

UCLA

UCLA Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

A History of the Ballet Nacional de Cuba: gendered labor and its representations

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1tp165h5>

Author

Martinez, Andrew Michael

Publication Date

2013

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

A History of the Ballet Nacional de Cuba:
gendered labor and its representations

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts
in Culture and Performance

by

Andrew Michael Martínez

2013

© Copyright by

Andrew Michael Martinez

2013

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

A History of the Ballet Nacional de Cuba:
gendered labor and its representations

by

Andrew Michael Martínez

Master of Arts in Culture and Performance

University of California, Los Angeles, 2013

Professor Robin Derby, co-chair | Professor Allen F. Roberts, co-chair

This thesis examines the ways that the Ballet Nacional de Cuba (BNC) was enfranchised into the 1959 Cuban Revolution. By foregrounding the national projects of the Revolution and examining representations of the homosexual Cuban male experience, I explore how the internationally distinct Cuban ballet technique emerged in dialogue and in response to the new man (*el hombre nuevo*) and the new nation that was being forged. Part I explores the Cuban ballet technique as a repository of the socio-political conditions in which the ballet was nationalized at the start of the Revolution. Part II considers the symbolic register that BNC founder Alicia Alonso may evoke in relation to Revolution, both as a woman and as an institution. I conclude that not only is the BNC complicit in producing the Revolution, but that the form of ballet itself evolves into a postmodern—if not just revolutionary—hybrid of ballet.

The thesis of Andrew Michael Martínez is approved.

Professor David Gere

Professor Robin Derby, Committee co-chair

Professor Allen F. Roberts, Committee co-chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2013

Dedication

For the readers of this thesis whom possess the decency to read the dedication page, allow me to thank you. For an interdisciplinary thesis to be written in the humanities, it is not such a leap to consider that the life experience of the person writing this paper has as much to do with the content of the work as the fascinating topic itself. Therefore I find it wholly relevant to share with you the folks in whom I find a deep merit. Merit for shaping my logic. Merit for providing a safe space in which to exist. And merit for allowing me to love them. There is no grander way to convey one's appreciation than to say "Thank You." Thank You is what you say to God.

To Sylvia Khan Basurto and Darrell Michael Martínez. I do not understand the circumstances that brought you together, nor those that parted your ways, but I am grateful for the opportunity to receive a life of education, travel, and more importantly unconditional love. I appreciate the continued efforts to co-parent me and my brother and sister. Thank you for your example. My heart is full. For my Samantha Andrea and Matthew Joseph, my sidekicks in childhood, the bane of my adolescence, and the joy in my young adulthood. I love you both equally. What I do for me, I do for all of us.

I would not only have had the opportunity to inaugurate my profound and abiding affinity for the piano were it not for the devotion of one Lucia Skinner. Dear Reader, I would not have had the important opportunity love a grandparent were it not for her inclusivity. It is Lucia alongside my parents who tended whatever good graces I have.

The naiveté I work like fury to hide is no match for the power of Mana Hayakawa. She mines continuously through very sharp sarcasm and wit to arrive at the

place where I hang my hat, put my hair down, and simply tell it like I see it. Thanks Masako and Masao for one awesome friend!

Janie knew what she was doing when she raised choreographer and wonderful thinker Kevin Patrick Williamson. Kevin's convictions are rooted in something extremely powerful. His potential for greatness both excites and terrifies me, but which I refuse to turn away from for fear of missing the most nuanced of expressions. Thanks buddy.

Finally, this dedication page would not be complete without the mentioning of my niece Miss Eliza Rose Martínez. What a great kid! What a great person! She hung the moon! To you I am devoted.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Part I: The Technique of the Cuban Ballet	21
Part II: Part II: The New (wo)Man and La Otra	44
Conclusion	54
Bibliography	59

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the following wonderful people and institutions for their contribution to this thesis as well as my education. I am indebted to the faculty and staff in the department of World Arts and Cultures | Dance for their commitment to interdisciplinary instruction. I am thankful to Professor Allen Roberts for sharing his talents and time with me, and most importantly for his interest in my project. His is an example to be emulated. Professor David Gere has been such a creative resource for me. I am thankful for his feedback and enthusiasm. And to Robin Derby who has brought such wonderful perspective and resources to this project. Thank you for working with me.

I would like to thank the Ballet Nacional de Cuba for making my first trip to Cuba so special. To the conservatory director, Senora Miriam Vila: every second of my time spent at the ballet was handled with such generosity and professionalism. Professor Miguel Cabrera, thank you for the history lessons. Migdalia, my methodology instructor, you are truly a jewel of the Ballet Nacional.

I am proud of my association with the McNair Scholars program at San José State University (SJSU), and the Moore Undergraduate Research Apprentice Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC). I would not have considered the path I am currently on were it not for the convictions and tenacity of directors Jeannine Slater at SJSU, and Rosa Perelmuter at UNC.

I would not be in graduate school if it were not for the mentorship and friendship of Ashley E. Lucas. She single-handedly thrust me into a doctoral program. Thanks to my Culture and Performance Cohort: Alessandra Williams, I-Wen Chang, Andrea Wang, Mana Hayakawa, Anna Creagh, Alison D'Amato, Brynn Shiovitz, Olive McKeon, Dana

Marterella, and Elyan Hill. As well as my MFA cohort: Emily Beattie, and Alexx Shilling. To my housemates on Military Avenue: Jenna Delgado, Mana Hayakawa, and Sarah Wilbur, you are a great support system, and we are so lucky to have one another.

I would be remiss not to acknowledge the generous administrative and financial support that has made this specific project possible. Thanks to Professor Raul Fernandez and the University of California—Cuba Academic Initiative. I am honored to have received both the Oxman scholarship from the School of Arts and Architecture at UCLA, as well as the Latin American Institute Summer Research Grant UCLA’s Latin American Institute. I am grateful for both the Jean Irwin scholarship and the Department of World Arts and Cultures | Dance Chair’s Discretionary Scholarship.

*A History of the Ballet Nacional de Cuba:
gendered labor and its representations*

Introduction

In the opening scene of the 1984 documentary film *Improper Conduct* ten leading male dancers of Alicia Alonso's Ballet Nacional de Cuba (BNC) are interviewed by the French media regarding their decision to seek political asylum in France on the closing night of their 1966 Paris debut. "The dancers spoke of the terrors of persecution of the Cuban revolution."¹ They talked about not having the freedom of artistic expression, but also about the legalized homophobia of Castro's government which resulted in frequent raids on the BNC's rehearsal studios and invariable imprisonment of presumed homosexuals.² This defection, known as "The Paris Incident," was a watershed moment for Cuban dancers using ballet as a medium of political and physical mobility. They joined the list of baseball players, musicians, and artists defecting from the island since the beginning of the Revolution. News of dancers' exile is often published in today's newspapers and is ever-present in the circulations of Cuban ballet related publications.³ News of the Cuban Ballet and dance defections are often presented together, so much so that they become inseparable.

Improper Conduct, by directors Nestor Almendros and Orlando Jimenez Leal, is not about ballet in Cuba or dance for that matter, but it highlights the male ballet dancers'

¹ Octavio Roca, *Cuban Ballet*. (Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith, 2010), 120.

² *ibid*, 122.

³ Daniel J. Wakin. "Citing Art and Money, 7 Cuban Dancers Defect to U.S." New York Times April 4, 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/05/arts/dance/citing-art-and-money-7-cuban-dancers-defect-to-us.html?_r=0 . (accessed May 10, 2013). This is a recent article about seven dancers defecting to the U.S. while on tour in Mexico.

defections as a salient image with which to begin its narrative of homophobia and homosexual persecution on the island, and the processes through which homosexuals in Cuba were targeted as being deliberately resistant and thusly compromising the values of the Revolution. The plight of the defecting male ballet dancers, whose ordinary practice is to convey unyielding grace and perfect comportment, becomes emblematic of the film's theme about improper conduct, while leaving the open-ended question of whose conduct *is* "improper."

The "Paris Incident" serves as an eerily compelling example and entrée into an inquiry about the company and ultimately the country from which these ten gentlemen exiled themselves. The 1966 defections of the leading male Cuban dancers had been what Octavio Roca calls, "an international embarrassment for Castro's government, as socialist and moderate intellectuals began to see that Cuba was not the worker's paradise they had envisioned".⁴ As was stated before, these dancers were choosing not to return to the island because of the artistic and homophobic restrictions of Cuba. Today, and since 1966, many dancers have defected, and although conditions for women and the queer communities in Cuba have improved, dancers still strive for greater artistic possibilities and better economies. Cuban exile and contributing writer to the *New York Times*, Mirta Ojito often writes about Cuban defectors.⁵ In a 2003 article she stated that between 2002 and 2003, 20 dancers defected. The dancers Ojito interviewed said they left for

⁴ *ibid*, 121.

⁵ Mirta Ojito. "Fleeing Cuba, Hoping to Soar On New Stage." *New York Times*. December 5, 2003.

professional reasons, but that Cuba's economic and political climate was another significant factor.

That the seemingly innocuous practice--and, indeed, the very presence-- of ballet in Cuba should be the source of the first and most public defection of the Cuban revolution is one example of how the BNC has become enfranchised in both local and international understandings of Cuban culture. In this masters thesis, I shall begin theorizing the BNC's contributions and significance to the construction of Cuban identity within the Revolution as a cultural institution, as well as its contributions to the international dance community more generally. My aim is not to historicize the BNC, for there are many published biographies of the BNC and its founder, prima ballerina Alicia Alonso. Rather I hope to construct a historiography of how a European dance form becomes a national institution in a communist state, and the socio-political necessities which inculcate its existence.

Since it became a state-funded institution in 1961, the BNC has as keen a reputation internationally for producing some of the world's best dancers as it does for dancers who defect from the island. As a means to construct a multi-vocal history for this institution, I will focus on the development of technical principles the body engages in within the BNC as they were developed at the same time principles of masculinity and femininity were being recalibrated and taught to Cuban citizens. I posit that in the process of developing Cuban ballet technique in accordance with the values of the Revolution, that the new citizenship Cubans were encouraged to exhibit is codified in Cuban ballet technique. The following sections will orient the reader to the cultural phenomenon of the BNC, as well as its utility to a much larger project of reading the Revolution through the

institution of the ballet, through the methodology of their technique, and through the BNC as a state-funded institution.

