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Independent Block of Macha Caporal: The Challenges and Restrictions in Female Dancing

Abstract

This paper explores the experience of six *Macha Caporal* dancers belonging to an independent female block in La Paz, a recent and still unexplored mode of association to dance. This article analyzes and makes visible the challenges and restrictions women face in endeavoring to sustain an independent dance practice in the context of urban folk dance in Bolivia. Through the accounts of the women and the ethnographic material gathered from fieldwork in 2018 in Bolivia, the study portrays the women's dancing context revealing the challenges and restrictions linked to the condition of being women in a society that is traversed by chauvinism. In the task of dancing, the women's performance reveals a complex negotiation of gender roles, ideas, and expectations; processes that highlight the women's agency and determination to carry on with a practice that ultimately grants them feelings of self-validation and autonomy.

Keywords: gender, performance, agency, independent blocks, Bolivia

Setting the Scene

“They start the negotiations. It seems they don't have a spot in the parade. He asks them for 100 bolivianos and the women refuse. He offers another spot at 80 bolivianos. They argue and finally agree on a sum. Each girl pays her fee. The dance starts. The girls are second last in the *entrada*. It is raining a lot and it has started to snow a bit. I am moved to see the girls dancing under the rain and in the cold. They are soaking wet [...]. They do what they can, at moments they lose synchronization, there is chaos. But they continue...”¹

¹ Santana 2018: Fieldnotes, 21st July, La Paz. Proofreaders of the article: Prof. Donald E. Morse – Dr. Balázs Venkovits.



This description of an *entrada folklórica*² (folk dance parade) conveys the multiplicity of stimuli and challenges women are exposed to in the dance event.³ It summarizes conditions encountered by independent female blocks of *Macha Caporal* dancers in their dance practice and the persistence of women to render a good performance. Above all, it conveys the commitment enacted by women to dance.

Macha Caporal are female dancers who have created a new role in the Bolivian dance *Caporales*. This dance is traditionally performed by two main characters: *Macho Caporal*, the male role, and *Cholita*, the female role. Within this demarcated gender structure, *Machas*⁴ appropriate the male's costume, name and steps, and adapts them to create a performance and visual presentation that depicts both male and female features.

This paper explores the experience of six Macha Caporal dancers. The recent expansion⁵ of these female dancers and their combination of perceived 'masculine' and 'feminine' signifiers in both their performance and physical appearance have attracted the attention of public opinion and provoked the social questioning of these dancers' identities and performances. Within the Caporales dance community, a faction of men still minimizes Macha Caporal's participation in the dance.⁶ As dance authority Israel Solor-

² Entradas are outdoor folkloric performances that are similar to parades and involve dancers traveling through the city's streets in an established pathway. Entradas usually happen associated with important religious celebrations.

³ I have to acknowledge how this and other accounts that form the body of my fieldnotes are influenced by how "I", as a researcher, felt on each occasion and captured the women's performances. These experiences were permeated by my own gendered condition in the field and also by my approach to this particular dance phenomenon. As a Peruvian female artist and scholar, I have explored and studied dance practices as performances where arts and politics intersect. Specifically, it was my ongoing interest in dance and gender intersections which led me to find in Macha Caporal a fascinating field of study.

⁴ In the text, I will also refer to the role of Macha Caporal with the abbreviations used by my contributors: *Macha* for singular and *Machas* for plural. The same will be applied to Macho Caporal.

⁵ Many authors recognize Lidia Estrada's performance in 1976 as the birth of Macha Caporal. However, the development of the character did not happen until recent years. See Benavente 2017.

⁶ This attitude is mainly present in the older generations of dance managers, founders and dancers, who reject Macha Caporal's presence partly based on authenticity issues, claiming this character was not part of the 'original' dance. The origin of this attitude is also related to the chauvinism present in Bolivian society.

zano⁷ commented during a personal interview: “Macha Caporal is present today, but her participation is not so relevant for the Caporales dance”. These types of attitudes towards Macha Caporal reveal how after decades of existence in a dance that “was imagined as a decidedly masculine space”⁸, female dancers still battle for recognition in the dance arena. Despite the massive presence of women in the dance, “the central motif, the significant chore [...] the main argument of Caporales is the men, their gestures, their dance, their appearance”⁹. This fact accounts for the predominance of a male perspective in how the dance has been understood and disseminated and highlights the necessity to shed light on the singularities of women’s performances, experiences and modes of organization.

