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‘Watch and do what I do’: ethnographic fieldnotes from the online salsa class

Abstract: Restrictions on movement and requirements for social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic have triggered an almost total shift to digital creation, teaching, and promotion in the field of dance. By employing an (auto)ethnographic lens, this article explores collective and individual embodied knowledge acquired through online dance classes, with a particular focus on Cuban social dance genres. Music and dance were core components of the Cuban tourism industry, an important pillar of the Cuban economy which was brought to a halt by the pandemic. Dancers’ participation in the global dance market through transition to online dancing was hindered by the struggles of everyday life in Cuba, yet their resilience and resourcefulness allowed them to transform their previous routines and pedagogies following the same mechanisms that lead to the emergence of a Cuban dance market in the first place. The article reflects upon the disruptions of old dynamics and emergence of new ones, by focusing on shifting methodologies of Cuban dance, strategies for monetizing creative labour, and the female dancing body as transformative space.

Keywords: salsa, dance, online teaching, Cuba

In January 2021, my friend and research participant Mireya, the owner of a salsa school in Havana, sent me the following message:

It is so sad to see that dance schools have almost disappeared, to see how teachers ended up working on construction sites of new hotels. Others had to sell their things because they can’t survive otherwise. I transformed the living room at home into a dance salon, in case some work shows up. So far, nothing. (Personal communication, January 8, 2021).

I have known Mireya since 2016 when I started researching Cuban salsa schools for my doctoral dissertation. Throughout the years, I followed her career as she went from apprentice dancer to dance school owner, picked up her business from the ashes twice, had a major falling-out with her brother because of their different managerial visions, and started over in three different locations, all while navigating the intricacies of Cuban legislation and bureaucracy. But this was the first time I read resignation and despair between the lines of her message.

The pandemic brought Cuba on the edge of the most severe economic crisis in three decades, amplified already existing social inequalities, and intensified everyday struggles. Cuba confirmed the first local cases, connected to European visitors, on the same day that the WHO changed the status of COVID-19 to a pandemic (Salas, 2020). A partial closure followed only a few days later, and it soon became total, as the country suspended all nonessential activities. Only a few dance schools had the means (financial and technical) to move to online teaching and the majority of dancers were excluded from these new spaces of digital dance.

Those who did participate in it were faced with a different market logic than the one Cuban schools had been accustomed to over the past several years, while dealing with yet another unprecedented situation: co-existing on these digital platforms with their European counterparts. Students could now choose to dance with Cuban teachers in Havana, in Melbourne, in Vancouver, or Rome, or they could simply resume their practice with their teachers (of different nationalities, specialized in Cuban dance).

This article is an ethnographic exploration of collective and individual embodied knowledge acquired through online dance classes and parties during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a particular focus on Cuban dance genres. Digital dance emerges in this piece as the tip of the iceberg, as I consider its rootedness in pre-existing teaching practices, pedagogies, and business strategies. I argue that the shift to virtual platforms and adaptation to online teaching are informed by the logic of innovation and struggle under precarious work conditions which were a consequence of the expansion of Cuba's dance market through the emergence of private salsa schools aimed at international tourists. Hardships, inequalities, but also resilience and resourcefulness characterized the emerging Cuban dance scene as (mostly) salsa¹ became a cultural commodity co-produced by performers, instructors, and aficionados alike.

I aim to develop an understanding of Cuban dance which centres dance-as-labor and dance-as-commodity in a new (virtual) context, in the absence of a key component that shaped Cuban dance pre-pandemic: dance-as-sociality. My analysis is informed by studies of Cuban dance as means for preserving traditions and identity in the context of cultural and economic globalization (Daniel, 2011) and by scholarship on the

¹ The dance market in Havana developed overwhelmingly around the promotion of 'salsa', referred to at times as 'Cuban salsa', and less frequently as 'casino', which is the original name of the dance, and the one Cubans use most often outside of their interactions with tourists. The international salsa community uses primarily the term 'Cuban salsa' as well.

transnational salsa scene (McMains, 2015), yet in building my argument of legacies of precarity and innovation in Cuban dance and dance teaching I also draw upon ethnographies that show how dancers engage with neoliberal, multicultural dance markets and their demands for corporeal flexibility (Kedhar 2020) in training, teaching, traveling and performing in order to thrive/survive. In my discussion of the new contexts of Cuban dance, I engage with recent literature on dance and screendance during the pandemic (Benthaus, 2021, LeLay, 2021, Porter, 2021) in order to understand the dynamics of increased flexibility, discussing how the consequences of worldwide lockdowns and restrictions have pushed practitioners into exploring new grounds between established pedagogies and teaching idea(l)s of cultural significance, on the one hand, and the new realities of dance as online commodity.

