The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in *Identities. Global Studies in Culture and Power.* https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2025.2463767

Modes of embodiment: exercising agency through Afro-Cuban dance

Abstract:

This article discusses Afro-Cuban dance and its agentive powers in the global dance business, characterized on the one hand by the public's appetite for novelty and exoticism and on the other hand by performers' precarity and uncertainty. Cuban dancers formulate understandings of dance-as-labor and dance-as-education, as counterpoints to the dominant frame of dance-as-entertainment functioning in the European countries where they live and work. As dancers reimagine Afro-Cuban dance in diasporic contexts, they challenge Eurocentric pedagogical models, exercising their agency vis-à-vis aesthetic shifts and codification patterns, while centring African roots of music and dance as a response to daily experiences of racism.

Keywords: Cuba, salsa, Afro-Cuban dance, dance labor, dance education

Word count: 7785

Introduction

In June 2023, one of Europe's leading centres for contemporary non-European arts, Haus der Kulturen der Welt (House of World Cultures) in Berlin re-opened its doors with the exhibition project *O Quilombismo: Of Resisting and Insisting. Of Flight as Fight. Of Other Democratic Egalitarian Political Philosophies*, aimed at reimagining cultural and political resistance through emancipation projects. One of the installations in the exhibition, *Table of Goods* by Portuguese visual artist Grada Kilomba consisted of a pyramid of soil surrounded by candles, indented with notches filled with coffee, sugar, and cocoa, to symbolize the violence that facilitates modern pleasures, and serving as a metaphor for trauma and the colonial wound. Shortly after the opening, one of my long-term research participants[1], Alvaro, sent me a series of pictures and videos on WhatsApp, enthusiastic about the installation which he found to be reminiscent of certain representations in *Regla de Ocha*, the Yoruba syncretic religion practised widely in Cuba. Our exchanges about the exhibition resonated with our on-going conversations about the fetishization of Black and Brown bodies as part of broader processes of commodification of Cuban music and dance on the island and in European contexts. Alvaro has spent over a decade in the German capital, working on artistic forms that merge performance, pedagogy, music, and dance spirituality while centring the African roots of Cuban cultural practices. Aside teaching dance and percussion classes during festivals or in collaborations with different dance schools, Alvaro founded an educational project focused on the emancipatory potential of Cuban music and dance and their ability to generate reflections and reactions to social unrest. Rooted in the experience of everyday life as an immigrant, his performances as well as his educational projects in the fields of music and dance deal with identity and belonging inscribed in the (dancing) body, showcasing the challenges and the intolerance experienced in a state of suspension between two nation states.

[1] We first met in 2015 during a festival dedicated to Cuban culture in Berlin, and he was one of my main research participants for the ethnographic project that constitutes the base for the present study (conducted from 2021 to 2024).

Our conversations inevitably touched upon the experience of racial discrimination in Berlin and the German desire and occasional positive valorisation of Blackness, almost unequivocally connotated negatively in Cuba. His stories resonated with those of Jorge, a dancer in his early twenties whose career in Rome was at a promising beginning at the time of my research in 2022-2023:

> In Cuba I used to have Black female friends who only wanted to date white guys, no matter how ugly, how old, or how fat – they call it *adelantar la raza*[2], but why would my race need to be changed? 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. It's good to be Black when you are dancing, because it is the only time when you are treated better. But they never ask about you, about your life, your problems, you are treated like an object, just for dance, and all that time you think how to send money to Cuba (personal communication, Rome, 2022).

In what follows, I analyse the manifold manifestations of Afro-Cuban dance and its agentive powers in the global dance business, which is characterized on the one hand by the public's voracious appetite for novelty and exoticism and on the other hand by performers' ever-growing precarity and uncertainty. I discuss how Cuban dancers who live and work abroad draw from the legacy of the educational model in the field of dance established after the Revolution of 1959 and argue that such heritage allows them to formulate and put forward understandings of dance-as-labor and dance-as-education which constitute counterpoints to the dominant frames of dance-as-entertainment and dance-as-leisure which function in the European contexts I analyse.

As dancers reimagine Afro-Cuban dance in a diasporic context, they challenge Eurocentric pedagogical models and exercise their agency vis-à-vis aesthetic shifts and codification patterns, while centring African roots of music and dance as a response to the daily experiences of racism in European contexts. In doing so, they deconstruct a European model that devalues the so-called 'ethnic dances' of Black and Brown bodies or only values them as entertainment, and not as a source of knowledge. The first part of the article contextualizes Afro-Cuban diasporic dance and asks in which ways do Cubans reclaim agency within music and dance styles that have been reinterpreted and commercialized around the world? I then move on to discuss how this embodied knowledge, rooted in the broader project at the core of the Cuban revolution, challenges certain educational models disseminated in European dance schools that teach broadly framed 'Latin American and Caribbean social dance'. Next, I discuss how the new socio-cultural and economic contexts of dance shift positions of knowledge control as embodied knowledge becomes commodified. Finally, I suggest some possible answers to the broader question about the transformative capacities of the dancing body on a global dance market characterized by an underlying epistemological tension of Black dance (and Black and Brown bodies) being controlled, dominated, and exoticized. Throughout this article I follow Susan Manning in employing the term 'Blackness' to refer to the 'social and artistic meanings that adhere to dancing bodies that can be read as marked by the culture and history of Africans in the New World, and Whiteness as a social and artistic privilege that adheres to dancing bodies that can be read as racially unmarked, the legitimizing norm against which bodies of colour take their meanings' (2004, XV).

