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“Rap is war”: Los Aldeanos and the Politics of Music Subversion in Contemporary Cuba

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Resumen

El estudio del hip hop cubano permite examinar hasta qué punto la música puede convertirse en una práctica de oposición política en las sociedades socialistas. Al tiempo que la política racial del hip cubano ha provocado estrategias estatales de asimilación y control hegemónico, el lado más contestatario de este movimiento se ha desplazado de las políticas raciales hacia políticas de confrontación más abiertas hacia el estado como lo ejemplifica el caso de Los Aldeanos. Este artículo analiza las letras y las intervenciones públicas de este grupo de rap e ilustra cómo estos raperos rearticulan el imaginario de la Revolución Cubana para proponer una política de confrontación radical que construye una identidad “revolucionaria” subversiva. Su música puede interpretarse como una forma de práctica política en un contexto donde la asociación política u otras formas de movilización cívica están restringidas. En última instancia, el caso de Los Aldeanos permite ilustrar las complejas relaciones entre música, estado y política en el socialismo.

Palabras clave

Cuba, hip-hop, música y política, revolución, control estatal, Los Aldeanos

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Abstract

Cuban hip-hop provides a good case to examine the extent to which music can articulate opposition in socialist societies. As hip-hop's racial politics became a concern to the state and a site for hegemonic control and assimilation, I suggest that the resistant edge of hip-hop as a cultural form has shifted from racial politics to a politics of confrontation best illustrated by the rap group Los Aldeanos. I analyse their lyrics and public interventions to illustrate how these rappers rearticulate the Cuban Revolution's framework to propose a radical politics of confrontation that mobilizes a subversive “revolutionary” identity constructed as a political agent. I argue that their music can be interpreted as a form of politics in a context where political association or other forms of public mobilization are restricted. Ultimately, their case reveals the complex interplay of music, state and politics in socialism.

Key words

Cuba, hip-hop, music politics, revolution, state control, Los Aldeanos

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“Rap is War”: Los Aldeanos and the Politics of Music Subversion in Contemporary Cuba¹

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Introduction

No one is protecting us or sponsoring us to sing what we sing (...) What we do is what we feel. We think somebody has to do it and we are doing it. Personally, we can't stand it any longer. This blissful idea they built for us is full of gaps, lies and more lies and when you build a castle of lies, it will collapse at some point. We can't bear it any longer. We aren't scared to speak out. We are not killing anyone or planting bombs or fostering terrorism. We are making music and telling the truth, period. If we have so many fans who believe in what we say, then we are not talking bullshit (El Bi, interview in Pedrero, 2010).²

When el Bi, one of the members of the rap group Los Aldeanos spoke about controversial matters like this on the big screen of the Cuban *Cinemateca* (otherwise known as Chaplin cinema), in the premier of the documentary *Revolution*, people started clapping and shouting. After different attempts to censor the documentary, produced independently by Maykell Pedrero, it was a last minute inclusion in the programme of the Festival [*Muestra*] of young filmmakers organized by the Cuban Film Institute (ICAIC in Spanish) in March 2010. *Revolution* was screened only once but simultaneously at the Chaplin, and 23 and 12 cinemas. At the Chaplin screening I attended, state workers, older citizens and members of the Communist Party were present to counteract possible disruptions of order. Yet, many members of the audience sang and clapped in an unprecedented gesture of collective defiance.³

Los Aldeanos [The villagers], comprised of the two rappers Aldo Roberto Rodríguez Baquero (a.k.a. Aldo) and Bian Oscar Rodríguez Galá (a.k.a. El Bi), is

¹ A version of this article was presented at the Centre for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, Columbia University, in September 22, 2011. It is based on a chapter from my PhD thesis entitled *Living in transition: popular music and social change in contemporary Cuba*, Department of Sociology, City University London, 2012. The research followed a qualitative multi-method approach combining some ethnographic techniques (interviews and observation) with textual analysis. Since discourse theory 'investigates the way in which social practices articulate and contest the discourses that constitute social reality' (Howarth, Norval and Savrakakis, 2000:3), this article appropriates some elements of discourse analysis. In particular, I borrow from the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) and the Critical Discourse Analysis proposed by Norman Fairclough (1992, 2003) to explore how rap songs provide categories and frameworks to represent changing realities, relations, and identities.

² All translations of Spanish quotes by the author. For help in the translation and correction of songs, I should also thank Roberto García, Julián Rodríguez Ramos and Marilia Sabalier-Lugo. I am deeply grateful to my husband, the researcher Abel Sierra Madero, whose help during the fieldwork was invaluable.

³ Personal observation, 28 February 2010. See also the account of Díaz (2010).

an underground⁴ rap group that openly criticizes the Cuban government. They have produced more than 20 demos independently and have had an active presence in the underground hip-hop scene since 2003, but their music does not fit the traditional scheme of “black” and “revolutionary” hip-hop.

