3 Shaking that ass: Reggaetón as an embodiment of "low culture" to mark difference and privilege in contemporary Havana[1]

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The article explores the popularity of reggaetón music in contemporary Havana in order to trace hierarchies between different expressions of female eroticism. It further analyzes how sexual boundaries are consolidated through portraying certain gendered values as "in/correct." The article is based on research among inhabitants in a relatively privileged section of Havana called Vedado, sometimes referred to as a white middle class *barrio*. The article explores how the interlocutors of the study, after the economic crisis in the 1990s, struggle to re-assert a position of privilege through making use of the gendered and sexualized inscriptions in the concept "cultural level." This is a common marker of difference that has strongly classed and racialized connotations, which the author argues is gaining new importance in contemporary Cuba. As a key example, the dance style of reggaetón is portrayed as an embodiment of "low culture." The article analyzes one everyday situation in detail, in which reggaetón plays a crucial role in drawing moral boundaries around dancing bodies. The discussion shows how the ascription of "low culture" to some reggaetón dancing bodies runs parallel to the ascription of "incorrect" gendered values. The article finally argues that in post-crisis Cuba, the concept of "cultural level" is being revitalized among the white middle class as a tool to re-establish an earlier position of privilege, relying heavily on the gendered and sexualized inscriptions of the concept.

El artículo explora la popularidad de la música reguetón en la Habana contemporánea, para examinar las jerarquías entre diferentes expresiones de erotismo femenino. Además, el artículo analiza la consolidación de fronteras a través de la representación de ciertos valores de género como 'in/correctos'. El artículo está basado en un estudio entre habitantes de El Vedado, un barrio relativamente privilegiado en la Ciudad de la Habana, al cual a veces se refiere como un barrio de clase media blanca. El artículo explora cómo los interlocutores de este estudio, después de la crisis económica de los años 90, se esfuerzan en reafirmar una posición privilegiada haciendo uso de inscripciones generizadas y sexualizadas del concepto de "nivel cultural". Éste es un marcador de diferencia común con fuertes connotaciones de clase y raciales, y la autora argumenta que éste concepto es cada vez más importante en la Cuba contemporánea. Un ejemplo clave serían las referencias al estilo de baile reguetón como una corporalización de "baja cultura". El artículo analiza una situación cotidiana al detalle, en la cual el reguetón juega un rol clave para delinear límites morales alrededor de cuerpos que bailan. El argumento muestra cómo la atribución de "baja cultura" a algunos cuerpos que bailan reguetón es paralelo a la atribución de valores de género "in/correctos". Para concluir, la autora sostiene que en la Cuba pos-crisis, el concepto "nivel cultural" se está re-vitalizando entre la clase media blanca como una forma de restablecer una antigua posición de privilegio, basándose en las inscripciones generizadas y sexualizadas del concepto.

This article takes the popularity of the music and dance style reggaetón in contemporary Havana as a point of departure to trace hierarchies between different expressions of female eroticism. The article explores how encouraged forms of eroticism are contrasted with a counter-image of "oversexualization," and shows that these boundaries are consolidated through portraying certain gendered values as "in/correct."

The article is based on research among interlocutors from the relatively privileged *barrio* Vedado, which is sometimes referred to as a "middle class" section of Havana (see Stout 2008: 724). Vedado is also a "whiter" section of Havana compared to other central *barrios*. This is a location of particular analytical interest at the current moment of Cuba's history. At present, the white middle class in Havana is struggling to grapple with their new position following the economic crisis in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet bloc (see, e.g., Espina Prieto 2004). The crisis brought with it new and growing economic inequalities and the middle class could no longer count on historic privileges. This article explores how inhabitants in Vedado struggle to re-assert a position of privilege in post-crisis Cuba, making use of the gendered and sexualized inscriptions in the concept "cultural level." The analysis is developed through a detailed reading of the moral distance that was marked against reggaetón music and dance.

Reggaetón

The interlocutors of this study often complained about what they called the "oversexualization" of Cuban society and popular culture. The growing popularity of the musical style reggaetón[2] was presented as the prime illustration of this "oversexualization." Reggaetón music typically has sexually explicit lyrics, and in Cuba the covers of reggaetón CDs are often illustrated with photos from pornographic magazines. Reggaetón was ever present in Havana at the time of this study, and its characteristic beat sounded everywhere; on radio and TV, at parties, people's homes, in taxis, kiosks, and street vendors' booths.

One common argument was that "reggaetón corrupts children." One woman in her early thirties commented, "Children of today are much less innocent than when we were children. Now there is sex on TV all the time. And the reggaetón – the lyrics are over-explicit. They are all about the ass [*el culito*] and the pubis." She complained about her niece's father who gave his daughter reggaetón CDs for her birthday, "So I tell him, 'Listen to the lyrics! You have to raise your daughter; think about what you give her!'"

