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Salsa and the (Eternal) City. Rethinking the Pleasure Periphery

Abstract: This article takes as a starting point one of the classic metaphors in tourism studies, the 'pleasure periphery', in order to examine how the embodied labor of subaltern bodies establishes a regime of recognition, visibility, and value. Situated at the intersections of transnational migration, social mobility, and bodily work, this analysis follows the professional and personal trajectories of Cuban dancers in Europe. I discuss the various forms of exclusion that emerge at the intersection of dance consumerism, assumptions about migrant belongings, and hierarchies of performance practices. The 'pleasure periphery' serves as a spatial and symbolic metaphor that gives insight into the pivotal role of Cuban dance and music for the transnational dance scene, while shedding light on how peripheralization is reshaped and reproduced in migratory contexts. The transnational contexts of dance labor bring into focus the tensions between its emancipatory potential for Cuban performers and the perpetuation of consumption patterns and business strategies that reify peripherality on various levels (spatial, symbolic, and affective). The article is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Havana, Cuba, and Rome, Italy among Cuban professional dancers and dance educators.

Keywords: Cuba, migration, dance work, pleasure periphery, Italy

Introduction

'Dance is not considered work by Italians', said Lazaro[1] with a mix of resentment and resignation in his voice. 'Often they expect you to work for close to nothing because that's how you are supposed to build your brand, to have more publicity for yourself, but you have to eat, you have to pay the rent at the end of the month'.

Lazaro was a dancer and dance instructor in his early thirties, who at the time of our interview in 2022 had been living in Italy for seven years. We were on the terrace of the ground floor apartment he shared with his parents in one of the most densely populated neighborhoods of Rome, where he also offered private dance lessons. We had just finished one such lesson when we were joined by his friend Jorge, a dancer in his late twenties who had recently moved to Rome after three years spent in one of Italy's Southern regions. He quickly jumped into the conversation: 'They [Italians] own our asses because most of the schools belong to them. They ask you to come and teach for a month, sometimes even without a contract, and then they tell you they no longer need you, but they keep teaching based on your work'. This was not the first time such opinions surfaced in conversations with Cuban dancers in Italy. Whether our talks focused on copyrighting choreographies for shows, performing during festivals, or designing methodologies for teaching, my interlocutors often addressed the underlying tension of Black bodies – and Black dance forms – being controlled, dominated, and exoticized, but at the same time they actively sought ways to exercise their agency.

[1] All interlocutors have been assigned pseudonyms. They have been informed about the purpose of the research, and consent has been obtained before formal and informal conversations. The interviews were conducted in Spanish and the English translation is mine. It is noteworthy that both my interlocutors and myself often mixed in some Italian words, especially what I call 'site specific' words that derive from the particularities of the Italian salsa scene. Such examples include: '*serate*', a term used for designating dance parties that take place in the evening, '*animazione*', roughly translatable as 'animation' (and its Spanish equivalent '*animación*'), a term that is not common for dance studies but is fundamental for dance careers of Cubans in Italy, and refers to a type of staged performance situated somewhere between a demonstration and a short show, with the dancer on stage demonstrating some steps that the audience follows in order to 'animate' the party, and most recently '*porta gente*', literally translated to 'bring people', a term used in relation to the expectations on the side of event organizers that dancers, dance teachers, and DJs ensure the presence of large numbers of people at a given event.

‘Italians are smarter than we are’, continued Lazaro, ‘they built the whole dance business, but they built it with what they learned from us. So, we have to keep going, to be smart too. You need to plan, to schedule, especially in this city if you don’t have a car, it’s difficult to get to class, but we need to stay active’.

Cuba – as imaginative construction – holds a central place in the global dance marketplace, which values or devalues dancers for their race and ethnicity. But as embodied knowledge becomes commodified, disrupted transmission processes are revived and integrated into new socio-cultural contexts, consequently shifting positions of knowledge control. In this article, I trace the various forms of exclusion that emerge at the intersection of dance consumerism, assumptions about migrant belongings, and hierarchies of performance practices that inscribe at the very bottom those dances commonly designated as ‘ethnic’ dances. The (racialized and sexualized) Black and Brown dancing body, transformed into entrepreneurial subject engaged in a continuous project of self-making, is central to my analysis. I take as a starting point one of the classic metaphors in tourism studies, the ‘pleasure periphery’ (Turner and Ash 1975) in order to examine how the embodied labor of subaltern bodies establishes a regime of recognition, visibility, and value. I examine how under certain work-related circumstances some migrant bodies are valued while others are devalued, establishing what type of work is deemed acceptable and fit for a migrant body, and the consequences of these processes of racialization when the border between labor and leisure is easily crossed. In what follows, the pleasure periphery serves as a spatial and symbolic metaphor that allows me to discuss the pivotal role of Cuban dance and music for the transnational dance scene while shedding light on how peripheralization is reshaped and reproduced in migratory contexts. My aim is to analyze the professional and personal challenges and tensions of migrant dance labor, following my research participants as they try to pursue ‘an ordinary life in a city that is truly the cynosure of the Western world’ (Herzfeld 2009: 11)

The first section of the article contextualizes post-Soviet Cuba in the center-periphery debates, with a particular focus on elements of intangible heritage in relation to labor and mobility. The following three sections turn to dance-related practices understood as strategies for spatial and social mobility. I first explore the relationship between dance entrepreneurship, precarious labor, and the European salsa circuit. I then move on to discuss dancers’ use of the city spaces and the possibilities that open up for their entrepreneurial endeavors. Finally, the last section of the article discusses the racialized dancing body and the multiple tensions that define dancers’ sense of belonging.

