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Azúcar negra: (Re) Envisioning Race, Representation, and Resistance in the Afrofeminista Imaginary

Kiley Jeanelle Guyton Acosta

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AZÚCAR NEGRA:
**(RE)ENVISIONING RACE, REPRESENTATION, AND RESISTANCE IN
THE *AFROFEMINISTA* IMAGINARY**

BY

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B.A., Spanish, Moravian College, 2003
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DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
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DEDICATION

In the wise words of my father, “we stand on the backs of our ancestors. Those that came before us have struggled and persevered to clear the path for future generations.” I dedicate this dissertation to my grandmother Eleanor Jeanelle. Grandma was a strong, loving woman who relentlessly pursued the educational advancement of her children above all else. Being poor, black, and female, Grandma spent her life laboring in fields and factories and domestic service, never having the opportunity to realize her dreams of becoming a scholar. However, her hard work and resilient spirit allowed me to walk a different path. Grandma left this earth when I was only five years old, but I have felt her guiding presence strongly throughout my life. I am deeply grateful to Grandma, and all of my ancestors, for creating a foundation for me to stand on. Ashé!

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AZÚCAR NEGRA:
**(RE)ENVISIONING RACE, REPRESENTATION, AND RESISTANCE IN
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by

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**B.A., SPANISH
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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I locate contemporary articulations of *afrofeminismo* in manifold modes of cultural production including literature, music, visual displays of the body, and digital media. As a point of departure, I examine the development of *afrofeminismo* in relation to colonial sexual violence in sugar-based economies to explain how colonial dynamics inflect ideologies of *blanqueamiento/embranquecimiento* (racial whitening) and pseudo-scientific racial determinism. In this context, I address representations of the *mujer negra* (black woman) and the *mulata* (mulatto woman) in Caribbean and Brazilian cultural discourse. Specifically, I analyze how the discourses around, as well as by, these figures contribute(d) to the (trans)formation of national identities in former slave societies. I subsequently situate *afrofeminista* epistemology among interrelated transnational discourses of Afro-diasporic female subjectivity.

My study brings into focus three geographic areas of concentration. These areas include the Hispanic Caribbean (Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic), Brazil and the diasporic Caribbean communities of the United States. Within these geographic areas, I have identified three dynamic contemporary sites of *afrofeminista* expression that revise and (re)envision blackness and womanhood in the Latin American and U.S. Latino cultural imaginaries. I posit these arenas as cross-cultural contact zones where symbolic and material expressions of ethno-racial identity and resistance expand third-wave African-American black feminist theory. Yet, *afrofeministas* also reveal nuanced racialized, gendered subjectivities in response to highly-specific socio-economic and political conditions. My research thus explores the various social, cultural and political mechanisms inextricably linked to the articulation of race, gender, and identity within those Latin American nations who share strong ideological ties to the construct of racial democracy. Furthermore, extrapolating from the Latin American context, I address the porous and highly conflictive networks of racial and national identity emerging from the multiply-positioned subjects of Caribbean diasporic communities in the United States. I argue that *afrofeminismo* generated organically within Latin American and U.S. Latino revisionist artistic spaces problematizes the idea of *mestizaje* (racial miscegenation) as a unifying agent of nationalism. Through cultural media, *afrofeministas* (re)imagine transatlantic slavery as a shared historical memory connecting African women and their descendants through collective structural and psychological conditions.

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INTRODUCTION

0.1 Statement of Purpose

The term “*afrofeminismo*” represents a theorization of the black female experience by a diverse and transnational spectrum of Latina women of African descent. In “*Azúcar negra: (Re)Envisioning Race, Representation, and Resistance in the Afrofeminista Imaginary*,” I approach contemporary articulations of *afrofeminismo* in manifold modes of cultural production such as literature, music, visual displays of the body, and digital media as discourses that contest hegemonic constructions of race and gender. The representative texts I analyze from these modes include novels by Loida Maritza Pérez and Junot Díaz, Maricela Medina’s interview on Afro-Dominican identity in the U.S., feminist writing by Brazilian authors Miriam Alves and Conceição Evaristo, Cuban and Brazilian rap music. In addition, I look at Afro-centric style trends and body aesthetics tied to the articulation of black feminism in the Cuban hip-hop movement and consider the contemporary implications of the widespread dissemination of these expressions through internet file sharing and social media.

The overarching objective of my research is twofold. First, I examine the historical legacy of colonial sexual violence in sugar-based economies and the enduring ideologies of *blanqueamiento/embranquecimiento* (racial whitening) as hegemonic structures that inflected nineteenth- and twentieth-century Hispanic Caribbean and Brazilian cultural discourse on national, racial and gender identity. In this context, I analyze how representations of the *mujer negra* (black woman) and the *mulata* (mulatto

woman) have contributed to the formation of national identities in former slave societies and left a legacy of (mis)representations of black women. Second, I place late twentieth and early twenty first-century *afrofeminista* cultural production in dialogue with these hegemonic national discourses to explore the representational practices through which Afro-Latinas are contesting dominant ideologies of race, nation and gender to (re)envision blackness and womanhood in the contemporary Latin American and U.S. Latino cultural imaginaries.

My study brings into focus three geographic areas of concentration. These areas include the Hispanic Caribbean (Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic), Brazil, and the diasporic Caribbean communities of the United States. This selection of countries is driven by my interest in theorizing *afrofeminismo* as transnational and diasporic. While the scope of contemporary *afrofeminismo* certainly extends beyond these regions, the analysis of *afrofeminista* cultural production from Cuba, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Brazil and the U.S. allows me to trace the transnational circulation of black feminist discourses. Within these geographic areas, I focus on Cuban hip-hop and U.S. Dominican diaspora performance as dynamic contemporary sites of *afrofeminista* expression that revise and (re)envision blackness and womanhood in the Latin American and U.S. Latino cultural imaginaries.

I posit these sites as cross-cultural contact zones where symbolic and material articulations of ethno-racial identity and resistance enrich third-wave African-American black feminist theory. Yet, *afrofeministas* also reveal nuanced racialized, gendered subjectivities in response to highly-specific socio-economic and political conditions. My research thus explores the various social, cultural, and political mechanisms inextricably

linked to the articulation of race, gender, and identity within Latin American nations that share strong ideological ties to the construct of a “racial democracy.” Furthermore, extrapolating from the Latin American context, I address the porous and highly conflictive networks of racial and national identity emerging from the multiply-positioned subjects of Caribbean diasporic communities in the United States. I argue that *afrofeminismo* generated organically within Latin American and U.S. Latino revisionist artistic spaces problematizes the idea of *mestizaje* (racial miscegenation) as a unifying agent of nationalism. Through the conduit of cultural production, *afrofeministas* (re)imagine transatlantic slavery as a shared historical memory connecting African women and their descendants through collective structural and psychological conditions.

In the following, I establish feminist theoritian Deborah King’s model of multiple jeopardy and sociologist Ruth Hamilton’s conception of African diaspora communities of consciousness as a theoretical framework. Multiple jeopardy describes the multiplicative negative effects of race, sex, and class-based institutional oppression. King’s theory synthesizes the interconnectedness of *afrofeminista* expression and unlocks contentious points of discussion. Hamilton’s theory of African diaspora identity formation in *Routes of Passage* supports my discourse analysis. This theory posits the formation of relationships among dispersed African diaspora peoples as a reaction to historically-conditioned structural inequalities that persist today. Hamilton suggests that African diaspora identity formation helps forge a sense of identity and belonging through personal and collective transnational communities of consciousnesses (28-32). I argue that textual, sonic and visual displays of *afrofeminismo* are indispensable to theorizing transnational feminisms. These modes of expression transcend the realm of the symbolic

to (re)envision race, representation and resistance in the digital age. Ultimately, my dissertation anticipates the aperture of historically marginalized, stifled Afro-diasporic female voices, and underscores their centrality to twenty-first century conceptions of race, gender, and representation in an increasingly globalized cultural imaginary.

0.2 Chapter Overview

Chapter one of this dissertation provides a socio-historical overview of nineteenth century racial ideology and introduces controlling images of *negra* and *mulata* women that inspired popular motifs of race and gender representation that were fundamental to national foundation in the sugar-producing regions of Latin America. This chapter presents background on *blanqueamiento/embranquecimiento* as a dominant racial ideology that orders transnational constructions of identity. I conduct textual analysis to explore the portrayal of race and gender in sentimental nineteenth century abolitionist novels of Brazil and the Hispanic Caribbean. The primary texts of this analysis include *A escrava Isaura* (1875), *La cuarterona* (1876) and *Cecilia Valdés* (1882), among other related examples of literature and cultural production. I also examine Francisco Arriví's play *Vejigantes* (1970), the short story "Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres" (1976) by Rosario Ferré, and twentieth century *negrista* poetry of the Hispanic Caribbean alongside related graphic and sonic cultural texts, such as Cuban tobacco labels and popular music.

In considering the value judgments and political implications inherent in cultural renderings of *negra* and *mulata* women, chapter one deconstructs the historic

disparagement of dark-skinned black women in contrast to the idolization of the *mulata* and mixed-race phenotype in Cuba, Puerto Rico, Brazil, and the United States. My main objective is to establish historical footing for the analysis of transnational discourses of race and gender. Examining the ideological roots of *blanqueamiento* sets the grounds for the analysis of contemporary, transnational ways of (re)envisioning blackness, Afro-Latina identity, and *afrofeminismo* in the subsequent chapters.

In chapter two, I use King's theory to synthesize important connections and address potential points of contention in my analysis. The ideas Hamilton presents in *Routes of Passage: Rethinking the African Diaspora* complement my core arguments and support the dialectic exchanges I locate among diverse cultural products.¹ Specifically, in considering processes of collective identity formation, *Routes of Passage* offers a comprehensive model that anchors the more conceptual discourses of race and gender examined in this dissertation. Hamilton premises her understanding of African diaspora identity as unfixed and malleable on variations that exist at the general and specific levels of African diaspora formation. That is, the formation of diaspora identities react to variations by geographical location, by generations, by material and institutional conditions, and by socio-economic and demographic patterns (8). Of major interest to Hamilton and myself are "...the "crosspoints," "active sites," and contradictions within a

¹ Time and again, I reference Hamilton's theories of African diaspora identity formation to draw together seemingly disparate elements of my research. Hamilton's thorough analysis of black social identity formation departs from the basic notion that "Fundamentally, a people can exist only in relation to other people" (8). In other words, the existence of a "we" implies the existence of a "they," and thus the process of identity formation implies a contradiction: "people stand (act) in opposition to the forces that have conditioned their existential reality and material circumstances. Moreover, who people *are*, *have been* and *may become* can be negotiated and can exist on many levels of social life. Neither sameness nor unity is implied" (8).

social system that not only facilitate the emergence and development of a collective “we” but also effectuate major dynamics within and among people of the diaspora.

The Afro-Latina subjects of this study resist the socio-political and discursive structures that have historically maintained and reinforced their marginalization. They speak through vocabularies of resistance to combat the muting of their voices within literary, artistic, and musical traditions. Discourses of resistance allow these subjects to uncover mirrors of their own reflections, and (re)imagine black female identities autonomously. Creative expression offers a progressive platform to explore how racialized representations, both past and present, have profoundly impacted the psyches, lived experiences and structural marginality of Afro-descendent women in the New World.

In chapter two I introduce Cuban hip-hop and Dominican-American ethno-racial identity performance in public history and culture venues as primary contemporary sites of revision. Within these creative spaces, self-named Afro-Latina women resist cultural knowledge bases of racial denigration and denounce persistent stereotypes. Supporting examples of *afrofeminismo* in Brazilian literature enrich my study peripherally. I argue that in spite of temporal and geographic divides, these revisionist sites of cultural production collectively deconstruct transnational ideologies of race, gender and identity.

Within this context I examine current developments in *afrofeminista* discourse among Afro-Latina women in Cuba and the Dominican diaspora of the United States. I sustain that like their African-American black feminist counterparts, many Afro-Latina feminists critique earlier feminist movements for normalizing the experience of white

middle class women while overlooking poor or working class white women and the complex subjectivity of women of color. As bell hooks observes, first-wave feminism in the United States failed to recognize a multitude of additional factors related to female oppression, such as race, class, religious beliefs and sexual preference (*Ain't I a Woman*, 1981). Afro-Brazilian, Afro-Caribbean and African-American black feminists note their exclusion from traditional models of feminist ideology as well as race discourse, theorized almost exclusively in relation to the black male experience of oppression. Such sweeping oversights leave Afro-descendent women at a disadvantage. Therefore, many women of color endeavor to assert the specificity of their experiences through factionalism with larger-scale movements. I contextualize this foundational discussion in chapter two by revisiting important developments in African-American black feminist theory from the nineteenth century to the present. Next, I look at twenty first-century offshoots of these ideas, with particular attention to the theorization of hip-hop feminism in Cuba and emergent conceptualizations of *afrofeminismo* in the Dominican-American community.

Chapter three provides background information on the ideological evolution of *afrofeminismo* in Cuban underground hip-hop. I begin the chapter with a historical review of the development of hip-hop in the United States, tracing hip-hop culture from its earliest expression among African-American and Afro-Caribbean disenfranchised mostly male youth in New York City's South Bronx neighborhood. This section focuses specifically on discourses of gender and media representations of Afro-descendent women in mainstream hip-hop culture and introduces emergent contemporary theories of hip-hop feminism.

Afrofeminista discourse produced in the Cuban Underground² Hip-Hop Movement (hereafter referred to as the CUHHM) of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries reacts to uniquely complex modes of racism and sexism compounded by highly specific social and economic conditions (Fernandes 109). In this chapter I discuss the arrival, adaptation, and subsequent marginalization of hip-hop on the island. Through the lens of race and representation in the national imaginary, I examine the eventual acceptance of hip-hop as an official, state-endorsed national musical expression in Cuba, looking specifically at the musical production of socially-conscious groups like Anónimo Consejo and Los Aldeanos.

This discussion leads me to analyze Gwendolyn Pough's assertion that hip-hop feminism is emerging as a global phenomenon. I base my analysis on the contributions of leading scholars of Cuban hip-hop, including Sujatha Fernandes and Tanya Saunders. Juan Flores' study *From Bomba to Hip-Hop* and *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, by Paul Gilroy are also cited in this section. From a sociological perspective, Ruth Hamilton's understanding of cultural creation in the African diaspora illuminates the contemporary relevance of hip-hop black feminism/*afrofeminismo* and supports the overarching arguments of chapter three. I suggest that although they occupy seemingly disjointed realms, black feminism, hip-hop and the Cuban hip-hop movement have merged in novel and fascinating ways as Afro-Cuban female rappers co-opt and modify principles of African-American black feminism and hip-hop culture in response

² The Cuban artists I include in this dissertation describe their rap music as belonging to the CUHHM. However, according to Sujatha Fernandes, the labels "underground" and "commercial" cannot be applied unproblematically in the Cuban context. Although some Cuban rappers identify themselves as underground and others as commercial, many artists acknowledge that the distinction is somewhat less relevant in Cuba than in the U.S. given that in Cuba there is no market. In Cuba the dichotomy between authenticity and success is further complicated by the state's promotion of underground rap" (95).

to their distinct socio-economic and political circumstances. Thus they are producing an organic, Afro-Cuban black feminist discourse through symbolic and material expressions of hip-hop culture. In accordance with Hamilton's notion that diasporas form communities of consciousness across time and space (29), I consider these expressions to be part of a transnational dialogue wherein *afrofeminista*/black feminist consciousness develops in the process of perceiving and experiencing cultural differences and diversity and assessing the singularity of one's own traditions as opposed to those of the other, dominant society.

Chapter four begins with a personal reflection on hip-hop aesthetics. This reflection frames my discursive analysis of personal communications and interviews by hip-hop activists Las Krudas as well as lyrics, images and commentaries by other black feminist artists of Cuban hip-hop featured in Cuba's *Movimiento* hip-hop magazine (2008). In addition, I bring in lyrics by Brazilian rapper Nega Gizza, and examine performances from Tata Amaral's film *Antonia* (2006). Collectively, these artists communicate counter-hegemonic messages by rejecting the act of passing for white through repressive beauty practices. Instead, the women consciously abandon colonial ideologies through the re-inscription of their bodies as sites of Afro-centric pride, beauty, strength, social agency and autonomy. They display visual vocabularies of resistance to *blanqueamiento* by integrating Afro-centric body art, dress, and adornment into their aesthetic presentation and musical expression. I argue that in addition to written and oral cultural production, visual vocabularies communicated via the body as text also play a fundamental role in combating historic (mis)representations of black women.

Chapter five shifts my discussion of race and gender representation to the Dominican diaspora of the United States, where expressions of black identity and counter-hegemonic critiques of *blanqueamiento* continue to emerge through literary production, music, and ethno-racial identity performances in public history and culture venues. This investigation consists of a close examination of *blanqueamiento*, blackness, and identity negotiation in the novels *Geographies of Home* (1999) by Loida Maritza Pérez and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), by Junot Díaz. I analyze these works alongside Maricela Medina's revelatory interview on race and identity, conducted by Hector Corporán for the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum exhibit *Black Mosaic* (1994). My analysis in chapter five also incorporates data garnered from oral histories, archival collections, and museum exhibits I collected during my tenure as a 2010 Smithsonian Institution Latino Studies Fellow. In particular, the investigations I conducted in residence at the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum and the City University of New York Dominican Studies Institute Library and Archives build on Ginetta Candelario's sociological study *Black behind the Ears* (2007) in powerful ways.

Chapter five enriches my theorization of *afrofeminismo* as transnational and diasporic. Along these lines, I insert Dominican-American discourse into a larger narrative of black feminist communities of consciousness. However, intensified convolutions of race, representation and identity in the Dominican diaspora of the United States significantly complicate my earlier analysis of blackness and *blanqueamiento* in the cultural production of Cuba, Puerto Rico and Brazil. In sum, this final chapter offers important projections for the broader discipline of Africana/Black Studies as it dismantles

the homogenizing U.S. socio-political racial category of “Latino” and probes ambiguities of ethno-racial identity.

The conclusion of the dissertation reiterates the central arguments of each chapter and relates them to the theorization that diverse Afro-Latina black feminist creative expressions have rendered a cognitive map guiding the formation of African diasporic communities of consciousness. Collectively, these voices connect through their shared transatlantic past and a history of structural oppression instigated by colonial sexual violence in sugar-based economies. Notwithstanding temporal, geographic, and cultural distinctions, Afro-Latina women yield a range of *afrofeminista* discourses in response to longstanding legacies of misrepresentation, silence, and conspicuous absence from the Western historical record. Through literature, hip-hop, and performance these artists and intellectuals reject the steadfast ideology of *blanqueamiento* and re-envision black womanhood for a globalized contemporary cultural imaginary.

0.3 Note on Racial Terminology and Identifying Labels

The use of racial terminology and identifying labels is unavoidable when examining identity discourse. However, while necessary, the selection of racial terminology and identifying labels can also become problematic when discussing individual, collective, and transnational concepts of identity. In *Routes of Passage*, Ruth Simms Hamilton defines collective identities as the historical continuity of cultural attributes, shared memories, and a sense of common destiny that exists between the

experiences of succeeding generations (8). Collective identities are contested, negotiated, conflictual, and dynamic (8).³

Hamilton provides useful sociological models for considering the multiple identifying labels and racial terminology peppered throughout this dissertation. With respect to the notion of black diaspora collective identity, she suggests that “While race is the indexical term in assessing the diaspora experience, racialization cannot be disentangled from the manifold axes of difference that constitute diasporic experience, access to opportunity, and the social identification, and meaning of black collectivity” (24). Throughout the dissertation I underscore associations among diverse international populations of women of African descent. I refer to these subjects as black, brown or mulatto, *negra*, *mulata*, Afro-Latina, Afro-Cuban, Afro-Brazilian, African-American, and Afro-descendent, among other identifying terms. I do not use these labels arbitrarily. Rather, I select them with intent to underscore the social constructedness of race. These categories point to the cultural specificity of racial identifications and reveal the national agendas inherent in systems of racial classification.

For example, Cuba and Brazil’s more nuanced modes of racial classification based on colonial Spanish and Portuguese *casta* systems recognize “*negro*” and “*mulato*” as distinct racial categories among a continuum of highly-specific gradations in skin color. Hamilton discusses the importance of understanding how racial ideology is put into

³ Paradoxical and contradictory, social definitions and identities generate internal difficulties that themselves need to find a political voice (Hamilton 8). “Thus we deliberately use terms such as social identities, social identity formations, and social identifications to emphasize that the significance and meaning of group membership are both ongoing and transient, relational to others and therefore comparative” (8).

practice in everyday life. “The named identity people carry, such as chombo, moreno, mestizo, negro, trigüeño, and mulatto, has an effect on their consciousness, how they see themselves, how they are seen by others, and what they believe others think of them” (25). However, irrespective of the socially-ascribed complexion-based names they carry, many artists featured in my study self-identify as black, Afro-Latina or Afro-descendent. The adoption of these labels, particularly for lighter-skinned artists who are not considered black by the dominant society, reflects a conscious choice to go against the grain and stand in solidarity with African diaspora peoples globally. I honor the self-naming practices of artists by referring to them with the particular labels they use to identify themselves. Kia Lily Caldwell’s study *Negras in Brazil: Re-envisioning Black Women, Citizenship and the Politics of Identity* and critical writing on Afro-Cuban identity by Inés Martiatu are particularly helpful in elucidating this point of discussion.

Likewise, I defend the viability of drawing discursive linkages among ethnically diverse populations of Afro-descendent women. In my research I examine feminist agendas that integrate these associations under similar arguments. Transnational black feminists believe that despite distinct geographic, cultural, socio-political, and economic contexts, which should not be discounted, Afro-diaspora women connect through the compounded experiences of institutional oppression articulated in King’s multiple jeopardy theory, which describes the multiplicative negative effects of race, sex, and class-based institutional oppression that are often overlooked by the dominant society. According to Hamilton, structural inequalities still exist today because they are historically conditioned, and the formation of relationships among dispersed African diaspora peoples in response to these conditions helps forge a sense of identity and

belonging through personal and collective transnational communities of consciousnesses (28-32). Along these lines, I insist that multicultural discourses of racial representation and resistance can be understood collectively, because there are commonalities in the black female experience that fit into a structural framework. These correlations across time and space connect through a structure, and they are significant because of their relationship to that structure.

0.4 Methodology

My research incorporates a various methods of data collection and textual analysis. Literary, folkloric and ethnographic perspectives inform my methodology and add depth to the interpretation of diverse primary and secondary sources of analysis. These perspectives highlight the relevance contextualizing cultural analysis. In accordance with Hamilton's idea that diasporas form communities of consciousness across time and space, I consider expressions of *afrofeminismo* to be part of a transnational dialogue wherein black feminist consciousness emerges from the process of perceiving and experiencing cultural differences and diversity, and from assessing the singularity of one's own traditions as opposed to those of the other, dominant society (29). Thus, the process of recognizing intertextual discourses in Cuban hip-hop feminist cultural production and identity performance of the Dominican diaspora, among other displays of *afrofeminismo*, departs from a discernment of the intricate socio-economic positionalities of *negra* and *mulata* women through the ages. I contemplate their

representation in multinational cultural imaginaries alongside related historical processes and the lived experiences of black female subjects.

My analysis of popular archetypes in Hispanic Caribbean and Brazilian cultural production with respect to colonialist concepts of race, gender, representation, and *blanqueamiento* sets in motion the intertextual analysis of cultural products, and their relationship to the original contexts from which they emerged. The cultural products examined in this dissertation react to shared historic circumstances that have shaped former American slave societies in overwhelming ways. Although chronologically far removed from slavery, past circumstances become compounded and play out in a gamut of convoluted interactions charged with historical significance. Creative expression facilitates the articulation of understated racial tensions tainting multiple realms of interaction. Black feminist cultural expressions dialogue with one another, working cooperatively to tease out and pinpoint the intangible yet malignant dynamics of marginality, while also denouncing more overt forms of discrimination.

I take a non-linear approach to analyzing the primary and secondary source materials of my study, with central theoretical arguments that orbit throughout each chapter. They do not begin or end abruptly, nor are they concretely proved or definitively resolved. These cyclical controlling arguments guide double and multiple interpretations of cultural products while allowing enough elasticity to introduce secondary supporting materials into my discussions peripherally. Generally speaking, double and multiple readings of *afrofeminista* cultural products break from traditional methods of comparative literary analysis. Shattering unilateral, essentialist approaches to textual interpretation, I examine *afrofeminista* products through a kaleidoscopic lens. This method provides an

aperture for viewing each expression as a multitude of colorful splinters, fractals, fragments, and ever-shifting shapes. It facilitates the perception of intricate junctures and dissention among distinct discourses and illuminates dialogues that defy temporal and geographic boundaries. Finally, the process of engaging in intertextual readings presupposes a critical methodology for the analysis of the dialectical and symbolic relationship among two or more cultural products.

CHAPTER ONE

Inscriptions of Racial (Mis)Representation:

The Black Female Body

in Hispanic Caribbean and Brazilian Literature

La blanca para casar, la mulata para gozar, la negra para trabajar.

--Popular adage in colonial Cuba and Brazil

Historically within Western borders, the African body is not just flesh or matter, rather, the African body has inscriptions/scripts that are projected onto it and can be read from it. These scripts were formulated out of one of the most heinous crimes against humanity – the trans-Atlantic trade of enslaved Africans

--Ruth Simms Hamilton, (*Routes of Passage* 287)

1.1 Introduction

In this dissertation, the voices of *negras*, *mulatas*, and a rainbow spectrum of transnational sisters intermingle across time and space to share, show, and tell the stories of their lives. As they speak, these black women break the enduring silence of muted

protagonism; a longstanding legacy of representation imposed on African women and their descendents by foundational discourses of New World conquest and colonization, and perpetuated in post-colonial cultural imaginaries spanning the Americas.

Accordingly, *Azúcar negra* begins with a comparative analysis of intersections of race, gender and nation in Hispanic Caribbean and Brazilian literature and cultural production. I dedicate this chapter to discussing the impact of foundational national discourses on nineteenth century New World cultural imaginaries. Next, I trace the ideological transference of colonial attitudes through literature and cultural production to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, drawing attention to the (mis)representations of *negra* and *mulata* women in Hispanic Caribbean and Brazilian society. The body of works I have selected for analysis in this chapter contributes to a broader understanding of the politics of representation. These texts reveal multiple angles of intersection between institutionalized structures of oppression and the scripts projected onto black female bodies, and read from them.⁴

Chapter one revolves around three fundamental inquiries. On a basic level, I consider *who* composes these scripts and subsequently reflect on *how* and *why* they form(ed). My aim here is to establish a transnational socio-historical context for critically relating commonalities in the African diaspora experience to the formation of social identifications and collective identities. Hamilton states that “Black African diaspora identity politics or the politicization of culture embodies processes of symbol and

⁴ My discussion of “scripts” references the same quote by Ruth Simms Hamilton that introduces chapter one of the dissertation. “Historically within Western borders, the African body is not just flesh or matter, rather, the African body has inscriptions/scripts that are projected onto it and can be read from it. These scripts were formulated out of one of the most heinous crimes against humanity – the trans-Atlantic trade of enslaved Africans” (287).

meaning construction in terms of active social and physical planes of action, the range of political activities, and the solutions engendered to resolve the conflicts that characterize each phase of diaspora history” (31). Moreover, as the *afrofeminista* discourses of my study reveal, black social identities that form in response to the politicization of culture yield pervasive manifestations of African diaspora oppositional consciousness (31). Hamilton explains that African diaspora identity politics generate actions related to the forms of political expression and struggle that characterize various strategies of liberation, resistance, and rebellion:

This ranges from slave revolts and the ebb and flow of worker militancy to urban insurrections...from the Haitian revolution of the late eighteenth century to the Grenada revolution of the late twentieth century; from flight of the former maroon communities (*palenques, quilombos, cumbes*) to the planned emigration settlements, back-to-Africa movements, and black Utopias in Canada. (31)

Like African-American black feminism, theorizations of *afrofeminismo* in the Hispanic Caribbean, Brazil, and the Dominican diaspora of the U.S. emerge and transform in permanent dialectical exchange with black struggles impacting the past and present circumstances of Afro-descendants in the Americas. As African diaspora social identities evolve in response to the changing socio-political and economic conditions affecting the lives of Afro-descendent peoples globally, they advance a continuing critical revision of race and representation.

The portrayal of race and gender among literary characters renders portraits of Afro-descendent women during slavery, colonization, and various stages of the twentieth

century. These renderings inscribe patriarchal ideologies onto black and brown female bodies, concretizing the very archetypes contemporary Afro-Latinas seek to rupture and rebuild. The ideological rupture of their work lays bare the entanglements between authorship, representation and the politics of race and gender in the fabric the Americas.

1.2 Sociohistorical Context: Colonial Rule to National Independence

Nineteenth-century Hispanic Caribbean and Brazilian romances serve as windows into complex national discourse because, as Doris Sommer theorizes, oftentimes, their central plot and protagonists function as microcosmic representations of the national political, economic and social climate. Furthermore, as products of the school of romanticism and the initial stages of realism, the literary production of this epoch captures multiple facets of the colonial experience. Writers took particular care in rendering verisimilar illustrations of their environment, with romanticism subjectively focusing on the more folkloric cultural traditions of the popular classes and realism minutely detailing the objective reality of urban spaces. In both cases, nineteenth-century literature not only provides readers with glimpses of daily life in colonial society, but also divulges broader, time-specific questions regarding race, gender, representation, and the hierarchical power structures steering their complex interaction.

Literary interest in people of African ancestry emerged in late nineteenth-century Brazilian literature, coinciding with hegemonic society's discursive efforts to forge a national ethnic identity around an idealized Indigenous past and the promise of a progressive, civilized European-modeled present. In the colonial Hispanic Caribbean,

literary attention to blackness received far more attention in Cuba than in the neighboring islands of Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic.⁵ Literary scholar William Luis cautions that when discussing the Hispanic Caribbean as a region, “Although various affinities of language, culture, and history link these three territories, the peculiarities of each limit the extent of the generalizations to be made about them” (xi).

Nevertheless, literary archetypes based on race and gender in foundational nineteenth century abolitionist novels capture the intersection of race, and gender representation in the complex world of nineteenth-century slaveocracies. Regarding blackness, the question arises as to why, during an epoch of reigning European literary influence, nineteenth-century writers such as Cirilio Villaverde in Cuba and Bernardo Guimarães in Brazil cast *mulatos* as the starring protagonists of their romances.

According to Claudette Williams, writing about mixed-race identity in the colonial period was a sign of the birth of local *criollo* consciousness. It represented the embryonic stage of the move to break the cultural hegemony of Europe (30). Williams adds that literary interest in the Caribbean *mulata* during this period illustrates how the unfixing of racial poles served to mitigate the racial disparagement of non-whites popularized in the preceding European artistic tradition (30).

As the last two strongholds of slavery in Latin America, both Cuba and Brazil remained slaveocracies well into the end of the nineteenth century, with Cuba finally abolishing slavery in 1886 and Brazil following suit in 1888. Their particular economic dependence on slave labor demanded a steady influx of *bozales*, continental Africans

⁵ However, records do exist of literature written by black writers in Puerto Rico during the nineteenth century.

shipped to the Caribbean and South America to be sold into the brutal machine of transatlantic slavery. With regards to their investment in the labor-intensive plantation-based economies of coffee, tobacco and sugar production, Cuba and Brazil share numerous parallels. Most notably, nineteenth-century politics, economics and dominant belief systems in both countries evolved in response to colonial society's fiscal dependence on slave labor. The increasing demand for workers on the Caribbean and Brazil plantations naturally led to rapid growth of the black population and a new emergent population of mulattos of mixed African and European ancestry. Yet, as foreign pressure from England and the international community to eradicate slavery intensified in the late 1800s, abolition became the burning question of the epoch.

The budding struggle to liberate national ideology from the power of European models of perception and representation inspired nineteenth-century authors throughout the New World colonies to entertain the themes of abolition, independence and national identity. Relevant aspects of this sociohistoric context of cultural production suggest that nineteenth-century Latin American writers endeavored to define the unique hybridism of their nations against Europe by casting mixed-race subjects as protagonists in their novels.

The prologue writer⁶ of the Ayacucho edition of *Cecilia Valdés o la Loma del Ángel* (1981) notes that Villaverde's social indignation and rebellious resentment towards Spanish colonial despotism unquestionably influenced his writing. In regards to his political views, "Para Villaverde la putrefacción del cuerpo político-social cubano podía detenerse y curarse con la libertad. Cuba tenía que librarse en lo político de la

⁶ The prologue writer is unidentified in this particular edition of the novel.

dominación de España y, en lo social, de las llagas corruptoras de la institución de la esclavitud” (18). Accordingly, the prologue writer states that “*Cecilia Valdés* es una novela antiesclavista y revolucionaria en la que se ve la primera expresión de la vida cubana como vida trágica” (18). In *Literary Bondage* (1990), Luis describes the antislavery narrative as a counter discourse to power whose immediate aim is to question and ultimately dismantle nineteenth century colonial and slave society (2). However, I would argue that this is not always the central objective of the antislavery novel. A careful examination of the political and historical conditions under which these narratives were produced reveals manipulations by Cuban elite figures. Such is the case of the autobiography of Juan Manzano. In Manzano’s autobiography we can read, rather than a radical anti-slavery position, a *relato* (account) of the good/benevolent masters versus the bad masters. As many literary critics have demonstrated, this literary agenda is due to the influence of abolitionist Domingo Delmonte and his circle.

The theme of gender in nineteenth-century literature appears deceptively inconspicuous in comparison with the widespread cultural fixation on race. Nevertheless, gender serves an equally critical function in the fictional plots and allegorical messages nineteenth-century novels impart. After all, the sexual power dynamics of New World slaveocracies gave rise to societies in which race and gender were the foremost critical determinants of human relationships in the public and private spheres of colonial society.

1.3 The Relevance of *Mestizaje* and *Blanqueamiento* to National Unification

Born of New World historical processes of conquest, colonization, and involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, the concept of *mestizaje/mestiçagem*, or racial miscegenation between Indigenous, European, and African peoples remains central to the construction of national identity and belonging in the Hispanic Caribbean and Brazil. *Mestizaje* is widely perceived as a positive acknowledgement of racial admixture, however, in viewing multiple dimensions of this discourse through a contemporary *afrofeminista* lens, I argue that notwithstanding its inclusive tone, *mestizaje* discourse minimizes the reality of exploitation and the downplays the violation of African women and their descendents, while ascribing credence to the racial whitening policies of *blanqueamiento*.

As a literary theme, *mestizaje* materialized in the Spanish *crónicas* as early as 1492 when Christopher Columbus encountered natives on the island of Hispaniola. Thus the Caribbean archipelago became the site of the first American multicultural experiment, the cradle of ethnic and cultural syncretism (Fernandez Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 13). Of the roughly five million Africans transported to the Americas over the course of four centuries, more than three quarters were intended for the sugar plantations of the Caribbean and Brazil (14). Hence, while millions of human beings of diverse racial, geographic, and cultural origins would be pressed into service in the sugar system, “the brunt of the enterprise was undoubtedly borne by enslaved Africans, making the Caribbean islands and Brazil ‘the historical and geographical core of Afro-America’” (14).

Hispanic Caribbean and Brazilian slaveocracies reacted to the rapidly growing black demographic and increasingly heterogeneous mixed-race populations with anxiety

and fascination. The racial whitening policy of *blanqueamiento* imposed a sense of colonial social order while the ideology of *mestizaje* offered a discursive means of negotiating unfixed racial categories, if only at the theoretical level. However, the idea of a collective national identity produced through generations of racial miscegenation did not gain widespread currency until the first half of the twentieth century when Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Brazil began to imagine themselves as products of a predominantly black/white multi-racial heritage often described as *mulataje*.⁷

Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre details the complex dynamics of Brazilian society's extensive racial hybridization in *Casa grande e senzala (The Masters and the Slaves 1933)*. Although his treatment of *negra* and *mulata* women is problematic, at best, Freyre's study represents a pioneering intellectual acknowledgement of the African contributions to Brazilian culture. Likewise, in the canonical socio-economic study *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar (1940)*, Fernando Ortiz coins the term "transculturation" to describe the complex co-mingling of disparate ethnic groups (most notably, white Spaniards and black Africans) in Cuba, whose fusion spawned a racially and culturally unique Cuban nation.

Ortiz uses the *ajiaco*, a staple of Cuban cuisine, as a metaphor for illustrating the process of transculturation. The *ajiaco* stew incorporates a savory blend of meats, pungent spices like black pepper, garlic and *ají* chili, green plantains, onions, tomato puree, and root vegetables such as *yuca* and *malanga*. By tradition, chefs improvise

⁷ The Dominican Republic did not follow suit in the adoption of *mulataje* / *mestizaje* as an ideology of national identity. As I will explore in chapter five, Santo Domingo developed a distinctive national ethnic identity premised on *hispanidad* and the imagined ideal of white racial purity.

ajiaco from whatever ingredients they find at hand in a nondiscriminatory manner. Nearly every animal and plant part goes into the *olla* (large iron pot), edible or not; from tough seeds to bones and gristle. The first spoonful of *ajiaco* could hold fibrous greens and firm, flavorful pumpkin pulp, and the next bite, acrid, rubbery bits of chicken liver. Different elements combine and marinate uniquely in this Caribbean invention, so that every batch becomes a sensorial journey. The metaphorical beauty of the *ajiaco* derives from the way qualities of the meats, vegetables and spices amalgamate to create an entirely original *sabor* (intense flavor). The diverse ingredients brew collectively in the *olla*, inevitably picking up the distinctive new *sabor* of the broth. Yet inasmuch as the elements infuse and influence one another, they still maintain their original form in the soup. The idea here is that the synthesis of the *ajiaco* represents Cuba, as the nation itself is the product of distinct, yet integrated nationalities. Moreover, “This metaphor has found an echo throughout the Caribbean region, finding its counterpart in the Dominican *sancocho* and the West Indian *callaloo*” (4). This is what the theories of *mestizaje* fail to acknowledge; that within transcultural societies a diversity of identities is still maintained. In general, they often also overlook the violence that takes place in the formation of *mestizaje*. Among other factors, the conceptualization of inclusive national identities based on *mestizaje* holds tremendous thematic currency in transnational literature and cultural production because it symbolizes an inimitable facet of American cultural identity and by extension, national autonomy.

In the twentieth century, the idea of *mestizaje* circulated widely throughout Latin America as this discourse corroborated official claims that nations such as Cuba and Brazil functioned as veritable “racial democracies.” Attainable through biological and

cultural processes of racial miscegenation and *blanqueamiento*, the racial democracy trope lands a celebrated, yet depoliticized deployment of blackness. The dominant discourses of *mestizaje* and *blanqueamiento* continue to reinforce the prevailing myth that ethno-racially hybrid countries like Cuba and Brazil are egalitarian societies in which the supremacy of collective national identity effaces the existence of racism and discrimination. These purportedly colorblind contemporary ideologies deem race/color distinctions among citizens as irreverent, divisive, and counterproductive to national unity and inclusion.

However, *blanqueamiento* and *mestizaje* are inextricable from the highly racialized sociohistorical contexts in which they evolved. Literature and cultural production offer a unique aperture for considering the relevance of these dominant ideologies to official agendas of national unification. Black feminism and race theory describe how colonial society set rigid boundaries between whiteness and its alleged opposite, blackness, and deemed the black slaves inferior to their white masters in culture and intelligence, in physical appearance and skin color. The origins of the race-color question date back to the initial moment of contact between European travelers and Africans, and the subsequent creation of the *other* antithesis of the white *self*. Both Cornel West and Claudette Williams note how European racial superiority infected colonizing powers with racist ideology that translated into the aesthetic devaluation of the Negro. Whiteness was accepted as the ideal, the reference point for the aesthetic disparagement of blacks (Williams 17).

Nevertheless, as a result of the sexual exploitation of slave women during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the fact that even if consensual, relationships

between white men and black woman were not legally sanctioned, official attempts at subverting racial miscegenation became virtually impossible. hooks argues that passive submission on the part of the enslaved black female cannot be seen as complicity (*Ain't I a Woman* 26) and that “any suggestion that enslaved black women had a choice as to their sexual partner is ludicrous” (25). Several historians note that some colonial women of color came to favor relationships with white men as a result of the benefits they derived from these unions (Morrissey 1989) and the social priveledges that they hoped would accrue to their lighter-skinned children. Both positions speak to a slave mentality/predicament that said women have not entirely broken free from today.

These intercalated dynamics of race, gender, and power spawned a population of mixed-race offspring whose visual presence disrupted the binary black/white color line of social order. Colonial societies in the Hispanic Caribbean and Brazil functioned as “pigmentocracies.” Whites held the most privileged position, blacks were relegated to the bottom, and brown-skinned mulattoes occupied the middle of the spectrum. Although the United States’ racial paradigm promotes the ideology of hypo-descent, popularly known as the “one-drop-rule,” the African-American community (particularly in the U.S. South) still employs color-based designations such as blue-black, redbone, honey-brown and high-yellow. In conveying distinctions of complexion, facial features, and hair texture among Afro-descendents, these identifications also imply hierarchal ascriptions of worth and beauty in accordance with the subject’s degree of racial admixture. In particular, this English language color-based terminology peppers informal exchanges and African-American musical expressions like hip-hop in reference to females. Within the similar socio-racial color continuum that emerged in the Hispanic Caribbean and Brazil,

light(er)-skinned mixed-race women of African descent received higher social valorization than dark(er)-skinned black women. According to Williams, “the mulatto woman was perceived as, and perceived herself to be, more beautiful than the black woman, and she was more acceptable to the dominant white ruling class” (17). In accordance with these popular ideologies, Fernando Ortíz co-opts the *mulata* to describe the nature of sugar and tobacco, the two most important crops of the nineteenth and twentieth century Cuban economy:

El tabaco es oscuro, de negro a mulato; el azúcar es clara, de mulata a blanca. El tabaco no cambia de color, nace moreno y muere con el color de su raza. El azúcar cambia de coloración, *nace parda y se blanquea; es almibarada mulata que siendo prieta se abandona a la sabrosura popular y luego se encascadilla y refina para pasar por blanca*, correr por todo el mundo, llegar a todas las bocas y ser pagada mejor, subiendo a las categorías dominantes de la escala social. (16 emphasis mine)

Ortiz goes on to emphasize the malignant, mysterious, sacrilegious and arrogant qualities of the *mulata* in painstaking detail. The innate human nature of this emblematic female figure, he suggests, personifies the lifecycle of sugarcane, from the humble beginnings of the harvest through its transformative refinement process to the global export and consumption of the sweet cash crop. Conversely, tobacco production is best understood in relation to the static social condition of the *negra*, for whom physical refinement is not a possibility. Ortiz posits these analogies as natural. Although he was a staunch proponent of Afro-Cuban cultural heritage, his inscription of *negra* and *mulata* women as logical models for discussing tobacco and sugar production suggests that

Ortiz' ideas were still subordinate to deeply engrained, pseudo-scientific-based notions of black inferiority and racial determinism.

The discursive linkage Ortiz establishes between the *mulata* archetype, *blanqueamiento* and Cuba's lucrative cash crops relate to dominant ideology and racial representation in other forms of cultural media, such as La Charanga's nineteenth-century tobacco label illustrations. Tobacco manufacturers once advertised their products to the domestic market through elaborate artwork printed on these wrappers, referred to as *marquillas* (Kutzinski 11). La Charanga's popular series of images entitled "La vida y muerte de la mulata" chronicle the trials and tribulations of the *mulata* protagonist in nineteenth-century Havana through a sequence of iconographic scenes. Together, the illustrations reveal the *mulata*'s socio-sexual delinquency (71) and foreshadow her tragic demise through telling interactions with white men and black background characters in various social situations. These images and corresponding captions reinforce the *mulata*'s abhorrence of the *negro*, an implied symptom of her own self-loathing and desire to disassociate from blackness and aspire for *blanqueamiento* at all costs. She seeks social ascension via the procurement of the white bourgeois man, who sexually expends the *mulata* before ultimately rejecting her.

Inasmuch as La Charanga's illustrations offer an entertaining visual chronicle of the *mulata*'s road to ruins, like Villaverde's novel *Cecilia Valdés*, the colonialist subtext of the images warns of the consequences of disrupting established social hierarchies when Nature dominates over Reason. Although the *mulata* ultimately fails to undermine these structures, Vera Kutzinski suggests that she must nevertheless be symbolically sacrificed to prove that "social order and hygiene are restored by way of discipline and

punishment” (79). Kutzinski emphasizes the masculine voyeurism and *blanqueamiento* ideology inherent in tobacco *marquillas*:

Consistent with these iconographic patterns is that representations of the mulata’s social success require the erasure of all images of blackness, which is the case in. . . . “Vida y muerte de la mulata.” These lithographs depict the mulata in a sequence of suggestive situations, always from the single-point, masculine perspective embodied in the figure of a white patron. Even when it is erased from the actual prints, this masculine perspective remains implicit in the verbal commentary. (73)

The patriarchal sociocultural dynamics depicted in *Cecilia Valdés* suggest that *negros* and *mulatos* in colonial Cuba subscribed wholeheartedly to *blanqueamiento*.⁸ Cuban poet and scholar Nancy Morejón explains that “El sistema esclavista engendró una tabla de valores enajenados. Los que se le inculcan a Cecilia, desde pequeña, vía su abuela Chepilla, suscriben la moral esclavista que era la predominante en la sociedad que la vio crecer” (22). On an aesthetic level, the glorified fair beauty of Cecilia and other nineteenth-century *mulata* protagonists gives emphasis to colonial society’s fixation on *blanqueamiento*. As a *cuarterona* (quadroon), Cecilia’s almost-white skin represents a tremendous asset as physical whiteness increases her potential of marrying a white man, ascending the social ladder and whitening her family’s supposedly “tainted” maternal bloodlines. Chepilla reminds her granddaughter that because Cecilia’s father is a white gentleman, in the future, she too might travel by carriage and enjoy a wealthy bourgeois lifestyle. On the other hand, Chepilla suggests that as a darker-skinned *mulata*, Cecilia’s

⁸ At the same time, it is imperative to underscore Villaverde’s positionality as a bourgeois white male before accepting the assumptions of his literary voice at face value.

friend Nemesia can only hope to marry a mulatto of her own category since her father “has more black in him than anything else” (20). Chepilla’s counsel shows the extent to which the ideology of *blanqueamiento* was consumed and propagated by the colored population of nineteenth-century Havana. So intense was the repugnancy towards blackness that, as Chepilla emphasizes, a poor white man makes a better husband than the richest *negro* or *mulato*. Despite his poverty, for a *mulata* to marry a white man would guarantee the whiteness, or explicitly, the whiteness of their offspring given that colonial society gave credence to a man’s skin color above his socio-economic status.

Brazilian Bernadro Guimarães’ titular protagonist Isaura faces a similar dilemma. Due to her extreme whiteness, beauty and noble personality, she is deemed “too good” to marry a slave, yet Isaura’s subordinate social condition diminishes her likelihood of having a legitimate union with a white man of social standing. As her young mistress Malvina counsels, the only realistic option for matrimony would be with a fair-skinned *mulato* of a social status equivalent to Isaura’s. “Tú amas, y eres muy Linda y bien dotada para sentirte inclinada hacia un esclavo. Al menos si fuera como tú . . .” (7). The advice imparted by Malvina and Chepilla alike speaks to the socio-cultural valorization of whiteness in colonial Cuba and Brazil. Their counsel also implies that mulattos subscribed to a pervasive color/class continuum of stratification system based on the dominant ideology of *blanqueamiento*.

Scholar Felicia Medrano credits this phenomenon to imposed, racially deterministic patriarchal structures employed by white Cubans in the nineteenth century to effectively subjugate the Afro-Cuban population (11). In Villaverde’s novel, Cecilia subscribes completely to this ideology. Regarding her amorous preferences she exclaims:

“Sí me gustan más los blancos que los pardos. Se me caería la cara de vergüenza si me casara y tuviera un hijo saltatrás” (224). For a *mulata adelantada* like Cecilia, the benefits of being a white man’s mistress outweigh marriage with a black man. Status as a white man’s *mantenida* (“kept” woman) might result in the procreation of a fair-skinned child, whereas Cecilia fears the shame of having an *hijo saltoatrás* (throwback child) darker than herself if she were to become involved in a socially sanctioned relationship with a black man *de raza inferior* (of the inferior race).

A la sombra del blanco, por ilícita que fuese su unión, creía y esperaba Cecilia ascender siempre, salir de la humilde esfera en que había nacido, si no ella sus hijos. Casada con un mulato, descendería en su propia estimación y en la de sus iguales: porque tales son las aberraciones de toda sociedad constituida como la cubana. (73)

Here, Villaverde’s omniscient narrator describes the ideological trap that confines Cecilia, Isaura and other *mulatas* in similar positions who believe themselves superior to black and mulatto men. Effectively, it is this superiority complex coupled with a deep-rooted, socially cultivated desire to disassociate from African heritage (self-hatred/inferiority complex) that steers the *mulata* toward her tragic fate. Morejón interprets *blanqueamiento* as a racial neurosis compelling mulattoes to distance themselves at all costs from the wretched status of black plantation slaves:

Por tanto, hasta sus propios descendientes quisieron y supieron alejarse, furtiva u oficialmente, del negro esclavo. Estos, educados y formados en principios ajenos a su real idiosincrasia, desvendaron también una fobia

hacia él, que degeneró en una neurosis colectiva, en realidad catártica.

Ese es el escondido sustrato de donde surge la condición trágica de Cecilia

Valdés. (*Fundación de la imagen* 16-17)

Twentieth-century female characters such as Juan Orol's *mulata* protagonist who attempts to pass for white in the film *La maldición de mi raza* (1966) and Francisco Arriví's Marta in his play *Vejigantes* (1970) appear equally as entangled in the ideology of *blanqueamiento* as their nineteenth-century counterparts. Ashamed of their blackness, these *mulata* women operate under chronic anxiety that their African heritage will be discovered by others. Compelled by this negrophobia, they adopt the consciousness of the colonial oppressor and strive for physical and cultural *blanqueamiento* via romantic liaisons with white men. These *mulata* women also inculcate their children with whitening ideology and thus perpetuate the cycle of black denial, shame and internalized oppression. As Arriví's Marta explains to her daughter Clarita: "Antes de casarme con tu padre ya pensaba en ti. En verdad, lo enamoré por ti. Te quería más blanca que yo. He creído que librarte de mi herencia africana, oculta en mi turbante, significaba tu dicha. Lo creo" (62). With respect to Puerto Rico's pigmentocracy, Marta's mindset of *blanqueamiento* reflects the ideological rule rather than the exception, yet Arriví inscribes her with a critical agenda. Through Marta, the playwright exemplifies the *blanqueamiento* mindset as a basis for deconstructing dominant ideologies of race, national identity and belonging in Puerto Rico.

In Arriví's play, Marta is the *mulata* daughter of Mamá Toña and Gallego Benedicto, a wealthy Spaniard. In her lifelong search for social acceptance by the bourgeois upper class she negates every symbol that codes her as black. Set in Loíza,

Puerto Rico in 1910, the opening scene of *Vejigantes* evokes the coquettish interplay between a drummer and dancer in the Afro-Puerto Rican *bomba* musical tradition. The stage directions spotlight a smitten Benedicto, who follows the sensual, dancing *negra* Toña into the *palmar* (grove of palm trees) to win her affections. Toña longs for a legitimate relationship with her white lover, but Benedicto is betrothed to a *dama de sociedad* and only offers Toña the role of “sirvienta en el día, pero reina en la noche” (22-23). The sexual consummation of their relationship produces an illegitimate daughter, Marta. Marta detests her black heritage and relentlessly pursues the physical erasure of African features by powdering her face with light makeup, concealing her kinky hair under a turban, hiding her mother Toña out of sight in the kitchen and forbidding Toña to listen to *bomba* music, with its unbridled rhythms. Marta succeeds in marrying a white man and gives birth to Clarita, an exceptionally light-skinned baby girl. Although Clarita’s fair looks ascribe her white passing privilege, she consciously chooses to acknowledge her blackness. As a young woman Clarita becomes betrothed to Bill, a white U.S. Southerner. However, upon discovering Bill’s racial bigotry, Clarita realizes that matrimony will come at the cost of denying her black heritage, and by extension, herself and her family. She thus ultimately breaks off their engagement.

If *Vejigantes* can be understood as a microcosmic metaphor of racial dynamics in Puerto Rico under U.S. colonialism, then Clarita symbolically ruptures the nation’s cycle of internalized racism by sabotaging Marta’s attempt to pass the family off as white. She does this by exposing the painful family history of black denial to Bill in a moving testimony. Clarita informs Bill that he is eye witness to the first steps of truncating the insidious roots of racial prejudice in her country. “Estas raíces, Bill, han provocado

grandes amarguras en Puerto Rico” (103). Clarita closes her monologue with a plea to Marta: “Mamá, vivamos de frente a esa realidad puertorriqueña. Sin los disfraces que convierten al país en una pesadilla de máscaras. Nos sobrarán fuerzas para vencer este embrujo de vejigantes y buscar una dicha real” (106). In denouncing *blanqueamiento* as deceitful and psychologically injurious, Clarita also destabilizes *mestizaje* as a foundational ideology of national identity and belonging in Puerto Rico. This ideological destabilization is implied symbolically through the re-integration of the occulted black grandmother character into the Puerto Rican family/nation. In the final scene, Clarita loudly plays a record of Mamá Toña’s favorite *bomba* song “Joyalito.” Next, she convinces Marta that the three women must walk together, in clear view for all to see.

Colonial pigmentocracies endure today as vestiges of European patriarchy and cultural hegemony in Cuba, Dominican Republic and Brazil, as well as in Caribbean diaspora communities of the U.S. Namely, *blanqueamiento* persists through the social prejudice and structural inequality imposed by the contemporary pigmentocracy; a system perpetuated, in part, by the collective notion that Afro-descendent women will derive economic and social benefits from seeking out relationships with white men. Therefore, heterosexual interracial liaisons should supposedly be sought out by black women as a means of gaining agency. The idea is that black women can secure sociocultural inclusion and national belonging on a symbolic level by whitening through procreation and thus contributing to the cultural ideal of *mestizaje*. In subsequent chapters of this dissertation, I will examine the theoretical and performative modes by which contemporary *afrofeministas* question and subvert official discourses of *blanqueamiento* and *mestizaje*.

1.4 Race and Representation: Foundational Controlling Images of Black Women

Dominant ideologies of race, identity and national unification are in constant dialectical exchange with the controlling hegemonic images that have typified representations of black women since the colonial period. Nineteenth-century literature envisioned and concretized depictions of the *mulata* as wanton, lascivious, sexually available, and therefore, unsuitable for marriage to white bourgeois men. The *mulata* character retained these core traits and picked up additional attributes from Caribbean *poesía negrista* of the 1920s through the 1940s⁹ as well as canonical novels like Brazilian Jorge Amado's *Gabriela cravo e canela* (1958). The mixed-race female image further evolved in New World cultural imaginaries as male poets co-opted the *mulata* body to describe the exotic natural resources and lush landscapes of the Caribbean archipelago. As an essentialized personification of New World geography and miscegenated racial demographics unique to the Americas, the *mulata* took on symbolic transcendence in numerous societies as a highly eulogized metaphor for national identity.