[2] Literally translated from Spanish as 'to improve the race', indicating the diffusion of racial stereotypes in everyday language in Cuba (for an in-depth analysis of discriminatory discursive practices in Cuba see Pérez Pérez 2019).

My case study is based on multi-sited ethnographic research conducted among Cuban professional dancers in Rome, Berlin, and Havana between 2021 and 2023, as part of a project that addresses and dance labor in touristic and migratory settings against the permanentized economic and social crisis ongoing in Cuba[3]. At the core of my project was participant observation in different dance worlds and immersion into the daily lives, training programs, creative struggles, and the challenges encountered by my research participants as they were defining their career paths and life projects in a migratory context. My attempts to understand how dancers navigate uncertainty, precarity, and multiple belongings is informed by fieldwork I conducted in Havana over the past decade, in the course of over fifteen research trips that lasted from between one and eight months, looking into the emergence of a transnational salsa scene and the extraction and commodification of artistic and embodied labor. The European salsa scene, as I discuss in this article, provides Cuban migrants with an opportunity to access the labor market by employing their bodily skills along with their symbolic and cultural capital. Cuban adaptations to global dance commerce are deeply rooted in legacies of dance education and dance work in Cuba under precarious conditions, and although the dance business may appear to create spaces for difference and inclusion, dancers often find themselves limited by rigid institutional settings, pushed into constant self-actualization and expansion of movement vocabularies as a result of increasing dance consumerism. Over the years, my experience as a dancer along with assumptions about memories of socialism in Europe, my 'peripheral whiteness' (Safuta 2018), my fluency in Spanish and my general knowledge of the Cuban context created a common ground with many of my Cuban research participants. In addition, our migratory background and precarious employment (one of the few points of intersection of neoliberal academia and the global salsa market, see also Fanoli 2023) created new, unexpected bridges and solidarities.

Collective bodily knowledge and educational work on the global dance market

My analysis of Afro-Cuban dance in its diasporic contexts is informed by critical dance pedagogies (Cruz Banks 2010) and by epistemologies of African indigenous dances, as epitomes of social and community knowledge (Ssebulime 2022). I conceptualize dance as a cultural lens for reading the social world, and Afro-Cuban dance in particular as a type of educational work that is aimed at reclaiming the knowledge, emotional and spiritual experiences embedded in dance. Based on my ethnographic material, I employ the term 'Afro-Cuban dance' broadly, aligned with the emic perspective of dancers and dance teachers in Cuba and abroad, to refer to theatrical, staged versions of ritual dances, such as those associated with *Regla de Ocha*, as well as social and popular dances like rumba, a hybrid practice influenced by Spanish and Central/West African traditions, brought together into a form that was brand new and described entirely as Cuban (Daniel 1995).

The collective bodily knowledge embedded in Afro-Cuban dance, music, and religious practices underwent several transformations as part of processes of institutionalization and transmission in Cuba and abroad. The institutionalization of Afro-Cuban practices was part of the government's attempt to erase racial inequalities after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, in line with the concept of a raceless society, which stood behind revolutionary ideology. As I discuss in the following sections of this article, the new collective body that reemerges in a diasporic context preserves not just traditions, but a way of dealing with traditions and transmission. Although the questions around authenticity remain central to certain groups of practitioners and become legitimizing tools in in light of constantly changing

[3] Interviews with Cuban dancers and dance teachers were conducted in Spanish. I wrote fieldnotes and diary entries in either English, Spanish, or Romanian, the choice influenced by topic, urgency, and my emotional state at the time of writing. All translations in the article are mine.

hierarchies of popularity and power on the international salsa scene, for many of my research participants, aware and critical of these dynamics of social differentiation, the questions to be asked are not who is allowed to perform or who 'owns' the dance, but rather how can a broader cultural practice be communicated outside of its original context.

In her analysis of dance and music behaviours in African derived religious systems of the Americas, Yvonne Daniel (2005) argues that dance performances and music making are primary vehicles for transmitting a type of 'embodied knowledge' understood as theoretical, emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual information embedded in dance. Embodied knowledge within the dancing and drumming body attends to memory, perseverance, inspires and supports survival and feeds into the physical and social body. In this way, dance mobilizes identities based on cultural difference and as discussed by Thomas DeFrantz (2004), offers an antiessentialist picture of cultures and dances of African origin. Dance decolonizes the body by asserting nondominant ways of being, experiencing, and feeling, and re-envisioning spiritual and secular life.

