

**Marc D. Perry**

*Negro Soy Yo: Hip Hop and Raced Citizenship in Neoliberal Cuba.* Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2016. ix + 284 pp. (Paper US\$ 24.95)

*Negro Soy Yo* is a strong first-hand account of the emergence and decline of one of the most socially influential critical arts scenes in Cuba's recent history. It reads as a reflective memoir, tracing the emergence and decline of Cuban underground hip hop via Marc Perry's experiences with Cuba's hip hop scene. He reflects on his conversations and encounters with artists during a moment of profound change when Cuba's posteconomic crisis was ending via State liberalization of the economy. As the text unfolds, it is clear that he was witnessing the evolution of a generation of Havana-based activist youths who ended up filling an important ideological void.

Perry undertakes an innovative methodological approach which he dubs a "raced ethnography," writing, "My raced positionality as a black North American scholar is indeed informative—and unapologetically so—of my scholarship and, I would add, embodied position in the Cuban field ... my racial situatedness served as an important site of engagement with my Cuban peers, where the space of blackness, through both its sameness and difference, became an initiating ground of dialogue" (pp. 20–21).

The book's first three chapters present "a historicized understanding of hip hop's ascendance in Cuba as one intimately tied to the island's own ambivalences of neoliberal condition" (p. 6). Perry does this by, for example, discussing the experiences of his highly educated Afro-Cuban host family, who had benefited from the 1959 Revolution via the State's antiracist education policy. However, they, like many black Cubans, would see those benefits erode with the economic downturn and limited access to the new economy. During this time, hip hop emerges in a racialized housing project outside of Havana.

Perry goes on to describe the evolution of this new music culture and introduces various influential figures who became central figures in Cuban hip hop. These youths connected to hip hop via what they perceived as a shared racial/economic experience with their African American and Caribbean counterparts. Cuban youth consciously engaged hip hop, researching its history and evolution in the United States. Through hip hop, artists would develop new "grammars of both black being and doing" (p. 15), which Perry argues were a continuation of a longer history of black self-making through diasporic connections.

Chapters 4–6 are the strongest in the book, as Perry continues the first-hand narrative account and reflection on his experiences in Cuba. He then addresses some of the tensions and the larger social impacts of the emergent arts scene.

While the Cuban State was initially ambivalent toward hip hop music culture, through the mediation of U.S. American activists such as Harry Belafonte and Danny Glover, the Cuban State began to understand the scene as a music culture responding to important social issues that it had not addressed after the economic crisis. This included, for example, the racism that persisted in Cuban culture, reflected in the lack of racially diverse representation at the state level and now in emergent material inequalities. The text also addresses the debates concerning the institutionalization of Cuban hip hop in the form of the Cuban Agency of Rap. It is in these chapters that Perry discusses some of the ideological interventions of hip hop artists such as debates about gender and sexuality, the embrace of African cultural legacies, the decline of Cuban hip hop, and the rise of a commercially profitable reggaeton scene.

Given the title of the book, one would expect some sustained discussion and theorizing throughout the book about the intertwined relationship of race and citizenship. There is very little theorization of what constitutes Cuban citizenship: what does it mean to be Cuban within the contemporary economic context? There is frequent mention of what it means to be “Black” and Cuban, but very little discussion of how to understand that dynamic. As such, readers are forced to take what is Cuban, blackness and nonblackness for granted. Some may be left trying to figure out what these power relationships even mean. It may also be a bit too soon to refer to Cuba as a neoliberal economy, or neoliberal state, as much as it actually is an economically struggling country that has had to cut programs out of financial need, not as a result of the full-on embrace of a neoliberal economic agenda (a tension that is briefly mentioned in the text). *Negro Soy Yo* will be useful for those interested in a rich and reflective personal account of a historic moment in a very important country.

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