A Brief History of the Ballet Nacional de Cuba

From the beginning of the Revolution, the BNC has occupied a unique role within the social and political landscape of Cuba, and for the world's ballet community. Many biographies of Alicia Alonso and histories of the BNC recount the legendary meeting between Fidel Castro, the ballet legend, and her then husband Fernando Alonso. One night Castro came to the Alonso home and talked with them into the early morning hours. When he was leaving he asked how much money was needed to establish a national ballet. Fernando replied, "About \$100,000," and as he stepped into the dark Havana night, Castro "roared a historic commitment: 'I'll give you \$200,000, but it better be a good ballet!'"⁶ Alonso was touring in Chicago when she heard the news that Castro had announced publicly that he would support a permanently subsidized national ballet company. Furthermore, it would be modeled after the American Ballet Theatre company of New York City, the very company in which Alicia had received international acclaim.⁷

Social discourse about Cuban ballet outside of Cuba itself usually focuses on one of two main themes: dancer defections and Cuban ballet technique. Did this technique come from Russia? Was the Cuban ballet technique modeled after Russia's ballet? Other discourses question ballet's relevance to the priorities of the Revolution when ballet resonates with Western aesthetics and bourgeois values. One thing is certain. While the

⁶ Walter Terry. *Alicia and her Ballet Nacional de Cuba: An illustrated biography of Alicia Alonso*. (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1981), 2.

⁷ *ibid*, 2.

BNC is recognized as producing some of the finest talent in the world, this institution also serves as flag-bearer for the Revolution. Dance critic and balletomane Walter Terry writes that in Cuba there are two names synonymous with the revolution: Fidel and Alicia.⁸

Anna Pavlova, Ted Shawn and his Men Dancers, and Fanny Elssler graced the stages of Havana theaters well before the founding of the BNC (Terry, 6), but the discipline of ballet was not taught on the island until 1931. The Sociedad Pro Arte Musical, a “privately endowed cultural center” that served middle and upper classes of Havana (Siegel, 3), began offering classes in the arts as a way to alleviate the financial strains felt by the economic depression.⁹ It should be noted that these classes were only offered as recreation and entertainment and not for the development or encouragement of practitioners to pursue careers in the arts. Alicia Martínez began her ballet training under the tutelage of Nikolai Yavorsky, whose own training was based in that of Michel Fokine. Yavorksy, a native of Russia, fled the revolution to Paris and performed with Ida Rubinstein who had been a student of Michel Fokine’s in Russia. Biographies of Alonso note Miss Martínez’s quick adaptation and artistic proclivity to ballet. They note her natural facility, affinity, and sacrifice of a conventional young girl’s social life in exchange for devoted, fanatic practice.

In 1934, Laura Reynari de Alonso, Alicia’s future mother-in-law, became the president of Pro Arte. Her fourteen-year tenure initiated great change to the mission of

⁸ *ibid*, 6.

⁹ Beatrice Siegel. *Alicia Alonso: The Story of a Ballerina*. (Warner, 1979), 13. The price of Cuba’s main commodity, sugar, had fallen and so too did many of the “financial empires” of Pro Arte’s patrons.

the institution. Tickets were sold to non-members, student tickets were sold, and ballet was made a greater priority in the season's programming.¹⁰ Most notable was Laura's encouragement that her sons Alberto and Fernando Alonso take ballet classes. The increase in male presence at Pro Arte afforded Yavorsky opportunities to choreograph full-length ballets, and allowed Alicia Martínez's burgeoning prodigy in ballet to shine. In 1935 and to much acclaim, thirteen-year-old Alicia performed the role of Swanilda in *Coppélia*, her first full-length role.¹¹

At fifteen Alonso "reached the top at Pro Arte," and the extent that Yavorsky could teach her (21). She began to think about her future, and she and Fernando Alonso, now romantically inclined, decided to "break tradition [with] their class" and left Cuba to train in New York City where they were married and welcomed their daughter, Laura.¹² There they also began touring with Lincoln Kirstein's Ballet Caravan, now known as the New York City Ballet. The Alonsos acquired a formidable education both in balletic movement—NYCB has a wonderful history with choreographer George Balanchine—and more modern American music.¹³ Following this venture, in 1941 Alonso began her legendary association with American Ballet Theatre, then under the helm of co-founder Lucia Chase. It was here that Terry credits Alonso being the most influenced—

¹⁰ *ibid*, 17.

¹¹ *ibid*, 17-18.

¹² *ibid*, 21-23.

¹³ *ibid*, 40-41.

personally, artistically, and professionally.¹⁴ It is important to note that both Ballet Caravan and Ballet Theatre had visions of being “American” companies producing American themes. In Siegel’s biography of Alonso, she attributes this desire to promote American ideals as a way to combat the defeat and despair experienced by the Great Depression. Terry’s biography of Alonso corroborates this idea by quoting director Richard Pleasant as describing Ballet Theatre as a company that would be “international in scope and American in spirit.”¹⁵ Alicia’s talent being honed in “American” institutions has a certain poignancy when one considers where Cuban ballet derives its influence.

In New York, Alicia was working with “American” choreographers George Balanchine and Anthony Tudor, and she was studying the Cecchetti ballet technique with Alexandra Fedorova, sister-in-law to Michel Fokine another legendary Russian choreographer.¹⁶ At Ballet Theatre, Alonso’s principal and soloist roles began receiving notices in the papers. The beginning of vision problems resulted in a brief hiatus from ABT. Throughout these years spent training in the U.S., Alicia and Fernando regularly returned to Cuba to visit their daughter who they had sent to be raised by both sets of grandparents, and also to foster the next generation of Cuban ballet dancers at Pro Arte.

The years 1940 to 1950 proved to be such a banner decade in regard to Alicia building her American reputation that in 1948, when Ballet Theatre stopped production for an entire year, Alicia and Fernando decided that it was the right time to head back to

¹⁴ Terry, *Alicia and her Ballet Nacional de Cuba: An illustrated biography of Alicia Alonso*, 15.

¹⁵ *ibid*, 15.

¹⁶ Siegel, *Alicia Alonso: The Story of a Ballerina*, 46. It is important to note that although the Alonso’s training were in “American” companies, none of the mentors listed above were born in America.

Cuba to found the Ballet Alicia Alonso. With Alberto and Fernando Alonso as directors and Alicia as prima ballerina and instructor, they established a company independent of the Pro Arte institution.¹⁷ Their dancer colleagues from Ballet Theatre travelled to Cuba and throughout Latin America to dance with Alicia during the 1949 season, when Ballet Theatre was on hiatus. In the early years of the Ballet Alicia Alonso company, Alicia continued dancing with Ballet Theatre and touring with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo as a way to financially support her burgeoning company in Cuba.

In 1950, the company received its first Cuban government funding under then president Carlos Prío Socarrás.¹⁸ In 1955, the ballet changed its name to Ballet de Cuba. When Batista reassumed the presidency of Cuba in 1952, the government subsidy was rescinded because Alonso refused to allow the ballet company to be absorbed into the Institute of Culture, even though she was offered a generous personal stipend for her position as an international figure. She was supported by protest rallies. The momentum of this artistic and political event culminated in a performance at the Havana Stadium in September of 1956 when the Ballet de Cuba danced for the last time until the Batista regime was overthrown—and this out of protest—for thousands of Cubans.¹⁹

Castro's generous subsidy of two hundred thousand dollars was further fortified with Law 812 of the Revolutionary Government: "The Ballet de Cuba will be employed in all official activities requiring ballet in its various styles, and it will lead, essentially, to

¹⁷ Terry, *Alicia and her Ballet Nacional de Cuba: An illustrated biography of Alicia Alonso*, 32-34.

¹⁸ Carlos Prío Socarrás was the Cuban President from 1948 through 1952.

¹⁹ *ibid*, 39.

the biggest and most exemplary diffusion of this artistic genre throughout the republic.”²⁰ Often in socialism, the political system encourages education and the advancement of artists and intellectuals. Konrád and Szelényi note that these artists are not merely creating on the periphery of politics, but they are participants and oftentimes leaders in their respective countries.²¹ While Marx never specifically commented on performance practices, he articulated his concerns toward oppressive working conditions that may hinder the laborer from being fulfilled by cultural pastimes.²² The question then becomes, whose art gets to be valorized?

Issues of regulation and control of arts practices is a major theme in criticism of the revolution and one Robin Moore confronts in his book *Music and Revolution: cultural change in socialist Cuba*. Moore is forthcoming in his explanation that it is difficult to track the discrepancies between official arts policy and the way they were enforced in daily revolutionary life, however he notes that Fidel took the lead from the Russia and China. “Artists should have the freedom to create whatever they would like as long as their work did not attempt to subvert the revolutionary process.” This sort of vague position resulted in a *for-the-revolution-or-against-the-revolution* attitude used toward measuring and critiquing artistic production.²³

²⁰ *ibid*, 53.

²¹ George Konrád, and Ivan Szelényi. *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class and Power: a sociological study of the role of the intelligentsia in socialism*. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 1979), 179-180.

²² Robin Moore, *Music and Revolution: cultural change in socialist Cuba*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 10-11.

²³ *ibid*, 16.

Literature and Film in Cuba are two genres of creative expression that have experienced the full force of censorship, and both are genres that are linked to exile populations and thrive in anti-revolutionary economies because of their banned status. After the Bay of Pigs invasion, the revolution was even more heavy handed with what was being produced. Any criticism of the government, and failure to have a clear perpetuation of the revolution's values, was perceived as a threat. In a 2005 American film titled *The Lost City* about a cabaret owner in Cuba, a rehearsal is interrupted by a musician's union representative. She demands that the saxophone be taken out of the band because it conflicts with the revolution's ideals. The baffled cabaret owner explains that there needn't be any worry as the saxophone is not solely associated with the American jazz form, but originated in Belgium. Infuriated, the union representative then yells back, "Do you know what the Belgians are doing in Angola?!" While this anecdote is a hyperbolic example from a film produced for a Cuban exile community, it is reminiscent of the unreasonable nature that government censorship has come to be known for.

With the ongoing U.S. embargo against Cuba imposed in the early-60s, Alonso was not permitted to enter the United States—to dance, or to visit—for the next 15 years.²⁴ She was no longer able to hire her American colleagues to dance with her company, so Alicia focused her efforts on ballet education in Cuba and building future talent from Cuba's own stock of dancers. She and the company toured the island, working in the fields and also performing to recruit young boys. "They enlisted in work brigades, they harvested sugar crops, they did everything that ordinary patriotic Cubans

²⁴ *ibid*, 54. The Ballet Nacional de Cuba had their United States debut in 1978.

were doing in support of their leader.”²⁵ Alonso also saw orphanages as a resource for talent.²⁶ One child, Jorge Esquivel later became one of her most well-known partners. At the same time Castro was passionately increasing literacy campaigns across the island, he was also setting up arts vocational schools. Education in revolutionary culture provided general education and arts education to both rural and city children. At age nine children are tested for their aptitude in dance and then are advanced to dance vocational schools. At age twelve they are tested again and advance to the provincial vocational school ,Escuela Nacional de Arte in Cubanacán, a suburb of Havana. From there, Alonso and her staff chose students to take company class and join the company.²⁷

With Castro’s fervent support of the Ballet Nacional reflected in Law 812, ballet training proliferated throughout the island and children were closely watched for their aptitude toward ballet technique. In addition to ballet training being made available to children throughout the island and not just in large cities, the stages where ballets were danced were filled with revolutionary-themed repertoire danced by Cubans whose style of dancing is recognized as distinct from any other ballet company in the world. Today, Alicia Alonso is 93-years-old and still the director of the BNC. She continues to hold the title of lead choreographer.

