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EL HIP-HOP CUBANO: AN AGENT OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CHANGE IN  
CUBA?

by

Margaree Jackson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College

Oxford

December 2019

Approved by

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Advisor: Dean Douglass Sullivan-González

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## ABSTRACT

MARGAREE JACKSON: El hip-hop cubano: An Agent of Social and Political Change  
in Cuba?

(Under the direction of Dean Douglass Sullivan-González)

Cuba experienced two distinct periods during which Afro-Cubans encountered various constraints and opportunities. During the Revolutionary Period, the Cuban government outlawed all forms of discrimination and created many opportunities for Afro-Cubans to participate in society. However, these new opportunities came with the price of outlawing discussion of racial discrimination and political and social organization along racial lines. Afro-Cubans who still experienced racial inequality faced the threat of political imprisonment if they spoke out against discrimination. In contrast, during the Special Period, Cuba experienced a devastating economic collapse in 1991. Government policies created in response to the collapse removed many of the opportunities for equality that the Cuban Revolution created, and as a result, many Afro-Cubans faced greater levels of inequality. Due to new policies allowing for greater artistic expression, Afro-Cubans, inspired by the American genre hip-hop, created a Cuban hip-hop genre of their own. Cuban rappers used hip-hop to form a movement known as The Cuban Hip-Hop Movement to speak about racial inequality, poverty, and socioeconomic issues and to bring racial discrimination to the political discussion. This thesis presents the contrast between the Revolutionary Period and the Special Period and the opportunity or lack thereof to influence political discourse and policies regarding racial inequality.

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## INTRODUCTION

There is evidence across the African diaspora of racial inequality, discrimination, and the subjugation of people of African descent. Blacks throughout history struggled and continue to fight against discriminatory systems introduced by European colonizers that attempted to rob them of their history, customs, culture, and identity. Colonizers created harsh stereotypes of blacks that depicted them as barbaric, lazy, uneducated, and criminal. In attempts to eliminate these stereotypes and to enjoy full enfranchisement, blacks fought for centuries to give people of African descent a voice. These battles for their inclusion, acknowledgment, and civil rights, have taken many forms throughout the diaspora.

One of the primary outlets that blacks across the diaspora used to deal with the daily struggles of being black and to find their voice was music. From spirituals during slavery to freedom songs during the Civil Rights Movement to hip-hop during modern times in the United States, music has served as an outlet for African Americans to express their struggles.

Music dating back to times of slavery served as a call to action for black people to fight the system and secure their freedom. Negro spirituals during slavery contained coded messages that led thousands of blacks to freedom. Harriet Tubman used songs such as “Wade in the Water” along the Underground Railroad. The chorus reads, “Wade in the water, wade in the water children. Wade in the water. God’s gonna trouble the water”. This song taught slaves to hide underwater when slave hunters came as the slaves made their escape to freedom (Jones 1900).

Similarly, civil rights activists used freedom songs to encourage blacks to persevere. Charles Albert Tindley's "We Shall Over Come," is one of the most popular songs sung by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the Freedom Singers, and other activists (Rose 63). They sang these songs as they marched hand-in-hand for freedom.

After the Civil Rights Movement ended, a younger generation of blacks used music as a call to action and as a way to make their experiences of inequality known. In the United States, the new freedom music was hip-hop. Hip-hop originated in the United States in the 1970s (Blanchard). According to Alridge and Stewart, "Socially and politically conscious hip-hop shares common ideas and ideology with the Civil Rights – Black Power Movement and the larger Black Freedom Struggle" (190). Early artists such as Public Enemy, Common, and Mos Def used conscious rap, a sub-genre of hip-hop, to impart knowledge to the black community and to speak out against racial discrimination, violence, poverty, and other ailments of society. Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" discussed making everyone aware of the inequality in America to fight against it (Public Enemy).

This new genre appealed not only to African Americans but also the younger generation of blacks who experienced similar struggles around the world. Scholars Derrick Alridge and James Stewart describe hip-hop as "a cultural and artistic phenomenon affecting youth culture around the world" (190). One of the places in which hip-hop took root was Cuba. The genre of resistance and rebellion spread across the diaspora, mixing with Afro-Caribbean beats to create Cuban hip-hop. Afro-Cubans used hip-hop to create an extensive social justice movement known as the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement. Similar to African American hip-hop artists, Afro-Cuban artists created



revolutionary songs highlighting their experiences of racial inequality, racism, poverty, and racial profiling to promote social, political, and economic change in their communities. Blacks used hip-hop to construct their identities as Afro-Cubans in a society that denied the existence of racial distinctions to promote greater equality.

Although there are many parallels between African American hip-hop and Afro-Cuban hip-hop, there is a divergence in the two movements. In the United States, segregationists fought to keep blacks and whites apart. They desired for blacks to attend separate schools; live in separate neighborhoods; and have separate churches, stores, parks, and neighborhoods. The desire for separation stemmed from ideas of superiority. American hip-hop fought for unity across communities and racial lines. In Cuba, however, government officials tried to eliminate racial classifications. They hoped that by declaring that everyone was the same, racial inequality would cease to exist. Afro-Cubans used hip-hop to promote black consciousness and to declare that the government had not ended racial inequality with the end of racial categories. Nevertheless, American conscious rap influenced the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement.

This thesis analyzes The Cuban Hip-Hop Movement as an Afro-Cuban movement that encouraged political discourse on racial discrimination in Cuba during a time of political and economic crisis. The rise of a collective movement of Afro-Cubans and dialogue on racial inequality during what is known as the “Special Period” (1991-2000) distinctly contrast with the Revolutionary Period. During the Revolutionary Period, the Castro regime declared all Cubans to be equal and punished those who organized along racial lines or spoke out about the racial inequality that remained. Policies that greatly improved Afro-Cuban rights and socioeconomic status counterbalanced Castro’s

declaration and potential punishments. In contrast, during the Special Period, Afro-Cubans' socioeconomic status deteriorated, while the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement enjoyed much greater freedom of expression.

Given the contrasting circumstances of these periods, this thesis focuses on the following questions: 1) What explains the variation in Afro-Cuban political discourse in these two periods? 2) Why were Afro-Cubans able to influence political discourse bringing racial discrimination into the discussion during the Special Period but not during the Revolutionary Period? 3) What changed the balance of opportunity and constraints for Afro-Cubans permitting them to form a movement for racial equality through hip-hop in the Special Period? We will return to these questions after presenting essential background information.

### ***Background Information and Context***

It is important to know the history of race in Cuba to understand the context of the Afro-Cuban struggle for recognition, opportunity, and equality. These efforts begin soon after the beginning of the slave trade in Cuba. Despite changes in laws, government leaders, and policies that outlawed slavery and eventually racial discrimination, the Afro-Cuban struggle for recognition and equality continues today. This section provides background information on the status and experiences of Afro-Cubans from the colonial period to the Cuban Revolution of 1959. The section also presents the context of the two periods that forms the basis of the arguments presented in this thesis.

African people have experienced inequality, discrimination, and systematic racism in Cuba from the 16<sup>th</sup> century through today. Beginning in the early 1500s,

African slaves toiled in the sugarcane fields of Cuba. Plantation owners viewed Africans as a commodity, used African slaves to boost Cuba's agricultural economy, and denied slaves citizenship and rights. Even after the Cuban government abolished slavery on October 7, 1886, whites desired to keep blacks at the bottom of society. They often allowed blacks to work only in labor-intensive jobs that whites deemed undesirable. Blacks labored as construction workers, farmers, barbers, and musicians with little opportunity to advance in society (Morales 58).

However, due to the strong desire to break ties with Spain, white Cubans allowed blacks to become full citizens if they supported Cuban independence and joined the fight against Spain. As a result, many blacks fought during the Ten Years' War (1868-1878), Cuba's first fight for independence (Perez 125; Morales 56). According to Morales, the Ten Year's War marked Cuba's first fight for the abolition of slavery, although not all whites desired to eliminate the institution (Morales 56). Despite earning citizenship, blacks continued to face racial discrimination and inequality. Whites tried to remove independence leaders of African descent, such as General Antonio Maceo, from the black race to purge blackness. Whites attempted to purge leaders of their blackness by solely presenting them as Cuban leaders without mentioning their African heritage (Perry 8).

The influence of the United States led to continued racial discrimination and inequality. U.S. soldiers fought alongside Cubans to break all ties with Spain during the Spanish American War (April 21, 1898 – August 13, 1898), Cuba's second and final war for independence. The United States maintained a strong presence in Cuba, and United States citizens living in Cuba introduced conditions similar to those of the Jim Crow South during the 1900s. These conditions permitted owners of clubs, hotels, beaches, and

other privately owned institutions to deny blacks access and prevented blacks from becoming equal participants in the Cuban economy, politics, and society (Saunders 50).

Afro-Cubans faced political, social, and economic marginalization as well as racial discrimination. Whites viewed blackness as impure and threatening and made efforts to *adelantar la raza* (or advance the Cuban race) in hopes of eliminating the black race in Cuba. This effort took the form of promoting an ideology of *mestizaje* (or one Cuban race) and by encouraging blacks to marry whites to promote racial mixture and slowly eliminate blackness (Morales 51). Afro-Cubans with European features such as lighter skin and straight hair could pass as white. They enjoyed greater opportunities to advance in society (Morales 55). Whites barred Afro-Cubans from attending the University of Havana and other institutions of higher learning and prevented blacks from gaining equal representation in government positions and the media (Perez 97; Morales 61, 77). Whites desired to keep blacks who could not pass as white in a position of subjugation that stemmed from the institution of slavery.

Amid the continued racial inequality, Afro-Cubans desired to construct their own identities and fight for the rights of blacks in Cuba. They formed the *Partido Independiente de Color* (Independent Party of Color, or PIC), Cuba's first political party of color, in 1908. The PIC called for the inclusion and full enfranchisement of blacks in Cuban society. Due to fears that the black political party would attempt to take over Cuba, the Cuban government created legislation in 1912 which banned party organization along racial lines. This legislation led to a massive protest by PIC members that ended with a massacre of PIC members at the hands of the Cuban army (Perry 10). The massacre, known as the 1912 Race War, presents yet another example of how whites desired to

prevent blacks from developing their own identities and politics to keep them in a position of subjugation.

The Cuban Revolution of 1959 and the resulting Revolutionary Period brought drastic changes and unexpected opportunities for the Afro-Cuban community, as Fidel Castro sought to eliminate racial discrimination. The revolutionary project provided equal access to public spaces and afforded blacks the chance to advance in society (Fernandes 33). Afro-Cubans now enjoyed access to education, health care, subsidized food and housing, and government salaries that they had not enjoyed before the Revolution (West-Durán 18). However, because of this new reality with opportunities for blacks, Fidel Castro declared that the government successfully eliminated racial discrimination in 1962 (Fernandes 33). Castro deemed further discussion of racial discrimination and inequality anti-revolutionary (Blue 38). This declaration stifled opposition movements, artistic expression, and the identity politics of Afro-Cubans who still experienced covert racial discrimination, creating a false sense of equality and racial democracy.

However, the Cuban government would soon overturn several policies introduced during the Revolutionary Period and loosen its firm censorship during the economic crisis known as the “Special Period in the Time of Peace” (Fernandes 34). The Special Period marked a significant shift in government policy toward policies that allowed Afro-Cubans to express themselves artistically and discuss their struggles of racial inequality. These policies allowing artistic expression, however, came along with neoliberalist policies that resulted in the deterioration of the socioeconomic status of Afro-Cubans. The government no longer possessed the resources it once used to promote socialism. As a result, the government faced tough decisions on how to best exercise control over the

Cuban people and maintain the revolutionary institution of socialism. The Special Period, along with the shift toward a neoliberal Cuban economy and the emergence of the new tourism industry, would create the conditions for the rise of the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement, black consciousness for Afro-Cubans, and the struggle for racial equality in Cuba.

### ***Research Questions and Arguments***

Due to the striking contrast in political discourse on racial inequality in the Revolutionary Period versus in the Special Period, what explains the variation in Afro-Cuban political discourse in these two periods? Why were Afro-Cubans able to influence political discourse bringing racial discrimination into the discussion during the Special Period but not during the Revolutionary Period? What changed the balance of opportunity and constraints for Afro-Cubans permitting them to form a movement for racial equality through hip-hop in the Special Period? This thesis analyzes the capacity of Afro-Cubans to push for policies and discourse on the subject of racial inequality across two distinct periods, the Revolutionary Period and the Special Period.

Each period presents three factors that are essential to analyzing the change in political discourse. The three factors include the context of the period and international influence, government policies, and the Afro-Cuban context.

Afro-Cubans experienced greater equality and opportunities during the Cuban Revolution with government policies that eliminated legal racial discrimination. These policies highlight Fidel Castro's attempt to rid the island of American influence and capitalism, which he believed resulted in racial discrimination. However, despite these

new opportunities, Afro-Cubans also faced the constraints of laws preventing Afro-Cubans from organizing along racial lines, the silencing of discussion on race, and a national ideology that declared the Cuban race to be the only race. These constraints discouraged Afro-Cubans from speaking out against racial inequality and forming a collective movement to recognize the prevailing racial inequality in Cuba.

In contrast, Afro-Cubans faced increasing inequality during the Special Period due to Cuba's economic collapse and neoliberalist policies that negatively affected the Afro-Cuban community. During this time, the government softened policies and allowed greater freedom in artistic expression. Influenced by American artists' use of hip-hop to discuss social ills, Afro-Cuban artists used hip-hop to discuss racial inequality, poverty, police brutality, and other issues barring the Afro-Cuban community from attaining equality.

The success of the revolutionary project and the subsequent silencing of discussion of racial distinctions and inequality during the Revolutionary Period prevented the rise of black identity politics movements through the arts. During this time, the revolutionary government took strides to remove race from the national discussion and impose a discourse of *cubanidad* or *cubanía* (one Cuban race). Artistic projects and political movements that mentioned racial distinctions faced government censorship, and those who spoke of racial inequality risked the consequences of being branded as counterrevolutionary and facing possible punishment.

The fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent collapse of the Cuban economy was the main factor that led to the rise of this important musical movement. During this time, Afro-Cubans faced a more significant economic divide due to the introduction of

neoliberalist policies that favored white Cubans. Black Cubans, concerned about the government straying from its position on providing equality to all Cubans, used hip-hop to speak out against racial inequality.

Increased acceptance of Afro-Cuban culture amid the economic crisis of the Special Period also led to the rise of the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement. During this time, the Cuban government sought to correct the “errors of the Revolution” by allowing greater expression of Afro-Cuban art and black culture (Rohrlich). Afro-Cubans began to form a collective movement in which they fought for and defended their rights as Cuban citizens as promised by the Cuban Revolution. They saw hip-hop as a way of life and a way to connect to international black struggles for rights. They also used their music to bring awareness to the issues they faced as black citizens in Cuba.

Finally, the government exercised control over the movement through the sponsoring of the Cuban Rap Festival, censorship of artists, the creation of the Cuban Rap Agency in 2002, and the cancellation of the annual Cuban Hip-Hop Festival in 2006. The government sought to control artists’ messages to promote racial equality and to profit from the globalization of commercial Cuban hip-hop. While the government created cultural spaces for hip-hop, the government also placed limitations on the Afro-Cuban hip-hop community.

