Dancing with the Revolution: Cuban Dance, State, and Nation, 1930-1990

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ABSTRACT

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Elizabeth Schwall

Against the backdrop of the 1933 and 1959 Cuban Revolutions, dance became highly politicized as performers interacted with the state and expressed ideas choreographically about race, gender, and social change. Starting in the 1930s, citizens invested in ballet as a means for cultural progress. In the 1940s and 1950s, a growing cadre of ballet professionals and their supporters advocated for the government to subsidize the form. Simultaneously, carnival, cabaret, and concert dancers sparked widespread discussion about nation and racial formation, specifically the place of blackness and whiteness in Cuba. As a result, performers and patrons established the political valence of dance as means for reflecting on larger questions about self and society.

After 1959, dancers adapted to the regime change while pursuing longstanding projects. Ballet dancers performed aggressive choreography in fatigues, along with traditional ballets from Europe and Russia, as part of their revolutionary repertoire. Dance teachers built upon previous pedagogical efforts and contributed to new social engineering projects to “improve” Cuban youth. In parallel, modern and folkloric dancers choreographically critiqued patriarchy and race relations in a supposedly post-racial society. These performances developed a Cuban way of dancing and watching dance, the latter characterized as engaged and talkative. Dancers and publics built a vibrant establishment that eventually transcended national borders with Cubans dancing and teaching abroad in the 1970s and 1980s. Meanwhile, dancers contributed to the growing tourist industry and pushed for institutional changes at home in the late 1980s. In 1990,
Cuba entered a crisis that destabilized the relationship between dance and politics that had developed over the previous six decades.

During this period, different dance forms including cabaret, carnival, ballet, modern dance, and folkloric dance received various levels of public and state support. I argue that there were important continuities in dance hierarchies with ballet holding the greatest cultural and political capital starting in the 1930s. I also contend that dancers of different genres employed similar tactics to navigate sociopolitical shifts and expressive parameters across the decades. They consistently shaped dance institutions and asserted the value of their work to revolution and nationhood. This social and cultural history of Cuban dance sheds light on the reach and limitations of state power in Cuba as numerous constituencies engaged with the revolution, maneuvering for agency within a limited public sphere.
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<tr>
<td>ABT</td>
<td>American Ballet Theatre</td>
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<tr>
<td>BNC</td>
<td>Ballet Nacional de Cuba (National Ballet of Cuba)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CARIFESTA</td>
<td>Caribbean Festival of Arts</td>
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<tr>
<td>CDR</td>
<td>Comité de Defensa de la Revolución (Committee for the Defense of the Revolution)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CFN</td>
<td>Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba (National Folkloric Ensemble of Cuba)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CNC</td>
<td>Consejo Nacional de Cultura (National Council of Culture)</td>
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<tr>
<td>CNDM</td>
<td>Conjunto Nacional de Danza Moderna (National Ensemble of Modern Dance)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DCC</td>
<td>Danza Contemporánea de Cuba (Contemporary Dance of Cuba)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DNC</td>
<td>Danza Nacional de Cuba (National Dance of Cuba)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ENA</td>
<td>Escuela Nacional de Arte (National Art School)</td>
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<tr>
<td>FAR</td>
<td>Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (Revolutionary Armed Forces)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FESTAC</td>
<td>Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture</td>
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<tr>
<td>FEU</td>
<td>Federación Estudiantil Universitaria (University Students Federation)</td>
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<tr>
<td>FMC</td>
<td>Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (Cuban Women’s Federation)</td>
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<tr>
<td>HPH</td>
<td>Hospital Psiquiátrico de la Habana (Psychiatric Hospital of Havana)</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICAIC</td>
<td>Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (National Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry)</td>
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<tr>
<td>INC</td>
<td>Instituto Nacional de Cultura (National Institute of Culture)</td>
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<tr>
<td>INDER</td>
<td>Instituto Nacional de Deportes, Educación Física y Recreación (National Institute of Sports, Physical Education, and Recreation)</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>INRA</em></td>
<td><em>Instituto Nacional de Reforma Agraria</em> (Magazine of the Instituto Nacional de Reforma Agraria, National Institute of Agrarian Reform)</td>
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<td>Acronym</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>INTUR</td>
<td>Instituto Nacional del Turismo (National Institute of Tourism)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MITRANS</td>
<td>Ministerio de Transporte (Ministry of Transportation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCC</td>
<td>Partido Comunista de Cuba (Cuban Communist Party)</td>
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<tr>
<td>PSP</td>
<td>Partido Socialista Popular (Popular Socialist Part, Cuba’s Communist Party from 1938 to 1961)</td>
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<tr>
<td>SFCC</td>
<td>Santa Fe Community College (Gainesville, Florida)</td>
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<tr>
<td>TNC</td>
<td>Teatro Nacional de Cuba (National Theatre of Cuba)</td>
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<tr>
<td>UJC</td>
<td>Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas (Union of Young Communists)</td>
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<tr>
<td>UMAP</td>
<td>Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción (Military Units to Assist Production)</td>
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<td>UNEAC</td>
<td>Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba (Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba)</td>
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Introduction. Dancing Politics in Cuba

On December 15-18, 1988, a new dance company, Danza Abierta (Open Dance), premiered in Havana. In an interview in 2001, company founder Mariana Boán described her group as part of a movement to “break with all that was established, very revolutionary.”¹ The program included Sin Permiso (Without Permission), choreographed by Boán. Sin Permiso featured seven dancers performing gestures like raising a hand and covering one’s mouth, ears, and eyes. Lasting over an hour and a half, Boán described the work in a 1988 interview as having a “fragmentary structure to keep the spectator active…. The leitmotif of the entire piece is raising a hand to ask permission to speak.”² The piece had a suggestive title and choreography and alluded to the expressive strictures that artists faced in Cuba. In performing a work that criticized aspects of Cuban society and government, these dancers also evidenced the degrees of freedom carefully cultivated by their predecessors and colleagues.

Even as the dancers of Danza Abierta strove to find new modes of expression, they existed as products of the Cuban dance establishment. High technical skill and creative flexibility testified to the world-class training and professional opportunities in Cuba. Boán and most of her collaborators had graduated from the national art school and worked with large national dance companies in Havana. As one journalist noted, these young dancers were “the fruit of the valuable trajectory of these companies…. From those teachers, those rich repertoires … have emerged these youth determined not only to dance, but also to act, experiment, and break

Actually this fresh iconoclasm represented a gesture to the past. Young dancers took up battles that their forerunners had waged albeit with different conditions and outcomes. Over the decades, dancers pushed their art in new directions and worked to prove its importance to Cuban society, culture, and politics. These dance enterprises are the principal focus of this study.

This dissertation examines Cuban dance, broadly defined, starting in 1930 and ending in 1990. During this sixty-year period of social change, popular mobilization, and authoritarianism, the connections between dance and politics in Cuba developed and solidified. This study juxtaposes traditionally separated dance genres – ballet, modern dance, folkloric dance, cabaret, and carnival – to examine dance as a diverse communicative practice in Cuba. Comparing these forms and their respective aesthetics, audiences, and levels of government support provides revealing insights into Cuban society and culture since each genre projected different ideas about race, class, gender, and sexuality. Along with an expansive approach to dance, I take a long view, comparing dance practices that existed before and after the 1959 Cuban Revolution. I ask the following questions: What were the power structures of dance enterprises and how did they differ by genre, geography, and generation? How did the 1959 Revolution affect the relationship between Cuban dancers and the state? I argue that there existed important continuities in terms of dance hierarchies across the 1959 regime change with ballet holding the greatest cultural and political capital from the 1940s to the present day. I also contend that Cuban dancers navigated sociopolitical shifts and expressive parameters by shaping dance institutions that asserted the value of their work to revolution and nationhood. Dancers employed these tactics not only to protect their art and profession, but also to influence politics and society. Dance served as their vehicle for exploring larger ideas about self and society. Whether performing, teaching, or seeking greater resources, dancers saw themselves furthering the revolutionary mission.

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Dance and the Historiography of Cuban Nationalism and the 1959 Revolution

Cuban nationalism has provided rich ground for historical study given that in 1898 Cuba went from a Spanish colony to a sovereign nation in a neocolonial relationship with the United States. In particular, scholars have examined the evolution of race relations in the new republic and how U.S. imperialism affected Cuban national identities. For instance, studies have analyzed “conflicting nationalisms” that paid lip service to racial harmony while downplaying persistent racial inequalities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Scholars have noted how clashing Cuban factions often deployed the same nationalistic symbols and discourses for divergent ends. These contradictions also appeared in popular culture and staged productions, as Cubans celebrated racial integration while reasserting social hierarchies. Along with race, historians have analyzed how Cubans appropriated and refashioned elements of U.S. influence into new symbolic representations of cubanía or cubanidad, that is, a unique Cuban identity and national consciousness. During the 1959 Cuban Revolution, Fidel Castro and his fellow rebels claimed to realize a long frustrated nationalism, provoking scholars to consider the motives and

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outcomes of such statements. Studies have focused on nationalist and revolutionary discourses articulated by government leaders or rebellious activists in moments of political conflict. My project analyzes how these ideologies related continually over a longer period as dancers deployed these frameworks on a daily basis while operating on the margins of state power.

In doing so, I engage in a larger discussion about the year 1959. As scholars have noted, it serves as a “great divide” in Cuban history and historiography. This conceptualization originated in the rhetoric of Fidel Castro and his 26th of July fighters, who claimed to bring about historic and radical changes. In the 1960s, scholars largely agreed and described great processual transformations to political culture and public consciousness. In the 1970s through the 1990s, political scientists and sociologists challenged previous interpretations by recognizing sociopolitical shifts and inertias. They described how the rebels built on the Cuban past in contemporary political endeavors. More recently, historians have nuanced this contention in studies on Cuban race relations, gender norms, and mental health. Treading a middle ground, they have shown, for instance, how race relations and gender norms in Cuba changed in

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9 Studies have examined nationalist sentiment during the independence wars, the early republic, and revolutionary movements of the early 1930s. See Lane; Ferrer; Guerra, *The Myth of José Martí*; Robert Whitney, *State and Revolution in Cuba: Mass Mobilization and Political Change, 1920-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).


important ways after 1959, yet never resulted in the unprecedented equality professed by the regime. The history of Cuban mental health has revealed “echoes, reverberations, and historical ghosts,” undermining claims of rupture and reform. These contributions have demonstrated how revolution resulted in “dislocations and transformative rearticulations of structures,” without necessarily destroying preexisting social, political, and economic models. As a result, scholars have described the 1959 Cuban Revolution as a palimpsest, layering and appropriating old and new political aspirations into a singular historical trajectory. Taken together, this more recent scholarship rigorously questions 1959 as a turning point in Cuban political culture and society.

In contrast to these efforts, most scholars have accepted 1959 as a watershed for Cuban cultural producers. This consensus comes from historical events and statements. Immediately following 1959, a broad range of arts initiatives such as new (or reconfigured) literary publications, arts schools, institutes, and performance groups appeared to signal unprecedented opportunities for artists and intellectuals. Many historical participants believed the new government offered a bright future for cultural production. Thus, in the program for a 1959 performance, the reorganized Ballet de Cuba proclaimed: “Today, liberty [is] achieved [and] … the Ballet de Cuba is reborn with more faith than ever in the historic destiny of our country, more hope than ever that we can reach our political, social, economic, and artistic goals.” Statements such as this have led authors to conclude that the 1959 Revolution allowed cultural producers to

fulfill previously unrealized dreams.\textsuperscript{18} Scholars, moreover, have assumed that Cuban art before 1959 had little intrinsic value, justifying a focus on an accepted year zero.\textsuperscript{19} Finally, scholars of the visual arts, music, and literature have tried to explain how artists related to revolutionary, and eventually socialist, politics.\textsuperscript{20} In particular they have examined how cultural policies, and an increasingly repressive environment, affected Cuban art and artists. As a result of these interests and research questions, their stories begin in 1959.

Since the late 1980s, literature on post-1959 cultural production has outlined distinct phases in governmental cultural policies and artistic creation. Scholars have agreed that the immediate post-revolutionary period witnessed great experimentation and ebullience in the arts. The heady days ended in 1961 when the government censored the short film \textit{P.M.}, and Fidel Castro delivered his famous “Palabras a los intelectuales” (Words to the Intellectuals) speech, declaring, “Within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing.” A statement that, as Cuban scholar Desiderio Navarro notes, “because of its brevity, construction, and categorical nature, has functioned, from that moment until the present, as a summary of the Revolution’s cultural politics.”\textsuperscript{21} The government established its right to police expression in the name of protecting the revolution. As the 1960s advanced, artists faced new challenges including a virulent homophobia, which ended careers and led to public humiliation and even

\textsuperscript{19} For instance, film scholar Michael Chanan asserts, “The films made in Cuba before the cinema of the Revolution exploded onto the world’s screens in the 1960s are of little aesthetic import, whatever the delights, mainly musical, they may sometimes contain.” Michael Chanan, \textit{Cuban Cinema} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 4.
\textsuperscript{21} Desiderio Navarro, “In Medias Res Publicas: On Intellectuals and Social Criticism in the Cuban Public Sphere,” trans. Alessandro Fornazzari and Desiderio Navarro, \textit{boundary 2} 29, 3 (Fall 2002), 188.
imprisonment. The year 1971 ushered in a particularly dark period. In March 1971, the award-winning poet and essayist Heberto Padilla was arrested and forced to apologize for his so-called counterrevolutionary work. In April, the government declared homosexuals unfit to teach or present their work abroad because their morals were “not in accord with the prestige of [the] revolution.”

During the following five years, Luis Pavón Tamayo directed the Consejo Nacional de Cultura (National Council of Culture, CNC). His tenure became known as the *pavonato* and the *quinquenio gris* (gray five years), because of the marginalization of experimental artists and official preference for mediocre, didactic art. A reorganization of the cultural bureaucracy in 1976 (with a Ministry of Culture replacing the CNC and Armando Hart replacing Pavón) led to a more open environment. As writer Ambrosio Fornet recalls about his fellow writers, “Perhaps never in our medium has one heard a sigh of relief as unanimous as that which was produced before television screens the afternoon of the 30th of November 1976 when … it was announced that a Ministry of Culture was going to be created and the minister would be Armando Hart.”

Yet, even this opening was not absolute. Scholar Georgina Dopico Black describes how in the early 1980s, “defensiveness on the political front was translated into a stricter interpretation of artistic policy.” These studies show how socioeconomic and political conditions impacted Cuban cultural policy.

However, while the above chronology contains elements of truth, recent scholars have raised questions about it. For instance, Desiderio Navarro claims that the gray five years in fact lasted about a decade and a half, from 1968 to 1983, and were “not gray but black for many

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Moreover, Nicola Miller points out that this chronology “is primarily a writer’s story.” Robin Moore, in his work on music, dates the *quinquenio gris* as 1968 to 1973, though he also recognizes repression and self-censorship at other moments. Analysts of the visual arts and film, on the other hand, emphasize the Cuban government’s relatively liberal approach to these forms. Art historian David Craven anecdotally explains differences between official artistic tastes in Cuba versus the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc:

In the early 1960s, a delegation of high-ranking officials from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe visited Cuba. While touring the Presidential Palace with revolutionary leader Fidel Castro, this group encountered a semiabstract mural by René Portocarrero…. Everyone stopped in front of this artwork and a member of the Soviet delegation asked scornfully: “And this, what does this mean? What does it have to do with the Revolution?” Fidel Castro responded, “Nothing at all. It doesn’t mean anything whatsoever. It’s just some crazy stuff created by a madman for people who happen to like this kind of craziness and it was commissioned by the madmen who made this Revolution!”

Beyond this encounter, in the 1965 text “Socialism and Man in Cuba,” Ernesto Che Guevara famously criticized socialist realism, the preferred artistic approach of the Soviet Union, calling it dated, out of touch, and limiting to present day revolutionaries. When compared to the Soviet Union, scholars have observed, Cuba accepted a wider range of visual artistic production. Filmmakers also seemed to enjoy considerable freedom. In the words of film scholar Michael Chanan, “The conventional view is that in the communist state the political public sphere ceases to exist, and the cultural public sphere is reduced and denuded by direct censorship, the direct arm of state patronage, and sanction. In Cuba, this happened to radio, television, and the press,

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28 Craven, 75.  
but not to cinema.” In his opinion, this was because of the “close relations” between the film institute director Alfredo Guevara and Fidel Castro. Historian Lillian Guerra has corroborated his interpretation, describing filmic critiques of government actions in the 1960s. However, she has also demonstrated the limits of that freedom. For instance, she has recounted how documentary filmmaker Nicolás Guillén Landrián was sentenced to two years of hard labor at a prison camp, electroshock therapy, and house arrest for ideological diversion in the late 1960s.

In analysis of post-1959 cultural productions, scholars have depicted artists as having a clear-cut stormy or amicable relationship with the state. Dance offers a far more ambiguous image of Cuban cultural policy. Different dance genres fell in and out of favor without the kind of public clashes that occurred in film or literature (such as the censorship of P.M. and Heberto Padilla). Disfavor resulted in the quiet cancellation of performances or budget cuts. Moreover, even as the state celebrated ballet and its iconic star, Alicia Alonso, it targeted male ballet dancers for presumed homosexuality. At the same time, other male dancers were allowed to continue working because of their public discretion. Dancers also had greater opportunity to critique aspects of society and politics on stage, identifying for instance racial and gender inequalities. Thanks to its metaphorical, non-verbal nature, dance often defied censors. The state also backed dance education projects that dancers almost entirely shaped and managed. In the 1970s and 1980s, the government deployed dancers, choreographers, and teachers all over the world as part of internationalist efforts and cultural diplomacy. As dancers traveled and worked abroad, they had to push for greater resources and professional opportunities at home, especially in the 1980s. With respect to dance, the Cuban state was consistently inconsistent.

30 Chanan, 17-18.
31 Ibid., 7.
32 Guerra, Visions of Power in Cuba, 343.
This inconsistency deviates from the standard narrative of post-revolutionary Cuban dance, which insists that the post-1959 political leadership generously supported dance and welcomed dancers into the official political fold. Even scholars of opposite political leanings and analyzing different dance forms share this assumption. For instance, the official ballet historian Miguel Cabrera and the anti-Castro Cuban exile Octavio Roca agree that 1959 marked a turning point for ballet; though Cabrera sees it as enabling, and Roca as severely inhibiting, ballet development. Studies of Cuban modern and folkloric dance describe both forms as growing in response to new attitudes and opportunities offered after 1959. In the process, they paint a rather stagnant picture of grateful dancers and a supportive state. These studies portray dancers as passive beneficiaries or victims (depending on the author) of the new leaders and the historical moment that resulted from the 1959 Revolution. Scholars never consider how dancers’ relationships with the state changed over time or how dancers shaped this evolution. Contrarily, I recognize fluctuations and contend that Cuban dancers had power over their art and relationship to the state in the decades leading up to and following the 1959 Revolution.

Because of the centrality of dance to Cuban society and culture, a study of the phenomenon contributes to understandings of modern Cuban history. Although a generalization, many perceive Cuba as a dancing island. For instance, Cuban ballerina Alicia Alonso wrote, “Cubans are a dancing people. Dance matters to us, and it matters deeply.” In a 2015 article on Cuban dance developments, critic Joan Acocella told readers of the New Yorker, “Rarely will

35 Alicia Alonso, “Foreword,” in Roca, 12.
you see such dancers…. Cubans have dance in their DNA.”

This derives at least partially from the vibrant Cuban dances that have circulated and continue to circulate internationally. Despite the perceived national significance of dance, not all dances have been treated equally either before or after the Revolution. When taken as a broad expressive category, dance allows for a comparative analysis of how different forms and practices simultaneously experienced state support, repression, or indifference. Dance challenges straightforward characterizations of post-1959 Cuban cultural policy and reveals important continuities across the “great divide.”

A study of Cuban dance has significance for scholars of Cuba because it relates to broader questions about the agency of Cuban citizens. Because of Fidel Castro’s concentrated power, observers have assumed, as political scientist Samuel Farber writes, “the Cuban masses have remained the objects rather than the subjects of history.” The same passivity is said to describe Cuban dancers as well. Joan Acocella, for instance, presumes, “After the 1959 Revolution, Cuban dance, like other Cuban arts, got fed into a Soviet-style propaganda machine.” Increasingly, however, historians have rejected such sweeping conclusions about state power to explore the multiple ways that Cuban citizens have influenced sociopolitical developments. For instance, Alejandro de la Fuente has shown how civic concerns compelled the new leadership to grapple with race relations in post-1959 Cuba. Citizens also subverted state discourses by idiosyncratically interpreting political objectives and inadvertently layering “the grand narrative of the Revolution,” as Lillian Guerra has described. Such counter narratives emerged from bold Cuban publics not quiescent, powerless masses. Along the same lines,

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38 Acocella.
39 De la Fuente, *A Nation for All*.
Michelle Chase has disrupted the focus on Castro and his male collaborators by chronicling how women participated in the revolutionary process. My study of Cuban dance contributes to this revisionist effort by broadening the definition of revolutionary action to include diverse dance initiatives that constituted and modified political ideals. Performers often spearheaded government-backed dance projects while simultaneously challenging ideological frameworks to create spaces for critical reflection.

This work on Cuban dance shifts the focus away from Castro and the country’s political leadership in order to address important issues not only in Cuban but also Cold War historiography. In dialogue with efforts to reassess Latin American Cold War histories “from within,” I offer a social and cultural history of Cuban dance that examines how individuals gave concrete, bodily form to abstract claims made in a polarized world order. This demonstrates what historian Greg Grandin calls the “politicization and internationalization of everyday life” – how transcendent ideologies shaped and were shaped by individuals engaging with them on local, national, and international scales. Furthermore, dance provides insight into the quotidian experience of revolution. Questions about the task of living a revolution, rather than necessarily fighting or opposing one, often get lost behind Cuba’s olive green military readiness. I work to understand the role of dance in Cuban society as an art activity that provided entertainment, occupation, and a means for political expression.

**Dance, Politics, and History**

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41 Chase, *Revolution within the Revolution.*


In examining Cuban dance as a general category, I depart from most dance scholars, who
tend to focus on a single genre and its choreographers, performers, and companies.44 Some
exceptions exist. For instance, studies have looked at various forms and practices to demonstrate
the broad impact of African American culture on U.S. choreography, the diversity of modernism
in U.S. dance after World War II, choreographic responses to deteriorating national structures in
East Germany, varied U.S. dancer diplomats abroad, and U.S. dance makers’ investments in
intellectual property rights.45 Building on this work, I juxtapose different practices, although I
focus more directly on how different genres were carefully constructed and constantly redefined.
Borrowing from literary scholar Wai Chee Dimock, I perceive genre as “a volatile body of
material, still developing, still in transit, and always on the verge of taking flight in some
unknown and unpredictable direction.”46 Throughout their careers, Cuban dancers highlighted
genre distinctions as they competed with their counterparts for state support and audiences; yet,
over a lifetime of work, dancers and choreographers also moved across genre lines to realize new
artistic objectives or simply to find work. Considering different forms together also demonstrates
how dance, broadly speaking, contributed to larger conversations about society and politics.

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44 A few examples include: Tim Scholl, “Sleeping Beauty”: A Legend in Progress (New Haven: Yale
University Press, 2004); Susan Manning, Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion (Minneapolis:
University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Julie Malnig, Dancing Till Dawn: A Century of Exhibition
Ballroom Dance (New York: New York University Press, 1995); Marta Savigliano, Tango and the

45 Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other
Contexts (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996); Gay Morris, A Game for Dancers: Performing
Modernism in the Postwar Years, 1945-1960 (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006); Jens
Richard Giersdorf, The Body of the People: East German Dance since 1945 (Madison, WI: University of
Wisconsin Press, 2013); Clare Croft, Dancers as Diplomats: American Choreography in Cultural
Exchange (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Anthea Kraut, Choreographing Copyright: Race,
Gender, and Intellectual Property Rights in American Dance (New York: Oxford University Press,
2016).

46 Wai Chee Dimock, “Genre as World System: Epic and Novel on Four Continents,” Narrative 14, 1
(2005), 86.
In analyzing the politics of dance and dancing politics, that is, dancing to express political tenets and building dance projects to shape public life, this study engages with a sizable literature. Whether ballet spectacles in aristocratic and revolutionary France, identity politics in African American vaudeville, or German modern dancers during the Third Reich, scholars have illuminated the individual and collective politics of dance, dancers, and dance institutions. Of particular relevance to my project are the works that deal with dance in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Scholars such as Elizabeth Souritz, Christina Ezrahi, Janice Ross, and Jens Richard Giersdorf have examined bold experimentation, crippling repression, and tactics for reclaiming “artistic autonomy in a system that sought to deny it,” which in turn resulted in “important, even defiant, work.”48 The issues discussed by these authors – state-dancer relations, censorship, and dancers’ maneuvers – resemble those that I analyze in the Cuban context. Cuba, however, also revises understandings of dance and politics in the socialist world. While influenced by leftist, Cuban dancers equally looked to local African diasporic culture to articulate political ideas about national identity and revolutionary objectives. Race rather than Marxist-Leninism most powerfully inspired dancing politics on the island.

When analyzing dance and politics, a central issue is whether dance served as a lens or a vehicle. In other words, did dances reflect their political context or did they impact political


outcomes? Most scholars insist that dance did both. For instance, in her cultural history of the postwar U.S., Rebekah Kowal uses modern dance as a lens, but also shows how “doing something on stage was tantamount to, or at least a rehearsal for, doing it in the world,” such that “dances substantiated the emerging body politic in unexpected and transformative ways.”49 My study also carries out this balancing act, confirming that dance mirrored and affected aspects of contemporary Cuban society, politics, and culture. I illustrate how dancers shaped state dance institutions as well as the ways that fellow Cubans engaged with these institutions as students, workers, or audience members. Dancers also flexed political muscle in their choreographed representations of Cuban nationhood and revolution at home and abroad. In general, dance enterprises influenced individual and collective sociability in Cuba, as citizens became active dance patrons and practitioners over the decades.

Along with addressing the relationship between dance and politics, this study posits a different approach to dance and history. Scholars have reflected on the challenges of writing about dance historically since unlike literature, music, or the visual arts, the choreographed cultural text disappears upon realization. As dance scholar Susan Manning writes, “An event bound in space and time, a performance can be read only through its traces – on the page, in memory, on film, in the archive. Each of these traces marks, indeed distorts, the event of performance, and so the scholar pursues what remains elusive as if moving through an endless series of distorting reflections.”50 Such slipperiness can be problematic for scholars trained in disciplines such as cultural studies, musicology, and literary or art history, in which the analyst carefully examines a tangible art object. Despite this quandary, for performance studies scholar

49 Rebekah Kowal, How to do things with Dance: Performing Change in Postwar America (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 18.
50 Susan Manning, Ecstasy and the Demon: the Dances of Mary Wigman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 12.
Diana Taylor, such “distorting reflections” can redress historical misinterpretations. She distinguishes the archive from the repertoire, defining the latter as “dance, theatre, song, ritual, witnessing, healing practices, memory paths, and the many other forms of repeatable behaviors … that cannot be housed or contained in the archive.”51 The repertoire, Taylor contends, brings attention to peoples and practices left out of or erased from historical records. These authors and others explain the problem and potential of historical performances. However, while very interested in dance and history, these works have not engaged dance to understand queries central to a historian’s craft: change over time, structural shifts, and individual agency within larger processes. My project attempts this work, allowing movement forms and practices to redefine the Cuban past. In doing so, I suggest greater commonality between dance studies and history than is usually recognized. Both fields examine incomplete remnants and subjective memories to reconstruct events and imagine long-gone, moving bodies and their relationship with a broad range of social forces.

To do this, I use press, performance programs, archival material, interviews, and oral histories, all of which offer insights into dancers’ objectives and actions. Material from archives and private collections in the U.S., Cuba, and Puerto Rico, such as the correspondence of Cuban dance leaders Alicia, Fernando, and Alberto Alonso and Lorna Burdsall, have shed light on individual experiences. Government archives in Cuba and Mexico have provided glimpses into state cultural policies. Unfortunately, ballet and modern dance have a more extensive archival footprint than folkloric dance, cabaret, and carnival. These disparities inevitably surface in the analysis, confirming my larger conclusion that dance hierarchies in place before 1959 continue to this day – in the public imaginary, state policies, and the material archive.

Chapters

I analyze the history of Cuban dance and politics in six chapters with the first two taking place in the decades before the 1959 Revolution and the remaining four examining dance developments after that year. These chapters move forward chronologically and thematically, examining different aspects of Cuban dance practice within the shifting sociopolitical context.

Chapter One analyzes ballet academies, professionals, audiences, and government subsidies from 1930 to 1959 and challenges assumptions that ballet only gained official support and widespread importance thanks to Fidel Castro and his government. The chapter argues that ballet became an important leisure and professional activity in Cuba thanks to the efforts of talented and visionary citizens rather than the government. Starting in the early decades of the twentieth century, Cuban civic associations brought famous performers to the island and organized classes for children and young people, making dance a pastime. In the 1940s, ballet became a profession when Cuban ballet dancers returned from abroad to found new institutions. At this time, the famous Cuban ballet triad of Alicia Alonso, her husband Fernando Alonso, and Fernando’s brother Alberto Alonso, secured a state subsidy for their ballet company, but later campaigned unsuccessfully for more public funds. Clashes between dancers and the state over resource allocations in 1956 and public support for the dancers, indicated how far ballet had come in Cuba. Rather than victims of a tyrannical regime, as official post-revolutionary histories recount, ballet dancers had considerable power on the island before 1959.

Chapter Two complements the first by examining the same pre-1959 period, but moving the focus to Africanist aesthetics or AfroCubanismo in performances. It examines poetry declamation, ballet libretti, carnival, cabaret, television spectacles, ballet, modern dance, and
folkloric dances before 1959 to show how various performance practices sparked widespread discussion about nation and racial formation, specifically the place of blackness and whiteness in Cuba. For instance, Cubans debated the legalization of carnival in 1937, supporting or opposing the image of Cuba projected by the annual event. In 1952, audiences protested a modern dance that featured African diasporic religious rites, compelling intellectual Fernando Ortiz to publicly support the work. Cabarets staged eroticized Africanist music and dance that pleased foreign tourists but dismayed nationalists like Fidel Castro and his 26th of July fighters, who bombed the venues associated with such performances. Dancers weathered these conflicts by defending their work as artistic form, popular entertainment, and political performance that benefitted Cuba. Through these efforts, dancers demonstrated the national significance of Cuba’s African patrimony in the years before Castro’s rise to power.

Chapter Three focuses on dance developments in the first fifteen years after the 1959 regime change. While dancers shared political discourses, their aesthetic embodiment of revolutionary ideologies differed significantly. This revealed not only that revolution was a capacious concept open to numerous interpretations, but also that dancers reframed their longstanding objectives in divergent ways to align them with new political codes. Ballets featured dancers in fatigues, enacting aggressive choreography to embody Ernesto Che Guevara’s vision of the “New Man”; yet, dancers also continued to perform traditional ballets though in somewhat Soviet-flavored versions. Modern and folkloric dancers staged theatricalized Afro-Cuban rituals, now framed as expressions of the “people” in keeping with contemporary populist rhetoric. Cabaret dancers claimed that their performances of popular dances best aligned with nationalist revolution. The chapter contends that dancers of different genres promoted
divergent, tensely coexisting political ideals in their work. As a result, dance vibrantly reflected larger ideological struggles and contradictions of the revolutionary project.

Chapter Four analyzes dance education in the 1960s and 1970s. The post-1959 dance educational system built upon and expanded prerevolutionary institutions. The chapter considers dance education for future professionals, non-professionals, and audiences. Dance education contributed to new social engineering projects to “improve” Cuban youth. Dance teachers recruited rural and orphan children to join elite training programs. Companies partnered with state daycare centers and mental hospitals to advance or “heal” vulnerable populations. Additionally, dancers taught the public to appreciate dance through the mass media and courses at public libraries and during dance festivals. This chapter argues that while the state and dance leaders had overlapping interests in furthering dance education, dance leaders determined the nature of dance socialization tactics rather than following a top-down state policy.

Chapter Five examines dance professionals in Cuba and beyond in the late 1970s and 1980s. As part of Cuba’s foreign policy, Cuban dancers, like doctors, soldiers, and construction workers, traveled to Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas to perform, teach foreign students, and set Cuban choreography. Foreign students also received scholarships to train and dance in Cuba. As a result of these efforts, Cuba became a recognized leader in world, and especially regional, dance initiatives. The chapter argues that Cuban dance exports could do what other political activities could not – defy the U.S. blockade and actively interface with capitalist and communist countries alike. As a result of these efforts, Cuban dancers had ample opportunity to connect their art to larger political projects of solidarity and national viability on a global scale.

Chapter Six examines dance developments of the 1980s inside Cuba, including the growth of tourism and the emergence of a new dance avant-garde. After years of considering
tourism an exploitative economic activity, the government began embracing it anew. Dance activities like cabaret performance and international dance workshops played a central role in attracting and entertaining tourists. Along with these developments, many young dancers broke with large companies and advocated for greater corporeal and creative freedom. The year 1990 marks the endpoint of this study as Cuba experienced an economic and political crisis caused by the falling Soviet Union, euphemistically called the Special Period in a Time of Peace. Examining dance developments in the decade leading up to this year, I challenge existing assumptions that the external crisis caused a sudden opening in Cuban society. Scholars focused on the Special Period have overlooked a long history of negotiation and creative labor.\textsuperscript{52} Cuban dancers, for instance, fought for a more open dance future in the years before 1990.

**Note on Terminology**

This study uses the terms concert dance (ballet, modern dance, and folkloric dance), entertainment and popular dance, as well as carnival to distinguish among different dance styles and practices. Concert dance signifies performance that generally takes place in theatrical venues. The terms entertainment and popular dance are particularly fluid. Entertainment dance refers to the presentation of various genres (often a mixture of concert and popular dances) in a cabaret setting or on television. Cuban popular dances include the danzón, rumba, mambo, cha-cha-chá, and Mozambique. They figure into diverse performances such as choreographed spectacles in cabarets, carnival celebrations through city streets, or on a nightclub dance floor. Carnival in Cuba comprises of music and dance groups called comparsas. Havana and Santiago (Cuba’s second largest city) have a long history of distinct carnival traditions. The conga dance

is often performed during carnival parades in both locales, though with stylistic differences. In practice many dance events defy easy definition.

To clarify further, ballet is a form that originated in European aristocratic courts, made its way to imperial Russia, continued to expand and diversify in nineteenth century Europe, and crossed the Atlantic to take root in the Americas in the early twentieth century. Although ballet has a long history as a popular expression and non-elite entertainment practice (for instance, in the music halls of nineteenth century Europe), ballet arrived in Cuba in the early twentieth century with elite connotations and patronage. The genre has a well-defined movement vocabulary, and given its history, retains associations with whiteness. In Cuba, principal ballet companies in the period analyzed include Ballet Alicia Alonso (founded in 1948), renamed Ballet de Cuba in the 1950s and Ballet Nacional de Cuba in the 1960s, and the Ballet de Camagüey (founded in 1967).

Modern dance emerged in Europe and the Americas in the late nineteenth century as a freer movement often performed barefoot. Female recitalists sought new modes of self-expression and rejected contemporary popular culture displays of the female, ballet dancer as a type of mindless, titillating entertainment rather than profound art. In Cuba, modern dance also has been referred to as “national dance” in the 1970s and “contemporary dance” in the 1980s to today. Reflecting this shift in terminology, the main modern dance company Departamento de Danza Moderna del Teatro Nacional (Department of Modern Dance of the National Theater, founded in 1959) was renamed Conjunto Nacional de Danza Moderna (National Ensemble of Modern Dance, CNDM) in 1962, Danza Nacional de Cuba (National Dance of Cuba, DNC) in 1974, and Danza Contemporánea de Cuba (Contemporary Dance of Cuba, DCC) in 1987. Despite these different terms, I use modern dance throughout to describe the genre.
Folkloric dance in Cuba refers to choreography inspired by the country’s Spanish and African patrimony. Of particular importance are dances and music part of the African diasporic, Cuban religion, Santería, which derived from Spanish Catholicism and Yoruban orisha worship. During Santería religious ceremonies or toques de santo, adherents perform praise songs, ritual drumming, and dances to summon the orishas. In the eastern part of the island, Haitian cultural influences are particularly strong and have resulted in the folkloric dance of tumba francesa. In Cuba, the main national folkloric dance company, Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba (National Folkloric Ensemble of Cuba, CFN), was founded in 1962. Important folkloric dance companies also emerged in the second largest Cuban city, Santiago de Cuba, in the eastern part of the island. This included the Conjunto Folklórico de Oriente in 1959, and in the 1970s, Conjunto Folklórico Cutumba, an offshoot of the former group.⁵³

Besides dance genres, the racial terminology employed in this study deserves explanation. Following the example of recent scholarship on Cuba, I avoid the term “Afro-Cuban” to describe individuals since Cubans historically used the terms negro (black), mulato or mestizo (referring to an indeterminate racial mixture), and blanco (white). I also sometimes employ non-white as shorthand for an African descended individual or cultural practice of an unspecified racial distinction (black or mulatto). I do use “Afro-Cuban” occasionally to describe African diasporic cultural practices and aesthetics in Cuba.

⁵³ José Millet and Rafael Brea, Grupos Folklóricos de Santiago de Cuba (Santiago de Cuba: Editorial Oriente, 1989), 98-101.
Chapter 1. Valuing Dance:
The Politics of Patronage in the Cuban Republic

Starting in the 1930s, internationally acclaimed dancers performed regularly in Cuba and formal dance instruction began on the island, introducing Cuban audiences and youth to a new pastime. Almost immediately, dance became a passion for patrons and practitioners. Dance in this case refers particularly to the concert dance forms of ballet, modern dance, and folkloric, especially Spanish, dance. Concert dance had a high art connotation by being performed in a theatre rather than on the streets, in a cabaret, or, by the 1950s, on television. Supporters believed that concert dance furthered national progress by exposing Cuban audiences to enlightened choreography, students to disciplined dance instruction, and professional dancers to opportunities for artistic growth. Although few questioned the value of concert dance, many debated its economic present and future in Cuba. More specifically, Cubans wondered about the relationship between dancers and their financiers, whether private associations, commercial businesses, or the state. They also disputed the relationship between Cuban and foreign dancers, as well as between concert dance in a theatre and dance performed on television and in cabarets. Some posited antagonism and others, synergism, between dancers of different nationalities and performance spaces. This chapter analyzes these clashing opinions, what I call the politics of patronage, that is, the sometimes competing and sometime collaborative views among dancers, audience members, and government officials about the social value and prospects of concert dance.

This chapter challenges existing literature, which ascribe dance developments to Fidel Castro and the 1959 Revolution.¹ Traditional narratives characterize the decades before 1959 as a

¹This resembles similar claims in the Soviet Union that ballet only existed in Moscow or St. Petersburg before the revolution and expanded to all parts of the country afterwards. The International Encyclopedia
cultural wasteland where elites funded art that appealed to bourgeois tastes, while the government remained apathetic to, and the masses ignorant of, concert dance. Here I underscore the politics of patronage because it reveals the numerous constituencies interested in dance, as well as the robustness of the Cuban dance establishment in this period. The chapter argues that broad and diverse sectors forged a rich, multifaceted dance tradition in Cuba by 1959. A close look at dance developments in the Cuban Republic also reveal that many questions and tensions regarding the ideal paradigm for dance patronage existed at the end of the 1950s. These uncertainties informed the improvised and contradictory approach to dance funding after 1959.

Below I analyze the politics of dance patronage in the Cuban Republic in three sections. The first looks at the first two decades of dance development spearheaded by philanthropically minded cultural associations. It details how these institutional origins connected dance to civil service. The second section examines the personal politics that affected dance developments in the late 1940s and early 1950s, resulting in new collaborations and ruptures among dancers and associations. Cubans debated the relationship between Cuban and foreign artists and between the concert stage and commercial venues like television and cabaret. Disagreements ultimately had a positive impact on the field, resulting in new institutions and visions for the art form. The final section analyzes debates regarding state support for dance. The state provided a subsidy for professional ballet starting with President Carlos Prío Socarrás in 1949. Funding ended with a

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of Dance on theatrical dance in Russia does not mention groups outside of Moscow or St. Petersburg until the 1930s. The entry on Ukraine does discuss theatrical dance in Kiev before 1917 and Polish ballet masters. See Galina Inozemtseva and Elena Fidorenko, “Russia” and Yuri Stanishevsky, “Ukraine,” in *International Encyclopedia of Dance* Online, ed. Selma Jeanne Cohen and Dance Perspectives Foundation (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

publicized clash between ballet leaders and the cultural bureaucracy of President Fulgencio Batista in 1956. In this period, discontent grew over dance allocations and became part of the larger protest against the Batista regime. Dance became a battleground in the political struggle.

Understanding these dance developments demands, first of all, a look at the social, political, and economic upheaval in Cuba at the time. In 1928, President Gerardo Machado changed the Cuban constitution to extend his presidential term. Widespread protest followed this move, and Machado used state violence to repress critics. Cuba felt the adverse effect of the 1929 global economic crisis, and labor in particular began mobilizing to secure rights and protections in the precarious marketplace. Students and intellectuals, along with other sectors of society, denounced the Cuban government for corruption, authoritarianism, and continued deference to the U.S. They condemned the 1901 Platt Amendment, which had established a neocolonial relationship between the U.S. and Cuba. Agitation culminated in the overthrow of Machado in the 1933 Revolution and the abrogation of the 1901 Platt Amendment in May 1934. Fulgencio Batista, a colonel who took part in the military revolt against Machado, became the power behind a series of presidents and eventually won the presidency in 1940. He established a new, progressive constitution that year and peacefully left power in 1944. The 1930s marked a fundamental shift from an oligarchic Cuban state where public authority rested with elites to a modern state where leaders had to contend with the popular classes.\textsuperscript{3}

In spite of these changes, discontent and tensions remained. Corruption plagued the government throughout the 1940s and early 1950s. Moreover, many of the reforms written into the 1940 Constitution remained unfulfilled. Then in 1952, Batista returned to power by military coup, and Cubans widely protested his flagrant disregard of constitutional law. Cuba had been proud of its democratic achievements and saw itself as more developed than Latin American and

\textsuperscript{3} Whitney, \textit{State and Revolution in Cuba}. 
Caribbean countries that were ruled by dictators at the time. This return to military authoritarianism meant an unacceptable step backward, and many Cubans, including young activists such as Fidel Castro, began rallying against the government. The fight against Batista in the 1950s became linked romantically to the struggle for independence from Spain in the late nineteenth century and, more directly, to the Revolution of 1933 and political discontent of the 1940s and early 1950s. Younger cadres recalled the battle cries of their parents and took up arms to further longstanding ideological aspirations. The 1930s through 1950s, then, can be seen as a period of evolving revolutionary rhetoric and intermittent struggle.

This climate affected the form and function of dance projects as citizens saw cultural production as a means for national renovation impossible in traditional political outlets. Many believed that performances, art exhibits, public libraries, and classes in the arts for children and adults furthered the intellectual and cultural development of Cuban society. Such activities also supposedly reaffirmed Cuba’s ability to operate independently of the U.S. and Europe. Furthermore, whereas politicians were authoritarian, corrupt, and pandered to foreign powers, artists appeared generous and patriotic. Their works explored national themes and impressed international audiences, thereby benefitting Cuba in many respects. Artists and art patrons rather than politicians declared that they truly had the interests of Cuban citizens in mind.

**Dancing and Patronizing Dance: A Service to Self and Society**

Concert dance in Cuba developed under the auspices of civic associations, principally led by women, and these origins situated dance within a larger project of social service. One important association to the history of concert music and dance in Cuba was the Sociedad Pro-Arte Musical. Founded in 1918 by white, bourgeois women, Pro-Arte aimed to cultivate a
domestic appreciation of high culture in order to “enlighten and educate” Cuban audiences.⁴ Although originally focused on music, starting in the 1930s, the women of Pro-Arte began supporting dance. They brought notable dancers and companies of modern dance, Spanish dance, and ballet to Cuba and organized dance classes for Cuban youth.⁵ These initiatives fostered a growing interest in concert dance performance and patronage.

Investing in the arts, according to Pro-Arte members, furthered a socially conscious agenda. In a 1930 article entitled “Cultura y Caridad” (Culture and Charity) for the society publication Pro-Arte Musical, an unidentified author described Pro-Arte as a charitable organization since humans needed not only “bread, asylum and hospitals, but also … the fine arts.” The author continued, “Pro-Arte Musical makes a cry – a patriotic cry – to … strengthen the collective progress in our country.”⁶ Another author for Pro-Arte Musical in 1940 wrote:

Pro-Arte Musical has labored, labors, and will labor for national culture … born of sincere and profound conviction that renders great service to the patria. Pueblos … forge, grow, and prosper under the favorable wing of Ariel, the eternal symbol of human spirituality. Pro-Arte Musical has dedicated itself … to strengthening the collective artistic conscience.⁷

The commentary alluded to the landmark essay, Ariel (1900), by Uruguayan essayist José Enrique Rodó, in which the author esteemed Latin America and its interest in culture as opposed

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⁵ Examples include modern dancers Irma Duncan Dancers (1931), Ruth Page (1932), Ted Shawn and his male dancers (1937), Harald Kreutzberg (1938, 1948), Ballet Jooss (1940), Martha Graham and Company (1941), and Cilli Wang (1951, 1952). Spanish dancers included Antonia Mercé, “La Argentina” (1936), Rosita Segovia (1939, 1942), Ana María (1939, 1942), Pilar López y su Ballet Español (1952, 1959), and Ballet Español Ximénez-Vargas (1955). Pro-Arte also brought ballet dancers and companies such as the Ballet Russe de Montecarlo (1936), Ballet Caravan (1938), Original Ballet Russe (1941), Ballet Theater (1947), and the Finnish National Ballet (1959). For a more complete list, see Parera Villalón, 56-62.
⁷ Pro-Arte Musical 17, 1 (Oct. 1, 1940), 1.
to the U.S. and its obsession with materialistic ends. The above authors heralded Pro-Arte Musical for its lofty work in furthering national progress through art.

Although led by bourgeois women, Pro-Arte attempted to expand the reach of its activities to benefit more Cubans. Along with performances in grand theaters, Pro-Arte hosted free concerts by famous Cuban and foreign musicians for inmates in Havana prisons, orphanages, and old-age homes starting in 1923. Though this program lasted only two years, popularizing initiatives continued and accelerated under the leadership of Pro-Arte President Laura Rayneri de Alonso (1934-1948). She instituted the practice of distributing seventy-five free tickets for each concert to students around Havana. Additionally, she lowered membership fees for the summer months to encourage enrollment. Pro-Arte functionaries also helped the general public secure tickets from members unable to use their seats. Furthermore, based on available figures for 1946, membership rates ranged from twenty pesos to join Pro-Arte plus three pesos per month for the orchestra seats to only five pesos to join and two pesos per month for seats in the second balcony. These policies helped to make Pro-Arte productions available to Cubans of different socioeconomic backgrounds.

A recent study published in Havana in 2011 confirms that Pro-Arte was less exclusive than traditionally presumed. According to Cubans interviewed about the association, families of modest means could afford to enjoy Pro-Arte concerts with little sacrifice. In the words of one

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9 Sociedad Pro-Arte Musical, “Breve historia y resumen de las actividades de la sociedad, desde su fundación en diciembre 2 de 1918 hasta julio de 1938” (Habana: Cultural, S.A., 1938), 13, in Folder 18, Box 1, Natalia Aróstegui Collection, Cuban Heritage Collection (CHC), University of Miami Libraries, Coral Gables, FL.
10 Parera Villalón, 14.
12 Performance Program, “La Sociedad Pro-Arte Musical Presenta Un Festival de su Escuela de Baile,” (May 25, 27, 29, 31 & June 1, 1946), Folder 19, Box 1, Natalia Aróstegui Collection, CHC.
interviewee, Ángel Vázquez Millares, “I had access to Pro-Arte. I say it because in these times there are people that complain, as if it was impossible. There is one certain thing that I am going to say with total sincerity; if I had two pesos a month I did not waste them buying Cristal or Polar beers. I went to the concerts of Pro-Arte.”\textsuperscript{13} The narrator referred to many post-1959 histories that decried Pro-Arte for its exclusivity. According to these interpretations, the majority of Cubans only had access to the arts after 1959.\textsuperscript{14} However, elderly observers interviewed for the 2011 book challenge this as a widespread misconception. Pro-Arte cultivated a heterogeneous public for the arts, from the “high national aristocracy” to more modest citizens, including teachers and students, the latter group easily identified in the audience by their school uniforms, as one narrator recalled.\textsuperscript{15} Another interviewee, Lillian Caos, argued that Pro-Arte had such progressive ideas about art and society that the association and its initiatives provided the foundation for post-1959 revolutionary cultural institutions such as the Unión Nacional de Escritores y Artistas Cubanas (UNEAC, National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists) and the Escuela Nacional de Arte (National School of Art, ENA).\textsuperscript{16} Pro-Arte aspired to develop Cuban culture for the benefit of a diverse population rather than simply for elite patrons.

Along with bringing professional foreign dancers to perform in Cuba, Pro-Arte organized the country’s first ballet classes. In 1931, Pro-Arte member Natalia Aróstegui suggested that the society counter membership slumps in the wake of the 1929 worldwide economic depression by inaugurating ballet, declamation, and guitar classes for youth. The classes cost an extra half of a peso a month (based on rates from 1946) and were a novel offering expected to attract new

\textsuperscript{13} Pacheco Valera, 77-78. 
\textsuperscript{14} For instance, see Cabrera, \textit{El Ballet en Cuba}, 21. 
\textsuperscript{15} Pacheco Valera, 72. 
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 74-75.
members.\textsuperscript{17} The society hired Russian émigré Nicolai Yavorsky, who was residing in Havana at the time, to teach the first ballet classes beginning that year. The early classes at Pro-Arte trained the first generation of professional Cuban ballet dancers, choreographers, and teachers including future dance leaders like the sisters Blanca (Cuca) and Alicia Martínez and the brothers Alberto and Fernando Alonso.

Looking at the family and social backgrounds of these Cuban ballet pioneers provides some indication of the demographics of ballet students in this period. Cuca and Alicia Martínez were the daughters of an army veterinarian of Spanish descent, who eventually reached the rank of captain, and a “well-educated seamstress with ambition.”\textsuperscript{18} They lived in a large apartment in the privileged Vedado neighborhood in Havana. Cuca and Alicia matriculated in Yavorksy’s classes in the summer of 1931. In 1932, Alberto Alonso enrolled, and his older brother Fernando followed three years later after being inspired by a performance that featured Alberto Alonso and Alicia Martínez.\textsuperscript{19} The Alonso brothers came from a distinguished family of Italian, Austrian, and Canary Island descent and lived in a house in Vedado. Their father was a public accountant and employee of a U.S. trading company and their mother, Laura Rayneri de Alonso, was a pianist and member of Pro-Arte. She became president of the association in 1934 and held this position until 1948. The Martínez and Alonso children’s upwardly mobile and upper class families provide insight into the backgrounds of the first generation of Pro-Arte students.

Although the school of Pro-Arte became the most well known and remembered, other civic associations and private enterprises played a role in dance instruction in Havana. In 1931, Sylvia de los Reyes y Delgado founded the Sociedad Infantil de Bellas Artes (Children’s Society

\textsuperscript{17} Performance Program, “La Sociedad Pro-Arte Musical Presenta Un Festival de su Escuela de Baile,” (May 25, 27, 29, 31 & June 1, 1946), Folder 19, Box 1, Natalia Arósteguí Collection, CHC.

\textsuperscript{18} Roca, 30.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 49; Singer, 13.
of Fine Arts). That year, the U.S. born ballerina and Spanish dancer Fernán Flor (née, Ina Cadwell), began teaching dance classes to Cuban children under the association’s auspices.\(^\text{20}\) Among her students, Sylvia M. Goudie and Magli Acosta went on to found their own studio in Havana in 1949. Another civic association offering dance classes in the capital was the Lyceum and Lawn Tennis Club, founded in 1928. According to the association’s statutes, the society strove to “foment in women a collective spirit, encouraging and guiding all types of activities of a cultural, social, and philanthropic nature.”\(^\text{21}\) This encompassed a range of programs from literacy and domestic skills classes for women to dance classes for young people. The Russian émigrée Anna Leontieva taught ballet classes for the Lyceum in the late 1940s and the Cuban dancer Cuca Martinez, in the 1950s.\(^\text{22}\) Russian émigrée Nina Verchinina, a former dancer with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, taught ballet and modern dance classes in the 1940s in Havana. These and other dance institutions illustrate the diversity and breadth of the dance instructional landscape in the decades before 1959. With numerous children involved in classes, dance played a role in the lives of more Cubans than previously acknowledged about this period.

What’s more, dance developments took place not only in Havana, but also in the provinces as a result of civic associations and individual efforts. Local elites founded Pro-Arte branches in Santiago de Cuba (called Pro-Arte de Oriente) in June 1940 and Manzanillo and Cienfuegos in July 1944.\(^\text{23}\) Later, chapters started in Holguín and Camagüey as well. Pro-Arte


\(^{21}\) Folder 1/3 “Administrative Organization - Statutes,” Box 1, Lyceum and Lawn Tennis Club Collection, CHC.

\(^{22}\) Based on incomplete programs detailing the club’s monthly activities, evidence confirms Leontieva taught in 1943-45, 1947, and 1948. Cuca Martinez taught in 1952, 1956, 1958, and 1959. Materials can be found in Folders 4, 8-11, Box 3, and Folder 7, Box 5, Lyceum and Lawn Tennis Club Collection, CHC.

\(^{23}\) Parera Villalón, 21.
often collaborated with other local arts associations, for instance, the Sociedad Filarmónica de Santiago de Cuba (Philharmonic Society of Santiago de Cuba), which helped to promote the city’s dance developments starting in the 1940s. In Camagüey, individual efforts pre-dated associational dance initiatives. Gilda Zaldívar Freyre, the daughter of a diplomat, lived in Europe with her family from 1933-1935 and studied ballet in Norway with a former student of the famous Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova. Upon returning to Cuba, she founded a ballet school in her Camagüey home and directed the academy on and off until her death in 1951. Another important institution for ballet instruction in Camagüey was the Salón de Ballet del Colegio Zayas. In 1951, Martha Matamoros Cordero began teaching at the Salón before establishing her own school in Camagüey in 1952. Vicentina de la Torre Recio studied with both Gilda Zaldívar Freyre and at the Salón de Ballet del Colegio Zayas before founding her own ballet school in Camagüey in 1957.24 These figures and institutions in Santiago de Cuba and Camagüey furthered dance instruction for the benefit of local audiences and students.

While provincial dance initiatives grew out of local actions and interests, they had connections to Havana. For instance, performance programs document that Santiago associations brought international stars to the eastern part of the island after they had performed in Havana. This included Pro-Arte de Oriente bringing Alicia Markova and Anton Dolin in 1947 and 1950, and the Sociedad Filarmónica bringing Nora Kovach and Istvan Rabovsky to the province in 1955.25 Dancers from the provinces also went to the capital to train. Camagüey dancer Martha Matamoros Cordero studied in Havana before opening her own school in her hometown. Furthermore, teachers often started in Havana before moving to other parts of the country. The

25 Performance programs from Grupo de Investigación, Documentación y Información Música Pablo Hernandez Balaguer, Santiago de Cuba, Cuba.
Bulgarian George Milenoff (who ended up in Cuba after performing with the National Opera Ballet of Bulgaria and the Paris-based dance company of Ida Rubenstein) taught at the ballet school of Pro-Arte in Havana, before going to Santiago at the behest of Pro-Arte de Oriente. After leaving a “bad impression,” Milenoff left Santiago, and Pro-Arte de Oriente invited Yavorsky to replace him in 1946. Links between the capital and other cities allowed dance resources to extend outward, beyond Havana.

As dance spread throughout the island, it became an important pastime, heralded as beneficial to young Cubans. Commentators highlighted the character traits developed in exacting daily classes and rehearsals. In the Pro-Arte Musical magazine, an author averred, “What sacrifices on the part of the girls … ‘It is necessary to triumph,’ is the thought that animates them…. How admirable the spirit of our ballerinas!” Another writer described how Pro-Arte teachers combatted dilettantism by developing responsible artists that possessed “a serious spirit of the artistic profession, … a sense of collective responsibility, and a consciousness of moral commitment.” Rather than a “simple diversion,” dance became a serious passion, even for dancers lacking talent. One author described Cuban students at Pro-Arte, regardless of their future prospects, as “not professional” rather than as “amateurs.” The former term supposedly suggested studious devotion while the latter signified dancing for mere entertainment. Disciplined dance study ostensibly taught students to work with their peers to create quality

26 Cabrera, El Ballet en Cuba, 28.
27 Letter Herminia Grieg de Santos Bush to Nicolai Yavorsky, Nov. 19, 1946, Exp. 5, Leg. 5, Fondo Personal de Nicolai Yavorsky, Archivo Histórico Provincial de Santiago de Cuba (AHPSC).
29 Renée Méndez Capote, “La Sociedad Pro-Arte Musical y Ballet en Cuba,” in Performance Program, “La Sociedad Pro-Arte Musical Presenta Un Festival de su Escuela de Baile” (May 25, 27, 29, 31 & June 1, 1946); F. Martínez Allende, “La Sociedad Pro-Arte Musical y su Ballet,” in Performance Program, “La Sociedad Pro-Arte Musical Ofrece El Primer Gran Festival de su Escuela de Ballet” (May 15, 18, 21, 23, 1943), both in Folder 19, Box 1, Natalia Aróstegui Collection, CHC.
30 Luis de Soto y Sagarra, “La Labor Docente de Pro-Arte Musical,” Memoria 1918 – 1943, Folder 18, Box 1, Natalia Aróstegui Collection, CHC.
dance, a constructive endeavor regardless of whether or not the students became professional practitioners.

Supporters also believed that along with character traits, young dancers (mostly girls and young women) benefited from the physical and mental demands, as well as the artistry requisite in ballet. An interest in dance paralleled larger social concerns about the physical education of women. The high society publication Social began publishing regular articles on women’s fitness in the mid-1930s. An article from August 1936, entitled, “Dance as a means of Physical Education,” featured a conversation with Nicolai Yavorsky in which he contended that ballet, “is one of the most complete and ennobling exercises known to educate the body.” The article concluded that dance as a “methodized and constant exercise” helped individuals achieve “bodily perfection.” According to one author in the magazine Pro-Arte Musical, young Cuban dancers developed a healthy, athletic body along with musical rhythm and coordination. Publications by the Lyceum Lawn and Tennis Club eulogized ballet exercises for cultivating “mental concentration, and a force of memory that are not common in other forms of physical exercise.” The same author in another issue of the Lyceum publication asserted that, “There isn’t any exercise comparable to dance for its beauty and harmony…. Even for the little girl or adolescent who does not want to continue dancing as a profession, the time spent in studying never will be in vain.” Dance improved Cuba according to one author, who announced, “the present interest in the study of ballet in our country is a very encouraging sign for the future,

32 Ibid., 54.
34 Carmen Rovira, “La Danza,” in Performance Program, “Program Concierto Exposición Infantil” (Jun. 1, 1947), Folder 3/4, Box 3, Lyceum and Lawn Tennis Club Collection, CHC.
because it contributes to improving the physical health and artistic education of our youth and of generations to come." Dance, then, became recognized as an activity that advanced young students, and in so doing, bettered Cuban society.

Dance eventually went from being an admirable pastime to a serious profession in Cuba. However, this transition depended upon Cubans winning professional distinction abroad. Achieving repute internationally played a crucial role, for instance, in Alberto Alonso’s success, particularly given existing prejudices against male dancers. As he recalled in a 1983 interview, when he began dancing, he was the only male student, and many of his friends teased him. However, he decided to confront the challenge and pursue his interest in dance. After several years of classes with Yavorsky, Alberto had the opportunity to audition for the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo in 1935 when the European-based company was performing in Cuba. Company director Colonel de Basil was an old friend of Yavorsky’s, and he offered Alberto a contract. Alberto danced with the company for six years before returning to Cuba in 1941. After teaching at Pro-Arte in the early 1940s, Alberto spent a year performing in the U.S. with the Ballet Theatre of New York from 1944 to 1945. These experiences distinguished Alberto professionally at home and abroad and dispelled some doubts regarding his profession of choice.

Alberto’s older brother, Fernando Alonso, and fellow dance student, Alicia Martínez, also went abroad to further their career. In 1937, Fernando and Alicia traveled to New York, married, and had their daughter Laura in 1938. Over the next several years, Fernando and Alicia trained with the greatest “Old World” teachers residing in New York. In addition to world-class

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instruction, they performed in Broadway musicals and newly founded ballet companies, including Lincoln Kirstein’s Ballet Caravan in 1939 (a predecessor of the New York City Ballet) and Ballet Theatre (today American Ballet Theatre) starting in 1940.\textsuperscript{39} New York offered opportunities unavailable at home and exposed them to ideas that influenced their developing artistic priorities.

Alicia Alonso in particular epitomized Cuban dance achievement as she became an internationally renowned ballerina. In her first year with Ballet Theatre, she performed leading roles and received critical praise. In August 1940, the \textit{New York Times} critic John Martin asserted that “she showed herself to be a promising young artist with an easy technique, a fine sense of line and a great deal of youthful charm.” At the end of the performance season, Martin flagged her as one of several artists “of less than stellar rank who belong among [the] season’s assets.”\textsuperscript{40} In November 1943, she performed the title role of the ballet \textit{Giselle} to great acclaim. Originally staged in nineteenth-century France, \textit{Giselle} had a long performance history. The libretto tells the story of a young peasant woman, who falls in love with a prince disguised as a villager. By the end of the first act, she learns the truth about his identity and dies of a broken heart because they can never be together due to class differences. In Alicia’s 1943 interpretation of this difficult role, Martin found that “Miss Alonso acquitted herself with brilliance … from the dramatic standpoint, which is so important in this quaint old piece of romantic melodrama.” Though Martin deemed her technique during the performance as, “not yet developed,” he found “its foundations … so strong that perfection seem[ed] only a matter of time.”\textsuperscript{41} Already in 1945,

Martin saw improvement. Regarding her second performance of *Giselle* that year, Martin affirmed, “she has grown immeasurably in her dancing … her technical grasp is prodigious.” This progress assured that the “extraordinarily brilliant young ballerina from Cuba will one day be one of the great Giselles.”42 The fact that Alicia mastered a classic in ballet repertoire indicated her arrival in the upper echelons of the art form.43

Alicia’s ballet achievements were hailed as a service to Cuba. Her fame went beyond the circumscribed world of ballet aficionados. In 1944, the magazines *Life*, *Norte*, and *Newsweek* featured pictures of her in a photo story on ballet technique, a cover picture, and a biographic interview, respectively. In 1946, the magazine *Mademoiselle* chose her as one of the ten most outstanding women of 1946.44 As a result of this distinction, supporters in Cuba formed a committee to organize a tribute to the ballerina. Led by performing arts critic José Manuel Valdés Rodríguez, the Comité Organizador del Homenaje Nacional a Alicia Alonso (Organizing Committee for the National Homage to Alicia Alonso) included Laura Rayneri de Alonso and Paulina Alsina Viuda de Grau (the wife of the President Ramón Grau’s late brother), among other distinguished cultural figures. The Committee campaigned to secure Alicia the Carlos Manuel de Céspedes award, the highest distinction for civilians. In a letter to the government of President Grau, the committee wrote, “In accordance with the exceptional merits of Alicia Alonso, recognized unanimously by world critics … we are writing to you to request that you confer upon her … the National Order of Merit Carlos Manuel de Céspedes.”45 The tribute took

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43 Her acclaimed interpretation of the role eventually became a central component of her persona, and books, conferences, and movies have provided hagiographic reflection on Alicia’s *Giselle*. See for instance, Mayda Bustamante, *Alicia Alonso o, la eternidad de Giselle: 1943-2013* (Barcelona: Ediciones Cumbres, 2013).
44 Siegel, 83.
45 Letter Comité Organizador del Homenaje Nacional a Alicia Alonso to Dr. Rafael P. González Muñoz, Jul. 9, 1947, Folder “Ballet Alicia Alonso, Correspondencias, Notas de Prensa,” Cajuela 196, Fondo:
place on August 5, 1947, at Teatro “Auditorium,” and consisted of a ballet performance with Alicia Alonso as the principal soloist accompanied by Cuban students of the Pro-Arte dance school. Alonso received a “prolonged and warm ovation” from the audience and a diamond encrusted cross that the organizing committee paid for with donations from friends and admirers. Along with these effusions, she received the Céspedes award, and with it, the title Dama. A commemorative postage stamp with her photo also was released in her honor.

Already in the late 1940s, Alicia enjoyed the status of a national hero. Her civilian supporters helped to make her distinction official by having government leaders induct her into a pantheon of Cuban patriots.

Her success also brought considerable financial gain and other symbolic trappings of stature. In 1940, as a dancer at Ballet Theatre in New York, Alicia began with a salary of twenty-five dollars per week. By 1944, her weekly salary reached one hundred dollars, and in 1945, it almost doubled to $175 per performance week. In her contract for the 1946-1947 season, Alicia received $250 per performance week. In the 1950s, this rate continued, depending on the length and location of performance tours. There were, however, instances of pay as low as $175 per performance week in the 1950-1951 season, to as high as $750 per week for sixteen days in late April and early May 1952. These salaries did not include rehearsal periods or furloughs.

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46 Memorandum Comité Organizador de la Función en Honor de la Bailarina Cubana Alicia Alonso to Paulina Alsina Viuda de Grau, Jul. 11, 1947, Cajuela 196, Fondo: Ministerio de Educación (1940 – 1961), Sección de Fondo: Dirección General de Cultura, MINCULT.
48 Siegel, 83.
(sometimes longer than a year), which were common during the late 1940s and early 1950s for Ballet Theatre. Nevertheless, to put Alicia’s fiscal ascent in perspective, Fernando, who began his professional ballet career the same time as Alicia, started at forty-five dollars per week in 1938 with a troupe led by Mikhail Mordkin, and reached ninety-five dollars per performance week in his eighth and final year performing with Ballet Theatre, in the 1947-1948 season.\(^{50}\) In addition to money, Alicia secured complimentary markers of status. In 1945, for instance, a contract stipulated that Alicia must receive “first” or principal role casting for the season and a privileged billing as “ballerina.”\(^{51}\) In the 1950s, as a guest artist with Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, billing issues dominated correspondence between Alicia’s agent, Betty Ferrell, and the administrators of Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo.\(^{52}\) These gains and demands evidenced Alicia’s position in the U.S. ballet establishment, and contributed to her fame at home.

Adding a heroic dimension to Alicia’s fame was her damaged eyesight. In 1941, Alicia discovered that the retina in her right eye had detached. After two surgeries in New York, she resumed daily classes only to experience more vision problems. She returned to Cuba where a local specialist found that the retinas on both eyes had detached. He operated immediately, ordered total bed rest after surgery, and predicted the end of her dancing career. By most accounts, Alicia lay immobile with her eyes covered for a year-and a-half, though some have claimed twelve months and others, two years.\(^{53}\) During that time Alicia practiced the role of Giselle in her head, using her fingers to mark the steps on her bed sheet, which functioned as a

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\(^{50}\) Contract signed Jan. 1938 in Folder 141, Box 2, ABT, JRDD-NYPL; contract signed Sept. 1947 in Folder 1284, Box 14, ABT, JRDD-NYPL.

\(^{51}\) Folder 464, Box 7, ABT, JRDD-NYPL.

\(^{52}\) Folders 1374-1376, Sergei Denham Records of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, *ZBD-492, JRDD-NYPL.

stage. Revisionist Cuban ballet historian Célida Parera Villalón challenged the mythic proportions of Alicia’s story in a letter to Newsday staff writer Jonathan Mandell about his article on Alicia, published on January 10, 1992. Parera Villalón is the first cousin to Alberto and Fernando Alonso, and before leaving Cuba in 1959, she was an administrative functionary of Pro-Arte. In the letter, she addressed exaggerations in Mandell’s article, including the details of Alicia’s ailment and recuperation. According to Parera’s recollection, Alicia was “confined her to bed and total inmobility [sic] for a period of 4 months, not 1 ½ year as legend has it.”

Regardless of the length of Alicia’s convalescence, there are two undisputed points. First, she eventually recovered and returned to New York to continue her meteoric rise. Second, her determination and the extraordinariness of her feats, in spite of her visual handicaps, defined her public identity.

As Agnes de Mille wrote in 1990, “What makes her unique, what makes her different from all predecessors, all rivals, is one simple fact: Alicia is blind.”

Alicia’s status contributed to the idea that proficient dancing not only distinguished individuals, but also elevated the nation. As this section has illustrated, this idea began with the associational origins of dance performance and education and grew thanks to Cubans, like Alberto, Fernando, and Alicia Alonso, who achieved fame for dancing abroad. This raised the value of dance, especially ballet, as a source of national accomplishment and pride. As a result of these merits, by the late 1940s, promoting dance performance and training became a priority for numerous groups from local elites and middle-class patrons to young students and a growing number of professional Cuban dancers. Interest in dance eventually percolated up to the

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55 Letter Célida P. Villalón to Jonathan Mandell (Jan. 12, 1992), Villalón, Célida Parera, Miscellaneous Manuscripts, (S) *MGZM-Res, Vil C, JRDD-NYPL.
57 De Mille, 70.
government as well, as will be seen in the following sections. This order of interest in dance, from citizens to the government, illustrates how concert dance was implicated in civil society from the moment of its inception in Cuba.

**Moving Across Boundaries: Debates on Valid Dance Collaborations**

Dancers moved across real and imagined boundaries that distinguished the Cuban from the non-Cuban and high art from popular entertainment. Dancers crossed one or both of these divides at various points in their careers to access new aesthetics and performance values. However, dancers also changed their minds about these crossings. For instance, although Cuban dance pioneers trained with foreign teachers in Cuba and abroad, some eventually aspired to distance new work from European and U.S. traditions to create a Cuban style of dance. Others continued to embrace international influences. Another issue that arose for Cuban dancers was performing across genre divides. Ballet dancers and choreographers worked on concert stages while also appearing in musicals, cabarets, and on television. Some viewed these cross-pollinations as detrimental, and others as beneficial, to artistic progress. Along with these debates, this section examines the personal politics that influenced performance and patronage. Clashes led to institutional growth as collaborators and their supporters went in different directions and spearheaded new projects in line with their respective artistic values.

An early example of boundary crossing in the Cuban dance world came in the form of Nicolai Yavorsky, the first ballet teacher in Cuba. Yavorsky was born in the Ukrainian city of Odessa in 1891 to a modest family of teachers and low-level bureaucrats. He fought in the White Army against the communists in the Russian Civil War. Although he had dabbled in ballet as a child, wartime encounters with the form had a more profound impact. During his military
service, Yavorsky worked for a section dedicated to troop propaganda and culture. In this capacity, he encountered ballet instructors enjoined to entertain soldiers. Yavorsky recalled being “captivated by the mastery with which they taught ballet.”\(^{58}\) By 1921, he had fled Russia and had started his performing career in Belgrade after a chance encounter with a childhood friend, the former Maryinsky dancer Elena Poliakova, who invited him to an audition.\(^{59}\) International tours with the Belgrade company took him to other parts of Europe, the Americas, and finally Cuba. Once in Cuba, Yavorsky embraced his (mostly female) students and claimed that they had abilities unlike dancers from any other country. As he opined:

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\text{The Cuban woman has natural grace … a temperament and character very appropriate for dance … and also a sense of rhythm that is so important…. [I]n no other place have I encountered such aptitude and such ability to dance…. [W]ith systematic and formal instruction they will be among the best choreographic artists of the world.}\(^{60}\)
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The peripatetic Yavorsky saw great dance possibilities in his new home and worked to further his talented students’ development into world-class artists.

Along with crossing international borders, Yavorsky worked across genre lines. First, he secured a position teaching ballet for Pro-Arte Musical in Havana, where he trained the first generation of Cuban ballet dancers from 1931-1939.\(^{61}\) Disagreements with the Pro-Arte leadership prompted Yavorsky to secure work elsewhere.\(^{62}\) According to a 1941 contract, Carlos Rodríguez, the president of a casino in the Playa section of Havana, employed Yavorsky to

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\(^{58}\) Nicolai Yavorsky, “Mi biografía,” trans. Russian to Spanish by Mireley García González and Pablo Batista Aja, in Exp. 1, Leg. 1, Fondo Personal de Nicolai Yavorsky, AHPSC.

\(^{59}\) Ibid.

\(^{60}\) Nicolai Yavorsky, “Mi opinión,” rpt. in Ernesto Rafael Triguero Tamayo, *Nicolai Yavorsky, un maestro ruso en la isla del ballet* (Santiago, Cuba: Ediciones Santiago, 2010), 67-68.

\(^{61}\) “Certificado dado por la Presidenta de la Sociedad Pro-Arte Musical, Laura Rayneri de Alonso, en la que hace constar que el Profesor Nicolai Yavorsky se ha desempeñado como director de los ballets que fueron presentado desde junio de 1931 hasta mayo de 1939,” Exp. 9, Leg. 1, Fondo Personal de Nicolai Yavorsky, AHPSC.

\(^{62}\) Parera Villalón, 95.
mount a dance spectacle in June of that year. Yavorsky had to create four numbers and received six hundred pesos a week for this work. A few years later, Yavorsky taught physical education classes for the Sección de Instrucción Primaria, and a 1944 contract with the Undersecretary of Education stipulated a salary of fifty pesos a month. Yavorsky also opened a private ballet school in Havana for a short time in the 1940s and then taught ballet in the eastern provinces. The contracts that Yavorsky negotiated with Pro-Arte de Oriente had him teaching three times a week in Santiago as well as regular classes in nearby Bayamo and Manzanillo for 300 pesos per month. Yavorsky only taught a few months before passing away in Santiago in 1947. The above illustrates that Yavorsky was able to find opportunities in the nascent dance establishment. Working in numerous performance spaces with ballet dancers, cabaret performers, and physical education students allowed him to sustain a career in 1930s and 1940s Cuba.