²⁵ *ibid*, 50.

²⁶ *ibid*, 51. Walter Terry says the model for recruiting dancers from orphanages comes from the Bolshoi Ballet’s example when the Moscow Orphanages introduced ballet classes. Ballet master Filippo Beccari was given sixty-two students in 1773. “A year later he had produced twenty-four soloists. The Bolshoi Ballet was born.”

²⁷ *ibid*, 53.

Building a Nation

In this masters thesis, I study Cuban ballet technique as it developed and was then standardized in the institution's first two decades of receiving its state funding. I propose that within this initial span of time, the ethos of the revolution became codified within the company's technique and repertoire that it was almost as if they were producing the Revolution itself. This concept of the body-producing-culture derives from Cynthia Novacks' *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture*. Novack posits that the body in its social practice is capable of producing and bolstering cultural values. Novack's theory is helpful when I examine particular tensions between the citizenship being produced at the quotidian level and what the citizenship being produced on the stage. I begin to interrogate Cuban ballet technique vis-à-vis the gender project of the Revolution as a way to demonstrate just how the BNC adapted to the regime's ideals of cultural production. I consider how the performance of gender in the technique of the BNC reflects the Cuban citizens' performance of gender.

One reading that particularly influences the way I approach the writing of history is "German Dance and Modernity: Don't Mention the Nazis," by Marion Kant.²⁸ This essay concerns the ethics and responsibility of writing a history, when particular research may disturb the otherwise unblemished legacies of two particularly formidable German choreographers due to their affiliation with the Nazi party. Does the researcher turn a blind eye to archive material that might contradict or sully the history? Kant's essay inspires a model by which I hope to situate two seemingly different projects such as

²⁸ Marion Kant. *Rethinking Dance History*. (London, Routledge, 2004).

gender and ballet, but whose juxtaposition reveal more texture and interface than solely existing contemporaneously.

My uses of the term *choreography*, as Susan Foster casts it in “Choreographies of Gender,” are twofold in this historical examination of the BNC. Defined as the codified system through which meaning is constructed,²⁹ I employ the term as a way of examining movement and ballet, and also the choreographies of power which influence both the state and the ballet as an institution and movement practice. Choreography will serve as an alternative mode by which to interpret the labor of both dancing and non-dancing Cuban citizens.

Judith Butler, who draws from the work of J.L. Austin, interprets the demonstrations of gender as “performativity,” or the reiteration of a norm or sets of norms that through the act of repetition becomes so nuanced that it forecloses any “possible apprehension of their constructedness.” However, Butler and Austin only engage with performativity in a verbal dimension, leaving the body as a passive vessel through which verbal representation can be practiced. Foster distinguishes that the concept of choreography would be useful in understanding gender, “because dance, like gender, consists largely of bodily actions rather than effects of speech, but also because it delineates a clear function for the performer.”³⁰ Choreography allows me to understand the “constellation” of circumstances that shape the ballet and the nation, whereas performance will limit the interpretation by focusing on the individual execution of such codes, norms, and conventions.

²⁹ Susan Leigh Foster. “Choreographies of Gender.” *Signs*. Vol. 24, No. 1. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 5.

³⁰ *ibid*, 5.

By analyzing the corporeal practices of both ballet dancers alongside those of non-dancing citizens, I identify how power manifests from the new state and the BNC to Cuban citizens. Through my analysis of gender on the island I am able to contrast the classical-dancing Cuban with the non-dancing in order to show how bodies are literally organized and calibrated to serve the revolution. I posit that the examination of these two institutions, the new Cuban government and the BNC, yields a history distinct from any other that might currently exist in Western representations of collaborations between Cuban and Latin American cultural institutions and the state.

This project seeks to lay a foundation upon which a contribution can be made to the fields of dance studies, Latin American studies, cultural anthropology, gender studies, and performance studies. No English-language scholarship theorizing the BNC's relation to the state is currently published, although there exists a generous collection of biographies and vanity press histories of the ballerina Alicia Alonso and the company. More generally, this project responds to Western discourses about Cuba that many times reduce the island to a "third world" country, incapable of producing anything or progressing outside of a capitalist logic. My hope is to show how the achievement of Cuban ballet counters this narrative, not only in aesthetic presentation, but in the very function of a ballet company within the communist state.

Part One of this thesis illustrates the process under which Cuban ballet technique was forged. This particular history identifies the social conditions which imbue the technique via the national project of creating a new Cuban citizen. This is accomplished by situating the standardization of the technique alongside the social processes that sought to discipline the gendered behavior of the gay male citizen's body in Cuba. An

analysis of the popular 1994 Cuban film *Fresa y Chocolate* and the auto-biography and life of gay Cuban poet Reinaldo Arenas provide examples of the way homosexuality poses a threat to the goals of the Revolution. Part Two theorizes the role of Alicia Alonso and her company plays in relation to the state. How is this institution compliant, allied, and supportive of the revolution, and how is it a site of resistance and source of political mobility for so many dancers who choose to defect? This section highlights the trajectory of women's labor in the Revolution as simultaneously being in alignment with Revolutionary goals, and contrary to traditional gender roles which preexist the Revolution.

Part I.: The Technique of the Cuban Ballet

With financial and political support from the state, the BNC and the Cuban ballet school flourished throughout the island. Ballet went from being a practice reserved for the middle and upper classes to being an actual vocation within the revolution. In addition to being taught in the schools and touring rural parts of Cuba, the form, the technique, or style of movement was becoming standardized. Throughout the world, Cuban dancers are marked by their particular brand, or style, of technique. Alicia Alonso has said that it is marked with a Cuban “temperament,” explaining that Cubans are warm and dancing people. While Alonso’s vapid description of the Cuban temperament fails to convey *what* the temperament is, this section explores *how* the temperament of Cuban ballet style of dancing on stage is shaped through the choreography of Cuban temperaments off stage in the non-dancing sphere.³¹ Because the technique is said to be most distinct in its portrayal of masculinity and femininity, I will focus on the circumstances that shaped gender in the revolution.

Within the genre of ballet as a dance form, there are several methods, or training systems by which the body is exercised while teaching ballet. In Russia, dancers most likely train according to the Vagonova method. In Italy they might train by the system developed by Enrico Cecchetti. Similar methods occur in France, with the Bournonville style, and also in the United Kingdom with the English style. All systems teach the basic movements of ballet, but there are nuances of the body to each respective style that make

³¹ I employ Susan Foster’s conception of the term *choreography* as a means to fully convey the ways in which a body verbally and corporeally articulate their conventions.

them distinct from one another.³² The Cuban style of ballet is no different, and this section focuses on the particular circumstances that formed and shaped the Cuban style of dancing.

In a 1971 article of *Dance Magazine*, Marian Horosko writes of her visit to Cuba and her search for Russian influences in Cuban ballet. This is an example of general assumptions about Cuba after the revolution. Many confuse the Soviet Union's influence with elision of US presence on the island.³³ She discovers that there were indeed classes being taught by Russian or Russian-trained teachers, but she concludes that "the technique is Fernando's; the artistry, Alicia's. The result, uniquely Cuban."³⁴ Although the respective BNC historians Walter Terry and Barbara Siegel both credit Alicia and Fernando's time spent in U.S. companies as being significant and formative to their technical educations, Alonso herself explains the Latin aesthetics or character of the Cuban ballet technique as having appeared organically over time.³⁵ "They just seemed to come out, as if the richness of the earth were getting into my art ... This richness of

³² Robert Greskovic. *Ballet 101: A Complete Guide to Learning and Loving the Ballet*. (Limelight Editions, 2005).

³³ Aviva Chomsky. *A History of the Cuban Revolution*. (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 2.

³⁴ Terry, *Alicia and her Ballet Nacional de Cuba: An illustrated biography of Alicia Alonso*, 58.

³⁵ It is important to note that although many assume that the national ballet must have been a result of Cuba's alliance with the Soviet Union, this is simply not the case. Alicia and Fernando's formative professional training began in the U.S. with deliberately "American" ballet companies, and the audiences whom she was first inured to, were American. However, their choreographers and teachers in the "American" companies were pre-soviet era Russian teachers. So it would be accurate to call their training Russian, but inaccurate to call it "Soviet."

heritage and home was always there.”³⁶ Terry proposes that the dire social conditions of Cuba were not lost on Alonso, and that she was dedicated to bringing the art of ballet to all Cuban people.

The Cuban Temperament

The Soviet training Marian Horosko was looking for and the “uniquely Cuban” style of ballet she discovered in Alicia and Fernando Alonso’s labor was a mere premonition to what Cuban trained bodies are known to be capable of doing today. They are known for bringing gravitas to their dancing and pantomime abilities, but the bravura of their pirouettes—the complete turn of the body on one foot, on point or demi-pointe—is a technical aspect that is often invoked in reviews of performances, and have come to distinguish Cuban ballet dancers from others.³⁷

While the providence of Alicia and Fernando’s formative training came from their association with American companies in New York City, the first few decades marked the foundation of Cuban technique. From niche media like *Dance Magazine* to the *New York Times*, Cuban dancers and their technique have been a site of repeated inquiry. While articles in the mainstream media focus on stories of defections, *Dance Magazine* writers consider the mechanics of the technique and how movements are executed in a distinctly Cuban fashion. What is often expressed, and what is the focus of this chapter, is that there is a general disposition that Cubans have that colors the technique and very

³⁶ *ibid*, 34-35.

³⁷ American Ballet Theatre. “Pirouette.” *American Ballet Theatre's Online Ballet Dictionary*. <http://www.abt.org/education/dictionary/index.html> (accessed May 10, 2013).

performance of ballet. Vague descriptions that cite everything from weather conditions in Cuba to a general state of suffering to inform the representation and execution of movement.

At the 5th International Ballet Festival held in Havana in 1976, Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier said that due to Cuba's African and Spanish ancestry, Cuba has always been "fertile ground" for ballet. Cuban men and women are born with an "instinct for music, due to a deep-rooted idiosyncrasy" that emanates from their heritages.³⁸ What is lacking from his description are the particular historical and social elements which dictate the construction of tradition, or "idiosyncrasy," as he puts it.

The standardizing of Cuban ballet technique during the early years of the Revolution provides an opportunity to look at the incorporation of a Western classical dance technique as a socialist/communist national institution. Alonso's husband Fernando, alongside his brother Alberto, is credited as being the father of Cuban ballet. In his description of the technique, he says that what distinguishes Cuban ballet from forms those practiced in Europe and North America is an "expression of Cuban sensibility."³⁹ What Alejo Carpentier or Fernando Alonso mean by "idiosyncrasy" or "temperament," is never revealed, and perhaps meant to mystify.