Cuban hip-hop has been read as a response of black youth to social change and crisis in the last two decades, and as a space to play out new black identities (Garofalo and Pacini, 2000; Perry, 2004; Fernandes, 2003, 2006; West-Durán, 2006). Rap has contested the dominant vision of the nation as *mestiza*, a symbolic construction that has been successfully mobilized to erase race from the public agenda. However, recent developments⁵ suggest that the Cuban state is finally accommodating a less antagonistic version of racial politics within the national project, especially addressing the cultural and individual manifestations of racism. Although the arguments provided emphasise the persistence of previous racial prejudices rather than racialized inequalities, and state policy measures focus on media representation and the reconstruction of a black history, the discussion of racism in the official media and institutions contributes to assimilating racial politics into the broader framework of the nation. Yet, the more radical perspectives voiced in hip-hop are left aside. Moreover, the racial projects in Cuban rap are not entirely visible because the hip-hop movement is currently very fragmented (Gámez, 2012). As hip-hop’s racial politics became a concern to the state and a site for hegemonic control and assimilation, I suggest that the resistant edge of hip-hop as a cultural form has shifted from racial politics to a politics of confrontation best illustrated by the rap group Los Aldeanos.

Scholars have found similarities between the ideology of the Cuban Revolution and the discourses of Cuban rap. For instance, Sujatha Fernandes (2009) argues that the revolutionary imagination conveyed in Cuban hip-hop is linked, on one hand, to the experience of racism and on the other, to the struggle against neoliberal imperialism. Cuban cultural critic Roberto Zurbarano

⁴ For a discussion on the meaning of “underground” in the Cuban music field, see Baker (2012).

⁵ For instance, the publication of books addressing racism, racial inequalities and Afro-Cuban identity (Morales, 2007; Fernández Robaina, 2009); the constitution of an official commission to tackle racism; the broadcasting of a TV program on January 20, 2010) dedicated entirely to the discussion of this topic, and the recent appointment of Zuleica Román, a black woman, as president of the Cuban Book Institute.

(n.d.:9).⁶ also stresses the identification of rappers with the ideology of the Revolution. For Geoff Baker the Cuban Revolution and hip-hop “are like two branches of the same tree, their shared roots making the question of appropriation or co-optation philosophically redundant” (2011b: 69). While these readings might be applied to state-sponsored groups such as Obsesión and Doble Filo, they are difficult to reconcile with the existence of extremely bitter political criticism in many rap texts, not only produced by Los Aldeanos but also by other groups such as Escuadrón Patriota and Hermanos de Causa. In addition, some authors have pointed out that rappers and intermediaries who were seeking state support for the movement have overemphasized such identification (Exner, 2003; Fernandes, 2006). In her study of the Cuban cultural field, Fernandes observed that “Artists and publics collaborate[d] with government actors to reincorporate critical expressions into official discourse, often strategically and self-consciously” (2006:3).

Various authors have suggested that the criticisms in Cuban hip-hop are not “systemic” or “structural” and are directed mainly towards the failed delivery of the Revolution’s promises (Perry, 2004; West-Durán, 2004; Geoffray, 2008; Baker 2011b). According to West-Durán, rap’s criticisms are not really oppositional or subversive but inform a “Cuban cultural politics of difference” (2004:16). Similarly, Baker contends that the work of Los Aldeanos follows the line of constructive criticism within the limits of the Cuban Revolution, and so, they “consistently seize the revolutionary initiative rather than contesting its ideological basis” (2011b: 51). Conversely, in this article, I examine the discourses and performances by Los Aldeanos as an example of radical opposition to the socialist state in the cultural public sphere.⁷ I will

⁶ Even for an official cultural promoter of hip-hop like Roberto Zurbarano, the connection of rap with the ideology of the Cuban state is not that straightforward. Thus, in a version of the same article for a US-published compilation he asserts that “the Cuban rapper, emerging in the Special Period, expresses not only material deprivation but also a deterioration and subversion of the utopian vision of the Cuban Revolution’s emancipatory project” (Zurbarano, 2009:148). The existence of this double discourse reveals how cultural officials negotiate censorship, and strategically— if not opportunistically— adapt their arguments to specific audiences. Such accounts might also influence those of foreign scholars who overstate the similarities of hip-hop messages with state ideology. Ultimately, it underlines again how hip-hop is discursively worked and re-worked. In relation to Los Aldeanos, Zurbarano expressed his concerns about their “radicalism” which is “irresponsible, if not reactionary because at some point that critical, radical language becomes an anti-system language” (in Pedrero, 2010).

⁷ According to Jim McGuigan this notion refers to “the articulation of politics, public and personal, as a contested terrain through affective—aesthetic and emotional—modes of

argue that their music engages with the revolutionary imaginary but through the dislocation of the Cuban Revolution as the primary point of reference of the revolutionary framework. The radical politics of confrontation of Los Aldeanos mobilizes a subversive “revolutionary” identity and presents it as a potential new political agent in the Cuban context.

