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Cuba finds itself at the centre of various discourses yet again, as publications such as The Economist and others debate the future of Cuban culture and society. While issues of economics, ideology and politics are fertile ground for discussion, they do not encompass the totality of such a conversation. The authors argue that critical to the conceptualisation of the Cuba of tomorrow is an awareness of Cuban youth cultures, the multiplicity and ideations of those cultures and the role that hip hop and reggaetón play in affording an alternative spaces for self-expression, critical dialogue, a fashioning of the what is to come and the receding futures of Cuba’s tomorrow.

Keywords: Cuba; youth culture; reggaetón; hip hop; Revolution

Introduction

Questions and predictions on the future of Cuba have arisen in recent years. For instance, in the March 2012 issue of The Economist, a 10-page report on the future of Cuba postulated that due to the change in leadership to Raul Castro and the many contemporary reforms, the communist nation is taking major steps towards capitalism. While we acknowledge the passing of laws that expand the private market and its flexibility, we argue that this is a simplified and reductionistic perspective on the future of Cuba. Not only do we suspect that the latest changes in law will potentially increase inequality and wealth accumulation, but the focus on the economy and material resources does not capture what is more durable and telling: the ideologies and cultures of the current generation of youths. In fact, we argue that in order to get a trace of what Cuba’s tomorrow will be, one has to take seriously the perspectives and ideations expressed in the multiplicity of youth cultures and the cultural productions of today’s generation of youths. It is here we argue where the future of Cuba resides.

Indeed, the political leadership is aging and ideologically departing from some of the political practices led by Fidel Castro. Under Raul Castro, the government has attempted to be more responsive to the interest of the people (e.g. introducing cell phones or allowing Internet use in hotels) while also trying to create a sustainable socialist economy under global capitalism (e.g. expanding the private market or investing in oil and natural

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resources). Despite the many successes of the Revolution in education and health care (Carnoy, Gove, & Marshall, 2007; Dixon-Román, 2012b; Kapcia, 2008; Kozol, 1978; Leiner, 1974), many Cubans continue to live under austere conditions; increased inequality, materialism and consumerism due to tourism; and a fractured moral economy. However, Cubans are not ideologically monolithic and their desires and interests are multiplicative. Thus, the focus on political and economic changes runs the risk of missing the social, cultural and ideological shifts that materialise in Cuban’s everyday practices, particularly for the youth. How might the Cuban youth make do in the face of their current conditions of lived austerity and the rapid political and economic changes? How might youth cultural productions enable the possibilities for engaging in critical and transformative dialogue? In what ways are pedagogical processes present within the dialogue of these youth cultural productions, particularly for the marginal? And, how might there be traces of Cuba’s tomorrow in the perspectives and ideations expressed in the multiplicity of youth cultures and the cultural productions of the youth today?

This article is part of a larger programme of research investigating the multiplicity of forms and ideologies of Cuban youth cultures. Much of the world and the Cuban government have discursively depicted homogeneity among the youth of the Caribbean communist nation (e.g. the Cuban government outlawed a documentary that exposed the multiplicity of youth culture and perspectives on the G Street in Havana). Our work seeks to demonstrate that a monolithic perspective of the Cuban youth is not only far from the truth but where much critical dialogue is situated for these youth. Here, we focus our analysis on the cultural product(ion)s and political tensions between hip hop and reggaetón in Cuba, a culturally constructed binary that has produced seemingly rigid differences between the two. We assert that differences between hip hop and reggaetón are cultural constructions that are very much so situated in and a product of the political history of hip hop in Cuba. The cultural and political distinctions between the two, we ultimately argue, are traces of the receding futures (Scott, 2004) of Cuba’s tomorrow.

One cannot do work in Cuba today without historically situating it within the political and economic context of the post-Special Period. The Special Period (in a time of peace) was the hardest economic time of the Cuban Revolution. This was brought on by Cuba’s weakened political and economic relationship with the falling Soviet Union in 1988 and continued through 1994 when the island turned to tourism for national income. As will be discussed, the Special Period created social and economic austerity as well as generational fissures in perspectives and ideations of the Revolution. The youth growing up during, or after, the Special Period began to become increasingly more disenchanted with the Revolution. As many Cuban youths have put it, the Revolution was their grandparents’ and parents’ Revolution, not their own. The youth not only imagined something beyond their current lived conditions, but also found a form of cultural production in hip hop which enabled them to articulate their own perspectives and critical questions. In particular, hip hop provided the youth with a cultural space and practice to critically question, within the ideological interest of the Revolution, yet, doing so, esoterically, deployed to go unnoticed by the panoptic gaze of State institutions (Foucault, 1977). This aligned with Fidel Castro’s first cultural policy of the revolution “Inside the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing” (Kapcia, 2008) while being critical of the Revolution.

In other words, hip hop provided the medium, form and possibility for critical expression that was interested in change within the existing Revolution and the language play that could also go unread or unreconised by the censoring eye of State institutions. We refer to State institutions rather than the State to highlight the fact that the State is not a monolithic entity, but rather made up of many varying bureaucratic institutions (Baker, 2011).
degree of social control and censorship materialises in government rhetoric, surveillance practices of video camera(s) and the police, in addition to the embodied surveillance practices of the people. The State institutions’ panoptic gaze structures a sense of paranoia for most Cubans. Thus, hip hop emerged as a cultural practice and production, a heterotopic space that enables “something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites . . . are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault, 1967/1986, p. 24) for marginal youth of Cuba. We will point out that present in both hip hop and reggaetón are transformative pedagogical possibilities, what we will later refer to as pedagogías marginal [marginal pedagogies]. Moreover, within these transformative pedagogical possibilities, we can find traces of the “to come” of Cuba’s future.

