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Raising consciousness on the dancefloor:

Soul, Funk, and Black Power in Latin American contexts

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This is a panel about the political meanings of music but as the personal very often has political implications, I want to start with a personal note. I was born in a state which ceased to exist, almost to the day, 26 years ago: the GDR. We didn't have much access to popular culture from “evil imperialist” US by then, but there was a carefully selected collection of Jazz and Blues records that was released by the state-owned record label AMIGA. It were only 15 to 20 records of stars like Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Ray Charles and Louis Armstrong. You would find these records in the households of all the people who suffered the lack of freedom and mobility in the GDR. This was also the case of my parents which is how I first got in touch with African-American music as an 8 or 9 year-old. I remember that from the first moment this music had a very special appeal to me, and I can say that it was the beginning of an intense relationship which lasts to the day, as you can see by a mere look at my research topic. Years after the wall came down a question came to my mind about the GDR's music's releasing policy: while the cultural authorities apparently found it ok to have their citizens listen to jazz and blues, for some reason there was virtually no classical soul or funk record available in the GDR – with the exception of one Aretha Franklin Greatest Hits album. This begs the question: Was there anything subversive about soul music a repressive regime might be afraid of when their people would listen to it?

Although it might be an interesting topic, this is not a presentation on the reception of soul music behind the iron curtain. Rather, my short introduction is meant to lead to some of the key issues of my research: broadly, the transnational appeal of African-American genres and its significance for political mobilizations, within and beyond US borders. And, more

specifically, the politicizing and consciousness-raising effects of consuming soul music, not in the GDR, but in Latin American contexts.

My focus is on the late 1960s and 1970s, when the African-American freedom struggle in the US was part of global wave of mobilizations against racism and colonialism and for human rights. The Civil Rights and Black Power movements and its cultural manifestations were global in their appeal, providing marginalized communities in the US as well as abroad with powerful symbols of resistance and self-affirmation in the face of oppression and exclusion. Soul music as a major cultural expression of the Black Power era proved to be a very effective message carrier and a key medium for the transnationalization of the African-American freedom struggle and the creation of networks of solidarity and connectedness.

While the role of U.S. African American influences as transnational “source of cultural and political raw material” (Gilroy 1987, p. 171) and the importance of black music for marginalized groups around the world has been highlighted by Paul Gilroy and others, the interactions between afro-diasporic communities in the U.S. and Latin America have remained at the margins of scholarly debates. One obvious explanation for the academic lack of attention for the inter-American exchanges and flows between African Americans in the US and diasporic communities in Latin American contexts is to be found in the conflictive and unequal relations between the US and Latin America. For a long time, interventionist and imperial U.S. policies in Latin America have dominated discussions on inter-American relations in a way which apparently left little space for counter-hegemonic North-South dialogues which would not fit into ideological agendas of academics and antiimperialist activists alike. By focusing on the inter-American dimensions of Soul music and the influence of the Black Power movement in Latin American contexts it is my aim to contribute to the promising efforts to bridge persisting demarcations between African American and Latin American studies and to conceptualize the Black Americas as a space of manifold cultural and political entanglements.

Until recently, the significance of the U.S. African American freedom struggle for the formation of social movements in Latin American contexts has been downplayed or ignored. And in fact, back in the days Latin America’s nationalist elites, left-wing activists and academics did everything to prevent U.S African American influences on local black communities. While the anti-imperialist impulse against anything from the US was one reason, there was also a racial dimension to the repudiation of African American influences from the North. Ideas, slogans and sounds of black consciousness and militancy in the face of white supremacy, which emerged during the U.S. black freedom struggle in the 1960s, were

met with hostility in Latin America as they challenged the dominant ideologies of *mestizaje* and *democracia racial*. According to these ideologies, Latin American societies distinguished themselves from the racially polarized US through the absence of racism. Because of promoting black pride as a way of overcoming the degrading effects of racism, soul music and black power were accused of importing racial hatred and conflicts to Latin America where race allegedly hadn't mattered at all.

Despite of this hostile environment and official repudiation, the black struggle in the U.S. had a deep impact on Afro-Latin communities, as researcher Agustín Laó-Montes confirms:

“En [el] proceso de desarrollo de las identidades políticas y culturales afrodescendientes en Latinoamérica, los movimientos negros estadounidenses y sus figuras más visibles - como Martin Luther King y Malcolm X – fueron, y siguen siéndolo, un referente fundamental.” (Laó-Montes 2010, p. 300)

As I want to show, soul music was crucial for Black Power making its way to Latin American contexts. The transnational appeal of soul music allowed for the bridging of political, cultural and linguistic barriers between formerly separated afro-diasporic communities and the emergence of cross-cultural and political alliances between them. I argue that, by challenging the established modes of racial hierarchies and traditionalist stereotypes, the symbolic appropriation of U.S. forms of blackness as manifested in the consumption and translation of soul in local Latin American contexts, constituted a rupture with *mestizaje* and *democracia racial* ideologies – and a way of articulating dissent with Latin American forms of racism.

