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# **Rhythm of Change: The Hip-hop Movements for Social and Political Reforms Throughout Latin America**

By Darian Andrade-Diaz

For generations, marginalized populations of African descent in Latin American nations have sought justice for their maltreatment. For those who preceded activists, the cultural and political landscape shaped by colonialist legacies distorted people's views on institutionalized forms of discrimination. Social and political disparities for populations of darker-skinned citizens in Latin American countries sparked a need for change. Colombia, Brazil, Cuba, and Mexico are the focus of this essay on hip-hop becoming a platform for articulating and spreading critiques of injustices. These critiques were crucial in creating political discourse among populations in these societies where government structure was built around promoting a false racially egalitarian society. In these societies, elites created a hegemonic and durable form of racial domination.<sup>1</sup> Activists used hip-hop to communicate new ideologies that challenged this commonplace structure and facilitated the growth of racial consciousness. The messages have created a global network that uses hip-hop as a musical, linguistic medium for conveying ideas. These ideas are about the politics that restrict the rights and opportunities of citizens, generally people of African descent. With a growing racial consciousness, African-descended populations mobilized and exercised unique social change in their countries. Organizations formed cultural centers to promote hip-hop culture in youth, annual festivals brought national and international attention to the ideology behind hip-hop, and hip-hop was used as a medium to persuade young people from gang violence.

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<sup>1</sup> Paschel, *Becoming Black Political Subjects...*, 7.

Hip-hop, often charged with political critique, creates a platform to engender social and political change. The messages spread through hip-hop are a call to action in these societies where the population can make the necessary changes. Though the practices of inciting change are different, the characteristics and origins of the hip-hop movements in these countries are similar. Hegemonic structures are legacies of colonial rule. Artists used hip-hop to spread political messages that challenged those legacies. These legacies also include racial ideologies of *mestizaje*, which governments used to control the cultural political narrative. *Mestizaje* is a generational cycle of nationalism used to reinforce false ideologies of egalitarianism for the majority of the populations throughout Latin America. *Mestizaje* narratives erased racial critique as a tool of discriminated populations and promoted the idea that the vast prevalence of race mixture created a society where race was not an issue.<sup>2</sup> Before the development of black racial consciousness movements, the populations of Latin American countries believed in their egalitarian societies, [where] whites had higher incomes, higher levels of education, and better health outcomes than nonwhites.<sup>3</sup> By embracing hip-hop messages, populations were made aware of the need to challenge their countries' social and political structures. By acting upon the messages spread by hip-hop artists, activists, and other performers, Black populations in Latin America have produced a wide array of different changes based on the regions and countries they live in.

Hip-hop spread socio-political critiques of Latin American countries and gave black racial consciousness movements momentum to act on change. In 1990s Colombia, the African descendant populations began lobbying for political recognition as their racial group for rights awarded to citizens and to level the playing field and combat marginalization. The push toward a

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<sup>2</sup> Paschel, 46.

<sup>3</sup> Paschel, 7.

collective Black racial consciousness and political acknowledgment began. Before years of lobbying, Black social movements had no real traction or political allies. This was due, for the most part, to *mestizaje* ideology, which has prevailed since the shift from colonization to independence. Despite decades of Black consciousness movements, no legislative changes were going into the 21st century. The socioeconomic practice of institutionalized racial inequality was perpetuated by the lack of legislation to support nonwhites in securing basic rights. By extension, *mestizaje* nationalism was used as a tool to convince the entire population that Black and indigenous peoples were not their political category. Hence, the promotion of racial democracy made a void of racial consciousness possible. This void fostered racial disparities related to poverty, wealth distribution, education, and limited opportunities for social mobilization among the Black populations in Colombia. Yet, despite these obstacles, Black activists found new mediums and spaces to articulate the injustices they lived through.

What made hip-hop accessible to Colombian migrants were the social and political critiques of lived experiences in what English-speaking artists called the “ghetto.”<sup>4</sup> The music had strong commentary about the dominant social order that marginalized the communities from which these artists came. Colombians who listened to the music identified with the realities these artists rapped about and considered the lack of critique in their own country. Hip-hop did experience widespread recognition in Colombia, but it was from region to region and depended on exposure. It was not until the mid-1990s when a group called La Etnia produced their hip-hop and self-marketed on the streets of Bogota and Medellin, that hip-hop entered the national spotlight. They had great success, and while seeking national distribution, the group still self-marketed and persuaded radio stations to play their music.<sup>5</sup> In one of their songs, “Real,” the

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<sup>4</sup> Tickner, 128.

