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doi:10.1017/S0149767724000019

Cuban-style Salsa: Intersections of Tourism-led Entrepreneurship and Dancing Personal Development

Ruxandra Ana

> "Too fat, too thin, too old… Feel like a super-attractive woman in just two days, without killer diets, without expensive cosmetics or medical procedures. Come with us to Cuba! You will dance salsa with handsome, dark-skinned men- wonderful dancers. You will attract looks filled with lust, and you will walk like a queen, graciously receiving compliments. We have been organizing groups to Cuba for five years now, getting to know real Cuban life. We dance, we meet people and their authentic world- a world in which complementing and seducing women are natural as breathing."[1]

Introduction

This was the caption chosen by a Polish tour operator in 2018 to illustrate a picture showing a group of three Black men and three white women in closed embraces, on a sunny terrace under a bright pink bougainvillea, as part of an advertising campaign for a dance trip to Cuba. Some critical comments under the post questioned the business strategy that seemed to be encouraging sex tourism in the Global South, others called out a neocolonial attitude, but the overwhelming majority referred to the "hot" nature of Cubans, to culturally different understandings of seduction, flirt and sexuality, and last but not least insinuations that local standards and ideas of beauty were fundamentally diverse from (in this case) Polish ones. Cubans were described as always happy, tolerant and appreciative of all body shapes and sizes, able to be content with very little – the good weather of the island and the dance-induced good moods.

The Facebook post and the dance program it advertised are not an isolated example but revealing of a larger phenomenon. Music and dance lessons "at the source" provide tourists with more than just immersive experiences into sounds and bodily practices: they emerge as transformative paths in the journey to one's "true self", achievable by means of consuming and "embodying" an exotic Other.

In September 2018 at the beginning of a seven-month research stay in Havana, I noticed that many of the dancers working in salsa schools for international tourists were cautiously optimistic about the high tourist season ahead. They referred to the previous one as "the lowest high" (*la alta más baja*) in many years, attributing the diminishing number of tourists to political and natural catastrophes

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("Trump propaganda"[2] and the devastation left behind by hurricane Irma, which hit the island in September 2017). Mireya, one of my closest research participants and owner of a salsa school in Old Havana, was getting ready for the first big group of the season. I had known Mireya for three years, from the beginning of her dance business journey. She described herself as a fighter, a firm believer in hard work and self-designed paths for success, despite the hardships she encountered as a woman entrepreneur. She believed them to stem, at least partly, from racial discriminations, something she indicated by rubbing two fingers on her forearm, silently indicating her skin color when discussing the unforeseen difficulties she faced in her entrepreneurial endeavor. A Canadian tour organizer and dance enthusiast was bringing twenty women to the school for a one-hour salsa lesson. Although the lesson was only going to take place in the afternoon, the place was buzzing with excitement from early morning. This was the third location for Mireya's school[3], one that she was finally content with: on the second floor of a colonial building, overlooking one of the squares of Old Havana, with three big rooms for dance lessons, a patio and a smaller room that doubled as a changing-room and coffee-break room for the dance teachers. The entrance hall, which had previously been used for dance lessons, underwent major transformations, and served as a lounge/reception area. The furniture that once belonged in Mireya's living room had been repurposed and transported to the school: the home bar cabinet, a maroon leather sofa and two armchairs, a small coffee table and three sets of plastic flowers. Mireya's brother-in-law arrived with two bags full of canned beers, wine, packs of powdered ingredients for piña colada, and two bottles of rum. Cristina, the Canadian tour organizer, stopped by to discuss some last-minute details, and by noon all the dance teachers had arrived – those who usually worked with Mireya, and some who worked with other schools. Tania, who had been part of Mireya's team ever since she opened the school, explained that in such cases, when the demands of the group exceed the possibilities of the school, they invite good dancers from other schools to help them out. "People are content, now that they have some work", Mireya chipped in.

When the group arrived, she invited them into the main room and gave a brief introduction in English: "The rhythm of Cuban salsa has eight beats, but you only need six to dance: 1,2,3, *pausa*, 5,6,7, *pausa*. In this school we work with four basic steps for men and three basic steps for women". She then turned to face the mirrors on the wall and asked the women to form three lines behind her. She demonstrated the basic steps and asked everyone to repeat them, until they seemed to have grasped the main idea and, most importantly, the rhythm. As she continued to count "1,2,3, *pausa*, 5,6,7, *pausa*" she made a barely noticeable hand gesture that signaled to the dance teachers they were needed for the next part of the lesson. She partnered with Eduardo, one of the most experienced dance teachers at her school, her right hand and trusted friend, whom she affectionately called *mi negrito*[4]. As she moved on to demonstrate the closed position, she inserted the little joke she always did: "The man's hand goes on the back, in the middle. Not on the ass, not on the hip. Ladies, in Cuban salsa the man leads, the woman follows. So, for the woman it is easier, she has to listen to the man, to do what he tells her, but not with words, with his body." When the couples were formed, Mireya and Eduardo continued to demonstrate the basic steps, and after a few minutes Mireya asked everyone to form a circle and continue dancing the basic step. She then switched to giving indications in Spanish, *arriba, pa'abajo,* thus making the couples move around in circle, clockwise or counterclockwise, in closed position. Every now and then she would say in English "switch partners", and the men walked under their partner's arm to the next partner. The movement was interrupted by more commands in English: "picture", and the couples stopped, striking a pose (usually a dip or a knee dip) and thus allowing Cristina, the tour organizer, to take some good quality pictures, not much different from the Polish tour operator's picture that showed the white women supported in dance poses by Black male dancers. Other times Mireya would ask them to shout out "*agua*!", "mojito!", "Cuba libre!" and the room filled with cheers and giggles.

