The Cuban penchant for dance expressed itself strongly already in the nineteenth century. Danza cubana, combining African-influenced rhythms with contradance choreography, achieved wide general popularity by mid-century, despite strenuous protestations from observers who feared the effects of African influence and decried the dancers’ close contact with each other. Danzón, a late nineteenth-century successor to danza, heightened the moralists’ fears by introducing the more syncopated cinquillo rhythm from eastern Cuba and encouraging a choreography of close embrace. The practice of such dances among the Havana elite made them unusual when compared to other Latin American elites in the same period, whose social dance repertory was limited to European forms. The cause of this disparity seems to be the timing of Cuba’s independence struggles, which coincided with the mid-to-late-nineteenth-century rise of danza and danzón. The tensions surrounding the struggles for independence conferred prestige on Cuban dances at all social levels among the native born. A similar phenomenon had occurred elsewhere in Latin America during the 1810–1825 independence wars, but the achievement of national independence throughout the continent had led to a decline in the popularity of native dances by mid-century. In sum, this essay calls attention to the link between nationalism and popular culture which, though commonly forgotten today, clearly expressed itself already in the nineteenth century.

“We don’t believe anywhere in the world can be more decidedly enthusiastic about dancing than Cuba and, above all, Havana.” Thus the Faro Industrial de La Habana reported of a society soirée in 1842.¹ The evening had begun with a concert, followed by a little musical comedy, and then, in spite of the suffocating heat, at 10 p.m. the band began a danza cubana, the distinctive Cuban version of contradance: “In truth, it would seem

¹ “Tertulia en la Habanera” (Faro Industrial de la Habana, 16 July 1842).
incredible that people dance in Havana on nights as hot as Thursday, but they do, so achieving two things at once,” reported the chronicler of the party. The two things were “taking a bath without intending to” and “enjoying a danza cubana of the kind you just can’t hear sitting down.” This chronicle was penned, not by a wide-eyed outsider, but by a Cuban who had begun to identify his own culture by its enthusiasm for dance. The journalist was probably Cirilo Villaverde, author of the Cuba’s canonical “national novel” of the nineteenth century, Cecilia Valdés.²

In novels and newspapers, on stage and in private letters – as well as in travel accounts by nineteenth-century visitors – Cuban affinity and enthusiasm for dance are proverbial. Forget imputations of national character. Proverbiality is the point, here. A discourse making dance central to Cuban national identity reaches back to the mid-nineteenth-century, well before independence. This insight is hardly original, of course. A special Cuban penchant for music and dance is today widely and unreservedly affirmed by Cuban vox populi. It is a standard part of the story (to echo a memorable phrase of Clifford Geertz) that Cubans tell themselves about themselves.

My innovation here is to stress the importance of the nineteenth-century Cuban discourse on dance as a symptom of the gestation of pre-independence Cuban national identity. Furthermore, I believe that dancing was constitutive of that gestation, that it historically helped to define Cuban national identity – just as the island’s vox populi would have it.

Nineteenth-century social dance was an activity in which people of all social classes participated as agents. It figured in amorous encounters but also in official public celebrations. It commemorated moments of deep personal and collective significance, like weddings. Nineteenth-century Cubans viewed dance as a primary expression of sociability and an integrative factor of social life. Dancing integrated everything from the voluntary associations of African slaves to the highest social circles of Havana society. Habaneros did not, of course, all dance the same way: very far from it. A spontaneous rumba in a tenement patio contrasted absolutely – in music, spirit, and dance genre – with an elaborate ball at an exclusive social club. Nevertheless, the several chambers of Terpsichore’s upstairs-downstairs Havana mansion all communicated. Cultural mediators moved up and down various staircases, carrying dance ideas. So far I have no news

²Although this routine chronicle is unsigned, Villaverde was on the editorial staff of the paper and clearly wrote some of its other articles on dance, which have a similar celebratory tone and are signed “C. V.”