In an effort to preserve the legacy of Cuban ballet technique, a working group entitled "The Cuban School of Ballet: Balance, Immediate Tasks, and Perspectives," was assembled in the late 1970s to reflect and standardize the technique. Universal principles

³⁸ Alejo Carpentier. "Closing Performance Speech." *Granma Weekly* (December 7, 1976), 9.

³⁹ Pedro Simón, *Alicia Alonso: Dialogos con la Danza*. (La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1986), 40.

like discipline and sacrifice were articulated in the resulting methodology, but the cultural context in which these principles were first experienced was deemed necessary in order to preserve the legacy and particularity of the technique. It was agreed that a “national idiosyncrasy” would be needed in order to complete the task of articulating the Cuban ballet aesthetic.⁴⁰ It was important for the ethos and pathos that was necessary to build the Revolution to be perpetuated, imbibed, and represented in the very practice of Cuban ballet technique. This idiosyncrasy coincides with a new cultural heritage of the Revolution which by design emphasizes a new Cuban identity. One that is committed to the supporting the revolution.

At the beginning of the Revolution, concerted efforts were made to produce and perpetuate a national heritage that would encourage Cubans to unite and build a new nation. In order to achieve the larger goals of the Revolution, such as building an economic base independent of U.S.-style capitalism, nurturing the Cuban citizen with revolutionary ethos would depend on collective participation. Such social management resulted in social and cultural heritage projects/efforts that were thought to help orient the citizen to the new state like the establishing of cultural ministries, unions, and literacy campaigns. The BNC also played a role in this mission. Revolutionary ballets and costumes and narratives became legible manifestations of revolutionary ideologies, but it was the opening of ballet schools and education across the island that offered a more nuanced way of disseminating the new Cuban idiosyncrasy packaged within a Ballet technique. One aspect of the ballet’s compliance with the new state was its racial integration at the beginning of the Revolution.

⁴⁰ “La Escuela Cubana de Ballet’ ... Ponencia.” *Cuba en el Ballet*. (Vol. 8, no. 3), 9.

The racial integration of the company was one result of the Revolution that distinguished the BNC from U.S. ballet companies, as well as pre-revolutionary Cuba, but the BNC regarded this as a tertiary achievement, or for the sake of our reading, a tertiary idiosyncrasy where the significance of the racial integration would be downplayed.⁴¹ To the new state, it would be a given that the ballet would be integrated to reflect the racial equality that the revolution brought. However, this event was not what was emphasized. The racial integration factor was more of an opportunity to focus on the success of all Cuban races uniting under one Cuban identity. Alicia Alonso is quoted as saying: “[Cuban ballet was] integrated with a naturalness...our dancers were not divided.”⁴² Whether or not the integration was significant or not for the BNC, Alonso’s comment complements the idea of a greater priority toward projecting shared national traits, than simply stating that racial integration was the end game for the institution. The emphasis of the idiosyncrasy was not to be placed on the integration, but rather that integration was necessary in order to achieve the even more compelling uniformity as one Cuban race.⁴³

⁴¹ “Entrevista a dos bailarines cubanos.” Areito. (Vol 4, no. ½, 1977), 56.

⁴² Simón, *Alicia Alonso: Dialogos con la Danza*. (La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1986), 40. As relaxed as Alonso’s comment is regarding the integration of the company, it should be noted that the social and cultural adjustment to integration was not simple. Cuba has a legacy as a slave colony, and slaves were not emancipated until 1886. Another example of the convoluted process by which racial and gender equality would be reached is that unlike the U.S. where social organizations advocate for legal representation, the Cuban state’s “legal changes came from above, while independent organizations aimed at pushing for social change were frowned upon.” Chomsky, *A History of the Cuban Revolution*, 6.

⁴³ *ibid.*, 40.

The working group assembled to standardize the methods of Cuban ballet made the choice to include this commitment to unity as part of their official pedagogy. That all the elements that comprise the Cuban heritage—a history of being a former colony, Latin and African heritages, etc.—would be invoked in the ethos and practice of Cuban ballet: “...that which is referred to as the Cuban school, is you, is us.”⁴⁴ Attempts to align the school of ballet alongside principles of Cuban nationalism could not be articulated more clearly than what the former quote conveys. To dance Cuban ballet is to dance to Cuba, to see Cuban ballet is to see oneself. The institutionalizing of national values into the technique engenders perspective that when one watches Cuban ballet, they are in fact also viewing revolutionary values.

The “idiosyncrasy” that emerges from the working group is alluded to in a 2008 *Dance Magazine* feature on Cuban technique. Former principle ballerina Loipa Araújo⁴⁵ described the physical mechanics needed to complete the Cuban form that she honed during her prestigious tenure at the BNC. Jumping and turning distinguish the Cuban style of ballet from others, and Araújo offered tips on how to execute certain movements. When asked what makes the Cuban style of dancing so distinct, she responded:

It’s a little bit of everything. First, being born in a sunny place in a country whose people’s characteristic is being gay and happy, we even make jokes out of our problems. We suffer, but we’re very positive for life, and we always think that things can be solved. We don’t let things push us down. That’s the natural characteristic of the country. And then the school. Noverre explained the technique

⁴⁴ “La Escuela Cubana de Ballet’ ... Ponencia.” *Cuba en el Ballet*. (Vol. 8, no. 3), 10.

⁴⁵ Araújo is one of the “four jewels” of the Cuban ballet. The four jewels are comprised of Josefina Méndez, Mirta Pla, Aurora Bosch, and Loipa Araújo. Bosch and Araújo are the two surviving “jewels” and are considered among greatest ballet instructors of Cuban ballet technique.

long ago, tendus and everything. But the school has been very well put together, picking up what kind of arabesque would be better for us, the position of the hips, the high passés, the high relevés, that would suit our personality and the way our bodies are made.⁴⁶

Araújo suggests that the geographical location, its weather conditions, and a shared experience of suffering may be sources that inform the particular inflection brought to Cuban ballet. What these superficial reasons do not offer is historical texture. For example, Araújo might have referenced the geographical convenience of the island in the processes of colonialism, and then the subsequent exploitation of labors and resources that would coincide with a creolization of Cuban peoples. Or would that she conveyed how then the Revolution would initiate economic and social strife that would lead to a shared experience of suffering, *then* these historical events might begin to warrant the circumstances Araújo hazards to cite. Although she, and others, suggest that “temperaments,” or “idiosyncrasies” simply exist rather than being culturally constructed, I posit that within these superficial claims can be read a history, or a heritage, that informs the ballet’s construction as a national institution and technique.

When A Man Loves a Woman

Alonso offers direct reasoning for Cuban ballet being distinct from other ballet methods. She locates the most visible aspect of Cuban ballet technique within performance of gender. Alonso states that the *pas de deux* between a man and a woman is what distinguishes Cuban ballet from the rest. Alonso asserts that there is a degree of equality between male and

⁴⁶ Barbara Newman. “Teacher's Wisdom: Loipa Araújo.” *Dance Magazine*. March 2011 <http://www.dancemagazine.com/issues/March-2011/Teachers-Wisdom-Loipa-Arajo-> (accessed May 10, 2013).

female roles that does not occur in other schools of ballet. For example, in many scenarios outside of Cuba, the male dancer plays a secondary role to the female. He will partner her in a way that exploits his labor by showcasing her body. He will lift her, pull her, turn her, all the while being as quiet and ornamental as possible, so as not to distract the audience's attention from her form.

However, not in Cuba. As Alonso holds, "something very Cuban" includes elements that come from popular dances. "In the [Cuban] 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, in which we have placed a lot of emphasis."⁴⁷ For Alonso, the male-female dynamic in social dances in Cuba influences how men and women interact in ballet. She adds that the Cuban pas de deux is more intimate, because dancers dance for each other rather than for the audience. Such assertive equality of masculinity and femininity on stage can be read as counter to European sexual norms, and as a demonstration of intimacy on stage and in public.

Making El Hombre Nuevo—The New Man

At the same time as socialist demonstrations of gender emerged on stage, a reformulation of gender took place among non-dancing Cuban citizens. Gender roles were changing greatly from those before the Revolution as a result of Castro's political project. The immediate goals of the revolution necessitated a complicity from the citizens if they were going to build an independent nation. Alonso and the committee that created the methods by which the Cuban school of ballet would be taught, understood the

⁴⁷ Alicia Alonso. "La Escuela Cubana de Ballet." *Revolucion y Cultura*. (April 1976), 18.

importance of standardizing their practice alongside the new Cuban identity the state was then looking to construct. If the ballet was seeking to be in step with the new state, one approach to examining the ballet's distinct performance of gender is to look at the ballet alongside the gender project.

What dictated the kind of men and women Cuba needed were the economic goals of the Revolution. Many Cubans who were responsible for the infrastructure of daily life in Cuba prior to the revolution had left the island when Castro took power. One approach toward mitigating this loss was to galvanize the remaining citizens into participating in the nation building process. The details of every-day-life were restructured for many citizens. From what people ate, to what kind of work they did. Many Cubans benefitted from the services and resources the new state redistributed such as literacy campaigns, labor unions, and medical care. However, this thesis will focus on one approach the state took to mold behavior to a standard citizen archetype that in turn influenced the Cuban identity being choreographed at the ballet. Naturally anything deviating from a standard example would be treated as against the revolution. Castro's famous quote to writers and artists explains the expectations of their contributions: "*Dentro de la Revolución todo, contra la Revolución nada!*" With the Revolution, everything, against the Revolution, nothing!

Until New Year's Day in 1959, Cuba had experienced 60 years of "semicolonial" rule. The 1898 denouement of Cuba's war for independence from Spain resulted in the Platt Amendment. This legislation gave the United States foreign and economic control over Cuban policy, the right for the U.S. military to protect it's property, and the right to develop coaling and naval stations on the island, through which the Guantanamo Bay

base was established.⁴⁸ The United States' growing economic presence in Cuba took the form of monopolies in the sugar and tobacco markets. Over the course of the next 40 years, these actions demoralized the Cuban bourgeoisie who could not compete with a strong foreign presence, and it also united the worker and peasant classes as they became more aware of importance in the agrarian economies. International relations scholar, Philip Brenner proposes that this moment of burgeoning class consciousness under U.S. imperialism "advanced the island's revolutionary potential."⁴⁹ He suggests that the revolution of the economy is what lies at the heart of the Cuban Revolution,⁵⁰ however with the challenges the Revolution's economic development encountered—especially in its first two decades—Che Guevara might say that to get to the heart of the Revolution, we must first address the soul—the Cuban people. The moral conditioning of men and women was initially treated as key to achieving economic security, and the conditioning of genders was certainly one theme in building moral character.

