HIP-HOP & SOCIAL MEDIA AS NEW SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ACTORS IN CUBAN CIVIL SOCIETY, FROM THE SPECIAL PERIOD TO "RAULISMO"

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By

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The arts and social media have become an important forum in which ordinary Cubans evaluate competing political alternatives, rethink the basic values of the revolution, and reformulate visions for the future. It is through these discussions and debates that new alliances and realms of agreement are consolidated between artists, bloggers, ordinary Cubans and the state. Artists, bloggers and public collaborate with government actors to reincorporate critical expressions into official discourses, often strategically and self-consciously. By raising marginalized issues that were kept under lid until they became part of the collective conscious, these new actors in the arts and social media field have successfully broadened public discourse within their communities and state institutions.

Despite the reprimanding of the state apparatus, Cubans continue to find ways to channel their plight and find a common voice to rise above their collective subconscious of how they understand their living circumstances since the “special period” to present day. Hip-hop and social media (bloggers) have played a crucial role in this new dynamic and have become central figures to both the formal and informal agreements between the government and citizens that have stemmed following the crisis of the “special period” and that continue until present day.
This thesis will try to highlight the uniqueness of the Cuban case, where the relationships between spheres of public action and state power may not be resolved if they are seen strictly through a black and white lens within the confines of formal organizations.

I will explore the Cuban case considering its governance is not confined to the state’s political apparatus, and that critical activity has indeed developed within the delicate marriage of official institutions (i.e., Agencia Rap) and its aligned and non-aligned actors in the hip-hop community and social media. Organizations whose objectives are not necessarily political reform, play an important role in the construction of civil society and the debate of ideas (Quiroz 2003). The hip-hop movement and new social media outlets look to push the balance of power toward society.

To further support the argument of Cuba’s uniqueness, I based much of my approach on the views of Ariel Armony (2004, 2005) who stated that: “if we wish to understand civil society in Cuba, we cannot adopt a restrictive approach. Cubans constant questioning, political debates over socialist models and economic reform, non-political youth movements (hip-hop artists and bloggers for the purposes of this thesis’ argument) and other social networks are spaces that can be described as civil society. These spaces define a public sphere made up of numerous autonomous niches vis-à-vis the state.” For this study’s purposes, civil society in Cuba will be seen as a conflictive space.
It is my thesis that through the delicate arrangement stemming from the special period, where the state relaxed its controls and exerted a dynamic of a “tolerance by omission” rather than through explicit policies (Dilla 2002, 2005), the hip-hop and social media movement has been able to occupy valuable public space within Cuban civil society. Under this environment, new artistic public spheres have been created despite the collusion of the state to shape which messages arising from these spheres can be considered acceptable within the framework of the government and the revolutionary project it pushes forward. In the same way that many studies have previously emphasized it, the vision of social actors in this paper will not be as socioeconomic or demographic aggregates, but rather as groups of subjects interacting with the rest of society, the state and their own conscience (CIPS 2003).

Through my research and observations in Habana, and the desk review of existing literature on the subject, I conclude that Hip-hop artists and bloggers indeed exist as relevant social actors and creators of accepted new social and cultural expressions1 within Cuban civil society, and that in turn, they have effectively influenced the public sphere.

In order to properly give voice to the actors in this paper, and to gather genuine information straight from the sources, I held open interviews with multiple subjects consisting of hip hop artists, book-writers, journalists, state officials, art critics, officials from cultural organizations, religious priests, music producers, magazine editors and hip hop aficionados. Given the sensitivity of some of the topics of

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1 In 1998 the Minister of Culture Abel Prieto officially declared rap “an authentic expression of “cubanidad”
discussion explored, and following the request of most of my interview subjects, the names of the participants in my interviews will remain anonymous. The fieldwork for this paper was carried out during a 3-week stay in Habana and its surrounding areas. The vast majority of my interviews and observations took place in the neighborhoods of Habana Vieja, Playa, Vedado and Alamar.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

“Será que me temen to’ esos mequetrefe?, o sera que no le dedique mi triunfo al comandante en jefe?”

The author would like to dedicate this thesis to Doña Frances and Doña Raquel, and to “V” & “T” who welcomed me inside their home in the Playa neighborhood and stood beside me when I got into trouble with state security. Many thanks go to the faculty of the Development Management and Policy program, both at Georgetown and at the Universidad Nacional de San Martin, particularly Dr. Eusebio Mujal-Leon who inspired the subject of this study and Dr. Eric Langenbacher. I also owe immense gratitude to Ms. Victoria Ballerini at the UNSAM in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

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Pa’lante Asere!
# Table of Contents

Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 1  
Research Objectives and Methodology ................................................................................. 3  
Historical Context – “Special Period” .................................................................................. 8  
Historical Context – “From Fidelismo to Raulismo” ......................................................... 13  
Hip-Hop in Cuba ...................................................................................................................... 18  
  Hip-Hop and Race Relations .................................................................................................. 21  
  Hip-Hop as an Export Commodity ......................................................................................... 24  
  Agencia Rap .......................................................................................................................... 25  
Social Media in Cuba ............................................................................................................. 29  
Theoretical Discussion ............................................................................................................ 40  
Conclusion ............................................................................................................................. 45  
Bibliography ............................................................................................................................ 54
Table of Figures:

Figure 1: Photo of Cuban Flag “Puzzle” .................................................................1
Figure 2: Photo of Malecon de la Habana.................................................................10
Figure 3: Photo of plaque “Thank you George Bush, cretin!”..............................40
Figure 4: Photo of image of Camilo Cienfuegos on Ministry of Interior............40
Figure 5: Photo of Fidel Castro quote “Contradiction”..........................................49
Introduction:

“Héroe es el cubano en general que se las ha arreglado para inventar más que los Chinos desde que estamos bloqueados! Héroe son los de batalla con arma, sangre y acciones! Heroes nosotros? Que va, héroe los 11 millones!”

In present day Cuba, youth and young adults are finding it increasingly harder to relate to the political, economic and social rhetoric that has been monopolized by official media outlets. These outlets have expanded the dissemination of the revolutionary discourse from “plaza speeches”, to areas of the arts such as film, television, music and literature. The trials and tribulations faced by ordinary Cuban citizens are no longer exclusively channeled through political organizations such as the Comité de la Defensa de la Revolución “CDR” or the Partido Comunista de Cuba “PCC”, they are increasingly being addressed in the spheres of culture and consumption.
Through new modes of expression such as hip-hop and social media, Cubans have empowered themselves and taken ownership of questions regarding socialism and democracy, racial and sexual discrimination, religious practices and tourism, immigration and freedom of speech, state bureaucracy and *jineterismo*.\(^2\) As authors such as Sujatha Fernandes (2006) have argued, “the arts have taken on a vital role in formulating, articulating and making sense of everyday life”.

The arts and social media networks have become an important forum in which ordinary Cubans evaluate competing political alternatives, rethink the basic values of the revolution, and reformulate visions for the future. It is through these discussions and debates that new alliances and realms of agreement are consolidated between artists, bloggers, ordinary Cubans and the state. Artists, bloggers and public collaborate with government actors to reincorporate critical expressions into official discourses, often strategically and self-consciously. By raising marginalized issues that were kept under lid until they became part of the collective conscious, these new actors have successfully broadened public discourse within their communities and state institutions (Fernandes 2005).

Despite the reprimanding of the state apparatus, Cubans continue to find ways to channel their plight and find a common voice to rise above their collective subconscious of how they understand their living circumstances since the “special period” to present day. Hip-hop artists and bloggers have played a crucial role in this new dynamic and have become central figures to both the formal and informal

\(^2\) *jineterismo*: term used for activities related to prostitution.
agreements between the government and citizens that have stemmed following the “special period”.

Hip-hop culture and social media have become –as acknowledged by government entities to an extent- a very important mode of communication for young Cubans trying to reconcile the island’s political struggles and economic woes with the ideas of the ongoing “revolution” which has surpassed its 50th year.

Research Objectives and Methodology:

This thesis will try to highlight the uniqueness of the Cuban case, where the relationships between spheres of public action and state power may not be solved if they are seen strictly through a black and white lens within the confines of formal organizations. I clearly acknowledge that the prevailing literature in political science catalogues civil society as being “lively, independent, autonomous”, and institutionally divided from between the spheres of public action and state power. However, while I do agree in principle with authors such as Jurgen Habermas’ (1996) who assert that “administrative intrusions of the socialist state corrode local networks, paralyze independent engagement, crush social groups and dissolve cultural identities”, I will argue that within the “uniqueness” of the Cuban case, hip-hop artists and bloggers have indeed created public spheres of civil society despite the nature of the island’s authoritarian/bureaucratic socialist society.

