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Reararticulation of Sacred Kinships and Hip Hop Feminism

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# Brincando bordes, cuestionando el poder: Cuban Las Krudas' Migration Experience and Their Rearticulation of Sacred Kinships and Hip Hop Feminism.

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When I say "Krudas," you say "Cubensi."  
"Krudas **Cubensi**," "Krudas **Cubensi**."

Las trabajadoras . . . **resistiendo**.

Las Latinas . . . **resistiendo**.

America Latina . . . **resistiendo**.

Black people . . . **resistiendo**.

Las mujeres . . . **resistiendo**.

Los inmigrantes . . . **resistiendo**.

La clase obrera . . . **resistiendo**.

Black sister . . . **resistiendo**.

Somos Cuba internaciona<sup>l</sup>.

Krudas Cubensi.

New Caribbean Feminists.

New Caribbean Feminists.

New Caribbean Feminists.

Nuestra lucha, explota como la gambu-  
cha.

Krudas sanando a la mujer ke es mucha.

Internacionalistas,

Cuba, Colombia, Ghana.

Australia, China , Russia.

Nuestra lucha

Latina lucha.

Cubana lucha.

Hip hop lucha.

When I say "Kru," you say "das."

"Kru-**da**," "Kru-**da**."

When I say "hip," you say "hop."

"Hip **hop**," "Hip **hop**."

When I say "Cuba," you say "Libre."

"Cuba **Libre**," "Cuba **Libre**."

When I say "sí," you say "se puede."

"Sí, **se puede**" "sí, **se puede**."

When I say "Krudas," you say "Cubensi."

"Krudas **Cubensi**," "Krudas **Cubensi**."

"When I say" Call-and-Response

Lyrics: Odaymara Cuesta and Olivia Prendes

Las Krudas at Blue Room Open Mic

September 12, 2007, La Casa Cultural Latina

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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Celiany Rivera-Velázquez is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Originally from Puerto Rico, her scholarship examines how feminist media practices happen within the Spanish-speaking insular Caribbean, where media-centered artistic practices flourish, despite the uneven geographical and historical development characteristic of post/neo colonial regions. Two of her films, "Re-choreographing Masculinities: videographic interventions in-to Javier Cardona's Ah-mén" and "T con T: lesbian life in contemporary Havana." She is currently finishing her dissertation, which documents the distinct cultural productions of a creative collective composed by three young Cuban women hip hop artists and street theater performers called Las Krudas.

Krudas Cubensi, also known as Las Krudas, is an all-women creative trio from Cuba. The sisters Odalys Cuesta-Rousseaux (a.k.a. Wanda) and Odaymara Cuesta-Rousseaux (a.k.a. Pasa Kruda), along with Olivia Prendes-Riverón (a.k.a. Pelusa Mc)—Odaymara's life partner—compose the trio. The three of them, actual *and* chosen family members, first came together when they decided to form the street theater group Topazancos Cubensi in 1996 and as the hip hop group Krudas Cubensi since 1999. Recently, for personal and professional reasons Las Krudas decided to leave Cuba—first Odalys in 2004 and then Odaymara and Olivia in October of 2006. In this paper I analyze how their economic subsistence through the arts—in Cuba as well as in the United States diaspora—exemplifies the intricate ways in which Caribbean women embody the everyday sociopolitical, economic, and cultural negotiations that occur within and in between nations.

### **Krudas Cubensi and the Cuban Hip Hop Movement**

In the article “Proven Presence: The Emergence of a Feminist Politics in Cuban Hip Hop,” Sujatha Fernandez summarizes and contextualizes the situation in which black Cuban women found themselves when rap music, and the broader spectrum of the expressive culture of hip hop, emerged on the island. She says:

Cuban hip hop began to gain momentum following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba's main trading partner, in 1991. In an attempt to rebuild the Cuban economy, the government promoted the earning of hard currency through tourism and the re-entry of Cuba into a global economy. Processes of economic adjustment brought about market inequalities, a reduction in social welfare and increased unemployment. In a period of increasing racial tensions and racial inequalities, rap music has taken on a politically assertive stance as the voice of black Cuban youth.

Young black women have been particularly affected, given the racist hiring policies in the tourist industry, the location of black families in poorer and more densely populated housing and women's continued responsibility for maintenance of the household. This compounded economic hardship has led growing numbers of black and mulatta women to enter into prostitution, known in Cuba, as *jineterismo*, as a means of survival. (5–6)

In his ethnographic analysis of Cuban hip hop Marc Perry documents the work of many rap groups that recount the hardships of black barrios and talk about how poverty, crime, and imprisonment are, indeed, racially-based ills to eradicate (138). In the same way that Bakari Kitwana defines the United States' hip hop generation as the group most affected by the deferment of the American Dream after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Perry establishes how the Cuban hip hop movement represents an example of the interpenetration of global capital and related free-market transformations after the 1990s economic crisis known as the "Período Especial" (Kitwana 37–43). I parallel my critique of Perry's work on Cuban hip hop to Aisha Durham's understanding of Kitwana's work on the United States' hip hop generation: class warfare, police brutality, drug use, and racial animosity are masculine frames of reference that *do* apply to Cuban black women, but in ways that differ greatly from their respective frameworks to understand the role of hip hop in the United States and Cuba (Durham 16).

In *Proven Presence*, Fernandes further argues that it was not surprising to see the female body as a site of contestation within Cuban rap, as it was within hip hop where many working-class black males allowed themselves to assert a spectacular masculinity located outside their everyday experiences of disenfranchisement (7). That is where Krudas Cubensi's cultural activism comes into play. They dismantle colonialism, racism, and social exclusion, but unlike most elements of the male-centered Cuban hip-hop movement, they strategically chose to mostly—if not solely—provide frames of reference that exemplify the way marginalization applied to people like them: poor-, black-, urban-, or lesbian-identified women. They rapped about the realities of many commonly overlooked women in metropolitan Cuba. The simultaneous notions of familiarity and racial diversity in the composition of the group not only strengthen the rhetoric of racial awareness that substantiates their participation in the hip-hop sphere, but also accentuates their common experience as resilient queer women. They all portray an out-of-the-norm image of the Cuban woman.

