

**Cuba “Underground”:
Los Aldeanos, Cuban Hip-Hop and Youth Culture**

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The genre most frequently mentioned in U.S. university textbooks and anthologies when discussing Cuba’s recent musical production is the *nueva trova*, which developed soon after Fidel Castro came to power. The first edition of *Más allá de las palabras* (2004), to cite just one example of an intermediate Spanish language textbook, uses the *trovistas* Pablo Milanés and Silvio Rodríguez as examples of “contemporary” Cuban musical artists (204). Books on Cuba aimed at monolingual English speakers also depend largely on the *nueva trova* when attempting to present Cuba’s current musical production. *The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (2003), an anthology of texts dating back to Columbus, uses samples from Silvio Rodríguez’s music on two occasions, in a chapter dedicated to the international aspects and impact of the Cuban Revolution and once again in a chapter dedicated to Cuba after the fall of the Soviet Union.

Without discounting the artistic merit and endurance of the *nueva trova* or the numerous *trovistas*, the use of this music (the heyday of which was primarily in the 1960s to early 1980s) as a cultural marker for Cuban culture today seems distinctly anachronistic. It would be analogous to using music from World War II era United States to describe the events and sentiments of the 1960s. Even Carlos Varela – also an excellent *trovista*, though of a later generation – seems slightly outdated in terms of his connection to the feelings of the youth that constitute Cuba’s future. Other musical expressions have taken root in Cuba since the inception of the *nueva trova*, most recently hip hop and reggaetón. This study will focus on hip hop rather than reggaetón principally due to the former’s more lyrically interesting content. I will focus primarily on the lyrical content of one compilation album which features some of Cuba’s best

known hip hop acts and on songs by the hip hop group, Los Aldeanos. Through the discussion of these I hope to foreground the tension that exists between the transnational aspects of Cuban hip hop and hip hop's journalistic qualities. These issues are an intrinsic part of Cuban hip hop's present and future as both a social and artistic movement. I argue that the complex political and social nature of the movement and the artistic worth of the material make it a valuable addition to any discussion of today's Cuba.

Bián Rodríguez Gala (a.k.a. El B., at times pronounced El Bi in Spanish) and Aldo Rodríguez Baquero (a.k.a. El Aldeano), who together comprise the duo known as Los Aldeanos, have jointly or independently released at least sixteen albums since their formation in February 2003.¹ Although Los Aldeanos have been described as “one of Cuba's best known underground hip-hop acts” (Neill), their music has not received much discussion in the extant academic literature on hip hop in Cuba. Like much Cuban hip hop, Los Aldeanos' homemade CDs may be found in Cuba if one knows the right people (Neill), but outside of Cuba their music is much more difficult to find in traditional formats. The Internet provides Cuban artists with a venue through which to make their music available beyond the island. Access to the Internet in Cuba, as many in Cuba can attest to and as is well documented in various studies, is restricted through various policies and methods.² Despite this, material by artists within the country is often posted on the Internet by others outside the country on sites such as *You Tube* or personal blogs and web pages. Even musical groups that are extremely critical of the Revolution, such the punk band

¹ For a discography of Los Aldeanos' musical output, please consult “Los Aldeanos - Discografía Completa 2003-2009” in the Works Cited page.

² On the topic of access to the Internet in Cuba, please see *Open Networks, Closed Regimes: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule* (2003) by Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor Boas, the chapter by John Côté titled “Cubans Log On behind Castro's Back” in *Capitalism, God, and a Good Cigar: Cuba Enters the Twenty-first Century* (2005) and Fernando J. Ruiz's “Medios de comunicación alternativa y dictaduras en transición: Cuba en perspectiva comparada” in *Cuba hoy y mañana: Actores e instituciones de una política en transición* (2005). Though far broader in scope, the report released in late 2009 by Human Rights Watch titled “New Castro, Same Cuba: Political Prisoners in the Post-Fidel Era” also includes references to ways in which government policies limit Internet use in Cuba today.

Porno para Ricardo, have videos posted on *You Tube* of songs such as “El Comandante,” in which Fidel Castro very explicitly is told to not eat so much dick (Porno). Los Aldeanos’ music and videos may be found on *You Tube* as well, but they – like Porno para Ricardo – also have a page on *My Space*. It is with this page that I would like to begin my discussion of the real and virtual contexts in which their music is developed and marketed, and the implications this has for the music itself and for a discussion of today’s Cuba.

