



**Cuban *Raperas*:
A Feminist Revolution within the Revolution**

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by

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Cuban *Raperas*: A Feminist Revolution within the Revolution¹

“This phenomenon of women’s participation in the revolution was a revolution within a revolution”

Fidel Castro, 9 December 1966

“Afro-Cuban youth are building a movement around hip-hop—a revolution within the revolution.”

Margot Olavarria, 2002

On December 9, 1966 at the closing of the Fifth National Plenary of the *Federación de Mujeres Cubanas* (The Federation of Cuban Women, or the FMC) Fidel Castro declared women’s participation in the Cuban revolution as “a revolution within a revolution” (Castro 1975:48). This famous speech alluded to their ongoing sacrifice and military support for the revolutionary cause and their efforts in building national revolutionary sentiment. Castro stated:

For events now are demonstrating the possibilities of women and the role that women can play in a revolutionary process in which society is liberating itself above all, from exploitation and from prejudices. [...] It seems to us that women must still fight and exert great efforts to attain the place that they should really hold in society. (1975:5)

When Fidel Castro articulated his revolutionary goals for Cuba in 1959 he announced his intent to abolish sexism, racism and classism. In 1960 he founded the *Federación de Mujeres Cubanas* to promote education and labour equality between the sexes. Headed by Vilma Espín, a chemical engineer and then wife of Raul Castro, the FMC has achieved the most progressive education, labour,

¹ The author wishes to acknowledge Dr. Louise Wrazen for her comments and suggestions.

family and health care rights for women in all of the Americas, including access to free abortion, affordable daycare and the right to divorce (Smith and Padula 1996). Despite the progressive strides of Cuban women’s rights during the 1960s and 1970s, patriarchy and macho² attitudes still reside in the social fabric of Cuban life in job roles, dress, marriage, gender stereotypes, and in the cultural arts (Smith and Padula 1996; Stoner 2000; Guillard Limonta 2002; Fernandes 2003; Fleites-Lear 2005). While this is slowly changing, these sexist beliefs remain especially common in the music industry (Fernandes 2003; Thomas 2005).

This paper will explore how Cuban *raperas*, or female rappers, are creatively pointing out the prevalence of unjust and sexist macho attitudes in current Cuban society. It will also consider their role in the revolutionary process of “liberating [Cuban women] from exploitation and from prejudices” (Castro 1975:5). Armed with intelligent, revolutionary lyrics, Havana *raperas* Telmary (a lighter-skinned heterosexual rapper), Magia MC (an Afro-Cuban rapper in mixed-sex trio *Obsesión*), and Las Krudas (an openly lesbian Afro-centric trio), are changing gender stereotypes and sexist perceptions of women. By challenging their male colleagues, and Cuban society at large, in a dialogue regarding the contradictory

² Machismo is defined as a belief system purporting “that men are superior to women and that women should be dominated socially, economically, physically, and sexually” (Fleites-Lear 2000:51n3) that “owes much to Spanish colonial ideas about women who were classified in legal codes as ‘imbeciles by nature,’ as well as the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church promoting virginity and sacrifice” (Fisher 1993:3).

rhetoric surrounding these provocative issues, Las Krudas, Magia MC, Telmary (and countless other *raperas*) are also demonstrating that their musical ability has little to do with their appearance, biological sex, or sexual orientation (Fernandes 2006). As this paper will illustrate, Cuba's hip hop movement has provided women, mainly of Afro-Cuban heritage, with a new forum in which to present their talent and feminist messages, as well as to upset the narrow-minded generalization that all independent women musicians (or *raperas* in this case) are lesbians.

After a brief overview of background issues and previous research, I will introduce Telmary and Las Krudas and provide an overview of the *rap cubano* movement before introducing *rapera*-feminist, Magia MC. I will then illustrate, through an analysis of the lyrics, performance images and vocal timbre, how these *raperas* are upsetting traditional gender roles in the music industry.

BACKGROUND

Rap cubano, or the Cuban hip hop movement, is also viewed as 'a revolution within a revolution.' Described as constructively critiquing "the deficiencies that exist in society, educating youth and opening spaces to improve the social order" (Olavarria 2002), *rap cubano* artists receive governmental support when they "focus on an integration of politically committed lyrics" around local issues of race and social equality as fundamental tenets of the revolution (Fernandes 2003:582). By utilizing rap music as a form of socio-political commentary on women's issues, Cuban *raperas* are

demanding women's full equality in the Cuban rap industry and society. In this sense, these women are carrying forward the triumphs of previous Cuban women and Cuban rappers into a new feminist 'revolution within the revolution' within the confines of Cuba's patriarchal state and music industry.

