NEGOTIATION WITH THE REVOLUTION:

THE POLITICS AND COMMODIFICATION OF CUBAN MUSIC

DURING THE SPECIAL PERIOD

by

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Contents

Introduction

Research Question

Cuba's music has always been a dynamic entity, a figurative barometer of the constantly evolving culture and politics of the island. Music serves as a voice of the Cuban people, tied into the daily Cuban experience. Contemporary styles of Cuban music are especially valuable because they are one of the few ways to publicly critique everyday life in Cuba or the state in a country where freedom of speech is extremely limited (Perna 2005, 5). Due to the fact that the lyrics are often subtle and figurative in their critique, they may pass on messages in a manner that does not receive the same scrutiny as overt protest offered in a non-musical context. Cuban music creates an artistic space allowing for self-expression, a space in which social problems are illuminated. One such example is the song "Un socio para mi negocio" (A Buddy For My Business Deal) by Los Van Van, "which alludes to private enterprise and black market dealings" (Moore 2006, 129). Such music is especially significant during periods of transition, as it reflects the complex human reactions that arise during periods of instability.

Throughout the era following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, known as the "Special Period," Cubans lived without the aid of the Soviet Union, its chief

economic ally and supporter since the triumph of Castro and the Revolution in 1959.[1] Just as Cubans wondered what would become of their Revolution following the fall of the U.S.S.R., Cubans today are faced with their leader's mortality. Especially during the course of the Special Period, Castro adopted an autocratic style of leadership and centralized power to such an extent that his death could seriously weaken the state (Moore 2006, 242). His recent health problems, including a severe intestinal illness, have raised concerns about Cuba's future. In July 2006 an ailing Castro temporarily ceded power to his younger brother, Defense Minister Raúl Castro, after undergoing emergency surgery. The transfer of power was symbolically significant, as it reflected the mortality of the dictator and brought the future of the island to the forefront of Cuban and international attention.

The current change of leadership and the aforementioned Soviet collapse parallel one another, both providing for a sudden possibility for profound economic and social change on the island. Similar to the Soviet collapse, which sparked political musical expression, there is now also great potential for a broad artistic treatment of the many facets of Cuban life as the population experiences transition. One journalist summarized the anxiety faced by Cubans during this volatile period by saying, "Now Cuba-watchers

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[1] The Special Period, known as "El Período Especial" in Cuba, signaled the loss of Cuba's primary economic ally. The Cuban government lost approximately $6 billion in subsidies from Eastern Bloc countries and an extra $1.2 billion in Russian military aid (Frey 1997, 3). This loss of aid resulted in dramatic shortages of food and supplies, making the effect of the United States' embargo on Cuba (refer to pp. 8-9) all the more severe in Cuba. Cubans were forced to find new, "special" ways to cope with these new conditions, and music became a primary outlet.

worldwide are frantically trying to figure out what comes next for the nation of 11 million people" (Robles 2006, 1). The questions surrounding Castro's health indicate that Cubans must look to a future without their leader. The concerns voiced inside and outside of the Cuban community point to the prospect for social and political change, a reality that may have a considerable impact on the manner in which individuals express themselves as well as the content of their expression, given the potential reforms of a new government.

Because music has traditionally been a productive process for Cubans to reflect on their situation as well as communicate their sentiments, music is an especially important source of information about the daily challenges and anxieties faced by Cubans today. My primary interest in this thesis is to uncover what hidden realities are expressed through this music of transition. How are Cuban artists addressing the challenges of life in Cuba, especially during times of uncertainty? How do these artists situate themselves in Cuban society and in the international community, and in what direction do the Cuban people hope to see their homeland go? Do songs focus on hope for a new Cuba, or do artists defend the Revolution? The new musical styles that developed on the island since the Soviet collapse, including timba (a mixture of salsa, jazz, and rap) and hip-hop, are characterized by their critical, often political, commentary.

This critique sprang from the *barrios* of Cuba, the most marginalized city populations. José Luis Cortés, known in Cuba as "El Tosco," founded the group Nueva Generación (NG) La Banda in the late 1980s and is considered by many to be the founder of timba. Cortés found his audience in the urban culture of Havana, realizing that the aggressive music he played appealed especially to black youth who enjoyed dancing and empathized with the critique of timba lyrics (Perna 2005, 61). Rap music appealed to youth in a similar manner, as Cuban youth embraced its outspokenness. The Castro regime's repression of public dissent requires people to find creative and less explicit ways to speak their minds, and the urban youth found this outlet in timba and hip-hop music. Despite the popular nature of these genres, their critique is valuable as an expression of the sentiments of young Cubans.

Instead of focusing on these genres that appealed to young Cubans, in the late 1990s the international music industry, including that of the United States, showed an interest in Cuban musical groups playing pre-Revolution music, including the Buena Vista Social Club. The initial rediscovery of the Buena Vista Social Club piqued this interest. The group performed a style of music popular during the prerevolutionary era known as *son*, a style heavily influenced by Afro-Cuban rhythms and tradition. The music industry commodified the Buena Vista Social Club through album and DVD sales. This commodification brought greater exposure to Cuban music in general. Individuals familiar with contemporary Cuban musical styles, however, asserted that

the Buena Vista Social Club phenomenon was an inaccurate representation of current Cuban musical trends. Thus, academics and critics placed increased attention on the more popular styles among contemporary Cuban youth, including timba and hip-hop. Commercialization of the Buena Vista Social Club indirectly brought to light the reality of the popular genres on the island, the styles championed by the Cuban youth. This series of events exposed two significant realities—the continued American influence in Cuba and the ambivalences and contradictions that abound in contemporary Cuban society that lie at the center of Cuban lyrical expression.

In this thesis I focus on the commodification of these contemporary Cuban musical styles. I discuss both the commodification process itself and its implications, specifically as it relates to three topics. In my first chapter, I describe the Buena Vista Social Club's success and its consequences, and attempt to understand the impact of the music industry's exoticization of this *son* music, a genre generally less politicized than timba or hip-hop. While the Buena Vista Social Club is a symbol of Cuba and its musical heritage, I show how the international music industry exploited this form of music in an effort to reconstruct the nostalgic prerevolutionary view of Cuba. This commodification ultimately added to a reinvestment in cultural tourism in Cuba by the international community as well as the Cuban government. The international community that consumed this music traveled to the island to experience the exoticness displayed by the music, including Americans who could acquire travel visas. The Cuban government

exploited this exotic portrayal of the island, incorporating this exotic "feel" into the tourist experience. I analyze the state's support of this movement of music, and I explore the patterns of consumption of the Buena Vista Social Club music and image abroad, and the implications of this transnational consumption.

In my second chapter I analyze contemporary Cuban music, including timba and hip-hop, in order to illustrate the realities of Cuban society as manifested through the music of a younger generation of Cubans. The success of the Buena Vista Social Club initially overshadowed this contemporary music, but it ultimately served as the accurate voice of the youth, a population central to the re-conception of the Revolution now and in the future, especially following the departure of Castro. Thus, I offer a close reading of the music's lyrics to gain a better understanding of the youth's take on the areas of the Revolution that need improvement. Unlike the Buena Vista Social Club, these styles offer significant critique of the state and various aspects of Cuban society. Specific themes of critique include, but are not limited to, poverty, politics, gender, prostitution, race, and exile.

In my third chapter I discuss the relaxation of censorship of Cuban music during the Special Period, as well as the tensions that accompany Cuban music today. I explore the government's patterns of censorship of this music, specifically analyzing reasons why the government remains relatively lax in terms of banning timba and hip-hop. I attempt to understand how some forms of critique are now deemed as acceptable and

even necessary elements of the Revolution. In the late 1990s the government expressed an interest in creating spaces for critical discussion, reincorporating Cubans back into the national goals of the country. Thus, Cuban citizens were encouraged to evaluate and discuss the Revolution, rather than trying to subvert the Revolution or work outside of the system. "In an attempt to reduce the gap between official ideology and lived experience, groups in Cuban society collaborated with political leaders to bring critical and oppositional expressions back into the purview of state organizations" (Fernandes 2006, 41). These forms of critique act as a means of creating dialogue and improving upon the Revolution, specifically in the context of the Special Period.

I investigate the tensions of Cuban society manifested in its music. The commodification of contemporary Cuban music through a process of worldwide dissemination illuminates these tensions. For example, the Cuban government diverts from its staunch commitment to socialism in order to stimulate its economy, exploiting music as a cultural resource that could result in capitalistic investment. The Cuban government's embrace of the Buena Vista phenomenon revitalized cultural tourism in Cuba by stimulating the interest of foreigners. Thus, investment in cultural tourism and music distribution abroad reflects Cuba's attempt to enter world capitalistic markets, while being internally socialist. Ultimately, with the Cuban government's consent, the music industry commodifies and exoticizes Afro-Cuban music and religion-based Santería for the world market, creating a cultural Other to be consumed.

In addition, I attempt to negotiate Cuban musicians' simultaneous discontent with and love for their nation. I concentrate particularly on the role of nationalism and its significance in contemporary Cuban music. I explore the reasons for these tensions, such as the flexibility of socialist ideology considering the economic position of the island after the withdrawal of Soviet support. I also explore the long-term implications of these contradictions in terms of the future of the Revolution in Cuba. I argue that these ambiguities are central to the future of Cuban society. They will become a focus during a transition into the future, as they provide a perspective on the desires of the Cuban people, as well as the diversity in their views.

My research explores the politics of the Cuban music market and the impact that the U.S. imposed economic embargo has had on the creation and dissemination of music, especially contemporary styles. I believe that an understanding of Cuba's economic relationship with the United States is essential to understanding the manner in which Cubans created new forms of music as well as the content of their critique. In 1961, the United States placed an economic embargo on Cuba, with the goal of combating the progress of its Communist counterpart. The choice of the United States government to dissolve diplomatic relations with Cuba led to a myriad of negative economic repercussions for Cuba. The island nation had once been a thriving center of commercial activity. By prohibiting all Cuban imports and disallowing travel to Cuba, however, the United States stifled several of the island's industries that had previously

carried the nation financially, including tourism and the sugar industry. Cuban revenue was devoted to finding new international markets, and once these markets were found, sugar was sold at lower prices. The tourism industry, which had primarily entertained Americans prior to the Revolution, no longer had clients to serve, leading to unemployment and poverty. In a study prepared by the Economic Investigations Institute of the Central Board for State Planning (Junta Central de Planificación Estatal, JUCEPLAN), a division of the Cuban government, economic losses imposed by the embargo are tremendous. "According to JUCEPLAN, the country suffered US$40 billion in losses from 1960 to 1990" (NotiSur, Latin America Data Base 1993). Laws passed since the Soviet collapse led to greater strain on Cuba as well. Due to legislation including the Cuban Democracy Act of 1993, also referred to as the Torricelli Bill, and the Helms-Burton Act of 1996, the United States tightened the embargo on Cuba as well as restrictions on foreign companies doing business in Cuba (Perna 2005, 56).

The United States' embargo, combined with the absence of Soviet aid, resulted in a variety of developments that influenced new Cuban musical styles. Cubans' access to music was limited, Cubans' could not afford to buy CDs, many Cubans attempted to leave the island, and an underground culture grew that illegally absorbed the American music transmitted from radio stations in Miami, especially genres such as hip-hop. As a result of these conditions, Cubans were inspired to voice their struggles through music, very much on a community level in the streets. Ultimately, a very distinct,

contemporary Cuban youth musical culture grew out of the specific circumstances in Cuba.

In terms of the Buena Vista Social Club phenomenon, I aim to understand the position of skeptics who perceive the group's success as a product of the United States' nostalgia for a pre-Castro Cuba as well as a misrepresentation of current musical trends. When the American music industry exploits consumers' fascination with and romanticization of the Buena Vista Social Club, it focuses on specific imagery of Cuba void of a communist presence, and this imagery is significant as it reflects the power exerted by the United States over Cuba prior to the intervention of Fidel Castro and the Revolution. I argue that the contemporary relationship between the United States and Cuba is much less straightforward, as Americans also provide a model for Cubans on how to express their concerns through music. Cubans on the island are engaged in a political, critical music, and they consume American styles that express critique and champion resistance. Whether it involves listening to American rap carrying over from Florida airwaves, or attending the performance of American rock band Audioslave, which performed in Havana's Anti-Imperialist Plaza in 2005, Cubans are involved in a transnational exchange, combining American styles with their own critique of Cuba, resulting in Cuban timba, hip-hop, and even rock. Ultimately, in an ironic sense, while Americans consume largely depoliticized Cuban music, Cubans consume a politicized, critical American music that impacts their own musical expression.

I also investigate the extent to which the music industry and the Cuban government force folk music and *son*, especially, into a model for people to consume. In addition, I question who is purchasing this music abroad, specifically in America, as well as their motivations. Are they looking for cultural authenticity? Do Cuban exiles consume this music in an effort to remain linked to their cultural heritage? Does primarily a non-exile audience consume this music? Answers to these questions shed light upon the dynamics of contemporary Cuban music consumption, showing the impact not just on the island but also in America and elsewhere. I investigate these issues in an effort to understand the consumers that fuel the Cuban government's capitalistic experiments, ultimately fueling internal critique and dialogue on the island.

There are dual effects of commodifying the Cuban experience, particularly that of poor black Cubans. On one hand, it allows relatively poor musicians to have social mobility. Specifically, Cuban musicians often tour internationally, providing them with greater freedoms and opportunities than other citizens, including increased access to profit and riches. In this sense, Cuban music serves as a particular democratizing force, as poor Cubans are given a greater voice through their music. Simultaneously, however, the Cuban government is entitled to a percentage of their wages, and they are exploited as marketing tools in an international market. The government encouraged international touring, both as a way of marketing Cuban culture abroad and laying claim to up to "50% of earnings from musicians that go overseas" (Watrous 1997). This

reality represents the contradictory stance of the Cuban government, especially considering its socialist foundation, as it is capitalistically exploiting the talents of its musicians. The government's effort to keep some of its musicians content is merely a means of preventing their defection abroad. This commodification of Afro-Cuban society is problematic, as it alienates Cubans who deal with issues of racism and poverty. These artists' work reflects a racialized street politics that parallels the American roots of hip-hop and rap. This commonality grew out of the marginalized experience and explains the overlap of contemporary styles of music in Cuba and the United States.

