

## Dancing for the Nation: Ballet Diplomacy and Transnational Politics in Post-Apartheid South Africa

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In early 2015, five students from Arlon Business School spent a week away from their elite United States MBA program to study and consult with Gauteng Ballet Company (GBC), South Africa's premiere professional ballet troupe, as the experiential part of a global development course. Arlon Business School and Gauteng Ballet Company, both pseudonyms, had collaborated once before and both were committed to a sustained relationship. At the end of their stay with the ballet company in Johannesburg, the business students delivered a series of strategic suggestions to increase interest in and attendance at the ballet.<sup>1</sup> Most were impractical for the small number of administrative staff already tasked with running theatrical performances, school outreach programs, ballet academy logistics, and international touring, which required a laborious amount of coordination and paperwork. But the business students helped catalyze one of their ideas while they were still in residence: a social media campaign that they hoped would circulate widely, creating a huge new patron base for the company. In the "pirouette challenge," both dancers and laypeople were asked to "turn" as many times as they could as a pledge of support to the company and their development programs in previously disadvantaged communities. The public relations staff recorded and posted videos of these pirouettes to the company's Facebook page and Instagram accounts.

To begin the campaign, the business students filmed themselves attempting a pirouette. One by one, they imitated the movements taught to them by the artistic director of the company and collectively voiced their support for the cause. Company dancers also filmed themselves performing pirouettes. The dancers, who come from many countries, transformed the campaign into an international challenge, posing one country against the other. How many rotations could Cuba do against South Africa, Brazil against Australia? As the company dancers in Johannesburg posted their videos, their home ballet networks responded in kind. Ballet dancers across the globe posted videos of their pirouettes in response, mapping the worldwide connections that existed within the company. In the end, the campaign did not succeed and in no way did it reach a domestic audience of potential patrons. Despite this failure, these videos made Gauteng Ballet Company's transnational configuration visible, both in the company partnership with the Arlon Business School students and the dancers' worldwide connections.

A pirouette contains within it a repetition and return, a cycle and a transition, all of which require coming back to the same position. A *good* pirouette can hide the quality and quantity of turns. Similarly, the pirouette holds a metaphor for South African state power and performance in relation

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to its global partners: it impresses and conceals, it involves a practice and an individual dancer. This article examines the dancing politics of those kinds of transnational circuits through Gauteng Ballet Company's ballet diplomacy. Ballet diplomacy, a term coined by the company's administration in the early 2010s as a pitch to both local government and foreign embassies, is the international exchange of dancers, teachers, techniques, and performances between GBC and other national ballet companies and schools. Through ballet diplomacy, Gauteng Ballet Company demands to be an agent of state power. The ballet company's participation in South African nationalism locates the role of dancers' bodies in the maintenance and dissemination of state politics.

The proponents of ballet diplomacy maintain it is an *institutional* structure made visible through embodied practice. This claim allows for the continuance of political and economic relationships that actively contribute to the sustenance of ballet in post-democracy South Africa. Moreover, these practices demonstrate that the relationship between performance and state power does not simply exist in the state enacting a set of ideologies on its general population, but can also specifically function in circulation with performers and actors who actively assert a claim to their national identities. In order to make my argument, I first situate ballet diplomacy within the historical trajectory of professional ballet in South Africa and its long-term imbrication with transnational politics. I then explore Gauteng Ballet Company's main diplomatic partnership with Cuba within its conditions of possibility. As I demonstrate below, the company uses ballet diplomacy to provide evidence for its commitment to post-apartheid South African ideals, such as racial diversity and political and economic connections with partners in the Global South. Their ten-year exchange with Cuban ballet is their most sustained and enmeshed example of this sort of partnership, particularly answering the call for a more racially representative ballet.<sup>2</sup> Cuban-South African ballet diplomacy performs the entanglements of politics and aesthetics in both state governance and ballet history. In this way, the partnership functions both as an emblem of the future of transnational ballet and a product of a long historical past.

## The Practice of Ballet Ethnography

As with Arlon Business School and Gauteng Ballet Company, mentioned above, all names and places in this text are pseudonyms drawn from fourteen months of ethnographic research with the South African professional ballet community conducted from 2012 to 2015. My research included sixty-seven formal interviews, archival research in personal, governmental, university, and ballet company archives, and over fifteen hundred hours of participant observation in professional ballet studios. Dancers, administrators, teachers, audience members, and all others quoted here gave explicit permission to have their statements published anonymously and without identifying characteristics. No subject here can be mapped onto a single person or organization. My interlocutors in this article are composites of a set of dispositions, beliefs, practices, and discourses that were repeated in my field notes and in interviews. As such, this paper elides the recording of precise dates, times, people, and places in order to make direct interventions into the political positioning of ballet bodies in South Africa and its global partners, as well as more broadly in postcolonial discourse.