Whilst most popular music produced in the last two decades in Cuba fits John Scott’s (1990) concept of hidden transcript—conveying coded, disguised criticisms against the state and the dominant elites—, the music of Los Aldeanos embodies such “rare moments of political electricity” when the hidden transcript of subordinated groups reaches the public arena in an open form and “is spoken directly and publicly in the teeth of power” (Scott, 1990: xii).

Los Aldeanos provide the best case to examine the extent to which contemporary Cuban popular music has challenged dominant state ideology and embodying emergent values and structures of feeling (Williams, 1990) that illustrate the ongoing process of cultural transition in the country. Ultimately, their case reveals the complex interplay of music and politics in socialism.⁸

“Rap is war”⁹: Los Aldeanos and the politics of confrontation

The three pillars or strategies in their discourses are: 1) the public legitimation of their voice as representative of the people; 2) the construction of social antagonism—via the deconstruction of state ideology and the presentation of the historical leadership as illegitimate—and 3) the reappropriation of revolutionary ideology to promote action through confrontation. Now, I turn to analyse these strategies, their articulation and outcomes in the music of Los Aldeanos.

Embodying the voice of “the people” is a very frequent claim in Los Aldeanos’ songs, asserting a genuine type of (political) representation, which is based, primarily, on shared life experiences that can breach the gap between

communication” (2005:10).

⁸ The dual economy, the increasing inequalities, the rising unemployment and cuts to the social security system are all features that point to a neoliberal post-socialist transition in Cuba. However, if the role of central planning and the political system are considered, Cuba can still be characterized as a state-socialist society.

⁹ Los Aldeanos, “El rap es guerra” (Rap is war), *El Atropello*. Las 26 Musas/Real 70. 2009.

everyday life and official discourse to voice ordinary people's concerns and opinions.

Although they refer to racial discrimination, especially from police harassment, their agenda is not specifically about racial politics. They uphold an all-encompassing and barrio-rooted definition of "the people" they claim to represent, as their track entitled "Los Aldeanos" reveals: "I am the people, I am the barrio, I am the street, I am white, I am black".¹⁰ Moreover, they claim to raise their voices on behalf of different subjects across the political spectrum of opinions: "for those who removed their blindfolds, for those who do not believe but live stubbornly, for those who believed but were betrayed and those who are here struggling rather than talking shit everywhere else".¹¹

Building political legitimacy also entails actively rejecting—albeit not deconstructing—the arguments and labels deployed by the Cuban government to counteract dissidence. Hence, they deny receiving money from foreign agents or to be connected in any way to the internal dissident groups— mostly discredited or unknown in the island— as well as rejecting the opposition based in Miami, which is perceived as antinational and opportunistic.¹² For example, in the documentary *Revolution El Bi* asserts that for him "talking shit" in Miami does not entail any merit, "the heat is here (...) I think that my cause is here not there" (in Pedrero, 2010). He airs a similar view in "Viva Cuba Libre" (Long live free Cuba), which is his angry response after being denied permission, twice, to travel to and to participate in the Latin American rap competition *Battle of the cocks* sponsored by Red Bull. While he criticizes emigration policies, he also suggests that legitimate political opposition could only exist within the country. By endorsing an exclusionary island-based opposition, they indirectly reaffirm the split between nation and diaspora/exile that is central in the political project of the Cuban state—an issue I will go back later in the text:

I already have a large collection of invitation letters¹³.
I know there are laws,

¹⁰ Los Aldeanos, "Los Aldeanos", *El Atropello*. Las 26 Musas/Real 70. 2009.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Los Aldeanos, "A modo de aclaración" (Clarifying statement), *Viva Cuba Libre*. Las 26 Musas/Real 70. 2009.

¹³ Before January 2013, people wanting to travel abroad had to present to the immigration authorities a certified invitation letter from a person resident in the country he or she wanted to visit. The price to certify this document in the Cuban consulates abroad was 200 CUC, around 225 dollars.

but sorry, they don't control emigration,
you are feeding the sharks.
Things are worsening and they're forcing me to agree.
I won't give in their matters.
Don't you realize what you're doing?
The bodies are here, but the minds are 90 miles away...
They have to realize:
They can stress me out but they will never drive me mad:
I'm not fleeing in a raft. What's up?
You won't fuck me up; I'm not going anywhere;
this struggle takes patience: You can suffocate me, but I will fuck your life up...¹⁴

While holding a critical stance helps them to build up closeness to ordinary people, it also shows independent thinking and courage in defying censorship and official politics, features that are central for their claims of authenticity. In songs such as “Hermosa Habana” (Beautiful Havana) and “Fuego” (Fire), they defy the government acknowledging the existence of poverty and inequality, the insufficiency of rationed food and salaries in Cuban pesos, the disadvantaged status of pensioners and housing problems.

