

## ***Inventos***

### **- Cuban Rap in a Transnational, Diasporic Context -**

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As John Miller Jones stated at the conference on *Music and Politics* which took place in Bielefeld, Germany, in May 2012, “music in itself is a flow, a temporal progression”, which crosses temporal and geographical borders and bridges gaps, transcending time and space. Contemporary Cuban rap emerged within the framework of such a global cultural flow, as the result of a transnational exchange between the United States and the Afro-Cuban community.<sup>1</sup> As the recent award winning documentary film *Inventos* directed by independent film maker Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi records, Cuban rap moves in between convergent spheres, at the crossroads of Afro-Cuban tradition and a Diasporic African culture in the Americas. The documentary aims at accomplishing several functions: to celebrate the African heritage and black Diaspora solidarity in Cuban hip hop as a sign of authenticity, to criticize the commercial aspect of contemporary rap as straying away from the original ideology of the hip hop culture, and to provide Cuban artists with a launch platform enabling them to enroll within international music projects. However, the socio-political context into which this particular movement developed is not to be neglected when discussing the style of expression and thematic of Cuban rap as compared to its U.S.-American neighbor. It seems to me that while Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi’s film struggles to draw a parallel between Cuban and U.S.-American rap as protest music with a strong racial focus, it nevertheless fails to acknowledge the differences in the development and performance of racial consciousness between North and South of the Florida Straits. In what follows I will try to shed light on the constructions of authenticity as revealed by the documentary and to outline the

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<sup>1</sup> As defined by socio-cultural anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, in the contemporary, globalized world there are five types of cultural flows, which he terms as follows: ethnoscaples, mediascaples, technoscaples, financescaples and ideoscaples. Ethnoscaples comprise the flow of people, such as tourists, exiles, immigrants and people moving or wishing to travel. Technoscaples refer to the flow of technology, such as the import and export of technological equipment. Financescaples, as one may already infer, relate to money transfers, while mediascaples refer to travelling information such as newspapers, films, PC games and so on. The last and for my case of study most important dimension of cultural flow, ideoscaples, comprises political and ideological images and ideas, trends and discourses, to which rap music subscribes; Appadurai 1996: 33-36.

shortcomings of the transnational dialogue between Cuban and U.S.-American rap music, which Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi fails to address.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Beginnings of Cuban Rap**

After 1959, the year that Fidel Castro came to power in Havana, Cuba severed its ties to the United States, which in turn imposed a harsh economic embargo on the country, isolating it from the rest of the Western world. Cuba responded by adhering to the socialist policy of the Soviet Union, making it its primary trade partner, and shortly after became an important player in the Cold War, which widened the gap between the island and its neighbor to the north. In the context of the Cold War, the Cuban socialist regime closed the doors to foreign cultural flow which was deemed as corrupted by capitalist values. This included film, literature and music coming from the United States, which Cubans' curiosity (especially that of the young generation) yearned for.<sup>3</sup>

Emerging in the early 90s, Cuban rap developed out of the cultural revolution which took shape during the so-called Special Period (*periodo especial*), a time of ideological and economic crisis in Cuba during the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>4,5</sup> Strongly influenced by the hip hop culture of the United States, Cuban rap was rejected by the authorities at first, as the music of the *enemy to the North*, and had to undergo a transition towards local originality, in both style and message, in order to gain national

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<sup>2</sup> Defining the concept of authenticity is not at all an easy task. Professor Graham Huggan mentions several possibilities to rely on, from Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor's definition "in terms of the moral ideals behind self-fulfillment" to anthropologist James Clifford's stance on authenticity as always being "something produced, not salvaged", always a construct; see Huggan 2001: 158. Perhaps a more accurate definition for authenticity is provided by Britta Timm Knudsen and Anne Marit Waade, "as a relational quality attributed to something out of an encounter" (Knudsen&Waade 2010: 13). Authenticity is performed or projected, a staged production, a constructed reality.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the Cuban Revolution please see Chomsky 2011.

<sup>4</sup> According to cultural critic and rap music promoter Ariel Fernández Díaz the roots of Cuban rap can be traced as far back as to the 1920s, when jazz music first came to Cuba; Fernández 1999: 4.

