

Andrea Lloyd
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Professor Joshua Heuman

Finding Cuban Identity through *Raperos*

In 1962, the US-Cuba Embargo becomes official. Repercussions ripple throughout the Cuban nation. U.S. and Cuba have been intertwined economically since the Monroe Doctrine in 1823 to the Platt Amendment in 1903 to the final Foreign Assistance Act in 1962 (Sweig, 2012). Escalating tensions didn't truly begin to disseminate until Obama announced plans to normalize relationships with Cuba in December of 2014 (Acosta, 2014). In those fifty four years, the US Embassy was closed, along with access to American products. However, this did not prevent American influence on the island.

In the 1980s, Florida radio and television waves reach the shores of Cuba, bringing the sound of rap and the sights of breakdancing (Cuban Hip-Hop). Local *Afrourbanos* resonated with the genre, and began to create their own underground music scene (Cuban Hip Hop). The 1990s begin and Alamar, a *barrio* of Havana, has become the birthplace of *rap de Cubano*. By 1999, the Cuban government declares Cuban Hip-Hop as an "authentic expression of Cuban Culture" (Umlaf, 2002). With a change of heart concerning to the nation's growing *raperos* community, the government began the *Agencia Cubana de Rap* to promote resources for registered *raperos*, for the small price of censorship of some raps (Cuban Hip Hop; Edward, 2016; Fernandes, 2011). The government promotes creating a Cuban identity with rap, but the *Afrourbanos* sought to create a self-identity separate from the governmental intentions.

Ultimately this complex relationship between the *cubano raperos*' and the Cuban government's differing goals leads to the question of how the Cuban hip-hop revolution creates identity for the *raperos* and the *cubanos*.

Before the birth of Cuban rap, we need to understand the parent of the genre. Gangsta Rap, beginning with Schoolly D in 1984 with “Gangster Boogie” (Last.fm), dominated the 1990’s hip-hop music sphere, romanticizing urban outlaw lifestyles (Gates, 2008). The music in general was most popular among the ghettos of inner cities and rebellious suburbs (Gates, 2008). The genre typically features lyrics explicitly portraying violence, hostility, and the drug use of urban gang life (Gangsta Rap). Each of these typical topics expands into different topics. “Gangsta Gangsta,” a 1988 hit single written by Ice Cube, conveys both the appealing and dangerous sides of a gangster lifestyle in Compton, California (Genius). This song shares details about -- apolitics, weed, cocaine, sex, rape, fights, death, jail, and prison -- a general abstract of a gangster lifestyle (Genius). Some of the lyrics draw from Ice Cube’s personal experience of jail time and dedication to his gang; others, such as smoking weed and cocaine, comes from the hip-hop persona he portrays for the song (Genius); many hip hop artists create fake identities in order to create stronger verse for commercial reasons. The gangsta rap genre is not limited to Ice Cube, but expands to the other 90s rap/hip-hop artists who craft the genre such as: Tupac, Ice - T, Snoop Dogg, and Notorious B.I.G. (Cuban Hip Hop). Miami Florida’s radio stations WEDR 99 Jamz and WHQT Hot 105 played these artists on the air waves often; the FM waves travelled across the Caribbean Seas, reaching the coat hanger antennas of Cuban residents waiting to receive it (Olavarria, 2002).

The hip-hop signals from Jamz 99 and Hot 105 plays strongest in a *barrio* east of Havana called Alamar, 228 miles southwest of their Miami origins, resonating with local *AfroCubanos* (Cuban Hip Hop; Distance to Havana from Miami). With racial exclusion in public places from the Cuban government officials towards the *AfroCubanos*, small gatherings begin with American hip-hop Jamz playing at the *bonches*, underground hip-hop house parties (Cuban Hip Hop).

Bonches were the seeds of the emerging rap community. *Moneros*, Spanish for dark-skinned and Cuban slang for “blacks,” were the main participants in *bonches*. They sought to create their own rap music. Despite the lack of equipment, *moneros* aspiring to share their lives through rap, and began to creating “bootleg US hip hop instrumentals on cassette tapes” to start their own underground music scene (Cuban Hip Hop; Edward, 2016). If not available to cassette tapes, *morenos* turned to their local instruments to mimic the sounds on the radio. This added to the Cuban *rapero* identity, making rap more personal than imitation. In the beginning, Cuban literature was often drawn upon for themes in *morenos*’ raps; This was pushed by Pablo Herrera, a professor of English at the University of Havana and the local rap producer (Fernandes, 2011). Allusions to literature and history is how *rap de Cubano* diverges into highbrow art while gangsta rap continues as lowbrow music (Fernandes, 2011). For example, *Tengo*, as rapped by *Hermanos De Causa*, was reworked from a 1964 poem that “praised the achievements of the revolution for blacks,” which were disappearing in ‘90s Cuba life (Fernandes, 2011). As the rap community grows, *rapero* concerts and *bonches* continue to grow in popularity and size; the gatherings were seen as American-capitalist influences and were closed often by the police when found (Olavarria, 2002). Despite negative pressure and discouraging actions from the government, hip hop continues to grow. Alamar became the *rapero* capital of Cuba.

