

# How Live Cuban Popular Dance Music Expresses Political Values in Today's Cuba

## Introduction

Aristotle argued that a political citizen is a person “who partakes in the act of ruling and the act of being ruled”,<sup>1</sup> and that the *polis* is the space in which such political equality is practiced through the exchange of opinions, values and preferences. Jacques Rancière has elaborated on the aesthetic potential of this Aristotelian politics, claiming that aesthetic experiences shape the production of new opinions, values and preferences among the people and thereby increase the space of political subjectivities.<sup>2</sup> In this article I discuss how live performances of Cuban popular dance music create an aesthetic *polis* space, in which grooves and melodies shape politics-in-the-making by disseminating opinions, values and preferences that are strongly critical of the totalitarian Cuban state, thus increasing political equality. The following research question will serve as the focal point for my analysis: How does the aesthetics of live Cuban popular dance music express political values in today's Cuba?

By researching popular music's communicative power in Cuban culture, and in particular the extent to which popular music increases the space of political equality, I will shed light upon the ways in which music's aesthetic qualities enable political subjectivization and participatory democracy. I will draw on the notions of *action*, *polis* and *wooing* in Arendt's political theory, together with Rancière's distinction between *politics* and the *police* and his notion of “the politics of aesthetics”, in tandem with existing research in musicology. I will then apply these notions to an empirical analysis of Interactivo's live performances in Havana in 2010 and 2013, in combination with an analysis of related qualitative interviews addressing the politics of Cuban popular music, thus combining interview data and observation data.

I will begin by briefly reviewing existing research on the politics of Cuban music; then I will present the theoretical concepts and methodological considerations that are relevant to my analysis. Following the analysis itself, I will sum up the main findings and answer the proposed research question.

1 Aristotle in Thomas Pangle, *Aristotle's Teaching in the "Politics"* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2013), 63.

2 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2004).

### Existing research on the politics of Cuban popular music

Ever since the nineteenth century, Cuban music and arts have represented powerful symbols of national identity;<sup>3</sup> prominent Cuban intellectuals such as José Martí, Nicolás Guillén, and Alejo Carpentier have all theorized about the ways in which Cuban aesthetics expresses an inclusive, hybridized notion of Cuban culture that transcends racial distinctions.<sup>4</sup> After 1959 the revolutionary government sought to strengthen this aspect of Cuban identity by investing heavily in the arts and introduced several music education programs and regular state-funded payments to qualified musicians.<sup>5</sup> The government also initiated professional music ensembles (e.g., Orquesta Cubana de Música Moderna) and supported weekly performances of Cuban popular music genres such as rumba guaguanco, nueva trova, son, son-related styles of Cuban dance music and various forms of Afro-Cuban music.<sup>6</sup> Yvonne Daniel argues:

"In Cuba, dance and all forms of expressive culture are used to support socialist and egalitarian behavior [...] Cuban artists and expressive culture are exciting and powerful aids to political struggle and economic development [...] The ministry broadly organizes and outlines cultural activities toward the goals of the revolution [...] By means of financial, organizational, and ideological support, the ministry and arts administrators have been instrumental in the promotion of rumba".<sup>7</sup>

The music style that was most explicitly linked to the revolutionary project between 1960 and 1980, however, was nueva trova.<sup>8</sup> Nueva trova artists wrote songs that glorified the revolution, such as Carlos Puebla's hymn to Ernesto "Che" Guevarra from 1965, "Hasta Siempre Comandante".

Yet the effort to incorporate music and the arts into the vision of the revolutionary project also produced political regulations and other constraints. When confronted with the question of artistic freedom within the revolution, Fidel Castro famously

3 Robin Moore, *Nationalizing Blackness: Afrocubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920-1940* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998). Alejandro Madrid and Robin Moore, *Danzón: Circum-Caribbean Dialogues in Music and Dance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 75-117.

4 Kjetil Klette Boehler, *Grooves, Pleasures and Politics in Salsa Cubana: The Musicality of Cuban Politics and the Politics of Salsa Cubana* (PhD Thesis, Oslo: University of Oslo, 2013), 125-140.

5 Robin Moore, *Music and Revolution: Cultural Change in Socialist Cuba* (Berkeley, CA: Berkeley University Press, 2006), 56-107. James Robbins "Practical and abstract taxonomy in Cuban music" *Ethnomusicology* 33 (1989), 389. Lisandro Otero and Francisco Martínez Hinojosa, *Cultural policy in Cuba*. Unesco, (1972).

6 On rumba see Yvonne Daniel, *Dance and Social Change in Contemporary Cuba* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995). On nueva trova see Robin Moore, "Transformations in Cuban Nueva Trova, 1965-95." *Ethnomusicology* 47 (2003): 1-41. On son see Argeliers León, *Del canto y el tiempo* (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1984). On Afro-Cuban music see Alejandro De la Fuente, *A Nation for All: Race, Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 289. Katherine Hagedorn, *Divine utterances: the performance of Afro-Cuban Santería*. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001). Judith Bettelheim, "Negotiations of Power in Carnival Culture in Santiago de Cuba" *African Arts* 24 (1991), 66-92.

7 Yvonne Daniel, *Dance and Social Change in Contemporary Cuba*. (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1995), 143-144.

8 Robin Moore, "Transformations in Cuban Nueva Trova, 1965-95." *Ethnomusicology* 47 (2003): 1-41.

responded to the Cuban artists: "Within the Revolution, complete freedom: outside the Revolution, none". Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Cuban authorities often censored Anglo-American pop, rock and jazz music, including the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, because they were thought to represent U.S.-led cultural imperialism.<sup>9</sup>

After Cuba's break with the Soviet Union in 1991 and the resulting ideological crisis, the space for political critique increased in Cuban popular music. Yet musicians clashed with the authorities nevertheless, following several controversial songs in the popular new timba style that described growing materialism, the increasing black market, prostitution and migration. Throughout the 1990s many songs were censored, and some musicians were sharply criticized for expressing counter-revolutionary values. One example of this is what Perna calls the "social scandal of *la Bruja*"<sup>10</sup>—this song, by the timba band NG la Banda,<sup>11</sup> was one of the first timba hits to allude to increased sex tourism on the island, something that Fidel Castro repeatedly denied. The Cuban government forced José Luis Cortés, the singer and composer of "*La Bruja*", to change his improvisational singing in the hit, because, officials claimed, the song was dismissive of proper female behavior. Instead of referring to "*la vida loca*", a term that is implicitly related to Cuban sex tourism, with the words, "You are a witch, a crazy, a sex addict" ("*Tu eres una bruja, loca, arrebatada*"), Cortés changed the lyrics to "You are a doctor, a teacher, an engineer," in order to please the government. However, as Cuban musicologist Olavo Alén Rodríguez points out, "Now the critique of the prostitution was even worse, because many prostitutes were in fact doctors, teachers and engineers".<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, there emerged different degrees of censorship of Cuban music—sometimes artists even received judicial sanctions, if the counter-revolutionary content of the song was sufficiently pointed. The punk rock singer Gorki Águila (hence Gorki), of the band *Porno Para Ricardo*, was imprisoned several times between 2003 and 2010 and repeatedly harassed by the Cuban government for disturbing the social order through his music.<sup>13</sup> The following excerpts, from Gorki's most popular song, "*El Comandante*", refer to Fidel Castro himself: "The commander wants me to work, paying me a miserable salary. The commander wants me to clap, after he has talked delusional bullshit [...] Commander makes an election that he himself invented to perpetuate the system".<sup>14</sup>

Other forms of political regulation of the Cuban music scene include the prohibiting of certain popular songs from the radio, TV or elsewhere. Based upon interviews

9 Vincenzo Perna, *Timba: The Sounds of the Cuban Crisis* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), 28-36.

10 Vincenzo Perna, *Timba: The Sounds of the Cuban Crisis* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005), 192-217.