My case study is based on multi-sited ethnographic research conducted among Cuban professional dancers in Rome and Havana between 2021 and 2022. The findings I present in this article are part of a bigger ethnographic research project that looks at dance labor in touristic and migratory settings, in an attempt to understand how dancers navigate uncertainty, precarity, multiple belongings and affective ties. In addition, my analysis is informed by fieldwork I conducted in Havana over the past decade, surveying the emergence of a transnational salsa scene and the mechanisms through which artistic and embodied labor is extracted and commodified. Recently I turned my attention to the European salsa scene, which provides Cuban migrants with an opportunity to access the labor market by employing their bodily skills and their symbolic and cultural capital. I consider Cuban adaptations to global dance commerce as deeply rooted in legacies of dance education and dance work in Cuba under precarious conditions, in a state of permanentized crisis. For this reason, throughout this article, my analysis moves back and forth between the two countries. Italy has had a long engagement with post-Soviet Cuba and is one of the most desirable destinations for Cuban migration, surpassed in Europe only by Spain. In addition, Rome emerged in the past decades as one of Europe’s most prominent salsa hubs, and the most rapidly growing market for Cuban salsa.

In both of the field sites I discuss in this article, participant observation and active involvement in dance classes, workshops, and festivals were at the core of my methodology. My long-term engagement with the study of Cuban dance was one of the biggest assets in establishing and developing new networks among Cuban dancers in Italy. As a Romanian-born, Polish-trained anthropologist, uprooted and re-rooted several times, I also found a common ground with my research participants due to our shared condition of being a migrant and a precarious worker, albeit in a field different from theirs, but nevertheless perceived as functioning at the peripheries of the Italian job market (see also AUTHOR, YEAR). My peripheral whiteness (Safuta 2018), my fluency in Spanish and my awareness of the Cuban social and political contexts played a determinant role in strengthening the ties with my research participants, as did my knowledge of the local Cuban dance scenes and my corporeal knowledge of dance. I worked with professionally trained Cuban dancers, as well as highly skilled dancers without formal training or dance aficionados who abandoned their previous careers and accessed tourism economies through dance. Although my interlocutors had very different levels of experience in teaching dance outside Cuba, and indeed different artistic expertise and choreographic knowledge acquired in Cuba, they all pointed out the sharp contrast between Cuban dancers' symbolic capital and the various forms of marginalization they are exposed to in their attempt to build, develop, or maintain their dance careers.

Post-Soviet Cuba and the center-periphery dynamic

Tourism studies have long been concerned with 'the periphery' (Christaller 1963, Turner and Ash 1975, Hall et al. 2013). The notion itself is relational (it invites the obvious question 'peripheral to what') and negatively connotated in most contexts, let alone its diminished relevance in times of increased physical and virtual mobility. In regional studies, the common denominators of what is traditionally considered a peripheral region are distance from the core region, weaker economy than core regions, and heightened migration, although a given region can be considered as either core or peripheral in relation to other regions (Pezzi and Urso 2017). In are terms, 'periphery' is used to designate either rural areas or 'city peripheries', evoking notions of remoteness, difficult accessibility, and elevated transportation costs. It is in this spirit that Turner and Ash (1975: 11) coined the term 'pleasure periphery' to refer to areas outside of well-established tourist circuits, with underdeveloped transportation infrastructures and services, and limited facilities, but which feed into the tourist desire to go beyond pre-formatted experiences. Economic and geographical marginality are therefore being mobilized in order to meet the recreational needs of tourists, and the periphery becomes valued, commodified, and integrated into broader economic systems (Hall et al. 2013). As the subtitle of the book authored by Turner and Ash suggests, through its reference to the Mongol Golden Horde, tourism appears to the periphery as a threat rather than a possibility, echoing notions of tourism 'consuming places' (Urry 1995), a perspective from which the hopeful and empowering potential of touristic encounters (Bloch 2021) seem inconceivable.

However, it is beyond the scope of my analysis to ponder over the implications of the center-periphery dynamic in locating present-day Cuba. As argued elsewhere (AUTHOR, YEAR), Cuba's unclear positionality is defined by the Cuban Revolution and the Non-Aligned Movement at its core, socialist ideology, economic and diplomatic isolation, and heavy dependency on tourism. The island's diverse history and multiple contexts make unequivocal regional categorizations impossible, be it Caribbean, Latin American, or post-Soviet (Hernandez-Reguant 2005).