In her introduction to *Women, Music, and Culture*, Ellen Koskoff quotes Elizabeth Wood, who writes: "for musical success, however socially defined 'women must frequently serve the linked economic and erotic interests of a dominant culture'" (quoted in Koskoff 1989:6). This leads Koskoff to conclude that: "Cultural beliefs in women's inherent sexuality may motivate the separation of or restriction imposed upon women's musical activities" (1989:8-9). This remains especially true in Cuba. Susan Thomas discovered in her 2002 research into alternative Cuban *trovadoras* (female singer-songwriters) that: "The image of the *trovadora*, then, as painted by the male musicians, was that of a socially marginal and musically insignificant group of women, trapped by their own irrelevance on the island" (2005:128). Thomas' research sheds light on the pervasive patriarchal macho attitude rampant in the Cuban music scene today. Her conclusions, based on fieldwork and interviews with male and female Cuban singer-songwriters, found that many Cuban male singer-songwriters dismiss their female colleagues as a "lesbian mafia," rarely acknowledging them as their musical colleagues. Describing a woman as a lesbian in Cuba is problematic due to the rampant homophobia inherited from Stalin's socialism (Joffe 2005).

Homosexuality was viewed in Cuba, until the late 1990s, as a product of bourgeois decadence (similar to feminism) and a contradiction of Che Guevara's Revolutionary *Hombre Nuevo* ("New Man") who is tough, strong, nationalistic and heterosexual (Lumsden 1996). By dismissing successful women musicians in derogatory terms as lesbians or feminists, these male musicians fail to recognize the *trovadoras*' musical talent or ability, focusing instead on these women's biological sex and sexual orientation, thereby reaffirming patriarchal hegemony. Thomas' findings echo my personal communications with female and male Cuban hip hop artists, producers, and female music students in Cuba (2007), as well as those voiced in previous interviews with other scholars which mention existing macho attitudes in the musical arena (Olavarria 2002; West-Durán 2000; Fernandes 2003a, 2006; Perry 2004; Joffe 2005). While it is "becoming cooler for [male] bands to have a female musician, especially if she is good-looking or talented" (Fernandez interview 2007) conditions and preconceived feminine gender stereotypes still remain.

The literature on Cuban rap is growing. Numerous North American, British and Cuban scholars, journalists and directors have written articles and produced documentaries on *rap cubano*, yet only a few authors have addressed sexism and female equality with detail and thoroughness. The most significant research on Cuban *raperas* to date is by Margaux Joffe (2004, 2005), Sujatha Fernandes (2003, 2005, 2006) and Tanya Saunders (2007). Joffe, an undergraduate student in English literature at Duke University, discusses sexism and women

in *rap cubano* and the sexual politics explicit in Magia MC, Las Krudas and Oye Habana's lyrics. Fernandes' short but astute section on women in *rap cubano* in *Cuba Represent!* (2006:109-117), examines the contradictions between *raperas* socialist cry for collective equality between the sexes and the overarching patriarchy in the Cuban hip hop scene. She also provides an up-to-date feminist analysis of recent women's movements, as well as hip-hop culture, in Cuba (2003b), Venezuela and Brazil (2006).

Norma Guillard Limonta, a Cuban sociologist and communications specialist, also writes extensively on Las Krudas. In her article, "Gender, Identity, Sexuality, and Social Communication in Hip-Hop" in Cuba's hip hop magazine, *Movimiento* (2005), she offers a sociological-psychological analysis of the positive impact Las Krudas have had in extolling a proud black female identity through their atypical performance image. Limonta uses Las Krudas' brave rap lyrics to highlight the powerful medium rap music provides for these Afro-Cuban women, and the rap community at large, in order to reclaim and assert their marginalized identity. She also provides a brief but useful thematic synopsis of Las Krudas' independent demo CD, *Cubensi*³. Lastly, Marc Perry, Tanya Saunders and Cleome Bova (2006) discuss Las Krudas' bold performance style, openly lesbian sexual orientation and controversial feminist rap lyrics. In his dissertation on the Afro-Cuban hip hop movement titled, *Los Raperos: Rap, Race and Social Transformation in Contemporary Cuba*

³ An invaluable resource, since obtaining a copy of Las Krudas' album was very difficult while they were living in Havana.

(2004), Perry provides the most extensive written quotes from interviews with Las Krudas outside of documentary footage, including Las Krudas' description of their rap as "superground" versus "underground," as a means to "underscore the overt political nature of their feminist-directed intervention within the male-dominant culture of Cuban hip hop; an intervention aimed at 'opening up' the movement's 'mentality and consciousness'" (2004:274). Further, Las Krudas challenge the patriarchal gender stereotype of women in their call for solidarity and respect between men and women. Similar points are mentioned in the university honours thesis by Cleome Bova (2006) that discusses her field research on the movement as a whole and her performance experience in Cuba with Las Krudas. Bova also includes a short section on women in *rap cubano*.

