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***A Brand New Beat: Soul music as message carrier of the
US African American freedom struggle in the Black Americas (1965-1975)***

Paper presented at International CIAS Conference "Reflecting the Americas as Space of Entanglements", Bielefeld University, October 27-29, 2016

I want to talk on some aspects of my research project, which also aims to contribute to the conceptualization of the Americas as space of entanglements, specifically the *Black Americas*. When I talk about Black Americas, I mean the communities, cultures and movements that make up the African diaspora in the Western hemisphere which have established manifold ways of communicating with each other throughout the last centuries. My focus here is on the 1960s and 1970s of the 20th century, when parallel struggles of liberation flowered throughout the Americas, and, thanks to the emergence of mass media and a new degree of transnational mobility, increasingly influenced and inspired each other.

My research centers on the question how soul music, as one of the major cultural manifestations of the US Civil Rights and Black Power movements, was able to bridge political, cultural, linguistic and geographical barriers between U.S. African Americans and Afro-Latin communities. More specifically, it is my aim to show how the consumption and translation of soul in local Latin American contexts contributed to the inter-American dissemination of Black Power-inspired discourses and symbols and the emergence of Afro-Latin social movements.

First, I want to explain why I believe soul music is a very interesting subject for researching transnational flows and entanglements in the Americas. One explanation would be that in contrast to hip-hop, the transnational dimensions of soul music are somewhat underexplored, but there's more to it. Soul music is representative of the role of black popular music for the articulation of new identity constructions and racial solidarity in the context of global struggles against white supremacy that shaped the 1960s and 1970s. In many circumstances, black music was "strategically employed to develop identification between people who

otherwise may be culturally, ideologically, or spatially separate or distinct from one another” (2014, p. 1f) as Shana Redmond puts it. According to her, the collective consumption of music functions as a method of participation within the border-crossing liberation projects which are characteristic of the African diaspora. Black transnationalism, as manifested in the translation of black radical thought from one diasporic context to another is closely related to the global diffusion of black music. In fact, the global outlook of Black Power corresponded with the transnational appeal of soul music, which would become a major source of inspiration for diverse diasporic communities in their quest for freedom. As it gave voice to the new mood of black pride and self-determination that had gained currency in the context of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, I argue that soul music had become a message carrier of the African American freedom struggle, providing afro-diasporic youth movements throughout the Americas with aesthetic symbols of defiance in the face of racial discrimination.

In my Ph.D. project, I plan to follow the traces of soul music and Black Power in three hemispheric contact zones where the flows I’m interested in effectively took place: New York, Rio de Janeiro, and the city of Colón in Panamá.

New York as one, if not *the* major site of afro-diasporic transculturation in the Americas, is maybe the most obvious choice here. Since the late 19th century, New York has been a pole of attraction for millions of afro-descendant migrants from the US Deep South as well as from the Caribbean and Latin America, which explains its reputation as capital of the Black Americas, “Latino metropolis and a mecca of the Black Atlantic” (Laó-Montes 2001, p. 2). While there already are scholarly works on contacts between African Americans and other diasporic communities in New York, my research will be focused on the role of soul music for black-Puerto Rican interactions and how it was paralleled by the building of interethnic political alliances between both communities in the era of Civil Rights and Black Power. In the late 1960s, a young generation of New York-based Puerto Ricans, or *Nuyoricans*, created Latin Soul/Boogaloo - a sound which combined Latin music traditions with African-American Rhythm ‘n`Blues, Soul and Funk influences, giving voice to the strong ties of connectedness between both communities that had developed between both communities who shared the same neighborhoods and features of racial and social marginalization. By reconstructing the simultaneous emergence of Latin Soul/Boogaloo and radical Puerto Rican political organizations as the Young Lords, who were clearly inspired by the Black Panther Party, I want to discuss an important chapter of border-crossing between US African Americans and a

Latino community. What I'm most interested in is the political significance of Puerto Rican migrants appropriating African American forms as featured in Latin Soul. I want to show that for many Nuyoricans embracing US black culture became a means of showing solidarity and identification with the African American struggle, but also a way for challenging the established boundaries of *Latinidad* discourse and the related Puerto Rican elites' racism. Translating African-American sounds, slogans and signs for Latino audiences as manifested in Nuyorican culture and specifically Latin Soul and Boogaloo was also meaningful beyond the local New York context, as it facilitated the diffusion of these influences in other Spanish-speaking Caribbean and Latin American countries.