When the lesson was over, people continued to chat, practice their basic steps and plan for the evening ahead over cold beers and *piña colada en polvo*. When the group finally left, Mireya called for a

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spontaneous work reunion with "her dancers", after making sure she had paid all the other dancers who came from different schools. She thanked them for their work, reminded them this was a beginners' group but that with advanced groups they would have to try harder. It was at that point that Osmani, one of the newer teachers, commented that even beginners' classes can be challenging: "You need to allow more time for them to learn the step", he said. "This is not your job," Mireya replied and Eduardo added: "It is a group lesson, this is why they pay less." Seeing Osmani unconvinced, Mireya continued: "It's a group lesson, they start at the same level, but they have different acquisition levels (*nivel de captación*). If they really want to learn, they will pay for private lessons." According to Mireya, the purpose of the group lesson was to provide a fun, memorable experience that would ensure a continued collaboration with the tour organizer and would provide clients with some basic skills in order for them to be able to have fun at night in popular dance venues.

Her strategy resonated with another tour organizer who happened to be there on that day, having arrived early for her private lesson with Eduardo. Fun, memorable experiences were at the core of dance tourism. Magdalena, a Polish woman in her late twenties, told me that over the past two years she had spent nine months in Cuba, a country she appreciated for its joyful people and vibrant dance scene: "From the first time I was here, I didn't pay attention to the fact that I could not find this or that. That's how it is here (*Tak po prostu tu jest*). Look at them, they have so little, and they are so happy."

Magdalena and Cristina were two of the many women I met during my research who were allured by the widely circulating imaginaries about Cuban people, created and maintained by the global tourism industry and adopted by Cubans in their interactions with foreigners. Cubans involved in the dance scene are commonly regarded as the embodiment of an imagined lifestyle that responds to tourist expectations: happy, carefree, always smiling, always ready to dance. Their "failure" to respond to these expectations is rarely interpreted as proof of the complexities of everyday life unfolding (also) in touristic settings but is rather perceived as a violation of tourist expectations and met with disappointment, disenchantment and sometimes frustration.

In what follows, I analyze how dance encounters in touristic settings bring about imaginaries and gendered performances of Cubanness, by focusing on dance programs for whom international female tourists are the main audience. The complex economies of desire, just like the very history of sexuality in Cuba, are intimately linked to colonial dominance. The cultural image of the *mulata*, portrayed as the prototypical Cuban woman, the embodiment of the exotic infused with the erotic (Kutzinski 1993) came to be associated with national symbolism due to her racial features but also to idealized representations of beauty. A symbol of Cuba's hybridity and a representation of an idealized 'Cubanness' – beautiful, promiscuous and sexually available, she attracts the patriarchal gaze through hip[g]nosis – the mesmerizing power of her hips in constant motion (Blanco Borelli 2016).

Drawing upon these arguments, I turn to my ethnographic material which indicates that hypermasculine and (presumably) sexually available dancing Black Cuban men also retain a certain type of exotic capital which becomes central to touristic spaces associated with music and dance, thus rendering them part of this fetishized, idealized notion of Cubanness.

Cuban-style Salsa and Tourism-led Dance Entrepreneurship

When in 2015 I decided to focus on dance as entrepreneurial endeavor in touristic settings for my doctoral dissertation, I did not "enter" the field, I rather "returned" to it. From 2011 to 2014 I had conducted fieldwork for my master's thesis, in which I analyzed the heritagizing processes of Cuban rumba, inscribed on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2016. During my first research project, I frequented rumba venues, took lessons from rumba practitioners in Havana and Matanzas, but occasionally I also went out to dance in salsa venues, which my research

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participants did not visit. The familiar faces I kept seeing in rumba events were rarely present at salsa nights, and the opposite also held true. Contrary to popular belief, dance worlds in Havana rarely overlapped. Similarly, dancers and dance aficionados who frequented queer spaces avoided the heteronormative salsa venues like the ones in which I conducted research. Tourists navigated swiftly these circuits, filling their vacations with dance and percussion classes, live concerts, parties and long hours of dancing every night. In March 2015, I was writing the following in my diary: "Last year, and the year before, everyone was willing to offer dance lessons on the spot. The offers are still here and still abundant, but there seems to have been a shift: now the dance teachers visually differentiate themselves from the rest of the dancing crowd, they wear t-shirts with the name of the school, they hand out business cards, and I am being offered lessons at school, not so much at home. They emphasize the importance of learning from a trained teacher who has the right methodology, knows how to build a class for the specific needs of each tourist, shortly put, someone who is a professional (a word they use very often)".

Unlike my research participants from rumba worlds, these dancers were not tied to one dance genre or one practice in particular. They danced everything, from salsa, rumba and bachata to tango and kizomba. They were usually in their twenties and thirties, some identified as Black, some as *mulato*[5], and they came from different dance backgrounds. Some were graduates of *Escuela de Instructores de Arte* and a few others of *Escuela Nacional de Arte*. Many had no previous dance training; they abandoned their jobs as lawyers, accountants, teachers or construction workers and started teaching tourists how to dance. Through their constant contact with foreigners, through their engagements with technology and social media, and sometimes due to their affective ties and long-distance relationships with tourists, they were part of a transnational field that modeled their hopes, desires and expectations (without necessarily implying mobility at the time of my research, although many of them had traveled abroad repeatedly and worked with various dance schools or festivals in Europe).

