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RARAS AL MANDO/QUEER WOMEN COMMAND: ALTERNATIVE  
SPANISH-SPEAKING CARIBBEAN FEMININITIES ON THE GLOBAL STAGE

BY

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DISSERTATION

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## ABSTRACT

This project documents current artistic projects led by queer Caribbean women performers who disrupt and reframe traditional Cuban, Dominican and Puerto Rican femininities through performance and media. Through words, images and sounds I narrate the multimedia tales and epiphanic moments that served as turning points in my exploration of the different modalities of feminist art and media in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. I focus on the work of Las Krudas from La Habana, Cuba and the impact of Rita Indiana Hernandez in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic as well as in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Because of the scarcity of empowering representations of queer women in the popular culture in each of the Islands, a large-scale comparative approach to the Spanish-speaking Caribbean is particularly important. I highlight the moments in which these embody alternative femininities to speak truth to power through critical perspectives that reject class exploitation, racism, xenophobia and homophobia across three countries that share similar histories of colonization and multiple linguistic and cultural crossings.

Through the Appendixes of this dissertation, which I have completed as videos, I exemplify the ways in which audiovisual knowledge can advance written scholarly formulations and arguments about aesthetic work, and vice versa. I utilized filmmaking to explore how ethnographic processes can create stories of feminism, agency and decolonization around Caribbean women's agency and art.

To abuela Basi (Basilica Reca) and abuelo Cano (Rodolfo Velázquez)  
for nurturing my curiosities and taking me to the sea  
&  
to my mother Ana Celia Velázquez-Reca  
for standing by at every step of my educational formation  
and for inculcating in me a passion for cinema  
&  
my father José Rivera-Santiago  
for showing me how to dance and role-modeling how to be a social butterfly  
&  
my brother Gabriel Rivera-Velázquez  
for loving me so much, just the way I am, and for his music  
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Somnath Baidya Roy and Tanya Saunders, for being the feminists in my life that have taught  
me the meaning of solidarity  
&  
and of course to Aisha Durham and Himika Bhattacharya,  
my soul sisters, for standing by me at *every* step of the way.

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## CHAPTER 1

### **Mapping the Contemporary Spanish-speaking Caribbean Through Feminism, Queerness, Media and Performance**

In this dissertation I document current artistic projects led by queer Caribbean women performers who disrupt and reframe traditional Cuban, Dominican and Puerto Rican femininities through performance and media. Through words, images and sounds I narrate the multimedia tales and epiphanic moments that served as turning points in my exploration of the different modalities of feminist art and praxis in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. The more I came to understand, and embrace, the complexities of doing research on the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, the more this project has become a vigorous interplay between form and content, imagination and reality. I propose nuanced understandings of the performativity<sup>1</sup> and visibility of the human experience in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean as a filmmaker, a feminist and queer cultural critic, and as a Latina from Puerto Rico negotiating various geopolitical border crossings.

My research is both queer and transnational as it explores the heterogeneity of a Black Atlantic feminist identity as experienced in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and its diasporas across the United States. This auto-ethnographic journey has allowed me to delineate my own narrative about being a Puerto Rican from the Island who over the last ten years has lived in

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<sup>1</sup>I distinguish two kinds of performance that overlap to generate performativity. The first one is performance as staged act for the consumption or entertainment of an audience. This would include a play, a choreographed dance or anything that represents a deliberate enactment. The second way I use performance is broader as it refers to the ways we enact social categories in our everyday lives and invest them with meanings. This could be the way we may conceal, express or expand concepts such as femininity, queerness, blackness or Latinidad as signifiers of our identity. Performativity, then, implicates the first two meanings by overlapping traditional staged performance with the performance of everyday life. Thus, performativity allows us to inscribe meaning to all kinds of performances whether we recognize that intentional interventions are happening or not.

Georgia, Illinois and New York (Ellis, 2009). I contextualize myself amongst other queer women who are exploring innovative ways to use and think about Caribbean bodies in movement, creating a trail of new media to document our existence in ways that feel relevant and nuanced.

I have done this by juxtaposing the stories I witnessed while actively seeking and recording the work of other Spanish-speaking Caribbean women. The films “Reina de mi Misma/Queen of Myself: Las Krudas d' Cuba” and “T con T: Lesbian Life in Contemporary Havana” are only two of the various creative film projects associated with my research journey. Through this journey, I have closely followed the work of Caribbean women in the Islands, focusing on their migration back and forth from the Islands and in between the United States. When I started this project in 2004, both Las Krudas and Rita resided in the insular Spanish-speaking Caribbean. Shortly after, starting in 2006, they all started to move and since then they have been in transit somewhere. In the chapter about Las Krudas, I go in depth to consider the impact of migration in the experiences of female cultural workers from the Spanish Caribbean whose lives are defined by constant movement and an accompanying state of (dis)location.

In this introductory section, I outline the importance of a project that takes the Spanish-speaking Caribbean as its starting point and women-centered artistic ensembles as its focus and expands current scholarship in the intersecting fields of Communications, Cultural, Feminist, Queer and Caribbean Studies. I ask how young women explore their own sense of identity and politicize their realities through self-representation. Through my written and visual exploration of these questions, I broaden the field of Communications by demonstrating ways to integrate documentation through feminist ethnographic praxis. I conclude the introduction by outlining each chapter of the project.

## **Looking for Myself in the Caribbean**

I always knew that I wanted to do a transnational feminist queer project. When I took Dr. Dara Goldman's course "Urban Desires: Sex & the City in Caribbean Cultures" in the spring of 2004, my queer inquiries finally resonated with familiar landscapes that I wanted to call "home" since I had been "away" from Puerto Rico since 2002. I justified my migration to the United States through educational purposes—by becoming a graduate student at the University of Illinois.

My educational migration narrative has been slowly transitioning into a professional one since I don't foresee going back "home" in the near future. Since 2009, besides being a PhD Candidate at University of Illinois, I have also become the Assistant Director of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Student Center at New York University. My body, U.S.A. passport in hand, is an axis of the colonial past and the neocolonial present spanning more countries than I can count for purposes that range from boosting the tourism industry to establishing intellectual bonds to spending time with given and chosen family. I am always now seen, as Aisha Durham (2007) expresses, a "welcomed visitor" (p. 21) to the Spanish-speaking Caribbean.

It was during Professor Goldman's course in 2004 that I decided that I had to visit Cuba as soon as possible. It was then that I began to travel, think, write and audio-visually record the Caribbean worlds to which I had access. I entered Cuba via a project about the factors that contributed to the scarcity of popular culture, media texts and scholarship dealing with the realities of queer women in relation to queer men. I had seen many films about alternative sexualities in Cuba that left me wondering, "What about the women-that-loved-women in Cuba?" While Gutierrez-Alea's "Strawberry and Chocolate" (1993), Bernaza and Gilpín's

“Butterflies in the Scaffold” (1995), and Campbell’s “Before Night Falls” (2001) are three relatively popular, full-length films addressing homosexuality in Cuba during various time periods, none of them speaks directly to the oppression and marginality lesbians face.

Moreover, significant studies of homosexuality in Cuba, such as “Machos, Maricones and Gays: Cuba and Homosexuality” (1996) by Ian Lumsden, deliberately did not address the situations of lesbians in contemporary Cuba. Lumsden argues that lesbian spaces are “inaccessible” and therefore outside of the scope of his study of Cuban queer identities (p. xxvi). Only in independent films like Graciela Sánchez’s “No porque lo Dice Fidel Castro” [Not because Fidel Castro says so] (1988), Kelly Anderson’s documentary “Looking for a Space: Lesbians and Gay Men in Cuba” (1993), and in Sonja de Vries’ documentary “Gay Cuba” (1994), do audiences get a glimpse into the particularities of queer Cuban women experiences.

During my first trip to Cuba, I met a wide range of lesbian-identified women with whom I had conversations about what was it like to be, meet, date and interact with other women that liked and loved women there. Many of these women expressed that they preferred not to call attention to themselves in order to keep living discreetly as locksmiths, retired police officers or lawyers. This became one of my first representation conundrums: how to shed light on realities that would much rather prefer to stay in the dark to ensure the peaceful continuation of their everyday life?

Towards the end of my trip in 2004, I was in the midst of thinking through these issues about voice and silence, visibility and invisibility, race and identity, nationality and sexuality, when I met Las Krudas. It was extremely refreshing to meet lesbian-identified women who had a commitment to talking out loud against all kinds of injustices. They were well-known urban poets strategically addressing how marginalization applies to people like them: poor, black,

urban women-who-loved-women. Once I met them I knew I had to do a project about Las Krudas and how they challenged the invisibility of women through staged performance and everyday life.

However, I did not want to limit my project to Las Krudas. I sought to identify distinct women-identified artists that were challenging the invisibility of alternative femininities and sexualities in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean in a similar fashion to what Las Krudas were doing in Havana. That is when I decided to take on a comparative approach in between Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. From the trips I took from 2005 onwards to Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and the United States, I got to experience different feminist interventions in art and performance spaces, hip hop concerts and conferences, literary readings and activist rallies. I sought to highlight and document cultural interventions being made by young women who represent a multiplicity of racial, socio-economic and aesthetic background and locations.

After having gone through this process I understand that this dissertation was also a way to get to know myself better through the experiences of other women from the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. I wanted to contextualize myself in a real and ideological space that took into account more than Puerto Rico and its circular migration to the United States diaspora. As a Puerto Rican scholar, I faced a dilemma that Yolanda Martínez San Miguel (2003) articulates in *Caribe Two Ways: Cultura de la Migración en el Caribe Insular Hispánico*: how to imagine the Caribbean when coming from Puerto Rico, a country whose official discourses and popular imaginaries seem to resemble the United States more than Latin America or the Caribbean? She states:<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>My translation of Martínez-San Miguel quote follows: “For me, as a college student that had never been outside of Puerto Rico, it was paradoxical that when we were discussing one of Bosh’s texts about culture and literature, the references that we made to the countries of the Hispanic Caribbean seemed, momentarily, allusions to remote and

Para mí, una estudiante universitaria que nunca había estado fuera de Puerto Rico, resultaba paradójico que al discutir el texto de Bosh en aquel curso sobre cultura y literatura, las referencias que hacíamos a la mayoría de los países del Caribe hispánico, me parecían, por momentos, alusiones a lugares muy remotos y muy desigualmente conocidos. Paradójico no tan sólo por la condición geográfica de nuestro país, sino también por el contexto de la urbanización en que crecí, rodeada de familias cubanas y dominicanas que pertenecían al sector profesional. (pp. 18-19)

When I read this in 2004, I immediately identified. While Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico share multiple historical, cultural and linguistic imaginaries, our relationship often highlights our similar histories of discovery, conquest and colonization<sup>3</sup>.

In this way, movement and migration--whether forced, voluntary, induced, circular or constant--have been some of the significant factors that cause the real and imaginary borders of the region to be in a constant state of renegotiation. In the article “Diasporic Dreams: Documenting Caribbean Migrations” Jorge Duany (2008) argues that during the past five decades the three countries of the insular Spanish-speaking Caribbean have, along with Mexico, constituted the primary sources of migrants to the United States. He states:

In the year 2006, more than half of all Puerto Ricans and nearly one out of nine Cubans and Dominicans resided outside their nations of origin, especially in the United States. Most of these immigrant communities maintain strong social, economic, cultural, and political ties with their sending societies. (p.1)

It is not a coincidence that migration has directly affected me as well as all the women I worked

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very unevenly known places. It was paradoxical not only because of the geographic location of our country, but also for the context of the suburb in which I grew up surrounded by Cuban and Dominican families that belonged to the professional sector” (Martínez-San Miguel, 2003 pp. 18-19).

<sup>3</sup>Historically the tropical climate of the Caribbean has been interpreted by imperial powers as an opportunity to “turn sunshine into money” (Hagelberg, 1985). Spain, England, France and Holland are just four of the six European nations that had a major socio-economic impact in the Caribbean region since mid-15<sup>th</sup> century due to the colonial enterprise (Shepherd and McBeckles, 2000). This misinterpretation and appropriation of resources marks one of the most brutal experiences in human history—the slaughter of thousands of indigenous people and the displacement of enslaved African descendants.

with in this project. Caribbean people have always been intimately involved in the capitalistic accumulation and rise of market economies in the North Atlantic, with the only difference being that we have historically struggled against it. Juan Bosh (1970) proposes that the recording and construction of Caribbean history can be summarized in three key stages: 1) imperial powers snatching the land from the natives, 2) imperial powers against each other filching over the conquered islands each had, and 3) Caribbean peoples struggling to liberate themselves from imperial powers.

In this dissertation I explore the freedom and liberation battles that young women are waging in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean today. How does our migration and movement reflect how much we have had to negotiate our personal and political lives in order to gain access to capital, technologies, education, entrepreneurship and agency? What are some of the most effective ways of creating knowledge about how Caribbean women, as Third World women, recreate themselves in a late-modern/postmodern, for-profit, advertising-saturated, corporate globe (Fregoso, 1999; Mohanty, Russo, and Torres, 1991; Sandoval, 2000; Shohat, 1998)?

When we approach the Spanish-speaking Caribbean as our subject of discussion, we must not only take into consideration geopolitical, economic, racial and ethnic complexities, but also contextualize these variances within the larger region of the Caribbean basin. In *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, Antonio Benítez-Rojo (1996) argues that “the spectrum of Caribbean codes is so varied and dense that it holds the region suspended in a soup of signs” (p. 2). By this he is referring to the region known for its fragmentation, instability, uprootedness, cultural heterogeneity, contingency and syncretism. These are deeply rooted factors that contribute to the conundrum of thinking about the Spanish-speaking Caribbean as a cohesive ideological site despite its multiple and contradictory socio-cultural intersections.

Currently Cuba is a socialist/communist republic and has been since 1959; the Dominican Republic is a capitalist/democratic republic and has been since 1960; and Puerto Rico has been a capitalist/democratic commonwealth with the United States since 1952. This means that the women artists that I document in this project are the second and third generation daughters of Fidel Castro's presidency (1965 to 2008) in Cuba; the intermittent Joaquín Balaguer presidencies (1960 to 1962, 1966 to 1978, 1986 to 1996) known as "the twelve years"<sup>4</sup> in Dominican Republic; and of Rafael Hernández Colón's (1973 to 1977 and 1985-1993) and Carlos Romero Barceló's (1977 to 1985) governance of Puerto Rico<sup>5</sup>. In this project I propose that it is precisely the region's diversity that makes this comparison so rich.

If, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico seem like an odd pair to position alongside Cuba, it is also because we have been led to believe that our participation in neocolonial and neoliberal systems is the most ideal way to escape poverty. How could this not be at odds with the fact that Cuba is the longest standing Third World socialist government in the Western Hemisphere? Growing up in Puerto Rico, I heard too many myths and jokes about Cuba as either an impoverished socialist experiment or as a police state led by Fidel Castro. In Puerto Rico, I grew up in a metropolitan context where it was acceptable to hold and share

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<sup>4</sup> In the book *The Tears of Hispaniola: Haitian and Dominican Diaspora Memory* (2006) Esther Suarez explains this twelve year period as follows: It was said that even in his late nineties, blind and no longer able to stand by himself, he was mulling another run for the presidency. Balaguer's rule was considered by many to have been as cruel as Trujillo's (p. 156.)

<sup>5</sup> I mention these political-economic formations not only to contextualize my project historically, but also to begin to imagine how this different male-centered leadership have helped the advancement of patriarchal political and cultural agendas within the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. While I think that there is a palpable amount of scholarship that shows a level of consciousness and criticism in relationship to the role that the socialist Cuban government has had on the livelihood of Cuba women, I still find there is much terrain to explore in this regard to Dominican and Puerto Rican women. While I can easily think of scholarship about Cuban women and how they challenge patriarchy on an everyday basis, I yet need to find more scholarship that addresses similar concerns in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico. However, one very successful example of this kind of project is the 1984 film, *La Operación*, which shows how the sterilization of women in Puerto Rico was an integral part of U.S. policy experimentation with the contraceptive drugs on the Island. The film expertly shows how female sterilization was a strategy used in tandem with government-encouraged emigration as a way to lower unemployment and decrease social tensions created by the forced and rapid industrialization in the Island.

discriminatory and racialized views about Dominican individuals and communities living on the Island as rural, poorly educated, unskilled or jobless.