11 NG La banda, *Grandes Exitos*, (Reyes 2006.)

12 Personal conversation with Olavo Alén Rodríguez, Havana, October 17, 2010.

13 Laura G. Freyre, "Porno para Ricardo: Rock, Analchy and Transition" in *A Changing Cuba*, edited by Mauricio Font (New York: City University of New York University Press, 2008), 561-602. Geoff Baker, "Cuba Rebelión: Underground Music in Havana" *Latin American Music Review* 32 (2009), 1-38.

14 My translation. Original lyrics in Spanish: "El Comandante quiere que yo trabaje, pagándome un salario miserable. El Comandante quiere que yo lo aplauda, después de hablar su mierda delirante. No Comandante, no coma usted esa pinga Comandante. El Comandante, hace unas elecciones, que las invento el pa' perpetuarse. El Comandante quiere que vaya y vote para seguir jodiéndome". The song was recorded on the CD *A Mi No Me Gusta La Política Pero Yo Le Gusto A Ella Compañero*, (La Paja Recold, 2006.)

with musicians, Perna shows how this implicit form of censorship has led many musicians to avoid certain socio-political content that might attract the attention of the authorities.<sup>15</sup> In summary, existing research on the politics of Cuban popular music has explored the ways in which the Cuban government has used music to strengthen national cultural identity and the ways in which popular music has served as a vehicle for socio-political critique. However, few studies have theorized a notion of politics in conjunction with the aesthetics of Cuban popular music or examined how musicians use the live scene in particular to address political issues. In what follows, I will engage with the potential relationships between politics and aesthetics by drawing on the work of Hanna Arendt and Jacques Rancière. Although Arendt's research is situated within the areas of political philosophy and social theory, and Rancière's within the philosophy of politics and aesthetics, their arguments are highly relevant as a conceptual apparatus for researching the politics of music. While Rancière<sup>16</sup> tends to oppose his political theory to Arendt's theoretical arguments, several researchers<sup>17</sup> underscore the strong similarities in their theoretical concepts. Here I will focus as well on the convergences in their writings on politics and aesthetics.

### *Theoretical framework: Understanding "politics" and the "politics of aesthetics"*

Both Arendt and Rancière sought to develop a political theory of practice (*praxis*) that is not confined to governmental issues but is instead grounded in people's equality and the right to seek political emancipation through expressions in everyday life.<sup>18</sup> Arendt theorizes the idea of participatory democracy (a politics of participation) specifically through her notions of *action*, *polis* and *woeing*.

### **Arendt's notion of action, polis and woeing**

Arendt first stresses the necessity for people to *act* in the course of political discussion and thereby increase the plurality of political opinions and values.<sup>19</sup> She notes, "The new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting".<sup>20</sup> For Arendt, *action* is a mode of human togetherness that recognizes each individual and allows for participatory democracy, in contrast to bureaucratized and elitist forms of politics such as representative democracies. As *action* is ultimately an individual pursuit, addressing the given person's potential to become a political citizen, Arendt turns to the Greek notion of *polis* to theorize how the plurality of *actions* might con-

15 Vincenzo Perna, *Timba: The Sounds of the Cuban Crisis* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005).

16 Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. (London, New York: Continuum, 2010).

17 Mustafa Dikeç, "Beginners and equals: political subjectivity in Arendt and Rancière" *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38 (2012), 78-90. Andrew Schaap "Enacting the right to have rights: Jacques Rancière's critique of Hannah Arendt" *European Journal of Political Theory* 10 (2011), 22-45.

18 Andrew Schaap, "Enacting the right to have rights: Jacques Rancière's critique of Hannah Arendt" *European Journal of Political Theory* 10 (2011), 22-45.

19 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 9.

20 Ibid.

stitute a political space. Arendt theorizes a *polis* that transcends physical limitations to become a means of living together:

"The *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be."<sup>21</sup>

Following Arendt, then, *polis* refers to a community in which people's actions are played out equally and in the plurality.

Applied to research on the politics of groove-based popular music, *actions* may be located in music experiences and made to serve as analytical lenses through which to analyze the extent to which music increases the space of political plurality and being together. John Miller Chernoff and John Blacking, for example, describe how rhythms and dance instigate, preserve and develop equal social relationships in African communities.<sup>22</sup> Following Blacking, this notion of togetherness on equal terms arises from music's ability to generate friendships through communal dancing: "Venda develop their bodies, their friendship, and their sensitivity in communal dancing".<sup>23</sup> Translated into Arendt's terms, rhythms and dance might be considered musical *actions* in the construction of a possible *polis* of being together-in-the-making.

However, to understand the nature of how this *musical polis* is constructed through *musical actions*, we must also engage with Arendt's notion of *wooing*, which informs those processes of expressing *actions* and building communities of *polis*. Although aesthetics and music do not have a place in Arendt's political theory as such, she does observe that communication through *actions* in the making of the *polis* is not a rational enterprise but instead involves persuasion through the mechanism of *wooing*.<sup>24</sup> Her expression "wooing the consent"<sup>25</sup> emphasizes the relevance of feelings, persuasion, aesthetics and rhetoric to the exchange of political opinions and values via *actions*. David Gutterman describes the role of wooing in Arendt's political theory as follows: "The point is less about agreement and more about engagement [...] The best democratic storytelling enhances relationships and engenders appreciation of the shared world".<sup>26</sup> Arendt's notion of wooing draws attention to the aesthetic potential of expressing political actions and communities of *polis*, and it could serve as a stepping-stone in linking the aesthetic power of music to its political potential.

21 Ibid., 158.

22 John Blacking, *How Musical is Man?* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000 [1973]). John Miller Chernoff, "The rhythmic medium in African music" *New Literary History* 22 (1991), 1093-1102.

23 John Blacking, *How Musical is Man?* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000 [1973]), 44.

24 Arendt in Behabib, Seyla. "Arendt and Adorno: The Elusiveness of the Particular and the Benjaminian moment" in *Arendt and Adorno: Political and Philosophical Investigations*, edited by Lars Rensmann and Samir Gandesh, (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2012), 54.

25 Ibid.

26 Guttermann, David. *Prophetic Politics: Christian Social Movements and American Democracy* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2005), 43.