Krudas Cubensi saw themselves as part of that sizeable social sector that found within hip hop culture nuanced languages to address the cracks of a socialist national identity constructed in homogenizing terms. On and off the stage, this trio of heavily pierced and tattooed hip hoppers—and self-identified black, fat, poor, lesbian feminists—verbally denounced

and visually problematized the investment Cuban culture and hip hop subculture made had in the heterosexist and racially exclusive image of the “new man” as the ideal patriot.

Notions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction are said to keep nations afloat. *Krudas Cubensi* execute women-centered cultural productions that problematize heterosexism, setting themselves apart from normative, reproduction-oriented, displays of femininity. As Susan Harewood points out in her study of Calypso/Soca performance in Barbados:

Unlike the hoary myths of origin of Europe and Asia, and the suitably cobwebbed foundational tales of North and South America, the national stories of origin in the Caribbean that are currently invoked are of relatively recent vintage; the independent states are quite young and their myths of origin are set in direct argument with the colonial myths, thereby making apparent the fictive nature of nationalistic narratives. (17)

Recognizing the fictive nature that informs the nationally endorsed idea of the “new man,” *Krudas Cubensi* ask for the recognition, respect, and critical representations of peoples of African descent. Simultaneously, they manage to denounce what Judith Halberstam calls the paradigmatic markers, or temporalities, of the heteronormative experience—birth, marriage, reproduction, and death (5). It could be argued that *Krudas Cubensi* constructed much of their identity as hip hoppers by reclaiming Cuban hip hop as the communitarian platform it professed to be in fin-de-siècle Havana. The fact that some of their most popular rap lyrics politicize menstruation, celebrate the bodies of black and fat women, and advocate the love for women and between women, has been one of the most vigorous challenges they pose to the male-centeredness of the Cuban hip hop movement.

As a matter of fact, recently *Las Krudas* began to pronounce themselves as “the third revolution.” First, they profess in between beats, there was the Cuban Revolution, then the Cuban hip hop revolution, and finally the feminist revolution within the Cuban hip hop movement. They would be, in any case, founding members of that ‘third revolution.’” Through their feminist hip hop interventions they carry out to the image of the “rebel” they know best—that of the socialist citizen who is profoundly critical, intensely revolutionary, and undoubtedly Cuban. Through

feminist themes and politics, Las Krudas map intricate ways in which women, particularly the most disenfranchised ones, have historically and contemporarily embodied the values of self-sacrifice, service, hard work, and incorruptibility to be expected from any *real* socialist citizen.

Las Krudas' fierce critique of the "voluntarism and collectivism that require citizens to sacrifice all their personal needs and desires for the achievement of a single national goal" (Fernandes 61) resonates with what Patricia Hill Collins describes as one of the dimensions of black women activism. "Black women's activism," Collins states, "consists of struggles for institutional transformation—namely, those efforts to change discriminatory policies and procedures of government, schools, the workplace, the media, stores, and other social institutions" (204). Despite the fact that African descendants in the Americas have been central to the development of most of our collective national identities, black people continue to be discriminated against and suffer disproportionately from poverty and social exclusion. There is a notable scarcity of historical and contemporary representations of people of African descent that challenge colonial and colonizing constructions of the black body as uncivilized, hypersexualized, or dangerous to the viability of the nation (Arroyo 21).

Krudas Cubensi form part of a worldwide generation of young women who are refashioning feminism toward their own ends through an active participation in the terrain of popular culture. More specifically, I locate their artwork among that of other young Spanish Caribbean<sup>1</sup> women who disrupt, transcend, and reframe the ordinary by amplifying, through performance<sup>2</sup> and select mediation practices, the ways our identities are marked with difference.<sup>3</sup> Las Krudas' emphasis on the empowerment of poor-, black-, urban-, and lesbian-identified women goes hand-in-hand with what Aisha Durham has coined as "hip hop feminism." She states:

Hip hop feminism is not a novelty act surfing atop the third wave of difference in the academy. It is not a pinup for postfeminism put forth by duped daughters who dig misogynistic rap music and the girl-power pussy politic of empowerment. Hip hop gains its popularity from its oppositionality and from its complicity in reproducing dominant representations of black womanhood. For hip hop *and* feminism to move in the lives of girls and women today, we must work in earnest to develop a progressive politic that aims not only to

eradicate sexist lyrics and images, but also to address the ways these representations work in concert with exploitative systems to thwart self-determination. I offer a working definition of hip hop feminism to provide a language to describe the kind of cultural work taking place already within communities of color. I define hip hop feminism as a socio-cultural, intellectual and political movement grounded in the situated knowledge of women of color from the post-Civil Rights generation who recognize culture as a pivotal site for political intervention to challenge, resist and mobilize collectives to dismantle systems of exploitation. (305–06)

Durham's definition of hip hop feminism moves notions of cultural agency away from the realm of spectacular bodies in rap and hip hop music and places it on everyday people—particularly “ordinary” women who, aware of the potential of this expressive culture to influence individual and collective worldviews, decide to use its popularity to turn the spotlight on the social conditions of women of color. This definition, however, has been formulated to understand the survival strategies of poor communities of color fighting for cultural, political, and economic power within context of the United States. I travel with Durham's definition to the Spanish Caribbean, to contemporary socialist Cuba in particular, where several Cuban and American scholars such as Roberto Zurbano, Joaquín Borges-Triana, Tanya Saunders, Marc Perry, and Sujatha Fernandes have documented the Cuban hip hop movement as a facilitator of the production and management of democratic participation on the island.