The second location I chose for my research is the city of Rio de Janeiro. It's not only because of Brazil's outstanding position as country with the largest Afro-descendant population in the Americas that Rio was included, but also because it was the site of Latin America's single-most important manifestation of often-ignored Black Power influences. Despite of being connected to the US through a long tradition of academic and cultural exchange and debates on comparative race relations which date back to the 1930s, Brazil was a very unlikely place for the emergence of an US-inspired Black Power movement in the 1970s. As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have pointed out in their outstanding study *Race in Translation* (2012), in Brazil there has been a strong rejection against those kinds of influences from the US, which challenged the nationalist discourse of *democracia racial* according to which Brazil was something like a beacon on the hill – a shining example for other multiethnic societies of how to overcome racism. Nevertheless, the discourses and symbols of antiracist resistance and black pride related to the US African American freedom struggle did reach Afro-Brazilians, contributing in significant ways to the deconstruction of this national myth. Soul music played an important role in crossing these barriers, as I want to show in my research.

I focus on the early-to-mid 1970s, when DJs popularized soul music from the US among Afro-Brazilians on huge public dance parties which were labeled *bailes black*. The so-called Black Rio movement became a mass phenomenon when soundsystems with names like Soul Grand Prix, Black Power, Afro Soul and Revolução da Mente started to gain massive popularity among the black working-class youth of Rio. The collective mass consumption of soul music went hand in hand with a massive circulation of Black Power-inspired symbolic representations of black pride in clothing, afro hair styles (“cabelo *black power*”) and dance moves. Celebrating US modes of blackness to the sound of James Brown's immensely popular “Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud” and consuming images of African

Americans successfully challenging white supremacy on video screenings and slide shows had profound political implications: in times of censorship and repression by a repressive military regime it inspired many black Brazilians to challenge the racist structure of Brazilian society hidden behind the nationalist myth of *democracia racial*. Activists confirm that the soul parties were fruitful recruiting grounds for Brazil's *Movimento Negro*, which gained influence in the late 1970s and 1980s. As I want to show, soul music carried the messages of the Black Power movement providing Afro-Brazilians with a means of expressing opposition to existing racial hierarchies and opening the window for transnational alliances with other black communities in the Hemisphere. The harsh reactions against Black Rio on behalf of white establishment and intellectuals alike attest for the political meaning of Afro-Brazilians dancing to US soul music: while Brazil's military rulers feared the Black Rio movement as a threat to national security for spreading the messages of Black Power radicalism, left-wing intellectuals rejected it as a case of US cultural imperialism which allegedly destroyed authentic national culture.

Maybe the least known of the sites I'm doing my research on is that of Colón. Situated at Panama's Caribbean coast and at the limits of the Canal Zone it constitutes an important juncture of hemispheric transculturations and what Earl Lewis has called "overlapping diasporas" (1995). Among many other groups, there is a huge community of West-Indian descent, whose forefathers had come as labor migrants from the Anglophone Caribbean to build the Panama Canal and Railroad. Throughout the 20th century, and effectively until today, these so-called *afro-antillanos* have been affected by double discrimination in Panama: as blacks, but also as members of an English-speaking minority. The presence of African American sailors and GI's in the Canal Zone, the reception of the local military radio station of the US base and the absence of linguistic barriers made sure that the flows between US African Americans and Colón's West Indian community were much more direct and intense than in most other Latin American contexts.

These links of connectedness manifested themselves in the 1960s and 1970s, when Colón's West Indian youth was heavily influenced by US Black Power, and soul music became the soundtrack for a new era of black assertiveness in Panama. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, many of the so-called *compos nacionales* as for example Los Dinamicos Exciters, released a series of Panamanian soul records which are considered extremely rare and precious goods by collectors nowadays. While there are several studies on Calypso and other afro-diasporic forms in Panama, there is no scholarly research on the vibrant local soul scene which emerged

under the described circumstances. By interviewing activists, musicians, DJs and other participants in the local scene, I want to find out in how far the popularization of soul in Colón was related to increased political mobilizations and the emergence of new identity constructions in the West Indian community.

As we were asked by the conveners of this conference to elaborate on the question in how far our projects might contribute to the analysis of the Americas as space of entanglements, I want to reserve the remaining minutes of my presentation by trying to answer it.

First, some comments on methodology. As this project investigates the ways of diffusion as well as the appropriation of soul music in different local contexts, it draws on different methodological approaches which are destined to conceptualize the mobility of cultural practices, identity discourses and actors. By following George Marcus concept of “following the thing” (1995) the cultural product of soul shall be traced in its diverse forms of reception and translation in different sites. Floya Anthias and her approach of “translocational positionality” provide a useful framework for analyzing the entanglements between different identity discourses as well as the emergence of translocal relations between afro-diasporic groups on the base of “similar experiences, goals and trajectories” (2009). Aiming to relate the diverse forms of appropriating soul to each other, these approaches shall be combined with Appadurai’s model of “scapes” outlined in *Modernity at Large* (2000) which allows for identifying the flows through which the different sites and translocal actors were connected.