The social revolution was strongly linked to economic development. There were two ideological thoughts presented at the time of the Revolution. Guevara's "idealist" approach wanted to skip the socialist stage of eradicating capitalism, and transition directly to communism, whereas another approach identified more with the Soviet model and saw that it was necessary to implement some "market mechanisms" into the

⁴⁸ Chomsky, *A History of the Cuban Revolution*. 24.

⁴⁹ Phillip Brenner, William LeoGrande, Donna Rich, and Daniel Siegel, eds. *The Cuba Reader: the making of a revolutionary society*. (New York: Grove Press, 1989), 60.

⁵⁰ *ibid*, 59.

transitioning economy from socialism to communism.⁵¹ Under Marx's communist system of distribution, people would be expected to work to contribute to society, and not for wages, because "goods and services would not be bought or sold, and needs would be met as they arose." Marx was aware of that this system would be challenging in the transition from capitalism to socialism and articulated a contingent plan that offered a wage. Castro and Guevara were convinced that the Cuban people could commit to a communist way of life, a collective consciousness, and share labor and production responsibilities.⁵²

Guevara firmly believed that "subjective conditions" could change the "objective reality" or the material base.⁵³ This economic model, which emphasized morality, was implemented from 1966 to 1970, and failed. Guevara's belief that achieving the immediate goals of the Revolution—such as increasing housing, improving health care and malnutrition, improving rural standards of living, and education and literacy for all—could be done through moral persuasion, however Wassily Leontief suggests that the moral incentive model cannot trump the self-interest carried over from the profit system prior to the revolution.⁵⁴

In his famous essay about the ideal revolutionary, "Man and Socialism in Cuba" Guevara describes the new man, *el hombre nuevo*, as embodying Marx' concept that

⁵¹ *ibid*, 61.

⁵² Muriel Nazzari, "The 'Woman Question' in Cuba: An Analysis of Material Constraints on Its Solution." *Signs*, (University of Chicago Press, 1983), 249.

⁵³ Brenner, *The Cuba Reader: the making of a revolutionary society*, 61

⁵⁴ *ibid*, 61.

“man truly achieves his full human condition when he produces without being compelled by the physical necessity of selling himself as a commodity.”⁵⁵ Guevara’s essay calls for the new man to sacrifice his personal happiness for the greater Cuban people, and upon achieving this will know great happiness. Following Marx’ writings, Che also believed that a socialist approach to a distribution of material goods would perpetuate a society where people could live in harmony with one another and live responsibly without the guidance of a government.⁵⁶

Achieving Masculinity through Labor

Regardless of one’s vocation, compulsory labor participation was mandated for all able bodies. The idea of coming to understand the values of the working population through labor, was thought to forge a community across class divisions. Photos of Fernando Alonso teaching ballet in his military fatigues with a gun at his side, and Alicia and her dancers cutting sugar cane in the fields, are just two examples of how serious the Revolution was at procuring participation.⁵⁷ As much as these photos were an opportunity to build a fan base for the ballet, they also conveyed the ballet’s relationship to the nation as one that is compliant. At the same time, the government was integrating and training Cuban men and women into the labor industries, the institutionalization of homophobia on the island was introducing violent techniques on the male body. In his

⁵⁵ *ibid*, 86.

⁵⁶ Robin D. Moore. *Music and Revolution: cultural change in socialist Cuba*, 5. Che and Fidel considered the arts as an absolute component in building this society.

⁵⁷ Roca, *Cuban Ballet*, 81.

book, *Gay Cuban Nation*, Emilio Bejel notes that the 1960s was the decade in which homophobic legislation snowballed. Castro and Guevara were promoting the new man, an archetype that would be an example for citizens of the revolution to comport themselves by, and an archetype that I propose was instrumental in the construction of a masculine male dancer.

The “new man” was not a term Castro or Guevara invented, rather, it was based—however loosely—on the concept Cuban political activist and Latin American literary figure, José Martí coined in his 1885 novel *Amistad Funesta* (Fatal Friendship). Bejel articulates that Martí was insistent on the need for Cubans to adhere to prescribed rules of conduct in order to avoid suspicious acts that threaten the “new and future nation of Cuba.”⁵⁸ Martí was writing on the cusp of Cuba’s independence from Spain, and wrote *Amistad Funesta* as an allegory about emerging Latin American nationalism and how he would encourage Cuban society to behave.⁵⁹

Bejel asserts that Martí’s novel strategically illustrates how men should dress, style their hair and even what quality of life they should pursue. “Martí’s symbolism is extremely rigid, since the characters are defined from beginning to end as good or evil based on an enormous accumulation” of cut-and-dry descriptions of the new man.⁶⁰ Martí’s archetype is ambiguous, calling for the Cuban man to be “strong but spiritual and refined, masculine yet also poetic.”⁶¹ Concepts like “masculine yet also poetic” seem

⁵⁸ Bejel, *Gay Cuban Nation*, 18.

⁵⁹ *ibid*, 18.

⁶⁰ *ibid*, 22.

⁶¹ *ibid*, 27.

contradictory, and yet however ambiguous Martí's prose is, his symbolism established a rubric from which Guevara and Castro loosely followed and which manifested in the most odious of ways. For example, Martí's illustration that Cuban man should be well-groomed was literally applied to the heads of bohemian men, gay men, and any men whose hair was assumed to be an expression of anti-revolutionary aesthetics. Their heads were forcefully shorn in an effort to rehabilitate them from homosexuality. Further resistance resulted in more forceful techniques against the body: labor and/or prison.

The *Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción* (UMAPs), forced labor camps, existed from 1965-1968 and were designed to “rehabilitate those persons thought to be ‘antisocial.’”⁶² Following the closures of the labor camps, less obvious forms of homophobia were initiated. In 1971, the Congress for Education and Culture officially designated homosexuality as “antisocial” and “socio-pathological” behavior, equal to prostitution and drug addiction. Furthermore, the congress decided “all signs of homosexual deviation should be strictly rebuffed and prevented in order to contain any spreading of homosexual practices.”⁶³ As such, random raids around the island, as well as at the ballet, ensued and men who fit the bill as being “anti-social” were sent to the camps and/or imprisoned.⁶⁴

The theme of juxtaposing the new man with the gay Cuban male is not unique to the film *Improper Conduct*. In fact, the oeuvre of gay Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas as well as the Cuban film *Fresa y Chocolate* (Strawberry and Chocolate), have become

⁶² *ibid*, 96-100.

⁶³ *ibid*, 105.

⁶⁴ The BNC was no exception to police raids looking for homosexuals. In fact, according

synonymous with the plight of the gay male in Cuba. In the following section, I will engage in a dialogue between Arenas' work and *Fresa y Chocolate* in order to chart the trajectory and climate of the gay male body in Cuba and how it engages with this regime. This dialogue between these two genres of representation contributes context to the construction of a Cuban revolutionary citizenship in the ballet, while also highlighting the conflation of high art culture with homosexuality.

Fresa and Before Night Falls

In the 1993 film *Fresa y Chocolate*, audiences were introduced to the character Diego, a homosexual who advocates for artistic freedom and the preservation of forgotten, or prohibited, culture in 1979 Cuba. While the film introduces Diego's passions for freedom and culture as the vehicles for challenging the Cuban revolution, it is Diego alone who becomes the target of prohibition. In the same year and in a non-celluloid world, the literary landscape was introduced to *Before Night Falls* (*Antes que anochezca*). The 1992-1993 autobiography of Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas describes his life in Cuba, his time in prison, and his ultimate escape to the United States as a gay Cuban male. *Before Night Falls* focuses on the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, when homophobia was institutionalized in Cuba.

1965 is the "key year" to study institutionalized homophobia as a "truly systematic homophobic repression of gays."⁶⁵ Focusing on how homosexuality was viewed in Cuba's socio-political discourse and legislation will clarify the context of the contemporaneous representations of gay Cuban men in film and publication. Examining

⁶⁵ *ibid*, 99.

these quasi-contemporaneous representations that thrive well past their inceptions provoke conversations that solicit both sympathy and judgment in popular discourse, but also reinforce a larger narrative about gay Cuban men who are destroyed by their sexuality and masculinity and the failure to perform the “right kind” of masculinity and sexuality. While both Arenas and Diego had themes of homosexuality and personhood at their core, they demonstrated different representations of homosexuality and homophobia that complemented and contradicted each other. It is within these consonances and dissonances of gay male representations in Cuba that one can begin to understand the landscape in which the new Cuban man was forged.

Fresa y Chocolate, a film directed by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea and Juan Carlos Tabío, is based on the short story *The Wolf, The Forest and the New Man (El Lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo)* written by Senel Paz in 1990, who also wrote the screenplay for the film. Set in 1979 Havana, the story revolves around David, a revolutionary and university student, and Diego, a “non-conformist, bourgeois Catholic homosexual” who is challenged by the revolution’s policies against homosexuality, and the censorship of bourgeois culture.⁶⁶ Diego is portrayed as a “stereotypical, effeminate gay man with aristocratic tastes, who comes to embody forbidden or neglected bourgeois culture,” and his references to homosexual writers is used to “immediately place his sexuality in a cultural context, and take the emphasis away from sex.”⁶⁷ David's homophobic classmate, Miguel, encourages David to spy on Diego, in an attempt to expose him and his robust

⁶⁶ Deborah Shaw. *Contemporary Cinema of Latin America: Ten Key Films*. (New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2003), 21.

⁶⁷ *ibid*, 24.

culture as a threat to the communist cause. The story captures the transcendence from what began as a Machiavellian-like effort to expose Diego, to a progressive friendship between Diego and David.

Before Nights Falls is a memoir that describes Reinaldo Arenas' personal and political journey from poverty to his oppression as a dissident writer and homosexual. Arenas' autobiography provides a first-hand, detailed account and trajectory of the idiosyncrasies of Cuba's authoritarian regime, including his time spent in the UMAP labor camps, and prisons, before eventually defecting during the 1980 Mariel boatlifts.⁶⁸ Contrary to the character of Diego being contacted-sexualized in *Fresa y Chocolate*, Arenas freely writes about his sexual encounters in Cuba. Bejel has noted that the 1960s was the decade in which homophobic legislation and this was corroborated by Arenas in *Before Night Falls*:

“I think that in Cuba there was never more fucking going on than in those years, the decade of the sixties, which was precisely when all the new laws against homosexuals came into being, when the persecutions started and concentration camps were opened, when the sexual act became taboo while the “new man” was being proclaimed and masculinity exalted.”⁶⁹

Here, Arenas establishes the time and place with this quote, and he also invokes Guevara and Castro's “new man” archetype.

⁶⁸ Chomsky, *A History of the Cuban Revolution*, 95. Nearly 125,000 Cubans emigrated from Cuba within a brief window of months in 1980. This mass migration was initiated by a small group of Cubans who drove through the gates of the Peruvian Embassy in Havana to seek asylum.