Like Yavorsky, the Alonsos’ gained invaluable experiences abroad, which shaped their professional trajectories. While in Europe and New York, Alberto worked with renowned choreographers including Russians Mikhail Fokine and George Balanchine and New York native Jerome Robbins. Fokine’s poetic content, Balanchine’s musicality, and Robbins’ ability to merge classical ballet with popular dance impressed Alberto. In terms of the latter, Robbins’ ballet *Fancy Free*, for instance, portrayed sailors on shore leave in a New York bar. Alberto performed the “Latino” sailor role (created by Robbins for himself), which included balletic sequences to

63 “Contrato entre el señor Carlos Rodriguez, Presidente de la compañía de Recreo y Deportes de la Playa de Mariano y Señor Nicolai Yavorsky, directo de ballet, para que este presente un espectáculo bailable en dicho casino durante un mes,” Exp. 4, Leg. 5, Fondo Personal de Nicolai Yavorsky, AHPSC.
64 “Una correspondencia de Luis Varona, subsecretario de Educación, dirigida al Señor Nicolai Yavorsky en la que le comunica que ha sido contratado para que preste sus servicios en al sección de instrucción Primera,” Exp. 2, Leg. 4, Fondo Personal de Nicolai Yavorsky, AHPSC.
65 “Contracto,” Exp. 5, Leg. 5, Fondo Personal de Nicoali Yavorsky, AHPSC.
jazz and Latin rhythms as the sailor tried to impress two of the ballet’s women.\textsuperscript{67} These artists shaped Alberto’s own growing interest in choreography. Similarly, international dance exposure also influenced Alicia and Fernando Alonso’s approach to dancing and teaching. As Fernando later recalled, he “absorbed from all the teachers, choreographers, and dancers who came [his] way – from the Italian, French, Russian, and Danish schools, even from musical comedy.”\textsuperscript{68} Alicia trained with the famed Italian teacher Enrico Zanfretta and Balanchine, among others, and later commented, “There was so much to learn…. I studied with [Alexandra] Fedorova, [Anatole] Vilzak, [Anatole] Oboukhoff and, in England, with Vera Volkova.”\textsuperscript{69} The Alonsos benefitted from leaving familiar realms of artistic experience to encounter rich, alien material, which they then made into their own. Putting a personalized stamp on artistic acquisitions meant remaking the foreign in the national image.

This endeavor aligned with similar efforts in other parts of the dance world. All three Alonsos witnessed and participated in what Alberto termed in a 1983 interview “progressivist movements in favor of national cultures.”\textsuperscript{70} In the ballet world, this trend began notably with Serge Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes (1909-1929), a company that “had yoked the idea of Russianness to modernism,” in the words of historian Lynn Garafola.\textsuperscript{71} Alberto was a member of a post-Diaghilev company, Colonel de Basil’s Ballets Russes. Other legacies of Diaghilev’s nationalist, modernist innovations included the twentieth-century British ballet movement, Rolf de Maré’s Ballets Suédois, Antonia Mercé’s Les Ballets Espagnols, Katherine Dunham’s Negro

\textsuperscript{67} Performance Program, \textit{Fancy Free} (Oct. 14, 1944), Folders 2289, Box 22, ABT, JRDD-NYPL.
\textsuperscript{68} Singer, 20.
\textsuperscript{70} Miguel Cabrera, “Con Alberto Alonso en sus 50 años con la Danza,” \textit{Cuba en el Ballet} 2, 2 (1983), 28.
\textsuperscript{71} Lynn Garafola, “Making an American Dance: \textit{Billy the Kid, Rodeo, and Appalachian Spring},” in \textit{Aaron Copland and his World}, eds. Carol Oja and Judith Tick (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 125.
Dance Group, and companies spearheaded by U.S. impresario Lincoln Kirstein. In the 1930s Kirstein began working to make ballet indigenous to the United States. Toward this end, he formed the small touring company, Ballet Caravan, which performed works inspired by U.S. history and daily life, such as *Pocahontas, Yankee Clipper, Filling Station,* and *Billy the Kid.*\(^\text{72}\) Fernando and Alicia performed with this company, and when they joined Ballet Theatre, many works also had “native” U.S. themes.

These ballet projects happened in close dialogue with modern dance developments in New York. Since many modern dance pioneers were native citizens of the United States (whereas many ballet teachers and choreographers in the U.S. at the time came from Europe and Russia), modern dancers claimed that unlike ballet, modern dance was a truly “American” art. They believed that their form, rather than the foreign born, hierarchical ballet, best represented the “free, American, democratic body.”\(^\text{73}\) Furthermore, modern dancers created works featuring U.S. themes, such as those by modern dance innovator Martha Graham including *American Document* (1938) and *Appalachian Spring* (1944). However, ballet proponents like Kirstein defended ballet as an U.S. form not only by way of the Ballet Caravan, but also in penned defenses like his 1937 *Blast at Ballet.*\(^\text{74}\) During the 1930s and 1940s, U.S. ballet and modern dance leaders espoused similar, yet competitive, nationalist goals.\(^\text{75}\) The tensions between ballet and modern dance in the U.S. during the 1930s and 1940s resembled what would appear in 1960s and 1970s Cuba. As will be discussed in Chapter Three, Cuban ballet and modern dance artists contended that their respective genres better embodied Cuban national identity.

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\(^\text{72}\) Jennifer Dunning, *“But First a School”: The First Fifty Years of the School of American Ballet* (New York: Viking, 1985), 76.

\(^\text{73}\) Garafola, “Making an American Dance,” 123.


The Alonsos’ encounters with nationalist choreography abroad clarified and fortified aspirations to build Cuban dance at home. In 1941, Alberto returned to Cuba and became the director of the Escuela de Ballet de la Sociedad Pro-Arte Musical de La Habana, a position that he held on and off until 1960. Alberto and his collaborators at the Pro-Arte ballet school (including his first wife, Canadian dancer Alexandra Denisova, and his second wife, Cuban dancer Elena del Cueto, among others) developed young Cuban talent and paved the way for the first professional ballet company in Cuba.\(^{76}\) During the 1940s, Alicia and Fernando returned to Cuba several times a year, often bringing fellow dancers of Ballet Theatre to perform with Alberto’s students.

Like the Alonsos, a student of Pro-Arte dance school, Ramiro Guerra, gained important artistic direction in New York in the 1940s. Guerra had started his dance studies in Cuba with Alberto Alonso and Nina Verchinina in 1943. He joined Colonel de Basil’s Original Ballet Russe in 1946 and performed with the company in Brazil and the U.S. The company took him to New York where he took classes with modern dancers Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, José Limón, and Franziska Boas. As with the Alonsos, Guerra’s experiences shaped his outlook on Cuban dance. Guerra found himself drawn to the physical and dramatic demands of Martha Graham’s dancing. However, he was dissatisfied with the stark dualities of her movement style. In contrast to Graham’s angularity and gravitas, Guerra believed that Cubans moved in a more subtle, “anarchic, emotional, improvisational” way that was “more open to

\(^{76}\) Important collaborators at the Pro-Arte dance school included Alberto’s first wife, Alexandra Denisova, who co-directed the school with Alberto until 1944, his second wife, Elena del Cueto, who taught at the school 1946-1962, Cuca Martínez (Alicia Alonso’s sister), who taught at the school 1946-1950, Adolfina Suárez Moré, who taught at the school 1950-1967, and Adelina Durán, who taught at the school 1953-1963, among others. For a more complete list, see Parera Villalón, 92-110.
discover physical possibilities and more adaptable to dynamic changes.”\textsuperscript{77} These ideas fueled his danced explorations of Cuban national identity when he returned home in 1948. The three-part process of leaving, learning, and then returning to Cuba crystallized his artistic intentions and ideas about the future of Cuban dance.

The Cuban dance establishment built not only on ideas from abroad, but also on foreign human resources. An unprecedented importation occurred in the spring of 1948. That year, Ballet Theatre of New York experienced severe financial problems, canceled its fall season, and suspended activities until further notice. At first, this elicited an anxious response from Fernando Alonso. As he wrote to Lucia Chase on August 2, 1948:

\begin{quote}
We received your communication about Ballet Theatre’s Fall Season being cancelled. Alicia and I are absolutely dumbfounded. It will be approximately 9 months lay-off by the time we start again! That is terrible!… Because of your position in the Ballet World, it should be comparatively easy for you to suggest something for us to do before Ballet Theatre starts operating again. We certainly would appreciate very much any advice you can give us.\textsuperscript{78}
\end{quote}

In spite of this initial reaction, disappointment quickly gave way to excitement. With no prospects, Fernando and Alicia returned to Havana with Ballet Theatre dancers in tow. They joined forces with Alberto, and the three Alonsos founded the first professional ballet company in Cuba, Ballet Alicia Alonso. The new cultural organization had a nationalist, even anti-imperialist resonance by stealing away the best U.S. ballet dancers, even if temporarily. For instance, the \textit{New York Times} dance critic John Martin noted in 1948, “if the Ballet Theater should decide not to carry on, this might be the organization to replace it, with its headquarters ‘right in the middle of America,’ as Fernando Alonso puts it.”\textsuperscript{79} While the future of an important


\textsuperscript{78} Letter Fernando Alonso to Lucia Chase, Aug. 2, 1948, Folder 470, Box 7, ABT, JRDD-NYPL.

ballet company in the U.S. seemed precarious, the form had a promising future in the insular heart of the continent, thanks to the Alonsos.

The Alonsos founded the Ballet Alicia Alonso not only because of the Ballet Theatre suspension, but also because of disagreements within cultural institutions in Cuba. Tensions had developed between the Alonsos and the Pro-Arte directive. This started with a clerical error in 1946. That year, a performance program accidentally stated that Laura Rayneri de Alonso had been president for twenty-five years, instead of president for twelve years and a member for twenty-five. This angered many women of Pro-Arte.80 The following year Alberto Alonso choreographed a work, *Antes del Alba*, which struck some Pro-Arte leaders as undignified because the main character was a lower-class woman who committed suicide and the choreography included popular dances alongside ballet steps.81 Because of these disagreements, Laura Rayneri de Alonso decided in 1948 not to run for another term as president of the association. That year, her sons and daughter-in-law distanced themselves from Pro-Arte by founding an independent company. Distance, however, did not mean absolute rupture as Pro-Arte allowed Ballet Alicia Alonso to borrow expensive sets and costumes, and Alberto Alonso continued his tenure as director of the Pro-Arte ballet school until 1960.

In 1950, working relationships and alliances shifted yet again. That year, Alberto left the Ballet Alicia Alonso to found his own company, Ballet Nacional. Also that year, Fernando and Alicia opened their own school, Escuela de Ballet Alicia Alonso. Alberto, the Pro-Arte dance school, and Ballet Nacional remained on one side and Fernando, Alicia, the Escuela de Ballet Alicia Alonso, and the Ballet Alicia Alonso on the other. Although there were occasions for

80 Parera Villalón, 21-22.
rapprochement in the 1950s, competition rather than collaboration characterized the relationship between the Alonso brothers and their respective enterprises.

A rivalry developed between Pro-Arte school and the Escuela de Ballet Alicia Alonso. Although the Pro-Arte school had a longer history, the Escuela de Ballet Alicia Alonso benefitted from the star status of especially Alicia, but also Fernando Alonso. Public statements highlighted the school’s exceptional character by describing its origins and founders. A performance program from August 1952, for instance, called the school a “culmination of the strenuous efforts of Alicia and Fernando Alonso,” and a dance institution “without equal” in Cuba.82 In 1953, an article published in the popular culture magazine *Gente* claimed that the Escuela de Ballet Alicia Alonso was the only institution capable of creating quality dancers in Cuba, marginalizing by omission, the work of Alberto Alonso and his colleagues at the Pro-Arte school.83 In response, Pro-Arte administrator Célida Parera de Villalón wrote a letter to the editor that challenged this portrayal. She countered that Cuban ballet success started and remained with the Pro-Arte school, which was, after all, the alma mater of the talented Alonsos and other budding dance professionals.84 A woman named Lily Ricard Valdés then sent a letter stating that ballet was not solely the product of Pro-Arte Musical’s efforts over the years.85 Parera followed up with a rejoinder that pointed out inaccuracies behind Ricard Valdés’s claims and reiterated once more the contributions of Pro-Arte.86 These squabbles went beyond institutional (and

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83 “Alicia Alonso estudió su arte en el extranjero; pero ha creado las condiciones para que cualquiera cubano pueda aprender ballet en su patria,” *Gente* (Aug. 16, 1953), 11-12.
brotherly) competition over reputations. The schools vied for students and their tuition in a relatively limited marketplace.

The onus to prove and publicize merit was on the newer school, Escuela de Ballet Alicia Alonso, and as a result, the founders waged a much more aggressive campaign than the Pro-Arte school in the 1950s. For instance, a 1955 program for the Escuela de Ballet Alicia Alonso performance describes the school as offering “the most complete education that can be obtained in the art of dance,” thanks to three elements: Fernando, Alicia, and the diverse course offerings. First, Fernando Alonso had developed a “scientific,” internationally inspired and locally adapted, “Plan of Instruction.” This curriculum drew upon “the Russian (Vaganova), English (Saddler Wells), Italian (Ceccetti), and French Schools” adapted “to the particular climatic and physical conditions of Cubans” to result in a method proven effective on many students.87 Second, the academy boasted Alicia Alonso as an inspiration and model for students. A photo in the first pages of the performance program conveyed this by showing two young girls holding up a portrait of Alicia in a ballet position as a third girl tried to mimic this posture, and a fourth along with the first two observed, smiling.88 (Figure 1) Advertisements also emphasized the school’s large teaching staff and extensive program of courses. This included ballet, pointe, adagio, variations, folkloric dance, Spanish dance, character dance, and modern dance, as well as ancillary classes in music, history of art and dance, costume design, applied anatomy, and make-up.89 These offerings, promotional materials assured Cuban readers, distinguished the Escuela de Ballet Alicia Alonso from other schools in Cuba.

87 Performance Program, “Escuela de Ballet Alicia Alonso,” Folder Ballet-Danza 1955, TNC.
88 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
Competition also manifested between the professional ballet companies Ballet Nacional directed by Alberto Alonso and the Ballet Alicia Alonso led by Fernando and Alicia Alonso. Both organizations shared a nationalist interest in developing local ballet institutions and audiences. In the statutes of Alberto’s Ballet Nacional, the authors laid out the company’s founding purpose to “foment the development of the art of dance in Cuba, utilizing for this, entirely or in major part, native elements.” This entailed organizing performances, conferences, recitals, and “whatever other acts” in Cuba and abroad.⁹⁰ In essays featured in Ballet Nacional programs from the 1950s, authors described a company of “valiant artists, Cuban in their

totality,” utilizing native choreography, music, and scenography to realize the full potential of Cuba as a land for ballet creation and consumption. Similarly, the founders of Ballet Alicia Alonso clarified in a 1951 program that although the company was named for its greatest star, Alicia Alonso, it was a “national and official institution created to foment in Cuba a taste for classical ballet.” The same essay described the company’s four main goals: 1) maintain a school of ballet where Cubans regardless of class, could study without needing to go abroad; 2) support a professional company; 3) open a new plane of activity not only for dancers, but also for composers, musicians, painters, designers, technicians, etc.; 4) develop a ballet-loving public though regular seasons, ridding ballet of its mark of exclusivity through all possible means, including free performances, publications, radio diffusion, and television programs. Since the Ballet Nacional and the Ballet Alicia Alonso shared the goal of becoming Cuba’s leading ballet company, the two organizations directly competed. Moreover, the leaders of the two companies had different ideas about the best means to achieve similar goals.

The founders of the Ballet Nacional believed that in order to advance a nationalistic ballet project, they needed to create an egalitarian space for Cubans to engage in cordial artistic collaboration. Program essays published in 1950 and 1951 detailed the company’s democratic aspirations. According to an unnamed author, the Ballet Nacional had an unprecedented structure that favored “the collective above the individual.” Choreography featured all dancers equally rather than having a star dominate a program with the ensemble serving as mere decorative ornament. According to the author, doing away with “anachronistic” formats that highlighted a single dancer, modernized ballet by utilizing a more equal “artistic mode that accords with the

ideology of the present time.” 93 The group operated for the benefit of “the entire community” – every member of the Ballet Nacional and the audience. 94 These aspirations shaped the company’s administrative structure. Dancers and other personnel participated in monthly executive meetings to avoid “the imposition of the will of a single person, which in many cases can degenerate into a dictatorship that promotes disharmony and demoralization, creating a hostile environment” that inhibits creativity. 95 Although never naming names, the author seemed to allude to Ballet Alicia Alonso, which revolved around the star figure of Alicia Alonso and likely catered to her wishes and needs. An essay in a 1950 Ballet Nacional performance program described the Ballet Alicia Alonso as an important though transitional step in the development of Cuban ballet. The apotheosis, according to the author, came only with Alberto’s democratic Ballet Nacional. 96

Whereas the Ballet Nacional fostered collective collaboration among Cuban equals, the Ballet Alicia Alonso embraced foreign influences and artistic hierarchies. In the same 1951 Ballet Alicia Alonso program cited earlier, the author claimed that the company did not harbor “extreme nationalisms” and instead saw foreign artists and systems of teaching as fundamental to Cuban dance development. In contrast to the Ballet Nacional, the Ballet Alicia Alonso had welcomed foreign influences since 1948 when the company premiered with dancers from Ballet Theatre. This continued throughout the 1950s as Alicia performed internationally and returned to Cuba periodically to dance with her company, often with foreign guest artists and teachers.

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94 “El Ballet Nacional, una oportunidad artística para todos los cubanos,” in Performance Program, Ballet Nacional (Apr. 15, 1951), Folder Ballet-Danza 1951, TNC.
accompanying her. Also diverging from the Ballet Nacional and its interest in equality and collectivity, “the Ballet Alicia Alonso believe[d] in artistic and human hierarchy,” as the 1951 program put it. The company believed that recognizing and encouraging meritocracy accelerated ballet development in Cuba and the world.97

Further evidencing the Ballet Alicia Alonso’s embrace of international collaborations, the company directors expressed the hope of one day establishing a regional coalition of dancers. Fernando Alonso submitted a proposal on the future of ballet in Latin America to the Continental Congress for Culture held in Santiago, Chile in 1953. Organized by the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, the event was one of several left leaning international peace and cultural conferences held during the 1950s and 1960s.98 In his proposal, Fernando suggested forming a new regional institution, “Ballet Latinoamericano,” which would comprise of a school and a company devoted to “academic” ballet and modern dance as well as the study of the “folkloric richness of traditional dances of the Americas.” All governments of Latin America would subsidize the company, and there would be annual festivals in rotating locations, featuring regional and international dancers.99 The plan indicated that Fernando and Alicia foresaw their contributions as national and eventually international in nature. According to Fernando, Ballet Latinoamericano would dignify each nation involved and enrich international dance repertoire through the infusion of underexplored culture indigenous to the region. This proposal clashed with Alberto’s vision of focusing on developing a distinctly Cuban dance aesthetic.

97 “Propósitos que dieron origen y dan vida al Ballet ‘Alicia Alonso,'” in Performance Program, Ballet Alicia Alonso (Dec. 22, 1951), Folder Ballet-Danza 1951, TNC.
98 Patrick Iber, “Anti-Communist entrepreneurs and the origins of the cultural Cold War in Latin America,” in De-Centering Cold War History: Local and Global Change, eds. Pieper Mooney, E. Jadwiga, and Fabio Lanza (Florence, KY: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 175.
Along with discrepant perceptions of foreign influences, Fernando and Alicia on the one hand and Alberto on the other disagreed over the boundary between concert and popular stages. Fernando and Alicia had performed in Broadway musicals early in their New York careers out of economic necessity and came to describe such genre crossings as problematic. In a 1952 Ballet Alicia Alonso program, an essay described ballet as “sacerdotal,” in that dancers must devote themselves completely to training in order to achieve the highest levels of professional ability. Performing on television for extra money, therefore, inhibited ballet development. According to the essay, television was a superficial medium that destroyed dancers’ artistic intuitions. The author concluded, “These performances before television cameras produce a disastrous result on theatre performances and constitute a serious threat to the artistic level of the Company.”

In contrast, Alberto and his dancers pioneered dance on television and performed regularly in cabarets as well as on concert stages throughout the 1950s. Along with the Ballet Nacional, Alberto worked as director and choreographer of the Conjunto de Bailes del Teatro Radiocentro and Ballet de CMQ Televisión, in addition to choreographing and directing shows at the Montmartre, Sans Souci, and Riviera cabarets from 1951-1959. Dancers from his Ballet Nacional participated in these productions. Alberto’s second wife, Elena del Cueto, for instance, began ballet training at Pro-Arte Musical, eventually taught ballet at the school, performed with Ballet Alicia Alonso, and was a founding member of Ballet Nacional. She also starred in Alberto’s television and cabaret spectacles, and became a celebrity hailed for “elevating” Cuban dance through her “harmonious lines.”

A picture of Elena in pointe shoes, a tutu, and tiara, striking a position outside of ballet vocabulary (off-balanced, turned in, with her arms struck out

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on either side in a showy gesture), illustrates how the ballet-trained dancer had an onstage persona that defied genre conventions.\textsuperscript{103} Another ballet dancer, who also delighted cabaret audiences, was Leonela González. She began her ballet training at Pro-Arte, performed with the Ballet Alicia Alonso and the Ballet Nacional, and also danced on television and in the Tropicana cabaret.\textsuperscript{104} Alberto and his dancers saw cross-genre dialogues as productive and rewarding. In a 1983 interview, Alberto reflected that choreographing for ballet, television, and cabarets in the 1950s gave him an opportunity to mix popular dance and ballet idioms.\textsuperscript{105} Dancers also became more versatile and able to move between styles with grace and charisma. These experiments left a lasting mark on both concert and popular stages in Cuba over the following decades.

Another dancer and choreographer who moved between performance spaces in the 1950s was Ramiro Guerra. In 1950, Guerra choreographed Latin American popular and folkloric dances as part of “cultural missions” organized by the Cuban Ministry of Education. He also worked with Fernando and Alicia’s ballet dancers and taught them modern dance. Additionally, he choreographed and performed in modern dance concerts, such as one in June 1955 that featured solos to classical music – J. S. Bach, the Spanish composer Joaquín Turina, and Brazilian composer Heitor Villa-Lobos – as well as a group piece to music by the Cuban composer Juan Blanco.\textsuperscript{106} Starting in 1956, Guerra directed a new company, the Teatro Experimental de Danza, under the auspices of the Escuela de Ballet Alicia Alonso. Ballet dancers in the group performed Guerra’s modern dance choreography as well as pieces by other young Cuban choreographers. At the end of the 1950s, Guerra choreographed for a national

television program, “Noche Cubana.”

Like Alberto, Guerra spent the 1950s moving back and forth between popular and concert dance forms and venues.

In spite of disagreements over the present and future of Cuban dance, tensions had an overall productive effect. The fact that Alberto Alonso created the Ballet Nacional only two years after the Ballet Alicia Alonso indicates the robustness of the nascent ballet establishment. Along with professional companies, new civic associations of dancers and patrons formed in the late 1940s and 1950s. In Havana, Club Ballerina (1945-1947) and Patronato Pro-Ballet Municipal (1949-1958) consisted of ballet administrators, audience members, and parents of ballet students. Alberto Alonso founded an association of artists and fans to support his Ballet Nacional. Alicia and Fernando followed this model and organized the Asociación Alicia Alonso Pro-Ballet (1952-1958), Institución de Ballet Alicia Alonso (1952-1956), and Patronato Ballet de Cuba (1955-1961) to abet their dance initiatives. The growing associational and institutional landscape revealed both artistic differences and new alliances.

At the same time, dance instruction proliferated. As Alicia Alonso’s fame spread, citizens opened new dance schools in her honor. For instance, in 1948, local enthusiasts in the eastern town of Palma Soriano founded an Escuela de Ballet Alicia Alonso with the “primary purpose to disseminate and enhance the art of classical dance.” Also that year, the dance school, Academia Municipal de la Habana, opened with Josefina Elósegui as ballet mistress and sub-

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107 Fidel Pajares Santiesteban, Ramiro Guerra y la danza en Cuba (Havana, 2012), 91.
108 “Club Ballerina,” Exp. 9386, Leg. 320, Fondo: Registro de Asociaciones, ANC; “Patronato Pro-Ballet Municipal,” Exp. 3358, Leg. 172, Fondo: Registro de Asociaciones, ANC.
109 “Ballet Nacional,” Exp. 4052, Leg. 188, Fondo: Registro de Asociaciones, ANC.
110 “Asociación Alicia Alonso Pro-Ballet en Cuba,” Exp. 2942, Leg. 161 Fondo: Registro de Asociaciones, ANC; “Institución de Ballet Alicia Alonso,” Exp. 3503, Leg. 175, Fondo: Registro de Asociaciones, ANC; “Patronato Ballet de Cuba,” Exp. 22775, 22776, Leg. 1085, Fondo: Registro de Asociaciones, ANC.
111 “Escuela de Ballet Alicia Alonso, Palma Soriano,” Exp. 7, Leg. 2461, Fondo: Gobierno Provincial de Oriente, AHPSC.
director. She also advised the civic association Patronato Pro-Ballet Municipal, founded by mothers of students in 1949, with the objective “to foment the development and aggrandizement of the Academia Municipal de Ballet de la Habana.”\footnote{Exp. 3358, Leg. 172, Fondo: Registro de Asociaciones, ANC.} The Camagüey ballet dancer and educator Martha Matamoros Cordero opened her ballet school in 1952. In 1954, this school commenced a formal association with the Ballet Alicia Alonso, becoming its official Camagüey branch. In the winter of 1954-1955, Fernando and Alicia traveled to Camagüey to examine Matamoros’ students.\footnote{Katy Illovys del Sol Costa, “Gloria Padrón Aluja: una historia de vida” (Thesis, Instituto Superior de Arte, Camagüey, 2001).} The school founded in 1949 by Sylvie M. Goudie received symbolic support from Alicia when the famous ballerina and her mother attended the academy’s end of the season ballet recital.\footnote{Sylvia M. Goudie Studio, Memoria, 1949 – 1959 (Havana, 1959), CHC.} In the late 1950s, Alberto Alonso’s collaborators Luis Trápaga and Raúl Díaz directed the Escuela de Danza de Ballet Nacional, inspired by Alberto’s artistic vision.\footnote{Parera Villalón, 105-106.} Another dance leader, Anna Leontieva, founded a school in 1943, and directed a group of dancers later called the Ballet de Cámara. Leontieva was interested in developing dramatically adept ballet dancers, and she choreographed works inspired by mythology, Biblical themes, and history.\footnote{Rodrigo Rams, “Academia de Ballet,” Carteles (Apr. 23, 1950); Arturo Ramírez, “El Ballet de Camara de la Habana,” Carteles (Sept. 18, 1955), 35.} In many schools, class offerings grew to include Spanish dance and, to a lesser extent, modern dance, among other courses.

As this section illustrates, Cuban concert dance had great dynamism and diversity in the 1940s and 1950s. This characterization overturns standard narratives of Cuban dance. Official histories jump from 1948 when the Alonsos founded the Ballet Alicia Alonso to ballet developments after 1959. This assumes a direct line between 1948 and 1959, without considering the dance projects that disrupted and impacted each other through intentional and unintentional
dance dialogues. Dance pioneers set an important precedent for crossing boundaries in the Cuban Republic, which resulted in constant, complex evolutions that defy a simple representation of Cuban dance in the 1950s. Rather than a teleological path from 1948 to post-1959, Cuban ballet moved in multiple directions in the intervening years, constantly challenging the status quo. From the vantage point of the 1950s, contingency and expansive possibility, rather than determinacy, characterized the future of Cuban ballet.

**Investing in Dance: Demanding Resources from the State**

Although the Cuban dance establishment grew impressively at the end of the 1940s and 1950s, economic uncertainties bedeviled dancers as money came from different sources with varying degrees of regularity. This included civic associations, businesses, and the government. In terms of the state, Article 47 of the Cuban Constitution of 1940 specified, “Culture, in all its manifestations, constitutes a primordial interest of the State.”\(^\text{117}\) In keeping with this mandate, the Cuban government funded numerous cultural activities and forged linkages with artists. Dancers not only welcomed these efforts, but also demanded greater collaboration with and financial support from the government. An unanswered question, however, complicated the amorphous relationship between dancers and the state. What did dancers owe their financiers in return? Different answers led to public disputes between Fernando and Alicia Alonso and the government of Fulgencio Batista. Alberto Alonso and his collaborators, meanwhile, were not as concerned with state funding since they worked in commercial venues like television and cabarets. As a result, this section focuses on Alicia and Fernando Alonso and their financial troubles, which became embroiled in the political campaign against Batista in the 1950s.

After founding the Ballet Alicia Alonso in 1948, the Alonsos took off for their first international tour. It quickly introduced them to the bitter frustrations of money shortages. The itinerary initially included Venezuela, Puerto Rico, Guatemala, Haiti, Dominican Republic, and Jamaica. However a Venezuelan military coup in late November 1948 disrupted their Caracas season, leaving them without the payment promised only after the completion of all planned performances. Fortunately, the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras helped the stranded dancers leave Venezuela by plane to perform for a receptive Puerto Rican audience. After Puerto Rico, the Ballet Alicia Alonso returned to Cuba for a series of performances in early 1949. Although short lived, their first tour indicated the challenges of depending on impresarios and performance proceeds to fund international tours.

To put on the early 1949 performances in Cuba, the Ballet Alicia Alonso cobbled together financing from numerous sources. Under President Carlos Prío Socarrás (1948-1952), the Ministry of Education agreed to sponsor three ballet performances at $5,000 each: one for the government and diplomatic corps, another for students, and the final one for “the people.” The latter two were free for all audience members. According to a program for the government sponsored performance on January 7, 1949, the administration sought to become more involved in promoting Alicia Alonso and her ballet activities since they “united democratic and popular culture with the most pure essences of Art and Beauty.”

La Cervecería Polar (Polar Beer Company) bankrolled two showings by the Ballet Alicia Alonso, the first of which was free for the Cuban public at the Stadium Universitario in Havana and had more than 40,000 attendees. Sponsoring such events, according to advertisements, evidenced Polar’s commitment to being,

118 Angela Grau Imperatori, “Cuándo, cómo y por qué se fundó la primera compañía de ballet profesional en Cuba,” Cuba en el Ballet 3, 1 (1972), 41-45.
120 Performance Program, Ballet Alicia Alonso (Jan. 7, 1949), SA-BNJM.
“La cerveza del pueblo” (The beer of the people).  

The student organization of the University of Havana, the Federación Estudiantil Universitaria (FEU, University Students Federation), also helped to organize performances and lobbied the government and private industry to provide greater funding for the ballet company. Along with these entities, company members and supporters founded the Asociación Alicia Alonso Pro-Ballet en Cuba (Association Alicia Alonso Pro-Ballet in Cuba) to help raise money for the Ballet Alicia Alonso and its affiliated dance school. The bylaws dictated that the association fought “to obtain a Law in Congress of the Republic that conceded to the Ballet Alicia Alonso, a permanent annual subsidy,” and worked to “involve all cultural institutions of the Republic, as well as businesses, industries, and individuals to cooperate for the success of this effort, both economically and socially.” The sparse financial information available indicates that the monthly membership fees yielded a modest $2,294.80 to support the company and school in 1955. Fernando and Alicia Alonso also invested their inherited and accumulated wealth, thousands of dollars according to a later account, in their dance projects. 

At the end of January 1949, Ballet Alicia Alonso embarked on a major international tour that included Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay. During this trip, the company received great exposure, but like the brief 1948 tour, had continuous financial difficulties, according to articles written in the early 1970s by Angela Grau Imperatori. Grau recounted problems arising soon after the company’s premiere in Mexico City when the impresario organizing the tour claimed to be on the brink of 

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121 Performance Program, Ballet Alicia Alonso (Dec. 1, 1949), Folder Ballet-Danza, 1949, TNC.
bankruptcy. Local Mexican artists, including the famous actor Cantinflas, helped to raise money for the Cuban dancers. The Ballet Alicia Alonso went on to perform in Guatemala and El Salvador, where the impresario was taken to court for financial insolvency. Unable to wait for the legal deliberations, the dancers either had to return to Cuba or somehow come up with money to continue their tour. Alicia Alonso decided to take out a loan and leave the jeweled cross that she had received in her 1947 homage as collateral. 125 Although the dancers protested, according to Grau, Alonso exclaimed, “We will rescue it when we achieve economic success, but if it is lost, I feel that gaining prestige through our art for our country compensates our people, I give back what they gave to me.” 126 With that, the company went on to perform in Costa Rica and Panama. Then in Colombia, the company ran low on funding and waited anxiously for money to arrive from the Cuban Ministry of Education, which the Asociación Alicia Alonso Pro-Ballet had secured by campaigning on the dancers’ behalf. 127 The company then traveled to Ecuador and Peru. In Chile, their outstanding debts caught up with them. Once again, however, they received much needed aid. The Argentinean government flew them out of Santiago to Buenos Aires, where the company had a successful close to their tour in Argentina and Uruguay. 128 In this telling, Grau underscored the dramatic obstacles that the company faced, as well as the Cuban government’s insufficient aid in overcoming these challenges.

While Grau’s rendition likely had important elements of truth, it also probably exaggerated especially the Cuban government’s antagonistic role in the story. On the one hand,

126 Ibid., 43.
127 Ibid., 44.
evidence corroborates that the Alonsos’ trials were real. In a letter written on November 24, 1949, Fernando Alonso revealed to Ballet Theatre director, Lucia Chase:

After a whole year of having the responsibility of the direction of a company, of having to solve unsolvable problems, of dealing with the financial difficulties of a Ballet Company, and of trying to keep all its artists happy, I would like you to know that now I understand you. 129

Yet, a Carteles article, for instance, reported that the Cuban government providing “effective economic cooperation” and helped the dancers perform abroad in 1949. 130 While the press may or may not have had the whole story in this report, other evidence shows that the situation of limited government resources seemed to be changing in a way not acknowledged by Grau. According to Fernando Alonso in another letter to Lucia Chase on January 24, 1950:

The Government is getting more and more interested in our company. The Secretary of Education is giving us quite a bit of help. On the 31th of this month we are having a special performance at the Presidential Palace. We are sure that by next year we will have a very consistent and healthy subsidy from the Government. 131

Then, in July 1951, Minister of Education Dr. Aureliano Sánchez Arango visited the Ballet Alicia Alonso school and hailed it and the company for their “intense artistic and cultural labor.” Accompanying the verbal praise, Sánchez Arango promised to increase funding for the next fiscal year. 132 Although immediately after 1948 Ballet Alicia Alonso encountered financial frustrations, the company also made headway in attracting a more stable subsidy – a fact ignored or downplayed by other historical accounts.

Along with the Ballet Alicia Alonso, the government promoted cultural activities, such as a “Cultural Mission” organized by the Director of Culture of the Ministry of Education, Dr. Raúl Roa, in 1950. The Cultural Mission brought dance, film, book, art and archeological exhibits,

129 Folder 470, Box 7, ABT, JRDD-NYPL.
131 Folder 470, Box 7, ABT, JRDD-NYPL.
music, lectures and discussions, and theater to the countryside.\textsuperscript{133} The goal was to democratize culture. The guiding philosophy of the mission, as articulated by Minister of Education Sánchez Arango, was that, “Culture is the patrimony of the people.”\textsuperscript{134} The mission’s so-called “Culture Train” left from Havana in March 1950 and returned in July, transporting the artists involved to thirty-nine locales, where they performed for an estimated 146,500 people.\textsuperscript{135} As part of this mission, Antoñio Núñez Jimenez, president of the Havana Speleological Society and a good friend of Fernando and Alicia Alonso, explained scientific and archeological exhibits. Cuca Martinez directed a group of ballet dancers, and Ramiro Guerra choreographed popular and folkloric dances performed during the mission.\textsuperscript{136} Observers praised the effort as realizing “the social function of the arts.”\textsuperscript{137} As one commentator declared:

\begin{quote}
The forgotten guajiro lives apart from civilization, orphan to the beautiful things of culture…. This Cultural Mission that now begins its crusade of art and education to the fields and cities of Cuba is like a light shining amid thick darkness…. Its purpose is not only entertainment, but also education.\textsuperscript{138}
\end{quote}

Dance reportedly played an important role in overcoming cultural, class, and geographic divides. Because of its visual and auditory, rather than verbal, nature, dance was the “easiest to understand,” especially for unfamiliar, rural audiences.\textsuperscript{139} Enlightening performances supposedly provided a “service to the Nation … [through the] liberation of consciences.”\textsuperscript{140}

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\textsuperscript{133} Javier Barahona, “Está en marcha el ‘Tren de la Cultura,’” \textit{Carteles} (Apr. 23, 1950), 40-42. \\
\textsuperscript{134} Raquel del Valle, “Historia Gráfica de las Misiones Culturales,” \textit{Mensuario} (1951), SA-BNJM. \\
\textsuperscript{135} M. Millares Vázquez, “Una revolución cultural en Cuba, El Campesino cubano y la obra de las misiones culturales,” \textit{Carteles} (Aug. 20, 1950), 32-33. \\
\textsuperscript{136} Núñez Jimenez mentioned in Javier Barahona, “Está en marcha el ‘Tren de la Cultura,’” \textit{Carteles} (Apr. 23, 1950), 40-42. For more on his friendship with the Alonsos see Singer, 11, 72, 85, 87. Cuca Martinez mentioned in Raquel del Valle, “Las Misiones Culturales y el Ballet,” \textit{Mensuario} (1951), SA-BNJM; Ramiro Guerra’s involvement discussed in Pajares Santiesteban, \textit{Ramiro Guerra y la danza en Cuba} (2012), 91. \\
\textsuperscript{137} J.M. Valdes Rodríguez, “Las Misiones Culturales del Ministerio de Educación,” \textit{Mensuario} (1951), SA-BNJM. \\
\textsuperscript{138} Javier Barahona, “Está en marcha el ‘Tren de la Cultura,’” \textit{Carteles} (Apr. 23, 1950), 40-42. \\
\textsuperscript{139} Raquel del Valle, “Historia Grafica de las Misiones Culturales,” \textit{Mensuario} (1951), SA-BNJM. \\
\textsuperscript{140} Ernesto Ardura, “Las Misiones Culturales,” \textit{Mensuario} (1951), SA-BNJM.
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one observer, such endeavors were “duties of the Cuban state” that contributed to “a new epoch, the marvelous emergence of a more beautiful, free, and just social life.”141 The 1950 Cultural Mission evidenced the intimate relationship between politics, culture, and social well being in the Cuban Republic. Building on decades of work by associations such as Pro-Arte and Lyceum and Lawn Tennis Club, which linked cultural production to social progress, the state and artists collaborated in a crusade to expose the Cuban populace to art and culture.

In spite of the support provided by Prío Socarrás and his administration, Fulgencio Batista’s March 1952 coup renewed uncertainties about state support for ballet. Ballet leaders at first felt confident that the political change would not affect their work. Fernando Alonso sent a telegram to Ballet Theatre director Lucia Chase two days after the coup with the assurance, “Political situation perfectly normal business as usual confirming performances 19th and 21st.”142 The message referred to a performance that featured eight Ballet Theatre dancers just a few weeks after the March 10, 1952 coup. Interestingly, the programs for the March 19th and 21st performances announced that they were, “Sponsored by the Ministry of Education of the Republic.”143 Whether the programs had been printed before the coup or the new administration left existing subsidies unaltered is unclear. However, the ballet dancers undeniably jumped at the opportunity to increase funding or address the possibility of financial cuts posed by the regime change.

As a result, there was a notable intensification and proliferation of arguments for greater government backing. The push started behind the scenes. On April 7, 1952, an unsigned draft of a letter on Ballet Alicia Alonso stationary to the new President Batista asked to meet with him to

141 Raquel del Valle, “Las Misiones Culturales y el Ballet,” Mensuario (Jan. 1950), SA-BNJM.
142 Telegram Fernando Alonso to Lucia Chase, Mar. 12, 1952, Folder 470, Box 7, ABT, JRDD-NYPL.
143 Paula Lloyd, Michael Lland, Royes Fernandez, Dorothy Scott, Angela Vélez, Enrique Martinez, Jean Babileé, Nathalie Phillipard, as noted in Performance Program, “Ballet Alicia Alonso” (Mar. 19 and 21, 1952), SA-BNJM.
discuss the company’s finances.\textsuperscript{144} On May 10, 1952, Fernando Alonso sent a letter to the Director of Culture of the Ministry of Education, Carlos González Palacios, to reiterate his case for the subsidy increase. He detailed the company’s achievements such as performing for mass audiences in Cuba and abroad. These tours, according to Alonso, “strengthens cultural ties with the numerous countries visited, elevates the artistic prestige of our country, proves … that Cuba cultivates other rhythms besides the guaracha, rumba, and mambo, and publicizes to the world an artist already considered … a premiere ballerina [Alicia Alonso].”\textsuperscript{145} Moreover, Alonso stated that the existing subsidy of $43,000 annually was “insufficient to cover fully the artistic necessities of a ballet” as most of this money went toward salaries, leaving almost nothing for sets, costumes, and other expenses of putting on a show. Moreover, the Cuban company could not provide salaries that competed with those offered by foreign companies. This compelled talented Cuban dancers to perform abroad.\textsuperscript{146} Along with direct appeals, the Ballet Alicia Alonso enlisted distinguished friends in other countries to substantiate its requests. Antonio Núñez Jiménez, acting as an administrator for the ballet, wrote to the Venezuelan radio figure Reinaldo Espinosa on July 19, 1952, asking him to send a letter to President Batista advocating for greater ballet subsidies.\textsuperscript{147} Finally, in November 1952, the company drafted a memorandum to Fulgencio Batista’s wife, Martha Fernández Miranda de Batista, following up on a meeting they had with her on November 11. In the memorandum, the authors summarized key points in their appeal. They claimed to need $300,000 annually, but were willing to accept $200,000, although President Batista had countered with $188,000 during a previous meeting. They now hoped that Ms. Batista could speak with her husband about funding possibilities:

\textsuperscript{144} Letter to Señor Presidente, Apr. 7, 1952, Cuaderno 1618, Misiones Culturales y Ballet Alicia Alonso, Fundación Antonio Núñez Jiménez (FANJ).
\textsuperscript{145} Letter Fernando Alonso to Carlos González Palacios, May 10, 1952, Cuaderno 1618, FANJ.
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{147} Letter Antonio Núñez Jiménez to Sr. Reinaldo Espinosa, Jul. 19, 1952, Cuaderno 1618, FANJ.
We earnestly urge you to be our sponsor [madrina] in this beautiful artistic endeavor…. The ultimate solution to the ballet’s problems in Cuba, will have enormous historical significance, ascribing to the government of General Batista, the coveted accolade of being the first of our republican history to recognize and protect an artistic-cultural expression of such high magnitude as the ballet.\footnote{Memorandum Ballet Alicia Alonso to Sra. Martha Fernandez Miranda de Batista, Cuaderno 1618, FANJ.}

Writing to and speaking with Batista, his administrators, foreign friends, and his wife, the Ballet Alicia Alonso and its supporters worked hard to try to convince the new government to invest more money into ballet.

Along with these behind the scenes efforts, the ballet company waged an equally aggressive public campaign. Ballet Alicia Alonso programs from August, September, and November 1952 asserted that the current government subsidy (in place since 1949) of about $43,000 annually, or $3,585.33 monthly, failed to cover high production expenditures. Not taking into account studio rentals and other miscellaneous items ($600 a month for rent, $350 or more for musical scores, $200 for choreography, $700 for costumes, $1,200 for scenery, $300 for shoes, etc.), the monthly wage for over fifty dancers ranged from $55 to $65 a month. This salary was far lower than that offered by other companies (Ballet Theatre dancers received $80 per week).\footnote{Fausto Martínez Carbonell, “Por que pedimos ayuda al estado,” in Performance Program, Ballet Alicia Alonso (Aug. 25 and 29, 1952), SA-BNJM; Fausto Martínez Carbonell, “Aclaraciones en torno al Ballet Alicia Alonso,” in Performance Program, Ballet Alicia Alonso (Nov. 13, 1952), SA-BNJM; Fausto Martínez Carbonell, “Los Estrenos de Ballets y sus Costos,” in Performance Program, Ballet Alicia Alonso (Sept. 18, 1952), Folder 1952 Ballet-Danza, TNC. Of course, these arguments never offered the caveat that cost of living in New York was much higher than Havana. A 1956 article in Carteles quoted the price of a typical ballet production as $3,861, covering an orchestra, theater rental, advertising, stage manager, costume and makeup artists, pianist, invited foreign dancers, and not including electricity, costumes,
The article continued by pointing out that numerous governments provided dance and opera companies an annual subsidy (England, $300,000, Argentina, $1,000,000, Denmark, $150,000, Finland and France, more than $100,000) and that the Soviet Union provided complete monetary support, regardless of amount, for more than seventy performing groups in the country. Uncompetitive salaries threatened to deprive Cuba of top dancers, who found work in other countries or in other media, such as television. Accordingly, ballet supporters contended that, “the Ballet Alicia Alonso needs urgently an annual subsidy of no less than $200,000” to fulfill its work. This estimate took into account the fact that the state already provided the Philharmonic $150,000 annually and the Police Band $100,000, and these groups did not need to buy backdrops, shoes, and costumes like the ballet. Financial support, ballet leaders argued, had to come from the state since princes, dukes, and nobles, who once funded the form, no longer existed in the modern world order.

To justify their requests, promoters contended that ballet had great social value, meaning that the money provided would ultimately further national well being. To make this point, advocates had to refute assumptions held by certain (undefined) sectors that state funds went directly to Alicia Alonso, rather than to the ballet company. In a November 1952 Ballet Alicia Alonso program essay, the author asserted that Alicia was simply another ballerina in the company. Rather than earning great fortunes in Cuba, she made “heroic” sacrifices to earn

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151 Ibid., 36-37, 80.
153 Fausto Martínez Carbonell, “Por que pedimos ayuda al estado,” in Performance Program, Ballet Alicia Alonso (Aug. 25 and 29, 1952), SA-BNJM.
155 Fausto Martínez Carbonell, “Por que pedimos ayuda al estado,” in Performance Program, Ballet Alicia Alonso (Aug. 25 and 29, 1952), SA-BNJM.
money abroad, which went towards supporting her “beloved Cuban company” at home.\footnote{Fausto Martínez Carbonell “Aclaraciones en torno al Ballet Alicia Alonso,” in Performance Program, Ballet Alicia Alonso (Nov. 13, 1952), SA-BNJM.} Along with clarifying that Alicia did not individually benefit from state funds, program essays contended that Cubans profited from a strong national ballet establishment. In grandiose terms, the author insisted that ballet fulfilled the spiritual needs of Cuban audiences “to experience aesthetic emotion before a work of art.”\footnote{Fausto Martínez Carbonell, “Por que pedimos ayuda al estado,” in Performance Program, Ballet Alicia Alonso (Aug. 25 and 29, 1952), SA-BNJM.} Ballet ostensibly elicited such a response because ballets presented stylized representations of real life and expressed ideas through the “oldest language” of dance. This dialect utilized by humans since the beginning of time was deeply resonant to all peoples regardless of age or background.\footnote{“La Importancia que tiene el Ballet en la Cultura de un Pueblo,” in Performance Program, Ballet Alicia Alonso, (Nov. 13, 1952), SA-BNJM.} While broadly accessible, ballet was a high art that ostensibly enlightened audiences. As a result, one author claimed that for society’s “collective improvement … institutions of high culture are as important as the campaign against illiteracy and for rural education.”\footnote{Fausto Martínez Carbonell, “Por que pedimos ayuda al estado,” in a Performance Program, Ballet Alicia Alonso (Aug. 25 and 29, 1952), SA-BNJM.} Along with Cuban audiences, Cuba as a nation benefitted from the prestige generated by the “best ambassador … Alicia Alonso, today internationally recognized as a premier figure of world ballet.”\footnote{Fausto Martínez Carbonell, “¡Pero Valen Más!” Bohemia (Sept. 12, 1954), 114.} One article in the popular magazine *Bohemia* featured a picture of Alicia Alonso’s legs, saying that her limbs had earned both tangible and intangible returns during a recent performance in Buenos Aires: the “devout awe and admiration of dance lovers” and four million pesos.\footnote{Fausto Martínez Carbonell, “Por que pedimos ayuda al estado,” in a Performance Program, Ballet Alicia Alonso (Aug. 25 and 29, 1952), SA-BNJM.} Finally, Cuban artists benefitted from a stronger ballet establishment since it provided opportunities for professional development. Advocates
hoped that in the near future, talented Cubans would not need to go abroad to further their careers.\footnote{Fausto Martínez Carbonell, “Por que pedimos ayuda al estado,” in Performance Program, Ballet Alicia Alonso (Aug. 25 and 29, 1952), SA-BNJM.}

While supporters agreed that ballet merited state backing, a financial arrangement was complicated by the unstable relationship between the Ballet Alicia Alonso and Batista. In 1954, the company participated in a protest against the Second Biennial Hispano-American Art Exhibition, which came from \textit{franquista} Spain and was sponsored by the Batista government. Joining other Cuban artists and intellectuals angered by the neocolonial and fascist implications of the exhibit, the Ballet Alicia Alonso performed under the auspices of the FEU with funding from the Polar brewery as part of protests associated with a counter exhibit known as the Anti-Biennial.\footnote{Abigail McEwen, “The Practice and Politics of Cuban Abstraction, c. 1952-1963” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 2010), 466; Singer, 74.} Yet, on February 25, 1955, Ballet Alicia Alonso danced at a special gala performance in commemoration of Batista’s “inauguration” ceremony that day.\footnote{“Toma de Posesión del Presidente Mayor General Fulgencio Batista, Función de Gala por el Ballet Alicia Alonso Programa Oficial” (Feb. 25, 1955), Folder Ballet-Danza 1955, TNC.} Moreover, soon after the performance, in the spring of 1955, the Ballet Alicia Alonso changed its name to Ballet de Cuba, associating the institution with Cuba rather than a single individual, in hopeful anticipation of greater official support and recognition. In April 1955, Ballet de Cuba directors, dancers, and supporters founded the association “Patronato Ballet de Cuba” and in the organizational statutes named the “President of the Republic and Minister of Education Honorary Members of the Patronato.”\footnote{Art. 29, “Estatutos [Asociación Patronato Ballet de Cuba],” Exp. 22775, Leg. 1085, Fondo: Registro de Asociaciones, ANC.}

The ambivalent relationship between ballet and the state deteriorated in the wake of changes in the government’s cultural apparatus. On July 27, 1955, presidential decree no. 2057
created the Instituto Nacional de Cultura (INC, National Institute of Culture), a “specialized and technical state agency through which the Ministry of Education carries out its cultural activity.”¹⁶⁶ Initially, the INC supported the Ballet de Cuba, “not only because of the meaning of this form of artistic expression – universally embraced by all societies – but also because it has contributed to the prestige of our country abroad,” as a program essay explained.¹⁶⁷ On December 14, 1955, the Patronato de Ballet de Cuba discussed meeting with the INC Director Dr. Guillermo de Zéndegui to extend “the generous help of the Government of the Republic through the National Institute of Culture.”¹⁶⁸ Although it is unclear if this meeting came to pass, the INC changed the government funds for ballet, though contrary to the ballet leaders’ hopes. In June 1956, a revised annual budget published in La Gaceta Oficial allocated $683,051.80 for cultural activities.¹⁶⁹ In spite of this sizable amount, Alicia Alonso received a letter dated August 5, 1956 from Zéndegui, stating that the INC planned to replace the existing subsidy for the Ballet de Cuba with $500 per month (or $6,000 per year – a fraction of the longstanding subvention of $43,000) for Alicia Alonso or her school, in recognition of service to the country.¹⁷⁰ Alicia responded in a letter published in the newspaper on August 15, 1956, expressing her indignation that the INC saw state funding for the Ballet de Cuba as a personal favor. Moreover, Alicia believed that Zéndegui offered $500 a month to purchase her complicity. The epistolary exchange was published in Nuestro Tiempo, the official organ for the left leaning cultural association, Sociedad Cultural Nuestro Tiempo (to which Fernando and Alberto Alonso

¹⁶⁷ *Performance Program, Ballet de Cuba*, Folder Ballet-Danza 1955, TNC.
¹⁷⁰ “Para la Historia,” *Nuestro Tiempo* 3, 13 (Sept. 1956), Supplement.
belonged).  

This set off a firestorm of protest as Cubans rallied around Alicia Alonso and rejected the INC as an incompetent and encroaching structure part of an authoritarian regime.

Dissatisfaction with the INC and concerns about expressive freedom in Cuba pre-dated August 1956. As described above, artists rejected the Batista-sponsored exhibition in 1954. Literary figures also took issue with the regime and its cultural organs. For instance, an essay published in the literary magazine Ciclón in 1955 entitled “Culture and Morality” explored the precarious position of artists and intellectuals in Cuba. First, the author excoriated the new INC as an incompetent group of journalists (rather than artists and intellectuals) who sponsored vapid cultural events that provided “pure entertainment” and “nothing that tries to harm Morality and Christian Society.”  

Second, the author concluded that governmental patronage was problematic when the state dictated the artistic content: “the morality of art has nothing to do with political morality improvised for the circumstances of the State…. The day … the artist has to live according to an ‘official morality’ and adjust his creation to the dictations of an ‘official culture,’ art and culture will suffer.”

An issue that came to the fore in the subsequent ballet polemic was whether the Ballet de Cuba was a public or private institution. This determination had considerable consequence since it decided how much government funding the company deserved. According to the INC, the Ballet de Cuba was a private enterprise, and since the government had many cultural initiatives to support, the money earmarked solely for the ballet company seemed unjustifiably large.

Decades later in an interview in Miami, Zéndegui recalled that there had been complaints about

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173 Piñera and Gingerich, 104.
the company’s extensive travel abroad and failure to provide more free performances in Cuba.\textsuperscript{175} Ballet supporters countered with statistics on Cuban audiences exposed to ballet and arguments about the benefits of performing abroad. They calculated that by the fall of 1956, the company had offered 64 “popular” performances in Cuba (23 for free and 41 for minimal ticket prices) and 301 performances abroad. The company also boasted of having trained a new generation of Cuban artists at its own school and by inspiring other studios to offer dance instruction all over the country.\textsuperscript{176} Institutional growth evidenced the company’s public services and justified state remuneration. Furthermore, the Patronato Ballet de Cuba contended that the ballet was “as private as the Philharmonic Orchestra of Havana, which has received in years past more than $100,000 annually from the State … [or] Pro-Arte Musical, which receives $40,000 annually.”\textsuperscript{177} These hybrid organizations were community cultural initiatives with broad social benefits, making the “private” label imprecise and debatable. As well, they had a mixed financial scheme, consisting of private and public patronage. The indeterminate status of Ballet de Cuba and other cultural organizations made them susceptible to personal and partisan politics.

Factions also debated how INC funding affected expressive freedom. Alicia, for instance, declared that the “state assistance, which we believe we deserve, cannot signify a loss of artistic independence that we defend as inherent to the exercise of our art.”\textsuperscript{178} The INC responded by refuting allegations that it sought to circumscribe expression:

The National Institute of Culture rejects the unfair and unfounded accusation that we seek to formalize the Ballet of Cuba or any other institution to limit in any

\textsuperscript{175} Célida P. Villalón, “Una conversación con el Dr. Guillermo de Zénegui,” \textit{Temas} (Apr. 1998), 13.  
\textsuperscript{177} Patronato Ballet de Cuba, “Respuesta del Ballet de Cuba a las Declaraciones del INC” in “Polemica y Ballet,” \textit{Nuestro Tiempo} 3, 14 (Nov. 1956).  
way its independence, for it is standard for this agency to practice and respect the freedom of cultural initiatives of a private nature, not having made at any time to Mrs. Alicia Alonso, or any representative of Ballet of Cuba, any proposal that would restrict their freedom of action.\textsuperscript{179}

In spite of such claims, observers presumed ulterior motives behind the INC’s actions. As one editorial explained: “Cultural institutions have remained steadfast in their belief that the removal of the subsidy to Ballet de Cuba did not come from economic hardship, but from a policy of formalization of our culture.” This led the author to ask “Does economic aid from the State to any cultural institution presuppose submission to the tutelage of the National Institute of Culture and the loss of its independence?”\textsuperscript{180} Important questions remained regarding the repercussions of financial aid: what did artists owe the state in return for monetary support?

After 1959, historical actors clarified what they had feared about the INC’s plans. Fernando Alonso wrote that the INC intended to “use the ‘Ballet de Cuba’ as a vehicle of Batista propaganda, of flattery and praise of the government and, at the other extreme, as a screen to hide the tragedy of our country.”\textsuperscript{181} According to Fernando, artists and intellectuals had initially worked with Batista’s regime based on “the fallacy of ‘apolitical’ culture;” however, they came to believe that even minor collaborations with the state “would serve the tyranny.”\textsuperscript{182} According to Fernando, cultural production had inherent political ramifications, given assumed responsibilities to financiers. Receiving money from the state meant implicit collaboration with the government. Once artists overwhelmingly opposed Batista, such an alliance became unacceptable. Fernando’s 1959 version of the company’s recent history justified inconsistencies in its behavior, initially working with Batista and then rejecting such a partnership.

\textsuperscript{179}“Expone el INC por que niega una subvención,” \textit{Nuestro Tiempo} 3, 14 (Nov. 1956).
\textsuperscript{180}“Un editorial de Nuestro Tiempo,” \textit{Nuestro Tiempo} 3, 14 (Nov. 1956).
\textsuperscript{182}Ibid.
Regardless, the Ballet de Cuba and supporters loudly protested the government in the press and by way of a national performance tour. The periodicals *Bohemia* on August 26 and *El Mundo* on September 8, 1956 decried the INC and supported Alicia Alonso and the Ballet de Cuba.  

*Bohemia* also featured a cartoon of Zéndegui in a tutu. His ridiculous appearance encapsulated the poor public opinion of him after the ballet fiasco. (Figure 2) Thirty-one cultural organizations signed a public denunciation of the “economic aggression of the Batista dictatorship against the Ballet de Cuba.”

A committee to honor Alicia (Comité Organizador del Homenaje Nacional a Alicia Alonso) in alliance with the FEU organized a free performance at the Stadium Universitario on Saturday, September 15, 1956. The company performed *Les Sylphides* and Alicia, the solo *The Dying Swan*. The company then carried out a “protest tour on stages across the country,” ending with a performance in Matanzas on November 15, 1956. The program for the performance purported to honor the Ballet de Cuba and Alicia Alonso for “the glories that they have conquered for our Patria.”

Although not explicitly naming the conflict with Batista’s INC, audiences likely understood the politics of the performance given the press regarding the conflict.

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184 This included writers’ groups, theatres, theatrical troupes, art galleries, societies of arts and letters, radio and television groups, faculty of the University of Havana, and associations like Lyceum Lawn Tennis Club, Casa Cultural de Católicas Cubanas, Club Femenino de Cuba, Sociedad Nuestro Tiempo, Sociedad Infantil de Bellas Artes. For a complete list, see Cabrera, *El Ballet en Cuba*, 332-333.

185 “Homenaje Nacional a Alicia Alonso,” *Bohemia* (Sept. 16, 1956); Singer, 76.

186 Singer, 76.

After the Matanzas performance, the Ballet de Cuba halted domestic activities. In 1957 and 1958, Alicia Alonso performed with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo in the U.S. and brought several of her fellow Cuban dancers to perform at the Greek Theater in Los Angeles.\footnote{Performance Programs, “Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo” (Apr. 22, 1957), “Coppelia” (Aug. 7-11, 1957, Greek Theatre), “Giselle” (Aug. 18 – 23, 1958, Greek Theatre) in [Programs], Folder “Alonso, Alicia 1950s,” *MGZB, JRDD-NYPL.}

Also during this time, Alicia and Fernando made an important trip to the Soviet Union. After receiving a formal invitation, Alicia had the opportunity to perform and Fernando, to teach classes, in numerous cities from December 1957 to January 1958.\footnote{“Alicia en la URSS,” Carteles (Mar. 2, 1958), 33; Singer, 78-79.}

The U.S. press labeled Alicia a “US Ballerina” and “the only Western Hemisphere ballet dancer to perform in the Soviet Union in recent times.”\footnote{Barrett McGurn, “Russians Wait in Cold to Hail U.S. Ballerina,” New York Herald Tribune (Jan. 21, 1958), 2.} Alicia impressed Soviet audiences, who “waited outside the theater in

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Figure 2. Cartoon by Antonio of Guillermo de Zénegui, Director of the Instituto Nacional de Cultura in Bohemia, August 26, 1956, 66. Photograph taken by the author.
a temperature of 27 degrees below to say ‘thank you,’ ‘beautiful,’ ‘we love you,’ ‘come back,’ all in carefully enunciated English.”191 The Soviet ballet establishment – with its huge audience from all social classes and its harmonious and strong dancers – impressed Fernando and Alicia.192 Meanwhile, dance training and performance continued at the Escuela de Ballet Alicia Alonso as well as at other dance institutions in Cuba.193

By the late 1950s, ballet, like many other sectors, had become part of the political struggle, and as a result, the political leanings of the Alonsos have been subject to much debate. Alberto and Fernando claimed in later decades to have joined the Communist Party in the 1940s.194 Indeed, their friendships and alliances confirm this as Fernando served as vice-president and Alberto as “vocal” of the Sociedad Cultural Nuestro Tiempo. Founded in 1951, Nuestro Tiempo became close to the Cuban communist party, Partido Socialista Popular (Popular Socialist Party, PSP).195 Alicia, on the other hand, has been described as apolitical. On October 28, 1958, she reportedly declared to the Venezuelan newspaper El Nacional, “to me, Machado, Grau, Prío, Batista and Fidel Castro all mean the same thing. I am apolitical and have never voted.”196 In his book on Cuban ballet, Octavio Roca argues that Alicia has always been naïve about politics and that Fernando was the political one.197 Regardless of political partisanship or lack thereof, as discussions of ballet finances indicate, the ballet leaders fully

191 Ibid.
192 Singer, 79.
194 In the 1983 interview, re-published as a short book in 1990, Alberto says he joined the party in 1945 while in New York, Cabrera, Alberto Alonso, 12. Fernando Alonso claimed his political views were “made in the U.S.A” in Singer, 40.
195 McEwen, 9, 19, 52-54.
196 Letter Célica Parera Villalón to Agnes de Mille, Aug. 13, 1990, Agnes de Mille Correspondence and writings, (S) MGZMD 100, JRDD-NYPL.
197 Roca, Cuban Ballet, 38.
realized the political implications of state support. In the late 1950s, however, questions remained about the ideal arrangement for the growing and diverse Cuban dance world.

**Conclusion**

Many histories of Cuban ballet point to 1956 as a melodramatic clash between victimized ballet dancers and the tyrannical Batista regime. While perhaps well founded, such a characterization fails to recognize the considerable leverage that dancers and supporters had at the time. As the proliferation of dance schools, companies, and associations indicate, Cubans valued dance and wanted to strengthen and expand the art form. Supporters aired their concerns about funding in programs and the press. They encouraged the government to provide greater resources, pointing to ballet dancers’ contributions to Cuban culture and society. When Batista’s INC attempted to decrease funding, Alicia and Fernando Alonso responded and in many ways won an important battle. As Alicia reportedly told Zéneguï, “Look, I do much more with my feet than you and all those men with your titles.”198 Ironically, Alicia by that time had her own fair share of titles, and these distinctions assuredly bolstered her cause. The 1956 event indicates how far ballet had come in Cuba and how questions about its future on the island remained. Moreover, the conflict served as a cautionary tale to future governments and bureaucrats about the political backlash of rejecting the demands of Alicia and Fernando Alonso.

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Chapter 2. Choreographing the Nation:
Race and Performance in the Cuban Republic

As discussed in the previous chapter, a dynamic and diverse dance establishment emerged in the Cuban Republic. Along with institutional developments, there were important creative innovations in terms of devising a distinct Cuban dance aesthetic. This chapter examines choreographic explorations of national identity and racial formation and the contemporaneous discussions that they elicited. Representations of nation and race in “high,” elite forms like literature, poetry readings, ballet, and modern dance as well as in “low,” popular and commercial productions such as carnival, cabarets, and television had mixed receptions. Some audience members enjoyed and praised these performances, while others took issue with their exoticism and sensuality. The first group believed that dances expressed a cohering national identity. Critics believed that these stagings debased Cuba and catered to the tourist’s gaze by glorifying lower-class culture in a reductive fashion.

Conflicts over race, nation, and representation in the 1930s through the 1950s had deep roots. During the late nineteenth-century insurgency against Spain, Cuban patriots like Antonio Maceo and José Martí promoted national identity that transcended racial difference. As Maceo famously claimed, “There are no little blacks [negritos] or little whites [blanquitos], only Cubans.” Martí’s version of a similar sentiment was, “Cuban is more than white, more than mulatto, more than black.” These statements promoted anti-racism to unite and strengthen the proto-nation. Despite these assertions, historians Ada Ferrer and Lillian Guerra have shown how race relations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were less sanguine than Maceo

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1 Lane, 2, 4.
and Martí had hoped.² During the war for independence and its aftermath, white Cuban elites promised racial equality through policies like universal suffrage, while simultaneously protecting white privilege by circumscribing the politics and power of non-white citizens. For instance, the careful policing of black Cuban activism famously resulted in the 1912 massacre of members of an all-black political party, Partido Independiente de Color (Independent Party of Color).³ As historian Melina Pappademos shows, black Cubans navigated insidious racial prejudices by emphasizing class, cultural, and ideological differences within the black community.⁴ For instance, many elite black Cubans rejected the Partido Independiente de Color and their policies of racial consciousness. They also decried African descended Cuban music, dance, and religion like Santería (the African diasporic religion that was often repressed by the state and stigmatized in the press as superstitious witchcraft). Upwardly mobile black Cubans embraced bourgeois-liberal cultural refinements and expanded their political, cultural, and economic capital by promoting images of respectability.⁵

While racial prejudice and inequality continued, important shifts occurred in the 1920s and 1930s as progressive intellectuals and artists began to celebrate African heritage as central to Cuban national identity. This was part of a larger trend in Latin America and the Caribbean. In Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Peru, and elsewhere, politicians, scientists, and scholars increasingly rejected the late-nineteenth, early-twentieth century assumption that mixed race populations were condemned to backwardness, and instead viewed hybridity as viable.⁶ Whereas Martí advocated for superseding racial difference, Cuban intellectuals in the 1920s promoted

² Ferrer; Guerra, The Myth of José Martí.
⁴ Melina Pappademos, Black Political Activism and the Cuban Republic (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).
⁵ Ibid., 58.
⁶ Peter Wade, Race and Ethnicity in Latin America 2nd ed. (New York: Pluto Press, 2010), 31-35.
racial and cultural synthesis or mestizaje. Moreover, African diasporic culture contributed importantly to national identity. In Cuba, the movement known as Afrocubanismo drew upon “black motifs” to create a discourse perceived as typically Cuban. Scholars have examined the movement and made important conclusions on how it related to larger discussions about race and society. For instance, literary scholar Vera Kutzinski and ethnomusicologist Robin Moore have argued that the cultural productions distracted from racial prejudice and reworked black culture on elite, white terms. While acknowledging some problematic aspects of Afrocubanismo art, Alejandro de la Fuente has challenged sweeping critiques. He has noted that although some artists reproduced racial stereotypes, others, including non-white Cubans, contested racism by celebrating African patrimony as central to national identity. Historian Alejandra Bronfman has summed up these tensions by describing the “democratizing tendencies and the reinforcement of racial hierarchies” of cultural mestizaje.

This chapter adds to these discussions by focusing on dance, which has been completely left out of conversations about the Afrocubanismo movement. A dance focus revises understandings of the period in two ways. First, previous scholarship on music, visual arts, theatre, and literature assumed that the ideologies and art of Afrocubanismo started in the 1920s, reached its peak in the 1930s, and drew to a close by the early 1940s, only to continue again after 1959. By contrast in dance, the movement began hesitantly in the late 1930s, expanded significantly in the 1940s, and found full expression in the 1950s to continue in the following

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7 De la Fuente, A Nation for All, 183-184.
8 Vera M. Kutzinski, Sugar’s secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993); Moore, Nationalizing Blackness.
9 De la Fuente, A Nation for All, 184-185.
decades. This chronology supports an argument for ideological continuity across the 1959 Cuban Revolution. Second, this chapter examines the relationship between Africanist aesthetics in “high” and “low” dance productions to understand the class interests involved in these performances. Elites of different racial backgrounds resisted performances of Afrocubanismo in most high art venues. Contrarily, white elites promoted, as black and mulatto elites protested, Afrocubanismo in tourist attractions and on entertainment stages. This chapter argues that numerous stakeholders found Afrocubanismo performances as profoundly impactful to class and racial interests. Dance, necessarily racialized and class-inflected, illuminated competing visions of nation and racial formation, specifically the place of blackness and whiteness in Cuba.

The chapter is divided into two sections. The first analyzes Afrocubanismo in the “high” art productions of literature, poetry readings, ballet, and modern dance. Artists interested in Cuba’s African patrimony tended to be on the left politically; and as a result, their art became associated with the anti-Batista left. The second section turns to Afrocubanismo performances in commercial arenas, such as carnival, television, and cabarets. For decades, the Cuban government had promoted the tourist trade. As a result, dance performances associated with tourism, especially those in cabarets, organically became linked to the Batista regime in the 1950s. Though high art and popular performances became associated with opposing sides, this chapter illustrates the similarities and sustained dialogues between the polarized realms.

Before beginning, it is worthwhile to reflect briefly on these tensions in relation to 1959. This chapter demonstrates how ideas about Cuba as a “Latin African” nation, as Fidel Castro called it in December 1975, long pre-dated that year. Choreographers explored this concept, and audiences both hailed and decried these performances before and after 1959. Even with these continuities, there was an important difference across the regime change. Before 1959,
performers were very rarely non-white. As dances explored *Afrocubanismo* choreographically, the bodies performing tended to be white, especially in ballet, modern dance, and cabarets catering to elite audiences. The image that Cuba projected to the outside world in advertisements also promoted a white body politic moving to African descended rhythms. As the next chapter shows, the demographics on stage changed drastically after 1959. Rather than assuming that these racial exclusions and inclusions made performances before 1959 problematic and those after, unbiased, this chapter suggests a more complicated reality. Including black culture in art and commercial venues before 1959, laid the groundwork for later integration on Cuban stages. However, the exclusionary legacy of white bodies performing Afro-Cuban choreography continued to affect Cuban dance and society well after 1959.

**Artfully Cuban: Experimenting with National Aesthetics**

Starting in the 1930s, Cubans explored *Afrocubanismo* in dance texts and performances. Initially, this included ballet libretti and poetry; then, declaimer Eusebia Cosme animated movements indicated in texts; and eventually, Alberto Alonso and Ramiro Guerra began creating *Afrocubanismo* choreography—dances that highlighted Cuba’s African patrimony. During this period artists and ethnographers shared similar priorities. They claimed that Cuba’s African roots were of equal importance to its European ones, and they celebrated expressions like Cuban popular dances with obvious African influences. While artists and intellectuals agreed, audiences of different backgrounds took issue with *Afrocubanismo* in staged productions. The analysis below examines these performances and their public reception to demonstrate the contested nature of danced nationalism in the Cuban Republic.
National and international circumstances caused a paradigm shift in the 1920s and 1930s. Whereas in previous decades writers had emphasized the criminality of lower class, black Cubans and their cultural practices, they began to offer a more benevolent, though still problematic and paternalistic, appraisal of the same practices and peoples. Domestically, the 1901 Platt Amendment, which gave the U.S. the right to intervene in Cuban affairs, threatened Cuban political and economic independence. Cubans asserted autonomy by promoting the African diasporic culture that was distinct to the island. This coincided with contemporary artistic currents in other countries. Internationally, artists became intrigued and inspired by the “primitive.” For instance, in Paris Pablo Picasso created Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (1907), which depicted Spanish prostitutes and imagery inspired by African masks. Cuba’s neocolonial relationship with the U.S. and the international vogue of primitivism led Cubans to view their country’s African heritage not as a threat but as an asset.

The trajectory of Cuban intellectual Fernando Ortiz provides insight into these changes. After training and writing as a criminologist, Ortiz became an ethnographer fascinated by Afro-Cuban culture. In 1923, Ortiz founded the Sociedad de Folklore Cubano, which aimed to “copy, classify and compare traditional elements of our popular life” to further “national reconstruction.” The society published the journal Archivos del Folklore Cubano, which included articles by white, elite intellectuals such as Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, Lydia Cabrera, and Juan Marinello. With a romantic sensibility, the group examined Spanish, indigenous, and African influences in Cuban culture with the goal of recuperating forgotten folklore to further national development. Although the association disbanded in the 1930s as a result of financial problems, in 1936 Ortiz founded a similar association, the Sociedad de

12 Bronfman, 113.
13 Exp. 11573, Leg. 384, Fondo: Registro de Asociaciones, ANC.
Estudios Afrocubanos. This time the group included white members like Roig de Leuchsenring and black and mulatto intellectuals like Nicolás Guillen, Gustavo Urrutia, and Eusebia Cosme. This society described its objectives somewhat differently than the earlier group. The association was “to study with an objective criteria the phenomena (demographic, economic, juridical, religious, literary, artistic, linguistic, and social in general) produced in Cuba by the coexistence of distinct races…. for the happy realization of common historical destinies.”\(^1^4\) Whereas the 1920s Sociedad de Folklore Cubano had focused on national progress, the 1930s Sociedad de Estudios Afrocubanos promoted social harmony. This was probably a reaction to rising social and political tensions after the 1933 Revolution. The Sociedad de Estudios Afrocubanos also published a magazine, *Estudios Afrocubanos*, and worked to cultivate broader appreciation of Afro-Cuban practices through events such as the first public concert of Santería music and dance organized by Ortiz in 1938.\(^1^5\) Although Santería was not illegal, many adherents worshipped in secret because the mass media and high Cuban society associated the religion with criminality.\(^1^6\) In this hostile environment, Ortiz’s 1938 Santería concert was no small feat.

Along with Ortiz’s ethnographic societies, the leftist Grupo Minorista explored Afro-Cuban culture and tied their artistic interests to political and social projects. Formed in the early 1920s, the group publically denounced political corruption and imperialism and embraced Africanist elements in art. Though the group disbanded at the end of the 1920s, affiliates continued working through other institutions to promote similar ideals. Some important members included Alejo Carpentier, Conrado Massaguer, Roig de Leuchsenring, and Marinello. Massaguer, Carpentier, and Roig de Leuchsenring played leading roles in editing the

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\(^{14}\) Exp. 5167, Leg. 213, Fondo: Registro de Asociaciones, ANC.  
\(^{15}\) Moore, *Nationalizing Blackness*, 145.  
\(^{16}\) George Brandon, *Santería from Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 93-94.
publications *Carteles* and *Social*, which served as platforms for Grupo Minorista priorities after the group dissolved.