Up until June of 2009, Los Aldeanos’ *My Space* web page offered us the opportunity to listen to Los Aldeanos’ music, buy a CD and DVD, read more about Los Aldeanos and read comments written on the page by others. The text on that page about Los Aldeanos emphasized their qualities of resistance and rebellion:

Este duo (sic) valiente de Nuevo Vedado demuestra cada día más que se puede combatir a la tiranía y que las verdades en ráfaga lírica (sic) le hacen realmente mucho daño a la Dictadura de Fidel Castro. (“Los Aldeanos”)

(This brave duo from Nuevo Vedado demonstrates each day that it is possible to battle the tyranny and that truths in lyrical torrents truly do much harm to Fidel Castro’s dictatorship.)³

This characterization of Los Aldeanos’ lyrical content was placed to the right of an advertisement for *Hip-Hop Cubano: The Inventos Mix Tape*, a CD compilation of Cuban hip hop

³ All transcriptions and translations are my own. Any errors in either are also my own. All song and album titles referred to in this work are believed to be accurate. Los Aldeanos’ music has been made available at a number of sites online. The lack of access to an official, orthodox, mass produced “album,” however, increases the possibility that song titles are improperly spelled and that they are attributed improperly to an album. This particular text was on Los Aldeanos’ *My Space* since at least December 2007, but was removed in mid 2009 at the petition of Los Aldeanos’ production company, Emetrece Productions, located in Minneapolis, MN. According to Melissa Riviere, director of Emetrece Productions and current producer and representative for Los Aldeanos, that web page was created without Los Aldeanos’ knowledge. Due in part to concerns about the possible repercussions the content on the page could have for Los Aldeanos in Cuba, *My Space* agreed to intervene and allow Emetrece Productions to take control of the web page. The content discussed here is therefore no longer available on Los Aldeanos’ *My Space* page. The ad for the *Inventos* mix-tape and documentary DVD were also removed at the same time.

featured in Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi's documentary *Inventos: Hip Hop Cubano*, produced and sold by Clenched Fist Productions. Despite the fact that there are no songs by Los Aldeanos on this CD, it was the only CD for sale on Los Aldeanos' *My Space* web page. The image on the cover of the CD very clearly conveyed its Cuban content via the use of the flag and the *campesino* style hat, its hip hop nature via the microphone and the graffiti lettering, and the elements of resistance and rebellion common to both hip hop and external perceptions of Cuba since the Revolution via its use of a raised fist.

Resistance and rebellion are qualities that are associated both with the contents of this CD and with Los Aldeanos' music, and this may account for both being on the same *My Space* web page. There are, however, significant differences in terms of what is being resisted and rebelled against, at least if one believes the characterization of Los Aldeanos' music in the text provided on the page. The text on Los Aldeanos' page speaks of that group's resistance to the Castro dictatorship. The songs on the *Inventos* CD address injustice in a more abstract and global sense, focused primarily on issues related to the African diaspora and race relations. The first song on the CD begins with drums and a song to the Yoruba deity Eleggua, followed by a more typical rap rhythm over which a rapper intones – in English – “Hold the mike like Fidel Castro,” repeating in verse the symbolic message on the CD's cover by conflating the image of Fidel Castro with that of an MC. The song eventually segues into the salsa rhythm of “La vida es un carnaval” (“Life is a Carnival”), the song made famous by Celia Cruz (though the version on this CD is not Celia's), only to have that song interrupted by someone declaring: “¡Para!...eso no es / es sobre Inventos / hip hop cubano” (Stop that / That's not what it is / It's about *Inventos* / Cuban hip hop). Another voice – again in English – calls out “Clenched Fist Productions.” The effect is of a clear distancing from marketed, popular images of Cuban culture even as this distancing is

itself marketed in a very direct manner via the reference to the compilation album's title and its production company.