<sup>5</sup> Tickner, 134.

group raps about the violent reality of life in a poor neighborhood in Bogota. When reflecting on everyday events, the group writes, “Atrapado en este ghetto/ban fuego/...Real, parchado en la marginalidad/Real, en la esquina divisando la verdad.”<sup>6</sup> Speaking to the disparities of life in the poorer areas of urban cities, La Etnia draws attention to the marginalization experienced by populations in favelas. Artists with these messages encoded in their songs highlight their circumstances and feelings of being marginalized and their voices silenced. Audiences of this music living in similar realities are forced to reflect on their situation. The growing consciousness spread by hip-hop transmits the idea that people must ask why their circumstance is rooted in socio-political polarity in a society that ignores racial disparities. As La Etnia and other artists achieved wider recognition, their success garnered increased support for the movement.<sup>7</sup> This translated into access to cultural centers in major Columbian cities, which became crucial hubs for fostering the development of Colombian hip-hop. These cultural centers actively cultivated a critical consciousness among youth by promoting hip-hop culture. The centers focused on spreading hip-hop culture to the youth so that they began to form their consciousness about social and political critique. These centers and the Institute for Culture and Tourism in Bogota sponsor an annual “Hip-Hop in the Park” that draws over 120,000 people, including national and international artists.<sup>8</sup> Hip-hop events like this are seen in other countries around the world. They all work to promote national and international hip-hop networks and to circulate ideas needed to convey the essential critiques of institutions.

In Brazil, similar to Colombia, the existence of *mestizaje* nationalism deeply rooted in colonialist rule also blinded generations of people to racial disparities. *Mestizaje* nationalism has

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<sup>6</sup> La Etnia, *Real* (5-27 Records, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Tickner, 134.

<sup>8</sup> Tickner, 134.

been institutionalized since the 1930s when President Getúlio Vargas actively sought to discourage Afro-Brazilians from identifying as “black.”<sup>9</sup> Racial categories were eliminated from census data to reinforce the ideals of *mestizaje*. In Brazil, the phenomenon of music carrying socially progressive ideas did not start with hip-hop in the 1990s. Similar movements came from Brazilians listening to 1970s funk, notably James Brown, and the examples of Black Panther messages from the United States. These ideas began to form the development of Black power movements in Brazil and a boiling yearning for change. It was not until the re-democratization of the 1980s that Brazilian Black power movements mobilized for change. Since then, political and social whitening had become widespread in Brazilian culture. If an African-descended person reached a specific economic or social status, that trumped marginalization. For the next generation of Afro-Brazilians, hip-hop impacted youth by advocating for the adoption of a Black racial identity to combat racial inequalities in society. The dominant political elements of hip-hop can explain the correlation between listening to hip-hop and racial consciousness among young Afro-Brazilians. The strong ties hip-hop culture also perpetuates this maintains to grassroots activism.<sup>10</sup> The origins of hip-hop in Brazil are similar to those in Colombia, with added influence from rhythms and ideas from TV programs like MTV from the United States. From 2006 to 2008, Bernd Reiter and Gladys Mitchell researched these correlations and existing qualitative studies but wanted to find more conclusive, quantitative data. The authors utilized responses from 346 respondents in their study from the selected neighborhoods of Itapoã, Federação, and Peri Peri in Salvador, Brazil. Interviews were conducted to ask members of households open-ended and closed-ended questions to gauge the degrees of racial consciousness the respondents had. Questions like “Do you listen to hip-hop music?” and “Do you think all

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<sup>9</sup> Bernd and Mitchell, “Embracing hip-hop as their...,” 4.

<sup>10</sup> Bernd and Mitchell, 1.