Based on ethnographic research performed in 2018 in the city of La Paz, this paper attempts to fill the research gap concerning female dancing and organization by focusing on a current and unknown mode of association of Macha Caporal dancers: independent blocks. Through interviews and observations from the field, I will introduce readers to the motivations and experiences of a Bolivian independent block named Machas Yuriña.¹⁰

Through my collaborators’ testimonies, I was able to locate the first appearance of independent female blocks in the first decades of 2000. Today, in La Paz, there only exists a few female blocks dancing in this form, which attests not only to the novel quality of this type of association but also to its vulnerability as it subsists in the Caporales dance community.

The 2019 report from The United Nations Development Programme avows: “Discrimination against women, male bias and cultural machismo [chauvinism] still prevail in political and social institutions, in public space and in the family”¹¹. Female dance practices are not exempt from this socio-cultural reality. As seen in the field, gender norms permeate women’s public and private spheres, imposing limits on their dancing practice. Furthermore, these limits are accentuated by factors such as the women’s socio-economic class, civil status, body image, and type of block. This paper examines Machas

⁷ For reasons of confidentiality, the real name of my collaborator has been replaced by a fictitious name. He is the manager of one of the first fraternities of La Paz department and the secretary of a folk dance departmental association.

⁸ Roper 2019: 392.

⁹ Sanchez 2006: 281.

¹⁰ The ethnographic material conveys observations from the dance event as well as rehearsals, moments of preparation for dancing, negotiations in the entrada and social gatherings. I interviewed all members of the block, male dancers and dance authorities of the Caporales community during fieldwork in 2018. I performed additional (online) interviews with the members of the block and male dancers between 2019 and 2020.

¹¹ UNDP 2003: 30.

Yuriña's experiences as an independent female block in the Bolivian folk dance context and observes how gender schemes interplay with their practice. The article draws from central ideas summarized on Santana (2021)¹², and, from there, it elaborates on the motivations, challenges, and performances of the women belonging to the block.

In presenting and analyzing the practice of women engaged in this type of association, this paper makes visible the voices of ordinary women dancing in uneven conditions in the context of dance *entradas*. Nevertheless, the research also highlights the agency and resilience of women in creating and sustaining new modes of practice that may ultimately engender experiences of autonomy and satisfaction.

Theoretical Considerations

The first dancers who danced as Macha Caporal infiltrated the male blocks of the dance in the 1970s and appropriated the male role's costume, name, and steps. From that moment on, Macha Caporal became a growing phenomenon. Dancers started to develop new ways to organize and conquered new spaces to dance.¹³ These advancements demonstrated how these women, initially only 'emulating' the male dance, were extending and defying the traditional possibilities of what women could do in the dance arena. One of the recent ways women develop dance involves independent female blocks, a type of self-funded block where women come together to manage their group and take responsibility for their own practice. To understand the implications and obligations of this new mode of dancing, first, we must explore the complexities of this third, in-between role, named Macha Caporal.

Macha Caporal represents a substantial change in the traditional gender representation of the original dance Caporales and has involved the adoption of certain roles and abilities not expected from women in La Paz. Due to their act of appropriation of the men's costume and their performance of movements belonging to the male world, Machas have generated a rupture with the "gender-culture differences"¹⁴ present in La Paz. This rupture has placed Machas in the spotlight and generated new discussions about their role in the dance and the kind of performance the women showcase.

¹² Unpublished manuscript.

¹³ Recent spaces conquered by Macha Caporal dancers are dance competitions.

¹⁴ Polhemus 1993: 12.

The first scholarly works that accompanied and influenced my perspective on Macha Caporal were the works of anthropologist Eveline Sigl and scholar Javiera Benavente. Both conducted ethnographic research on Macha Caporal dancers, in Bolivia and Chile respectively. Through their accounts, read before arriving in the field, I gained two different understandings of this dance phenomenon. Sigl maintains that Machas do not challenge the patriarchal structure; their performance may suggest that “the woman, on the other hand, has to resort to masculine symbols to adjudge even if only symbolically the power for which she also fights outside the folk context”¹⁵. Benavente, however, understands the character’s performance as an act of transgression and “an alternative to stage one’s gender conceptions”¹⁶ where women can enact a different way of being a woman. Despite the different readings of the phenomenon of Macha Caporal, the idea of empowerment is suggested by both authors.

The differences in their perspectives towards Macha Caporal dancers’ performance are a testimony to the various experiences of women dancers in diverse contexts of place, time, and type of block. Benavente focused on Machas who danced in fraternities’ mixed-gender blocks during 2016 in the southern region of Santiago de Chile. Sigl has done extensive fieldwork in Bolivia interviewing women dancers in urban and rural contexts, however, the type of block of the Machas interviewed was not specified.