<sup>5</sup> During the decade of the 90s Cuba went into a severe economic depression, euphemistically called 'The Special Period in Times of Peace', caused by the fall of the Soviet Block. Most of the socialist allies of the Castro régime were gone; the Cuban economy found itself on the verge of collapse. According to Nadine Fernández, after 1989, there was a 73% drop in imports and scarcely any oil on the island, which "paralyzed" the local economy (Fernández 2010: 25). Cuba needed to implement capitalist strategies in order to keep the economy of the country afloat, a situation which slowly gave way to old racial and class divisions "confined to people's heads" only during the years up to the Special Period (Fuente 2001:19). Socialism was failing not only on an economic scale, but also on an ideological one, which was slowly but surely leading to a crisis of the very Cuban identity that had grown to incorporate socialist principles.

support.<sup>6</sup> Being a new direction in the musical field of the island, it needed a certain period of sedimentation before evolving into an autochthonous product, a period during which imitation prevailed over originality. Indeed, the first generation of Cuban rappers was very much oriented towards their U.S.-American peers. The initial stages revolved around private gatherings called *bonches*, where young Cubans would come together and listen to the latest rap tapes smuggled in from the United States. With time, the *bonches* became *moñas*, meaning public gatherings for listening to rap music.<sup>7</sup> Gradually some of those frequenting the *bonches* started writing and recording tracks of their own, by sampling the beat off U.S.-American tapes, to which they rapped their lyrics in Spanish and then later began synthesizing hip hop beats with Afro-Cuban rhythms. With this second generation (Orishas, Los Aldeanos, etc.), Cuban rappers found their own style, integrating Afro-Cuban beats and rhythms, and adapting their music to the social and political problematic of the country, so as to later re-inscribe itself in the international music scene.<sup>8</sup> The outcome is that Cuban rap developed a double function: to address ardent contemporary issues, such as race in Cuba, the social injustice tourism creates, or the lack of morals and principles, and to reflect an identity which goes beyond national borders, by creating a refuge for the African Diasporic experience, an alternative to express cultural roots through style and sound.<sup>9</sup>

In the early 2000s, U.S.-American independent film maker Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi traveled to Cuba in search for the story behind Cuban rap. The fifty minute documentary is a collage consisting of a series of performances and interviews, among others, with members of Cuban rap groups such as Anónimo Consejo and EPG&B, Junior Clan, as well as Cuban rap promoter Ariel Fernández. By following rap artists into their homes and around the city to their gathering sites, jamming sessions and local improvised performances, Jacobs-Fantauzzi records a wide range of the manifestations of Cuban rap in the artists' daily existence. Hip hop is a way of life, a whole universe, confesses Ledis, one of the female protagonists in the film.<sup>10</sup> Wherever the camera follows, hip hop is the main topic of conversation. The Vedado neighborhood in Havana resonates with live rap sessions on the roof tops and in the

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<sup>6</sup> See Fernández 1999: 7. Rap is a genre of protest music which developed in the 1970s in the United States together with DJing, break dancing and graffiti spraying as part of a so called 'hip hop' culture. See Menrath 2001: 52. In contemporary media the terms rap and hip hop are often used interchangeably.

<sup>7</sup> *Bonche* is the term for a private gathering for listening to rap music; *moña* is defined as a public rap gathering; see Pacini-Hernández 1999: 23.

<sup>8</sup> Testifying to the local adaptation of music and style, see Fernández 1999: 5, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Roberto Zurbano in Hernández-Reguant 2009: 151, 152, 157.

<sup>10</sup> Jacobs-Fantauzzi 2005.

artists' bedrooms. The film encompasses and bridges the gap among different generations, with children free-styling in the streets about strawberry ice cream and fourteen year old Sandra rapping along with adult artists at hip hop festivals. All in all, we witness a monopoly of rap over the daily life in Havana, with a varied succession of interviews in which each artist attempts to define the meaning of hip hop for him/her, interspaced with recorded performances, including some by U.S.-American hip hop group Dead Prez. The film makes use of direct-to-camera address, there is no voiceover whatsoever, nor does it provide us with a direct account on the director's behalf versus his personal stance on the subject. However, in several other interviews Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi does define himself as an activist, whose aim is to create awareness of the social injustice around the world. For Jacobs-Fantauzzi, Cuban hip hop is genuine and pure, implying that such qualities have been lost to much of our contemporary rap music. He is a member of the Clenched Fist Productions, an organization which functions as a gathering point for hip hop artists with a political message and the releaser of the documentary.<sup>11</sup> *Inventos* thus does have an agenda, one which aims at bringing back the 1970s flavor of rap music, a time when it addressed social, racial and political issues exclusively.