...stop denying poverty...
people are really fucked, and privileges are but for a few.
This is abusive. What do you think life in the barrio is like?
How does the barrio survive? How do people strive for their daily bread if salaries amount to a few bucks? Tell me, how?
Retirees are on the streets, get it?
Suffering vs. agony;
Money slips by like sand
and in two weeks, they won't have anything to eat.¹⁵

All these issues are framed as the consequence of government's policies and performance and not, as the official discourse reiterates, of the embargo or imperialism. In such way, the legitimacy of the government, which is seen as displaying a double discourse and unable to deliver its promises, is called into question.

Undermining the symbolic legitimacy of a political regime is an important feature of the construction of social antagonism. Social antagonism reveals the impossibility for hegemonic projects to stabilize meanings, especially in times of social transformations— such as the Cuban crisis of the last two decades— that function as “dislocatory experiences” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985:158-159; Howarth, Norval and Stavrakakis, 2000). Under such conditions, social agents

¹⁴ Los Aldeanos, “Viva Cuba Libre”, *Viva Cuba Libre*. Las 26 Musas/Real 70. 2009.

¹⁵ Los Aldeanos feat. Escuadrón Patriota, “Fuego”, *Recor-Pila-Acción*. Las 26 Musas/Real 70. 2006.

face a blockage of identity—in this case, the Cuban social subjects cannot fully attain their revolutionary or socialist identity—and “they construct an ‘enemy’ who is deemed responsible for this ‘failure’” (Howarth, 2000:105). While musicians during the nineties channelled their blockage of identity mostly through disenchantment (Gámez, 2012), Los Aldeanos create an enemy that is not imperialism or any other external agent, as the dominant discourse suggests, but the powerful elites themselves.

Such discourse emphasizes the opposition between the people and rulers. In recent albums, the regime is labelled a dictatorship—“Fuego” (Fire), “La Naranja se picó” (The orange is rotten)—and a military autocracy— “Declaración” (Declaration). The result is their complete detachment from the regime and the rejection of its authority, as expressed in “Los Aldeanos”¹⁶: “I am my law, I am my Constitution..; I am my revolution ..., I am my government...; I am my commander.¹⁷ We are Los Aldeanos. ¡Pinga!”¹⁸

These frames also allow them to further challenge the legitimacy of the so called “historical” generation in power, harshly questioned in “Tiranosaurio” (Tyrannosaurus) for holding on to power by capitalizing on their “heroic” past, and in “Resurrección” (Resurrection)—featuring Escuadrón Patriota— because they are too old to carry on a “real” revolution. “La Naranja se picó” more openly expresses the erosion in leadership of those in power:

I’m gonna keep saying what I live in every song.
And yes, why not, live to the Revolution!
But this situation is unbearable.
In conclusion: you are motherfuckers
and this country is a prison.¹⁹

Within the broader construction of social antagonism, the loss of moral authority of those in power comes along with a depiction of “the people” as passive, fearful and suffering, which appears in almost every song. This creates a sense of injustice that is best captured in the song “Héroe” (Hero), featuring Silvito “El Libre”, the son of the Nueva Trova singer-songwriter Silvio

¹⁶ Los Aldeanos, “Los Aldeanos”, *El Atropello*. Las 26 Musas/Real 70. 2009.

¹⁷ An allusion to Fidel Castro, known in Cuba as Commander in Chief.

¹⁸ A slang word for penis. Although it cannot be developed in this paper, it is worth at least to notice the parallel between Los Aldeanos and Calle 13 in their use of what Frances Negrón-Muntaner calls “the poetry of filth” (2009).

¹⁹ Los Aldeanos, “La Naranja se picó”, *El atropello*. Las 26 Musas/Real 70. 2009.

Rodríguez. The song challenges the political use of the term in the current campaign for the release of “The Cuban Five”²⁰ to suggest that ordinary Cubans—bakers, bus drivers, doctors, teachers, war veterans, even *jinetas* or female prostitutes—are the real heroes in their struggle for survival:

Heroes are those who fought in Angola a while back
and were awarded medals although they came back mutilated.
Hero is the young Cuban girl who looks at herself in the mirror
and sees her body on top of an older one.
She has ambitions and the crude conviction
that nowadays decency doesn't pay for illusions.
Heroes are the teachers, who sweat their shirts,
educating generations for a miserable salary (...)
Heroes are the Cubans unfairly jailed in Cuban territory,
the brothers who lose their brothers at sea
while striving for the wellbeing for their families and homes (...)
Heroes are those who fight, shed blood and make a deed.
Are we heroes? No way! Heroes are the eleven million people.²¹

