

REPRESENT CUBA: HAVANA HIP HOP UNDER THE LENS

Geoff Baker
Royal Holloway, University of London

Between 1997 and 2010, the Havana hip hop scene was the subject of some two dozen documentaries, the majority by non-Cubans. This article considers how the act of film making may participate in the dual process of transnational connection and division, and explores the politics and ethics of transnational cultural production, reception, and representation. While documentaries have given Havana rappers a voice, they have also exposed them to the “tourist gaze” (Urry 1990) and have actively shaped the hip hop scene on the ground as well as on film. Film makers were not only documenting censorship but actually indirectly responsible for it, and they played a role in the local hip hop economy. Events involving Cuba’s leading hip hop group, Los Aldeanos, illustrated the risks that accompanied the transnational circulation of filmed images. Such problematics are elevated to a central theme of Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck’s Young Rebels.

When you develop your idea, when you make your documentary, when you do your job, you are going to do it in a way, without meaning to, that when you show it to anyone, we’re going to look like *gusanos* [worms]. People who don’t agree with the government, or anything. No, no, no, it’s unavoidable.

-Aldo Rodríguez (Los Aldeanos), speaking to camera in the documentary, *Pa’lante*

In one of the few critical interventions on the topic of Cuban hip hop documentaries, Alan West-Durán (n.d.) notes how the film, *La FabriK*, documents the difficulties and disappointments that Cuban rappers have faced in bridging the gap with the United States, while at the same time illustrating a “profound afro-diasporic dialogue” across political frontiers. I would like to push this idea a step further and consider how the act of film making

itself may participate in this dual process of transnational division and connection. Between 1997 and 2010, the Havana hip hop scene was the subject of at least two dozen documentaries, almost certainly more (it is hard to keep track), the majority of them by non-Cubans, illustrating a degree of foreign interest that exceeded hip hop's cultural space in the city. This sheer volume of foreign documentary production both exemplifies and has intensified the marked transnationalism of this scene, which has been nourished by the transnational flow not just of disembodied music, but also of human beings and material resources. It also raises questions over the politics and ethics of transnational cultural production, reception, and representation. What effects has this intense burst of documentary making had on the Havana hip hop scene? Does it matter that it has been primarily in foreign hands? To what extent have documentary makers elided or reflected on such questions?

During a number of years of researching Cuban hip hop and making repeated visits to Havana, I have watched many documentaries on the topic. The films in question range from the factual to the symbolic, the construction of history to the construction of conceptual bridges, but limited space obliges me to generalize in the full knowledge that each of my remarks will be relevant to some films and not to others. My aim here is primarily to raise broad questions about the politics and ethics of film making rather than analyze individual films in detail or critique particular film makers (with a couple of exceptions). Nevertheless, I firmly believe that some hip hop documentary makers have worked in ethically sound ways in Havana, that many have tried to, and that most have had a sincere interest in and sympathy for their subjects. As someone who has made films about *rumba*, I have first-hand experience of the challenges and dilemmas of filming in Cuba.¹ It is also important to bear in mind that the ethical principles of documentary making are far from established: a recent study based on interviews with many experienced documentary makers revealed uncertainty and disagreements over ethical questions and a high degree of pragmatism because of the need to make or remake rules on the spot (Aufderheide et al. 2009). As a result, the ground on which to base an ethical critique of documentary making is not clearly staked out.

There have been isolated attempts to examine Cuban hip hop documentaries, for example, in three articles (including West-Durán's) in the sixth edition of *Movimiento*, the Cuban hip hop magazine, though the analysis of the politics and ethics of film making is limited and in some aspects quite wide of the mark. For example, Félix Mauricio Sáez's (n.d.) criticism of Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi, the director of *Inventos*, shows little understanding of the practicalities of small-scale, independent film making, and its comparison of the director with Wim Wenders and Christopher Columbus does not move the debate forward very far. It also elides the fact that the director made efforts to unite and promote émigré Cuban rappers now living in the U.S., above all through his *Mujeres de hip hop cubano* tour, and that he—like other film makers and researchers—donated equipment to artists on the island. There are good reasons for critiquing both broad aspects and particular instances of the Cuban hip hop documentary boom, but not all critiques are equally valid.

