From a queer place in the diaspora. The hip-hop group "Las Krudas Cubensi"

The Cuban Underground hip-hop group, Las Krudas Cubensi, challenges the oppressive discourses concerning Black women and Black Lesbians within Cuban society. With an Afro-Cuban, Black feminist and Queer consciousness and hip-hop as their tools, they link racist, sexist and homophobic experiences as well as social and political structures to the patriarchal and heteronormative system and to the ideological legacies of colonialism.

1. Introduction

This article discusses song lyrics, interviews and music videos of Las Krudas Cubensi examining how they use the genre of hip-hop, which is often claimed as U.S.-American and heterosexist, to create a queer and feminist space for addressing and criticizing the interdependent inequalities that exist for Black lesbian women caused by racism, sexism, homophobia and coloniality within Cuban society.

I argue that radical Caribbean women like Las Krudas create queer practices and interventions that challenge and expand what has recently been discussed in Western feminist theorizing and academic discourses under the concept of „queer“. This article shows that Cuba and the Caribbean is a space of queer knowledge production where the work of musicians and activists like Las Krudas open critical alternative spaces and counter narratives which question the singularity and exclusivity of critical gender and queer knowledge as being produced solely and unquestionably in the U.S.-American and European context. As Rinaldo Wilcott, one of the first academics who works on a Black Queer Diaspora Studies project, argues for „a diaspora reading practice“¹, this essay also poses the question of how and in which ways queerness emerges and exists in diasporic contexts which are marked by transnational identification and informed by the colonial and slavery history of displacement and violence.

Las Krudas Cubensis' queer practice and self-image is from the very beginning deeply entangled with the complexities of being Black afradescendants(see box to the right) lesbian women in a heteronormative and white-dominated society where historical processes of coloniality, the transatlantic slave trade and the related asymmetries of power and representation still have effects on individuals and society. Their queerness can not be seen outside the intersection of race, gender, sexuality and class hierarchies, as they are „marginalized by the marginalized, at the bottom, in all senses“, as they rap in the song 120 Horas Rojas.

To contextualize Las Krudas' queer feminist hip-hop I first elaborate on the emergence of hip-hop in Cuba and its intersections with race, gender and sexuality within society to subsequently shed light on the emergence of Black women rappers, feminist and lesbian perspectives in the hip-hop scene within a newly arising movement of a queer Afro-feminism claimed by activists, academics, bloggers and raperas like Las Krudas Cubensi. The last chapter introduces songs and videos by Las Krudas Cubensi to elaborate on how they construct through language, images and beats, a musical space for negotiating the personally experienced multilayered discrimination in the context of broader social inequalities linked to patriarchy and colonialism, as well as how they create a counter site of empowerment, agency and resistance.

About Las Krudas Cubensi

Pasita, Pelusa and Wanda. Image via progressivepupil.wordpress.com

Pelusa (Olivia Prendes) and Pasita (Odaymara Cuesta) via gales.tv
The all-female hip-hop band Las Krudas Cubensi primarily consists of sisters Odaymara Cuesta (Pasita), Odalys Cuesta (Wanda), and Olivia Prendes (Pelusa), the partner of Odaymara Cuesta. Before joining the hip-hop movement, the three artists were co-founders of a Havana-based Black lesbian-run organization called Oremi in 1996, a year later they formed the street theatre group Agrupación de Creación Alternativa CUBENSI, internationally known as Tropazancas, and performed regularly in the streets of Havana. In 1998, Las Krudas Cubensi performed for the first time at the Cuban Hip Hop festival in Havana and 2003 they recorded the first album „Cubensi Hip Hop“. From 2004 on until today, Pasita and Pelusa started to perform as a hip-hop duo and moved in 2006 to Austin in the United States, but come back regularly to Cuba to perform, give workshops, educate, record and tour in the Caribbean. As Las Krudas themselves put it on their web site,

Odaymara Cuesta and Olivia Prendes are Cuban Hip Hop MCs, Independent Musicians, Poets, Theater Performers representing Womyn, Immigrants, Queer and People of Color Action as a Central Part of World Change. They choose the art as a weapon to fight against oppression, for justice, for balance, for our rights, to celebrate the life […] bringing Cubensi Hip Hop, Dance Hall, Cumbia, Old School, Mixtapes and new strongly beautiful Beats from all around the World with their Amazing Afro Caribbean Rebel Lyrics & Voices to empower the community, mujeres, people of color, immigrants, queens, workers, anarquistas, feminists & conscious people.3

2. Cuba and the Caribbean as a space for queer knowledge production

2.1 Race, gender and sexuality in Cuba’s rap and society

The history of Cuban hip-hop is closely entwined with the social and cultural dimensions of race, gender, sexuality and class hierarchies in Cuban society. The hip-hop culture emerged on the island in the late 1980s and began to gain broader force following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba’s main trading partner, in 1991. From the very beginning it was a movement by the Black Cuban youth to demand racial equality and voice a „local response to experiences of displacement and relocation, as well as as imperishment and discrimination.“4 Women were also present in the movement then, and in the late nineties raperas began to use hip-hop as a vehicle to deal with issues arising from the ongoing economic crisis, but also to negotiate inequalities caused by sexism and racism, e.g. the objectification of Black women by the sex tourism market.