While *Los Aldeanos* represent the current situation as unjust and unbearable, they also mobilize the revolutionary imaginary to define “struggle” as the path of action that could achieve a “social change that is not convenient to the government”.²² Given that the hegemony of the current system is revealed in the impossibility for people to conceive alternative political actions rather than acceptance, emigration or waiting for an external intervention (Gámez, 2012), their discourses insist in the plausibility of change:

Fatherland or death, we will prevail'.
That is you have taught to us.
We don't believe you anymore, the deceit has ended.
Much time of silence and fear.
Get off the stage. Revolution is to change what must be changed.
Enough with the worn out story about a past that was worst.
I grew up with their lies and I know that something better exists.
The pain will end; change will be unstoppable.
Peace and love for my people, long live free Cuba!²³

Ironically, they use a concept of Revolution first aired by Fidel Castro in a public speech in 2000, to suggest the urgent need of change.²⁴ Their proposal

²⁰ These are five Cubans imprisoned in USA, under charges of espionage, who received harsh sentences in a Miami court. The Cuban government has launched a massive propaganda campaign both within the country and abroad to advocate for their release on the basis that the trial was unfair and that they were antiterrorists fighters— “heroes”—, not spies.

²¹ *Los Aldeanos*, “Héroe”, *Los Kaballeros*. Las 26 Musas/Real 70, 2009.

²² *Los Aldeanos*, “El rap es guerra”, *El Atropello*. Las 26 Musas/Real 70, 2009.

²³ *Los Aldeanos*, “Viva Cuba Libre”, *Viva Cuba Libre*. Las 26 Musas/Real 70, 2009.

²⁴ “Revolución es sentido del momento histórico; es cambiar todo lo que debe ser cambiado; es

of a new revolutionary identity is based on symbolically decentring and disentangling the Revolution from the historical leadership, and its reattachment to “the people” (“change is necessary, it is not impossible, the people are the revolution, there is no essential leader”).²⁵

In the political religion of the Cuban socialist regime—a term that both Damian Fernández (2000) and Rafael Rojas (2006) use to explain the symbolic force of the Cuban revolution—,national identity has been identified with the support of the socialist project (Bobes, 2003:24). The *patria* [fatherland], the people, and the state have been subsumed into the overarching notion of the Revolution. To Los Aldeanos, being revolutionary also means to be patriotic, but the fatherland here means the people, not socialism: “I am a patriot, I love my country; and to be clear, patriotism has nothing to do with supporting a doctrine or agree or disagree with any regime or government. Patriotism is love for your country, its people and its true history”.²⁶ Likewise, in the documentary *Revolution*, Aldo bluntly states he is not a communist or socialist but a revolutionary (in Pedrero, 2010). In political terms, the reappropriation of the concept of revolution might be more adequate than importing an external discourse that could alienate them from ordinary Cubans and their political culture, especially when in “the last 150 years of Cuban history there has been a tendency to identify political virtue with the condition of being a revolutionary” (Dilla, 2002:69).

By disrupting the chain of equivalences (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 127-9) between the nation, the Revolution and socialism, on one hand, and the association between the revolutionary ideal and the current regime, on the other, Los Aldeanos open the possibility for rearticulating a new revolutionary identity that can pursue a politics of confrontation through *la lucha* (the struggle, the fight). In this framework “rap is war” and the forceful Rastafarian metaphor of fire is used to signal what has to be razed. They recuperate the language of the 19th century independence wars (*Viva Cuba Libre, a degüello,*

igualdad y libertad plenas...” [Revolution is a sense of the historical moment; it is to change what must be changed] (Castro, 2001).This excerpt from a speech on May Day in 2000 is presented in official propaganda as “the concept of Revolution”.

²⁵ Los Aldeanos, “Intro”, *Viva Cuba Libre*. Las 26 Musas/Real 70. 2009.

²⁶ Los Aldeanos, “A modo de aclaración”, *Viva Cuba Libre*. Las 26 Musas/Real 70. 2009.

manigua, machete, grillete)²⁷ to call for a new liberation:

And we know well what we lack.
We know well what we have in excess.
And in so many years of revolutionary work, dude,
we have realized that what we have in excess are you all.
I set myself free; no one can stop me now,
the street is my redeeming battleground (...)
Let the machetes strike.
Cubans, get rid of your shackles. Long Live Free Cuba!²⁸

If political agents emerge when discourses are ruptured and new forms of identifications appear (Howarth, 2000:121), the discourses of Los Aldeanos might have significance for the constitution of new political subjectivities in contemporary Cuba. Notwithstanding, the politics of confrontation embodied in their music responds to what Laclau and Mouffe label "a strategy of opposition" in which the negation of a political order is not linked to a viable project for the reconstruction of society and thus, such strategy "is condemned to marginality" (1985:189). The exclusive oppositional character of Los Aldeanos' discourses limits the possibility that new subject identifications, such as the subversive revolutionary, could provide the basis for an organized project of social reconstruction (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). In their rap, positive references to a future society are rather vague, if not absent. In this way, the hegemony of the Cuban regime is still able to fixate the limits of social agency. Yet, at the face of such open opposition, how has the state dealt with Los Aldeanos?