In my research, I have focused on sites in Latin American contexts, where the reception of soul music had caused the emergence of translocal scenes which were clearly inspired by the US African American youth culture and political discourses of the Black Power era. Today, I want to talk about two of these contact zones, in which the exchange of cultural products and political ideas took place: Spanish Harlem in New York and Rio de Janeiro in Brazil.

New York's relevance for my research is founded in its condition as a site of hemispheric transculturation between afro-diasporic communities from the US, the Caribbean and Latin America. My focus here is on New York's huge Puerto Rican community, who had shared social marginalization and racial discrimination with the African American community throughout the 20th century. Similar living conditions have lead to intense interactions with African Americans which was an important factor in the emergence of *Nuyorican* culture and identity discourses among young Puerto Ricans. Music played a major role as a platform for

the construction of interethnic alliances between African Americans and Latino migrants since the 1920s – as the city’s vibrant music scene and styles as Latin Jazz showed. In the context of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, embracing African-American culture and politics became even more a major feature of Nuyorican culture.

With the emergence of Latin Soul and Boogaloo in 1966, in which Latin rhythms were combined with African-American Rhythm n Blues, Soul and Funk, the close relations between both communities found another musical expression. Pete Rodriguez, Willie Colon, Ray Barretto and Joe Bataan, only to name a few, were some of the outstanding artists of this era, who also enjoyed massive popularity among African American audiences. The appropriation of African American forms by Puerto Rican migrants as featured in Latin soul has been interpreted as “strategic anti-essentialism” by George Lipsitz (1994, p. 80): according to him, a young generation of Nuyoricans embraced U.S. black culture as a means of showing solidarity and identification with the African American struggle, but also as a way of affirming Puerto Rico’s neglected African heritage and challenging the Puerto Rican elites’ racism.

In order to give you an impression, I want to discuss one song which not only represents the combination of Latin and U.S. African American elements typical of Latin Soul, but which is also one of the very few songs of this genre in which political issues are addressed explicitly. It is by Jimmy Sabater, who was born as son of Afro-Puerto Rican migrants in the neighborhood of Spanish Harlem. He was onstage as singer of the Joe Cuba Sextet when the song “Bang Bang” was played for the first time in 1966, which is still acknowledged to be the first Latin Soul song and marked the beginning of the late-1960s Boogaloo hype. Jimmy Sabater strongly identified with the Black Power movement, as you can hear in the song “Times Are Changin’” released in 1969.

I’m gonna scream, ain’t gonna worry

I’m a fighting man, I’m in a hurry

Don’t shed my tears, 200 years

The times are changin’ in the USA

I’ve got ambition, no inhibitions

Got my pride, and the guts on my side

I got my goal, I’m black as coal

The times are changin’ in the USA

*It's time for freedom, it's time for rights
My soul was cryin', but times have changed
I want a lover, and have respect
Things still ain't right, baby, no, no, not yet
But now on days, we'll have our way
'Cause times are changin' in the USA*

The lyrics speak for the assertive and demanding mood of the era. The line “I got my goal, I’m black as coal” is especially telling as it voices the identification of many young Nuyoricans with blackness, a very unusual thing to do for the older Puerto Rican migrant generations who often were inclined to draw a clear line between themselves and African Americans.

Latin Soul and Boogaloo were rejected by white Puerto Rican elites and older generations of Latin musicians as Tito Puente and Mario Bauza, because it “violated the bounds that kept distinct what was Black and what was Latino” (2001, p. 244), as Raquel Rivera put it. Traditionalists and advocates of *latinidad* discourse found that African American influences in slang and rhythm as represented in Nuyorican culture and Latin Soul constituted a contamination of the pure, and explicitly non-black Puerto Rican Latino heritage. Although Latin Soul and Boogaloo were about dancing and selling records, crossing these lines and challenging racial demarcations by reaching out to Black America as was manifested in the Latin Soul movement had deeply political connotations.

In terms of radical politics, Latin Soul and Boogaloo had its counterpart in the formation of the Young Lords, a Puerto Rican organization based on the model of the Black Panther Party, which also spoke to the strong cross-cultural appeal of Civil Rights and Black Power movements, encouraging young Nuyoricans to show unity with the African-American freedom struggle and to overcome Puerto Rico’s specific patterns of racial discrimination.

By translating African-American sounds, slogans and signs into a Hispanic idiom, Nuyorican culture facilitated its diffusion in Latin American countries. The Latin America-wide success of soul-inspired Latin Boogaloo records from New York City constituted a major factor for the dissemination of US black influences in Latin contexts.

While migration and the related mobility of people was essential to the emergence of close interactions and transculturations between African-Americans and Puerto Ricans in the case of NYC, in the following I will now present a case in which the mobility of sounds was even more crucial.

