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Review

of the doctoral thesis by Ruxandra Ana, M.A entitled, “Embodied souvenirs’. Heritage tourism, entrepreneurship, and the cultural politics of dance in contemporary Havana (Cuba)” under the supervision of Prof. dr hab. Anny Wieczorkiewicz and Dr Renaty E. Hryciuk for the University of Warsaw

General Comments:

Thank you for the opportunity to read this dissertation. Overall, it is a well-written, researched and ethically nuanced demonstration of ethnographic fieldwork alongside critical engagements with heritage, tourism, dance ethnography and dance studies. I really appreciated the careful attention paid to the relationships with your research participants and how they were described. I was also impressed by the historical, cultural and political knowledge about Cuba which helped to really contextualize the ways in which dance as a form of knowledge production and exchange functions for the dancers/dance teachers who were the main focus of the study. Lastly, the writing was clear and fluid when it came to the more “objective” divulging of information, literature review and historical context. In the other instances when the writing emerged from fieldnotes the complexities of feelings, thoughts, doubts and fears came across quite powerfully in their very moving vulnerable expression. This is commendable as it is often quite difficult to write about oneself within research without coming across as if one is self-indulgent or navel gazing. As someone who has done work in Cuba and understood the many levels of challenges while doing fieldwork there, there were moments I was transported to my time there while being aware that much has changed since 2011 (my last time there) and really appreciative of how the contemporary moment is described in this research. On

page 4, the research questions listed function as signposts for the project overall and it is clear that these have been entertained, nuanced and answered in the project. By answered I do not mean a totalizing response that does not leave room for further analysis or more generative contemplation and complication, but for the requirements of a PhD thesis which should demonstrate an original idea and knowledge of the discipline, I think this thesis does a significant job of demonstrating knowledge and expertise. This is a highly laudable effort especially since the bulk of this, I assume, was written during a global pandemic. The material that follows below will be grounded from my perspective as a critical dance studies scholar. I offer further suggestions for reflection and engagement with dance in order to help expand the already significant original work being proposed in this dissertation. I write it as comments made directly to the student in honor of the often intimate and vulnerable rhetorical style mobilized in the dissertation. So I begin:

Specific Comments & Questions:

On page 4 you state “Dance, I argue, functions as an interface for more complex, alternative networks of economic and emotional exchange that entail a Cuban political economy of pleasure.” It is evident throughout the dissertation that dance, and everything it stands for, e.g., dance-as-culture, dance-as-pedagogy, dance-as-labor, dance-as-form, dance-as-technique, dance-as-aesthetic, dance-as-profession, dance-as-activity, dance-as-sociality, dance-as-commodity, etc., is the starting point and the center of the discussion. What is not so evident is the theorization through the dance form or a sustained explicit theorization of the original concept of “embodied souvenir.” Sometimes what can be further developed seems lost in literature review or contextual information that, while necessary and useful for a PhD dissertation since a student is required to demonstrate their knowledge of the field,

sometimes interrupts or delays the authorial voice and its particular knowledge. This is often a challenge in dissertations, i.e., how to move between demonstration of knowledge of the field (citing significant scholarship from the field) and one's own confident and comfortable authorial presence. There were some moments when you interrupt your own voice and excellent observations with a citation in order to ground the claim (feeling, thought, analysis) in something already validated in academia. In the future, I would suggest you trust your knowledge and further develop your ideas and voice rather than relying too much on other scholars to do the heavy lifting, as it were. Perhaps this was a methodological tactic employed to avoid making the dissertation seem "too personal," but, I would counter that any ethnography that is about your own body out in the field, learning, dancing, socializing, moving through the tense, multi-layered intimacies of ethnographic research is always-already (Althusser) personal. It must emerge from your own positionality even if you are strategically maneuvering it throughout so it is not centralized or calcified; even if your positionality is also in contention and negotiation.