The emergence of hip-hop becoming an important organ for the marginalized Black youth is related to the specific socioeconomic context of Cuba in the Nineties.5 In that time called the „Special Period“, the Cuban state faced a legitimacy crisis, as pressures for social change and racial divisions increased. The loss of Soviet-based economic stability forced the government to adopt austerity policies in order to increase Cuba’s competitiveness in the global economy and to legalize the dollar as hard currency.6 The effects of the economic downturn and its consequences affected Black Cubans the strongest.7 The public discrimination against Black Cubans increased in terms of employment and access to the lucrative dollar currency,8 but also in terms of negative stereotypes and racial prejudices that became increasingly visible and acceptable: „Black Cubans lived in a highly radicalized society where the majority of the population holds negative views about Afro-Cuban culture, social conduct, and/or physical appearance.9 In that situation Black Cubans find themselves deprived from a political voice which is enforced by the Cuban revolutionary leadership supporting the ideology of a color-blind society by referring to hegemonic discourses of racial democracy, equality and a general unity and sameness.10 Addressing social inequalities concerning race, as well as gender, class and sexuality, is impossible.11 Jafari Allen states that „Cuba seems to have been struck not only (color) blind but also dumb - silencing race and thereby reinscribing racial terror.“12

A note about language

Mulata and mulato is a contested term that is used as an selfdefinatory term in the Cuban context that describes a separated racial category to Black and White. In other contexts this term is highly criticized and rejected as a racist slur. I use this term as well as the term afrodescendente only in this specific context as it is the chosen and politically claimed term by those groups or individuals this text is about. The Spanish spelling and the capitalized initial letter in both Mulata and Black is an attempt to avoid an affirmative use of a racist categorization drawing on a physical feature like skin color, and rather to underline the social constructiveness without depriving on the terms’ significance for identity politics and social realities. Additionally, the term Black is a politically claimed self-designation by Blacks to counter colonial and racist practices of designation, not only in Cuba but also in the United States and Germany.

See Sandra Abd’Allah-Alvarez Ramirez on these terms within the Cuban context.

Outside of the official and mainstream cultural life young black rappers began „taking over the street corners and open parks, breakdancing and rhyming in small informal gatherings“\(^{13}\) and articulating demands for racial equality. The hip-hop movement developed quickly „as a utopian social movement that challenges social and economic oppression through grassroots-level consciousness raising, community activism, and an anti-capitalist critique“\(^{14}\), not least because of the state’s acceptance attempting to attenuate the growing racial and social divisions. Rap and hip-hop became the voice for the marginalized black working class youth and was first shaped by underground U.S.-American rap, tapes and music videos of which found their ways through the increasing Cuban tourist market to the hands of the young folks. Particularly socially conscious hip-hop by urban Black American young rappers, who also faced racism and economic disenfranchisement, was crucial to the formation of Cuban hip-hop as a critical art form.\(^{15}\) This connection to transnational networks, that Alan West-Duran understands as „diaspora dialogue“\(^{16}\), allowed and inspired a way to articulate critique on the state’s discourse of revolutionary moralism, women rappers seek to define their own notions of sexuality and desire.\(^{17}\) Thus, the recurrence of the connection to transnational networks marked by common experiences as Black and female, Cuban Black women rappers identify with the ideas and principles of the third wave Black feminism in the United States that consists of the recognition that race, class and sex oppression are intertwined. In their songs they talk about the experiences of Black women in Cuban society, in order to assert a female agency, dealing with practices such as prostitution (jineterismo) without disparaging it but rather talking about the precarious conditions that force women into prostitution (e.g. Magia Mc in „Le llaman puta“, 2002). Sujatha Fernandes states that, „In contrast to both the objectification of women’s bodies and a confining revolutionary moralism, women rappers seek to define their own notions of sexuality and desire.\(^{18}\)"

**Gender and sexuality in Cuban rap and society**

During the time of the „Special Period“ young Black women had been particularly affected by the economic crisis and its increasing racialization. As result a growing number of Black and Mulata (see box to the right) women were forced to enter prostitution, known in Cuba as jineterismo, as a means of survival.\(^{44}\) Fernandes links Cuba’s economical needs to access to global markets especially via attracting tourism and investment to the growing number of jineteras and, furthermore, a reinforced emergence of racist and (hetero-) sexist images of Black and Mulata women as erotic, sexualized and available. Recurring to an image and stereotype of women as sexualized objects traded between men, a practice was renewed which is deeply rooted in the slave system.\(^{45}\)

The double discrimination of Black women by racism and sexism presents itself also in Cuban rap, which was male-dominated at the beginning, as Fernandes explains. The female body served as a site of negotiating and contestation, „a means by which black working-class males assert their masculinity in a context where they are increasingly being disempowered and displaced.“\(^{46}\) Thus, the recurrence of the image of the female body as a site for constructing heterosexual masculinity also denied any different forms of sexuality and desire. It can be assumed that the Cuban hip-hop movement, especially in the field of male rappers, was a predominantly heteronormative space where non-heterosexual forms of living and desire were practically invisible. But it was not until women rappers claimed space in the islands’ hip-hop scene that rap became a site where these heteronormative and sexist notions were contested and radical feminist narratives were introduced into discourse.

**The emergence of Black women rappers and queer-feminist and lesbian perspectives**

Although hip-hop is a space of hetero- and male-defined notions of sexuality and the female body, hence it may be seen as a contradictory genre for feminist and lesbian expression, „female rappers seek to carve out an autonomous space within the broader hip-hop movement, in which they narrate female desire and the materiality of the female body on their own terms. “\(^{47}\) Still, it was a long and arduous struggle for women to establish themselves in a male-dominated scene and gain access to stages and music productions, not as background singer but as forefront rappers.\(^{48}\)