### **The Influence of US-American Hip Hop Culture**

Developing in the 1970s against the background of discontent with national politics and as a genre of protest music, rap found popularity among the younger generation of the time. It has been often connected to another counterculture movement which was initiated in the late 1960s in New York, namely the graffiti scene. Together with break dancing, also known as B-boying, and with DJing, these four elements constituted the initial US-American hip hop culture, which gained worldwide reputation through music artists such as Grandmaster Flash, Run DMC and later Public Enemy.

HipHop entstand Mitte der 70er Jahre in der Bronx von New York. (...) Dort trafen DJ-Techniken und die Straßenreimkultur des Rapping zusammen; auf Straßen und öffentlichen Plätzen veranstalteten DJs und MCs gemeinsam *block parties*: der Dj legte auf zwei Plattenspielern jeweils ein Exemplar der gleichen Schallplatte an einer bestimmten Stelle (dem Instrumentalteil) auf und erzeugte durch Hin- und Her-Mixen zwischen den beiden Plattentellern die fortlaufende Wiederholung eines Rhythmus. Der MC forderte durch ein Mikrophon mit Reimen und Kommentaren das Publikum zum Tanzen auf (Menrath 2001: 52).

Hip hop developed in the mid-70s in Bronx, New York. (...) That was where new DJ-ing techniques and street culture rhyiming fused together; DJs together with

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<sup>11</sup> According to a short interview *Reelblack TV* conducted with film director Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi in 2007.

MCs organized block parties on the streets and in public places; the DJ played on each of the two turntables the same part of two identical discs and thus created a repetitive rhythm by rubbing the discs back and forth. The MC's comments and rhymes called on the audience to dance.<sup>12</sup>

Thus it was in the streets of New York that rap grew to become one of the most popular music genres of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Artists organizing block parties aimed at reaching the community with spare means. The message which took shape was rooted in the political disappointment, social inequalities and racial discrimination governing the U.S.-American society in those decades, when ethnic groups, in particular African-American citizens, were at the bottom of the social hierarchies.<sup>13</sup> It was indeed mainly the racial component that played a crucial role in rap music, a great number of its representative artists being African-Americans, while their lyrics focused on redefining black identity and consolidating an African-American consciousness in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>14</sup>

Eli Jacobs-Fantauzzi confesses to hold great respect for the awareness of the original hip hop movement in the United States.<sup>15</sup> *Inventos* reflects the celebration of that racial consciousness as a sign of authenticity, to which several film elements testify. The Cuban hip hop generation of 2000s grew up under the influence of 99 Jams and 1040 am U.S.-American radio stations, whose playlists focused on R&B and hip hop, as Ariel Fernández states, inferring that rap music is black music, in the sense that it reflects the problematic issues of people of color (Jacobs-Fantauzzi 2005).<sup>16</sup> Although rap music and the hip hop movement arrived to Cuba somewhat later and sinuously due to the economic and ideological blockade between the two countries, in the 1980s B-boying became popular in Havana, with children imitating the moves seen on television shows illegally picked up from the United States. The first rap music tapes, though not available to everyone, made their way to the Cuban youth in the 1990s, as Alexey, member of the Cuban hip hop duo Obsesión remembers.<sup>17</sup> Whereas any connoisseur of Cuban rap can testify to the majority of Cuban rappers as being of

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<sup>12</sup> My translation.

<sup>13</sup> African-Americans stayed at the bottom of social hierarchies well into the late 20th century, according to Berlin 2010: 202.

<sup>14</sup> The Civil Rights Movement is remembered as the struggle against racial discrimination and for equality before the law for all African-American citizens, which took place in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, and which helped create awareness for the hardships blacks still confronted in the U.S. at the time; Romano 2006: xii. The Civil Rights and its representatives inspired many rap artists, such as Public Enemy and Grandmaster Flash, in their protest music.

<sup>15</sup> According to *Reelblack TV*, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> The author elaborates on this matter in Fernández 1999: 5.

<sup>17</sup> As Sujatha Fernandes states in Birkenmaier 2011: 174.