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 kinesthetic cultures are reduced to products apt for consumption. Modes of transmission of embodied knowledge are influenced by the fact that these exchanges happen for profit (as opposed to training to be a professional dancer in Cuba) and so the focus shifts to dance aesthetics and less to embedded knowledge. Subsequently, music and dance are often treated as separate elements in training, as the focus is on acquiring the kinaesthetic skills, but in fact, these are not separate elements in performance.

In Cuba, these processes are related to a great extent to the presence of dance in tourist venues, considered beneficial not only because of the financial opportunities it provides, but also because it reinforces the importance of dance for the community and draws international attention to valued and valuable manifestations of Cuban culture. Cuban heritage regimes come forth within the framework of state socialism, but they did not remain untouched by neoliberal logic which led market ideologies to dominate the sphere of heritage management. Although the dance market remains dominated by salsa[4], many dance aficionados perceive the genre as a highly commercial one and turn their attention to rumba and Afro-Cuban folkloric dances. Over the decades, drawing upon Afro-Cuban popular culture, Cuban performers challenged racial and class prejudice and inequalities on stage, while advocating for racial justice off stage (Schwall 2021). However, as they are disseminated to broader audiences, these practices are often embraced solely as aesthetic practices, and their racial and social contexts remain widely unacknowledged.

Afro-Cuban movement practices developed from the perspective of politically integrated practices, grounded in the neighbourhoods, shaped by everyday realities. Cuban ethnographer Tato Quiñones explained this as following:

> In the beginning, rumba was a folkloric fact (*hecho folklorico*) that appeared in a spontaneous manner, done by the people in the street. They would gather in a *solar* (tenement building), on street corners, in someone's house, and there were clear aesthetic and ethical rules that defined it. Then it started gaining other spaces, so you can go see a performance on stage (*proyección escénica*), and so professional and semi-professional groups appeared, that is how the dance got professionalized (personal communication, Havana, 2014).

[4] Throughout this article I follow my research participants in their use of terms salsa or Cuban-style salsa as dictated by the conventions of the global dance market. The word 'casino', which designates a popular dance form developed in Cuba in the second half of the twentieth century (Carbonero 2006) and market abroad as Cuban-style salsa is used less frequently.

Dance and music behaviours in African derived religious systems of the Americas challenge the notion of hierarchical types of knowledge, attend to memory and perseverance, and retell myths and cultural stories (Daniel 2005, 5). Divinities receive dance and music offerings along with food and beverage offerings, they come to dance with the community, inspiring and supporting the survival of the dancing and drumming body. Outside of the original context, deconstruction replaces imitation, intuition, improvisation. The breaking down of a social dance into simplified sequences adapted to an accelerated embodiment process is a defining feature of the classes offered to international audiences in Cuba, as well as during workshops, classes and festivals in Europe, whether online or in the studio.

The first time I travelled to Cuba in 2011, having no previous experience with Cuban dance but having been trained in social ballroom dancing and LA style salsa, I was quickly confronted with the limits of the teaching system in which I functioned as an amateur dancer. As I was waiting for my teacher to come back from running her errands, her eight-year-old grandson offered to start the lesson for her. While I was changing into my training clothes, he took my camera and indicated a shrine with votive offerings, dedicated to one of the Santería deities. He took a picture of me next to the shrine, explained the role and characteristics of that particular deity (*orisha* in Spanish), and then moved on to give me a complete tour of all the other shrines in the house, complete with pictures and detailed explanations. When we finished, he told me: 'Now you know about religion, you are ready to learn how to dance'. He placed a drum in front of me and asked me to play a rumba, so that he could demonstrate the steps. I told him I didn't know how to play the drums, which judging by the look on his face must have been very puzzling. He came up with a solution quickly and told me we could still learn the dance without the drums, as long as I sang a rumba he could dance to, then he would sing, and I would dance. Slightly embarrassed by now, I had to admit to not being able to sing. Somewhat exasperated, but not willing to give up on me, he put on a CD, and we danced a few steps before his grandmother walked in. 'How come this girl can dance but she cannot play nor sing a rumba?' he asked. 'She's European', his grandmother replied. 'She's a good dancer and she learns fast, but she's not Cuban'.

I was no stranger to one of tourism industry's favourite stereotypes, occasionally repeated by Cubans as they rubbed two fingers on their forearm to indicate skin colour: having music and dance in the blood. But in this case, she also meant something else: because I was not Cuban, I had not been exposed to an education system that valued music and dance education, not just in schools and universities, but also through community projects, *casas de la cultura*, theatres, concert halls and performance venues. I did not have the embodied experience of diverse, multilayered cultural and spiritual practices, but only fragmented knowledge of body movements separated from their daily and ritual contexts. As I discuss in the following section, dance education played an important role in the Cuban Revolution and its legacy informs the choices made by new generations of dancers and dance teachers in Cuba and abroad.

