



Dancing back to front: *regeton*, sexuality, gender and transnationalism in Cuba

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Abstract

In this Middle Eight using ethnographic observation and interviews made in Cuba in May–July 2005 and March–April 2006 I problematise the new Latina/o dance music ‘reggaetón’ which in the USA is being heralded as ‘an expression of pan-Latino identity . . . the latest Latin musical style to sweep the world . . . the one with the most promise of finding a permanent, prominent place not just in US but in global popular culture . . .’ (Marshall, 2006). Notably along with hip-hop with which it is now related in Cuban cultural politics, this is the first pan-Latin style of non-Cuban origin to have a strong presence in post-‘Special period’ 1990s revolutionary Cuba. I focus on the significance and possible history of the dance moves and the lyrics of two key songs, discussing possible political double meanings and implications within a Cuban context. While focusing particularly on issues of regeton in Cuba, I place regeton in Cuba in the larger context of reggaetón history in the Latin world and of Latin dance history and discuss it within the constant construction of an appropriate Cuban national identity¹. I pose open questions about gender, sexuality and generational attitudes. The overall theoretical context falls within the context of Järvioluoma et al’s work on ‘gender as cultural construction’ (2003). It builds on work on gender and dance which forms a small part of Fairley (2004).

Regeton lyrics: The Yuma factor – ‘A tí, te gustan los yumas’ – the body as ‘convertible currency’

Havana 2005 and I am living in Vedado, that is uptown, in an area that before the 1959 revolution was mostly white Hispanic middle class and which is now mixed socially and racially. Between May and July almost every night, through my bedroom window, I hear one song played frequently by the people officially squatting in the half built building alongside. Each time it comes on they pump up the volume. I become aware of this song everywhere, in taxis, fast food restaurants and bars, at house parties and on radio. It’s the song of the moment and for a foreigner like me it has a lot of ironic resonance. It’s called ‘‘A tí, te gustan los yumas’ (Oh you, you like foreigners’) and on the home burned compilation I buy from a Cuban on the street one day, I learn from the minimal information on the paper sleeve (names of songs and

artist only) that it is by Reana (an artist I have so far not managed to find anything about). Its' catchiness makes it stick in my memory immediately, particularly what I hear as the 'diffidence' or irony of the female chorus as they sing the title line, "A tí, te gustan los yumas".

In Cuban *yuma* is the street slang used to refer to a 'foreigner'. Originally it meant a 'Yankee', someone from the USA but now it is used, often pejoratively, to refer to any foreigner. Unequal access to the dual currency on the island (the Cuban peso and Cuban convertible peso, the latter having replaced the American dollar which functioned as dual currency from 1993 until 2001) has led to a certain disdain verging on dislike of foreigners among Cubans, an implicit resentment due to the fact that access or selling services to foreigners of any nature, officially or unofficially, is one good way of getting the convertible pesos which Cubans need to get hold of more than the basics of life. The text of the song discusses the impact of *yumas* while professing mutual love between a Cuban couple, 'yo soy tu mangote . . . tu locote' ('I'm your big mango, your crazy one'). The 'mutual love' of the text was re-inforced by the *regeton* dance itself being danced between Cubans rather than between Cubans and 'yumas' (seen on occasion but few *yumas* dance *regeton* effectively, *regeton* moves are quite difficult for non-Latinos as they take a lot of body learning). I see this *regeton* song as voicing similar sentiments to those expressed in the *timba* lament 'La Bruja' written by Jose Luis Cortés of NG La Banda, which caused controversy and was effectively marginalized from the Cuban media in 1999, after protests from the Cuban Women's Federation. As a song while it undoubtedly expressed could be interpreted as having misogynistic elements it was simultaneously a male lament at the sadness of Cuban woman preferring foreign men to Cuban men as a result of the implied dollar factor (Fairley 2004, p. 91).

I found the *yuma* text really interesting, as, following research on *timba*-dance music in the late-1990s in Cuba, I concluded that during this period in Cuba song lyrics for dance-music functioned like newspaper articles and columns in other cultures. They acted as a barometer of Cuban everyday life, an essential way of finding out what ordinary Cubans think about what is going on politically, economically and socially particularly in the absence of any newspapers or popular press (*ibid.*, p 86). In the 1990s in a climate of service *jinetera* culture, the music scene was one of the most promising for Cubans to meet tourists and gain possible access to much-needed hard currency.

I noticed the development of 'new' dance/moves involving the 'solo' female body: the *despelote* (all-over-the-place) and *tembleque* (shake-shudder) and the *subasta de la cintura* (waist auction). These moves define a solo female dance style which involves fast undulating and turning/swirling of the area from below shoulders and chest to pelvis (as if one was hula hoop-ing or belly dancing). Often accompanied by hand and body gestures mimicking self pleasuring, in the 1990s it constituted a noticeable change in dance style, of women dancing to be 'looked at' both by their partners, by other prospective partners, and by other spectators, using their body as a/their major asset. This was in striking contrast to the more normative couple dancing (which continued to thrive, see later). I noted how the female body could be read symbolically as the 'convertible currency' of the 1990s 'Special Period', 'exchanged' between Cuban males/musicians and foreign men. I linked these development to attitudes towards, about and among women at the time, arising from the responsibilities women assumed during the 'Special Period' which gave them new authority (*ibid.*, p. 92). I wrote then that, 'lyrics were danced out in the musics

shifting polyrhythms and structures which themselves form and mirror coital narratives . . . the dancing maps the complexities and contradictions of the new 'tourist' dollar economy' (*ibid.*, p. 92). I linked *timba* as a driving dance music with a vital black Cuban dancing public.

Regeton similarly, while danced by 'white' Cubans, is associated with a young, black Cuban population. My interest in *regeton* in 2005–6 'stems from this. I believe music and dance raises important questions. So I asked myself, why is *regeton* so popular and why now? What do *regeton* lyrics and dance moves suggest about gender and sexuality in Cuba; and about Cuban identity and local/global relations. An what kind of reading could be given to the way in which in *regeton* Cuban women were standing in front of their men with their backs to them, rather than facing them as in other dances?