Our most recent political and economic situations, mainly over the last 60 years, have made open, cross-cultural contact seem inorganic and unlikely. This is why I had no idea how people experienced their lives in everyday Cuban or Dominican contemporary cities. I was especially curious about how the people from my generation, or those who grew up in the 1970s, 80s and 90s were experiencing the world. How did young women and men move through space? How to they carry and represent themselves? How have they experienced the intense technological transformations of our in-between-centuries chance to be in the world? How do they use their bodies and media to manipulate language and culture in everyday life? How to they produce themselves outside of powerful transnational media conglomerates and without the sponsoring of big financial institutions?

Through ethnographic methods I came to meet young Cuban, Dominican and Puerto Rican women who were using new and old audiovisual traditions to configure their own cultural identities. In 2004 I met Las Krudas in La Habana, Cuba; in 2005 I met Rita Indiana Hernández in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic; and in 2007 I met Las Hermanas Colón in San Juan, Puerto Rico. When I met them I wanted to know what had motivated them to self publish and record their own books and CD's, design their own marketing, create their own concerts and finance their own music videos. How did they reach their audiences outside of major media conglomerates and corporations? How did they address, contest or relate to national tropes of race, class, gender and sexuality?

I learned that in Cuba, for example, Krudas Cubensi joined a sizeable social sector in 1999 that found, within hip hop, nuanced languages to challenge a socialist national identity

constructed in homogenizing terms. As outspoken feminists, their lyrics politicize menstruation, celebrate the bodies of fat women, and advocate for women to love women on the most basic level. In terms of how open they were about addressing queerness in their work, I would say that audience members who were “in the know” about their sexual orientation as lesbians, could easily map lesbian undertones and allusions to their womanist discourse.

Alongside their artistic careers as street theater actors since 1996, and as hip hoppers within and beyond the underground Cuban hip hop movement since 1999, Las Krudas have mastered the art of reaching across a wide-range of audiences despite cultural and linguistic challenges, especially since their migration to the United States in 2006. In the last five years, they have made their identity as queer migrants considerably more explicit and political. Although they continue to raise awareness about racism and sexism first and foremost, the range of identities that they advocate for has increased. They also now openly raise consciousness about migrants and international mobility issues, in addition to queerness. They regularly advocate for the opening of womanist and feminist spaces for people that fall under the transgender spectrum, especially of trans masculinities.

The work of Las Krudas is in conversation with the work of Dominican Rita Indiana Hernández, an artist who published a pioneer novel in Dominican literature called *La Estrategia de Chochueca* (1999) while she still was in her early 20s. *Chochueca* is one of the cultural products that epitomizes the work she has pursued not only as a writer, but also in video, installation, sound, and performance art. Through very populist and minimalist narratives and images, she is able to write extremely compelling portraits of Third World city life and reflect the intimate relationships that newer generations have to the “urban.” Her literary work deserves praise for its ability to render lucid visuals of the contradictory, circular, or irrational bits and

pieces of the Caribbean. However, when she departs from performance and the audiovisual, the possibilities for alternative understandings of those same realities are outstanding. In the same way that she is the kind of writer that can tell a story that makes characters jump off the page and be alive, she accomplishes that through art installations, video, graphic design and musical performance. I am most interested in tracing Rita's performance trajectory from Casiful, to Los Niños Envueltos, to Miti Miti as predecessors to her most recent full-band music project, Rita Indiana y Los Misterios—which has secured an extraordinary amount of attention from mainstream Dominican media and audiences.

In Puerto Rico, I was thrilled that in 2006 when I witnessed Gloria Soto and Gisela Rosario perform as the ensemble Las Hermanas Colón (2004-2007). Their stage personas were “Mari” and “Macha.” These personas emerged from the fact that they were constantly asked if they were sisters because of their physical resemblance. Queering the sister motif, they played on the slang “marimacha”—a derogatory way of referring to a manly-looking woman or a butch dyke in Puerto Rico. Colón is one of the most common last names in Puerto Rico. Their choice to christen themselves as the sisters “Mari Colón” and “Macha Colón,” generates a coded awareness of alternative/deviant femininities next to a last name that is common, mundane and generic. This explicit play on queerness placed their project somewhere between satire and reality<sup>6</sup>. The image of Macha's voluptuous body wearing a tight polka-dot dress while retelling—through piquant and repetitive musical hooks—stories of past lovers that required lucid instructions to please the foreign cartographies of full-figured women, has been velcroed to

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<sup>6</sup>Dara Goldman, one of my dissertation committee members, has prompted me to think about a possible relationship between Las Hermanas Colón's decision to name themselves “Colón” as a means to challenge through their queer self naming, the colonial and patriarchal legacies of Cristobal Colón (Christopher Columbus), the “discoverer” of the New World and the patriarchal Rafael Hernández-Colón, who was the governor of Puerto Rico between 1973 to 1977 and then again between 1985 and 1993.

my memories of home.

While I dedicate most of this dissertation to discuss Cuban and Dominican performers, I wanted to contextualize the work that Las Krudas and Rita Indiana have done in the Caribbean and the diaspora in relationship to that of the Puerto Rican Las Hermanas Colón for several reasons. Between 2004 and 2007 Las Hermanas Colón performed at important events such as two of the Centro Cultural Caribeño de Luquillo's Exploratoria, and in the 2006 Parada de Orgullo LHBTT. Before their short, but intense career doing solo and feature concerts, Las Hermanas Colón were, on more than one occasion, the opening band for Superaquello, a more established indie band in Puerto Rico that mixes acoustic and electronic sounds with boricua flavors. Las Hermanas nurtured a solid fan base by producing what they called "synthetic pop"—an amalgam of ska, punk, rock and disco.

While they never had the opportunity to record an album, they generated a significant repertoire. Their most well known songs were Punk Eres Mía, Ya, Huroyuki and Parapapara. Owing to discrepancies in view about the original intention and future of the duo, Gloria Soto and Gisela Rosario decided to dissolve the Las Hermanas ensemble in 2007; yet Gisela took the project in a different direction that same year. She started the ensemble "Macha Colón y los Okapi," retaining her Las Hermanas persona Macha Colón. Ironically, in performance she is the hyper feminine of the two. Although she is straight-identified, Macha claims to be seduced by drag queen culture. Macha's performance style is loud, big and outrageous. "Los Okapi" that accompany Macha are a handful of women musicians, most of whom are queer-identified, and who have given themselves over to Macha's vision and exploration of alternative pop sounds. The band recently recorded the single, Jaya. This song, like many of Macha's productions deal with excess in relation to the body. In short, sister Macha has grown into her own *gocé* by

narrating herself in the pursuit of happiness through an investment in extreme (read deviant) modes of Puerto Rican femininity.

These women's work has never been discussed in this particular broader Spanish-speaking Caribbean framework. Therefore, this project is autoethnographic because it makes me, as researcher and recorder, the real and symbolic Puerto Rican body traversing and interconnecting their stories. We are all sustained through the re-articulation of our queer gender expressions and sexualities within different Spanish-speaking Caribbean cultures, subcultures and movements. My particular comparative approach goes beyond established modes of analysis: feminist and queer Caribbean women performers disrupting traditional Cuban, Dominican and Puerto Rican femininities through their use of performance and media.

From all the stories I learned through my interaction with these artists and the ones that narrate my own interaction with their music and representation, I share those closest to my own sense of aesthetic delight. I highlight the moments in which alternative femininities speak truth to power. I bring a critical perspective, and not a delusional nostalgia, in recording the present and the past. In doing so, I follow the example of these women who challenge Caribbean popular imaginaries and everyday practices through their work that reinforce class exploitation, racism, xenophobia, patriarchy and homophobia (Rivera, 2007.)

In other words, I am interested in culturally-specific mechanisms through which feminist artists gain visibility within their respective Cuban, Dominican and Puerto Rican alternative scenes. I have been especially interested in artists that live and embody queer performance aesthetics to distinguish their artistry from normative, reproduction-oriented displays of femininity. As I emphasize the need for new theories and methods to study the particularities of the intersection of gender, sexuality, and aesthetics within national contexts, some definitions

are in order. Over the next few pages I explain the ways that I am approaching queerness, feminist agency and performance in relationship to the production of art and media today.

### **Femininities and Sexualities in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean**

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 intentionally engage the ways in which women are making sense of the recent temporal and spatial shift in human sensibilities. Aileen Schmidt's (2003) rationale for comparing 19th and 20th century Puerto Rican and Cuban women's autobiographical writing has informed my interest in concentrating on the experiences of contemporary female cultural workers from the Spanish Caribbean. I am also interested in the intersection of marginality, self-definition, the real and the fictional.

While I focus on performance and media, Schmidt focuses on the transgression of the women's letters as the expected and preferred autobiographical medium; however, there are several fruitful overlaps in our approaches. Through letters, she argues, these women informed, educated, philosophized, entertained, revealed news, narrated trips, gave advice and maintained personal and family ties. In studying the particularities of this medium of expression, she threads the narratives of various Spanish Caribbean women as defiant of what was expected of them colonial Cuba and Puerto Rico. She states<sup>7</sup>:

Así podrían ser las cartas conversacionales, descriptivas, dramáticas, filosóficas,

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<sup>7</sup>My translation of Schmidt quote follows: "Whether the letters ranged from conversational, to descriptive, dramatic, philosophic, spiritual or propagandistic; they were always transgressive as they emerged at the margins of the grand narratives of history offering the inscription of a marginalized subject, not authoritative and anti-hegemonic (Schmidt, 2003, p. 77).

espirituales, propagandísticas; pero siempre transgresoras, pues surgieron al margen de las grandes narrativas de la historia, ofreciendo la inscripción de un sujeto marginal, no autoritario, anti-hegemónico. (p. 77)

Schmidt describes Cuban Catalina Rodríguez de Morales' (1857-1894), or the Puerto Rican Lola Rodríguez de Tió's (1843-1924), life stories as interwoven texts that challenged their assigned position of marginality and lack of authority by virtue of writing about their experiences *as* Caribbean women. In my work I consider the ways in which Rita, Las Krudas and Las Hermanas Colón have employed different forms of postmodern aesthetics. In particular, I explore how their alternative performances of femininity subvert established artistic and gendered conventions as they explore the nature and meanings of those conventions themselves (Prinz, 1991).

In the words of Homi K. Bhabha, both the lives and work of the women that Schmidt documented and the ones I work with—then and now—challenge how patriarchal nationalist notions are inscribed onto the comfort of social belonging, the customs of taste, the powers of political affiliation, the sensibility of sexuality, the blindness of bureaucracy, and the common sense of justice and injustice (Bhabha, 1990). In all of Las Krudas', Rita Indiana's and Las Hermanas Colon's work we can find extensive commentaries about the ways Caribbean people work within and against socialist and neoliberal ideologies. "There is growing evidence," Arjun Appadurai explains in *Modernity at Large* (1996), "that the consumption of the mass media throughout the world often provokes resistance, irony, selectivity, and, in general, agency" (p. 7). These women intentionally strategize and self determine their representations around increasingly globalized Caribbean citizenships.

In *Out of Bounds: Islands and the Demarcation of Hispanic Caribbean Identity*, Dara Goldman (2007) explains how self-fashioning narratives characterize constructions of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. Despite our nations' continuous efforts to trace, define and

represent themselves, the Caribbean is not exempt from a global history of nationalisms that has never granted women and men the same access to the resources of the nation-state. Women have traditionally waged battles against their disenfranchisement in traditional modes of power—in government, religion, education and the economy—by actively participating in popular culture in different ways.

For the purposes of this research, I define feminist agency as follows: if you don't see yourself properly reflected in the public spheres around you, then you must create your own representation. I am particularly interested in women enacting spectacles that highlight alternative or oppositional femininities. I align my understanding of feminist agency with the Saba Mahmood's (2005) articulation of the revival of different kinds of feminist subjectivities.

She states:

Agency, in this form of analysis, is understood as the capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective). Thus the humanist desire for autonomy and self-expression constitute the substrate, the slumbering ember that can spark to flame in the form of an act of resistance when conditions permit. (p.8)

Despite their vast multiplicity of musical genres, styles and audiences, the main motivation driving my comparative approach is that Las Krudas, Rita Indiana and Las Hermanas Colon embody and articulate alternative and oppositional femininities. In staged performance I have witnessed these women transgress traditional expectations of "respectable" Cuban, Dominican and Puerto Rican femininities in a various ways. These range from suggestively licking vinyl records, drawing beards and mustaches on their faces, to enacting the fat female body as healthy and desirable. they not only disrupt gender binaries but also complicate the male/female binary by bringing in sexuality. They not only disrupt gender binaries but also complicate the male/female binary by bringing in alternative sexualities.

From within all the possible categories that we might identify with from any given spectrum of sexualities, both the women I work with and myself comprise a wide range of queer-, lesbian-, bisexual- and heterosexual-identified women. While most of our work might be understood as contributing to feminist cultural productions, not all of us adopt explicitly feminist or queer labels individually. I identify as part of the second generation of queer scholars who have inherited a substantial history of changes in social perspectives and practices (promoted under a gay and lesbian front) and came into academia when queer was a “theoretical and political tool already in play” (Boone, 2000, p. 14). Throughout my research about women-centered art, videos and music, I was unavoidably also responding to my own set of confusions, feelings of delight and aesthetic pleasure when stereotypes that caricaturize women as chaste, dutiful, daughterly or maternal are disrupted in performance (Smiers, 2003).

In the context of this dissertation, the term queer refers to people and actions that go against the grain—those that could be described as 'different'—and whose divergence may or may not be related to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender sexualities or identities. I use this term to address issues considered peripheral to mainstream gender and sexuality representations that center around the paradigmatic markers or temporalities of the heteronormative experience—birth, marriage, reproduction and death (Halberstam, 2005).

### **Performance and Digital Audiovisual Media**

While I strongly depart from the premise that it has been through literature, the arts, and grand pedagogical discourses that Caribbean identities are reinvented, I must agree with an important observation that Camila Stevens makes in her book “Family and Identity in Contemporary Cuban and Puerto Rican Drama” (2004). She states:

While it has become commonplace to expect any cultural history of Latin America and the Hispanic Caribbean to identify the role of writing in the project of constructing and defining nationhood, the place of performance in cultural politics of representing the nation has been less rigorously investigated. (pp. 1-2)

This is not surprising given how often we think of knowledge production as only possible in the written form. As David MacDougall (2006) argues “we are accustomed to regarding thought as something reassembling language—the mind speaking to itself, or, as dictionaries put it, a process of reasoning” (p. 1). Our default modes of transforming all of our ideas, passions and sensory reactions into words (scholarly papers, grocery lists, journal entries) might not be particularly effective when our awareness of the world is vastly different from previous eras in which print used to be the dominant form of communication.

In *Mediation and the Communication Matrix* (2003) C. Kaha Waite asserts that new communications technologies are altering our relationship with the world as we are surrounded by an unprecedented and continuous flux of multimedia. Incorporated throughout this document, then, are the vast contributions that literary studies of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean have represented for my own understandings of the region. In this project, however, I privilege the importance of performance and media as key elements to my research. I propose that it is through media that the live and staged performances of these artists become memorialized.

I generally understand performance as a way in which artists employ their bodies as the raw material for their art. In this way I concur with Stevens (2004) when she argues that the power of theatrical performance lies in its capacity to direct a collective gaze onto different stages where cultural and national discourses are “not only reiterated through dialogue, but also made visible through non-verbal communication codes” (p.9). When I talk about performance I am also referring to the performativity and embodiment of identities in everyday life. In this way art not only imitates life, but life itself is aestheticized to elaborate new forms of existence and

care of the self (McCarthy and Dimitriadis, 2000, p. 232). In this sense, the self is embedded in a hybrid communal context, which connects artists and performers to multiple traditions, both globally and locally.

I approach the study of these women's polysemic and polyphonic lives and aesthetics with the understanding that doing so has implications for researchers conducting ethnographic work within media and cultural studies. My ultimate goal is that some of the ideas that I sketch in my analyses of Las Krudas' and Rita's work will provide new avenues for Cultural and Media Studies scholars searching for room to incorporate the flexibility that studying the art of postmodern, post/neocolonial, queer subjects, demands. These artists are well known internationally, not only in rarefied circles and underground artistic spheres. Their performances have been captured for many personal, grassroots and artistic purposes and through a wide range of personal and professional audiovisual technologies, economies and practices for a long time now, but increasingly over the past five years.

