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La Lucha Mujerista: Krudas CUBENSI¹ and Black Feminist Sexual Politics in Cuba

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Abstract

This essay analyzes the discursive intervention of the Cuban Underground hip-hop group, Las Krudas CUBENSI, whose members are Black feminist activists. From 1998 to 2006, their work in Cuba centered on challenging the oppressive discourses concerning Black women and Black lesbians within Cuban society. Las Krudas link Black women's, particularly Black lesbians', oppression to the ideological legacies of colonialism. I argue that Las Krudas' feminist discourse is a Black feminist critique because of their choice of art, particularly hip-hop, as a political aesthetic. Las Krudas' feminist discourse has become a key discourse within the hip-hop community. The data for this essay are drawn from ethnography, textual analysis, and interviews collected from 1998 to 2006.

¹ For additional information about Las Krudas visit their website at: www.myspace.com/3krudas

Introduction

One of the most influential groups of the Cuban Underground Hip-Hop Movement (CUHHM) is the Black feminist lesbian trio called Las Krudas CUBENSI (Rivera-Velázquez 2008, Armstead 2007, Fernandes 2006, Joffe 2005, West-Durán 2004, Perry 2004). Las Krudas use art to challenge the oppressive hegemonic discourses within Cuban society that concern race, gender, and sexuality. They have been working to do so for over a decade. Las Krudas describe their goal as contributing to “the third revolution within the Revolution,”² that of Black women and lesbian equality. Their work is a timely intervention into public discourse surrounding gender and sexuality, as several recent independent surveys (released in 2002, 2003) have concluded that lesbians remain one of the most socially marginalized and invisible groups in Cuba (Acosta et al 2003, Más 2003, OREMI 2005, Saunders 2009). The studies note that cultural norms persist in which women are evaluated by their physical appearance, specifically by how “feminine” they are. Black women face a particularly harsh social environment because they are deemed unfeminine or even mannish because Blackness is perceived as a marker of aggressiveness and hyper masculinity (Candelario 2007 Saunders 2009)

In their music and hip-hop performances, Las Krudas attempt to interrupt hegemonic systems of representation, as a means to expand Revolutionary discourse to include the citizenship demands of socially marginal groups such as Black women and Black lesbians. By combining Revolutionary discourses of inclusive citizenship with an Afro-Cuban, hip-hop and Black feminist consciousness that centers on embracing difference as a means to promote social equality, Las Krudas’ strategy as cultural workers has been to challenge dominant discourses concerning “women” and heteronormativity³ within Cuba’s expansive cultural sphere⁴.

Krudas’ politics of a linguistic and ideological intervention into hegemonic discourses surrounding race, gender, and sexuality, problematizes oppression through the critique of individual experiences that they link to systemic forms of social oppression. Their work centers on changing the minds of fellow citizens as a means of spurring grassroots social change. It is through their usage of tools such as poetry (hip-hop lyrics) and street theater performance that Las Krudas has been able to work within Cuba’s cultural sphere, a key component of Cuba’s public sphere. In this sphere, they have been able to challenge the hegemony of the sexist, racist, and homophobic discourses that continue to circulate within Cuban society. They do so by educating their peers and communities about social inequality, particularly racial, gender, and sexual inequalities.

² In reference to Fidel Castro’s 1966 speech where he stated that the women’s movement represented a revolution within the Revolution (Bunck 1994, 87)

³ Heteronormativity consists of the social practices and social institutions that legitimize and privilege heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships as ‘natural’ and fundamental to a healthy society. See Cathy J. Cohen. “Punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queen: The radical potential of queer politics?” in *Black Queer Studies*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, 25(Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁴A note about language: the Cuban government is referred to as the “Revolution” on the Island. In this piece, I use the term ‘mulato’ to refer to Cuba’s biracial category. In Cuba, ‘mulato’ is considered a separate racial category. I use the Spanish spelling ‘mulato,’ so that this racial category is not confused with the English word ‘mulatto.’

In this essay, I will first locate Las Krudas within a Black feminist epistemology and within Cuba's radical artistic tradition. I will then focus on their work within the CUHHM, a key genre in Cuba's alternative music scene. In the CUHHM, Las Krudas coined the term "mujerista" to denote their particular feminist identity, which is constructed at the intersection of their identities as Black lesbians, Black feminists, and socially conscious Revolutionary artists. The "mujerista" identity, I will explain, is an indigenous term that Las Krudas themselves coined in order to name their discourse of Black women's liberation. In an American context, this term would be akin to Black feminism. Black feminism, Las Krudas' mujerista discourse, and Las Krudas' decision to use underground hip-hop as a chosen aesthetic, reflects a Black feminist epistemology that centers on an experience of oppression linked to the cultural legacies of colonialism. These legacies are racialized forms of sexism, classism, and homophobia that intersect to make life particularly difficult for all Black women, regardless of their actual sexual orientation. Within Cuba, the CUHHM is considered a movement for Black empowerment through community activism and anti-racist social critique. Thus, the CUHHM is very popular among socially conscious activists and a larger Afro-descendant public who value the anti-racist critique of the CUHHM.