Early female rap groups and rappers like Instinto and Magia MC performed at the international hip-hop festival 1996 in Alamar laying ground for upcoming women hip-hop artists. It is noteworthy that from the very beginning women rappers tend to articulate feminist critiques. This politicization is related to their contacts with women feminist activists within Cuba and U.S.-American Black feminist rappers (like Salt-N-Pepa, Queen Latifah and MC Lyte) that have inspired and helped to strengthen their voices within hip-hop and create more of a presence for Black women’s concerns within society.\(^{49}\) Given these experiences in transnational networks marked by common experiences as Black and female, Cuban Black women rappers identify with the ideas and principles of the third wave Black feminism in the United States that consists of the recognition that race, class and sex oppression are intertwined. In their songs they talk about the experiences of Black women in Cuban society, in order to assert a female agency, dealing with practices such as prostitution (jineterismo) without disparaging it but rather talking about the precarious conditions that force women into prostitution (e.g. Magia Mc in „Le llaman puta“, 2002). Sujatha Fernandes states that, „In contrast to both the objectification of women’s bodies and a confining revolutionary moralism, women rappers seek to define their own notions of sexuality and desire.\(^{50}\)"
Lesbian sexuality and experience was first openly addressed and identified with by Las Krudas Cubensi. Given the homophobia of the Cuban political leadership and society, as well as the absence of lesbian images from mass media and culture, the presence of lesbian rap group Las Krudas represents an important opening. Tanya Saunders believes that the criminalization of homosexuality by the Cuban state is related to the image of the ideal citizen that was promoted by the government in the Cuban Revolution in 1959. The „New Man“ or the „Revolutionary“ represents a white heterosexual male and moral subject who cares for and defends his nation. Homosexuality was first deemed as „a decadent, bourgeois social ill“ and then „a form of immorality that could corrupt Revolutionary youth“ and was therefore criminalized. The focus of manhood as the ideal citizen quality suggests that women, lesbian women especially, were not represented in Cuban society. Saunders points out that reports on homosexuality have tended to focus on a universalized „gay experience“ in Cuba, and that lesbian experiences remained almost invisible and unreported. It might be that lesbian and the overall female experience was not of interest or even acknowledged as existent, but it also might be that lesbian spaces were harder to access and know about. By examining representation of lesbian experiences in Cuban films, Saunders notes that during the HIV/AIDS crisis the government sought to reduce the social stigma of homosexuality, and the result of which was state policies that created more public space that were inclusive of gay male Cubans. In the 1990s she records efforts by the lesbian scene to create communitarian structures in order to struggle for more economic independence as consequence of Cuba’s economic crisis, but also shows that lesbian spaces still remains very marginalized. Saunders emphasizes that Black lesbians especially face a situation of multiple discrimination were their voice and critiques of their social experiences have been silenced in the historical record.

In the following I argue that Las Krudas Cubensis not only introduce forms of lesbian desire into a broader hip-hop and social discourse but at the same moment express a radical feminist critique and a queer perspective on sexuality, body politics and race, class hierarchies.

2.2 The Nu Caribbean Feminism or Afro-feminism queer movement claimed by Cuban activists, scholars, bloggers and raperas

Las Krudas Cubensis’ queer-feminist hip-hop is located within a transnational discourse around a Nu Caribbean Feminism and a Afro-feminism queer which is emerging in Cuba’s academic, activist and artistic contexts and takes place in workshops, conferences, concerts, panels as well as in the online sphere. This discourse is dedicated to the overcoming of inequalities caused by the intersections of sexism, racism, homophobia, lesbophobia, transphobia and class hierarchies and is articulated through activism, hip-hop, academic theorizing and community building. It is a struggle against heteronormativity and racism and for sexual diversity as well as an act of empowerment for Black Cuban women by referring to an afrodescendant identity. It forms part of collective imaginations about the past and present of Black Cuban women but also address particular forms and mechanisms of racial and (hetero)sexist oppression as consistencies and consequences of coloniality and slavery.

This chapter introduces some of the key protagonists of Cuba’s rather new queer feminist movement figuring their main critiques, demands and practices and also their relations to a transnational network of Black feminist thinking. Furthermore, I would like to take an approach to the significance and practice of queerness in this discourse. Sandra Abd’Allah-Alvarez Ramirez stresses the importance of three voices within the actual lesbian and feminist discourse that are Las Krudas Cubensi themselves, the historian Logbona Olukonoe and the anti-capitalist LGBT collective Portal Arcoiris and its editor and blogger Yasmin Silvia Portales Machado. Sandra Abd’Allah- Alvarez Ramirez herself collects, reports and discusses since 2006 current topics of the afro-feminist and lesbian community on the blog Negra cubana que tenía ser which became an important transnational organ and platform for the afro-cuban queer feminist and anti-racist movement.

Emerging of a Black feminist consciousness
As has already been mentioned the Black and Chicana feminist movement in the U.S. which confront the multilayered forms of oppression by racism, sexism and classism is an important point of recurrence for afro-Cuban women to analyze and criticize similar experiences and structures within Cuban society and to establish a Black feminist consciousness.\textsuperscript{23} Next to afro-Cuban feminist activists and artists there are many references to Black and Chicana feminist theorists and poets like Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberly Crenshaw, Cheryl Clarke or to contents of the statement by the Black feminist lesbian organization The Combahee River Collective.

The Black feminist statement is a key document from 1977 that explicitly outlines that Black feminist politics are a struggle against racism, sexism, homophobia, and classism, as all these forms of discrimination and oppression simultaneously affect the lives of Black women. Furthermore, they link these intersecting dynamics to capitalism and colonialism, particularly identifying slavery as one of the sources of Black women's oppression. The goal to examine „the multilayered texture of Black women's lives“ as a means of creating theories and practices of resistance necessary for achieving liberation is also the concern of queer feminist Black women in Cuba. The issues range from body politics, sexist and racist harassment, trans-, lesbian and queer identities to migration, poverty and health care that are examined towards how race, gender, sexuality and class intersect. An important aspect is to develop create alternative and counter narratives as a means of empowerment and community building.

