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THE REVIEW OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS BY RUXANDRA ANA,
*'EMBODIED SOUVENIRS'. HERITAGE TOURISM,
ENTREPRENEURSHIP, AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF DANCE IN
CONTEMPORARY HAVANA (CUBA),*
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The PhD thesis submitted by Ruxandra Ana is an anthropological study of dance-related entrepreneurship in the tourism sector in Cuba. Scrutinizing salsa schools, Ana takes a closer look into the changing meanings of work, leisure, consumption, and dance itself at the nexus of (still officially defined as) socialist state and neoliberal capitalism, and the new inequalities which they generate. The thesis thus situates within a few important fields of anthropological inquiry – the anthropology of tourism, heritage, and dance – at the same time drawing on theoretical inspirations from mobility, race, and gender studies. The central category analyzed by Ana is embodiment because in this new entrepreneurship these are dancing bodies – with all the cultural capital ascribed to them – which are transformed into economic capital. The Author's research focuses on Havana, but references to other Cuban cities are also made.

The thesis is well structured. It consists of a prologue, introduction (which contains a discussion on the thesis' topic, research questions, the state of research, theoretical setting, introduction to the field and research participants, and the employed methodology), five chapters (on the tourism market and the development of the private sector in Cuba; on dance(s) as Cuba's heritage; on the emerging dance work professional regimes in the tourism sector; on



female – although not only – dancing body; and on transnational mobilities which stem from tourism encounters and are related to the (imagined) international dance careers), conclusions, glossary, and references. This classic structure, however, has been unconventionally modified with self-reflexive “soliloquies.” I find these autoethnographic ‘interludes’ highly thought-provoking – a critical insight into one’s positionality in the field, the processes of rapport-building, the many roles played by an anthropologist, many identities ascribed to her are crucial for understating how anthropological knowledge is co-created. This is what differentiates anthropological writing from other scholarship and it is the value we should cherish. Apart from soliloquies, there are also extensive case studies, written in literary style, which serve Ana to demonstrate how the processes she analyzes are woven into the entrepreneurial life stories of her key research partners. I appreciate the efforts made by the Author to experiment with innovative forms of narrative, by merging creative writing with critical academic writing. Finally, the thesis contains 41 figures, which do not merely illustrate the text but are part of it, co-creating the anthropological narrative.

The great value of the thesis is its firm ethnographic grounding. Ruxandra Ana spent fourteen months – over the course of five years – doing fieldwork in Havana, which is a good span of time to grasp the constant and the change, regularities and exceptions, and temporalities. It is worth mentioning that Ana managed to obtain funding from two grants, which enabled her to conduct extensive fieldwork and then to write the thesis. She employed the most appropriate research techniques to study embodiment: she danced (using her body as a research tool, when taking classes or attending different dance venues; she “danced her way into the field,” p. 153), but was also aware of the risk of falling into a trap of dance-centrism (see the schedule of her daily dance-related activities in 2016 and 2018 on pp. 132-133); she engaged with different actors involved in making of dance heritage; and she talked – both informally and taking semi-structured interviews – to dancers, dance teachers, and dance school owners. And she kept in touch with her research partners in a virtual world, which broadens the boundaries of our field sites (I particularly liked the metaphor of a Möbius strip used by Ana to describe her fieldwork). It is worth noticing that although Ana chose salsa schools as her case study, she immersed



herself in the heterogeneous dance worlds of Havana, attending ballet and contemporary dance events, taking lessons of tango and kizomba, and even attending pilates and yoga classes. What I also find valuable is the attention Ana paid to informal conversations and insights gained from daily interactions. Ethnography, especially in such settings and on the embodiment, cannot be reduced to formal interviews. Consequently, Ana does not reduce her research partners to informants and her ethnographic material to quotes from the interviews. People in her research are real people with their subjectivities.

As a result, the thesis is rich in ethnographic detail, allowing the reader to immerse herself in the ambiance of dance schools, living rooms, balconies, and rooftops of Habana Vieja as well as in the life stories of Ana's research partners, their professional and personal biographies. The extensive case studies are of great value in this respect (and demonstrate how friendship in the field, accompanying in everyday life activities, gossiping, hanging out, and assisting in the tourism businesses development offer a nuanced and in-depth insight). Even the more historical sections of the dissertation – those on tourism and heritage developments in Cuba – are blended with ethnographic material, which I find a very convincing writing strategy. Ruxandra Ana does not take an easy way of a standard thesis construction with 'historical background' and 'theoretical setting' being separated from 'ethnographic material' and its 'analysis.' She intertwines all of them, making her writing fabric rich and fascinating.