The current research is based on ongoing ethnographic work in Cuba that began in the winter of 2008. At least one to two visits have been made each year since 2008, each between 2 and 4 weeks in length. Interviews with hip-hop artists, visual ethnography and participant observation in youth cultural spaces such as Calle G in Central Habana (outside the youth hang-out space), the privacy of interviewees’ homes, underground hip-hop clubs, the office of the Cuban Rap Agency and the Malecón (famous 8 km sea wall where the youth hang out) were employed. Each interview with an artist was based on either a mutual contact or a direct contact via one of the youth cultural spaces. A dozen artists were identified via networks and snowball sampling methods; these artists were interviewed using a set of open-ended questions on hip hop, reggaetón, the Revolution and society for about 1 hour. The first author had already known one of the interviewees for 2 years and had developed a relationship with him. The interviews were conducted in spaces where the respondent felt most comfortable, given the realities of their concerns for the panoptic gaze of State institutions and a structured sense of paranoia or constraint in expression.

While both authors are Latino from the United States (where the second author’s first language is Spanish), we enter into the spaces and cultural communities of Cuba as extranjeros [foreigners]. Throughout our work with Cubans, we made clear our positionality as extranjeros from the United States. We were cognizant of the fact that as Americanos [Americans] we were read in a particular way that likely influenced the trajectory of conversations. Moreover, we knew that our Western assumptions of the world would influence our read of Cuba, and thus, we not only interrogated our own habitus (Bourdieu, 1972/1977) but also pushed our conversations with Cubans to both deconstruct and construct our understandings. In a constant questioning of the data, we tried to maintain a radical doubt (i.e. scepticism) and attempted to develop our own social understandings of the data (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In this article, we focus primarily on the interviews with three related, albeit, different artists (i.e. artists from La Nena, La Agencia Cubana de Rap and Narking). The interview data were video recorded, transcribed and closely read for analysis. Analytically, we were interested in expressions and perspectives towards hip hop and reggaetón and a critical questioning of the two, their points of convergence and moments of divergence. We begin by situating this work in the post-Special Period.

The post-Special Period imagination

The Special Period has been the most trying time of the Revolution thus far. Many foreigners thought that Cuba was the next communist country to fall, behind the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union. While the Revolution continued its social priorities to provide universal access to education and health care, the Cuban society also lost a substantial amount of capital in their moral economy post-Special Period (Kapcia, 2008). Prior to the Special Period, the economy of Cuba was well resourced and healthy. Their economic and political
relationship with the Soviet Union maintained a substantial amount of national income and resources despite the US embargo on Cuba. During these times, the top two professions to aspire to and occupy were those of doctors and teachers (Dominguez, 1993). There were good reasons to go to college and to contribute to the Revolution because the Revolution was providing for the people. However, when the Soviet Union fell in 1991, these forged relationships were severed alongside ties in national resources. The economy dropped and the government had to turn to tourism in order to save the country. Unfortunately, tourism gave workers in the tourist industry access to currency beyond what they were paid by the government (Espino, 2000). In short, the turn to tourism and access to the US dollar began to shift the prescribed and perceived financial value inherent in occupations in the labour market. Thus, the country began to see many doctors and teachers leaving their respective professions to work in tourism. Hotel staff and taxi drivers began to make more money than their doctor or teacher counterparts which began to put into question the necessity of higher education for many of the people. At an elementary level, precisely because there is no financial incentive imbedded in the system itself, the cultural capital inscribed and derived from the pursuit of that education began to erode at the seams.

This produced increasing inequality in income where in 1986 the Gini coefficient – a measure of income inequality that ranges from 0 to 1, where 0 signifies complete equality and 1 signifies complete inequality – for Cuba was estimated at 0.22 (del Carmen Zabulla Argüelles, 1999) and in the late 1990s increased to 0.41 (Reid, 2012). The Special Period also brought increased practices and dependence on la bolsa negra [the black market] along with increased remittances from Cuban family abroad and jineteria [practices of street hustling including sex work].

The demographics of the service occupation of tourism also shifted dramatically. Although Fidel Castro declared on 1 April 1959 that racism is not of this Revolution and that to be racist is to be contra la revolucion [against the Revolution], racism continued to manifest and re-manifest itself culturally, ideologically and in practice. One material manifestation of these racialised practices was in the shifts in the labour market towards tourism. Prior to the legalisation of the US dollar and turn to tourism in 1993, over 38% of the workers in tourism were of colour (De La Fuente, 2001). When Cuba legalised the US dollar and opened its borders to tourism, many people then wanted to obtain employment in the formerly less desirable sector of the labour market. The remnant and reproduced ideologies of los negros [Blacks] as “lazy”, “inefficient”, “ugly”, “dirty”, “smelly”, “unintelligent” and “defiled” seemed to materialise once again in the hiring and firing practices of tourist labour. The rationales given were that los negros lack the physical and educational attributes to interact with tourists including “good presence”, “proper manners” and nivel cultural [cultural level].

In addition to these racialised labour market practices that contributed to increasing racial inequality in income, there was already an inequitable distribution of remittances from family members abroad since an overwhelming majority of the Cubans that fled were White. Both of these processes substantially contributed to the demographic shifts in the labour market and increased racialised income inequality. The dynamics of inequality and lived conditions of the Special Period structured the lived conditions of the generation of youths and marginalised youth in particular from which emerges hip hop. Thus, hip hop in Cuba was predominantly a socially and economically marginalised and Black cultural production (Baker, 2011). And, despite the changing complexion of artists in more recent years, hip hop is still a youth culture that is narrativised as Black, deviant and radical (L. Suarez, personal communication, 7 June 2012).
Cuban youth and the Special Period

One of the profound effects of the Special Period was on the youth. Those that grew up in or were born during the years of the Special Period did not experience the more well-resourced days of the Revolution. The Cuban government declared the end of the Special Period in 1998. However, the residual effects socially, economically, culturally and politically continued to manifest as seen in the 2006 Gini coefficient. Youths had become increasingly disenchanted with the Revolution and frustrated by the system in which they were living. While tourism provided substantial national income, it also exposed youths much more to *extranjeros*, their cultures, styles, ideals and the privileges that were being allotted to them. In fact, a 1994 survey in Havana and Santiago found that generational differences were the primary factor determining perceptions about the Revolution, its achievements, its shortcomings and the impact of the Special Period (De La Fuente, 2001). Youths were becoming increasingly disillusioned.