Carpentier furthered Grupo Minorista ideals through collaborations with composer Amadeo Roldán for the ballet libretti, *La Rebambaramba* (1928) and *El Milagro de Anaquillé* (1929), inspired by Afro-Cuban culture and folklore. As musicologist Caroline Rae points out, Carpentier first considered a career in music before writing, and music and performance greatly impacted his work.\(^{17}\) Closely connected to musicians while living in Havana and Paris during the inter-war period, he eventually collaborated with Roldán to create libretto for the two ballets mentioned. These ballets depict black and mulatto Cubans defying white oppressors and demonstrate the nationalist, anti-imperialist messages common to *Afrocubanismo* art and performances in the high art realm. They also merit closer examination because they influenced later dance pioneers. Alberto Alonso would choreograph a version of *La Rebambaramba* for television in 1957, and Ramiro Guerra would create versions of both ballets in the early 1960s.

*La Rebambaramba* takes place during a nineteenth century Three Kings’ Day celebration on January 6, which in colonial Havana was a carnivalesque day of freedom for slaves with music, dance, and costumes. In the ballet, slaves prepare for the upcoming festivities. A flirtatious *mulata* (a mixed-race woman) named Mercé enjoys time with her free black lover, El Curro. A soldier, who admires Mercé, joins the party in the hope of winning her affection. Then, the master unexpectedly appears with his aide, Aponte, who also likes Mercé. El Curro and the soldier hide, but Aponte, upset that they had cavorted with Mercé, jealously tries to find them. Eventually they escape, and the second scene opens on the Three Kings’ Day carnival.

Eventually, Aponte and the soldier fight and are arrested. El Curro and Mercé happily embrace as the _comparsa_, a group of carnival dancers and singers, perform a final number.\(^\text{18}\)

_El Milagro de Anaquillé_ portrays a group of “black” sugar-cane workers preparing a sacred ritual when a Businessman arrives.\(^\text{19}\) Wearing a mask, a plaid suit, and golf pants, the Businessman represents U.S. imperialism. He carries a tripod for a movie camera “[o]n his shoulder, like a rifle,” and a bicycle pump. A Yankee sailor and a flapper also appear, dancing frenetically as the Businessman manically puts up signs announcing “Ice Cream Soda,” “Bar,” “Wrigley’s Chewing Gum,” and the “Church of the Rotarian Christ (the biggest in the world).” After inflating a giant skyscraper with the bicycle pump, he tries to stage an exotic scene with the sailor dressed in a tiger skin, the flapper in a Hawaiian grass skirt, and the sugar cane workers performing their ritual. However, the latter keep the sailor and the flapper at bay and kill the Businessman. At the ballet’s bloody end, the cane cutters raise their arms to the sky as the curtain slowly falls.

In the libretti, Carpentier and Roldán drew upon Afro-Cuban cultural practices, particularly dances, to make political statements. For instance, in _La Rebambaramba_, El Curro dances the _contradanza_ “with pompous, ridiculous flourishes” to make fun of white, European movement styles. In _El Milagro_, the notes indicate that the Businessman “should seem monstrous and unreal, moving robotically,” while the cane cutters “act with perfect synchrony, simultaneously executing the same gestures.”\(^\text{20}\) The workers’ unison and final violence perhaps critiqued the dehumanizing impact of hard labor and exploitative power relations. As dance scholar Lester Tomé points out, _La Rebambaramba_ and _El Milagro de Anaquillé_ had


\(^\text{20}\) Carpentier, “The Rebambaramba,” 70; Ibid., 57.
progressivist, nationalist resonance as black and mulatto protagonists outwitted and defeated white oppressors – “avatars of colonial power” in the former and neocolonial U.S. capitalists in the latter.\textsuperscript{21} However, these projects remained intellectual rather than activist. The white collaborators had observed black Cubans worshipping with music and dance in the suburbs of Havana and used this material to further their own agenda (creating a ballet) rather than pointing to contemporary inequalities and racial injustices.\textsuperscript{22} These works had little impact on the social order and in fact were not produced until the 1950s and 1960s. Roldán conducted performances of the ballet scores by Havana’s Orquesta Filarmónica in 1928 and 1929; however, Roldán and Carpentier could not secure a choreographer or dancers to interpret the works.\textsuperscript{23} Choreographic cues written into the libretti remained words on a page.

While Carpentier and Roldán ridiculed white elites, poets of the 1930s portrayed Afro-Cuban culture as a distinguishing facet of national identity. Known as poesía negra, poesía mestizaje, negrista poetry, or poesía afroantillana (as similar trends occurred in other circum-Caribbean countries), these works were controversial. To illustrate, the collection, Motivos de Son (1930) by the black Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén, sparked considerable debate. Comprised of eight short poems, Motivos de Son represented the lives of lower class, black Cubans as well as the popular son music through quotidian language and rhythms. Fernando Ortiz hailed Guillén’s work as “perfectly translating the spirit, picaresque, and sensuality of anonymous productions,” or in other words, popular expressions that surged from an unknown source.\textsuperscript{24} In spite of these

\textsuperscript{22} Carpentier, “El recuerdo de Amadeo Roldan,” Carteles (Jun. 4, 1939), rpt. in Alejo Carpentier, Crónicas (Havana: Arte y literatura, 1976), 134.
\textsuperscript{23} Rae, “In Havana and Paris,” 384-385; Tomé, 174-176.
\textsuperscript{24} Fernando Ortiz, “Motivos de Son por Nicolás Guillén,” Los Archivos del Folklore Cubano 5, 3 (Jul.-Sept. 1930), 222.
accolades, many found Guillén’s work offensive. When Guillén presented his poetry to Club Atenas, an elite black civic organization, he met with a hostile reception. According an article about the event by the black journalist Gustavo Urrutia, the Atenas members (“keepers of black prestige”) found the popular expressions and behaviors in Guillén’s work “detestable” and dangerous because they propagated an image of the entire race as uneducated and lower class.²⁵ Urrutia defended Guillén as an avant-garde artist who sought to combat prejudices by introducing audiences to popular culture in Cuba.²⁶

Urrutia expanded his ideas on blackness in Cuban art in a series of four articles in the journal, Adelante, the magazine of the black society Adelante, devoted to issues of race and race relations. Urrutia argued that the selective embrace of Afro-Cubanismo revealed prejudiced assumptions. In the first installment, he noted that most Cubans accepted African influences in music but not in literature. According to Urrutia, this derived from the fact that music was viewed as “a purely emotional art in which intellectual reactions do not fit”; hence, African influence was “pressing and welcome.”²⁷ In the second installment, Urrutia said that a common claim undergirding these assumptions was that “the black man has a marvelous musical talent,” which presumed a literary incapacity.²⁸ Urrutia also critiqued representations of non-white Cubans in literature, where they appear as objects, explained by white narrators, or in ethnographic works where “erudite” experts such as Fernando Ortiz provided glossaries and explanations for “black speech” and practices. According to Urrutia, in the third article, such tendencies inhibited black Cubans’ contributions to literature.²⁹ In his final installment, Urrutia described the current moment as a political opportunity to address these lapses in opportunity

²⁵ Gustavo Urrutia, rpt. in Ortiz, “Motivos de Son por Nicolás Guillén,” 235-238.
²⁶ Ibid.
and inclusion: “the triumph of the revolution and the sovereignty of the State … spiritually licensed the black man…. While the cerebrum of the black man fights against prejudices, his spirit, already on the road to liberty, can indulge in his own art.” He also praised Guillén’s poetry for helping to construct a “genuine black literature that will truly influence Cuban literature.”

In these selections, Urrutia suggested that Afrocubanismo literature demonstrated the national relevance of blackness and challenged historical exclusions in artistic and social realms.

As Urrutia problematized assumptions regarding literature, intellect, and whiteness, professional dramatic reader Eusebia Cosme challenged racial and gender lines through her declamatory performances of Africanist poems from all over the Americas. Cosme was an African descended woman from Santiago de Cuba, orphaned as a minor, and raised in Havana by a distinguished Santiago family that became her patron. She studied music, piano, elocution, and declamation. Teachers and local artists helped to launch her career. In 1934, she gave her first major performances to the female civic association, Lyceum and Lawn Tennis Club, and then, for a larger public at the Teatro Principal de la Comedia. Cosme’s recitals primarily featured Spanish-language poetry, but she also performed works by the African American poets Langston Hughes and Paul Laurence Dunbar. Her performances included background scenery and costumes of her own design and some interpretive movements and gestures. As the poet Nancy Morejón noted decades later, Cosme was an outlier in the era’s predominately masculine world of letters.

Cosme impressed Cuban audiences of different racial backgrounds. For the white female audience at the Lyceum, Fernando Ortiz provided an introduction. His speech, later reprinted in

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30 Gustavo E. Urrutia, “Cuba, el arte y el negro IV,” Adelante (Jan. 1936), 11.
Revista Bimestre, started with the rhetorical question and answer: “Who is Eusebia Cosme? I will try to tell the female members of Lyceum, who invited me for that reason.” This framed his subsequent remarks as expert insights on the black female performer for an audience of white women, implying their incapacity to explain and understand without his mediation. In spite of these conceits, Ortiz generously praised Cosme’s work for sagely revealing Cuba’s emotional center: its “integrative nationalism.” Cosme embodied racial integration because in his words, she was “a mulata, born in an instant of peaceful synthesis of the dialectical races.” Further, the Lyceum event evidenced Cosme’s integrative power, given her race and that of her audience. Along with Ortiz, Adelante admired Cosme. In November 1935, the magazine featured three photos and statements providing “an homage to her merits.” In 1938, Adelante also published a tribute to Cosme after her successful performances in New York.

What was so powerful about Cosme to impress Cubans when the poetry she declaimed was so controversial in text form? This chapter suggests that the corporeality of her performance accommodated the sensual aspects of poesía afroantillana, which had upset some middle- and upper class Cubans of different racial backgrounds when it was produced in print. The verses Cosme recited evoked dance, and her performances included gestures and rhythm, making her a movement performer if not a dancer per se. In his introduction to her Lyceum performance, Ortiz noted that in poesía afroantillana “there are elements unwritten, but very real, of dance.” Therefore, he suggested, her movements completed the poem: “the reciter dances it for us,

35 Ortiz, “La poesía mulata,” 211.
36 Ibid., 205.
37 Ibid., 206.
moves it for us, with this expressive miming that completes the act of speech.”

In an essay on poesía afroantillana published in Adelante, the Mexican writer Baltasar Dromundo drew explicit connections between Cosme and dance: “Oh, this black woman Eusebia Cosme, the supreme attraction of Havana, declaimer-rumba … declaimer-son.”

In an interview with Adelante, Cosme described her performance techniques as incorporating movement and music: “A bit of dance, some singing, occasionally black instrumentals, diluted, subordinated to the most noble art of declamation…. A reciter, above all, has to recite.”

With this observation, Cosme provided some indication of why she became such an important figure, especially for black middle- and upper class Cubans. Declamation, with its tie to literature, remained “the most noble art,” more intellectual and respectable than music and dancing, though not excluding these modalities given the performative nature of her recitations. Cosme, then, appealed to the sensibilities of black and mulatto elites. Moreover, Cosme as a young, attractive female, raised in the genteel atmosphere of her Santiago patrons, likely softened, neutralized, and made acceptable poetry that seemed unrefined in black and white print. While elite black Cubans had criticized poesía afroantillana, Cosme received their widespread support. If critics of Cosme existed, they were far less vocal than those who disliked poesía afroantillana. Perhaps, since literature provided an entrée to an exclusive “lettered city” and therefore had lofty connotations, sensual images and popular culture in printed poems seemed blasphemous.

In the poetic performances by Cosme, however, there existed a satisfactory middle ground that completed and elevated the performer and the material in the eyes of viewers.

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40 Ortiz, “La poesía mulata,” 212.
42 Eusebia Cosme qtd. in “La Triunfal Tournée de Eusebia Cosme,” Adelante (Oct. 1938), 14.
Though Cosme performed only a short time in Cuba before moving to the U.S., especially compared to later poetry performers like Luis Carbonell, she is nevertheless an important figure in the history of Cuban dance.\(^{44}\) The discourses surrounding her work revealed not only the hierarchy of art forms, but also the tensions of performing Afrocubanismo in high art settings. Scholars have argued that Cosme had limited agency as an interpreter rather than creator, as poetry’s voice, rather than its creative mind. Viewed in this light, she was an object, not a subject, “consumed” by audiences.\(^{45}\) Moreover, authors have suggested that she had limited options, leaving only declamation as a possible career, even though she actually hoped to be an actress.\(^{46}\) Acknowledging these limitations, Cosme also reconfigured poesía afroantillana, utilizing an amalgam of literature and movement to access the high art stage. Moreover, looking at her performances and public reactions to them reveals an important priority for black Cuban activists in particular. Works inspired by Afro-Cuban culture had greater validity when thoughtfully interpreted by a professional with ties to elite circles. Cosme straddled the line between high and low culture by reciting poetry (highbrow) that incorporated images of the body, dancing, music, and popular culture (lowbrow). The legitimacy of Afrocubanismo performances depended on their professionalism and hybridity, as artists noted their connection to “authentic” popular Cuban culture as well as elite cultural institutions. This standard endured and shaped Cuban performance well beyond Cosme’s peak of fame in the late 1930s.

A few years after Cosme regaled audiences with her poetry performances, Alberto Alonso began exploring Afrocubanismo in ballet choreography. For instance, Alonso created Antes del alba (Before dawn) in 1947, which was his first ballet with a Cuban theme. He


\(^{45}\) Kutzinski, 16.

\(^{46}\) López, 69.
collaborated with like-minded progressivist artists including the Spanish dramaturge and ballet librettist Francisco Martínez Allende, who had fled the Spanish Civil War, Cuban designer Carlos Enríquez, and Cuban composer Hilario González Iñiguez. (Figure 3) The ballet had four scenes set in an impoverished Havana neighborhood during carnival season and told the story of Chela (performed by Alicia Alonso), a woman with tuberculosis, who commits suicide by setting herself on fire. The work highlighted unpleasant social problems in an unprecedented way. The ballet also featured a novel choreographic language: Alberto fused popular dances such as rumba and conga with ballet. To prepare Alicia for her role, Alberto had a rumba dancer, “Chamba,” famous for his performances at the Cabaret El Faraón, coach her.47 It is possible that Alberto found inspiration for his production from Jerome Robbins’ ballet, Fancy Free (1944), which included a rumba infused solo that Alberto performed while in New York in 1944.

Figure 3. Sketch for Carnival Costume by Carlos Enríquez in *Antes del Alba*, 1947. Courtesy of the Museo de la Danza, Havana, Cuba.

Perceptions of *Antes del Alba* ranged widely. A critic in the popular magazine *Carteles* wrote several weeks before the premiere that the work would “open fruitful avenues to national art,” since “Cuba possesses abundant folkloric wealth and variety … from the indigenous siboney to the creole, intermingling the Hispanic and the African.”

48 However, according to Alicia Alonso in an interview forty years later, the women of Pro-Arte were appalled and asked if she “would dare” to perform the ballet. Alberto Alonso recalled that the rehearsal atmosphere was “horrible” as mothers angrily watched their daughters in the cast rehearse the conga. The situation became so dire that the creative team decided to make rehearsals private, no longer

allowing hostile parental observers.\textsuperscript{49} When the work premiered on May 27, 1947 with Alicia, Alberto, and Fernando Alonso in the title roles, it provoked a scandal among audience members who were shocked to see proper young ladies performing dances that supposedly did not belong in a ballet.\textsuperscript{50} Despite this reception, later official ballet narratives in post-1959 Cuba celebrated the work as the first truly Cuban ballet.\textsuperscript{51}

Ignoring the scandal, Alberto Alonso and his Ballet Nacional continued experimenting with \textit{Afrocubanismo} ballet and nationalist aesthetics. For instance, Alberto choreographed the non-narrative \textit{Cuatro Fugas} (Four Fugues, 1950) to music by Cuban composer Edgardo Martín and scenery and costumes by the Cuban visual artist René Portocarrero. The playbill described the piece as depicting “ñáñiga” (members of Abakuá, the Afro-Cuban, male secret society) in their “fambá” or secret room, where they performed rituals and ceremonies in costumes “inspired by Afro-Cuban signs.”\textsuperscript{52} Alberto’s second wife, the dancer and choreographer Elena del Cueto, created \textit{Concierto Cubano} (Cuban Concert, 1950) for the Ballet Nacional. Critic Arturo Ramírez described the piece as “a new force for the development of ballet with vernacular motivation.”\textsuperscript{53} In 1951, del Cueto choreographed \textit{Fantasia Cubana} (Cuban Fantasy), which program notes described as “a fantasy based on Cuban rhythms and dances.”\textsuperscript{54} With these Cuban-focused works, Ballet Nacional gave ballet “a Cuban spirit, a new modality in world ballet, something

\textsuperscript{49} Dino Carrera, “A Cuarenta Años de \textit{Antes del Alba},” \textit{Cuba en el Ballet} 6, 2 (1987), 12.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 10-16; Cabrera, \textit{El Ballet en Cuba}, 33-35; Performance Program, “Sociedad Pro-Arte Musical Presenta al Ballet Theater y su Escuela de Baile” (May-Jun. 1947), Folder Ballet-Danza 1947, TNC.
\textsuperscript{51} Cabrera, \textit{El Ballet en Cuba}, 33-36.
\textsuperscript{52} Performance Program, Ballet Nacional (Oct. 15, 1950), Folder Ballet-Danza 1950, TNC.
\textsuperscript{54} Performance Program, Ballet Nacional (Apr. 15, 1951), Folder Ballet-Danza 1951, TNC.
autochthonous that reaches a character of universality.” The Ballet Nacional saw Cuban popular culture becoming universally readable and important when integrated into ballet.

Like the choreographers of Ballet Nacional, Ramiro Guerra also looked to Afro-Cuban folklore and cultural practices to inspire his choreography in the 1950s. However, rather than ballet, Guerra used modern dance technique to explore *Afrocubanismo*. *Toque*, his first major choreography for the concert stage, drew from “Afro-Cuban religious experience.” The work grew out of his alliance with the Escuela de Ballet Alicia Alonso where he began teaching modern dance in 1951. In 1952, Guerra choreographed *Toque* for a combined cast of Ballet Alicia Alonso company members and advanced students. Set to music by the Cuban composer and ethnomusicologist Argeliers León, *Toque* had four scenes: “Invocation,” “Ritual,” “Dance of the Ancestor,” and “Dance of Origin.” According to the program notes, the piece did not try “to copy realistically a rite,” but instead meditated on ritual objectives and ideals. In this case, the work considered male and female identities as they fused “during the fertilizing action.” In other words, the piece portrayed a fertilization ritual.

Perhaps anticipating a public outcry or because of resistance during rehearsals, the program for the premiere included essays that defended *Toque*. First, there was an editorial by the Cuban writer and feminist activist Renée Méndez Capote, who described *Toque* as “a very noble attempt of folklore stylization” that drew inspiration from a “popular motif” and fulfilled an intellectual debt to affirm “lo cubano [Cubanness] through the ethnological elements that

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56 Performance Program, Ballet Alicia Alonso (Feb. 9, 1952), Folder Ballet-Danza 1952, TNC.
57 Performance Program, Ballet Alicia Alonso (Aug. 31, 1951), Folder Ballet-Danza 1951, TNC.
58 Performance Program, Ballet Alicia Alonso (Feb. 9, 1952), Folder Ballet-Danza 1952, TNC.
Méndez also justified the ballet’s sensual elements, saying that it provided a “careful and thorough study of a religious rite … of people who very reluctantly were incorporated into our midst. In these cases the dances, prayers, [and] songs have a painful flavor that ennobles it, despite its sensuality.” Highlighting Guerra’s careful approach and the violent history of African slavery, Méndez endorsed the choreographer and the subject matter. Further defending the work, the author cited similarities between Toque and renowned European repertory such as L’Après-midi d’un faune (Afternoon of a Faun), choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky for the Ballets Russes in 1912, and Bacchanale, choreographed by Leonide Massine for the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo in 1939. The European ballets interpreted sensual stories and characters from Greek mythology, and in kind, Guerra staged sexually charged African diasporic practices in Toque. The author concluded by hailing Guerra for working “without prejudices” to represent the elements that contributed to Cuban culture, “stylizing them, elevating them to the category of a work of art. The realization of Toque, in Cuba, is the fulfillment of a duty.”

Along with Méndez’s article, the program included a letter from Fernando Ortiz to Fernando Alonso, written February 2, 1952, a week before the premiere. Ortiz had observed a rehearsal of Toque (upon Alonso’s invitation), and in the letter, Ortiz hailed its artistic and national merits. He applauded Argeliers León for his score, which represented “our rich national folklore, with clean honesty, without vulgarity or mystification,” and Guerra for his choreography, which thoughtfully interpreted folkloric symbols and styles. Likely knowing that the letter would be published, Ortiz tried to orient the public by describing Santería deities in terms of the Greek pantheon. He explained to the audience that in the “black ballet you all will

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60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
hear the beautiful melodies, rhythms, and steps of Changó (Yoruban Apollo), Yemayá (the Venus of Nigeria), Obatalá (the Mother Goddess), and Babalú Ayé (the god [genio] of disease) ... filtered through a harmonic, allegorical and choreographic net made with the textures and embellishments of a modernist aesthetic.” According to Ortiz, the ballet furthered an “aesthetic transculturation,” which expressed “national integrity, translated into a language of universal resonances.”\textsuperscript{62} Here Ortiz used the term he coined in 1940, “transculturation,” to describe the merging of cultures in Cuba.\textsuperscript{63} Transculturation, he suggested, gave legitimacy to \textit{Afrocubanismo} performances. Ortiz believed that Guerra’s choreography had national and universal importance in utilizing Cuban folklore to innovate new, modern aesthetics. Such claims about cultural integration resonated with those made by other Latin American intellectuals of the era about the value of African and indigenous culture to a modern national identity.\textsuperscript{64}

In spite of these efforts, public outrage over the scenes portraying the Santería fertilization rite closed the ballet after one performance.\textsuperscript{65} The Cuban public opposed the sexually suggestive African diasporic practices in a concert setting. However, this single performance of \textit{Toque} illustrated two important dance developments in the early 1950s. First, the \textit{Toque} affair connected the work of ethnographers like Ortiz to Guerra’s project of choreographing “Afro-Cuban” concert dances. According to Ortiz, Guerra’s work “elevated” folkloric practices and strengthen national identity. Second, the work demonstrated Guerra’s interest in \textit{Afrocubanismo}, which continued throughout his career. Guerra later explained the

\textsuperscript{62} Fernando Ortiz, “¡Buenos augurios del Ballet Negro! (De una carta a Fernando Alonso),” in Performance Program, Ballet Alicia Alonso (Feb. 9, 1952), Folder Ballet-Danza 1952, TNC.
\textsuperscript{65} Pedro García Suárez, “Ramiro Guerra y la Danza Moderna,” \textit{Bohemia} (May 17, 1963), 18.
origins of his life’s work by describing his childhood neighborhood of Cayo Hueso as constantly pulsating with Afro-Cuban music and dance.66

Although Toque had only one showing, Guerra’s Habana 1830 (later renamed Estampas Cubanas) was also an Afrocubanismo performance, and it had a longer performance life. Set to music by the Cuban composer Ernesto Lecuona, the work had three scenes from colonial Cuba: “El Sarao” (The Soirée), “El Batey” (The Barracks, where the sugar plantation workers lived), and “La Plaza” (The Plaza). The program notes described the work in the following terms: “Evocation of bygone years: days of soirées and hoopskirts…. happiness and charm of rumba mulatas … and the nostalgic songs of sad slaves, who cried in labor camps.”67 The Ballet Alicia Alonso performed Habana 1830 on tour to South America in 1952 and gave at least one performance the following year in Cuba.68

Along with collaborating with Fernando and Alicia Alonso’s school and company, Guerra also advanced his work under the auspices of the leftist cultural organization, Sociedad Cultural Nuestro Tiempo. According to its bylaws, the goal of the society was to “foment the creation and spread of cultural manifestations in general … offer[ing] theatre, music, film, ballet, plastic arts exhibitions, conferences, and … cultural exchange with all countries of the world.”69 Guerra, along with ballet teacher and administrator Josefina Elósegui, served as a “vocal” (representative) for the “Sección de Ballet.” Guerra’s name appeared on member lists and in

69 Exp. 22684, Leg. 1080, Fondo: Registro de Asociaciones, ANC.
society minutes in 1955, 1957, and 1959. Guerra also choreographed and performed in concerts sponsored by Nuestro Tiempo. In a review of a 1955 recital, Eduardo Martín praised Guerra for his vivid choreographies to diverse musical selections. Along with abstract dances, Guerra had more narrative choreography like the ensemble work, Son para turistas (Son for Tourists), with music by Juan Blanco, text by Fermín Borges, and scenery by Servando Cabrera. The piece depicted a man unsuccessfultly trying to sell his wares to tourists. Martín lauded Guerra’s subtle, but humorous approach to a topic that could have resulted in vaudevillian kitsch or crass socio-political criticism. Instead, Guerra’s choreography and Blanco’s music, according to Martín, provided a sophisticated treatment of the theme. The technical rigor, expressiveness, and variety of the program distinguished Guerra’s work for the critic.

In 1957 and 1958, Guerra directed a group of former Ballet de Cuba dancers in a company called Teatro Experimental de Danza, which sought to explore new directions for Cuban concert dance. A playbill described the group’s intentions as creating “a suitable atmosphere for the birth of new forms, new artists … and in short … dance, in its various forms and styles.” The company grew out of the “experimental department” of the Ballet de Cuba and the Escuela de Ballet Alicia Alonso. Although part of a ballet institution, the department pursued its own artistic course, aspiring to “create new paths for ballet in Cuba, and, along with it, maintain an organization appropriate for … opening doors to all young artists that want to develop new ideas in this great theatrical endeavor.” The surviving programs have very limited notes, making it difficult to assess the nature of the group’s choreographies, but the musical

70 Exp. 22684, Leg. 1080, Fondo: Registro de Asociaciones, ANC; Exp. 22685, Leg. 1080, Fondo: Registro de Asociaciones, ANC; Exp. 22688, Leg. 1080, Fondo: Registro de Asociaciones, ANC; Exp. 22690, Leg. 1080, Fondo: Registro de Asociaciones, ANC.
72 Ibid.
73 Performance Program, Teatro Experimental de Danza (Mar. 17-18), SA-BNJM.
74 Performance Program, Teatro Experimental de Danza en Sala Hubert de Blanck, SA-BNJM.
choices are suggestive. For instance, the ballet dancers José Parés and Joaquín Banegas choreographed works to Tchaikovsky, Mozart, and Strauss that were probably based on traditional ballet techniques and aesthetics. Guerra, on the other hand, performed a solo, Rítmica, to a percussion score of the same name by Amadeo Roldán, suggesting that the choreography had Africanist influence. Although short-lived, the Teatro Experimental gave dancers a space to innovate new directions for Cuban dance and lay the groundwork for explorations that would continue in other venues after the company’s dissolution.

From the 1930s through the 1950s, artists experimented with nationalist aesthetics in various movement laboratories. Debates surrounding Afrocubanismo in high art confirm that the realm was both highly guarded and penetrable by select figures. Individuals with elite connections like Eusebia Cosme and Alberto Alonso challenged the boundary between high and low culture, earning great acclaim in the case of Cosme and occasional outcry in the case of Alonso. Regardless of reception, the written and performed choreographies analyzed above signify that artists grappled with race and nation in the decades before 1959. These efforts would continue thereafter, building on the inquiries that guided the earlier cultural productions.

**Selling Cuba: Dance and Tourism in the Cuban Republic**

Not unlike performances on concert stages, Afrocubanismo in carnival and cabarets provoked larger discussions about social relations and politics in the Cuban Republic. This section starts by analyzing the 1937 legalization of carnival comparsa dancing and debates over the policy change. Then the focus turns to images that circulated worldwide in the 1940s and 1950s to “sell” a festive, dancing Cuba. It also examines extravagant cabaret spectacles, which became a part of the 1950s visual economy. Notable choreographers included Alberto Alonso
and Roderico Neyra (known as “Rodney,” a mix of the beginnings of his first and last names). In these productions, blackness in the form of African descended music and dance served as a locus for Cuban nationalism. Whiteness equally figured into performances of cubanidad as performers with lighter skin overwhelmingly populated stages and imagery portraying Cuba and Cubans. Carnival and cabaret not only reflected aspects of racial ideologies (and prejudices), but also became part of larger political battles of the period. As the Batista regime promoted the tourist industry, festivities and popular tourist attractions became targets for 26th of July Movement attacks in the late 1950s. Although cabarets became tied to the Batista regime, many of the artists and aesthetics involved were the same as those associated with anti-Batista factions. In other words, great dance dialogues happened across political divides in the 1950s.

A discussion of Afrocubanismo in popular and entertainment arenas necessarily begins with carnival, which existed before 1937 in Cuba, but only in carefully regulated contexts. In the 1910s and 1920s, comparsa ensembles were not included in carnival festivities but at times performed for campaign events at the behest of white politicians, provided that they refrain from using “African” instruments and dancing “lewdly.” Yet, as scholar Thomas Anderson notes, comparsa ensembles often defied the rules and paraded in local neighborhoods. Authorities did not strictly enforce bans, allowing comparsas to slip into regulated carnival processions. However, in the 1920s, the government passed a series of laws circumscribing these performances. In 1922, for instance, President Alfredo Zayas passed legislation prohibiting African diasporic religious ceremonies that involved dancing and drumming. According to the law, these practices resulted “in a spectacle offensive to morals and good customs,” contrary to

75 Moore, Nationalizing Blackness, 71.  
76 Anderson, 26-27.
the “culture and civilization of the people.” His successor, President Gerardo Machado, signed legislation in 1925 banning street performances during carnival. The law prohibited “immoral contortions with the body, incited by the African drum” since these “lascivious movements of an inconceivable sexual promiscuity,” offended morals and disturbed the peace.

By the 1930s, however, official judgments had begun to change. As historian Rosalie Schwartz has analyzed, changing views on carnival coincided with a boom in Cuban tourism. After the 1929 Great Depression and the Revolution of 1933, tourists began returning to Cuba in the mid-1930s. The Cuban Corporación Nacional del Turismo (National Corporation of Tourism) began functioning in July 1935 to help manage the growing industry. Civic and government leaders worked to build local infrastructure such as more hotels and events to accommodate and entertain foreigners. As part of this effort, local authorities organized comparsa demonstrations in fixed locations for seated judges and audiences made up of tourists and members of the Cuban elite. Then, in 1937, Havana mayor Antonio Beruff Mendieta gave official support to comparsa participation in carnival street parades.

Before making this decision, Beruff solicited the advice of Fernando Ortiz and his Sociedad Estudios Afrocubanos. A letter dated January 30, 1937, stated that the Comisión Asesora del Turismo Municipal (Advisory Commission of Municipal Tourism) had recommended that the Havana carnival festivities of February, complete with “typical Afro-Cuban comparsas,” be reinstated to attract tourism. The government, the letter continued, recognized the “doubtless historical value and artistic richness” of these performances and not

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77 Rpt. in Moore, Nationalizing Blackness, 229-230.
78 Ibid., 231.
79 Rosalie Schwartz, Pleasure Island: Tourism and Temptation in Cuba (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 64.
80 Ibid., 94-102.
82 Moore, Nationalizing Blackness, 83.
only hoped to authorize them, but also to fund and offer prizes to the best groups. However, people had expressed disdain for these festivals, classifying them as detrimental to Cuban cultural progress and the root of racial conflicts and public disturbances. As a result, the mayor solicited the advice of the Sociedad de Estudios Afro cubanos about whether comparsas were “contrary or beneficial to the culture of our people and to the good opinion of us formed by foreigners when they visit.”

In his response, Ortiz contended that supporting folkloric manifestations aligned Cuba with international indicators of progress since in civilized nations “governments and scientific and artistic entities” worked to preserve folkloric customs as an integrationist strategy. Defining the costumes, floats, dancing, and music as “estimable elements” of artistic value, Ortiz saw protests against carnival as signs of racial prejudice and “collective inferiority.” Moreover, Cuban people, Ortiz claimed, had a right to enjoy themselves without worrying about the opinion of ignorant foreigners. He also denied the contention that comparsas led to racial conflict, arguing instead that they encouraged harmonious collectivity.

Supporters saw carnival as an essential and innocuous part of Cuban national identity. In the preface to a pamphlet published in 1937, Beruff praised the celebrations as hyper-national:

…this creole and extremely Cuban art of ours … must lead to a bright future in which our personality may grow and our independence reaffirm itself. To repudiate it on behalf of childish prejudice and fear … is antipatriotic and suicidal. Instead, to cultivate it, to promote its development … is to Cubanize ourselves [cubanizarnos].

The cultural magazine Social published several articles reiterating this point. The editorial team included Conrado W. Massaguer and Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring. Massaguer was a member of

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83 Antonio Beruff Mendieta, Las Comparsas Populares del Carnaval Habanero, cuestión resuelta (Havana: Molina y Cia, 1937), 8.
84 Fernando Ortiz, rpt. in Beruff Mendieta, 8-20.
85 Beruff Mendieta, 6.
an advisory committee to the municipal Department of Tourism while Roig de Leuchsenring was a longtime participant in Ortiz’s societies. In the March 1937 issue of Social, they described carnival as “an opportunity for healthy, happy, and unworried diversion” that exhibited how Cuba was “the happiest place in the world.” Roig de Leuchsenring echoed Beruff by saying that “Afro-Cuban” music and comparsas did not result in “Africanization,” with its connotations of backwardness or incivility, but rather in “Cubanization.” This distinction refashioned Africanist influences into expressions of the national present rather than holdovers of the past.

In the aftermath of the 1933 Revolution, the reauthorization of carnival was a part of populist politics of the era. As Fulgencio Batista proposed sweeping social reforms in his Plan Trienal (Three-Year Plan, 1937), local officials demonstrated their populism by reauthorizing carnival. Roig de Leuchsenring described the carnival policy change as democratizing and rectifying an unjust past: “carnivals were reduced to the passing of coaches and automobiles … diversions for the middle and upper class…. And the carnivals remained suppressed during the tyrannical misrule of Machado and successive governments.” For the first time in history, according to Roig, the government allowed the people to enjoy not only parades (“the most interesting spectacle of beautiful creole color and doubtless folkloric richness”), but also free cultural events programmed to coincide with carnival, such as orchestra, choral, and band concerts, theatrical productions, film screenings, public dances, and lectures on Havana history.

Along with white politicians and intellectuals, African descended Cubans discussed the carnival policy changes. The leaders of the civic association Adelante, for instance, generally opposed carnival, seeing it as an instrument used by political elites and as detrimental to the

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89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
image of black Cubans. The opening editorial for the March 1937 issue of the association’s publication defined carnival as “an attraction mostly for tourism” that resulted in an “unedifying spectacle, which denigrates us, not only before the foreigner … but also offends at the same time the good taste of the sensible elements of the country.”

In one of several articles Alberto Arredondo, a mulatto economist, echoed these sentiments. He noted that politicians used carnival to promote their own interests – whether to attract votes in an election or money in the tourist trade. Arredondo also lamented how advertisements incorrectly suggested that the majority of blacks in Cuba enjoyed carnival and had “uncivilized and barbaric” tastes.

Arredondo pointed out in another article that no members of the elite Club Atenas, Cuba’s most prestigious black society, nor black workers or middle class Cubans participated in the street comparsas. Neither did the white advocates of carnival for that matter. White promoters acted as avid spectators to the 1937 festivities. The only participants, according to Arredondo, consisted of “lumpen-proletariat, that is, a backward, … unconscious victim of the system.”

Many critics felt that these manifestations distracted from pressing social inequalities and structural racism in Cuba. As Alejandra Bronfman points out in her study of 1937 carnival legislation and debates, “rites” did not translate into “rights” as black activists believed that “stereotyped spectacles” during carnival underscored and heightened social inequalities and became an obstacle to furthering the prerogatives of citizenship. One Adelante author pointed out that the government-backed festivities diverted state funds and distracted citizens from grave

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92 Arredondo’s racial background mentioned in Pappademos, 212; Alberto Arredondo, “El Arte Negro a Contrapelo,” Adelante (Jul. 1937), 5.
96 Bronfman, 161, 168-171.
issues affecting the country.\textsuperscript{97} Indeed, authorities invested a considerable sum, forty thousand dollars, according to figures for the 1937 festivities.\textsuperscript{98} Contrasting the bawdy merriment of carnival with the pitiful cries of hungry and dying children, the author concluded, “The comparsa is the drug, is the opiate of the people discovered again!”\textsuperscript{99} Arredondo similarly wrote: “So long as the black man is not in an economic situation of well being, equal to the white … the comparsas will be a drug. And as a drug ultimately, it will only be delivered to the minority. Precisely the most exploited minority.”\textsuperscript{100} These authors believed that carnival adversely affected the city’s most vulnerable population.

Not all authors featured in \textit{Adelante} had the same opinion of carnival. For instance, Angel Pinto questioned Arredondo’s previous writings and argued that promoting carnival demonstrated tolerance and compassion for the plight of African descended Cubans.\textsuperscript{101} Arredondo rejoined, “Democracy, in this case, seems to lie – for Pinto – in the freedom of the black man to parade after the comparsa, while for us, equality of the black man is in parading with the white man on the road of economic opportunities.”\textsuperscript{102} Some writers distinguished between comparsas and congas, generally supporting the former and not the latter. Comparsas in the late 1930s meant organized parades down certain streets by groups of dancers and musicians while congas involved unstructured dance and parading. In “A Clarifying Letter,” published in the March 1937 issue of \textit{Adelante}, the society’s Central Committee expressed its support for comparsa and rejection of conga:

\begin{quote}
We understand that a well-organized comparsa … would contribute to giving color and animation to our monotonous Carnival Parade, [but] would be negative,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{97} María Luisa Sánchez, “Zafra y Comparsas,” \textit{Adelante} (Apr. 1937), 13.  
\textsuperscript{98} Beruff Mendieta, 21-22.  
\textsuperscript{100} Alberto Arredondo, “El Arte Negro a Contrapelo,” \textit{Adelante} (Jul. 1937), 5.  
\textsuperscript{101} Angel C. Pinto, “Una Aclaración,” \textit{Adelante} (Jun. 1937), 10.  
\textsuperscript{102} Alberto Arredondo, “El Arte Negro a Contrapelo,” \textit{Adelante} (Jul. 1937), 5.
if … the disorganized nuclei, called congas passed through the neighborhoods of the city… [I]t is known that the elements of the lowest social strata exploit these opportunities to unleash their vices and bastard passions.\textsuperscript{103}

The letter concluded with a plea for the government to suppress congas.\textsuperscript{104} Another article in the same issue described comparsa as “an artistic group … loyal to the postulates of culture and social justice,” while conga was a “motely overflow of people outside of any artistic discipline, generally poorly dressed … without ‘decency’ and with ‘lewd’ gestures.”\textsuperscript{105} These distinctions allowed hesitant support for some carnival practices and participants and not others.

Although carnival began as a controversial event, it soon became a regular part of Cuban culture and an important tourist attraction. In 1947, a Cuban journalist reported governmental plans to expand Cuban carnival in order to compete with Mardi Gras festivities in Nice, Rio, and New Orleans.\textsuperscript{106} In a 1953 tour guide to Havana, the foreign author W. Adolphe Roberts described carnival as “one of Havana’s great attractions,” and how the “Tourist Commission does everything in its power to promote and publicize it.”\textsuperscript{107} A 1953 English-Spanish guide to Havana, edited by the Cuban-based Roger Le Febure and “approved by the National Tourist Commission,” characterized carnival as “thrilling and leav[ing] indelible memories.”\textsuperscript{108}

Havana was not alone in experiencing these shifts and debates. In Santiago de Cuba, the most important carnival celebrations fell in the summer, on the days of Saints Cristina, Santiago, and Ana – July 24, 25, and 26, respectively. Like in Havana, local authorities slowly but surely reinstated previously repressed practices. In the early 1930s, political turmoil and the 1933 Revolution led to carnival prohibitions. On July 25, 1934, however, a newspaper reported that in

\textsuperscript{103} Mariano Salas Aranda, “Una carta aclaratoria,” \textit{Adelante} (Mar. 1937), 4.

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{105} “Las Comparsas,” \textit{Adelante} (Mar. 1937), 1.


\textsuperscript{108} Roger Le Febure, ed., \textit{The Blue Guide to Cuba} (Havana, 1953), 88.
response to a “vehement desire” for carnival, the mayor would allow limited celebrations, closely supervised by the authorities. In 1935, decrees regulating carnival stated that the government allowed organized comparsas to go through the streets, but not congas. Moreover, people watching the parade had to “observe the strictest morality.” In 1940, a law permitted the use of guitars, claves, maracas, and wind instruments, but prohibited drums used by congas. As in Havana, policy shifts happened slowly and were accompanied by public debate.

Santiago citizens held different opinions of the festivities. At one extreme were those who associated carnival with entrepreneurship and productivity. A 1938 editorial in Oriente asked readers why Santiago did not have a winter carnival since carnival meant an opportunity for profit, particularly from tourists. Berating his audience, the author urged the citizens of Santiago to give up their inactivity and suggested that the government organize a winter carnival with “parties … to delight the people and benefit the economy of the city.” In contrast to this proposal, other writers decried carnival, particularly congas as “uncultured and uncivilized.” One author suggested that the annual dancing and music-making reflected a sad, dark history of social injustice: “In conga … there is a deep shadow of injustice, misery, slavery, outrages, thievery, and deceit.” Like in Havana, Santiago citizens divided over what the festivities meant in racial, social, and cultural terms.

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110 Pérez Rodríguez, 15-16.
111 “Prohibieron Ayer la Salida de la Salida de las Típicas ‘Congas,'” Oriente (Jul. 27, 1940), rpt. Pérez Rodríguez, 121-122.
In the 1940s and 1950s, carnival became increasingly normalized, commercialized, and extravagant in Santiago. In the late 1940s, a special committee, the Comité de la Gran Semana Santiaguera, started organizing the city’s annual festivities, and became a registered civic association in 1954. Upper-class leaders in local business and society comprised the group. The 1954 bylaws described the committee’s objective to organize carnival festivities to “foment tourism and the exaltation of our traditions.” The group claimed to be “apolitical, strictly social, with absolute autonomy and organizational independence,” free to reach out to other civic institutions and local industries. Advertisements in Santiago newspapers in the months leading up to carnival in the 1940s and 1950s indicate that many businesses, such as Bacardí Rum and the Hatuey and Polar beer companies, helped to fund aspects of the celebrations. These resources were necessary since carnival was extremely expensive. For instance, in 1954, the committee detailed expenditures of $11,935.99. The three most costly items were employee salaries and general office expenses ($4,146.79), a car as the grand prize for the woman elected Queen of the Carnival that year ($2,500), and advertising ($1,780.50). In 1955, carnival week cost $12,605.48. A detailed breakdown revealed that $2,500 went to purchase a Buick for the Queen of the Carnival, $199 for a television for the first runner-up, and $68.40 for a radio for the second runner-up. In 1956, the committee spent a total of $12,420 for carnival with $2,905 going to “Prizes for Queen and Ladies.” These ostentatious gifts suggest that local businesses gave sizable contributions to fund carnival, which in turn stimulated the local economy.

Increasingly, Santiago citizens spoke less about whether or not to allow carnival, and more about how the festivities could best serve the Cuban people. In 1947 a commentator

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115 Pérez Rodríguez, 191-192.
116 Leg. 634, Exp. 30, Fondo: Gobierno Provincial de Oriente, APHSC.
117 Ibid.
118 Pérez Rodríguez, 225, 243.
119 Leg. 634, Exp. 30, Fondo: Gobierno Provincial de Oriente, APHSC.
encouraged citizens and officials to reform rather than suppress carnival: “We must end these bawdy songs that offend and humiliate… Our conga is something very much ours that we cannot suppress or avoid, but must ‘reform,’ so that it is a cause for excitement and not repulsion…. Award the best congas, but yes, remove wild groups that make them odious.”

Calls for reform continued into the 1950s. In 1953, several institutions of “great moral prestige,” including cultural and religious organizations, pushed for an end to “using semi-naked young teens and girls in dances of lascivious contortions and movements.” The declaration finished by saying: “We have to make our carnivals decent … eliminating evils that tarnish our traditional celebrations in Santiago.” In 1956, there was another protest against the display of women during carnival: “A group of girls … representing a foreign product, competed in lewd contortions on a truck to the delight of individuals who cannot measure the consequences of debauchery.”

According to the author, festivals should evoke ancestral traditions, and improve and enrich them, not allow them to become “brothel scenes before which society indignantly stands.” These statements raised concerns over the morality of carnival and its Cuban essence. They illustrate the centrality of the female body to safeguarding and challenging respectability. In these denunciations, citizens labeled carnival parades as immoral in catering to foreign interests and by failing to remove so-called offensive or humiliating dances and songs.

Nevertheless, by the 1950s Santiago’s summer carnival had become famous and attracted many foreign tourists. Observers described Havana’s winter carnival as a stiff affair compared to the boisterous festivities in Santiago. A 1950 article criticized the Havana events as accentuating

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123 Ibid., 264-265.
class differences with the upper and middle classes showing off their wealth while the lower classes danced, sang, and paraded. Santiago on the other hand featured a “true” carnival of “the people.” An article in *Bohemia* hailed the eastern carnival because it did “not like formalities…. [T]hey parade only one day before a Jury. The rest of the time the groups pass through the city bringing to all corners their carnival fanfare and stunning Afro-Cuban rhythm.” An article in *Carteles* averred, “In Santiago … the camera is enraptured by the unnerving beauty of carnival…. Up and down go the comparsas and not like those of Havana, that do one orderly and neat pass, but the boisterous comparsas, where black and white and Chinese, rich and poor dance.” Labeled the “apotheosis of the most healthy popular happiness,” Santiago carnival became known by the late 1950s for its open, multi-class celebration.

For the most part, debates among community leaders and journalists over carnival ignore the views of those who actually took part in the activities, especially lower-class Cubans. As many authors pointed out, few of the commentators in the press actually wound through city streets behind the comparsas. Yet, public festivities had an important role in the social, political, and economic lives of everyday Cubans, particularly as part of larger efforts to build community. Historian Melina Pappademos demonstrates how social life contributed to creating political communities, which drew upon and revised dominant nationalist discourses. For example, while elite black societies sponsored fancy balls and distanced themselves culturally from Africa, humble black associations embraced an Africanist identity and demonstrated their commitment

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to both Cuba and Africa.\textsuperscript{128} Leisure activities, religious celebrations for patron saints, and mutual aid all fell under the jurisdiction of these societies.

One important association, the Sociedad de Instrucción y Recreo “La Caridad de Oriente” (Society of Instruction and Recreation “Charity of Oriente”) founded in 1918 celebrated the saint’s day of the Virgen Caridad del Cobre (Our Lady of Charity of Cobre) on September 8 each year. The society had the objective, “besides celebrating dance parties, to accumulate funds sufficient to meet the relief of its members in case of death or illness,” as stated in Article 1 of the society’s statutes.\textsuperscript{129} Annual celebrations of sacred figures and the pooling of monetary resources nurtured members spiritually and economically. Pappademos describes the society as comprising of poor, black Cubans of Haitian descent, who kept alive their music and dance forms called \textit{tumba francesa}.\textsuperscript{130} Indeed, low membership costs corroborate the socioeconomic status of members. To join, an individual paid one peso and fifty centavos and then one peso each month. Membership was open to both sexes between eighteen and forty-nine years old. Like other black societies, Caridad forged vertical, symbolic links with powerful political figures. For instance, the minutes of a meeting on January 20, 1953, declared Fulgencio Batista Zaldívar and his wife Martha Fernández de Batista honorary members of the organization.\textsuperscript{131} This gestured to the official acceptance of such communities and their activities by the 1950s.

Along with Caridad del Cobre, other religious figures served as the focal point of local associations, demonstrating the social significance of beliefs and festivities. Law Decree 1387, passed on May 3, 1954, mandated that groups celebrating a religious patron had to register with the government. As a result of this law, a deluge of petitions, now in the provincial archives of

\textsuperscript{128} Pappademos, 115.
\textsuperscript{129} Exp. 4, Leg. 2684, Fondo: Gobierno Provincial de Oriente, APHSC.
\textsuperscript{130} Pappademos, 45, 224.
\textsuperscript{131} Exp. 4, Leg. 2684, Fondo: Gobierno Provincial de Oriente, APHSC.
Santiago de Cuba, crossed local authorities’ desks. They attest to the widespread desire to publically celebrate icons with music and dance. A list of holidays registered in the eastern town of Baracoa included twenty-three petitioned festival days, falling in all months of the year except September, November, and December. Along with the sheer number of festive days, the archival materials record that civic associations organized around local institutions such as schools. For instance, in June 1954, two members of the Asociación de Padres, Vecinos y Maestros de la Escuela Pública 22 (Association of Parents, Neighbors, and Teachers of Public School 22) wrote to the provincial government in accordance with Law Decree 1387 to register a holiday for the local patron saint, “San Juan Bautista” (Saint John the Baptist) on June 24.

Festivities took various forms. Although few petitions detailed the content of special day celebrations, a document written in April 1954 by José Gómez Morodo and Faustino Fernández Naranjo noted that the festivities for the celebration of Saint Germán in a local home during April 30, May 1, and May 2, included a masked dance for the Sociedad de San Germán members, a parade, as well as games of luck. These petitions serve as reminders that beyond elite politicking and capitalistic maneuvering, Cubans danced and celebrated saints throughout the year as part of intimate enterprises of community building and faith.

While Cubans at all levels of society involved themselves in annual festivities, images of a dancing, festive Cuba circulated abroad. Cuban dance crazes, including the mambo, cha-cha-chá, conga, and rumba, swept through the United States and Europe. One 1949 article described how the U.S. chain, Arthur Murray dance studios, acted as an incubator for tourists to Cuba. Whether students happened upon rumba unknowingly or sought out Cuban rhythms in

132 Exp. 17, Leg. 634, Fondo: Gobierno Provincial de Oriente, APHSC.
133 Exp. 11, Leg. 635, Fondo: Gobierno Provincial de Oriente, APHSC.
134 Exp. 151, Leg. 635, Fondo: Gobierno Provincial de Oriente, APHSC.
preparation for already planned trips, Arthur Murray dance students flocked to the island.\textsuperscript{135} A 1943 tourist pamphlet published by the Cuban Tourist Commission promoted this idea with a picture of a woman dancing the rumba and a caption that read, “Improve your rhumba where the rhumba was born.”\textsuperscript{136} Photographer Earl Leaf, who visited several Caribbean islands in the late 1940s, noted, “More plain Americans are taking rumba lessons than any other social dance except the fox trot, according to dance school statistics…. To them rumba is a drug.”\textsuperscript{137} A 1955 article on mambo described a “mambista epidemic” in the “land of Uncle Sam” and many other cities and countries throughout the world including Paris, Japan, Spain, the Soviet Union, and China.\textsuperscript{138} Along with sugar, one article claimed, Cuba exports the cha-cha-chá and the mambo to the U.S. Both dance products at the moment competed as “the ‘articles’ that Yankees most consume.”\textsuperscript{139}

However, these border crossings often altered the original dance forms. One Cuban journalist derided paltry attempts at dancing Cuban rhythms, specifically the conga, in the U.S.: “Americans have translated the conga to English…. They claim that they have made the conga decent. But the conga does not need to be made decent, because what is spontaneous, simple, and natural is never indecent.” The author went on to describe the conga in New York as “a cold, sterile, unnatural conga, without vitamins … very artificial and anti-aphrodisiac.”\textsuperscript{140} Cuban pianist Emilio Grenet described Cuban dances like rumba abroad as being “divested of its true

\textsuperscript{135} Rodrigo Rams, “Medio Millón de Alumnos de Rumba!” \textit{Carteles} (May 29, 1949), 26-27.
\textsuperscript{136} C.M. Zoehrer, \textit{Cuba the Holiday Isle of the Tropics} (Cuban Tourist Commission, 1943), Back cover, Vicki Gold Levi Collection, The Wolfsonian-Florida International University (VGLC, W-FIU).
\textsuperscript{139} “Exportando Cha Cha Cha,” \textit{Carteles} (Mar. 27, 1955), 52.
\textsuperscript{140} Antonio Ortega, “Las Comparsas,” \textit{Bohemia} (Mar. 9, 1941), 38-39, 54.
As the above observations indicate, Cuban dances had an international life of their own. Cuban nationalists sometimes took issue with foreign misinterpretations of their dances. Yet, accurate or not, popular Cuban dances had a powerful impact on international audiences, awakening curiosity about the island and its rhythms.

Along with dances, postcards, advertisements, and tour guides from the 1930s through 1950s in Cuba and abroad contributed to a particular image of the island. One 1950s postcard, for instance, featured a white-skinned, black-haired woman, eyes closed, mouth stretched wide in a smile, holding maracas, and suspended in mid-air with legs bent in a jaunty jump. The text reads, “So near and yet so foreign, 90 miles from Key West. Visit CUBA. Courtesy Cuban Tourist Commission.”142 (Figure 4) A 1951 advertisement for Webster Cigars in *The Saturday Evening Post* included a photograph of a couple in colorful, ruffled rumba costumes, dancing for seated on-lookers. The caption reads, “For pleasure, go to Havana; for Havana, go to Webster Cigars.”143 A tour guide for the 1955-1956 season featured a cartoon of a white-skinned, black-haired woman in a ruffled dress lunging and grabbing the shoulders of a blond man to kiss him on the cheek. The man awkwardly stares out at the viewer, his suitcase and pipe in mid-fall as he blushes, surprised by the gesture. The accompanying text reads, “Welcome to Cuba.”144 (Figure 5) These images similarly featured attractive women, and sometimes men, dancing. Depictions of Cuba catered to racial prejudices as they featured people with white skin and flowing dark hair – stereotypically Spanish, rather than African, descent. The visual portrayal of a festive, dancing Cuba, invited tourists to a place familiar and foreign, safe and adventurous.

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142 Cuban Tourist Commission, “Visit Cuba” Postcard, c. 1950, VGLC, W-FIU.
143 “For pleasure, go to Havana; for Havana go to Webster Cigars,” *The Saturday Evening Post* (Mar. 2, 1951), 101-103, VGLC, W-FIU.
144 Instituto Cubano del Turismo, “Welcome to Cuba” (Cuban Tourist Commission, 1955), VGLC, W-FIU.
Figure 4. “Visit Cuba” Postcard, c. 1950. Vicki Gold Levi Collection, The Wolfsonian-Florida International University, Miami, Florida.

Figure 5. “Welcome to Cuba” Guidebook, 1955. Front cover illustration by Conrado Walter Massaguer. Vicki Gold Levi Collection, The Wolfsonian-Florida International University, Miami, Florida.
The pictorial emphasis on Cuba’s Spanish rather than African roots dovetailed with local elite tastes. Spanish dance was very popular, especially with Cuba’s upper classes, in the 1930s to 1950s. Spanish dancers like Martha Andrews, Rosita Segovia, María del Pilar, and Mariemma performed in Cuba, sponsored by cultural organizations like Pro-Arte and the Asociación Cultural (Cultural Association), which promoted opera. The Spanish dance troupe, Ballet Español de Ana María, also had great success in Cuba and abroad. Ana Maria began performing in Cuba in 1939. In 1940, she debuted in the United States, featuring ensemble works as well as solo numbers. Spanish born Adelina Durán performed at the nightclubs Sans Souci and at local theatres, and began teaching Spanish dance at the Pro-Arte school in the 1950s. According to Earl Leaf in the late 1940s, “Habaneros have never lost their taste for fine Spanish dancing and there is no floor-show in the Cuban capital without its team of Spanish dancers.” The ubiquity of Spanish dance on Cuban elite stages was part of a larger trend in Europe and the U.S., where Spanish dancing was in fashion. While Cuban elites embraced Spanish dances, rumba was another story. As Leaf described, “Not until the rumba … had crossed the sea and taken the world by storm did the Cuban aristocrats recognize it as anything but a vulgar display of exhibitionism by social outcasts…. Haltingly and grudgingly, with ill-concealed

146 Arturo Ramírez, “Farándula,” Carteles (July 18, 1948), 46.
148 Leaf, 46.
condescension, they allowed this low-caste, orgiastic plebe within the portals of their sacrosanct nightclub.”

Even though elite audiences favored Spanish dance, the government fostered *Afrocubanismo* performance not only in carnival, but also via the folkloric dance group Grupo Nacional de Bailes Folklóricos (National Group of Folkloric Dances), founded by the Ministry of Education in 1951. However, even here white dancers interpreted Afro-Cuban culture. Dr. Amparo Carrión, a former professor at the University of Havana, directed the group, and Isabel Menocal served as Associate Director. The troupe had around twenty white female performers and a repertory that included “danza, contradanza, son, danzón, rumba, conga, Cocoyé, Habanera, Guajira, and Erinbangando (a dance of the cabildo).” The group performed at festivals in Mexico and the United States. A photo from a 1954 performance in the U.S., illustrates how the company represented black culture in distorting ways. In the photo, two white women perform a dramatic encounter between a woman and a figure from the all-male, Afro-Cuban Abakuá secret society. (Figure 6) The tight costuming of the gender bending “travesty dancer” (a woman representing a man) provided only loose interpretations of “folklore.” Nevertheless, the group and its performances abroad illustrate that blackness had become a part of Cuban cultural identity by the 1950s.

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150 Leaf, 38.
151 Mexico in 1952 and the National Folk Festival in St. Louis, Missouri in 1954. Untitled history of the company, Box 2, Adria Catalá Casey Papers, CHC.
As Cubans clashed over race and representation in performance, Alberto Alonso presented his own version of choreographic pluralism on television and cabarets, performed by dancers with the Conjunto de Bailes del Teatro Radiocentro, the Ballet de CMQ Televisión, and the Montmartre, Sans Souci, and Riviera cabarets. Like his work for concert dance stages, he mixed popular dance and ballet. For instance, *El Solar,* featured songs and dances from lower-class Cuban neighborhoods performed by ballet-trained dancers like Sonia Calero. Critics described the work as a “Cuban creation for Cubans” but also able to entertain audiences “in any capital of the world. Such is its universal value.”153 (Figure 7) *El güije,* a twelve-minute piece televised during the weekly music and dance program *Cabaret Regalías,* was inspired by the

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legend of a fantastical creature who could change shape, living in bodies of water and causing mischief. The production reportedly demonstrated the potential of Cuban choreography that mixed classical ballet with Cuban popular dances:

*El güije* has served for something more than to reaffirm the stellar quality of the television program most seen and heard in Cuba; it has served also to demonstrate that Cuban ballet could be a reality of unusual thematic force and surprising beauty. With our rites and creative imagination, we have something more to offer in art: native choreography.

Then in 1957, Alberto staged a version of the Carpentier/ Roldán ballet *La Rebambaramba* for the television program *Gran Teatro del Sábado*. On September 14, 1957, at 9:30 p.m., television viewers enjoyed a “folkloric kaleidoscope” offered by Alonso and his dancers.

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155 Ibid.
156 “La Rebambaramba,” *Carteles* (Sept. 29, 1957), 53.
Along with Alonso, Roderico “Rodney” Neyra experimented with national themes and aesthetics in cabaret choreography. Born in Santiago de Cuba in 1908, at fifteen years old he started out as a singer and moved to Havana where he joined the company at the Teatro Payret. At some point he contracted leprosy, but his charisma and talent rather than the deforming disease defined his persona. He performed on CMQ Radio and with various musical and theater groups, eventually touring through South America and then returning to Cuba. Rodney also worked at a burlesque theater called the Shanghai in Havana’s Chinatown, where tourists and sailors enjoyed evenings that included dance performances, comic routines, live music, female striptease, and nude performances. During these years, Rodney honed his skills as a performer and learned how Havana audiences responded to bawdiness. In the 1940s, Rodney worked at the Teatro Fausto and eventually became a choreographer. According to Carteles, Rodney created colorful spectacles at Fausto that brought together “amateur and professional elements, giving them unity, discipline, and the value of experience, through constant rehearsals and presentations.” In the late 1940s, Rodney formed the group Mulatas de Fuego, which included singer Celia Cruz and dancers. In 1948, the Mulatas de Fuego performed in Mexico and then Venezuela. The numbers performed on tour featured Rodney’s “line of popular choreography and plastic sense,” set “to Cuban and Hispano-

157 Rafael Lam, *Tropicana: un paraíso bajo las estrellas* (Havana, Editorial José Martí, 1997), 54-56.
159 Lam, 54-56.
158 Lowinger, 117.
161 Lam, 54-56.
American and also black music … of the United States.”\textsuperscript{164} By the late 1940s, Rodney had developed an eclectic choreographic style that produced vivid, entertaining spectacles.

As Rodney developed as a choreographer at Fausto, Montmartre, Sans Souci, and Tropicana nightclubs competed and depended upon big shows to attract tourists and visitors. During that decade, Victor de Correa, a man of Portuguese and Italian descent who had settled in Cuba in the early 1930s, directed shows at the Tropicana, mostly choreographed by Sergio Orta. In 1941, they staged a spectacle in collaboration with David Lichine called \textit{Congo Pantera} (Congo Panther), which depicted a panther running dramatically through the African jungle.\textsuperscript{165} The performance demonstrated early cross-genre collaborations in nightclubs and the centrality of exoticism to performance narratives and aesthetics. The show included dancers from the temporarily disbanded Original Ballet Russe, which had performed in Cuba under the auspices of Pro-Arte Musical and then experienced financial troubles. While the dancers were stranded in Havana, they sought work at the Tropicana among other places.\textsuperscript{166} In this particular production, ballerina Tatiana Leskova was the panther, and Nina Verchinina and Anna Leontieva, appeared in solo roles.\textsuperscript{167} When Rodney took over as the Tropicana’s main choreographer a decade later, he also staged \textit{Afrocubanismo} (with ballet flourishes) on a grand scale.

In early 1952, immediately before moving to the Tropicana, Rodney staged \textit{Sun Sun Babae} at the Sans Souci cabaret, a show that indicated his approach to \textit{Afrocubanismo} spectacles. Rodney practiced Santería, and reportedly asked for special permission from religious leaders to stage sacred Santería songs and dances for a paying public. To prepare for \textit{Sun Sun Babae}, Rodney took his performers to the outskirts of Havana to witness an actual \textit{bembé}, a

\textsuperscript{165} García-Márquez, 274-75; Lam, 50-51.
\textsuperscript{166} García-Márquez, 272-275.
\textsuperscript{167} Lam, 50-51; Lowinger, 91 (Tatiana Leskova referred to as Tania Leskova).
religious ritual involving music and dance.\textsuperscript{168} The production opened with three black men dressed in white, wearing colorful beaded necklaces and drumming on batá drums used in a \textit{bembé} while a chorus chanted sacred Yoruba songs.\textsuperscript{169} The musicians included the renowned drummers Trinidad Torregrosa, Raúl Díaz, Merceditas Valdés, and Francisco Aguabella.\textsuperscript{170} A woman dressed in yellow performed the orisha Ochún as others danced around her. The theatrical rendition included a woman in the audience becoming “possessed” though she was actually a U.S. tap dancer, planted as part of the show.\textsuperscript{171} Public representations of Santería rituals shocked some in the audience.\textsuperscript{172} However, the performance also impressed the public, including the Tropicana administrators, who hired Rodney as the cabaret’s main choreographer.

Rodney’s work at the Tropicana portrayed a variety of cultures and themes. Works of \textit{Afro-Cubanismo} included \textit{Omelen-ko} (1952), \textit{Karabali} (1955, originally entitled \textit{Abakuá}), \textit{Embrujo en la Noche} (1955, A Nighttime Spell), and \textit{Tambó} (1957). There were also productions inspired by foreign material such as \textit{Malagueñas} (Women of Malaga, 1952), \textit{Serenata Gaucha} (Gaucho Serenade, 1953), \textit{Carnival Carioca} (Rio Carnival, 1953), \textit{Casa de Té} (Tea House, 1955), \textit{Fantasía Mexicana} (Mexican Fantasy, 1956), \textit{Primavera en Roma} (Springtime in Rome, 1957), and \textit{Vodú Ritual} (1958).

Contemporary reviews praised Rodney’s eclecticism. One journalist wrote, “The choreography of the Tropicana is very varied…. It is famous for its specialty in the best-known stylized popular dances, from the creole \textit{comparsa} … to folkloric manifestations of countries like Spain, Brazil, the United States, or Haiti.” The Tropicana also mixed dance genres “from expressive popular choreography to the most demanding demonstration of so-called classical

\textsuperscript{168} Lowinger, 192.
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid., 125-126.
\textsuperscript{170} Fernandez, 119.
\textsuperscript{171} Lowinger, 125-126.
\textsuperscript{172} Ibid., 125.
Another journalist commented that these varied performances demonstrated Rodney’s skill: “it appears that he wants to show us that his possibilities as an intuitive artist – with an observant and refined creative spirit – does not have limits. He has given us magnificent Afrocuban, Brazilian, Spanish, Central European, Parisian, and North American fantasies, etc.”

These spectacles differed, but shared the premise that choreography, costumes, and music represented national identities and that accuracy was subordinate to entertainment value.

These priorities affected representations of especially Santería rituals in Rodney’s work. *Omelen-ko* (1952) resembled *Sun Sun Babae*, with ritual dances, drummers like Trinidad Torregrosa, and a “possession” scene with someone in the audience, who was in fact a cast member. While using music and themes from ritual practices, Rodney introduced changes such as more revealing costumes for women.

The spectacular rendition warped sacred songs and dances to entertain a mostly white, Cuban and foreign, audience unfamiliar with the beliefs portrayed. The possession scene, a profoundly spiritual moment, became a frenzied gimmick for dramatic effect. Perhaps responding to these issues, the drummers led by Torregrosa informed Rodney that the show had angered the Santería orishas, and insisted that the female performer carrying out the possession scene wear sacred beads to protect her from bad luck. Regardless of whether this actually transpired, Rodney continued to create *Afrocubanismo* productions. For instance, his 1955 *Karabali* came from the “ñáñiga liturgy, with all its characteristics, costumes, colors, music, dances, and ornaments.” A critic praised the show for providing “a grandiose setting for exciting dances, in a dazzling feast of rhythm and color.”

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175 Lowinger, 199.
176 Ibid., 200.
Noche offered “a vibrant and dynamic page from the Havana carnivals.”⁷⁸ These spectacles were expensive to produce. Tambó (1957), which “represented African liturgical passages,” cost $22,000 for costumes alone and featured eighty people on stage.⁷⁹ (Figure 8) The entertainment value and venue seemed to make AfroCubanismo spectacles acceptable to audiences. That is, whereas audiences had revolted against Ramiro Guerra’s Toque in 1952, sensual scenes taken from Santería in Rodney’s shows were accepted and lauded. In an announcement for Karabali and Embrujo en la Noche the author labeled the Tropicana as “the pride of Cubans, jewel of the Americas.”⁸⁰

![Figure 8. Tambó, 1957 at the Tropicana Nightclub. Photographer Unknown. Printed in Show, February 1957, 68.](image)

While drawing upon African diasporic forms for creative inspiration, the Tropicana and other elite nightclubs featured mostly light-skinned dancers. The pages of the 1950s

⁷⁹ “Apoteósico Triunfo de Rodney,” Show (Feb. 1957), 68.
entertainment magazines *Show* and *Gente* show that black men and women were singers and musicians, but white-looking women made up the majority of models and dancers. Although Rodney was mulatto according to musicologist Helio Orovio, he filled his stages with women that the audiences – in the majority, white Cubans and foreigners from the middle and upper classes – supposedly preferred.\(^{181}\) Anecdotes about the Tropicana suggest that although the club never barred non-white patrons, and in fact warmly treated wealthy black and mulatto Cubans, these patrons preferred clubs where they “felt comfortable,” as Orovio put it, that is a place with a largely non-white clientele.\(^ {182}\) Clubs differed not only in audience demographics, but also in entertainment. As Leaf observed in the late 1940s, “fashionable” cabarets like the Tropicana put on performances that lacked “the wild abandon … [and] the sensuality … danced in the joints, dives, and honkytonks.”\(^ {183}\) Leaf’s companion elaborated on this difference in an article entitled “Havana Honkeytonk”[sic]. The author described a bar with “sailors, stevedores, [and] dockworkers,” where patrons danced “without reservations … ranging in color from chocolate brown to milky white.”\(^ {184}\) Although Rodney likely offered shows different than what Leaf and his companion saw at the Tropicana in the late 1940s, they nevertheless pointed to a distinction between elite cabarets and more humble dives with a “rowdy atmosphere.”\(^ {185}\) The former featured staged elements of black culture on white bodies versus lower class patrons of different racial backgrounds dancing together.

Further promoting a white image, the Tropicana continued to utilize ballet in its propaganda and shows. For instance, a ballerina statue by sculptor Rita Longa, placed in front of

181 Lowinger, 239.
182 Ibid., 242.
183 Leaf, 20.
185 Leaf, 24.
the nightclub on December 31, 1949, became the Tropicana’s symbol. According to Longa decades later, Tropicana officials commissioned her to do a sculpture based on the 1948 British ballet film, *The Red Shoes*. Along with this symbol, actual ballet dancers performed at the Tropicana. Similar to Alberto Alonso, Rodney utilized ballet dancers, including Leonela González and Maricusa Cabrera, as well as José Parés and Joaquín Banegas, the latter two dancers had been with the Ballet de Cuba and needed work when the company suspended activities at the end of 1956. An announcement in *Carteles* on December 9, 1956, noted that a new Rodney production, *Prohibido en España*, featured Parés and Banegas. Judging from the accompanying picture, the choreography remained decidedly in the ballet idiom but with a Spanish flavor (Figure 9). An announcement in 1957 also listed Parés in the works *Tambó* and *Copacabana*.

![Figure 9. Leonela González, José Parés, Adriano Vitale, Joaquin Banegas, and Alicia Figueroa in Prohibido en España, 1956 at the Tropicana Nightclub. Photographer Unknown. Printed in Carteles, December 9, 1956, 34.](image)

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187 Lam, 32.
188 Arturo Ramírez, “De la Farándula,” *Carteles* (Dec. 9, 1956), 34.
Along with white connotations, ballet dancers also probably filled cabaret spectacles for economic and stylistic reasons. First, dancers sought out such work since the booming entertainment industry in all likelihood paid more than ballet contracts. Second, cabaret choreographers seemed to enjoy working with the highly trained ballet dancers, who reportedly had “natural” abilities for dancing popular dances and rhythms outside of the ballet canon. A description of Leonela González illustrates this: “All that she knows she learned in academies. But her plasticity is part of her nature. A plasticity full of beauty and rhythmic emotion.”

Experienced ballet dancers had professional discipline and knew how to pick up choreography. Indeed, ballet training became a technical baseline for many cabaret dancers. In terms of how ballet contributed to the aesthetic whole of the production, this depended on the viewer. One critic described ballet in cabaret spectacles as “a gift for the eyes of spectators.” Privileging ballet’s whiteness perhaps compelled the author to call ballet sequences a “gift” for audiences.

Through his years at the Tropicana, Rodney grew in fame and accomplishment. His obsession with novelty seemed to set him apart in the eyes of many. One observer praised, “his versatility as a choreographer experimenting, overturning on each attempt, the product of a fertile imagination, converting himself in each step into discoverer and laboratory worker.” Rodney not only made a name for himself in Cuba, but also abroad as tourists and luminaries visited the famous Tropicana nightclub during their visits to Havana. As one journalist put it, “All over the world Rodney’s talent is praised, and his ability to mount dazzling shows…. Each decade has a luminary; this is the decade of Rodney.” Another contemporary asserted, “With pride we can affirm that Rodney has given more name to Cuba than all of our diplomatic corps.

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190 “La Farándula Pasa,” Bohemia (Jul. 6, 1958), 138.
191 “Adelaida Gomez, deslumbra por su delicadeza y sensibilidad,” Show (Sept. 1957), 16-18.
192 “El día 20 cumplió cinco años de triunfos en ‘Tropicana’,” Show (Sept. 1956).
193 Ibid.
and in the world of global art, his name has as much impact as the illustrious statesman.”

Rodney not only earned qualitative praise and international name recognition, but also quantitative gains. Although he started out his career earning forty cents per performance, in 1954 he signed a contract stipulating five hundred dollars a week.

By 1959, Rodney had left his mark on Cuban performance. He had demonstrated the spectacular potentials of *Afrocubanismo* onstage. While these productions contained problematic aspects, particularly in terms of exoticizing religious practices, the shows nevertheless exposed a wide audience to Cuba’s African patrimony. Experimenting with these aesthetics and normalizing them on a commercial stage helped pave the way for dancers and choreographers to continue exploring African diasporic culture in Cuba after 1959. Along with this contribution, Rodney also asserted that Africanist aesthetics existed as one part of a larger visual world. He equally drew upon European, Asian, and Latin American cultures. This sweeping curiosity influenced the work of his successors.

Even as Rodney enjoyed distinctions, festive venues, like carnival and cabarets, became battlegrounds in the political conflict against Batista in the 1950s. On July 26, 1953, Fidel Castro and fellow rebels attacked the Moncada military barracks in Santiago, taking advantage of the general disarray caused by carnival. In subsequent years, anti-Batista inhabitants of the city supposedly used carnival rehearsals for revolutionary activities. As a result of increased political tensions and violence, the government suspended the 1958 carnival in Santiago. Anti-Batista guerrillas also attacked the booming tourist industry. During his regime, Batista worked assiduously to increase tourism, as revealed by his papers, which include handwritten lists of

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194 Ibid.
196 Joel La Marque, Unpublished, Untitled Manuscript on the History of Santiago Carnival, Museo del Carnaval, Santiago de Cuba, 73-80.
hotel room capacities and prices, the income generated by tourism in the 1950s, and memos and proposals for further infrastructural growth of the tourist trade.\textsuperscript{197} Opponents saw Batista as pandering to foreign interests and denigrating national honor, especially as notorious U.S. mobsters became partners in running Havana casinos.\textsuperscript{198} According to many contemporary and later observers, 1950s Cuba was an immoral, sexual playground, particularly for U.S. visitors.\textsuperscript{199} These seedy alliances and Batista’s increasingly violent repression made the nightclubs, casinos, and hotels targets for anti-Batista rebels. For instance, on New Year’s Eve 1956 a bomb went off at the Tropicana.\textsuperscript{200} As a result of these aggressions, cabarets, nightclubs, hotels, casinos, and Batista were on one side of a political battle and anti-Batista fighters on the other.