### ***Important Note on Race in Latin America***

Before presenting the research, it is important to note the difference in race relations in Latin America versus in the United States. Digna Castaneda, professor of history at the University of Havana, describes this difference: “In the U.S., one drop of



black blood makes you black. But here in Cuba, it's the reverse – one drop of white blood makes you white” (Pioneer Press). Cubans with more European features such as lighter skin, slim noses, straighter hair can pass as white without problems in many social spaces (Morales 55). Although they would only pass as black in the United States, Afro-Cubans who can pass as white even receive identification cards (known in Cuba as *el carnet de identidad*) that list their race as white (“Cuba: The Next Revolution”).

The Cuban government, like many other governments in Latin America, introduced a system of *mestizaje* (or racial mixture) in an attempt to whiten the population and create national unity. Scholar Edward Telles states in his book *Pigmentocracies*, “Although elements of racial mixture ideologies were considered progressive because they sought national unity across often divisive ethnoracial boundaries, they also denied or downplayed the persistent social disadvantages faced by dark-skinned people” (236).

This racial mixing in Cuba led to the creation of various racial categories based on mixed heritage and colorism. Common categories for Afro-Cubans include *negro* (black), *moreno* (brown-skinned), and *mulato* (mixed). In addition to these three categories, Cubans use around 40 additional terms to describe color distinctions (“Cuba: The Next Revolution”). Due to the increased racial fluidity that Afro-Cubans experience, it is important to note that not all Afro-Cubans experienced the same hardships presented in this research.

## CHAPTER 1: THE REVOLUTIONARY PERIOD

### *Introduction*

The Revolutionary Period introduced a level of equality unfamiliar to Afro-Cubans who lived during the post-Revolutionary Period. Castro made radical changes that outlawed racial discrimination and provided Afro-Cubans with access to new resources and opportunities. These changes, however, came with the price of not being allowed to discuss any experiences of microaggressions or subtle racial discrimination that continued to permeate Cuban society. The constraints that the government imposed on the Afro-Cuban community when it eliminated discussion of racial inequalities prevented the formation of a collective Afro-Cuban movement to fight against the racial discrimination that remained in Cuba.

Fidel Castro led the five-year struggle, known as the Cuban Revolution, to overthrow President Fulgencio Batista, a repressive leader who received U.S. support. Fidel Castro, along with the Rebel Army and the 26 of July Movement, successfully overthrew the Batista regime on January 1, 1959 (Pérez-Stable 62). The government's three primary goals included developing the economy, forming international alliances, and establishing new political power (Pérez-Stable 10). Cuban leaders also sought to address inequalities and social justice as a means of economic development (Pérez-Stable 10). Afro-Cubans supported the Cuban Revolution more fervently than any other race, due to the government's goal of assisting the poor and eliminating class inequality (Gonzalez and McCarthy 53). Castro worked to transform Cuba's government into a socialist government and promote greater equality among all Cubans. In an address to the nation in March 1959, Castro stated that the racism present in Cuba resulted from

American and capitalist influence (Blue 38). Castro declared:

One of the battles which we must prioritize more and more every day...is the battle to

end racial discrimination at the workplace. . . There are two types of racial discrimination: One is the discrimination in recreation centers or cultural centers; the other, which is the worst and the first one which we must fight, is racial discrimination in jobs. (Castro)

### ***Economic Restructuring***

Castro took drastic measures to promote an equal Cuban society. He began to restructure the Cuban economy to exercise more power over the economy and implement policies aiming to eliminate racial discrimination and create economic equality. Castro tied racial inequality and prejudice to a capitalist financial system (Blue 38). He believed the government could eliminate racial inequality and discrimination through a form of economic restructuring that would rid the country of capitalism (Blue 38). This economic restructuring took the form of widespread nationalization of businesses and the private property abandoned by those opposed to the Revolution (Hamilton 19).

Cuban government leaders believed that nationalizing companies and eliminating capitalism would lead to an increase in social justice (Pérez-Stable 84). According to Hamilton, from 1959 to 1963 the Cuban government took control of land, private property, and oil refineries owned by U.S. companies such as the International Telephone and Telegraph Corporation, Texaco, and Shell (19). The nationalization of businesses and real estate drove U.S. influence and capitalism out of the country as the government

moved toward socialism in 1961 (Pérez-Stable 80). Government ownership of businesses allowed the government to implement and monitor hiring practices that aligned with the elimination of racial discrimination.

Cuba also became trading partners with the Soviet Union as the Cuban government shifted toward socialism. In April 1960, Cuba received a \$100 million loan and signed a trading agreement with the Soviet Union (Fagen 70). The United States responded by creating a formal trade embargo against Cuba the same year and in 1961 ended all diplomatic relations with the country (Fagen 71-72). Prior to this time, Cuba depended on the United States for approximately 65 percent of the country's trade and resources. However, after breaking ties with the U.S., the Cuban government began to depend on the Soviet Union for nearly 90 percent of the country's trade and resources (Hamilton 19; Bunck 17). The Cuban economy continued to thrive due to the agricultural sector, which continued to produce sugar, as well as products such as citrus fruits, tobacco, coffee, and cattle (Pérez-Stable 86). The Soviet Union purchased large amounts of Cuban sugar and supplied the island with medicine and other goods (Pérez-Stable 86).

The Soviet Union began to influence the Cuban social, economic, and political climate, just as the United States had previously, due to Cuba's strong dependency on the republic for resources. The Cuban government made a shift toward Communism and began to use the Marxist ideology of the Soviet Union to promote a revolutionary culture (Bunck 5). Castro hoped to cleanse the country of "cultural ills" such as racism, elitism, greed, materialism, and "pervasive attitudes" toward women, race, and manual labor that he associated with American influence (Bunck 3). Enforcers of revolutionary culture

sought to construct new ideologies that focused on hard work, volunteerism, patriotism, and equality (Bunck 8).

### ***Greater Opportunities for Afro-Cubans***

The economic restructuring led to many new opportunities for Afro-Cubans, as the Cuban government could closely monitor the hiring practices of nationalized institutions. Afro-Cubans now had access to jobs, leadership positions, and resources previously exclusive to white Cubans or those who could pass as white. Blacks had access to careers as teachers, doctors, hospital administrators, state agency administrators, and more (Gonzalez and McCarthy 56). In 1981, blacks and mulattos made up 22.1 and 22.9 percent of the professional workforce respectively compared with 22.2 percent whites, providing evidence that blacks experienced nearly equal levels of employment (Gonzalez and McCarthy 53). The Cuban government worked to decrease unemployment by providing access to employment to all Cubans as well as adding a work requirement. As a result, the annual unemployment rate among Cubans dropped to 1.8 percent by 1970 (Pérez-Stable 91).

Afro-Cubans further benefited from guaranteed state salaries provided to all Cubans. This salary, equivalent to approximately 20 U.S. dollars per month, greatly benefitted Afro-Cubans, who previously faced unemployment due to discriminatory hiring practices (Roland 404). The highest-paid workers – surgeons and engineers – only earned 4.5 percent more than janitors and waitresses – the lowest-paid workers (Hansing 335). This new, much lower, salary differential created relative economic equality among Cubans. Blacks could look forward to the guaranteed salary provided by the state each

month, along with rations for food and access to social services that whites previously denied them.

In addition to increasing employment opportunities, the revolutionary government worked to make quality education, healthcare, and housing more accessible to all Cubans. The government took over private schools and institutions and created free public schools (Fernandes 33). By 1981, 11.2 percent of blacks and 9.6 of mulattos 25 years and older had a high school diploma compared to 9.9 percent of whites. College graduation levels among blacks and mulattos 25 years of age and older reached 3.2 percent and 3.5 percent respectively compared with 4.4 percent of whites (Gonzalez and McCarthy 54). The education reforms led to fewer disparities in educational attainment among white Cubans and Afro-Cubans.

Increased access to health care also benefited Cubans since the revolutionary government made healthcare free to all. Life expectancy rates rose, and Cubans could access primary health care professionals in nearly every province of the country (Pérez-Stable 92). Cubans of all races had access to all forms of health care from primary physician visits to open-heart surgery completely free of charge. These changes improved the quality of life for all Cubans, especially those who could not previously afford costly medical services.

The government also provided increased access to housing with plumbing and electricity. Government officials allocated homes abandoned by upper- and middle-class Cubans to poor Cubans who had previously lived in tenement housing (Gonzalez and McCarthy 53). The government worked to further promote racial equality by integrating neighborhoods (Fernandes 33). Housing projects in towns such as Alamar, located near

Havana, provided new living spaces to Afro-Cubans who formerly lived in slums or experienced homelessness. The government created the housing projects in Alamar complete with health care and sports facilities, boarding schools, daycare centers, and theatres for entertainment (Fernandes 87). These new housing facilities created communities where Afro-Cubans could congregate and have access to necessities they once lacked.

Although Afro-Cubans could access more jobs, they continued to face the racial discrimination that subtly undermined their progress in terms of formal equality. Groups, such as the *Unidad Revolucionaria* (Revolutionary Union), portrayed black males as sexually aggressive men who would use their position as doctors to take advantage of women (Benson 8). These groups sought to maintain the stereotypical image of blacks as criminals unfit for professional positions. The *Unidad Revolucionaria* and similar groups prove that despite the government's attempts to rid the country of racism, whites continued to pass down racist ideals and stereotypical images of blacks from generation to generation.

### ***Racial Democracy and Silence***

The newfound racial equality came at a high price for Afro-Cubans who disagreed that the government successfully eliminated racial discrimination. While the revolutionary government opened new spaces in which Afro-Cubans could be active participants in society, the government believed these changes had effectively eliminated racial discrimination and inequality. As a result of the integration of Cuban society and the provision of social services to all Cubans, Fidel Castro declared the revolutionary

government successfully eliminated racial discrimination (Fernandes 31). He stated:

In a class society, which is to say, a society of exploiters and the exploited, there was no way of eliminating discrimination for reasons of race or sex. Now the problem of such discrimination has disappeared from our country, because the basis for these two types of discrimination, which is, quite simply, the exploitation of man by man, has disappeared. (Castro)

Castro claimed the problem of racial inequality no longer existed since the revolutionary government worked to eliminate the class system. The state viewed all citizens as equals (Saunders 51). This declaration also included the elimination of further discussion of racial inequality. The government attempted to justify the enforced silence on racial discrimination by stating that discussions of racial inequality contradicted the revolutionary goal of *Cubanidad* (or one Cuban race) (Brock 12). Government officials viewed any discussion of racial discrimination or racial inequality as divisive and counter-revolutionary (Blue 38).

The imposition of silence resulting from Castro's declaration permeated many areas of society. Government officials removed influential blacks, who played significant roles in the Cuban independence movements and the Cuban Revolution, from history textbooks, while white figures remained there. Blacks also disappeared from national media (Saunders 110). The government suppressed all discussion of race to construct an ideology of one Cuban race. This legislated silence, however, led to a misrepresentation of the Cuban population and miseducation regarding the history of Afro-Cubans. Consequentially, younger Cubans did not have the opportunity to learn about the



sacrifices Afro-Cubans made for the country when they fought for independence from Spain alongside white Cubans, for example.

Furthermore, government officials monitored and censored the arts as well as other aspects of social life such as group organizations and associations and individuals' activities (de la Fuente 719). Members of the *Comités de Defensa de la Revolución* (Committees for the Defense of the Revolution) reported suspicious, counter-revolutionary activities to the government for further investigation. Afro-Cuban artists suspected of creating counterrevolutionary work could face severe punishments during this period. Castro made a declaration in 1961, stating that that government would permit anything for the Revolution and would not permit anything against the Revolution (Baker 376). Artists who created art that officials deemed counterrevolutionary faced political exile (Saunders 64).

In addition to these new policies, the government also denied the organization of Afro-Cuban groups and organizations, believing these groups would bring about division in society (Saunders 52). The government did not permit racial distinctions or racial politics, claiming that all Cubans belonged to one race, the Cuban race (Gonzalez and McCarthy 55). Government officials sent those suspected of being counter-revolutionary and anti-socialist to forced labor camps known as the *Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción* (UMAP, Military Units for the Aid of Production) between 1965 and 1968 (Saunders 52). The fear that whites would accuse blacks of counter-revolutionary actions led to an increased silence among Afro-Cubans even when they faced racial discrimination.

The fears of acting as counterrevolutionaries bled into the Afro-Cuban social and

cultural spheres as well. The government closed both black social clubs and white social clubs, further eliminating spaces where people of color could congregate and express their concerns. Television stations canceled *telenovelas* that portrayed black and white artists collaborating. Black poets working for *Radio Progreso* faced the humiliation of being accused of plotting a conspiracy because they planned to air a new show about a black poet (Benson 9). The government prevented black artists from gathering together and collaborating out of fear that their actions would result in counter-revolutionary activities. These actions led to a misrepresentation of Cuban society and underrepresentation of Afro-Cubans in the arts and media.

Afro-Cuban artists who praised the revolutionary government for the equality experienced by Afro-Cubans, however, could share their work. Afro-Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén is a primary example of one of these artists. His poem titled “Tengo” (“I Have”) praises the revolutionary government for the increased equality he and other Afro-Cubans experienced due to the Cuban Revolution. Guillen states in the final four stanzas of “Tengo”:

Tengo, vamos a ver,	I have, let's see
que siendo un negro	that being black
nadie me puede detener	no one can detain me
a la puerta de un dancing o de	at the door of a dance hall or
un bar.	a bar.
O bien en la carpeta de un hotel	Or even on the rug of a hotel,
gritarme que no hay	scream at me that there is no
pieza,	room,

una mínima pieza y no una pieza  
colosal,  
una pequeña pieza donde yo pueda  
descansar.

Tengo, vamos a ver,  
que no hay guardia rural  
que me agarre y me encierre  
en un cuartel,  
ni me arranque y me arroje de mi  
tierra al medio del  
camino real.

Tengo que como tengo la tierra  
tengo  
el mar,  
no country,  
no jailaif,  
no tenis y no yacht,  
sino de playa en playa y  
ola en ola,  
gigante azul abierto democrático:  
el fin, el mar.

a small room and not a large  
one,  
a tiny room where I can  
rest.

I have, let's see  
that there are no rural police  
that will detain me and lock me  
up in a cell,  
neither tear me from nor cast me  
onto my land in the middle of  
the highway.

I have, like I have the earth  
I have,  
the sea,  
no country clubs,  
no high life,  
no tennis and no yacht,  
but from beach to beach and  
wave to wave,  
gigantic blue open democratic:  
in short, the sea.

Tengo, vamos a ver,	I have, let's see,
que ya aprendí a leer,	I have learned to read,
a contar,	to count,
tengo que ya aprendí a escribir	I have learned to write,
y a pensar	and to think,
y a reír.	and to laugh.
Tengo, que ya tengo	I have, now I have,
donde trabajar	a place to work
y ganar	and earn
lo que me tengo que comer.	what I have to eat.
Tengo, vamos a ver,	I have, let's see,
Tengo lo que tenía que tener.	I have what I wanted to have.
(Guillén)	(Guillén).
(Translation by Margaree Jackson)	

Guillén's poem illustrates the freedom and opportunities Afro-Cubans experienced during the Revolutionary Period. According to the poem, this freedom came only once the Cuban government eliminated American institutions such as exclusive country clubs and dance halls. Racial inequality and discrimination persisted on a much smaller scale; however, Castro implemented policies to promote racial equality and to improve the political, economic, and social status of Afro-Cubans. As Guillén states, Afro-Cubans could access beaches, hotels, and free education, among several

opportunities. The Cuban government gave Afro-Cubans opportunities that they previously could not access due to systematic racism and discriminatory practices.