The majority of women performers in the CUHHM seek to support the CUHHM through showing solidarity with the male leaders of the CUHHM. These women refuse to take any actions in their performances that seem unfeminine and anti-male. However, Las Krudas' music ended the silence on the particular oppressions faced by women such as sexism and homophobia. They explicitly challenged the deference of women to a male gaze at the expense of women's solidarity. Las Krudas felt that these dynamics were reflected in the dearth of all women hip-hop groups within the CUHHM. They argued that the disappearance of women from the CUHHM was not simply due to male domination of the CUHHM as it grew in popularity, but because women's boyfriends and spouses dictated whether women should continue in the CUHHM or to focus on their role as a mother, or a partner. In the cases of women that continued performing, their male partners controlled their creative energy. The result is that many of the women now performing within the CUHHM are primarily singing backup to male artists.

Las Krudas' concerns are well founded. There are very few women MCs in the CUHHM, and there are a few women MCs who write and produce their own music or who MC alone. In my own interviews with female artists, there were a few cases where the MC's husband refused to release her music or to let her work with producers that could enhance his wife's career. In this piece, I draw from ethnographic data collected in Havana's underground hip-hop and lesbian scenes from 1998 to 2006, and several interviews with each member of Las Krudas and a total of 20 hip-hop artists, in Havana, Cuba, during the period 2004–2006. The interviews lasted two to three hours.

Embracing difference: The alternative music scene and Cuba's underground hip-hop movement

Havana's underground hip-hop scene is an integral part of Cuba's contemporary alternative music scene (AMS). Cuban music critic Joaquín Borges Triana writes in his online journal, *Those of Us Who Dream Through The Ear*, that the term "alternative music scene" is an operative category. This scene is not simply composed of a limited number of genres, though hip-hop, rock, jazz, and Nueva Trova could be considered key genres. The AMS does not reject the egalitarian ideals of the Revolution; indeed, it works for the furthering of Revolutionary ideals through its advocacy of multiple discourses in service of social equality. The AMS addresses one central critique of the Revolutionary cultural aesthetic: that the Revolution's hegemonic discourse of unity and sameness, which the state argued was necessary to ensure social equality and defend against U.S. aggression, implicitly supports older pillars of artistic expression through limiting the criticism of Revolutionary discourse and social policy. The effect is that the classism, racism, homophobia, and other forms of social inequality associated with the pre-Revolutionary institutions, which were developed under Spanish colonialism and U.S. neo-colonialism, continue unaddressed in many areas of social life (Borges-Triana 2004).

The CUHHM is the story of how disenfranchised and marginalized youth, living in a marginalized nation, found their critical public voice. The CUHHM emerged during the 1990s when the Cuban state faced a legitimacy crisis, as generational pressures for social change increased, and the loss of Soviet-based economic stability resulted in the post-Soviet economic downturn called "the Special Period" (Perry 2004, Fernandes 2006).

The economic downturn affected Black Cubans the most (De La Fuente 2001, Perry 2004, Fernandes 2006). During the 1990s, Black Cubans began to face more public discrimination. Black Cubans were the first cut from jobs and the least likely to be hired within the lucrative, foreign currency-driven tourist industry. When employed, Black Cubans were usually employed by the State, which meant that Black Cubans were paid using the weak Cuban peso. Black Cubans were also the least likely to receive remittances from family members abroad, as the first few generations of Cuban immigrants had few Blacks. Black Cubans live in a highly racialized society where the majority of the population holds negative views about Afro-Cuban culture, social conduct, and/or physical appearance (de la Fuente 2001, 322–323)

Meanwhile, during the early 1990s, Cuba began receiving radio signals and TV images from Miami. Cuban youth of African descent were fascinated by hip-hop and requested recordings of hip-hop music videos and tapes from tourists, even though they were initially skeptical of the ideological content of the music. However, through African American intellectual and cultural exchanges in the late 1990s, Black Cuban youth became drawn to U.S. American socially conscious hip-hop as a critical art form they could cultivate within a Cuban context (Echeverria 1990). These youth also rejected commercialized forms of hip-hop as an example of capitalism's perversion of socially productive creative energies for the sake of profit.