In this second song, "Asere" by Anónimo Consejo, references are made to unity between Cuba and Puerto Rico, the Puerto Rican island of Vieques, and to the "cinco hermanos en prisión," ("five brothers in prison," a reference to five Cubans currently held in U.S. jails after having been found guilty of spying). Magia, one of Cuba's better known female hip hop artists, is also featured in the song echoing themes of the Cuban government's own discourse when she claims herself to be "justa como reforma agraria" ("fair like agrarian reform"). A number of the songs are hardly about Cuba at all. The groups EPG y B and Grandes Ligas collaborate on a song about Latin America as a continent oppressed by "un estado al norte" ("a nation to the north"). The song begins by making reference to Antonio Maceo, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King and others, ending the litany with "y nuestro ejemplo vivo: Free Mumia!" ("And our living example: Free Mumia!"), using the slogan "Free Mumia" to refer to Mumia Abu Jamal. Another song is dedicated to Assata Shakur, the ex-Black Panther who was tried and convicted in the U.S. for murder but who, after her escape from prison in 1979, sought and obtained political asylum in Cuba on grounds of having been persecuted by the FBI COINTELPRO operation. The song is performed by hip hop artists associated with the Black August Hip Hop Project, a group which defends black freedom fighters and political prisoners of the U.S., and includes snippets from an interview in English with Shakur on the concept of freedom.

The song fades into "Shout out to Comrades," by the U.S. rap group Dead Prez. This song – called "a revolutionary salute" by the artists – is also in English and mentions figures that, each in their respective contexts, have been part of insurrections against a status quo. In addition to Nehanda Abiodun (a U.S. expatriate who, as Rob Sharp explains in an article for the *New*

Statesman, some consider to be the godmother of rap in Cuba), the song makes references to Leonard Peltier, the Black Liberation Army, the Zapatistas, the Mau Mau, the tupamaros and others, accompanied by the sounds of a gun being cocked. The song concludes “African people around the world unite / you know what I’m saying / one aim, one struggle, one gun,” collapsing all these representatives and insurrectionary movements as part of a quest for justice on a global scale which the Cuban government has at least publicly defended and with which the CD’s producers attempt to associate Cuban hip hop. The song immediately after, “Ashe”, addresses Cuban history as it goes through a short litany of leaders of slave revolts, the Cuban wars for independence and “mártires” [martyrs] of the Partido Independiente de Color (The Independent Party of Color), the proposal of which led to a war in 1912 in which thousands of Cubans – mostly black – were killed.⁴ The song’s chorus borrows the identity politics of the Partido Independiente de Color by stating its identity not in national but rather in ethnic terms: “Afrocubano soy yo.”⁵

Clearly, rap is a transnational phenomenon that subverts linguistic divisions and the traditional discourses of borders and the nation. However, the avoidance of specific, contemporary local references and issues that have a direct and concrete impact on the lives of the Cubans rapping on the *Inventos* CD is noteworthy. This avoidance foregrounds how the universalizing nature of diasporic narratives of resistance can be co-opted by governments and promoters for purposes other than the resolution of issues pertinent to the inhabitants of that particular locality, in this case the younger generation in Cuba. “The development of Cuba’s ‘Revolutionary’ ‘rap discourse,’” notes Geoff Baker, “was shaped by an exiled American in Havana [Abiodun], a transnational collective [Black August], and by visiting U.S. conscious

⁴ For a detailed discussion of this topic, see Aline Helg’s *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886-1912*.

⁵ A longer version of this song appears on *Anónimo Consejo*’s album *Hablando de algo* (2007).

rappers” (Baker 383). As stated in an article on Cuban rap published in *Workers World*, Cuban rappers thanked Harry Belafonte for a conversation he had with Fidel Castro and Minister of Culture Abel Prieto which led to the government establishing a studio and a special division for hip hop in the Ministry of Culture (Hales). Indeed, this confluence of the government, the CD producers and Cuban hip hop aficionados and artists’ interests becomes manifest on the *Inventos* CD; immediately after an announcement urging listeners to buy the CD at the production company’s web site, one can hear the voice of Ariel Fernández, the person who at one time was considered Cuba’s “National Hip Hop Promoter.”⁶ The government’s “assistance” to hip hop, to use Harry Belafonte’s word for it (Hales), came with a price: Soandry, one of the rappers who performs on *Inventos*, states in the film *East of Havana* that Cuban authorities vetted song lyrics prior to performances at festivals held in Havana. Judging from the temerity with which any blame is assailed at Cuba’s government on the *Inventos* CD for problems presently confronting Cubans in Cuba, it’s not difficult to surmise that such oversight of hip hop’s artistic freedom has not been limited to festivals. Indeed, Cuban Rap Agency head Susana García Amaros said as much in a New York Times article of December 2006: “We don’t have songs on a record that speak badly of the revolution...That doesn’t make sense” (Lacey).