Instead, I turn to a reinterpretation of the concept through an experiential lens, as argued by Weaver, for whom 'geographically and economically marginal locations in this perspective are places where various kinds of peak sensations and emotions are sought' (Hall et al. 2013:

82). The places where such experiences are made available through the mechanisms of international tourism are more accurately described, according to Weaver, as pleasure cores (while notably remaining economic peripheries).

Building upon this proposal of the periphery functioning in parallel as an experiential core, I discuss the transnational contexts of dance labor by bringing into focus the tensions between its emancipatory potential for Cuban performers and educators and the perpetuation of consumption patterns and business strategies that reify peripherality on various levels (spatial, symbolic, affective).

Since the early 1920s, Cuba promoted itself as a tourist destination and became one of the most rapidly growing countries in the Caribbean in terms of foreign tourists. As mass tourism overtook elite travel after World War II (Enloe 1989: 31), the fantasy of tropical, distant sceneries became intertwined with the fantasy of meeting Caribbean people, objectified as part of the natural landscape. Imaginaries related to music and dance were strongly connected to the central role of hedonism for practices related to tourism in the region, achieved through 'naturalizing the region's landscape and its inhabitants as avatars of primitivism, luxuriant corruption, sensual stimulation, ease and availability' (Sheller 2004: 170).

Revolutionary Cuba ended the financially profitable tourism industry which from the 1920s to the 1950s attracted (mostly) North American tourists with romanticized visions of a tropical paradise. The government reoriented the economy toward tourism in the 1990s, as a consequence of the deep recession brought about by the fall of the Soviet Union, Cuba's main trade partner. Developments in Cuban tourism revealed one of the paradoxes of the revolutionary government: since the country reopened to tourism, official promotional campaigns started to recreate prerevolutionary imagery of a sensual, luxuriant paradise, predicated on the same set of attributes associated in the early years of the Revolution with bourgeois excess and decadence. Although the sector was initially seen as 'necessary evil' (Fernandez 1999) it became a means to rebuild a nation.

For the first time after the Revolution, monetary gain became an explicit incentive for Cuban workers, as a new class of 'consumer citizens' (Rosenberg Weinreb 2009) was on the rise. For Cubans of the younger generation, dance teaching aimed at foreign tourists became one of the entrepreneurial strategies developed in Cuba's emerging markets of exchange under the influence of neoliberalism. Dance work offers the opportunity to enter tourism economies, as other potential jobs in the private sector require investments that many young Cubans cannot afford. Their social mobility is challenged by their lack of capital, their youth, their skin color, while dance is one of the few venues where dark skin color can be capitalized upon and functions as an additional legitimizing tool. Consumer goods and lifestyles associated with 'the outside world' are central to their experiences, but access to education and universal healthcare, considered achievements of the Revolution and praised by the older generations, bear little appeal. Most of them do not regard education as a path for social mobility and financial security and they have weak or inexistent affective ties with the romanticized vision of the Revolution put forward by the official discourse. Since many young Cubans aspire to travel, work, and live abroad, if only for a limited period, dance careers provide an alternative to an otherwise difficult-to-access labor market.

Many dance teachers from Havana developed their networks so as to be able to travel or settle down in a European country. In most cases, they sought places that 'felt like home', and the most common associations were usually Italy or Spain. Take for instance Ariel, a dance instructor in his mid-30s, who after 'one year, two months, and fifteen days in Germany' decided this was 'not a good place' for him, although it had been a financially rewarding experience. The mere fact that he kept precise track of the time spent in Germany alludes to the difficulties he encountered in an environment perceived as foreign and hostile, albeit beneficial for his networks and transnational career. He then added: 'Italy, Spain, they are a

different thing. You see people out in the streets, they smoke, they drink, they are loud, some streets make you feel like in Cuba'. This alleged familiarity is also a common trope in Cuban narratives about foreign tourists. Cubans who work in the tourism sector routinely categorize tourists according to their country of origin, economic status, budget availability, consumer behaviors and knowledge about Cuba, but most are ultimately assigned the label of 'European', 'American' or 'Latino'. The case of Italian tourists is a particular one, as perceived cultural and linguistic affinities, predispositions, and world views contributed, especially during the past decades, to the emergence of certain imaginaries that single out Italians and depict them as culturally and emotionally close to Cubans (the vocabulary of kin is often employed, especially by Cuban men referring to Italians as 'brothers'). Since changes in legislation under Raul Castro made it somewhat easier for Cubans to engage in two-way travel, and migration was no longer stigmatized as unequivocally shameful, Italy became one of the most desirable destinations for Cubans of the younger generation (the 'Italian dream' surpassed in terms of attractivity perhaps only by the 'American dream'), fed by popular music, fashion, iconic symbols and tourist landmarks that became more visible and present in Cubans' daily lives due to increased internet accessibility.