It is my conclusion that the new social actors observed in this study have indeed become fundamental subjects when exploring changing attitudes in Cuban society. These actors have become de facto “sound-boards” for issues being raised
by sectors of society who do not have formal channels to voice their concerns given the inexistence of a system of political pluralism under the Cuban state. Despite initial hopes that a transition from “Fidelismo” to “Raulismo” would allow for the opening of spaces simpatico to the idea of increased openness in the social discourse, no significant changes have occurred. The placement of new ideas in the public discourse that may challenge, contrast or oppose the ideas espoused by the revolutionary project will still face severe obstacles or outright repression.

Cuba differs from most other Latin American countries in that its civil society has traditionally been tightly bound to state mechanisms in such a way that unions, neighborhood committees, and women’s organizations have all demonstrated shared interests with state institutions. However, the current Cuban experience corresponds to the experiences of other Latin American countries in that the island has experienced the creation of new spaces and opportunities for social interaction both for social and state actors (Tulchin, Espina Prieto, Bobea, Hernandez 2005).

I will explore the Cuban case considering its governance is not confined to the state’s political apparatus, and that critical activity has indeed developed within the delicate marriage of official institutions (i.e., Agencia Rap) and its aligned and non-aligned actors in the hip-hop and social media community. Organizations whose objectives are not necessarily political reform, play an important role in the construction of civil society and the debate of ideas (Quiroz 2003). The hip-hop and social media movements look to push the balance of power toward society.

To further support the argument of Cuba’s uniqueness, I based much of my approach on the views of Ariel Armony (2004, 2005) who stated that: “if we wish to
understand civil society in Cuba, we cannot adopt a restrictive approach. Cubans constant questioning, political debates over socialist models and economic reform, non-political youth movements (hip-hop artists and bloggers for the purposes of this thesis’ argument) and other social networks are spaces that can be described as civil society. These spaces define a public sphere made up of numerous autonomous niches vis-à-vis the state.” Civil society in Cuba must be seen as a conflictive space.

Public spheres have come to exist within the island’s one-party system and the state apparatus has been forced to slowly move away from highly centralized forms of rule in order to accommodate the needs and demands of existing or newly formed actors. As expressed in (Cohen and Arato 1994), there can be very different types of civil society, more or less institutionalized, more or less democratic, and more or less active. For the purposes of this thesis, civil society has been viewed under this premise.

It is my thesis that through the delicate arrangement stemming from the special period where the state relaxed its controls and exerted a dynamic of a “tolerance by omission”, rather than through explicit policies (Dilla 2002, 2005), the hip-hop and social media movements have been able to occupy valuable public space within Cuban society. In this environment, new artistic public spheres have been created despite the collusion of the state to shape which messages arising from these spheres can be considered acceptable within the framework of the government and the revolutionary project it pushes forward. In the same way that many studies have previously emphasized it, the vision of social actors in this paper will not be as socioeconomic or demographic aggregates, but rather as groups of
subjects interacting with the rest of society, the state and their own conscience (CIPS 2003). This thesis will also explore how these movements, born during the special period under Fidel Castro, may or may not change following the shift in the island’s leadership to his brother Raul Castro Ruz and the new era referred to as “Raulismo” by scholars in the “cubanology” field.

Although arguments could indeed be made about how the discourse, messages and ideas put forward by hip-hop artists and bloggers remain state-controlled through their incorporation into state agencies such as Agencia Rap, rich sources of dissent and social commentary not benefitted with open means of dissemination keep growing. As they grow, their ideas increasingly find their way into the accepted discourse as they become too strong and ever-present in the “underground” to remain ignored. At snail’s pace in some aspects, and incredibly quick in others, the social dialogue once limited to hushed ruminations in living rooms and streets corners across the island has found important outlets in the voices and hands of an incredibly brave cadre of men and women who have put their livelihood and personal security at risk in the hopes of ushering a new era of openness and dialogue between Cubans regardless of their political leaning.

I will argue that these ideas have been bred independently from the state and their adoption from the state are part of the delicate balance and informal arrangements of the “tolerance by omission” dynamic that forced the state to embrace new social actors and their expressions to qualm the discontent brought on by the special period. As Rafael Hernandez (2005) has stated: “The
acknowledgement of Cuban thought is indispensable for reflecting on Cuba’s current and future reality”.

Through my research on the field in Habana, and the desk review of existing literature on the subject, I have concluded that Hip-hop artists and bloggers do exist as relevant social actors and creators of accepted new cultural expressions within Cuban civil society, and that in turn, they have effectively influenced the public sphere.

In order to properly give voice to the actors in this paper, and to gather genuine information straight from the sources, I held open interviews with multiple subjects such as hip hop artists, book-writers, journalists, state officials, art critics, officials from cultural organizations, religious priests, music producers, magazine editors and hip hop aficionados. Given the sensitivity of some of the topics of discussion explored, and following the request of most of my interview subjects, the names of the participants in my interviews will remain anonymous. The fieldwork for this paper was carried out during a 3-week stay in Habana and its surrounding areas. The vast majority of my interviews and observations took place in the neighborhoods of Habana Vieja, Playa, Vedado and Alamar.

Given the kindness, openness and candidness I received from my interview subjects through their stories, anecdotes and observations, it is my sincere hope that some of the ideas expressed in this paper serve to create a better understanding of the situation lived by many Cubans in present day. Although some of the ideas expressed herein will stand in contrast to the findings of many social
and political scientists, it is my hope that this paper will somehow enrich the increasingly growing literature on what is referred to as cubanology.

**Historical Context – “Special Period”:**

“*Héroe pa’ mi son los panaderos que con el honor roto hacen pan pa’ un pueblo entero. Héroe pa’ mi es el chofer del “P4”, que maneja pa comprarle al hijo un par de zapatos. Héroe pa’ mi es el doctor de este pais que salva vidas y en el dia del cobro lo ves feliz. Héroe es el que lucha y el que suda, y mas si nació en un hospital de Cuba.*”

Almost two decades after the crisis of the 1990s, the Caribbean island of Cuba finds itself assessing and adapting to the process of change brought by the crisis in society, economy, politics and culture.


The decline in Soviet aid representing billions of dollars and a large percentage of the Cuban gross social product, as well as the decline of Cuban exports ushered a time of severe economic crisis. Appealing to the collective *conciencia,*
voluntarism and moral incentives, a “Special Period in Time of Peace” was declared in September 1990 with authorities coining the term “special period” in order to minimize the expected duration of the ensuing difficulties (Ibid).

By the following year, imports from the Soviet Union had fallen by 62.2%, the gross social product had fallen by 25% and close to 30,000 workers were laid off. Cuba’s oil imports dropped to 10% of pre-1990 amounts. Furthermore, the implosion of economic agreements with the petroleum-rich Soviet Union saw Cuban consumption fall to 20% of its previous level within two years. The scarcity of hydrocarbon energy resources forced long-lasting blackouts, and severely hampered the island’s transportation systems as well as the productivity of its industrial and agricultural complex (Ibid).

The lack of access to gasoline, diesel, and other petroleum derivatives forced a reduction in national bus schedules of 40.5% and train schedules by 38.4%. The quasi-paralization of public transportation systems gave way to the lasting images of ordinary Cubans over-crowding -and at times dangerously dangling- from means of public transportation such as buses and the 1950s taxi cars known as “almendrones”. During a televised speech during the 2009 ALBA meetings held in Habana, Venezuela’s President Chavez quipped that during his first visit to Cuba: “I was surprised by how empty the streets were, I saw donkeys pulling modified public transportation buses”. At present, Cuban public transportation is done in modern buses –many of them still donning the emblem of the township in Spain, Italy or Korea where they were donated from (Ibid).
“oh mi Habana, no sé si es tu malecón una distracción o una extensa oficina de inmigración...”

Figure 2: Photo of Malecón de la Habana (author’s own).

The “special period” not only transformed Cuban society and its economy, it affected the Cuban psyche immensely as living standards dropped drastically from their already existing uncomfortable levels (Benglesdorf 1994, Gott 2004). Cuban youth became especially disenfranchised as they realized their living situation would not see signs of improvement as the achievement of higher education would no longer be equated with the long-held assumption of a university degree directly translating into an employment opportunity. Furthermore, the highly sought-out
jobs in the tourism industry and service sector have not necessarily aligned themselves with the skills university graduates obtained within their field of study.

The loosening of the state’s economic and political grip due to the loss of power of institutions over its members, forced the state to loosen its grip on the Cuban people opening the space for civil society groups to expand and function (Dilla 1999, Acanda 1997, Limia 1999). Despite the fact that the profound economic crisis resulting from the special period spurred neither dangerous instability nor serious political change, the centralized government was forced to accept new social arrangements through tolerance by omission (Mujal-Leon 2011, Dilla 2005).

