

ORAL HISTORY TECHNIQUES FOR BALLET CLASS:
MIGRATION AND MEMORY IN CUBAN PEDAGOGY

By

Samantha Sacks

Advisors: Liza Zapol and Brent Hayes Edwards

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Introduction

When I was 17 years old I moved from Chicago to Cuba to train at *La Escuela Nacional de Ballet* in Havana. The opportunity arose after I participated in a multi-year cultural exchange founded by the director of my childhood ballet school called “Cuba y Chicago.” This program invited a small group of high school-age dancers to spend several weeks taking classes and rehearsing with the students at *La Escuela Nacional*. The school was a setting unlike any I had ever danced in before. The massive building was a temple for the arts, with its ornate and cavernous studios and grand marble staircases. Classical music poured onto the streets via arched but paneless windows. Thousands of students passed through the halls every day, moving from ballet, to math, to *Danzas de Salon* to history, to rehearsals. Once I began dancing there full-time, I came to feel like I was part of a regiment. My teachers would direct rehearsals with a kind of military precision, demanding a conformity in the angles of the head and articulations of feet. In *corps de ballet* rehearsals, every arm position came under scrupulous attention by the ballet mistress. Teachers demanded that we hold exceedingly long *relevés* (balancing on tip toe) and *développés* (one leg extended in the air). I would come home from tiring days with my ballet tights soaked through with sweat and dark grey from the soot collected on the studio floors, realizing I’d never been part of a group or a system so singularly devoted to a common goal to create the strongest and most virtuosic dancers. In Havana I was immersed in a new set of aesthetic frameworks and structures that dictated how I should dance, and gave me the training necessary to achieve those aims. My teachers, a group of poised, powerful and strict women imparted this knowledge to me through morning announcements, daily classes and rehearsals. By virtue of this cultural exchange I abided by different methods of teaching, I witnessed different ways of dancing, and I absorbed different ways of organizing oneself in the ballet class.

But one need not to have participated in this kind of overseas cultural immersion to experience Cuban ballet technique. While emigration and even exile have been defining experiences for much of Cuban Society, more than a million of whom fled the island in 1959 alone,¹ Cuban dancers in particular have remained a visible sub-group of leavers and defectors. Today, Cuban ballet dancers live everywhere, not only performing in leading companies around the world, but also teaching technique to what must be thousands of students across the United States.

Much has been written about Cuban ballet and its diaspora, from both artistic and political angles. Historian Elizabeth Schwall situates the development of the *Ballet Nacional de Cuba* within the context of revolutionary politics in her 2021 book *Dancing With The Revolution*. Cuban ballet historian and Smith College professor Lester Tomé has examined Cuban ballet as an expression of nationalism, analyzed it within a postcolonial discourse, and through the lenses of labor and migration.² In his 2010 book *Cuban Ballet*, Cuban exile and balletomane Octavio Roca writes a biographical study of Alicia Alonso, founder of the *Ballet Nacional de Cuba*, and explores how the continuous exodus of defecting dancers has impacted both individual performers and the Cuban National company as a whole. This body of scholarship consistently emphasizes the superhuman and expressive qualities of Cuban dancers and examines how their interpretation of European ballet tradition reflects their unique cultural, social, and political context. For my own undergraduate thesis, I wrote about young Cuban ballet dancers who had recently left the island to pursue careers abroad. Though they followed the steady stream of

¹ Jorge Duany, “Cuban Migration: A Postrevolution Exodus Ebbs and Flows,” Migration Policy Institute, July 6, 2017. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/cuban-migration-postrevolution-exodus-ebbs-and-flows>

² Lester Tomé’s scholarship includes: “Music in the Blood”: Performance and Discourse of Musicality in Cuban Ballet Aesthetics” (2013); “Black Star, Other Fetichized: Carlos Acosta, ballet’s new cosmopolitanism, and desire in the age of institutional diversity” (2019); and “The Cuban Diaspora: Stories of Defection, Brain Drain, and Brain Gain” (2021).

dancers who for decades have been seeking opportunities outside of Cuba, I was interested in how new immigration policies altered the status of dance migrants—people who no longer identified as ‘exiles’ but as emigres who would maintain an opportunity to return home. That study asked how the changing landscape informed dancers’ ongoing sense of connection to their home country, and what, if any, tensions of identity existed for them as they joined companies abroad. For that project, I did zoom interviews with seven dancers.

Because my experiences in Cuba exposed me to this national dance establishment and kept me close with the many dancers who have left the island, I became interested in questions about the migration of Cuban teachers and Cuban technique into the U.S. Technique, defined here as an established structure that prescribes how to execute ballet steps, was honed by a particular ideological system within an insular milieu, and has fanned out into dance classrooms everywhere. This raises questions of how a culturally specific form mutates and reassimilates as it encounters new and different social and political environments. This phenomenon is not unique to Cuban dance. All kinds of regional ballet and non-ballet dance styles have also traveled across the world and taken hold in different contexts. But the particular historical conditions that led to the creation and global dissemination of Cuban ballet technique, and the close ties that Cuban teachers feel to a singular dance institution, make for an interesting case study in what it looks like to carry history and memory in the body as it travels across borders. This thesis took shape asking *how* it is that dance knowledge travels from body to body, across borders and from generation to generation.

Even more so, pursuing a degree in oral history has shaped this project around method. As performance scholar Nien Yuan Cheng writes, “what distinguishes oral history from other modes of historical inquiry [is that] interviewing involves dealing with body-to-body

communication, with embodied ‘archives’—archives that are not of documents but of flesh and blood.”³ As an oral historian, I pursue the difficult task of writing about an ephemeral art form by experimenting and exploring interview methodologies that center the body as a storehouse of knowledge. This project therefore emerged from three interviews with Cuban ballet teachers living in the United States: one with Caridad Martínez, based in New York City at American Ballet Theatre Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School; a second with Tania Suárez, teaching at the Durham School of Ballet and the Performing Arts in North Carolina; and third with Ana Novoa, at Ballet Hispánico in New York City. I take up questions seeded by Bill Bissell and Linda Caruso Haviland in the Introduction to their 2018 book *The Sentient Archive*, who ask, “What would it mean to say the body is an archive?” and “What sort of investigations or practices might facilitate the archiving of bodied acts or events, as well as their potential for retrieval and reenactment?”⁴ This thesis puts forward the idea that the practice of oral history might allow us to understand how embodied cultural memory is present and is transmitted in the teaching of a ballet class.

In the following study, I make conjectures about three key ways in which the ballet class and oral history converge. First, just as the goal of the oral historian is to understand the formation and system of logic that informs a narrator and their stories, teaching dance is a kind of revelation of one’s life story, built from personal memories as well as (for Cuban teachers especially) overlapping social and political legacies. Second, ballet technique and ballet pedagogy are types of embodied knowledge, capable of carrying and transmitting culture. Absorbing these stories entails listening for the embodied delivery of memory. And third, just as

³ Nien Yuan Cheng, “‘Flesh and Blood Archives’: Embodying the Oral History Transcript,” *Oral History Review* 45, no. 1 (2018), 127, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ohr/ohx071>.

⁴ Bill Bissell and Linda Caruso Haviland, “Introduction,” in *The Sentient Archive: Bodies, Performance, and Memory* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2018), xv.

oral history interviews are spaces of co-creation between narrators and interviewers, ballet classes are similarly live, dialogic encounters, where new knowledge is generated in the meeting between bodies.

In my thesis work for the Columbia University Oral History Masters, I ask what happens when we view the dance class as itself a kind of oral history? How does that change the way that we participate in the art form, the way we listen to teachers, the way that we respond to other bodies in the room? How does it affect our understanding of dance history, including where is it created and where is it preserved? In this framing, the object of study is the pedagogical encounter itself: the migration (or transference) of culture and memory that unfolds in the ballet studio. I orient this work toward three main audiences: dancers, who I hope will use these insights to rethink their daily practices in the ballet classroom; students of any kind of embodied art form, who may find value in considering how memory is constructed and conveyed in teaching, and to oral historians, who may use this research to think about the centrality of the body in remembering and transmitting cultural knowledge and personal memory. Through the interview process and analysis of these conversations, I attempt to show how movement is culturally and historically informed, and to make the case that oral history methods can reveal how dance history is being recalled and remade daily in the dance studio.

The remainder of this study is organized as follows. In the next section, I share how I arrived at this interview methodology, both from coursework at the OHMA program and from the broader literature with which I engage. I also include brief backgrounds about each narrator and how I staged and conducted the conversations. The body of this study is divided into three parts. The first is where I present arguments on how memory and pedagogical lineages are present in the ballet class; the second is where I discuss technique as a type of embodied

knowledge, capable of carrying and transmitting culture; and the third is where I describe that ballet class is an interactive, dynamic bodily conversation resulting in the co-creation of knowledge both for the student and the teacher. I conclude by explaining how I've shared this research through formal presentations and informal conversations with my dance community and the potential for this framework to enhance the experience of participating in a dance class.

Interview Methodology

While simultaneously pursuing a master's degree in oral history and my own professional dance career, it is only logical that I began to think about the dance studio as a site for oral history. Moving between my coursework in oral history theory and my daily ballet classes made me appreciate the ways that teachers reveal their life stories via lessons in dance. As a participant in their classes I receive the information that they impart and in this exchange share back my own bodily information.

In designing this project I wanted to conduct interviews that interrogate that process and center the body as a source of knowledge and memory. As I take dance classes from teachers that are a range of nationalities and whose pedagogies pull from all over the world, I started asking, how is culture carried in the body? How does culture inform pedagogy? How is culture transmitted through pedagogy? How does the body express and transmit layers of cultural knowledge?

In the juxtaposition of dance studies and oral history I have found the work of Jeff Friedman, a dance studies scholar and oral historian at Rutgers University, particularly impactful. In his 2005 article "Muscle Memory": Performing Oral History," Friedman identifies the "shared logic" of dance and oral history, writing that "dance calls for a documentary method that is also

alive: embodied, contingent, temporal.”⁵ In turn I wanted to create an interview structure that consciously embraces the overlaps with dance.

Through our many months of conversation, it was my thesis advisor Liza Zapol who encouraged me to experiment with an interview structure that reenacts the ballet class, and to see what kinds of physical and verbal memories can be revealed in the reenactment. Pulling from her own theater experience, Zapol helped me develop interview prompts and an interview structure that would emulate the transmission of embodied knowledge that occurs in the ballet class.⁶ The practice of oral historian and dancer MiRi Park was been similarly inspirational. In her 2023 chapter of *Dance Research Methodologies*, “Cyphering with Oral History,” Park writes about the creation of an interview method that reflects the nature of cyphering itself. My research launches from a similar premise of investigating a genre of dance through interview methods that replicate and recontextualize those dynamics. I consider my experiments in interview techniques as a response to Professor Nyssa Chow’s broader invitation in her course “On Listening and Interpretation” to see the interview as a site of “interpretation and potentiality.” She began our class asking, “What (more) is possible to hear in the oral history?”⁷

Thus my task was to construct oral history interviews where I could emulate the ballet class in an interview about ballet; where I could incorporate dance into interviews about dance history. My goal was to come up with experiments and explorations in interview techniques to engage with Cuban dance teachers about memory, training and teaching across time and place. Notwithstanding, each interview developed into a different experiment. In part, this was because the narrators had varying levels of comfort with the oral history process. At one extreme, Tania

⁵Jeff Friedman, “‘Muscle Memory’: Performing Oral History.” *Oral History* 33, no. 2 (2005): 35. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40179868>.

⁶ Liza co-taught a course at Columbia OHMA with Nicki Pombier called “Serious Play,” an experiential workshop that conceived of oral history as an artistic and performative act.

⁷ Nyssa Chow, *Roots & Branches: On Listening and Interpretation* syllabus, Columbia University, Fall 2023.

Suárez invited me to spend the weekend with her and her family in North Carolina, where I interviewed her twice and filmed all of our interactions together. At the other was Ana Novoa, who didn't want me to bring any video equipment to our interview. In addition, the experiments diverged insofar as I did not follow a strict set of prompts or adhere to the same structure in each. While the same kinds of questions guided each of my conversations, my goal was to follow the guidance of Professor Chow, who explained the interview as “letting the narrator go on a journey of remembering.”⁸ As I understood this, a fruitful interview would be coauthored by the interviewer and narrator, not structurally imposed onto the narrator like a questionnaire or a stencil in which they have to fit. Chow defines oral history as “memory work,” a process that unfolds between interviewer and narrator in which an interviewer helps the narrator make meaning of their memories by following them on this associative journey.⁹ Thus with each narrator, I experimented with different ways of integrating movement into our interview.