### ***Conclusion***

The Revolutionary Period presented both opportunities and restrictions for the Afro-Cuban community. The Cuban Revolution brought new legislation that aimed to eliminate all levels of inequality from economic inequality to social inequality. Castro believed that inequality in Cuba had ties to American influence and capitalism and desired to eliminate these influences.

While Afro-Cubans did enjoy a higher level of equality due to anti-discriminatory legislation passed by Fidel Castro, the Cuban government failed to create complete racial equality. Blacks could now attend the same schools as whites, have similar job opportunities, and live in the same neighborhoods. Whites, however, still associated blacks with negative stereotypes and ideologies that their colonial ancestors passed to them from generation to generation. These racist stereotypes and mindsets still affected Afro-Cubans.

However, since the government declared that it eliminated racial inequality and now had a racial democracy, blacks could not speak up about their circumstances. Those who spoke out risked punishment and being sent to work camps for counterrevolutionaries. The Cuban government went so far as to eliminate Black historical figures from textbooks and discussion in the media to make everyone believe that only one Cuban race existed. These events, along with the elimination of black social

clubs and politics, led to the stifling of black political and social organization in Cuba during the Revolutionary Period.

## CHAPTER 2: THE SPECIAL PERIOD

### *Introduction*

The Special Period presented a unique combination of opportunities and constraints for the Afro-Cuban population. The collapse of the Cuban economy in 1991 along with government policies in response to the collapse led to a growing economic divide between white Cubans and Afro-Cubans. These new circumstances led to more open racial discrimination and inequality, including discriminatory hiring practices that denied Afro-Cubans positions in the tourism industry. However, despite these constraints, Afro-Cubans experienced unique opportunities during this period. The government created policies allowing for greater artistic expression during the crisis. Afro-Cubans took advantage of these policies, creating an artistic movement known as The Cuban Hip-Hop Movement to address issues of inequality and racial discrimination and to advocate for political, social, and economic change.

The Special Period brought drastic deterioration of the socioeconomic status of Afro-Cubans that forced blacks to find ways to make their concerns of inequality known. Open racial discrimination re-emerged after the Cuban government transformed the economy and permitted privatization of select businesses (Saunders 58). Afro-Cubans who grew up during the Revolutionary Period and experienced relative racial equality were unaccustomed to whites denying them access to private spaces such as hotels, clubs, and resorts. They also did not become accustomed to being stopped and detained by police officers who suspected them of being criminals (Perry 48). Class difference and inequality also began to result from these new policies, as Afro-Cubans did not equally benefit from the economic changes.

The resulting racial and class inequality, along with the introduction of American hip-hop to the island, prompted Afro-Cubans to use hip-hop to voice their struggles and concerns to the government. During this time, the government began to criminalize artistic forms that had any ties to capitalism due to fear evoked by the economic collapse that the country could fall into capitalism (*Buena Vista* 68). Artists initially faced imprisonment. However, the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement grew with such force that the government had to take notice and respond.

The Special Period officially began in Cuba in 1991 after the fall of the Soviet Bloc. The Cuban government lost its largest trading partner, a partner on which the Cuban government had become extremely dependent for goods and economic stability. The collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in the loss of billions of dollars in aid. In a speech given in 1990 following the 1989 collapse of the Berlin Wall, Castro declared Cuba to be in a “Special Period in a Time of Peace” (Fernandes 34). During this time, economic inequality began to re-emerge as the financial system began to collapse.

The government began to increase the prices of necessities, as sources to import them became scarce. The government also cut wages, which made it difficult for Cubans to pay for necessary goods and services (Gonzalez and McCarthy 56). Job security no longer existed, 29,348 workers lost their jobs, and the living standards of Cubans declined. Electricity blackouts became common, and busses and trains ran less frequently to conserve oil (Fernandes 34). These new economic conditions facilitated financial instability greater than that of the Revolutionary Period and affected all Cubans.

Many Cubans during this time began to question the legitimacy of socialism and whether socialism would prove the best form of government to provide for the Cuban



people. Cuban leaders and scholars proposed, in response to these concerns, socialism to be the best form of government to deal with the nation's economic crisis. Government officials worked to convince citizens that for the progress of the Cuban Revolution to continue, the Cuban people must hold on to their socialist values and principles. The socialist model, however, proved to be unsuccessful and led to the opening of the Cuban economy in 1993 (Fernandes 35). The failure of this model during the Special Period serves as an indicator of a weak and vulnerable state.

### *Changes in the Socioeconomic Status of Afro-Cubans*

The Cuban government shifted its focus from equality and a classless society to economic recovery during the Special Period by withdrawing various social programs and introducing neoliberalism (Blue 35). The resulting changes greatly affected Afro-Cubans who did not have access to the same resources as white Cubans. The lack of access to resources and opportunities and the decrease in government assistance led to the re-emergence of racial and class inequality and racial discrimination.

### Neoliberalism and the New, Dual Economy

The Cuban government began making drastic reforms in an attempt to save the Cuban economy and to maintain the progress that resulted from the Cuban Revolution. These reforms involved allowing homeowners to rent rooms, serve food, and open shops in their homes (Blue 49; Perry 36). The state also divided state-owned farms and permitted privately owned farms and farmers markets (Perry 36). In 1993, the government created a dual economy by permitting the use of the U.S. dollar, which

became equivalent to the new Cuban convertible peso (CUC) in addition to maintaining the Cuban peso (CUP) (Hamilton 25).

The government allowed Cubans to receive remittances sent in dollars by family members and accept payments from those who rented rooms in CUCs (Fernandes 88). These economic reforms aimed to bring enough hard currency into the country to be able to revitalize the Cuban economy and to continue the revolutionary project (Hansing 334). This goal, however, negatively affected Afro-Cubans, many of whom did not always have legal ways to access CUCs. The negative impact the opening of the Cuban economy had on Afro-Cubans is evident in almost every sector of society, including health care, education, and tourism.

#### The Decline in Health Care and Education

Sectors of the government that provided free services to Cubans during the Revolutionary Period began to decline in quality as the state cut jobs, wages, and food rations. While health care remained accessible to all Cubans, those who wanted quality, prompt health care services provided *regalitos* (or small gifts) to doctors. The *regalitos* served to provide necessities to doctors who experienced wage cuts, only had access to government salaries, and received payment in CUPs instead of CUCs. Those who could not provide *regalitos* to doctors experienced longer wait times and did not receive high-quality health care treatments (Hansing 344). This new system disproportionately affected Afro-Cubans who needed medical attention and operations but could not afford to bring gifts to physicians.

Similarly, the quality of public education declined as a result of wage cuts and

layoffs. Many teachers left the classrooms to become private tutors. Private tutors had access to hard currency and received much higher salaries than state-employed tutors (334). The exodus of teachers resulted in lower quality education for those, such as Afro-Cubans, who could not afford to pay for a private tutor for their children (Hansing 344).

### The Re-emergence of Open Racial Discrimination

The shift toward neoliberalism and the creation of the CUC hurt the Afro-Cuban community. Many Afro-Cubans did not have family members residing abroad. According to Benson, blacks and mulattos made up only three percent of Cubans who migrated to Miami (13). Many Afro-Cubans could not benefit from new economic policies permitting Cuban residents to receive remittances from family members living abroad. Most citizens who remained on the island are of African descent and do not have family members living abroad. Similarly, blacks often lived in overcrowded homes or housing complexes and could not benefit from the new laws permitting Cubans to rent out rooms to tourists. These conditions created a clear economic divide between the haves and the have nots and opened the door to the re-emergence of class inequality that had deep ties to racial discrimination.

Additionally, the Cuban government converted prices of necessities such as clothing and food to CUCs. Blacks, who could not access CUCs as easily as the whites who owned private homes or had relatives residing abroad, experienced less access to basic necessities. Consequently, some blacks and other Cubans began to turn to illegal means of making money, known by Cubans as *jinetismo* (or hustling). This practice allowed blacks to have access to CUCs and to be able to survive. Prostitution, stealing

from state institutions, and selling items on the black market became the most common forms of *jineterismo* in the country (Hansing 334). *Jineteros* could make an average of between \$20 and \$80 a day, much more than the government salary of roughly \$20 per month (Fernandes 105). Although Afro-Cubans are not alone in their participation in illegal activities to be able to afford much-needed items, Afro-Cubans do make up much of the lower class.

The government responded to the participation in *jineterismo* by increasing the presence of the National Police Force on the streets of Cuba. This initiative, introduced by Castro, aimed to decrease the number of Cubans participating in black market activities. This policy instead served to increase the black prison population, as police officers often targeted black men whom they viewed as dangerous criminals. The initiative also led to practices similar to stop and frisk practices. Police officers demanded that black men present their *carnet de identidad* (ID card) which the officers used to check for previous criminal history. These encounters with the National Police Force often resulted in an arrest even if Afro-Cubans had no criminal history (Perry 48). The government's attempt to rid the country of *jineterismo* created the conditions for police officers to target Afro-Cuban males due to the continuation of racial stereotypes that labeled them as criminals. This practice gave police officers the power to stop Afro-Cubans solely on suspicion of criminal activity and contradicts the national ideals of racial democracy.

The government also lowered state wages in addition to shifting prices to CUCs instead of the CUPs (Blue 48). This action by the Cuban government resulted in blacks having the most significant presence in the lowest-earning categories (Blue 48).

Hairdressers, who owned private shops and serviced tourists had access to tips and could make 20 to 50 percent more than state-paid workers who worked as doctors and surgeons (Hansing 335). Employees of private businesses made an average of \$50 to \$100 per month, while state employees made an average of \$12 and \$16 per month depending on their field (Blue 49). The gap between those who could access CUCs and those who could not resulted in an approximate \$38 minimum salary differential. Employees of privately owned businesses made enough to afford basic necessities. On the other hand, government employees, comprised of mostly Afro-Cuban workers, struggled to make a living wage.

Few Afro-Cubans obtained employment in informal sectors where they could enjoy access to CUCs. Jobs in the informal sector included positions such as domestic workers and cooks. One Cuban janitorial worker made an additional \$20 per month by working as a cook and domestic worker in a beach home. She could keep her job as long as she could provide the homeowner with a constant supply of tourists to rent his property (Blue 51). This additional \$20 per month, paid in CUCs, would enable this janitor to buy necessities such as soap, clothing, foodstuffs, and oil exclusively available at government dollar stores (Perry 36; Fernandes 103). Those without access to CUCs are not able to purchase items at these stores (Fernandes 103). Many Afro-Cubans searched for opportunities such as these to be able to make ends meet.

#### Tourism Sector and Hiring Practices

Afro-Cubans faced further discrimination in the booming tourism sector. Discriminatory hiring practices re-emerged in hotels, on resorts, and in other tourist

locations. Hotel owners would not hire Afro-Cubans because they viewed blacks as unpresentable and uneducated (Blue 42). Hotel and resort managers reserved jobs in the tourism sector for whites, whom they deemed presentable and intelligent. This practice continued even in instances where white candidates had lower levels of education than black candidates. According to Perry, white European and North American tourists preferred workers who “looked like them” (39). Police officers often detained Afro-Cubans whom they suspected of offering rides to white tourists or allowing whites to reside in their homes (Perry 50).

Afro-Cubans did not have access to the CUCs needed to purchase many necessities because Cuban employers did not permit Afro-Cubans to work in the tourism sector. Afro-Cubans also did not have access to homes with available rooms for rent, which made it even harder for them to access CUCs. White citizens who owned their own homes made approximately \$15 to \$30 in CUCs per night per room (Roland 404). Blacks, once again, began to make up the majority of the lowest-paid workers in the Cuban economy. They did not have access to property that allowed them to benefit from the shift to neoliberalism.

White Cubans not only prevented blacks from working in the tourism sector, but they also prevented blacks from having access to these spaces. Guards denied blacks access to tourist destinations such as hotels. Tanya Saunders, an African American scholar, reveals that guards denied her access to hotels during her fieldwork in Cuba. She also reveals that doorkeepers, who physically forced her out of hotels, harassed her continuously. City police officers also stopped her and asked her for her  *carnet de identidad*. Saunders experienced these events because guards, door attendants, and police

officers believed her to be Cuban. She states that when officials recognized her American citizenship, they took this revelation with surprise and let her pass. She observed whites, even those of Cuban origin, passing freely through these spaces (Saunders 59). These occurrences serve as evidence of the re-emerging racial discrimination that blacks faced before the Cuban Revolution.

### ***Government Response to the Arts and Economic Change***

Several Afro-Cubans turned to the arts to support themselves during the economic crisis. The Cuban Hip-Hop Movement became a massive socio-political movement during the Special Period and early 2000s. Hip-hop artists not only sought to make a living but to make their concerns known to the government (Saunders 9). The government initially viewed the genre and the massive gatherings of Afro-Cubans with skepticism, fearing rebellion and revolution. However, after realizing the popularity of the genre, the government began to sponsor the movement (Saunders 177). The Cuban-Hip Hop Movement ultimately attracted tourists and brought money to the Cuban economy as hip-hop artists gained international popularity (Baker 370).

### **The Cuban Government Commercializes Afro-Cuban Culture**

It is common for tourists to view Afro-Cuban culture and religion as exotic. For this reason, many tourists flood the streets of Callejon de Hamel in Central Havana to view and experience Afro-Cuban culture in the forms of music, dance, and art. The Cuban government has played a significant role in the commercialization of black culture for economic gains in the tourism sector. The government has sanctioned aspects of Afro-

Cuban culture such as the *Asociación Cultural Yoruba de Cuba* (the Cuban Yoruba Cultural Association) and permitted the association to create the *Museo de los Orishas* (the Orishas Museum) in Havana. This museum is open to visitors who pay an entrance fee of \$10 in CUC. The government also sponsors tours that enable tourists to participate in Afro-Cuban religious ceremonies for additional charges (Perry 43-44).

Tourists also experienced a new form of Afro-Cuban art that began to gain popularity in the 1990s. This form of art is known as Cuban hip-hop. Afro-Cuban artists held small showcases and gatherings featuring the new genre and breakdancing on street corners and in parks (Fernandes 85). Tourists and Cubans alike enjoyed the music; however, Cuba's Ministry of Culture had not yet deemed this music an official expression of Cuban culture. It is no surprise that government officials would soon create a cultural space for hip-hop after learning just how large of an impact the genre had on tourists and Cubans alike. The paper will explore the government's response to the movement in greater detail in a later chapter.

### The End of the Special Period

The Special Period officially ended at the end of the 1990s when Castro partnered with Hugo Chávez in Venezuela (Romero). Cuba sent doctors to Venezuela, and Venezuela supplied Cuba with oil subsidies, textiles, construction materials, and food, among other items (Romero). Hugo Chávez supported hip-hop and even collaborated with Venezuelan hip-hop artists La Septima and Familia Negra (Fernandes 122). Chávez's support for hip-hop may have influenced Castro to become more accepting of Cuban hip-hop artists. The Cuban economy began to grow, and conditions began to



improve for Cuban citizens. Cuba now had a new trading partner that would provide many of the resources the country lacked during the Special Period. Hip-hop also continued to grow with new economic assistance.