This “softer” approach on the government control exercised by the Castro brothers and the communist party opened the door for new cultural and mediatic expressions to flourish and give Cuban Civil Society new ways to express their discontent as they coped with new and ever-changing realities. Today, some of these new cultural expressions that came to be accepted as part of Cuba’s new cultural identity, after being embraced by the state apparatus, find themselves trying to keep a forward momentum.

Some experts have argued that Cuba’s economic resurgence, resulting from the direct aid of Hugo Chavez and the ALBA alliance, has given the government enough economic impetus to return to some of the controls that were commonplace in the years pre-special period. However, it is still too early to tell if the Raul Castro-led government will revert to controlling the spheres of public action that had previously been allowed. Given that Cuba’s economic stability is intrinsically tied and exposed to Venezuela, it would seem an unwise move by the regime to further
clamp down on social demands when increased economic hardship may befall the island should the political leadership in Venezuela change following the October presidential elections.

Despite the island's economic woes remaining a punishing force for the population as a whole, many people interviewed felt they were at their best economic levels since the era when Soviet aid would flood the country. Herein lies the Cuban paradox; economic betterment may arrive hand in hand with the state's suffocating grip on society.

The collapse of the Soviet Union made possible new kinds of transnational linkages that facilitated closer contact with the non-socialist world (Fernandes 2005). In a growing contact with the outside world, interpretive communities are increasingly detached from national referents (Garcia Canclini, Beverly 2001). Solidarities and exchanges based on race, style and other markets of cultural identity replace national belonging in the formation of “international communities of consumers” (Garcia Canclini 2001). This helps explain the adoption of mannerisms, clothing styles, slang expressions, fashion and the overall ethos of the art form by youth and young adults who are increasingly more exposed to their peers in visual ways as more exchanges take place. Youth in Habana can now visually identify with the afro hairstyle of Questlove from the band the Roots, or the tattoos of René from Calle 13. The visibilities of these transnational figures and their embracing by troupes within Cuban society have also allowed rap musicians to more openly express through their appearance, gestures and conduct their own racial identity.
It is under the dichotomies of the special period that members of Cuba's youth, through hip-hop or blogging, began to channel the ways in which they reconcile the socialist values of the revolutionary project such as the collectivism, solidarity and egalitarianism, with the individualism and growing inequality brought on by the economic crisis of the “special period” - and in recent years- the introduction of the CUC. As Gramsci (1971) stated, economic crises can “create a terrain more favorable to the dissemination of certain modes of thought, and certain ways of posing and resolving questions”. This assertion is remarkably poignant 40 years later when the global economic crisis has opened up the terrain for discussions on wealth as brought to the fora by civil society movements such as “Occupy Wall Street” in the United States and Indignados in Spain.

Historical Context – “From Fidelismo to Raulismo”:

Following Fidel Castro’s continuous bout with a crippling illness speculated to involve complications due to diverticulitis; an intestinal ailment common in older people, the Comandante en Jefe was forced to abdicate his post on July 2006. As Castro stated himself during an interview with the Mexican daily “La Jornada”, during the illness his weight fell to 145 pounds, extremely thin for a man thought to be about 6-foot-3 and known for his large frame.

The eighty-one-year-old Raul Castro assumed the temporary leadership of the country in July 2006 when his brother Fidel fell seriously ill. He would later assume the presidency of the Council of State in February 2008 and the post of first
secretary of Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) at its Sixth Congress in April 2011. Raul Castro embarked on a program to streamline the Cuban state by updating (not reforming) the existing model in hopes of reviving the island’s sinking economy by transferring a substantial part of its production from the state to private enterprises. This included measures such as increasing agricultural production by leasing state-held land to private farmers, raising prices paid for produce and allowing farmers to buy their own supplies amongst other measures.

Raul Castro has also opened the doors to opportunities for self-employment and a new generation of entrepreneurs. Under his leadership, the state has issued hundreds of thousands of new licenses for people who wish to embark in private sector ventures. Around 200 professions have been opened to limited private enterprise and the government alleges the self-employed now reach a number of around 325,000.

Raul Castro is seeking to create mechanisms that would provide for sustainable growth. He has become very aware of the state’s inflated payrolls and how they could potentially “jeopardize the very survival of the Revolution”. The State employs around 85% of all Cubans with average of earnings of $20 US Dollars per month. The Cuban labor federation announced layoffs of around 2 million workers, although this has been delayed. The economic reforms set out in 313 “guidelines” approved by the Communist Party congress in April 2011 have begun implementation with a renewed approach in which the government would proceed “without hurry or improvisation, working to
overcome the old dogmatic mind-set and correcting any mistakes in a timely fashion”.

In greater detail, Raul Castro’s agenda of change included the following elements: “(1) consolidating political control and preparing for the orderly transfer of power to the successor generation; (2) shrinking the size and scope of the paternalistic state while enhancing its administrative efficiency and maintaining control over strategic economic sectors; (3) transforming state enterprises into autonomous holding companies that would no longer receive state subsidies and whose survival would depend on their ability to self-employment (cuentapropismo) with the goal of spurring agricultural production and providing additional jobs for those state workers who would be eventually laid off”. (Mulal-Leon, pg.155, 2011).

Furthermore, in an effort to shake up the economy, Raul Castro announced policy changes that would permit for the first time in 52 years the buying and selling of houses and newer automobiles, as well as freer travel abroad.

Raul Castro has refashioned the ruling coalition and prepared the next generation of leaders to whom power will be transformed as the octogenarian leadership of the revolutionary generation naturally fades. Despite naming the 80 year old Jose Ramon Machado to the second-highest position in the Communist Party in what could have be interpreted as a sign of business usual, Raul Castro also named several people younger than 70 to the central committee and 3 to the 15-member politburo. Furthermore, in April 2011 he proposed politicians be limited to two five-year terms as well as measures to foster leadership rotation and the separation of party and state functions.
Despite Raul’s best efforts, the Cuban economy has followed the fate of many world economies rattled by the effects of the global recession that began in 2008. The US Embargo remains and will seemingly forever be used as the culprit for many of Cuba’s economic ailments, both deservedly and un-deservedly so. Venezuelan aid has served more as a lifeline than an economic booster due to the after-effects of natural disasters and the economic lethargy that affected Cuban tourism and trade as a result of the ongoing global financial crisis. To make matters worse, Venezuelan president, ally, and de facto Cuban economic savior Hugo Chavez has been struck with a rumored fatal illness which has heightened what many perceive will be a very unpredictable electoral process due to take place on October 7, 2012.

A Chavez defeat in the coming elections would undoubtedly put in danger the barrels of oil Cuba receives daily, in excess of 100,000, with no clear sign of a replacement. With dwindling foreign reserves and the value of oil barrels presently standing between 88 and 92 US Dollars per barrel, along with the threat of oil markets tail-spinning with further instability in the Middle East or an all out war with Iran, the Cuban government may find itself once again in the abyss it faced during the special period. The Cuban people may very well not tolerate a scenario that returns them to the days of increased food scarcity, prolonged blackouts and unreliable transportation. It remains unclear if the investments being made in the country by other emerging world powers, such as China, Russia and regional super-power Brazil, would be enough to stave off the economic downfall that the fall of the Chavez government may bring.
With respect to civil liberties, Raul Castro has freed around 130 political prisoners and signed UN covenants on Human Rights. Some experts have gone as far as arguing that repression has become less brutal and dissenting expressions and academic debate have indeed become freer. Given the island’s dire economic situation and the prospect of its aid patron Hugo Chavez losing his country’s October elections, it is not far-flung to imagine Raul Castro’s focus centered solely around the economy and less so on the slow, yet steady, expansion of civil society. As Mujal-Leon argues, “Raul Castro is focused on implementing economic reforms, he does not intend or desire to engage in opening the political system as they fear that any political opening could destabilize an already fragile situation” (Mujal-Leon, pg.163, 2011).

In what has been interpreted by some as a blow to the intellectual and artistic sector, the Minister of Culture Abel Prieto was ousted from his post as Minister of Culture on March 2012. For 15 years he headed the Ministry of Culture in Cuba and embraced positions that went against those of other government ideological extremists. As expressed by leading blogger and social media figure Yoani Sanchez: “for writers and artists Abel Prieto represented a more modern, current, and open thinking...many placed their hopes on the young minister for an end to censorship and exclusion on ideological grounds, but it was not to be”.