Everyday life is inseparable from the textual, aural, and visual processes that produce popular culture. In agreement with Durham's definition of hip hop feminism, *Las Krudas*' cultural interventions reside where the ordinary and the spectacular meet—which, in the performers' case, is at the juncture of hip hop and street theater. If one sees the routine processes by which one “makes a living” as part of ordinary life, then one has to evaluate *Las Krudas*' street theater participation side-by-side their involvement in creating a feminist space within the Cuban hip hop movement; they were fierce-feminist-urban-poets only part of the time. It could be argued that they actually spend their evenings with hip hop events and their days with the production of an attractive-to-tourist-eye, carnival-like tradition in the streets of *La Habana Vieja*.

## Krudas Cubensi and Street Theater

Las Krudas' "ordinary" way of make a living as street theater performers is also quite spectacular. I must say that after three years of conducting exploratory ethnographic research on the "underground cultural spheres in the metropolitan insular Spanish Caribbean,"<sup>4</sup> one of my strongest research interests became to understand how people of my generation, particularly women, employ media to generate critical mediated messages *and* make a living from it. After attending many experimental musical, dance, theater, art-action performances and holding conversations with a wide variety of artists and cultural workers and organic intellectuals from across the insular and diasporic Spanish Caribbean for the last four years, I must admit I have always been impressed with Krudas Cubensi's cultural work for several reasons—one of them is the fact that their cultural work expands across a selection of mediated and performative forms. Since the mid-1990s, they are actually one of the few—if not the only—all-female Caribbean ensemble with the longest continuous trajectory of alternating, sometimes combining, hip hop and street theater to subsist economically.

The same three heavily pierced and tattooed women who on every hip hop stage forcefully denounce the stereotypical images of what Cuban revolutionaries looked and *acted* like were the same three entertainers who performed Afrocentric tunes and tales down the most prominently touristy, cobblestone-covered boulevards and plazas of La Habana Vieja. Tropazankos Cubensi, the street and community theater group that Krudas Cubensi founded in 1996, could be seen performing around the "colonial zone" in colorful hand-stitched costumes and five-foot-tall stilts, six days a week, four hours a day.

Tropazankos employs approximately fifteen people consisting of stilts walkers, musicians, and dancers—from which more than half were or are women. The route the troupe follows—and I speak in the present tense, because although Las Krudas have migrated, Tropazankos continues to perform—demarcates the most prominently touristy boulevards and plazas of La Habana Vieja. They stop in the plazas to run musical games for the children and to pose for extensive video and photo shoots for tourists. The music never stops, the performance never ceases—even when they are posing for the cameras. The tips they collect for entertaining tourists and locals becomes the salary to be distributed daily among the *entire* troupe at the end of each workday.

As multifaceted artists and performers, Krudas Cubensi work at once with and against the politics of each of the cultural environments they navigated in La Habana. As part of the hip-hop movement, they recognized and confronted the absurdity of the noticeable inequalities implied in the fact that tourists have so much more economic privilege on the island than most locals. Nonetheless, they partly depended on that same tourist economy to gain a daily income in dollars or euros. They also relied on the occasional hip-hop activities in which there was some form of international cultural exchange to sell their homemade CDs to supplement their income.

At this point, we must remember what Fernandes discussed in *Proven Presence* about the situation of young black women in relation to the racist hiring policies that permeated the Cuban tourist industry (5–6). While many black and mulatta found themselves with few options outside of *jineterismo* or the “the myriad commercial transactions with foreigners, including prostitution, at all levels” (La Fountain-Stokes 16), Krudas Cubensi determined and negotiated the urban environment around them by *performing and working* their way out of a tough economic situation.

Because at the core of my query there is an interest in fleshing out and embracing the complexities of the praxis—either through embodiment or institutionalization—of multiple progressive ideologies, the study of Las Krudas in relation to the tourism industry pinpoints the inherent contradictions within the socialist cultural and subcultural spheres they inhabited in Cuba. I take interest in those contradictions because those were, in part, what motivated Las Krudas’ migration to the United States by way of Russia and then Mexico.

In situating the contemporary Cuban sex tourism experience within a larger historical and global context, in *Pleasure Island: Tourism And Temptation In Cuba*, Rosalie Schwartz pinpoints the inherent contradictions that occur in between a new national economy based in tourism and a government that has spent decades inculcating the higher moral value of nonexploitation. She states:

In the last decade (and more intensely since the collapse of the Soviet Union), Cuba has revived tourism and made the industry central to its economic viability. More tourists visit Cuba now than in the 1950’s, their experience disconnected from the reality of Cuban daily existence. Housed in well-appointed—even luxurious—hotels and fed from well-stocked larders, they are conveyed from place to place in air-

conditioned buses, while citizens endure the hardships of an extended economic crisis. The drama plays to a worldwide audience eager to know the fate of Cuba's socialist and tourist experiments. (xv)

Contradiction, of course, emerges when capitalism shows up at socialism's front door. Schwartz documents foreign investment in Cuba's hotels, beach resorts, and other attractions at about \$500 million by 1994. The profit, of course, motivated more investors, and at that point Cuba permitted foreign partners to control the labor force and to repatriate their half of the gain.

Because for every action, there is a reaction, the inconsistencies of the Revolutionary discourse surfaced when the potential for self-employment (by nature a capitalist, individualistic endeavor) becomes an issue of great concern for the Communist Party. Schwartz documents the Central Committee's 1996 examination of the effect of the new economic policies on the Revolutionary ideology. After deliberating for a few hours in a closed-door session, committee members expressed apprehensions about the actions of their own government's economic decisions and warned against "profiteering and corruption." The committee criticized the "humiliating" reality of prostitution and the "changed values brought about by access to dollars." The committee particularly expressed concern for Cubans leaving their professions to take up less skilled jobs in the tourist industry (211). Certainly there are contradictions in the way the Cuban government has handled efforts to stay on top of its economy while remaining one of the longest-standing Third-World socialist governments in the Western Hemisphere. These contradictions have very real effects in the lives of Cuban men and women.

