Through the lens of salsa: im/mobile careers in transnational dance worlds

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Abstract

The social sciences have long been criticized for their nation-state-centred epistemology and use of static categories in research methods. This paper presents empirical material and methodological reflections to shift our approach to studying and researching transnational dance worlds. Starting from current debates in migration and dance studies, it explores how these two distinct fields of research might fruitfully be combined. Based on ethnographic research with salsa dance professionals in Europe and Cuba, this paper introduces the notion of im/mobile careers. It explores ways in which global inequalities affect dance professionals and illuminates the intersections of gender, ethnicity, race and class. The paper highlights the contributions of a methodological approach which includes mobile research and a focus on individual life stories as well as performance. It argues for a reflexive approach to challenge the epistemological and methodological limits of current research. The paper contributes to the growing body of literature that studies social phenomena through the lens of im/mobility and empirically adds to our understanding of contemporary social processes.

Keywords: dance research, im/mobility, ontology, qualitative research

Introduction

> 'I don't speak so many languages, but because I know how to dance, I can connect with everybody; it's a huge tool of communication. Regardless of who you are, or where you're from. (…) It's a great tool, and it's making me travel all over the world.'

This quote from a salsa dance professional whom I met at a large salsa event addresses the topics of this paper, which brings together research on the circulation of dance practices with current debates in migration and mobility studies to address problematic biases in social science research.

In an article entitled 'Enacting the Social,' Law and Urry (2004) argued that the social sciences and their research methods do not simply describe the world but also enact it. According to these authors, our research methodologies often reflect 19th-century, nation state-based preoccupations, and thus also tend to reproduce such realities. Research methods (help) make social realities, and by acknowledging this performativity, we enter the realm of 'ontological politics' (Law and Urry 2004: 396). We therefore need methods to address 21st-century social realities, which are adapted to deal with, among other things, the sensory, the emotional and the kinaesthetic (Law and Urry 2004: 403). Starting from current epistemological and methodological debates in migration and dance studies, this paper explores how these two distinct fields of research might fruitfully be combined, using an empirical case study with salsa dancers.

As stated in the introduction to this special issue (Salzbrunn and Rodriguez-Quinones 2023),

ISSN ISSN-Print 2199-8108 ▪ ISSN-Internet 2199-8116
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research on dance and music contributes to current debates in the studies of migration, mobility and diversity in many ways. Recent scholarship focusing on the circulation of artistic practices has shown the importance of dance and music for the study of (trans)national identifications on different scales (Aterianus-Owanga, Djebbari and Salzbrunn 2019). Dance research takes moving bodies seriously, moving beyond theories which treat the body primarily as a site of inscription and testifying to the multiple identities which can be performed through movement (Reed 1998). Dance researchers have thus demonstrated the importance of bodies for social science research as a means of overcoming the Cartesian mind-body dichotomy and enabling a more holistic approach. Building on earlier studies on dance and nationalism and dance and migration, anthropologists have recently combined a focus on the movements and meanings of dance for its carriers such as migrants and tourists (Neveu Kringelbach and Skinner 2012). Using this perspective, this article focuses on dance as a phenomenon, which, insofar as it is inscribed into and at the same time performed by moving bodies, can shed new light on current topics such as im/mobility, gender, racialization and global inequalities.

Based on ethnographic research with salsa dancers, this paper presents theoretical and methodological reflections for the study of dance worlds. The argument is twofold. On the one hand, the paper introduces the notion of im/mobile careers to explore how global inequalities affect dance professionals. It sheds light on differences in accessing resources such as mobility and the importance of gendered roles and racialized representations of dance practices. On the other hand, it highlights the contributions of a methodological approach which includes mobile research (Büscher and Urry 2009) and a focus on individual life stories as well as performance. By following three dance professionals' careers, it illustrates how a focus on actors from different backgrounds can be helpful in moving beyond static categories. In summary, this paper contributes to the growing body of literature studying contemporary social phenomena through the lens of im/mobility.

The article first clarifies problems with the 'container thinking' of migration studies and social science research, exploring some of the main critiques and proposed methodological avenues to address the challenges. Second, it presents the context of the study, the salsa circuit, often described as a paradigmatic space of diversity and inclusiveness. In line with recent research on salsa, I argue that a closer look reveals manifold power dynamics that contradict the inclusiveness narrative. Third, I present a research design that considers some of the above-mentioned critiques and introduces the notion of im/mobile careers. Fourth, the im/mobile careers of three differently positioned salsa dance professionals are described, completed by, fifth, a discussion of their stories. In conclusion, I highlight three key advantages of the approach I present here.