Precarious dance labor on the peripheries of the salsa circuit

In Europe, the dynamics associated with 'salsa' or 'Latin' dance consumerism go back to the early 2000s, with notable exceptions like Rome, where salsa was already living its 'golden age' in the mid-1990s (Conte 2022). The period was marked by the emergence of dance festivals and congresses, following a trend established during the previous decade mainly in the US (McMains 2015). The phenomenon was inscribed in the 'diversity turn' of European multiculturalism policies, based on putative recognition and celebration of cultural differences, yet materialized in a false sense of inclusion (Kedhar 2020). Although the dance business appears as a prime example of 'embracing diversity' and discovering new cultures through dance, its paradox lies in the fact that the business is kept alive by negating this premise and reducing cultural encounters and exchanges to venues such as dance schools or salsa parties. Dance aficionados rarely blend in with migrant groups or practice social dances outside of pre-defined, institutionalized settings (Jimenez-Sedano 2019).

Despite this paradox, or perhaps precisely because of it, salsa dance commerce accounts to one of the largest percentages of the global social dance business (McMains 2009), and 'Cuban salsa' has become increasingly visible on the European dance market, through the emergence of festivals, workshops, and specialized schools. But since salsa is not publicly recognized as an art form, it is neither endorsed by professional organizations (as in the case of ballet or competitive ballroom dancing in Europe) nor does it receive financial support from powerful institutions. Therefore, dancers' careers are subjected exclusively to market logic and develop mostly through affective labor (Hardt 1999) in capitalist economies.

Dance careers abroad are built at the intersection of various forms of mobility, from the normalized mobility of international (Western) tourists to the mobility of non-European dancers, hindered by visa applications and bureaucratic procedures. Their transnational mobilities are in most cases configured by the same processes that subject individuals (and intimate relations) to market logic, through advertising, fetishization, and commercialization. In what follows, I look at the processes of peripheralization that characterize the sphere of labor relations established by Cuban migrants on the Italian (and transnational) dance markets.

Accessing the salsa circuit is regulated through a series of elements, such as establishing relationships with strategic actors, constant self-promotion and social media proficiency, and

the continuous actualization and expansion of their movement vocabularies, connecting their skill and expertise to market logic. In the early stages of a dancer's career, having a well-developed network is key. Along the way, work is reconfigured in order to respond to the expectations of clients of dance schools and venues, leaving Cuban dancers with a feeling of inadequacy in the early stages of their careers abroad. Take for instance Yuli, a dancer in his mid-twenties, trained in Cuba's famous Cabaret Tropicana:

> A typical show in Cuba lasts one hour and forty-five minutes, you have three minutes to change your costume between dances. Here you do a ten-minute *animazione*, and they pay you one hundred dollars. The first time it happened I couldn't believe it'.

Yuli's surprise points out two noteworthy aspects: the first one is related to the value placed on dance work and the actual income related to it, considerably higher than the earnings of even the best-paid Cuban dancers in Cuba. The second one relates to the prestige of artistic and embodied labor in Cuba, which translates to proper venues for dance shows, an audience familiarized with the artistic language of dance and therefore willing to attend long performances and the physical demands that make performances on stage the domain of trained professionals. Artistic education was deeply embedded in the broader educational project that was at the core of the Cuban Revolution of 1959. From the proletarization of Cuban ballet (Tomé 2017) to the institutionalization of a specific Cuban form of modern dance (Cashion 1989) and the increased support of Afro-Cuban dances, in line with the revolutionary agenda aimed at erasing racial inequalities (Moore 2006), the government prioritized accessibility and was keen on creating an image of dancers as workers. On the contrary, some European dance venues (especially festivals and congresses) and the tradition of *'animación'* on stage are in many cases dominated by skilled dancers but without any kind of formal training.

Although many of my interlocutors were born in the late 1980s or early 1990s, when many of the revolutionary projects retained only a shadow of their former glory, they all benefitted from an education system that still valued and actively promoted dance as a viable career path. The economic realities of their formative years, marked by multiple crises, scarcity, and uncertainty, forced many dancers to reinvent themselves as cultural brokers, responding to the neoliberal logic of entrepreneurship and to tourist imaginaries and desires. Their racialized and sexualized identities became part of an embodied and commodified performance that reproduces one of the main tropes of tourism promotion in the Caribbean, the sexual objectification of 'exotic' bodies. As tourism intensified, teaching foreigners became a remunerated activity more lucrative than dancing professionally. One hour of dancing in a private school could easily gain a dance instructor the equivalent of a month's salary in a state-financed company.

The dynamics of the Cuban dance business for tourists inform the choices made by dancers as they try to access the salsa circuit outside Cuba and expose them to criticism from fellow dancers with more experience abroad, who have managed to establish their position on the market. Gerardo, a dance instructor in his late fifties who has spent half of his life in Italy explained this as following:

> When they arrive from Havana, they are ready to sell themselves for very little, for the same money they take there for a dance lesson. But if you charge here 10 or 20 euros for a lesson that is worth 30 or even 50, what you do is destabilize the market for the rest of us.