Lesbian and queer feminists like Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa also emphasize the anti-colonial and anti-hegemonic resistance that is held up by non-heterosexual Black, Latina, Chicana, Mulata women to counter heteronormative and hegemonic discourses.\textsuperscript{25}

At the same time Las Krudas Cubensi and other queer feminist activists claim Cuba and the Caribbean as a site from where transnational perspectives and resistances emerge. It has been their continuing work to blur the lines between radical activism and the academic sphere, as well as creative and artistic expression in order to overcome national boundaries. As Audre Lorde said, “Without community, there is no liberation ... but community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.” Creativity, recuperation of lesbian history, personal experience and self-care are also crucial strategies for the empowerment and the resistance of Black lesbian women that were particularly articulated by the poet Audre Lorde are very present in the work and life of Cuba's queers.

The meaning of queer in Cubans Black feminist discourse

The practice of self-designation and reclaiming of perjorative terms has played an important role for resistant decolonial and anti-hegemonic practices, especially for the Black empowerment movement. As well the term queer meant originally ‘strange’ or ‘peculiar’ and came to be deployed pejoratively against those with same-sex desires or just non-normative relationships in the late 19th century. In the 1980s North American feminists and activists reclaimed the term to empower the community of non-heterosexual and poor people of color. Today, the term is used in many different and contradictory ways (its constituent characteristics is its resistance to normative definitions), but receives an increasing popularity as an analytical tool in European and North American intellectual and academic spheres. Queer theory is often being criticized as „eurocentric“, „whitewashed“, „elitist“ and „macadamized“.\textsuperscript{26}

Sandra Abd’Allah- Alvarez Ramírez relates to the origin of the term queer but extend it within an afro-cuban critique:

\begin{quote}
Para mi, queer, desde una crítica afrodescendiente feminista puede entenderse más allá de una definición para reconocer las identidades sexuales no heterosexualas, como una forma de vida vinculada a los estilos de vida de muchas mujeres afrodescendientes y también mujeres blancas pobres, quienes viven sin la presencia del hombre como jefe del hogar o proveedor económico y cuyos ingresos dependen de los negocios ilícitos, el mercado negro, el trabajo sexual, los trabajos en los sectores informales, por ejemplo. Muchas madres solteras, mujeres lesbianas, mujeres trans, jefas de familia, cuentapropistas de los sectores más pobres entran en esta categoría.\textsuperscript{27}
\end{quote}

(Author's translation) 
“For me, queer, from a feminist afro-descendant critique can be understood beyond a definition that just recognize non-heterosexual identities, as a way to live that is linked to the way of lifes of many black women and white poor women too, who live without the presence of man as the head of the household or economic provider or whose incomes depends on illegal businesses, the black market, sex work, work in informal sectors, for example. Many single mothers, lesbians, trans women, women that run households, self-employed entrepreneurs of the poorest sectors fall into this category.”

Thus, queerness may not be reduced to one category as same-sex desire or relationships, but rather implies more entangled complexities of work and life conditions that are affected by racist, hetero-sexist and class structures in capitalist and neo-colonial societies. In this sense Safari Allen writes that,
... to talk about sexuality is to talk not only about the everyday lived experience of the sexual(ualized) body and its reproduction, but also about the cultures, histories, and political-economic realities of the nation (region, diaspora, globe), and the historicity, imagination, desires, and intentions of the sexual(ualized) subject.

Olivia Prendes (Las Krudas Cubensi) commented on the term queer in an interview by the blogger LaNepantlera pointing out that queerness is first of all a practice that is not invented by northern scholars but by the people who live and struggle for it, and that it actually refers to something that forms part of the history and traditions of southern regions as Cuba, the Caribbean, Latin America and Africa.

(... esto de lo queer parece que viene del norte, parece que viene de europa, pero realmente hemos tenido doble y triple espíritus en nuestra cultura toda la vida. [...] Pienso que siendo quienes somo también estamos rompiendo fronteras y uniendo estos términos [como queer] que vienen de todas partes, que no solamente vienen del norte, de europa, también vienen de nuestras tierras, del Caribe, vienen de Latinoamérica, vienen de Africa [...] realmente tienen nombres diferentes en diferentes partes pero es algo que ha estado todo el tiempo con nosotros! [...] En el norte les gusta clasificar las cosas, academizarlas y llevárselas a los libros y todo lo que han hecho. Y de hecho no están descubriendo eso, no están creando nada. [...] Yo digo siempre que hay una práctica en nuestros países interesantíssima, nosotras por ejemplo, después de que hemos aprendido estas definiciones y términos [en los EEUU], cuando vamos a Cuba nos quedamos bien impresionadas porque ahí realmente tenemos una práctica de transgenerísmos, práctica de queeridad, práctica de feminismo lesbico radical, practica. Todos, sin las definiciones, todos en espíritu, todo natural e real."

(Author's translation) "... This queer seems to come from the north, seems to come from Europe, but actually we had double and triple spirits in our culture ever since. [...] I think being who we are, we are already breaking down borders and uniting these terms [as queer] that are actually coming from everywhere, not only from the north or Europe, they come right from our lands, the Caribbean, Latin America, Africa [...] of course it has different names in different places, but it is something that has been with us for all times! [...] In the north they like to categorize and academize things, they put them into books and all they have done. And in fact they are not discovering this, they are not creating anything. [...] I always say that there is a most interesting practice in our countries. After we have learned these definitions and terms [in the US], and when we go back to Cuba we are pretty impressed because there we have a real practice of transgenderism, queerness and of radical lesbian feminism. All without definitions, all in spirit, all natural and real."