The Cuban musical identity is complex, as these musicians are constantly involved in a negotiation with the state. This negotiation involves employing critique in music, often in a coded or creative manner. The commodification of contemporary music styles has highlighted this negotiation, primarily illustrating the extent to which ambivalences are voiced in the face of censorship. While Cuba has a history of outspoken musicians, specifically those influenced by the *nueva trova* style, contemporary Cuban artists have voiced a multitude of concerns and critiques that are met with varying degrees of acceptance by the Cuban government. Specific questions regarding contradictions become relevant when some forms of music are sanctioned, while others are censored. What critique is deemed as being overly political and why? Has the Cuban government established specific limits on what may or may not be

voiced? For groups that are not censored, how exactly do they go about employing their critique? I hope to gain a greater sense of the dictatorship's approach to artistic expression and grasp what is deemed as acceptable music in Cuba.

Finally, I investigate music's basic role as a voice and a form of release for the Cuban people. How does music allow people to live with the difficulties of Cuban life, and what purpose does it serve as a means of survival? The diversity of musical styles is indicative of a diverse population of Cubans who come from different racial, ideological, generational, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Music provides artists with a forum to address a variety of social concerns. More progressive, contemporary Cuban music styles such as rap explore issues such as gender, as female *raperas* challenge traditional gender roles and the machismo that often lies at the center of gender discourse in Latin America. A juxtaposition of these newer styles with the older styles illuminate the profound evolution of Cuban music, which has largely been impacted by foreign ideas and styles that have penetrated the island's borders, including American rap and jazz. *Sui generis* art forms are defined by an amalgamation of Cuban and American consciousness.

Ultimately, through my thesis I hope to gain a deeper sense of the *Cubanidad* that pervades Cuban music and culture. This *Cubanidad* is described as "Cuban-ness"—the pride that Cubans have for their country and their culture, as well as the passion with which they approach everyday life. I hope to understand how this nationalism and

passion coexist with the ambivalence of marginalized Cuban people. Intense emotions surround Cuban people and their music, and I hope to create a discourse that reconciles with this emotion. The reality is that just as the Revolution continues to endure, Cuban musicians continue to adapt and produce music, whether in music conservatories on the island or informally in the *barrios*. This is a testament to the significant role that music plays in shaping Cuban culture.

Significance of Research

Through an engagement with contemporary styles of Cuban music, my research aims to illuminate the role of music as a means of voicing the ambivalences of the Cuban people. One can gauge the feelings of Cubans with regard to issues such as poverty, politics, gender, prostitution, race, and exile by looking closely at the messages offered in timba and hip-hop songs. I argue that these sentiments are especially significant now as Cuba confronts the reality of its transition into a post-Castro era, just as it was confronted with the prospect of financial collapse after the demise of the Soviet Union. This music serves not just a cultural purpose, but rather it has political import as well. Scholars and Cuban legislators may look to the music of the Cuban youth today as a guide for molding a new phase of the Cuban Revolution, as the emotional and ideological contributions of the youth speak to the desires and feelings of the common people, those individuals who are intended to lie at the center of the socialist model.

The Buena Vista Social Club phenomenon, including the commodification of the group and its style, is significant because it highlights the contradictions faced by the Cuban government, engaging in capitalistic ventures despite its socialist foundation. These contradictions highlight the alternative ways of living adopted in Cuba during the Special Period, and they continue to be a part of the transitional Cuban society. During the Special Period, the Cuban government eased restrictions on individual expression, as well as sexuality and religion, out of a need for money (Frederik 2005). The Buena Vista Social Club movement illuminated realities about Cuban society, especially the manner in which race is still very much exploited as a means of generating income through cultural tourism. The Cuban government offered the international tourist an exotic version of Cuba, creating a racial Other while simultaneously creating what was marketed as an authentic version of Cuba.

I assert that the Buena Vista Social Club's music sheds light on the broader hybrid economic model Cuba adopted during the Special Period, as well as the manner in which race is instrumental in the construction of Cuban identity. Thus, Cuban identity is not just a product of internal dynamics but is also based on the manner in which the outside world, especially tourists, perceives and consumes a specific identity that is fed to it. Ultimately, the culture industry and the outside world play a significant role in identity formation (Neustadt 2002). This search for authenticity is active on the island as well, especially among rap artists, as they aspire to retain a Cuban foundation

in their American-influenced art form, appropriating Cuban images such as Che Guevara to reinforce their authenticity (Foehr 2001).

In addition, paying attention to the critique voiced in timba and hip-hop is significant, as these styles reflect the attitudes of many people toward the direction the nation is going—politically, economically, and socially. This music allows Cubans to express their concerns for the future of the country (Moore 2002). By listening closely to their sentiments, one can gain a sense of the elements of Cuban society that are perceived as being desirable or undesirable. This close listening allows one to understand the attitudes of the younger generation of Cubans. If the Revolution is to survive, one must pay attention to the attitudes of these individuals, as they represent the future of Cuba. The government's willingness to listen to and sanction newer styles reflects an understanding of the changing face of the Cuban Revolution and the concessions that must be made to secure the future of the movement (Wunderlich 2005). My research aims to fully understand the implications of the negotiation between the artist and the state and understand the role the artist plays in giving voice to the Cuban people.

Additionally, I hope to understand the way the government views artists, especially their role in shaping the Revolution. In the context of the Special Period, musicians were seen as artists who could bring new revenues to the state through international touring and the distribution of their music, as the state received

contributions from the artists' profits through taxes. The state sorely needed this revenue in the context of the economic hardship of the Special Period. The government granted musicians a privileged status in Cuban society. They occupied a high position economically in comparison to other Cubans, as they were allowed to negotiate contracts with foreign entities (Hernández-Reguant 2002). This foreign investment in Cuban musicians reflects capitalistic negotiation, displaying the contradiction of arts as a means of social advancement within a supposedly egalitarian, socialist state.

The aims of the Cuban state drive international consumption of Cuban music, and international record labels facilitate this consumption. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai comments on this dynamic, advancing the notion that deterritorialization—the figurative breakdown of national borders—forms complex transnational networks that create imagined communities. In the case of Cuba, the manner in which the international music industry and the Cuban state market musicians and culture impacts the international consumer's perception of Cuba, creating an imagined world. "Mediascapes" and "ideoscapes" are constructed in which imagery and narratives are offered to the consumer, resulting in differences in the manner Cuba is interpreted internally and externally (Appadurai 1990). Ultimately, Cuba's involvement in international musical flows results in contrasting experiences of Cubans on the island and individuals abroad.

Methods

The Cuban Revolution is unique in that it has endured for over 48 years despite an economic embargo imposed by the United States and doubt from members of the international community. This uniqueness is often conjured or referenced in Cuban music, through imagery, lyrics, and the music itself. In my research I analyze Cuban nationalist identity and how a Cuban sense of community is maintained through lyrics, interviews, and scholarly writings, focusing on the impact that the Revolution has had on Cuban artists and the rest of the Cuban community. I hope to understand the thoughts of different Cuban artists and their motivations for creating their music as well. Contradictions apply not only to the Cuban government, but also the Cuban musicians themselves, who simultaneously express an exceptionalism and nationalistic pride in their country despite a sense of dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the Revolution and the challenges it faced following the Soviet collapse.

Especially in the second chapter on contemporary musical styles, I employ a discourse analyzing these new forms of music, focusing on the nature of the music itself, lyrics, and the visual representations of the music. I argue that by looking at the lyrics of timba and hip-hop, especially, one can gain insight into a variety of ambivalences and concerns voiced by the Cuban people in response to the difficulties faced in their everyday lives. Lyrics are a main focus of my analysis, as I perform close readings of the words of Cuban artists. From these lyrics I gain a better sense of the ambivalences of the

Cuban people. I explore various themes of critique, including poverty, politics, gender, prostitution, race, and exile. An exploration of these issues illuminates the degree to which the Revolution has permeated certain aspects of society, particularly following the Soviet downfall. Ultimately, this exercise revolves around the concepts of representation and expression, and the often-varied interpretations of musical and lyrical creation. Most importantly, my research involves listening to recordings of Cuban music and watching documentaries about the music. This will expose me to the substance of my research—the music itself. By looking at video, I also hope to gain a sense of the manner in which contemporary styles of Cuban music are portrayed visually, as I argue that visual representations of the music are just as important and illuminating as the content of the music.

As the son of a Cuban immigrant, I have a personal investment in this project, as I have deep ties to the culture of Cuba, and I have always been fascinated by the richness and complexity that is Cuban music. I perform Afro-Cuban music, so through my research I hope to gain a better understanding of the creative process and how Cuban artists approach the creation of different styles of music that I both listen to and play. My entire life I was exposed to my mother's family's memories of Cuba and I developed a curiosity for life on the island. Through my research I realized that contemporary Cuban culture is relatively different from their memories. Since they departed from the island in 1961, their memories of Cuba are predominantly of prerevolutionary times. I

hope to gain a better understanding of Cuba's development following their exile so that I may better understand the Special Period, the focus of this project. My research aims at juxtaposing my family's memories with contemporary realities of Cuban life. I believe that this juxtaposition will illustrate similarities and differences between the old and the new Cuba. Their decision to leave the island reflects a similar reality of transition. Contemporary Cuban youth, however, face different issues, living in the context of a largely different Revolution. It is this very difference that I hope to grasp through analysis of current musical styles.

1. Buena Vista Social Club and the Transnational Cuban Music Market

It was a cold winter day in New York City. I can remember sitting in the backseat of our family car, driving around the perimeter of Central Park. It was early 2000, and I was fourteen years old. My family was going to see the Buena Vista Social Club live in concert at the historic Beacon Theatre in Manhattan. The weather outside was cold and gray. All I knew was that we were going to see this group of old Cuban musicians that had suddenly become extremely popular in the United States. I was unfamiliar with their music, and I did not quite know what to expect. I remember that my parents had different seats from my older brother and me. My brother and I sat in the very last row of the orchestra section with my cousin, while my parents sat much closer to the stage with my mom's cousin. I grew up listening and dancing to Cuban music at family parties, and my mother, who emigrated from Cuba in 1961 with her family, always exposed me to Cuban culture. This outing was part of my broader education in my Cuban heritage. I distinctly remember the instruments set up on stage before the musicians appeared, different colors of light illuminating the artificial smoke that slowly rose to the ceiling of the theater.

Then the musicians came out, some very slowly. After all, these musicians had been around for a very long time and had only recently been rediscovered by an American guitarist sitting up on stage with them—Ry Cooder. Despite their age, they

performed with a surprising vitality. Although I was not yet familiar with their names, I felt a sense of attachment to them as a result of our shared Cuban heritage. They seemed to exude a unique energy of individuals much younger, and I interpreted this as the *Cubanidad* of which I had so often heard. My relatives told me that this *Cubanidad* was what marked the Cuban people—"hot blood" and a love of life and music. Cuban scholar Fernando Ortiz asserted that the identity of the Cuban people—*Cubanidad*—"should be thought of in terms of the ajiaco [stew], since the encounter of different cultures in Cuba contributed to the development of a hybrid culture. The term he used to describe this cultural process was transculturation" (Catoira 2005, 181). The collection of musicians onstage reinforced this hybridity, bringing different musical backgrounds, geographic origins, and racial makeups to the ensemble.

I was most struck by a small, hunched-over octogenarian—Rubén González. This man with snow-white hair sat down at the piano and played a series of beautiful Cuban melodies with adeptness and speed, forcing me to question whether or not this man was actually in his 80s. All of the musicians seemed to love the music they were playing, and they shared this love with the audience. It was from this moment that I genuinely became enchanted with the music of Cuba and its culture. I remember the entire audience dancing, and even though I was often shy and reserved, I could not help but dance in the rear of the theater with my brother and my cousin. I yearned to get

closer to the stage, to get closer to the energy and liveliness of the music being performed. This concert is one that profoundly impacted me.

1.1 Rise of the Buena Vista Social Club

My initial affinity for the Buena Vista Social Club and its music led to subsequent consumption of the group's music, through its self-titled CD, as well as a DVD of the same name that features a documentary on the group by filmmaker Wim Wenders. I was one of millions of individuals in the United States and abroad captivated by the unique story of this group. Supported by Nick Gold, the British owner of the record label World Circuit, guitarist Ry Cooder visited Havana in 1996 searching for forgotten musicians who enjoyed their greatest success prior to the Revolution in Cuba. Cooder was initially planning to record a fusion album with musicians from Cuba and West Africa, but the African musicians were unable to attend.

Cooder then met with Juan de Marcos González, a Cuban producer who had been recording an album with a group known as the Afro-Cuban All-Stars, which consisted of many of the same musicians who would later appear on Cooder's album. While the Afro-Cuban All-Stars album had a brassy Havana sound, Cooder preferred a gentler, more acoustic sound for his album. Cooder recruited several old-time *soneros* who had been missing from the Cuban musical scene for several years, including Ibrahim Ferrer, Compay Segundo, Rubén González, Eliades Ochoa, and Omara Portuondo. The album *Buena Vista Social Club* met critical international success upon its

release in 1997, and the compilation inspired the documentary of the same name, released in 1999. German director Wim Wenders shot the film during the later recording of a solo album by Ferrer (Robinson 2000, C.01).

While the film portrays the poverty of a decaying Havana, it illustrates a rejuvenation of the elderly musicians, many whose careers had been dormant for years. The documentary also includes footage from an emotional performance at Carnegie Hall in New York. The Buena Vista Social Club phenomenon is significant in that it aided in the preservation of traditional Cuban music, especially *son*. The project documents the roots of Cuban music from the first portion of the twentieth century, ensuring its preservation in the minds of Cubans and foreigners. Thus, the Buena Vista Social Club phenomenon is significant as a historical reminder of an important period in the development of Cuban music.

1.2 The personal experience of Cuban music

The international attention that the Buena Vista Social Club received brought increased attention to Cuba in general. The images in Wim Wenders' documentary exposed contemporary Cuba to the world. The images employed in the film drew on nostalgia for prerevolutionary Cuba. Following the concert at the Beacon Theatre, I found my relationship with my Cuban heritage to be much more significant in my life. I began to appreciate the role that Cuban music plays in life on the island, and by listening to different recordings and watching films, I attempted to get closer to this

music. Since I had never been to Cuba, my relationship with the island was through family rituals and experiences. From a very young age my grandparents spoke Spanish with me and fed me *arroz con frijoles negros*, *yucca*, *plátanos maduros*, *ropa vieja*, *croquetas*, and countless other Cuban dishes. I experienced Cuban music from a young age as well, as my great-aunt held parties in her backyard in Queens. The Latino DJs would play Cuban songs, the music emanating from the speakers and calling me. I would sit along the fence that enclosed the concrete backyard and watch the adults as they spun each other around and around, their legs and hips a blur, in tempo with the clave rhythm of older Cuban artists such as Celia Cruz and newer ones such as Gloria Estefan. I would always try to beat out the rhythms on my legs as I sat watching intently.

