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Through a Diasporic or Transnational Lens? Post-‘89 Cuban Mobility and Migration in Canada and Western Europe

“The Cuban identity is something rooted in me [...] no one can take that from me.”
(Canada)

“Cubans are like seeds in the wind – we are everywhere.” (Spain)

“We are all descended from travelers [...] I’ve come to believe [...] there has to be a historical memory [...] something within us that on arriving we can say ‘Here I am’ [...] I feel I belong everywhere.” (France)

“I have adapted to this society and have also acquired some ways of behaving that you have to take on [...] to integrate in this system.” (Germany)

“I came to this country like an orchid. The orchid lives from the air, it has aerial roots, it’s not grounded [...] work and home aside, there was nothing else keeping me rooted to this country.” (UK)

Quotes from Cuban migrants interviewed in Canada and Western Europe

Canada and Western Europe catapulted into renewed prominence in their relations with Cuba after the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall. Never having broken with post-1959 revolutionary Cuba, nor having joined ranks with the United States in its embargo on the island, they stepped into the void left by the Soviet Union’s 1990s desintegration and curtailed relations with Cuba. As Cuba plunged into an economic crisis of catastrophic proportions with devastating social fallout, and as the Cuban revolutionary government strategized to reposition the country in the global economy, Canada and Western Europe resumed a similarly critical role to the one they had played in the early 1960s, before Cuba’s relations tightened with the Soviet bloc. Despite Canada’s proximity to the US and the European Union’s close identification with US interests, bilateral constructive engagement on the part of both Canada and Western European countries positioned them as front-runners for Cuba in trade, investment, tourism, and cooperation, as well as recipients of coveted Cuban exports – cigars, rum and culture, not least art, dance, and music. A seemingly logical if unintended accompanying development was that Cubans would become

increasingly mobile and migrate in growing numbers to Canada and Western Europe.

Cubans did so in what proved to be a systemic post-'89 shift. The context was a re-invention of Cuba to ride the crisis and rebrand the country at home and abroad, targeting the overseas tourist market. This was accompanied by gradual Cuban state openings to, and depoliticization of, migration, especially when not entangled in the dominant Cuba-US axis. In January 2013, Cuba lifted most barriers to travel, and in December 2014, Cuba-US relations took an announced turn towards normalization. Cuba had by then become a country of net emigration, and by 2016, alongside a population of almost 11.5 million on the island, an estimated further two million Cubans were abroad. The migration continued to be skewed to the US and heavily concentrated in the Miami area, but there had also been significant new flows elsewhere in the Americas and across Europe, with Canada and Western Europe in line as destinations of choice.

The flows were often not unidirectional, and circulatory migration became a recognizable component involving one or more destination countries and Cuba. Alongside work in the burgeoning tourist sector, having family members abroad sending remittances and making return trips to the island were what enabled many Cubans to survive and (in the case of some) branch out as *cuentapropistas* and build up small family businesses. Since many who emigrated were young men and women of working and childbearing age, circulation became of prime importance in mitigating the loss of Cuba's young working support base for an aging population.

We charted the parameters of this in two recent articles ([Krull/Stubbs 2017, 2018](#)), drawing on research conducted in Canada and four core countries of Western Europe, namely, France, Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom.¹ Our focus was primarily on major cities where Cubans gravitated most: Mon-

1 The project, conducted since 2011 and nearing completion, has involved historical and sociological research, ethnographic site visits, and in-depth interviews with Cuban migrants to explore their motivations, experiences, and perceptions and the ways in which commodities, generations, gender, class, race, and culture have had an impact. Our research was also designed to examine the extent to which there are observable patterns that are similar to or different from those of other migrants, especially those from the Caribbean and Latin America. The project was made possible by funding from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), for which we express our thanks, as also to institutions, colleagues, and the many Cuban migrants themselves, who have nurtured our research in countless ways. We are especially indebted to Anja Bandau and Christoph Singler, who organized our 2012 project workshop in Paris and incited us to think more closely about the role played by the circulation of knowledge, ideas, and values and by cities as "relay stations" for this (cf. Bandau/Zapata Galindo 2011 and, for Paris, Bandau/Mallinckrodt 2010). We also extend thanks

treland and Toronto in Canada and, in Western Europe, the capital cities of Berlin, London, Madrid, and Paris; however, other cities with significant concentrations, such as Barcelona in Spain and Marseille in France, were also considered. In this article, we shift tenor. In the first part, we take our cue from Cohen's (2015) celebration of epiphytes as a metaphor for diaspora to reflect on the tension linked to the politics of exile between the concepts of diaspora and transnationalism in the recent study of the Cuban migration to the US and Spain. We contextualize this in studies of transatlantic Caribbean and Latin American migration seen through either a diasporic or transnational lens.