A polarizing figure for many, Prieto is credited with managing artistic creation as "a weapon of struggle in the Revolution". While he indeed championed artistic expressions such as hip-hop (over-seeing the creation of the Agencia Rap), he was also at the helm of the ministry in what some consider dark times for artists
on the island as he became -some say- the symbol of culture bowing down to power. It remains to be seen what the young former minister will be able to do for writers and artists in his new post as adviser to the President, Raul Castro.

Six full years after temporarily -and then permanently- taking the reins of the island’s leadership, Raul Castro has come to unequivocally represent the transition into a post-Fidel Cuba. As perfectly stated by Mujal-Leon (2011), “Raulismo represents the transition from Fidelismo. It is an effort to shore up the revolutionary project by stabilizing the economy and clearing the way for a successor generation to take up the reins of the leadership”.

Hip-Hop in Cuba:

“...quiero ver el mundo y regresar, pero siempre conspiran, parece que de lejos se ven mejor sus mentiras...”

In the words of British rapper Akala³: “The rhythm of hip-hop helps understand what is being said, it helps communicate feelings, the tonality, the way and mood of what you say is as important as what is being said. For this reason hip-hop is a perfect vehicle to express the urgency of the issues expressed. Rappers talk about “Kicking science”, “dropping knowledge”, “spreading mathematics” while simultaneously talking about what life was like during their upbringings, there was no contradiction between both of those elements, the important thing is who is custodian of the knowledge. The decision was made to educate themselves and

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³ Shakespeare Hip-Hop Company TED Talk.
transmit their knowledge through the music. Like any art, hip-hop seeks to question the world around us”.

Hip-hop is a cultural and musical movement that’s had an incredible impact on Cuba’s musical culture. Hip-hop surges in Cuba during the aftermath and success of North American “black” music genres such as “Motown soul” and funk in the mid to late 1970s and early 1980s. Hip-hop in Cuba was seen as the logical step towards a new musical identity following the impact the art form had in the United States, with its inherent social and political messages. Themes of social uneasiness with regards to race relations and negroe identity (negritud) were previously glossed over in the lyrical messages of the musical mainstream. The up-front placement of these themes in hip-hop music struck a nerve with many young Cubans, especially those that inhabit the Alamar neighborhood east of Habana.

Located at the periphery of Habana to the east, Alamar is widely credited as the birthplace and home of Cuban rap. The vastly black population that re-settled from central Habana to the housing projects of Alamar resulted in a mixing of different classes and backgrounds (Baker 2006). Due to its relative remoteness from central Habana, certain forms of culture surfaced to fill the void and isolation from its distancing from the city leading to the development of many alternative cultural forms since the early 90s.

Culture houses, poetry festivals, visual and plastic arts, and trovadores that were left out of the mainstream establishment of galleries and venues found an

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4 DJing, MCing, Breakdancing, Graphiti Art & Knowledge
outlet for their art in Alamar. The barrio residents became very proud at the creation of a cultural establishment/movement that represented them and could be called their own (Fernandes 2005). Chief among the movements bred in Alamar, is Cuban hip-hop. The counter-cultural movements that sprung from Alamar, as well as the environment that was created around it, eventually got noticed to the point where music festival, fairs and exhibits started coming in culminating in the first annual rap festival in 1995, and what many consider the peak of Cuba’s first wave of hip-hop in 1998.

The initial steps in the Cuban hip-hop movement were taken by bands such as Obsesión, Anonimo Consejo, Doble Filo, Instinto (all female group), Hermanos de Causa and Explosion Suprema among others. At the time, issues of legitimacy presented themselves much like they had at other different points in Cuban musical culture. When foreign elements, genres or influences start filtering through what is widely considered and accepted to be the Cuban cultural “matrix”, they absorb the Cuban musical “DNA” and transform it, giving it the strength to interact with other cultural expressions as they seek to impose themselves into the collective conscience and gain legitimacy. Once the fusion is successfully created, something truly magical is created.

Rap festivals were organized by Grupo UNO during the beginning of the “Alamar days”. After that, the Asociación Hermanos Saez started organizing the festival and giving rap groups access into the association. The association had a prior tradition and track-record as being at the Cuban forefront of exposing modern
or avant-garde expressions of art as well as young artists who do not fall into the conventional or commercial mainstream, artists who live *FOR* their art not *FROM* it.

Hip-hop and Race Relations:

Perhaps the most important issue raised by Cuban hip-hop artists regarding society at large, has been the issue of the *negritud Cubana* and what many Afro-Cubans feel has been the lack of an updated revision of race relations following the special period.

Half a decade after the revolution, Fidel Castro (1966) stated that: “In a class society, which is to say, a society of exploiters and exploited, there was no way of eliminating discrimination for reasons of race or sex. Now the problem of such discrimination has disappeared from our country, because the basis for these types of discrimination, which is, quite simply, the exploitation of man by man, has disappeared”. As Fernandes (2005) argues, the Cuban political leadership assumed that by addressing the perceived material bases of exploitation, they could eliminate the discrimination by sex and race from Cuban society.

The anti-colonial resistance that united Cubans of different races created a cross-racial alliance; to speak of race could compromise the nationalist project. Despite the promotion of a race-less Cuba by equally black and white state officials and intellectuals, many Cubans feel that the growing inequalities that have surfaced after the special period between whites and afro-descendants has not received an updated revision (Ferrer 1999).
Afro-Cubans have become considerably poorer than white Cubans according to recent studies. While it is fair to say that Afro-Cubans benefited more from the revolution, they have also suffered the most from the crisis. The bulk of the money coming in from remittances goes to white Cubans, as it was their relatives who left early on (Wunderlich 2005). Darker Cubans have also been locked out of the profitable tourism industry. They face discrimination for tourism’s highly sought out jobs exacerbating the class divide.

Opinions seem to be divided on the source of this type of discrimination being government-generated, or a reflection of an alleged preference from tourists to interact with Caucasian, i.e. white people. For Afro-Cubans who get the chance to interact with tourists outside hotels and less controlled environments, and who feel these interactions with tourists provide no racial prejudices or discrimination, it becomes difficult to accept the explanation put forth by the tourism industry. “Buena presencia” in the tourism industry remains attached to “whiteness” or “light-skin-ness”, however, Afro-Cuban women complain that dark skin is only seen as a problem within hotels but not on the streets where black women comprise the majority of sex workers attached to the tourism industry.

Furthermore, Cuban experts such as Pedro Dupre claim that “the lack of political will of the Afro-Cubans in exile to form their own political organizations, the lack of representation on the actual Cuban government and the abdication of their rights to vocalize their concerns as a separate and distinct issue may be in the end what perpetuates their exclusion from the life of the nation as participants. Afro-Cubans in exile who accepted the handouts of the Miami elite and thus
compromised their ability to speak for the rest of the Afro-Cubans have become an antithesis to the movement they should have been leading. Unable to bite the hand that feeds them and fully dependent on the benevolence of their patrons, they have once again colluded with the people who have no good design or plans for their future, poster-gating the redemption of the Afro-Cuban people."

Hip-hop, as a representation of African identity in Cuba, has been able to create a relationship with Afro-Cuban intellectuals who have helped artists channel the struggles and history of African settlers in Cuba as well as touching on topics relating to black emancipation and the emancipation of black women. For example, the "matanza de los independientes de color" in which black soldiers and officials were left outside power structures, which in turn led to an insurrection and massacre, was a very sensible topic which hadn’t been brought up musically until hip-hop developed musical themes revolving around it.

In 2010, Obsesion’s record titled “El Disco Negro” received the “Walterio Carbonell” award handed out as the top prize by the NGO Cofradia de la Negritud whose mandate is to sensitize communities and perform actions against racism. This is just but another example of hip-hop’s positive impact on modern race relations.

Black intellectuals have provided artists with many theoretical and historical lessons and have been responsible for imparting strategies to better express their views within the cultural community, as hip-hop is considered to be an expression deeply engrained within the communities that give birth to it. This community-
based focus is something that doesn't get removed from, or escapes, the musical expression regardless of the commercial success or acceptance it may receive.

From rap, these intellectuals have received in return a new way to reach people and expose themes of race that are ever-present. Brought up through hip-hop with a breath of fresh air and new points of view, their ideas make their way unto popular music, which in Cuba is considered by many to be the nation's most important artistic manifestation. Known inside and outside of Cuba, the island's musical expression gives identity to its people in its themes, its dances. Hip-hop has managed to encrust itself in Cuban culture—as in other countries—as a voice for a popular mass culture of resistance, a culture of protest against social or environmental degradation, class struggles, exclusion and intolerance.