⁶⁹ Reinaldo Arenas, *Before Night Falls*. (New York : Penguin Books, 2000), 105.

In addition to the themes of the molding the perfect revolutionary and the “new man,” *Fresa y Chocolate* also explores the dynamic of cultural censorship. The revolution took umbrage with the bourgeois aesthetic, which at that point was identified as a medium of stratification. Beauty became a sort of enemy. “Under a dictatorship, beauty is always a dissident force, because dictatorship is itself unaesthetic, grotesque; to a dictator and his agents, the attempt to create beauty is an escapist or reactionary act.”⁷⁰ This bias against beauty was echoed in the short story *El Lobo, El Bosque, y el Hombre Nuevo* when Diego, whose apartment is a beautiful ode to bourgeois culture, implores David to understand his desire to enjoy high culture and remain a revolutionary to Cuba: “They don’t want me here, why not turn my cheek any longer; besides, I like being the way I am, to put on a little plumage now and then. Tell me, who do I harm, if they’re my feathers?”⁷¹

The annihilation of beauty was hardly a violent form of persecution when compared to the legislation and labor camps for homosexuals in Cuba at that time. In *Fresa y Chocolate*, the threat of “culture” was emphasized more than the threat of Diego’s homosexuality. The film addressed the reality of surveillance in Cuba in regard to homosexuality, but to a moderate extent. The stakes in the film were not as high as they were regarded in the real world at that time. In Deborah Shaw’s article about *Fresa y Chocolate* director Tomas Alea’s “changing images of the revolution,” she addresses the

⁷⁰ *ibid*, 87.

⁷¹ Thomas Christensen. *New world, new words : recent writing from the Americas: a bilingual anthology*. (San Francisco: Center for the Art of Translation, 2007), 195. This quote is an excerpt from the short story by Senel Paz. In the film *Fresa y Chocolate*, the collages that adorn David’s wall include a photo of Alicia Alonso.

one scene that shortly references the repercussions of being an officially confirmed homosexual in Cuba. “It should be noted that ... state and individual homophobia is underplayed, with only the dogmatic, young communist student Miguel seen to be genuinely homophobic.”⁷² Shaw adds that the film includes also includes a brief reference to the UMAP camps, but it offers no explanation.

In his autobiography, Arenas describes the government’s discovery of one’s homosexuality as a “sinister expulsion because it also included a dossier that would follow each person for the rest of his life and would bar him from admission to any other state school.”⁷³ In addition to an official record, Arenas says the accused would receive a telegram reprimanding him of his amoral behavior and notify him of his termination from work and/or notification of work in the forced-labor camps where the individual would also be rehabilitated.⁷⁴ The result would be humiliating, degrading, and could lead to death or suicide, yet the film portrayed Diego’s case as an unfortunate but surmountable situation.

Despite any discrepancies between representations of the homosexual male in both the film and Arenas’ memoir, *Fresa y Chocolate* was a commercial success.⁷⁵ Bejel contends “Alea’s film *Fresa y Chocolate* attempts a sort of “rectification” of the homophobic policies of the Cuban government. Through an alliance between a gay man and an open-minded socialist, the film’s logic tries to convince its audience of the possibility of integrating gays (and, by implication, lesbians) into the very concept of the

⁷² Shaw, *Contemporary Cinema of Latin America: Ten Key Films*, 21.

⁷³ Arenas, *Before Night Falls*, 48.

⁷⁴ *ibid*, 138.

nation.”⁷⁶ The “logic” Bejel refers to is the use of a homosexual character that is stripped of human behavior and used to educate a young revolutionary in an effort to bring culture back into Cuba.

Shaw writes that Alea in his later years as a director exercised his influence as a respected director to be critical of the government through his work, and that *Fresa y Chocolate* was an opportunity to show the value of alternative voices (13). Alea later also claimed that *Fresa y Chocolate* was an attempt to call for “an end to discrimination against gays,”⁷⁷ which contradicts what Paz, the writer of the original short story and screenwriter for the film says about *Fresa y Chocolate*’s intentions. Shaw asserts that at one point, Paz defensively stated that the film was never intended to advocate or “campaign on behalf of homosexuality,”⁷⁸ rather the theme of general “tolerance” is what should be most salient; and that homosexuality is but a metaphorical-vehicle in which to deliver this theme. “By the end of the 1970s, the Cuban Communist Party no longer considered homosexual behavior to be in fundamental contradiction with the revolutionary process” and homosexuality went from being a crime to being a purely a psychological and medical problem.⁷⁹

Although “homosexuality” in Cuba was no longer a crime, it was not an invitation to be equal with the heteronormative revolution either. “It is worth mentioning that although Diego is helping to forge the *new*, new man, it is never suggested that he, as a

⁷⁶ Bejel, *Gay Cuban Nation*, xxi.

⁷⁷ Shaw, *Contemporary Cinema of Latin America: Ten Key Films*, 21.

⁷⁸ *ibid*, 23.

⁷⁹ Bejel, *Gay Cuban Nation*, 106.

homosexual, could be that new revolutionary man.”⁸⁰ What keeps Diego from assimilating into revolutionary culture, and *Fresa y Chocolate* from truly breaking the mold, is Diego’s contained sexuality: “Audiences are encouraged to like Diego, partly because he has been discriminated against, and partly because he is a safe (nonsexual) gay man ... Diego’s sexuality is subsumed in culture and is thus made more palatable for David and straight audiences.”⁸¹ *Fresa*’s success as an enjoyable film about friendship must be viewed as independent of its limited contribution to the improvement of the gay narrative because Diego’s story, like Arenas’, ends in exile. There is a disconnect, or lack of continuity in the way Diego’s censured file was powerful enough to send Diego away from Cuba, because there was content missing in the film that was in the book that delivers Diego’s cold reality into exile, that may have otherwise compromised the film’s warm reception in Cuba and Latin America.

The original short story, which the film is based on, defines the stakes for Cubans who leave the island: “For us Cubans, *I’m leaving*, in the tone Diego had spoken it, had a terrible connotation. It meant leaving the country forever, erasing yourself from its memory and it from yours, and – like it or not – it meant treason. That is something one knows from the start.”⁸² This quote not only defines “exile” for Cubans as synonymous with treason, but it is one that also reflects Arenas’ real-life journey away from Cuba.⁸³

⁸⁰ Shaw, *Contemporary Cinema of Latin America: Ten Key Films*, 28.

⁸¹ *ibid*, 22.

⁸² Christensen. *New world, new words : recent writing from the Americas: a bilingual anthology*, 193.

⁸³ In 1990, Arenas committed suicide in New York City, where he had been suffering from AIDS.

The audience knows that Diego will be leaving the country, but the trauma of what Diego might have to face, what Arenas faced, is never realized because the priority of the film is show David's progress as a young, and now cultured, revolutionary.

What this pas de deux between Reinaldo Arenas' autobiography and the film *Fresa y Chocolate* achieves is the beginning of a context that attempts to articulate the political climate from which the ten male dancers from the Ballet Nacional de Cuba chose to leave. This analysis suggests that these dancers found no sanctuary even within their practice of beauty, because even beauty was a stratifying force. Despite the ballet's efforts to conform to the ideals of the new state, the dancers could never achieve the status of the new man, lest they face the violence of the UMAP camps, or the quiet—but no less polarizing—systems of oppression from legislation.

Part II: The New (wo)Man and La Otra

Feminine Labor

At the same time the BNC was cultivating its international reputation in the first two decades of the Revolution, and the economy was vacillating between different systems of distribution, the Revolution continued to address areas of inequality. These areas were comprised of dismantling prerevolutionary Cuba's class structure, addressing issues of racism against blacks, closing the education and economic gap between urban and rural populations, and male-female inequality.⁸⁴ Che's "New Man" essay was inclusive of the Cuban woman and although its title is devoid of the female pronoun, this was not meant to alienate women from the project of redefining the Cuban citizen. However in retrospect, one could interpret the omission as foreshadowing the challenges the revolutionary woman would face as she was incorporated into the work force. In this thesis which has thus far looked at the construction of Cuban national identity within ballet technique, it would be beneficial to continue with an analysis of the Cuban woman and the way she and her labor have been distributed to both the Revolution and in the home. I propose that this analysis will provide a piquant contrast to how Alicia Alonso navigated the revolutionary landscape.

Up until the 1959 revolution, women had made significant gains in terms of legal equality,⁸⁵ however in her article "Revolution and *Conciencia*: women in Cuba," Lourdes

⁸⁴ Lourdes Casal. "Revolution and *Conciencia*: women in Cuba." *Women, War, and Revolution*. (NY: London, Holme and Meier, 1980), 184.

⁸⁵ *ibid*, 186-187. In 1917 women were granted rights to her children, and in 1918 women had rights in divorce proceedings. The first Cuban Women's Congress in 1925 helped women attain rights in the work place, followed by the Maternity law in 1934 that covered child delivery costs. The 1940 Constitution prohibited discrimination based on

Casal illustrates how the legal gains in the sixty years prior to the revolution did not necessarily exist in the practicalities of daily Cuban life. Prior to the Revolution, women went from being subordinate to their parents or husbands to obtaining their rights to divorce, to vote, to maternity leave and expenses in the workplace.⁸⁶ Casal notes that “complementary legislation and enforcement” was slow to materialize until a law in December of 1950 was created in order for the government to be more accountable of women’s rights.

The advent of Castro brought renewed momentum to incorporating women into the building of a communist nation. In his “Speech to the Women,” Castro spoke of women’s importance to be liberated from “domestic slavery” for the betterment of themselves and the revolution. In her article “The Woman Question in Cuba,” Muriel Nazzari analyzes the nature of women’s precarious dependency on previous systems of distribution. Nazzari proposes that the “system of distribution based on material incentives and the requirement that enterprises show a profit perpetuates women’s inequality in the home and the work force.”⁸⁷ Marxist-feminist theory has made the claim that reproduction and child-rearing justifies a labor that should be honored in socialist society, and Nazzari places this concept in the developing nation of Cuba and the challenges they face within conventional Latin American systems of power.

sex, advocated for equal pay in the work place, gave women the right to property and salary.

⁸⁶ According to the 1902 Constitution and Civil Code.

⁸⁷ Nazzari, Muriel. The "Woman Question" in Cuba: An Analysis of Material Constraints on Its Solution.” *Signs*, 247.

Women were called to work in an effort to be liberated from domesticity, but also to fill the practical void of those Cubans who left Cuba at the start of the Revolution. The initial distribution of resources in the 1960s included land and housing redistributions as well as food rationing in order to promote a greater access to food and nutrition.⁸⁸ Women all over Cuba were provided with sewing machines and taught how to sew. In housing redistributed in both rural and urban centers, people were receiving running water and electricity for the first time. Nazzari notes that the most successful accomplishment of the Revolution was the campaign to end illiteracy and the institution of education and free health care.⁸⁹ However, these infusions of social services were not serving the greater goal of building a better economy in a direct, economic way.