In my work I have sought to represent how these women artists are currently re-creating themselves through media in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. I highlight the sense of agency that these women have found by representing themselves using independently produced books, CDs, movies and music videos. Media's power to influence ideologies and hegemonies goes both ways: in other words, these artists employ the very media channels that speak to us to foster all kinds of queer, anti-racist, feminist, resistance and nationalistic images and sounds. A crucial element that I want to highlight through this research is that I am not the only one watching or recording. Las Krudas, Rita Indiana and Las Hermanas Colon have all appealed to significantly different musical spheres in their respective national milieus that range from hip hop in Cuba, to electronic/lounge, merengue in Dominican Republic, and vanguard pop/punk in Puerto Rico.

From photos and CDs, to DVDs and online videos, fliers and posters, magazines and blog criticism, all of these women maintain a steady presence in the public sphere. In these and other ways their performances continue to be shared, memorialized and followed.

Given these forms of exchange and circulation, these artists fit Michael Rush's description of cultural workers who employ new media in their art. In his text "New Media in Art" (2005) he states:

Film and television have informed their everyday experience, but unlike those that pursue commercialized uses of technologies, these artists seek to make personal statements without regard for the commodity value of what they do. Like other artists that work in paint, wood or steel, these artists explore and often subvert, both the critical and technological potentials for new media. (p. 9)

Fans, and the artists themselves, record the work through photo and video cameras, used for intellectual or entrepreneurial purposes. These modes of documentation continuously challenge the impermanence of staged performance by augmenting its spotlight moments.

Immediate connections and shared media experiences are facilitated through everyday networking and creative sharing mechanisms such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and YouTube. These new media technologies have played an important role in how these artists promote themselves by making their music, pictures and videos available to audiences. The recent wealth of audiovisual enhancement technologies generates social understandings about art, which seem to increasingly merge with those of media.

Throughout the dissertation I refer to "media" in a variety of different way: in terms of the mainstream and conglomerate media forms that generates markets of sounds, images and technologies. I also include independent and grassroots media, personal and mobile media, and bodies, which are capable of producing media, performance and art. For that reason, I find it useful to locate my project within a framework that allows for a humanistic understanding of the

rapid change in technologies in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. In his book *Global Technography* Grant Kien (2009) states:

Although mobility and human influence on environment are not new phenomena, we are living through a seismic shift in our media environment that is bringing with it unprecedented freedoms and changes in power relationships that are enacted in the physical world through mobility... Meanwhile, transit itself is a new normal. There is a class of global citizen constantly in motion for whom the term “migration” is meaningless, as the act of settlement isn’t much part of their everyday experience. This is the set of circumstances in which evolve the portrait of the technologically mobile subject: a hypermediated 24/7 virtual environment. (p. 2)

Acknowledging the importance of experiential and audiovisual media in the configuration of Spanish-speaking Caribbean identities, I intentionally blur the contours between media and art because both these fields are not only subject to continuous change, but also the center of many historical, cultural and national anxieties.

### **Feminist Ethnographies in Movement**

Throughout the past six years, I have had the chance to conduct fieldwork twice in La Habana, Cuba (July 2004 and December 2005) and thrice in Santo Domingo and Puerto Plata, Dominican Republic (May and July 2005 and October 2005). I have dedicated three trips “home” for research purposes (March and December 2006 and January 2007.) In this way I have completed what ethnographers call participant observations and snowball sampling at many concerts, festivals, galleries, museums and different grassroots, artistic, educational or cultural spaces in Cuba, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and several cultural spheres across the United States.

A few examples of these spaces in Cuba are the Galería Fayad Jamís in Alamar or La Madriguera in Centro Habana.. The defunct project of La Chocloatera and Chocopop in Puerto

Plata or Casa España in Santo Domingo come to mind in the case of Dominican Republic. In Puerto Rico, the Taller de Cantautores (Taller C) in Río Piedras, La Respuesta in Santurce, the Nuyorican Café in Old San Juan, or Casa Cruz de la Luna in San Germán are resonant..

In all these places I have met women artists who are firmly placed in the contemporary and who have earned a space of respect and a sizeable following within the different underground, performance-driven musical youth cultures they navigate. When I refer to the “underground” cultural circuits in the Islands, I am particularly talking about a set of sites or spheres in which in the execution of visual arts, musical performances and/or theatrical expression happens within performative spaces closely associated with the production of alternative national aesthetics within predominantly metropolitan (though sometimes rural) spheres.

Far from suggesting that the production of alternative national aesthetics only happens within the confines of these places, I offer these as examples of where subcultural or countercultural expressions have consistently occurred since the opening of these establishments. Because all the stage and media performance activity is happening in the relative “now,” and because of the ephemeral nature of many of these cultural spaces, the permanence of these spaces as landmarks of the underground cultural circuit has been subject to change since I last visited the Dominican Republic in 2005 and Cuba in 2006.

In an effort to keep myself abreast of the insular underground cultural scenes on these respective islands, I have continued to hold conversations with acquaintances and friends that were involved in the arts and who lived on the Island until late 2008 or early 2009. Carlos Ortiz, a queer Dominican performance artist (who in 2009 migrated to Cuba), related the following

definition of “the underground” in Santo Domingo in an e-mail conversation:<sup>8</sup>

Podríamos también hablar de una dilución del "underground", algo como una expansión o bien inclusión progresiva en experiencias más masivas como un quita y deja performativo. Visual artists who appear in merengue parties putting video art a la vista de todos, like a fruit on a tree, for example. Por otro lado, cada circuito tiene sus nuevos mesías, y con estos ocurre una exploración que, según observo, se encamina hacia un sincretismo, como un mangú muy rico. Así, los lugares donde una élite selecta pernoctaba, se ve expandido a otras dinámicas y tendencias. Hip hop graffiti culture that just recently included freestyling, tratando de ponerse al día y a la vez evolving into something more articulated and fun. Electronic dj's playing hip hop and merengue. All for the sake of new indie blood transfusions that will keep them alive. Some places you could mention are Cinema Café, Encuentro Artesanal, pequeños teatros y espacios urbanos improvisados, comme toujours.

I found similar messages about the expansion of Cuba’s “underground” and its increasing tendency to merge what used to be considered marginal with the elite.

Around the same time, late in 2008, I was also in correspondence with Ivonne Chapman, a lawyer and professor at the Universidad of La Habana (who in 2009 migrated to Spain). She points out the following about the underground in La Habana:<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> My translation of this quote is as follows: We could talk about the dilution of the “underground” as something like the expansion or more like the progressive inclusion into more mass-mediated experiences, like the performative comes and goes. There are visual artists that show their work in merengue parties, putting video art out there for everyone to see, like a fruit on a tree, for example. On the other hand, each circuit has its own messiahs and with this, an exploration happens, which as I see it, is headed towards syncretism, like a delicious mangú dish. In this way, the places where the elites used to hang out at night have opened up to other dynamics and tendencies. Hip hop graffiti culture, which until recently just included freestyling, is trying to move up to speed and to evolve into something more articulated and fun. Electronic DJs now play hip hop and merengue. All for the sake if indie blood transfusions that will keep them alive. Some places you could mention are Cinema Café, Encuentro Artesanal, small theaters and other improvised urban spaces, comme toujours.

<sup>9</sup> My translation of her quote is as follows: In reference to your question about the frequented spots nowadays, what happens is that there is a lot of diffusion. As I was telling you, the places that used to be just for elites are now opening up to the underground. In this way, all of the sudden, you see that it is not only in La Madriguera or in the Alamar Gallery (which used to be the most representative I would say), but also you can see art galleries like La Acacia in Old Havana or in nightclubs like El Karachi are implicated in presenting rappers. You cannot forget the Amphitheater of Parque Almendares, which although is not very active these days, it was until not so long ago an important place in that sense. Also, in El Vedado you can find important events like the Cuban Rap Symposium, which is being organized by the people from [the hip hop group] Obsesión and which meets year in the Casa de Cultura de Plaza or in the Las Vegas Club, where a lot of electronic music is made. In the end, yes there are places,

Sobre tu referencia a los lugares frecuentados en estos momentos, es que se está fusionando mucho, como te decía, y lugares que antes eran de élite ahora acogen también parte de lo underground. Así ves, de momento, que ya no solo en La Madriguera o en la Galería de Alamar (que serían los mas representativos digo yo) que de pronto ves galerías de arte como La Acacia en la Habana Vieja o clubes nocturnos como El Karachi implicados en presentar raperos. No se puede olvidar el Anfiteatro del Parque Almendares, que aunque en este momento no está haciendo mucho, fue hasta reciente un lugar importante en este sentido. También en El Vedado se dan eventos importantes como el Simposio de Rap Cubano que ahora lo están haciendo la gente de Obsesión y que sesiona cada año en la Casa de la Cultura de Plaza o el club Las Vegas en Centro Habana, donde también se hace música electrónica. En fin, hay más lugares ahora mismo, pero están mezcladitos.

Through my research, I came to understand the contemporary Spanish-speaking Caribbean “underground” as a series of rapidly changing and amorphous physical and ideological spaces that do not follow or fit any recognizable mold. The underground is encompassed by an always elusive counter-cultural discourse where progressive politics and art meet to resist the mainstream.

In the United States, I have attended concerts and appearances in activist and artistic spaces that foreground the cutting-edge and new work of established, evolving and emerging performers, poets, musicians and visual artists. Las Krudas, for example, have performed in the House of Blues in Chicago, the Women’s Building and the Galería de la Raza in San Francisco, La Peña Cultural Center in Berkeley and in BADDass Women Festival and S.O.B.s in New York City. Rita Indiana, for example, has performed at Nacothèque, a now defunct rotating dance party in New York City that prides itself on highlighting new and old, popular and obscure music. This party, developed for and usually very well attended by many “hipster” Latinos, foregrounds some of the rock n' roll, new wave, indie rock, baile-funk, nouveau-eighties, electropop, disco, cumbia, punk, and hip-hop being produced these days in Latin America and

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but they are quite mixed.

the Spanish-speaking Caribbean.

I initially traveled to La Habana in the summer of 2004 to begin a project about the factors that contributed to the scarcity of popular culture, media texts and scholarship dealing with the realities of queer women in relation to queer men. I had seen many films about alternative sexualities in Cuba that left me wondering, “What about women that loved women in Cuba?” During my first trips to Cuba, I met a wide range of lesbian-identified women with whom I had very interesting conversations about what was it like to be, meet, love, date and interact with other women there. They knew I was an academic and a visitor. Many of these women expressed that they preferred “not to call attention to themselves” in order to keep living discreetly as locksmiths, retired police officers or lawyers. This became one of my first representation conundrums: on stories buried, hidden, silenced.

This is why meeting Las Krudas during my first trip to Cuba was an experience that stood out. I perceived in them something very different from the other lesbian-identified women I had met in Cuba: a commitment to talking out loud against all kinds of injustices. They were well-known urban poets strategically addressing how marginalization applied to people like them: poor, black, urban women who loved women. In other words, they were rapping stories about women to whom mass media has traditionally paid very little attention because of the specificity of their cultural identities and locations. Their art not only named and challenged the overwhelming sexism that surrounded them in the hip hop movement, but also as part of their “day job” in which they performed street theater on five-foot-tall stilts, six days a week, four hours a day around touristy areas of La Habana. In other words, these women had been practicing feminist interventions within the hip hop movement and the street theater economies in tourism-driven sectors of La Habana since the late 1990’s. I directly address these

interventions in Chapter 2 of this dissertation: “Las Krudas: Hip Hop Feminism with a Cuban Flow.”

Approximately a year after I met Las Krudas in Cuba, I met Rita Indiana in the Dominican Republic when I was attending the 2005 Caribbean Studies Association conference in June of 2005. I narrate the story of our first encounter at the beginning of Chapter 3 of this dissertation, “Rita Indiana: Chamaleonic Media Acts in Dominican Art.” Rita’s work, as a young queer metropolitan artist from Santo Domingo intersects with my general research interest: understanding how postmodernity is experienced, contested and negotiated in Spanish Caribbean contexts. Since that Summer of 2005, I realized that I had to do a comparative project that traced how both of these artists spoke to my own sense of aesthetic delight because their bodies, sexualities and art distinguishes them from normative, reproduction-oriented displays of femininity.

Towards the beginning of this ethnographic project in 2004 and 2005, I was already daring to imagine the union of this diversity in terms of women’s self-representations across three different Caribbean countries. However, my vision at that time could not adequately address or foresee the everyday struggles and material realities facing these artists. Wanda, one of the three members of Las Krudas, had already left Cuba just a couple of months before I returned for the second time in 2005 and was recording “T con T: lesbian life in contemporary Havana,”. This means that when I was in the midst of defining my project in terms of the insular Spanish Caribbean feminist productions, Wanda decided to leave, prompting Olivia to follow her footsteps in 2006.

Because there is an interest in fleshing out the complexities of praxis of multiple progressive ideologies at the core of my query —either through embodiment or

institutionalization— the study of Las Krudas 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' reluctant migration to the United States via Russia and then Mexico and the United States. This means that I met Las Krudas when they were already in a very transitional period.

In 2006, Rita also temporarily left the Dominican Republic for New York City. This prompted me to consider the transformative impact of migration on these women's understandings and representations of the larger scope of social moments happening to and around them<sup>10</sup>. Before they migrated, some of the biggest theoretical challenges I faced were around the articulation of the project in a comparative fashion. The women artists that I wanted to compare were not contiguous or even aware of one another. Additionally, there is huge a variance amongst the musical genres of their choosing, which in turn also generate vastly heterogeneous audiences (even within each national context). This launched many questions about and around Caribbean spectatorships, including my own.

Looking at all these women's productions side-by-side, despite the great variety in the musical genres in which they chose to express themselves, has made me a very engaged fan. I saw their performances as a direct call for action. Attempting to combine such diversity of musical styles and political views into my analysis has afforded me new ways of looking at the contemporary sounds, images and practices produced within Cuban, Dominican and Puerto Rican spaces. I offer biographical information, in some cases, with the understanding that this is integral for a full comprehension of the artwork and the social phenomenon these women create.

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<sup>10</sup>The case of the Puerto Rican Las Hermanas Colón is, similarly, very interesting in terms of its foundation and evolution. Gisela Rosario and Gloria Soto became friends in the New York diaspora. Reuniting on the Island after many years of educational and professional exile, and after many jam sessions, they came up with the ensemble's concept.

And even though I am a fan, I aim to critically analyze how the aesthetic and embodied pleasure that I have experienced from these artists work arises out of their feminist aesthetic intervention.

From all the artists I have worked with, I have developed the closest relationship with Las Krudas. Over the last six years I have cherished not only a rich ethnographic interaction, but also a friendship. Our interactions have spanned from Havana in the summer of 2004 and over the winter transition from the year 2005 to 2006. After that, we have interacted across several locations in the United States since 2006. I have documented their work and interviewed them in Austin, TX; New York City, NY (more than once); Champaign, IL (more than once); Lehigh, PA; Jersey City, NJ and Hartford, CT. We also took a trip to Puerto Rico over the winter transition from 2007 to 2008, in which I coordinated and promoted a five concert-tour.

I have also worked to integrate my scholarship and campus activism. My long-lasting research relationship with Las Krudas has been an asset for the Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities' Women of Color Feminism Group; the Office for LGBT Resources; and the Chicano Association—all campus units at the University of Illinois for which I have been able to coordinate collaborations featuring the rappers. I have done the same with my role as Program Administrator at New York University. Las Krudas performed there in October 2009.

As a Puerto Rican scholar working to understand Caribbean women's contemporary manifestations of feminist agency through art, I have refrained from viewing researchers and audiences, representation and reception, as fixed analytical dichotomies. These artists' creations challenged me to develop new languages to document the ways they re-articulate nationalized bodies in their work. Through some of the appendixes that I have completed as videos, I exemplify the ways in which audiovisual knowledge can advance written scholarly formulations and arguments about aesthetic work, and vice versa.

In this way, my research process has been an exploration of the cultural and mediated experiences that inform who these women are (representation), but also an exploration of the ways in which I want to construct my own story in relationship to them (production). The way that I have gone about the documentation of this journey has allowed me to not only record social phenomena, but also to bring a creative approach to my interpretation of these women's art and performances as scholarship.