The limits of music subversion in Cuba

Scholars have examined how popular music—either through feelings of alienation or vocal criticism—conveyed a critique of socialism in the Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries (Cushman, 1991, 1995; Wicke, 1992; Szemere, 1992; Ramet, 1994). According to Anna Szemere in socialist Hungary, rock contributed "undermining the past social order by creating, through

²⁷ Viva Cuba Libre (Live to Free Cuba) was the cry of the Cuban troops (known as *mambises*) during the independence wars against Spain. *Manigua* means forest, the primary battlefield in such conflicts. *Tocar a degüello* was the order to attack. *Degüello* comes from *degollar*, to cut your head off, in this case, with a *machete*, so the word's choices also meant to threaten the Spanish soldiers. Finally, *grillete* means fetter, an allusion to slavery.

²⁸ Los Aldeanos, "Viva Cuba Libre", *Viva Cuba Libre*. Las 26 Musas/Real 70. 2009.

the music, an alternative social and cultural space where the dramatization of a severe cultural and moral crisis prevalent in contemporary Hungarian society was possible" (1992:93). Similarly, in Peter Wicke's analysis of rock in the political disintegration of East Germany, he concluded that musicians "can play a very effective role in radically changing the political and cultural environment of which they are part" (Wicke, 1992:196). In the German Democratic Republic, rock musicians and songwriters got involved in politics and released a statement demanding public dialogue and expressing their concern about the massive exodus that preceded the Wall downfall (Pollack, 2002:311).

Both Szemere and Wicke listed the conditions of possibility for popular music to play such a significant role in political change. In the Hungarian case, Szemere highlighted the loosening of political control over the production and consumption of music (1992:94). She also observed a new generation of amateur musicians, breaking into the popular music field, "whose members were either too young, or artistically too ambitious and, in term of their relationship to the existing socio-political system, too marginal to be pressed or corrupted by the need to make 'big money' through pop music" (Szemere, 1992:94). Wicke added some other vital conditions such as the possibility for rock musicians to organize (in a Committee for Entertainment Arts) and a seed for a civil society in the form of a democratic grassroots cultural movement of young people (1992:202).

Although Cuba shares a similar political context, the spaces for association and the development of a civil society are still very limited. With respect to musicians, the Cuban state learned from the experience of Eastern Europe, preventing the self-organization of autonomous economic actors, so artists are not allowed to associate independently. Musicians and composers pertaining to the state music agencies are heavily taxed and are "not permitted to form an association to manage their international royalties" (Hernandez-Reguant, 2009:9).

More directly, the Cuban state has deployed a variety of strategies to counteract critical music—made by either state-sponsored musicians or those claiming to be underground. The most important are censorship, policies of strong marginalization, and assimilation or "cultural appropriation", the pro-

cess "whereby the cultural practices...which threaten to disrupt the *status quo*...are attended to and transformed through direct intervention by elites with the end of defusing their social transformative power" (Cushman, 1995:19). As Fernandes (2006) has already noticed in Cuban hip-hop, this is a complex process in which musicians themselves, and despite their reluctance to intervention, actively engage in negotiations with officials in search for state support and legitimation. It is necessary to underline here that the state controls all performing venues, the media and all cultural institutions, as well as granting work and travel permissions; therefore, some kind of engagement with the state and its various institutions is almost unavoidable.

In his article "Cuba Rebelión", Baker argues that Los Aldeanos build their fame "on the trope of censorship" although they "have been given radio, TV, and major concert opportunities" (2011a:3). To support his thesis that censorship is "rare" in the musical field (2011a:7), he claims that the vast majority of underground musicians do not face the kind of repression experienced by political activists and that "sanctions have been sufficiently infrequent and weak in nature" so "they inspire little fear in artists" (Baker, 2011a: 4). Although Baker complains about the lack of nuances in "the portrayal of underground musicians struggling against 'the regime' (2011:8)", his own account of Los Aldeanos tends to minimize state efforts to control the cultural sphere. Since his analysis simplifies the complex dynamics of power and the construction of hegemony in socialism, in what follows, I will use two major events in these rappers' career—their concert at the cinema Acapulco and their trip to Miami in 2010—to complicate the understanding of music politics and its limits in socialist Cuba.

In the case of Los Aldeanos, their increasing popularity prevents open repressive measures, an option that has never been the preferred strategy to deal with artists and intellectuals in Cuba, who are considered key actors "for the reproduction of a project of power" (Dilla, 2003:145).²⁹ Nevertheless, they face a policy of strong marginalization and censorship. They appeared only once on television in the music programme *Cuerda Viva*—on 28 December 2008—, as winners of the best rap demo award in the program's competition.