These contradictions also affect the experience of tourists who visit the island. In conversations with a literary, film and queer theorist from Cuba's International School of Film and Television, I learned that the carnival-like cultural interventions that Las Krudas performed on a daily basis did not correspond to any performative Cuban traditions that he could recognize, at least from the island's western region. Santiago's carnival tradition at the eastern tip of the island "is something else," he said, while showing some concern for the cultural fabrication *Tropazankos Cubensi* was putting up for La Habana's tourist eyes.

The conundrum of a fabricated national image vis-à-vis the idea of disenfranchised women's survival through a plethora of theatrical and performative enterprises could be better understood if one judges

cultural phenomena as partial and incomplete because “culture itself is not precisely bounded and continually evolves (Harper 30). In fact, Rosalie Schwartz proposes the notion of “tourism as history” in analyzing the complicated relationship the island has had with this industry. Proponents of these ideas assert that all agents engaged in tourism initiate action, alter behavior, shape attitudes, and influence culture through art, music, religious ritual, and food preferences (xii–xiii).

Given the exposure that Krudas Cubensi has had to all kinds of international tourists through their “day job” in street theater and their “night gigs” as part of the Cuban hip hop movement, one can argue that they have had the opportunity to initiate action, alter behaviors, and shape the attitudes of pockets of people around the world without ever stepping off the island before 2005. To say the least, there is a long list of cultural critics and scholars such as Álex Ayala, Sujatha Fernandes, Yoshie Furuhashi, Norma Guillard-Limonta, Joffe Margaux, Marc Perry, and Tanya Saunders as well as filmmakers such as Ana Boden and Ryan Fleck, Sonja de Vries, and Vanessa Diaz who have documented much of Las Krudas’ and other hip hop artists’ cultural impact in La Habana and elsewhere.

Las Krudas benefited from the streets and the stages of La Habana in various, sometimes convoluted ways. La Habana is, like other Third-World cities, a space in which modernity, late-modernity, and postmodernity are negotiated every day despite the uneven geographical and historical development characteristic of post- and neo-colonial regions. Acknowledging the dichotomies that Las Krudas inhabited as a means of surviving the Cuban metropolis motivates me to ask the following question: how many of us can say that while we did our low-paying jobs, we also got to challenge and resist the continued oppression of women of color, established a festive, theatrical, carnival-like tradition in the streets of La Habana Vieja, recuperated Afrocentric her-stories as a means to combat institutional racism, and requested the redistribution of global resources? Sounds tiring, no? In an interview that I held with them on September 13, 2007, when I asked about their decision to migrate to the United States they replied with an excerpt from, “Huir, Eskapar,” (To Run Away, To Escape) one of Krudas’ postmigration songs written by Olivia “Pelusa MC” Prendes:

En Cuba, dentro, estábamos dentro  
años y años, calientes, al centro.

Aisladas, sin saber que tantas realidades podían suceder.  
 Cuba madre: reprime, comprime, gime.  
 ¡Quiero salir! grita mi gente  
 y de tanto mar estamos ausentes.  
 Hemos estado austente del mundo toda nuestra vida  
 y soñando con cruzar el mar, cruzar el mar, cruzar el mar.  
 Han sido sueños de años  
 han sido empeños frustrados  
 de muchísima gente de nuestro país.  
 Ha sido tanta la gente que ha muerto  
 en ese intento de cruzar el mar.  
 Y ha sido, realmente, también  
 la posibilidad del cambio de vida de tanta gente,  
 de tantas familias.

If there is anything that Krudas Cubensi consistently denounce, it is that no nationalism in the world has ever granted women and men the same privileged access to the resources of the nation-state. Their voices, even if loud, were starting to sound muffled by their constantly having to avoid falling through the cracks and by their relentless desire to write themselves into the grand narratives of history.

In the next section I take up the different ways in which Krudas Cubensi's migration experience has prompted them to rearticulate the feminist ethics they lived by in Cuba. With the movement from the metropolis of a socialist post-colony to Texas, George W. Bush's State of origin, they have had to reimagine what it means to be Cuban, to be lesbians, to be islanders, to be artists, and most importantly, to be family. Now from within the United States diaspora, their freestyle continues to turn patriarchy on its head. Their post-migration hip hop performances have been placing an increasing emphasis on the notion of family reunification through displacement, and on women's rights to cross national boundaries (invented by men) as a means to honor the sacred kinships left behind and preserve the chosen ones.

### **Las Krudas and the Spanish Caribbean Migration Experience**

Las Krudas' relocation presents an opportunity to reflect on the ways their feminist discourse—which at its core articulates the connectedness of the experiences of marginalized women—moves along and evolves

with them. In *Scattered Hegemonies*, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan reflect: “If the world is currently structured by transnational economic links and cultural asymmetries, locating feminist practices within these structures becomes imperative” (3). How does the critical work of Krudas Cubensi’s imagination become part of, and necessarily transform, different types of collectivities? A comparative analysis of their cultural productions on the island and now in the diaspora, I propose, advances dialogues around the ways in which Spanish Caribbean women materialize and embody the everyday sociopolitical, economic, and cultural negotiations that occur in between our respective insular milieu and our diverse reasons to be here, in the United States. In *Bridges to Cuba*—a collection of essays about the relationship between Cuba and the United States and the many struggles Cubans experience on both sides of the “puddle”—Ruth Behar states:

Cuba since the revolution has been imagined as either utopia or a backward police state. Cuba, viewed with utopian eyes, is a defiant little island that has dared to step on the toes of a great superpower and dream ambitiously of undoing the legacy of poverty, inequality, and unfulfilled revolutions that have plagued Latin America and the Caribbean. Alternatively, as newspaper headlines in the U.S. media like to declare, Cuba is “an island of lost souls,” a place where huddled masses “yearn for the comforts of life” and will sacrifice everything to leave, plunging into the “deadly sea of dreams” as *balseros* (raft people) or Cuban “wetbacks.” Within this conflicting web of representations born of the Cold War, there is little room for a more nuanced and complex vision of how Cubans on the island and the diaspora give meaning to their lives, their identity, and their culture in the aftermath of a battle that has split the nation at the root. (2)

Las Krudas’ social justice-inspired message has always thrived on the (transnational, black feminist) politics and aesthetics of difference. Their actual migration experience is no different. In the interest of confidentiality and due to the haphazard nature of any sad experience of displacement, I cannot detail the steps through which Odalys ended up in the United States in 2005, or all the hoops that Odaymara and Olivia jumped through in 2006 in their attempt to replicate the brave journey of the first of the three Krudas. Despite the fact that both of Krudas Cubensi’s migration “rounds” stand in different places in relation to governmentally approved

transnational movements, they share Russia and Mexico as common stepping-stones into the United States.