Other prominent scholars worth mentioning in passing include Deborah Pacini-Hernandez and Reebee Garofalo (1999-2000), Margot Olavarria (2002) and Alan West Durán (2004), who have written on the *rap cubano* movement as well, referencing the first all-female Cuban rap group, Instinto, in their discussions. Annelise Wunderlich (2002), Geoff Baker (2003, 2006) and Alberto Gonzalez (2006) have also written extensively on *rap cubano* but tend to focus exclusively on male participants. Finally, Lois M. Smith and Alfred Padula (1996), Lynn K. Stoner (2000), Marisela Fleites-Lear (2000) and Hilbourne Watson (2003) have each undertaken tremendous research and provided excellent discussion about the double standard expected of Cuban women post-1959 as well as the ongoing patriarchy and macho attitude of the

Cuban state.

LAS RAPERAS: TELMARY AND LAS KRUDAS

One of Cuba's successful *raperas* is Telmary Díaz, who has just released her solo album, *A Diario* (see Appendix) on BISMUSIC label as an alternative artist. She began her music career rapping with controversial group Free Hole Negro (a pun on *frijol negro*, or "black bean") in the 1990s., Telmary performed at the annual Alamar Rap Festival with this male rap collective, as well as at the Havana Black August rap festival (1998) alongside African-American hip hop group, The Roots. She switched to an alternative fusion style in early 2000 and is currently a member of *Interactivo*, a new Cuban alternative music collective. Her lyrics are poetic and less overtly political than those of Magia MC or Las Krudas, yet she is recognized in the *rap cubano* movement for her tremendous freestyle rap ability. She is presently living in Toronto, Canada.

Las Krudas, whose name translates into "the raw ones, referring to their raw lyrics, appearance and adherence to vegetarianism" (Perry 2004:374), began rapping in 1999 after establishing themselves with a colorful stilt-walking street performer troupe in Old Havana's tourist district. This trio is made up of sisters Odaymara Cuesta (a.k.a. Pasa Kruda) and Wanda Cuesta (a.k.a. Guenga Kruda) and Olivia Prendes (a.k.a. Pelusa MC), who is Odaymara's girlfriend. Las Krudas promote feminine solidarity through their female rapper collective, *Omega Kilay*; and propagate Luce Irigaray's philosophy that masculine and feminine discourse forms

social consciousness, who writes:⁴

By asserting a black lesbian feminist subjectivity within the movement's otherwise masculinist heteronormativity, Las Krudas' intervention resonates in many ways with those articulated by the U.S. black lesbian feminist Combahee River Collective of the 1970s and 80s which declares: 'Although we are feminists and Lesbians [sic.], we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and ... struggle with Black men about sexism.'" (quoted in Perry 2004:263)

As Las Krudas' demo CD, *Cubensi's* opening song "Vamo' a vencer la dificultad" ("We are going to overcome the difficulty") declares: "Feminine sex, always relegated/But the Krudas have broken the mold/We are going to overcome the difficulty" (trans. Joffe 2005:4). In this song, the trio announces their fight for women's equality in society at large. These lyrics can also be seen to reference Las Krudas' sexual orientation – something that is rare for most Cuban women to announce so publicly. Overall, these *raperas'* lyrics promote freedom and confidence to be true to one's female identity. The subject of numerous documentaries and dissertations, Pasa and Olivia finally reunited in 2006 with Wanda in the United States, where they are currently living.

HISTORY OF RAP CUBANO

Rap music first arrived in Cuba in the 1980s through radio airwaves from

⁴ Luce Irigaray, a French philosopher, presents rather complex and controversial ideas, yet this summarized point is outlined on the main page of www.krudas.org. Marisela Fleites-Lear also brings up a similar argument in her chapter "Women, family, and the Cuban revolution" (2000:46-7).

nearby Miami radio stations WEDR 99 Jams and WHQT Hot 105 into Alamar, a soviet-era housing project a half-hour drive east of Havana. Romanticized by many scholars as the South Bronx of Havana due to its marginal location and large Afro-Cuban population, Alamar is considered the birthplace of *rap cubano* (Garofalo and Hernandez Pacini 1999; Hoch 1999; Perry 2003; West-Durán 2004; Baker 2005, 2006).

Hip hop culture appealed to young Afro-Cubans as an African-American music distinctly different from salsa, *timba*, and rock music. Intrigued by the funky breakdancing style, rhythmical lyrics and fresh musical sounds reminiscent of Afro-Cuban musical genres, *rumba* and *son* (Gonzalez 2006), young Afro-Cubans quickly embraced the hip hop movement, as seen in early North American hip hop movies, *Breakin'* and *Beat Street*. Ironically, these Cubans were initially unaware of the strong Puerto Rican influence in the early hip hop movement, most notably in the conga rhythm tracks and acrobatic breakdance style. Despite Cuba's predominantly negative view of U.S. culture, Afro-Cubans understood hip-hop music to be the African-American's creative voice of protest against racism, marginalization and police brutality. Unfortunately, these were also issues that Afro-Cuban youth identified with in the 1990s during Cuba's economic crisis, known as the Special Period.

