4-14-2021

The Cuban Diaspora: Stories of Defection, Brain Drain, and Brain Gain

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POSTPRINT

Chapter 17
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The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Ballet
(2021), 280-98
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190871499.013.50

Abstract: *Since the 1990s, many dancers from Cuba have found work in North American and Western European ballet ensembles. This chapter describes how their international dance careers reflect high-skilled labor migration in the global economy, as well as the decentralizing expansion of ballet's labor market. Migrant Cuban dancers cite a depressed local economy and the artistic stagnation of the Ballet Nacional de Cuba as fundamental reasons for looking for work in international ensembles. Their exodus is also political—extending into the present practices and discourses associated with the Cold War concept of defection. The numerous departures constitute a detrimental form of brain drain for Cuban ballet, which loses precious human capital and is relegated to the subaltern role of labor supplier for the international ballet community. Yet, this diaspora could also fuel brain gain—a scenario in which émigrés such as Carlos Acosta return home to reinvest in local institutions the knowledge and resources acquired abroad.*

In the 1990s, Cuban ballet dancers began to make their way into the rosters of international troupes. The number of Cuban dancers working outside their country has increased in the twenty-first century, as dozens of these artists have established a worldwide presence in companies ranging from New York's American Ballet Theatre to London's Royal Ballet, from the San Francisco Ballet to the Béjart Ballet Lausanne. This trend reflects the entry of artists from several Latin American and East Asian countries into an international labor market that in ballet has become increasingly global. In the case of Cuba, the dancers' diaspora has been of such a scale that it has become a defining element of Cuban ballet—just as massive exodus has left a profound mark on the nation in the years since the collapse of the Eastern Bloc triggered a prolonged economic and ideological crisis on the island.[1] Many dancers cite a dysfunctional economy and the artistic stagnation of the Ballet Nacional de Cuba (BNC) as fundamental reasons for looking for work abroad. Even though such material and professional motivations are common causes of high-skilled labor migration in the global economy, the Cuban dancers' diaspora has been highly politicized—for it extended into the twenty-first century certain methods of departure and punitive state sanctions associated with the seemingly obsolete Cold War concept of defection. By international standards the Cold War ended in 1990, but for Cuban dancers defection remained a practical action and an ideological discourse informing attitudes toward migration until fairly recently. Not until 2018 did the BNC publicly announce that, putting behind the Cold War rhetoric, the company would "turn the page" and welcome back émigré dancers as members of the "family" of Cuban ballet.[2]

From an economic perspective, the exodus of dancers constitutes a detrimental brain drain through which Cuba and the BNC lose precious human capital—and the resources invested in its development. Yet, high-skilled labor migration also presupposes scenarios of so-called brain gain in which expatriates return home to reinvest in local institutions, contributing knowledge and resources acquired during their international careers. In Cuba, sanctions against émigrés, such as bans to re-enter and work in the country, have prevented the reinsertion of expatriate dancers in local ballet institutions and thus precluded brain gain. However, the government's growing acceptance of a concept of Cuban nation as a diasporic community promises more fluid relations between local institutions and Cubans living abroad. The Havana-based troupe *Acosta Danza*, founded in 2016 by the transnational Cuban dancer Carlos Acosta, models the artistic and economic benefits of embracing émigrés as members of the national community.

Attending to the political, economic, and institutional context of Cuban ballet, this chapter underscores how local state ideology and the colonialist configuration of the world economy complicate the status of Cuban dancers as transnational workers. Even though the case of Cuba is unique, the present discussion of labor circulation is relevant for theorizing the participation of other dancers from Latin America and East Asia in ballet's international workforce. As artists from those regions leave their countries to work in Western Europe or North America, questions arise about how their transnational movement stands for brain drain or promotes brain gain, and how these two scenarios may reinforce or destabilize assumed notions of a center and a periphery in the international ballet community. The international trajectories of dancers should be considered in light of trends in labor migration and against the background of worldwide coloniality.

Dancers' Moves: High-Skilled Labor Migration in a Global Labor Market

One of contemporary ballet's most distinctive features, the extensive internationalization of the labor market, was prefigured in the 1990s. That decade witnessed an increased circulation of dancers within Europe and across the Atlantic, including the movement of artists from the former Eastern Bloc to the West.[3] In the twenty-first century, ballet's transnationalism has broadened. Today, some workers of the ballet economy continue to crisscross Europe and traverse the North Atlantic, but others carve larger global pathways between East and West, North and South. Historic locations of ballet training such as Russia, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States still feed the dance form's economy. However, a number of Latin American and East Asian nations, including Cuba, Argentina, Brazil, China, Japan, and South Korea, have decentralized ballet training and substantially expanded the field's labor pool. The prestigious Prix de Lausanne, from which many European and North American ballet ensembles recruit new dancers, illustrates the workforce's expanded internationalism. In 2014, East Asians and Latin Americans accounted for *more than half* of the finalists in that competition.[4] The development of this worldwide labor supply has gone hand in hand with the internationalization of ballet ensembles in the Global North. Consider the case of the Boston Ballet. In 2013, half of its fifty-four dancers came from outside the United States: nine hailed from Latin America, eight from Eastern Europe and former Soviet republics, five from Asia, and four from Western Europe.[5] Artistic director Mikko Nissinen explained that these numbers reflected a deliberate decision to establish the Boston Ballet as an international institution.[6] For ensembles like this one, recruiting globally is a way of ensuring quality by hiring the best workers the labor market has to offer. At the same time, it is also a strategy of institutional diversity: to retain their sociocultural

relevance, ballet companies are increasingly pressed to mirror, in their composition, the multicultural and global cities in which they operate.[7]

