

**Cubanidad o Desigualdad:
The Impact of Post-Revolutionary U.S.-Cuban Relations on Racial Inequality in Cuba**

by

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CUBANIDAD O DESIGUALDAD: THE IMPACT OF POST-REVOLUTIONARY U.S.-CUBAN RELATIONS ON RACIAL INEQUALITY IN CUBA

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The majority of recent academic interest on the topic of Cuban race relations have concluded that racial inequality in the country has increased over the last two decades for the first time since the Revolution. My paper expands on this consensus to consider the more specific question: to what extent have U.S.-Cuban relations impacted this rise in racial inequality? To fully answer this, my paper is divided into three sections. Section one provides an overview of how the Cuban government's diverging economic policies of the 1990s to recover from an economic crisis caused by both the collapse of the USSR and the lack of trade with the United States resulted in the re-stratification of wealth by race using GDP/GNI data and previous research. Section two examines several forms of propaganda by the Cuban government, including speeches, pamphlets, and newspapers, to argue that the Cuban government's frequent use of the United States as an inferior example of race relations discouraged Afro-Cubans from acknowledging persisting micro-level examples of racial discrimination. Finally, section three looks at the impact of African Americans as cultural ambassadors, particularly in terms of Hip-Hop music production. Through a lyrical analysis of several famous Afro-Cuban rap songs, I contend that the adoption and transformation of this form of music provided a new vehicle for the Afro-Cuban community to express their discontent with racial tensions and socioeconomic conditions. While in the cultural realm the United States has had a positive impact on race relations in Cuba, I argue that this can be better attributed to the connection between African American and Afro-Cuban communities rather than any efforts by the U.S. government. Furthermore, the U.S. government's influence on

racial inequality has actually been an overall negative, particularly in the spheres of economics and politics.

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PREFACE

First and foremost, I would like to extend my most heartfelt thanks to my advisor for this thesis, Professor Michele Reid-Vazquez. I could not have asked for a more kind, helpful, and understanding advisor. I will never forget how much it meant to me that she was willing to help me with this project when I first approached her as a Sophomore. Since then, she has not only helped me to be a better writer and researcher, but she has also taught me to examine the world from a different perspective. I would not be the student I am today without her support.

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Finally, I want to thank my parents for their continued support throughout my four years of college. I would not have been able to pursue any of these opportunities without them. To my dad: thank you for encouraging me to step outside my comfort zone and challenge myself academically, I would have never studied abroad or believed I could write a paper like this on my own without you. To my mom: I would not have made it through my first “semester” of college without you. I owe you the world.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The first Cuban rap group to gain international fame, Orishas, took inspiration from their roots in U.S. Hip-Hop to inform their music. One of their most famous songs, *Represent*, embraced Cubanidad in all its forms – through musical rhythm, ancestry, and race. This music has provided the soundscape for tensions over race relations that the Revolutionary government declared resolved, as well as the economic strain of the Special Period in the 1990s. At the same time, the chorus of the song, “Represent, Represent Cuba, es mi música,” demonstrated a clear link to the United States with the use of the English language.¹ Through the process of globalization, historically Cuban cultural production has been forever altered by the United States, with Cuban Hip-Hop artists’ deriving inspiration as much from the traditional rhythm of rumba music as from African American rap beats. Using a variety of sources, including GDP/GNI data, speeches, pamphlets, and song lyrics, I argue that the economic, political, and cultural factors in Cuba since the 1959 Revolution have heightened domestic discussions on the racial debate, and that the United States has had a decisive influence on these discourses.

The concept of transculturation anchors this study. Originally put forth by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz, this process is a combination of both the adjustment to the culture of the existing society (acculturation) and the loss of previous culture by new immigrants

¹ Orishas, *Represent*, EMI Music France, track 2 on *A lo Cubano*, 2000, CD.

(deculturation).² Like the melting pot metaphor in the United States, ajiaco – a Cuban stew - is seen by many as a representation of the ethnic diversity that has always been an important facet of Cuban society. Each new immigrant group to Cuba has maintained some of its own unique flavor while also transforming itself into a new society. Today, we see a multicultural Cuba, a finished ajiaco, rather than the individual cultures.

Recently, however, the standard ingredients found in traditional Cuban ajiaco have changed due to the limited access to these components. In a 2005 interview conducted by Professor Karina L. Cespedes, a Cuban engineer named Alaen Pérez from Cárdenas described the ways his preparation of the stew is different than his father's. Many of the ingredients, like pumpkin, are impossible to find in Cuba. Instead, Alaen grows his own pumpkins using seeds sent from his wife's family in the United States. He also uses American Spam as additional protein when he doesn't have enough pork or beef.³ Good or bad, Cuban ajiaco no longer contains only Cuban elements. The stew now includes ingredients from the United States, just as Cuban culture today is influenced both domestically by its multiracial population and internationally by U.S. culture. Therefore, one cannot examine any aspect of contemporary Cuban culture without considering the impact of the United States.

Cuban race relations are no different. After Fidel Castro prematurely declared the end of racial discrimination in Cuba in 1961, the new socialist government made efforts to eliminate structural racism and alleviate economic inequality throughout the country. However, the U.S.

² Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, trans. Harriet de Onís (USA: Duke University Press, 1995), 98. According to Ortiz, transculturation describes an alternative characterization of cultural transition. Unlike other theories of cultural transition that suggest the introduction of a new culture will either assimilate with an existing culture completely or remain distinct and form a multicultural society, transculturation suggests that newly introduced cultures can be maintained while also adding to the unique character of a society.

³ Karina L. Cespedes and Alaen Perez, "Spam in the Cuban Ajiaco: An Interview with Alaen Perez," *Callaloo* 30, no. 1 (2007): 72, 74.

trade embargo placed on the island that same year weakened these advances. This paper analyzes the impact of the Cuban government's implementation of various policies following the trade embargo on the Afro-Cuban community from the perspective of Africana critical theory. By examining the way "human frailties", such as slavery, colonialism, or in this case socioeconomic oppression, have "hindered Black people from achieving freedom," Africana critical theory demands that public policy promote equity, justice, and fairness for all groups of people.⁴

Following these tenets, this study examines the major themes of oppression and empowerment within the contemporary Afro-Cuban community. In the case of Cuba, insufficient policy targeting racial inequality in the late twentieth century contributed to the resurgence of racial disparity and debate in the country. Despite the early efforts by the Revolutionary government, Afro-Cubans continually experienced frustrations, including underrepresentation in government, job discrimination, and negative racialized stereotypes. However, the global hip-hop movement, spearheaded by people of color in the United States, and the concurring developments in technology and globalization aided in the increased awareness and discontent in the way Afro-Cubans viewed their place in society.

Despite the shared history between the United States and Cuba, international relations between the two countries since the Cuban Revolution have been antagonistic at best. These hostilities resulted in the imposition of the U.S. embargo on Cuba in 1960, further strengthened by the 1992 Cuban Democracy Act. In response to the embargo, Cuba turned to the USSR for its major trading needs. As a result, when the USSR collapsed in 1989, Cuba experienced the worst economic crisis in Latin America of the twentieth century, known as the Special Period. I contend

⁴ Magnus O. Bassey, "What is Africana Critical Theory or Black Existential Philosophy?" *Journal of Black Studies* 37 no. 6 (2007): 920, 924.

that during this time of economic and political unrest, international factors exacerbated domestic social conditions increasing domestic racial debate and divide. Although the Cuban government asserted that racial issues had been resolved by the Revolution, Special Period economic policies and U.S. targeted propaganda by the Cuban government placed Afro-Cubans at a socioeconomic disadvantage by limiting their opportunities for economic advancement while convincing the public that racial tensions no longer existed. Contrastingly, the growing popularity of Hip-Hop from the United States influenced Afro-Cuban musical production, providing the community with a legitimate outlet for expressing their discontent with the expanding racial inequality.

Previous studies on the topic of contemporary race relations in Cuba have varied. Historian Alejandro de la Fuente centered much of his research around the social aspects of race relations in twentieth century Cuba. His works, including “The New Afro-Cuban Cultural Movement and the Debate on Race in Contemporary Cuba,” “Race, National Discourse, and Politics in Cuba: An Overview,” and *A Nation for All: Race and Politics in Twentieth Century Cuba* inspired much of my research. De la Fuente’s analysis of race relations during the Special Period focused mainly on how government policies in the realms of tourism, remittances, and private business impacted racial tensions, the debate on race, and the resulting Afro-Cuban cultural production. According to de la Fuente, race relations had been historically poor in Cuba leading up to the Revolution, and while the Revolution improved some of the conditions, the economic crisis of the Special Period revealed unresolved tensions. While my research concurs with his argument, I have analyzed the issue from a more international perspective, choosing to focus on the United States’ direct impact on the issue of race.

Other researchers such as geographer Sarah A. Blue have analyzed the issues of contemporary racism in Cuba from a strictly economic perspective. Using survey data from over

300 Cuban families in Havana, Blue argued that the structural policies of the Revolutionary government such as equal access to education and employment have lost their equalizing powers. Her research indicated that the same policies regarding tourism, remittances, and private business led to a widening gap in incomes between white and Afro-Cubans. My research is intended to be more interdisciplinary in nature, by analyzing the issue of contemporary racial inequality through a combination of economic, political, and cultural perspectives.

Although the academic interest in Cuban race relations developed more recently, the majority of studies come to the same conclusion – that racial inequality and discrimination have increased over the last two decades. My research uses this consensus as a jumping off point to consider the more specific question: To what extent have U.S.-Cuban relations impacted this rising racial inequality? To fully answer this inquiry, my paper has been divided into three sections. Section one looks at the United States as an economic barrier to Afro-Cuban development. It provides an overview of how the diverging economic policies of the Special Period intersected with the government's efforts to recover from an economic crisis caused by both the collapse of the USSR and the lack of trade with the United States following the trade embargo. Relying on GDP/GNI data and building off of previous research on the topic, this section depicts the United States as a key player in the stratification of wealth by race during the Special Period. Section two examines the Castro administration's portrayal of the United States as a common enemy to the Revolution. Through an analysis of several forms of propaganda by the Cuban government, including speeches, pamphlets, and affiliated newspaper articles, this section argues that the Cuban government frequently used the United States as a means of comparison in the realm of racial politics to convince its population of Cuba's superior race relations. In turn, this discouraged Afro-Cubans from acknowledging the country's persisting challenges with discrimination for some

time. Finally, section three looks at the impact of the United States as a cultural ambassador, particularly in terms of music production. A lyrical analysis of several famous Afro-Cuban rap songs from the 1990s and 2000s demonstrates how U.S. rap influenced many of the common themes. I contend that the adoption and transformation of rap music by Afro-Cuban musicians led to the development of a new vehicle for Afro-Cubans to voice their discontent with racial tensions, socioeconomic conditions, and government policies, among other issues.

Despite Section three's argument that the United States' influence helped develop a new voice for Afro-Cubans, potentially improving race relations through increased access to free speech, I portray the United States' impact on Cuban race relations as an overall negative. Tense international relations between the two countries have led to poor economic conditions on the island, in addition to political games played by the Castro administration, both of which disproportionately impacted the Afro-Cuban community by decreasing their comparative wealth and restricting their ability to voice their concerns. Any gains made by the spread of hip-hop to the island I attribute to the powerful cultural bonds between the African American and Afro-Cuban communities rather than the influence of the U.S. or Cuban governments. Through the use of Africana critical theory, this paper demonstrates how cultural empowerment can benefit people of African descent throughout the diaspora despite various forms of economic, political, and structural oppression.

2.0 THE UNITED STATES AS A BARRIER TO AFRO-CUBAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: THE RACIALIZED ECONOMY IN POST-COLD WAR CUBA

As a tourist destination, Cuba has been trapped in a time capsule, forced to continuously portray the now bygone image of a Batista-era Havana, conjuring 1950s automobiles, rumba music, and exotic Caribbean women. After the 1960 U.S. trade embargo and the collapse of its leading trade partner, the USSR, in 1989, the Cuban government promoted this cultural commodification even more. With the rise in cultural tourism came a concurring rise in sex tourism. During the Special Period, “the sexualized and ‘exotic woman of color [was] one of the most recognizable icons of tourism in Cuba.”⁵ Due to U.S.-Cuban economic policies, Afro-Cubans had limited access to beneficial economic opportunities and some turned to prostitution. In this way, Cuba’s tourist sector maintained a colonial hierarchy, placing wealthy foreigners at the top, and impoverished Cubans, particularly Afro-Cubans, at the bottom.⁶

The history of U.S. interference in the Cuban economy and government began with the United States’ entrance into the Spanish-American War in 1898.⁷ After U.S. victory, the William McKinley administration enacted the Platt Amendment of 1901. This legislation developed a new political system in Cuba, dominated by American occupiers and Cuban elites to preserve the social inequalities of Cuba society.⁸ In the new structure, private industries and powerful American corporations, like the United Fruit Company, dominated the economy. This shift forced the

⁵ L. Kaifa Roland, “Tourism and the Commodification of Cubanidad,” *Tourist Studies* 10, no. 1(2010): 6.

⁶ Ibid, 15.

⁷ In Cuba, The Spanish-American War is also referred to as the War for Independence.