Beyond methodological nationalism and sedentary visions of society

Contrary to the increasing political project of naturalizing the association of culture with place, social scientists have criticized the idea of an isomorphism between a specific territory, ethnic community or nation and culture. This container model of society has also been criticized with regard to the analysis of migration, where often the boundaries of the nation state are taken as a natural unit of analysis in research. Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002) disclosed the reproduction of such nationalist thinking in social science research as a form of 'methodological nationalism'. Dahinden (2016) challenged the nation state- and ethnicity-centred epistemology which often informs migration studies and which risks reifying categories.

Since the rise of this critique of methodological nationalism, there have been several efforts to move beyond it. Vertovec's (2007) notion of 'super-diversity' features prominently, calling for greater attention to the bases of differentiation within ethnic or national groups. This concept

captures the increasing diversification connected to immigration within and between specific localities. While super-diversity has mainly been used as a lens to analyse everyday diversity in urban neighbourhoods, the related literature often remains focused on ethnic differences in immigration contexts. According to Foner, Duyvendak and Kasinitz (2019) super-diversity's theoretical potential for overcoming the ethno-racial lens therefore often remains unfulfilled.

Another approach to overcoming the nation-centred epistemology of migration studies stresses the importance of transnationalism. Scholars in this field claim to move beyond the vision of unity between the state and its population. They suggest that, contrary to classical assumptions in assimilation theory, 'transmigrants' become rooted in their new country while maintaining ties to their countries of origin, making their home and host societies a single arena for social action. New concepts have been coined to account for social relationships sustained across national borders, such as 'transnational social space' or 'transnational social field'. Contemporary approaches argue for a transnational perspective as an epistemological lens rather than a theoretical framework (Dahinden 2017).

Scholars associated with the 'mobilities turn' have also criticized the sedentarism of much social science research and developed concepts that have normalized movement and mobility rather than stasis. However, such positive accounts of mobility have also been questioned, as scholars have been reminded that mobilities need moorings and that they are both productive of and produced by unequal relations of power, or what Cresswell (2010) calls the 'politics of mobility'. Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013) propose a framework of 'regimes of mobility', which addresses the barriers to movement in terms of the state and international regulatory regimes.

These epistemological reflections have inevitably led to shifts in research methodologies, with researchers considering ways to render migration unexceptional in research designs and as a unit of analysis. Dahinden (2016) suggests several strategies to 'de-migranticize' research on migration and integration, for example, starting from a spatial unit such as a school or an urban neighbourhood, based on the idea that, when taking a part of the whole population as a starting point, migrants and non-migrants alike necessarily form part of the research sample. Similarly, Salzbrunn (2017) argues that entry through an event is helpful in shifting the focus from a predefined group to the plural affiliations of the people involved in the event. This is precisely where research with a focus on the im/mobile careers of a 'community of practitioners,' such as dancers, comes into play.

The salsa circuit, a paradigmatic space of diversity?

Numerous studies investigate cultural and artistic practices linking people in different places within translocal, transnational or global networks. While these practices differ starkly in their outreach, funding, and embeddedness within various national and international networks, the 'art worlds' in which they develop share some commonalities. Most importantly, in the case of many of the dance practices now being consumed by middle- and upper-class citizens in urban centres around the world, commodification has also led to a professionalization of teaching, which in turn has created new career opportunities for many dancers (Andrieu and Olivier 2017).

Salsa, a couple dance that has proliferated in many urban centres around the world, has been described as constituting the largest percentage of social dance commerce worldwide (McMains 2015: 311). Numerous salsa studios, weekend events in hotels, salsa holidays and tourism all form part of this market. Some dance professionals earn a living by teaching salsa dance to students all over Europe, North America and Asia, some as part of a local studio, while others, the so-called 'travelling artists,' move several times a month to teach and perform at events. They build and maintain social networks spanning the globe, with several important hubs on the imagi-

nary salsa map, such as Cuba, New York, Los Angeles and Milan. This transnational art world or 'salsa circuit' (Menet 2020) constitutes the unit of analysis for this study.