The flow of dancers from Latin America and East Asia to European and North American companies is consistent with high-skilled labor migration across other fields of the global economy. Since the 1990s, the most rapidly growing segment of international migration has been the one composed of high-skilled workers, including those moving from developing to developed countries.[8] Discussions of this phenomenon commonly underscore the circulation of scientists, academics, information technology experts, financial specialists, and medical personnel. Artists are seldom at the center of these analyses—dancers, in particular, are notably excluded. Through terminology that equates professionals to *brains*, studies of high-skilled labor migration neglect workers who specialize in bodily skills. Dancers, of course, negate this separation of body and mind. In fact, ballet dancers epitomize the definition of an elite, high-skilled workforce. Like other specialized professionals, they are precious human capital whose expertise is achieved at a great cost of time, effort, and material resources.

In Cuba, the state devotes significant assets to training dancers. It absorbs the cost of facilities, teaching staff, and dance productions, while providing dance supplies and room and board to most students. In 2017, the government fully subsidized the education of approximately nine hundred ballet students.[9] Despite its high cost, training so many students is necessary for maintaining a broad pool of talent from which exceptional artists emerge. Only the most accomplished dancers are allowed to advance to the next phase of training, which pushes students to the limit in terms of preparation. A few from each cohort make it to graduation after six to eight years of training. By this point they enter the labor market as high-skilled professionals equipped with formidable technical expertise, artistic knowledge, and work habits.

Latin American dancers have typified high-skilled labor migration since the turn of the century. In 2005, the *New York Times* deemed this group the "new soaring force" in ballet, pointing to the fact that half of American Ballet Theatre's principal dancers were from Latin America.[10] Cuban dancers, reputed for their training, have been particularly sought out by international ensembles. This became evident in 2008 after three lead dancers quit the BNC during a tour of Canada. As the news spread, prospective employers made quick arrangements to recruit them: Hayna Gutiérrez, Taras Domitro, and Miguel Angel Blanco were soon hired as principal dancers of the Alberta Ballet, the San Francisco Ballet, and the Joffrey Ballet Chicago, respectively.[11] Dozens of other Cuban dancers have been appointed soloists and principal dancers at The Royal Ballet, the Bavarian State Ballet, Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, American Ballet Theatre, Boston Ballet, and other North American and Western European companies (table 17.1). Many others have found employment in Australian, South African, and Latin American troupes. Cuban dancers have also been in high demand as teachers and régisseurs in institutions including English National Ballet in London, the Béjart Ballet in Lausanne, the Ailey School in New York, and Teatro Alla Scala in Milan (Table 1).

Table 1
Cuban Principal Dancers and Soloists in International Ensembles (since 1990)*

UNITED STATES AND CANADA		
Adiarys Almeida Lorna Feijóo Nelson Madrigal Dalay Parrondo	Boston Ballet	Boston
Cervilio Amador Jorge Barani Gema Díaz Edward González	Cincinnati Ballet	Cincinnati
Alejandro Méndez Annier Navarro Randy Pacheco	Ballet Arizona	Phoenix
Javier Morales Humberto Rivera Amaya Rodríguez	Kansas City Ballet	Kansas City
Adrián Molina Maraya Piñeiro Dayesi Torriente	Pennsylvania Ballet	Philadelphia
Joan Boada Taras Domitro Lorena Feijóo	San Francisco Ballet	San Francisco
Javier Morera Gian Carlo Pérez Oscar Sánchez	Washington Ballet	Washington, DC
Elier Bourzac Hayna Gutiérrez	Alberta Ballet	Calgary
José Carreño Xiomara Reyes	American Ballet Theatre	New York City

* This is not an exhaustive list of all Cuban artists working as principal dancers or soloists in North American and European companies. Some of these dancers have held appointments in more than one troupe. For the sake of succinctness, they are affiliated with only one group in this list. The information has been compiled through internet searches, primarily of company websites.