### Rancière's "politics of aesthetics" and "politics and the police"

In *Politics of Aesthetics* Rancière argues that aesthetics can instigate a political consciousness by defining the perceptual coordinates of what can be said, heard and felt about a subject.<sup>27</sup> He conceives aesthetic experiences as *a priori* to politics, because they define the preconditions of the ways in which the common is constituted within the community. According to Rancière, the production of "what is common within the community"<sup>28</sup> is the essence of politics, because it defines what is valuable, or not valuable, among the people. His definition of politics, then, encompasses common perceptions of what can be said, heard and felt about a subject matter:

"What really deserves the name of politics is the cluster of perceptions and practices that shape this common world. Politics is first of all a way of framing, among sensory data, a specific sphere of experience. It is partition of the sensible, of the visible and the sayable, which allows some specific data to appear [...] It is a specific intertwining of ways of being, ways of doing and ways of speaking."<sup>29</sup>

Rancière argues that there is always aesthetics at play in politics and politics at play in aesthetics. The ways in which aesthetic perceptions arise (e.g., through moving to rhythms or reading a novel) further define what is common within a community and are thus the "essence of politics".<sup>30</sup> Rancière's main argument is that the distribution of aesthetic sensations shapes the production of politics by bringing people together in sensory communities and influences preferences, practices and value judgments:

"What is common is 'sensation'. Human beings are tied together by a certain sensory fabric, I would say a certain distribution of the sensible, which defines their way of being together, and politics is about the transformation of the sensory fabric of the 'being together' [...] Aesthetic experience [...] is a common experience that changes the cartography of the perceptible, the thinkable and the feasible. As such, it allows for new modes of political construction of common objects and new possibilities of collective enunciation [...] Film, video art, photography, installation, [music], etc. rework the frame of our perceptions and the dynamism of our affects. As such they may open new passages toward new forms of political subjectivization."<sup>31</sup>

By defining politics in aesthetic terms, as the production of commonalities through shared values, feelings, opinions and preferences, Rancière enables the political to emerge in the aesthetic experience of music. In relation to groove-based music research, then, it is interesting to analyze how perceptions of rhythmic interplay, groove structures, melodic design and lyrics shape communities and the production of their

27 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2004).

28 Ibid., 14.

29 Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (London, New York: Continuum, 2010), 152.

30 Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2004).

31 Jacques Rancière, "Aesthetic Separation, Aesthetic Community: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art", *Art and Research* 2 (2008), 4-14.



political values. Rancière's arguments call for a combination of musical analysis, aesthetic description and social analysis as means of understanding the politics of music.

A last theoretical concept from Rancière's political theory is his emphasis on *dissensus* via his distinction between *politics* and the *police*.<sup>32</sup> Rancière views the political as played out in the battlefields between "politics" and "the politics of the police". The latter refers to the regulation of the space of opinions, values and preferences by larger institutions and corporations, while the former refers to the ways in which these regulated spaces are challenged and changed by the people through aesthetic expressions, demonstrations and the making of new political movements and actors. He argues:

"The police says that there is nothing to see on a road, that there is nothing to do but move along. It asserts that the space of circulating is nothing other than the space of circulation. Politics, in contrast, consists in transforming this space of 'moving-along' into a space for the appearance of a subject: i.e., the people, the workers, the citizens: it consists in refiguring the space, of what there is to do there, what is to be seen or named therein. It is the established litigation of the perceptible."<sup>33</sup>

Applied to musicological research, this perspective enables readings of how the aesthetic power of music can shape people's socio-political critiques through their perceptions of interlocking grooves, melodies and lyrics. Through the aesthetic construction of a "politics", music can increase the number and variety of available opinions, values and preferences among the people and contribute to musical *actions* and the making of a musical *polis* (as underscored by Arendt). Within the field of musicology, Robert Walser makes a related argument in his analysis of the politics of Public Enemy, stating, "Only the musical aspects of rap can invest his [the rapper] words with their affective force"<sup>34</sup> and thereby enable his socio-political critique to reach millions of listeners. Paraphrasing Rancière, musical expressions of political critique may challenge the order of the police and create a real *politics* through aesthetic means.

### Summarizing theoretical perspectives

These five concepts—actions, polis, wooing, political aesthetics and the "politics of the police" versus politics—will serve as theoretical touchstones throughout the analysis that follows. The Arendt-inspired notion of musical *actions* will inform a discussion of the ways in which musical performances increase the plurality of political subjects and give voice to the voiceless through the experience of interlocking grooves, melodies and lyrics. Arendt's notion of *wooing* underscores how these actions communicate aesthetically, and we will frame the groove experience as consisting of multiple acts

32 Jacques Rancière "Ten Thesis on Politics." *Theory & Event* 5 (2001), accessed June 27, 2014 <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/jacques-Rancière/articles/ten-thesis-on-politics/>. Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. (London, New York: Continuum, 2010).

33 Jacques Rancière "Ten Thesis on Politics" *Theory & Event* 5: (2001), §22. <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/jacques-Rancière/articles/ten-thesis-on-politics/>,

34 Robert Walser, "Rhythm, Rhyme and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy", *Ethnomusicology* 39 (1995), 193-194.

of wooing (e.g., through its rhythms, melodies, call-and-response sequences, and so on). Taken together, these musical actions and processes of wooing can create a new *polis* in which people come together as equal political subjects. Music's political potential is also described at the end of Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone*, when he notes that while singing together does not require shared identities or ideologies as such, it is still "capable of constituting a sense of community that would otherwise not exist".<sup>35</sup> Rancière's notion of the politics of aesthetics expands Arendt's arguments and enables readings of the ways in which the aesthetic power of music shapes people's values, opinions and preferences in new political communities. Lastly, Rancière's distinction between politics and the politics of the police provides a theoretical framework with which to analyze how music enables the political critique of the existing order and expands the space of available political opinions and values.

Before I apply these theoretical concepts in my analysis, I will briefly sketch out my use of methodologies and data sources.

### *Methodologies and Data Sources*

The following analyses draw on ethnographic interviews with a leading Cuban musician, one music aficionado and one musicologist, all conducted in Havana in 2010; field notes from Interactivo's concerts at Teatro Bertolt Brecht and El Sauce in Havana (November 2010); and media representations (documentary videos and articles) of Interactivo's concert at Plaza Anti-Imperialista in September 2013.

### **Interview data**

All of the interview data stems from semi-structured qualitative interviews completed in Cuba in 2010.<sup>36</sup> These interviews were intended to address key issues related to aesthetics and politics in Cuban popular music, though the discussions also followed leads from the informants along the way. All of the interviews were based on an interview guide that centered upon two key questions: (1) How does Cuban popular music express Cuban identity and culture? (2) How are social and political values expressed in Cuban popular music? At times, interviewees spoke freely about these main issues and sometimes even anticipated my questions. At other times, the interviewees took the discussion in the direction of other topics of interest. Most of the interviews lasted between twenty minutes and an hour, and all were one-on-one discussions.

My informants included a musicologist, a music aficionado working elsewhere in the cultural sector and a leading musician. *Neris Gonzales Bello* is a prominent musicologist in Cuba who has done extensive research on Cuban popular dance music, especially timba and reggaeton. She works as a researcher and teacher at the Institu-

35 Robert Putnam, *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 411.

36 Here I refer to Steinar Kvale, *Interviews: an Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1996), 5-6.



to Superior Des Artes in Havana. *David* is a filmmaker and scholar of cultural studies who lives in Cuba and is an engaged music aficionado and consumer of Cuban music. *Roberto Carcasses* (born in 1972) is a key figure in contemporary Cuban popular dance music and the leader of the band *Interactivo*. My discussions with these informants enabled my culturally grounded analysis of the politics of Cuban music from within, and I selected them in order to guarantee relevant and various voices in this regard. All of them were educated about the project and signed up (with informed consent) to participate in it. To protect the anonymity of the music fan, I used the pseudonym "David", but I used real names for the well-known musicologist and musician. While my presence as a foreign interviewer introduced certain limits upon the informants' ability to openly criticize the political regime, their answers nevertheless raised interesting questions with regard to contemporary Cuban politics.