Hip-Hop as an Export Commodity:

The arts have become a privileged site for the exercise of cultural citizenship, and at the same time, a commodity for the export sector of the Cuban state and the tourism sector. The Cuban government is keenly aware of the potential to exploit Cuban culture as an important export commodity in the same way Dominican’s are exporting merengue, Puertorrican’s reggaetton, and Mexican’s and Peruvian’s their cuisine to give an example. Cuban arts and popular culture have been commercialized to spark a higher interest in the tourism sector, and with it the possibilities of foreign investment and the badly needed revenue in hard currency that it provides to the government (Chavez 2005). Hip-hop in Cuba has faced the same roadblocks other new forms of expression have faced during the past 50 years.
If these expressions have the potential to divide Cubans it must be supervised, limited or outright prohibited. If they don’t, they should be pushed forward and exported to the world. In an increasing fashion, Cuban hip-hop has been getting more and more exposure internationally.

The international prominence of Cuban music and the new way in which technology allows for the dissemination of music or other art forms, has made the Cuban government more conscious of the ideological messages behind the music (Whitfield 2002). However, the state has found resistance from some hip-hop artists who are more interested in putting forth Afro-Cuban themes such as religious practices or their blackness as a political identity, instead of the more “export friendly” ideas of a Habana as the tropical playground of the 1950s as immortalized in song, Hollywood movie images or the tropical drinks favored by Ernest Hemingway.

Agencia Rap:

One of the biggest achievements of the “alternative” movement was the creation of the Cuban Rap Agency. Many groups considered to be the founders of the rap movement now form part of the Rap Agency as well as graffiti artists, b-boy dancers and poets. The Rap Agency signaled a triumph due to the relative immaturity of the movement. It was a triumph of the movement’s legitimacy against the institutions, the public and even other musicians or artists who may not have seen this form of alternative culture as one that is important or pertaining to the generally held perceptions of what Cuban culture is. It is an incredibly meaningful gesture the fact that the Cuban government’s attitude towards rap quickly shifted
from hostile (canceling scheduled performances with no clear reasons) to funding the annual rap festival, recordings and other means of promotion through the agency.

The Cuban government has not only used the agency to monitor the dissemination of rap and its contents, but as a tool to understand what is going on in the movement as they are aware that only by assimilating rap can they make it something that’s not antagonistic to the regime or the system. It’s in their interest that hip-hop becomes part of the accepted culture instead of an insurgent movement.

Still, hip-hop faces an uphill battle against pre-established notions of what should be considered acceptable culture. For example, The *Consejo Nacional Casa de Cultura “CNCC”* is responsible for the training of around 30 thousand instructors in the arts who go through a 4-year formation program tied to schools and *casas de cultura*. In the words of the leading CNCC official, the goal is to “present and foster traditional popular culture”. Furthermore, he stated that: “the formation of “taste” is our goal...to have an audience with better “taste”... “appreciation”...to form a public that is more cultured and that allows people to get involved in culture through artistic teachings”.

Alarmingly, the same high-level official claimed that the Cuban hip-hop movement was not born out of a social problematic, and that “aficionados” (as he refers to rappers) choose not to “professionalize” themselves –by enrolling in state supervised organizations- so they can keep producing “lyrics out of context”. When asked about the issues of racial identity these “out of context” lyrics touch upon, his
blunt response was that: “En Cuba no existe el racismo, eso es auto-racismo y auto-margenación de los raperos”.

These perceptions of rappers raise a troubling disconnect between them and the state entities in charge of promoting their music as an art form that has effectively become part of the new popular culture.

This vision also stands in stark contrast with that of the female head of the Agencia Rap who has been a respected voice in issues of gender and race as a rapper and activist in both a national and transnational environment. The acknowledgement by many artists of the existing disconnect between officials from Agencia Rap and segments of the Ministry of Culture have also been another reason why some rappers refuse to form part of the Agencia Rap. Artists feel support for their music through the agency can only happen if their music is seen to serve the revolution, such as when their lyrics are centered around warnings to Cuban youth to steer away from the temptations of “imperialist capitalism”.

Rap in Cuba depicts a distinctive, powerful and street-credible vision of black identity, which doesn’t always align itself with the idea promoted by the government of a society that has become color-blind since the beginnings of the revolution (Wunderlinch 2005). Many artists are faced with the need to compromise their message or face the risk of not being allowed to disseminate their music or hold public performances.

Agencia Rap, like other organizations in Cuba, has on occasions adopted autonomous positions on specific problems affecting their spheres of action, exhibiting a certain degree of autonomy at the grass roots level where their capacity
for leadership and collective action has matured (Dilla 2005). Unfortunately, the adoption of autonomous positions from time to time hasn’t been enough to satisfy some of its members. More than once, rappers have been turned away from the Agency for putting forth in their lyrics verses that may be considered “unsuitable” and they have been explicitly told that texts affecting “the principles of the revolutionary leadership, the Commander in Chief, or the lives that they are living, will not be tolerated, they can protest yes, but protest about other things.”

The Agencia Rap faced recent turmoil with a group of artists requesting the Minister of Culture to remove the head of the Agency for an alleged lack of transparency in the use of funds. Eventually, the head of Agencia Rap, Magia Lopez, was removed and suspended from performing and no new leadership succession has been made.

Many artists increasingly choose to remain independent and un-censored which could lead to a future dissolution of the Agency given the lack of sympathy for the Agency and its leaders by well-liked and respected rappers. Given the position of some officials at the CNCC and the Ministry of Culture vis-à-vis hip-hop, the dissolution of the Agencia Rap would deal a lethal blow to some of the advances made by the hip-hop movement.

Alternative culture manifestations as tattoos, piercings, rap, rock or nova-trova are just other links to a chain that has been existing for a long time despite what names or identities it may take. This eventually gives way to, or results in, a generational concentration. The initiators of a movement give life to an expression, as other expressions surface, conflicts start to arise between what is now the old
guard and the new guard creating a scenario where the movements become polar opposites of each other as the new crop modifies the behaviors of the initiators (Chavez 2005).

Social Media in Cuba:

“...a pesar de las muchas limitaciones, nos hemos convertido en internautas sin internet...”

Upon coming to office, Raul Castro called on university students to debate Cuba’s deficiencies setting in motion thousands of discussions across the island on how the 1959 revolution had steered of course. Many of these debates found their way into the collective conscience via new spaces of discussion on the internet. Cuba is one of the least-connected countries in the world, and as a result, is not known for its technology sector. The country relies on a costly, plodding satellite hookup despite a $70million investment in fiber-optic links strung from Venezuela that for unspecified reasons are still not being used. University students are not allowed to use the internet until their 2nd year of studies, access is slow and unaffordable to the average Cuban, and connection sites are not commonly found outside of a small number of hotels, universities, government buildings or embassies. Furthermore, Cuban experts argue that the lack of internet access on the island is not precisely a technical issue, but a political one.

Though internet censorship is still very much persistent, and citizens have very limited access to the web, people in Cuba have still managed to connect to

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5 “Cuban blog gathering prompts official criticism”, www.businessweek.com
social media as so many other people have done worldwide. The fact that ordinary Cuban citizens are able to access the web is an accomplishment in and of itself. The average rate for internet usage in a hotel is the equivalent of 10 US Dollars per hour, or roughly half of the monthly salary of a state worker. The availability of computers at “Centros Martinianos” is limited, furthermore, the connection is unreliable, many webpages are restricted and long queue lines at some of these centers is the norm.

The Cuban government has tried with little success to find ways of co-opting social media by launching copycat versions of Facebook and Wikipedia called, respectively, Red Social and EcuRed. Nonetheless, Facebook remains the most visited social media site in Cuba and Twitter is used despite the government’s critique of the social media platform for not censoring Fidel Castro death rumors.

In Cuba, Blogs⁶ have become one of the preferred methods for some intellectuals to hold wide-ranging debates, discussions and social commentary. As in most cases worldwide, Cuban blogs are either the work of a single individual, a small group, or what are known as "multi-author blogs" (MABs), which have developed with posts written by large numbers of authors and are professionally edited. MABs from newspapers, other media outlets, universities, think tanks, interest groups and similar institutions account for an increasing proportion of blog

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⁶ Blog (a portmanteau of the term web log) is a discussion or information site published on the World Wide Web consisting of discrete entries ("posts") typically displayed in reverse chronological order so the most recent post appears first (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog).
traffic. The rise of Twitter and other "microblogging" systems have helped integrate MABs and single-author blogs into societal newstreams\(^7\).


Despite being labeled as one of the world’s most “unplugged” nations, Cuba’s increased foray into social media has led to the creation of two very important home-grown nationwide social media festivals: the independent “Clic Festival” and the pro-government “Blogazo X Cuba”.