The dance floor has been analysed in previous literature as a space of inclusiveness, where the usual social hierarchies are reversed, and competence in the dance is the only factor that counts (Gilroy 1991). Also, when it comes to salsa dancing, several researchers have supported dancers' strong belief in salsa's openness to everyone (Skinner 2007). My empirical data also show that one of salsa's attractions lies in its alleged ability to overcome social markers of difference, such as race, ethnicity, class and age. As stated in the opening quote of this paper, salsa dancers often describe salsa as a kinetic language that opens up possibilities to travel and meet people who are linked in a transnational 'salsa community.' In the words of a US- based travelling salsa artist:

> I think the beauty of salsa is its diversity and how accepting it is to all demographics, all different cultures, age groups, income levels, education levels, whatever. (…) And I think that the range of people actually contributes to what this dance is. It's nice to have different cultures represented; they make it richer.

Many dancers see the salsa floor as a space where the boundaries of class, ethnic and religious categories are blurred, allowing differently positioned dancers to meet and embody different identities or a 'cosmopolitan subjectivity' (Hutchinson 2014).

However, scholars have also criticized salsa's inclusive narrative for several reasons: first, Boulila (2018) highlights the racialized underpinnings of 'salsa cosmopolitanism' and the power processes that inform salsa's commodification. She writes: 'Although salsa as an individual movement can be interpreted and performed by *any body*, not all bodies have the same access to symbolic and material systems of power' (Boulila 2018: 6). A second critique of salsa's celebratory diversity narrative is formulated by Hutchinson (2014: 13), underscoring the importance of class in an analysis of salsa: Although the dance floor at salsa festivals 'may create an ethnically inclusive community, it is one with little class diversity.' Indeed, the possibility of connecting with other salsa dancers in the circuit is limited to those who have access to the necessary time and economic means. That said, in a transnational social field, class also needs to be discussed in relation to mobility, which this article sets out to do through the analysis of dancers' im/mobile careers. In focusing on their underlying im/mobilities, this paper contributes to the debate on salsa cosmopolitanism by adding nuance to its image of inclusiveness.

Existing studies of salsa often focus on dance students or the development of local dance scenes in what could be termed a 'methodological localism' (exceptions are McMains 2015 and Djebbari 2019). Many of these studies tend to conceptualize salsa through a global/local dichotomy, ignoring the ties between these sites and the diverse mobility practices of salsa dance professionals. Hence, less is known about dance professionals who build careers and transform salsa (mainly through teaching) into a lifestyle and livelihood. This paper sets out to ask what a different research approach could add to similar studies in order to broaden our understanding of current global processes.

A research design with a focus on im/mobile careers

This paper argues that an exploration of the im/mobile careers of (migrant and non-migrant) artists has several advantages, allowing us to move beyond nineteenth-century binary categories. Similar concepts have been used in studies with artists. Kiwan and Meinhof (2011) suggested a transnational and translocal network model as appropriate in studying African musicians' careers between different 'human or spatial hubs' in the Global North and South. Martiniello and Rea (2014: 1081) developed the notion of the 'migratory career' to illuminate the importance of arts and culture in the lives of migrants and to open up 'perspectives to make sense of the specific migration experience and circulation of

artists who very often connect different parts of the world with their artistic practice.' This fruitful approach allows the simultaneous study of incorporation processes in both country of origin and destination. However, while these approaches illuminate the importance of music and dance in social life, they often focus solely on people categorized as migrants.

Navarro (this issue) illustrates how a focus on artists' various mobilities is helpful in analysing the diversity of social and artistic positions within a 'music scene.' Other mobility scholars have developed an interest in migration routes and journeys. Studying im/mobility trajectories is particularly fruitful for acknowledging the dynamism of these journeys to overcome 'the simplistic notion that the outcome of migration solely depends on a momentous go/non-go decision in a country of origin' (Schapendonk, Bolay and Dahinden 2020: 3243). Based on these reflections, I conceptualize the im/mobile career as potentially characterized by a continuous process of development, transnationally or translocally, including the possibility of numerous stays in different places.