At first I thought *yuma* was an acronym. It seemed likely as in the last thirty plus years Cubans have shown a highly inventive way of creating acronyms and personal names unheard of anywhere else in South America, by using the oral spelling of words heard or encountered in everyday life, many of them of North American origin. Despite the 40 year blockade of Cuba by the USA and hostile relations between the two governments, Cubans remain fascinated with US culture, re-enforced by the US- Cuban diaspora and strong, attendant cultural influences. A whole generation of Cubans in their 20s and 30s have proper names such as 'Yusnai', 'Yusa' (USA), 'Usnavi' (US navy), 'Milady' (My Lady) pronounced colloquially which make their derivation oblique. When asked about the origin of the word 'Yuma' Cubans reference its etymology as the name of a place 'somewhere in the USA' (and there are a number of places in the USA called Yuma). It is also explained as being a Cuban Chinese whispered version of USA or 'United', i.e. saying the name of the 'enemy' without actually saying it. Indeed, in the song 'A tí te gustan los yumas' the boy actually addresses the girl as 'Unite'. The best definition of *yuma* I have been given comes from a Cuban lawyer,

'Es un lenguaje muy popular, creo que en otros países de Latinoamérica se usa también, sirve para mencionara los Estados Unidos, pero en un tono, así un poco despectivo; es como aquellos Estados Unidos adonde va la gente del tercer mundo a exiliarse, soñando con el *american way of life*. Es difícil explicar pero se usa bastante con chabacanería, en slang' ('it's in a popular lingo, I think other Latin American countries also use the term, it's a way of referencing the United States, but in a tone that is a little bit deprecatory; it's like the United States where people of the third world go to exile themselves, dreaming of 'the American way of life'. It's difficult to explain but it is used a lot in street talk and slang' (int. A).

Interestingly enough although I have been going to Cuba since 1978 (1989/1999/2000/2001/2003) it is only in 2003–5 that I gradually become aware of the word *yuma* being bandied about in public to refer to not only North American but all foreigners. Some Cuban friends debate this, saying the word has been used for years to refer to foreigners and indeed I may have been 'deaf' to the word hitherto. However, knowing how courteous Cubans can be to ones face, my hunch is that it was used between Cubans about foreigners and not between Cubans and foreigners and was said when I as a 'foreigner' was not around, i.e. behind ones back. Other Cuban friends agree with this theory. It was certainly not a word that peppered conversations as it does now. While it is on occasion used within ones hearing today, if one refers to oneself as a *yuma*, Cubans look downright embarrassed. So far I have failed to come up with reason why or when *yuma* began to be used. Still, what struck me every time I

heard this song in 2005 in houses, Cuban peso taxis, blaring from bars and the occasional fast food outlets, is the way the verse is sung by male hip-hop style rappers with clever rhyming verses over pre-recorded 'background', while the chorus sung by a group of female singers sounds diffident – like a 'shrugging shoulder' – as if liking a *yuma* or foreigner is a necessary evil, i.e. voicing an attitude inherent in Cuban everyday life.

Regeton and informal distribution networks

The music of 'A ti te gustan los yumas' is a *regeton*, that is voices singing/ rapping against a computer/ machine-made 'background' recording, what Marshall calls 'inherently hybrid . . . an industrial music . . . a high-tech product . . . based around recycled rhythms and riffs' (Marshall 2006). And indeed the 'background' for the *yuma* song is reliably thought to come from Puerto Rico (Fournier forthcoming). It's a song of the times due to its unofficial distribution. featuring on various home-burnt unofficial *regeton* compilations circulating in Cuba 2005 offering a mix of homegrown songs and Pan-Caribbean hits. *Regeton* production and distribution (like hip-hop and rap before them, yet more so) is the result of new underground initiatives fostered by the arrival in recent years of computer hard- and software into the hands of individuals who for the first time in Cuban history have the opportunity to create and distribute their music independent of state networks, albeit unofficially and illegally. This is in sharp contrast the 1980s when lack of cassette hardware and personal machinery meant that music which circulated in cassette form had limited public impact. In 2004 within a much larger context of a Cuban mixed economy anyone can find burned CDs without much problem, and a greater number of Cubans have the hardware to play CDs and DVDs. The existence in Cuban of informal networks means that within reason copies of practically everything is available, with individual initiatives concerning supply and demand clandestine but rampant. People put the word out among friends about what they want, a process which also works in reverse. People survive economically through these initiatives which are always paid for in convertible pesos whether it's a certain colour shirt to match a new skirt or a pirate DVD copy of the film 'Brokeback Mountain' (only days/weeks after its international release outside Cuba). DVDs now circulate for the cost of 1PCV (equiv. \$1 US) with all sorts of subtle sale techniques to get passed the eyes of street corner policemen.

Sold 'privately' the *regeton* compilations I purchased had an overlap of songs. One compilation with twenty tracks identified by title only, had a cover sporting a white, blond topless model up to her thighs in the sea baring her bottom naked save for a thong. The other called 2005: *La cocinita, volumen 12, La popola* (a reference to a song where a woman complains about her sore fanny) sports a blond white soft-porn female model kneeling by a Ahamay motor bike with the titles of 8 of its 22 tracks scattered alongside. 'Women love blokes with motorbikes', a Cuban contact told me while borrowing it to play while he worked (int.B). The inside offers 22 track titles some nineteen of which include an artists name. Most tracks were not Cuban in origin. The atmosphere of the disc is fast, upbeat and fun with some witty introductions to songs, yet it has to be said that close scrutiny of the lyrics of many of the songs be they non-Cuban or Cuban leave little to the imagination. As a result, in Cuba the lyrics were often spoken of as 'vulgar', while simultaneously the same song as an entity would be

appreciated for having an irresistibly 'good' dance beat which largely outweighed the impact of lyrics (int. B).