Film making and the tourist gaze

Since the release of Joe Wentrup's *Más voltaje – más volumen, rap en Cuba* (1997), films and film makers have played a vital role in establishing the international influence of Cuban hip hop.² Indeed, this impact has been mediated primarily by film rather than recordings; by 2010, many more documentaries had been produced for international consumption than official albums. Films have given rappers an international stage on which to present themselves, compensating for a relative lack of interest from the media and music industry within Cuba. Kokino (Anónimo Consejo) and Papo Record both use the film *Cuban Hip Hop All Stars* to make an explicit pitch via the lens to foreign music impresarios. Furthermore, the idea that film has served Cuban artists as a vital outlet to the wider world was confirmed to me by Soandres del Río (Hermanos de Causa), one of the protagonists of *East of Havana*, who told me that documentaries had enabled him to overcome internal political problems, local media neglect, and the U.S. blockade of Cuba to assert his existence and forge a connection with New York, the home of hip hop. The plethora of hip hop documentaries has thus provided a valuable window onto the Havana scene, providing artists with much-needed

projection and stimulating international acclaim and connections, and there is recognition among artists of the potential and real opportunities that films have opened up.

Nevertheless, the sheer quantity of lenses pointed at Havana hip hoppers raises some interesting, and at times awkward, questions. Hip hop has never been the dominant form of popular music in Havana, yet many more films have been made about it than about *timba* (Cuban salsa) or *reggaetón*, commercial genres that are far more widely consumed. The body of hip hop films points not just to a fascination with the genre, but also to a more general foreign interest in alternative or underground culture, and a certain aversion to the mainstream. It is perhaps worth asking what lies behind this attraction: Why have the biggest stars in Cuban popular music been relatively neglected in favor of artists that many Cubans have never heard of? Why do we foreigners want to go “underground”? Why are we not content to explore the “surface” that most Cubans enjoy?

In a context in which foreign tourism looms so large, this predilection for the underground might suggest a rejection of the “tourist gaze” (Urry 1990) and its filmed counterparts like *Buena Vista Social Club*. Yet, in considering the activities of foreign film makers who work in a touristic environment and produce images primarily for foreign consumption, one cannot ignore that such film making overlaps with tourism in multiple ways. Furthermore, the urge to “get beneath the surface” to see the “real city” is central to contemporary tourism and to the intensive foreign visualization of Havana since the end of the Soviet era and the resulting economic crisis of the early 1990s, known as the Special Period. At the very least, there are notable parallels between filming and tourism; to put it more strongly, as Ana María Dopico does, “tourism is the only gaze in town” (464). This gaze is both exploited and critiqued in the best-selling novels of Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, such as *Trilogía Sucia de La Habana*, in which the voyeur and the camera-toting tourist are recurrent (and frequently mocked) figures (Whitfield 2008). The status of the foreigner who watches, photographs, or films is problematized, raising concomitant questions of power, inequality, and transnational relations. As both artists and scholars have noted, then, the capturing of Havana by foreign lenses is far from an innocent exercise, indeed it is sometimes viewed as a form of neo-

colonialism at the level of the imaginary. Examining this process is central to understanding Cuba's relationship with the outside world over the past two decades.

Films that focus on underground culture make the same promise to show the real Cuba behind the tourist facade as Gutiérrez's novels, yet—with one notable exception, discussed below—without the self-reflexivity and the (self-)critique of voyeurism that goes with them. The desire to “uncover” Havana drives the sale of Gutiérrez's novels around the world, suggesting that films that do the same, even if made by fans of underground culture, are in some ways subsumed by the commercial and touristic imperatives that are so often disdained, both explicitly and implicitly, by their makers and subjects. Havana may be a “projection screen for Western fantasies” (Dopico 452), in this case fantasies born out of a disgust with developed-world commercialism, but the repressed “Western” realities are still part of the picture, not least because the audience for many of these films is primarily made up of foreign armchair tourist-consumers. The desire for authenticity that underpins the capturing of underground music blends seamlessly into the desire for authenticity of contemporary touristic consumption, both of which give pride of place to the camera lens. In a context in which many, perhaps most, foreign visitors want to “uncover the real Havana,” the filming of underground culture may thus be considered a facet of the tourist gaze rather than an alternative to it.