Dance education after the Cuban Revolution

One of the first large-scale enterprises after the onset of the revolutionary government was the literacy campaign in December 1961. The same year marked the foundation of the School of Art Instructors (*(Escuela de Instructores de Arte)*, whose purpose was to 'bring the light of culture and arts into schools, factories, villages, military units' (Concepcion Alvarez, n.d.). The instructors were to cultivate new habits and tastes, working with diverse students and channelling the most talented ones into educational programmes, blending artistic democracy and meritocracy (Schwall 2021, 132). The School had its precursor in a course for art instructors held at the Cuban National Theatre, where dance-instructors-in-training

formulated early dance pedagogies, described as following by Cuban dancer and dance scholar Graciela Chao Carbonero (1988): 'They were simply repeating in the studio what they would usually do in a *rumba* or a *fiesta de santo*[5]. There was no code, no nomenclature of steps and dances, only a great desire to learn and a great desire to teach'. By training instructors in the arts, the revolutionary government aimed to disseminate knowledge among ordinary people, and ultimately create active participation by 'rescuing the talents that had been neglected through underdevelopment, social segregation, and reactionary social structures' (Kumaraswami 2009, 536). Artistic literacy was considered a fundamental component of the literacy campaign.

In 1962, the government inaugurated the National Art Schools (*Escuelas Nacionales de Artes*) specialized in four disciplines: ballet, theatre, plastic arts, and music, to which modern dance and folklore were added in 1965. Researchers in this department were the first to codify and standardize Afro-Cuban dances (Yoruba technique) and to create the curriculum for teaching students who were not practitioners of any of the Afro-Cuban religions. Through these processes of standardization, dance heritage of African roots began to be disseminated on a larger scale, and with the first generation of graduates, certain dance practices were massively presented and taught across the country. The methodology taught in these schools would constitute the basis for the methodologies developed decades later by private schools aimed at international tourists, while incorporating elements specific to the transnational salsa scene. The National Art Schools represented a unique revolutionary and cultural project, which was meant to reflect the regional specificity of Cuban culture, emphasizing its African and Spanish roots.

In the first years after the Revolution the Department of Modern Dance of the National Theatre was delegated with creating a new Cuban dance style, with an original repertory, providing the Cuban people with a representative form of artistic and cultural expression. '*Técnica cubana'* (Cuban dance technique) was developed 'intentionally, as a state-supported, multi-cultural dance form, a pluralistic representation of Cuba' (Suki 2012, 51). The intentionality of *técnica cubana*, and the government support it received before it even came into existence, illustrate the ideological dimension of the dance incorporated in the political agenda of the new government. The aim of this new technique, as described by its creator, Ramiro Guerra, was to set the grounds for a national dance movement, after a thorough investigation in the fields of history, sociology, politics, and the social and cultural characteristics of Cuba's racial mix, while reflecting Cuba's rich dance heritage (Guerra 1959). As it reflected a collective identity in motion, *técnica cubana* was different from most modern dance styles and techniques which came to be associated with their creators, perpetuating the idea of the choreographer as the author. Building on the premise that dancers from various backgrounds move in different ways, Guerra created a dance company that brought together amateur and professional dancers specialized in different techniques, from Afro-Cuban to ballet and modern dance, creating a hybrid technique 'that is tremendously athletic and expressive, a reflection of the African, Spanish, and Caribbean roots of Cuban culture within the theatrical tradition of modern dance' (Suki 2012, 51).

By the 1970s, dance became an important part of the educational project for all Cuban citizens, starting in early childhood with the study of Cuban folklore, followed in later years by Latin American forms and eventually international folklore such as Russian, Czechoslovakian, German and Scandinavian dances (Schwall 2021).

As they begin to function transnationally, Cuban dancers and dance instructors quickly become aware of the fragmented reality of the global dance market. Reina, a Berlin-based

[5] One of the central celebrations in Santería, which allows practitioners to stay in contact with the Orishas (Yoruba divine beings syncretized with Catholic saints), and include drumming, dancing, and making festive offerings (see also Brown 2003).

dancer and choreographer in her early forties, explained that one of the first things she had to deal with as she was starting her career abroad was people's failure to notice the multiplicity of dance behaviours, contexts, and manifestations, as opposed to Cuba where there is a greater variety of venues and events and dance is more present in public and private spaces. No matter how many sub-styles and fusions the international salsa scene generates, it remains a reductive environment that perpetuates the same patterns that made its existence possible in the first place: dance is consumed in schools, festivals, congresses and parties, in the absence of other venues that could incorporate dance in all its diverse manifestations. 'There is a big misunderstanding around social dance', she told me during one of our habitual long walks through the parks of Berlin, 'this is not a performance, you don't need to change your entire outfit and put on your high heels so you can dance with your friends, you are not on stage'.

Taking as a starting point an educational model provided by the institutionalization of dance under the Cuban Revolution, professional Cuban dancers in Europe have recently started setting up initiatives that centre ownership, identity, and agency. Their motivation often stems from the limitations imposed on them by the international salsa scene which at the same time requires an enormous flexibility and adaptability in designing their methodologies and pedagogies. The corporeal vocabulary shared by many of the dancers is usually reduced to a set of common elements such as footworks, floorpatterns, accents in the hips and torso, and certain figures and combinations of figures that ultimately lead to the perpetuation of similar patterns in the ways dance is produced and consumed during classes, workshops, and festivals. Moving beyond the movement vocabularies generated by international communities of practice, and which necessarily respond to certain expectations, Cuban dancers specialized in Afro-Cuban folklore organized in Europe dance companies that employ the same educational models of the companies that function in Cuba.