I realize this is not a dance studies dissertation and I am not asking for this to be done in order to improve/expand the thesis. However, I wonder how you might expand your observations, findings, preliminary conclusions if you think about what is being generated by the activity of dancing. For now, much of the material reads as if things are being done to dance (gender, race, coloniality, capitalism) rather than the form and the dancers doing something to it, theorizing something through it. In other words, what does Cuban casino **do** to understandings of gender, race, coloniality, capitalism, culture, history? What does its aesthetic, form, style, pedagogy **do**, let alone materialize in social relations? Dance scholar Savigliano, who you cite frequently, demonstrates this through the ways she theorizes the tango

grasp/clutch and twists the gendered expectations of the male and female dancers by her use of qualifying adjectives to undermine gendered expectations. I wonder if something similar can be considered when it comes to Cuban casino? Especially since the focus of your study is on the women teachers who are, for all intents and purposes, choreographing gendered Cubanidad for tourist consumption. What happens when we examine the dance form as the site of knowledge production? Dance forms in Cuba are so heavily overdetermined by race, gender and the state's support/sanctioning of it. This then informs the dance's discursivity and you do attend to this in significant ways throughout all of your chapters. What I want to know more about is how your research participants were thinking about the form beyond its commercialization and function as a mode of employment. I realize the economy and economic necessity for Cubans can often overrule ways of thinking beyond the immediacy of "resolver," but I am curious if you saw or spoke with dancers/dance teachers who wanted to explore creatively. What stymied them? How did they negotiate with the tourists, if at all? Are all tourists uniform in their search and desire for "authentic Cuban salsa"? I wonder if you might nuance the tourist desires and think about how this dance between tourist desire and Cuban economic need generates a multiplicity of social relations that are not easily resolvable. There was a sense of holding back happening in some of the provocative encounters or moments which again, could be read as a methodological tactic on the researcher's part.

Can you speak about the vulnerability of the dancers and your "friendships" with them, if at all? What was at stake for them to be vulnerable? How did you know you could trust the friendships in such a tenuous economy such as Cuba? I wanted to learn more about what you call "the double edged sword of vulnerability" (32). How did they play out while dancing? Touching? How did these wavering intimacies

appear on the dance floor and in the way you followed (or led when asked)? Also, I wanted more of a sense of your own embodied experience as you learned salsa. Sometimes the descriptions were sparse because I understood you were trying to move your reader to the analysis of how the teachers were negotiating the complexities of salsa teaching in contemporary Cuba. However, I wonder what informed your opinions on who was a “good” teacher? And, how does it stem from your privileged position as researcher, dancer trained in Europe? What did you think/feel as you were learning and putting this form into your body? I wonder if you are familiar with the work of Maya Berry who writes about learning rumba and Afro-Cuban dance. It would be useful to read to think about how she writes about embodying these forms and the social exchanges involved in the pedagogy. Like you, she was also learning in someone’s house or living room. Like you, she also developed friendships as she learned (new) dance forms. In similar vein, Janet O’Shea’s book *Risk, Failure, Play* is a dance studies informed ethnography about her learning different forms of martial arts. It is a wonderful example of how to write about the challenges of learning something new in our bodies and its somatic experience and, then, what that pedagogical, embodied exchange means on a greater macro-level socio-politically. She is particularly thinking about our neoliberal moment and how risk and failure are productive.

To what extent are the dance teachers owners of the “embodied souvenir” they leave their students with? Souvenir is a type of keepsake, an unchanging one, right, as it is often a material object, but in your postulation, the souvenir is embodied. Because it is embodied it will not be the same thing as it is transferred from body of teacher to body of student. Embodied exchanges are never exact. And, if the student becomes proficient (dances “like a Cuban”) does that mean that she is

an exact replica of her teacher or does it mean that she has learned the form sufficiently to be able to innovate, expand, improvise beyond the codified form. Remember, that salsa, as a popular dance form, has its codified steps, but it offers opportunity for improvisational innovation. My question here is then this, what is lost and gained in the transmission of the form that cannot be a static souvenir? What are the limits and failures of the souvenir when it is, in fact, embodied?