As a result, both the nature and—perhaps more importantly—the impact of these filmed representations emerge as significant topics. It is not just that the lens may create a distorted representation of reality, but that the act of representing itself may distort that reality. Just as tourists seeking “unspoiled” locations alter these places by the mere act of going there (and photographing them), the presence of film makers has changed the underground scene that drew them to Havana and has contributed to the steady commodification of that scene. The makers of these two dozen documentaries have been very much part of Havana hip hop, and their effects have been felt in concrete ways, both positive and negative.

Most foreign film makers (and researchers such as me) have economic resources beyond the dreams of the average Cuban, and some have been conduits for money and material goods that have expanded the capacity for local hip hop production (while also introducing a certain competition for resources). In *Hasta Siempre*, a group of rappers, including Los Paisanos and Aldo Rodríguez, points out that none of them are wearing Cuban clothes: they all depend on donations from foreigners. The scene wears its transnationalism on its sleeve. Film makers accord prestige to certain artists and exclude others (usually the more commercially oriented). Jauretsi Saizarbitoria organized musical events to provide footage for her film, *East of Havana*, which again implies selectivity. In one case, in August 2004, she was forced to respond to the last-minute cancellation of the Asociación Hermanos Saíz (AHS) hip hop festival that she had gone to film, and the resulting concert at the Acapulco theater by necessity excluded as many artists as it included, leading to rumblings of discontent among rappers who were not part of her “cast.” Foreign film makers are thus comparatively influential, not to mention wealthy, and they have made a significant impression on the compact Havana scene. If their presence has had an impact during the process of filming, the subsequent circulation of some twenty-five documentaries in North America and Europe has boosted foreign interest in the scene, ensuring the circulation of underground hip hop as a commodity in the international market and conditioning the expectations of visitors to Havana, who seek out artists they have seen in films. The films return to the Havana hip hop scene converted into tourist dollars and desires.

Even though hip hoppers have benefited in tangible and intangible ways from this commodification, a number expressed to me a broadly negative view of foreign documentary production. Some felt concerned about being misrepresented; and as Aldo’s comment at the head of this chapter reveals, such misrepresentation does not depend on willful manipulation, but can result even from sympathetic intentions: “when you make your documentary ... we’re going to look like *gusanos* [worms, i.e. dissidents]. People who don’t agree with the government, or anything. No, no, no, it’s unavoidable.” Aldo recognizes that the camera is no mirror, that it intervenes as it mediates, even in the hands of a sympathetic Cuban director like

that of *Pa'lante*. In an intensely politicized and visualized context, filming is inevitably a charged act, even more so when the camera is wielded by a foreigner. For example, senior groups like Obsesión and Doble Filo spoke of romanticization of, and an excessive emphasis on, material scarcity in many films, even if the intention has often been to underline local resourcefulness and talent.

More worryingly, a common theme was that participants in some documentaries had heard little or nothing from the makers after filming had finished; a number told me that they had never been sent a copy of, or even seen, the final product. Few of the two-dozen documentaries circulated in the Havana scene. Documentary makers have long debated the pros and cons of showing footage to subjects during the editing process (Pryluck 2005; Aufderheide et al. 2009); while at least one hip hop documentary maker showed rough cuts to key protagonists in Havana and responded to criticism, such a strategy is not universally expected within the world of documentary making. But a repeated failure to share the finished product and to ensure its circulation points up a rather more fundamental ethical problem in this particular documentary boom.

This lack of feedback has intersected with a broader (if largely unfounded) fear that film makers have returned to their countries of origin and become rich on the back of their films, having paid little or nothing to the local participants. Again, the issue of remuneration is a contested one within documentary making (Aufderheide et al. 2009), so it would be hard to argue definitively that film makers erred in Havana. But rightly or wrongly, a number of protagonists of Cuban hip hop documentaries expressed concerns about being ripped off, and they were acutely aware of their inability to do anything about it. They felt keenly their sense of being physically cut off from the film makers, powerless to pursue them even by phone or email, given Cuba's limited connections with the outside world, much less in person. In the realm of hip hop documentaries, the separation between Cubans and foreigners, subjects and film makers, has often been stark; for all the friendships that have been forged, film making has also emphasized geographical and economic divisions. Of course, opinions varied among

hip hoppers to whom I spoke, and some film makers generated positive responses, but issues of dispossession and misrepresentation recurred in these conversations.

