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Being Cuban is about Being (im)mobile

This paper inquires the question of mobility and immobility in the current socialist Cuba, through an ethnographic understanding of Cuban “traditional” musicians in the tourism industry. A sense of immobility characterizes what it means to be Cuban in the post-Soviet political economy, as it draws a clear boundary between Cubans and the mobile tourists. The Cuban authority and the U.S. embargo make it extremely difficult for their citizens to leave the country whereas the Cuban economy’s need for hard currency has recently eased the restriction for Cuban émigrés to return to their homeland. Since the breakthrough of Buena Vista Social Club in the late 1990s, Cuban “traditional” music has emerged as a compelling tourist commodity, within which being Cuban is articulated as being exceptionally artistic, redefining the difference between Cubans and non-Cubans in terms of “innate” creativity. Paradoxically, within this quality of Cubanness lurks the possibility of being mobile; the international fame of Cuban “traditional” music opens the door for local musicians of all levels of popularity to perform outside of the country. Nevertheless, this mobility is again marked by Cuba’s socialism. The move out of the national boundary is weighed as a politically charged act, and it is a highly controlled procedure as much as it entails the option of exile. This paper explores what the question of mobility in this intersection of music and tourism in socialist Cuba might mean, particularly at this moment of history.