Among the white middle class of Vedado, reggaetón was generally referred to with contempt. In 2006 I did an interview with Fernando, a man in his late twenties who was active in the Communist Youth League (UJC, *Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas*).

Silje: What do you think of reggaetón music?
Fernando: I don't know, I don't like it.
Silje: But what do you think, about… the music, the lyrics.
Fernando: I don't know why it has come into fashion. It's probably because it's so simple, so simple, it doesn't require any comprehension or having a wide culture to accept it, far from it.
It has become very popular, it has become popular above all among adolescents, and I really see that as a danger. Even that values will be lost. Because the reggaetón songs don't transmit any value. On the contrary, all they do is to encourage *machista* [approx. male chauvinist] feelings, degradation of women, exaltation of man's virile values, things like that. And that I'm better than you, there's a certain competition among everyone, some even say, like, so-and-so [Fulano] is better. So these values don't seem correct to me. And, I don't like it, I usually say that this music is a neuron destroyer.
Silje: Come again?
Fernando: Neuron destroyer [laughs].
Silje: So you think that this affects people's values, or…?
Fernando: Yes, sometimes. There are two forms that one can… Almost always the people who listen to that… The thing is that it doesn't seem correct to me just to accept those lyrics. Just hear them and accept them. But well. There are people who don't really go with that, they dance, because it's true that it has a rhythm that sticks, it's very infectious, so people, well, they dance, and that's what it's made for, for dancing. And they try not to hear the lyrics so much, instead, it's good for dancing, for having a good time, and they forget a little bit about that.
But others don't. There are even those who don't dance, and learn the lyrics. So you can see that they don't like to dance, because they're shy, but they know all the songs. And they even repeat them with pride – right? – because they know the song. And they repeat all of it.
So, they come to believe what it's saying, this discourse that appears there, they incorporate it, sometimes, unconsciously. Unconsciously. They incorporate it, and then you can see it reflected in their attitudes. Above all in adolescents.
And it affects both males and females. And the females are relegated to the sexual role, the sexual object that is represented in the music. Just a sexual object. Set out in all the songs. A sexual object, an object to compete for, by men, a trophy. And we're all supposed to fight for that trophy, to dominate it, to conquer it, but in the end there's no value there for the woman. She has no rights, it's the height [emphasized] of *machismo*. It's like a musical representation of *machismo*.

Fernando almost admitted that he occasionally danced to reggaetón – "it's true that it has a rhythm that sticks." At the same time, he portrayed himself as able to listen to the lyrics with a critical distance. He made sure to establish an explicit distinction between "us" – who are educated, conscious, and intelligent enough to overlook the substance of the reggaetón lyrics – and those who were portrayed as listening "unconsciously." Thus, Fernando argued, there was a risk that adolescents or those who did not have a very "wide culture" would incorporate the "values" of reggaetón lyrics. Consequently, the popularity of reggaetón was dangerous.

Fernando attributed the popularity of reggaetón to the lack of comprehension and "culture" of the reggaetón audience. "Culture" or "cultural level" is a common marker of difference in the Cuban context. One can talk about having "(high) culture" or "low culture," or a high or low "cultural level." According to Mette Rundle, to *have* cultural level in this context includes "moderation, decency, and restraint" as well as an "emphasis on non-promiscuous behavior, and preferences in style and taste of music, food, hair and clothing" (Rundle 2001: 8). Rundle argues that the discourse of "cultural level" has "become an idiom in which to articulate racialised and classed ideas of morality and behavior, without acknowledging it as such" (Rundle 2001: 8). Similarly, Nadine Fernandez suggests seeing "low culture" as "a class discourse embedded with a racial one" (Fernandez 2010: 138). In this context, playing on "high cultural values" and distancing oneself from "low culture" can work as symbolic strategies of "whitening" (see, e.g., ibid.: 137).

I argue that in today's post-crisis in Cuba, the concept of "cultural level" has been revitalized to establish a position of privilege, relying heavily on the gendered and sexualized inscriptions of this concept. The rest of this article traces this process through examples from everyday encounters, after a brief contextualization of these matters in the context of revolutionary Cuba.