The making of music documentaries thus risks mirroring and perpetuating the effects of tourism. It has brought new goods, money, and dreams into the local economy, but also new inequalities, dissatisfactions, and temptations. The power to represent is not spread evenly, and foreigners hold most of the cards; and, as Calvin Pryluck notes, the greater the imbalance of power, the more important the question of ethics (201). Of course, in contrast to the photographs analyzed by Dopico, the subjects of documentaries speak, but the ultimate power to create meaning still lies behind the lens. The subjects often know little about the wider project, since they are generally far removed from the editing process and sometimes never see the end result.³ They can be framed in ways with which they disagree strongly, even without their knowledge, because of travel and internet restrictions in Cuba.

For all that the camera lens has opened up a channel between Cuba and North America, then, transnational exchange has brought challenges as well as opportunities. The communication that ensues is not always as free flowing as the rather idealistic “diasporic dialogue” that is often imagined by critics and film makers. The idea among hip hoppers that film makers had profited handsomely in financial terms underlines the distortion and misunderstandings that marked this transnational “conversation.” This point is illustrated by Thomas Nybo’s interview with Papá Humbertico in *Guerrilla Radio*, in which non-communication is the dominant (if inadvertent) theme: Nybo’s attempt to persuade the rapper to incriminate himself on camera leads to understandable truculence on Papá Humbertico’s part. Yet even clamming up is not enough to protect the rapper from the editor’s distorting hand, which paints him in counter-revolutionary tones. This scene exemplifies a film that stands as an example of the risks that hip hoppers run by collaborating with foreign film makers. When the director is determined to enlist rappers to a political position with which they disagree, the distorting power of the lens is overwhelming. If *Guerrilla Radio* had actually been shown to its leading protagonists in Havana, it is unlikely that hip hoppers would have agreed to participate in such film projects again.

Censorship, dollars, and the camera

Censorship is a recurrent theme in these documentaries. Foreigners are fascinated by the extent to which Cubans, and especially rappers, may or may not speak their mind about social and political issues. Some hip hoppers are uncomfortable about discussing censorship on camera, though surprisingly, others are quite willing to do so (*Obsesión* tackle this theme in *La FabriK*, and Los Aldeanos joke about it in *Pa'lante*). What only becomes clear in *Young Rebels*, however, without question the most interesting film to have been made on Cuban hip hop, is the extent to which film makers were not only documenting censorship but actually indirectly responsible for it. Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck's film is littered with scenes that draw attention to the problematic role of the film maker and the camera in the Havana hip hop scene (see Baker, *Buena Vista in the Club*, for a more detailed discussion). Several key scenes revolve around cameras—either the camera that is shooting the documentary, or cameras wielded by other foreigners. Unlike most other films, which carefully edit out the presence of “rival” film makers and cameras, *Young Rebels* makes a point of filming other camerapersons at work, and alludes to the economic inequalities and negotiations that underpin filming. In a sense, the camera is the star of the film.

In perhaps the most telling scene of the film, Randy Akozta, one half of rap duo Los Paisanos, explains that the rap festival is the most important event of the year, so it has more “eyes” on it—in other words, TV and documentary crews from around the world. There follows a rapid sequence of shots, cutting between images of several different camera crews that were also present at performances that appear in the film, and zooming in to one with “CNN” emblazoned on the side. The sheer density of foreign observation via the lens is thus brought to the forefront. Akozta says that as a result, rappers have to be careful about what they say because their views can be misinterpreted or manipulated abroad.

Film makers have often tried to capture their subjects making statements about censorship, but only Boden and Fleck allude to the fact that the presence of so many cameras acted as a brake on rappers' freedom of speech and ensured unusually zealous surveillance

from the Cuban government. When Papá Humbertico hoisted a banner reading *denuncia social* (social denunciation) at the 2002 hip hop festival, the mere knowledge that his gesture was caught by foreign cameras was enough to precipitate official consternation and retributive action (Henríquez Lagarde 2002). Alpidio Alonso, president of AHS and the official ultimately responsible for the festival, stated clearly that the problem was principally the presence of foreign media, whom he accused of parroting stereotypes, searching out controversy, and twisting messages. The foreign lens was not invisible; both state officials and rappers knew they were being watched and their behavior was affected accordingly. It is no coincidence that the most intensively filmed hip hop event of the year, the Havana hip hop festival, was also the most strictly controlled by the state. Far from dodging the issue, Boden and Fleck encourage their viewers to make this connection between filming and censorship.