On this CD, numerous songs with titles like 'Cógeme el tubo' (Hold my tube) serenade sexual parts, various sore orifices, oral, doggy style and implicitly anal sex. For example, DJ Emilio celebrates female body parts 'Mami dame chocha/quiero chocha chocha chocha (sweetie, give me pussy, I want pussy, pussy, pussy) [*chocha* in Cuba being slang for euphemisms for vagina/pussy/fanny]. The female chorus response is, 'estaré mi corazón' ('you'll be in my heart'). A Los Gatos song implies a woman's insatiability for sex and includes lines like, 'me gusta . . . chocha . . . este palo es para ti perra, . . . te gusta que te pega y que te pasa broche' (I like . . . pussy . . . this stick is for you bitch . . . you like me to hit you and pass the brush . . .) [where the latter word 'brush' has explicit sexual meaning concerning moving 'the stick/penis' between orifices]. The point here is that while double entendre is a strong feature of all Cuban music throughout the 20th century from classic *trova* to *son* to *changüí* most of it was and is through often very witty innuendo with nothing explicit. In contrast, taken lightly, humorously or not, *regeton* lyrics are more often than not explicitly pornographic and challenging. A good example of this came one day when in a *regeton* sung by a 6 year old into my microphone in response to the invitation to 'sing me a song' (when *regeton* was far from the discussion). Her musician mother was visibly shocked when her daughter sang shyly, 'Que me gusta suave suave,' (I enjoy it slowly, gently . . .). Although many of us know words of songs off by heart but never actually reflect on their 'meaning', and while there is no doubt that most Cubans enjoy *regeton* just to dance to and may ignore the words, when they do listen to the words of some of the songs they agree that lyrics and their subliminal meanings can be questionable when younger listeners are concerned. By 2005 as the music par excellence for school parties, home fiestas and the all-important coming-of-age fifteen year old 'quince' birthday parties, particularly for girls, because of lyrics and dance moves, *regeton* was under scrutiny.

Marginalisation of *regeton*

By the time I returned to Cuba in March–April 2006 *regeton* was being officially marginalized. Articles in the press following a debate on *regeton* at a significant Young Communist movement meeting, were particularly prominent and persuasive stimulating private and public discussion. Both lyrics and dance movements came under fire, 'cuerpos muy pegados . . . como hacer el amor con ropa' ('bodies stuck together . . . like making love with clothes on'), cultural institutions had reacted against *regeton* (Juventud Rebelde, as reported in Terra 2006). In response, *regeton* was defended by musicians, with female singer Oneilys Hevora of the group Los Gatos, reported as saying, 'mi música es para bailar, para disfrutar, para que muchos se divierten . . .' (my music is for dancing, for pleasure, for many people enjoyment). Despite this, *regeton's* fate was sealed, 'esta siendo sutilmente limitado en los medios de prensa; se aconseja que no se utilice en fiestas de centros de enseñanza y se filtra en las discotecas' ('it is being subtly limited in the media and press; advised not to use it in teaching institution parties, and filtered out of discoteques') (Terra report, *ibid.*).

So in 2006 there was less *regeton* obviously heard on the streets and a more informed response (*ibid.*). Press articles discuss the disappearance of 'children's music' in both private and public spaces and its non-availability i.e. suggesting *regeton* is played by default at school parties and fiestas not merely because it is popular but

also because it is readily available and popular and there is nothing else available. A recent press article even questioned whether *regeton* is Cuban. With minimal information on the paper covers of home-burned CDs most Cubans are unaware of the origin of either songs or artist on such compilations and largely unconcerned.

'Gasolina' and Petro-Caribe

As a result of this lack of concern and of informal distribution, Dad(d)y Yankee's international hit song 'Gasolina' (Petrol) circulated for at least a year in Cuba before various Cuban associates read in the paper that it was actually Puerto Rican-US and not Cuban in origin. They assumed it was Cuban as the majority of music that circulates on the island is Cuban. For them ultimately the issue was whether it was good to dance to or not.

My own reading of the popularity of 'Gasolina' in 2005 was against the ironic background of its defining line, 'me gusta la gasolina, dame mas gasolina' ('I like petrol, give me more petrol'), playing in euphemistic Benny Hill-like humour terms, with the penis-like image of the petrol pump. The popularity of 'Gasolina' in Cuba and among Latinos in the Caribbean and Central and South America, never mind North America, can be set against the larger economic and political context of PetroCaribe and the organisation's significant challenge to the US Bush government's continued 40 year plus seige tactic of isolationism against Cuba (including it in its 'axis of evil'). This has resulted in the forging of stronger friendship links between Cuba and Venezuela.

PetroCaribe is the pan-Caribbean economic group established by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez with Cuba's President Fidel Castro and other Caribbean Prime Ministers and Presidents that is recently extending as far as Argentina and Brazil and possibly depending on election results to Mexico. Challenging US hegemony in the region it allows cash-strapped governments to purchase of Venezuelan oil (Venezuela being the worlds fifth largest oil exporter) at a special price, with the difference to the world price per barrel put into a special social development fund held and used in each buyer country. In recent years Cuban-Venezuelan relations have become closer, with exchange of students, doctors and other key people including cultural workers as part of both the deal and the governmental relationship. The result of increased economic, social, political and human contact is vividly expressed culturally in numerous exchanges and festival activities in both countries, including in Cuba the 'Fiesta del fuego' held in Santiago July 2004, 2005, 2006.

For me, in 2005, the popularity of both 'A tí, te gusta los yuma' and 'Gasolina' hinged on their potential political double meanings: *yuma* as a euphemism for dollars, goods and the possibly getting out of Cuba to work abroad; *gasolina* for both sexual liason, travelling abroad and much-needed petrol. As lyrics for *regeton* dance music they not only fitted into popularity of song lyrics in Cuba dealing with significant social, political and economic issues but also, as discussed, with developments in female solo dance observed in the 1990s. The lyrics of 'A tí, te gustan los yumas' link to *jinetera* culture (service culture) and the complex ambiguities around female 'autonomy' expressed in dance. Interestingly enough, by 2005 *tembleque* or crotch and bottom shuddering had also been adopted as part of mainstream choreography by Cuban TV dancers, featuring also in dancing in shows by male groups like Manolito Siboney (Cubadisco concert, May 2005).

Dancing back to front (cheek-to-crotch)

Regeton dancing in both Cuba and elsewhere in Latin America) is as far as I know the first internationally popular 'back to front' dance of its type to be danced in the Americas. It is a dance which sensualises the bottom and pelvis in festishistic fashion. Hitherto most couple dancing has been face to face, save for processional congas in Cuban carnival, which uses quite different dance movements, and sound system carnival *blocos* in Brazil. While I am aware that the moves for the 'wining' dance in Jamaican dance-hall and other club moves of the 1990s in USA may also feature and even be a precedent for back-to-front dancing, talking to choreographers and dancers in Cuba, I found that Cuban *regeton* moves were seen to have precedent in Cuban dance history, rather than coming into Cuba from elsewhere, like some of the music itself. Let me describe three moments of *regeton* dance.