⁸ Aviva Chomsky, Barry Carr, and Pamela María Smorkaloff, *The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 147. This, according to the authors’ interpretation of the Platt Amendment ratified by President Theodore Roosevelt.

majority of Cubans to work for low wages while a select few Cuban elites benefitted. Between 1899 and 1931, foreign sugar producers acquired thousands of acres of farmland, mainly at the cost of Afro-Cuban farmers who lost almost half of their fields.⁹ In response to Afro-Cubans' growing discontent with such U.S. occupation policies, Evaristo Estenoz, Pedro Ivonnet, and other veterans of the War for Independence developed the first Black political party in the Western Hemisphere, the Independent Party of Color.¹⁰ The group included Afro-Cubans from across the island, including day laborers, peasants, and workers, with the goal of pursuing racial equality through increased Afro-Cuban integration into society and government. However, after a government sanctioned massacre against a gathering of party members protesting the banning of their party, the Independent Party of Color was terminated.¹¹

Residual effects from the United States' occupations of Cuba from 1898-1902, 1906-1909, and again from 1917-1922, contributed to the extreme economic inequality of the 1940s and 1950s. These poor socioeconomic conditions eventually triggered the Cuban Revolution of 1956-1959. Led by Fidel Castro, this worker's insurgency sought to bring economic equality to the island and to improve the lives of the working class. Since Afro-Cubans made up a large portion of the impoverished working class, they benefitted substantially from the gains made by the revolution. This, in turn allowed them to achieve more equality with their fellow Cubans. Despite the economic embargo placed on Cuba by the United States in 1960, known colloquially as *el bloqueo*, the reduction in socioeconomic inequalities continued for the first few decades under the new

⁹ Alejandro De la Fuente. *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 106.

¹⁰ Aline Helg, "To Be Black and Be Cuban," in *Beyond Slavery: the Multilayered Legacy of Africans in Latin America and the Caribbean*, ed. by Darién J. Davis (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 124.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 137.

Cuban government. After the United States enacted this embargo, Cuban leaders turned to the Soviet Union (USSR) for their international trading needs.

Initially, the USSR provided Cuba with export subsidizations that boosted the Cuban economy. However, after its collapse in 1989, Cuba could no longer rely on the USSR to continue to buy their exports at inflated prices. The termination of this trade partnership resulted in one of the worst economic crises in Latin America in the twentieth century. Referred to as the Special period, this decade of economic hardship was characterized by food shortages, loss of work, little international trade, and waves of emigration to the United States. The Special Period forced the Cuban government to alter the national economy in order to preserve the financial and physical well-being of its people. Once assumed completely eliminated in this communist society, poverty again became a major issue facing the Cuban people, and with it came blatant racial discrimination.¹²

Throughout the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, the Cuban government struggled with developing new policies to fight the reemergence of extreme poverty in the country and eventually settled on reintroducing the U.S. dollar into the legal economy in 1993.¹³ This policy encouraged the development of the service and tourist sectors and the introduction of more remittances from the United States.¹⁴ New private businesses diversified the economy while more tourist dollars helped expand it. Remittances from expatriates in the United States directly supplemented the personal income of Cubans with American family members. The improvement to the Cuban economy and individual Cuban incomes is corroborated by the trends in GDP and

¹² Gerald Home. *Race to Revolution: The United States and Cuba During Slavery and Jim Crow* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2014).

¹³ Jorge I Domínguez, Omar Everleny Pérez Villanueva and Lorena Barbería, *The Cuban Economy at the Start of the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

GNI per capita at the time. According to the World Bank, both measurements declined between the fall of the USSR and the legalization of the US dollar, but rebounded immediately following 1993.¹⁵ The Gross Domestic Product of Cuba saw a rise of almost \$10 billion dollars after the

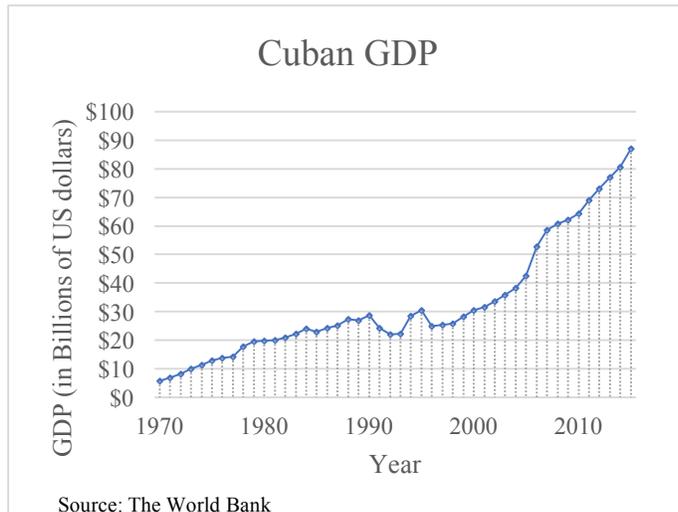


Table 1: Cuban GDP

initiation of the legalization policy, despite the concurring economic crisis. This drastic upward trend in GDP continued, with the GDP increasing nearly three-fold in the first fourteen years of the twenty-first century. Gross national income per capita, which had been decreasing since 1988, also saw a return to its previous highest level just a few years after the introduction of the U.S.

dollar to the Cuban economy. While this indicated that the legalization policy proved advantageous to Cubans on average, it did not guarantee that the policy was beneficial for all Cubans equally. Although the legalization improved the Cuban economy overall, its effects only favored a small subset of

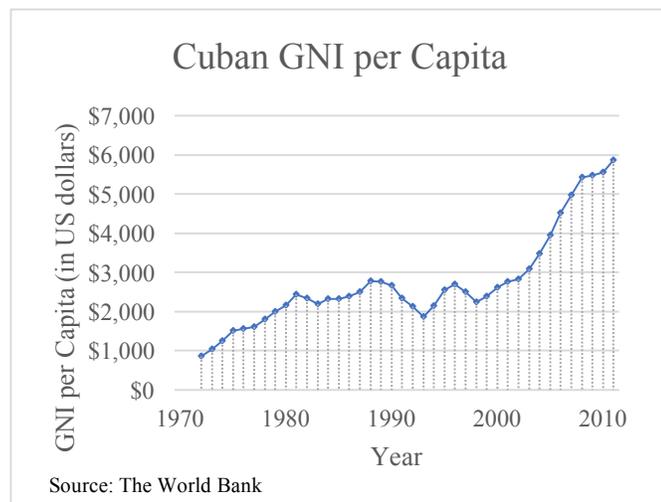


Table 2: Cuban GNI per Capita

the population: white Cubans with access to U.S. dollars. This included Cubans who received

¹⁵ “Cuba.” Cuba | Data. Accessed April 22, 2018. <https://data.worldbank.org/country/cuba>.

remittances from U.S. family members, Cubans who collected foreign tips working in the tourist sector, and Cubans who had the means to start their own private business. Due to historical disadvantages, these three economic trends of the 1990s signified the beginnings of a stratified social differentiation by race, between those with and without access to hard currency.¹⁶

This shift represented a key change in government policy relating to inequality. The U.S. dollar acted as the mechanism for a new hierarchy in contemporary Cuba, responsible for the loss of many of the economic and social gains made by the Cuban Revolution, especially along racial lines. White Cubans were more likely to have family members living in the U.S, to work in the tourist sector, and to own a private business venture. Therefore, these policies predominantly benefited white Cubans over Afro-Cubans. Additionally, with the decrease in government supervision of small businesses and the privatization of the service sector of the economy, controlling the rise of racial inequality became just as difficult for the Cuban government as curbing the expanding economic disparity.

Although the United States' embargo passed by the Kennedy administration was initially unsuccessful at its goal of ending the socialist policies of the Cuban Revolutionary Government, the fall of Cuba's leading trading partner in 1989 forced the Cuban administration to adopt more capitalistic economic policies to support its citizens. This legislation, which included expanding the tourist sector, permitting private business, and allowing remittances from the United States, led to an increase in inequality along racial lines. Despite the advances towards equality made by the Cuban Revolution, a few decades later, the government's response to the Special Period

¹⁶ Sarah A Blue, "The Erosion of Racial Equality in the Context of Cuba's Dual Economy," *Latin American Politics and Society* 49, no. 3 (2007): 35.

financial crisis curtailed economic opportunities for Afro-Cuban's, exacerbating latent racism in the country that persists today.

2.1 EXPANSION OF THE TOURIST SECTOR

With approximately 2 million foreigners visiting the island nation every year, the tourist sector grew in significance for the Cuban economy, replacing older industries as one of the most profitable new enterprises.¹⁷ This trend can be seen in the shift from agriculture and food production to service sector jobs.

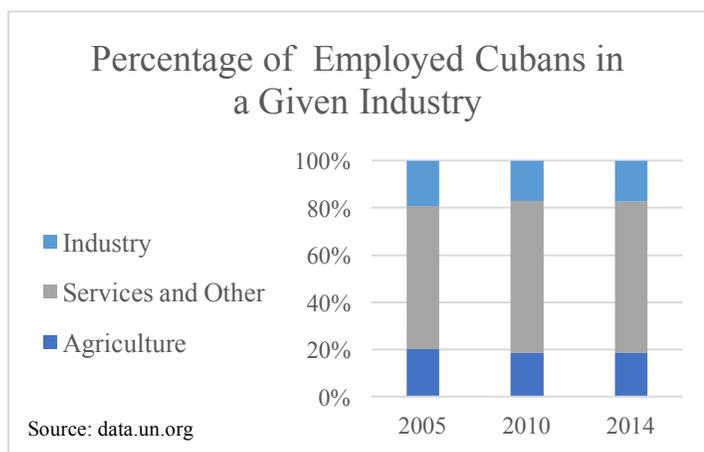


Table 3: Percentage of Employed Cubans by Industry

Once a country with a plantation based economy, by the start of the twenty-first century agriculture made up only 20 percent of all employment in Cuba.¹⁸ According to data from the United Nations Statistics division, service sector employment mainly replaced previous agricultural jobs, making up almost 65 percent of total employment as of 2014. This flip in the economy demonstrated a clear increase in the supply of labor for service positions, presumably relating to the rise in tourism.

¹⁷ Jorge I Dominguez, Omar Everlenny Pérez Villanueva and Lorena Barberia, *The Cuban Economy at the Start of the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 2.

¹⁸ "UN Country Stats." United Nations. Accessed April 22, 2018. <http://data.un.org/CountryProfile.aspx?crName=cuba#Economic>.

The dramatic expansion of tourism was due to the influx of wealth from foreigners, including Canadian, Chinese, and some other European visitors. Workers for luxury hotels, restaurants, and up-scale taxi services had the benefit of receiving tips from these vacationers on top of their standard paycheck. However, the availability of these positions varied significantly based on skin color. This phenomenon, referred to as “tourism apartheid,” described the tendency of major hotels and resorts to hire light-skinned Cubans for jobs in which the employee had to interact face to face with a tourist.¹⁹ According to sociologist Robert Zurbarano, hotel managers historically hired exclusively white Cubans as employees so as to “not offend the supposed sensibilities of their European clientele.” Despite the fact that this “type of racism [became] less socially acceptable” by the end of the twentieth century, it persisted, and Afro-Cubans continued to be underrepresented in the expanding tourist sector.²⁰

As previously stated, the economy of early twenty-first century Cuba evolved due to the success of the tourist sector, which drew more and more Cubans seeking employment. Only a select few, however, could be hired. Those employed, in essence, created a new elite class in the Cuban socioeconomic hierarchy that was majority white.²¹ This exacerbated racial inequalities. Rather than being based on education or talent, the accumulation of hard currency determined a person’s value in the new Cuban “tourism apartheid” Moreover, this paradigm privileged white Cubans and cast them as more capable of the positions allotted them. Thus, a duality existed between race and employment opportunity. While all Cubans were guaranteed some amount of

¹⁹ Donald E Schulz. *Cuba and the Future* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994), 91.

²⁰ Roberto Zurbarano. “For Blacks in Cuba, the Revolution Hasn’t Begun.” *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), Mar. 23, 2016.

²¹ Eugene Robinson, “Cuba Begins to Answer its Race Question,” *The Washington Post* (Washington, DC), Nov. 12, 2000.

wage by the government, only white Cubans could gain access to alternative ways of earning the more valuable U.S. dollar.

These white workers with the most access to hard currency also widened the wealth gap between themselves and other Afro-Cubans through the process of recommending friends and family members for open positions. Since access to tourist jobs relied heavily on having an interpersonal relationship with someone already working in the tourist sector to make a referral, not only were white Cubans more likely than Afro-Cubans to be hired based on appearance, they could also receive the necessary job recommendation from a friend or family member.

The new dollarized economy of the 1990s, particularly in the tourist sector with its preference for white workers, threatened the strides toward equality made by Afro-Cubans in the first three decades of the revolution.²² Unlike other global economic trends of the 1990s, such as the Computer Revolution, changes in the Cuban economy did not affect the supply of labor based on educational level. In more developed countries such as the United States, the advancement of technology during the 1990s led to increased demand for workers with higher educational attainment, resulting in exacerbated economic inequality. However, the expansion of tourism in the 1990s in Cuba expanded economic inequality between white and Afro-Cubans with no correlation to education. Although the adoption of economic policies that promoted tourism saved Cuba from a collapsing economy in the 1990s, it also signaled a divergence from the Revolution's goal of racial equality, aggravating economic disparities between white and Afro-Cubans.

²² Sarah A Blue, "The Erosion of Racial Equality in the Context of Cuba's Dual Economy," *Latin American Politics and Society* 49, no. 3 (2007): 36.

2.2 REMITTANCES

Outside the tourist sector, other means of accessing hard currency existed during the Special Period, such as foreign remittances from the United States, which emerged as one of the most popular methods. Remittances are stipends of money typically sent back home to the family of an expatriate that left their country for work or other reasons. In the case of Cuba, most remittances came from Cuban expatriates that left the island during or after the Revolution. Looking at the history of Post-Revolutionary Cuba, the “racially disproportionate nature of Cuban emigration” suggests the racial overtones that emerged.²³ Immediately following the Cuban Revolution of the 1950s, many upper class white Cubans escaped the country to the United States.