Official debate

The popularity of reggaetón music has been debated in official state media, for instance among columnists in the newspaper *Juventud Rebelde*, which is published by the Communist Youth League (UJC) (see also Fairley 2006: 475). A couple of years ago, there was an extended debate in the online edition of this newspaper on the pros and cons of reggaetón (for a more recent example, see Córdova 2011). In this debate, one musician suggested that reggaetón implied a musical fall-back, and a cultural centre tried to raise interest in the classical Cuban dance style *danzón* to counteract the popularity of reggaetón among

youth (Castro Medel 2005; Caballero 2009). One article made the point that the "vulgarities" of reggaetón are not new, and that the same people who were fans of the Beatles in the 1960s now lash out against the reggaetón fans in the same pejorative terms that were once used against them (*Juventud Rebelde* 2006).

The columnist Julio Martínez Molina took a very critical stance in the debate. He characterized reggaetón as aggressive, offensive, vulgar, pornographic, and barbarian. Moreover, he suggested that reggaetón is degrading to women and represents an animalization of eroticism (Martínez Molina 2007a, 2007b). However, Martínez Molina made sure to point out that he "does not have Norwegian blood nor is a descendant of puritans" (Martínez Molina 2007c), that is, that he was not critical of the erotic content of this music *per se*.

The most positive stance was taken by art critic Rufo Caballero (Caballero 2009), who stated that he likes reggaetón and calls those who attack reggaetón "censors in the name of good taste, of high culture" (ibid.). He argued that reggaetón is not vulgar at all but represents a "culture from the street" that jokes with the "Cuban macho" but should not be taken at face value. Moreover, Caballero suggested that reggaetón is filled with a lot of "Cubanness," and he can thus "not see any problem around the legitimacy of this kind of music" (ibid.; see also Estrada Betancourt 2009).

It is interesting how "Cubanness" is used as an argument in this debate, both to put the legitimacy of reggaetón in question and, inversely, to defend the same. For instance, through the contrast between reggaetón and the classical Cuban dance style *danzón*, the latter is automatically ascribed a higher value for its traditional Cuban authenticity. Also, we saw that Martínez Molina found it necessary to point out that his critique against reggaetón did not make him a cold northerner. This reflects a contrast between a positive erotization of "Cubanness" on the one hand, and a barbarian "animalization" of eroticism represented by reggaetón on the other. In comparison, the opposite stance, the defenders of reggaetón, choose to point to its alleged "Cubanness" to portray this music as more "legitimate."

Fernando's explanation of his contempt for reggaetón above reflected many of the same arguments as the debate in *Juventud Rebelde*. He too argued that reggaetón lyrics are offensive and degrading to women. Fernando's reasoning, being a member of the UJC, and the semi-official debate in the online edition of the UJC newspaper *Juventud Rebelde*, are interesting because their summary of the "incorrect values" represented by reggaetón are strikingly similar to the terms in which sexual education has been developed in Cuba.

Sexual education

In revolutionary Cuba, sexual education was initiated in the 1970s (Smith and Padula 1996: 174; see also Krause-Fuchs 2007). Sexual education was considered to be a task for public health as well as psychological education and a political-ideological initiative; as "an essential step in the development of the new socialist person" (Leiner 1994: 69). The project of sexual education strove to undermine what were considered traditional sexual prejudices and taboos, "vestiges of the past," of prerevolutionary Cuba (ibid.: 68). In short, sexual education was considered a means to create equality between men and women. A resolution from the First Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) in 1975 stated:

> A new morality exists, and because of it, new relations of equality between men and women have arisen. The new generation must leave behind the remainders of discrimination. The joint action of the whole society is to praise women and teach our children and youngsters the traditional chivalry of our people in its new proletarian dimensions.
> Adequate sex education will have a positive impact on the social relations between men and women, starting in the home, and scientifically reinforced in school, as presented in the study plans for sex education. The Youth Organizations must steer people towards normal, sound and fraternal relations among boys and girls, stimulate the harmonious development of young people and contribute to the establishment of relations of mutual cooperation in carrying out social duties, in the home and in the education of children. (PCC congress, cited in Leiner 1994: 69)

The norms that should accompany sexual behavior were formulated in relation to the new socialist society. Sexual education encouraged heterosexual eroticism (Guillard Limonta 2009: 66). What age young people started to have sex was considered less important; instead, sexual education focused on the *values* that should accompany "socialist sexuality," such as love, solidarity, cooperation, mutual respect, and equality (Leiner 1994: 73; Smith and Padula 1996: 174ff.).