The aesthetic form and content of socially conscious hip-hop were compatible with the socially conscious traditions of Cuba's radical artistic movements, and the ideological interests of Cuba's state (Pacini- Hernandez 2004, Baker 2005). This allowed Cuban Underground hip-hop, with state support, to quickly emerge as a utopian social movement that challenges social and economic oppression through grassroots-level consciousness raising, community activism, and an anti-capitalist critique.

Cuba's 1990s hip-hop generation has much in common with its U.S. American counterpart who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s. Bakari Kitwana (2003) describes this generation as those who came of age at the end of the civil rights/Black power generation. The hip-hop movement had its origins in New York City, in the 1970s, in the midst of an economic collapse that demonstrated the inability of capitalism, and the 1960s movements, to provide the socio-economic benefits associated with the American dream. Cuba's Black and Mulato youth connected with the socially conscious critiques of poor, urban Black American youth, who also faced racism and economic disenfranchisement. By the mid-1990s, Cuban artists began a socially conscious movement called "Underground Hip-Hop."

"Underground" refers to the socially critical and uplifting messages produced by youth as a means to empower fellow Cubans to understand their social experiences, and to work for social change⁵. The artists refuse incorporation if incorporation depends on changing the socially conscious message in the music. The CUHHM is referred to as being "underground" because these socially conscious critiques are not easily marketed for profit like mainstream forms of hip-hop such as "Gansta Rap" or "Reggaeton." The anti-capitalist orientation of the music does not lend itself to cooptation by profit-driven music corporations that market whatever sells, even if it is socially toxic. In this sense, most socially conscious or "underground" hip-hop exists outside of hegemonic centers of media production and dissemination.

Like other influential underground hip-hop artists, Las Krudas sought to connect with audiences at the level of feeling. Las Krudas link lived experiences to theory in their social critiques, and they reject the generalized, abstract universalism embedded in most theoretical frameworks concerning social life, including canonized academic feminism. Las Krudas connect the difficulties that they and other Cuban youths face in their everyday lives to the larger struggles of inequality. For Krudas, these struggles are connected not only to the U.S. blockade and Cuban government policy, but also to larger issues of globalization, such as the global exploitation that manifests itself in sweatshops in some places and, in Cuba's case, in tourism. However, the most difficult struggle they face is the inequality that persists in Cuban society due to racism, material inequality, sexism, and homophobia.

⁵ This definition of underground is based on my interviews with CUHHM artists. This definition is also reflected in Baker's (2005) and Perry's (2004) work with CUHHM artists. Similar definitions of "underground" are also found in the United States' socially conscious hip-hop (see Rose 1994).

Race, gender and sexuality in contemporary Cuba

From the late 1960s through the late 1970s, homosexuality was deemed a decadent, bourgeois social ill by the Revolutionary Cuban state (Arguelles and Rich 1984, Lumsden 1996). Between 1965 and 1980, the Revolutionary government considered homosexuality to be a form of immorality that could corrupt Revolutionary youth and it enforced preexisting social decency laws, which criminalized homosexual acts (Arguelles and Rich 1984, Lumsden 1996). In 1971, the state mandated that known homosexuals not be allowed in educational, cultural and other institutions that were in direct contact with Revolutionary youth. In the case of women's rights organizations, by 1970, known lesbians were not allowed to join the country's only women's rights association: the state-run Federation of Cuban Women. This exclusion lasted until the late 1980s (Smith and Padula 1996).

Existing research on sexuality in Cuba largely focuses on heterosexual women and gay male sexuality; analyses of homosexuality have tended to focus on a universalized "gay experience" in Cuba (Almendros and Jiménez-Leal 1984, Arguelles and Rich 1984). Additionally, print accounts of homosexuality in Cuba in the 1980s and 1990s have been written by men who acknowledge that their work does not focus on the experiences of lesbians, as lesbian spaces are hard to access (Lumsden 1996, La Fountain-Stokes 2002).

There has been some representation of lesbian's experiences in independent film (*Not Because Fidel Says So* [1988], *Looking for Space* [1994], *Gay Cuba* [2000]). These films capture the changes in state policy concerning homosexuality between 1980 and 1996, when the state began to focus on targeting homophobia within Cuban society in order to address the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s and early 1990s. The state sought to address the crisis through reducing the social stigma concerning homosexuality, and undertaking a massive sexual education program that targeted men who had sex with men (Acosta et al 2003, OREMI 2005). The result of state policies has been more public space that is inclusive for gay male Cubans.