Young Rebels reflects on many of the issues that I have outlined above, and it is this thread of self-reflexivity that makes it stand out from the corpus of Cuban hip hop documentaries. Early on, Randy Akozta turns to the camera and says, with a grin on his face: “If you folks didn’t come to Cuba, nobody would buy our CDs, and we wouldn’t have U.S. dollars.” The role of film makers (and other foreign observers) in the local hip hop economy is thus laid bare, along with the broader relationship between the foreign lens and economic transactions. Dopico notes that Havana’s photographic boom has stirred “political interest and market appetites” (452), and the same mix of politics and economics underpins the hip hop documentary boom, even if the latter element is usually eclipsed by the former. In *Young Rebels*, however, foreign documentary making is shown to be not extrinsic to the hip hop scene but part of its very construction.

The inequality of this economic relationship is exposed in one of the documentary’s story lines: the group Familias Cuba Represent is trying to shoot a music video but struggling with a lack of resources, specifically a camera. The video’s director says: “We need a camera. We need a good camera. Something professional. [*in English, looking at the lens*] Like this [*laughs*].” The power of foreigners training a lens on Cuban hip hop is problematized by their subjects’ powerlessness to make a video without foreign help. The presence of the frustrated

music video maker points up the camera as a symbol and perpetuator of developed-world privilege, and it is also a comment on the *foreign-ness* of the filmic gaze on Cuban hip hop (since few Cubans have the necessary equipment).

With the camera playing the role of a leading character, the problematics of film making are elevated to a central theme of *Young Rebels*. Diasporic dialogue there may be, but Boden and Fleck reveal that underneath it lie currents of commercialization, censorship, and the reproduction of inequalities of power. The lens is a medium of negotiation between foreigners and Cubans, and Randy Akozta's comments in the film illustrate that Havana hip hoppers can be astute in this regard. But as this documentary points out, it is the film maker who holds most of the cards and who also, in one sense, stands as a proxy for state surveillance. Jay Ruby argues that "an intelligently used reflexivity is an essential part of all ethically produced documentaries" (215). *Young Rebels*, by its self-reflexivity, airs questions about the ethical problems of filming in an impoverished and politically sensitive environment, and by doing so manages to critique the filming boom as it participates in it.

Representing Havana hip hop

In his meeting with Familias Cuba Represent in *Young Rebels*, the music video director urges the group to break away from the traditional clichéd images of Havana like the *solar* (courtyard) and Havana streets and rooftops. This brief moment foregrounds the way in which Havana is constructed by the camera lens and, by extension, it reminds the viewer of the constructed-ness of documentary film, a point not always remembered in discussions of these works. It may be salutary to bear in mind "the political fantasies, the artificial memories, and the imaginative recolonization" (452) that Dopico finds in Special Period photography, for it points to the transformative power of the lens, especially when in foreign hands, and its capacity to reify desires as well as deeds. It is particularly illuminating with regard to a documentary-making boom that formed part of a larger foreign infatuation with Cuban hip hop, one underpinned by political beliefs from across the spectrum (resulting in rappers being portrayed as everything from the Che Guevaras of hip hop to subversive counter-

revolutionaries) and by the language and ideology of the U.S. civil rights movement (which had its heyday before many of the film makers were born, hence the “artificial memories”). Dopico’s image of Havana as a “projection screen for Western fantasies” (452) is remarkably apposite to the film making process. In documentary making, as in tourism, fantasy and desire are the other side of the coin of the search for authenticity—a simultaneous quest for the unreal and the ultra-real.⁴