Festival Clic was organized by bloggers on the island, of note among them, Antonio Rodiles and Yoani Sanchez. Ms. Sanchez is considered by many to be the preeminent Cuban opposition blogger due to her wide American readership. Her blog “Generación Y”\(^8\), along with her role as founder of the Cuban Blogger Academy, have given Ms. Sanchez a vast visibility on both the local and international stage. For her followers, she has become one of the key figures of social media in Cuba and is regularly quoted, or referenced, by international scholars and experts given her balanced analysis of the Cuban reality, as well as her keen sense of the country’s

\(^7\) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blog
\(^8\) http://www.desdecuba.com/generaciony/
“emotions” which can be hard to sensibly grasp from an outsider’s perspective. Conversely, she has become a figure of scorn for her detractors who accuse her of being a champion of “sui generis” capitalism and a US government agent at the service of the “empire’s” aggressive agenda.

The Clic Festival counted with the support of the organization Estado de SATS, which despite sometimes posting incendiary videos on their webpage, has been able to evade government control when organizing debates, conferences and expositions about the future of Cuba and its transition towards democracy. The Spanish Blogger collective Evento Blog España (EBE) prepared the event’s webpage and consulted with local bloggers on the event’s preparation. The festival which aimed to “share what we have learned and the revealing of our deficiencies...without ideological or market trends”, included multiple workshops on topics including Twitter, the Internet bill of rights for Cuban computer users (netizens), the local digital journalism community, and web music and graphic technologies. Prior to the event, Yoani Sanchez circulated across the local and international social media an invitation to the festival that read as follows:

“Under the name of CLIC Festival, we want to meet to discuss new trends in web 2.0 and also to address the challenges that lie ahead in the use of these tools for dissemination and communication. We especially like the future projection of Cuba as a country inserted into technological modernity and try to answer the question of

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9 The State of SATS project hopes to create a plural space for participation and debate, where open and frank debate is exchanged. The project sponsors panel discussions, forums and other events that are filmed and broadcasted on the Internet.
what we can do to speed the time when every citizen of this country will have full access to cyberspace. **The event is promoted by several organizations, groups and individuals from civil society, but it does not respond to the particular interests of any of them, its character is not ideological or political, but technological.** It is not intended as a forum to complain about what happens to us, but as a forum for proposals to consider for tomorrow. This does not forbid us, however, from raising our voices against the harsh reality of being the nation with the least connectivity to the web in this hemisphere. **We will not incur in any political segregation or use any ideological sieve for selecting participants, much less fall into the exclusions that have plagued previous encounters with other Cuban bloggers or twitterers.** The Click Festival will not have a final statement disqualifying or insulting anyone, much less consider the Web as a battlefield against any other group, event or trend. As in the table of the poet Walt Whitman, in the event there is room for everyone without exception. In the coming days the invitations shall be sent via email and in person, but everyone who has read this text and guests can feel invited.

Our main support is the energy, talent and hard work of many people. The resources to be used for these three days come from the organizers and participants. So no party, government or institution has funded the event, participated in carrying out its program or influenced the initial idea of doing or not doing. Yes, we received the words of encouragement and emotional support from hundreds of Internet users, ordinary citizens, volunteer translators and other friends. Also of note is the solidarity and dissemination provided by the Event Blog.
Spain (EBE) that has had a hand in creating the website and inspired us with their example of plurality and debate. We’d love to make known what will happen during these three days to every citizen who is interested in the topic. If at the time of the event you are a foreign tourist visiting the island, we want you to participate with us, we will open the doors at the CLIC Festival. That visibility and transparency will be the best protection that we could afford.

I feel that the technology and knowledge will gain!”

Despite adopting an open and transparent approach to the event as the best way to safeguard against government repression, as explicitly stated in the clearly conciliatory and apolitical invitation to the event on behalf of the organizers of the Festival Clic, the government-controlled publication Cubadebate issued a scathing attack of the event under the title “Desmontando un engendro: La inocencia imposible del Festival Clic”. With far-reaching assumptions and a conspirational bent, the review/opinion piece of the Festival Clic that appeared in Cubadebate read as follows:

“A subversive freak is being cooked-up in Habana, seemingly un-politicized, "promoting" the use of Information Technology and Communications (ICT). The same people in the island who benefit from millions in funds provided by U.S. government agencies such as NED and USAID for "regime change" in Cuba, are now trying to present themselves as promoters of the widespread use of the Internet.

10 www.cubadebate.cu
11 Note the capitalization of the letters C.I.A on the word inocencia.
The provocation has the name "Festival Click", in association with a Spanish company that has the support of transnational firms such as Microsoft and IBM. These two empires that implement a disciplined U.S. blockade to Cuba on the Internet, are sponsors of the Spanish organization that presents itself as a promoter of independent voices and shamelessly benefits from further funding by the BBVA Bank, against which they protest today through social networks as the #15M movement.

Event Blog Spain (EBE) admits on its website that in recent months it has been working "very intensively" with certain counter-revolutionaries to celebrate a great event dedicated to promoting the use of Internet in Cuban society. " In its note, EBE ensures that they always do this with "a premise in mind: web technologies do not understand ideologies", but their allies in Cuba deny it cheerfully".

The ham-fisted critique continues and takes personal aim at leading blogger and Clic Festival organizer Yoani Sanchez by stating:

“one of the organizers of the event, has confessed to openly promoting capitalism in Cuba - "sui generis capitalism," ...she has proven systematic links with the U.S. government and its agents in Cuba. The imperial blogger holds the record of being the person who works with a U.S. embassy often mentioned in the Wikileaks cables, she appears in 11 un-censored communications and in other documents, her name strikethrough, but certainly alluding to this woman. The location that houses the Click Festival is the meeting site for members of the counter-revolution who shine for their mediocrity and do not disguise their intentions of turning this scenario as the launch pad for the long-desired construction of
a Cuban "civil society" serving Washington. It is no wonder that sites encouraged from the U.S. such as Havana Times, have adhered enthusiastically to the call.”

The attack on the festival turns into further over-reaching accusations when it states that:

“This maneuver has clear antecedents in the network built in Syria by an official in the U.S. State Department, used today to encourage terrorism and foreign intervention, and which the United States disguised as a service to report school abuse. In Libya, the "Thuraya" cellphones promoted by the U.S. allowed to establish coordinates and locate civilian and military targets, which caused incalculable losses to the forces loyal to the government at the time. The intention of the Click Festival is evident: advance the strategy of building networks prior to an aggression, as they did in Libya, Syria and formerly in Yugoslavia, and strengthening the idea of a counter-revolution allied to the United States as a promoter of freedom on the Net.

The U.S. government has not deviated, and will not deviate one millimeter from its policy of a clear and relentless attack against the Cuban Internet: access to the network and its instruments only for the obedient, those who help flesh out the rhetoric that serves also to impose international sanctions and prevent access to resources and technologies. In other words, to run without too many setbacks, the country’s economic isolation, and deny access to resources that are key to the cultural growth and economic efficiency, scientific research, participation in government decisions and political expression.

The scandalous financial penalty against the Swedish company Ericsson confirms this. For repairing old equipment for mobile phone networks in the island,
the Treasury Department of the United States imposed a fine to the transnational of $1.75 million and the expulsion of the employees of the subsidiary in Panama that allegedly facilitated the Cubans service. For the Click Festival promoters, the blockade does not exist. In their statement to uninformed internet users, they state: "In Cuba, to download a 2 or 3MB file is an ordeal." They do not explain why. It suits them. They and their friends work to shield the blockade and justify an aggression."

As Haroldo Dilla argued in an opinion piece for the Havana Times blog titled “Festival CLIC and the Vast Minority”, the Cubadebate attack provided an example of what the Cuban political elite could do. To place such serious accusations in a country where public opinion does not exist, there is no autonomous press and the judiciary subsystem isn’t even moderately independent, poses an immense personal danger to the people involved with this festival and other similar initiatives. This type of attack could be one of the explanations attributable to the relatively small participation of people to such a highly touted event12.

Despite counting with government backing, and thus avoiding the harassing and dangerous accusations experienced by the participants of Festival Clic, the convention “Blogazo X Cuba: Primer Encuentro de Blogueros en Revolución” suffered from very poor attendance as well. The event celebrated in Matanzas and organized by the pro-government blog collective La Joven Cuba, made their political agenda explicitly clear as they expressed unfavorable opinions of bloggers who criticized the regime, citizens they have dubbed as dissidents and “mercenaries” as such. Unlike Festival Clic, the Blogazo X Cuba did issue an event’s “final declaration” which

12 Various accounts agree on the number of participants of the event limited to less than 100 people, with varying estimated guesses placing participants at around 60 in number.
highlighted the immense rift that exists between them and other Cuban bloggers. The cause for this rift lies at the heart of the 3rd proclamation from the event’s declaration: “Respetamos y promovemos el pensamiento crítico, necesario y útil para preservar nuestra condición de revolucionarios, con la premisa de que no es posible ser revolucionario fuera de la Revolución.”