During the years of my doctoral research project, from 2015 to 2019, over twenty salsa schools (almost all of them located in Old Havana) were my places for "deep hanging out"[6], individual and group lessons, as well as formal and informal interviews[7]. Some schools were already well established on the market, others were in the early days of their activities, but the common denominator was a marketing strategy developed almost entirely around "Cuban salsa". The school names commonly included the word "salsa" in various configurations (usually together with "Havana" or "Cuba"), indicating the centrality of the practice for the business. Where other names were preferred, all promotional materials, from banners and leaflets to websites and social media necessarily specified *escuela de salsa*. The word "casino", which designates the popular dance form developed in Cuba in the second half of the twentieth century (Carbonero 2006) and marketed abroad as "Cuban style salsa", was used less frequently. When it did show up in conversations with tourists, it was interpreted as a sign of cultural intimacy and often an indicator of their proficiency level in dance. Casino did not disappear only from dancers' vocabulary. Its focus on body movement and isolations, which in the opinion of many of my research participants gave the dance its "true Cuban flavor" was also lost in translation, as the form taught during classes was simplified and adapted to correspond to the international salsa scene. Round turn patterns were increasingly mixed with linear patterns, and particular attention was placed on long and seemingly complicated figures, that involved a lot of wrapping and twisting. Since many of the individual clients of these schools had some dance experience from their own countries (often with Cuban teachers), they expected to find in Havana local replicas of their own practice, enhanced by the skill level of their Cuban teachers "at the source". What tourists danced *allá afuera* ("out there") was determining to a great extent what they were willing to dance in Cuba. The dynamics of dance consumerism on the international salsa scene and the constant desire for novelty (Jiménez Sedano 2019) influenced the offers of many salsa schools, as teachers had to become proficient in subgenres that at certain times were popular with dancing tourists, such as bachata sensual or urban kizomba. Teaching in front of the mirror and including elements of stretching before and after class became as important as good promotional strategies and positive reviews online.

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Although dance lessons for international tourists are not a novelty in Cuba (some of the state-owned companies organize smaller workshops and a six-day festival every year), encounters around dance such as the ones described in the opening vignette were made possible by the expansion of the small business sector, which created new spaces for the professionalization and institutionalization of dance and generated employment opportunities. Self-employment (*trabajo por cuenta propia* or *cuentapropismo*) in Cuba allowed a shift from the state sector to the private sector, reshaping work relations and becoming a symbol of economic and political transformations in late socialism (Phillips 2006). Contact with tourists creates certain opportunities that strengthen one's own economic or social position, thus resulting in empowerment and overcoming of underprivileged situations (Bloch 2021). As studies of contemporary Cuban dance music indicate, the dollarization of the economy and the crisis of the 1990s paved the way for new spaces of artistic expression within private entrepreneurship, fostering a generation that looked up to tourists as role models and economic resources (Perna 2016). But even as new opportunities presented themselves outside of the strictly state regulated framework, the state's failure to control and regulate certain aspects of self-employment did not go unnoticed by dancers trained in higher education institutions.

Rogelio, a dancer in his early thirties, who worked for a state-owned company and had his own private school in the living room of the house he shared with his partner, explained this as following:

> "Nobody asks for any proof or documents [of formal education in the field of dance], you just go and say you want a license to be a teacher of music and other arts. And they did this in all sectors, cell phone repair, hairdressers – nobody checks your skills. Nobody but the market. When people realize that you don't know your job, they will stop seeking your services. But with dance it's more difficult because sometimes tourists don't know if they were taught well or not. Beginners in particular can't tell the difference, they can be tricked easily."

Rogelio's comment suggests that the regulatory mechanisms of the market can establish and confirm a professional where the state fails to acknowledge the differences between practitioners. The ability to understand the market and the demands that come from tourists is understood as the key to achieving success and is often presented in opposition to the state's lack of flexibility and capacity to innovate. These new spaces and forms of economic activities, and the work practices associated with them, are common for post-socialist transitions and create the basis for individual explorations of new spheres of decision-making and self-reliance.

The labor performed by dance teachers situates them on the border of dance as service (paid for) and dance as interpersonal encounter (Menet 2020, 234). In daily interactions with their clients, dance teachers come to establish a broad spectrum of relations that are influenced by inequalities of resources and unequal access to mobility, since it is the (usually) white European and North American dancing tourists who take up space as central dancing figures, co-creating the cultural script that fetishizes Cuban Black bodies, especially in settings such as salsa schools or popular dance venues. Notions of success, professionalism and competition are redefined at the intersection of entrepreneurial projects and affective encounters. Back in 2016, the dance business was summarized as following by Luis, a dancer in his late twenties:

> "People slowly understood this was easy money. In one hour, you can make the equivalent of the monthly salary in this country. And then maybe you find yourself a girlfriend; you leave the country. It's easy to make them fall in love with you. You don't believe all these women come here just to learn how to dance, do you? Some of them come because Cubans are so *cariñosos* (affectionate) and make them feel appreciated; others come because they already have a very good level, and they just want a man who can dance. But in the end, they all come for the attention, for the way we are, for how we treat women."