The Special Period lasted from 29 August 1990 to the end of 1998, although ramifications of this time are still felt today in Cuba (Fernandes 2003a, 2006; Perry 2004; Joffe 2005; Gonzalez 2006). After the dissolution of the former U.S.S.R and the Eastern Bloc

in 1989, Cuba lost 85 percent of its foreign trade-cum-aid and faced severe economic crises marked by electrical, oil and food shortages (mainly meat & dairy), factory closings, and a loss of jobs forcing Cubans to live at a much lower overall standard of living than they did before 1990. Financial strain was worsened by the U.S. embargo being codified into law in 1992, which forced Castro to adopt a U.S.-dollar-based economy in 1993 and foster a tourist industry to support the country. A mixed-dollar and peso economy made access to dollars critical. Cubans without family living abroad (and who did not benefit from U.S.-dollar remittances) turned to *jineterismo*, literally “horse-jockeying,” as a form of hustling tourists for dollars. Seen in its most crude form, *jineterismo* translates into sex tourism and prostitution, and forms the subject of numerous Cuban rap songs. Since the majority of exiled Cubans are lighter-skinned, Afro-Cuban women were believed to resort to prostitution more than lighter-skinned Cubans to keep their family afloat.

The first Cubans began rapping around 1988, and male groups formed as early as 1991. The first all-female rap trio, Instinto, entered the scene in 1993. Due to severe shortages that made turntablism impossible, Afro-Cubans invented ways to beat-box and rap over recorded U.S. hip hop samples recorded onto cassette tapes (Pacini Hernandez and Garofalo 1999:27). In order to increase improvisation time for freestyle rapping, rappers graduated to Afro-Cuban percussion grooves. With time, the rap movement grew and in 1995 Rodolfo Renzoli obtained permission from *Asociación Hermanos Saiz* (AHS) to mount the first Alamar Rap Festival.

Identified by nationalist lyrical themes, Afro-Cuban rhythms and percussion instruments (such as the *tambor*, *bátá*, *catá*, and *cajón*), and the implementation of U.S. hip hop terms like “aight,” “represent,” and “nigga,” *rap cubano* was officially established as a Cuban genre in 1996 when *Amenaza*, a rap group now known internationally as the *Orishas*, incorporated Afro-Cuban *bátá* drums in their performance at the Alamar Rap Festival. *Rap cubano* garnered international and state support and, in 1999 Minister of Culture Abel Prieto officially nationalized *rap cubano* along with rock music, declaring them to be authentic expressions of *cubanidad* (Cuban national identity). Prieto stated, during a national television broadcast, “We have to support our Cuban rappers because [...] they are saying powerful things with this art.” (Hoch 1999; Olavarria 2002). Ariel Fernandez, who wrote the *Hip Hop Manifesto* (1998) explaining how hip hop can serve revolutionary goals, also helped rap to be accepted by government officials and avoid the persecution and censorship that afflicted *Nueva Trova* in the 1960s and rock music a decade earlier⁵. Fernandez was appointed Director of the Alamar Rap Festival and the AHS in 2000 to manage numerous hip hop groups. Fidel Castro proclaimed Cuban rap music to be at the vanguard of the Revolution and by 2002 the *Agencia Cubana de Rap* (Cuban Rap Agency or

⁵ Cuba’s *Nueva Trova* movement of the 1960s is an offshoot of Latin America’s *nueva canción* genre, a nationalist response to imperial rock and roll incorporating indigenous instruments and political lyrics. It was nationalized in Cuba after the artists suffered much censorship and persecution for supporting “capitalist” music. For a more explicit history on the rise and nationalization of *Nueva Trova* see Robin Moore *Music and Revolution* (2006).

the ACR) formed, complete with a state-sponsored recording studio, promotion house and producer of hip-hop magazine, *Movimiento*. To date, the ACR represents nine national Cuban rap groups. Only one rapper in one of these groups is female.

WOMEN IN RAP CUBANO

When Instinto won second prize at Alamar's second annual rap festival in 1996, their feminist lyrics and energetically charged performance secured them an international recording contract in Spain, thereby inspiring other all-female rap groups such as Ambar, Atración, and Explosión Femenina (known today as Oye Habana). Instinto's provocative dress opposes most other Cuban *raperas*, who dress in loose-fitting African-style clothing with head wraps, similar to early African-American female rap artists' androgynous clothing (see Appendix). Like their male counterparts, *raperas* incorporate Afro-Cuban percussion, Santería invocations, and rapid-fire rhymes. Instinto, like many Cuban *raperas*, engage in rap battles on women's issues, often triumphing over their male colleagues.

