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Recording the Cuban Transformation:  
From Socialist *Nueva Trova* to Contemporary Rap

*“After silence that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible is Music” –Aldous Huxley*

Every society can be viewed and studied through the lens of artistic expression. In Cuba a valuable source of information can be found in its music. The demographic of a society produce different types of music. Each genre of music has a special connection to the time period in which it is produced. Cuban music is a reflection of the Cuban society itself, as well as the people's relation to the national government and the world. Cuban music has had global impact; various genres of music can be traced back to a Cuban music influence (Sweeney 1). The complexity of music operates on many levels and therefore can be studied through analyzing various features of it. The music provides insight into different aspects of Cuban history, such as poverty, revolution, foreign relations, gender and race. The analyzing of specific songs and surveying of certain artist, the role played by Cuba's government in the music scene, and the general message of the music, which transcends time and space, serve as the framework from which to gain a deeper understanding of Cuban history. The rich history of Cuba from its pre-Revolutionary standing, through its transition to Socialism, and its condition today can be better understood by comparing and contrasting the music created in each time period; *Nueva Trova* was a product of Socialist Cuba and Rap is significant in Contemporary Cuba. Through the examining of *Nueva Trova* and Rap it is apparent that while the new Socialist government makes valiant attempt to create a utopia in post-Revolutionary Cuba, Cubans continue to be plagued by poverty, class struggle and government coercion.

Folk Music, or *Musica Folklórica* in Spanish, is music by the common, everyday people in any given region. Folk music is a direct product of the working classes of a society. In Cuba

the working lower class has historically been of African descent, beginning with the introduction of African slaves during the colonial period in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. While Cuba was a colony under Spanish control, they allowed slaves to have drums; newly arrived slaves frequently associated to other slaves from their region of origin through music (Sweeney 3-6). Cuban folk music originated in the mist of Afro-Cubans. New musical genres were labeled as “backwards” and rejected by the white upper-class authorities. However, after acquiring appreciation from the middle-class, the upper-class followed by modifying the music into a more mainstream genre.

Cuba’s most prevalent folk music is known as *Son*. *Son* consists of music made up of basic string and percussion instruments. Most *Son* was sung by Afro-Cubans who worked long days in the sugar fields, “it was played by and for blacks” (Robbins 182). *Son* usually deals with themes of everyday happenings and the longing for a better life. *Son* also comments on race relation and other issues of inequality. In the 1920s *Son* began to attract a larger audience, not only the rural laborers but also the urban intellectuals. *Son* reached new heights of regard, meeting the demand for entertainment that rose from the 1920s to the 1950s as Cuba emerged as a tourist destination (Robins 182-183). With tourism and the growth of trade network *Son* was exported to other nations. *Son* is particularly popular in Africa and in Latin American nations like Brazil that have a large African-descent population that shares feelings of repressed and injustice (Carpentier 326-329). With tourism corruption and oppression escalated in Cuba, Cubans were treated as second-class citizens to North American and European tourist. The growing appeal of *Son* also illustrated the growing frustration with the current government order, lead by President Fulgencio Batista.

*Son* illustrates how the stage was set for revolution. Revolutionary movements joined under the leadership of Fidel Castro demanding the overthrow of Batista. As the political climate of un-satisfaction heightened in the 1930s, the themes of poverty and yearning that had long characterized *Son* music were perceives as “revolutionary” and therefore threatening to the Batista regime (Carpentier 330-336). Revolutionary rebels accused the Batista regime of

gratified foreign interest and tourism at the expense of the Cuban people. Castro reached people through mass media, such as television and radio. Like other Cuban revolutionaries had historically done, Fidel Castro united people through the sentiment of race-less, pride for Cuban identity, *Son* came to be “used as a root of cultural nationalism” (Robbins 187). Cultural nationalism is a widespread sentiment of pride for a nation characterized by cultural attributes, among them distinct traditions and customs and aspirations. Despite the Batista regime’s efforts to avoid revolutionary confrontation by censoring *Son* among other things, on New Year’s Eve of 1958 Castro’s revolution triumphed. Batista’s flee from Cuba was followed by the departure of some upper-class Cubans, other government and military officials, many foreign investors and tourist. Soon thereafter Castro and the rebel troops were welcomed into the streets of Havana with music. However, the Castro administration continued a long practiced Cuban government trend; *Nueva Trova* and Rap were no exception to artistic expression censorship.

