

TECHNOLOGY DOMESTICATION, CULTURAL PUBLIC SPHERE, AND POPULAR MUSIC IN CONTEMPORARY CUBA

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Within the larger social shaping framework and with roots in media studies and anthropology, domestication theory explores how information and communication technologies (ICTs) are incorporated and appropriated by their users, initially stressing how they were fitted into the household (Silverstone, 1994; Silverstone and Haddon, 1997). Yet this theory allows us to ask broader questions about how technologies are incorporated and used creatively within a community. New interest on social networks and social capital has enriched this framework by showing how social networks influence the adoption of technologies and by asking questions regarding not only how social capital plays a role on familiarizing, acquiring and using a certain technology, but more importantly, what type of social, cultural and political capital are created via the appropriation of ICTs.²

This paper takes this framework as a starting point to explore the various implications of the “domestication” of information technologies by Cuban musicians, fans, and “entrepreneurs.” Although this is still a slow and limited process, it has made possible the independent production and distribution of music, which I will argue, has contributed to the democratization of the cultural public sphere and has provided a space for under-privileged social groups to be heard. This process has not developed uncontested; hence, I will give attention to the cultural and politi-

cal responses coming from the Cuban state, the official media and the intellectual elite. The complex Cuban scenario, in which different technologies are unevenly or not accessible at all for most Cubans, produces a number of paradoxes I will also address. For example, how are we to understand the two million You Tube viewers of a video clip by the Cuban rap group Los Aldeanos while at the same time they are censored in the Cuban media and their members claim they do not even have Internet access?

The paper draws on various disciplines—such as media and communications, sociology of culture and popular music studies—and fieldwork carried out in Havana to analyze a number of case studies from music genres such as reggaeton and hip hop. I should clarify that this paper will not go into details of specific music technologies but will rather focus on stimulating the debate on the cultural and political implications of musicians’ use of new technologies in the Cuban context.

STATE CONTROL OF ICTs IN CUBA

As Roger Silverstone—one of the developers of domestication theory—has remarked, technology does not come naked, nor neutral, nor straightforwardly (1994:79). Hence, I will start by briefly contextualizing ICTs use in Cuba. The most noteworthy ele-

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at LASA 2013 in the panel “Technological mediations in Latin American popular music: A transdisciplinary assessment.”

2. See for instance Warschauer (2003), Haddon (2004) and Green and Haddon (2009).

ments in this respect are the governmental control and the resulting underdevelopment in this area.

Over the years, the Cuban state has granted a great importance to the realm of information, communication, and discourse. The early control over the media achieved during the first years of the Revolution, the illegalization and prosecution of opposition and the tight control over all fields of cultural production in general point to an awareness of the decisive role of controlling public opinion and the resources for the social construction of reality for the stability of the regime. If a “distinctive and comparative feature of any dominant social order is how far it reaches into the whole range of practices and experiences in an attempt of incorporation” (Williams, 1990:125), then it is very salient the amount of energy and resources that the Cuban state allocates to the construction of hegemony. Through education (from primary school to university), the media and a myriad political and social institutions, the Cuban state attempts to socialize individuals into its own version of the “socialist conception of the world.”

In consequence, political goals and ideological frameworks became embedded on decisions and policy-making concerning ICTs, and contradictions rapidly emerged. At least at the discourse level, there was an early recognition of the potential role of technologies for economic and scientific development (MIC, 2004) and the government put into place ICTs-learning programs and provided computers for most schools in the country. Yet, the penetration rate of Internet remains as one of the lowest in Latin America.³ According to the Cuban authorities, the limitations in Internet access are a consequence of the U.S. embargo and the lack of resources (MINREX, 2005;

MINREX-MIC, 2005). However, in a country with a tightly controlled media system, Internet is also perceived as a threat and the word “cyberwar” is repeatedly used in official discourse to frame the Internet in the context of the Cuba-U.S. conflicted relations. In general, the model of Internet development and appropriation in the country is explained and justified through a “social use” thesis. This framework attempts to make compatible and acceptable, at a discursive level, the need to use the Internet as an economic tool with the imperative to control the Internet as a communication technology and source of alternative information for individuals (Gámez Torres, 2006:3).