They all took relatively long routes to the United States. Determined not to plunge themselves into the ninety-mile Atlantic stretch between Cuba and the United States that Ruth Behar describes as the “deadly sea of dreams,” Las Krudas strategized their exits around two factors. First, they used the permits they had to “exit” the island for the purposes of international cultural exchanges that never materialized. Second, they knew that obtaining a visa to visit Russia is a relatively uncomplicated process, thanks to the island’s old economic and ideological relationship with the Eastern bloc that existed until the Soviet Union’s disintegration in 1991. Once in Russia, they figured different ways to get to Mexico; this process took months in both of their respective migration “rounds.” But what is the logic behind the extremely long puddle jumps that each of Las Krudas made between Cuba, Russia, and Mexico? An online article titled “Rush of Cuban Migrants Use Mexican Routes to U.S.,” recently published in the *International Herald Tribune*, explains:

In fact, unlike Mexicans, Central Americans and others heading to the United States’ southwest border, the Cubans do not have to sneak across. They just walk right up to United States authorities at the border, relying on Washington’s so-called wet foot/dry foot policy, which gives Cubans the ability to become permanent residents if they can only reach American soil. (Lacey)

Las Krudas’ multinational jumps and transnational crossings attest to the multiplicity of puddle-jumping and border-crossing practices that people from the different parts of the Caribbean and Latin America experience as they migrate to the United States.

Krudas Cubensi embody a more nuanced and complex image of the Cuban migrant than the one that Behar described in *Bridges to Cuba*. They also hold reasons much different than just yearning for the “comforts” of capitalism that the United States can offer to a trio of Cuban, black- and lesbian-identified women. Las Krudas’ drive to migrate to the United States was based, in part, on their hope to find and build solidarity with the people who have benefited the least from the “American Dream.” During a recent interview, Odaymara “Pasita” Kruda expresses the following sentiment (my translation):

I always wanted to come to the States, really. Since I was a teenager. I listened to American music and I received news of stuff happening here with African Americans, and revolutionary movements, of hippies and all those things from a country boiling in rebelliousness. So really, I always wanted [to come] because it was like, wow, United States, the black people have power, the women are feminists, and they have conferences, and there are lesbians and they organize things [. . .] so it was like an utopia, like, *coño*, the United States. Now that I am here, I see that it is not like I thought on my dreams or as much as I thought. And being here, sometimes I am like . . . “Oh, this is it?”

In *Prophets Of The Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*, Imani Perry states that “gender and sexuality politics, as well as conflicted relationships to Americanness, all form part of the symbolic field of hip hop music. Home—in the literal, experiential, and imaginative senses provides the grounds for interpretation, and the home of hip hop is black in melting-pot America” (37). The dual discourse of empowerment and disenchantment that Odaymara describes when explaining her experience in the United States is endemic of both: the conflicted relationships to Americanness that characterizes hip hop culture locally and globally and to America’s own inability to control its perception across the world given its ridiculously powerful capacity to disseminate ideologies through many channels (Grewal 2).

“There is growing evidence,” Arjun Appadurai explains in *Modernity at Large*, “that the consumption of the mass media throughout the world often provokes resistance, irony, selectivity, and, in general, *agency*” (7). Agency, in my paper is defined by the creation of oneself to one’s liking. If you do not see yourself properly reflected in the “bodies of knowledge”<sup>25</sup> that compose the public spheres you navigate, then you create yourself. The ability of Krudas Cubensi members to create themselves to their own liking across different national contexts, I propose, should be connected to the way other Third-World women recreate themselves aesthetically and politically within their own national contexts and in the diaspora.

Building upon Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s notion of “feminism without borders,” I am attempting to amend the dearth of discourses that interconnect the cultural practices of people of Spanish Caribbean descent, but women in particular. Mohanty states:

Feminism without borders is not the same as “border-less” feminism. It acknowledges the fault lines, conflicts, differences, fears, and containment that borders represent. It acknowledges that there is no one sense of a border, that the lines between and through nations, races, classes, sexualities, religions and disabilities are real—and that a feminism without borders must work to envision change and social justice across these lines of demarcation and division. I want to speak of a feminism without silences and exclusions in order to draw attention to the tension between the simultaneous plurality and narrowness of borders and the emancipatory potential for crossing through, with and over these borders in our everyday lives. (2)

Implementing a “feminism without borders” epistemology in the Caribbean and its diverse diasporas around the world, then, calls for deliberately creative stratagems. To achieve this, we need necessarily to destabilize fixed dichotomies of old and new imperial systems. In critically documenting Krudas Cubensi’s anticolonialist and feminist interventions across different cultural, subcultural, and national landscapes, I see my project as in dialogue with that of other transnational feminists such as Rosa Linda Fregoso, Chela Sandoval, and Ella Shohat, who articulate the relationship between the material conditions experienced by Third-World women in a late-modern/postmodern, for-profit, advertising-saturated, corporate globe.