Miguel Anaya Romel Frometa	Ballet Met	Columbus
Miguel Angel Blanco Ernesto Quenedit	Joffrey Ballet Chicago	Chicago
Randy Crespo Marize Fumero	Milwaukee Ballet	Milwaukee
Lyván Verdecia	Ballet Hispánico	New York City
Yosvani Ramos	Colorado Ballet	Denver
Carlos Quenedit	Houston Ballet	Houston
Carlos Hopuy	Les Ballets Trockadero	New York City
Jesús Corrales	Les Grands Ballets Canadiens	Montreal
Annia Hidalgo	Los Angeles Ballet	Los Angeles
Carlos Guerra	Miami City Ballet	Miami
Karel Cruz	Pacific Northwest Ballet	Seattle
Reyneris Reyes	Royal Winnipeg Ballet	Winnipeg
	EUROPE	
Julio Arozarena Juan Sánchez Daniel Sarabia Catherine Zuaznábar	Béjart Ballet Lausanne	Lausanne
Yonah Acosta Yan Set Chang Arionel Vargas	English National Ballet	London
Alberto Ballester Yoel Carreño Yolanda Correa	Norwegian National Ballet	Oslo
Osiel Gouneo Alejandro Virelles	Bavarian State Ballet	Munich

Yanier Gómez Liuva Horta	Compañía Nacional de Danza	Madrid
Rolando Sarabia Venus Villa	Opera de Roma	Rome
Ernesto Boada Howard Quintero	Royal Ballet of Flanders	Antwerp
Lienz Chang	Ballet National de Marseille	Marseille
Rafael Rivero	Ballet Zürich	Zurich
Dayron Vera	Corella Ballet	Segovia
Rodrigo Almarales	Deutsche Oper am Rhein	Düsseldorf
Amílcar Moret	Hamburg Ballet	Hamburg
Melissa Gutiérrez	Les Ballets de Montecarlo	Monaco
Javier Torres	Northern Ballet	Leeds
Carlos Acosta	Royal Ballet	London
José Alberto Becerra	Víctor Ullate Ballet	Madrid

The political dimensions of Cuban migration have complicated this exodus. In March 2013, after seven performers left the BNC in Mexico and sought asylum in the United States, the international media resorted to Cold War rhetoric and categorized the incident as a defection.[12] Yet, the dancers attributed their action to economic and professional ambitions rather than political reasons. They wanted to work in the United States—and, effectively, within six months they had contracts with Ballet Arizona, the Sarasota Ballet, the San Juan Ballet, and the Washington Ballet.[13] By this measure, they were no different from other high-skilled workers seeking professional opportunities in the United States. Nevertheless, their decision to leave while on tour and request asylum did indeed harken back to a Cold War definition of defection.

The incident took place against the background of critical changes in Cuba's travel and migration policy. Weeks earlier, after decades in which Cubans could not leave their country freely, a new law had eliminated the requirement of a state permit to exit the island and restored the right to travel for most citizens (with the exception of military and healthcare personnel).[14] Over the previous few years, the increased flexibility of migration policy under Raúl Castro's government had allowed a growing number of Cubans to travel and, in the case of those residing abroad, return for visits.[15] Such flows evidenced an official trend to no longer regard migration through the lens of ideological stigma. However, despite the reforms, the state maintained its

prerogative to punish so-called illegal emigrants. According to the 2013 law, athletes, diplomats, and other professionals who stay abroad while traveling on a state mission—a criterion likely to include BNC dancers on tour—face an eight-year ban from visiting Cuba. While authorities have not always enforced it, the letter of the law warrants ongoing categorization of certain departures as punishable acts equivalent to the classic defections of the Cold War. Moreover, a history of politicization of dancers' migration going back to the 1960s has influenced how, through this transitional period in migration policy, Cuban institutions, the foreign media, and dancers themselves have continued to conceive of these departures as defections.

Defections Reconceptualized: Cold War Escapes, Still, or Career Leaps?

Migrant dancers challenge a historic model of patriotism set in the origin story of the BNC. According to this account, company founder Alicia Alonso gave up a glittering international career to promote ballet in Cuba. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, she had been a star of Ballet Theatre and the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo. Simultaneously, she had struggled to keep afloat a professional ballet company in Havana. In 1959, in the early weeks of the Cuban Revolution, Fidel Castro authorized the state's financial support of the BNC. Soon after, Cuba and the United States turned into Cold War enemies, and Alonso faced the quandary of continuing her international career, based in New York, or staying in Havana to work toward the development of Cuban ballet. She chose Havana.[16] Inscribed in the history of Cuban ballet as an act of commitment to the BNC and the revolution, Alonso's personal decision established an expectation of faithfulness to the company and the government for generations of dancers to come. The revolution's generous funding of ballet reinforced that presumption of loyalty.