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Luis was one of my first dance teachers when I started traveling to Havana over a decade ago. Our lessons would usually take place at night, after he finished his day job. Luis worked as a blacksmith and taught dance to tourists in order to help the family business. His family owned a *casa particular* and, in those days, it was common to offer dance lessons to tourists, along with taxi services, recommendations for other *casas particulares* in different provinces, or homemade "traditional Cuban" meals. Lessons usually lasted one hour or one hour and a half, and oftentimes family members would gather in the living room to watch us dance and sometimes give indications or comment on our (my) dancing. Friends and neighbors stopped by to chat, and sometimes Luis interrupted the lesson and danced with whoever happened to be standing in the doorframe, in order to give me a better idea about a new step or a combination. At first, it was a rather uncomfortable experience for someone used to training individually with a teacher, behind closed doors, in the organized setting of a dance studio or a dance school, based on my previous experience taking ballroom dance lessons or L.A.-style salsa in various European countries. Other times Luis would simply continue dancing while casually chatting with his friends who were smoking on the balcony.

One evening during the lesson, he got caught up in a seemingly endless conversation, all the while turning me left and right. I told him he was hurting me, that his lead was too strong. He replied promptly: "I have to use more force because you need more practice. When you dance better, I'll be *más suave* (softer)." Eventually I got used to it, and to his skill of dancing and conversing at the same time, which I came to understand was not one of his quirks, but an art mastered by many, especially in popular dance venues where salsa parties took place. As I began to frequent these places as a form of dance escapism during the years when I conducted research on rumba, in an attempt to engage in dance-as-leisure (rather than dance-as-research), I noticed two things. The first one, and the most obvious, was that the crowd was generally made up of Cuban men (usually Black) and foreign women (usually white and European/North American). The second one, which only became obvious after the first few years, was related to the dynamics on the dance floor. As the number of dance schools increased, dance teachers started working as "taxi dancers", which meant they accompanied their clients to parties and concerts at night. Their labor routines underwent restructuring and the boundaries between work time and free time were practically erased, since their free time was used to seek potentially lucrative activities (see also Heintz 2002). But as tourists started going out accompanied by their dance teachers, interactions with other dancing bodies (whether coming from other schools or simply attending a salsa night as regular clients) diminished considerably. Salsa schools reserved entire tables for their clients and in the case of bigger groups they mobilized all the staff to take part in nighttime entertainment. As a consequence, the unwritten rule that said "dance with everyone in order to improve your skills" was being replaced by "dance with everyone *you know* in order to improve your skills".

My attempt to reach deeper into these dynamics revealed one of the most prominent divisions among Cubans who participate either formally or informally in tourism economies: the division between Cubans who see themselves as honest and hardworking, on the one hand, and 'the others', deceitful, cunning, who make a living at the expense of credulous tourists. But it also revealed the limits of fieldwork: I was coming to this new field not just from the position of the researcher, but of the white woman frequenting popular dance venues in the company of a Black Cuban man.

"Un negrón que baila tan pegado": Eroticizing the Black Body in Tourist Encounters

In her study on tourism and sexuality in Costa Rica, Susan Frohlick (2012) discusses the different ways in which bodies "arrive" in tourist spaces and key sites of tourist–local encounters. Foreign bodies are perceived according to local gendered scripts, and sexuality and gender (together with race and class) are central aspects of embodiment. Throughout the years, my physical appearance and my heterosexual subjectivity became inextricably bound up with other people's readings of my

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body. My body "arrived" white, but my "peripheral whiteness" (Safuta 2018), along with assumptions about my experiences and memories of socialism in Europe, my fluency in Spanish and knowledge of the Cuban context created a common ground with some of my research participants.

My body arrived "heterosexual". When sensuality and sexuality are a major component of what is being researched, and especially given the over-sexualization of dance in tourist spaces in Cuba, being attributed sexual and emotional availability was an almost instant reaction to my "arrival" in the field. It was not uncommon for my research to be perceived as a pretext for a hidden agenda: finding myself a Black Cuban partner. Somewhat irritated, but mostly concerned for my professional integrity and worried that misreading these situations would make me a "bad anthropologist" (see also Johansson 2015), I opened up about this to Eduardo and his colleague, Yoel, during a break between lessons at Mireya's school. Eduardo explained: "Many women come here with this idea, that they have a dance teacher and a Cuban boyfriend. They come to Cuba with this idea, I'm going to find myself a Cuban. He can be a dancer, a dance teacher, or someone they just met at a party." Right before starting a kizomba lesson with a client who just the day before had asked Mireya to change her teacher and assign her to Eduardo, he added: "It's very convenient, classes here are cheaper than in Europe, they are on vacation, they enjoy the sun and the beach, and a Black man who dances so close to them (*un negrón*[8] *que baila tan pegado*)."

Yoel and I stayed on the balcony to watch the lesson, and he picked up on the suggestion made by Eduardo. Like many Cubans, Yoel (whose skin color was lighter than Eduardo's) assumed that Eduardo's blackness placed him higher up in the hierarchy of desirability among female tourists, highlighting the eroticization of Black bodies in tourist encounters. Male dancers repeatedly pointed out that foreign women who come to Cuba for dance lessons usually expect more from their potential dance partners/dance teachers, mirroring from a different perspective the blurred boundaries that historically characterized dance academies in pre-revolutionary Cuba, as described by Melissa Blanco Borelli: men who found themselves attracted to their dance partners could pay extra (at the ticket desk of the academy, to the girl's mother or chaperone) for a more intimate contact off the dance floor (2016, 74). A certain ambivalence that characterized touristic encounters was also pointed out by Luis' mother, who over the years became one of my closest friends in the field. She would often repeat that Luis and his sister should be "grateful" to her for their lighter skin color, which she believed to be an advantage in terms of employment opportunities and diminished discrimination. But it also meant that Luis would be less successful with female tourists interested in dance, because he was not "*un negro alto, fuerte*".