At the beginning of the Revolution, the priority was to first employ all able-bodied men. Upon achieving this by 1964, women began to be incorporated into the work force. Childcare and night schools were opened in order for woman to become “typists, secretaries, bank tellers, and bus drivers,” and all in the name of economic, social, and efficient production.⁹⁰ There weren’t as many employment opportunities once all the men were employed, so women were mobilized via volunteer positions. These efforts were steered by the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC). Founded in 1960 the FMC saw itself as a feminine, not feminist organization. It was aware that men had more opportunities to develop as revolutionaries than women and was therefore a tool to integrate them into the revolutionary process.

⁸⁸ *ibid*, 250.

⁸⁹ *ibid*, 251.

⁹⁰ *ibid*, 254.

In 1966, Castro called for one million women to join the labor force, but found it difficult to fund the facilities and social services needed in order for women to be able to work. Employers complained that it was more costly to employ women because they would need to provide paid maternity leave and that it costs twice as much to pay for one woman because of this. Castro insisted that once they built a larger material base to develop economically then more women would be able to work wage-earning jobs. The majority of women continued to volunteer with the motivation from the FMC. In fact, women were responsible for about 41 million hours of volunteer hours in the sugarcane harvest in 1970.⁹¹ Despite the rousing calls to women from Castro, the efforts to revolutionize women, motivate productivity and build the economy were futile as the lack of a material base and institutionalized discrimination limited women's potential. Let us now take a look at the role of women in the home.

Mona Rosendahl's ethnographic fieldwork in rural Palmera, a city in Cuba, examines the ways revolutionary values manifested in the daily lives of Cuban citizens. Her chapter "Men and Women in Palmera," elucidates the roles men and women play both in the Revolution and within conventional Latin American gender structures. First and foremost aligning with Che's essay, the ideal man and woman is one that sacrifices for society and the Revolution.⁹² According to Rosendahl's population, a real man is one who provides and protects his family, and is strong and autonomous. They are also expected to "protect the honor of their women and children by controlling their behavior

⁹¹ *ibid*, 255.

⁹² Rosendahl, Mona. *Inside the Revolution: everyday life in socialist Cuba*, 61

outside the home.”⁹³ Rosendahl defines the “good woman” in near opposition to her male counterpart. They are mostly defined by their roles of mother and wife.

Motherhood, or *maternidad*, is considered sacred. She states that becoming a mother assures a higher status, and that few women would choose not to have children. Wives should also not be overly attractive for fear of representing their family dishonorably.⁹⁴ There is an explanation for how these gender ideals exist within the Revolution.

Rosendahl locates these ideals within a social/gender apparatus that pervades all of Latin America—*Machismo*. “Machismo suggests an exaggerated display of manliness but also the idea that men should have supremacy and control over women in every aspect of life.” Machismo also generally operates under the assumption that men and women are in different spheres both physically and psychologically.⁹⁵ In Cuba, Rosendahl sees Machismo as inherited from Mediterranean and Caribbean concepts of gender. A woman’s virginity and a man’s ability to provide and protect are key virtues to machismo, and honor and shame are the inherent barometers by which social/gender performance is judged in the context of Machismo. Rosendahl’s research took place in the 1970s/1980s and while many men she interviewed gave the perfect revolutionary

⁹³ *ibid*, 62. “Most Palmeran men do not account for their whereabouts when they leave the house, and they consider it irritating if they are asked where they have been when they return home ... A real man is a very social person who likes to drink, to go to parties, to converse, and to be generous with himself and his time and money ... He should be able to tell jokes and dance well. Most men like to dress well and are well groomed.”

⁹⁴ *ibid*, 65-66.

⁹⁵ *ibid*, 53.

answer of wanting total equality in the political context, implementing the practice of equality in the home proved to be a challenge.

One of the ways Rosendahl found these gender divisions manifested culturally in Palmera is in the concepts of *la calle* and *la casa*—the street and the home. The male sphere is *en la calle*, or out in public.⁹⁶ They work outside the home, primarily in agriculture where their labor is seen as manly. Alternatively, the women's sphere is *en la casa*, although in the context of women working or volunteering, it is a more symbolic representation suggesting that the center of her world is in the home, fulfilling the role of wife and mother. These spheres merge, or rather collide, when in 1975 The Family Code articulates that there is to be an equal distribution of domestic duties and child-rearing. This law was another attempt to bring women into the work force, by forcing men to share in domestic responsibilities.

However challenging this concept of conventional gender roles in the revolution may seem, there was one role that women occupied that was no less marginalized than the wife/mother, but allowed her a different kind of agency. Her name is *la otra*—the other woman. Rosendahl's list of male attributes includes his having women on the side. Rosendahl notes that discretion is important to the *la otra* dynamic. The “intelligent woman” should never mention her knowledge of the other woman and be tolerant toward her husband. The man is expected to respect his wife by being discreet in his extramarital relations.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ *ibid*, 58.

⁹⁷ *ibid*, 64.

Women's development in the revolution was multifaceted. They were being called out of the house to join in the public revolution, only to be called back into the privacy of their home by their husbands and traditional values. Legislation and social services were tied to the material base of the economy so there was a tension between the ideals of the revolutionary man and woman and the stalwart cultural institution of machismo. In such an economically tumultuous time, and in the cultural context of Latin America, it would be easier to default into the conventional gender dynamics Machismo nurtures. Between conventions and revolutions, behavior was accounted for socially. However *la otra* had some room to maneuver. *La otra* is not provided for or protected, but she cannot be socially ruined by her husband. *La otra* is neither in the street nor in the home. I propose that Alicia Alonso, particularly in the early decades of the revolution, exhibited traits of *La otra* in that she was not resigned to performing her gender in the same ways and spaces that other Cuban women were.

Alicia en la Calle

The Ballet Nacional de Cuba was constructed in a constantly evolving milieu of policy, economics, morality, and gender issues. The Revolution saw the importance of cultural institutions serving the ideals of the socialist system. Robin Moore's 2006 scholarship about music in the Revolution notes that Cuban cities continue to be covered in slogans to "keep revolutionary ideals in mind and to continue to struggle for a better common future."⁹⁸ There are economies, films, and social discourses focused on cultural institutions such as literature, film, music, and art being censored in the Cuban

⁹⁸ Moore, *Music and Revolution: cultural change in socialist Cuba*, 9.

revolution, yet there is nothing written about the revolution censoring ballet. How was it that ballet was even able to exist in the regime so unscathed? How was it possible that dance critic Walter Terry was able to write in his biography of Alicia Alonso that “there are two superstars in Cuba, both known to eight million Cuban’s by their first names:”

FIDEL! ALICIA!

How was ballet, whose aesthetics so closely mirrored those of the dominant bourgeois culture and was brought by the bourgeois class into Pro Arte, able to continue into the Revolution? Moore suggests that although culture is used as a tool of the state, it is limited “because of the difficulty of determining its meanings to the public” and thusly “difficult to regulate.”⁹⁹ This understanding is not new to dance. Dance can be often be underestimated due to an assumption that dance is generally indecipherable, however in contrast to film, music, literature and art, this may have been key for the BNC’s relative lack of regulation from the Cuban government and long tenure as a national institution.

Another perspective is offered by Anna Guillermoprieto in *Dancing with Cuba: a memoir of the revolution*. Guillermoprieto, a Mexican national, was a modern dancer in New York City who travelled to Cuba in the 1970s to teach modern dance at the Escuela Nacional de Arte in Cubanacán. Guillermoprieto notes a general ambivalence and contradiction that the USSR had toward focusing their efforts on fostering cultural institutions, and that even though any sort of modern or abstract dance was not permitted in Soviet theaters, there was never a “single diplomatic delegation to the Soviet Union that wasn’t invited to spend an evening in Bolshoi Theater watching *Swan Lake* or *The*

⁹⁹ *ibid*, 23.

*Fountain of Bakhchisaray.*¹⁰⁰ Guillermoprieto suggests that the Cuban revolutionary government's support of the national company was directly influenced by the Soviet Union in much the same way.

Guillermoprieto also writes about the difficulties of teaching at the arts conservatory. She remembers asking when the mirrors were going to be installed in the classroom, and being strongly dismissed. She was told, “*Somos revolucionarios!* We are revolutionaries! There will never be mirrors in the studios at Cubanacán.” This anecdote complements one that Guillermoprieto's student said about the stunning facilities at the Ballet Nacional: “If Alicia wants a marble toilet, she gets one.”¹⁰¹ There is a telling discrepancy here between what is being told to Guillermoprieto about the mirrors at the school she is teaching at and what is being said about the toilet where Alicia Alonso rehearses. If being without mirrors is what makes us revolutionaries, what are we with a marble toilet? Who was Alicia Alonso in the context of the Revolution?

I propose that Alicia's navigation of this political, economic, and cultural terrain—as a woman and as the head of her ballet company—can be regarded as an exceptional example of how a woman and a cultural institution operated in compliance to revolutionary agenda. This analysis of the BNC's compulsory participation in the Revolution alongside the role women have played within the revolutionary workforce illustrate the challenge of women and feminized cultural practices within patriarchal political contexts and/or Latin American structures of power such as machismo. I posit that the relatively low volume of regulation from the government can be read as a

¹⁰⁰ Alma Guillermoprieto, *Dancing with Cuba: a memoir of the revolution*. (New York: Vintage Books-Random House, 2004), 75.

¹⁰¹ *ibid*, 74.

metaphorical compliance that the role of women prior to the Revolution demonstrated to their husbands. If literature, film, music, and art experienced a level of regulation not extended to the ballet, these genres and the kind of compliance they produced on behalf of the state can be seen as performing the same functions and traditional compliance to the larger hegemonic structures as the role of mother and wife do, I posit that Alonso's role better aligns with the role of *la otra*, the role outside of the home. Even her decision to have her daughter raised by her parents, and to recruit orphaned children into her company, can be read as alternative conceptions to more traditional practices of *maternidad*.

Decisions like these which point toward Alonso's autonomy, alongside ballet's elusiveness as not being as efficacious a media for the revolutionary work, works to prevent her from being enfranchised into the mechanism of revolutionary cultural practice, yet it was Alonso's international reputation that compelled British dance critic Arnold Haskell to write "Alicia is the first woman in Cuba, a very symbol of its courage and independence."¹⁰² I would say Haskell's intuition is correct, however in this essay I must clarify that she is not the "first woman" in the sense that she is the president's wife, or any man's "first" woman or wife. Because Alicia does not reside *en la casa*. Alicia is the first woman *en la calle*.

¹⁰² Tana De Gamez. *Alicia Alonso: at home and abroad*. (New York: Citadel Press, 1971), 19.