Only state companies and foreign citizens with residency in Cuba can pay ETECSA, the state telecommunication monopoly, for home Internet access, usually a slow 56Kbps-modem connection, with prices starting at 20 CUC for 10 hours of web surfing.⁴ Internet access is also available in some institutions such as universities, research centers, Youth Computing Clubs⁵ and others work sites in the educational, public health, cultural and scientific areas. In these environments, it is assumed that Internet should be used for work or educational purposes; thus games and chats are not allowed and it might be the case that Web-based e-mail services are restricted to certain times—for instance, at the University of Havana, Yahoo mail and Gmail mail used to be blocked after 10 a.m.

After more than a decade of restrictions, in 2009 Cubans were allowed to access the Internet at cybercafés located in hotels, but an hour can cost from 6 to 12 CUC⁶—compared to the 14 CUC average monthly wage for state workers. But, unlimited or hourly

3. According to the UN agency International Telecommunication Union, the number of broadband subscriptions in Cuba is 0.04 per 100 inhabitants, which is lower than in Haiti and similar to the percentage in many African countries. (See statistics at <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>, accessed on July 9, 2013).

4. A full list of prices can be seen at the ETECSA official website: http://www.etecsa.cu/?page=internet_conectividad&sub=internet, accessed on January 14, 2013.

5. These are classroom facilities created by Fidel Castro and the Youth Communist League (UJC in Spanish) to teach computer science and skills in the community. According to their official website, there are more than 600 of these clubs around the country. See http://www.jovenclub.cu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=69:quienes-somos&catid=77:informacion-fija&Itemid=483, accessed on January 14, 2013.

6. See ETECSA website.

based ADSL and modem Internet services are provided to selected journalist, scientists, intellectuals, researchers and other state officials.

After the ALBA-1 undersea fiber-optic cable between Cuba and Venezuela started a trial, telecommunication authorities informed the official newspaper *Granma* that “When the testing process concludes, the submarine cable being put into operation will not mean that possibilities for access will automatically multiply.”⁷ Free Internet access has been a central demand by both dissident and officialist bloggers and with the cable in operation, authorities decided to open 118 Internet salons around the country.⁸ Still, the cost of one hour of Internet access is 4.50 CUC, almost the weekly average salary of a state worker. With the relative relaxation of restrictions, it seems that the model of ICTs control is shifting from a direct political-led state control to an “apparent” market control. While the state controls the market and fixes the prices, the questions around access “appear” now as matters of consumer power and economic inequality.

It is difficult to know the real number of Internet users in the country.⁹ According to the Anuario Estadístico de Cuba, published by the Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas e Información (ONEI), in 2011, 2,610,000 users—14% of the population—accessed “Internet Services,” but this number includes access to Internet, the Cuban Intranet and email.¹⁰ It is also unclear if this number also includes tourists accessing from hotels cybercafés. The ONEI also reports the existence of 783,000 computers in the island but only half of those are connected to a network.¹¹ This data is provided by the Ministry of Communication and Information and again, it is not clear if this number also includes computers legally bought or

imported by individuals entering the country as part of their personal effects.

This is applicable to other information and communication technologies. Cubans were not allowed to pay for mobile lines until 2008. Before then, only Cubans with second nationalities or foreign residents in the country were allowed to rent them. In 2007, the price of opening a mobile phone line was 120 CUC, down now to 30 CUC, but still very high in relation to state salaries. Similarly, the importation of personal computers, printers and DVDs into the country by individuals travelling abroad was only allowed with special permissions (signed letters of authorization) until 2007. In 2008, Cubans were finally allowed to buy them on state stores but they can only be afforded by the most affluent.

All these regulations fed a booming black market where computers, parts and accessories, and other technologies such as TV sets and DVD and MP3 players could be acquired. In this way, the computing savvy could construct their own cheaper systems by assembling different components. With the relaxation of restrictions, this process has speeded up, eventually allowing young people with little musical training to build independent music studios, produce music and distribute music in copied CDs.

MUSICIANS’ USE OF TECHNOLOGIES

The slow domestication in the island of recording and sound reproduction technologies in the late 1980s and 1990s—first, cassettes and walkmans, and later CD players—started to change the audience dependency of the radio and TV as music providers and augmented the possibilities for alternative music cultures to emerge. In the nineties, a second-generation of the *Nueva Trova* or *Novísima Trova*, were also known as “the moles” due to their under-

7. <http://www2.tbo.com/news/news/2013/jan/24/cuba-confirms-undersea-cable-carries-internet-traf-ar-615630/>. Spanish version in: <http://www.granma.cubaweb.cu/2013/01/24/nacional/artic04.html>.