*Son* served as the foundation for *Nueva Trova*; while stylistically and instrumentally similar the stark contrast between *Son* and *Nueva Trova* is found in the lyrics (Manuel 173). The government was rather ambivalent to *Nueva Trova*, until about a decade after the revolution. Castro was well aware of the importance mass media played on public opinion and political success. Ergo, Castro created the Cuban Institute of Arts and Cinema (*Instituto Cubano de Arte y Industria de Cinema*, ICAIC) in March of 1959. However the ICAIC’s central focus was placed on visual arts, especially film. It was not until 1969 that the ICAIC created a branch to focus on musical art and oversee the creation of *Nueva Trova*. Since 1961 the Cuban government made a full transitioned to a Socialist state. Fidel Castro’s policy of “with the revolution: everything, outside the revolution: nothing” applied to *Nueva Trova* (Sweeney 157-160).

The government funded the creation of *Nueva Trova* as long as it sustained the socialist agenda, either directly or thematically. This gave musical artist who agreed with the Socialist Cuba a great advantage over musicians who did not necessarily applaud Socialism (Benmayor 13-14). The government funding of *Nueva Trova* placed power over the content in the hands of

the government. This type of government censorship compromised the credibility of Cuban music and its message. *Nueva Trova* was especially important to the government because it was clearly a **Cuban** creation. While the new Socialist government was trying to establish itself as sovereign, *Nueva Trova* portrayed an image of autonomy from American and European influence (Manuel 175-176).

Carlos Puebla is considered the link between *Son* and the creation of *Nueva Trova*. In 1959 he was placed in charge of the National Council of Culture. Puebla's song "At That Point Fidel Arrived" (*Y en Eso Llego Fidel*) is basically an ode to Fidel Castro.

*"Thus they thought to carry on, playing democracy  
And the town, that in its misfortune, would conclude its own demise.  
And to continue in a cruel manner,  
Without even bothering with appearances, with robbery as norm...  
And at that point Fidel arrived!  
And the diversion was finished:  
The Commander arrived and he called for a stop!"*

(Puebla, *De Cuba Traigo un Cantar*)

The song portrays Fidel as the savior of Cuban society. "Until Always Comandante" (*Hasta Siempre Comandante*) was Puebla most distinctive success, for which he received global regard.

*"We learned to love you  
From the heights of history . . .  
Your revolutionary love  
Leads you to a new undertaking  
Where they are awaiting  
The firmness of your liberating arm  
We will carry on as we did along with you  
And with Fidel we say to you:  
Until Always, Comandante"*

(Puebla, *De Cuba Traigo un Cantar*)

That song is a tribute to the deceased Ernesto "Che" Guevara. Puebla also dealt with the issues that created the platform of socialism through his music. For example, his songs "All for the Agrarian Reform" (*Todo por la Reforma Agraria*) and "Ode of the Literacy Campaign" (*El Son de la Alfabetización*) deal with agrarian land reform and fighting illiteracy, both major promises of the revolutionary movement. In May 1959 an Agrarian Reform Law was enacted. The law was meant to limit the size of land holdings, redistribute land to poor peasant and diversify agriculture in an attempt to eliminate large estates, address poverty and establish Cuba as a self-

sufficient nation. 1961 was declared the “Year of Education” in which campaigns were launched to eradicate illiteracy by making education equally accessible to rural areas. While both, agrarian reform and literacy campaigns encountered limitations, the songs idealize the efforts and present them as indisputable successes. Puebla’s music became synonymously known as the soundtrack of socialist revolution (Sweeney 173-175).