Not only have exiled dancers defied such expectations of patriotism and commitment to the government, but, historically, they have also undermined the BNC's important mission of cultural diplomacy. In the midst of the Cold War, the company's international tours advertised the social, educational, and cultural achievements of the revolution.[17] To audiences in the Western Bloc it came as a surprise that Cuba boasted an ensemble of more than seventy dancers, a company comparable in quality to those of Europe and North America.[18] Eliciting astonishment, the BNC proclaimed the success of the Cuban government in sponsoring the arts. More broadly, the troupe's excellence signaled that communism enabled Cuba to attain socioeconomic and cultural indicators equivalent to those of the developed capitalist world.[19] Nevertheless, dancers' defections evidenced the human toll of the revolution's project already in the first visit of the BNC to Western Europe, when ten male dancers sought political asylum in Paris in 1966.[20] As characters of Cold War history, defectors were then at the center of propaganda battles. Notably, deserters such as the Soviet ballet dancer Rudolf Nureyev contributed to imprinting long-lasting notions of communist countries as prison states and of the West as the free world.[21] The desertion of the Cuban group, which followed Nureyev's break five years earlier in the same city, reinforced such views. The dancers' motivation was their fear that in Cuba they could be targeted as homosexuals and interned in forced-labor camps.[22] Offsetting the potential of the BNC's debut in Paris for cultural diplomacy, the incident triggered extensive press coverage that corroborated the Cuban government's imprisonment of gay men and other alleged enemies of the revolution.[23]

The end of the Cold War had dramatic consequences for Cuban emigration. Entering the 1990s, Cuba lost its trade partners in Eastern Europe as those countries transitioned to capitalism.

The island's economy collapsed, and the value of monthly salaries plummeted to the equivalent of ten to fifteen US dollars during a crisis that the government euphemistically labeled the *período especial*, or special period.[24] To escape economic hardship and its dehumanizing effects, scores of Cubans fled the country by any means available, including sailing on rafts and risking their lives at sea to reach the United States. Within a few years, close to one million Cuban migrants settled in the United States alone.[25] One indirect effect of emigration during the *período especial* was the sudden transformation of Cuba into a supplier of high-skilled labor to the global economy. Since the 1990s and until today, a significant proportion of the island's emigrants arriving to the United States and other countries have been in possession of competitive training and professional experience in healthcare, technical fields, the sciences, education, and the arts—the result of the Cuban government's decades-long policy to make education accessible and cultivate a qualified workforce.

With the onset of the *período especial*, the BNC began to customarily lose dancers during international tours—a phenomenon that continues today.[26] The total number of dancers who since the 1990s have left the company while on tour is difficult to establish, but it has been substantial enough to almost certainly exceed the size of the troupe itself. In 2003 alone, the company lost twenty artists during appearances in the United States, Spain, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic.[27] This exodus illustrates the push-and-pull economic and professional causes of high-skilled labor migration, as defined by Andrés Solimano. While certain circumstances push workers away from one location, more desirable alternatives in another place pulled in this human capital. Salient among these determinants are differences in per capita income, living standards, and economic security between the origin and destination countries. Career conditions are an equally important reason for the migration of workers such as scientists, academics, and artists. Professional isolation, institutional stagnation, bureaucracy, ineffective leadership, poor infrastructure, lack of funding, inadequate career advancement support, and professional underrecognition drive talent to locations that offer desirable alternatives to these conditions.[28]

Cuban ballet dancers often cite material reasons for migrating. In their country, as one dancer explained in 2003, many of them live in houses with leaking roofs and have to resort to the black market for food.[29] Conscious of the paradox of being among the best-trained yet lowest-paid ballet dancers in the world, they pursue better-remunerated employment in foreign companies. Artistic ambitions also drive this diaspora, in correspondence with the global projection of a professional class that, having received world-class training, aspires to worldwide success. The stagnation that has afflicted the BNC in recent years makes such artistic aspirations all the more urgent. The performers taking jobs outside the country seek not only international prestige but also artistic growth. Frustrated with the BNC's impoverished repertoire, many dancers seek access to the more diverse and innovative programming of European and North American ensembles. After staying in the United States in 2001, Nelson Madrigal explained that he had grown tired of dancing *Giselle*, *Swan Lake*, and other nineteenth-century classics on high rotation in the BNC's seasons.[30] Like him, Hayna Gutiérrez complained of the Cuban ballet's heavy diet of classics after she stayed in Canada in 2009: "If you're dancer, choreography is your food. You can't eat spaghetti all the time."[31]

Decades earlier, the BNC had been a pioneer in the cross-pollination of ballet and contemporary dance that is now a hallmark of choreographic innovation in ballet ensembles across the world. Dancemakers such as Alberto Méndez, Iván Tenorio, and Hilda Riveros, who created inventive works for the BNC in the 1970s and 1980s, had started their careers in modern dance and transferred elements of its groundbreaking aesthetic to their ballets. Additionally, Alberto Alonso, who had performed with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and Les Ballets Russes de Colonel W. de Basil, was heir to the twentieth-century ballet avant-garde and carried over its sense of experimentation in works he choreographed for the BNC until the 1980s. A golden era of Cuban ballet choreography drew to an end when these artists ceased or reduced their collaborations with the troupe in the 1990s.