Racial discrimination in Cuba remains the result of structural racism (Clealand 2013) and not just incidents of individual prejudice. The government's measures aimed at developing the free market and increasing the contribution of tourism to the economy of the country have not provided a great deal of opportunities for the large group of Afro-Cuban population, limited to a great extent from interacting with foreigners and restricted to working at the periphery of the sector, engaging in informal contacts (de la Fuente 2001). The emergence of a dance market developed around private salsa schools meant that many young Cubans could capitalize upon their skin color and bodily skills, in what was shaping out to become an "eroticized market for blackness" (Perry 2016).

Before the Cuban Revolution of 1959, the country was considered one of the most racist in the Caribbean, a reality used by Fidel Castro in gaining support for his revolutionary ideas. The abolition of slavery in 1886 and the anti-colonial struggles against Spain had set the grounds for a new nation-building project, one that accentuated the Spanish origins of Cuban culture and, although it acknowledged African practices, deemed them incompatible with the modernizing destiny of the nation and ultimately expected them to disappear (Morrison 2015, 162). The revolutionary government claimed to have achieved the ideal, raceless society, a concept rooted in the works of José Martí and Marxist ideology, which went along with the strong critique of bourgeois excess associated with the influx of tourists, gambling, prostitution and capitalist moral decay. But when tourism

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returned as a "necessary evil" (Fernandez 1999) as a means to rebuild the nation after the fall of the Soviet Union, "the dollarization of the economy profoundly demarcated social classes, leading to class segmentation, most notably along racial lines" (Cabezas 2009, 64).

The reproduction of racial stereotypes contributed to the growing popularity of Cuba as a tourist destination where sex is easy, available and part of the holiday experience, thus reinforcing the connection between the sexualization of Cuban people in tourism and leisure services and the island's colonial past (Sánchez Taylor 2000; Kummels 2005). The reemergence of sex tourism in the 1990s recalled images associated with pre-revolutionary prostitution, corruption and excess that the government had wished forgotten. But state institutions were quick to emphasize the distinction between pre-revolutionary forms of prostitution caused by poverty and new forms manifested after the 1990s and characterized as "voluntary" and an expression of moral decadence as a result of increased desire for consumer goods, epitomized by the phenomenon of *jineterismo* (Berg 2004). The term literally means horseback riding, but it is used to define hustling and/or prostitution. The persons engaging in *jineterismo* (called *jineteros* or *jineteras*) offer sex, company, guidance and sometimes goods (usually cigars but not only) in exchange for money, meals or a night out. Often such engagements with tourists are expected to lead to marriage and, subsequently, the possibility of leaving the country. Relationships are seen as either purely sexual – usually between Afro-Cuban women and male tourists (see also Fusco 1998) or romantic, lacking economic connotations (Fernandez 1999). When it comes to Cuban men and foreign women, such relationships are often framed as "romantic involvements", although not excluding the economic component, and they reinforce sexualized racist fantasies that attract female (sex) tourists to the Caribbean (Kempadoo 2004; Simoni 2015).

As more schools started offering the service of "taxi dancer", the delimitations between leisure and labor became blurred, and dance school owners and tour organizers started demanding increased flexibility from dancers. But the expansion of the dance business into the domain of nighttime entertainment came with additional challenges for dancer teachers' subjectivities. Encounters in highly circulated tourist areas (bars, clubs, concert venues) are believed to be marked by the presence of *jineteros*, who at times may appear to mobilize the same resources as dance teachers in their interactions with tourists, even though they may not necessarily be interested in accessing the salsa circuit. Especially since tourism reinforces the idea that in Cuba everyone dances, dance schools usually take the responsibility of creating "safe spaces" for their clients also outside class. As seen above, dance teachers commonly assumed that female dancing tourists who frequented certain salsa spaces in Havana did so in an attempt to find more than a dance partner. Their protective behavior became an additional resource of professionalization, a means of self-affirmation and a strategy for defending the business. But it was also strongly criticized by Cubans who were regular clients of these venues, without being involved in the dance business.

Such was the case of Reinaldo, a man I met at a salsa party and with whom I went out dancing a few times. Reinaldo was a regular at one of the most famous salsa venues in Havana at that time. I enjoyed dancing with him, and I appreciated his honesty: he said he enjoyed dancing but did not consider himself a dancer and preferred to stay away from dancing tourists, especially if they tried to be "more Cuban than Cubans" (*más Cubanos que los Cubanos*) when they danced. I had heard this opinion before, from Cubans not involved in the dance school business: in order to dance with tourists who regularly take dance lessons, one would have to take lessons with their teachers first.

As salsa parties shifted from being a space of leisure to a space of ethnographic work in the economy of my research, some of the limitations of my fieldwork became obvious. I soon realized that although to my mind Reinaldo and I were casually dating, if dating at all, perceptions from the outside were completely different. Most of the other men who came to dance in that particular venue would not talk to me in his presence, let alone ask me to dance. Some would even pretend not to

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know me. Performances of masculinity and scripted interactions (Grazian 2008) between female tourists and locals were revealing a "hierarchy of desirability for tourist women" (Frohlick 2012, 82), comprising a variety of factors like beauty, age, wealth, country of origin. These men did not identify as *jineteros*, but they identified everyone else as such. Most of them frequented 1830 alone or in the company of their male friends, although at times they could be seen in the company of female tourists for longer periods of time. At play were the male codes of honor which "prioritize male friendship over romantic affairs and present women as secondary" (Gámez Torres 2012, 241). If a woman was accompanied by a male partner, then any attempt made by other men to dance with her was interpreted as an effort to seduce her and, consequently, an offense to her partner's masculinity.