A survey of the scarce bibliography produced on Machas between 2000 and the current day, reveals a lack of research on the subject of independent female blocks. The motivations, ways of organization, experiences, and performances of these dancers remain unexplored. To that end, I decided to concentrate my study on a single independent female block.

Machas Yuriña

Machas Yuriña is a block of six Bolivian women,¹⁷ whose ages range between 22 and 32 years. Two of the women are students and the rest make a living in jobs such as sales, nursing, and dressmaking. Some of them have not completed their school or university studies. They live in complicated household situations and two of them are single mothers. Their homes are located

¹⁵ Sigl 2012: 104.

¹⁶ Benavente 2017: 70.

¹⁷ For reasons of confidentiality, all the names of my collaborators have been replaced by fictitious names. In the article, I will only use the real name of the block.

mainly in the periphery of the city of La Paz and some of them even live in districts that are considered dangerous areas. The women's complex life conditions demand an intersectional approach to their dancing practice. As Grimshaw states, "one is never just a man or a woman"¹⁸. Although the main focus of this article is on the impact of the gender system in the performances and practices of independent Macha Caporal dancers, this paper will also reveal how categories such as socio-economic class, civil status and family affect women's participation in the dance event.

To look at gender in the dance field demands that we look at women's dancing as a gendered performance. This implies analyzing women's actions and interactions within the frame of a particular cultural understanding of gender and the norms associated with it. As Bordo argues:

"Our languages, intellectual histories and social forms are 'gendered'; there is no escape from this fact and from its consequences in our lives...our deepest desire may be to 'transcend gender dualities' ... But, like it or not, in our present culture activities are coded as 'male' or 'female' and will function as such within the prevailing system of gender-power relations."¹⁹

In a society where the gender dichotomy prevails, a character such as Macha Caporal – characterized by its combination of both male and female attributes – is immediately put under surveillance. At the same time, we must consider how gender systems permeate different spaces of action engendering particular ways of social relationships among men and women which produce real consequences in women's lives. As we will explore, the women's personal and dance spheres are situated in a socio-cultural context that is permeated by chauvinism, a fact that creates limitations on women's power, as well as gender inequality.

Motivations to Dance

The women's complicated life conditions make the enterprise of dancing a significant endeavor. As seen in the field, most of them face time challenges and economic issues, which complicate their commuting and their ability to participate in rehearsals and entradas. They also revealed complex family relationships, sometimes lacking their relatives' support to dance or experiencing

¹⁸ Grimshaw 1986 as cited in Callaway 1992: 33.

¹⁹ Bordo 1990: 152.

jealous attitudes from their couples. According to the women, the lack of support from their families is related to the expected roles of women in La Paz. Women dancers are often perceived negatively due to the common assumption that dancers enjoy drinking and partying. Also, women are expected to quit the dance once they are engaged or get married. Notwithstanding, women manage to overcome these obstacles and participate in the dance entrada, which involves an annual payment for their costumes and the payment of a band's fee every time they perform.

The commitment of women to dance is related to the perceived benefits of dancing which in turn sheds light on the question of why women dance. One of the main motivations expressed by the women relates to the newness and extraordinary quality of women dancing with 'male' attributes. For the women, the similarity between Macha Caporal and the male dancer was meaningful. As Jessica puts it: "I liked it because the men's dance is more complicated than the women's dance [Cholita's dance] and the girls [Macha Caporal] matched the men." This is partly because, in their socio-cultural context, the male dance is perceived as having a superior value. As Jackeline confirms: "I saw Caporales, I saw the men [Machos Caporal], I saw the women [Cholitas] and I admired the men".

Women acknowledge that dancing as Macha Caporal engenders the feeling of doing something out of the ordinary for women. Indeed, among Machas Yuriña's dancers, a collective sentiment of 'feeling special' and different from other women endures. Claudia summarizes this difference: "From my point of view, you show yourself more. As rude, stronger. You don't act so feminine... You cannot compare yourself to a Cholita. It is something very different from them. In movement and costume." Another dancer, Talia, defines her Macha Caporal as "a woman that wants to show she can be different from other women. That she can step out of the ordinary like the skirts. A woman who can also show that she has strength, that she has the same value as a man".

If we assume "movement lexicons of males and females often demonstrate the ideals of gendered difference in action"²⁰, we can understand Macha Caporal's dance as a sign of departing away from that gender difference. Indeed, for the women, moving and dressing differently from what is socially expected from a woman responds to a different conceptualization of gender. They prefer Macha Caporal's dance because it is more active and stronger, a decision that denotes women's desire to move beyond the tradi-

²⁰ Reed 1998: 516.

tional expectations placed on women concerning appropriate behavior and ways of dressing.