Compounding this problem, the BNC has not been able to pay the licensing fees for works by international choreographers such as Jiří Kylián, William Forsythe, or Twyla Tharp, who have set the tone of contemporary ballet. Financial limitations have also kept vast tracks of earlier choreography out of reach. That has been the case, for example, with the canonic ballets of George Balanchine, Jerome Robbins, Frederick Ashton, and Kenneth MacMillan. Many of the dancers who have left the BNC to pursue careers abroad have relished their expanded access to choreography. Lorna Feijóo (Boston Ballet) and Taras Domitro (San Francisco Ballet) explain that mastering the works of choreographers such as Balanchine, Kylián, and Forsythe became the most rewarding aspect of their careers after leaving Cuba.[32]

Dancers who leave the BNC to work abroad also attribute their decision to dissatisfaction with the troupe's governance and artistic leadership. Cervilio Amador and Adiarys Almeida, who stayed in the United States in 2003, felt alienated by the fact that every decision about their careers lived with Alicia Alonso, the all-too-powerful director of the BNC.[33] For decades, until her death in 2019, Alonso's leverage with the Cuban government and standing within the international arts community have opened many doors for the BNC, but her critics accused her of remaining in her position for too long and therefore halting company renewal by a younger generation of artistic leaders. Some claim that Alonso, now a blind nonagenarian with limited mobility, was no longer fit for her job and had to rely on many aides at the expense of a unified artistic vision for the troupe.[34]

It is apparent that, in comparison to dancers who defected decades earlier for urgent political reasons, recent exiles have left Cuba due to a set of economic, artistic, and institutional circumstances more in line with the push-and-pull factors of high-skilled labor migration in an age of global labor markets. Nevertheless, as indicated earlier, their departures have continued to be politicized under the Cold Ward rubric of defection. There are several reasons for this. Since Cuba's communist regime survived the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, in many ways the relations between the country and the rest of the world have continued to follow a Cold War dynamic. This influences how dancers' departures are perceived internally and externally. One could argue that, as in the past, dancers' migrations remain politically motivated, at least to the extent that the economic, artistic, and institutional problems that now drive dancers to work abroad—from their country's economic crisis to the long hold on power of Alonso as the BNC's artistic leader—have been failures of the Cuban political system. Moreover, some of the mechanisms of defection from the Cold War era endure, as it is the case with the dancers' choice to abandon the BNC during international tours. Before the government legalized international travel in 2013,

this was their most practical method for leaving the country. But even under new circumstances that make individual travel possible, quitting the troupe while on tour remains strategic. It spares dancers the onerous cost and effort of securing passports, visas, and flight tickets on their own. During BNC tours all of this is managed and provided to them by the ensemble.

Finally, as noted earlier, the government has kept the defection paradigm alive as part of the new travel and migration law, which maintains sanctions against citizens who desert while acting as official representatives of Cuba. Of significance to this analysis of labor migration, the law is designed to partially prevent brain drain. For instance, it stipulates that healthcare personnel, one of the most valuable assets of the nation's labor force, must still obtain an official exit permit to travel abroad. Furthermore, by punishing the desertions of athletes, artists, and other citizens on official trips, the law aims not only to avoid these departures' negative effect on the government's international image but, presumably, also to curb the emigration of some of the country's most talented professionals. In other words, the state's stigmatization of this high-skilled labor migration as defection transcends the political arguments of the Cold War to also act as an instrument of brain drain management.

Effects of Brain Drain for the Subaltern Labor Supplier

The growing presence of Latin American and East Asian dancers in European and North American ballet troupes destabilizes assumed notions of which nations occupy positions in the center or the periphery in the world of ballet. The colonialist world order commonly relegates Cuba to the periphery, yet in the arena of ballet the country produces world-class artists and demonstrates how, far from those European and North American sites traditionally thought of as the center, other locations have come to occupy significant positions in the global ballet community. Cuba not only is home to the BNC and first-rate ballet schools but also boasts strong regional ensembles such as the Ballet de Camagüey and hosts the reputed International Ballet Festival of Havana, which in twenty-six editions held from 1960 to 2018 has attracted dancers from all over the world. The country is also known for its large and knowledgeable ballet audience. Such achievements warrant Cuba's claim to being in the center, not the periphery, of the international ballet community. Yet, this decolonialist gesture is jeopardized by the exodus of local dancers to the Global North, which casts the country in the subaltern role of a labor supplier for European and North American institutions. The outflow of talent reinforces the colonialist structuring of international ballet. It compromises the excellence of Cuban ballet troupes, which, by losing their best dancers, are relegated to a less competitive international status. Conversely, the outflow reproduces the dominant standing of Global North ensembles, which benefit from recruiting talented Cuban artists to reaffirm their stature as international centers that concentrate resources, opportunities, and cachet.[35] This situation captures the failure of the neoliberal market's promise to decentralize the international economy through globalization. It evidences that in most regards, including the circulation of high-skilled labor, coloniality continues to structure the economic relations between developed and developing nations.