I would later learn that my family was part of a diasporic community of Cubans living in New York. They had left in 1961 after Fidel Castro announced to the world his socialist plan for Cuba. They went to New York City, moving between many communities, ultimately settling in Elmhurst, Queens, where my grandparents live until this day. As my grandparents worked multiple jobs to support the family, they were forced to live in tiny apartments, three or four sharing a bed. Absent from their acculturation in the United States was my grandfather, my mother's father, who had been taken as a political prisoner by the Cuban government after refusing to accept an accounting job in the government. He would later join the family over ten years later, after years of being forced to work in Cuba's sugar cane fields. This event was a source

of great sadness in the collective memory of my family, and I was only made aware of this much later in my life.

After seeing the Buena Vista Social Club live, my interest in Cuban music was fed by my godmother's brother, a man with an intense interest in Cuban music and its history. He had thousands of CDs of Cuban music, and it seemed to me that he could name any artist from the last century. He would always find me in a corner during family parties and quiz me on what artists I knew and did not know. He always encouraged my interest in Cuban music, and he became somewhat of a mentor for me in this area, approving of my adopted interest in Cuban percussion. I began playing the timbales and the conga drums. I realized later that this process of learning about Cuban music and my heritage was part of my initiation into a culture of which I did not have physical access. Especially in recent years, it has been very hard for Cuban Americans and Americans in general to travel to Cuba, as a result of the tightened travel regulations and embargo legislation. Since I did not have physical access to the island and the people there, my family fostered my pride in my Cuban heritage. When I heard stories of Cuba, they were always stories of a prerevolutionary Cuba, including one story from my great-grandmother about her son, who had been friends with Cuban singing legend Beny Moré when my family lived in Cuba. These stories and early experiences shaped my conception of what Cuba is and what it means to be Cuban.

1.3 Cuba: An imagined community

Ultimately, Cuba became an "imagined community" for me. In his 1983 book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson offers his theory on the creation of the imagined community and the impact this conception has on the formation of nationalism. The imagined community is tied into nationalism in the sense that nationalistic feelings, including connections to a broader collective of individuals who share a common heritage or connection to a nation, may be created or constructed. Anderson asserts that the nation is an imagined political community. "It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 1983, 15). I find that Anderson's argument applies transnationally to my experience growing up in a Cuban family and the understanding that I have of Cuban culture and my personal link to my heritage. The traditions and stories that my Cuban grandparents and my relatives exposed me to provided me with a sense of personal connection to Cuba, its people, and its complex history.

Whenever I play Cuban music, whether it is playing a recording or performing with an ensemble, I feel a strong connection to the Cuban people and their rich musical culture. Thus, my participation and consumption of Cuban music and other elements of Cuban culture help me create a personal sense of Cuban nationalism. I feel pride in the

origins of my mother's family, and even though I have never been to Cuba, I have established a connection to the Cuban people who make up the international imagined community of Cubans. This community consists of Cubans on the island, Cuban exiles, and the descendants of these exiles. The bond that I have with these distinct groups of individuals is complex, as each community is diverse and has different conceptions of what it means to be Cuban. Thus, the imagined community is in itself an ambiguous notion, as there are as many interpretations of this imagined community as there are members.

The Buena Vista Social Club embodies the type of music that my family was listening to prior to the arrival of the Revolution. Thus, it has intense symbolic significance, as it embodies all of the experiences that they had prior to their exile from their homeland. The *son* performed by these older musicians permeated everyday life in Havana, where my mother was born and lived for the first six years of her life. Her experience of the Buena Vista Social Club concert at the Beacon Theatre was a reminder of the early years of her life. While she has few memories of Cuba since she left the island when she was only six years old, her memories of the music include the music played in her family's home in New York. Her grandfather often spoke about *son* as well. When asked about the experience of seeing the Buena Vista Social Club live in concert, she said, "I was moved by the energy of the music and the audience. The audience [composed of Cuban exiles and Americans] was standing up dancing and

cheering. I think there was a great degree of nostalgia that was evident in the audience." She believes that the music of the Buena Vista Social Club is popular among many Cuban exiles because it evokes memories of the old Cuba and being in Cuba in general. Memory plays a key role in the manner in which exiles experience Cuban culture, even when their memories are of a profoundly different period on the island.

1.4 Representation and reality

Despite the familiarity of the exile community with the musical style of the Buena Vista Social Club, Cubans on the island criticized the international success of the group, establishing that it did not accurately represent the music being played and heard on the island today. Contemporary styles including timba, a hybrid of salsa, jazz, and rap, and hip-hop are the music of the Cuban youth, not the music of the old *soneros*. Prior to the Buena Vista phenomenon, Cubans on the island already knew of many of the Buena Vista artists, including Compay Segundo and Omara Portuondo. Most Cubans were surprised that the album and film achieved so much success, as they considered the music to be anything but new and exotic. "On the island, the record has been received with skepticism by music critics, amazement by the general public and absolute indifference by the youth" (Perna 2005, 248). Cuban musicians have attested to the fact that the portrayal of the group's music as the predominant form of music in Cuba today is misleading. The music is seen as a sterilized, romantic version of

prerevolutionary Cuba, an embodiment of the exoticism Americans so frequently associated with Cuba prior to the arrival of Fidel Castro.

Many Cuban exiles, including my mother and grandparents, are generally unaware of newer styles of Cuban music largely due to their absence from the island for decades. She noted, "I don't think many Cuban exiles, especially those who left immediately following the Revolution, know that there is a different type of music in Cuba today." Juan de Marcos González, an integral component in the success of the Buena Vista Social Club, states that his ultimate goal as a producer is not to perpetuate the idea that *son* still rules the island. Although he values his involvement with the ensemble, he hopes to bring current Cuban music to an international audience, genres that accurately represent modern Cuban music, music of the youth. "'The only way to move forward is to bring in young musicians, so the public won't have the erroneous impression that the only legitimate music in Cuba was made 40 years ago and that the only worthwhile musicians are 80 years old'" (Gurza 2004, F6). By solely concentrating on artists who thrived prior to the Revolution, there is an inaccurate representation, especially in the international sphere, of what contemporary Cuban music looks and sounds like.

Other Cuban musicians echo the sentiments of González. Pianist Chucho Valdés argues that for musical progress to be made, the older styles must be preserved and acknowledged but newer styles must be embraced as well. "'The thing we [as Cuban

musicians] can't do now is all give in to [the demand for traditional music] and start playing the music of the fifties. That music has its place, but we have to keep moving forward, and the new music will have its moment'" (Pérez 2003, 128). It is evident that Cuban youth are embracing newer styles of music, genres that not only reflect the evolution of music on the island, but also evolution of the island and its people throughout the course of the Revolution. These younger musicians active on the island today employ critique in their work, an element that, for the most part, sets their work apart from that of the Buena Vista Social Club.

This element of scrutiny reflects the importance of confronting the issues and conflicts associated with the current manifestation of the Revolution. Carlos Alfonso, the founder of Cuban Afro-rock band Sintesis, emphasizes the importance of Cuban music in reflecting the problems of the people, comparing musicians to journalists in their responses to the joys and challenges of Cuban life. "'Cuban music has a lot of… duality, which is why the music can be, and is, a political tool as well as a cultural expression. The musician reflects the situation of the country'" (Foehr 2001, 157). By taking note of the messages in this music, one can better gain a sense of the reality of the island, especially in the context of the Special Period.

1.5 Authenticity and imagery

Recognizing two different groups of Cuban musicians representing the old and the new, a dialectic develops between Cuban music characterized by an intense

nostalgia for the pre-Castro era and music addressing real life issues on the island today, as embodied by timba and hip-hop. The nostalgia evoked by the music of the Buena Vista Social Club conflicts with the reality of modern depictions of Cuba in timba and hip-hop. This opposition brings an important question to mind: What is authentic Cuban music? Is it the music of the older musicians or is it the music of the younger musicians who are writing about their ambivalences pertaining to everyday life in Cuban society?

I assert that both styles of music are authentic in the context of their respective time periods. In addition, I argue that is important to not simply categorize both types of music as "world music" to be consumed. Critics of "world music" see it as a "dangerously misleading term which robs various musics of their unique national and ethnic origin, locating them in a decentered 'other' category which is at best a marketing strategy, at worst, an appropriation and watering down of authentic music styles" (Ferguson 2003, 10). In the context of an international, commercial music market, there is the danger of depicting the Cuban music styles as exotic and forbidden—a product that evades the restrictions of the American-imposed embargo and reaches American ears through the assistance of third-party record labels abroad. Thus, Cuban music is largely depoliticized when commodified and marketed to a global audience. The marketing of the Buena Vista Social Club was focused on a specific category of world music consumer, which seemed to exclude Latin American audiences altogether.

According to many music retail specialists, "the typical Buena Vista Social Club consumer is a Caucasian between 35 and 55 who has heard about the album through the Wenders documentary, public radio or newspapers" (Perna 2005, 248). Thus, the music is marketed to appeal to a white audience intrigued by the exotic, "world music" appeal of the Buena Vista Social Club.

Through the passage of legislation, the American government has denied its citizens access to Cuba for many years, imposing travel restrictions and the embargo. This legislation "transformed the island into a tropical mystery situated in the realm of the 'unknown.' Cuba represents a 'paradise lost' of American tourism and a 'paradise found' for Europeans, who feel they have the delicacies of the island to themselves" (Neustadt 2002, 149). I argue that it is important to not ignore the critical substance of contemporary Cuban music amidst broader efforts to market the island to tourists. In the music of Cuban timba and hip-hop lies an important commentary on Cuban society during the Special Period, and if one is to discern the significance of the music as a means to the voices of younger Cubans, one must perceive the difference between the older and newer styles.

Imagery associated with the Buena Vista Social Club album lacks the same critical element found in Cuban timba and hip-hop. The images used as artwork on the album focus on the representation of a Cuba from the past. "[The album] displays photographs in muted tones with only traces of color. On the cover, a man who appears

to be [singer] Ibrahim Ferrer walks down an Old Havana street. The back cover features a rusted 1950s automobile" (Neustadt 2002, 147). The images are characterized by a "classic" look, representing a snapshot of Cuba that is specifically indicative of the prerevolutionary era. This imagery carries over to the lyrics themselves. The songs are traditional and relatively simple musically. "The lyrics encompass the themes of love and lost love (in several cases the lyrics function as a picaresque double entendre), the Cuban countryside, spirituality, and work" (Neustadt 2002, 140). While the Buena Vista Social Club album does incorporate lyrics that evoke sex, the distinction between this evocation and that found on timba albums is that there is a difference of degree and tone. In the song, "Chan Chan," for example, a man expresses his desire to have intercourse with a woman. This act is expressed through the double-entendre of sitting on a log:

> *Clean the straw off the road*
> *Because I want to sit down*
> *On the log that I see*
> *Without clearing the road I can't arrive*

"Whereas *soneros* often evoke double-entendre ironically to sing of sex, *timberos* do so more blatantly and directly" (Neustadt 2002, 146). The imagery evoked does not express the same ambivalence or critique that is so often an element of contemporary musical styles.

Wim Wenders' documentary about the group employs similar imagery of a classic era in Cuba. Wenders "filmed the concerts in a washed color that is near black-

and-white, tinted with pastels. But he filmed… the Havana street scenes, the interviews and the recording session in a hypersaturated color that captures the visual sensuality of the place" (Watrous 1999, 2.22). This conscious decision to capture the footage in this way gives the music and the musicians a vitality and sensuality that is meant to create an appealing sense of cultural authenticity. The film is significant in the manner in which it is meant to appeal to the pathos of the audience and the consumer, creating a sense of empathy among the audience for these aged musicians whose careers have only recently been revived.

Wenders also includes footage of two concerts in the documentary—one in Amsterdam and one in Carnegie Hall. He especially focuses on the reactions of the *soneros* to the bustling commercial atmosphere of New York City, revealing their fascination with intense consumerism, the opposite of the reality that they have known so long on the island. By contrasting the affluence and grandeur of New York City with the decrepit, crumbling state of Havana in the film, Wenders creates a positive view of the capitalistic opportunities available to the Cuban musicians. A Cuban street mural in the film reads "Creemos en sueños" (We believe in dreams), "a text that originally intended to evoke the socialist dream of a more just society. Presented in the context of the *Buena Vista Social Club*, however, Wenders rewrites the socialist slogan into a version of the 'American dream' of financial success and fame" (Neustadt 2002, 153). While the musicians take in the consumerism around them in New York City, they too are

commodified into products to be consumed by the world market. This creates a phenomenon centered on the commodification of the group. In addition, unlike contemporary styles of Cuban music such as timba and hip-hop that critique the Cuban experience, the Buena Vista Social Club is largely depoliticized in the film. "Though Mr. Wenders studiously avoided the political throughout the film, there is an ever-present sense of the continual dance that goes on to avoid the obvious political questions and of the Cubans' own awareness of the penalties for criticizing their government" (Watrous 1999, 2.22). The old musicians, at least in the film, do not critique the hardships of Cuban society. This contrasts with the much more politicized content of contemporary musical styles on the island.

1.6 Inciting critique

It is important to note that younger Cuban musicians came under the radar of the international community and scholars relatively recently largely due to the attention given to the Buena Vista Social Club. These musicians were recording and performing in Cuba, and they were waiting in the wings for their chance to be recognized. Once the spotlight was placed on the older *soneros*, these younger musicians began to gain attention. This attention constitutes a part of a much larger phenomenon of commodification of Cuban music during the Special Period. Ultimately, the music of the younger musicians was appropriated by the government as a cultural export, acting as a stand-alone product as well as a marketing tool for Cuba's developing cultural tourism

industry. In a sense Cuban musicians today serve as cultural ambassadors, especially when they tour the world, providing a glimpse into the music and culture that exists on the island.

Not only did the Buena Vista Social Club illuminate other, more contemporary styles of music in Cuba, but it is also served as a source of critique in the music of its younger counterparts. The nostalgia evoked by the Buena Vista Social Club for prerevolutionary times points toward a period when the United States asserted its dominance over Cuba. Ariana Hernández-Reguant asserts that the Buena Vista Social Club evokes "imperialist nostalgia" for prerevolutionary Cuba, a nostalgia that neglects the inequalities created on the island by American intervention. Hernández-Reguant further argues that by isolating selective parts of Cuban history, the film presents an image of Cuba that Americans choose to remember. This image is "not one of right-wing dictatorships, American weapons, and bloodshed, but of smiles, music, *mulatas*, and cigar-smoking peasants" (Moore 2006, 132). By focusing on this specific imagery the film and the album depict a Cuba where the United States wielded a great deal of power. This conscious choice of what to present and market evokes memories of a time when the United States asserted hegemonic control over Cuba.