## What Is Ballet Diplomacy?

Broadly considered, the South African ballet community is as much grounded in and informed by the specifics of South African nationalisms and state formation as it is a site for the transnational ethic that sustains ballet as well as other global art forms. While ballet emerged from Europe, and its most well-known institutions are located in the Global North, the early twentieth century saw a proliferation of the form across the Global South. Both through colonial pathways (and the "civilizing" agenda), as well as Soviet emulations, schools and companies in places like New

Zealand, Australia, Iran, Turkey, China, Japan, South Korea, Brazil, Colombia, and Cuba claim a portion of the ballet imaginary that is often overlooked by popular narrations of its reach. In the post-socialist era, rarely do state and national companies include only citizens, instead drawing on a network of dancers, teachers, and choreographers linked by training programs, competitions, and performances that cross the globe. In South Africa, this transnationalism takes a particular angle, where in 2014 and 2015, Gauteng Ballet Company's multinational roster included seven Cuban dancers, three Brazilians, an Australian, and an Irishman. These international dancers allow the company to make claims on state resources and connections that would be impossible without their transnational ties. As a result of their positions and dancing experience with the company, the dancers who move across national borders can often leverage their experience to become more international (and thus more mobile), furthering their careers through their global circulations. These motivations are not new to the ballet community, though they are often narrated as such.

Ballet diplomacy operates at the intersections of economic, cultural, and political capital and is embodied in its performance. Through ethnographic evidence, I articulate the direct relationship between transnationalism and politics in the dancing world. The circulations of dancers from the Global South to the Global North and its reverse also entail government intervention in these dancers' daily lives. Visa applications and boycotts have as much influence on dancers' careers as their training, skill, and talent. The nationalization of ballet training and professional companies throughout Western Europe, Latin America, Asia, and, historically, South Africa, have produced dancers who are cultivated in the name of the nation. While one can certainly not collapse the transnational circulation of dancers into the politics of the state, the political agency and potential of the ballet dancer is always latent.

While Gauteng Ballet Company leadership argue that they are the originators of ballet diplomacy, the sort of transnational exchanges they are involved in are part of a sustained pattern in South African ballet that dates back to the turn of the twentieth century. Proponents have attempted to position ballet as the national art form of South Africa with varying degrees of success over the past hundred years (Farrugia-Kriel 2015; Glasstone 2000; Grut 1981). Its constancy through major sociopolitical transformations suggests the form is far from its demise, unlike Jennifer Homans's (2011) suggestions that ballet is in need of a eulogy. In large part due to its devotees' dedication and persistence, ballet has held a visible presence in a place where, as a friend in Cape Town suggested to me, perhaps "it doesn't belong at all."

The belonging question is an impossible one. Ballet is and has been a part of South African artistic practice for a century. Though its popularity ebbs and flows, ballet is housed in professional institutions that have used a broad range of strategies to maintain the art form. These methods range from courting private donors to forging creative alliances with the state, which have consistently secured teachers, dancers, choreographers, and funding across a range of political and cultural climates. Specifically, Gauteng Ballet Company does this by participating in the political ideologies and rhetoric of the moment. The ballet has cohosted events with the largest national labor union. It has been an agent of a state developmentalist agenda, teaching children pliés and tendus as a promise for a way out of the townships. Its representatives have even testified before parliament, making the case for ballet as a repository of history and a literal demonstration of the endurance and beauty of the nation.

Rife with questionable partnerships, undelivered promises, and transparent appeals to people with money and cultural capital, Gauteng Ballet Company manages to keep its doors open and pay its dancers for full-time employment in the most challenging financial climates ballet has faced in its century-long history in South Africa. From 2012 to 2015, the company performed such classics as *Romeo and Juliette*, *Giselle*, *Coppelia*, and *Swan Lake*, premiered new choreography from two of its own dancers as well as three other South Africans, and toured throughout South Africa in addition

to Botswana, Zimbabwe, and China. The company casts people of color at all ranks in its productions, an important accomplishment for *any* major ballet company in the world. It has raised the status of ballet and ballet dancing once again to the national stage in South Africa, and it has redefined the ballet business with corporate partnerships that are groundbreaking in the arts industry.

Ballet diplomacy is part and parcel of Gauteng Ballet Company's larger strategic plan. As company dancers and administrators step into diplomatic roles, they claim a stake in high order state dealings. These kinds of exchanges welcome ministers, ambassadors, and business leaders into ballet audiences, making ballet a space for international negotiation and dialogue and a meeting place for the elite with sufficient cultural and financial capital. On the opening night of a 2014 production of *Swan Lake*, for example, the first three rows of the Johannesburg Theatre were filled exclusively with African National Congress officials, ambassadors from Cuba, China, and Colombia, South African indigenous royalty, celebrity talk show hosts, and real estate, insurance, and natural resource executives. The ballet lends its artistry to political and business dealings. For example, the company hosted an informal studio performance before their ten-day tour of China in 2014. The tour was the finale to the South Africa Year in China. They had been invited to participate in the tour by the South Africa Year in China steering committee, which was comprised of both South African and Chinese government representatives, who company administrators had specifically courted over the previous two years. The event served as a meeting space for Chinese businessmen and a member of the national mineral and petroleum board to discuss Chinese investment in the mining industry. Jaco, the company's executive director, publicized this meeting with pride to the whole audience in his concluding speech of the evening. South African ballet opens the space for diplomacy and trade, a service to the state. The company's diplomatic relations also then serve the company, as it is deemed as part and parcel of the transnational state-building projects it facilitates in its studios. As a result, its attempts at securing local government funding from agencies other than the cultural desk (for example, marketing and tourism and urban development) have proved more successful, as have pursuing the financial sponsorship of people and private institutions with vested interest in similar projects, for example, banks, construction, and resource extraction firms.