I include a transnational perspective in the analysis of careers to allow for a combination of a focus on individual action with a focus on social structural dynamics. In a transnational social field, the question of who can travel and under what conditions is co-constituted by class. Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013: 196) state that class has often been defined based on differential access to a range of resources. Instead, they put forward a regimes-of-mobility approach' to 'expand this understanding so the ability and legal right to travel become one of the criteria by which class is defined and class privilege upheld.' Class is therefore not only defined as financial access, it also relates to people's legal status and their associated rights to travel. This argument is in line with a politics of mobility perspective, which theorizes mobility as an unequally distributed resource that individuals may access and mobilize under certain conditions (Moret 2016). For salsa dance professionals aspiring to participate in the salsa circuit, travel is an important practice in accessing symbolic and material resources.

The empirical data presented in this article were collected during a multi-sited ethnographic research project with salsa dancers in Europe and Cuba between 2013 and 2017. The paper focuses on three case studies chosen from 23 semi-structured interviews I conducted with salsa dance professionals, defined as dancers making a living mainly from teaching activities. I conducted multi-sited fieldwork including participant observation at salsa festivals in European cities and tourist dance spaces in Cuba, thus following the social practices of a diverse set of actors in multiple contexts using a mobile research strategy. Inspired by a grounded theory approach, I chose interviewees based on a theoretical sampling strategy (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In theoretical sampling, cases are chosen based on their relevance to the 'theory' that is to be developed, rather than for their representativeness of the population under question (Flick 2014: 173). The dancers I spoke to included male and female dancers from various countries of origin who were at different stages of their salsa careers.

Im/mobile careers of salsa dance professionals

In this section, I focus on the im/mobile careers of three salsa dance professionals to examine the obstacles these dancers must overcome, as well as the ways they position themselves to take part in the transnational salsa circuit.[1] The stories reveal some of the ongoing power struggles within the salsa circuit that unfold at the intersections of gendered and racialized bodies, salsa's commodification and issues of class (which includes access to mobility). The three stories shed light on the career possibilities available to differently positioned dancers by virtue of salsa's global diffusion and popularity. I chose the three cases for their diversity in terms of the danc-

[1] This section draws on and enhances a chapter of my book *Entangled mobilities in the transnational salsa circuit* (2020).

ers' positions in the transnational field of salsa. However, it is important to note that this choice is not representative in terms of the gendered mobility dynamics of salsa dancers in general. In other words, while this article discusses the im/mobility stories of two women and one man, this selection of case studies is not meant to suggest that female dancers are more mobile than male dancers. I will start with Melanie, a German salsa dance professional in her mid-forties at the time of the interview; then present the story of Yanet, a Cuban salsa dance professional in her twenties, circulating back-and-forth between Cuba and Europe; and finally develop the case of Frank, a Cuban salsa dance professional in his forties, based in Cuba.[2]

From travelling artist to local dance studio owner

Melanie was born in a German city and started ballroom dancing at an early age. In her twenties, she encountered salsa on holiday in Miami, caught the 'salsa virus' and started regularly attending the few clubs that played salsa music back home. As she recalled during the interview, she was soon asked to share her dancing skills and started teaching others alongside her daytime job as an industrial management assistant. For Melanie, salsa allowed her to tap into an energy, joy and passion that she now wanted to transmit.

> I no longer felt German; I never felt German. Suddenly I found my vocation, truly, in dance, in passion. And indirectly or directly I also passed this onto my students in class; they learned much more than just steps with me, but also learned to feel themselves, to achieve self-worth. They were seeking something in the somewhat boring German everyday life, and discovered through dance and music a joy of life that fulfilled them, that fulfilled me.

Melanie embodied an 'alternative sense of self' (Bosse 2008: 60) that she perceives to be more vibrant than her German self. Smiling, she told me that people often thought she was 'a Latina or Spanish'. For Melanie, dancing salsa provides her with a space in which to perform an alternative set of identifications in terms not only of national identity, but also gender, as described below.

Once Melanie had found her calling, she proceeded to dance at events, where she met her dance partner, and together they slowly established a name in the transnational salsa circuit. Here her German passport, which allows her to travel freely to many countries, was helpful. During the 1990s, salsa events started to be established in cities all over Europe and North America, and Melanie and her dance partner were invited to perform their show and teach paying salsa students at these events. For salsa dancers, partnership is central, because in the heteronormative space of salsa events, couples are invited to teach men and women, while solo dancers are rarely invited. There was, however, one exception: Melanie proudly told me that she was one of the first to teach ladies' styling, a set of movements that focuses on specific body parts such as the hips, upper torso and arms, mostly performed by female dancers. As she mixed salsa movements with movements from other dances such as tango, she was soon asked to teach her special styling at events. Melanie thus found herself occupying a niche in salsa teaching even after breaking up with her dance partner.