By evoking this earlier period, the Buena Vista Social Club phenomenon also contributed to a reinvestment in cultural tourism, an industry that thrived in Cuba during the prerevolutionary period. Following the signing of the Platt Amendment in

1901, which established the foundation of the close relationship between Cuba and the United States following the Spanish-American War, Cuba became known internationally as an exotic tourist destination, a place where Americans, especially, could escape to enjoy themselves. As Cuban historian Louis A. Pérez, Jr. notes, "Cuba was constructed intrinsically as a place to flaunt conventions, to indulge unabashedly in fun and frolic in bars and brothels, at the racetrack and the roulette table, to experiment with forbidden alcohol, drugs, and sex" (Pérez 1999, 187). Cities such as Havana became the centers of such activity on the island.

As American musicians gained exposure to Cuban styles primarily between the 1920s and 1950s, Cuban music, such as mambo, thrived in the North American market, catering to northern tastes. Music from Cuba was a "pervasive force in the development of popular dancing in the United States. North American appropriation of Cuban musical idioms was accompanied by adaptation and alteration, largely commercial transformations to meet local market conditions" (Pérez 1999, 198). In very much the same way, Americans consume the Buena Vista Social Club and other forms of Cuban music today. The Buena Vista Social Club's success brought Cuba back into the consciousness of the American and international consumer. Producer Juan de Marcos González believes that the Buena Vista Social Club was important for Cuban music in general, as it signified a reclaiming of Cuba's position as one of the top sources of Latin music. "Before the 1960s, we were the best sellers of tropical Cuban music in the world.

Even in America, we Cubans were quite famous, with people like Machito, Desi Arnaz, Chico O'Farrill, who were performing in New York and writing for films in Hollywood" (Foehr 2001, 160). In a sense the island was chic and exciting again, and many foreigners traveled to the island in an effort to experience its music and culture portrayed on the Buena Vista Social Club album and documentary.

During the Special Period, Cuba was forced to experiment with capitalistic ventures in an effort to generate revenue that was no longer being supplied by the Soviet Union. A 1991 report by Fidel Castro to the Fourth Congress of the Communist Party "indicated that there was an urgent need to stimulate foreign earnings, with a strong emphasis on culture, as well as a new need for 'self-financing' of enterprises rather than centrally planned 'budget financing'" (Ferguson 2003, 9). Thus, the export of Cuban music and touring of Cuban musicians would be primarily funded by international record labels, which could bring Cuban musicians to an international stage. This dissemination of Cuban music in foreign markets would help to advertise the island as a tourist destination as well. Essentially the government utilized the Buena Vista Social club as a marketing tool to attract individuals abroad to the island. "The international prominence and marketability of the arts, [comprising the pan-cultural transatlantic *nuevo boom cubano* (new Cuban boom)], has reduced the importance of ideological considerations for the Cuban government" (Fernandes 2006, 11). By recognizing the tremendous possibilities that music could bring to the island

economically, the government used the success of the Buena Vista Social Club as a model for marketing other Cuban artists and disseminating their music internationally in an effort to promote foreign investment and consumption of Cuban music.

As the island struggled economically, however, the island's reinvestment in cultural tourism brought about negative consequences for Cuban society. *Jineterismo*, or prostitution, flourished, in which prostitutes sell their bodies predominantly to foreign tourists to earn money. This prostitution serves as a major source of critique in contemporary Cuban timba and hip-hop. In addition, the Buena Vista Social Club musicians are perceived to be the product of a mass commodification that exoticized and Othered the *soneros* and their music. The debate is racialized as well, as many of the musicians in the group were black. Thus, the record labels, with the approval of the government, created an image of the old, relatively poor black Cuban to be packaged and sold.

The juxtaposition of white American Ry Cooder with the primarily black members of the Buena Vista Social Club also situated Cooder as the triumphant, empathetic white American salvaging the musicians from obscurity on the island. Musicians on the island recognized that this one-sided, racialized construction of their identity and music was detrimental to the world's understanding of the reality of life in Cuba as a whole. Anthony DeCurtis, a New York-based writer who has followed trends in popular music for decades, asserts that the Buena Vista Social Club album came at the

right time, as Americans who sought authenticity began listening to "world music," and the culture of Cuba, and Latin America in general, was very popular. He also believes that the music was "'perfectly packaged for the American market' by Cooder and Wenders" (Robinson 2000, C.01). This "perfect packaging" rested on the creation of a myth, in which the music was forced into a model for people to consume. Juan de Marcos González stated, "If you want to sell something, you have to create a myth…. The story that a white guy came to Cuba to discover these musicians, this music—it's very comfortable. But it's a myth. We don't need any American to come here and discover us" (Robinson 2000, C.01). The mythologizing of the group and its commodification created an allure out of what was foreign, and specifically to the American audience, forbidden. Americans were able to access the music of the group through international record labels, allowing them to navigate the embargo and lay claim to a music and a product that their government had consistently told them for years was off limits.

The success of the Buena Vista Social Club illuminated the opportunity for social advancement for musicians despite the hardships of the Special Period. Essentially, through the commercialization and dissemination of Cuban music worldwide, Cuban musicians gained social mobility. The Buena Vista Social Club musicians were able to afford cars, cell phones, and nice clothes with the profit they accrued from their album sales and international tours. Singer Ibrahim Ferrer, now deceased like several members

of the group, was able to move from his cramped apartment in Wim Wenders' documentary to a larger apartment. "[Producer Juan] de Marcos said that [singer Ibrahim] Ferrer, with his share of the royalties from the Buena Vista album and the success of his own CD, [had] become a millionaire" (Robinson 2000, C.01). While the opportunities afforded the musicians served as a democratizing force for them, providing them with more resources and a more comfortable standard of living, the government still exerts control over the musicians by taxing them. Although musicians are given independence to tour internationally and arrange record contracts with foreign record labels, the Cuban government restricts the profits that the musicians can make, taxing the artists typically between 10 and 50 percent (Moore 2006, 236). The wealth of the members of the Buena Vista Social Club is not indicative of the reality of all Cuban musicians. Thus, when other musicians are making considerably less profits, the fees imposed by the government limits the extent to which musicians can benefit. This disparity in wealth is a reality on the island and is a common part of the debate and critique among contemporary Cuban musicians.

1.7 Buena Vista *and the globalization of Cuban music*

The Buena Vista Social Club phenomenon shed light on other styles of Cuban music on the island, including timba and hip-hop, but it also illuminated the broader hybrid economic model Cuba adopted during the Special Period. Experiments with capitalism, particularly through the dissemination of Cuban music abroad, resulted in

transnational consumption. By entering into foreign markets, Cuba became much more globalized. Many contemporary Cuban musicians and fans believe that "the exaltation of the *Buena Vista* musicians has taken place at the expense of younger contemporary musicians who are on the vanguard of Cuban popular music" (Neustadt 2002, 154). Some artists assert that one should not completely ignore contemporary musical styles by turning back the clock and drawing on international, particularly American, nostalgia for an exotic Cuba. Many hope that one day they will receive the same attention that the Buena Vista Social Club received. When this happens, there is the possibility that the outside world will gain a better understanding of the contemporary Cuban experience.

I argue that worldwide dissemination of contemporary musical styles on the island is essential in order for the world to comprehend the Cuban Revolution in the context of the Special Period. Instead of fetishizing the consumption of old Cuban music, which is certainly significant in its contributions to Cuban musical history and development, it is imperative that the world come to recognize the complex and contradictory nature of what it means to be Cuban. By looking at contemporary timba and hip-hop more closely, for example, the world can begin to understand the feelings of ambivalence that arise during periods of instability or transition. By learning about the attitudes of average Cuban musicians, one can gain a sense of the sentiments of the masses, especially how they perceive the Revolution and how they envision the future of the island, especially following Fidel Castro.

2. Critique in Contemporary Cuban Music

Given the economic crisis faced by Cuba following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Cuban government realized that its people needed to be actively involved in the generation of new income. Cubans were living in a Special Period, where unique circumstances called for new solutions and flexibility in the manner in which Cubans lived. With the loss of such tremendous subsidy from the Soviet Union, survival was the primary issue. During a period of such great hardship, Cubans became actively involved in critique of their society. The new economic conditions forced the government to recognize these challenges, as it needed the active support of a younger generation of Cubans who were somewhat distanced from the original goals and ideals of the Revolution. As a result, Cubans were encouraged to be vocal about the current state of affairs as part of a redefinition and appropriation of a "new Revolution" by the younger generation.

Despite the hardships faced by Cuban people, the opportunity to express ambivalences gave younger Cubans a sense of ownership of the transition of the island into a new, post-Soviet era. The youth were viewed as active participants in this transition, and they used popular media and the arts, especially music, as a means of offering their critiques and visions for Cuba's future. This critique is significant, as it offers a glimpse into the concerns faced by common Cubans on an everyday basis. Young artists from the *barrios* use primarily timba and hip-hop as a vehicle for

expressing their thoughts about the state of Cuba. After all, this music is *the* music of the Cuban youth, and it serves as a means of sharing concerns and critiques with fellow youth. Rock and *nueva trova*, a style with roots following the triumph of the Revolution in the 1960s, also serve as avenues for critique in contemporary society.

For the first time, musicians were allowed to express their views on a variety of themes that seemed to plague the Cuban people. Some of these themes were issues that had been around for many years, specifically prior to the Revolution, while other concerns were related more closely to the conditions and anxieties created by the Special Period. The challenges that originated prior to the Revolution were certainly amplified by the tensions of the post-Soviet era. The government's recognition of the importance of the participation of the Cuban youth reflected openness to the inclusion of new ideas. Without the support of the youth, the Revolution could not conceivably envision a future. Thus, the younger generation proved to be instrumental in the illumination and open discussion of challenges that Cuban society needed to address in order to survive. This critique, unless overtly critical of the government, was not viewed as being outside of the Revolution. Instead, the encouragement of the expression of critique through music was seen as a form of patriotism, as it signified an active engagement with the goals and future of the Revolution on the island.

Not only did contemporary musical styles allow for the expression of ambivalences about Cuban society, but they also created an outlet of release for the

Cuban people. Due to the hardships of the Special Period, including food shortages and power outages, Cubans used music as a means of surviving from day to day. It created a form of diversion from daily obstacles, and it allowed Cubans to forget, at least temporarily, about the pressures of life on the island. Public concerts in the *barrios* became the spaces of dance and song, in addition to sites of critical discussion. Thus, engagement with the ambivalences of the Cuban people through music was part of a broader movement of popular participation. In these dramatic spaces, Cuban musicians facilitated public interaction, in which survival became a community effort. Concerts and dances attracted Cubans into public spaces in which they could enjoy each other's company while also engaging, often subconsciously, in a significant form of activism.

I will use this chapter as a means of exploring the various themes on which Cuban musicians focused and continue to focus. I will conduct a textual analysis of specific songs. These texts are important indicators of the sentiments of the Cuban people. Through this analysis, I hope to gain a sense of the manner in which lyricists voice their critique. For example, is this criticism explicit or does it take more figurative forms? Also, why is the choice of how to approach one's criticism significant? What does this say about censorship and the relationship between the state and the Cuban people? Also, I will analyze commentary made by musicians outside of their music to understand their opinions as well. I will cover several themes covered in contemporary Cuban music, including drugs and violence, authenticity and representation, exile,

poverty, race, gender, prostitution, globalization, and revolution. I will also attempt to reconcile the nationalistic messages that coexist with messages of ambivalence and critique. In addition, I will analyze the unique Cuban identity retained in these styles of music, despite being largely influenced by foreign, specifically American, musical forms, including jazz and rap. The fact that a variety of themes and issues are addressed in the music reflects a new consciousness and a hope to enact reform through music, reform in which Cubans are currently engaged and will continue to be involved.[1]

2.1 Drugs and violence

2.1.1 Cuba's war against drugs

Prior to the triumph of Fidel Castro in 1959, Cuba was an exotic destination where tourists could come to enjoy themselves and engage in gambling and the consumption of drugs and alcohol. Cuba was perceived as a place where foreigners could escape to engage in the vices that they craved. Following 1959, however, the new Cuban government launched a campaign to crack down on establishments that catered to such activity. Castro interpreted these vices as a polluting element of Cuban society that had the potential to impede the success of the Revolution. Drugs, in particular, became the focus of the government's efforts, and officials went to great lengths to

[1] Elsewhere I have written a website condensing these parts related to timba, hip-hop, and other contemporary Cuban musical styles. This website may be found at http://www.duke.edu/~ejo11/FinalProject/FinalProject.

combat the drug trade, a trend that continues in Cuba today. Despite being along the route between the primary world drug producers and the United States, the principal consumer, Cuba is active in its attempt to keep drugs from entering the island. Although drug traffickers often throw packaged narcotics on their way to the United States off boats that land on Cuba's shores, officials sink these drugs in the sea. The Cuban government also organizes operations with the Interior Ministry, the Armed Forces, and the national customs to prevent the drug trade on the island ("Cuba Spends A Lot to Fight Drugs" 2005).

2.1.2 Cuban music and drugs

While the government has gone to great lengths to prevent the trafficking of drugs in Cuba, drugs still infiltrate communities throughout Cuba, often found in the *barrios*, becoming a part of underground street culture. While Cuban musicians from these *barrios* are aware of the presence of these drugs, there is a relative absence of references to these drugs in the lyrics of contemporary musical styles in Cuba, including timba and hip-hop. Researcher Margaux Joffe asserts that "[t]he initial content of Cuban rhymes alluded to drugs, guns, and gangs, all realities of American rappers, but ones that did not exist in Cuba.... Cuban rap… has since evolved into a unique musical expression known as hip-hop Cubano" (Joffe 2005, 3). The drugs that are often a large part of American street culture and American hip-hop are largely absent in Cuba. This creates a style of music that centers on other elements and critiques of Cuban society.

By not incorporating drug references into their lyrics, Cuban artists create a style of hip-hop that starkly contrasts with the gangster rap that is popular in the United States. Cubans are not able to afford the luxuries of their American counterparts. Thus, when Cuban artists rap about social justice and racial equality, "'they do it for a love of the music, 'cause they're not really getting much from it. They're not getting the Bentleys or the big diamonds [or the expensive drugs]—that's not going to happen in Cuba'" (Wunderlich 2005, 72). While some Cuban youth may obtain marijuana on the black market, drugs are not an everyday presence in Cuba. Thus, it is important to note that most Cuban lyrics deal with a reality of Cuba where drugs are not a main concern.

2.1.3 Violence

When considering Cuba's history since the revolution, the island nation has not had the same violence and bloodshed on a national level that characterized much of Latin America during the same period. This general absence may be attributed to the control the Castro dictatorship has exerted over the Cuban people. Dissident musicians, especially, are faced with the threat of imprisonment and violence if they directly criticize the government. As a result, artists often subtly employ critique in music. In addition, violence becomes a subject when discussing the exile community as well as Cuban rap, two topics that I will address in this section.