My own practice during the pandemic becomes the pretext for reflecting upon the changes that took place on the Cuban dancing scene. In doing so, I ask myself: What is the outcome of moving a highly embodied practice, with which many people engage in the pursuit of leisure², into the online space? What happens when the body in motion, not prone to digitalization (deLahunta, 2002), has no alternative but to lend itself to it?

My argumentation of the topic is threefold: in the first part of the article, I look at pedagogies and methodologies of dance teaching, as I discuss the changes I observed during lessons I took in Cuba and online, due to the growing influence of the international salsa market on the local dance (teaching) scene. Building on those arguments, in the second section I move on to analyse how the processes related to the commodification of Cuban dance are deeply rooted in discourses about authenticity and first-hand experience, predicated on travel and participation, and the challenges posed by the shift to virtual dance. Finally, in the last part of the article I look at (gendered) dance labor and teaching as feminine care work.

The lockdowns that characterized the first year of the pandemic disrupted certain dynamics related to the commodification of dance. New dynamics emerged, which speak of pedagogies, self-commodification, and solidarity, illustrating the complexities of new corporealities while shedding light on the old ones. These intimate ties between the old and the new were the starting point for my reflections, as I began

² My focus in this article is on salsa dance as leisure pursuit of dance aficionados with various levels of experience, who engage in classes and parties and actively participate in the international salsa community with non-competitive, non-performative goals.

to ponder the changes in a field of research I had come to know primarily through my dancing body.

In his article on Zoom tango during the pandemic, Jonathan Skinner (2020) draws a parallel between the responses to the pandemic and the Montserrat volcano crisis in the Caribbean: ‘on the island, there was a period of denial, an insistence on maintaining the everyday state of affairs such as icing a wedding cake for the weekend with earthquake tremors, ashfalls and the stench of sulfur shrouding the experience’ (p. 88). New routines were emerging worldwide, building on the remains of pre-pandemic routines. Dance and the performing arts were particularly hit: as entire countries went into lockdown, communal experiences were banned, and performance spaces, schools, and studios were closed for long months in order to contain the spread of the coronavirus. Dance was no longer safe anywhere else but in digital spaces.

As I took my leisure pursuits to previously unexplored digital territories, I discovered just how surprisingly easy it was to continue my pilates practice almost unhindered. When gyms closed in Berlin (where I was living in the spring of 2020) I purchased a yoga mat right on time before the closure of all nonessential activities. I then moved my daily practice to the living room floor, using common household items as props to diversify and make my practice more challenging. I started following a few Instagram accounts to have some fresh ideas for when I felt uninspired and transitioned smoothly to a full workout plan at home. Several factors made this transition smooth. First, I found myself in a rather privileged situation: a healthy, able-bodied woman in her mid-thirties, without the responsibility of care work, and although I was under the pressure of a doctoral dissertation that still required a considerable amount of work, I still had my doctoral scholarship (the precarity of life as an early career researcher was looming on the horizon but the perspective was somewhat distant). I was living alone at the time, but I knew that as soon as the borders reopened, I would join my partner in Rome.

Lockdowns and restrictions on movement caught me in a period of my life that could be called nomadic, would the term not pose so many interpretive challenges for an anthropologist to use as an essentialized label. I had spent ten months in Cuba in the course of two research trips for my doctoral dissertation, and the year before that I lived out of a suitcase between the Balkans, the Mediterranean, and the Sinai Peninsula. Consequently, long before the pandemic forced most of us to resort to online forms of socialization, I started relying heavily on technology in order to stay in touch with most

of the people in my life. My research participants (Cuban dancers, dance instructors, dance school owners) existed simultaneously in the same (virtual) space as my family, my partner, my friends, and my colleagues.

In their analysis of single women's leisure during the pandemic, Audrey Giles and Jacquelyn Oncescu (2021) argue that women who are not responsible for the provision of care struggle with a sense of shame and selfishness as a result of acknowledging their privileged position, while at the same time experiencing acute, at times exasperating loneliness in pursuing their regular leisure activities. My experience, particularly during the first months of lockdown, was very similar, layered with a sense of inadequacy both as a scholar and as a dancer. I did not keep a corona diary neither online nor offline, and I did not engage in any of the scholarly debates or research projects about the effects of the pandemic until early 2021. I also rejected the idea of online dance for as long as I could. I saw the announcements for the first online salsa classes, I followed Facebook and Instagram stories reporting on the first zoom lessons, I saw screenshots and collages of pictures taken during class. Yet I did not dance once, not until November 2020.