In situ 1

Carnival in Santiago de Cuba in July 2005: a line of five girls are dancing *regeton* with their men who are using the wall of a dark side street to lean back on to support them. Wearing tight figure hugging clothing they are making fast swirling undulations from chest to their pelvic area bottoms stuck slightly outwards, while their partners stand close behind them, their own pelvic area thrust forward, so that their partners are stimulating their presented crotches. The girls look straight at a group of Cubans and non-Cubans dancing salsa in the beer bar in front of them. A lot of the time they look us straight in the eye, with occasionally smiling, faces that imply, 'I don't mind if you look at me, look at what I can do for my man'. Their men meanwhile have their eyes roving slightly diverted, inward looking concentrating on what is happening, or, exchanging glances as if slightly diffident to the whole process. While this may appear pure conjectural observation, asked what the experience was like, a Santiago Cuban male dancer told me, 'Slowly, often you get to you are about to 'come' when it is happening, it is amazing' (int. B). The dance appears to be 'female' led. Its performativity and conventions certainly sets up vivid notions of gendered power relations (Järviluoma, et al 2003).

Later that night I am standing at the back of a specially erected main Carnival dance stage which has a sequence of live bands pumping out vibrant Cuban salsa-*timba-regeton* dance music from 10pm to 6am. At the invitation of a band member, I am standing with the group of friends, family and others one often finds on a Cuban stage. Next to me a girl starts to *regeton* dance for her man while the band play. He starts to talk to the guy next to him while she is swirling her body against him and she gets annoyed and walks off in a huff. When I discuss this later with my trumpeter friend in his late twenties, he tells me that the night before, 'A girl offered to do it for me, but I said no, because she asked me what I was doing after, and when I said, 'playing another set', she said that after dancing [*regeton*] like that she usually liked to go straight to bed.' (int. C).

In situ 2

July 2005 and Santiago's premier folk-dance ensemble Cutumba are invited to the Tropicana, Santiago's top cabaret night-spot with their guests, a group of British tourists who are taking a fortnight's dance classes with them. The Tropicana in

Santiago as in Havana has continued pre-Revolutionary traditions (re appraised in the 1960–70s) of a night-club with a big dance and music spectacle. Today this involves top University trained dancers and musicians. On this specific night the public also included a 60–70 person mixed-gender squad of Venezuelan sailors spending time visiting Cuba. Both males and females were in their late teens and early twenties and were dressed in pristine white uniforms. After the live show, whose vividly exuberant finale of a pan-Caribbean celebration of dance symbolically affirms the significance of PetroCaribe economic relations and government agreements between Venezuela, Cuba and other parts of the Caribbean and South America, the disco takes over. Within minutes Venezuelan sailors are inviting Cutumba's British male and female guests to dance but mostly the female guests.

On the dance floor while some couples dance salsa, several pairs of Venezuelan men begin to dance with one woman 'sandwich' style between them, the women's colourful dresses between the white uniforms bringing home the sandwich metaphor. They are dancing close-in with a man back and front, bodies touching, one man swiveling his pelvic area and pushing against the woman's bottom, the other her front. In practically all cases the eye contact is homo-social between two men over the woman's head acknowledging each other as they move. Occasional movements take the trio or one or other of the men swivelling (corkscrewing) down the woman's body to a crouched semi-squat, their head level either with the woman's mid-bottom or her crotch, to then move back up again. The music is *regeton*, the atmosphere is playful. One woman in such a sandwich is seen pushing both men front and back away from her trying to achieve a more 'normal' dancing distance. Another tries to dance-squirm her way into freer space in vain.

Asked afterwards how they felt one of these woman said, 'It started out fun and flirty then it got rather heavy and I felt cramped and heavily pressed into and 'used'. I used my arms to try to make them keep their distance but that just seemed to add to their idea of 'fun' (int. D and E). Given that dance floor etiquette prevails, i.e. being courteously asked to dance and then thanked afterwards, more often than not being accompanied back to their seat, the actual sexual /emotional impact of the experience is 'forgotten' in the moment, or at least not mentioned. The only 'negative' message given by these women to the men that they did not exactly enjoy the experience is by declining to dance again.

The sandwich dance is reportedly part of various Caribbean TV programmes where a woman is covered with water so that when she dances in a sandwich between two men, wet patches on their clothes afterwards reveal where their bodies have touched. Indeed such 'wet' patches offer a simulation of the excretions associated with sexual activity, notably sweat and semen.

Reading the dance: dance and pornography, dance and gender relations

Let us say dance example In situ 1 is a publicly performed, symbolically masturbatory, dance. In situ 2, the sandwich dance, apes troilism, and pornographic 'split roasting', i.e. woman serving one man sexually while another man is having sex with her. That is both these dances have sexually explicit if not pornographic references. How then are these dances to be 'read', if we take into account the opinion of dance scholar Judith Lynne Hanna, who writes, 'Feelings and ideas about sexuality and sex roles

(also referred to as gender) take shape in dance. These visual models of which dancer (male or female) performs what, when, where, how, why, either along, or with another dancer, reflect and also challenge, society's expectations for each sex's specific activities, whether dominance patterns or mating strategies' (1988, xiii, as quoted in Magrini, p. 6, 2003).