Indeed, the counter fight to what is considered traditional or normal for a woman is one of the aspects that lie beneath the decision of becoming a Macha. Aside from a preference for challenging actions and activities, the girls manifested a strong rejection of the traditional female role's costume. According to the majority, Cholita's costume – comprised of high heels, a revealing blouse, and a short *pollerita* (mini-skirt) – implies revealing parts of the body that the women are not willing to show. Nancy, for instance, remembers how much she hated the experience of dancing as Cholita because she felt completely exposed to the male gaze. Jessica also recalls her first experience as Cholita: “men were only looking at me down there and I felt harassed”.

Macha Caporal's contested nature lies in the fact that she broke the gender binary present in the dance by crossing the limits between the gendered differences of the female and male characters. She intruded on the male's block and danced side by side with men. She appropriated the male's costume and recreated its design by merging characteristics from both the male and female costume: she wears pants, a hat, and boots with bells, and at the same time, she preserves the female way of adorning the body such as hairstyle, jewelry and a blouse that emphasizes her cleavage. Furthermore, she extended the idea of what women could do in the dance when she appropriated and performed movements associated with men such as running, jumping, and kicking. Machas, in every aspect of their performance, are extending the possibilities of what women can do in the dance arena. Today, they have become independent from the men and go on to form their autonomous associations. Moreover, their decisions to dance as Machas confirm a general attitude of resistance to the regular expectations imposed on female dancers by their wider social context.

Dancing Independently

Whether in a mixed-gender²¹ or female block or an independent or fraternity block,²² the mode of participation in the dance is one of the aspects that

²¹ Mixed-gender blocks are Macho Caporal blocks that admit women.

²² Fraternities are dance associations that usually involve an organizing committee and dancers. Their organization tends to be very hierarchical, leaving the major decisions to the organizers. Each fraternity has a place in the overall *entrada* where they distribute blocks and rows of dancers and one or two music bands.

has more impact on the experience of women dancing. It is the mode of participation that defines aspects such as how they dance, who they dance with, in what type of events they dance, economic investment, and even the prestige of the block.

Machas Yuriña are an independent female block of *figuras*²³. As expressed by my collaborators, choosing to dance in an independent block was not their first choice. During our interviews, many of the women share past dreams about dancing in a big and prestigious fraternity such as San Simon or ENAF. However, many of them felt discouraged to join a fraternity's block due to the high costs one must commit to paying at the beginning or due to their demanding requirements for gaining membership. As Claudia remembers:

“You are not forced to dance in all [entradas] but you must have the costume made and dance in Oruro which is the main entrada. It's 6,000 [bolivianos]²⁴ as they told me that time, in ENAF and those [type of big fraternities] [...] and the worst is that to be admitted you have to give an exam, they do... like a job interview.”

The women's experiences reveal how factors such as socio-economic level, family situation, and even body image, restrict their participation in a fraternity block. Many fraternities have discriminative criteria to select Macha Caporal dancers such as measuring over 1.70 meters or having a specific body figure. Sanchez illustrates the expected image of Machas by quoting Caporales San Simon's definition: “Machas are a group of tall and beautiful women who lead the fraternity”²⁵. Jackeline's experiences also confirm this perception about Machas: “When I saw Machas they were all tall. Tall. And I... but I am short, I do not think they will take me.” In consequence, to become a Macha, many of them had to look for less formal or more accessible spaces such as an independent block. Thus, the independent form of association emerged in La Paz as a new alternative to dance due to the demanding requirements requested by fraternities and a desire from dancers to have more autonomy in the overall decisions involved in the demands of dancing in the folk dance scene.

Being independent poses both advantages and disadvantages for the women's practice. On the one hand, it gives them greater freedom and autonomy to make decisions about their costume and visual presentation, on

²³ Grouping of dancers in a single row.

²⁴ Bolivian currency.

