

Island Paradise, Revolutionary Utopia or Hustler's Haven? Consumerism and Socialism in Contemporary Cuban Rap

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Introduction

The contemporary period of economic crisis in Cuba following the collapse of the Soviet Union, known as the 'special period',¹ has seen the rise of consumerism, particularly as Cuba begins to open up to a global market. In comparison with the largely empty government ration stores, the new dollar-based shopping complexes such as *La Epoca* and *Carlos III* witness a steady stream of customers, particularly before events such as Mother's Day and Christmas. As dollars begin to flow into the economy once again through tourism, remittances and investments of foreign firms in Cuba, those with access to dollar incomes now have a disposable income and the desire to spend. This period has also seen the rise of rap music among young Afro-Cubans, a musical form that has been associated in the West with conspicuous consumption and commodity fetishism. Yet this turn to consumption is at odds with the continued focus of the Cuban political leadership on socialist ideology and practice. This essay looks at contemporary debates and struggles within Cuban rap to find out how the contradictions presented by consumer culture are being negotiated by Afro-Cuban youth within the subculture of hip-hop.²

In this essay, I argue that rap music is one of the crucial sites within Cuban society where young Afro-Cubans are reinventing contemporary political values and ideologies. Attracted by the music of certain politically engaged African-American rappers who have coined the term 'underground' or 'conscious' rap,³ Cuban 'underground' rappers offer strong criticisms of neoliberal globalization and they object to consumerism and the spread of market ideologies. In the lyrics of those groups who identify as 'commercial', consumerism and activities such as hustling are presented as strategies for black youth to survive in the special period. Different tendencies within the Cuban rap movement are engaged in a struggle over the political values that shape the culture of hip-hop, and an analysis of their debates can give us a window into changing utopias, desires and ideologies in a period of crisis and transformation in Cuban society.

According to prominent scholars of 'postsocialism' such as Katherine Verdery, consumerism was the crucial axis upon which state power in former communist regimes was fought and lost.⁴ As the Soviet Union lost ideological legitimacy in

the eyes of its citizens, consumerism came to fill the void, a move which eventually led to the collapse of the socialist state. Scholars of China have similarly described the ways in which consumerism has come to replace the ideology of Maoism.⁵ This study of Cuban rap attests to the unsettling potential of consumerism, as the increasing generation of needs and desires such as those articulated by the more commercial rappers are beyond the capacity of the state to fulfil. But the emergence of values of capitalist consumerism has not come to pose a major threat to the state. Instead I argue that values of consumerism and socialism have come to coexist, as seen within the subculture of Cuban hip-hop. Despite their criticisms of materialism and consumerism, 'underground' rappers themselves are tempted by the possibilities offered up by transnational record labels, and they seek to reconcile their radical politics with the potential of earning money and achieving fame. The flourishing of a diverse set of logics and practices provides multiple options for black youth to survive, while supporting the pluralization of the Cuban revolution as it expands to incorporate a variety of tendencies and ideas.

This article seeks to explore contestations over values of consumerism and socialism in Cuban rap. In the first section, I give a brief explanation of the origins and development of Cuban rap. I look at the evolution of distinct tendencies in Cuban rap that are generally associated with the US-derived dichotomy of 'underground' and 'commercial' and I explore how these categories are complicated in the context of Cuba. In the next section, I look at competing representations of 'Cuban culture' among those rappers who are funded by foreign labels and those who see themselves as 'underground'. In the third section, I analyse how strategies of consumerism and hustling are more than the result of marketing strategies by foreign companies; they are utilized by youth as a means of survival and contestation in the special period. I then go on to explore the rejection of these strategies by 'underground' rappers, who continue to promote narratives of upliftment and socialist values as a way of coming out of present difficulties. In the final section, I suggest that despite these opposing tendencies within Cuban rap, the multiple overlaps between categories of 'underground' and 'commercial' prevent the emergence of sharp polarization in hip-hop and in Cuban society more generally.

The Genesis of Cuban Rap

Cuban hip-hop is shaped by a highly specific set of social and economic conditions, including the demographic restructuring of the urban metropolis and increasing racial inequalities in the current period of crisis. For the first five years of its evolution in Cuba up to 1992, hip-hop culture was produced and consumed within the specific social context of the local community or neighbourhood. At parties people would play music from compact discs that had been brought from the US, or music recorded from Miami radio, and they would pass on recorded cassettes from hand to hand. There would be breakdancing competitions and people would rhyme in private houses, on the streets or in parks. The period from 1995 to the present has involved the institutionalization and commercialization of Cuban hip-hop culture in several different ways. As the art form has developed its own Cuban style, as it has become distinctly more complex, and as it has begun to garner large levels of support among Cuban

youth, rap music has simultaneously, and on different levels, become intertwined with Cuban state institutions, transnational record companies, and hip-hop movements in the US. This has produced various factions, or blocs, within Cuban rap, which are identified with the broader national and transnational forces. From certain social, historical and institutional locations emerge the commitments and solidarities that are crucial to the articulation of political demands, the reinvention of utopias and the framing of desire within Cuban rap.