T Con T: Lesbian Lives in Contemporary Cuba (a forthcoming film in which members of Las Krudas are interviewed) is the first film to focus exclusively on lesbians in Cuba. *T Con T* offers more insight into the issues facing lesbians, as it focuses on the underground lesbian scene in Cuba and efforts at creating a lesbian community while navigating their decreased economic independence as women (which is a result of Cuba's 1990s economic crisis). The women in the film note the increase in gay male public space over the last 20 years, while lesbian space remains invisible. Gay male domination of non-heteronormative space is linked to the ways in which heteronormativity intersects with machismo⁶ to create a particularly vitriolic and isolating experience for Cuban lesbians (Arguelles and Rich 1984).

There seem to be several factors that make it difficult for women, particularly Black lesbians and self-identified feminists, to challenge the social ills that they face. One is

⁶Fleites-Lear (2003) defines machismo as "the idea that men are superior to women and should dominate them socially, economically, physically, and sexually."

that throughout the Caribbean, and much of the world, feminism is associated with imperialism. This belief has some basis in some of the historical actions of European and North American feminists. For example, during the hemispheric struggle for universal suffrage during the 1920s and 1930s, feminists from the United States argued that Latin American women were not ready for universal suffrage; that they did not understand the responsibilities of participating in an electoral public (Stoner 1991, 113). Feminists from the United States fought against suffrage being expanded to the racialized, and by extension inferior, populations of women of Latin America and the Caribbean (Stoner 1991). As a result, this history has prevented feminism from being accepted as a legitimate discourse for social equality in post-colonial and neo-colonial societies.

Another factor is that post-colonial and neo-colonial Caribbean states tend to conflate morality, sexuality and gender. M. Jacqui Alexander (1991) argues that the managing of sexuality through legislating morality has affected the ability of subsequent organizing against heteronormativity. In the case of Trinidad and Tobago, Alexander links this move to legislate morality to colonial rule and to the post-colonial state's attempt at legitimizing itself: the postcolonial state uses Victorian notions of civilization as a tool to discipline and regulate the social. By conflating gender and sexuality with a notion of morality, feminists and other women-centered activists cannot only focus on "gender" or "women" as a means of challenging social inequality; they must also focus on morality. Like Trinidad and Tobago, Cuba also implemented morality laws that sought to implement social order through the conflation of gender, sexuality, and morality.

When the Cuban Revolution occurred in 1959, the Revolutionary government ushered in the "New Man," or the "Revolutionary," as the ideal citizen. At the core of the notion of the "Revolutionary," was a notion of morality: the Revolutionary was a white, heterosexual male and moral subject who cared for and defended his nation (Bejel 2001). These factors, combined with Cuba's highly racialized society, has created a situation where women can only critique their social experiences as feminine, heterosexual subjects. While the majority of the women within the CUHHM critique the treatment of women within their music, only Las Krudas have connected the ways in which heteronormativity—as a racialized system through which culturally based notions of gender conformity and heterosexuality are policed—is constitutive of and reinforces Black women's oppression.

Towards a black feminist critique

Black feminist identity is composed of multiple subjectivities that borrow from multiple theoretical frameworks, especially personal experiences, in order to articulate itself (Smith 2000). Personal experience is a crucial element of Black feminist thought because Black feminist subjectivity is located at the intersection of multiple subjectivities (Smith 2000, The Combahee River Collective 2000). Black feminist epistemologies are disseminated through poetry, music, video, performance, and essays instead of positivistic forms of academic media (Smith 2000, Hill Collins 2000).

"A Black Feminist Statement" by The Combahee River Collective (2000) is a key canonical essay that explicitly outlines a Black Feminist epistemology. The Combahee River Collective argue that Black feminist politics are a struggle against racism, sexism,

homophobia, and classism, as all these forms of discrimination simultaneously affect the lives of Black women. They link these forms of discrimination to capitalism and colonialism—specifically identifying slavery as one of the sources of Black women’s oppression. The Combahee River Collective argue that their Black feminist consciousness emerged because they realized that these intersecting dynamics were “driving them crazy.” A Black feminist consciousness also emerged when they learned how to love and value themselves and other Black women. They reject the mandate to separate their struggle from the struggles of the larger Black community since the struggles are interconnected.

The Combahee River Collective writes that neither a socialist Revolution, nor an anti-racist movement, nor a feminist revolution will guarantee Black women’s liberation. For them, Black women’s oppression is a result of culturally based ideologies. The Collective’s analysis considers culture, as this is something that is often understudied in discourses about oppression. Their goal as Black feminists, however, is to examine the “multilayered texture of Black women’s lives,” as a means of developing the theories and practices necessary for achieving Black women’s liberation (17).