Drawing upon feminist conceptualizations of knowledge as always partial and contingent, experiential and embodied (Harding, 1991), scholars in the field of leisure studies have argued for research that articulates 'women's lived experiences as contextual and multiple' (Toffoletti et al., 2021, p. 5). While I can only write from my embodiment, bearing in mind that embodied exchanges are never exact, I employed my subjective bodily engagement in order to try to make sense or at least create a common ground for understanding others' somatic experiences. The 'I' of the ethnographer is thus situated in the Cuban field site, which gives insights into the creative strategies unfolding behind dance work, and the virtual site, informed by and interpreted through the lens of the Cuban one. I spent fourteen months in Cuba researching dance for my doctoral dissertation, from 2015 to 2019, in the course of six research trips. My time was mostly spent dancing, observing dance lessons (private and group lessons), attending events in popular salsa venues and private parties, or simply socializing and going about our daily routines, together with my research participants, outside the dance school. Much of the material upon which this article is based comes from extensive participant observation and from the interviews I conducted in Cuba, as well as from four months of online ethnographic research during the pandemic. From December 2020 to March 2021, I attended online dance lessons at least three times a week, from

beginner to advanced classes, and I attended a three-month workshop for female dancers. Classes were taught by dancers based either in Havana or in European countries (Poland and Italy) and usually lasted one hour, and the recording was made available to participants for another 24 hours after the end of the class.

The singularity of my dance practice and own embodied experience renders itself useful as a lens through which I look at what is lost and what is gained as dance is being transmitted, holding the promise of Cubanness embodied and integral to salsa dancing³.

‘Just do this’: visual and verbal cues

Although the need to shift to online teaching almost overnight caught off guard many of the Cuban dance instructors (whether they were based in Cuba or abroad), the foundation for their adaptability is to be found in the constant innovation that characterized precarious dance work on the island and outside of it, as I discuss in this upcoming section. Cubans who migrated to European countries and who tried to build (successful) careers as salsa artists or teachers had to reinvent themselves according to the demands, limitations, and growing competition of the international salsa scene. Those who stayed in Cuba reinvented themselves as cultural brokers, adapting and responding to a neoliberal logic of entrepreneurship and to tourist imaginaries and desires, which to an extent governed their participation in the global dance market. The number of dance schools in Havana grew mainly for two reasons: on the one hand, changes in legislation regarding self-employment and work in the private sector, and on the other an increased demand for live music and dance lessons as part of the affective and emotional networks of interest in Cuban culture and Cubans (Ferguson, 2003, p. 2). As the Cuban government legalized self-employment, the visible transformations in the field of labor relations led to a type of downward mobility (Ritter and Henken, 2015), which saw doctors, lawyers, and teachers working as taxi drivers, waiters, or managers of private accommodations, as a means for overcoming a precarious present. A similar dynamic was reflected in the field of dance, and the global fascination with Cuban music and dance materialized on the island in hybrid business tactics, formal and informal, developed around racialized and sexualized dancing

bodies. Highly skilled dancers and choreographers ended up teaching tourists, motivated mostly by the economic aspect. Yet in many cases, Cubans who become involved in the dance business experience an upward mobility, financial and symbolic, due to the imaginaries and narratives about dance and dancers, created mostly outside the island. The moving body becomes a powerful tool for accessing tourist economies through the mobilization of cultural resources. Dancers' and instructors' work is ultimately inscribed in a constant circle of objectification, (mis)representation and emotional entanglements, as their skills became commodified. The new business strategies of the salsa schools were ultimately aimed at ensuring international visibility (most often measured in reviews, popularity on social media, and reservations from tourists who had either seen videos of the teachers dancing or had come across the school's website).

Digital methods have been part of the dance world in several ways before the pandemic, but 'dance as a field has been slower to take up digital modes than other realms of artistic practice' (Weber, 2020). As argued by dance scholar Elena Benthaus (2021), public engagement with popular screendance media dates back at least to the early 1980s, when MTV was launched, and took diverse forms from amateurs dance covers of videos to commercial videos on YouTube, popularized dance fads on social media platforms such as Vine, Instagram, and TikTok (p. 283). During the COVID-19 pandemic, restrictions on movement and requirements for social distancing have triggered an almost total shift to digital creation, collaboration, teaching, and promotion. The cyber salsa community was not new to these dynamics, as it developed for at least two decades 'through the logic of hyperlink rather than the geography of a city and its history of migration' (McMains, 2015, p. 293). The difference lay in the fact that now the networks of salseros from different nations were completely deprived of the possibility of physical interaction, central to the modern salsa industry, through its congresses and festivals which bring together thousands of participants each year. Video recordings, marginal at such events, and usually restricted to the final part of a class, as the instructor went through the entire material once again in a sequence of a few minutes, were now taking centre stage.