The racial demographics of Cuba in the second half of the twentieth century shifted due to the mass emigration of upper class white Cubans following the Revolution. By 2000, white Cubans made up only 35 percent of the island’s population, yet they also made up an astonishing 84 percent of the one million Cuban emigrants living in the United States.²⁴ Due to this disparity, white Cubans still living in the country were disproportionately more likely to be receiving remittances from relatives or friends in the United States. According to historian Alejandro de la Fuente, this disparity would have resulted in “\$680 million out of the \$800 million [in remittances] that [entered] the island each year [ending] up in white hands.” This meant that the average white Cuban would have received \$85 per year from foreign relatives, while their fellow Afro-Cubans collected less than half as much.²⁵

²³ Sarah A Blue, “The Erosion of Racial Equality in the Context of Cuba’s Dual Economy,” *Latin American Politics and Society* 49, no. 3 (2007): 157.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Alejandro De la Fuente. *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 319.

Although it is true that other waves of emigration from the island to the United States occurred during the last two decades of the century, such as the Mariel Boatlift of 1980 and the *balseros* during the Special Period with equivalent amounts of white and Afro-Cubans fleeing the country, Cubans who emigrated to the United States in the 1950s would have possessed more resources to send remittances back to their families than those who left the country more recently.²⁶ This is why most remittances from abroad derived from the “nerve center of the mostly white exile community” – Miami.²⁷ This trend can be seen in statistics calculated by geographer Sarah A. Blue, whose research suggested the “smaller percentage of black emigrants who sent money home may reflect their more recent emigration.”²⁸

As traditional household income decreased over the decade following the collapse of the USSR, Cubans struggled to find money from non-traditional sources. In addition to the salaries provided to them by government-controlled jobs, Cubans sought out remittances and other sources of funds to supplement their incomes. As alternate sources became more available, they also opened the door to more inequality and social re-stratification.²⁹ During the Special Period, government distributed salaries that had once equalized the population financially became only a portion of a typical Cuban’s paycheck. Other additions to one’s income, such as remittances, while beneficial to the overall Cuban GDP, were not dispersed equally. White Cubans gained more wealth through remittances from family members abroad than their Afro-Cuban counterparts, furthering Cuban society from its Revolutionary goal of racial equality.

²⁶ Eugene Robinson, “Cuba Begins to Answer its Race Question,” *The Washington Post* (Washington, DC), Nov. 12, 2000.

²⁷ Roberto Zurbaro. “For Blacks in Cuba, the Revolution Hasn’t Begun.” *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), Mar. 23, 2016.

²⁸ Sarah A Blue, “The Erosion of Racial Equality in the Context of Cuba’s Dual Economy,” *Latin American Politics and Society* 49, no. 3 (2007): 58.

²⁹ Jorge I Dominguez, Omar Everleny Pérez Villanueva and Lorena Barberia, *The Cuban Economy at the Satart of the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 5.

2.3 ESTABLISHMENT OF PRIVATE SECTOR BUSINESS

A third economic policy of the Special Period, the introduction of a private business sector, also jeopardized Afro-Cuban economic equality. The private sector or “informal economy” consisted of legal practices such as entrepreneurship and illegal activities such as black market trading. Cubans took advantage of these opportunities to gain access to the newly legalized U.S. dollar by opening various types of private businesses, which included *paladares* (private restaurants), *casas particulares* (guest houses), and *maquinas* (taxi services), in addition to engaging in illegal forms of entrepreneurship or *jineterismo* (hustling).³⁰

Being legal, entrepreneurial ventures such as private restaurants, hotels, and taxi services became socially acceptable and more commonly practiced by white Cubans. However, this was not the case for Afro-Cubans. Due to historical disadvantages, Afro-Cubans were less likely to own the necessary house or vehicle to convert into a private business.³¹ Furthermore, Afro-Cuban communities were historically concentrated in overcrowded areas of the city made up of mostly dilapidated infrastructure.³² Therefore, Afro-Cubans were systemically barred from many of these new forms of private entrepreneurship, which widened the economic gap by race.

³⁰ Alexander I Gray and Antoni Kapcia. *The Changing Dynamic of Cuban Civil Society* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2008), 5.

³¹ Sarah A Blue, “The Erosion of Racial Equality in the Context of Cuba’s Dual Economy,” *Latin American Politics and Society* 49, no. 3 (2007): 49.

³² Alejandro De la Fuente. *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 321.

Although Afro-Cubans did not have the same access to these new private business ventures, there has been little evidence to suggest that any more than a very small portion of Afro-Cubans participated in illegal activities. However, even the Afro-Cubans involved still remained at a disadvantage in their access to the dollar economy compared to white Cubans, resulting in lower levels of income.³³ Political scientist Mark Q. Sawyer defended this argument, claiming there was “ample evidence that blacks [continued] to be overrepresented in older, less desirable neighborhoods” where it would be more difficult to start up a private business.³⁴ Additionally, he suggested that due to Afro-Cubans’ lack of access to hard currency through remittances, tourist jobs, and private business, some “Blacks obtained dollars only through gray or black market activity like prostitution and the illegal sale of goods.”³⁵ This trend led to increased discrimination towards Afro-Cubans. Afro-Cuban women have borne the brunt of this bias. Participation in prostitution reinforced existing stereotypes that depicted Afro-Cuban women as being inherently more “sexual.” This assumption persisted throughout the Special Period, despite the fact that both Afro-Cuban and white women used sex work to better themselves financially, not by necessity but by choice.³⁶

The extreme rationing and decrease in wages for government-funded jobs, forced Cubans to find alternative options to access U.S. dollars. In particular, Afro-Cubans struggled to gain access to hard currency through the typical methods of the time such as remittances and private businesses, which placed them at an economic disadvantage to their white Cuban counterparts.

³³ Alejandro De la Fuente. *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 51-52.

³⁴ Mark Q Sawyer, *Racial Politics in Post-Revolutionary Cuba* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 77.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 76.

³⁶ L. Kaifa Roland, “Tourism and the Commodification of Cubanidad,” *Tourist Studies* 10, no. 1(2010): 3-18.

Additionally, illegal options did exist, such as black market trading and *prostitution*. However, those Afro-Cubans who chose to obtain U.S. dollars through more illicit methods experienced increased discrimination which only promoted the existing racial bias.

2.4 CONCLUSION

The economic and racial inequality that characterized Cuba in the first half of the twentieth century lessened under the initial socialist policies of the Cuban Revolution. However, after three decades of the new Revolutionary Government, many of these issues resurfaced. In particular, pre-revolutionary era economic and social trends reemerged due to the dollarization of the Cuban economy that occurred at the start of the Special Period. Before the Cuban Revolution, Cuban society was characterized by a racial hierarchy placing white Cubans above Afro-Cubans. With the new policies introduced during the Special Period, a similar dual society appeared.³⁷ As noted by writer and critic Roberto Zurbano,

Two contrasting realities [persist] today. The first is that of white Cubans, who have benefits of a supposedly more open socialism. The other reality is that of the Black plurality, which witnessed the demise of the socialist utopia from the island's least comfortable quarters.³⁸

³⁷ Erin Aubry Kaplan, "American in Cuba: Nationality trumps race, and color still matters. But everyone struggles together," *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Feb. 21, 2007.

³⁸ Roberto Zurbano. "For Blacks in Cuba, the Revolution Hasn't Begun." *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), Mar. 23, 2016.

Despite attempts by the revolutionary government to end the racial inequality and racist attitudes that persisted through the late twentieth century, the traces that remained from before the era of Cuban Socialism reappeared with the new economy. Many of the more capitalistic policies meant to create economic growth during the Special Period, such as increased tourism, remittances, and private entrepreneurship, had racially specific benefits. Although some renewed inequality was to be expected from these policies, the equality and racial integration that had been achieved and maintained for three decades by the Revolutionary government should have been sufficient to guarantee an equal distribution of benefits by the policies of the Special period.³⁹ However, the evidence makes it clear that during the Special Period, racial inequality and social tensions worsened, meaning that the unequal effects of the Special Period economic policies were distributed by race rather than one's "position in society."⁴⁰ The reality was that, these policies represented a departure from Fidel Castro's goal of racial equality during the Revolution. For Cubans, one's perceived value in the new socioeconomic structure depended solely on their skin color.⁴¹

³⁹ Alejandro De la Fuente. *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 318.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Roberto Zurbarano. "For Blacks in Cuba, the Revolution Hasn't Begun." *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), Mar. 23, 2016.

3.0 THE UNITED STATES AS A COMMON ENEMY: ATTACKS ON U.S. RACE RELATIONS THROUGH TARGETED PROPAGANDA

A letter to the editor from a January 2000 issue of *The Wall Street Journal*, criticized the author of the article “Race Equality in Cuba.” The reader claimed, “Cuba has many faults, but race relations are not among them” and cited the history of racial conflict in the United States in comparison to Fidel Castro’s campaign to end racial discrimination by 1961.⁴² Although policies of economic socialism enacted by Castro’s Revolutionary government did make strides towards racial equality, they did not definitively end racism in the country. While it is true that many other socialist and communist governments in world history have not experienced major challenges with race relations, Cuba is unique. Unlike socialist countries such as Sweden, the Netherlands, and China, Cuba is significantly more diverse.

The misconception of this *Wall Street Journal* reader, however, is not uncommon. In the United States, many people interpret the high literacy rate and life expectancy of Afro-Cubans as indicators that this population is not faced with the same challenges as African Americans. This is not necessarily correct. As discussed in Section one, many of the economic policies the Cuban government adopted in response to the crisis of the Special Period favored white Cubans over Afro-Cubans. Since the 1990s, the resurgences of racism throughout the country and the connected

⁴² Anre Husval, “Letters to the Editor: Race Equality in Cuba,” *Wall Street Journal* (Boston, MA), Jan. 14, 2000. D. S. Benson, *Antiracism in Cuba: The Unfinished Revolution* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 151.

government policies led to the majority of new financial opportunities developing in sectors of the economy to which Afro-Cubans had limited access.

Despite this harsh reality, Afro-Cubans joined white Cubans in the promotion of a strong, singular national identity. In Cuba, the popular phrase “*todos somos Cubanos*,” used as a symbol for national unity, could also act as a hindrance to a person’s acknowledgment of the role of race in their own personal identity. Since the 1960s, revolutionary ideology encouraged a style of national unity that “transcended race” and “discouraged racial identification.”⁴³ Although the promotion of this type of national identity meant that both white and Afro-Cuban people identified as Cuban first, it limited Afro-Cuban identity in particular. Afro-Cubans risked losing their ability to speak out about their own personal struggles due to their fear of seeming anti-Cuban and anti-community.

Following the Cuban Revolution, Fidel Castro maintained a position of power as head of the Communist Party of Cuba with the general consensus being that Afro-Cubans were his greatest supporters even fifty years later.⁴⁴ However, following the Revolution, Castro’s speeches continued to concentrate on national unity instead of addressing concerns about racial differences. This meant that, through their support for Castro, the majority of Afro-Cubans were forced to adopt the belief that issues of racism and racial discrimination had been eliminated on the island. As a result of the decisive language on race found throughout Castro’s Anti-American speeches and in government-run news outlets, Cuban discourse on race during the Revolutionary period remained suppressed, limiting Afro-Cuban agency and freedom of expression. Out of fear of party power,

⁴³ Gleibermann, Erik. “Where Hip-Hop Fits in Cuba’s Anti-Racist Curriculum: The Country’s Education Leaders Confront Deep Seated Discrimination in the Classroom Through Rap.” *The Atlantic* (Boston, MA), Aug. 01, 2016: 5.

⁴⁴ Kaplan, Erin Aubry. “American in Cuba: Nationality trumps race, and color still matters. But everyone struggles together.” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Feb. 21, 2007.

Afro-Cubans stayed silent on the issue of race for decades, allowing racism and discrimination to go on unchecked.

3.1 ANTI-AMERICAN SPEECHES

As leader of both the Cuban Revolution and the new socialist Cuban government, Fidel Castro repeatedly used his popularity and authority to influence public opinion on the United States. Since the revolution, the Cuban government, including Castro, portrayed the United States as an imperialistic, capitalistic foe, by highlighting problems with American culture, particularly race relations. For instance, Castro used ongoing examples of shortcomings in U.S. social policy – particularly in terms of racism – to demonstrate American inferiority. In a 1979 speech made on the twentieth anniversary of the Cuban Revolution, Castro questioned the United States’ promotion of capitalism over socialism in Latin America, citing how the United States “discriminates against Blacks, exterminates Indians, despises Chicanos, Puerto Ricans and other Latin Americans, forces women into prostitution, and exploits children for sexual purposes.”⁴⁵ While the United States did have a history of both discrimination towards Native Americans and African Americans within its own borders and exploitation of Puerto Ricans since the Spanish-American war, there was little evidence to support Castro’s other assertions of forced prostitution and child abuse. However, by listing these more salacious claims along with factual ones, especially in regards to sociopolitical

⁴⁵ Fidel Castro, “Speech on the Twentieth Anniversary of the Revolution” (1979), ed. Education for Socialists (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1979): 133.

policies, Castro draws the attention and shock of the audience – which he then targets at the United States.

Similar examples of extreme language against the United States recurred throughout Castro's speeches. Such was the case with his Second Declaration of Havana in 1962 in which he described a "U.S. system of lynching and brutal discrimination" where "brothers to the north [could not] ride the same buses as their White compatriots or attend the same schools, or even die in the same hospitals."⁴⁶ To his supporters, Castro painted a very bleak image of the quality of life for Black Americans, highlighting the struggles of legalized segregation. He continued on to explain how "[Black Americans were] maltreated by imperialists in Ku-Klux-Klan disguise, confined to the [unhealthiest] neighborhoods, forced into the most menial services, the heaviest work, the least lucrative professions which presuppose no contact with universities, centers of higher learning or special schools."⁴⁷ This quote from 1962 described the economic and social challenges faced by African Americans at the height of the Civil Rights Movement. At this time, many of these Americans had very little job opportunities and limited access to education or training programs. Ten years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, most universities did not admit African American students. Because of this, the majority of Black Americans at the time worked at entry level jobs or as manual laborers, while being paid less than their White counterparts. Furthermore, they regularly faced examples of dominative racism, referred to by Castro as encounters with the Ku Klux Klan.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ "Cuba, Country Free of Segregation." Havana: Dirección de Información, Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, 1965. Pamphlet: 9.