Hip hop and reggaetón in the revolution

It was the confluence of these historical, social and economic conditions, the racialised ideologies and practices and the disillusionment towards the Revolution that birthed hip hop in Cuba. What started as youths of the north of Havana using clothes hangers to pick up Miami’s hip-hop radio station, 99 Jamz, then morphed into everyday practices of not just consuming but re-using, re-producing and re-appropriating in order to produce their own forms of media and cultural productions. That is to say, by working with the materials that they had – what was initially a radio or tape recorder and later the computer or laptop – youths began to produce their own forms of hip hop in Cuba. Indeed, the transnational flows of hip hop produced Cuban hip hop as a unique re-appropriation of US hip hop (Baker, 2011). Those transnational flows have also influenced US hip hop. Artists such as Mos Def, Dead Prez and Common have visited the island and produced songs inspired by Cuba. Two popular examples are Mos Def’s “Umi Says” and Common’s “A Song for Assatta” (for Assatta Shakur, a Black Panther in Cuba with political asylum). In fact, it has been these outside interests by US hip-hop artists (e.g. Mos Def, Talib Kweli, Common, Dead Prez, the Roots, etc.); US, Canadian and European academics; and consumers that have maintained a market for Cuban hip hop.

Reggaetón, initially born out of Puerto Rico, Panama and Jamaica, emerged as a new musical genre in the early 1990s. The fusion of salsa, rumba, reggae and rap was infectious throughout the Americas. Reggaetón is fast rhythm and its use of salsa, reggae, dancehall and rumba incites the body to move and dance. Although the genre existed in Cuba prior to 2002, it was primarily an *extranjero* cultural production. However, because of its infectious form and its clear commercial viability, Reggaetón has surpassed hip hop in popular consumption. It is in part for these reasons that the former rap group Primera Base then made the conversion to reggaetón in 2002 (Baker, 2011). The popularity and consumption of Cuban reggaetón then began to spread rapidly as more artists began to either emerge or make the switch for the more commercially viable genre. Indeed, the popular advent of reggaetón in the year 2002 eclipsed rap’s popularity and put into question rap’s place in Cuba, particularly given its commitments to being critical and political.

*Rap es para pensar o expresar, reggaetón es pa basilar.*

[Rap is for thinking or expressing, reggaetón is for partying.]

La Nena
The quote above is something more than the sum of its individual parts. Rapper La Nena sets the tone for the ways in which Cuban rappers have framed their creative, expressive, embodied, projected and performed positionalities and ways of being. Although a dialectical relationship is established to differentiate the two genres of hip hop and reggaetón (which seemingly dominate the popular imagination of Cuban youth), it is precisely the discursive framing between the two that produce two distinct relational experiences. The relational experience between hip hop and reggaetón is defined not by mere definitions of degree, but rather by the distance between the two. Rap and reggaetón in Cuba may represent distinct practices of the sonic, aural, genealogical and, by extension, geographical type. They address realities that provide both context and subtext to the sounds that inform and are informed by the political, as well as the individuals that embody it. Furthermore, they provide the contours that define discourses that mould the ways in which paradigms are constructed vis-à-vis conversations surrounding insiderism/outsiderism, everything/nothingness, mind/body and the mainstream/underground.

Simultaneously, they do not overlook matters of kinesthetic, access, presence or lack thereof and the relationship of these (overlapping) issues when thinking about what constitutes the myriad of multiplicities of Cuban youth culture and popular expression in a post-Special Period. Rightfully so, a superficial reading of such a positioning of perspectives may signal a sign of crisis, a fragile fault line, an outgrowth as much from internal disagreement, as it is one of the substances pertaining to the moral and ethical high ground of particular forms of Cuban youth expression. That is to say, on the one hand, rap is for thinking and expressing the critical and the political; on the other hand, reggaetón is for dancing and partying, a freeing of the mind from the body through bodily movement. Thus, while rap cultivates expression and reggaetón claims and exercises ownership of the body, they both do so exceeding and transcending the scope and jurisdiction of the State institutions. The solution, or rather point of departure, for critical dialogues of how hip hop and reggaetón share space, appropriate one another and have contacts/departures from one another suggests a far more nuanced approach be taken. A nuanced approach in which these similar, yet unique cultures and forms of expression, are being taken up to shape the parameters for possibility, potential and the audacity to envision Cuba’s tomorrow. The approach envisions a Cuba that is reflexive and self-critical, advancing the ideals of the Revolution yet not bound by it.

In establishing the parameters for defining the complex realities of what constitutes rap and reggaetón in Cuban society, there are a number of perspectives that speak to how rap and reggaetón manifest themselves, but more importantly what their function is. One ethnographic informant, La Nena, is a 20-year-old female emcee for whom the genres of rap and reggaetón represent distinct goals and obligations for its respective constituents. In this capacity, La Nena expresses the sentiment that rap allows for the expressive possibilities of being in its penultimate form. Not only does rap serve as a vehicle from which to say what one cannot articulate (whether censored or not) vis-à-vis other musical genres, but it is also a musical form whose function and value is predicated upon and firmly entrenched in the liberatory effects of rapping and its ability to illicit an affective disposition of freedom. Rap is at once individually therapeutic, and indicative of the collective suffering(s) of the youth who remain marginal, yet choose not to acquiesce to the silence that sometimes threatens to engulf them.