After attending a press conference in Havana (May 2004) that featured a panel of ten male hip-hop producers, Margaux Joffe concluded "that most, if not all of the musical production in Havana is controlled by men" (2005:22). Pablo Herrera, a Cuban hip hop producer now living in Scotland, confirmed Joffe's statement in an interview with me, declaring that "Cuban hip hop is a male-oriented field," and out of the 200 rap groups on the island today, 50 are female (Herrera interview 2007).

Sujatha Fernandes identifies that "part of the problem facing women rappers is that they are part of a broader movement of hip hop that is closely tied to state institutions, in which men still make most of the decisions" (2006:117). Another one of these state institutions is the Federation of Cuban Women that endorses the very patriarchal and homophobic strategy of the Cuban state and Communist Party of Cuba. Many of the female leaders "eschew gender [and feminism] as a bourgeois preoccupation" and denied rank to lesbians until the late 1990s (Watson 2003:77-8). Yet a large number of Cuban women see the FMC as simply an extension of the patriarchal state (Kaufman Purcell in Pescatello 1974:262), and feel the organization is out of touch with their growing concerns, including media portrayal of women and rising prostitution. Unfortunately, organizing an alternative feminist movement is prohibited, as it opposes socialist collectivism (Fernandes 2005). With a lack of freedom in which to discuss issues of sexism and machismo, rap music has come to fill that void in Cuba (Fernandes 2006:116). *Raperas* are therefore using the Cuban hip hop movement as a community platform to voice women's issues. Their fight, however, has not been easy.

Magia MC, the sole *raperas* in the *Agencia Cubana de Rap*, won first place in the 1998 rap festival as part of rap group, *Obsesión*. Although she forms this duo with her husband, Alexei Rodriguez (a.k.a. El Tipo Este), Magia is "relentless in speaking up for women's equality in the Cuban rap recording industry" (Perry 2004:276). She is also responsible for organizing the first all-female rap and art showcases in Havana

during 2002 and 2003, thereby inspiring the Communist Youth League to include an all-female portion of the rap festival named “*Probada Presencia*,” (Proven Presence) on December 17, 2003. Magia regards this special section of the Alamar Rap Festival devoted to *raperas* as a “patronizing act, and a product of machismo.” She states in an interview with Joffe that, “women should not be pitied or put on pedestal in the hip-hop movement and in society as a whole. [I don’t want] female rappers to be viewed solely as a special section of a male festival” (2005:22). Despite her hard work over the years “as one of the most active and accomplished MCs, regardless of gender, Magia has garnered considerable respect from practically all in the movement. While she has increasingly asserted [...] her own voice as a woman over the years, [Magia...] continues to be strongly identified within the *rap cubano* movement with her husband Alexei” (Perry 2004:260). Being identified as an extension of her husband unfortunately recalls the macho and patriarchal ideology Magia is attempting to dissolve by organizing all-women showcases and independently releasing solo albums with rap lyrics addressing machismo and sexism (see Fernandes 2006).

RAPERAS’ BATTLE AGAINST MACHISMO

Raul Landau describes Cuban machismo as *cajones* (“balls” or “testicles”), being “a trademark of Cuba’s special brand of machismo, in which the rooster crows loudly of his prowess. In Cuba it means ‘tough, brave and virile; ... the Latin American variant of patriarchal sexism’” (quoted in Watson 2005:80). Although it can be argued that women encourage

sexist behaviour in the manner that they rear their sons, it should also be pointed out that Cuba’s Family Code of 1976, which dictates a balanced split of domestic duties and responsibilities between both male and female partners, including child-rearing is not a current reality. It has been cited that many men will expound upon the importance of equality among the sexes at work, yet still expect dinner on the table when they return home at six o’clock (Fleites-Lear 2000:39).

This patriarchal establishment has forced Magia and other *raperas*, like Las Krudas, to release albums independently, identify as feminists, and write rap lyrics that denounce machismo. Magia and Las Krudas also defend *jineteras* (prostitutes) as victims of economic circumstance instead of acting as materialistic whores. The appearance of a rap song such as “*Malo*” (“Bad”) by male rap group, Primera Base, which criticizes domestic violence toward women, macho attitudes still remain prevalent among male *raperos* in the *rap cubano* movement. This ongoing attitude prompted a forum addressing machismo in rap lyrics to be held on International Woman’s Day in 2003. Telmary stated in an interview with me, “all the girls hate machismo and everyone is fighting for that. Now women in the hip hop movement are all talking about that -- this topic is popular” (interview 2007). And in her song *Que Equivoca’o* (“How Wrong You Are”), Telmary challenges the female stereotype singing, “Is that what you want? One that washes, you prefer one who waits, who cooks, that mops? Is that the women?” Similar sentiments are heard in Las Krudas’ song, *Madre Natura* (“Mother Nature”), where Olivia raps, “If I no longer give

birth, If I no longer smile, If I no longer cook, I'm still a woman. You'll learn with my hip hop it got better. It used to be worse" (*Krudas* 2003). Here Olivia directly references how rap music has helped Las Krudas spread their feminist message while she questions gender roles across Cuba.