8. See <http://www.juventudrebelde.cu/cuba/2013-05-27/cuba-amplia-el-servicio-publico-de-acceso-a-internet/>, accessed on May 28, 2013.

9. A country profile relating to Internet can be found in <https://opennet.net/research/profiles/cuba>.

10. <http://www.one.cu/aec2011/datos/Notas%20Metodologicas.pdf>, accessed on February 17, 2013.

11. <http://www.one.cu/aec2011.htm>, accessed on accessed on February 17, 2013.

ground origin (Borges Triana, 1988). Since they lacked the institutional support that the original members of *Nueva Trova*¹² enjoyed, their first records were produced abroad,¹³ although their music circulated in the country, first through cassettes and later through pirated CDs and MP3s. Despite the poor media promotion, their concerts were advertised by word of mouth and became important cultural events for Cuban youth. Carlos Varela himself recalls in an interview with the weekly newspaper *Claridad* in Puerto Rico, how he had to perform during three consecutive nights in 1990 to a packed audience of 5,000 people at the Karl Marx, the largest theatre in Cuba (Varela interviewed in Millán Ferrer, 2010).¹⁴ This popularity was in part possible due to the informal circulation of his music in cassettes.¹⁵

The gradual penetration and appropriation of music technologies in the country has provided musicians with new quotes of relative independence to make and disseminate their work. If trovadores such as Carlos Varela and Frank Delgado had to produce their records abroad in the 1990s, contestatory groups such as Los Aldeanos make their music in Cuba in home-based studios. To the dissident punk band Porno para Ricardo, the possibility to build a home studio is a conscious statement of autonomy from the government and its institutions, and an attempt to reclaim the means of cultural production (Astley, 2012).

Many underground and even established musicians have developed alternative networks of production and distribution. While ultimately relying on EGREM¹⁶—the most important state recording company founded in 1964—for distribution purposes, many musicians from the alternative and pop rock scenes such as Buena Fe and X Alfonso produce and record their own CDs and DVDs.

Critical to the developing of the reggaeton scene was the emergence of an informal music economy network boosted by the relative increased availability of music production and reproduction technologies such as MP3s and CD players. Another important factor is that music piracy is not prosecuted in Cuba. In fact, selling copied music CDs in the street has been recently legalized as a self-employment activity (Ministerio de Trabajo y Seguridad Social, 2010:119). Most hip-hop and reggaeton have been produced in home-based studios¹⁷ and distributed by street sellers because record companies have paid little attention to these genres. In 2009, the reggaetonero Baby Lores, explained how he distributed his music in the “street” and the negative consequences for the quality of reggaeton:

I release my tracks to the street, I give them to people. I know that street music sellers [*quemadores*] sell them and I am not bothered but this conflict should be solved at some point. There is a lot of talent in this country (...) and it is still difficult to reach a record company. Although I am happy with my computer and the simple equipment we have, and with the fact that the tracks become hits among

12. For a brief analysis of state support to los *novísimos*, see Shaw, 2008.

13. Carlos Varela's *Jalisco Park* (1989) was produced in Canarias; *Monedas al Aire* (1992) in Caracas; and *Como los Peces* in Madrid, thanks to the collaboration of Joaquín Sabina. Frank Delgado's *En México* was produced, as suggested by the title, in that country in 1994, while *Un buen lugar* was recorded in Buenos Aires in 1996.

14. His first large concert took place in the cinema Charles Chaplin, in the building of the Cuban Institute of Film Art and Industry, on April 29, 1989, under heavy police presence.

15. Carlos Varela, personal interview, September 13, 2012.

16. Empresa de Grabaciones y Ediciones Musicales.

17. See Boudreault-Fournier (2008) for an exploratory research on home-based studios in Santiago de Cuba. The author contends that they are illegal but Élsida González, music director of EGREM, stated at the Seminar “Popular music and contemporary Cuban society,” organized by the Fernando Ortiz Foundation, that they were never limited and that “artists have the right to do their own production. Nowadays it is much easier with the alternative studios” (González, 2007). This might explain why authorities have not ordered a crack down on home-based studios as they have done with video rentals or satellite TV dishes in the past. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/6344691.stm>, accessed March 10, 2013.

the people, if this work is not done professionally, the mixes will keep sounding badly, the sound would be insufficient...at least in reggaeton (interview in López Corso, 2009).