Instructors and participants in dance classes faced new difficulties in the teaching process, although most classes tried to maintain the typical structure of a dance lesson in a school or a studio: warm-up, isolations of the different body parts, a short sequence of usually basic steps danced first to the counting of the beats done by the

instructor, then to music, and finally a series of figures that would form a short choreography repeated for a few times at the end of the class. In most cases, the only communication channel between instructor and participants was the comments section, rendering the learning process more difficult, since writing a comment while executing a series of steps was not an easy task. Confusion over the reversed image in videos dominated especially among beginners, who were used to the reverse movement typical of a dance lesson in presence. Finally, the delays in music and copyright issues rendered the synchronicity between body movement and musical sequence at times impossible, either due to delays or to Facebook's copyright infringement policy – as most classes remained recorded and online for 24 to 48 hours, parts of the recording (containing music for which the dance instructor did not have the right) would simply be automatically silenced.

In the teaching process, responsibility for movement quality, rhythm, and correct execution of a particular sequence shifted almost entirely to the person dancing. The lack of visual communication between instructors and participants in the lesson made it impossible for instructors to observe the learning process of the steps and figures and whether participants were indeed keeping up with the sequences and choreographies taught. Indications were not codified and seemingly not difficult to understand – for example, even when figures were described by their names, they were also accompanied by a description of the actual movement, the steps, and how they were counted to the rhythm. However, these verbal cues were puzzling in other aspects: indications such as 'work within your own range of motion' (when teaching hip or shoulder movements), 'let the movement be natural' (usually accompanied by a digression about what 'feels natural' to a Cuban body as opposed to a European body, an aspect I shall return to in the last section of this article), 'shift your body weight entirely', 'relax and release all tensions from the body', 'dance from the heart' turned out to be challenging particularly in the case of participants without a lot of previous dancing experience.

Given the fact that the majority of people who participated in these dance classes did so from home⁴, the main difficulty they claimed to have encountered was the lack of mirrors. Even absolute beginners assumed that being able to see their image reflected

⁴ Professional dancers or people with access to dance studios did not dance exclusively from home.

in a mirror, as opposed to just following the movements of the instructor on screen, would help identify and correct potential mistakes.

I caught myself doing the same. One evening, halfway through my first online dance lesson I instinctively turned toward the window. What was I expecting to see in the square frame that reflected my upper body, piles of books, and the desk where I spent long hours during the day writing my dissertation?

All those years spent dancing in Havana I convinced myself I could ‘feel it’ and that my body awareness, my familiarity with the rhythms and with the dance steps would allow me to participate in class and even enjoy myself without the facilities of the dance school or studio. Had I not done so every time I travelled to Havana for fieldwork? Had I not danced without a mirror? Moreover, had I not taken my first salsa lessons in a domestic setting, back in the days when dance studios were not so common?

I first travelled to Cuba in 2011, when the country was still in the era of dial-up internet, long before the days of Facebook and Airbnb reservations. On one of the few fully functional, error-free sites that allowed searching for private accommodation⁵ I found the description of a house in Old Havana along with a picture of the host family. Enthusiastic reviews on TripAdvisor mentioned lessons taking place in the living room and described Ernesto, the hosts’ son, as ‘the best salsa dancer in Havana’. It was a detail significant enough to matter when I made the first reservation. Shortly upon arrival, I was dancing with Ernesto in that living room on an almost daily basis. Not only did we not have mirrors, we also did not have the privacy that I expected during a dance lesson. We would usually start by moving the furniture around, so as to have more space and to avoid accidentally knocking over any of the colourful trinkets and framed family photos Ernesto’s mother kept on display in the living room. By the end of the lesson, it was quite common for other family members to gather around and watch us dance, while at the same time giving indications or commenting on our (my) dancing and the progress I was making. Friends and neighbours stopped by to chat, and sometimes Ernesto would interrupt the lesson and dance with whoever happened to be standing in the doorframe, in order to give me a better idea about a new step or a combination. At first, it was a rather uncomfortable experience for someone used to

⁵ *Casa particular* is a type of private accommodation or private homestay, similar to a bed-and-breakfast, and an alternative to hotels, which are state-owned.

train individually with a teacher, behind closed doors, in the organized setting of a dance studio

Having grown accustomed to such interruptions and interactions over the years, why was I so bothered when during my online dance lessons my partner interrupted me? Why was it such a nuisance to be asked to join a video call for a few seconds before going back to my dancing? And why did our domestic space feel less appropriate than the living rooms in Havana? I was tempted to find the explanation in our daily routines, in the transformation of our domestic space during lockdowns and how it was fundamentally different from my Cuban experience of the domestic space. But there was more to it, in my insistence to keep the door shut, to change my shoes before I danced, to put my phone aside, and in the way my eyes and my body sought after the mirror. My ‘homebody’, defined by L. Archer Porter (2021) as ‘the product of the dialectical relation between the *habitat* and the *habitus*’ (p. 15) was exploring new, unfamiliar, uncharted territories in an attempt to reify the familiar ones. It soon became clear that those distant memories of my early dancing days in Havana were just that – distant memories.