### *Conclusion*

The Special Period introduced distinctive circumstances that changed the balance of opportunity and constraints for Afro-Cubans. The loss of economic support from the Soviet Union created a divide between white Cubans and Afro-Cubans. Afro-Cubans now faced discrimination similar to the discrimination that Afro-Cubans faced before the Revolutionary Period. Afro-Cubans took advantage of new policies allowing for greater artistic expression and used hip-hop to speak out against inequality. The Cuban government, however, did not initially approve of the popularity of the American genre.

The Special Period marked a significant time of economic downturn in Cuban history. The collapse of the Soviet Union put unfamiliar pressure on the Cuban economy, which led to the reemergence of inequality. To strengthen the economy, the government created new policies allowing dollars to flow in from the United States, creating a new currency, and allowing some small privatization. These policies disproportionately negatively affected the Afro-Cuban community, a community that enjoyed less access to remittances, CUCs, and private homes.

In addition to economic disparities, Afro-Cubans also experienced more racial inequality. Managers in the tourist sector were hesitant to hire blacks who would serve as the face of Cuba in the eyes of tourists. They believed that blacks were unrepresentable and unintelligent and, therefore, reserved positions in tourism for white Cubans.

The re-emergence of discriminatory practices, racial inequality, and economic inequality led a group of young Cubans to express their concerns through hip-hop. Although hip-hop initially frightened government officials because it was an inherently American and black genre, the government would soon create a cultural space that would help the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement thrive.

## CHAPTER 3: RISE OF CUBAN HIP-HOP CULTURE, BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS, AND THE CUBAN HIP-HOP MOVEMENT

### *Introduction*

Chapter 2 presented the decline of the socioeconomic status of Afro-Cubans during the Special Period. Afro-Cuban artists began to counterbalance the growing inequality by discussing race and racial inequality through hip-hop. The genre grew so much in popularity that artists used the genre to form a collective Afro-Cuban movement for equality and social justice.

Hip-hop emerged in the housing projects of South Bronx, New York, in the early 1970s (Blanchard). Early hip-hop focused on stating the problems in society affecting people of color living in poverty. The new genre “addressed the ongoing liberation struggles of African American and other historically oppressed people.” Artists such as Public Enemy, Common, MC Lyte, Salt-n-Pepa, and Mos Def captivated young listeners with their rhymes that shared the reality of many blacks in America. Hip-hop swept the nation, not only as a music genre but as a way of viewing the world. Hip-hop culture included music, dress, graffiti, break dancing, rapping, and Disc jockeying (Alridge and Stewart 190). According to Derrick Alridge and James Stewart, “For many youth, hip-hop reflects the social, economic, political and cultural realities and conditions in their lives, speaking to them in a language and manner that they understand” (190).

Black liberation struggles are evident in various American hip-hop songs. Public Enemy’s “911 is a Joke” discusses the slow police response times to black neighborhoods. They state, “Now I dialed 911 a long time ago. Don’t you see how late

they're reacting? They only come, and they come when they wanna. So get the morgue truck and embalm the goner" (Public Enemy).

Similarly, Dead Prez's "Police State" discusses mass incarceration as a system created to keep blacks in a position of inferiority. He says, "The average black male [live] a third of his life in a jail cell. Cause the world is controlled by the white male. And the people don't never get justice." Immortal Technique says in "The Poverty of Philosophy," "Most of my Latino and black people who are struggling to get food, clothes, and shelter in the hood are so concerned with that, that philosophizing about freedom and socialist democracy is usually beyond their rationale." These songs are just a small representation of the many hip-hop songs that discussed the political, social, and economic strife of African Americans.

These early hip-hop songs not only inspired minorities in the United States but also those abroad. The beats and messages traveled across the Atlantic Ocean by way of radio waves and imported music, arriving in the coastal towns of Cuba (Llamoca). Alpidio Alonso, president of the *Asociación Hermanos Saíz* (Saiz Brothers Association), described American rap as "resistance against the dominant culture that conveyed a revolutionary social message" (*Buena Vista* 33-34). According to Alonso, Cuban rap would become revolutionary music projecting a revolutionary message (*Buena Vista* 34).

Young Cubans in the coastal town of Alamar began listening to hip-hop at social gatherings in apartment complexes similar to the projects in the Bronx. They picked up the music from radio stations in Miami using makeshift antennas. This new generation of Afro-Cubans who did not live through the pre-revolutionary times faced unfamiliar circumstances of inequality and extreme poverty during the Special Period. They

identified with the messages on poverty, racism, and police brutality in American hip-hop. Influenced and inspired by the hip-hop culture and the music and its messages of black struggle and liberation, Afro-Cubans began to create music of their own. Artists joined together, creating a collective movement known as *El Movimiento de hip-hop cubano* (The Cuban Hip-Hop Movement) and performing at the annual Cuban Hip-Hop Festivals.

### ***The Emergence of Hip-Hop Culture and Identification with the Black Struggle***

Inspired by hip-hop culture in the United States, young Cubans imitated American rappers, participated in breakdancing, created graffiti art, and dressed like American hip-hop artists. They often wore bandanas and American t-shirts, imitating American artists (Artist 1)<sup>1</sup>. They fell in love with American hip-hop culture and desired to create a hip-hop culture of their own. One artist shared,

I became interested in the genre of hip-hop listening to North American music on the FM radio. And I began to hear music that I loved. It arrived, and I began to feel inside my body that my blood vibrated when listening to hip-hop and all of the music that came from there [America]. And I felt like it had a lot to say. I did too, but in my own language (Artist 1).

(Translation by Margaree Jackson)

Hip-hop culture grew underground in the coastal towns of Cuba and areas of Havana with predominately Afro-Cuban communities affected by increased poverty during the Special Period. Young Afro-Cubans held parties and gatherings known as

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<sup>1</sup> The Cuban hip-hop artists' names have been changed for their protection.

*penas*, where they played American hip-hop discs and passed them along to their friends and neighbors for the next *pena* (Fernandes 578). Cubans wanting to create their own version of hip-hop and express their concerns took to the microphone making recordings in their bedrooms (Tutton). The artists initially used soundtracks from the United States until they were able to get recording equipment donated from the United States (Artist 1). They began performing their music at *penas* and handing out their CDs to share their rhymes. Cuban hip-hop quickly grew in popularity.

While the music's beats and the artist's performances entertained, rappers used the genre to inform others about the current struggles of the Afro-Cuban people. Artist Aldo Rodriguez, a member of the hip-hop group Los Aldeanos, states, "Hip-hop is an art form that speaks the truth about how people are living" (Tutton). Scholars such as Alan West-Durán state that Cuban rap is the equivalent to CNN in Cuba because it is a country where the media is actively controlled and monitored by the government (17). Rappers spoke out about the reality of racial discrimination, economic disparities, and the lack of civil rights for Afro-Cubans since the government failed to acknowledge that Afro-Cubans and racial inequality existed. West-Durán also states, "They are using rap as a form of social pleasure and action for the expansion of civil society" (16).

Artists creatively crafted their music in a way that would entertain and help others identify with the black struggle in Cuba. Cuban rappers fashioned their music using distinctively Afro-Cuban musical traditions such as Yoruba chants, rumba, mambo, and son (West -Durán 8). White Cuban authorities initially banned these traditions due to their association with Africa and blackness ("Cuba: The Next Revolution"). Saunders states,

Many Cuban artists thus use hip hop as a vehicle to represent a Black radical and hemispheric Black consciousness that has long existed on the Island. Most importantly, the artists used hip hop to redefine what blackness would come to mean in Special Period and post-Special Period Cuba (25).

For years, white Cubans associated blackness with ugliness, immorality, and criminality. These stereotypical thought processes lead the pre-revolutionary government to attempt to eliminate blackness. In the early 1900s, the Cuban government paid over \$1 million to bring over 600,000 Spaniards to Cuba in an attempt to whiten Cuba and rid Cuba of the ills associated with African heritage (“Cuba: The Next Revolution”). Rap artists have used hip-hop to reverse stereotypes about the black community and to demand their inclusion in political and economic spheres of Cuba during the Special Period and the early 2000s (“Fear of a Black Nation” 576, 587). Hip-hop became the vehicle for diminishing negative views of Afro-Cubans and increasing black consciousness among Afro-Cubans.

### ***From Dispersed Artists to a Collective Movement***

Early Cuban hip-hop was limited to songs recorded in artists’ homes or small underground performances at parties (Tutton). Hip-hop originally appeared mostly within the context of the neighborhood and community (“Fear of a Black Nation” 57). Artists distributed their recordings on cassettes and passed them along for others to listen to and to play at gatherings. These underground performances of hip-hop flourished. Cuban hip-hop's surge in popularity led Rodolfo Rensoli, the founder of the first Cuban hip-hop group, to try to bring artists together to form a collective movement (Curabelo).

Rensoli shared his ideas of a Cuban hip-hop festival with various directors of Cultural Houses in his neighborhood in the early 90s. The idea reached Magdalena Valdés, the Provincial Director of Culture, who approved his request to host a festival for Cuban hip-hop. Before hosting the first festival, Rensoli spread the word to hip-hop artists in hopes of recruiting them to perform. He partnered with other creatives to host workshops before the first festival that provided vocal and poetry lessons to artists who were interested in participating (Curabelo).

Rodolfo Rensoli's goal was to create a form of community development through hip-hop. He wanted the youth affected by the economic crisis of the Special Period to have something positive of which to be a part. He also hoped to attract resources to the community through a collective movement of artists (Curabelo).

With the support of the Casas de Cultura, Rensoli and Grupo Uno hosted the first Cuban Hip-Hop Festival from July 27 to July 29 in 1995. Artists from across Cuba attended and participated. The festival was such a success that the Casa de Cultura moved the festival to Alamar, where more people could attend the following years. However, according to Rensoli, the amphitheater in Alamar still was not large enough. Three thousand attendants filled the amphitheater designed to seat 1,500 attendees (Curabelo).

Due to the festival's popularity, producer Pablo Herrera contacted an American journalist to report on the event. The journalist published the article in *Vibe* magazine, which sparked American interest in the festival (Curabelo). The article reached the Black August Collective, a hip-hop group that focused on black activism and hip-hop culture, in the United States (Curabelo) ("Fear of a Black Nation" 580). The collective soon became a large supporter of Cuban hip-hop (Curabelo). Artists such as Common, Dread Prez,



Paris, and Talib Kweli traveled to Cuba to perform at the Cuban Hip-Hop Festival and to speak about black activism (“Fear of a Black Nation” 581).

The Cuban Hip-Hop Festival brought artists together to collectively display their talent and share their love for the new genre that swiftly grew in popularity. Many scholars such as Tanya Saunders and Sujatha Fernandes credit the first Cuban Hip-Hop Festival in 1995 as the beginning of the collective Cuban Hip-Hop Movement. Artists used their voices to form a progressive social justice movement that created opportunities within the black community and helped to bring awareness to the collective struggles as Afro-Cubans.

### ***Black Consciousness and Struggles in the Lyrics***

Afro-Cuban hip-hop artists used hip-hop to highlight and bring awareness to the struggles of the Afro-Cuban community in a country that prides itself on having a mixed cultural heritage. The silencing of discussion on racial differences and inequality, however, suppressed the voices of Afro-Cubans who experienced these issues first-hand. Artists who desired change and increased equality for the Afro-Cuban community chose to speak out about their personal experiences of racial discrimination and the experiences of those around them.

Many of their lyrics not only speak about racial discrimination but also marginalization, racial profiling, poverty, and hustling (West-Duran 16). Rap music that focuses on these subjects is known as “conscious” or “progressive rap”. Scholar Arlene Tickner states, “Progressive rap became associated with the representation of everyday experience of marginality, poverty, violence, and discrimination in a non-commercial

way geared toward building a sense of activism among urban youth” (124). This call to activism and social consciousness permeates Cuban hip-hop.

The hip-hop group Hermanos de Causa created a song titled “Tengo” in response to Nicolás Guillén’s poem “Tengo.” The song presents a stark contrast to the poetic praises Guillén gives the Castro regime. Hermanos de Causa states:

Tengo una raza oscura y discriminada	I have a race dark and discriminated
Tengo una jornada que me exige y no da nada	I have a job that demands but does not pay.
Tengo tantas cosas que no puedo ni tocarlas	I have so many things that I can’t even touch
Tengo instalaciones que no puedo ni pisarlas	I have facilities that I can’t even step in
Tengo libertad entre un paréntesis de hierro	I have freedom in parenthesis of steel
Tengo tantos derechos sin provechos que me encierro	I have so many rights without enjoyment that I close myself inside
Tengo lo que tengo sin tener lo que he tenido (Hermanos de Causa).	I have what I have without having what I had (Hermanos de Causa).

(Translation by Margaree Jackson)

The new lyrics to “Tengo” present the stark contrast between the Revolutionary Period and the Special Period as it relates to racial inequality. Nicolás Guillén expressed his gratitude to the Cuban government during the Revolutionary Period. He could enter hotels and clubs without being stopped by the police, he was able to go to beaches and resorts, and he could get a job without fear of discrimination. Hermanos de Causa, however, did not experience these freedoms. They speak about the experiences of blacks

during the Special Period and the increased racial inequality associated with this time period.

Although the Cuban government outlawed discrimination based on race and gender, new policies created during the Special Period opened the doors to more blatant racial discrimination. Once again, hotels and clubs began turning away Afro-Cubans, believing that Afro-Cubans would taint the vacation experience of European tourists (Blue 42). Racial discrimination is evident when Hermanos de Causa says, “I have so many rights without being able to enjoy them that I close myself inside.” (Hermanos de Causa).

Afro-Cubans have a right to equality, according to the Cuban Constitution. However, during the Special Period, blacks experienced levels of inequality that caused them to question their rights and demand redress. White Cubans working as police officers arrested blacks whom they suspected were criminals. Door attendants would not allow blacks into hotels. Employers who did not hire blacks to work in the tourism sector prevented many Afro-Cubans from exercising their right to racial equality.

Their song “Lágrimas Negras” (“Black Tears”) also shares the grievances and experiences of Afro-Cubans in a country that claims there is no racism. They state:

Lágrimas...	Tears. . .
Yo de frente, todo el tiempo realista	Me looking ahead, in realistic time
no digas que no hay racismo donde hay	do not say that there is no racism where
un racista	there is a racist
siempre y cuando, donde quiera que me	always and whenever, wherever you

encuentre,	find me,
el prejuicio de una forma u otra está	prejudice of one form or another is
presente.	present
Negro delincuente, concepto legendario	Black delinquent, legendary concept
visto como el adversario en cualquier	seen as the adversary at any
horario	hour
blancas con tiki-tiki ganando buen	whites con tiki-tiki earning a good
salario	salary
blanquitos miki-miki jugando súper	whites con miki-miki playing Super
Mario	Mario
tienen metido en su psiquis que por mi	they have in their psyche that because of
color yo soy un ordinario (“Lágrimas	my color I am ordinary (“Black
negras”).	Tears”).