I identify as a filmmaker rooted in a feminist media studies epistemology. Trained in general media production (advertising, journalism, public relations, photography, graphic design) and with moderate formal training in filmmaking and editing, I am uniquely equipped to produce audiovisual scholarship. I have worked by myself (as opposed to working with film crew), to utilize the distinctive expressive structures of the visual media, rather than those derived from expository prose. In doing so, I explore how research can be open to constant change and creativity challenges, while at the same time, properly record participant observations and question the notion of finding truth in culture.

I encourage the reader/viewer to read and watch the chapters in the order that they are presented in the table of contents as the text and the video inform each other. Simultaneous watching and reading of these pieces (in the order I have outlined) will highlight the nuances of these women's cultural production. This is a methodological intervention in the ways of thinking about doing Media Studies. In this project, the visual and the textual go hand in hand.

In this project, I ask how young women are exploring their own sense of identity and politicizing their realities through self-representation. Moreover, through my written and visual exploration of these questions, I broaden the field of Communications by demonstrating ways to integrating feminist documentation through feminist ethnographic praxis.

## **Dissertation Chapters and Appendixes**

In this project I exemplify the different ways in which Las Krudas and Rita Indiana help us actualize images of contemporary femininities in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. I focus on talking comparatively about Las Krudas and Rita Indiana, with whom I have sustained the most consistent ethnographic relationship since 2004 and 2005.

### **Chapter 2: Las Krudas: Hip Hop Feminism with a Cuban Flow**

This chapter presents a trajectory of Las Krudas' artwork before and after their migration from Cuba to the United States via Russia and Mexico. It contextualizes their street theater and carnival-like-stilts-work in relation to the global landscape of the city of Havana and the underground hip hop scene. Further, it maps the extensions and convergences of theater and hip hop into Las Krudas's most recent productions of feminist media and post-migratory performances. *This chapter directly relates to the video Appendix 1, Reina de mi Misma/Queen of Myself: Las Krudas d' Cuba, a Feature Film.*

One of the main arguments that fuels my interest for comparing and contrasting these two Caribbean artists' work is that while Las Krudas thrive in the reiteration and contextualization of their work within antiracist, feminist and queer groups in sync with transnational movements for social justice, Rita refuses to address herself in such explicit political ways. While Las Krudas embrace a "tell it like it is" approach to their lives, style and work, Rita thrives on creating meaning of the nonsensical and inconsequential, the elusive and the mundane things

Both of these approaches offer necessary interventions to the ways we understand and represent what it means to be Cuban or Dominican. They both actively choose how to represent themselves through their artwork, thus breaking patriarchal discourses that are compulsorily

ascribed to women. To a larger extent, in these two sections I illuminate how social justice aesthetics are manifested at different degrees of explicitness within the Cuban hip hop movement and the Dominican music, youth and performance-based scenes.

### **Chapter 3: Rita Indiana: Chamaleonic Media Acts in Dominican Art**

In this chapter I examine the prolific work and chameleonic persona of Rita Indiana Hernández, a contemporary Dominican creative writer/performer/video and installation artist. Through textual analyses I deconstruct some of Rita's video, sound, and performance interventions. These comprise videos and performances I was able to record, or collect first-hand, in between 2005 and 2007. I analyze how her work, as a young queer metropolitan artist in constant transit in between Santo Domingo, Puerto Rico and New York, offers us new ways to understanding how postmodernity is experienced, contested and negotiated in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. This is a context in which media-centered artistic practices have flourished, despite the uneven geographical and historical development characteristic of post/neo colonial regions (Soha, 1989). *This chapter directly connects to video Appendixes 2, Rita Indiana on Artistic Freedom and Sustenance, and 3, Tuni and the Third World Caribbean.*

### **Chapter 4: Conclusion: Lessons Learned and Next Steps in Documenting Queer Spanish Caribbean Femininities on the Global Stage**

I present concluding remarks about my overall journey through the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and my search for cultural and national referents that were disrupting and reframing discourses around race, gender, sexuality, tradition and belonging. I outline further steps for my continuation of performance and electronic mediation practices that challenge the objectification of female bodies in contemporary consumer culture in the Caribbean and Latin America. *This*

*chapter directly connects to video Appendix 4, Las Krudas, Rita Indiana and Las Hermanas Colón Reunion in Puerto Rico.*

### **Appendix 1: Reina de mi Misma/Queen of Myself: Las Krudas d' Cuba, a Feature Film**

Mirroring the analytical structure of Chapter 1, this documentary-style video has three main sections. The first one shows the impact that the trio has had on the Cuban hip hop movement. The second section exemplifies some of their street theater work in Havana, Cuba. The third section explores their migration and economic subsistence through the arts as an example of the intricate ways Caribbean women embody the everyday linguistic, economic and cultural negotiations that occur within and between nations.

This is a general description of the video I have attached to the online video to describe and contextualize it for readers and viewers. This is, for example, the text that I would put on a DVD sleeve cover: "Reina de Mi Misma, Queen of Myself: Las Krudas d' Cuba" is a feminist documentary film that explores the feminist work of Krudas Cubensi, also known as Las Krudas, an all-women creative trio from Cuba. It narrates the impact the trio has had in the Afro-centric and underground hip hop spheres in La Habana and the United States. Actual and chosen family members, Las Krudas first came together when they decided to form the street theater group Topazankos Cubensi in 1996 and as the hip hop group Krudas Cubensi in 1999. Recently, for personal and professional reasons, Las Krudas decided to leave Cuba—first Odalys in 2005 and then Odaymara and Olivia in October of 2006. The film explores how their spiritual and economic subsistence through the arts—both in Cuba as well as in the United States diaspora. They exemplify the intricate ways in which Caribbean women embody the everyday sociopolitical, economic and cultural negotiations that occur within and between nations."

**This is the most important video attached to this dissertation.** This 20 minute piece compiles many of the interviews, archival images, and audiovisual materials that I recorded first-hand while spending time with Las Krudas in Cuba, the United States (different states, sometimes multiple times) and Puerto Rico. It contains important interviews that I conducted when I first met them in 2004; we discuss their role in hip hop and theater spheres. It also has theatrical footage of a 6-concert tour that I coordinated for them in Puerto Rico over the winter of 2007 and photos and images of concerts they have held at University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign and New York University.

A first draft of this video was completed for the “Race, Sex, Power: New Movements in Black and Latina/o Sexualities” conference in Chicago, Illinois during April 11-12, 2008. Las Krudas watched that draft of the film just a few days later at “El Proyecto/The Project: A Showcase of Global Hip Hop and Contemporary Art,” a conference that happened at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania from April 18-19, 2008. At that time they gave me extensive criticism. In particular we disagreed about one of the scenes in terms of how I represented their street theater experiences in relation to tourism economies. In between 2007 and 2009, I had time to reflect and finesse the ways that I was able to relate, understand and represent Las Krudas in a way that was reflective of their voice, style and experience. I was also negotiating the creation of a satisfactory final product for our professional, scholarly and economic goals or investments in the project. I frame the narrative arch by presenting my last interview with them in October of 2009, providing an additional sense of clarity to gaps in the 2007 draft as well. In addition, it gives insight to Las Krudas after they had spent three years of being racialized Cuban queer migrants in the United States.

## **Appendix 2: Rita Indiana on Artistic Freedom and Sustenance**

Dominican artist Rita Indiana addresses her artistic trajectory and the diverse set of media she uses to generate art outside of predetermined artistic definitions and confinement. She also talks about how to make a living and ends meet.

## **Appendix 3: Tuni and the Third World Caribbean**

Dominican artist Rita Indiana discusses "Tuni," the main character of the song "En los Noventa/In the Nineties" from Miti Miti's album, *Altar Espandex*. This short video exemplifies the populist and minimalist images that Rita is able to render as she portrays Third-World-city-life and embodies the intimate relationships that newer generations have to the “urban” in the 21st century Spanish-speaking Caribbean.

## **Appendix 4: Las Krudas, Rita Indiana and Las Hermanas Colón Reunion in Puerto Rico**

This is the video of a dream come true. I always wanted for Las Krudas, Las Hermanas Colón and Rita Indiana to be in the same space at the same time. Over December 2007-January 2008, it just so happened that they were all in Puerto Rico. This video shows my documentation of this gathering at Macha Colón/Gisela Rosario’s porch and of an impromptu jam session the artists had.

## CHAPTER 2

### Las Krudas: Hip Hop Feminism with a Cuban Flow<sup>11</sup>

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’.

Krudas Cubensi.

New Caribbean Feminists.

New Caribbean Feminists.

New Caribbean Feminists.

Nuestra lucha, explota como la  
gambucha.

Krudas sanando a la mujer que es  
bucha.

Internacionalistas,

Cuba, Colombia, Ghana.

Australia, charda, 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**”.

Las Krudas in Call-and-Response

Blue Room Open Mic

September 12, 2007

La Casa Cultural Latina

University of Illinois

at Urbana-Champaign

Krudas Cubensi, also known as Las Krudas, is an all-women creative trio from Cuba. The trio is comprised of the sisters, Odalys Cuesta-Rousseaux (a.k.a. Wanda) and Odaymara Cuesta-

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<sup>11</sup>A version of this essay has been published in the journal *Letras Femeninas* in a Special Volume titled “Families Under Construction: Migratory Female Identities in the Remaking of Hispanic Cultures” (2008) edited by Irune del Rio Gabiola, Maria del Mar Soria López, Dara E. Goldman, and Eva-Lynn A. Jagoe.

Rousseaux (a.k.a. Pasa Kruda), along with Olivia Prendes-Riverón (a.k.a. Pelusa Mc)—Odaymara’s life partner. The three women, 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 in 1999. Recently, for personal and professional reasons Las Krudas decided to leave Cuba—first Odalys in 2005 and then Odaymara and Olivia in October of 2006. Through a comparative analysis of their cultural productions on the Island and now in the diaspora, I propose that they advance dialogue 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 milieus and our diverse motivations to be here, in the United States.

In this chapter I analyze how Las Krudas’ economic subsistence through the arts—both 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* (2007), Sujatha Fernandez summarizes and contextualizes the situations 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. (pp. 5-6)

Anchored at the intersection of survival and art, Las Krudas reiterated that to properly challenge women's experiences with racism and poverty, hip hop critiques to the Cuban socialist idiosyncrasy had to forefront feminist and queer perspective to account for the experiences of women like them and to be in conversation with other transnational movements feminist social justice.

In his ethnographic analysis of Cuban hip hop, Marc Perry (2004) documents the work of many rap groups who recount the hardships of black barrios and talk about how poverty, crime and imprisonment were, indeed, a racially-based social ill to eradicate (p. 138). In the same way that Bakari Kitwana defines the United State's 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 is an example of the interpenetration of global capital and related free-market transformations after the 1990s economic crisis known as the 'Período Especial' (Kitwana, 2002, p. 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 much from their respective frameworks to understand the role of hip hop in the United States and Cuba (Durham, 2007b).

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 of their everyday experiences of disenfranchisement (p. 7). This context is precisely where Krudas Cubensi's cultural activism comes into play. They dismantle colonialism, racism and social exclusion, but unlike most of the male-centered Cuban hip hop movement, they strategically chose to provide frames of references that exemplify the way marginalization applies to people like them: poor, black, urban, and/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 strengthens the rhetoric of racial awareness that substantiates their participation in the hip-hop sphere, and also accentuates their common experiences as resilient queer women. They portray an out-of-the-norm image of the Cuban woman 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 subcultures had in the heterosexist and racially exclusive image of the “new man” as the ideal patriot.

Notions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction keep whole nations afloat. Krudas Cubensi executes women-centered cultural productions that problematize heterosexism and set themselves apart from normative, reproduction-oriented, displays of femininity. The idea of the “new man” creates a particular role for women in the socialist national project by reproducing nation-building projects in the Caribbean that have relied on white and heteropatriarchal representations of the nuclear family and reproduction. Recognizing the fictive nature that informs this 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 (2005) calls the paradigmatic markers, or temporalities, of the heteronormative experience—birth, marriage, reproduction and death (p. 5). It could be argued that Krudas Cubensi constructed their identity by re-claiming Cuban hip hop as the communitarian platform as it was professed in fin de siècle Havana. The fact that some of their most popular rap lyrics politicized menstruation, celebrated the bodies of black and fat women, and advocated the love for women and in between women has been one of the most vigorous challenges posed to the male-centeredness of the Cuban hip hop movement.

To this point, Las Krudas recently started to promote themselves as “the third revolution.” First, they profess there was the Cuban Revolution, then the Cuban hip hop revolution, and finally the feminist revolution within the Cuban hip hop movement. Through their feminist hip hop interventions they embodied the image of the “rebel” they knew best—that of the socialist citizen who is profoundly critical, intensely revolutionary and undoubtedly Cuban. Through womanist themes and politics, Las Krudas mapped the multiple and 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” (Fernandez, 2006, p. 61) resonates with what Patricia Hill Collin’s describes as one of the dimensions of Black women activism. “Black women’s activism,” Collins (2000) 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” (p. 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,2003).

Krudas Cubensi form part of a worldwide generation of young women who are refashioning feminism toward their own ends through active participation—and intervention—in the terrain of popular culture. More specifically, I locate their artwork amongst that of other young Spanish Caribbean women who disrupt, transcend and reframe the ordinary by amplifying, through performance and select mediation practices, the ways our identities are marked with difference<sup>1</sup>. Las Krudas’ emphasis on the empowerment of poor, black, urban, and/or lesbian-identified women goes hand in hand with what Aisha Durham (2007) 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. (pp. 305-306)

Durham’s definition of hip hop feminism moves notions of cultural agency away from the realm

of feminine spectacular bodies in rap and hip hop music and places it on everyday people—particularly “ordinary” women. These women, 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, state and economic power in context of the United States. I adopt and adapt Durham’s definition to the Spanish Caribbean, to contemporary socialist Cuba in particular, where several Cuban and American scholars such as Roberto Zurbarano, Joaquín Borges-Triana, Tanya Saunders, Marc Perry and Sujatha Fernandes have documented the Cuban hip hop movement as facilitating 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 their case, is at the juncture of hip hop and street theater. If one sees the routine processes by which ones “makes a living” as part of ordinary life, then one has to evaluate Las Krudas’ street theater participation side-by-side with their involvement in creating a feminist space within the Cuban hip hop movement; they were fierce-womanist-urban-poets only part of the time. They sorted their evenings with hip hop events and their days with the production of an attractive-to-tourist, carnival-like tradition in the streets of La Habana Vieja.

### **Krudas Cubensi and street theater**

Las Krudas’ “ordinary” ways of making a living as street theater performers are 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," one of my strongest research interests became understanding how people of my generation, particularly women, employ media to generate critical mediated messages *and* make a living.. 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 have been impressed with Krudas Cubensi's cultural work for several reasons: in particular the fact that their cultural work expands across a selection of mediated and performative forms. 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 since the mid 1990s to subsist economically.

The same three heavily pierced and tattooed women that forcefully denounce the stereotypical images of what Cuban revolutionaries looked and *acted* like on every hip hop stage, were the same three entertainers that performed Afro-centric 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 as 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/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 touristic 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 from 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 works, at once, with and against the politics of each of the cultural environments they navigate 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 depend on that same tourist economy to gain a daily income in dollars or euros. They also rely on the occasional hip-hop activities in which there is some form of international cultural exchange, to sell their homemade CD's as a means to supplement their income.

At this point, we must remember what Fernandes discussed in *Proven Presence* (2007) about the situation of young black women in relation to the racist hiring policies that permeate the Cuban tourist industry (p. 5-6). While many black and mulatta women found themselves with few options outside of *jineterismo* or the “the myriad commercial transactions with foreigners, including prostitution, at all levels” (La Fountain-Stokes, 2002, p. 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 of multiple progressive ideologies—either through embodiment or institutionalization—, 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 they are, in part, what motivated Las

Krudas' migration to the United States via Russia and then Mexico and the United States.

Situating the contemporary Cuban sex tourism experience within a larger historical and global context, Rosalie Schwartz (1998) 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 non exploitation. 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 (p. xv)

Contradiction, of course, emerges when capitalism shows up at socialism's front door. Swartz documents that, by 1994, foreign investment in Cuba's hotels, beach resorts, and other attractions reached close to five hundred million dollars. The profit, of course, motivated more investors and it was then that Cuba permitted foreign partners to control the labor force and to repatriate their half of the gain.