Caridad Martínez

My initial interview took place with Caridad Martínez in March 2024 at the Gibney dance studios at 890 Broadway. Caridad is a petite woman with a round face and pronounced cheek bones. Caridad was the first Black principal dancer with the National Ballet of Cuba and was the founder of *Ballet Teatro de la Habana* in Cuba. She currently teaches at the American Ballet Theatre Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School and the Alvin Ailey School, in addition to offering private lessons and coaching. Caridad left Cuba in 1991, moving first to Mexico and then to the United States. She is a woman in demand. As a legendary member of the *Ballet*

⁸ Nyssa Chow, *Roots & Branches: On Listening and Interpretation* lecture, Columbia University, September 12, 2023.

⁹ Ibid.

Nacional de Cuba and prominent and accomplished teacher in New York City, many people have interviewed Caridad on her life and work.

I opened the interview with Caridad by asking her to share her earliest memories of learning ballet technique, or any early memories of absorbing technique in her body when she was young. Caridad was seated next to a ballet barre, which I invited her to use during the interview. I made the decision to capture myself in the footage with Caridad in order to center the intersubjective nature of the dialogue between us. I put a camera on a tripod in the corner of the creaky floored studio and got up to check it at 15 minute intervals. I asked Caridad about ballet technique, how she remembers learning it, and how she may teach it differently here in the United States. Caridad's was the first interview in which I experimented with formal movement prompts. In the last 20 minutes of the interview I reconfigured the room, pushing away the folding table and inviting Caridad to stand at the barre. I asked her to demonstrate the nuanced differences in the way that different national techniques hold the head and arms that she described throughout our conversation. In this moment I got to play as her student. While the interview as a whole invites an interviewer to be a student in the life of the narrator, to have her move my body and give me physical corrections allowed us to step into the roles of teacher and student more formally. (See Video Excerpts [1](#) & [2](#)).¹⁰

Tania Suárez

The interviews I conducted with Tania Suárez took place over the course of two days in February 2025 and represent the most immersive interview process of this project. Tania lives in Durham, North Carolina where she teaches at the Durham School of Ballet and the Performing Arts. Tania has a side swept salt and pepper pixie cut, and at around 15 years younger than

¹⁰ Excerpted interview clips are embedded within the body of the text and can also be found in Appendix I.

Caridad, she is part of a different generation of dancers that trained at the school and the company. She graduated in 1993 as both a dancer and ballet teacher through a dual degree program offered by the National School of Art. She danced with the *Ballet Nacional de Cuba* until 2002. Over the next twenty years Tania became a ballet teacher for a number of companies in Cuba with a non-ballet repertory, including *Danza Contemporánea de Cuba*, *Compañía Rakatán*, *Compañía Malpaso*, *Conjunto Folklórico Nacional*, among others. During that time she also got a degree in contemporary dance and teaching at The University of Arts of Cuba. Tania moved to the U.S with her two daughters and husband in 2020. She was extremely warm, and she and her family invited me over for lunch and dinner. Tania relaxed and spoke more freely when the cameras were not rolling. In our informal conversations I heard about their new lives in Durham as they calmed their hyperactive pug.

My first interview with Tania took place in a large studio at the ballet school where she teaches. She wore a form fitting black v-neck with her name embroidered on the chest. If my initial interview with Caridad was about introducing videography and movement based questions, my goal going into the interview with Tania was to create an environment in which I could most closely replicate the pedagogical encounter, to feel as though the interview was happening as part of the dance class. I contracted a local film student to be our videographer so that I did not have to check the camera or worry about whether both of our bodies were in frame. To begin the interview I invited Tania to teach me a warm-up exercise at the barre. ([See Video Excerpt 3](#)). She demonstrated for me how she likes students to focus on the beginnings and ends of combinations, finishing the movements of the arms, arriving at deliberate stillness. We ended the interview with a *reverence* (French word meaning "respect"), a closing bow combination performed at the end of a ballet class. While I had hoped to dance more with Tania during the

interview, we ended up spending most of the time in the studio talking, rather than dancing, though we stayed on our feet. My intention was to integrate movement prompts seamlessly throughout the interview but once we were in the flow of conversation, the transition from the verbal sharing of a memory into the physical demonstration of a memory didn't always feel natural. I realized that the interweaving of ballet steps with oral storytelling outside of the natural setting of the classroom had a quality of artificiality. I did however get to see her in action as a teacher, first, in watching her teach an afternoon ballet class for an hour, and then in setting up at the barre and taking her evening ballet class.

Ana Lourdes Novoa

The last experiment with a body-centered approach to interviewing was with Ana Lourdes Novoa in July 2025. I spent half a day with her observing classes at the Ballet Hispánico Summer Intensive on the Upper West Side of New York and then interviewing her outside the studio after class. Ana fits in the generation between Caridad and Tania. She was born in 1960 and became a principal dancer of the *Ballet Nacional de Cuba* in 1990. In her 22 year career, she performed all over the world, including as a principal dancer with the English National Ballet. She returned to teach at the National Ballet of Cuba before moving to New York City in 1997. Today, Ana teaches at Ballet Hispánico and also at the American Repertory Ballet. She lives in New Jersey with her two daughters.

Ana was extremely patient with her cohort of students, a somewhat rowdy group of 30 who giggled between combinations, but fell into line quickly when the music started. The majority of the students were Black or Hispanic, a more diverse ballet classroom than I commonly see in the U.S. In observing Ana's class I took the opportunity to look for the ways in

which memory and embodied knowledge were transmitted in the pedagogical space. As Ana preferred for me not to film the class nor our conversation, she presented me with a valuable challenge in describing her gestures and movements without a visual historical record.

Supporting Interviews with Victor Alexander, Candice Webster, and Jeff Friedman

In addition to interviews with Caridad, Tania and Ana, I conducted three additional supporting/ informational interviews for this project. In March 2024 I reached out to Jeff Friedman from Rutgers University in search of advice on how to best center the body in oral history. Given his experience writing his own dissertation on Twyla Tharp dancers, it was he who recommended that I conduct my interviews for this thesis in dance studios, where the environment would bring the object of study to the forefront of our conversations. In his own work he had discovered that it made sense to hold an interview in a dance studio because, as he said, “I knew they’re gonna dance for me.” In addition, he recommended that I film all of my interviews, saying, “When I think about Cuban ballet and pedagogy, there's so many ways that I could imagine that a subject that you're going to interview is going to use their body.” In July 2024, I spoke with Victor Alexander, the director of Ruth Page School, who initiated the “Cuba y Chicago” student exchange program when I was in high school. As an Afro-Cuban and Modern Dance teacher who performed with Danza Contemporanea de Cuba for a decade, Victor spoke about how he understood the ways in which his own pedagogy has changed over time. And in May 2024 I interviewed Candice Webster, a co-facilitator of the Cuban Ballet Methodology training seminar at Towson University. This four-day long seminar instructs dance educators on delivering the advanced curriculum of the Cuban National Ballet School. While I was hoping to attend this seminar, the program has not run for the past two summers due to underenrollment.

Selected Literature Review

In planning interviews and analyzing these conversations, I turned to lectures in oral history and literature related to performances studies and translation studies. This scholarship informed additional choices I made in pursuing my methodology.

In my decision to include myself in the interview footage, I was guided by lessons from Professor Amy Starecheski at OHMA, who elucidated the concept of intersubjectivity in the interview. In her foundational fieldwork course, Professor Starecheski shared that the interview gives us access to verbal renditions of memories, generated by the presence of the interviewer.¹¹ The relationship and subjectivities of the interviewer and interviewee (narrator) dictate what will be shared in an interview, and establishing and cultivating the relationship between these parties is a big part of the work of oral history.¹² Alessandro Portelli's 2018 article "Living Voices: The Oral History Interview as Dialogue and Experience" was another source I used to consider my involvement in the oral history exchange. He writes, the interview is "a form of dialogue: we are not in the field to extract data from informants, but to exchange knowledge with citizens of our own world and time, our contemporaries."¹³

Relatedly, I was further compelled to think about the relationship between my body and those of the narrators through Mary Marshall Clark and Ann Cvetkovich's course "Listening and Seeing with the Body in Mind," in which they highlighted the multisensory nature of the interview. Coming with backgrounds in trauma studies and affect theory, these professors encouraged me to think about the dynamics between interviewer and narrator at the level of

¹¹ Amy Starecheski, "What is oral history? Intro to recording and interviewing," lecture, *Oral History Fieldwork, Production and Archiving*, Columbia University, September 4, 2023.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Alessandro Portelli, "Living Voices: The Oral History Interview as Dialogue and Experience," *The Oral History Review* 45, no. 2 (2018): 241, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ohr/ohy030>.

emotion and physical response, about how peoples' emotional responses to real world occurrences and structures are foundational to understanding how they traverse the world differently.¹⁴ As a final project for their course, I was able to reflect on a choreographic process in which I took part and how the improvisatory nature of the dance mirrored the dynamics of an oral history exchange. That encouraged me to see the dynamics between the narrators and I as a kind of dance.

The concept of embodied knowledge, which I understand to mean how lived experiences are stored in the body also appears throughout this study. It is a term that was first introduced to me by Professor Chow. In her lectures, she explained that embodied knowledge is the idea that each of our bodies encounters the world differently and therefore we all feel and remember things differently in our bodies.¹⁵ I also draw from ethnomusicologist, dancer and professor emeritus at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute Tomie Hahn's writings on embodied cultural knowledge and how it is transmitted in her essay "Stalking Embodied Knowledge--then What?" I've read further into the concept of the knowing body in Bill Bissell and Linda Caruso Haviland's 2018 anthology *The Sentient Archive: Bodies Performance and Memory*. In Linda Caruso Haviland's "Considering the Body as Archive" she writes, "Given the universal and inescapable materiality of humanness, the bodied nature of thought, and the powerful appeal of both history and memory, the notion of the body as and in the archive has import for us in all aspects of our lives."¹⁶

One of the central goals of this project is to identify how embodied knowledge is present in the ballet class and how that knowledge is communicated in the pedagogical space. To this

¹⁴ "Studying Affect," Carleton University, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences. 2025.
<https://carleton.ca/fass/story/studying-affect/>

¹⁵ Chow, *Roots & Branches*, September 12, 2023.

¹⁶ Linda Caruso Haviland, "Considering the Body as Archive," *The Sentient Archive: Bodies, Performance, and Memory*, ed. Bill Bissell and Linda Caruso Haviland (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2018), 10.

end, Friedman advised me to create discussion prompts “that can elicit information about embodied knowledge,” or to ask questions that will reveal “embodied values” as a way to trace how pedagogy and technique adapt across borders. In our conversation he suggests how inviting them to dance, “will help you, and help them articulate what is the Cubanness of this? And how do [they] transmit that then, as you ask, to a whole other set of bodies?” With support from Zapol I also asked questions such as: What kinds of corrections do you give to students here in the United States? How did you get to school each morning, get home at night? Did that impact the way you danced during the day? Can you remember a moment or day in which you experienced clarity with regards to technique? Can you describe that sensation? How does that impact the way in which you teach that step now?