In the second part, we conceptualize the Cuban migration to Canada and Western Europe as both diasporic and transnational. Central to our argument is that, as governments, ministries, and private sector in both sender and receiver countries rebranded and reimagined post-'89 Cuba 'from above,' Cubans appropriated this 'from below,' devising their own ways of riding hardship through diverse forms of mobility and migration. We illustrate this through the dynamics of select (g)local relations and disconnections: cultural circuits in the arts, citizenship and immigration policy know-how, language proficiency, school and science networking, and shared ideas and values.

Drivers such as these enable us to characterize the post-'89 migration to Canada and Western Europe as a generational diasporic cohort that has evolved in singular response to the vestiges of Cold War and globalization. Highly transnational in its practices and thinking, this cohort is forging new hybrid identities that depart from the US-Cuba binary divide in ways we explore here.

1 Botany and Diaspora

The quotes at the beginning of this article, which were echoed in many of the interviews conducted for our study, resonate with Cohen's "Seeds, Roots, Rhizomes and Epiphytes: Botany and Diaspora" (2015). Cohen alluded to the "good gardener's guide" in his now classic first edition of *Global Diasporas* (1997) – "scattered seed," corresponding to the original Greek origins of the notion of diaspora; "uprooting" and "transplanting/replanting," as applied to victim and labor diasporas; and various other references, such as "cross-pollinating," "dividing," and "grafting." After discarding botany as metaphorically fanciful in

for the invitation to present our work at the 2015 Hannover conference on *(G)local Dynamics of the Caribbean: Relations and Disconnections*, which gave rise to this article. Note: Interviews were conducted in either Spanish or English but mostly Spanish and translated into English for the project. All interviewees were guaranteed anonymity.

the second edition of *Global Diasporas* (2008), Cohen returned to it in 2015 as a useful tool for analysis.

Seeds, he argued, were integral to the etymology of diaspora, both in the sense of being sown and dispersed; however, we needed to think more about *how* diasporas were dispersed. The image of the dandelion was frequently used, evoking a perhaps “postmodern lightness of being.” (Cohen 2015: 3) The quest for roots, however, continued to be a frequent leitmotif, especially among groups who suffered violent uprooting, such that Dufoix in *La dispersion* (2012) returned to a certain centrism of origin. In contestation, Cohen appreciated routes and the reaction against trees of knowledge from a single rootstock in Deleuze and Guattari’s *Mille plateaux* (1980), whereby knowledge was seen as a multiplicity of loose connections, nomadic in nature, like the shoots of rhizomes. He singled out Glissant’s *Poétique de la Relation* (1990) in the rhizomatic making and remaking of the Self-Other and constantly unstable process of creolization rather than one fused culture of *Créolité*. He also referred to the journal *Rhizomes*, founded in 2000, as further consolidating the Deleuzian approach.

Cohen’s concern, however, was that rhizomes spread subterraneously, which could fuel machinations of migration as an unwelcome underground process. By contrast, an epiphyte, like an orchid, as illustrated by Misrahi-Barak and Raynaud in *Diasporas, Cultures of Mobilities* (2014), affixes non-parasitically to other plants, drawing nutrients from the air and rain. Cohen made explicit the connection between epiphytes needing the support of a tree, just as diasporas may need the support of a country, yet not harming it, providing their own shelter and adding beauty.

2 Diaspora and Transnationalism

How does Cohen’s work on diaspora resonate in the Cuban case? His early *Global Diasporas* volume was timely in the field of diaspora studies, the new seeds for which he acknowledged were sown by cultural theorists such as Hall (1990), Clifford (1992), and Gilroy (1993) and further nurtured in *Diasporas*, founded by Tölölyan in 1991. Simultaneously, in the early 1990s, a short-lived literary journal was published in Havana, entitled *Diaspora(s)*, by a small group claiming “insile”;² and the term diaspora gradually gained acceptance in Cuba

² *Diaspora(s)* refers to a small poetry collective founded in 1993 by Carlos A. Arguiera, Rolando Sánchez Mejías, Pedro Márquez de Armas, and others as well as the small independent journal they produced. The plural form reflected the dispersal of Cuban culture

and abroad as more neutral than the term “exile,” which had been applied to and used by Cuban Americans.