These actions have had very clear consequences: , the inconsistencies of the Revolutionary discourse came afloat when the potential for self-employment (an capitalist, individualistic intent in nature) becomes an issue of great concern for the Communist Party. Schwartz documents how, in 1996, the Central Committee examined the impact of the new economic policies on the Revolutionary ideology. After deliberating for a few hours in a closed-door session, they 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 expressed particular concern for the Cubans leaving their professions to take up less skilled jobs in the tourist industry (p. 211). Certainly there are contradictions in the way the Cuban government has handled its economy while maintaining the longest standing Third World socialist governments in the Western Hemisphere. These contradictions have very real impacts on the lives of Cuban men and as well as on the tourist experience on 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 West of the Island. 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 boundaried and continually evolves (Harper, 1998 ). In fact, Rosalie Swartz (1998) proposes the notion of ‘tourism as history’ in analyzing the complicated relationship the Island has had with this industry. This idea asserts that all agents engaged in tourism initiate action, alter behavior, shape attitudes and influence culture through art, music, religious ritual and food preferences (pp. xii-xiii).

Through 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, 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 prior to

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 that have documented much of Las Krudas' and other hip hop artists' cultural impact in La Habana and elsewhere. They are critical to understand hip hop feminism within a Cuban context because they brought to the Forefront conflicting aspects of their experiences in Cuba.

Las Krudas benefited from the streets and the stages of La Habana in multiple, sometimes convoluted ways. La Habana is, as many other Third World cities, a space in which modernity, late-modernity and postmodernity are negotiated everyday despite the uneven geographical and historical development characteristic of post/neo- colonial regions. Acknowledging the multiple 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 Afro-centric 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 Las Krudas on September 13, 2007, I asked about their decision to migrate to the United States. They replied with excerpts from one of their unpublished post-migration poems (see Table 2.1).

If there is something that Krudas Cubensi consistently denounced, 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, especially black women across the continent and the African

**Table 2.1**

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<i>Poema sin título Original</i>	<i>Untitled Poem English Translation</i>
En Cuba, dentro, estábamos dentro años y años, calientes, al centro.	In Cuba, inside, we were inside. For years and years, hot, at the center.
Aisladas, sin saber que tantas realidades podían suceder.	Isolated, without knowing that so many other realities could happen.
Cuba madre: reprime, comprime, gime.	Cuba, mother: represses, compresses and whines.
“¡Quiero salir!” grita mi gente y de tanto mar estamos ausentes.	“I want to go out!” my people screams and of so much sea we are absent.
Hemos estado ausente del mundo toda nuestra vida y soñando con cruzar el mar, cruzar el mar, cruzar el mar.	We have been absent of the world all of our lives and we have been dreaming about crossing the sea.
Han sido sueños de años han sido empeños frustrados de muchísima gente de nuestro país.	These have been dreams of years, it of frustrated attempts by many people of our country.
Ha sido tanta la gente que ha muerto en ese intento de cruzar el mar.	So many people have died in that attempt of crossing the sea.
Y ha sido, realmente, también la posibilidad del cambio de vida de tanta gente, de tantas familias.	And it has been, really, the possibilities of a life change for so many people, of so many families.

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*Note.* Translation provided by the author.

diaspora. In this poem I see Las Krudas yearning for the opportunity to leave the Island and become part of a larger Black Atlantic conversation.

In a recent article titled “Black Lesbians and Racial Identity in Contemporary Cuba” Tanya Saunders (2010) explores the ways in which racialized discourses--in conjunction with the limitations of post-revolutionary citizens’ address social inequality, and the economic downturn called the “Special Period”—contribute to the fact that lesbians, especially black lesbians, are one of Cuba’s most socially marginalized populations. Saunders explains:

While there has been a notable improvement in the social treatment of gay men between 1994 and 2003, there is virtually no change in the social treatment of lesbians. In fact, the percentage of lesbian acceptance has slightly decreased. One key point of this quantitative data is the overwhelming distaste for lesbians, while gay men are becoming increasingly tolerated in Cuban society and are clearly more respected. In her piece “Cuba: Lesbiana, la más rechazada,” published in the March 3-10, 2003, edition of the *Servicio de Noticias de la Mujer*, Sara Más writes that more than half of the people in the study said they treat homosexuals normally, but almost all women were disgusted by lesbians. The study indicates that lesbians in particular continue to be the most obscure and marginalized population within the homosexual population. Heterosexual-identified women’s attitudes toward lesbians are an area that deserves much attention. It is very likely that, given the narrow framework for performing acceptable femininity and the high social cost of inadequately performing femininity, heterosexual-identified women are more likely than men to police gender/sexual boundaries. (p. 8-9)

In between the time that I met Las Krudas in the summer of 2004 and the time that I went to Cuba for the second time in late 2005-early 2006, Las Krudas became actively involved with, and eventually disinterested in, an initiative called Grupo OREMI. OREMI was intended as a “support group” (in a psychological counseling fashion) put forth by the National Center for Sex Education (CENESEX). CENESEX is officially the first state-supported lesbian organization in Cuba.

In her article “Grupo OREMI: Black Lesbians and the Struggle for Safe Social Space in Havana” (2009) Tanya Saunders states that OREMI received institutional support due to an increasing amount of independent, unpublished and state-recognized Cuban studies about

homosexuality that were conducted between 1994 and 2003. The research indicated the intense social isolation that lesbians faced in comparison to gay men (p. 168.) She describes the beginning (and end) of the group as follows:

In order to address the dearth of visible public space available to lesbians, particularly black lesbians, in the city of Havana, during the summer of 2005 about eight “out” lesbian professionals living in Havana, the majority of whom were black-identified, worked with the state-run National Center for Sex Education (CENESEX) to begin the first state-supported lesbian organization in Havana, called Grupo OREMI. [...] For two months during the summer of 2005, Grupo OREMI created a safe and dependable space for antiracist social critique, lesbian empowerment, and socialization. Eventually the group ended when CENESEX began to restrict social events because of public pressure; CENESEX received a plethora of complaints from the public, which knew that the social events targeted Havana’s lesbian population. There were public complaints about the visibility of women being openly affectionate, something not acceptable in public space where children could witness “low-class” behavior. Nonetheless, it is definitely important to document this grassroots effort led by black-identified women who were brave enough to undertake such an initiative. (p. 170)

Las Krudas were invited to participate in the recruitment of interested participants for Grupo OREMI due their popularity within underground youth, hip hop and lesbian scenes. They grew to be upset, however, about the ways that CENESEX handled the neighborhood’s complaints regarding the women attending the meetings. The neighbor's complaints were that these women were loud and disorderly, but also and that they were having inappropriate displays of affection in the streets. These remarks were not only homophobic in nature, but also racist and misogynistic. Hanging out with Las Krudas so often after this experience had just happened gave me the unique insight to contextualize specific sexist and homophobic processes that influenced their performances of hip-hop culture, the theatrical nature of the stilts work, their views regarding queerness and feminism, and how all of these elements interwove in their lives as Cuban lesbian urban women. Their voices, even if loud, were starting to sound muffled by constantly avoiding falling through the cracks, by relentlessly wanting 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 re-articulate 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 re-imagine what it means to be Cuban, to be lesbians, to be islanders, to be artists, and most importantly, to be family. From within the United States diaspora, their freestyle continues to turn patriarchy on its head. Their post-migration hip hop performances place 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.

Las Krudas re-location is 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* (2006) Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan reflect: “[i]f the world is currently structured by transnational economic links and cultural asymmetry, locating feminist practices within these structures becomes imperative” (p. 3). From this perspective, it becomes critical to ask how the critical work of Las Krudas' imagination becomes part of, and necessarily transforms, different types of collectivities.

In “Bridges to Cuba” (1995)—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. (p. 2)

Las Krudas’ social justice-inspired message had 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 dejected 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 compared to the bulk of Cuban emigrants. Determined not to plunge themselves into the 90 mile Atlantic stretch that lies in 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 employed the permits they had to “exit” the Island for the purposes of a “pleasure” trip to Russia. They knew that obtaining visas to visit Russia was a relatively uncomplicated process due to the Island’s old economic and ideological relationship to the Eastern bloc previous to the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. Once in Russia, they came up with different ways to get to Mexico; this process took months in both of their respective migration “rounds.” But what is the logic behind the really-long-puddles that each of Las Krudas jumped in between Cuba, Russia and Mexico? The article titled “Rush of Cuban migrants use Mexican routes to U.S.” (2006) 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.

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 Caribbean and Latin America experience as they migrate to the United States. In other words, they came to the United States via Mexico after originally having left Cuba with Russian visas.

However, Krudas Cubensi embody a more nuanced and complex image of the Cuban migrant than the one that Behar described in "Bridges to Cuba." Because 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 that have benefited the least from the "American Dream." During a recent interview Odaymara "Pasita" Kruda expresses the following (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 (2004) Imani Perry states "gender and sexuality politics, as well as conflicted relationships to Americanness, all forms 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” (p. 37). The dual discourses 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 multiple channels (Grewal, 2006, p. 2). Krudas Cubensi’s ability to create themselves to their own liking across different national contexts, I propose, should be connected to the way other Third World women re-create themselves aesthetically and politically within their own national contexts and in the diaspora.

Building upon Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s (2003) notion of “feminism without borders,” I work 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. (p. 2)

Implementing a “feminism without borders” epistemology in the Caribbean and its disperse diasporas around the world, then, calls for deliberately creative stratagems; we must necessarily destabilize fixed dichotomies of old and new imperial systems. By critically documenting Krudas Cubensi anti colonialist 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 (2000) state: “[t]he Caribbean was the centre of an imperialist policy that saw modernity taking its clearest form as a network of contradictory and unstable forces” (p. xiii). In other words, the “invention of the Americas,” a term coined by the historian Edmundo O’Gorman in the 1960’s, was jumpstarted and built upon the discovery, conquest, colonization and continued exploitation of the Caribbean.<sup>12</sup> 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 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 we are and what we are worth—in the past and in the present. Las Krudas, both in “ordinary” life and through their creative practices, have undertaken the most strenuous of tasks—that of subsisting mostly on enterprises of self-determination. No predetermined routes, no prepackaged identity struggles, no programmed discourses of postcoloniality. Table 2.2 is an excerpt of their post-migration songs.

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<sup>12</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 lost sailor who arrived to the Caribbean completely lost in his geography, confused by his own cartography, and obfuscated in his cosmology (p. 31). This kind of reconceptualization reveals, as Susan Harewood (2006) explains, the fictive nature of Caribbean nationalistic narratives (p. 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.

**Table 2.2**

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<i>No Me Dejaron Entrar en España (Excerpt, original)</i>	<i>They Denied Me Entry into Spain (English version)</i>
Dicen ke toda nuestra gente se kiere kedar allí.	They say that all of our people want to stay there.
¿Acaso olvidaron cuando vinieron a colonizar akí?	Perhaps they forgot when they came to colonize here?
Desde antes de mi abuela la gente kiere emigrar.	Since before my grandmother's time, people want to emigrate.
De España misma vinieron pa' mi familia fundar.	From Spain itself they came to start off my family.
Ke la tierra entera es nuestra y el derecho de viajar.	That the earth is ours and so it is the right to travel.
Huir, escapar... no es sólo una actitud de kien teme.	To run away, to escape... just an attitude of those who are fearful.
Es un desafio de kien más no puede sostener su realidad.	Is the defiance of those that cannot further sustain their reality
Es la dignidad de kien decide cambiar aunke a donde valla, no halla ni casa, ni mama, ni papa, ni ja-ja-ja.	Is the dignity of who decides to change even though were you are going there is no house, no mom, no dad and no ha ha ha.
Latinoamerica tiene derecho a emigrar.	Latin America has the right to emigrate.
Africa tiene derecho a emigrar.	Africa has the right to emigrate.
Asia tiene derecho a emigrar.	Asia has the right to emigrate.
Caribe tiene derecho a emigrar.	The Third World has the right to emigrate.
Tercer mundo tiene derecho a emigrar.	Even animals have the right to emigrate.
Hasta l@s animales tienen derecho a emigrar.	

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*Note.* Translation provided by the author.

In some of their most recent songs, Krudas Cubensi simultaneously address and confront the difficulties that most “third world” peoples experience when trying to migrate to “first world” locations. I appreciate this song because of the direct way it challenges the representation of migration as just an escape for those that have given up on the nation. Krudas’ response to the realities they experienced in multiple embassies and airports of these “first world” countries asks: “Don’t you remember colonialism? Who gave *you* permission to exploit me? And how dare you to continue to exercise surveillance, force and criminalize my movement, and 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 anyways. As feminists, it is our job to dismiss and cross them whenever possible.”

Within the last couple of years, 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. Their migration has not changed their name, or who they claim to be. Krudas Cubensi, as well as the rest of the Cuban hip hop 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 communications technologies, they have chosen to remain as Manuel Aviles (2007) succinctly puts it, “linked together, [to] exchange information, and maintain cooperative relationships by means of hyperlinks around a common background, interest, or project” (p. 3). They de-center Cuba by taking it along with them in songs and images. The family and the nation are re-constructed and portable: a kind of a

feeling within.

### **Las Krudas, migration and transnational hip hop feminism—concluding remarks**

Krudas Cubensi re-fashion 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 prime medium of communication today (Karlyn, 2007, par. 7).

From the centrality of censorship strategies--that are 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 plays a central role in the construction of political and social identities. Media is said to be so powerful because it teaches us about society by repeatedly showing certain types of people enacting certain types of roles. But if we really understand Communications as a multiple-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 ideologies and hegemonies moves in various, multiple and disperse ways.

As I mentioned in my earlier discussion of the theatrical legacy that Krudas Cubensi generated in La Habana Vieja, Las Krudas know how to *perform and work* their way out of a tough economic situation. While in La Habana they created their “day job” within street theater and their “night gigs” within the hip hop movement. Their labor distribution has definitely shifted since they entered the diaspora due to what they describe as the institutionalization of the arts as more of a leisure activity in the United States. 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, like we did in Cuba with Tropazankos, is like what Pasita said: people don't have time, every one is looking out for themselves. We would actually have to organize a more serious, less spontaneous project, like presenting a grant to a non-profit 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, personal agency in 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 has facilitated Krudas Cubensi's agency to survive in the diaspora. Nonetheless, they have seen the need to highlight theatricality in hip hop. Krudas have been blessed enough to continue to live through their art, and their rap continues to be in Spanish. Due to the language barrier of their current fan-base in the United States, who more often than not are English-only speakers, Las Krudas has resorted to what Eric Darnell Pritchard and Maria L. Bibbs (2007) 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. (p. 33)

For instance, when Las Krudas perform one of their most highly acclaimed songs called "La

Gorda”<sup>13</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.” In other words, the theatrical is merged with hip hop in the U.S in order to survive.

Hip hop has become a viable way of living for Las Krudas for several reasons. First, it has provided them with a full-time opportunity to economically sustain themselves via honorarium-based concerts that more often happen within the realm of academic and privately-owned progressive/subcultural spheres. Secondly, 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 impact 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

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<sup>13</sup>What follows in an excerpt of Las Krudas’ song La Gorda (Da Fat Woman). “(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.

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. They do so because, aware of the potential of this expressive culture to influence individual and collective worldviews, they intentionally use its popularity to turn the spotlight not only onto the social conditions of disenfranchised women in the United States, but also of women around the globe. For example, as part of my interview with them on Sept 13, 2007, they 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 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? Is to do 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, that left Cuba going back and taking hip hop equipment and materials to Cuba, like the people back and taking hip hop equipment and materials to Cuba, like the people from here has 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 go 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 could 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." *Contra*, here there are a lot of good things, but there is also a lot of bad things.

As accomplished artists within localized and globalized hip hop aesthetic spheres, Las Krudas internationalization has just begun. As Cuban rap practitioners, in the Island and the diaspora,

they have continued to live by their ideals of collectivism, egalitarianism and solidarity even through moments of impending transitions.

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” 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 its revolutionary imagination. With their migration to the United States, they started calling themselves, New Caribbean Feminists—the kind that practices transnational feminism through body and practice.

## CHAPTER 3

### **Rita Indiana: Chameleonic Media Acts in Dominican Art<sup>14</sup>**

I met Rita Indiana-Hernández on one of my first visits to the Dominican Republic, while attending a congress of the Caribbean Studies Association. Rita was in the audience for the panel on which I presented. After our session, a big group of queer-identified and queer-friendly folks decided to grab a bite at a nearby restaurant.