²⁵ As cited in Sanchez 2006: 333.

the other, it demands a greater economic expense due to their small number of members. At the same time, being an independent block means the group is not ‘officially’ registered with any local or regional association of folk groups²⁶, which prevents them from having certain benefits such as a designated place in the entrada. Therefore, their only way to participate in an entrada is through the invitation (involving a payment) of a fraternity to dance among their blocks.²⁷

Being a female block and remaining independent can be seen as an achievement for the women but it also poses a series of difficulties for their dancing practice. This difficulty is directly related to the context in which they dance and the asymmetry of power and inequality experienced by women in terms of economic negotiations and access to positions of power in the dance community. As an independent block, women have to stay active in the dance community, which implies dancing regularly and investing money in a costume and paying a band’s fee, transport, food and beverages. They also have to interact and negotiate payments with dance authorities in asymmetrical situations and sometimes inappropriate environments. It is under these sorts of conditions that many independent female blocks have disappeared.

The scarcity of independent female blocks in La Paz made the process of finding and joining a block a difficult task. The search for an independent block involves different strategies such as asking people, searching the web, and going to the street of Los Andes where most of the independent blocks belonging to a low or middle socio-economic class practice before an entrada. The informality of independent blocks and the lack of information about Machas permeated the women’s experience of finding a block. As Talia recalls: “In 2017, I started to look where to go, well, where to dance...And I did not know where to look or who I could ask about. I did not know many Machas.”

²⁶ For instance, Asociación de Conjuntos Folklóricos del Gran Poder (ACFGP) which is in charge of organizing the prestigious *Fiesta del Señor del Gran Poder*. Being registered with an association implies rights and responsibilities for fraternities. Being part of an association of this kind is still a privilege of fraternities. Independent blocks are not allowed to register yet.

²⁷ The payment an independent block makes to a fraternity in order to dance within their blocks during the entrada is emically understood as the band’s fee. This means the fraternity hires one or two bands to play for them during the entrada and splits the final cost between every dancer of their blocks (including the guest blocks such as Machas Yuriña).

Despite the difficulties present in dancing and sustaining an independent practice, the women's testimonies confirm the sense of satisfaction obtained from belonging to an independent block. As Jessica states:

“While let's say at first, I had to go knocking on doors but now the payoff is that they already know me. Therefore, many people know me. Because let's say I've always been there and [...] what I like is what this friend told me: 'You are earning our respect.' It's like an ego.”

One of the aspects that have helped Machas Yuriña to position the block within the Caporales community is the notoriety they have achieved by dancing as *figuras*. Being a *figura* is a fundamental aspect to understanding how women dance. A block of *figuras* is a mode of grouping that implies a formation in a single row of three to seven dancers. It is commonly executed by Machos and Machas. The women's statements demonstrate the special value dancing as *figuras* has in their experience. Through this modality of dancing, women affirm they feel seen and valued. It gives women the autonomy to dance and allows them to be noticed or be more visible than if they were, for example, dancers in a mixed block. Moreover, this modality saves them from the anonymity of dancing in a large block. As Nancy comments:

“The special thing for me is that they know us more and when we pass, they applaud us, they know who we are and, in many cases, they even recognize us by our names and congratulate us. And what I saw in a larger block is they [the dance community] only know the block's leader and the rest [of dancers] are not known in many cases.”

Talia also agrees on this point and highlights the importance of being visible:

“Everyone knows you; they give you more importance than if you were dancing in a big block where they don't see you much. It's just a row. Instead the [big] block is several rows and sometimes they put you in the middle or back where people don't see you much.”

Finally, women associate the experience of dancing in an independent block of *figuras* with values such as autonomy and the power of decision. As Talia says: “Among all, we choose the color and the model of the costume. Instead, in a large block, we have to follow what the organizer says. In most cases, they give you the costume on the day of the presentation.”

Additionally, the women agree that dancing in an all-female block, in contrast to a mixed block,²⁸ involves a feeling of comfort and easygoingness. As Talia explains: “there is more space to dance and they are girls so, you feel more comfortable being with them. Besides, they are your age”. Consequently, the women seem to find in Machas Yuriña a space that provides a friendly environment to dance as well as the possibility to stand out from other Macha Caporal dancers through their participation as figuras.

Here Comes Machas Yuriña: Performance and Experience in the Dance Entrada

Using the definition of Richard Schechner, who postulates that “performances exist only as actions, interactions and relationships”²⁹, I propose to observe the performances of Machas Yuriña as an action that encompasses not only the act of dancing but how women perform, relate and interact with different actors and situations during the entrada. This approach of looking at their practice as performance involves not only focusing on what women do and their experience of dancing but also on how their performances reveal “complex relationships with power systems”³⁰.

In order to describe and evaluate the women’s performances, it is necessary to understand the context of their practice and the dynamics present in their work. I understand the context to include the dance setting, the social environment they inhabit, and the people with whom they interact and co-construct the meanings of their practice. In this context, ideas, meanings, and classifications of gender are made manifest and expectations and feelings about the dance are exchanged and negotiated among its participants.