As Verene Shepherd and Hilary McD. Beckles state: “The Caribbean was at the centre of an imperialist policy that saw modernity taking its clearest form as a network of contradictory and unstable forces” (xiii). In other words, the “invention of the Americas,” a term coined by the historian Edmundo O’Gorman in the 1960s, was jump-started and built upon the discovery,<sup>6</sup> conquest, colonization, and continued exploitation of the Caribbean. The tropical character of the Caribbean, interpreted by Europeans as the opportunity of “turning sunshine into money,” set off one of the worst experiences of human history—the slaughter of thousands of indigenous people and the dislocation of millions of indentured servants of African descent (Hagelberg 2). As I had mentioned before, to this day, there is a notable scarcity of historical and contemporary representations of people of indigenous and African descent that challenge colonial and colonizing discourses of brown and black body as uncivilized, hypersexualized or dangerous to the viability of the nation.

Krudas Cubensi members form part of the current generation of Spanish Caribbean young women generating Y2K-compatible social justice discourses and practices. These are women who have quit giving other people permission to define who they are and what they are worth—in the past and in the present. Las Krudas, both in real life and through their creative practices, have undertaken the most strenuous of tasks—that of subsisting mostly of enterprises of self-determination. No predetermined routes, no prepackaged identity struggles, no programmed discourses of postcoloniality. Raw as the metaphorical meaning of the group's name and inverted like the exchange of the "C" for a "K," the following is another excerpt from "Huir, Eskapar" (To Run Away, To Escape), one of their postmigration songs:

Dicen ke toda nuestra gente se kiere kedar allí.  
 ¿Acaso olvidaron cuando vinieron a colonizar akí?  
 Desde antes de mi abuela la gente kiere emigrar.  
 De España misma vinieron pa' mi familia fundar.  
 Ke la tierra entera es nuestra y el derecho de viajar.  
 Huir, eskapar [. . .]  
 no es sólo una actitud de kien teme.  
 Es un desafío de kien más no puede sostener su realidad.  
 Es la dignidad de kien decide cambiar  
 aunke a donde valla,  
 no halla ni casa, ni mama, ni papa, ni ja-ja-ja.  
 Latinoamerica tiene derecho a emigrar.  
 África tiene derecho a emigrar.  
 Asia tiene derecho a emigrar.  
 Caribe tiene derecho a emigrar.  
 Tercer mundo tiene derecho a emigrar.  
 Hasta los animales tienen derecho a emigrar.

One of the rationales through which Krudas Cubensi have addressed their migration experience in some of their most recent songs simultaneously addresses and confronts the difficulties that most "Third-World" peoples experience when trying to migrate to "First-World" locations. Krudas' response to the realities they experienced in embassies and airports of these "First-World" countries seems to resonate: "Don't you remember colonialism? Who gave *you* permission to exploit me? And how dare you to continue to exercise surveillance, force and to criminalize my move-

ment, and to persist on curtailing my advancement? The world is ours, and we have the right to migrate. All these national boundaries of pass and impasse have been created under patriarchy, anyway. As feminists, it is our job to dismiss and cross them whenever possible.” If the invention of the Americas started through the Caribbean, and the Caribbean has also spread all over the United States and the world, then Mohanty’s notion of “feminism without borders” aids me to sustain both the grounding body-centeredness of Krudas cultural productions vis-à-vis their current experience of transnational (dis)location.

Not only are origins of Caribbean founded upon oppression and onslaught—which in turn generated an ever-present resistance to subordination that still remains peripheral to the grand narratives of our constituencies—but also the very borders of the region are constantly open to movement and renegotiation. Krudas Cubensi, along with a large group of artists also considered founding members of the Cuban hip hop movement, have migrated to the United States, Canada, and Europe within the last couple of years. Their migration has not changed their name or who they claim to be. Krudas Cubensi, as well as the rest of the Cuban artists in the diaspora, still want to be understood as the raw ambassadors of everything that the Cuban hip hop movement has come to represent: a chance to form a community outside of (yet in relation to) the shared cultural precinct of the nation.

It has been mostly through online social networking mechanisms such as MySpace that this community remains connected outside of Cuba. Through new communication technologies, the Cuban hip-hop community has chosen to remain as Manuel Aviles succinctly puts it, “linked together, exchange information, and maintain cooperative relationships by means of hyperlinks around a common background, interest, or project” (3). They decenter Cuba by taking it along with them in songs and images. The family and the nation are reconstructed, portable, a kind of feeling within.

### **Las Krudas, Migration and Transnational Hip Hop Feminism—Concluding Remarks**

Krudas Cubensi refashion feminism toward their own ends through an active participation in popular culture. Australian feminist Catherine Lumby argues that if feminism is to remain engaged with and be relevant to the everyday lives of women, then feminists desperately need the tools

to understand everyday culture. We need to engage with the debates in popular culture rather than taking an elitist and dismissive attitude toward the primary medium of communication today (Karlyn, par. 7).

From the centrality of censorship strategies known to be in place in the media systems of almost every country to the government and media alliances in the management of nationally relevant information, media play a central role in the construction of political and social identities. The media are said to be so powerful because they teach us about society by repeatedly showing certain types of people enacting certain types of roles. But if we really understand communication as a many-way avenue in which people not only receive but also produce ideas, information, opinions, or emotions, we must understand that the power of the media to influence a flux of ideologies and hegemonies moves in various and diverse ways. In other words, we must recognize the viability of employing the very media channels that speak to us, to foster all kinds of resistance movements. In these times of rapid transformation, I argue that if we would like to generate a productive conversation about the meanings of nationalism, of historical accounts of race and gender, or of what it means to live by a set of feminist ethics, this dialogue must engage with the different ways audiovisual technologies mediate the terrain of popular culture—where the world is replayed to us through endless aural and visual mediations.