Rap music and hip-hop culture grew rapidly in relocative housing projects such as Alamar and other areas of high-density housing, occupied by mainly black, working-class communities such as Old Havana, Central Havana, Sancto Suárez and Playa. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union, black and working-class communities in Cuba were relatively protected from late capitalist processes of economic restructuring. However, the crisis of the special period forced the Cuban government to adopt policies of austerity in order to increase the competitiveness of the Cuban economy in the global economy. Although policies of austerity and restructuring have affected Cuban society as a whole, Alejandro de la Fuente argues that there have also been various racially differentiated effects.⁶ The legalization of dollars has divided Cuban society according to those who have access to dollars and those who do not. Family remittances are the most important source of hard currency for most Cubans, and since the majority of Cubans in the diaspora tend to be white, it is white Cuban families who benefit most from remittances.⁷ In the tourism sector, another area where Cubans are able to earn in hard currency, blacks have tended to be excluded on the grounds that they do not have the education or proper appearance and attire to interact with tourists.⁸ Other options of survival in the special period, such as opening *paladares*, or family-run restaurants, are also less available to blacks who tend to be based in more densely populated housing and do not have the space to carry out entrepreneurial activities.⁹ De la Fuente also argues that racial prejudice has become increasingly visible and acceptable in the special period.¹⁰

Cuban hip-hop emerged as a local response to experiences of displacement and relocation, as well as impoverishment and discrimination. However, it has grown and developed with the support of national and transnational institutions with different, often contradictory agendas. The main form of institutional support for Cuban rap comes from the *Asociación Hermanos Saiz* (Brothers Saiz Organization, AHS), the youth cultural wing of the official mass organization of Cuban youth, *Unión de Jóvenes Cubano* (Union of Cuban Youth, UJC). But North American rap music is the original source of Cuban rap, and from the early days underground Cuban rappers have maintained close ties with their 'conscious' and 'underground' counterparts in the United States. While the early waves of hip-hop music to come to Cuba were more commercial, by the time of the first rap festival in 1995 Cubans were hearing African-American 'conscious' rappers such as Paris, then Common Sense, Mos Def and Talib Kweli. Like the Black Power activists who visited Cuba throughout the 1960s and 1970s, from Stokely Carmichael through to Angela Davis and Assata Shakur, who is currently in exile in Cuba, Paris and Talib Kweli spoke a language of black militancy that was appealing to Afro-Cuban youth.¹¹

Another avenue of transnational participation in Cuban hip-hop is the global market, via transnational record companies. While hip-hop in the United States started as an urban underground movement, it is now a major commercial

product, distributed by five of the largest multinational music labels including Universal, Sony, BMG, EMI and WEA.¹² Records are judged by their Sound-Scan numbers, or the number of records they sell in the first week.¹³ In the Cuban context the multinational labels, with their promises of videos, records and large contracts, are tempting to Cuban rappers whose resources are scarce. In 1996, Law 51, section 61 permitted foreign record companies to come to Cuba under the representation of an *empresa* or state-owned enterprise, and sign deals with Cuban artists. At times signing a deal may mean leaving the country, such as happened with the Cuban rap group Orishas, who signed with the transnational record company EMI and currently reside in France.

Cuban rap has been influenced by these diverse networks of African-American 'conscious' rap and transnational record companies. In some ways, the intervention of various transnational networks into Cuban rap has polarized the movement: Fernández argues that the movement of Cuban hip-hop is divided by a major polemic between those who see themselves as 'underground' and those who see themselves as 'commercial'.¹⁴ He describes 'underground' groups as having two main qualities: first, 'they maintain an orthodox and radical stance along the lines of the origins of the genre and they distance themselves from whatever possibility of fusion for its commercialization'; and second, 'they focus much more on an integration of politically committed lyrics with the social context'.¹⁵ Commercial groups are those who, 'incorporate popular Cuban rhythms in order to be more accepted, achieve authenticity, and become commercially viable'.¹⁶ In the context of Cuba, commercial rap groups are defined somewhat by their ability to reach larger audiences. While most 'underground' rap music is limited to small *peñas* and shows, the biggest gathering being the annual rap festival attended by up to 5000 youth in the large stadium at Alamar, a commercial group such as Orishas have reached the broader Cuban public, and the sounds of their latest record entitled *A Lo Cubano* can be heard in discos, private homes and parties, as well as blaring from cars and on the street.

Categories of 'underground' and 'commercial' have some resonance in the context of Cuba because they reflect real contests over access to resources and diverging ideological positions. For some Cuban rap groups who self-identify as 'underground', there is hostility towards those groups who attract foreign funding and attention because they are willing to dilute their political stance. In their song *El Barco* (The Boat), Los Paisanos criticize the more commercial rappers who are funded because they have compromised their politics and dedication to the purity of rap: 'those without shame who say they are rappers, but who are patronized because of their mixture of rhythm'. The rapper vents his anger against those who choose the commercial path: 'I shoot words at them, I don't kill them, but I detest them and I don't silence the truth, but I bring it to the text.' The group Los Paisanos, which started off with three members, lost one member who left the group for a foreign deal to make more commercial-sounding rap mixed with salsa, forsaking both the group and his participation in the hip-hop movement.