Within this new "socialist sexuality," the gendered double standard should be eliminated (Smith and Padula 1996: 175). The Catholic ideal of female chastity and expectation of female virginity was termed "the most anachronistic symbol of woman's devaluation and a sign of woman's servitude" (Leiner 1994: 82). Instead, sexual education explicitly encouraged heterosexual female eroticism, it "challenged the traditional veneration of female virginity and sought to teach both men and women that women can and should enjoy their sexuality" (Smith 1992: 188). These ideals are also reflected in current educational television programs and campaigns. For instance, female eroticism is relatively frequently

discussed in television programs such as *Cuando una mujer*, a program designed by the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC). Norma Guillard Limonta sums up:

> Women can now consciously separate pleasure from reproduction and enjoy their sexuality according to their individual needs. Autoeroticism has been validated, sex can be enjoyed before and after marriage, even during adolescence, and sexuality can be experienced in more intense ways. (Guillard Limonta 2009: 66)[3]

As the quote from the 1975 PCC congress clearly illustrates, from the outset sexual education intended to teach sexual behavior that was considered "normal" and "sound." This included that sex should be practiced within monogamous heterosexual love relationships and stressed "a regard for reproduction as an essential component of sexuality" (Smith 1992: 188). Lois Smith and Alfred Padula suggest that "Castro would attempt to mold sexuality to serve the revolution" (Smith and Padula 1996: 169). Sexual education could be read as a means to "tame" "uncontrolled" sexual expressions and instead encourage sexual behavior of a kind that was considered compatible with "correct" socialist values. An important ingredient in these values was the ideal of equality between men and women.

Cuban sexual education has thus encouraged heterosexual eroticism while stressing that this should be accompanied by "correct" values. In my interpretation, sexual education has been constructed against a counter-image of uncontrolled sexual expressions that must be "molded" to fit socialist society. This counter-image is very similar to the use of reggaetón by its critics: as an illustration of a negative "oversexualization" of Cuban society and popular culture. Importantly, neither sexual education nor the critics of reggaetón criticize a positive eroticism, but they make use of a similar implicit contrasting image of a "sexual other" that is out of control. The "sound" sexual values that have been taught in sexual education – such as the importance of stable monogamous couple relationships of mutual respect and solidarity in which sex is based on love, in contrast to the risks and dangers of "promiscuity" – are the same values used by the critics of reggaetón to represent this music in terms of "oversexualization" and male chauvinism.

Importantly, "oversexualization" or "incorrect" sexual values are closely connected with certain gendered ideals. Sexual education was created as a political project to enhance equality and counter the gendered double standard for sexual behavior. The main criticism of reggaetón is that it is degrading to women, who are treated as sexual objects. Thus, in both cases there is a tight connection between a positive and celebrated eroticism and the specific gendered ideals that should accompany it so that it will not stray out of control.

Reggaetón as an embodiment of "low culture"

To elaborate on this point, a situation from an everyday Havana will be presented at some length. The negotiations of this situation can be understood through the loading of reggaetón as a symbol of "low culture" among the white middle class in Vedado. Below, it is also shown how reggaetón becomes a marker of difference through conflating hierarchical sexual and gendered ideals.

One day during fieldwork I met with a group of friends at my place. We came to talk about an acquaintance we had in common, a young woman called Claudia. My friend Zusel explained to me that Claudia looked like the ideal Cuban woman: "She is the typical *criollita*; with a waist and big buttocks and breasts." The subsequent conversation was saturated with slightly condescending remarks that Claudia liked to "show off" her beauty. Luis complained that Claudia was so conscious of her beauty that she hardly made an effort to be sociable; she just wanted attention for her attractive looks.

From these intricately spun evaluations, it seemed that Claudia provoked a combination of admiration and envy. It was generally acknowledged that she had the ideal curvy body, and it was also clear that she excelled in skills of playful flirting. All the same, Claudia was somewhat belittled through suggestions that she was "nothing but" gorgeous and all too conscious of her envied eroticized position.

A while after this conversation I met Claudia at a party. The atmosphere was radiant and everyone danced wildly in a big group while smoking and drinking. A friend of the hosts arrived at the party, and the group dancing was interrupted as he and Claudia started to dance close in reggaetón style. Claudia shook her hips and moved her buttocks against his pelvis, which he thrust in a rhythmic manner towards her. The rest of the group watched them dance. While some smiled and nodded at their dance, one guy whispered to me, "*Ella se come lo que le pasa por delante* [lit. she eats everything in her path; in this context approx. she throws herself at anyone]." Another acquaintance named the different guys at the party that Claudia had been involved with. I asked him whether people talked about this, and he replied, "No, she's like this. She can do these kinds of things without people thinking that she's vulgar or a slut [*puta*]."

Later that night, another group of guests arrived at the party. It was a friend of the hosts who had brought some of his neighbors from a less central and less privileged part of Havana. The new guests, among them a woman named Tania, were only barely acquainted with the rest of the guests. After kissing us hello, they joined the dance floor and Tania organized a line dance. While most of us

were busy trying to organize our steps, Tania and Claudia stood out as the most exceptionally skilful dancers. They kept dancing as the line dissolved and the rest of the group watched.