African descent, it is crucial to mention the fact that *Inventos* presents Afro-Cuban rappers *exclusively*, each of them voicing their claim to being a true bearer of the hip hop message. Seen from this angle, the documentary constructs authentic rap music by placing an equal sign between the artists and the racial coordinate, though apparently not only at the content level. The latter constitutes the focus of several live performances interspaced with interviews from Anónimo Consejo and members of the EPG group. As one member of Anónimo Consejo, Kokino, formulates:

Mi compromiso es con la gente que me quiere / Mi compromiso es con la gente que me ama / Más importante son ustedes que la fama / Hoy estoy aquí, no sé mañana / Aquí me ves, cerrando bocas de celosos que cambiemos (...) / Cuando llegó Colón: saqueo, esclavitud, opresión.

My commitment is to the people that want me / My commitment is to the people that love me / You are more important to me than fame / I am here today, but I might not be tomorrow / Here I go, silencing mouths of jealous people who want us to change (...) / When Columbus arrived, so did slaughter, slavery and oppression.<sup>18</sup>

*Inventos* stresses the fact that black Cubans see rap as a possibility of expression and of identification at a global level with the black Diaspora, a discourse confirmed by cultural critic Roberto Zurbano as part of a “conciencia transnacional, diaspórica, descolonizadora y emancipatoria”, a transnational, Diasporic, decolonizing and emancipating conscience.<sup>19</sup> While part of the Cuban society still rejects hip hop as genuinely Cuban, the response of the protagonists is to subscribe their music to a globally encompassing “cultura Africana. (...) todos somos hijos (...) de Africanos”, an African culture which throughout centuries bore its children in Cuba, as well.<sup>20</sup> As descendants of the oppressed, Cuban rappers assume the responsibility to denounce the social and racial injustice which resurface in Cuba during the Special Period, or better yet the government’s policy of failing to acknowledge the persistence of class and racial divisions in the social sphere. Those “jealous mouths” and “stupid people trying to destroy everything” obviously have names, which are intentionally left out from the lyrics (Jacobs-Fantauzzi 2005). What starts out as a call to fans of underground Cuban rap, goes much deeper than the denotative meaning, into a cry for awareness and active critique of the hardships that Afro-Cubans confront during the *periodo*

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<sup>18</sup> I use here the translated subtitles in Jacobs-Fantauzzi 2005.

<sup>19</sup> My translation; Zurbano 2012: 22.

<sup>20</sup> Cuban rapper Alexis in Jacobs-Fantauzzi 2005.

*especial*.<sup>21</sup> Kokino *tiene un compromise con su gente* and he pays his debt by voicing out the complaints of an oppressed people.

### **Afro-Cuban Resistance Re-Invented**

The encoding of a political message into rap lyrics here is not at all a coincidence, but something typical for the Afro-Cuban community, which has learned to adapt to constant vigilance and never call names, but always veil its claims. Unfortunately, Jacobs-Fantauzzi's documentary does not address the historical context behind this particular discourse of Afro-Cuban resistance. Rap music definitely constitutes a form of cultural protest in a country where, according to scholar Andrea Easley Morris, "national identity has been constructed in terms of "raceless" nationalism", regardless of the considerable impact which African heritage had on its society (Easley Morris 2012: xxi). Black Cubans have learned to culturally survive over centuries by hiding, either in the mountains during colonial times, or by blending their heritage with elements of the accepted standard culture. Easley Morris mentions, among other forms of cultural resistance, in a chronological order, the *palenques* (gathering places for runaway slaves during colonial times) and the *solares*, (the so-called Cuban form of 'ghetto') to which I would definitely add the religious syncretism of *Santería*, *Palo Monte*, and *Abakuá* among others. Still, one can argue that cultural resistance in general has never taken an outspoken offensive stance in Cuba, but rather a defensive one. With rap music, the critique is also disguised, this time under slogans of the revolution.<sup>22</sup> "*Revolución!*" cry the protagonists of the documentary during their live performances. The explanation which the director fails to provide us with is that as long as the artist sells his protest as part of the revolution, he is definitely on the safe side. After all, the general rule in Cuba goes as follows: '*dentro de la Revolución todo; fuera de la Revolución, nada!*', to quote the famous words of president Fidel Castro in his

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<sup>21</sup> As an example for the amount of tension governing the Cuban population (of all ethnic backgrounds) in the 1990s, according to historian Louis A. Pérez Jr., various dissident groups emerged in Havana during the *periodo especial*, whose voices of protest spurred the rest of the population to a series of violent demonstrations and street riots in 1993 and 1994; see Pérez 2011: 314.