After ten years working at events in many places and countries, Melanie decided to settle down and open her own dance studio in her native city. In her mid-forties at the time of the interview, she had successfully been running the studio for many years, employing several dance teachers alongside herself. She had stopped travelling to events when she became a mother a few years previously. She believed that, besides her passion, developing a specific teaching concept 'for the Germans' was key to her success.

> They teach very badly, the Latinos. Yes, Cubans are great dancers, but they don't have any idea how to teach Germans. I know how Germans think and I can get a feel for them, and I developed a method so they can learn and feel themselves better.

[2] All names and some personal details have been changed to preserve the anonymity of participants.

The proliferation of dance studios and salsa events with paying guests in the 1990s meant that formalized teaching and specific methods of teaching became more important. As McMains (2015) shows, dancers at this time implemented teaching techniques they had learned in standardized ballroom dancing. Put simply, salsa dancing was presented as a series of steps on counts that need to be acquired in the specific context of a dance lesson (Urquía 2005). Here Melanie draws on this vision and a set of culturalist ideas of methodical Germans versus less organized Latinos/Latinas or Cubans. When she presents the latter as great dancers, she repeats a common discourse that assumes that racialized people are naturally endowed with dancing skills, though lacking the necessary teaching skills. This argument relies on a problematic construction of 'the other' that not only reproduces colonial categories but is also particularly dangerous in an immigrant context, where the association of emotionality or excessive sexuality with non-white bodies may serve to legitimize unequal treatment or exclusion (McMains 2016). I observed several European-born dancers using this argument as a way to distinguish themselves from Cuban dancers, who might be better positioned in terms of the 'authenticity value' attached to their dancing.

Back-and-forth between Havana and Europe

Among dancers in the salsa circuit, the origins of salsa music and dance are hotly debated, though on the imaginary salsa map, Cuba holds a special place as (one of) the place(s) from which today's commercialized salsa originated. Many European dancers told me that they had been in Cuba at least once to take dance or, occasionally, percussion lessons. For some adepts of *Salsa Cubana*, or what in Cuba is called *casino*, the trip to Cuba is seen as a 'rite of passage' in an individual's salsa career. In this, the rumba plays a particularly important role as a marker of authenticity. Rumba is a dance with a complex history of colonial repression and stigmatization before its institutionalization by the socialist government after the revolution of 1959, and later its inscription on the UNESCO List of Intangible Heritage in 2016. Despite its increasing public recognition, not least at salsa events around the world, practitioners of rumba in Cuba are still often racialized and associated with low social status (Ana 2017). At European salsa events, rumba movements are often taught by Cuban salsa instructors who found that stressing the so-called 'Afro-Cuban' origin of their dance proves a fruitful marketing strategy in the competitive field of teaching opportunities.

One of the successful teachers of this style was Yanet, whom I first met when she was teaching a workshop in a big dance school in a Swiss city. One and a half years later, I joined her and a group of students on a dance trip to Havana.

Yanet was born in Havana and grew up in a family of musicians and dancers, identifying as Afro-Cuban. As a teenager, she assisted her family members in teaching groups of European students. Later, she danced in several performance groups and continued teaching tourists as opportunities arose. Nevertheless, as she stated in the interview, she wanted to see something else: 'I always wanted to travel, get to know cultures, people, and I was always very interested in culture. So I said to myself, I could show them my own culture; I've always wished to do that.'

With no economic means, no official diploma from any of the state's dance academies and without the necessary travel documents, leaving Cuba and following such a cosmopolitan lifestyle was not possible for Yanet, as is the case for many other street dancers in Havana. Travel was only made possible when she met and fell in love with a German man who eventually became her husband. As she remembered during the interview, her future husband had invited her to Germany before their marriage, but she was not able to obtain the required visa. Instead the couple married in Cuba, after which the German authorities allowed her entry to the country. Another six months passed before she could leave Cuba because she had to wait for authorization to live

in a foreign country. Finally, she moved to Germany at the age of 23.

Once there, Yanet started to learn German and started teaching salsa and rumba in an established salsa school, building on her teaching experience in Havana. At the same time, Yanet was introduced to the festival circuit through an old Cuban friend of her family who already performed at several festivals annually. She performed with him and in this way started her career, performing and teaching at salsa festivals at weekends. She was now able to obtain a residence permit and thus travel to other European countries with no restrictions. In this way, through her dancing, her dream of travelling and participating in the cosmopolitan lifestyle of the salsa circuit came true.