²⁹ Some musicians I interviewed pointed that the cultural officials also bargain with artists in order to get their loyalty, offering them a house or a car.

According to Aldo Rodríguez Baquero, after their trip to Miami in November 2010, they have been banned from all artistic venues on the island.³⁰ Before, they managed to appear in semi-informal gigs and small clubs at times, albeit confronting many difficulties that many times were themselves the expressions of “soft” censorship. For example, I tried to see los Aldeanos at Rio Cristal, an open-air park in the outskirts of Havana in March 2010. Although this could be considered an “underground” place—in terms of its peripheral geographical and cultural status— and thus, less subject to control, it is still a state venue and so, the concert did not occur because the person with the key to unlock the audio system never appeared. Similarly, when the famous singer-songwriter Pablo Milanés invited Los Aldeanos to his concert at the Anti-imperialist Tribune in 2008—a unique event only possible due to Pablo’s “legendary” status in the Cuban cultural field—, their microphones were turned down.³¹ In addition to direct measures such as banning musicians from the media or specific venues, censorship takes on these diffuse, indirect forms. While foreign spectators may think that “Paranoia feeds the search for evidence of government conspiracy, making the true extent of censorship hard to measure” (Baker, 2011:9), any attempt to “measure” the “true extent of censorship” must take into account that the state—its institutions and functionaries at various levels—operates in subtle ways, precisely, to obscure the work of power.

However, there are other controlling strategies to be considered here. Although in terms of production, Los Aldeanos are independent— they make their music at the home studio *Real Setenta*—,³² the state still controls the access to “legitimate” venues for cultural performances such as theatres and clubs. Whereas the confrontational nature of their discourse may suggest that there is no room for state co-optation or assimilation, ultimately, they position themselves as musicians, rappers, not politicians, and such an identity is always vulnerable to the promise of publicity. Thus, in an unprecedented event

³⁰ Interview with Aldo Baquero, 24 March 2012. They faced a similar prohibition in 2009.

³¹ Interview with Aldo Baquero. Aldo also referred to this episode in the interview with García Freyre (2009).

³² Most hip-hop and reggaeton have been produced in home-based studios and distributed by street sellers because Cuban record companies have paid little attention to these genres. According to Aldo, they release their records and give them to people, with no profits. They could only sell them for a couple of years at small commercial clubs, a fact reported by Baker (2012). Ironically, since they are not currently allowed to perform in Cuba, their economy now depends on concerts abroad.

and under intense police surveillance, they were allowed to perform in April 2010, at the Acapulco cinema.

Probably, the *Hermanos Saiz* Association [AHS in Spanish],³³ the only institutional affiliation of Los Aldeanos, played a key role in convincing authorities to allow the concert and to try new strategies of assimilation. The former Minister of Culture, Abel Prieto, has acknowledged the role of the AHS in being "always attentive to those living zones of creation that originate and develop outside the institutional framework" (in Rubio 2011). At the same time, the chance to have a concert on a "proper" stage came with a price. In an interview with Aldo, he confirmed that in the last minute they were asked by officials of the Cuban State Security not to sing their most subversive songs, if they wanted to perform at all.³⁴

Hence, the outcomes of this concert are unclear. It could be perceived as a first step in the process of incorporation and assimilation of Los Aldeanos, who self-censored under pressure in order to perform in public. To many in the audience, this came with disappointment since their popularity heavily relies on such critical statements. Others simply understood that "there are songs that cannot be sung in public". In general, the audience also behaved with self-imposed discipline, especially because of the impressive police and MININT³⁵ deployment.³⁶

Conversely, if taken into account all their allusions on stage about the effort done to make the event happen, it is probable that Los Aldeanos saw it as a victory over the authorities, who did not have any other choice than to recognize their existence and popularity, and grant them a public space to perform. The state would never have allowed such rebellious musicians to perform in a moment of greater hegemony—for example in the 1990s. In this reading, the public performance of Los Aldeanos is another symptom of the weakening state and the growing power of critical cultural practices in contemporary Cuba.

³³ The Association Hermanos Saiz groups young artists, and writers, musicians—and rappers—in the country.

³⁴ Interview with Aldo Baquero, 24 March 2012.

³⁵ Ministry of Interior Affairs, the equivalent to Homeland Security.

³⁶ Personal observation, 23 April 2010.