Conclusion

It would be beneficial to synthesize the first two parts of this thesis as I draw my exploration to a close. Thus far I have introduced a gendered labor and its representation. How bodies comport themselves at the behest of the state, or how the autonomy of a female cultural leader operates, become material and symbolic examples through which we might understand the medium and purposes of ballet in and to the Cuban Revolution. Both speak to labor, but in different ways. Here, let us revisit the salient aspects of Parts I and II of this thesis in order to talk about the broader implications of the BNC as an institution as well as a dance practice.

In Part I., the examination of the Cuban ballet technique offers a context for a broader consideration of how the male citizen body is constructed. More than being about ballet technique, this section highlights how bodily technique and the material body are shaped by physical practices and regiments that are mandated by the Revolutionary government. Symbolically, my analysis tells us about gender representation through types of action that might have an impact on the shape of the body and how it looks when it walks around, or even dances ballet.

Although there have been feeble attempts to describe the Cuban “temperament” in the ballet, Alonso clarifies that the demonstration of gender is what makes Cuban ballet most distinct. I juxtapose the construction of the male ballet dancer in relation to the way masculinity was constructed to serve the revolution. I chart the legacy of homophobia on the island within legislation, literature and film representations as a way to understand how the national ballet was consonant with the values of the revolution.

In contrast, Part II. is not about technique, nor about what Alicia Alonso's body is doing on a daily basis. Rather, it is about her mobility and what it signifies to a populace. This is a symbolic study, then, and representational, as her autonomy—though imperfect—serves as a representation of her labor. Whether Alicia is using her influence to spring her male dancers from jail during the police raids of the BNC in the 1960s, or travelling the globe with her company, a symbolic dimension to her labor represents the construction that was developing in the name of the new, Revolutionary nation.¹⁰³

Finding (post)Modernity

These analyses are part of a larger inquiry regarding the form and function of the BNC. In other words, what are the implications of a European dance form being practiced in a communist country in Latin America? How is the hierarchal lineage of ballet recast in the context of a communist national institution? Through my examples of ballet technique being comprised of revolutionary values and Alicia Alonso's role as a Revolutionary woman, I have sought to demonstrate two instances in which the original form of ballet would not recognize the revolutionized form, and vice-versa.

This kind of consideration goes against the grain of particular conceptions of Cuba. For example, John Jeremiah Sullivan, writing in the Sunday *New York Times Magazine* about Cuba, captures American ignorance that the economic embargo of Cuba invariably yields.

¹⁰³ Roca, *Cuban Ballet*, 122. Roca writes about the thin line Alonso tread in regard to the personal relations she had with her dancers and the public persona in the Revolution. One account details Alonso hurrying into the police station demanding respect for her dancers and her public.

On the plane, something odd but also vaguely magical-seeming happened: namely, nobody knew what time it was. Right before we landed, the flight attendant made an announcement, in English and Spanish, that although daylight saving time recently went into effect in the States, the island didn't observe that custom. As a result, we had caught up — our time had passed into sync with Cuban time. You will not need to change your watches. Then, moments later, she came on again and apologized. She had been wrong, she said. The time in Cuba was different. She didn't specify how many hours ahead. At that point, people around us looked at one another. How could the airline not know what time it is where we're going? Another flight attendant, hurrying down the aisle, said loudly, "I just talked to some actual Cubans, in the back, and they say it'll be the same time." That settled it: we would be landing in ignorance.¹⁰⁴

Sullivan has said nothing about dictators, political ideologies, or the literal distance travelled to Cuba, but instead, he highlighted a collective confusion about "time" in Cuba. When an entire plane full of people are unable to orient themselves to Cuba, one knows that the embargo of Cuba was successful, at least insofar as people foreign to the island are concerned. Even time has been blockaded.

Similar confusion about Cuban time exists in a genre of coffee-table books devoted to the classic American cars that remain on the island after the Revolution. These books detail the lengths to which cars as an antiquated American presence on the island have been preserved. The success of these books depends upon the idea that Cuba exists outside of time and suggests that these old cars, with their fifties' fins and grotesquely oversized chassis are the markers of such a lack of progress. Indeed, even as the books foster non-Cuban readers' nostalgia for the days when such vehicles ruled the roads, the assumption must be that Cubans themselves feel nostalgia for these same old, US-

¹⁰⁴ John Jeremiah Sullivan. "Where is Cuba Going?" *New York Times Magazine*. September 20, 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/23/magazine/where-is-cuba-going.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 (accessed May 10, 2013)

dominated days, as they so lovingly care for their cars. In other words, Cuba's refusal to participate in Western capitalism's equation of time: consumption equals progress, ensures that Cuba will always be "outside" of time from such perspectives.

But what of the ballet? Ballet descends from Western traditions, but in Cuba it deviates from its patriarchal beginnings. In Cuba, ballet is integrated according to gender, and accessible to the masses. It is repurposed to convey the Revolution's ideals. The ballet resists the pastiche of modernism to assume more potent roles in the Revolution. But what do we call a ballet company that clearly references its revolutionary ties? Classical? Contemporary?

Fredric Jameson's theories of postmodernism provide an enticing model for how culture's capacity for representation is tied to the economy.¹⁰⁵ While Cuban ballet escapes the capitalist logic in which it was born—to an extent, anyway—in many ways it developed in resistance to it. The fact that modernist/postmodernist aesthetics operated as a referent to be resisted meant that the ballet was still dialectically engaged in modernist/postmodernist codes of aesthetics, albeit toward non-capitalist goals. I propose that within this context there is perhaps an autonomy not yet explored.

“...we must go on to affirm that the dissolution of an autonomous sphere of culture is rather to be imagined in terms of an explosion: a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm, to the point at which everything in our social life can be said to have become “cultural” in some original and yet untheorized sense.”¹⁰⁶

This “explosion,” this “prodigious expansion” that Jameson encourages harkens to what Walter Benjamin writes about in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History.”

¹⁰⁵ Fredric Jameson. *Postmodernism as the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 1984.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid*, 48.

In order to move away from a universal, or linear history, a historical materialist must blast a “specific era out of the homogenous course of history—blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework. As a result of this method the lifework is preserved in this work and at the same time canceled; in the lifework, the era; and in the era, the entire course of history. The nourishing fruit of the historically understood contains time as a precious but tasteless seed.”¹⁰⁷ In this context—what Jameson calls a new “sphere” as a result of what Benjamin calls a “blast”—what could one call a ballet company that resists a Western association and emerges from a break with capitalism? I might consider “Revolutionary Ballet,” as a possible name, but for now calling it “Cuban National Ballet” is more appropriate.

¹⁰⁷ Walter Benjamin. “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” *Illuminations: essays and reflections*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1968), 263.

Bibliography

- Alea, Tomás Gutiérrez and Juan Carlos Tabío. *Fresa y Chocolate*. Miramax Films, 1994.
- Alicia Alonso. "La Escuela Cubana de Ballet." *Revolucion y Cultura*. (April 1976), 18.
- American Ballet Theatre. "Pirouette." *American Ballet Theatre's Online Ballet Dictionary*. <http://www.abt.org/education/dictionary/index.html> (accessed May 10, 2013).
- Bejel, Emilio. *Gay Cuban Nation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001. Print.
- Benjamin, Walter, "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations: essays and reflections*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1968).
- Brenner, Philip, William LeoGrande, Donna Rich, and Daniel Siegel, eds. *The Cuba Reader: the making of a revolutionary society*. New York: Grove Press, 1989.
- Carpentier, Alejo. "Closing Performance Speech." *Granma Weekly* (December 7, 1976), 9.
- Casal, Lourdes. "Revolution and *Conciencia*: women in Cuba." *Women, War, and Revolution*. Carol Berkin and Clara Lovett, eds. NY: London, Holme and Meier. 1980.
- Chomsky, Aviva. *A History of the Cuban Revolution*. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.
- Christensen. *New world, new words : recent writing from the Americas: a bilingual anthology*, 193.
- De Gamez, Tana. *Alicia Alonso: at home and abroad*. (New York: Citadel Press, 1971), 19.
- "Entrevista a dos bailarines cubanos." *Areito*. (Vol 4, no. ½, 1977), 56.
- Fernandez, Enrique. *A Contemporary Cuba Reader: Reinventing the Revolution*. Ed.
- Foster, Susan. "Choreographies of Gender." *Signs*. Vol. 24, No. 1. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 5.
- Garcia, Andy, dir. *The Lost City*. Magnolia Studios, 2005. Film.
- Guillermoprieto, Alma. *Dancing with Cuba: a memoir of the revolution*. New York: Vintage Books-Random House, 2004.

- Greskovic, Robert. *Ballet 101: A Complete Guide to Learning and Loving the Ballet*. (Limelight Editions, 2005).
- Improper Conduct*. Dir. Néstor Almendros and Orlando Jiménez. 1984. Film.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism as the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 1984.
- Marion Kant. *Rethinking Dance History*. (London, Routledge, 2004).
- Konrád, George, and Ivan Szelényi. *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class and Power: a sociological study of the role of the intelligentsia in socialism*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. 1979.
- "La Escuela Cubana de Ballet' ... Ponencia." *Cuba en el Ballet*. (Vol. 8, no. 3), 10.
- Lumsden, Ian. *Machos, Maricones, and Gays: Cuba and homosexuality*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996.
- Moore, Robin D. *Music and Revolution: cultural change in socialist Cuba*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.
- Nazzari, Muriel. The "Woman Question" in Cuba: An Analysis of Material Constraints on Its Solution." *Signs*, University of Chicago Press. Vol. 9, No. 2. (Winter, 1983), pp. 246-263.
- Newman, Barbara. "Teacher's Wisdom: Loipa Araújo." *Dance Magazine*. March 2011. Web.
- Ojito, Mirta. "Fleeing Cuba, Hoping to Soar On New Stage." *New York Times*. December 5, 2003.
- Roca, Octavio. *Cuban Ballet*. Layton, Utah: Gibbs Smith, 2010. Print.
- Rosendahl, Mona. *Inside the Revolution: everyday life in socialist Cuba*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997.
- Shaw, Deborah. *Contemporary Cinema of Latin America: Ten Key Films*. (New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2003), 21.
- Siegel, Beatrice. *Alicia Alonso: The Story of a Ballerina*. Warner, 1979.
- Pedro. *Alicia Alonso: Dialogos con la Danza*. (La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1986), 40.
- Sullivan, John Jeremiah. "Where is Cuba Going?" *New York Times Magazine*. September 20, 2012. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/23/magazine/where-is-cuba-going.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 (accessed May 10, 2013)

Terry, Walter. *Alicia and her Ballet Nacional de Cuba: An illustrated biography of Alicia Alonso*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1981.

Daniel J. Wakin. "Citing Art and Money, 7 Cuban Dancers Defect to U.S." New York Times April 4, 2013. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/05/arts/dance/citing-art-and-money-7-cuban-dancers-defect-to-us.html?_r=0 . (accessed May 10, 2013).