But even though some Cuban rappers may self-identify as 'underground' or 'commercial', these labels cannot be applied unproblematically in the Cuban context. While the distinction between 'underground' and 'commercial' in the US derives from a perception of authenticity and commercial success as diametric opposites, Cuban cultural producers are often attributed an automatic

authenticity or 'underground' status by their American counterparts, due to historic associations of socialist Cuba with a revolutionary nationalist politics. At times, Cuban rappers themselves acknowledge that the distinction is somewhat less relevant in Cuba than in the US. In a song called 'I don't criticize what is commercial', rapper Papo Record suggests that underground and commercial are all the same in Cuba because there is no market. The label of 'commercial' is also somewhat of a misnomer because not all groups that mix salsa and other instrumental forms with rap are funded by record companies; some just enjoy those styles. Despite the problems associated with applying the labels of 'underground' and 'commercial' in the context of Cuba, it remains that some rappers do identify with these. In the following sections, I suggest that Cuban rap is shaped by the struggle between these different tendencies within the movement, although, as argued in the last section of the article, the boundaries between them remain permeable.

Representations of 'Cuban Culture'

As the Cuban government attempts to earn hard currency by attracting international tourists and as transnational companies seek to capitalize on exotic representations of carefully packaged 'Cuban culture', Cuban rap has been drawn into marketing strategies that seek to present Cuba as a tropical island paradise.¹⁷ The Cuban rap group Orishas were previously part of a group called Amenaza who were central to the evolution of the Cuban hip-hop movement. But since signing with the transnational record label EMI and leaving Cuba to pursue their careers in France, they have adapted their music, lyrics and styles to accommodate global consumers. Those groups who identify as 'underground' challenge these stereotypes and they point out the absurdity of imagery that celebrates Cuba as a tropical paradise when Cubans are facing some of the worst difficulties since the start of the revolution. These 'underground' groups highlight the exclusion of Afro-Cubans from commercial representations of Cuba and they resist being drawn into what they see as cultural marketing strategies by foreign multinational companies.

The music of Orishas utilizes stereotypical images and representations of Cuba that have become more popular in the recent period. In their album *A Lo Cubano*, Orishas have popularized pre-revolutionary iconography of Cuban life such as rum, tobacco, and 1930s Chevys and Oldsmobiles. Like the internationally marketed film and record of the Cuban group Buena Vista Social Club, the Orishas represent Cuba as a nostalgic fantasy that has been preserved intact from the 1950s, wishfully ignoring the revolutionary upheaval of the last forty years. In their song *A Lo Cubano* taken from the name of the album, Orishas provide an image of a Caribbean island where people are dancing in the streets, drinking rum and smoking Cuban cigars:

*A lo Cubano, botella de ron,
tabaco Habano,
chicas por doquier,
bonche en casa de Guano,
aquí no hay vida pa' los mareados.*
[Cuban style, bottle of rum,

Havana tobacco,
 women on both sides,
 rap concert in Guano's house,
 this is not a life for fools.]

In contrast with the famous stenograph of Che, or the images of Fidel dressed in fatigues and smoking a cigar, used through Latin America and the Third World to identify Cuba with revolution, the Orishas resurrect stereotypes of rum, tobacco and women, imagery that has become more widespread in the official marketing of Cuba to the West in the special period. In the song, the rapper claims that, 'I will represent a mulatta rum Cuba', making reference to the advertisements of Bacardi rum which identify Cuba as a sexually available mulatta woman. While based on a typically heavy hip-hop background beat, the song incorporates salsa rhythms, Cuban percussion instruments such as the batá and sung choruses typical of live salsa performances, giving the song a lively, dance feel. The musical style, the pre-1959 stereotypes and the use of Afro-Cuban imagery on the album cover are part of a marketing strategy that seeks to sell Cuba to Western audiences.

'Underground' rap groups have challenged these stereotypical representations of Cuba. At a concert at Café Cantante, the group Reyes de la Calle entered the stage wearing beach slippers, beach hats, and sitting in a large blow-up beach floatie. As all three members of the group sat in their blow-up floatie, they began their song about the *balseiros*, or Cubans who leave for Miami in boats. The contrast between the frivolous paraphernalia of beach slippers and floaties, and the serious theme of the *balseiros*, who face the treacherous journey to Miami for hopes of prosperity in the US, challenges the superficial imagery of Cuba as a fun, Caribbean island. Female rappers such as Magia and the all-female rap group Instinto seek to project alternative images of women through their attire. While women in salsa music and in popular Cuban dance music supposedly dress with short skirts, make-up and high heels, Magia from Obsesión usually wears a head wrap and an African gown, or a long baggy shirt and pants. The assertive and non-sexualized styles of Cuban female rappers challenge the imagery of the scantily clad Tropicana dancer and the *ron mulata* symbol as representative of Cuban popular culture. Other rappers seek to incorporate symbols of Cuban life and the revolution, wearing Guayabera shirts, military fatigues or the olive green caps and pullovers of Che.

'Underground' rappers argue that within state-sponsored tourist magazines and in commercial representations of Cuba, black people are generally excluded, and white or mixed-race Cubans are presented as the face of Cuba. In their song *Lágrimas Negras* (Black Tears), Hermanos de Causa criticize the racism of the tourist industry:

Blancos y mulatos en revista 'Sol y son'
pa' el turismo,
mientras en televisión casi lo mismo.
En una Cuba donde hay negros a montón,
mira tú que contradicción.
 [Whites and mulattoes in the magazine
 'Sol y Son' for tourism,
 while on television just the same.

In a Cuba where there are a ton of blacks,
will you look at the contradiction.]