The analysis summarizes general findings both across and within my interviews via a process of "meaning condensation".<sup>37</sup> In the representation of this data, I refer to myself as K and to the informants by their surnames, except in the case of the pseudonym "David".

### **Interactivo as data material**

Carcasses is the director, pianist and composer of the popular Cuban dance orchestra *Interactivo*, which mixes timba with several other Cuban and Afro-Latin music styles, together with elements from Western funk and jazz. Since the band won *Cubadisco* in 2006 with the album *Goza Pepillo*,<sup>38</sup> *Interactivo* has been one of Cuba's most popular performers of Cuban music, particularly among younger people. *Interactivo* features several leading figures within contemporary Cuban popular music, including the famous singers Yusa, Francis Del Río, William Vivanco and Telmary Diaz, all of whom also have solo careers. In recent years, other well-known musicians have joined the band, including trumpet player Julio Padrón, saxophonist Carlos Miyares and drummer Oliver Valdés, among others. *Interactivo* plays a groove-based, rich and physical style of music, and the instrumentation consists mainly of lead vocals, backing vocals, drums, percussion, bass, piano/rhodes, horn section (saxophone, trombones and trumpet) and guitar.

### **Field notes: Interactivo at Teatro Bertolt Brecht and El Sauce**

During the autumn of 2010, *Interactivo* gave almost weekly concerts at the venues El Sauce and Teatro Bertolt Brecht in Havana, which were both excellent settings for interaction between musicians and audiences. The venues are both usually packed, and the entrance fee is relatively modest, allowing students and music aficionados to gather there and dance. Performance high points often included vamping montuno sections encompassing various improvisations and a busy, moving audience.

37 Ibid.

38 *Cubadisco* is a Cuban version of a Grammy, and it is the most prestigious annual award in Cuban popular music. See also: [http://cubaabsolutely.com/Culture/article\\_music\\_Concerts.php?id=XVII-Cubadisco-2013-Festival](http://cubaabsolutely.com/Culture/article_music_Concerts.php?id=XVII-Cubadisco-2013-Festival).

At each of these concerts, I brought a notebook for field notes and usually a camera as well.<sup>39</sup> However, since my aim was to study the music through participation, I often put the notebook in my pocket and engaged with the music through dancing, all the while trying to commit to memory everything that was happening. I was particularly interested in how political values were expressed through the musical communication between performers and audiences. As a means of documenting these interactions, I transcribed and analyzed melodies, rhythms and rapped lyrics, and I also documented the modes of communication I witnessed. I noted things like the number of people, degree of repetition and participation, and overall aesthetic atmosphere.

Bodily engagement via dancing along with the grooves seemed to me to be a crucial means of understanding how the interplay between aesthetics and politics took place musically, and it allowed me to feel the bodily pleasures of specific grooves and rhythms just like the rest of the participating audience. Following James Clifford, the body can serve as a crucial medium for producing knowledge through participant observation, and dancing was practically a precondition for discussing the politics of Cuban grooves.<sup>40</sup> In my analysis I relied upon sets of field notes from those musical moments at the two concerts that best described the complex relationship between aesthetics and politics in practice. In the process of carrying out my analysis, as well, I refracted all of those field notes through the aforementioned theoretical lenses.

### *Analyzing the Politics of Interactivo's music*

#### **Singing politics: "Ay Obama come and get crazy in Havana"**

As one Cuban academic said while discussing musical censorship in Cuba, "You have to be careful and play the game here. You can't voice too harsh of a critique, because then you will be censored by the authorities".<sup>41</sup> Likewise, Carcasses, the bandleader in Interactivo, and his peers had all experienced songs being censored or criticized in the official newspaper (*Granma*). For one thing, all albums and songs released in Cuba have to pass through "The House of the Author" (*Casa del autor*), an institution supposedly dedicated to preserving copyright privileges for musicians. In practice, however, officials at *Casa del autor* decide whether the lyrics in question express potentially contra-revolutionary values. Many songs and recordings do not make it through this revolutionary filter, which in turn forces musicians to exercise a type of self-censorship. On the one hand, creating music featuring socio-political commentary has the potential of generating a big hit, because it can reflect a shared frustration about revolutionary control over all aspects of society. Socio-political critique, in other words, represents a narrative with which young people can identify. On the other hand, this content can also cause problems for the musicians with the authorities.

As a solution to the obstacles posed by revolutionary authorities through institutions such as *Casa del Autor*, many musicians use the live scene as a space for so-

39 Sometimes the doorman did not allow me to bring in the camera.

40 James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 24.

41 Personal conversation in Havana, autumn 2010.

cio-political commentary, since this is harder to suppress. The following extract from my participant observation of Interactivo's concert at *Teatro Bertolt Brecht* in Havana, December 2010, can serve as an example:

*"After an hour of intense grooves, dancing and enjoyment, the audience at Bertolt Brecht witnesses a guest artist entering the stage in the middle of a sweaty montuno groove. Hayla, the former lead singer of Bamboleo, enters the scene, grabs the microphone and start moving softly to the irresistible rhythms. After some vocal improvisations she elegantly interlocks with the 3-2 rumba clave that provides the rhythmic foundations, singing the words: "Ay-yyy Obam-a, get crazy and come to Havana!" [Ay-yyy Obam-a, vuelve te loco ven pa la Habana!] Everybody sings along and calls Obama to join the party. Although the place is packed, people are able to move along with the groove while singing together. The melody is catchy and easy to sing along with because of its melodic design and rhythmic structure. After starting on the fifth it moves diatonically downward, only interrupted by movements of a third between the first and the third scale degree in D major [see transcription below]. The alternation between syncopations and on-beats in its rhythmic structure induces a fitting ragged feeling to the melody and allows it to elegantly fit into its dense accompanying groove [...] After the concert ends, many people keep on singing the refrain, calling Obama while they walk around in Vedado and continue the party, myself included [...] In the following Interactivo concerts over the next few days, the Obama-phrase is sung several times during different montunos. The Obama-coro has become integrated in Interactivo's live performance, and their audiences remember it. Every time, everybody sings along".<sup>42</sup>*

The figure displays two systems of musical notation. The first system is for the phrase "A - a - - ay O - ba - ma". It features a voice line on a treble clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The melody begins with a whole rest, followed by a quarter note 'A', a half note 'a', and a half note 'ay'. The second system is for the phrase "Vuel - ve te lo - co ven pa la Haba - na", starting at measure 5. The voice line continues with a quarter note 'Vuel', a quarter note 've', a quarter note 'te', a quarter note 'lo', a quarter note 'co', a quarter note 'ven', a quarter note 'pa', a quarter note 'la', a quarter note 'Haba', and a half note 'na'. Below the voice lines, the 3-2 rumba clave rhythm is shown on a single-line staff with two measures: the first measure has a half note followed by a quarter rest, and the second measure has a quarter note followed by a half note. The notation is repeated for the second system.

Figure 1. Transcription of the Obama melody sung at the concert with clave rhythm below.