Las Krudas also challenge *raperos* for excluding women in Cuba's hip hop movement, singing, "I have talent and I ask how long will we be the minority on stage?" (Fernandes 2006:115). In their song "*Eres Bella*" ("You are Beautiful"), Krudas empower women, reminding them to accept their natural African-descended appearances as beautiful. They compare machismo to racism as a form of slavery (Joffe 2005:4) and criticize the fake beauty women buy into as a means to attract men as a perpetuation of patriarchal colonialism:

Fake laughs and implants are
A continuation of the colonialist tale.
Don't buy it.
Move away from that false point of
view;
You are talented.

Wicked and macho society that
corrupts-
Is there no racism?
And, shit,
What about us? Still on the same step -
There is no real revolution without
women
It is not laziness. (*Krudas* 2002 trans.
Perry 2004:374)

In the second stanza, Las Krudas pose a rhetorical question ("Is there no racism?") to highlight existing racism in Cuba today. They also question the progressive rights of women in Cuba singing: "What about us? Still on the same step." The trio then recalls Castro's statement, "There is no real revolution

with out women" and add, "It is not laziness," a comment suggesting that sexist attitudes are not just a product of laziness, but a discriminatory belief pattern. In an interview with Marc Perry, Pasa states:

The movement greatly lacks female representation. The community is made up of both black women and black men. We therefore have to represent black women. So we're supporting the movement, particularly the women because there are different realities. Some [in the movement] may think all is the same, no. There are different realities, different truths, different experiences that women have due to their sex, their gender. (Perry 2004:263)

One such difference is menstruation. Las Krudas address this taboo women's issue in their rap titled "*120 horas rojas*" ("120 Red Hours") because "female bodily functions are the reason why women are perceived as physically and intellectually weaker than men" (Fernandes 2006:115). In this forceful song Olivia raps, "What you don't want to listen? Thanks to this red source you could come to know this world" (*ibid.*).

Unlike Las Krudas, Telmary has achieved greater commercial success with Cuban-Spanish label BISMUSIC since leaving the male-dominated Cuban rap industry. When I asked a prominent male figure in Cuban hip hop why this was so⁶, he noted that Telmary is helping to create a new fusion sound for Cuba with Roberto Carcasses, a male Cuban musician and producer. He then announced that Telmary is a lesbian. I challenged his comment based on my

⁶ I privately wondered if it is because she is heterosexual-like Magia—or lighter-skinned and more conservative in her appearance and performance style than Las Krudas).

research, mentioning that Telmary had just moved in with her boyfriend. He responded, “Oh, I guess I am telling you things that you don’t know yet! Well, she has probably just not come out yet” (Anonymous interview 2007).

This informant’s comments recall Thomas’ findings of Cuban *trovadoras* being dismissed by male informants as a “lesbian mafia” (2006:127). Although some *trovadoras* are gay, the belief that capable female musicians are lesbians perpetuates macho and patriarchal attitudes and recall Elizabeth Wood’s statement that women in music must cater to “linked economic and erotic interests” of a dominant, patriarchal culture (quoted in Koskoff 1989:6). In her essay on gender relations in the Caribbean, Hilbourne Watson attempts to explain this patriarchal, macho phenomenon as follows:

In Cuban sexuality, lesbianism is ... linked with two myths found in Catholic cultural ideology, namely female sexual passivity and the weak and childlike feminine woman. ... Heterosexual males might also see lesbianism and homo-sexuality as a rejection of machismo and forms of competitions that contradict the rooster’s sense of its prowess... It could be that lesbianism also exposes certain masculine insecurities about manhood and its link to womanhood and the nation that the FMC, the state, and the Communist Party of Cuba were not willing to acknowledge publicly. (2003:81)

Watson’s analysis provides an interesting angle. I believe that by labeling Telmary a lesbian, my anonymous informant was attempting to insult her capabilities as a self-possessed woman and appease certain “masculine insecurities” (unless, of course, he

knows more than Telmary disclosed to me). Telmary’s sexual orientation, however, should not be the reason behind her success: rather, her abilities as a rapper and musician (and one could argue her contacts she has built up in the music industry) have maintained her ongoing accomplishments. Furthermore, even if Telmary were a lesbian, her confident stage persona and self-managed musical career deeply resist the Catholic cultural ideology of a lesbian, adopted by Cuba, as being the ‘weak, childlike feminine woman’ (Watson 2003) It can also be argued that Telmary’s songs and discussion about sexism reminds the Cuban public of Fidel Castro’s 1966 declaration: “women must still fight and exert great efforts to attain the place that they should really hold in society” (1975:5).