Currently, the quality of reggaeton recordings has improved because music producers buy hardware and other electronic devices abroad, during tours. Audiovisual technologies and the development of an independent filmmaking movement have also boosted reggaeton. The diffusion of reggaeton in the capital increased due to the reproduction of video clips on flat TVs in new private cafeterias and restaurants and widescreens on parties (fiestas) or concerts organized by newly funded music show companies such as PMM, Havana Show, and Fiesta Habana.¹⁸ Compilations of video clip are popular products in street music selling stands.

Reggaetoneros such as Osmany García—a.k.a La Voz—acknowledges the importance of video clips and audiovisuals for “the business.” Since professional video clips are expensive—for instance, the cost of the video clip of his controversial hit *El Chupi Chupi* was 7,000 US dollars, but the cost was covered by a foreign producer—Osmany has relied on DYS filmmaking practices allowed by digital cameras and editing software. He works with an audiovisual team that follows him during his performances. They have produced a DVD with recordings of his presentations around the country entitled “Un sueño hecho realidad.” The audiovisual is also posted in his own promotional website,¹⁹ You Tube²⁰ and other Cuban music websites such as *suenacubano.com*. He believes this is a useful experience that can be replicated by other musicians with low budgets.²¹

The circulation of audiovisuals in these informal networks of distribution is so potent, that reggaetoneros even produce video clips that are intended exclusively for this market and not for the official media. According to Osmany, the video clip of *El Chupi Chupi* was not even intended for Cuban television. Although he alleges to remain interested in the official media, he believes these new technologies and alternative networks allow him to be more popular.²²

Despite the limitations discussed in the previous section, Cuba-based musicians and producers use the Internet and social media to promote their activities and construct new markets abroad. Although there is a small niche of urban privileged fans that have access to email and limited Internet within Cuba, most of this online activity is directed towards foreign audiences and the promotion of tour and concerts. Since musicians’ most important sources of income are not records but live performances—either abroad or in local venues with entrance fees in hard currency—tours abroad are fundamental to economically sustain their activity.

Many of these websites have been built by fan communities or foreign entrepreneurs—see for instance, <http://cubamania.twww.tv/?eonair>—and musicians hold little control of them. The fact that many musicians, especially from the underground, do not have access to the Internet in Cuba creates further paradoxes. In an interview with Aldo Baquero, member of the rap group Los Aldeanos, he claims “I don’t know what Internet is. Here I don’t have access to it. When I am abroad, I would rather watch sports than being on the Internet.”²³ However, the oldest post in You Tube of Los Aldeanos video clip of the song *La Naranja se picó* reached more than 2 million hits.

18. These show producers seized the opportunity offered by the liberalization of cell phones to advertise parties and concerts through SMS but this service was blocked later due to the political risks involved in dissidents using the same approach.

19. <http://www.lafabricadeexitos.com/video/6c196d08654311e2ab3af0def1a2b2d8/> Accessed on February 7, 2013.

20. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELWqC4BbNTE>. Accessed on February 7, 2013.

21. Osmany García, personal interview, September 12, 2012.

22. Osmany García, personal interview, September 12, 2012. The importance of flash drives for the circulation of information in Cuba has been also highlighted by dissident blogger Yoani Sánchez (see <http://www.miamiherald.com/2013/03/09/3276989/blogger-cubans-evade-censorship.html#storylink=cpy>, accessed March 21, 2013).

