

“Rap is Our Best Feminist Tool”

Interview with the Cuban Hip Hop Duo La Reyna y La Real

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The hip hop movement of the late 1990s and early 2000s in Cuba had a decisive impact on the creation of an afro-descendant, anti-racist feminist discourse on the island. After the Cuban revolution of 1959, the discourse of alleged equality had made any form of feminist and anti-racist debate difficult. The end of the Cold War and the partial opening of the island led to a very vivid music scene, particularly during the years the Festival Cubano de Rap took place. From the beginning, women artists have claimed this format as a space for discussion panels on gender issues, creating a public space that did not exist before.² Today (as of 2022), the rap duo “La Reyna y La Real” who belong to the second generation of Cuban hip hop artists, have become one of the most audible voices of the second generation of the Cuban underground afro-descendant feminist music scene. Reyna Mercedes Hernandez Sandoval (La Reyna) and Yadira Pintado Lazcano (La Real) formed the Havana-based duo “La Reyna y la Real” to represent a voice of women’s empowerment and the fight against pre-established gender roles in Cuban (hip hop/rap) music. La Reyna (born 1986) studied Industrial Chemistry and practiced this profession for five years before she joined an all-women group/project called “Alzar la voz,” [Raise your voice]. La

1 The interview was conducted on 2 and 4 September 2022. Translated from Spanish by Julia Roth.

2 On the Cuban Hip Hop movement, see Alejandro Zamora Montes (2009): *Rapear una Cuba utópica: testimonios del movimiento hiphopero*, Sevilla: Guantanamera; on the creation of a feminist public sphere, see Tanya L. Saunders (2016): *Cuban Underground Hip Hop: Black Thoughts, Black Revolution, Black Modernity*, Austin: University of Texas Press, and Julia Roth (2017): “Rapear el feminismo de otra manera: Hip-Hop y modos alternativos de producir conocimiento.” In: *Cuba Posible*, January 23, 2017 (<https://cubaposible.com/rapear-feminismo-otra-manera-hip-hop-modos-alternativos-producir-conocimiento/>).

Real (born 1986) graduated as a social worker and simultaneously began to rap and to perform with several neighborhood rappers.³ After occasional collaborations since 2010, La Reyna and La Real came together as a duo in 2012.⁴ They have been performing regularly in Cuba since 2013, e.g. at the Second Women's Hip Hop Festival "Mar-genes" [Mar-gins], in the province of Holguin as well as at the Hip Hop Symposium at the Palacio de La Rumba in Havana. In the summer of 2022, they toured Europe, performing in Berlin, Germany, and various locations in Sweden. Since 2015, La Reyna y la Real have been listed in the catalog of the Cuban Rap Agency. So far, the duo has published the albums *Beefcon Kriño* (2015), *Miky y Repa* (2017, TumiMusic), *Mírame* (2020), and *Dale Espacio* (2021). La Reyna y la Real fuse rap and hip hop with jazz, R&B, and other elements, often combining vocalists with piano, guitar, drums, trumpet, trombone, and saxophone, and sometimes also choirs and percussion.⁵ Their musical style reflects their identification as strong afro-descendant women, often identifying as "cimarrona(s)"⁶ and celebrating Afro-Cuban religious rituals in their self-designed outfits and jewelry. The dialogic notion and the strong and empowering feminist message of their music come out even more strongly in their live performances, in which they directly address the audience and ask them to dance, sing along, and breakdance.

How did you get involved in hip hop? How and when did you start?

La Reyna: In my case, I became familiar with the hip hop movement in the early 2000s. I didn't know, I had no knowledge that rap existed in Cuba, let alone that it was so powerful at that time. By the year 2004, 2005, in my neighborhood, Luyano, a fan club of the group Orishas was created. At that time, Orishas were very popular in both Cuba and Europe. There, I became aware that an entire, and very powerful, rap movement existed in Cuba. I came to know groups that we now call "old school", such as Obsesión, Krudas Cubensi, Anónimo Consejo, and Explosión Suprema etc. Once I got to know everything about this existing rap movement, I took an interest in writing lyrics, expressing what I thought,

3 See: <http://www.tumimusic.com/La-Reyna-y-La-Real/812/artists/music/>; <https://festivalcervantino.gob.mx/artista/152/la-reyna-y-la-real>.