2.1.4 The exile community

Following the reemergence of Cuban music with the Buena Vista Social Club, the anti-Castro Cuban exile community grew hostile towards the dissemination of the work of contemporary Cuban musicians. Through a relatively violent, outspoken effort, exiles boycotted tours of Cuban musicians in the United States and threatened radio stations playing the music of Cuban musicians. This community believed that the Castro regime would only benefit financially from the spread of Cuban music abroad, and thus expressed vehement opposition.

In March 1997, a Spanish-language radio station in Miami, Tropical 98.3, began playing music by contemporary Cuban pop stars, including artists such as Isaac Delgado and Los Van Van. Station director Zummy Oro was forced to respond to various forms of protest from the exile community, including telephone calls and public protests outside the station. "[F]our days after the new playlist was aired, the station was evacuated, having received a bomb threat" (Brenneman 2004, 165). In order to protect its employees, the station pulled the Cuban artists from its playlist, ultimately forced to censor their music.

Numerous other violent exile responses have occurred since this incident. In 1999, the Latin Grammys were moved from Miami to Los Angeles after opposition was expressed by Cuban exiles who learned of the participation of several Cuban artists. In addition, a performance by Los Van Van at American Airlines Arena the same year was

heavily protested, as "thousands of demonstrators showed up, throwing rocks, batteries, cans and bottles at those entering the arena" (Brenneman 2004, 166). This violent opposition reflects a discord between members of the Cuban exile community and Cubans on the island, illuminating the complexities of Cuban identity. Thus, Cuban musicians must not only be aware of potential obstacles to expression on the island, but off the island as well.

2.1.5 Rap and violence

Although hip-hop in Cuba was inspired by the American hip-hop and rap culture that often dealt with issues of violence and drugs, many Cuban hip-hop artists, including exile rap group Orishas, intentionally do not glamorize these subjects. Orishas rapper Yotuel distinguishes himself from his American rap counterparts by commenting, "'Like American rap artists, we too come from a marginalized world.... [B]ut where we differ is our lyrics.... When a rapper gets up onstage they're like a professor; they are delivering a message and that's a responsibility'" (Leonin 2000). Orishas refuses to inherit the destructive elements of the American rap style. The group members do not try "to be pimps or gangsters; there is even a song on their second album about women's rights ("Mujer")" (Malik 2005). Thus, there is a conscious rejection of violence, with the aim of not encouraging it.

2.2 Authenticity and representation

Music in Cuba lies at the core of contemporary popular culture. Current styles including timba and hip-hop are disseminated often on a very local level through live performances. As a result of the economic pressure the American embargo places on Cuba, most Cubans cannot afford to buy CDs. Instead, music is a currency of the streets, shared and enjoyed by people in a public setting. Through both timba and hip-hop, artists are able to express themselves in a manner that captures the realities of the everyday in Cuba. This work is significant musically and lyrically, and it also is important to understand the visual representations of this music. I will use this section as a means of exploring the discourse of popular culture as it relates to these contemporary forms of Cuban music.

2.2.1 Hip-Hop and authenticity

Since the success of the Buena Vista Social Club in the late 1990s, many Cubans on the island have argued that the genres of music that capture the true experience of Cuba today are timba and hip-hop. These styles employ critique and often attempt to distance themselves from the nostalgic, exotic, pre-Revolution notion of Cuba that is so often presented to the international community. Thus, there is a conscious emphasis on the Cuba of today that faces struggle, rather than the utopian, depoliticized version of Cuba that is marketed to the outside.

Ariel Díaz, a Cuban journalist who covers the hip-hop scene in Cuba, asserts that individuals outside of Cuba only know of its aesthetic beauty and its traditional music. He states, "This is important music, but it doesn't show the real Cuba, you know?.... But when you hear hip-hop, you know exactly what is happening in Cuba'" (Foehr 2001, 36). When considering this assertion, one must consider its implications. Hip-hop artists are concerned about expressing the authenticity of their music within the context of Cuba today, as they hope to establish the relevance of their work and use their art as a vehicle for effecting social change and creating social consciousness.

Thus, the more critical current styles constitute an element of a contemporary popular culture in Cuba that aims at improving society and improving upon the weaknesses of the Revolution. The protest or critique that is voiced is done in an effort to strengthen and affirm the Revolution. Even the Cuban government has addressed the significance of hip-hop, citing it as an important contribution of the youth to the Revolution. "[I]n 1998 Abel Prieto, the minister of culture, officially declared rap 'an authentic expression of *Cubanidad*' and began nominally funding [an] annual rap festival" (Wunderlich 2005, 73). Ultimately, the Cuban government realizes that the youth are the future of the Revolution, and its voice must be acknowledged in order to preserve popular support for the Revolution.

2.2.2 Timba: Voice from the *barrio*

In addition to Cuban hip-hop, timba also raises questions of relevance, including issues surrounding race, gender, prostitution, and identity. Timba originated in the *barrios* of Cuba. The group NG (Nueva Generación) La Banda, one of the early pioneers of timba music, came from this environment and employed popular street slang into their lyrics. They often incorporated critiques of racism into their music, providing commentary on the Afro-Cuban experience on the island. The group became popular among working-class black youth and analyzed the supposed "racial democracy" that exists in Cuba. In a 1993 song entitled "Búscate un congelador, camará," the group addresses the difficulties of interracial marriage in Cuba:

> *Why do you pretend otherwise? It is obvious*
> *that you cannot stand that she is mine*
> *You greet me without looking me in the eye*
> *and showing your hypocrisy*
> *She is white, I am black*
> *the taboos of racism are a thing of the past*
> *the values I sponsor*
> *conquered her caresses and kisses*
> *Chill out compañero* (Hernández-Reguant 2006, 255).

These lyrics question the persisting racial prejudice in Cuban society, offering a desire for the racial democracy Cubans have idealized for many years. Another popular group in the early 1990s, La Charanga Habanera, expressed criticism of the tourist industry in Cuba, as it led to prostitution, or *jineterismo*. The band's 1996 album, *Para que se entere la Habana*, features controversial songs such as "El temba" [The rich guy] and

"La turística" [The tourist-minded girl]. "This album was actually banned in its entirety by the government for a time, in part because of its content and in part because its cover art consists largely of a U.S. hundred-dollar bill" (Moore 2002, 68). This event brings to mind the reality that the manner in which the music is visually represented is equally as significant as the words that are offered through the songs themselves.

2.2.3 Visual representations of Cuban music

This emphasis on the visual contributes immensely to the manner in which the music is constructed and perceived as a whole within the structure of popular culture. Early timba groups, especially La Charanga Habanera, were seen as being flashy, an image that reflected the intensity and aggressiveness of the timba style. The image of the hip-hop artist in Cuba, however, grew to be a topic of immense interest to scholars studying Cuban music. At hip-hop festivals and performances, Cuban rappers developed their own distinct style of Cuban hip-hop. Many artists appropriate Che Guevara as a symbol of inspiration in their work. Thus, many artists are seen wearing Che clothing to show their investment in his philosophies and revolutionary messages.

Ariel Díaz acknowledges that the content and style of Cuban rap is constantly evolving. "'In the beginning people wanted to dress in Nike. Now they like to dress in Che T-shirts. They try to find an identity so, when you see them, you know that is Cuba.... Now they want to be Cubans…. They want to be different than the United States'" (Foehr 2001, 34). This statement suggests the nationalism of the artists as well as

an image constructed in opposition to the United States, which may clarify to some extent the Cuban government's embrace of hip-hop. When adopting the Che image, one must understand that the discourse surrounding Che is brought into the hip-hop discourse, and these images become powerful symbols of the music's potential.

2.3 Immigration and exile

Following Fidel Castro's takeover of Cuba and his ultimate announcement of his communist plan for Cuba in 1961, many Cubans, mostly of the middle and upper classes, left the island as exiles, finding homes primarily in the United States. Large exile populations were established in Miami, New York, and New Jersey. These individuals were suspicious of the change the new regime would bring to Cuba, and they immigrated north to establish a new life for themselves. During this period, the United States sponsored Operation Pedro Pan, where thousands of Cuban children were flown to the United States unaccompanied by their parents, creating a new generation of Cuban-American youth.

Over the course of the Revolution, Cubans left the island for various reasons, including poor economic conditions, repression, and a lack of freedom of expression. Jazz saxophonist and clarinetist Paquito D'Rivera, famous for his work with the Cuban band Irakere, sought asylum in the United States so that he could pursue his music more freely. Other Cubans left in 1980 during the Mariel boatlift, an event where Cubans made a mass exodus for Florida in boats with the consent of the government. During

the early 1990s people known as "balseros" left the island in rafts to escape the poverty brought to Cuba by the Soviet collapse.

All of these periods of emigration from Cuba deeply impacted the manner in which Cubans both on and off the island created music, especially the themes that they incorporated into their work. Music of the Special Period particularly reflects the ambivalence that Cubans have about exile. This legacy of immigration is a constant presence, as Cubans on the island recognize the absence of those who left.

2.3.1 Collective sadness and *nueva trova*

During the early period of the Revolution, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s, a style of music took hold in Cuba detailing the experience of living in the Revolution. Known as *nueva trova*, this socially conscious form of music focused on the trials of Cuban life. Artists including Pablo Milanés and Silvio Rodríguez became national heroes for their music and were seen as a necessary cultural component of the Revolution.

These *trovadores* continue to write music and perform today. In his 2000 album *Los Días de Gloria*, Pablo Milanés' piece "Exodo" speaks of the intense collective sadness Cubans on the island have when remembering their friends who left Cuba. In many cases families were divided up, and people lost contact with one another. After hearing Milanés' song at a public concert in Havana, Cuban exile and scholar Dalia J. Llera comments, "Tears run down my face. I look around me and I see other tears and other

voices singing along with Pablo; I feel a profound bond between 'those of us who left and those who stayed.'" The lyrics of the song capture the sadness of separation caused by the exile of so many Cubans:

> *Where are the friends*
> *I had yesterday*
> *What happened to them?*
> *Where did they go?*
> *I am so sad.*
>
> *Wherever they are*
> *I greet them and tell them*
> *that I love them,*
> *that I have wished*
> *more than one time*
> *that they return with me*
> *to die* (Llera 2003).

This song serves as a reminder of the longing many Cubans on and off the island have to reconnect with one another. Thus, an element of the discourse related to immigration in contemporary Cuban music centers on a desire to see members of the diasporic community in the United States again.

2.3.2 Rap on and off the island

Given the departure of many Cuban musicians, there are two different communities of artists: those on the island and those in exile. The rap group Orishas, based in Paris, is an internationally known exile group. Some artists on the island criticize exile groups, particularly Orishas, claiming that their music does not represent music on the island. "Once abroad, the group made hits… by adding Cuba's beloved

salsa and rumba beats to their music. As their singles climbed the foreign charts, Cuban rappers back home criticized them for selling out to commercial pressures to evoke Cuban nostalgia" (Wunderlich 2005, 66). This negotiation between Cuban artists on and off the island about what is authentic and inauthentic Cuban music is an ongoing debate.

In an effort to combat notions of Cuba as the stereotypical exotic paradise, some rap groups on the island appropriate lyrics that point to the immigration crisis. These artists also employ this theme in their public performances. In 2001 the group Reyes de la Calle wore flip-flops and broad-brimmed straw hats at a performance. The three members sat in a large blown-up inner tube and sang about the *balseros*. "The contrast between the frivolous beach paraphernalia and the serious theme of the balseros, who face the treacherous journey to Miami… underlines the superficiality of imagery that portrays Cuba as a fun Caribbean resort" (Fernandes 2006, 95). This act demonstrates the tension between the nostalgic view of Cuba and the hard reality of life on the island for its people. Exiles escape this reality physically, and their separation from Cubans on the island creates a tension as well.

2.3.3 Timba in exile

There are many timba bands in exile, including Tiempo Libre, Manolin "El Medico de la Salsa," and the Cuban Timba All-Stars. These artists often make reference to the immigration experience, as they are a product of that experience. Timba is often

seen as a genre that creates a transnational bond across borders, linking the exile community with the Cuban community on the island. Recalling an NG La Banda concert in Miami, group leader José Luis "El Tosco" Cortés recalls how his group related to the Cuban-American crowd. "'There, NG stopped the traffic.... As I am the music of the *balseros* (rafters), I am from their times, the *balseros* have been to my concert to sing and dance what they've brought with them from Cuba'" (Perna 2005, 284). This concert reflects a shared experience, as Cubans who successfully leave the island and those who do not still understand the subject in the same way. This shared understanding is due to the fact that both groups were once in Cuba together, looking at immigration from the same vantage point.

The exile timba band Tiempo Libre, based out of Miami, released its second album in 2006 entitled *Lo Que Esperabas*. On the album, the band performs a cover of the classic Cuban song, "A Bayamo en Coche." Bayamo is a historic city in the eastern part of Cuba that people traveled to in horse and carriage, alluding to an idyllic moment. In the second half of the song the chorus is modified to, "Ahora voy a Miami en bote"—and now I am going to Miami by boat. A rap section follows that enumerates priceless things that the Cuban exile carries—dance, music, and rum. The song also praises the lack of censorship in the United States. Jorge Gomez, the band's musical director explains, "Our intent with this song was not only to reinterpret it musically, but also give it a new, contemporary twist in the lyrics and sound—something that will certainly

speak to all Cubans who have left the island" ("Interview with Jorge Gomez" 2006). Ultimately, there is an effort to create a message that is universal to the exile community, and in general, all Cubans.

2.4 Revolution and reform

The Cuban Revolution permeates all aspects of Cuban society, especially contemporary popular music. The music created is considered to be part of the Revolution, and the themes and ideas of this work are all framed within the scope of this struggle. Critique voiced in genres of music of the Special Period such as timba and hip-hop is significant, as it is part of a larger project to reform the Revolution in its current state and address the ambivalences of marginalized people on the island.

In addition to this investment in reform and improvement of Cuban society, nationalism is a primary theme throughout popular music today. Ultimately, many Cuban musicians express their loyalty to the nation, despite their criticisms. National heroes and icons serve as a source of pride for Cuban musicians. Thus, a unique dynamic appears where simultaneous celebration and dissatisfaction are manifested in the music. This reflects the deep ambiguity of what it means to be Cuban, especially in a modern context where many young Cubans are somewhat removed from the original goals of the Revolution.