State deployment of dance as a form of and space for cultural diplomacy is certainly not new, nor is it unique to South Africa. Naima Prevots (1999) and Claire Croft (2015) have documented the United States Department of State sponsorship of hundreds of international dance tours since the end of World War II, allowing for exercises in soft power and a specific branding of America's national image. Hélène Neveu Kringelbach (2013) shows how the French government and its agent abroad, the Alliance Française, invest in dance partnerships with former colonies in sub-Saharan Africa. France also serves as host for one of the largest African dance and performance festivals in the world, which convenes in the former colonial metropole of Paris. South African dance diplomacy, however, is unique, as the ballet's proposal to serve as an avenue for soft power and cultural exchange comes from within the institution itself. This proposal emphasizes the ballet's business orientation toward nationalism. The company transforms itself into an agent of the state and its dancers as embodiments of the nation, as opposed to the state selecting the companies and artists who circulate under the auspices of the state internationally.

## Transnational Legacies

Erica is a twenty-one-year-old white woman with long dark brown hair and a slight build. She is at Gauteng Ballet Company for the day, taking class alongside her sister-in-law, a corps de ballet member. Born in a small town in the Western Cape, Erica left South Africa at the behest of her teachers when she was sixteen, moving to London and studying at the Royal Ballet School. After school, she was offered a position in the Royal Ballet, where she has been ever since. Erica's family owns a large tract of land that her grandparents farmed, but now, her father, a doctor, and mother,

an accountant, use it to raise their four children. Her parents did not want her to leave home, but she was already commuting an hour each way for ballet, taking her away from the rhythms of family life. And they had known several other dancers who had studied in England. “It was an extraordinary chance, when I got in. Royal Ballet, it’s the dream. And it really is. I don’t know, maybe I’ll come back here, teach what I’ve learned eventually. What my teachers did.” As a member of the Royal Ballet, Erica is building on a long-established tradition of ballet exchange between South Africa and England that finds its roots in British colonialism and replicates itself from generation to generation. The company’s teacher that morning, Barbara, is a sixty-year-old white woman with silver hair cut into a sharp bob, standing five feet tall with razor straight posture. Erica runs forward to greet her with a hug. Barbara has taught Erica over the years and they are close. When Erica was first considering leaving South Africa for England, Barbara encouraged her to do so, saying her own decision to move and train abroad “made my life as a dancer possible.” They are both graduates of the Royal Ballet School whose names are on the long list of dancers who have forged dancing connections to old colonial pathways.

This history and its contemporary manifestations are what most balletomanes and ballet historians call to mind when they narrate the story of South African ballet. Building on a ballet historiography that locates the form solidly within the Global North, the “aberrations” of the Global South must be explained in their relation to the old colonial metropolises. These narrations, built on real transnational pathways, however, undermine seeing the ways South African ballet and its dancers constitute and contribute to transnational forms and spaces of knowledge production. In reality, they mark continuity with the colonial past while creating a template for new international exchanges.<sup>3</sup>

## South African Ballet’s Origin Story

South African ballet has been transnational from its conception. British colonialism facilitated ballet’s arrival in South Africa. The first ballet classes were offered as programming for British ladies’ clubs in Johannesburg and Cape Town, designed to teach grace and refinement to young white women on the tip of the African continent. Concerned with the cultivation of *proper* women in such a wild and exotic landscape, then called “fancy dancing” took hold in the early 1900s. By the 1910s, several young women left their immediate families in South Africa and went to London to study at the Operatic Dancing Association of Great Britain (now known as the Royal Academy of Dance), or with teachers of the Italian Cecchetti method, who were also based in England. These young women returned to South Africa and then began offering ballet classes as colonial British families began to find it “fashionable for virtually every well-bred little white girl to take ballet lessons, for at least a few years, to develop good posture, deportment and refinement of movement” (Triegaardt 1999, 468). For the next fifty years or so, if dancers, all white, wanted to pursue either teaching dance or dancing as a full-time career, they left, at least for a while, and studied in England.

This connection to the Commonwealth was far from unusual. The founder of the Royal Ballet, Ninette de Valois, helped the establishment of ballet companies throughout the empire, most notably in its other settler colonies of Australia and New Zealand. Additionally, a series of famous English ballet dancers toured the country, perhaps most notably Alicia Markova and Margot Fonteyn, both in the 1950s (Grut 1981). Peter Stoneley argues that the “feminine afterlife of empire was . . . the rise of English ballet” (2002, 140). These performances are persistent parts of the imagined ballet history of South Africa, marking the country as a part of the British imperial circuit.