The most universally renowned Cuban *Nueva Trova* artists are Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanés. Both were early products of the government changes, while still old enough to remember pre-Revolutionary life in Cuba. Their age and involvement in government programs such as the Literacy campaign and communist youth groups greatly influenced their ideological lyrics and loyalty to the Revolution. Milanés, a *mulatto* (a light skinned Afro-Cuban), began his career as a *Son* artist and made a transition to *Nueva Trova*. Milanés’ music is highly influenced by Cuban folklore and his fan base is mostly lower class, young colored people. Rodríguez, a Hispanic Cuban, began his career as a poet and transitioned into a *Nueva Trova* musician. Rodríguez’ music is more internationally influenced by foreign artist, such as Bob Dylan, and his fan base is largely made-up of white intellectuals. Milanés is attributed with helping the Revolution reach a younger generation while Rodríguez is credited with taking the Revolution abroad (Moore 143-145) .

Both artist encountered problems with the high government involvement in artistic expression. Pablo Milanés complained, “The Party makes me change pieces of text if they believe this or that section may be misinterpreted” (Moore 151). Later Milanés’ song “Life is Worth Nothing” (*La Vida No Vale Nada*) was suppressed by the government because it was considered unsuitable. Government restrictions became so overbearing that Rodriguez took a hiatus from music altogether. When Rodríguez returned to music he made the lyrics so metaphorically surreal that direct interpretation was nearly impossible (Moore 152). The restrictions placed over the artistic expression of *Nueva Trova* artists illustrate the government power over the people. The lyrics produced in the time express the devotion Cubans had in the new

Revolutionary, and Socialist, government of Castro (Manuel 153). Just as Pablo Milanés and Silvio Rodríguez came together as *Nueva Trova* artists the government attempted to create a society in education and success was attainable to all, eliminating race, class and region as obstacles. The peoples' desire for social and economic change was not exclusive to Cuba.

*Nueva Trova* literally translates to "New Song" soon after the popularization of *Nueva Trova* other Latin American nations followed suit with the genre of *Nueva Canción*. *Nueva Canción* was used to spread a revolutionary message and was used to subtly arouse revolutionary sympathy. *Nueva Canción* became protest music throughout Latin America, with the exception of Cuba, its origin (Manuel 174). Other Latin American nations, such as Chile, used *Nueva Canción* to protest the current government and demand reform. While *Nueva Trova* in Cuba did praised Socialist ideals it was not actually in protest of anything because a Socialist government was in fact already power, and more importantly in control of the musical genre. Due to the political message of *Nueva Trova* it was intentionally created for "exportation" (Benmayor 23-28). Carlos Puebla later released a collection of his 24 greatest hits entitled *Cuba Si, Yankee No*. The title itself is a direct message to the Cubans who left Cuba for the United States and as a response to the perceived U. S. imperialistic history with Cuba.

*Nueva Trova* lost its appeal with new artists beginning in the mid-1980s. By the mid-1990s Cuban rap began to emerge "as a unique musical and poetic genre, distinct from both Cuban Oral traditions and American rap" (Fernandes 85). Rap in contemporary Cuba is the cry of a generation that had feels little, if any, connection to the Revolution of 1959 and the establishing of a Socialist state. The ever-growing economic and social problems faced by the Castro administration created a political nightmare and a disconnect between the people and the government. In the beginning of the 1990s Cuba was dealing with plunging economy and the disappearance of the Socialist world, thus Castro announced the beginning of the Special Period. During the Special Period certain measures were endorsed by the government in order to ensure the survival of Cuba as a socialist government (Fernandes 88, 97). Special Period measures

included changes to the economy. The dollar was decriminalized, foreign investment and a degree of private ownership was allowed for the first time since 1959. Significant social changes resulted due to the new economic policies that were permitted during the Special Period. The generation that produces rap is in fact the product of the aforementioned changes.