Another issue that comes up in the pedagogical element of the dance teaching is authorship and intellectual/creative property. I am thinking of Mireya and the way she invested time in writing down her steps. As a popular dance form, salsa (Cuban casino) has its recognizable steps, but what about the ones that are invented or innovated? Where is there room for this and what happens once they begin to circulate? Who ultimately can lay claim to these steps? Here, I would recommend Anthea Kraut's book *Choreographing Copyright* for an entry point into black dance forms (black dance makers) and the ownership of their forms. Although her book is specifically North American focused, its theoretical engagement with bodies, steps and dance copyright might help think about the processes the Cubans are engaging in to monetize their creative labors and lay a claim to them.

In terms of race and gender, you attend to the ways that these pairings both overdetermine the perceptions of the Cuban fe/male (black) body, but what is often lacking is your reactions to these overdetermined perceptions. For example, when you are at the callejon and the man says he can teach you because he is black (by rubbing his two fingers alongside his forearm) you leave it at that. What did you think when he said that? Were you annoyed? I would have rolled my eyes and written about it. How were you mitigating your whiteness (assumed privileged status) while there even when you learned enough to "blend in"? What about the exhaustion

involved in straddling multiple identities while experiencing so many overdetermined ones? In what ways was your whiteness and Europeanness a type of embodied souvenir for those that danced and/or interacted with you? How does one attend to these messy slippages of identity through the dancing body?

On page 68 you address issues of upward mobility. Is there a way that the dance form allows one to do this? Is there a change in how one dances or with whom, in addition to the shifting of the form/presentation of the dance that allows for this? If so, how are the dancers/dance teachers forging a type of corporeal flexibility? Here I am thinking about Anusha Kedhar's book *Flexible Bodies* which looks at British South Asian dancers and choreographers and how they engage with neoliberalism and its demands by become flexible (in training, in teaching, in traveling, in performing) in order to survive/thrive. I think this book would be useful to you as you continue to develop this work further especially since she is an expert dance ethnographer who writes in beautiful ways about the complexities of friendships and intimacies in sharing dancing with others across gender, nation, class, and sexuality.

I remember that by page 109 I felt that your presence was missing in the dissertation. By this I mean that I wanted to know more about you (what D Soyini Madison and Della Pollock would call "the performative I") as the ethnographer because, as I mention in one of my exam questions, ethnographies often are implicitly about the ethnographer, not just about their object of study. I realize you later take care of this somewhat in your "The Anthropologist and" sections, but by page 109 I wrote these questions down in the margin as I read: So far what is missing is your own embodied experience of the lessons: what skill did you come with and what did you learn? how did you find their teaching? what were the power

dynamics (race and gendered) with you? why did you keep going back to Cuba? why do you like Cuba? What about your relationship with Cuban women? What constitutes pedagogy in these living room dance classes beyond the mere follow and dance? How are the teachers you learned from different/similar? How do you know you're being told the truth and not hustled? What happened if you didn't like the way s/he taught? How did you feel after being asked to help teach? The girl who cried when she was corrected... who consoled her? Where was she from? In these quick questions I wrote down as I was reading, I was informed by Kamala Visweswaran's *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* and how it trained me to read for absences silences. I was reading your dissertation for what you were NOT saying sometimes because I knew so much of the contextual information. Perhaps that is the other question to ponder: who is your ideal reader when/if you turn this project into a book? Or do you want to have multiple entry points depending on who reads it, e.g., a Cuban, a Cuban dancer, a European anthropologist, a dance scholar, a Cubanophile, your informants.

The dance lesson chart could also use some embodied observations from your perspective. As of now, it reads as trying to be as objective/positivist as possible and it needs your own somatic/experiential analysis to enrich the embodied exchange. This, after all, would then help ground your theoretical proposal of the "embodied souvenir" because you can only speak about it from your own embodiment, not anybody else's. In one of your explanations you claim to know what needed to be fixed and you fixed it. How did you "know"? What did your body tell you? How did your body "know"? Then your teacher leaves quickly after the lesson and you abruptly end by saying you hadn't taken off your shoes yet. How did you feel about this? Is this part of the exchange? Part of the professional demeanor

necessary? Was it too much of an abrupt shift from the performed intimacy of dancing as a couple? Did you have other expectations?