All the early figures of South African ballet trace their dancing lineages to England. David Poole explained in 1969: “As ballet grows in South Africa, it is a tremendous tribute to ballet in Britain. Because in every way, the people who are running it and the repertory we do have up to now had to draw from British ballet and the classics which, thank God, British ballet has preserved”

(Poole 1969, 18).<sup>4</sup> Even after the official rise of apartheid and South Africa's exit from the Commonwealth in 1961, ballet fan clubs planned tours to London to catch the Royal Ballet's latest seasons, companies scrambled to get the newest choreographic works coming out of the country, and the best dancers would still try to get to England to complete their training and secure a position in one of the country's many companies.

From the mid-1960s through the end of formal apartheid rule, all four of South Africa's professional ballet companies, based in Durban, Bloemfontein, Johannesburg, and Cape Town, were direct subsidiaries of the state and correspondingly were segregated, all-white institutions. Ballet thrived under the white supremacist regime. The national government set up regional arts councils that served exclusively white audiences, administrators, and performers, operating from the assumption, Kenneth Grundy argues, "that only European art forms mattered" (1994, 241). Gauteng Ballet Company's apartheid-era predecessor, the Gauteng Commission on the Arts' Ballet, was the paradigm of high art for the privileged white minority in Johannesburg and nearby Pretoria.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, though it was a state institution, the apartheid-era company was also multinational. Despite boycotts, from the 1960s through the 1980s, the company attracted a handful of international members, including dancers from Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States. These international dancers, much like their current successors at Gauteng Ballet Company, brought their own dancing networks with them to South Africa. In so doing, they expanded the global connections of the company, helped secure rights to perform ballets by American and European choreographers, and brought new techniques and aesthetics to South African ballet studios. Thus, these dancers undermined the company's commitments to the nationalistic apartheid state, if only symbolically. With an exclusively white company roster, the apartheid-era company enjoyed a level of assumed prestige, as Grundy (1994) alludes to above, that enabled dancers, choreographers, and teachers to circulate internationally as representatives of the state without risking the public undoing of South Africa's white nationalist stance. As it was explained to me by those dancers and teachers who circulated between England and South Africa, the company's continued connections were proof positive of the extraordinary quality of South African ballet. This international repute could easily be incorporated into a larger nationalist narrative of the preservation of elite European culture on the tip of the African continent.

Drawing on a very different network of transnational politicking, the 1992 reopening of the city-owned Johannesburg Civic Theatre was marked by a performance by the Dance Theatre of Harlem, a New York-based ballet company composed almost exclusively of dancers of color. The new leadership of the theater and the American consulate, which sponsored the event, billed the performances as a representation of the future of a nonracial South Africa and an inclusive South African ballet. As *New York Times* dance writer Bill Keller wrote, "The very choice of the predominantly black ballet company, which opened to critical and public admiration on Wednesday night, was intended to be a statement of postapartheid cultural enlightenment" (1992). In a letter to Dance Theatre of Harlem director Arthur Mitchell, Nelson Mandela remarked that "for a few hours, I was able to forget all my troubles" (Mandela 1992). It was, Bill Keller went on to remark, "a pas de deux of culture and politics" (1992). This lineage demonstrates how ballet has implicated itself in transnational state politics since its arrival in South Africa and how national and international systems of power and privilege sustain its ongoing development. Ballet's participation in the nationalist project locates the role of dancers' bodies in the maintenance and dissemination of state politics. That makes the ballet studio a complex space of transnational negotiations that sometimes, though not always, are made visible in more public and political realms.

## Performing a "New" Nation

Dance scholars such as Susan Manning (1993), Mark Franko (1995), Jens Richard Giersdorf (2013), and Anthony Shay (2002) have engaged the relationship between state power, aesthetics, and dance



practice. Both Manning's work on Mary Wigman (1993) and the rise of German National Socialism and Franko's (2002) research into the relationship between dance and labor movements in 1930s United States argue for the historiographic potential of dance to reframe narrations of the rise and fall of political movements through choreographic practice. Anthropological work, such as Cynthia Novack's *Sharing the Dance* (1990), on the emergence of contact improvisation in the United States, Helena Wulff's *Ballet Across Borders* (1998), and Francesca Castaldi's *Choreographies of African Identities* (2006), use ethnography to demonstrate the dispersions of political power and potential in individual dancers' bodies, embedding the institutions of the state into everyday physical practice. As this South African instance illustrates, the construction and choreographing of political movement is produced within and beyond the nation.

South African ballet has been built and sustained in relation to both its global partners and performers. As they are made "in the name of" the nation, the political motivations and consequences of such exchanges give insight into the shaping of nationalist ideologies and practices through performance. State power, Kelly Askew writes, "not only requires performance, but instead is itself more often than not an act of performance" (2002, 8). Gauteng Ballet Company, the contemporary inheritor of the entwinement of ballet and nation, maintains itself as a relevant cultural institution, no longer with guaranteed state or governmental funding, because it argues it can promote a new ballet and, therefore, a new South Africa. It does this by building political and economic relationships through transnational and national ballet partnerships and cultivating a new generation of black dancers and audiences.