Half an hour into the appetizers, our whole table was having a passionate discussion about homonormativity politics and practices (Duggan, 2002) in the Spanish Caribbean. In the midst of the debate, Rita recounted how a drag queen once warned her to stop public displays of affection with her lesbian lover or else they would have to leave the gay bar. This happened when she was visiting Puerto Rico and hanging out at *Eros*, a gay disco located in Santurce. With a playful tone, Rita explained to the attentive table, that they were simply taking advantage of what the dark corners of a safe queer space are supposed to allow. The drag queen thought she was male and continued to admonish her to leave the bar because straight people could not make-out there. When the disco lights struck Rita's face, the queen somehow noticed a transformation from androgynously masculine, to androgynously feminine in Rita's face. The queen immediately apologized, "I'm so sorry. I am a woman too."

If you can you picture an androgynous person who is first asked to leave a gay bar for

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<sup>14</sup>A version of this essay has been published in the book *Globalizing Cultural Studies: Ethnographic Interventions in Theory, Method, & Policy* (2007) edited by Cameron McCarthy, Aisha Durham, Laura Engel, Alice A. Filmer, Michael D. Giardina, Jennifer Logue, Miguel Malagrega.

being misrecognized as a conceitedly-straight-man infiltrator, and next, being welcomed to stay due to a tacit recognition of some unspoken femininities—that are, of course, imagined, reconstructed and employed within very particular queer times and spaces (Halberstam, 2005)—then you are imagining Rita. Her work and persona embody this particular notion of fluidity.

As a creative writer/performer/video and installation artist, her work is prolific and protean. Rita’s work, as a young queer metropolitan artist from Santo Domingo, plays a significant role in my general research interest: understanding how postmodernity is experienced, contested and negotiated in Spanish Caribbean contexts—where media-centered artistic practices flourish, despite uneven geographical and historical development, (Soha, 1989) characteristic of post/neo colonial regions.

In this paper I explore Rita’s polysemic and polyphonic aesthetics to address the ways in which her work presents an alternative idea of the Dominican gendered and national self. In the essay *Art and the Postcolonial Imagination* (2000), Cameron McCarthy and Greg Dimitriadis indicate that “contemporary critical thinking on art and aesthetics performs a number of well-rehearsed discursive moves decipherable in the trajectory of cultural studies and beyond” (p. 231). In breaking away from the flattening of aesthetics into the realm of commodified, popular culture bodies and artifacts, it is important that among the many avenues in which we can study Rita and others like her, we consider that Cultural and Media Studies provide crucial lenses through which to approach these women’s hypervisual multimedia performances of self.

### **Rita’s Video-art, Sound and Art-action Interventions**

Rita’s pioneer novel, *La Estrategia de Chochueca* (1999), was first published when she was only 19 years old. It deals with the intimate relationships that new generations have with the

urban space in *fin de siècle* Santo Domingo. A postmodern coming-of-age story, this text circularly follows, as Juan Duchesne Winter points in its prologue, a group of pleasure-seeking-electro-bohemian-Americanized-middle-class-alienated youngsters into their wanderings around a tropical city. Their seemingly trivial goal is to return some stolen speakers from a concert, but in doing so, the narrative turns the underground periphery into the center; there are no Caribbean blue skies, no all-inclusive hotels, and no palm trees.

Impoverished and loud neighborhoods, tacky corner stores and tourist-cramped boulevards, not only become the center of action, but are “the place to be.” The undertone of the whole novel seems to reason, if you are stuck in Santo Domingo, you might as well make it cool. Through what Néstor E. Rodríguez (2002) describes as a subversive cartography of Dominican identity, the Third World city becomes the hippest anti-utopia. Rita achieves this through an ever-present first-person voice, seemingly directionless adventures, discontinuous or fragmented narratives, and very populist and minimalist language and undertones. Such capacity is postmodern multilayering at its best.

The ever-present first-person voice, the discontinuous or fragmented narratives, and minimalist undertone are present not only in *Science Suction* (2003) and *La Estrategia de Chochueca* (1999), but also in her previous and most recent works, such as *Rumiantes* (1998) and *Papi* (2004). However, it is not Rita’s written work that I am most interested in. I argue that while her literary work should be praised for her ability to render lucid visuals of the sometimes contradictory, circular, or irrational bits and pieces of the Caribbean, the possibilities of alternative understandings of those same realities when she departs from the audiovisual itself—or when she intervenes in her constructed milieu employing herself as the art piece—are even more impressive and remarkable.

## **Video-art Interventions: La última vez que vi a Linda**

I encourage the reader to watch the first video under this section, “La última vez que vi a Linda” / “The Last Time I Saw Linda, 3:38 min., one of Rita’s video-art pieces that precedes the moment we met in 2005. I selected this particular visual experiment from among others she has produced because the form heavily informs the content of the video. The fact that she is handholding the camera, recording herself, while at the same time conceptually orchestrating her self-representation, provides us with a window to not only appreciate the figurative aspects of her media intervention, but also the artistic persona behind them.

Briefly, the video “La última vez que vi a Linda” portrays looped images of Rita’s right hand slipping in between the buttons of her shirt only to find a golden chain necklace that she pulls out from her neck through the same gap that we saw her hand maneuver its way into the shirt. This is one of the many fleeing and fragmented images within this video that is set in an unoccupied office space. The very inviting circularity of a revolving white and blue umbrella (just previously shown ‘penetrating’ its carrying plastic case), emphasizes the shortness of the tie she is wearing, and focuses attention on Rita’s funky hairstyle and stylish sunglasses. All of this visual stimuli is heightened by semi-chaotic camerawork that from time to time wanders to see what’s beyond a glass window, through the blinds, only to encounter a busy Santo Domingo avenue on a cloudy day. When I initially saw all of these elements, seamlessly edited on top of a mixed soundtrack that combined classic merengue and techno beats, I interpreted the piece to be a queering of iconic macho symbols.

Although this piece is open to a myriad of interpretations, upon further reflection, a small piece of information that Rita mentioned when introducing the video strengthens my interpretation. She mentioned that the title of her video is a play on the lyrics of Daniel Santos’

1942 greatest hit, *Linda*. This song's very emotive beginning is "Yo no he visto a Linda" ("I have not seen Linda"), a close parallel to Rita's title "La última vez que vi a Linda." In analyzing this video, I propose that several factors are pertinent to its critical analysis: first, an awareness of Daniel Santos' personal, artistic, and political persona; second, a description of the story that *Linda*, the actual song, narrates; third, an analysis of the popularized, somewhat vulgar, meanings of 'Linda' within Spanish Caribbean popular culture; and finally, an understanding of the cultural impact that Daniel Santos, as a bolero singer, has had in Spanish Caribbean literature and literary criticism.

While Daniel Santos (1916-1992) was a very famous Puerto Rican bolero singer, he was infamous for having married twelve times and for his alcoholic tendencies. The song *Linda*, which he popularized, was composed by Pedro Flores (another famous Puerto Rican composer), precisely after Santos had had a bad romantic turnout with a Dominican woman. The lyrics and my translation are in Table 3.1. Speaking from within the grand narrative of heterosexuality, this song evolves in a rather strange and heterosexist way. The speaker goes from derisively judging Linda's disappearance, to constructing her as naïve by possibly welcoming many roguish men's attentions, to self-victimization for being left, to the realization of his loss and his impatience to receive any sort of notice from Linda. When he finally receives a letter from Linda, he is appalled by the fact that she has decided to become a nun and thus, lives in celibacy and has abandoned hegemonic displays of femininity (the song makes a point to say that she has cut her hair). This turns into the speaker's acknowledgement of the underestimation of the relationship, and finally, the his nonchalant—almost elusive—confession of infidelity, which, of course, should be the actual cause of his remorse and regret on the first place. So, it is not until the end

**Table 3.1**

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<i>Linda Original</i>	<i>Linda (English translation)</i>
Yo no he visto a Linda, ¡parece mentira! Tantas esperanzas que en su amor cifré No le ha escrito a nadie, no dejó una huella. No se sabe de ella desde que se fue.	I have not seen Linda, this is unbelievable! So many hopes that I had in her love. She has not written to anyone, she did not leave a trace.
Sabrá Dios mío cuántos le estarán pintando ahora pajaritos en el aire.	We don't know anything about her since she left.
Yo no he podido ni podré querer a nadie con tan loco frenezí.	Only God knows how many guys are trying to get with her right now.
Menos el domingo, todas las tardes, salgo a ver al cartero, a ver si trajo algo para mi, ¡Oh Virgen de Alta Gracia! Quizás algún día se acuerde de mi.	I have not and will not be able to love anyone with such crazed frenzy.
¿Por qué no me has escrito? ¿Por qué me has olvidado? Si es que me has traicionado, déjame lo saber.	Everyday but Sunday, all afternoons, I come to see to the mailman to see if he has brought anything for me.
Por fin, recibí carta de Linda. Por fin ahora sí sé donde está.	Oh, Altagracia Virgin! Maybe one day she will remember me.
En un convento, donde vive cerca al cielo. Donde se cortó su pelo y entregó su libertad Mi malicia, tan perversa, la juzgaba en la maldad.	Why hasn't she written? Why would you have forgotten me? If you have betrayed me, please let me know.
ella a mi me idolatraba, y yo desde aquel altar la besaba y la engañaba hasta que no pudo más y se fué y me dejó en la soledad.....	Finally, I received a letter from Linda. I finally know where she is at. In a convent, where she lives close to heaven.
¡Ave María!	Where she cut her hair and gave away her freedom. My malice, so evil, judged her harshly. She adored me and, me, from that altar kissed her and cheated on her until she could not take it anymore and she went away and left me on loneliness.
	Hail Mary!

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*Note.* Translation provided by the author.

of the song that we find out that Linda “disappeared” because this man was cheating on her. Although this song linearly narrates a whole range of emotions, the critique that the situation was motivated by the man’s infidelity, a hypersexual performance of hegemonic masculinity, is minimal, if present at all.

How would a reinterpretation of this song be different if the narrative would have prioritized the woman’s version of the story? Personally, I think Linda would have probably spared us the demonization of women for abandoning cheating men. And while I would not go as far as to suggest that Rita embodies a contemporary refashioning of the shorthaired Dominican Linda from Santos’ song—that might be too heteronormative—Rita’s video certainly portrays an empowering redefinition of the elements of appropriate Dominican womanhood. In recuperating and reversing Santos’ very traditional narrative, Rita establishes that nobody needs to speak *about* or *for* Dominican “Lindas”; they can tell their own stories and represent themselves.

There is also an interpretation that considers *Linda*’s appropriation within the Spanish Caribbean vernacular and popular culture. This may be what Rita was pointing out when she mentioned that the title of her video alluded to this particular Daniel Santos’ song. This song has to do with the loss of a passionate love (“I have not and will not be able to love anyone with such crazed frenzy”) from the perspective of a hypersexualized heteronormative performance of masculinity. Linda’s abandonment provoked a long and torturous process of uncertainty and finally the giving up of hope. But hope of what?

Within Spanish Caribbean popular culture, the hope that is gone is that of sexual contact. Popularly and metaphorically speaking, to say that “I have not seen Linda” also means “I have not had sex.” In peculiar ways “Linda” has been related to a lack of sexual activity, and all the

possible outcomes and consequences of that withdrawal. In other words, it describes undergoing a “dry spell.” In looking back to the video and incorporating this “dry spell” premise into the analysis, all of the sudden the desolated and monotonous-looking office setting, the constant view out of the window to find the same cloudy and heavy-traffic urban day over and over, the hysterical look on Rita’s face with the revolving umbrella as a backdrop, the very sexual imagery of the umbrella “penetrating” its plastic carrying plastic, the shortness of Rita’s tie, and the wanderings of her hand into her shirt, indeed, evoke a delusional feeling of solitude, eagerness for action and self-exploration.

Even in its abstractness, repetition, circularity and fragmentation, this interpretation of the portrayal of a queer-looking woman’s sexual needs denotes a very bold move, especially when contextualized within the state of GLBTQ identities and activism in the Dominican Republic<sup>15</sup>. Although I am pretty sure that Rita does not identify as an artist doing “queer art,,: I think that the form of the video—in its abstractness, repetition, circularity and fragmentation—still informs its content and visually comments on the possible wanderings of queer woman and the status quo of her sensual or sexual experiences.

Finally, I should say that I find Rita’s decision to reinterpret a text from the Puerto Rican

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<sup>15</sup>Jacqueline Jiménez-Polanco, a lesbian activist on the Island and the Dominican diaspora in New York City, adjudicates the current difficulties of consolidating a GLBTQ movement on the Island to a series of obstacles. These difficulties range from the Catholic Church’s weight at the State level, the blatant homophobia represented in mass media and experienced in social and political sectors at large, to the condescending attitude that the GLBTQ middle class shows in response to existing discrimination. Jiménez-Polanco, actuallyheavily criticizes the GLBTQ middle class for sustaining the closet in fear of losing their status quo and the benefits they gain within a highly excluding society (Jiménez-Polanco, 2006, p. 19). It is also relevant to mention that the first GLBTQ Pride March in the Dominican Republic happened in 2001, which is an entire decade later than in Puerto Rico (the neighboring Island), where the pride parade has been happening annually since 1991. Additionally, in the Dominican Republic, due to two violent incidents that happened the day of that parade (that may have not even be associated to the Pride march), the event was not repeated until 2005. This last time the organizers did not even frame it as a march, but as a pacific demonstration of pride. For this event, hundreds of GLBTQ folks congregated in a plaza and wore T-shirts that were distributed at the event. Jiménez-Polanco report of the event reveals that there was heavy police surveillance and that the State illegally banned the circumventing businesses from catering any food or beverages to the participants.

Daniel Santos significant because it contextualizes this piece within a transnational crossroads of cultural productions, conventional and contemporary, that implicate the three Spanish Caribbean Islands. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, Santos traveled between Cuba and New York quite often for concerts and performances. In 1946, he composed the song *Sierra Maestra*, which Fidel Castro adopted as the official hymn of the July 26 movement and then transmitted every morning through Radio Rebelde (Rebel Radio) just before updating the nation about the enterprises of the takeover of Fulgencio Batista's government. Santos' relevance at individual and collective levels in the Spanish Caribbean was initially examined in the Puerto Rican playwright Luis Rafael Sánchez's text *La importancia de llamarse Daniel Santos* (1988). More recently, Jason Cortés' *Vivir en varón: Machismo y modernidad en La importancia de llamarse Daniel Santos de Luis Rafael Sánchez* (2005) and Maja Horn's *Bolero Bad Boys: Luis Rafael Sánchez's La importancia de llamarse Daniel Santos* (2006) contextualize Santos's personal and political persona in the Spanish Caribbean through contemporary feminist and queer lenses. I propose that whoever is interested in this topic should also consider Rita Indiana's *Linda No Veo* as an important critical interpretation of Santos' transnational and transcultural persona.

This is not the first time that one of Rita's video pieces has served as a commentary to comment on this kind of transnational cultural exchange among countries of the Spanish Caribbean. I also interpret her short video, *Ausente* (Absent / 1:07 min), as a visual experiment in which she employs trans-Caribbean evangelical speeches and electroshock therapy images to make a statement about the connection of Church and State in the formation of Dominican and Puerto Rican moral, straight, subjects. She also explored the connection of sexuality and State in an unedited collaboration with Carlos Ortiz, a fellow Dominican contemporary artist and performer. In this untitled video, they employ the visual metaphor of a man submerged in a

bathub of fuchsia plantains to comment on Dominican sex tourism as it relates to gender performativity.

### **Sonic interventions: Casiful's "Platanito"**

A chameleonic artist, Rita's experiments with music and performance can be traced to 2005. She became the lead singer of an electronic music trio called *Casiful* in which the other two band members—a pair of Spaniard siblings residing in the Dominican Republic—played a small keyboard and a music box. For some “queer” reason, Rita painted a mustache on her upper lip for all of their performances. The fact that the lyrics were mostly improvised live, shows a different aspect of her genius. It is one thing to be able to portray the circularity, irrationality and repetition of the Caribbean within a carefully composed literary text, and another to pull-off a similar effect during a live improvisation.