As I mentioned in my earlier discussion of the theatrical legacy that Krudas Cubensi generated in La Habana Vieja, the artists of Las Krudas know how to *perform and work* their way out of a tough economic situation. In La Habana they created their “day job” in street theater and their “night gigs” in hip hop movement; since they joined the diaspora, their labor distribution has definitely shifted, because of what they describe as the U.S. institutionalization of the arts as a leisure activity. They state the following (my translation):

Yes, people live where the work is at, in whatever way they can. I think that theater work, which is much more complex (and in our case, that we like to do it with a lot of people, with live music and with instruments), as we did in Cuba with Tropazankos, is like what Pasita said: people don't have time, everyone is looking out for themselves. We would actually have to organize a more serious, less spontaneous project, like presenting a grant to a nonprofit and you know all the processes, the paperwork, the bureaucracy of this country, *se ponen*

*de madre* (they become really difficult to handle). So then, it would have to be a more serious project with paperwork and things so that we can obtain a budget and be able to “invite” some people that we would like to participate in the project with us . . . and do a thing . . . like . . . - bla . . . in the end . . . in Cuba it was more spontaneous, it was easier, and it really became a way of living . . . and it continues to grow and grow. In Cuba, Tropazankos continues to be giving something to do to La Havana Vieja, but for us here, hip hop has been, like, easier, more accepted, less complicated. Now Las Krudas can do their own discs in an independent manner, and we have managed to have our own T-shirts to sell and stuff. So, I don’t know, personal agency is relation to hip hop has been so much easier than the stilts work, which usually requires a much bigger production.

The fact that hip hop has come to represent a form of cultural capital around the word, I think, has facilitated Krudas Cubensi’s agency to survive in the diaspora. They nonetheless have seen the need to incorporate theatricality into hip hop. Krudas have been blessed enough to continue to live through their art. Their rap continues to be in Spanish. Because of the language barrier between them and their current fan base in the United States, who more often than not are English-only speakers, Las Krudas have reverted to what Eric Darnell Pritchard and Maria L. Bibbs denominate as the especially creative ways in which queer women of color performers engage with hip hop audiences. They state:

In order to bring a touch of brightness to the scene, many queer women of color in hip hop have developed innovative ways to connect with one another and their fans, all while simultaneously creating a space that is more affirming of the diverse and collective folks in hip-hop, particularly women of color (33).

For instance, when Las Krudas perform one of their most highly acclaimed songs called “La Gorda”<sup>7</sup> (Da Fat Woman), they go out of their way to signal to and accentuate with hand gestures, poses, and stage interactions the “enormity” of their bellies, buttocks, and breasts. Odaymara “Pasita” Kruda, the composer and main interpreter of the song, even raises her shirt to show all of her “love handles.”

Hip hop has become a viable way of living for Las Krudas for a couple of reasons. First, it has provided them with a full-time opportunity to

sustain themselves through honorarium-based concerts that tend to happen in academic and privately owned progressive or subcultural spheres. Second, it has also become the space through which they can create and maintain familial bonds with other people, women particularly, who are also committed to building ties of solidarity and social consciousness through the transnational, dissent-based aspect of hip hop culture.

Locating Las Krudas' cultural influence within the framework of the Spanish Caribbean and its United States diaspora provides me with a solid standpoint from which to unravel the inherent contradictions of the implementation of capitalist and democratic ideologies in media-driven Western societies—where the role and function of media in democratic societies has been highly contested. How has the critical work of Krudas Cubensi's imagination become part of, and necessarily transformed, different types of collectivities in the island and the diaspora? Krudas Cubensi embody the ethics that expand Aisha Durham's notion of hip hop feminists. The artists do so because, aware of the potential of this expressive culture to influence individual and collective worldviews, they decide to use its popularity to turn the spotlight onto the social conditions of disenfranchised women not only in the United States but also around the globe.

Las Krudas say to live and abide by the "third revolution," that of the womanist/feminist revolution within the Cuban hip hop movement that has sought to re-gender the core socialist values such as self-sacrifice, service, hard work, and incorruptibility as female. Ironically, it seems that the "third revolution's" ability to sustain itself even within the orbit of U.S. hegemony goes hand-in-hand with what has been described by many as the rebel street cred' that Cuba has within the revolutionary imagination. For example, during my interview with them on Sept 13, 2007, the artists of Las Krudas described the way they envision their return to Cuba. While the exit was individual, the return is imagined as collective. They would like to return to Cuba side-by-side other Cuban hip hop revolutionaries spread all over the world. They say (my translation):

So what I want to say is, that if all the people from Cuba that are around here from the hip hop movement do like a caravana of . . . of the ones that left, we can go back, at some point, for some kind of festival or something. We want for all of us to go back, we can even coordinate with artists from here, from the the United States that also want to go [to the island], and go back there with things,

because we know that they are needed. You understand me? It's like a bridge, but not like in the past with only people from the United States taking [hip hop] stuff to Cuba, but of people from Cuba who left Cuba going back and taking [hip-hop equipment and materials] to Cuba, like the people from here have done, you understand me? Is like a bridge with people *from* the country, you understand me? And that's like our dream, not only to go back just to sing. But we want to go back, and sing, and also take back things for the people, because it was very nice when we were over there and somebody brought for us a little stack of blank CD's or something. It was like, ¡*coño!* We also want to tell people [our story], so that people can see, because I think that coming out of Cuba, for example, the feeling I have is that on the one side, I am really happy, but I feel that many people, of the ones that are in Cuba, the ones that we were hanging out just before the moment we left, were like very . . . “Well now that you left . . . now you are something else.” So its a matter of going there, tell our experience, and tell people that is not the best. Many people think, and I also used to think, “no, the *yuma*, whoa whoa whoa.” *Contra*, here there are a lot of good things, but there is also a lot of bad things.