Las Krudas CUBENSI emerged in the 1990s in a country that had an anti-racist, socialist revolution. Las Krudas argue that their feminist identity emerged as an “indigenous feminism,” one in which they started to realize how significant aspects of their experiences were not addressed by anti-racist and socialist discourses, which guaranteed their material equality regardless of race and gender. Through using Cuba’s institutionalized cultural sphere, Las Krudas sought to make a cultural intervention into the issues that they faced as Black Cuban women. Like The Combahee River Collective, they link their culturally based oppression to the legacies of colonialism, particularly slavery, and imperialism. Through an ideological intervention in Cuban cultural life, Las Krudas worked tirelessly to end the ideological basis of social oppression.

Las Krudas CUBENSI: Underground hip-hop and Cuban black feminism

Las Krudas are sisters Odaymara Cuesta (Pasita), Odalys Cuesta (Wanda), and Olivia Prendes (Pelusa), the long-term partner of Pasita. Pasita and Wanda are Black women from central Havana, while Pelusa is White, and from Guantanamo, Cuba. Though Pelusa is white, she is staunchly anti-racist. In hyperracialized, Spanish-speaking societies such as Cuba, Pelusa’s solidarity with Pasita and Wanda is a political statement: all Cubans must unite to fight oppression (Helg 1995, Ferrer 1999, De la Fuente 2001).

Before joining the hip-hop Movement, Pelusa and Pasita of Las Krudas entered onto the performance art scene in 1997 as the founders of the independent art troupe, Agrupación de Creación Alternativa CUBENSI, which is a precursor to their internationally acclaimed street theater group, Tropazancos. Wanda joined the performance art troupe in 1998. Pelusa writes the following about their group:

We were not happy with the landscape offered to females and our gender within the movement and stimulated by the possibilities of expression that the occasion presented, in 1998 we founded Krudas Cubensi, with the

intent of satisfying our own expectations of representation and to incorporate a feminist discourse to the unrestrained posture of the masculine majority, which meant a great challenge for us. (Prendes Riveron 2006)

In 1998, Pasita, Pelusa, and Wanda emerged as *Las Krudas CUBENSI* in Cuba's underground hip-hop scene. Known for their work as community-oriented street theater artists, they were asked by several influential artists and producers to perform at the 1998 IV Hip-Hop Festival in Alamar, a housing project outside of Havana. As Pelusa notes in the previous quote, Las Krudas felt that CUHHM was heavily dominated by a masculine discourse. The women MCs who participated in the movement largely rapped about themes such as their relationships with men or presented themselves as sexual objects. Las Krudas decided to focus on the needs of Black women as a way to address the limited discourse concerning women's liberation in the movement. Las Krudas did their first non-Tropazancos solo performance, as a trio, at the 2000 Havana hip-hop Festival.

Black feminist thought is at the core of Krudas' work as Black lesbians. Pasita and Wanda are highly skilled in their discussions with Krudas, I asked what feminism has meant for them. All three agreed with the following description by Pasita. When I asked Pasita how Krudas defined feminism, her first comment was, "We are not talking about the feminism of Gloria Steinem!!!" She went on to state as follows:

What is feminism for me? It is a woman defending the reasons to live and the necessity that we have to be happy and respected in ...[every one] of the decisions we make in life. Or better, I'm talking about a basic feminism. I am not talking about the academic feminism of Gloria Steinem or none of those other White women over there... Nor do you need to have a vocabulary of 2,603 words per minute, but feeling yourself to be a woman and feeling the things that happen to all us women and from that stand up and say, yes I am a feminist...always defending my thing because I think that we are at a super, super disadvantage. For me, that is feminism. (Pasita interview, Havana 2006)

In this quote, Pasita points to the importance of lived experience in forming feminist subjectivity. For Black Cuban women, one's identity and experience cannot be found in the canonized feminist texts of scholars such as Gloria Steinem. Because of the multiple forms of oppression Black Cuban women face, it is important first to have that moment of acknowledgement that, as Barbara Smith notes in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, there are multiple -isms that are kicking one's "behind." For Krudas, it is in the moment that one realizes there are multiple forms of oppression facing Black women *and* one realizes that one should be happy, respected, and respecting oneself as a woman, that a feminist consciousness emerges.

Las Krudas locate their work within the tradition of Black Cuban women, such as Gloria Rolando and Nancy Morejón, who have offered their social critiques through the arts. Also, when Las Krudas invoke the names of feminists, they are the names of women, oftentimes Black women, who have been influential figures in Cuban and world history.