Tania and Claudia both accentuated their moves in reggaetón style, shaking their hips and breasts to the rhythm.[4] The situation developed into a playful dance competition in which Tania seemed to gain the upper hand. Suddenly, Claudia started exaggerating her dance moves and the crowd laughed approvingly. Tania, for her part, turned to her boyfriend and danced as if going down on him, touching his body from head to toe and then turned around to move her buttocks against his pelvis. All the time she was dancing with him he looked away, smoking his cigarette.

This situation abounds with subtle references to a wider symbolism around reggaetón. In Cuba, reggaetón dance style is often summed up as "having sex with your clothes on" (see Fairley 2006: 475). At the party, both Claudia and Tania danced with typical reggaetón dance moves, shaking their hips and breasts when dancing alone, and with a back-to-front rhythmic hip-shaking towards male pelvises. As Tania finished off her dance performance, no one who was present at the party could but notice her boyfriend's studied disinterest as Tania was "going down" on him. This performance captured all the characteristics of reggaetón as defined by its critics: an eroticized demonstration of a male power position of sexual arrogance towards his "trophy."

Interestingly, the crowd reacted in different ways to Claudia's and Tania's performances. Claudia was explicitly considered "not vulgar" while Tania's finishing performance was met with raised eyebrows and condescending glances. The differing interpretations of their dance were hence not related to the reggaetón dance style per se. Rather, I would stress that reggaetón was used as a symbol in a process of othering, through differing ascriptions of detachment and irony to these two performances. Even though Tania turned out to be the superior reggaetón dancer, Claudia managed to skillfully outclass her through changing the rules of the game. As Claudia suddenly fell into playful and exaggerated moves, she demonstrated detachment from the classic reggaetón dance style. This was greeted with approval and cheers by the group, and Claudia managed to create an ironic "we." In contrast, Tania was not interpreted as consciously playing with clichés. Instead, the raised eyebrows in her direction seemed to reflect an interpretation of her performance as "buying into" the stereotype of reggaetón.

The contrasting interpretations of Claudia and Tania can be understood through the analysis of sociologist Beverley Skeggs of how cultural characteristics are used to fix certain groups into determined social positions, so as to enable others to become mobile and flexible. Skeggs writes:

> Some bodies can be expanded rather than condensed. At the same time they become a resource for others. […] some forms of culture are condensed and inscribed onto social groups and bodies that then mark them and restrict their movement in social space, whilst others are not but are able to become mobile and flexible. (Skeggs 2004: 1f.)

I suggest that the irony and detachment that Claudia used to change the rules of the game and consolidate group solidarity with her could be read as such an "expansion." She was read as a *performance*, which, in the words of Skeggs, "requires conscious action, it is knowledgeably and consciously enacted" (Skeggs 1997: 134). The condescending reaction to Tania, on the other hand, seemed to deny her the potential of a distant, detached performance, which I read in terms of a "condensation." Claudia could use the reggaetón symbolism as a resource – to simultaneously play with and distance herself from – while Tania was positioned by the same symbolism. Thus, the fixing and condensation of Tania was the condition of Claudia's mobility – irony, playfulness, detachment (see Skeggs 2004: 26). Skeggs argues that to impose fixity onto those from whom one claims moral distance through ascribing essential characteristics to them is a form of symbolic domination (ibid.: 4).

The differing interpretations of Claudia and Tania can be understood through the common view among my interlocutors of reggaetón as a symbol of "low culture." According to Fernando, who was introduced at the outset of the article, reggaetón was popular among the less educated because it was so "simple" that it did not require any comprehension or "wide culture." Reggaetón fans, he argued, "incorporated" the message of its lyrics and acted accordingly. But then there were other people – like him – who could listen to reggaetón music with distance and detachment without taking the lyrics seriously, and just dance to the contagious beat of the rhythm. In my reading of the situation above, Claudia's ironic performance was clearly ascribed the latter detachment. The essentializing reading of Tania, on the other hand, as "buying into" or "incorporating" the cliché of reggaetón, denied her this ironic distance.

Tania's superior reggaetón dance skills together with her "provocative" clothing and her living in a poorer part of Havana all melted into one to ascribe "low culture" to her. Thus, reggaetón became one of several markers of difference in the encounter between Claudia and Tania. Claudia managed to create an ironic "we," while Tania was interpreted as acting in line with the reggaetón symbolism for which my interlocutors had so much contempt.

After the party I walked home with Zusel and Ernesto. We talked about the events at the party and entered upon the subject of Tania and her friends.