Sociologist Mimi Sheller traces the Caribbean passage from slave societies to modern-day service economies by examining the transatlantic circulation of people, commodities, images and ideas. In *Consuming the Caribbean*, she argues that enduring value systems of race and gender reveal an intrinsic link between black female archetypes

⁹ *Poesía negrista* refers to poetic writing of the black-themed poetry movement also popularly known as *poesía negroide*, *poesía negra*, and *poesía mulata*. Literary production depicted black folklife in the Antilles, with specific attention to heavily symbolic renderings of *negra* and *mulata* subjects. Well known Hispanic Caribbean poets include Fortunato Vizcarrondo (Puerto Rico), Luis Palés Matos (Puerto Rico), Nicolás Guillén (Cuba), among others. The majority of celebrated poets of *poesía negrista* were Caribbean male authors and intellectuals who eulogized black music, dance and folk traditions as cultural outsiders. Artistic production during this time period corresponded with the Negritude movement of the Antilles.

and the marketing of Caribbean commodities (3-4). Cultural products borrowed from and contributed to founding controlling images of black women. Specifically, the mixed-race female body began to be marketed in association with exotic fruits, spices and edible commodities such as mango, melon, molasses, clove and cinnamon. Alongside the cultivation of cash crops such as tobacco and sugar cane as well as rum production, the *mulata* subject likewise was commodified as a potentially lucrative domestic resource. Widely disseminated sexually suggestive images of *mulatas* became standard marketing strategies for advertising products, goods and services ranging from cigars and rum, to cars and tropical vacations.

The archetype of the sensual *mulata* who dances with abandon represents another thematic fixture memorialized in popular Hispanic Caribbean and Brazilian cultural discourse. Specifically, references to the physical beauty and hypnotizing movements of the caramel-colored *mulata* dancer have featured regularly in Afro-Caribbean¹⁰ and Brazilian¹¹ popular music throughout the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. The dancer motif also commodifies the *mulata* through a voyeuristic male gaze that reduces her to undulating, gyrating body parts; namely, the hips and buttocks.

Perverse fascination with the black female buttocks in the European imaginary was popularized, in part, by exhibition of the “Hottentot Venus.” Between 1810 and 1815, the naked body of Saartje Baartman, a Khoikhoi slave woman from South Africa,

¹⁰ Orchestra Larry Harlow’s guaracha song “El paso de Encarnación” (1974), for example, helped memorialize the *mulata/trigueña* through the popular motif of the sensual dark-skinned women dancing with abandon.

¹¹ Specifically, references to the beauty and skills of the *mulata* dancer abound in diverse styles of samba music. Moreover, the idealization of the *rainha do samba* (Queen of Samba) parading down the *pasarela* (catwalk) during carnival in Rio de Janeiro is commonly imagined as a beautiful, scantily-clad *mulata* dancing jubilantly in high heels and wearing an immense head-dress of colorful feathers.

was exhibited around Europe to audiences who paid to see her pronounced posterior region and genitalia. Baartman's exploitation epitomized the phenomenon surrounding European objectification of Afro-descendent women. Moreover, during this epoch Baartman's body parts offered the world empirical scientific "evidence" of the hypersexual nature of black and mulatto women. Not until the latter half of the twentieth century did Hispanic Caribbean and Brazilian writers begin to dismantle these characterizations through critical discursive approaches that problematized the one dimensional, eroticized representation of mixed-race female subjects.¹²

Foundational, hegemonic controlling images of dark-skinned *negras* in New World cultural imaginaries overwhelmingly cast black women in the stereotypical role of the *mãe preta* (Brazil)/*ama de leche* (Hispanic Caribbean)/black mammy (United States). This archetype persists in the popular imaginaries of Brazil, the Caribbean and the U.S. South, often informing and perpetuating cultural expectations of the maternal, servile role of the *negra* in post-colonial society. In large measure, images of the *mãe preta*/black mammy endure through present-day media¹³ (mis)representations via one-dimensional film and television background roles.¹⁴

The selfless devotion of the *mãe preta* character, for instance, to (white) Brazilian family life through the ages earned the matronly black woman cultural currency as a cherished figure in Brazil, much like the cultural adoration of the mammy in the U.S.

¹² On rare occasion, twentieth century male writers such as Nicolás Guillén and Francisco Arriví managed to insert critical counter discourses into archetypical literary representations of the *mulata*.

¹³ To some extent, the idealization of the *ama de leche* is still found in one of the short stories by Afro-Puerto Rican writer Ivonne Denis Rosario (Capa Prieto 2009) and in the Cuban film *Los sobrevivientes* (1978).

¹⁴ In particular, North American soap operas and Latin American *telenovelas* are notorious for casting black women in stereotypical black mammy/*mãe preta* roles as the servants of well-to-do upper-class families.

South. Today, the comforting presence of the slave mother prototype still graces the post-colonial domestic space as black women are memorialized in kitschy home adornments, folk art and knickknacks.¹⁵

For instance on numerous occasions I have observed decorative kitchenware and clay figurines of the *mãe preta* proudly displayed in residential middle class homes in Northeastern Brazil. The prototypical figurine doll seems to eulogize *mãe preta*'s bright white toothy grin and her rosy cheeks: two round red circles peeking through opaque mahogany-colored paint. The contrasting hues and structural prominence of her features and facial expression appear exaggerated and minstrel-like. Her ample bosom sheathed in an apron, *mãe preta*'s corpulent terracotta body bolsters a bulbous head wrapped in a brightly-colored fabric turban. The figurine smiles in perpetual jubilation, seemingly content in her life of domestic servitude.

Variations of this depiction grace the packaging of countless manufactured goods. The black mammy/*ama de leite*/*mãe preta* image has historically been co-opted to sell food and household cleaning products. As a case in point, the original Aunt Jemima brand (U.S.) pancake mix logo featured the cherub-like brown face of Jemima grinning ear-to-ear against a red background, her head wrapped tightly in a yellow checkered kerchief. These examples suggest that manufacturing companies nominate black female characters as authoritative spokeswomen for marketing their products on the basis of the perceived wisdom and authority the black mammy/*mãe preta* holds over all matters of

¹⁵ I make this broad statement in reference to numerous black mammy-themed knick knacks, pieces of folk art, collectibles, images, decorations, souvenirs /*recuerdos*. I have seen these items in private homes and for sale in commercial venues throughout North America, Central America, the Caribbean and South America.

domestic maintenance and food preparation.¹⁶ Brazil's *Mãe Preta* brand stout beer illustrates this point. In addition to the potential enjoyment benefits derived from the product's ingredients and alcoholic content, *Mãe Preta* stout's marketing claim is that drinking this brand of beer will increase breast milk production in lactating women (pers. comm. 2/13/13). The company's marketing strategy thus clearly derives from a shared cultural knowledge base in which the agency of dark-skinned black women is unequivocally circumscribed to the domestic space and enacted through the role of wet-nurse/nana/caretaker. Fittingly, the beer's packaging design features a graphic portrait of the half-occulted face of *mãe preta* donning a headscarf.

As a colonial fixture in bourgeois home life in Brazil, the *mãe preta* was typically described by her white patrons as a "member of the family." Likewise, upper-middle class families today use similar inclusive terminology when speaking of their live-in *mucama* (female domestic servant). Nevertheless, I argue that the seemingly affectionate place reserved for the *mãe preta* in Brazilian culture is an imagined space ascribed to an idealized black character of the hegemonic imagination. By extension, I view any notion of genuine socio-cultural agency ascribed to the *mãe preta* as imagined as well. The longstanding visual and discursive national presence of the mammy character offers historically enslaved black women and contemporary domestic workers little retribution for their vital contributions to Brazilian society. Black women's contributions represent(ed) lifetimes of service and sacrifice. These contributions often incite(d) extensive losses for these women on a personal level. Dominant colonial structures of

¹⁶To some extent, manufacturing a romanticized image of the black female domestic also appeals to a nostalgia for past times when whites had certain privileges, as evident in the tours of plantations in Louisiana and other southern states in the U.S.

patriarchal power and privilege tied to race, class, and gender robbed *negras* in the domestic space of any real notion of power and ownership, despite their centrality to the progress and sustainment of family and social life. Most certainly, structural oppression deprived them of agency over their own representation in popular culture.

1.5 The Place Assigned to *Negra* and *Mulata* Subjects

In contrast to the overwhelming discursive attention lavished on the *mulata*, the *negra* appears conspicuously ignored as a subject. A qualitative examination of nineteenth century Caribbean and Brazilian literature suggests that for male writers of the epoch, the *negra* did not rival her lighter-skinned *mulata* counterpart in beauty, sensual appeal or symbolic significance. In literature, the *negra* tends to be assigned a utility value only. As a common background character she lacks development and appears most frequently in the roles of nursemaid, domestic worker, slave mother, or grandmother of a *mulata* protagonist. In the rare instances where black women are developed as influential characters, they often embody the black mammy/*ama de leche*/*mãe preta* stereotype. Whereas the *mulata* house slave is painted as a beautiful temptress of white men, the black woman is devoid of sexuality. As Williams explains, “race determines both the general sexualization of dark-skinned women and the differentiated sexualization of black and mulatto women” (1).

The black mammy subject of Vicente Palés Matos’ poem “La negra que me criou” illustrates Caribbean dichotomies of color, gender and representation. The *ama de leche* described by the poet contrasts sharply with the erotic image of the *mulata*: “La negra

que me crió: sus dulces ojos compasivos inclinados sobre el fogón, el gordo seno que me daba, y el delantal de calicó. Reía con risa de melaza y enseñaba los dientes de arroz. Mi niñez halló asilo en su falda como en un nido de algodón” (qtd. in Morales 105). With her head covered in a red kerchief and her body resembling a Ceiba tree, the mammy is a sexless maternal figure. Palés Matos represents her in an endearing light, but her value in these verses directly corresponds to her role as nurturer and by extension, her servitude within the patriarchal system. The popular Brazilian saying “white women for marriage, mulatto women for pleasure, negro women for work” (Freyre 13) succinctly sums up the pervasive nature of racial representation as it relates to the de-sexualization and social death of dark-skinned black women in former American slave societies. With respect to the broader implications of this seemingly-innocuous colonial proverb, Williams theorizes that:

The black-skinned woman, clearest descendant of the African slave, occupies the lowest end of the social scale. In the Spanish [and Portuguese] saying she retains the labor value of her slave past, but like her white counterpart, she is divested of her sexuality, though for different social reasons. Both the denial of her sexuality in the first saying and the ascription to her of the role of wench or prostitute in the second bespeak the stigma that has been attached to the black woman’s race. (2)

1.6 The Ascription of Physical, Psychological and Moral Qualities to *negras* and *mulatas*

In accordance with the pseudo-scientific theorization of black inferiority and racial determinism that took root during the Enlightenment period, blacks, and by extension, mulattoes were presumed to lack honor and morality. The conflation of blackness with psychological degeneracy informed nineteenth-century racial attitudes and sanctioned discriminatory practices pertaining to Africans and their descendents. *Mulata* women were thus believed to be instinctively malicious, immoral, sexually unrestrained and proud; character flaws that tainted the *mulata*'s potential to be viewed as an upstanding, legitimate marriage prospects for *señoritos* of the elite ruling class. The following stanzas of "La mulata," by Francisco Muñoz (1845) touch on these ideas: "Mulata. . . solo sé que al hombre tu nombre es un talismán. . . tu nombre es tu vanagloria...que ser mulata es tu gloria...ser mulata es ser candela...es la mulata la fatal manzana...y la barbarie y la cultura luchan en su frente tostada y majestuosa" (qtd. in Morales 195-96). In a thematically similar poem, Del Monte renders the *mulata* as a predatory serpent and describes the destructive, disorienting effect she has on men: ". . . Y en tus brazos locamente el hombre cae sin sentido, como cae en fauce hirviente de americana serpiente el pájaro desde el nido. . . Elástica culebra, hambrienta boa, la mulata a su víctima sujeta, lo oprime, estrecha, estruja, enreda, aprieta, y chupa y lame y muerde su furor" (198-99).

The discursive projection of bewitching sexual prowess onto the black female image relates to bell hooks' theory that sexual abuse inflicted on *negra* and *mulata* women during slavery provided justification for placing these women in the role of prostitute. In *Casa grande e senzala*, Gilberto Freyre discusses the perceived moral depravity of Afro-Brazilian women:

The negro woman and a large part of mulatto women as well, *for who honor is a chimerical term signifying nothing*, are ordinarily the first to begin the early corruption of the young masters, giving them their first lessons in libertinism, in which, from childhood on, they are engulfed; and from this there comes, for the future, a troop of young mulattoes and *crias* whose influence in the families is to be a most pernicious one. (396 emphasis mine)

Freyre's perception of the detrimental influence of *negras* and *mulatas* in Brazilian family life demonstrates the common tendency to project onto black women sole responsibility for the sexual corruption of white males, notwithstanding the unequal power dynamics of interracial sexual relations between masters and slaves. Moreover, the blanket ascription of moral depravity as a natural trait of Afro-descendants presupposes the notion that race and behavior share a biological basis. In *Cecilia Valdés*, the following conversation between Don Cándido Gamboa and Mayor Fernando O'Reilly illustrates prevailing ideas about the *mulata* woman's biological propensity towards dishonesty and wanton conduct:

En todo país de esclavos no es uno ni elevado el tipo de la moralidad; las costumbres tienden al contrario, a la laxitud y reinan, además ideas raras, tergiversadas, monstruosas, por decirlo así, respecto al honor y a la virtud de las mujeres. Especialmente, no se cree, ni se espera tampoco, que las de la raza mezclada sean capaces de guardar recato, de ser honestas o esposas legítimas de nadie. En concepto de vulgo nacen predestinadas

para concubinas de los hombres de la raza superior. Tal, en efecto, parece que es su destino. (279)

In light of this general attitude towards the lacking moral fiber and marital unsuitability of mixed-race women, it becomes apparent why don Cándido's son Leonardo Gamboa chooses Isabel Ilincheta as his bride and Cecilia as his concubine. To offer a further example of racialized behavior and morality, Antonio Zambrana's novel *El negro Francisco* (1873) depicts the *mulata* slave Camila as biologically condemned to her innate sensuality, despite pure intentions to embody the innocent image ascribed to white women. Zambrana writes that Camila wishes to be an angel inspiring immaculate yearnings, but she is the devil inducing shameful fantasies. She longs to be the image of chastity, but she is the statue of temptation. This she is in spite of herself (48). Camila covets purity in much the same way as the *mulata* narrator in Carmen Colón Pellot's twentieth century poem "Ay, señor, que yo quiero ser blanca." Camila's character not only reflects the racial determinism attributed to the *mulata*, but she also underscores the erotization of the *mulata* as a specifically white male fantasy.

In *El negro Francisco*, the noble slave Francisco truly loves Camila and therefore he views her through a pure and romanticized lens. Yet ultimately, the white male narrative imagination recognizes the grim "reality" of the *mulata*'s racial condition. According to Williams, the diametrical difference between the characterization of white and *mulata* women is that the white woman, descendant of the European colonizer, is idolized and prized as the sexless model of purity and beauty (2). Conversely, "The light-skinned mulatto or brown woman, hybrid product of the sexual liaisons between European men and African women, represents the Creole middle group, but is tainted

racially, and, by extension, morally. Therefore she can only be the provider of those taboo sexual pleasures that would tarnish the “fair lady” (2).

1.7 Related Representations of Black Men and White Women

The sociohistorical contexts that shaped many of the gendered, racialized stereotypes of *negras* and *mulatas* produced equally problematic characterizations of black men and white women. Because identity formation fundamentally depends on the existence of an “other” entity against which to define the self, I suggest that cultural (mis)representations of *negra* and *mulata* women can be more thoroughly understood alongside white female archetypes of the colonial imaginary.

The image of white women shifted dramatically in the nineteenth century. Once painted as temptresses, in nineteenth-century depictions, the white woman became pure, virtuous and non-sexual in conformity with prevailing ideals of domestic femininity as conceptualized by the cult of womanhood. hooks states that the shift away from the image of the white woman as a sinful temptress towards her idealization as an honorable lady coincided with the mass sexual exploitation of enslaved black women (32). Mediated through a patriarchal male gaze, the idealization of white women as innocent and virtuous creatures was also contingent upon abnegation of the sexual self. “As long as white women possessed sexual feeling they would be seen as degraded immoral creatures; remove those sexual feelings and they become beings worthy of love, consideration, and respect” (31).

Numerous nineteenth-century texts render white women in the image of the Virgin Mary. White female characters like Villaverde's Isabel Ilincheta, Avellaneda's Carlota and Machado de Assis' Helena are pursued by bourgeois men for marriage and motherhood. Despite twists and turns in narrative plot, the depictions of white female characters as unadulterated fair ladies devoid of sexuality, remain static.

For example, in *Cecilia Valdés* (1882), the moneyed *señorito* Leonardo Gamboa describes his betrothed *señorita* Isabel as an elegant, virtuous, rigid marble statue. “Bella, elegante, amable, instruida, severa. Posee la virtud del erizo, que punza con sus espinas al que osa tocarla. Estatua, en fin, de mármol por lo rígida y por lo fría, inspira respeto, admiración, cariño tal vez, no amor loco, no una pasión volcánica” (252). Villaverde renders Isabel in the likeness of a precious costly sculpture to be displayed and admired from afar. In light of these qualities, Gamboa prescribes Isabela a courteous, distant type of love that he feels should never be defiled by passion. Passion, infatuation and ardent physicality are qualities Gamboa instead lavishes on his hot-blooded *mulata* mistress Cecilia, ironically nicknamed “*La virgencita de bronce*” (The Little Bronze Virgin).¹⁷

Twentieth-century Caribbean literature dialogues with literary archetypes of the previous century through satirical critiques that problematize prevailing ideologies tied to race, gender and representation. For instance, Rosario Ferré's short story “Cuando las mujeres quieren a los hombres” (1976) satirizes the immaculate characterization of white women through the exaggerated persona of Isabel Luberza. Ferré deeply enmeshes

¹⁷ This moniker references *La vírgen de la caridad del cobre* (The Virgin of the Copper Charity), Patron Saint of Cuba. In Afro-Cuban folklore, this Catholic virgin is syncretized with the Yoruba Orisha diety Oshún in the Regla de Ocha / Santería religious tradition. Cultural representations of Oshún consistently render the popular Orisha as a gorgeous, fiery *mulata* temptress.

Luberza within the ideological trappings of white femininity while simultaneously rendering her in uncanny likeness to Isabel la Negra, Luberza's alleged black female opposite in the storyline. In the following passage, Isabel la Negra visualizes Isabel Luberza after death and contemplates the sacred body of her white double:

Ese cuerpo del cual nadie había visto jamás hasta hoy la menor astilla de sus nalgas blancas, las más tenue viruta de sus blancos pechos, arrancada ahora de ella esa piel de pudor que había protegido su carne, perdida al fin esa virginidad de madre respetable, de esposa respetable que jamás había pisado un prostíbulo, que jamás había empalada en público como lo fui yo tantas veces, que jamás había dejado al descubierto, pasto para los ojos gusaneros de los hombres, otra parte de su cuerpo que los brazos, el cuello, las piernas de la rodilla para abajo. (40-41)

Here, Isabel la Negra venerates the guarded purity of the *dama de sociedad*. Contemplating the ideal of white femininity from her perspective as a black prostitute, Isabel la Negra imagines Luberza's cadaver and the implications of the woman's demise in amusing detail. Yet the most compelling feature of this internal monologue relates to Isabel la Negra's adoption of patriarchal discourse. In expressing the dominant cultural ideologies of white purity and black moral depravity she has clearly internalized, Isabel exacerbates her own character's clichéd portrayal as a sexually promiscuous *negra*.¹⁸

With respect to archetypes of the black man, nineteenth-century representations of African slaves as uncivilized, sexually compulsive brutes inspired anxiety and terror in

¹⁸The character of Isabel la Negra in Ferré's story is based on the historical figure of the powerful madam Isabel la Negra, whose real name was Isabel Luberza.

the colonial bourgeois imagination. Historically, the physical exploitation of black males as powerful beasts of burden on the plantation compounded by hyper-sexualization of the African subject in Western discourse nourished the prevailing myth that black males harbor a natural inclination to commit acts of violence and rape.¹⁹

The predatory aggression and sexual prowess ascribed to black males therefore represented an inherent threat to white female sexual purity in the colonial imaginary. Consequently, the mere suggestion of amorous contact between white women and black men was taboo, while the reality was punishable by law. Literature mirrors its socio-historical context of production in that the conjugal union between a man of color and a white woman was an unthinkable nineteenth-century social taboo. Conversely, sexual relations between white men and *negra* or *mulata* women represented a commonplace social reality. It therefore comes as no surprise that in Cuban Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda's nineteenth-century novel, the *mulato* slave Sab lives and dies loving his white mistress without daring to dream of the possibility of consummating a union. Meanwhile, *mulata* protagonists of the same era became the objects of relentless sexual pursuits by white bourgeois men.

According to popular belief, the sexual danger of black men could only be dealt with through emasculation. Frantz Fanon affirms, "We know historically that the Negro guilty of lying with a white woman is castrated" (72). Although antiquated, anxieties surrounding black male sexuality continue to reinforce modern racism and provide grounds for legitimizing racial discrimination. In *We Real Cool: Black Men and*

¹⁹ Adolfo Caminha's belligerent maroon slave protagonist Amaro embodies this characterization in the novel *O bom crioulo* (1848).

Masculinity, hooks writes, “with neo-colonial white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the black male body continues to be perceived as the embodiment of bestial, violent, penis-as-weapon hypermasculine assertion” (79). Furthermore, “Psychohistories of white racism have always called attention to the tension between the construction of the black male body as danger and the underlying eroticization that always then imagines that body as a location for transgressive pleasure” (80). The fear, loathing, angst and fetishization mediated through the black male provide a counterpoint for interpreting the scripts projected on black and brown female bodies.

1.8 Violence, Control, and the Black Female Body

Deborah King postulates that the institutionalized exploitation of black females during slavery exemplifies the entangled dynamics of multiple jeopardy and also distinguishes black women’s oppression from that of white women. “Our institutionalized exploitation as the concubines, mistresses, and sexual slaves of white males distinguished our experience from that of white females’ sexual oppression because it could only have existed in relation to racist and classist forms of domination” (47). Bell hooks’ critical examination of the exploitation of black women in *Ain’t I a Woman* sheds light on the black female slave experience as a historical juncture key to the formation of the black woman’s consciousness as well as the hegemonic perceptions that shaped her oppression. Although her critique references the “peculiar institution” of North American plantation slavery, an assessment of nineteenth-century Caribbean and

Brazilian literature suggests that hooks' analysis pertains to the treatment of black women in the Latin American slaveocracies as well.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault writes that the convulsion of sexual intimacy and physical abuse that characterized interactions between enslaved captives and their masters produced power relationships that were unique to New World slavery. With respect to the sexual exploitation of the black slave woman in particular, bell hooks retraces her captive journey back to the Middle Passage. Aboard crowded slave ships traversing the vast Atlantic Ocean, African women were branded, stripped naked and permitted to roam freely as ready targets for physical abuse while black men remained immobilized by shackles and chains (*Ain't I a Woman* 18). The violent conditions of the black male's subjection should not be downplayed within this narrative: however, hooks draws attention to strategies of violence inflicted specifically on the black female body. She argues that "the nakedness of the African female served as a constant reminder of her sexual vulnerability" (18). hooks strategically employs this historic example of degradation as an introduction to her exhaustive discussion of institutionalized sexism, manifested via (socially) legitimized sexual exploitations of the black female (24).

The visible, immutable status of being a female and having dark skin, multiplied by the enslaved condition of black women, left these subjects vulnerable to innumerable, simultaneous forms of oppression. These compound oppressions appeared most saliently in the various acts of sexual exploitation carried out against black and mulatto women on the slave plantation. Black feminist scholars agree that the effects of concurrent modes of physical and psychological abuse are not easily quantifiable. Regarding the economic expectations surrounding plantation life and the productivity of male and female slaves,

Angela Davis claims that the threat of the whip outweighed considerations of sex. However, she adds that female slaves suffered in different ways as victims of sexual abuse and barbarous treatment that could only be inflicted on women (6).

The imminent threat of abolition significantly exacerbated gendered abuse in nineteenth-century plantation society. Preoccupied that abolition of the international slave trade would thwart the expansion of the U.S. cotton industry, North American slaveholders began to rely on natural reproduction to replenish and multiply the domestic slave population. The slaveholding class placed a premium on the reproductive capacity of enslaved females. Much like brood mares, black women were either praised for their fertility or devalued and shunned because of their reproductive inadequacies (6-7). According to Davis, “Ideological exaltation of motherhood--as popular as it was during the nineteenth century--did not extend to slaves . . . in the eyes of the slaveholders, slave women were not mothers at all; they were “breeders”--animals whose monetary value could be precisely calculated in terms of their ability to multiply their numbers” (7).

Brazilian scholar Kátia da Costa Bezerra touches on this subject in *Vozes em dissonância*. She explains that Brazil’s *mãe preta* archetype of the black slave mother bore biological children only to have them ripped from her bosom and sent to labor their lives away in the sugar mills. Meanwhile, the *mãe preta* nourished countless white babies at her breast in the perpetual capacity of wet nurse. Unfailingly abnegate and loyal, the prototypical *mãe preta* raised the master’s brood at her skirts. She nurtured these children through adolescence and into adulthood; affectionately attending to them with an undivided attention her own offspring would most likely never have the opportunity to experience. Bezerra argues that colonial society justified the commercialization of slave

mothers and their offspring by discursively rendering slave women as breeders, thereby excluding them from the status of mothers and women (74-75). “Isso implicou definir a maternidade como uma construção marcada por vetores de raça e gênero –uma dinâmica que privou as escravas de seus direitos como sujeito” (75).

Marietta Morrissey states that on occasion, slave women indirectly protested their commercial exploitation by practicing abortion, infanticide and sexual abstinence. These women were severely punished for attempting to control their bodies, their reproductivity and the lives of their future offspring: “In the U.S. South slave masters monitored pregnancies and punished women who aborted . . . In the French West Indies women thought to have aborted or contributed to the death of a newborn were whipped or made to wear an iron collar, sometimes until pregnant again” (152).

Literature represents a powerful expressive medium for negotiating historical traumas associated with white reproductive control over the black female body. Nowhere is the cultural transcendence of this subject more evident than in the thematic cross-pollinations of African diaspora women’s literature. Toni Morrison poignantly captures the tragic reality of slave motherhood in her Pulitzer prize-winning novel *Beloved* (1987). The enthralling storyline of *Beloved* unfolds in Sweet Home, a cotton plantation nestled in the heart of the U.S. South. However, insufficient archives from this region and historical era obliged Morrison to travel to Brazil to conduct the detailed research her novel would require. Consequently, she spent months scouring archival records and relied heavily on Brazilian slave narratives in preparation for composing this important contribution to Afro-American historical fiction.

Morrison bases the climactic moment of *Beloved*'s plot on a documented incident she unearthed during her archival investigations in Brazil. The turning point in the storyline occurs when Sethe, the female slave protagonist, flees Sweet Home with her four children in tow after surviving a brutal sexual assault by her master and his sons. In hot pursuit of their escaped property, Sethe's violators track her down with the intention of re-enslaving the woman and her offspring under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. The inescapable terror of continuing life under the yoke of her rapist-captors drives Sethe to resist in the only way she can. Out of a mother's desire to spare her daughter from the living nightmare of black female exploitation, Sethe slits the throat of her two-year-old daughter with a handsaw, killing her. Horrified, the white men scream that only an animal would have the capacity to murder her own offspring. The unanticipated shock of Sethe's act shakes audiences to the core, provoking a conflicting array of emotions that oscillate between rage, sadness, judgment and compassion. All things considered, as an adept storyteller, Morrison equips readers with tools to grasp the multidimensionality of Sethe's circumstances. Valued only as an economic commodity, Sethe lacks agency in every realm of existence. She is nothing more than a powerless pawn in her own fate. Morrison helps us recognize this quandary. She assists in this process by offering opportunities at strategic points in the narrative for the reader to empathize with Sethe's reaction as an alternative to casting moral condemnation and judgment on her actions from an uninformed standpoint. I suggest that for Sethe, sparing her baby girl from an inevitable life of servitude and physical abuse symbolizes a defiant act of maternal love. Yet, the tragic irony of the event lies in the knowledge that as a female slave, the only

way for Sethe to exert agency over her body and that of her daughter is to commit this sacrificial act of violence.

Bell hooks writes about the breeding of black women as a socially legitimized method of sexual exploitation (39). However, her discussion focuses on the sexual harassment of black and mulatto servants living within the white domestic household. hooks describes this symbolic nucleus of patriarchal domination as a convenient setting for sexual assault where young girls endured verbal and physical threats, torment, and persecution (25). Regarding this topic, the sexual exploitation of *negra* and *mulata* domestic servants appears thematically in nearly every nineteenth-century abolitionist novel of the Spanish Caribbean and Brazil. Works such as “Petrona y Rosalía” (1838), *Francisco*, (1839, 1880), *Cecilia Valdés* (1839,1882), *La cuarterona* (1867), *El negro Francisco* (1873), *A escrava Isaura* (1875) and *Sofía* (1891) all incorporate the (attempted) sexual domination of women of color by white men as central components of their plots. Each of these storylines features scenes in which house slaves (typically fair-skinned *mulatas*) are sexually harassed or pursued, either by predatory white masters or by the younger *señoritos*²⁰ of the house.

From a socio-historical standpoint, the sexual domination of *mulata* protagonists reflects the dynamics of race, gender and power in colonial society. Domination over the brown body also signifies the continuation of a pre-established cycle of sexual exploitation dating back to the rape of *negras de nación* (black women brought from Africa to the Caribbean as slaves) by European slave traders, plantation owners,

²⁰ The term *señorito* refers to a young man, usually the master’s son, belonging to the colonial elite ruling class.

overseers, and other males in positions of authority. Even un-enslaved *mulata* characters like Cecilia Valdés that actively pursue consensual romantic relationships with white male love interests fall victim to this cycle of power and domination. Inevitably, interracial liaisons send the *mulata* plummeting towards a tragic fate predestined by the universal laws of racial determinism.

The scenarios of these literary works fall in line with hooks' argument that black women were forced into the role of prostitute by the dominant society, both physically and discursively. She describes how white male slave owners often bribed black women, "grooming" them, if you will, in preparation for sexual overtures so as to place these women in the role of prostitute. By "paying" for the sexual services of their black female slaves, the white slave owner felt absolved of responsibility for such acts (*Ain't I a Woman* 25). Davis adds that: "white men, by virtue of their economic position, had unlimited access to black women's bodies. It was as oppressors--or, in the case of non-slave-owners, as agents of domination--that white men approached black women's bodies" (26). hooks stresses that, "Given the harsh conditions of slave life, any suggestion that enslaved black women had a choice as to their sexual partner is ludicrous. Since the white male could rape the black female who did not willingly respond to demands, passive submission on the part of the enslaved black women cannot be seen as complicity" (26).

However, nineteenth-century white male abolitionist writers such as Villaverde and Guimarães often cast free and enslaved *negras* and *mulatas* as complicit agents of their own sexual objectification, exploitation, and demise. This imagined agency derived from the exotic beauty and licentious power oft-ascribed to the *mulata* temptresses. In

the United States, the term “prostitute” was used even among abolitionists in reference to the buying and selling of black women for sexual purposes (*Ain't I a Woman* 33).

According to hooks, labeling black females as prostitutes “lent further credibility to the myth that black women were inherently wanton and therefore responsible for rape” (34).

In Puerto Rico also, black and mulatto women are portrayed as promiscuous and libidinous, particularly in the social discourse of the 1940s. The United States and Brazil subscribed to these ideological scripts of black womanhood over the course of different historical periods as illustrated in Page Smith’s *Daughters of the Promised Land* and Freyre’s *Casa grande e senzala*. Both influential works naturalize the sexual compliancy and objectification of black women while making light of white male sexual aggression as a case of “boys will be boys” (hooks 29).

In Freyre’s analysis of the role of blacks in sexual and family life on the Brazilian plantation, he describes how the *mulata* of the Big House “. . . initiated us [white male slave owners] into physical love and, to the creaking of the canvas cot, gave us our first complete sensation of being a man” (278). Deceptively, Freyre ascribes the *mulata* with agency through the verb forms “initiated” and “gave” in spite of her subordinate position as owned property. In another passage, he holds the female slave responsible for corrupting the sexual life of Brazilian society. Freyre substantiates this accusation by casting *negras* and *mulatas* as precocious courtesans of sorts, describing how these jezebels took it upon themselves to initiate young males of the white Brazilian family into the erotic realm of physical love (323). He further justifies non-consensual sexual contact between white men and black women by explaining: “Eroticism, lust, and sexual depravity have come to be looked upon as a defect in the African race; but what has been

found to be the case among Negro peoples . . . is a greater moderation of the sexual appetite than exists among Europeans. African Negro sexuality is one that stands in need of constant excitation and sharp stimuli” (323).

1.9 Towards Criticism and Control over Representation

Cecilia Valdés is one of the few nineteenth-century novels to inscribe a dark-skinned black female character with a voice, albeit through the pen of a white male author. In Villaverde’s storyline, the elderly house slave María de Regla simultaneously serves as a nursemaid to illegitimate baby Cecilia in the *Casa Cuna* and wet nurse to Adela Gamboa, Cecilia’s white half-sister. María de Regla exemplifies the wise, abnegate, loyal black mammy stereotype. Fittingly, she loves her master’s children as her own and is warmly described by her patrons as a “member of the family.” However, Villaverde offers a small measure of critical insight into the largely ignored subjectivity of black slave women via María. At the close of the novel, the Gamboa family’s faithful servant delivers a moving testimony to Adela about her marginal condition as a slave woman:

Ay, niña del alma esto no es vivir, esto es morir todos los días y a cada hora. Su merced no comprende la causa de mi llanto. Su merced no sabe, ni Dios quiera que sepa nunca, lo que pasa por una esclava. No le dejan hacer su gusto en ningún caso. Los amos le dan y le quitan el marido. Tampoco está seguro de que podrá vivir siempre a su lado, ni de que criará a los hijos. Cuanto menos lo espera, los amos la divorcian, le venden el

marido, y a los hijos también y separan la familia para no volver a juntarse en este mundo. (318)

María de Regla goes on to describe the pain of separation from her children Tirso and Dolores, who were sent away to work at a tender age. She grieves the absence of her husband who she has not seen in over twelve years. She asks Adela to put herself in the nursemaid's place and imagine what it must feel like to suffer the multiple jeopardies experienced by the black slave woman, as Villaverde implicitly urges the reader to do the same. The acknowledgement of the social death²¹ of the female slave by a white male author was highly unusual. Afro-Cuban (*mulato*) writer, orator and nineteenth-century antislavery movement leader Martín Morúa Delgado²² publicly criticized Villaverde's depiction of *negro* and *mulato* characters. However, Morúa Delgado's own novel *Sofía* (1891) fails to incorporate any insightful representations of Afro-Cuban protagonists beyond sympathetic background characters.²³

²¹ With respect to slavery, I use the term "social death" in reference to the fact that black slaves were not fully accepted as human beings in colonial society. This condition is also exacerbated by sexism and other forms of discrimination

²² Martín Morúa Delgado (1856-1910) played an interesting role in Cuban history. The mulatto son of a *negra de nación* and a Spanish immigrant, Morúa Delgado was an avid autodidact who became deeply involved in Cuba's national independence movement. His political agenda revolved around the ideology that Afro-Cubans were hindering themselves by organizing along racial lines and identifying as people of color. As an advocate of the positive implications of *blanqueamiento*, Morúa Delgado implemented ideologies of racial whitening in his political activities as well as his literary endeavors. In 1910, in his capacity as President of the Cuban Senate, Morúa Delgado introduced a law banning political parties such as the Black Independents from organizing on the basis of race or color. This law preceded Cuba's infamous Race War of 1912. Aline Helg offers a thorough examination of race, politics and Cuban society during this epoch in her book *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban Struggle for Equality, 1886-1912*.

²³ As the mulatto son of a *negra de nación* and a Spanish immigrant, Morúa Delgado, more so than Villaverde, was ideally positioned to help create a discursive space for the *negra*. However, on the contrary, he pursued his political and literary agendas in allegiance to the idea that black Cubans should abandon racial specificity and identifications as people of color in favor of assimilation with the dominant society.

The conceptualization of identity and belonging in relation to individual and collective feelings of inclusion/exclusion from the nation relates to the metaphor of the veil, proposed by W.E.B Du Bois (*The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903). The symbolic veil of invisibility impedes the formation of black self-consciousness and the recognition of social belonging. The veil prevents blacks from looking at their own reflection. As veiled subjects, they cannot see beyond the warped image dominant society holds of them. They search in vain to gaze at their own reflection, only to perceive society's distorted mirror image cast back at them. The invisible social condition of the black subject brings to mind the final scene from the film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), directed by Stanley Kramer. Here, the parents of John Prentice (Sidney Poitier) and Joanna Drayton (Katharine Houghton) express approval of the interracial matrimony between their respective children by finally sitting down to dinner together as in-laws. Yet, the Drayton's black domestic servant Tilly is conspicuously excluded from this metaphorical national union. Notwithstanding the progressive attitudes of her patrons, Tilly still occupies a position of servitude, a visible implication of the black woman's social inferiority. Although "Tilly has been a member of this family for twenty-seven years," oddly, she is the only family member never invited to eat at the table with everyone else. Perhaps Tilly's exaggerated Southern dialect and adamant disapproval of her surrogate white child Joanna's desire to marry a black man justify her metaphorical exclusion from the New America.

As exemplified by nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary and cultural production in the Americas, dark-skinned women of African descent were relegated to the lowest stratus of Western society. The prototypical characterization of the tragic

mulata from a masculine perspective appears most prominently in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century cultural media of the Caribbean, Brazil and the United States. Yet as these discourses foreground her symbolic utility, they also perpetuate pervasive misrepresentations of *mulata* women. As a female character, the *negra* is comparatively ignored and/or rendered invisible in popular cultural expression and by extension, society.

Nicolás Guillén's poem "Mulata" (1931) satirizes the stereotypical image of the Cuban "*mulata adelantá(da)*." Like Cecilia Valdés, Guillén's arrogant, fair-skinned vainglorious character seeks out relationships with white men, believing black men to be beneath her. Guillén's verses render a colorful portrait of the proud, narcissistic diva as she parades past the speaker-poet:

Ya yo me enteré, mulata,

Mulata, ya sé que dice,

Que yo tengo la narice

Como nudo de corbata.

Y fíjate que tú

No ere tan adelantá,

Porque tu boca e bien grande,

Y tú pasa, colorá

Tanto tren con tu cuerpo,

Tanto tren;

Tanto tren con tu boca,

Tanto tren;

Tanto tren con tu sojo,

Tanto tren

Si tú supiera, mulata,

La verdá;

¡Que yo con mi negra tengo,

Y no te quiero pa na!

Using the informal *lenguaje bozal* of the Afro-Cuban population in his phonetic verses, Guillén positions the black male speaker-poet as unabashed admirer of the beautiful lady and the object of her (implied) rejection. Yet instead of taking offense to rebuff by the *mulata adelantá*, the speaker-poet expresses pride in his own black physical features and ridicules the *mulata* for her own self denial. He informs the arrogant woman that she is not as white as she imagines, for her full lips and kinky, reddish hair give her

away. Although he can't help but pay tribute to the rhythmic cadence of her body as she struts by, Guillén ultimately and defiantly rejects the *mulata* in favor of his *negra*. Not only does the poem presuppose the binary inferiority/superiority of the *negra* versus the *mulata*, it also assumes that the black narrator instinctively favors the woman of mixed-race. In Guillén's poem and Langston Huges's English rendering of it, the poetic voice is giving the wrong response to the mulatto woman, or at least one that is subject to criticism because it never questions the symbolism ascribed to black features by the dominant society. In the poetic voice, what does not allow the mulatto woman to be "*tan adelantá*" are the racial features that she inherited from her black ancestry (*su boca y su pasa*). Also, the fact that the speaker-poet says "*yo con mi negra tengo*" has the connotation that the *negra* is less valueable than the *mulata*, but he is fine with her.

Langston's Huges' English language interpretation of Guillén's piece reflects the transnational interconnectivity of discourses of race and representation. The dialectical exchange between the two poems also speaks to cross-cultural pollinations among artists and intellectuals in former slave societies. In "High Brown" Huges asserts:

Yep, now I gets you, high brown!

High Brown, I knows you likes to say

how wide my nose is anyway

like a tie-knot flattened down.

Well, look at yo'self an' see

you aint no prize to wed.

yo' mouf' is awful big fo' me,

an' yo' naps is short an' red.

So much switchin' wid yo' hips,

jes' so hot!

So much twitchin' wid yo' lips,

jes' so hot!

So much witchin' wid yo eyes,

jes' so hot!

If you jes' knew de truf,

Miss High Brown,

I loves my coal black gal

and don't need you hangin' 'round.

Clearly, the fluidity with which Hughes transposes the linguistic style and content of Guillén's "Mulata" to a U.S. socio-cultural context intimates the similar ways race and

color shape the perception and representation of Afro-descendent women in Cuba and the United States. Both poems depart from a presupposed cultural valorization of the light-skinned *mulata* along with the assumption of her inherent narcissism. However, there is a tension in the way she is eulogized. Ultimately, poetic adulation gives way to a twist in each piece as the male speaker-poet dismisses the *mulata*/high brown in favor of “his” *negra*. Regarding the *mulata*, Kutzinski finds these types of discursive entanglements contradictory given their symbolic privileging of a socially underprivileged group defined by its mixed race, phenotype, gender, and its imputed licentious sexuality: “In the case of the *mulata*, highly symbolic or cultural visibility contrasts sharply with social invisibility” (7). On the whole, Afro-descendent women almost always lack agency over their image and representation in cultural media. In viewing these discursive entanglements through an *afrofeminista* lens, this dissertation examines the emblematic (hyper)representation of the *mulata* vs. the disregard/absence of the *negra* to understand how racial representation in the symbolic realm informs national agendas and shapes the lived experiences of women of color in ever-changing ways.

The vestiges of transatlantic slavery did not magically disappear with abolition in the Americas. Racism, sexism and classism in multiplicative manifestations remain insidious burdens on the individual and collective consciousness of Afro-descendent women. Brazilian author Miriam Alves writes that “Our [black women’s] confinement to the servile context didn’t change much; seeing that from slaves we went on to become domestics who still keep the slavocratic heritage in place after the pseudo-abolition of slavery” (22). Contemporary *afrofeminista* performance questions and subverts these colonial legacies of gendered racial representation. Beyond addressing the manifold ways

these (mis)representations impact the physical, social and emotional well-being of Afro-descendent women, *afrofeminista* theory introduces new models of black cultural resistance and agency as we will see in the following chapters.

CHAPTER TWO

Transnational Dialogues:

Theorizing *Afrofeminismo*, from the Black Feminist Movement to the Birth of Hip-Hop

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the evolution of black feminism in the United States as a movement that informs the production of *afrofeminista* cultural media on intellectual and creative levels. The development of black feminist ideology is particularly relevant to the analysis of *afrofeminismo* in Cuban underground hip-hop I undertake in chapters three and four. In addition, discourses of blackness and womanhood in the black feminist and hip-hop movements enrich my investigation of ethno-racial identity in the U.S. Dominican diaspora in chapter five. Correlations among these diverse, yet interrelated discourses bring my investigation full circle.

Chapter two begins with a synopsis of the black feminist movement in the United States from the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth century. My main objective in presenting this overview is to situate fundamental concepts of black feminism developed by pioneering scholar-activists, including bell hooks and Angela Davis, within a historical context. These building blocks of black feminism have led to the expansion of more complex theories and multifaceted understandings of black female positionality. At

present, Cuban hip-hop artists and transnational black feminist networks adjust and utilize many of these founding arguments in contemporary conceptualizations of *afrofeminismo*. Throughout the dissertation, I maintain that slavery and colonization in the Americas left ineffaceable footprints on the black female psyche. Successive generations of Afro-descendent women connect through lived experiences and processes of identity formation, anchored in the collective memory of these events. Likewise, the psychological imprints of slavery and colonization unite distinct transnational crosscurrents of black feminist thought and legitimize the many connections among them.

By revisiting key developments leading to Deborah King's theorization of multiple jeopardy, I aim to demonstrate how King's model applies to the past and present political and socio-economic conditions that shape black women's oppression in Cuba and the Dominican diaspora of the United States. These ideas relate back to my preliminary literature review of race and gender representation in colonial literature of the Hispanic Caribbean and Brazil. They also frame Cuban underground hip-hop revisionist projections of blackness and *blanqueamiento* in the sections to follow.

My overview of black feminism is not intended to be exhaustive. Rather, I focus on topics that hold particular relevance to my dissertation as a whole. In my discussion of black feminism and contemporary theorizations of *afrofeminismo*, I tease out Ruth Simms Hamilton's idea that "Throughout history, there have been 'shifting centers of historical gravity' within the diaspora" (31). Hamilton suggests that places, people and events that represent or embody the most active sites of conflict and change vary over time and space:

These diverse fields of action are interrelated and tend to represent acts of deliberate cross-fertilization and interpenetration. They also represent a people's realization of its own potential to engage in the transforming and rebuilding process of society, a conscious force acting for itself. This notion encompasses the cumulative and shared endeavors to make themselves the kind of people they imagine themselves as capable of being, to make their own developments, to realize their humanity in their own terms, to deny their status as simply social objects--as slaves or wage laborers in some other people's development process. 31-32

In the United States and Cuba, hip-hop culture first emerged in underserved urban communities as a creative byproduct of poverty, disenfranchisement and racial oppression. Through rap music, subaltern voices chronicle aspects of their daily lives and existence at the social periphery. The genre lends itself to feminist expression yet women continue to occupy a doubly marginalized space as hip-hop artists globally. In Cuba their numbers are small in comparison to male artists that dominate the musical and visual realms of hip-hop production. Cuban *raperas* (female rap artists) contend with a range of socio-cultural, economic and political challenges to the creative process however, such obstacles have not entirely hindered the transmission of their agendas. In fact, Cuban *raperas* draw international acclaim for the revolutionary ways they use performance to problematize (mis)representations of Afro-descendent women and revise multicultural ideologies of womanhood, sexuality and racial identity. All things considered, Cuba's original brand of *afrofeminismo* reflects a cross-cultural pollination process that defies chronology and trivializes the notion of borders.

The current chapter looks back in time and across space at significant intersections I argue can be established between the black feminist and hip-hop movements of the United States and Cuba. The main threads of this discussion will also resurface in my analysis of ethno-racial identity performance and *afrofeminista* cultural production of the U.S. Dominican diaspora. I propose these creative intellectual junctures as a strategic point of departure for considering the current significance and future implications of *afrofeminismo*.

2.2 “Ain’t I a Woman?”²⁴

The Evolution of Black Feminist Ideology in the United States

According to bell hooks, nineteenth-century black women were more aware of sexist oppression than any other female group in North American society at that time. Not only were they the group most victimized by sexist discrimination and oppression, but “their powerlessness was such that resistance on their part could rarely take the form of organized collective action” (*Ain’t I a Woman* 161). Black feminist ideology in the United States emerged alongside the anti-slavery cause and the women’s rights movement: two revolutionary historic struggles that upset traditional centers of power and indisputably transformed American society. Nevertheless, the national and international attention these struggles garnered virtually eclipsed the determined efforts of black women who, like their fellow compatriots, also fought for just treatment as

²⁴ I borrow this subheading from the title of Sojourner Truth’s legendary speech “Ain’t I a Woman” (1852) and bell hook’s foundational black feminist book, *Ain’t I a Woman* (1981), titled after Truth’s speech.

human beings and equal rights as American citizens. The evolution of black feminist ideology in the United States from the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth century produced several key contributors of black female enfranchisement whose ideas have inspired subsequent black feminist movements in other regions of the African diaspora. Specifically, this synopsis considers the formative trajectory of King's multiple jeopardy theory. The model might be utilized to posit diverse experiences of oppression that fall outside King's original scope of analysis, which examined the marginalization of women of color living in the United States.

2.3 “The Maker of Blueprints:”²⁵ Forging Black Feminism in the Nineteenth Century

At the second annual convention of the women's rights movement in Akron, Ohio, in 1852, amid protests by white men and suffragists that she should not be allowed to speak, former slave Sojourner Truth delivered her legendary speech “Ain't I a Woman.” Truth's eloquent demand for recognition as a black woman countered the widely-accepted nineteenth century notion that all women, regardless of race or color, should be denied equal rights due to their physical inferiority to men. The arguments expounded in “Ain't I a Woman” reference Truth's personal life experiences as a southern slave and field worker who plowed, planted and endured floggings in addition to bearing thirteen children, only to see all of them sold off into slavery.

²⁵ This subheading is borrowed from a quote in bell hooks' *Ain't I a Woman* (1993).

In contrast to the discursive techniques commonly employed by white women suffragists, Sojourner Truth drew on her past “. . . as evidence of woman’s ability to function as a parent; to be the work equal of man; to undergo persecution, physical abuse, rape, torture; and to not only survive but emerge triumphant” (160). Truth was among the first abolitionists and women’s rights activists to call attention to the doubly marginalized position of black women: a concept which would slowly begin to take shape in the U.S. Over a century later, these ideas would have tremendous influence on King’s theory of multiple jeopardy. In general, Truth’s eagerness to publically champion women’s rights in the face of social disapproval and resistance opened the door for other politically-minded African-American women to express their views (160).

Twentieth-century intellectual Angela Davis explains that the abolitionist appeal to end slavery in the United States was answered also by vast numbers of white women, including prominent abolitionist and author Harriet Beecher Stowe (31). Stowe’s renowned anti-slavery text *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) became the bestselling novel of the nineteenth century. However, Davis finds numerous contradictions in the execution of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and in the ideological position of the author, believing the work to be pervaded by assumptions of black and female inferiority. Davis suggests that had Stowe been questioned as to why the cause of abolition attracted so many nineteenth-century white women, “she might have argued that women’s maternal instincts provided a *natural* basis for their anti-slavery sympathies” (31). Furthermore, Davis adds that: “As ironic as it may seem, the most popular piece of anti-slavery literature of that time perpetuated the racist ideas which justified slavery and the sexist notions which justified

the exclusion of women from the political arena where the battle against slavery would be fought” (31).

Thus, while both the abolitionist and women’s rights movements may have been well intended efforts to eradicate rampant inequalities among Americans divided by race and gender, nineteenth-century cultural products bear witness to the subtle, yet complex dynamics at play in these processes. For instance, the ideological consciousness controlling Stowe’s literary voice reveals that even staunch allies and supporters of these causes were subordinate to the ingrained value systems of their epoch.²⁶ Activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton managed to break into the male-dominated political arena, where for decades she would promote equal rights as a white abolitionist and women’s suffragist. Notwithstanding her contributions to these causes, Davis reminds us that like Stanton, “. . . the most visible white female figures in the anti-slavery campaign were women who were not compelled to work for wages. They were the wives of doctors, lawyers, judges, merchants” (36).

A determined woman of social privilege, Stanton published the first women’s rights newspaper called *The Revolution* in 1868 with Susan B. Anthony. Along with Joselyn Gage, Stanton and Anthony also edited the first three volumes of *The History of Women’s Suffrage* in 1887, and Stanton went on to publish *The Woman’s Bible* in 1895. In 1866, Elizabeth Cady Stanton gave her *Petition for Universal Suffrage*, in which she maintains that “The prejudice against color of which we hear so much is no stronger than

²⁶ Similar subtly-hypocritical impressions permeate nineteenth century Cuban novelist Cirilio Villaverde’s abolitionist work *Cecilia Valdés* (1882). In understated ways, writers, artists and activists alike often reproduced the very messages they sought to challenge.

that against sex. It is produced by the same cause and manifested very much in the same way.” The petition earned Stanton widespread recognition as the first white female to publicly articulate the analogy between sexism and racism.

Stanton utilized shrewd argumentative strategies for problematizing sexism. In her petition, she foregrounded anti-black racial prejudice as a natural point of comparison. By presenting her contemporaries with the widely debated controversial social phenomenon of racism, which they were already familiar with, and then drawing logical parallels among racial and sexual oppression, Stanton garnered feminist allies among those already convinced of racism’s evils.²⁷

Although she (arguably) aided in the development of black feminist theory by championing abolitionism in the early stage of her feminist activism, Stanton soon broke her abolitionist ties. Convinced that white women deserved to be enfranchised before black men, she strongly opposed the ratification of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, which gave African-American men voting rights. According to Davis, whether criticism of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments expressed by leaders of the women’s rights movements was justifiable is still being debated (76). “But one thing remains clear: their [white suffragists’s] defense of their own interests as white middle-class women --in a frequently egotistical and elitist fashion-- exposed the tenuous and superficial nature of their relationship to the post [civil]war campaign for black equality” (76). In numerous instances, Stanton resorted to racist language to gain the Southern vote and to argue the superiority of white women.

²⁷ Stanton’s arguments are akin to Cuban novelist Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda’s feminist-abolitionist agenda in *Sab* (1841).

Davis comprehends the anger of Stanton and other suffragists and empathizes with their disenfranchisement. However, she adds that, “. . . in articulating their opposition with arguments invoking the privileges of white supremacy, they revealed how defenseless they remained --even after years of involvement in progressive causes --to the pernicious ideological influence of racism” (76).

In the late nineteenth century, Anna Julia Cooper was among the first black activists to encourage black women to articulate their experiences and bring public attention to the effect racism and sexism had on their social status (hooks 166). The mulatto daughter of a prominent white landowner and a slave, Cooper was the fourth African-American woman to earn a doctoral degree, and eventually she became one of the most renowned black scholars in U.S. history. Her publication *Voice from the South* (1892) is widely recognized as one of the earliest articulations of black feminism. This work employs a feminist standpoint to consider the social status of black women and their right to access higher education from a feminist standpoint. Concerning the unique positionality of nineteenth-century black women, Cooper wrote: “. . .she [the black woman] is confronted by a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or unacknowledged factor in both” (166). Here, Cooper brings attention to the social invisibility of black women who are dismissed for their color and discounted because of their gender. Her belief that this double disenfranchisement not only eclipsed the agency of black women, but also obscures their subjectivity and compounded their marginal status, would become fundamental to transnational theorizations of black feminism.

Cooper wrote and spoke of the double enslavement of black women, and felt that they should not assume a subordinate position in relationship to black men. She criticized black males for refusing to support the enfranchisement of black women and challenged the accusation by black leaders that the participation of black women in the struggle for women's rights undermined their involvement in campaigns to eliminate racism. Cooper maintained that the enfranchisement of women would produce more black female leaders, who, in turn, would be committed to ending racism (167). Cooper's position illustrates hook's argument that black women found themselves in a double quandary: ". . . to support women's suffrage would imply that they were allying themselves with white women activists who had publicly revealed their racism, but to support only black male suffrage was to endorse a patriarchal social order that would grant them no political voice" (3).

Other nineteenth-century African-American women focused on the right to vote as it would give them the tools to change the education system to permit women to fully pursue their educational goals (168). Activists such as Mary Church Terrell felt compelled to lobby fiercely for women's suffrage. Born in 1863 to slave parents, Terrell became an internationally acclaimed writer, suffragette and civil rights supporter. Among her numerous accomplishments, Terrell was among the first African-American women to attend college and serve on the District of Columbia Board of Education. Nominated as the first president of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) and a founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Terrell advocated tirelessly for equality and helped effect the 1953 ruling to de-segregate eating establishments in Washington, DC shortly before her passing.