In nearby Puerto Rico, the *reggaetón* dance is called *el perreo* ('doggy' style in Puerto Rican/Latin slang). Put *perreo* into an Internet search mechanism and you are presented with a lot of 'veiled' porn sites. The relationship between doggy dancing and porn is direct and unequivocal. In the USA, 'sandwich dancing' and *reggaetón* are called 'Super Freak', after a 1981 song by Rick James that celebrates a sexually adventurous woman, with freak-dancing defined as, 'a female-bottom-to-male-groin grind'. Various US newspaper articles reference attempts by US High Schools to control what they call 'lewd dancing', one such example being: 'Students are expected to dance appropriately. If a student is dancing inappropriately (i.e. crotch-to-crotch dancing, grinding, sandwich dancing or prone positions) they will be given one verbal warning by a chaperone . . . One thing . . . [to] watch out for is when girls have their behinds to the boys . . . it's my measure of when things are going too far' (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, Sunday 18 December 2005).²

At the risk of entering muddy moral waters, there are issues to explore. How are we to read *regeton*, *perreo*, 'sandwich dancing', and 'freak dancing' if we approach gender as performed identity? If we consider that the rules that discipline the use of the body in the dance, 'in many societies constitutes not only a means of self display for the individual but also and especially the traditional occasion for public relationship between men and women (as well as between persons of the same gender)' (*ibid.*, p 6). And if we agree that if dance rules offer a typical example of the synthesis of ideas on the feminine, the masculine and on the 'proper' interaction between genders (or within a single gender) that distinguishes a given community at a given point in time, that, 'Dancing provides a faithful expression of the most diverse and nuanced meanings, since its rules specify who can take part in the dance and how the body is used . . . allowing or denying specific forms of bodily contact, and regulating other aspects in such a way as to highlight shared ideas on what constitutes an acceptable physical relationships in the public sphere' (*ibid.*, p. 6).

Without wishing to offer too deterministic an explanation, where does the back to front dance position come from? Can it be explained other than simply another novel way of dancing? Other than folkloric explanations, no Cuban I spoke to so far, could offer me a reason as to why this dance with these moves has emerged. Is it too mechanistic to suggest that the symbolic impact of the dance is greater in the 1990s, as women came to the fore in managing the difficult economic and domestic situation of the Special Period, keeping families fed and together under severe economic duress, that the woman does indeed stand forward with her man behind her? And that this a reading that can be given to the dance at one level. This subjective interpretation would not explain its wider emergence and popularity within the Latin world outside Cuba it would have implications given that women are emerging more as independents in the economic market and public sphere.

In 2006, Cuban professional dancers I talked to were keen to dispel any over-reading of *regeton*: 'Es un movimiento del cinturón, menea, circulando caderas y cintura sin mala intención. El hombre disfruta del movimiento sin mala intención . . . es una provocación al hombre pero sin pretension del sexo, se puede 'conquistar el hombre' tambien' (It's a move of the waist, a swirl, circling the hips and waist without

any bad intention. the man enjoys the movement without any bad intention [either] . . . it provokes the man but without any intention of sex, you can 'conquer a man' in this way as well) (int. F and G). While the 'lack of any bad intention' may mean these dancers were hedging their response given the 2006 media outcry against *regeton*, their remarks fall within the etiquette of much Cuban public discourse expressed verbally, which tends to 'qualify', never slander anything and avoid critique. When asked about 'sandwich' dancing the response was, 'No es costumbre en Cuba pero si en el Caribe . . . se baila pero tiene que ser con alguien que se conoce, en una fiesta cuando se conoce entre compañeros sería dos hombre y una mujer o dos mujeres y un hombre pero no es común.' (It's not a custom in Cuba but it is in the Caribbean . . . it is danced but only with someone you know, at a party when you know the friends, whether two men and a woman or two women and one man, but it isn't common' (*ibid.*).

In situ 3

In March 2006 all night filming is going on at the open-air ballroom of the 'camping' holiday camp at Playa Blanco, down the coast from Santiago, for a DVD for the song 'La Farandula' (The Night-Life) by Salsa Chula, a Santiago based orchestra trying to get official recognition at the time. The song and video celebrate the vibrant dance night life of Santiago and the dancers are a mix of professional trained state salaried dancers and those from 'street' (i.e. non-salaried) groups. The choreographic moves of male and female are encoded with *regeton* moves and the song features vocals from male singer 'El medico del *regeton*' (The Doctor of *Regeton*, a singer who in his day life is indeed a doctor). Talking with these dancers about *regeton*, including posing the question, 'what's in it for women?', the answers I got were that (a) it is fun, (b) it can be erotic for both parties as the man caresses his partners body including neck, shoulders, hips and buttocks (int. H). Women dancers stressed you would only dance it with your boyfriend or someone you knew well. It was mentioned that it was all about sex, and that occasionally when people danced *regeton* in the right place and time, sex might occur. The explanation given was that there are few places for young people to meet in private as most live with their families often sharing a bedroom with a sibling or other family member. In discussing privacy and young people I was told there are rooms that can be rented for an hour for liaisons, but with money short, many young people prefer to congregate in parks with little or no lighting. That people do have sex in parks may not be desired behavior but everyone knows it happens. 'Where else?', one person remarked? Then a male dancer told me, 'In *regeton* it is possible for the man to come in from the behind, as the woman lifts her skirt and bends over more, the guy drops his knees, drops his zip and he's in' (int. B).

Antecedent Cuban dance moves

I first saw a precursor to the body movements used by women for *regeton* in 1989 during the Havana Jazz Festival in the main seated concert area of Cuba's National Theatre. In an aisle-way between sections of seats while others sat and listened, a girl with a red Lycra dress clinging to her frame, legs slightly apart, moved fast swirling her bottom outwards behind her while a steady stream of men took their turn to stand behind her. At a certain point the man immediately behind her benefiting from her

gyrations was 'moved on' by a man standing at her side (friend, boy friend, brother, lover, pimp?) This was a masturbatory dance done proudly as if the woman's body was a glorious choice, a public expression of male and female libido.

In early 1980s and through the 90s Pedro Calvo, then lead singer and dancer with Cuba's top group Los Van Van, would dance *sandunguera* style with women he pulled up onto the stage out of the audience, the whole thing encapsulated in the Los Van Van song 'Sandunguera'. Depending on the context he would invite women of all ages from pre-teen to middle age to dance *sandunguera* style. While they swivelled their bodies facing in front of him, often he undulated downwards, going 'down' on them so that his head and mouth at one point would be level with their crotch as if he was going to 'eat' them, a stylized direct reference to oral sex. In Cuba such public dancing behaviour is not considered to transgress taboos, nor in my experience is it considered taboo when a young (female) child in their first 12–18 months of life (months not years) apes swirly pelvic and bottom movements. Rather such precocity is applauded and celebrated: 'aquí nos celebramos, es una gracia . . . cuando vemos un niño o una niña es novedoso para nosotros y pensamos que le trae en la sangre de cuando pequeño' ('here we celebrate that, as a gift, when we see a young girl or boy do it, it is a novelty for us, and we think they carry it in their blood') (*ibid.*). What might be construed as sexual movements prominent in Cuban dance are part of normative learned behaviour from young.

