

Postscript

On a warm October afternoon I set out with Obsesión's Magia López and Alexey Rodríguez to attend a local Sunday second-line parade in a black working-class section of New Orleans. The two had arrived the night before for a weeklong program of performance and forums as part of a 2011 North American tour. This being their first visit to New Orleans, I could think of no more fitting introduction to the city's cultural cartography than a Sunday second-line parade. With the recent lifting of Bush-era travel restrictions on Cuban artists and intellectuals, Havana raperos were now again free to tour the United States after a long hiatus. Building on stints of international travel melding music and social activism—including participation in the 2006 World Social Forum in Caracas, Venezuela, and repeated invitations to Vancouver's Hip Hop for Peace Festival organized around antiwar and anti-imperialist concerns—Magia and Alexey were quite resourceful in exploiting the renewed opening. This would in fact be the first of two subsequent U.S. tours, the second unfolding in 2013 and involving artistic collaborations with émigré and local MCs alongside outreach in black and Latino communities regarding antiracist and antisexist themes.¹

This Sunday's second-line was organized by Women of Class Social Aid and Pleasure Club, one of a handful of such female-centered clubs in New Orleans and seemingly all the more apropos given Magia's pioneering work as a rapera. Following the club members' flamboyant entrance from a local

bar to the calls of an awaiting brass band, the second-line started at a slow gait. As the energy grew, however, Magia and Alexey found themselves enveloped in the moving mass of bodies and music as they danced their way along the second-line's three-plus-hour route of street parading. A certain *afrocaribeño* intimacy appeared in play as the two spoke of an affinity and embodied comfort with the second-line, drawing on their experiences of *la Conga*, Santiago de Cuba's massive carnival street parades that, akin to New Orleans' circum-Caribbean variation, weave through black working-class barrios of Santiago as community members follow in step with percussive *conga* bands. I too was reminded of the congas' shuffle-step procession, often of thousands marching in moving time with the bands' *clave* (key rhythm), as I worked to keep step with the second-line's rolling mass lest I trip and take down others, given the intimacy of the shared movement. The second-line's music and pace calls all into rhythmic communion as a mobile community, one in which Magia and Alexey seemed to find fellowship that New Orleans day.²

During our parading we noticed a sharply dressed, young Asian man dancing up front. In classic hip hop flair of baseball cap, warm-up jacket, baggy pants, and athletic shoes, the dancer exhibited a wonderfully playful sense of the second-line "footwork" as he improvised his way down the route with attendant focus on the other dancing parishioners. As Alexey and I admired his moves, I queried a woman photographing him. She informed me that his name was Ivan Stepanov, aka B-boy Forwin—a breakdancer from Siberia who had just arrived in New Orleans at the invitation of a local arts nonprofit. Like Magia and Alexey, it was his first second-line, and on the spot the two invited him to perform with them in one of their upcoming shows. The following Friday evening B-boy Forwin joined the duo alongside an assemblage of local artists including an Afro-Cuban percussionist, a Japanese bassist, a saxophonist, a DJ, and a Trinidadian-born MC—all in creative sync via converging currents of diaspora and hip hop that found innovative form that week.

As explored, transnational routes of musical communion have been similarly alive in the creative making and moving of Cuba's hip hop community. Amid legacies of racial disenfranchisement forged at the confluence of exclusionary national histories and ongoing market elaborations that have denied equities of presence and participation, Afro-Cuban raperos have sought a multivocality of black citizenship and antiracist critique through

spheres of musical life. Here the now-global cultural terrain of hip hop offered both imaginative resource and creative recourse in crafting political claims and cosmopolitan belonging at simultaneous levels of the nationally and transnationally diasporic. Within this mix, raperos have had to navigate varying state strategies to manage their art and message in addition to the enduring constraints of a regulatory nonracialism, while contending with Cuba's unfolding complexities of neoliberal marketization alongside the competing rise of reggaetón. Rather than moving as isolated outliers, these efforts arose in dialogue with a range of social actors seeking anti-racist redress to the ideological silencing and structural marginalization of Afro-Cubans from full livelihood within the Cuban nation. While this moment may indeed be one in ongoing flux, as is all in a rapidly transforming Cuba, it appears evident that the political urgency of such calls continue to resonate critically forward.

Coda: In November 2013, Alexey Rodríguez and his partner gave birth to their daughter, Nehanda Imani—her name a celebratory ode to their friend, African American political exile, and rapero mentor Nehanda Abiodun, coupled with Imani, Swahili for faith.