⁴⁷ Ibid: 9. This speech was made by Castro in 1962 which was a few years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, a major victory for Black education in the United States. Additionally, Black universities did exist in the United States at this time, but they were not desegregated. Therefore, Castro's comments can come across as intentionally misleading.

⁴⁸ Dominative racism is defined as a form of racism that is physically acted out. The alternative form, aversive racism, refers to racism that is conducted through the use of official institutions.

Many of these challenges, underlined by Castro as American problems, paralleled the Afro-Cuban experience prior to the Cuban Revolution. Before the policy changes made by the Revolutionary government, racism, few job opportunities, and poor living conditions characterized Afro-Cuban life. One of the most significant examples of dominative racism before the Revolution was the 1912 Massacre which targeted Cuba's Independent Party of Color. The political party, established to fight racism and encourage more Afro-Cuban representation in government, was seen as a direct threat not only to the existing Liberal Party but to Cuban society as a whole. When a large group of Afro-Cuban supporters later protested government actions that repressed and banned the party, they were murdered by the Cuban army in a racially and politically motivated attack.⁴⁹ Additionally, following U.S. occupation in 1902, Cuba passed an immigration law that prohibited people of African descent, specifically from Haiti and Jamaica, from entering the country until 1912.⁵⁰ Despite this history, Castro attempted to align the Cuban struggle with that of African Americans seeking justice in the United States by creating a selective narrative that all Cubans had struggled together, in the same ways that African Americans had struggled, to overcome issues like segregation, discrimination, and racism. In forging this description, Castro failed to acknowledge Cuba's poor legacy with race while highlighting the benefits of the revolutionary politics of unity. Not all Cubans suffered equally from racism and discrimination. However, by referencing the challenges faced by Black Americans but not addressing Cuba's similar challenges, Castro provided his listeners with an image of a superior, unified Cuba that they could celebrate for its lack of racial conflict.

⁴⁹ Aline Helg, "Afro-Cuban Protest: The Partido Independiente de Color, 1908-1912." *Cuban Studies* 21 (1991): 101.

⁵⁰ Mark Q Sawyer, *Racial Politics in Post-Revolutionary Cuba* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 37. Mark McLeod, "Undesirable Aliens: Race Ethnicity, and Nationalism in the Comparison of Haitian and British West Indian Immigrant Workers in Cuba, 1912-1939," *Journal of Social History* 31 no. 3 (1998): 602.

Whether or not Castro’s analysis of the conditions of Black life in America was accurate, it is important to note which issues he interpreted as measures of racial equality – education, living conditions, and access to healthcare. One could argue that in Cuba all three of these issues were resolved by, or at the very least addressed by, the Revolutionary government. By quantifying racial inequality through access to education, good living conditions, and healthcare, Castro defined racial inequality as a nonissue in Cuba. Since these topics had already been acknowledged by the Revolutionary Government, according to Castro’s interpretation, racism therefore must not exist in Cuba.

However, these are not the only measures of racial inequality – they are just the ones which the Revolutionary Cuban government addressed that the United States did not. For this reason, Castro chose not to mention the American Civil Rights Movement in his speech, which, at the time, positively impacted racial equality in the United States. In fact, there has been a significant lack of access to information about African American history in Cuba, which has continued into the twenty-first century. A 2016 article from *The Atlantic* described the status of Cuban anti-racism education as “similar” to the United States with “Cuban [students hearing only] about the U.S.’s more high-profile news, including fatal police profiling and the Black Lives Matter response” because “Cuba [could not] buy any of the United States’ anti-racism curricular materials or African American or Latino literature.”⁵¹ Since the embargo with the United States limits all forms of trade between the two countries, including the exchange of cultural and educational materials, many Cubans lacked access to information on this topic and therefore did not have even a basic understanding of race relations in the United States. The majority of their knowledge on the issue

⁵¹ Gleibermann, Erik, “Where Hip-Hop Fits in Cuba’s Anti-Racist Curriculum: The Country’s Education Leaders Confront Deep Seated Discrimination in the Classroom Through Rap.” *The Atlantic* (Boston, MA), Aug. 01, 2016: 7.

came from the cherry-picked information provided by Castro and the Communist party. While many Cubans were aware that major issues such as discrimination, police profiling, and neighborhood violence impact Black Americans, many were also unaware of the extent freedom of speech has been used by Black Americans and has been allowed by the United States government.

Because Castro defined racial inequality solely in terms of access to public resources and not freedom of expression, the Communist party of Cuba was able to make claims that all races in Cuba were equal. For example; in a speech made in 1964 on the eleventh anniversary of the attack on Moncada Barracks, Fidel Castro stated:

In our country, there are no white gangs persecuting Negroes, and that here, on the beaches, on our streets, in our theatres or restaurants, everywhere, we live together as brothers: we, Negroes and Whites live with equal rights, we Negroes and Whites are ready to give our lives for our country.⁵²

Statements such as these placed Afro-Cubans in a position where they had to accept that racism did not exist, because the party that advocated for them during the Revolution claimed to have eradicated it. However, racism as a social issue surpassed equal access and national unity between races. Castro defined racism in a way that disregarded some of its aversive forms and ignored the significance of individual racist practices. Just because direct, dominative examples may not have existed, that did not guarantee that other forms of racism did not persist through institutions and government policies.⁵³ White and Afro-Cuban ability to unite under common national pride did

⁵² "Cuba, Country Free of Segregation." Havana: Dirección de Información, Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, 1965. Pamphlet: 7.

⁵³ Moore, Carlos, "Cuban Communism, Ethnicity and Perestroika: the Unmaking of the Castro Regime," *Caribbean Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (1996): 14-29. According to Moore, despite the population shift from majority White to majority

not negate the possibility that individual instances of discrimination and racial prejudice could and did still occur.

Although the issues of segregation and discrimination may not have existed to the same extent in Cuba as they did in the United States, Castro and the Communist party failed to comment on the evidence of micro-level prejudices that continued to occur in Cuba after the 1960s, through the start of the Special Period in the 1990s, and into the twenty-first century. In a 2009 documentary entitled *Raza: a Cuban Documentary in Colors*, director Eric M. Corvalán Pellé explored the ways individual racism and prejudice persisted through this time period. In the opening credits of the film, a group of white and Afro-Cubans were asked if they believe racism exists in Cuba – white Cubans replied no, but many Afro-Cubans disagreed.⁵⁴ Despite the claims of the Communist Party of Cuba, Afro-Cubans believed that negative stereotypes and prejudices towards them persisted into contemporary Cuban culture in the media and everyday Cuban life. In fact, according to the documentary, many of the challenges faced by Afro-Cubans paralleled those that African Americans faced in the United States. For example; police profiling occurred frequently in Havana, with 8 out of 10 people stopped being Afro-Cuban. In the media, Afro-Cubans were only recognized for accomplishments as musicians or athletes. On television, soap operas rarely had main characters that were Afro-Cuban and therefore never portrayed the experiences of Afro-Cuban families. In Cuban ballet, the art form was dominated by lighter-

Afro-Cuban after Castro's rise to power, Cuba's ruling class continued to be dominated by white (90.2%), middle-aged (98.8%) men (98.8%).

⁵⁴ Corvalán Pellé, Eric. *Raza: a Cuban Documentary in Colors*. Directed by Eric Corvalán Pellé. 2008. Chiapas Media Project-Promedios, 2009. DVD.

Revolutionary government and political party, many of its stories can be read as biased in the manner in which they maintained the status quo on race relations

One such piece from a January 14, 1990 edition of *Granma* entitled “Race War in Miami” by Raúl Riesgo did exactly that.⁵⁶ Written about race relations in Miami, Florida, this article described a specific incident of police brutality that occurred on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day the year prior. According to the author, two African Americans were killed by a police officer for committing a traffic violation on a motorcycle. The author introduced the story by sardonically claiming “Martin Luther King never received any greater honor than in the city of Miami on January 16, 1989, the day the United States set aside to honor him,” in reference to this case of police brutality. Taking advantage of the holiday this confrontation occurred on, the author highlighted the subject of police brutality in the United States. He analyzed race relations in the city of Miami as a microcosm for the larger United States, stating “[not only was] there [nothing] unusual about blacks killed due to police brutality in Miami” but also “Miami blacks, in addition to enduring [this] police violence and racism typical of all ghettos in big U.S. cities, [were] subject to a unique form of discrimination resulting from the special features of this city, [Miami].” In this context, the phrase “special features” referred to the unique ethnic and racial makeup of Miami, characterized by a large Latino population, predominantly Cubans, that was double the African American population. The author’s description of this sector is supported by a 1990 US government census of Miami. According to the census, the Black population of Miami comprised 369,621 out of a total population of 1,937,094.⁵⁷ Additionally, 953,407 of the Miami populace were of Hispanic origin with 563,979 of those being Cuban.⁵⁸ These statistics support the author’s

⁵⁶ Riesgo, Raul, “Race War in Miami,” *Granma* (Havana, Cuba), Jan. 14, 1990.

⁵⁷ U.S. Census Bureau. Population by Race and Hispanic Origin MSA, Miami-Dade County, 1930-2020.

⁵⁸ U.S. Census Bureau Persons of Hispanic Origin by Country of Origin, Miami-Dade County, Florida, 1990 to 2007.

argument that Miami had a uniquely diverse racial makeup, with the potential to cause extreme racial and social tensions within the city.

Granma's decision to publish this article was significant due to the historical context of immigration to Miami and the author's explanation behind the racial tensions in the city. Riesgo stated:

The number of Latinos, chiefly Cubans, [was] double the number of Blacks in Miami. The first to arrive were Cubans displaced by the Revolution, who were more skilled and better organized and had greater group solidarity and, above all, received unprecedented financial aid plus political and social help from the federal government. This enabled them to establish deep roots in the city business, banking, the media, and local government, thus severely limiting job access for blacks.⁵⁹

This quote, depicting race relations in the American city of Miami, described economic and social conditions that almost perfectly paralleled the economic and social conditions of the Cuban Special Period just a few years after this article was released. Following the legalization of the U.S. dollar in 1993 and the introduction of economic policies that allowed for limited entrepreneurship and increased tourism, white Cubans experienced an economic advantage over Afro-Cubans similar to that of Latinos in Miami. Cubans escaping the Revolution to Miami had benefits including higher skill sets and organization in addition to federal financial assistance, while outnumbering African Americans in the city nearly two-to-one. Thirty years later, in Special Period Cuba, white Cubans had similar economic advantages such as access to high paying tourist sector jobs and opportunities to open private businesses. Unlike Latinos in Miami whose main benefits resided in

⁵⁹ Riesgo, Raul, "Race War in Miami," *Granma* (Havana, Cuba), Jan. 14, 1990.

their higher skill set, white Cuban's were advantaged by having nicer homes or cars to convert into small business ventures. Furthermore, the white population (64.1%) in Cuba also outnumbered the population of African descent – Black (9.3%) and mixed race (26.6%) – by a similarly wide margin.⁶⁰ Although this article did not directly discuss Cuban race relations in any way, it is a perfect example of the Cuban government's continued effort to use the United States as a model country for terrible, *inferior* race relations, without addressing their own struggles with race. *Granma* and the Cuban government made the United States appear as a common enemy to the goals of the revolution – which included economic and racial equality.

A month after the publication of Riesgo's essay, *Granma* released another article describing how Cuba marked Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 61st birthday. According to the author, a ceremony held at a Cuban memorial named in his honor was attended by many Cuban protestants, American academics, and other guests.⁶¹ At the event, Reverend Raúl Suárez highlighted Dr. King's significance to African diasporic culture in general, stating “he was a man of the people who practiced what he preached” and “[he] always realized he was black and his roots were in Africa.”⁶² The quotes highlighted by the author stand out for their ambiguous interpretations – each line recognizes Dr. King's impact on broad spectrum ideas such as religion, improving social conditions, and ending poverty and injustice. None of these quotes, however, reference his impact on race relations in the United States specifically, despite the fact that his most significant contributions were to American society. The author also referenced other American academics,

⁶⁰ “The World Factbook: CUBA.” Central Intelligence Agency. June 04, 2018. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cu.html>. It is important to note that this data was self-reported and may be slightly biased. Therefore, it is possible that the Black and mixed race populations in Cuba were actually slightly larger than reported.

⁶¹ “Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr's 61st Birthday Marked in Cuba,” *Granma* (Havana, Cuba), Feb. 18, 1990.

⁶² *Ibid.*

such as sociology Professor Jualynne E. Dodson, who he cited in the article as claiming “Martin Luther King, Jr would have been proud of what [Cubans] are trying to do” regarding the advancement of church-state relations.

In addition to its selective celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., which focused predominantly on his religious message and significance for people of African descent worldwide rather than his specific accomplishments for those in the United States, *Granma* continued to emphasize the major problems facing U.S. race relations. The paper featured soaring prison populations and drug crime rates that disproportionately affected African Americans. Another article by author Raúl Riesgo examined the high rate of drug crimes attributed to African Americans through the example of Marrion Barry, mayor of D.C. from 1978 until 1990. Barry, a Black mayor elected in 1978 in part due to his work as a civil rights activist alongside Jesse Jackson, was charged with drug use just days before his nomination for a fourth term as mayor. According to Riesgo, other Black Mayors experienced similar difficulties, officials in Los Angeles and Detroit also faced different scandals meant to tarnish their public image.⁶³ These attacks sought to confirm the stereotype that African Americans were responsible for the majority of drug consumption in the United States.