Afro-descendants of different colors are black (negro)?”<sup>11</sup> These questions were relevant in being able to quantify the relationship between Black racial identity and listening to hip-hop. The table below shows regressions between the study’s independent variable and the independent variables of listening to hip-hop, gender, age, color, and income. Of all the variables the researchers found data for, listening to hip-hop was the most statistically significant. The coefficient of .20 suggests that the respondents who listen to hip-hop had a higher Black racial consciousness because they also stated in the interviews that all Afro-Brazilians were black, despite their color.<sup>12</sup>

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**Table I: Regression Analysis of Black Racial Consciousness and Independent Variables (listen to Hip Hop, gender, age, color, and income)**

**Dependent Variable:** All Afro-Brazilians are Black  
**Independent Variables**

	Coef.	S.E.
Hip Hop	.20***	.05
Gender	-.05	.05
Age	-.01	.03
Color	-.02	.01
Income	-.01	.03
Constant	1.12***	.16
N=290		

\*p<.10 \*\*p<.05 \*\*\*p<.01

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Source: Reiter and Mitchell, 2008, 7.

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<sup>11</sup>Bernd and Mitchell, 27.

<sup>12</sup> Reiter and Mitchell, Table 1, 7.

Reiter and Mitchell also find that 53% of respondents ages 16-25 and 41% of respondents ages 26-40 are those who listen to hip-hop. This directly correlates to the history of Black power movements in Brazilian history. The previous generation was affected by social movements just like the younger generations, which have a new movement fostered by the ideas spread by hip-hop. The pervasive nature of politically charged hip-hop can also be traced to activism. Specific non-governmental organizations have worked with youth in favelas using hip-hop as a way to bring attention to police brutality and to get young people to think before dealing drugs or being involved with gangs.<sup>13</sup> In Brazil, the hip-hop movement has been used as a voice for those who historically and currently do not have accurate political representation and are marginalized in society. More importantly, the ideals of hip-hop rhetoric have broadened the influence and formation of black racial consciousness, giving one the perspective of knowing there needs to be change. A similar development of racial consciousness was also seen in Cuba.

In Cuba, racial injustice stemming from the colonial period continued to persist throughout the 1900s and hip-hop also served as a platform to critique the inequalities. The unjust institutions set in place come from colonial domination. The racial ideologies of colonialism prevail and have manifested in a racialization of culture, knowledge, and experience. The hegemonic system of *mestizaje* created a Eurocentric hierarchy where African-descended Cubans were marginalized and treated as second-class citizens. Marginalization in Cuba has roots in adapting Western perspectives of othering based on the institutionalization of African forced labor in colonialist economies. The racial inequality that exists in Cuba is a consequence of the colonial legacy and has resulted in the continued manifestation of colonial subordination of African-descended people where critique about race is virtually absent.<sup>14</sup> In modern-day Cuba,

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<sup>13</sup> Reiter and Mitchell, 27.

<sup>14</sup> Saunders, *Cuban Underground hip-hop*, 3.



neo-colonial policies perpetuate racial inequalities and are illustrated in laws concerning what the government defines as good taste, appearance, and proper conduct. To combat institutionalized racism in Cuba, a group of artist-activists, calling themselves “artists,” created the Cuban Underground Hip-hop Movement (CUHHM). CUHHM’s early discourse by young activists called for the need for change, and the hip-hop created by its members began to critique the limitations of the government’s material-based approach to citizenship and equality.<sup>15</sup> As the movement gained momentum and support, CUHHM helped create an institutionalized, revolutionary, anti-capitalist, anticolonial ideology in the Cuban cultural sphere.<sup>16</sup> The Havana Rap Festival also bolstered recognition of Cuban hip-hop music, which was charged with social and political critique that focused on race, racial discrimination, and inequality.<sup>17</sup> Although some of these songs were banned on radio stations, their national popularity made them well known, and populations of marginalized Cubans rallied behind the artists' messages. One such song, by Clan 537, called *Quien Tiró La Tiza?* Examines the racial disparities that exist in Cuban societal practice. The chorus states, “Quien tiró la tiza?/No fue el hijo del Doctor, no/ Quien tiró la tiza?/El negro ese/ Porque el hijo del Doctor es el mejor.”<sup>18</sup> The blame put on the Black kid to save the son of the doctor speaks volumes to the type of inequalities the artists want their audience to be aware of. They bring attention to the status given to white Cubans, who were valued as being better than African-descended people. The class difference exists because there is an unspoken racial hierarchy where those who have more assigned status, equivalent to those who are lighter, can take advantage of opportunities unavailable to African-descended Cubans.