<sup>22</sup> Cuban rap focuses among other topics on race and racism in Cuba, on the injustice tourism creates, and on the negative aspects of tourism, but never as a direct critique to the government and often in a language meant not to give the artist away as counterrevolutionary, when complaining about the existing problems; Roberto Zurbano in Hernandez-Reguant 2009: 151, 152, 157; West Durán 2004: 16.

1961 discourse on intellectual freedom.<sup>23</sup> As Cuban sociologist Alan West Durán confesses,

Cuban rap has been vigorous in attacking racism but for the most part within the egalitarian claims of the revolution. By thoroughly embracing rap, the Cuban *raperos* have sought to join the Black Atlantic dialogue, and by doing so they have enlarged the notion of Cuban blackness as something that needs to be seen in an international context and have sought a non-essentialist, non-homogenous meaning of blackness (West Durán 2004: 35).

This is the real *invento*, to refer back to the title of the documentary, not so much the toothpaste that Cubans use to stick their posters of U.S.-American rappers on the wall, or the recording studios improvised in egg-tray sound-proof kitchens, as the metaphoric *invento* of making a message heard without literally spelling it! This way, Cuban rappers employ the established discourse of the Revolution in order to underline its very failures, obviously another sign of authenticity in Jacob Fantauzzi's documentary.

While the boldness of Cuban rappers comes from their ability to play with word connotation in order to make a political statement, the Afro-American hip hop performances in the documentary reflect a stand point which can hardly be classified as veiled. Dead Prez's live act in the documentary, to which a numerous crowd sings along, goes as follows: "I'm a African, I'm a African / And I know what's happenin' / It's plain to see, you can't change me / Estoy with mi gente (I'm down with my people) for life", to which one group member adds a straight "Fuck the police! (...) One aim, one gun" (Jacobs-Fantauzzi 2005). It is plain to see that the concept of roots is here a recurrent element throughout the documentary, especially through the hybrid concerts of U.S. and Cuban rap artists which *Inventos* records. From the 1970s onwards U.S.-American rap has had a considerable impact worldwide, once it became internationally broadcasted. Many issues that it addressed, such as ignorance, oppression, racial discrimination and lack of political representation, still appeal to a Diasporic black community, regardless of its origin. However, none of the Cuban rap artists presented in the film instigate to physical violence or armed rebellion. I take this particular instance in the documentary to be one of its weakest points, which might have been clarified with a better audiovisual input on the topic of racial dynamics in the Americas. The society of the United States obviously developed a different protest culture than its southern neighbor. The fight against racial discrimination and particularly the Civil Rights Movement ultimately paved the way for direct protest and a more uninhibited freedom of speech than in Cuba, where a policy of silencing was practiced throughout

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<sup>23</sup> According to Chomsky 2011: 66.



the entire past century.<sup>24</sup> There were indeed several emancipating Afro-Cuban literary and intellectual movements which took place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however they functioned more on the folkloric level, not as a form of political representation, never opening up a political dialogue on the horizontal.<sup>25</sup> These movements focused mainly on the elevation of popular dance, music and religious performance to a national cultural symbol. With Cuban rap, the medium remains the same, nevertheless this particular movement dares to voice critique against the system, but does so in a non-aggressive manner. The critique takes the form of the metaphor. Jacobs-Fantauzzi's documentary does not address the issues of violent language/instigation to violence within the context of rap music, although a subtext explanation in my opinion is here long overdue, since the viewer can easily discern between a neutral Cuban and an aggressive U.S.-American style of rapping. Though united in their general cause for racial awareness and representation, the Cuban rap scene and the U.S.-American rap scene go separate ways when it comes to style and performance. Integrating the music act by Dead Prez without any reference to the background of protest traditions in Cuba and the United States therefore creates more of a barrier than common grounds between the two counterparts.

### **Black Diasporic Solidarity and Local Syncretism**

*Inventos* thus wishes to present us with “the real hip hop” in the sense of a music genre which functions within the realm of black Diasporic solidarity (Jacobs-Fantauzzi 2005). However, a further discrepancy arises with the recurring topic of Mumia Abu-Jamal. The releasing of Mumia Abu-Jamal, an Afro-American charged with the murder of a white policeman in 1981 and sentenced to life prison without the possibility of parole, becomes a central theme of the documentary. At the time *Inventos* was produced,

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<sup>24</sup> Throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, black Cubans were not allowed to group themselves in political parties. When attempted, such as with the creation of the *Partido Independiente de Color* in 1908, the Cuban government reacted with constitutional banning of the party and armed repression of its members, which escalated in a violent conflict in 1912, known under the name of the Race War. With the dawn of the Revolution led by Fidel Castro, the topic of race was shortly taken up as part of the political agenda, with several institutional reforms meant to erase discriminatory practices. As early as 1962, racism was officially declared as eradicated, and so the topic was once again made taboo. Silencing the issue allowed for a subtle racism that was deeply rooted in the Cuban society to continue; Fernández Robaina 2009: 8; West-Durán 2003: 65; Fernández 2010: 5.