I have noted how I see the origins of immediate moves of *regeton* in Cuba in the solo female *tembleque* and *despelote* dance moves popular in Cuba in the 1980s and 90s, which developed at the height of new tourism and *jinetera* (service) culture. And also how by 2006 this swirling flow of top to bottom waist, pelvis and bottom body undulations is now a constituent part of dance choreography found in everything from Bollywood dance to MTV pop and rock videos and also in Cuba TV choreography. As members of the TV Ballet dance company aged between 20–30 told me, 'that move is part of us' (meaning our generation) (int. H).

According to a Cuban choreographer some of the moves involved in *regeton*, *despelote* and *tembleque* reference rumba, notably the *baile de yambú*, 'donde la mujer tiene la fuerza, una oportunidad [de] mostrar su belleza, la coquetería con el hombre desplazado, se deplaza atrás de la mujer' ('Where the woman has the power and opportunity to show her beauty and coquetry while the man displaces himself behind the woman') (int. J). Other dances mentioned as possible sources for choreographic gestures are rituals of the Afro-Cuban Palo religion, *baile de Makuta* and *de yuka*, 'que es un baile en que el hombre y la mujer empieza en frente pero después el hombre baila atrás de la mujer como algo picaresco amandola y haciendo gestos de una agradecimiento pero de atrás como un gallo' ('which is a dance where the man and women begin in front but then the man goes behind the woman in a picaresque way, loving her . . . making gestures of appreciation from behind like a cock') (*ibid.*).

Dances in Latin America since colonial times include the stylized flirtatious 'cock and hen' couple dances known as the *zamacueca* and *cueca*, which exist under other names and in different forms in various countries. This dance usually leaves the women in a decisive position as to whether to be symbolically 'possessed' or not, in similar ways to the *vacunar*, the 'possession' move in rumba. In the Colombian *cumbia callejera* the woman controls by carrying a handful of lit candles which she holds in front of her lower waist in order to be able to see and fend off the man trying to conquer her. However, while they involve moves denoting symbolic attempts at sexual possession, none of these dances is a back-to-front dance.

Rueda (the wheel)

From the 1990s onwards solo female dance and couple salsa was balanced by a resurgence of the *rueda* circle dance popular since the 1950s. In *rueda* a number of couples (historically four, six, eight to a hundred or more) engage in a fast spot-on-timing choreography in which female partners are exchanged. Considered by many as the height of Cuban-ness with a long fertile history, *rueda* builds on the moves of the casino couple dance (a Cuban rock and roll whose complex moves are also part of salsa). Casino and thereby *rueda* have always shown enormous flexibility incorporating new moves which dynamically reflect the concerns of different periods. In her book *El casino y la salsa en Cuba* (Letras Cubanas 2003) Barbara Balbuena spells out the history of casino and *rueda* charting the development of old and new moves over the 20th and 21st century.

What is relevant here is that in contrast to *regeton* dance where the woman seems to lead, in *rueda* it is always a man who gives the calls for the change, and it is always female partners who are exchanged i.e. like salsa (and tango) it is male led. Calls which include, 'dame, dame una, dame dos, dame otra' (give me, give me one, give me two, give me another) imply, 'I don't want this partner, give me another'. Recent moves include 'yogurt', a quick hit between the couple of pelvic areas, the yogurt in question standing in Cuban street language for 'la crema' i.e. ejaculated sperm. When I learnt *rueda* in Cuba in 2001 while I found it fun and compelling (and hard work demanding all your concentration!) I also found the calls and moves jarred my western persona, however weak my feminism is or isn't. Discussion with Cuban and British female dancers at the time inevitably agreed but mocked my sensitivity!

Balbuena's chapter on the period 1981–2000, draws attention to the new freedom of movement between the couple latterly, and the development of more separate moves among a host of new moves, notably moves done face to face, in *rueda* circle form or as a male facing female line-dance. New moves noted include those I have noted as possible *regeton* antecedents, and those derived from different dance manifestations of Afro-Cuban ritual origin, among them Santería dances (of Elegua, Ogun, Ochosi); rumba figures (mainly *columbia* and *guaguancó*); movements from *makuta* and *yuca* dances and *conga*'. Also mentioned is *panque* (*ibid.*, p. 113) and the aforementioned yogurt which Balbuena says has 'an erotic meaning', done in various styles including *yogurt de perro* (dog-yogurt) done back to front double time with rapid undulations pelvis (*ibid.*, p. 96). Balbuena offers no explanation as to why new moves might have emerged. The significant point of Balbuena's detailed work for my argument here is the historic, ritual dance references offered for *rueda* dance moves some of which are similar or the same as *regeton* moves i.e. shared.

Regeton in context of a history of transgressive dance in Latin America

In Cuba until the ongoing Young Communist discussion which began openly in December–January 05/06 (and institutionally back in the spring), dance moves are rarely spoken of as transgressive. Yet, as Charles Chasteen shows in his history of dance, focusing on the emergence of tango in Buenos Aires, Argentina, *danzón* in Havana, Cuba, and samba in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, transgressive dance is the key to dance history in Latin America (Chasteen 2004) He shows how social and gender inequalities and imbalances created the climate in which tango, *danzón* and samba

(which have all become 'national' dances) emerged. Each were regarded as deeply transgressive at the time, and each shocked western sensibilities with their explicitness. In Cuba *danzón*, which appeared in the 1880s, was felt to have too much African influence as it brought the pelvic *requebro* (the *vacunar*), the breaking of natural vertical line body by a fast-hitting move frontally of the pelvis from male to female as a mark of possession. Chasteen quotes a 'Cuban social reformer' writing: 'The dancers were pushing their thighs and hips together separated only by the women's wrinkled skirt' (*ibid.*).