> Europeans tend to underrate everything that comes from the outside. There is an intrinsic Eurocentrism and a hegemonic arrogance to the way they approach dance. And this is not helped by the fact that in this country [Italy] the Dancesport Federation has already codified and developed a competitive system in Caribbean dance according to its own design, which is nothing more than a caricature of what we know as Caribbean dance' (Aymee, personal communication, Rome, 2022).

Their reaction to the standardization of Cuban dance by a regulatory body associated with competitive dance is not just an attempt to preserve a certain choreographic inheritance embodied and disseminated through dancing. It creates the venues for reaffirming African identity and an anticolonial, anti-Western stance, emphasizing the importance of learning and understanding from overlooked world wisdoms:

> '[In my methodology] I employ a critique of Western culture which I see as a culture of individualism, of selfishness, which makes it difficult for people to follow ways of knowing based on oral tradition, memory and memorizing, imitation, so these are values that need to be retaught, reintroduced in our education system so as to open new paths for knowledge' (Alvaro, personal communication, Berlin, 2023).

As I discuss in the next section, reading Afro-Cuban dance through the lens of political and symbolic restitution does not imply overlooking the economic dependencies that characterize diasporic dance on the global dance scene, as market logic still governs these projects.

From reparto to conga and afro-contemporaneo

When Reina moved to Berlin in 2023, after several years spent between Cuba and Italy, she did not have to wait long before one of the local salsa schools contacted her and proposed a collaboration. 'You know how it is, you say you are a dance teacher from Cuba, and they are ready to give your work', she told me, but also expressed her surprise at discovering that the international salsa community operates with reductive views of what dance is. 'People claim there is no dance here in Germany, they don't know their country's dance history, how can you say there is no dance in the country of Pina Bausch? Dance has so many manifestations.'

Even the broad category of Latin American and Caribbean dance proved to be more restrictive than she had expected. As a choreographer and professional modern dancer, Reina was hoping to bring parts of her repertoire to the schools that were inviting her to teach, but she understood that the role she was meant to perform (and be paid for) was that of a salsa teacher. Her artistic labor was rendered irrelevant and what was expected from her was a movement vocabulary connected to international communities of practice and that responded to certain expectations shaped by the global dance scene. Similar dynamics characterize the Cuban dance market for international tourists: dances that were commonly associated with informal learning and which did not constitute the core of dance education became the most lucrative in new tourism economies, forcing Cuban teachers to adapt to new ways of teaching and to refine their methodologies. One week before starting to teach in Berlin, Reina told me:

> They asked me to teach reparto[6], I did not even know you could teach that. But that is what they asked, and I had to come up with a method, with a structure. I have no idea how other people teach it, but I adapted my method based on what I know from our Afro contemporary lessons (personal communication, Berlin, 2023).

In Europe, the dynamics associated with 'salsa' or 'Latin' dance consumerism go back to the early 2000s, following a trend established a decade earlier in the US (McMains 2015), and salsa dance commerce came to account to one of the largest percentages of the global social dance business (McMains 2009). Since many dance aficionados perceive salsa as a highly commercial genre, their attention turns toward Afro-Cuban folklore (primarily rumba and dances of the Santería deities). A preference for these genres is often treated as a marker of experience and a legitimizing tool. Even when elements of Afro-Cuban dance function as a compensation for the perceived lack of authenticity of the salsa scene or as an attempt to diversify dancers' portfolios, they still emerge as powerful tools for dancers' affirmation of identity and belonging.

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 the nation, thus justifying with this romanticized notion of dancers the most meagre of wages. In this context, being 'professional Cubans' (Berg 2011) takes precedence over their being professional artists and the sense of duty resonates with ideas promoted for decades as part of the institutionalization and professionalization of dance in Cuba, where cultural activities were believed to render services to the homeland (Schwall 2021).

A few weeks after she started teaching in Berlin, Reina added more classes to her portfolio: Afro-Cuban contemporary dance, body movement, which allowed her to mix the various techniques she had been trained in during her years of study in Cuba, and even started adding elements of other popular dances such as conga to her salsa classes. In this way, she could continue on a career path that was closer to what she had envisioned for herself back in Cuba, while also raising her students' awareness about the multiple dance manifestations that

[6] The term used in some salsa communities to refer to the Cuban version of reggaeton (alternatively Cubaton).

coexist in Cuba. The originality of her classes and her innovative methodologies (although deeply rooted in Cuban traditions) also meant that she secured a place for herself on an increasingly competitive dance market where newcomers rarely manage to find a way after the public's fascination with novelty wears off. Much in the same way, Mirana, a Cuban dancer in her late thirties based in Rome explained why she rarely taught salsa lessons and instead preferred to focus on Afro-Cuban folklore:

> Everyone dances and teaches salsa, and especially here in Italy there are so many talented instructors who made a name for themselves, they have their client base, so why would I take the job of some Italian, when I can do something that I am good at, something that represents me? I come from Folklórico[7], I was trained to teach Afro-Cuban dances (personal communication, Rome, 2023).