<sup>25</sup> The Afro-Cuban movements (*Afrocubanidad*) refer to literary and intellectual movements with a focus on the African heritage of Cuba; the first one took place in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with Alejo Carpentier, Lydia Cabrera, Fernando Ortíz and Nicolás Guillén as its initiators; in the 1960s and 1970s a second phase of *Afrocubanidad* takes place, whose main representatives are Miguel Barnet, Natalia Bolívar and Nancy Morejón; see Fernández Robaina 2009: 19, 74, 79.

Mumia was still on the death roll and the source of heated press controversies in the United States over his alleged guilt or innocence.<sup>26</sup> “Free Mumia!” is the repetitive slogan Cuban rappers shout on various occasions on camera, accompanied by an upward movement of the right arm with the fist clenched up in the air (Jacobs-Fantauzzi 2005). The documentary uses the gesture of the clenched fist as a symbol for the support that Mumia’s appeal for release supposedly finds among black Cubans in particular and for the resistance against racial prosecution in general. The footage means to build a bridge between Cuban and U.S.-American black citizens and provide the audience with a convincing picture of the transnational solidarity between them, as unified through rap music as a protest movement. However, the use of the clenched fist gesticulation may backfire in such a context, when interpreted as a reference to the Black Panther Party or Black Nationalism, for that matter.<sup>27</sup> Jacobs-Fantauzzi does not comment on the possible implications of such interpretations, instead he leaves the issue open for discussion. Moreover, the controversy regarding the accusations against Mumia Abu-Jamal is not at all addressed in Jacob-Fantauzzi’s documentary. The questions which normally arise are: Who is Mumia Abu-Jamal? Why is he in prison and why should he be freed? This lack of information deprives the solidarity gestures of black Cuban rappers of their transparency, leaving the viewer who is not familiar with the case of Abu-Jamal puzzled.

Jacobs-Fantauzzi’s film can be read on at least two levels, since it embeds the double function of Cuban rap as a contributive element to the construction of a Diasporic African identity on the one hand and as an expression of local struggle for ethnic representation on the other. The documentary features recorded material interspaced with cultural elements of African heritage, which contribute to the portrayal of Cuban rap as original and authentic. The director attempts several times throughout

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<sup>26</sup> According to the official website [Freemumia.com](http://freemumia.com), “Mumia Abu-Jamal is an African-American writer and journalist, author of six books and hundreds of columns and articles, who has spent the last 29 years on Pennsylvania’s death row (...). In 1982 Mumia Abu-Jamal was tried, convicted and sentenced to death for the murder of Philadelphia police officer Daniel Faulkner (...). Philadelphia prosecutors argued, and still claim, that Mumia, while driving a taxi in downtown Philadelphia, came across his brother who had been stopped by Officer Faulkner. Prosecutors further argued that, motivated by a longstanding hatred of the police from his days as a Panther (...) Mumia ran to Faulkner and shot him in the back” ([www.freemumia.com](http://www.freemumia.com)).

<sup>27</sup> The Black Panther Party was an African-American revolutionary group, which initially militated for the protection of African-Americans from police brutality. Various media sources argue that the Black Panthers partly developed a Black Nationalist agenda ([www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com)). For the connection between the Black Panthers and Cuba see Carlos Moore’s *Castro, the Blacks and Africa* and Alejandro de la Fuente’s *A Nation for All*. The black clenched fist among other symbols has often been associated with a Black Nationalist trend, as well as the white fist often reminds of white nationalist movements.