The Cuban rap scene continued to develop, with more oppression from the Cuban government. Sometime around 1999, Fidel Castro was introduced to the sounds via Abel Prieto, Cuban’s minister of culture (Cuban Hip Hop). Following the initial introduction, Castro is said to call Cuban hip hop the “vanguard of the revolution” and Prieto calls hip hop “an authentic expression of Cuban culture” (Umlaf, 2002). Prior to this moment, the government’s actions did not technically endorse, support, or forbid hip-hop. Now with the approval of Castro, movements

towards creating the *Agencia Cubana de Rap*. The goal of the governmental agency is to promote *raperos* and Cuban culture through providing performance venues, recording spaces, paychecks, and ration books for registered *raperos* (Cuban Hip Hop; Edward, 2016). The price of being a registered *raperos* is limited lyrical topics from criticizing the government and ideologies (Cuban Hip Hop; Edward, 2016). As established earlier, gangsta rap often include politics, apolitics, economics, social issues, and rebellion. (Canton, 2006). Without the *Agencia Cubana de Rap*, “there was no money to be made from hip hop” unlike in other nations like Japan and America (Edward, 2016). This left an unspoken ultimatum with the hip hop community: young *raperos* must choose between fighting “the good (revolutionary) fight and greener pastures,” meaning they must leave the country to rap as they choose or give in the censorship and paychecks (Fernandes, 2011; Perry, 2008). Despite the goals of the agency, censorship promoted innovation. Metaphors, allusions, and ambiguity were used to hide intended meanings of songs and promote a faulty connotations. *Obsesión*, an *Afro cubano* rap-band, often defends songs with hidden agendas of voicing Cuban problems. Magia Lopez, one of the rappers from the group, defended a song by stating it was about “capitalist countries”; the song is actually about the struggles of prostitutes in the *barrios* of Havana (Fernandes, 2011). Although hidden meanings of songs can be argued, the government still subsidizes and supports her rap group.

Nehanda Abiodun, a US Black Liberation Army activist in political exile in Cuba, became involved with Cuban rappers in 1990 at the same time when Cuban raps began to emerge (Cuban Hip Hop; Olavarria, 2002). Initially, she was worried about blind imitation of US gangsta rap -- the aggressive, violent, and misogynistic lyrics didn't match the Cuban realities. In order to expose more progressive-style raps to the island, Abiodun organized the Malcolm X

Grassroots Movement. US progressive rappers such as the Roots, dead prez, Mos Def, and Fat Joe, all performed for the *Cubano raperos* in Alamar. The introduction to new styles introduced an idea of conscious, politicized rap to the island. In 1995, the first *Festival de Rap Cubano* was held in Alamar, primarily organized by local rappers, the Roots, and Mos Def. A member of the rap group *Grupo Uno* who helped organized the event, believed that the festival would help legitimize the genre and avoid political pitfalls. They next year another festival was held; the *cubano raperos* began using rap to ease and vocalize frustrations in their communities such as: racism, prostitution, social stratification, and other social problems (Edwards).

Much of the *rapero* community embodies the cultural aspects from their Afro-Hispanic heritage. The majority of rap acts perform in duos, trios, or collectives, but rarely a solo act. This parallels with the interdependent community, working together to overcome the hardships they face: “food shortages, electricity blackouts, and telephone breakdowns” (Levinson, 2016). Using rap as a vehicle for change, *raperos* bring awareness of issues in the community and their perspectives on it.

Despite demanding controls of the socialist government, Cuban rap is becoming more popular. The once local impromptu festival is now boasting an internationally acclaimed competitive twenty-year anniversary (Cuban Hip Hop). The ingenuity and innovation seen in daily Cuban life continues to follow into the music as they avoid censorships. When viewing what was once gangsta rap imitation has travelled so far. The everyday identities that shape their individuals have grown up to shape their music as well. As we watch Cuba grow into a stronger nation, we will find *Cubano*-style rap growing in America, coming full circle. The Roots, who went to Cuba in 1995, helped produce and perform the recent musical about a Caribbean immigrant to America, Alexander Hamilton (Cuban Hip Hop; Evans, 2015). The revolutionary

musical draws musical tendencies from the revolutionary Caribbean rap subgenre. The identity that has come to define Cuba has begun to recapture the American heart. With the mending relations of American and Cuban governments, our political and musical futures are bound to become intertwined as they were before.

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