Mirana's narrative about her place on the labor market is the reflection of the ideological rhetoric dominant in public debates on migration in Italian society and widely disseminated by leaders of the far right in the past years, according to which migrants 'steal jobs' from Italians (see also Chiaromonte and Federico 2021). At the same time, both Mirana's and Reina's examples reveal dancing bodies as spaces of transformation, challenging the intrinsic racism and exoticizing practices of the global salsa business. Their choices are only partly dictated by the dynamics of the dance labor market – of equal importance is exercising their agency within a dance style that has been commodified and repackaged for international audiences.

Along with favouring lesser-known genres, challenging Eurocentric pedagogies and modes of transmission allows dancers to reimagine Afro-Cuban dance in a diasporic context and to reassert it as everyday practice that relates to the memory and social identity of marginalized, dispossessed communities (Parfitt 2021). In doing so, body-to-body modes of transmission regain centrality, favouring the improvisatory principle, and creating a counterpoint to the rise of inscribing practices which meant that incorporating practices began to be devalued and neglected (Schroeder 2021).

> I don't assume there is an inherent hierarchy that places European culture on top and everything else below it – this is what Europeans did for centuries, and it created a culture of individualism and ego which makes it difficult for people to follow ways of knowing based on oral tradition, memorising, imitation. These are values that need to be retaught, reintroduced so as to open new paths of knowledge (Alvaro, personal communication, Berlin, 2023).

However, he did not see codification and teaching in an analytical way as necessarily a negative influence on emerging pedagogies of Afro-Cuban dance. As he explained repeatedly during our meetings, codification can prove to be a helpful tool that allows for breaking down the movements of hands, hips, and feet, as well as rhythm, without taking away from the tradition of the dance.

> I understand that they do not use the names of the dance figures from their original context, they try to make a technical translation so that they can facilitate access for those who were not born in this culture. And up until here I don't see anything wrong with this – problems arise when they start to distort the original (Alvaro, personal communication, Berlin, 2023).

Since immersion is not always possible and does not allow for context-based processing of bodily information, codification ensures a different type of assimilation of important details

[7] Conjunto Folklórico Nacional (CFN), The Cuban National Folkloric Ensemble, established in 1964 as the first revolutionary institution dedicated exclusively to Afro-Cuban folklore.

that would otherwise be lost. As he went on to explain, the result of colonization is the aesthetic shift that at times happen within certain dance forms, not the tools take can make teaching easier. The lines between the teaching process and the aesthetic shift proved are often blurred, since the two coexist and their intersections bring to light a rarely touched upon issue in the context of the pedagogical component od the global dance business: the racial dynamics of authorship and appropriation in dance, which I discuss in the next section.

Embodied responses to European experiences of racism

In her analysis of tango and its dissemination, Marta Savigliano (1995, 2) points out that even though the economy of Passion appears to celebrate non-Western cultures, it actually relies on the perpetual (re)making of hierarchical difference as part of a system of representation that shares the same history of imperialism and capitalism, predicated on commoditizing the colonials in order to suit imperial consumption. Similar to the ways in which tango was sexualized to disguise class and racial tensions in was born of, or the dynamics that stand behind the obscuring of class and race differences in the American ballroom dance industry, Cuban salsa was integrated into global dance circuits as an embodied expression and performance of an exoticized, eroticized Other, detached from its original contexts. Afro-Cuban dances, whether in their secular expression (rumba) or religious expression (dances of the orishas) allow for at least a partial regain and recognition of movement practices shaped by everyday realities, that are the opposite of the spectacular.

Recentring the African roots of Cuban dance and affirming Black identities is for many Cuban dancers a necessary response to the European experience of racism and exoticization.

> People are willing to admit that if you are Black maybe you are better than Europeans at dancing, percussion, sports – football in particular, but you will not be an intellectual equal. They always seem shocked when I can have a conversation on their level. When I came to Germany, I had to reinvent myself, I arrived here with a diploma which is not recognized, but it helped me create my method which draws on traditional wisdom and the African roots of Cuban dance (Alvaro, personal communication, Berlin, 2023)