In many other sectors that rely on precarious work, the last ones to arrive are more prone to work for less (Quadrelli 2004), however, what differentiates the dance business is the

thin line that divides labor and leisure. As Gerardo went on to explain, Italy has a significant number of accomplished, highly skilled Italian instructors of Cuban salsa, who have made a name for themselves on the international scene and pose a real, serious competition to Cubans. Many of them dedicate their free time (after their day job) to dance teaching, which becomes a secondary occupation, often defined as ‘passion’. For Cuban dancers, the symbolic role that blackness takes as a marker of authenticity in touristic settings in Cuba, or naturalizing ideas about gendered, racialized, and sexualized bodies (i.e. the notion that Cubans have dancing and sensuality ‘in their blood’) do not fulfill the same promises outside the island. Instead, dancers are expected to become fluent in the language of entrepreneurship and self-promotion, even though they do not grasp all the intricacies of the legal system that would allow them to set up and develop their own businesses.

‘Italians have their clan, they help each other. But Cubans abroad are very individualist, there is a lot of ego, a lot of arrogance’, Jorge once said, commenting on the difficulty of being invited to perform at big dance festivals. When dancers manage to find work, often in the form of teaching some classes and having several other side gigs (rarely as part of a registered contract), they are faced with the intricacies of a system many of them idealized before leaving Cuba. Dancers who work in salsa schools in Cuba speak in appreciative terms of an imagined ‘capitalist work ethic’ characteristic of ‘the world out there’, which they consider superior to the socialist one. To many of them, individualism, personal responsibility, drive and ambition are the pillars of newfound independence and freedom outside of the state-regulated system.

Outside the island, the realities of building a career on the neoliberal dance market bring back into focus the notion of solidarity, once at the heart of the Cuban Revolution. During one of the parties at a festival I attended in Southern Italy, Lazaro explained this as following: ‘The famous artists, those who made a name for themselves, they come to see you perform, they congratulate you at the end. *Pero hermano, presentame!* [But brother, introduce me to others!] Help me get some gigs!’ The struggles faced by Cuban dancers are rarely attributed to the logic of dance entrepreneurship, which compels dancers to deploy a series of tactics that increase their marketability, but instead to the dissolution of reciprocity and to the loss of Cuban identity abroad. In this case, ideas about Cuban identity are built around notions of mutuality, selflessness, and readiness to step in and help a fellow Cuban – in stark contrast with the logic of individuality that was seen as a desirable feature of the emerging dance business in Cuba. In maintaining a clean professional account, Cubanness is constantly negotiated, as I discuss in the next section taking as a starting point the ways in which dancers experience the city once they manage to establish a certain position on the dance market.

Navigating the peripheries of the city

When in 2021 I started taking private lessons with Mirana, she provided me with two essential pieces of information: first, she offered significant discounts for ten or twenty-lesson packages, which she found more convenient since she had to drive all the way from (and back to) the outskirts of Rome. Second, I could expect her to always respect our schedule and not cancel at the last moment, ‘as it happens so often in Cuba’. For our first lesson, she arrived with a slight delay, and although she had sent me a WhatsApp message to let me know, she started apologizing as soon as I opened the door: ‘I’m never late, but it took me a long time to find a parking place. I don’t like to be late, I’m a very precise person, people always tell me that from this point of view, I don’t seem Cuban’.

Although a certain performance of Cubanness was central to her work, her professional image relied on dissociating from the negative stereotypes commonly associated with Cubans and broadly with migrants from Latin America and the Caribbean. As I showed in the previous

section, adhering to the higher standards of work believed to characterize capitalist countries meant that she was organically integrated in the Italian social and economic fabric. In this section, I discuss spatial peripheries in order to understand how Cuban migrants involved in the dance world become knowledgeable of the city and how they master mobility in everyday life.

Like many of my interlocutors, Mirana had to rely on private modes of transportation in order to show up on time for her work commitments. As Gerardo explained, the car is fundamental for the business of dance teaching and performing, especially in a city like Rome where public transport is not deemed reliable, and salsa venues are far from the city center due to prohibitive rents. More than an aspiration or a sign of distinction 'borrowed' by migrants from the local middle class, the car becomes an essential component of Cuban dancers' entrepreneurial endeavors. For dancers like Lazaro and Jorge, who at the time of my fieldwork in Italy did not own a car, limited mobility in the city translated to limited work opportunities and additional complications when planning their night work. Their modes of navigating the city and understandings of space as relational, as practical place (De Certeau 1984) recall the periphery as distance, placing transport costs, remoteness, and accessibility among the key characteristics that define peripherality. As research on migrants' urban expertise demonstrates (Buhr 2018: 311), the use of space 'conditions the very activities that can take place', creating conditions of accessibility and a repertoire of possibilities. While careful scheduling during the day could in most instances guarantee that they would make it to work on time (whether group lessons at various dance schools or private lessons in their clients' homes), for their nighttime activities like *animación*, parties, or shows, they had to rely on an extended network of friends, acquaintances, and clients, all involved in the salsa world, and willing to give them a ride. For this reason, and at odds with many young dancers' dreams of stardom and fulminating careers, many of the dancers of the first generation like Gerardo reconceptualized success in terms of stability, tranquility, and predictability, and not in terms of visibility and uninterrupted presence in the city's salsa hotspots. Having 'his own school' meant that he could afford to emulate the lifestyles of his clients, and that included having enough spare time to dedicate to his family, to participate in social events not related to dancing, to travel, and setting somewhat clearer boundaries between leisure and labor. Freed from the pressure to animate parties every night, like in the early days of his career in Italy, he could focus on developing his own business.