**Conclusion**

In July 1959, shortly after the 26\textsuperscript{th} of July Movement overthrew Batista, Ramiro Guerra published a statement in the new cultural magazine *Lunes de Revolución* about the state of Cuban dance. He described decades of carnival comparsas for touristic pleasure, “lamentable failures” to fuse classical ballet with the pelvic movements of Cuban popular dances, and “frivolous spectacles” at nightclubs and cabarets that had distorted national folklore. Guerra labeled these dance experiments a disappointment and declared the need to address past wrongs to finally achieve a “national dance.”\textsuperscript{201} Guerra’s interpretation of the pre-1959 period endures, reproduced in contemporary studies of Cuban dance on and off the island.\textsuperscript{202}

\textsuperscript{197} Folder 76, Box 136 and Folder 135, Box 137, Fulgencio Batista Zaldívar Collection, CHC.
\textsuperscript{198} Schwartz, 145.
\textsuperscript{200} Lowinger, 286–294.
This chapter challenges this historical narrative by foregrounding the choreography and discourses of *Afrocubanismo* performances in the 1930s through the 1950s. Characterizing 1959 as a fundamental break with the past, served Guerra’s own interests by demonstrating the urgent need to rectify previous wrongdoings in the dance world. However, dance projects of the Cuban Republic continued after the 1959 Cuban Revolution. Tensions regarding the representation of race and nation, authenticity, morality, professionalism, and finding “new” directions for Cuban dance remained and provoked further reflections and debates. Dance innovators employed worn and revised tactics. They drew upon pre-1959 efforts, demonstrating a series of continuous evolutions rather than a singular revolution that changed everything.
Chapter 3. Revolutionary Overtures:
Institutional Developments and Contesting Choreographic Virtues

In a letter written in 1959, the Spanish dancer Ana María made a political and artistic proposition to the Minister of Education.¹ Praising the end of the “Batista tyranny” and the beginning of a new “climate of liberty and democracy suitable for art and culture,” she proposed that her company Ballet Ana María, founded in Cuba nineteen years prior, perform throughout the country in order to raise funds for the Ciudades Escolares (school-cities), a rural education project promoted by Fidel Castro.² Though Spanish born, Ana María emphasized the Cubanness of her company, saying that it had formed in 1940 with “Cuban elements (dancers, scenic designers, costume designers, musical direction, technicians, etc.)” and performed not only Spanish dances but also Cuban and other Latin American dances. Ana María also specified the bureaucratic needs of her project. She suggested appointing a “permanent delegate” of the Ministry of Education or the 26th of July Movement to coordinate her company’s activities. The only funding she requested was to offset transportation costs, a point she emphasized by writing that the performances would be “NO COST WHATSOEVER for the Revolutionary Government” (with all capital letters in the original). Ana María contended that her company had a lot to offer the revolution: “I believe that in accordance with revolutionary pronouncements, this form of popular contribution by the Ballet Ana María, represents both an economic contribution … to the great work of the Ciudades Escolares and an invaluable contribution to the

1 The only indication of the date comes in the close, when she writes “Yours Sir Minister, respectfully, in the early days of the Year of Liberation, Ana María.” Letter Ana María to Señor Ministro de Educación, Folder “MinEd, INC, Ballet 59,” Cajuela 99, Fondo: Ministerio de Educación (1940 – 1961), Sección de Fondo: Dirección General de Cultura, MINCULT.
2 About the significance of Ciudades Escolares in developing a radical consciousness of the 1960s see Michelle Chase, “The Country and the City in the Cuban Revolution,” Colombia Internacional 73 (Jan.-Jun. 2011), 129.
development of the artistic Culture of the people.” Attuned to the opportunities of regime change, Ana María made a case for her art as politically and culturally beneficial.

Despite her aspirations, by 1960, Ana María and her Cuban husband had relocated to New York, definitively disrupting her dance activities on the island. Although Ana María never fulfilled the role posited in her letter, the epistolary proposal exemplifies the overtures made by dancers after 1959. First and foremost, the letter illustrates how Ana María saw herself as an important contributor to revolutionary politics. To make this point, she emphasized her art’s outstanding achievements and potential. Additionally, her letter indicates the vagueness of who was in charge. She addressed herself to the Minister of Education, yet suggested appointing a delegate from the Ministry of Education or the 26th of July Movement, the latter of which she realized held sway over Cuba’s fate. The letter also demonstrates the centrality of economics in dance activities. Ana María needed money and official support (but not in excess) to realize the tour. She underscored the economic value of her company as a fundraising mechanism for the government. In addition, her dances had the unquantifiable benefit of contributing to the “Culture of the people.” In sum, Ana María’s letter provides an entrée into the main focus of this chapter: revolutionary politics, dancer tactics, shifting bureaucracies, and the emerging state’s economic and moral support (or lack thereof) for dance activities in the years after 1959.

In the analysis below, I chart professional dance developments in Cuba from 1959 through the early 1970s. The first of three sections focuses on the initial years after 1959 as dance leaders reorganized old companies and founded new ones. It examines the personal connections and cultural capital that allowed dancers to successfully launch dance enterprises. Moreover, it analyzes how ballet, modern dance, and folkloric dancers linked their work to the

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revolution to secure state support and finite resources. The section concludes that the early years not only contained impressive growth in the dance establishment, but also frustration and disillusionment. It ends in the middle of the 1960s, as smaller experimental dance companies dissolved after several years of struggle. The forgotten history of “failed” dance companies disrupts triumphalist narratives about post-1959 Cuban dance development. The next two sections explain why some dance forms received more state support than others by looking at normative values regarding race, gender, and sexuality. The second section focuses on race, analyzing how modern and folkloric dancers described their art as revolutionary for its celebration of Cuba’s African patrimony in contrast to the historically white, European ballet. As the 1960s continued, however, danced explorations of racial identity increasingly challenged the official line that racial inequality had ended in Cuba, making modern and folkloric dance, in the eyes of the government, inconsequential at best and counterrevolutionary at worst. The third and final section on dance, gender, and sexuality juxtaposes cabarets, ballet, and modern dance to analyze how dancers maneuvered within an environment in which the state promoted bourgeois moralism, traditional gender roles, and ideals of corporeal discipline. Strict moral policing also targeted homosexuals in the late 1960s, a move that impacted dancers since many Cubans presumed dancing men to be effeminate. The section closes with dancers’ tactics in response to government repression in the early 1970s, revealing persistence and innovation despite setbacks.

As discussed below, dancers shared a discourse on revolutionary aspirations, yet their opinions about the best way to realize political goals differed drastically. This revealed not only that revolution was a capacious concept open to numerous interpretations, but also that dancers similarly reframed very dissimilar longstanding objectives to align with new political codes. The
chapter contends that dance reflected larger ideological struggles and contradictions of the 1959 Revolution as dancers promoted divergent, tensely coexisting political ideals in their work.

**Growing and Disappearing Dance Enterprises: A Shifting Institutional Landscape**

Soon after Fidel Castro and his 26th of July Movement overthrew Batista, dancers like Ana María took advantage of the regime change to promote their art. This meant mobilizing preexisting networks, as well as taking advantage of new connections and opportunities. This section examines dancers’ tactics and the outcomes of their efforts, which included reestablishing old companies and founding new companies. However, as the 1960s continued, broader centralizing trends in the Cuban political economy precipitated the end of new, smaller experimental companies. Moreover, institutional inertias and unchanging hierarchies led the government to support ballet over all other dance experiments. By the mid-1960s, Cuban ballet under the leadership of Alicia and Fernando Alonso dominated the field of Cuban concert dance, building on the groundwork laid during the 1940s and 1950s.

In the early months of 1959, Fernando and Alicia Alonso pledged their loyalty to the Revolution and the 26th of July Movement. On February 3, the Ballet de Cuba performed for the first time since 1956, and on February 15, mounted the same program in tribute to the new government. On September 17, 1959, a ballet performance program declared the company’s alliance “with the Revolution.” Along with these proclamations, Fernando and Alicia benefitted from their longtime friendship with Antonio Núñez Jiménez, a geographer and 26th of July Movement captain. As discussed in Chapter One, Fernando and Alicia befriended Núñez

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5 Singer, 85.
6 Folder Ballet-Danza 1959, TNC.
Jiménez in the 1940s and participated in excursions with his Spelunkers society, Sociedad Espeleológica de Cuba.\(^7\) In 1952 Núñez Jiménez married Lupe Velis, a ballerina in Fernando and Alicia’s company, and he began actively supporting the ballet. Company documents, correspondence, and performance programs listed him as “Administration” in the early 1950s, and he served as First Vice-Secretary of the Institución Ballet Alicia Alonso, a civic association founded in 1952 to support the company.\(^8\) Núñez Jiménez then helped to facilitate an alliance between the post-1959 Cuban leadership and ballet. In the spring of 1959, Núñez Jiménez visited Fernando at his home late one night, accompanied by Fidel Castro. After hours of conversation, Fidel famously asked Fernando how much money he needed for his ballet company.\(^9\) Fernando supposedly told him $100,000 and Castro replied, “Take $200,000 and make it good.”\(^10\) This often-repeated legend suggests Castro’s beneficence and ignores the fact that Alicia and Fernando had pushed for $200,000 since the early 1950s.\(^11\) Regardless, the gentlemen’s agreement became Law 812, passed on May 20, 1960.\(^12\) Explosive evidence of the partnership between ballet and the new government came in August 1960, when counterrevolutionaries planted a bomb at the Ballet de Cuba studios.\(^13\)

Meanwhile, choreographer Alberto Alonso and his collaborators continued pre-1959 efforts to combine ballet and popular dance. Responding to the political moment, he praised the revolution and aligned his art with contemporary political objectives. For instance, his company premiered an evening-length work entitled *Cimarrón* on April 21, 1960 in Havana for the annual

\(^8\) “Ballet Alicia Alonso: Sur América y Cuba,” FANJ; Exp. 3503, Leg. 175, Fondo: Registro de Asociaciones, ANC.
\(^9\) Singer, 85.
\(^11\) As discussed in Chapter One.
\(^12\) Cabrera, *El Ballet en Cuba*, 339-342.
conference of the Confederación de Organizaciones Turísticas de la America Latina (Confederation of Touristic Organizations of Latin America). The piece told the story of slaves who escaped their cruel master for the uninhabited wilderness of el monte. The program notes asserted, “the world premiere of Cimarrón has … a deep significance for Cuba … representative of the efforts made by the Revolutionary Government in its proposal to recuperate and dignify our music and our folklore, long subject to foreign influences.” In this statement, Alberto and his company contended that their art importantly furthered anti-imperialist, nationalist projects. In 1962, his company was renamed Conjunto Experimental de Danza de la Havana (Experimental Dance Ensemble of Havana), and the group continued working to further revolutionary objectives through dance.

Although the Alonsos equally demonstrated their support for the post-1959 government, Fernando and Alicia established their prominence over Alberto by not only furthering a particular vision of Cuba’s dance future, but also its past. Fernando and Alicia changed the name of their ballet company from Ballet de Cuba to Ballet Nacional de Cuba in 1962, effectively appropriating or erasing memories of Alberto’s Ballet Nacional discussed in the previous chapters. As early as 1959, Alberto’s Ballet Nacional and its accomplishments were receding from popular memory. Dancer and teacher Raúl Díaz Domínguez spoke out in a letter to the editor of Carteles, published on March 22, 1959. His letter reminded the “public and journalists” that the Ballet Nacional never had anything to do with Alicia and Fernando, but rather had been an ensemble of dancers founded by Alberto. “The Ballet Nacional,” he insisted, “always

functioned … without having any union whatsoever with Ballet Alicia Alonso or the Ballet de Cuba,” because of fundamental differences between the companies’ artistic objectives and administration. Although no explanation has been found for why Alicia and Fernando chose to change the name of their company to Ballet Nacional de Cuba in 1962, it had the effect – intentional or unintentional – of integrating ballet enterprises into a singular establishment with Alicia and Fernando as the main protagonists.

As the Alonsos advanced their ballet projects, the Teatro Nacional de Cuba (National Theatre of Cuba, TNC) fostered the growth of modern and folkloric dance. In the early months of 1959, several members of Sociedad Cultural Nuestro Tiempo, including Isabel Monal, Argeliers León, and Ramiro Guerra, collaborated on a national art festival convened by the 26th of July Movement in May 1959. According to press about the festival in the 26th of July newspaper, Revolución, “The 26th of July [Movement] that was able to forge a revolutionary consciousness wants to bring to the public a program that rescues its most significant values in the field of art.” About a month after the festival, on June 12, 1959, the government passed Law 379, officializing the TNC (a project that began under Carlos Prío Socarrás and Fulgencio Batista) and placed it under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. The law stated that the nationalized TNC was in charge of developing “theatre, music, ballet, opera, and artistic activities in general.” The government appointed Monal to direct the TNC. Although not an

17 Exp. 22684, Leg. 1080, Fondo: Registro de Asociaciones, ANC; Exp. 22685, Leg. 1080, Fondo: Registro de Asociaciones, ANC; Exp. 22686, Leg. 1080, Fondo: Registro de Asociaciones, ANC; Exp. 22687, Leg. 1080, Fondo: Registro de Asociaciones, ANC; Exp. 22690, Leg. 1080, Fondo: Registro de Asociaciones, ANC.
20 Ibid., 357.
artist, she had connections in the cultural arena and later suspected that intellectual and 26th of July fighter, Carlos Franqui, had recommended her for the position.\textsuperscript{21} According to Guerra in an interview decades later, Monal decided the TNC would follow the schema of the May 1959 festival. She proposed forming separate departments for each art form and inviting her recent collaborators to take charge of a section.\textsuperscript{22} The TNC had five departments: Music, Dramatic Arts, Modern Dance, Folklore, and Theatrical Extension.\textsuperscript{23} Guerra became the Director of the Department of Modern Dance and León, the Department of Folklore.

Guerra took steps to establish a new modern dance company, the Departamento de Danza Moderna del TNC, in the fall of 1959. On September 11, 1959, an advertisement appeared in the newspaper calling for people of all different backgrounds and physical types to audition for scholarships to take dance theory and technique classes at the TNC with the possibility of becoming a permanent member of the new company after a year.\textsuperscript{24} From this audition, Guerra selected an eclectic group of dancers of different racial backgrounds and dance experiences. They ranged from Eduardo Rivero, who had taken ballet classes and performed in cabarets before 1959, to “people from the street” without formal training.\textsuperscript{25} Along with a mixed group of Cubans, U.S. born dancer, Lorna Burdsall also joined the new modern dance company.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} Sánchez León, 48.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 231.
\item \textsuperscript{23} The fifth department, originally “Departamento de Publicaciones e Intercambio Cultural,” became “Departamento de Extensión Teatral” in July 1960. Irene Reloba directed the department starting in September 1960, and assumed responsibility for non-professional theater, dance and music (the amateurs’ movement or movimiento de aficionados) as well as the promotion of public theater. Sánchez León, 49. It may be useful to note that previous scholars (citing each other) incorrectly identified the fifth department as “chorus,” such as Hagedorn, 137-138, and Moore, \textit{Music and Revolution}, 205.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Hoy (Sept. 11, 1959), 6, in Folder “Prensa 1959,” Archives of Danza Contemporánea de Cuba, Teatro Nacional de Cuba, Havana, Cuba (DCC).
\item \textsuperscript{25} Eduardo Rivero in Roberto Pérez León, \textit{Por los orígenes de la danza moderna en Cuba} (Habana, 1985), 21-22.
\end{itemize}
Burdsall had worked as a professional dancer in New York before meeting and marrying Manuel (“Manolo”) Piñeiro, a Cuban student who was taking courses at Columbia University. Burdsall moved to Cuba to be with her husband in 1955. Soon after, Piñeiro joined the 26th of July Movement in the Sierra Maestra (earning the moniker “Barba Roja” or Red Beard), and after 1959, became Vice Minister of the Interior. Immediately after the 1959 regime change, Lorna lived in Santiago de Cuba with her husband, but in June they relocated to Havana. According to her memoir she went to the modern dance audition and was accepted into the company in the fall of 1959. A 1965 memorandum in the Cuban Ministry of Culture Archives corroborates this recollection, stating that Burdsall was formally contracted to work with the Departamento de Danza Moderna del TNC on October 19, 1959.

Burdsall, like Alicia and Fernando, had high-level political connections through her husband. The letters she wrote to her family in the early months of 1959 make clear her privileged position in the post-1959 society. In a letter dated February 24, 1959, Lorna wrote about her small time celebrity status, “Being a rebel wife, I am exempt from so many things. Sometimes I have to fight to pay – money is no payment for what the rebels did for Cuba & everybody knows that.” In a letter from March 8, 1959, Burdsall wrote, “Now that we’re high society we have to have a house at least.” On March 17, 1959, she told her parents, “Here I am reclining on the bed of Batista’s ex-bedroom across the hall from Raul [Castro] and Vilma

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26 Lorna Burdsall, More than Just a Footnote: Dancing from Connecticut to Revolutionary Cuba (Havana: Lorna Burdsall, 2001), 48, 54.
27 Ibid., 125.
28 Ibid., 129.
29 Memorandum (May 18, 1965), Folder “CDN Asistencia Técnica, ’60,” Cajuela 224, Fondo: Consejo Nacional de Cultura, MINCULT.
30 Letter Lorna Burdsall to “Mother, Dad, Ruth, Ned, etc.,” Feb. 24, 1959, Folder 1, Box 1, Burdsall Family Papers, CHC.
31 Letter Lorna Burdsall to Mother and Daddy, Mar. 8, 1959, Folder 1, Box 1, Burdsall Family Papers, CHC.
[Espín]…. I have never seen such luxury.” On March 27, 1959, Lorna recounted a trip to the beach with her son, husband, one of her two maids, and “two rebels,” all piled into a jeep (leaving their air conditioned Cadillac at home). Once the group arrived at the beach, they “were surrounded by admirers taking pictures, etc. The children especially love M[anuel] & the rest of the ‘bearded ones’ (‘barbudos’ in Spanish). After being so afraid of the former regime, they love the rebels like Santa Claus.” Her letters from the 1960s and 1970s reveal a comfortable situation complete with nice homes (including, for a brief interlude, one part of the “palatial mansion of Fulgencio Batista Zaldívar”), maids, cars, and diplomatic trips all over the world.

Burdsall had unique access to power circles as the wife of an official and as an U.S. citizen. In February 1959, she described a recent conversation with the wife of an U.S. consul about, “mutual problems – one being that we don’t enjoy Cuban ‘society’ which we are supposed to belong to – instead of squeezing into a girdle, stockings ‘winter’ dress & playing canasta at the ritziest club (which we are ‘supposed’ to do) we prefer to wear casual clothes & take the children swimming.” She went on to recognize her advantageous position as a friend of local U.S. elites and Cuban political leaders: “I am in an extremely interesting position – the [wife] of the chief of Oriente and an American. I therefore am in the middle and can pull the strings to my liking on both sides.” Burdsall never elaborated on how she manipulated situations to her benefit. Of course, being an U.S. citizen in Cuba became less helpful as relations between the island and its northern neighbor soured in the following year. However, her status as the wife of Piñeiro seemed to negate any disadvantage of her native citizenship. Moreover, her connections to the U.S. continued to pay dividends even after the U.S. and Cuba broke diplomatic relations. Two

32 Qtd. Burdsall, More than Just a Footnote, 121.
33 Letter Lorna Burdsall to Ned & Family, Mar. 27, 1959, Folder 1, Box 1, Burdsall Family Papers, CHC.
34 Quote from Burdsall, More than Just a Footnote, 125-126; more on material privileges, pages 116-174.
35 Emphasis in the original – Letter Lorna Burdsall to “Mother, Dad, Ruth, Ned, etc.,” Feb. 24, 1959, Folder 1, Box No. 1, Burdsall Family Papers, CHC.

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examples illustrate how she solved problems with the help of her husband and her U.S. family. In 1960, through her husband, Burdsall secured scenic apparatus and air conditioning for the still unfinished TNC. Over the following years, she had her family in the U.S. send fabric and music for her modern dance projects when such items became scarce on the island.

As Burdsall used her connections to help modern dance over the years, folkloric performance benefitted from the leadership of musicologist Argeliers León. León had been a student of Fernando Ortiz and carried out folkloric research in the 1940s and 1950s. Under the auspices of the Department of Folklore, León directed a seminar from October 1960 to May 1961 to train folkloric researchers, published a periodical of folkloric studies entitled Actas del Folklore, and organized folkloric performances. The seminar comprised of eight scholarship students who received a monthly stipend of one hundred pesos and thirty-five students who had to pay ten pesos for the course. The seminar offered classes in “ethnographic and folkloric studies; historic studies and applied geography; sociological, political, economic, and revolutionary studies; archival cataloging … as well as lectures in foreign languages” taught by Léon, musicologist María Teresa Linares (León’s wife), and historian Manuel Moreno Fraginals among others. One of the eight scholarship students, Rogelio Martínez Furé, would play an important role in developing folkloric performance as detailed below.

Just considering the early networks and institutions of ballet, modern, and folkloric dance in the months following 1959 does not offer a clear picture of hierarchy. More helpful indicators like budgets and salaries exist but are incomplete. However, limited quantitative information dated 1959 and 1960 reveal that ballet had numerical privilege from the beginning. As noted,

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36 Sánchez León, 30-31.
37 Folder 2, Box 1, Burdsall Family Papers, CHC.
38 Sánchez León, 81.
39 Ibid., 141.
40 Ibid., 140.
Castro offered the ballet establishment a budget of $200,000 annually in 1959. In 1960, modern dance had an annual budget of $48,000, which was relatively modest compared to ballet’s budget or even the TNC Department of Music budget of $167,000.\footnote{Ibid., 232.} Though comparable numbers for the Department of Folklore have not been found, the monthly salaries of artists involved in the departments of Modern Dance and Folklore are known and suggest that the former had a greater budget than the latter. Directors of both departments, Guerra and León received the same salary of $311.55, suggesting efforts at pay equality within the TNC. However, the twenty-five dancers in the Department of Modern Dance received salaries ranging from $100 to $225 per month while the twenty-nine folkloric artists had salaries of $14 to $34 per month. The students in the eight-month Department of Folklore seminar, however, received a stipend of $100 a month.\footnote{Ibid., 140-141.} While modern dancers could support themselves as professional artists, the performers in the Department of Folklore had to rely on income from other jobs.\footnote{Ibid., 131-32} These numbers begin to illustrate the pecking order that existed starting in 1959, as well as the challenges that folkloric performers faced in building professional prestige.

Political events in 1961 affected cultural institutions. After the U.S. backed Bay of Pigs attack in April, the political environment went from open and celebratory to defensive. In this context, the government carried out its first act of censorship. The Comisión de Estudio y Clasificación de Películas del Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (Commission of the Study and Classification of Films of the Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry) confiscated the fifteen-minute film *P.M.* that had aired on television.\footnote{William Luis, *Lunes de Revolución: Literatura y cultura en los primeros años de la Revolución Cubana* (Madrid: Editorial Verbum, 2003), 50-51.} The film had no critique of the government and in fact lacked a single coherent word, featuring
instead the late night choreographies of lower class, mostly black and mulatto Cubans carousing during the winter holiday of 1960 to 1961. The commission’s official communications asserted that *P.M.* offered “a biased image of Havana nightlife that, far from giving the spectator a correct impression of the Cuban pueblo in this revolutionary stage, impoverishes, disfigures, and distorts.” Following the controversy, artists, intellectuals, and government officials met in June 1961 to discuss the parameters of cultural production. During the final meeting, Fidel Castro delivered his famous “Palabras a los intelectuales” speech, asserting that only art that furthered the revolution had a right to exist. The film ostensibly failed in this respect.

Later that year, bureaucratic reorganization shifted the TNC and all other dance enterprises from a cultural section of the Ministry of Education to the newly established Consejo Nacional de Cultura (National Council of Culture, CNC). The CNC aimed to “put an end to the dispersion and anarchy and to guarantee that all cultural activities could be realized under the direction of one center,” as a representative stated in a September 1961 televised conference. With this change, only modern dance remained at the TNC, and the Departamento de Danza Moderna de TNC was renamed the Conjunto Nacional de Danza Moderna (National Ensemble of Modern Dance, CNDM). Folkloric research relocated to the newly established Instituto Nacional de Etnología y Folklore (National Institute of Ethnology and Folklore) at the end of 1961. The institute focused on the investigation rather than the performance of folkloric forms.

Folkloric performance continued, however, thanks to the TNC Department of Folklore seminar student Rogelio Martínez Furé and the Mexican choreographer Rodolfo Reyes. Martínez Furé and Reyes met as a result of their mutual collaboration with Alberto Alonso’s company.

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45 *P.M.*, dir. Sabá Cabrera Infante and Orlando Jiménez Leal (Havana, 1961).
46 Luis, 224.
Martínez Furé taught classes on Cuban folklore while Reyes gave modern dance technique classes to the company’s dancers. After several months of conversations, Martínez Furé and Reyes decided to form a new folkloric dance company. They received encouragement from Isabel Monal and Gilda Hernández, an actress, director, and dramaturge. Without monetary support from the government, Martínez Furé and Reyes borrowed rehearsal space from fellow artists. Directors of the theatre troupe Teatro Estudio let them use their rehearsal space in Centro Havana for an audition in April 1962. Ramiro Guerra lent his company’s studios at the TNC for folkloric rehearsals from eight at night until midnight. This crucial aid from fellow performers predated state support. The first rehearsal of the new Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba (National Folkloric Ensemble of Cuba, CFN) took place on May 7, 1962. According to Martínez Furé, for six months the company operated without funding. Then, one night at the end of 1962 or beginning of 1963, Raúl Castro unexpectedly walked into the studio and watched a rehearsal with great enjoyment. Several weeks later, the company leaders received a government memorandum that they now had a studio in the pleasant Vedado neighborhood of Havana. Monetary support from the government increased slowly, but surely, over the following years.

As dance institutions crystallized, frustrations accompanied moments of exciting creation. Dancers, for example, noticed and complained about the government’s privileging of ballet. A letter dated November 27, 1962, written by the Sección de Danza y Ballet (Section of Dance and Ballet) of the Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba (Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba, UNEAC) addressed to Edith García Buchaca (then the Secretary of the CNC) articulated the tensions within the dance field. The authors described, in vague terms, the cause of discord:

49 Sánchez León, 100.
50 Interview with Rogelio Martínez Furé, Sept. 23, 2014, Havana, Cuba.
“At this time we are faced with a split created by the privileges enjoyed by one figure and director of one group, to the detriment of the majority.” The letter writers asserted that dance leaders needed to collectively discuss dance developments based on “the equality of all groups, preventing the hegemony of one over another, and ensuring equal access for all to material means” and maintaining “the aesthetic freedom of each group, without fostering criticism” (underline emphasis in the original). The letter went on to say that although the CNC claimed to have interest in encouraging “contemporary” dance, “its vacillating policy did not preserve it morally or materially,” and instead the CNC offered “all support to classical ballet.” This led to a “sense of competition among the other groups.” Given these factors, the letter proposed leveling resource allotment and publicity. Though the letter never named Alicia Alonso, it referred to the unfair promotion of certain “personalities” and criticized the privileging of “classical ballet.” The letter was signed simply as the “Sección de Danza y Ballet” without revealing exactly who was involved. This letter demonstrates that as early as 1962, dancers perceived the government’s preferential treatment of Alicia and Fernando’s ballet company. To date, no evidence indicates the CNC’s response. However, the continued favoring of ballet suggests that these requests went largely unaddressed.

Growing pains not only resulted in tensions among groups, but also the eventual demise of companies. The modern dance company Danza Contemporánea, founded and directed by Guido González del Valle, dissolved in 1965, and Alberto Alonso’s Conjunto Experimental de Danza ceased to exist in its original form in 1966. Examining these largely forgotten dance enterprises challenges existing historiography, which, based on Cuban dance companies that

52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
persist today, presumes a straightforward, linear development from a post-1959 beginning to the present. The large national companies solidified in the mid to late 1960s as multiple artistic objectives, tinged by moments of success and failure, vied and intermingled. Furthermore, the history of Danza Contemporánea and Conjunto Experimental foregrounds the role artists played in actively dialoguing with cultural bureaucrats to advocate for their art. Guido González and Alberto Alonso produced a cachet of letters, budgets, and proposals as they tried to save their companies. Taken together, these documents illuminate the hopes and struggles of the companies’ dancers in the early 1960s.

Each company had styles and goals that defied easy genre definition. Alberto Alonso’s Conjunto Experimental debuted on November 14, 1962, and according to press releases, performed “works inspired by national folklore” to create “a national dance synthesis with universal resonance,” based on new socialist values like a renewed appreciation of popular culture. A 1964 performance program essay described the company’s aesthetic as combining ballet, modern dance, and popular dance, and choreographing works based on Cuban daily life and folkloric traditions. The company repertory included musical theater (Alberto’s El Solar); abstract pieces (Conflicto by Luis Trápaga); works inspired by Cuban poetry (Armando Suez’s Elegía a Jesús Menéndez based on poems by Nicolás Guillén); and others about Cuban “folklore” (Misterios I-II-III by Tomás Morales about Yoruba deities and Abakuá). Danza Contemporánea was created on March 26, 1963, and worked with “different theatre groups of the

State to solve dance issues.”\textsuperscript{57} The company performed in musicals with the Conjunto Dramático Nacional, theatrical pieces with the theatre groups Teatro Estudio, Grupo Guernica, and Grupo Milanés, and in modern dance works.\textsuperscript{58} Company members took daily classes in ballet, modern dance, music, and “philosophy.” For a short period, they also received instruction in gymnastics, acting, improvisation, literature, and art history.\textsuperscript{59} Teachers and choreographers of the CNDM gave classes in modern dance technique and choreography to Danza Contemporánea.\textsuperscript{60} Rodolfo Reyes of the CFN also reportedly taught Danza Contemporánea dancers on occasion.\textsuperscript{61}

The eclectic nature and cross genre collaborations of Conjunto Experimental and Danza Contemporánea perhaps made the companies problematic, confusing, or dispensable to cultural bureaucrats. A decision in late 1963 reflected possible bureaucratic disinterest or misunderstanding. That year, the CNC divided dance affairs into Ballet and Dance, with Fernando Alonso in charge of the former and Mexican modern dancer Waldeen in charge of the latter. Guido González protested this move in a letter to the Directorate of Ballet and Dance of the CNC. He recounted how during a December 1963 meeting, he and Alberto Alonso had showed their surprise by the decision since it divided the dance establishment into ballet (with only the Ballet Nacional de Cuba) and everything else (including modern and folkloric dance

companies like the CNDM and CFN as well as companies with a less defined genre like Danza Contemporánea and Conjunto Experimental. González called Fernando Alonso and Waldeen’s positions “superfluous,” suggesting instead that the CNC dialogue directly with each company director since she or he could best assess a company’s needs.

Accompanying bureaucratic misunderstanding or devaluation, budget limitations and programming problems plagued Danza Contemporánea. In a letter to the CNC from February 7, 1964, González described how members of his group had pooled their own money, $6,935 since the company’s founding, to pay for a tape recorder, costume and scenery materials, promotional photos, water, and teacher salaries. Along with financial troubles, the Danza Contemporánea also had frustrating programming issues. In an emotional letter from November 1964, González recounted difficulties getting into the theatre to rehearse (because no one had a key). When the company went instead to use the Ballet Nacional de Cuba studios after hours, they found locked doors (because the studios closed at 4 P.M.). Moreover, the studios of the CNDM were unavailable because non-professional groups rehearsed in the building in the evening. He concluded, “Please pardon the perhaps desperate tone of these lines, but believe me that they are sincere and that I feel many times trapped in a vicious cycle of absurdities and contradictions.”

Moreover, the company was allowed only a short season once they finally had the theatre. In

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December 1964, González protested the “completely ridiculous” run of only six shows after rehearsing almost a year, calling it “anti-economic, anti-cultural, and completely mechanical and illogical.”

Conjunto Experimental appeared not to have the same money issues but did have programming problems. In a 1965 budget proposal, the company requested $285,409. The only document encountered that provides comparative information on different companies’ funding is from 1965 about funds allocated for storage and maintenance. Therein, the BNC received $13,000, Conjunto Experimental $7,700, Danza Moderna $5,400, Conjunto Folklórico $4,500, and Danza Contemporánea, nothing. In this financial hierarchy, Fernando and Alicia’s company was first, followed by Alberto’s, the modern dancers, folkoric dancers, and González’s dancers. Alberto’s status as the brother of Fernando Alonso and the scale of his work (large productions in collaboration with notable visual artists, musicians, and writers), likely helped him secure high levels of funding. However, the Conjunto Experimental complained about short durations in the theater, noting that they performed only two months out of the year. They hoped to increase their stage time to five months.

For numerous reasons, Danza Contemporánea and Conjunto Experimental ceased to exist in 1965 and 1966, respectively, with the members of each group joining other, larger companies. In a letter from November 16, 1964, González wrote to a cultural bureaucrat about a recent

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meeting with Lorna Burdsall about the possibility of Danza Contemporánea fusing with the CNDM. Citing the Danza Contemporánea’s constant financial difficulties, González wrote that despite “completely different discipline and methods of working in the two companies,” joining forces would enrich both participants by fusing the “best elements” of both. He concluded that, “what Danza Contemporánea has asked, always is the opportunity to work, to present our work to the public.” ⁷⁰ Although the details of this transition remain unclear, a document from 1965 about Danza Contemporánea stated, “This group was created on March 26, 1963 and already has disappeared.” ⁷¹ Conjunto Experimental also fused with another company, the musical theater group Teatro Musical, in January 1965, as revealed by a memorandum. ⁷² A January 1967 memo affirmed the Conjunto Experimental’s pivot towards musical theater. ⁷³

Although no 1960s documents elaborate on the Conjunto Experimental’s shift, Alberto Alonso explained publically after leaving Cuba in the early 1990s. In a 1994 interview with Cuban dance historian Célida Parera Villalón in New York, Alberto confided that upon returning to Cuba in 1966 after Conjunto Experimental’s performance tour to European and socialist countries, he discovered that the government had appointed a new director of his own company. ⁷⁴ In a speech to audiences in Gainesville, Florida in the 2000s, Alberto said that the government had replaced him because he had not been a Communist Party member. He went on to say, “The new director, a party member, of course, knew nothing about art, much less about

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⁷¹ “Conjunto de Danza Contemporánea” (1965), Folder “Conjunto de Danza Contemporánea,” Cajuela 225, Fondo: Consejo Nacional de Cultura, MINCULT.
⁷⁴ “Alberto Alonso,” Video-recording (Sept. 20, 1994), *MGZIA 4-2078, JRDD-NYPL.
dancing. He was a tailor.”

In October 1965, the Cuban government founded the Comité Central del Partido Comunista de Cuba (Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba, PCC). This ideological development coincided with the change in leadership at the Conjunto Experimental. Soon after, Alberto resigned and left the last company that he would found and direct in Cuba. His dancers scattered. They found work on television (Cristy Domínguez), in cabarets (Tomás Morales and Armando Suez), the CNDM (Víctor Cuéllar), and the BNC (Sonia Calero). From 1966 on, Alberto also worked with larger companies as a choreographer and artistic adviser.

The trajectories of the Danza Contemporánea and Conjunto Experimental artists, from participants in small, experimental companies to functionaries of larger institutions, resonated with the broader centralizing trends taking place in the Cuban economy, society, politics, and culture in the late 1960s. They also reflect how in 1965 and 1966 official perspectives on artists hardened. Ernesto Che Guevara articulated official suspicion in his 1965 essay, “Socialism and Man in Cuba.” In the essay he asserted, “the fault of many of our artists and intellectuals lies in their original sin: they are not true revolutionaries.” This inherent sinfulness meant that artists had to prove their political allegiance and utility to the government by participating in mass organizations, political parties, as well as performing works with revolutionary content. The definition of “revolutionary” however remained vague and open for interpretation. The next section examines how dancers defined revolutionary ideals choreographically in dialogue with state discourses on race and race relations.

75 Alberto Alonso, untitled, undated speech, Personal Archive of Sonia Calero, Miami, Florida (PASC).
76 For more on this see Pérez, Cuba: between reform and revolution.
An Africanized Spain in the Caribbean: Dance, Race, and Folklore

Early in 1959, Fidel Castro declared racism to be immoral and incompatible with the revolution, making anti-racism an important part of aspired social change. Correspondingly, modern and folkloric dancers described anti-racist objectives as motivating their interpretations of Cuban “folklore.” Folklore, for mid-twentieth century Cubans, included cultural practices of European and African descent that had certain class connotations as the art of the non-elite majority. Since class was racialized in Cuba, folklore-inspired productions portrayed the culture of poor, black citizens. After 1959, the historically disenfranchised, such as the descendants of slaves who had opposed colonialism and slavery for centuries, became symbols of the revolutionary vision. In 1960, for instance, the government credited Abakuá members for revolutionary actions in nineteenth-century slave revolts and independence wars.78 This reading of the past gave African roots new significance in Cuban history and contemporary politics. As black intellectual Walterio Carbonell provocatively asserted in his 1961 book: “Africa has facilitated the triumph of the social transformation of the country. This does not mean that Spain has disappeared. Spain has been Africanized.”79 However, as the 1960s continued the government increasingly sought to highlight national unity rather than racial difference. This section examines how modern and folkloric dancers conceptualized the Africanized Spain floating in the Caribbean, interpreted it choreographically, and viewed their work as a refreshing contrast to the mostly white, European-originated ballet. It also examines how modern and folkloric dancers diverged from state policies regarding race and racism as the 1960s continued and how this impacted their work.

One of the earliest post-1959 statements about dance, folklore, race, and nation was an article by Ramiro Guerra published in _Lunes de Revolución_ in July 1959. Guerra critiqued previous approaches to interpreting folklore in dance performance. He also laid out a plan for better practices in the field. Guerra asserted that the country lacked adequate institutions for the “conservation and development” of folklore. Instead, folklore previously had been distorted in commercial venues, tourist attractions, and misguided official troupes:

…[folklore’s] best performers have been lost in the daily grind of the “night-club,” where they unconsciously adapt to the sense of frivolous spectacle of those places. Also, we have seen how the carnival comparsas have been converted into “shows” for tourists and we have lamented the absence of serious folkloric festivals organized for the enjoyment of the people and conservation of traditions. And based on similar ignorance, pseudo groups of national folklore have been created, in which … false folkloric interpretations with big doses of bad taste have gone to the public, and worse, abroad as official representatives of our country, during the years of the fallen regime.80

Guerra criticized cabarets, carnival, and “pseudo-groups of national folklore” like the one discussed in the previous chapter that traveled to Mexico and the U.S. in the 1950s. These performances often strayed considerably from original materials, for instance by having women portray Abakuá men. In order to redress these past wrongs, Guerra contended that a true, national dance needed “the direct intervention of individuals of the black and mestizo race.” Black contributions to Cuban art had been inhibited, Guerra continued, because of persisting prejudices and the fact that “black and mestizo artists, owners of the powerful expression of their race, escape the grasp of serious art for economic reasons … [as] they end up involved in the vulgarity of commercial art.”81 He said black and mestizo dancers needed the opportunity to “develop” their faculties and “their spontaneous knowledge of black folklore with a conscious [consciente] technique of a universal dance.” Guerra rooted folkloric knowledge in the bodies of black and

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81 Ibid., 11.
mestizo artists—spontaneous and inherent, as opposed to mindful, “universal” modern dance technique. Subtly paternalistic, Guerra established a divide between improvised folkloric expressions on one hand and crafted folklore-inspired productions on the other. New dance enterprises that incorporated black and mestizo artists needed state resources, Guerra argued. This seemed little to ask since “classical ballet … had been protected through subventions” for years. Ballet, in Guerra’s estimation, was foreign and incapable of becoming a truly Cuban expression. Capitalizing on the political moment, Guerra called for expanding folkloric and modern dance as part of the “current profound changes of our nation and its strengthening of national principles.”

To Guerra, folklore and modern dance were instrumental to nationalist revolution.

Guerra soon put these thoughts into practice. He accepted an even number of what he deemed as black, mulatto, and white, male and female dancers, in a September 1959 audition and crafted choreography that explored race, folklore, and nationalism in Cuba. In the inaugural performance on February 19, 1960, the company presented Guerra’s Mulato about racial discrimination in the colonial era and Mambi about the heroic sacrifices of Cuban fighters in the wars of independence against Spain. In April 1960, the company premiered Guerra’s version of El Milagro de Anaquillé and in February 1961, La Rebambaramba, the ballets of Alejo Carpentier and Amadeo Roldán discussed in Chapter Two. In the months leading up to this premiere, Guerra published an article on the original libretti and noted the theatrical richness and “nationalistic message” of the ballets but also some inaccuracies that resulted in picturesque rather than realistic representations of “Afro-Cuban ritual and religious elements.”

The 1961 performance program of La Rebambaramba featured an essay by Alejo Carpentier, in which he

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82 Ibid., 10-11.
83 Performance Program, Departamento de Danza Moderna del Teatro Nacional de Cuba, SA-BNJM.
noted how Guerra had made the work more “authentic” thanks to the “resources made available to the Cuban choreographer by … the Revolution.” In this early moment, Guerra created works that featured nationalistic and anti-racist content. Observers linked his oeuvre to the political and social changes brought about by the regime change.

Also drawing upon folklore to create a “national dance” was Guerra’s Suite Yoruba, which premiered in June 1960. Suite Yoruba depicted the drama of Santería myths, divinities, dances, and music. It had a quartet of dances to the orishas Ochun, Chango, Yemayá, and Ogun, performed to sacred vocal and drum music. The piece explored religious syncretism, as conveyed with great theatricality in the opening scene, when a dancer in an oval cutout of the Virgin Mary stepped through as Yemayá to dance with her attendants. Guerra saw Santería syncretism as reflective of Cuba’s national identity, which he defined in a 1960 interview, as one of racial integration.

The film Historia de un ballet (History of a Ballet, 1962) directed by José Massip further explored these themes by documenting Guerra and his collaborators in their creative process. The modern dancers worked with the Instituto Cubano de Arte e Industria Cinematográficos (Cuban Institute of Cinematographic Art and Industry, ICAIC), according to Lorna Burdsall in a letter to her mother. As Burdsall recounted in her memoir, Massip had insisted on the misnomer title as the history of a “ballet,” which had annoyed Guerra because the film had “absolutely nothing to do with ballet!” Rather, Historia de un ballet focused on the modern dance company and its effort to cross cultural and racial boundaries. The opening scene shows the modern dancers rehearsing at the TNC. The narrator explains that Cuban folklore inspires the

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85 Performance Program, Danza Moderna (Feb. 17, 1961), Folder Ballet-Danza 1961, TNC.
87 Letter Lorna Burdsall to E.S. Burdsall, Jan. 7, 1963, Folder 2, Box 1, Burdsall Family Papers, CHC.
88 Burdsall, More than Just a Footnote, 138.
artists as exemplified in their newest work *Suite Yoruba*. “What is Yoruba?” the narrator asks. To answer this question, the camera cuts to a tobacco factory with the Cuban poet laureate Nicolas Guillén reading his poem *Son número 6* to the workers. It begins with the powerful assertion: “Yoruba soy” (I am Yoruba). Eventually, the film shows a ferry going to the humble neighborhood of Regla across the bay from Havana, where faithful carry out ceremonies of music and dance in honor of Santería saints. The internationally acclaimed folkloric dancer Nieves Fresneda performs in the middle of a crowded room. In a corner, Guerra and costume designer Eduardo Arrocha, the latter with a sketchpad in hand, consult each other as they observe and record elements of the scene before them. The film eventually moves from the ethnographic moment to modern dance rehearsal and performance. On stage, the modern dancers present stylized versions of the dances observed in Regla. Many of the Regla performers appear seated in the audience, watching the professional company interpret their music and dance practices.89

Critics praised Guerra’s work for its racial integration, equalizing aspirations, and nationalistic resonance. Reviews described young dancers “of all colors,” undermining racial prejudice as they “mingled in true integration, white and black.”90 One journalist said that dancers performed solo and ensemble roles, which eliminated professional rivalries, and the racially integrated casts expressed the group’s democratizing intent. Through these initiatives, modern dance waged “the most beautiful battle for national art … nurturing the revolutionary ideal.”91 Also admirable, Guerra and his dancers “elevated” folkloric dance materials into art by

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combining them with the “universal” technique of modern dance. Furthermore, journalists cited Guerra’s Suite Yoruba as defying social barriers by entertaining and impressing audiences while also making Santería cultural practices more “accessible intellectually and emotionally for the spectator with little knowledge of such manifestations.” Because of the integrating and “elevating” capacity of modern dance, the form truly embodied revolutionary visions in the eyes of supporters.

In doing so, modern dance reportedly diverged in important ways from pre-1959 cabaret and ballet. Observers described Guerra as “Rodney converted into art,” a reference to the choreographer Roderico “Rodney” Neyra of the Tropicana Nightclub. In this interpretation, Guerra created impressive Afro-Cuban spectacles, not unlike Rodney, yet Guerra’s work was art rather than mere commercial entertainment. Additionally, for many proponents, modern dance had more to offer revolutionary Cuba than ballet with its strict technique, codified forms, courtly origins, and thematic limitations. In short, ballet seemed inherently distant from armed insurgency and sociopolitical reform. Whereas ballet developed from bygone imperial courts, modern dance belonged to the militant present, or as Guido González del Valle put it in a 1964 editorial: “Why modern dance? For Revolution.”

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92 David Camps, “Ramiro Guerra y la Danza Nacional,” Bohemia (Mar. 12 1965); Ramiro Guerra in Roberto Pérez León, Por los orígenes de la danza moderna en Cuba (Havana, 1985), 12.
As Guerra used folklore to inspire modern dance, the Department of Folklore of the TNC worked from 1959 to 1961 to study “the expressions of our people and, without distorting them, offer them again.” The programs Cantos, bailes y leyendas cubanas (February 1960), Bembé (May 1960), Abakuá (August 1960), and Yimbula, Fiesta de palmeros (November 1960) featured diverse cultural practices, including those of the African diasporic religions Santería and Palo Monte, Abakuá, popular music and dance such as rumba and son, and carnival, as well as songs and dances of Hispanic origin.97 Folkloric investigators in the department collaborated with “old singers and dancers … as valuable informants.”98 Notes in the November 1960 program for Cantos, bailes y leyendas cubanas described these informants as men and women who brought “habitual practices” of music and dance to the stage. They were not “professionals who had acquired these manners of playing, singing and dancing in large periods of study with an academic organization,” but “people of the pueblo.”99 This picturesque humility belied the long hours of rehearsal and hard work behind their performances.100

Through these shows, the Department of Folklore hoped to broaden public appreciation of folkloric music and dance. In the program for the November 1960 Yimbula, Fiesta de palmeros, León wrote scripts and extensive notes to help audiences understand the history and significance of the material presented.101 These productions had larger political significance, according to León. He argued that folkloric performances signified Cuba’s newfound control over national goods. He contended that when a nation regained sovereignty as Cuba had after decades of imperialist control, the country not only recovered economic means of production but also, “cultural goods … including that of its folklore,” which helped to forge a national

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97 Sánchez León, 120.
99 Performance Program, “Yimbula Fiesta de Paleros” (Nov. 1960), SA-BNJM.
100 Sánchez León, 131-133.
101 Performance program, “Yimbula Fiesta de Paleros” (Nov. 1960), SA-BNJM.
Folkloric performances therefore supposedly strengthened Cuba’s grasp on its past, present, and future.

In 1962, two events had sizable impact on danced interpretations of folklore. First, in February 1962, Fidel Castro declared that the revolution had eradicated discrimination based on race or sex. This assertion undermined the revolutionary resonance of anti-racist modern and folkloric dance since racism no longer existed in Cuba. Castro’s statement made discussions about race taboo. As John Clytus, an African American man who spent time in Cuba in the 1960s noted, “in Cuba black people were hindered from any identification with blackness.” This made danced explorations of blackness in Cuba potentially problematic. However, on the heels of this announcement, folkloricist Rogelio Martínez Furé and Rodolfo Reyes held an audition to choose dancers for their new company, the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba (CFN). The company aimed to highlight the vitality of African diasporic culture in Cuba and political identities forged in the wake of the 1959 Revolution. The company founders were not alone in their interests, as demonstrated in April 1962, when somewhere between four and five hundred people auditioned for the CFN.

Building on León’s work in the Department of Folklore of the TNC, the new company strove to preserve the “authenticity” of folkloric materials while entertaining audiences with highly crafted spectacles. For this contradictory task, Martínez Furé and Reyes brought together a broad range of collaborators from the life-long practitioner to the academic researcher to the professional choreographer. In the initial audition, they chose forty-five dancers, drummers,
singers, and “informants,” or bibliotecas vivientes (living libraries), who had expert knowledge of traditional popular culture.  

Years later, Martínez Furé described how the company used teamwork, fraternal discussion, and positive criticisms to turn the “individual I into a collective we.” After a year-and-a-half of work, the company made its debut on July 25, 1963, with Yoruba, Congo, Rumbas y Comparsas at the Teatro Mella in Havana. In the 1963 inaugural performance program, Martínez Furé described the company’s unprecedented revolutionary significance:

The Conjunto Folklórico Nacional emerges to meet a need of our country, which did not possess an institution capable of recovering the dance and musical manifestations of a national character and to integrate them in a definitive form into the new socialist culture…. The revalorization and divulgation of this cultural archive is one of the fundamental purposes of the revolutionary process, because only in this way a true culture that reflects the historical reality of our pueblo will develop.

Perhaps in response to shifting state priorities, Martínez Furé carefully avoided the language of race in the program, and instead described the company as working towards a nationalist, populist project to recover and “integrate” creative expressions into a “new socialist culture.”

Although Marínez Furé did not directly reference race, slavery and African-derived religion figured prominently in the performance. For example, the first program had three parts. The first section presented the world of the gods with Yoruban music and dance “to create the atmosphere of Santería legends” that reflected on creation, maternity, life, sickness, and death. The second section depicted Cuba’s nineteenth century slave society. Bourgeois Cubans danced the popular contradanza, oppressed peoples lamented their condition, and rebelling slaves performed a dance of freedom. The third section showed Cubans enjoying their simple daily life. The performers went through various popular expressions including rumba and carnival

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106 Martínez Furé, Dialogos Imaginarios, 250-254.
107 Ibid., 252.
comparsa. Along with the dances, program essays explained the Santería pantheon and material culture of worship (i.e., instruments, clothing, representations of the gods) as well as the importance of African diasporic culture to Cuba. For instance, Martínez Furé wrote, “It is without a doubt that religious elements have played an important role in the creation of many manifestations of our folklore.”

Audiences recognized the racial significance of these performances, as indicated by a review in the magazine *Mujeres*. The author lauded the “extraordinary richness” of the music, dances, and visual culture inspired by “the strong black hand hitting the leather drum on dark nights in the slave barracks of colonial Cuba.” The CFN raised racial issues in a period when the topic was officially avoided. Depicting scenes from Cuba’s slave society gestured to the long history of racial exploitation on the island. Moreover, the production linked the past directly to the present by moving through different historical epochs in a single program, suggesting the persistence of historical injustices. The company also portrayed Santería faith as a vibrant and timeless practice.

Juxtaposing footage of Santería practices in the films *En un barrio viejo* (In an old barrio, 1963) and *Nosotros, la música* (We are the music, 1964) demonstrates the close connection between daily rituals and CFN spectacles. This similitude moreover gestures to the boldness of the CFN’s endeavors. The 1963 short film *En un barrio viejo* by black filmmaker Nicolás Guillén Landrián shows scenes from daily life in an Old Havana neighborhood, complete with citizens marching, shopping, chatting, eating, and worshipping during a *toque de santo*. At various moments during the quotidian choreographies on the streets of Havana, the sound of drumming pulsates in the background, foreshadowing the religious celebration at the end of the

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109 Ibid.
Young children, grown men, and women dance, sing, and play drums in a room adorned with 26th of July Movement posters featuring the faces of Fidel and other rebel leaders.\textsuperscript{112} The music and dance of the scene closely resemble that of a performance by the CFN in Teatro Mella shown in \textit{Nosotros, la música}. At the beginning of the film, dancers prepare backstage and the audience mills around the atrium of the theatre. Then the performance begins with men and women dancing, singing, and producing a sense of community that mimics real life ritual. By staging Santería practices, the CFN made a statement about its cultural value and exposed wide audiences to its aesthetics.

Scholars have argued that the CFN undermined black religiosity and culture with picturesque and objectifying performances.\textsuperscript{113} I question this interpretation, because it overlooks the company’s significance to performers and its efforts to show that Cuba’s African patrimony had great value. The company performers had a lifetime of talent and knowledge to bring to the stage. In interviews, the first general director of the CFN, Marta Blanco, and Martínez Furé recalled that there was great public resistance to the company. For many Cubans harboring racial prejudices, Africanist music and dance was not “culture” that belonged on a theatre stage.\textsuperscript{114} However, the company persisted despite these countervailing forces. Moreover, the performances highlighted the present day importance of Santería, which became a transgressive message as the 1960s continued. The state increasingly cast African descended religions as obstacles to socialism, backwards, superstition, and linked to criminality. The government also implemented measures that prohibited initiation ceremonies of Santería. Although the state revoked the rule in 1971, restrictive conditions remained. Adherents still had to receive special

\textsuperscript{112} En un barrio Viejo, dir. Nicolás Guillén Landrián (Havana: ICAIC, 1963).
\textsuperscript{114} Interview with Rogelio Martínez Furé, Sept. 23, 2014, Havana, Cuba; Interview with Marta Blanco, Mar. 2, 2015, Havana, Cuba.
government permission for ceremonies, and minors could not attend. Given these details, CFN merits more recognition than it has received for its efforts to promote black identities and culture in Cuba, especially given the antagonistic political climate.

While employing different methods, Ramiro Guerra and his modern dancers also explored Santería and the place of blackness in Cuban identity even after the “eradication” of racism in 1962. For instance, in 1964 Guerra created *Orfeo Antillano* (Antillean Orpheus) based on the story of Orpheus transposed to a modern Cuban setting with Santería divinities in place of the Greek pantheon. In the work, Antillean Orpheus, a drummer, leaves the bustle of carnival to follow his beloved, the recently murdered Eurydice, to the world of the dead. Orpheus’s drumming impresses the Yoruban gods, and they allow him to see Eurydice again. However, she has become an evil spirit, and he flees the phantoms, only to be killed in a brawl. Though full of tragic love and death, the work ends on an hopeful note, as another drummer recovers the fallen drum and returns to take part in carnival, a symbol of life, which continues eternally. 

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Like the 1963 CFN program, Guerra’s *Orfeo Antillano* examined race in the Cuban present, an era described in the program notes as a period of win or lose struggle for “indissoluble futures.” These parameters were evocative of post-1959 Cuban discourse of existential counterrevolutionary threats and utopias on the horizon. Moreover, Guerra’s artistic process reaffirmed his interest in reflecting on present day society. Utilizing Stanislavsky’s methods, Guerra had the dancers study sectors of Cuban society and write biographical outlines for their characters. For instance, soloist Luz María Collazo spoke with former prostitutes and poor women in Havana to better understand the work’s licentious female protagonists. The piece probed Cuban realities, namely racial and class inequalities. Towards this end, Guerra cast

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117 Performance Program, *Orfeo Antillano*, SA-BNJM.
118 Ramiro Guerra, *De la narratividad al abstraccionismo en la danza* (Havana: Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Cultura Cubana Juan Marinello, 2003), 273.
119 Interview with Luz María Collazo, Aug. 8, 2013, Havana, Cuba.
dancers of African descent to play the main characters for the work’s premiere.\textsuperscript{120} In many ways this casting was a natural outcome of the work’s influences and creative objective. In terms of influences, Guerra and contemporary critics referenced “points of contact” between Guerra’s dance and the 1959 French-Brazilian film \textit{Orfeu Negro} (Black Orpheus) directed by Marcel Camus.\textsuperscript{121} The film was set in a Rio de Janeiro favela during carnival, and Guerra, in a 1963 interview about his dance in progress, said that the carnival scenes from the film had influenced him.\textsuperscript{122} The film created a world on screen entirely populated by people of African descent. While this casting skirted the issue of racial tension that affected both Cuba and Brazil at the time, it foregrounded the racialization of class and suggested that violence and tragedy plagued the darker, lower classes in both countries.\textsuperscript{123} A mythological lens allowed Guerra to explore social inequalities and revolutionary shortcomings in the limited revolutionary public sphere.

\textsuperscript{120} Orfeo: Eduardo Rivero or Gerardo Lastra; La Muchacha: Luz Maria Collazo or Silvia Bernabeu, Euridice: Silvia Bernabeu or Luz Maria Collazo, Aristeo: Gerardo Lastra or Arnaldo Patterson, Performance Program, \textit{Orfeo Antillano}, SA-BNJM.


\textsuperscript{123} This provoked critique in Brazil over not analyzing racial tensions. Myrian Sepúlveda Dos Santos, “The Brazilian Remake of the Orpheus Legend: Film Theory and the Aesthetic Dimension,” \textit{Theory, Culture, & Society} 20, 4 (2003), 49-69.
Along similar lines, in 1968, Guerra created *Medea y los negreros* (Medea and the slaves). Based on the story of Medea and Jason, Guerra’s work was set in the Caribbean at the end of the eighteenth century when the slave uprising in Haiti caused French colonists to flee to Cuba. Jason was a European adventurer traveling from Haiti to Cuba with his concubine Medea, a princess of an African tribe. When Jason abandoned Medea for another woman, she used Haitian Vodou to destroy Jason.124 The piece explored how racial violence spawned and reinforced a never-ending cycle of destruction. Linking African diasporic religions to Greek myths, Guerra showed how divinities shaped human lives across cultures and epochs.

During this period, the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional continued to push the boundaries of their art, reworking “old” material to bring audiences something new. As a critic wrote in 1967: “We enter through the hallway of [Teatro] Mella sure that there will be nothing new for us on

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124 Guerra, *De la narratividad al abrastraccionismo en la danza*, 261-262.
that night of Folklórico Nacional, but when the batá drums begin to sound and the songs raise …
and the tremendous dancers of the group come surging from all sides of the stage with the rhythm of Shangó, Yemayá or Obatalá, an influx of blood awakens the viewer that is always incredibly exciting. “125 Additionally, the company performed in the all-black production, María Antonia. Although no known footage of the 1968 performance exists, a later version of María Antonia by Cuban filmmaker Sergio Giral provides insights into the role played by the CFN dancers in the 1968 theatrical production. Several scenes involve ritual ceremonies, including a powerful moment towards the end. In a crowded room, men and women dance together, surrounding María Antonia as she fervently moves to the music with her eyes closed. The momentum grows and she dances in a state of possession, looking but not seeing, smiling and sweating as the music, dance, and community embrace her. This moment differs considerably from the adversarial interactions María Antonia had with people throughout the play. Angered wives confronted her for seducing their husbands, and lovers violently used her body for their own pleasure. However, as the religious community dance around her with precision and strength, María Antonia reaches unprecedented levels of dignity. 126

While María Antonia was extremely popular with audiences, drawing a record twenty thousand people to eighteen performances in its first month, the play shocked many critics because of its Afrocentric focus. The work violated established mores by talking about racism in Cuban society, the culture of black slums, the context of everyday violence, and Cuban machismo. Moreover, the work posited that Santería provided a pivotal source of freedom in the face of social oppression. At the height of its success, the government halted the production, calling it distorting. María Antonia coincided with efforts by black intellectuals to discuss race

and racism with government authorities. These proposals met with state censure and varying levels of punishment.\textsuperscript{127}

Both the modern and folkloric dance companies struggled as a result of their devotion to folkloric exploration during this period. In interviews conducted in the 1990s and 2000s, Guerra recalled the numerous battles he fought with cultural bureaucrats in the late 1960s:

When my work about folklore brought me close to the traditional religious cults, to which some of my dancers belonged (two of them became “santo” during this era), … I was summoned by officials that threw in my face the fact that I was encouraging within the Conjunto religious practices outside the prevailing ideology of that time…. The functionaries thought that as director of the group, I should also be a functionary and act on their behalf.\textsuperscript{128}

During this time, the government assigned a non-artist bureaucrat, who was also director of the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional, to direct the modern dance company. Guerra and his collaborators immediately fought this as a threat to the company’s autonomy and very existence. Although eventually overturned, this organizational scheme indicated official disfavor for modern and folkloric dance in the late 1960s. Efforts to unite the companies reflected a general under appreciation of both as the state saw them as expendable and therefore able to be combined. Guerra sardonically claimed that during this time he truly earned his last name, Guerra, which means war in Spanish. He was engaged in an uphill battle to secure a place for folklore-inspired modern dance in Cuban society.\textsuperscript{129}

As modern and folkloric artists focused on blackness in Cuban identity, ballet in 1960s Cuba represented whiteness or at least an absence of blackness. During the first decade after 1959, discussions of ballet had almost no references to race. A few indirect allusions appeared in an \textit{INRA} article that described the hard working ballerina as a “delicate and subtle porcelain

\textsuperscript{127} Guerra, \textit{Visions of Power in Cuba}, 270-273.
\textsuperscript{128} Ramiro Guerra in Pajares Santiesteban, \textit{Ramiro Guerra y la danza en Cuba} (1993), 163.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid.
doll,” and a *Bohemia* article that said Cuba, the “country of the rumba,” identified with “more cultured forms of dance through Alicia.”*¹³⁰* In the latter statement rumba had connotations of blackness and stood in opposition to the more “cultured” (presumably white) ballet. In 1967, British critic Arnold Haskell made the most direct reference to race and Cuban ballet when he noted that he saw great racial mixture in the BNC, especially when compared to other famous companies in Europe and the Soviet Union: “A unique detail of the Cuban ballet is the integration of races.”*¹³¹* Indeed, by the late 1960s, students of African descent, who started training after 1959, had joined the company ranks. In the 1970s, Alicia Alonso and her collaborators emphasized that the post-1959 ballet establishment allowed non-white ballet students and dancers for the first time in Cuban history.*¹³²* However, integration happened slowly and lead females of the company remained mainly white. The general domestic silence on the issue of race in 1960s Cuban ballet contrasted sharply with the regular discussion of blackness in modern and folkloric dance.

Moreover, racialized distinctions between ballet and other dance forms did not go unnoticed to contemporary Cubans. For instance, author Elizabeth Sutherland spent time in the summer of 1967 with the performers of *María Antonia* and they discussed the subtle and not so subtle languages of race and racism in Cuban society and institutions. One youth named José noted, “Don’t speak of paternalism without mentioning that wonderful word *folklore*. Ah, the Institute of Ethnology and *Folklore … the Folklore Ensemble*… Afro-Cuban culture is folklore, and that’s it.” A woman in the group named Alicia chimed in, “The ballet is culture, but we are

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folklore.” Another youth, Julio, added, “Folklore means a degenerate culture.” They observed the state and citizens privileging ballet over folklore with the former representing development and civility, and the latter, backwards practices.

Artists nevertheless looked to Africanist culture, categorized as folklore, to inspire dances of national identity, revolution, and socially engaged art. Modern and folkloric dancers believed that work inspired by folklore offered more dancers unprecedented professional opportunities. As a 1965 modern dance program stated:

Human material came … from Television and Cabaret, media that before the Revolution did not offer physical or spiritual possibilities to realize a serious or artistic professional perspective…. [They now] appear on stage as professionals, a group of dancers … creating the foundations of a national dance … according to the needs of the revolutionary culture.134

These newly professional dancers communicated the extraordinary value of Cuba’s African heritage to audiences. This resulted in a collective fight to valorize Cuba’s multi-cultural heritage. As Martínez Furé asserted in an essay on the CFN’s origins, “The Conjunto, as a child of the Revolution, proposes to win a battle against numerous neocolonial concepts about culture and prove that national patrimony transmitted during centuries of collective memory, also possess artistic values.”135 Dancers believed that their political art had moral valence in constructing a better, more just and equal Cuba.

Staging Gender and Sexuality: Dance, Morality, and Culture

Along with race, gender and sexual norms often articulated in terms of “morality” figured importantly into revolutionary discourses. Fidel Castro and the 26th of July Movement emphasized the moral righteousness of their political effort, seeking to redeem the nation after

133 Sutherland, Cuba Now, 73-75.
134 “Marionetas,” Folder Ballet-Danza 1965, TNC.
135 Martínez Furé, Dialogos imaginarios, 252.
decades of exploitation by corrupt tyrants and greedy foreign antagonists. Historian Lillian Guerra describes how the revolution became “a militant struggle for collective redemption” that aspired “to create a uniquely moral society.”136 This moralism built upon bourgeois cultural norms of corporeal discipline, traditional gender roles, and heterosexuality reframed as part of a nationalist, leftist revolution. Dancers reproduced, troubled, or subverted hegemonic discourses on revolutionary morality in their staged performances and daily lives. In particular, sensual performances on cabaret stages seemed antithetical to the moralistic dictates of revolution. Ballet, in contrast, embodied the discipline, control, and self-sacrifice that the Cuban state championed. Yet, dance in general struck many in the Cuban government and public as an effeminate profession, making male dancers targets for homophobic measures of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Juxtaposing cabaret, ballet, and modern dance, this section analyzes how dancers maneuvered within the confines of repressive state policing of gender and sexuality.

In 1959, cabarets bore associations with vice, exploitation, and the deposed ruler; however, they also aligned with the festive ethos following the change of power. As the ebullience of the early years dissipated, particularly after the Bay of Pigs attack in 1961, cabaret performers had to actively defend their work as still appropriate for the political moment. To do this, they reformulated the content of choreographed numbers to include revolutionary messages. Shows still drew heavily on erotic exoticism, particularly through the display of the female body. Cabarets featured both male and female performers, but women played a central role in seductive entertainment. Yet, cabarets also began featuring scenes relevant to contemporary political projects. For instance, starting in December 1961, the Tropicana Nightclub premiered *Leyenda Antillana* with performers in Chinese and Russian costumes, interpreting national dances, as well

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136 Guerra, “‘To Condemn the Revolution is to Condemn Christ,,’” 74, 77-78.
as numbers about the recent literacy campaign.\(^{137}\) This likely reflected and responded to the audience, which according to a U.S. report from March 1962, included mostly “middle class Cubans, Communist bloc technicians, and a few out-of-town farmers who often turn up with their children.” The same author described how contrary to the “propaganda” at the Tropicana, the Habana Riviera had the “only girlie act in all of Cuba,” yet that too was tame as “girls wander around in briefs, tossing confetti at the audience … trying to appear enticing, yet moral.”\(^{138}\) According to Carlos Franqui, the growing puritanical ethos resurrected “all the punishments [Fidel] suffered as a boy in his Jesuit school … separation of the sexes, discipline…. All sensuality, of course, is anathema to him.”\(^{139}\) According to this admittedly retrospective, imaginative view, growing signs of social conservatism may have represented the continuation of bourgeois scruples in a revolutionary key.

Even though leisure and nightlife seemed incompatible with an increasingly austere revolution, these activities remained important. In fact, retaining a lively nightlife had its own defiant importance for a government accused abroad of provoking widespread social disarray. In October 1961, an article in *Bohemia* claimed that widely patronized cabarets signaled an increase in the average citizen’s purchasing power and evidenced government efforts to keep entry “prices affordable to all.”\(^{140}\) Furthermore, a March 1962 article asserted that in contrast to “lying reports” in the international press, Cuba enjoyed a vibrant club scene. Though no longer featuring “trashy striptease,” large cabarets in Havana boasted shows with budgets as high as twenty-six thousand dollars, and a hundred or so smaller clubs operated at full capacity.

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nightly. 141 Another, more sanctimonious piece described how in addition to club entertainment the revolution had an alternative, equally inspiring nightlife of pupils studying by candlelight, government employees working late into the night, and militants guarding against “imperialist sabotage.” 142 In nightclubs, dance filled evenings with “alegría combatiente,” a combatant happiness, indicative of Cuban resiliency and good taste, according to a 1964 commentator. 143

Despite these claims of change, sensual choreographies not unlike those from previous decades continued, and yet, dancers proclaimed their work to be undoubtedly part of the political present. Unique evidence of this can be seen in film outtakes from a 1964 Canadian Broadcasting Corporation special on Cuba in which a reporter and her team visited a cabaret and interviewed two female cabaret dancers. The footage has scenes from the cabaret performance, which resembled pre-1959 productions—complete with women in extravagant attire, dancer Ana Gloria (a fixture on cabaret circuits before and after 1959, known for Cuban dances mambo, cha-cha-chá, guaracha, son, and rumba), and couples performing acrobatic versions of popular Cuban dances. 144 In the interview outtakes, two female dancers spoke with the Canadian reporter through a translator, still in their skimpy costumes and full makeup, perspiring and drinking water after their performance. The reporter asked the first woman if she missed U.S. audiences. The dancer carefully deflected the question while promoting her status as an artist. For the dancer, performing for small audiences posed no problem since, in the translator’s words, “she likes her art and she works with pleasure even … when there is [sic] a few people around.” Using the term “art” instead of “entertainment,” the dancer cast her performances as meaningful

144 “Images of Havana and Fidel Castro’s Personal Interactions with the Public,” Box 75U (Use copy DVD), Cuban Revolution Collection, Yale University, New Haven, CT (CRC).
revolutionary work. Later, the reporter asked the dancers about the differences between pre- and post-1959 working conditions. The first dancer responded that before 1959, she performed mainly for foreigners and elites. By contrast, after 1959, “she now works for the people…. This working place belongs to them,” the translator asserted. The second dancer responded similarly. She noted, “The main difference is in the public…. Now we find all kinds of people, intellectuals, workers, professionals, all kinds of people that compose the Cuban society of this day.”145 In these responses, the dancers utilized populist rhetoric to portray their art as a valuable contribution to Cuban culture. They also called Fidel an “important man” and affirmed their revolutionary nationalism. As the translator put one of the dancer’s responses: “She only knows that she’s Cuban…. And she fights for her country and does anything she has to do.”146 While wearing heavy makeup and minimal costumes, the dancers incorporated moralizing tropes of the post-1959 era, describing themselves in lofty terms as “artists” working for “the people,” praising Fidel, and identifying as devotees of the political cause.

As female cabaret workers attempted to redefine their genre to fit within the moral paradigms of revolution, ballet dancers also worked to exhibit their revolutionary relevance. To do so, they highlighted ballet dancers’ discipline and militancy, which they demonstrated through daily practices, political statements, and choreography. A 1960 article in the magazine INRA described how young dancers did “rigorous exercises … to obtain perfection in movement, absolute control on balance and expressive capacity of the body.”147 Along with physical rigors, a professional ballerina reflected in a 1961 INRA article, “dance is not only virtuosity and technique … it is necessary, as well, to have a balanced mind and a heart disposed to

145 “Entrevista a Artistas de Cabaret,” Box 70U (Use copy DVD), CRC.
146 Ibid.
147 “Ese mundo en punto de pies…,” INRA (Feb. 1960), 46.
With this practiced discipline, Alicia Alonso asserted that BNC “members [were] willing to serve the revolution in the way that [was] most useful, not only dancing, but also passing on their ballet knowledge and experiences … to help in the artistic construction of a new Cuba.” This devotion also came through choreographically in works such as *Avanzada* (1963), a “ballet inspired by a heroic event in the battle of Stalingrad,” choreographed by Soviet dancer Azari Plisetski. In the ballet, dancers in fatigues performed strong movements of aggression. In 1966, the implied connection between dancers and armed fighters became a staged reality. In June, sixty-six members of the Batallón de Ceremonias de la Defensa Popular (Ceremonial Battalion of Popular Defense) joined six ballet dancers in a special performance of *Avanzada*. Ballet dancers performed the original choreography and the battalion danced moves inspired by “throwing grenades, various exercises, all based on choreographic designs,” the newspaper reported. In this event, soldiers of art and actual soldiers performed their militant support for the revolution in tandem.

Alicia Alonso in particular served as an exemplum of bodily command, political support, and revolutionary citizenship and womanhood. In short, she became a prominent revolutionary icon. According to a 1960 *Lunes de Revolución* article, Alicia had achieved her stardom through hard work and sacrifice: “Alicia has had to overcome her deficient eyes … hers is a triumph of will…. Alicia is a great ballerina because she wants to be.” In the realm of Cuban politics, Alicia participated in mass organizations including the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (Federation of Cuban Women, FMC). She also led the Ballet de Cuba in forming its own Comité

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150 Performance Program, Ballet Nacional de Cuba (Nov. 9, 1967), Folder Ballet-Danza 1967, TNC.
de Defensa de la Revolución (Committee for the Defense of the Revolution, CDR) in 1960, declaring institutional commitment to “revolutionary vigilance.”154 Further, Alicia became a paragon of revolutionary femininity, according to one article. It declared that she had broken a “myth” by demonstrating, “her indisputable supremacy in the world of ballet,” while also being a “complete woman, mother of Laurita, grandmother of Iván.”155 Alicia ostensibly contributed to social advance through professional success, political participation, and fulfilling familial obligations. These discourses on morality, discipline, and gender roles indicate the persistence of bourgeois norms and their incorporation into the revolution.

In addition to ballet dancers’ exemplary character, their achievements on domestic and international stages earned them praise. During the 1960s, dance leaders in coordination with cultural bureaucrats organized international dance festivals in Havana in 1960, 1966, and 1967, which demonstrated to audiences “the great Cuban social transformation” taking place, according to period observers.156 Dancers also competed in international ballet competitions and won distinctions in Varna, Bulgaria (1964, 1965, 1966, and 1968), Paris (1966), and Moscow (1969).157 After the 1964 performances, Alicia reported in Mujeres, “From the political point of view, we believe that we contributed with this tour to give knowledge of the advance of our country in the construction of socialism, through art.”158 While Cuban ballet dancers merited recognition, claims that ballet evidenced Cuban refinement had paternalistic overtones. Based on traditional aesthetic hierarchies, ballet became a barometer of development, and ballet dancers, the most heralded dance laborers in Cuba. A cartoon in Mujeres reaffirmed this point. The image showed a ballerina in a difficult pose, tending to crops in a field. The caricature suggested the

154 Rpt. in Cabrera, El Ballet en Cuba, 342.
156 “El Gran Festival de Ballet,” Bohemia (Mar. 20, 1960), 69.
primacy of ballet dancers in Cuba as they ceaselessly contributed to political projects through their devotion and dexterity. Despite the demands of their craft, the cartoon implied, they still found time for volunteer labor.\footnote{La ballerina en el trabajo productivo,” Mujeres (Jul. 1968), 71.} 

Figure 12. “The ballerina in productive work” in Mujeres, July 1968, 71. Photograph taken by the author.