Table 3.2 is a transcription (and my translation to English) of the song *Platanito* (Lil' Banana) that *Casiful* first improvised during a concert in the 2005 National Biennale of Visual Arts in the Modern Art Museum in Santo Domingo. The song was replayed at the grand-finale for the third CHOCOPOP Performance Art Festival at Puerto Plata. While I think the fact that Rita has established herself as a key figure in the local Dominican alternative-art scene since she was very young definitely played a big role on *Casiful*'s tremendous success as an ephemeral experiment, there is something to be said about the form and content of this particular sonic cultural intervention. I argue *Platanito* should be contextualized within the postmodern characteristics of absurdity and parody.

Absurd stories often take place in nightmare or dreamscape narratives. In this particular case, Rita narrates that she dreamt herself embodied as a jungle monkey searching for bananas.

**Table 3.2**

<i>Platanito (Lil' Banana) Spanish version</i>		
¿Dónde está mi platanito?	Coge Platanito	Casi-casimente
¿Dónde está mi platanito?	Reconoce Platanio	Contagiosamente
¿Dónde está mi platanito?	Rememora Platanito	Interesadamente
¿Dónde está mi platanito?	Investiga Platanito	Calurosamente
	Zapato platanito	Limitadamente
Yo creo un españolito	Sombrero platanito	Saludablemente
se alzó con mi platanito.	Aparato Platanito	Conceptualmente
	Documento Platanito	Minuciosamente
Anoche que yo soñé que	Pantalón Platanito	Verdaderamente
era un monito	Camisa Platanito	Masomenamente
y que iba por la selva	Idiotica Platanito	Artísticamente
recogiendo platanitos	Corazón Platanito	Políticamente
Anoche yo soñé que era un		Casualmente
monito	¿Dónde está mi platanito?	Amigablemente
que vivía en la selva	¿Dónde está mi platanito?	Ambiciosamente
recogiendo platanitos.		
		¿Dónde está mi platanito?
<i>Platanito (Lil' Banana) English translation by author</i>		
Where is my lil' banana?	Take lil' banana.	Warmly
Where is my lil' banana?	Recognize lil' banana	Limitedly
Where is my lil' banana?	Remember lil' banana	Healthily
Where is my lil' banana?	Investigate lil' banana	Conceptually
	Shoe lil' banana	Carefully
I think that a lil' Spaniard	Hat lil' banana	Truly
stole my lil' banana.	Artifact lil' banana	More-or-lessly
	Document lil' banana	Artistically
Last night I dreamt that I	Pants lil' banana	Politically
was a little monkey and	Shirt lil' banana	Casually
that	Idiotic lil' banana	Friendly
I was going around the	Heart lil' banana	Ambitiously
jungle picking up lil'		
bananas.	Where is my lil' banana?	Where is my lil' plantain?
Last night I dreamt that I	Where is my lil' banana?	
was a little monkey and		
that	Almost-almostly	
I was lived in the jungle	Contagiously	
picking up lil' bananas.	Interestingly	

This corresponds to the postmodern characteristic of the absurd as satire. The parodic aspect comes with the ridiculous effect caused by constant repetition of what seems illogical. By randomly associating bananas with unanimated objects and by creating an impromptu list of adverbs linked only through alliteration, Rita provokes the audience to look for patterns of meaning. When we, as an audience, realize that we have willfully engaged in a futile exercise of looking for common sense and dominant readings in something that we intuited was random and meaningless in the first place, then *Platanito* becomes comical. In this case, the parody lies in the humor that is based on the form. This connects to the widespread postmodernist belief that life inherently is non-sensical. Opposite to didactic or political art, *Platanito* seems to be an exercise of “art for arts' sake”—a bohemian creed originated in the late nineteenth century which believes that artistic pursuits do not need a moral justification in the name of love, devotion, patriotism or the like to be able to make a culturally subversive statement.

I argue that although this might be the intended motivation, Rita's choice to avoid traditional artistic goals, to instruct, inspire or give a moral lessons, is a very political aesthetic decision—particularly when it is a woman who has the power to opt for not being intelligible, easily accessed, or consummable. Beyond this, if we embark on a search for negotiated messages, we might even refer to psychoanalytic and iconographic queer readings, in which bananas are associated with phallic symbols. When such messages comes from a fake-mustache wearing, Dominican, light skinned, extremely tall and skinny, queer-/androgynous-looking woman, at an outdoor concert on the beach and under palm trees, the door for multilayered and intersectional readings is wide-open.

### **Art-action/performance interventions: “hopf/ haar” and “Multiple Entries”**

Many of the postmodern themes also emerge in Rita’s art-action or performances pieces. Within my research, I understand performance (or art-action), as the replacement of the canvas or the clay with the human body in space and in action (Senelick, 2000). As a performance artist, Rita is chameleonic. Although she has done many performances, I will only address the ones that I have seen firsthand or have access to through video-recordings<sup>16</sup>.

At the 2005 CHOCOPOP Performance Art Festival in Puerto Plata, Dominican Republic, I saw Rita and her partner, at that time, establish a wordless dialogue, a conversation mediated by musical forms employing vinyl records. In their performance—titled *hopf/ haar*, which in German means *head / hair*—both women were located at opposite ends of a table; by employing their respective record players, they established a wordless conversation through music. They responded to each other as deejays of their own tune. Halfway through the presentation, both stopped using their fingers to manipulate the revolving disks and started licking the vinyl while looking at each other. As a highly homoerotic intervention, I interpret this piece as a re-conceptualization of the use of media to communicate meaning and nurture creative dialogues, especially among (queer) women. I will say it once again—it was a great moment, I wish I could show you the video.

I have also seen Rita chew excessive amounts of gum while blindfolded in a performance titled *Multiples Entries* at the Río Piedras campus of the University of Puerto Rico (UPR). The piece took place in a vestibule of the General Sciences building. The audience sat on the floor and gathered around the center of the action, which contained a Chinese tea table, and a laptop

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<sup>16</sup>I would like to acknowledge Lara Reyes, the Puerto Rican documentary photographer and filmmaker, for graciously agreeing to video-record Rita’s performance *Multiple Entries* at the University of Puerto Rico during November 2005.

connected to a screen.

During the first half of the piece, Rita stood behind the short table facing the audience and, one by one, chewed all the pieces of a *Big Red* cinnamon-flavored chewing gum package—even when her mouth could not fit all of them. When she finished stuffing her mouth with gum, and still blindfolded, she randomly selected five people from the audience to join her at the center of the action. They all sat in the floor next to Rita. She sat at the center of the semicircle, removed the blindfold and started typing in a Word document on the computer. In the meantime, each of the selected audience members at the center of the action was provided with spinning tops, which needed to be activated with the sound of a whistle that Beliza Torres, a Puerto Rican performer and friend of Rita's, was playing at irregular intervals.

While the people in the semicircle obediently waited for their sound signals, the rest of the audience watched the large screen to see what Rita was typing. She never typed full sentences, but phrases that hinted at names of well-known (at least in Puerto Rico) Dominican entertainers—such as TV host personality Charityn Goico and Jossie Esteban, the lead singer of the *Patrulla 15* merengue band—while alternating them with words that referenced bureaucratic and illegal processes of emigration such as *yolas*.<sup>17</sup> Instead of employing sound and language as parody and surrealism like in *Platanito*, Rita employed silence and the required repetition of chewing gum, revolving tops and typing to comment what I interpret as a critique of the culture of consumerism and excess that prompts people to replicate irrational, neurotic behaviors over and over.

At a more transnational/collective level, the content and form of this art-action piece made me reflect on the repetitive action that chewing gum requires—while the superficial texture

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<sup>17</sup>Spanish word for the bootleg vessels commonly associated with illegal immigration.

and flavor of the gum might change considerably every time you chew it, the core materiality and composition do not. Contextualizing this in relation to what Antonio Benítez-Rojo (1996) calls “the repeating Island” in his discussion of the postmodern Caribbean, I was prompted to map this texture/core composition premise in relation to my project.

Going back to the idea of the “welcomed visitor” that I discussed in the introduction, I want to keep in mind that Rita executed this art action piece at my alma mater in Puerto Rico. Rita’s complex relationship to Puerto Rico has made me further question how our presences in each other Islands might be filtered through a different set of lenses. My presence in Cuba and the Dominican Republic is a constant negotiation of the relationships that Puerto Rico has held with these countries in the historical past<sup>18</sup> and the present.

Because of the geographic proximity that the Dominican Republic has to Puerto Rico, the capitalist financial opportunities available in Puerto Rico in comparison to other Caribbean nations, as a result of our economic relationship to the United States, my presence in the Dominican Republic is mostly read through the lenses of the relationships held by our countries in the present. To understand the despair of recent Dominican migration, one has to first, dare to imagine the deep ideological and political rut in which Dominican Republic found itself after Rafael Leonidas Trujillo’s bloody dictatorship from the 1930s up to his assassination—by the

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<sup>18</sup>My presence in Cuba was dramatically filtered through the cultural memory of the relationships held by our countries in the past. For instance, the resemblance between the Puerto Rican and the Cuban flags marks a historical point in the late 1890’s when both the Puerto Rican and Cuban Revolutionary parties’ headquarters in New York joined efforts in the struggle against Spanish colonialism. These relations were gradually tainted after the 1898 Spanish American War, when Cuba was able to evade U.S. colonial occupation in 1902 and Puerto Rico was subjected to it—arguably, until the present day. Nowadays, my position as a U.S. citizen of an American territory located within the geographical and cultural space of the Spanish Caribbean is a source of uncertainty and tension as it simultaneously brings up the subsistence of the Puerto Rican colonial subjectivity and its economic privilege. In other words, while Cuba fights against the Yankee imperialist and the Dominican Republic contends with it, I am at once unwillingly attached and subjected to it.

United States—in 1961<sup>19</sup>.

The beginning of Joaquin Balaguer's second presidency in 1966 not only drew a dotted line back to the Trujillo era, but also started Balaguer's "twelve years" of reign known for the many infrastructural advancements on the Island (in the forms of highways, parks and schools) at the expense of keen class disparity. Extreme economic hardship for the poor and the continuation of a milder version of the Trujillo Era's human rights violations and civil liberties repressions (Suarez, 2006) continued. This is when the demographic of Dominican migration in Puerto Rico started to change dramatically.

Thus, for me, it made a lot of sense that Rita alluded to contemporary Dominican media personalities such as Charityn and Jossie Esteban in her chewing gum piece. These celebrity/spectacular bodies, due to their their light skinned complexions and resulting elevated class status—and—occupy a privileged position vis-à-vis the xenophobia experienced by the majority of working class, dark skinned Dominicans in Puerto Rico. During all my years attending Colegio San Antonio, a private Catholic school located in the midst of Río Piedras, there were no History or Social Science classes that explained or contextualized what was happening right there, all around me. Río Piedras is an area known for its increasing Dominican population since the 1980s. In the midst of the still ongoing gentrification of Río Piedras, I could

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<sup>19</sup>By this time Trujillo had appointed his last puppet-president, Joaquin Balaguer. In 1962, a rough ideological battle erupted when moving from dictatorship-as-usual to Juan Bosch's democratically elected presidency since 1924. During his first year and a half as president, Bosch, who was also a historian, a writer and an educator, established a series of left-leaning policies and promoted a liberal constitution that granted rights to unions, pregnant women, homeless people, children, family and farmers—never acknowledged before. The Bosch presidency was short-lived as in 1965 he was overthrown by a right-wing faction of the military—which was, again, supported by the United States through an invasion to the Dominican Republic called Operation Powerpack. Although Bosch had never called himself a communist, he was indeed redistributing land and nationalizing certain foreign holdings. This, of course, alarmed the United States, who was skeptical of even a hint of left-leaning politics in the Caribbean after Fidel Castro openly declared himself a Communist. After all, it had only been six years since Fidel Castro's Revolution successfully masterminded a classic guerrilla campaign to overthrow Fulgencio Batista's dictatorship in Cuba, which was overwhelmingly funded and influenced by the United States during the 1940s and 1950s. When overthrown, Bosch fled towards Puerto Rico, only to return to the Dominican Republic to lose the 1966 election (and a few other ones thereafter) to Balaguer.

not understand why Dominicans were the target of so much prejudice, racial and ethnic discrimination. What are the mechanisms that allow us to forget that while Dominicans were, and still are, considered low-pay service workers, laborers or craftspeople, they are sending hundreds and thousands of dollars per month to their relatives in the Dominican Republic—thus making their stay in Puerto Rico an important source of foreign currency for the Dominican Republic?

### **Concluding remarks**

While many cannot really understand how the performative act of chewing excessive amounts of gum, or working with the sonic and visual metaphor of plantains, or of licking vinyl records are meaningful acts of disruption, I sustain, as Prinz (1991) establishes, that conceptual art is not a purposeless subversion of established conventions, but as a serious exploration of the nature and meaning of the conventions themselves. In every single one of Rita Indiana's cultural interventions, she redefines the parameters of appropriate Dominican womanhood.

As Homi Bhabha (1990) explains, to confront the discourses that privilege the comfort of social belonging, the customs of taste and the sensibility of sexual compliance, among others, is to challenge the elements that compose the nation. Rita's polysemic and polyphonic aesthetics break hegemonic patriarchal discourses that are compulsorily ascribed to women. Her self-representation embodies the postmodern ideal that art is not supposed to imitate life, but that life needs to be aestheticized in order to question sexist patterns that do not prioritize women's realities or question fatigued ideas of what normality and tradition implies (Weedon, 1999).

While hypervisuality and multimedia are characteristic of many of the mediated texts Rita uses, she is actively choosing how to represent herself through her artwork. Functioning at the periphery of first world media conglomerates, it could be said that Rita and others like her are

not only the directors, producers, promoters and marketers, but also the agents of their own voice; that's the importance of being Rita Indiana-Hernández.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Lessons Learned and Next Steps in Documenting Queer Spanish Caribbean Femininities on the Global Stage**

#### **Overview: My Intervention Narrative**

In this dissertation I theorized within and across Caribbean locations. I have done this exercise with insistent focus on gender and sexuality. My research sought not only to critique, but also to generate new audiovisual ways of looking at the work of a specific set of Cuban, Dominican and Puerto Rican queer women artists. My project approached the current production and consumption of feminist art as a cultural intervention to be contextualized within a larger framework of transnational feminist and queer perspectives. Otherwise, the work of these women might have gone under-documented, under-critiqued and under-engaged beyond their immediate context. My ethnographic fieldwork tracked the popularity and reception these artists have had across national borders since the late 1990s. This is a first step in thinking about the interventions that my research accomplishes in engaging literature from globalization studies, critical race, and feminist theory by centering how traditional femininities can be reframed through music, performance and media.

As a young woman growing up on the island of Puerto Rico during the 1980s and 1990s, I did not have many role models of what queer, empowered or alternative femininities look or feel like in the media or the streets. Because of the scarcity of empowering representations, not only in Puerto Rico but also across other islands, a comparative approach to the Spanish-speaking Caribbean is particularly important. This wide framework provided me a platform to contextualize ongoing feminist interventions in countries with similar histories of colonization,

as well as multiple linguistic and cultural references. All three nations, also share a dissimilar interaction with global economies, exploitation and complex histories of migration to different parts of the United States and the world. This project is timely because it fills gaps in Spanish-speaking Caribbean popular cultures, which often fail to prioritize marginalized racial, class, gender and sexuality experiences within and across borders.

The women that I documented not only disrupt preconceived notions of appropriate femininities, but also offer oppositional role models to conceptualize Caribbean womanhood. In other words, engaging in conversation and collaboration with other women who also disrupt borders, as a means to become visible, was the driving force of this research. Through documenting women's artwork, I also created my own ways to combine written and audiovisual texts to address the biographical and analytical aspects of my intervention.

The intersection of staged performance and “new media” is a key aspect of the ways these women make themselves visible in popular cultures. Through blogs and websites, photos and downloadable music, online videos and electronic fliers, these women maintain a steady presence in the public sphere, which is facilitated through everyday social networking mechanisms such as Facebook, MySpace and YouTube. These new media technologies have played an important role in how these artists transcend the ephemeral nature of their stage performances by making their music, pictures and videos available to audiences at a local and global level. The combination of the Internet visibility along with their (often contested) geographical mobility has influenced the process through which these women have travelled far beyond their Caribbean insular contexts of origin.