The significant feature of the thesis is self-reflexivity, already mentioned when referring to the dissertation's structure. Ruxandra Ana is not afraid of 'unveiling' herself as a vulnerable researcher with all her doubts, fears, frustrations, and failures. Ana does not pretend to be an anthropologist-heroine who 'have gone native' – she openly admits that in many contexts she was perceived, before anything else, as a tourist (starting with the prologue where she tells the story of being treated like a tourist on the very last day of her long-term stay in Havana or in a dialogue with two Cuban girls which opens the section "The anthropologist" of the Introduction). She makes the process of anthropological knowledge-making visible, even with regard to the aspects often silenced in anthropological writing, i.e. those related to the ethnographer's sexuality and her intimate relations in the field. I find this dimension of the



thesis – i.e. “rendering the self as embodied and subjective” (p. 237) – sincere, transparent, and highly insightful.

The development of the tourism sector in Cuba is depicted from many angles – Ana discusses the emergence of the private sector in the post-Soviet *Período Especial*, the reemergence of sex tourism, and rising inequalities (notably along racial lines). She also refers to the colonial past and the making of *Cubanidad* in the anti-colonial agenda, which still influences tourism imaginaries, as well as tourism development in postcolonial Cuba, which strongly contributed to the racial inequalities and fueled people’s support for revolutionary ideas. The reintroduction of tourism after the economic crisis of the 1990s resulted in new disparities, again, mostly racial ones, which found its manifestation in *jineterismo*. The dance tourism market, based on Afro-Cuban heritage, increased the opportunities of non-white Cubans to benefit from tourism and at the same time, it reinforced the exoticized and sexualized notions of blackness. Ana touches upon tourism imaginaries and the role the UNESCO brand has played in developing heritage and cultural tourism in Cuba. However, she primarily focuses on the most recent history of the past decade, when Cuba and the tourism sector in Cuba underwent significant changes, which the Author could observe by herself. What might be missing in this part of the thesis is the lack of a general description of the tourism sector in Cuba, which for readers unfamiliar with the Cuban context may not be obvious (for instance, which enterprises are only state-run?; what actually are *casas particulares* and how do they operate?; what are the most popular tourist itineraries and attractions in Cuba?; and what categories of tourists can be met in Cuba?).

The second chapter starts with a lively ethnographic vignette of a Christmas party hosted by Ana, i.e. the situation which the anthropologist created herself and which illuminated “various grassroots regimes of heritage” (p. 76). This example demonstrates how ethnographic understanding is born in informal encounters, how we – anthropologists – gain insight into meanings that cannot be researched through more formal research techniques. Ana discusses here Cuban dance in the context of the processes of heritage-making (as well as nation-making), by demonstrating how various social actors ascribe meanings to dance-related practices through



processes of heritagization (as well as politicization and touristification). She scrutinizes the reasons why casino (salsa) and rumba have grown to be the most popular dance tourist attractions in Cuba.

The category which often comes into play when heritage and tourism are researched is authenticity. It is also the case of Ana's thesis. Luckily, the Author does not fall into the trap of perceiving authenticity as an ontological category, but takes a constructivist stand, looking at how certain practices (understood as heritage) become authentic in a dynamic interplay between a market economy, identity politics, and individual agency. Ana, following John and Jean Comaroff, argues that tourists' interest and external recognition contribute to the positive valorization and pride in culture, especially with regard to those practices which had earlier been perceived as inferior and/or marginalized, such as Afro-Cuban ones (along with the Cuban government's attempts to support equalitarian, raceless society, although often only declaratively).