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

The following song, *Eres Bella*, is an example of Krudas' poetry (hip-hop lyrics). In the song, they ask the women in the audience how long they (Krudas) will be the only women on stage. This often drives the point home that there is a glaring absence of women in public life.

Eres Bella

[Coro]
 Eres bella siendo tú,
 ébano en flor, negra luz
 Eres bella siendo tú,
 cuerpo no es única virtud
 Eres bella siendo tú,
 ébano en flor, negra luz
 Eres bella siendo tú,
 inteligencia es tu virtud

(Eres Bella –“You Are Beautiful”)

[Chorus]
 You are beautiful being you
 Ebony in bloom, black light
 You are beautiful being you
 The body is not your only virtue...
 You are beautiful being you
 Ebony in bloom, black light
 You are beautiful being you
 Intelligence is your virtue

Pasita begins the song with a temporal play, which is a key component of African-based music and culture (Rose 1994). Pasita states, “Never here [has anyone spoken to you like this], I left.” Such a temporal rupture may spur one to think about, or try to understand what is happening at that moment. It is after this point that Pasita tells the audience what is happening: they are going to talk about a “colonial story.”

In the song, Las Krudas attempt to illustrate how the realities of today are linked to a history of colonial oppression and anti-neocolonial struggle. Las Krudas use the image of an Ebony tree in bloom to describe Black women; Krudas want women to remember that Blackness is beautiful, and that Blackness is feminine. Blackness, which socially marks Black women as outside of femininity and beauty, affects the ability of Black, poor, and/or fat women to see themselves as beautiful (Fernandes 2006, Joffe 2005, De la Fuente 2001, Kutzinski 1993).

In their interviews, Las Krudas argue that in Caribbean societies, women still have a difficult struggle ahead of them: figuring out a way to challenge heteronormativity is difficult when feminism is still considered a foreign and imperialistic Western European and American discourse (Smith and Padula 1996). They hope that by pinpointing the problems within their culture, they can encourage people to work for a resolution. To this end, Pasita says the following about the goals of their feminist activism:

Our thing is working against the posture of the entire world, specifically that of Cuban culture, Latin culture, Caribbean culture. [These cultures] are very rich, very flavorful but [they are also] very *machista*, very *lebobhobica*. Very misogynistic are these cultures. So our project is to take all of this negative stuff, put it on the table, acknowledge that it exists and decide what we are going to do to resolve this problem. (Pasita interview, Havana 2006)

In their particular position as Black Caribbean women from a Latin culture, Krudas are working at the intersections of their own culture(s) for social change. Las Krudas' intervention in the CUHHM is also an intervention in the preexisting Black feminist discourses of the CUHHM, which did not challenge heteronormativity but encouraged it through its focus on heterosexuality, and the reification of Black femininity (Cuesta Rousseau interview 2005, Prendes Riveron 2005, Fernandes 2006, 2007).

Thus, Las Krudas do not only identify as feminists; they also theorize about pushing the boundaries of feminism, by exploring other identities, such as their "mujerista" identity, as key identities that form part of their larger "Kruda identity." The term "mujerista," Pelusa commented in a 2005 interview, seeks to acknowledge that feminism at times operates as a counterbalance to patriarchy, and that each maintains and reinforces the other.⁷ But a mujerista identity is completely outside of the feminism/patriarchy dichotomy, and focuses particularly on all things part of women's experiences, including sexuality and the right to represent one's interests, whatever they are, without limiting the analysis of women to their experiences of oppression under patriarchy. For Krudas, being a "Super-feminist" is not enough. Pelusa argues in a 2006 interview that women have to be stronger, more assertive, and learn everything they can from men, since men dominate established knowledge, including music production within hip-hop. Las Krudas' identity is not only one of Black female subjectivity. They also have a lesbian subjectivity. Pelusa says the following about their agenda:

Then when we feel that there are other women who have a feminist discourse, we felt that we could take it up another step. And the other step is the step of coming out of the closet completely, and come out as lesbian rappers and continue going up the ladder until we arrive at an emancipation absolutely Kruda... (Pelusa interview, Havana 2005)

Las Krudas' strategy was first to help women develop and deploy a feminist discourse in their music. They tried to build solidarity with women artists. When they felt there was a solid feminist discourse within the CUHHM, they felt that they could then completely come out of the closet on stage and focus primarily on their experiences as Black lesbians. As Las Krudas gained acceptance and respect as women artists who revealed

⁷ The literal translation of mujerista is "womanist." The English term womanist is a product of specific political debates that occurred in the United States. Las Krudas use this term differently and the term emerged in a Cuban context, not an American context. Therefore, I will use the Spanish term mujerista, in order to contextualize Las Krudas' identity politics.

much of the complexity of life surrounding women, they gradually began to come out of the closet.