In “Lynching from a Negro’s Point of View” (1904), Terrell appeals to white women on the basis of a common womanhood, urging them to stop being accomplices to their fathers, husbands, brothers and sons who continue to lynch blacks during slavery’s aftermath. Terrell infantilized the men who lynched negroes, referring to them as “children” of the women who sat by their firesides, proud and content in the company of their own progeny while they looked on uncompassionate at the anguish of the slave women, whose offspring had been sold off (169). Her explicit, maternal appeal to southern white women underscored race as the controlling determinant of motherhood during slavery. By referencing binary distinctions between the experience of procreating to bring joy and strength to the nuclear family versus procreating as chattel,²⁸ Terrell gave voice to the unique trauma of slave mothers. At the same time, she persuades white women to critically consider their privilege.

Like many pioneering black feminists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Terrell’s discourse reiterates the double marginalization of black women: “Not only are colored women handicapped on account of their sex, but they are almost everywhere baffled and mocked because of their race. Not only because they are women, but because they are colored women” (292). Mary Church Terrell lived to see the fruits of her activism when, in 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment granting all women the right to vote was finally ratified.

Notwithstanding this triumph and many others, bell hooks notes that black women had learned a bitter lesson in their struggle to win the vote. “They found as they worked

²⁸ Only to have one’s offspring ripped from the breast and predestined to abuse and captivity as experienced by Toni Morrison’s character Sethe in *Beloved*.

for suffrage that many whites saw granting women the right to vote as yet another way to maintain the oppressive system of white racial imperialism” (170). She explains that the southern white suffragists supported a platform which strengthened white supremacy, and instead of using their voting rights to support women’s issues, the great majority of these women voted as their fathers, husbands, or brothers voted (170-71). In contrast with the ideals of militant white women suffragists, the willingness of many white women voters “. . . to compromise feminist principles allowed the patriarchal power structure to co-opt the energy of women suffragists and use the votes of women to strengthen the existing anti-woman political structure” (171). Thus, the social hierarchy of institutionalized white patriarchal supremacy was maintained. By extension, blacks and women remained marginalized, and black women continued to occupy the periphery of these margins.

In the women’s liberation movement of the twentieth century, gender, race and class remained interlocking issues, just as they had been for women’s suffrage during the previous century. In 1951, sociologist Helen Hacker published “Women as a Minority Group” in the journal *Social Forces*. Deborah King describes this article as “the first formal typology of the race-sex analogy” (44). Hacker suggests that unlike many ethnic groups, both white women and black women and men possess ineradicable physical attributes that define their status and social aspirations over a lifetime. She identifies four dimensions of similarities between the caste-like status of blacks and women. In the first category, both groups are ascribed attributes of emotionality, slyness and immaturity. The second dimension deals with the rationalization of their status, conveyed by notions of “appropriate” circumscribed places and spaces. The third dimension highlights their perceived accommodating and guileful behaviors, while the fourth category discusses the

economic, legal, educational and social discrimination they confront (44). Similar to Elizabeth Cady Stanton's observations a century earlier, Hacker's analogy of the subordinate position of blacks and women, although problematic, served as motivation for social change during the twentieth-century women's liberation and civil rights struggles.²⁹

From the outset, the women's liberation movement of the twentieth century was marked by a racial chasm similar to that of the nineteenth-century struggle for women's suffrage. In a similar way in which the nineteenth-century conflict over black male suffrage versus woman suffrage had placed black women in an ideological bind in the civil rights movement of the twentieth century: "contemporary black women felt they were asked to choose between a black movement that primarily served the interest of black male patriachs and a women's movement which primarily served the interest of racist white women" (9). African-American black feminists agree that the spirited anti-feminist backlash can be partially attributed to the Black Power Movement of the 1960s, which encouraged black women to assume subservient roles in contention with feminist ideals. These same women also felt repelled by the racial and class composition of the women's liberation movement (187). Overall, exclusion from multiple realms compounded the rejection and debate of feminism by many African-American women.

2.4 Theorizing Multiple Jeopardy: Politics of Exclusion in the Twentieth-Century Feminist Movement of the United States

²⁹ Notwithstanding justifiable critiques of this conjecture.

Betty Friedan's publication of *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 initiated the second wave of feminism in the United States. Her bestselling book explores what Friedan refers to as "the problem with no name;" that of the condition of "women"³⁰ in American society. Friedan examines the role of bourgeois women in industrial societies and draws on her psychology background to critique Freud's penis envy theory. She frames her discussion around the perceived entrapment of the homemaker and encourages women to pursue higher education and employment outside of the domestic sphere. Undoubtedly, *The Feminine Mystique* had a monumental impact on feminist consciousness. Friedan initiated a powerful discourse that would continue in publications, discussions, politics and collective action for decades to come.

However, some black women took issue with the text. They felt that the homogenization of Friedan's perceived female subjects only reinforced the exclusion of black women from the feminist movement. Their discordance initially stemmed from the white feminist assumption that one could speak of a uniform "women's experience" without addressing distinctions of race and class. Bell hooks explains that throughout American history:

The racial imperialism of whites has supported the custom of scholars using the term "women" even if they are referring solely to the experience of white women. Yet such a custom, whether practiced consciously or unconsciously, perpetuates racism in that it denies the existence of non-white women in America. (8)

³⁰ I place the term "women" in quotation marks to reflect Friedan's usage of the term, which was subsequently criticized for its exclusive application to white middle-class American women.

She further states that when black people are discussed, the focus tends to be on black *men* and when women are discussed the focus tends to be on *white* women, adding that, “Nowhere is this more evident than in the vast body of feminist literature” (7). Along with other popular feminist publications, *The Feminine Mystique* assumes that the “stifling” situation of white, middle and upper-class married housewives --who wanted a life beyond the home, child-rearing and capitalist consumption-- could be applied to all women. In addressing the sexism faced by these homemakers, many second-wave feminists did not take into consideration the experience of poor or working class white women, or women of color. In addition, they do not consider the diversity of other factors in addition to class and race, such as religion and sexual preference.

In *Feminist Theory from Margin to Center* (1984), hooks states that although sexism is an institutionalized system of domination, it has never determined in an absolute way the fate of all women in American society (5). For example, while the feminist movement frames American women as unemployed white homemakers prescribed to the domestic space, Angela Davis reminds us that in the post-slavery period, “most black women who did not toil in the fields were compelled to become domestic servants” (90). The first chapter of Betty Freidan’s book advises women to no longer ignore the voice within them longing for careers instead of housework and childcare. However:

She did not discuss who would be called in to take care of the children and maintain the home if more women like herself were freed from their house labor and given equal access with white men to the professions . . . she ignored the existence of all non-white women and poor white women . . .

she did not tell readers whether it was more fulfilling to be a maid, a babysitter, a factory worker, a clerk, or a prostitute, than to be a leisure class housewife. (hooks 1)

Thus in large part, factionalism within the feminist movement of the twentieth century emerged because women of color felt excluded from a struggle rooted in the interests of the white upper middle class. These women claimed the feminist movement as theirs, and made it nearly impossible for new and varied theories to emerge until the 1970s (9). Hooks underscores the incongruence of a women's liberation movement structured as racist and exclusionary, but warns that the existence of these inherent contradictions should not lead any woman to ignore feminist issues (195). According to Deborah King, at one level, black women, other women of color, and white women share contemporary concerns around which feminists have sought to foster solidarity. While this sisterhood presumably includes black women, invisibility and marginality nonetheless characterize much of their relationship to the women's movement (57). King states:

The assertion of commonality, indeed of the universality and primacy of female oppression, denies the other structured inequalities of race, class, religion, and nationality, as well as denying the diverse cultural heritages that affect the lives of many women . . . For black women, the personal is bound up in the problems peculiar to multiple jeopardies of race and class, not the singular one of sexual inequality. (57)

Therefore, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, numerous outspoken scholars, activists and writers began to delineate a black feminist theory that compounded their well-founded critiques, and took into consideration complex factors such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. For instance, hooks, in *Ain't I a Woman*, announces her own feminist vision: "I choose to re-appropriate the term 'feminism,' to focus on the fact that to me 'feminist' in any authentic sense of the term is to want for all people, female and male, liberation from sexist role patterns, domination and oppression" (195).

As hooks observes, these sexist role patterns of domination and oppression also involve black men. Early nineteenth-century black feminist writing had noted that in fighting for racial equality, black men often sought to emulate patriarchal white imperialist power structures. And although black women fought for civil rights and supported black men as they assumed a central role in the Black Power Movement, as with the feminist movement, the subordinate position of black females meant that their unique needs were not being met. Furthermore, while black feminists drew much inspiration from twentieth-century race theory such as Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* (1901), W.E B Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and Frantz Fanon's *Black Skins White Masks* (1952), many critics and activists noted that "Traditionally, scholars have emphasized the impact of slavery on the black male consciousness, arguing that black men, more so than black women, were the 'real' victims of slavery" (hooks 20). Black feminists have thus lamented the inattention paid to their experience and the subsequent psychological negotiations they endure as a legacy of slavery and colonialism.

Hooks has argued that change occurs only when there is action, movement and revolution (193). She sees the nineteenth-century black female as a woman of action, not only for her ability to overcome the suffering and harshness of a racist, sexist world, but for her concern for the plight of others, which motivated her to join the feminist struggle: “She did not allow the racism of white women’s rights advocates or the sexism of black men to deter her from political involvement. She did not rely on any group to provide her with a blueprint for change. She was a maker of blueprints” (193).

Fannie Lou Hamer made a similar appeal in 1971 when she addressed the NAACP Legal Defense Fund with a commentary that championed civil rights and the liberation of all people. She also added that the white woman’s freedom was shackled in chains to the black woman: “and she realizes for the first time that she is not free until I am free” (Lerner 609). One year later, Frances Beale would introduce the term “double jeopardy” to articulate the black women’s position. Her article “Double Jeopardy: To be Black and Female” (1972) describes the dual oppression of racism and sexism experienced by black women. Beale’s article also touches on the reality of economic disadvantage and how it comes into play in the dynamic of double jeopardy, but she fails to conceptualize class as an autonomous form of oppression.

In 1979, Beverley Lindsay called attention to the class oppression of black women in conjunction with their race and gender as a triple jeopardy in *The Study of Woman: Enlarging Perspectives of Social Reality* (1979). She theorizes that if whiteness, maleness and money are advantageous, then the poor black woman occupies a triply disadvantaged position. In the same year, Bonnie Thornton Dill’s article “The Dialectics

of Black Womanhood” (1979) identified the complex social roles black women perform in reaction to the multiple jeopardies of their reality.

The black feminist writing that followed in the 1980s encapsulates nineteenth- and twentieth-century studies of black womanhood within a critical framework to advance the theoretical synthesis of multiple jeopardy. Bell hooks’ breakthrough work *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981) treats the interconnectivity of race, class and gender, and the perpetuation of the three factors in a system of oppression in relation to black women. Angela Davis’ publication of the same year, titled *Women, Race and Class* (1981), offers non-additive models of multiple discriminations faced by black women. In locating the junctures between these systems of oppression, both hooks and Davis revolutionize black feminism. More militant than their predecessors, hooks and Davis intertwine revolutionary black female perspectives with resistance discourses as they revisit influential movements in U.S. and world history.

In 1983 and 1984, Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde contributed to the discussion by considering additional jeopardies such as age, health and sexuality. Their respective works *Sister Outsider* (1984) and *Homegirls: a Black Feminist Anthology* (1983) offer valuable ideological expansions of previously established black feminist theories. Barbara Christian’s *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (1985) discusses black women’s responses to manifold oppressions through the medium of literature. Vital to the development of the black feminist movement, these works steer black feminist discourse in novel directions. In addition, they introduce a more nuanced spectrum of black female experiences.

In her groundbreaking essay “Multiple Jeopardy, Multiple Consciousness: The Context of a Black Feminist Ideology” (1988), Deborah King proposes an interactive model for considering the interplay of racism, sexism and classism suffered by African-American women, both historically and at present. King’s multiple jeopardy transcends the aforementioned equation models of discrimination against black women, such as double jeopardy (racism plus sexism) and triple jeopardy (racism plus sexism plus classism). As previously mentioned, the idea of the double burden of being black and being female in a racist, patriarchal society gained currency in the late nineteenth century and underwent a transformation in the 1970s, when a third jeopardy of economic class oppression was considered as an integral component of the discourse. However, while both antecedent models underscore the black female subject’s disadvantaged positionality, they fail to recognize racism, sexism and classism as three interdependent control systems, and therefore, they maintain the theoretic invisibility of African-American women (43-7).

In contrast to double and triple jeopardy, which suggest that racial, sexual and class oppressions function as autonomous factors that, when added together, exacerbate black women’s experience with discrimination, multiple jeopardy more accurately captures the simultaneous and multiplicative relationships among these oppressions. King posits multiple jeopardy as an evolution of the earlier models proposed in the 1970s and early 1980s. Thus, instead of viewing sub sequential oppressions as additive, multiple jeopardy foregrounds the complex effect of multiple forms of discrimination on the black female consciousness.

My purpose for presenting this general timeline of African-American black feminism, and highlighting influential developments leading to the theoretical formation of multiple jeopardy, is to provide a basis for understanding manifold post-twentieth century transnational black feminist discourses. These discourses take root in the same fundamental arguments as they relate a shared Afro-diasporic experience in the New World. Throughout this study, I explore the relationship between African-American black feminist theory and Caribbean conceptualizations of *afrofeminismo* on many different levels. My intention is not to give precedence to one national discourse over another, but rather, to tease out their countless, colorful, common threads. Ultimately, I endeavor to demonstrate how these threads weave a collective narrative.

2.5 “We Come without Mirrors:”³¹ Transnational Reflections on *Afrofeminismo*

In my research, I argue that cross-fertilizations of black feminist ideology inspire *afrofeminista* cultural production and inform transnational experiences of ethno-racial identity formation among Afro-descendent women. In the United States, the writing of third-wave black feminist writers including Ayana Byrd, Denise Cooper, Eisa Davis, Eisa Nefertari Ulen, Shani Jamilla, dream hampton, Joan Morgan, Tara Roberts, Kristal Brent-Zook and Angela Ards is expanding black feminist theory and black women’s intellectual traditions in fascinating ways (Pough vi). In Latin America and the Afro-Latino diaspora of the United States, feminist activists such as Mayra Santos-Febres, Ochy Curiel, Ana Maurine Lara and Sueli Carneiro add indispensable perspectives to contemporary

³¹ I borrow this subheading phrase from Ana Lara’s essay “Uncovering Mirrors: Afro-Latina Lesbian Subjects” (299).

conceptualizations of black feminism. Like their African-American counterparts, Afro-Latina black feminists argue that multiple factors differentiate the experiences of *negra* and *mulata* Latina women in the Hispanic Caribbean and the United States. As a marginalized demographic, Afro-Latinas must be understood in conjunction with the historic and socio-economic processes that shape their oppression. *Afrofeminista* scholars and artists recognize themselves as fitting into a historical structure enforced by shared systems of power and domination. Their relationship to this structure connects them to other Afro-descendent women who confront similar present-day challenges.

In the essay “Latinegras: Desired Women – Undesirable Mothers, Daughters, Sisters, and Wives” (2010), Marta Cruz-Janzen introduces the term “Latinegras” to describe Latin American women of African descent, and explains their connection to black women in the New World:

Latinegras are Latinas of obvious Black ancestry and undeniable ties to Africa, women whose ancestral mothers were abducted from the rich lands that cradled them to become and bear slaves, endure the lust of their masters, and nurture other women’s children. They are the mothers of generations stripped of their identity and rich heritage that should have been their legacy. (282)

Cruz-Janzen claims that Latinegras “cannot escape the many layers of racism, sexism and inhumanity that have marked their existence” (282). In this way, her ideas converge with the writings of hooks and King to bridge transnational discourses of black feminism. On the other hand, Cruz-Janzen’s essay also highlights distinctions among

U.S. and Latin American interpretations of blackness. Drawing from the Spanish-colonial *casta* labels used in Caribbean vernacular, her descriptions of Latinegras reveal the socio-cultural specificity of “race:”

Latinegras are marked by a cruel, racialized history because of the shades of their skin, the colors and shapes of their eyes, and the textures of their hair. They are the darkest *negras*, *morenas*, and *prietas*, the brown and golden *cholas* and *mulatas*, and the wheat-colored *trigueñas*. They are the light-skinned *jabás* with Black features and the *grifas* with White looks but whose hair defiantly announces their ancestry. They are the Spanish-looking *criollas*, and the *pardas* and *zambas* who carry indigenous blood. (283)

Here, Cruz-Janzen expands traditional African-American conceptualizations of blackness to include a wide spectrum of mixed-raced women of varying phenotype. Black feminist discourse often excludes the experiences of women who are not identifiably “black” by U.S. standards of racial classification, despite having African ancestry.³² Notwithstanding the tensions and limitations of her theoretical extensions, Cruz-Janzen’s reflections reinforce the main threads of my research. Her writing is a personal and historical narrative of multiple jeopardy³³ specific to her experience as a biracial Puerto Rican woman. Cruz-Janzen spent her childhood in Puerto Rico during the

³² The tendency to deny black identity to mixed-race people who are not visibly identified as black in the United States, but who have African ancestry, occurs in spite of the U.S.’ adherence to the “one-drop-rule.”

³³ In “Latinegras” (2010), Cruz-Janzen states: “I was raised in Puerto Rico during the 1950s and 1960s, and lived on and off in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s. Today I still live in both worlds, and most of the gender and race themes I grew up with remain. This essay is my personal and historical narrative of the intersection of racism and sexism that has defined my life and that of other Latinegras” (283).

1950s and 1960s, and resided in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s. As the child of a white Puerto Rican mother and a *prieto* (dark black) Puerto Rican father, from a very young age she became aware of Latino racism, and contradictory socio-economic divisions within this purportedly integrated society (283). Cruz-Janzen straddles many worlds, and she defines blackness and womanhood from her unique location as a biracial, bicultural, transnational subject. “I am a Latinegra, born to a world that denies my humanity as a Black person, a woman, and a Latina; born to a world where other Latinos reject me and deny my existence even though I share their heritage” (283). Through the testimonial act of self-naming,³⁴ Cruz-Janzen casts off imposed identities and assumes agency over her own identification. In the process of declaring who she is and what she represents, Cruz-Janzen symbolically records herself, along with other Latinegras, into existence.

However, her theory presents significant blind spots that merit consideration. Specifically, the inclusiveness of the concept “Latinegra” as developed by Cruz-Janzen means that almost every Latina in Latin America and the U.S. would be a Latinegra. By extension, the concept would then undermine the racial politics of black feminism; namely, its aim to place race or blackness at the center of the political agenda in order to address the link between racism and economic and social inequality through policies. In this sense, forms of identity politics that foment racial politics can be problematic with respect to economic/social action through policies. For example, if every Hispanic Caribbean Latina is identified as black, then racism and racial inequality become

³⁴ The act of self-naming is a recurrent theme in *afrofeminista* cultural production. It describes the process of shifting from an ascribed identity to assuming one’s own form of identification. I borrow the term from Kia Lily Caldwell’s study *Negras in Brazil: Re-Envisioning Black Women, Citizenship, and the Politics of Identity* (2007). Self-naming will be discussed in further detail in subsequent chapters of this dissertation.

extremely difficult to address in projects such as affirmative action that seek to remedy economic/social gaps or provide reparations for descendants of slaves. Another tension in Cruz-Janzen's theory is the idea that the majority of women within the spectrum she describes would not consider themselves black, nor would they be considered black by others in Latin America. Moreover, many of these women are likely to practice racism against the darkest women within the racial spectrum delineated by Cruz-Hanzen. Consequently, the share of racism experienced within this spectrum is vastly unequal. In sum, while the concept of *Latinegras* is fruitful in its capacity to highlight race and gender as determinant factors of Latina subjectivity, it poses a set of limitations that can be counterproductive to black feminist agendas.

Ethno-racial identity discourse features prominently in this newer theorizing of *afrofeminismo*, particularly among Afro-Latina feminists like Cruz-Janzen, who simultaneously navigate racial paradigms of the United States and Latin America. These women exist in a tenuous cultural limbo, occupying what Juan Flores and Miriam Jiménez Román describe as “the racial and cultural seams of society in the United States” (97).³⁵ According to Flores and Jiménez Román, although new immigrants to the United States often times encounter a variant of the same racism they experience in their countries of origin, ironically, the overt nature of U.S. racism proves to be “. . . a refreshing change from the hypocritical rhetoric of Latin American and Caribbean ‘racial democracy’” (98). The U.S. color-line poses a range of different identification options for

³⁵ See Flores and Jiménez Román's edited volume *The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States* (2010, 97). In the introduction of Section III: Afro-Latin@s on the Color Line, the editors discuss how Afro-Cubans, Afro-Puerto Ricans and others defined as “Spanish-speaking Negroes,” suffered the indignities of Jim Crow segregation alongside black Americans, while also being viewed as outsiders of American society

Afro-Latin@s.³⁶ Occupants on this precarious color-line invest their energies and talents into forging a place for themselves in multiple spaces (97-98). Often times, they become cultural bridges between African-American and Latino communities. Even so, the identities Afro-Latin@s assume are not arbitrary, nor are they based exclusively on personal preference. As I will explore further in my investigation of Dominican diaspora narrative performance, the process of ethno-racial identity formation depends “on factors such as generation, time of arrival, phenotype and location” (98).

Sherezada “Chiqui” Vicioso describes her ethno-racial identity as a synthesis of the contentious Hispanic Caribbean and North American social constructions of race in the short essay “Discovering Myself: *Un Testimonio*” (2010). Born in the Dominican Republic, Vicioso claims that she did not discover her identity as an ethnic minority and a *caribeña* (Caribbean woman) until she lived in New York City: “In Santo Domingo, the popular classes have a pretty clear grasp of racial divisions but the middle and upper-middle classes are very deluded on this point. People straighten their hair and marry ‘in order to improve the race’ and so on, and don’t realize the racist connotations of their language or their attitude” (263). Jarred by the experience of being racially classified at Brooklyn College, she formed alliances with Puerto Rican, African-American and non-Spanish-speaking Caribbean minority students. At that point Vicioso began to look critically at blackness in Dominican insular discourse, and critique the racist connotations of popular language (263). Vicioso explains:

³⁶ My usage of the “@” symbol reflects non-gender specificity. While in Spanish, the masculine form of the adjective is used to modify nouns that refer collectively to male and female subjects, Jiménez Román and Flores consciously use the word Afro-Latin@ in their text.

In the United States, there is no space for fine distinctions of race, and one goes from being *trigueño* or *indio* to being “mulatto” or “black” or “Hispanic.” This was an excellent experience for me. From that point on, I discovered myself as a Caribbean *mulata* and adopted a black identity as a gesture of solidarity. At that time, I deeply admired and identified with Angela Davis, and ever since then I have kept on identifying myself as a Black woman. (263)

The process of exploring different facets of ethno-racial identity eventually led Vicioso to reflect on her womanhood. She describes how identifying as a black woman “opened another door; I learned about Frantz Fanon and other Caribbean theoreticians and that finished Europe for me. . . I only became a feminist much later” (263). Vicioso recalls in detail her coming-to-consciousness as a radical Afro-Latina black feminist:

When I first became more radical I was very much put off by feminism and people like Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan --to me they were representatives of the white middle class in the United States who were busy telling us how *we* were being screwed by machismo. In a first stage I rejected this and, up to a point, I also had a false sense of solidarity with our men, who were racially oppressed as well. I felt that if we women criticized our men we were only providing the racists with ammunition. This created a conflict of loyalties for me. (263)

Vicioso’s reflections recall critiques made by pioneering black feminists. Like hooks and Davis, her radical posture derives from feelings of disconnection and

exclusion from white, middle-class feminism, as well as Vicioso's discomfort with sexist role patterns of oppression and domination. Her ideological evolution as a feminist follows a concrete trajectory. Yet, for Vicioso, discovering herself "as a woman" came long after her black feminist identity formation. "First I had to discover that I was part of a certain geographical area, and then that I was Latin American" (264). She reiterates that living in New York City was crucial to the discovery of her Caribbean ethnic identity and her black racial identity. "The New York experience . . . has made me a very, very critical person with respect to my own society. Things I never noticed before, now I see. Like racism, for example. Class differences" (264). Vicioso reckons that she would not be the woman she is today had she not gone to New York (264).

I would have been the classic *fracasada* (failure) in my country because I know that I would not have found happiness in marriage and having children. I would have been frustrated, unhappy in a marriage, or divorced several times over because I would not have understood that within me was a woman who needed to express her truths, articulate her own words. That, in Santo Domingo, would have been impossible. (264)

Current transnational *afrofeminisma* discourses describe highly-complex experiences of multiple jeopardy that invite revisions to King's original theoretical model. For example, Ana M. Lara eloquently articulates her invisibility as a queer Afro-Latina in the testimonial essay "Uncovering Mirrors: Afro-Latina Subjects" (2010). Poignantly, Lara equates her multiple jeopardy as a black Latina lesbian with non-existence as a human being. She proposes a sort of primordial "birthing-of-self" as a

symbolic way for invisible subjects to come into being, and find solidarity through the mutual discovery of their own reflections:

As Afro-Latina lesbians we move through multiple spaces simultaneously, carrying ourselves and the weight of our histories. We come without mirrors, for in the eyes of a world in which we do not yet exist, we have not yet been born. As we walk, we must at every turn choose our own birthing, we must choose that first breath. To birth ourselves. Again. And again. And again. And to find joy in that birthing. To come together as water does on a smooth surface, and in doing so become mirrors for each other. (299-300)

Lara's conjectures complement post-modern, transnational discourses of *afrofeminismo*. In addition, her analysis brings to light additional factors that intensify the multiple jeopardies of Afro-Latina female marginalization, such as sexuality and class. Lara's discussion in "Uncovering Mirrors" is particularly relevant to my exploration of race, gender, class and sexual preference in Cuban hip-hop and U.S. Dominican diaspora cultural production. Although sexuality is not the focal point of my investigation, the theme factors prominently in the resistance discourse of Cuban hip-hop group Las Krudas, who identify as queer Afro-Latinas. Dominican-American author Loida Maritza Pérez indirectly broaches homosexuality as it relates to machismo in the novel *Geographies of Home* (1999), while her compatriot Jaqueline Jiménez Polanco dedicates a seminal compilation of poetry and prose to the testimonies of Dominican diaspora lesbians in *Divagaciones bajo la luna* (2006). All things considered, my comparative

observations suggest that self-naming as black, Latina and queer within U.S. and Hispanic Caribbean spaces ranks among the most radical acts of identification.

Lara's perspective as a transnational Dominican-American black feminist offers new, insightful modes of imagining self-identification(s). She suggests that the process of crossing borders changes the identity and body politic. Whereas claiming an Afro-Latina identity in the United States challenges the expectations around both *latinidad* (Latinness) and African diasporic identities, lesbianism undermines heterosexual assumptions about race and ethnicity (309). Moreover, Lara states that claiming Afro-Latina lesbianism also problematizes notions of the body and desire, citizenship and production (309). "Enter Afro-Latina lesbian subjects and bodies --bodies which lack citizenship, bodies which participate in citizenship, bodies which complicate citizenship by laying claim to more than one place, space, or set of terms" (309). In an effort to decipher the complex, coexistent, and sometimes contentious realms of black identity, Lara argues that we must turn to a different cosmology, born out of African diasporic experiences and worldviews (309). These cosmologies "cannot be read as essential truths but rather as fluctuating relationships between people and their larger social, political and economic contexts" (309). Furthermore, she argues that an expansion of *latinidad* into a Pan-Caribbean and Afro-Caribbean identity would help Afro-Latinas advance theorizations of lesbianism in conjunction with ethno-racial identification:

For it seems that although we are all struggling with the long-term impacts of colonialism and the ongoing impact of the United States imperialism on our bodies, as Caribbean bodies our West Indian, English-Speaking Caribbean sisters have generated

the beginnings of larger lesbian bodies of work that specifically consider lesbianism within the African diasporic context. (309)

The metaphorical usage of mirrors in Lara's essay reflects a universal motif throughout contemporary *afrofeminista* theory and cultural production. Generally, women theorize *afrofeminismo* as a means of calling themselves into existence, both rhetorically and visually. With respect to past and present representations of Latinegras, Cruz-Janzen states: "Painters, poets, singers, and writers have exalted their beauty, loyalty, and strength, but centuries of open assaults and rapes have also turned them into concubines, prostitutes, and undesirable mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives" (282). As Afro-Latinas navigate untried paths toward self-naming, they seek veridical reflections of themselves in others. Glimpses of the familiar reinforce a sense of solidarity and collectivity among dispersed women of the African diaspora. Yet in order to reclaim agency in how they are viewed by the larger society, historically oppressed subjects must uncover mirrors of the past. Some of these mirrors remain buried, many are shattered, and others never existed at all. *Afrofeminismo* assumes responsibility for recovering and repairing mirrors, so that Afro-descendent women can begin to (re)envision³⁷ accurate black female representations in the transnational cultural imaginary.

Along these lines, Cuban scholars and artists such as Inés Martiatu and Las Krudas posit their conceptualizations of black feminist theory and hip-hop feminism as responses to historic objectification, exclusion from national discourse, and mainstream feminism's irrelevance to their lived realities. Hip-hop feminism adds another layer to

³⁷ I use parenthesis here to capture the idea that while many imposed representations of Afro-descendent women are in need of revision, other have yet to be imagined by black women themselves.

emergent discourses of *afrofeminismo* as women struggle to assert their agency within a male-dominated, Afro-originated genre of music and expression that faces mainstream cultural marginalization. Ruth Hamilton's panoramic paradigms establish unequivocal points of contact among the diverse ideas of transnational black feminists. Hamilton states that settlement, demographic and migration patterns, as well as the labor and production of global Africa into the world economy, have been, and continue to be, directly impacted by the economic dominance of Europe, North America and the "white" Euro-elite bridgeheads of Latin America (21). "It is within the context of a global system in which Euro-American power is hegemonic that African diaspora connections are symbolically and materially shaped and transformed" (21). Situated in this global system, Cuban hip hop and Dominican-American identity performance represent ardent cultural contact zones. Within these dynamic spaces, African diaspora connections are symbolically and materially shaped and transformed through sonic and visual vocabularies of resistance.

2.6 Afrofeminista Voices:

Counter-Discourses in Contemporary Caribbean and Brazilian Literature

As a preface to my analysis of *afrofeminismo* in Cuban hop-hop and Dominican-American narrative performance, in this section, I consider contemporary *afrofeminista* literature that critically de-constructs historic inscriptions of the black female body. Looking back to founding controlling images of black women, I agree with Vera Kutzinski that ironically, there is no place for the *mulata* in the cultures and societies that

consistently represent themselves through her (7). I would add to Kutzinski's idea by suggesting that the literature and cultural products of my study evidence a conspicuous underdevelopment and/or absence of the *negra*: a discursive exclusion that reinforces and perpetuates the social invisibility of African women and their descendents in former slave societies. Racialized archetypes evolve in response to socio-political transformations. Thus, as long as hegemonic patriarchal ideologies dominate cultural representations of black women, *negras* will remain case aside as unworthy subjects, and images of the sensual *mulata* will continue to be refracted through an objectifying masculine gaze.

Take, for example, the song "Mi chocolate" (1999) by the popular Cuban salsa group Los Van Van.³⁸ Playfully, the lead vocalist wonders where his voluptuous *mulata* girlfriend, who he affectionately refers to as "his chocolate" (read: the recurrent association between brown bodies and edible commodities), has disappeared to. As the simple, driving melody of the repetitive salsa piano hook evolves to include a full, sonorously decadent orchestra of percussion instruments and horns, the singer-narrator illustrates how the wily *jinetera* has capitalized on her *mulata* guile and succeeded in seducing an Italian tourist into marrying her. A familiar classic of Cuban popular music, "Mi chocolate," underscores the relationship between the symbolic value system tied to the *mulata*, as described Kutzinski, and the tangible effects these discourses have contemporary discourses of race, gender, and representation. Whether envisioned as the lascivious, predatory mistress of the nineteenth century or the brazen, cunning twenty first-century *jinetera* escort of the European tourist, the *mulata* has forever been imagined

³⁸ Led by musical director Juan Formell, Los Van Van is widely recognized for their pioneering role in popularizing *timba*, a homegrown Cuban musical genre described by Ned Sublette as a rumba-derived "unruly musical wave that exploded in Havana in the late 1980s" (272).

as a social threat. Yet paradoxically, popular culture continues to exalt her as an emblematic icon of female beauty, *mestizaje* and Cuban national identity. All things considered, the transposition of this national imaginary to real life circumstances and day-to-day cultural interactions produces fragmentation in the female subject.

The past four decades have yielded surprising contestations to representations of the colonial imaginary as transnational black feminist voices weave a tapestry of counter-discourses. Through deconstructions of race/color symbolism, women of African descent in the Americas contest negative legacies of representation and introduce alternative perspectives of black womanhood. Numerous artists of the tapestry communicate through the medium of literature. To produce and publish these types of counter-discourses from the social margins is a tremendous accomplishment as New World cultures are hesitant to value or legitimize black female literary traditions. In the face of ridicule and skepticism, black women must demonstrate their competence as writers and relentlessly prove the significance of their work.

Miriam Alves describes the cannon of Brazilian literature as rich in Afro-Brazilian female characters yet severely deficient in black female voices, having included only a handful of black women writers sprinkled over the centuries (*Enfim . . . nós* 3). Carolina María de Jesús is one of Brazil's earliest black writers to receive recognition on the national level following the publication of her memoir *Diário de Bitita* (1960). The diary chronicles the discrimination and destitute living conditions de Jesús endures as a single mother struggling to raise her children in the Brazilian *favela* (shantytown/slum). Contemporary Afro-Brazilian feminist writers including Conceição Evaristo, Esmeralda Ribeiro, Geni Guimarães and Ruth Souza also draw on their life experience to delineate

the multiple jeopardy of black female subjectivity. The subtext of their stories problematizes Brazil's national myth of "racial democracy" as the women's personal narratives reveal the unquantifiable impact of compound forms of oppression on the black female body and psyche. Alves' pioneering bilingual anthologies of Afro-Brazilian women's poetry and short stories *Enfim. . . nós / Finally. . . Us: Contemporary Black Brazilian Women Writers* (1994) and *Women Righting: Afro-Brazilian Women's Short Fiction/Mulheres escre-vendo* (2005) compile the work of many of these up and coming writers. As a genre, black feminist writing in Brazil is marginalized, ignored and has yet to be officially documented as a literary tradition (4). Therefore, the literary efforts of this contemporary cohort represent invaluable contributions, not only to Brazilian letters, but also to the growing transnational black feminist/*afrofeminista* literary tradition.

In *Women Righting*, Alves states that to claim one's blackness is mostly a political act:

Black Literature --before anything else--valorizes the actions of the anonymous Brazilian, removing the mask of invisibility from her existence. Only one who occupies this position can speak about it because she knows its faces, colors, laughs, and cries. It's a question of claiming that space. This becomes a challenge, a new-old incorporated through literature by a citizen-woman-writer who claims her right to be through writing. Her unveiling. (11)

Just as patriarchal ideologies inscribe black and brown female bodies in manifold ways through the ages, Alves stresses the importance of black women claiming a space to

inscribe themselves: “Through a black woman’s world view, a double shift is required because it is not enough to write --to inscribe herself becomes necessary. In line with this idea, she introduces *Enfim...nós* as a book that “...rebels with its poetic action, reclaiming the ownership of the body, going on to being the subject of desire and pleasure, de-objectifying itself” (25). Alves affirms: “Black women’s writing with this attitude rejects the common notion of the black woman’s passivity, of the so-called “mulata” who always is pictured as the object of pleasure in constant prostitution and without any other perspectives” (25). *Enfim . . . nós* thus represents a seminal anthology that “exalts its own aesthetic, in a revision of the patterns of established beauty” (25).

Furthermore, Alves sustains that “Through a black feminist literary tradition we arrive at the realization that the category “citizen” is still denied, and “black woman citizen,” unfortunately always ignored” (*Women Righting* 11). Virginia Woolf famously argued that women deserve to have “a room of one’s own” (1929) to write, create and express themselves into existence. In similar fashion, Alves advocates for black women to claim their own specificity by establishing a black feminist literary tradition in spite the obstacles and life challenges that complicate this process: “To publish as an Afro-Brazilian means to leave anonymity and to value oneself. Someone’s skin color does not characterize a literature, but to ignore the color of the writer’s skin has been a constant in Brazilian Literature (and criticism) throughout all these years” (9). “. . . Others treat this literature as subordinate to a more formalized literature, characterizing it merely as an emergent reaction by Afro-Brazilian intellectuals. This way, an Afro-Brazilian aesthetic becomes only a challenge to the systematic racism and discrimination in Brazilian society” (11).

Alves claims that a black feminist aesthetic only becomes possible through the black female poetic agent (13): “Any other attempt is a false alarm. This being who finds her poetic reason in her blackness, opposes invisibility and anonymity. She wants to be heard and received in full. . . ” (13). Along this vein of thought, she also warns: “No literary analysis based on fragmentation can be allowed since it is this splitting up that partially or completely prevents the message from coming through” (13). On a personal level, Alves reveals that the completion of *Women Righting* is the fulfillment of a dream, and most certainly a labor of love she cherishes and nurtures (9):

Despite talent and skill, writing is hard work in our lives, only a series of tasks required of us, to find the time and place among all the roles we perform to make writing possible --and having our work published against that context becomes almost an impossible act. (9)

For Alves, this labor of love is well worth the battle because the collections she has published mean that “another small window has opened against the wall of invisibility that has kept Afro-Brazilian women writers away from our literary desires and aspirations” (9). Once this window opens: “. . . the light that comes through expands into many places, towards a horizon at the heart of the Universe --since the heart of the universe does not stop beating” (9). In the same anthology, Maria Helena Lima argues that the debut of the pioneering Afro-Brazilian journals *Cadernos negros* in 1978 have since contributed to the establishment of black identity and consciousness which are integral to the Brazilian reality (18-19).

In this way, many Afro-Brazilian writers have assumed responsibility for reclaiming “. . . the voices of the people excluded from the literature produced by the Brazilian elite” (19). Black literature in Brazil, she explains: “has managed to grow and cultivate its readership through individual funding efforts, alternative presses, and groups such as Quilombhoje in São Paulo” (19).

In *La mujer negra en la literatura puertorriqueña* (1999), Marie Ramos Rosado considers the role of black women in the Puerto Rican literary canon from a panoramic perspective. Ramos Rosado laments that black women most frequently appear in the capacity of oppressed and exploited slaves, servants, mistresses, and prostitutes (349). However, the short-story genre of the 1970s marks an ideological rupture with this characterization. Puerto Rican writers such as Ana Lydia Vega and Rosario Ferré critique dominant bourgeois attitudes through thematic intersection of feminism and Negritude.

In *Virgenes y Mártires* (1981), Vega satirizes sexism, racism, classism, and the colonial mentality in stories like “Despedida de duelo” and “Pollito Chicken.” Her narrative “Puerto Príncipe abajo” follows a black Puerto Rican woman on a group trip to the Republic of Haiti, where she and other dark-skinned Caribbean women contend with their positionality as colonized subjects that project their own superiority complexes on the physical *blackness* of Haitians and the country’s miserable economic condition. Among all of the women of her cohort, the Puerto Rican protagonist is most conscientious of the contradictions she embodies (Rosado 321). Like many of Vega’s short stories, “Puerto Príncipe abajo” also underscores blackness, African cultural heritage and the shared historical experience of slavery as the common link between geographically dispersed populations of the Caribbean archipelago.

Nancy Morejón's impressive corpus of poetry, prose and literary criticism redefines traditional conceptions of the black female experience in Cuba and the African Diaspora. As I will further elaborate in chapter three, Morejón's poem "Mujer negra" symbolically traces the black woman's exploitative Middle Passage voyage through the present day. Despite the pain she endures at different geographic and temporal stages of her transatlantic journey, the poem ends with the speaker-poet (re)claiming her personal autonomy as well as her belonging as a legitimate member of Cuban society. The first verses of Morejón's compelling poem "Amo a mi amo" articulate the internalized oppression of the black female colonized subject, poignantly illustrated through the speaker-poet's unconditional love and blind devotion to her abusive slave master. However, once the speaker-poet reaches a level of consciousness that permits her to view her own mistreatment with eyes wide open, she retaliates, mutilating her master mercilessly to the pulse of African drums. The slave woman's rebellion thus signifies an act of black female redemption through which Morejón's speaker-poet regains control over her commodified body and at the same time, recuperates her intellectual independence.

The contemporary poetry and prose of Conceição Evaristo help establish black feminist literary as diasporic through transcendental themes that capture aspects of a shared past, and the present circumstances that inflect collective experiences of black womanhood. Evaristo's debut novel *Ponciá Vicencio* (2007) exemplifies the thrust of her work. In attempting to piece together fragmented memories of the past and mend a family history blemished by slavery, protagonist Ponciá discovers how different mechanisms of social control and economic exploitation subjugate her community in an

endless cycle of poverty and oppression that simply perpetuate the power dynamics of plantation slavery.

Over the course of her narrative journey, Ponciá gains insight into the multiple jeopardies she and her people continue to suffer. Gradually, the ingrained psychology of black invisibility and self-loathing dissipates as the young girl develops a profound sense of self pride and reverence for her African cultural heritage. Elements of African spirituality such as the hybrid Afro-Brazilian religious traditions of Candomblé infuse Ponciá's story organically. Among many other unique qualities of this novel, one particularly notable feature of Evaristo's writing style is how her literary language highlights the importance of the oral nature and kinesthetic traditions of African diaspora cultural expression (song, drums, and dance), and captures this traditional orality through the written word. Evaristo explains:

I grew up listening to my family telling stories about slavery. All of this oral communication that I received had to spill out in some way and it began coming out in what I wrote. My writing has a lot to do with my position in Brazilian society, with my position as a woman, as a black person and as a poor person. My writing depends strongly upon me as an individual to a great extent, but it also depends a lot on my history and upon the history of my community. (*Ponciá Vicencio* inside cover)

Numerous contemporary writers hailing from the Caribbean diaspora communities of the United States echo similar sentiments about the personal and collective forces that compel their writing. I find the following conjecture by Maria

Helena Lima useful in my approach to analyzing the transnational texts I have selected for this investigation. Lima suggests that while it would be inaccurate to speak of all the stories collected here [in the anthology *Women Righting*] as “race stories,” it does seem that each reveals aspects of contemporary society, in all of its postcolonial complexity, which cannot be found anywhere else. Many of the stories selected for my analysis have a peculiar, unexpected twist at the end, a surprise or contradiction which opens up not only a space for various readings, but the intertextual bridging of the Afro-Brazilian/Afro-Caribbean/U.S. Caribbean diaspora reality with that of the African diaspora (*Women Righting* 20). In particular, I argue that revisionist literature produced within culturally integrated U.S. urban enclaves such as New York City, for example, offer complex, heightened conceptualizations of blackness and *afrofeminismo*, and nuanced notions of African diaspora identity and belonging. Ruth Hamilton reminds us:

As a place, Africa in the diaspora is part of a collective memory, a reference for tradition and heritage. It’s symbolic and material significance lies within changing relations and ideas of homeland and diaspora-- a dialectical relationship between and within Africa and its diaspora, defined by an ongoing proliferation of passages and marked by the impermanence of place and home. (19)

The U.S. Caribbean diaspora texts of my analysis cast Africa in the diaspora as symbolic of a collective memory marked by ongoing passages. Most notably, the Nuyorican novel *Daughters of the Stone* (2009) by Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa beautifully expresses Hamilton’s conceptualization of diaspora as a concept that “. . . epitomizes the dialectical relationship between old, new, and emerging “roots,” and is therefore an

essential element in understanding the emergence and development of the diaspora as a social formation” (Hamilton 21). *Daughters of the Stone* intercalates stories of four generations of protagonists who navigate black female subjectivity within specific historical contexts as each woman struggles to make sense of the spiritual-cultural-ancestral legacies left by her mother and grandmothers. The storyline, which begins in the mid 1800s and closes at the start of the new millennium, leaps temporally and geographically from Africa to Puerto Rico, to New York City, and back to the island. Conceptually, this text draws together the main threads of my research as Llanos-Figueroa demonstrates the importance of examining black female subjectivity within the context of historic structures of oppression. What makes this novel particularly compelling is the voicing of complex facets of black female subjectivity through narrative performances that oscillate between the personal, the political, and the collective Afro-diasporic experience.

Ultimately, the intertextual readings I carry out in this investigation respond to Toni Morrison’s claim that historically, black women were rarely invited to participate in discourse when they themselves were the topic (“The Site of Memory” 1995). Adding to Morrison’s claim, Barbara Christian reasons: “If black women don’t say who they are, other people will say it badly for them. If other black women don’t answer back, who will? When we speak and answer back we validate our experiences. We say we *are* important, if only to ourselves” (xii).

My study will provide a closer look at how Afro-Latina writers, artists, and black women from different walks of life are validating their experiences by “speaking and answering back.” Expressly, I will explore a variety of strategies marginalized subjects

utilize to “answer back” to dominant discourses of race and gender representation. I posit these diverse strategies as acts of resistance, for collectively, they demonstrate that the creative processes of “speaking and answering back” give birth to novel inscriptions of the black body in tandem with critical theorizations *afrofeminismo*.

CHAPTER THREE

Rapping Race and Resistance:

A Breakdown of the Cuban Underground Hip-Hop Movement

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will review the development of hip-hop in the United States as it relates to the cultural and political significance of the movement in Cuba. Next, I will conduct an in-depth examination of the racial and sexual politics that inflect the hip-hop movements in both countries. This discussion serves as a point of departure for considering how dynamics of race, gender and representation play out in the contemporary Cuban context. Through a review of primarily secondary sources, my goal for chapter three is to discuss the dynamics of gender/class, and underscore the voicing of black subjectivity in Cuban hip-hop. This review will contextualize the analytical exercise of primary *afrofeminista* texts that will be presented in chapter four.

In revolutionary Cuba, hip-hop music functions as a mirror reflecting the highly-charged pulse of a society in transition. Despite longstanding political disaccord between the United States and Cuba, inherent linkages exist between the socio-economic contexts in which rap developed as well as the collective frustrations experienced by many of its participants in both countries. Still considered peripheral to mainstream Cuban culture, hip-hop overtly articulates ongoing discontent with racism, social inequalities and

historically-based patriarchal systems of domination. Yet the irony of hip-hop's critical messages is not lost on black female Cuban hip-hop artists who pursue their own revolutionary politics (Fernandes 2003) in the struggle to combat gendered marginalization within this expressive art form that fiercely denounces dominant power structures and legacies of oppression.

3.2 Old School Hip-Hop: From New York to the Caribbean

Hip-hop began in New York City's South Bronx neighborhood in the 1970s as an African American musical and cultural movement, with significant participation early on from the Jamaican and Puerto Rican communities of the borough. Although the terms "hip-hop" and "rap" are often used interchangeably in popular speech, founding artists and musicians of the movement are quick to point out that hip-hop encompasses diverse expressions of visual and performing arts associated with the broader hip-hop culture. Rap, on the other hand, refers specifically to the unique style of music which evolved within this context. Hip-hop culture is comprised of four principal artistic elements which include emceeing, deejaying, graffiti art and break dancing. Vocal percussion, also known as beat boxing, is often included as a fifth element. Throughout its evolution in the 1970s and early 1980s, hip-hop culture came to embody a novel and dynamic blend of creative expressions that would shift popular culture in the United States as it expanded to include marginal urban voices.

The movement flourished in casual neighborhood gatherings and block parties, where young emcees and deejays collaborated to develop the distinct musical style

known as rap. On street corners lined with makeshift cardboard dance floors, b-boys and b-girls³⁹ honed exhilarating break dancing moves in synchronicity with beats and rhymes resounding from portable boomboxes. Meanwhile, artists armed with cans of spray paint created a new and controversial urban aesthetic of stylized graffiti art by tagging subway walls and inner-city buildings with written messages, murals and symbolic images.

Rap music is the most widely recognized component of hip-hop culture. At its inception, rap was initially characterized by rhythmic spoken vocals of a rapper, or emcee, set against a loop of steady background beats produced by the deejay. Rap lyrics were commonly complemented by catchy-sounding refrains, or hooks. In many cases, vocal and instrumental hooks were sampled in the chorus of the raps. The lyrics and melodies of numerous tracks were sampled from older, well-known jazz, gospel, and blues songs, and looped in the chorus. Early rap was produced using equipment such as turntables, microphones, drum machines, samplers and synthesizers, as well as more traditional instruments like pianos and guitars. Rappers either formulated freestyle rhyming techniques, or laid tracks with prepared poetry or verse. Some of the most celebrated pioneering North American rap artists include DJ Afrika Bambaataa, DJ Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash, Grandmaster Caz, Kurtis Blow, Run DMC, Big Daddy Kane and LL Cool J, among others. As rap developed in the African-American community, it drew heavily from older African and African-American musical influences, such as the West African griot storytelling tradition, and call and response patterns. Rap also

³⁹ “B-boys” and “B-girls” are labels used in hip-hop culture to refer to male and female breakdancers.

incorporated elements of signifying/playing the dozens,⁴⁰ spoken word and performance poetry. The North American musical influences of jazz, blues, funk, and soul music, among other genres have all impacted rap in distinct ways.

While universally recognized as an African-American musical expression, American hip-hop has strong Afro-Caribbean underpinnings given the ethnically diverse Caribbean ancestry of rap innovators like Afrika Bambaataa and DJ Kool Herc in the 1970s, and 1990s acts such as deejay Charlie Chase, Mellow Man Ace, N.O.R.E and The Notorious B.I.G. Juan Flores' book *From Bomba to Hip-Hop* (2000) details the fundamental role Puerto Ricans played in the development of hip-hop since its inception. Flores states that before the genre gained mainstream popularity, deejays such as Charlie Chase of the Cold Crush Brothers were manipulating the rhythmic texture of the songs by sneaking in beats and baselines from popular salsa numbers like "Tú coqueta" (123). However, "The ten-year delay in the acceptance of Spanish rhymes was due in no small part to the marketing of rap, through the eighties, as a strictly African-American musical style with a characteristically Afro-centric message" (128). Moreover, early rap reflects other Afro-Caribbean influences, including the distortion of musical tracks in dub reggae of the 1960s and 1970s and Jamaican-style toasting⁴¹ of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Scholars including Paul Gilroy (1993), Flores (2000) and Alan West-Durán (2004)

⁴⁰ "Signifyin(g)," or "playing the dozens" is a verbal sparring game in which contenders showcase their linguistic skills through a ritual exchange of insults. For a detailed explanation of this African-American cultural tradition, see Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey: a Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1989).

⁴¹ "Toasting" is considered a precursor to the vocal styling of rap. It developed at blues dances in Jamaica's ghettos and consists of rhythmically talking and rhyming in a monotone voice over musical tracks about themes ranging from gossip and social commentary, to culture and politics. For further information on toasting and Caribbean music, see Dick Hebdige's book *Cut 'n' Mix: Culture, Identity and Caribbean Music* (1987).

underscore parallels between rap and various forms of Caribbean black music and view the holistic confluence of these genres as a “diaspora dialogue” (Fernandes 91). Cuban hip-hop represents a contemporary thread of this transnational conversation.

Since establishment, hip-hop music provides a creative outlet for African-Americans and underprivileged racial and ethnic minorities to express the social, political and economic disenfranchisement they experience within North American society. Underground from the outset, the genre was a marginalized musical expression that remained peripheral to mainstream American popular culture until the sound of rap diversified in the early 1980s, and more artists began to record albums. By the early 1990s the popularity of hip-hop music and culture in the United States had risen concomitantly with its marketability and mainstream acceptance.

The lyrics and messages of North American rap constantly incite controversy, debate and censorship. Thematic content ranges from politics and Afro-centricity in the 1970s and 1980s to nihilism, police brutality, sexism and misogyny propagated through the subset of gangsta rap in the 1990s. In the late 1990s and into the twenty-first century, mainstream North American hip-hop was highly criticized for its glorification of violence, materialism and rampant sexual promiscuity. Moreover, rap narratives (projected through male voicings) frequently render chauvinist depictions of women. Andreana Clay states, “Scholars agree that hip-hop culture is predominantly male and decidedly masculine. In its current form, this genre is characterized by highly sexualized images; ‘video hos’ and sexually available women, pimps and playas, and economic capital in the form of an abundance of material goods” (153). Although contextually far removed from Cuban popular culture, and technologically isolated from Cuban media

representations, U.S hip-hop reproduces similar discourses of gender, color and power. These connections stem from transatlantic slavery and European colonial hegemony, and they intertwine both societies within a larger historical narrative of blackness.

3.3 Twenty-first Century Venus Hottentots:

Sexism, Color and Commodification in African-American Rap

Mainstream U.S. media are saturated with sensual images of women and materialistic value systems. According to Clay, images of sexualized females and riches comprise a hip-hop fantasy land that provides refuge for a generation of disenfranchised black men. “Essentially, this is a mythical world where men rule since Black men, who are often the protagonists in hip-hop music and videos, do not have the same economic, social or cultural capital outside of popular culture. . . ” (153). Highly suggestive rap lyrics and images portray women (particularly women of color) as nothing more than sex objects that adorn the lavish, excessive hip hop fantasy lands rappers claim to inhabit. Along with the mansions, yachts and expensive cars, scantily-clad models accessorize rap videos as symbolic displays of male sexual prowess, monetary wealth and material excess. Rap videos often flaunt models in pairs or multiples to accentuate the abundant sexual possibilities available to the male protagonist(s). Meanwhile, this sexual abundance also implies anonymity among the surplus of ladies who populate rap’s fabricated fantasylands. Sexism in mainstream rap manifests in the advertising of female bodies as possessions to be used, disposed of, and easily replaced. It provides the subtext

to pop culture marketing strategies that nourish gluttonous consumption patterns with perceptions of female expendability.

Established lyrically, reinforced visually and concretized through strong media presence, these renderings invite audiences to partake in the objectification of Afro-descendent women. Sexualized images of women position audiences as consumers of one-dimensional interpretations of female sensuality, beauty and worth. Moreover, chauvinistic rap discourse entices fans to gaze on female bodies through the co-opted lens of male artists, thus perpetuating female objectification in the hip-hop imaginary.

Notwithstanding the growing diversification of rap's female voices in recent years, the most visible role of women in hip-hop culture remains that of the silent, scantily-clad models popularly referred to as "video vixens." Looking back to the nineteenth century fetishization of Saarljite Baartman,⁴² Muhammad likens these female rappers and rap music video girls as twenty-first century "Venus Hottentots." She suggests that hip-hop's representation of young black female identities in this first decade of the twenty-first century lack diversity because Venus Hottentots currently eclipse other black female identities (134). Images of modern video vixens consist of fragmented close-up shots of gyrating body parts and suggestive facial expressions. The temptation to overindulge in such images evokes the strategic sensual objectification of *negra* and *mulata* women in early twentieth century *negrista* poetry of the Spanish Caribbean.