23. Interview with Aldo Baquero, March 24, 2012.

Other websites such as www.suenacubano.com and www.havana-cultura.com are websites developed with the support of Cuban institutions and companies in an effort to promote Cuban music and arts abroad.²⁴ Particularly worrying is the fact that musicians, especially those coming from the underground reggaeton and rap scenes, gain little through music purchase online via iTunes or other online stores. A quick search on iTunes reveals that popular reggaeton groups and performers such as Los Cuatro, Osmany García and Gente de Zona, and even hip hop group Los Aldeanos, have albums on sale. The poor insertion of the country in global markets, the embargo restrictions, the lack of knowledge of contract negotiation and online sale tools and, last but not least, pressing economic needs usually translate into reggaetoneros signing unfair contracts with foreign labels, with no shares of online sales, as Osmany García and former Los Cuatro producer Frank Palacios confirmed in interviews with me. Aldo also refers to this phenomenon and reflects on how his first trip to the U.S., helped him to understand the commercial aspects of the music industry:

I didn't know music was a business and it was not enough to feel it, that art was not enough. You start realizing there is a lot of people around you making money from your work and they force you to think, well if I don't do it and no one else does it, but the fact is that they are doing it and they do not write my songs. I have to start making money because I have two children, a boy and a girl. Music is a dirty business.²⁵

We may expect the disadvantaged situation of these musicians to change, as they travel abroad more frequently and learn the dynamics of the international music industry.

NEW TECHNOLOGIES, NEW VOICES

Initiatives to produce alternative media or the use of technology to produce alternative discourses have a long history of prosecution in the island. Artist Tania Bruguera's *Memorias de la postguerra* newspaper series appearing in 1993 attempted to become a forum of critical debate of the Cuban context by artists living within and without the island. Not even her approach of the publication as a performatic work of art was sufficient to convince the bureaucracy to allow its circulation. According to the official website of the artist,

The Visual Arts Council demanded not to publish a second issue. It was censored when it came out, a portion of the copies was seized to prevent their distribution and there was a threat of imposing an imprisonment sentence of up to 15 years. Police authorities discussed this event in some assemblies of the Cuban Communist Party.²⁶

Yet, the gradual domestication of information and communication technologies—in particular, those related to music and filmmaking—has resulted in new actors coming to play in the cultural field. Currently, the means of cultural production no longer exclusively lie on the hands of cultural or political elites and this certainly creates a new public scenario characterized by social heteroglossia (Bahktin, 1981), in which dissenting or alternative voices from the bottom up are heard loudly, in the streets, taxis, schools and other public places.

In a context of media censorship, popular music and the arts, in general, have replaced the official media in promoting necessary public debate, thus functioning as cultural public spheres (Gámez Torres, 2012a).²⁷ In dialogue with Habermas' theory (1989), Jim McGuigan (2005:9) stresses that the current

24. "Havana Cultura exists to enable Havana's artists to show the world what they do, and to let the world see and hear what they have to say about their work, their life and their city. It's an international effort, originating in Havana and made possible by Havana Club International S.A." (<http://www.havana-cultura.com/en/int/picture-of-cuba/cuban-life>, accessed March 17, 2013.)

25. Interview with Aldo Baquero, March 24, 2012.

26. <http://www.taniabruquera.com/cms/504-0-Postwar+Memory+I.htm>. Accessed March 15, 2013.

27. I am not arguing that cultural practices exclusively promote debate. Bloggers, dissidents, journalists, academics and other actors have also used ICTs to promote public debate—see for instance Geoffrey (2013) and Henken's contribution in this volume. Yet, for the past two decades, popular music has had a particularly significant role in promoting debate because of its massive reach, its emotional appeal, and other elements discussed in this paper.

popular engagement with the public sphere usually takes an “affective mode” rather than a purely rational one. Hence, he develops the notion of a “cultural public sphere” that refers to “the articulation of politics, public and personal, as a contested terrain through affective—esthetic and emotional—modes of communication (...) The cultural public sphere provides vehicles for thought and feeling, for imagination and disputatious argument, which are not necessarily of inherent merit but may be of some consequence” (McGuigan, 2005:10).

Affective modes of communication, such as popular music “help people think reflexively about their own lifeworld situations and how to negotiate their way in and through systems that may seem beyond anyone’s control on the terrain of everyday life” (McGuigan, 2005:10). Furthermore, as they engage with “chronic and persistent problems of life, meaning, and representation” they can be regarded as “historical documents of an era” and as “sites of disputation” (2005: 4).

In this light, cultural and artistic practices in the last two decades in Cuba have led to the construction of “artistic public spheres” (Fernandes, 2006) or “semi-autonomous spheres of cultural practices” (Hernandez-Reguant, 2009b). To Hernandez-Reguant, they are the result of both the state’s relative weakening and new commercial opportunities brought by the reforms implemented in the 1990s to attract foreign investment and hard currency. To this equation, I will add the increased availability and gradual domestication of music technologies.

