the complete article. Our thanks to Peter Jordens for bringing this item to our attention.

...

Since arriving in Havana several weeks before to investigate Cuba's work to eliminate racism, I had discovered a collaborative, tight-knit movement that's gone largely unpublicized in the U.S., including in its six-time-zone, decentralized academic world. In Havana, community artists like Lopez, academics like Fernández, and members of the National Ministry of Education are collectively exploring how to integrate Afro-Cuban history and related gender concerns into the primary-through-university school system. It's hard to imagine a U.S. parallel, such as Secretary of Education John King officially asking teachers to teach students a song like "Le Llanan Puta" (They Call Her Whore)—López's critique of how Afro-Cuban women are driven into prostitution—to fulfill the Common Core standards.

Efforts to combat racism in Cuba—which is widely believed to be majority nonwhite—through education have emerged quietly over the last several years. The National Ministry of Education officially leads the way through the Aponte Commission, where Fernández has served, exploring how to remove traces of racially denigrating language and imagery from, and include more Afro-Cuban history in, school textbooks. But the bold efforts are coming from below. A few semi-independent universities in Havana, and regional centers like Matanzas, Santiago de Cuba, and Camagüey, are taking the initiative, along with grassroots educators and activists involved in a hip-hop movement spearheaded by Obsesión.

These educational shifts belie the stereotypical image of hovering Cuban authorities appropriating schools to baldly transmit socialist ideology and shut down social criticism. The U.S. press has historically maintained an ambivalent dual narrative when it comes to Cuba. Recent storylines note the promise of the American flag above the U.S. embassy in Havana and American Airlines flying direct from New York beginning this fall. But a darker narrative depicts continued repression under Fidel Castro's lingering presence. Education is [often assigned the second narrative](#), but that's not what I found on the ground. While I did read some dry 10th-grade history texts portraying the U.S. as an imperialist aggressor and was slightly unnerved by overzealous, uniformed fourth-graders in Camagüey Province reciting Fidel quotes in the yard, generally, I found schools to be relaxed. There were engaging communities where I openly talked about social concerns, including those like racism that showed the government in an unfavorable light, and even designed lessons comparing Cuban and U.S. racial dynamics.

...

Beyond the classroom walls, several hip-hop groups and grassroots activists have openly developed an anti-racism curriculum, signaling the government's willingness to permit public discussion of racial issues. Some hip-hop groups are even registered with a national Cuban Rap Agency. The key community-outreach organization is *Red Barrial Afrodescendiente* (Afrodescendent Barrio Network), a group of Havana women who hold meetings to discuss racial realities and provide hands-on workshops for families. The leader, Hildelisa Leal Diaz, said the meetings give women a language to describe a racism they had never consciously named. In the Black Doll project, named for a José Martí short story, mothers and their children make paper-maché figures that are sometimes Afrocentric, such as the Yoruba Santería deity Yemaya.

...

Many artists focus more on children. Working with poets and visual artists, Obsesión's López and husband Alexey Rodriguez Mola have done extensive anti-prejudice education in primary schools. They described one workshop for fifth- and sixth-graders that explored prejudice through fables. "In one story, there was a cockroach who was supposed to be ugly and we talked about why we separate people into beautiful and ugly," López said. "Some of the students actually laughed at my natural hair. They've taken in the message that straight hair is better."

"We don't impose these ideas on the students," Rodriguez said. "We want to help them ask questions about prejudice."

The couple carries those ideas beyond classrooms through their music, too. In "Victimas," Obsesión depicts police racial profiling, and in "Los Pelos" the group celebrates natural black hair. The "Los Pelos" video opens with López echoing the black-doll theme, darkening the skin of a white doll found in a storefront and then calling out, "Yo te enseño" (I teach you) to convert a Havana street into a collective open-air classroom. While she and Rodriguez walk the barrio announcing that "stretching your hair makes you a liar," a crowd trails repeating the *enseño* chant.

López layers feminism into the anti-racism message in the "La Llanan Puta" video. Rapping as an African-clothed godsister, she suggests how historically rooted racial-economic disparities, institutional racial discrimination, and individual prejudice combine to marginalize black women.

"The hip-hop movement has played a leading role in promoting public debates."

De la Fuente said that "the hip-hop movement has played a leading role in promoting public debates about race, discrimination, and racism in Cuban society." Morales said that "groups exemplified by Obsesión can reach beyond the classroom to the street, and in particular, to young people."

...

The evolution and social dynamics of Cuba's fledgling anti-racism education work echo similar work in the U.S. over recent decades. Without any national curricular guidance, U.S. educators, like their Cuban counterparts, have created anti-racism teaching at the ground level of districts and individual schools. Collaboration across the Straits of Florida could be powerful because Cuba's contrasting racial paradigm offers an opportunity for the U.S. to examine its racial realities through a different lens. Currently, many U.S. students know virtually nothing about race in Cuba, although Cubans hear about the U.S.'s more high-profile news, including fatal police profiling and the Black Lives Matter response.

As the debate on lifting the Cuban embargo continues into the next presidential term, Congress might recognize that the embargo affects more than commerce. Schools can't exchange materials: Cuba cannot buy any of the U.S.'s anti-racism curricular materials or African American and Latino literature.

I talked to Cuba's national director of history instruction, Miriam Egea Alvarez, about great African American novelists who illuminate racial realities, such as Langston Hughes and Richard Wright. When I pulled out my Spanish translation of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, she said, "We'd like these, but we can't get them with the embargo."

I'd like to imagine President Obama having coffee in Magia López's living room after he's freed up in January and talking with Egea and other Cuban activists about how to promote educational exchange for social justice between the two countries. I'm sure he'd be interested. I remember him saying once his favorite novel is Morrison's *Song of Solomon*.

SHARE THIS:



Loading...

RELATED

[Havana Theatre Festival Opens](#)

October 25, 2013
In "News"

[Lecture at the Bildner Center: "Church and State in a Changing Cuba"](#)

March 27, 2012
In "News"

[ROSEWAY, FIRST ORIGINAL U.S. TALL SHIP IN HAVANA IN 57 YEARS](#)

November 1, 2016
In "History"

Posted in [News](#)

By [lisaparavisini](#)

[1 Comment](#)

ONE THOUGHT ON "WHERE HIP HOP FITS IN CUBA'S ANTI-RACIST CURRICULUM"

DR CAROLINE MORAES

August 8, 2016 at 5:07 am

Reblogged this on [CARISCC](#).

★ Like

↪ [Reply](#)

LEAVE A COMMENT