> Ernesto: They're showing off. They are hottie wannabes [*Se hacen las jevitas ricas*]. That's the only thing they do, that's the only thing they have. They asked me to put on reggaetón music, or Michael Jackson. I told them that fortunately I didn't have that music. The blond girl [Tania] said to me, "You've got to be up to date with what's trendy! [*¡Hay que estar al tanto de la moda!*]"

Zusel said that she knew of Tania and her boyfriend through another friend. Suddenly, Zusel mentioned that Tania's boyfriend beat her.

> Silje: Why is she with him?
> Zusel: They're a good match, she wants a macho man [*machote*] who tells her that she's sexy.
> Silje: But why is such a hot girl with such an… un-attractive man?
> Zusel: You mean fat?
> Ernesto: Maybe because he gives her what she wants, she wants to feel sexy, he tells her that she is. She dances like that, not only for him, but for everyone else, for herself. She's hot, that is the only thing she is.
> Zusel: That woman has never had an orgasm in her whole life. She's acting all that, but she's so superficial and unhappy that she has never had an orgasm.

In this conversation Zusel and Ernesto concisely ascribed to Tania a number of interrelated characteristics. Some of their points will be approached here. First, the numerous and contradictory sexualizing references to Tania are explored. Second, the analysis turns to the suggestion that Tania wanted a *machote*, a macho man, together with the sudden mentioning of her boyfriend's abuse. I suggest that the ascription of these specific characteristics to Tania – characteristics that can also be interpreted in terms of reggaetón symbolism – were further means to ascribe "low culture" to her.

It is worth noting the terms used to frame Tania in the conversation above. Interestingly, the exact same wordings that were once used about Claudia were now used about Tania. Both Claudia and Tania were referred to as "just" hot, "nothing but," and "showing off." To again borrow from Skeggs, they were portrayed as "only appearance, lacking in substance" (Skeggs 1997: 108). However, there was a crucial difference between the irony and detachment ascribed to Claudia, and the interpretation of Tania. In the encounter between the two, these belittling characterizations *moved* from Claudia to Tania. In their

encounter, Claudia was *not* vulgar or "showing off"; instead, she was read as detached and playfully ironic. In contrast, all the belittling suggestions that were once used about Claudia were now ascribed to Tania, that she was "showing off" and "nothing but hot."

Tania was recurrently referred to as "acting" or being a "wannabe." The verb used was "*hacerse*," which in this context means to pretend, to play or act something. Tania *se hace* – acts – the hot chick; she is a "hottie wannabe." *Se hace* – she pretends – to be a woman who has orgasms. *Hacerse* may also mean to "become" something, and this meaning could potentially ascribe to Tania a conscious performance, that is, a certain mobility (Skeggs 2004: 1f.). However, in my interpretation of the situation, this terminology was not used to ascribe to Tania the same ironic detachment that was ascribed to Claudia's performance. The essentializing reading of Tania as buying into the cliché of reggaetón opens rather to a revelation of her as a "fake," as "acting" something that she is not. If read in relation to the statement that "she is *only* hot," the suggestion that Tania is an act – she is just pretending, in short, a fake – could even be taken as a further condescending remark about her lacking substance: she is not *even* that which she is "only." With Skeggs, this could be understood as a form of symbolic violence that effectively essentialized Tania and denied her Claudia's mobility and detachment.

The numerous sexualizing references to Tania could be read in line with the same argument. The suggestion that Tania was a "hottie wannabe" who wanted to "show off" that she was sexy was clearly double-sided. On the one hand, the sexualizing references to Tania could be taken to express a certain envy and admiration of a celebrated eroticized position. This implies that Zusel's argument that Tania had "never had an orgasm" again worked to reveal her as a "fake": she "acted all that," portrayed herself as hot and sexy, but she was "actually" a sexually unsatisfied woman. With this argument, Zusel took on a power position through switching potential envy and admiration into a slightly patronizing pity.

Let me quickly recapitulate the conversation that preceded the events at the party. On that occasion, Claudia was talked about with a combination of envy and slightly condescending remarks about her being "just hot" and "showing off." However, in the aftermath of the party, the characterizations of Claudia turned to a positive and "appropriate" erotization. Her ascribed eroticism was redrawn, from envy and somewhat belittling remarks, to be included in the "we" that she managed to create at the party. This "we" was created through approving laughter that simultaneously ridiculed Tania.

Claudia walked clear of the disdain and contempt that characterized the reading of Tania's performance. Hence, Claudia's behavior – playful flirting,

"showing off," many boyfriends, reggaetón dance – was approved and even celebrated. Tania's ditto and similar behavior, however, was read as the "wrong" sort of female sexual behavior – "too much," vulgar, out of control – through which she was essentialized and denied Claudia's playfulness and detachment.