The emerging Rap scene perplexes many because it does not bluntly support or oppose political system altogether. Instead Cuban Rap deals with the racial inequality that many Afro-Cubans face and challenges the authorities (Fernandes 92). When the dollar was legalized this allowed for Cubans to receive monetary aid from family members in other countries, generally Cubans who fled after the Cuban Revolution. Those who were in other countries were the people who made up the upper-class during the Batista regime, most of them white. Therefore access to the dollar was largely determined by race. Consequently, once again an economic divide was created, placing Afro-Cubans without access to the dollar as second-class citizens (Fernandes 103). In the search for employment many Afro-Cubans migrated from eastern rural areas to western urban centers. A regular destination was Havana; with mass migration Havana becomes overcrowded. Since the Special Period a major source of income for Cubans lies in the sector of tourism. Nevertheless the tourism industry wants “white-faced” employees, therefore the Afro-Cubans face discrimination and are left unemployed (Fernandes 103). Residences were created in the outskirts of Havana to accommodate the growing population. The new residences become known as the *barrios*. The *barrios* are notably impoverished in comparison to the rest of Havana. Also, other problems such as crime increase as a consequence of overcrowding and unemployment. Racial tensions intensify as whites in Havana blame Afro-Cubans for the troubles faced in Havana and other major cities (Fernandes 104-105). Rappers use lyrics to comment on the stereotypes that afflict the *barrios* which they inhabit.

*"I am the guy that walks, dominates the territory  
With the dry and what is mine  
The things function as usual  
Here in the hilltop, we smoke day by day  
Listens, our lower work the neglected zones*

*Defiance, to enter the system . . .*  
*Starting point, vicious cycle*  
*It's your life, see, shared, no way out*  
*Prisoners of a destiny that is better with joy*  
*The death in each corner*  
*Look youngster, no one should be nervous . . .*  
*They are the things of life, yes*  
*A dead end road . . .*  
*Assured victory*  
*Of a war that you lost already*  
*You know what, for nothing*  
*If want to know, motives and reasons*  
*Should listen the others*  
*Know to avoid tensions*  
*Force and faith, to arrive your objective*  
*And fixed, if you fight you will achieve it*  
*The life has a road*  
*Fight by the liberty*  
*That is the small motive*  
*He returns home very late*  
*Already at the brink of sunrise*  
*For motives of money*  
*His luck is already thrown*  
*Evil luck, you played a bad hand"*

(Orishas, *A Lo Cubano*)

The above song, entitled "*Barrio*" by the rap group Orishas, depicts the life that many Afro-Cubans lead in the *barrios*. The rap groups' name Orishas refers to Santeria. Santeria grew drastically during the Special period by incorporated African religions with Catholicism (Fernandes 89). Religion provided hope in the times of constant struggle for Cubans through faith, as is mentioned in the song. Without means of adequate employment many Afro-Cubans turn to less reputable forms of income, hustling, known as *jineterismo* in Cuba, and other unlawful activity. As Cuba is reinstated as a tourist destination the problem of sexual tourism becomes widespread. Though accurate figures on sexual tourism are difficult to attain, it is estimated that Afro-Cubans meet a large percentage of the demand. Orishas' anecdotal song "Daring" (*Atrevido*) chronicles the migration of a couple to Havana. In Havana the man, Pepe, hustles his wife to tourists in order to make money.

*"You pass through the neighborhood, seldom are you here in my ghetto.*  
*Continues Pepe, the legendary one continues his mission, with discretion.*  
*He steals everything that calls his attention.*  
*Seeking in his girl pure emotion.*



*With some luck the satisfied one, Don Pepe has left the mud.  
 Although having to tell it to your face, I'm not going to hold back.  
 You believed yourself to be daring, that my girl you profited.  
 Now see, I left you with nothing.  
 Without a girl to dance, nor a group to impress.  
 It is so because you failed to think, that others also profit.  
 And by the grace of God, I didn't rip your face . . .  
 What an idiot that guy, what class of Yankee we've swindled!*

(Orishas, *A Lo Cubano*)

The song ends on a comic note that condones and places hustling on a pedestal as a legitimate way of escaping poverty. Orishas escaped poverty through Rap. Cuban Rap has gained global popularity, especially in European nations like Spain and France. Since the Special Period a great magnitude of foreign influence is present in Cuban life. Foreign companies invest in Cuba through tourism, and more importantly by providing capital for other industries, including music. In 1998 the Orishas was created in Paris, one of the four members of Orishas is a Paris Cuban. "*A lo Cubano*," their first album, was a French-Cuban collaboration and an instantaneous success. The Orishas have continued living in France, returning to Cuba only for short promotional and personal visits (Sweeney 334-336). Foreign investment in their music is considered crucial for the success of Cuban rappers. While Havana alone has more than 250 rap groups there are only a few Cuban producers. The most instrumental producer, Pablo Herrera, has helped bridge the gap between Rap and the Cuban government (Wunderlich).