The ‘stage’ or dance setting of Machas Yuriña is the folkloric entrada.³¹ Entradas, as the dance setting, are a reflection of the wider social context the women live in. In this sense, they are plagued by chauvinism and inequality that materialize in different forms. The women’s stories reveal situations of sexual harassment experienced during the entradas and the feelings of danger

²⁸ Some members of the block belonged to mixed-gender blocks and left this type of block due to competitive and chauvinist attitudes displayed by male dancers.

²⁹ Schechner–Brady 2013: 30.

³⁰ Taylor 2012: 6.

³¹ Machas Yuriña participate mainly in entradas zonales which are smaller parades in very distant and even dangerous neighborhoods. Due to their remote location and lesser popularity, many prominent fraternities choose not to participate in these smaller events and prefer dancing in the more prestigious entradas.

associated with gender violence in their wider social context. The dynamics of access to participate as an independent block are marked by inequalities and asymmetrical relations. At the same time, their role as Machas is questioned and problematized through chauvinist actions and comments from spectators, peers, and even family members. Women are exposed to male harassment and molestation during the dancing and at the end of it. In my field notes of Chijini, I illustrate the environment at the end of the dance event:

“We continue and there are more and more people, and the road becomes narrower. The drunk men increase and become more disrespectful. They cross your path, they bump into you, they look at you, they tell you things. Two drunk young men have started dancing behind Ariana [a Cholita] and it seems like they are about to touch her. I stare at them –vigilant– and they retreat a little. In the end, the girls take them out of the block, ‘go and dance in another place, you drunk’. We continue and the dance space has been reduced to a fifth [...] the personal space has disappeared.”

Nancy’s statement confirms my observations concerning the risks women face of being molested by men during the entrada:

“I am going to tell you an experience that I have seen many times. You have seen when men are already drunk in several entradas, they touch the girls [...] once it happened to me. I was walking and they touched me. I turned around and kicked him and the guy flew away. You do not touch me, I told him [...] I know how to defend myself.”

This risk is also experienced at the end of the entrada when the women face the uncertainty of how to get home safely. As Jessica comments:

“So, you know we are in a distant place, better to be with someone you know, with friends [...] I always try to find my old friends. The same happened in Chijini³² with Guillermo, they are friends that I know, who will take care of us in the sense that we cannot leave alone, so, we can go until certain point [together] and then leave.”

The testimonies of the women demonstrate two different attitudes towards violence experienced in the entrada. Nancy takes a more autonomous stance, that of defending herself; while Jessica reveals the vulnerability of women who have to turn to men to feel secure and be ‘taken care

³² Dance entrada of the neighborhood of Chijini.

of because of the fear of being robbed, but mainly of being harassed or raped, is always there. Despite the different approaches, both testimonies give evidence of the concrete presence of sexual violence in their dancing context.

In terms of participation, women experienced restrictions due to their mode of association as an independent female block of *figuras*. To participate in any *entrada*, *Machas Yuriña* need to be invited by a fraternity as a guest block. The process of negotiation after the invitation is of great importance for an independent block because the place in which a block dances has a special value in the dance community. As Jessica explains:

“The *figura* that is in front of the band is the one with more prestige. So, being closer to the band is as a matter of prestige and obviously that you dance better, because the *bombo* [drum] sounds louder, the music stimulates you.”

This testimony reveals the relationship between the dancer’s position in the parade and the prestige it represents. The position of the block, as explained before, involves a payment that is divided equally among the block’s members. The smaller the number of dancers, the higher the amount they have to pay. This aspect suggests that the prestige of a block is not only measured by its trajectory or dancing quality but is directly related to the economic power of the block.

Another restriction can be spotted during the negotiations for a place between the women and the fraternities’ authorities. The women’s testimonies highlight the power differentials between the two parts of the negotiation. Although sometimes the negotiation can be done with a woman, it is often done with men of higher status in the dance community such as a fraternity’s founder. In my field notes, I registered Jessica’s feelings regarding one experience of negotiation:

“She was also summoned once in a bar by one of the founders of *Simon Bolívar* [...]. And they were two men and she was going to be alone. She was afraid and called *Talia*. But both were unsure and called *Guillermo* so he could help them to negotiate. Why do women feel defenseless in the act of negotiation? What are they afraid of? Why would anyone summon you in a bar, with the presence of alcohol, to negotiate? It is evident that women have much to lose in these negotiations.”