My dance practice had moved from living rooms, rooftops, and street corners to the organized, curated and choreographed space of the dance school. And one of the earliest indicators of the institutionalization and professionalization of dance teaching aimed at international tourists were the mirrors. By 2016, my dance lessons in Havana started to resemble more and more the lessons I was used to taking in Europe: I was making online appointments on the schools’ websites, my teachers carried business cards and wore t-shirts with the school name and logo, they discussed their methodology with me before starting the class, made sure I stretched before and after class, offered me discounts after a certain number of lessons, invited me to try out other dance styles, and reminded me to write a positive review on Trip Advisor, Airbnb and Google Maps. And most importantly, they would always reassure me that I was in a ‘professional’ dance school, an argument in this respect being the presence of the mirrors.

While I found them helpful in my practice, my teachers seemed to either ignore them or, at best, used them only during the first part of the lesson, for warm-up and a short revision of the basic steps. Central to the school’s identification as professional, the mirror remained marginal in the teaching process, fulfilling a function that was external to Cuban dance pedagogies but at the core of newly acquired marketing

strategies dictated by the international dance market. Ricardo, one of my dance teachers, insisted that the mirror did not even belong in the world of Cuban popular dance:

When I studied and later trained as a professional dancer, we never used mirrors. The dance that uses the mirror the most, in order to perfect movements, is ballet. But in most occasions the mirror brings nothing good, because when you are in front of the mirror you are not focused on your body. So it ultimately creates a vice: you are looking into the mirror instead of looking inside yourself. (Personal communication, April 11, 2016).

His colleague, Pascual, went on to explain that while mirrors could in fact be helpful they are not always necessary, since ‘the teacher is your mirror, your reference point’ (personal communication, April 19, 2016). This reference was lost during online dance lessons, as the dancing body on the screen would provide no substantial feedback or interaction with the dancing homebody. As Sarah Town (2020) notes, ‘Zoom bodies are fragmented, two-dimensional, and out of proportion. The angles are strange and disorienting’ (p. 104). To render the experience as complete as I possibly could, I relied on imagination and the affective memories of my body, recalling the genuine and reciprocal relations that were at the core of my practice for many years (see also Le Lay, 2021 for a similar point on the centrality of relations for culturally relevant pedagogical philosophy).

Copyrighting the commodified self

Before the pandemic, one of the most powerful narratives that characterized the Cuban dance scene was that ‘real dance’ can only be found at the source. Cubans would return to the island to reconnect with their ‘roots’ while dancing tourists ritually travelled to Cuba in order to bring back to their home countries (and dancing communities) ‘the move of the year’, ‘the song of the year’, new trends and new layers of knowledge that would ultimately serve to legitimize their skill level in front of the other members of the salsa community. Thus, the perceived authenticity of the practice is transferred, through the body of the dancer, to the organized, sanitized context of the salsa class. The pandemic brought this quest for ‘authentic movement’ to a sharp end and forced Cuban dancers to take a crash course in new technologies, that up until a

few years ago were far from being part of Cuban daily realities⁶. In what follows, I analyse the intersections of dance pedagogies, promotion strategies, and discourses about the authenticity of Cuban dance forms, deeply rooted in the idea of travel, presence, and participation.

While the experience of the online dance lesson required a certain work of imagination to compensate for the ‘disembodied intimacy’ (Town, 2020) of the screen, I took comfort in knowing I had at least one other day after the lesson to access the recording and go through the material at my own pace. All the six modules of a Ladies’ Styling Classes I ‘attended’ during the spring of 2021, including detailed instruction videos about arm and hip movement, musicality, style and expressivity in solo and couple dance, are still available online, easy to access and repeat as a full course or simply as fragmentary knowledge on specific movements and sequences.

A new situation for me, born out of the particular context of the pandemic and the restrictions that came with it, reminded me of what seemed to be a rather common experience for my Cuban interlocutors, even during the days of my first research trips. Back in 2016 I broke my salsa routine for one day and signed up for a tango lesson. Jorge, my teacher, explained that he had chosen to teach tango because ‘everyone is a salsa teacher in Havana now’ and so he started watching tango videos and learning from old recordings. A few years into his tango practice he discovered kizomba and felt strongly attracted to the dance, so he started learning in the same way. While he did take a few tango lessons with instructors from Argentina who travelled to Cuba, he took pride in having taught himself kizomba solely through the use of videos. When he showed me a video of a kizomba performance he had done recently with his partner in one of Havana’s popular salsa venues, I complimented him and asked if he could transfer it to my phone. I had recently discovered Zapyra, an app Cubans used frequently at the time to transfer files of any size and format without an Internet connection. But it seemed that I was using it mostly to exchange pictures with other tourists. Jorge explained he didn’t want his videos circulating: ‘I like to show these videos, but I don’t want them on Facebook or anywhere on the Internet. Imagine if people from Europe

⁶ This is due to the fact that Cuba has one of the lowest Internet access rates in the Western hemisphere (Henken, 2017), with costs so high that these services are rendered unaffordable for large parts of the population. In addition, it was only in late 2018 that a 3G data service was rolled out for cell phones, but it remained prohibitively expensive.

see them, learn from them, they won't come to Cuba anymore to take lessons' (personal communication, April 5, 2016). I could not imagine that, but I could feel his concern and that of his fellow dancers. A common narrative among my research participants was glorifying family traditions and the 'seeing and learning' method, building their life story around the figure of a family member who was particularly skilled at dancing. These personal narratives reinforced one of the most common tropes that circulated in touristic settings, which naturalize ideas about racialized, gendered, and sexualized bodies (McMains, 2013), like the assumptions that Cubans are good dancers because they have it 'in their blood'.