In 2013, the city of Johannesburg, a stronghold for the African National Congress, engaged in a series of re-branding efforts. The goal of the campaign was to transform Johannesburg's image from dangerous and decrepit, imagery tied to the violence and white flight from the city center in the 1980s, to a "world class African city," with the cultural appeal and amenities to attract both tourist dollars and larger international investment and trade (Smith 2013). The ballet company joined the city's campaign, advertising itself as a "world class ballet company for a world class city." This marketing shift came just after a watershed moment in Gauteng Ballet Company's more recent history. The company had successfully received funding from the city. This was the first time professional ballet had been awarded Johannesburg city funding since the dissolution of the state company in 2001. Johannesburg officials and marketers wanted to emphasize the city as the gateway to Africa, a key site in financial, political, and cultural dealings that reached throughout the country. Thus, government representatives argued in ballet board meetings, ballet performances should also be representative of the populations that Johannesburg represents. A handful of government aides told me that they loved the spectacle of the ballet and that they were willing to invest both time and money into the potential for a racially representative ballet. They believed that such a ballet was a promising prospect for their visions of Johannesburg's worldly image.

But the question of race continues to plague Gauteng Ballet Company. Recent grants from the city, orchestrated in large part by the above government aides, entailed a promise that the company would stage an entirely black ballet on the same stage that Dance Theatre of Harlem, a company dominated by dancers of color, used two decades prior. The promised performance has yet to materialize. Even with the company's active recruitment of dancers of color from outside of South Africa, there are not enough dancers for such an event. This issue, the unfulfilled promise of a South African ballet that looks like the demographics of South Africa, haunts the ballet company as its dancers continue to pursue political connections. Their reputation as agents of the state is dependent on their representation of a racially diverse, democratic nation. Company administrators often pin the possibility of fulfilling the promise of racial diversity on their partnership with Cuba, a country that consistently produces dancers of color and, moreover, touts ballet as its national art form, a ballet that is beyond the confines of race and class.

## (Trans)national, (Non)racial

We are riding in the company van to a small, private performance at the Cuban Embassy, a one-hour drive from the Gauteng Ballet Company studios in central Johannesburg. The dancers are relatively calm, only two couples are performing excerpts of well-known pas de deux: *Spring Waters*, a 1962 ballet duet with choreography by Asaf Messerer and music by Serge Rachmaninoff (Dunning 1992), and the Bluebird pas de deux from the third act of *Swan Lake*, which are standard repertoire for them. In the last four months, they have performed these duets several times. The black-tie affair offered a prime opportunity for dancers and administrators to network with Johannesburg's cultural elite and the dancers were specifically asked to bring *nice* clothing to change into after their dancing. Juan, Ernesto, and Roberto, all Cuban dancers, and I are chatting in the back of the van about their upcoming tour to China, a fairly last-minute, ten-day trip hooked into the final festivities of the official "South Africa Year in China" (the next calendar year was "China Year in South Africa").

In trying to decipher the sociopolitical constructions of South African ballet, my Cuban interlocutors and I spent many hours talking about race and racism both in our home communities and in the context of the apartheid state. Even though apartheid had formally ended over fifteen years before their arrivals in South Africa, they felt the resonances of the white supremacist state in their daily lives. Apartheid race laws were centrally concerned with controlling the mobility of people based on racial categories, viciously constructed and enforced through the enactment of a police state. These categories were and continue to be the major cadences in which South Africans see and understand race. Yet, on any given day in the Gauteng Ballet Company studios, a self-purported *national* ballet company, there are upward of three competing state-informed conceptions and classifications of race: Cuban, South African, and American. Correspondingly, our conversations around their conceptualizations and experiences of race entail talking about nations, histories, and diasporas that are often not part of the "new" nonracial in South Africa's popular imagination. They are, however, an intimate part of ballet and the racialization of ballet in South Africa now.

For the most part, these Cuban dancers do not understand themselves as white in Cuba or in South Africa. In South Africa, however, they were taken aback by the rigidity of racial categories and the cultural discourses around race. Alejandro, a Cuban dancer who had been with Gauteng Ballet Company for two years, told me the topic of race dominated his everyday conversations outside the ballet studio: "We have to talk about it [race] all the time so that they can tell me they aren't racists." Most Cuban dancers in the company are interpolated as, and understand themselves to be, black within the particularities of the South African system. There are open conversations among ballet insiders about the influx of black dancers to the company since the beginning of the Cuba-South Africa exchange. The beginning of the Cuban partnership is celebrated as a true turning point in diversifying South African ballet along explicitly racial lines.

There is a certain amount of mystery around why specific Cuban dancers, all of whom were current students or recent graduates of Cuba's National Ballet School, were offered positions at Gauteng Ballet Company. Company administrators have travelled to Havana often since the exchange began, visiting the National Ballet and the National Ballet School, and engaging in active, if hushed, dialogue with their Cuban counterparts. No one explicitly states that only black dancers are chosen to join the company. Moreover, there are a few Cuban dancers who neither identify nor are recognized as black in the South African context. Nonetheless, the orators in the Cuba-South Africa partnership consistently mention the radical potential of a diversified ballet, only made possible through this transnational project.