And finally, the many degrees of translation that are essential to my analysis is an idea I explored with Professor Brent Edwards, another invaluable advisor for this project. At the core of this study are the stories of Cuban ballet teachers living in the United States who migrated abroad to teach an art form that itself had migrated to Cuba. On this level alone, as elucidated by Professor Edwards and Professor Karen Van Dyck in their seminar on “The Hybrid Voice: Comparative Diasporas and Translation,” my work considers how a European form that was adopted in the Caribbean travels to the United States and gets reabsorbed into yet another social and political context. The class was “organized around the proposition that any consideration of diaspora requires a consideration of comparative and overlapping diasporas, and as a consequence a confrontation with multilingualism, creolization and the problem of translation.”¹⁷ Oral history itself involves translation, insofar as one must translate their memories into a narrative they can share. Since I interviewed Caridad, Tania and Ana in Spanish, this project also

¹⁷ Brent Hayes Edwards and Karen Van Dyck, *The Hybrid Voice: Comparative Diasporas and Translation* syllabus, Columbia University, Fall 2023.

includes my translation of interviews into English. Translation appears yet again at the level of transcription, where I move from the auditory to the written word, as seen in both the subtitled, movement-based interview clips linked throughout this document, as well as in the translated interview excerpts contained in the body of the text. I include the original Spanish language of these quotes in the footnote references as well. Added to all of this is the translation of gesture and physical movement into language, one of the central tensions of this thesis. Through all of these layers of translation—memory to speech, oral to written, body to body, gesture to language—I realize that our ability to communicate our knowledge to another is often reliant upon a series of approximations. As I explore in this study, dance teachers, perhaps more than anyone, have honed a practice of translating memory.

Tracing Pedagogical Inheritance and Lineages of Memory

Perhaps the most basic way that the ballet class can take on the character of an oral history is through recognizing that dance instruction is itself revelation of memory. As Professor Nyssa Chow explains, how someone narrates their life depends on how their family, community, nationality and ideology have shaped their world view. What one shares in an oral history are the worlds we are born into.¹⁸ Just as it is the task of the oral historian to understand a person's formation and the system of logic that has informed their sharing of memory, I propose that we can learn more in a ballet class by listening for the personal and cultural histories of our teachers. As Tania says, teaching is “not just the methodology you use. It's how you use that methodology...it's your life story. It's what you learn to be able to transmit.”¹⁹ She suggests that

¹⁸ Nyssa Chow, *Roots & Branches: On Listening and Interpretation* lecture, Columbia University, September 12, 2023.

¹⁹ Tania: “Es que ser maestro no es solamente la metodología que tú usas, es también cómo tú usas esa metodología...Y además es tu historia de vida, es lo que tú aprendes también para poder transmitir.”

teaching dance is not only done through the systematic application of technique, but is informed by one's memories and life experiences. Teachers pull from the pantheon of mentors that have trained them and impacted their life experiences.

Across the interviews, I hear the ways in which a key part of each narrators' memory formation derives from the outsized role that their own dance teachers played. As Tania says, "[A teacher is] a person with other characteristics, with another sensibility and with something else. When you are a teacher, and you call yourself a teacher, I say that person was born with it."²⁰

Tania recalls how her teachers moved, the corrections they gave. She remembers,

I had a teacher, I love her, she was wonderful. Her name is Adria...I have to think about it, but I have the idea that she was the only teacher who went to study historical dances in the Soviet Union when it was the Soviet Union. She is short, plump, and did all those character dances and everything like that. So, you can imagine all the Russian dances, the czardas, the mazurka, all of that she did, spectacularly.²¹

Likewise, Ana recalls the influence of instructors at her early time at the *Escuela Nacional de Arte*. "The first years, I had a really good teacher, her name was Josefina Manferrer.

Excellent...for those first levels she would set you up, she gave you everything. And after that I had [the well known luminary] Ramona de Saá, [also known as] Cherry, and then after that in the final years I had Karemia Moreno. She studied in Russia and so she had more arms, *port de bras*..."²² As she *port de bras*, the French word meaning literally, "carriage of the arms," but in effect meaning how the arms move from one position to another, she holds them round in front

²⁰ Tania: "Es una persona con otras características y con otra sensibilidad y con otra cosa. Cuando tú eres maestro, que te llamas a ti mismo maestro, yo digo que esa persona nació con eso."

²¹ Tania: "Tenía una maestra, me encanta ella, ella era maravillosa, se llama Adria...Tengo que pensar, tengo que averiguar bien, pero yo tengo la idea de que fue la única maestra que fue a estudiar danzas históricas a la Unión Soviética cuando era Unión Soviética. Es bajita así, es regordita, y además hacía todo lo que era bailes de carácter y todo eso. Entonces te imaginabas todas las danzas rusas, la csárdás, la mazurka, todo eso lo hacía ella, espectacular."

²² Ana: "Los primeros años, tuve una maestra muy buena que... se llamaba Josefina Manferrer. Excelente porque...ella para los primeros niveles...te colocaba, te daba todo para y después tuve a Ramona de Saa, Cherry, y ya después los últimos años, tuve a Karemia Moreno que ella estudió en rusia y entonces tenía más de brazos de *port de bras*."

of her and bends deeply at the waist. “The early years, they were focused on technique...The corrections of hip placement...After that Cherry was extremely strict with technique, but also about moving the head, the arms, dancing more. And the last one was more Russian, which was even more dancing, but with her technique as well.”²³

What becomes clear in these reminiscences is how remembering their teachers ties them to the very origin of ballet in Cuba itself. The narrators, who are in their 50s, 60s and 70s, retain a personal connection to the founders of the National Ballet Company and National Ballet school in Cuba via their teachers. Caridad herself danced with Alicia Alonso, the legendary founder of the company.²⁴ Of Alicia’s husband, the cofounder of the company and school, and one of the architects of Cuban ballet methodology, Caridad says “I was lucky enough to have Fernando Alonso, Alicia — geniuses.” Her stories of technique and training are colored by a number of the figures who impacted her learning. She continues, “I had geniuses. Fernando Alonso, Alicia Alonso, Loipa Araújo, José Parés, Joaquín Banegas.”²⁵

In Tania’s broad overview of the founding of Cuban ballet she explains,

Before the Revolution triumphed, there was already a ballet movement that was taking shape. Little by little they were putting the pieces together, sticking them together. And these two Cuban dance greats appear—who were Fernando and Alberto. Then Alicia appears in this whole plot...The Ballet Alicia Alonso is created. A little bit later they create the school, and from that process Fernando, Alicia, and Alberto are working on a methodology.²⁶

²³Ana: “Las correcciones de las caderas en su lugar, no era más bien sobre la técnica. Ya después, Cherry era durísima la técnica, pero también más sobre mover la cabeza, los brazos, bailar más y ya la última como era más rusa, esa era más todavía baile, pero con su técnica igual.”

²⁴As Octavio Roca writes in his book *Cuban Ballet*, “One extraordinary woman has been and continues to be at the center of [the] revolution, and the effects of her influence on world dance and culture will linger long after the revolution itself has been consigned to the dustbin of history.” Together with her husband and brother in law, Alicia built the Cuban National Ballet into one of the world’s leading dance companies. Though going blind in 1940, Alicia remained at the help of the company until her death. Octavio Roca, *Cuban Ballet*, (Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith, 2010), 63.

²⁵Caridad: “Y además, yo tuve la suerte de tener a Fernando Alonso, Alicia, genios. Yo tuve genios. Yo crecí con genios. Fernando Alonso, Alicia Alonso, Loipa Araújo, José Parés, Joaquin Banegas”

²⁶Tania: “Antes de que triunfara la revolución ya había un movimiento de ballet que se iba estructurando, que poquito a poco iba armando las fichas, iban pegando las fichas unas a otras. Y aparecen estos dos geniales de la

Tania lists members of the company in its early days, dancers who brought to life the new Cuban ballet style and brought prominence to the project of Cuban ballet.²⁷ She says, although “I didn’t take class from Alicia, I studied with everyone directly below Alicia,” including from “Josefina, Cristina Álvarez, I don’t know, Loipa, Marta, Mirta, everyone. I took classes from all of those people . . . who were there.”²⁸ She continues, “When I was dancing, all of my paradigms and all of my examples were dancing. They were there. Or they had just stopped dancing, but they were there and I could go see them at shows. I was in the school and I would go see all of their shows.”²⁹ In this way the narrators situate their own experiences as part of a common inheritance, a chain of dancers and teachers who, as Caridad says, enabled her “to do everything that I have [done] because of them.”³⁰

For Tania, the ability to trace lineage is part of what establishes the integrity of her knowledge base. Although she personally did not take class from Alicia, she can make a direct connection between herself and the founding methodology, as she can literally name the links in the chain that connect her to the founder. For this reason, she laments the grand exodus of dancers and dance teachers in Cuba, which she says causes “gaps” in the learning for young Cuban students and company members.

danza cubana que son Fernando y Alberto. Luego aparece Alicia en todo ese entramado . . . Se crea el ballet Alicia Alonso . . . se crea un poco después la escuela y ya desde ese proceso están Fernando, Alicia y Alberto, están trabajando en una metodología.”

²⁷ Upon seeing the Ballet Nacional de Cuba perform for the first time at the Varna competition in Bulgaria, British dance critic Arnold Haskell described the young Cuban competitors as the “Four Jewels of the Cuban Ballet,” *Cuatro Joyas del Ballet Cubano*. The Ballet Nacional de Cuba website marks June 17, 1967 as the important date in which Haskell published his article about the Four Jewels and the historic achievements of the Cuban national ballet school. Tania refers to these women and other members of the early company.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20170816185242/http://www.balletcuba.cult.cu/cuatro-joyas-del-ballet-cubano/>

²⁸ Tania: “No recibí clases de Alicia. Pero recibí clases de Alicia para abajo de todo el mundo. Desde Josefina, Cristina Álvarez. No sé lo de Marta, Mirta, todos. Yo recibí clases de toda esa gente que eran la gente que estaba, o sea que fue la gente que creció . . . en esa metodología, en ellos se probó la metodología.

²⁹ Tania: “Cuando yo bailaba, todos mis paradigmas y todos mis ejemplos bailaban, estaban ahí, o habían apenas terminado de bailar, pero estaban ahí y las podía ver en las funciones. Yo ya estaba en la escuela y iba a ver las funciones de todas ellas.”

³⁰ Caridad: “yo he podido hacer todo lo que he podido hacer por eso.

What example does this new generation have to follow? Who remains as an example? So the quality is being lost a little. That oral transmission, that continuation in the lineage, I teach you, and you teach me, and you keep teaching with that same lineage. So there are gaps in the learning, and in those gaps a whole set of things is lost — a set of values, of culture, of tradition, of strategy. But well, dancers are still coming out [of Cuba]. There must still be something good left when dancers of that quality are still being produced.³¹

An additional revelation from the recitation of ballet's origins in Cuba is the close relationship between ballet and the state. For example, "Every province in Cuba," Tania informed me, "has a vocational school where the students with inclinations can begin studying ballet, music and dance."³² Tania started studying ballet at a school in the province of Holguín, Cuba when she was eight years old, and when her family relocated back to Havana she was transferred into the main ballet school. When it came time for high school, Tania flipped a coin to decide whether to continue her training at the *Escuela Nacional de Arte* or to enter a special science high school, which she tested into to study physics. "I tossed a coin five times. And it fell three times on ballet, and twice on physics. So I went for ballet."³³ When Victor Alexander was in the sixth grade, he remembers two people walking into his class in the small town of Guane in the Pinar del Rio province of Cuba. They let all of the kids know they would be holding an audition for students to study at the National School of the Arts in Havana. Though Victor had not necessarily dreamed of becoming a dancer, "We have all those different schools due to the educational system there, so you have the idea that you can go and can have these opportunities."

³¹ Tania: "Entonces, ¿qué ejemplo tiene la nueva generación para seguir? ¿Qué, quién queda de ejemplo? El éxodo grande de maestros de los que fuimos estudiantes de esos grandes maestros ya tampoco están en Cuba. Entonces se va perdiendo un poco la calidad, se va perdiendo un poco esa transmisión oral, ese, esa consecución en la línea, te enseño y tú me enseñas y sigues enseñando con esa misma línea... Entonces hay como saltos en ese aprendizaje y en esos saltos se pierden un conjunto de cosas, se pierden un conjunto de valores, se pierden un conjunto de valores, de cultura, de tradición, de estrategia. Pero bueno, siguen saliendo bailarines. Algo bueno todavía queda cuando siguen saliendo bailarines de esa calidad."

³² Tania: "Las provincias de Cuba, cada provincia tiene una escuela, se llaman las escuelas vocacionales. Que es donde los estudiantes con inclinaciones, empiezan a estudiar ballet, música, danza."

³³ Tania: "Pero bueno, tenía este salto que estaba en el medio entre el ballet por un lado y la física por el otro lado, y aunque no lo crean, tiré una moneda. Cinco veces, y cayó tres veces al ballet, dos veces a la física, y me fui por el ballet."