⁴² Saarljite Baartman is the given name of the historic black female slave known as the "Venus Hottentot." Baartman was a Khoikhoi woman from South Africa who became the slave of a Dutch farmer. In the early 1800s she was exhibited in London for her buttocks and genitalia, which were perceived as unusual by European spectators.

Kaila Adia Story summarizes this tendency in “Performing Venus ~ From Hottentot to Video Vixen” (2007). “Simultaneously an animal and woman with an unbridled and sly sexual prowess, the Video Vixen fits perfectly within the historical legacy of Black female bodily commodification (240). Furthermore, with respect to the selection of video vixens, popular aesthetic preferences favor women that might be labeled as “light-skinned”⁴³ blacks in the African-American color continuum.

Archetypal rap music video vixens tend to be curvaceous mixed-race models of visible African descent. These models are selected on the basis of physical features considered to be striking or unusual for black women, such as almond-shaped eyes, exceptionally long tresses, blonde hair, or blue, green or hazel eye color. Such physical features (natural or contrived) offset against flawless tan complexions, ranging from light-honey to deep-golden-brown mark these women as “exotic.” The “exotic” label describes unique looks that complicate racial classification by U.S. standards. It also implies a deviation from the norm, and by extension, outsider cultural status.

With respect to the historical trajectory of race, gender and representation, I argue that the mixed-race, twenty-first century Venus Hottentot video vixen harkens back to the historically-based value system that nourishes the idealization/objectification of the *mulata* in Hispanic Caribbean discourse. Like nineteenth-century abolitionist literature as well as Hispanic Caribbean colonial and post-colonial cultural products, the glorification of the mixed-race woman for her light(er) skin and unascertainable, not-quite-black looks

⁴³ The term “light-skinned” is used frequently among African-Americans to describe people of visible African descent with light to medium brown complexions. People referred to as light-skinned in the U.S. might be classified as *trigueño*, *canela*, *café con leche*, *jabá* or *mulato* on the Spanish Caribbean race/color continuum. Well known African-American celebrities and public figures that might be classified as light-skinned include actresses Halle Berry, Thandie Newton, Maya Rudolph and Jazmine Guy, musicians Beyoncé, Alicia Keys, Mariah Carey, Rihanna and Drake, and politicians Barak Obama and Colin Powell.

nourishes the gendered notion of *mulata* aesthetic superiority in contrast to the disparagement of black women.⁴⁴ The persistent idealization of the *mulata* video vixen in mass media not only reinforces *blanqueamiento* on a subconscious level among the African-American population, but it also severely limits the ways in which black women are deemed “attractive” and subsequently accepted as “beautiful” by entertainment media and popular culture.

Off-screen, the mixed-race aesthetic ideal advertised by scantily-clad video vixens on display translates into social regard for these subjects as veritable commodities. That is, overstated visibility in rap music videos, viewed by a broad cross-spectrum of audiences, begets the commodification and consumption of the exotic *mulata* image. Valued as a trophy and a status symbol for black men, the *mulata* is sought after for purchase, so-to-speak. Her value is appraised aesthetically; determined by the coveted lightness of her brown skin and the exotic appearance of her facial features. Ultimately, she is sold in the currency of social standing.⁴⁵ Muhammed broaches this convoluted topic. She notes that upon closer consideration of hip-hop and the logic and practice of the U.S. media industry, twenty-first century Venus Hottentots represent hip-hop culture’s adaptation of marketplace logic, wherein booty is literally capital (134). “Record labels and male recording artists, like the nineteenth-century European colonizing explorers, are mining black female bodies in the name of scientifically studied profit. . .” (134). Muhammad looks to the past to contextualize present black female commodification beyond the parameters of African-American hip-hop. Her analysis of

⁴⁴ In mentioning “black women” here, I am specifically referencing dark-skinned black women who are not visibly of mixed-race.

⁴⁵ As understood by the African American community. See Muhammed (2007).

the problematic trajectory of black female representation in the post-colonial cultural imaginary parallels discourses of Cuban hip-hop *afrofeminismo*. Like Cuba's feminist rappers, Muhammad claims that temporal and geographic factors informed by racism and sexism lay the foundations for representations of black women in contemporary mass media marketing practices (135). For instance:

Acknowledging the historical weight of the Venus Hottentot image is not an unwarranted imposition of some original image's aura onto all expressions of Black female sexuality. Indeed, its historical weight has persisted for centuries (as the cast of her body is still on display) and still festers underneath social policy controlling Black women's sexual health and mainstream cultural discourses about Black women. (135)

Along these lines, she warns that mass communicated pleasure requires experiential knowledge (memory): "and should be handled/enjoyed with eyes on the look out for interlopers from 'the system' at all times" (135). Muhammad suggests that feminists' sights need to remain focused on retooling and reinventing repressive modern body cultures. She ends the discussion with a hopeful projection, announcing that hip-hop culture and young black women are ready for revolutionary identities. Ideally, these identities will address women's issues, learn from the failings of previous generations, sample from other identities, and develop in innovative ways (135-36). "From the nakedly violated identity of Saarijite Baartman . . . and others, hip-hop feminists (as artists/performers and audience) must create something fitting and beautifully inspiring to prepare our daughters for balanced identities and fulfilling lives" (136). Transnational cross-fertilizations of black feminism, *afrofeminismo*, and hip-hop feminism are

particularly crucial to this process. These realms of discourse produce countless re-readings and reinventions the black female body.

3.4 The Black Feminists of Old School Hip-Hop

Only a handful of pioneering American female rappers such as Salt-N-Pepa, Queen Pen, Rah Digga and Queen Latifah (*Queens of Hip-Hop* 2003) broke through the male-dominated industry and rapped against the grain by adopting overt black feminist stances in their lyrics. While they have undoubtedly contributed to the genre's evolution, other commercially successful female artists including Lil' Kim, Charlie Baltimore and Foxy Brown assumed masculine postures in their discourse, garnering attention through self-exploitative thematics and crude rap styles. Their respective inner-city upbringings in New York's toughest ghettos as well as their intimate friendships and musical collaborations with hip-hop's major players such as Notorious B.I.G. and Ja Rule strengthened the street credibility of these female rappers. With inside knowledge of underground drug-trafficking and cocaine sales, the women found acceptance and inclusion among exclusive circles of male rappers who provided career guidance and mentorship that played on the raw, unrefined qualities that made these artists so controversial.

Lil' Kim, for example, gained infamy as a rough-edged rap diva that scandalized audiences with her notoriously vulgar lyrics, rampant with explicit details of sexual performances and unabashed references to her genitalia. Regarding the agency of Lil' Kim and other female participants who "willingly" acted as commodities and

participated in hip-hop sexism, Muhammad suggests that marketplace logic offers women the illusion of choice: alienation of themselves on an in-kind basis and or alienation of their bodies and sexuality for pay. Whereas hip-hop's early self-expressions of black female sexuality focused on claiming pleasure and agency, once pleasure becomes marketed, it is appropriated and stripped of point of origin, context, depth and intentions (134-35). Likewise, she stresses that: "If Black women, through silence or participation, co-sign Black male valuation of pimp and/or player fantasies, then Black female identities take on hoe status with only delusional agency" (135).

Organized protests in the late 1980s and early 1990s against the objectification of black women in rap lyrics and music videos were led by older generations of black women and generally dismissed by the female peer group of rap music listeners (133). At this time, high profile female rappers like Salt-N-Pepa and Queen Latifah succeeded in countering those degrading depictions in their music and performance styles while communicating the young, black, female experience as complex and varied (133). "Female rap acts seemed to have hit the high water mark of exposure and success in the mid-to late 1990s with Lauryn Hill, Missy Elliot and Eve balancing out Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown and other lesser-known, look-at-my-booty-while-I-talk-nasty female rappers" (133). The genre's earliest feminists transformed hip-hop in understated ways, introducing positive models of black womanhood and agency through non-conformist performance styles and critical messages as their fan bases and popularity increased exponentially. Notwithstanding, hip-hop remains one of America's most active breeding grounds for degenerate sexist discourse and internalized race-color prejudice among communities of color.

3.5 Hip-Hop without Borders

By the end of the millennium, hip-hop had attracted a worldwide audience with the advent of the internet in the 1990s and the ever-increasing rapid dissemination of communications media. Despite the problematic portrayals and thematic controversy the genre incites, a diverse global fan base finds inspiration in the struggles and triumphs of marginalized communities through rap. As a space for the articulation of social experience (Flores 117), rap facilitates transnational exchanges among blacks and other disadvantaged populations around the world. Sujatha Fernandes claims that: “in countries such as Cuba, Brazil, Colombia, and Venezuela, as well as in several African countries, such as Senegal, South Africa, and Mali, black communities draw on African-American rap music to address local issues of race and marginality, however differently those relationships may be constituted” (2007, 92). Notwithstanding, hip-hop scholars advise that transnational flows promoted by black nationalist African-American artists must be seen independently from global hip-hop movements in which African-American hip-hop culture is predominantly appropriated by non-blacks (92). Despite the unique political context from which it emerged, Cuban hip-hop reflects hip-hop feminist Gwendolyn Pough’s assertion that in the twenty-first century hip-hop music is being explored “as a worldview, as an epistemology grounded in the experiences of communities of color under advanced capitalism, as a cultural site for rearticulating identity and sexual politics” (vii).

In *Cuba Represent!* (2006), Fernandes identifies Cuban rap and visual arts as cultural movements that have developed publics outside of official cultural life. Cornel West describes these cultural movements as the “new cultural politics of difference.” They thrive “. . . in the streets and barrios rather than in official theaters, movie houses, and galleries. What is distinctive about these new cultural movements is their language of diversity and particularity” (85). The cultural, linguistic and physical marginality of Cuban underground hip-hop epitomizes the new cultural politics of difference. Moreover, radical expressions of blackness, womanhood and resistance within this peripheral socio-cultural space provide paradigmatic examples of contemporary *afrofeminismo*. Broader discussions of race, gender and marginality converge in the CUHHM through intense, revolutionary modes of expression. Meanwhile, the intersection of these themes in relation to Cuba also creates an ideal aperture for introducing the more nuanced, and convoluted discourses of ethno-racial identity I will go on to explore in *afrofeminista* cultural production of the Dominican diaspora in chapters four and five.

3.6 Cuban Hip-Hop Memoirs

Although academic research informs my analysis of race, gender and resistance in the Cuban hip-hop movement, my interest in this subject matter was sparked over a decade ago by close friends and casual acquaintances in the animated streets, stoops, and homes of Havana. Thus my scholarship on this topic is admittedly subjective, for the conjectures and arguments I present are inextricable from my lived experiences, social interactions and informal observations. In 2002, Havana was abuzz with hip-hop culture.

That particular summer, when I wasn't sitting in overheated classrooms at the University of Havana, adjusting myself against splintered chairs or vigorously fanning rivulets of sweat from my forehead as I took class notes, you could find me *vacilando* (Cuban slang for "hanging out") with my friends in popular gathering spots around the city. My introduction to Cuban hip-hop was entirely accidental. I spent every day of that sweltering summer with Armando,⁴⁶ a long-time friend whom I considered as a brother, and our cohort of companions in their late teens and early twenties. Nearly everyone in that social circle was either an aspiring rapper or obsessed with rap music and hip-hop culture. Through our constant interactions I inadvertently became immersed in the elusive galaxy of Cuban underground hip-hop. At the start of the new millennium, my friends voraciously consumed commercial African-American rap by popular artists of the day, including Snoop Dogg, Eminem, Dr. Dre, Ja Rule and the Fugees. Like many young *habaneros* (residents of Havana), Armando and our companions had never left Cuba's capital city.⁴⁷ Their existence was circumscribed to the pulsating tropical metropolis in disrepair, with its crumbling boulevards, ramshackle *solares* (housing projects), and spirited urban bustle. Notwithstanding state censorship and suppression, rap thrived and proliferated in the 1990s alongside the traditional, popular, and folkloric manifestations of Cuban musical culture that received government patronage. During this early stage of development, the underground hip-hop movement provided Armando and his peers with a creative outlet in the face of extreme material scarcity and social hardship. Cuban youth viewed rap as much more than a hip-hop fantasyland of exotic women and material

⁴⁶ Names of subjects have been changed.

⁴⁷ Cuban citizens are legally forbidden to move freely between domestic provinces or travel abroad with the exception of visas granted to select artists, performers or state officials for international travel, or state-approved travel for international marriage or family reunification.

excess.⁴⁸ For the generation that came of age during Cuba's special period,⁴⁹ rap provided a conduit for marginalized youth to transcend imposed geographic limitations and to explore worlds, cultures and ideas that were otherwise physically out of their reach. In an atmosphere pregnant with imposed silences and self-censorship, rap unchained stifled voices.

None of the Cubans in our clique spoke English, and the young men persistently requested that I translate recurring slang and colloquialisms they heard in American rap songs, like "yo," "shorty," "holla," and "represent." They were fascinated with African-American vernacular and attempted to use it appropriately whenever possible during informal social interactions.⁵⁰ Despite linguistic barriers, they appreciated rap as an expression of protest and insurgence that was specific to the African-American male experience. Rap's adamant tones resonated with dark-skinned Afro-Cuban men like Armando and other *negros* (black men) in our social circle. Black male youth in particular sought an outlet for the mounting frustration they experienced after being pushed to the social periphery during the economic crisis of the special period.

The young men I knew memorized their favorite rap songs by heart, and passed the time rhyming heavily accented English verses in turn as they strolled down the pothole-ridden sidewalks of Centro Habana. In the shadows of decaying Spanish colonial

⁴⁸ As hip-hop culture was portrayed in American media during the 1990s. . .

⁴⁹ Cuba's special period began in the early 1990s with the collapse of the Soviet Union. With the U.S economic embargo strongly in place, and severely underdeveloped domestic industries, Cuba suffered extreme economic hardship and material scarcity without Soviet support. At present, many Cubans argue that the special period on the island has yet to end. The special period and its myriad socio-cultural and economic effects will be discussed at length in chapters three and four of this dissertation.

⁵⁰ I recall strolling along the *malecón* (Havana's seaside promenade) late one afternoon in 2010 with an American colleague in Havana for an academic conference. My old friend Cuban friend Samuel spotted us from a great distance, and to get my attention called out loudly, "Hey yo, shorty!!" This American slang comprised the little English he knew, all of which he learned from African-American rap music.

structures and shabby Soviet high-rise tenement buildings that teetered precariously against feeble scaffolding, they huddled in ciphers,⁵¹ flaunting their lyrical prowess through rapid verbal exchanges. Youngsters spit rhymes on the rusty park benches of Paseo del Prado, and on street corners amidst the drone of seemingly-ancient, American-made Ford pickup trucks and, 57 Chevys bumbling through the rutted intersections of El Capitolio. Over the constant cacophony of couples quarreling, friends gossiping, neighbors calling across the way to one another, and children playing in the doorways of Habana Vieja, rap offered these boys an escape. To them, the music represented a refuge; an exhilarating oasis that broke the monotony of day-to-day existence and assuaged the sting of destitution, if only momentarily.

My friends found inspiration in Amenaza, Cuba's first rap group to achieve domestic celebrity with the help of producer Pablo Herrera. Their popular track "Mixed-up mulato" represents a straightforward articulation of the ambiguous racial/social positionality of mixed-race Afro-Cuban teenagers. At the time of its release, the song resonated with a broad demographic and put Amenaza on the map. Eventually, the group garnered international fame as exiles in France under the name "Orishas." From Paris, they released their hit album *A lo cubano* in 1999. Bootlegged copies of the album still reached the island and spread like wildfire at the start of the new millennium. I remember one master cassette tape of the album being passed from person to person in 2001. Everyone I knew would take turns copying the tape whenever a double tape deck or appropriate recording equipment was available. With the success of Orishas, Cuban youth added homegrown hip-hop that blended African-American and traditional Cuban

⁵¹ Ciphers are formed when several rappers huddle in a circle and take turns rhyming.

sounds to their rap music repertoires. Encouraged by rap's radical ascension and the international success of Amenaza, the realities and constraints of voiceless youth at the end of the millennium propelled aspiring rappers like Armando towards the underground hip-hop movement. Artists joined forces as architects of their own discourse in this peripheral cultural space, connecting through the type of networks Cornel West conceptualizes as "the new cultural politics of difference" (*Cuba Represent!* 85).

The severe shortages of food and basic supplies that typified the special period continue well into the twenty-first century as Cubans struggle to live, work and subsist under austere conditions, exacerbated by the longstanding U.S. economic blockade. Since the early 1990s, people grumble about eating only one meal a day. There is a general consensus that food and hygiene rations allotted on the *libreta de racionamiento*⁵² are dreadfully inadequate, yet as global economic turmoil further destabilizes the Cuban economy, the state continues to tighten its belt.⁵³ As per my own observations, any improvements in the living conditions of the general population over the last decade seem trivial, and everyone I know continues to carp about *la necesidad*.⁵⁴ Back in 2002, Armando and our friends considered travel-sized tubes of toothpaste coveted commodities along with ordinary toiletries like shampoo and deodorant. Facial tissues and toilet paper were nonexistent in their homes due to perpetual paper shortages on the

⁵² The *libreta de racionamiento* is the ration booklet of food and supplies allotted to every Cuban household by the state under Cuban socialism. Ration quantities are determined by the size of the household and the age of its members. At present, the *libreta* generally does not provide adequate monthly sustenance for citizens. Many Cubans seek other means of supplementing their diets and household necessities.

⁵³ Recently in 2011, Raul Castro's administration removed soap, toothpaste and detergent from the *libreta*.

⁵⁴ "*La necesidad*" literally translates as "the need." However, the socio-cultural and economic implications of the Cuban usage of this term transcend its literal translation and definition. *La necesidad* is a Cubanism born of the special period. It is an all-encompassing expression that articulates the complex levels of need Cubans endure as a result of the widespread scarcity of food and supplies that characterize post-special period Cuba.

island. With limited wardrobes consisting of two or three shirts, a staple pair of baggy shorts and worn sneakers, these teens prioritized fashion and, somehow, kept up remarkable standards of style. As I recall, Armando used to sport a hand-me-down Bob Marley t-shirt gifted to him by a tourist he crossed paths with on the *malecón* (he inherited the majority of his clothing this way). Armando would always wear Rastafarian-themed pendants, bracelets, and headbands decorated with red, black, green and yellow designs. His went to great lengths to coordinate his look.

Even so, given socialist Cuba's limited commercial shopping venues compounded by the economic inaccessibility of such venues to the majority of the population, the acquisition of clothing and accessories did not seem to dominate identity expression on the island, as in some capitalist societies. Hair, on the other hand, can be acquired and possessed without capital, and intermittently modified at the discretion of its owner. The deficiency of styling tools and grooming products on the island does not prevent Cubans from using hair culture as a mode of self-expression. On the contrary, hair can represent important aspects of identity, and some Cubans rely on hair as a way of communicating individualism, unconventionality, or in Armando's case, blackness. Along with like-minded Afro-Cuban males, he wears natural hairstyles that showcase his kinky, unprocessed tresses as a marker of black identity and resistance. Armando takes pride in his coarse hair, despite people describing it as *pelo malo* (bad hair). For over fifteen years, he has meticulously maintained tight dreadlocks that spring defiantly about his head. Without a doubt, these types of unambiguous corporeal inscriptions of Afro-centrism aggravate the racial profiling and harassment he endures from the police officers

who regularly patrol El Vedado.⁵⁵ Yet even as a self-described “*iman pa’ la policia*” (“police magnet”), Armando derives solidarity from his nonconformist identities as a *peludo*⁵⁶ and a *rasta*.⁵⁷ He feels strongly that these deliberate displays of black culture unite him with other Afro-descendent people in countries like the United States, Jamaica, Brazil, Panama and Puerto Rico, and considers his himself part of a collective black struggle against racism.

As the years progress, Armando continuously finds ways to sharpen his intellect and hone his lyrical skills. He composes original raps that capture the triumphs, setbacks, hardships, and extreme frustrations of his lived experiences. His verses are sharp-witted, dexterous, and sobering. Armando is an active member of Havana’s underground hip-hop community and constantly interacts with an extensive social and artistic network throughout the city. Nonetheless, despite his popularity, Armando refuses to perform on stage. He avoids rapping out loud in open public zones like the *malecón* promenade or state authorized hip-hop performance spaces around El Vedado due to the socio-political satire and acerbic observations that dominate his songs. However, at the request of close friends, Armando will eagerly slip into an alleyway, or duck behind a cluster of trees to

⁵⁵ *El Vedado* was formerly an upscale neighborhood in the pre-revolutionary era. It remains a highly-populated residential area. The northern perimeter of *El Vedado* along the *malecón* promenade consists of hotels, nightclubs and restaurants. As one of Havana’s most important tourist zones, north Vedado is constantly patrolled by police officers in an effort to ensure the safety and wellbeing of foreign travelers. Because tourism is currently Cuba’s main source of financial revenue, the safety and comfort of tourists is generally prioritized over the rights of Cuban citizens.

⁵⁶ *Peludo* is a Cuban slang term used in reference to Afro-Cuban men who wear natural black hairstyles such as dreadlocks, cornrows or twists. It carries a negative connotation in the popular vernacular.

⁵⁷ In the 1990s, many young black Cubans adopted elements of Rastafarianism and began identifying themselves as *rastas*. While they did not necessarily follow official tenants of Rastafarianism, *rasta* youth formed a sort of sub-culture in Cuba that came to be associated with blackness, marginality, and resistance.

share his latest masterpiece. Over the hushed, breathy beatboxing⁵⁸ of a fellow hip-hopper, he will let loose a hushed torrent of lyrical fury, punctuated with flashing eyes and rapid gesticulations. His latest raps⁵⁹ express brazen assessments of Cuba's current political leadership via unanticipated narrative twists and exhilarating wordplay.

Armando is undaunted by longstanding taboos regarding social protest, and unconcerned with the outright prohibition of any denunciation made against a government official or political party leader. The names Fidel and Raul propel from his densely woven verses like firecrackers, leaving a trail of incandescent sparks on his tongue as they explode into the nocturnal atmosphere. While Armando is an extraordinary artist and an exceptional individual, the attitudes and ideas he articulates are not unique. His creative production expresses the myriad frustrations felt by Cuban teens and young adults born after the apex of the revolution. This demographic exists in a decidedly different Cuba. Having never experienced firsthand the triumphs of the socialist project, they do not necessarily contextualize the advantages of socialism through the same lens as preceding generations. Hip-hop is Armando's voice. Through rap, he speaks honestly to those he trusts most. He does not rap for fortune or fame, or for public recognition. Armando raps to impart his truths and pass on his stories, and the stories of so many.

⁵⁸ Beatboxing is a musical element of hip-hop culture. The term refers to an art of vocal percussion wherein artists use their mouths and breathing patterns to produce beats and rhythms, and to imitate the sounds of different instruments.

⁵⁹ Composed between 2010 and 2011.

3.7 *Loma y machete*:⁶⁰ Contextualizing Rap, Race and Resistance in the Cuban Hip-Hop Movement

Cuban hip-hop culture is inherently linked to creative expressions of struggle and marginality throughout the African diaspora. The Cuban underground hip-hop movement is a homegrown offshoot inspired by the African-American cultural resistance movement that originated in New York City in the late 1970s. Often described as a revolution within the revolution, the Cuban underground hip-hop movement represents a progressive forum of civil rights and social reform under Cuba's totalitarian system. Rap first arrived in Cuba in the late 1980s via illegal Miami airwaves. Young residents of Alamar, a large-scale public housing project located on the outskirts of East Havana, intercepted Miami radio signals by strategically positioning makeshift antennae rigged from wire hangers along Alamar's high rooftops.

Initially, *raperos* in Alamar familiarized themselves with popular American tracks like "Rappers Delight," drawing heavily on the structural frameworks and sonic foundations of old-style U.S. hip-hop music. Young Cuban protégées studied and imitated the cadence, tonality, and aggression of English-language rap. However, early rap production in the United States involved turntables, microphones, drum machines, samplers and synthesizers in addition to traditional instruments like the piano and guitar. Lacking this technology, Cuban hip-hop sound veered down a distinct path. The imitation of U.S. styles eventually gave way to innovation as *raperos* invented their own sounds with the limited resources at their disposal.⁶¹ The Cubanization of rap solidified during

⁶⁰ I reference this subheading from Anónimo Consejo's rap song of the same title.

⁶¹ Cuban underground rappers devise clever ways to emulate complex hip-hop sound techniques and scratching with ordinary household items, kitchen utensils and other tools. "Sophisticated" recording

the 1990s. During this period, rap gained popularity in urban black working-class communities including Old Havana, Central Havana, Playa and Santos Suárez, (Fernandes 88).

Inspired by Afro-Atlantic expressions including jazz, blues, funk, soul, reggae, *rumba*, *son*, and *timba*, Alamar's pioneering *raperos* inaugurated an initial phase of musical production. This stage was characterized by straightforward beats produced with limited technology and instruments the artists managed to obtain. Because English language listening comprehension and oral proficiency were limited among Cuba's earliest *raperos*, these musicians connected first and foremost with the rhythms of U.S. hip-hop. They recognized hip-hop beats as rhythmically distinct from their Afro-Cuban folkloric music and sacred ritual *batá* drumming patterns. But nonetheless, musicians understood these beats in conjunction with worldwide black musical tradition. The importance of rhythm superseded the lyrical content of songs for some time, until *raperos* began to compose lyrics in Spanish.⁶²

In Cuba, drums represent common, accessible resources for musical production. With skilled local musicians and a plethora of percussion instruments readily available, hip-hop artists weave secular and sacred Afro-Cuban rhythms into background music and

technology in Cuba typically consists of a rudimentary, outdated personal computer, most likely donated by a family member or acquaintance abroad. If the rapper is lucky, he or she might own a microphone and appropriate connection cables. In order to sound-proof home studios (which also double as bedrooms and communal living areas occupied by multiple family members), *raperos* collect large, three-dozen-sized cardboard egg cartons and nail them to the wall in place of acoustic foam padding. They develop beats and build instrumental tracks with the extremely limited sound technology available on nearly-obsolete personal computers. Anónimo Consejo still rehearses in the Havana living room of one of the group members, holding remote controls in place of microphones as they run through their internationally acclaimed musical repertoire (Nybo 2007). At present only a privileged handful of rappers have access to legitimate production spaces and machines. Thus the majority of Cuban hip-hop artists must continually come up with innovative ways of producing sound in spite of technological limitations.

⁶² Although the majority of Cuban rap is composed in Spanish, *raperos* occasionally intersperse words from the West African Yoruba dialect still spoken in Cuba at present.

interludes. Numerous rap songs also adhere to West African call-and-response structures. The track “Loma y machete” (Hill and Machete) (2007), by Havana rap duo Anónimo Consejo illustrates this fusion. “Loma y machete” begins with the haunting melody “No no no no no no no...” chanted over the duet between a deep, measured conga drum and a *güiro*⁶³ scratching out the tempo. Group members Sekou (Yosmel Sarrías Nápoles) and Kokino (Maigel Entenza Jaramillo) alternate reggae style singing and humming with tempered, unhurried rhyming. Their vocals seem to transport listeners back to the slave plantations of colonial Cuba. Lyrically, the *raperos* eulogize the plights and triumphs of Cuba’s *cimarrones* (maroon slaves) in the chorus “Loma y machete / no somos esclavos ya / Loma y machete / Ya no hay grilletes mas / (African dialect) / Palo Monte!” In these verses, the *cimarrón* rejects captivity by discarding his *grilletes* (shackles) and fleeing to the hills. He clears a path to freedom with his machete, and along this journey the *cimarrón* recuperates his native language and finds power in the religious practices of Palo Monte.⁶⁴ Icons of Afro-Cuban cultural resistance like the *cimarrón*, the *machete* and the *grillete* carry tremendous contemporary relevance for disempowered blacks as audiences throughout the African diaspora may find strength and community in resistance imagery and symbolic reductions of cultural heritage. In addition to symbolic imagery, Cuban *raperos* also communicate Afro-centric agendas musically through specific rhythmic patterns of the sacred batá drum, an essential element of Regla de Ocha ritual worship. Known outside of Cuba as Santería, Regla de Ocha religious practices

⁶³ The Cuban *güiro* is a percussion instrument fashioned from a hollowed gourd. It is played by scratching a stick rhythmically down a series of notches carved into the body of the instrument to produce a ratchet-like sound. The Cuban *güiro* is commonly used in *salsa* and *cumbia* music. Variations of the instrument exist in the Dominican Republic (*güira*) and Brazil (*reco-reco*).

⁶⁴ For information on the religious practices of Palo Monte in Cuba, see Natalia Bolívar Aróstegui and Valencia Porras Potts’ *Orisha ayé: La espiritualidad del Caribe al Brasil* (2011).

synchretize the Yoruba pantheon of Orishas⁶⁵ with Catholic saints and virgins. Regla de Ocha epitomizes one of the earliest manifestations of black resistance in Cuba, as captives from the region of West Africa currently known as Nigeria maintained Yoruba teachings during slavery and colonialism. In the face of forced conversion to Catholicism, elements of Yoruba folklore survived through the integration of Yoruba ritual and worship with Catholic practices (*Orisha ayé* 2). The incorporation of Regla de Ocha drum patterns, called *toques*, in the introductions, interludes and closings of various Cuban rap songs --along with Yoruba chants and references to specific Orishas-- reflect strategic efforts to communicate defining qualities of Afro-Cuban identity and pride through sound. These musical subtleties habitually fly under the radar of listeners. They are almost-exclusively recognizable to cultural insiders familiar with the traditional songs and drumming of Regla de Ocha ritual worship. Anónimo Consejo honors the physical and spiritual resistance of their African ancestors by calling out “Eleggua suena cara el batá. / Aquí está África / Alive in my heart.” They salute Eleggua, a demi-god in Afro-Cuban epistemology⁶⁶ with steady batá *toques* and measured rhyme. The maintenance of these rituals and traditions keeps the rapper-narrators spiritually connected to their ancestral homeland. Blending Yoruba and Spanish raps overtop complex drum patterns; “Loma y machete” is representative of an enduring tendency of Cuban rap to maintain oral and musical Afro-Cuban ritual practices and pay homage to the shared African past of Cuba and other former slave societies.

⁶⁵ In the Yoruba religion, Orishas are akin to demi-gods.

⁶⁶ In Regla de Ocha, the Orisha Eleggua is a mischievous spirit associated with children. He is believed to control multiple realms of communication and guard the crossroads of life. In ritual practice, practitioners must always pay homage to Eleggua first before commencing any ceremony or activity.

In Cuban underground hip-hop, radical messages of black pride and resistance synthesize transnational and local aspects of African diaspora experience. According to Tanya Saunders, “Despite Cuba’s predominantly negative view of U.S. culture, Afro-Cubans understood hip-hop music to be the African-American’s creative voice of protest against racism, marginalization and police brutality” (5). Afro-Cuban youth identified with similar issues when suddenly, Cuba’s economic crisis of the 1990s known as the “special period” altered socio-economic dynamics and brought latent racial tensions and discrimination boiling to the surface (5). Sujatha Fernandes explains that until the collapse of the Soviet Union, black and working class communities in Cuba were relatively protected from late capitalist processes of economic restructuring. However, the economic crisis forced the Cuban government to adopt policies of austerity in an effort to increase Cuba’s competitiveness in the global economy.⁶⁷

The special period exacerbated socio-economic divisions along race and color lines and reawakened racial dynamics on the island reminiscent of the Batista era.⁶⁸ Cuba’s push for economic diversification through tourism and foreign investment in conjunction with the legalization of the American dollar in 1993⁶⁹ significantly

⁶⁷ Numerous researchers such as Alejandro de la Fuente (2001) argue that blacks have felt the negative effects of these changes most strongly (Fernandes 2007, 88).

⁶⁸ Military leader Fulgencia Batista served as Cuba’s elected president from 1940-1944. He then ruled as dictator from 1952-1959 until he was overthrown and removed from power during the 1959 Cuban revolution. Batista was backed by the United States government and had strong ties to the American mafia. During Batista’s time in power, prostitution, drugs and gambling were rampant in Cuba. Racism and socio-economic divisions among the populace skyrocketed with the mounting corruption of the regime.

⁶⁹ The American dollar circulated in Cuba from 1993 until 2004. In 2004 circulation of the dollar was discontinued and replaced by the Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC). The CUC, or *divisa* (as it is popularly referred to), is the official Cuban currency used for transactions in the tourist sector. Currently, any exchange of American dollars to CUC incurs a 10% fine.

aggravated discriminatory practices. For instance, well into the twenty-first century, darker-skinned *negros* and *mulatos* continue to be denied employment in the tourist sector on the grounds that Afro-Cubans supposedly lack the education, proper appearance, and attire to interact with tourists (Fernandes 2007, 88). Moreover, the legalization of the American dollar and the circulation of the Cuban Convertible Peso (CUC)⁷⁰ post-2004 facilitated the sending of remittances to Cuban citizens from family members abroad. However, the majority of Cubans in the global diaspora who send remittances tend to be white and, therefore, it is white (or light-skinned) Cuban families that benefit economically from this elusive source of hard currency (88). All things considered, the dissolution of egalitarianism during the special period provoked mounting resentment and resistance among Cuba's black population, who lack the structural support and political organization tools to combat their marginalization (89).

Hip-hop's growing popularity during the special period stemmed from the same type of circumstances that engendered its rise among impoverished black communities in the United States. Community structures were ravaged as New York's poor became displaced from their neighborhoods by slum-clearance programs during the 1960s and relocated to areas like the South Bronx (87). Similarly, the rise of hip-hop in Cuba during the special period is directly attributed to the relocation of large numbers of predominantly black populations to the Alamar housing-projects. This relocation process weakened kinship networks and limited economic opportunities for community inhabitants as a result of Alamar's geographic isolation and the structural inflexibility of

⁷⁰ The CUC was circulated after 2004 following the discontinued circulation of the American dollar in Cuba.

the prefabricated apartment units to accommodate changing families (86-87). As in the U.S., hip-hop culture allowed for the renewal of local networks and the reconstruction of community bonds by residents of Alamar, and by Afro-Cuban youth in particular (87).

In the early days of the Cuban hip-hop movement, Havana's young male *raperos* (rappers) endured police harassment and threats of incarceration for gathering on street corners and freestyling in public. Initially, the state viewed *raperos* as a separatist menace to the revolution and banned hip-hop expression on the island. Rap's confrontational language and highly-charged critiques of racism challenge the purported image of Cuban society as a racial utopia⁷¹ and expose many shortcomings in the revolutionary project. However, despite official attempts to repress the music in its fledgling stage of development, local Havana groups such as Primera Base, SBS, Triple A, Al Corte and Amenaza⁷² persevered.⁷³

The Cuban government officially recognized hip-hop as a national cultural expression and sanctioned hip-hop cultural production in the mid 1990s. The Cuban government appointed music producers Ariel Fernández Díaz⁷⁴ and Pablo Herrera as

⁷¹ Cuban society is often described as a "racial democracy" in official and popular discourse. This notion has been propagated since the early revolutionary period. One of Fidel Castro's goals for the Cuban revolution was to eradicate the drastic economic and social disparities that existed between black and white Cubans. Emphasis was placed on national identity and a shared sense of *cubanidad* (Cubanness) among citizens, as opposed to their differences along race/color lines.

⁷² As a case in point, Amenaza struggled creatively prior to the state's approval of rap music. It was not until several original members fled to exile in France and signed with EMI that Amenaza would eventually become Cuba's first rap group to gain worldwide acclaim and commercial success with the band name "Orishas" for the debut album *A lo cubano* (1999).

⁷³ Many of Cuba's pioneering rap groups have since dissipated or left the island as their creative output and musical production suffered under the dearth of technological resources and restrictions imposed by the socialist regime.

⁷⁴ As Fernández Díaz states in his 2001 interview with Sujatha Fernandes, it thus became crucial for the Cuban movement to recognize the rap movement "politically, culturally, and musically, because

intermediaries between rappers and the state (Fernandes 90), and loosened restrictions by permitting hip-hop gatherings at festivals and public performance spaces (Nybo 2007). In large measure, Castro's endorsement of the hip-hop represents a strategic move executed at the apex of mounting social tensions. Had he not recognized hip-hop as a legitimate cultural, political and musical expression of Cuba's youth, Castro would have risked inciting social instability. Notwithstanding the advantages of government sponsorship, Fernandes observes that support of hip-hop comes from state and commercial institutions run by actors with different, often contradictory agendas (90).

Many *raperos* perceive the alliance between official institutions and the hip-hop movement in Cuba as a creative hindrance. State support signifies heightened vigilance over hip-hop lyrics and the omnipresent threat of censorship and punishment. Therefore, Cuban *raperos* inclined to critique the system are masters of metaphor. They communicate through allegory, ellipsis, double-meaning and highly symbolic language. Generally, the interpretation of Cuban underground rap involves a reciprocal exchange between creator and audience. Astute listeners actively participate in decoding the cryptic symbolism and veiled references interspersed throughout the music. Nevertheless, the socio-cultural specificity of colloquialisms and allusions in Cuban rap poses an interpretive challenge to cultural outsiders unfamiliar with the struggles of the island's marginalized youth. For example, songs like "El jóven fantasma" ("The Young Ghost") "Rap es guerra" ("Rap is War"), and "El atropello" ("The Abuse")⁷⁵ are expressed with abstract symbolism and intentional vagueness. While some ideas resound clearly, other

imagine if this whole mass of young people were in opposition to the revolution, if all of these people did not feel empowered by the revolution, how would they feel?" (91).

⁷⁵ All of these raps were composed by Havana rap duo Los Aldeanos.

messages slip by listeners who lack the appropriate socio-cultural knowledge base for fully grasping the meaning behind certain rap lyrics.

Notions of proper conduct in contemporary Cuba are tied to the stereotype of young black males as threats to society.⁷⁶ Law enforcement keeps tabs on the whereabouts of groups of young men and closely monitors behavior for potential misconduct. State-sponsored performances at festivals and venues like Havana's Casa de la Música trigger heightened consciousness regarding the content and delivery of political messages. Direct criticism of the system is a calculated risk, and Cuban authorities make examples out of defiant *raperos* through public punishment. In 2002, underground *rapero* Papá Humbetico⁷⁷ kicked off the eighth annual Havana Rap Festival with the rap lyrics "Police, police you are not my friend, for Cuban youth, you are the worst nightmare, you are the criminal, I detest you" ("Cuban Rappers"). On stage behind him, two young men unfurled a hand-painted banner reading "*denuncia social*" (social denunciation). Papa Humberitco was escorted off stage and barred from future public performances. At the same festival, rappers Norlan Leygonier and Alexander Pérez (who incidentally styles his hair in long twisted dreadlocks) revealed to the crowd that on their way to the same concert they were stopped by police and asked to present their *carnet* identification cards, a process they claim Afro-Cuban youth experience almost daily ("Cuban Rappers").

⁷⁶ This stereotype is most often applied to young Afro-Cuban males. The term *peligrosidad social* (social dangerousness) is used in Cuba in reference to racial profiling and the perception of young males as threats to society.

⁷⁷ Papá Humbertico is one of the island's most critical and widely respected underground rappers. His given name is Joel Cabrerías Santana. He is originally from Guanabacoa, Cuba, and continues to reside there at present, where he produces music for an array of hip-hop artists from a makeshift studio in his mother's house. This independent production company is called "Calle Real 70" after the street and house number of his residence.

Numerous *raperos* use lyrics, styles of adornment, and performance to play with the stereotypes of blacks as delinquents and criminals (Fernandes 100). Specifically, male artists confront the inherent injustice of these forms of racial profiling and policing through aggressive, militant performance styles and bold displays of the body. For example, Aldo Roberto Rodríguez Baquero (“El Aldeano”) and Brian Oscar Rodríguez Galá (“El B”) of the Havana duo Los Aldeanos both flaunt tattoos in black cursive script across their right forearms. The tattoos read “*rap es guerra*” (rap is war). Los Aldeanos do not promote physical violence but rather, wage intellectual war with their oppressors and wield words as weapons to critique multiple realms of marginalization. Underground recordings and performances that discuss racial discrimination and other forms of social injustice convey these messages through assertive beats, repetitive hooks or melodies, and hostile vocals. On certain tracks, these aggressive sounds offset the monotonous quality of unsophisticated background music. The technological simplicity of Cuban underground hip-hop background music⁷⁸ accentuates the perspicacity and depth of the rap vocals, which communicate volumes through economized, meticulous language. Sujatha Fernandes argues that the aggressive postures adopted by underground *raperos* challenge those in positions of power and condemn the silencing of dissent by the state (100-101). “The adoption of an aggressive posture serves as a form of self-defense, particularly when young black Cubans are being constantly harassed by the police and asked to produce identification, and when the broader Cuban society views them as criminals and drug dealers” (100).

⁷⁸ In comparison with the technological recording resources available to many U.S. rappers.

Deeply committed to rendering veridical representations of Cuban reality, *raperos* such as Doble Filo, Obsesión, Papá Humbertico, Anónimo Consejo and Los Aldeanos generate the most critical rap discourses in contemporary Cuba. Highly influential to the movement's development, these artists straddle the old and new guards of Cuban underground hip-hop. At present, Anónimo Consejo and Los Aldeanos⁷⁹ have sizeable followings outside of Cuba through the sharing of music files, videos, and audio tracks uploaded to Youtube by devoted fans. They continue to produce increasingly provocative work about polemic themes such as racism, poverty and the abuse of power. The fact that these *raperos* avoid censorship and remain in good standing with the Cuban government⁸⁰ speaks to their poetic aptitude and dexterous usage of double entendre. Under restrictive conditions and with limited technology, Cuban underground *raperos* capitalize on rich linguistic resources to confront problematic representations of blackness in the contemporary cultural imaginary. Collectively, the underground movement assumes responsibility for reconstructing the shattered self-images of disadvantaged Afro-Cuban youth. In essence, hip-hop in Cuba functions as a microphone through which society's invisible subjects speak their truths, and listen to familiar voices projected from their own neighborhoods and communities.

⁷⁹ However, it is important to note that Aldo and Bian of Los Aldeanos do not have internet access in Cuba. In fact, in the documentary *Real 70: Hip-Hop Cubano* (2011), they state that they do not even know how to use the internet. Their videos and songs are uploaded to Youtube and other internet sites and disseminated in large part by their international fan base.

⁸⁰ In 2012 Anónimo Consejo received permission from the Cuban government to perform in Venezuela and Mexico. The group also has a personal Facebook page which it is able to access (infrequently) from Cuba.

3.8 The Impact of Tourism, *Jineterismo* and Discrimination on Cuban Hip-Hop Discourse

Economic benefits derived from the state's dramatic expansion of the tourism sector during the special period came at a social cost as prostitution and gender-color based discrimination skyrocketed. This dynamic informs the strategic protests of underground rap. In the song "Tengo" ("I Have"), whose title and format reference Cuban National Poet Nicolás Guillén's poem of the same name, the male rap group Hermanos de Causa exposes recurrent racism as an ironic, unintended outcome of the Cuban revolutionary process. In Guillén's "Tengo" (1964), the black speaker-poet marvels over his newfound inclusion as an equal member of Cuban society during the early revolutionary years. "Tengo, vamos a ver, / tengo el gusto de andar por mi país, / dueño de cuanto hay en él, / mirando bien de cerca lo que antes / no tuve ni podía tener" (62). Guillén's speaker-poet describes his social transformation with euphoric tones.

In contrast, Hermanos de Causa declare, "Tengo una bandera, un escudo y un tocororo⁸¹ / también una palmera y un mapa sin tesoro / tengo aspiraciones sin tener lo que hace falta. . ." The rap is marked by a monotone, overly-simplistic beat that progresses to a short jazzy keyboard hook. The looping repetition of background music and the seemingly-simple lyrics juxtapose the speaker's biting observations and keen intertextual references. A chorus of *raperos* chants the refrain in unison. Despite the song's somber, resigned tone, a sense of urgency and perseverance propel the reproachful collective narrative voice.

⁸¹ The *tocororo* is the national bird of Cuba.

In mentioning the flag, shield, *tocororo* and palm tree, Hermanos de Causa explicitly reference the imagery of José Martí's epic poem "Versos sencillos" ("Simple Verses") (1891). Foundational to nineteenth-century nation-building discourse, "Versos sencillos" exalts national autonomy and advocates freedom from Spanish colonial rule through powerful visual symbols of Cuban national identity as well as the island's native flora and fauna. Martí's poem was resurrected in the twentieth century as a quintessential model for the egalitarian ideals promoted in the revolution led by Castro.⁸² The introductory rap verses of "Tengo" also dialogue with earlier pro-revolutionary proclamations made by Guillén's speaker-poet, who extols the socio-economic advancement and liberties blacks initially experienced under socialism. "Tengo, vamos a ver, / Que siendo un negro / Nadie me puede detener / A la puerta de un dancing o de un bar. / O bien en la carpeta de un hotel / Gritarme que no hay pieza, / Una mínima pieza y no colosal, / Una pequeña pieza donde yo pueda descansar" (Guillén 63). Four decades later, Hermanos de Causa navigate a society governed by tourist apartheid,⁸³ where regardless of color, average Cuban citizens are barred from buildings and zones circumscribed to tourism. In their world, Guillén's speaker-poet is denied entry at *un dancing* or *un bar*, and forbidden from reserving a hotel *pieza*. The *raperos* paint a very different picture of race relations in Cuba during the 1990s. "Tengo una raza oscura y

⁸² "Versos sencillos" has inspired numerous popular songs such as Celia Cruz' "Guantanamera." The poem continues to be studied and recited by schoolchildren in Cuba today.

⁸³ Prior to 2008, the state forbid Cuban citizens from entering hotels, discos, restaurants, beaches such as Varadero, and other circumscribed tourist zones. The state justified tourist apartheid laws on the grounds that average Cuban citizens lack the economic means to book a hotel room or pay for a meal in *divisa*. Therefore, their presence in tourist areas is assumed to be related to disreputable activities, like prostitution or hustling money and goods from foreigners. In 2008, Raul Castro officially lifted the law that banned Cubans from entry in hotels. However, tourism apartheid is still generally enforced in everyday practice. Unless Cuban citizens have nepotistic connections to hotel staff or offer bribes, few are permitted to enter hotels beyond the lobby area. Afro-Cubans are most frequently barred from entry on the suspicion of *jineterismo*.

discriminada / Tengo una jornada que me exige y no da nada / Tengo tantas cosas que no puedo ni tocarlas / Tengo instalaciones que no puedo ni pisarlas / Tengo “libertad” entre un paréntesis de hierro / Tengo tantos derechos sin provechos que me encierro / Tengo lo que tengo sin tenerlo que he tenido / Tienes que reflexionar y asimilar el contenido.”

The “Tengo” rap lyrics stand in stark contrast to Guillén’s descriptions of black social advancement. Although the word *tengo* at the start of each verse implies personal ownership, the lyrics communicate nothing but disillusionment, deception, and loss. Viewing the Cuban revolution through a set of newer, fractured lenses, these *raperos* challenge the current political leadership’s claim that socialism provides Afro-Cubans with healthcare, education and welfare at no cost. Hermanos de Causa suggests that these benefits are given to Afro-Cubans patronizingly and without recognition or regard for their political rights. Such so-called gains have come at the cost of their prerogative to speak out as a minority group (Fernandes 99).

Hermanos de Causa emphasize the positionality of Afro-Cuban youth through repetitions of the chorus: “Tengo una conducta fracturada por la gente. . . tengo fundamentos sin tener antecedentes / Tengo mi talento y eso es más que suficiente.” In sum, “Tengo” captures the dislocation and powerlessness felt by Cuban youth. Other groups such as Los Paisanos illustrate their experiences as Afro-Cubans coming of age during the special period. Their raps render street life in communities that continue to be marginalized, despite the government’s assertion that socialism has eradicated marginality in Cuban society (Fernandes 100). Fernandes cites a significant increase in the popular support of African derived religious practices in Cuba, such as Santería,

during the special period. However, she argues that rap music assumes a more radical and politically assertive stance as the voice of black Cuban youth:

Some older black Cubans cannot relate to the militant assertion of black identity in Cuban rap, but it is becoming increasingly relevant to Cuba's young people, who did not live through the early period of revolutionary triumph and are hardest hit by the failure of the institutions established under the revolution to provide racial equality in the special period. (89)

The resurgence of prostitution and sex tourism in Cuba⁸⁴ during the special period complicates contemporary problems with racial discrimination on the island. According to Mimi Sheller, "The surreal overlay of an economy based on dollars onto a population still living on pesos has produced a marketing dream: the close yet unattainable, the illicit embrace of the taboo island, the sexually charged meeting of packed wallets and poor brown women" (164). From the colonial period to the present, Cuban foreign relations and economics inflect the consumption of national commodities and cultural products. This dynamic is particularly evident in the novel ways in which *negras* and *mulatas* are objectified as *jineteras* (sex workers) and peddled by the lucrative sex tourism industry (Facio 57).

The theme of *jineterismo* features prominently in Cuban hip-hop discourse. Defined literally in English as "jockeying," the term loosely translates as "hustling" or "gold digging." In Cuba, *jineterismo* describes the island nation's particular brand of local sex tourism and economic opportunism that became common practice during the

⁸⁴ In the Batista era, Cuba was known as "The Brothel of the Caribbean."

special period as a result of widespread economic hardship. Men and women who engage in *jineterismo* are popularly referred to as *jineteros* and *jineteras*.⁸⁵ *Jineter@s* do not exclusively sell sex in exchange for hard currency. Their activities in tourist zones range from propositioning foreigners as unofficial tour guides and escorts, to providing sexual services, to black market trade, economic scams and marriage fraud. Sex work in Cuba is perceived as “casual” in contrast to the highly organized, hierarchical prostitution networks found in many capitalist societies. *Jineter@s* range in age from pre-teens to mature adults and work independently, without the involvement of a pimp or third-party contractor. In most cases, they are highly-educated state employees who moonlight in *jineterismo* to supplement inadequate incomes.

In addition to cash money, *jineter@s* may seek multiple forms of compensation (57) including meals, drinks, cigarettes, and clothing, to basic staples in short supply on the island such as soap, shampoo, toothpaste, feminine hygiene products, and toilet paper. Scores of foreigners travel to Cuba specifically for sex tourism. However, just as often, naïve tourists become targets of non-sexual forms of *jineterismo*. Many *jineter@s* are adept at posing as jovial hosts, eager to befriend curious travelers. Outgoing and affable, they cheat tourists through sly, underhanded tactics, in the end, *acabando*⁸⁶ (finishing-off) with their clueless prey.

⁸⁵There is a gender-distinction in Spanish grammar between male *jineteros* and female *jineteras*. When referring to both male and female sex workers in the same thought, I will hereafter use the term *jineter@s* to reflect both genders.

⁸⁶“*Acabando*” translates literally as “finishing-off.” In popular Cuban vernacular, *acabando* in this context means “taking someone (the tourist) for all he/she is worth.”

Composed at the height of the special period, the song “Atrevido” (“Bold”) (1999) by hip-hop group Orishas⁸⁷ playfully illustrates the common practice of *jineterismo*. “Atrevido” narrates the tale of a destitute young Cuban couple that hatches a plan to improve their deplorable quality of life. In order to “salir del negro fango que lo ahogaba,” as the song describes, the pair calculatingly hoodwink a naïve tourist out of a large sum of money. The male narrator-protagonist of the rap coordinates a scheme in which his girlfriend cunningly seduces a wealthy vacationer. After the love-struck foreigner wines and dines the woman, taking her to pricey concerts and elusive beach excursions, and showering her with gifts, the couple robs the tourist at knifepoint, leaving him flat broke and without the girlfriend who so convincingly seduced him.

The narrator-protagonist ends the song with a mocking admission of the couple’s joint exploit: “. . . te creíste que eras vivo, que mi chica te ganabas / Ahora ves te dejé sin nada / Sin chica para bailar / Ni grupo pa’ impresionar / Te pasó por no pensar que los demás también ganan . . .” The centrality of the *jineterismo* theme to popular commercial Cuban music like *timba* and *reggaeton* as well as hip-hop speaks to the prevalence of the practice, and its manifold effects on social and interpersonal relationships at all levels. Within the scope of my research, *jineterismo* also represents a contemporary site where antiquated ideas about race and gender resurface and play out. Often times, interpretations of *jineterismo* in popular cultural production perpetuate existing stereotypes and reinforce discrimination against Cuban women, and *negras* and *mulatas* in particular.

⁸⁷ The hip-hop group Orishas is formally known as Amenaza.

In “Tourism, Social change, and *Jineterismo* in contemporary Cuba” (2001), Mette Louise Rundle states that “In Cuban media, *jineterismo* is perceived as being a problem particularly regarding female *jineteras*. *Jineteros* are not in the same way seen as transgressing moral boundaries, although they are just as exposed to policing” (2), adding that “The popular stereotype of a *jinetera* is a black or *mulata* woman soliciting male tourists in the streets” (2).⁸⁸ Rundle explains:

In Cuba’s new tourist zones, such as certain districts in Havana, the police routinely carry out identity checks and arrests aimed at containing *jineterismo*. Because of the racialized connotations of *jineterismo*, young AfroCubans who, for whatever reasons, are present in touristy areas are particularly exposed to harassment, which further cements the association between AfroCubans and illicit activities. (2)

The common portrayal of the female *jinetera* sex worker as a wanton, opportunistic mulatto woman who exploits her sexuality for economic advancement is rooted in the aforementioned *mulata* archetype, which gained widespread notoriety in nineteenth century Cuba through cultural products such as literature, popular music, painting, and even tobacco labels (Kutzinski 1997).

In Los Matadores de Charanga Habanera’s reggaeton song “*Jinetera*” (2008), the singer-narrator is privy to his girlfriend’s *jineterismo*, yet unlike the male character in “*Atrevido*,” he does not seek residual material gains from her practices. In fact, the

⁸⁸ Rundle adds that “While AfroCubans do often seem to be in the majority of those who roam the streets in search of tourists, two recent Cuban studies, however, concluded that the majority of *jineteras* were white or *mestiza*...” (2).

singer-narrator expresses heartbreak over the woman's moonlighting. He makes unconvincing excuses for her suspicious whereabouts, disreputable activities and shady behavior in an effort to save face to his social network, and to avoid confronting this disturbing reality. "Ella no es mala, no te confundas, (¡listen to me, okay!) / Siempre que sale el sol ella es una aventurera / Anda sola por las calles trémula la noche entera / No quiero que la maltrates." Despite roaming the streets and dancing the night away, the singer-narrator defends his lover as a "good girl" to the listener, whose posture is assumed to be judgmental. "No le digas jinetera, ella no es una cualquiera, déjala que viva a su manera como ella quiera." Yet the singer-narrator loses credibility as he details her *callejera* (street) lifestyle and the extravagant gadgets and designer accessories she flaunts. In Cuban society, these displays of material wealth are almost exclusively attainable for *jineteras* who fraternize with affluent foreigners. "Día, noche y madrugada en vela / Con su pantalón a la cadera, su par de muelas, Dolce & Gabbana, Carolina Herrera, su Motorola y su cartera / A recorrerse sale el sol que vuela / Porque ella viene pelo suelto y carretera."