The third chapter, deeply grounded in ethnography, shows how 'dance work' in the context of the tourism sector evolved and how the notions of professionalism developed within the new logic of entrepreneurship, which included the processes of self-orientalization and creativity in inventing a methodology of how to teach foreign tourists. Here Ana recalls a useful emic distinction between *bailadores* (those who learned how to dance empirically, "in the street") and *bailarines* (formally educated dancers) and the competition over professionalism between the two of them. She discussed the ambivalence of the "street", perceived by tourists as "authentic" (but also unsafe) and by *bailarines* as unprofessional (although the latter are claimed not to understand the market demand – this dynamic is interestingly captured by Ana). A category that the Author identifies as an important feature of one's professionalism is responsibility for the clients, especially for the safety of female tourists, which I also noticed in my research on the informal tourism sector in India. Such responsibility is associated with the "cultural level" of dance teachers, which I – in the aforementioned research of mine – refer to as intercultural competence in dealing with tourists. Ana also analyzes the blurring boundary between labor and leisure in the lives of Cubans engaged in the dance tourism market, especially



in the context of services offered by “taxi dancers” who accompany clients at dance parties (here some more nighttime ethnography would be helpful). She concludes that in a survival economy most daily activities are related to money-making opportunities (p. 134). However, the same can be said about the informal sector in the context of the seasonality of tourism (while low season is more about stagnancy, idleness, and waiting). But Ana also rightly notices that “While ‘free time’ becomes practically inexistent, ‘work time’ is also characterized by increased flexibility” (p. 135), which coincides with my observations of small entrepreneurs in the informal tourism sector in India.

The body regimes, ideals of beauty, economies of desire, and food consumption habits are discussed in the fourth chapter. Ana skillfully captured the contradictory nature of these regimes, rooted in tourist imaginaries of Cuban – preferably Afro-Cuban – femininity and female sexuality as well as Western ideals of fitness of a dancing body (and the neoliberal idea of self-development towards perfection, self-esteem, and confidence). Moreover, the female body regime related to workout and dieting is confronted with the scarcity of “proper” food in Cuba and the omnipresence of sugar along with the belief in its energizing virtues. These regimes are accompanied by an idealized model of (Afro-)Cuban masculinity and the tourists’ expectations towards Cuban male teaching bodies. An interesting observation made by Ana with regard to tourist women and their bodies refers to the attempts of ‘going native’ which often result in the misreading of the local ‘dress-code’ and breaking the codes of proper conduct (I could observe the same failed attempts in India, where some female tourists wore the cropped top without a sari or *salwar* trousers without a long shirt called *kameez*, which was perceived by Indians as they were only half-dressed). This is also the chapter where Ana writes about the everyday struggles of Cuban women to make ends meet by, recalling the figure of *luchadora* (she particularly refers to her research partners – entrepreneurs in the tourism sector – who juggle both daily chores and a business).

The last chapter explores the opportunities which dance work and tourism offer in terms of migration ‘*alla afuera*.’ These transnational mobilities are connected to the dreams of an international dance career. Here the cultural capital and the (affective) encounters with tourists



are what makes these mobilities possible, often – but not always – within the framework of “intimate mobilities.” What is particularly interesting in this chapter is that Ana starts with the discussion on internal migration from the eastern provinces of Cuba to the capital, and demonstrates how the perception of those migrants by *habaneros* is shaped along racial lines (here some inspiration from Said’s Orientalism could be drawn, with *habaneros* presenting themselves as modern, civilized, and cosmopolitan vs. backward and emotional migrants from *Oriente*). This internal dimension of migration is often overlooked in migration studies which seem to focus on international migration processes, while the two are intertwined and often the former precedes the latter. In this last chapter, Ana also discusses multiple roles performed by dance teachers – as gatekeepers/cultural brokers, friends, and lovers. She rightly notices that the benefits which dance teachers draw from close relationships with tourists/clients (like being invited to places which they could not afford otherwise or receiving gifts of significant value) do not undermine their self-esteem, because tourists are perceived in this context as the replacement of the Cuban state which has failed to take care of its citizens (p. 219). At the same time, Ana shows how the internal divisions and hierarchies are built within Cubans engaged in tourism and how *jineteros/jineteras* as othered.