2.4.1 Enacting reform through critique

The unique circumstances of the Special Period in Cuba prompted the creation of an environment where more critical artistic ideas could enter the public sphere. The government began to interpret more and more music as a valuable resource that could be utilized to understand the sentiments of ordinary Cubans. This liberalization of the flow of ideas and music was all part of a new philosophy of incorporation and inclusion where Cuban musicians were seen as stakeholders in the future development of the Revolution. "After the late 1990s there were increasing attempts to use the arts as a way of reincorporating and reintegrating the Cuban people into a new hegemonic project, increasingly defined as national rather than revolutionary" (Fernandes 2006, 40). Minister of Culture, Abel Prieto, who worked to give Cuban rap credibility as a valued form of cultural expression in the context of the Revolution, largely supported this shift.

Cuban authorities believed that criticism of social circumstances of the Special Period was permissible, rather than overt mass protest. Within spheres of rappers, especially, there was an effort to make hip-hop an art form that was a credible form of Cuban cultural expression, rather than associating it with American hip-hop. Proponents of Cuban rap framed the art form within a purely Cuban context, hoping to give the government less of an opportunity to crack down on the music. Pablo Herrera, a Cuban hip-hop specialist who taught at the University of Havana, "tried to instill in rappers a more socially responsible outlook—to do away with the materialism that they

were imitating from the north and to deal constructively with the problems facing Cuban society" (Quiroga 2005, 170). Ultimately, there is a conscious effort to deviate from the American content of rap music. This decision results in the employment of critique that alludes to distinct elements of Cuban society and the Revolution during the Special Period.

Many Cuban rappers began to focus on issues that were pertinent to them, such as racism. In his book *Last Dance in Havana*, Eugene Robinson writes of a performance he attends at a club known as the Cabaret Las Vegas, featuring a rap group called Explosión Suprema. The group focuses on issues that Cubans do not normally discuss, such as discrimination by police. "Alert! Discrimination right here… I'm already a criminal to you, simply for being six feet tall and having dark skin… Does the way that I dress bother you that much?… The failures of black people are due to the brutality of whites…" (Robinson 2004, 107). These lyrics indicate a desire of rap artists to expose their frustrations with various elements of Cuban society. The openness of the Special Period facilitates this critique.

2.4.2 Nationalism and the conceptualization of the Revolution

Nationalism, a theme of central importance to the Revolution, plays a large role in contemporary popular music in Cuba, as Cuban artists express pride in their heritage and their struggle. Despite the difficulties faced in Cuban life, this nationalism is a constant presence and it is found in timba and rap music today. The film *Reggaetón: The*

Cuban Revolución analyzes a new style of music that mixes American rap and Jamaican dance hall influences, focusing on the manner in which this genre incorporates Cuban pride, as well as critique. The filmmaker attempts to understand how artists in Santiago de Cuba, a province at the eastern end of the island, reconcile their daily struggles with the Revolution born in their area. It is this negotiation that makes this music significant, as it speaks to the complex duality of life in Cuba.

These styles of music often reflect a loyalty to and responsibility for the Revolution. Thus, despite the problems that appeared during the Soviet collapse, Cubans often voice a close connection to the Revolution that they do not want to abandon. Altering Che Guevara's notion of the *new man*—an individual completely committed to the ideals of the Revolution—Laurie Aleen Frederik evokes the notion of the *Hombre Novísimo*—the even newer man. This *Hombre Novísimo* of the 21st century "upholds a moral stance against capitalist greed and domination, and fights against those who challenge the Revolution and contaminate the *pura cepa* (pure root, pure stock) of Cuban identity" (Frederik 2005, 402). This entity characterizes the spirit of popular music forms in Cuba today, as many artists are loyal to the Revolution and work to preserve aspects of the Revolution's legacy in their own messages.

The *Hombre Novísimo* finds its way into timba lyrics, as young Cubans express pride in their identity. This music appeals to Cubans on the island who have a pride in their heritage and the connotations of that identity, including a connection to the

Revolution. La Charanga Habanera's song "No Estamos Locos," from the album *Tremendo Delirio*, affirms the confidence of the Cuban youth. They sing:

> *We are not crazy*
> *We know what we want*
> *We are Cubans*
> *We will play our music*
> *With an eternal smile*
> *We will conquer the world* (Neustadt 2002, 146-147).

La Charanga Habanera's lyrics reinforce this nationalism and confidence in themselves as a collective. In conclusion, nationalism is employed in contemporary Cuban music, demonstrating allegiance to the Revolution. This music carries the spirit of the Revolution, as it is questioning, critical music that advances new ideas in an effort to reform the social and musical landscape.

2.5 Globalization

Cuba exists in an international, globalized environment. The Platt Amendment of 1901 established the terms of the relationship between the United States and Cuba in the period following the Spanish-American War. After the Revolution, the Soviet Union served as a primary source of resources and financial support. In addition, Cuba has long been a tourist destination that attracts individuals from all over the world, further contributing to the globalized exchange in which the nation participates.

Cuba's music exchange has a long, globalized history as well. The island's music has roots in European and African styles of music. Cuban music made a particular

impact in the United States, especially the mambo dance craze. Conversely, American styles including jazz and rock infiltrated the island's borders, leading to the development of hybrid musical styles. This hybridity is the reality of Cuban music today, as timba combines *son* with American funk, jazz, and rap. American hip-hop inspired the development of Cuban hip-hop. Cuban rock bands are also influenced by the development of American rock. Thus, despite the restriction of commerce between the United States and Cuba, as imposed by the embargo, American musical styles have managed to enter the consciousness of Cuban youth through predominantly illegal means, such as radio waves from Miami and cassettes, creating new opportunities for the sharing of musical ideas and styles. Ultimately, despite the embargo, the United States and Cuba continue to retain a globalized connection.

2.5.1 Prostitution and poverty

Prostitution, in particular, is a concern in Cuba, as many women turn to *jineterismo*, as it is called, to earn money from tourists. A significant product of the newly revived tourist industry was the proliferation of prostitution. The mass introduction of foreign tourists to the Cuban market has a profound impact on the economic and social dynamics of the socialist state. The presence of tourists resulted in a dualism of currency in Cuba, as the introduction of the American dollar was coupled with the domestic peso. The dollar is invaluable to Cubans, most who make very little income. *Jineteras*, who often congregate in areas outside hotels and nightclubs for

tourists, are able to provide not only for themselves, but also for their extended families. The possession of the dollar in contemporary Cuban society is equivalent to greater purchasing power, and essentially, a more comfortable style of living. By establishing relationships with wealthy tourists, Cuban women are offered a sense of hope and possibility in their lives (Codrescu 1998).

Jineterismo in Cuba reflects the interconnectedness of peoples and capital on a global scale. When the Soviet Union dismantled, the newly reformed policy of the Cuban government gave rise to deterritorialization, in which constraints on foreign travel were lifted and tourists flowed back and forth across the island's borders. By offering their bodies to tourists, *jineteras* are a major commodity in the global sex trade—the literal buying and selling of sex across national borders. Driven by inequalities of wealth, these prostitutes seek out well-to-do men who are searching for love, whether for an evening or for a lifetime. In his article "Picking the Flowers of the Revolution," journalist Andrei Codrescu acknowledges that despite a state announcement in 1995 declaring a crackdown on private businesses and prostitution, the reform was never implemented. Ultimately, the participation of Cuban women in *jineterismo* is a clearly defined example of women adapting their roles in order to survive. Codrescu acknowledges that prostitution on the island is a matter of unique ethical dilemma. His piece is revealing in that it exposes the differences between jineteras and other "classic" prostitutes. While they are similar to other prostitutes in that they are imploring capital,

most of them are also eyeing potential boyfriends and husbands who will rescue them from *jineterismo* (Codrescu 1998).

Timba bands and hip-hop groups critique prostitution and the conditions on the island forcing women to resort to this work. La Charanga Habanera's song "Hagamos un chen" (Let's Make a Chen), refers to the *chen*, or exchange, of money for sex. Thus, there is a cultural and economic exchange occurring between the international tourist and the Cuban prostitute. The song parodies the socioeconomic differences characterizing this exchange, as the man asks the woman how he should pay her:

> *And when we do the*
> *chen, chen, chen, chen,*
> *How do you want me*
> *to pay you, baby?*
> *With a check or in cash?* (Neustadt 2002, 151).

"The difference between payment in *cheque* (check) and *efectivo* (cash) marks the different worlds that those involved inhabit. A check is a symbolic representation of money that functions in the tourist's home country but is useless to a Cuban" who does not have a bank account (Neustadt 2002, 151). This prostitution reflects the broader separation between Cuba and other, more advanced commercialized societies. The juxtaposition in this song illustrates the manner in which Cubans were forced to find alternative modes of survival following the Soviet collapse, often depending on money from foreigners.

One of the most popular timba compositions of the 1990s was the song "El temba," written by La Charanga Habanera as well. "This song popularized the term *temba*, meaning a middle-aged man… who has plenty of money and is willing to share it with young women in return for sexual favors. *Tembas* are usually thought of as foreign tourists but can also be wealthier Cubans" (Moore 2006, 130). This song achieved critical success throughout the island, and came to be one of La Charanga Habanera's most popular pieces, as illustrated by the overwhelming response of audiences at public shows featured on the 2006 documentary about the group, *Popular!* "The chorus of 'El temba,' performed in a highly rhythmic, semi-rapped style, tells young women: 'Búscate un temba que te mantenga…pa' que tú goces, pa' que tú tengas" (Go find a *temba* that will support you…so you can enjoy yourself, so you can have things)" (Moore 2006, 130).

In the song the group illuminates the practice of women finding men who can support them financially, as many Cuban women struggle to find jobs that provide enough income to properly support themselves and their families. The figure of the *temba* becomes a way out from the economic struggles of Cubans. Ultimately, desire is commodified in the transaction—the desire of the prostitute to find a wealthy patron and the desire of the patron for sex. By searching for wealthy tourists, especially, Cuban women engage in a complex transnational exchange with unique economic and ethical ramifications.

The song "El temba" makes reference to the sex trade in Cuba, a market that was revived largely due to the economic crisis of the Special Period and the subsequent growth in tourism. The song not only speaks of the sex trade, but it addresses racial conflict in Cuba as well. The closing lines of the song,

> *so you can have*
> *what you had to have*

parody the poem "Tengo" ("I have"), written by Afro-Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén. Guillén was considered to be the black poet of revolution, one who championed the rights of all black Cubans. His poem praises the achievements of blacks under the Revolution. The poem ends with the lines:

> *I have, Yes now I have*
> *a place to work*
> *and to earn*
> *what I to eat must have*
> *I have, just wait and see,*
> *I have what I had to have*

"By transforming the last line of 'Tengo' into 'so that you can have/what you had to have,' [lead singer David] Calzado states that what really counts is an older man with a lot of money" (Perna 2005, 227). Ultimately, Calzado's lyrics question Guillén's vision of the achievements of Afro-Cubans, presenting the reality of the *temba* and sex tourism on the island. The fact that many black Cubans engage in the sex trade illuminates the racial divides created by Cuba's contemporary economy, specifically its investment in cultural tourism. La Charanga Habanera's messages express strong critique of the

conditions that Cubans must endure, especially the conditions forcing them to look for income in ways that are morally compromising. The band's work reflects Cubans' acute sense of problems relating to prostitution, race, and gender in the *barrios* on the island.

The poverty on the island created by the withdrawal of Soviet support forced countless Cubans to find alternate sources of income, either through prostitution or some other black market trade. The island lost subsidies traditionally used on food and other products. The Special Period brought food shortages and long lines for the food that was available. Hunger was a palpable feeling experienced by the majority of Cubans, as they were forced to ration the food that they ate. The seminary timba group NG La Banda released a song during the Special Period called "La soya," or "Soy," that spoke to the manner in which Cubans were forced to adapt to new food shortages, as well as the food substitutes that were introduced in place of the traditional items that people once purchased. A food substitute, known as *picadillo de soya*, or soy hamburger, inspired the song, as it was distributed to the population for several years when the government could not afford real meat. The soy hamburger was a mixture of soy mash with animal blood and entrails, creating a vague taste of meat. In reality, most Cubans were disgusted by this meat substitute. "Open criticism of this food item was impossible in the state-controlled media, so [NG La Banda leader José Luis] Cortés chose instead to praise its virtues in a highly exaggerated manner. Using this approach, discussion of the *picadillo* became a form of parody."

Ladies and gentlemen
what I'm telling you is great news.
Soy hamburger has 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10,
ten advantages over most global diets.
In China they eat soy, in Belgium, in Switzerland, in Holland,
in Japan they eat soy; Cuban hamburger is made of soy too…

Because soy is a food that gets the whole world in shape.
Women look wonderful,
lovely waists, legs that make you fall all over.
I don't know what's going on, but, man,
soy is for good sha-, sha-, sha-sha, sha-sha, shape, shape, shape, shape,
great shape is what soy offers, man.
Peruchín, hear that? Get ready to eat! (Moore 2006, 129-130).

NG La Banda's commentary on how women look wonderful reflects a thinness created by a lack of a proper diet. This lack in food caused frustration, a frustration that was manifested in a popular timba song. The fact that Cortés parodies instead of overtly criticizing illustrates the manner in which Cuban artists engage in a negotiation with the state through their songs. Either by employing parody or figurative language, musicians are able to avoid censorship that certainly would have been brought upon them had they used direct criticism.

2.5.3 Neoliberalism and rap

Many rap artists in Cuba characterize their art form as a form of resistance that aligns itself with the spirit of resistance of the Cuban Revolution. These artists see their work as resistance against the abuses of globalization, as they reject the commodification of their music. The struggle at the center of Afro-Cuban rap parallels the struggle of the

Cuban Revolution. Thus, the messages of Cuban rappers are often associated with the messages of the government. "Images of rebellion and resistance in Cuban rap are drawn into broader geopolitical strategies of black cultural opposition; these are identified with the Cuban Revolution… as the lone voice contesting neoliberalism in a largely capitalist world order" (Fernandes 2006, 120-121). It is for this reason that the government champions rap as an art form important to the Revolution and its advancement. While Cuban rappers are inspired by the work of their American counterparts, rap is used in Cuba to advance the Cuban cause. "While Cuban rappers build networks with U.S. rappers based on race and marginality that transcend national affiliations, they simultaneously generate a critique of global capitalism that allows them to collaborate with the Cuban state" (Fernandes 2006, 122). In this context, the critique of the Cuban youth is not always focused inward on the internal struggles of the island, but rather it is focused externally on the negative effects of globalization and neoliberalism, especially, in their opinion, as advanced by the United States.

2.5.4 American rock in Havana

The styles of music that thrive among the youth in Cuba today are very much influenced by the globalized flow of ideas between the United States and Cuba. Whether it is funk, jazz, rap, or rock, Cubans are constantly learning about American musical styles. Cubans are able to hear American music by listening to radio programs picked up from Miami radio stations or by listening to recordings from America, usually

on cassette or pirated CDs. Just as Cuban music has impacted the American musical consciousness, American music affects the way Cubans make music as well.