The very nature of rap, however, would seem to posit it in an antagonistic relationship with any government intervention. As Chuck D is reputed to have said, rap is black America’s CNN (Chang 251). Alan West-Durán extends Chuck D’s observation to Cuba, but expands the

⁶ This is the term used in the biography of Ariel Fernández posted at his web site. Fernández now resides in the U.S. and gives lectures on various topics, including the hip hop movement in Cuba. Geoffrey Baker argues that the representation of Cuban hip hop as having been “co-opted” by the state is too reductive. As evidence of the reductive nature of such arguments, Baker cites the sometimes contradictory perspectives and policies that the Cuban government has had towards the hip hop movement and the benefits different parties accrue from the collaboration between artists and the government. Ariel Fernández’s attempts to promote hip hop were, in effect, part of an ongoing dialogue between hip hop enthusiasts on the island and various other agents, including the Cuban government and foreign intermediaries. Nonetheless, the very fact that some of the groups featured on *Inventos* were allowed to travel outside of Cuba is a clear indication of government approval of the project.

concept: “In Cuba, where the media is state controlled and heavily censored, rap (and Cuban rock to a lesser degree) is not only African-Cubans’ CNN, but every Cuban’s CNN” (West-Durán 17). The group La Fabrika indicates something similar on one of the songs in the *Inventos* CD: “es el contexto el que me hace los textos” (“it’s the context that makes the text for me”). Accordingly, the compromising of hip hop’s journalistic quality in such a context converts the issue from a purely aesthetic one to one of national importance because, in essence, it deals with the concepts of freedom of the press and of personal expression in general. The artists themselves become complicit in the censorship. The limitations imposed on the genre for either political or marketing purposes are manipulations to which the hip hop artists themselves must acquiesce if they are to be produced, distributed and heard in what Fernando J. Ruiz has called Cuba’s post-totalitarian state (Ruiz “Medios” 204). Yet as has been said by both Leonardo Padura Fuentes and Amir Valle – two of Cuba’s most renowned authors and both disaffected journalists who turned to fiction as, ironically, a way to more accurately chronicle life on the island – Cuba is in dire need of honest, uncompromising, unmediated journalism (Padura 34-35; Valle 159-61). Much as Padura and Valle do in their fictional narratives, it is this need that Los Aldeanos address in their music, which is produced independently and distributed without government support. Indeed, Los Aldeanos repeatedly refer to themselves and their art as part of an “underground” that expresses, as Aldo says in the song “Chie Chie,” “lo que la prensa se traga” (“what the press swallows,” or keeps silent about).

Many of Los Aldeanos’ songs, including those that were readily available on Los Aldeanos’ *My Space* web page until mid 2009, undermine the moral authority of the Cuban Revolution and by extension that of those who – as on *Inventos* – fail to critique it. They do this by questioning the very idea of revolution in the name of social justice that the producers of