Las Krudas’ lyrics and performance image also oppose such feminine-gendered Cuban-Catholic stereotypes of lesbians as being weak and passive.

Las Krudas represent a radical departure from both conventional Cuban images of feminine beauty as well as the standard masculine hip hop fare. With their dreadlocks, full-figured bodies and in-your-face feminist lyrics Las Krudas refuse to conform to patriarchal gendered prescriptions of Cuban women as passive, male-gaze oriented objects. (Perry 2004:374)

By celebrating their over-sized natural female beauty and open lesbian identity, Las Krudas acknowledge: “Within the culture of hip hop it seems that our image is very powerful. Because in reality women that I have seen tend to be delicate, very refined, passive. Women for men, as usual” (as quoted in Perry 2004:264).

RAPERAS' INVERSION OF GENDER STEREOTYPES

It can be argued that by being openly gay, Las Krudas fits into Thomas' 'lesbian mafia'; however, Magia, a married heterosexual, and Telmary, a female singer and lyricist who pens songs on heterosexual love and sexism, do not fall neatly into this 'mafia'; nor do these *raperas* fall into the category of 'passive female': Magia independently releases solo CDs featuring feminist lyrics and spearheaded the first all-female artist showcase in Havana, while Telmary left an all-male rap group to strike out on her own and achieve greater success as an independent lyricist and songwriter. Telmary and Magia thus directly oppose these narrow gender stereotypes of women singer-songwriters as being weak, passive, childlike, or lesbians.

Ellen Koskoff notes: "music performance can also provide a context for behavior that challenges and/or threatens the established social/sexual order" (1989:12). The work of Las Krudas, Magia MC and Telmary supports Koskoff's statement. Through non-sexualized dress of baggy pants and tank tops combined with a confident stage presence and assertive lyrics, Las Krudas (who do not wear bras), Telmary (known for her headwraps and bell-bottom pants) and Magia MC (who engages in the most verbally aggressive rap style) all deliver cutting rhymes in alto voices. Various scholars have attempted to present music in a gendered masculine/feminine binary with aggressive, loud music being understood as masculine, while softer, romantic, head register songs are understood as feminine (Shepherd 1987; Fast 2005;

Tagg 2006). Many contradictions emerge in these musical distinctions, as well as in attempting to carry these metaphors across to human biology. Assigning such culturally constructed mannerisms to biological attributes (i.e., chest register is masculine and head register is feminine), the very sexist cultural ideology that these *raperas* are attempting to eliminate is reinforced.

Furthermore, Las Krudas, Magia and Telmary all rap in their chest register – in part because this is the traditional mode of delivery for rap's spoken style. Magia's loud, forceful and 'traditionally masculine' delivery (Shepherd 1987; Fast 2005; Tagg 2006) is contradicted by her petite frame and lyrical themes supportive of women⁷. Telmary's 'manly' husky alto-chest voice is whispered in most of her songs on *A Diario*, recreating the sensual Erykah Badu/Me'Shell NgeDecello sound of the 1990s⁸. While it can be argued that this intimate rapping style recalls the traditional sexy feminine image, Telmary's feminist lyrical content in *Que Equivoca'o* and *Libre* also contradict this 'passive feminine' label. Las Krudas fall into the middle of this spectrum, incorporating a hard-hitting rap style (featuring the most unconventional lyrics) superimposed with flowing vocal glissandos over 'pretty' flowing orchestral electronic base-tracks ('pretty' and 'flowing' being typically identified as 'feminine' in Tagg 2006) or Afro-Cuban percussive

⁷ These include rap songs: *Que Equivoco*, *Niche* and *Llaman una puta* ("They Call Me A Whore," which supports *jineteras* as victims of economic circumstance).

⁸ Erykah Badu performed in the annual Rap Festival and concerts (Fernandes 2006:108).

grooves⁹.

Male rappers have criticized Las Krudas for not having any lyrical flow in their rap style (Perry 2004:274). Grisel Hernández debates this criticism in her 2005 review of Las Krudas' album:

One of this group's attributes is its way of rapping, which makes it possible to single out each singer's flow by pitch, inflexion and performing strength. There is obvious emphasis in the use of resources such as declamation and acting, reminding us even from the viewpoint of their sonorous result, the dramatics surrounding their public concerts. (2005:2)

The important element to Las Krudas' music is their message. While Olivia raps with the most ease, incorporating vocal glissandos and harmony over Pasa and Wanda, their sound and rapping style does not obscure each song's meaning. Dismissing Las Krudas' ability as rappers recalls the patriarchal attitudes touched on briefly in the introduction. Moreover, many male and female rappers from North America and Cuba support the theatrical display Las Krudas present in their live performances. Recently, at one of their concerts in New York, Pasa lifted up her shirt, exposing her flabby belly while shouting into the microphone, "fat," and having the audience respond, "beautiful!" This unconventional action (met by cheers from the audience) clearly dictated to both male and female audience members the strong permeation of cultural gender roles and stereotypes (as seen in media portrayals of women in and out of the music industry) as well as

the power in reclaiming the natural female body shape without shame.