Sometimes, these cultural public spheres are highly politicized. From *trova* to rap, there is a strong tradition of social commentary and dissent in contemporary Cuban popular music—see for example the work of trovadores such as Carlos Varela, Frank Delgado; rappers such as Los Aldeanos and Escuadrón Patriota; rock bands such as Porno para Ricardo; and musicians in the fusion/alternative scene such X Alfonso. However, popular music not only carves alternative and oppositional spaces but also constitutes a cultural public sphere where apparently non political topics are linked to a broader discussion on key matters such as nationalism, racism, economics and the

future of the country. It is also the site to negotiate global and local identities and to “play” with other, capitalist, values, aspirations and identities. This is the case with reggaeton.

Elsewhere I have analyzed the connections of reggaeton with a Cuban underclass and emergent values of consumerism that challenge the hegemony of socialist (Gámez Torres, 2011; 2012b). Reggaeton emerged close to socially, economically, and politically marginalized youth, mainly Black, who found in reggaeton, among other things, a job opportunity. One of the main reasons this genre has been so criticized is its insistence on money, conspicuous consumption, and class distinction. In that sense, I contended that to the authorities, the most problematic feature of reggaeton is not the vulgar language. On the one hand, reggaeton demonstrates that the state and its cultural institutions can no longer monopolize the sphere of production and distribution. On the other, the massive popularity of the genre illustrates how capitalist values such as consumerism proclaimed in this music have gone mainstream (Gámez Torres, 2011; 2012b).

STATE RESPONSES

So far, I have argued that the increased availability of technologies has prompted a diversification of music making, distribution, and consumption. This is an important consideration explaining the relative wider discursive boundaries in musics such as reggaeton and hip-hop when compared to official media, for example. However, the state still controls most performing venues, the access to legal work, the record companies, and the mass media, which is why state cultural policies are still influential in the music field.

Over the years, the Cuban state has deployed a variety of strategies to counteract critical music or music that does not fit the official definitions of “proper” or politically correct culture. Bureaucracy is a basic one. A system of artistic agencies controlled by the Ministry of Culture provides musicians with work permits, travel documents, and permission to tour abroad. Access to these agencies has become a major obstacle for amateur musicians such as reggaetoneros and rappers since they are designed to represent musicians formed in the state musical schools.

Other strategies involved direct censorship or policies of strong marginalization. An extreme example was the recent detention of Gorki Aguila, the leader of the contestatory punk-rock band Porno para Ricardo, to stop the release of the independently-produced album *Maleconazo ahora*.²⁸ In the interview with Aldo Baquero, he reveals that Los Aldeanos have not been allowed to perform since they came back from their first tour to Miami in 2010, even after they restrained from openly criticizing the government in the Miami media. Likewise, he confirmed they were pressed by the Cuban State Security not to sing some of their most subversive songs at their concert in Aca-pulco in April 2010.²⁹

The case of the Festival Rotilla is exemplary of state maneuvers to contain the power of popular music. Another important outcome of the domestication of music technologies in Cuba is the flourishing of digitised music (or as it is called in the Island, “electronic” music). Although with much more less popular than reggaeton, this music has built a niche of mostly white urban young audiences coming together around parties and festivals such as the Rotilla Festival, which was shut down in 2011, after it reached 20,000 participants. The festival started in 1998 and gathered DJs, musicians and fans for three days at the Jibacoa beach, in Mayabeque, former Havana province. Its organizers, the group Matraka directed by Michel Matos, fought to keep control of the festival, its programming and organization, although coordination was always made with cultural officials and other local authorities—including the police and the Ministry of Health. One would expect that electronic music, with no discursive content or lyric, could be easily accommodated as part of the booming alternative music scene in Cuba. However, such insistence on keeping control of the festival, in terms of the performers invited—for instance the rappers Los Al-

deanos and Escuadrón Patriota—and the fact that the event grew so rapidly, attracting foreign press attention and gathering thousands of young Cubans, turned this festival into a problem for authorities. In 2011, the authorities decided to keep the festival going under a different name—“Verano in Jibacoa”—, remove the organization from Matraka’s hands and invite less controversial but still popular musicians such as Buena Fe and David Blanco. The group Matraka denounced what they considered as plagiarism and theft of their work:

Una cosa es la censura (ya tradicional), otra muy diferente es el robo, el plagio y el secuestro de una obra que ha alcanzado muy altos niveles de atención a nivel incluso internacional, y que cuenta con las congratulaciones de miles de jóvenes cubanos que allí han asistido por años. El equipo organizador de Rotilla Festival, quiere dejar muy claro y de manera categórica, que este año 2011, se cancela el Festival Rotilla, por la violencia ética que han manifestado las máximas autoridades de la cultura cubana. Nosotros, realizadores y autores de Rotilla Festival, y en mi nombre propio, su director y fundador, DENUNCIAMOS el robo, el plagio y el secuestro que esta actitud significa para todos los jóvenes de esta tierra que hoy representamos. Denunciamos la excesiva y terca censura que se está ejerciendo contra cualquier actividad cultural que NO provenga de las llamadas instituciones. Denunciamos el acoso a que estamos siendo sometidos de manera constante, a la vigilancia y las amenazas sutiles o directas de las que somos objeto cotidianamente.³⁰

At the same time, an unfavorable press campaign started,³¹ and Matraka denied the allegations in the social media:

...hace varios meses se ha venido lanzando por distintas vías una campaña difamatoria hacia los miembros del colectivo Matraka, alegando que son mercenarios de potencias extranjeras y que el dinero que reciben para hacer el festival y los otros eventos que organizan viene a través de agentes de la C.I.A. con fachadas de funcionarios diplomáticos, o que el

28. http://www.diariodecuba.com/derechos-humanos/1362848621_1112.html, accessed on March 9, 2013.

29. Interview with Aldo Baquero, March 24, 2012. See also Gámez Torres (2013).

30. <http://observatoriocriticodesdecuba.wordpress.com/2011/07/20/comunicado-oficial-de-rotilla-festival>, accessed on December 12, 2012.

31. See <http://espaciodeelaine.wordpress.com/2011/08/13/%C2%BFa-rotilla-no/>; <http://www.rebellion.org/noticia.php?id=132934>, accessed on December 12, 2012.

Prestigioso EXIT Festival de Serbia, principal patrocinador del nuestro, es un puente de la USAID. Acusaciones muy serias construidas sobre la nada, pues no existe ninguna prueba real de vínculos con los supuestos personajes. Además nunca ningún patrocinador nos ha siquiera sugerido qué hacer en nuestro festival.³²

The officialist website La Jiribilla quickly published an interview with the director of culture in Mayabeque, Luis Enrique Veliz García, denying that authorities were “at war” with Matraka and that “Verano in Jibacoa” was a copy of Rotilla. After all, he said, the new event had a different name and it was not even registered in ACDAM—the local copyright agency—although he conceded that we “kept some of its features.”³³ He explained that they did not exclude the group Matraka from the new event and that the intervention of authorities in the festival was due to problems of “artistic direction” and “order.” Yet his declaration implies further motives:

Les aclaramos nuestra inquietud sobre el hecho de que se manipulara a Rotilla como un evento independiente y al margen de la intención de la programación de las instituciones culturales. También nos preocupó que muchos de los artistas invitados no se hubieran contactado a través de los canales habituales de sus empresas.³⁴

In addition to measures such as banning musicians from the media or specific venues, censorship may take diffuse, indirect forms. For example, when the famous singer-songwriter Pablo Milanés invited Los Aldeanos to his own concert at the Anti-imperialist Tribune in 2008—a gesture only possible due to Pablo’s status in the Cuban cultural field—their microphones were turned down.³⁵ 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. In many occasions, censorship is coupled with strategies of assimilation or “cultural appropriation,” the process “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 officialdom in search for state support and legitimation—which comes with no surprise, given the state’s control over key public resources such as performing venues, the media and all cultural institutions.³⁶

Most of the time, political rejection is presented as a matter of moral and cultural values, conservation of traditions or threats to national culture. Moreover, any discussion of cultural values and hierarchies is in fact, an immersion into (cultural) politics given that “the truly ideological effect consists precisely in the imposition of political systems of classification beneath the legitimate appearance of philosophical, religious, legal taxonomies” or cultural hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1990:170). In this sense, the new wave of moral panic triggered by the case of El Chupi Chupi not only reveals the state’s revolt at the hints of “vulgarity” in popular culture but its fear of the transgression of cultural regulation and the dangerous blur of boundaries of high and low culture (Hall, 1996, 290–292, 302).