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<sup>15</sup> Saunders, 10.

<sup>16</sup> Saunders, 16.

<sup>17</sup> Tickner, 130.

<sup>18</sup> Tickner, 131.

There is no real foundation for scholarship on the formations and racial consciousness movements of Afromexicaness through hip hop. In the 1990s Mexico's physical and cultural proximity to Los Angeles made gangsta rap's influence particularly visible.<sup>19</sup> The influence of gangsta rap and adaptation to Mexican hip-hop offered a linguistic base for writing lyrics and addressing issues such as violence and the hardships of street life.<sup>20</sup> The political climate of Mexico that ignored Blackness could also explain Afromexican's exclusion from participating in hip-hop to express their hardships. Instead of Afromexican hip-hop is a strong identity of blackness among African-descended Mexicans illustrated by *corridos*. This can be explained by the formations of Black identity in Mexican culture that emerge[s] from a dynamic that merges social science scholarship, government interest, and the consciousness and self-definition of individuals with particular understandings of their own cultural, historical, and political experiences.<sup>21</sup> In post-colonial Mexico, *mestizaje* nationalism took root. In census data and political discourse of independent Mexico, national statistics that omitted blacks and mulattoes...came to characterize the new nation.<sup>22</sup> Despite the political disappearance of Black as a racial group, Afromexicans in Mexico cultivated a strong identity. This identity has been tied with Costa Chica de Guerrero where the majority of the Afromexican population lives. Afromexicans use *corridos* to display their pride and carve out a place in Mexican culture. A *corrido* is a musical folk ballad about situations related to different aspects of Mexican history.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Tickner, 129.

<sup>20</sup> Tickner, 129-130.

<sup>21</sup> Laura A. Lewis, "Blacks, Black Indians, Afromexicans: The Dynamics of Race, Nation, and Identity in a Mexican 'Moreno' Community (Guerrero)," *American Ethnologist* 27, no. 4 (2000): 898–926, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/647400>. Pg 900.

<sup>22</sup> Lewis, 901.

<sup>23</sup> Paulette A. Ramsay, "History, Violence and Self-Glorification in Afro-Mexican 'Corridos' from Costa Chica de Guerrero," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 23, no. 4 (2004): 446–64, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27733690>. Pg 446.

Afromexican musicians blend their intersectional identities to create corridos that are representative of their heritage in Mexican society often in discussion with the history of their ancestors being imported into Mexico during the 1600s slave trade. These unique characteristics of Afromexican corridos manifest in illustrating the oral tradition, the corridos are thought-provoking, anecdotal, and typified by tradition, action, and performance. They are perplexing, depicting various settings and experiences.<sup>24</sup> Navigating marginalization and political indifference to being Black, Afromexicans have created their form of corridos that display their complex history. Afromexicans have made their place in broader Mexican culture and innovated the corrido to exemplify their role in Mexican history.

By examining the similar origins of institutionalized racial inequalities in Colombia, Brazil, and Cuba, the legacies of colonialism prevail in racialized socio-political landscapes. The influences of *mestizaje* ideologies throughout Latin America kept Eurocentric hierarchies in place. The hegemonic structure in these countries creates a system that automatically marginalizes African-descended people. The countries differ in the responses of those populations to the disparities. By embracing the messages of social and political critique in hip-hop music, undervalued populations can be made aware of and develop their racial consciousness. Their consciousness can be used to educate and further spread the idea that change must be enacted. Hip-hop can and has also been used to strengthen national and international networks to transmit the messages and ideologies perpetuated in the music. Artists seeking such change have been known to create organizations promoting activism and combat the vicious cycles instilled generations ago. Music is not just a collection of beats and notes count on a music sheet or rhythm; music can facilitate changes needed to level the playing field.

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<sup>24</sup>Ramsay, 448.

In the countries examined in this paper and beyond, music's power is universal, and like-minded people will find a way to rally support and progress towards change.

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