Prendes stresses a crucial point (which appears in their songs again and again) of queer practice, namely its implication of transnational and intersectional exchange and oppression that is located in the subjugated and (post-)colonial continents and regions. Rejecting the theorisation and classification by eurocentric academies, Prendes denounces Cuba as a place where queerness as a means of resisting and decolonial practice and knowledge has been a reality for centuries.

**Tortillera and the reclaiming of queer history**

Returning to one of those resistant and anti-hegemonic practices that is the praxis of self-designation and reclaiming of pejorative terms, the term tortillera became somewhat of an Afro-Cuban and particularily lesbian equivalent to the term queer in its very origin.

In an attempt of recuperating lesbian and queer narratives in the afro-Cuban history, Olukonee explains the history and meaning of the word tortillera that is used to designate lesbian women in a pejorative way within Cuban society. The collectively imagined origin of this caption lies in a group of women who used to sell tortillas and all kinds of sweets in a certain place in the oldtown of Havana City. As the story goes, these women lived together, and had neither husbands nor male companions, but some had female lovers and life companions. Olukonee points out that the story of these women inscribes itself in the popular imaginaries and language most of all for the reason that they were autonomous female entrepeneurs, lived an anti-normative and independent life-style without the presence of men. It is remarkable that these aspects are still connected to lesbianism in Cuba, stands Olukonee, hence it is deeply entangled with notions of non-normative life and work conditions and not just same-sex desire. Today women are called tortilleras even _por no responder a los propios de los hombres_, por no tener un compañero masculino, o _por tener un estilo de vida diferente al que debe seguir una mujer en Cuba, como ser madre o estar casada_ "[for not responding to compliments of men, for not having male companionship, or just for having a different life-style than a women is supposed to have in Cuba, for example being a mother or being married]. Thus, women that resist heteronormative patterns of living, working and loving, or that are just considered as 'weird', are disparaged by this term. However, women like Olukonee, Olivia Prendes and Odaymara Cuesta re-appropriate the word tortillera and reclaim the (her)story of lesbians in Cuba to transform it to an empowering and identity-asserting meaning:
... desde un posicionamiento feminista afrodescendiente, “tortillera” es en sí mismo el reconocimiento de la rebelión de las mujeres queers contra el sistema heterosexual, por lo tanto es una historia de sobrevivencias y de autonomía feminista. [La historia de las tortilleras] quedó en nuestro imaginario popular como un ejemplo de la resistencia de las mujeres afrodescendientes queers contra la explotación colonial heteropatriarcal.

(Author's translation)...

Not only by reclaiming Lesbian and Black women’s history, but also by critically analyzing how patriarchy and colonialism are inscribed into the way bodies are seen and valued within society, Cuba’s queer feminists create counternarratives and resistant practices. Logbona Olukonee, and also Las Krudas Cubensi, as we will see in the next chapter, point out that queerness is an embodied experience, as a means of “luchar contra mis propios demonios, descolonizar mi mente y mi cuerpo de esos mismos prejuicios para mi bienestar y el de las personas que me rodean.” (“fighting against my own demons, decolonizing my mind and body from the same prejudices for the sake of my own and my people’s well-being.”) They criticize body and beauty standards that are associated with ‘femaleness’. Moreover, they contradict and challenge its racialized and gendered stereotypes, and claim the right to perform and love queer bodies as a means of ambiguous, non-normative and transgendered bodies as well as physical and emotional well-being and healthiness.

The actuality and recency of the afro-Cuban queer feminist discourse is displayed at the last year’s conference “Contraxxyones: FeminisXs y Queeridad en el Caribe AfricuBianX” / “Contraxxions: Feminism and Queerness in the afro-Cuban Caribbean” held in Havana City, where the work of artists, intellectuals and academics that are struggling against racism, patriarchy, homophobia, sexism from a queer and afrodescendant’s point of view was rendered visible and brought together. The conference honored the role of the hip hop group Las Krudas Cubensi for representing an important driving force for young feminist and queer rappers and activists - Ramirez yet entitles their work as “el timón del nuevo afro-feminismo queer cubano.” / „the catalyst of / the guiding role within Cuban’s new queer afro-feminism”. 28

3. Body politics, sexuality, racism and decolonialism from a Black queer diaspora perspective. Analysis of Las Krudas Cubensis' song lyrics and videos

Lyrics “Gorda” (extract)

“Round like the earth, that enclose so many myths and legends. Round like acetate discs to the old school, the novices. Round like a CD that includes this beat which was done for me. Circle shape like coins, round like bread, round up to where I want, like my girls, who are fine as they are, look for yourself and see how well they are. Resisting as a fatty, as a black woman, as a warrior. Me, a whale, more space in the world, more is seen, with no shame. Let them tell me fat, let them mention me. So that they will remember this fatty and her songs, let them signal me because I exist, gladiator weight, I’m in love with myself. Silence doesn’t protect me, I won’t shut up.” (Translation by Las Krudas Cubensi)

Lyrics “Eres bella” (extract)

“You are beautiful being you / Ebony in bloom, black light / You are beautiful being you / The body is not your only virtue... / You are beautiful being you / Ebony in bloom, black light / You are beautiful being you / Intelligence is your virtue” (Author’s translation)
This chapter introduces the hip-hop group Las Krudas Cubensi and analyses exemplary song lyrics and videos to gain insight into their musical and artistic expression of a queer afro-feminist perspective. Even though Krudas Cubensi’s discursive context of Cuba’s new queer afro-feminism has already been explained, it is fruitful to look at the song lyrics and videos to see how they construct through language, images and beats a musical space for negotiating the personally experienced discrimination in the context of broader social inequalities linked to patriarchy and colonialism as well as a site of empowerment, creative agency and resistance. I argue that they not only enunciate counter narratives and critiques to hegemonial patterns of race, gender and sexuality but also create queer forms and narratives of using language and images which all together constitutes a queer practice that is grounded in the intersectionality of their identity. It should be noted that the study of Las Krudas Cubensi’s work is not a musical analysis but rather an associative encounter with their lyrics and videos on a linguistic and visual perspective. Needless to say that by translating the Spanish lyrics into English subtle linguistic shades and nuances, as well as the rhyming schemes get lost.