Dance schools and festival organizers (institutions that target broad audiences of non-professionals, who study dance as a pastime) must constantly update and diversify their offers, so as to satisfy the voracious appetite of dance lovers. Since dance instruction in Europe is predicated on the idea that people will commit to a learning scheme of at least a few weeks if not months or even years, Cuban instructors abroad have – paradoxically – a wider educational platform at their disposal than their colleagues on the island. Although in recent years Cuban salsa schools aimed at international tourists started including rumba and Afro-Cuban dance lessons in their offers, the limited amount of time spent by dancing tourists on the island does not allow for deeper insights and reflections on the history and meaning of these dances. One of my long-term research participants in Havana, Mireya, who runs a salsa school for tourists, explained that after the pandemic she changed the formula of her lessons, since tourism dropped dramatically on the island, and she received fewer groups of dance aficionados. Her main client base for the past three years was made up of retirees on cruise ships, who happily attended her ‘interactive shows’ but showed little interest in taking two-three hours long classes every day. She included Afro-Cuban dances in the program but, due to time limitations, her explanations about these dances were reduced to brief comments about ‘the slaves who lived here before us’, and the characteristics of each deity. By contrast, Cuban dancers in Europe find themselves in a situation that allows for in-depth explorations of these dances with their groups of students. The Afro-Cuban course taught by Mirana in Rome, for example, dedicated each

class to one deity, breaking down the movements and explaining rhythms and gestures in detail, in the broader context of that specific orisha's history.

In her analysis of popular and religious Afro-Cuban traditions, Maya Berry (2015) argues that performers inside these traditions are often overlooked in the literature on antiracism because they operate within the racialized stereotypes of 'folklore' which perpetuate controlling images of Blackness. But these forms of community-based practices and collective agencies articulate Black cultural difference in a social and economic context that has made it increasingly difficult for Afro-Cuban practitioners to navigate the emerging private sector. Much in the same way, the European contexts I discussed above allow for claiming and affirming a Black, African-rooted identity that does not obscure the source material, as has happened in the processes that led to the commodification of salsa around the world.

The interest demonstrated by international communities of practice translates to more economic opportunity and recognition on the festival scene, but dancers oftentimes find themselves in vulnerable situations, framed by unequal power relations dictated by the dance market. As popular dance forms, Cuban dances (whether salsa, rumba,or Afro-Cuban dances labelled as 'folklore') have their own sets of recognizable steps and figures, and their circulation across bodies is integral to their existence. However, as Anthea Kraut 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' (2015, 5).

In this way, the contemporary salsa scene is reminiscent of the racial dynamics that characterized Cuba's dance scene before the Revolution of 1959, when African-descended performers were excluded from certain spaces yet continued to inspire white performances. Haunting choreography, as theorized by Melissa Blanco Borelli (2016) involves a subaltern dancing body that is instrumentalized and takes centre stage in an unacknowledged fashion, through the performances of a white body. Yasnara, a former professional dancer with CFN, recounted during our interview the many instances in which she was asked by Italian salsa instructors to teach a few private lessons, only to discover some months later that her choreographies, created upon request, had been incorporated in said instructors' new shows, presented on stage during national and international festivals. 'There is an intrinsic eurocentrism to their behaviour, they don't put themselves in a position where they recognize someone else's authority', she told me, adding that the first few times she saw her choreographic composition performed on stage without any kind of acknowledgment proved to be valuable lessons about the dynamics of the dance market. Like many of her colleagues before her, Yasnara learned to navigate the thin line between retaining her 'authentic' cultural capital and becoming accessible and marketable on a dance scene that commodifies difference, while at the same time defending her art and her 'agentive power' (Kedhar 2020).

Closing remarks

In an uncertain and uneven dance economy, certain dance forms and their modes of transmission can constitute a counterpoint to multicultural education which often puts forward romanticized, decontextualized, stereotypical cultural information (Cruz Banks 2010). Dance behaviours become involved in a type of educational work that recovers the knowledge embedded in cultural diversity and contextualizes the history and the meanings (political and social) of Black dance forms, on a dance scene characterized by immediacy and the desire for novelty.

In this article my aim was to show how Cuban dancers rely on their heritage in order to revalue dance as a source of knowledge and not just mere entertainment. I showed how

understandings of dance-as-labor and dance-as-education allow for the formulation of alternative projects that go beyond dance extractivism.

Although the global dance market operates with pre-defined roles for Cuban dancers and creates a set of expectations around their bodies, many performers actively challenge established patterns and positions of knowledge control. Cast in the role of salsa dancers and instructors, many Cuban dancers find themselves aspiring at a different status, aligned with their previous artistic and intellectual paths, before they found themselves in a migratory context. Although framed as exotic and desirable on stage, off stage their bodies are often perceived through reductive, discriminatory lenses. Their skills and self-identification as artists, which in many cases stems from their education and their careers in Cuba, allow for a certain upward mobility that delimitates them from other instructors of diverse bodily practices.

The aim of their strenuous bodily labor is twofold: symbolic restitution, on the one hand, and facing the economic dependencies that characterize diasporic dance on the global dance scene, on the other. As the examples of Alvaro and Reina demonstrate, their self-affirmation projects are at the same time educational projects that valorise Cuban heritage and the new methodological tools at their disposal in diasporic contexts. Afro-Cuban dances allow to reclaim the emotional and spiritual knowledge embedded in dance and transmit social and community knowledge, while shifting the question of 'authenticity' to the broader reflection on the dynamics of embodied transmission outside the original context. In diasporic contexts, movement practices derived from Afro-Cuban traditions create a much-needed platform for discussing otherwise still unacknowledged racial and social issues that go well beyond the worlds of dance.