his work to underline the influence of traditional Afro-Cuban rhythms on modern Cuban rap and manages to capture a various range of visual or acoustic symbols which inscribe rap artists into the realm of Afro-Cuban tradition: For example through the *collares* which many of the protagonists in this documentary wear, typical colorful beads necklaces worn by the followers of the *Santería* cult as a symbolic attachment to their *orisha*/patron saint; or through the vocabulary they use, such as the word *asere*, a greeting phrase of Yoruba origin used in Cuba and Puerto Rico mostly, or chants in the old *Lucumí* dialect, still spoken on the island and sometimes even unconsciously part of the everyday language.<sup>28</sup> That the African influence has been playing an active part in the linguistic and cultural evolution of the Cuban nation was an acknowledged fact among intellectuals even before the 1959 Revolution. As Vera Kutzinski writes, quoting Cuban anthropologist Lydia Cabrera:

“There is no doubt,” Cabrera writes, “that ‘Cuba is the whitest island in the Caribbean.’ But the impact of the African influence on that population which regards itself as white, is nonetheless immeasurable, although a superficial glance may not discern this. You will not be able to understand our people without knowing the blacks. That influence is even more evident today than it was in colonial times. We cannot penetrate much of Cuban life without considering that African presence, which does not manifest itself in skin-color alone.” (Cabrera quoted in Kutzinski 1987: 135).

This manifestation of the century old African presence on Cuba is mostly audible in the island’s musical tradition. The use of percussion instruments of African origin is wide spread throughout the Caribbean region and further, from the *marimbula* of old *Merengue* music in the Dominican Republic to the fashioning of steel drums or pans in Trinidad and Tobago, to the *ngoma* drums of Congo origin which came to be known as the congas, etc.<sup>29</sup> In the case of Cuba, while the conga drums used in rumba performances are probably best known worldwide, there is a set of instruments called *batá* drums, which are very popular on the island, though not so well known among the foreign public. The *batá* drums are a set of three differently sized drums used in

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<sup>28</sup> Afro-Cuban religions combined African practices with Catholicism, thus bearing new systems of faith, with *Santería* as one of the leading syncretic practices, known not only in Cuba, but also in the United States and meanwhile also in Europe. *Santería* developed throughout centuries of slavery, during which hundreds of thousands of slaves were brought to Cuba from the West coast of Africa; West-Durán 2003: 55, 57. It is described as the product of syncretism, a mixture between the religion of the Yoruba ethnic group of South-West Nigeria, whose system rests on a pantheon-like structure similar to the old Greek mythology, and Spanish Catholicism. The original pantheon of the Yoruba numbers approximately 400 *orishas* (deities), each of them responsible for and endowed with certain powers; Bascom 1969: 79-91; Barnett 2001: 38.

<sup>29</sup> See Manuel 2006: 26, 119, 240.

*Santería* rituals and similar to those used in Nigerian Yoruba practice.<sup>30</sup> Jacobs-Fantauzzi's documentary often combines recorded material of the *batá* drumming ceremony with improvised performances of rap music. Moreover, the visual and sound overlapping of rumba performances (here rumba is to be understood as public dance performances of *Santería*) with rap recordings, as well as the integration of footage where songs dedicated to the *Santería* deities are performed together with members of the EPG group leaves no doubt about the ethnic symbolism behind this production.<sup>31</sup> If the hip hop movement in Cuba in its initial stages was mostly limited to the diffusion of rap tapes featuring U.S.-American artists, the first decade of the 2000s witnesses the outcome of the appropriation of rap to the Afro-Cuban culture, whose markers cannot be missed in this documentary, an outcome which Jacobs-Fantauzzi proudly inscribes under the sign of authenticity.

### **Commercial versus Authentic**

Apart from the portrayal of such original characteristics *Inventos* also sketches clear frames for an 'inauthentic' hip hop scene, to which the commercial aspect plays a central role. In an interview with Anónimo Consejo, the commercial side of contemporary hip hop is mostly defined in terms of symbolic markers, such as expensive clothes and precious metal accessories. "El rap es una cosa que nace aquí en el corazón (...) Y eso no nació con una ropa ni con una etiqueta" says Yosmel to the camera, addressing the issue of hip hop clothing style and labels.<sup>32</sup> The Cuban market does not abound in FILA and NIKE products or diamond watches, which U.S.-American rappers otherwise proudly display on the cover of magazines and in MTV reality shows. Needless to say, hip hop in the United States has partly moved from the counterculture level of the 60s and 70s to the business sphere, backed up by an entire entertainment industry of recording studios, managers, producers, stylists, and talent shows. Among other music genres, U.S.-American contemporary hip hop is indeed to a large extent characterized by a certain label dress code, which marks an artists' inclusion or exclusion from the field of a successful career. With the help of Cuban band Anónimo Consejo Jacobs-Fantauzzi makes a strong statement, meant to draw a

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<sup>30</sup> See Hagedorn 2001: 78 for further information on the format, size and role of the three different *batá* drums.