If Alicia and her fellow ballerinas became celebrated revolutionary women, dancing men proved far more problematic in relation to ideas about revolutionary masculinity. In Cuba, as elsewhere in the mid-twentieth century, male dancers were viewed as effeminate. Fernando and Alberto Alonso recalled being teased by male friends when they studied ballet as youths.\footnote{Cabrera, Alberto Alonso, 6; Singer, 14.} Ramiro Guerra also encountered prejudices. After graduating from law school he waited years before telling his family about his decision to dance, and he used a different stage name to keep
his profession secret. The public still considered dance a female activity after 1959. One article on ballet developments in Santiago de Cuba stated a need to address “prejudices” against male dancers through public education in hopes of “liquidating the remnants of the past.” Such prejudices had limited the number of male professional dancers. In a 1960 document on future plans for dance pedagogy, Fernando Alonso and Anna Leontieva wrote:

… to promote in Cuba the cultivation of ballet and modern dance among men in order to solve the current shortage of [male] dancers … [we need] a lot of propaganda and a curriculum that, in terms of men, presents dance as what it is and should be, besides an art, a way to achieve the totality of masculine physicality, the development of strength as well as grace and elegance, and a supreme aesthetic expression of virility.

A summary reiterated: “The country needs to resolve the lack of male dancers – for which it is essential to transform the propagandistic focus of dance in respect to men, insisting on their hygienic, virile and even … sporting aspects.” These statements reacted to conspicuous prejudices against male dancers. Ballet leaders reaffirmed prevailing heteronormative frameworks and tried to promote male dancers as masculine and virile revolutionaries.

Despite these efforts, the state labeled several male dancers homosexual, as seen by a series of internal reports on modern dancers from 1964. These reports consist of thirty single sheets of paper each with an artist’s name and short sentences about the individual. Nineteen

165 For more about the ballet becoming identified with women, see Garafola, “The Travesty Dancer in Nineteenth Century Ballet.” For the continued connections between ballet and women in twentieth century, see for instance, Ann Daly, “The Balanchine Woman: Of Hummingbirds and Channel Swimmers,” The Drama Review: TDR 31, 1 (Spring 1987), 8-21.
have no date, but sometimes refer to an upcoming tour to Brussels, and the other eleven have the date September 11, 1964. It appears that the government carried out these evaluations in preparation for the CNDM’s planned 1964 tour to determine whether or not the company should represent Cuba abroad.

Several of the memos called individuals homosexuals. Take for instance the report on Ramiro Guerra:

Ramiro Guerra

Resides in the building Lopez Serrano, situated at 13 Street #108, apt. 141 11th floor, Vedado.

He supports the Revolution and cooperates with the CDR, when it is necessary to do economic work.

…He is 40 years old and is homosexual. On occasions he has been seen entering his apartment with unknown men.

He was the director of the C. Danza Moderna and asked to be replaced in this role because the members of the Conjunto did not respect him, remaining to exclusively choreograph in the same Conjunto.

He is the creator of the work “Orfeo Antillano.”

¡Venceremos! [We will triumph!]¹⁶⁶

Another memo on Eduardo Rivero Walker shows how dance leaders encouraged heterosexual performances off as well as on stage:

Eduardo Rivero Walker

Resides on 58 Street #2713 between 27 and 29, Mariano, with his siblings who are integrated in the Revolution. One of his sisters is the President of the CDR… Their mother can be found in the United States.

Eduardo is homosexual. He married Xiomara Olivia Baeza one month ago, as had been proposed by the director of the Conjunto Lorna Burdsalt [sic], who wanted to take him on tour, but feared he would fall back into homosexual acts.

Eduardo is not integrated in the Revolution in his neighborhood or in his work center…

He works in Conjunto de Danza Moderna, as a soloist. He is a hard worker and disciplined.

…¡Venceremos! 167

In a similar vein, the rest of the memos cover dancers mostly with the CNDM, but also a few with Danza Contemporánea (who also danced with CNDM) and musicians with both companies. Among the other twenty-eight individuals, nine other men were described as homosexual.

The reports provide a unique window into how the state saw public and private behavior as indicative of a citizen’s revolutionary credentials. Every report stated whether or not the individual and close family members were “integrated into the Revolution” through mass organizations. They also commented on how personal relationships reflected positively or negatively on an individual’s character. For instance, the report on “militant” Silvia Bernabeu Martínez stated that “her morality [was] good.”168 Miguel Sarria Sarria, a fifty-four year old “black, tall, heavy” musician, lived with his mother and belonged to a CDR; his “morale [was] correct,” a report stated.169 Edith Llarena Blanco on the other hand displayed “incorrect moral conduct.” Even though she had been heard speaking positively about the revolution, the report noted that she had “gone out with different men when she was living with her previous husband.”170 Musician Roberto Alfonso Hirme was politically “indifferent,” drank too much, and

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had a “lumpen” son who regularly missed school and had pulled a knife on another boy. The report presumed that Alfonso Hirme had “very low” morality. Harsh language denounced Orlando Cruz López. The report described him as a “homosexual, who flaunts it,” by interacting with “effeminate elements” and leading “a life of few morals.” In the report on Lino Guinferrer Menendez, the author excoriated his “horrible moral conduct,” evidenced by “frequent scandals” with other gay men. The reports directly linked private and public lives in efforts to evaluate an individual’s revolutionary devotion or lack thereof.

These judgments were often based on observations from “the neighborhood,” suggesting that officials interviewed neighbors, tapping into a network of citizen spies, as historian Lillian Guerra calls them. The invasiveness of policing can be seen in the report on Manuel Hiram, a Mexican dancer who worked with the CNDM starting in 1960 and who lived in a hotel in Vedado. In the report, the author confirmed Hiram’s militancy by describing, “in his room at the hotel, photos and emblems of the Revolution have been seen.” Surveillance had no boundaries. It also functioned as part of larger efforts to discipline the Cuban populace for political and economic reasons. As historian Lillian Guerra explains in her work on the topic: “state-directed forms of gender policing and ideological scrutiny of intellectual thought and artistic expression were integral aspects of Cuban officials’ plans to re-craft the national economy on the basis of an obedient, volunteer labour force and legitimate politically

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174 Guerra, Visions of Power in Cuba, 198.
authoritarian ideals among emerging generations of citizens raised under the Revolution.”

The state scrutinized dancers to extend its control over expression, politics, and labor.

After the reports were completed, the government decided that the modern dancers should not perform abroad. Earlier in 1964, French choreographer Maurice Béjart, director of the Brussels-based Ballet du XXe Siècle (Ballet of the Twentieth Century) had visited Cuba as part of a worldwide search for dancers from thirteen countries for a new work celebrating the brotherhood of nations. Out of several companies, Béjart chose the dancers of the CNDM. After weeks of excited preparation, four days before the company’s departure in late September 1964, the Cuban government informed the modern dancers that they were not going to Europe. In her 2001 memoir, Burdsall, then the director of the CNDM, described fighting the decision: “I ran around knocking on doors and tried in vain to get in touch with other ‘important’ people who might be able to turn the tide of events, even my husband, but alas, time was against us…. The tactic of waiting until the last minute to cancel our trip made it impossible.”

In a letter to her mother, Burdsall detailed:

…the trip was too expensive a proposition for 36 dancers, drummers, etc. Since there were major changes in the Culture Council that’s why the change of plans – the new director just put into office didn’t approve the plan…. Oh well, modern dancers are used to struggles and revolutionaries are used to struggles so being both we’ll pull out of it fast.

Adding insult to injury, the Ballet Nacional de Cuba, as Burdsall told her mother in another letter, “got to go on their trip to the Soviet Union … but they were lucky because they left before

179 Burdsall, More than Just a Footnote, 155.
180 Letter Lorna Burdsall to E.S. Burdsall, Sept. 26, 1964, Folder 2, Box 1, Burdsall Family Papers, CHC.
the restriction got too tough.” Burdsall later learned that “Alicia Alonso had gone to Brussels to dance with Maurice Bejart” instead of the modern dance company. Despite explanations provided about finances, the internal reports suggest that the government based their decision on the personal and political behavior of the modern dancers.

Government surveillance only accelerated the year following the modern dance incident. In 1965, the government labeled homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, Catholic priests, Protestant preachers, some artists and intellectuals, and young peasants who resisted collectivization as “anti-socials” and “reeducated” them in forced labor camps called Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción (Military Units to Assist Production, UMAP). No evidence has indicated whether the government harassed male modern dancers; however, accounts from the 1980s have confirmed that some male ballet dancers experienced detainment and interrogation in the 1960s. During these episodes, Alicia Alonso intervened on her dancers’ behalf. The actual number of ballet dancers affected remains unclear. The BNC dancer Julio Medina recounted his personal experience, and Jorge Riverón only said that, “many dancers … had been persecuted.” Then in 1966, when the BNC traveled to Paris for an international ballet competition, ten male ballet dancers defected. The defectors explained, “We are not opposed to the revolutionary action of the present regime. But we deplore the arbitrary persecution, … which affects anybody showing the least sign of nonconformity either in his way of life, his religious opinions, or simply his clothes. It has become impossible for us to work as artists in

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181 Letter Lorna Burdsall to E.S. Burdsall, Oct. 11, 1964, Folder 2, Box 1, Burdsall Family Papers, CHC.  
182 Burdsall, More than Just a Footnote, 155  
183 Guerra, Visions of Power in Cuba, 227-231.  
185 Ibid., 123-125, 129.
such a climate of threats and incertitude.” In their statement, the dancers described the regime betraying the Revolution through its repressive policies.

As the state threatened dancing men, the aesthetic of sexual promiscuity in cabarets continued to have a vexed place in the cultural milieu, prompting a careful defense published in Bohemia in 1967. Entitled, “El Cabaret, ¿También Cultura?” (Cabaret, also culture?), the article reflected on the dark history of cabarets: exploitative impresarios, demeaning displays of women’s bodies, and unthinking audiences in a drunken stupor. Such mediocre performances had wasted the talents of beautiful Cuban women, the author stated, and had no place “[i]n a society that … tries to elevate its level, not only economic but also moral and cultural of its members … like ours today.” The author went a step further to contend, “the cabaret also can be an instrument of culture.” The production Labana in the Capri Cabaret was “a show that manages to entertain and amuse, within the framework of cabaret, by means of culture and not against it,” according to the article. Though the author provided no further indication of the show’s content, he assured the reader that the “Capri has not been converted into a dusty and silent library. There are bottles. There is music, dances, scenery, jokes, swaying. There are also female thighs always very delightful.” The Capri managed to achieve a delicate balance. It featured “delightful” women on display but furthered Cuban “culture” in line with high-minded revolutionary aspirations. As the author wrote, “without abandoning the drink for the doctoral gown,” the cabaret affirmed its foundations in a “cultured and happy society.”

Culture and its political implications were the focus of the January 1968 Cultural Congress in Havana. Jamaican Andrew Salkey attended the congress during the day and explored Havana nightlife in the evenings. He had trouble reconciling the political messages that

186 Kathryn Kenyon, “Cuban Ballet’s ‘Giselle’ is Success Despite Defections,” Los Angeles Times (Nov. 17, 1966), D22.
Cuban leaders espoused during the day and the performances he encountered at night. As Salkey detailed, the plenary sessions commemorated Che Guevara (killed in October 1967) and encouraged intellectuals and artists to devote themselves to liberating the Third World.\footnote{Andrew Salkey, \textit{Havana Journal} (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1971), 139-40, 148-49, 152.} By contrast to these austere messages, the extravagance of the Tropicana surprised Salkey. “Three full orchestras … magnificent luminous costumes, fire-work displays and gushing tinted smoke screens dazzled the large audience,” he recalled.\footnote{Ibid., 52.} As bedazzled “chorus girls high-kicked,” non-Cuban congress goers with Salkey took issue with the perceived foreignness and commercialism of the show, so-called “hand-me-down left-overs from Broadway and Batista.” Salkey, though, saw “native Cuban contributions to the vulgarit,” leading him to accept the performance “on its own terms … because it was superbly well done.”\footnote{Ibid., 52-53.} While appreciating Cuban inventiveness, Salkey wondered at the “staleness” of cabaret shows and how they related to the political present. Moreover, he discussed this with Cubans who “agreed that there was a ‘gap’ between the new life in Cuba and the many forms of popular entertainment.”\footnote{Ibid., 76.}

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the cabaret sector entered a crisis soon after Salkey’s visit. In March 1968, Castro declared the beginning of a Revolutionary Offensive to address ideological lapses and economic stagnation. Among many radical gestures, including the nationalization of all remaining Cuban-owned private businesses, Castro forced cabarets along with bars and places selling alcohol, even state-owned establishments, to close their doors.\footnote{Lam, 65; Guerra, \textit{Visions of Power in Cuba}, 301.} The radicalization sought to remove distractions. Citizens had to focus on harvesting the overly ambitious goal of ten million tons of sugar in 1970. Only after the sugar campaign concluded unsuccessfully did the government reopen cabarets. For the Tropicana’s grand return to operations, director Joaquín

\footnote{Ibid., 52.}
\footnote{Ibid., 52-53.}
\footnote{Ibid., 76.}
\footnote{Lam, 65; Guerra, \textit{Visions of Power in Cuba}, 301.}
M. Condall staged *Así eran los romanos*, inspired by ancient Rome and complete with stately images from antiquity.\(^{193}\) The choreographer’s choice perhaps aimed to promote the “culture” of recently defunct cabarets or the heroism of a regime persevering through crisis. Though only speculation, the piece nevertheless provided a suggestive political juxtaposition that likely not only entertained, but also inspired audiences to reflect on current events and society.

Curiously, in this strict environment, the government allowed the CNDM to travel abroad in 1969 for an international tour to Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and the Soviet Union. During the trip, Guerra and his dancers encountered exciting countercultural artists and postmodern artistic movements. Emboldened by these experiences, Guerra choreographed two theatrical dance satires. His 1970 *Impromptu Galante* satirized machismo, the feminine mystique, gender relations, and sexuality through the aesthetics of the “happening” and vaudeville.\(^{194}\) The program notes asserted:

> This is a satire of the biblical myth of man and woman and their first integration as a sinful engendering duality of mankind. Adam and Eve unfolded in all men and women of the world competing in the domain of one over the other by the most naïve and primitive means.\(^{195}\)

Guerra’s next work, *Decálogo de Apocalipsis* (Ten Commandments of the Apocalypse), was to last two hours without intermission and take place in different locations outside the TNC, requiring the audience to move during the performance. Architectural spaces inspired the choreography, and the content alluded to the Ten Commandments. The work combined psychedelic elements with Cuban pageantry. Using burlesque and sarcasm, the work reflected on the international social upheavals of the 1960s through vignettes featuring polemical images like a crucifixion of a black man, prostitution in exchange for luxuries, a heterosexual orgy,

\(^{193}\) Lam, 65-66.  
homosexual abduction, and quasi-tribal phallic worship in ironic counterpoint to biblical poems. The residents in the neighborhood near the TNC, known as La Timba, provided an attentive audience during the year-and-a-half it took to rehearse the piece.\textsuperscript{196}

Although the work was widely advertised, two weeks before its April 15, 1971 premiere, the government canceled the performance in the first clear instance of censorship in dance. The cancelation happened in the immediate lead up to the Primer Congreso Nacional de Educación y Cultura (First National Congress of Education and Culture) in late April 1971. According to Lorna Burdsall in her 2001 memoir, “During the course of rehearsals, word spread that there were pornographic elements and phallic symbols flying…. All of this was just too much for some of the pseudo-puritanical ‘cultured’ bureaucrats.”\textsuperscript{197} During the congress, leaders decried “decadent” art and called for the “decolonization of culture” by artists who act as “soldiers of the Revolution.”\textsuperscript{198} The final declaration of the congress stated that homosexuals would be barred from jobs in which they had contact with Cuban youth.\textsuperscript{199} As part of the Congress, Comisión 6 Medios Masivos de la Comunicación (Commission 6 Mass Media of Communication) included a discussion about “pornography in Cuban art,” which mentioned Guerra’s Decálogo del Apocalipsis.\textsuperscript{200} This dispute compelled Guerra to leave the company permanently. For the next seven years, he choreographed nothing. Accounts remain vague about whether this was state mandated or a personal choice. In an interview, he started the meeting by preemptively stating

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\begin{enumerate}
\item[197] Burdsall, More than Just a Footnote, 173.
\item[198] Jorge Fornet, El 71: Anatomía de una Crisis (Havana: Letras Cubanas, 2013), 165, 175, 179.
\item[199] Ibid., 170.
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\end{footnotesize}
that he would not discuss *Decálogo del Apocalipsis*.*201* Regardless, following the fiasco, he devoted himself to research and writing about dance. As Lorna Burdsall explained simply in a letter to her mother in November 1972, “Ramiro is no longer with us – he decided to dedicate himself to translating dance books.”*202* Though separated from what had been his life’s work, Guerra considers himself lucky, as he continued to receive his salary during this dark moment.*203*

The CNDM persisted in spite of losing a formative creator and educator. New choreographers filled the void that Guerra left behind. In particular, Eduardo Rivero, Gerardo Lastra, and Victor Cuéllar premiered important work that focused on African diasporic culture. For instance, on May 13, 1971, the CNDM performed Rivero’s *Súlkary*, an “exaltation of fecundity and fertility,” inspired by African sculpture and featuring three male-female pairs (all black or mulatto dancers).*204* On the same program, Gerardo Lastra’s *Negra Fuló* premiered, set in the colonial era in Brazil and inspired by Brazilian poet Jorge de Lima’s poem about a beautiful slave woman who overpowers her master through her sensuality.*205* Lastra created another Brazilian themed work, *Zamba de la Favela*, which premiered December 22, 1972, and depicted poor Brazilian citizens in city slums, who “fight for a better society, without exploitation.”*206* On February 25, 1973, Victor Cuéllar’s *Panorama de la música y danza cubana* (Panorama of Cuban music and dance) premiered, a celebratory piece that moved through Cuban history to display popular music and dance, products of “the fusion of Spanish and African

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*201* He refused to discuss the topic because of previous treatments in U.S. scholarship of the work and its censorship. I assume that he was referring to Melinda Mousouris’s writing about it though he did not specify. Taped interview with Ramiro Guerra, Mar. 12, 2014, Havana, Cuba.

*202* Letter Lorna Burdsall to E. S. Burdall, Nov. 19, 1972, Folder 3, Box 1, Burdsall Family Papers, CHC.

*203* Mousouris, “The Dance World of Ramiro Guerra,” 70.

*204* “Repertorio General Ilustrado,” 19, DCCuba Histórico, DCC.

*205* “Repertorio General Ilustrado,” 20, DCCuba Histórico, DCC.

*206* Performance Program, Conjunto Nacional de Danza Moderna, Folder Ballet-Danza 1973, TNC.
cultures.” Along with these works, the company continued performing Guerra’s *Suite Yoruba, Orfeo Antillano, and Medea y los negreros* through 1972. The company also presented overtly political pieces that displayed their revolutionary commitment. For instance, Cuéllar’s *Dialogo con el presente* (1972) paid homage to “all guerrilla fighters, who through the figure of Commander Ernesto Che Guevara will achieve the ultimate expression of the new man.” Additionally, the CNDM performed *Uruguay Hoy* (1973) by visiting Uruguayan choreographer Teresa Trujillo, which, according to program notes, was “inspired by the fight of the Uruguayan people, which fascism wants to silence.”

Though the CNDM presented an impressive array of choreography, turmoil existed behind the scenes. In late 1972, Lorna confided in her mother that many problems derived from what she viewed as problematic proposals made by Fernando and Alicia Alonso, which threatened the autonomy and very existence of the modern dance company:

The ballet is desperate for modern works & wants us to fuse with them. This would be the end of mod[ern] dance in Cuba since Fernando & Alicia never respected mod[ern] dance. They only want some black dancers & some mod[ern] works to build up their company. I just spent a week writing a paper on modern dance, its ideology, concepts, and 12 years of mod[ern] dance in Cuba; it will go to everybody important & let’s see what the outcome is…. Mod[ern] dance … gets invitations to Canada, Italy, Switzerland, Belgium but we never get to go! Ballet gets sent instead.

To Burdsall, the Alonsos’ proposal and the fact that modern dance rarely toured abroad pointed to a larger under appreciation of the genre. She sent the “paper on modern dance” to CNC President Luis Pavón Tamayo among others. In a handwritten attachment to the essay dated

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207 “*Repertorio General Ilustrado*,” 22-23, *DCCuba Histórico*, DCC; Performance Program, Danza Nacional de Cuba, Folder Ballet-Danza 1974, TNC.
209 Performance Program, Conjunto Nacional de Danza Moderna, Folder Ballet-Danza 1973, TNC.
210 Performance Program, Conjunto Nacional de Danza Moderna, Folder Ballet-Danza 1973, TNC.
211 Lorna Burdsall to E. S. Burdall, Nov. 19, 1972, Folder 3, Box 1, Burdsall Family Papers, CHC.
January 6, 1973, Burdsall requested an in-person meeting with Pávon to discuss the content of her report.

Burdsall’s report, now housed in the Ministry of Culture archives, protested years of mistreatment by the cultural bureaucracy and demanded resolution to these failings. The essay detailed the history of the CNDM and Cuban modern dance training. After several pages of exposition, Burdsall addressed important internal and external problems in a section titled, “Criticás y autocríticas” (Criticism and self-criticism). According to Burdsall, when the CNC took charge of dance enterprises in 1962, modern dancers “had the first impressions of a lack of support” from the CNC. She described difficulties in getting theatre space, stating that groups “like ours and that of Folklórico Nacional, had sporadic performances in different theatres. These changes in one theatre for another lowered the quality of the works because of dissimilar conditions and different personnel in each theatre.” Burdsall also complained about the labeling of *Decálogo del Apocalipsis* as pornography during the 1971 congress. She wrote:

> The act of criticizing the work before the participants of the Commission VI, and arriving at a generalized opinion about the Conjunto without deeply analyzing the labors and works that had been realized since the beginning or having someone of modern dance present to defend the national line of the said group, was in our opinion a great mistake and an injustice. The result was the implementation of an extremist policy, eliminating from the repertory all the works of the choreographer of the work in question. In the recent months, the company has changed director five times and only one of them formed a council [of artistic advisors] – the others simply imposed artistic criteria without adequate knowledge of modern dance and did not seek the cooperation of those us who had some experience.  

This instability led to a lack of confidence in the directorship of the company, Burdsall continued, affecting the “discipline and morale of the members.” Adding to the poor morale, the CNC had discouraged recent modern dance graduates from joining the CNDM. Also, the CNC

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had failed to fix a studio in need of reparations and never invited the CNDM to perform for official foreign visitors. Burdsall went on to suggest steps that the CNC should take to improve the situation: provide a regular theatre space and performance season for the company; facilitate “didactic performances” by the CNDM in work centers, schools, and television to expose new audiences to modern dance; allow the CNDM to perform abroad; repair their studios as soon as possible; and invite modern dance groups from other countries to perform in Cuba. She concluded by reiterating the value of the company to Cuban and international culture, “in spite of all these limitations and incomprehension, we can affirm that modern dance in these twelve years have made a modest contribution to the culture of our country and to Latin America.”

Though it is unclear how the CNC responded, the Director General of Activities for the CNC Armando Quesada recorded some reactions in a letter to Pavón from March 20, 1973. He wrote that Burdsall’s report presented a “biased analysis of all the problems of the Conjunto de Danza Moderna,” by suggesting that all fault lay with the CNC rather than acknowledging internal problems within the company. Quesada also noted “unresolved contradictions without solution between the Ballet Nacional and the Conjunto de Danza Moderna, while its main ideologues survive.” He believed nonetheless that modern dance and ballet “should be fully developed, without trying to eliminate one for the other.” He also considered the company and Ramiro Guerra’s future:

Currently, the Conjunto de Danza Moderna is at its best moment after the departure of Ramiro Guerra. Furthermore I ask permission to incorporate Ramiro Guerra as choreographer of the Conjunto, authorizing him would end the contradictions and complaints of Lorna, because in the end it is what she wants. Doing that we will be able to stabilize and neutralize. After all there are other homosexuals that work with less talent and even more problems than Ramiro Guerra.

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213 Ibid.
In this revealing final statement, Quesada demonstrated the cultural bureaucracy’s contradictory approach to homosexual artists – they were allowed to work when talented, causing few “problems,” and politically beneficial (neutralizing Burdsall’s complaints). The unsympathetic response also ignored the other issues raised and interpreted the complaints as indicative of clashes between ballet and modern dance leaders rather than reflecting mismanagement on the part of the CNC.

Although the CNC never reinstated Guerra, perhaps because he refused the offer, conditions improved for the CNDM soon after Burdsall’s letter. In February 1973, she told her mother that she had accepted the position of artistic director for the company: “as they have been asking me since last year but since there was a general director who would have been above me that I didn’t like, I didn’t accept. Now we have a new general director whom I like & so I accepted.” In March 1973, the CNDM performed for a Peruvian delegation, and Fidel Castro was at their performance for the first time in the company’s history. He congratulated the dancers after the performance, which left everybody in the company, according to Burdsall, “floating on air.” In October of that year, she happily reported in a letter, “The Conjunto is on the up & up & we have all kinds of ambitious plans this year.” In January 1974, Burdsall wrote her mother: “We have had good audiences, lots of publicity, etc. The result of all this is that modern dance is finally come into the Love! The film institute will film two of our dances in March in color. This will be hard work but worth the effort. Especially if we could win some money to spend on leotards and tights which are always badly needed.” And then in April, she

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215 Letter Lorna Burdsall to E S. Burdsall, Feb. 11, 1973, Folder 3, Box 1, Burdsall Family Papers, CHC.
217 Letter Lorna Burdsall to E.S. Burdsall, Mar. 13, 1973, Folder 3, Box 1, Burdsall Family Papers, CHC.
218 Letter Lorna Burdsall to E. S. Burdsall, Oct. 1973, Folder 3, Box 1, Burdsall Family Papers, CHC.
219 Letter Lorna Burdsall to E. S. Burdsall, Jan. 28, 1974, Folder 3, Box 1, Burdsall Family Papers, CHC.
asserted: “Modern dance has finally been ‘discovered’ and we are at last coming into the fore…. In October we celebrate our fifteen anniversary and will perform 15 of our best works. There is also talk of tours to Europe, etc. but that I refuse to believe until it happens. Although this time things are different and I doubt if something like the Brussels trip will repeat itself.”\textsuperscript{220} As this final comment shows, Burdsall was still traumatized by the 1964 incident. Luckily, as she hesitantly presumed, circumstances had changed.

The company’s recuperation in 1973 and 1974 provided testament to the power of Burdsall’s claims making with Cuban cultural bureaucrats and challenges sweeping characterizations of the early 1970s as the \textit{quinquenio gris}, a dark period of no creation. Although the modern dance company indeed experienced harsh aggression on the part of the state, they also continued creating and found unprecedented support in the span of a few years. For instance, in 1974, the CNDM commemorated its fifteenth anniversary with a name change to Danza Nacional de Cuba (National Dance of Cuba, DNC). The new title was a “sign of maturity” according to a congratulatory 1974 letter from CNC President Pavón Tamayo to the company for their fifteenth anniversary.\textsuperscript{221} Marianela Boán wrote in an explicatory article that removing “modern dance” from the company name, showed that the company had achieved its objectives to “cement a new form of dancing highly contemporary and Cuban.”\textsuperscript{222} The crisis and then resurgence of modern dance in the early 1970s ultimately points to the impossibility of general chronologies in terms of state cultural policies in the dance world.

\textbf{Conclusion}

\textsuperscript{220} Letter Lorna Burdsall to E. S. Burdsall, Apr. 7, 1974, Folder 3, Box 1, Burdsall Family Papers, CHC. 
From Spanish dancer Ana María’s letter that opened the chapter to Burdsall’s report that closed it, dancers actively engaged with the state, attempting to eek out a place in the revolutionary order. Beyond ensuring resources and company existence, dancers aspired to impact the wider society. This meant staging Africanist aesthetics, in the case of modern dance and folkloric dance, despite official opposition towards explorations of racial difference. Even as the state demanded a serious moralism and heterosexuality, dancers troubled these norms. Women shook their hips on cabaret stages and defined themselves as serious nationalists. Power holders like Lorna Burdsall and Alicia Alonso tried to protect male dancers from homophobic policies. Male dancers like Eduardo Rivero suggested the flexibility of Cuban manhood with his powerful performances. Defecting male ballet dancers made powerful claims on an international stage against policing citizens. Moreover, after the CNC censored Guerra in 1971, modern dancers resisted marginalization. Choreographers like Rivero, Lastra, and Cuéllar innovated and Burdsall denounced the status quo. These and other instances illustrate how dancers challenged state actions and shifting ideologies, particularly regarding race and racism and the staging gender and sexuality in a revolutionary society. Seeing performance as “a utopian gesture,” Cuban dancers worked to protect and advance their art for the good of society.223

Chapter 4. Ameliorative Gestures:
Teaching Dancers and Dancing Publics

In January 1966 ten thousand students, including those of modern dance, ballet, and theatre from the Escuela Nacional de Arte (ENA, National Art School), physical education programs, and peasant women from rural vocational schools, performed in a mass dance entitled *Solidaridad* (Solidarity) choreographed by U.S. born, Mexican dancer Waldeen de Valencia for the Tricontinental Congress in Havana.¹ According to a twenty-page performance score complete with technical cues, action descriptions, and choreographic sketches, the work featured a storyline “based on the speeches of Comandante Fidel Castro and the words of Patricio Lumumba, Nguyen Van-Troi, etc.”² Cuban actor Sergio Corrieri narrated selections from the political manifestos of the Cuban, African, and Vietnamese leaders, and a chorus responded reiterating certain points for dramatic effect. The dancers performed vignettes that portrayed the long history of colonial and imperial exploitation of workers, peasants, and non-white populations, as well as the more recent mobilizations by these previously victimized peoples. In the climatic finale, the performers united in a “happy” dance of joyful solidarity. As Cubans of different ages and backgrounds followed choreographic directives and moved in unison, they exhibited their discipline, artistic achievements, and revolutionary support in a moment of high political theatre. The event demonstrates how dance offered a strangely fitting medium for socializing Cubans in certain revolutionary values, particularly ideals of education, self-control, and coordination with state projects.

¹ Letter Lorna Burdsall to E. S. Burdsall, Jan. 29, 1966, Folder 2, Box 1, Burdsall Family Papers, CHC.
² Waldeen, “Solidaridad” Performance Score, SA-BNJM.
This chapter examines Cuban dance education, broadly defined, in the 1960s and 1970s. It encompasses children learning dance at schools, cultural centers, and even hospitals, as well as dance appreciation campaigns for audiences and parents of dance students. Starting in the early 1960s, state-backed dance education initiatives professionalized and democratized the form. An expanding system of academies helped to professionalize dance and the *movimiento de aficionados* (amateurs’ movement) democratized it. In the early 1960s, dance education dovetailed with larger efforts to create an informed, civilized society of new men and women. At the end of the decade, dance education objectives shifted, tracking the state’s interest in controlling and disciplining citizens of all ages. With increased Soviet influences in the 1970s,
democratization efforts came to the fore and dance in its various forms became a public good to be enjoyed by all. In the final half of the 1970s, dance leaders highlighted their accomplishments, declaring that Cuba possessed a notable school and knowledgeable dance public. The island had become a place of distinguished dance making and watching. Over the two decades, dance served as a source of ameliorative gestures that the state and dance leaders believed could improve and at times heal Cubans. As dance leaders contributed to larger social engineering projects, they saw themselves as simultaneously furthering their art and benefitting society. They considered a well-informed Cuban public and talented young dancers to be central to ensuring the country’s dance future. This chapter argues that while the state and dance leaders had overlapping interests in furthering dance education, dance leaders determined the nature of dance socialization tactics rather than following a top-down state policy.

The following analysis is organized chronologically. The first section examines dance educational efforts of the early 1960s, which included the founding of professional academies and aficionado programs, as well as professional companies’ efforts to create a public for their art. In this early period, naïve children and ignorant citizens were the focus of educational energies. Dance leaders scoured the island for raw talent; art instructors taught dance to remote communities; and, professional dancers performed for new audiences. These efforts aimed to find new performers, build an informed public, and counter existing homophobic prejudices against male performers. The second section turns to the late 1960s, noting a change in tone from romantic hope to no-nonsense realism. Whereas Cuban political and dance leaders in the early 1960s discussed impressionable children and uninformed publics, in the latter half of the decade they aimed to control wayward youth and audience members. This happened against the backdrop of larger efforts to discipline all sectors of society, a process that culminated in the
early 1970s. Despite previous efforts to counter prejudices, homophobia figured prominently in concerns about dance students and deviance. The third section turns to the ballet programs for young children including those with mental or emotional problems. These initiatives provide insight into persisting concerns about the relationship between dance and sexuality as well as ideas about dance as a positive force in society. The fourth section discusses the renewed focus on the masses in the 1970s. Dancers and government officials reinvigorated the movimiento de aficionados and tried to make dance an art for all through large public presentations and the mass media. Finally, the fifth section examines discourses about a Cuban school of dance, which gained traction in the late 1970s. The section explains what the construct meant for Cuban dancers and what it reflected about Cuban society and culture.

**Armies of Art: Utopic Hopes for Revolutionary Dance Education**

Immediately after 1959, Cuban dancers and the government worked to further dance instruction on the island, building on methodologies and institutions that had been developing since the 1930s. This section examines how utopic discourses and aspirations shaped early dance education projects. This manifested in Fidel Castro’s 1961 promotion of two distinct but related initiatives – art instructors and a national art school. The former aspired to democratize the arts by sending instructors to remote rural communities. The latter aimed to create an art academy for the best, most talented youth in Cuba. Simultaneously, dance leaders hoped to combat “backwards” prejudices against male dancers through curricular changes and public education campaigns. Alongside these efforts, ballet, modern, and folkloric dance companies attempted to attract new audience members. In this early period, dancers and the state posited dance training and patronage as enlightening activities that fostered social transformations.
In 1961, Fidel Castro stated the national significance of Cuban arts education in three major speeches. In the first, a televised roundtable on March 21, 1961, Castro linked the training of *instructores de arte* (art instructors) to creating a professional art academy for talented youth. The former stemmed from the same democratizing energies that created the 1960 Agrarian Reform and the 1961 Literacy Campaign to teach illiterate Cubans of all ages to read. Just as these programs addressed historical inequalities, especially in rural communities, art instructors supplemented this work by introducing Cubans to the arts. In the roundtable, Castro contextualized arts instruction within revolutionary policy. He declared that the government provided families with “free housing, electric light, water, medical services, medicines, the *Círculo Social* [Social Center], and also … instructors of theatre, music, [and] dance.”\(^3\) He emphasized that instructors were different from artists and teachers since they had only rapid, basic training in how to impart their art form to a large number of non-professional students for their casual enjoyment. Castro went on to condemn chicken fighting and gambling and enjoined art instructors to cultivate new habits, tastes, and pastimes in remote populations. Castro also foresaw newly trained art instructors operating all over the country finding “all those children who have true artistic vocation … to come to the National Academy of Art.”\(^4\) In this speech, Castro asserted that artistic democracy and meritocracy worked in coordination. As art instructors (distinct from the better trained teachers or more talented professional dancers) countered backwardness and isolation in the Cuban countryside, they kept their eyes out for new talent. Able youth then had the opportunity to go to Havana to train in a national art academy.

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\(^3\) “Intervención del Dr. Fidel Castro Ruz, Primer Ministro del Gobierno, en la mesa redonda sobre los *Instructores de Arte*” (Mar. 21, 1961), Folder 11, Box 15, Carlos Franqui Collection, Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, Princeton, NJ (CFC).

\(^4\) Ibid.
In his June 1961 “Palabras a los intelectuales” speech, Castro elaborated on these dual efforts. He described how “drama, music, and dance instructors at each cooperative and state farm” helped to facilitate “the artistic works of ordinary men and women.” According to Castro, widespread cultural production would accelerate national progress. “Imagine when there will be 1,000 dance, music, and drama groups throughout the island,” Castro mused. “Imagine what that will mean for cultural advancement.” Along with developmental hopes, Castro discussed the radical implications of a future national arts academy: “Cuba is going to have the most beautiful Academy of Art in the world. Why? Because the academy is going to be located in one of the most beautiful residential districts in the world, where a section of the Cuban bourgeois living in the greatest luxury used to reside…. The schools of music, ballet, theatre, and plastic arts will be in the middle of a golf course, in a dreamlike setting.”

In a legendary encounter, Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, and other guerrilla fighters played golf at a former country club in the luxurious Cubanacán neighborhood of Havana sometime in 1961. As the story goes, during the round, Che playfully suggested building an arts school, free for scholarship students, in the once exclusive setting. Castro liked the idea. Converting the elitist club into a school for artistic creation symbolized the utopic endeavor of radically recreating society. Rather than supporting capitalist privilege the new government made art a priority.

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6 Ibid.
Then, in September 1961 at the first congress of the Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba (UNEAC), Castro informed professional artists and art instructors of their shared responsibility to further arts education. Castro asserted, “All of us, without exception have the role of teachers.” He went on to address the instructors of art in the audience:

Remember that we are the seeds that have to be planted to produce a large crop. And you, the instructors, are the seeds … from which will come … countless artists. You all have to go to choose the boys and girls that will go to the Escuela Nacional de Arte [National Art School, ENA] that the Revolution already is constructing, and that will begin to function next year, at the beginning of the year
and that will have capacity for 3,000 youth … to receive a comprehensive [integral] education.\(^8\)

As scholar Ana Serra points out, in this speech, Castro alluded to biblical parable of the farmer sowing seeds in several places and only those in good soil producing a large crop.\(^9\) In the parable, Jesus is the farmer and the seeds that produce a good crop represent his disciples that believe in his Christian message. Given this allusion, Castro linked art education to spreading and strengthening revolutionary faith and faithfulness. Whether exposing Cubans to professional art, imparting art skills, or teaching scholarship students at ENA, art educators helped to integrate new constituencies into the revolution through the gospel of art, according to Castro.

As part of this push, in April 1961, the Escuela de Instructores de Arte (Art Instructors’ School) opened for students. The dance section of the school comprised of professional dancers preparing new instructors to take their art to all corners of the island. The newspaper reported that approximately 4,500 instructors, evenly distributed between the four branches of visual arts, music, theatre, and dance, started classes at the TNC, but relocated to the Hotels Comodoro (theatre and visual arts) and Hotel Copacabana (dance and music) in the middle of 1961.\(^10\) The program of study included art training and appreciation, literature, social sciences, natural sciences, math, and political ideology.\(^11\) Alberto Alonso and members of his company worked at the Escuela de Instructores de Arte – Alonso, as the first director of the school, and company members, as teachers of folkloric and popular dances as well as basic technique classes in modern dance and ballet. Later Lorna Burdsall, Elfride (known as Elfrida) Mahler, Rodolfo


\(^9\) Serra, 9.


Reyes, and Waldeen de Valencia also taught instructors.12 Mahler and Waldeen had come to Cuba soon after 1959 from the U.S. and Mexico respectively to contribute to dance developments on the island. Both worked with Cuban dance professionals before and after teaching dance instructors. Graduates of the instructors’ school, Teresa González and Graciela Chao, not only worked in rural communities, but also eventually became teachers at ENA and joined the professional company, Conjunto Folklórico Nacional. The Escuela de Instructores de Arte, then, provided dance leaders an opportunity to engage with young talent and experiment with dance pedagogy, while giving students, who later became professional performers and teachers, access to quality dance education.

Instructors and their students, non-professional dancers called aficionados (amateurs), became emblematic of revolutionary advances. An article in Bohemia, entitled, “Youth on all fronts, Army of Art,” rhapsodized about the art instructors: “Cuban youth occupy a place in the forefront of the struggle for building a new social system without exploiters or exploited…. And one of these fronts is that of culture … and the development of art…. [N]othing is more beautiful than the sight of these young men and women who are trained as art instructors, children of our workers and peasants, humble sons of the people.”13 An article on a folkloric dance group formed by workers in the eastern part of the island proclaimed, “for the first time in Cuba the working class can develop its artistic vocation.”14 During a 1964 festival for aficionados, groups of workers and farmers traveled to Havana to perform. They reportedly partook in “a healthy entertainment” that allowed them to “join our professional artists … in their daily fight for better

Art instructors helped to create a “healthy,” artistic populace, and aficionado students contributed to a nationwide “fight for better art.”

Along with non-professional dance, professional training institutions, like the Escuela Nacional de Arte (ENA, also known as Cubanacán, after the neighborhood) contributed to contemporary art crusades. The government commissioned the Cuban architect Ricardo Porro Hidalgo and the Italians Roberto Gottardi and Vittorio Garatti to design the new academy in 1961. Responding to the natural environment, material shortages, and ebullience of the early 1960s, the architects created buildings formed by cheap and durable Catalan vaults that snaked through the hilly landscape. According to Alma Guillermoprieto, who spent several months in 1970 teaching at ENA, the buildings resembled an “African village,” “a great pagan temple or the lunar observatory of some past or future civilization.” The school’s location and idiosyncratic designs prompted one Bohemia article to declare: “Cuba will be in possession … of the most modern and best equipped School of Art of all the continent.” The still under construction school opened for music, ballet, drama, and visual art students in 1962. The Department of Modern Dance was added in 1965.

Although ENA received a lot of attention, the ballet academy, Academia Municipal de Ballet de la Habana, was the first institution in a national system of professional dance instruction. The teachers Josefina Elósegui and Anna Leontieva, as well as Fernando Alonso, played leading roles in organizing the school after 1959. The original Academia Municipal was founded in 1948 with Elósegui as a ballet teacher and school sub-director. She also advised the civic association Patronato Pro-Ballet Municipal, founded by the mothers of students in 1949.

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with the objective “to foment the development and aggrandizement of the Academia Municipal de Ballet de la Habana.” Elósegui was involved in political and cultural developments outside the school as well. In March 1951 Elósegui attended one of the first meetings of the Sociedad Cultural Nuestro Tiempo and served with Ramiro Guerra as a “vocal” for the “Sección de Ballet.” After 1959, she continued to administer the Academia Municipal de Ballet, and in August 1960 the municipal government appointed her director of the school. Her previous political and professional connections likely helped her secure the position. In September 1960, she directed auditions for teachers. She hired dancers from the Ballet de Cuba and teachers from the ballet school of Pro-Arte Musical. Originally the Academia Municipal occupied studios in Old Havana (at the streets Rastro and Belascoain) and at Leontieva’s former studios in Miramar. The school consolidated and in 1961 began relocating to a new building at L and 19 streets in Vedado, where it continues to operate today. Also that year, Leontieva along with Fernando Alonso, designed a detailed curriculum for ballet students, complete with the ballet steps and milestones for each of the nine years. The activities of Elósegui, Leontieva, and Alonso demonstrate how many administrators and pedagogues contributed to organizing an already vibrant, but dispersed, ballet instructional system in Cuba.

18 Exp. 3358, Leg. 172, Fondo: Registro de Asociaciones, ANC.
19 Exp. 22684, Leg. 1080, Fondo: Registro de Asociaciones, ANC.
20 Dancers Luis Trápaga and Menia Méndez and musician José Ardevol served as the judges for the audition. Dancers with Ballet de Cuba chosen as teachers included Martha Mahr, José Parés, Carlota Peyrera, and Enrique Martínez. Adolína Suárez was a Pro-Arte teacher chosen. Folder “Municipio de la Habana, Academia Municipal de Ballet, Ballet de Cámara, 1960-1961,” Fondo: Ministerio de Educación, Sección de Fondo: Dirección de Cultura, MINCULT.
Alongside these efforts, the government made official its support for ballet education. In the March 1961 Law 742, the Ministry of Education declared the need to organize professional ballet instruction for selected scholarship students. The law asserted:

According to the interests and abilities of the people of Cuba to dance in all its forms, which is evident from the traditional dances of the black cultural heritage of the country to the existence of world-famous dancers, there still remains the fact that in Cuba no true school exists for the formation of professional dancers, it is clear that Cuban culture urgently demands the establishment of a model center for teaching Ballet.²³

The Ministry of Education pledged to support ballet instruction at the Academia Municipal de Ballet. The law stipulated that training would include classes in dance technique, music, and languages, weekend visits to museums, art expositions, theater, other “activities that contribute to cultivating … artistic appreciation,” and nighttime conferences “about aesthetic themes and problems of a national interest that contribute to artistic and ideological formation.”²⁴ By asserting that “no true school” or “model center” existed, the law downplayed pre-1959 dance education and left ambiguous what constituted a “true” or “model” school. Regardless, the law asserted the significance of such an institution. Young ballet dancers would begin at the academy in Vedado and move on to ENA for middle and high school level ballet training.

While the government supported dance education, dance leaders gave programs and institutions content and meaning. For instance, a document produced by the Academia Municipal laid out the “central ideas” guiding the school. This included finding students with the character and physical traits necessary for success, providing scholarships for talented students from “the


²⁴ Ibid.
poor population,” and attempting to address “the lack of male dancers.” The Ballet de Cuba lacked Cuban male dancers and had to hire Puerto Rican, U.S., and Soviet male dancers to partner Alicia in leading roles. Although never explicitly stated, homophobia and assumptions about dance as an effeminate art deterred families from allowing their sons to dance. As a 1961 INRA article put it, the “erroneous prejudice of some families” impeded the development of Cuban male dancers.

To begin putting these objectives into practice, the school held an audition to select students. In July 1961, over nine hundred children auditioned for 250 scholarships to study at the academy located at L and 19. According to the school’s 1961 bylaws, children had to have long legs, neck, and torso, flexible feet, the ability to raise their legs high, imitate, jump, express themselves, and respond to music and rhythm. The first year was a conditional one, asserted Article 6 of the same bylaws. Students had to prove that they possessed the physical ability, discipline, and “other essential characteristics indispensible to the profession” to remain in the program. Choosing the most promising youth had important political ramifications, according to dance educators, who described the school forming “dance artists and citizens who can put their professional capacities to the service of the country.” Instructors reaffirmed the militant role of ballet dancers in their discourses and even clothing. Consider for instance the picture of Fernando Alonso teaching a ballet class in military fatigues (Figure 15). In the same guerrilla fighter clothing worn by government leaders, he projected authority and demonstrated ballet

26 Ana Pardo, “Inicia Cuba una nueva escuela de ballet,” INRA (Oct. 1961), 64.
27 Ibid., 61.
dancers’ battle readiness. A school document confirmed this by stating that teachers demanded “rigorous discipline” and taught children “the cheerful sacrifice of personal egoism when collective work requires it.”

Figure 15. The caption reads: “The dynamic Fernando Alonso, militiaman, director general of the Ballet, does ballet steps in the middle of the salon.” Photograph by Osvaldo Salas. Printed in INRA, August 1961, 93.

Along with the open audition, ballet leaders selected promising young boys from orphanages. This tactic built upon precedents. For centuries, governments from different parts of

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29 Ibid.
the world had enjoined orphan boys in various state projects for practical and ideological reasons. For instance, monarchies throughout Western Europe had enlisted orphan boys as sailors and soldiers well into the nineteenth century. In the same period, boys with talent in singing remained in the orphanage until they could be ordained as priests. Orphans with poor behavior were sent to distant colonies as punishment or to serve the Crown as forced colonizers. The ideologies underpinning the fate of orphans changed over time. For instance, historian Ann Twinam notes how a shift occurred in the eighteenth century as the Spanish monarch went from viewing orphans as “cannon fodder for the Spanish navy” to “fictive offspring of the monarch to be protected and valued.” Along with European practices of “adopting” orphan boys into state institutions, Russia had a history of channeling orphans into the performing arts. The Bolshoi Ballet had its origins in the ballet classes that began in the Moscow Orphanage in 1773 and trained the company’s first soloists.

Like these precedents, Cuban dance leaders chose young orphan boys to serve as ballet laborers. An internal memo dated August 15, 1961, listed sixteen boys between ten and thirteen years old from the orphanage “Hogar Granma,” who received scholarships to study ballet. The list included two names that became celebrated: Jorge Esquivel Estrada and Pablo Moré Solis. According to Esquivel and his teacher Joaquin Banegas decades later, the school auditioned

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31 Coates, 128-129.
34 Letter Josefina Elosegui to Rolando López del Amo, Folder “Municipio La Habana Academia Municipal de Ballet, Ballet de Cámara,” Fondo: Ministerio de Educación, Sección de Fondo, Dirección General de Cultura, MINCULT.
around sixty boys, and Esquivel was among the thirty-five chosen.\textsuperscript{35} Banegas and his colleagues observed the boys doing exercises from gymnastics, fencing, boxing, and other movements that provided useful information on their physical capabilities. Once chosen, the boys were housed in the nice Havana neighborhood of Miramar and were taken to various cultural activities like the movies, concerts, and dance performances to further their “cultural formation.” However, not all students were pleased by their recruitment. For instance, one boy acted out and hurt his leg when he kicked a mirror. According to Banegas:

[T]he student was impossible for a time … and to win him over, I made him my assistant, especially to illustrate the positions of the arms. The boy, with rare talent, captured and assimilated the most difficult combinations and each day his uncommon poise and elegance became more notable…. The restless character was none other than Jorge Esquivel, today the most outstanding male figure of Cuban ballet.\textsuperscript{36}

As Esquivel’s story shows, the process of recruiting young boys from orphanages had ambiguous implications. On the one hand, boys had secure housing, food, and job training. Moreover, for better or worse, the process disciplined “restless” souls like Esquivel. On the other hand, boys had little choice in their fate.

Along with this recruiting effort, dance leaders implemented curricular changes to counter presumptions about dance as effeminate. For instance, Article 10 of the Academia Municipal de Ballet bylaws asserted that boys and girls would train separately starting in the second year of study, and boys would have a male teacher. This ensured that boys did not “imitate” girls’ gestures, as clarified in a note following the article.\textsuperscript{37} Moreover, boys took gymnastics and sports along with daily dance technique classes, thus “providing them with a


\textsuperscript{37} “Escuela Ballet de Habana, Reglamento,” Folder “Municipio La Habana Academia Municipal de Ballet, Ballet de Cámara,” Fondo: Ministerio de Educación, Sección de Fondo, Dirección General de Cultura, MINCULT.
virile stamp,” according to a 1961 INRA article on the school.\(^{38}\) In addition, the school planned to launch a propaganda campaign to advertise how dance allowed men to express and develop their manliness.\(^ {39}\) Fernando Alonso and Anna Leontieva, who wrote the document, never clarified what form this propaganda would take.

The campaign to eliminate prejudices against male dancers had revolutionary implications, according to supporters. A 1961 INRA article about the ballet school celebrated, “The Socialist Revolution has challenged myths and many prejudices that existed previously in Cuba. One of them made families stop their sons from starting to study dance at a young age. Today, all children with vocation and aptitude study ballet.”\(^ {40}\) Change was slower in the provinces, however. In 1964, ballet schools in Santiago and Holguín in the eastern part of the island had only a few male students, one Bohemia article noted. Teachers interviewed for the article presumed that this problem would go away with the “education of our audience [and] the liquidation of remnants of the past.”\(^ {41}\) A 1964 article in the woman’s magazine, Mujeres, profiled Havana ballet schools and suggested that talented male students would undermine old prejudices. Accompanying the article, a photo of ballet boys had a caption with a quote by teacher Joaquin Banegas, who said that the students were learning “the essential qualities to contribute to the technical, spiritual, and moral development of the new society.”\(^ {42}\) (Figure 16) In the photo, boys exude order and discipline. Uniform in clothing and pose, muscles taught, and organized in straight lines, they appear poised and ready for action, waiting for the signal to charge. These images and accompanying text contended that dance teachers revolutionized

\(^{38}\) Ana Pardo, “Inicia Cuba una nueva escuela de ballet,” INRA (Oct. 1961), 64.


\(^{40}\) Ana Pardo, “Inicia Cuba una nueva escuela de ballet,” INRA (Oct. 1961), 66.


instruction to cultivate and bolster masculinity within the form, thereby “solving” longstanding prejudices. Such statements, of course, privileged heteronormativity and institutionalized rather than eradicated problematic mandates about gender and sexuality.

Figure 16. Young boys in a ballet class. The caption reads, “… essential qualities to contribute to the technical, spiritual, and moral development of a new society …” Photograph by O. Salas. Printed in Mujeres, August 1964, 79.

While parents resisted enrolling young boys in ballet classes, they wanted their daughters to dance. Mothers were enamored of “the ethereal figure of the ballerina” and hoped that their daughters would “dedicate themselves to this art,” as noted in the same Mujeres article. Banegas elaborated, “almost all young girls dream of being a ballerina…. In Cuba there is a

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43 Ibid., 78.
tradition for girls, because we have great dancers led by our own Alicia Alonso.”

Mothers dreaming of ballerina daughters, young girls aspiring to dance, and boys remaining outside of oneiric frameworks were not unique to Cuba. For instance, in October 1960, *Bohemia* reprinted a translation of an article written by the British critic Arnold Haskell addressed to mothers in England who wanted their daughters to dance. In “5 consejos a las madres” (5 tips for mothers), Haskell said body shape, age, character, diet, education, and dedication determined a young girl’s potential for success as a dancer. Like their British counterparts, Cuban mothers valued ballet as a noble vocation specifically for their daughters.

As ballet instructors reached out to families and trained young boys in an ostensibly masculine way, professional dancers also attempted to address public apathy or misunderstanding of staged performance. They did this through film and performances for unfamiliar publics. For instance, the Ballet Nacional de Cuba (BNC) collaborated with the film institute ICAIC to create documentaries about their work. *Alicia en los países maravillosos* (1962) followed the ballet company during its first international tour through socialist countries. The film not only promoted ballet but also political messages. For instance, it featured footage of Fernando Alonso teaching class in military fatigues, dancers parading through Soviet streets lined with huge, cheering crowds, and Alicia saying that Cuba, as seen during the tour, was not alone. Additionally, the BNC and ICAIC produced *Giselle* (1963), which made the ballet widely available and easier to disseminate. Ballet dancers also began performing for audiences outside the capital to expose more Cubans to their work. In 1964, the BNC presented *Avanzada* to Cuban soldiers in Guantánamo. This production supposedly contrasted with the entertainment

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44 Ibid., 78.
47 “Giselle: Ballet o filmación?” *Bohemia* (Dec. 6, 1963), 18-23.

Modern dance leaders also tried to acclimate viewers to the relatively new form. For instance, in 1960, the modern dance pioneer Ramiro Guerra explained that he created dances with a plot and narrative because he believed that they were more accessible to general audiences. In an interview for Lunes de Revolución, he stated, “I am not against abstract dances, on the contrary. But if now I insist on dance with a plot … it is because we are creating a public, and for this public it is easier for them to understand modern dance based on a plot. The public

Figure 17. Alicia Alonso in Avanzada, 1964, in Guantánamo, Cuba. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Museo Nacional de la Danza, Havana, Cuba
reacts better.”⁴⁹ The 1962 film *Historia de un ballet* discussed in the previous chapter also helped to “explain” the new art form. In subsequent years, the company screened the film during lecture demonstrations to help audiences understand the origins and objectives of Cuban modern dance.

To further publicize its work, the Conjunto Nacional de Danza Moderna (CNDM) went on national tours to farms, factories, and work centers in the early 1960s. Starting in 1966, they also volunteered at the sugar harvests and performed for workers.⁵⁰ Guerra described a 1963 performance at a farm outside of Havana as instructive for dancers and audience members:

Dance that we present to farmers has a lot to do with teaching. We, after presentations, have a half hour of conversation with them. And you should have seen the things they said and what they taught us! There is no doubt that it was, for us, a rich experience. The farmers commented directly, precisely, because they saw, in its simplest forms, something of their quotidian endeavors. They located immediately expressions of sadness, love, fight, action, in an amazing way.⁵¹

At a work center in 1965, the CNDM showed parts of dances, screened *Historia de un ballet*, and took questions from the audience. The goal of attracting new publics seemed to work. An article about the event recounted how Lorna Burdsall, then director of the company, “explained the numbers … and offered general concepts about contemporary dance. The workers asked questions that were amply answered…. The workers applauded a lot and said they would go to Teatro Mella to see … the new choreography of the Conjunto.”⁵² In 1966, the company performed throughout the country for an estimated 27,000 spectators, which according to a *Granma* article, demonstrated the company’s relevance to “audiences distinct from the Havana public.” It also showed how provincial populations could appreciate dance: “The agricultural worker, farmer, citizen of rural communities, understands all expressions of art…. When the man

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⁵² Clipping: “Danza moderna a los centros de trabajo,” *Hoy* (Sept. 19, 1965), Folder Prensa 1965, DCC.
of the countryside applauds a dance phrase, his perception is not dulled by ‘dilettante’ prejudices, and communication is better, more pure.”53 The fact that provincial Cubans, the “pure” parts of society, enjoyed modern dance illustrated its poignancy and broad relevance. Though based on problematic assumptions about rural populations as ignorant, these statements reveal how modern dancers worked to develop a wider audience.

While modern and ballet dancers tried to make their work accessible, folkloric dance seemed to attract Cubans without problem. According to Isabel Monal in a later interview, there were so many people trying to attend the first performance by the Department of Folklore of the TNC in 1960 that they did not all fit.54 A large public also appeared to patronize the CFN performances, as revealed by the 1964 film, Nosotros, la música, which includes scenes of the bustling theatre lobby before the show. People mill around and socialize, including famous figures like the singer Bola de Nieve. Several audience members go to the front of the auditorium and put their heads under the curtain to talk to family and friends getting ready on stage. The casual, celebratory mood suggests that CFN performances were an enjoyable, regular part of many Cubans’ lives. Although these scenes may have been constructed for the film, witnesses later corroborated the ambiance presented in Nosotros, la música. Years later, visiting U.S. dancer Muriel Manings jotted in her diary: “saw the professional co[mpany] – Conjunto Folklórico Nacional – very theatrical … audience response great, truly pack[ed] theatre!”55

In the early 1960s, political and cultural leaders hoped to make Cubans of all ages dancers and dance patrons. Fidel Castro and the press described dance as a socializing agent, cultivating the qualities of hard work, discipline, and civility. Dance leaders also emphasized

54 Sánchez León, 132.
how increasing the number of male dance students challenged “backwards” presumptions about the effeminacy of dance. Of course, in the process, dance leaders exhibited their own homophobia, as they demanded that young boys perform in a supposedly masculine manner. Regardless, professional dancers believed that their art enlightened unrefined Cubans and spread the seeds of revolutionary idealism. This not only contributed to the political effort of remaking society, but also furthered dance aspirations to integrate staged performances into revolutionary culture. The multifaceted army of art, made up of dance instructors, teachers, students, and professionals, battled underdevelopment with dance to realize a brighter future.

**Disciplining and Controlling Wayward Dancing Publics and Students**

In contrast to the idyllic hues characterizing dance projects in the early 1960s, dance education at the end of the decade became sterner in tone. Economic failures of the late 1960s led to radical moves like the 1968 Revolutionary Offensive and mass mobilization for ten million tons of sugar in the 1970 harvest. As discussed in the previous chapter, the state also policed and targeted “anti-socials” in the late 1960s. This included men showing signs of “nonconformity,” whether physical traits like long hair, western fashions like tight pants and sandals, or behaviors like homosexuality or questioning the revolution. Within this context, dance leaders worked to understand and control wayward dance publics and dancing youth. From the late 1960s through the early 1970s, they encouraged greater appreciation and etiquette among audiences and discipline among rebellious dance students. This culminated in the 1971 Primer Congreso Nacional de Educación y Cultura and subsequent redoubled efforts to address juvenile deviance.

In many ways, the initiatives of the early 1960s to create a dance public had succeeded. During the 1967 Festival Internacional de Ballet (International Ballet Festival) in Havana,
foreign observers found avid Cuban audiences surprising and impressive. For instance, British critic Arnold Haskell reported in the Portuguese dance publication *O Ballet*: “One can almost compare it to the delirium of the multitude for soccer or, in our days, for pop singers. The ovations in the spectacles are colossal … the technique and style of the dancers are the object of heated discussions in intermissions with a general knowledge of dance that can do nothing less than surprise.” Moreover, Haskell noted that when a ballet performance aired on television, one could hear the music from outside along with animated conversations about the dancers.\(^{56}\)

Another article on the 1967 festival described the difficulty of getting tickets, attesting to the popularity of ballet: “Obtaining tickets to see the invited and Cuban dancers in any show of the Festival was difficult. Ballet lovers formed lines for three days – and nights – outside the García Lorca theatre.” Fortunately, seeing the performances did not solely depend on a coveted ticket. The article continued, “this festival was not limited to the theatre where they performed…. [T]he shows were televised to bring the festival to the entire country.”\(^{57}\) As Cubans watched and commented on ballet, they surprised foreigners because in other parts of the world a small elite rather than the masses patronized ballet.

While impressed by Cuban audiences, outside observers also found their effusions at times obnoxious. In an interview with *Juventud Rebelde* during the 1967 festival, Haskell conveyed, “The public with so much applause kills the art and interrupts the succession of movement. The majority of artists like to finish their movements without interruption.”\(^{58}\) In a roundtable discussion reproduced in a special supplement of *Granma*, Haskell again berated the audience, saying that their enthusiasm “has tended to get out of control.” While the popularity of

\(^{56}\) Arnold Haskell, “Algunas Impresiones sobre el Festival Internacional de la Habana Exclusivo para ‘O ballet’ #7” (1967), 20-21, SA-BNJM.


ballet in Cuba was a positive development, according to Haskell, the passion now “should be cultivated [and] educated, to protect the treasure.” Bulgarian critic Teodosi Teodosiev chimed in: “The night of May 30 the conduct of the public surprised me…. It was the height of an anti-artistic delirium…. The love of dance should serve to help and not spoil the art.”

Along with foreign observers, local artists and administrators noted a lack of audience etiquette. Historian Miguel Cabrera recalled an incident in 1970 that demonstrated the need to “educate” the Cuban public. Students attended a special ballet showing “without previous preparation.” During one part of the performance, students started shouting, and in another a student “unfamiliar with the laws of Newton, threw a paper airplane to a friend on the other side of theatre,” just when Alicia appeared in the opening pose of the ballet, Carmen. Raúl Castro heard about the incident and sent flowers and a note apologizing to her. According to Cabrera, Alicia said that dance leaders, not the students, were to blame since they had not “offered artistic education to those people.” The episode supposedly inspired the BNC to organize a series of performances for students. According to these narrators, Cubans had much to learn about watching dance.

Whether or not this anecdote, related in an interview decades later, actually happened, two reports illustrate that dance leaders and cultural bureaucrats of the late 1960s were interested in better understanding Cuban dance publics. One report has no date or authors; the other has both date (July 1968) and compilers (Victoria Peñalver, Marcia Castillo, Miriam Cataneo, and Orlando Nodal). Since the two studies were stapled together and share similar structures and appearances, they likely came from the same period. The undated study looked at how

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60 Miguel Cabrera in José Luis Estrada Betancourt, De la semilla al frutos: la compañía (Havana: Casa Editorial Abril, 2008), 129-130.
61 Untitled reports, SA-BNJM.
frequently Cubans of different ages and professions from the provinces of “Las Villas” (Villa Clara), Camagüey, and Oriente, attended dance performances. Across the provinces, occupations, and ages, Cubans outside of the capital overwhelmingly reported that they did not attend performances because there were no shows in their area.62 The second report on Cuban audiences from July 1968 focused on the practices of dancing publics in San Antonio de los Baños, a town in Artemisa province located southwest of Havana. The first part of the study examined the types of dance performances that urban, rural, and school age populations enjoyed. Of the study’s 377 participants, 341 liked watching dance performances and only 36 did not. The study also noted, “The type of dance they prefer is predominantly ballet, with the exception of the school population, which prefers modern dance.”63 A very low percentage of respondents liked folkloric dance. Interestingly, the study also examined whether the locals enjoyed dancing themselves and, if so, what type of dance. The report found that while high school students and the rural population enjoyed dancing, urban dwellers disliked it. The authors hypothesized that women in urban areas had to work outside jobs on top of “domestic obligations,” leaving little free time, which they did not like to use for dance. In general adults preferred the danzón and bolero while young people liked popular dances such as the “monkey” and “yé-yé,” a type of pop music that originated in Europe in the late 1950s. These findings suggest that in addition to a talking public, Cuba had a dancing one. The report on San Antonio de Baños concluded, “San Antonio de los Baños, has demonstrated itself to be a musical and dancing pueblo. This natural condition can improve further, elevating its level.”64

While suggestive, these reports provide only fleeting insight into local and national dance objectives. For instance, the partial documents never indicate what institution commissioned the

62 Untitled report, SA-BNJM.
63 Victoria Peñalver, Marcia Castillo, Miriam Cataneo, and Orlando Nodal, Untitled report, SA-BNJM.
64 Ibid.
study. The authors also never articulate their standards and goals. Was the aim to have the entire population enjoy all kinds of dance as a spectator and participant? This seems possible since the second report propounded that “Rogelio Martínez Furé, who is presently the advisor of the Conjunto Folklórico” should advise on how to expand dance practices and address the disinterest in folkloric dance in San Antonio de los Baños, among other issues.\(^{65}\) Even though the motivations and goals, not to mention the impact, of the studies remain unclear, they still evidence that the dance practices of regular Cubans interested officials in the late 1960s.

Given these priorities, dance demonstrations and seminars became more common at the end of the 1960s. During and following the 1967 international ballet festival, the BNC sponsored lectures on dance history, theory, and analysis given by visiting critics Teodosiev and Haskell.\(^{66}\) A relatively small group of dance experts, fans, and students attended. For instance, an article on Haskell’s seminar recorded that the room was filled with “teachers and dancers … of diverse ballet schools that operate in Havana, Santiago de Cuba, Camagüey and Cienfuegos, Cuban intellectuals and artists, writers, art critics, journalists, and students of ballet.” Young girls sat on the floor of the lecture hall, listening avidly and taking notes in their notebooks, the article reported. Also in attendance were notable figures such as the singer Bola de Nieve and the Soviet ballerina Evgeniia Klemetsaia.\(^{67}\)

In 1968, the BNC extended this educational reach to non-experts. That year, the company created “an artistic brigade,” under the direction of the Sección Sindical del Ballet Nacional (Syndicate Section of the National Ballet) charged with giving choreographic demonstrations and lectures about ballet. The first performance demonstration took place on

\(^{65}\) Ibid.


\(^{67}\) “Curso sobre ballet del Prof. Haskell,” *La Marina* (Jan. 27, 1968).
June 11, 1968 for nine hundred students of the University of Havana. From June through December 1968 and then again in June and July of 1969, the group gave a total of eleven demonstrations to factories and schools. A series of reports for the CNC President on the events, written by ballerina and co-director of the program, Silvia Marichal, provide some insight into the objectives and outcomes of this effort. For instance, in a report dated June 18, 1968, Marichal wrote that ballet administrator Sara Pascual gave a lecture to some four hundred workers about world ballet history and “contemporary ballet in Cuba … signaling the importance of this art within national culture. She also spoke about the school of ballet at Cubanacán, its students, characteristics, and the development of new teachers, dancers, and choreographers.”

Then there was a technical demonstration by a dancer with the BNC and two students from Cubanacán, including Pablo Moré (mentioned earlier because he was recruited from an orphanage). At the end of the event, the ballet dancers handed out tickets for the upcoming performance at Teatro García Lorca in Havana. According to a report by Marichal from July 10, 1968, the BNC performed at a textile factory for around eighty workers, who “showed curiosity” about the topics discussed. In October 1968, Marichal wrote that in a lecture demonstration for some two hundred factory workers, the dance brigade discussed: “the importance of attending the Theatre as a means of cultural development.”

Along with performances in factories and schools, dancers coordinated with other institutions to sponsor dance appreciation seminars. In October 1968, the BNC collaborated with

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70 Ibid.
UNESCO on a seminar about the history of Cuban ballet. In 1969, the University of Havana sponsored a public education course on dance appreciation taught by Ramiro Guerra. The three-week session (April 21 – May 12) took place Mondays and Thursdays from eight to ten in the evening at the Julio A. Mella building in Vedado. In an interview about the course, Guerra said that people failed to realize the levels of preparation and knowledge needed to appreciate dance: “The public in general does not believe it obligatory to read and inform themselves about dance…. One has to inform oneself to understand it better. People inform themselves about the cosmos, space flights, I believe they also have to find out about what dance is.” The themes covered included religious, recreational, and theatrical dances, choreography, the dance profession, the relationship between music, visual arts, and dance, and the role of the mass media in dance appreciation, or as a course description put it, “the conquest of a dance public: film, television, and mass theatre.” The term “conquest” reflects the more muscular policy of dance education of the late 1960s in contrast to the first half of the decade.

Along with audiences, young students in the Department of Modern Dance of ENA became the focus of disciplining energies in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Several institutional hurdles made it difficult to inspire and manage modern dance students. For instance, when the Department of Modern Dance began, there were not enough modern dance teachers in Cuba. As a result, foreign dancers and teachers, both temporary and permanent residents of Cuba, began teaching at ENA. The Mexican choreographer Waldeen de Valencia, who choreographed Solidaridad, served as the first director of the modern dance department of ENA from its opening in 1965 until 1966 when she returned to Mexico. Starting in 1966 Elfrida Mahler, a U.S.

74 Clipping: Bertha Recio, “Curso Sobre Apreciación de la Danza,” UNKNOWN (Apr. 21, 1969), Folder Prensa 1969, DCC.
75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
dancer and communist who had moved to Cuba with her husband in 1959, became director. Mahler worked hard to recruit teachers for the school. In 1967 she invited Lorna Burdsall and the Mexican dancer and choreographer Elena Noriega, both working with the CNDM, to teach.\textsuperscript{77} Mahler also found teachers in the U.S., including the Mexican-born, New York dancer Alma Guillermoprieto and the New York native Muriel Manings. Only twenty years old, Guillermoprieto had almost no teaching experience; however, her Spanish and training in Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham techniques made her a natural candidate when Mahler searched major New York studios for teachers. Though Manings spoke limited Spanish, she had taught for many years at the New Dance Group Studio among other places, making her a seasoned teacher in her forties when she traveled to Cuba.\textsuperscript{78}

Historical traces and memories reveal that modern dance students had poor training but great passion in 1970. Guillermoprieto recalled students having technical faults. They were “surprisingly weak in the torso” and had other “bad habits” as a result of training that she called “criminally insufficient.”\textsuperscript{79} In a journal that Manings kept during her months in Cuba, she called the students “really quite fantastic,” but blamed daily classes for stressing straight technique and failing to prepare students for “lyrical movement, big movement,” outside of mechanical routines.\textsuperscript{80} However, both Manings and Guillermoprieto praised students for their love of dance and folkloric dancing abilities. Manings attended a small performance by her students and reflected, “like performers they came thru [sic] with things you don’t see in class.”\textsuperscript{81} Guillermoprieto caught glimmers of students’ abilities in the final part of one class when

\textsuperscript{77} Burdsall, \textit{More than Just a Footnote}, 159.
\textsuperscript{78} Finding Aid, 3, 5, MM-WKC, LOC.
\textsuperscript{79} Guillermoprieto, 45, 52.
\textsuperscript{81} Manings, “Journal Cuba 1970,” Jun. 29, 1970, Folder 18, Box 4, MM-WKC, LOC.
combinations moved through space on a diagonal. She wrote decades later, “They threw themselves into the movement, fearless and exalted, arms beating the air, leaping with all their might, their faces filled with emotion.”82 The ENA students also impressed Guillermoprieto and Manings in their folkloric dance classes with Teresa González.83 Recalling González’s class, Guillermoprieto wrote that students “might not have my technique, but they have another one, and in the performance I had just seen, they were true artists.”84 In her journal, Manings complimented the students’ energy and abilities in the folkloric dance classes she had observed.85

While passionate, students sometimes acted out, probably in response to the generally poor morale of the modern dance department of ENA in the late 1960s. In her 2001 memoir, Lorna Burdsall recalled arriving to teach evening classes at ENA only to find the studios plunged in darkness because, in her words, “a lazy student who didn’t feel like taking class that night [had] switch[ed] off the breakers hoping that for lack of electricity, the class would be cancelled.” However, she and Elena Noriega taught an even more challenging class in the dark. Burdsall recalled, “I would drive [Elena] home and then, over coffee and cigarettes, stay up too late analyzing the many problems of the school and the company.”86 Guillermoprieto described a scandalous rebellion that took place in 1970. According to her, unsupervised younger students vandalized their dormitory by spreading excrement on the walls and scraping obscene words and drawings into the filth. One distraught administrator supposedly asked, “This is what the school, the Revolution, represents for these children? … Do the children we chose from the countryside

82 Guillermoprieto, 46.
84 Guillermoprieto, 58.
86 Burdsall, More than Just a Footnote, 159.
to give them the very best, the guajiritos who we thought must feel pride and love for their school, hate us so much that they cover everything with shit?“

Older students posited that the younger ones had been sent to ENA unwillingly by families that wanted one less mouth to feed. The students had misbehaved because they were unhappy.

Whether the incident actually happened remains an open question. Guillermoprieto’s direct quotations undoubtedly came from her imagination since the memoir was written over thirty years after her visit. Moreover, Guillermoprieto’s account contains dramatizations, raising doubt as well. Manings had left Cuba and no other record has verified the event. Nevertheless, the melancholy, uncertain environment that Guillermoprieto depicted in the Department of Modern Dance at ENA likely contained elements of truth. A possible barometer of this can be found in matriculation rates, which dropped from thirty-seven new students in 1966-1967 to twenty-nine in 1969-1970, twenty-four in 1970-1971, and eleven in 1971-72 before rebounding for the next decade and a half.