A few days before the incident, Jesse Jackson complained about the myth that the average drug addict is black. While Afro-Americans make up only 12 percent of those who abuse drugs, according to data from the National Institute of Drug Abuse, they represent nearly 30 percent of those arrested for this reason, Jackson wrote.

⁶³ Riesgo, Raul, “Fight Against Drugs Conceals Political Intentions,” *Granma* (Havana, Cuba), Feb. 4, 1990. Other Black mayors included Tom Bradley and Coleman Young.

This means they are a minority of the drug addicts but a vast and disproportionate percentage of the prisoners of that war.⁶⁴

The topic of the overrepresentation of African Americans in jails resulting from drug crimes and the resulting stereotypes appeared frequently in *Granma* articles.

A full-length, in depth piece by Cino Colina appeared in 1990 in *Granma* entitled, “A Fourth World in the United States,” addressed the poor quality of life and lack of due process for many U.S. prisoners. The author cited various statistics that indicated the disproportionate amount of incarcerated Black Americans was based on their race and not due to a preference for any specific crime.⁶⁵ Many of these imprisoned African Americans and other minorities were also rebels, protestors, objectors and anti-imperialists; therefore, according to Colina, their activities cast them as active opponents to the state. The author identified the Marion, Illinois federal prison and its prison population as “the one with the highest security in the United States, to which people were sent for ‘rather vague’ reasons, but for which the political views and the possible leadership role of the prisoner [were] important. Prisoners [were] denied their rights and sometimes even religious services.”⁶⁶ This distinction was a key aspect of the article meant to draw attention to the lack of freedom for African American and minority dissenters in a country that celebrated and promoted its citizen’s freedoms.

The loss of liberty for incarcerated Americans, however, was eerily similar to the conditions faced by many imprisoned Cubans. According to a Human Rights Country Report on

⁶⁴ Riesgo, Raul, “Fight Against Drugs Conceals Political Intentions,” *Granma* (Havana, Cuba), Feb. 4, 1990

⁶⁵ Colina, Cino, “A Fourth World in the United States,” *Granma* (Havana, Cuba), Jan. 21, 1990. According to the author, Black Americans are six times as likely to go to jail than their white counterparts. The rate of Black imprisonment in the United States is the highest in the world – twice as high as South Africa. The author cites experts such as William Nagel, Steven Box, and Chris Hale.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

Cuban prisons by the U.S. State Department in 2013, “the law [prohibited] abusive treatment of detainees and prisoners. There were credible reports, however, that members of the security forces intimidated and sometimes physically assaulted human rights and prodemocracy advocates, dissidents and other detainees and prisoners both during detention and while imprisoned, and they did so with impunity.”⁶⁷ The hypocrisy of this *Granma* author calling out the United States for its incarceration of political dissenters when Cuba was known for acting similarly is evident through this report.

Cino Colina also referenced the struggles faced by minority women leading to their incarceration in this article. Many of their challenges paralleled those later faced by Afro-Cuban women during the Special Period. According to the article, numerous prisoners were unwed mothers driven into lives of crime due to economic, self-defense or familial-defense reasons. The forced participation in illegal activities resulting from economic stressors also occurred in Cuba a few years after the publication of this article. During the economic crisis of the Special Period, many Afro-Cuban women were also pushed into black market activities. When Cuba legalized the U.S. dollar, private businesses boomed. Several legal forms of private business such as taxi services and in-house restaurants became restricted to white Cubans due to their higher likelihood of owning a suitable house or car. However, Afro-Cubans, particularly Afro-Cuban women were also interested in gaining access to the valuable U.S. dollar, and some began participating in more illicit private sector activities such as prostitution. Like African American women, some Afro-Cuban women participated in illegal businesses out of economic necessity.⁶⁸ Women detained in Cuban prisons for these activities also faced poor living conditions such as lack of access to

⁶⁷ “U.S. State Department Human Rights Country Report 2013: Cuba.” U.S. State Department February 27, 2014. <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/220646.pdf>.

⁶⁸ Roland, L. Kaifa. “Tourism and the Commodification of Cubanidad,” *Tourist Studies* 10, no. 1(2010): 3-18.

feminine hygiene products and insufficient prenatal care, in addition to the major problems with sanitation, overcrowding, and inadequate medical care experienced by both imprisoned men and women.⁶⁹

The irony of these various anti-American *Granma* articles is that they demonstrated an acknowledgement by the Cuban government and its supporters of the true dangers of poverty and police profiling and brutality on African Americans a few years before the Cuban government allowed a similar deterioration of race relations in its own country. Due to the economic strain of the Special Period of the 1990s, economic inequality along racial lines actually widened in Cuba, discrimination became more easily identifiable, and even police violence against Afro-Cubans escalated in many tourist areas. By focusing on the problems of race in the United States as opposed to their own country, the revolutionary government failed to properly address Cuba's own issues with race relations. Instead, they were shoved under the rug.

Despite Castro's declaration in 1961 that racism had ended and the Cuban Constitution's criminalization of discrimination by race, racial tensions remained an issue in the country that worsened with the rise of economic inequality. Discrimination persisted in the form of stereotyping and media bias against Afro-Cubans. One could even argue that the party policies, exhibited by the 1989 and 1990 articles, also aided in the further deterioration of race relations in the 1990s in addition to economic disparities. From reading *Granma*, it is clear that Cubans had an understanding of the economic conditions behind racial inequality. So why then did the government later propose economic policies such as the promotion of the tourist industry with its racial biased hiring practices and the legalization of the U.S. dollar with its disproportionate

⁶⁹ "U.S. State Department Human Rights Country Report 2013: Cuba." U.S. State Department February 27, 2014. <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/220646.pdf>.

distribution of wealth by race, that would hurt Afro-Cubans in similar ways? Perhaps the issue of racial inequality was not as important to the Cuban government as the party news outlet claimed.

3.3 DEPICTIONS OF THE UNITED STATES IN OTHER FORMS OF CUBAN MEDIA

Like many one party political systems, the use of propaganda to influence public opinion has been common in Cuba. Beyond government-run newspapers, other forms of propaganda – such as billboards and informational pamphlets – have been used effectively by the Communist party. Information pamphlets, like the one entitled “Cuba: Country Free of Segregation” from 1965, were written from the perspective of the Cuban Revolutionary government. This brochure from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs specifically compared both Cuba’s history of race relations and their status at the time to other multicultural countries. By repeatedly comparing Cuba’s successes with the failures of other multicultural nations such as the United States and South Africa, the government sought to display national unity to the rest of the world.

In order to signify the magnitude of success the country had in diminishing racial inequality, the pamphlet began with a brief history of the Afro-Cuban experience. According to the document, “despite a rapid and extensive process of racial mixing [by the introduction of the slave trade to the island], the Cuban Negro and his descendants were subject to hard servitude based on manual work. Racial mixing and the contribution of African customs and ways of expression enriched Cuban folklore, surpassing the bounds of ethnic differences. These relations... exonerated Cuba from the social violence and brutal persecution prevalent... in the southern

United States.”⁷⁰ Beginning with the introduction of enslaved Africans to the island in the sixteenth century through the Atlantic Slave Trade, the pamphlet glossed over the hardships faced by these enslaved people. Instead, it chose to highlight their cultural contributions, which in many cases were also hard won.⁷¹ Although this reference to cultural influence demonstrated an acknowledgement of Afro-Cuban agency and significance, the cursory description of their struggles as enslaved peoples was a clear example of the Cuban government’s desire to overlook the more inhumane aspects of its racial history in the name of “national unity.”

The pamphlet then jumped ahead to the 1886 emancipation when enslaved Afro-Cubans finally achieved freedom. Although the challenges faced by Afro-Cubans during the previous centuries were not mentioned, the pamphlet was quick to address the struggles they endured during the U.S. occupation of Cuba in the early twentieth century. “As United States capital penetrated Cuba, starting in 1898, racial discrimination in Cuba was basically an economic phenomenon, manifesting itself socially in forms that were often inhuman.”⁷² The U.S. imposed segregationist policies on the Cuban people, prohibiting Afro-Cubans from certain public areas and from achieving high-paying, high-level employment.

It was impossible for a Negro to attain one of the better positions. The professions were not within his reach; it was made almost impossible for him to carry out specialized or advanced studies, due to the prohibitive cost of higher education.

Bank employment was also closed, as was employment in United States companies,

⁷⁰ “Cuba, Country Free of Segregation”. Havana: Dirección de Información, Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, 1965. Pamphlet.

⁷¹ The best example of African cultural influences is the impact of Yoruba on Cuban religion. Santería, a mixture of Catholicism and the Yoruba religion, has become the most popular belief system among both White and Afro-Cubans. However, it was once an underground religion, practiced mainly by Afro-Cubans and not supported by the government.

⁷²“Cuba, Country Free of Segregation”. Havana: Dirección de Información, Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, 1965. Pamphlet.

except on the lowest levels. No important establishment, and least of all, stores patronized by the upper bourgeoisie, employed Negroes.⁷³

These policies led to severe economic inequality in the country and were, in part, catalysts for the Cuban Revolution. One of the main goals of the revolution, besides achieving economic inequality, was to provide social equality for people of all races in Cuba.

Whether or not Cuba was completely successful in this endeavor is debatable. However, this pamphlet promoted the government's opinion that the Revolution *was* successful in ending racism and discrimination. Furthermore, it worked to spread this opinion to the rest of the world. Written by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, rather than a government department focused on domestic affairs, the intended audience is clearly international. In addition to the brief internal Cuban history provided, the pamphlet also quoted several speeches by Cuban leaders that called out the United States and South Africa for issues such as racially motivated lynching, segregation, police brutality, and apartheid. In one of the included speeches, Carlos Lechuga Hevia, Cuba's UN representative, declared his solidarity with Black Americans who were "victims of brutal discrimination, sacrificed by an unjust system, subject to storms of demagoguery" and rejects, "with deep contempt and indignation, the merciless and intolerable conduct of the fascist regime in South Africa."⁷⁴ Written during the same year as the March on Selma at the height of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, the timing of the pamphlet's publication is not coincidental. At the same time President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Cuban government propaganda touted complete racial equality and "true" democratic values.

⁷³ "Cuba, Country Free of Segregation". Havana: Dirección de Información, Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, 1965. Pamphlet.

⁷⁴ Ibid. These quotes were made in an address by Carlos Lechuga Hevia, permanent representative of Cuba to the United Nations, on October 7, 1963.

While the publication date alone does not unequivocally prove this document was anti-American propaganda, the featured photos depicting interracial Cuban classrooms and communities compared with images of the Ku Klux Klan and police brutality in the United States support this claim. After the brief Afro-Cuban history and various Castro quotes, the pamphlet presented these pictures along with brief captions meant to reiterate the differences in race relations between the two countries. For example: the caption of a photo that shows a line of Klansmen marching claimed, “to be a black in the United States is a criminal offense. To defend the egalitarian rights proclaimed by the constitution is also an offense. For that reason, as long as racism exists in the United States, scenes like this one will be frequent.”⁷⁵ On the parallel side of the pamphlet, a photo of a Cuban teacher working with students held the caption, “All children are equal at the infantile Circles. They all have the same rights. They all enjoy the same careful attention, regardless of colour or origin.”⁷⁶ Overall this pamphlet is a key example of the Cuban government’s efforts to focus on race issues in other countries, specifically the United States, in order to diminish the significance of their own racial divide. To be sure, the first decade after the Cuban Revolution, fostered optimism towards resolving these important social and economic issues. Acknowledging that racism and racial prejudice persist in Cuba today, however, allows us to analyze this pamphlet as government propaganda rather than historical fact.

⁷⁵ “Cuba, Country Free of Segregation”. Havana: Dirección de Información, Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, 1965. Pamphlet.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

3.4 CONCLUSION

After Castro declared the end of racial discrimination in Cuba in 1961, his Revolutionary government spent the next three decades criticizing the United States not only for its imperialism and capitalism, but also for its institutional racism. In speeches, newspapers, and pamphlets, the Cuban government called out issues such as police brutality, poverty, and high incarceration rates. Targeting African American and other minority communities, these issues were highlighted as examples of the inferior status of race relations in the United States. Even during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, Castro and his government rarely acknowledged the strides African Americans made towards equality such as the Voting Rights and Civil Rights Acts. Newspapers would publish stories discussing Martin Luther King, Jr.'s impact on Africans in the diaspora, such as Afro-Cubans, without acknowledging that the majority of his efforts benefitted African Americans. National education paralleled this government propaganda since many students lacked access to materials on the Civil Rights Movement. Such biased reporting, education, and speeches, demonstrated the Cuban government's goal of directing public opinion to a point where all Cubans would see American race relations as poor, and by comparison, Cuban race relations as improved and racism as eliminated. By uniting Cubans behind this common critique of the United States, the Revolutionary government hoped to discourage public discussion on domestic race relations.

It was not until the Special Period economic crisis of the 1990s revealed latent and underlying racial tensions in Cuba that Afro-Cubans began speaking up about their struggles with racial prejudice and discrimination en masse. After delaying the national debate on racism for several decades, the rise of global hip-hop in conjunction with the economic challenges faced by Afro-Cubans during the 1990s led to the development of an art movement that directly examined these issues. Although successful for the first few decades, the Cuban government's policy of

discouraging political dissent, particularly in regards to the debate on racism, came to an end with the rise of globalization and technology and the resulting spread of American culture and ideas.