I am also curious about your own background and the three different countries you can claim as being from (depending on the context). Here I refer to footnote 79. Your liminality (despite being read as white in Cuban context) becomes a source of agency for you, or what Savigiano would say is an ethnographer's trick. You can be unlocatable therefore flexible and malleable in your interactions. How did you mitigate this ethically? I am also curious about the similarities/differences between a post-Soviet Romania and a post-Soviet Cuba and if this came into play in your analysis/analytical frame, i.e., how you chose to read/understand the signs/signifiers of post-Soviet statehood.

In terms of the structure of the dissertation, what was the rationale for putting your creative writings/observations in the latter half of the dissertation? I wonder what would happen if these observations interrupt the narrative you are constructing about Cuba and dance from the beginning. How might the idea of embodied souvenir as a theory be complicated by the singularity of your particular embodied souvenir? I think this concept could have come into play more throughout the piece specifically to show the tensions inherent in it as a concept materialized through Cuban intellectual and embodied labor which is then extracted and exchanged to others through the machinations of transnational tourism.

I offer the following books for future/further consultation as you continue to think about your role as ethnographer/anthropologist/dancer/researcher. I think they will enrich the embodied perspective that you are aiming for in your work and help complicate the frictions, tensions, class, race and gender dynamics you so keenly observe. The books include: Cindy Garcia's ethnography of working class salsa

dancing in Los Angeles *Salsa Crossings: Dancing Latinidad in Los Angeles*; Ramon Rivera-Servera's ethnography *Performing Queer Latinidad: Dance, Sexuality, Politics* where he speaks about the constant "frictive encounters" on the dance floor; *Dancing on the Canon* by Sherril Dodds where she interrogates popular dance and the term popular and what it mobilizes; the work of D. Soyini Madison especially her work on self-reflexivity in performance research; Francesca Castaldi's *Choreographies of African Identities* for the way she, as a white Italian woman ethnographer, navigates the space of race, sexuality, gender and pleasure in Senegal; *Ishtyle: Accenting Gay Indian Nightlife* by Kareem Khubchandani; and Imani Kai Johnson's "Battling the Bronx: Social Choreography and Outlaw Culture among Early Hip-Hop Streetdancers in New York City," *Dance Research Journal*, 50.2 (August 2018), for her ethnography and the way she speaks about her friendship with the hip hop dancers. There are others but these are the ones that came to mind because of the relationship between the scholar and their research participants, the space(s) where they dance and the different power relations involved, and the intersections of gender, sexuality and race that emerge in all of them. Additionally, each of these scholars makes themselves present and active in the text which models how to do ethnographic research in the field of dance from a vulnerable, ethical self-reflexive positionality.

Conclusion:

To summarize, the thesis prepared by Ruxandra Ana M.A and submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of PhD in Anthropology of Tourism and Heritage grows out of the original research that is well-presented and carefully conceived. Its aims, objectives and methodology are clearly thought out and

presented. The original theoretical contribution of the concept of “embodied souvenir” relies on an extensive participant-observer ethnography which had multiple effects, both corporeal and cerebral/emotional on the researcher/dancer/woman. The choice of writing style to move between these registers and identities was brave, bold and creative. The thesis also relies on a dance studies lens in order to expand how heritage and tourism rely on corporeal exchanges for affective and economic relations. It also attests to the necessity of interdisciplinarity in order to fully encompass the ethnographic experience as it relates to the complexities of race, gender, power, privilege and pleasure. My comments and questions as they pertain to the discipline of critical dance studies are not intended to diminish the value this work presents to heritage and tourism or demonstrate any limitations of the student’s understanding. On the contrary, the use of dance ethnography and dance studies only serves to enrich and enliven the discipline where this dissertation sits. Therefore, I conclude that the manuscript presented for review fulfils the criteria for the PhD theses set by Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education (‘Ustawa o tytule naukowym i stopniach naukowych’ from 14 March 2003, article 13), and recommend that Ruxandra Ana, M.A is allowed to pass to the next stage of PhD degree awarding.

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