Every negotiation entails a tension between obtaining the best place they can for their limited budget. Economic power, then, becomes a key factor of constriction for women’s participation. According to Jessica, this is one of

the main reasons why dancers quit the dance. To dance in Caporales, a female figura must invest yearly around 3,000 bolivianos in a new costume and pay for the band's fee each time they dance. Consequently, women dancing independently as figuras experience a huge disadvantage due to their 'informality' and reduced number of members.

Although economic power is a problem that affects both male and female figuras, this particular restriction is more severe on women. It highlights the power differences between men and women in the dance entrada. Guillermo, a Macho Caporal dancer, confirms the hierarchies present among Machos and Machas in the dance event:

“In the structure of the organization to enter an entrada, I have hardly ever seen Machas in front of the band [...]. There is always a block of men and other men and men with women³³ [...]. They [Machas] don't get the best place unless they pay a lot.”

Machas disruptive nature and hybridity between the male and female roles have caused controversies among spectators, peers, and family members. If “how one moves and how one moves in relation to others, can constitute a public enactment of sexuality and gender”³⁴, Macha's dance performance and display of gender has engendered both the public's rejection and approval. Indeed, in Machas Yuriña's testimonies, the effect of the audience's reactions to their performance is very significant. It is in the entrada where they exchange and negotiate meanings and values about the dance. While dancing, women have to interact with all kinds of comments and gestures concerning their performance. As Jackeline says: “I heard some comments that day that women can't dance [like men], that they only know how to move the pollerita and that's it. I've heard people say in Gran Poder and other entradas.”

Claudia also remembers the attitude of male dancers towards them during the same entrada:

“The boys, the Machos are the ones who look at you badly [...]. They must think you want to imitate them. They looked at us with an expression of: what are they doing? Like saying: we can jump and you can't, we can lift our legs like that [suggesting a big height] and you can't.”

³³ Referring to mixed-gender blocks that are run by men and composed of a majority of men. Thus, the blocks that tend to occupy an emically relevant spot in the parade are male blocks.

³⁴ Desmond 2001: 6.

During an interview with Guillermo, he denied any competition between Machas and Machos: “They do not compete with men from what I have seen, well, because we are a little more agile. They are clumsier in the steps.” This male dancer’s perception of competitiveness takes the opportunity to compete with men away from women due to their inability to dance like them, which only confirms the women’s perceptions about male dancers’ feelings of superiority in the dance field.³⁵

The experiences of rejection, diminishment and aggression expressed by the women reveal how “social relations are both enacted and produced through the body”³⁶. In dancing, Machas are continually measured against the social expectations regarding a woman’s performance and the canons established in dance about what a woman can or cannot do. Thus, their experiences only confirm the chauvinism present in the dance entradas. Nevertheless, Machas Yuriña has managed to win the approval of a segment of the audience due to their ability to match the man in the dance through a singular performance style. According to Jessica, in Caporales dance, style can be classified into three categories: strong, intermediate, and soft. In this spectrum, she situates the block in the intermediate style. The categories brought up by Jessica suggest a conceptualization of dance that relates movement qualities with features associated with traditional gender characteristics perceived in the opposites of the gender binary: masculine and feminine. Therefore, the strong style is related to an extreme roughness such as the one displayed by some male blocks, and the soft style is related to a soft and delicate performance associated with Cholitas.

The key aspect of Machas Yuriña’s performance lies in the balance of qualities that are featured both in the male and female characters. The women appropriate the male’s strength and use of space but at the same time, keep their sensuality and elegance. In their performance, what they perceive as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ traits have the same value. It is the women’s capacity to redefine femininity through an active and strong performance that consolidates their dancing style and allows them to display a presentation that is – as the women perceive – ‘out of the ordinary’.

³⁵ Although the focus of this paper is to make visible women’s points of view, men were also interviewed to contrast and complement women’s opinions. The older men presented an orthodox point of view that diminishes or rejects the presence of Machas in the dance. Younger Macho Caporal dancers are more open to welcoming Machas in the dance. However, in their testimonies, the perception of the supremacy of the men’s dance based on their belief in masculine corporality’s superiority prevailed. I will explore these findings in a future article that compares Macha Caporal and Macho Caporal performances.

³⁶ Desmond 1997: 33.

As explored, social expectations and gender norms permeate women's performances and experiences posing challenges to them as women in the field and as independent dancers. Nevertheless, the women display agency in the dance arena, managing to counteract diverse obstacles and presenting a singular performance style. In the field, they showcase skills to negotiate and achieve a place in the dance event.