### The Cuba–South Africa Exchange Origin Story

Cuban ballet rose to its current position through political and financial support from Fidel Castro, who underscored the Cuban revolution's ties to the Soviet Union, a powerhouse of ballet.<sup>6</sup> While



Gauteng Ballet Company dancers have performed as part of Havana's International Ballet Festival and trained at the school's summer and teaching programs, the majority of the decade-long exchange, which began in 2007, has happened on South African soil with Cuban dancers. The Cuban partnership has two major benefits for the company. First, the Cubans provide the company with black and/or male dancers, both of whom are desperately needed, and second, the partnership itself gives credence to the ballet company's claims to nationalist politics that are in line with the new South African state. Through their diplomacy with Cuba, the company is cementing its place as an important cultural institution on a national and international scale.

Beginning in the 1970s, Cuba provided military training, armed personnel, and weapons to anti-imperialist struggles throughout southern Africa, and was a public supporter of both the South African Communist Party and African National Congress's anti-apartheid efforts on the international diplomatic stage (Glejises 2003, 2016). Nelson Mandela and Fidel Castro went on to have a long political friendship, publicly praising one another for their visions of anti-imperialist, non-racial societies (Mandela and Castro, 1991). In contemporary Johannesburg, however, Cuba is famous not for this militarized historical legacy, but for sending two things to South Africa: doctors and dancers. Cuba's mission in supporting South Africa has shifted from militarized intervention to medical and cultural exchange.

Ballet in South Africa is simultaneously perpetuating apartheid-era standards of operation, relying on colonial imaginations and institutions that first propelled the form to fame, as it seeks to transform itself to be socially, economically, and politically relevant after the official end of apartheid. On the one hand, the majority of South African ballet institutions look toward European companies as embodied ideals. They teach the London-based Royal Academy of Dance syllabus in their studios and send their most talented students to London to train and learn abroad, both of which rely on well-worn colonial pathways. Simultaneously, however, the Cuban dancers and teachers who are brought into the Gauteng Ballet Company's studios are the lifeblood of a potential post-apartheid ballet. In public rhetoric, Gauteng Ballet Company hails Cuba as their perfect partner because Cuban ballet has done what they strive to do in South Africa. Propagandists from both sides report that Cuban ballet has achieved nonracialism and non-classism within its studios and among its audiences. "Even my cab driver had a favorite ballerina," Jaco says to a group of patrons at a private fundraising event before opening night of Gauteng Ballet Company's first major production of 2015. Jaco's speech is a form of propaganda that may have minimal empirical accuracy.<sup>7</sup> Yet such propaganda has been incredibly successful among South African ballet supporters.

## Performing Possibilities

In July of 2013, Gauteng Ballet Company organized an International Ballet Gala in celebration of Alicia Alonso, the leader of revolutionary ballet in Cuba. The gala also coincided with the seven-year anniversary of the Cuban-South African ballet partnership. The performances featured ballet dancers from South Africa, China, Cuba, the United States, and elsewhere around the world at a theater embedded in a casino complex in Johannesburg's northern suburbs.

As audience members arrived on the evening of opening night, they were shuttled through metal detectors and their bags searched by one of the eight security guards stationed by the entrance. This setup was far from unusual. In the years since apartheid, armed security personnel and systems have dramatically increased in popularity throughout urban South Africa as a response to upper classes' fears of violence and theft. This fear, which has been documented ethnographically by Vincent Crapanzano (1985), among others, emerges from a panic among protected white South Africans during the country's transition to democracy, that their lives and property were in danger and the country would devolve in the hands of the black majority. Guards armed with machine guns are a common presence, particularly in sites of capitalist accumulation such as casinos, malls,

and bank ATMs. Security infrastructure such as high, concrete walls, electrified fences, and metal detectors, and the political, embodied practices that they generate, have become so quotidian in South Africa that they have become merely contextual for an event like the gala, marketed as an apolitical occasion.

Five minutes before the beginning of the program, once most of the attendees were in their seats, a series of camera flashes began going off near one of the house doors. A hush set in as the ninety-three-year-old Alicia Alonso, the prima ballerina assoluta, in a long, glittering dress and sunglasses, entered the theater. She was surrounded by photographers, the Cuban ambassador to South Africa, the deputy minister of arts and culture, and the deputy president of South Africa. Company administrators and security guards followed behind. Once Alonso was seated, the house lights went dark, as if to indicate her arrival as the beginning of the show. Before the dancing began, the politicians in attendance each spoke, glorifying Alonso's contribution to a nonracial, nationalist project of ballet. The minister of arts and culture's speech is an example:

Not only is Madame Alonso a shining light and an inspiration to her own country, but to the whole world, and in many ways to us here in South Africa in our unique and special circumstances. Under Madame Alonso's guidance, Cuban ballet has served as a unifying force in Cuba, cutting across race, cultural heritage, social backgrounds, and political beliefs, not only to unite the nation, but to serve as a source of great national pride. In this way she serves as a wonderful example to us here in South Africa in the ways in which the arts can become a focus, a rallying point, and an aspirational endeavor for our young generations. (transcript from author's personal recording)

As a high-ranking Cuban diplomat ambassador indicated in his speech the same evening, Cuban politics more broadly emphasize a society *beyond* race and class, of which the ballet is a prime example.