Mujerista identity and the black feminist critique

In the following excerpt from their song “Candela,” from their first album *CUBENSI 2003*, Las Krudas talk about their intersectional existence as fat, Black lesbians. At the beginning of the song, Las Krudas show that the “mujerista vanguard” are “giving school,” or educating the listener.

“Candela” by Las Krudas CUBENSI *Metia* (forthcoming)

The primary voice of this song is Pelusa with Wanda and Pasita Krudas sounding in agreement.

el hombre esa expresión	man [as a universal term] this expression
no me incluye	does not include me
los humanos esa expresión	Human beings this expression does not
no me incluye	include me
somos hembras todo eso	We are women and all of this influences
influye en lo que voy a	that which I am going to
explicarte aquí adelante	explain to you in a moment
...	
como existe lo masculino	Like masculinity exists
exista la feminidad	Femininity exists
como existe lo heterosexual	As heterosexuality exists,
existe la homosexualidad	Homosexuality exists
todas y todos tenemos	all women and all men, we have
derecho a la libertad	the right to liberty

At the beginning of this song Pelusa shouts, “Audience, listen!” After assertively commanding the audience’s attention, Krudas then directly plant a seed for people to reflect on: embracing human diversity also means embracing sexual diversity. In this song, they talk about their feelings of being poorly treated, ignored, because they are women (and implicitly meaning lesbians). Pelusa rejects the term “mankind” as exclusionary to women, as the term centers on “man.” It is in this way that Las Krudas call attention to the subtle ways in which women’s oppression operates systemically: even something as mundane as everyday language is male-centered. Las Krudas’ references to male and female, darkness and light, may be linguistic references to symbols that are seemingly natural dichotomies. By stating these accepted realities first and couching them in terms of persisting inequality, Las Krudas create the space necessary to assert a reality that is often invisible to most Cubans: homosexuality, particularly female homosexuality, exists.

The issue of “morality” plays a key role in justifying the social isolation of lesbians. Parents are very hesitant to let their children be “exposed” to “homosexual behavior” for

fear that their children may be influenced by such “immorality.” In 2004, I asked Las Krudas about their views on being lesbian. Pasita said the following:

To be lesbian is a path. To be bisexual is a path. To be transgender is a path. Every person has their path and within the most diversity is the world, the richest...variety covers the surface of the world... Can you imagine if the world were equal? Damn!!! [with] the varied richness, the [varied] diversity because there are different criteria and different ways of living life, then... the... how do I explain this to you... the transcendence of the human species is more varied because of the different origins of the different components that have mixed, and so at the end a person is more on point because they have an open mind towards all that comes because it's [all] OK (Pasita 2004).

Krudas argue for the embracing of difference. In this quote, Pasita envisions a future where people can simply be without any requirements on what that being entails. For Pasita, everyone, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, will be able to follow his or her own path. Las Krudas felt comfortable in discussing the difficulties they faced as Black lesbians, because they were part of a movement, the Underground Hip-Hop Movement, where the goal was to create a space for the representation of marginalized and racialized social identities and experiences; it was a space that strongly encouraged social critique. Through Pasita and Pelusa's long-term relationship and their numerous contributions to Cuban society, Pasita hopes to challenge established notions of morality that depict lesbians as morally inept and socially unproductive.

In another song, “Amikemiñongo,” which is on their upcoming CD, *Metia*, Krudas directly engages the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and their relationship to Cuba's colonial legacies. The following is an excerpt of “Amikemiñongo” (all three voices of the group are represented throughout the song):

¿Qué más tú quieres de mi, si todo yo te lo he dado?	What do you want from me if I have given you all of it?
...	...
Que te creías pequeña que el mundo	What do you think that the world is small
De estar organizado seria como tu cuarto	As to be organized like your room
...	...
Explotación discriminación pobreza violencia osorbadera	Exploitation, discrimination poverty, damn violence
...	...
Bruja, tuerca, Yo mujer, yo Libertad por siempre...	Witch, dyke I am woman, I (am) Freedom forever...

This song is another critique of modernity. In essence, Las Krudas center on modernity as a corporal and cultural project of social reorganization for the productive interests of

Western capital. In this song they focus on the social organizing agenda and the cultural logics of colonialism. In essence, they center on modernity as a corporal and cultural project of social reorganization for the productive interests of Western capital. In an anti-modernist temporal move, Las Krudas evoke the collective memory of Black and Brown populations as a means to articulate the connection between the colonial period and the contemporary period. Rhetorically, they ask the imagined perpetrators of colonialism, “Do you think that the world is small, as to be organized like your room?”