The video clip of the hit El Chupi Chupi by Osmany García—featuring some of the most popular local reggaetoneros—was transmitted in the television show Lucas and was voted through SMS the “most popular video” in the Lucas competition—although

32. <http://www.penultimosdias.com/2011/07/31/rotilla-y-la-escena-de-lo-alternativo>, accessed on December 12, 2012.

33. http://www.lajiribilla.cu/2011/n539_09/539_19.html, accessed on December 12, 2012.

34. http://www.lajiribilla.cu/2011/n539_09/539_19.html, accessed on December 12, 2012.

35. Interview with Aldo Baquero, March 24, 2012. Aldo also referred to this episode in the interview with García Freyre (2009).

36. See also Gámez Torres (2013).

it was eventually pulled off. The title of the song is code for oral sex but also how lollipops are known in the island. Explicit criticism of El Chupi Chupi appeared in the official newspaper *Granma* and in the no less official television program than *Mesa Redonda*. The media was the one to blame for airing content with no artistic or ethical values. Yet I argued that behind the moral panic against reggaeton among cultural officials and intellectuals in the island, there is a rejection to a new type of social/political subject which is clearly disconnected from socialist values:

Reggaeton makes visible the existence of a socio-political subject that does not fit the requirements of the “New Man” or revolutionary subject. In that sense, reggaeton poses a challenge to the dominant ideology and its symbolic control over the construction of reality, over the construction of identities and the “right,” “correct” values in an allegedly socialist society (Gámez Torres, 2012:253).

Indeed, it seems, there is more than a reason to try out a new strategy of control after the Chupi Chupi event: the explicit regulation of music and its “social use.” The new initiative was announced by the president of the Cuban Institute of Music, Orlando Vistel, during a meeting of the National Council of the Cuban Union of Artists and Writers in September 2012.³⁷ According to the report published in the newspaper *Juventud Rebelde*, during the meeting the cultural critic Desiderio Navarro argued that:

La cuestión no es solo de vulgaridad y mal gusto, sino, sobre todo, de divulgación y la predicación de elementos que van en contra de nuestra ideología, afirmó. Que tengan su público no es el problema, sino que con los medios del Estado se empiecen a imponer al resto de la sociedad de manera masiva, y con ello se estén naturalizando las ideas del capitalismo.³⁸

There are still no public details of this regulation but it seems to aim at controlling the music played in the media and state venues, including schools. Although

a formal ban of reggaeton in nightclubs would definitely have a negative impact on the genre, the regulation would still be unable to control the dense informal social networks of production and distribution of music and other content.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

How to evaluate the political potentials and/or impacts of the processes of music creation and distribution discussed so far? It can be argued that the democratization allowed by technology has fostered a democratization of the cultural public sphere in Cuba. The central issue is the state’s loss of control over independent cultural production, which certainly poses new challenges to a regime so far used to monopolize the cultural field.

Through the omnipresent reggaeton, and other genres such as hip-hop, the lower classes and blacks have reached an increasing visibility in the cultural public sphere to the point of making state cultural policies centered on high art appear obsolete and prompting public debate on racial issues. Sometimes consciously, some other times not, musicians are using technology to disseminate oppositional messages or conflictive values such as consumerism. They have come together to independently produce music, audiovisuals, shows, and festivals.

In this scenario, the government is finding problematic to control the cultural public sphere and bottom-up collective creation of cultural content. Censorship attempts are fought back by performers and made public via the Internet and the social media. The authorities have to, at least, be prepared to be questioned and give some sort of response as the Rotilla case showed. From monologue to heteroglossia, it seems technology is helping to change the rules of the cultural field in Cuba.

37. <http://www.granma.cubaweb.cu/2012/09/20/cultura/artic01.html>, accessed on September 20, 2012.

38. <http://www.juventudrebelde.cu/cultura/2012-09-19/la-musica-que-nos-preocupa/>, accessed on September 20, 2012.

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