While the U.S.-imposed embargo restricts the musical exchange allowed between Cuba and the United States, rare opportunities allow Cuban musicians to perform in the United States and American musicians to perform in Cuba. When these opportunities arise, individuals are exposed to new styles of music, learning from these styles and incorporating them into their own music. In May 2005, the American rock band Audioslave was granted permission to perform in Havana's Anti-Imperialist Plaza. Playing a free concert for a crowd of tens of thousands of Cubans, the band offered a taste of American rock to the audience. Audioslave was the first American rock band to play an outdoor show in Cuba. The band, comprised of three former members of the group Rage Against the Machine, with the exception of singer Chris Cornell, is known for its style of aggressive rock. "An outspoken socialist who co-runs a grass-roots advocacy group, Axis of Justice, [guitarist Tom] Morello... says there was an agreement between Cuba and the U.S. that the focus of this trip would be cultural exchange, not political proselytizing" (Grigoriadis 2005, 10). Despite such an agreement, one must be cognizant of the implications of the band's performance. Its aggressive, critical music parallels the resistance of the Cuban youth. Exposure of Cubans to Audioslave creates an opportunity for global exchange of ideas relating to music and critique.

3. Censorship and Contradiction

When the Cuban state relaxed its restrictions on creative expression during the Special Period it signaled a dramatic social and political change. Instead of outlawing all critical discourse in the arts, specifically music, the government refocused on Castro's call for "everything within the Revolution," a phrase immortalized in his famous 1961 speech, "Words to the Intellectuals." This meant that culture could be created as long as the Revolution maintained supremacy (Delgado 1999, 7). The state established that it was patriotic to express critique of Cuban life if it was delivered with the distinct purpose of reform, not toppling the Revolution for some other economic or ideological alternative. This created the condition within which it became possible to critique the Revolution. In this chapter I explain how this historical context is significant to understanding contemporary Cuban music, as the Cuban government needed the support of its people, specifically the younger generation, as the island lacked financial and physical resources needed to survive.

Yet at the same time, I show how the proliferation and commodification of Cuban music that is critical of the state reflects the consequences of Cuba's recent policy of free speech and open markets. Romanticized images of Cuba associated with the Buena Vista Social Club are crosscut by tensions, ambivalence, and contradictions. These include the strain of defining the Cuban nation as ideologically communist when it is also engaged in the capitalistic free market. Also, Afro-Cuban music is portrayed in

the world market as an idealized racial democracy, although this does not exist in the reality of Cuba's race-stratified society. Finally, I explore the contradictory combination of internal Cuban nationalism with a radical critique of the state by its citizens and by the artists themselves.

The Special Period marked a return to the roots of the Revolution, as Cubans were encouraged to rededicate themselves to the national struggle as it was initially envisioned and championed by revolutionary leader and hero Che Guevara. Guevara said that the growth of revolutionary culture would be the product of the molding of a "new man." In regard to the development of total consciousness of man's social being, Guevara stated, "This will be translated concretely into the reconquering of his true nature through liberated labor, and the expression of his own human condition through culture and art" (Guevara 2003, 372). Guevara's claim became one of the goals of the Cuban Revolution. His hope was that the notion of the "new man" would both inspire and be present in works of art and all creative forms of creative culture. The development of contemporary forms of music in Cuba, including timba, hip-hop, and rock, was a manifestation of this growth in culture.

Timba, in particular, came to be celebrated as a style of music that understood the condition of common Cubans during the Special Period. Timba music's primary focus was its lyrics, which, in turn, were written from the perspective of Cubans who felt marginalized by the Revolution. Many black Cubans, especially, faced racism and often

lacked the economic resources to live comfortably. These individuals speak, through timba, to the reality of everyday life in Cuba, a reality that the government could not hide from in light of the economic crisis. While not all Cubans were overtly critical of the state of Cuba at this time, one could not deny that social problems became apparent, including repression related to poverty, state neglect, racism, and a large underclass.

It is likely that the high visibility of these issues kept government officials from denying Cuban society's social ills through music censorship, a common practice throughout the course of the Revolution prior to the Soviet collapse. Timba artists "discussed subjects that did not appear in news reports: illegal business dealings, the detrimental effects of tourism, and the lack of consumer goods…. For this reason, the public perceived timba as more relevant and meaningful than other popular music" (Moore 2006, 129). In a sense, timba artists were individuals who spoke of the tensions that plagued the island, the tensions that the government did not want to explicitly address.

Yet why would the Cuban government be so willing to relax its censorship practices and risk dissent against the Revolution? Why were artists who were expressing their critiques of Cubans society not subject to the silencing normally enforced by the dictatorship? A primary tension and ironic question that must be addressed is the relaxation of the censorship of artists to accommodate critical voices. In this chapter I will look at the history of censorship in Cuba as well as the broad

implications when censorship is either enforced or eased. In this chapter I examine the contradictions between state policy and marketing of Cuban music. Ultimately, my purpose is to reconcile the official national ideology of the Cuban government and its relationship with the ideology expressed by artists through contemporary popular music, one that both affirms and challenges the official ideology.

3.1 Cuban censorship past and present

A main tension following the Soviet collapse was a change in the way the Cuban government approached censorship. Despite being a dictatorship, the government allowed for a nuanced approach to censorship and more open critique in the arts, suggesting a transformation in the manner in which the state perceived music and other artistic media. To understand this change, one must look at the history of censorship. "Despite recent rumblings of a growing hard line within the world of culture, many Cuban artists today feel that the persecution of the 1970s, dubbed the 'gray decade' for the Soviet-influenced repression of the era, will not be repeated" (Kinetz 2004, E1). At this time the Cuban government was quick to censor any artists who were overtly critical of the government and the Revolution.

The case of poet Herberto Padilla in 1968 is perhaps the most famous violation of freedom of expression on the island since the triumph of the Revolution. Although Padilla was an intellectual who initially supported the Revolution, he received criticism in 1967 after writing a scathing critique of Cuba's cultural bureaucracy in *El Caimán*

Barbudo, discrediting the Cuban writers union and condemning the manner in which Cuban exile Guillermo Cabrera Infante had been kept in the country against his will prior to his departure. The response to this statement was relatively mild, but Padilla caused controversy again in a piece he wrote in 1968 in the same publication arguing that Cuba lacked a constitution and he warned of the dangers of the manner in which the country was governed. In July 1968, Cabrera Infante published a piece criticizing the Revolution, and Padilla was seen as having defended a traitor. This event, combined with poetry Padilla wrote in the book *Fuera del Juego (Out of the Game)* referencing police-sponsored terror and persecution, among other items, led to intense criticism. In January 1971 Padilla read controversial poems in public from a new, unpublished book of poems called *Provocaciones*. Word also got out about a novel he was working on entitled *En mi jardín pastan los héroes (Heroes are grazing in my garden)*, in which Castro was a character. The government ultimately imprisoned Padilla, along with his wife, and tortured him for his actions. The state also forced him to renounce his actions in public. Following the Padilla case, censorship of overt critique of the Revolution essentially became institutionalized. The Padilla case is significant, as it illustrated the height of censorship in Cuba during the 1970s and the repercussions that accompanied direct critique of the government by an artist. (Reed 1991, 99-122. All the factual information in this paragraph comes from this source.)

During this period, however, one also witnesses the popularity of *nueva trova*, a style of folk music that was initially questioned by the Cuban government, as officials were concerned with the aims of the new genre, especially since the style was compared to "protest music" from the United States (Manuel 1987, 174). Although the genre was informed by a tremendous social consciousness and was attuned to sociopolitical issues on the island, it was ultimately embraced because it advanced a more or less favorable view of the Revolution. I argue that contemporary Cuban music is informed by the social consciousness of *nueva trova*, as well as its nationalist sentiments. Perhaps it is for this reason that the Cuban government has allowed for greater critique during the Special Period, as the state recognizes a parallel between nueva trova and newer styles.

In a sense, contemporary timba and hip-hop are modern offshoots of nueva trova. The government may recognize the social awareness of these genres as an attempt to operate and voice opinions within the structure of the Revolution, rather than consciously subverting the state apparatus. As long as artists do not challenge or question the Communist Party or socialism in Cuba, these artists are able to offer criticism as well as self-criticism. In June 1990 Cuba's Community Party called "for 'a broad national debate' about democracy, 'the eradication of bureaucratic mechanisms,' and 'deficiencies' in the economy," some of the areas subject to criticism through the arts (Reed 1991, 166).

Some artists are often arrested as political dissidents for their overt critique. In an effort to avoid this critique, some musicians choose to operate outside of the mainstream music structure in an effort to avoid government regulation. Pedro Luis Ferrer, an older singer who experienced censorship since first voicing his strong critique of Cuban society during the early years of the Special Period, continues to be famous largely through the organic manner in which his music, much of which has been recorded in a home studio, is shared informally among people through cassette tapes. "'It was an experience which marked me profoundly; I learned that the artist is thunder and the people are the wind. I think that it was the best and freest manner in which my music has been distributed—without intermediaries or censorship'" (Navarro 2005, 12). Ferrer's statement suggests that artists raise awareness about different issues, stimulating discourse among the masses, who share and debate the music and its content through informal discussions on the streets and in homes.

Even when the Cuban government censors music and other media from public dissemination, the material is often circulated through underground networks, reflecting the power that musicians have to spur dialogue through their work in public and private settings. The black market trade facilitates the spread of new music, as well as movies and art. Thus, even though Cubans on the island may not have access to these cultural products in the public sphere, they consume them in private, a whole other form of critical education for younger Cubans. This is illustrated by the example of

"Quién Tiró la Tiza?" by the hip-hop group Clan 537, which achieved broad success among youth audiences, despite never being released officially on the island. The title references the classic question asked by a schoolteacher when a student throws chalk from the back of the classroom. The song achieved success throughout Havana, and it was ultimately banned from the airwaves by the government for addressing "racism and inequality, two things that weren't supposed to exist in today's Cuba. 'Who threw the chalk?' the lyric went. 'It was that black kid… *Not* the doctor's son'" (Robinson 2004, 206). The song initially received a great deal of airplay, alarming the government. The song illuminates the broad economic disparity between different groups of Cubans, defying the very communist, egalitarian ideal that the Revolution is meant to embody.

Despite the fact that the government clamped down on the song, the music was made accessible through a broad underground grassroots network. "'You can ask any Cuban if they know that disc,' said Darsi Fernandez Maceira, the representative in Cuba of the Sociedad General de Autores y Editores," an intellectual property management group. "'They do. The demo went through the whole country'" (Kinetz 2004, E1). Since it is difficult to monitor black market exchange, it is apparent that artists' opinions and critiques are dispersed broadly, no matter the stance of the government on the artists' work. This phenomenon reflects the power that the Cuban youth have to mobilize efforts of awareness, providing them with the opportunity to constantly engage with the Revolution and their unique relationship to it.

Despite what may be perceived as youth autonomy, one must be cognizant of the more clandestine ways in which the Cuban government exercises its control over the music being produced by artists. Rap festivals receive considerable government subsidy. As a result, a relationship of dependency is formed, as rap artists must ask for funding from the government and must receive permission to perform, as the government reviews the lyrics of rap artists to ensure that they are not counterrevolutionary. Rappers may be forced to remove offensive language or bold political statements if they want to appear on the radio. "Although they welcome the more prominent role that Cuban rap has achieved through institutionalization, rappers and young Afro-Cubans in general view the state's sponsorship of rap with some suspicion" (Fernandes 2006, 125). This suspicion reflects a feeling of discomfort, in which the artists question the true concerns of the state, as they are cautious of losing a sense of autonomy. The knowledge of government intervention may spark fear and result in self-censorship, a phenomenon that prevents artists from expressing their opinions and views completely. This creates a hegemonic dynamic in which the state continues to exercise its control over artists even though it appears as though it is being open and welcoming of critique through institutionalized support.

The recent case of rock artist Gorki Luis Águila Carrasco reflects the dangers of performing music that is perceived to be a threat by the Cuban government. His case illustrates the risk that artists take in their negotiation with the state, especially if they

may be perceived as having gone too far with their critique. The front man of the punk rock band Porno Para Ricardo was arrested after a concert in 2003 on drug charges, and he was imprisoned with other political dissidents. He was ultimately sentenced to a four-year prison term for drug trafficking, although no evidence was ever presented. "Once after a concert, a secret police officer asked Gorki to clarify what he meant with [the song 'Tan Loco' (So Crazy)], and threatened him that he could get into trouble if he kept singing it" ("Notes to CD" 2004, 227-228). The song may be characterized by the protagonist's, presumably Gorki's, discontent with the state and Fidel Castro: "I've been so crazy all these years, I've told off so many wiseasses, that want to make out of me, a puppet like they want." Artists are forced to decide how far they wish to go with expression of their views and ambivalences, as there are certainly repercussions for those who do not adhere to the government's restrictions on overt critique.

The reality is that Cuban censorship is defined by a conflict between official ideology and reality. The official position of the government is that censorship does not exist on the island (Kinetz 2004, E1). This position is problematic, though, as the government prevents the broad dissemination of music and other media on the radio and television when it deems material to be anti-revolutionary. Artists seen as political dissidents are also imprisoned. Yet, censorship has evolved more into a negotiable, vague concept. "The Cuban government remains surprisingly tolerant of artistic expression," and musicians have been known to tackle issues including prostitution and

racism at hip-hop festivals supported by the state (Kinetz 2004, E1). Yet why is this critique allowed? What motivations are driving this general relaxation of censorship?

I propose two hypotheses relating to the causes of this change in the approach of the government, the first related to economic context and the second related to inclusion of the island's youth. First, given the economic crisis of the Special Period, the government was forced to find alternative sources of income. Music and the arts, which have long been a source of cultural capital for the island, were exported in an effort to bring profits back to the state, as musicians serve as employees of the government, and the government is entitled to a percentage of tour wages. As artists become better known internationally, and ultimately bring more revenue back to the state, these artists are given greater freedom. As a result, those musicians that are more commercially successful are allowed greater opportunity to express their critique, as long as it is not directly critical of the state.