There are several factors that frame Krudas’ conceptualization of colonial legacies. For Krudas, it is global European capitalist interests that deploy physical and ideological violence in an attempt to organize subjects, including “nature,” to prepare them for European capital’s productive interests. The colonial period marks the emergence of oppressive ideologies and social hierarchies such as racism, sexism, and homophobia that are a result of the social organization and the valuation of people according to reproductive capabilities.

While focusing primarily on women in this song and making the call for women to fight to liberate themselves, they also slip in the word “tuerca,” which is slang for “dyke.” Through addressing all these elements in one song, Krudas are able to link race, gender, and sexuality to colonization. Through making these connections between racism, sexism, classism, exploitation, homophobia, and colonialism, Krudas attempt to help the audience to see that liberation is for *everyone* who has suffered as a result of the organizing impulses of modernity.

In the case of race, Las Krudas also highlight the particular difficulties facing Black lesbians. In a 2006 interview, Pelusa commented that members of the CUHHM often ask Las Krudas why more Black lesbians do not attend underground hip-hop events. She says the following about being a woman in hip-hop, and about the precarious existence of Black lesbians in Cuba:

It’s that, for example, Black lesbian women don’t have a lot of time to go to hip-hop [shows], they have to work hard to make it, to survive, to look for money. In hip-hop there isn’t much money, there is no money and lesbian Black women don’t have money, they don’t have ways to... [Pauses to think] For a lot of Black lesbian Cuban women it is difficult, their life, very difficult. (Pelusa interview, Havana 2006)

In this quote, Pelusa discusses the difficult lives of Black lesbians. The CUHHM is a male-dominated space. When Black lesbians have an opportunity to leave the home, they look for other lesbians in other types of spaces. However, lesbian life is so secretive, that oftentimes women, particularly Black lesbians, remain isolated. Black lesbians also have to work much harder than other Cubans to earn a living. The lack of well-paying jobs available to Black women has made economic independence difficult to achieve. Additionally, race and class segregate the lesbian community in Cuba. Light-skinned wealthy women, who are able to afford their own home or have the leisure time to create

women-centered spaces, are typically unwelcoming of working-class women and Black women.

Through their friendships with foreigners, Las Krudas were able to collect films, books and other materials freely circulating outside of Cuba. In Cuba, they shared these materials with lesbian friends and acquaintances. Their activism within the CUHHM has also drawn state attention to the needs of lesbians. Because of their work to bring attention to the issues facing lesbians, Las Krudas were invited by psychologists working at CENESEX (the National Center for Sex Education) to be the co-founders of the first state-sponsored lesbian organization in Havana, called OREMI, during the summer of 2005.

Discussion/conclusion

In his analysis of the heteronormative tendencies of socialism, Roderick Ferguson (2004) utilizes a Black feminist framework to argue that Marx never challenged the relationship between race, gender, sexuality, and notions of social progress in the bourgeois notion of civilization. Black feminist theory accounts for how the “intersecting racial, gender and sexual practices antagonize and/or conspire with the normative investments of nation-states and capital.” (Ferguson 2004, 5) Because of Black feminist’s subjectivity to colonialism and the emergence of the nation-state, there must be a transnational, or even regional, account of heteronormativity (Ferguson 2004).

It is in this way that Las Krudas’ critique of heteronormativity is a Black feminist critique. Through linking their oppression as Black lesbians to colonial legacies, Las Krudas’ non-heteronormative critique challenges the utopian discourses of both Marxism and feminism. Las Krudas bring attention to how they, as non-white, lesbian subjects living in the global south, are excluded from liberatory discourses concerning “humanity.” Through taking advantage of the socially critical space provided by the CUHHM, Las Krudas worked to address the intersectional oppression, and social isolation, of Black lesbians not only in Cuba but also throughout the Americas.

In the fall of 2006, Las Krudas left Cuba as a means of realizing their dream of bringing global awareness of the presence of Black Latina and Caribbean lesbians who continue to live an isolated existence globally. They are currently based in San Francisco, California and Austin, Texas. They are currently on tour in the United States and Mexico.



Las Krudas. From left to right: Wanda Krudas, Pelusa Krudas, Pasita Krudas.



Tropazancos, April 2004. Photograph courtesy of Beth Ferguson.

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For more information about Las Krudas see: www.myspace.com/3krudas

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