As it was shown in the first chapter, in the cuban sphere hip-hop was primarily a heteronormative and male-defined space where the emergence of female, feminist and/or lesbian perspectives remain a rigid and enduring struggle. Simultaneously rap proves to be a powerful medium to carry out social critique into public spheres, a characteristic which is also used by Las Krudas Cubensi to perform queer feminist critiques from a afro/cuban perspective.

The name of the group is noteworthy as both words „kruda“ and „cubensi“ have a particular meaning to the group members in terms of their identity construction. Musicians Odalys Cuesta and Odalyys Cuesta explain that „cubensi means everything that’s Cuban. For us it means we’re pure Cuba, that’s Cuba. Cu-bensi:“ and on the band’s website it says, „Kruda in Cuba means raw, unprocessed, unrefined, natural, real, deep, […] Cubensis is a latin word that defines some caribbean area native species […] Krudas Cubensi: The raw ones native from Cuba and the Caribbean representing in the world … to empower the community.“

While they transform Cuba, the Cuban to Cubensi/as an imagined space and identity that reaches beyond national and cultural boundaries. Krudas implies a rawness, openness and inadequateness similar to the concept of queer as a means of a resistance to a closure of meaning or definition. According to this notion of openness and undefinability Las Krudas Cubensi practice a fluid band member policy as they record and perform not always as the duo of Pasita and Pelusa but also in varied constellations, alone, or together with other female MC’s.

3.1 Radical and queer fatness

In the song „Gorda“ and its video clip Las Krudas Cubensi negotiate normative body and beauty standards, images and stereotypes of Black fat women. „I experience a profound pleasure in a world of many forms of women,“ raps Pasita rising her shirt and invites the audience to „enjoy this dance with your fat belly“ defining herself as „beautiful and mysteriously cylindrical“. The song and and its video clip represents a visual and decolonial insurgency against normative notions of female bodies and sexuality, as is appears in an unmediated discursive visual space making use of a juvenile language and slang words to enunciate simple, humorous and striking messages of empowerment, agency and resistance to the oppressive hegemonic representations of Black women bodies.

Pasita speaks of dominant beauty ideals, for example „always skinny sexy girls on TV“ and simultaneously devalue it as „same old image“ „Silicons here and there, ‘perfect torso’“ is immediately scoffed by saying „how lovely!“. Las Krudas criticize the impact of society’s demands to conform to normative gender roles and accompanying beauty standards on young girls by addressing imagined parents, as they rap, „hungry daughter, starving daughter, to be a baby, to be a doll“ as well as they call attention to the absurdity of by-society-imposed „anorexia in times of war“.

At the same time they rewrite and revisualize categories of reading bodies and produce counter-offensive visual and linguistic representations of body, sexual and racial policies. In the video clip the three women Pasita, La Real and Wanda, powerfully pose and dance in public places like parques, streets or on stage. Through their body language they express strength and enjoyment of their bodies and, for example show their naked bellies which is seen as a social taboo for fat women.

In the video clip single parts of the lyrics appear on the screen translated to english which allows an understanding also by a non-spanish-speaking audience and highlight particular words. Thereby ‘fat’ is spelled phat; a term originated from Black rap slang that signifies ‘cool’, ‘easy-going’ or ‘excellent’. Beneath revaluing the rather perjoratively used term ‘fat’ linguistically as something desirable, they also reclaim the image of fat black bodies by associating roundness and fatness with positive universal notions and meanings: “Round like the earth, that enclose so many myths and legends. / Round like acetate discs to the old school, the novices./ Round like a CD that includes this beat which was done for me.”

Paul Gilroy’s Black Atlantic

„Paul Gilroy’s The Black Atlantic, which was first published in 1993, remains remarkable for its introduction of the validity of ‘race’ as an analytical category in presenting the ‘Atlantic’ as a discrete geo-political unit in the modern capitalist world-system. The book elaborates a richly provocative critique of cultural nationalism, against which Gilroy posits black diasporic cultural and intellectual production. Gilroy’s ‘Black Atlantic’ delineates a distinctly modern, cultural-political space that is not specifically African, American, Caribbean, or British, but is, rather, a hybrid mix of all of these at once; this is evidenced via a series of compelling readings of a cohort of key modern black intellectuals and artists. Martin Delaney, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, Toni Morrison, and Richard Wright, and black Atlantic music from jazz to hip-hop-all these find their place in Gilroy’s pantheon. The ‘black Atlantic’ thus denotes a specifically modern cultural-political formation that was induced by the experience and inheritance of the African slave trade and the plantation system in the Americas, and which transcends both the nation state and ethnicity. “ See Phillip Kaisary (2014)
Pasita signifies fatness with strength, beautifulness, the courage to speak up and fight for recognition. In saying "Silence doesn't protect me./ I won't shut up" she refers to a line of Audre Lorde's essay „The transformation of silence into language and action”\textsuperscript{31}. Lorde describes the importance of speaking up and finding words for „the tyrannies you swallow day by day” as a Black lesbian woman. This difficult task in a structural and representational system where language and image are inherently racially and sexually marked seems to be simultaneously seriously and humoristically countered by Las Krudas’ rap songs. They perform their bodies as enviable and desirable, potent and strong, making fun of „super strong and super machos breaking their neck” but actually „Looking at what? My beautiful body.”