He ended up auditioning for the modern dance division. As he recalls, they had him do a split, point his feet, *tendu* to the side, do a bridge. Out of the thousand kids that auditioned in his province, he was one of three chosen. Ana began dancing at the *Escuela Nacional de Arte* when she was eight years old. She describes “a very strict training, very rigorous... They woke us up at 6AM and made us march like soldiers. And then we would go to classes, which we had all morning. We had ballet, we had historical dances, character dances, pointe, and variations, for the highest levels.”³⁴ In each case that the narrators describe, the state subsidized system of specialized education played a critical role in their journeys as dancers.

As the scholarship on Cuban dance explains, the vision for a rigorously-trained, world-class corps of classical dancers fit perfectly within the ideals of the Cuban Revolution. As Fidel Castro noted in his 1961 speech, “Words to the Intellectuals,”³⁵ one of the goals of the Revolution was “to create the conditions that will permit every artistic, literary, scientific, or any other kind of talent to be developed.”³⁶ The Revolution ushered in a model in which the government would fund the art schools “to educate those artists who would give socialism in both Cuba and the Third World its aesthetic representation.”³⁷ The revolutionary government’s embrace of the *Ballet Nacional de Cuba* was mutually beneficial for the company and the government. Given the “close linkage of the Cuban ballet to its European sources,”³⁸ traditional

³⁴ Ana: “El entrenamiento era muy estricto, muy duro. Era toda la mañana desde por la mañana, nos levantaban a las seis de la mañana nos hacían marchar primero como militar y después de de íbamos a las clases, teníamos toda la mañana. Teníamos ballet, teníamos danzas históricas, danzas de carácter, puntas, variaciones, ya en los niveles más altos.”

³⁵ Fidel Castro, “Palabras a los Intelectuales,” June 30, 1961.

³⁶ English translation by Charleyne Biondi. Original Spanish: “Vamos a crear las condiciones que permitan que todo talento artístico o literario o científico o de cualquier orden, pueda desarrollarse. Y piensen lo que significa la Revolución que tal cosa permita y que ya desde ahora mismo, desde el próximo curso, habrá alfabetizado a todo el pueblo, y con escuelas en todos los lugares de Cuba...”

<http://blogs.law.columbia.edu/uprising1313/fidel-castro-palabras-a-los-intelectuales-words-to-the-intellectuals/>.

³⁷ John A. Loomis and James Loomis, *Revolution of Forms: Cuba’s Forgotten Art Schools* (Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), 19-20.

³⁸ Lester Tomé, “‘Music in the Blood’: Performance and Discourse of Musicality in Cuban Ballet Aesthetics.” *Dance Chronicle* 36, no. 2 (2013): 219 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24252647>.

aesthetic hierarchies meant ballet became a barometer of development, and ballet dancers the most heralded dance laborers in Cuba.³⁹ Fernando Alonso, co-founder of the Ballet Nacional, wrote about the integration of the dancer with revolutionary ideology in a 1971 article “*La función del profesor en la formación del artista*” (The role of the teacher in the training of the artist), in which he acknowledged that. “It was not possible to carry out the same kind of work with dancers before the triumph of the Revolution.” He also put forth that, “the social revolution that completely transformed the life of our country, liberating forces that had been shackled and propelling them into a dizzying race forward, [allows] the artist to occupy the place that belongs to them in society and to have at their disposal the resources they need to express themselves.”⁴⁰

The connection between the training at the *Escuela Nacional de Arte* and the state in Cuba persists. From students’ first steps at the barre to company performances at the *Gran Teatro Alicia Alonso*, the (proverbial) check is written by the government, such that teachers of a later era also carry the memories of these ideals. “You didn’t debate politics,” Tania recalls. “You accepted what was there and that was that. It wasn’t something that you could say, ‘no I’m opposed to such a measure.’ That was not debatable. You accept it and you keep going.”⁴¹

Thus when Tania describes her final years at the National Ballet School in the early 1990s, during the so-called “*Periodo Especial*” (Special Period), she shares a harrowing account of sacrifice to keep the ballet school operational during a time of severe economic hardship. She recalls,

³⁹ Elizabeth Schwall, “Dancing with the Revolution: Cuban Dance, State, and Nation, 1930-1990.” Columbia University, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.7916/D8GM879J>, 179

⁴⁰ “Desde luego, hay un factor decisivo en todo este proceso: la revolución social que transformó totalmente la vida de nuestro país liberando fuerzas que estaban maniatadas y que se lanzan en una carrera vertiginosa hacia adelante, permitiendo al artista ocupar el puesto que le corresponde en la sociedad, y disponer de los recursos que necesita para expresarse.” Fernando Alonso, “La función del profesor en la formación del artista,” *Revista Cuba en el Ballet* 2, no. 1 (1971): 10.

⁴¹ Tania: “La política no se debatía Tú aceptabas eso que estaba y eso era lo que era. No era algo que tú llegabas, no, porque estoy en contra de tal medida. Eso no era algo discutible. Eso lo aceptas y sigues el camino.”

The school was also so deeply absorbed in trying to resolve its own issues—trying to make sure classes didn't fall through, that studio schedules were coordinated, that the small performances could happen, that with the few resources we had we did whatever was possible: making costumes, painting the sets. The school was trying to carry all of that... I mean, the teachers were trying to keep the place from closing, to make sure it could keep going. And that all the objectives for each year were met.⁴²

Even when the shortages were so severe that a lack of fuel prevented students from being able to travel from dance classes in the *Teatro Lorca* to the building where they held academic classes, the school maintained its revolutionary promise of creating and training great dancers. Tania recounts, “And when you put on false eyelashes, put your hair up, and put on that tutu, you're not thinking that the only thing you ate was a piece of bread.”⁴³ In this way, naming one's teachers, recalling one's lineage, and surfacing the origin stories of Cuban ballet collapses these oral history layers between personal and global history.

With these memories, the narrators suggest that one's life story is not incidental but necessary to invoke in order to be able to teach. As she says, the transmission of dance knowledge is teaching someone about yourself. Further, viewing the ballet class as a kind of oral history, we can recognize that each lesson contains not just the immediate teacher-student relationship, but an exposure to generations of pedagogical memories – in our teachers' teachers, and in their teachers before them. As inheritors of the Cuban ballet tradition, these personal memories are nested within layers of national stories and ideological frameworks. That is why, as I learn from my conversation with Candice Webster, the Cuban Ballet Methodology training seminar at Towson University teaches participants about the history and cultural traits of the

⁴² Tania: “O sea, la escuela también estaba tan embuida en tratar de resolver sus propios asuntos, tratar de que las clases no fallaran, de que los salones se coordinaron, de que, eh, de hacer las pequeñas funciones, de hacer, eh, Con los pocos recursos que teníamos a hacer, lo que se podía hacer, los trajes, o sea, pintar la escenografía. La escuela trataba de sobrellevar todo eso... O sea, los maestros estaban intentando que aquello no cerrara, que aquello pudiera salir adelante. Y que se hiciera, se cumplieran todos los objetivos de cada año.”

⁴³ Tania: “Y cuando te pones las pestañas, y te pones un moño, y te pones tutú, tú no estás pensando que lo único que te comiste fue un pan. Es ese momento y te transformas en eso.”

Cuban National Ballet School, not just “the positions, steps, and exercises that make-up the academic dance.”⁴⁴ To teach Cuban technique, one must understand the historic and cultural formation of the Cuban National Ballet School.

Technique as Embodied Knowledge

Part A: Locating Embodied Cultural Knowledge

If one aspect of oral history is exploring someone’s memories via the personal and historical events that have shaped them, a method of doing this is by listening for and observing embodied knowledge. Over the past three decades, scholars across oral history, anthropology, performance studies, and feminist theory have moved the field of oral history towards a more expansive understanding of how memory is stored and shared in the body. As Linda Caruso Haviland writes in “Considering The Body as Archive,” “The many kinds of dance actions, events, and experiences, and the varying levels of expertise at which all of these can be practiced, both require and make evident...the knowledge that resides deep within and throughout the body. The body can generate, assimilate and process knowledge and is an archive able to store knowledge.”⁴⁵

As I understand it, a key container of embodied knowledge in ballet class is technique itself – the codified syllabus which dictates how to execute steps, phrases, jumps, and turns. In interviews with Caridad, Tania, and Ana, they illuminate this proposition, articulating the ways in which the technique they display in class has baked into it, by design, the physical qualities and personality traits of Cubans. In Tania’s telling of the origin story of the *Ballet Nacional de*

⁴⁴ “About the Seminar,” Cuban National Ballet School Methodology Teaching Seminar, Towson University Community Dance.
<https://www.towson.edu/campus/artsculture/centers/communitydance/professional-development/teaching-seminar/about.html>.
<https://www.towson.edu/campus/artsculture/centers/communitydance/professional-development/teaching-seminar/about.html>

⁴⁵ Haviland, “Considering the Body as Archive,” 1.

Cuba, she describes the founders' codification of Cuban technique as an attempt to put to use the physical attributes of Cuban dancers who had "different characteristics from that Italian, that Russian, that French, and that English [dancer]."⁴⁶ Alicia says as much in the forward to Octavio Roca's book *Cuban Ballet*, writing, when "classical technique is assumed in a country with its own distinctive culture, and when within that technique are assimilated a people's national culture the labors of its ballet masters and its dancers, that technique begins to acquire unique shadings."⁴⁷ I understand these "unique shadings" to mean embodied knowledge.

Caridad begins our conversation talking about how the aesthetic visions for various ballet techniques around the world emanate from the various cultural environments in which they originate. As we sit opposite from one another at a folding table, Caridad explains how different training environments share many of the same goals, i.e. "everyone wants that expressive language of the foot, wants that expressive language of the upper body," but the particular look or style associated with a national company or academy is different based on the elements of its identity. As she enunciates "*lenguaje expresivo*" (expressive language) she luxuriously opens her palms, then scoops in towards her chin one finger at a time. She toggles between a conventional kind of gesticulation, slicing her hand forward, "They all work towards the same goal," and a dancerly pantomime--brushing her fingernails to airily move her chin from left to right, "There is a feeling". As Caridad contends, these distinct national schools draw from the ways that people of a given place tend to express themselves.

The sensibility of each school is different because it's based on many ethnic factors, physical factors of each country... So I'm not the first to say this, but yes, the culture of each country and the way of being of the people in each different country like... the Italians that are also very open and outward.... The Russians have an intensity... They have a very specific body. The body of the students that they select is a body that can

⁴⁶ Tania: "Empiezan a traer su información y empiezan a ponerla en función de ese cubano con características diferentes a ese italiano, a ese ruso, a ese francés, a ese inglés."

⁴⁷ Alicia Alonso, "Foreword," in *Cuban Ballet*, (Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith, 2010), 8.

express...the technical language of the school. All of that is in the technique and the way they express themselves while dancing.

And in our school, it's really, really, really strong... We Cubans are a mix of Africans, with the Spanish, with, yes there are Indians, the Taínos, but I see especially in our school rhythm and sensuality... And the way that Cubans do it is all more expressive, more flash. There is a lot of expressivity, lots of giving in the way you transmit there, for the audience. But like that, directly, because we are that way. In the way that we talk, the weather we have. And the people talk so quickly. And so all those ethnic and personality traits of Cubans are in the technique.⁴⁸ ([See Video Excerpt 4](#))

In my interview with Tania, she suggests a similar idea that technique builds from the natural tendencies of a people, pointing to the very deliberate expression of 'Cubanness' within Cuban modern technique. In contrast to ballet, she says that Cuban modern technique "has a part taken completely from folkloric dance. The work of the pelvis, the work of the hips, work with undulations—that comes from all of our popular dances." While, as she notes, that intentional infusion is "something we don't have [in ballet technique]," ballerinas "have it in our genes, in the sense that you see a Cuban woman walking and she sways. Not because she wants to sway, but because her body sways. They taught her to walk, swaying...and that's how she dances."⁴⁹ She continues, "All of that flirtation that Cubans have, they carry it in their dancing. It's not

⁴⁸ Caridad: "La sensibilidad de cada escuela es diferente porque está basado en muchos factores étnicos, físicos de cada país...Entonces, pues eso es algo de que yo no soy la primera que lo estoy diciendo, pero si la cultura de cada país y la manera de ser de cada de las personas en cada diferentes países como... los italianos que son también muy abiertos y afuera. Todo eso está en la técnica y en la manera en que ellos se expresan al bailar. El ruso, el ruso tiene un sentimiento extra, hay un sentimiento, hay una intensidad que tiene una calidad de movimiento y ellos tienen un cuerpo muy específico. El cuerpo de los estudiantes que ellos toman es un cuerpo para que pueda, expresar su escuela, su lenguaje expresivo del lenguaje técnico de su escuela. Y en la escuela nuestra está muy, muy, muy fuerte...Nosotros los cubanos, somos una mezcla de africanos con españoles, hay indios, los Taínos todo, pero yo veo sobre todo en nuestra escuela, el ritmo y la sensualidad...Y como la manera que tiene el cubano es todo más expresivo, es más flash. Hay mucha expresividad, mucha entrega en la manera tú transmites allá, pa público, pero así directamente, porque nosotros somos así de la manera en que hablamos, el clima que tenemos y la gente habla muy rápido. Entonces, todo esos aspectos étnicos y de personalidad del cubano están en la técnica."