Because of the intricacies of Italian bureaucracy, along with the legal and financial demands for opening a dance school in an independent location, Cuban dancers resort to the solution of renting out gym spaces simply because the alternatives are out of their reach. Adalberto, a dance teacher based in Milano, fondly remembered the 90s, when Cuban salsa was gaining popularity in Italy and he could afford to rent out a studio space with two dance halls, changing rooms, and a small office for reception and administrative tasks. He attributed the temporary success of his business to two factors: one was the profitability of the dance business back in those days, and the other one was his Italian partner at the time, who had the knowledge, skills, and economic capital necessary for the dance school to function. When they separated, he continued to teach in various locations, which like many other of my interlocutors he described as 'his own school'. Embodied and emplaced outside the island, 'authenticity' is transferred from the authenticity of the practice to the authenticity of the person (Buckland 2006: 221).

It is noteworthy that the meanings of 'having one's own school', associated with the professionalization of spaces and methodologies of teaching, are often a reflection of the legacies of precarious dance labor in Havana, influenced to a great extent by the transnational salsa scene. Around 2015-2016, dance lessons in Havana's salsa schools had aligned to methodologies, reservation systems (also due to increased Internet availability), rating systems, and professionalism standards attributed to the international dance business. My interlocutors

in Havana acknowledged the importance of meeting their clients halfway and teaching them in the same spirit they had been taught in their home countries. Mirana also brought up this argument during one of our lessons in my living room in Rome:

> You need to understand the client, with some people you can have the lessons at home, as we do in Cuba, but this is not very professional. For the more demanding ones, or the ones who do not know Cuba, I have the alternative of renting out a space at a gym close to my house, but then it takes them one hour to get there, because of the traffic.

With few exceptions, dance schools in the main cities in Cuba are concentrated in the historical part, 'the old town', close to representative heritage sites or touristic attractions. Although Cuban tourism does not exclude the classic Caribbean trio sun-sea-sand, the industry became increasingly preoccupied with elements of Cuban intangible heritage. As already noted above, salsa schools and venues in Rome are confined to remote neighborhoods or even to the peripheries of the city, for reasons that have to do partly with the dynamics of the tourism market (and the millions of tourists who visit the city each year) and partly with the realities of the real estate market. Although for different reasons, the experiences of mobility of Cuban dancers whether in Cuba or abroad bear striking similarities. As seen in Mirana's example at the beginning of this section, hardships in navigating the city were the main reason why she turned down some jobs and instead chose to focus on participating in festivals or working with clients who were willing to commit to an extensive study plan. In like manner, dance school owners in Cuba found it increasingly difficult to ensure the constant presence of teachers on the school premises, even during the high season: 'A few years ago they used to come to class even if it was for one hour because they knew they would make $10, now they don't even bother for that kind of money since they started earning a lot more'.

The situation described in 2018 by Sofia, the owner of one of the most popular salsa schools in Havana, translated to an increased number of dancers migrating from Santiago de Cuba to Havana searching for work opportunities. In their case mobility from the province to the capital was envisioned as an open door toward transnational mobilities. Desired and dreamed of while in Cuba, mobility becomes an intrinsic part of the struggle to make ends meet and aspirations are tied to the possibility to choose when to be mobile and when not. Whether it is within the city, across the country or abroad, being constantly in motion is positively valued only when dancers themselves have full control over their schedules. When Mirana took a job as a cleaning lady and later as a receptionist for an Italian company, she felt that the financial security that came along with a permanent contract allowed her to finally choose the dance jobs she wanted and to refuse those she deemed inconvenient or underpaid compared to the amount of work she had to put into them. She would travel as an artist, free from the financial pressure that made her say yes to all the jobs she was offered.

Migration scholars have discussed the experience of moving freely between countries and crossing borders without hassle as central to migrants' integration (Fortier 2000). For Cuban dancers in Europe, their professional and artistic belonging provides a path to overcome the bureaucratic complications associated with migrations from the Global South. Their bodily coded status capital is not easily disguised and, as I discuss in the following section, their 'immigrant background' clashes with expectations about an inclusive, diverse Europe, where racial barriers are more subtle or less visible than in Cuba.

The racialized dancing body and the peripheries of belonging

Although the revolutionary government introduced reforms that were meant to ensure equal opportunities in terms of healthcare, education, and employment, racial discrimination

in Cuba remained the result of structural racism, and not just incidents of individual prejudice (Clealand 2013). Racial preferences in tourism-related employment further exacerbated inequalities, and the large group of Afro-Cuban population was restricted to working at the periphery of the sector engaging in informal contacts (de la Fuente 2001). The emergence of the dance market and the strong emphasis placed on Afro-Cuban heritage challenged some of these notions and although it maintained the myth of the sexual, exotic Other, it opened new paths for upward mobility on the transnational salsa scene. Jorge remembered the beginning of his dance career in Cuba as following:

> Growing up, I was constantly bullied, whatever happened, it was always the fault of the black kid. I gained more confidence once I started working in tourism, I was dancing in hotels and all of a sudden, I was surrounded by white tourists, from all over the world, who wanted to meet me. At first, I was confused, but then I understood what it means to be black in this world.