As for many other non-European dancers I talked to, personal social networks such as friends or family members were decisive in dancers launching a career at European festivals. Making contacts and then organizing the necessary documents to obtain the right to travel and stay are barriers few dancers are able to overcome. For Yanet, her German husband proved to be pivotal, allowing her to obtain a residence permit and access the local salsa scene in Germany. At the same time, she relied on contacts her family had established previously to access the salsa circuit and perform at festivals.

Once in Europe, Yanet quickly recognized a growing interest in the Afro-Cuban and folkloric dances she knew from her childhood. Parallel to her teaching and performance activities in Europe, she therefore started to organize teaching opportunities at European festivals for family members and friends still in Cuba. However, this proved to be difficult and financially prohibitive. Therefore, she decided to take her European dance students, whom she had met at workshops at salsa events all over Europe, to Cuba. Yanet advertises her dance holidays with slogans such as 'authentic experience' and 'cultural roots'. In doing so, she builds on a specific understanding of 'Cubanness' that she performs on particular occasions.

She describes herself as a cultural broker, enabling friends and family in Cuba 'to have a job and transmit their culture.' At the same time, she emphasizes that dance students from Europe 'also get something,' as they strive to learn the dances in the Cuban context. These tourists from Germany, France, Italy, Switzerland, Norway and other North and West European countries have the financial means to travel to Cuba and pay for dance lessons, simply requiring a tourist visa. The direction of movement here and Yanet's insuccess in organizing for Cuban dance students to come to Europe point to unequal global power dynamics. Yanet's trajectory shows how dancers, once participating in the salsa circuit themselves, may try to include other individuals, thus connecting the European salsa circuit with localized, immobilized dancers elsewhere.

Teaching incoming tourists

Since the 1990s, tourism in Cuba has been growing as a result of the authorities' efforts to develop international tourism as a path out of the economic hardship Cuba faced after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Many musicians and dancers engage in the informal tourist economy, attempting to share in the opportunities offered by the growth of cultural tourism. Tourists in Havana often seek a genuine experience of learning and dancing salsa in Cuba 'with Cuban dance partners'. Organizers thus advertise dance holiday packages, catering to the visitors' wish to dance with Cubans on Cuban soil.

One of the dancers teaching visitors in Havana is Frank, a man in his late forties who has been dancing and teaching *casino* for over twenty years. I met him during an organized salsa holiday where he was acting as a dance partner for female participants during lessons.

Frank learned to dance 'in the street,' as he told me, and never had any formal training. During his interview, he nevertheless insisted that he was a professional dance teacher, keen on passing his knowledge on to motivated people. Describing a French student who believed he knew the steps better than his Cuban teacher,

he stated: '*casino* is mine, it's Cuban. Nobody can take that away from me, it comes from my country.' Frank thus positioned himself as the rightful owner of Cuban dances, mobilizing a symbolic resource available to him in an otherwise restricted space for manoeuvre. While he enjoyed teaching European tourists, he also referred to the organizational challenges of his dependence on the seasonal rhythms of tourism. Whenever a befriended dance holiday organizer or a student called him to work, he had to drop everything else. At the same time, during the low season there was practically no work for dancers like him. Frank thus managed his life in Havana based on the influx of tourists and their requests.

Frank told me that he did not approve of the numerous young Cubans who left the island with tourists they had met in Havana's salsa space. He himself rarely had the opportunity to leave the country. The first time he was able to travel was when he was working as a tourist animator on a cruise ship, and the second time when he travelled with a performance group to several countries in Europe. He returned to Cuba and continued teaching salsa to tourists at a dance school in Havana, as well as working as a dancer for organized salsa holidays. His second attempt to teach at a small salsa event in Europe, organized by a dancer he had befriended, failed because he could not get the necessary visa: 'It's not that I don't like to travel, it's just that I haven't been given the opportunity yet. One day it will come, I don't despair.' Although Frank would like to travel to festivals in other countries and partake in the salsa circuit, he told me that he could only imagine travelling to another place if he could also work there: 'I'd like to travel, but for work. I don't like to go on holidays. You know why? The moment I go on holidays, I depend on another person (…) The bills go on you. (…) No! I have two hands and two feet.' He was conscious of the economic disparities between himself and his European students and discouraged by stories he had heard of men living abroad without work. Instead of becoming mobile himself, Frank remained in Havana, where he has been building up his professional career on the incoming flux of tourists. Facing asymmetric power dynamics, dancers like Frank find themselves at the edge of the salsa circuit, with no opportunity to partake in the transnational mobility of travelling artists, but capitalizing on the mobility of others.