⁴⁹ Tania: "Hay una parte que la tienen completa, que la sacan del folklore. O sea, completa. Trabajo de pelvis, trabajo de cadera, trabajo de ondulaciones, que lo sacan de todo el baile popular nuestro. O sea, nosotros eso no lo tenemos. O sea, eso lo tenemos En los genes de que tú ves una mujer cubana caminando y se contonea, no porque se quiera contonear, sino porque su cuerpo se contonea, le enseñaron a caminar, no sé, contoneándose, no sé, se contonea, así mismo baila."

something that's taught. It's not something that's imposed. It's something you develop because of where you are. You develop it because you watch your teacher; you develop it because you see a woman."⁵⁰ The idea that we move our bodies differently across cultures has long been suggested in the literatures of sociology and anthropology. While not referring specifically to dance, Marcel Mauss, in his seminal 1935 essay "Techniques of the Body," describes "technique" as "the ways in which from society to society men know how to use their bodies."⁵¹ He writes that "Each society has its own special habits" where habits (understood in the French sense of *habitus*, 'acquired ability' and 'faculty') "do not just vary with individuals and their imitations, they vary especially between societies, educations, proprieties and fashions, prestiges."⁵²

Alicia Alonso makes this distinction clear in her own writing, when she says that "classicism is the foundation of each aspect of the Cuban ballet's artistic life"⁵³ but that "[c]lassical technique is layered on [the] foundation [of] a country's national culture and in the talent unique to a people to express itself in dance."⁵⁴ Indeed, Caridad and Tania suggest that the body of Alicia herself was instrumental in forming this embodied cultural expression. As Tania says,

When you start to study from where that Cuban dancer emerges, those texts tell you she emerges from the example of Alicia. The example of Alicia is used to build everything that becomes the Cuban dancer... With the figure of Alicia as the example, as the paradigm, there are a number of things that I suppose would look better than others, because bodies are different. Lines are different. The mannerisms are different, the cadences are different.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Tania: "Todo ese coqueteo que tiene el cubano lo lleva en el baile. No es algo que se enseñe. No es algo que se impone. Volvemos a lo mismo. Es algo que tú vas desarrollando porque es donde estás. Lo desarrollas porque ves a tu maestro, lo desarrollas porque ves a la mujer."

⁵¹ Marcel Mauss, "Techniques of the Body," trans. Ben Brewster, *Economy and Society* 2, no. 1 (1935), 70-88.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 73.

⁵³ Lester Tomé, "'Music in the Blood': Performance and Discourse of Musicality in Cuban Ballet Aesthetics," *Dance Chronicle* 36, no. 2 (2013), 219, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24252647>.

⁵⁴ Roca, *Cuban Ballet*, 8.

⁵⁵ Tania: "Cuando uno empieza a estudiar de dónde sale esa bailarina cubana, los libros, los textos te dicen después, bueno, sale del ejemplo de Alicia, o sea, el ejemplo de Alicia se usa para de ahí armar todo lo que sigue la bailarina cubana... Teniendo como ejemplo, como paradigma la figura de Alicia, hay un conjunto de cosas que supongo que

The mother of Cuban ballet had a particular body, and this body may actually be the mold on which Cuban technique was shaped. Alicia had a “*cuerpecito*, as we like to call it,” says Tania, outlining the imaginary silhouette of a curvy woman. “A mermaid’s body that is longer with wide hips...I mean when you saw Alicia, walking or dancing, she swayed.”⁵⁶ The Cuban ballet school would therefore look to emulate Alicia’s quality of expression, teaching movement with energy and precision because, as Caridad describes, Alicia had incredible velocity of the feet when she danced.⁵⁷ And because Alicia had particular ideas about how to shape the artistic sensibility of the company, she imposed her vision into the curriculum. As Caridad explains, Alicia taught a *port de bras* that was “more pure and academic, similar to the English school, because she didn’t want to use the exaggerated version that Vaganova uses.”⁵⁸

To be sure, it would be overly simplistic to say that all Cubans are all fast talkers, or all sensual, or social, or that they express themselves through dance in the same way. Even as the narrators describe embodied knowledge as something shared in a people, personal bodily memories and lived experiences color their individual expressions of technique. Caridad, for example, experienced discontent during her time at the company, according to historian Elizabeth Schwall, and co-founded a new company, *The Ballet Teatro de la Habana*, to respond to her sense that “a diversity of style does not exist” in the *Ballet Nacional de Cuba*. With this alternative company, she sought to “shake all the rigid concepts that had prevailed in the

se verían mejor que otras, porque los físicos son diferentes, las líneas son diferentes, los manierismos son diferentes, las cadencias son diferentes.”

⁵⁶ Tania: “Además de que tenía un *cuerpecito*, como le decimos nosotros, cuerpo de sirena, que son más estrechitos y abren un poco las caderas...O sea, si tú ves a Alicia caminando, bailando, se contoneaba.”

⁵⁷ Caridad: “Alicia tenía una velocidad increíble de pie y su manera de bailar.”

⁵⁸ Caridad: “Ella no quería *port de bras* que utiliza Vaganova que el Bolshoi no lo tiene... Alicia lo tenía bien claro que ella no quería eso. Ella quería un movimiento más puro de la parte superior más académica que quizás eso nos acercaba a la escuela inglesa.”

formation of classical dance.”⁵⁹ That project was perhaps, (based on my analysis of technique in this study) an effort by Caridad to renegotiate her relationship to her pedagogical inheritance, or to reinterpret technique as something more capacious.

In our interview, Tania speaks about how a different variety of lived experience made its way into her embodied knowledge as well. She says,

You have to see that on top of everything, being a professional dancer in Cuba is a big struggle. It’s complicated. So that struggle, it doesn’t seem like it, but that’s also in the dance. I mean, that contradiction, those desires to express something different, those desires to demonstrate something different, all of that is also in the dance. And you feel that. That, having eaten or not, those basic needs that aren’t being met, all of that is in the dancing. And all of that is felt in one way or another.

But really, it’s that. All the work you put in to get to the studio, all of those buses that don’t come, that bus filled with people who smell horrible. All of that comes out in the dance... It comes out in the way that you project on stage. It comes out in how you want to convey something to that audience. That despite everything, you’re there. Despite all of the shortages, all of the problems, despite everything, you’re there. And that space is like magic.⁶⁰ ([See Video Excerpt 5](#))

In other words, the conditions outside of the studio – on the street, in peoples’ homes – that co-exist alongside her training and performing, are part of the experiences that solidify into her embodied knowledge and inform how she expresses herself through dance. This is to say that embodied knowledge arrives in the dance classroom not only through a formal curriculum, but also in the way that one absorbs their lived experiences into their artistic practices.

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Schwall, “Dancing with the Revolution: Cuban Dance, State, and Nation, 1930-1990.” Columbia University, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.7916/D8GM879J>, 347.

⁶⁰Tania: “Y tienes que ver por encima de todo eso que en Cuba ser bailarín profesional es una lucha bien grande...Es complicado. Entonces, esa lucha, parece que no, pero esa también está en el baile. O sea, esa contradicción, esas ganas de expresar algo diferente, esas ganas de demostrar algo diferente, todo eso también está en el baile. Y eso se siente. Esa comida o no comida, esas necesidades básicas que no están resueltas, todo eso está en el baile. Y todo eso se siente de una manera u otra...Pero realmente es eso. O sea, todo el trabajo que pasas para llegar a un salón, todo ese bus que no pasa, esa guagua llena de gente con olores de horrible. Eso sale en el baile...Sale en la manera en que tú te proyectas en el escenario. Sale en la manera en que tú le quieres transmitir algo a ese público que pese a todas esas cosas está ahí...Y ese espacio es como mágico.”

Candice Webster from Towson University acknowledges the indelible influence of the environment on the Cuban dancers, when she describes the goal of the teaching seminar as giving teachers an understanding of the cultural context around which ballet is taught on the island. As she explains, “The [Cuban] students have to walk a mile in the heat and they're hearing music being played on the street and so their body is already in that rhythmical motion.”⁶¹ To be able to dance like a Cuban, one needs to know about what it is like to dance in Cuba. Therefore, as Victor Alexander, the director of the Ruth Page Center for the Arts in Chicago posits, teaching itself, whether or not it adheres to the purity of the Cuban codified style, carries one's story. He says: “What makes [Cuban technique] unique is you as a Cuban... It's your voice. It's your cultural background. It's your persona... Because you have the cultural experience. You live in Cuba for a long time. You carry a history with you. It's you transmitting that cultural experience.”⁶² What unfolds in the studio reflects the social contexts of one's life experiences.

Technique as Embodied Knowledge

Part B: How Do You Transmit Embodied Cultural Knowledge?

The framework of oral history has allowed me to recognize the presence of cultural memory and embodied knowledge in ballet technique. Technique is a repository of cultural memory that dancers are able to call upon as second nature. As Ana says “you have it integrated. It is part of you. And you always use it because [your teachers] taught it to you well at the beginning.”⁶³

⁶¹ Candice Webster, interview by Samantha Sacks, May 21, 2024.

⁶² Victor Alexander, interview by Samantha Sacks, July 10, 2024.

⁶³ Ana: “Lo tienes integrado. Y siempre lo utilizas en la forma correcta, porque es que te lo enseñaron muy bien desde el principio.”

The question then becomes how is it that this embodied dance knowledge passes from one body to another and from generation to generation. Again, oral history literature helps elucidate the diversity of ways that knowledge is communicated. As Elinor A. Mazé writes in a 2006 article, “The Uneasy Page: Transcribing and Editing Oral History,” “The oral history interview... [is] created not only with spoken words but with gesture, silence, intonation, rhythm, volume, accent, and dozens of other elements of expression that convey meaning during the event.”⁶⁴ A crucial aspect of memory work, of the meaning-making of memories, is listening for the physicality or embodied delivery of stories. Maori Historian Nepia Mahuika’s 2019 book *Rethinking Oral History and Tradition* encourages practitioners to recognize that oral histories “are not simply aural, but multisensory productions.”⁶⁵ He rejects the “the ghettoization of indigenous oral practice and knowledge as anything less than history” by “open[ing] up the potential of oral sources as multisensory forms inclusive of visual and performative expressions and experiences.”⁶⁶

Thus building on Mahuika’s recognition that knowledge can be transmitted verbally, visually, and spiritually and Tomie Hahn’s notion that “How we express ourselves through the body reveals a great deal about our personal, cultural, and social backgrounds,”⁶⁷ I am interested in how exactly this information is transmitted to students, and effectively, the next generation of dancers. I think alongside Tomie Hahn in her essay “Stalking Embodied Knowledge—Then What?” who asks, how do we come to embody cultural knowledge?⁶⁸ What does the actual

⁶⁴ Elinor A. Mazé, “The Uneasy Page: Transcribing and Editing Oral History,” in *History of Oral History: Foundations and Methodology*, ed. Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007), 233.