While speaking and scoffing about personal stories they also contextualize the racist and sexist assumptions on Black female bodies to colonialism but converge it simultaneously into agency or even threat: „A quienes consumen cuerpos colonizados los tengo estresados.” / „Those who consume colonized bodies I will stress them out.”

In the song, \textit{Eres bella} (Cubensi. 2003), Las Krudas also attempt to demonstrate how today’s realities of Black women are entangled with a history of colonial oppression but also historical movements of Black empowerment and anti-colonial struggles. As Blackness socially marks Black women as outside of feminity and beauty\textsuperscript{32} Las Krudas counter that racist assumption by using the image of the Ebony tree in bloom to describe Black women as beautiful: “Eres bella siendo tú, / ébano en flor, negra luz” / “You are beautiful being you / Ebony in bloom, black light”.

In \textit{Locas} (Levantate, 2012) Pelusa raps in a clear and rythmically voice while Pasita is beatboxing: „People use to call us crazy because we always question our supposed role./ Because united and firm we still stand as rocks,/ because we call ourselves beautiful with these fatty skins.” She speaks of the experienced discrimination contradicting and criticizing socially expected roles, behaviour and appearance through the building of alliances and community from where they draw strength to call themselves „beautiful with these fatty skins”. Recalling Audre Lorde's description of racism as weather and the need to counter it ( „In order to withstand the weather, we had to become stone”\textsuperscript{33}) Olivia Prendes takes on the image of the rock/stone as a symbol of strength for Black fat and lesbian women persevering together the ongoing oppression.

In \textit{Caradéla} (2005) Las Krudas Cubensi call attention to the subtle ways in which women’s oppression works through misrepresentation and language, „hard reality, unfair and constantly we are ignored, mistreated, discriminated, as women very little well represented: ‘Gentlemen’ that expression does not include me.”\textsuperscript{34} They directly adress the audience to listen and learn from them: „I am telling you, that all that matters, is that us being so little, we are the ones that are rocks, here we are in the resistance, defending rights, educating the audience.” The message they want to send out is the simple but radical acknowledgement and equal treatment of the diversity of genders and sexualities, as they repeat in the refrain of \textit{Caradéla}: „Listen audience. There is diversity, as skinny bodies exist, fatty bodies exists. As lightness exists, obscurity exists. As male exists, female also exists. As heterosexuality exists, homosexuality and queer exists. All of us deserve the right to freedom, listen, each of us is getting burned with virtues, with flaws. Everyone is on Fire, no one is completely perfect.”

\section*{3.2 Migration, structural racism and its colonial roots}

In the more recent song „No me dejaron” / „They didn’t let me into Spain” (2012) Las Krudas reflect on the subject of migration by referring to a personally experienced situation. They were invited to give a show in Spain but were rejected by the border police to enter the European country. In the first lines Pelusa imitates a Spanish border officer in an exaggerated Spanish accent, „Cubana? Teneis una nacionalidad que no os favorece. No les deremos visa a España ni a ninguno de los países de la union económica Europea. Sois posibles inmigrantes. / Cuban? You have a nationality that do not benefits you, we shall not give you a visa to Spain or any other country in the economic union of Europe. You are a possible immigrant.” Then Pasita describes how they were perceived in Europe and links it to the inherently racist assumptions about Blackness. „Hey, they didn’t let me into Spain because since I am black, I’m strange to those folks, and with that hair, they said she’s got her head in limbo. And ‘cause of my tattoos they thought to themselves, that negra doesn’t bathe.” Thus, they are not only refused as Black and Cuban but also received as strange because of their non-normative appearance.

Olivia takes the experience as an occasion to condemn unjust and racist visa policies and citizen regimes, that contributes to continuing global inequalities especially for refugees from formerly colonized countries, „They say that all our people want to stay there, but they forget how much they colonize here” and makes clear that „the right to travel, flee, escape is not just the attitude of the fearful, / but a challenge for those who can not sustain their life, / it is the dignity of those who choose change / even if where they go they have no house, mother, food, nothing, nothing.” Pointing to the larger global dimensions of racist citizen regimes Las Krudas opens up a transnational alliance, which becomes clear in the following lines that are repeated in the refrain: „Latin America, Africa, Carribbean, Asia, Third World ... has the right to migrate.”
In their song Amikimíongo (500 años basta) they negotiate explicitly the colonial past. Odaymara Cuesta raps, „They came to force with arms / Deployed themselves / They took possession of me in Africa / And brought me here / Genocide Tears, moaning, suffering all the time / It’s always been this way, what violence / How long for allow them to tell me / 500 years Enough”. The next strophe is about the still present effects like „Exploitation / discrimination / poverty / damn violence” and rhetorically asks the imagined perpetuators of colonialism, „What do you think that the world is small / As to be organized like your room”. In Resistiendo they call for Migrants, Blacks, Cubans, Queers, Carribbeans, Black Sisters to unite and resist and claim the „New Caribbean Feminism”. This notion of transnationalism and -culturalism guides me to the next aspect in Las Krudas Cubensi’s work.

3.3 Transatlantic Blackness

In an interview with The Postcolonialist Olivia Prendes states that „desde la diáspora continuamos representando nuestra identidad siendo embajadoras alrededor del mundo” / „from the diaspora we continue to represent our identity being ambassadors around the world” and defines their music as a means of „reclamando nuestro derecho como ciudadana mundial de nacionalidad cubana”/„reclaiming our right as world citizens of Cuban nationality”.