Obama's arrival as U.S. president after years with a Bush administration had given Cubans hope that the relationship between the two countries could improve. In contrast to his predecessor, Obama was popular among the Cubans, being black, liberal and Democrat. Still, Cubans were not allowed to express their political interest in more collaboration with the Obama administration in the public media. A change of official

42 Field notes, Interactivo's concert at Teatro Bertolt Brecht, Havana, 8. December 2010.

enemy could weaken the legitimacy of the revolutionary project. This was probably why Fidel Castro started writing headline articles titled *Reflexiones del Fidel* in the official *Granma* newspaper in spring 2009, three years after leaving office. At a time when both Obama and Raul Castro were talking about re-establishing diplomatic relations,<sup>43</sup> Fidel Castro felt compelled to remind the Cuban people that the United States represented a tradition of evil imperialist capitalism. According to him, this was a threat to the Cuban nation, so the Obama administration should be kept at distance as well, though he did acknowledge that Obama was among the more likeable of the American presidents.<sup>44</sup> According to this view, the United States represented a necessary political antithesis to the revolutionary project that the Cuban government could not live without.

However, at 11 pm on 8 December 2010, a music-loving audience would express what were officially illegal political preferences by singing along to Hayla's melody at Interactivo's concert. Calling for Obama's presence during the montuno of a recorded song would probably not pass *la Casa del autor*. However, at the live concert, hundreds of Cubans did exactly that through acts of singing in unison, every fourth bar, for roughly twenty minutes. The Obama theme, which emerged out of an improvisation by a guest artist, then became part of Interactivo's concert repertoire and was sung at other times, by both band members and audiences, during late autumn 2010.

According to Arendt's theory, the call to Obama via an improvised melody situated in a dense groove is an example of how musical *actions* are expressed through techniques of *wooing*. The political argument for better U.S.–Cuban relations through the words "Obama, get crazy and come to Havana!" is made to *woo* people through catchy melodies and seductive grooves, allowing people to associate the text with aesthetic pleasure through the act of collective singing. The aesthetic experience of the political statement invests the words with communicative power, which in turn evokes Rancière's theoretical arguments as well. Calling for Obama's presence in today's Havana certainly increases the plurality of political opinion, thus shaping a musical *polis*.

During this same period, another political improvisation emerged as well, this time through rapping, during Interactivo's concerts at El Sauce, another thriving live scene in Havana.

### Rapping for political change

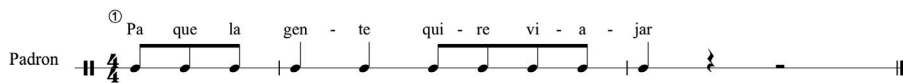
The following field notes from El Sauce can illustrate the power of musical critique through rapping:

"Interactivo gives their Wednesday concert at El Sauce, an outdoor concert venue in Havana. Between two and three hundred young people between 15 and 35 have filled the place. The audience dance and sing along to Interactivo's music [...] During one of the montuno vamps, trumpet player Julito Padrón suddenly puts down the trumpet and grabs the microphone. He starts rapping elegantly

43 Both Obama and Raul Castro repeatedly emphasized the need to sit down and talk and find a solution to the diplomatic problems between the two countries through various forms of media, including TV and the newspapers, in late 2008 and early 2009.

44 See *Reflexiones del Fidel* in *Granma*, pp. 1–3, between April and June 2009.

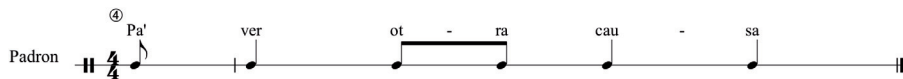
over the groove in an improvisational and syncopated manner, calling out the words: 'Why do the people want to travel?' (Pa'que la gente quiere viajar?)



The words are stretched over ten syllables in combinations of eighths and quarters spread over one bar. The phrase starts on the accents of the three last off-beats, 3&, 4 and 4&, and ends on a downbeat in the following bar. It is followed by a one-bar pause, allowing interlocking percussion, piano tumbaos and bass tumbaos to represent the audible center for the listeners, thus dragging the participants deeper into the groove experience. Just before the silent bar ends, Padrón continues his phrase by asking the two-syllable question 'For what?' (Pa' que?). The rapped question is followed by a related one, 'For what reason?' (Pa'que causa?), with the two last syllables on the beats:



Then suddenly the three questions are answered in the concluding phrase: 'To see something different!' (Pa' ver otra causa).



Through the end rhyme in Spanish—'Pa' que causa? Pa' ver otra causa!'—the rapped statement feels catchy, is easy to rap along with, and invites one to dance. Throughout the montuno Padrón continues to repeat these four phrases over a densely syncopated basic unit that makes up the repeating groove.

*The audience reacts immediately to Padrón's rap with dance steps and enthusiasm. After some repetitions, the audience remembers the rap phrase as well and raps along over the groove. However, after the audience has rapped in unison with Padrón, he invites them into a call-and-response dialogue. First, Padrón starts the dialog by rapping: 'Why do the people want to travel?' He gives the microphone to the dancing audience. They respond in a rhetorical, almost ironic manner by rapping 'For what?', as if everybody knows why. Just one and a half beats later, Padrón takes back the microphone, responding 'For what reason?', returning attention to his initial question. Immediately the whole grooving crowd shouts back to Padrón: 'To see something else!' The call-and-response dialogue between the musicians and the audience keeps repeating throughout the concert, constantly fused by new syncopations and breaks in the rhythm section".<sup>45</sup>*

Through his improvised rapping, Padrón enables hundreds of Cubans to repeat a political call for the freedom to travel, which was forbidden by Cuban law at the time of the concert. In order to travel abroad, Cubans had to apply for a "permission to leave"

45 Field notes, Interactivo's concert at El Sauce, Havana, 23 November 2010.

(permiso de salida) issued by a state official and obtain an “invitation letter” (carta de invitación) from the country to be visited. Officially, this law was in place to prevent “brain-drain” (robo de cerebro), because many well-educated Cubans were extended economic incentives to travel abroad to work as doctors, engineers, and so forth. This is the shared cultural context that makes the rapped words so powerful.

Translated into Arendt’s political theory, this phrase can be considered an *action* through which people demand the right to travel. However, this musical action is not expressed through normal speech but through a process of *wooing*—that is, rapping in the context of an appealing groove that invites the audience to dance and interact socially. The wooing in this action invests the phrase with aesthetic power and encourages feelings of pleasure and engagement as it is repeated every fourth bar during the montuno. In a Rancierian sense, the rapped phrase is a critique of the police’s (that is, the Cuban government’s) restrictions on Cubans’ ability to travel; through an aesthetic act, the rapper calls for change in the political order of the police and expresses a real politics. However, since the described political action reaches the bodies of the listeners through techniques of *wooing*, it is important to look at exactly how the musical structures of the rapped text invest the phrase with its communicative power.

### Wooing political actions through rhythmic structures

On a macro level the rhythmic structures that make up the wooing processes of the political action can be visualized as follows:

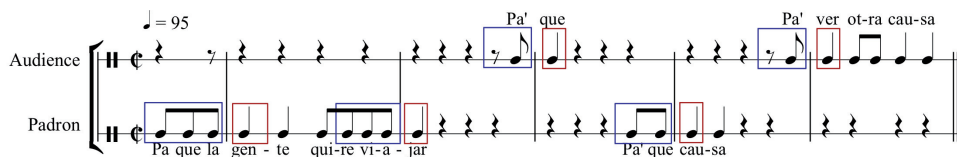


Figure 2. The repeating basic unit of the rap phrase over four bars.