Finally, when analyzing intimate relationships, Ana argues that one cannot make a binary distinction between love relation and interest, because these relationships situate somewhere in-between and are “reciprocally influenced” (p. 222). She demonstrates – again, autoethnographically – how transnational networks of material circulation are created via formalized intimate relationships, and how they pave the way to upward socio-economic mobility. In this regard, consumption of the goods from the neoliberal world is a means to build one’s social status and to shorten one’s distance to the tourists (while increasing the one to fellow Cubans who do not have access either to tourists or relatives living abroad). It is interesting how mobility becomes a symbolic capital that can be used to build better lives also in Cuba (and not exclusively *alla fuera*). What I find somehow missing in this chapter – which to a great extent deals with real and imagined international mobility – is the discussion on legal changes which have allowed Cubans to engage in two-way travel (during my frequent visits to



Cuba between 2004 and 2008, such mobilities were hardly possible and people were literally stuck on the island).

Ruxandra Ana's thesis is ethnographically deep, methodologically sophisticated, and theoretically rich. I would love to read more such empathetic, self-reflexive and multi-dimensional anthropological theses. My criticism refers mainly to Ana's Cubano-centrism. In the thesis, one can find very few references to other case studies and I believe that comparisons with anthropological studies of – for instance – the entrepreneurship in the informal tourism sector or the interplay between gender and race in tourism would shed new light on Ana's ethnographic findings, enabling her to see which processes and strategies are distinctive for a Cuban context and which are broader phenomena. Meanwhile, Ana makes only a few laconic references to Romania and Russia (while writing about post-socialist economic reforms and the lack of trust towards the state), to – generally – Latin American countries (with regard to the informal economy), and to China (a very short mention about rural tourism). I also find some analytical frameworks and concepts missing while others not fully explored. For instance, at some point, Ana introduces briefly the distinction made by Tom Selwyn between “cool” and “hot” authenticity when discussing the difficulties in adapting the Cuban teaching system and methods to international demands (p. 116). However, in my opinion, she does not use the whole potential of this analytical framework, which offers a great interpretative tool when speaking of the multisensory experience of dancing tourists or their need to ‘fraternize with the locals’ (when discussing how complex and multilayered relations between tourists and dance teachers are and how expectations on both sides are constantly questioned and negotiated; see e.g. the story of the Korean female tourist disappointed with her failure to ‘make friends’). The concept of “hot” authenticity could be very useful here (as well as literature on cultural brokers, which is missing in the thesis). Also, the mobility turn was presented quite superficially and Ana did not explore its potential. The whole idea about the mobility turn – as well as the new mobilities paradigm (developed, among others, by the authors quoted by Ana – Mimi Sheller, John Urry, or Noel B. Salazar) – is not about fetishizing mobility and arguing that everything and everyone is more mobile and fluid now than it used to be. It is rather about making mobility an equal to



sedentariness dimension of human (and not only) condition; about abandoning the perception of being ascribed to a particular place as a normative condition while being mobile/displaced as a deviation from the norm. A few times, Ana recalls the tourist image of Cuba as “frozen in time,” but she does not refer to the already classic anthropological works of Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other* (regarding the denial of coevalness), or Nicolas Thomas, *Out of Time* (on how Others are placed in a timeless time). These references would help Ana to situate her analysis of the tourism imaginaries in a broader context. With regard to the way Cubans respond to the above imaginaries, the concept of strategic essentialism by Gayatri Ch. Spivak as a weapon of the weak might be useful.

Finally, the thesis is neatly edited, but there are some minor deficiencies (e.g. the footnote no. 6 on p. 19 is missing), repetitions (e.g. the information on 96 legal activities organized under 28 categories of self-employment on p. 59 and p. 64), and language issues (e.g. p. 100, the verb ‘is’ is missing in the sentence “If ‘authenticity in the eye of the beholder’...”; p. 101 “from cultural strictures” instead of ‘structures’; p. 110: “which over the years took me places” instead of ‘to the places’). If considered for publication – which I recommend – the figure on p. 123 (i.e. ‘The register of the dance salon Michel and Isabel rented out to Sofia’s dance school’) should be removed because names can be identified there.

To conclude, Ruxandra Ana’s thesis offers a significant contribution to the critical dance scholarship and critical tourism studies. Moreover, the Author engages with the issues of race and gender in a complex reality of both postcolonial and post-Soviet country, thus moving beyond the narrow boundaries of subdisciplines. She has a great ethnographic eye and ear, which makes her anthropology nuanced and sensitive to the not-so-obvious tunes of the field. Therefore, I am fully convinced that the thesis of Ruxandra Ana meets all requirements for doctoral theses and that its Author can be admitted to the next stages of the procedure for obtaining a doctoral degree.

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