On the other hand, in their attempt to keep up with market demands and develop their business, dance school owners would often express different points of view. Such was the case of Sofia, who insisted on the importance of promotion in social media long before the Internet became somewhat more available in Cuba:

We talked about videos [with the dance teachers] that we need to put on YouTube. And they were telling me look, if the people in Germany can see salsa classes on the internet, they will no longer come to Cuba, because they can learn this on YouTube. I explained that if other schools have videos on the internet, but we don't, people will go to take classes there when they come to Cuba. (Personal communication, April 4, 2016).

Others, like Mireya, saw in the use of videos another potential tool for developing her business and her own practice, allowing for new creative solutions to distinguish her business from that of other dance schools:

Once I had a student who would come to classes during the day and go out to parties at night, he would make videos and come back the next day, saying 'I want to learn this', so I had to look for a teacher, who'd study the video, figure out what figures were in it, and then teach it, and it took a lot of time to create what he wanted. Even though there are so many figures in salsa that we teach here in the school, this was about mixing things, creating something new. (Personal communication, April 11, 2016).

Two aspects come forth in these approaches: innovation and creativity, central to maintaining the business, are intimately tied to the imaginaries related to 'dances in the street', perpetuated by international media and the tourism industry, while at the same time indicating the tensions that come forth in matters of ownership of social and popular dances.

Whether taught in a studio or online, the main feature of the lesson, repeatedly emphasized by teachers, is to induce a good mood and allow participants to have fun.

Dance lessons capture the essence of the dance in a series of decontextualized movements, much like in touristic settings souvenirs function as ‘selective templates’ (Benson, 2004, p. 27), reducing the places they represent to a series of decontextualized moments. The main goal of dance classes taught in Havana’s salsa schools was, in the words of many of my research participants, ‘to give a feeling of what Cuban culture is’. Online dance lessons built upon this, and dance instructors made it their mission to keep spirits high and help build a community around the shared experience of dancing.

Widely circulating imaginaries about ‘Cubans dancing in the streets’, of joyful, spontaneous dances that begin on street corners for no apparent reason, made the street a key element of touristic representations of Cuba. The street became central to instructors and dancers as a source of inspiration, as essence of ‘Cubanness’, but marginal, even menacing to the business of teaching dance. The ‘unmediated’ street is generally deemed undesirable, although it was constantly acknowledged as the source of all social dances tourists are usually interested in, and a source of inspiration for dancers and dance teachers alike. But for the street to become part of the experience offered by dance schools, knowledge has to be extracted and rendered unique through recognition, in a process of strategic separation from the environment (see also Brighenti, 2017). It was this kind of knowledge dance teachers were trying to preserve and to avoid it being distributed through channels that up until a few years ago were available to tourists, but not to Cubans themselves.

Their reluctance speaks of a rarely touched upon issue, especially in the context of the pedagogical element of dance teaching: the racial dynamics of authorship and appropriation in dance. As a popular dance form, Cuban casino has its set of recognizable steps and figures, and its circulation across bodies is integral to its existence. However, as Anthea Kraut (2016) argues in her study of black dance forms and their ownership, exchanges and borrowings rarely occur on equal grounds: ‘questions of who possesses the rights to which movement, or who is authorized to borrow from whom, and who profits from the circulation of dance are all entangled in the legacies of racial injustice’ (p. 5). It is (mostly) white European and North American dancers who take up space as central dancing figures in this exchange, co-creating the cultural script that fetishizes Cuban black bodies, especially in settings such as salsa schools or popular dance venues. Ownership on the side of the dancers became important precisely because tourists started building their own narratives around issues of competence, skill, as well as the international recognition of their dance instructors. Cubans’ strategies to monetize their creative labours and lay claim

to them come forth as part of the transnational move of dance forms, as complex kinetic cultures are reduced to products apt for consumption. The breaking down of a social dance into simplified sequences adapted to an accelerated embodiment process is a defining feature of classes offered (in presence or online) by dance schools. Their very existence is predicated on the fact that people are willing to learn in ways other than (or at times complementary to) direct socialization in the original context.