4.0 THE UNITED STATES AS A CULTURAL AMBASSADOR: THE EMERGENCE OF CUBAN RAP AND HIP-HOP AND THE RISE OF THE DISCRIMINATION DEBATE

After decades of the Castro regime dictating the national discourse on race, inequality and discrimination, many Afro-Cubans began to question the validity behind the government's claims that racism had been completely eliminated. In 1986, the Third Congress of the Communist party openly acknowledged, for the first time since the Revolution, that not all forms of inequality had been resolved and called for the promotion of more Afro-Cubans to leadership roles.⁷⁷ But by the 1990s, discontent towards the status of race relations in Cuba had spread throughout the Afro-Cuban community as Special Period economic policies produced more, rather than less, inequality on the island. To address this growing injustice, Afro-Cuban artists turned to various forms of cultural production – such as music, visual art, and writing. The adaptation of the newly introduced African American Hip-Hop facilitated such Afro-Cuban expression through a new type of music. Although originally inspired by the rhythm and lyrical style of African American Hip-Hop in the United States, Cuban Hip-Hop created its own unique cultural space. Used as a method of criticizing the Revolutionary government, Hip-Hop represented a powerful form of agency among the Afro-Cuban community as social and economic inequality continued to rise throughout the Special Period.

⁷⁷ Alejandro De La Fuente, "Race, National Discourse and Politics in Cuba," *Latin American Perspectives* 25, no. 3 (1998): 62.

Afro-Cuban Hip-Hop emerged during the 1990s as a result of three key factors; (1) the contradiction between the government claim that racism had been eradicated on the island and the individual instances of racism that many Afro-Cubans experienced, (2) the disproportionate negative effects of the Special Period economic crisis on Afro-Cubans, and (3) the cultural influence from U.S. Hip-Hop artists. While the economic crisis and the rise of Hip-Hop music were unique phenomena to the 1990s, the government's lack of action on race relations was not. Since the Revolution, the Cuban government continuously worked to decolorize society by encouraging citizens to identify as Cuban over their respective race. Not only did Fidel Castro declare the end of racial discrimination on the island in 1961, but the Revolutionary government also used propaganda to promote the idea that racism was an issue that existed solely outside the island.⁷⁸ Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, government affiliated newspapers such as *Granma* ran stories highlighting racial tensions in the United States, while the Cuban government sent troops to support liberation movements in African countries such as Angola, South Africa, and Mozambique. However, after the Special Period economic crisis in the early 1990s, it became evident that racial inequality and discrimination also plagued Cuba. Emerging from this environment of economic and social disparity, Afro-Cuban Hip-Hop adopted themes of racial injustice to inform their music.

New government policies during and after the Special Period combined with existing racial and gender stereotypes that exacerbated disparities among Afro-Cubans. As the administration promoted the tourist sector, private businesses, and remittances, economic inequality for Afro-Cubans widened. At the same time, negative stereotypes based on race became

⁷⁸ Dipannita Basu and Sidney J. Lemelle, *The Vinyl Ain't Final: Hip Hop and the Globalization of Black Popular Culture*, (London: Pluto Press, 2006): 170.

increasingly common in Cuba, both publicly and privately. In the public sphere, popular telenovelas imported from countries like Brazil had very few Afro-Latin American cast members, and those that existed were often whitewashed or portrayed as having negative characteristics. For example, one of the more popular telenovelas of the time, *La Esclava Isaura*, cast a white actress to portray the role of a mixed-race enslaved woman.⁷⁹ At the individual level, Afro-Cubans experienced racial profiling by police – particularly around preferred tourist destinations. Afro-Cuban women, specifically, also faced bias from their peers and feared sexual harassment at work and in public spaces due to common stereotypes that cast them as prostitutes.⁸⁰

Although originally derived from the Hip-Hop culture spreading from the United States, Cuban Hip-Hop of the 1990s acted as an agent for Afro-Cubans to critique the distinct problems they faced in their own society due to the ongoing racial discrimination and policies of the Special Period. Hip-Hop artists throughout the country questioned decisions made by the Revolutionary government in their lyrics and criticized how these actions hurt race relations on the island. Artists also used the medium as a form of introspection by exploring the meaning of being Black in Cuba, including female artists who lent their voice to the unique experience of being both Black and female in a machista society.

⁷⁹Marilyn J. Matelski, “As Our Worlds Turn: The Birth and Rebirth of Cuban Serial Drama,” *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 38, no. 4 (2010): 189.

⁸⁰L. Kaifa Roland, “Tourism and the Commodification of Cubanidad,” *Tourist Studies* 10, no. 1 (2010): 6.

4.1 EARLY STAGES OF THE CUBAN HIP-HOP MOVEMENT AND ITS ROOTS IN THE UNITED STATES

The first examples of Cuban Hip-Hop appeared in Havana in the mid-1980s as an offshoot of the rap tradition from the South Bronx of New York City that spread to the island a decade after its creation in the United States. The use of Cuban Hip-Hop as a social movement began in earnest in the 1990s as a reaction to the Special Period economic crisis.⁸¹ During this period, a “dual city” developed in Havana as a result of the government’s focus on expanding the tourist sector in some neighborhoods, while ignoring the deteriorating infrastructure of other areas. In the context of this “dual city,” Cuban Hip-Hop emerged as a critique of the poor living conditions and social norms that Afro-Cubans faced on a daily basis.⁸²

The contemporary tourist sector in Havana began in the late 1980s, and was further promoted as a rising source of economic growth during the Special Period. At the time, top tourist destinations included the city of Havana, specifically the neighborhoods of Habana Vieja, Miramar, and Vedado, and the tropical beach of Varadero, some 90 miles east along the coast.⁸³ An article from the Cuban newspaper *Granma*, at the start of this major tourism expansion, described the future improvements to infrastructure that needed to be made in order to develop a successful industry. According to the reporter Carlos Cabrera,

It’s not just a matter of building hotels at random, we must build fifty thousand rooms while protecting the environment. But rooms aren’t the only problem. We must build roads,

⁸¹ Marc D. Perry, *Negro Soy Yo: Hip-Hop and Raced Citizenship in Neoliberal Cuba*. (Durnham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2016): 57.

⁸² Geoff Baker, “La Habana que no conoces: Cuban Rap and the Social Construction of Urban Space,” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 15, no. 2 (2006): 220.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

airports, piers, support facilities such as packing plants and warehouses, laundries and facilities for manufacturing handicrafts. All this will create jobs so tourism is beneficial in several ways: hard currency, earnings jobs, and cultural enrichment by entering into contact with men and women from other parts of the world.⁸⁴

Over the course of the following decade, the Cuban government achieved many of these goals. To account for the growing influx of tourism, the government updated airports, roads, and ports, built new hotels with additional rooms, and employed more Cubans in the burgeoning industry. However, much of these improvements came at the cost of stagnated development in other areas of the city, particularly in Afro-Cuban populated neighborhoods of Havana, such as Alamar, Cojímar, and the non-tourist sectors of Vedado.

Decades of poor government oversight culminated in the deterioration of infrastructure throughout the non-tourist areas of the city. Filmmakers Florian Borchmeyer and Matthias Hentschler described the dilapidated buildings of Havana as lived-in ruins. In their documentary *Havana: The New Art of Making Ruins*, they showed several examples of run-down buildings throughout the city – some had dilapidated plumbing, others had collapsing walls. Perhaps many should have been condemned, yet individuals and families still lived in all of these structures.⁸⁵ Just a few blocks away, however, tourist spots, such as the Hotel Nacional, Hotel Inglaterra, and Hotel Saragota were perfectly maintained. The “dual city” developed between the tourist occupants of Havana and real Cuban citizens necessitated the creation of an alternative space for Afro-Cubans, particularly Afro-Cuban youth, to socialize and express their concerns.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Carlos Carbrera, “Cuba at the Hour of Tourism,” *Granma* (Havana, Cuba), Sep. 16, 1990.

⁸⁵ *Havana: The New Art of Making Ruins*, directed by Florian Borchmeyer (2006: New York, NY: Cinema Guild, 2006). DVD.

⁸⁶ Geoff Baker, “La Habana que no conoces: Cuban Rap and the Social Construction of Urban Space,” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 15, no. 2 (2006): 220.

To accommodate the needs of Afro-Cuban youth, venues such as Parque Almendares and La Madriguera, controlled by the state-run organization Asociación Hermanos Saíz, dominated the social landscape of central Havana Hip-Hop as places for Cubans in general, and Afro-Cubans in particular, to express their dissatisfaction with issues such as racism, police harassment, and tourism.⁸⁷ The Asociación recognized the idea of a “free space” for debate as an important aspect of Cuban Hip-Hop and rap. In a country with a singular political party controlling both the government and media outlets, the opportunity to air one’s grievances proved crucial for the promotion of individual agency. The development of Cuban Hip-Hop in the 1990s provided a necessary cultural and social venue for Cubans to address their concerns with how the government’s economic and social policies directly impacted them.

The concept of Hip-Hop developing as the response to urban experiences has been widely adopted by geography scholars, such as Andrew Leschon, David Matless, and George Revill, who argue that this type of music developed out of issues of space, not necessarily race. These scholars suggested that “hip hop [was] not (just) a ‘black thing’ but (also) a ‘street thing’... since appropriations, transformations, and representations of urban space have been central to hip hop since its beginnings in New York City.”⁸⁸ In the case of Havana, the economic crisis of the Special Period, and its impact on the more impoverished urban population, helped create interest in Hip-Hop music and desire for more representation.

⁸⁷ Geoff Baker, “La Habana que no conoces: Cuban Rap and the Social Construction of Urban Space,” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 15, no. 2 (2006): 221-223. The Asociación Hermanos Saíz was the cultural wing of the Union of Young Communists. It was the primary institutional support system for Cuban rap before the development of the Cuban Rap Agency in the 2000s.

⁸⁸ Geoff Baker, *Buena Vista in the Club: Rap, Reggaetón, and Revolution in Havana*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011): 181.

Race, in the form of African-diasporic social experiences and cultural aesthetics, nevertheless, remained a key factor in the development of Cuban Hip Hop. Not only were many of the Cubans negatively affected by the Special Period – and therefore many Hip-Hop artists – of African descent, but these artists also drew from distinctively African methods of music production, particularly the traditional drum beat.⁸⁹ Hip-Hop became a much-needed cultural space for Afro-Cubans after being introduced to the island through radio airwaves emanating from Miami.⁹⁰ In a 1986 newspaper article from *Granma*, reporter Hernán Uribe described the government’s celebration of twenty-five-year anniversary of Havana Radio, Cuba’s response to U.S. radio reaching the island.⁹¹ The article explained that the government originally established Radio Havana Cuba “to meet the country’s need to counter overwhelming U.S. anti-Cuba propaganda that started flowing in right after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959,” which according to the reporter, “grossly [distorted] the facts of what was happening in the country.”⁹² As the decades past, other U.S. radio stations began emitting music, such as Hip-Hop and Rap, as an alternative form of influencing Cubans through cultural production.⁹³ Moreover, the geographic proximity of Havana to the U.S. city of Miami facilitated these efforts. This explains why Cuban Hip-Hop rose in popularity in the city of Havana as opposed to other large metropolitan areas such as Santiago de Cuba.

⁸⁹ *Havanyork: Estamos Hechos de Luz y Sonido*, directed by Luciano Larobina. 2011; Mexico City, Mexico: Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía, 2011. DVD. The drum played an important role in Afro-Cuban musical production. Traditionally used in rituals of the African Yoruba religion to invoke spirits, Cuban Rumba and Hip-Hop heavily featured drums.

⁹⁰ Arlene B Tickner, “Aquí en el Ghetto: Hip-Hop in Colombia, Cuba, and Mexico,” *Latin American Politics and Society*, 50, no. 3 (2008): 121-146.

⁹¹ Uribe, Hernán. “Radio Havana Cuba: The Other Side to the News,” *Granma* (Havana, Cuba), May 18, 1986.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ M.D. Perry, *Negro Soy Yo: Hip Hop and Raced Citizenship in Neoliberal Cuba*. (Duke University Press, 2016), 55.

At its inception, Cuban Hip-Hop as a style of music almost completely mimicked African American Hip-Hop. Artists wore New York-styled clothing and even copied the pronunciation styles used by Black rappers. Due to its promotion of American culture, the Castro government censured Cuban Hip-Hop on television, radio and other forms of media. Nevertheless, Cuban artists began to develop their own unique version of Hip Hop, highlighting social problems that existed at home and incorporating familiar music styles such as rumba, making it no longer a foreign medium. Through the combination of Hip-Hop and rumba music, artists created a “common soul” through the drum beat.⁹⁴ Like American Rap, Cuban Rap and Hip-Hop emerged from “underground,” listened to on street corners by young people looking for a more meaningful alternative to the popular club music of the time.⁹⁵ As this socially-conscious genre gained popularity, the Cuban regime took note. In 2002 the government established the Cuban Rap Agency as a way to maintain some control over the burgeoning music production. As asserted by sociologist Sujatha Fernandes, Cuban officials saw the developing connections between Cuban and American rappers on the issues of race and marginality as “transcending nationality” while simultaneously “[generating] a critique of global capitalism” making it possible for rappers and the Cuban state to collaborate.⁹⁶ This partnership, however, remained tense whenever the government interpreted Hip-Hop lyrics criticizing social conditions as crossing the line into counter-revolutionary protest. Despite its roots in American music forms and the limiting force of government censorship, Cuban Hip-Hop persevered as a popular art form in the country, and

⁹⁴ *Havanyork: Estamos Hechos de Luz y Sonido*, directed by Luciano Larobina. 2011; Mexico City, Mexico: Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía, 2011. DVD.