Moreover accounts suggest that the souring atmosphere partially resulted from frustrations facing the broader field of modern dance. In her memoir, Guillermoprieto recounted students worrying over their professional future. At one point, students noted that the CNDM did not have space for all the graduates of the school. What would they do then? During a school meeting, a student complained that given the mediocre scholastics at ENA, in case of injury he would only be able to secure work in the sugar cane fields or construction projects. Additionally, as discussed in the previous chapter, in the 1960s, modern dancers felt that the

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87 Guillermoprieto, 218-219.
88 Ibid., 219-220.
90 Guillermoprieto, 74.
91 Ibid., 237-238.
government privileged ballet at their expense. Manings sensed these tensions and recorded in her journal, “Strong rivalry exists between ballet & modern.”\(^92\) In the early 1970s, Lorna Burdsall confirmed, “the fact that the Conjunto de Danza Moderna had little support and prestige made the work of the teachers at the Escuela Nacional de Danza Moderna very difficult.” She elaborated that the administration of ENA “prohibited visits by students to the Conjunto [Nacional de Danza Moderna] and dancers of the Conjunto to the Escuela, explaining that the ‘professional’ groups did not have correct morals.” The same rule did not apply to ballet dancers, according to Burdsall, as students of the ballet school were allowed to interact with the BNC. The low morale of the professional modern dance company adversely affected students who “lacked motivation and reason for choosing this art as a career.”\(^93\)

Moreover, prejudices against dancing men also affected modern dance students. In an essay published in a 1971 collection on arts education, Lorna Burdsall discussed the importance of dance in childhood development. Burdsall contended that male participation in modern dance provided a path toward eradicating longstanding presumptions about dance and sexuality. She wrote, “the other important reason for modern dance in the education of children, is to eliminate as fast as possible the great prejudices that have existed for many years against the man that dances. We should remember that in primitive societies the most virile men danced and that all the arts form an integral part of life.”\(^94\) She concluded that modern dance served “not only as a national artistic expression, but also plays an important role in the education of the Cuban pueblo in its current historical moment.”\(^95\) Modern dance, according to Burdsall, was a corrective

\(^95\) Ibid.
medium to address longstanding misconceptions about male dancers. Masculine qualities inherent to modern dance supposedly contrasted to effeminate ballet.

Perhaps as a result of these professional challenges and prejudices, modern dance students put up with harsh criticism and humiliation. Both Manings in her journal and Guillermoprieto in her memoir describe attending an autocritico (self-criticism) session during their time at ENA. The autocritico shocked Manings. In her journal, she reflected on administrators telling students that:

[T]he revolution demands … students … to be militant, diligent, enlightened, etc. For me some of the criticism was very harsh. Those students who may be the most creative & fearless were roughly dealt with in all areas. Accused of “liberal tendencies” in relation to their criticism of curriculum – or in relation to their companions outside – homosexual attitudes or religious attitudes. Each student’s marks were recited & criticism of work in all areas discussed by both admin[istrators], faculty & students. Some of the reactions were very emotional (when areas of a personal nature was [sic] discussed). On the whole, it is quite remarkable (dogmatic yes) but the students handled themselves well – with clarity, intelligence, [and] dignity.96

Manings highlighted the differences between these expectations and contemporary rebellious youth all over the world. As she wrote, it was “very diff[icult] for me to comprehend when our youth has protested [so] much – and here what is demanded is obedience, productivity, diligence, etc. Wow!”97 Indeed as young people elsewhere rebelled and protested injustice during the “global sixties,” many times inspired by Cuba, political leaders on the island demanded that students adhere to institutional and state power.98 As scholars of the “socialist sixties” have

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demonstrated, Cuban leaders allowed elements of youth culture to exist, but cast intergenerational clashes and counterculture as threats to the political order. Youth were considered vectors for revolutionary advance, and this “hagiography of youth” limited their options for rebellious expression.99

Modern dance students were not alone in experiencing these strictures in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In 1967, journalist Elizabeth Sutherland spoke with youths about concerted efforts to target “nonconformity.” Police harassed individuals with hairstyles and clothing part of global youth culture, like mini skirts and short hair on girls and tight pants and long hair on boys.100 These fashions, according to the state, demonstrated a predilection for decadent, capitalist culture, and evidenced “residual manifestations” of prostitution and homosexuality.101 Along with targeting supposedly counterrevolutionary tastes, the government attempted to address unproductive behavior and rising levels of absenteeism and idleness. In the spring of 1971, the government passed a law against loafing, criminalizing the inactivity of working age individuals not in school.102 In April 1971, at the Primer Congreso Nacional de Educación y Cultura, Castro called for tougher measures to help eradicate foreign fashions, customs, and behaviors of “maladjusted” and “antisocial” minors.103

The 1971 congress represented not only a culmination in disciplining youth (and professional artists as discussed in the previous chapter), but also the beginning of a new cultural

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102 Ibid., 95.
103 Ibid., 105.
focus of the decade. Reflective of increased Soviet influences, the Cuban government emphasized the need to further develop aficionado art. A 1971 article in Bohemia summarized the shifting priorities, which sought to ensure that Cubans “not only passively enjoy cultural manifestations, but also are constant creators of culture…. [I]n a collectivist society – as our Revolution postulates – [art] is an activity of the masses, not the monopoly of an elite.” The masses, rather than intellectuals and artists, became the state’s preferred allies in consolidating revolutionary advances.

The ceremonial close of the 1971 Primer Congreso Nacional de Educación y Cultura underscored this policy shift. A group of young folkloric dancers from the Vento School gave the final performance, according to a Bohemia article. Vento began several years before as an experiment to develop well-rounded youth, adept in science and technology, but also sports and the arts. According to an article on the school, seventy-five percent of the Vento graduates pursued technological, scientific, and agricultural studies. One of the most innovative aspects of the curriculum, however, was the fact that all students studied the arts. The goal was not to produce professional artists but to encourage creativity and cultured tastes. There were groups for pantomime, theatre, music, and dance, and 184 of the 906 students danced.

Footage of the Vento students dancing captured by filmmaker David C. Stone in 1969 provides insight into the performances that closed the 1971 congress. The audiovisual record shows Vento students practicing folkloric dance sequences. In one segment, the students rehearse dances of Santería orishas to live drumming. Boys perform aggressive gestures in pairs, lunging and slashing the air with their arms while girls dance behind them, throwing their arms down and

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104 “La Cultura Como Actividad de Masa,” Bohemia (Nov. 19, 1971), 12-17.
106 Ibid., 14-19.
raising them up as they shift weight from one foot to the other. Later the boys and girls dance in pairs. Then, in the final section, the boys return to the earlier confrontational mode with one in each pair dramatically winning and the group celebrating his victory. In another reel, the dancers warm up with stretches and steps from ballet technique. In the short clip, they move their feet from fifth to forth to first positions while standing in the center of the floor. Then they begin folkloric dance practice, which involved elements from orisha dances repeated continually as the students advanced through space. Live drummers and singers accompanied the students. The performers drip with sweat and appear to enjoy themselves in the fury of music and dance.

The 1971 folkloric performance by Vento set the tone for the decade. As Soviet influence increased, Cuban idealism of the previous decade gave way to pragmatism and institutionalization in economics, government, and foreign policy. In the dance field, this meant a renewed focus on cultural productions of the masses. Soviet and Eastern European societies had a long tradition of amateur performance from experimental ballet groups in the Soviet Union to local folk troupes in post-World War II Eastern Germany. With renewed vigor, Cuban institutions promoted amateur dance in the 1970s, which tended overwhelmingly to be of a folkloric variety. Folkloric dance was more accessible to a wider range of bodies with different levels of talent, making it particularly important for Cuban aficionados. The growth of aficionado folkloric performance in Cuba also arguably reflected contemporary foreign policy interests in Africa. Lorna Burdsall commented in a 1972 letter to her family about a recent trip that her husband and Fidel had made to Africa, “Fidel is on a folklore kick these days and they

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107 “Dance Classes,” Box 34U (Use copy DVD), CRC.
108 “Scenes of School Life,” Box 37U (Use copy DVD), CRC.
saw many groups dance and sing and play native instruments.” However, despite the growing significance of folkloric dance in the 1970s, it was not the only genre for non-professional dancers. Ballet also was a medium for the masses as the following sections detail.

**Ballet for the Health and Healing**

In the early 1970s, the BNC partnered with childcare centers and the psychiatric hospital to introduce vulnerable populations including young children and mentally disturbed youth to ballet. Dancers and medical specialists believed that ballet improved the physical and mental health of practitioners. While Cubans claimed to pioneer ballet therapy, their work resonated with precedents in the United States. For example, modern dancer Franziska Boas taught dance to young psychiatric patients at Bellevue Hospital in New York in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Marian Chace utilized modern dance in Washington, D.C. psychiatric hospitals in the late 1940s through the 1960s. Chace eventually supported the development of the American Dance Therapy Association and served as its first president 1966-1968. Though dance therapy had a history, Cubans diverged from precedents in specifically using ballet rather than modern dance in classes. As demonstrated below, ballet had an important place in the Cuban imaginary as a source of physical strength, mental equanimity, creativity, and feminine poise that made it the preferred curative medium in the 1970s.

In the early 1970s, the BNC worked to strengthen programs that brought ballet to young children. Joining forces with the mass organization for women, Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (FMC), the BNC devised activities filled with dance, music, and play for the wards of state

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111 Letter Lorna Burdsall to E.S. Burdsall, Jun. 10, 1972, Folder 3, Box 1, Burdsall Family Papers, CHC.
childcare facilities, *circulos infantiles*. About the program, Alicia Alonso explained, “a plan of games … will include physical exercises, comic storytelling, rhythms, etc., that will tend to the physical construction of the child for his projection as an individual that belongs to a collectivity. Also, it tries to teach them from childhood a code of behavior, education, respect, and finally social skills.”\(^\text{114}\) The BNC consulted with Julio Martínez Páez, director of the Hospital Ortopédico Nacional (National Orthopedic Hospital), to ensure that the activities “would be constructive in accordance with the physical constitution of Cubans.”\(^\text{115}\) (Martínez Páez had been a long supporter of ballet and a member of the civic association Asociación Patronato Ballet de Cuba, founded in 1955.\(^\text{116}\) With his approval, ten ballet dancers and music education specialists worked with *circulos infantiles* on methods for integrating movement and rhythm into daily activities. When asked where the idea for the new plan came from, Alicia responded vaguely, “from the Revolution,” gesturing to ideological synergies rather than bureaucratic details.\(^\text{117}\) Regardless of whether government leaders, the FMC, the BNC, or other bureaucrats originated the program, it surged from the reinvigorated push “to bring art to the masses,” as Alicia affirmed in another article on the topic.\(^\text{118}\)

Working with the *circulos infantiles* provided the foundation for another program, *psico-ballet* for troubled children. The program as a whole demonstrates how Cubans employed ballet as a curative medium. The Hospital Psiquiátrico de la Habana (Psychiatric Hospital of Havana, HPH) sponsored the therapeutic initiative for children with mental and emotional problems. Publications listed psychologist Dr. Eduardo B. Ordaz and ballerina Alicia Alonso as codirectors. Ordaz had fought in the Sierra Maestra with the 26\(^\text{th}\) of July Movement, and Castro had


\(^{115}\) Ibid.

\(^{116}\) Exp. 22775, Leg. 1085, Fondo: Registro de Asociaciones, ANC.


appointed Ordaz director of the main psychiatric hospital in January 1959. Ordaz and Alonso possessed unimpeachable revolutionary credentials and institutional power. Official publications described *psico-ballet* as evidence of “the close relationship between science and art at the service of the health of our children and adolescents that are the most promising part of our pueblo.” Under these noble auspices, the first class took place on February 21, 1973 in the psychiatric ward of the Hospital “Angel Arturo Aballí.”

Like many initiatives of the post-1959 era, this one built upon precedents. Nurses at Mazorra, the name of the psychiatric hospital during the Republic, approached Alicia Alonso in April 1950 to see if she would perform at the hospital on May 18 “for the delight of the patients and general public.” Around the same time, Alicia began choreographing a piece based on a patient at Mazorra. The dramatic ballet told the story of Lydia García Bequé, who had studied ballet with Alicia as a young girl, developed schizophrenia, killed her mother, and was then institutionalized at Mazorra. A 1953 article described how Alicia first consulted psychiatrist friends and eventually went to observe her insane friend. Alicia reportedly interacted with the “sullen,” disturbed woman to prepare for her ballet role. This involved Alicia improvising steps in Lydia’s cell. The article hailed Alicia’s acting abilities and reaffirmed her uncanny mimesis with visual evidence – pictures of Lydia, patient 13,482, next to Alicia, both with faces twisted in a grimace of pain and confusion (Figure 18). According to a reporter, nearby patients provided an audience for this creative experiment. Their faces “sank into the bars of their cells, watching...”

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that exceptional visitor.”123 According to the medical staff, the patients experienced an unexpected serenity during Alicia’s visits. The ballet *Lydia* premiered on January 2, 1951, at the Teatro Auditorium and depicted the “the history, painful and grim of Lidia, a poor woman who could not live, love, or die freely…”124 After Alicia completed the ballet, the nurses begged her to continue visiting the hospital.125 The May 1950 letter from Mazorra nurses and Alicia’s creation of *Lydia* demonstrate that the connection between ballet and Havana psychiatric wards predated the 1970s.

Figure 18. Patient 13,482 at Mazorra Hospital (left) and Alicia Alonso portraying her (right), c. 1950s. Photographs by Candido Iglesias. Printed in Ramon Dueñas Fumagalli, “Un Crimen Convertido en Ballet…Y Alicia Alonso Aprenden las Celdas de Mazorra,” *Bohemia*, October 25, 1953.

Perhaps partially thanks to these previous connections, the hospital joined forces with the BNC to develop ballet therapy in Cuba. The ballet therapy program included children with

123 Ibid.
124 Performance Program, Ballet Alicia Alonso (Aug. 31, 1951), Folder Ballet-Danza 1951, TNC.
behavioral problems such as hyperactivity, anti-social tendencies, or aggressiveness, as well as physiological handicaps like blindness, deafness, and mild to severe mental retardation. Alicia Alonso developed exercises for the young patients based on those created for the círculos infantiles. Weekly one-hour sessions involved ten to sixteen children of a similar age with various maladies and a psychologist and ballet teacher “acting in close coordination.” Each meeting had two parts: first, the ballet instructor taught ballet steps, and, second, the instructor guided students in individual and collective dances, rhythmic games, and pantomimes. During the nine-month course, parents attended sessions with therapists and fellow parents to discuss concerns, frustrations, and effective parenting practices. Parents also received regular updates from the staff about their children. In the final months of treatment, students learned choreography and performed in a show. Performances took place at hospital facilities (Hospital “Aballí” on July 17, 1973 and the stadium of the HPH on December 15, 1973), a floating stage in Lenin Park (December 1974), on the television program Ballet Visión, and at the Teatro García Lorca in Havana (1976). Patient-students performed excerpts adapted from traditional ballets like Pas de Quatre and The Sleeping Beauty (1976) as well as new works with a juvenile theme such as Raggedy Ann (1976) or Hockie-Pockie (1981). Afterwards, the therapeutic team evaluated children’s progress and classified them as highly cured, greatly improved, improved, or not improved.

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127 MINSAP, HPH, Psicoballet, 33.
128 Ibid., 33.
129 Ibid., 39.
The organizers reported ballet therapy as beneficial for children, parents, and the nation. They saw children improving thanks to the emotional and physical release of dance as well as the discipline, self-control, and socialization skills they gained in the process. An official publication by the psychiatric hospital reasoned that children were natural dancers, moving and expressing themselves with gestures before words. *Psico-ballet* allowed children to cultivate these natural tendencies and communicate through rhythmic movement.\(^{133}\) Parents also benefited from learning more about their children and seeing them improve.\(^{134}\)

In a 1975 article on the initiative, psychologist Georgina Fariñas described how a five-year-old autistic girl “W.B.D.” began to speak again in public and make friends after four months in the program.\(^{135}\) “I.T.P.,” an eleven-year-old who had received years of psychiatric treatment for disobedience and aggressiveness, improved after starting *psico-ballet*. I.T.P demonstrated such talent that he or she was eventually admitted to the ballet academy at L and 19.\(^{136}\) In these cases, ballet solved children’s physical, mental, and emotional issues, so that they could become “valuable” members of society. Besides these success stories the project had the added plus of being internationally innovative. Creators claimed that there was no other instance of ballet being used in psychotherapy in the world.\(^{137}\)

In literature on the program, Alicia Alonso in particular emerges as a central curative figure even though her daughter, Laura, in fact acted as the main teacher and choreographer in the early years of the program. For instance, Fariñas described the case of the nine-year-old “A.P.N.,” who had social problems and talked to inanimate objects, but stopped after meeting Alicia. A.P.N eventually went on to teach dance classes to children in Santiago de Cuba. Along

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\(^{134}\) MINAP, HPH, *Psicoballet*, 30.  
\(^{136}\) Ibid., 16.  
\(^{137}\) Ibid., 17.
with A.P.N., all the children “admire and love Alicia dearly,” according to Fariñas. During Alicia’s surprise visits, the children reportedly talked freely about their lives and feelings.\textsuperscript{138}

Restoring the health of children had great political significance since youth figured prominently in revolutionary discourses on remaking Cuban society. As Alicia summed up in a booklet: “Through psico-ballet children gather to sing, dance to express themselves spontaneously, meet, [and] play. We hope that this activity will continue developing in the rest of the country because of its importance for our children, because we know the great responsibility that they have in the construction of our socialist society.”\textsuperscript{139} Ballet therapy indeed spread. By 1977, there were rehabilitation programs in Havana, Matanzas, Cienfuegos, and Villa Clara.\textsuperscript{140}

While promoters saw ballet therapy as beneficial, the relationship between ballet and sexuality remained ambiguous. More specifically, psico-ballet became a preferred method for “curing” young girls of “masculine tendencies,” even as supporters staunchly denied that ballet effeminized boys. In a 1981 publication by the HPH, a section entitled “Ballet and Masculine Roles” delved further into these issues. The essay asserted that when the organizers began using ballet as therapy for young girls with “Masculine Tendencies,” no one imagined incorporating “patients of the masculine sex for fear that at the end of the established time they would have Feminine Tendencies.” The psychiatric specialists assumed ballet to be a feminine art, but Alicia Alonso disagreed and said that boys should be included in the program. Acquiescing to Alicia’s judgment, “but with some internal concern, it was decided to create groups of each sex with varied behavioral disorders.” A male teacher taught the boys. As Alicia had anticipated, the boys developed no “mannerisms” (amaneramiento) as a result of studying ballet.\textsuperscript{141}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[138] Ibid., 14.
\item[139] MINSAP, HPH, Psicoballet, 7.
\item[140] Ibid., 9.
\item[141] MINSAP, HPH, Los Niños y el Psicoballet, 19.
\end{footnotes}
In spite of this, only a small group of boys received training. Many of them were the brothers of girl patients. Administrators had to work hard to convince even those parents to enroll their sons. In a 1975 article, Fariñas described the challenge posed by “backward” assumptions about ballet as feminine, or in her words, “the anti-scientific conception, so ingrained in our people, that ballet feminizes men – a conception born of the underdeveloped state that we had during the years that preceded the triumph of our Revolution.” 142 As of 1981, the psico-ballet program had treated 481 girls and only 79 boys, or 16% of the cases. Only 27 of those boys finished the entire treatment cycle. These few were “brave enough to face what ‘the public will say.’” 143 The hospital gave a questionnaire to parents who had removed their sons from the program. Almost all of them admitted that they had halted the treatment because they feared their sons would develop “mannerisms” and face public ridicule. Yet, the study confirmed that no boys had developed feminine traits after participating in the therapeutic sessions. 144

Programs for children in childcare centers and psico-ballet attested to the democratization of an elite art form. A 1973 article on popularizing ballet initiatives had a title that summed it up well: “Cuba: Ballet for All.” 145 These programs demonstrated Cubans’ belief in ballet’s healing powers. Psico-ballet performance programs, for instance, described ballet as “therapeutic, rehabilitative and preventative.” It reportedly freed children from their isolation and anguish as they danced and made friends. Ballet programs for children reflected the ethos of the 1970s. Ballet was used to create productive citizens able to contribute their body and art to the revolution. Ballet leaders not the state defined the content of these programs. By pushing to

143 MINSAP, HPH, Los Niños y el Psicoballet, 22.
144 Ibid., 22-23.
include boys in these activities, Alicia Alonso tried to challenge longstanding assumptions about dance, sexuality, and gender.

**Making Dance a Mass Art**

Along with the programs discussed above, dance leaders employed other tactics to popularize the form. They employed mass media to disseminate information, organized public education seminars and performances, and bolstered the *aficionados* movement to help regular Cubans dance in their free time. While ballet, modern, and folkloric dance companies equally engaged in these efforts, ballet leaders had the greatest resources to promote their form.

On October 27, 1969, the radio program *Ballet* aired for the first time on the station CMBF Radio Musical Nacional. The BNC directorship had asked Pedro Simón, a young ballet critic with *Juventud Rebelde*, Miguel Cabrera, a recent graduate of history at the University of Havana, and Francisco Lara Richard, a former guerrilla fighter in the Sierra Maestra and friend to the ballet, to create the radio program. Usually lasting about a half hour, it transmitted information about dance, music, critical reception, interviews, news, and “other themes of interest.”

 According to Simón in a 2004 article, the young collaborators had no office, so they met to prepare the weekly broadcasts at the Biblioteca Nacional José Martí. When other patrons complained about the noise they made while discussing upcoming sessions, the collaborators went to the nearby bus terminal to finish preparing in the waiting area.

Along with *Ballet*, *El Mundo de la Danza*, a program of “world news of ballet and dance,” also began airing in 1969. Transcripts of programs aired through 1976 indicate that

they focused geographically on Cuba, Latin America, and socialist countries, and thematically on ballet. However, they regularly mentioned, and sometimes analyzed at length, modern and folkloric dance. To illustrate content variety, on October 23, 1969, the host reported on a folkloric festival in Italy, ballet performances in London, the Soviet Union, and Argentina, the recent retirement of a Canadian ballerina, modern dance performances in New York, and the status of the CNDM on tour in Europe. Along with news updates, there were lessons in dance history and “curiosities.” To illustrate, a show that aired May 22, 1970, discussed the Spanish ballet *El Amor Brujo*, British dance leader Marie Rambert, and the “curiosity” of ballerinas dancing on the tips of their toes. Although focused primarily on ballet, some programs in 1970 featured Ramiro Guerra speaking about modern dance (March 13), the job of a choreographer (June 12), and thematic motivations behind choreography (June 19). In the forty-five transcripts from 1974, twenty programs covered ballet topics like the history of *The Sleeping Beauty*, choreographer August Bourneville and the Danish ballet, and ballet in the Soviet Union. However, that year also featured a special on the modern dance production, *Cantata Santa María de Iquique* choreographed by Lorna Burdsall, and detailed the life and work of U.S. modern dance choreographer Alwin Nikolais. In the sixty-four transcripts from 1975 and 1976, programs discussed Soviet, Polish, Bulgarian, Czechoslovak, Siberian, Yugoslavian, Romanian, and Azerbaijan folkloric troupes, ballet companies, star dancers, and choreographers. As for non-ballet programs, one aired on September 19, 1975, and was entitled, “Cuba and Modern Dance, Its First Contacts.” In 1976, hosts announced a modern dance choreographic workshop in

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149 Ibid.
152 “El Mundo de la Danza,” 1974, SA-BNJM.
Mexico and a folkloric dance festival in Peru. Although the number and types of listeners remain a mystery, the ballet radio shows were popular enough to lead to another one, which started airing in 1974, called Sobre el Ballet (About Ballet).

In addition to radio, ballet leaders began publishing the magazine Cuba en el ballet in 1970 and had a regular television program, Ballet Visión. Pedro Simón, the cofounder of the Ballet radio program, announced that the new periodical served domestic needs and acted as a barometer of Cuba’s regional leadership in dance. Simón claimed that Cuba en el ballet endeavored to examine dance activities in Latin America as well as “the past and future development of this art throughout the world.” In the first issue, contributor Angela Grau Imperatori also focused on the global projection of the publication. The trimestral magazine, she asserted, would “make known to the world our achievements and our efforts.” In contrast, the television program Ballet Visión focused on enlightening local audiences about ballet. It started on February 1, 1972, as a program that aired fortnightly on Tuesday evenings at 10 P.M. (and in 1973 moved to 8:30 P.M.) on channel 6. It featured clips of ballet performances, interviews with famous ballet dancers, ballet news, and commentaries in order to broadcast throughout the country “the history and achievements of traditional classical ballet as well as more contemporary repertory.” Ballet in the mass media depended on considerable state funding and support. The fact that the ballet establishment alone spearheaded such programs (modern or folkloric dance only gained occasional mention therein) indicates ballet’s supreme political and cultural capital.

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155 Pedro Simón, “Ballet desde Cuba, Especial para PRENSA LATINA,” SA-BNJM.
Along with the mass media, dancers used choreography to popularize ballet. For instance, the ballet *Dinamia*, which premiered on December 29, 1971, in the sports stadium Ciudad Deportiva, highlighted to audiences the linkages between ballet and sports. Ballet dancers and “the most distinguished athletes of the year” collaborated in the performance co-sponsored by the CNC and the Instituto Nacional de Deportes, Educación Física y Recreación (National Institute of Sports, Physical Education, and Recreation, INDER). According to an article in *Cuba en el Ballet* about the event, the work showed, “two superior human activities” that exhibited “the individual as an active member of the community.” The thirty-three minute piece incorporated movements from “baseball, fencing, cycling and walking, weightlifting, gymnastics, boxing, basketball and track and field sports.” A choreographic collective that included BNC dancers Sonia Calero, Josefina Méndez, Loipa Araújo, and Aurora Bosch among others worked with their fellow athletes to stage a production that accurately reflected the various aspects of physical culture in Cuba. As a result, *Dinamia* was a tribute to teamwork and “a spectacle of the vanguard for a people in revolution.” Ballet dancers likened their art to sport, suggesting that citizens should patronize and admire ballet like they did boxing or baseball. Moreover, they connected male dancers and athletes, likely to counter ideas about effeminate dancing men. Cubans did not question the masculinity of male athletes, and *Dinamia* suggested that male dancers were athletes.

Along with appealing to Cuban sports fans, the BNC promoted wider understanding and appreciation of ballet, regardless of its choreographic content. For instance, from late 1971

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159 Ibid., 17.
160 Ibid., 18.
161 Ibid., 17.
162 Ibid., 18.
through early 1972, the BNC carried out a series of educational ballet demonstrations for transportation workers. Over several weeks, the BNC went to different Ministry of Transportation (Ministerio de Transporte, MITRANS) centers to teach employees about ballet history in Cuba and the world. According to a *Granma* article, transportation workers showed a “surprising thirst for knowledge” about ballet, which resulted in an “interesting dialogue between artists and workers.” A final performance took place for MITRANS at the Ciudad Deportiva stadium and featured Alicia Alonso in a program that included *La Guagua* (The Bus), staged by Sonia Calero, *Pas de Quatre*, and *Avanzada*. A worker in the audience commented:

> The impression left by Alicia Alonso cannot be expressed in words…. [I]n her conversation she referred not only to purely artistic frameworks, but also described … her life and the formation of ballet in our country, before and after the triumph of the Revolution, nuanced with practical examples on the development of human beings and all their possibilities, when the working class is in power.

The dancers described these exchanges as realizing a longstanding interest in popularizing ballet. A spokesperson explained that since 1948 the company had wanted to “educate … the great masses” with their art. However the company had focused on achieving international acclaim, “something that in those moments was indispensible to subsist and be respected.” Although the BNC had worked previously to further public dance education, their work with transportation workers marked a new level of achievement and organization, according to the company. When

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165 *La guagua* was likely based on the 1953 version of the work of the same name by Alberto Alonso and performed by Calero for Havana nightclubs. “Participaran aficionados de transportes en función con Alicia Alonso, en la ciudad deportiva,” *Granma* (Dec. 20, 1971).
asked about the results of their dissemination efforts, the BNC said that the Cuban public of the early 1970s, like that of earlier decades, appreciated, understood, and enjoyed their work.  

Ballet was not alone in working to popularize their art. Modern dance also focused on public education in the 1970s. In August 1974, the CNDM performed for children at the daycare center, Circulo Infantil “Patricio Lindo,” and after the performance, asked the young audience members for their reactions. About the origins of the program, company director Pablo Bauta claimed, “the idea came from an encounter … with the Grupo Teatro Escambray, which has developed similar work with children.” As his statement reveals, ballet, modern dance, and theatre groups similarly endeavored to reach broad sectors of the population in the 1970s. Along with targeting children, in 1975, the dancer and choreographer Gerardo Lastra held lectures and discussions on modern dance and its history at the Biblioteca Nacional José Martí. According to one article, the lectures discussed how modern dance “now contributes to the integral formation of new men” through teaching and dancing at circulos infantiles. As part of the company’s twentieth anniversary in 1979, they performed at a hospital in Havana and a steel factory among other locations. During performances in Holguín that year, the company described interacting with the audience before and after the performances in “a true dialogue.”

The Conjunto Folklórico Nacional also worked to expand their public. Starting in 1975, the company began informal performances on Saturdays in the patio of their studios in Vedado. According to Rogelio Martínez Furé, this started as an effort to attract “a more heterogeneous

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168 Ibid., 76-77.
171 Clipping: “Actividades Colaterales por el XX Aniversario de Danza Nacional de Cuba,” Folder Prensa 1978, DCC.
172 Clipping: “Que hay de nuevo?” Folder Prensa 1979, DCC.
public (from school children, to workers, professionals, artists, and foreign visitors).”¹⁷³ This became Sábados de la Rumba (Rumba Saturdays), a tradition that continues today. The CFN also sponsored special conferences to coincide with larger political events. For instance, in February 1977, Martínez Furé gave an eight-week series of lectures (each Saturday at eleven in the morning, before the rumba performance) at the CFN studios to mark the III Congreso de la Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas (III Congress of the Union of Young Communists) and Festival Mundial de la Juventud (World Youth Festival) in Havana. The lectures focused on African cultures (including African songs, dances, and poems), their impact in Cuba from colonial times to the present, and how they had contributed to diverse Cuban cultural productions. The final lecture dealt with Cuban protest songs from the seventeenth century to the triumph of the 1959 revolution.¹⁷⁴ This series explained not only a long history of cultural exchange, but also the significance of the CFN in actively investigating these cultural productions.

An article about the company’s fifteenth anniversary spelled out how the CFN cultivated and publicized knowledge about Cuban folklore. According to the article, the company shared information “as teachers of aficionados in work centers and schools,” as performers on international and domestic tours, and in didactic activities such as a recent discussion in Matanzas following a performance at Teatro Sauto.¹⁷⁵ Martínez Furé explained the goals behind didactic activities such as special conferences and Rumba Saturdays: “Our didactic programs have a fundamental objective to awaken the interest of our people in their folkloric traditions,” which not only entertained, but also functioned as “a source of information about our history, our

¹⁷³ Martínez Furé, Dialogos Imaginarios, 255.
struggles for national liberation.”\textsuperscript{176} In addition to expanding folkloric appreciation, the CFN strove to connect with Cuban audiences as fellow revolutionaries. As Martínez Furé noted, CFN members participated in “sugar harvests, productive work, [and] industrial projects wherever needed…. And many times, in the place where during the day they have given their productive efforts, at night they have offered their art on improvised stages. For the members of the Conjunto, there are two things that are one: the Revolution and Folklore.”\textsuperscript{177} For the CFN, as for other companies, connecting with audiences as artists and revolutionaries was a major priority.

Another tactic for cultivating public interest in dance was supporting \textit{aficionado} programs. For instance, in June 1972, a group of 112 \textit{aficionado} ballet dancers formed the Grupo Experimental de Ballet Universitario. At an event celebrating its commencement, Alicia Alonso, along with Fernando Alonso and Loipa Araújo, spoke about the “importance of creating a group of ballet \textit{aficionados} at the University of Havana.”\textsuperscript{178} In an interview, Ismael Albelo, a former member of the Ballet Universitario, revealed that the group worked with BNC teachers and choreographers and used the company’s studios.\textsuperscript{179} Other amateur groups also worked with notable dance professionals. In 1976, for instance, the Brigada “Granma” won gold in an international amateurs’ festival in East Germany, performing a spectacle choreographed and directed by Alberto Alonso and Sonia Calero.\textsuperscript{180} As another example, in 1973, the CNDM advised six modern dance \textit{aficionado} groups.\textsuperscript{181} In 1978, the modern dance company, by then renamed Danza Nacional de Cuba (National Dance of Cuba, DNC), worked with an \textit{aficionado}
dance group of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (Revolutionary Armed Forces, FAR).

The CFN also taught and choreographed for aficionado groups, in addition to serving as jury members in amateurs’ competitions and festivals.

Individuals in aficionado groups often developed an interest in staged dance performance that extended beyond their years of amateur performance. Modern dancer Eddy Veitia started dancing in 1965 with a medical syndicate aficionado group advised by Rodolfo Reyes. In 1966, Veitia joined the professional modern dance company, CNDM. Dancer and choreographer Roberto Espinosa also started with aficionado groups before joining the CFN. Even some who never performed professionally became pursued dance-related careers. Ismael Albelo’s trajectory provides a case in point. After a few years of aficionado dancing, he went on to teach dance history, write about dance, and serve in dance administrative capacities.

Through these various means, dance companies cultivated large-scale interest in their art. Although popularization efforts tracked the policies of the revolutionary state and depended on state resources, the initiatives were nevertheless spearheaded and sustained by professional companies’ interests. Forging mass audiences secured the future of the form. Whether casting ballet as a sport, teaching young children to enjoy modern dance, or making folkloric dance a Saturday afternoon activity, dance professionals connected with regular Cuban citizens and made their work an impactful revolutionary art.

Creating a “Cuban School”

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183 Martínez Furé, Dialogos imaginarios, 255-256.
184 Veitia Guerra, Anexo 3; Taped interview with Eddy Veitia, Mar. 21, 2014, Havana, Cuba.
By the late 1970s, local and international observers proclaimed a “Cuban school” of ballet and modern dance had emerged. A school in this case referred to a style of dancing, which among other features, integrated elements from Cuban popular and folkloric dances into ballet and modern technique and choreography. Since ballet and modern dance originated in Europe, Russia, and the U.S., creating a Cuban school signified a high achievement. It implied Cuban parity with dance establishments in the “developed” world. Equally, Cuban homophobia defined key features of the Cuban school. The dance educational system institutionalized prejudices by demanding that men and women perform traditional gender roles and heteronormativity.

The idea of a “Cuban school” of ballet first appeared in 1964. British critic Arnold Haskell praised young Cuban dancers at Varna, Bulgaria and declared them part of a “Cuban miracle” – the creation of a new school in a surprisingly short amount of time.\textsuperscript{187} In 1968, Fernando Alonso delivered a speech about the Cuban school of ballet at the international ballet competition in Varna. According to Fernando, the Cuban school of ballet emerged from:

… a ballerina of world fame, with a very unique style, that became an example to follow; a choreographer that developed, absorbing within traditional forms, a series of elements of quotidian Cuban life, that culminates in a new language; a teacher that looks … to create dancers that can express or fulfill the necessities of traditional and modern vocabulary.\textsuperscript{188}

This rendition highlighted the Alonso triad of Alicia as the performer, Alberto as the choreographer, and Fernando as the pedagogue and suggested that these three individuals created the Cuban school of ballet. Fernando also attributed the Cuban school to the Revolution, stating:

It was not possible for dancers to pursue the same work before the triumph of the Revolution. The conditions prevailing in the country did not allow a boy of 8 or 9 years to be aware of his vocational abilities and much less to decide to study ballet…. Today, we find a new situation: several dancers, … choreographers, and … teachers, working within a broader spirit of collaboration for the same goal …

to develop the school already created to the highest level possible, open to all
innovation or experimentation, based on the purest dance technique.\footnote{Ibid.}

The Revolution, according to Fernando, created the conditions for young boys in particular to
study ballet for the first time. As a result, ballet laborers could work collectively to further the
development of the Cuban school.

Alicia was cast as the main protagonist in the formulation of the Cuban school. Alicia
explained that while dancing in New York in the 1930s through the 1950s, she realized her
movement quality, derived from a “mix of Spanish and African inheritance,” distinguished her
from non-Cuban ballet dancers.\footnote{Pedro Simón, “La Escuela Cubana de Ballet,” \textit{Cuba en el Ballet} 4, 3 (1973), 49-58.} However, she reportedly borrowed and revised admired
qualities from other national traditions to formulate a Cuban approach to ballet dancing: “from
the Italian [school] great quickness in the movement of the feet; from the British, technical
cleanliness … from the French, spontaneity; and … from the North American, the use of some
resources of modern dance.”\footnote{Ibid., 53.} According to Fernando, Alicia made the Cuban school possible
by experimenting and adapting existing ballet techniques to the Cuban body and culture.\footnote{Alonso, “La función del profesor en la formación del artista,” \textit{Cuba en el Ballet} 2, 1 (1971), 9.}

Her paradigmatic status went beyond the circumscribed field of ballet. For instance, in
1972, at the II Congreso de la Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas (Second Congress of the Union of
Young Communists, UJC), the UJC passed a resolution hailing Alicia as an exemplar for all
young Cubans. The document, reprinted in \textit{Cuba en el Ballet}, stated that given the “constant
successes of the Ballet Nacional de Cuba … and the decisive participation of … Alicia Alonso,
who has devoted her life to the development of Ballet and revolutionary art in Cuba, the II
Congress of the UJC resolves…. [t]o recognize the selfless dedication, as well as the firm and
revolutionary attitude that comrade [\textit{la compañera}] Alicia Alonso has maintained … becoming a
role model for all our youth.”193 Declarations such as these illustrate how Alicia became a notable figure in the education of young Cubans. Political elites, like the leaders of the UJC, held up her service to ballet, country, and revolution as an ideal to follow.

Fidel Castro also made public statements about dance accomplishments. At the first Central Committee of the Communist Party Congress in December 1975, Fidel Castro delivered a lengthy statement about Cuban society, which included an enumeration of several dance accomplishments.194 He stated, “From the foundation of the National School of Art in the Cubanacán zone, free art education has been extended systematically. It has been structured as a broad network of art schools and there are currently forty-seven with almost five thousand students studying as instructors, teachers, or artists.”195 He then noted impressive statistics about the reach of artistic production: “Around 600,000 pioneros [Communist Pioneers, the mass organization for children] are linked to artistic activities that result in beautiful songs, drawings, poems, stories, and dances … where they express their highest and pure feelings, at the same time becoming more complete human beings.”196 Finally, he acknowledged the successes of professional dance companies Danza Nacional de Cuba, Conjunto Folklórico Nacional, Ballet Nacional de Cuba, and Ballet de Camagüey, as well as the Escuela Nacional de Ballet. “These groups,” Castro stated, “have achieved great victories for Cuba and international recognition for their quality.”197 Castro characterized the Cuban dance educational system, from aficionados to professionals, as furthering the revolution from the inside out, by creating “complete” human beings that sometimes went on to win accolades abroad.

193 “Resolución del II Congreso Nacional de la UJC,” Cuba en el Ballet 3, 2 (1972), 44.
195 Ibid., 26.
196 Ibid.
197 Ibid.
In a 1976 speech, Alicia Alonso elaborated on the Cuban school of ballet and called it one of the greatest artistic achievements of the Revolution. One important trait of the school was the nature of male-female pas de deux partnering, Alicia claimed. Describing these dance sequences as “very Cuban” and resembling what happens in Cuban popular dances, Alicia asserted, “In the pas de deux, the woman dances for the man, and the man for the woman. It is like a dialogue, a conversation between the two.”\(^{198}\) This supposedly contrasted with other schools where men simply lifted, turned, and directed women without a more intimate connection.\(^{199}\) Such statements emphasized heteronormative partnering as a marker of the Cuban school.

In the final years of the 1970s, the concept of a “Cuban school” dominated not only ballet discussions but also haunted modern dance. In an interview, modern dance choreographer Victor Cuéllar asserted that Cuba had a school of modern dance, nurtured by Cuban folklore and based on the techniques of Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, and José Limón. He also argued that the U.S. embargo had benefitted its development by encouraging an internal focus on national tendencies and producing a very Cuban version of modern dance.\(^{200}\) Growing interest in the Cuban school of modern dance among children and families also attested to its crystallization. According to Lorna Burdsall in an article entitled “¿Su hijo quiere ser bailarín de danza moderna?” (Your son wants to be a modern dancer?), by the late 1970s many parents and their children were interested in modern dance. Burdsall described how in previous years fathers in particular had opposed their sons studying dance because the career had little or no prestige and “innumerable prejudices” existed against male dancers. Now, Burdsall claimed, with “the

\(^{199}\) Ibid.
existence of many professional groups of dance and the great necessity for instructors and professors … there are many opportunities for graduates of modern dance.”201 In the rest of the article, Burdsall detailed the audition process and the qualities that a future dancer needed. The article resembles the Haskell essay directed to mothers who wanted their daughters to study ballet. In 1979, Lorna Burdsall published an article entitled “Hacia una escuela cubana de danza moderna” (Toward a Cuban School of Modern Dance). She detailed the history of ENA and suggested that decades of collective pedagogical efforts and the integration of “Yoruban dances” into modern dance technique had created a distinctly Cuban school of modern dance.202

Although commentators claimed that prejudices against male dancers had disappeared, a report on dance in the provinces from 1977 and a speech given at ENA, published in 1979, reveal a different reality. The 1977 article on ballet developments in Santa Clara, entitled “Ballet for Girls and…Boys,” reported on the Escuela Provincial de Arte Olga Alonso and noted that the fifty-seven students were mostly girls. The director and teacher Teresa Romero claimed, “We have a problem with boys. Many boys demonstrate aptitude, but encounter disapproval from their parents. We talk to them, but unfortunately, old beliefs about dancers still exist that inhibit our work.”203 Desperate for male students, Romero tried to appeal directly to children by visiting primary schools and doing demonstrations about dance.204 Soon after this article, Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, a longtime Cuban communist and political leader, gave a speech called “The Problems of Art in the Revolution” at ENA. It was published as a small text in 1979. In the speech, he stated that in official circles dancing and homosexuality had no connection. Still, he

201 Lorna Burdsall, “¿Su hijo quiere ser bailarín de danza moderna?” Bohemia (Feb. 3, 1976), 33.
204 Ibid.
also demonized homosexuals and suggested that only with time would the idea of masculine
dancers become widely accepted. As he stated to the audience at ENA:

We believe that there is no relationship between dance and mannerisms [el
amaneramiento] or other phenomenon much more complex than mannerisms. We
believe that masculinity is compatible with the profession of the dancer and vice
versa; and we believe that here in this school is the source … of the dancers of the
future, of dancers free of those manifestations, free of those vices…. The
phenomena of homosexuality are too complex to adopt a simplistic attitude
towards them but, I want to say that in the future all youth will be revolutionary,
energetic, cutters of cane, and dancers. 205

Rodriguez believed that ENA fostered the masculine revolutionary dancer of the future and that
the homosexual “vice” remained an evil to combat.

As the 1970s came to a close, the Cuban school became a widely recognized entity. In
U.S. dance critic, Walter Terry’s hagiographic book on Cuban ballet, Alicia Alonso asserted,
“There is something important and typical about us … about the Ballet Nacional de Cuba, the
Cuban way of dancing, and the Cuban School.”206 Terry agreed and pointed out two traits that
distinguished the school. First, he noted, “Cuban men are macho, that is, they wear their virility
like a cloak of honor … the distaff side of the Ballet Nacional is utterly feminine…. You will
find no machonas (tomboys) here.”207 Second, he believed that the Cuban school had a unique
resourcefulness, cultivating young talent regardless of origin or character. As Terry put it: “The
pattern in Cuba is to waste nothing, so the orphan, the child from a remote region, the disturbed
boy, the partly malformed child, are provided with more than equal opportunity – they are given
special help – to find a useful place in Cuban society and, when suitable, in Cuban ballet.”208 In
these formulations, the Cuban school perfectly complemented larger revolutionary objectives. It

205 Carlos Rafael Rodriguez, Problemas del arte en la Revolución (Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas,
1979), 76, 77.
206 Terry, 62.
207 Ibid.
208 Ibid., 54.
reached far and wide to incorporate Cuban youth into the revolution and adjusted curriculum and choreography to make dance an acceptable pastime for boys and girls. These contributions likely earned the state’s imprimatur, ensuring the continued survival of the dance establishment despite pervasive presumptions about male dancers. Dance training also transformed even “disturbed” or “malformed” youth into productive members of society. Such achievements, according to dance leaders and supporters, attested to the reach and power of dance and revolution in Cuba.

Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, dance served as a tool to socialize Cubans of all ages. In the early 1960s, Fidel Castro saw the state in coordination with dance leaders creating a revolutionary utopia through choreographic projects, whether teaching rural peoples to be art makers, training young citizens to become world-renowned professionals, or teaching ignorant audiences to appreciate novel art forms. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, controlling audiences and youth became a priority. This included disciplining talkative audiences and frustrated modern dance students at the Escuela Nacional de Arte. The 1971 Primer Congreso Nacional de Educación y Cultura served as a culmination and turning point in these efforts. While control remained an underlying goal in the 1970s, renewed democratizing discourses led to an increased focus on the aficionados movement. Whether students from the Vento school performing folkloric dance or children at the psychiatric hospital dancing ballet, the non-professional dancers symbolized the sweeping access that Cuban citizens had to dance as a means for self-realization. To grow their public, dance companies in the 1970s created dance radio programs, television shows, and magazines and promoted aficionado performance. These efforts collectively added up to a Cuban school, which pointed to not only a particular style of dancing,
but also the mechanisms and institutions that went the distinct tradition. As Walter Terry noted, Cubans wasted no thing and no one in developing a national school of dance.

In many ways dance, a form that called for disciplining the mind and body, lent itself to elite political endeavors; however, it also confounded revolutionary gender norms especially for men. Homophobia shaped the content and form of dance education in Cuba. This began with recruiting boys from orphanages and revising the ballet curriculum to ensure that boys learned a masculine way of dancing ballet. In the late 1960s, modern dance students endured criticism if they exhibited markers of homosexuality. In the early 1970s, ballet was prescribed as a means for healing girls with masculine tendencies. By the late 1970s, the Cuban school of ballet was filled with Cuban male ballet dancers appearing supremely masculine and women, feminine. Even though prejudices remained entrenched in many sectors, dance leaders proclaimed some progress had been made by the late 1970s, as parents enrolled their daughters and sons in dance classes in Havana.

Dance training became a means to enlighten Cubans or make them “useful,” enjoining them to participate in the revolutionary project. Domestic dance education set the stage for ambitious endeavors to promote Cuban dance abroad. Dance networks expanded to all corners of the island and eventually spilled beyond insular borders. As the next chapter details, Cuban dance styles and teaching moved to other countries. The internal developments of the 1960s and 1970s discussed here provided the crucial foundation for making dance a national good for export.
Chapter 5. Dance as a National Good:
Realpolitik, Internationalism, and Third World Solidarity

In the 1970s and 1980s, dance increasingly became an exportable Cuban good. The extensive dance instructional system discussed in the previous chapter refined raw dance material on the island, producing an ever-growing number of dancers, teachers, and choreographers. These dance professionals contributed not only to local dance initiatives but also to those outside of Cuba’s borders. International dance activities took many forms: Cuban choreographers set their work on foreign companies; Cuban teachers trained non-Cuban students and teachers; and, Cuban dancers performed abroad as a company, in competitions, or as individual guest artists with non-Cuban companies and academies. At the same time, foreign dancers went to Cuba to train. These exchanges established Cuba as a recognized dance authority in the hemisphere and the world, praised by fans in North America, Latin America, the Soviet Union, Europe, Africa, and Asia alike.

Dance activities aligned with larger Cuban foreign policy objectives of the period. In the 1960s, the island focused on backing armed guerrilla movements in Latin America. By the end of the decade, however, the 1967 death of Ernesto Che Guevara in Bolivia and late 1960s economic hardships inhibited this modus operandi. In the 1970s, Cuba strengthened relations with the Soviet Union and increased exchanges with Eastern Bloc countries, especially in 1972 when Cuba joined the socialist economic community under Soviet leadership, the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance. Although capitalist countries in Western Europe and Canada never went along with the U.S. policy of isolating Cuba, their trade with the island increased in the 1970s and 1980s. In regards to Latin America, Cuba tempered its stance from aggressively
promoting armed struggle to pragmatically building relationships with willing partners, reestablishing diplomacy and trade with a dozen countries (some leftist and others not). In kind, Latin American leaders, even those ideologically divergent from Castro, pursued better relations with the island for the sake of trade and the symbolic benefit of defying U.S. imperialism. These moves became increasingly possible in the environment of Cold War detente of the 1970s. The United States signed arms control agreements with the Soviet Union and reestablished relations with China in 1972. Behind the scenes, there were on-going backchannel talks between U.S. and Cuban representatives, which gained important ground under U.S. President Jimmy Carter. The U.S. and Cuba opened embassy-like “Interest Sections” in 1977. However, further progress in building Cuban-U.S. relations halted due to Cuba’s involvement in African wars for independence and then policy reversals under President Ronald Reagan.

While Cuba engaged in realpolitik with capitalist countries in Western Europe, North America, and Latin America, idealism and veiled pragmatism fuelled involvement in Africa. Dispatching Cuban troops jeopardized relations with the West at a crucial moment, drained economic resources, and surprised Soviet allies. Yet, according to historian Piero Gleijeses, “Castro sent troops because he was opposed to minority white rule.”¹ Historian Christine Hatzky adds that even this idealistic platform had practical benefits, namely in giving Cuba the opportunity to “increase its prestige on the international stage, particularly among African countries,” not to mention possible access to Angolan raw materials.² Moreover, Castro demonstrated his autonomy in foreign policy. Africa became symbolically very important for

Cuba in this era of accommodation and integration into diverse economic and political relationships.

Within this context, Cuba deployed soldiers and civilian specialists, such as doctors, teachers, construction workers, and cultural producers like dancers to different parts of the world. Divided by geographic region, this chapter examines the international circulation of Cuban dance exports – choreographers, teachers, and performers – during the 1970s and 1980s. The first section examines Cuban ballet specialists in Europe, the Soviet Union, Canada, and the United States, since the Cuban government readily deployed this privileged form of high culture to cosmopolitan centers. Cuban ballet activities in economically and politically powerful countries challenged asymmetries as the backwater nation had much to offer in terms of training, artistry, and expertise in the form. The second section examines ballet and modern dance exchanges with Latin American countries. In line with Cuba’s policies of realpolitik in the 1970s, dancers performed in places with leftist and non-leftist governments. Yet, Latin American hosts overwhelmingly praised and welcomed Cuban dancers despite political differences. Dance exchanges in some cases celebrated shared revolutionary ideals (for instance with Nicaragua starting in 1979), and in all contexts, signified friendship and respect. The third section analyzes modern and folkloric dance exchanges with the Caribbean and Africa. Although Cuban dance activities in the Caribbean often overlapped with those in Latin America, the region, like Africa, had connotations of blackness in the Cuban imaginary. As a result, the government sent Cuban modern and folkloric dancers to Caribbean and African countries, because these two dance forms, in contrast to ballet, foregrounded Cuba’s African heritage. Dance activities in the Caribbean and Africa explored shifting notions of blackness in Cuban national identity as it intersected with postcolonial nationalisms and transnational black identity politics of the era.
In contrast to the majority of the literature on 1970s and 1980s Cuban foreign policy, I focus on a different set of protagonists – civilian dancers rather than elite politicians or military personnel. I also examine a different form of power. Through dance as cultural diplomacy, Cuba exercised what political scientist Joseph Nye calls “soft power,” which he defines as “culture, values, and policies” rather than military or economic coercion. Scholars of U.S. cultural diplomacy in the Cold War have pointed out the problematic nature of labeling cultural initiatives as soft power in opposition to hard power. Dance scholar Clare Croft has suggested that the terminology downplays the politic valence of soft power and accentuates that of hard power, emphasized by the feminine connotations of “soft” and the masculine connotations of “hard.” Moreover, as Croft and historian Penny Von Eschen have noted, separating culture from political economy or military incursions obscures and misleads. They helpfully illuminate the politics and economics that shaped U.S. cultural diplomacy during the Cold War and early twenty-first century. While perhaps problematic, soft power has become a popular term used to describe the policies of economic or political centers like the United States, Russia, and China.

The literature on soft power overwhelmingly focuses on hegemons, overlooking the non-military power plays of middle-level or smaller nations, such as Cuba. Examining Cuban dance deployments revises a central tenet within conceptualizations of soft power. Scholars depict soft

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power as secondary and supplementary to military and economic efforts, all directed to a similar goal of weakening enemies and asserting global dominance. However, I argue that Cuban dance exports did not just supplement hard power, but did what hard power could not, namely circumvent the U.S. embargo. Cuban dancers, framed as apolitical national goods, flooded into Europe, the Soviet Union, the Americas, and Africa.

**Agreeing on Ballet: Cubans in Europe, the Soviet Bloc, Canada, and the United States**

Scholars of the Cold War have long asserted Cuba’s considerable influence on international affairs, far larger than the country’s small geographic size. This calibration has been based on forms of aggression, such as military missions and loud denunciations of U.S. imperialism. Similarly, Cuba’s influence on world ballet developments has belied internal economic limitations and political frustrations. Cuba was not just a David fighting Goliath as so often emphasized, but also a dancing David, providing choreography and instruction to friends and foes alike. Also, through dance, Cuba had a very different relationship with the “First World” than generally recognized. Scholars often presume that Cuba allied with the Third World and had animosity for or dependence on power centers like the U.S. and the Soviet Union. In the ballet field, Cubans collaborated as equals with counterparts in more powerful countries with different ideological leanings. Therefore, examining the international activities of Cuban ballet challenges Cold War dichotomies by demonstrating how networks of dance and politics coexisted with and complicated the communist versus anticommutist world order.

This section focuses on ballet, which was an important form of dance diplomacy before and after 1959. The Alonsos started touring internationally in the late 1940s and 1950s under

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Carlos Prío Socarrás and Fulgencio Batista. When Castro came to power, ballet dancers expanded activities particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. This involved not only performing abroad, but also setting Cuban choreography on foreign companies. In 1967, Alberto Alonso went to the Soviet Union to create Carmen, upon the request of Bolshoi ballerina Maya Plisetskaya who had been impressed by a 1966 performance by his Conjunto Experimental in Moscow. In choreographing this work, Alberto fulfilled the first instance of external demand for Cuban choreographic services. In the 1970s and 1980s, this became a regular occurrence. For Cubans, these contracts attested to their ballet achievements. Exchanges also challenged Cuba’s status as a poor country of the Third World as well as larger geopolitical divides. As one Cuban diplomat noted, even as the Cold War polarized the world, all parties seemed to agree that Cuban ballet dancers had much to offer.

In the 1970s, several European companies invited Alicia Alonso to mount and star in her versions of traditional ballets. This included Giselle (1972), Pas de Quatre (1973), and The Sleeping Beauty (1975) for the Paris Opera. The Vienna State Opera Ballet invited her to set her Giselle in 1980, and the Czechoslovakian National Theatre, her production of La Fille Mal Gardée in 1981. These invitations illuminated Cuba’s connections to a distinguished ballet lineage. Each of these ballets had a long history with numerous celebrated artists involved in their production. For instance La Fille Mal Gardée, first performed in 1789, remains one of the

oldest works in ballet repertory. *Giselle* and *Pas de Quatre* had origins in the 1840s and involved the greatest ballerinas of the nineteenth century including Carlota Grisi, Lucile Grahn, Fanny Cerrito, and Marie Taglioni. Moreover in 1941, when Alicia was a member of Ballet Theatre in New York, choreographer Anton Dolin created a ballet evocative of the by-then lost original choreography of *Pas de Quatre* for the company.\(^{12}\) The ballet, then, had connections to illustrious dance makers of nineteenth-century Europe and twentieth-century New York. *The Sleeping Beauty* premiered in Russia in 1890 with choreography by the famed Marius Petipa.

To proud Cuban supporters, the fact that Alicia had adapted traditional ballets in an internationally applauded way suggested her parity with her distinguished predecessors. In reality, Alonso’s revisions evidenced the malleability of the nineteenth century, copyright free legacy. Her creative license began with *Giselle*. She first appeared in the title role on November 2, 1943, with Ballet Theatre in New York. From adapting a single protagonist to fit her dramatic sensibilities, Alicia began revising other sections of choreography and staging. Through this reworking, Alicia asserted Cuban independence from previous ballet metropoles. For instance, about her version of *The Sleeping Beauty* in its 1974 premier in Havana, Alicia stated, “For the first time in the history of our continent *The Sleeping Beauty* is mounted without having to depend on imported versions.”\(^{13}\) Furthermore, exporting Cuban versions of familiar “classics” only confirmed the country’s ballet vitality.

Restaging *Giselle* at the Paris Opera in 1972 had particular significance given the long history of ballet in France. Louis XIV founded the Paris Opera in 1669 and the institution served as a crucible for ballet development. It was at the Paris Opera in 1841 that *Giselle* first premiered. When Alonso danced the title role in her version of the ballet in 1972, the Cuban

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press asserted: “The Cuban star has received the double honor of being recognized for her art as a performer and as a choreographer of Giselle simultaneously, in the place in which this ballet has a lot of meaning and tradition.” Along with Alonso, Cuban ballerina Josefina Méndez also performed the title role. The same article therefore concluded that the Paris Opera hailed not only Alicia but also “the Cuban school” by inviting Josefina Méndez – “a young figure created under the direction of Alicia and Fernando Alonso” – to perform.  

The 1972 event was an important moment for Latin America generally, in Alicia’s opinion. As she told Juventud Rebelde: “this was the first time that two Latin American ballerinas danced with the company of the Paris Opera in its theatre.” For this reason, Cuba en el Ballet described the performance as “adding prestige and tradition to Latin American ballet.”

Alejo Carpentier, the Cuban writer and ambassador to France noted that French critics hailed the “Latin spirit” of the production because it gave the ballet “a new vitality, a new significance.” According to Carpentier in another article, as Alonso stood in the theatre foyer beneath portraits of great ballet artists, an administrator of the Paris Opera said, “Giselle was a museum piece, something dead. You with your genius, you have revived it. You have restored it to us.”

In 1980, Alicia’s role as a cultural ambassadress took on added dimensions in Vienna. Like the Paris Opera, the Vienna State Opera Ballet boasted, “a prestige … cemented over centuries of tradition,” as described by a Cuba en el Ballet article. The article continued to assert that the Vienna performance of Alonso’s Giselle offered “another important milestone for this

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16 “Versión Cubana de Giselle en la Opera de Paris,” Cuba en el ballet 3, 2 (1972), 11
17 Alejo Carpentier, “Josefina Méndez ante el público de Paris,” Granma (Mar. 4, 1974)
ballerina and the work, which are the pride of the Ballet Nacional de Cuba.”\textsuperscript{19} Moreover, since Vienna was the birthplace of the famous nineteenth-century ballerina Fanny Elssler, Alonso and her supporters took the opportunity to underscore connections between Cuban ballet and Elssler. Elssler had performed in Havana in 1841 and 1842 as part of larger international tours. These appearances had a lasting impact, according to a later commentator, who stated, “Fanny Elssler’s two stays in Cuba … constituted important moments in Cuban performing arts.”\textsuperscript{20} In Vienna, Alicia took a floral wreath to place at Elssler’s tomb and helped to inaugurate an exposition “Fanny Elssler and Romanticism,” which included reproductions of historic documents from Elssler’s time in Cuba. In this way the “Cuban heirs of Fanny Elssler,” as an article in \textit{Cuba en el Ballet} termed them, repaid the Austrian people with Alonso’s \textit{Giselle}, a work built upon “traditions that crystalized in the past century.”\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 14.
While Alicia and Cuban observers highlighted links between the island and Europe, 1970s performances by Alicia in North America led many fans to clamor for the return of a beloved New York dancer. In 1971, Alonso performed in Montreal, and U.S. fans and Cuban exiles traveled to Canada to see her dance. According to New York Times critic Clive Barnes, “an amazing number of American balletgoers have made the pilgrimage to Montreal…. Many of her fans had come to see her from all over North America, feeling no doubt that this would be their last chance to see again one of the great Giselles of our time.”22 Nancy Goldner, writing in The Nation, also noticed the “many dance fans who had traveled from New York. They knew Alonso

as an American dancer. During the 1940s and 1950s she was American Ballet Theatre’s leading dancer.”

Along with U.S. fans, many Cubans were in the audience, who saw the “dancing [as] much more than dancing.” One, for instance, had attended the performance “despite castigations of Cuban friends who thought his wish [to see her as] traitorous.” As scholarship has shown, extremist anti-Castro exiles, especially those in Miami, often harassed and sometimes killed people within the community who deviated from a hardline against Castro and his supporters.

Overcoming logistical difficulties and threats, the audience demonstrated their appreciation of Alicia with “more than 30 minutes of ovations.” While inspiring enthusiasm in many admirers, the performance had a bitter sweetness, according to Clive Barnes: “She is a woman who has done a great deal for American ballet, and it seems very sad that political considerations prevent her from making a final appearance in New York.” Fans enjoyed the opportunity to see the Cuban ballerina, but also reflected on the intervening years of separation from Alicia’s dancing, which seemed nowhere close to ending.

However, end it did. In 1975, after a fifteen-year absence from the U.S., Alonso made a surprise appearance at the American Ballet Theatre’s gala. This happened as the Nixon and Ford administrations (under the guidance of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger), pursued detente, which included improving relations with Cuba. In 1973, the U.S. and Cuban governments signed an anti-hijacking treaty, and in 1975, the U.S. allowed subsidiaries of U.S. corporations in

24 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
foreign countries to trade with the island. In part, these shifts helped to make the performance possible. As Alan Kriegsman explained in the *Washington Post*:

A recent thaw in the political winds between the United States and Cuba set the stage for an extraordinary artistic event here Monday night, when internationally renowned Cuban ballerina Alicia Alonso returned to a New York stage for the first time in 15 years.... A State Department source in Washington ... confirmed yesterday that Alonso’s present appearance was in line with recent policy “clarifications” allowing Cuban citizens to visit the United States for religious, scientific, or cultural purposes.

However, the ballet performance was not simply an outgrowth of government actions. Rather the private institution, American Ballet Theatre (ABT), had worked for years to bring Alicia to the U.S. According to Anna Kisselgoff in the *New York Times*, ABT had tried to bring her three years before, but New York mayor John Lindsay had discouraged the effort “because of possible security problems involving anti-Castro Cuban refugees.” Although Cuban exile violence remained a threat, U.S. and Cuban negotiators apparently decided to allow Alicia Alonso to perform in the U.S anyways.

Cold War politics simmered in the background as Alicia and her old New York friends expressed affection for each other and as U.S. audiences loudly applauded the Cuban ballerina. Friendship, not partisanship, came to the fore in one report, which quoted Alonso telling ABT company members: “American Ballet Theatre is a company I was – and am – part of.” Lucia Chase, the company’s longtime director, told critic Anna Kisselgoff, “She is one of my greatest friends and I adore her.” Frenzied fans inside the theatre did not hold back their affection for the Cuban ballerina. As Alan Kriegsman wrote in the *Washington Post*, “her enraptured

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28 García, 138.
performance brought the entire audience to its feet ... for 10 minutes of shouting, stamping, rhythmic applause and streaming confetti.”  

Yet, although Alonso remained “the idol of the many Cuban émigré ballet fans who make up a sizable contingent of ballet theater’s current audience,” her appearance also inspired demonstrations outside the theatre.  

Kriegsman described protesters armed with “such signs as ‘Alicia Alonso has the blood of the Cuban people on her sleepers (sic) [slippers].’”  

These tensions continued and escalated in the next several years as Cuban ballet dancers continued appearing in the U.S.  

In 1976, Alonso made a more extended tour, performing in Washington D.C. and New York. She performed Alberto Alonso’s Carmen with the Cubans Jorge Esquivel as Escamillo, Orlando Salgado as Don José, and ABT dancers in other supporting roles. Her Washington performances brought politics to the fore. As Kriegsman dryly commented: “Henry Kissinger, flanked by Liz Taylor on one side and Liza Minelli on the other, stood and led the ovation for Alonso’s ‘Swan Lake’ adagio. The political overtones alone were gala enough for anyone’s lexicon.”  

Kissinger’s presence squared with his behind-the-scenes support for quiet negotiations between the U.S. and Cuba, under Nixon and Ford, though more productively during the latter administration. Yet, these appearances also happened as anti-Castro exile violence escalated. In April 1976, commandos attacked fishing boats and bombed the Cuban Embassy in Portugal, killing several. In July, bombs exploded at the Cuban mission of the United Nations, the offices of a Cuban airlines representative in Barbados, and inside a suitcase about to be loaded onto a Cuban jet in Kingston. Cuban consul and embassy employees disappeared in

Argentina and were almost kidnapped in Mexico. Then in October, bombs exploded on a Cuban jet minutes after leaving Barbados, killing 73 passengers on board.38

Anti-Castro émigré violence escalated in 1977, especially as negotiations with Cuba accelerated under Jimmy Carter. Yet, Alonso performed in Giselle on the East and West Coasts of the U.S. As before, Alonso’s performances sparked demonstrations of anger by anti-Castro factions and love by balletomanes. In New York, Clive Barnes recounted dramatic pre-performance happenings, which started with a “bomb scare, called into the Metropolitan switchboard at 7:15 PM by an unidentified caller, 15 minutes before the audience was to be seated, [and] led to a police search, with bomb detector dogs, of the entire building. It was not until 8:25 that the audience started to file into the auditorium.” The performance eventually began and Alicia entered the stage “at precisely 9:11. There was prolonged applause and Miss Alonso and Giselle were joined together in New York once more.” At the end of the evening, audiences gave a twenty-minute ovation leading to twenty-three curtain calls, or bows, by the Cuban ballerina.39 Alonso’s West Coast performances had considerable excitement as well. She danced Giselle with the San Diego Ballet, and once again, “anti-Castro pickets” appeared outside the theatre while inside the auditorium “[p]eople stood, people applauded, people shouted bravas and chanted ‘Alicia, Alicia, Alicia…’ [in] a genuine outpouring of enthusiasm for one of the greatest ballerinas of all time in her greatest role.”40 Throughout this tour, Alicia garnered collective praise, especially as reviewers noted her age (well into her 50s) and physical handicap (near blindness).

38 García, 140-141.
After this successful trip, *New York Times* reporter Laura Foreman wrote in August 1977 that a 1978 trip was in the works, “arranged with the blessing of both Governments.” 41 This trip would be a bolder exchange with the entire Ballet Nacional de Cuba making its first U.S. tour. As Cuba and the U.S. anticipated opening Interest Sections in September 1977, organizers from both countries planned to share the financial burden of the upcoming ballet events. Foreman reported: “The Cuban government will pay the company’s travel expenses, and the Kennedy Center and the [New York] Met[ropolitan Opera House] will pay expenses that the 85-member troupe incurs in the United States.” 42 However, unbeknownst to organizers, 1978 would be a

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42 Ibid.
year of stagnation and reversal in Cuban-U.S. relations. A May 11, 1978 invasion in Shaba, Zaire by a small group of former Katangan gendarmes set off a public “shouting match” between Carter and Castro as the U.S. assumed Cuba had been involved, and Cuba denied any participation.\(^{43}\) When the Cuban ballet dancers arrived in the U.S. at the end of May 1978, there were sharp tensions between the two nations. Talks about improving relations stalled because the U.S. demanded that Cuba end military involvement in Africa, and Cuba balked at U.S. desires to dictate Cuban foreign policy.\(^{44}\)

This context did not dampen balletomane enthusiasm, however. As one reporter noted:

As the curtain rang down on *Giselle*, the audience reacted as if it had just witnessed a touchdown or a home run with the bases loaded. It was a friendlier climate than anyone could have anticipated considering the circumstances of the troupe’s appearance. After all, earlier that day … President Carter had assailed Cuba’s involvement in Africa at a meeting of NATO allies. Majority Leader Robert Byrd had called for a break in diplomatic relations with Cuba…. These political perturbations aside, Cuba’s U.S. representative, Ramón Sánchez Parodi, responded to the dance troupe’s roaring reception by remarking that “Cuba and the United States disagree about many things but there is one thing about which we are in complete agreement – ballet.”\(^{45}\)

The BNC greatly impressed critics who compared its U.S. debut to “the triumph of the Stuttgart Ballet in 1969.”\(^{46}\) Before the Stuttgart Ballet, Soviet dance companies had attracted large, admiring crowds in the 1950s and 1960s, despite political clashes between the anti-communist and communist worlds.\(^{47}\) Similar to these socialist predecessors, the BNC, undeterred by the tricky environment, gave sixty-nine performances in New York, Washington, Boston, San


\(^{44}\) LeoGrande and Kornbluh, *Back Channel to Cuba*, 130.


\(^{47}\) Naima Prevots, *Dance for Export: Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War* (Wesleyan University Press, 1998); Ezrahi, *Swans of the Kremlin.*
Antonio, Los Angeles, and Berkeley. The Cuban dancers found warm receptions everywhere. As one reporter noted, “At the Berkeley opening, Alonso was showered with bouquets during 10 minutes of curtain calls. The fans chanted ‘Viva Cuba.’ The heroine had conquered personal adversity and returned in obvious triumph.” President Jimmy Carter welcomed Alonso in a function at the White House.

![Image](image.jpg)

Figure 21. President Jimmy Carter with Alicia Alonso (and her husband Pedro Simón in the background) at a 1978 event at the White House. Photographed by Bill Fitzpatrick. Printed in Pedro Simón, Alicia Alonso: Orbita de una Leyenda (Madrid: Publicaciones y Ediciones, Sociedad General de Autores y Escritores, 1996), 73.

Yet politics were never far from the surface. When asked about whether “changed conditions may prevent another U.S.-Cuban cultural exchange of such note in the near future,” Alicia answered, “I don’t want to talk about politics. We came to dance. That’s the way Cubans

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talk – through culture.” Although Alicia hoped to focus attention on dance, journalists examined not only geopolitics, but also Cuban exile politics. For instance, one author described political infighting within Alonso’s own family as symptomatic of a larger phenomenon:

Some insist that … Alonso in effect made a pact with the devil in return for the money to build a ballet troupe. Even her family is sharply divided about Castro. Her sister, Cuca Martínez, was once married to a treasurer of the revolutionary regime, but wound up joining the anti-Castro underground and today lives in Miami. She was sentenced in absentia by a Cuban court to 30 years in prison.

This detail about Alonso’s familial conflicts likely seemed relevant given the violence that shook the Cuban exile community in Miami. More than one hundred bombs exploded in the city from 1973 and 1976, and the FBI dubbed it the “terrorist capital of the United States.” Alonso and her company provoked political passions as some protested and others celebrated the dancers.

Although full company tours halted after 1978, Alonso and Cuban dancers continued to travel occasionally to the U.S., especially to take part in international dance festivals and special events. For instance, in June 1980, Alonso appeared at the Spoleto-U.S.A. dance festival in Charleston, South Carolina. During the tour, Cuban American journalist and longtime balletomane Octavio Roca interviewed the ballerina. The Mariel boatlift was in full swing and a steady stream of Cubans were arriving in Miami. Roca asked Alicia to comment on those events. “An exodus, a massive exodus is never pleasant,” she responded. “But I think it is good to notice that it is not only Cubans that want to leave their country and come to the United States, but also thousands of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans, for example. Yet the press here does not seem to become as hysterical about these other emigrants…. The situation is very complicated…. You cannot deny that there are millions who want to stay. We have to see both sides. Of course, I

52 García, 141.
wish all could stay, I wish all would want to stay.”\textsuperscript{53} Roca also wondered, given the mounting tensions between the U.S. and Cuba, if it was strange for Alicia to dance in the U.S. “‘What is strange,’ she said, ‘is not dancing here.’” She went on to say:

“It is very funny, when politicians travel and speak with the press, they are never asked to speak about ballet. Why should it be that ballet dancers have to discuss politics? I am not an expert in politics,” continues the woman who in her worldly travels has been called Cuba’s strongest diplomatic force. “Just be sure that I am a Cuban that I do support the revolution. Then, let me dance.”\textsuperscript{54}

As Roca intimated by calling Alonso “Cuba’s strongest diplomatic force,” her relationship with politics seemed undeniable. Yet, she claimed that politics was a tiresome topic. Here, Alonso displayed her political acumen by deflecting further questions on current events.

Alonso’s next major trip to the U.S. occurred in June 1982, and provides unique insight into the economic benefits of foreign engagements. That year, Igor Youskevitch, the director of the Dance Department at the University of Texas in Austin and Alicia Alonso’s regular dance partner in the 1940s and 1950s, was retiring. As dance critic Walter Terry put it, “a modest retirement party exploded into a four-day dance event that, for the duration, transformed Austin, Texas, into a world dance center,” with Alonso and several other international guests.\textsuperscript{55} Agnes de Mille provided colorful details of the event in an essay published in her 1990 volume of reminiscence, \textit{Portrait Gallery}. Alicia, she wrote, “arrived from Havana with her new husband and four hefty bodyguards, who were dressed in ordinary suits that bulged with what looked like very effective hardware and who followed her closely everywhere.”\textsuperscript{56} The presence of bodyguards indicated persisting concerns about anti-Castro Cuban violence. Moreover, the tough

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} De Mille, 86-87.
realities of the cash-strained Cuban ballet establishment became apparent in how Alonso spent her honorarium. De Mille quoted a university administrator at length about the money issues:

> On Saturday, the day before the performance, [Alicia] came to me with her honorarium check, which was for $6,000, and she said, “Cash please.” So I called the president of the university, and he called the president of a local bank, and the local banker opened up the vaults and cashed her check. All day Sunday she and her bodyguards shopped, and when they boarded their flight to Cuba on Monday, they were loaded down with VCRs, tape-recording equipment, slide projectors, and every conceivable thing you could imagine for filmmaking. It was for her school and company.57

Although the Cuban government subsidized the arts, artists found it necessary to supplement state funds with money earned abroad. Despite hardening policies under Reagan, the famed Cuban ballerina was allowed to return home with much needed hard currency procured from a public university in the U.S.