(Translation by Margaree Jackson.)

Hermanos de Causa speak on the thought that racial discrimination does not exist in Cuba. They say prejudice follows them each day, revealing that Cuba has not succeeded in creating racial harmony. Whites enjoy greater access to resources while labeling blacks as criminals and watching them struggle. These lyrics emphasize the growing divide between blacks and whites during the Special Period. The artists proceed to say:

Blancos y mulatos en revista Sol y Son	Whites and mulattos in the <i>Sol y Son</i>
para el turismo	magazine for tourism

mientras en televisión, casi lo mismo	While on the television, almost the same
en una Cuba donde hay negros a montón	in a Cuba where there are lots of blacks
mira tú qué contradicción	Look you at the contradiction
la pura cepa casi no aparece en la	The pure black rarely appears in your
programación	programming
ocasión, cuando salen, si no es en	Occasionally, when they appear, if it is
deporte es en papeles secundarios	not in sports, in secondary roles, playing
haciendo de resorte haciendo el clásico	without a choice, playing the classic role
papel de esclavo fiel sumiso,	of a faithful slave,
o haciendo el típico ladrón	Or playing the typical thief whose
de moral por el	morality lies on the
piso (“Lágrimas negras”).	floor (“Black Tears”).
(Translation by Margaree Jackson)	

The artists do not understand why in a nation where so many black people exist, blacks do not experience equal representation in magazines and on television. The artists claim that if they exist in these spaces, they have minor roles or play the stereotypical black. The stereotypes presented in the song are rooted in colonial and post-independence ideologies whites held portraying Afro-Cubans as rapists, rebel savages, and witches (Helg 130). They also share how colorism plays a role in which blacks can have specific roles such as models in magazines.

“Lágrimas negras” exemplifies conscious rap in that it presents the everyday struggles of Afro-Cubans. Hermanos de Causa use shared experiences to help others see that racism is prevalent in Cuba and affects many Afro-Cubans.

Los Aldeanos in their song “*El Juicio*” discuss how their music is meant to revolutionize the country and should not be a crime. They state:

El ciudadano hip-hop de apellido underground	The hip-hop citizen with the underground last name
Es acusa’o por los tantos corazones que ha roba’o	Is accused by the many hearts that it has stolen
Por las vidas que ha cambia’o de manera clandestina	By the many lives that it has changed in a clandestine way
Y su mayor delito es el tráfico ilegal de rima	And its biggest crime is the illegal trafficking of rhymes
Permiso ...	Excuse me... ...
Objeción	Objection
Mi defendido es hombre de bien Lucha por sus derechos también	My defendant is a good man He fights for your rights too.
Es inaudito que lo quieran encerrar	It is unprecedented that you want to arrest him
Por defender una causa y no claudicar	For defending a cause and not giving up

En su contra pruebas	You have presented evidence
han presentado	against him
Pero no basta, eso lo	But that's not enough,
sabe el jurado (Los Aldeanos).	the jury knows it. (Los Aldeanos).
(Translation by Margaree Jackson)	

Los Aldeanos defend hip-hop in the song, setting the stage for hip-hop going to court against those who claim hip-hop is bad for society. They make arguments for why hip-hop is beneficial to society. They also state:

Pues esa señoría es del pueblo la	Well that hono is the expression of the
expresión	town.
Su misión no es destruir; es	Its mission is not to destroy; it's to
construir	construct
Y construir a un mejor porvenir	And construct a better future
(Los Aldeanos).	(Los Aldeanos).

(Translation by Margaree Jackson)

Underground artists such as Hermanos de Causa and Los Aldeanos used their positions as rappers to speak out against injustice and to help promote and construct a better society for all Cuban people. Los Aldeanos fought for and defended underground hip-hop and its use to society.

Finally, Clan 537 speaks on racial and class inequality in Cuba with their song, “¿Quién tiro la tiza?” They state:

¿Quién tiro la tiza?	Who threw the chalk?
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El negro ese.	That black guy there.
¿Quién tiro la tiza?	Who threw the chalk?
No fue el hijo del doctor, no.	It wasn't the son of the doctor, no.
¿Quién tiro la tiza?	Who threw the chalk?
El negro ese,	That black guy there,
Porque el hijo del doctor,	Because the son of the doctor, he
es el mejor (Clan 537).	is the better one (Clan 537).
(Translation by Margaree Jackson)	

“¿Quién tiro la tiza?” demonstrates racial inequality and stereotypes associated with blackness in Cuba. The accusers blame a black child of throwing chalk because he’s black and belongs to a lower economic class. They say that the doctor’s child, who is most likely white and wealthy, could not have thrown the chalk because of his status that makes him “better.” The song shows just how prevalent and harmful racial stereotypes could be.

Blacks faced accusations for unpleasant behavior and criminal activity solely based on the color of their skin. According to Morales, blacks experience overrepresentation in the prison population in Cuba (77). “¿Quién tiro la tiza?” speaks to the even larger issue of criminalization of blacks in Cuba.

### ***Conclusion***

The historical context of the Special Period combined with neoliberalist policies and increased inequality for Afro-Cubans created the perfect conditions for the rise of the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement and discussion of race. Influenced by the similar



socioeconomic struggles of African Americans, young Cubans saw hip-hop as an avenue to discuss their struggles and organize as Afro-Cubans to promote equality.

Hip-hop arrived in Cuba via the Bronx by way of radio waves. The socially conscious messages of early American hip-hop artists inspired Cuban youth to create their own hip-hop. Although the government and enforcers of the revolution initially questioned hip-hop, several intermediaries including Pablo Herrera, Rodolfo Rensoli, and Harry Belafonte stepped in to defend hip-hop before the Cuban government. Rappers could perform and gain designated spaces to share their art and form a collective movement.

The Cuban Hip-Hop Movement served as a social justice movement addressing the societal issues that blacks faced. Artists used their voices and their rhymes to spark discussion on racial inequality and discrimination, racial stereotypes, poverty, criminalization of Afro-Cubans, and other topics. They used their position as artists to spark a movement with the ideals of the Cuban Revolution to eliminate inequality and promote an equal society for all Cubans.

Artists explicitly stated their concerns in their songs as well as their desires for equality. They fought against the ideas that only one Cuban race existed and reclaimed their black identity to unmask the underlying inequality. The struggle for equality through hip-hop grew with such popularity that the Cuban government began allocating resources to artists and providing venues for their performances. Chapter four provides a more in-depth analysis of the relationship between the artists and the government and the government's role in the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement.

## CHAPTER 4: GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO HIP-HOP

### *Introduction*

Although the Cuban government permitted greater artistic expression in the 90s, the government did not initially approve of gatherings of hip-hop artists. The government's initial disapproval of hip-hop presented a set of constraints for hip-hop artists that the government would later loosen due to the growth and popularity of hip-hop and The Cuban Hip-Hop Movement.

The Ministry of Culture permitted the creation of *Casas de Cultura* (Cultural Houses), neighborhood cultural spaces, to promote the arts and culture since the Revolutionary Period (Saunders 67). Those whom the *Casas de Cultura* deemed supporters of the Revolution received government support and government salaries based on their levels of education (Saunders 67). They worked to ensure that art forms supported the revolutionary cause. The government and those responsible for monitoring the arts and culture viewed the primarily American music genre and the ideals associated with hip-hop with skepticism. The rise of hip-hop and the congregation of Afro-Cubans evoked fears of race riots and division. Hip-hop artists and fans initially faced jail time for their support of the genre (Saunders 90). The Cuban government worked to try to prevent these gatherings, but they continued, and Cuban hip-hop grew in popularity.

The Cuban government's relationship with hip-hop is one that is challenging to describe. As the genre grew in popularity, the government created cultural spaces for hip-hop artists to share their art not only through music but also through graffiti and breakdance. Scholar Sujatha Fernandes states that the government's support of the genre was a way for the state to recapture popular support in the time of crisis. The

government's support also came with censorship as a means to deradicalize the growing movement and as a form of official containment ("Fear of a Black Nation" 593-594).

The government's involvement in the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement included promoting the genre and providing a place for Afro-Cubans to express themselves through the Cuban Hip-Hop Festivals. The government financed the festival from 1997 to 2005, through the *Asociación Hermanos Saíz* (AHS) (Baker 34). The AHS is the youth cultural wing of the *Unión de Jóvenes Cubanos* (Union of Cuban Youth) (*Asociación Hermanos Saíz*).<sup>2</sup> This involvement continued with the later creation of the Cuban Rap Agency.

The government also sought to benefit from the movement during a time of crisis and to prevent the movement from escalating to a race war. Due to the number of hip-hop artists that grew from the movement and the government's lack of full support for the genre, not all hip-hop artists received resources, salaries, and benefits from the Cuban Rap Agency (Artist 2). These artists, therefore, remained underground hip-hop artists who aimed (and some who are still aiming today) for change and equality in Cuba.

### ***Creation of Cultural Spaces and Sponsorship***

Hip-hop artists used their voices to demand government action and a return to the revolutionary goals of eliminating racial discrimination. They used music as a form of political protest to gain the attention of the Cuban government and to shift the revolutionary discourse to acknowledge the demands of socially marginalized

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<sup>2</sup> Cuban constitution recognizes the AHS as a cultural and artistic national organization that joins artistic and intellectual youth in Cuba (*Asociación Hermanos Saíz*).

populations (Saunders 98). The fundamental issue involved local enforcers of culture, paying little to no attention to the artists' actual lyrics. They only saw the rising Cuban hip-hop genre as an American genre supported by Afro-Cubans. There is no doubt that hip-hop showcases and gatherings raised concern among local enforcers of culture, which led to the arrests of hip-hop artists and supporters. According to Saunders, the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement served as one of the most prominent areas for black political mobilization (78). Artists sought to make their concerns known to the government and force a discourse on the presence of racial inequality in Cuba.

The Cuban Hip-Hop Movement grew with such force that the government had to find a way to control its progression and ensure that artists did not plan to start a revolution. They found arresting artists to be a challenging task that would only serve to increase the number of rappers speaking about police brutality. Sponsoring hip-hop proved to be the only way for the government to control the movement. Saunders states, "The sheer numbers of Afro-descendant people who listened to hip-hop and the number of self-described underground hip-hop groups cause the government to take note and treat the movement as a legitimate cultural and, by extension, political force" (78). The growth in popularity of the movement forced government leaders to respond.

Artists and cultural promoters, such as Rodolfo Rensoli, with government connections in the Ministry of Culture advocated for government support for hip-hop as the genre grew in popularity. Rensoli and others helped members of the Ministry of Culture to see that many Cuban hip-hop artists did not discuss committing crimes or denounce the government in their music (Curabelo). Instead, they spoke the truth about the realities many Afro-Cubans faced and that the government had ignored. These

realities included the increasing social, political, and economic inequality Afro-Cubans experienced due to continued racial discrimination. Cultural promoters played an essential role in changing the balance of opportunity and constraints for Afro-Cubans within the context of hip-hop. They helped the government realize that Afro-Cubans wanted to promote the equality the Cuban Revolution sought to promote.

Cultural promoters also sought to create a space for critical rap by presenting how rappers' messages paralleled those of the Cuban Revolution. Pablo Herrera stated,

Hip hop artists are a major challenge to the social and cultural struggles, so-as-to make them better. What they are implementing is the evolution of the 1959 Revolution. It's almost the same ideological agenda as Castro's Revolution, but the next step...(Buena Vista, 45)

The government began to view the movement not only as a way to promote revolutionary ideals of equality but also as a way to profit (Baker 369; Saunders 187).

As early as 1991, artists participated in organized hip-hop concerts known as *penas* in *Casas de Cultura* (Fernandes 580). That same year, a radio program called *La Esquina de Rap* (Rap Corner) began to air and spaces on television promoted international rap artists (Fernandes 580). The government continued to allow more cultural spaces for rap. In 1992, the AHS created a cultural space for rap near the Malecon, a popular tourist site in Havana (580).

Due to the growth in popularity of the genre, the Cuban government also permitted the first Cuban Hip-Hop Festival organized by Rodolfo Rensoli in 1995 (de la Fuente 698). The government provided a venue, music equipment, lights, technical assistance, and publicity to artists who participated in the festival (Baker 372). The

festival, in return, brought tourism to the country as it gained national attention and attracted hip-hop fans and artists from around the world. The Cuban hip-hop magazine *Movimiento* mentions American, Spanish, Mexican, Brazilian, and Canadian artists, among others, as participators in the hip-hop festival (Noda). The government most likely viewed the Cuban Hip-Hop Festival as a new source of revenue for the country through tourism attracting thousands of attendees each year (Fernandes 93). The festival occurred each year until 2006 when the Cuban Rap Agency declared that the government did not have enough resources to fund the festival after Hurricane Charley made landfall.

In 1999, the Ministry of Culture formally declared Cuban hip-hop to be a formal cultural expression accepted by the government. This declaration occurred after singer and activist Harry Belafonte met with Fidel Castro and the Ministry of Culture to advocate for official recognition of hip-hop and artists (Fernandez 7). Hip-hop artists and rappers began to view the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement as a revolution within the Revolution (Saunders 98). The artists used their newly granted public sphere to highlight the racial inequality blacks experienced (Fernandes 96).

Artists such as Obsesión and Los Hermanos de Causa challenged Cuban leaders' declarations that a racial democracy exists in Cuba (Fernandes 97,99). Members of the group Anónimo Consejo directly challenge police harassment and other actions by government officials that specifically targeted Afro-Cubans (Fernandes 101). Cuban hip-hop artists continued to use their voice to highlight practices of racial inequality, discrimination, and profiling that contradicted the ideals of the Cuban Revolution. They sought to bring about the experiences of greater equality that had existed before the emergence of the Special Period.

### *Artists Push Government to Provide Additional Support to Rappers*

The government continued to support the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement in the early 2000s, allowing the Cuban Hip-hop Festivals to continue and allowing artists to continue to perform. Many scholars who attended the Cuban Rap Festivals say that many people would be surprised by the amount of freedom of expression that Cuban rappers have under the communist regime. While artists are not entirely free from censorship, they do have a certain degree of freedom of expression. Rapper Papa Humbertico demonstrated this freedom of expression during the Cuban Rap Festival in 2002 (Vicent). His declaration frightened foreigners attending the festival so much so that the government quickly formed the Cuban Rap Agency (Rohrlich).

Humbertico took to the stage with two friends who held a sign saying “*Denuncia Social*” (Social Denouncement) (Vicent). He rapped two songs about social issues, but his third song was the one that shook the nation, government officials, and the foreign press (Vicent). In his third song, Humbertico faced police officers in charge of monitoring the festival and stated,

*Oye tú, contigo mismo, contigo, que en paz no me dejas un instante, no te tengo miedo, no me intimida tu vestimenta azul ni el cargo que tengas, para mí no dejas de ser un ignorante, adelante, estoy a tu disposición, aprieta todo lo que quieras mis manos con tus esposas, móntame en tu jodido camión, que yo, yo no me callaré* (Vicente).

Hey you, with yourself there, you, you never give me even an instant of peace, I am not afraid of you, you do not intimidate me with your blue

uniform and the responsibility that you have, to me you never stop being ignorant, go on, I am at your disposition, tighten my hands all you want with your handcuffs, put me in your f\*\*\*ing truck, and me, I will not be silenced (Vicent).