In want to continue with some thoughts on the theoretical perspectives of the project. I believe that an afro-diasporic perspective on the Americas is of great use for the concept of entanglements, as it sheds light on manifold interrelations and transversal flows that are not captured by nation-state based or regional approaches. In contrast to many nationally confined accounts, research which deals with the interrelatedness of the African diasporas in the Americas allows for insights into the high degree of mobility and the cultural practices of interregional and translocal exchange that defines many communities in the Black Americas.

While Paul Gilroy and others have advanced the field of African diaspora studies in significant ways, many of their contributions on the transnational dimensions of black cultures have centered on the US African-American and Anglo-Caribbean experience, leaving Afro-Latin America at the margins of scholarly attention. Also in Latin America, there has been a strong opposition against relating local black communities to other afro-diasporic groups. My research is indebted to the increased efforts to overcome the marginalization of Afro-Latinos

from the historical, cultural and political mappings of the African diaspora. As Afro-Latinos are positioned at the intersection of blackness and *latinidad* discourses, focusing on their cultures and histories of resistance allows for the challenging of exclusive and essentialist identity concepts of what is “black” and what is “latino” in the Americas. Relating and comparing different Afro-Latin experiences to each other is meant to generate new findings on parallels and differences between modes of racial domination and antiracist mobilizations in various hemispheric contexts.

Concluding, I want to highlight some factors and concepts which have proven crucial for analyzing the flows of ideas and cultural products I’m working on.

Massive migration from the Caribbean and Latin America to the U.S., but also from the Caribbean to Panama facilitated the development of close interactions between afro-descendants in sites of “hemispheric transculturation” like New York and Colón. In my research, the accounts of migrants and their role as translocal actors, as for example musicians, activists or DJs, who created new cultural products and established networks of solidarity with other diasporic groups are of special importance. I just want to cite the example of Toni Tornado – an Afro-Brazilian musician who had spent the 1960s as an illegal immigrant in Harlem, where he got in touch with soul music and the dynamics of the black freedom struggle. On his return to Brazil in 1969, Tornado started a career as a soul musician in which he capitalized on his Harlem experience. In appearing with an Afro hairdo, and making references to the Black Power movement during his stage appearances he caused public outrage, and was even arrested at one of his shows. But he also found many Afro-Brazilian followers and was one of the first musicians to introduce the Brazilian audience to the style of African American soul culture, which would become immensely popular in the years to come.

Research on the hemispheric diffusion of soul is obviously intended to further debates on the mobility of sounds but also on the relations between music and social movements. Recent contributions from the field of Inter-American Studies hint at the crucial role of popular music for the emergence of translocal identity constructions in the Americas, where the migration of sounds facilitated the emergence of “transversal consumer cultures” (Thies and Raab, 2009). Preceding the emergence of reggae and hip-hop as global youth cultures, the transnational diffusion of soul music in the 1960s and 1970s constitutes a key chapter in what Brazilian investigator Livio Sansone has labeled the „globalization of blackness“ (2003): an ongoing

process of cultural transfer between highly mobile afro-diasporic communities in which black popular culture from the US occupied a prominent position as major focus of identification. While the transnational popularization of US popular music has often been delegitimized as form of cultural imperialism by defenders of “authentic” national cultures, I think it is important to highlight the significant role of soul and other African-American genres in empowering local diasporic communities, challenging racial hierarchies and forging bonds of solidarity between formerly isolated groups.

When dealing with the conditions of inter-American diffusion of soul the commodification of music is also a crucial concept. Whereas in the early-to-mid-1970s the increased commodification of soul music and Black Power protest contributed to the demise of the sound and the movement in the US, it were the very same processes which brought movements like Black Rio into being: the transnational circulation of Black Power-inspired symbols and the related emergence of transversal consumer cultures of resistance depended on the distribution chains of global capitalism. As George Lipsitz emphasizes in his analysis of diasporic transculturations in popular music, “commercial culture can provide an effective means of receiving and sending messages” (1994, p.13). The creative appropriation of soul by Afro-Latin audiences, who used the medium as a platform for challenging racialized hierarchies and forging bonds of transnational solidarity, testifies to the emancipatory potential of black cultural products in circulation.

In the Americas, hegemonic and interventionist US policies, asymmetric power relations and nationalist ideologies have caused a lack of attention to the dialogues that unfolded between African Americans in the US and other diasporic communities in the hemisphere. By highlighting the inter-American dimensions of Soul and the related impact of the Black Power movement in Latin American contexts, the project is intended to bridge persistent demarcations between Black and Latino Studies, which I consider another important step toward conceptualizing the Black Americas as space of hemispheric entanglements.

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