In spite of her bad-girl image, the singer-narrator urges listeners not to pass judgment on his girlfriend for wanting to enjoy herself, yet his contradictory depiction of her activities tells a different story. "No le digas jinetera, déjala que baile déjala que goce pero a su manera / Si se quiere divertir y no prefiere sufrir entonces deja la morena, no le critiques al final aquí cada cual hace lo que quiera / Ni bandolera, ni jinetera, ¡ella es una niña buena!" Finally, he reveals his heartbreak over the perceived loss of this woman to *jineterismo* while desperately inscribing her with more "positive" labels explanatory of her party-going and overt sexuality:

Ahora ya no sale el son y no brillan las estrellas / Se muere mi corazón
porque no la tengo a ella, niña buena. / No le digas jinetera, ese
nombrecito no le queda, dile terremoto la candela / Mírala que linda
mírala que bella se me parece una modelo de pasarela. Es una habanera o
guajira guantanamera, con su pasaporte cruza la frontera / ¡Tu mejor deja
cada loco con su tema (lo que tengo pa' ella es candela) / Dile rumbera o
discotequera, dile salsaera o reggaetonera, dile fiestera o farandulera pero
no me gusta que le digas jinetera.

Despite boasting a much higher level of current commercial success in comparison to underground rap, Cuba's infectiously danceable homegrown version of *reggaeton* music (known as "*cubaton*") is commonly overlooked as a site of critical discourse since its thematic content seldom departs from partying and detailing overt sexual acts. Yet in this case, the tone of "Jinetera" is deceptively light, for the song speaks volumes about how *jineteras* are imagined through diverse gazes, and specifically, through the masculine gaze of a cultural insider intimately involved with the subject. The lyrics map acute boundaries between socio-cultural notions of acceptable female conduct and disreputable behavior, revealing stark incongruities among the characteristics ascribed to "good girls" versus "bad girls."

The dark-skinned *morena* female subject possesses a conflictive combination of these characteristics, which propel the singer-narrator into a sort of frenzied monologue. In describing and defending his girlfriend's comings and goings, it becomes clear that in the public eye, this *morena* is viewed as transgressing moral boundaries. Therefore, although *he* loves his girlfriend, the singer-narrator is ultimately unable to reconcile and

justify the *jinetera*'s virtuousness through the gaze of others. By extension, he fails to defend her right to be respected and valued by the dominant society.

Notwithstanding arguable inaccuracies in the prevalent *mulata/jintera* stereotype, *jineterismo* represents a common practice in contemporary Cuba, irrespective of factors such as age, gender, color or phenotype. Due to a myriad of economic, social and personal reasons, young people commonly resort to *jineterismo* to supplement their meager incomes or provide for their families. With few alternatives, *jineter@s* hustle for material advancement and defend their activities as reliable means of survival. Cuban underground hip-hop actively deconstructs *jineterismo*, considering multifaceted dimensions of the practice and its consequences.

The song “Prostituta,” by rappers Magia and El Tipo Este, of the duo Obsesión, describe *jineterismo* as a mounting social ill propelled by tourism and exacerbated by Cuba's dire socio-economic situation. Over the course of the rap narrative, the positionality and agency of the young Afro-Cuban protagonist shifts drastically. The opening scene sensitively depicts her frustrations and inner sadness: “Ella se levantó de un salto y respiró profundo, / Tiró al suelo el pañuelo que ataba su pelo, / Caminó hacia la ventana con ganas de ver el cielo / Y por instinto luego, / Se paró frente al espejo para mirarse por dentro.” The girl contemplates her dysfunctional home-life: “Hizo un recuento de lo que había sido su vida hasta el momento / Y se vio siendo centro de las discusiones, / De los reproches de una madre que la maltrataba en ocasiones... / El padre, justificaba sus pocas atenciones con la dichosa empresa / (eran mujeres convertidas en reuniones)...” Sobbing, she decides she has had enough, and vows to take control over her tragic, lonely fate. “Y se cansó de que nadie le diera valor a sus opiniones / De no

tener a quien contarle sus problemas, sueños y pasiones. / No pudo evitar el llanto por un buen rato, rodaban lagrimas cansadas, / Tomó un cigarrillo y entre bocanadas exclamó: Basta ya!”

Initially, Obsesión renders this protagonist as a victimized, melancholic girl looking for love in all the wrong places. In an effort to take control over her life, she becomes a college dropout, lured into *jineterismo* out of loneliness and the financial pressures of *la necesidad*: “. . . la lanzaron a la calle a cazar algún extranjero corazón / Dejó la escuela, para darle tiempo completo a la faena.” As the second verse insinuates, many young Cubans (women in particular) abandon school and dedicate themselves to informal prostitution in the tourist sector. This pattern typifies the life trajectories of female sex-workers in Cuba. Regarding the topic, a young male Havana resident adds: “No olvidemos que las primeras jineteras del ‘boom’ contemporáneo de jineterismo eran las universitarias” (Pers. Comm., 2010).

As the storyline of “Prostituta” progresses, the young girl comes into her own as a *jinetera*, gaining material agency and honing her sexual prowess by “hunting” tourists: “. . . y se hizo artista en la conquista de turistas, una experta en amor fingido...” Yet ultimately, the *jinetera*’s expertise in feigned love, seduction and sex brings her nothing but venereal diseases and heartache. The rap closes with the same chorus that opens the song. However, by the end of the narrative, the connotation of the chorus seems to shift in meaning. In an effort to be “someone” through *jineterismo*, the nameless girl hurls herself towards further anonymity: “Ella se cansó de no ser nadie / Y vino a ser motivo de este cuento / Se abandonó, ya abandonada / No sé donde estará en este momento / . . . no lo sé.” The didactic lesson here embodies the old adage that “all that glitters is not gold.”

Throughout “Prostituta,” Obsesión also intimates that the psychological, social, and health-related consequences of sex work far outweigh its fleeting material benefits.

In the next chapter, I will expand this discussion with an analysis of *jineterismo* in *afrofeminista* cultural production. Cuban feminist hip-hop stands out as one of the few contemporary expressive art forms to discuss in real and meaningful ways the connection between *jineterismo* and the history of race, gender and representation as it relates to Afro-Cuban women. Numerous female rappers frame their critiques of contemporary Cuban society with references to the historical objectification of the *negra* and *mulata*. Along these lines, I suggest that the hip-hop genre not only be understood as a form of entertainment and resistance, but that it also be appreciated for its rare first-person accounts of the experiences and emotions attached to Cuba’s history, and the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade in the Americas.

3.9 Towards the Synthesis of Cuban Hip-Hop *Afrofeminismo*

Underground hip-hop music has dramatically impacted the development of *afrofeminismo* in Cuba. Afro-Cuban female hip-hop artists theorize their own interpretations of black feminism through visual displays and sound to uncover voices of the past, discuss present island conditions, and contemplate the future of Afro-descendent women in Cuba and throughout the African diaspora. The first wave of feminist Cuban hip-hop emerged in the late nineties and continued into the beginning of the twenty-first century. Approximately thirteen women rappers and a handful of all-female collectives (Fernandes 116) including Mágia López, Instinto, Explosión femenina, DJ Yary, Nono,

Telmary Díaz, Las Krudas and the collective Omegas Kilay changed the scene with creative production themed on the historic plights of Afro-Cuban women and their influence on contemporary projections of womanhood and identity. While these young *raperas* shared discursive and performative similarities with African-American hip-hop feminist counterparts such as Rah Digga and Queen Latifa, differentiations among these transnational artists grew as Cuban *raperas* covered uncharted underground terrain. Their emphatically *afrofeminista* discourses were dramatized through experimental sounds, visual displays and performances and represented an overlooked thematic in Cuban arts, letters and popular culture that had not yet been explored in a meaningful manner relevant to the lives of Afro-Cuban women. First-wave *afrofeminista* hip-hop never achieved widespread popularity, recognition or commercial success on the island. Nonetheless, the novel synthesis of *afrofeminismo* in Cuban hip-hop problematizes the black female condition through kalaiedesopic perspectives that merit interdisciplinary examination.

Fernandes and Saunders agree that despite the ongoing participation of women in the Cuban hip-hop movement since its inception, female artists have notoriously struggled to achieve the same level of attention and recognition as their male counterparts since discussions of racial prejudice are often demarcated through a masculine framework. At present, female artists lament that their voices are often disrespected, discounted, and delegitimized in hip-hop. They suggest that male rappers outwardly support *raperas* while at the same time projecting misogynistic messages that undermine women and reinforce machismo within the hip-hop genre. Cuban disk jockey *raper*a and spoken word artist DJ Yari claims female artists are generally absent from concerts and

public performances and would benefit from a greater level of support, inclusion and visibility within the movement (Puerto 32-33). Moreover, Yari underscores the need for black women's voices to be heard within this revolutionary genre, and in Cuban society generally:

El rap es una cultura negra, fuerte y rara en Cuba. No es una música tradicional y representamos algo diferente en la sociedad: nuestra forma de pensar revolucionaria, nuestra forma de vestir. Entonces la gente nos dice: "Pero estas niñas, ¿Qué tienen en la cabeza? ¿Por qué ustedes se aferran a hacer esto?" Simplemente somos jóvenes que queremos plantear nuestras verdades. Y como somos negras eso causa más impacto todavía y tiende al rechazo, al comentario o a la polémica. (Puerto 33)

Critiques of race, gender, sexism and misogyny in rap music consolidate through the epistemology of "hip-hop feminism," a term coined by African-American black feminists. Joan Morgan's book *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks it Down* (1999) and *Homegirls Make Some Noise: Hip-Hop Feminism Anthology* (2007) represent pioneering scholarly research on hip-hop black feminism in the United States. While Morgan's early work tussles with the contradictions of African-American black womanhood, *Homegirls Make Some Noise* expands on Morgan's meditations through original contributions that deconstruct the complicated roles black women play as passive objects in hip-hop culture and active consumers of mass media (mis)representations of themselves.

Other than an article by Fernandes on feminist politics in Cuban hip-hop, the compilation includes few global perspectives on hip-hop feminism. However, *Homegirls Make Some Noise* proposes that the next phase in theorizing hip-hop feminism as a worldview should include strategies for integrating hip-hop feminism into the agendas of transnational feminism(s) (vii). With respect to my research, the anthology offers valuable resources for theorizing this largely unexplored contemporary cultural contact zone. Many critical perspectives presented in the collection serve as insightful subtexts to why and how *afrofeminismo* is articulated in the contemporary cultural production of Latin America and its diasporas in the United States.

According to Fatimah Muhammad, the work of hip-hop feminist critics is to question cultural practices and social conditions, send up the warning, and call out the cultural, social, historical, and material factors involved in rendering women powerless in a world rife with sexism and racism (132). My qualitative examination of black feminist cultural production suggests that transnational hip-hop feminists critique cultural practices, social conditions, and historical and material factors through similar approaches. Building on Hamilton's notion that socio-political contexts and social practices have a direct effect on the form and content of collective remembering and forgetting, and on how people perceive their past (30), I sustain that *afrofeminismo* in Cuban hip-hop intertwines with other transnational expressions of hip-hop feminism to form part of a global agenda. For example, just as African-American women theorized black feminism in response to their perceived exclusion from the (white) Feminist Movement and the Black Power Movement, Afro-Cuban artists draw on similar arguments to convey the multiple jeopardy of their condition:

Women rappers, given their experiences in racially transnational networks of hip-hop, identify with the ideas and principles of black feminism as it emerged from third-wave feminism in the United States. These ideas, as defined by the Combahee River Collective, consist of recognition that race, class and sex oppression are intertwined; women must struggle with black men against racism and with black men about sexism; black women face psychological obstacles and minimal access to resources and they must pursue a revolutionary politics. (Fernandes 10)

Fernandes explains that while Cuban male rappers address the effects of slavery on their present marginality and utilize slavery a metaphor for contemporary injustice and exploitation (13, 101), Afro-Cuban women contend with forms of enslavement and marginalization from males themselves (13). Confined by revolutionary moralism and the objectification of women's bodies in popular culture and society, female rappers endeavor “. . . to carve out an autonomous space within the broader hip-hop movement, in which they narrate female desire and the materiality of the female body on their own terms” (114). Women rappers have been able to develop more radical feminist perspectives through their contacts with likeminded activists in Cuba and abroad, and their politicization within the hip-hop movement (109).

Inasmuch as the cross-fertilizations and intersections of transnational hip-hop feminism(s) can be understood collectively, they must also be appreciated as contextually unique epistemologies. They stand apart as different pieces to the same puzzle that interlock to form a whole. Along these lines, Hamilton warns, “To recognize the existence of common and particular features does not imply cultural unity or the

existence of only one culture of the black diaspora” (32). Therefore, although they stem from a common root, it would be inaccurate to essentialize transnational black feminist hip-hop theories into a single cultural epistemology of the black diaspora. Generalizing hip-hop feminism in this manner ignores the idiosyncrasies and nuances that distinguish each branch of theory.

The revolutionary politics of race and gender in Cuba define the content and the sounds of *afrofeminista* hip-hop. Female rappers utilize quality of vocal expression to convey multiple realms of emotion. Oscillating between pride, fury, militancy and melancholy, hip-hop feminist rappers contemplate their complex experiences and thought processes through shifts in vocal tonality that rise and fall with driving beats, simple hooks and poignant melodies. These dynamic voices and musical accompaniments powerfully communicate meaning and message with an emotionality that transcends linguistic barriers. Female rappers in contemporary Cuba create and produce within the same musical laboratories as male artists, and they contend with identical technological limitations and challenges. Yet in spite of production constraints, first-wave feminist Cuban hip-hop music reveals incredible musical versatility. While some early tracks foreground rapping technique and lyrical content against bare-bones background beats, others, such as Las Krudas’ “Eres bella siendo tu” and Atómica’s “Mi piel oscura,” produce robust melodies; often incorporating string and percussion instruments with hip-hop beats. *Raperas* are also known to frequently switch up their lyrical flows, change tempos, incorporate spoken word, and experiment with different styles of delivery. They alternate between singing solos and harmonizing multiple voices within the same song.

Irrespective of gender, underground Cuban *raper@s* express infinite nuances of the human experience through words and tonality. The universal language of music serves as a conduit for building Afro-diasporic connections, and for (re)establishing the narrative integrity of the historically oppressed speaker. Language and its intended meaning also distinguish stripped-down recordings of early feminist underground hip-hop from the contemporaneous work of male rappers. That is, first-wave *afrofeminista raperas* geared their creative energies towards theorizing black feminism for twenty-first century Cuban women. In contrast to the aggressive rapping style and pointed critiques of police and the state favored by male rappers, pioneering Cuban hip-hop feminists articulate the political from a more personal standpoint. They expand their male cohorts' analysis of racial discrimination in the special period by discussing how gender significantly complicates the double jeopardy of race and class. As the subjects of problematic contemporary representations of *negras* and *mulatas*, underground *raperas* tackle the theme of *jineterismo* with applicable advice and constructive ideas about how women can resist socio-cultural denigration on the individual and collective levels. In sum, these artists convey introspective musings, experiences and emotions regarding blackness and womanhood within a larger economic, social and political framework. Through the analytical exercise of primary texts presented in chapter four, I will offer an in-depth examination of this newer theorizing of black female subjectivity through *afrofeminisma* hip-hop.

CHAPTER FOUR

Afro-Cuban Counterpoint:

Blackness and *Blanqueamiento* in the Hip-Hop Feminist Imaginary

4.1 Introduction: Hip-Hop Aesthetics from Havana to Philly

I had never contemplated the aesthetics of Cuban hip-hop until one balmy summer night in 2010, when my friend Armando abandoned our lively cohort with me in tow. We had been enthusiastically *vacilando* (hanging out) and conversing on the seawall of the *malecón*, as we did most evenings, and I was not pleased to be pulled away from the action. With a spontaneous twinkle in his eye, Armando abruptly grabbed my arm and ushered me nearly a mile west, up the crumbling sidewalks of 23rd Street, past the red and black billboard of Che Guevara on La Rampa and the art deco façade of the Habana Libre hotel, and beyond the Café Litoral on G Street. After walking for what felt an eternity, I began to shoot Armando annoyed glances. I had no idea where we were headed, and I was already feeling weary from a long day of incessant activity and unremitting Caribbean heat. Preparing to launch a complaint, I spun to my right, mouth agape, ready to convince him to escort me home. At that moment, the large crowd materialized before me, seemingly out of nowhere. Armando and I walked the length of a rusty chain-linked fence until we reached the narrow entryway, passed through, and joined the peaceful sea of onlookers. Large, worn speakers sat at either end of the empty makeshift stage in front

of us. I glanced to my left and spotted a corroded swing set frame with no swings attached. Beneath my feet, I could make out faint traces of white paint dusting the discolored concrete. Naked without its net, a thin, steel basketball hoop loomed above my head like a halo. It dawned on me that we stood in the middle of a public playground. For a brief moment, I contemplated the oddness of standing among hundreds of adults in the dark, surrounded by broken playground equipment, waiting patiently for a hip-hop concert to begin. It felt like a peculiar dream. Passing through that fence, we had escaped the boisterous *cubaton*⁸⁹ music blasting incessantly from the *solares*, storefronts and taxis. We left behind the young women in platform heels and threadbare spandex dresses, and the heavily-perfumed men sporting flashy gold chains, moccasins, and tight, ornately decorated blue jeans. Until now, I had always innately associated Havana street life with particular sounds, images and certain fashions and styles of dress that I had yet to encounter in any other setting. Yet standing amid this playground crowd, I experienced an entirely different realm of urban Cuba. The eclectic gathering of individuals appeared so serene, I had difficulty fathoming that Armando had brought me to an underground hip-hop show. Other rap performances I had attended in Havana and Santiago de Cuba always radiated an edgier, more aggressive energy, with strategically-positioned policemen never far from sight. As we meandered through the peaceful crowd, Armando introduced me to countless friends and acquaintances. I was surprised when, instead of the customary Cuban cheek-kisses and rigorous hugs, these hip-hoppers greeted me with simple, sincere smiles, or respectful nods of the head. At times, Armando would navigate

⁸⁹ *Cubaton* is Cuba's homegrown version of *reggaeton* music. The genre blends Cuban *timba* with simple *reggaeton* beats, and the rhythms of other popular Latin music genres.

away from me and become submerged in the calm sea of concert-goers, only to resurface again in another area of the playground.

In my tranquil solitude, I examined the multitude of faces around me. They felt so familiar, yet I knew no one there. Quietly, I scanned the array of head wraps, twinkling stud nose rings, cornrows, afros, locks and twists. The jewelry, accessories, and styles of dress seemed oddly reminiscent of something I couldn't put my finger on. They were adornments and arrangements I had seen before, but in a different place and time. Absently, I wondered how some of these folks had obtained their retro Puma jackets, NBA jerseys, pristine Nike sneakers, Rasta gear, stylish head scarves, woven ethnic bags, and vibrantly beaded Maasai jewelry. Commercial shopping venues in Havana were scarce, and the few in existence certainly didn't sell these international articles and sporty brand names. With interminable accounts of *la necesidad* replaying in my mind, I contemplated how any Cuban living on state wages would be able to afford some of the fly trends showcased before me. My internal dialogue continued, agitating me slightly. What was so uncannily familiar about this scene, and at the same time, what felt so...perplexing about the familiarity of these strangers? All at once, disconcert dissolved into wonderment. I *had* observed this scene before, just as I had stood amongst seas of underground hip-hoppers resembling the crowd enveloping me in its mellow vibe at that very moment . . . Just not *here*, and not with *these* hip-hop fans in *this* precise context.

Memories of my high school days flooded back. Friday night shows at Philadelphia's Electric Factory in 1999. DJ Questlove beatboxing over the jazzy instrumentals of The Roots. Common Sense and his quietly brilliant way of philosophizing in rhyme. Mos Def and Talib Kwali, interspersing freestyle raps with

reggae when they still performed as Black Star. The raspy, booming base vocals of Rastaman Buju Banton. These thoughts led me back through time, resurrecting powerful images of hip-hop's women from the recesses of my living memory. I thought not of the gyrating music video vixens with their painted faces, nor the sensationalized, foul-mouthed rappers and their crude gestures, but, instead, reminisced about the unpretentious hip-hop songstresses who spoke to me through their critical lyrics and original music. Jill Scott's fluffy afro bobbing across the stage...melodies like thick molasses, sweetening her spoken word poetry. Erykah Badu singing "On and on," a regal queen in her head turban and multihued lapas.⁹⁰ The Miseducation of Lauren Hill album. Not merely listening to, but experiencing the emotional rollercoaster of Lauren's joy, anguish, and maternal gratitude as her heart breaks in "Ex-Factor," and swells while she belts out "To Zion." Loving Lauren for her strength and vulnerability. Coveting that unique style, appreciating her twisted dreadlocks, admiring her deep ebony velvet skin and full lips. Recognizing Lauren's stunningly beauty, and realizing that physical features like hers rarely appear in magazines, or on TV. The 1990s were the heydays of socially conscious underground hip-hop in the U.S. I always knew that the lyrics, ideologies, messages and aesthetics of certain African-American artists had influenced Cuban underground hip-hop and that, in turn, many of these U.S artists looked to Cuban underground hip-hop for inspiration as a unique laboratory of revolution, resistance and social transformation.

However, while casually contemplating the Cuban hip-hoppers' outfits, natural hairstyles, and Afro-centric ritual adornments on the shabby playground off of 23rd Street

⁹⁰ African wrap skirts.

that humid night in Havana, it dawned on me that I might just as well be standing in the heart of Philadelphia outside the Electric Factory on 7th Street a decade earlier. The stylistic concordance between the old-school Philly concert-goers of memories past and the modern, underground Cuban hip-hoppers intermingling there on the basketball court astonished me. The women seemed to embody this conscientious aesthetic most dramatically. Proudly, they displayed body arts and distinctive adornments in acknowledgement of their African ancestry. A number of the girls defied unspoken codes governing the social acceptability of female appearance by wrapping their heads with large kerchiefs in a technique commonly used by Afro-Cuban folkloric dancers, or styling unprocessed hair in elaborate braids and exuberant afros. I had witnessed firsthand the discrimination, mistreatment and derogatory comments these natural black styles black often invited in public spaces, and I admired the women for their bold choices. Struck by the insignificance of temporal and geographic limits, I contemplated a novel realization. Transnational hip-hop movements engage in reciprocal cultural exchanges that are inspired and shaped as much by visibility and the aesthetics of presentation as they are influenced by thematic content, ideology, and of course, sound. In fact, with respect to cross-fertilizations between CUHHM *afrofeminismo* and socially-conscious U.S. hip-hop, I suddenly understood these factors as inseparable.

4.2 Cuban *Raperas*:

Moving Towards a Transnational Hip-Hop Feminism

Radical feminist rappers of the Cuban hip-hop movement interrogate dominant discourses of race and representation in Cuba through visual and sonic displays of black pride and resistance to oppression. These *raperas* dialogue with cultural knowledge bases of racial denigration and denounce persistent stereotypes through symbolic and material expressions of hip-hop culture. Transnational black feminist epistemologies guide Cuban *raperas* as they theorize and re-envision Afro-Cuban identity in response to Cuba's complex contemporary socio-economic and political circumstances.

In this chapter I draw from personal communications and interviews of hip-hop activists Las Krudas as well as the analysis of lyrics, images and commentaries by other *raperas* featured in Cuba's *Movimiento* hip-hop magazine (2008). I first investigate why Cuban hip-hop feminists problematize misrepresentations of blackness in the cultural imaginary and examine how *raperas* of African descent use performance to revise popular notions of womanhood and sexuality on their own terms. I then reflect on the symbolic ways these performances enrich contemporary theorizations of *afrofeminismo* as it pertains to Latin America and the Hispanic Caribbean. I interpret *Movimiento's* special edition "Mujeres en el hip-hop" (2008) as a landmark black feminist manifesto for contemporary Cuba. My projection finds grounding in this issue's public statement of the principles and goals of theorizing black feminism in Cuba as well as the proposal of action plan(s) through which *afrofeminismo* can be utilized to promote social justice and improve the lives of black women. In this seminal publication, hip-hop feminist artists and intellectuals address the conspicuous absence of Afro-Cuban female viewpoints from popular and official channels and present candid assessments of Cuba's tenuous racial climate. *Movimiento's* hip-hop imaginary provides ample creative latitude for *raperas* to

introduce profound, compelling theorizations of *afrofeminismo* through entertaining media.

Namely, Cuban hip-hop *afrofeminista* critiques underscore the role popular black female stereotypes currently play in the island's tourist economy and its aggravation of discrimination and typecasting against Afro-Cuban women. The distresses these subjects experience in day-to-day socio-cultural interactions, compounded by Cuba's deteriorating economic conditions, inform the *raperas*' methods of revising and re-envisioning black female identity. In my analysis of hip-hop *afrofeminista* expression, I identify the resistance motif as a common thread linking contemporary black feminist cultural production throughout the African diaspora. Secondary materials including rap lyrics by Afro-Brazilian rapper Nega Gizza and Afro-Costa Rican rapper Queen Nzinga Maxwell reinforce my analysis of cultural production in *Movimiento*. The key points I will explore in this chapter relate to the collective way in which these artists' counter-hegemonic messages reject the act of passing for white through repressive beauty practices. Instead, *raperas* consciously abandon colonial ideologies through the re-inscription of their bodies as sites of Afro-centric pride, beauty, strength, social agency and autonomy. They display visual vocabularies of resistance to *blanqueamiento* by integrating Afro-centric body art, dress and adornment into their aesthetic presentation and musical expression.

I situate these sonic and visual performances of *afrofeminismo* within current transnational black feminist discourses of race and representation. My ideas find grounding in King's foundational black feminist model of multiple jeopardy (1988) and Hamilton's theory of African diaspora communities of consciousness (2007). I argue that black feminist theories generated within Latin American and U.S. Latino revisionist

spaces of cultural production represent interconnected expansions of third wave African-American black feminist ideology, despite myriad contextual distinctions that merit acknowledgement. With respect to Cuban underground hip-hop, organic offshoots of *afrofeminismo* take root in the historical memory of transatlantic slavery that bonds African women with their descendants through collective structural and psychological conditions.

Part of my goal for this chapter is to counter the silences within the historical record by focusing on Afro-Cuban women's voices today. Through the act of challenging influential discourses such as *blanqueamiento*, Afro-Cuban women share a sense of their own history and re-appropriate the past through aesthetic displays and performances. Artistic expression offers a progressive platform to explore how racialized representations, both past and present, have profoundly impacted the psyches, lived experiences and structural marginality of Afro-Cuban women. Like written and oral cultural production, visual vocabularies of black feminist resistance offer viable tools for women to re-envision ethno-racial identity on their own terms and claim agency in their representation within the cultural imaginary. My research situates *afrofeminista* resistance discourse within a transnational Afro-diasporic narrative. Ultimately, I advocate for the inclusion of Cuban hip-hop cultural production within contemporary theorizations of black feminism as a worldview.⁹¹

4.3 Blackness and *Blanqueamiento*:

⁹¹ See *Homegirls Make Some Noise: Hip-Hop Feminism Anthology* (2007). Although the anthology includes few perspectives on global feminism, co-editor Gwendolyn D. Pough proposes that the next phase in theorizing hip-hop feminism as a worldview should include strategies for integrating hip-hop feminism into the agendas of transnational feminism(s) (vii).

The Politics of Race and Color in Colonial Cultural Production

In Cuba and societies such as Brazil, Jamaica and Puerto Rico, who share a history of colonial sexual violence and involvement in the transatlantic slave trade and sugar-based economies, the objectification and commodification of black and brown women has adapted to contemporary systems of power and domination and is best understood within a historical context. Cuban cultural production has long articulated the values, identity and fears of a society in transition from Spanish colonial rule towards national independence. Many of the hegemonic value-systems established in nineteenth-century slave society still endure in text, image and music, and continue to evolve in response to ever-changing global and local conditions.

As I explored in chapter one, archetypal representations of Afro-Cuban women are intrinsically tied to the marketing of Cuba's national economic commodities such as tobacco and sugar in the colonial period, and rum and tourism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Sheller 2003). In Cuba and Brazil, the prototypical characterization of the *mulata*⁹² gained notoriety in the nineteenth-century novel, and through literature we observe the racial whitening project as central to the national project (Bezzera 2007). Literary representations of the *mulata* render her as beautiful, arrogant, lascivious and malignant. Desperate to escape her humble beginnings, the *mulata* relentlessly pursues romantic liaisons with white men in hopes of ascending the

⁹² In Cuba, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic and Brazil, among other former Spanish and Portuguese colonies, the term "*mulata*" describes mixed-race women of European and African ancestry. The nuanced syntax of the term and its connotations vary from country to country. In Cuba, "*mulato/a*" also identifies a specific range of light to medium brown skin colors on Cuba's race/color spectrum of classification. This application of the term is solely color-based and has little to do with a person's facial features or hair texture.

social ladder. She notoriously fixates on “refining” herself physically in order to pass for white. Her innate malice and guile mark her as an immoral, dangerous beauty. Conversely, the social condition of the dark-skinned *negra* remains static. With the exception of cameo literary appearances as the *ama de leche/mãe prêta*, she is conspicuously ignored as a subject worthy of attention. A qualitative examination of nineteenth century Caribbean and Brazilian literature suggests that for male writers of the epoch, the *negra* did not rival her lighter-skinned *mulata* counterpart in beauty, sensual appeal or symbolic significance. In literature, the *negra* is most often assigned a utility value. As a nondescript background character, she lacks development and appears most frequently in the roles of nursemaid, domestic worker, slave mother, or grandmother of a *mulata* protagonist.

Typically narrated from a masculine perspective, the fate of the sensual *mulata* is almost always tragic. Tales of her tragic demise in text, image, and music encode themselves in the ideological construction of Cuba as an imagined community.⁹³ Vera Kutzinski argues that while symbolizing and celebrating the phenomenon of transculturation, in the uniquely Cuban historical process of racial intermixture, the *mulata*'s discursive over-representation also serves a cautionary purpose, as her character exemplifies socio-sexual delinquency and the consequences of disrupting the patriarchal social order (7). Kutzinski finds these discursive entanglements contradictory given their symbolic privileging of a socially underprivileged group defined by its mixed race, phenotype, gender, and imputed licentious sexuality (7). With respect to the *mulata* she surmises that: “highly symbolic or cultural visibility contrasts sharply with social

⁹³ For further analysis of the concept of imagined communities, see Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1991).

invisibility” (7). Despite the premium placed on their symbolism, *negra* and *mulata* Afro-Cuban women have historically been excluded from participating in the discourses produced about them. Fernando Ortíz’ co-opting of *negra* and *mulata* subjects to represent the processes of refining tobacco and sugar exemplifies the hegemonic reinforcement of racialized female archetypes. Among a myriad of related depictions in the cultural imaginary, Ortíz’ well-known economic theories described in *Cuban Counterpoint of Tobacco and Sugar* (1940) illustrate how misrepresentations of Afro-Cuban women are inextricably linked to color, gender, class, and the colonial ideology of *blanqueamiento*.⁹⁴

I premise my research on race, representation and resistance in Cuba’s underground hip-hop movement on a qualitative assessment of the value judgments and political implications inherent in aesthetic renderings of Afro-Cuban women in the cultural imaginary. The arguments I present throughout this chapter problematize the historic disparagement of the dark-skinned *negra* in contrast to the national idolization of the *mulata*, and perceptions of her relentless desire to pass for white and *mejorar la raza*⁹⁵ through liaisons with white men. These bases of Eurocentric knowledge

⁹⁴ In his foundational study *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (1940), Cuban ethnographer and economist Fernando Ortíz likens Afro-Cuban women to tobacco and sugar, Cuba’s chief exports throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Tobacco, he muses, is akin to the dark-skinned black woman because it does not change in color. “El tabaco es oscuro, de negro a mulato. . . no cambia de color, nace moreno y muere con el color de su raza” (2002, 16). Conversely, he adds that “El azúcar cambia de coloración, nace parda y se blanquea; es almibarada mulata que siendo prieta se abandona a la sabrosura popular y luego se encascadilla y refina para pasar por blanca, correr por todo el mundo, llegar a todas las bocas y ser pagada mejor, subiendo a las categorías dominantes de la escala social” (2002, 16).

⁹⁵ The phrase *mejorar la raza* refers to the desire to produce offspring whiter than oneself. This idea is anchored in the belief that peoples of African descent should strive to whiten (and thereby improve) family bloodlines for future generations through intermarriage and/or sexual relations with white or light-skinned partners. This ideology gained currency among *negros* and *mulatos* in colonial Cuba and continues to permeate contemporary attitudes toward race.

production still influence Eurocentric standards of beauty and the commodification of black and brown bodies through their permeation of contemporary discourses.

4.4 *Movimiento*'s "Mujeres en el hip-hop:" A Cuban Counterpoint for the New Millennium

The progressive quarterly hip-hop magazine *Movimiento* is the earliest government-sanctioned hip-hop publication in Cuba. Established in 2001 under the direction of Ariel Fernández Díaz, the magazine unites intergenerational academics and artists. In solidarity, they are able to deliberate on topics that are still considered off-limits in everyday conversation, such as racial discrimination, machismo, and politics. The seventh issue of *Movimiento* (2008) was published as a special edition entitled "Mujeres en el hip-hop" and dedicated exclusively to the social, intellectual, and artistic contributions of Cuban women. It is momentous to the formation of black feminist communities of consciousness given that until its release, female participation in Cuban hip-hop had never been explored on a critical national or international level. I would argue that this issue is among one of the first state-run non-academic publications to attempt to directly interrogate the multiple realms of racial, sexual, and socio-economic marginality experienced by Cuban women in general, by Afro-descendent women collectively, and by the Afro-Cuban woman in particular.

Distributed on the island in 2008 among a highly educated public with severely-restricted access to digital media, *Movimiento*'s special issue captures an extraordinary moment in hip-hop chronology. The first wave of feminist Cuban hip-hop emerged in the

late nineties. At the time of publication, most of the movement's prominent female players still resided in Cuba, interacting closely as friends, and collaborating creatively as colleagues. Despite limited technology at their disposal, these *raperas* forged personal and ideological connections to Cuban and transnational black feminists as well as socially-conscious international musicians. Although first-wave *afrofeminista* hip-hop never achieved widespread popularity or commercial success on the island, feminist *raperas* nonetheless transformed Cuban hip-hop with novel perspectives on womanhood and ethno-racial identity. While the Cuban government continues to prohibit its citizens from liberal international travel, a significant number of *raperas* managed to leave the island between 2005 and 2010. Those who left presently reside throughout Europe and North America. Despite the present geographic dispersal of its original contributors, "Mujeres en el hip-hop" continues to advance the development of communities of black feminist consciousness in Cuba and among its diaspora at the grass-roots level.

Movimiento's hip-hop feminist discourse underscores associations among diverse international populations of women of African descent. Throughout this chapter I refer to these subjects as black, brown, *negra*, *mulata*, Afro-Cuban, African-American and Afro-descendent. I do not use these labels arbitrarily. Rather, I select them with intent to underscore the notion of race as a social construct.⁹⁶ Moreover, I reference certain labels in accordance with the self-naming practices that emerge in Cuban hip-hop.⁹⁷ The Cuban

⁹⁶ When considered alongside one another, these categories point to the cultural specificity of racial identity construction and reveal the national agendas inherent in systems of racial classification.

⁹⁷ Cuba's more nuanced system of racial classification based on the colonial Spanish *casta* system recognizes "black" and "*mulato*" as distinct racial categories among a continuum of highly-specific gradations in skin color. However, irrespective of complexion many Cuban rappers self-identify as black, Afro-Cuban or Afro-descendent. The adoption of these labels --particularly for lighter-skinned artists who are not considered black by the dominant society--reflects a conscious choice to go against the grain and stand in solidarity with peoples of the African diaspora.

afrofeminista agenda substantiates these associations under the argument that despite distinct geographic, cultural, socio-political and economic contexts, which should not be discounted, women of the African diaspora connect through the compounded experiences of institutional oppression King articulates in her model of multiple jeopardy.⁹⁸

According to Hamilton, structural inequalities still exist today because they are historically conditioned, and the formation of relationships among dispersed peoples of the African diaspora in response to these conditions helps forge a sense of identity and belonging through personal and collective transnational⁹⁹ communities of consciousnesses (28-32).

Along these lines, I insist that multi-cultural discourses of racial representation and resistance can be understood collectively because there are commonalities in the black female experience that fit into a structural framework. These correlations across time and space connect through a structure, and they are significant because of their relationship to that structure.

Like their African-American and Afro-Caribbean black feminist counterparts, Cuban hip-hop *afrofeministas* critique earlier feminist movements for normalizing the experience of white middle-class women while overlooking poor or working-class white women and the complex subjectivity of women of color. As hooks observes, first-wave feminism in the United States failed to recognize the diversity of other factors

⁹⁸ As explained in chapter two, multiple jeopardy describes the multiplicative negative effects of race, sex and class-based institutional oppression that are often overlooked by the dominant society.

⁹⁹ My use of the terms “transnational” and “diaspora” are not interchangeable. I use “transnational” in reference to many nations. “Transnational” also describes the transcendence of national boundaries, both geographically and figuratively. I use “diaspora” in reference to the global dispersal of African peoples away from their ancestral homelands on the continent of Africa. My understanding of the term “African diaspora” relies heavily on Ruth Hamilton’s conceptualization of the African diaspora as a global social formation (Hamilton x).

influencing subjectivities in addition to class and race, such as religion and sexual preference (*Ain't I a Woman*).

In the male-dominated discourses of Cuban hip-hop, discussions of racial prejudice are often demarcated within a masculine framework, and Cuban male rappers address the effects of slavery on their present marginality with little regard for the forms of gender marginalization that Cuban women contend with (Fernandes 13). Regarding my interpretation of “Mujeres en el hip-hop” as a manifesto, this compilation of contemporary Afro-Cuban voices asserts the specificity of the black female experience on theoretical and practical levels. The publication deconstructs the trajectory of feminism and racial politics in Cuba as a preface to issues such as sexuality, motherhood and racial stereotypes. Today, the repertoire of stereotypes ascribed to Afro-Cuban females includes that of the *jinetera* who loiters in tourist hot zones and exploits her sexuality for economic advancement.¹⁰⁰

A counterpoint of art and theory, “Mujeres en el hip-hop” includes critical articles, rap lyrics, visual art, photographs, interviews, and personal reflections by an international contingent of hip-hop artists and intellectuals from diverse schools of thought. Using a variety of artistic media and discursive techniques, these contributors systematically deconstruct the bases of cultural knowledge that nourish discriminatory representations of *la negra* and *la mulata*. *Movimiento* addresses oppression in accessible language and offers viable strategies for critically examining the psychological

¹⁰⁰ As discussed in chapter three, while *jineterismo* (the art of hustling for money, goods, and food to supplement meager state wages) became a reality for many Cuban men and women in the special period, popular perceptions of the *jinetera* as a sexually deviant *negra* or *mulata* in pursuit of white male tourists trace their origins back to the aforementioned characterizations of Afro-Cuban women in the cultural imaginary.

effects of internalized racism. Cuban hip-hop activists model this examination process by candidly discussing personal struggles with race/color inferiority complexes and self-acceptance. In turn, audiences discover symbolic tools of empowerment in the sounds, performances, and styles of adornment these artists create. Cuban *raperas* harness cultural production to communicate intelligible messages of *afrofeminismo* that are relevant to the daily lives of Afro-Cuban women and also applicable to an eclectic public. The motif of resistance weaves each text, image, and performance into a transnational narrative of black feminism. Collectively, these resistance discourses inspire women of African descent to take pride in their heritage and physical appearance, and to prioritize self-respect and love. Through resistance, speakers from the margins claim narrative authority and (re)envision black female identities.

With respect to artistic encounters of this nature, Hamilton theorizes that the ongoing struggle of the black diaspora for human dignity and liberation is a creative process that embodies contradictory crosscurrents and conflicts as seen in the dialectical relationship between creativity and action, travail and reaction (33). I base my conceptualization of “Mujeres en el hip-hop” as a seminal black feminist manifesto on the issue’s creativity as a principle for politicizing many social justice issues that pertain specifically to Afro-Cuban women through music lyrics, personal interviews, photography, and graffiti art. Moreover, advocacy for social justice and anti-discrimination is communicated through accessible language and media, thus facilitating the dissemination of the issue’s *afrofeminista* agenda to a wider demographic of readers. These qualities set the hip-hop magazine apart from heavily-theoretical scholarly publications on *afrofeminismo* exclusive to academic circles. *Movimiento*’s special

edition demonstrates the emancipatory value of creative processes and captures the orality¹⁰¹ of hip-hop music and other African-derived expressions. At the same time, the magazine provides a permanent archival record of creative analysis and activism.

For example, Maria del Carmen Gonzales Chacón writes about the groundbreaking roundtable project “Alzar la voz: quebrar el margen, rap y discurso femenino.” According to Gonzales Chacón, “Alzar la voz” was imagined and executed entirely by women of color, who realized their mistake in looking to the West for theories and models of redemption (23). Founding members thus established their own forum to project a variety of feminist voices through concerts, colloquiums, and presentations. According to Gonzales Chacón, “Hemos logrado identificar arte y vida, creando espacios de luz ante nuevas realidades económicas, éticas y sociales” (22). “Alzar la voz” represents an ongoing collaboration supported by everyday Cuban women as well as *raperas* including Danay, Telmary and Unión Perfecta.¹⁰² The roundtable assesses feminist discourse in response to Cuba’s past, as well as the nation’s current socio-economic climate:

No ha sido fácil demostrar que del otro lado de la razón existe un discurso femenino que se niega a seguir visitando viejas promesas de liberación. Un discurso que logre un espacio donde el lenguaje impuesto por la crisis económica, la revalorización de necesidades primarias y el deterioro del presupuesto moral, erigido durante siglos por el patriarcado, dejasen de ser

¹⁰¹ Many African-derived cultural expressions such as folklore, dance, and musical styles have survived in the New World through oral tradition and the maintenance of cultural heritage through ritual practice.

¹⁰² Culminating achievements of the project include the 2008 presentation in Cubadisco together with African poets, as well as hip-hop’s first ever inauguration of the International Festival of Poetry in Havana (Gonzales Chacón 24).

la única avenida transitable hacia la solución de los problemas de la comunidad. (22)

In sum, “Alzar la voz” projects a discourse “. . . basado en experiencias personales, con voces de barrio, sin pretensiones teóricas. . . una voz femenina que se disfruta mujer, negra, capaz de regir y disfrutar su elección sexual, que no le interesa hablar de las nieves de París sino de las abstinencias nacionales, incrustadas al Caribe” (22).¹⁰³ In February 2006, “Alzar la voz” received the *Premios Memoria* award from the Centro Cultural Pablo de la Torriente Brau. As a result of the roundtable’s success, the state officially recognized hip-hop as one of the newest and most progressive popular culture expressions in twenty-first century Cuba (22).

4.5 *Recuerdos del camino a Guinea: Self-Naming through Historic Memory*

According to Inés María Martiatu, the cultural image of the black woman has occupied a prominent place in Cuban musical expression over time, while women’s discourse has paradoxically remained absent from Cuba’s musical history (2). “En la historia de la cancionística cubana, aparece como tema preferente, como fuente de inspiración y aun como intérprete. A pesar de esa importancia temática. . . siempre ha existido una ausencia del discurso femenino en este campo” (2). Martiatu argues that the white heterosexual male majority has imposed dominant images of beauty and yet, these

¹⁰³ Some of the social themes most pertinent to the female condition of “Alzar la voz” participants include “los hijos muertos en la guerra. . . [la] consecuencia de viejos principios y desmanes colectivos por el afán de blanquear el rostro de la isla. . . amores y amantes difíciles, senos, orgasmos, clítoris, [y] menstruación” (23).

aesthetic, cultural, and religious projections have been unexplored, depreciated, and systematically dismissed (2-3):

Se evidencia que la mujer negra ha sido excluida e injuriada por ese discurso de los que ostentan históricamente el poder económico y cultural en nuestro país: una minoría blanca, masculina y heterosexual, que desde posiciones de poder indiscutibles, ha impuesto su visión donde la belleza, las proyecciones estéticas, culturales y religiosas de la mujer negra han sido desconocidas, despreciadas y descalificadas sistemáticamente. (3)

Musical contributions made by *negra* and *mulata* Cuban songwriters of traditional *Trova* and the *Nueva Trova* movements¹⁰⁴ including María Teresa Vera, Isolina Carrillo, and Tania Castellanos constitute essential elements of the nation's sonorous musical history. However, the musical arrangements and lyrics of these composers lacked any personal autobiographical components that might have served as black female testimonies for the epoch (Martiatu 5). While nineteenth century female novelists such as Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, Juana Borrero, and Cristina Ayala broke barriers with works that express feminist sentiments and establish subtle analogies between the conditions of slavery and the oppression of women, an explicitly Afro-Cuban female artistic tradition was not recognized until the mid-twentieth century.¹⁰⁵ The short-lived

¹⁰⁴ *Trova* and *Nueva Trova* are guitar-based Cuban popular musical expressions. Both genres are recognized as artistic movements in their own right. The musical evolution of traditional *Trova* and *Nueva Trova* throughout the twentieth century is deeply tied to Cuba's history, politics, economy and social movements. For a detailed history of *trova* music see Ned Sublette's *Cuba and its Music: From the First Drums to the Mambo* (297-305, 524-27).

¹⁰⁵ See Martiatu and Duke.

literary magazine *Minerva*¹⁰⁶ (1888-1889; 1910-1915) is one of the few early forms of publishing dedicated to Afro-Cuban women's issues.

Dawn Duke argues that Afro-Cuban women's literature was virtually unheard of prior to the 1959 revolution (Duke 102). Her research indicates that to date, there are no real records to indicate that black female writers (novelist, poet or dramatist) left a lasting impression on the Cuban literary scene before the revolutionary era (102). Cuba's National Poet Nancy Morejón and other acclaimed Afro-Cuban writers including Excilia Saldaña and Georgina Herrera pioneered writings on blackness and feminism during the initial revolutionary period.¹⁰⁷ With the support of government-sponsored grassroots literary campaigns, Morejón, Herrera, and Saldaña garnered gradual public esteem for their works and continued to publish throughout the 1970s and 1980s alongside an increased number of women writers (Duke 102-3). However, Duke maintains that "Today artistic and literary manifestations of a black woman's specificity are still largely unaccompanied by a formally sanctioned discourse of feminism and Negritude¹⁰⁸ given the permanent prioritizing of the Marxist revolutionary agenda" (16). Duke's research on

¹⁰⁶ For a brief historical background on *Minerva*, see *Diccionario de la literatura cubana* (619). For further analysis see Duke (99-101).

¹⁰⁷ The poems "Mujer negra" and "Amo a mi amo" published in Nancy Morejón's *Octubre imprescindible* (1982) best capture Morejón's treatment of black identity and gender. Juanamaría Cordones-Cook's *Soltando amarras y memorias: Mundo y poesía de Nancy Morejón* (2009) offers a profound, meticulously-researched analysis of Morejón's creative writing and scholarship. For a comprehensive list of notable works by Georgina Herrera and Excilia Saldaña published throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, see Duke (104-16).

¹⁰⁸ Négritude marks a momentous turning point in the modern conceptualization of African diaspora identity and culture. The term "Négritude" was coined by Martinican poet Aimé Césaire along with Léopold Senghor and Léon-Gontran Damas in Paris in the 1930s. Négritude finds its roots in the thought of W.E.B Du Bois and Marcus Garvey, among other prominent black thinkers of the twentieth century, and is deeply inspired by the Harlem Renaissance of the United States. During the 1930s and 1940s the concept garnered significant support from French Caribbean politicians and historians. Négritude represents a transnational cultural and artistic movement premised on cultivating pride among New World blacks. The cultural production of the movement seeks to eradicate colonial ideologies of black inferiority and reverse the stigma of blackness through the revalorization of Africa and African cultural heritage. See Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s co-edited *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience* (670).

twentieth century Afro-Cuban women writers reveals that “Any specific interest in a black woman’s agenda appears as a more personalized enterprise, arising out of individual convictions that her tumultuous history and contemporary experience confirm the need for more detailed differentiation” (16).

My examination of contemporary Cuban literature and cultural production supports Duke’s contention that the prioritizing of the Marxist revolutionary agenda continues to hinder the formal sanctioning of subaltern discourses and complicate acts of self-naming that stand in contention with the ideals of the revolution. Namely, public voicings of ethno-racial subjectivity are perceived as separatist, and therefore, in disaccord with constructions of national identity, which are grounded in the collective notion of *cubanidad* (Cubanness) and racial democracy.

However, I suggest that an artistic sub-culture has emerged in Cuba as a byproduct of socialism, wherein marginal expressive spaces like the underground hip-hop movement form organically in response to voicelessness within the hegemonic agenda. Instead of subordinating the act of self-naming to a national political agenda, Cuban *raperas* skillfully critique multiple aspects of their marginalization by discursively returning to Africa. Through this imagined return to the ancestral homeland, they retrace New World historical processes that affect African women and their descendants. In this way, *raperas* theorize contemporary Afro-Cuban identity while maintaining allegiance to the Cuban revolution.

The themes of African heritage and black identity in poetry, prose, and rap attest to the dynamic engagement of communities of consciousness. My lyrical analysis of

songs such as “Loma y Machete,” by Anónimo Consejo, exemplifies the propensity of artists driven by an Afro-centric agenda to conjure ancestral memory in the act of self-naming. Yet, how do factors like the gender and sexuality of the speaker impact black identity discourses? The song “A mi ke miñongo” (2007) by Las Krudas, for example, re-imagines the violent transatlantic displacement of Africans from their ancestral homelands to the Americas and casts this event as the premise of the black woman’s invisibility and oppression in the New World. The rappers wonder when they as black women will be allowed to tell their own story after five hundred years of silence. This simple question unites Las Krudas with Nancy Morejón (*Octubre imprescindible*), bell hooks (*Ain’t I a Woman*), and numerous black female artists and intellectuals who willfully insert their voices into the Western historical record through cultural production. Inter-textual references to slavery as the genesis of their subjectivity exemplify my contention that structural frameworks link Afro-descendent women across geographic and cultural lines.

A cross-reading of Morejón’s canonical poem “Mujer negra” (1982) and Las Krudas’ “A mi ke miñongo” demonstrates that inasmuch as diasporic discourses converge, they also reveal important geo-political, cultural, and generational disparities that merit consideration. For example, “Mujer negra” begins with a hazy sensorial flashback of the narrator’s African homeland and the forced Middle Passage journey:

Todavía huelo la espuma del mar que me hicieron atravesar. / La noche,
no puedo recordarla. / Ni el mismo océano podría recordarla. / Pero no
olvido al primer Alcatraz que divisé. / Altas, las nubes, como inocentes

testigos presenciales. / Acaso no he olvidado ni mi costa perdida, ni mi
lengua ancestral. (52)

Morejón describes the traumatic uprooting and transplantation of the Middle Passage with somnambular disorientation that wavers between acute sparks of detail and indistinct, muddled memories. After having been “left” (in her words) in the New World, the dislocated poetic voice slowly gains momentum and stakes a claim in the adoptive land she toils. Cuban soil bears witness to the subject-poet’s rebirth. Despite efforts to remember her African, Mandingo self, the implication is that the woman can never fully recuperate her former African identity, nor will she return to her ancestral homeland. “Me dejaron aquí y aquí he vivido. / Y porque trabajé como una bestia, aquí volví a nacer. / A cuanta epopeya mandinga intenté recurrir” (52). She tries, and fails, to recover epic Mandingo poems from the recesses of her memory. Therefore she resigns herself to her new surroundings, enduring with strength and dignity a legacy of trauma, physical labor, and childbirth particular to the black female experience. “Su merced me compró en una plaza. / Bordé la casaca de Su Merced y un hijo macho le parí. / Mi hijo no tuvo nombre” (52).

As insignificant as chattel purchased in the colonial plaza, the speaker-poet alludes to her social anonymity and that of her *mulato* offspring. However, the fundamental economic role of the black women in nation-building and her subsequent exclusion from partaking in the fruits of her labor does not escape the reader: “Esta es la tierra donde padecí bocabajos y azotes. / . . . Bajo su sol sembré, recolecté y las cosechas no comí. / . . . Por casa tuve un barracón. / Yo misma traje piedras para edificarlo. . . .” (53). Slavery signifies a partial erasure of the speaker-poet’s connection to her African

homeland: “Ya nunca más imaginé el camino a Guinea” (53). Not only does she relinquish the symbolic map home by way of the mythical Road to Guinea, but the forced removal and dispersal of Africans destabilizes her internal compass; she simply cannot remember how, or even where to return to. Still, the speaker-poet perseveres through generations of hardship, as represented in the sequence of declarations interspersed between each stanza: “Me rebelé,” “Anduve,” “Me sublevé,” “trabajé mucho más” (52-3). According to Duke, the speaker-poet physically submits for she has no choice, yet these thoughts revealed to us sporadically throughout the poem are her own and these are sacred (147). “Strategically placed in the poem, these words confirm that she never stops moving; her mobility and vigor ensure her triumph, albeit centuries later, in a symbolic merging with her liberation with Cuba’s” (147). At long last the speaker-poet finds inclusion, equality and acceptance in a communist Cuba that she, as a black woman, has fought for; first, alongside Antonio Maceo’s troops in Cuba’s first war of independence, and a century later, in the Sierra Maestra among Fidel Castro’s ranks. I agree with Duke’s interpretation of the complex levels of racialized, gendered, and political symbolism in “Mujer negra,” since as she states: “Assuming a more global dimension, gendered subjugation becomes a dialectic for postulations against colonialities of power, threats to Cuban sovereignty, and capitalist maneuvers. In an attempt to balance the scale an alternative perspective presents itself, one that is egalitarian, female, and black” (149).

Thus the self-naming of Morejón’s speaker-poet as a black woman is inextricable from her Cubanness, for she has come to own these multiple dimensions of her identity through an extensive historical journey of self-sacrifice and persistence. Her triumphant sense of social belonging is ultimately validated by her communist party political

alliances. Therefore the speaker-poet's racialized, gendered identity is perceived as less conflictive from an egalitarian viewpoint because she transcends her specificity as a black woman.

Consequently, despite their thematic similarities, the political undertones of Morejón's body of work often stand in contrast to the black cultural production of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, in which many artists bemoan the post-special-period social exclusion and marginalization of Afro-Cubans by the socialist regime. Like "Mujer negra," Las Krudas' "A mi ke miñongo" revisits the violent transatlantic displacement of African women to America as the initial premise of the black woman's invisibility and oppression in the New World. Both pieces communicate a profound sense of loss and nostalgia as consequences of slavery, however, the texts differ in register. Morejón references the slave trade using passive, non-confrontational language ("Me dejaron aquí y aquí he vivido"). In contrast, Las Krudas denounce this historical process in a straightforward and accusatory manner. Unabashedly, they direct their anger toward the human trafficker(s) and explicitly name the suffering they still endure as a consequence of their violent abduction from the ancestral homeland "¿Que más tú quieres de mí si todo yo te lo he dado? / Con las armas coaccionaron, se colaron, de África se adueñaron y me trajeron aquí, / Llanto, lamento, sufrimiento en todo momento / ¿Siempre fue así? / ¡Que violento!"

"Mujer negra" and "A mi ke miñongo" dialogue with one another in many respects. Both narrative voices journey through time and space, seeking answers from an imagined ancestral past in order to understand their present subjectivity as Afro-Cuban women. Along this path they confront memories of indelible physical and psychological

wounds that have yet to heal, and they revisit the triumphant moments in which they managed to resist, rebel, and persevere against all odds. These works also echo hooks' similar conception of the black female slave experience as a historical tragedy key to the formation of the black woman's consciousness and the hegemonic perceptions that have shaped her oppression (*Ain't I a Woman* 25-6).