A retired Cuban diplomat, speaking on condition of anonymity, acknowledges the fact that Carlos Varela, a Cuban artist who has achieved tremendous international success, is not censored in the way other Cuban artists are treated, including Raúl Rivero, a poet and journalist sentenced to a 20-year jail term in 2003 who was ultimately released. "'Carlos Varela sings the same things that Raúl Rivero says. Why Varela is allowed is very difficult to understand. And I don't see much difference between Varela and [Pedro Luis] Ferrer'" (Kinetz 2004, E1). Ultimately economic success translates into

greater privilege for artists. This illustrates the idiosyncratic censorship policy of the government and the judgements that it makes on a case-by-case basis. One is forced to question whether the artistic freedom of these artists is compromised by the knowledge of their relationship with the government, as they may self-censor in order to win support for commissions and international tours. In addition, I argue that the economic struggles of the island led to a lack of infrastructure and resources to monitor the black market, leading to the further dissemination of critical ideas through popular music.

My second hypothesis is that in an effort to connect with a younger generation of Cubans, most born decades after the victory of the Revolution, the government has made an effort to accommodate the youth's musical interests in order to create a greater sense of connection to the Revolution. The boundary between what is acceptable and unacceptable in terms of music has changed, as illustrated by the proliferation of timba and hip-hop groups on the island today. The institutionalization of these genres of music is manifested through state-sponsored support for public performances and festivals, which showcase contemporary Cuban musical styles as important forms of cultural discussion within the Revolution.

Despite a general relaxation of censorship on the island in the context of the Special Period, especially for financially successful artists, the image of a group is judged just as closely as the lyrical content of its music, especially if the artists are seen as projecting an image that is dangerous and challenges the status quo. Timba artists

encountered this problem during the late 1990s, as critics perceived the genre to be overly aggressive, showy, and commercial. In the case of La Charanga Habanera, the band was sanctioned for a 1997 concert in Havana in which the musicians were criticized for their eccentric costumes and their provocative dance moves on stage. The group was banned from performing in public for more than six months. "The ban on La Charanga was part of a broader clampdown…. [T]he social disparities it created had produced an ostentatious… lifestyle that the government immediately recognized as projecting the 'wrong' image of Cuba to foreigners" (Quiroga 2005, 167). It is apparent that the government's discomfort with timba stemmed beyond just the surface of La Charanga Habanera's image.

Instead, the state was preoccupied with the underlying semiotics and symbolism that timba brought to mind—a genre of music that was perceived as embracing money and capitalism in its flashiness. The group's image was further complicated by the content of its lyrics, particularly in the song "Green Mango," which draws a comparison between a green mango and Fidel Castro dressed in green military fatigues: "'Hey green mango, now that you're ripe, why have you still not fallen?'" (Silverman 1998, 3). Thus, the artist must be conscious of both the content of its lyrics as well as the image that it displays to its audiences through its music and dance.

3.2 Tensions in contemporary Cuban music

The negotiation that exists in music between the government and the artist illuminates the manner in which a variety of tensions manifest themselves in Cuba. Life on the island is a continuum of space for discourse and debate. There is constant negotiation and discussion. Instead of operating in absolute terms, the unstable time of the Special Period forced Cubans to adapt. This includes the government as well as the people. As a result, seemingly contradictory tensions are indicative of the contemporary period, as the island continues to define its present and its future. Instead of black and white, Cuba operates in shades of gray, forced to confront different challenges as well as the diversity of views that accompany these challenges. I assert that these tensions are the natural product of a nation working to sustain its Revolution in the context of a predominantly capitalistic world, a world whose reality starkly contrasts with that found on the island.

I assert these tensions are all interconnected. The negotiation of artist with the government as it relates to censorship is highly impacted by the island's experimentation with capitalism. As displayed by artists such as Carlos Varela, or popular timba artists such as NG La Banda or La Charanga Habanera, the government displays greater leniency when artists are more commercially successful and able to bring revenue back to the state. As a result, while the state continues to advance communist ideals as its core philosophy, Cuba has become more involved with

capitalistic markets. This includes the sale of Cuban music abroad as well as investment in the tourism industry that attempts to sell an exotic image of Cuba to the international consumer. "[T]he Special Period obliged the authorities to liberate Cuban artists from reliance on the state, to seek part of their livelihood in the emerging domestic tourist-oriented market and even abroad. This… helped increase the cultural community's political leverage" (Kapcia 2006, 36). For staunch defenders of communism, this shift seems contradictory and indicates a sort of compromising by the Cuban government in its ideology. Yet, as manifested in the negotiation over censorship, accommodations are made for survival.

This survival effort, tied into a reinvigoration of the tourism industry, brings forth an additional, seemingly contradictory tension. Especially during the Special Period, Cuba was marketed to tourists in a fashion similar to the manner in which Cuba was marketed to foreigners prior to the Revolution—as a paradise where Afro-Cuban people lived, people with so-called "hot Cuban blood." This stereotype is significant and problematic, as this exoticized image has been very much ubiquitous since the Soviet collapse. In a sense, this image, which continues to abound in the marketing of contemporary Cuban music, reflects a sort of racial democratization, as blacks have achieved a place of cultural and social significance since the departure of a predominantly white Cuban constituency following the Revolution.

Music serves as a principal democratizing force for Cubans, specifically, as it allows artists to record their music, travel, and make more money than ordinary Cubans. This wealth is illustrated in the documentary, *Popular!*, which covers the trajectory of La Charanga Habanera. Specifically, bandleader David Calzado and his musicians are able to travel to perform in Japan and they are able to afford jewelry, cars, and nice clothing as a result of their commercial success. Despite this democratic element of the image of the Afro-Cuban, I assert that there is a conscious effort in the marketing of the island to doubly mark its inhabitants as "Afro-Cubans" and children of the Revolution. These individuals are portrayed as being both passionate about the nation's struggle and connected to the island's African roots. This creates an atmosphere of excitement around the exotic. "Historically the state has appropriated forms of Afro-Cuban cultural expression as a way of fostering national cohesiveness, particularly during times of crisis" (Fernandes 2006, 119). This focus on Cuba as a mixed-race nation has the potential to conceal the true nature of relationships between individuals of different races on the island. Is racial harmony then a myth on the island?

I argue that it certainly is not fully realized, as cultural Othering continues. Ambivalence about this Othering is found in the lyrics of contemporary artists who continue to address issues of race as they relate to prostitution and interracial relationships. This protest reflects a desire for improvement of race relations, especially within music and the performing arts. Cuban actor Alden Knight argues, "Artists must

reflect in their work the past we have left behind, the present we have attained, and above all the future to which we aspire" (Knight 2000, 117). Such sentiments reflect the existence of a dynamic cultural space that gives Cubans the opportunity to express their opinions about how to improve the Revolution, a consciousness mobilized largely by the struggles of the Special Period.

Cuban artists' effort to challenge the image of the Cuban as the exotic Other is linked to an additional tension—the coexistence of critique and nationalism. I assert that critique, more so than prior to the Soviet collapse, is an integral part of the Cuban experience. Critique of Cuban society, without being overtly critical of the government, is accepted more and interpreted as necessary for the active participation of Cubans in the present and future of the Revolution. Ultimately, critique by Cubans, especially artists, is not necessarily unpatriotic or anti-nationalistic. Instead, this critique is seen as a primary example of nationalism, as it expresses concern for the state of the island and its people.

As indicated in an earlier chapter, Aleen Frederik's notion of the *Hombre Novísimo,* the even newer man (a renewal of Che Guevara's *new man*), is indicative of a broader attempt of renewal and reinvestment in defining the goals of the Revolution and making improvements where needed. The appropriation of the Che image by hip-hop and timba artists reflects a dedication to the initial struggle of the Revolution. The juxtaposition of Che's image with the critique made by artists seems fitting, as Che was

outspoken in the defense of the Revolution and was vocal in defining how the Revolution would be shaped. Ultimately, the seemingly contradictory tensions that abound surrounding Cuban music and society can be understood as part of a broader discourse in which Cubans are attempting to reconcile the island's contemporary challenges with the Revolution's founding ideologies and promises.

3.3 Conclusions on the present and future of Cuban music

What can we learn from the development of contemporary, critical styles of Cuban music, especially timba and hip-hop? What roles will these genres play in the growth of the Cuban Revolution, and what impact will they have in a post-Castro era? These styles, which developed during the Special Period, are indicative of the power that youth have on societal dynamics, as illustrated earlier in the twentieth century, prior to the Revolution. "In the 1920s, the music *son*, a faster, more danceable version of the older *danzón*, was rejected by classic ballrooms. But Cuban youth refused to be dictated to and adopted *son*, which went on to form the backbone of today's raucous, often socially critical salsa" (LaFranchi 1997, 7). The Cuban youth continue to demonstrate their capacity to shape musical trends. I anticipate that the younger generation will continue to find its voice and reconcile its relationship with the Revolution, a struggle constantly engaged in a negotiation between ideology and practice.

The Buena Vista Social Club had a deep impact on the development of more critical forms of Cuban music during the Special Period. The commercial nature of the group's phenomenon brought about intense resentment, as the group's music was seen as an inaccurate representation of music on the island today. At the same time, however, the group's commodification and subsequent international success brought increased attention to music on the island, specifically styles such as timba and hip-hop, which offer important critiques and reflections on contemporary Cuban society. This critique was facilitated by a general relaxation of censorship following the Soviet collapse, although harsh consequences still existed for direct critique of the government. While expressing their critique through music, young Cuban artists continue to engage with the meaning of the Revolution—looking back on the past, making sense of the present, and looking toward the future. Similar to youth movements and artists around the world, young Cubans are always attuned to political conditions, and they will undoubtedly play a major role not just as musicians but as Cuban citizens in general, helping shape the future of life on the island and redefining what it means to be Cuban.

What conclusions can be made about the nature of Cuban music on the island today and the critique that it offers of Cuban society? Aware of the success of the Buena Vista Social Club, a group who thrived off a relatively depoliticized style of prerevolutionary music, younger artists must be cognizant of the implications of international musical success. While such an opportunity serves as a potential

democratizing force for musicians, record contracts with capitalistic global record labels can be just as silencing as the threat of censorship imposed by the Cuban government. Major record labels often look for music that appeals to a broad audience, not necessarily work that is full of ambivalence and contentious statements. Cuban artists may need to look to independent record labels that provide them with an international audience for their critique without influencing the nature of the music itself.

Ultimately, capitalism may not necessarily be a freeing feeling for artists, especially for black Cubans, who are constantly negotiating their existence racially and socially on the island. The communist model is not perfect for the artists, either, as there is the threat of censorship for direct political criticism, resulting in self-censorship. Censorship of music on the island and censorship of Cuban music in Miami, for example, are equally repressive. If the exile community wants democracy for Cubans, censorship of the music of Cuban artists certainly does not indicate a full embrace of such ideals, specifically freedom of expression. One is forced to wonder if complete opportunity for freedom of speech exists.

A large amount of qualitative information can be gained by studying the lyrical content of contemporary Cuban music. As illustrated by the texts explored in this thesis, Cuban artists explore a variety of themes in their music, including poverty, race, gender, prostitution, exile, and a myriad of other topics. While looking at this information is extremely significant in ascertaining the viewpoints of Cubans today, I argue that an

equally significant exercise is asking what is absent from these lyrics. What is *not* sung about? What questions can we ask about these silences and the resulting discourses? The silences in the music are telling, as certain topics may be deliberately avoided, reflecting perhaps some sort of control over the artists.

Such an absence could also illustrate specific taboos as well as insecurities related to certain social issues. For example, homosexuality is not a common theme in contemporary timba and hip-hop. This may reflect ambivalence towards homosexuals as well as a pervading "machismo-leninismo" indicative of Cuba and the Revolution, reflecting a dominance of heterosexual male dominance when considering gender roles (Smith 1996, 185). This machismo manifests itself in both the lyrics and music of timba and rap artists. The texture of timba music, especially, is aggressive, bold, and brassy, and early critics of the genre focused on artists' preoccupation with sex and heterosexual lust. Thus, the sound of the music is equally as important as the words in reinforcing themes and underlying messages. When one understands what is present or missing in the music, one can then attempt to understand why it is missing. This exercise illuminates the deeper layers of Cuban society that may normally be obstructed for some reason or another.

As I studied the Buena Vista Social Club, I learned more and more about the essentialist images of Cuba and its people. How could Cuba be represented to the world in a largely homogenous way when there was surely diversity of people and views on

the island? I often wondered—what does this mean to Cubans? Just because popular media or the government may construct Cuba, is this construction any less legitimate? Ultimately, I have found that constructions of a people can be misleading in order to present a different reality. While this construction is just as important as reality, I believe that it is important for individuals to interact with these people on an individual, personalized level to truly get a sense of a culture. For Cuban exiles and North Americans, the Buena Vista Social Club embodies a nostalgic reminder of a past reality. In a sense, "real" Cuba becomes for these individuals more of what is packaged. For younger generations, La Charanga Habanera and Clan 537 represent a contemporary reality. For inhabitants of the island, this "real" Cuba is experienced every day. This discourse is significant as each representation of the island signifies a sort of postmodern invention of tradition, traditions emblematic of different periods. Each of these traditions is important in understanding Cuba at different stages of its development.

There is no doubt that the reality of contemporary Cuban music reflects trends of globalization and the international exchange of ideas. Predominantly American consumers purchased the music of the Buena Vista Social Club, while Cuban youth consume the rap, jazz, and rock styles arriving from the United States, such as the music of American rock band Audioslave or modern trends in hip-hop technology. Many Cuban artists sign contracts with international record labels and travel the world as well, assisting the spread of Cuban music and identity around the world. The intriguing

aspect of this globalization process is identifying the foreign, often American elements that infiltrate Cuban music, as well as the Cuban elements that are incorporated into American music. It is apparent, though, that despite the mixture of styles, the music that is created consistently retains an element that is uniquely Cuban, primarily through reference to issues and history that are unique to the island.

If I were to expand this thesis, I would hope to some day have the opportunity to travel to Cuba to immerse myself in the music of the island and speak to young artists about their work and the environment in which they operate. I believe that my findings could be further enriched by engaging with these individuals to gain a sense of their passions, their feelings, and what ultimately inspires them to create the music they do. This is an exciting time for Cuban music, given the dynamic nature of life on the island, especially in the post-Soviet context. A transition of power following the passing of Fidel Castro will certainly bring about new music that reflects the emotions of that transition, as well as thoughts on the past and the prospects of the future. Nevertheless, Cuban music and the critique that it offers will no doubt continue to spread throughout the world, largely as a result of a broader phenomenon of deterritorialization and the creation of complex transnational networks, contributing to the expansion of the imagined community that is Cuba. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai writes that "many persons on the globe live in… imagined 'worlds' and not just in imagined communities, and thus are able to contest and… subvert the 'imagined worlds' of the official mind and

of the entrepreneurial mentality that surround them" (Appadurai 1990, 297). Contemporary Cuban artists have done just that. They have clarified the state of the island in the Special Period and have illuminated a myriad of tensions and ambivalences in an effort to bring greater consciousness to the Cuban reality of today.

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