The over-arching aim of most Cuban bloggers remains the same when it comes to areas such as supporting the systematic holding of other meetings of Cuban bloggers and tweeters enhancing contacts with other communities and Web 2.0, the gradual integration of young people and university students into the Cuban blogosphere in a genuine and natural manner, and the reformulation of provisions limiting use, connectivity and access to the website of the institutions of the country for the sake of a greater presence of Cubans in cyberspace. Despite the list of shared common goals, the great ideological divide is exposed when one group is solely capable of seeing activities for the benefit of the common public good through the lens of the revolutionary project.

It is unfortunate then that many bloggers aligned with the government have used the blogosphere to exercise a heavy-handed promotion of the revolutionary agenda by discrediting opposition views with non-factual accusations and blatant propaganda, instead of engaging in a differing yet enriching debate. The reaction of State Security and state-backed social media to manifestations it feels are too critical of the government or that create space for disidencia has been swift. For example, during a meeting of “Estado de SATS” regarding cultural and academic exchanges
between Cuba and the United States, an organized police operation in the surrounding streets intimidated participants and set off in motion a simultaneous smear campaign on the internet by outlets who serve as political and ideological information control and represent the worst aims of the Cuban government under the direction of the party’s Ideological Department.13

Ironically, it is the pro-government bloggers who have proudly proclaimed on their event’s final declaration to “commit to respecting differences and frank debate, as the truth is always revolutionary”.

Fortunately for civil society and the future of social media in Cuba, most bloggers are still pushing ahead with valuable civic and intellectual projects despite facing the possibility of intimidation from pro-government bloggers, or outright repression from State Security. Many bloggers have taken advantage of the Raulista strategy of broadening social consensus through a less restrictive cultural environment (Mujal-Leon, 2011). By acknowledging the changes in Cuban society during the past decades, Raul Castro’s strategy of broadening social consensus could eventually lead to a transition to an authoritarian regime with greater social, cultural and economic pluralism where reformers from within the regime could interact with members of the moderate opposition.

If this is to occur, the spheres that have opened up and allowed for the frank discussion and debate of ideas should be left independent in order to allow for the expansion of thought. They should grow and be fostered, not get repressed, intimidated or co-opted by the state apparatus.

13 Haroldo Dilla, Havana Times opinion piece “Festival Clic and the Vast Minority”.
“...si el oficialismo cierra las puertas, pues hay que abrir ventanas...” –El Blog del Compañero.

Theoretical Discussion:

Figure 3: Photo of plaque “Thank you George Bush, cretin!”. Figure 4: Photo of image of Camilo Cienfuegos outside Ministry of Interior building. Both images author’s own.

“mi Habana...enemiga del imperialismo y de la explotación, la que paga con Camilo y te cobra con Washington”

When considering hip-hop artists and bloggers as social actors in Cuban Civil Society, I decided to observe Civil Society beyond the confines of formal organizations. If we adopt a definition of civil society strictly as an autonomous space for citizen association – and we focus on the world of formal associations - then the answer is Civil Society does not exist in Cuba in a strict sense (Armony 2004, 2005). If we look at Civil Society from a legal standpoint, there are no “independent” citizens organizations in Cuba. By law, citizens’ organizations must exist under the auspices of certain government institutions (such as Agencia Rap) and must
maintain an ongoing relationship with government supervisory agencies (Quiroz 2003). If I were to strictly follow these definitions, then I couldn’t argue that hip-hop artists and bloggers constitute proper social actors as such.

However, hip-hop artists and bloggers in Cuba exist and function under both formal and informal social groups and networks through which citizens participate in political and community activities. Following Skocpol and Fiorina (1999), if we take into account the public sphere -that is, the social space in which collective debates among different “publics” take place-, these spaces can clearly be defined as Civil Society.

The most common interaction between the state and hip-hop or social media, as representations of civil society, is the interaction between the state’s coercive dimension and civil society’s organizing and mobilizing capacity (Armony 2005). State repression has at times weakened the capacity of an independent mobilization, and state protest of hip-hop artists by unilaterally cancelling their performances, censoring recordings, or forbidding the travelling abroad as a coercive tactic to keep the actors and society in check has mostly back-fired and made actors even more vocal. Following Armony’s analysis, this coercive approach weakens the state as society perceives the state’s fear in allowing manifestations that may expose faults or incongruence in the national project. As Armony argues, this interaction results in a negative sum for both the state and civil society.

“por que que intentas borrarme? sabes que algo es cierto, el pueblo escucha y se identifica, no soy yo el que está mintiendo…”
In sum, while the definitions of Civil Society of Quiroz and Armony do in fact apply to hip-hop artists or bloggers under government supervision (i.e., artists under Agencia Rap), there is still a group of “underground” artists who operate through informal social groups and networks and don't respond to government supervision, therefore making them de facto social actors.

These social actors constitute the perfect example of the “tolerance by omission” power struggle and balancing act found in Cuban Society. By refusing to be members of the state supervised Agencia Rap (or La Joven Cuba for bloggers), these “informal” actors are constantly denied the opportunity to properly record, perform, or travel (“no te parece muy duro? que un maricón sentado en un sillón juega ping-pong con tu futuro?, con tus sueños, tus deseos, con tus aspiraciones...ya tengo una colección de cartas de invitaciones!!”). Yet their message is popular and the channels for communicating it remain outside the state apparatus. The state has at times acknowledged the message and pushed it forward in censored versions via “formal” actors, in essence, they have tolerated the message by not completely omitting it from public consumption. Underground hip-hop artists are against the censorship or editing of their music from state bureaucrats and having them alter the dynamics of modern cultural production in Cuban society.

“Venezuela 2007, Mexico 2008, victoria frustrada por la dictadura de pinocho, que empacha con la idea de sociedad justa y socialista, pero amordaza al pueblo y viola los derechos del artista...”

Although the messages put forth by these new social actors are not endorsed by the state, they surface, multiply and gain enough traction were the state is forced
to start tackling the issues brought up, albeit as they see fit. The Cuban state continues to monitor and shape domestic cultural production and reception, going as far as stating that “it is imperative that the youth doesn’t allow the existence of two Cuba’s in one culture”. Through its agencies, the state continues to try to incorporate new expressions into suitable messages that could blend with a revision of the revolutionary project. By doing so, the language and form by which these ideas finally reach society may not be the way they were originally intended, but if a topic that wasn’t being addressed by the “formal” networks starts being addressed by the pressure to do so from the “informal” social networks, then that independent influence must be acknowledged as an independent social actor through Cuba’s unique scope.

In this repositioning and creation of new spaces of participation, it is plausible to question whether the emerging social actors and new social activity face the risk of generating tensions with the state, despite the fact that for the most part they emerged from within the system itself and in accordance with it (Tulchin, Espina Prieto, Bobea, Hernandez 2005).

While many experts will argue that the State has limited the public sphere out of fear that civil society can become a “fifth column on behalf of the United States” (Crahan 2005), there have been counterclaims from some analysts of Cuban civil society who have argued that the Cuban government is in fact allowing the expressions resulting from open public spheres so that civil society can rebuild social and political consensus. Despite the arguments of the analysts of the counterclaim, the totality of interviewed subjects for this paper fear that any
manipulation to gain information that can get people labeled as dissidents muddles up the genuine expression as it has caused musicians in the past to get banned from radio play or public performances. This occurs despite the fact that these actors are talking about Cuban society from socialist perspectives, from the perspective of people who were born and raised in Cuba during the socialist revolution.
Conclusion:

“Es que no entienden lo que hacen? Los cuerpos están aquí pero las mentes están a 90 millas y continúan en trance”

The importance of Cuban hip-hop and social media as the topic of this study is the clear realization that through their art and thought dissemination, rappers and bloggers have been given the possibility to affect or alter the way in which discourses are constructed, to represent what one rapper claimed is the “history lived, not the one found in books”. Hip-hop and social media has become an increasingly relevant force for change in modern Cuban society, and rappers have become a conduit not only for themselves, but for intellectuals as well, allowing for the injection of counter dominant expressions into official discourses and institutions. As the head of the Agencia Rap expressed while interviewed, “cambiarse de protestas a propuestas”.