When asked about the disappointment of some members of the audience at the concert, Aldo admitted they accepted the pressures, as it was a “take it or leave it” situation, and replied:

We are human beings (...) It is easy to say “I wanted more” but if I go to jail, it is me who stays for three or four days. And you wanted more, but you go to the political parade at the Revolution Square and you also have to do something. I do, but I have to take care of my family too.³⁷

The presentation of Los Aldeanos in Miami in 2010 further illustrates the challenges involved in enacting a coherent political identity in a socialist society. Probably because of a combination of self-censorship and their critical opinions about the politics of the Miami exile, they were compelled to declare at their arrival in the U.S. that they were not “political” but “artists” (Rubio, 2010). In the Cuban context, these statements are important to defend artists’ positions as different from the political dissident movement and to elide sanctions while challenging the boundaries of power. Musicians do this consciously, and during our conversation, Aldo elaborates on the political character of his rap: “I do hip-hop in a country in which everything, since you are born, is related to politics (...), so it is impossible to make rap in a country like this and detach myself from politics”.³⁸

However, other aspects of their public discourse are more problematic. The nationalist rhetoric that appears in their music also makes them vulnerable to state co-optation. While other young musicians from the pop-rock and alternative scenes have embraced a diasporic and transnational sense of Cuban identity (Borges Triana, 2012; Thomas, 2005; Gámez, forth.), Los Aldeanos consider that only island-based Cubans should have a say in national politics. Hence, even before their trip to Miami, they held the limited Manichean vision of the Cuban community in Miami that has circulated for decades in official discourse in Cuba. These views were reinforced when encountering the hostility of extremist exiles upon their arrival in the city:

³⁷ Interview with Aldo Baquero, 24 March 2012.

³⁸ Interview with Aldo Baquero, 24 March 2012.

It was very difficult. I think they [the Cuban authorities] did it on purpose, because Miami is exactly like here [Cuba] but with Coke. They treated me as if I were a politician or a member of MININT (...) It was crazy, people were harassing us and speaking of "Castro, Castro"...Suddenly, there were old people holding posters reading "Salsa with blood". I don't play salsa; I haven't killed anybody; I didn't separate those people's families. They even broke our CDs.³⁹

Under such circumstances, they refused to participate in a couple of TV shows hosted by Channel 41, which has conducted openly anti-Castro politics, but appeared in *Esta noche tonight*, the prime time show conducted by the emigrated comedian Alexis Valdés in Mega TV. Although they spoke of the need for a "spiritual" change in Cuban society and their commitment to their social rap, they avoided making any political statement against the Cuban government (Mega TV, 2010). Aldo explained in the interview that "none of the people in Miami have to come back [to Cuba]" and he asserted "I was not going to comment on a reality they do not experience and suffer anymore, and they laugh about".⁴⁰ Despite the protests of some Cuban Americans, they finally performed at the Miami County Auditory on November 15, where they assured the audience of mostly young emigrated Cubans of their Cubanness, stating "we are not Castro".

Possibly, this episode eroded "the moral capital" of Los Aldeanos as political actors (Street, 2006:60). The official Cuban press strategically used the incident as an example of the "unscrupulous cultural war" instituted by the Cuban exile (Rubio, 2010). Even Abel Prieto declared "I believe Los Aldeanos are revolutionary, they were in the US and had a tremendously consequent position" (in Rubio, 2011). However, in practice, although they "behaved" and restrained from criticizing the Cuban government, they have not been allowed to perform in Cuba ever since, and because they cannot perform, they have lost contact with their fans. Moreover, after their return, Aldo has perceived that their "barrio" and underground fans no longer identify with them to the same extent they did before, due to the fact they have traveled and they are now perceived as privileged. As Aldo suggested in the interview, in a context of great scarcity, this creates resentment: "People tell you, 'hey, you gained

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

weight in the Yuma [US], you have new clothes' (...) The Cuban resents another person's prosperity".⁴¹

The case of Los Aldeanos demonstrates how difficult is to avoid the manipulation of music, and arts in general, in state-socialist societies. Ultimately, it illustrates how authority is contested at the margins and there is "a continuing probing on the part of the rulers and the subjects to find out what they can get away with, to test and discover the limits of obedience and disobedience" (Moore, 1978:18).

Conclusions

In a context in which political opposition is prosecuted, the music of Los Aldeanos emerges as a "concrete social site" that stands as a form of politics itself (Lipsitz, 1994:137), embodying resistance, envisioning change, and mobilizing a new political identity: the subversive revolutionary. Their radical antagonistic subjectivity suggests that the state ideology has lost much of its hegemonic force to constitute itself as a "totalizing horizon" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) defining the limits of Cuban society. Furthermore, showing how the Revolution is itself an "empty signifier" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) that can be effectively used in an oppositional discourse, is one of the most noteworthy political outcomes of their music. In this scenario, the Cuban hip-hop motto "a revolution within the Revolution" acquires a new and destabilizing potential. At the same time, the impossibility for musicians to trespass the last line between "artistic" and "political" practice through political mobilization and organization makes them more vulnerable to co-optation and trivialization, and clearly illustrates the boundaries of music politics in the Cuban context.

⁴¹ Ibid.

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