Inventos associate with the Cuban government. As expressed in the song “Libertad de expresión” (“Freedom of Expression”), those in power “hablan de revolución y no tienen ni noción de esto” (“speak of revolution but have no notion of what this is”). The critiques in this particular song by Los Aldeanos are pointed and direct, addressing specific policies and practices of the Cuban government in a way which none of the songs on the *Inventos* CD do, almost flaunting the right to speak out against the government. Cuba’s “free” university education is revealed to have a cost: “Aquí te dan / la oportunidad / de estudiar gratuitamente / en la universidad / pero a decir verdad / esto es un chantaje tapiñado / porque después tienes que / trabajarle dos años al estado” (“Here they give you / the opportunity / to study for free / at the university / but in truth / this is a well disguised scam / because later you have to / work two years for the government”). Cuba’s agreements with Venezuela under Hugo Chávez are vulgarly dismissed: “Venezuela a Cuba le coge el culo” (“Venezuela fucks Cuba up the ass”). Recent ventures into capitalism by the Cuban military such as Gaviota S.A. and transnational agreements between the military – which is under Raúl Castro’s control – and companies such as the hotel chain Meliá are also critiqued, as are semi-autonomous private companies such as Caracol S.A., a “dollar” store where customers could not use the national currency to purchase goods.⁷ The persistence of discrimination against people from the eastern part of the island is also commented upon: “Así que la Universidad es para todos / menos para los orientales” (“So the university is for everybody / except for the *orientales*”).⁸ The directness of “Libertad de expresión” is hardly an anomaly in Los Aldeanos’ *oeuvre*. The accusation of discrimination on the part of those in power is brought up again in the wholly scatological “Me cago,” in which Los Aldeanos shit on, among other things, “corruptos

⁷ The Cuban government’s policies toward the dollar have changed over the years. For a discussion of this topic which focuses roughly on the period discussed in “Libertad de expresión,” see “Cuba’s ‘New’ Peso Food Chain: Linkages and Implications for U.S. Exporters” by James E. Ross and María Antonia Fernández Mayo.

⁸ The term “orientales” refers to people from the Eastern part of the island.

militares / los cuatro canales nacionales ... en el estado y en tu racismo disimulado” (“corrupt members of the military / the four national channels...on the State and on your dissimulated racism”). Los Aldeanos’ lyrics are reflective of the feelings that lead to either immigration, apathy or dissent. As they state in “Libertad de expresión”: “Este tu niño... Se cansó de tanto engaño / Y sin conciencia descargó / La calma por la taza del baño / Hace años” (This little boy of yours / Grew tired of so much trickery / And without a second thought flushed / His patience down the toilet / Years ago”). Such sentiments, and the directness with which they are expressed, make the characterization of Los Aldeanos’ music on the *My Space* web page until mid-2009 seem to have been fairly accurate.

The concepts of revolution, rebellion and resistance with which both the artists on the *Inventos* CD and Los Aldeanos seek to associate themselves (and which in a sense explains the presence of both on the same web page despite their different approaches to their art), present a problem for Los Aldeanos in particular because of the “revolutionary” context in which they seek to effect their own revolution. Los Aldeanos’ lyrics expose the association between a revolution for social justice and the Cuban revolution as merely the public transcript of a ruling elite, to use James C. Scott’s terminology (Scott 18). In so doing, El B. and Aldo of Los Aldeanos practice the adversarial position of investigative reporters as discussed by Theodore Glasser and James S. Ettema. In their analysis of the conflict between adversarialism and objectivity in investigative journalism dating back to the penny press and the muckraking tradition in journalism, Glasser and Ettema point out that for a transgression to be *proven* a transgression requires the objectification of moral standards, which consists of the standard’s conversion from a subjective and thus questionable individual claim to an objective, empirical claim. The conversion is achieved through the appeal to “some self-evidently credible moral

authority” (10), which generally include the law, formalized codes or guidelines, recognized expertise, normality as established by statistics or other measures, or common decency. The conflation of social justice with resistance and the need for change common to the songs on *Inventos* and Los Aldeanos’ music leaves only one “self-evidently credible moral authority” to fall back on: the need for change implied by the concept of revolution. For this reason, the question of who truly speaks on behalf of revolution is contested ground between Cuban rappers. But the very notion of what the term denotes is also in question. Los Aldeanos’ revolution finds its “self-evidently credible moral authority” in a perhaps idealized past, the nature of which is ambiguous at best but to which a return – a revolution – is apparently desired. In “Enemigos del presente” Los Aldeanos offer a meticulously detailed analysis of an “hoy en día” (“today”) that is repeatedly contrasted with an “antes” (“before”): “recuerdo que antes éramos personas / pero hoy en día somos calculadoras” (“I remember that before we were people / but today we are calculators”).