<sup>31</sup> There is one particular scene in the documentary where *Aguanilé*, a popular song dedicated to Oggún, the *orisha* of iron, is performed on a roof top in Vedado, together with members of the EPG&B group; Jacobs-Fantauzzi 2005.

<sup>32</sup> Rap is something that is born here in your heart (...) And that's not something that is born from clothes or a label; Jacobs-Fantauzzi 2005.

clear line between form and content, between the markers and the message of the hip hop culture. A true rapper, in the portrayal of *Inventos*, does not need symbolic markers in order to belong to the hip hop culture. On the contrary, a true rapper consciously and proudly rejects such an image, along with the products it promotes. Witty lyrics protesting against social injustice and racial discrimination are required instead. Authentic rap music is defined here as an underground movement, as a minority culture and thus leads me to conclude that Jacobs-Fantauzzi envisages the transition towards mainstream as a transition towards inauthenticity. Whether Cuban rappers reject the image of many their contemporary U.S. peers out of conviction or simply because they lack access to the necessary goods and the financial means remains to be seen. Fact is that they do need symbolic markers, which they display in the form of bodily decorations and tattoos, as for example with the EPG group members, who wear the name and logo of their band ink-impregnated on their forearms.

Finally, a further function which *Inventos* sets to accomplish is the promotion of Cuban rap in an international context. The documentary was particularly successful in the United States, winning several film awards, like *Cine de las Americas* and the *Pan African Film Festival*.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, it turned out to be a useful platform for supporting the transnational musical cooperation between Cuba and the United States. In this sense, the last part of the film documents the arrival of several Cuban rap groups in New York, such as Obsesión and Anónimo Consejo, where they are offered the opportunity to perform live in front of U.S.-American audiences and to record at the D&D hip hop studios located in the same city, the resulting CD being available for purchase along with the film documentary. The diffusion of Cuban rap in the United States and beyond comes as a plus to the growing popularity of rap music in Cuba at the time the documentary was produced. Before June 1995, when the first festival of rap was organized in Cuba, in *Alamar*, one of the poorest neighborhoods in Havana, rappers had to rely on meager material for production.<sup>34</sup> After the success of the *Alamar* festival, Cuban rappers slowly gained the support they needed for recordings, distribution and international diffusion of their music, such as access to professional material, no longer having to completely improvise on tape recorders in sleeping rooms insulated with egg trays.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the *Agencia Cubana de Rap* was created and became the national organization managing and promoting the autochthonous groups

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<sup>33</sup> For a documented list of film awards see Jacobs-Fantauzzi 2005.

<sup>34</sup> Sujatha Fernandes in Birkenmaier 2011: 176.

<sup>35</sup> Pacini-Hernández 1999: 25.

of artists. With the support of national institutions and of Clenched Fist Productions, the cooperation between the U.S. and Cuba as mediated by *Inventos* closes the circle of transnational cultural flow between the two countries and opens new perspectives for Cuban rap artists. In that sense, Jacobs-Fantauzzi's documentary takes a significant step in the direction of open dialogue between two countries which share an extremely tensioned history of embargo policies, Cold War stigmas and interrupted diplomatic relations, by appealing to the unifying force of music.

### **Conclusion**

Regardless of the divergent politics which the two neighboring states exercise, the hip hop cultures North and South of the Florida Straits share common elements, such as the struggle for racial equality, fair representation and a transnational, black Diaspora consciousness.<sup>36</sup> Jacobs-Fantauzzi's message sometimes gets lost amid incomplete background information and oversimplified/overstretched representations of authenticity. *Inventos* partly accomplishes its task, by testifying to the importance of Cuban hip hop as a key element in the construction of a transnational African identity in the Americas. Still, Cuban rap has a lot more to say through the lens of international media, at best with the proper contextualization and a sharper critical stance.

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<sup>36</sup> The embargo is a trade blockade with Cuba imposed by the United States in 1960. Shortly after the Cold War reached its peak, with the Missile Crisis bringing the world on the verge of a nuclear war between the Soviet powers and the United States; see Bardach 2002: 356.

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