⁹⁵ Geoff Baker, “La Habana que no conoces: Cuban Rap and the Social Construction of Urban Space,” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 15, no. 2 (2006): 216.

⁹⁶ Sujatha Fernandes, *Cuba Represent! Cuban Arts, State Power, and the Making of New Revolutionary Cultures*. (Durnham: Duke University Press, 2006): 122.

provided Afro-Cubans with a means of finding a freedom of expression they had previously been denied.

4.2 EXPRESSING DISCONTENT THROUGH AFRO-CUBAN HIP-HOP

Hip-Hop became a global phenomenon at the end of the twentieth century, spreading from New York City to countries throughout the world, especially in Europe, Latin America, and the continent of Africa. Some of the countries where Hip-Hop became most popular include Cuba, Brazil, South Africa, and France, among others. As a universal form of music, every national version of Hip-Hop shared stylistic similarities, such as strong beats and African inspired rhythms, that stemmed from its roots in the original New York City Hip-Hop while still adding its own cultural spin to the global movement. Each country that celebrated Hip-Hop culture suffered from its own social, political, and communal challenges, but still shared some common struggles, which is part of what has made Hip-Hop such a powerful movement.

Hip-Hop from Havana, which added Cuban melodies to its music and described the unique social challenges faced by its residents, situated itself squarely within the international Hip-Hop community. An example of a song that placed Cuban Hip-Hop on the map of the global movement was the song “Represent” by Orishas, the first Cuban Hip-Hop group to find international success. This song was featured on their debut and most famous album, *A lo Cubano*.

Candidato, pa’ rumbear en la cadencia
Represento a mis ancestros toda la mezcla
No lo pierdas bro, yo

Latino Americano de la Habana
Aprenderás que en la rumba esta la esencia
Que mi guaguancó es sabroso y tiene Buena mezcla

¿Tú Ves? A mi vieja y linda Habana
Sentimiento de mañana todo eso representas, Cuba⁹⁷

Candidate, rumba to the rhythm
Representing for all of my ancestors
Don't lose it, bro

I'm Latin American from Havana
You will learn that in the rumba is the essence
That my guanguancó is flavorful and has a good mixture
Do you see? My old and beautiful Havana
Feeling of tomorrow, you represent all of that, Cuba

Through these lyrics, Orishas highlighted various characteristics that represent Cuban Hip-Hop: the rumba rhythm, particularly guanguancó, combined with the influence of ancestral culture and music. Another excerpt of the song drew attention to the global reach of Hip-Hop music.

Cuando quiero estallar yo me voy a mi zona
Pa' La Habana yo me voy
J'représente le blanc, le noir, le chico, la chica
D' Chicago a Panama, Toyko a la Habana
J'représente la fiesta soul de Cuba y mi congo

(Chorus)

Represent, Represent Cuba, Orishas son del lao de La Habana
Represent, Represent Cuba, es mi música
Represent, Represent Cuba, Orishas son del lao de La Habana
Represent, Represent Cuba, es tu música⁹⁸

When I want to explode, I go to my zone
I go to Havana
I represent the white, the Black, the boy, the girl
From Chicago to Panama, Tokyo to Havana
I represent the fiesta soul of Cuban and my drum

(Chorus)

⁹⁷ Orishas, *Represent*, EMI Music France, track 2 on *A lo Cubano*, 2000, CD. Guanguancó is a specific form of Cuban rumba.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.* In Cuban slang, “pa” is short for the Spanish word “para” and “lao” is short for the word “lado.”

Represent, Represent Cuba, Orishas are from the side of Havana
Represent, Represent Cuba, it's my music
Represent, Represent Cuba, Orishas are from the side of Havana
Represent, Represent Cuba, it's your music

These lyrics are significant because they demonstrated the song's call to global listeners through the use of three distinct languages: Spanish, English, and French. The French lyrics also call out Black and White people, men and women, and inhabitants of Chicago, Panama, and Tokyo. In doing so, the song developed a global context and established Cuban Hip-Hop's position within that space.

Cuban Hip-Hop during the 1990s also addressed major issues of social and political concern, including tourism and its impact on urban life through the development of a "dual city" in Havana. One famous song by Cuban rapper Papá Humbertico, "La Habana que no conoces," examined the two sides to the city of Havana: the developed areas for foreigners and the deteriorating neighborhoods left for Cuban citizens.

(Chorus)

Esta es mi Habana, La Habana que no conoces
La Capital Cubana después de las doce
Te gustan, extranjero, y luchan si eres de allí
Lo Habana, como te yo quiero, ¿que haría sin ti?⁹⁹

(Chorus)

This is my Havana, the Havana that you don't know
The Cuban capital after midnight
You like it, foreigners, and you fight if you are from there
Havana, how I love you, what would I do without you?

⁹⁹ Papá Humbertico, *La Habana que no conoces*, Real 70 Productions, *Denuncia Social*, 2002, CD.

In the chorus of his song, Papá Humbertico reiterated the significance of *his* Havana versus the one that visitors experience. He explained that foreigners do not know the same Havana that he did, for to experience his Havana was to struggle and to see others struggling. The rest of the song highlighted the social and economic issues of prostitution, black market trading, and theft, placing them in the dark imagery of midnight. This represented the “dark side” of Havana that he and other Cubans experienced every day, far from the pristine tropical paradise advertised to travelers. Impoverished people living in urban areas throughout the world faced many of these social issues and, therefore, these are not themes specific to Cuban music. In the context of Cuba’s dual economy however, where participants had to supplement their state-determined wage with alternative forms of income, these challenges proved to be uniquely Cuban.

Several years later, Papá Humbertico reflected on the power of rap in calling out the government’s disregard for the plight of impoverished Cubans in another powerful song entitled, “El Rap es Guerra.” In this rap, Humbertico created a metaphor between his criticism of government policy through rap and actual warfare. He compared his words to “bullets” and described his mission as a fight for freedom of expression.

No frenas la redacción es la acción de libre expresión
De una pasión con misión, salvación
(¡Sabes lo que con lleva!)
Estas solo en tu causa sin pausa es eterno
Luchar por un cambio social que no le conviene al gobierno¹⁰⁰

Don’t stop, writing is the action of free expression
From a passion with a mission, salvation
(You know what it provokes!)
Being alone in your cause without rest is eternal
Fighting for a social change that the government does not agree with

¹⁰⁰ Papá Humbertico, *El Rap es Guerra*, Real 70 Productions, track 11 on *El Atropello*, 2014, CD.

In this excerpt, Humbertico called his fans to fight for a social change that may not be convenient for the government. Lyrics such as these demonstrated the importance of rap as a method for the unheard to be listened to. They also provided a prime example of a message that would not necessarily have been approved by the Cuban government. Humbertico recognized this later in another verse of the song when he stated “eso en T.V. no sale,” meaning that the ideas he highlighted would not come out on television, referring to government censorship of rap and opposition to government policies. In the chorus of the song, Humbertico returned to the metaphor of rap as a form of warfare.

(Chorus)

Siempre a la ofensiva
En defensa de las vidas que anidan heridas
EL Rap Es Guerra
La lucha no está perdida
Liberen la verdad cautiva
No se detengan sigan
EL Rap Es Guerra

Cuanta tierra llevo mi guerra la boca no me cierra
Sus leyes no me aterran pa
Cada letra reparto por cada puerta que me cierran
Permiso como no voy a ver¹⁰¹

(Chorus)

Always on the offensive
In defense of the lives that suffer wounds
Rap is war
The fight is not lost
Free the captive truth
Don't stop, keep going
Rap is war

¹⁰¹ Papá Humbertico, *El Rap es Guerra*, Real 70 Productions, track 11 on *El Atropello*, 2014, CD.

How much land I have, my fight, I will not close my mouth
Your laws do not terrify me
Each lyric shared for each door closed on me
Permission like I'm not going to see

To him, rap became a method of defending those hurt by poor societal conditions. Despite the government's attempts to hide the reality that many of its own citizens suffer, "the captive truth," he insisted that the fight had not been lost. Specially, he did not fear the Cuban government or its laws, and he would not "shut his mouth," meaning that he would keep rapping. This song captured the significance of Cuban rap as an agent for change. By comparing rapping to warfare, Papa Humbertico demonstrated the power words could have, especially regarding freedom of expression in a communist country.

While Cuban rappers used their music to address many different struggles that they faced on a daily basis, race relations remained one of the most frequently discussed subjects. Afro-Cubans dominated the underground rap scene, with groups like Hermanos de Causa and Obsesión taking on major issues such as discrimination, poverty, racial stereotypes, and racism in their raps. In the chorus of one of their most famous songs, "Lágrimas Negras," the rap duo Hermanos de Causa argued that racism existed and was evident throughout Cuban culture.

(Chorus)

Siento odio profundo por tu racismo
Ya no me confundo con tu ironía
y lloro sin que sepas que el llanto mío
Tiene lágrimas negras como mi vida

No me digas que no hay, porque yo sí lo he visto
No me digas que no existe, porque lo he vivido
No me digas que hay oculto un prejuicio racial
Que no condena y nos valora a todos por igual¹⁰²

¹⁰² Hermanos de Causa, *Lágrimas Negras*, Real 70 Productions, track on *Calle Real 70*, 2008, CD.

(Chorus)
I feel a profound hatred for your racism
I'm not confused by your irony
And I cry without you knowing that they are my tears
He has black tears like my life

Don't tell me it doesn't exist, because I have seen it
Don't tell me it doesn't exist, because I have lived it
Don't tell me that there is a hidden racial prejudice
That does not condemn and value everyone equally

In these lyrics, Hermanos de Causa worked to negate the argument that racism had been eliminated in Cuba. According to the artists, they did not believe the government line that racism had been resolved because they experienced, saw, and lived it every day. The use of the second-person throughout the lyrics suggests that the artists viewed this as a societal problem, a government problem. By categorizing the problem as “your racism,” they directed the blame outward – to non-Afro-Cuban communities and to officials in the government who maintained racism as nonexistent.

Other songs by Hermanos de Causa focused on similar issues of race, like their rap “Negro Cubano.” This song discussed several specific examples of how Afro-Cubans struggled from the residual effects of daily racism. The first stanza talked about hearing racist jokes. Other lines referred to the imperialistic tourist with his master card and passport. In addition, the song noted that the schools did not teach children about the history of Cuba’s Independent Party of Color. Another section addressed the criticism of dreadlocks. In recognition of the resilience of Afro-Cubans, the song ends by promoting Black self-respect:

Negro, entiende acere
Que el mundo es también tuyo
Tu color y tu pasa son parte de tu raza
Y tu raza y tu pasa tienen que ser to orgullo

Negro, tiene que ser tu orgullo¹⁰³

Black man, understand homey
That the world is also yours
Your color and your past are part of your race
And your race and your past have to be your pride
Black man, you have to be your pride

Despite the challenges Hermanos de Causa described earlier in the song, by the last verse they still encouraged Afro-Cubans to take pride in who they are. In contrast to the government's position, they argued that a person's skin color was part of their heritage – their *raza* – and should be embraced. Not only should they be proud to be Cuban, they should also celebrate being Afro-Cuban.

The idea of understanding one's self and one's African heritage emerged an important theme in Cuban Hip-Hop. Another Rap duo, Obsesión, explained in a 2011 interview, “es consecuente que tratásemos... la problemática racial porque es algo que nos afecta directamente y no podemos hacer un rap de manera coherente con nuestra realidad sin abordar este asunto.”¹⁰⁴ To Hip-Hop artists like Obsesión and Hermanos de Causa, rap required honesty about the issues of race that exist in the country, because many Afro-Cubans had to face the effects of discrimination and racism on a daily basis. Without addressing this issue, their rap would not have been as authentic. Obsesión went on to explain that their “preocupación-intención más fuerte radica en hacer que la población negra cubana, en primer lugar, adquiera o aumente su autoestima, orgullo;

¹⁰³ “Negro Cubano,” in “Poesía-Rap: Textos de Soandry del Río (Hermanos de Causa),” *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana* 53/54 (Summer/Fall 2009).

¹⁰⁴ Obsesión, interview by Sandra Álvarez Ramírez, *Other Modernities*, Università degli Studi di Milano, 2011. “It's important that we address the race problem because it is something that affects us directly and we cannot make rap in a manner consistent without reality without tackingling this issue.”

que sepa sobre su historia particular, sus próceres.”¹⁰⁵ Through the process of addressing everyday racism and discrimination in their music, not only did these rappers help Afro-Cubans recognize examples of prejudice directed towards them in their real life but they also helped unite Afro-Cubans through their common experiences. By combining this deeper understanding with messages of Afro-Cuban history and heritage, this form of rap empowered Afro-Cubans in a way that official declarations “ending racism” never could.

4.3 FEMALE VOICES IN AFRO-CUBAN HIP-HOP

Strong influences from machismo, in addition to issues of racial discrimination and prejudice, also characterized Cuban society. In a machista culture such as Cuba, traditionally masculine associated characteristics dictated social preferences. This cast men as more powerful than women, with men expected to work outside the home, and their wives required to care for the home. The combined economic struggles of the Special Period and machismo negatively affected women by obliging them to maintain the home while still supporting their family with outside income. Afro-Cuban women during the Special Period faced even more difficulty with regard to finding work. In instances where Afro-Cuban women were incapable of finding sufficient income, some would turn to *jineterismo* – mainly black market trading or prostitution. Although Afro-Cuban women

¹⁰⁵ Obsesión, interview by Sandra Álvarez Ramírez, *Other Modernities*, Università degli Studi di Milano, 2011. “Their biggest concern lies in making the Afro-Cuban population, firstly, gain or increase their self-esteem, pride; that they know their own story, their own heroes.”

participated infrequently in jineterismo, the combination of Cuba's misogynistic and racist society, exacerbated the racial stereotypes and hypersexualization that Afro-Cuban women experienced.