Humbertico's denouncement of the police and the constant harassment that they perpetrated against blacks in Cuba shocked foreign attendees.

Cuban producer Ariel Fernandez commented on the declaration stating,

The words and the intent kind of got taken out of context. It spread all over U.S media, CNN, Associated Press. *The Miami Herald* was saying 'Cuban youth are rebelling against Castro,' so it turned out to be a big deal. No one was trying to bring down the system; these were all real-life stories about what is happening in Cuba (Rohrich).

Government officials, in response to Humbertico's declaration and U.S. media taking the declaration out of context, formed the Cuban Rap Agency five days after the festival (Rohrich).

The power of Humbertico's declaration, as well as the sheer number of artists active in the movement, pushed the government to find a way to exert control over the movement. The Cuban Rap Agency became the way for the government to have a certain degree of control over artists, which soon became extremely controversial.

### ***Underground vs. Commercial Artists and Censorship***

The newly created Cuban Rap Agency offered support to Cuban rappers. This support, however, only benefited artists who conformed to the government's terms and



conditions. The Cuban Rap Agency served to promote professionalism among hip-hop artists and to commercialize artists. Government officials required hip-hop artists to have an official affiliation with the state under the Cuban Rap Agency to have access to cultural institutions and media markets within the country. Members of the agency also received government salaries (Saunders 189).

Some hip-hop artists viewed the creation of the Cuban Rap Agency as the government making material reparations for those who experienced marginalization during the Special Period (Saunders 190). Artists, however, had to comply with the desires of the state to legally make a living within the country. The state took advantage of the opportunity to make money from hip-hop and worked to commercialize artists to encourage foreign investment (Fernandes 118; “Fear of a Black Nation” 584). While there is not much data available on the number of artists that attracted foreign investment or how much investment they brought in, commercial artists did attract foreign investment (“Fear of a Black Nation” 584).

Spaces in the Cuban Rap Agency, however, were limited. Hundreds of hip-hop artists who desired to be a part of the agency did not receive spots in the agency. One artist shared,

Like me, there are various other artists who have been a part of this movement for years. And we are without an identity, without anything, without power to earn money, without the ability to enter the agency. We try to do an audition to be a part of the agency, and they know that we exist, but there is always a justification that they need one thing or another. We have little contact, really. Many artists belong to an agency to be able to work, to be able to earn money, and I do not

know why. Only they know... I do not know why we are not inside [of the agency]. We are the orphans of the scene (Artist 1).

Since these artists are not a part of the Cuban Rap Agency, they are not legally allowed to make money through their music. They make a living working other jobs, but they are dedicated to the hip-hop movement and using the movement as a means to promote equality for Afro-Cubans (Artist 2). The sheer number of hip-hop artists and groups – around 500 in 2003 – even though there are limited spaces in the Cuban Rap Agency demonstrates the artists' dedication to the cause.

The government gave the majority of airtime on the radio and television to commercialized artists. This airtime served as a way for the government to demonstrate its support for hip-hop and to indicate the type of hip-hop that they supported.

Underground artists such as Soandry who did not agree with the “diluted” messages of state-sponsored rappers stated, “We are creating an elite, and I think hip-hop in Cuba must become a voice of ordinary Cubans” (Rohrlich). Numerous rappers believed that the government did not understand hip-hop culture and the pure struggles that rappers wanted to convey. For this reason, some artists chose not to join or later left the agency.

Artists who wanted to have more freedom of artistic expression or who did not get a spot within the Cuban Rap Agency remained underground artists. Underground artists received support from the AHS and continued to promote their cause of the government fixing the racial and economic disparities caused by the Special Period (Baker 15). Rap promoter William Figueredo fought for the creation of the radio show *La Esquina de Rap* and to create a space for underground artists on radio programs. Figueredo stood by his proposals until the government accepted them (Baker 16). The AHS was a cultural

government institution that provided support for underground culture and dedication to preserving the messages of underground rappers.

The government, however, did not completely exempt underground artists from censorship. These artists still experienced forms of mild censorship during the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement. If an artist performed at an event with official monitors of culture and his or her song had lyrics that officials thought were counterrevolutionary, the officials would let the artist finish performing their song, but they would shut down the venue after their performance. Other underground artists scheduled to perform would not be able to perform due to the previous artists' lyrics ("Cuba: The Next Revolution").

Underground artists also experienced (mild) forms of censorship during the Cuban Hip-Hop Festivals. According to the documentary *East of Havana* (2006), the government required that all artists participating in the festivals submit their lyrics before performing (*East of Havana*). The lyrics submission was a way to exert some control over the festivals and the artists' performance. This censorship at the festivals was most likely a way to make sure that Cuban artists did not denounce their own government in front of an international hip-hop audience.

Underground and commercial artists experienced varying levels of censorship and support by government officials. The Cuban Rap Agency provided the most support to commercial artists, and the *Asociación Hermanos Saíz* provided the most support to underground artists. Underground artists did not experience the constant watchful eye of government officials. Therefore, underground artists could use hip-hop as a tool to discuss problems in society to promote awareness and provoke change more so than

commercial artists. Commercial artists experienced criticism for selling out and diluting their messages to appease government officials and to make a living from their music.

### ***Government Acknowledges Failure to Create Racial Democracy***

The artists successfully made their grievances known to the government. Fidel Castro acknowledged, at the end of the Special Period, that the Cuban Revolution did not create a racial democracy. He stated during a meeting in 1999 that Afro-Cubans experienced overrepresentation in the prison population. The same year, Raúl Castro acknowledged the need for more women, Afro-Cubans, and youth in leadership positions in the government (de la Fuente 15).

Castro stated in a speech on September 8, 2000, in Harlem, New York:

I am not claiming that our country is a perfect model of equality and justice. We believed at the beginning that when we established the fullest equality before the law and complete intolerance for any demonstration of sexual discrimination in the case of women, or racial discrimination in the case of ethnic minorities, these phenomena would vanish from our society. It was some time before we discovered that marginality and racial discrimination with it are not something that one gets rid of with a law or even ten laws, and we have not managed to eliminate them completely, even in 40 years (Castro).

Castro acknowledged that racial discrimination continued to be a prominent issue affecting Cuban society. Furthermore, during a speech in 2003, Castro stated, “the Revolution has not achieved the same success in the struggle to eradicate differences in the social and economic status of the country’s black population” (Schmidt 162).

It is likely that the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement played a vital role in the Castro brothers' recognition that racial inequality and discrimination existed. The movement, with the help of cultural promoters, also likely helped the government to shift in its position, allowing greater acceptance of Afro-Cuban culture and the discussion of social, political, and economic inequality through hip-hop. The Cuban Hip-Hop Movement proved to be a social and political force that raised awareness about the present struggles of Afro-Cubans, struggles that Castro believed ended with anti-discriminatory laws that took effect in the 1960s.

However, despite Castro's declarations, silence around race and racial inequality still exists today. Race remains a taboo subject in Cuba today ("Cuba: The Next Revolution"). Many Cubans still refrain from speaking out about racial discrimination and still hold on to the ideologies of *mestizaje* ("Cuba: The Next Revolution").

### ***A Better Future for Afro-Cubans and Cuban Hip-Hop?***

According to Saunders, the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement officially ended in 2006, the same year that Fidel Castro stepped down from power, with the rise of the popular genre reggaeton (302). The last Cuban Hip-Hop Festival occurred in 2005 (Saunders 100). The Cuban hip-hop scene still exists today, but it is no longer the strong arts-based social movement that existed from the Special Period until 2006 (Saunders 303). Artists 1 and 2 shared that the movement exists in some capacity today, but the strength of the movement has weakened since its beginning 20 years ago. The state has worked to ensure that hip-hop artists are not able to create another social movement that is as extensive as the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement (Saunders 305).

The government has done this by advertising nationally and internationally for events such as the 2013 Puno Arriba hip-hop awards but placing the event in a venue that only seats 200 people and is known for technical equipment that does not always function (Saunders 305). The state exercised greater control over social movements, such as the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement, once the government gained strength and power, and the country recovered from the Special Period.

Underground artists had more freedom to speak out against the government as they were not always under the careful, close eye of government officials. The government created the Cuban Rap Agency in hopes to more closely monitor and censor these artists. However, due to the lack of resources caused by the economic crisis, it is likely that the government was not equipped to provide spots at the Cuban Rap Agency to all hip-hop artists. This lack of resources and power to co-opt all Cuban hip-hop artists created the conditions for underground artists to continue to create their music and to more freely express themselves.

### ***Conclusion***

Although the Cuban government initially responded to hip-hop with arrests of artists, the Cuban government began creating cultural spaces for hip-hop artists in the mid-90s and early 2000s. The government's assistance to the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement came after influential supporters of hip-hop such as Pablo Herrera, Ariel Fernandez, Rodolfo Rensoli, and Harry Belafonte expressed their support for the genre. They explained hip-hop's message of promoting equality to government and cultural officials. Once government officials acknowledged that rappers promoted ideals of the revolution

and after a push from artists such as Papa Humbertico, the government provided more resources for the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement.

There was a divide between mainstream, commercial artists and underground artists. The Cuban Rap Agency sponsored commercial artists who often diluted their messages and dealt with more censorship to remain a part of the agency. The AHS provided performance venues for underground artists and sponsored the Cuban Hip-Hop Festival. The government carefully monitored government-sponsored artists.

Underground artists, while not entirely free, experienced more freedom of speech, as they did not receive government salaries for making, performing, and distributing their music.

The Cuban Hip-Hop Movement and the artists' push for equality helped the government acknowledge and speak on issues of racial inequality, underrepresentation of Afro-Cubans in government positions, and mass incarceration of Afro-Cubans. The Castro brothers' declarations on racial inequality, however, did not allow for more discussion of racial discrimination and inequality outside of hip-hop. Discussion of racial inequality remains taboo today, and the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement is less powerful than it was in the 90s and early 2000s.

## CONCLUSION

The context of the Revolutionary Period and the Special Period along with international influence, government policies, and the Afro-Cuban context in each period work together to explain the variation and balance of opportunity and constraints for Afro-Cubans. Strict policies banning discussion of racial inequality during the Revolutionary Period prevented Afro-Cubans from publicly organizing and fighting for equality. The Cuban government declared all Cubans to be equal and banned racial distinctions. In contrast, policies permitting more artistic freedom, the government's new understanding of the aim of Cuban hip-hop, and the overwhelming popularity of the movement allowed racial discrimination to arise in the political discussion in the Special Period.

The Cuban Revolution brought about many changes for Afro-Cubans as the government worked to eliminate capitalism and American influence. Afro-Cubans did not experience the complete equality and elimination of racial discrimination that the government had hoped for; however, economic and social conditions improved for Afro-Cubans. All Cubans could access quality health care, housing, and education and new nationalized entities such as hotels and beaches. These changes and the benefits that the changes brought to the Afro-Cuban community are evident in Nicolás Guillén's poem "Tengo." The government believed it had successfully eliminated racial inequality and subsequently outlawed all further discussion of racial discrimination and inequality in Cuba. Officials considered those who engaged in the discussion of racial inequality to be counterrevolutionary. These constraints made Afro-Cuban organization nearly impossible and discouraged political discourse on racial inequality.



The beginning of the Special Period, however, brought sweeping changes to the nation and created the conditions that would allow a resurgence of racial discrimination. Employers did not hire Afro-Cubans for jobs in predominately white sectors such as tourism. The divide between the haves, comprised of mostly whites, and the have nots, comprised of mostly blacks, significantly increased due to discriminatory practices. The government no longer had the power to monitor and ensure that Afro-Cubans received fair and equal treatment because the government re-opened private ownership of businesses and corporations. The growing divide between white Cubans and Afro-Cubans, along with new experiences of racial inequality that Afro-Cubans faced, led to the rise of the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement.

The Cuban Hip-Hop Movement gave Afro-Cubans a voice that the government eventually recognized, after learning that the rappers sought to promote the ideals of the Revolution. The annual Cuban Hip-Hop Festival, sponsored by the AHS, attracted international attention and brought in tourists from around the world. The success of the festivals and the number of tourists coming to Cuba each year to attend the festival prompted the government to sponsor the festival through the AHS from 1997 to 2005.

The state provided resources to cultural organizations supporting hip-hop and created a platform for hip-hop artists who promoted revolutionary ideals of racial equality. The government, however, limited resources such as salaries and airtime to artists belonging to the Cuban Rap Agency. Underground rappers received support from the AHS, allowing them to perform, but they could not legally make money from their music. The state's relationship to hip-hop is intricate and challenging to understand,

especially due to the cancellation of the 2006 Cuban Hip-Hop Festival and recent decreasing support for hip-hop.

The Cuban Hip-Hop Movement proved to be a powerful force that promoted change, such as the acknowledgment by Fidel Castro that racial discrimination still plagued the Cuban society. The movement, however, ended in 2006, the same year that Fidel Castro stepped down from power. The Cuban economy has since recovered from the Special Period, and the state has had more power to control artists today than during the Special Period. Hip-hop artists no longer have the platform and force for political and social change that they once enjoyed, and discussion or racial discrimination remains taboo.

Nevertheless, the conditions of the Special Period led to the rise of the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement. Afro-Cubans, inspired by American rappers, joined together based on their struggles and identities as Afro-Cubans to form a collective movement to promote their full inclusion in society. The movement led to a rise in black consciousness and awareness of the daily struggles of Afro-Cubans. They used their voices to speak out against racial discrimination, police harassment, mass incarceration, poverty, and inequality. Artists hoped to be the revolution within the Revolution using their music to spark change and promote equality for all Cuba.

### *Limitations*

It is difficult to understand race in Cuba and how hip-hop played a role in race relations in Cuba without traveling to Cuba. One artist, who chose not to continue with their interview responses, stated that I must go to Cuba to understand race in Cuba. As I

was not able to travel to Cuba for this research, I could not witness and gain a deeper understanding of race in Cuba.

Furthermore, due to technical difficulties in Cuba, I conducted interviews via Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp. I recorded my questions and sent them all at once to the hip-hop artists who I interviewed. For this reason, I was not able to have in-depth conversations with artists about their connection to the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement and could only use the typed or audio responses they provided.

### ***Suggestions for Further Research***

Researchers should conduct further research on the economic, political, and social conditions of Afro-Cubans in the post-Fidel period (2006-present). Cuba has experienced two changes in administration since Fidel Castro, but scholars have not conducted considerable research on the current struggles of Afro-Cubans. There is little knowledge on whether the government made further reparations to Afro-Cubans who experienced marginalization due to the Special Period outside of the governments' sponsorship of Cuban hip-hop artists.

Scholars should also conduct further research on the long-term effects the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement had on society. These studies should include how hip-hop and the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement affected social, political, and economic spheres in Cuba. These studies should also provide information on how much the government profited from hip-hop and the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement.

Furthermore, the Cuban government recently passed *Decreto 349* (Decree 349) in 2018 that places further limitations on artists. The law establishes new political-cultural

crimes and allows the Ministry of Culture to impede any artistic expression without the possibility to appeal to authorities. According to the law, Cuban authorities can arrest artists who perform at private events without a license or permission from the Ministry of Culture or a work agency (Rojas). Authorities arrested rap artists such as Maykel Castillo and other artists who protested the decree this year (Pacheo). Scholars should conduct further studies with the recent developments and decrees that strengthen the censorship of the arts in Cuba.