De la Fuente argues that the racialized construct of 'good presence', including the belief that blackness is ugly, has played a role in the exclusion of Afro-Cubans from commercial representations and from the tourist sector more generally.¹⁸ Hermanos de Causa protest the racialized lines along which the tourist sector is being developed.

Unlike the more commercial rap groups, 'underground' rappers are critical of tourism and the limited market economy that has begun to emerge in Cuba because they see the market as introducing new racial hierarchies and forms of domination into Cuban society. Hermanos de Causa go on to criticize consumerism and mentalities of individualism introduced by the market, in a song entitled *Contaminación y Globalización* (Contamination and Globalization). Hermanos de Causa associate the globalization of capital and technology with processes of environmental destruction and consumerism:

*Tecnología controlando el gusto de tu mente,
eres esclavo del producto como mucha gente.
El artículo y su marca no se desmarca,
el eslogan que la firma domina y abarca.*

[Technology controlling your tastes in your mind,
you are a slave to the product like many people.
The article and its brand are not distanced,
the slogan of the firm extols and controls.]

The contamination of the environment caused by chemicals and pollutants is associated with a moral contamination caused by capitalism, which replaces collectivism and socialist ideals with individual consumerism and materialism. This critique of global capitalism is also reflected in the stance of 'underground' rappers towards what they see as consumerist strategies by multinational clothing labels. In a personal interview with rap producer Pablo Herrera in May 2001, he described a situation where a photographer from *Vibe* magazine came to Cuba to do a photo shoot of Cuban rappers wearing Tommy Hilfiger clothing. The rappers refused to cooperate, as they saw this as a mechanism for the Tommy Hilfiger brand to advertise its product in Cuba, and promote the message that Cuban youth are turning towards American consumerism.

Jineterismo and Hustling

However, representations of consumerism and hustling as are common in the more commercial rap are not only a result of sponsorship by transnational companies; in this section, I look at how, among certain sectors of Afro-Cuban youth, practices of consumerism and hustling have also been presented as a political strategy to get by in the special period. 'Underground' rap groups contest the validity of these strategies, suggesting that Afro-Cuban youth need to maintain the values of hard work and education as a way of rising from the difficulty of their present circumstances. I suggest that what is at stake in these battles is competing social values and struggles over the access of marginalized groups to resources as Cuba opens up to a global market economy.

Hustling has become particularly popular among unemployed black youth,

who have the time to devote to the task and are often pushed into such activities by economic need. One of the main forms of hustling is known as *jineterismo*, a practice whereby *jineteros* (translates as ‘jockeys’ but used to referred to street hustlers) earn an income and acquire consumer goods through their contact with foreigners, either befriending them or engaging in a romantic or sexual relationship with them.¹⁹ In contrast with the \$7–\$15 per month earned by working full time in a government job, a *jinetero* can make between \$40 and \$80 by helping a tourist, driving him/her to the beach, or selling him/her a box of cigars. Robin Kelley has explored the ways in which marginalized African-American youth, facing high rates of joblessness or the prospect of low-wage service work, remake the realm of consumption into a site of production, blurring the distinction between ‘play’ and ‘work’ that is characteristic of wage work under late capitalism.²⁰ Similarly, for certain Afro-Cuban youth faced with declining opportunities for earning an income, play becomes a creative strategy of survival.

Commercial rap groups promote practices of *jineterismo* in their music. In the song *Atrevido* (Daring), Orishas tell the story of a couple who manage to take advantage of tourists as a way of bringing themselves out of rural poverty. The song begins by describing the situation of the poor couple in the countryside:

*Había una vez una pareja desprovista poca
vista sin dinero pensaban
tónico tónico crónico cómo vivir,
salir del negro fango que la ahogaba.*

[Once upon a time a deprived couple
without money were thinking
of a chronic tonic to live,
to leave the black mud in which they drowned.]

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

*Todo lo que le pedía, el punto se la gastaba,
una linda habitación en el Cohiba, el punto se la gastaba,
un vestido pa’ ella, y una camisa pa’ mí, el punto se la gastaba,
si quería ir a la playa, el punto se la gastaba,
ya la cuenta no le daba, no le daba, y el punto se la gastaba,
al concierto con Orishas, a bailar, y el punto se la gastaba.*

[Everything that she asked for, the idiot paid out,
a pretty room in the Cohiba, the idiot paid out,
a dress for her, and a shirt for me, the idiot paid out,
if she wanted to go to the beach, the idiot paid out,
he was running out of money, but the idiot paid out,
to dance at a concert with Orishas, the idiot paid out.]

In the Orishas song, *jineterismo* is presented as a vacation for the woman who is taken to the beach, receives new clothes and has a fancy room in the hotel Cohiba. The Orishas even write themselves into the song, saying that the woman

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

The values of *jineterismo* as represented in 'commercial' rap contradict socialist ideology, and disrupt the attempts of the state to justify new forms of labour discipline related to Cuba's insertion into a global economy. Many foreign construction companies, foreign agencies contracted to do infrastructural work, and even the smaller 'free trade zones' opening up in various regions of Havana, require local labour. The foreign companies pay the Cuban government about \$US 8–10 per hour for each of the labourers and the labourers are paid 200 pesos (\$US 9.50) a month by the state.²¹ But through hustling *jineteros* can bypass official avenues for earning an income. As the Cuban state seeks to regulate foreign currency towards a centralized state bureaucracy, through activities such as *jineterismo*, certain black and mulatto youth siphon off some of the dollars that have begun to enter Cuba.