On the International Ballet Gala stage, there were eight Cubans dancing, six men and two women, as well as dancers from Russia, South Korea, Japan, Australia, and the United States representing ballet companies from across the Global North (in addition to the National Ballet of Cuba and Gauteng Ballet Company). The evening's repertoire was, as a company administrator told me the week before, standard fare. It consisted of a series of well-known pas de deux, including another performance of "*Spring Waters*," "*Diana and Acteon*," and "*Grand Pas Classique*," excerpts from the full-length ballets *Swan Lake* and *Don Quixote*, a contemporary solo danced by the choreographer, a soloist with the English National Ballet, and a grand finale choreographed by Gauteng Ballet Company's artistic director. The dancers, for the most part, were soloists or principals in their home companies, experts in their craft and skilled in the specificities of the roles they performed that evening. The dancers performed well for their casino audience. There were beautiful, explosive jumps, impressively held balances, and well-torqued turns. A few dancers performed with a partner from their home company, but most did not. The internationalism of the evening was well-evidenced through the actual ballet performances, negotiated and rehearsed across distance and time zones.

These instances of transnational ballet production were framed as the backdrop to the celebratory Cuba-South Africa partnership, a partnership which derives sociopolitical power in two regards. The grand political discourse embedded in the Cuban-South African ballet connection, as exemplified in the opening night speeches, directly bolsters Gauteng Ballet Company's claims to national and international politics. Moreover, the collaboration boasts other material benefits. Whether or not ballet in Cuba is truly nonracial, the National Ballet School in Havana consistently produces dancers of color. Gauteng Ballet Company has made promises both to the city of Johannesburg, which has taken greater and greater interest in the company in recent years, and corporations invested in diversifying their public images, to either train or hire dancers of color, particularly

black dancers. “We want ballet to be for everyone,” a member of the Johannesburg City Council, a regular at the ballet, tells me, “the children need to see themselves on the stage.” Cuban ballet dancers, then, offer an immediate solution to the otherwise whitewashed South African ballet community.

Gauteng Ballet Company runs after-school ballet programs in several poor, black communities in Johannesburg and the surrounding area. Through these programs, which run ballet classes three days a week for beginning and intermediate students, the company is attempting to demonstrate that in future generations, the dancers of color on its stage will be South African, not Cuban or otherwise. This plan has been far from realized. Though the program, which is about eight years old, has over two hundred students enrolled in classes, there has been one dancer who has been accepted as a trainee to the company and no others on record who have pursued professional dance careers. As the program ages, the company’s South African contingent remains predominantly white. There is a gap in training opportunities, making it nearly impossible for dancers above the age of fourteen (the age that ballet training must begin in earnest for the possibility of a professional career) to get the training necessary to be on par with their white peers who trained in the private studios of rich Johannesburg suburbs. These programs, company administrators claim, will also solve the “boy problem” in the ballet. There is a conspicuous absence of boys of any racial demographic in preprofessional ballet classes. The few that do get to such levels often leave because, as Thando, a black dancer from Soweto who now dances with Carolina Ballet in the United States, told me, “the taunting was just unbearable after a point.” Bias against boys in ballet is certainly not a uniquely South African problem, but it is a significant problem for South African ballet. Cuban dancers, again, fill a necessary space at Gauteng Ballet Company, while solidifying transnational ties.

## Politicking Ballet

Pedro is a twenty-one-year-old dancer from Cuba. He has been with Gauteng Ballet Company for almost five years now, joining officially after graduating from the National Ballet School when he was not offered a spot in the National Ballet of Cuba. He told me of the eighteen graduates of the school every year, only six get offered spots in the national company.

Pedro’s father was not thrilled with his choice to become a ballet dancer and had stopped his older brother from going to ballet school, saying “baseball was for boys and ballet was for girls.” But, Pedro was both talented and obstinate and auditioned for the National Ballet School in Havana when he was fourteen. He moved to South Africa, a place he previously did not even think *had* a ballet company, when he was eighteen. Pedro is one of six Cuban dancers in the company at the moment, four men and two women, who make a substantial impact on a company of less than thirty. Pedro was part of the first contingent of Cuban dancers who were offered full-time employment at Gauteng Ballet Company. Their numbers have waxed and waned, but the Cuban delegation has held a steady presence in the company in the last decade.

Pedro and his colleagues do fairly well in the company. Unusually, they came in as high-ranking soloists. Very rarely do young dancers join a company at anything above apprentices or corps de ballet. They all make just under ZAR 10,000 (USD \$900) a month, which, while fairly low by international standards, is decent pay in a company in which some dancers make as little at ZAR 3,000. And because none of them have South African drivers’ licenses, the company drivers provide them transport whenever they need it. The four men are also excellent turners and jumpers, so they get featured in a lot of the shorter corporate performances that are making up more and more of the company’s season. They dance more than many of their colleagues.