Through this representation we see that the political statement consists of four related rapped motifs separated by smaller breaks. The added blue squares in each of the motifs illustrate how the articulation of the words starts on what Klette Boehler terms the accents of the ponches (Beat 3&, 4, 4&).<sup>46</sup> With this rhythmic design, the rapped words are firmly situated in a Cuban groove tradition that typically consists of accentuations on 3&, 4 and 4& in a la breve. More importantly, this rhythmic shaping places the rap perfectly within the syncopated, dense, polyrhythmic context in which it is performed, backed by percussion and piano and bass tumbaos, all of which are organized around ponches accentuations, and in particular the accentuations of beat 4 and 4&.

By also accentuating the first beat in the four motifs, as indicated by the red squares, the rap rhythm likewise evokes common phrasing patterns in hip-hop and funk, genres that also stress a combination of syncopations and heavy accents on the

46 Kjetil Klette Boehler, *Grooves, Pleasures and Politics in Salsa Cubana: The Musicality of Cuban Politics and the Politics of Salsa Cubana* (PhD Thesis, Oslo: University of Oslo, 2013), 43-44.



beats.<sup>47</sup> Another aspect that adds catchiness to the rapped words and makes them enjoyable is the call-and-response dialogue between the four motifs, as numbered here:

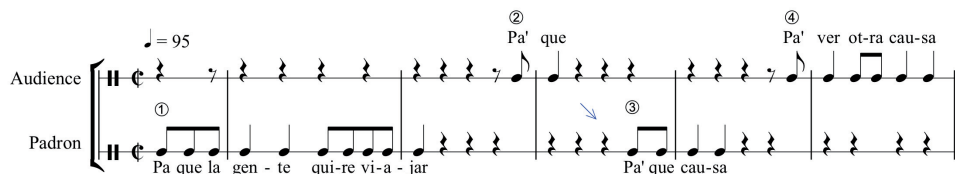


Figure 3. Representations of the rap through numbered motifs.

From this angle, motif 1 is the longest one, consisting of ten syllables stretching over roughly three bars. Motif 2 is a short, snappy phrase of only two syllables that can be considered a musical call, the response to which is the four-syllable motif 3, as illustrated by the blue arrow. The structural relationship between these two motifs, and the musical coherence this establishes, can be more clearly illustrated in a vertical representation that juxtaposes the two motifs:

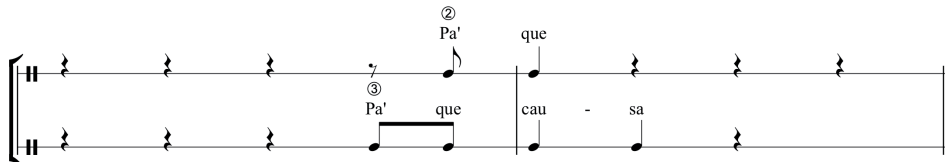


Figure 4. Vertical juxtaposition of motifs 3 and 4 to illustrate rhythmic similarities.

The vertical juxtaposition of these motifs illustrates their structural resemblance by showing how motif 3 is in fact a doubling of the tone duration in motif 1, both to the left and to the right. Then, in motif 4, the rhythmic syntax in motifs 1 and 3 is synthesized into a longer statement

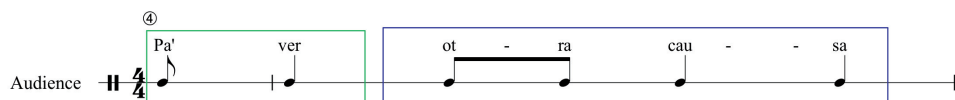


Figure 5. Motif 4, compared with motifs 2 and 3, identified by colored squares.

The green square shows that the first two syllables in motif 4 consist of the content of motif 2, while the blue square shows that the last four syllables in motif 4 resemble motif 3, although they start on a different beat. Through these rhythmic relationships, Padrón's rap communicates a sense of coherence. Referring back to Arendt's theory, the political statement's aesthetic configuration through rhythms is a musical example of "wooing the consent" through the groove.<sup>48</sup> These rhythmic features hint at how

47 Anne Danielsen, *Presence and Pleasure: The funk grooves of James Brown and Parliament* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2006). Anne Danielsen Danielsen, *Musical Rhythm in the Age of Digital Reproduction* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2010). Such combinations of on-beats and off-beats are also common in Cuban conga-songs such as the phrase "Aé, Ae, Aé" from the classic Conga song "La Chambelona".

48 Arendt in Behabib, Seyla. "Arendt and Adorno: The Elusiveness of the Particular and the Benjaminian moment" in *Arendt and Adorno: Political and Philosophical Investigations*, edited by Lars Rensmann and Samir Gandesh, (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2012), 54.

Interactivo communicates with its audience and shares political statements with hundreds of dancing Cubans as they rap with the band in unison.

In order to fully grasp the political potential of Cuban popular dance music in light of Arendt and Rancière's perspectives, it is also important to discuss how people perceive this music as representative of the being-together of the Cuban people—that is, music's relationship to a common Cuban cultural identity.

### Musical constructions of *cubanía*

"Cuban idiosyncrasy is everywhere in the music: in the social fabric of the music, in the specific rhythms, the ways in which we interpret it. It's like a general mode of musical perception that contributes to *cubanía*, the ways in which the audience in a split second interprets a piano tumbao by moving their hips [...] It's in every aspect".<sup>49</sup>

Cuban musicologist Neris Gonzales Bello's response to the question "How is Cuban identity expressed in Cuban popular dance music?" encapsulates key features of how the music embodies *cubanía*, or a shared Cuban identity. Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz describes *cubanía*/cubanidad as the product of the multiple cultural influences that have shaped local practices on the island through ethnic intermingling.<sup>50</sup> Musically, *cubanía* comes to life in specific rhythms, dance steps, aesthetic flourishes and the overall collective experience of the music. As Gonzales Bello underscores, music is also closely tied to her conception of "la idiosincracia de Cuba", and she places Cuban music at the heart of the discourses, customs, preferences, practices and values that make up Cuban culture. Bello Gonzales thus evokes Rancière's theoretical arguments about the politics of aesthetics, by showing how Cuban popular music shapes values, communities, identities and ways of being together in Cuban culture. Her description also paraphrases Arendt's notion of the polis as the being-together of equal political citizens, in that Cuban music can bring forth participatory democracy by expressing shared Cuban culture.

David, an intellectual in Havana, elaborates on the relationship between Cuban cultural identity and music by defining *el Cubano* as musical by nature:

**K:** Here in Cuba people consume a lot of music. They spend a lot of time and money on music, going to concerts, buying music stereos and CDs, and listening to a lot of music, sometimes very loud, mainly Cuban music. Can you explain to me why that is so?<sup>51</sup>

49 Informal conversation with Bello, Vedado, Havana, 13 November 2010. **Bello:** "*la idiosincrasia de Cuba es omnipresente en la música: en el ámbito social de la música, los propios ritmos, la manera en que lo interpretamos. Es como una forma general de percibir la música que contribuye a la cubanía, la manera en que el público en un mini segundo interpreta un tumbao en el piano moviendo la cintura [...] esta en todo los aspectos*"

50 Ortiz, Fernando, *Los factores humanos de la cubanidad*. (Habana: Impreso por Molina y cia, 1991) first published in 1940.