'Underground' rappers do not share the views of more commercial rappers such as Orishas; they reject the paths of *jineterismo* as a way of surviving in the special period, suggesting instead that it is important to maintain a belief in socialist values of honesty and work in order to raise oneself up. The criticism of *jineterismo* in 'underground' rap music is a polemic against consumerist mentalities that have been emerging with increased access to a market economy, and a condemnation of the desire of young people to find an 'easy fix' rather than working hard to achieve their goals and the goals of the revolution. In their song *Jinetera*, Primera Base talk about the young girls who walk the streets in order to attract the attention of foreign men. The girls 'don't have any sense' and 'only think about dressing up and living in the moment'. These values of vanity and consumerism are presented as highly antithetical to revolutionary values. The rapper concludes with his incredulity at this phenomenon:

*Todos están perdidas, por eso están
a expensas a contraer el sida,
pero andar por la calle para ellas es lo primero.
Pero andan luchando brother,
andan con extranjeros, esa es la causa fundamental,
ofreciendo tu cuerpo para en la vida triunfar.
Por eso digo esto y de veras la sorprende
entregarse por dinero,*

son cosas que no entiendo.

[They are all lost, this is why they are at risk of contracting AIDS, but walking the street is the most important thing for them.

They go on hustling, brother, going with foreigners, this is the fundamental cause, offering up your body to triumph in life.

That is why I say this, and really it is surprising to surrender for money, these are things that I don't understand.]

The rapper sees the practice of *jineterismo* as dangerous, risky and as giving in to consumerist desires. There is a certain focus on the body as a receptacle of morality, which must be defiled in order for consumerist and materialistic wants to be fulfilled. The *jineteras* who walk the streets are attractive to the rapper, 'they are very pretty' he agrees emphatically, 'yes!', but they are empty inside: 'inside they are all plastic and materialist'. The rapper claims that external beauty and the trappings of materialism are unimportant compared with greater political and spiritual goals. *Primera Base* seek to uphold conventional standards of morality in contrast with the open celebration of consumption, sexuality and desire in narratives dealing with *jineterismo*.

Narratives of Upliftment and the Value of Work

In *Atrevida* and *Jinetera*, both songs that deal with questions of *jineterismo* from a male perspective, the gendered nature of contestations over consumption and morality is particularly notable. As Gina Ulysse observes in her study of Jamaican dancehall, the black female body becomes a primary site of exhibition and commentary within black popular culture.²² For *Primera Base*, the body of the *jinetera* represents the moral purity of the revolution that must be defended against consumerism as a form of spiritual disease that is infecting the body politic. In the Orishas' song the *jinetera* is objectified by the pimp who uses her to revenge himself against the tourist; the female body constitutes a form of what Ulysse refers to as 'the ultimate cultural capital'.²³ Given the historical conception of women as objects that are traded between men as a way of constructing their masculinity,²⁴ it is not surprising that the female body would again become a site of contestation, a means by which black working-class males assert their masculinity in a context where they are increasingly being disempowered and displaced.

Female rappers have challenged some of these representations. In a song by Obsesión, entitled *Putá* (Whore), the female rapper Magia attempts to talk about the desperate conditions that give rise to prostitution, and the sad lives of the many women forced into prostitution. The song's chorus begins with the phrase 'They call me *putá*', deliberately employing the derogatory slang used for female sex workers in order to invoke the humiliation and degradation associated with this occupation. Magia originally stated that the song was about prostitution in capitalist society. But during a discussion following an Obsesión concert at Teatro Riviera, one of the male members of Obsesión said to Magia he thought

that prostitution was a legitimate way for women to earn money to survive and support their families. Magia replied that since the revolution provides women with housing, healthcare, childcare and everything that they need there should be no need for women to become prostitutes in Cuba, indicating that the song was intended to provoke debate within Cuba. Magia, like Primera Base, argues that it is consumerist desire and weakness that provokes women to sell their bodies on the streets when the revolution has given them the options to work hard and earn a living. Magia is seeking to show that prostitution should not be celebrated as a practice that gives women agency as in the Orishas' song. For her it is a degrading lifestyle into which women in capitalist societies are forced because of a lack of other options, and she believes that since women in Cuba have other options, their turn to prostitution or *jineterismo* must be based on other reasons such as consumerism.

Obsesión employ a narrative of upliftment, suggesting that the way to survive in the special period is to educate oneself, study and work hard. In a song entitled *Guapo*, Obsesión criticize the macho posture of the so-called 'guapos' or young men of marginalized communities who have a reputation on the streets for being tough and mean. The word *guapo*, which means 'handsome', has taken on negative associations among marginalized communities as 'macho man' and 'tough guy' but Obsesión want to redefine the word to fit its earlier connotations of strong character and bravery. The song lists all the attributes of '*guapería*' as loudly announcing one's presence wherever one goes, looking for fights to prove one's manhood and boasting about one's exploits. Instead, the rapper urges the *guapo*:

*Así q' socio, déjate de aguaje y búscate
otra forma de ser un salvaje.*

Pues la calle no te pertenece

y no me enseñes cicatrices

q' no me dicen de q' colores son los peces.