Consistently, through all the cultural spaces their artwork circulates, these women can be traced back to the specific musical interventions or innovations they have proposed vis-à-vis

their national context. For example, Las Krudas has branded themselves as the only lesbian and feminist Cuban hip-hop group of the Caribbean and Latin America. Rita Indiana, on the other hand, has a diverse skill set as a literary writer and contemporary art and gallery performer. With such a diverse experimentation with the arts, Rita has been hesitant to brand herself too rigidly. While she would usually respond in interviews that she would prefer not to assign a label to her music (which fuses Afro-Caribbean, electronic and lounge with witty lyrics), she says that if she had to call it something, she would simply call it, contemporary Dominican music. While I set out to evenly document the work of young Cuban, Dominican and Puerto Rican artists, I focused more in depth on the work of two queer Cuban and Dominican women, Las Krudas and Rita Indiana. There is much to compare and discuss between the Cuban women who define themselves as staunchly political hip hop versus the Dominican woman who prefers to be stay undefined as she fuses traditional Dominican music with loungy, experimental, electronic and Afrobeat.

### **Las Krudas, Rita Indiana and Collaboration**

The balance of biographical and analytical content of my scholarship about Las Krudas and Rita Indiana is indicative of the length and depth of my collaborations. I met Las Krudas in 2004 and Rita in 2005. I focused on these queer women doing hip hop and other contemporary media/musical projects because I see that as a mirror in which to envision what contemporary Caribbean queer feminisms look like today. These artists offer incisive interpretations of the everyday experience of their respective national contexts, and of the connections of metropolitan Havana and Santo Domingo in particular.

Through my research journey I have developed lasting personal, professional and

collaborative relationships with these two artists. When I say collaborative relationships, I mean that we have not only been in direct communication about the specific questions that I had in relationship to this project, but that we have also engaged in event coordination, film production, video screening as well as other activist and academic projects both on the Islands as well as in the United States' diaspora. Oftentimes when I am presenting my written or audiovisual scholarship about their work, these artists are also performing or attending the same conferences, social justice events, book releases or screenings. Because I have invested so much time in immersing myself in the scenes that I have documented, I have done my best to honor the specificities of each of these Cuban and Dominican artists. Attempting to combine diversity of musical styles, gender presentations and political views into my analysis has afforded me new ways of looking at the contemporary sounds, images and practices produced within Cuban, Dominican and Puerto Rican spaces. I have intentionally contextualized the artists' relationship to the cultural space they navigate as they use media and live performance to account for their everyday lives, on and off the stage. My research methodology was configured to create meaningful projects as a means to develop intentional connections. In this way, I have ended up with two potential feature films about Cuba, and two short analytical video pieces about DR LGBTQ work focusing on spectacular and regular bodies.

My connection with Las Krudas, for example, has resulted in a friendship as well as long-term working partnerships. Since their migration to the United States, I have organized the multiple appearances that they have had in both of the universities that I have been affiliated with: the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and New York University. Because of this, they have often stayed in my homes in Illinois, New Jersey, and New York for weeks at a time. I coordinated a five-concert tour for them in Puerto Rico and have been involved in conversations

with other activists that want to mobilize funding and resources to see them perform at their countries and cultural spaces.

Las Krudas and I are now also connected through two film projects. The first of those projects is “Reina de Mi Misma/Queen of Myself: Las Krudas d' Cuba,” a 20-minute documentary that records their experience with hip hop, theater and migration. The other film project is still a work in progress. It is “T con T: lesbian life in contemporary Havana,” a collaboration between Las Krudas, other Cuban, black American subjects and myself that captures a moment in late 2005-early 2006 when a group of queer-identified women coincided in Havana to watch the first two seasons of the show *The L Word*. Seeing that representation of lesbian life in Los Angeles, California prompted us to question, what would a representation of lesbian life look like in contemporary Havana. “T con T” is different from other queer films done in Cuba as it is the only film that sets out to document lesbian experiences independently of the experiences of queer men.

With the Dominican artist Rita Indiana I have developed a friendly connection as well. My two short videos about Rita demonstrate our rapport as artist and documentarian. In both, “Rita Indiana on Artistic Freedom and Sustenance” and “Tuni and the Third World Caribbean,” I share my close readings about her artwork by layering them with excerpts of interviews and segments of her songs in which she addresses the very topics she sings about—the ways in which youth navigates and negotiates everyday life in Urban Santo Domingo.

Something that stood out in one of my interviews with Rita was her discussion of “Tuni,” the main character of the song “En los Noventa” (or “In the Nineties”) from Miti Miti's album, *Altar Espandex*. Combining an excerpt from her song as audio with visuals of an interview and my own footage of transportation and night life in the Caribbean, I sought to capture the

wandering urban spirit of the song. In this way I was able to reflect the same Santo Domingo that I was experiencing—that of a fast-paced, movement-driven, urban Spanish-speaking Caribbean in my analysis of Rita. I saw this as an opportunity to creatively combine her musical recordings, flesh out the text visually on the screen, and to employ images that were taken outside of the context of the interview. I see both kinds of representation of knowledge (written/visual as well as biographical/analytical) as a part of my scholarly imagination. They all speak with the same and a different voice to issues that I deeply care about and to the tension between different ways of knowing.

### **Filmmaking and Scholarship in Communications**

In this dissertation I make the case for Communications (a Social Science and Humanities based-discipline) to open up to creative documentary work as an interactive way to engage people within and outside of academia in meaningful conversation. My videos, independent of my written work, contain a substantial amount of critical work. My work moves Communications and Media Studies forward by proposing that the combination of ethnographic methods and creative work addresses how different textual modes cater to the process of reaching different ways of knowing in the world (Bhattacharya, 2008; Durham, 2007). My main motivation was to generate more audiovisual representations than written critiques, which already would contain a feminist interpretation.

I have completed this project with the goal of fulfilling certain benchmarks of scholarly production towards a Ph.D. in Communications from a public university in the United States. These representations reflect the motivations, contexts and locations at the time of their production. The fact that within my department, the Institute of Communications Research, no

one had presented a dissertation with videos as a central component (as in chapters or Appendixes), connects with the fact that I have struggled with the idea of identifying myself as a filmmaker in a department that has no tradition of training people as such.

After completion of all the chapters and appendixes of this project, I realized that I was making contradictory distinction in between my “scholarly work” and the work of “traditional filmmakers.” I have had to work to undo my own perceptions of how filmmakers must be trained. I envisioned that training happening in film school, where students were taught to work with sound, makeup, photography, budget and production teams. In addition, I imagined a place where students were also provided with the basics of how to circulate films through film festival circuits and distributing houses.

My background, however, entails coming to the United States from the University of Puerto Rico, where I was trained as a communications generalist. In the midst of learning about marketing, graphic design, public relations and written journalism, I developed a particular interest in photo journalism and media theory. This means that I had theoretical and practical media productions skills, when I came into graduate school at Illinois. Amongst all my coursework, I decided to take classes on basic and advanced video editing. The combination of these audiovisual skills with the Women’s and Cultural Studies courses I was taking prompted me to think about the intersections of agency, feminism and media in my own life. All this background has contributed to my interest in documenting women's art.

Because I was trained as a photographer and public relations professional as an undergraduate, and then as a videographer during my graduate career, it felt organic to create videos that not only reflect the critical interventions these women were doing, but that also demonstrated my own artistic sensibilities toward the study of Caribbean women's

representation. I presented the knowledge I have gained from these women's work in way that seemed possible and appropriate. For this reason, I depart from the premise that all my scholarship, either written or audiovisual, is a work of fiction.

The ideas of “design your own rules” and “do it yourself” are two of the inspiring characteristics that have attracted me to document the work of Las Krudas and Rita Indiana. Right along with the artists, I am also producing "independent" videos that are in theoretical and practical conversation with the idea of "new" media about queer feminist work. My videos, and the way that I approach them, intersect and interrupt current theory on the relationship between new and independent media.

### **Do It Yourself: DIY Methodological Approach to Scholarly Filmmaking**

At the moment of conceptualizing the work, the main motivation for doing video work was to create representations that already contain a critical message. As such, video scholars must not be asked to do double work by conducting textual analysis of their own creative work. This can potentially duplicate the message for readers/viewers and is extremely exhausting to accomplish as the person doing the video and then writing about the video.

The audiovisual work that I have done about Las Krudas for this project speaks directly to my scholarship about them. Both, my documentary-style video (“Reina de mi Misma/Queen of Myself: Las Krudas d' Cuba”) and their Chapter in this dissertation are divided into three different sections. First, the origin and impact of Las Krudas in the Cuban hip hop scene. Secondly, their economic subsistence through community-theater in Havana. Third, how they have merged hip hop and theatricality after their migration to the United States to translate the messages embedded in their Spanish hip hop lyrics. Thus far, they have sung these songs in

concerts they give to English and Spanish-speaking audiences across the United States, Mexico, Puerto Rico and Guatemala and Russia.

Comparatively, my video work about Rita tends to be more analytical in nature—both the written and the video. In my written work of her I conducted close readings of her performance-art and sound interventions before she became the lead singer of the musical band Rita Indiana y Los Misterios. In terms of videos, I focus on my interviews with her. In much of these interviews, she conducts close readings of her own work. In one, she addresses her artistic trajectory and the idea of using a diverse set of media, from novels to music, to generate art outside of predetermined artistic definitions and confinement. In this interview, she also addresses the ways in which she has been able to make a living as an artist. This is different from my work with Las Krudas in which I was able to capture so much footage of them actually making a living through hip hop and theater rather than they just telling me about their jobs. This reflects the fact that my time with Rita was always for a shorter periods of time.

One of the challenges of doing video research towards the completion of a dissertation--which by default is meant to prove that we can complete an independent project--is multitasking the ethnographic process and the filming process. Doing videos as one project with low to no budget is also challenging. From the selection of the location for the interview, to keeping the interviewee engaged in meaningful conversation, to obtaining the information you want becomes 10 times harder when you are shooting video at the same time. This is especially challenging when you are recording with just one camera. In this way, you have to keep one foot in the interview and the other in how you are going to edit this material in such a way that it would look like one had multiple angles at the moment of editing. Through this process I learned that zooming in and out of the interviewee is another mode that you can get a variety of angles.

When doing video scholarship, editing the footage is the most crucial part of the research process. Through this process, with every decision, we must balance ideas of how presentable/artsy/creative the editing can be as while maintaining informative content that is consistent to the narrative and format. An example of this kind of editorial decision comes with the politics of subtitling in terms of font size, location and color. In my case, I wanted the subtitled text to hold a balance between translating from Spanish to English and being playful with the images and color. I assigned different speakers different colors for subtitles and positioned the text wherever it made sense for me in the screen regardless of formalities.

Another important component is that doing video research is especially challenging when documenting the work of live subjects: who you are friendly with, who are also up and coming contemporary artists. I was very invested in both Las Krudas and Rita Indiana liking the representations that I did of them. I now know they do. One of the things that I Las Krudas appreciates from my work is its pedagogical potential. One of my advantages is that I have multiple ways to interact with a wide range of symposia and social dialogue (academic and otherwise) about women and queerness, Cuban- and migrant-identities, hip hop and social justice.

For example, when I am asked to present in a class about my work on Las Krudas, I usually recommend the professor to assign my published article about them for students to read in preparation for the guest lecture. The fact that my video about them is only 20 minutes makes it the perfect length to play at the beginning of the class and to have a discussion about the article and the video after the screening. Students value the fact that both the article and the video share a conceptual structure that allows the conversation to be about hip hop and theater in Havana, before migration, and the transformation of those two elements into a more global perspective

after their migration to the United States.

One of the challenges of doing video research in the academy is that we must make sense, without any training, of how our videos interact in relationship to the other written and visual work out there, including our own. Who are some of the role models who are doing similar work and doing well in academia? How do we measure success? Since there are so few parameters to measure and praise the work of video researchers, we ought to be creative when it comes to gauging that we are moving ahead. I personally embarked in a continuing education process in which I sought out classes that would allow me to better handle the technical aspects of my film editing, packaging and distribution. Perhaps if I have one of my videos picked up by a distributor or if I continue to gain more experience through other projects, I would feel that I also have a better handle on how to create video scholarship.

Within academia, I see myself being successful in any of the following ways. I could self-define as a filmmaker and get a job that takes both creative work and scholarly production into account when reviewing for tenure. These kinds of jobs are more often in art departments, but not always. The key would be to have it spelled out very clearly in writing that creative work will be part of the tenure process. This would definitely mean teaching film/video/media making. Another option would be for me to get a job where I am expected to teach film/video production, but only as a part of my teaching assignment. Many jobs right now ask candidates to do everything—from being a scholar who can teach the history of communication to being the person that can also teach the students how to make films. I am qualified to do this when many people are not. So, taking this route might broaden the job opportunities available for me. The issue is, though, whether the creative work would count toward tenure. Often, folks in these kinds of jobs are "the only ones" in the department, and so they have to negotiate expectations

very clearly.

Because these tend to be regular Communications departments, often they are not used to counting creative work toward tenure. In any case, what I am struggling against is being defined as a "regular" scholar, who also does creative work. In this case, my creative work would not really count towards tenure. It might count in the sense that it might make me seem extra fabulous, but it would not take the place of scholarly requirement.

I see myself a feminist videographer and a published feminist scholar whose work has been shown at conferences and festivals internationally. Through the completion of this dissertation, I developed a unique range of both theoretical and production skills. Having accomplished video research in an academic environment where the written word is still relevant and thriving, I have more work and reflection to do about the intersection of scholarly methods and feminist agency and survival through my education.

### **Future of this Project**

Beyond documenting the artists and my collaborations with them, I have created a vast grid of connections with folks who do work within and about Spanish-speaking Caribbean cultures all across the Americas. I look forward to putting the work that I have done thus far with Cuban and Dominican women in conversation with the work of Puerto Rican women. Besides the work that I have already accomplished with the Puerto Rican group Las Hermanas Colón since 2007 (when I had already defended my dissertation proposal) and the duo's development into the all women band Macha Colón y los Okapi in 2008, I am currently looking at the work of Puerto Rican Awilda Rodriguez Lora as the future of my research in terms of queer performance in Puerto Rico. Further, while documenting these artists' work I have been simultaneously

following projects that revolve around the development of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) organizing and cultural initiatives in Cuba and the Dominican Republic. I look forward to thinking more intentionally about spectacular and not spectacular LGBTQ bodies.

One of the two tangible artistic, activist and pedagogical projects that I have created from these experiences are the film “T con T: lesbian life in Contemporary Havana,” which I mentioned before as an example of my video collaboration about my experiences in Cuba. More recently, I have developed a class titled “LGBTQ Advocacy and Movements in the Dominican Republic” that takes 14 students from New York University to Santo Domingo to engage in service and experiential learning with the LGBTQ community there. In other words, through my research, I have managed to insert myself in ongoing conversations that testify to the existence and relevance of feminist interventions in artistic, activist and academic spaces.

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## APPENDIX A

### **Reina De Mi Misma/Queen of Myself: Las Krudas D' Cuba, a Feature Film**

This video explores the feminist work of Krudas Cubensi, an all-women creative trio from Cuba. It narrates the impact the trio has had in the Afro-centric and underground hip hop spheres in La Habana and the United States. This video may be found in a supplemental file named **Reina De Mi Misma/Queen Of Myself: Las Krudas d' Cuba.mov**.

## APPENDIX B

### **Rita Indiana on Artistic Freedom and Sustenance**

This video addresses the artistic trajectory of the Dominican artist Rita Indiana and the diverse set of media she has used to generate art outside of predetermined artistic definitions and confinement. This video may be found in a supplemental file named **Rita Indiana On Artistic Freedom And Sustenance.mov**.

## APPENDIX C

### **Tuni and the Third World Caribbean**

In this video Dominican artist Rita Indiana conducts a close analysis of "Tuni," the main character of the song "En los Noventa/In the Nineties" from Miti Miti's album, *Altar Espandex*. This short video exemplifies the populist and minimalist languages that Rita is able to render to portray the intimate relationship that newer generations have to the "urban" in the 21st century Spanish-speaking Caribbean. This video may be found in a supplemental file named **Tuni and the Third World Caribbean.mov**.

## APPENDIX D

### **Las Krudas, Rita Indiana and Las Hermanas Colón Reunion in Puerto Rico**

This video records a reunion and impromptu jam session in Puerto Rico of members from Las Krudas, Las Hermanas Colón and Rita Indiana in January 2008. This video may be found in a supplemental file named **Las Krudas, Rita Indiana And Las Hermanas Colón Reunion in Puerto Rico.mov**.