The nature of that “antes” (“before”) in Los Aldeanos’ music is questionable, and puts into question the nature of the “presente” or “hoy en día” of the song. While at times, as in the previous quote, “antes” seems to reflect a pre-Soviet Union collapse Cuba in which the mechanisms of a market economy were not as visible, the description of present decadence makes the past it refers to seem to indicate a more generalized prelapsarian past, as in the following passage from “Mi filosofía”:

Hoy en día nos maltratamos, pisamos, culpamos,
 nos creemos amos y no frenamos nuestros reclamos;
 nos usamos, nos satisfacemos sin sentidos vínculos,
 Eva piensa con la alcancía, Adán con los testículos

(Today we mistreat, step on, blame each other,
 We believe ourselves masters and don't cease our demands;
 We use each other, we satisfy ourselves without heartfelt ties,
 Eve thinks with her piggy bank, Adam with his testicles)

A similar generalized sense of decadence from an idealized past is expressed in “¿Adónde vamos a parar?”: “*Man, ¿adónde vamos a parar? / Ya no se regalan rosas / Ya no se dan serenatas / Ni se expresa amor en prosa / Ya no se dice ‘Te invito / Sino ‘Vamos a formar cosa’ / Tampoco se dice ‘Te quiero’ / Sino ‘Mi casa es grandiosa’*” (“*Man, ¿where are we heading? / No one gives roses anymore / No one gives serenades / No one expresses their love in prose / No one says ‘I’ll pay for you’ / But rather ‘Let’s go mess someone up’ / No one says ‘I love you’ / But rather ‘My house is grand’*”). The ambiguity of the “antes” referred to in both songs is supported by a general feeling of nostalgia for the past that runs through Los Aldeanos’ lyrics, as in the lyrics of “Infancia Virtual,” which bemoans the rise of video game culture and its effect on children and “la aldea”: “*No hay un niño que toque una puerta y se mande a correr.../ se desliza con tristeza la brisa / en busca de risas / infantiles / lleva el pesar en su prisa / y pisa adoquines / buscando chiquitines / para secar su sudor / mientras sus tiernas miradas se las traga un monitor*” (“*There’s no child knocking on a door and running off.../ the breeze slides sadly / in search of the laughter / of children / it carries its sorrow in its haste / and steps on the cobblestones / in search of little ones / to cool off their sweat / while their tender stares are swallowed by a monitor*”). Los Aldeanos’ songs clearly express a feeling that something has been lost in Cuba. When that something was lost, however, seems to shift depending on the topic being addressed in each song.

Los Aldeanos’ lyrics add an aesthetic element to this feeling of loss as they posit their “Real Hip Hop” against the hip hop of those who – in the parlance of capitalism – “sell out.” In

“Mandamos a parar,” a song from their album *Poesía esposada* (2004) they very pointedly comment that they’re not willing to help “Susana...opacar la urbana poesía cubana” (“Susana...cloud over Cuba’s urban poetry”) – referring to the aforementioned Susana García Amaros, the head of the Cuban Rap Agency – and berate Anónimo Consejo’s MC’s, authors of the song “Hip Hop Revolución,” for their lack of artistry.⁹ In words that evoke Chuck D’s own words, Los Aldeanos claim to be different from groups such as Anónimo Consejo because they have kept themselves “más reales que los reportajes de la CNN / hablando lo que viven / no lo que conviene” (“more real than the reports from CNN / speaking about what they go through in life / not what’s convenient to say”) (“Mandamos a parar”). Los Aldeanos are also critical of Cuban artists who censor the extent of their critiques of the government in exchange for favors such as permission to travel outside of the country: “Mira / Los mayores gusanos son / los que cuidan su expresión / Sí, éstos que cantan a favor de nuestra revolución / A muchos de éstos en mi Cuba se les ha dado promoción / Y al final se van de gira y no vuelven a la nación” (“Look / The greatest traitors are / those who watch what they say / Yes, those who sing in favor of our revolution / Many of these in my Cuba have been promoted / and in the end they go on tour and don’t come back to the nation”) (“Libertad de expresión”).¹⁰ The duo’s strong attacks against other hip hop groups are based on the idea that such hip hop is essentially insincere, as El. B

⁹ Geoffrey Baker makes a similar observation about Los Aldeanos’ critique of Anónimo Consejo in “Mandamos a parar” based on a version of that song performed by the duo at the 10th Havana Hip Hip Festival in August of 2004 (Baker 368, 381).