In front of international audiences, Jorge was the embodiment of racialized authenticity and desire, having found, like many of the dancers who frequented popular salsa venues, 'enterprising ways to mobilize markers of blackness within an evolving economy from which they are otherwise largely excluded' (Perry 2016: 45). In Italy, his career was off to a promising start and shortly upon arriving in Rome he secured contract for *animazione* at one of the most popular Latin nightclubs. Like other migrants whose class mobility does not free them from the racial technology of exclusion (Alloul 2021: 184), he found himself immersed in a deeply racialized context, which negated his assumptions about the respectability and prestige associated with successful artistic careers. In a country where migrants are commonly equated with racialized others and pushed to the margins of belonging, the 'anxiety to belong' is a definitive trait of the collective identity that goes hand in hand with the fear of being marginalized (Fortier 2000: 119). In this section, the periphery serves as a metaphor to reflect upon migrant belongings. My findings converge with studies of migrants' leisure time (Horolets 2022: 29) which show that migrants are more prone to remain 'alert and prepared to participate in migration-related regimes' in the workplace. Their perceptions are reinforced by media representations of migrants (and broadly of otherness) as part of the nexus migration-insecurity-illegality, depicting migrants as either tragic heroes, victims of structural violence, or villains, intruders who threaten national identity (Fanoli 2013). In narrating his story, Jorge highlighted:

> Being a migrant in Italy is already difficult enough, being black only makes things more complicated. When we travel with the dance company, or when we come back from work at night, it's so easy to recognize dancers because of their posture, and their garment bags, of course, they don't look like drug dealers, and yet the police stop you. Being black in this country is only good if you are a football player or a dancer on stage.

Performances of Cubanness onstage draw from the same imaginaries as the ones that feed into the tourism sector and the dance market in Cuba. Encounters around dance work rely on idealized versions of both the dances and the dancers, reinforcing and perpetuating racialized and sexualized notions about the mobbing body. Assumptions that Cubans are good dancers because 'they have it in their blood' or 'they are born with it' are widespread on the island and outside of it, and lead to romanticized visions according to which Cubans are 'poor but happy' and very often to the instrumental treatment of dancers and dance teachers. Framed as such, notions of happiness and lightheartedness are fragments of a broader political reading that ultimately normalizes and justifies poverty, through the implication that it can be overcome

precisely because of these innate emotional predispositions. The racialization and precarization of dance work intersect with gender inequality, strengthened in this case by the stark gender binary promoted by the international salsa business, which creates a higher demand for male teachers in Cuba and in turn facilitates their mobility. As in the case of other women migrants from the Global South, the position of Cuban women is marked by vulnerability and the intersection of multiple axes of inequality (Boatcă and Roth 2019). My research participants' struggles are further complicated by the fact that dance work is often devalued, as was seen in the opening vignette of this article. Furthermore, the international dance scene operates with an idealized image of dancers, 'valued for their creativity, flexibility, absence of material needs' (Martin 2012: 66), motivated by their love of art. In the case of Cuban dancers, this presupposition is further strengthened by the belief that they are animated by their love for Cuban culture and the intrinsic desire to promote it and to represent, thus justifying with this romanticized notion of dancers the most meager of wages. In this context, being 'professional Cubans' (Berg 2011: 132) takes precedence over their being professional artists. Advancing their careers and building a name for themselves offers Cuban dancers the possibility to avoid some of the jobs they consider demeaning, as explained by Lazaro:

> They [event organizers] invite you to open for Prince Royce, for Marc Anthony, and of course if you are new in the business, you say yes, I did it too in the early days. But they don't pay you, they treat you like an animal. They tell you it's good publicity, yet the most you can get out of it is being seated in the VIP corner. But you don't see any money.

Having had similar experiences shortly after moving to Italy, Jorge pointed out that no matter how precarious the dance business abroad, it still allows Cubans to become involved in consumer behaviors that respond to a certain set of expectations created before migrating:

> Cubans like a lot to show off [*especular*]. You see the pictures they post on Instagram and on Facebook, in Versace pants and Gucci t-shirts, but this is not how they live, they can't afford this lifestyle. They just have to do it online, to give this idea of success. And then Cubans in Cuba think we are all international artists, very successful, very rich.