Downplaying migration's negative consequences for the BNC, Alicia Alonso explained that artists who leave are immediately replaced with new graduates from the island's ballet schools. "We have 110 beautiful dancers [in the troupe], and we have more coming up each year through our school," she boasted in an interview.[36] In reality, it is difficult to think of gifted artists with unique talents and personalities as replaceable workers. Even if they are replaced, the new

graduates who fill the vacated spots become next in line to leave, which generates a fast, harmful rotation of personnel, especially principal dancers and soloists.[37] Brain drain turns the BNC into a training ground in which young dancers are groomed only to leave for other troupes before maturing and realizing their full potential in Cuba. This dynamic has created a deficit of mature artists that is detrimental not only to the quality of performances but also to the growth of incoming company members. The deficit of seasoned dancers—compounded by the migration of teachers and *regisseurs* also afflicting the BNC—weakens the transmission of knowledge from one generation of dancers to the next, a process that is the cornerstone of expertise preservation and development in any ballet ensemble. Namely, brain drain impoverishes the troupe's store of expertise, posing risks of long-term deterioration.

To counter brain drain, the BNC prevents its members from signing work contracts with foreign troupes, as was the case when principal dancers Rolando Sarabia and Octavio Martín received respective offers from the Boston Ballet and the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. By refusing the dancers' petitions of release, the BNC pushed them to decamp during a trip to Mexico—from where Sarabia and Martín traveled to the United States. They both had hoped that, rather than resorting to defection methods, they could have left their country through regular channels and that, instead of breaking ties with the troupe, they could have maintained parallel careers in the BNC and abroad. "They threw me out," pointed out Sarabia to convey that it was the negation of permission to work transnationally that turned him into a so-called defector.[38] Such conflict of interests between the institution and its members is one of the reasons perpetuating the dancers' practice of defection in a post–Cold War context.

The BNC's retaliatory measures toward émigrés, such as invisibilizing them and banning them from performing in Cuba, have also contributed to prolonging a historic model of what defection entails. Consider the case of the former BNC star Lorna Feijóo, a darling of Cuban audiences in the 1990s. After she left the troupe during a tour of the United States in 2001 and became a principal dancer of the Boston Ballet, the BNC magazine *Cuba en el Ballet* rendered Feijóo invisible. Her name and any mentions of her international career would be omitted from that publication, which serves as the institutional memory of the Cuban ballet.[39] Such treatment of Feijóo by the BNC extended even after the government allowed the dancer to re-enter Cuba. She publicly expressed her strong desire to dance for local audiences again, but the company never invited her to do so.[40] Until 2018, only exceptionally did some expatriate dancers—whose international careers were sanctioned by the state and the BNC—perform in Cuba. In that rare category were Carlos Acosta (The Royal Ballet), José Carreño (American Ballet Theatre), and Yoel Carreño (Norwegian National Ballet).[41]

The example that Alonso set in the initial years of the revolution by relinquishing her international career has continued to dictate an expectation of similar patriotism for BNC dancers in the twenty-first century. Supposedly, the country's ballet community is a family in which members, having been nourished by the state and previous generations of dancers, assume a responsibility to work in Cuba for the community's greater good. This assumption informed Alonso's criticism of emigrants. "They are like kites that one builds carefully with rods, and string and paper. Then you launch them into flight and suddenly they break loose from the cord. It is sad how they fool themselves," she declared to a reporter.[42] In the same interview, Alonso implied that émigrés were disloyal and stressed that they could compete in the international labor

market only because they benefited from years of state-subsidized studies and artistic mentoring in the ensemble. Discrediting exiles as unfaithful careerists who put their personal interests above those of the national collective constitutes another typical response from the Cold War script on defection.[43] However, among recent generations of dancers, the push-and-pull factors of high-skilled labor migration supersede a view of patriotism that conflates love of the country with faithfulness to the government and the BNC. In a televised appearance in 2013, four Cuban dancers who had just arrived in the United States acknowledged their indebtedness to Alonso, the BNC, and the Cuban educational system, but they asserted their right to follow their professional aspirations on international stages, free from bonds of gratitude to their country's institutions.[44]

In 2003, minister of culture Abel Prieto had met with all dancers of the BNC to remind them of the consequences of staying in other countries while on tour: a ban from re-entering Cuba and denial of permission to their families to join them abroad. Following the meeting, the Ministry of Culture took the extraordinary measure of amending the dancers' work contracts to explicitly include these stipulations.[45] At the same time, the government recognized that the dancers' migration was not simply a political matter but also a problem of high-skilled labor management. Striking a negotiating tone, Prieto promised that the state would review the cases of dancers who received work offers from abroad so that these possibly could be authorized through official channels, without dancers having to take the drastic step of leaving the BNC during tours. In other words, even while doubling down on its old punitive strategies, the state acknowledged that such measures perpetuated rather than eliminated the phenomenon of defection, and that a new approach was necessary. Prieto signaled acceptance of the notion of Cuban dancers as a transnational workforce, in line with the aspirations of artists such as Sarabia and Feijóo to move fluidly between international locations and Havana.