Unlike *regeton*, *danzón* (like tango and samba) was initially popular in bordellos i.e. with the 'other' side of society, gradually making their way into the salon via upper class men who transgressed their social strata into lower class haunts to then bring these dances to private salons where they became stylized and changed so as to no longer be transgressive dances but normative. It occurs to me that while *tembleque*, *despelote* and *regeton* moves did not develop in bordellos, they all developed in the climate of modern sexual flirtation and potential liaisons between Cubans and Cubans, and Cubans and non-Cubans in the heady atmosphere of Havana clubs in the 1990s when *jinetera* (service culture) and sexuality as 'convertible currency' was prime (Fairley *ibid.*). As such, in comparable ways to tango and *danzón*, explicit relations acted out elsewhere are being dominate the dance floor. The difference with *regeton* per se post 2000 is that it is notably danced out between Cubans. On occasion it is also danced between Cuban women and foreigners, although publicly few foreigners are very good at it.

By 2006 *regeton* was associated with what were called '*barrios malos*' (bad neighbourhoods) which implies poor and more black. Indeed, people have inferred that *regeton* in Cuba is stronger in the city of Santiago de Cuba than Havana because there are more of these 'bad;' neighbourhoods. So although *regeton* may not have emerged in bordellos. it is definitely identified with the 'lower strata' of Cuban society, in so far as such a strata officially exists (Fournier forthcoming).

Following the 'official' message from the Cuban media that *regeton* is a questionable form, it is notable how *regeton* moves and music have been absorbed into hip-hop and other salsa hybrids at both music and dance level. This conforms to the cultural politics of an island where Fidel Castro's maxim 'within the revolution everything outside the revolution nothing' has persisted since the 1960s, and where every cultural form to avoid being marginalized must be legitimized and supported by official institutions. It is also part of music hybridity. A good recent example came at the tenth anniversary concert of Maraca and Otra Visión held at the Cine Teatral Austral in Havana on Friday 31 March 2006 (Maraca being one of Cuba's top flautists and band leaders), with an abundance of guests old and young for each song, when young hip *regetonero* Amiel performed a *timba-regeton* with the group.

Officially *regeton* may be suspect but unofficially it will not disappear, protected by hybrid forms and performers who create and enjoy it. Similarly, its absorption into hip-hop and rap category of Cuban music 'protects' it. although this is because rap and *regeton* on the island are perceived as two different musical genre (as opposed to say Puerto Rico where *reggaetón* emerged within hip-hop culture and is therefore seen as part of it (Fournier forthcoming). Indeed the cultural politics of the official Hermanos Saiz cultural associations who encourage cutting edge or youth music in Cuba, is that there is 'good' and 'bad' *regeton* (see Fournier and Fairley forthcoming). While it is not within the remit of this paper to discuss racial issues, they are deeply relevant in Cuba and 'banning' dance popular with black Cubans as a form of social

control is an integral part of Cuba's cultural history since before the 19th and 20th centuries (see Moore, 1997; also Fournier and Fairley forthcoming). Racial questions are complex in Cuba as, while racial equality is state ideology, racial difference is articulated in everyday conversation by the description of subtle gradations of skin colour when habitually referring to family and friends, often, as if inadvertently, in (self-) deprecating manner. Separate black social movements in Cuba stopped with the 1959 revolution (Moore, *ibid.*).

Regeton and Transnationalism

Writing about Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and the USA, Debbie Pacini Hernández suggests *reggaetón* is a pan-Latino phenomenon, a style that speaks for the inner-city Latino youth, 'the first type of music that second-generation Latinos can say is their music, in contrast to the music you grow up with because of your parents, the way you grow up' (Pacini Hernández 2005). For young Dominicans hip hop and R & B are mainly considered part of black culture, African American culture while *reggaetón*, 'for the first time you have a type of music that you can say is your music, and that is a very unique genre' (*ibid.*). Although suggesting it would be 'too simplistic to suggest that *reggaetón*'s sole appeal is its inclusiveness', she notes that, 'It is precisely *reggaetón*'s hybridity that gives it the flexibility for artists to incorporate national flavors without compromising the genre's pan-national inclusiveness' (*ibid.*). I suggest that hybridity in Cuban *regeton* could also be influenced by cultural politics. I have noted Cubans are writing their own *regeton* on their own themes using their own street language just as Puerto Ricans are 'grounding their *reggaetón* in Puerto Rican locality through their extensive use of Puerto Rican slang, and occasionally sprinkling *bomba* and salsa elements into their music. Dominican artists are similarly producing localized Dominican *reggaetón*'s infused with merengue and *bachata* that Dominicans recognize and appreciate' (*ibid.*).

Does *regeton*, despite its' Cuban-ness to Cubans, therefore exemplify the first Cuban generation to be part of a Latino/ as opposed to Cuban identity? The present young generation have a different experience of the Revolution that contrasts with their 'parents generation who are running the country. They are considered more hedonistic and materialistic having grown up in the 1990s when Soviet support of the revolution disappeared overnight leaving the country with the 'Special period', very difficult years of enormous material hardship to overcome. In their 30s, 40s, 50s and 60s, the oldest of the present ruling generation (s), their parents generation, were entering their teens at the time of the revolution and were caught up in the idealism of its effective literacy campaigns, benefiting from its educational and health policies as well as being part of its cultural dynamic and struggles. In contrast the youth of Cuba's 'Special period' who lived through a period of great hardship are keen to be both Cuban and simultaneously part of the world outside. They dress similarly to that other world generation in shirts, jeans, latest fashion belts, camisole vests and mini skirts are MTV familiar, although the way they are worn is quintessentially Cuban.

Adopting Pacini Hernández' argument for Puerto Ricans and Dominicans, can we see *regeton* as the first transnational style representing a first generation of Cubans who have an idea of themselves as 'Latino/a'? While latterly the Bush government has clamped down on communication between the USA and the island making money transactions and other contacts more difficult, between the many Cuban

families in Miami, elsewhere in the USA and the diaspora, one way or another, through informal bartering and exchange networks, people communicate with the outside world. As the internet becomes more available for Cubans, legal or illegally, formally or informally, Cubans are now in more direct communication with the rest of the world. Many Cubans have yahoo email addresses via Spain or Mexico. An increasing number of have access to the outside world via mobile phones bought for them by foreign visitors so that they can now text on and off the island. Some Cubans watch MTV and other station programmes on satellite or on recorded videos and DVDs which circulate.