While some films make strenuous efforts toward objectivity (such as *Cuban Hip Hop Desde el Principio*), others are more polemical (*Guerrilla Radio, A Short Radiography of Hip Hop in Cuba*) or symbolic (*HavanYork*), and their significance cannot be grasped without understanding their political, cultural, or economic agendas. For example, the *tambor* (drum) makes frequent appearances in apparently informal scenes in documentaries, yet in reality it was rarely found in hip hop circles outside very particular presentational contexts, often for foreign consumption. To put it bluntly, during the years that I researched Havana hip hop (2003-2010), most Havana rappers did not want to rap over live drums, and most hip hop fans did not want to hear live instruments in performance. The groups who included live instruments tended to be aiming at either non-hip hop or foreign audiences, and their performances to local hip hop crowds sometimes fell flat. Most dedicated hip hop fans were drawn to electronic music and the DJ-rapper(s) or sound system format. There were exceptions to this picture, including some of the most commercially successful hip hop artists (the connection between the “authentic” drum and commercialism is worth noting), but I never encountered a *tambor* in the dozens of ordinary hip hop *peñas* (club nights) that I attended. The appearance of drums in documentaries is thus usually more symbolic than mimetic and should not be taken at face value. In *HavanYork*, it serves as the central metaphor for diasporic connection (the “dialogue between two worlds” of the film’s subtitle). The idea behind this film is as much to *create* a bridge between New York and Havana as to *describe* one. The drum is an imagined, idealized object, not a commonplace presence, and the film’s soundtrack is an original studio creation, not the sound of the Havana streets.

In several films, such as *La FabriK*, the appearance of the drum exemplifies the broader phenomenon of the exoticist emphasis on African-derived cultural symbols that is central to the commodification of Cuban culture today (Hernández 2002). In *Cuban Hip Hop All Stars*, it serves to authenticate the soundworld of the album of the same name, even though this one-off studio production was actually atypical of Cuban hip hop at the time (Baker, *Buena Vista in the Club*). As in *HavanYork*, then, the drum's appearance reflects *idealized* musical exchange and its presence is determined by the film's soundtrack and sister CD (produced for foreign consumption) rather than the everyday musical realities of the Havana hip hop scene. Most viewers will recognize visual images such as classic American cars and the Capitol building to be clichés, but the filmic construction of the musical side of Havana hip hop, in which film makers tend to downplay the influence of U.S. hip hop in favor of more "colorful" traditional Cuban music, is less easy to read without first-hand knowledge of the scene. Even academic researchers have sometimes overplayed the theme of local musical adaptation as they mistake the symbolic for the real, meaning that scholarly accounts of musical style in Cuban hip hop provide a more accurate reflection of the documentaries' visual and aural discourse than of the scene itself.

Things are not always as they seem, then, in Cuban hip hop documentaries, or indeed in Cuban hip hop per se. The status of visibility is in fact questioned in local hip hop, if in subtle ways. In *Inventos*, Kokino acknowledges the quantity of rap groups in Havana, but speaks dismissively of the majority, referring to *los falsos que andan por ahí* (the fakes that you find all around). The question of reality and falsehood, and specifically the ease of *looking* like a rapper but the difficulty of *being* one, recurs in many conversations and rap songs, such as Los Paisanos' "Está de moda ser rapero" (it's fashionable to be a rapper). Appearance and (self-)representation are thus areas of concern in a scene where, as Kokino suggests, many talk the talk but few walk the walk. "Representing" is a central discourse in hip hop, but it is also a site of unease in the Havana scene, where the need to distinguish "true" representations from "false" ones arises constantly. This is no postmodern free-for-all. In Havana, this distrust extends, unsurprisingly, to the realm of film. Both the process of representation and the

finished product are viewed with a certain skepticism, and as a result, documentaries are not, generally speaking, seen as repositories of unadorned truth.

Los Aldeanos in Miami and Havana

Events that took place between March 2009 and February 2010 involving Cuba's most popular hip hop group at the time, Los Aldeanos, illustrated the risks that the transnational circulation of filmed images posed for the scene, but also the potential for foreign film and video production to have a positive impact back in Havana.

By Easter 2009, Los Aldeanos' burgeoning fame seemed to suggest that the leeway for contestatory musicians was greater than at any stage over the previous half century. Their rise implied that the government considered the risk of silencing them greater than that of letting them continue, with the threat that they posed partially contained by their exclusion from TV and large concert venues. The amount of intrusive censorship experienced by rappers had been in steady decline over the past few years—it used to affect primarily the hip hop festival, suspended in 2005—and it appeared that by 2009, no one in the government cared too much what Los Aldeanos rapped about as long as it was kept at a low level of exposure.⁵