Entangled mobilities and negotiated categories of difference

While the diversity narrative in salsa prevails at events that take place in Europe, the cases presented demonstrate that this diversity is built on differential access to resources and embedded in global inequalities. The careers of these three individual dance professionals shed light on some of the resources mobilized in the unfolding of im/mobile careers in the salsa circuit.

First, all three careers are built on cross-border mobility. Melanie initially travelled to many events, a fact that she still uses in the marketing of her local dance studio, and settled in a German city. Yanet built her mobile career based on her own back-and-forth mobility between European cities and Havana, while Frank's career and livelihood strategies in Havana depend on the mobility of European salsa students travelling to Cuba as tourists. Some dancers face considerable challenges when they wish to follow the routes of salsa's transnational dissemination, in particular Cuban dancers. These challenges are revealing of the barriers to physical mobility in our contemporary world, with its exclusionary migration regimes. Yanet's story demonstrates the importance of having access to mobility, which can be used strategically to generate other mobilities: once she had travelled to festivals, she met dance teachers at other schools who wished to organize dance trips to Cuba for their students. In this way, she uses her own mobility in the salsa circuit to trigger new mobilities, those of European salsa students visiting Havana, connecting the salsa circuit with her family and friends in Cuba. Once she had acquired the necessary legal status, she could convert her geographical mobility into social mobility (Moret 2016) and include her Cuban family in her success. Nevertheless,

Yanet's reflections on how to bring together her Cuban relatives with her European students are also revelatory in terms of the connections between mobility and immobility: as the mobility of one group (Cubans to Europe) proved to be too expensive and difficult to organize, Yanet decided to reverse the trajectory. However, this move was not possible for Frank because of his own immobile status.

The empirical material showing how the im/mobile careers of differently positioned dancers develop reveals the entanglement of dancers' mobilities. It sheds light on an often-neglected aspect of salsa and other artistic careers: while mobility is a central aspect of accessing salsa events and building a career, access to mobility is not distributed equally among salsa dancers. While some dancers of non-European citizenship manage to build mobile careers in Europe, the conditions under which this mobility occurs are quite different from that of dancers with European citizenship. At the same time, not all dancers do engage in mobility, as in some circumstances it is also possible to build a career in salsa without being mobile oneself.

Second, the im/mobile careers of salsa dance professionals illuminate underlying social processes as they develop along the lines of intersecting categories such as gender, ethnicity, race and class. All the presented dancers' careers were shaped by gendered representations, not least due to salsa's predominantly heteronormative character, which defines a dancers' role and movement vocabulary, and thus also teaching opportunities, from the outset. The so-called 'leader' role in salsa dancing is most often gendered as male, while the 'follower' role is mostly performed by female dancers. Elsewhere I have discussed in detail how these gender arrangements may affect dancers' careers, with female dancers having fewer opportunities to acquire a reputation in the teaching business (Menet 2020). Against this backdrop, it is interesting to consider how the three dancers discussed in this paper negotiated such challenges. While in Europe, Yanet successfully teamed up with an already well-established dance partner, and together they stressed their Cuban origins, Melanie was able to perform a specific type of femininity to establish a niche based on the teaching of ladies' styling. Frank, on the contrary, was able to capitalize on the numerous female European salsa students who travelled to Cuba, serving as a dance partner for them. Gendered performance and identifications thus always intersect with ethnic and racial identifications.