The reproduction of personal and cultural intimacy is at the core of the dance business, as dancers professionalize their art and dances become globally reproduceable, objectified, and commodified. Within the new contexts of labor relations in Cuba, the emergence of small businesses centred on dance revealed new work practices and a complicated relation between leisure and labor, as both were associated with a type of bodily practice commonly perceived as entertainment and reduced to an aesthetic function. As part of new models of entrepreneurship, dancers began to internalize notions designed for the marketing of commodities, inscribed in the economic logic of Cuba's neoliberal turn (Perry, 2016). Cuban dancers repeatedly emphasized the regulatory mechanisms of the market, which could establish and confirm one as a professional.

Being able to offer a variety of classes as to ensure client satisfaction, a coherent methodology and efficient promotional strategies were the main features of a successful business in the eyes of my research participants. Many found themselves in a situation where they had to learn new skills almost overnight, as their digital presence started impacting their business. Their activities, inscribed into the 'digital reputation economy' (Hearn, 2010), further blurred the lines between professional and private lives, pushing them into self-management and self-promotion around the clock. The pandemic only deepened the inequalities that stem from digital competence access to resources. The few schools which managed to navigate the new realities and stay in business by staying online updated their offers to include dance forms that came to be taught for the first time online (not previously included in the school's standard offer). At the same time, they made sure to keep their loyal clients close, which translated to an increased availability of Cuban Ladies' Styling classes, as I discuss in the following section.

Ladies' styling and communities of care

The new contexts of social dance during the pandemic meant that spatial and kinaesthetic awareness changed, and so did sensory perceptions – the experience was no longer shared in a physical space, but that did not deprive participants of collective, corporeal knowledge. In this section I discuss how moving alone, yet with others, and sharing the experience from the distance, allowed new performances of collective identities to emerge, from the intense embodied memories of pre-pandemic times (Parfitt, 2021).

Developments in Cuban tourism over the past decades and the increased demand for music and dance lessons on the island have set the grounds for the emergence of a new type of activities: first, ‘styling lessons’ (classes taught usually to women in order to improve their dancing, enriching it with decorative elements) were included in the offers of most dance schools on the island. In recent years, such lessons began to be included in workshops and ‘self-development’ programs aimed at women, who were being promised they would learn to embody ‘Cuban femininity’ by trying to emulate traits believed to be specific of Cuban women and re-enacting experiences that belong to their everyday lives. While prevailing Western descriptions of Cuban women tend to idealize an assumed freedom from the effects of global neoliberalism, by also highlighting the over-sexualization and commodification of the female body in Cuba, local definitions and ideals of beauty challenge these perceptions and reveal complicated and contradictory approaches to body image and ideals of beauty (Ana, 2019).

The female dancing body became central to these personal-development programs, in a world of presumed freedom and tolerance around the body. Aimed primarily at women (who are more involved than men in the Cuban salsa scene) these programs operate with an idealized pattern of gendered behaviour, depicting a type of femininity to be treated as a source of inspiration. Dance programs hold the promise of transformation and Western notions of self-development and personal growth are intertwined with imagined and desired local notions of sensuality and hypersexuality.

Bodies are conceived as spaces of transformation, which leaves nothing untouched – from clothing to ways of walking, looking, touching, and dancing. Attributes of a broader idea of ‘Cubanness’ (seduction, playfulness, sensuality) are framed as desirable skills that need to be enhanced, rooted in the neoliberal idea(l)s of ‘self-discovery’ or ‘self-building’ which one should constantly undergo in order to realize one’s full potential. This entails a strong belief in one’s capacity to develop self-

esteem, self-love, build meaningful relationships and become more confident. The lack of such qualities is usually attributed to external factors pertaining to the ‘developments of the Western world’ and presumably, can be fought back through immersion in Cuban culture. Such beliefs are deeply connected with the idea that it is possible to seek and find ‘meaning’, ‘authenticity’, ‘truth’ through practices related to embodiment and performance of Cuban dance – which stops being a purpose in itself, but a tool towards self-discovery, ultimately leading to increased satisfaction and a sense of being content, comfortable with one’s ‘true self’ or ‘true nature’.

The same holds true classes that came to be known as ‘Cuban Salsa Solo’ or ‘Ladies’ Styling’, which both offline and online become a pretext to talk about Cuban femininity, reduced to a few elements. Certain ways of moving, which Cuban women are believed to be ‘born with’, become the main teaching objectives during these classes. Being ‘*suave*’ (soft) is considered one of the most important achievements that can improve not just a woman’s way of dancing, but her posture and elegance: it is a way of moving which eliminates tensions from the body and from the couple, is reactive and responsive to the lead, soft but controlled, in a state of permanent preparedness but not stiff. More than figures, combinations, rhythm, or musicality, this was considered one of the most difficult things to teach.