¹⁰ This also is not an isolated instance. Los Aldeanos differentiate themselves from other groups on the same grounds in “Mandamos a parar”: “Entre mis planes no está retirarme sino situarme en / la diminuta lista de verdaderos MCs / que no hacen hip hop solamente para salir del país” (“My plans don’t include retiring but becoming one of / the few real MCs / who don’t make hip hop only to leave the country”). Such comments, which are both aesthetic and political, are common in their repertoire. It should be noted that Los Aldeanos’ critiques are often directed at the Cuban government’s promotion of less lyrically problematic music. In “Pésima conducta” Aldo is critical of the Puerto Rican reggaetón duo Wisin y Yandel’s repeated appearances on Cuban musical shows. Accusations of racism in general on the part of those making decisions for television programming in Cuba form the backdrop to “Negros en TV,” in which El. B comments sarcastically on, among other things, the predominance of music from Spain on Cuban television programs.

makes clear on the song “Mi filosofía”: “No invento como cientos cantan y mienten en el fondo” (“I don’t invent like hundreds of others sing and are lying in their hearts”).

The accusations of betrayal to the hip hop movement may in some ways recall the East Coast / West Coast conflict in rap of the 1990s in the U.S.; however, the context in which this conflict takes place adds a political and aesthetic dimension. It resembles much more the split in the Left between authors such as Mario Vargas Llosa and Carlos Fuentes over the Heberto Padilla affair and Cuba in general at the end of the 1960s and the different positions taken by authors of the same era in journals such as *Mundo Nuevo*, *Marcha* and *Casa de las Américas* (Draper 417-19). One curious aspect is that the divide is inextricable from the aesthetics of poetry and rap. In Aldo’s song “Chie chie,” for example, various forms of co-optation and corruption of the “Real Hip Hop” are refused, including the seductive power of expertise: “No estoy aquí para dar clases a los que dan clases” (“I’m not here to give classes to those who give classes”) and the common lure of financial gain and the use of sex in art common to certain types of hip hop and reggaetón: “desprecio el comercio y los versos inmersos en besos y sexo” (“I detest commercialism and verses immersed in kisses and sex”). The same song contains lyrics on the effect of poetry’s seductive power: “Me molesta ver hojas en blanco” (“It bothers me to see blank pages”); “musas me llaman / las ganas me ganan / es vana la resistencia” (“the muses call me / my desires defeat me / resistance is in vain”) and the rapper’s commitment to a defense of his art: “voy a hacer que el hip hop se crezca y mantenga la forma” (“I’m going to make hip hop grow and keep its form”).

The constant representation in Los Aldeanos’ music of the rapper as an individual forced to resist external pressures in the name of artistic integrity eventually leads to conclusions that have political implications. These are perhaps best put forth in “Mi filosofía.” The song very

clearly states an intent to renounce all dogma and return to an individual subjectivity as that moral authority which can then renounce master narratives of the revolution. This revolution (cyclical in the sense that it values the individual over the collective of the socialist model –a notion more publicly acceptable prior to the Cuban Revolution) is presented in the song through a metaphorical meditation on the value of zero:

Como Robin, mis palabras son flechas indetenibles
 sólo que hoy no es una banda comanda un solo hombre libre
 Incontenible y no cree en sistemas, ya no más infiernos
 Yo, mi libertador, mi paradigma, mi gobierno
 eterno guerrero, sincero, ni último ni primero,
 ni el uno, ni el dos, ni el tres, siempre el número cero
 que representa la nada, que está y nada sucede
 pero el más necesitado a la hora de pasar de nueve
 (Like Robin, my words are unstoppable arrows
 only today it's not a band but a lone free man
 unrestrainable, who doesn't believe in systems, no more infernos
 I, my liberator, my paradigm, my government
 eternal warrior, sincere, neither last nor first,
 neither one, nor two, nor three, always the number zero
 which represents nothingness, which when present does nothing
 but is the most needed when it's time to get beyond nine)

El B's elevation of the apparently valueless is a riff off the popular saying “Es un cero a la izquierda,” which derisively negates an individual's value to an enterprise or mission by

assigning that individual the value zero has in front of any other integer. “Mi filosofía” inverts the saying by highlighting the importance of zero as a placeholder in our positional notation system. By analogy, the “solo hombre”, who in the song claims to be freed from master discourses, becomes equally essential.¹¹ Idealistic and incomplete as the intent to renounce master narratives may be, there is no doubt that Los Aldeanos’ focus on the local and the personal posits the *petit histoire* of the individual versus various master narratives, elevating that which the rhetorically collectivist and socialist government discourse has traditionally devalued.