Ruth Hamilton emphasizes the symbolic and material significance of Africa as a reference for tradition and heritage in the diaspora that becomes part of a collective memory (19). She argues that Africa's symbolic and material significance "lies within changing relations and ideas of homeland and diaspora-- a dialectical relationship between and within Africa and its diaspora, defined by an ongoing proliferation of passages and marked by the impermanence of place and home" (19). The discursive similarities and discrepancies between Morejón's work and the more recent production of hip-hop feminists illustrate this shifting dialectical relationship between ancestral past, place, and home. They also bring Cuba's tenuous contemporary dynamic of social inclusion versus exclusion into focus. Memories of the African homeland ultimately lead Morejón's speaker-poet back home to a Cuba that embraces her. Nevertheless, the symbolic Road to Guinea generally leads hip-hop artists to re-envision black female identities as dislocated from Marxism, and in ideological contention with the Cuban revolution, from which they feel rejected.

"A mi ke miñongo" argues that given the inextricability of blacks from the formation of the nation, the exclusion of Afro-Cuban women from national discourse and the persistent racial denigration they confront are unacceptable. Alternating their discussion between the colonial era and the present, Las Krudas state that although blacks

no longer stand on the auction block or sweat on the sugar plantations, black faces remain conspicuously absent from television: “¿Por qué me miras con desdén, y encima te comes mi maíz? / Ahora las cosas son distintas, no sudamo’ en el trapiche, no, / No nos venden en la plaza, no, / Pero no estamos en televisión, ¿no quieren negras en casa?” Their provocative inquiries into the role of black women in contemporary society juxtapose the utilitarian value placed on African slave labor with the figure of the disregarded black maid, whose racial (de)valorization and social invisibility are compounded by her circumscription to the domestic space. Conversely, this discussion also harkens back to the socio-economic implications of skin color in the colonial period, when lighter-skinned *mulat@s* were kept as house slaves while dark-skinned *negr@s* toiled the fields. Through double entendre, the rap exposes manifold layers of multiple jeopardy and broaches conflictive politics of racial representation.

Las Krudas criticize the tendency to admire black beauty only in reference to the perceived physical strength of Afro-descendent peoples and observe that the worth ascribed to physical robustness supersedes the valorization of black intellectual contributions. Furthermore, the rappers note that when black women open their mouths to expose *verdades krudas* (crude truths) about social marginality, they are collectively silenced for broaching the taboo theme of race. In the song “Pa ke enteres” (2007) Las Krudas once again resist the systematic silencing and (mis)representation of black women, utilizing rap as a remedy to their exclusion. “Siempre luchando por ser incluidas (coñó!) / Coje mi lírica, chequea mi medida.” The artists declare that they are neither maids nor sexual objects, but rather, maternal beings: “¡Ni criadas ni objetos sexuales! / ¡Me harté del abuso! / Somos seres maternas (maternas) / . . . Existiendo natural

amante tierna, espiritual, carnal / . . . Es la mujer la más hermosa ser que existe de la tierra / Piénsalo mil veces, ¡no violencia con las mías!” In large measure, the *raperas*’ musical repertoire and social activism argues that black women are systematically denied a voice in these numerous problematic representations. What sets Las Krudas apart from their artistic predecessors is the group’s direct rejection of these stereotypes, and the outspoken insistence that women must re-envision their worth and identities on their own terms:

Féminas no somos para solo vernos bonitas / Para seguir el coro y estar
calladitas / Aquí estamos Las Krudas con el micro en mano /
Representando a la prima oye tú hermano / En esta vida tenemos gran
importancia / Nuestro lugar defenderemos con elegancia / Más que Uds.
conocemos la discriminación / Somos clase humilde, somos color / Pero
además somos mujeres necesitamos amor / Conocemos el sudor
discutamos nuestro honor / Tenemos tan buen sabor (¡flavor flavor,
aiiiight!).

Similarly, the female rap group *Atómicas* decries the social invisibility of blacks in contemporary Cuba, both in telecommunications media as well as in the tourism industry: “No es muy común ver rostros negros en televisión / No es muy común que un negro sea gerente de un hotel o de alguna asociación.” Exasperated with common discriminatory refrains that pepper the Cuban vernacular, they reveal the insidious nature of popular adages in which blacks are always the punch line, or the sacrificial butt of the joke: “Me canso de que mi color sea blanco de la ignorancia, / Esas palabras y refranes en algún momento se las tragarán, / Esas bocas sucias y racistas, rebosada de arrogancia, / Nosotros, que si la hacemos a la entrada o a la salida, que si el negro ese, quien tiró la tiza

/ ¡No jodas!” Atómicas frame references to slavery and colonialism within a contemporary discourse that exposes the failures of the Cuban revolution to create an egalitarian society free of discrimination and structural oppression. Adeptly, they invert the negative symbolism of the *bemba* (thick African lips) into a mechanism of resistance by inscribing the *bemba* as a musical refuge from racial prejudice: “Hoy mi bemba es como un agrío son de refugios sobre austeras socializaciones fascistas / Caprichos embadurnados de prejuicio racista / Que rompen el entono de un mundo netamente dominado por el racismo.” In some measure, these types of re-inscriptions and re-associations allow Afro-descendent women to re-claim agency in their (mis)representation.

4.6 *Se vende caramelo*:¹⁰⁹ Commodifying *Blanqueamiento* in the Popular Imaginary

Racial representation in the symbolic realm has indelibly marked the everyday lives and experiences of (mis)represented¹¹⁰ subjects. *Movimiento* contributor Lirians Gordillo sustains that Afro-Cuban women suffer a form of double-discrimination akin to King’s multiple jeopardy theory with respect to the multiplicative negative effects of race, sex and class-based institutional oppression that are often overlooked by the dominant society. After so many years of revolution, insists Gordillo, Cuba still owes its black women the right to tell their own stories (9). In her interview with Magia López of

¹⁰⁹ This subheading references a popular description of *mulata* women as “Carmel candy for sale.” This saying gained popularity in the nineteenth century with Villaverde’s novel *Cecilia Valdés*. It appears in various musical and literary expressions in the Cuban cultural imaginary.

¹¹⁰ I use of parenthesis here to emphasize the problematic nature of many representations of Afro-Cuban female subjects. Stereotypes of *la negra* and *la mulata*, for example, might best be described as misrepresentations.

the Cuban rap duo Obsesión, López describes how from girlhood, Afro-Cuban women are inculcated with beauty codes through models they seek to emulate, yet in the popular imaginary they are always slaves, maids, domestic servants, or pitiable inhabitants of the *solar* (a humble, Cuban housing project or tenement building). She notes that consequently, the label *negro* becomes an offensive word in the Cuban vernacular, and the negative connotations of language related to blackness inflict indelible psychological damage on Afro-descendent peoples (9-10): “Entonces la palabra negro se convierte para muchos en una ofensa, un nombre y eso ha afectado a muchas personas. . .” (9-10).

López deconstructs the same relationship between Eurocentric standards of beauty and black female cultural stereotypes espoused in nineteenth century foundational literature and twentieth century cultural products. Across time and space, the psychological consequences of these values are predictably similar. Looking back to the early twentieth century, Puerto Rican poet Carmen Colón Pellot’s piece “¡Ay señor, que yo quiero ser blanca” (1938) captures the cry of the socially alienated *mulata* in the throes of a racial identity crisis. According to Claudette Williams, Pellot’s *mulata* subject represents the other side of the fear of being black expressed by Nicolás Guillén’s *mulata*: the yearning to be white (100-102). “. . . What the *mulata* hankers after is the white woman’s beauty; she wants to be white and blonde. . . This poem is a tragic illustration of one psychic consequence of the dominance of white aesthetic standards. Self-alienation results from the *mulata*’s obsession with an inaccessible whiteness” (102). However in contrast to racialized colonial-inspired depictions rendered in text, print images and music, today audiences are bombarded with the *blanqueamiento* ideology via popular television shows, international soap operas, film, and music videos. Magia

confirms that even in the twenty-first century, Eurocentric standards of black beauty and the common, subconscious desire to whiten one's self, both physically and culturally, continues to chip-away at the psyches of Afro-descendent women:

Y que todo esto apunte a personas blancas, deja como resultado que debo tener mis facciones finas, ser delgada, mi pelo debe ser lo más lacio posible, mi piel debe aclarar cada día más, etcétera. Luego, hay cosas que puedes lograr; sin embargo, cuando llegas a querer aclarar cada día más tu color de piel y que tus facciones sean menos gruesas, ya ahí se te complica la historia y se crea un *shock* psicológico, espiritual y maldices a tu mamá por casarse con tu papá porque es más negro, o viceversa, y provocó un “atraso.” Rechazas todo lo que venga de allí porque te hace más negro: cultura, historia, religión, etcétera. Yo pasé por todo eso. (10)

Magia's candid testimonial describes how Afro-descendent women often fall victim to overpowering inferiority complexes akin to the self-alienation of colonial Cuban *mulata* literary protagonists such as Cirilio Villaverde's Cecilia Valdés,¹¹¹ who strive in vain for a European aesthetic. Specifically, the “psychological and spiritual shock” (10) Lopez mentions reveals an obscure undertone of Cecilia Valdés' declaration: “Sí me gustan más los blancos que los pardos. Se me caería la cara de vergüenza si me casara y tuviera un hijo saltatrás” (Villaverde 224). Nonetheless, Cecilia's whitening

¹¹¹ Cirilio Villaverde's canonical abolitionist novel *Cecilia Valdés* (1839,1882) describes the social, political, economic, and geographic landscapes of nineteenth century Havana in minute detail. The plot centers on the incestuous amorous affair between the beautiful fair-skinned *mulata* protagonist Cecilia Valdés and her rich, white lover Leonardo Gamboa. Villaverde's novel captures the complex dynamics of race, class, and gender in colonial Cuba. Specifically, through Cecilia's characterization as a *mulata* obsessed with passing for white in colonial society and ascending socially through liaisons with white men, Villaverde crystallizes the exotic, lascivious “tragic *mulata*” prototype in the Cuban popular imaginary.

pathology reflects the pre-abolition racial climate of the 1800s. By 2008, Cuba had already subsisted for forty-nine years under its second independence revolution, a socialist transformation premised, in part, on egalitarianism and the eradication of discrimination and racial prejudice against Afro-Cubans. The notion that nearly two centuries after the initial publication of *Cecilia Valdés* (1839, 1882) Magia draws from an identical value system to convey *blanqueamiento*-inspired self-deprecation and psychological trauma substantiates the persistence of these ingrained ideologies, notwithstanding discernible social and political gains towards racial equality in contemporary Cuban society.

The production of other Afro-Latina rap artists such as Queen Nzinga Maxwell of Costa Rica and Brazil's Nega Gizza confirms that in former American slave societies, peoples of the African diaspora utilize artistic expression as a means of deposing binary archetypes of black and *mulata* women. For instance, Maxwell addresses the correlation between ideals of *blanqueamiento* and paternalism from an intimately personal standpoint in the lyrics of "Yo soy yo." Here, she stresses the relationship between patriarchal domination and beauty standards that do not include *la cruzeza* (the crudeness) of the type of African beauty she herself embodies (Hernández Hormilla 39):

Mi fisonomía es de osamenta gruesa y desde mi juventud no me he sentido incluida en los estándares de belleza de nuestras sociedades. Por tanto, estos cánones impuestos me afectaron emocionalmente. En mi comunidad, como producto de los procesos de colonización, existen también diversos modelos que tienen que ver con el grueso del cabello, con que la piel sea más o menos oscura o si tus facciones son más finas. (41)

With her deep ebony complexion and full features, this rapper, visual artist, performer, and activist advocates the ideology of “Black is Beautiful” in her eclectic creative endeavors. She describes how her personal conceptualization of feminism connects her to communities of black feminist consciousness on a global level: “Por todo ello, mi discurso es feminista y a la vez humanista, porque a nivel global nos basamos en un canon de belleza injusto, estrictamente europeo y construido incluso sobre representaciones antinaturales” (41). As a case in point, she references the Barbie doll, whose flaxen features and exaggerated measurements represent a problematic Western standard of female beauty. Maxwell observes that due to the worldwide commercial popularity of Barbie and her blonde, blue-eyed husband Ken, these idealized characters are exalted as symbols of what successful women and men should strive to be in contemporary society. She feels these ideals are based on vanity at a social level, which affects women most negatively as they are compelled to dye their hair blonde, chemically relax coarse hair, wear light-colored contact lenses, bleach the skin, and even undergo plastic surgery to alter the physical appearance (41-2). Likewise, Maxwell critiques the absence of positive images of women of color from mass media and denounces the tokenism of black women who appear on Latin American television primarily in the roles of mistress, prostitute, or domestic worker:

Estos criterios cerrados de la belleza no contienen a la mujer africana o a la latinoamericana, lo cual crea un espacio de exclusión. Por otra parte, ellas llegan a confinarse a la glamorización sexual. En las imágenes televisivas podemos ver a las mujeres negras conceptualizadas como prostitutas, como revelo sexual, lo cual refuerza el mito de que somos más

calientes y a la vez más fuertes, tanto para limpiar como para otro tipo de trabajo físico. (42)

Maxwell's musical critique of the masculine gaze and its incessant fixation on body parts in contemporary print media dialogues with generations of cultural products, ranging from Caribbean *negrista* poetry of the early twentieth century to modern day media images that normalize the dismembering of black female bodies in the cultural imaginary. Her repeated affirmation "yo soy yo" throughout the song underscores the act of challenging exclusion, claiming autonomy as a unique self, and denouncing (black) female objectification, which she describes as the compulsive focus on body parts filtered through a masculine lens: "Muchos tienden a no ver más / En una mujer / Que los pechos / Las piernas / Y lo que llevamos detrás / No pueden ver más allá que partes separadas / Engendradas / Por imágenes alteradas / De modelos en revistas maniqués sin identidad. . . (39). This direct critique of the compulsive focus on body parts in modern-day print media responds to early *negrista* poems, such as Francisco Negrón Mattei's "Baila la negra el son" (n.d). "Baila la negra el son. . . el vientre desnudo. . . y las nalgas redondas. . . las caderas se mueven en firme oleaje. . ." (Qtd. in Morales, 48). Negrón Mattei's simple verses extol the serpentine gyrations of a black woman, rapt in the rhythms of *son* music. The poet describes the *negra* as bare midriff, round buttocks, and gyrating hips. His verses illuminate her body parts with photographic precision, as if under a spotlight, while the subject herself remains an occulted afterthought. In "Máscaras de una realidad violent," *Movimiento* contributor Karen Rodríguez López-Nussa sustains that the indiscriminate reduction of females to idealized corporal representations through which they can be desired and consumed constitutes an invisible form of violence. In particular,

sexualized stereotypes of black and brown females inflict violence on a wide gamut of women who do not fit these idealized parameters, but who in some respect attempt to attain them (19-20): “Frecuentemente [las mujeres] pierden su identidad y queda anulada su personalidad, pues se convierten en solo un “meneo,” es sencillamente por un “buen movimiento de cintura” que son deseadas, admiradas, valoradas y hasta “amadas” (20). López-Nussa perceives inherent danger in behavioral patterns as women reject their individuality out of frustration, low self esteem, and their inability to embody these supposed ideals. Conversely, those women who fall outside of the standard parameters, or those who choose to assume other postures are seen as “odd,” problematic, or repressed (21). Hip-hop feminist Kaila Story reiterates Maxwell and López-Nussa’s arguments from a North American perspective. Story claims that currently, African-Americans and other ethnic minorities in the United States absorb the consumption patterns of the hegemonic culture and, consequentially, appropriate the objectifying gaze on the black female body through a white, masculine, heterosexual lens:

Much of the history of Black female body commodification has been founded on the general logic that the Black female body equals sexuality and sexuality for women equals their worth. From “Hottentot Venus” to Josephine Baker to the modern-day “Video Vixen,” the Black female body at one time served as the site of projection for White moral fears and sexual fantasies, and it now does the same for Black audiences.

(“Performing Venus” 236)

While cultural production undoubtedly exacerbates the objectification of *negra* and *mulata* bodies throughout the Americas, *afrofeminista*/black feminist expression

holds the potential to annul (mis)representations through the empowerment of Afro-descendent women as subjects of their histories and agents of their identities. Maxwell insists that her work goes beyond fomenting consciousness and fighting for spaces of inclusion within the male-dominated rap tradition. “Con mi discurso pretendo empoderar más a la mujer, despertarla, hacerla agarrar su fuerza, hacerla percatarse de que tiene las herramientas y que ella misma puede salir de su opresión” (Hernández Hormilla 42).

Similarly, in “Larga o bicho” (“Let the Animal be”) (2002) Afro-Brazilian rap artist Nega Gizza rejects the objectifying label of *mulata* and lyrically redefines herself as a power-wielding black warrior. Laden with resistance imagery, her verses take a militant stance against multiple jeopardy. In order to reclaim agency as a black woman who suffers multiple forms of oppression, the rapper inscribes her body as a weapon of combat, waging ideological warfare against forces of racial and sexual subjugation.

Mulher preta de espirito guerreiro / Quem é, é, sem caô sem desespero /
Não sou mulata não sou mula sou canhão / sou granada que explote a
solidão. . . / Não sou mulher de reclamar de homem mane / Descendente
africana conservando minha fé. . . / Trago na pele a força e minha
juventude / Trago na massa encefalica a negritude. . .

Nega Gizza’s multi-layered deconstruction of the label *mulata* also suggests a rejection of *blanqueamiento/embranquecimento* that challenges standard associations between whiteness and physical beauty conveyed in Hispanic Caribbean and Brazilian discourse. Here, she also explicitly emphasizes the often-overlooked, derogatory origin of

the *mulata* racial classification.¹¹² While the term *mulata* is deemed more favorable than *negra* by hegemonic Brazilian society, Nega Gizza prefers to identify as *negra* and consciously self-names as such in her raps. In “Larga o bicho,” she affirms her identity as an Afro-descendent woman who conserves her faith, carries the force of her youth in her dark skin, and advocates the tenets of negritude. According to Kia Lilly Caldwell, self-identifying as a black woman can be considered as an act of resistance precisely because it involves the inversion and re-articulation of dominant racial significations:

By becoming *negras assumidas*, Afro-Brazilian women contest the unmentionability and devalorization of blackness and bring issues of race to the fore of social discourse. Foregrounding race through the adoption of a black identity also contests hegemonic constructions of Brazilian color categories as privileged forms of (self-) identification. (129)

In addition to resisting the socio-cultural value systems that nourish *embranquecimento*, through the act of self-naming as a *mulher negra*, Nega Gizza extends her identity discourse to the symbolic realm. She proudly imagines herself as a descendant of Zumbí, the quasi-mythical leader of Brazil’s longest-lived autonomous maroon community Quilombo dos Palmares.¹¹³ References to Zumbí’s unyielding militancy in combat appear throughout the rap when Nega Gizza casts herself as an Afro-descendent woman with a warrior spirit. The verse “Sou negra de pele e na mente / Isso

¹¹² Widely used throughout the European colonies to describe mixed-race people of African and European descent, this term derives from the word “mule,” the cross-breed, sterile offspring of a donkey and a horse.

¹¹³ Quilombo dos Palmares thrived for nearly a century in Northeastern Brazil until its 1695 defeat, despite numerous attacks by Dutch and Portuguese colonial powers. Once enslaved himself, Zumbí’s legendary leadership and steadfast defense of Palmares earned him immortality as the reigning cultural icon of heroism and black resistance to hegemonic oppression.

me faz valente / Pois sei que sou descendente do guerreiro Zumbí,” demonstrates the co-optive value in positive African cultural representations. Ruth Hamilton proposes that populations throughout the diaspora look to new and old traditions, myths, and fictitious or even borrowed identities to restore dignity (31). They also utilize these myths, traditions and borrowed identities to “. . . reconstruct connections among people long divided by class, race, and color-- as is the case in Brazil, due to the ideologies of racial democracy and *mestizaje*” (31).

4.7 “No hay verdadera revolución sin mujeres:”¹¹⁴ Conceptualizing Afrofeminismo and Resistance in Cuban Hip-Hop

On the whole, rappers like Maxwell and Nega Gizza exemplify transnational black feminism as they engage in global artistic and intellectual exchanges. Like their international allies, many Cuban hip-hop artists premise their formation of black feminist subjectivity on living memory.¹¹⁵ For example, Odaymara “Pasita” Cuesta, of Las Krudas, stresses that her definition of feminism is far from the ideals espoused by Gloria Steinman. Pasita describes basic principles that have little to do with academic theory, canonized texts, or scholarship. Yet, she theorizes feminism as an organic identity process related to her lived experiences as a black, lesbian woman who confronts multiple forms of oppression in Cuban society (Saunders, 2009, 9). Since the seminal release of the album *Krudas Cubensi* in 2007, Las Krudas tirelessly participate in diverse manifestations of queer *afrofeminista* activism around the globe, including gay rights

¹¹⁴ This subheading is a slogan borrowed from Cuban feminist rap group Las Krudas.

¹¹⁵ See Tanya Saunders’ “La Lucha Mujerista.”

demonstrations, academic conferences, creative workshops and fundraising events. In the article “Sista’ Outsider” (2007), Eric Darnell Pritchard and Maria Bibbs consider the invisibility of queer women of color in hip-hop discourse and explore the contentious relationship that exists between mainstream hip hop (especially the element of rap) and lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender identity (21). Although their analysis is premised on African-American hip-hop culture, it sheds light on the unique space Las Krudas establish for themselves as queer rappers, previously within the confines of communist Cuba, and currently, as Cuban exiles that travel internationally and permanently reside in the United States. Pritchard and Bibbs sustain that the exclusion of bisexual and lesbian women of color from heterosexual male-centered mainstream hip-hop: “. . . creates the need for spaces for queer women of color in the hip-hop community that are less susceptible to cultural colonization, sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia or homogenous dialogues” (29). Accordingly, forums such as websites, online social networks, and festivals are realms in which members of various communities can honestly engage in dialogue within a safe, supportive atmosphere free of propaganda, pressure, and power imbalances (29, 38). Las Krudas successfully advance their art, activism, and personal agendas through these media. Pritchard and Bibbs suggest that such spaces promote artists and introduce fans and artists to one another to share ideas and inspiration, while simultaneously increasing the visibility of queer women of color working as artists and activists to all corners of the globe (38).

Olivia and Odaymara, of Las Krudas, maintain a clear intellectual/artistic vision and tirelessly promote social justice and equality. Their musical production, collaborations, and performances all reflect an acute level of feminist consciousness;

from the ideals they espouse in their rap lyrics to the type of venues they perform at, to the causes and organizations they patronize. Factionalism and militancy are perceived as absent from their value system, which they label “womanist.” Relating the specificity of their experiences through messages of pride and non-violence, Las Krudas encourage local and global communities to respect women, valorize their contributions, resist machismo, and fight peacefully for human rights.

In “La lucha mujerista: Krudas CUBENSI and Black Feminist Sexual Politics in Cuba,” Tanya Saunders elaborates on the group’s conceptualization of feminism. First and foremost, Las Krudas situate their work within the tradition of black Cuban women, including Gloria Rolando and Nancy Morejón, who have offered their own social critiques through the arts (9):

Also, when Las Krudas invoke the names of feminists, they are the names of women, oftentimes Black women, who have been influential figures in Cuban and world history. They also include the names of the women ancestors and their families. Krudas do this in order to locate their work within social change spurred by the actions of everyday women and popular women who have not been written into Cuban history, while linking their struggle to the global struggles facing women, particularly Black women. Las Krudas center their critiques not just on Cuba, but also on issues facing Black women regionally and globally. (9)

Like their African-American counterparts, Cuban *afrofeministas* take issue with feminist icons such as Steinman for normalizing the experience of middle class white

women. Like the first wave of black feminism, *afrofeminismo* responds to the discursive invisibility of women of color. Despite the disparate socio-political contexts and experiences that shape their ideologies, Cuban *afrofeministas* and African-American black feminists share a cross-cultural epistemological bond. These theorists are cognizant of a shared structural framework, wherein historical processes affect cultural practices, living memory, and experience.

Parallels between Brazilian Sueli Carneiro's essay "Ennegrecer al feminismo" and hooks' infamous critique of Gloria Steinman in *Ain't I a Woman* illustrate this transnational ideological confluence. Just as hooks takes issue with first-wave feminists for ignoring the existence of all non-white women, and failing to "tell readers whether it was more fulfilling to be a maid, a babysitter, a factory worker, a clerk, or a prostitute, than to be a leisure class housewife" (1), Carneiro discusses the systematic marginalization of black women in former slave societies like Cuba and Brazil.

First, she argues that the classic myth of feminine fragility has never included black women. "Nosotras --las mujeres negras-- formamos parte de un contingente de mujeres, probablemente mayoritario, que nunca se reconoció en este mito, porque nunca fuimos tratadas como frágiles" (48). Carneiro emphasizes the myth's historical irrelevance to black women, who worked for centuries as slaves, toiling the land, or in the streets peddling goods or prostituting themselves (48). Like hooks, she underscores the irony of the so-called "liberation" of white women via their entry into the workforce, which signifies the transposition of women of color from colonial servitude to modern-day domestic work: "¡Mujeres que no entendían nada cuando las feministas decían que las mujeres debían ganar las calles y trabajar! Somos parte de un contingente con

identidad de objeto. Ayer, al servicio de frágiles señoritas y nobles señores tarados. Hoy, empleadas domesticas de las mujeres liberadas” (48). Carneiro’s argument that black women were never included in the feminine myth, because they were never recognized as fragile, dialogues with Las Krudas’ denouncement of the stereotype of the *negr@* as “strong” and “healthy” (“A mi ke miñongo”). Moreover, Carneiro’s recurring usage of the collective voice (“nosotros”) in her conceptualization of a black female diasporic contingent reinforces the idea that structural oppression forges black feminist communities of consciousness. Echoing other pioneering *afrofeminista* discourses published in *Movimiento*, Carneiro reiterates the centrality of multiple jeopardy to the formation of ethno-racial identity:

Las mujeres negras tuvieron una experiencia histórica diferenciada, que el discurso clásico sobre la opresión de la mujer no ha recogido. Así tampoco ha dado cuenta de la diferencia cualitativa que el efecto de la opresión sufrida tuvo y todavía tiene en la identidad femenina de las mujeres negras. (48)

Overall, these distinct theoretical and artistic discourses form a single intertextual narrative. The common thread of this transnational narrative stresses the ways past mechanisms of oppression evolve into contemporary institutional marginalization. Collectively, *afrofeminista* scholarship and creative expressions bear witness to the magnitude of historic processes that negatively affect Afro-descendent women in ever-changing ways.

4.8 Visual Vocabularies, Virtual Communities: Race, Representation, and Afrofeminista Resistance in Cuban Hip-Hop Media

Nineteenth-century Cuban literature and cultural production paints memorable portraits of fair-skinned *mulatas* intent on refining themselves physically and socially in order to pass for white, and therefore achieve success and esteem in a society structured to oppress Africans and their descendants. The acts of racially passing and resisting oppression both involve a heightened state of consciousness concerning aesthetic presentation of the self. To pass implies leaving behind the aspects of identity one wishes to occult. It involves modifying or concealing undesirable physical traits, or deceiving by omission to gain acceptance in hegemonic culture. For Cuban *afrofeministas*, to resist is to reveal the oppressed aspects of one's self and emancipate the mind from colonial ideologies by inverting the meaning of physical attributes and symbols coded as undesirable by the dominant society. Images featured in "Mujeres en el hip-hop" represent a transformative site of revision where positive inscriptions of blackness and womanhood counteract the tangible negative effects of *blanqueamiento* ideology. Here, the exaltation of black heritage and the appropriation of African markers on the body and through mythologized objects and styles of dress displayed throughout the magazine challenge hegemonic concepts of feminine beauty.

Offset against a black and neon-green graphic background, the collage of informal snapshots of female underground hip-hop artists displayed on the front and back covers of the issue resembles a natural hairstyle spread in *Essence* magazine. *Rapera* Magia López smiles candidly, head tilted; her face framed in a buoyant reddish-brown afro. DJ Yari and Nono, of the duo Omega, strike confident poses. Yari wears a black tank top

decorated by a graffiti-style graphic of three cartoon women emerging from the Venus symbol, arms crossed and defiant. Above them, the shirt reads in English, “We Got Issues.” Resembling the characters that adorn her top, Yari sports large silver hoop earrings and tiny cornrows braided tightly at the crown that burst midway across the scalp into an explosion of ringlets. Microphone in hand, Ismaisy performs in a Rasta-style necklace of black, red, yellow, and green plastic beads. Like La Nena, her hair is tightly plaited along the scalp and spills down her back in thick braids. Yudicet, Mariana, Telmary, and Olivia of Las Krudas wrap their hair in turbans of colorful fabric. Rappers Lucy, Madyori, Odaymara, and Odalys “Wanda” Cuesta¹¹⁶ of Las Krudas display diverse styles of dreadlocks that vary in texture, color, and length.

These informal portraits represent more than passing beauty trends. The natural hairstyles and Afro-centric motifs of self-presentation these artists display reflect their personal ideologies, identity politics, and agendas. The images speak volumes about how race and gender are understood through the lens of hip-hop feminism and how these constructs of identity play into the artists’ individual conceptualizations of beauty. In effect, the beauty practices of these Cuban *raperas* read as visual vocabularies of resistance against *blanqueamiento*.

I borrow the term visual vocabularies from Curator Diana Baird N’Diaye of the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. N’Diaye sustains that visual vocabularies represent aspects of identity communicated through the cultural aesthetics of the arts of the body, dress and adornment, which are more than simply statements of

¹¹⁶ At the time of publication, Odalys Cuesta was a member of Las Krudas. She has since left the group, although she still maintains close ties with group members Olivia Prendes and Odaymara Cuesta (her sister).

personal taste and sense of style. These can be understood as symbols of community and individual self-naming: “as markers of ethnicity, of entitlement, of commitment to faith, a cause or an idea; as avenues of artistic expression and mastery. . . These arts of attire incorporate both the aesthetics of everyday dress and that of ritual regalia; both the production of material culture and the arts of performance.” (Diana Baird N’Diaye, pers.comm., 2010).

With respect to aesthetic displays in the Cuban context, Inés Martiatu claims that from irrefutable positions of power, the white, masculine, heterosexual minority has imposed its vision where beauty, aesthetic, cultural, and religious projections of the black woman have been systematically unexplored, denigrated, and discounted (3). Martiatu posits beauty practice as resistance, explaining that the theme of racial discrimination has elevated connotations in the Cuban hip-hop movement because racism affects the great majority of the movement’s constituents. Against cultural norms, these young people display and manifest racial pride “. . . a través de una proyección estética que desafía el rechazo de la cultura hegemónica europeizante, son sus peinados, su forma de vestir y las expresiones de una religiosidad afrocubana en la Santería y otras religiones, incluso afro caribeñas, cuando asumen las doctrinas rastafaris” (6).

Olivia Prendes and Odaymara Cuesta, of Las Krudas, describe their aesthetic presentation as a declaration of diverse facets of identity, including religious practices, political affiliations, and cultural groups: “Los collares representan Ancestros y la religión yoruba proveniente de Nigeria y asentada en Cuba” (Las Krudas, pers. comm., 2011). These *collares* (also called *elekes/ilekes* in Cuban Santería and Regla de Ocha) hold tremendous visual symbolism for Cubans and practitioners of other Yoruba-derived

religions in Africa and throughout its diaspora. Traditionally, one receives *elekes* during ceremony from a *babalawo*¹¹⁷ in the early stages of initiation into Regla de Ocha. Each *eleke* is strung with a precise number and pattern of tiny glass beads, and its colors represent a specific Yoruba deity.¹¹⁸ The wearing of *elekes* transcends stylistic aesthetics and trendsetting.¹¹⁹ For those that recognize the religious significance of the *collares*, the colorful grouping of necklaces is a sacred beacon signifying the wearer's commitment to a spiritual path. As Diana N'Diaye suggests, ritual regalia such as *elekes* also represent symbols of community and ethnic identity. On the sonic level, musicians incorporate sacred batá drum *toques* into their music to pay homage to Yoruba spirituality. Similarly, for many underground *raper@s* and artists of popular commercial genres like *timba* and *cubaton*, such as Hadelaziz Moreno,¹²⁰ wearing *elekes* is a visual mode of communicating aspects of cultural identity and faith. Without uttering a word, they visually proclaim their belonging to a transnational community of religious practitioners while acknowledging African heritage. Las Krudas frequently don their *elekes* during concerts, photo shoots and public appearances. Yoruba ritual regalia complements the *raperas'* unique style of dress, and the original Krudas t-shirt designs marketed at their performance venues, which feature sacred African cowry shells, Venus symbols and the

¹¹⁷ Priest of Ifá, sacred Yoruba religious doctrine.

¹¹⁸ The most commonly represented Orishas (Yoruba deities) in the initial set of *elekes* include Elegua, Changó, Yemaya, Obatalá and Oshún.

¹¹⁹ Note: The wearing of *elekes* transcends trendsetting *theoretically*. Like any form of ritual regalia, some people adorn these necklaces for purely aesthetic reasons. With the increase of Santería practices in Cuba during the special period, many youth see *elekes* as trendy, and they seek initiation into Regla de Ocha as a symbol of status. In other cases, often-times foreign tourists in Cuba buy *elekes* or *collares* as jewelry or souvenirs, with no understanding of the religious significance they hold for practitioners of Regla de Ocha.

¹²⁰ Hadelaziz Moreno is a Cubaton artist who currently resides in Spain. In Moreno's music video "Como te extraño" (2012), the artist appears wearing his *elekes*.

bold statement *mujeres resistiendo* (women resisting). With respect to their distinctive look, the women explain:

Siempre [llevamos] pantalones; son muy confortables y seguros. Así es como queremos sentirnos para continuar nuestra lucha feminista... [En] nuestros t-shirts, mensajes de música, amor, respeto, justicia y lucha por los derechos de la gente oprimida, de emigrantes y de las mujeres del mundo. [Somos] más casual y menos formal, más barrio y menos burocracia. (Las Krudas, pers. comm., 2011)

Las Krudas flaunt bold, ever-changing hair-sculptures such as mohawks, shaved heads, and cascades of dreadlocks sprouting from patches on a bald scalp. They select these creative hairstyles and adornments conscientiously, explaining that “Nuestra forma de llevar el cabello y nuestras expansiones representan Afrika y Amerika Nativa, resistencia de culturas, anticolonialismo” (Las Krudas, pers. comm., 2011).

Unsurprisingly, the styling of black hair is the most evident site of visual resistance to *blanqueamiento* given the denigration of natural black hair in North America and Hispanic Caribbean cultures. These post-colonial societies ascribe worth to African hair textures along a continuum of perceived “bad hair” to “good hair” based on proximity to fine, silky, naturally straight hair. Ginetta Candelario points to the importance of hair as a defining race marker central to beauty practices, stating that: “Hair, after all, is an alterable sign. Hair that is racially compromising can be mitigated with care and styling. Skin color and facial features, conversely, are less pliant or not as easily altered” (129).

Atómicas re-conceptualize black hair as beautiful in their music and personal styles of adornment. They ask why women opt to destroy their hair by processing it with chemical relaxers when it is alive like vegetation of the thickest forest: “¿Para qué desear un cabello muerto si tu pelo es vivo como la vegetación del más angosto bosque? / Me di cuenta que es mejor llevar dreados, trenzas o moños que procesarlo bajo una química que te ampolla la cabeza coño / (nada)” (“Mi piel oscura,” n.d.). As self-named black women, they appreciate the benefits of wearing dreadlocks, braids or buns as alternatives to blistering the scalp through barbaric straightening regimes. Like Atómicas, the vast majority of Cuban hip-hop *afrofeministas* consciously reject the common use of chemical straightness and flat irons that alter black hair to fit European beauty standards. In “Eres bella siendo tu” (2007), Las Krudas critique hair extensions and chemical straightening techniques, seeing these practices as a continuation of colonialism: “Juguemos nuestro papel, es nuestro tiempo / Artificios desrices y postizos son / Continuación del cuento colonialista no te cojas pa’ eso / Deja esa falsa vista.”

While dominant society still scorns afros and braids as unprofessional and unrefined, Cuban hip-hop feminists opt to wear natural black hairstyles in support of the “Black is Beautiful” ideology, self-acceptance, and the type of female empowerment they espouse in their lyrics and performances. In this manner, the conscious selection of body arts and adornment extends beyond the stylization of stage presence as presentational preferences respond symbolically to historic processes of marginalization. Olivia and Odaymara, of Las Krudas, note a seamless fluidity between their aesthetic expression as artists and their self-presentation in everyday life, explaining that as rappers, there is little distinction between the two realms (Las Krudas, pers. comm., 2011).

María Puerto's interview of hip-hop duo Omega also explores the junction between female rappers' self-conceptualizations as artists and as black women in their day-to-day existence. According to MC Nono, members of Omega express themselves through unique fashion tastes and their individual, fearless ways of standing out. "No tenemos que ser las súper mujeres," she asserts. "Para ser mujeres no tenemos que estar todo el tiempo maquilladas sino naturales, reflejándonos tal cual somos. El que uno tenga los *dreadlocks* o los pelos parados o andemos en pantalones u otra forma de vestir, no quiere decir que seamos varoniles" (33). DJ Yari emphasizes the transmission of visual vocabularies through musical production and authentic self-expression (33), describing how Omega "lets loose" in their songs. They speak of their lived realities and the difficulties facing the Afro-Cuban woman:

En las canciones lo dejamos caer. Hablamos de la realidad, de los trabajos que pasa la mujer negra en Cuba, porque aun hoy sigue siendo discriminada, porque yo he sido discriminada en mi centro de trabajo, en el Hip Hop o en la sociedad. Y eso lo seguimos abordando sin que nos digan: "¡Cállate!," porque es una realidad de la que hemos sido víctimas. A través de las conversaciones con amistades trato de expresar lo que he aprendido estos años, lo que soy, mi propio reflejo. (33)

Cuba's homegrown brand of hip-hop gives women of color a critical forum to consider, as Yari fittingly describes, their own reflections. Female artists draw on personal experiences and observations to expound on the human facet of racial discrimination on the island, where Afro-Cuban women fall victim to racial profiling as *jineteras* and discriminatory hiring practices in the tourism industry that favor employees

with *buena presencia* (good looks, as defined by European standards). Irrespective of gender, Afro-Cuban subjects tend to live as racially-marked bodies under constant suspicion of transgressing moral boundaries in a precarious economy driven by foreign revenue and the coveted tourist dollar. Notwithstanding, since *negra* and *mulata* women are the primary targets of today's peculiar manifestation of multiple jeopardy in Havana and other tourist hot-zones, Afro-Cuban feminist rappers feel compelled to mount the most vocal critiques against this social dynamic. Las Krudas empathize with the plight of their Cuban sisters¹²¹ who practice *jineterismo* as a means of coping with *la necesidad*: “Yo también como tú he hecho cosas mezquinas / Yo también como tú he felado por dos pesos o nada en cualquier esquina / Yo también como tú he sido violentada y llevada a la brutal fornicación” (“Eres bella siendo tu” 2007). Instead of maligning *jineteras* for their choices, Las Krudas offer critical perspectives on the historic objectification of women: “Y hoy seguimos siendo objeto, desvaloración / ¿Qué nos queda? / Prostitución, seducción, esto es solo una costumbre heredá / Pa’ ayudar a nuestra gente en este mundo tan material.” Finally, they offer women alternative ways of imagining themselves that resist prevalent representations in the popular imaginary. Las Krudas intentionally downplay the importance of physical appearance and instead, emphasize the virtues of intellect: “No somos nalgas y pechos solamente / Tenemos cerebro mujer, siente / Abre tus ojos sin lentes la vida constantemente dura / Machismo idéntico sistema de esclavitud / Interioriza tu cuerpo, no es tu única virtud.”

¹²¹ Las Krudas empathize specifically with women currently living in Cuba who practice *jineterismo* due to the dire economic conditions. In reality, female sex workers on the island include women of all colors, not just Afro-Cuban women as per popular stereotypes.

Given that repercussions of prejudice are harder to quantify and appraise through empirical evidence, few academic investigations have adequately evaluated the effects of race and gender-based discrimination to understand how they inflect the qualities that Afro-Cuban women deem beautiful. Although pervasive silence obscures the Afro-diasporic female experience in historical records-- leaving us with limited knowledge of how beauty is inscribed and conceptualized by different generations of Afro-Cuban women-- hip-hop *afrofeministas* speak loud and clear. Rap is a forum for performance artists like Las Krudas and Atómicas to show, tell, and step up to the microphone. From this platform they remedy racial stereotypes by re-inscribing worth and beauty in historically denigrated physical traits, such as dark skin, kinky hair, and full lips.

In the chorus of “Eres bella siendo tú,” Las Krudas profess: “Eres bella siendo tú / Ébano en flor / Negra luz / Eres bella siendo tú / Cuerpo no es única virtud / Eres bella siendo tú / Inteligencia y plenitud.” Over a hauntingly delicate guitar piece, “Mi piel oscura,” by Atómicas, address *negr@s* and *mulat@s* that degrade their skin color and prefer to remain ignorant about black history. Lilting, feminine voices push listeners from victimized positionality towards psychological transformation. Atómicas encourage self-reflection on Afro-centric conceptualizations of beauty by deconstructing culturally ingrained forms of black denigration and critiquing the widespread equation of blackness with social delinquency in contemporary Cuba. The final verses of “Mi piel oscura” dialogue with Fernando Ortíz *mulata* character,¹²² who aspires to pass for white through Euro-centric re-inscriptions of the body. Atómicas ask: “¿Será posible que destruyas tu raíz olvidando realmente quien eres? / Rechazando donde historia sacrificada para

¹²² As described in Ortíz’ economic study *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar*.

adoptar un rol que no te pertenece es lo que prefieres.” In conclusion, they offer a cautionary message regarding the ideology of *blanqueamiento*; “Si negro naciste negro morirás / Aunque a pura casualidad cambie el color de tu piel tu sangre revelará esa matriz que pues siempre perdurará, / Sí, / Perdurará.”

DJ Yari is non-judgmental in her conceptualization of black beauty, suggesting that it should be an expression of pride and individuality, above all else:

Quiero que la gente entienda que la mujer negra es bella y que debe sentirse orgullosa de lo que es y de cómo nació. . . [Quiero] demostrar que la mujer no solo tiene que tener su pelo de una forma para ser bella: está la mulata que tiene el pelo rizado, la negra que se puede lacear el pelo o no; que con su figura puede hacer lo que quiera y lo que entienda. (Matienzo Puerto 33)

Classified as *mulata* in the Cuban race/color continuum, Yari recognizes herself as such, while also exalting her African heritage by identifying as a *negra* in solidarity with other black women. The process of self-naming then becomes an act of resistance through which this artist ruptures conventional classifications in order to establish less restrictive black female identity discourses. “En nuestro discurso [el discurso del rap dúo Omega] también está evitar un estereotipo de la mujer negra, porque ella tiene varias facetas. ¡Que se sienta orgullosa de sus raíces, de sus costumbres!” (33). Yari exemplifies this philosophy through her personal beauty practices and eclectic expressions of dress and adornment. She frequently alternates between cornrows, afros, and other natural black hairstyles, and flat-iron-straightened hair. Her fashion tastes reflect a range of

creative combinations. Yari says that although she often enjoys “camouflaging herself like a chameleon,” her preferred look involves long braids embellished with colorful beads, and her favorite pair of wooden earrings, painted red, yellow, and green, and carved in the shape of Africa. These accessories flow well with vibrant attire from urban labels like South Pole and Sean John (DJ Yari, pers. comm., 2011). Yari bears an uncanny resemblance to popular African-American singer-songwriter-musician Alicia Keys, and draws much inspiration from Keys as a fellow *mulata* and international style icon. Overall, transnational hip-hop culture showcases constant stylistic cross-fertilizations among Afro-Centric motifs, styles popularized in 1990s reggae and dancehall reggae music scenes, and modern African-American hip-hop and R&B trends, to cite just a few examples. In many cases, visual vocabularies of dress and adornment single-handedly communicate ideologies, agendas, and fundamental aspects of the wearer’s identity. With respect to their particular conceptualization of beauty and its determinants, Las Krudas opine:

Desde nuestras experiencias personales pensamos que la belleza es amplia. Natural o artificial. Coloreada. Diversa. Intensa. Más bella aun con conciencia, autenticidad y autonomía. . . La belleza viene de dentro y desde el interior te adorna también externamente. La belleza es revolucionaria, transformadora. La belleza tiene formas interminables. Eres bella siendo tú. Lo que elijas con pasión será tu belleza. (Las Krudas, pers. comm., 2011)

Playfully, they warn: “A veces la belleza también es engañosa, ¡cuidado!” (Las Krudas, pers. comm., 2011). In contrast to the limited projections of race, gender, and

beauty that shape popular discourse, Las Krudas endorse a holistic, optimistic, and inclusive understanding of the concept. At present, the impact of visual vocabularies of resistance rapidly transgresses temporal and geographic boundaries. This phenomenon reflects the ever-increasing numbers of Cuban hip-hop artists residing permanently outside of the island, in *La Yuma*.¹²³ The majority of *raperos* leave Cuba through cultural exchange, by invitation, through marriage to a foreigner, or after receiving government permission to tour. Cuban underground hip-hop artists reconvene in *La Yuma*, strengthening previously established social networks and liberally exploring novel creative outlets. Improved telecommunications systems and technological access abroad lead Cuban *raper@s* to engage international allies in a constant virtual exchange of audio-visual artifacts that prioritize anti-colonialist, positive Afro-diasporic identifications. *Movimiento*'s current editor in chief Sandra Álvarez recently created a

¹²³ *La Yuma* is a popular contemporary Cuban vernacular term for “abroad.” Most commonly, *La Yuma* refers to Europe and the United States. In Cuba, the term is also used to describe someone perceived to be a foreigner.

Facebook¹²⁴ fan page (ca. 2010) for the magazine featuring photos of artists, artwork, and workshops in Cuba as well as downloads of the elusive first four issues.¹²⁵

Residing at present in Austin, Texas, Las Krudas imbue heightened significance in visual presentation as they broadcast symbolic displays of pride globally via web-based file sharing. On their personal Facebook sites as well as their official fan page, they post performance videos and activist pictorials as well as candid and staged images that visually reinforce their anti-conformist attitudes and affiliations with Yoruba religious practices, queer issues, and feminism. Unfortunately, the promotional images of these revolutionary agendas remain elusive for the majority of Cubans on the island who do not own personal computers, and for whom internet access is severely limited.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Although a handful of underground hip-hop groups have personal accounts, and members of the *Agencia cubana de rap* use Facebook to post event invitations and promote hip-hop symposiums, it is imperative to note that regular access to the Facebook social networking website remains an elusive forbidden fruit for most Cubans on the island. Revered national celebrities and employees of the tourist sector are occasionally able to set up legitimate Facebook pages or personal accounts, although the criterion for selection and permission to set up such accounts is enigmatic. These pages display limited, controlled content subordinate to the national agenda. They always represent the country in a favorable light. Private Facebook accounts are generally unattainable for citizens due to the blocking of most social media sites. However, Cubans with financial means intent on joining Facebook manage to connect through black market internet networks. Savvy techies stimulate a booming underground market where they charge users for the initial set up and regular access to a private Facebook account. Many of these contraband accounts are exclusively purchased for business purposes, such as the establishment of romantic relationships with foreign suitors who represent viable tickets out of the country as marriage prospects (A. Cruz, pers. comm., 2011).

¹²⁵ These issues are nearly impossible to locate in print. In general, *Movimiento* is difficult to obtain, especially outside of Cuba. The magazine is circulated in limited venues on the island (typically national bookstores that sell to citizens in the Cuban peso currency). The Cuban Rap Agency prints a limited number of copies of each issue.

¹²⁶ Telecommunications in Cuba is considered one of the least-developed systems in the Western Hemisphere (Torres 2011). Among a multitude of political and economic factors, the trade embargo imposed by the United States in 1960 has greatly retarded the nation's entrance into the digital age. Cuba did not establish its first internet connection until 1996 and cell phone usage remained illegal until 2008. Since its advent, less than 2% of the country's population has access to the internet in the course of a given year (Torres 2011). Privileged use of the unrestricted outside internet network connection enjoyed by the majority of the world's users is exclusive to government officials and tourists, who pay hefty fees to connect in spaces circumscribed to privileged Cubans and foreigners, such as state institutions and hotel lobbies. Cuban citizens who locate means of access outside of the black market actually connect to a

4.9 Conclusion

The acts of racially passing and resisting oppression both involve a heightened state of consciousness manifested in aesthetic displays. To pass implies leaving behind the aspects of identity one wishes to occult. It involves modifying or concealing undesirable physical traits, or deceiving by omission to gain acceptance in hegemonic culture. For Cuban hip-hop *afrofeministas*, to resist is to reveal oppressed aspects of one's self and emancipate the mind from colonial ideologies by inverting the meaning of physical attributes and symbols coded as bad, ugly, and African by the dominant society. Through rap, Cuban underground hip-hop artists wield "la verdad como escudo y la oralidad como arma" (Gonzales Chacón 22) and reclaim agency in their representation as *negras* and *mulatas*. Likewise, the physical exaltation of black heritage and the appropriation of African markers on the body, and through mythologized objects and styles of dress, denote aesthetics of resistance. These visual displays of ethno-racial pride

domestic *intranet* wherein content is restricted to nationally regulated encyclopedias and databases. The highly-anticipated installation of the ALBA-1 double fiber optic underwater cable link with Venezuela completed in February 2011 has yet to yield a significant increase in Cuba's internet speed (*BBC News* 2011). At present, internet usage among the general population remains low while international calling costs to and from wireless devices as well as landlines on the island are still priced among the world's most expensive. Free personal email accounts are reserved for employees of universities, hospitals, and other government institutions. Email access for the majority of the population is also highly regulated and complicated by cost and lack of availability. The acquisition of complimentary personal email addresses from popular public domains such as Yahoo, Google or Hotmail is a possibility only to those with black market equipment and/or significant monetary remittances sent from abroad to facilitate the purchase of unregulated outside internet access. The majority of email addresses are distributed through an in-country system primarily reserved for employees of aforementioned government institutions. Although most Cubans do not have individual private accounts and rely on the sharing or borrowing of email accounts for interpersonal communication on the island and abroad, this practice is technically illegal. Legitimate personal email accounts must be purchased from the national postal service Correos de Cuba for a hefty initial set-up cost that does not include the monthly maintenance fee required for the account to remain active. Given that the greater part of the population subsists on a state salary equivalent to fifteen U.S dollars per month, email is far from a necessity and rarely factors into the budget of an income funded exclusively by the state and paid in Cuban pesos. What's more, individuals who do purchase and pay to maintain a Correos de Cuba account can only access their account at a physical post office location where they are charged an exorbitant minute-by-minute fee after waiting in long lines to use slow, outdated computers. Moreover, this fee is charged in Cuban convertible pesos (CUC).

contrast sharply with traditional representations of Afro-Cuban women in cultural production. In the sonic realm, songs like “Eres bella siendo tu” attempt to remedy the exclusion of the dark-skinned *negra* and her physiognomy from national discourse by establishing positive associations between blackness, morality and physical beauty. Lyrically, *afrofeminista* rap artists reference a shared ancestral past and conjure historical memory as a mechanism of (re)building contemporary conceptualizations of black identity and, by extension, Afro-Cuban female representations in the cultural imaginary. *Raperas* such as Magia López condemn characterizations of the wanton *mulata* who fixates on passing at all costs and manifests *blanqueamiento* ideology as pathology through the erasure of African phenotype and procreation with white men. Although some *mulata* hip-hop artists like DJ Yari recognize their mixed-race heritage, they pointedly reject *blanqueamiento* and affirm their ethno-racial identity as Cuban *negras* in solidarity with black feminists globally. For instance, Atómicas encourage *mulat@s* to embrace African ancestry instead of carrying their blackness as a burden: “. . . Que no te pese nunca que ser negro es un orgullo / Seas mulato / Se ha acabao’ / Eres negro igual y tú lo sabes.” In this sense, self-naming represents a deliberate act of black racial pride and Afro-diasporic solidarity.

The archival deficit of African female voices of the African diaspora signifies the absence of their stories from the Western historical record, which still privileges the written word over oral expression. However, hip-hop *afrofeminismo* belies the notion that Afro-Cuban women remain silent victims of problematic national discourses, crystallized in cultural archetypes of the *negra* and *mulata*. Cuban underground hip-hop media underscore the vital role visual vocabularies of resistance play in combating

(mis)representations of silenced populations, and influencing conceptualizations of aesthetic worth and beauty among women of African descent. Through creative production, these women become subjects. They recover, project, and preserve black women's experiences by sharing their personal stories and by self-naming in the manner they consider most fitting.

Cuban hip-hop media production has flourished abroad over the last four years in global virtual communities unreachable from the island. Freedom from mitigation by official state parameters has produced an inevitable shift wherein the rapid transmission of creative media encourages participants to re-think and re-imagine insular concepts of race, gender, identity, and representation in real-time. Increased media literacy outside of Cuba creates an aperture to theorize *afrofeminismo* in real and meaningful ways without fear of reprisal from the Cuban revolutionary agenda or accusations of factionalism from the nation's purported racial democracy. From the island to the diaspora, Cuban hip-hop feminism establishes emancipating discourses for the black female subject in anticipation of her eventual liberation from the confines of race, gender, and social marginality in Cuba and throughout the Americas. Yet, I argue that as hip-hop artists synthesize their ideas and build bridges within these virtual and tangible spaces, transnational black feminist networks must remain cognizant that island voices are not drowned out by the growing digital divide. Currently, media justice issues complicate web access and the engagement of insular Afro-Cuban feminists in the landmark dialogues they helped initiate. In the new millennium, virtual black feminist communities must collaborate to prevent segments of the diaspora from being silenced by modern manifestations of multiple jeopardy in the digital age.

CHAPTER FIVE

Black like Us:¹²⁷

Negotiating Race, Representation, and Resistance in the Dominican Diaspora of the United States

5.1 Introduction

In this section, I shift my discussion of race, representation, and resistance in the *afrofeminista* imaginary to Dominican diaspora communities of the United States.

Chapter five explores the discourse of *afro-dominicanas* (Afro-Dominican women) whose diasporic experience has led them to perform and Afro-Latina identity in ways that contest and challenge hegemonic discourses. The point of my analysis is to elucidate how this identity is performed, and what elements of hegemonic racial/gender discourses are challenged in revisionist discourses.¹²⁸

My use of African-American black feminism as a theoretical lens to analyze Cuban underground hip-hop in chapter four, and Dominican diaspora performance in chapter five, offers new socio-cultural and historic foundational frameworks for comparative research on the common threads entwining identity discourses throughout

¹²⁷ I borrow this subheading from a dialogue in Loida Maritza Pérez' novel *Geographies of Home* (190).