Although ballet remained Cuba’s chief dance export to its estranged northern neighbor, two other Cuban companies performed in the U.S. after the 1959 Revolution. The first was the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba (CFN), which appeared at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in February 1980 and in Washington D.C. the following month.58 The reviews were mixed, and some observations seemed to have reflected a critical bias. For instance, in his review of the Brooklyn performance, Jack Anderson commented in the New York Times that, “it was greeted enthusiastically by an audience that included many people who were not only able to appreciate the choreography, but who were also linguistically fluent enough to relish the slangy remarks with which the performers peppered their dancing.”59 For Anderson, the show had limited appeal, except to cultural insiders. This contrasted with ballet, which built on a shared Western tradition, and was familiar to elite audiences. Alan Kriegsman in The Washington Post

57 De Mille, 88-89.
also had complaints. “The Conjunto,” he wrote, “appears to represent something of an uneasy compromise between unvarnished folklore and theatrical stylization, with an effective point of balance yet to be reached. And despite diversity of costume, language and form, the dance contents seemed fairly monotonous.”60 Unfamiliarity with African diasporic culture in Cuba probably led critics to under appreciate the company’s offerings. In addition to the CFN, a small group of Cuban modern dancers led by Lorna Burdsall performed at Stanford University in 1985, thanks to connections between Burdsall and Stanford dance professor Susan Cashion.61

Though Cuban dancers appeared less and less in the U.S., activities in Europe and Canada continued unabated in the 1980s, as can be seen in the activities of choreographers Alberto Méndez and Alberto Alonso. Méndez started his career as a modern dancer, but eventually joined the Ballet Nacional de Cuba and began choreographing for the company in 1970. In 1980, he set his works Rara avis (1978), Muñecos (1978), Tarde en la siesta (1973), and Alicia Alonso’s Pas de Quatre on the Warsaw ballet.62 In 1982, Méndez went to Budapest and Strasbourg, France to stage his choreography.63 Also that year, Cuban ballet advisors went to Italy to review and revive Alicia’s Giselle and Méndez’s La Dama de las camelias previously set on the San Carlo Theatre Company in Naples.64 In 1983, Méndez went to Madrid to stage Tarde en la siesta and Muñecos on the Ballet Clásico Español.65 Then, in the late 1980s Alberto Alonso was especially active in Europe. In 1985, he created a new work, Quasi una fantasia, on the Ballet Arabesque of Sofía, Bulgaria. While he was there, he also reviewed his Carmen, which

61 Burdsall, More than Just a Footnote, 192.
64 “Noticias,” Cuba en el ballet 1, 4 (1982), 42.
65 “Noticias,” Cuba en el Ballet 2, 4 (1983), 44.
had been part of the company’s repertory since the late 1960s. In 1988, Alonso staged his *Carmen* in Madrid.

Along with choreographers, Cuban teachers regularly taught in Europe. From 1980 to 1984, teachers spent time in Barcelona and Madrid, teaching ballet classes to students of various institutions. In 1988, Alicia Alonso gave five master classes in Madrid, and, in 1989, several Cuban teachers including Aurora Bosch taught classes in different parts of Spain. In 1983, Cuban ballet teachers began an exchange with Italy, and in 1984 and 1985, lead ballet pedagogue Ramona de Sáa spent several months teaching classes to students and methodology classes for teachers in Turin. In 1988, de Sáa returned with another Cuban teacher; then in 1989, Mirta Plá gave classes in Italy as part of an “exchange agreement” reportedly reached in September 1987. Another site of regular exchanges with Cuba was Belgium, where Cuban choreographer Jorge Lefebre and his wife Menia Martínez held leading positions with the Ballet Royal de Wallonie. Lefebre often set his work in Cuba but also welcomed his compatriots to work in Belgium. In 1988, Fernando Alonso spent three months giving classes to Lefebre’s company, and visiting Ballet de Camagüey dancers starred in Lefebre’s *Excalibur*. Northern Europe also welcomed

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72 The Ballet de Camagüey dancers were Pedro Martin and Guillermo Leyva. “Noticias,” *Cuba en el Ballet* 7, 2 (1988), 43.
Cuban dance teachers. In 1986, Laura Alonso taught classes at the Finnish National Ballet.\textsuperscript{73} In 1989, she returned to Finland and then went to Copenhagen to teach the Royal Danish Ballet.\textsuperscript{74}

Besides Western Europe, Cubans traveled regularly to work with companies and dancers in the Soviet bloc. For instance, in 1982, and annually starting in 1986, Cuban teachers spent extended periods teaching classes and coaching dancers at the Grand Theatre of Lodz and the Ballet of Poznan in Poland.\textsuperscript{75} Beyond daily classes, teachers also participated in ballet conferences, such as one in Lodz in April 1987, where they discussed characteristics of the Cuban school of ballet to an international audience.\textsuperscript{76} From December 1986 to July 1987, the Cuban ballerina and teacher Aurora Bosch worked in the Soviet Union. While there, she coached dancers in Odessa, attended various congresses as a Cuban representative, and gave a lecture about the current status of the Cuban ballet and its school.\textsuperscript{77} Exchanges also took place with East Germany. For instance, in 1989, Cuban teacher Ileana Farrés taught class and worked with the State Theatre of Baden.\textsuperscript{78} These are just a few examples of Cuban exchanges with Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and do not consider the regular performance tours the entire company made to countries in the region.

The Cuban ballet also had regular exchanges with Canada. Cuba and Canada developed good relations in the 1970s, as powerfully demonstrated in 1976 when Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau became the first NATO head of state to visit Cuba.\textsuperscript{79} Dancers with the Ballet

\textsuperscript{73} “Noticias,” \textit{Cuba en el Ballet} 5, 1 (1986), 44.
\textsuperscript{74} “Noticias,” \textit{Cuba en el Ballet} 8, 1 (1989), 42.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.
Nacional de Cuba performed in Canada in 1971 and 1978. Along with these performances, Laura Alonso became a regular teacher in various Canadian schools. She taught classes in Alberta in 1982, 1983, 1984, and 1986. In 1984 she also worked with students at the University of Art of Banff and brought Cuban dancers Caridad Martínez and Rolando Canadia as part of the exchange. In 1986, Alonso also taught classes at L’école Supérieure de Ballet of Quebec and Les Grands Ballets Canadiens in Montreal. In addition to teaching, Alonso coached students to participate in international dance competitions. Cuban Miguel Goméz was a guest teacher at the summer course at L’école Supérieure de Ballet of Quebec, and two Cuban ballet students accompanied him on the trip. At the same time, Canadian choreographer Fernand Nault went to Cuba with two Canadian dance students. In 1988, Laura Alonso worked with the Calgary City Ballet and the Ballet of Alberta and, in 1989, with Les Grands Ballets Canadiens.

Regardless of political leanings, dancers and audiences in Western and Eastern Europe, the United States, the Soviet Union, and Canada seemed to agree that Cuban ballet had much to offer. These exchanges suggested a shift in ballet’s geographic center of gravity as Cuba asserted its leadership in the field by teaching locally devised methodologies and choreographies all over the world. Moreover, these ballet exchanges evidenced shared cultural traditions and value systems as Cuba, like Europe, the Soviet Union, and North America, coveted ballet. To carry out these exchanges, Alicia Alonso and her fellow ballet dancers claimed to transcend mundane politics. Nonetheless, performances had great power to appeal to hearts and minds, thereby winning politically charged battles in ways impossible in other discursive realms.

80 Cabrera, El Ballet en Cuba, 285.
83 “Noticias,” Cuba en el ballet 5, 2 (1986), 53.


**Moving in Solidarity: Cuban Ballet and Modern Dance in Latin America**

Starting in the 1970s, Cuba exported ballet and modern dance teachers and performers to Latin America. This was part of larger efforts by the Cuban regime to reestablish formal and informal connections with Latin American nations and break hemispheric isolation imposed by the U.S. embargo. Countries mutually benefitted from ties with Cuba, as these alliances undercut domestic, leftist critiques and appealed to anti-imperialist sensibilities by defying U.S. efforts to control regional affairs.\(^{86}\) In some cases, dance exchanges transpired with countries like Mexico and Nicaragua (starting in 1979), which shared Cuba’s revolutionary discourses and ideals. In other cases, Cuban dancers went to countries with no shared ideological underpinnings. This included Panama, Peru, Costa Rica, Venezuela, Colombia, Dominican Republic, and Ecuador, which had widely varying governments from those with reformist agendas to those with conservative and repressive tendencies. In the late 1980s, Cuban dancers traveled to nations emerging from long military dictatorships in the Southern Cone including Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil. Dancers played a role in Cuba’s rapprochement and realpolitik in the region. Dance exchanges at times predated, and at others followed, formal diplomatic relationships between Cuba and fellow Latin American countries. Concurrently, dancers pushed their own objectives while serving as cultural ambassadors. They promoted locally honed styles and asserted their regional dance leadership.

While ballet had a special place in Cuban cultural exchanges with power centers, Cuban modern dance had opportunities to perform and teach in Latin America. After a hiatus in international performing (following the 1971 censorship of Ramiro Guerra’s work), the company traveled regularly in the second half of the 1970s. This period opened with a tour of Panama in

\(^{86}\) Mesa-Lago, 123-125.
1974. The trip coincided with increased dialogues between Castro and the Panamanian dictator, General Omar Torrijos (1968-1981), but predated the 1975 reestablishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. The tour foreshadowed not only a shift in Cuban-Panamanian affairs, but also exciting developments for the Danza Nacional de Cuba. Lorna Burdsall wrote to her family that on the tour, the company enjoyed “tremendous success, all sold out days before and people asking for more performances.” 87 In another letter she wrote, “We’re sitting on top of the world after our successful Panamanian trip and I’m sure it won’t be long before we get sent on another. We are probably the best and biggest modern dance group in Latin America.” 88

Burdsall’s forecast came true. In the years that followed, the company made numerous trips to perform and teach classes to local dancers. Anticipating a trip to Costa Rica, Burdsall wrote: “I will give some master classes to the students at the University and we will have a lecture on mod[ern] dance in Cuba.” 89 This trip occurred as the Costa Rican President Daniel Oduber Quirós granted legal status to the Costa Rican communist party in 1975 and preceded his restoration of consular relations with Cuba in 1977. Cuban modern dancers aided larger diplomatic processes while enjoying invaluable international exposure. In another letter, Burdsall reflected, “After the Conjunto has made its rounds advertising our teaching we keep getting requests from other Latin American countries to come & study.” 90 In response, Cuban modern dancers increasingly traveled abroad to advise new and established modern dance troupes throughout the region. Long-time dancer, choreographer, and rehearsal director with the Danza

87 Letter Lorna Burdsall to “Mother and Family,” Aug. 20, 1974, Folder 3, Box 1, Burdsall Family Papers, CHC.
88 Letter Lorna Burdsall to “Mother, Ned and All,” Sept. 1, 1974, Folder 3, Box 1, Burdsall Family Papers, CHC.
89 Letter Lorna Burdsall to her Mother, Aug. 21, 1975, Folder 4, Box 1, Burdsall Family Papers, CHC.
90 Letter Lorna Burdsall to “Mother, Ned & all,” Sept. 23, 1977, Folder 4, Box 1, Burdsall Family Papers, CHC.
Nacional de Cuba, Isidro Rolando, explained in a 1978 interview that Cubans traveled to other countries because “those countries solicited our services.”

As Cuban modern dancers made a name for themselves in the late 1970s, Cuban ballet became part of important shifts in the relationship between Mexico and Cuba. Immediately following the 1959 Cuban Revolution, the two countries were friendly. This amity was jeopardized when Mexico backed the U.S.-led resolution to demand the removal of Soviet missiles from Cuba in 1962. Yet, Mexico refused to break diplomatic relations with Cuba in 1964, based on respect for the principles of national sovereignty. As numerous studies have shown, this gesture greatly pleased Cuba and benefitted Mexico by demonstrating its relative power in the region. In the late 1960s, the Cold War in Mexico “heated up,” as historian Renata Keller has written. Students, workers, and other sectors of society protested, and the government responded with violence, most notably in the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre in Mexico City, but also in other instances throughout the country. Cuba remained neutral in the face of Mexico’s troubles. The Cuban press did not discuss the massacre, and Castro sent athletes to the 1968 Olympics and Alicia Alonso to perform. Despite Castro’s neutrality, President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964-1970) feared external communist subversion and suspected Cuba of covertly supporting anti-government movements. Further complicating a souring relationship, the Cuban government accused Humberto Carrillo Colón, a Mexican press attaché in Havana, of

95 Keller, 209-217.
spying for the CIA. However, when Luis Echeverría became president in 1970, relations improved between the two countries. Air travel, suspended in 1962, resumed. A Cuban commercial mission visited Mexico in June 1973 to sell Cuban products; and in October of that year, a Mexican commercial mission reciprocated in Cuba. Cultural delegations established collaborative programs for artists, intellectuals, and institutions from the two countries. Then, Echeverría visited Cuba in 1975. These alliances benefitted Mexico as Echeverría appealed to the battered left and established Mexico’s leadership position in the Third World. Cuba equally benefitted from Mexican trade and moral support.

Through these ups and downs in official relations, Cuban and Mexican dancers collaborated. After 1959, Mexican modern dancers traveled to Cuba to contribute to modern and folkloric dance on the island. Mexican dancers directed the Department of Modern Dance at ENA, worked with the CNDM, and cofounded and choreographed for the CFN. However, ballet exchanges never happened. Lorna Burdsall observed in a letter to her mother in 1973, “the ballet in Mexico is terrible, never did have any tradition there.” While ballet did exist in Mexico, local ballet dancers paled in comparison to modern and folkloric dancers. Ballet connections between Cuba and Mexico promised to address the weakness. Exchanges began in 1971 when the Cuban ballerina Aurora Bosch appeared in the ballet Antigona with the Ballet Independiente de México and danced the title role in Coppelia with the Ballet Clásico de México. She also taught classes to Mexican dancers for several months.

97 Edmundo Flores, Antesalas del Poder 2 (Mexico, D.F.: Editorial Posada, 1990), 165.
98 Flores, 175-176; Covarrubias, 150.
99 Letter Lorna Burdsall to “Mother,” Mar. 22, 1973, Folder 3, Box 1, Burdsall Family Papers, CHC.
100 “Aurora Bosch en el Festival Internacional de Danza de México,” Cuba en el Ballet 2, 3 (1971), 14-16.
In 1975, Cuban ballet dancers participated in a cultural mission to Mexico. The Ballet Nacional de Cuba performed in a gala event in Mexico City on April 15, and enjoyed an audience of Mexican President Luis Echeverría, his wife María Esther Zuno, and other Mexican and Cuban officials. Echeverría then invited the company to return again to Mexico, and they performed in June for audiences in Mexico City, Monterrey, Guadalajara, Veracruz, and Jalapa. Cuban teachers and dancers, including Joaquin Banegas and Aurora Bosch, also visited the Academia de la Danza Mexicana in Mexico City to speak with Josefina Lavalle, the Mexican director of the school, as well as other Mexican choreographers and dancers.\(^\text{101}\)

This trip established a plan of future exchanges between the two countries. As *Cuba en el Ballet* reported, “As part of the cultural cooperation agreement signed between the National Council of Culture [of Cuba] and National Institute of Fine Arts of Mexico, the Ballet Nacional de Cuba has initiated a plan of artistic advising and technical assistance to the Mexican dance movement.”\(^\text{102}\) Under the direction of Alicia Alonso, several dancers including Aurora Bosch, Mirta Plá, Ofelia González, Pablo Moré, Clara Carranco, and teachers from the Escuela Nacional de Ballet de Cubanacán such as Ramona de Sáa reorganized “plans of study of different schools, as well as of the Compañía Nacional de Danza de México. This fraternal exchange … include[d] also auditions to select future students, Mexican dancers and teachers to visit Cuba, and a continued pedagogical assistance based on the principles and methods of the Cuban school of ballet.”\(^\text{103}\) Twelve Mexican students received scholarships to study at the ballet for the 1977-1978 and 1978-1979 academic years.\(^\text{104}\) Though the focus here, ballet was not alone in


\(^{102}\) “Noticias,” *Cuba en el Ballet* 6, 3 (1975), 45-46.

\(^{103}\) Ibid.

cultivating dialogues between the two countries. Documents in the Mexican Archive of the Secretary of Foreign Relations reveal that the agreement for cultural exchange also included students and experts of the economy, political science, agriculture, film, visual arts, publishing, radio and television, architecture, journalism, and sports.\(^{105}\)

Ballet collaborations accelerated in 1976 and solidified by the end of the decade. In 1976, Ofelia González and Pabló Moré starred in Alicia Alonso’s version of *Coppelia*, performed by the Mexican ballet company Compañía Nacional de Danza. The Academia de Ballet de Coyoacán in Mexico inaugurated a “Salón Alicia Alonso,” a studio named for the Cuban ballerina in commemoration of Cuban contributions to Mexican ballet.\(^{106}\) Later that year, Cuban teacher Joaquin Banegas went to Mexico to teach at various academies and help with the staging of Alicia Alonso’s version of *La Fille Mal Gardée* on the Mexican Compañía Nacional de Danza.\(^{107}\) Then, a delegation of Mexican teachers from the Academia de la Danza Mexicana, presided over by Josefina Lavalle, went to Cuba to visit and observe dancers at the Ballet Nacional de Cuba, Conjunto Folklórico Nacional, the Danza Nacional de Cuba, and the Escuela Nacional de Arte.\(^{108}\) Banegas and other Cuban teachers returned to Mexico several times in the late 1970s to teach classes and organize “Methodology Seminars” for local teachers.\(^{109}\) Cuban teachers also reportedly recruited boys from Mexican orphanages to increase the number of male students developing “correctly from an early age, free from familial binds or prejudices.”\(^{110}\)

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\(^{105}\) “Protocolo No. 1 de la Comisión Mixta Cubano-Mexicana de Cooperación Cultural y Educativa” (Sept. 5, 1975), Folder DAC 3 12-1 (1a P). 1973-1975 Convenio Cultural Mexico-Cuba, Fondo: Dirección General de Asuntos Culturales, SRE.


\(^{108}\) “Noticias,” *Cuba en el ballet* 7, 3 (1976), 42.


the first five years of collaboration, thirty-six dancers and teachers with the Ballet Nacional de Cuba taught and/or performed with Mexican ballet dancers; eight teachers of the Escuela Nacional de Ballet de Cubanacán taught in Mexico; and, eight Mexican teachers traveled to Cuba to participate in special workshops on ballet methodologies.111

The fruits of this labor showed. In the summer of 1976, improved Mexican ballet dancers performed new, Mexican-themed choreography. During a gala performance on June 17, 1976, Alicia Alonso performed with Jorge Esquivel for an audience that included President Echeverría and his wife. The program featured the ballet *La noche de los mayas* choreographed by the Cuban choreographer Jorge Lefebre to music by Mexican composer Silvestre Revueltas, inspired by Mexican culture.112 In 1980, Mexican students participated in the V Festival Nacional de Escuelas de Ballet y Danza (National Festival of Ballet and Dance Schools) in Cuba. An article in the Cuban publication *El Caimán Barbudo* stated, “Their performances demonstrated that the export of Cuban ballet technique appears to be well assimilated by the new Mexican dancers.”113

Ballet collaborations between Cuba and Mexico continued and expanded through the 1980s. In 1981 Cuban dancers performed in Alonso’s *Swan Lake* with the Mexican Compañía Nacional de Danza.114 The same Mexican company also performed Alberto Alonso’s *Carmen* in 1982 and 1988.115 Cuban choreographer Gustavo Herrera set several of his works on Mexican dancers. Herrera had started his career in television and cabaret before joining Alberto Alonso’s Grupo Experimental de Danza in the 1960s. He began taking ballet classes, joined the Ballet de Camagüey in 1969, and choreographed for the company for several years. Eventually he was

111 For a complete list, see Ibid., 15.
112 “Perspectivas en el ballet mexicano,” *Cuba en el ballet* 7, 3 (1976), 35.

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invited to choreograph for the Ballet Nacional de Cuba and played an important role in their internationalist efforts. Influenced by his early work on television, in cabarets, and in Alberto Alonso’s company, Herrera became known for his ballets inspired by Cuban folklore and popular dances like danzón and son. In Mexico, dancers performed his works in 1980 and 1982. Cuban choreographer Alberto Méndez also worked in Mexico, and in 1989, he staged his choreography on dancers of the Instituto de Bellas Artes. Along with these choreographers, Cuban dance teachers taught in Mexico City, Tijuana, Mérida, and Sonora.

According to participants and observers, the Cuban ballet activity in Mexico strengthened connections between the two nations and improved ballet in Latin America writ large. Alicia Alonso reflected on these achievements in a public address before a Mexican gala performance in 1976. She described how over many years of effort, the Cuban ballet had developed its own technical and expressive elements based on “our own physiognomy.” She continued:

We have tried to share with our brothers from Mexico these experiences, convinced that the principles of the Cuban school of ballet address, more than any other, those necessities of the Mexican dancer, given the ethnic and cultural affinities that bind us. We believe this collaboration is an important step for the formation of what, in the future, will be called the Latin American school of ballet, which will comprise the specific contributions of national cultures of our America…. With it we will be contributing to the history of dance as an art that, without losing its universal projection … [has] roots in our traditions and characteristics.

Mexico served as an important staging ground for the regional projection of the Cuban school of ballet. As Alonso explained in 1978, this involved respecting local traditions. She stated that with other peoples in Latin America, “we are obliged to share … the achievements of the Cuban

120 “Perspectivas en el ballet mexicano,” Cuba en el ballet 7, 3 (1976), 35.
school, without loosing the particularities of each [country].”¹²¹ In her formulation, ballet served as a means for exploring and celebrating each nation’s cultural distinctiveness.

Confirming the significance of Cuban ballet instruction, Alicia Alonso, along with poet Nicolás Guillén and painter René Portocarrero, received El Águila Azteca, the highest Mexican award. During the 1982 ceremony, the Mexican ambassador to Cuba, Rodolfo Echeverría Ruiz, detailed the long history of Cuban-Mexican friendship and hailed the honorees for their contributions to this and larger political accomplishments: “Alicia, Portocarrero, and Guillén have contributed in decisive form to the arduous process of decolonizing culture…. [T]he Mexican people, radically Latin American, honor you … with the Mexican distinction El Águila Azteca, like a large embrace, to you, to the artistic people of Cuba.”¹²² This highlighted Mexico and Cuba’s shared priorities to “decolonize culture” and exhibit national sovereignty. Although Echeverría was no longer president in 1982, such statements resonated with his efforts to highlight Mexico’s position of leadership in the Third World.

Nicaragua, like Mexico, offered opportunities for Cubans to support revolutionary ideals through cultural and political exchanges. The Cuban government sent dancers to Nicaragua following the fall of the Somoza government and the rise to power of the Sandinista National Liberation Front in 1979. Ballet was just one arena for cultural collaborations. For instance, Cuban theatre experts Sergio Correrí and Carida Chao Carbonero provided technical assistance to the Nicaraguan theatre group Nixtayolero in 1980.¹²³ Also that year, the Ballet Nacional de Cuba performed in Nicaragua, and the performances became “emotional acts of artistic exchange

¹²¹ “Fuentes y antecedentes de la Escuela Cubana de Ballet (final),” Cuba en el Ballet 1, 1 (1982), 29.
and solidarity between the revolutions of Cuba and Nicaragua.”124 During the trip, Alicia Alonso presided over an official inauguration of the Nicaraguan Escuela Nacional de Danza and attended a lunch with Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega.125 Students from Nicaragua, along with those from Ecuador, Mexico, and Cuba, participated in the V Festival Nacional de Escuelas de Ballet y Danza in Cuba in 1980.126 In 1982, the BNC traveled to Nicaragua, and the Ministries of Culture of both countries signed an official cultural agreement for further exchanges.127 In 1983, during a BNC tour in Nicaragua, company historian Miguel Cabrera offered a series of seminars on dance history for more than 200 dance professionals and students of different Nicaraguan groups.128 In 1986, the BNC toured Nicaragua again, and the press asserted that, “The presentations of Alicia Alonso and the Ballet Nacional de Cuba in Nicaragua confirmed … the profound love that unites both pueblos.”129

Cuban dancers highlighted the political significances of their art and actions in countries with shared histories of revolution like Mexico and Nicaragua. For instance, modern dance choreographer Victor Cuéllar went to Mexico in 1979, “invited by the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes … [to] offer classes and mount a work for the Ballet Nacional de Mexico.”130 Cuéllar spent about a month collaborating with various companies, teaching at schools, and giving talks about Cuban dance history, which inevitably touched on politics. As a Cuban article in Juventud Rebelde explained, Cuéllar gave:

a series of talks … about the development of dance, folklore and ballet in our country, about the revolutionary action that made possible its great quantitative

125 Ibid., 3.
130 “Que hay de nuevo,” Juventud Rebelde (Sept. 10, 1979).
and qualitative jump, [and] the creation of schools and dance groups…. Then there was a collective blood donation … for Nicaragua by the dancers that were in attendance.\textsuperscript{131}

Cuéllar spoke about the role of revolution in modern dance developments. Then, he and his students drew blood to promote these ideologies abroad. Bodies soon followed blood when DNC choreographer Gerardo Lastra traveled to Nicaragua for a year, “to develop … internationalist labor within his specialty.”\textsuperscript{132} Dance exchanges were part of larger political statements and gestures of solidarity with allies in the region.

In concert with discourse and action, choreography conveyed political sentiments. For instance, in 1980, Burdsall taught modern dance classes in Mexico City and choreographed for professional companies, including a work about the 1973 Chilean coup called \textit{Ahora} (Now). The dance dramatization was set to music and spoken words from the writings of Pablo Neruda, Wilhelm Reich, and Fidel Castro. The movement consisted of women slowly lamenting the violent coup. In a dramatic moment, “the list of murdered and missing people was read, [and] these women, in slow motion, rose to their feet to form a tight line of frozen faces. The light also revealed the clasping of each other’s hands before each one left the line, one by one, to walk slowly to meet her fate.”\textsuperscript{133} \textit{Ahora} shows how choreography went hand-in-hand with contemporary Cuban politics of solidarity and protest.

The Cuban government not only deployed dancers to countries with revolutionary aspirations, but also to places like Peru, which under Juan Francisco Velasco (1968-1975) had reestablished relations with Cuba in 1972, but drifted rightward after 1975. Nevertheless, in 1978, the Instituto Nacional de Cultura del Perú invited Alicia Alonso and Jorge Esquivel to perform in Lima. They received awards and honors, and the Peruvian dancer Stella Puga

\textsuperscript{131} Alejandro G. Alonso, “¿Qué hay de nuevo,” \textit{Juventud Rebelde} (Nov. 8, 1979), 4.
\textsuperscript{133} Burdsall, \textit{More than Just a Footnote}, 177-178.
renamed her Trujillo dance school the Academia de Ballet “Alicia Alonso.” In 1978 and 1979, Cuban delegations supported the new international dance festival organized by Puga in Trujillo, and Cuban teachers taught a course about Cuban ballet methodologies. Relations between Cuba and Peru deteriorated during the 1980 Mariel crisis when Cubans received political asylum in the Peruvian Embassy in Havana; however, the relationship improved a few years later as evidenced by the BNC travelling to Peru in 1983 and 1984. During these tours, the Cuban ballet dancers encountered warm audiences and received local government “diplomas of recognition of the labor realized” (1983) and a Medal of the City of Lima, its “highest official distinction” (1984).

Under Peruvian President Alan García (1985-1990), Cuban ballet exchanges accelerated. In 1986, the Ballet de Camagüey director Fernando Alonso formalized an agreement with Stella Puga and her newly revamped Ballet Nacional de Peru to establish exchanges between Camagüey and Peruvian dancers. In an inaugural collaboration, Fernando Alonso presided over the jury of a Peruvian ballet competition and offered a seminar on the Cuban school of ballet in the fall of 1986. Cuban pedagogue Ramona de Sáa and Ballet de Camagüey dance makers also traveled to Peru to work with the Ballet Nacional de Peru that year. In 1988, the BNC toured throughout Peru, performing not only in Lima but also “in other places that permitted them to carry their message of art and solidarity to broader sectors of the Peruvian

136 García, 55; Domínguez, To Make the World Safe for Revolution, 231.
139 This included dancers Aida Villoch and Pedro Martín and choreographer Francisco Lang. “Noticias,” Cuba en el Ballet 5, 4 (1986), 43.
people, which in the majority had contact for the first time with the art of ballet.”

During this trip Cuban teacher Adolfo Roval gave master classes, and Cubans gave lectures on the history of dance and ballet in Cuba for Peruvian ballet students and professionals.

Along with Peru, Ecuador became a site for considerable Cuban dance exchanges. Rapprochement between Cuba and Ecuador began in the early 1970s with quasi-dictator José María Velasco Ibarra, but a military coup in 1972 halted this process. With the democratically elected Jaime Roldós Aguilera (August 1979 – May 1981), who pushed a populist platform, relations improved as indicated by the Cuban-Ecuadorian dance exchanges that soon followed. In September 1979 the cultural ministries of Ecuador and Cuba signed an agreement for music and dance collaborations. In 1981, during a performance tour that included Ecuador, the BNC offered lecture-demonstrations in the countryside to peasants and soldiers and performed for 30,000 people in Guayaquil. Despite Roldós’s untimely death in a plane crash in May 1981, Cuban teachers and choreographers worked in Quito in 1982. When the more conservative President León Febres Cordero (1984-1988) took power of Ecuador, dance collaborations with Cuba continued. In 1984, choreographer Gustavo Herrera and dancers from the Ballet de Camagüey worked with the Ballet Ecuatoriano de Cámara and Instituto Nacional de Danza in Quito. In 1985, the Ballet Ecuatoriano de Cámara honored Herrera for his work. Also that

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141 Ibid., 21.
142 Velasco Ibarra who pursued no revolutionary measures but perhaps sought relations with Castro as part of his belligerence against the U.S. He readily had seized U.S. boats entering Ecuadorian waters. Mesa-Lago, 120-121.
year, President Febres Cordero visited Havana and met with Castro.\textsuperscript{148} Then in 1986, Ecuadorean dancers awarded Alicia Alonso a special medal and diploma for Cuba’s ballet contributions and wrote to the ballerina, “Thank you, master teacher Alicia Alonso, for your artistic light that illuminates and will always illuminate our America…. [Y]our spirit and teachings live in every one of America’s dancers.”\textsuperscript{149} During a 1987 performance tour through Latin America, which included Ecuador, Alicia Alonso was awarded the keys to the capital city.\textsuperscript{150}

Ballet dancers also played a role in high-profile cultural diplomacy with Venezuela in the 1980s. Venezuelan President Carlos Andrés Pérez (1974-1979) had reestablished relations with Cuba in 1974. Relations waned over a 1976 Cuban flight bombing, because Cuba believed that the conspirators had planned the attack in Venezuelan territory. However, President Luis Herrera Campins (1979-1984) continued exchanges with Cuba as part of his muscular foreign policy based on the country’s booming oil wealth. Herrera Campins signed agreements with Mexico to provide oil to Central American and Caribbean countries and sided with Argentina in its war with Britain over the Falklands. In 1983, Herrera Campins received Alicia Alonso at the Presidential Palace and attended the gala performance of the BNC during their Venezuelan tour. The company dedicated one performance in Caracas to Simón Bolívar in honor of his bicentennial. Alicia and the entire company deposited a floral arrangement before his statue in the Plaza Bolívar.\textsuperscript{151} In 1985, Cuban choreographer Alberto Méndez set his works on the Ballet

\textsuperscript{148} Jorge Domínguez, “Cuba in the 1980s,” \textit{Foreign Affairs} 65, 1 (Fall 1986), 130.
\textsuperscript{149} “Noticias,” \textit{Cuba en el ballet} 5, 2 (1986), 51.
\textsuperscript{151} Mayda Bustamante, “Venezuela, Colombia, Perú, Puerto Rico y Republica Dominicana,” \textit{Cuba en el Ballet} 2, 2 (1983), 4-5.
For the rest of the decade, Cuban teachers traveled regularly to work with Venezuelan dancers.\footnote{“Noticias,” Cuba en el Ballet 4, 3 (1985), 42.}


Ballet dancers also played a role in building diplomatic relations between Cuba and countries transitioning from military dictatorships to democracy, such as Brazil. In 1984, the Ballet Nacional de Cuba danced in Brazil for the first time in twenty-five years. During the tour, Alicia Alonso presided over a meeting of the “José Martí” Cultural Society in São Paulo,
attended by Brazilian singer Chico Buarque, among others. During the meeting, the participants discussed their desire “for the reestablishment of cultural and diplomatic relations” between the two countries. In 1985, the Ballet del Teatro Municipal de Rio de Janeiro invited Lázaro Carreñó and Luis Aguilar of the BNC to appear as guest artists in their April performances. “Our reception in Rio was spectacular … by both the press and spectators,” Carreñó told reporters. “It’s exciting to see the fondness that they feel for Cuban ballet, for our school…. The achievements of Cuban dance are increasingly more known, mentioned, and respected in the world.” In 1986, Brazilian President José Sarney reestablished relations with Cuba. During a 1987 Brazilian tour, the BNC enjoyed large audiences, which included famous figures like Frei Betto, who in 1985 published a book on his conversations with Fidel Castro on religion. In 1987, 1988, and 1989 Cuban teachers, including Josefina Méndez, traveled to Brazil to give classes to dancers, teachers, and rehearsal directors in Rio, Brasilia, and São Paulo.

Uruguay similarly offered a new arena for exchange once its military dictatorship ended in 1985. In 1986, the Ballet Nacional de Cuba performed in Uruguay, the first group of Cuban dancers in twenty-eight years. Long lines formed as Uruguayans waited to buy tickets. President Julio María Sanguinetti and other political leaders attended the performance and celebrated “the new … rapprochement between the countries of Uruguay and Cuba, after the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries.”

1987, Alberto Alonso spent time in Uruguay, creating the ballet *Delmira*, which President Sanguinetti praised warmly.\(^{163}\) In 1989, Gustavo Herrera created a work, *Candomballet*, based on Uruguayan themes, for the Uruguayan Ballet del SODRE.\(^{164}\) Ballet dancers helped facilitate and then cement relationships with emerging democracies in the region.

Although Cuba retained formal diplomatic and economic relations with Argentina throughout its violent dictatorship in the 1970s, ballet dancers only began traveling there after President Raul Alfonsin took power in 1983. In 1985, 1986, and 1987, Cuban teacher Karemia Morena taught ballet classes, coached dancers, and led discussions about the Cuban school of ballet for artistic leaders in Buenos Aires.\(^{165}\) About dancers in Argentina, she claimed, “There is a great respect for our work and a notable preference for the Cuban school.”\(^{166}\)

Cuban ballet dancers also traveled to places where political tensions remained high. For instance, the Dominican Republic and Cuba had no diplomatic relations, yet the Ballet Nacional de Cuba performed in the Dominican Republic in 1976 and received “the warmest demonstrations of sympathy and admiration from the Dominican people.” Dominican President Joaquín Balaguer met with Alicia Alonso and invited her to visit the country again.\(^{167}\) Along with the Dominican Republic, Alonso, Jorge Esquivel, and other dancers from the BNC performed in Puerto Rico in 1979. Ovations there lasted more than twenty minutes.\(^{168}\) In many ways, this trip was a bold move considering it happened against the backdrop of Puerto Rican separatists bombing sites in New York and Chicago in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The

\[^{163}\]“Noticias,” *Cuba en el Ballet* 6, 2 (1987), 35.


\[^{166}\]“Noticias,” *Cuba en el ballet* 5, 2 (1986), 52.


Cuban dancers’ presence likely heightened U.S. government suspicion of Puerto Rico. Yet, in 1983, the Ballet Nacional de Cuba performed in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic as part of an international tour that also included Venezuela, Colombia, and Peru. A summary of the tour noted, “From Caracas to Santo Domingo, Alicia Alonso and the Ballet Nacional de Cuba were protagonists of a beautiful encounter with brother countries…. Once more the Cuban school confirmed its validity and underscored the way of the future to a Latin American school of ballet, which brings together the forces of the artists of our America, in search of an aesthetic language with individual particularities and universal relevance.”

Soon after, Cuban dancers went to Puerto Rico to stage Alberto Méndez’s Tarde en la siesta on the Ballets de San Juan in 1984. In 1988 and 1989 Cubans taught classes at several Dominican ballet academies and schools, and choreographer Alberto Méndez went to Puerto Rico to set his work La calinda on Ballet Concierto de San Juan.

Political differences and tensions were put aside in the interest of building regional ballet.

By the end of the 1980s, Cuba had achieved a special position of dance leadership in Latin America as demonstrated by regional dance conferences. In 1983 the First Latin American Congress of Dance met in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, under the auspices of the International Council of Dance of UNESCO and the Brazilian Council of Dance. Alicia Alonso served as President, because of her “vast experience and … prestige recognized not only as the highest figure of dance from the … Americas but also as one of the most universal in all the history of this art.”

The congress included dance leaders from Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Mexico, Venezuela,

Uruguay, Paraguay, Argentina, and Cuba, and reportedly had an atmosphere of “constructive
confraternity.” The Congress drafted a series of goals and resolutions, which aligned with
longstanding Cuban dance achievements. This included “fighting for the State to recognize the
importance of dance as a respectable … profession and to support the creation of [dance]
schools,” as well as challenging “erroneous concepts” that ballet was the “cultural patrimony of
elites and modern, contemporary, or experimental dance, as exclusive to a minority of
intellectuals.” Instead, these forms were “popular” expressions for large portions of the
population.

The Second Latin American and Caribbean Congress on Dance met in Havana in
November 1988. It coincided with Cuba’s biennial Festival Internacional de Ballet.
Representatives from Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador,
Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, Puerto Rico, Uruguay, and Venezuela, as well as numerous
observers from other parts of the world attended. The second meeting revisited issues from the
first congress and made similar conclusions. This included a resolution to fight for governmental
recognition of dance as a respectable profession and dance schools as part of the educational
system in all Latin American countries. As a final act of the meeting, Alicia Alonso was elected
president of a new foundation in charge of furthering the congress’ proposals.

In a pamphlet on the foundation, an essay explained that the organization was a unifying
force that remained sensitive to local cultures: “It is necessary that Latin America unites its
enormous artistic and social potential and express its reality…. Not intended to denationalize the

173 Ibid., 23.
174 Ibid., 22.
175 Pompeyo Pino, “II Congreso Latinoamericano y Caribeño de Danza,” Cuba en el Ballet 8, 1 (1989),
36-38.
dancer, but to develop him in accordance with his roots that ultimately are common to all.”

The same pamphlet described the foundation as “profoundly democratic” with decisions going through a superior council formed by two elected representatives from each of the member countries and presided over by Alicia Alonso. The foundation laid out four main objectives: 1) to strengthen dance cultures in Latin America and the Caribbean, incorporating national characteristics in “search of the true identity of our peoples”; 2) support research, experimentation, and creation in dance, as well as “communication between teachers, specialists, and professionals”; 3) cultivate social respect for those who have dedicated their life to dance; 4) support Latin American artists and groups in efforts to disseminate dance throughout their respective countries. Through this foundation, Cuban ballet also realized a longstanding aspiration. The stated goals of the late 1980s resembled those articulated by Fernando Alonso in his 1953 call for a Ballet Latinoamericano discussed in Chapter One. With the new regional dance foundation, Cuba institutionalized its dance leadership after decades of working toward this end.

Cuban dance exchanges with Latin America reveal how dance effectively furthered governmental foreign policy interests in the region. In this era of realpolitik, Castro sent dancers to strengthen emerging relationships like in Mexico, pave the way for future diplomacy like in post-1985 Brazil, or circumvent political disconnect with countries like the Dominican Republic. Danced soft power had such flexibility due to its apparent apolitical nature. That is, in many instances, according to period observers, dancers were above politics, bearing the gifts of art and culture. While perhaps serving an instrumental function, dancers equally benefitted from their international activities. Burdsall articulated how international performing opportunities offered

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177 Ibid.
Cuban modern dance the chance to travel abroad, impress foreign audiences, and gain supporters who then solicited their dance services. For ballet dancers, wide circulation allowed them to test their locally grown methodologies and assert their dance leadership in the hemisphere. Moreover, traveling as representatives of the state evidenced their cultural and political capital in Cuba and beyond. Dance became an important national good, which the Cuban government readily exported to fellow Latin American nations. This transaction benefitted, most dramatically, the Cuban dancers moving across borders and stages.

The Politics of Blackness: Cuban Folkloric and Modern Dance in Africa and the Caribbean

In contrast to dance collaborations with Europe, the Soviet Bloc, North America, and Latin America, exchanges with Africa and the Caribbean underscored anti-racist promises of the revolution. Africa had symbolic importance as the source of blackness that shaped Cuban national identity. It was also a place where Cuba exhibited its political and military capability in the 1970s and 1980s, especially via collaboration in Angola’s postcolonial wars – contrary to Soviet preferences and defying U.S. pressures to withdraw. Cuban exchanges with fellow Caribbean states also served as a means to connect to blackness, an identification that mixed history, culture, and racial identity to forge an “imagined transnational community.”\textsuperscript{178} Highly public, but ultimately externalized celebrations of blackness allowed the government to deliver on anti-racist platforms while not necessarily acknowledging persistent internal disparities and prejudices. For Cuban dancers, the politics of blackness inspired choreography and fuelled dance collaborations of great significance. While the Cuban government effectively demobilized racial

politics through symbolic rather than progressive measures, Cuban dancers continued to animate
discussions about race nationally and internationally.

From November 1975 to April 1976, Cuba stunned the world by dispatching 36,000
Cuban soldiers to Angola, which began over a decade of sustained large-scale operations to
support anti-colonial struggles on the continent. The mission was codenamed Operation Carlota,
after the slave woman who had helped to lead a planned slave revolt in Cuba known as the
Escalera Conspiracy in 1843. The large incursion, according to Cuban leaders, was part of a long
history of African rebellion against racial injustice. This massive involvement, and revolutionary
Cuba’s connections with Africa more generally, had a prehistory. Cuba developed close relations
with Algerian leader Ahmed Ben Bella’s regime and in 1963, sent military forces to help Algeria
resist Moroccan attacks. Che Guevara made an important three-month trip to Africa in December
1964, signaling Cuba’s interest in the continent. Then in 1966, the Cuban government sent troops
and doctors to Guinea-Bissau to help them fight for independence from Portugal. The Cuban
involvement in Guinea-Bissau continued until the end of the war in 1974.179 In the midst of this
campaign, Castro made his first trip to Africa in May 1972. He brought economic and military
aid to Guinée and Algeria and granted a large number of scholarships to African students to
study in Cuba.180 Then, Cuba gave substantial military and civilian aid to Angola from 1975-
1991. According to historian Christine Hatzky, around 400,000 Cuban soldiers were involved in
the war for independence and postcolonial conflict and around 50,000 Cuba civilians including
doctors, nurses, construction workers, teachers, and other skilled professionals contributed to the
effort over the years.181 Scholars have explained the high-level political rationale behind this

179 Piero Gliejeses, “The First Ambassadors: Cuba’s Contribution to Guinea-Bissau’s War of
181 Hatzky, 4.
large-scale involvement and its impact on Angolans and Cubans part of the effort.\textsuperscript{182} Shifting the focus to Cuban dancers provides a different perspective on Cuban-African relations. It illuminates what Africa signified for Cuban artists, and by extension, the Cuban imaginary.

Africa had long been central to the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba (CFN) as analysis of their early performances in Chapter Three indicated. These connections became more concrete when the CFN performed in the recently liberated Algeria in 1964. President Ahmed Ben Bella attended the performance and the audience applauded loudly throughout, shouting ovations such as, “Viva Ben Bella, Viva Fidel, Viva la rebelión de los humildes!”\textsuperscript{183} The energetic performance and its reception highlighted ties between Cuba and Africa. \textit{Palenque} (1976), created during the onset of Cuba’s involvement in Angola, elaborated on this connection by meditating on the memory of slavery and its place in contemporary political discourses. It opened with an excerpt from a 1973 speech by Fidel Castro, in which he spoke of Cuba’s debt to the “slave fighters” who had challenged slavery in nineteenth-century Cuba. Praising the historical warriors for their “extraordinary human and political valor,” Castro declared them “precursors of our revolutionary patria.”\textsuperscript{184} The program essay, probably written by Rogelio Martínez Furé, opened with a rhetorical question: “How to classify the work \textit{Palenque}? Dramatic dance? Danced opera? Musical drama?... It’s difficult to pigeonhole it in one category.”\textsuperscript{185} Instead, the company defined the work in the playbill as “an experiment ... where the most heterogeneous elements of song, music, anonymous poetic texts, and dance are integrated.” The program essay continued by saying that the “popular traditions of African descent” allowed them

\textsuperscript{182} Glijeses, “Moscow’s Proxy?”; Hatzky.
\textsuperscript{184} Quoted in Performance Program, “Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba presentan \textit{Palenque y Mambisa}” (1976), SA-BNJM.
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid.
“to exalt the eternal spirit of rebellion of [the Cuban] people, [and] its long tradition of fighting against oppression and exploiters.”

The aesthetic and narrative content of the work gestured to Cuba’s connection to Africa in the past and present. *Palenque* included music and dances from Yoruba, Congo, Arará, and Carabali cultures, as well as “experimental music,” a combination that made the work a part of “tradition and the vanguard.” The work was set in 1843-1844, known as “the year of the lash,” a period of harsh repression when Cuban authorities executed, imprisoned, or banished thousands of African-descended Cubans, slave and free, in response to the Escalera Conspiracy. The piece portrayed violence, close escapes, and the creation of settlements or *palenques* by those who got away. After detailing the content of the work, the author of the program essay concluded that the historical peoples were part of a larger struggle that continued in the present. Fighters across time incited “one, two, three *palenques* to generate the Revolution of the exploited on behalf of the exploited.”

The quote alluded to Che Guevara’s message to the 1966 Tricontinental Conference, calling for one, two, three Vietnams, that is, for world revolution. Included in the playbill was a 1976 quote from Fidel Castro about Cuban military involvement in Africa, which further linked the work to current events: “In Africa, with the heroic combatants of Angola, Cuban blood has spilled … [T]he sons of [the patriots José] Martí, [Antonio] Maceo, and [Ignacio] Agramonte … inherited the internationalist blood of [Maximo] Gómez and Che Guevara.” Castro continued, “Those who … enslaved men and sent them to America, probably never imagined that one of those peoples receiving the slaves, would send combatants to fight for the liberty of Africa.” Castro tied Cuban combatants in Africa to
important figures in the nineteenth-century struggle for independence against Spain, as well as to the recently deceased icon, Che Guevara. *Palenque* explored the relationship between Cuba and Africa as well as the internationalist relevance of Cuban nationalism.

The CFN not only promoted Cuban links to Africa choreographically at home, but also when performing in Europe, the Soviet Bloc, the Americas, the Middle East, and Africa. Its tours from 1980-1987 demonstrate the extent of its travels. The CFN performed in Canada and the United States in 1980, Nicaragua and Belize in 1981, Ghana, Angola, Mozambique, and Zambia in 1982, Italy, France, Spain, and Venezuela in 1983, the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, East Germany, and Peru in 1984, East Germany, Austria, Switzerland, England, Holland, and Czechoslovakia in 1986, and Angola, the Dominican Republic, and Iraq in 1987.¹⁹⁰

Along with the CFN, modern dancers of the Danza Nacional de Cuba (DNC) also played a role in fostering Cuban-African connections. In 1977, DNC demonstrated solidarity with African nations in Nigeria during the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC ’77), which included participants from Africa and the African diaspora. The event, as analyzed by historian Andrew Apter, was an extravagant spectacle that simultaneously celebrated Nigerian nationalism, Pan-African unity, and utopian modernity by staging a rendition of “global Africa.”¹⁹¹ The Cuban modern dancers furthered this ideal by uniting Cuba’s Africanist traditions with modern dance technique, a fusion that fit within larger developmental narratives framing FESTAC. According to a Cuban article on the recently returned dancers, the company expressed “fraternity” with “Mozambique, Angola, and Guinea” and celebrated the African origins of Cuban popular music and dance. The performance aligned with the DNC’s

¹⁹¹ Apter, 441.
main goals, which according to the same article, had been “since its founding … to establish that strong link with the African continent through the culture that they gave us.” Some 2,500 people attended the company’s performance and gave the Cuban dancers a warm reception.

Along with Africa, Cuba strengthened ties with new nations in the Caribbean in the 1970s. This was part of a larger trend as countries in the region pushed for greater political, economic, and cultural alliances. For instance, in 1968, the Caribbean Free Trade Association was established to remove trade restrictions among participating countries. In 1973, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, and Jamaica established a Caribbean Community to further economic integration. Cuba increasingly became part of these developments. In 1972, Cuba established diplomatic relations with Jamaica, Barbados, Guyana, and Trinidad and Tobago.

In the cultural sphere, Guyana’s Prime Minister Forbes Burnham harbored longstanding hopes of creating a regional arts festival. This became a reality in 1972 when Guyana hosted the first Caribbean Festival of Arts (CARIFESTA). The festival then took place in Jamaica (1976), Cuba (1979), and Barbados (1981). Among the participants were artists from the Caribbean islands, as well as from Colombia, Costa Rica, French Guiana, Guyana, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, El Salvador, New Orleans, Surinam, and Venezuela.

The goal of CARIFESTA was to celebrate Caribbean diversity and collaboration in a moment when divisions plagued many nations in the region. For instance, in Guyana, violence had erupted in the 1960s between Guyanese of African descent and those of the Indian

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193 Ibid.
subcontinent. African descended Forbes Burnham succeeded the Indian descended Cheddi Jagen as Prime Minister of British Guiana. In 1966, Burnham became the leader of a newly independent Guyana. Burnham later claimed to have had “a vision or dream of a Caribbean Festival of arts” within the unstable context of a newly independent nation riddled with ethnic, racial, class, and cultural tensions. In 1976, Michael Manley, the Prime Minister of Jamaica, articulated the unity aspirations of CARIFESTA, which in his words, involved creating, “in everyone who lives in a country whose shore is washed by the Caribbean Sea, a sense of their ‘Caribbeanness’ – to remind them and to make them proud of the common historic roots which link them with their neighbours, as well as making them aware of contemporary achievements and the progress of their respective societies.” The rotating meetings also allowed the host country to assert its leadership in the region. In 1976, Armando Hart, the Cuban Minister of Culture, said that hosting the festival was a “gesture that honors Cuba and that implicitly recognizes the importance of our country in the cultural movement of this region.”

At least in part, Cuba’s importance stemmed from its many and diverse contributions to the festival. For instance, in Guyana, Cuba was represented by the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba, the musical group Orquesta Aragón, and poet Luis Suardíz. The dance companies representing Cuba in Jamaica were the Ballet Nacional de Cuba and the Danza Nacional de Cuba. In Barbados, the Conjunto Folklórico de Oriente and Danza Nacional de Cuba

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197 “Souvenir Programme Carifesta ’76” (Jamaica, Jul. 23-Aug. 2, 1976), Folder Programoteca 1976, DCC.
198 Ibid.
200 “Noticias,” Cuba en el Ballet 3, 3 (1972), 47.
At CARIFESTA 1979 held in Cuba, the Ballet Nacional de Cuba, Danza Nacional de Cuba, Conjunto Folklórico Nacional, and the Conjunto de Danza de la Televisión Nacional performed. Moreover, Cuba invited delegations from thirty countries to participate in performances of music, dance, theatre, visual arts, “book debates,” conferences, symposiums, and discussions about different aspects of Caribbean culture. Cuban organizers added an exhibition of “primitive painting of the Caribbean,” a Caribbean carnival, and a meeting for Caribbean musicologists. A record number of 3000 participants took part in the Cuban event (compared to 1250 in Guyana, 1000 in Jamaica, and 2000 in Barbados).

The ethos of CARIFESTA framed other collaborations between Cuban dancers and their Caribbean counterparts. For instance, celebrating a shared Caribbean identity came to the fore when the National Dance Theatre Company of Jamaica performed in Cuba in 1974 and met with the Danza Nacional de Cuba. *Juventud Rebelde* detailed how the Jamaican company visited the DNC at their studios and saw them perform selections from Eduardo Rivero’s *Súlkary* (1971), Ramiro Guerra’s *Suite Yoruba* (1960), and Victor Cuéllar’s *Panorama de la danza y la música cubana* (1973). Impressed, the Jamaican choreographer and artistic director, Rex Nettleford, praised the group and recognized “the same line of creation” in Cuba as in Jamaica. Nettleford believed that this reaffirmed with “certainty that there are a surplus of elements for a dance theatre of the Caribbean with its own characteristics.”

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202 Performance Program, “Carifesta 81 Barbados: Cuba,” SA-BNJM.
204 Letter Ernesto Madero to Secretario de Relaciones Exteriores, Mar. 12, 1979, Folder 100 230-2 “1979 Festival de Artes Creativas Carifesta Havana Julio 1979,” Fondo: Dirección General de Asuntos Culturales, SRE.
206 Gabriel, “Que hay de nuevo,” *Juventud Rebelde* (Sept. 8, 1974).
repertory, and he invited the Cuban company to perform in Jamaica. Sustained connections between the two countries became a reality in 1980, when Cuban choreographer Eduardo Rivero worked in Jamaica for a year, setting his *Sulkary* and giving classes in Cuban modern dance technique to Jamaican dancers.

Another important collaboration arose in August 1977, when the DNC choreographer, dancer, and teacher Gerardo Lastra arrived in Georgetown, Guyana to work for one year. The groundwork for this trip was laid a year before when the DNC spent a week in Guyana, performing “under the auspices of the Guyana-Cuba cultural co-operation agreement.” During the trip, the Cuban dancers emphasized their interest in future collaboration with the Guyanese. At a press conference, the Cuban performers “expressed their country’s willingness to provide training for Guyanese in any cultural field in which it has expertise.” Cuban modern dance developments, according to the same article, came at least partially (and ironically) from the United States’ trade embargo. The article described how Cuban “artists were forced, because of the total blockade of Cuba by the West, to grow up as revolutionary artists, looking at home for inspiration and creativity, and this helped them to produce a high standard of dance, which was particularly Cuban and Latin American.” Guyana became a beneficiary of this Cuban style, forged in the crucible of a punitive politics.

Lastra arrived in 1977 to teach classes and direct the National Dance School of Guyana, which had been founded two years earlier. Lastra succeeded the school’s first director, Lavinia Williams, a U.S.-born dancer of West Indian descent who had shaped dance developments in the

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207 Gabriel, “Que hay de nuevo,” *Juventud Rebelde* (Sept. 8, 1974).
209 “Cultural Centre praised by Cuban dancers,” *Guyana Chronicle* (Jul. 20, 1976), 10, in Folder Prensa 1976, DCC.
210 Ibid.
211 Ibid.
Caribbean, especially Haiti. In addition to the school, Lastra intended to explore the possibility of creating a professional modern dance company. In a statement to the press, Lastra was realistic about his time in Guyana: “Of course the emergence of such a company will take years and, so far, I am to be here for only 12 months…. But this plan is so important to the development of your culture that I am happy to be here even for the very beginning.” According to the Guyana press, Lastra had been hired as “part of the cultural exchange programme between his country and Guyana.” To Guyana observers, Lastra was important for the Guyana dance establishment, not only because of his merits as an artist, but also because of his gender. As one Guyana article noted, “the National School of Dance has always been plagued by too few male dancers and it is hoped for that with a man as Director, more men will be encouraged to enroll in the new school year scheduled to begin next month.” In another Guyanese article entitled, “No longer a ‘Sissy,’ the Male Dancer must be Athletic, Virile and Robust,” the author described dance for men as a new concept in Guyana. Lastra, according to the article, described similar problems facing “the National School of Dance in Havana some years ago. ‘At that time, in my country, many men believed that dancing was not masculine enough and that they would be looked upon as sissies if they became dancers.’” He went on to clarify how Cuba overcame that problem by creating a “masculine” way of dancing: “At home we have many powerfully built young men in our dance school and the choreography … they perform almost always tests them to the utmost. We find too that the dance exercises are perfect

215 Ibid.
for developing the muscles … and so the dance student is always afforded the opportunity to be trim and healthy.”

Along with addressing the lack of male dancers in Guyana, Lastra sought to encourage new choreographers to draw upon “Guyanese folk tales … much as he did with those of … his own homeland.” Toward this end, students had classes not only in modern dance and ballet, but also in Guyanese folkloric dance forms. A Guyanese article summarized Lastra’s interest in folkloric material: “The Professor is certain that the salvation of the dance in Guyana lies in the republic’s folklore. He regards such preoccupation with things folk as yet another way of holding on to the nation’s roots.” Though never clarifying what folkloric meant, programs from the Guyana National School of Dance indicate that this included works inspired by African and Indian diasporic culture. For instance, in 1979, the students performed *Hold On*, choreographed by Gerardo Lastra based on a “negro spiritual … expressing the theme of courage and togetherness,” as well as *Indian Scarf Dance* choreographed by Mathadyal Persaud, which depicted a “folk dance done in the Punjab region of India…. in celebration of the rich rice harvest.” Although President Forbes Burnham catered to black constituents at the expense of the East Indian population, which overwhelmingly supported the opposition party, cultural producers riffed on ideas about multiethnic harmony in Guyana and the Caribbean writ large. Lastra described his work in Guyana as building international friendships, “In the case of

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216 Raschid Osman, “No longer a ‘sissy,’ the male dancer must be athletic, virile and robust,” *The Citizen* (Oct. 27, 1977), 5, in Folder Prensa 1977, DCC.
220 Performance Program, “Guyana National School of Dance, Tour of the Republic of Suriname” (May 10-17, 1979), SA-BNJM.
Guyana, I believe that the currents of sympathy, interest, and respect between Guyanese and Cubans, are strengthened by this work and contributes to the friendship between our countries.  

As Lastra and Guyanese dancers embraced the Caribbean’s cultural pluralism, other Cuban artists promoted blackness as a key to Cuban and Caribbean identity. In 1978, the sculptor and print maker Rafael Queneditt Morales created Grupo Antillano, a collective focused on black culture and its centrality to Cuban and Antillean history. The group’s first exhibition in 1978 featured painters from Havana and Santiago de Cuba as well as musicians like Sergio Vitier and his Grupo Oru and musicologist Odilio Urfé. The artists established close ties to the Cuban painter Wifredo Lam, and in 1980 Lam agreed to be Grupo Antillano’s honorary president for life. From 1978 to 1982, the group had thirty-two exhibitions, several outside Cuba in Prague, Sofia, Mexico City, and Surinam. For the 1981 CARIFESTA in Barbados, Grupo Antillano mounted an exhibit on a Cuban merchant vessel that made stops at several Caribbean islands. In 1983, it held its last group exhibition, dedicated to Lam on the first anniversary of his death. Although Grupo Antillano produced innovative and important work, its artists received minimal state backing and were largely ignored by the Cuban press and art historians. Questions remain surrounding the erasure. Scholars wonder if the lack of visibility was the product of official disapproval for art seen as cultivating black separatism, racial prejudice, or a perception of the movement as dated or out of touch for the late 1970s and 1980s. Regardless, a recent

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224 De la Fuente, Grupo Antillano, 72.
225 Ibid., 73.
226 Ibid., 43.
227 Ibid., 73.
volume edited by Alejandro de la Fuente has addressed this silencing and the significance of Grupo Antillano and its history.

As Grupo Antillano consolidated, scholars in Santiago de Cuba founded a Caribbean research center called the Casa del Caribe in 1982. The location was fitting since Santiago de Cuba called itself and was known as the “most Caribbean” of Cuba’s cities. As anthropologist Grete Viddal clarifies in her work on folkloric dance in Santiago, this designation has a racial component since Cubans consider the eastern provinces of Santiago and Guantánamo as the country’s “blackest.” An important leader in the Casa del Caribe effort, Joel James Figarola claimed that Santiago de Cuba always had greater ties and more in common with Port-au-Prince, Santo Domingo, Kingston, and San José than Havana, and that only with U.S. hegemony starting in the late nineteenth century, did eastern Cuban cities begin gazing northward. According to the founding resolution of the Casa del Caribe, the center would facilitate international exchanges among researchers and artists and host festivals and conferences on Caribbean culture. In a 1982 address, Minister of Culture Armando Hart described the center as “profoundly internationalist” for desiring to connect and relate with the world. The Casa del Caribe published Del Caribe, which featured recent scholarship on slavery, popular culture, rebellion, African diasporic faith systems, art, literature, music, and dance.

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229 Grete Viddal, “Vodú Chic: Cuba’s Haitian Heritage, the Folkloric Imaginary, and the State” (Ph.D. Diss., Harvard University, 2013), 20.
231 “Resolución del Comité Ejecutivo de la Asamblea Municipal del Poder Popular en Santiago de Cuba que crea la Casa del Caribe,” rpt. in La Casa del Caribe Sueño y Realidad. Documentos fundacionales y artículos sobre el Festival y la Casa del Caribe, ed. Leticia Milián Delgado (Santiago de Cuba: Casa del Caribe, 2000).
233 Milián Delgado, 70.
Additionally, the Casa del Caribe organized an annual event, Festival de las Artes Escénicas de Origen Caribeño (Festival of Scenic Arts from the Caribbean). The first festival in 1981 predated the formal founding of the center. However the Festival de las Artes Escénicas de Origen Caribeño became a regular event under the Casa del Caribe auspices in 1982. In 1983, a delegation from Surinam internationalized the festival. After that, the event had an annual, internationalist theme, dedicated to Haiti in 1985, Cuba in 1986 (for the centennial of the abolition of slavery), and Guyana in 1987. Unlike other arts festivals, this one took place mostly in open, public spaces such as plazas and streets rather than theatres. Moreover, the festival provided a space for professional and aficionado groups as well as spontaneous celebrations of traditional, popular culture.234 It also filled the gap left by CARIFESTA after 1981 (as it only started up again in 1992). In 1984, around fifty artistic groups – professional and non-professional – participated in a broad range of theatre, music, visual arts, and dance events. Dance occupied a prominent place in the festivities, with more than twenty Santiago dance groups performing, including Conjunto Folklórico de Oriente, Conjunto Folklórico Cutumba, and Grupo Barrancas.235 The founding of the Casa del Caribe and its Caribbean festival shows how Cuba went from being a fellow participant to leader in regional cultural initiatives.

During the 1980s, dancers and choreographers also made Caribbean themes central to their work. An important example of this was choreographer Eduardo Rivero, who had long explored African and Caribbean themes in works for Danza Nacional de Cuba, renamed Danza Contemporánea de Cuba in 1987. He furthered this effort when he started his own company in Santiago de Cuba, Compañía Teatro de la Danza del Caribe (Dance Theatre Company of the Caribbean) in 1988. In a statement about the company, Rivero described its aesthetic as based on

modern dance technique and “a profound process of investigating the cultural roots of the Caribbean region and especially the eastern zone of the country.”

In October 1989, the company performed Tributo (Tribute), which explored the relationship between Cuban and Caribbean identifications and highlighted the import of cross boundary dance dialogues. The work paid tribute to reggae, which the program notes defined as a “rhythm born in Jamaica, that is an element of cohesion and cultural identification among the peoples of the English-speaking Caribbean.” Choreographed by Rivero to the music of Bob Marley and Jimmy Cliff, the movements reflected on political messages in the music, which came from the “ghettos of the Third World,” to criticize “racial discrimination, oppressive regime of apartheid, war, injustice, oppression, and sang for love, unity, and liberty of the people.” Inspired by reggae’s messages, the work offered “a tribute to all our [Cuban] heroes and martyrs and all those that have given their lives or part of them for these principles and ideals.” Reggae resonated with Cuban political ideals and therefore honored Cubans who had fought against global injustice for a better future. The work featured dancers from Rivero’s company and the Conjunto Folklórico de Oriente. By having modern and folkloric dancers perform together, Rivero reiterated the idea of artistic, and by extension social, unity.

Not unlike efforts in Latin America, Cuban dance activities in Africa and the Caribbean contributed to larger political projects, particularly exhibitions of anti-racist, internationalist solidarity. However, the Cuban government’s geographic division of dance labor also highlighted racialized inequalities and persistent dance hierarchies. The Caribbean and Africa became a niche for Cuban modern dancers, as demonstrated “in Guyana, with Gerardo Lastra;

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236 Performance Program, “Compañía Teatro de la Danza del Caribe” (Feb. 16-19, 1989), Folder Ballet-Danza 1989, TNC.
238 Ibid.
and in Mozambique with Diana Alfonso and Manuél Vázquez,” according to an article on the DNC’s international work.\(^{239}\) By sending modern and folkloric dancers to these regions, the Cuban government advertised its supposed elimination of race problems as enlightened artists imparted inclusive racial ideologies and aesthetics to performers and audiences in other parts of the world. Yet the government ultimately reserved ballet for cultural capitals and sent modern and folkloric dance to places with a shared (and less prestigious) African tradition. Despite these problematic implications, teaching and performing abroad allowed modern and folkloric dancers to exhibit the international relevance and national distinctiveness of their methodologies, as they transported and translated them to new locales.

**Conclusion**

As this chapter has shown, dance was an important national good, acting as a form of soft power throughout the world. Ballet played an outsized role in the “First World,” highlighting shared Western traditions and globalized hierarchies in which ballet ranked above all other dance forms. Modern dance had greater presence in Latin America, the Caribbean, and to a lesser extent, Africa. Folkloric dance represented Cuban links to Africa. Cuban dancers propagated these various identities – the western whiteness of ballet, racial and cultural mixture of modern dance, and the African blackness of folkloric dance – simultaneously in different locales. Very different choreographic projects worked in concert defying an oversimplified characterization of Cuba in the world in the 1970s and 1980s as pragmatic or idealist, aggressive or passive, appealing to capitalist or socialist countries, but rather all of the above at once. Soft power had the flexibility to do what military and economic aid could not. It also showed inconsistencies in

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Cuban foreign policy as artists built cultural alliances in communist and anti-communist countries alike.

While furthering internationalist efforts, Cuban cultural workers earned hard currency and added to the Cuban economy. Although exact numbers for dancer contracts have yet to be encountered, figures on monetary return for Cuban military and civilian programs provide some indication of what dance exports translated to economically. For instance, in 1977 Cubans overseas generated around $50 million in hard currency, which amounted to approximately 9 percent of commodity exports to capitalist countries.\textsuperscript{240} In 1981, Cuba received $250 million for military and civilian operations in Angola.\textsuperscript{241} In her study on Cuban-Angolan cooperation, Christine Hatzky explains that the Angolan government paid Cuban civilian workers an agreed upon monthly salary, half of which came in the form of U.S. dollars.\textsuperscript{242} Average salaries according to Angolan records from 1983 were 743.80 USD per person for a total of 1,823 employees.\textsuperscript{243} These figures, along with the anecdotal evidence like Alicia Alonso cashing her $6,000 from the University of Texas in 1982, reveals the great economic benefit of Cubans working abroad.

Engagements abroad also added professional prestige. In a 1987 article, Miguel Iglesias, the director of Danza Contemporánea de Cuba, explained the intersecting economic and symbolic benefits of foreign performing, “When we travel abroad our goals are to show how a country like Cuba can have a high quality artistic movement … and also to generate currency to contribute to the economy, in addition to having the personal satisfaction of being recognized as

\textsuperscript{241} Ibid., 380.
\textsuperscript{242} Hatzky, 182.
\textsuperscript{243} Ibid., 183-184.
Cuban artists.” Rather than just national leaders in their field, dance makers became international experts – a reality that was institutionalized in the regional dance organizations presided over by Cubans.

By the 1980s, Cuban dancers were in high demand. Whereas this chapter detailed the international frameworks that went into the circulation of Cuban dancers, the next focuses on domestic dance developments including new forms of employment that emerged in the 1980s. In Cuba, a growing tourist industry employed performers in cabarets, and dancers also created jobs by founding new performance collectives. This occurred along a backdrop of limited state experiments in capitalism in the early 1980s followed by policy reversals in 1986. Within this moment of confused shifts, dancers improvised and pushed the boundaries of their field. Engaging by then familiar tactics of creative negotiation, dancers overcame economic and political limitations that threatened their professional development.

244 Nadia Karandashov Robinson, “Al talento hay que darle oportunidades,” Trabajadores (Sept. 3, 1987).
Chapter 6. Moving Markets:
Dance, Tourism, and a New Vanguard

In the 1980s, large professional companies had decreasing space for talented dancers graduating each year. While internationalist initiatives discussed in the previous chapter provided one outlet, new opportunities in the tourist industry and smaller experimental companies at home also accommodated the growing field. As dancers secured employment, they participated in changes to the national economy and cultural scene. During the decade, the government promoted tourism as a bid for hard currency, and dancers on cabaret stages entertained a growing numbers of visitors to the island. Moreover, professional dance companies organized annual and semiannual international dance workshops in Havana, which offered introductions to Cuban ballet, folkloric, and modern dance training. These workshops helped to make the island a destination with not only warm beaches, but also unique cultural experiences like intensive exposure to Cuban dance. As international dance workshops codified Cuban dance into neatly packaged experiences for foreign travelers, some Cuban dancers disrupted the establishment’s coherence. In dialogue with artists of other media, dancers left large companies and formed small troupes that experimented in collaboration with dramaturges, actors, writers, and musicians. By creating new spaces for expression, dancers exhibited their boldness and political acumen. They negotiated with hierarchies that regulated the dance world. In sum, this chapter examines the material conditions and aesthetic questions that propelled changes to dance, as well as the power structures that impacted shifting dance markets of the 1980s.

In tracing the reemergence of tourism and new expressive openings before 1990, this chapter challenges scholarship on Cuba after that year. The fall of the Soviet Union caused a
major economic and political crisis in Cuba, euphemistically and ambiguously labeled by the Cuban government as the Special Period in Time of Peace. Many scholars have suggested that this crisis caused a sudden turn to tourism and the emergence of civil society in the 1990s through today.\(^1\) For instance, anthropologist Ariana Hernandez-Reguant observed that the Special Period saw local artists exploring “multiple positions and consciousness of self and others based on race, generation, and sexuality … [that] marked a departure from an earlier social pressure to express a uniformity of experience.”\(^2\) Political scientist Sujatha Fernandes concluded, “The crisis that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union gave rise to a plethora of agents seeking to negotiate with the state for varied and competing social demands.”\(^3\) Dance scholar Suki John claimed that in the 1990s, “While many aspects of Cuban life withered, dance flourished. The material lack that resulted from the Special Period engendered a particular sort of creativity in Cuba.”\(^4\) Yet this chapter suggests that scholars focused on the Special Period have missed an important legacy of negotiation and creative labor in Cuba. Rather than benefitting from external shifts, Cuban dancers fought with varying levels of success in the 1980s for a more open dance future, complete with alternative institutional organizations and more avenues for professional development.

The analysis considers these issues in two sections. The first looks at government efforts to reinvigorate tourism and the ways that dancers became involved in the industry. Cabaret dancers impressed thousands of tourists a month, and international dance training workshops drew travelers interested in Cuban art and culture. The second section turns to professional ballet

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\(^2\) Hernandez-Reguant, 3.

\(^3\) Fernandes, 2-3.

\(^4\) John, 10.
and modern dance developments in the 1980s. During this time, dancers left larger companies or eeked out spaces within existing institutions for smaller collectives, which gave them greater freedom to perform and choreograph. Through this process, dance establishment leaders served as intermediaries and gatekeepers. Company directors like Alicia Alonso of the Ballet Nacional de Cuba and Miguel Iglesias of the Danza Contemporánea de Cuba (starting in 1985), determined the fate of these groups by questioning their worth or giving them crucial support. This chapter illustrates how dancers set and challenged the parameters of the Cuban dance establishment in the 1980s. For those able to effectively negotiate with power brokers, new opportunities were in the offing.

**Dance as a Tourist Attraction**

As the 1970s drew to a close, the Cuban government set its sights on expanding the tourist industry, which had floundered since the early 1960s. In 1976, the government founded the Instituto Nacional del Turismo (National Institute of Tourism, INTUR) to develop and collect data on national and international tourism. The global climate of détente allowed a growing number of visitors from capitalist countries to visit Cuba in the late 1970s. According to one report, a Canadian company began charter tours to Cuba in 1975, and it resulted in “a mini-flood of Canadian tourists,” or 40,000 by 1976.\(^5\) Whereas only 8,400 visitors from capitalist countries went to Cuba in 1974, 69,500 traveled to Cuba in 1978.\(^6\) The U.S. was a part of this influx thanks to Carter easing travel restrictions in 1977. In 1979, a New York freelance journalist Paula DiPerna published a guidebook on Cuba for North American travelers, “with the assistance of …

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the Cuban National Tourism Institute.”7 In the next decade, the Cuban government’s touristic investments paid off as the number of foreign visitors to the island more than doubled from 132,902 in 1981 to 340,329 in 1990.8 This section examines the growth of tourism and how dancers figured into the industry as entertainers on cabaret stages and organizers of a special cultural experience in the form of dance training intensives.

The Cuban government expanded tourism in hopes of earning money to service a large foreign debt, which in 1985 was $3.4 billion to non-Communist countries.9 For example, in 1980, 200,000 foreign tourists (44% from Canada and 9% from the United States) brought $100 million into the economy.10 Visitors from the United States, mostly journalists, researchers, and Cuban Americans on family visits, faced renewed difficulties in 1982 when the Reagan administration reinstituted strict travel bans that had been in place from 1963 to 1977.11 However, at the same time, the Cuban government targeted other hard currency countries like Canada, Spain, Germany, and Mexico.12 To accommodate increased numbers of tourists, Cuba worked to address its underdeveloped infrastructure. In 1982, the government passed Law-Decree No. 50, allowing joint ventures with foreign companies from Spain, France, Britain, Venezuela, and Canada, which included hotel construction among other activities.13 In 1984, the Cuban government announced it would invest $500 million over the following five years to expand tourist facilities. At that time, INTUR had offices in Canada, France, and Mexico, and

8 Dolores Espino, 102.
13 Dolores Espino, 105.
planned to open more in London, Milan, and Frankfurt.\textsuperscript{14} Canada became the largest supplier of tourists and by 1990, accounted for 22\% of all foreign tourists to the island. Western Europe as an area offered 40\% of visitors in 1990 with the highest numbers coming from West Germany, Spain, Italy, France, and Austria in that order. Latin America supplied 24\% of the total in 1990, with the most from Mexico, Venezuela, and Brazil. Meanwhile, there was a steady decline of visitors from the Soviet Bloc, and the amount almost disappeared by the end of the 1980s.\textsuperscript{15}

Reports overwhelmingly point to the Tropicana Nightclub as an important fixture on the tourist circuit. According to Stephen Kinzer writing for the \textit{Boston Globe}, “For those seeking the ultimate good time, the legendary Tropicana nightclub is still the obvious choice in Cuba. Scores of beauties kick up their heels … much as they did before Fidel Castro’s ragged band took Havana 23 years ago.”\textsuperscript{16} The Tropicana in the 1980s, however, represented more of a return than an uninterrupted continuation. As Joseph Treaster reported in the \textit{New York Times} in 1984:

\begin{quote}
In the 1960s Cuba was pouring what money it had into education, health programs and housing. The costumes at the Tropicana began to get tattered. In the mid-70s the performances carried heavy political messages. One featured the freeing of slaves. In another, a group of scrubbing women threw down their washboards, stomped around a chorus of protesting men and happily ended their dance as the men picked up the washboards. Now the Cuban Government sees the Tropicana as a means of earning badly needed dollars from Western tourists and the nightclub has a virtually unlimited budget. The lamé and the crepe and the spangles are plentiful. Some of the gauzy hats are nearly three feet tall. And the politics are gone.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

As this summary of the cabaret’s recent history suggests, the government redirected resources to the Tropicana and replaced political proselytizing with shimmering gauze and spangles.