Both the German and the Cuban dancer in Europe stressed national belonging as a form of symbolic capital, drawing on common clichés of German methodical ways of being and Cuban authenticity in salsa and particularly rumba. Reference to such reifying elements may also have harmful effects. In particular, Cuban dancers are confronted with mystified representations of their Cubanness, with a celebration of a supposedly Cuban 'joy of life' and 'sense of rhythm.' At the same time, they are excluded from recognition in the realm of teaching methods. In these unequal relations, dancers like Frank redefine their position as legitimate dance teachers through reference to their Cubanness. As seen in the salsa circuit, Cubanness (and sometimes so-called 'Latinness') forms a powerful marker of distinction. However, this valorization of difference also always transports a reifying element, as dancers are never recognized for their individual dancing style (in a show) or teaching methods (in a formal class setting). Rather, they are treated as part of a static group, leaving them with little room to manoeuvre. In a paper based on research with Palestinian contemporary dancers, Rodriguez Quinones (2022: 248) reveals how the professional recognition of these dancers is often based on discourses and representations of otherness, pointing to 'the subtle essentialization that underlies diversity celebration.' Such constructions of a 'radical difference' (ibid.) between dancers of Latino/a or Cuban origin and dancers of European origin, intersecting with other categories of difference, thus also influence dancers' career opportunities.

Conclusion

In this paper I have shown how fruitful it may be to bring into dialogue research in dance with studies of migration, mobilities and diversity. Through the im/mobile careers of three differently positioned salsa dance professionals, this article has explored the routes opened up by salsa dancing, connecting people on both sides of the Atlantic in many transnational practices. Interpretation of the empirical data has shown that, indeed, cosmopolitan subjectivities are available not only for an elite class but potentially for many differently positioned people (Reed 2016). However, it also demonstrates that salsa's success as a worldwide kinetic language is only one side of the story. When considering a diverse sample and shedding light on the unfolding of im/mobile careers, it becomes clear that global inequalities such as unequal access to mobility, ethnicized and racialized representations and gendered roles do not stop at the edge of the dance floor.

In terms of the reproduction of harmful biases in social science research, this discussion raises a series of questions regarding research design, the unit of analysis and the analysis of actors' discourses and embodied doings. If our methods do not simply describe the world, but also enact social realities, then the choice of our tools becomes a question of ontological politics. In this paper, I have therefore asked how we could approach issues of migration, mobility and forms of global inequalities from a dance-based perspective, and how this could be helpful for overcoming essentializing accounts and a sedentarism bias. Applying a multi-sited research approach and following the im/mobile careers of artists has undoubtedly some limits, not least regarding the common critique of multi-sited research as risking the sacrifice of depth for breadth (Salazar, Elliot and Norum 2017: 10). However, as this paper has argued, such an approach – as one example among many – has the potential to add new perspectives to familiar issues in several ways.

First, approaching the social world through the lens of dance allows us to work with a sample including categories of people that we do not usually consider together, thus addressing the problems of methodological nationalism. It becomes possible to move beyond static notions of migrancy, including the migrant-non-migrant dichotomy. Thus, my research sample included dancers who could otherwise be categorized as refugee, migrant, expat, tourist or local. Using this approach, a range of im/mobilities were considered in one single analytical framework, thus rendering visible relational aspects that would otherwise have remained hidden. It also made it possible to understand better how categories of difference are made relevant in the construction of careers.

Second, a focus on dance offers a salient frame for the analysis of performances and articulations of multiple categories of difference. Research on dance has amply shown its potential to grasp the seemingly contradictory identifications that dancing individuals embody (Aterianus-Owanga, Djebbari and Salzbrunn 2019; Djebbari 2019). In the salsa circuit, meanings circulate along with travelling bodies, and the salience of these categories may change within different contexts. This paper has explored how three differently positioned salsa dance professionals negotiate their legitimacy as professionals and build their careers, taking into account the intersections of gender, ethnicity, race and class. Much research on dance focuses on the staged performance as a site of 'heightened reflexivity' and a venue for the mediation and reification of difference (Reed 2016). This study, however, has focused on such performances beyond the stage or dance floor while keeping the same ontological openness in terms of how categories of difference and expressions of belonging are negotiated in the development of dance careers. Instead of simply applying categories on to individuals, this approach shows empirically which categories are made relevant in which social contexts.

Following the im/mobile careers of artists enables us to see connections and frictions that

would otherwise remain invisible. In his poetic ethnography of four Ivorian dancers in the US, Reed (2016: 280) convincingly argues that individual life stories and performances are 'effective frames for understanding the mobile, transnational lives' of his research participants. Similarly, in this paper I have followed the social practices involved in dancers' constructions of their im/mobile careers with the aim of shedding light on the im/mobilities of otherwise less studied individuals. This approach illuminated how the lives of my research participants are entangled through a common dance practice, without losing sight of the barriers and boundaries that govern movement in our contemporary world.

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