¹²⁸ It is significant to point out that the women in these interviews and the characters in the novels I discuss are not necessarily representative of all diasporic subjects.

the Hispanic Caribbean, Brazil, and the U.S. Dominican diaspora. In examining cultural production across temporal and geographic lines, I aim to advance a more transnational interpretation of the socio-cultural and historic factors shaping ideas about race, gender, and representation in the Americas. Beyond emphasizing the irrefutable socio-historic and cultural correlations that exist among dispersed Afro-descendent populations, I intend to illustrate how constant movements and migrations among Afro-descendent populations result in unfixed diaspora formations that progressively complicate gender and ethno-racial subjectivities. When approached from an *afrofeminista* standpoint, such a transnational vision of race, gender, and representation sheds new light on King's multiple jeopardy model and supports Ruth Hamilton's theory of communities of consciousness.

I begin chapter five by examining a representative body of Dominican literature spanning the nineteenth and twentieth century. Premised on longstanding hegemonic ideologies of anti-Haitianism, I aim to highlight the discursive strategies these foundational texts employ to cast Dominican national identity as Hispanic/European, and, by extension, non-black. My review of Dominican insular literature serves as a foundation for discussing narrative performances of gender and ethno-racial identity in the Dominican diaspora of the United States. Specifically, I explore how Dominicans of African descent navigate insular paradigms of ethno-racial identity and gender. This exploration serves as a departure point for examining how the experiences of black Dominicans on the U.S. color line inspire revisionist discourses of Dominican national identity that inflect the act of self-naming in the diaspora.

I interpret the structured interview testimonies of Afro-Dominican women as well as Dominican-American fictional narratives as performative sites of identity. My analysis of these complementary materials suggests that for subjects of narratives of identity born in the Dominican Republic who immigrate to the United States during childhood and adolescence, as well as for many U.S.-born Dominican-Americans, negotiating Dominican-American duality and multi-faceted subjectivity may involve a rejection of insular ideologies of *blanqueamiento* and machismo. The introspective nature of these negotiations leads the female performers in my research to self-name as black through a dialectic approach reminiscent of the self-naming practices of hip-hop feminists.¹²⁹ On the representational level, these Dominican-American women reclaim agency over their ethno-racial, socio-economic and sexual identities (among other defining factors) by co-opting and transforming black feminist ideology into highly individualistic interpretations of *afrofeminismo*.

The primary sources of analysis in this chapter consist of a selection of cultural artifacts from the Dominican Republic and the distinct U.S. Dominican diaspora communities of New York City and Washington, DC. These cultural artifacts include text, image, interviews, and other performative sites of identity memorialized in the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum exhibit *Black Mosaic: Race and Ethnicity among Black Immigrants in Washington DC (8/21/94 – 8/7/95)*.¹³⁰ According to former Anacostia Museum Director Steven Cameron Newsome, *Black Mosaic* explores the

¹²⁹ I discussed the self-naming practices of Cuban hip-hop feminists and their allies such as Las Krudas, Magia MC, Queen Nzinga Maxwell and Nega Gizza in the previous chapter. These artists consciously choose black identities as a political statement.

¹³⁰ As I will elaborate further in this chapter, my analysis of the *Black Mosaic* interviews as primary source sites of identity performance builds on sociologist Ginetta Candelario's research on this exhibit for *Black behind the Ears* from a cultural studies perspective.

cultural, national, linguistic, and social diversity that enriches black community life in the Washington DC metropolitan area:

The exhibition allows us to examine contemporary manifestations of the African diaspora, share memories of childhoods spent in the Caribbean and Latin America, and gain insight into reasons for seeking a new life in the United States. Through the use of photographs, video and sound recordings, documents, artwork, and a variety of objects, this exhibition looks at ways in which people choose to identify themselves, adapt to a new cultural environment, maintain customs and traditions, and, ultimately, form viable, living communities.

Between 1993 and 1994, Anacostia Museum field researcher Hector Corporán interviewed different generations of Dominican women living in Washington DC. Born and raised in the Dominican Republic, Corporán emigrated to the States as a boy in 1959 to join his mother, one of the first embassy domestic workers from Santo Domingo and a widely revered matriarch of Dominican metro society. Corporán lived through significant historical and racial climate changes in the United States. Like many transnational Afro-Latin@s of his generation, he teetered precariously on the U.S. color line at the apex of mounting tension between American blacks and whites. Unique life experiences inflect his perspectives and opinions, inform his eclectic work, and shape the deep-rooted local and international artistic and social networks he established over time.

I believe that Corporán's status as a pillar of the DC Latino community factors prominently in the quality and outcome of the interviews he conducted as a research liaison for *Black Mosaic*. Firstly, Corporán's social connections and contacts contributed

to an over-representation of Afro-Dominican women in the *Black Mosaic* exhibit archives. That is to say, despite the near-invisibility of this demographic in U.S. mainstream society, Dominican women were interviewed and represented in *Black Mosaic* disproportionately in comparison with other Afro-Latin@s, such as Afro-Brazilians, Afro-Cubans and Afro-Panamanians. Of additional value to my research is the open and structured quality of Corporán's formal interviews with Dominican women such as Juana Campos, Julia Lara, Maricela Medina, and Francia Almarante. The archived recordings of these encounters play out like conversations among old friends reminiscing over scenes from a shared past. Content-rich, this intergenerational cross-spectrum of one-on-one interviews abound with sensorial descriptions of spaces, places, and emotions. Dominican voices defy historic silence and mainstream underrepresentation by delineating the parameters of representation, and by humanizing the temporal and socio-cultural shifts felt by Afro-Latin@s caught in the U.S. racial paradigm. These narratives illustrate untold intricacies of urban community life in Washington DC, offering a counterpoint to accounts of the Dominican experience in New York City. In this way, they also speak to the overwhelming ways geographic location affects identity formation in Dominican diaspora enclaves. All things considered, Corporán's fieldwork thoroughly enriches my analysis of race, representation, and resistance in Dominican diaspora cultural production of the *Black Mosaic*.

This section also explores contemporary Dominican-American fiction including Junot Díaz' *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) and Loida Maritza Pérez' *Geographies of Home* (1999). In many ways, these fictional narratives complement the testimonies of Dominican women memorialized in Corporán's interviews. Collectively,

these diverse primary source materials delineate a discourse of ethno-racial identity based on temporal and geographic passages. I argue that the novels represent counter-hegemonic discourses that interrogate insular identity politics and pose a revisionist view of history. Both Díaz and Pérez utilize elements of fiction including character, plot, setting, theme, and style to redefine Dominicaness from a contemporary diasporic perspective. The content and form of their writing differ dramatically from that of nineteenth century foundational Dominican literature, which projects steadfast nationalistic values imbued with anti-Haitianism and machismo, as noted by Collado. I sustain that *Oscar Wao* and *Geographies of Home* offer unique responses to Santo Domingo's established notions of *hispanidad* and racial purity while toying with gender roles and the concept of Dominican masculinity. Specifically, Díaz and Pérez challenge these constructs by underscoring their contradiction and their conspicuous omissions from Dominican historiography.

As island-born Dominican-Americans, Díaz and Pérez essentially “write back” to Santo Domingo and its foundational literary canon by deconstructing traditional insular identity boundaries to forge new spaces of belonging for Afro-Latin@s in the North American racial paradigm. My analysis of the fictional narratives of these authors also touches briefly on the reception of Spanish-language translations of their work in the Dominican Republic. Likewise, other contemporary literary and artistic production by self-named Dominican-American *afrofeministas* including Daisy Coco de Filipis, Jaqueline Polanco, Josefina Báez, and Ana-Maurine Lara politicizes questions of gender, sexuality, race and identity, leading to a profound questioning and diasporic re-positioning of these concepts, and ultimately, theorizations of *afrofeminismo* in relation

to the unique subjectivity of Dominican-American women. Hence, I suggest that the emergence of vanguard voices in Caribbean Latin@ literature as well as venues of public culture engage transnational dialogues between homeland and diaspora that reframe Dominican identity, thus bespeaking its unstable, mutable nature.

5.2 Writing Away Blackness from Brazil to Santo Domingo:

Indigenist Literature and the Fictionalization of National Identity

According to Dawn Stinchcomb in *The Development of Literary Blackness in the Dominican Republic*, by mid sixteenth century, Hispaniola's indigenous population was virtually eradicated by disease and the violence of the Spanish conquest. With the advent of the transatlantic slave trade in 1501, the island's black population grew rapidly and Dominicans of African descent quickly outnumbered whites in the census polls (2). Despite attempts on the part of the ruling Spanish elite to "whiten" the island by encouraging the immigration of poor white Canary Islanders, Santo Domingo's black population continued to increase. Intense efforts to whiten the island through racial miscegenation failed as Canary Island immigrants shunned intermarriage with blacks and original white Dominican families emigrated to neighboring Spanish colonies (2). Stinchcomb suggests that Santo Domingo's long history of foreign invasion and occupation explains the island's need to establish itself as white (2). While Spain's neglect of Santo Domingo had left it vulnerable to the incursions of French and English colonial powers, it was the multiple invasions and twenty-two-year occupation of the black republic of Haiti from 1822-1844, which radically shaped Dominican racial

ideology. Stinchcomb draws from Dominican historian Frank Moya Pons' *Manual de historia dominicana* (1977) to explain that in order to account for the obvious physical differences between the white descendants of the Spaniards and the descendants of their African slaves, by the seventeenth century:

Dominicans recognized only two groups that would define Dominicaness: *blancos* (whites and lighter mulattoes) and *blancos de la tierra* (darker mulattoes). As for the majority of the population, which was black- the *negros* (slaves or the offspring of African slaves) – their existence in Dominican discourse began to be erased. (3)

In short, the Dominican Republic constructed a national identity in direct opposition to its neighbor to the West. Haiti gained notoriety as a sovereign nation of ex-slaves, and because Dominicans associated blackness with their former oppressors, they came to view themselves as a European-descendent society. Silvio Torres-Saillant¹³¹ agrees with this explanation, adding that “. . . the founding fathers of Dominican cultural discourse . . . invariably subscribed to a definition of national identity that constructed Dominicans as heirs of Iberian values dating back to the conquest and colonization” (216).

Dominican national identity politics have historically been influenced by hegemonic political agendas disguised within patriotic literature. In the nineteenth century, Santo Domingo's post-independence literary efforts to assert a uniquely

¹³¹ See Torres-Saillant's *The Intellectual History of the Caribbean*.

Dominican national identity inspired numerous canonical works of poetry and prose by eminent poets, writers and historians such as José Núñez de Cáceres, Salomé Ureña de Henríquez, José Joaquín Pérez, Gastón Fernando Deligne, José Gabriel García, Manuel de Jesús Galván, and César Nicolás Pensón, among others. Dedicated to defining the Dominican nation and cultivating national historiography, these nineteenth-century authors portrayed Santo Domingo as a proud and resistant young nation whose roots could be traced to the Spanish colonizers and the aboriginal Taínos who originally inhabited the island of Quisqueya.¹³² The didactic posture inherent in nineteenth-century Dominican letters falls in line with Doris Sommer's assertion of the inextricability of politics from fiction in the history of nation-building (5-6).

As one of the country's most celebrated writers of romanticism, José Joaquín Pérez' work exemplifies the strong nationalistic and Indigenist undercurrents propelling poetry and prose of the post-independence period. In Pérez' poem "Ecos del destierro" (1877), the poetic subject assumes the melancholic tone of a loyal expatriate. Pérez' narrator identifies himself as a poor pilgrim and troubadour, and the lament he sings resonates with disillusionment over the despotism that has ravaged his homeland. Yet in the face of hopelessness, he offers exclamations of resistance against tyranny: "¡que a ti no puede un sátrapa violento / imponerte su ruda tiranía!" (Qtd. in Zayas 48). Through apostrophe, the poetic voice addresses his nation and encourages a defiant stance against the threat of oppression. In like manner, he exclaims, "Juega en las linfas del Ozama undoso, / besa los muros do Colón, cautivo, / de negra y vil ingratitud quejoso, / el peso

¹³² The island of Hispaniola is also referred to by its Taíno name of Quisqueya.

enorme soportara altivo” (Qtd. in Zayas 48). Pérez’ reference to the winding Ozama River in the first verse alludes to his fervent nationalism. The Ozama, whose name is derived from a Taíno word, runs along the eastern part of the Caribbean coastal plain and divides the colonial city of Santo Domingo. Christopher Columbus was said to have entered Hispaniola via the Ozama, where he supposedly docked his ship upon arrival. Occasional allusions to the river appear as a patriotic marker throughout the writing Pérez produced while in exile.

In “Ecos del destierro,” Pérez links the acts of playing in the symbolic Ozama River and kissing the walls belonging to Columbus. In doing so, the poet ascribes a positive subtext to these noteworthy elements of Dominican topography and history. Likewise, the imagery of the natural curvature of the Taíno-named River alongside the steadfast walls built by the Spaniards allegorizes the foundational link between the Taíno and European origins of the Dominican nation. The complementary images of frolicking through a fluid, meandering body of water and kissing an unyieldingly solid wall contrast sharply with the abrupt insertion of the word “captive” in the second verse and the glaringly negative descriptions in the third and fourth verses. Pérez ascribes the color black to the querulous ingratitude and haughty, oppressive weight the captive must withstand. Far from being gratuitous, this linkage between vileness, subjugation and blackness harks back to a polemic Dominican-Haitian history of invasion and tyranny. Thus, using literature as a vehicle to propel his nation forward, Pérez exemplifies the mechanisms through which nineteenth century writers atoned for their young nation’s painful past by constructing binary ideals of the righteous national “self” versus the malevolent foreign (read: Haitian) “Other.”

The poetic voice also takes on a paternalistic quality in the fourteenth stanza: “Ve y si junto a mi madre, mi inocente / dulce huérfana implora por mí al cielo, / estampa un beso en su virgínea frente, / signo de amor y paternal desvelo” (Qtd. in Zayas 48). Here, the distance between the poetic subject and his homeland is tangible through the description of his orphaned daughter, yet the physical expanse between symbolic father and daughter accentuates the protective masculine authority of the narrator. In the first and second verses, the orphaned daughter is rendered sweet, innocent, and helpless. The meticulous language of the third and fourth verses complicates this image by idealizing the virginal status of the female child, which must be safeguarded by the unfaltering vigilance of her father.

In addition to upholding ideals of nationalism and paternalism, José Joaquín Pérez played a vital role in popularizing the strong Indigenist sentiment characteristic of foundational Dominican literature of the Romantic period. Widely recognized as “el cantor de la raza indígena,” Pérez wrote extensively about Taíno culture, incorporating elements of Taíno legend and historical experiences into his writing as he elaborately reimagined colonial contact between the Iberian conquistadores and Quisqueya’s natives.

Of interest to this study is the glaring irony that Pérez and his contemporaries opted to compose fictional Dominican historiographies featuring idealized sixteenth-century Taíno characters at a historical moment when Santo Domingo’s population was predominantly African due to involvement in the lucrative slave trade. In their preoccupation with national independence, foundational Dominican texts such as Pérez’ poetry anthology *Fantasías Indígenas* (1877) and Manuel de Jesús Galván Galván’s *Enriquillo: Leyenda dominicana (1503-1533)* (1882) strategically exclude the African

element of Dominican society while glorifying Indigenous bravery and Spanish cultural contributions. From its idealized depiction of the noble savage to the thematic incorporation of impossible love, religion and liberty, Galván's *Enriquillo* exemplifies the Indigenist trend in Latin American Romanticism popularized by Euro-descendent authors of the dominant classes.

Set in sixteenth-century Hispaniola at the inception of colonization, the novel chronicles an epic tale of colonial contact between the Spanish and the valiant Taíno Cacique Enriquillo of the Jaragua Kingdom. Throughout the text Galván relays facets of the Taíno work ethic, social organization, religion and cultural practices in a positive light. Like most Indianist depictions, the European gaze of the author (positioned as an outsider of native cultures) filters through the narrative voice and manifests itself as a superficial appreciation and admiration for the Indigenous way of life. However, the narrative voice also reflects a patriarchal, Eurocentric doctrine that esteems only those aspects of Taíno culture that are deemed valuable by European standards. For example, in describing the Kingdom and Jaragua, Galván states:

Regido por una soberana hermosa y amable; habitado por una raza benigna, de entendimiento despejado, de gentiles formas físicas; su civilización rudimentaria, por la inocencia de las costumbres, por el buen gusto de sus sencillos atavíos, por la graciosa disposición de sus fiestas y ceremonias, y más que todo, por la expansión generosa de su hospitalidad, bien podría compararse ventajosamente con esa otra civilización que los conquistadores, cubiertos de hierro, llevaban en las puntas de sus lanzas, en los cascos de sus caballos, y en los colmillos de sus perros de presa. (59-60)

In addition to reducing Jaragua's inhabitants to idyllic abstractions, Galván paints them as naïve and innocent using sweetly condescending language. Without directly stating their inferiority to European civilization, in this description and others Galván insinuates European superiority in his simplistic interpretations of Indigenous peoples through a Western lens. *Enriquillo* has remained popular in the Dominican Republic well into the twenty-first century and its appeal is due in part to the fact that Galván posits the novel as a national legend and intertwines true historical figures with fictional characters throughout the narrative. The literary techniques, tropes, and action-packed plot of *Enriquillo* make for a captivating historical tale that complemented Galván's political agenda to whiten the island through alliances with Spain and the United States. Furthermore, by detailing the battles and persecutions of Enriquillo and his staunch, macho resistance to tyranny, Galván alludes to the Dominican independence struggle. All things considered, he succeeded in rousing national pride in an imagined Indo-Hispanic Dominican identity for generations to come.

The Indigenist works of Pérez and Galván are reminiscent of José de Alencar's nineteenth century Brazilian novels *Iracema* (1865) and *O Guarani* (1875), which discursively deny the existence of Afro-Brazilians by allegorizing Brazilian identity through the imagined colonial contact between European and Indigenous protagonists.¹³³ In her critical work *Foundational Fictions* (1991), Doris Sommer theorizes that many novels of nineteenth-century Romanticism in Latin America serve as fictional representations of the national situation and/or often idealized projections of the future of the country. Through her analysis of nationalism, eroticism, and the dynamics of power

¹³³ For more on the theory of "foundational fictions" and Alencar's novels, see "*O Guarani* and *Iracema*: Brazil's Two-Faced Indigenism" in Sommer's *Foundational Fictions*.

and desire manifested by the union between characters of different ethnic groups or social strata, Sommer extracts a didactic lesson of nation-building from each novel. She explains that the *romance* or love-story in its nineteenth-century use was boldly allegorical, and that:

The classic examples in Latin America are almost inevitably stories of star-crossed lovers who represent particular regions, races, parties, economic interests, and the like. Their passion for conjugal and sexual union spills over to a sentimental readership in a move that hopes to win partisan hearts. (5)

The first concern of Sommer's study is to emphasize the inextricability of politics from fiction in the history of nation-building. Secondly, in order to make sense of the phenomenal success well into the twentieth century of Latin America's romantic novels, Sommer locates an ongoing erotics of politics by linking national ideals to the literary depictions of "natural," heterosexual love and nonviolent consolidation at mid-century (6). Thus, the amorous unions in nineteenth-century Latin American literature communicate ideal models of nationhood which, to varying degrees, manifest inextricable links to the national political agenda. In the chapter of her book entitled "*O Guarani* and *Iracema*: Brazil's two Faced Indigenism," Sommer explores fiction as a national foundation in two famed novels by Brazilian writer José de Alencar. Sommer suggests that these crossover historical romances between Indian and white lovers appealed wildly to the general public as a result of their reaffirmation of Brazilianness based on interracial love rather than on the literary charm of the novels themselves (140-41).

While *O Guarani* (1857) and particularly *Iracema* (1865) both contain tragic elements dramatically woven into the fabric of each tale, their endings allude to an optimistic future for Brazil in the form of early seventeenth-century racial miscegenation. The construction of the nation takes root in the union between Peri and Ceci, an Indian man and white woman, and the racially-inverted couple of Martim and his Indian princess Iracema in *O Guarani* and *Iracema*, respectively. In *O Guarani*, the successful escape of Ceci and a newly-civilized (i.e. baptized), pistol-toting Peri into the forest at the end of the novel suggests the triumphant survival of Brazil through the solidarity of its white and Indian elements. *Iracema* carries this allegory to a more explicit level. Although the Indigenous heroine loses her home, her family, and eventually her life, her relationship with Martim proves fruitful through the birth of their *mestizo* offspring Moacyr. Despite the fact that Iracema has perished (perhaps symbolically), her son would live on in the “civilized” world of his father, helping to recruit new European settlers for the spot where his mother was buried. Moacyr alludes to the emergence of a new, uniquely Brazilian national population born from a mythic past and a prosperous future.

In examining the nation-building allegories of *O Guarani* and *Iracema*, it must be noted that while the love affairs in both novels seem genuine and the theme of racial miscegenation is portrayed in a positive light, Peri and Iracema must be compromised either through “civilization” or death in order for their interracial union to bear fruit. Thus, Alencar’s novels ideologically suggest that the Indian only becomes intertwined into the fabric of the new society at the cost of his/her people, his traditions, and frequently, his/her life.

While historically, the formation of American nations resulted from the genocide and virtual eradication of indigenous peoples, Alencar essentially reconstructs a national past by integrating the romanticized Amerindian as an integral element of the Brazilian legacy. As Sommer notes: “What could be more Brazilian and proclaim independence from the Old World more clearly than casting the nation’s protagonists as Indians and as those first Portuguese who, in turning their backs to Europe, chose to unite with the natives?” (147). Sommer’s statement rings true, and from this perspective, one can comprehend the immense effect *O Guarani* and *Iracema* have had on the national consciousness. Like a watercolor, Alencar’s writing conveniently blurs the distinction between historical-fact and fiction, thus depicting a noble Indian identity which his fellow countrymen can proudly accept from a historical distance without confronting the weightier ethno-political realities of their indigenous heritage. In her article “The Red and White: The “Indian” Novels of Jose de Alencar” (1983), Renata Mautner Wasserman explains:

He [Alencar] is creating myths of origin for his nation, and by affirming the value of hybridism, he will forge a link between the first phase of colonization – when the Portuguese took Indian women and started peopleing the land, inviting whole Indian tribes to settle around new forts and trading posts to help defend the land against French and Dutch inclusions – and the European view of the unspoiled inhabitant of the New World as an example and a hope for redemption for a cruel and decadent civilization. (817)

The acknowledgement of Brazil's Indian ancestry in nineteenth-century literature was a means by which to culturally distinguish the New World nation from its colonial oppressor, Portugal. Thus, Alencar's famed fictions served as unifying narrative foundations for Brazil's national genealogy. In relation to the national "myths of origin," Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1991) theorizes that "nation-ness" is a conglomeration of cultural artifacts whose creation towards the end of the eighteenth century resulted from the "spontaneous distillation of a complex 'crossing' of discrete historical forces" (4). Anderson notes that, once created, these forces have the capacity to be transplanted to various social terrains and to merge with an extensive variety of political and ideological constellations, creating a distinctly "imagined" national community (4-6). Anderson sustains that print-languages laid the groundwork for the proliferation of national consciousness, and this statement elucidates the impact literature has had on the ideological formation of "nation."

Like their Brazilian counterparts, Dominican Indigenist texts provided convenient foundational myths of origin for the Dominican nation based on the romantic projections of the Creole elite rather than the historic and demographic realities of the young nation. Stinchcomb discusses how writers like Galván redefined whiteness to mean not black, ascribing a nuance to the term that resulted in the definition of Dominican as opposed to Haitian (8). Moreover, through conspicuous ellipsis in their texts, authors of Dominican foundational fictions planted the ideological seed of negrophobia which Trujillo's brutal dictatorship propagated in discourse and anti-Haitian practices throughout the twentieth century.

In *Haitian-Dominican Counterpoint* (2003), Eugenio Matibag states: “Blinded by chauvinist or ethnocentric prejudice, these writers in search of the nation’s roots refused to consider the enslaved Africans or Afro-Dominicans as forbearers” (170). He goes on to argue that, “Those whose labor sustained the colony even during the harshest years of misrule and neglect in their eyes barely deserved mention” (170). In fact, a survey of nineteenth-century canonical Dominican literature confirms the obvious evasion of Afro-Dominicans and their instrumental role in nation building as worthy literary topics. Instead, as we observe in Pensón’s editorials¹³⁴ from the newspaper *El Teléfono* as well as in his fiction, a strong anti-Haitian sentiment tinged with racial undertones permeates the writing of this period. The rare appearance of “sympathetic” black characters such as Pensón’s Taito Polanco in “Barriga verde” (“Green Belly”) paint Afro-Dominicans in a rather patronizing light. Even those who exhibit loyalty and goodness are typically depicted as provincial, poor, uneducated, inarticulate, unattractive, and simple-minded. As is the case with Taito Polanco, the nineteenth-century black character serves as the perfect model against which to highlight the ideals of worldliness, wealth, intelligence, and beauty ascribed to the Euro-descendent character. In sum, with the exceptional rare appearance as an underdeveloped literary character or an unfavorable parody, the Afro-Dominican is denied in nineteenth-century Dominican letters.

When compared with Hispanic Caribbean neighbors who share similar historical experiences of conquest, colonization, and transatlantic slavery such as Cuba and Puerto Rico, twentieth- and twenty first-century Dominican literature is marked by a

¹³⁴ See César Nicolás Pensón’s editorials in the nineteenth century newspaper *El Teléfono*. Of note is an article from May 18, 1891 entitled “Siempre los mismos” which criticizes Haitians.

conspicuous dearth of celebrated national writing that acknowledges African heritage. Although the theme of blackness materialized as poets including Tomás Hernández Franco, Francisco Dominguez Charro, Rubén Suro, and Antonio Fernández Spencer participated in the Caribbean *poesía negroide* movement spanning the 1920s, 1930s and early 1940s, these representations of black culture are viewed as problematic from a contemporary standpoint. Similar to Indianist literature, *poesía negroide* was predominantly composed by white males who rendered simplistic, stereotypical representations of *cocolos* (West Indian migrant workers), Haitians, and Afro-descendent women. Manuel de Cabral and Pedro Mir stand out as Dominican poets who have adopted a more critical perspective of black themes in poetry.

As in the previous century, politics played an instrumental role in the nation's literary expression. Trujillo's lengthy reign from 1930 until his assassination in 1961 undeniably stifled the organic development of Afro-Dominican literature. The dictatorial regime dominated television, radio, and print media outlets and obliged all Dominican writers to turn their attentions toward Trujillo. Besides having their work censored, Santo Domingo's literati were coerced into writing commemorative anthologies of Trujillo's tenure in power. In *Black behind the Ears*, sociologist Ginetta Candelario argues that the negrophobia inherent in Dominican representation should be understood as part of a geopolitically framed racial project of U.S. imperialism which intersected with Dominican nation-building projects through anti-Haitianist ideology and discourse (14). Those projects, notes Candelaria, coalesced during Trujillo's regime: "when the Dominican state fully institutionalized anti-Haitianist national-identity formations and

began to circulate in the United States its own travel-narrative accounts of Dominican racial identity” (14).

The erasure of blackness was enforced in theory and in practice. In the 1930s, government discourses of racial whitening and anti-Haitianism became official policy. In an effort to whiten the island through racial miscegenation, Trujillo implemented an open door immigration plan which encouraged Jewish refugees and Spanish Civil War exiles, among others, to settle in the Dominican Republic. In 1937, he executed the brutal massacre of tens of thousands of Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans along Santo Domingo’s northeast border with Haiti. Trujillo’s actions performed the ideology of *blanqueamiento* in real and terrifying ways. As a racial whitening project, *blanqueamiento* placed individuals in a complexion-based color continuum, or caste system of social privilege which to this day employs terms such as *indio* to account for the presence of dark(er)-skinned Dominicans despite the sixteenth-century eradication of the Taíno population. Aida Heredia details this color-based prejudice in *La representación del haitiano en las letras dominicanas* (2003). She explains that racism, along with the color hierarchy so valued in the construction of national identity:

Es savia que impregna todos los componentes de la sociedad: el sistema educativo desde la primaria hasta la enseñanza superior, los centros culturales, los premios nacionales de literatura, los cargos diplomáticos, la descripción física en las cédulas de identidad personal, los proyectos de reforma agraria y de desarrollo de la frontera, los programas de televisión, la industria del turismo, las iniciativas urbanas de “llevar la cultura” a las

zonas fronterizas con Haití, la violación de los derechos humanos de los haitianos y los dominico-haitianos. (vii)

The overt negation of Dominican blackness, valorization of whiteness and abhorrence of the Haitian described by Heredia continues on a discursive level and in this sense, Dominican literature remains chained to a violent history. Furthermore, the complexity of national racial ideology in the Dominican psyche goes hand in hand with notions of hyper-masculinity. Like the anti-black aesthetic, the cultural expectation of Dominican machismo was introduced through the paternalism of nineteenth-century literature and co-opted as a fundamental element of the *Trujillato*.

Numerous scholars such as Eugeio Matibag, Juan Flores, and Nick Nesbitt, to name a few, examine legacies of violence in the Caribbean and their influence on the formation of diasporic identities. Likewise, Lúcia Suárez' study *The Tears of Hispaniola* (2006) considers the memory of violence exposed through Haitian and Dominican diaspora literature. I agree with Suárez' contention that "The violence produced and reproduced in Hispanic Caribbean culture is fashioned on macho bravado, based on caudillismo . . . and originates in the European "discovery" and colonization of the Americas" (107). Along these lines, I will suggest that to the extent that they were reinforced and propagated throughout Trujillo's regime, the chauvinistic and anti-black archetypes of nineteenth century Dominican writing, which remain tightly woven in the fabric of contemporary cultural discourse, can be viewed as by-products of a tumultuous history culminating in the physical and psychological violence inflicted by the dictatorship.

5.3 “Yo soy latina pero soy negra también:”

Blackness, Dominicaness, and the Inevitable Act of Self-Naming in the Diaspora

“Yo soy latina pero soy negra también,” declares Maricela Medina during her field interview with Hector Corporán for the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum exhibit *Black Mosaic: Race and Ethnicity among Black Immigrants in Washington DC*.¹³⁵ A Howard University PhD, historian, professor, and entrepreneur born in the Dominican Republic in 1951, Maricela’s transnational story is one of migration, adaptation, and negotiation through the multiple national, cultural, and ethno-racial subjectivities she embodies as a bilingual Afro-Latina. My intention in presenting Maricela’s interviews alongside a range of primary source texts examined in this chapter lies not in comparing her testimony to fictional narrative, but rather, in demonstrating how these materials confirm instances of a transnational discourse of ethno-racial identity. Maricela’s narrative testimonies complement the fictional narratives by Díaz and Pérez. Collectively, these texts delineate the gradual evolution of a black/Latin@ double consciousness among transnational Afro-Dominicans subjects, who must negotiate racial paradigms, both in the Dominican Republic and the United States.

As a young child, Maricela lived with her mother and aunt in a modest home on the small farm of Coco Seco in the eastern central province of Monte Plata, a rural region

¹³⁵ Maricela Medina was interviewed by Hector Corporán on 8/3/94. Disk 10, Box 120. *Black Mosaic: Race and Ethnicity among Black Immigrants in Washington DC*. The Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum. 8/21/94-8/7/95. All interview transcriptions of audio files are my own and were completed between March and April 2010.

intersected by the Ozama and Yabacao rivers. Growing up during Rafael Leonidas Trujillo's dictatorship, she recalls singing the Dominican national anthem in unison with the masses and unfailingly attending church on Sundays, where all of her male cousins served as altar boys. To demonstrate national allegiance and avoid the repercussions of political dissention (whether real or perceived), every household displayed a portrait of Trujillo prominently in the foyer, and people referred to him as "The Great Benefactor." "We didn't call him 'dictator' back then," she chuckles. In her youth, Maricela conformed to the common aesthetic and social etiquettes established for young Dominican girls during the *Trujillato*. She maintained her hair long and well-groomed in meticulous *peinados* (hairstyles), wore skirts and dresses, always primped before leaving the private realm of the home and entering the public space of *la calle* (the street), and never traveled on public transportation, as society deemed this means of travel inappropriate for *señoritas* (young unmarried women).

Family, education, and community were fixtures in Maricela's upbringing. She learned to read and write long before she reached school age. Her mother assumed personal responsibility for Maricela's literacy and required her to read out loud regularly. The family's limited collection of household texts included the Holy Bible, a medicine book, and the newspaper *El Caribe*. On her daily walk to attend the afternoon shift of elementary school from 1:00 PM to 5:00 PM,¹³⁶ Maricela would pass children drawing pictures on the concrete sidewalks with *carbón* (charcoal) as love-struck drunkards blasted the same melancholy song over and over again from a tired old jukebox inside the bar across the street from her house. She loved watching the diminutive preschoolers

¹³⁶ Officials divided the school day into shifts so that all of the town's children could attend.

toddle along on their way to *la escuelita*,¹³⁷ schoolbooks balanced precariously on their heads and tiny chairs in tow, eager to draw maps of Hispaniola because their Caribbean island resembled the shape of an alligator. The air still pregnant with *boleros*¹³⁸ and lingering minor chords of *amargue*¹³⁹ when she left the schoolhouse each evening, Maricela and her neighborhood friends would gather to scale the large tree that loomed over Mamá Juana and Papá Jesús' home. Through the open window the youngsters watched the elderly couple's black and white television, the first and only in the neighborhood, with great anticipation of dramatic new plot developments in the popular *novelas* (soap operas).

Maricela's transnational journey from Dominican Republic to the United States represents just one generational link in an extensive chain of migration and diasporas. In the early 1930s, her grandparents traveled to the Dominican Republic from Saint Kitts and Nevis as migrant workers, arriving alongside masses of West Indian immigrants who flooded the country mid-twentieth century. These workers filled increased demands of the island's rapidly growing sugar export economy. Like many sugar laborers, Maricela's grandparents entered the Dominican Republic on two-year work contracts and stayed on after the expiration of their contracts. This period marked a significant demographic shift in the ethno-racial composition of the Dominican population as West Indian blacks from the English-speaking and Francophone Caribbean settled and established permanent

¹³⁷ Preschool and primary school in the Dominican Republic are often referred to as *la escuelita*.

¹³⁸ The bolero is a traditional style of Dominican guitar music believed to have roots in Cuba.

¹³⁹ Bachata music is known as *la música del amargue* for its melancholy, nostalgic thematic content. Marginalized as music of the lower classes until the mid-twentieth century, bachata music was officially outlawed in the Dominican Republic during the Trujillo dictatorship and did not receive radio airplay until 1962 following Trujillo's assassination.

residence in Santo Domingo, while also maintaining cultural and linguistic ties to their countries of origin.¹⁴⁰

When Maricela's maternal grandmother emigrated from Nevis, she left three daughters behind in the care of relatives and never returned for them. After settling in the Dominican Republic, she raised three more daughters, including Ana Stanley, Maricela's mother. Generally speaking, black sugar laborers suffered widespread poverty, deplorable living conditions in the *bateyes* (barracks), and pervasive discrimination. Nevertheless, first-generation West Indian-Dominican sugar laborers like Ana possessed a cultural/linguistic plurality and familiarity with the English speaking world that proved advantageous to their socio-economic advancement within Dominican society, and eventually, in the emergent Dominican diaspora communities of the United States.

In 1962, Ana Stanley emigrated to the United States, leaving Maricela in the custody of her father while Ana worked to establish a new life for herself and her daughter in Washington DC. This transition impacted Maricela's world significantly given that she was not raised by her father. An agricultural entrepreneur, Melchoir Medina owned a slew of produce trucks and a rice factory. Not unlike the majority of successful Dominican businessmen and politicians of high social ranking, Medina married within his own social class and also juggled a revolving assortment of extramarital relationships. By the time Maricela reached adolescence, Medina had fathered a considerable brood of offspring from many different mothers. This situation was acceptable, if not expected, for a man of Medina's socio-economic standing. As

¹⁴⁰ Maricela cites the establishment of the African Methodist Episcopal church in the Dominican Republic as one example of the maintenance of cultural ties from the West Indies.

Maricela explains, Melchoir Medina was highly revered by everyone; from his many women and children to the teams of workers who served him faithfully. At the same time, his children were cautioned never to speak loudly in his presence or upset him in any way. To Maricela, he represented a distant patriarchal dignitary more than an active parent figure. She still maintains a vivid mental image of her father as the traditional, classy *tigüere dominicano*¹⁴¹ posed in the cab of one of his company trucks puffing a *puro habanero*,¹⁴² his elegant panama hat cocked to one side.

Before migrating to Washington DC, Ana Stanley had worked in the Dominican Republic as cook and housekeeper for one of Melchoir Medina's brothers. Medina's nephew Fredys was well connected to the ruling class as a pilot who flew personal planes for Trujillo's infamous son Ramfis. In 1961, government officials sent Fredys to the U.S. embassy as a military attaché. Shortly after arriving in Washington DC, he arranged a diplomatic visa for Ana to come to the capital and continue her domestic service work in his home, and in the residences of prominent embassy families. Similar circumstances played out for other black female domestics towards the end of the Trujillo dictatorship with the great exodus of high-ranking government officials from the Dominican Republic. When diplomats and military elite fled for exile in the U.S., many brought with them the service workers who faithfully served their families on the island. In this way, Ana Stanley and her small cohort of female domestics became the first (Afro-) Dominican immigrants to establish themselves permanently in Washington DC. These women not only set down roots for the city's Dominican diaspora population, but as

¹⁴¹ In this section I will further discuss the Dominican male cultural prototype of the *tigüere* as it relates to Lipe Collado's characterization of *el tigüere dominicano*.

¹⁴² Upscale brand of Cuban cigar.

some of the very first Latin American immigrants to settle the area, they also played a monumental historic role in founding Washington DC's Latino community.

During the day, Ana Stanley cleaned embassy residences in the upscale Dupont Circle neighborhood. At night, she returned to her humble residence in the more-affordable nearby city of Bethesda, Maryland to sleep. Ana unfailingly sent half of her \$60 salary back to the Dominican Republic each month to pay for Maricela's food, clothes, and costly tuition. These remittances shifted the gendered socio-cultural expectations placed on Maricela as a young Dominican girl. In essence, financial support from abroad helped Maricela circumvent many of the barriers and limitations placed on her half-sisters and other women in the Coco Seco community. For example, Melchoir Medina strictly forbade his daughters from wearing pants. However, he made an exception for Maricela, allowing her autonomy in her wardrobe and styles of dress since the clothes were sent by her mother from the U.S. Although the education of females was not always valued in those days, Maricela's schooling became a top priority with Ana's financial support. Ana placed her daughter in the primary care of Melchoir Medina's wife for two years so that she could attend the María Auxiliadora boarding school, an elite institution run by Spanish nuns. "My mother had goals, dreams," says Maricela. "She always wanted me to continue with my studies."

Maricela left the Dominican Republic on June 11, 1964, at the age of twelve. She took an airplane for the first time, flying from Santo Domingo to Puerto Rico to Washington DC's Friendship Airport, her final destination. Vividly, she recalls key thoughts and images that significantly influenced her pre-adolescent consciousness in the

days and months preceding her trip. While attending to *diligencias*¹⁴³ in Santo Domingo, Maricela was struck by the pale complexion, platinum blonde hair, and piercing blue eyes of the U.S. Consulate officer. She had never seen blonde hair, blue eyes, and pink skin on any person in real life as this combination of physical features was unusual among the Dominican population. Having observed only white American actors in Hollywood films, and white tourists on the island, she assumed that all Americans shared these fair features. “I did not know there were blacks in the U.S. besides my mother,” she exclaims with amusement.

The experience of transnational migration and adaptation to the North American racial paradigm dramatically transformed Maricela’s race consciousness (or lack thereof). In spite of the existence of race/color discrimination in the Dominican Republic and Trujillo’s national identity politics of *blanqueamiento* and anti-Haitianism, these questions did not penetrate her idyllic childhood in Monte Plata in any significant way. On the island, brown skin and African features are not in contention with cultural conceptualizations of Dominicanity or Hispanic/Latino identity given the country’s large Afro-descendent population. Maricela blended in culturally and linguistically with the general population. The insular environment did not require Maricela to think critically about notions of “ethno-racial identity” and “belonging” and thus these questions were non-issues in her youthful world.

However, life in the U.S. involved constant experiences and interactions that obliged Maricela to contemplate identity alongside the infinite complexities and

¹⁴³ In Dominican Spanish, *diligencias* in this context refers to the legwork required for obtaining visas and other travel/immigration documents.

contradictions this concept evokes. Consciousness regarding the tangled subjectivities of gender, ethnicity, and race/color blossomed upon her arrival in the States. Maricela describes the moment she landed at the airport and first laid eyes on her mother after two long years apart. She was shocked at Ana's Americanized manner and physical appearance. Her mother spoke English rapidly and no longer dressed in Dominican clothes. Her *peinado* was different. Through her daughter's eyes, these linguistic and aesthetic changes somehow made Ana seem less *dominicana*.

Maricela came of age in Washington DC in the sixties and seventies during the civil rights era, a time of powerful socio-political change in the United States instigated by acute, longstanding racial tensions on the U.S. color line between American blacks and whites. She and Ana lived on 17th Street while Maricela attended classes at the Americanization School on 19th Street. Initially, the neighborhood's predominantly African-American population stunned her. Maricela was taken aback at seeing black children playing in the streets and black women sitting outside on their stoops, gossiping jovially as their fingers rapidly wove wooly tresses into tight cornrows and plaited tiny braids, stringing the ends with colorful plastic beads held in place by rubber bands. She found these scenes both comforting and disturbing at the same time. Sunday matinees of Roy Rogers at the Monte Plata movie theatre in Dominican Republic rendered a radically different portrait of American life. The DC metro area's large black majority shook everything Maricela thought she knew about the U.S. and American culture. On the other hand, she explains that "It was comforting in a sense that my mother and I aren't going to be the only ones." Thus inasmuch as she initially viewed African-Americans through the lens of a naïve cultural outsider, at some level, Maricela also recognized that as Afro-

descendants, she and her mother belonged to the African-American demographic since U.S. dominant society perceived them as “black.”

In Washington DC, mother and daughter found camaraderie among other Dominicans. They socialized almost exclusively within the local Latin@ Caribbean¹⁴⁴ community of embassy domestic workers and their families during Maricela’s adolescence and teenage years. “Everyone would go places with their kids. As kids you went where your parents went.” Maricela and Ana would gather socially in the homes of friends on Thursdays: “maid’s day off.” All of the children learned Dominican folkloric dances from the “lady with a glass eye,” and once the local church ordained a Dominican priest, everyone would attend Sunday mass together. However, beyond the tight-knit locus of their Spanish-speaking social circle, Maricela grappled with English language learning and vernacular challenges that negatively affected her academic performance for some time. Likewise, she struggled to acclimate to the divisive socio-linguistic/ethno-racial dynamics that awaited her in the high school hallways:

One of the things I noticed, and I noticed them in high school, is that even us Hispanics as we used to cling together, hang around each other, part of the reason for that is we have the same language. Stuff like that. But one of the things I remember very vividly is that even in those groups you could see people sort of gravitating towards one group or the other, when, you know, we went through this stage. And I know I did myself. I didn’t

¹⁴⁴ Prior to the 1980s, the working class Latin@ community in Washington DC was predominantly comprised of Cubans, Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, and a sprinkling of other nationalities. A large influx of Central American immigrants from El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua changed the Latin@ composition of the DC metro area during 1980s. This demographic shift is attributed, in part, to the civil wars and political instability in Central American during this time period.

want to be drawn into this racial situation in the United States. People saying, “are you black or are you Hispanic?”

Furthermore, outside of school, she witnessed pervasive conflict between blacks and whites along racial lines. White flight to the suburbs in the aftermath of riots following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King rapidly transformed city neighborhoods and zoning for the DC public education system. Among other events, the impact of such experiences compelled Maricela to adapt to hegemonic U.S. culture and racial paradigms as a means of developing the skills to succeed in her host country. Throughout her interview with Hector Corporán, Maricela reflects on the evolution of her double consciousness as a black Latina. She revisits many moments that shaped her gendered subjectivity on the U.S. black/white color line: experiences that eventually compelled her to choose an African-American identification.

Raw emotion permeates her theorization of taboo topics such as Dominican blackness, *blanqueamiento*, and the myth of national identity. Moreover, Maricela’s biographical narratives shed light on gender roles, ethno-racial identity, and *afrofeminismo* from the rare perspective of a cosmopolitan, college-educated *afro-dominicana* PhD who dominates Spanish and English, and who fluidly traverses multiple international, cultural, and socio-economic realms. Consequently, Maricela alternates naturally and seamlessly between testimony and critical historical perspectives as she articulately excavates her living memory to contemplate the significance of being black, *dominicana*, Latina, and female in America. Her life stories resonate with similar biographical experiences retold through the work of Pérez, Díaz, and Josefina Báez, among other artists, writers and performers. Collectively, they convey the inability of

contemporary hegemonic society to accommodate their presence as multifaceted transnational subjects within existing conventions.

On the structural level, I argue that the spoken words, printed pages, identity performances, and other artifacts of this analysis constitute informal appeals for official recognition, validation, and space within Dominican national discourse and the U.S. racial paradigm. Given that Dominican-Americans such as Maricela Medina (presumably) lack political power and influence on the personal level, the act of speaking out represents a declaration of resistance. As they resist, these voices rupture a chronic silence surrounding prejudice that extends from Hispaniola to the mainland and throughout Latin America.

Several minutes into Maricela's *Black Mosaic* interview, Corporán abruptly steers their discussion towards the heart of the matter, point blank. He asks her to describe the ethnic composition of the Latin@ communities in Washington DC in comparison to New York City with respect to the identity politics of blackness. "Well that's one of the things Latins are not supposed to talk about; color and race!" she retorts. "Well, let's talk about that!" Corporán cheekily replies.

5.4 Writing Back to the Island:

Revisionist Discourses in Dominican-American Fiction

Growing Dominican communities in New York, Washington DC, Boston and Philadelphia, as well as suburban towns like Lawrence, Massachusetts are rapidly changing the cultural landscape of the United States. Established immigrants raise new generations of Dominican-Americans in the diaspora, arrange emigration visas to bring

family members from Santo Domingo to the States, and travel back to the homeland with greater facility via economy airlines like JetBlue.¹⁴⁵ The continuous geographic shuttling of bodies between island and mainland inevitably generates the movement of ideas and shifts in belief systems. Thus while Dominican communities expand and transform abroad, insular notions of race and to a lesser degree, gender, begin to erode as their historic and socio-political infrastructures deteriorate in the diaspora.

Literature represents a powerful tool of reflection, and Dominican-American authors such as Loida Maritza Pérez and Junot Díaz utilize fiction as a forum to question the normative dynamics of *hispanidad* and machismo in the Dominican community. As I previously examined in several examples of canonical Dominican literature, the line between history and narrative is ambiguous, at best, for each text is imbued with some level of subjectivity and agenda. Therefore, I sustain that *Geographies of Home* and *Oscar Wao* can arguably be read as revisionist discourses.

I interpret Pérez' *Geographies of Home* as a counter-hegemonic text that critiques Dominican identity through a transnational gaze. In relating to the haunting odyssey “home” of the main character Iliana, Pérez exposes the inheritance of Dominican racial prejudice and machismo offset against a stark Brooklyn backdrop of poverty and disenfranchisement. I argue that the multiple oppressions endured by Iliana and the identity negotiations she faces further complicate King's model of multiple jeopardy. Moreover, I view violence as an overarching paradigm that extends beyond the boundaries of Iliana's immediate story. With respect to her ancestral past in the

¹⁴⁵ JetBlue and other economy airlines currently offer frequent flights to Dominican Republic at discounted prices from major cities along the U.S eastern seaboard.

Dominican Republic, violence colors a migratory transatlantic history beginning with the African slave trade and carried through the trauma of *Trujillato*, the destitute living conditions on the island and the ravaging immigration experience. Violence then manifests itself through North American racism and social disenchantment while it permeates the locus of Iliana's dysfunctional Dominican family. In New York City, the bleak reality of the present collides with violent remnants of the past until there is scant distinction between these chronological realms. In this way, violence delineates a trajectory of poverty, racial prejudice, machismo and misogyny from Santo Domingo to Brooklyn and beyond. However, by reframing key constructions of race and gender through the act of writing, Pérez actively participates in creating a space of identity and belonging for working class Afro-Caribbean women in the North American context.

The unique approaches of more recent diaspora novels such as Díaz's 2008 Pulitzer prizewinning novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* also challenge constructs of *hispanidad* and masculinity by addressing the ellipses of Dominican history, as exemplified through the Indigenist texts of Romanticism. Díaz deconstructs *blanqueamiento* by including footnotes in his novel that directly dispute longstanding "truths" and strategic historical omissions in the Dominican literary canon. This technique allows the author to discuss at length the historical role of the *mujeriego* (womanizer) and underscore blackness as a key element of Dominican identity, albeit through outrageous and self-consciously informal verbiage. Moreover, Díaz deftly manipulates questions of race, and to a lesser extent, machismo by fashioning central protagonists who both exemplify the prototypical Dominican playboy, *prieta* (dark-

skinned woman) and *parigüayo*¹⁴⁶ while simultaneously debunking these cultural clichés. With respect to the diverse voices in Dominican diaspora fiction, I maintain that Junot Díaz most daringly breaks the Eurocentric tradition of Dominican letters to critique patriarchal ideologies and embrace African heritage as an essential component of Dominicanity. Like *Geographies of Home*, Oscar Wao also gives visibility to the Dominican diasporic community as its members navigate their unique experiences as racialized and gendered subjects.

Primarily narrated by Yunió, Oscar's streetwise, macho roommate, the novel offers biographical snippets of the amorous misadventures of Oscar and his colorful family members. Yunió's anecdotes oscillate between the Dominican Republic, Washington Heights and Patterson, New Jersey, and each geographical shift reveals the uncanny interconnectedness of (seemingly) unrelated misfortunes. The gradual fusion of these disparate storylines drags Oscar toward impending doom at the hands of the ancient fukú curse, which has ravaged its way through his lineage.

In contrast to the historic glorification of European contributions to Dominican culture by canonical writers such as Manuel Rueda, Manuel de Jesús Galván, and Max Henríquez Ureña, Junot Díaz begins his novel with an alternative foundational discourse. Through the sharp-witted voice of Yunió, he describes the fukú curse as originating in

¹⁴⁶ *Parigüayo* is a Dominican slang term loosely equivalent to the insults "chump" or "loser." It is rumored to have come from the English "party watcher," a term applied to the American soldiers who attended parties during periods of U.S military occupation in Dominican Republic. Dominicans called the Americans "party watchers" (pronounced in Spanish as "*parigüayos*") because of their wallflower-like tendency to observe the social scene from the periphery while Dominican partygoers danced and celebrated. Today, the colloquialism is most often used to describe a male who has no luck with women, and who is therefore deemed a failure, and decidedly un-masculine. The less-common feminine form of the word (*parigüaya*) can be used to describe women who do not dress well or who lack fashion sense. *Parigüaya* also operates as an insult referring to a woman's naïveté or ignorance. When employed negatively in Spanish, this Dominican term can carry a similar connotation as the words *jíbaro* (Puerto Rico) and *guajíro* (Cuba), depending on the context of its usage.

Africa: “. . . carried in the screams of the enslaved...the death bane of the Taínos, uttered just as one world perished and another began . . . a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles” (1). Emphatically, he adds that “. . . the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the fukú on the world, and we’ve all been in the shit ever since” (1). Thus the African fukú curse enters the novel as a vibrant character on a mission to avenge the catastrophic fate of its peoples by spreading doom to the New World. In blaming Europeans for unleashing the evil fukú and identifying Christopher Columbus as the fukú’s first European victim, Díaz positions his discourse in direct opposition to post-independence nineteenth-century writing such as José Joaquín Pérez’ “Ecos del destierro,” which exalts Columbus and the Iberian explorers as the island’s founding fathers and the moral compasses of Santo Domingo. In effect, Díaz strips Dominican history of its Eurocentricity by denouncing Spain’s celebrated “discovery” of the Americas and, instead, inserts an alternate construct of African historic agency, despite the malevolent nature of the fukú.

While his ironic humor differs greatly from the melancholy tone of Pérez’ novel, Díaz’ passage also resurrects images of the violent aspects of history which inflect present experience. His reference to the role of conquest and colonization in the annihilation of the Taínos and the exploitation of hundreds of thousands of Africans in the sugar industry does not escape the reader. Furthermore, Yunió mentions that both Puerto Rico and Haiti have their own version of the fukú. In this sense, the curse functions as an ancient link between the African diasporic cultures of the Antilles, allowing Díaz to stress the idea that the Dominican Republic and Haiti have more cultural commonalities than traditionally acknowledged in Dominican rhetoric.

From the start, Díaz renovates Santo Domingo's national myths of origin by introducing African heritage as a vital and valuable component of his legend. Although his treatment of gender proves less innovative than that of race, Díaz establishes intersectionality between these concepts, which illuminates key aspects of identity formation in the U.S. Dominican diasporic community. Consequently, *Oscar Wao* rewrites Dominican identity as pastiche and in this sense, the novel functions as a transnational, twenty first-century foundational fiction.

The United States experienced an influx of immigration from the Dominican Republic at the end of the Trujillo dictatorship in 1961 and as a result of the U.S. invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1965 (Luis xii). Dominicans are considered to be the newest members of the Caribbean diaspora in the United States. Yet according to William Luis in *Dance Between Two Cultures* (1997), their presence in Latino communities was not noticeable until the 1970s and 1980s. Like Puerto Ricans, the majority of Dominicans left their homeland to escape declining economic conditions only to encounter similarly devastating circumstances in their diasporic communities. In *Magical Urbanism* (2001), Mike Davis warns that in the worst-case scenario, many of today's Dominican immigrants could replicate the bitter experience of the Puerto Rican diaspora due to the disappearance of key sectors of employment, such as manufacturing (103-08). He muses that: "Despite the stereotype of a *bodega* on every street corner in upper Manhattan, Dominicans are on the verge of displacing Puerto Ricans as the poorest major ethnic group in the city with 36% in poverty. . ." (108).

Iliana's family typifies this statistic in *Geographies of Home*. After the *Trujillato*, the large family attempts to escape destitution and the noxious effect of the dictatorship

by emigrating in clusters from Santo Domingo to Brooklyn, “where the horror of nightmares appeared full-blown in life.” Yet despite fifteen years of moving from apartment to apartment, the concept of “home” still remains elusive. Iliana’s mother Aurelia dreams:

Of going home to a place not located on any map but nonetheless preventing her from settling in any other. Only now did she understand that her soul had yearned not for a geographical site but for a frame of mind able to communicate any place as home. (137)

The family’s motivation for emigrating is vital to conceptualizing the link between the host environment of the literary characters and the forces which compel them to chart new identities on and off the island. As Luis points out: historic events vary the experiences of Hispanics from the same country (xiii). The (dis)similarity of historic experience in the homeland is further exaggerated by disparities of wealth, political ideology, phenotype, and reason for (one’s family) leaving the island of origin. In this sense, shared conditions in the host country as well as in the diaspora often trump national differences when it comes to articulating a common understanding of identity through the medium of literature.

For example, while Dominican-American protagonists such as Carla, Sandra and Yolanda of *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) also carry the burden of violent (political) legacies etched into the living memory of their families, Julia Álvarez’s characters do not contend with the externally imposed violence of poverty and racism, and therefore I argue that they fail to penetrate the convoluted confines of nationality,

gender, class, and race as profoundly as protagonists of the urban working class diaspora literature such as Pérez's Iliana and Díaz's Oscar.