*Que ya quedó atrás el tiempo de pistolas,
projectiles, y perfiles cortantes.*

Hablo por miles q' preguntan,

¿cuáles son tus metas?

[So friend, stop boasting, look for another
form of showing off.

The street doesn't belong to you
and don't show me your scars
that don't tell me anything.

The time of projectiles, pistols and high postin' is gone.

I speak for thousands who ask,
what are your goals?]

The rapper is arguing that the form of life represented by the *guapo* does not lead anywhere. The rapper asks the *guapo*, 'what are your goals?' In answer to this question, the rapper himself suggests, 'Go to cut cane, use your skills to find out who you are'. Harvesting sugarcane has been seen throughout the years of the revolution as a symbol of honest labour that builds revolutionary spirit and character. Solidarity brigades from around the world have visited Cuba to participate in cane cutting throughout the years of the revolution, and local

voluntary groups are sent out to rural areas on a regular basis to harvest the cane necessary for Cuban exports, but also to emphasize the importance of hard manual labour in the constitution of revolutionary citizens. The emphasis in the song on cutting cane suggests that hard labour rather than hustling must be the solution to the difficulties faced by marginalized communities. At the end of the song, the rapper identifies himself as a *guapo* as well, expressing solidarity with the social origins of the *guapo* in the song; however, he is a *guapo* who has come out of marginality by using his talents and his music: 'I am one of those *guapos* who don't make trouble. My stabs are sharp words, for all those who choose the wrong way.' The rapper from Obsesión is proposing a solution to the problems of marginality, which involves leaving behind a marginal way of life and embracing what society has to offer.

The Contradictory Space of Cuban Hip-Hop

Although 'underground' rappers oppose the commercial tendencies and consumerist inclinations of groups such as Orishas, the movement of hip-hop within Cuba is located in a contradictory space that is shaped by, even as it resists, capitalist consumerism. The hip-hop movement in Cuba reflects trends within American hip-hop such as conspicuous consumption, and the use of American clothing has also been used to make certain political statements. It is undeniable that the wearing of designer label clothes such as Fubu and Tommy Hilfiger that forms part of the hip-hop movement in the United States has also become incorporated into Cuban hip-hop. The majority of audiences at a *peña* or during the festival are attired in baggy pants, sweatshirts, and baseball caps or stocking caps brought by relatives in Miami or from tourists. Moreover, this style is not simply an adoption of American styles and capitalist culture, it is also a gesture of defiance that signals a refusal to conform to the dominant society. In his work on the meaning of style in working-class subcultures such as punk in postwar Britain, Dick Hebdige suggests that styles have a double meaning:

On the one hand, they warn the 'straight' world in advance of a sinister presence—the presence of difference—and draw down upon themselves vague suspicions, uneasy laughter, 'white and dumb rages'. On the other hand, for those who erect them into icons, who use them as words or curses, these objects become signs of forbidden identity, sources of value.²⁵

Cuban rap audiences use their clothing, and their adoption of American slang such as 'aight' and 'mothafuka' as a way of distinguishing themselves as a group, and of highlighting their identity as young, black Cubans. Their style has not gone unacknowledged by state officials either, who recognize the subversive potential in their form of dress. In an article in the Cuban newspaper *El Habanero*, journalist Tony Pita derided rappers for wearing hats, long pants and stocking caps in a hot climate not suited to such apparel.²⁶ However, more at stake than the matter of climactic suitability is the associations of the clothing with a culture and society forbidden to young Cubans. Just as punks in postwar Britain used the symbol of the swastika, not to identify with the Nazi regime but rather to exploit its associations of evil and enemy, so too young Cubans seek to

break down exclusive boundaries erected by a cold war climate by dressing in the attire of the 'enemy'.²⁷

Even those rappers who seek to insulate Cuban hip-hop from the market face the reality of its associations with consumerism. Pablo Herrera related to me that after he was interviewed by *Vibe* magazine, an American producer came to Cuba and offered him clothing by the Edge label.²⁸ Herrera felt conflicted over whether to accept it, because on the one hand he felt it was a symbol of multinational capitalism but on the other hand the clothing was very fashionable, and it is difficult to find good clothing in Cuba. Many rappers feel torn between their commitment to the hip-hop movement and their personal ambitions as a rapper. This aspect was strongly brought out when four rap groups were invited to participate in a hip-hop festival in New York in October 2001. Prior to their departure there was a meeting convened in Havana, which was attended by other rap groups, producers and members of the hip-hop community. Many of the rappers who were leaving on the trip brought up concerns about the contradictions between their revolutionary beliefs and their desire for success as a rapper. One rapper from Anónimo Consejo posed the question to the collective: 'If I get recognized as a rapper, and make lots of money from recording, is it okay for me to keep that money?' This question reflects the sense that rap is an activity that can lead to economic prosperity, or a way out of difficulties. In the song *Prosperaré* (I Will Prosper) by Papo Record, he suggests that the current poverty of Cuban rappers will eventually be rewarded by material success:

*Hoy te canto en una peña, mañana doy una gira,
pasado quiero viajar.
Hoy unos cientos por un tema, mañana
unos miles por un disco.
[Today I sing in a peña, tomorrow I'll
travel around the country,
and the day after tomorrow I want to travel abroad.
Today some hundreds for a song,
tomorrow some thousands for a record.]*