Telmary has also been viewed as leaving the Cuban hip hop movement to join Havana's alternative musical fusion collective, Interactivo. Regardless, her oral dexterity and improvisatory skills as a rapper often surpass many male rappers in spontaneous rap competitions (Fernandez interview 2007). Interestingly, Magia MC is not criticized. This is in large part because she follows a traditional North American rap style with a "flow" that is smooth, direct and attacking; and, also perhaps because she forms a part of the male-dominated trio, *Obsesión*.

Despite the accomplishments of Las Krudas, Telmary and Magia MC, Cuban women have yet to fully embrace the feminist messages of these rappers, most notably those by Las Krudas. In a documentary filmed on the trio in 2003, Pasa explains:

When we came into the hip hop scene in 1999-2000 the discourse was totally masculine. I mean... women were ghosts. After all our efforts, now, many groups use the word female in their discourse. The audience is changing too, there are more women... sometimes women are more responsive to us they acclaim us more when we ask "where are the women?" and they go women! (fists raised) but when they're with their boyfriends they remain still. When we leave the state men welcome us more than women. You know how we are: many women may think, "Watch out these lesbians will eat us!" (Krudas 2003)

This threat of lesbianism to Cuban women (as well as men) recalls a homophobic socialization pattern that predisposes heterosexual women to

⁹ With the exception of their song *120 horas rojas* that samples a jarring Russian orchestral score that I am still trying to identify.

internalize patriarchal ideology. In spite of this, Norma Guillard Limonta believes that Las Krudas, and *rap cubano* as a collective movement, has the power to recreate new identities for (Afro-Cuban) women:

Be it with our songs or our emotions, every one of us must provide support for a solution. [...] Identity construction and deconstruction involves analyses and corrections whenever necessary. [...] We have to give top priority to alliances between women and men and in every possible sector, mainly in the mass media. Let us keep an eye out for inequalities. [...] we must work on our own racism, our own homophobias and even our own classism, [or] few of the changes we are demanding will ever be made. (Limonta 2005:6)

CONCLUSION

Rap music in Cuba and, I would argue in many global contexts, is often used to express what cannot be normally said in regular day-to-day conversation. While “the transition to socialism in Cuba did not abolish the patriarchal relations inherited from capitalism and Catholicism” (Watson 2003:78), the answer to this predicament, according to Cuban author Marisela Fleites-Lear, lies in “opening the political discourse to new ideas, new organizations, new non-sexist language” (2000:50). I argue, as have previous scholars since 2000, that *rap cubano* is serving to open this debate by engaging in political dialogue with the state and providing future Cuban generations with an alternative paradigm and non-sexist discourse in which to eliminate contradictions within Cuban society. Unfortunately, the growing popularity of *reggaetón*¹⁰ has surpassed

¹⁰ *Reggaetón* is a rap-dancehall-*plena/bomba* fusion that some argue was born in Puerto Rico

rap cubano in popularity, dismissing feminist *raperas*' efforts thus far and highlighting the inconsistencies of the Cuban state's promotion of these women.

Regardless of this setback, what remains most compelling is how music is able to express and distribute ideas. When the contents of these ideas are revolutionary, innovative and founded in reality, political ideologies and rooted hegemonies can finally be exposed for what they truly are, thus allowing progressive social change to ensue. Although not the sole cause for change, Cuban *raperas* have fought to make their message clear, raising awareness of prejudices such as sexism, lesbianism and machismo in a manner that cannot be ignored. In their work towards changing gender stereotypes and sexist perceptions of women, Las Krudas, Magia MC and Telmary are continuing Cuban women's and *rap cubano*'s 'revolution within the revolution.'

in 1993-4, although Panamanian El General's "Tu Pum Pum" is acknowledged as the first *reggaetón* hit to infiltrate the Caribbean and the Americas in 1991. *Reggaetón*'s popularity as dance music has increased in Cuba since the early millennium despite its lyrics, which tout a very macho and materialistic message.

APPENDIX



A Diario



Telmary



Olivia and Pasa, Las Krudas
(www.krudas.org)



Telmary at Lula Lounge
(taken by author 2006)



Pasa & Olivia,
Las Krudas, Cuba



Instinto
(www.metroactive.com)



Obsesión: unidentified male, Magia
MC (Magia López) and El Tipo Este
(Alexei Rodríguez)
(www.myspace.com/obsesioncuba)

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