Claudia's positive eroticism could be included in this "we" through a process of othering in which "low culture" was ascribed to Tania. In this process, reggaetón became an important marker of difference that opened to creating hierarchies within female eroticism. The numerous sexualizing references to Tania thus worked to demarcate a line between Claudia's "appropriate" sexual behavior that was celebrated and included in the "we," and Tania's behavior that was imbued with reggaetón symbolism and thus interpreted as "wrong," cliché, and "low culture."

Gendered violence

Let me now turn to the question of how to understand Zusel's suggestion that Tania wanted a *machote*, a macho boyfriend, together with her sudden revelation that Tania's boyfriend beat her. I would argue that both these characterizations play a crucial role in a process of othering. Zusel's statements play on a common stereotype held among my relatively privileged interlocutors that lower-class women, due to their ascribed "low cultural level," want men who are dominant to the extent that they beat women. In 2005 I interviewed Marilú, a woman in her mid-twenties, who elaborated on this point. In our interview we sat pondering the question of whether *machismo* was changing among younger generations. Marilú suddenly interrupted our discussion and argued:

> I don't know, people of a lower level, people like that, who haven't studied, those men are more *machista*, like that, you see?
> I don't know if you have noticed it here, but I've been out and I've seen men who hit women, in front of everyone, punching them and everything. And you're like, what's up with that? But not everyone's like that. […]
> I think that often it's not so much the man's fault, because if you're there, it's because you want to be there, because you like being punched, that you like the man to be like that.
> Silje: So you mean that women are *machista*…?
> Marilú: If a woman is together with a man who is *machista*, it's because she is a masochist, she likes it. Because a man who raises his hand to you, the first day you do like this [raising the flat of her hand to gesture stop], and that's it, you see? He doesn't even have to do that, you see?

In a somewhat misplaced interruption of Marilú's argument, I tried out a suggestion that was often repeated among my interlocutors, namely that women who are exposed to violence by their male partners "are more *machista* than the men who beat them," because, it was argued, they want to be with a "real man" who beat them. Marilú's argument was headed in a slightly different direction but in the end seemed to reach the same conclusion: women are beaten because they like it; they are "masochists." The way Marilú wound up her argument could be read as a gesture of othering, as she suggested that "we," she and I, would never accept being beaten, implying a contrast to the "masochist women." This may also be read in line with Marilú's initial argument when she suggested that *machismo* was a sign of a "lower [cultural] level."

This explanation of violence against women in heterosexual couple relationships was very common among my interlocutors. With an argument similar to Marilú's, one middle-aged woman told me in an interview, "There are women whose husbands beat them, and still they stay with the man. And what, do they like it? They have to like it" (see also Lang 2009: 123).

Sociologist Miriam Lang has analyzed gendered violence in Cuba in relation to the post-1959 practice of social control of the "private sphere" through the work of the neighborhood committees, the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR). Lang shows that "specifically in cases of violence against women the actors of social control do not feel authorized to intervene in the citizen's private sphere" and argues that "in Cuba, individual rights of women violated by their partners do not figure among the motives that motivate an intervention of state actors in the private sphere" (Lang 2009: 132, my translation). Interestingly, the local saying *entre marido y mujer nadie se debe meter* – between husband and wife nobody should interfere – is used by police officers *not* to interfere when women report abuse from their partners.[5] Lang shows that when a woman is exposed to violence it is viewed by the police and representatives of the CDR as an individual problem (ibid.: 131). Moreover, the violence is considered *her* problem; it "is 'privatized' as a personal problem of the affected woman" (ibid.: 139, my translation). In cases when police or doctors intervene against domestic violence, these are considered interventions against problems of the public order or alcoholism (ibid.: 132).

Domestic and sexual violence for a long time remained largely unaddressed within official discourse in Cuba.[6] When addressed, it was often related to economic problems and crowded housing.[7] At times, it has been formulated as a legacy of a capitalist past (Lang 2009: 133), and consequently it is argued that in Cuba, the problem of violence is considerably less than in the rest of the world (Lundgren 2003: 58; Proveyer Cervantes et al. 2010: 67). Miriam Lang argues that the prevalence of violence has been made invisible because the official

discourse has related violence to women's emancipation (Lang 2009: 133) and that recognition of this problem hence might question the achievements of the socialist revolution (ibid.: 134; see also Lundgren 2003: 58).