⁶⁵ Nepia Mahuika, “The Indigenous Truth of Oral History,” in *Rethinking Oral History and Tradition: An Indigenous Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 171.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁶⁷ Tomie Hahn, “Stalking Embodied Knowledge—Then What?,” in *The Sentient Archive: Bodies, Performance, and Memory*, ed. Bill Bissell and Linda Caruso Haviland (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2018), 30.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

transmission of this knowledge look like in class? And as a result of this expanded awareness, what do we gain in our comprehension of embodiment?⁶⁹

Watching Ana's morning ballet class at Ballet Hispánico as an ethnographer rather than participant, it becomes increasingly clear from the observation that bodily communication often relies on multiple layers of translation. Perhaps most apparent is the translation that happens between how a teacher demonstrates movement and how students follow that lead. This is a routine I know well. The basic set-up of a ballet class consists of teachers demonstrating a combination and then students performing the combination (often set to the music of a live pianist). There are times when demonstrating corrections yields direct results. In the class that I visit, Ana's most frequent correction is that her students are leaning backwards. She imitates them and then exaggeratedly corrects herself by placing her hands on either side of her ribs and moving them slightly forward. The expectation is that they will copy her. Later in the class, as she sees that the mistake has not been corrected, she goes over to the student and gently pushes their torso and shoulders over their hips, re-aligning them, literally shaping the bodies around her.

As I continue my observation, I appreciate that there are many moments where the body's absorption of this direct modeling gets stalled in the process. Often, as in the case in dance classes more generally, Ana does not demonstrate with her own body the output she wishes to see from students. Rather, she marks a combination,⁷⁰ showing an approximation or even the opposite of what she intends for students to do. For example, when Ana intends for the class to do their *grand battements* with pointed toes, she marks the combination with a flexed foot.⁷¹ When her students do jumps, she calls out "down, down, down," presumably because she wants

⁶⁹ Ibid., 29.

⁷⁰ Marking means mapping out what a sequence will be without doing the combination full-out.

⁷¹ Marking with a flexed foot as opposed to a pointed one is often a lower effort way of moving.

them to spend longer in their *pliés*. Sometimes she forgoes the use of her feet altogether instead symbolizing the intended movement with her hands. For the *développé* combination, for example, she traces her fingers up the length of her arm until she reaches the elbow, then extends her hand directly in front of the stationary arm. Thus, one arm represents the supporting leg (the leg on the ground) and the other the working leg (the leg moving). A *coup de pied* position (French for “neck of the foot”), where one wraps their toes around the ankle, with the heel in front and toes in back, is made with a scoop of one hand, curling the fingers behind and the thumb in front of the other hand. In the *dégagé* combination, to show the *en croix* (in the shape of a cross) pattern, Ana lightly claps the top, then side, then back of the hand. This mode of communication, heavily reliant on visual aids, reflects a coded lexicon that teachers and students acquire in the studio. I see layers of translation and interpretation in what is required to learn to embody these movements.

Teachers do rely on words and language for communicating embodied knowledge, but in this respect the lexicon of the studio tends to be more akin to poetry than prose. Tania describes how she has had to parse the nuances of English vocabulary to elicit what she wants from her dancers. With the added challenge of teaching in a second language, she explains how she has come to understand the difference in meaning, for example, between “to stretch” and “to elongate.” She says,

It’s not the same thing to say stretch the leg as it is to say elongate the leg. I don’t know why, but it works differently. Stretch is like, ach, it stays here. [When she says stretch, her arm stops moving.] Elongate is like—you see it. [Tania extends her arm forward, lengthening it with no end pause.] It’s not the same to say stretch your arm. No, you don’t have to stretch it. You have to elongate it. Sometimes you don’t have to be stretched, just elongated.

What words do you use to awaken what you need and not something else that is detrimental? Like *estirar* and *alargar*, for example. In English, I haven’t learned the word

alargar, which is not estirar. It's not stretch. Elongate. But I started saying elongate and they didn't understand what elongate meant. Well, elongate isn't estirar. When you say *estira*, it gives you an image, it gives an idea that it is something that ends. You ended. You stretched. It ended there. When you say *elongas*, the image that gives is something that does not end. ([See Video Excerpt 6](#))

The poetics of ballet class are of course written into its French vocabulary. To *fondue* means “to melt,” but to execute the step the supporting and working leg simultaneously bend and then the working leg extends; a *frappé* means “to strike,” wherein the working foot sharply brushes or hits the floor before extending. *Pas de chat* means “step of the cat,” but in practice, the dancer springs from one foot to the other, drawing both knees upward and then landing on one foot and then the other. The terms themselves carry this imagery. More generally, however, the use of abstractions in the studio extends to other types of directives. A teacher might tell you that the wind is pushing your arms, or remind you to set your sightline towards the first balcony, even though you are actually in a classroom. The implication for this analysis is to recognize the invocation of analogies, allusions and imitative steps as a lingua franca that attempts to transfer embodied knowledge from one body to another. While the transmission of knowledge in the dance studio often brushes up against the limits of prose, the deployment of imagery helps bridge this gap.

What I also see from these interviews is that the metaphors that surface in dance classrooms can reflect the cultural embodied knowledge of a particular teacher. In our conversation, Jeff Friedman notes that the metaphors we employ to make sense of our experiences derive from the distinct orientations of how we see the world. Friedman says, “our embodied experiences generate cognitive metaphors that enable us to generate speech. And the great example...is the fact that we actually live in a vertical relationship to the world means that

we have metaphors like, ‘I’m feeling really up today, It’s getting downsized.’⁷² In observing Ana’s class, I see her pull from her unique rolodex of references based on the environment where she learned to dance. During a fast-paced *dégagé* combination (the word means “to disengage”), in which the students quickly shift weight from one leg to the other, Ana yells while comedically shaking her hips, “Don’t move the hips! No cha cha cha!” She conjures the image of the ballroom Cuban triple step. (I recall my own teachers giving me that *dégagé* correction by telling me not to dance the hula). Indeed many of the metaphors she presents to her students are borrowed from the actual lived experiences she knew from her own training. Thus, when Ana tells me that she asks students to picture that they are holding a cup of water on their ankles, it is because her teachers would place a cup of water on her ankle to get her to turn out; or hit her in the gut to get her to suck in, or give her something heavy to hold in her arms to understand the proper force of a turn.⁷³ As she gives corrections to her students today, these memories are reconstructed into the language of ‘as if.’

I hear a similar recall to another cultural reference – in this case the cityscape of Havana – in my interview with Tania, as she explains the basics of ballet technique. Recollecting the austerity of contemporary Cuban architecture, she says:

I always say, ballet is a building. You have the foundation, and there you start putting blocks on top, one by one. In Cuba, where the houses are made of blocks, not here where they are made of wood. Our houses, made of blocks. And cement in the middle, even though the roof is made of zinc. But it’s blocks and cement. It’s one block at a time. It is a row of blocks, and another row on top that is superimposed. It doesn’t go like this (she stacks one hand on top of the other imperfectly) because it could fall. It goes like this. Ballet is just like that. You have to go to the base. Base. Alignment of the body, placement of the body, working with the weight of the body. If you’re going to move, where are you moving? You can’t work with the weight in the heel. You can’t work

⁷² Jeff Friedman, interview by Samantha Sacks, March 22, 2024.

⁷³ Ana: “Yo tenía [una maestra] que te daban. “Entra aquí! barriga adentro.” Te daban. No es como aquí que tú no puedes tocar. Barriga adentro, eso *y turn out!* Una me puso un vaso aquí para que yo pasara al lado --no lo vires. Esas cosas como. También para los pirouettes para que empujarte el brazo te ponían algo pesado aquí.”

sitting into your back because you'll end up a little behind yourself. That's why I say, the ribs. A tiny bit. It's nothing. It's like an image. It's not reality. It's an image from your head that your ribs are lifting up.⁷⁴ ([See Video Excerpt 7](#))

In these ways, metaphors are kinds of signatures of pedagogy. As George Lakoff writes in *Metaphors We Live By*, “The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.”⁷⁵ That is, it is not just understanding a *pas de cheval* as a step of the horse, but one way of doing something through the frame of experiences of another person. These abstractions capture realities that are otherwise difficult to communicate. They are not necessarily the thing, but a representation of the thing that teachers use to synthesize their memories to make technique understandable to dancers. And that is why Tania tells me that she does not want to overcommunicate to her students. As she explains, “I don't want you to do what I am saying. I want you to feel it, I want you to understand that it's you, it's not me and I can't do it for you... I want you to reform, modulate your body with what I am trying to transmit. Not with what I am saying. Not with an order.”⁷⁶ She wants students to filter the information through the knowledge of their particular bodies. She wants students to do the work of interpretation. Through this oral history project I want to suggest that metaphor and more generally, abstract language and imagery, can be a revelatory or evocative channel within the ballet class to transmit embodied cultural knowledge.

⁷⁴ Tania: “Yo siempre digo, el ballet es un edificio. Ahí está su zapata. Y ahí le empiezas a poner arriba los bloques. Uno por uno. En Cuba, que las casas se construyen con bloques, no aquí que son de madera. Nuestras casas construidas con bloques. Y cemento en el medio. Aunque el techo después sea de zinc, pero es bloque y cemento. Es un bloque a la vez. Es una línea de bloques. Y otra línea arriba que va superpuesta, no va así porque si no se puede caer. Va así. Así mismo es el ballet. Tienes que irte siempre a la base. Base, alineación del cuerpo, colocación del cuerpo. Trabajo con el peso del cuerpo. Si te vas a mover, ¿hacia dónde te mueves? No puedes trabajar con el peso en el talón. No puedes trabajar sentada en la espalda porque te vas un poquito hacia atrás. Que por eso yo le digo, las costillas un tin. Es nada, es como, es una imagen, no es una realidad, es una imagen de tu cabeza, que la costilla levanta.”

⁷⁵ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 5.

⁷⁶ Tania: “Con los años creo que me he puesto muy parlanchina. Quiero que entiendas, no quiero que repitas, no quiero que hagas lo que te estoy diciendo, quiero que lo sientas, quiero que entiendas que eres tú, que no soy yo y no puedo hacerlo por ti. Si te digo que respire, no, no, lo tienes que sentir. ¿Dónde están los pulmones tuyos? Respira. Llénate de aire, exacto, pero no porque te lo digo... Yo quiero que tú reformes. Modules tu cuerpo con lo que te estoy tratando de transmitir. No con lo que te estoy diciendo. No con la orden.”

Dance Class as Dialogue

I propose that one final way in which the framework of the oral history interview expands the analytic possibilities of the dance class is by recognizing that both are sites of dialogic formation of knowledge, where something new is being generated in the meeting between bodies. As Portelli contends in, “Living Voices,” “The heart of the oral history interview is the relationship. The interview is *about* the past—like all other historical sources, it provides us with factual information that can be verified and critically scrutinized—but is *of* the present.”⁷⁷ What is revealed in an oral history, and how memory is recalled, is based on the relationship between the parties. How I frame a question dictates how a narrator will respond. And also, how one feels on a certain day, or the location of the interview—these are factors that come together to create the oral history, a unique revelation of memory that Nyssa Chow calls a “spontaneous literature.”⁷⁸ Jeff Friedman builds on this idea of co-produced meaning in his invocation of the theorist Mikhail Bakhtin.

[Bakhtin’s] theory of utterance supports ascribing contingency to oral history. Both subjects in a dialogue formulate their own utterance in relation to the previous cache of expressive communication as it accumulates between speakers...any oral response is embedded within and produced from inside the intertwining relationship of the speakers, alive to all the contingencies of both subjects and their social/historical context.⁷⁹

From this lens, the act of dance instruction can also be understood as a dialogue between students and teachers, in the sense that both parties, standing body to body, need to be willing to share and receive new information in the classroom. Dance classes are similarly characterized by intersubjectivity, in that they are “vulnerable to the particularities of location, how they are

⁷⁷ Portelli, “Living Voices,” 245.

⁷⁸ Chow, *Roots & Branches*, September 12, 2023.