La Nena describes reggaetón as a musical genre that is diametrically opposed to the commitment of broader social, cultural and political realities (particularly regarding social control and censorship). These same realities are seemingly both a residual factor and an outgrowth of the failure of the Cuban Revolution to bring about the desired structural
changes of eradicating societal inequality across racial, gender and class divides. La Nena speaks to this perceived binary that distinguishes the thought of hip hop with the dancing invoked by reggaetón:

Reggaetón sometimes tries to emulate rap, but it doesn’t work, and you can try to capture what underground [rap] is doing or does . . . Nothing can interrupt or trump what rap has. Rap is inherently independent by default. Most [artists] don’t have representation, capital, a deal or distribution rights. There is an inherent independent spirit to hip-hop, each artist looks for its own audience – rap has its public. Other genres have unity, rap needs it.

What differentiates rap from reggaetón in this capacity, if rap is an unwavering allegiance to thought, is critical social theory as manifested via the performance of lyrical dexterity as it pertains to the everyday realities of life. The stark contrasts and contradictions of lived experience is what drives a demand for honesty, critique and unity within hip hop. Reggaetón, understood within this framework, is relegated to and defined by dance and the space of the club. And, while reggaetón sometimes attempts to emulate the urban aesthetical form of rap’s delivery and content, it ultimately does not, or cannot, capture what the underground does naturally. According to La Nena, there appears to be an inherent independent spirit to hip hop that constitutes and is directly constituted by the occupation of public and counter-public space. While it may be important for other genres to project an air of unity, rap mandates it as part of its platform to liberate in a lyrical quest to name, claim, puncture and own the locales that speak to visible and invisible borders and boundaries in Cuban society, musical and otherwise. Similar to debates surrounding the distinction upholding the ideals of the rapper as apart from the emcee, whereby the latter is the former, but the former does not necessarily constitute the latter, so, too, does reggaetón share this relationship to rap in Cuban society. That is to suggest that reggaetón incorporates and is tolerant of sharing space with rap, but rap does not welcome reggaetón within its parameters.

For someone like La Nena, it is apparent in both bodily disposition and language that there is no possibility for unity between the two genres. When the example of Puerto Rican reggaetóneros [reggaetón artists] like Daddy Yankee is raised as an artist who balances both hip hop and reggaetón in his recordings, La Nena responds by suggesting that Daddy Yankee “es un extranjero, en su país cabe, aquí no”, meaning Daddy Yankee is a foreigner, one that fits the particularities of Puerto Rican reggaetón and Puerto Rican society, but someone who is ultimately an outsider in a Cuban context. The implications of said distinctions are, if anything, quite profound if one is to engage the ways in which Jorge Duany (2011) wants to both deploy and conceive a “CubaRican” identity within the context of the transnational and global. The possibilities for thinking through the extent to which one can think about the Cubanisation of Puerto Rican culture, or the ways in which one can refashion the CubaRican within a discourse of diaspora and inclusion/exclusion based on a politics of authenticity are present. As one of the context of origin, the Puerto Rican influence on the Cuban cultural productions of reggaetón is evident even in La Nena’s reference to Daddy Yankee. However, as La Nena reminds us, Cuban reggaetón is a unique re-appropriation of Puerto Rican reggaetón where the Cuban reggaetónero could never embody the rapero [rap artist].

La Nena further notes that hip hop is a deliberative wedding of “conscience, feeling, and genre; a purity forged in commitment to the craft of hip-hop. Salsa is positioned as being able to extrapolate, appropriate, genres, but for rappers . . . that is not the case”. In this capacity, there appears to be a unilateral relationship, whereby rap cannot readily
assimilate other sounds, as other sounds intend and/or attempt to do with rap. Ironically enough, the efforts to move the crowd from salsa to Cuban hip hop come via the vehicle of moña, the local name for hip hop (and rhythm and blues) originating from the United States.

Returning to an earlier point, La Nena further augments her claims of inclusion/exclusion by drawing distinctions between “raperos real y los raperos frustrado”, that is to say, clear distinctions between the real rapper and the frustrated rapper. On the one hand, explicitly this stance points towards the existence and policing of a politics of identity that differentiates the two genres. On the other hand, she implicitly alludes to the politics of authenticity that dictates access to space, respect and the potential for and limitations of alternative modes of presentation. Both politics of identity and politics of authenticity simultaneously speak to the exclusivity of the genre and those who participate. Such distinctions seem real, albeit arbitrary in nature, as raperos real are those who are always present at rap events, always have a pen and pad ready, engage anything hip hop and do so in a way that challenges the dominant scripts of hip-hop being, as one can perform hip hop, while not “looking it”. The rapero frustrado is one whose denial of involvement is trumped by their contradictory stances towards the public and private critique of rap – a stance embodied in the statement:

\[ a \text{ mi me gusta} \ldots \text{no es mi genero pero me gusta} (I like it and may be bound to move (unexplicably), but it’s not my genre, the one that represents me).\]

In this capacity these distinctions almost seem to universalize the hip-hop mantra, It’s not where you’re from, but where ya at?

As such, La Nena positions the distinction between the rapero and reggaetónero as fundamentally ideological. While many of La Nena’s ideas are shared by many in the hip-hop community, there are also clear departures by other participants in the community, some of these departures having to do with their positionality to the government.