These unique challenges inspired female voices in the Cuban Hip-Hop community. Magia Lopez, one of the most famous female rappers in Cuba, and part of the duo Obsesión, wrote a song entitled "La Lllaman Puta" that highlighted many of the specific struggles of Afro-Cuban Women.

La llaman puta
Para todos, no es más que una mujerzuela
Disfrutando el hecho de ser bonita, loca.
Carne que invita, que excita, provoca...
Menudo oficio el que le toca

Apura sus caderas porque fuera espera a otro cliente.
Puede ser un borracho.
Puede ser un demente. Un tipo elegante.
O un asesino que vino Escondido es un cuerpo masculino.
¡Cuantas no van por ese camino, por eso la llaman puta!

La llaman puta. La sociedad no nos refuta. Prostituta.
Quien se revuelca por dinero, eso que no se discuta.
Todos los días la misma ruta
con el miedo recogido entre las piernas.
Cada hombre es una prueba de amor su familia.
Cada hombre la aleja más de los hombres.

De pronto estás hacienda fila, arañando algún empleo desesperada.
Pero la jugada está apretada.
Vas a una y mil veces y nada.¹⁰⁶

This song told the story of an Afro-Cuban woman, struggling with the challenge of providing for her family while at the same time facing judgement by her peers. It started off by describing the way society viewed her – as “a floozy” and “a slut.” As a person, she was nothing more than her

¹⁰⁶ Obsesión – Magia Lopez, *La Lllaman Puta*, Obsesión, track 5 on *Grandes Cortoletrajes*, 2011, CD. English lyrics located in the Appendix.

hypersexualized figure. The song then went on to describe her experience working as a prostitute. Never knowing who her client may be, she feared each encounter and how her job affected her marriage. These lyrics clearly portrayed prostitution as an unwanted but necessary employment for many Afro-Cuban women, which diverged from the racist and misogynist view that depicted Black women as hypersexualized and preferring of such occupations. Later in the song, the rapper described the other side of the life of a prostitute. During the day, she went out looking for employment but repeatedly got rejected, leaving her with no choice but to seek out an undesired economic opportunity. In this verse, the lyrics change to the second-person. In doing so, the rapper flipped the perspective of the narrative from an unknown woman to the listener, allowing a more personal connection between the audience and the song. Because of this, the audience could better understand the frustration of the last few lyrics. Despite the fact that “you” had no other options, because of “your” body, society perceived you as hypersexual, a “slut.”

Female rap music in the United States has also focused on similar themes of examining sexuality, stereotypes, and negative perceptions of Black women from a feminine perspective. However, the societal conditions that Black women in the United States experience have not perfectly mirrored the challenges of Afro-Cuban women. While Black women in the United States struggled with hypersexualization, body image, and hair positivity, Cuban women have not faced these issues in the exact same way. Additionally, African American women encountered similar economic challenges, particularly single mothers attempting to care for their children. However, many of their challenges stemmed from low access to education, weak minimum wage laws, and other economic issues associated with capitalism.

The struggles of Afro-Cuban women derived from a different economic environment. As a socialist society, the Cuban government provided everyone with state determined wages meant

to maintain relative economic equality among its citizens despite varying levels of education. Unfortunately, due to the Special Period economic crisis, many Cubans had to supplement their wealth with outside income. This led to an economic disparity that disproportionately affected Afro-Cubans, particularly Afro-Cuban women. Because these women had limited access to alternate forms of outside income such as tips, remittances, and personal businesses, they more frequently experienced economic hardship.

Like Afro-Cuban men who used Hip-Hop as an agent of expressing discontent with Cuban society, Afro-Cuban women also embraced the medium to address their own unique challenges. Living with the double jeopardy of being both female and Black in a racist and machista society, Afro-Cuban women suffered from multiple types of discrimination due to rampant negative stereotypes about them. Similar to the problems addressed by African American female rappers, their Cuban counterparts also highlighted the experience of living in a society with similar prejudices against them. As examined through a distinctly Cuban lens, artists such as Magia Lopez of Obsesión called out negative stereotypes against Black women that developed as a result of the Special Period economic crisis. Like *Hermanos de Causa*'s efforts to promote Afro-Cuban pride, Magia Lopez also encouraged a renewed appreciation for women, particularly Afro-Cuban women, through her work. During an interview at an event hosted by University of California – Los Angeles, Magia explained that the intent of her music was to “bring to light and appreciate the daily work of women, which [has been] looked down on around the world,” stating “the most important message in [their] music [was] that of appreciation for black female bodies.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Magia Lopez, moderated by Aisha Finch, *Conversation on Hip-Hop and Race in Cuba*, UCLA Latin American Institute, April 21, 2017.

4.4 CONCLUSION

The emergence of Hip-Hop as a popular form of music within the Afro-Cuban community in the 1980s and 1990s provided a significant voice of resistance against the government and the economic crisis that disproportionately impacted Black Cubans. As their communities in Havana deteriorated in the shadow of a burgeoning tourist sector, a “dual city” developed, and supplied the urban space for Hip-Hop music to flourish. Inspiration from African American rappers in the United States provided the catalyst to help create this new culture within the divided city landscape. As Cuban Hip-Hop grew in popularity, however, it began to differentiate itself from its roots in American music. Artists like Papá Humberitco tackled themes such as the dual city and poverty. Other groups like Obsesión and Hermanos de Causa examined issues pertinent to many Afro-Cubans, including racism, stereotypes, and inequality. Later on, the Hip-Hop community became more inclusive, leaning on the voices of Afro-Cuban women to express the dual-struggle of being both Black and female. Throughout this process, Cuban Hip-Hop emerged as a distinct form of cultural production. Inspired by U.S. rappers, Cuba’s version drew on African-derived music like rumba and the expression of discontent over contemporary Cuban society.

Unlike with its political and economic impact, the United States’ musical influence on Cuban society stemmed predominantly from the Black Hip-Hop subculture of New York City. Where the trade embargo hindered Cuba’s economic development and consequently created a crisis of extreme poverty and inequality within the Afro-Cuban community, the spread of Hip-Hop music to the island actually benefitted the same community by introducing an agent of free expression. Eventually tolerated by the Cuban government, this dissemination of ideas had more to do with the larger powers of globalization and cultural connection within the diaspora than it did with actual interference by the U.S. government. Furthermore, Cuban Hip-Hop diverged from

its roots in American Hip-Hop to develop into its own unique musical style worthy of examination as a distinct Cuban cultural entity.

5.0 CONCLUSION

On a trip to Cuba in the summer of 2016, I was surprised by the contradicting attitudes towards the United States I discovered across the island. At the Museo de la Revolución in the center of Havana, I recognized life-sized caricatures of Presidents Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and George W. Bush depicting them as ineffective, illiterate villains that helped strengthen and consolidate the Cuban Revolution. However, when I attended an Olympic qualification match between the Cuban and U.S. Men's Volleyball teams at the Ciudad Deportiva across the city, I saw Cuban fans in the audience cheering on both teams. Positive or negative, the United States remains a significant figure in both Cuban history and contemporary culture.

Although it has been a century since U.S. occupiers attempted to impose Jim Crow laws on their neighbor across the gulf, the United States still plays a key role in the Cuban racial debate.¹⁰⁸ Even with a well-maintained trade embargo between the two countries, the United States also continues to have an economic, political, and cultural influence on Cuban citizens and their government. After the 1989 collapse of the USSR, Cuba's main trading partner following the implementation of the trade embargo, Cuba experienced a major economic crisis characterized by food shortages, mass emigration, and high unemployment. In response, the Cuban government enacted several public policies such as developing the tourist sector, encouraging private businesses, and permitting remittances, that created a racialized economy which favored white Cubans over Afro-Cubans. For the first time since the Revolution, economic inequality by race

¹⁰⁸ Gerald Horne. *Race to Revolution: The United States and Cuba During Slavery and Jim Crow* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2014), 20.

rose. Negative racial stereotypes and discrimination also reemerged despite decades of effort by the Cuban government to suppress public discourse on the topic by comparing Cuba's race relations to racial tensions in the United States. In this political and economic environment, Cuban Hip-Hop emerged, also inspired by African American rap culture, as a vehicle for Afro-Cuban repudiation of government policies and micro-level racial discrimination.

Despite the cultural benefits resulting from the introduction of U.S. Hip-Hop music to the island, the United States has had a detrimental effect on racial equality in Cuba. Hip-Hop's rise to popularity within the Afro-Cuban community can be better explained by its roots in traditional African forms of music and its cultural connection between people of African descent throughout the diaspora, with the U.S. government's influence coming strictly from its initial decision to emit rap music from Miami radio stations.¹⁰⁹ On the other hand, the poor socioeconomic and political conditions faced by Afro-Cubans during the Special Period can be more easily traced to U.S.-Cuban international relations. The capitalistic economic policies used by the Cuban government to account for a failing economy in the 1990s resulted in the reemergence of racial inequality. Additionally, Castro's continued Anti-American propaganda highlighting poor race relations in the United States discouraged the open discussion of racial discrimination by Afro-Cubans by invoking fears of being labeled as anti-nation.

One could hypothesize that without the loss of trade with the United States, combined with the collapse of the Soviet Union, racialized economic inequality would not have developed to the same extent at the end of the twentieth century. Furthermore, without the Cuban government's desire to portray the United States in a negative light by any means necessary, debate on race

¹⁰⁹ Arlene B Tickner, "Aquí en el Ghetto: Hip-Hop in Colombia, Cuba, and Mexico," *Latin American Politics and Society*, 50, no. 3 (2008): 121-146.

relations may have been less taboo, allowing Afro-Cubans to more openly address issues of racial discrimination stereotypes in their daily lives. But this was not the case as U.S.-Cuban international politics moved into the twenty first century. Despite the restoration of diplomatic relations between the two countries in 2015, the trade embargo remains mostly intact, travel restrictions persist, and politicians continue to bash the opposing country for cheap political points.

However, on the morning of April 19, 2018, Miguel Díaz-Canel was inaugurated as the new president of Cuba, marking the first time in over half a century that a Castro did not hold the position.¹¹⁰ What could this mean for the future of race relations in the country? Unlike his predecessors, Díaz-Canel did not live through the Revolution. With this in mind, Díaz-Canel may struggle achieving the same level of support and legitimacy from Cuban citizens, particularly Afro-Cubans, who have gained confidence criticizing the government and the status of race relations over the past two decades. Still, Raúl Castro selected Díaz-Canel specifically to fill his position, meaning that he will likely continue similar, if not identical, economic and social policies, such as those established by Fidel Castro, during the Special Period which led to a racially re-stratified Cuban society. It has already been noted that Díaz-Canel's international politics remain strongly anti-American due to a leaked video of him addressing party officials arguing that Cuba had no obligation to meet the expectations of the return to diplomatic relations organized by President Obama.¹¹¹

On the other hand, Díaz-Canel has demonstrated a willingness to improve technology and internet access across the island.¹¹² A policy such as this could signify a major shift in Cuban

¹¹⁰ Patrick Oppman and Alanne Orjoux, "Miguel Díaz-Canel Named Cuba's New President." *CNN* (Atlanta, GA), April 20, 2018.

¹¹¹ Azam Ahmed and Frances Robles, "Who is Miguel Díaz-Canel, Cuba's New President?" *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), April 19, 2018.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

culture. With instant information on other countries such as the United States at their fingertips, particularly U.S. television shows, movies, music, and books, Afro-Cubans would have access to African American educational and cultural materials. American Hip-Hop has already had a significant impact on the Afro-Cuban community, inspiring a musical outlet that has allowed them to voice their discontent towards the socioeconomic conditions of the Special Period. The opening of a more direct internet connection between artists in both countries could promote international collaborations and the further development of Afro-Cuban Hip-Hop as a leading force in Cuban cultural production.

However, many of these changes may require several more years to come to fruition. Although Díaz-Canel's inauguration took place in April 2018, the role of President in Cuba remains a highly ceremonial one. As of July 2018, Raúl Castro remains leader of the Communist Party in Cuba with no intention of turning the position over to Díaz-Canel until 2021.¹¹³ Whatever happens, as long as the economic embargo and the political animus connecting the two countries remain in place, the United States will continue to play a significant role in contemporary Cuban culture, particularly in the realm of race relations. The best hope is that the Afro-Cuban community further embraces freedom of expression and international movements striving for social justice and racial equality, providing them with the confidence and ability to speak out against socioeconomic and political oppression.

¹¹³ Azam Ahmed and Frances Robles, "Who is Miguel Díaz-Canel, Cuba's New President?" *The New York Times* (New York City, NY), April 19, 2018.

APPENDIX A

La Llamam Puta (They Call her “Slut) – Magia Lopez
Translated Lyrics in English

They call her slut
For them, she’s nothing more than a floozy
Making the most of being pretty and crazy
Flesh that invites, excites, provokes...
Often that’s the job you get!

She hurries her hips because another client waits outside.
He can be a drunk.
He can be demented, or an elegant man,
Or a killer that’s disguised in a masculine body.
Countless women go down that path.

They call her slut. Society doesn’t deny it. Prostitute.
Who wallows for money, we don’t talk about that.
Every day the same route.
With fear collected between her legs.
Each man is a test of love for her family.
Each man brings her further from men.

Suddenly you’re waiting for a job, clawing desperate.
But the game is tight.
You go a thousand one times, and nothing.
You fall asleep to the sound of doors slamming in your face.
Society throws the line and you take the bait, obligated.
Obligated to do what you don’t want.
You escape the thought, but misery has an ugly face though you won’t believe.
So then, whatever comes.
You get as dolled up as you can.
You go out clanking your heels.
You review mentally whether there are other options, but no.
Your body assumes.
They call you slut.

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