In Cuba of the special period where foreign travel is an impossibility for many, and rappers barely receive a subsistence income, rap music provides the fantasy of wealth and stability. It is undeniable that material desires, which have shaped the movement in the West, also inform the movement in Cuba. This appearance of consumerist desire even among the anti-capitalist, underground elements of the hip-hop movement provokes us to rethink the sharp dichotomy that has been posed between desire and wants in socialist and capitalist societies. As Verdery argues, it is not that consumerism was absent in socialist societies, on the contrary, socialist governments presented consumer desire as a right, and the increasing deprivation of these needs kindled them even more.²⁹

Verdery links consumer deprivation to an increasing discontent that leads to public protest but it seems that in Cuba it is not that values of consumerism have replaced the socialist utopia but rather, as Kevin Latham argues in his article on consumption in China, 'one dominant teleology has been replaced by a whole spectrum of alternative teleologies'.³⁰ 'Underground' rappers popularize a range of diverse, often contradictory practices, that constitute fallback options in a

period of uncertainty. In *El Barco*, Los Paisanos point to the dire situation of rap musicians in Cuba:

*La situación de rap Cubano en esta
era no prospera,
el dinero que producen mi imaginación
no hace estancia en mi billetera.*

[The situation of Cuban rap in this era
does not prosper,
the money that my imagination produces
does not materialize in my wallet.]

Rappers are not convinced that if they join the AHS and work through state institutions they will be able to make a career as a rapper. Working through AHS may be the only way for rappers to practically organize their concerts and get paid for their work. Yet the young, marginalized rapper has a vision of larger fame and glory beyond state institutions. Even as they reinforce the need for revolutionary values of work, collectivism and honesty, underground rappers feel the stagnation of a situation that does not reward them for their loyalty. In *Tengo*, *Hermanos de Causa* claim that:

*Pasan los años y la situación prosigue
intacta.
El tiempo no perdona, pregúntale a la Habana,
que ahorita están en la lona,
a nadie le importa nada.*

[The years go by and the situation
is still the same.
Time is not forgiving, ask Havana,
right now it's on the rocks,
and it doesn't matter to anyone.]

The crumbling buildings of the capital city represent the decline and stagnation faced by the country, and while Cuban rappers believe that they must participate in the rebuilding of their nation, at other times this task seems impossible and undesirable to them. In this context rap music is not simply a means for expressing discontent, or a 'safety valve' for letting off frustrations, but an occupation that could provide a way out of the situation.

The fantasy of wealth as represented by American commercial rap music is not a realistic strategy for survival as are hustling or *jineterismo*. Few Cuban rappers are likely to amass large fortunes through their music. As hip-hop in the United States has become big business, contracts look more like loan agreements, with expenses that used to be paid by the label being passed on to the artist.³¹ If artists do not sell large numbers of records and constantly tour, they will never make enough money to keep the lavish lifestyles that are represented in the hip-hop videos. Even Orishas suggest that in their encounters with transnational record label EMI they are little more than workers:

You have to really work out your ideas all in the same day, so they can exploit the maximum out of you. There is a labor necessity because there is a company that has invested in you, you are a worker. You have to extract the maximum from yourself because this is going to

have repercussions for your future. If you make a bad record, and you don't sell copies, this reflects on your future artistic life.³²

In contrast with the notions of Cuban rappers that through rap music they can make lots of money and tour the world, Orishas suggest that commercial fame does not guarantee wealth and even artists who have been able to create top-selling albums have a constant pressure to sell more. The pressure to sell and perform is a new element for Cuban artists, most of whom are accustomed to operating within a system where appealing to a mass audience is less important than political connections and 'who you know'. But while fantasies of wealth and prosperity do not constitute realistic options for young Cubans, they are part of the process by which diverse logics come to flourish against the homogenizing visions of a singular socialist utopia. In a period of economic uncertainty and stagnation, Cuban rappers devise multiple strategies by which to revitalize utopian promises and express their needs and desires.

While 'underground' rappers focus on the principles of work and collectivism, 'commercial' rappers suggest that in a context where work is no longer remunerative, it is valid to steal from tourists and hustle in order to survive. 'Underground' rappers criticize this mentality, and continue to believe in a socialist system that prioritizes values of work, justice and equality. In a context of more intensified conflict, the particular configuration of interests that constitute Cuban hip-hop could help pave the way for more radical change or towards the acceptance of a market system. However, in the contemporary context, the coexistence of several tendencies within Cuban hip-hop has opened up the Cuban state to a greater acceptance of plurality. As Martín Hopenhayn comments in relation to social movements in Latin America, 'the invocation of social creativity and diversity do not aim to strengthen the market against the State, but to call attention to social complexity, to the variety of actors and sociocultural costs that the enterprise of homogenizing modernization drags after it'.³³