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

Competing interests: the author declares none

References

Berg, Mette Louise. 2011. *Diasporic Generations. Memory, Politics, and Nation among Cubans in Spain*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Berry, Maya. 2015. "'Salvándose' in Contemporary Havana: Rumba's Paradox for Black Identity Politics", *The Black Diaspora Review* 5(2): 24-53.

Blanco Borelli, Melissa. 2016. *She Is Cuba. A Genealogy of the Mulata Body.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Brown, David H. 2003. *Santeria Enthroned: Art, Ritual, and Innovation in an Afro-Cuban Religion.* London: Routledge.

Chao Carbonero, Graciela. 1988. "Danzas y Bailes Cubanos y Metodología". Paper presented at the V Conference of Scientific Investigation on Art (V conferencia de investigaciones científicas sobre arte), Instituto Superior de Arte, Havana, Cuba.

Chiaromonte, William, and Veronica Federico. 2021. "The Labour Market Needs Them, But We Don't Want Them to Stay for Good: The Conundrum of Migrants, Refugees and Asylum Seekers' Integration in Italy". In *Migrants, Refugees and Asylum Seekers' Integration in European Labour Markets,* edited by Veronica Federico and Simone Baglioni, 193-212. IMISCOE Research Series. Springer, Cham.

Concepcion Alvarez, Miriam. n.d. "La enseñanza de la Música en Cuba", trabajo de diploma, Instituto Superior de Arte, Facultad de Música.

Cruz Banks, Ojeya. 2010. “Critical Postcolonial Dance Pedagogy” The Relevance of West African Dance Education in the US”, *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 41(1): 18-34.
Daniel, Yvonne. 1995. *Rumba: Dance and Social Change in Contemporary Cuba.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
Daniel, Yvonne. 2005. *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomble.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
DeFrantz, Thomas. 2004. *Dancing Revelations. Alvine Ailey’s Embodiment of African American Culture.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Fanoli, Francesco. 2023. “A striking comparison: on young Senegalese wrestlers and precarious scholars”, *Allegra Lab.* https://allegralaboratory.net/a-striking-comparison-on-young-senegalese-wrestlers-and-precarious-scholars/ [retrieved 05 March 2020].
Guerra, Ramiro. 1959. “Hacia un movimiento danzario nacional”. *Lunes de Revolución*, 18.
Kedhar, Anusha. 2020. *Flexible Bodies. British South Asian Dancers in an Age of Neoliberalism.* New York: Oxford University Press.
Kraut, Anthea. 2015. *Choreographing Copyright: Race, Gender, and Intellectual Property Rights in American Dance*, Oxford University Press.
Kumaraswami, Par. 2009. “Cultural Policy and Cultural Politics in Revolutionary Cuba: Re-reading the Palabras a los intelectuales (Words to the Intellectuals)”. *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 28(4): 527-541.
Manning, Susan. 2004. *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Martin, R. 2012. “A Precarious Dance, a Derivative Sociality”. *TDR: The Drama Review* 56 (4): 62–77. https://doi.org/10.1162/DRAM_a_00214 [retrieved 11 April 2023].
McMains, Juliet. 2009. “Dancing Latin/Latin Dancing. Salsa and DanceSport” In *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake. A Social and Popular Dance Reader*, edited by Julie Malnig, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 302-322.
McMains, Juliet. 2015. *Spinning Mambo Into Salsa. Caribbean Dance in Global Commerce*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
Parfitt, Clare. 2021. “Introduction: Dancing with Memory” In *Cultural Memory and Popular Dance. Dancing to Remember, Dancing to Forget*, edited by Clare Parfitt, Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies, 1-22.
Pérez Pérez, Patricia. 2019. “Perdurabilidad de estereotipos raciales en el habla popular cubana”, *Études caribéennes* [Online], 4, Online since 20 May 2020. https://doi.org/10.4000/etudescaribeennes.17844 [retrieved 05 March 2023].
Safuta, Anna. 2018. “Fifty shades of white. Eastern Europeans’ ‘peripheral whiteness’ in the context of domestic services provided my migrant women”, *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies* 21 (3): 217–231. https://doi.org/10.5117/TVGN2018.3.002.SAFU.
Savigliano, Marta. 1995. *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion.* Boulder, CO: Westview.
Schroeder, Janet. 2021. “Tap Dance and Cultural Memory: Shuffling with My Dancestors” In *Cultural Memory and Popular Dance. Dancing to Remember, Dancing to Forget*, edited by Clare Parfitt, Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies, 25-38.
Schwall, Elizabeth B. 2021. *Dancing with the Revolution. Power, Politics, and Privilege in Cuba.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
Ssebulime, Andrew. 2022. “Music as Dance and Dance as Music: Kizino Dance Training, a Dance Moment in the Diasporic Transmission Context”, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, https://hal.science/hal-03772129 [retrieved 10 September 2023].
Suki, John. 2012. *Contemporary Dance in Cuba. Técnica Cubana as Revolutionary Movement*. McFarland&Company Inc.