Reinaldo was as skilled as Luis was at dancing and conversing. Constantly alert to our surroundings, oftentimes there was a pragmatic undertone to his communication: while leading me with one hand, he would signal with the other hand the presence of other female tourists to his friends on opposite sides of the dance floor, usually by waving, indicating the direction, and the number of women who did not have a dance partner. In the eyes of dance teachers, Reinaldo and his friends were not deemed fit as dance partners for their clients: their dancing skills were considered average and without any potential to "improve" tourists' technique. By hiring a taxi dancer, tourists could practice what they learned in class but in a safe, secure environment, which would not only protect them against possible deceit but would be a guarantee for the quality of the dancing. The presence of dance schools and organized groups was perceived by dancers such as Reinaldo and his friends as a deterioration of the dance scene which became less interactive and lost its fun and spontaneity.

What they all seemed to agree on was portraying other Cubans as unreliable and not trustworthy, thus reinforcing the narratives about instrumental and deceitful relationships with Cubans. "*Nadie es santo en La Habana*" were the words Reinaldo used to justify his protective behavior, which was becoming frustrating on a professional level and daunting on a personal one. By being associated with Reinaldo, my chances at gaining insight into the systems of male competition and male alliances that were part of a quest for social mobility diminished considerably. Friendships with other men would have gone against the codes of masculinity that defined interactions in these venues.

Cubans' self-representation as virile and hypersexual is a mainstream cultural trope that links sexual prowess to national pride (Forrest 2002; Stout 2014). In tourist encounters, these self-perceptions are strengthened by additional notions of openness, lack of inhibitions and being *caliente* (hot) – almost always emphasized in opposition to tourists themselves, perceived as closed, cold and inhibited. As I discuss in the next section, many dance programs idealize this essentialized, heteronormative representation of Cuban masculinity and they actively encourage women to engage with it as a boost for self-esteem and confidence, imagined to ultimately lead to enhanced performances of femininity.

Dancing Personal Development and the Fetishization of Poverty

In 2016, I interviewed Beata, a Polish tour operator who had recently started organizing dance trips to Cuba. She was already planning the next dance programs, despite some inconveniences related mostly to logistics and time management on the Cuban side. The other aspect that bothered her was the behavior of some of the male dancers:

> "We went to this *paladar* (privately owned restaurant) with some of the Cuban guys in our group, they were very nicely dressed, I really love this, they looked like peacocks. But it annoys me that everything, all the time borders on *jineterismo*. With women it's easier to notice, you know, a working girl. But with men, you never know. All of them have iPhones, you think they went to the shop and bought

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> them? But this is the nation, some ask for soap in the street, some ask for phones and shoes. But what bothered me most was that even though we just paid for the dance lessons, they still expected us to pay the entry fee for the party."

Aware of such perceptions and usually in better economic and social positions than most Cubans, many dance teachers found it easier to distance themselves from behaviors associated with *jineterismo*, and to display a lifestyle closer to the lifestyles of tourists. In many cases, this is the ground on which relationships are built and developed as a 'hybrid model' (Simoni 2016) in which a purified, disinterested vision of friendship coexists with an interdependency between interest and emotional attachment. Inequalities come to the fore especially when different consumer practices are revealed, as many dance teachers pointed out that their clients either invited them to places which they could not afford otherwise or brought them gifts of significant value. Most of the times, however, these differences were regarded as a consequence of the Cuban state's failure to take care of its citizens and provide decent living and working conditions, which could allow dancers to fully engage in tourists' lifestyle. In this way, the focus shifts from the economic status of the tourist to the failed contract between the citizen and the state.

While many tourists acknowledge to a certain extent the difficulties of daily life in Cuba, these essentializing processes lead to a romanticized vision according to which people are "poor but happy", "have a difficult life but know how to enjoy it through music and dance." By insisting on the "authentic" character of Cuban music and dance and the enjoyment that results from immersion in this world, dance programs put forward and explicitly advertise the promise of a "new path" toward one's "authentic self". Claims at an innate predisposition for happiness become embedded in the political and economic context, as Cubans are praised for their resilience and creativity, while emotional identities are normalized and inscribed in the stereotypes of the happy, free tropical local. To this day, happiness and smiles remain common tropes in tourism promotion and encounters in touristic settings, not unlike the joyful images of Cubans aimed at promoting the state's vision of itself and its citizens in the 1960s and 1970s (Guerra 2023, 345). Additionally, by implying that the island has somehow remained "unspoiled" by capitalism, notions of happiness and lightheartedness are fragments of a broader political reading which ultimately normalizes and justifies poverty, through the implication that it can be overcome and 'lived with' precisely because of these innate emotional predispositions. In this way, tourism projects an amount of permissible poverty into the tourist gaze, transformed into part of the scenery, and often experienced from a disengaged position (Rolfes 2010).

The same nostalgic tropes of "isolation" that place the entire country in a "frozen in time" state are employed in order to explain the transformative power of dance. Furthermore, it is suggested that Cuban men have a particular ability to make women feel special and attractive. The normalized everydayness of sexual promiscuity and availability are framed as a "way of being" rather than a "way of behaving" (Ogden 2015, 123).