Unfortunately for Los Aldeanos, this turned out not to be the case. A series of events in March to May 2009 led to the most notorious case of censorship to hit the hip hop scene since Papá Humbertico's ban in 2002.⁶ It is worth underlining that Los Aldeanos had been making contestatory hip hop since 2003, so this was not a simple question of offending government ears. Rather, it was the complex interplay of foreign involvement, local politics, and the camera lens that upset the delicate balance. First of all, film footage shot without permission at Los Aldeanos' illicit *peña* at Barbarám found its way onto a Miami TV station, leading to the almost immediate suspension of the club night (and the venue's manager). Then the duo were interviewed on CNN, and a video of El B's incendiary song, "La naranja se picó" (The orange has gone sour), launched on a U.S. website sympathetic to the Cuban Revolution (Emetrece Productions), was immediately pirated and broadcast by another Florida TV station. Finally, an interview with Aldo was published on the anti-Castro website www.cubaencuentro.com

(García Freyre 2009).⁷ Los Aldeanos were catapulted to a new level of international prominence and visibility, and their images were seized on by anti-Castro elements abroad, above all in Florida. Reaction in Havana was strong and swift, and Los Aldeanos went from darlings of the hip hop scene to untouchables in the space of a few weeks.

This turn of events illustrates a recurring pattern in Cuban hip hop: it is the transnational circulation of information (above all, visual images) that causes the biggest impacts back in Havana. Los Aldeanos' experience exemplifies the foreign fascination with Cuban underground music, the often inaccurate constructions that result (either in the images' production or in their reception), and—completing the loop—the potential effect that transnationally circulating film footage can have back on the underground scene in Havana. It is worth repeating that Los Aldeanos had been performing and distributing their music in Havana for six years by this point; it was the uncontrolled circulation of their music overseas in filmed form that tipped the balance from grudging tolerance to blanket ban.

A subsequent chapter in this story presents a rather more positive aspect. On 24 January 2010, Melisa Rivière of Emetrece Productions organized a video/film screening and concert at the AHS headquarters in Havana, La Madriguera. By presenting her audio-visual work in the city, Rivière brought together a large and enthusiastic hip hop audience, showing that the difficulties of sharing films back at source could be overcome and that there was considerable local interest in such a move. Perhaps most significantly, the event provided the first officially-sanctioned, public platform for Los Aldeanos to perform in nearly a year. In contrast to the picture presented in *Young Rebels*, this foreign film maker negotiated with a state body (the AHS) in order to give a welcome boost to a scene that had struggled in recent months due to the absence of its most popular voices, and to push back, if only temporarily, the shadow of censorship that had fallen over it.

Conclusion

My aim here has been to bring into the academic (and English-language) sphere the kinds of ethical questions surrounding documentary film that have been regularly discussed

within the Havana hip hop scene. As a foreign researcher, I am well aware that any kind of observation or investigation raises ethical questions and that there are not always easy answers. I have no doubt that a similar critique could be made of academic involvement in and representations of the Havana hip hop scene (and I address this issue in Baker, *Buena Vista in the Club*). But I believe that film is a particularly significant and complex medium in Havana, and so—especially with so many documentaries in existence—a discussion of the politics and ethics of filming Cuban hip hop is long overdue. As Pryluck writes, “discussion of ethical issues will not by itself solve the problems; [but] it may remind us of their existence and perhaps lead to a more fruitful relationship between filmmaker, subject, and audience” (207).

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Notes

¹ These films are available at <http://growingintomusic.co.uk/cuba-rumba/films-of-growing-into-music-2.html>.

² This article revisits and extends ideas presented in Baker, *Buena Vista in the Club*.

³ I have noted a similar problem with some foreign-produced compilations. On more than one occasion, I have arrived in Havana and commented to a hip hop artist about his track on a compilation that I recently bought in the UK, only to be met by a quizzical look.

⁴ As Urry notes, “Places are chosen to be gazed upon because there is anticipation, especially through daydreaming and fantasy, of intense pleasures, either on a different scale or involving different senses from those customarily encountered” (3). Pedro Juan Gutiérrez explores the sexual undertones of this gaze, this desire to “uncover Havana,” through the recurrent figure of the voyeur, and the combination of fantasy and the urge for authenticity suggests an uncomfortable parallel between film making and the sexualized world of Cuban tourism.

⁵ See Baker, “Cuba Rebelión,” for more on Los Aldeanos and censorship.

⁶ It should be noted that Los Aldeanos’ ban was never made official; the duo was simply shunned by the managers of music venues.

⁷ I am grateful to Melisa Rivière for illuminating these events in Havana.