To Dance Makes Them Human

This role that moves between binaries – male and female, masculine and feminine – and whose surface is a sum or combination of seemingly opposite elements – beauty and strength, delicacy and roughness – has gained a place in the dance circuit and is today recognized by many as a character of the dance. This acceptance of Machas is reflected in the field by the audience's words of congratulations, cheers, and applause. As Jessica says: "as Machas, the ladies, the men, children, everyone comes and congratulate you because you are dancing well [...] trying to match the man [...] they come and congratulate you".

In the women's testimonies, the power of the audience's applause and congratulations seems to have an enormous effect on the satisfaction and positive feelings they associate with dancing: to Nancy, it elevates her self-esteem, whereas to Claudia, is a feeling she craves for every time. To Talia, is proof that she did a good job. And to Jackeline, is a joy. Thus, the dance entrada becomes a space of experience, where women can exchange their desires, fears, and expectations with peers and audiences. Through the other's recognition of their performance, women can build a sense of self-validation. As Nancy expressed it: "well, to me what I like the most...is that they applaud us. That they say: there come the girls, they are the Machas Yuriña. That they see us...dance, develop a step, express ourselves, with freedom." In this search for recognition, being recognized by their own merits becomes an important aspect for women. As Jessica notes:

"One of the benefits of having your own block is that you have more display. You are seen more and you can be recognized for how you dance, not by the money you have or by your name but for how you dance."

The women's interviews give testimony to the obstacles and preconceptions faced during entradas. In their performances of Macha Caporal, women's identities and abilities are put into question. However, through the

performance of this role, they also gain happiness, freedom, and a sense of satisfaction that comes from the process of dancing autonomously and matching the men in performance.

In addition, the intimacy and closeness experienced in an independent block seem to provide women with a web of support and friendship. It is through dancing that some women have achieved a feeling of community and fulfilled their need for social interaction, entertainment, and affect. For instance, Jackeline recalls finding in the block the comfort and strength she needed when she had to separate from her son. To Jessica, creating the block and dancing was a motivation to overcome a deep depression. The women, in general, acknowledge the comfort, trust, and fun that is created in the environment of an independent female block.

For each of the women, the experience of dancing works differently, but the effects of dancing are enough to keep them in the dance. What I have come to learn from the women's own experiences while also seeing it as a participant is that women tend to give more value to positive feelings. Those sensations and emotions that they cherished the most can obscure any negative experience and motivate them to persist in a practice that poses many limitations to them as independent female dancers.

Conclusions

Through the description and analysis of Machas Yuriña's performances, this study has examined the endeavors involved in the processes of managing and dancing in an independent female block. The experience in the field revealed that women have to engage in numerous negotiations to participate in the entradas as individuals and as an independent block. Such negotiations covered items ranging from the time and money to be invested in the dance event as well as more personal aspects such as the support or lack of it from the women's families. The dancers' experiences reveal an intricate network of gender issues where expected gender roles, restrictions, and stereotypes are present and intertwine with their dancing. What emerged progressively in the research through in-depth interviews were the asymmetrical relations at play in the dance with gender being a tacit restriction. Women appear to be less assisted or more limited by the conditions set in the dance environment. The risks of sexual harassment threaten their safety and dance experience.

The challenges women face in performing are counteracted by the feelings experienced in and through dancing. The material gathered indicates women have found in Macha Caporal a role that allows them to dance on their own

terms. Specifically, to dance as they want by being dressed more comfortably to move with freedom, strength, and with a feeling of safety. In the women's testimonies, the dancer's mode of association has emerged as a relevant element. Machas can dance independently or in a fraternity – the most traditional mode of participation. Each mode of participation engenders different types of organizations, performances, and experiences. Thus, identifying these differentiated modes of dancing within the research was relevant to contextualize and better understand Machas Yuriña's practice.

As the study has shown, dancing independently as *figuras* engenders feelings of accomplishment and self-validation in the dancers. It appears that this mode of dancing provides a space for women to dance together, joining efforts to resist and by-pass the adversities present in the dance context. In this process, Machas Yuriña, a small and independent enterprise of ordinary women accomplishes the unexpected: achieving recognition and visibility from others in a dance field permeated by gender inequality.

This article has put in evidence the complex interrelationships of aesthetics and politics in female dance practice. Furthermore, it has revealed women's strategies to make their way in a male-dominated arena, highlighting the "agentive nature of dance"³⁷ and the creativity and resourcefulness of women to generate and sustain a singular dance style and practice that enables them to reach a position not as equal to men but as 'out of the ordinary' women and dancers.

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³⁷ Reed 1998: 521.

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