This tactical use of individual subjectivity, of course, can be incorporated as part of other master narratives. Miki Flow and Magyori are two of the Cuban hip hop artists featured in *East of Havana*. In the film, Magyori is depicted performing a song called “Freestyle,” featured in both *East of Havana* and the *Inventos* CD, in which she raps against fascism and the imperfect nature of the world. Both she and Miki Flow performed in a 2007 multi-campus tour with *Raíces de Esperanza*, a group of Cuban and Cuban-American students that has mobilized itself to educate U.S. university students about Cuba. As an organization, *Raíces*’ perspective largely reflects that of those who have left Cuba or their children and their interpretation of what social justice for Cuba entails (*Roots of Hope / Raíces de esperanza*). One of the songs performed and included in a promotional video posted on *You Tube* speaks about the breakdown of socialism (“The Evolution Tour – Part II”). The facility of such political transformations echoes Los Aldeanos’ critiques of Cuban hip hop’s co-optation by the government and its effect on hip hop’s integrity as an art form. The accusations go both ways, though. While those who sing of social injustice on a global scale are accused by groups such as Los Aldeanos of being less than politically, aesthetically and personally honest, those who speak bluntly about problems in Cuba

¹¹ El B’s valorization of that which has no value curiously parallels the scatological tendencies of contemporary visual art in Cuba (Fernandes *Cuba* 151-52), lending credence to the idea that Los Aldeanos, while defending the individual in this song, are nonetheless very much part of a broader cultural movement.

can be easily accused of collaborating with what the Cuban government calls the exile mafia, counterrevolutionaries in Cuba or the colonialist and annexationist plotting of an imperialistic United States. Indeed, the film *East of Havana*, which features Miki Flow and Magyori while they were still in Cuba, has been accused of having a pro-U.S. sentiment (Cogshell). *East of Havana* is co-directed by a Cuban exile whose parents left Cuba and established a restaurant in Miami which was bombed in Miami in 1996 when it was announced that they had invited an artist from Cuba to sing there (Hari). The film also was screened as part of *Raíces de Esperanza*'s college tour ("The Evolution Tour – Part II"). Neither fact simplifies matters. As always, any discussion about Cuba very quickly transcends the island's geographic borders and prompts suspicions about the motivations and integrity of all involved.

Things, of course, are never black and white. Los Aldeanos' criticisms are limited neither to socialism nor the Cuban government. Despite the predictable pro-government rhetoric of *Inventos*, the strong feminine presence on the CD and in Cuban hip hop in general thanks to artists such as Magia and groups such as Las Krudas, and the critiques of drug consumption, machismo and other social concerns make even the apparently co-opted Cuban hip hop music worthy of discussion. And, as Alan West-Durán has argued, there are elements of Cuban hip hop that point to a complex refashioning of the national image along the lines of a new cultural politics of difference. The very mention of the Partido Independiente de Color and the focus on race on the *Inventos* CD stands in stark contrast to a government that for decades has permitted only one party to exist based, ironically, on the same logic of the need for unity that was used to repress the Partido Independiente de Color. Texts used in U.S. universities may prefer to focus on the *nueva trova* because those songs – at least the ones more frequently used in textbooks – tend to speak of issues students may relate to more, like U.S. policies or injustice on a more

global and abstract scale, which do not require deep knowledge of the particularities of life in Cuba. What is clear from the numerous articles, documentaries, web pages, and blogs that comment on and use Cuban hip hop is that it is a vibrant art form that is being actively promoted, heatedly discussed, and used for political and other purposes both in and outside Cuba. Cuban hip hop in all its transnational, globalized, diasporic, ideological and at times prohibitively local complexity, beckons to be taught and included as part of the discussion about Cuba as much as *la nueva trova*.

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