In the early-to-mid 1970s, Rio de Janeiro became Latin America's most important site for the reception and translation of symbols, discourses and sounds of the U.S Black Power movement. It were mainly DJs and promoters who were responsible for the emergence of the so-called Black Rio movement which became a mass phenomenon when soundsystems with names like Soul Grand Prix, Black Power and Afro Soul started to gain massive popularity among the black working-class youth of Rio's Zona Norte. DJs played exclusively imported soul records from the USA on so-called *bailes black*. 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 and dance moves, which were also transmitted to the audiences through video screenings and pictures that featured icons of the movement as James Brown, Muhammad Ali, Malcolm X and the Black Panthers. Afro-Brazilian musicians like Tim Maia and Toni Tornado, who had spent the 1960s in New York, became famous with their Brazilian translations of soul music and also had great importance for popularizing representations of Black Power in Brazil.

In the 1970s, Brazil was a most unlikely place for the emergence of a local version of the Black Power movement which challenged the status quo of race relations. Since 1964, the country was ruled by a right-wing military regime which fiercely advocated *democracia racial* as a national ideology and repressed any expression of dissent as subversive activity. It comes as no surprise that possible influences of militant Black Power discourses from the U.S. on Afro-Brazilians were seen as a serious threat by the ruling elites who feared nothing more than social unrest and applied censorship on any mentioning of racial discrimination in Brazil.

While the general climate of repression impeded open political activity, the soul parties of Black Rio became a platform for showing identification and solidarity with the African American freedom struggle, which had a deep impact on Afro-Brazilian youth. According to DJ Dom Filó, his soundsystem "Soul Grand Prix" was established as a revolutionary enterprise in which soul music was used as a way to elude the regime's censorship and raising awareness for denied racial discrimination in Brazil among Rio's black community. The immensely successful approach of combining entertainment and dancing pleasure with the

activists' intentions of raising black consciousness and forging bonds of afro-diasporic solidarity became a major feature of the Black Rio movement.

Celebrating US modes of blackness to the sound of James Brown's immensely popular "Say It Loud. I'm Black and I'm Proud" (1968) and consuming images of African Americans successfully challenging white supremacy had profound political implications: in times of censorship and repression by a fierce military regime it inspired many black Brazilians to challenge the racist structure of Brazilian society hidden behind the nationalist myth of "democracia racial". While Afro-Brazilian cultural creations as carnival, samba and capoeira had become 'nationalized' as symbols of authentic folk culture, soul music and Black Power provided alternative modes of identification and a means of expressing opposition to existing racial hierarchies. Activists confirm that the soul parties were fruitful recruiting grounds for Brazil's *Movimento Negro*, which gained influence in the late 1970s and 1980s.

When the regime finally took notice that a full-fledged black mass movement had developed under its eyes by the mid-1970s it launched a campaign, in which Black Rio was denounced as "un-Brazilian" because of introducing racial hatred to a country where racism didn't exist. In an awkward alliance representatives of the nationalist right-wing military regime and leftist intellectuals alike agreed that the militancy and black assertiveness related to Black Rio was totally out of place in a "democracia racial" like Brazil. They declared Afro-Brazilians dancing to imported soul music from the US as lacking any kind of authenticity and alien to cherished folkloristic expressions as carnival, samba, and capoeira, which they demanded Afro-Brazilians to represent.

The Brazilian military regime also feared the subversive potential of Afro-Brazilians being exposed to the subversive influences of rebellious blacks from the U.S. Anxious about the consequences of a raised awareness on matters of racial discrimination and the inspiration of black people revolting against their persistent discrimination, the military regime unleashed its repressive apparatus on the movement in the mid-to-late 1970s. Secret police documents have been found, which prove that the Black Rio movement was suspected of using foreign money from U.S. black nationalist organizations for subversive activities directed at instigating a race war in Brazil. The police started to crack down heavily on the movement, infiltrating it with secret agents, frequently raiding soul parties and arresting organizers and DJs, as was the case with Dom Filó who was kidnapped and tortured by secret agents after DJing at "Noite do Shaft". So in 1970s Brazil, soul music did become a matter of national security and DJing an act of resistance.

The presented cases of Latin Soul in NYC and the Black Rio have one thing in common. In both cases, marginalized communities were inspired by the example of the African American revolt and appropriating soul music became a way of expressing identification and connectedness with this struggle. More than books and pamphlets, which often couldn't be read due to linguistic barriers, soul music displayed an ability to bridge borders between communities – and to connect music with politics, as the contribution of the genre to the formation of afro-diasporic social movements in different hemispheric contexts underlines.

In the featured Latin American contexts, soul music displayed its emancipatory potential as it provided young Afro-Latinos with a means to break with dominant paternalistic and folkloristic identity concepts and a way of expressing opposition to the neglected racial discrimination. In some cases, the empowering impulse of soul was significant for the formation of anti-racist movements and the emergence of hemispheric networks of solidarity which connected formerly isolated Afro-Latin communities with other sites of the African diaspora in their struggles for human rights.

Other examples from sites as Panama which is also part of my research, suggest that there's still a lot of potential not only for investigating the traces of soul music and the Black Power movement throughout Afro-Latin America, but also many other issues related to translocal interactions between afro-diasporic communities in the Americas, which is why I want to invite you to join our recently launched research network on the Black Americas.

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