In this way, as hip hop feminists, Krudas Cubensi adhere to what Cameron McCarthy and Greg Dimitriadis call the postmodern move of Third-World artists. In this move, art does not imitate life, but life itself is aestheticized and becomes the genetic code for the elaboration of new forms of existence, of care of the self, and with concern for the Other (232). As accomplished artists in their own right within local and global hip hop aesthetic spheres, Las Krudas' internationalization has just begun. As Cuban rap practitioners, either on the island or in the diaspora, they have chosen to continue to live by ideas of collectivism, egalitarianism, and solidarity even through moments of impending transitions. Change and movement are essential for growth and Krudas Cubensi forge a particular kind of transnational hip hop feminism as they come and go. They are, as they call themselves, New Caribbean Feminists—the kind of practicing transnational feminists we should all aspire to engage.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I understand the insular Spanish Caribbean as a geopolitically inspired ideological site in which the historical, cultural, and linguistic manifestations shared between Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and their United States diasporas, allow for correlation despite—or precisely because of—the different current politicoeconomic material conditions within each of these locations.

<sup>2</sup> While I am generally interested in artists who employ their bodies as the raw material of their work in this project, I focus on productions that indeed converse with the temporality of performance art yet augment this spotlight moment with the employment of electronic media—particularly musical interventions—that reflect the irony, anger, humor, and resistance with which the local receives and transforms the global.

<sup>3</sup> I compare *Las Krudas* to other feminist (and often queer) Caribbean women artists, such as the Dominican Rita Indiana-Hernandez or the Puerto Rican *Las Hermanas Colón*. All these women have created a space of respect within the Cuban hip hop movement, the Dominican art-action circuits, and the Puerto Rican alternative music scenes. *Las Krudas*, Rita Indiana-Hernandez, and *Las Hermanas Colón* are just three examples of a larger network of Caribbean women of my generation (a group I loosely define as currently in their late twenties and thirties) also challenging the objectification of female bodies in contemporary consumer culture through the arts.

<sup>4</sup> When I refer to the underground cultural circuits in the Spanish Caribbean, I am specifically talking about a set of sites or spheres in which the execution of visual arts, musical performances, and theatrical expressions happens within performative spaces closely associated with the production of alternative national aesthetics within metropolitan (though sometimes rural) spheres of Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. As I experienced them during my ethnographic fieldwork, a few examples of these spaces are the *Galería Fayad Jamís* in Alamar or *La Madriguera* in Centro Habana (Cuba); *La Chocloatera* in Puerto Plata or *Casa España* in Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic); *Taller C* in Río Piedras, *Café Seda* in Old San Juan or *Casa Cruz de la Luna* in San Germán (Puerto Rico). Far from suggesting that the production of alternative national aesthetics happens only within the confines of these establishments, I offer these as examples of where subcultural or countercultural expressions have consistently occurred since their formation. Other sites in which I have experienced expressions of nontraditional national aesthetics are university halls and corridors, outdoor plazas in the historical colonial zones,

galleries, museums, beaches, and other sparse, occasionally impromptu, exhibit locations. I expound on a transnational discussion of these circuits as they relate to the United States diaspora.

<sup>5</sup> My employment of the concept “bodies of knowledge” is a result of an ongoing dialogue with my colleague Aisha Durham about the conjunction of advanced qualitative research methods and Cherrie Moraga’s notion of “theory in the flesh” (1981). Within the context of this project, “bodies of knowledge” has three meanings. It refers (1) to the bodies of literature employed within my analyses, (2) to the body and experiences of our informants as the foundation of the researcher’s social understanding, and (3) to the intrinsic relevance of the researcher’s body and experiences throughout the research process. I further examine the notion of bodies of knowledge during the methodological section later in the introduction.

<sup>6</sup> From within newer historiographic accounts of the Caribbean, Pedro San Miguel (2004) offers quite a nuanced description of Christopher Columbus. San Miguel describes him as a sailor who arrived to the Caribbean completely lost in his geography, confused by his own cartography, and blinded by his cosmology ( 31). This kind of reconceptualization reveals, as Susan Harewood (2006) explains, the fictive nature of Caribbean nationalistic narratives (17). Many cultural myths about the origins of the Caribbean avow for Columbus as a founding figure without conceding that he persisted on having arrived to Asia all throughout the Caribbean conquest—all due to, what we now know, were untrustworthy geographic notions and miscalculated cartographies.

<sup>7</sup> What follows is an excerpt of Las Krudas’ song *La Gorda* (Da Fat Woman) written by Odaymara “Pasa Kruda” Cuesta. “(CHORUS BEGINS:) Llegó la gorda, / la gorda llegó / Llegó la gorda, / la gorda soy yo. / A mí que me digan / gorda, redonda, esfera / A mí que me digan gorda, / soy gorda. (CHORUS ENDS.) / Nenas flacas/ Sexys / En la TV / siempre lo mismo / Silocona / Allá, aquí/ Torsos perfectos / Que lindo. / Anorexia en tiempos de guerra / Paulina, / Jennifer, / Beyonce... / que perras. / Pasando hambre, / Haciendo dieta / Hormonas pa’ las tetas / Y las niñas sofocás / por ser Barbie, / por ser muñecas. / Aquí, bola, / pero no de nieve / ¿Qué tiene? / Hermosa / Y silíndricamente misteriosa / Cuando paso por los gimnasios / más llenos que el camello / En la vidriera/ Los super fuertes/ Los super machos / Rompiéndose el cuello / ¿Mirando qué? / Mi cuerpo bello. / Gigantesca / Exceso / Volumen. / A quienes consumen / cuerpos colonizados / Los tengo estresados / Ven / ¿Me vas a cargar? / Ay, chico, / te vas a herniar. / No me escondo pa’ comer / Tengo voz de mujer. / Estoy en paz / conmigo misma / Sabia de mi cuerpo / Y mira a través del prisma / ¿Qué vez? / El reflejo de la luz que dejo al caminar / Rolletes de grasa / en mi cintura

/ No me voy a operar / Ni a embutirme / en una faja. / Ataja / La gorda se reveló / Sintió / Rimó. / Se confesó / Explicó / Y una vez más, / y como siempre, / te la echó. / Baja de peso tú / porque yo, yo no. / ¿Oíste? / Fatty/ Fatty / Fatty / Papi / ¿Oíste? / Esto también es pa ti mami.”

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