Sujatha Fernandes, stated in her book “Cuba Represent: Cuban Arts, State Power and the Making of New Revolutionary Cultures”, that the Cuban state tolerates counter-hegemonic cultural practices such as critical art because they can be reincorporated in official institutions, traditions and discourses in ways that bolster the state’s popularity, delineate the boundaries and limits of contestation, and promote national unity in the face of increasing ideological polarization and growing racial and economic disparities in Cuban society. However, critical art can also give rise to ideas, strategies, and agendas that do not coincide with those of the Cuban state.
The artistic, academic and cultural exchanges brought about by new social actors in hop-hop and social media are extremely important during the process of expanding and making accessible to others the free flow of information and knowledge that has become such an integral part of the modern world. These exchanges have the possibility of becoming an integral part of a future transition to a full democracy or something that resembles it. As some experts have argued, the fundamental challenge may lie in getting the Cuban civil society and diaspora to intersect.

The reason for focusing this study on post “special period” Cuba is that the economic reforms implemented to confront the crisis have served to diversify and complicate Cuban civil society, creating new social actors and new relations and interactions (Tulchin, Espina Prieto, Bobea, Hernandez 2005). The socio-economic crisis of the 90’s marks a new level in the reformulation of the inclusion/exclusion equation and in the ascription of the social narrative to the political discourse (Bobea 2005).

The collapse of the Soviet Union altered the capacity to control the distribution of resources and the production of ideological resources. As the government became increasingly less capable of fulfilling the population’s basic socioeconomic needs, it could no longer justify repressive policies and actions such as organizing civil society into government-created mass organizations on the ground under the pretext of ensuring equitable distribution of the benefits of a socialist economy (Crahan 2003, 2005).
The changes following the special period have caused Cuba to evolve from the most egalitarian social structure in the world to one governed by patterns of greater inequality (Valdes Paz 2005). Although efforts have been made to preserve a level of social justice that would prevent any one group from being crushed, the ongoing transfer of the island’s moribund economy to private hands has started breeding profound socio-political implications. The same goes for the inequalities brought on by the “convertible peso” (CUC) which has altered the dynamic between those with access to it (through work in tourism and remittances, mostly racially white people), and those who have reduced or no access to CUCs. As some have said in Cuba: the whites shop the styles found in the US, the blacks shop the styles found in the pesos stores (Chavez, Wunderlinch 2005).

Furthermore, the crisis of the special period has posed newfound difficulties for the social integration of youth from the standpoint of three basic elements: employment, education and sociopolitical participation (Dominguez 2005). This presents an incredible challenge for the Cuban state as it seeks to instill in new generations a commitment to the socialist project. It is within this framework and delicate environment that the new social actors presented in this paper surfaced as they are known today.

As Cohen and Arato (1994) have pointed out, the total democratization of state and economy cannot be the goal of civil society. Civil Society is an important terrain of democratization, of democratic institution building. The new social actors and creators of public sphere discussed herein, do not see themselves as strict precursors of impending democratization, but as the channels to raise valid
“inquietudes” in the hopes of exerting more influence over politics and society by catalyzing changes in government policies through their actions, interactions and other dynamics.

Simply put, Cuban civil society is looking to play the role that inherently belongs to it. Through their actions, new social actors are looking to shift -or at the very least expand- the discourse that has been put in place for 53 years by a group of individuals who assumed the monopoly of ideas, words, face and logic that generations upon generations in the island have been subjected to. The same group of intolerant individuals who find it acceptable to prevent the opening of new discourses through the use of force or intimidation.

“Viendo tu televisión no se conoce mundo...no con un régimen autocrata sin salida, que te dice que tienes que decir, y qué hacer con tu vida”.

People in Cuba, and young people in particular, feel they live in a state of exaltation of moral and social values due to the revolution. Cubans across generations canalize things in different ways, and intense passions are ever-present at times of discussing, approaching or fighting all kinds of problems. There is a constant debate and exchange of critiques, and expressions tend to surge from these exaltations and passions.

Young Cuban adults are becoming more openly frustrated by the lack of opportunities in the island and by the contradictions between official ideology and lived reality (Dominguez 2005). This has led to an increased apathy regarding politics, with many young adults enrolling in state sponsored institutions with the sole purpose of avoiding harassment: “para que no te jodan por no tener carné”.
Some authors argue the social image that today’s young Cubans have of emigration abroad has become increasingly neutral and depoliticized (Domínguez 2005). Yet emigration is a recurring theme in hip-hop as the following couplets exemplify:

“oh mi Habana, donde hay patriotismo, pero si vuelven a abrir el Mariel, aquí solo se queda el “narra” y el hermano de él”.

“que cuando le preguntas cuál es tu gran fantasía? Responden: montar avión y no sobornar más policías”.

“muchos están muertos o en cama, prefieren morir por el sueño Americano que vivir la pesadilla Cubana”.

Figure 4: Photo of Fidel Castro quote “Contradiction” (author’s own).
The contradictions are aplenty throughout Cuban society, the state will promote the creation of family units, yet recently married couples find themselves forced to live separately -or in one of the couples’ family homes- as the housing infrastructure hasn’t increased to support the population growth of the past 50 years.

One of the highly touted social gains of the revolutionary project has been a high-quality education system with very few rivals in the region. Yet the high levels of education have also fostered a breeding ground for discontent as young people become disenfranchised with the realization that there are very limited avenues they can take to reach their potential.

College graduates interviewed, with degrees in fields such as architecture or civil engineering, will commonly find themselves under-employed by the state and relegated to tasks such as supervising the re-painting of walls on a restoration project in Old Habana, or manning a phone line that “never rings” at a government ministry for the sake of “la causa”. Journalists and engineers are forced to make a living by parading tourists through the streets of Habana. Doctors will eschew their craft and profession to peddle DVD movies out of backpacks.

For an increasing number of young women, the disparity in job opportunities has led to even worse options. The lure of prostitution –known as “jineterismo”- has become a quasi-acceptable chore in order to sustain families or make a decent living. Many young students and recent graduates have been increasingly falling into the profession, often times with the knowledge or consent of their family, husbands or partners. As a rap song grimly states “Habana Hermosa...donde las
“bebés con 14 abriles ya fornican...”. It is no surprise then that many Cubans’ response to the social gains of the revolutionary project— and many do irrefutably exist— has become: “todo eso esta muy bien, pero y para que?”.

Older Cubans who unequivocally supported or keep supporting the revolutionary project have also been putting into question more and more their “ritual activities” (Burawoy and Lukacs, 1992). The bodega stocks of essential food staples to be purchased with “the libreta” are paltry, and the stores selling products in foreign currency “tienda de divisa” are outside the reach of those Cubans not benefitting from foreign remittances or income earned formally—or informally—through the tourism economy. While many Cubans won’t go into questioning the reasons and values that motivated the revolution in 1959—their overwhelmingly approve of it—they do question what values and reasoning are keeping it alive when they feel it has ultimately failed to give them a decent livelihood.

Hip-hop and blogging serve as channels for the manifestation of all these frustrations, but more importantly, they also serve as an empowering factor in a positive way. If a cultural expression comes from within a marginal or vulnerable place, and said expression produces no financial gain, it gives way to the integration of a certain amount of values that makes youth conscious enough within to let go of a life of delinquency, marginalization and un-fulfillment.

The current Cuban reality can be considered a second social, cultural and political revolution. The changes experienced by Cuban society during the last decade have been accompanied by a proliferation of intellectual movements, academic institutions, modes and spaces of reflection, exchanges with external
actors and the formatting of opinion through specialized blogs and magazines, all of which have expanded the civil privilege of freedom of expression. (Bobea, Hernandez 2005).

Hip-hop and blogging provides a space for a variety of perspectives that do not reflect institutional points of view. As Rafael Hernandez (2005) argues, the new breed of organs of civil society –such as hip-hop music and blogs- open the discussion for debate of topics as diverse as race relations, gender issues, religious activities, Cuban culture abroad, the role of mass media, social diversity, inequality, Cuban history and Marxism. By delving into dimensions of culture related to society, ideology, and politics, expressions found in hip-hop have succeeded in creating a framework where issues of a controversial nature can be placed in a manner that is equally coherent, challenging and interesting.

The Cuban revolution has always placed a big priority on culture and those cultural values have tended to be values based on protest, resistance and rising against what is considered to be wrong, and to comment on daily life from a critical standpoint. Art remains one of the most important avenues for opening public debate over emerging social problems. The artistic sector has produced the most sustained and influential criticism by desanctifying revolutionary symbolism, as well as attempting at elaborating an autonomous organization (Dilla 2005).

Sometimes more aggressive and sometimes more modest, Cuban hip-hop and blogging couldn’t be any other way, it is what was expected. It is the natural evolution.
“Y es un sueño difícil de lograr pero no por eso vamos a parar de luchar, no se rindan que aún queda camino por andar y esto a favor del pueblo algún día va a cambiar...todo esto lo soñé en compañía de mi almohada.”
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