Carlos Acosta and Acosta Danza: Transnationalism and Brain Gain

Understood as brain drain, high-skilled labor migration is a flight of human capital that invalidates the Global South's investments in education and deprives the region's countries of the contributions that émigrés could have made to local development. However, scholars of labor migration such as Andrés Solimano, Simon Commader, and Herbert Brücker underscore so-called brain gain scenarios in which this diaspora may revert into benefits to the origin countries. While the notion of brain drain presupposes a one-way outflow, the brain gain paradigm recognizes the possibility of a circular movement of professionals, ideas, and resources.[46] The latter perspective allows envisioning a dynamic role for Latin American and East Asian dancers who work in Europe and North America but reinvest in home institutions. Traveling back and forth between the assumed periphery and center of the international ballet community, these artists could operate a redistribution of resources and expertise, and thus destabilize such hierarchical mapping of the ballet world. This means that in spite of having left Cuba, or precisely because of it, émigrés could make valuable contributions to their country and help revitalize local ballet institutions. In theory, they could give back knowledge, connections, and resources acquired through their insertion in international artistic networks. Yet, the Cuban government and the BNC's condemnation of these dancers as defectors have foreclosed the chance of brain gain. The few exceptions to such stigmatization, such as Carlos Acosta, render a picture of how dancers working transnationally, with one foot in Cuba and the other foot elsewhere, could offset the damage of brain drain if not fully at least partially.

In 1990, Acosta was still a student at the National School of Ballet when he won top honors in the Prix de Lausanne and the Paris International Dance Competition. The awards paved the way for his transnational career. He obtained rare authorization from the government to accept a position in the English National Ballet. Later, he would rise to stardom as a principal dancer of The Royal Ballet. While working abroad, Acosta managed to keep uncharacteristic good standing with Cuban institutions and authorities. Far from ostracizing him, the government and the BNC recognized him as an ambassador of Cuban ballet who boosted the country's international image, as asserted in reports in the state-run media of his achievements on stages across the world.[47] It is indicative of Acosta's privileged position that in 2003 Fidel Castro attended one of his performances in Havana, and eight years later the artist was presented with the National Dance Award after a jury declared that he was a son of the revolution who had brought glory to Cuba.[48] Given the standard official view that dancers who migrate undercut cultural diplomacy, it is ironic that the government turned Acosta into one of Cuba's most effective cultural diplomats, not by curtailing his ability to work abroad, as authorities tried for years with other dancers, but, on the contrary, by facilitating his participation in the international labor market.

Acosta's officially sanctioned status as a transnational worker enabled the dancer to carry out valued professional activities in Cuba. He continued to dance in his country as a regular guest of the International Ballet Festival of Havana. Thus, local spectators were not deprived of the artistry of one of the world's best ballet performers. Audiences also benefited from Acosta's brokering of a historic visit of The Royal Ballet to Cuba in 2009. Spectators in Havana eagerly received that company's performances of Ashton's *A Month in the Country*, MacMillan's *Manon*, and Wayne McGregor's *Chroma*, works that had never been seen in Cuba and which constituted a stimulating alternative to the BNC's heavy rotation of nineteenth-century classics.[49] Moreover, Acosta enjoyed the opportunity to choreograph in Cuba in collaboration with local dancers and musicians. His production of *Tocororo*, which premiered in Havana in 2003, juxtaposed artists with ballet training and performers with a background in contemporary dance. The hybrid choreography incorporated those two styles as well as hip-hop, Cuban social dances, and Afro-Cuban folklore. The resulting product was a piece with a level of commercial appeal not normally found on Cuban stages, which expanded the range of local offerings. Funded by the Sadler's Wells Theatre in London, *Tocororo* followed a production model beneficial for a country with limited financial resources. The investment of foreign capital generated jobs and international exposure for the Cuban cast, as the show went on to tour the United Kingdom, Italy, Austria, Turkey, and Hong Kong.[50]

After retiring from The Royal Ballet in 2016, Acosta redirected his career toward the development of his own Havana-based company, Acosta Danza. Through this organization, he has bridged the local and international dance communities. The troupe has emerged as a crucible for choreographic creativity, while producing rewarding employment for Cuban dancers. Over a short period the group's repertoire has grown to include works by Justin Peck, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, and Pontus Lidberg, among other exponents of current international choreography.[51] Crucially, the company promotes the development of a young generation of Cuban choreographers, including Ely Regina Hernández and Raúl Reinoso. Created for the troupe, Hernández's *Avium* (2016) cites, deconstructs, and enlarges Mikhail Fokine's *The Dying Swan* for an ensemble of androgynous performers. Her choreography expands the classical vocabulary

through polycentric articulations, while embracing the tension between jagged shapes and fluid movement. Reinoso produces works that are similarly eclectic. Integrating elements of contemporary dance, ballet, and Afro-Cuban dance, in *Satori* (2018) he probes the Zen Buddhist concept of spiritual awakening through the ensemble's metaphorical play between nudity and spectacular costuming.[52] These and other works in the company's heterogeneous repertory regularly demand dancers to transition between dissimilar genres, techniques, and aesthetics, engaging a versatility that stimulates the performers' artistic development. By increasing the range of Cuban ballet, Acosta Danza supplements the BNC's emphasis on the classics and consequently repositions Cuba within the international ballet community as a site of not only tradition but also experimentation.