Nowhere is this more evident than La Nena’s positioning of hip hop and lyrical expression as something to be embodied publicly, while privately making manifest and heard, the types of issues, subject matter and content that is deemed inappropriate and radically challenging to the ideals of the Revolution. La Nena posits the following:

\[ \text{Everytime you listen to the subject matter [lyrical content], you say to yourself, but they said this, and this, and that, and it’s truth. The genre [hip-hop] must be suited to say what one feels, what one needs to express, that which cannot be said face to face: the inherent liberatory principles. The liberty to express and encompass a message is most important.} \]

La Nena’s response alludes to an inherent, if not presumed, allegiance, a belief that there is an already widely recognised truth behind hip hop’s “truth claims”. To partake in hip hop, in any capacity, especially, that of the emcee, is something of critical importance. There is an established communal belief entrenched in the art form, as well as its participants, that rap, social critique and the push towards the critical are interchangeable parts of the culture with no substitute. Reggaetón may have commercial appeal with the youth and the Cuban Rap Agency, but it ultimately lacks the critical presence and voice of the black bodies it claims to speak on behalf of. Cuban hip hop is a lyrical foray into the politics and theorising of affect. Such affect, according to La Nena, is absent from the sound(s) and voice(s) of reggaetón. The production and consumption of both genres are the materiality of two distinct, yet related forms of youth cultural productions, youth ideations of their current conditions.
and a sophisticated understanding of positionality within the increasingly transnational, transregional and digital spheres of contact and influence. State institutions such as the Cuban Rap Agency are cognizant of the realities of these youth cultural productions.

**La Agencia Cubana de Rap**

The Cuban Rap Agency,¹ a government-created and sponsored institution, is dedicated to preserving, promoting, producing and advocating for hip-hop-centric programming, concerts and initiatives across the Cuban geographical landscape. While it adheres to articulating a viewpoint that differentiates rap from reggaetón, the Agency does so by offering a critical genealogy of both the roots and the routes of hip hop and reggaetón. The Agency argues that the genre differentiation is embedded in the temporal, spatial, political and cultural push and pull factors that collectively can be called history: its trajectory and seemingly natural progression (as aided by the arbitrary nature of human greed, opportunity, finances and chance). What one is greeted with, almost immediately, upon visiting the Agency is a quote by famed musician Silvio Rodriguez that reads: “50 años de musica en la revolucion, te doy una canción y digo patria!” (50 years of music in the Revolution, I give you a song and say for the country in the name of patriotism).

In this context of La Agencia, it can be quite difficult to neatly position rap within a discourse of Revolution and radical change. That being said, rap, critically examined under this lens, constitutes a post-Revolutionary musical genre; one that both carries on and embodies an inherent (critical) unpacking of the Revolution, one that symbolically establishes a real and imagined historical link and symbiotic investment between the Cuban government, on the one hand; and the founding of La Agencia Cubana de Rap, on the other, in 2002. While the employees of the Agency, themselves rappers, speak to similar qualities shared by rap and reggaetón in Cuba, they suggest that reggaetón goes along with what comes easy, the movement of the body. However similar, the differences to be found between rap and reggaetón are located in the words of the Agency’s employees, in rap’s ideological commitment to the critical, “a lo fuerte, a lo underground” (a commitment to the hardcore, to the underground) and reggaetón’s incitement for dancing and partying. It suggests not only is there a difference of substance and content informing both genres, but rap’s commitment to a certain extent is wedded to a conscious positioning that is present, yet beyond the scope of the panoptic gaze of State institutions (Baker, 2011). Sonically, there appears to be a commitment between the body, space, time and musical content that effectively transcends the physical boundaries of space, and the body, as it embodies and understands that space.

It is ironic that the Cuban Rap Agency exists only due in part to its relationship to the Cuban government and the funds the government distributes for concerts, promotion of shows, the distribution of CDs, the publication of magazines and the payment of salaries to employees. These employees are direct in their admitting openly that one of the immediate factors separating rap from reggaetón is that of time, reggaetón is more a contemporary phenomenon, whereas rap has spent years “en la lucha” (years in the struggle). That struggle is without question a struggle for recognition, presence, market visibility and, most importantly, commercial viability. It is within this context that the institutional and individual definitions of what constitutes rap and reggaetón seem a paradox of sorts, as the Agency explicitly advocates for and on behalf of the underground, while simultaneously desiring and needing the most commercially viable of those artists. It is also a commitment to rap, which is specific in its requests of the genre. Furthermore, what the Agency advocates is not just rap, but underground rap, “a lo fuerte” (hard-core/hard-hitting rap). This alludes
to a yearning of sorts for commercially viable artists who are implicitly mainstream and financially self-sufficient, while wanting to lay claims to the access, existence, authenticity and space of the underground. This space is predicated on an internal and collective strength whose cadence, tone, delivery, stance and mannerism are direct, confrontational with a myriad of subtleties and a commitment to principles that project an air of the future.

Further, the Agency is interested in a mass of critical artists which use the art form of hip hop as a medium for developing understanding and layering multiple messages that may otherwise face censorship, questioning or relegation to the margins of society. The Agency’s yearnings and interests seem to represent a desire for a kind of (heterotopic) occupation of space, public liminality and visible invisibility. A heterotopia where the markers of the authentic, the viable and the included are inextricably tied to a matrix of ideas, governing laws, stakeholders and agents of change (i.e. rappers). Indeed, rappers operate independently of, yet indebted to, the decisions and complex web of forces that collectively make the Cuban Rap Agency, an agent and extension of State institutions.