‘Styling lessons’ usually come to complete dance lessons with a male partner, in order to make the movement look more ‘natural’, more ‘fluid’, to give it ‘Cuban flavour’, as explained by the women I met during various stages of my research. In Cuba, most of them were spending a few weeks (in some cases a few months) perfecting their dance technique and would occasionally take one or two ‘styling lessons’ to learn how to move their arms, shoulders, and hips, or how to improvise during moments of solo dancing. In European salsa schools, these lessons were either the entry point for the world of salsa dancing, especially for those women who did not feel confident enough to take up couple dancing, or a way for women already familiar with couple dancing to work on their personal style.

The pandemic weighed particularly heavy on women, who had to adapt their daily routines so as to accommodate remote work, care work, their personal needs and those of their immediate and extended families, leaving little time for leisure activities. Building upon observations of societies that normalize partnership and childbearing (Chasteen 1994) scholars in the field of leisure studies have argued that women in relationships have either to negotiate their leisure time with their partner (also a

reflection of pre-pandemic situations), while single women had to face the strengthened prevalent assumption that ‘single women do not have inhibitory constraints on their leisure’ (Giles and Oncescu, 2021: 206).

The case of Anna, a Cuban dance instructor from Poland, is telling in this respect. As a single mother, she was at the same time the sole provider for herself and her son, concerned about his safety and health, in charge of helping him with home-schooling, and a passionate dancer for whom Cuban salsa was ‘her happy place’. She did not venture right away into online teaching, in fact, it was only a few months after the first lockdown that she decided to go live every night a few times a week, mainly for the sake of her loyal clients who insisted she took this step. Her decision stemmed not just from the financial interest and the observation that there was in fact a market for her classes, but also from a sense of solidarity with the women who had been dancing with her before the pandemic. As Sarah Town (2021) notes, such initiatives of professional artists and teacher speak as much about their marginality and their need to be seen, heard and paid, as they do about a certain spiritual mission.

Anna saw these classes primarily as ‘time for herself’, where her body could reconnect with the rhythm of Cuban music, as part of a communal experience. Along with teaching, she started taking online lessons with some of her teachers from Havana, an option she did not have before the pandemic, which gave her the possibility to stay in touch with people she cared for and to help them financially just like the women in her dance group were helping her. A community of care (Toffoletti et al., 2021) formed around these classes she had resisted for so long. She adapted her schedule and the planning of future classes to the needs of the women in her Cuban Ladies’ Styling Facebook group, who seemed to prefer late evening hours, after their children had gone to bed. When during one lesson Anna said children, partners, and pets were welcome to join, one of the participants made it clear that the salsa lesson was ‘mommy time’, and she intended to keep everyone out of it for as long as she could.

Limited as time was for many women attending these classes, a subtle shift did happen compared to offline classes. Few women could afford dance lessons in Havana for three months in a row. Yet a few hundred could attend the online dance program. Since the teaching process was no longer under the pressure of time, the experience turned out to be far more enriching. Movements could be broken down and remained available in the group for everyone to consult, old videos were shared with the more than one hundred women participating in the program, as to provide a comparative

context for the most popular Cuban dance genres, dance parties and dance challenges took place on Zoom, along with live sessions and practice sessions. Women were encouraged to share videos documenting their progress as the course advanced, and although the issue of shame did come up in a few instances as videos were shared, the reactions from the group were overwhelmingly positive, supportive and encouraging. The comfort of home, the safe space where dancing bodies were sheltered from the gaze of other participants, the availability of recorded materials and the ability to study at one's pace made for little, yet not insignificant compensation in times when the entire dance community was coping with its sense of collective loss.

Conclusions

The Cuban dance community responded to the challenges of the pandemic with the same adaptive resilience that allowed it to navigate uncertain times over the past decades. Transition to online dancing proved particularly challenging for Cuban dancers who were still living in Cuba at the time dance schools were closed. The new contexts of dancing and teaching brought about new behaviours, new ways of experiencing dance, community, and sharing information. Although in a precarious condition, as their livelihoods depend almost exclusively on classes, they took to social media in order to maintain their visibility and some source of income, uncertain as it may have been. The routines and rituals that emerged around dance were rooted in pre-existing patterns that at times deepened already severe inequalities, but at times allowed for new models of solidarity and collaboration to manifest.

Before the pandemic, dance stood out as an expression of the rich and diverse Cuban cultural heritage, disseminated in the entire world as an epitome of Cubanness. Transformed into a cultural commodity, its complexity was broken down into fragments that could be taught fast, reduced to a recognizable set of figures and combinations. As the practice moved online, it transformed previous routines and pedagogies, while remaining deeply rooted in the same mechanisms that allowed for the emergence of a Cuban dance market in the first place. These shifting methodologies of Cuban dance constituted yet another response to market demands, shedding light on the centrality of innovation and international recognition as part of the broader strategies for monetizing creative (dance) labour.

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