In the Cuban context, the troupe's transnational financial model has been equally innovative. The Ministry of Culture partially subsidizes the ensemble, providing it with studios, offices, and access to theaters. Yet, Acosta raises operational funds through international sponsorships that he is well positioned to secure as a result of his past career in London. Building on the model of *Tocororo*, Acosta Danza is an international associate company of Sadler's Wells. This British institution manages the company's appearances in the United Kingdom and also arranges tours of other countries, so far including the United States, Russia, France, and Germany. While state funding guarantees a stable infrastructure, international sponsorships and engagements boost the dancers' incomes far beyond the regular state salaries of most Cubans. Acosta proudly declared to the *New York Times* that since joining the group some of the performers have been able to purchase houses in Havana.[53] Favorable artistic opportunities and compensation are an incentive for the ensemble's dancers to work in Cuba rather than emigrate. Seemingly, the brain gain typified by Acosta precludes brain drain by creating circumstances that retain high-skilled workers.

In comparison to Acosta Danza, the BNC has struggled to accept a transnational definition of the national community. However, the 2018 edition of the International Ballet Festival of Havana marked a turning point in the relation between the BNC and the diaspora. For too long, the troupe's identity as a symbol of the revolution, the weight of Cold War history on the migration of ballet dancers, and the association of their exodus with brain drain had hindered an institutional model of collaboration with expatriates. The 2018 festival took distance from this history. In a press conference convoked to announce the festival's program, the BNC announced that invited to perform in Havana were nine former members of the troupe who now worked in Europe and the United States, including Domitro, Gutiérrez, and Almeida—who years earlier had abandoned the group during tours. The company's publicist indicated that, although those dancers had left the BNC in "improper fashion," the festival was focusing on the present, not the past, and sought to reunite the Cuban ballet "family." He indicated that this reconciliation with the diaspora was in the spirit of the government's more flexible policy on migration.[54] Reporting on the press conference, articles in two local newspapers announced the visits of dancers from twenty countries. However, in a sign of the lingering ideological stance toward expatriates, those newspapers omitted any reference to the Cuban émigrés' participation.[55]

Even though the cases of Acosta and the BNC appear to confirm that Cuban authorities and institutions are progressively relinquishing practices and discourses that alienate migrant dancers as defectors, it is difficult to predict how economic and political developments in a country in

transition—and changes of the BNC's artistic and administrative philosophy under new leadership since Alonso's death—will either sustain or reverse this trend. Endorsing a conception of the nation as a diasporic entity inclusive of émigrés and enriched by transnational cooperation between Cubans on the island and those in other locations would facilitate brain gain. It would also be consistent with the state's attempt to liberalize travel and migration, as well as with economic reforms that since the turn of the century have aimed to open Cuba to foreign investments and strengthen its participation in international markets. Independent of this peculiar national context, the challenges of brain drain and brain gain are consequential for all actors, not only Cubans, in ballet's global labor market. The international circulation of the ballet workforce, which reflects the workings of coloniality and neoliberal markets, warrants further analysis at a time of increased scrutiny of ideologies of labor in dance studies. As indicated earlier, brain grain and brain drain impact the reproduction, or disruption, of the colonialist organization of international ballet as a hierarchical system in which power and influences are mapped according to notions of a center and a periphery.

Difficult questions arise in connection with the status of ballet dancers as partakers of high-skilled labor migration in the global economy. How should dancers and ballet institutions navigate the economic, political, artistic, ethical, and human factors that cause the globalization of the ballet workforce and the resulting circulation of dancers? What are the implications of the drive toward hiring Latin American and East Asian dancers in ballet companies in the Global North if such initiatives promote much-needed racial and multicultural diversity in those ensembles, while simultaneously stimulating brain drain? How should individual dancers weigh aspirations to international careers versus responsibilities toward home institutions? Which policies, if any, should governments adopt to prevent brain drain or foster brain gain in countries where the state, by financing dance training, has a stake in these situations? How could any such policies balance protection of the nation's human capital and respect of the personal freedom of dancers to come and go at will? Do the benefits of brain grain offset or merely palliate the negative effects of brain drain? How can locations in the periphery transcend the subaltern role of labor supplier? In which other ways can these locations assert their international relevance?

Acknowledgments

I thank Ariana Reguant for comments on a draft of this essay, as well as the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, at Harvard University, where I initiated this research as a visiting scholar.

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