These official explanations of gendered violence must be understood in relation to the general model of change underlying Cuban official discourse. Within this model, a generalized access to education and broad educational campaigns from above are thought to contribute to new and more "correct" values among the population, much in the same manner as the construction of sexual education. *Machista* values are referred to as "vestiges from the past," as "backward" values from "old bourgeois society," which will wither with new generations that have been brought up in a socialist society (see Leiner 1994: 68; see also Lang 2009: 138f.). This serves as a context for understanding how violence is explained as an expression of "low culture," and portrayed as a trait among those less educated who have not yet left behind such "backward" behavior. It also contextualizes the pathologizing comments among my interlocutors that women exposed to violence are "masochists" and probably "like to be beaten." In 2005 I interviewed Camila, a lawyer who explained to me why laws on equality and women's rights are not always followed in practice: "It always depends on people's upbringing, people's level [*nivel*]." I would suggest that such individualizing explanations are related to the attribution of *machismo* and violence to a "low cultural level" against which "we" – Marilú, Camila, and my other interlocutors – could claim moral distance.

Conclusion

Zusel's suggestions above, that Tania wanted a *machote* and that her boyfriend beat her, might be understood in light of the interconnections between *machismo*, violence, and a "low cultural level." These suggestions became ways to demarcate difference and ascribe "low culture" to Tania. Reggaetón became one among other tools in this process, due to its connotations of *machismo* and "low culture." All the elements that were used to depict Tania – her dance style, her musical taste, her "showing off" and being a "fake," and finally her *machote* boyfriend who beat her – became tools in a process of othering and exclusion. This made it possible for Claudia to create a detached and ironic "we" and for Zusel to elevate her self-ascribed "cultural level" – both at Tania's expense.

It is worth noting the intertwinement between sexual and gendered ideals in this process of othering. The process of ascribing "inappropriate" sexual behavior to Tania ran parallel to the ascription of "incorrect" gendered values. Reggaetón symbolism was used to imbue Tania with "low culture," on the one hand through disdainful sexualizing references, and on the other through letting her embody "incorrect" gendered ideals – *machismo* and violence/"masochism."

Thus, the hierarchy that was established between Claudia's and Tania's sexual performances was *accentuated* by these gendered ideals, through using "low culture" as a marker of difference.

Due to its strongly gendered and sexualized inscriptions, reggaetón became a very central symbol to mark moral distance for the inhabitants of the relatively privileged *barrio* Vedado in Havana. This should be understood as closely related to the historic moment of post-crisis Cuba. In a situation of new and unfamiliar differentiations, earlier hierarchies are being renegotiated. In this context, negotiations around ideals of gender and sexuality have taken center stage in the white middle-class struggle to re-establish an earlier position of privilege.

Notes

1 This article is based on a chapter from the doctoral dissertation Heterosexual Havana: Ideals and hierarchies of gender and sexuality in contemporary Cuba (Lundgren 2011). The dissertation explores how difference and hierarchies are articulated in the negotiation of ideals around gender and sexuality in Vedado, Havana. The material of the dissertation was collected during two extensive periods of fieldwork in the period 2004–2007 (with a re-visit in 2010), through methods of participant observation, individual and focus-group interviews, and the recording of official media and popular culture (see ibid.).

2 See Wooldridge (2007); see also Fairley (2006), Colón Pichardo (2008), and Díaz Calderín (2008).

3 Guillard Limonta stresses, however, that this has not included lesbian eroticism (Guillard Limonta 2009: 66; see also Saunders 2009).

4 Jan Fairley describes this female reggaetón dance style, which "involves fast undulating and turning/swirling of the area from below shoulders and chest to pelvis (as if one was hula hoop-ing or belly dancing)" (Fairley 2006: 472).

5 For an example of this, see Negra cubana tenía que ser (2006).

6 See Htun (2007: 120); see also Vera Estrada and Díaz Canals (2008: 481f.), referring to Pérez González (2003).

7 In the early 1990s, the Casas de Orientación de la Mujer y la Familia were founded by the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC), which would offer legal advice and psychological support to women exposed to violence (see Lang 2009: 136). In 1997, the Grupo Nacional de Trabajo para la Atención y la Prevención de la Violencia Familiar (GNTV) was founded (see Proveyer Cervantes et al. 2010: 68) to coordinate measures against gendered violence at an institutional level, educating public health workers, police, and political representatives on gendered violence.

8 Since the 1990s, there is a growing body of research on gendered violence in Cuba (see Proveyer Cervantes et al. 2010: 67; see also Muñiz Ferrer et al. 1998; Ortiz and Morales 1999; Artiles de León 2000; Culay 2000; García Méndez 2000, undated; Hasanbegovic 2001; Proveyer Cervantes 2001a, 2001b, 2002; Espina Sierra 2002; Rodríguez 2006)

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