Regarding Paul Gilroy’s reflections on the Black Atlantic, Las Krudas’ self-positioning in a transnational and transcultural context from where they address the intersecting forms of oppression like racism, sexism, homophobia, citizenship and migration regimes as linked to colonial legacies and Western capitalist supremacy can be seen as „a counterculture of modernity”. In response to Gilroy’s Black Atlantic that overcomes national boundaries Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley elaborates that the Black Atlantic has always been a queer Atlantic. She explains that queer relationships emerged in the holds of slave ships that crossed between West Africa and the Caribbean as an expression of collaboration and resistance. The word mati describes intense relationships between same-sex ‘shipmates’, „those who had survived the journey out from Africa together … those who had experienced the trauma of enslavement and transport together.” These queer mati-like relationships still exists in the imaginaries and realities of today’s lesbian women in the Caribbean and, following Tinsley’s explanations, queer is not to be understood as just a gay or same-sex loving identity but a as a praxis of resistance:

„Queer in the sense of marking disruption to the violence of normative order and powerfully so: connecting ways that commodified flesh was never supposed to, loving your own kind when your kind was supposed to cease to exist, forging interpersonal connections that counteract imperial desires for Africans’ living deaths.”

Tinsley conceptualizes the Atlantic as a theoretical and ethnographical borderland „where elements or currents of historical, conceptual, and embodied maritime experience come together to transform radicalized, gendered, classed, and sexualized selves.” Keeping this in mind, the song Mundo Azul by Las Krudas Cubensi together with the Cuban singer Luz de Cuba depicts the meaning of the Atlantic as a site and metaphor for queer, afrodescendent and racially hybrid identities but also „for concrete, painful and liberatory experience.” In this song the three women honor Yemaya, which is the spirit of the ocean and the mother of all spirits in the yoruban mythology (which influenced the afrocuban religion Santería). Olivia Prendes rhymes, „Your are the origin of everything, past, now, future. You are responsible of all this people, Ashe” using the yoruban word ashe that refers to the creative power that makes things happen and is often used in greetings and prayers. They figure the ocean as „a colossal majestic..wearing a multicolor dress, clear dark, intense deep” and a „mistress of indecipherable mysteries”. The atlantic is imagined as a space that is both connected to the violent past of the transatlantic slave trade but also the source and bridge to their African, or rather transatlantic belonging and empowerment, a consolidating space where they can truly be who they are: „I cry inside, I cry inside, sorrows I tell you, I know that you are listening because I feel it. There will be a tomorrow, patiently I will wait.”

Las Krudas Cubensi express a queer counterculture speaking from a place in the Carribbean where decolonial resistances and collaborations has been connected to queer practices since the time of the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism. In numerous songs they discuss and contextualize the entangled dimensions of race, gender, sexuality and class to the colonial legacies, but always refusing to accept the oppression of their social selves. On the contrary, they empower themselves and their audience to unite and resist.

4. Conclusion
In this article written within the academic context of art history studies at the Freie Universität Berlin in Germany there was no getting around a certain academic representation and categorization of the 'research object' - a radical and activist hip-hop group who actually criticize the North-American and European academy for doing so. As a white author I do not share major experiences of vulnerabilisation with the artists, theorists and activists whose work I introduced in this essay, hence it was not the aim to grasp the complex life circumstances and represent them as a means of to speak for them. Rather, I meant to reconstruct the discursively given hegemonic racism, sexism and heteronormativity and specific disposition for Cuban Black lesbian women to render their practices of queer resistance against these interlocking forms of oppression more visible in the academic field. As Rinaldo Wilcott I come to the conclusion that Black diaspora queers have actually pushed the boundaries of transnational identification much further than we sometimes recognize and questions the singularity and exclusivity of critical gender and queer knowledge as being produced solely in the U.S.-American and European context.

5. Literature


6. Weblinks


Interview with Logbona Olukonee: [http://www.redsemlac-cuba.net/component/debates/questions/10/105/7.html](http://www.redsemlac-cuba.net/component/debates/questions/10/105/7.html) (accessed 22.3.15).

Homepage of the documentary film about Las Krudas Cubensi „Queen of myself“. See [http://www.queenofmyself.com](http://www.queenofmyself.com) (accessed 10.4.15).


7. References


8 Tanya Saunders explains that Black Cubans were excluded from jobs in the arising and lucrative tourist industry and if at all, were hired by the state, which meant that they were paid with the weak Cuban peso. As the Cuban diaspora tend to be white, they were also less likely to receive remittances from family members abroad. See Saunders (2009): 4.


15 cf. ibid.


18 In Fidel Castro's 1966 famous speech he promoted the concept of „dentro de la Revolución todo, fuera de la Revolución nada” (within the Revolution: everything, outside the Revolution: nothing). Situating artistic production and politics within the process of the Revolution is a common and often necessary strategy for Cuban artists and intellectuals as it allows them more freedom of expression. The Cuban feminist movements describe their struggle as „a revolution within the revolution“. Cf. Saunders (2009).


23 See for example Ramirez on her blog Negra Cubana que tenía ser (e.g. on the influence of Audre Lorde’s work: http://negracubanateniaqueser.com/2014/01/06/audre-lorde-inspira-a-feministas-cubanas/). Logboma Olukonee describes the importance of Black feminist works here: http://www.redsemlac-cuba.net/component/debates/questions/10/105/7.html (accessed 22.3.15).


28 Quoted from the trailer of the documentary „Queen of myself“. See http://www.queenofmyself.com (accessed 10.4.15).


33 Translated lyrics by Las Krudas Cubensi: http://www.krudascubensi.com/lyrics/ (accessed 27.3.15).


38 Ibid.

39 Santería is a syncretic afrocariibbean religion which developed in the Spanish Empire among West African slaves.