The Cuban government maintains an intricately strange relationship with the contemporary Rap scene. Early on, the government was hesitant about classifying Rap as a threat or an asset. However, since the Afro-Cuban community is present in the Rap scene the Cuban government began to show support for Rap in hopes of creating positive sentiments among the Afro-Cuban population. In 1994 "Rap Corner" (*El Rincon del Rap*) was created with government authorization. The government also organized the first official rap festival, which has continued and spread as a yearly tradition (Sweeney 290). Now there are "complex and complicated forms of negotiation, accommodation, and alliance between rappers and the state" (Fernandes 118). Rappers often complain about the officials in power and the socio-economic

circumstances they face in Cuba while still commending revolutionary icons such as Ernesto “Che” Guevara. The globalizing of communication is making difficult for Cuba to keep control over or silence the Rap. Still the government holds a great deal of authority over rappers through the assigning of venues to hold concerts in exchange for lyrical regulation.

Anónimo Consejo, a Rap duo whose name translates to English as “Anonymous Counsel,” has pervasive notoriety among the Cuban population their economic condition has not improved much. The two member of Anónimo Consejo spent the night in jail in 1999 after singing a song that directly condemned police for racial profiling. After being warned they now make sure to always include songs that praise Cuba, the Revolution and the current government powers in their concerts (Wunderlich). There is a sense of animosity among Cuban rappers who perceive themselves as “underground” and the “commercial” rappers, such as the Orishas. Underground rappers criticize commercial rappers of being sellouts and abandoning the raw truth and appreciation for heritage spirit of rap for marketable sensationalized hip-hop. For example, Obsesión another rap group that is lead by Magia MC, a woman, criticize Orishas for the way their song “Daring” portrays hustling. Commercial Rappers are considered to be out of touch with the Cuban people and their struggles. Magia raps about *jineterismo* in her song “They Call Me a Whore” (*Me Lllaman Puta*). However in her approach “Magia talks about the desperate conditions that give rise to prostitution and the sad lives of many women forced into it” (Fernandes 112). Rap has also served as an instrument for female empowerment. Nehanda Abiodun, an American woman living in exile in Cuba is an “elder guide” for underground rappers (Wunderlich). However, Magia MC of Obsesión remains the only woman rapper in the nine rap groups officially recognized and sponsored by the government (Fernandes 117). Just as in the contemporary Rap scene, women have a long way to go to gain equality in Cuban society.

From *Nueva Trova* to Rap Cuba has undergone about half a century of government, economic and social changes. Poverty is sung about in *Nueva Trova* in the past tense, referring to life during the Batista regime. However, Rap covers poverty as the present reality. The shift in

efforts made by Socialist Cuba to eradicate poverty is illustrated through the music. While revolution is present as a theme in both genres it is approached differently. *Nueva Trova* praises past revolution while Rap has a revolutionary spirit looking for change of the current situation through the government in power. This shows the people's shift from idealistic to disillusion. *Nueva Trova* was exported to Latin American and African nations while Rap is exported to European nation. This is a portrayal of Cuba's foreign relations. During the early Socialism a great focus was placed on developing relation and aiding African and Latin American nations. Today Cuba has reestablished relation with Europe through investment. While *Nueva Trova* stayed away from racial issues, Rap is deeply rooted in racial identity. This shows the outlawing of racial discrimination and how it failed after the Special Period. The gender involvement in music is very telling of the time period. *Nueva Trova* was mostly dominated by males and Rap is seeing a slow but strong female voice. By comparing and contrasting the musical genres it is apparent that while Cuba continues to be weight down by poverty, class and gender struggles and government intimidation, Cubans remain prideful and determined to create a better tomorrow.

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