

Íñigo Sánchez Fuarros (2012)

**Cubaneando en Barcelona. Música, migración y experiencia urbana**

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“Does a Cuban community exist in Barcelona?”<sup>1</sup> Íñigo Sánchez Fuarros asks in the preface to his study *Cubaneando en Barcelona*. Based on fieldwork he undertook for his doctoral thesis between 2003 and 2006, he examines the importance of music for the production of social spaces by the Cuban diaspora in Barcelona in three different locations frequented by Cubans in the Catalan capital. Sánchez Fuarros asks how music further serves in maintaining a feeling of belonging in situations of migrations, loss, and displacement. The introductory chapter on the study’s methodological approach and a historical contextualization of Cuban migration is followed by three chapters, each of which focuses on one location frequented by Cubans in Barcelona.

The first chapter depicts three “generations” of Cuban migration to Spain during the last six decades, whereby Sánchez Fuarros does not differentiate between male and female migrants, nor does he specify gender particularities: Firstly, exiles, consisting predominantly of white

middle-class Cubans who were against Castro and came right after the revolution; secondly, the “sons of the revolution”, who were also mainly white and among whom were many artists and writers that came during the 1980s and were disillusioned by the promises of the revolution; and, thirdly, migrants arriving from the mid-1990s on, who constitute a much more heterogeneous social and racial group that keeps close ties to the island thanks to new technologies and loosened travel restrictions (30). Respectively, the author underscores his understanding of diaspora as an open concept including distinct experiences and displacements all over the planet (31). To describe Cuban identity along musical imaginaries, Sánchez Fuarros refers greatly to Cuban authors (Antonio Benítez Rojo, Fernando Ortíz, José Martí, Alejandro de la Fuente). Since such an identity is a play between how one sees oneself, and how one is seen by the new society, music has also played a decisive role in cementing an exoticized colonial view of Cuba. Elaborating on the most common stereotypical perceptions of the island, Sánchez Fuarros claims

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1 “¿Existe una comunidad cubana en Barcelona?”

that “both scenarios, the sexual and the revolutionary, coincide in the fantasy of the possibility of the primitive-savage associated with the colonial gaze that the metropolis has historically projected onto geographic territories and exploited humans” (49, my translation). However, Sánchez Fuarros observes how individuals can at the same time reenact related images. As he shows by observing the practices of a Cuban dancer in a Barcelona nightclub and with reference to Critical Race scholars Stuart Hall and bell hooks, individual actors can appropriate images such as the oversexualized “Cuban mulata” and fill it with new meaning (104-08).

The first case study in chapter two focuses on La Paladar del Son, a Cuban restaurant with live music, which turns the place into a “total stage” of interaction between musicians and dancers, especially on Sundays and during special events such as festivals. Aside from rather traditional music styles, the place is decorated with photographs and objects which evoke a nostalgic image of the island, thus creating a shared memory. According to Sánchez Fuarros the decoration, the food, the dynamics of space, and above all, the music, turn La Paladar del Son into an intermediate space between private and public, into a “home” which creates the illusion of a community every week (59).

The club Habana-Barcelona in the fashionable La Barceloneta district does not cater to such stereotypical notions of Cuba, as the second case study in chapter three demonstrates. The club rather

resembles a nightclub in contemporary Havana. A Cuban DJ (taking turns with non-Cuban DJs) plays contemporary Cuban dance music, and the public is more Latino and mixed than in the Paladar. The nexus to the island is maintained through the “sonic continuity” (101) of the music played throughout the day. The chapter focuses on how the incorporated actualization of a collective notion of *cubanía* is expressed through the body-in-movement constructed through a play with recognition and difference on the dance floor producing a “space in movement”<sup>2</sup> (101).

The fourth chapter focuses on an event called “Domingo de la Rumba”<sup>3</sup>, a space for Cuban folklore music reminding of neighborhood and community gatherings in Cuba. The “Domingo de la Rumba” started as a get-together of Cuban musicians in a public park in Barcelona. Soon, the event was moved to a community center to host reunions of amateur and semi-professional musicians to celebrate the “spontaneous rumba” (in contrast to the “prepared rumba” or “commercial rumba” played on stages for an audience) in a participatory and interactive manner. Traditionally, the rumba has been the public expression of subaltern and dispossessed subjects in Cuban society, especially of the Afro-Cuban population in the poorest neighborhoods. While elaborating on the importance of Afro-Cuban elements and the references to Afro-Cuban religions during these encounters, the chapter also

2 „espacio en movimiento“

3 „Rumba Sunday“

gives an insightful excursus to racism in Cuba before and after the Revolution and the problematic dimension of the concept of a presumed “mestizaje” (150-5). As long as the “Domingo de la Rumba” was taking place at the community center, it was free of charge and food and drinks could be brought, thus attracting numerous families with kids and not-so-well-off Cubans residing in Barcelona. When the event was transferred to a restaurant and the organizer had to charge an entrance fee, the Rumba Sundays soon disappeared.

The opening phrase, “this feels like Cuba!”<sup>4</sup> uttered by one Cuban teenager to another in a nightclub in Barcelona, seems to be paradigmatic of Sánchez Fuarros’ findings: it points at the question of whether a Cuban community exists in Barcelona as being rather a rhetorical one. The study makes visible a community by bringing to the forefront a perspective that enjoys little attention in social studies to migrant communities. As the three case studies demonstrate, the participation in different forms of musical practices makes Cubans visible as a group and strengthens their ties with the new society, serving as a “resource” for action and agency such as the appropriation and re-signification of certain urban spaces through musical practices. The study follows a transdisciplinary approach rooted in anthropology and recent ethnomusicological practices and is further informed by urban studies, postcolonial studies, gender studies, diaspora studies, performance studies, and dance

studies. References to the book in a number of newer studies on music and (migration) indicate the study’s relevance to a broad field of study. A resume or outlook summing up possible theoretical contributions to conceptualizations of diaspora and to further migration studies would have been helpful. However, the study provides a vivid example of how to conceptualize, compose and write an excellent transdisciplinary anthropological study. The book is elegantly written, inserting the quotes and fieldwork notes in a smooth narrative manner that makes the text a pleasure to read.

4 “¡Esto parece Cuba!”