Cuban dancers' presence in Gauteng Ballet Company have become commonplace, as has the kind of daily transnational politicking that enables their presence. Those state and governmental negotiations are overridden by dancers' repetitive practice and training in studios and their spectacular performances on stage. Cuban ballet diplomacy in South Africa is realized in the space of the studio, Pedro argues, as I push him to elaborate on the political friendship between Cuba and South Africa: "It's about the dancing, at least to us. Yes, politics and yes, ballet."

As Pedro so succinctly summarizes, Gauteng Ballet Company's ballet diplomacy locates the potential for state power within the bodies of individuals. Individual dancers utilize these connections for their own ends. Their dancing enacts an institutional claim to state power, a participation in the performances of transnational politicking that secures ballet a place on national and international stages. The company's institutional claims are legitimated through the actual work of ballet, an embodied practice.

The company argues that their exchanges with the Cubans gives them a foundation and model to promote nonracism and diversify its ranks, in addition to solidifying historical friendships between the two nations. Embedded in ballet administrators and dancers' balletic diplomacy is a politics in and about bodies—representation, relevance, ability—that is constructed through multiple historical narratives. South African ballet has been transnational since its arrival with British colonists in the 1900s. Through remarkable ingenuity, company dancers and administrators have managed to shift the circulation of dance to include exchanges with Cuba, a key African National Congress partner in fights against colonialism and apartheid. Thus, Gauteng Ballet Company has used ballet diplomacy not only to secure political and financial capital but also to maintain its place in South Africa's artistic landscape through major sociopolitical transformation.

## Dancing Across Borders

In the above discussion, I have demonstrated the political links between governments and ballet institutions in South Africa. Despite Gauteng Ballet Company's claims as the originator of ballet diplomacy, their participation in political partnerships, key to their institutional goals as well as beneficial for their partners, is consistent with South African history. Ballet and transnational politics have, since the early twentieth century, been embroiled with one another, demonstrating, as Bob White has phrased it, "the ways in which it [performance] had become implicated in the performance of state-based forms of power and authority" (2008, xiv). Dancers, who often narrate themselves beyond the politicking of their national companies and schools, perform as representatives of the nation. They are direct beneficiaries of the investments of governments and institutions such as Gauteng Ballet Company that frame them as agents of state ideology and performance. When ballet is performed, practiced, and experienced in these diverse modes and locations, it is wrought with political potential. Because it has retained a relatively cohesive aesthetic and maintained its elite location in international imaginations, ballet often appears as if it is simply the performance of artistry, here strategically deployed for the state. But ballet performances are historically and culturally situated, wrought with politics within their construction and execution, and made into being through bodily moves.

Gauteng Ballet Company has gained traction as they have engaged the political ideologies of the state and brought them onto the stage and into the studio, enabling investment, mobility, and success perhaps otherwise unattainable. Nonetheless, it remains important to situate contemporary forms of transnational ballet politicking within its broader history, in which the persistent question of race and the enduring forms of white hegemony within South African ballet begin to come into view. Moreover, these practices are only made possible by practitioners; ballet is made by the dancers themselves. These dancers have their own politics, careers, and commitments to consider and their own creative ways of deploying the transnational pathways that ballet creates for them.

## Notes

1. I discuss my methodology and accompanying ethical concerns in detail on page 85.
2. It should be noted that Gauteng Ballet Company's most regular exchanges are with the National School of Ballet in Havana, yet there have been other exchanges: company dancers performing at Havana's International Ballet Festival, a few dancers with the National Ballet performing at gala events or in special ballets, and teachers from both the Havana ballet school and elsewhere helping to train South African teachers.
3. Elizabeth Schwall's 2017 piece, "Coordinating Movements: The Politics of Cuban-Mexican Dance Exchanges, 1959–1983," sheds light on other transnational ballet collaborations in the Global South and Global North. These collaborations highlight the intimacy of political movement as the South African case demonstrates the racialized labor involved in such circulations of movement.
4. Ballet companies in South Africa performed works by such British choreographers as Dame Ninette de Valois herself, as well as Fredrick Ashton and Kenneth MacMillan (Glasstone 2000; Grut 1981). Additionally, the apartheid-era ballet companies in South Africa held rights to many of John Cranko's ballets, which, I was told by former dancers, were incredibly popular with South African audiences. John Cranko, perhaps South Africa's most well-known ballet choreographer, left Cape Town in 1946 in order to study at London's Sadler's Wells School and became a member of Sadler's Wells Ballet (which later became the Royal Ballet) shortly after. In 1961, he was appointed as the ballet director at Stuttgart Ballet, where he remained until his death in 1973 (Percival 1983).
5. Carol Steinberg (1996) has written an incisive summary and critique of the formation of apartheid South African arts policy, which serves as a historical document on its own—published just as the new African National Congress government was reordering arts and culture funding structures.
6. See Schwall (2019) and Tomé (forthcoming)
7. Elizabeth Schwall has a forthcoming chapter in an edited collection, and Lester Tomé, a forthcoming monograph, both of which tackle the complexities of race, nationalism, and performance in Cuban theatrical dance.

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