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## APPENDIX

### *Interview #1: Spanish*

- Margaree Jackson: ¿Cuándo se convirtió en una artista de hip-hop?
- Artista 1: Bueno, mi convertí en una artista de hip hop en el año de 1996.
- Margaree Jackson: ¿Cómo se interesó en el género de hip-hop?
- Artista 1: Me interesé en el género de hip-hop escuchando música norteamericana por la radio, por la FM. Y empecé a escuchar música que me encantó. Llego y empecé a sentir dentro de mi cuerpo que vibraba la sangre al escuchar a hip-hop, y escuchar toda la música que provenía de allá. Y sentí que tenía muchas cosas que decir. Yo también, pero en mi idioma.
- Margaree Jackson: ¿Puede contarme un poco sobre su música y qué mensajes son importantes transmitir en sus letras?
- Artista 1: Bueno, cuando comencé en el año 1996, hice el primer grupo en Cuba del rap femenino. No existía movimiento femenino en ese momento. Todos eran hombres, y al ver eso, yo que escuchaba esa música dije yo también puedo subir en escena y decir lo que yo siento desde el punto de vista mía como mujer. Y entonces, la primera canción en el primer grupo que se llamaba --- éramos tres chicas. Yo era la directora. Me llamo ----. Empezamos a cantar canciones que hablaban sobre el machismo. Como el hombre trataba a la mujer, y cómo queríamos nosotras que sí fuimos tratadas. Y entonces, lo más interesante es que esos temas eran

escritos solo por hombres, y nosotras los interpretábamos. Parece que ellos no les tenían quien les dijera como con melodía.

Margaree Jackson: ¿Cuál es su relación con el movimiento de hip-hop cubano?

Artista 1: Pues en el año '96 cuando empecé como todo comienzo fue un poco difícil. Pero con mucho empeño y sacrificio mi grupo femenino tuvo mucha aceptación. Preparé un trabajo muy profesional con mucho amor. Y éramos la duda de muchos. Primero porque no se conocía mucho del género hip-hop, el rap. Y segundo por ser un grupo solo de mujeres. Entonces estábamos en todos los escenarios de actividades de hip-hop, y otros que no eran de hip-hop. Y en todos enseñamos con mucho orgullo nuestro trabajo. En ese tiempo el movimiento de hip-hop era más sacrificado que ahora. Entonces con ese movimiento si veíamos las donaciones que mandaban desde Estados Unidos a nosotros raperos. Nos mandaban música sobre todo porque en ese tiempo nos era demasiado imposible tener background. Usábamos tape récord que eran norteamericanos. Mi relación con el movimiento de hip-hop ahora es relativo. No es cien por ciento como antes. Ahora siento que no hay mucha unión entre los raperos. Ahora el movimiento es un poco dividido, y siento que todavía falta más participación femenina y muchísimo apoyo institucional.

Margaree Jackson: ¿Puede describir el impacto social del movimiento de hip-hop cubano?

Artista 1: En los comienzos cuando yo empecé, empezaba, empecé en el año 96. En el año 95 fue el primer Festival de hip-hop en Cuba, el impacto social fue bastante grande. Fue muy bueno, y fue muy acogido por la sociedad. Eh, le gustaba muchísimo el hip-hop en esos tiempos. Ahora, al existir, otros géneros incursionado por jóvenes, con otros temas, el hip-hop no tiene tanta fuerza. Y ahora, está tratando de renacer en Cuba. Aunque exista un movimiento yo lo siento pequeño en comparación con 20 años atrás.

Margaree Jackson: ¿Puede describir el impacto político del movimiento de hip-hop cubano?

Artista 1: Pues el impacto político. Pues, al principio, hubo mucho, tuvimos muchas limitaciones como en el vestuario. Que no podíamos usar por ejemplo pañuelos que tenían la bandera norteamericana o un t-shirt con la bandera norteamericana. Y se vigilaba mucho los gestos y lo que fuimos a decir. En mi caso no tenía problemas porque yo estaba hablando de la situación social del hombre y la mujer, pero otros artistas, yo creo que muchos ... las letras se la eliminaban. Tenía mucho miedo de lo que uno fuera a decir. Yo personalmente no tuve un problema. Pienso que ahora el movimiento es más marginalizado y no nos presta mucha atención.

Margaree Jackson: ¿Por qué los funcionarios cubanos patrocinaron el hip-hop?

Artista 1: Pues los funcionarios de aquí del hip-hop, del gobierno. Yo creo que hip-hop no les interesa. No les interesa para nada. Eso es a mi

vista, de mi punto de vista. Es mi opinión personal. No les interesa absolutamente para nada.

Margaree Jackson: ¿Cómo se benefició personalmente del patrocinio?

Artista 1: Como yo, hay varios artistas que llevamos muchísimos años en este movimiento. Y estamos sin una identificación sin nada, sin poder ganar dinero, sin poder entrar a la empresa. Tratando de hacer una audición para llegar a ellos, y ellos saben que nosotros existimos, pero siempre hay una justificación que necesitan una cosa que necesita la otra. Tenemos poco contacto, de verdad. Muchos artistas pertenecen a una empresa para poder trabajar, para poder ganar dinero y no sé por qué. Solo lo saben ellos, solo lo saben ellos. No sé porque no estamos adentro. .... Somos los huérfanos del escenario.

Margaree Jackson: ¿Los funcionarios cubanos hicieron un gran beneficio de las ventas de discos, conciertos y el Festival de hip-hop cubano?

Artista 1: Entonces si hay algún beneficio, no sé por dónde será. No sé con qué artista será. Será con muy pocos artistas. Con cuatro, con cinco, con diez. Viendo por lo menos cien artistas en la calle. Solamente se beneficiaron con diez o más porque los otros artistas que llevamos experiencia en la escena, que llevamos años trabajando en ese escenario, estamos en la calle.

Margaree Jackson: ¿Era usted un artista capaz de ganarse la vida como artistas después del patrocinio gubernamental del género?

Artista 1: Ya ves, nunca me he ganado la vida como artista de hip-hop porque no he pertenecido a la empresa. No pertenezco a la empresa de hip-hop que hay aquí en Cuba. Y entonces, no sé ni quien es el funcionario que ha permitido que se haga la empresa ni nada. Es algo que uno no se puede enterar allí porque no sé. Uno se va y no. Es como si no fuiste artista.

Margaree Jackson: ¿Se siente como el gobierno limitaba la libertad de expresión de los artistas de hip-hop?

Artista 1: Al principio vigilaban a lo que fuimos a decir.

Margaree Jackson: ¿Cuáles personas y entidades cubanos han apoyado el hip-hop y el movimiento de hip hop? ¿Cuáles han tenido reservas?

Artista 1: Solo hay una empresa de Cuba para los raperos que se llama Agencia de Rap Cubano, y es la que estaba diciendo que todos los raperos no tenemos acceso a ella. Piden audiciones. Piden muchos requisitos para estar dentro. Y entonces como yo no estoy adentro, no te puedo decir nada. Intenté entrar por una audición que hicieron con muchas artistas, con muchos raperos, y no nos aceptaron. Éramos como 20 y solo entro uno, y no sé quién es.

Margaree Jackson: ¿Qué funcionarios representan la interacción del gobierno cubano con los artistas?

Artista 1: Existía un grupo de organizadores llamado Grupo Uno que eran los organizadores de eventos que defendían mucho a los raperos, grafiteros, bailadores de break dance e invitaban artistas

norteamericanos a Cuba, con los cuales tuve el gusto y honor de compartir escenarios.

Margaree Jackson: ¿Cree que el período especial creó las condiciones para el ascenso del movimiento de hip-hop cubano? ¿Por qué o por qué no?

Artista 1: Bueno, el periodo especial fue un periodo donde empezó mucho más la escasez aquí en Cuba. Pero en mi caso no, yo no empecé a hacer hip-hop por el periodo especial ni nada así, sino porque como te decía antes, la música llegó a mí, yo la sentí, y yo tenía cosas que decir. También existían grupos con otros temas sociales, pero a nivel con un poco de humor, ¿no? Decían muchas verdades, pero no ofendían a nadie, ni hablaba de la necesidad, ni la escasez, ni nada así.

Margaree Jackson: ¿Cómo se vio afectado personalmente por el período especial? ¿Enfrentaste dificultades económicas y la discriminación racial?

Artista 1: Bueno, afectada por el periodo especial. Recuerdo que yo era un poco muy niña, ¿no? Y muy jovencita. Y si nos vemos afectados todos aquí por la escasez de todo de todo de todo. Pero en el plano mío personal, eh, no sentí sobre mí ninguna discriminación racial. Porque creo que existe personas racistas, pero no que sea una cosa oficialmente del gobierno. Yo creo que son las personas que son racistas. Por aquí en los mismos lugares, en el mismo lugar que trabaja un blanco, trabaja un negro. En la misma escuela que estudia un blanco, estudia un negro. En la misma guagua se monta

un blanco, se monta un negro. No hay un lugar escrito aquí que dice que “negros no.” Yo no lo he visto. Yo sí, he visto personas que son racistas. Que haya distintos tipos de actitudes y aptitudes, eso sí. Pero creo que, yo pienso que es una cosa muy personal en la forma que te educaba, en la forma en que te hayan criado. Si crees que eres superior o crees que eres inferior, eso es una cosa de educación. Eso es mi opinión personal. Pero aquí no hay una raya que diga que los blancos van y los negros para acá. Yo no lo he visto. Si, existe personas con esos pensamientos, pero parte del gobierno, no lo he visto un lugar que dice “aquí no entran negros.” Tampoco he visto un lugar que dice, “aquí no entran los blancos.” Entonces el periodo especial afecto sí de manera económica a todas las personas las limitaciones en el vestir; en el transporte; a todos, a todos, a todos. Pero no, no de forma racista.

Margaree Jackson: ¿Por qué cree que los funcionarios cubanos permitieron discusiones sobre la discriminación racial en forma de hip-hop cuando los funcionarios prohibieron previamente las discusiones sobre la desigualdad racial?

Artista 1: Si permiten temas sobre la discusión racial y todo así, es porque yo creo que es necesario escuchar la opinión de la juventud quien tiene la fuerza. Y entonces también han cambiado mucho los tiempos. Han cambiado, eh, algunas, ha venido el desarrollo en Cuba que era a hora de que llegara. Por ejemplo, desarrollo



tecnológico de todas maneras en Cuba siempre ha estado informado mucho y interesada mucho en las cosas que pasas afuera.

Margaree Jackson: ¿Hubo otros movimientos artísticos afrocubanos fuertes durante el período especial que tuvo un impacto importante en la sociedad cubana, especialmente con respecto a dar luz sobre la discriminación racial?

Artista 1: ---

### ***Interview #1: English Translation***

Margaree Jackson: When did you become a hip-hop artist?

Artist 1: Well, I became a hip-hop artist in 1996.

Margaree Jackson: How did you become interested in the genre?

Artist 1: I became interested in the genre of hip-hop listening to North American music on the FM radio. And I began to hear music that I loved. It arrived and I began to feel inside my body that my blood vibrated when listening to hip-hop and all of the music that came from there. And I felt like it had a lot to say. I did too, but in my own language.

Margaree Jackson: Can you tell me a little more about your music and what messages are important for you to convey in your lyrics?

Artist 1: Well, when I began in 1996, I created the first female rap group in Cuba. There was not a female movement at that time. All of them

were men, and after seeing this, I, who listened to this music said I can also enter the scene and say what I feel from my perspective as a woman. And then, we created the first song in the first group that was called ---. There were three of us. I was the director. My name is ---. We began singing songs that spoke about machismo, how men treated women, and how we as women wanted to be treated. And then, the most interesting is that those topics were only written about by men, and we performed them. It seems like they did not have anyone to tell them how to with melody.

Margaree Jackson: What is your relation to the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement?

Artist 1: Well in '96 when I began, liked all beginnings, it was a little difficult. But with much endeavor and sacrifice, my female group was widely accepted. I prepared a work that was very professional with much love. And many people doubted us. First, because they did not know much about the genre of hip-hop, or rap and secondly, for being a group made up only of women. So, we were on all of the stages at hip-hop activities and at others that were not hip-hop. And at all we performed our work with much pride. During that time, the hip-hop movement was more demanding than it is now. So, with that movement we did see donations that those in the United States sent to us rappers. They sent us music most of all because in that time, it was basically impossible to have background music. We used tape recorders that were North

American. My relationship with the hip-hop movement [now] is relative. It is not 100 percent like it was before. Now, I feel like there is not much unity among the rappers. Now, the movement is a little divided, and I feel as if we still lack more female participation and much institutional support.

Margaree Jackson: Can you describe the social impact of the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement?

Artist 1: In the early stages when I began, I began in 1996. The first Cuban Hip-Hop Festival was in '95. The social impact was fairly large. It was great, and it was very welcomed by society. Um, they really liked hip-hop in those times. Now that other genres exist that are popular among the youth, with other topics, hip-hop does not have as much power. And now, it is trying to make a comeback in Cuba. While the movement does still exist, it is very small compared to the movement 20 years ago.

Margaree Jackson: Can you describe the political impact of the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement?

Artist 1: Well, the political impact. Well, at first, there was a lot. We had many limitations like in our way of dress. We could not wear, for example, bandanas that had the American flag or t-shirts with the American flag. And they watched our gestures and what we said. In my case, I did not have problems because I was talking about the social situation of the man and the women. But other artists, I

think that many... had their lyrics censored. The government was afraid of what one said. I, personally, did not have a problem. I think that now, the movement is more marginalized, and the government does not pay that much attention.

Margaree Jackson: Why did Cuban officials sponsor hip-hop?

Artist 1: Well, the hip-hop officials here, from the government... I think they are not interested in hip-hop at all. It doesn't interest them at all. That is in my view, from my perspective. It is my personal opinion. It doesn't interest them at all.

Margaree Jackson: How did you benefit personally from the sponsorship?

Artist 1: Like me, there are various other artists who have been a part of this movement for years. And we are without an identification, without anything, without power to earn money, without the ability to enter the agency. We try to do an audition to be a part of the agency, and they know that we exist, but there is always a justification that they need one thing or another. We have little contact, really. Many artists belong to an agency in order to be able to work, to be able to earn money, and I do not know why. Only they know. Only they know. I do not know why we are not inside. We are the orphans of the scene.

Margaree Jackson: Did the Cuban officials make a large profit from record sales, concerts, and the Cuban Hip-Hop Festival?

Artist 1: So, if there is any benefit, I do not know where it would be. I do not know what artist would receive it. It would be with very few artists. With four, with five, with ten. I see at least 100 artists in the streets. The government only benefits from ten or more artists because the other artists that have experience in the scene, that have years of work experience in the hip-hop scene, we are on the street.

Margaree Jackson: Were you as an artist able to make a living wage as an artist after the government sponsorship of the genre?