Born on the island and raised in the U.S., Pérez is one of the first contemporary Dominican-American authors "write back" to Santo Domingo by producing a pioneering, thematically perilous text that maps previously uncharted territory.¹⁴⁷ Pérez leads a new generation of Dominican-American women writers such as Nelly Rosario, Chiqui Vicioso, Jaqueline Jiménez Polanco, and Ana-Maurine Lara who address the historic silence and invisibility of black females through literature and critical theory. During a classroom lecture for literature students at the University of New Mexico (2008), Pérez discussed her exclusion from Santo Domingo's official discourse. She revealed: "As a black Latina I don't officially exist in my country." In this talk, Pérez emphasized her connection to the African diaspora while recognizing that although not a historian, she feels compelled as a novelist to fill in the gaps of history for those whose voices have been underrepresented and ignored. Junot Díaz communicated a similar sentiment during his 2008 book tour. He expressed a fascination with the "shadows of history" and the tremendous amount of history which bleeds into the present. He then elaborated on the vacuums in historical records and his interest as a writer in the "gaps" in history.¹⁴⁸ Both authors convey a keen awareness of their roles as unofficial historiographers.

¹⁴⁷ Other pioneering contemporary female Dominican and Dominican-American writers include Jeannette Miller, Aída Cartagena Portalatín and literary scholar Daisy Cocco de Filippis, among others. For more information on Dominican diaspora literature, see Silvio Torres-Saillant and Ramona Hernández' *The Dominican Americans* (111-18).

¹⁴⁸ Díaz' lecture was given at the University of New Mexico in Woodward Hall on 9/23/08.

I locate Pérez's most revealing treatment of race from a flashback scene in *Geographies of Home* in which Iliana grapples with her conflictive ethno-racial identity. Iliana recounts how as a child growing up in Brooklyn, she yearned “. . . to look like the Puerto Rican or black American girls so that she could be easily identified as belonging to either group. . . . She used to hate the question “Where you from?” because few of her classmates knew of the Dominican Republic and several of her black friends assumed that she claimed to be Hispanic in order to put on airs” (190). Unlike the heavily Caribbean communities of Queens and the Bronx, the Brooklyn of Iliana's childhood lacked a sizeable Dominican population and therefore her ethnic classification remained an ambiguous point of contention. Iliana recalls interactions with African-American and Latino peers which problematized her identity as an Afro-Latina throughout her school years:

“What you talking about, girl?” they'd ask. “We don't care where you come from! You be black just like us!”

“Nah, you speak Spanish. You one of us,” her Puerto Rican friends would say. (190)

She muses that “with her skin color identifying her as a member of one group and her accent and immigrant status placing her in another, she had fit comfortably in neither and even less in the circles she had found herself in when she finally went away to school” (191). In her *Black Mosaic* interview, Maricela Medina describes similar feelings as a high school student in the 1960s. Dark skin, Dominican ethnicity and her native Spanish language placed Maricela precariously on a divisive, binary black/white color

line she had yet to comprehend. In her words, she “. . . didn’t want to be drawn into this racial situation in the United States. . . You had to choose sides and stuff like that, and I’m saying: “no, I’m not an American. I’m Dominican, or I’m Latin. This has nothing to do with me. But you realize that it does. And what happens is that you begin to choose sides.”

Corporán’s interview with Juana Campos (8/2/94)¹⁴⁹ discloses another angle of identity negotiation. Juana immigrated to the United States from Santiago de los Caballeros, Dominican Republic, in 1940 at the age of twenty-two. She obtained permanent residency under a State Department congressional decree granting asylum to any persons whose arrival on U.S. soil preceded World War II. Had Juana decided to live with her cousins in the South Bronx or any other New York City neighborhood heavily populated with Spanish speakers, and Latino-run local businesses, she might never have needed to learn English or assimilate into American culture and society. Had she lived in a northeastern urban metropolis like New York or Boston, she most certainly would have avoided the unconcealed institutionalized racial segregation of blacks and whites. However, Juana chose to reside in Washington DC: she said she preferred the warmer climate, magnificent architecture, and above all, the cleanliness of the capital city in comparison to the grimy streets of the Big Apple: “A mi me gustó Washington porque era tan liiiiimpio!”

As an Afro-Dominican woman in the Jim Crow south, Juana occupied an ambiguous realm in public community life. She arrived in Washington DC with no

¹⁴⁹ Juana Campos was interviewed by Hector Corporán on 8/2/94. Disk 6, Box 120. *Black Mosaic: Race and Ethnicity among Black Immigrants in Washington DC*. The Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum. 8/21/94-8/7/95. All interview transcriptions of audio files are my own and were completed between March and April 2010.

context for comprehending the system of black/white racial segregation on the institutional level. “Se separaba a la gente, los prietos a una parte y los blancos por otra parte, pero no estaba así en Nueva York, porque en Nueva York había tanta gente latina. . . . Acuerda que Nueva York es una ciudad cosmopolita y al llegar aquí. . .yo no sabía, no sabía eso de la discriminación. Eso no estaba en Santo Domingo.” Juana finally grasped the concept of racial segregation after her Puerto Rican friend explained the situation to her.

In the 1940s, Washington DC lacked a sizeable Latino population and thus the location of Latin@s on the color line was indefinite, at best. Although Juana’s phenotype led to her categorization as “black” in the U.S. racial paradigm, upon speaking limited English with a heavy accent, language and cultural markers disclosed a “foreignness” that often trumped her blackness. Juana learned to negotiate the U.S. color line using Spanish as her primary mechanism of circumventing institutionalized discrimination. In fact, Juana claims she never experienced the level of racial discrimination and mistreatment African-Americans received from southern whites: “. . . A los latinos, a la gente de color, no nos decían nada. Aquí nunca sentí discriminación. No me discriminaron nunca, nunca!” When confronted with the question of ethno-racial identity, Juana exclaims: “Cuando la gente me pregunta ‘where you come from,’ yo digo ‘dominicana’ porque aquí no escogieron negros pa’ trabajar.” She digresses to describe how race-based discriminatory hiring practices extended even to American blacks with light skin and “*pelo bueno*” (“good hair”), but adds: “. . . A mí eso no me afectaba.” Thus, the realization that color hierarchy in the U.S. did not function as it did in the

“pigmentocracies” of Caribbean societies gave Juana further impetus to emphasize her *latinidad*.

Juana married in 1943 and raised her two young children in Washington DC during segregation. A close friend of Hector Corporán, Juana’s son Ramberto used to share stories about how his mother forced him to speak Spanish when they went into town to avoid being discriminated against as African-Americans. With no fixed segregation rules regarding Latinos, Juana and her children often gained entry into white establishments as Spanish speakers. Corporán remembers the situation as it was told to him by Ramberto: “Mi mamá siempre me enseñó a mí que cuando yo entraba en un lugar público entrara hablando español y pidiera hablando en español porque cuando ellos veían mi color, ¿tú me entiendes?, por si me discriminaban por mi color pero cuando me oían hablar. . . era distinto.”

By the latter half of the twentieth century, the option for Afro-Latin@ Spanish speakers to “opt-out” of black identification on the pretense of language no longer held the viability it once provided for Juana Campos and her children during segregation. In “Latinegras,” Cruz-Janzen describes her experience as a biracial Puerto Rican recently arrived in the United States:

When we moved to the United States mainland in the 1960s, concerned Latino friends advised me to emphasize my Latinness and to downplay my African traits to avoid being confused with African Americans. Some teachers advised that I might as well be Black because I would be treated like one by White Latinos and mainstream White Americans. They felt

that I should prepare myself for what inevitably awaited me. Fearful, I deliberately spoke with a Spanish accent even though schools kept placing me in speech courses; I learned to use a fan gracefully, and wore my hair long and straight. Many Latinos overtly distanced themselves from me by calling me *morena* (Moorish Black), a derisive term reserved for dark-skinned Blacks, especially African Americans. (285)

For younger generations of Afro-Latin@s like Pérez's protagonist Iliana, social integration entails finding ways to negotiate Latino ethnicity while acknowledging shared African ancestry among diverse black populations. *Afro-dominicanas* such as Maricela Medina and Juana Campo's daughter Carmen find empowerment through identification with the established, upwardly mobile tier of Washington DC's large African-American demographic. All things considered, because North American racial ideology is founded on the "one-drop-rule," Hispanics of African phenotype living in the U.S. can no longer discursively rid themselves of their blackness. William Luis explains that the racial situation in the States: ". . . makes Afro-Hispanics understand more clearly that discrimination exists in their country of origin; and the racial prejudice in the United States forces many Hispanics and Latinos to seek refuge in African American culture"(xiii).

Luis's observation captures Iliana's psycho-social negotiations, and also applies to *Oscar Wao's* Dominican-American characters when we examine the remarkable divergence between their racial identity negotiation and that of their island-raised family members. While Dominican-American protagonists such as Yunior, Oscar, and his sister Lola reflect a strong sense of Dominican ethnic pride, in the U.S. racial context, they are

forced to reject the ideology of *blanqueamiento* and recognize themselves as Afro-descendent people of color. Through their dual positionality as Dominicans and Americans they retain elements of their Latin@ Caribbean identity while acknowledging their blackness, and often, identifying with African-American culture, as Luis suggests. Likewise, once Maricela acclimates to life in Washington DC, she begins to gravitate towards an African-American identity while still maintaining a cultural, linguistic and ethno-racial plurality as a *dominicana*. In line with Luis' statement (xiii), the experiential journey of identity formation imbues Maricela with critical new perspectives on Latin American racial prejudice.

“Would you say there is racism in the Latin community?” inquires Corporán during their 1994 interview. “Very much so,” Maricela responds with conviction:

I think that we live in a racist society. We live in a society where race and color play a key role. I don't think that we can expect anybody who lives in a society to be unaffected by the biases and prejudices of that society. Ah, not only that, but I think that many of those prejudices and biases were brought from home. . . I think that there's something else that we need to recognize. And this is the point that a lot of Latin Americans do not want to see. That although racism . . . may not have existed in Latin America, and I can point to some instances where that would be proven incorrect, prejudice was always there. And I'll relate to you from my own background.

Maricela reminisces about conversations that took place among family and friends on the island, pointing out common exchanges that exemplify the seemingly innocuous ways in which *blanqueamiento* burrows into the Dominican cultural consciousness:

Now growing up I always heard about “*pelo bueno*” y “*pelo malo*.”

“Good hair” and “bad hair,” the same thing you have in United States . . .

and the thing was I never really gave it much thought. Because this is, it

wasn’t until I left the Dominican Republic and was confronted with the

situation in the United States that I really began to think about those things

and the meaning of those kinds of comments. There was the idea of when

you married, “*mejorar la raza*”. . . The idea that improving the race was

always whitening. But see, you don’t make that connection at home, I

don’t think that you can because you’re, you know, surrounded by this and

immersed in this thing so you can’t really look at it from a detached point

of view.

The literature and cultural artifacts of my analysis all support Maricela’s claim that temporal-geographic detachment from Santo Domingo compels Dominicans in the States to question, resist, and eventually reject ingrained whitening ideologies. Along these lines, she touches on a common point of contention that impedes transnational discussions of race, prejudice and inequality. Many Latin American nations (particularly those that define themselves as “racial democracies” such as Brazil, Cuba, and Colombia) argue that in blindly imposing the binary U.S. race/color paradigm on Latin America, North Americans naively misinterpret the dynamics of socio-economic inequality in

Latin American societies and perceive these class disparities (mistakenly) as manifestations of racism:

You know, Latin Americans will argue that it's a question of economics: it's not a question of race, but why is it that even in countries that we are a racial majority, is it whites or very light-complexioned people who control everything? Who are at the helm? Um, that's a complicated one. I mean, I'm not saying that it's based totally on race but I think it has a lot to do with what happened in the post-emancipation period. We were slaves. I mean, Dominicans don't want to admit that. We were slaves. There were no original black people in the Americas, ok. . . Now Latin Americans say "well, we never had the kind of discrimination that they had in the United States." Yes. But how many blacks did you see growing up working in banks in the D.R.? How many blacks did you see doing anything? I mean, we can go on and on and on ad infinitum on this, but my point is that although many of us may not be racist, saying that "just because you're black," or "just because you're Chinese," or whatever, "we don't want you on general principle, we hate you on general principle". . . We have to recognize that many of us are prejudice. Ah, and by "us," I'm talking about Latin Americans. Any they will deny that!

In the United States, additional socio-cultural misunderstandings manifest in urban enclaves like New York City and Washington DC. Racial tensions and misconceptions arise among distinct U.S.-born groups living alongside ethnically diverse immigrant communities in densely populated areas. "I understand there are problems on

both sides,” states Maricela. “I don’t think that African-Americans realize that there are distinctions among Latins. They tend to lump all Latins together the same what that whites do.” She mentions Lincon Jr. High as a case in point, explaining that when the school opened there were fights every day. “. . . And part of the problem was that, that then black Hispanics would be caught in the middle because the African-Americans wanted to kick this Hispanics’s butt cause’ they were white, or as the African-Americans say “they think they’re white.” And then the blacks would say, “Man, you can’t beat up my friends! How can you be friends with that whitey?”

Junot Díaz offers countless literary construction of this ambiguous social location in which none of the Dominican-American protagonists is comfortably settled. Shifting conceptualizations of traditional gender roles further complicate these indeterminate social identities. In Oscar’s case, whites classify him as black based on his “blackish” appearance, but, because he does not perform his blackness, or his Dominican masculinity in traditional ways, he fits in nowhere. Yuniors explains that:

The white kids looked at his black skin and his afro and treated him with inhuman cheeriness. The kids of color, upon hearing him speak and seeing him move his body, shook their heads. You’re not Dominican. And he said, over and over again, But I am. Soy dominicano. Dominicano soy.

(49)

Here, the performativity of ethnic identity and gender is just as crucial as accepting one’s blackness in the diasporic re-definition of Dominican manhood. Oscar represents an anomaly because despite his phenotype, he behaves as a *parigüayo* and

therefore is not viewed as an Afro-Latino male. With respect to gender and ethno-racial identity, Yuniór's casual usage of the N-word throughout his narrative suggests his inclusion in the Afro-American male community. On the other hand, his constant insertion of un-italicized Dominican colloquialisms, expressions and cultural references convey his Latino Caribbean identity. Clearly, these identities are not mutually exclusive in Yuniór's world. His East Coast, Spanglish-infused slang reminiscent of the syntax of Nuyorican poetry reads as a text in itself. It is vital to the novel in that it legitimizes a unique oral discursive space vital to the maintenance of ethnic identities in diverse Latin@ diasporic communities of the United States. Moreover, while Yuniór seems comfortable as a black American, he also underscores his Dominicanness by overstating his machismo. As suggested by the popular Dominican-American bachata boy band Aventura in their lyrics "Soy mujeriego porque soy varón," Yuniór's identity as a womanizer is rendered natural, and it ultimately helps solidify his belonging as a U.S. Dominican. Unlike the performance of masculinity, the racial identity of the Dominican-American characters drastically shifts in the mainland context. Although they still distinguish themselves culturally from black Americans, in contrast to their island-born relatives, Iliana and the second-generation Dominican-Americans of *Oscar Wao* openly recognize their belonging in the African diaspora.

In a powerful scene from *Geographies of Home*, Iliana's racial dilemma manifests itself in the private sphere of home life. It becomes her inescapable crisis as she struggles in vain to make her family see the hypocrisy of their own racial prejudice. When Iliana's older sister Marina begins to criticize black men, Iliana whirls around to face her:

“What are you saying? That blacks are inferior? Is that what you think about yourself?”

“I’m Hispanic, not black.”

“What color is your skin?”

“I’m Hispanic!” (38)

Iliana’s question pointedly disregards the racial identity boundary which permits Marina to choose the classification “Hispanic” over black. Because Iliana has ventured furthest outside of the locus of home, she, like Oscar and Yunior, has learned from experiencing racism in the U.S. context that black and Hispanic are not necessarily two distinct categories. As the first member of her family to leave Brooklyn and attend college, Iliana is regularly harassed with racial slurs and finds *nigger* scrawled on her dorm room door. Diaspora and a harsh entrance into the academic realm of white supremacy force Iliana to look past traditional limits of identity in order to understand herself and how she fits into a reality different from that of her parents. Her attempt to impart this newfound understanding to her siblings proves unfruitful and divisive. Consequently, in her quest for self-understanding within multiple frameworks, Iliana mounts different racialized, gendered performances which question the validity of the boundaries of race and gender, both on the island as well as in the United States, that have forcefully imposed identity classification on her in the first place. Both Pérez and Díaz juxtapose the post-modern identity construction of Dominican-American youth against the outmoded *blanqueamiento* island model. Through literary performance, they offer contemporary redefinitions of Dominicaness based on an acknowledgement of

shared ancestry among blacks in the Dominican Republic, the United States, and throughout the African diaspora in the Americas.

5.5 Performing Multiple Jeopardy:

(Re)envisioning Race and Gender in the *Afrofeminista* Diasporic Imaginary

This section examines a selection of autobiographical narratives that reveal the psycho-social struggles of Dominican and Puerto Rican female subjects as they negotiate the black Latin@ paradox in the United States,¹⁵⁰ and struggle to affirm their conflictive ethno-racial and sexual identities as black Latinas. In *Divagaciones bajo la luna* (2006), queer *afrofeminista* writer Ana-Maurine Lara describes her approach to reclaiming autonomy in her ethno-racial and sexual identity:

My writing and performance focuses on the modern day dilemmas resulting from the Middle Passage between Africa and the Caribbean. I attempt to redefine the concept of freedom through the lens of African ancestral memory, Dominican history, and present day struggles for liberation in the Caribbean and in the United States. (3)

This artistic agenda speaks to a meandering personal journey of introspection, social interaction, reaction, and action. For Lara, the experience of watching Xiomara Fortuna perform on stage in Santo Domingo was like looking into the mirror and unexpectedly discovering her own image for the first time. “I used to think I was the only

¹⁵⁰ Juan Flores uses the phrase “the black Latin@ paradox” in reference to Piri Thomas’ struggle to affirm his identity as a black Latin@ in *Down These Mean Streets (The Afro-Latin@ Reader 209-10)*.

one . . . until I saw her, up on stage, her head shaved. Her mouth glowing in the stage lights as she sang . . . what I experienced was more than music. It was connection. Up on stage was a woman who looked like me-- shaved head, cacao skin (mine a milk shade lighter), who was . . . a *lesbiana* (“Uncovering Mirrors” 298). Lara connects to Xiomara because she sees aspects of herself, aspects she has not yet taken ownership over, reflected in the performer’s image and projected outwards to a receptive audience. This mimetic moment brings Lara face to face with her own Afro-Latina queer subjectivity and initiates the theorization of *afrofeminismo* that would eventually define her work.

For Marta Cruz-Janzen, coming to consciousness as a Puerto Rican Latinegra entails a gradual process of ethno-racial identity performance and transformation. In “Latinegras,” she discusses her own experience as a college student at Cornell University in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In an effort to fit in, Cruz-Janzen tried unsuccessfully to join Latino student organizations and establish a club for Puerto Ricans. She quickly discovered discrepancies in the self-perceptions of Puerto Ricans from the island versus those from the United States mainland: “Puerto Ricans from the island did not want to be perceived as Black and rejected me, as well as mainland Puerto Ricans, quite shamelessly. In contrast, Puerto Ricans from the United States mainland saw their strength through unity with African American students” (287). During her college years, Cruz-Janzen severed ties with most Latinos from Latin America and sought out the African and African-American communities. Alongside other U.S. Puerto Rican peers, she fostered this unity through the aesthetics of dress and adornment, much like the visual vocabularies of Cuban underground hip-hop *afrofeministas*:

Many [Puerto Ricans] flaunted even the minutest African heritage with Afro hairstyles and African clothing . . . I styled my hair in an Afro and began wearing African clothes. I found myself in a constant struggle to define my identity. I felt obliged to prove my Blackness to other African Americans, even when they looked just like me. I was the victim of jokes because my hair would not stay up and was thus called “flat-top” and “lame-fro.” I tried all sorts of styling chemicals; I even wore hairpieces and wigs. Finally, I cut my hair as short as possible. (287)

Cruz-Janzen experimented extensively with black and Afro-centric aesthetics in an attempt to legitimize her Latinegra identity. In searching for legitimacy, she came to perform and negotiate blackness on the color line by denying her *latinidad* (Latinness):

Repeatedly, African Americans told me that I must be ashamed of my African heritage because I tried to conceal it by claiming to be Latina and speaking Spanish. They insisted that Blacks were foremost a single people, regardless of where they found themselves or what languages they spoke. I was accused of thinking myself superior, on one hand, and mocked as inferior for being impure and carrying the “blood of the devil,” on the other. I grew ashamed of my White heritage, prevented my mother from visiting me on campus, and worked hard to keep a dark tan. Eventually I stopped visiting Puerto Rico; I married an African American who planned to live in Africa, and I thought of adopting a traditional African name. (287)

From the streets to the stage to the printed page and beyond, identity performance takes many forms. In an effort to illustrate how public spaces oblige her to negotiate and affirm her identity as a black Latina, Maricela recounts a traffic confrontation in the DC metro area involving herself, two Central American motorists, and two African-American men:

Maricela: “I was driving on Euclid St., stopped in standing traffic. A guy hits my car, backs up, says, “I didn’t do anything.” The guy starts in Spanish cursing and talking loud. Two brothas. . .”

Hector: [Interrupts Maricela to clarify the term “brothas”] “You mean African-Americans?”

Maricela: [Digresses to explain] “When I’m out there on the street, they don’t see me as Hispanic. I don’t have Hispanic written over me. I don’t look, you know. . . What is a Hispanic? The stereotypic image of straight black hair, Indian features, I don’t have it. So when people see me out there, they see me as a *black* woman.”

Maricela: [Returns to telling her anecdote] “So the two brothas say “Sista, what’s the problem, can we help you?” I’m trying to calm them down. Two guys, Salvadorians, say “aquí vienen estos negros jodidos a molestar, que esto y lo otro.” I’m saying to them “miren, déjense de cosa. Uds. no pueden venir hasta destrozando la gente, aunque yo no entiendo lo que Ud. esta diciendo en la manera en que lo está diciendo.” Entonces comienzan a decir in English “mothafucka,’ que que esto y lo otro.” Los muchachos

desde luego are getting excited about this, they want to kick butt, right? Guy says, “yea all you want is for these morenos to hit us.” I’m sayin,’ I turn around and say, “what do you think I am?” “No, you’re Latin, you’re Latina.” I say, “Si, yo soy latina pero soy negra también. Así que cuando Ud. está insultando a estas otras personas me está insultando a mi porque soy negra también.”

Maricela’s anecdote is particularly significant to this study because it sheds light on the conflictive experience of Afro-Latin@ identity on a contemporary U.S. color line based on artificial divisions between blacks, whites, and Latinos, among other socio-political “racial” groups. In this instance, Maricela’s claims her socio-political existence with the affirmation: “Soy latina pero soy negra también.” With this act of self-naming, Maricela reclaims autonomy over the multiple jeopardies of her existence. Like Marta Cruz-Janzen, Maricela’s experiences on the color line led her to believe that successful integration into the upwardly-mobile tier of American society required Afro-Latin@s to choose a racial identification:

What happens is that you begin to choose sides. And I would say that I certainly made my choice . . . There is no question that I sided with the African-American community . . . clearly my identification is with the African-American community. Not with the white community. And part of that has to do with the fact that I myself am of African descent.

Both Maricela and Cruz-Janzen consciously gravitated towards the African-American community, although their black racial identity choices presented

complications over time. Maricela analyzes the different ways identity performances and race dynamics played out among her Afro-Latin@ contemporaries depending on their social alliances:

I saw people gravitating, making those kinds of decisions. And then I remember there were many light-complexioned um, Latins, who, in the United States would have been classified as blacks, cause I know some blacks who are lighter than they are, who look white and who are considered and consider themselves black, begin to gravitate to the other group [Hector: “the other group meaning . . . ?”] Whites. In terms of associating with them. It’s not that they turned their backs on Latins, but that you could see that when they made friends out of the group they tended to be white. While you saw some blacks who, Hispanics, who, when they tended to make friends outside of the group they tended to be black friends. And it’s an interesting phenomenon. . . There were people who never resolved that. Who, I don’t know if they never resolved it or maybe they did resolve it by choosing to sort of live life in limbo or forget. Pretend that it didn’t exist and maintain that they are Dominican or Panamanian. And you still find Latins who say that! “Well, I’m not this or that, I’m Dominican.” And I’m saying get off of it!

In closing, Maricela restates, “I’m still Dominican, but there is no question in my mind that I’m, you know, African, of African descent.”

Like Maricela's testimonial performance, I interpret Pérez's novel as a literary performance that speaks to the complexity of the author's own experience as a black Dominican woman of the U.S. diaspora. Although understated, the ethno-racial performance of *Geographies of Home* suggests an African diasporic endogamy among second-generation U.S. Dominicans, despite their ethnic difference from African-Americans. Moreover, I argue that much like the diverse primary source of my analysis, the novel further complicates Deborah King's theory of multiple jeopardy as it relates to the marginalization of black women. King's theory dissects the marginalization of black women by underscoring the multi-dimensional nature of their oppression. Multiple jeopardy is a valuable tool for exploring the problematic depiction of Afro-descendent women in that it brings to light the oppressive forces at work in their literary and cultural renderings.

In *Geographies of Home*, the performance of black working class womanhood is intensified through Dominican ethnicity, an additional factor which should be recognized among the multiplicative oppressions of race, class, and gender that constitute multiple jeopardy. Thus through anecdote and reflection, Pérez fills in a historical gap long neglected in transnational writing and discourse by including first and second-generation Dominican women such as Iliana, her sisters, and her mother Aurelia into Dominican and North American racial paradigms, both literally and figuratively.

Although she does not challenge insular constructions of race as directly as Junot Díaz, Pérez compellingly criticizes the violence of the Trujillo dictatorship manifested in the dysfunctional machismo which permeates the immigrant family. Iliana appears as a pariah in her household because she has sought higher education and refuses to perform

the gender roles of docile caretaker and mother traditionally ascribed to Dominican women. She does not cultivate aesthetic femininity by dressing up, wearing makeup or styling her hair. Unlike her older sisters, she has not married or borne children at a young age, and therefore she does not feel as limited to the confines of the home. While she and her family members are bonded by a primordial love, Iliana's understated rebellion against traditional Dominican identity boundaries makes her the target of multiple forms of domestic violence.

Although Papito does not exhibit the cliché sexual prowess exemplified in Díaz' Yunió, the psychological trauma of his impoverished youth in Santo Domingo exacerbated by the grim reality of an unattainable American dream in New York City compels him to beat his children unmercifully, despite a fierce devotion to his religious faith. Suárez describes Papito's strict adherence to the Seventh Day Adventist church as a means of correcting the effects of Trujillo's corruptive rule, and as a way to mitigate the extreme poverty he experienced on the island and in the New York ghetto (166). Yet ironically, the immense pressure to alleviate his family of poverty and make a better life for them in the diaspora causes Papito to replicate violent memories of his past through sexism and machismo.

Like the poetic voice in José Joaquín Pérez's "Ecos del destierro," Papito strives to safeguard the purity and innocence of his daughters in theory, but in practice he falls short of this objective and inflicts harm instead of protecting his daughters against it. As a consequence, Iliana and her sisters must bear the physical and emotional scars of a violent history of macho bravado and misogyny. Loida Maritza Pérez illustrates this reality through partial sketches of an ever-shifting family unit in constant crisis. Iliana's

older sister Rebecca deteriorates physically and psychologically at the hands of her abusive husband Pasi3n, whom she initially marries in an effort to elude old-maidhood. Rebecca exchanges her parent's household for a life of filth and putrescence in Pasi3n's decaying, feces-ridden brownstone overrun by his beloved chickens and roosters. Unwilling to leave Pasi3n and rescue her three neglected children from this deplorable environment, Rebecca remains trapped in a tangled web of machismo, brutality and denial. Likewise, Marina steadily degenerates into a delusional mental state as the traumatic memory of rape consumes her. This obsessive fear of (black) male sexual power transforms Marina into the very monster terrorizing her. Eventually, she simulates the violent act engrained in her own consciousness by inflicting unspeakable sexual harm upon Iliana. Su3rez contends that several scenes in the novel provide excellent insight on the subject of machismo in Dominican culture and memory and its intersections in diaspora life. These issues produce new emotional pain for diasopric subjects such as Iliana who find themselves caught between assimilation and transculturation: "where new forms of abuse and sexism complicate the fight for women's rights" (166).

Unlike *Geographies of Home*, D3az's treatment of gender in *Oscar Wao* bursts with humor. Yunior and Oscar enter the novel as caricatures of the (anti)Dominican male. While the extremes of their characterization seem, at times, absurd, D3az deftly manipulates these portrayals to reveal the subtle interaction between gender and ethnic identity. Thus as an attractive college-aged Dominican male living in a Dominican community in New Jersey, Yunior performs his hyper-masculinity on a daily basis to reinforce his sense of ethnic identity. His narration throughout the novel establishes a visual and behavioral standard for Dominican men that corresponds with Lipe Collado's

description of *El tíguere dominicano*. Collado identifies behavioral idiosyncrasies of different types of *tígueres* including *el tíguere bambim*, *el tíguere cintura* and *el tíguere rankiao*, among others, but he stresses that the “typical” Dominican male exhibits an unmistakable prowess. In short, *el tíguere dominicano* should be good-looking, well-groomed, athletic, sexually promiscuous, macho, and a womanizer. Yuniór reinforces these ideals through his personal conduct: “I was busy,” he explains. “. . . What state player isn’t? I had my job and the gym and my boys and my novia and of course I had my slutties” (172). Labeled as an overweight “ghetto-nerd,” Oscar possesses none of these attributes and is therefore marked as “non-Dominican” by his family and peers. As Yuniór points out in chapter one:

Our hero was not one of those Dominican cats everybody’s always going on about- he wasn’t no home-run hitter or fly bachatero, not a playboy with a million hots on his jock. And except for one period early in his life, dude never had much luck with the females (how *very* un-Dominican of him). (11)

Oscar’s fondness for nerdy genre games and reading *Encyclopedia Brown* solidify his exogamy from the Dominican male community, despite his efforts to imitate his cursing, swaggering cousins on the island and to “polish up what remained of his Dominicanness” (30). Consequently, Yuniór embodies the quintessential Dominican player and operates in direct opposition to Oscar, who can best be described as a *parigüayo*: the antithesis of Collado’s *tíguere*. While on the one hand, these antithetical characterizations reinforce one-dimensional stereotypes of Dominican men, they also

provide novel venues of exploration into the multiple intersections of identity formation in the transnational setting.

Although Yuniors names Trujillo's henchman Porfirio Rubirosa as the quintessential Dominican playboy (12), Trujillo's influence on constructs of Dominican masculinity does not escape Yuniors historical narrative. "If you think the average Dominican guy's bad," he muses, "Trujillo was five thousand times worse. Dude had hundreds of spies whose entire job was to scour the provinces for his next piece of ass; if the procurement of ass had been any more central to the Trujillato the regime would have been the world's first Culocracy" (217). DÍaz's novel offers a wealth of details regarding Trujillo's sexual appetite, but the author juxtaposes these entertaining descriptions of the womanizing dictator against the violent atrocities he committed throughout his reign of terror.

It is worth noting that DÍaz follows a long tradition of authors who denounce Trujillo through creative and influential texts. Following the backlash of protest writing that emerged at the end of the regime, the publication of Viriato Senci3n's *Los que falsificaron la firma de Dios* (1995), which was composed in New York, provoked a national uproar and became the best-selling book in Dominican history. Likewise, Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa garnered critical acclaim with his masterpiece *La fiesta del chivo* (2000). Consequently, DÍaz' hyperbolic characterizations of the dictator and his literary treatment of the *Trujillato* alludes to a rich intertextuality of notable earlier works on the theme.

Perceptions of blackness, color, and Dominican masculinity are not central components of Díaz's tale, yet they play a pivotal role in conveying the acute sense of place and time he establishes in his text. Often nuanced and at times, brazen, Díaz's usage of racialized language and pointed references to color throughout the work illustrate the conflicting racial ideologies inherent in Dominican island culture which undergo transmutations by Dominican diasporic communities of the United States. Although both Díaz and Pérez include performative cultural expectations of gender which intersects with their treatment of race, both novels suggest that while standard displays of Dominican manhood may appear slightly overstated on the mainland, gender identity discourse never undergoes the level of geographic modification as discerned from the formation of Afro identity on and off the island.

Díaz confronts Santo Domingo's cultural negation of blackness throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with a defiant stance. In a footnote, Yuniór describes Trujillo, whom he dubs the "hypeman" and "high priest" of fukú as "A portly, sadistic, pig-eyed mulato who bleached his skin, wore platform shoes, and had a fondness for Napoleon-era haberdashery" (2). He goes on to describe the laundry list of atrocities committed by Trujillo over the course of his thirty-one year rule including the 1937 genocide against Haitians and the Haitian-Dominican community (3). Yuniór's rendering of *El jefe* as a *mulato* who chemically lightened his skin seems particularly defamatory in light of the fact that the *Trujillato* reinforced the anti-Haitianist discourse and black denial projected in nineteenth century literature. In fact, Díaz fills a historical gap by officially referencing Trujillo's known maternal Haitian ancestry.

Through Yuniór's satirical and often intrusive narration, Díaz conveys minute aspects of the twentieth century anti-black Dominican value system which remains tightly woven into the fabric of contemporary society. In describing the summer trips of Oscar's wealthy grandfather Abelard Cabral and his family in Puerto Plata, he muses: "Abelard's two daughters, Jacquelyn and Astrid, swam and played in the surf (often suffering Mulatto Pigment Degradation Disorder, a.k.a tans) under the watchful gaze of their mother, who, unable to risk no extra darkness, remained chained to her umbrella's shadow" (231). Here, Yuniór pokes fun at the looming, ever-present Dominican phobia of dark(er) skin. In a society shaped by the tenets of *blanqueamiento*, suntanned skin was not only aesthetically undesirable, but it put one at risk for being mistaken as Haitian.

Díaz's critique also touches on the complexion-based hierarchy reflective of the colonized mentality. While this fixation on fair skin seems to imply projections of racial superiority, I would argue that it signifies an inferiority complex, for it entails a deep-rooted, preoccupation driving the subject to distance themselves from their African blood at all costs. Just as Puerto Rican poet Fortunato Vizcarrondo pokes fun at the common tendency in Puerto Rico to hide one's black grandmother in the kitchen in his poem "¿Y tu agüela, a'onde ejta?," Afro-Dominican poet Juan Antonio Alix's poem "El negro tras de la oreja" echoes a similar sentiment. Alix notes: "Todo aquel que es blanco fino / Jamás se fija en blancura, / Y el que no es de sangre pura / Por ser blanco pierde el tino / . . . pues a la blanca aconseja / Que no baile con negrillo, / Teniendo aunque es amarillo, / "El negro tras de la oreja" (Qtd. in Morales 201). Thus Alix locates those who are "black behind the ears," as the popular adage goes, by observing that true whites needn't strive so desperately to prove their whiteness to others.

Acutely aware of his country's distain of darkness, Díaz fashions Oscar's mother Belicia as an archetypal *prieta* in defiance of the white ideal. Extremely dark-skinned and ravishingly beautiful; a combination of traits often considered contradictory, Beli's existence begins tragically, yet she barrels through life with arrogance. After recounting the catastrophic downfall of the Cabrals at the hands of Trujillo, Yuniór explains that according to the family, the first sign that they had fallen victim to the fukú was that Abelard's third daughter Belicia was born black; "And not just any kind of black. But *black* black --kongoblack, shangoblack, kaliblack, zapoteblack, rekhablack --and no amount of fancy Dominican racial legerdemain was going to obscure the fact" (248). He adds, "That's the kind of culture I belong to: people took their child's black complexion as an ill omen" (248). Shortly after Beli's birth, her mother is hit by a bus, both of her older sisters die, and her father remains captive in Trujillo's infamous Nigüa prison, yet no surviving extended family members will take "the tiniest little *negrita* on the planet" (253) because she is so dark.

Díaz utilizes Beli as a window into the inner-workings of the color continuum in Dominican society. Take, for example, his description of the fateful encounter at the El Hollywood nightclub between a young Beli and the "Gangster" dubbed the "Caracaracol of Culo" (121) who she would soon fall madly in love with. Coolly, the Gangster offers to buy Beli a drink and when she turns away rudely, he grabs her arm and says, "Where are you going, morena? And that was all it took: a Beli le salió el lobo. First, she didn't like to be touched. . . Second, she was not a morena (even the car dealer knew better, called her india)" (115). While Beli is far too conceited to feel self-conscious about her complexion, the passage illustrates how, regardless of how black one looked, to be

identified directly as such was considered extremely insulting. Thus, dark-skinned Dominicans were (and are) typically identified as *indios* (Indians) in the color continuum. In this manner, Dominican society conveniently evades its African heritage while fabricating a national racial identity which only legitimizes Indo-Hispanic ancestry.

Beli is as clever as she is stubborn, and in spite of her feral personality and volatile temper, her bodacious body turns her into the most coveted woman in the town of Baní. She is an unquestionably powerful woman, yet Beli derives her power directly from her sexuality. Yunió spares no detail in describing her enormous breasts and bottom, and the ludicrous effect they have on men. Although comical, I argue that Beli's sexualization as a *prieta* only reinforces longstanding stereotypes regarding the sexual availability of dark-skinned women. In fact, we can locate her counterparts in numerous Dominican works of *poesía negroide*. In Cabral's "Trópico suelto," the poet objectifies his black female subject through the masculine gaze:

Tu canción de curvas canta más que tú:

sabe los secretos que te dio el vudú.

Negra que sin ropa, tienes lo de aquel

que siendo secreto se quedó en tu piel.

Tiro mis ojos en tus pezones

cuando tu vientre derrite sones. (Qtd. in Morales 222)

While each stanza glorifies the *prieta*, her value throughout the poem is reduced to the sum of her body parts. Antonio Fernández Spencer's poem "Se va su voz" adopts a

similar perspective in exalting the beauty of the black woman: “La muchacha negra pasa / y me rompe el corazón / con sus caderas de estrellas / y su paso de canción” (Qtd. In Morales 282). Like Díaz, both poets use rhythmic, colorful language to convey the innate sexuality and seductive movement of the females they describe. Yet in their fascination with the women’s curvaceousness, genitalia, and sexual prowess, the humanity of the subjects is lost. Thus while Díaz successfully questions the boundaries of masculinity and racial identity through Yunior’s satirical representation in *Oscar Wao*, I argue that he falls short in his ability to offer meaningful insight into Dominican womanhood through his female characters.

On the other hand, Loida Maritza Pérez inverts the literary archetype of the *prieta* in her critical depiction of the dark-skinned Iliana as an intelligent and composed college student. In contrast to the sexually uninhibited representation of the aforementioned characters, Iliana reflects an androgynous beauty unrelated to the sexual act or the exposition of her body. She demonstrates a psychological complexity far richer than *Oscar Wao*’s female protagonists, and through Iliana, Pérez captures the palpable silence, marginalization and perseverance of Afro-Latina subjectivity.

5.6 Revisionist Discourses of Race and Gender in Dominican Diaspora Cultural Production

In conclusion, both Pérez and Díaz insert alternative discourses into officially-sanctioned national historic imaginaries through memorable characters and strong storylines that straddle the U.S. and Santo Domingo. In many ways, their writing

validates the tricky experience of ethno-racial and gender identity formation in the diaspora by pointing an accusatory finger towards the island and its inherited color/gender politics which do not translate smoothly in the racially-charged U.S. urban climate. At the same time, these diasporic texts are premised on a fierce loyalty to the Dominican Republic, and island life is often portrayed through the picturesque, quasi romantic gaze of the emigrant. I agree with Silvio Torres Saillant's reading of the poem "Ciguapa" by New York-based Dominican actress, dancer, arts educator and writer Josefina Báez. Torres Saillant explains how Baez's transplantation of the Ciguapa (a mythical Taíno female figure of Dominican folklore) into the post-industrial setting of inner-city New York offers a meaningful counter-discourse to the academic glorification of transnational identity (33). The poem inserts the Dominican Ciguapa into a stressful immigrant space in which her survival depends on social and cultural transformations of various kinds: "She encounters a world of potentialities that harbor both an enhanced checkerboard of empowering options and a grievous catalogue of disheartening permutations. Her existence oscillates erratically between the polar extremes of liberatory self-realization and the disabling throes of voiceless destitution" (33). Torres-Saillant argues that Báez's poem suggests a problematized appraisal of migration, as insinuated by the third-person narrative following Ciguapa's journey from Santo Domingo to New York, and her first visit back to the island after seven long years away:

After years of struggle asserting her human identity as a cultural other in ethnically stratified American society, the political site of her permutation, Ciguapa's return to the Dominican Republic can have a modernizing, revolutionary influence on the land of her birth. Like many Dominicans

who renew their contract with the ancestral land after having embraced social justice in their own search for socioeconomic and moral survival as members of a disempowered ethnic minority in the United States, Ciguapa will find it hard to contain her indignation against political corruption there. There she will decry the authoritarian demeanor of the ruling elite, the arrogant abuse of power by the well-to-do, and the pervasive indifference toward inequality that condemns large portions of the population to abject poverty. (33)

His analysis also touches on the same transformations of ethno-racial consciousness that accompany migration experienced by Maricela Medina, Iliana, Yuniór, and other real and fictional subjects of my investigation:

The peculiar racial history of the United States and the non-white population's acute awareness of their need to protect themselves from the material effects of racism will have probably sensitized Ciguapa to the importance of recognizing and respecting difference. One can expect her to repudiate visions of Dominicaness and notions of national culture that are unduly Eurocentric and overtly negrophobic. Back on native land, where she will visit mostly as a circular migrant, Ciguapa will distance herself radically from representations of the Dominican that exclude African heritage and privilege the cultural predilections of a Western-educated, light-skinned Dominican minority. She will also harbor little tolerance for and less patience with the anti-Haitian sentiments evident in the public discourse of party leaders, legislators, television commentators,

and newspaper columnists. Having met and collaborated with many Haitian immigrants in New York, where the two Caribbean communities learn to recognize each other as sharing a common plight, both having suffered expulsion from home countries that closed the doors of opportunities on them, Ciguapa will carry an ideological chip on her shoulders.

From this tension between nostalgia, respect, and rejection arise several key inquiries regarding the discursive leverage each geographic site holds over the other. First, (dis)advantages emerge from definitively adopting diasporic discourse over foundational Dominican discourse, and vice versa. I maintain that foundational insular discourse sanctions hateful and repressive ideologies and potentially complicates the U.S. immigration experience for those who adopt a steadfast rhetoric of Dominican nation-building. In this case, the inflexibility or unwillingness to critically reflect on Dominican national ideology may lead to identity crisis in the diaspora, or the inability to adapt to the host environment. This scenario speaks to the outcomes of adopting a diasporic discourse. However, the appropriation of diaspora discourse may be far less advantageous for Dominicans on the island, for it is likely that their daily experiences and interactions do not constantly mandate a revision of racial, ethnic and sexual identity as they often do in the diaspora.¹⁵¹ Furthermore, let us not forget that irrespective of its essentialist projections of Dominican identity, foundational insular ideologies emerged from tumultuous historic wounds that needed healing. Thus to appropriate a counter-hegemonic diaspora discourse on the island would be to place oneself in contention with

¹⁵¹ In an effort to avoid extreme generalizations, it must be noted that there are Dominicans on the island fighting racism, and diasporic subjects practicing racism in the United States.

established social codes and potentially disrupt longstanding conventions. While diaspora writers disrupt these conventions from a geographic distance out of personal desire, their tenuous positionality also necessitates the construction of alternative identities. Perhaps the most advantageous stance is one that honestly considers the merits and drawbacks of blindly assuming either discourse.

In conjunction with this idea, the diaspora novelists' conferred status as international subjects and the marketing of Díaz and Pérez as U.S.-based, English language ethnic niche writers begs the question of whether these critiques of *hispanidad* and masculinity in Dominican culture are read as inauthentic by the Dominican island readership. In other words, does Dominican diaspora fiction generally fall on deaf ears with little critical acknowledgement on the island? Given that many Dominican-Americans bring a set of life experiences and values to the readings that are analogous to those of the writers, we must ask ourselves if Díaz and Pérez are preaching to a diasporic choir that comes to the table already receptive to their critiques.

Díaz received much U.S. critical acclaim from the mainstream media and the Latin@ Caribbean readership after winning the Pulitzer. Proud to claim Díaz as one of their own, the prize garnered *Oscar Wao* significant media attention in Santo Domingo, although print and television interview questions often circumvent the novel's bold critique of anti-Haitianism. When asked about the reception of the book in the Dominican Republic, Díaz states that as in the United States, it elicited overwhelmingly favorable responses from some readers and lukewarm feelings in others. The 1999 publication of *Geographies of Home* received far less fanfare than *Oscar Wao* and due to the novel's raw exposure of physical and sexual violence within the immigrant family, reactions to

the text were divisive. Pérez was frequently criticized in the Dominican-American community for “airing dirty laundry.” Yet in her defense, the author claims, “There is no ‘typical experience’ either for Dominicans living in this country or those remaining in the Dominican Republic. . . .”¹⁵² (5). She sustains that while Dominicans and other Latinos will encounter familial issues, “Ultimately, these issues pertain to the human condition: our need to belong and be accepted” (6).

Since the inquiries themselves presuppose a fundamental awareness of Dominican and U.S. cultural ideologies among readers in both geographic sites, an equally problematic aspect of pinpointing definitive answers is the (non)existence of Spanish-language translations of Dominican-American novels and their accessibility in Santo Domingo. The foreign rights of *Geographies of Home* were sold in the United Kingdom, Germany, and Holland, but currently only the writing of Junot Díaz has been published in Spanish and marketed in the Dominican Republic. Although *Enriquillo* was translated into English and published by UNESCO as *The Sword and the Cross* in 1954, it was not until the 1990s that other celebrated Dominican texts began to be translated, published and marketed in the United States (Torres-Saillant and Hernández 116-17).

Despite the inherent complexities involved in the interpretation of their impact, *Oscar Wao* and *Geographies of Home* can be read as unequivocal responses to longstanding socio-political paradigms of *hispanidad* and masculinity memorialized in nineteenth century Dominican letters. Deliberately or not, Díaz and Pérez have written back to the island and in doing so, they have placed Dominican-American fiction in a

¹⁵² See Penguin Books’ 1999 interview “A Conversation with Loida Maritza Pérez” (5).

loaded ideological position. Their unique discourses actively empower Dominicans in the United States by writing them into the nation. These authors' exploration of convoluted questions of identity hark back to the trend set by urban working-class Puerto Rican writers of the 1960s and 1970s such as Piri Thomas, Nicholasa Mohr, Pedro Pietri, and Tato Laviera. As a whole, the literature produced by the U.S. Caribbean diaspora has introduced alternate sites of identity and belonging through the creative evaluation of idiosyncratic cultural constructions such as race and gender.

How the conversations between diaspora and homeland will play out remains to be seen. Therefore, the ultimate objective of this study is to enrich the growing cultural production and scholarship of diaspora writing, and encourage further inquiry into how correspondence between diaspora and island discourses influences transnational developments in *afrofeminismo*. If contemporary U.S. Dominican literature is any indication of future trends, narrative performances will continue to reframe, redefine and rewrite what it means to be a member of the twenty-first century Dominican diaspora community for generations to come.

CONCLUSION

6.1 “África es una sola madre con veinte hijos”

In closing, I am reminded of a comment made by Caridad Paisan, a specialist in Afro-Cuban folkloric music and dance, and member of the rumba group¹⁵³ Clave y guaguancó, during a road trip we took in September of 2012. During the long, scenic drive, my *tía* (aunt) Cari and I were engaged in a boisterous conversation about certain commonalities we recognized among different rhythms, kinesthetic expressions, and ritual practices found throughout the Afro-Atlantic. “Africa,” exclaimed *tía* Cari: “es una sola madre con veinte hijos. Todos son diferentes, pero vienen de la misma vientre” (Pers.Comm. 9/14/2012). Although profound in its simplicity, her spontaneous comment articulated blackness as transnational, diasporic, and complex.

The metaphor of Mother Africa was, of course, familiar to me. However, my imagination had never ventured beyond that clichéd metaphor to visualize Mother Africa’s international New World offspring as siblings, engendered from the same maternal womb. I found this image both inspiring and emotive, for it symbolically captured the relationship among the small cohort of sister-friends that accompanied Caridad and I on our journey that day. Two of us were U.S.-born American citizens, and the other two women were born in revolutionary Cuba several decades earlier. There was a twenty-five year span in our ages. Our hair textures and facial features varied immensely, as did our complexions, ranging in tone from caramel to deep chocolate.

¹⁵³ Clave y guaguancó won a Latin Grammy Award in 2001. Paisan is also currently a member of the Yoruba musical group Okan.

Still, all four of us self-identified as *afrodescendientes* (Afro-descendants), and were generally classified as black/African-American in the U.S. racial paradigm. None of us were blood-relatives, yet, naturally (and without much thought), upon meeting, we established individual connections through the recreation of kinship relationships. For example, Caridad referred to herself as my *tía*, and the other women affectionately called me *hermana* (sister).

Through extraordinarily distinct, yet interrelated Afro-diasporic expressions of music, dance, religiosity, and literature, all of us gravitated towards a perceived ancestral bond with Africa via cultural practices. Whether real or imagined, these mythic connections, reminiscent of Nancy Morejón's conceptualization of the *camino a guinea* (road to Guinea), helped us navigate black womanhood and complex ethno-racial subjectivities, both as individuals, and collectively. Thus, as *tía* Cari's analogy implies, we came to understand our unique selves and our relationship to one another in dialectical exchange with the image of Mother Africa as a unifying agent. Following this vein of thought, I will suggest that the structural historical framework shared by Africa's diverse "offspring" be construed as a call for black women to move beyond artificial categorizations to seek increasingly transcendent forms of solidarity and alliance.

6.2 Summary of Dissertation Project

In my dissertation, I have examined the historical legacy of colonial sexual violence in sugar-based economies and the enduring ideologies of *blanqueamiento/embranquecimiento* as hegemonic structures that inflected nineteenth-

and twentieth-century Caribbean and Brazilian cultural discourse on race and gender identity. In this context, I analyzed how representations of the *mujer negra* and the *mulata* have contributed to the formation of national identities and left a legacy of (mis)representation of black women. Next, I placed *afrofeminista* cultural production in dialogue with hegemonic national discourses of *blanqueamiento* and *mestizaje* to explore the representational practices through which Afro-Latinas are contesting dominant ideologies of race, nation, and gender; and articulating an Afro-diasporic, female subjectivity to (re)envision blackness and womanhood in the Latin American and U.S. Latin@ cultural imaginaries.

Through intertextual analysis, I have introduced examples of contemporary theorizing of *afrofeminismo* by a transnational selection of Afro-Latina women from the Hispanic Caribbean, Brazil, and the Dominican diaspora communities of the United States. Specifically, I have explored discourses of Afro-Latinas whose experiences have led them to perform a black, or Afro-Latina identity in ways that contest and challenge *blanqueamiento*. I have shown how multiple jeopardy marks a theoretical intersection among cultural products such as fiction, narrative testimony, music, visual displays of the body, and digital media. Moreover, I have considered how these discourses build on Deborah King's original model in powerful ways, by expressing the problematic of an additional ethno-racial component of multiple jeopardy.

The geographic scope of my research, as well as my rationale for selecting Cuban hip-hop and diasporic Dominicans as the main focus of the chapters, reflect my interest in theorizing *afrofeminismo* as transnational and diasporic. I have argued that the selected *afrofeminista* discourses of analysis can be understood as theoretical expansions of third-

wave black feminism. In dialogue, these discourses articulate an Afro-diasporic female subjectivity based on a shared history of structural oppression that has engendered certain commonalities in the experiences of Afro-descendent women. Throughout this study, I have sustained that the cultural media of my analysis renders a cognitive map, connecting black women across temporal and geographic divides, in novel, and ever-evolving ways, through an identity formation process Ruth Hamilton conceptualizes as the construction of African diaspora communities of consciousness.

Chapter one consisted of a literature review in which I explored how founding controlling images of *negra* and *mulata* women have contributed to the formation of national identities in former slave societies. I looked specifically at how the colonial ideology of *blanqueamiento* permeates nineteenth-century literature and cultural production of the Hispanic Caribbean and Brazil and considered the impact of racial/gender ideologies on hegemonic structures of oppression and (mis)representation. In chapter two, I retraced important developments in African-American black feminist theory from the nineteenth century to the present. This review led me to introduce key guiding theories of my study, including Deborah King's multiple jeopardy model, and Ruth Hamilton's theory of African diaspora communities of consciousness. The evolution of African-American black feminism also served as a departure point for discussing newer theorizing of *afrofeminismo* and hip-hop feminism by transnational Afro-Latinas. Chapter three focused on the emergence of hip-hop culture in the U.S. and Cuba, paying particular attention to the intertextuality between "old school" American hip-hop of the 1980s, and the underground hip-hop movement that ignited Cuba during the 1990s. Through a brief analysis of racial representation and gender discrimination in

U.S. hip-hop, I established the contextual framework for the in-depth analysis of race, representation and resistance in Cuban hip-hop I undertook in chapter four. This portion of my study also examined Afro-centric style trends and body aesthetics tied to the articulation of Cuban hip-hop black feminism, both on the island, under the constraints of a centralized socialist state, and through the internet file sharing and social media exchanges among *afrofeministas* residing abroad in Cuba's global diaspora. In chapter five, I explored the negotiation of Dominican ethno-racial identity alongside counter-hegemonic critiques of *blanqueamiento* in literature, fiction, and archived interviews of the Smithsonian Anacostia museum exhibit *Black Mosaic*. I sustained that the venues of public culture and public history selected for this analysis represented different examples of how some Dominican diaspora women have negotiated the U.S. color line by affirming their blackness, and denouncing the dominant Dominican narrative of national identity founded on the ideology of *blanqueamiento*.

6.3 Final Projections

My dissertation has ventured beyond historically-established borders of time, space, and nation to underscore the interconnectedness of textual, sonic, and visual displays of *afrofeminismo*. By evidencing the dynamic ways in which cultural production transcends the realm of the symbolic to (re)define boundaries of an Afro-Latina identity, I endeavor to communicate the indispensability of cultural products to theorizing transnational feminisms. Notwithstanding the inherent tensions and limitations of this newer theorizing, my dissertation anticipates a resurgence of historically

marginalized, stifled Afro-diasporic female voices, currently engaged in creating novel apertures through which they convene and dialogue in the digital age.

The examples I have drawn from Cuban hip-hop feminist expression, performative narratives of the Dominican diaspora, and related materials of analysis, demonstrate the centrality of Afro-diasporic female subjectivity to problematizing hegemonic conceptions of race, gender, and (mis)representation. In large measure, the selections of texts I have considered react to Barbara Christian's belief that if black women don't say who they are, other people will say it badly for them. Moreover, as declarations of *afrofeminismo*, these texts speak to other transnational Afro-descendants, and answer back: thus validating the collective experiences of black women, as Christian suggests. She affirms that, in this way: "We [black women] say we *are* important, if only to ourselves" (xii). Ultimately, it is my hope that this study will contribute constructive strategies for resisting (mis)representation, (re)inscribing the black female body, and (re)envisioning identity on discursive and practical levels in an increasingly globalized cultural imaginary.

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