However, I would suggest that transnational theory needs re-situating in the case of Cuba. While *regg(a)eton* ostensibly may link Cubans to the Miami-Cuban diaspora, to the Latin Caribbean, and to the US it is filtered through the defining influences, constraints and censures involved in the daily process of establishing cultural norms on the island itself with its state controlled media and cultural politics. Given the hostilities that surround leaving the island from both sides i.e. regarded by the Cuban authorities as someone who has 'sold out' as well as a source of income tax for return, regarded by the US authorities as someone who will turn their back on the Cuban revolution. As a result any pan-Latino identity has a 'proxy feel to it. as young Cubans tend to openly identify first with other young Cubans rather than with other Latinos. I see them as a modern young generation who while aware of contemporaries outside Cuba, because of the island's cultural politics, identify themselves first and foremost as Cubans rather than Latinos. However, *regeton* in the context of Petro-Caribe has undoubtedly planted the seeds for a stronger Caribbean sense of belonging (excluding the USA and the Cuban diaspora). With influences from Puerto Rico (*reggaetón*) Panama (ragamuffin) and Jamaica (reggae) *regeton* music and dance inevitably bring these places closer to Cuba and into the Cuban way of thinking (Fournier forthcoming).

Conclusion: women and post-post feminism?

In this piece I have followed two strands: the possible history of *regeton* dance moves in Cuba and some contextual issues, noting the potential double meaning of the lyrics of two *regeton* songs. I set this against a background of the ambiguity of women's position, of questions of sexual empowerment and subordination in the 1990s, with the present generation of young people part of a different sexual cultural climate and dynamic than previous generations. It is notable that from Madonna forwards, including Latin pop icons like Cristina Aguilera and Britney Spears, film and videos today regularly personify powerful, sexual women with a degree of female competitiveness. Today's media culture and fashion communicate the idea that women can be 'hot chicks' from a very young age and that it is cool to be the object of male fantasy and attention.

In Cuban street culture women accept male *piropos* (chat up lines, calls, wolf whistle) as a 'compliments' despite the fact that they define women as sexual object. At the same time in Cuba there is an open, healthy, non-judgmental attitude towards sexuality than those I am accustomed to in the UK: Saturday editions of the *Juventud Rebelde* newspaper as limited as it is in size, often feature a 'scientifically toned' page by a sex therapist on subjects such as 'the G point', space less often allocated to other kinds of cultural features.

My interest in *regeton*/*reguetón*/*reggaetón* stems from the way Cuban song lyrics, music and dance and the oral tradition offer a rich way to monitor society and people's thinking and behaviour. Interestingly in 2006, the follow up to 'A tí, te gusta los yumas' in terms of both discussing the *yuma* factor and in being a comparable ubiquitous everyday popular hit song is 'Añoranza para la conga' by the group Sur Caribe. It tells the story of a Cuban girl who has married a foreigner and left the island, only to find herself far away and homesick, missing the conga of the Santiago carnival. Many in Cuba speak of this song as talking of a 'real situation'. And rather than being available on an illegal *regeton* compilation, as a salsa-conga rather than a *regeton* it is on an officially released Egrem album.

Future questions

I would like to end with a series of questions: in the 21st century, given its 'back to front' positioning and intrinsic sexuality, does *regeton* pose a serious set of post-feminist questions? And historically did other dances like *danzón*, *son*, rumba, tango, samba, also pose such issues before they were 'cleaned up'? Is the bottom (sic!) line that the values embraced by both sexes are 'male' values? Analysing new dance moves which have fed into *regeton* in Cuba, does this signify different sexual values embraced by a new generation of women? Dances which accentuate sexual movements of the body may make a woman feel she is in control of attracting men to her by using her body. There is a 'sense of power' from the idea that women are in control, turning their man on, capable of being what men want. Sexual attractiveness 'showing of your assets' at all times has become more of a norm, confusingly tied up with confidence and self-esteem (3).

Is *regeton* as a dance empowering for women? It is empowering to one generation and not another? To me its' message is, 'I am a woman and I am here to serve men's needs, when I choose!' However, as both song lyrics and the dance are familiar to and copied by pre-teen and pre-pubescent teenagers as well as teenagers, is the subliminal message of this dance, a foreplay dance acted out in public, the sexual 'domestication' of women into traditional 'service' roles i.e. publicly a woman's role is to serve her man? Is it a dance in which Cuban women are telling their men they still serve them even if they have to face foreigners and other men? This would mean that in transnational terms, *reggaetón* is being brought from the 'global' arena to the 'local' where it is used to express a fe(male) identity and traditional bonded relationships?

Coda (or encore?)

Willing to put myself in the firing line and aware that this is a Middle Eight rather than an article, I would argue that *reggaetón* in general as both a Cuban and Pan-Latin phenomenon has serious issues attached to it. In the global context of the increased availability of pornography mostly consumed by men, of increased media use of soft porn images in advertising to the extent that soft porn is considered as normative; the increased sexual trafficking of young women throughout the world; the information that anal sex and doggy style sex are part of an increasing aids climate with anal sex with wo (men) as the 'ultimate male fantasy'; that sex workers get paid most for unprotected anal sex leading to higher incidence of HIV – given this, surely behind *regeton*/*reggaetón* fun is a less positive reality? Or am I being an old prude! *Reggaetón*

we are reliably told by a leading British Sunday newspaper will soon be the subject of a Hollywood film. Perhaps in the same way Hollywood bastardised and cleaned up tango with its Rudolph Valentino films in the 1920s and 30s, *reggaetón* dance and lyrics be 'cleaned' up, made palatable for the mainstream media perhaps with the swirling butt of Jen(n)ifer López! But, I would argue, the deeper issues for women, feminist or not, remain.

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Endnotes

1. In Cuba *regeton* is known on the street as *regeton/regetón*, occasionally *reguetón* (Cubans are often negligent about accents). Officially in and outside Cuba it is now also known as *reggaetón*. In deference to the orality of Cuban culture, I use *regeton* when talking only of Cuba as this was the first spelling I saw on a home-made poster, and *reggaetón* for outside Cuba.
2. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Sunday, 18 December, 2005 (www.philly.com/.../news/local/states/pennsylvania/counties/philadelphia_county/main_line/13423950.htm (www.theweekmagazine.com/article.aspx?id=41-27k-)

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