Metaphorically, this latter point can be located within claims that what the Cuban sees on television is what exists, as reiterated by one of the Agency’s employees. Rap’s rise to prominence and social recognition were obtained without access to television programming, an institutional, cultural and communicative barrier that reggaetón has not had to contend with. What was reiterated several times throughout our interview with members of the Agency is that “in Cuba, gossip travels faster than I don’t know what. And as such, what is on television is read by the Cuban viewers/public as an authentic representation of the culture”. To this effect, the Cuban rap movement did not protect itself as it should have at its cultural apex of public recognition. In other words, rap needed television, space, time and representation in order to be legitimated and recognised by the Cuban public. But as such, the movement was perceived to exist as a homogenous space, never able to fully recuperate what reggaetón has been able to pick up on: mass appeal, an audience, the sounds of other genres and much needed financial backing.

Speaking to this shift in image, the rappers from the Cuban Rap Agency explained that rap was recognised as a club culture, one whose eclectic sensibilities focused on as broad an audience as possible:

If you analyzed one of the best things about rap, there were recordings of all types. There were groups like RCA and others, you understand, that did a more commercial rap. There were recordings like . . . Amenaza that had . . . or Obsesion that had another vision, and like Primera Base had the same . . . there was variety, there was a product guapo of Cuban rap that came and said, “I don’t like this, but, another sounded good.” That is to say there was a way to hook the people. We lost that. Here was a time when reggaetón came and swept everyone up. I think there was a moment within hip-hop Cubano that was capable of a hip-hop Revolution. Rappers closed themselves off and there’s only the underground. If you suppose that there were many rappers doing commercial style rap, and they weren’t allowed to rock because they did commercial rap. And those that made up the many went on to do reggaetón . . . But if us rappers are not capable of uniting, to see beyond what you and I sing . . . we are all rappers, we’re all going through the same work. When I go to the media, they don’t censor because we sing (or do other genres of music), they censor us because we rap and we’re rappers. That is to say, I think it’s that mentality that hasn’t gotten off, the mentality and perception of dancers and the body.

[. . .]

. . . it’s necessary that song accompany bodily movement, the lights of a show, the function of the lights, the collective bodies moving that opens and closes, the spectacle, the images . . . It’s very difficult to compete with reggaetón today.
Cuban rap was seen from the holistic standpoint of all it could bring to resolve, a critique that is valid when framed within the context of a discourse of a fusion of the popular and conscious, as articulated by Narking in a section below, an artist who is a proponent of the successful merging of rap and reggaetón in the mainstream. As such, according to the Agency, reggaetón arrives at a critical juncture in the social, cultural and political landscape of change and reform in Cuban law and government. To riff on Hector Lavoe’s “El Dia De Tu Suerte” (The Day of Your Luck), reggaetón came on the Cuban scene to say “olvidete los problemas y su dolores” (forget your problems and what pains you). As articulated by one of the Agency’s employees, further corroborating this signifying on Lavoe’s music, “reggaetón arrives to tell people forget all of your problems, let’s dance!”

An example of these divides by content, subject matter and genre is evident when assessing a song like “Hermosa Habana” by Los Aldeanos: (please go to the following link for the Hermosa Habana video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eLHtukfQkDc), compared to a song like “Chupi Chupi” by Osmani Garcia (please go to the following link for the Chupi Chupi video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMDIdbvheW0).

On a song that conveys a certain nostalgia of the Habana past, in both its visual and audio formats, the cinematography and aesthetics of the Hermosa Habana video are a montage of alternating palimpsest images that visually create the dichotomy expressed in song. The song itself waxes nostalgia on the Cuba of pasts, with the presence of history manifested in the present. To this effect, Los Aldeanos, through the grainy framework that is the camera, attempt to juxtapose the ideal of revolution with the nostalgia and aftermath that is revolution in practice. They speak of two Havanas, one a Cuba ripe for consumption, a still image of pleasure, women, beaches, and tourism, the other, one of glimpses of potential in that which seems tangible, yet unobtainable, where prostitution, hustling, and the respectability of professionalism and education has given way to survival and the conditioned response of schizophrenic behavior. Where possibilities of better are best juxtaposed by revolutionary images captured on postcards destined for foreign lands, and ambitions of travel with no return in sight, unknown, perceived to be a reality, yet received as something akin to a paradise, one created in the image of new Cuban realities.

If the literal, and metaphorical can be said to represent two paradigms, rhetorical rhyme schemes that embody reggaeton and rap, Chupi Chupi is a manifestation of the former, rather than the latter. If Los Aldeanos use of visual images conveys a myriad of narratives structured by layers, both filmic and lyrical, Chupi Chupi lacks those conventional methods. While the song itself is a rather atheoretical treatise on oral sex, the visuals accompanying the track further augment those claims. Scantily clad women, are not seen gyrating, but there gaze towards the camera, and presumably eyes of the viewer, suggest an intentionality of sexuality, only heightened by the consumption of ice cream pops. At one point, this feeling is further corroborated as a woman rubs the ice cream in between the cleavage of her outfit. The lyrics are suggestive of the rampant sexual conquest of women by the most virile of men and of an insatiable thirst for oral sex. The only female voice on the track inverts the narrative, by placing the woman on the receiving end of the exchange of oral sex, however, it does little to subvert the power dynamics and male dominated, patriarchal and heteronormative content of the lyrics and the visuals that exists alongside those lyrics.

As can be observed in the stark contrast between these two songs, there is a cultural canyon in the lyrical content between rap and reggaetón. In “Hermosa Habana”, we see the overt commitment to the critical and the political, whereas in “Chupi Chupi”, the body and partying are the central tropes of interest.