\textsuperscript{15} Dolores Espino, 102-104.
To 1980s U.S. journalists, the Tropicana seemed out of place in a communist country. For instance, commentators noted the “richness and splendor” of the Tropicana, the so-called “jewel in Havana’s nightclub crown.” These allusions to monarchical wealth highlight the paradox of the cabaret’s luxury in a communist country. Tropicana’s ostentation, from large headdresses to extravagant costumes, “must have absorbed half the annual Cuban textile production,” journalist Suzanne Garment of *The Wall Street Journal* surmised. To Bert Shanas, writing for Baltimore’s *The Sun*, the discrepancy between the sumptuous scenes inside the nightclub and the shortages outside of it seemed too extreme. As he put it, “The Tropicana was nice, but I got more out of talking to a housewife in a government store about the rationing of meat and milk. For Cuba today is not the Tropicana; it is a Communist country in every sense of the word, where life is hard line not chorus line.” Others disagreed with Shanas, seeing the Tropicana and the joie de vivre therein, as characteristically Cuban. As Garment noted, “A few days in Havana remind you ineradicably that the Cubans are not Soviets. The revolution has dulled the city, but these are people you can still hear humming as they go about their business.” The Tropicana pointed to Cuban distinctiveness. Treaster in the *New York Times* described how nationalism as well as tourist dollars explained the Tropicana’s value: “The gyrating young women seem to personify the so-called decadence that Communist theoreticians have found so sickening in Western capitalist societies. But in Marxist Cuba the Tropicana is embraced as a national tradition…. It is a Government showcase for visiting delegations from the Communist countries of Eastern Europe and a magnet for tourist dollars.” Though for some

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18 Bert Shanas, “Tourists only trickle back to Cuba’s drab playground,” *The Sun* (Dec. 15, 1980), B3.
20 Bert Shanas, “Tourists only trickle back to Cuba’s drab playground,” *The Sun* (Dec. 15, 1980), B3.
the Tropicana seemed curiously out of place in communist Cuba, others rationalized that the venue fed the economy and paid nationalistic tribute to Cuban culture.

Cuban reflections on the Tropicana in the 1980s corroborate the conclusions made by outsiders. For instance, an article in *Bohemia* described the club and the industry it sustained as a “decisive weapon to win the economic war” that embroiled the nation.\(^\text{23}\) Besides this stern, militant characterization, other Cubans defended the performances as nationalistic. For instance, when a hostess at the club was asked about how Cuba could claim to have equality of the sexes and to have eliminated bourgeois practices if “chorus girls … perform in their mini-outfits.” She reportedly responded, very seriously, “Oh no, you don’t understand; the nightclub acts are part of the Cuban culture and heritage.”\(^\text{24}\) Tropicana choreographer Tomás Morales described the cabaret as, “searching all the time to try to show the best of our music in the most artistic way.”\(^\text{25}\) Ricardo Villanueva, the manager of the Tropicana, elaborated on the cultural significance of the nightclub in an interview with Joseph Treaster, “We socialists cannot overlook the beauty of the show…. It is not possible for us to close the cabaret because it is a center of dance, a center of culture and heritage. The first show every night gives the people our roots in the music, the African folklore. The second show, at 1 A.M., has a little more dynamism, a little more variety.”\(^\text{26}\) Moreover, the dancers were highly trained and well paid. As Villanueva explained, the Tropicana’s dancers and musicians came from the National School of the Arts, and were paid between $295 and $350 a month. According to Villanueva, “the dancer dances as a professional

\(^{23}\) “El Turismo Saca la Cara,” *Bohemia* (Jun. 21, 1985), 51.

\(^{24}\) Bert Shanas, “Tourists only trickle back to Cuba’s drab playground,” *The Sun* (Dec. 15, 1980), B3.


and is respected by everyone. And, of course, our society defends her. Cuban citizens seemed to agree since they patronized the club as much as tourists in the 1980s. As Treaster noted:

Trade union members, meaning virtually every adult Cuban, qualify for a discount on admission, drinks and meals, and for most young Cubans, a night at the Tropicana is regarded as the best date in town…. Nobody here seems to think the show exploits women…. Most of the men who go to the Tropicana are accompanied by wives or friends…. Between performances the couples take to the dance floor. Their movements are very much like those of the professional dancers, which may help to explain why the Cubans see nothing worthy of a raised eyebrow about the show."

As Cuban patrons danced in between numbers, they affirmed that the cabaret presented popular culture, widely enjoyed and respected by local audiences.

And yet, even as Cubans defended the Tropicana, a 1988 tour to the U.S. by performers of the cabaret reveal existing ambivalences about its place in Cuban society. Paul Trautman, a U.S. promoter decided to bring the Tropicana to the U.S. for a performance tour. According to a New York Times article by Jon Pareles on the process, “both the United States and Cuban Governments initially resisted the United States appearances by the Tropicana revue.” Pareles quoted Trautman as explaining that although Cubans respected popular music and dance, “when they [(i.e., the government)] consider what goes for export, they have a bias toward high art; they’d send ballet … but they’d be reluctant to send salsa. The Tropicana, for instance, had never even been to the Soviet bloc countries. It took several visits and a lot of negotiations to get the Cuban government to let them out.” At first, the Cuban government tried to convince Trautman to organize a tour by “something a little bit ‘better,’ more classical,” like dancers from the Danza Contemporánea de Cuba or Conjunto Folklórico Nacional performing in “Tropicana-type costumes.” However, Trautman finally prevailed, getting the Tropicana choreographer

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27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
(Tomás Morales) and company members to make the tour. In these discussions, the Cuban government ranked the cabaret and its dancers below other professionals on the island. The U.S. government shared these prejudices. The State Department initially resisted the Tropicana’s appearance, saying that the performance was “popular … not culture – it [was] Las Vegas.”

Despite official reluctance, the performers received a warm reception by audiences and critics in the U.S., as well as supportive coverage in Cuba. Pareles reviewed the show in the *New York Times*, and described it mixing “tourist attractions with a cultural conscience. Encompassing Cuban music from Yoruba chants to ‘Besame Mucho,’ and presenting it with kilowatts of glitter, miles of leg and bared navels by the dozens, the Tropicana revue is a pop marvel. A closing song described it as ‘the pride of every Cuban.’” The show’s range, glitz, and energy stood out – featuring rumba, mambo, son, guaracha, cha-cha-chá, “Yoruban chants,” flashing gold lamé suits, and “sequined bikinis and headdresses” in an “utterly kinetic” performance. The audience loved it. The singer Juana Bacallao elicited a “long ovation” and “delirium” from the New York public, and the singer Omara Portuondo led audience members to “applaud repeatedly and some even wept.” Cuban reviews praised dancers for their perseverance in the face of bureaucratic hurdles and “threats of exile counterrevolutionary groups.” For instance, the Cuban troupe had to go straight to the theater from the airport. They still performed well thanks to their “professionalism,” an article in the Cuban daily *Granma* reported.
The press in the U.S. confirmed what Granma mentioned regarding threats of anti-Castro violence and other “major last minute snags.” First, the Cuban government refused to let the performers travel without the singer Omara Portuondo and two others, who were still waiting for their visas. The U.S. only granted the remaining visas three days before the scheduled opening performance on Tuesday, which had to be cancelled. Although the Wednesday performance happened, anti-Castro demonstrators protested outside the theatre, and audience members were frisked before entering the auditorium. Then, the show began five hours late and left out some of the planned numbers, but still lasted until 4 A.M. After the chaotic opening night, protesters kept a vigil outside the Beacon Theater on Broadway for four days. On the fifth and final day of the Tropicana’s New York showings, the Beacon Theater received bomb threats. After this dramatic run, the Tropicana made its way to Los Angeles. However, the West Coast turned out to be equally complicated. The company had to debut three nights earlier than scheduled because the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service claimed that they had overstayed their visit. In an interview, Trautman described the looming deportation threat as just another obstacle in a series of challenges faced over the previous year of organizing the tour.

As the performers struggled to fulfill their engagement, the audience remained divided on the political valence (or lack thereof) of the program. Some anti-Castro Cuban Americans protested the show because they saw the Tropicana as “propaganda for Fidel Castro,” as José Garcia, the head of the Los Angeles chapter of the Cuban American Foundation put it. Jorge Rodríguez, a writer for La Opinión in Los Angeles disagreed, countering that, “The Tropicana show is the biggest entertainment event in the entire hemisphere…. If you talk about the

39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
Tropicana from either a left or a right point of view, it’s wrong. The Tropicana has nothing to do with politics and it’s a mistake to use it as a political tool. It’s popular culture.”

Pareles similarly characterized the show as having “little political import beyond a generalized Cuban nationalism.” Cuban Americans in the audience appeared to agree. Pareles noted that “many nostalgic Cubans” were in the New York audience, and their emotions rather than political leanings seemed to dictate their responses to the performers. They enthusiastically applauded “the leggy, briefly costumed, wonderfully lithe corps of dancers,” but singer Juana Bacallao earned the loudest effusions. According to Pareles, because of this reception, she “burst into grateful tears – apparently overwhelmed that after three decades of embargo, she still ha[d] American fans.” Cuban performers and Cuban American audience members put their differences aside to celebrate Cuban music and dance. While not performing agitprop about Castro or communism, the Tropicana’s performance nevertheless was political in a different register by exhibiting a “generalized nationalism” that brought Cubans together. This unifying power highlighted the political divides that impacted countless Cuban families and the populace in general.

The Tropicana revue, inside and outside of Cuba, played an important role in Cuba’s growing tourist industry in the 1980s. Moreover, the institution served as another professional option for new dance graduates. As noted above, Tropicana’s manager Villanueva pointed out that the Tropicana’s dancers graduated from ENA and received a good salary for their work. Choreographer Tomás Morales described the dancers furthering their training at the Tropicana with daily classes in “modern Cuban dance, some classical dancing and most of all, folkloric

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41 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
dance.” The fact that the Cuban government had hoped that Trautman would organize a trip by “better” modern and folkloric performers perhaps indicates that the least talented dancers ended up working at the cabaret. Yet, even dancers from the more esteemed companies collaborated with the Tropicana. For instance, four modern dancers of the Danza Contemporánea de Cuba performed with the Tropicana in the U.S. in 1988. These dancers likely went because they did not have roles in upcoming modern dance performances; therefore, touring with the Tropicana gave them more stage time and the opportunity to travel abroad. The Tropicana contributed to the broader dance establishment as a space for professional development.

While the Tropicana was an important institution for Cuba’s tourist industry, international dance workshops organized by the Ballet Nacional de Cuba, Conjunto Folklórico Nacional, and Danza Contemporánea de Cuba also attracted foreign visitors to Cuba starting in the 1980s. These workshops served as a type of advertising for Cuban dance achievements. They promoted Cuban ballet, modern, and folkloric dance as established techniques that could be learned by students from different national backgrounds. The annual and semiannual intensives also generated much needed hard currency as participants paid considerable enrollment costs and spent money in other state-run industries as they paid for housing, food, and souvenirs. As Cuba tried to compete with other Caribbean islands as a tourist destination, the dance workshops epitomized Cuba’s distinct cultural offerings. Dancers from all over the world traveled to Cuba to train with renowned teachers whilst also enjoying other attractions like beautiful beaches, museums, and a lively nightlife.

45 Dancers Lázaro García, Esteban Delgado, Roberto Fresneda, Odalys Cuéllar, as indicated in a typed note at the bottom of the page for the press clipping, “Amenazas no impiden presentación de Tropicana en Nueva York,” Granma (May 21, 1988), Folder Prensa 1988, DCC.
According to official histories, it was Alicia Alonso who had the idea for “Cuballet,” an international workshop on the Cuban school of ballet. The first course took place in the fall of 1982, coinciding with the Festival Internacional de Ballet in Havana. Alicia Alonso’s daughter, Laura Alonso, was the main teacher and organizer of this and subsequent workshops in the 1980s. For Cuban observers, it was a natural outgrowth of the Cuban ballet’s international activities. An article in *Cuba en el Ballet* described, “The presence of the Ballet Nacional de Cuba and its most important figures on the principal stages of the world, the popularity that Cuban choreographers enjoy, and the intensely creative atmosphere of the International Ballet Festivals that take place in Havana every two years, have awakened a notable interest in the methodology of teaching and the scenic realization of the Cuban school.” Participants in the 1982 workshop came from the Bahamas, Spain, France, Hungary, Italy, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, U.S., and Venezuela, as well from the six Cuban provinces of Havana, Pinar del Río, Villa Clara, Holguín, Camagüey, and Guantánamo. Pre-professional students, young professionals, and teachers took classes in the Cuban school ballet technique, pointe, adagio, make-up, and choreography. They watched Cuban ballet films and learned about the “universal history” of ballet, the Ballet Nacional de Cuba, the Cuban school of ballet, and Cuban choreographic movement. They also participated in a master class on romanticism given by Alicia Alonso. Upon completing the course, the students received a certificate.

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49 Ibid.
After a successful debut, Cuballet took place annually. The second session in 1983 had students from fifteen countries including Cuba. New classes along with those offered the previous year were kinesiology, musicology, lighting design, and scenic design. In 1984, Cuballet attracted over 230 students from Africa, North America, Europe, Asia, and Latin America. Cuballet 1985 had over 190 participants from fifteen countries, and included additional classes in Spanish and modern dance. Cuballet in 1986 had more than 200 participants from nineteen countries. In 1987, Cuballet had a winter and summer session, each three weeks long. The summer workshop had around 300 participants from fifteen countries. The winter and summer sessions of Cuballet 1988 had over 300 participants from fifteen countries. The Cuballet in January 1989 had more than 150 students: the majority (ninety) were from Brazil and the rest from Mexico, Argentina, Jamaica, the U.S., Peru, Venezuela, and Cuba. These workshops attracted numerous tourists from capitalist countries in Latin America and Europe, meaning that they generated considerable hard currency for the ballet establishment and Cuba in general.

The workshops had symbolic and economic returns. Commentators, for instance, claimed that the annual event contributed to regional ballet developments. As an article in Cuba en el Ballet put it, with the “triumphal culmination of Cuballet, the Cuban school of ballet has taken

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50 The fifteen countries were Czechoslovakia, Colombia, Ecuador, Spain, U.S., England, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, Puerto Rico, Switzerland, Soviet Union, Venezuela, and Cuba.
52 This included Angola, Argentina, Bahamas, Canada, Colombia, Spain, U.S., Greece, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Panama, Peru, Portugal, Dominican Republic, Venezuela, and Cuba. “Cuballet 1984: Curso Practico Internacional de la Escuela Cubana de Ballet,” Cuba en el Ballet, 3, 4 (1984), 22.
55 This included Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, U.S., England, the Netherlands, Mexico, Nicaragua, Peru, East Germany, Uruguay, Venezuela, and Cuba. “Noticias,” Cuba en el Ballet 7, 2 (1988), 40; Condis Ventura, 32.
56 Condis Ventura, 35.
one more step toward what one day will be – as Alicia Alonso says – the Latin American school of ballet.”57 Another article in Cuba en el Ballet claimed that the large number of Latin American students demonstrated how “the Cuban school of ballet [was] at the service of dancers, teachers, choreographers, students, and other specialists linked to dance, from all parts of the world, and especially the rest of Latin America.”58 While benefitting foreign students, the workshops also made the BNC considerable amounts of money. Documents for the 1987 three-week session reveal that classes and housing cost $450 for children, $500 for dancers thirteen and up, and $550 for teachers.59 While each workshop generated income for Cuba, participants also sometimes won Cuban funding. In 1987, for instance, the Cuban organizers awarded a six-month scholarship valued at $3,000 USD for the best dancer at the camp to continue studying ballet in Cuba.60 The scholarship in 1988 went to a youth from the Netherlands.61 This exchange not only benefitted the Dutch student, but also exhibited the international acclaim of the Cuban ballet school, which could ultimately attract more students in later years.

Ballet was not alone in drawing foreign students. In 1985, the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba held its first international course on Cuban folklore, called “FolkCuba,” for two weeks in October. The first day involved matriculation, lunch, a visit to the Escuela Nacional de Danza Moderna y Folklórica, and an evening welcome reception.62 Besides dance and music classes, the activities included a conference on Cuban music, a trip to museums in Guanabacoa and Regla, a performance by the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional at Teatro Mella, and

60 Ibid.
62 “Programación General de FolkCuba ’85,” Folder Ballet-Danza 1985, TNC.
a toque de santo or Santería religious ceremony in the municipality of Madruga. Participants from Canada, Spain, U.S., Finland, Mexico, Sweden, Venezuela, and Cuba took classes in Yoruban and Palo dances, Rumba (yambú, Columbia, and guaguancó), cha-cha-chá, mambo, son, danzón, and percussion. They also took part in Sábado de la Rumba (Rumba Saturday), dancing with members of the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional. In 1986, FolkCuba took place in June and included sixty participants from the Americas and Europe. In addition to dance and percussion classes, there were newly added lectures on Cuban cultural history by Manuel Moreno Fraguínals, Pedro Dechamps, Argeliers León, Odilio Urfé, and Rogelio Martínez Furé. In June 1987, FolkCuba included students from fourteen countries. In 1988, the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional followed the ballet’s example and began holding a winter and summer session. In January 1988, FolkCuba had over forty people from fifteen countries in the Americas, Europe, and Asia. In 1988, FolkCuba took place for two weeks in July. In 1989, FolkCuba had almost eighty participants.

Pamphlets on the 1985 and 1987 sessions targeted an international audience and detailed full schedules for a reasonable price by international standards. A dual language (English and Spanish) pamphlet for the 1985 FolkCuba advertised two different “specialties” – one for dance and one for percussion, each at a cost of $150 USD. The pamphlet also detailed different tourist packages that covered transfers to and from the airport and daily classes, visits to ENA, museums and other cultural attractions, the beach town of Varadero, and participation in the

63 Ibid.
64 “Noticias,” Cuba en el Ballet 5, 1 (1986), 42.
65 This included Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Chile, Curacao, U.S., Holland, Switzerland, Sweden, East Germany, and Venezuela.
68 This included Austria, Canada, Colombia, Chile, Denmark, Spain, U.S., France, the Netherlands, Italy, Japan, East Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, and Cuba. “Noticias,” Cuba en el Ballet 7, 2 (1988), 44.
Sábado de la Rumba. The prices for housing varied depending on the category of the hotel and whether it was a single or a double, ranging from $175 USD to $511 USD for fourteen nights. Another trilingual pamphlet for 1985, written in Spanish, English, and French, listed the addresses of Cuban tourist agencies in Canada, Spain, France, Sweden, Italy, Switzerland, Mexico, Venezuela, and Panama, indicating the pamphlet’s anticipated wide audience. By 1987, the program had expanded to three different class levels of increasing cost. The basic level included classes in four Cuban popular dances and two different rumba styles; the intermediate level offered five Cuban popular dances, three rumba styles, and the dances of three Santería orishas; and, the advanced level covered five Cuban popular dances, three rumba styles, and the dances of seven Santería orishas. The cost of the respective levels was $150 USD, $200 USD, and $250 USD. The pamphlet also stated that the official languages of the workshop were Spanish, English, and French. The different languages and levels illustrate how FolkCuba tried to appeal to beginner and advanced dancers from countries all over the world.

In 1989, Danza Contemporánea de Cuba hosted its first international dance workshop, “Cubadanza.” According to dancer and teacher Atanasio Mederos, the Danza Contemporánea de Cuba had decided to initiate Cubadanza because of “repeated requests made by dancers and other professionals from various countries.” Performance tours and international teaching engagements had introduced audiences to Cuba’s unique modern dance style, fanning interest in its methods and choreographies. As Mederos explained, “The Cuban school of contemporary

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70 “First International Laboratory of Folklore in Cuba/ Primer laboratorio internacional de folklore, Conjunto Folklórico Naiconal de Cuba,” Folder Ballet-Danza 1985, TNC.
71 “Cuba’s first international folklore’s laboratory/ Primer laboratorio internacional de folklore en Cuba,” Folder Ballet-Danza 1985, TNC.
72 “FolkCuba: Laboratorio Internacional de Folklore en la Habana,” Folder Ballet-Danza 1987, TNC.
dance … has created a singular form of movement that is derived from the Spanish and African roots of Cubans, joined to the traditional technique of [modern] dance.” 75 This claim suggested a simple, commodified dance product, which did not accurately represent the diversity of Cuban modern dance. Yet, this construction was easier to market to foreign students. The first Cubadanza included classes in Cuban modern dance technique, choreography, theatre design (costumes, scenery, lights, and makeup), acrobatics for dancers, popular dances, and kinesiology. 76 According to a pamphlet on the program, “prestigious teachers” taught the “technique of Cuban Modern Dance, based on our Afro-Spanish roots, enriched with our Cuban-Caribbean idiosyncrasy,” which had resulted in the “Cuban School of Modern Dance, internationally acclaimed for its originality.” 77 The course cost $250 USD per person for participants and $150 USD for observers. The package included participation or observation of all classes, an excursion to the historic center of Havana, and transportation from the hotel to the classes each day. 78 More than thirty foreigners from eleven countries participated in the first Cubadanza. 79 In 1990, the company held two sessions – one two-week session in January and one in July. The coordinator for the event, Mariana Torres, described its significance for Cuba and its modern dance establishment: “Cubadanza constitutes … an event of transcendent political, cultural, and economic significance.” The course encouraged dancers to “investigate and rescue our traditions … that have made possible the surge and development of modern dance over thirty years.” 80

76 Ibid.
77 “Cuba Danza ’89” Pamphlet, Folder Ballet-Danza 1989, TNC.
78 Ibid.
As Cuba spruced up tourist attractions, the government tried to emphasize that the 1980s tourism differed from the industry of thirty years prior. For instance, one article in Cuba Internacional claimed that Cuba cultivated tourism that was “wholesome and different, dignified and friendly.” Tourism supposedly accommodated Cuban sensibilities as a country that “works, constructs, and fights, but also loves, dances, sings, and laughs.” The tourist industry not only reflected Cuba’s light-hearted approach to life, but also strengthened political gains by earning much needed economic relief. According to these statements and others, Cuba did not offer visitors the vices of sex, drugs, and gambling, but instead cultural and political experiences unlike any other destination. Dance workshops substantiated these claims. Moreover, they bolstered Cuban dance companies’ reputations and attested to their worth in an international marketplace. The analysis above shows how dancers integrated into an industry that became central to the Cuban economy.

Flooded Markets, Ruptures, and Dancing with the Fragments

While the tourist industry grew, large professional dance companies had decreasing space for young dancers in the 1980s. When graduates became company members, they performed in the ensemble while older dancers continued in lead roles. Moreover, younger artists had few opportunities to develop as choreographers. Modern dancer Rosario Cárdenas, who graduated

81 “Un turismo sano y diferente, digno y amistoso,” Cuba Internacional (Jan. 1984), 33.
82 Emphasis in the original. Ibid.
from ENA in 1971 and joined the CNDM soon after, noted in 1979: “There is much restlessness [inquietudes] among the young members of the company. At the moment we are in the process of organizing a Brigade in all the groups of theatre and dance … the movement will create a choreographic workshop with members of the Ballet Nacional, Pantomime Theatre, our group … I think they can develop things.” The restiveness that Cárdenas described eventually resulted in dancers breaking from larger national institutions to create new, smaller groups during the 1980s. As dancers pushed for change, cultural bureaucrats and dance leaders supported (and influenced when possible) the direction of new dance initiatives. This process illustrated flexibility in cultural policy during the decade, as well as enduring power structures that continued to shape the dance field across generation and genre.

The generation that entered adulthood in the 1980s was the first formed entirely under communism. Artists who came of age sought new modes of expression, including famously in the visual arts. In 1981, eleven artists mounted an exhibition, “Volumen I,” in Havana. Art historian Luis Camnitzer described the group as “defined more by a shared interest in experimentation,” which “began a process of increasingly radical ruptures with Cuban art traditions.” The exhibition moved away from the style popular in the 1970s, known as photo-realism, a term used to define a Cuban brand of hyperrealism. Aware of international art trends, Volumen I artists sought to create nationalist art without resorting to isolationism. The evidence of international influences sparked some critics to complain that the artists had abandoned the nation for cosmopolitan ideals. Nevertheless, they began showing their work in private homes and eventually gained the official acceptance needed to exhibit at the Centro de Arte

85 Luis Camnitzer, New Art of Cuba (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 5.
86 Ibid., 9.
Internacional in Havana.\textsuperscript{87} Volumen I influenced other artists, including Grupo Hexágono, formed in May 1982, which introduced humorous and erotic elements into their work.\textsuperscript{88} Others worked to “de-sloganize” the Communist Party by creating irreverent puns and devising performative events. In one instance, a group called Arte Calle, performed an unannounced happening during the UNEAC awards ceremony in 1987. During the event, they carried signs that said “Art critics: know that we have absolutely no fear of you,” taking inspiration from and commenting on a billboard facing the U.S. Interest Section in Havana that said, “Messrs. Imperialists, we have absolutely no fear of you.” In another instance, artists entered a UNEAC conference on sex dressed as giant penises and spraying milk on participants.\textsuperscript{89} This group of artists also reflected on the process of “rectification,” which Fidel Castro announced in February 1986 at the Third Congress of the Cuban Communist Party. The process targeted “immoral economic actors” and halted some limited experiments in free market economics of the early 1980s, such as freer peasant markets, while leaving others, like tourism, intact.\textsuperscript{90} Within this context, younger artists challenged political and artistic conventions.

Dancers also broke with the institutional status quo. The earliest dance rebel was none other than Lorna Burdsall, who had started with Ramiro Guerra in 1959, taught at ENA, and directed the CNDM. The professional break paralleled a personal one. Burdsall divorced her former husband, the powerful Cuban politico, Manuel Piñeiro, in the mid-1970s. She had sensed that her husband was having an affair and retaliated with her own extramarital dalliance. While on tour in Hungary and Yugoslavia, she spent time with a company musician. As she recalled in

\textsuperscript{87} Camnitzer is not clear on how they gained this government support, but he does indicate that the young artists had high profile supporters (art critic Gerardo Mosquera) and critics (Alejandro G. Alonso, art critic of \textit{El Caimán Barbudo}). Ibid., 3-4.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 175.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 177.
her memoir, “opportunists in the company who were waiting to pounce on my job” reported the romantic evenings. Although her husband forgave her, she insisted on a divorce. More disturbing than the upset to her personal life was the impact on her professional career: “The General Director of the Danza Nacional de Cuba changed the lock on my office door on my first day back from the company’s successful tour to Europe, leaving me a message that I no longer worked there.”91 While initially upset, Burdsall made the best of the change. For one, she had greater freedom to invite friends to her home. She soon found herself with a steady stream of students and fellow teachers eating her homemade cookies and discussing dance. According to Burdsall, “I learned more about Cuba and Cubans after my divorce than I ever would have had I remained in my matrimonial cocoon.”92 These events heralded in a new era in her dance career, characterized by an experimental dance theatre that took place in her apartment, museums, public parks, and other nonconventional performance spaces.

In 1981, Burdsall founded Así Somos (The Way We Are), which included young dancers with high levels of technique, but in need of guidance about how to approach choreography so as to develop into artists. As Burdsall noted in a program essay about the company, “During the year 1981 … I began to elaborate a dance with an educational purpose and humoristic character that was about how to make a dance.”93 This appealed to her young collaborators, who “translated their concerns … about knowing themselves” to focus on understanding “the concept of Cubanness, imbued now with the broad humanistic concerns of Art in a Socialist country.”94 From the beginning, the company employed artists of different disciplines – painters, actors,

91 Burdsall, More than Just a Footnote, 175-76
92 Ibid., 177.
93 “Danz-Escultura, Lorna Burdsall y su grupo” (Sept. 24-27, 1990), Folder Ballet-Danza 1990-1991, TNC.
94 “Moda ’86, Espectáculo ‘Multi-medias’ por el Grupo de Danza Contemporánea Así Somos,” Folder Ballet-Danza 1986, TNC.
musicians, and dancers – to create “image theatre using choreographic movement, poetry, music and properties that often come from personal experiences of company members.”⁹⁵ One famous member of the troupe was a young student of theatre, Mariela Castro, the daughter of Raúl Castro.⁹⁶ As Castro’s participation demonstrates, even experimental groups had strong connections to high politics, perhaps indicative of the conditions necessary (i.e., close ties to political elites) to challenge the status quo. Given interests in theatricality rather than virtuosity, the company rejected the term modern dance for “contemporary dance” and claimed to possess “a great dose of humor, typical of Cuban idiosyncrasy.” Company members often interacted with the public during performances and strove to provoke reflections on love and mankind.⁹⁷ A critic for the Palo Alto Weekly described Así Somos as reflecting “the exuberance and creativity of the Cuban youth of today.”⁹⁸

The company made its debut on October 31, 1981 at the Sala de Teatro Estudio (Hubert de Blanck), a small space often used by theatrical and musical groups. As Burdsall recounted: “As one of the many props, I used an army surplus white silk parachute which has become emblematic of Así Somos. This huge round globe that floated over the dancers, lit from the inside or the outside, made a very effective setting for our numerous inventions.”⁹⁹ The next two performances that year took place in Burdsall’s apartment for a single audience member, choreographer Elfrida Mahler in one case and U.S. choreographer Anna Sokolow in another. In 1982, the company performed in Burdsall’s apartment for a delegation of professors from Hunter

⁹⁵ Pamphlet: “Un Salto al nuevo milenio, Así Somos...teatro de imágenes,” Personal Archive of Gabriela Burdsall.
⁹⁷ “Moda ’86, Espectáculo ‘Multi-medias’ por el Grupo de Danza Contemporánea Así Somos,” Folder Ballet-Danza 1986, TNC.
⁹⁸ Untitled Performance Program, Personal Archive of Gabriela Burdsall.
⁹⁹ Burdsall, More than Just a Footnote, 184-85.
College, in Havana theatres for a wider public, and at a casa de cultura (community cultural center) for a mid-sized audience. In 1983 and 1984, the company performed at museums, cultural centers, and theatres in Havana, schools in Santiago de Cuba, and in Burdsall’s apartment. In 1985, the group participated in an exposition of “kinetic sculpture” at a casa de cultura in Havana, a show at the Casa de las Americas, and traveled to Stanford University to participate in the XXIV Congress of the International Institute of Iberoamerican Literature. There, the company surprised audiences “by performing avant-garde pieces instead of the expected Afrocuban and popular forms…. One member of the audience asked [Lorna] after the performance if [they] were able to dance such dances back home.” The audience member had assumed, “only socialist realism was allowed in Cuba.”

When the company returned to Havana, they performed Moda ‘86, a work that illustrated Burdsall’s interest in costumes, props, and theatricality. It depicted a fashion show, though models wore clothing used on a daily basis rather than fancy, cutting edge styles. For instance, outfits included clothes for walking down the malecón, going to the store, riding the bus, or remembering your first love. During the rest of the decade, the company performed in Havana cultural centers, museums, theatres, galleries, on television programs, and in Burdsall’s apartment.

Along with modern dancers, ballet dancers also sought new avenues for performance and expression. In 1984, a group called “Joven Guardia,” comprised of young dancers ranging from eighteen to twenty-five years old, began performing. According to a notice on the group’s founding and first performance at the García Lorca Theatre on June 10, 1984, Alicia Alonso had conceived of the project while Laura Alonso directed it. In this initiative, like Burdsall’s Así Somos project, the dancers sought to blend traditional and contemporary elements in their performances. The Joven Guardia showcased a variety of dance styles and incorporated elements of Afro-Cuban music and culture.

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100 Ibid., 192.
101 “Moda ’86, Espectáculo ‘Multi-medias’ por el Grupo de Danza Contemporánea Así Somos,” Folder Ballet-Danza 1986, TNC.
Somos, dance leaders with political and cultural capital played key roles in reworking the dance field. A document entitled, “Ponencia sobre la fundamentación y desarrollo de la Joven Guardia del Ballet Nacional de Cuba” (Presentation on the founding and development of the Young Guard of the Ballet Nacional de Cuba), described Joven Guardia as a “brigade” of the BNC that “groups the young graduates of ENA and other members of the company … 18 to 25 years old with the objective that in the term of four years, they receive a type of post-graduate, technical and artistic complementation for their continued development as dancers.”¹⁰³ These years, according to the document, were among the most formative for a young dancer. Early and often stage experiences helped them develop individually and collectively. One aspect particularly emphasized was finding good male-female partners and having them develop this artistic relationship through performance opportunities. In an unpublished document simply entitled “Joven Guardia” from the archives of Laura Alonso’s dance school Centro ProDanza, the unnamed author asserts: “Ballet is an art for youth and this is precisely the principal objective of the Joven Guardia: perfecting dancers in less time. It is not necessary to wait many years to technically interpret important works of universal repertory of ballet.”¹⁰⁴ The assertion that ballet belongs to youth was possibly a jab at Alicia Alonso who continued performing into her seventies. In the Joven Guardia, young dancers had unprecedented opportunities to learn leading roles and perform them in Havana and elsewhere.¹⁰⁵

In the early years of its existence, the Joven Guardia performed at small-scale, youth oriented venues, but quickly developed into a serious international troupe. In 1985 and 1986, the company performed for Cuballet, the Lenin Vocational School, and with ballet students at the

¹⁰⁴ “Joven Guardia,” Folder “Original del Folleto Promocional,” CPD.
Teatro Sauto de Matanzas among other local engagements. In November 1987, the Joven Guardia performed selections from traditional ballets and premiered new work by Gustavo Herrera. At this time, the group not only included young Cuban dancers of the BNC but also “foreign dancers that receive artistic training in Cuba.” The group also performed outside of Havana. In December 1987, they traveled to the Isla de Juventud and the eastern province of Granma where they offered lecture demonstrations moderated by Isis Armenteros, a young dance critic. The company then departed for Nicaragua. During their nine-day tour, the dancers performed in theatres and unconventional spaces such as a hospital, military school, and outdoor square. Historian Miguel Cabrera traveled with the group to offer educational lectures and introductions to their works. Upon their return home, the Joven Guardia performed in Havana and Villa Clara. Dancers with the Joven Guardia also won awards at international festivals. For instance José Manuel Carreño, who became a star with American Ballet Theatre in the 1990s and 2000s, won a gold medal at the International Ballet Competition in New York in 1987.

A more radical break in the ballet world occurred in 1987 when Caridad Martínez, the first mulata principal ballerina of the Ballet Nacional de Cuba, founded a new company, Ballet Teatro de la Habana. The company combined ballet dancers with young actors to embark on what a journalist described as “a process of inquiry, to work theatrical codes in accordance with dance and to shake all the rigid concepts that had prevailed in the formation of classical dance.” Decades later, Martínez shared the turmoil behind this move in an interview in her New York home. According to Martínez, in 1985, she and several other lead dancers of the BNC

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108 Ibid.
110 Laura Alonso to Sr. (Sra.), 1991, Folder “Cuballet, 1991,” CPD.
including Rosario Suárez, Amparo Brito, and Mirta García wrote a letter of protest to Alicia Alonso in which they complained about not having any say in artistic decisions particularly regarding their individual careers. Inspired by the policies of reformation (perestroika) and opening (glasnost) in the Soviet Union, the protesting dancers hoped that they would be able to push for improvements in the Cuban ballet establishment. The protesters (except for Brito) decided to leave the BNC and found the Ballet Teatro. Unsurprisingly, Alonso denounced the dancers and “of course, the Ministry of Culture supported her unconditionally,” Martínez recalled.\(^\text{112}\) The Ministry of Culture refused to authorize the new group.

Yet, there was, in fact, enough ideological dissent within the dance world to challenge Alicia Alonso’s authority. After several months passed, the rebel dancers received backing from other leaders including cultural promoter Nisia Agüero, former ballet administrator Angela Grau, musician Sergio Vitier, and Miguel Iglesias, who let the dancers use the Danza Contemporánea de Cuba studios for rehearsals.\(^\text{113}\) With this support, the new group eventually received approval from the Ministry of Culture. Although their 1987 performance programs nowhere indicated official sponsorship, the 1988 programs had “Ministerio de Cultura” on the cover, a sign that the Ballet Teatro had received the imprimatur of the state.\(^\text{114}\) This outcome suggests that by the late-1980s some cultural producers saw the benefit of revising the dance establishment.

Martínez and her collaborators used their discontents to fuel aesthetic experimentation. In 1987, their inaugural year, a program called “Ciclo de Experimentación en la Imagen Escénica” (Cycle of Experimentation in the Scenic Image) took place at Havana’s Mella Theatre. For the


\(^{113}\) Ibid.

premiere, choreographers drew inspiration from literature and poetry. For instance, Martínez had
a few lines of poetry by the Brazilian leftist writer Thiago de Mello in the program notes for the
first work, *Hallazgos*. The second piece, *Solo*, had a quotation from an Italian poet, Cesare
Pavese; and, the third, *Hablas como si me conocieras*, a lyrical text that referred to love and
collectivity. Ballet de Camagüey choreographer Lázaro Martínez also had a piece on the
program, *Altazor*, whose title came from Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro’s magnum opus and
starred Jorge Esquivel and actor Adolfo Llauradó. The program notes for the work stated more
emphatically its objectives:

> An actor, dancer, [and] four musicians join a choreographer to recite a poem (!),
> composed by poems of a universal Latin American. A ballet? A recital? A
> concert? We don’t know. It is the result of a craving [ansia] to do something
> beautifully daring, young, revolutionary…. Music, Theatre, Dance, Poetry and
> Lighting, unite in this experiment that seeks only the pleasure of the work; to
> think, dream and enjoy with you all and for all.115

In this text, the artists shy away from categorizing their performance, yet they proclaim their
yearning to create something “young, daring, revolutionary” that encourages utopian visions of
harmony. In many ways, this statement resembles those made in the years leading up to and
following 1959, when then young artists like the Alonsos, Ramiro Guerra, and Rogelio Martínez
Furé sought a radical break from existing art to further social change. By the late 1980s, the
earlier generation’s work had begun to show its age, and younger dancers wanted to build anew.

In 1988, Ballet Teatro de la Habana presented several new works by Martínez as well as
other modern dance and ballet choreographers. In the performance program for Martínez’s
*Eppure si muove!*, a “Manifesto” by the Cuban author Marilyn Bobes reflected on the objectives
of Ballet Teatro in relation to broader dance trends: “It is possible that for [German
choreographer] Pina Bausch … any gesture could be theatre, any gesture could be dance. For

115 “Ciclo de Experimentación en la imagen escenica,” Folder Ballet- Danza 1987, TNC.
Caridad Martínez, for Cary, and this unfortunate tribe [desheredados de la fortuna], which nobody can take away their desire and right to work, dance and theatre are gestures. Just like words.”

Referring to the dancers as a disinherited, unfortunate tribe alluded to their clash with Alicia Alonso and the cultural bureaucracy. Yet, as the manifesto noted, the artists persisted despite efforts to reject, discredit, and silence them. According to a Granma review, Eppure si muove! investigated gestures particular to Cubans and those with universal meanings. The performance integrated classical and contemporary dance, theatre, body expressions, and pantomime. It lasted an hour and twenty minutes and invited viewers to discover “our” (Cuban) identity through a non-linear production. Another work performed by the company was Freud, choreographed by the “guest” collaborator with the company, Victor Cuéllar, a longtime choreographer with Danza Contemporánea de Cuba. Ballet Teatro also performed Muerte Junto al Lago (Death near a Lake) and Rejuego (Interplay), both choreographed by Jorge Esquivel. Both pieces featured Martínez and Rosario Suárez as well as students from the Escuela Nacional de Ballet.

In 1989, the company continued to push the boundaries of ballet with great success. In Martínez’s work Test (1989), a multidisciplinary collective of choreographers, dancers, actors, visual artists, writers, and musicians presented open symbols to the audience for each member to interpret and “test” their relative levels of neurosis. A performance program insert advised audience members to select which of the twelve scenes “most pleased them” and “least pleased them.” Additionally, the insert instructed the observer, “Do a self-observation: the relation that

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116 Performance Program, Ballet Teatro de la Habana in “Eppure, si muove!” Folder Ballet-Danza 1988, TNC.  
120 “Ciclo de Experimentación en la imagen escenica,” Folder Ballet-Danza 1988, TNC.  
exists between the twelve scenes is linked to the cause of your neurosis.”122 The company enjoyed a relatively large following. “Excited spectators” filled the Mella Theatre for performances of Test, noted a journalist in the audience. Writing for Juventud Rebelde, the author elaborated that the public success was impressive because “it has not been something common for the dance groups of the vanguardist sector…. There were spectators and above all youth, wanting to enter in the problematic labyrinth that the new work presents.”123

Another important emerging company was Danza Abierta, founded by modern dancer and choreographer Marianela Boán. The name of the company and the works presented made explicit the iconoclastic intentions behind the initiative. In the program for the company premiere on December 15-18, 1988, a poem like text appeared on the first page:

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OPEN, TO OPEN, OPENING
visible to invisible
body to voice
detritus to epic
viscera to form
movement to gesture
Metaphor to concept
Dancer to actor
Dance to posture
Muscle to metaphor
Concept to sensation
Form to question
Question
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ABIERTA, ABRIR, ABRIENDO
Lo visible a lo invisible
el cuerpo a la voz
el detritus a la epopeya
la víscera a la forma
el movimiento al gesto
La metáfora al concepto
El bailarín al actor
La danza a la postura
El músculo a la metáfora
El concepto a la sensación
La forma a la pregunta
La pregunta
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The company included young dancers from the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional, Danza Contemporánea de Cuba, recent graduates of the Escuela Nacional de Danza and Escuela Nacional de Ballet, as well as Gabri Christa, a young Curazao dancer, who had started her

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professional career in the Netherlands. The company also collaborated with actor and director Victor Varela, who created two works out of four in the first program.

The most obviously political pieces of the evening included Varela’s *Godot*, inspired by Samuel Beckett’s celebrated play, and Marianela Boán’s *Sin Permiso* (Without Permission). *Godot* featured Boán and Christa as Vladimir and Estragon and seemed to gesture at the stagnation and deprivation that were part of Cuban daily life, most evident in the long hours spent in lines waiting for everything from food to buses. Boán’s *Sin Permiso* had seven dancers, and the choreography incorporated the gestures of raising a hand and covering one’s ears, eyes, and mouth. The piece had a suggestive title and a central gesture that alluded to the expressive limitations that artists faced in Cuba.

Danza Abierta had experienced these limitations first hand. In order to perform, the new company needed permission. This hinged on approval from cultural leaders. In the premiere program, the company thanked Miguel Iglesias, director of Danza Contemporánea de Cuba, for his support. Founding member Gabri Christa in an interview confirmed that Iglesias had been very helpful, providing free rehearsal space and observing practices and performances. When asked why he had been so receptive, Christa guessed that he understood the need for more outlets in the flooded dance market. There were more dancers than positions in the existing, large companies. Smaller companies like Boán’s would take the pressure off and provide work for dancers. In addition to Iglesias’s encouragement, Boán and her company needed permission from the Ministry of Culture. During a rehearsal for opening night, Alicia Alonso appeared at the Mella Theatre to appraise the program. As Christa recounted to scholar Suki John:

> After what happened with Caridad [Martínez and Ballet Teatro], Alonso had decided her permission was needed in order for a piece to go on. She came to our

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125 Interview with Gabri Christa, Sept. 25, 2016, Staten Island, New York.
dress rehearsal with her entourage; she was almost blind but people were telling her what was happening onstage. Alicia was the unofficial head of the Ministry of Culture and said, “not without my permission.” We were very nervous, there was one piece with nudity. We didn’t know until an hour before if we could even do the performance.\(^{126}\)

No documentation or interview has explicated the bureaucratic decision-making process. However, Alonso’s political and cultural capital meant that she had great power over the future of Cuban dance. The scandalous defiance of Martínez and her collaborators, especially lead ballet dancers like Rosario Suárez and Alonso’s former dance partner Jorge Esquivel, had traumatized Alonso (and perhaps cultural bureaucrats) enough to prompt careful oversight of new groups. Apparently, Alonso found Danza Abierta’s performance acceptable enough to go on despite its edgy material. The company received the permission it needed and performed a piece reflecting critically on the creative atmosphere in Cuba, characterized by bureaucratic hurdles and expressive strictures.

Danza Abierta demonstrated what the Cuban dance establishment had achieved and also what it lacked. Boán had graduated from ENA and was an established choreographer with the Danza Contemporánea de Cuba for almost a decade. In 1981, the company devoted a whole evening to her work.\(^{127}\) Yet, as Boán explained in a 1988 interview, she wanted greater freedom:

> The group was born because I wanted to experiment seriously and like a scientist I needed my laboratory and instruments: a small collective of interpreters, some graduated and others still students of the schools of ballet and dance, they are youth that want to break formalisms and they have formed a very powerful vanguard choreographic movement.\(^{128}\)

In many works Boán cast an irreverent eye on contemporary society. For instance, in *Un elefante se balanceaba sobre la tela de una araña* (An elephant balancing on a spider web), six dancers...

\(^{126}\) Christa quoted in John, 106.
\(^{127}\) Performance Program “Recital Marianela Boan, Danza Nacional de Cuba,” Folder Ballet-Danza 1981, TNC.
danced on and around a single chair. According to one journalist, the work “invited reflection on inertia, boredom, routine, conformism.” Boán rejected the convention of covering large spaces in an aesthetically appealing manner, common in most choreography. She ambiguously questioned the present Cuban condition of bureaucracy and scarcity. Finally, she broke dance conventions by utilizing spoken word and song. One critic called Boán and her Danza Abierta as “one of the most interesting [dance groups] in the so-called New Vanguard.”

This “new vanguard” also included Isabel Bustos Romoleroux, a woman of Ecuadorian descent, born in Chile and raised in Cuba, who studied at ENA. After some time abroad, she returned to Cuba and in 1987, founded Retazos (Remnants), a dance theatre company with dancers, actors, and visual artists from ENA. An announcement about a 1987 performance declared that the “young group … based its choreographic creations on the preoccupations of people today, their inner world, and their role in society and history.” Another notice stated that the group was inspired by “experimentation and discovery through the movement of the everyday and universal.” The group consisted of eight dancers and performed works with titles like Mujer (Woman), Tango, Agua (Water), and Agonía (Agony). In an interview decades later, Bustos recalled that the first rehearsals and performances took place in her small living room. Her company worked for several years in a room at the Casa Guayamín art gallery before receiving adequate rehearsal space and official support.

Modern dance choreographer Rosario Cárdenas also started her own group after working with Danza Contemporánea de Cuba for almost twenty years. Sometime after Danza

Contemporánea premiered her acclaimed 1989 work Dédalo, she decided to form her own company. She called her troupe Danza combinatoria (Combinatorial dance). The name came from mathematics and combinatorial formula analysis, which uses combination, permutation, and variation. Cárdenas built upon this idea to inspire choreography and technical innovations. She exchanged, combined, and varied, all to arrive at something new.

The late 1980s proved an exciting moment for dance (and the arts scene in general) although it did not necessarily mark a radical change from the past. Writing for the performing arts magazine, Tablas, Raquel Mayedo described the developments in the following way: “From the large companies, young dancers leave, wanting to say something new or not, but something of their own…. They are not performers in outright contradiction with their collectives, but they are the fruit of the … companies.” This appraisal contended that even while moving away from their origins, rebel dancers served as testaments to their rich training and careers in major institutions. Rather than denying the impact of these earlier experiences, leaders of the new dance groups acknowledged their lineage. For instance, in an interview Cárdenas explained how choreographers Eduardo Rivero and Ramiro Guerra had shaped her work.

As dancers created new spaces, the period seemed to be characterized by increasing fragmentation. Along with restless dancers breaking off to start their own companies, older dancers explored fragmented dance memories, the only remnants of a receding past. Most notable was the work choreographed by Ramiro Guerra for Danza Contemporánea de Cuba in 1989, called De la Memoria Fragmentada (Of Fragmented Memory). Guerra had not worked

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with the company he had founded in 1959 since 1971 when he left (or was pushed out). Current company director Miguel Iglesias invited Guerra to choreograph for the company’s thirtieth anniversary.\footnote{Raimundo Díaz Rosell, “Sueño en la memoria de Ramiro Guerra,” \textit{Bastion} (Aug. 3, 1989).}

\textit{De la Memoria Fragmentada} featured sections from Guerra’s famous 1960s works \textit{Suite Yoruba} (1960), \textit{Orfeo Antillano} (1964), and \textit{Medea y los Negreros} (1968), described in later writings as a trilogy that explored Santería and other aspects of Afro-Cuban culture in spectacular form.\footnote{Guerra, \textit{De la narratividad al abstraccionismo en la danza}, 258.} It also included references to his censored work, \textit{Decálogo del apocalipsis} (1971).\footnote{“De la Memoria Fragmentada, Guión de Ramiro Guerra,” Folder \textit{De la Memoria Fragmentada} 1989, Fondo: Repertorio, DCC.} Lasting forty minutes, \textit{De la Memoria Fragmentada} featured thirty-nine dancers, including some like Eduardo Rivero, who was no longer with the DCC, but had returned to dance the roles he had originated decades earlier. Also part of the production was the 1962 film, \textit{Historia de un Ballet}, about the making of \textit{Suite Yoruba}.\footnote{Ibid.} In an interview, Guerra described that the work as “not a depiction of the works as they were staged … but a new scenic game of mine, a collision of memory, nostalgia.”\footnote{Mireya Castañeda, “Sentir el pulso del momento,” \textit{Granma} (Sept. 3, 1989), 7.} One critic described the work as utilizing “a language more contemporary, avant-garde,” with elements of “dance-theatre [and] a tone that utilizes pop and expressionism as a figurative language.”\footnote{Milsania, “Donde convencionalismo no tuvo lugar,” \textit{Tribuna de la Habana} (Sept. 5, 1989), Folder Prensa 1989, DCC.}

Based on a dance score written by Guerra, the work had eight scenes. Scene 1 took place in the vestibule of the theatre with dancers performing sections from \textit{Medea y los negreros}, \textit{Suite Yoruba}, and \textit{Orfeo Antillano} in the middle of audience members before disappearing into the crowds. Scene 2 began before a seated audience with the curtain opening on a stage filled with
smoke. A voice, “mysterious and sly,” said to the audience: “Memory is populated by fragmented ghosts that only can be conjured through the desacralizing exorcism of parody.” Then dancers performed slow motion movements in “complete and total silence” and eventually disappeared into the smoke. Scenes 3 and 4 included the projection of the film Historia de un ballet while dancers in wheelchairs wheeled around and others danced Guerra’s choreography. After choreography from Medea y los negreros in Scene 5, Scene 6 started with the theatre completely lit and a screaming siren. Two nurses rushed on stage with a woman on a stretcher, followed by a man in a wheelchair. They began “an absurd dialogue about a work that they should have staged but could not: Decálogo del apocalipsis.” Then a screen lowered and projections of Decálogo photographs appeared. More dancers in wheelchairs entered and yelled threats at the images. Scene 7 featured a carnival scene from Orfeo Antillano and figures from Medea y los negreros. In Scene 8, all the dancers appeared on stage and climbed on each other, forming a large mass of bodies. Others in wheelchairs circled the center group. Three stilt walkers with suitcases in hand joined the circle of wheelchairs while the scene filled with smoke. Accompanying the action was the voice of Cuban Esther Borja singing lines from the song Ausencia (Absence) by Jaime Prats about the impossibility of returning home. In a 2014 interview, a dancer who took part in the performance stated that Guerra criticized Cubans who left to escape the difficult conditions on the island. The curtain fell, and then opened on an empty stage, filled only with smoke. It closed and opened again to show only wheelchairs and suitcases on stage. Then it closed for the last time.

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144 “De la Memoria Fragmentada, Guión de Ramiro Guerra,” Folder De la Memoria Fragmentada 1989, Fondo: Repertorio, DCC.
145 Ibid.
146 Taped interview with Luis Roblejo, Aug. 12, 2013, Havana, Cuba.
147 “De la Memoria Fragmentada, Guión de Ramiro Guerra,” Folder De la Memoria Fragmentada 1989, Fondo: Repertorio, DCC.
Guerra utilized choreography from his major works from the 1960s and his 1971 magnum opus, which the government censored, to reflect on his career and modern dance history in Cuba. The choreographic experiments from *Suite Yoruba, Orfeo Antillano*, and *Medea y los negreros* had formed the basis of Cuban modern dance technique. Revisiting these works recapitulated the development of modern dance in the first decade after the 1959 revolution. However, *De la Memoria Fragmentada* hardly offered a conventional homage to a career and cultural establishment. Instead, using mystery and ironic elements, it encouraged audience members to question the institution celebrating its thirtieth anniversary. For instance, having performers in wheelchairs perhaps alluded to the fact that government censorship had crippled Guerra and the development of modern dance in Cuba. Moreover, using suitcases to reference the many Cubans that had left highlighted cultural and political divides, undercutting triumphalist narratives of cultural and political achievement. The final image, populated only by wheelchairs and suitcases, solemnly closed Guerra’s first and last return to choreograph for the company he had founded. Emptiness rather than fulfillment came out of revisiting his fragmented memories.

As this section has demonstrated, artists shook up the Cuban dance establishment in the 1980s. Generational change had led to new views on the future of Cuban aesthetics and institutions. Dancers collaborated with actors and musicians to push the boundaries of their form. Moreover, they used their work to critique aspects of Cuban culture, politics, and society. From Martínez and her fellow ballet dancers protesting the ballet status quo to Boán’s *Sin Permiso*, dancers pushed for and benefitted from an opening in the establishment and its constituent power structures. Yet, openings did not disrupt existing hierarchies. Alonso retained important sway over the Ministry of Culture and edgy critiques happened with the help and crucial support of
dance leaders like Miguel Iglesias. Before premieres or just a few months after, the Ministry of Culture incorporated experimental outsiders into the system. A close look at the 1980s shows how dance defiance operated internally. Appreciating these dynamics challenges existing interpretations of Cuba following 1990. As this section shows, generational changes helped to rework revolutionary institutions, a process which accelerated further in the wake of the crisis that triggered the Special Period.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has shown how tourism and vanguardism changed the dance establishment in the 1980s. Cabarets like the Tropicana became main tourist attractions, thereby receiving increased government support and international visibility like in the 1988 tour to the U.S. Dance workshops Cuballet, FolkCuba, and Cubadanza also attracted tourists, albeit from niche markets. Meanwhile, dancers also began questioning existing institutions. Burdsall fostered young artists of different media in Así Somos. Laura Alonso helped young ballet dancers perform lead roles and develop as artists in Joven Guardia. More radical breaks happened when Caridad Martínez and her colleagues protested and left the Ballet Nacional de Cuba to found Ballet Teatro. Modern dancers like Marianela Boán, Isabel Bustos, and Rosario Cárdenas also started their own companies to have more choreographic freedom. These groups arguably and perhaps unsurprisingly thrived thanks to their connections to power holders.

This process resembled similar developments in other art forms, and yet, dance also differed in important ways. In terms of similarities, the visual artists of Volumen I resembled the 1980s dance vanguards, because they went from shocking the establishment to becoming heralded innovators within it. However, dance also perhaps had more room for experiments
because of its size and prestige. Practically speaking, new groups served an important purpose in giving young dancers more opportunities to grow as artists. Moreover, the leaders of new companies had contributed importantly or had tight connections to the establishment through familial ties or sympathetic supporters. For instance, even though Martínez and her Ballet Teatro clashed with the powerful Alicia Alonso, the rebels had an adoring public that helped them. After sending the 1985 letter of protest, the government suspended the dancers’ salaries “until ballet fans collected money to pay [them].”\textsuperscript{148} The scandal prompted the government to return their salaries. Dancers and dancing publics helped challenge hierarchies and ultimately those moves effected change in the establishment.

\textsuperscript{148} López, “No hice ‘Giselle’ por ser negra.”
Conclusion. Dancing With and Without Ideology

In the late 1990s, the Cuban government started bestowing a Premio Nacional de la Danza (National Dance Award) for distinguished artists in the field. The order of awardees reasserted hierarchies in the Cuban dance establishment. In 1998, Alicia Alonso won, followed by Ramiro Guerra in 1999, Fernando Alonso in 2000, Eduardo Rivero in 2001, and Rogelio Martínez Furé in 2002. Santiago Alfonso received the award in 2006, becoming the first well-known figure associated with cabarets to win. Although his career spanned several genres as a former dancer with the CNDM and director of the CFN in the 1960s, he became a regisseur at the Tropicana in 1971 and artistic director in 1992 until he left the club in 2003.¹ In this pecking order, figures from ballet, modern dance, ballet again, modern dance again, folkloric dance, and eventually cabaret received recognition for their contributions to the field. Beyond that year, distinguished dancers, choreographers, and teachers, who have appeared in this study, won the award. For instance, Lorna Burdsall was recognized in 2008.² Notably absent from the list are dance makers like choreographer Alberto Alonso and Marianela Boán, who left Cuba and relocated to the United States via Mexico in the 1990s and the Dominican Republic via the United States in the 2000s, respectively. Although it is unclear who chose the awardees, the decision makers carefully reasserted dance hierarchies of a political and aesthetic nature in place before the 1959 Revolution and persisting today.

This dissertation has examined dance and politics from 1930 to 1990 in Cuba to understand a key chapter in Cuban history. Although Cuba underwent radical changes, important

continuities spanned the six decades. First, dancers actively advocated for their art, appealing to the state and audiences to patronize and appreciate their work. This began in the decades before the 1959 Revolution and continued in the years to follow. An important dancer tactic in this effort was to connect staged performances with larger discussions about politics, social relations, and nationhood. Dancers believed that their art had the capacity not only to reflect on current events, but also to shape politics by effectively communicating a particular social vision to audience members. Second, cultural values that privileged ballet above all other forms remained intact even as the government claimed to radically remake Cuban society. In highlighting this privilege, I do not deny the talent and merits of Cuban ballet dancers, teachers, and choreographers. However, I underscore the fact that the Cuban ballet enjoys more economic and symbolic backing from the government than other dance forms. This points to the continuation of bourgeois norms and racial prejudices after 1959. The state and much of society applauded (and continues to applaud) the discipline, self-control, and whiteness of ballet even as other innovators tried to promote Africanist popular culture and danced expressions of blackness in modern and especially folkloric dance.

Perhaps the best indicator of continuity is Alicia Alonso herself. At ninety-five, mostly blind, nearly deaf, and often confined to a wheelchair, Alonso remains the artistic director of the Ballet Nacional de Cuba, which she helped to found in 1948. Not unlike the persistent Castro brothers who led revolutionary factions in the 1950s and retain control over national politics today, Alonso embodies the way long standing hierarchies became reinstated after the 1959 Revolution. Pointing out her surprising longevity does not discount her considerable contributions to Cuban dance, culture, politics, and society. She was determined to make Cuba a ballet-dancing island and she succeeded. However, her status as an untouchable revolutionary
icon has also eclipsed the contributions of other figures. People unfamiliar with the details of Cuban dance usually have heard of Alicia Alonso and no one else. On the island, she remains an enduring presence. The Museo de la Danza founded in 1998 and run by her husband Pedro Simón serves as a hagiographic center that celebrates her career. In being named a museum of dance and honoring Alicia and ballet almost exclusively, her supporters have made her name synonymous with Cuban dance writ large. Fading or erased from Cuban ballet memory are people like her ex-husband Fernando Alonso and his brother Alberto Alonso, both now deceased. Other key figures that have received awards do not have the name recognition, particularly outside of Cuba, that Alicia Alonso enjoys.

While pointing to the problems of Alicia Alonso’s hegemony over Cuban dance, history, and popular memory, I also recognize that she represents another argument of this study – the active role of dancers in constructing dance institutions. I challenge existing depictions of a beneficent and enlightened Fidel Castro bestowing previously victimized dancers with unlimited funds. Rather than depoliticized and passive beneficiaries, I see dancers as activists, ceaselessly negotiating for resources and opportunities within shifting political orders. Even its most prized representatives, like Alicia Alonso, had to work for her position in Cuban culture. She confirmed this for me in an interview in 2015. The interview was brief, around thirty minutes, and she had great difficulty in hearing my questions. However, once she found out that I was from the U.S., she showed an impressive sharpness as she responded to my questions, posed in Spanish, in her perfect English. At one point in the conversation, I asked her about her role of Carmen. I am not sure she heard my question, but her comments were revealing. She said:

Well, in the beginning, [it] was ourselves and a few persons who helped us. But it was with our own … money [laugh]. And then after we proved that we could be ballet dancers and have a great company … the State, the government, start[ed] to subsidize and pay for everything…. Since then, they have been helping us in that
sense … all the governments…. We started like all the companies of the world, from nothing…. I was already in North America and I made a name, I came here and I said, we will dance here ballet … and I did … we all did. We are all very happy because it was, it is a good ballet…. I’m proud of being a Cuban and I’m proud of having this company. And, I’m proud of the Cuban people who are good dancers…. I will tell you a secret. I wanted to show that the Cubans could dance classical … because every time that you spoke about Cubans – oh, rumba, cha-cha-chá … no sir. Classical. They would go, what? I would say, classical.³

In true dancer fashion, as she spoke, Alonso used her body. Though weakened with age, she employed what was available. Her long fingernails tapped and her fists hit the surface of the desk to emphasize certain points. Her head moved constantly up, down, and side to side. She averred that she and her collaborators had to prove to “all the governments” and the world that Cubans could dance classical ballet and that it benefitted national culture. Above all else, tenacity and determination exuded from the nonagenarian, evidencing a lifetime of creative struggles to make a point. When she started, Cuban dance meant rumba. Today, it also means “classical” ballet.

Of course, Alonso was not alone in her effort to promote her dance form. For instance, the impassioned letters of Lorna Burdsall on modern dance and the writings that span decades by Rogelio Martínez Furé on folkloric dance illustrate that many other dance makers worked hard to establish and advance their companies. In these efforts, dance leaders similarly highlighted not only their talent, but also the multifarious ways that their art could contribute to political projects. For instance, dancers showed how their form served as an educational tool, training young Cubans’ bodies and teaching them discipline and patriotic self-sacrifice. Dance professionals also exposed broad Cuban publics to a variety of aesthetics and political messages. Ballet dancers performed works in olive green fatigues that celebrated revolutionary militants. Modern dancers focused on racial integration, bringing together what directors deemed as white, mulatto, and black dancers, and fused Cuba’s Africanist dance practices with U.S. modern dance

³ Taped interview with Alicia Alonso, Mar. 25, 2015, Havana, Cuba.
techniques. Folkloric dancers staged the songs and dances of Santería among other African
descended cultural practices that had been criminalized and marginalized for much of Cuba’s
history. Through their art, modern and folkloric dancers promoted anti-racist ideals articulated by
the government, particularly in the early 1960s. Dancers also furthered political causes outside of
Cuba. Through performances, they impressed international audiences and advertised the cultural
achievements realized under the Castro regime. They acted as a form of soft power, defying the
U.S. embargo and hemispheric isolation by collaborating with dancers from other countries.
Dancers also contributed to tourist initiatives in the 1980s, attracting much needed hard currency
to win the revolution’s ongoing economic battles. As the government sought to revolutionize
Cuba, dancers purported to be on the front lines, furthering the mission through public
performances and dance practices.

However, as this study has equally shown, dance, whether the heralded ballet or the
struggling cabaret, was not a straightforward tool of the state. Homophobia and assumptions
about effeminate dancing men meant that certain maneuvers were necessary to fit male dancers
into narrow conceptualization of revolutionary manhood. In professional companies, dance
leaders encouraged men regardless of sexual orientation to project a macho masculinity and
heterosexuality. Fernando Alonso described ballet as a virile form. Ballet leaders recruited young
boys from the countryside and orphanage to overcome family resistance to sons studying ballet.
Lorna Burdsall encouraged Eduardo Rivero to marry a woman to discourage his homosexual
behavior. Modern dance in general, according to Burdsall, countered longstanding prejudices
against dancing men since the form was inherently more powerful and masculine than ballet.
Ballet therapy was originally used to heal girls with masculine tendencies. Dance, then, became a
cure and a means to socialize citizens in traditional gender roles. Some men that the government
labeled as homosexuals, like Ramiro Guerra and Eduardo Rivero, avoided internment in forced labor camps though Guerra experienced censorship and house arrest in 1971. Rivero was allowed to continue working, perhaps because of his marriage to a woman. In folkloric dance and cabaret, dancing men appeared to be a non-issue. The folkloric company performed dance practices seen in daily rituals and popular dances, projecting the presumed heterosexual norm. Less seemed to be at stake in cabarets. The dancers did not perform abroad and enjoyed less prestige as the government saw them as entertainment rather than art like ballet or modern dance. Additionally, popular dances on cabaret stages, like in folkloric performances, were based on heteronormative partnering. This study shows how dance went along with the highly masculinized ethos of the Revolution, but also challenged it by exalting dancing men, quite non-traditional images of masculinity, which ran up against consistent tensions and backlash.

As dancers engaged with politics and the state, there were instances of collaboration and resistance. Collaboration happened as dance leaders socialized students and citizens in revolutionary values and promoted socialism, racial equality, and militancy. In terms of resistance, dancers performed metaphoric, non-verbal, but not insignificant critiques of state actions. For instance, the state declared racism eradicated in 1962 and demonized Santería as a backwards superstition in the late 1960s. Yet, modern and especially folkloric dancers continued to reflect on race, celebrated Santería, and depicted a legacy of racial violence and prejudices in their performances. They challenged the state’s narratives about race and nation, encouraging public discussion of issues often viewed as taboo. In the 1970s, dance students rebelled in reaction to the demoralized climate plaguing the Escuela Nacional de Arte. Lorna Burdsall berated cultural bureaucrats for mistreatment and demanded better working conditions. In the 1980s, ballet and modern dancers sought more freedom of expression and control over their
careers. Some like Caridad Martínez articulated formal protests. Others like Marianela Boán and Rosario Cárdenas rejected the status quo by founding new companies where they could experiment with new aesthetics and air political critiques. Nevertheless, this study also shows how defiant and compliant Cuban dancers used a chisel rather than a bludgeon to shape revolutionary institutions. They resisted with the help of their powerful connections and their experiments eventually became part of the establishment. Such quiet transactions differed from those in other art forms, where public clashes occurred as in the case of the filmmakers of P.M. or poet Heberto Padilla. Dancers and the state did not have an entirely stormy or supportive relationship. Instead, inconsistent cultural policies led to vacillations in the dancer-state relationship, which differed depending on the genre being considered and the historical moment.

Besides addressing the famous 1966 defection of male dancers in Paris, I do not examine dancers in exile because they fall largely outside of the temporal scope of this study. Dancers began leaving in huge numbers in the 1990s through present day. Although difficult to have a clear historical picture of the more recent dance developments, this study helps explain crucial international networks and aesthetic priorities of the 1970s and 1980s that figured into later decisions to leave Cuba. Dance makers who traveled abroad as part of internationalist or cultural diplomatic missions had the opportunity to make connections and negotiate lucrative contracts to be activated later if the artist defected, something that happened with increased frequency after 1990. Moreover, some dancers who sought greater freedom of expression and power over their careers in the 1980s eventually left, dissatisfied with the outcome or speed of institutional changes. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Caridad Martínez’s Ballet Teatro ceased to exist in the early 1990s, and its founding members Martínez, Rosario Suárez, and Jorge Esquivel left Cuba permanently. Danza Abierta and the companies of Rosario Cárdenas and Isabel Bustos persist
today though Marianela Boán has left, and Danza Abierta has a different artistic director and choreographer. Not all vanguards migrated though many did. These varied outcomes challenge simplistic portrayals of exile as the inevitable outcome for inspired artists.⁴

Regardless of the underlying reasons, an exit caused considerable scandal and disappointment. This can be seen dramatically in the case of Jorge Esquivel, the orphan adopted by the revolutionary ballet establishment who became Alicia Alonso’s partner. In an interview about his decision, he told Los Angeles Times reporter Martin Bernheimer, “I have decorations from Castro and from the ministry of culture. They regard me as a traitor. My decision to leave was motivated by artistic, not political, reasons, but that wouldn’t make any difference.” About Alicia Alonso, Esquivel sadly noted, “She would not speak to me. In her eyes, I now am a dead person. She thinks I have betrayed a trust, betrayed her, betrayed the company and the country too…. She is like a sick mother. She gave me life, in a sense, and she thinks I belong to her.”⁵

Many of those who left cited economic and artistic limitations as the reason for their departure. They were frustrated that Cuban companies were unable or unwilling to connect with new international dance currents. Dancers believed that the large, Cuban companies, like the country, were stifling and stagnant at best and sinking ships at worst. While valid to consider these actions and opinions, this dissertation shows that dancers’ political positions had greater variety and nuance than realized by scholars who focus on those who stayed versus those who left.

Migration not only happened for more reasons than normally acknowledged, but also could signify institutional successes as well as economic and political decay. The trajectory of dancer Carlos Acosta provides a case in point. In 1989, a sixteen-year-old Acosta participated in

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⁴ Roca.
an exchange between Cuban and Italian ballet establishments, accompanying his teacher Ramona de Sáa to train with his Italian counterparts. Because of his progress, de Sáa sent Acosta to compete in an international ballet competition in Lausanne in January 1990, which he won. In June 1991, Acosta graduated with a contract to join the BNC. Around the same time, Ivan Nagy, the director of the English National Ballet, offered Acosta a position as a principal dancer with “one of the most prestigious companies in the world,” as Acosta described it in his memoir. According to Acosta, de Sáa encouraged him to accept by saying, “When I think about your future, I know that you have to leave…. An opportunity like this doesn’t come along very often. It’s your life, your profession, and I am determined that you should take this step.” Acosta’s opportunity abroad evidenced the Cuban ballet establishment’s accomplishments as he joined the upper echelons of a distinguished company. De Sáa’s determination that Acosta should go to England also indirectly acknowledged the economic crisis and institutional slippages in Cuba. In the early 1990s, Acosta’s prospects abroad were more promising than those at home.

Acosta’s story also shows how pursuing international opportunities does not always result in a definitive break. Acosta maintained a good relationship with the Cuban dance establishment while performing in British and U.S. companies. He brought Cuban dancers to perform in London, and in 2015, he returned to Cuba to begin his own company. Acosta’s trajectory illustrates how international careers can result in a complicated, fluid process of relocation that also includes an eventual return.

In contrast to Acosta chasing opportunities abroad, Alberto Alonso encountered professional frustrations off of the island, illustrating how the exilic experience does not always

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7 Ibid., 140.
8 Ibid., 145.
entail unbridled possibility. At the age of seventy-six, Alonso and his wife Sonia Calero left Cuba in the early 1990s. Their son pushed them to relocate when he left Cuba on a raft while they were working in Mexico. Eventually, Alonso found a job teaching ballet at Santa Fe Community College (SFCC) in Gainesville, Florida from 1993 to 1996, and then from 2000 until his death on December 31, 2007. In the final years of his life, the SFCC Dance Department created a documentary entitled, *Dance of my Heart*, about Alonso’s career and his role in inspiring students in their local dance program. The film alludes to the challenges that Alonso faced in finding work in the U.S. and adjusting to his new life, as well as his over qualifications as a renowned choreographer working with non-professionals in a community college program. Alonso’s story defies the narrative of escaping a communist hell for a capitalist utopia. Dancers like Alonso encountered challenges, albeit of a different variety, in Cuba and abroad.

While exile remains an important part of modern Cuban history, this study focuses on dancers on the island to provide insights into political expression in Cuba. Revisionist scholars have recognized the agency of Cuban citizens even in the face of state hegemony. However, generally this entails examining what was said, written, or caught on film. Dance provides a different perspective by considering non-verbal communications of political thoughts and dialogues. These kinesthetic statements were significant because dancers had unique freedom to move in and out of sync with official dictates and opinions before and after 1959. This liberty stemmed at least in part from the fact that dance, as an art of motion, eluded “fixity” and lacked the precision of verbal language, making it more open and experimental than other discursive forms. As a result, Cubans citizens – professional and non-professional artists and art publics – used dance to express ideas impossible to articulate in conventional arenas such as print or mass culture. Men and women of different racial and social backgrounds danced together, celebrating

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9 *Dance of my Heart*, dir. Ricardo Acosta (Gainesville, FL: Santa Fe Community College, 2009).
visions of equality in choreographic terms, which contrasted with the persistence of social disparities and divides. Homosexual male dancers and choreographers expressed themselves through dance in ways otherwise impossible in the face of social prejudices and the threat of state persecution. Through dance, forms of difference and exclusion were transformed, without an open debate that would criticize the regime, but with great public effect. With choreographed manifestos on revolution and nationhood, the body served as an important platform for political expression in twentieth century Cuba.

This study opened with Marianela Boán’s late 1980s choreographic experiment Sin Permiso, and it closes with her thoughts on dance and power. In 2013, Boán wrote, “Where ideology is strong, bodies must adapt and resist. I’m fascinated by the way our bodies are pushed … by ideology and by the spaces beyond ideological control where bodies come together, establish themselves, and dance.”\textsuperscript{10} In her rendering, political ideology has such power it affects not only the mind, but also the body. In response to its force, citizens become resilient and clever. Her words underscore how through dance, individuals engage with structures and turn ideas into actions. Cuban dancers shaped and were shaped by revolutionary ideals. They used their mind and body to influence the shifting cultural landscape. While this study focused on professional dancers, their students, and audiences, dancers in more quotidian settings had similar experiences in using their body to push against ideology and sometimes dance outside its purview. Whether in rehearsals or classes, grand stages or makeshift platforms, private rituals or public revelry, Cuban citizens danced with the revolution as a political context and structural reality. In doing so, they corporeally contended that motion rather than stagnation ought to define Cuba’s present and future.

\textsuperscript{10} Marianela Boán, Untitled Blog, accessed Feb. 3, 2016, \url{http://marianelaboan.blogspot.com/2013/06/mipais-es-mi-cuerpo.html}
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