⁷⁹ Friedman, “Muscle Memory,” 35.

historically situated in time, and the dispositions of participants.”⁸⁰ When talking about her own experiences in reaching students, Caridad shares that,

You end up changing the mindset of the person you’re working with, because everyone has the ability—with mental strength, without being afraid—to understand that they’re not doing what the choreographer wants. And being able to relax and have openness to integrating new information in your body, and try to arrive at what that choreographer or that teacher wants. You can feel that you’re not doing it right but it is possible to do. That transformation you can achieve with strength, with intelligence, but you cannot be scared.⁸¹

In this, Caridad explains the moments of connection with students as a kind of mental and physical release into a state of receptivity. This requires a physical responsiveness on the part of her students, but it also requires a mental alacrity. Caridad wants her students to be active participants in her class. She continues,

That moment [of teaching] has to be a moment of enjoyment in the class. I don’t like teaching when the student is scared of me. I like to start from a place of enjoyment of the training. I like to develop a dancer that thinks, a dancer that isn’t scared to ask questions.⁸²

As the narrators reveal, it is not just students who must be receptive to the feedback they receive. Teaching is an intersubjective dialogue, a so-called two way street. Thus, teachers must also be attuned to what students say or show that they need. In my conversation with Ana she talks about the difficulty of trying to teach Cuban pedagogy to dancers who were not raised in that training system. She shares,

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Caridad: “Y terminas cambiándole la mente a la persona con quien estás trabajando... porque cada persona tiene esa posibilidad de poder, con la fuerza mental, no tener miedo, cuando te das cuenta que no es lo que el coreógrafo quiere. No sino relajar y tener la apertura para esa información, hacerla parte de tu cuerpo y tratar de llegar a lo que ese coreógrafo o ese maestro quiere. Que tú puedes sentir que no es lo que tú estás haciendo y es posible. O sea, eso es algo que es posible. Esa transformación tú la puedes lograr con fuerza, con inteligencia, pero no puedes tener miedo.”

⁸² Caridad: “Ese momento tiene que ser un momento de disfrute en clase. A mí no me gusta enseñar y que el alumno me tenga miedo. A mí me gusta partir del disfrute del entrenamiento. A mí me gusta desarrollar un bailarín que piense, un bailarín que no tenga miedo a preguntar.”

You go learning over the years, because at first I wanted to teach the same way, but you can't because it is different. And so you learn to go more gently... It's not the same body. [The students] are not chosen. Here there are people with no natural turnout. There are people that have bigger jumps, less high jumps, better feet, worse feet. You go seeing and learning with time, you are learning how to treat people differently because it's difficult. It's difficult.⁸³

This means that the teaching process too must embrace a dynamic pedagogy. Caridad, Tania, and Ana all describe the ways that new or challenging contexts have led them to modify their approach. Specifically, the teachers I interviewed across this project describe how their pedagogy has needed to change with their migration. It is impossible to teach Cuban technique the same way outside of Cuba because the structure around the teaching is different. Ana thus suggests that she does not teach a “pure” Cuban technique as an instructor in the United States, but must adjust her pedagogy to meet her present reality and the needs of the students in front of her. Caridad makes a similar point about prioritizing the growth of her students over the pure preservation of a cultural form. Neither teacher feels that they are confined by teaching Cuban technique, but rather that they have come to see it as one of many tools in their toolbox as teachers. Caridad shares,

For example, at Ailey, if I see that a student turns very well, and their manner of turning isn't ours [the Cuban way], I don't touch it. Now when I see that they've learned a certain way of doing *piqué* turns in the diagonal... and I see that they're not working, I say let's try this the Cuban way, because they're not coming out well.⁸⁴

Tania echoes this sentiment, emphasizing the diverse contents of her embodied memory, with Cuban technique as one of many options for teaching.

⁸³ Ana: “Vas aprendiendo con los años, porque al principio yo que pero quería enseñar igual, pero no puede ser porque es otro y entonces vas aprendiendo a ir más suave. Ah. Tratar también no es el mismo cuerpo, no los escogen. Hay gente que no tiene *turn out* natural. Hay gente que tiene más un salto menos alto, más pie, menos pie, ir viendo y ir aprendiendo con el tiempo, vas aprendiendo a cómo tratar diferente y porque es difícil, es difícil.”

⁸⁴ Caridad: “Por ejemplo, en Ailey, si veo que un alumno gira muy bien y su manera de girar no es el nuestro, no lo toco. Ahora, cuando les veo que ellos han aprendido de cierta manera hacer diagonales, por ejemplo, que hacen diagonales de *piqués*... si yo, cuando les veo que no lo pueden, que están fallando... Digo, vamos hacerlo a lo cubano porque no les están saliendo.”

Ok if what they need is this, I think that the path is this one. I think that in all this archive that I have here inside, in all of these mental papers I think I can take one out and say, this one works for me to go down this path. And so that's what I have done here.⁸⁵

Tania invokes the “archive” to refer to the metaphorical storehouse of knowledge that she holds as a teacher. Thus, if one way of communicating her knowledge does not appear to work, she has the agility to access another approach to convey the information. By this articulation, Tania recognizes that the accumulation of her lived experiences form her personal bodily archive and are available for retrieval when needed. The narrators’ efforts to incorporate responsiveness and flexibility into their teaching methods mirrors a best practice in oral history.

In perhaps the most illustrative anecdote of our interview, Tania describes an inherent value in the dialogue—the back and forth—between teachers and students. For one, the dialogic nature of teaching forces a teacher to interrogate and recontextualize their pre-existing set of assumptions. This emerges most clearly in Tania’s description of teaching ballet technique to dancers trained in other disciplines than ballet. After leaving the *Ballet Nacional de Cuba* in 2002, Tania became a ballet teacher for a number of companies including *Danza Contemporánea de Cuba*, *Compañía Rakatán*, and *Conjunto Folclórico Nacional*. These positions created hurdles for her as a teacher, and the feedback she received challenged the very foundations of her method. As she explains,

That constant questioning. That way of— ‘teacher, explain it to me again because I did not understand. Do you have another way of explaining? Do you have any other examples that I can follow? Do you have any other option that you can give because seriously, I want to. But it’s that I don’t understand.’⁸⁶ ([See Video Excerpt 8](#))

⁸⁵ Tania: “Ok, si ellos lo que necesitan es esto, eh, yo creo que el camino es este. Creo que entre todo este archivo que tengo aquí adentro, entre todos estos papeles mentales, creo que puedo sacar uno y decir, ok, este me sirve para irme por este camino. Y entonces eso es lo que he hecho aquí.”

⁸⁶ Tania: “Ese cuestionamiento constante. Esa manera de, maestra, explicámelo de nuevo, porque es que no entendí. O sea, ¿tienes alguna otra manera de explicármelo? ¿Tiene algún otro ejemplo que yo puedo seguir? Tiene alguna otra opción que me pueda dar, porque en serio, yo quiero, pero es que no entiendo.”

The relationship with the contemporary dancers is described here as a literal dialogue. Moreover, in this memory, she hears from her students that they do not understand the basic references that she makes; that the logic of what she's asking for does not make sense to them. This interaction maps onto the dynamic of an oral history conversation, wherein one party invokes their frames of reference and systems of logic as part of their revelation of memory; and where the other party must make that worldview feel legible. In the words of Professor Chow, "legibility" in the oral history interview is the notion that you trust or assume that the ways you know yourself are known to the person sitting opposite you. Chow says that oral historians are "architects of space," creating the conditions for legibility that are necessary for the interview to succeed.⁸⁷

As Tania continues her story, she explains that the solution comes from a transformation of her own pedagogy based on the feedback of her students. She says,

I have to find [a way]. I have to find it, even saying 'look, give me a chance. I'll go back and think and tomorrow I'll tell you and see if I can find another option.' Or 'look, try it this way,' or 'no, you know what? You're doing it well. You'll get it like that. I am learning from you. Now I know that you are offering me another option, thank you.' That opening permits one to arrive and say, OK what do we have here?⁸⁸

In addition to this re-contextualizing of her assumptions, the dialogic process, as Tania describes it, has value in its ability to create something new. The exchange with her students is what allows her to "find another option." Tania uses the same word as Caridad – *apertura*, opening – to describe this space of exchange. The dialogue requires openness from a student to receive new information and integrate it in their bodies. And it requires openness from a teacher to problem solve and to be able to meet the needs of the students in front of them. The

⁸⁷ Chow, *Roots & Branches*, September 12, 2023.

⁸⁸ Tania: "Y la tienes que buscar. La tienes que buscar, incluso decirle, mira, dame un chance, yo lo voy a volver a pensar y mañana te digo, a ver si puedo encontrar otra opción. O mira, trata de esta manera, o no, ¿sabes qué? Lo que estás haciendo está bien, vas a llegar por ahí, lo estoy aprendiendo de ti, ya sé que tú me estás ofreciendo otra opción, gracias. O sea, entonces, esa apertura te permite llegar y decir, OK, ¿qué tenemos aquí?"

collaboration between the two is an opportunity for co-creation. Tania concludes that those challenging circumstances that arise (teaching ballet to nonballet dancers) are the ones that “force you to modulate and transform the methodology, the teaching, and everything else.”⁸⁹

This appreciation that dance methodology is malleable brings to light a broader truth about the historical formation of Cuban technique. As the narrators reveal in the interviews, in the origin story of the *Ballet Nacional de Cuba* the founders also went through a process of figuring out what worked. From the beginning, there was a quality of change and experimentation in the development of technique. Tania shares,

In the studies I’ve done, in the writings I’ve found, I haven’t seen it captured exactly how we assembled and put together the technique. There is nothing written that says exactly how we did that. We think it was trial and error. So it’s not something like, ‘Look it’s my methodology, I wrote it myself.’ No. It’s something that has evolved and has been changing over time. So. I think that its value lies in that. That it was a trial and error.⁹⁰

Caridad shares a similar account, saying that the project of the *Ballet Nacional de Cuba* began little by little, where Fernando and Alicia went “adjusting and filtering what elements from other schools worked for us.”⁹¹ In other words, the development of technique was not a definitive declaration, but a processual unfolding. In fact, Tania describes how the development of Cuban ballet technique was actually a project undertaken by many, not only the select three founders of the ballet—Alicia, Fernando and Alberto. Tania continues,

So of course, it is known that it was only those three, but really it’s not only three... There is another group of dancers. There is another group of teachers that go adding, there are foreign teachers that go adding, and all of them are starting to think about this

⁸⁹ Tania: “Esas circunstancias son las que se dan, y esas circunstancias son las que te obligan a modular y a transformar la metodología, la enseñanza y todo lo demás.”

⁹⁰ Tania: “A ciencia cierta en los estudios que he buscado, en los escritos que he encontrado... no lo he encontrado donde esté plasmado exactamente cómo fue que fuimos armando, fuimos enderezando, fuimos poniendo no hay nada escrito como eso... Y pensamos también que era una cosa de prueba y error. Entonces no es algo que, ‘mira, esta es mi metodología, la escribí yo. No ha evolucionado y ha ido cambiando en el tiempo. Pienso que también su valor radica en eso, que fue un prueba y error.”

⁹¹ Caridad: “Pero, cuando tú empiezas un proyecto como Fernando y Alicia... en la medida en que ese proyecto iba creciendo, so él iba ajustando y filtrando cuál eran los elementos de otras escuelas que funcionaban para nosotros.”

methodology...And the teachers start to work on those methodologies. And they make adjustments, they make changes, they increase the grades, they increase the classes. The curriculum changes. And they spend years doing that, until finally a curriculum is made. And still today, programs and lesson plans continue to change. I mean they continue making changes.⁹²

The historical formation of Cuban technique as a heuristic process is mirrored in how teachers understand what it means to teach today. Lessons are co-created with students and teachers can feel empowered to adapt technique. Technique and dance methodology make space for incorporating invention and innovation. Thus, technique is not a static system. Technique, as Freidman writes in *Muscle Memory*, is a “sort of knowledge [that] can be represented - made present - only through action, enactment or performance.”⁹³ The idea that technique exists only as it is transmitted is an example of what Diana Taylor calls “the repertoire” in her 2003 book, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Taylor distinguishes between knowledge that is preserved in the supposedly stable, authoritative, tangible archive, versus that which is preserved in something called the repertoire – performances, gestures, orality, movement dance – “acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge.”⁹⁴ Taylor writes that the essential quality of the repertoire is that it “requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by ‘being there,’ being a part of the transmission...the actions that are the repertoire do not remain the same. The repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning.”⁹⁵

⁹² Tania: “Entonces, claro, se conoce nada más que son ellos tres, pero realmente no son tres...hay otro conjunto de bailarines, hay otro conjunto de maestros que se van sumando, hay maestros extranjeros que se van sumando, y todos ellos van empezando a pensar en esta metodología... Y empiezan los maestros a trabajar en esas metodologías, que se hacen reajustes, que se hacen cambios, que se aumentan los años, que se aumentan las clases, que se cambian los, el currículum se cambia, y eso, estuvieron años en eso, hasta que finalmente se hace un currículum, y todavía hoy, se siguen cambiando los programas y los planes de estudio, o sea, se siguen haciendo arreglos.”