The centrality of consumer goods for my research participants in Cuba brought about visible markers of social inequality. Access to brand names and imported goods were only some of the strategies adopted in crafting selfhood, fueled by touristic encounters that constantly created new expectations in regard to commodities which 'signaled a type of agency on the part of the consumer that transformed things into symbols of status' (Stout 2014: 131). Many young dancers still subscribe to the general view that leaving the island equals succeeding, a belief reinforced by the narratives of Cubans migrants and by their digital presence. The behaviors described by Jorge respond to just such imaginaries and are part of a performance of 'Cubanness abroad', defined by a newfound class sensibility and celebratory narratives of upward social mobility. Such spectacles of consumption made visible across social media, contributed to reshaping notions of 'good life' (Fischer 2014) associated with capitalist countries, along with new ideas of exemplary economic behavior and entrepreneurship (Simoni and Voirol 2021).

While these digital routines responded to certain expectations from family, friends and broader social networks in Cuba, they mainly served to reinforce ideas of Cubanness in performance and became one of the most powerful tools for self-promotion. Although described as deceiving (as seen in Jorge's narrative above), they were constantly enacted by

the majority of my research participants. Online images essentially fulfilled the role of positively valuing one's migratory experience (Schmoll 2022) and artistic trajectory, creating new possibilities for corporeal dimensions to be curated and choreographed. Overcoming the precarity and peripherality that characterize dance work in Rome, my interlocutors created and promoted their image as professional, successful dancers using the city center and its touristic landmarks as a backdrop for their social media strategies and the creation of their digital artistic personas.

Although focused primarily on promoting their careers, dancers' online presence is not entirely apolitical, which poses additional challenges to their sense of belonging and allegiance. An example in this respect is provided by the story of Osvaldo, a dance instructor in his late thirties, who in the summer of 2021 had recently moved to Rome and started teaching. The 11th of July went down in Cuban history as the day of the biggest antigovernmental protest since the Cuban Revolution, as thousands of people took to the streets, hundreds were detained, and dozens were charged with crimes that could mean up to 30 years in prison. *Patria y Vida,* a collaborative song released earlier that year by Cuban rappers, and which is an inversion of the famous phrase *Patria o Muerte* coined by Fidel Castro after the triumph of the revolution, became the slogan of the protests. Osvaldo, who describes himself as a true revolutionary, shared the song on his social media, and although most reactions were supportive, he was faced with criticism and soon came to find out that he would have to take his business elsewhere. The space he was renting out for his lessons, he explained during an interview, was administered by members of the Italian Communist Party, who found his criticism of the Cuban government unacceptable. Painfully aware of current Cuban realities and even more so of the consequences that can occur when they take a stand, many dancers learn to navigate these tensions and as a result rarely open up about politics, especially in the early days of their careers. Osvaldo's story became somewhat of a cautionary tale and the reason invoked by some of my interlocutors for their refusal to talk about politics. In the words of Lazaro: 'now you understand how far politics can take you. Cuba is what it is, and we are not the ones to change it, not from the outside'.

Conclusions

In this article I have tried to show how Cuban dancers adapt to the demands of the multicultural dance economy while retaining their agentive power (Kedhar 2020). By employing the metaphor of pleasure periphery, I argued that the centrality of Cuban-related imaginaries for the global dance markets does not necessarily translate to a central position for dancers themselves in the bigger scheme of institutionalized dance teaching and performing. Despite the growing number of dance schools and 'Latin' parties and festivals, these presumably diverse, inclusive spaces oftentimes exclude large groups of practitioners who are not involved in the dance business. Furthermore, they generate new work practices, new movement vocabularies, and particular hierarchies that Cuban dancers learn to navigate in order to balance the multitude of expectations created around them.

By exploring the repertoire of places and possibilities available for use to Cuban dancers in Rome, I discussed the nature of place-making, belonging, and the mechanisms through which embodied and artistic labor is extracted as a result of transnational mobilities. Dancers' dealings with the city shed light on their access to the labor market, their relations to a wider social and economic system, and the ambivalence of their belonging. Their embodied and emplaced performances are situated between dance-as-labor and dance-as-commodity in the Italian social and urban landscape. Their being Cuban is associated with the cultural and symbolic capital that can counteract exclusion from the labor market. But the lack of professional organizations or institutions that regulate and validate dance careers in the fields

of ‘Latin dances’ or ‘ethnic dances’ (as opposed to the worlds of ballroom dancing or ballet, for instance) means that dancers’ careers are subjected exclusively to market logic.

Through the examples of my research participants, I showed how successful careers abroad are predicated on collective performances of identity. Embodying Cubanness (shaped by tourism imaginaries and the international dance market) onstage allows dancers to become involved in consumer behaviors that respond to a set of expectations about the world ‘out there’ before leaving Cuba. In Cuban terminology of everyday life, the notion *‘allá afuera’* (literally translated as out there) encompasses a continuum of (capitalist) countries and reflects Cubans’ perceptions and production of imagined spaces, which come to shape cultural consumption practices in everyday life. The possibilities of adaptation and hybrid belonging become resources of professionalization both in Cuba and abroad since the transnational circulation of Cuban dance forms resulted in the creation of a standardized product. ‘Out there’ becomes a space of cultural borrowings and adaptations for business strategies, but as dancers come to discover as they try to build their careers abroad, it includes notions and contestations of Cubanness than span well beyond the world of dance.

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