Reggaetón’s function in Cuba was perceived to be for partying and dancing as was elsewhere. Seeing the financial incentives present in this shift, whereby an artist could
make in 2 years what he could not in 10 years as a rapper, rappers made the sonic and ideological shift to reggaetón. While the Agency also suggests, much like the stance of La Nena that rap is to think while reggaetón “es pa basilar” (it’s to party), they point to reggaetón’s success in transitioning in the cultural imagination of Cuba by assimilating Afro-Cuban rhythms, instrumentation and sounds into its lyrical oeuvre. One of the things that is an outgrowth and point of contention between the two genres, as alluded to in the narrative of the rapper turned reggaetónero pointed out, is that reggaetón had access to a market and financial capital that rap did not. Hence, reggaetón was visual and present in a way that rap was not. While the Cuban rap movement once boasted a level of home-grown style and lyrical diversity comparable to US hip hop in the early 1990s, its rigid commitment to thought and the underground doomed it to be relegated to the margins, where the political and conscious was the beginning and end of what was permissible.

**Narking: merging two genres**

In the light of sonic distinctions, Narking embodies an artist that seeks to move towards the production of an amalgamation of the two genres. If there is anything to be learned from the conviction of La Nena’s rhymes and positionality vis-à-vis rap versus reggaetón, and the unique cultural, social and political push and pull factors, of which history makes the Cuban Rap Agency a player, and rap, a genre that still exists in a state of limbo vis-à-vis public acceptance, it would be articulated by Narking. Having both the insight and the foresight of age (28), experience and skill, Narking articulates a fundamental rupture between hard-core lyrical content of the underground and its proponents, and the “subpar” nature of the sonic component of music. That is to suggest that both lyrical content and instrumental are inextricably linked, transcending hierarchy and social order, such that they serve as text and context, something to be critically examined for a point of contact, and ultimately status, in the public sphere whereby what is popular in rap, lyrics with conscience, is fused with that which is popular and unique of reggaetón, its infectious sound.

Identifying the central importance of the Cuban listener as both the audience and the market for Cuban reggaetón (and implicitly rap), Narking proposes a medium of the two: one that is sensitive to the possibility of cultural misreading on the part of the Cuban audience vis-à-vis rap and one that acknowledges the ability of reggaetón to unite and appeal, given its alleged apolitical stance towards production and performance. Seeing no viable solutions or blueprint for the solutions of the problems rappers talk about quite explicitly and excessively, Narking proposes a merging of the two genres, one which he expresses interest in spearheading, a way to salvage conscience and content, while packaged in a medium, reggaetón, that people can understand. In the contemporary age of hip-hop culture in the United States, Narking appears to be explicitly aware of the lack of artistry, lyrical content and the like in music. He understands it given his access to the Internet (as a University of Havana student) and promotion that artists chase fame for fame’s sake.

Speaking on the state of Cuban hip hop, the government, reggaetón and the possibilities for crossover success, Narking offers an innovative solution that pertains to lyrical content and societal change. Referring to Cuba rappers, Narking states:

They (i.e., Cuban rappers) are trapped in making good music with subpar music to accompany it. And they want to do things with high music (culture) playing alongside topics/themes/subject matter that is very serious. Playing themes that in reality the people need to hear. To hear what you have to say, but you have to do it in a particular mode of how things are allowed to be said. It’s not what you want to do, or how you want to say it, it’s
the mode in which you say it so that the people can understand. Like that should be what the people like no? That the rest of society understands, that they listen, that they follow. Rap now has (pigeon holed) itself as being too direct, rhymes/commentary about the government, but if you do something else let’s see how it’s going to look. But in reality, if you say something that is against the government that’s ok (gestures with thumbs up).

Here everything is the government. All of the themes that people want to hear, the themes that have always been heard and played, they’ve always been played, but all of that discourse is the same. It’s not always that theme or subject matter. There’s no one theme, I don’t know. But all of the things I hear have to do with the situation. It has to do with the system being a shit, and its true that the system is a shit, but we also have to come out from under that, understand?

The system is not life. Then . . . then it’s good to touch the conscience of the person and give them motivation to live, don’t simply give them the reality, understand?

[. . .]

Future of rap in Cuba is not known. No one is doing anything for hip-hop . . . The lyrical content of rap can contain a unique conscience centered around the artist with a style that people can understand.

This coming together of sonic instrumentation presents a style that the Cuban audience on a broad scale can embrace. Narking expressing the idea that he would like to be the founder of the union of rap and reggaetón, a union based on rap’s existence “in the conscience, but reggaetón for being the popular”. This is the fusion of what constitutes the conscious alongside the popular, the sacred conceived as the principled territorialism and provincialism of hip hop, with the profane, the perceived, non-thinking, anti-intellectual component of reggaetón. As an artist who willingly and happily engages the two distinct genres of rap and reggaetón, Narking suggests that what ultimately appeals most to his fans is an ability to identify with his music in part because they feel the music as exactly as he does. This feeling of affect, and mutual affect, is something that is alluded to by the Cuban Rap Agency when they talk about sentido, or feeling in rap. It is in and through Narking’s ideations of mixing and blending of genres that we begin to get a glimpse into the future possibilities of hip hop, reggaetón and Cuban youth culture. Fusion allows for alternative forms/modes of expression, while adding the possibility of added international appeal. Narking suggests that people who identify with his music in part feel what he feels. These future possibilities of hip hop and reggaetón are not just an amalgam of two genres but ultimately a political move to achieve greater politicised expression and advancing of the ideals of the Revolution, especially for the marginalised youth.

**Pedagogías marginal**

Embedded in the artists’ perspectives expressed above are examples of larger material practices of critical dialogue that also constitute *pedagogías marginal*. We argue that both hip hop and reggaetón are two forms of marginal pedagogies, or what Dixon-Román (in press) refers to as indigenous cultural repertoires. Indigenous cultural repertoires are those practices labelled and sanctioned by the dominant society as deviant and that are often overlooked, ignored and shunned – practices that not only serve as cultural currency and legitimacy in marginalised communities, but are also processes of complex pedagogical experiences. The term repertoire refers to the cultural “tool kit” of acts, practices, skills and styles (Swidler, 1986). Dixon-Román (in press) argues that present in these cultural repertoires or acts of non-conformity, ruses and processes of adaptability are complex and meaningful experiences of learning and development. Indigenous cultural repertoires
appropriate a politics of deviance (Cohen, 2004) that seeks to centre labelled practices of deviance while considering the rich pedagogical experiences that are present in these practices.