⁹³ Friedman, “Muscle Memory,” 37.

⁹⁴ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 20, <https://www.dukeupress.edu/the-archive-and-the-repertoire>.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

In the oral history context, scholars have also pushed the field to recognize the diversity of ways in which knowledge is shared and stewarded. In their teaching methodologies at OHMA, Liza Zapol and Nicki Pombier resist the “default presumption that the primary reason for the interview seems to be the archive itself, and that serious archiving takes place via institutional repositories.”⁹⁶ Instead, As Starecheski writes in her 2020 article on her South Bronx Walking Tours project, “Stories stay alive because they become part of the people who care about them, and those people’s bodies become living archives.”⁹⁷ So rather than say that technique is contained in the “bodily archive” of teachers, perhaps it is more apt to describe technique as part of their repertoire, existing always in a state of embodied transmission. In order to pass down or to preserve ballet pedagogy, it must be transmitted through embodied demonstration, which necessarily transforms it. The result is that pedagogical changes represent innovations. A kind of dance history is made everyday because experimentation and reconfiguration are baked into the transmission of this knowledge.

Finally, the dialogic nature of the dance class (and oral history conversation) creates the potential to encounter something unanticipated and surprising, and in this way allows for the imagination of something one may not have thought possible. In her lectures Professor Chow explains that an interviewer should come into the interview as an expert on their narrator. But even as you may come in thinking that you are an expert on a person or on an event – or in terms of the dance class – even if you come in with a lesson plan, or thinking you know a student’s habits and how they tend to move, you must respond to their body. You must let them reveal themselves to you, as opposed to working from an imposed idea of what you think they may

⁹⁶ Nicki Pombier and Liza Zapol, “Serious Play: Teaching to Play in Oral History,” *The Oral History Review* 52, no. 2 (2025): 218–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00940798.2025.2535279>.

⁹⁷ Amy Starecheski, “South Bronx Soundwalks as Embodied Archiving Practice.” *Oral History* 48, no. 2 (2020): 102–12. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48615296>.

do.⁹⁸ The interviewer should be ready to improvise with their narrator. For Tania, the groundbreaking moment to recognize this best practice happens by witnessing a literal dance improvisation exercise unfold in front of her.

I thank [the contemporary dancers] for my having been an observer during such extremely diverse creative processes, which in ballet does not usually happen. In ballet, the choreographer comes...with the choreography already set... And you repeat that choreography or you fail. Pum pum, arm, arm Giselle (gently fluttering her fingers in one direction) arm, arm, Swan Lake (then in the other direction), and it's established. Or the choreographer comes to make something more contemporary or more neoclassical and they come with their choreography made... As a dancer, I've never faced a process where the choreographer arrives and says to me, 'do an improvisation to see what we can take from here.' No.

But I've sat in the Danza Contemporánea studios with a choreographer next to me that said, 'Dancer, impress me. Surprise me. Make a movement, make a phrase that surprises me.' So that changes you. That changes the way you see life and the way you see everything...And so you find a dancer that has their movement fetishes and [the choreographer] says, 'no. Those movements, no. Change them for me because I don't want that. I want you to investigate your body. I want you to understand your body. I want you... to do something that I've never seen.' That's practically impossible, that's doing something impossible.⁹⁹

What Tania witnesses is dancers being pushed outside of their comfort zones. She sees dancers being asked to produce movements that a choreographer has never seen, and to do so from outside of their "movement fetishes," or the patterns of movement in which they feel most

⁹⁸ Chow, Roots & Branches, September 12, 2023.

⁹⁹ Tania: "Les agradezco haber estado como observadora en medios de procesos creativos tan extremadamente diversos que en el ballet no suele suceder. En el ballet viene el coreógrafo...con las coreografías que ya están armadas..., y es esa coreografía, y tú repites, o te fallibilizas. Pum, pum, brazo, brazo, y Giselle, brazo, brazo, Lago, y está establecido...o viene el coreógrafo a hacerte algo contemporáneo, más contemporáneo, o más neoclásico, y viene con su coreografía hecha...Jamás me enfrenté yo siendo como bailarina a un proceso donde llegara el coreógrafo y me dijera eh, hazme una improvisación para ver cómo sacamos algo de aquí. No. Sin embargo, yo estuve sentada en los salones de danza contemporánea con un coreógrafo al lado que decía, bailarín, impresioname, sorpréndeme, hazme un movimiento, hazme una frase que me sorprenda... y entonces te encuentras con un bailarín que tiene sus movimientos fetiche y que le dices, no, esos movimientos no. Cámbiamelos porque no quiero eso. Quiero que investigues tu cuerpo. Quiero que entiendas tu cuerpo. Quiero que... Que me hagas algo que yo no haya visto, prácticamente imposible, hazme algo imposible. Y entonces, ese tipo de procesos son bien, bien ricos. Son procesos que te cambian la vida."

comfortable. In other words, she watches a process that asks dancers to redefine their relationships with their dancing and their bodies.

So it's important to always be open to everything. It's important to live in your surroundings as well, not only in your personal capsule. Because at the end of the day what you do is shut yourself away there. You lose the chance to see the wonderful world around you...that's why I'm telling you. The question of methodology is just the foundation. What gets built on top of methodology is a gigantic tree. And that's how everything is—it's like life itself.¹⁰⁰

As Tania sees them reaching into a reservoir that she never knew existed, they push the limits of her understanding of what can be unlocked in the dance space. The dance exchange becomes like a dramatization of what happens in the best of an oral history interview, wherein people with fundamentally different sets of experiences expose each other to multiple ways of knowing. These encounters allow one to realize that their belief systems are not inevitable, and keep them open to recognizing the existence of new paradigms. For Tania, “Those types of processes are very, very rich. Those are processes that change your life.”

Conclusion

This thesis reimagines the ballet class as a kind of oral history. Through my conversations with Caridad Martínez, Tania Suárez, and Ana Lourdes Novoa about teaching ballet technique, I identify three central analogs to the elements of an oral history interview: the transmission of memory, the sharing of embodied knowledge, and the fundamentally collaborative nature of the conversation. Through my experiments with interview methodology, I try to emulate the ballet class to access the ways in which teachers carry with them the traces of their mentors' pedagogy.

¹⁰⁰ Tania: “Entonces es importante siempre estar abierto a todo. Es importante vivir en tu alrededor también, no solo en tu cápsula personal. Porque al final lo que haces es enclaustrarte ahí. Pierdes las opciones de ver un mundo maravilloso de alrededor. Entonces es importante, por eso te digo. El tema de la metodología es solo la base. Lo que se construye arriba de la metodología es un árbol gigantesco. Y así es todo, es como la misma vida.”

I hear about the origins of their embodied cultural memories and the many layers of translation they employ to convey this knowledge to other bodies; and I learn of the back-and-forth between instructor and student that makes it possible for interlocutors to digest new knowledge, create pedagogical innovations, and discover surprises in reinvestigating what is possible.

I see my contributions to the already rich intersection of dance and oral history as a focus on pedagogy in particular, as opposed to performance, as I believe this study has implications for how dancers might re-evaluate the experience of participating in a dance class. Sharing my research with the dance community has therefore been a central aim of this project. To this end, I hosted a workshop in April 2025 for dancers called “Migration & Memory,” wherein I introduced my theories about recontextualizing the dance class as oral history. My hope for this session was for participants to consider how this framing might change what we think of as dance history, where it is made, where it lives, and how it is preserved. Just like my interviews, I held this convening in a dance studio to foreground dance class as a space for memory sharing; and I structured the event around video segments of my oral history interviews, inviting commentary from my attendees about what they observed in my narrators’ recollections. I then prompted them to use this framework of analysis to share their own dance lineages and describe how their teachers make their artistic inheritances known to them in the studio. The exercise resonated with the group, who actively participated in sharing their memories of training. In addition to this workshop, I presented pieces of this research at the Dance Studies Association annual conference in June 2025 on a panel called “Modes of Learning,” the focus of which was a comparative analysis of dance pedagogies across the globe. My daily ballet classes have also become opportunities to test my hypotheses about how dance history is being shared in the pedagogical space. I perk up when I hear someone invoke their teacher or their training, or

describe a movement using a particularly evocative metaphor. I recall traveling to Mexico City, where the ballet teacher told us not to take hesitant steps like we were in “*laberinto del fauno*,” a cultural touchstone from the Spanish-language film. These questions often lead me to post-class hallway conversations where I get to learn about my teachers and their experiences in a new light. I thank all of the dancers and teachers with whom I’ve been in dialogue for shaping this work.

In addition, while this study attempts to show how the ballet class is enriched by the framework of oral history, I see a reciprocity between these forms. Students of oral history – not necessarily those involved in dance – also gain by recognizing the body as a container of knowledge. Centering the body as an indisputable source of knowledge in an interview puts emphasis on the ways that gesture, silence, and rhythm themselves carry meaning. Giving recognition to the mannerisms, habits, postures, and even aesthetics of a narrator is an acknowledgement for how memory becomes manifest in embodied, non-verbal forms. And drawing information from multiple sites of expression helps expand what we pay attention to as oral history. The context of a dance class dramatizes the ways that the body holds and conveys memory. The case study, as presented here, helps illustrate the contention that the body contains and transmits both personal and social histories.

To me, this goal of tracing the historical and cultural roots underlying someone's dance pedagogy is not to decipher what share of their teaching derives from which particular tradition, but to open up a space in which we can observe cultural embodied knowledge in continuous conversation and transformation.¹⁰¹ That the embodied knowledge of ballet gets transmitted in the studio is possible in part (as I observe in the interviews for this thesis) because of a teacher’s

¹⁰¹ Gabriele Brandstetter, Gerko Egert, and Holger Hartung, “Movements of Interweaving: An Introduction,” in *Movements of Interweaving: Dance and Corporeality in Times of Travel and Migration* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 1.

craft in translating what they know; and because of the dialogic nature of the dance class, which invites participants to interpret technique differently across generations and across cultures and borders. This is itself a kind of democratizing of ballet pedagogy and technique. As Jeff Friedman encouraged me to appreciate early in this study, “a project like this is going to do the work on the ground for the equity around ballet that people, to some degree, were trying to impose from the above... When you have a teacher who embodies the ability to teach a French court form, inflected by Cuban values... that is going to be the place where we're going to get that equity.”¹⁰² As I reflect on this idea, the ability to absorb, modify and inhabit dance knowledge becomes the basis for co-creation. We are not passive recipients taking in knowledge from a distant or abstract origin; the instruction we receive is from teachers who themselves have inherited and adapted the technique. We are co-conspirators in a reinvention of our bodies and our histories only if we know how to listen for and interpret these stories.

¹⁰² Jeff Friedman, interview by Samantha Sacks, March 22, 2024.

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Appendix I

In order of appearance in the paper:

Video Excerpt 1: (Caridad and me at the barre pt 1)

<https://youtu.be/rg0QXTjVO8Q>

Video Excerpt 2: (Caridad and me at the barre pt 2)

https://youtu.be/Qml1O_kwPVg

Video Excerpt 3: (Tania's warm up)

<https://youtu.be/czHJxIEFZPo>

Video Excerpt 4: (Caridad's aesthetic distinctions between each school)

https://youtu.be/Yh-Ju3N6_RE

Video Excerpt 5: (Tania's expressing struggle through the dance)

<https://youtu.be/eTpAkfPRNVI>

Video Excerpt 6 (Tania's power of imagery)

https://youtu.be/j__AQVyAvh4

Video Excerpt 7: (Tania's Cuban architecture as metaphor)

<https://youtu.be/S1YLSDVCA1A>

Video Excerpt 8: (Tania's reframing logic with contemporary dancers)

<https://youtu.be/exkxhaBa1gA>