Artist 1: You see, I have never earned a living as a hip-hop artist because I have not been a part of an agency. I am not a part of the hip-hop agency that is here in Cuba. And so, I do not know who the authority is who has permitted that the agency be created or anything. It's something that you can not uncover there because I don't know. One goes and no. It's as if you are not even an artist.

Margaree Jackson: Do you feel as though Cuban officials restricted the freedom of expression of hip-hop artists? Why or why not?

Artist 1: At the beginning, they watched what we said.

Margaree Jackson: Which Cuban officials and entities have supported hip-hop and the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement? Which ones have had reservations?

Artist 1: There is only one business in Cuba for rappers that is called the Cuban Rap Agency, and that is the agency I was telling you about. Not all rappers have access to it. They request auditions. They

have many requirements in order to be a part of the agency. And so, since I am not a part of the agency, I can not tell you anything. I tried to enter an audition they had with many other artists, with many rappers, and they did not accept us. There were about 20 of us, and they only accepted one person, and I don't know who they are.

Margaree Jackson: Which officials represent Cuban government interaction with artists?

Artist 1: There was a group of organizers called Grupo Uno who were the organizers of events and defended the rappers, graffiti artists, break dancers and invited North American artists to Cuba. Ones with which I've had the pleasure and honor of sharing the stage.

Margaree Jackson: Do you believe that the Special Period created the conditions for the rise of the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement? Why or why not?

Artist 1: Well, the Special Period was a period when scarcities of many items began here in Cuba. But in my case, no, um, I did not begin making hip-hop because of the Special Period or anything like that, but because, as I said earlier, the music came to me, and I felt it. I felt as if I had things to say. There were other groups with other social topics, but with a little bit of humor. No? Their songs told many truths, but they did not offend anyone or talk about necessities, the scarcities, or anything like that.

Margaree Jackson: How were you personally affected by the Special Period? Did you experience any economic hardship or racial discrimination?

Artist 1: Well, affected by the Special Period... Remember that I was a very little girl, no? And very young. Yes, all of us were affected here by the scarcity of everything, of everything, of everything. But in my personal experience, um, I did not feel that I experienced racial discrimination. Because I believe that there are racist people, but I do not think that it is something official from the government. I believe that there are people that are racist. Here in the same places, in the same place that a white person works, a black person works. In the same school that a white person studies, a black person studies. On the same bus that a white person rides, a black person rides. There is not a place here with writing that says, "No Blacks." I have not seen it. I have seen people who are racist. There are distinct types of (racist) attitudes and aptitudes, those exist. But I believe that, I think that it is a very personal thing that comes from the way you were educated and the way that you were raised. If you believe that you are superior or believe that you are inferior, it's a thing of education. That's my personal opinion. But here there is not a line that says that whites go here and blacks go there. I have not seen it. Yes, there are people with these ideas who exist, but I have not seen on the government's part, a place that says "Blacks not allowed to enter." I also have not seen a place that

says, “Whites not allowed to enter here.” So yes, the Special Period affected everyone economically. The limitations in clothing, in transportation. It affected everyone, everyone, everyone. But not in a racist way.

Margaree Jackson: Why do you believe Cuban officials allowed discussions of racial discrimination in the form of hip-hop when officials previously banned discussions of racial inequality?

Artist 1: If they permit topics about racial discussion and everything, it’s because I believe it’s necessary to hear the opinion of the youth who have power. And so, the times have also changed. Some people have changed. Development has come to Cuba that was long past due. For example, technological development. Cuba has in every way, in every way been very informed and interested in what was happening abroad.

Margaree Jackson: Were there any other strong Afro-Cuban art movements during the Special Period that had a major impact on Cuban society, especially in regard to shedding light on racial discrimination?

Artist 1: ---

### ***Interview #2: Spanish***

Margaree Jackson: ¿Cuándo se convirtió en una artista de hip hop?

Artista 2: Me convertí en una artista de hip hop en el año 2001.

Margaree Jackson: ¿Cómo se interesó en el género de hip hop?



Artista 2: Me interesé en el género de hip hop después de sufrir 2 violaciones y una agresión física públicamente y sentí la necesidad de expresar mi rabia, mi odio, mis estados de ánimo, etc. Y me sentí la obligación de ser una consejera para otras mujeres que hayan sido afectadas por el machismo, la discriminación, la exclusión, agresores violentos. Y también para las mujeres que no han pasado por eso. Es importante estar alerta.

Margaree Jackson: ¿Puede usted contarme un poco sobre su música y qué mensajes son importantes transmitir en sus letras? ¿Y cuáles eran importantes durante el periodo especial y en los años 2000?

Artista 2: Mi música y mis letras siempre han sido en defensa de la mujer, abogando por la NO VIOLENCIA, la discriminación de cualquier índole sobre todo racial, y en general todos los males sociales que afectan directamente a las mujeres en el mundo.

Margaree Jackson: ¿Cuál es su relación con el movimiento de hip-hop cubano?

Artista 2: Yo comencé a cantar hip hop en el año 2001, Comencé como publico antes y luego bailando para un grupo. Comencé en el año 2001 como rapera siendo integrante de un grupo. Ahora soy de las pocas femeninas rapero que han seguido su carrera como MC durante 18 años consecutivos sin interrupción. Soy muy respetada dentro del movimiento nacional de hip hop en Cuba.

Margaree Jackson: ¿Puede describir el impacto social del movimiento de hip-hop cubano?

Artista 2: Pienso que en los años 90 el impacto fue mayor, porque el movimiento de jefa tenía mucha más fuerza. Ahora tienen un impacto social de otra forma, de una manera más objetiva porque no es el género de moda en Cuba. En mi caso yo veo mucho más de cerca el impacto social porque trabajó directamente con las comunidades más intriguadas de Cuba. Y las personas se me acercan personalmente a decirme que se sienten identificadas con mis canciones. Y muchas mujeres me han dicho que quieren cambiar su vida.

Margaree Jackson: ¿Puede describir el impacto político del movimiento de hip-hop cubano?

Artista 2: En cuanto al impacto político, no sabría qué decir porque nunca me he involucrado con la política, siempre he hecho mi música para provocar impactos sociales directos en las comunidades.

Margaree Jackson: ¿Por qué los funcionarios cubanos patrocinaron el hip-hop?

Artista 2: Nunca han patrocinado el hip hop. lo que hicieron fue crear una empresa de rap en Cuba para agrupar y tener controlados a los raperos.

Margaree Jackson: ¿Cómo se benefició personalmente del patrocinio?

Artista 2: Yo no me he beneficiado nunca de este patrocinio porque no pertenezco a esa empresa. Soy una artista y activista independiente.

Margaree Jackson: ¿Los funcionarios cubanos hicieron un gran beneficio de las ventas de discos, conciertos y el Festival de hip-hop cubano?

Artista 2: No sé de qué manera se han beneficiado las instituciones con esto porque como ya te digo no pertenezco a esa institución.

Margaree Jackson: ¿Era usted capaz de ganarse la vida como artista después del patrocinio gubernamental del género?

Artista 2: Yo me gano mi dinero haciendo otras cosas que no tienen nada que ver con mi trabajo como rapera.

Margaree Jackson: ¿Se siente como si los funcionarios cubanos limitaban la libertad de expresión de los artistas del hip-hop? ¿Por qué o por qué no?

Artista 2: Yo pienso que por supuesto que sí los funcionarios limitan la libertad de expresión a los raperos. Porque aquí lo asocian todo con la política. Y pueden tener problemas con la justicia.

Margaree Jackson: ¿Qué funcionarios y entidades cubanos han apoyado el hip-hop y el movimiento cubano de hip-hop? ¿Cuáles de los funcionarios han tenido reservas?

Artista 2: Los funcionarios de instituciones no tengo mucho conocimiento sobre eso, porque soy una artista independiente. Pero sí sé que la Asociación Hermanos Saiz sí apoya a los artistas independientes de hip hop, Al igual que la dirección de Cultura municipal del municipio playa y las casas de cultura de playa. El funcionario directo que representa a los artistas de hip hop ante las instituciones cubanas se llama Rubén Marín.

- Margaree Jackson: ¿Qué funcionarios representan la interacción del gobierno cubano con los artistas?
- Artista 2: La institución que representa la interacción entre los artistas de hip hop y el gobierno es la Agencia Cubana de Rap
- Margaree Jackson: ¿Cree que el período especial creó las condiciones para el ascenso del movimiento de hip-hop cubano? ¿Por qué o por qué no?
- Artista 2: Pienso que el periodo especial creo un ascenso en el movimiento de hip hop, porque había muchas necesidades económicas por lo tanto había también mucha necesidad de decir todos los problemas sociales que estaba ocasionando tanta necesidad económica.
- Margaree Jackson: ¿Cómo se vio afectado personalmente por el período especial? ¿Enfrentó dificultades económicas y la discriminación racial?
- Artista 2: Yo personalmente con el periodo especial me vi afectada económicamente, provengo de una familia muy pobre y mis padres son obreros literalmente. Con salarios mínimo y sin esperanza de mejorar en aquellos tiempos. La comida era muy poca, vestí zapatos viejos, etcétera. Pero no sufrí discriminación en ese entonces.
- Margaree Jackson: ¿Por qué creen que los funcionarios cubanos permitieron discusiones sobre la discriminación racial en forma de hip-hop cuando los funcionarios prohibieron previamente las discusiones sobre la desigualdad racial?
- Artista 2: Yo no sé la realidad sobre estos permisos sobre hablar de discriminación y desigualdad racial pero sí pienso que aquí este

tema es complicado, quieren hacer ver que no hay discriminación aquí, pero sí la hay y mucha. Solo tienes que ser negro para vivirlo en carne propia.

Margaree Jackson: ¿Hubo otros movimientos artísticos afrocubanos fuertes durante el período especial que tuvo un impacto importante en la sociedad cubana, especialmente con respecto a echar luz sobre la discriminación racial?

Artista 2: En ese tiempo yo era muy joven y no recuerdo ningún movimiento afrocubano y antirracista

Margaree Jackson: ¿Cree que el hip-hop ayudó a los afrocubanos a construir sus propias identidades a partir de la idea del gobierno de “cubanidad” (o que solo existe una raza en Cuba) y cómo? ¿Piensa que el hip-hop le ayudó a construir su identidad y cómo?

Artista 2: Pienso que para los artistas como yo de hip hop nos ayudó de muchas maneras, pero lo primero es que hemos decidido que el hip hop es una forma de vida entonces de ahí se deriva la creación de nuestra identidad.

### ***Interview #2: English Translation***

Margaree Jackson: When did you become a hip-hop artist?

Artist 2: I became a hip-hop artist in 2001.

Margaree Jackson: How did you become interested in the genre?

Artist 2: I became interested in the hip-hop genre after suffering from two rapes and one public physical assault. And I felt the need to express my rage, my hate, my emotions, etc. And I felt the obligation to be a counselor for other women who have been affected by machismo, discrimination, exclusion, and violent aggressors. And also for women who have not been through those things. It is important to be alert.

Margaree Jackson: Can you tell me a little about your music and what messages are important for you to convey in your lyrics?

Artist 2: My music and my lyrics have always been in defense of women, advocating against violence, discrimination of any type and especially racial, and in general against all of the social ills that directly affect women around the world.

Margaree Jackson: What is your relation to the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement?

Artist 2: I began to sing hip hop in 2001. I began as a member of the crowd before and after dancing for a group. I became a rapper in 2001 as member of a group. Now, I am one of the few female rappers who have continued in the field as an MC for 18 years without interruption. I am very well respected within the national Cuban Hip-Hop Movement.

Margaree Jackson: Can you describe the social impact of the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement?

Artist 2: I believe that in the 90s the impact was greater, because the hip-hop movement had much more strength. Now, it has a social impact in a different form, in a way that is more subjective because it is not the most popular genre in Cuba. In my case, I see much more of the social impact because I work directly with more intricate communities in Cuba. And the people come up to me personally and tell me that they identify with my songs. And many women have told me that they want to change their lives.

Margaree Jackson: Can you describe the political impact of the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement?

Artist 2: With respect to the political impact, I would not know what to say because I have never been involved with politics. I have always made my music to promote social change directly in the communities.

Margaree Jackson: Why did Cuban officials sponsor hip-hop?

Artist 2: They have never sponsored hip-hop. What they did was create a rap agency in Cuba to group and have control over the rappers.

Margaree Jackson: How did you personally benefit from this sponsorship?

Artist 2: I have never benefitted from this sponsorship because I do not belong to that business. I am an independent activist and artist.

Margaree Jackson: Did the Cuban officials make a large profit from record sales, concerts, and the Cuban Hip-Hop Festival?

Artist 2: I do not know in what ways these institutions have benefitted from this because like I told you, I am not a part of that institution.

Margaree Jackson: Were you as an artist able to make a living wage as an artist after the government sponsorship of the genre?

Artist 2: I earn money doing other things that have nothing to do with my job as a rapper.

Margaree Jackson: Do you feel as though Cuban officials restricted the freedom of expression of hip-hop artists? Why or why not?

Artist 2: I believe that of course the officials limited rappers' freedom of expression. Because here, they associate everything with politics. And they have problems with justice.

Margaree Jackson: Which Cuban officials and entities have supported hip-hop and the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement? Which ones have had reservations?

Artist 2: The officials and institutions. I do not have much knowledge about that because I am an independent artist. But I do know that the *Asociación Hermanos Saíz* does support independent hip hop artists, along with the direction of municipal culture of the beach municipal and the beach Houses of Culture. The direct official that represents hip hop artist before Cuban institutions is Ruben Marin.

Margaree Jackson: Which officials represent the Cuban government's interaction with artists?

Artist 2: The institution that represents the interaction between hip-hop artists and the government is the Cuban Rap Agency.



Margaree Jackson: Do you believe that the Special Period created the conditions for the rise of the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement? Why or why not?

Artist 2: I think that the Special Period created a rise in the Hip-Hop Movement because there was much economic need. Thus they (rappers) also speak about the need to talk about all of the social problems that were causing the economic need.

Margaree Jackson: How were you personally affected by the Special Period? Did you experience any economic hardship or racial discrimination?

Artist 2: Me personally during the Special Period, I was affected economically. I come from a very poor family, and my parents are literally farmers. We came from very little and without the hope that things would get better in that time. We had little food, I wore old shoes, etc.

Margaree Jackson: Why do you believe Cuban officials allowed discussions of racial discrimination in the form of hip-hop when officials previously banned discussions of racial inequality?

Artist 2: I do not know the reality about the permissions to speak about racial discrimination and racial inequality, but I think that here this topic is complicated. They want to say that there is no discrimination here, but there is and much of it. You just have to be black to experience it firsthand.

Margaree Jackson: Were there any other strong Afro-Cuban art movements during the Special Period that had a major impact on Cuban society, especially in regard to shedding light on racial discrimination?

Artist 2: In that time, I was very little, and I do not remember any Afro-Cuban and antiracist movement.

Margaree Jackson: Do you believe that hip-hop helped Afro-Cubans to construct their own identities even though the government enforced an idea of “*cubanidad*” or that only one race exists? Do you believe that hip-hop helped you to construct your own identity and how so?

Artist 2: I think that hip-hop helped many to construct their identity. I think that for hip-hop artists like me, hip-hop helped us in many ways, but the first was that we decided that hip-hop was a way of life. So, from there we derived the creation of our identity.