4 See: <https://suenacubano.com/lareyna-y-lareal/>.

5 See: <https://revistamaces.com/la-reyna-y-la-real-yo-tambien-soy-ellas/>

6 *Cimarrona*: female maroon (runaway enslaved person). *Cimarronaje* (marronage) also refers to resistance against enslavement in general.

and I wrote it, and showed it to the people in the club, so they knew I was writing. Then, in 2009, Carmen González, a Cuban writer and poet started a project called "Alzar la voz" [Raise your voice], a women's project, where I also met [spoken word artist] Afibloa [Sinufola], and she asked me to join her project if I dared to rap and write. And it was there, in 2009, that I started to make a name for myself in the rap world as La Reyna.

As for La Real, she started in her neighborhood Jesús María around the same time. She had been in the rap movement for a little longer, she started rapping with a group of men, and now she is the only one who is still rapping. She's been around a few years longer than me.

What role does the hip hop movement of the early 2000s play? Who were and are the artists that inspired you the most (in and outside of hip hop)?

La Reyna: In the early 2000s, hip hop in Cuba was a very powerful movement. It was one of the strongest movements in Latin America, one can say. We didn't rap at that time, but this movement became a strong influence on our work. And nowadays, when we talk about references, we can't stop talking about the strong rap movement that existed at the beginning of the 2000s in Cuba. A very strong movement that boosted and raised the voice of Cuban rap, nationally and internationally.

Well, there were a great many artists that inspired us. In the beginning, we listened to a lot of music from the United States that came to us thanks to the sailors who brought their cassettes. So we didn't even know which artists we listened to, or who they were. But we did know that we liked them. In terms of national rap, we were very inspired by Krudas Cubensi, the first female rappers in Cuba, by Obsesión, Anónimo Consejo, Explosión Suprema. Internationally, we listened a lot to Missy Elliot, Erykah Badu, Lauryn Hill. And all this mix of rap, both national and international, inspired us, and led us to what we do today.

What does hip hop mean to you?

La Reyna: To us, hip hop is life, it is part of our culture and a way of expression [...] Hip hop is a very strong, a very powerful tool for communication. It harnesses the power of the word, the power of the message, the power of the experience. And, of course, for us to be able to master this tool is a great step, a great power that makes us the artists that we are and makes us great. To have

the power to bring this message to all the people who can listen to us, to the people who can see themselves reflected in us, to the people who can identify with us and for whom we can serve as an example, as an inspiration, for us, it is a great blessing to have this tool. Really, to have this tool, this gift of the word, this strength, this power that allows us to have rap, the rap that we defend, and the hip hop that we live.

Where do you see the particularities of Cuban hip hop? Do you see a decolonial dimension? Which international ties do you have through hip hop?

La Real: [...] [T]alking about rap, well, we think that each place has its own way of doing it because of its own history, its own culture. And what makes Cuban rap Cuban is that it has our warmth, it has our charisma. And what sometimes differentiates it from rap from other places [is] our idiosyncrasy. We could say that the ties that we have today internationally, we practically owe all of that to rap, to hip hop, because of our music. That is, for having gone to other countries, or someone who discovered our music and wrote to us from Mexico, from Peru, from Chile, from Argentina. From many places they have written to us, and they have told us that they identify with our music. And to me, that is one more link that we have created internationally. And all this thanks to rap.

In how far do you see hip hop as a tool for communicating and presenting feminist topics (and feminist knowledge)?

La Real: La Reyna and La Real speak from a position of womanhood, as women, and for women, based on our experiences, on our lives, and serving our message to identify, to represent, to reflect the reality that all women live in Cuba, as well as in Latin America, as well as in the whole world. Our message is a feminist message that places women where they should always be. Where in many occasions we are placed. Where many people do not recognize our worth.

Rap is the strongest weapon we have because it is a very big communication media, which we can expand. And we can achieve great reach because many women listen to the messages that we want to convey. For many women, uh, see our experiences, feel our experiences, many women can identify with us and see other solutions, see other realities, see that everything is possible. Of course, rap is our best tool. And it is the basis on which we rely for this discourse, make it extensive and try to take it to every corner of our world. Or as far as we can.

Which other inequalities (beyond gender) do you think are important to address?

La Real: More than talking about inequalities, we like to highlight the equality that we do have, to get people to see every day that even though they are Black – because there is still a little bit of racism in some minds, in some types of people – to tell them that we are equal, that we can do the same things that other people can do because we are people. We are not from another planet. We're obviously human beings, who think, live, and whose hearts beat just like everybody else's. And speaking of rap, well, we think that each place has its own way of doing things because of its own history, its own culture.