Idealized images of Cuban femininity are expected to materialize in self-improvement, in enhanced femininity that has learned the secrets from the source, thus perpetuating the scheme of "femininity as spectacle" (Bartky 1997, 140). Interactions with Cuban women are, however, quite limited, and usually are reduced to "styling lessons" and the adoption of a few visual elements understood as signs of body positivity. This stereotypical image of Cuban femininity overlooks how representations of racialized gender contributed to sexualized social stigma and controlling images (Berry 2021) as dance classes focus on embodying desire under the male gaze. To this end, "styling lessons" are aimed at breaking down specific movements of the arms, shoulders and hips, and place strong emphasis on the woman's capacity for creative improvisation during moments of solo dancing. They usually come to complete dance lessons with a male partner, in order to make the movement look more "natural", more "fluid", to give it "Cuban flavor", as explained by the women I met in various schools during my research. Most of these were women tourists who

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spent a few weeks (some of them a few months) perfecting their dance technique and who would occasionally take one or two "styling lessons". Only some of them considered it was necessary to study with a female instructor for longer, and in many cases the focus was not on bodily movements and improvisation, but rather on partner dancing, with the teacher leading – or *bailando de hombre* (dancing the male steps).

Certain ways of moving, which Cuban women are believed to be "born with", are another key element of most dance programs. Being "*suave*" (soft) is considered one of the most important achievements that can improve not just a woman's way of dancing, but her posture and elegance: it is a way of moving which eliminates tensions from the body and from the couple, is reactive and responsive to the lead, soft but controlled, in a state of permanent preparedness but not stiff. More than figures, combinations, rhythm or musicality, this was considered one of the most difficult things to teach and was usually explained by male teachers through an "innate" tendency of Western women to lead and control. Tourists' bodies were perceived primarily through the lens of work and the challenges that arise from the need to transfer enough knowledge and skills in order to transform them into "dancing bodies", a task made increasingly difficult by time limitations.

The other challenge was posed by the ambivalent nature of closeness, especially in a teacher-student/client relationship, where not just emotions are at stake, but also the very notion of professionalism. Eduardo jokingly used the word *jamonear* to describe a way of touching that was overtly sexualized and served no purpose in dancing (whenever he used the word, it was accompanied by a hand gesture that recalled the squeezing and mixing together of different meats in the process of making ham). "But then you have to stop the lesson, he added, and explain that the hand doesn't go there, the leg doesn't go there, and you have to be very delicate because you can't upset them, everyone needs the client and the money".

Male teachers' narratives usually highlight the woman's initiative, which they usually believe to be a consequence of imaginary constructions of Cuban masculinity. Just like Eduardo, Yoel acknowledged the expectations tourists arrived with but was cautious in his responses to these expectations:

> "I cannot risk a misunderstanding just to make someone feel good. When a client comes to my class, I make it clear it is just that, a class. But it happens anyway that girls imagine other things, because there are people out there who dedicate themselves to that, they pretend to know how to dance, they ask them out, dance with them, and by the end of the night, it is no longer about dance. And then tourists put all of us in the same bag (*nos meten en la misma jaba*)."

Since many dance programs emphasize seduction and flirtation as desirable skills to be transferred from Cuban women to foreign women who visit the island, intertwining gendered body and beauty ideals with narratives of success (understood in many cases as successfully performed seduction), movement and learning to dance "like Cubans do" become the path towards achieving this goal. Paradoxically, features of femininity and skill that are admired for being "disconnected" from consumerism and capitalist logic are to be put to work in order to increase efficiency and success in a neoliberal scheme that is not to be challenged but improved through knowledge extraction.

Although dance plays an important part in these personal projects of enhanced femininity, other elements come into play. Bodies are conceived as spaces of transformation that leave nothing untouched – from clothing to ways of walking, looking, touching and flirting. Attributes of a broader idea of "Cubanness" (seduction, playfulness, sensuality) are framed as desirable skills that need to be acquired and improved, in order for women to realize their full potential. This entails a strong belief in one's capacity to develop self-esteem, self-love, build meaningful relationships and become more confident. The lack of such qualities is usually attributed to external factors pertaining to the "developments of the Western world" and presumably, can be fought back

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through immersion in Cuban culture, as advertised by many of these dance programs. The example below, advertising a women's only retreat in Cuba, is illustrative for a broader tendency to valorize Cuba's imagined state of "isolation" and put it to work towards personal goals of female tourists:

> "Many of us are so caught up in the system, that we've lost connection to our true selves, our authenticity, our female wisdom. However, in Cuba, the rules are different, and you can feel the female wisdom vibrating through the air. It's the best place for women to learn how to fully embody this feminine wisdom from in to out[9]."

Such beliefs are deeply connected with the idea that it is possible to seek and find "meaning", "authenticity", "truth" through practices related to embodiment and performance of Cuban dance – which stops being a purpose in itself, but a tool towards self-discovery, ultimately leading to increased satisfaction and a sense of being content, comfortable with one's "true self" or "true nature". Rooted in the neoliberal idea(l)s of "self-discovery" or "self-building", these programs emphasize the process of transformation one should constantly undergo in order to realize one's full potential. For the neoliberal self-governance mode, "to be empowered, free and actively choosing becomes the normative ideal" to which one must aspire through ceaseless self-care and perfection, and for which one must bear full responsibility and take risks (Chen 2013, 448).