51 **K:** *Aquí en Cuba, la gente consume mucha música. La gente usa mucho tiempo y dinero en música, ir a conciertos, comprando equipos de música y discos, y escuchando mucha música, a veces muy alto, principalmente música cubana. Podría explicarme porque es así?*

**David:** Because basically Cuba is the island of music. El Cubano is very musical [...] The internal harmony of el Cubano es "rítmica". Remember (*Fíjate*) that you can even see this in the way people are walking. They walk with rhythm. And for whatever reason, people here love music.<sup>52</sup>

David, a connoisseur of Cuban culture and music, reproduces existing (tropical) stereotypes of Cuba as the island of music and of the importance of rhythms in everyday Cuban life. However, he does not mean this to sound reductive in a negative manner. David's notion of "el Cubano" simply personifies the aforementioned Cuban cultural characteristics as an imaginary ideal type. As descriptions of how Cuban music signifies within Cuban cultural practice, the notions of *cubanía*, *la idiosincracia de Cuba* and *el Cubano* reveal the linguistic tropes that allow people to map cultural identity onto musical sounds, thus implicitly locating political communities through music. More importantly, they demonstrate everyday Cubans' understanding of their own music as a source of cultural pride.

### "In our music we want to define the big questions"

When discussing how contemporary Cuban dance music expresses Cuban identity, Interactivo bandleader and pianist Robertico Carcasses emphasizes that music should both express the beautiful parts of Cuban identity but also address the problems:

**K:** Can you talk about the lyrics in the songs of Interactivo? What are you communicating? What do they say?<sup>53</sup>

**Carcasses:** A lot of social commentary [*cronica social*]. We want to describe the good as well as the bad things about Cuba. We want to participate in the bigger debates about Cuba in our time. And we express it with our music, which is a very strong medium of communication. In our music we want to define the big questions, like the concepts of being revolucionario, la revolución, socialista, capitalista, as well as criticizing stupid laws [...] such as the law that makes it difficult for many Cubans to travel [...] As artists we both have the possibility and the duty to shape the meanings for the young Cubans. We have to constantly define *cubanía* and our idiosyncrasy.<sup>54</sup>

52 Informal conversation with David, Vedado, Havana, 24 February 2010. **David:** "Porque, básicamente, Cuba es la isla de la música. El Cubano es muy musical, [...] la armonía interna de el Cubano es 'rítmica'. Fíjate, que se puede ver eso hasta en la manera en que la gente caminan. La gente camina con ritmo. Y por cualquier razón, la gente aquí ama a la música."

53 **K:** "Podrías hablar sobre las letras de las canciones de Interactivo? Que están transmitiendo? Que quieren expresar?"

54 **Carcasses:** "Mucha crónica social. Queremos describir lo bueno y lo malo de Cuba. Queremos participar en los debates importantes sobre Cuba en nuestra época. Y lo expresamos con nuestra música, que es un medio de comunicación muy, muy fuerte. En nuestra música queremos definir preguntas importantes como el concepto de ser revolucionario, la revolución, socialista, capitalista, y también criticar las leyes que son absurdas [...] como la ley que dificulta que los Cubanos viajen [...] Como artistas tenemos la posibilidad y la responsabilidad de fomentar las ideas de los jóvenes cubanos. Tenemos que constantemente definir la *cubanía* y nuestra idiosincrasia."

**K:** Why is it so important for Cuban musicians to constantly define la Cubanía and Cuban idiosyncrasy?<sup>55</sup>

**Carcasses:** Probably because it is still not done. Three million Cubans are living in all sorts of different countries [there are approximately 11 million people in Cuba]. They also belong to our idiosyncrasy. And we have big social problems. Still, cubanía, la Patria and our nation are yet to be defined. And now we are living in a crucial time, trying to find our own identity. We have to define what is Cuba, who we are, and mark the future. So in our music we communicate messages to shape meaning for the people.<sup>56</sup>

As an artist Carcasses wants to participate in discussions about central revolutionary values. In light of Arendt's concept of *action*, his goals represent an example of how musical actions increase the space of political equality by allowing new voices into the debate. In a Rancierian sense, Carcasses musical actions contest the framework of political discussion set by the *police* (revolutionary authorities) and articulate real *politics* through aesthetic means, addressing "the good as well as the bad things about Cuba" (Carcasses). Through his music Carcasses thus seeks to create a new Cuban *polis* of "acting and speaking together"<sup>57</sup> by nuancing the notions of cubanía and patria to encompass the *actions* of the nearly three million Cubans who have migrated because of political or economic problems. Redefining the practices, preferences and values that make up cubanía, Carcasses aimed to expand the boundaries of the "the politics of the police"<sup>58</sup> and increasing political plurality.

From David's prior statement that Cuban popular dance music was indispensable to the Cuban people, it is also reasonable to believe that the music of Carcasses had some impact on the values and ideas of the Cuban people, and especially the younger ones. Art forms such as music, film, poetry and theater do play a role in shaping popular culture via socio-political critique—fed up with dogmatic, paternalistic revolutionary rhetoric, many younger Cubans dismiss the highly censored traditional media apparatus in favor of live performance scenes and direct and interactive communities like Teatro Bertold Brecht. As a former employee within the Cuban foreign ministry said: "If you write 10 percent of what they sing in *la música* in the newspaper or one of these media, they put you straight in jail. Here it's all very well controlled."<sup>59</sup> Though

55 **K:** "Porque es tan importante para los músicos Cubanos constantemente definir la Cubanía y la idiosincrasia de Cuba?"

56 Interview with Carcasses, Mariano, Havana, 20 November 2010. **Carcasses:** "Probablemente es porque todavía no esta hecho. 3 millones de Cubanos están viviendo en cualquier tipo de países (approximately 11 millions in Cuba). Ellos también pertenecen a nuestra idiosincrasia. Y tenemos grandes problemas sociales. Todavía, Cubanía, la Patria y nuestro país no están definido. Y ahora estamos viviendo en una época importante, tratando de buscar nuestra identidad. Tenemos que definir lo que es Cuba, quienes somos, y marcar el futuro. Entonces, en nuestra música comunicamos mensajes para fomentar los conceptos del pueblo."

57 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 158.

58 Jacques Rancière "Ten Thesis on Politics." *Theory & Event* 5 (2001), accessed June 27, 2014 <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/jacques-Rancière/articles/ten-thesis-on-politics/>.

59 "Si escribes en el periódico u otros medios públicos 10 % de lo que cantan en la música, te meten directamente preso. Aquí todo es muy bien controlado"

this is an exaggeration, it is true that Cuban music and the arts are freer to voice socio-political commentary and can be considered aesthetic expressions of "politics" paraphrasing Rancière.

### Improvising political critique on live TV

In September 2013 Interactivo was invited to perform during a big concert at Plaza Anti-Imperialista in honor of the five Cubans (Los Cinco Heroes) imprisoned in the United States.<sup>60</sup> The Plaza Anti-Imperialista is Cuba's biggest outdoor concert venue, and it is strategically placed in front of the U.S interest section<sup>61</sup> as a political symbol for the revolutionary struggle and Cuban independence. This concert featured several popular Cuban bands and had thousands of people in the audience; it was also broadcast live on state-run Cuban TV. During Interactivo's performance, Carcasses started improvising melodic vocal lines (guías) in response to the main coro during the song "Cubanos Por el Mundo", which is among the most popular songs on Interactivo's recent album of the same name. The call-and-response sequence between the backing vocalists and Carcasses went like this:

(1) **Carcasses:** We want our brothers to come back home, and we want much more.