Notes

- 1 The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 prompted the Cuban state to declare a 'special period in times of peace' in September 1990, in an attempt to rebuild the Cuban economy through policies promoting self-sufficiency in food, the reintroduction of wide-scale rationing, the earning of hard currency through tourism, and the re-entry of Cuba into a global economy.
- 2 Hip-hop is a movement that includes breakdancing, graffiti writing, DJing and the verbal component known as rapping. DJing and graffiti writing have been difficult in Cuba because of the lack of turntables, records, spray cans and the other resources necessary for these practices, although some Cuban DJs have managed to improvise with cassettes. But breakdancing and rapping became much more popular in the context of Cuba.
- 3 While 'conscious' rap refers to socially aware rap musicians, 'underground' refers to a certain style that is usually adopted by conscious rappers. In underground rap, certain rappers form an allegiance to each other and the movement as a whole in an effort to keep their form pure and untainted by commercial dictates, or even by mixture with other musical forms. In the US, 'underground' rappers do not always identify as 'conscious' but in Cuba, rappers who adopt the English word 'underground' generally use it to define both a political orientation and a musical style.
- 4 Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).
- 5 Ci Jiwei, *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution: from Utopianism to Hedonism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).
- 6 Alejandro De la Fuente, *A Nation For All: Race, Inequality and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba*

(Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1994). Race relations in Cuba differ considerably from experiences of race in the North American context. See for instance Peter Wade, *Blackness and Race Mixture: The Dynamics of Racial Identity in Colombia* (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993). According to Wade, race in Latin America is characterized by a complex interweaving of patterns of discrimination and tolerance that cannot be understood by reference to forms of racial identity in the North American context. De la Fuente corroborates this account of the contradictory nature of race relations in Latin America, arguing that while discourses of racial fraternity in Cuba minimized claims for justice made by black populations, the more fluid understanding of race that such discourses made possible also opened up avenues for the participation of blacks in mainstream cultural life. However, it is particularly in contexts of crisis such as special period Cuba that racial inequalities, stereotypes and prejudices re-emerge in ways that promote racial conflict and restrict the options open to blacks for work and advancement.

- 7 Alejandro De la Fuente, op. cit., p. 319.
- 8 Alejandro De la Fuente, op. cit., p. 320.
- 9 Alejandro De la Fuente, op. cit., p. 321.
- 10 Alejandro De la Fuente, op. cit., p. 326.
- 11 For a discussion of race and black nationalism in Cuban hip-hop see my article, 'Fear of a Black Nation: Local Rappers, Transnational Crossings, and State Power in Contemporary Cuba', forthcoming in *Anthropological Quarterly*.
- 12 Mimi Valdés, 'The Big Payback', *Vibe*, February 2002.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ariel Fernández, 'SBS. ¿Timba con Rap? El hip hop de la polémica', *Revista Salsa Cubana*, 5/17 (2002), p. 43.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 See Deborah Pacini Hernandez, 'Dancing with the Enemy: Cuban Popular Music, Race, Authenticity, and the World-Music Landscape', *Latin American Perspectives*, 100/25 (1998), pp. 110–125. Pacini Hernández describes how, in the 1990s, non-Western music 'had become an established and increasingly profitable niche within the international music industry', op. cit. p. 112. She argues that once it became legal to distribute Cuban music in the lucrative US market, producers began developing marketing strategies to meet the diverse aesthetic preferences of American consumers, op. cit. p. 120.
- 18 Alejandro De la Fuente, op. cit., p. 320.
- 19 *Jineterismo* has evolved from a spontaneous activity into an organized system, which is divided into established zones, with *puntos* (points of contact) who buy off the police in order to establish their territory. See for instance, Hannah Elinson, 'Cuba's *Jineteros*: Youth Culture and Revolutionary Ideology', in *Cuba Briefing Series Papers*, No. 20 (Washington, DC: Center for Latin American Studies, Georgetown University, 1999). However, *jineterismo* is still a fairly undefined activity that can include romances such as those of women who date foreign men to support their families, or someone with a car driving around tourists for a fee.
- 20 Robin Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), p. 75.
- 21 Ben Corbett, *This is Cuba: An Outlaw Culture Survives* (Cambridge, MA: Westview Press, 2002), p. 125.
- 22 Gina Ulysse, 'Uptown Ladies and Downtown Women: Female Representations of Class and Color in Jamaica', in *Representations of Blackness and the Performance of Identities*, ed. by Jean Muteba Rahier (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1999), p. 158.
- 23 Ulysse, op. cit., p. 159.
- 24 Gayle Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex', in *Toward an Anthropology of Women's Liberation*, ed. by Rayna Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press: New York, 1975), pp. 157–210.
- 25 Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London and New York: Methuen, 1979), p. 3.
- 26 'Rap, Tiramós La Primera Piedra', *El Habanero*, 3 August 1999.
- 27 Rappers in the US also draw on associations with the enemy as a way of talking back to the state. During the 1991 Gulf War, American rapper Paris claimed in one of his songs that, 'Iraq never called me "nigger" '.
- 28 Personal conversation, 9 May 2001.

- 29 Katherine Verdery, op. cit. p. 28.
- 30 Kevin Latham, 'Rethinking Chinese Consumption: Social Palliatives and the Rhetorics of Transition in Postsocialist China', in *Postsocialism: Ideals, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia*, ed. by Chris Hann (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 230.
- 31 Mimi Valdés, op. cit.
- 32 'Orishas: El aché a través del hip-hop', *El Caimán Barbudo* (2000) pp. 6–9.
- 33 Martín Hopenhayn, *No Apocalypse, No Integration: Modernism and Postmodernism in Latin America* (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2001), p. 132.

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