As interactions with Cuban women are rather limited for most female tourists, idealized images of local femininity are usually materialized entirely through interactions with Cuban men. The streets of Cuba provide the venues for other types of scripted interactions, as women can relish the prospect of being complimented and chatted up by Cuban men, as was seen in the opening vignette in this section. Through sensual and sexual(ized) experiences with local men, the 'secrets' of local femininity are broken down into sequences and reduced to almost mathematic formulas that can be successfully learned. Havana becomes a stage where seductive, flirtatious and skilled at dancing Cuban men are the only social actors who matter in daily interactions, and where Cuban women are repositories of knowledge about seduction. This knowledge is assumed to be transferable through the body and then practiced with local men. Foreign women arrive in a "border zone" (Bruner 1996) and their tourist gaze is already conveniently directed toward essentialist representations of local masculinities and femininities, hence what is seen and experienced is interpreted further in terms of these categories (Urry 1995,132).

As was seen in the first part of this article, Cuban men involved in the dance business (formally or informally) commonly associate female tourists' desire to learn how to dance with a "hidden agenda" which can go from having a sexual affair with a 'hot Cuban' to finding a partner for a long term relationship and eventually marriage. It is only in rare cases that women are believed to be interested in just dancing, and for that reason sexual engagements are simply viewed as an extension to their performance of masculinity (see also Fernandez 2018). In the space of the dance school, such performances become conflicting with notions of professionalism. Although dance teachers don't deny the possibility of one day becoming involved with a tourist (which was, in fact, the case of most of my research participants at some point or another), their professional identity and self-commodification strategies remain central to their preoccupations.

Conclusions

The global fascination with Cuban music and dance is part of the affective and emotional networks of interest in Cuban culture and Cubans (Ferguson 2003, 2) and one of its consequences is the transformation of bodily assets into economic capital. Dancing bodies, racialized and sexualized, become transactional through their inclusion in hybrid business tactics, formal and informal. Embedded in the current neoliberal transformations of global capitalism, ideals of authenticity become the ultimate goal in a culture of self-fulfillment.

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As members of Cuba's newly emerging entrepreneurial class, my research participants translated to exchange value family traditions, leisure activities, and in some cases their formal education in the field of dance. Their work, their leisure, their free time, their entire existence was inscribed in seductive imagery loaded with eroticism and thinly veiled sexual allusions which link racialized and gendered bodies with the history of colonial dominance and its racial and gender hierarchies, while blurring the boundaries between public work and private romantic lives. These tropes of (self)representation, whether strategically employed or not, are always present in the entanglements of dancing bodies, economic opportunity, emotions, work and enjoyment.

Dancers' racialized and sexualized identities become part of an embodied and commodified performance that is interpreted as "natural" and "real", reproducing one of the main tropes of tourism promotion in the Caribbean, the sexual objectification of "exotic" bodies. The socio-economic changes of the post-Soviet period in Cuba are reflected in micro-transformations at the level of everyday life, activating new economic possibilities that build on widely available cultural resources. In the process, dance becomes a cultural commodity that is co-produced by Cuban dancers, dance instructors and international tourists alike.

International travel agencies and salsa schools that organize dance programs on the island, and that market primarily to a female public, promise self-development experiences through immersion in the bodily practices associated with Cuban dance. Inscribed in the broader frame of new forms of self-governance, these programs encourage female tourists to explore Cuban culture as new paths considered most adequate and compatible with their self- interest. For European women tourists, especially, Cuban dance creates their own "project of the self," which is aimed at building up confidence and individual identity, and is subsumed to the domain of marketized self-governance. Private dance schools and popular dance venues in Havana become the meeting grounds for tourists, dance professionals and local dance aficionados, as bodily assets are transformed into economic capital and the meanings of Cubanness constantly negotiated. Through the works of a globalized tourism industry, dance consumerism feeds into the idea that the world can be experienced through the individual journey of the dancing body, a body that discovers new ways to move, to feel, to connect to itself and to others.

Funding

National Science Center, Poland, Project number 2021/40/C/HS3/00086

Notes

1. Translation from Polish by the author.

2. The Trump administration rolled back all of the reforms of the Obama era and put Cuba back on the list of State Sponsors of Terrorism.

3. When I first met Mireya in 2016, she was running another dance school, owned by her brother who at the time was working in Europe. When he came back to Cuba and reclaimed his business, Mireya opened a dance school of her own. The frequent changes in location (after the episode mentioned in this article, she changed the school location two more times before the Covid pandemic and three times afterwards) were due to complicated regulations, an unstable rent market and fluctuating prices.

4. *Negrito* is the diminutive of *negro* and is often used as a term of endearment in Cuba (at times even for people with a different racial identification).

5. The official categories used in government forms (*blanco, mulato/mestizo, negro*) overlap only partly with the most common informal categories (*blanco, trigueño, mestizo, mulato, negro* and *chino*), but Cubans employ more than twenty descriptive color terms (Guanche 2003; Alfonso-Wells 2004).

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6. Anthropologist Renato Rosaldo is often credited for coining the term (see Clifford 1996), which was later made more widely known by Clifford Geertz (1998).

7. Interviews with Cuban dancers and dance teachers were conducted in Spanish, interviews with tourists and tour organizers were conducted in either English, Spanish or Polish, based on their preference. I wrote fieldnotes and diary entries in either English, Spanish or Romanian, the choice of language influenced by topic, urgency and my emotional state at the time of writing. All translations in this article are mine.

8. Superlative of *negro*, used in Cuba to refer not only to skin color, but also to other physical features such as height, strength.

9. https://www.powerofsomaticintelligence.com/retreat-power-of-sabrosura [accessed 31.08.2020].

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