**Coro:** I want, remember that I always want . . .

(2) **Carcasses:** Free access to information, so that I can make up my own opinion.

**Coro:** I want, remember that I always want . . .

(3) **Carcasses:** I want to elect the president, through voting and not another way.

**Coro:** I want, remember that I always want . . .

(4) **Carcasses:** No military people, nor dissidents. All Cubans with the same rights.

**Coro:** I want, remember that I always want . . .

(5) **Carcasses:** That the blockade will end, and the auto-blockade also.<sup>62</sup>

This improvisation disseminated a strong critique of the Cuban government to hundreds of thousands of people watching the concert live and on TV. Immediately after the concert, the state-run Instituto Cubano de la Musica suspended Roberto Carcasses from all musical and artistic activities in Cuba. As Interactivo wrote on its Facebook page:

60 According to the Cuban government are the five Cubans illegally imprisoned in the U.S, while the U.S convicted the Cubans on the basis of espionage and conspiracy.

61 After the break down of diplomatic relationships between Cuba and the U.S both countries are not allowed to have embassies in each others country both only interest section, which function as de facto embassies.

62 My translation. Original lyrics in Spanish are: "Carcasses: Queremos que regresen nuestros hermanos (los cuatro agentes) y queremos muchas cosas más. Coro: Quiero, recuerda que siempre quiero. Carcasses: Libre acceso al información, para tener yo mi propio opinión. Coro: Quiero, recuerda que siempre quiero. Carcasses: Yo quiero elegir al presidente, por voto directo y no por otra vía. Coro: Quiero, recuerda que siempre quiero. Carcasses: Ni militantes, ni disidentes, cubanos todos con los mismos derechos. Coro: Quiero, recuerda que siempre quiero. Carcasses: Que se acabe el bloqueo, y el autobloqueo".

"They invited us all to a reunion at Instituto Cubano de la Musica, where we were informed that Roberto will be 'separated from the sector.' In other words, he cannot play, alone or with Interactivo or any other state-affiliated group".<sup>63</sup>

The Cuban cultural ministry argued that Carcasses had dishonored the revolution by expressing his harsh critique on live Cuban television at an event in honor of Los Cinco Heroes. Carcasses was called into a meeting with a cultural official to discuss these charges and refused to admit that he had dishonored the revolution. He then wrote an article that he posted online to announce that he was drawing upon the revolutionary spirit to address critical matters but was not arguing against the revolution:

"As much as I see the video and reread what I said, I do not see why my ideas do not conform to the line of the Cuban revolution, if we are trying to improve our system and if it takes courage to harm yourself by saying what you think [...] Perhaps I was wrong to expect that my words would provide an image of tolerance and evolution in the current Cuban government [...] I don't think that electing the president through voting would much affect our system—instead, it could give the people the chance to feel represented by the state on a higher level".<sup>64</sup>

Two days after the publication of the article, one of Cuba's most famous musicians, Silvio Rodriguez, who is now a member of Cuba's national assembly and an important spokesman within Cuban cultural politics, openly criticized the way in which the Cuban government had banned Carcasses from all cultural activities. He also, however, criticized the singer's use of a patriotic event to perform a political critique.<sup>65</sup> Several other artists, both in Cuba and abroad, also demanded that the Cuban government lift the ban on Carcasses.

A few days later, on 18 September, Cuban cultural ministry officials and Silvio Rodriguez met with Roberto Carcasses to discuss everything, and the government decided to lift the ban on the artist. In the words of Silvio Rodriguez: "Authorities from the Cultural Ministry had a reunion today with Roberto Carcasses and the conversations were so positive that they decided to lift the sanction".<sup>66</sup> Interactivo and Carcasses promptly returned to giving concerts in Havana, as well as abroad.

From an Arendtian perspective, this incident includes several examples of *actions* disseminated musically through techniques of *wooing* that aim to increase the space of political debate in Cuba. In light of Rancière's theoretical arguments, the sung political critique contests "the politics of the police" and addresses "politics" through aesthetic means. The political improvisation illustrates how the aesthetic power of

63 My translation. Original text in Spanish is: "*Nos citaron ayer a todos a una reunión al Instituto Cubano de la Música, donde se nos informó que Roberto queda 'separado del sector' por tiempo indefinido. Quiere decir que no se puede presentar solo, ni con Interactivo, en ningún lugar estatal.*"

64 <http://www.havanatimes.org/?p=98832>

65 See, for example, [http://www.diariodecuba.com/derechos-humanos/1379424616\\_5110.html?page=1](http://www.diariodecuba.com/derechos-humanos/1379424616_5110.html?page=1), and Silvio Rodriguez's blog, [http://www.diariodecuba.com/derechos-humanos/1379424616\\_5110.html?page=1](http://www.diariodecuba.com/derechos-humanos/1379424616_5110.html?page=1)

66 My translation. Original text in Spanish: "*Autoridades del Ministerio de Cultura se reunieron hoy (martes) con Roberto Carcassés y las conversaciones fueron tan positivas que han decidido dejar sin efecto la sanción.*"



music can disseminate a political critique of a totalitarian one-party state to hundreds of thousands of people, thus playing out the participatory democracy that highlights Arendt and Rancière's arguments.

Taken together, the presented analyses illustrate the political potential of Cuban popular dance music as a medium to bring forth participatory democracy and increase the space of political discussion in a totalitarian regime. I will now summarize the findings of this article and respond to the questions presented in the introduction.

### *Conclusion:*

In this article I have discussed how live performances of Cuban popular dance music create an aesthetic *polis* space, in which grooves and melodies increase participatory democracy by disseminating a plurality of opinions, values and preferences that are potentially critical of the totalitarian Cuban state. Inspired by Arendt's theoretical concepts of action, polis and wooing, and Rancière's notion of police versus politics and theory of the "politics of aesthetics", I showed how the aesthetic experience of Interactivo's live performances gives voice to the voiceless in a totalitarian state. I suggested that this musical politics is played out through the interplay of grooves, melodies and lyrics, which invites dancing and collective singing among the participating audience members. My findings expand upon Arendt's argument that political actions are expressed through acts of wooing in a musical context. In this way Interactivo's live concerts shape political consciousness through music. Drawing on ethnographic interviews with the leader of Interactivo, Robertico Carcasses, I showed how the musicians thought of their music as an important political expression; Carcasses notes, "As artists we have both the possibility and the duty to shape meanings for young Cubans". Drawing upon Rancière's broad notion of how the politics of aesthetics is played out through the making of communities and value production in aesthetic experience, I also showed how many informants conceived of Cuban music as an embodied representation of a shared Cuban culture; for my informants, Cuban music expressed practices, values and ways of being-together related to *cubanía*, or a common Cuban identity. Inspired by Rancière's distinction between politics and the politics of the police, I showed how Interactivo's music increased the space of opinions otherwise restricted by the Cuban state.

As one of the most powerful forms of communication within the arts, popular music has a political potential to bring people together in new ways and change the political order constructed by the police. More research on how popular music shapes participatory democracy in the making through songs, concerts, and its role in revolutionary movements and in the making of new socio-political groups would shed further light on the politics of popular music.