Hip hop, reggaetón and the critical dialogue between their culturally constructed binary are instantiations of indigenous cultural repertoires for Cuban youth. On the one hand, the production of both requires great technical, creative and linguistic skill, a kind of bricolage and poaching (de Certeau, 1980/1984) of other forms of cultural productions within and beyond the symbolic boundaries of Cuba. These practices of re-appropriating, for instance, the beat or style of a US-produced hip-hop track by adding Cuban signifiers of sound and very politically situated lyrics, enable the possibility for these youth to not only make do, but begin to learn and master the arts of cultural productions. They begin to learn and use technologies in fundamentally new and different ways from what they were originally purposed for (e.g. the turntable or the laptop) ultimately enabling them to reuse that which they have consumed to become producers of their own creative products.

On the other hand, the culturally constructed binary of the two musical forms, contents and genres also produces social interstices of enabled critical dialogue that implicitly questions the role and function of musical form within the post-Special Period moment of the Revolution and their futures. The dialogue works out to be a kind of critical questioning of the function and identity of both genres, the State institutions and the Revolution, and the contradictions in lived conditions that would not take place with other musical genres. As a form of reflexive questioning, the critical dialogue also insightfully considers the future possibilities, given what is recognised and understood of the tastes and aesthetic desires of their consumer base and, moreover, a radical critique of the existing society. This critical questioning enables transformative pedagogical possibilities that would not exist under the constraining auspices of the panoptic gaze of the State institutions.

Undeniably, the indigenous cultural repertoires of hip hop and reggaetón are forms of marginal pedagogies that are pregnant with substantial transformative possibilities. To be sure, the pedagogical experiences present range from technological skills to literary and poetic creativity (as seen in the above lyrics from Los Aldeanos). These skills are not insignificant in a society where resources are not in abundance and much must be re-fashioned, re-crafted and re-imagined. Furthermore, it is within the auspices of the re-appropriating processes of hip hop where the esoteric form of delivery and expression facilitates a discourse that not only questions the today but imagines alternative possibilities for their lived conditions.

**Imaginings of the “to come”**

Within the discussed discourses and practices of marginal pedagogies can be found both frustration and desire, resentment and possibility. As a form of media and cultural production, Cuban hip hop continues to maintain itself via an *extranjero* market, with very little Cuban market viability structuring a sense of frustration for the *rapero* to maintain their existence. It is also clear that the artists, both underground and located within the Agency, desire more recognition, affirmation and possibilities for their lived realities. While there may be some resentment towards the eclipsing popularity of reggaetón, there are clearly some artists that are beginning to see some possibilities for the two beyond the culturally constructed binary.

The diverging ideologies and the critical discourses that are enabled by the medium of hip hop facilitate the possibilities for critical pedagogical experiences. As Freire (1970) reminds us, the containment of critical questioning and expression constrains
any transformative possibilities. The panoptic gaze of State institutions materialises, for instance, in the constant presence of the police and their practices of checking identification cards of Cubans on the streets or the presence of video cameras in particular spaces. Symbolically, State institutions such as the Committees on the Defense of the Revolution in every neighbourhood (founded to identify dissidents in the early days of the Revolution) continue to signify an embodied watchful eye ("Oye . . . Te estoy mirando" [Listen . . . I am watching you]; found on a wall in Nuevo Vedado). In addition, the selection and creation of media representations by the institutions of television and radio have substantially limited and constrained any media spaces of possibility for hip hop. As the employees of La Agencia Cubana de Rap explained that if it is not on television in Cuba, then it does not exist. Lastly, censorship plays itself out in the embodied practices of the people as the ideological narrative of social control and censorship structures a sense of paranoia; as such, it is a kind of self-imposed censorship. That structured paranoia and way of being are embodied in all Cubans to varying degrees. Thus, the space, production and embodiment of hip hop, as a marginalised youth culture, provide the possibilities of engaging in the kind of critical questioning beyond the constraints of the State institutions’ panoptic gaze as evidenced in some of the musical examples and interviews cited above. It is precisely this kind of critical questioning that facilitates the potential for transrational thoughts, perceptions and imaginings. Transrational facilitation is a form of reasoning that goes beyond one’s own culturally bounded inhibitions, a kind of imagining beyond the borders of the cultural order of understanding. Hip hop as an embodied practice of transrational facilitation in Cuba will continue to imagine new possibilities of being and doing in the face of the hegemony of Revolution.

What’s more, the expressed positionalities and ideologies of the youth begin to provide a window into the receding futures of Cuba. It holds true that the government under the Revolution has maintained a substantial panoptic gaze and policing of the being and doing of Cubans. However, this deterministic narrative also misses the moments of restructuring and the spaces and practices of social interstices that have enabled the creation and production of hip hop in Cuba, the development of a government institution for rap (the Cuban Rap Agency) and the more recent changes in the Cuban economy. While there is always a dialectical relationship between political economic systems and subjectivities of culture, the latter is never fully harnessed by the former, and the former is always having to appropriate the shifts and challenges in the latter. As such, the multiplicity of ideologies, embodiments and positionalities of the Cuban youth are the potential markers, markings and foreshadowings of Cuba’s tomorrow. Indeed, Cuba’s tomorrow is already being sketched in the ideations and embodiments of the Cuban youth today.

Note
1. In order to maintain anonymity of the artists we interviewed, we only refer to La Agencia Cubana de Rap or the Cuban Rap Agency.

References