The Cuban sister concept to creolization was that of transculturation, developed by Ortiz (1995 [1940]) and celebrating Cuba’s fusion of peoples and cultures while critiquing any static notion of *cubanidad*. The end-of-century Ortiz revival, in Cuba and abroad, challenged essentialism, and a Cuban American discourse was advanced that was both transcultural (Benítez-Rojo 1990; Fernández/Cámara-Betancourt 2000; Font/Quiroz 2004; Perez-Firmat 1989, 1994; Rojas 2005) and transnational (Duany 1997, 2011, 2014; Fernández 2005; Portes 1996; Portes/Guarnizo/Landolt 1999; Portes/Puhrmann 2015). Duany was one who early balked at the telluric images in much of the writing on Cuban-ness, full of references to roots, uprootedness, transplants, mother earth, and the trunk of national culture. He called for “a new language, an aesthetic of traveling cultures, border crossing and nomad identities.” (Duany 1997: 4) He saw aerial and aquatic metaphors as more appropriate to Cuba’s *longue durée* migration history, and he drew conceptually on Cohen and others cited above to explore the shared history of the Hispanic Caribbean vis-a-vis the US and the Cuban American *pueblo disperso* in his later work. Embracing a broad concept of diaspora that involved movement, displacement, and hybridity, he called for a comparative transnational perspective of historical processes between sending and receiving countries that varied according to cycles, events, and crises prior to and during the most recent era of globalization. For him, borders (as distinct from the legal spatial boundaries set by states) constituted blurred geographical and cultural zones whose scope was far more diverse and expansive than the narrower economic, social, and political practices that Portes and others had identified as globalization and transnationalism “from below.”

Duany endorsed the approach taken by Flores, who, in *The Diaspora Strikes Back* (2008), characterized Cubans in New York City as stemmed not so much from a nationally defined diaspora but from broader Caribbean and Atlantic counterstreams, a group “disengaged from explicitly national moorings and comprised of an already transnationalized mix of multiple cultural traditions.” (Flores 2008: 7) Flores also embraced Cohen and cultural studies theorists, and he added Van Hear, whose *New Diasporas* (1998) emphasized the political dimension of situating unprecedented global migratory patterns in the end-of-Cold-War era. Revolutionary developments in communications technology and transportation, Van Hear argued, combined with the loosening of demographic constraints and ideological instabilities resulting from the Cold War impasse. Flores termed this new era “the cauldron of rapid and extreme shifts in

and the need to deterritorialize Cuban culture, since literary boundaries on and off island were no longer clearly delineated (Hernández-Reguant 2012).

the configuration of world power,” (Flores 2008: 22) emphatically marking off “new diasporas” with a transnationalism “from below” in their everyday practices, negotiating life in multiple locations and political and economic systems, and creating multidirectional cultural flows and innovations.

Most recently, López, in *Impossible Returns* (2015), influenced, among others, by Cohen and Glissant, titled her introduction “The Poetics of Return.” She began by acknowledging Eckstein’s analysis in *The Immigrant Divide* (2009), whereby the new historically grounded generation of Cubans (in the Mannheimian sense) leaned more toward maintaining ties with the island. However, she posed a significant question: “A Diasporic Community or a Trans-Nation for All?” She returned to Tölölyan’s notion of diasporas as “exemplar communities of the transnational moment” (López 2015: 11) and Safran’s essay in the foundational 1991 issue of *Diasporas*, in which he linked the Cuban case to the Armenian, Turkish, and Palestinian, among others. She referred to Cohen’s 1997 critique of Safran’s centrality of homeland as the axis around which diasporas coalesce and recognized how diasporas link places of origin and settlement – roots and routes, evoking the journey, evolving identities and shifting, non-essentialist positionings. She also accepted the transnational paradigm as applying more to the over 50% of Cubans who had arrived in the US after 1990. However, unlike Flores and Duany, she shared the narrower understanding of transnationalism as practices directly linked to homeland over and above “homing desires,” which excluded Cuban American exiles. For her, the concept of diaspora was thus more inclusive and more acceptable than transnationalism in the Cuban American context.

3 Reimagining the Cuban Diaspora

Is there a similarly observable tension between diaspora and transnationalism in the case of the Cuban migration to Canada and Western Europe? In contrast to the abundance of studies on the Cuban migration to the US, there is a relative paucity of study elsewhere. A major exception, however, is Berg’s *Diasporic Generations* (2011), highlighting both Cuba and Spain’s contested past and histories of migration. Drawing on Mannheim’s historically grounded generations, Berg identified three diasporic generations: exiles (1960s – early 1970s), children of the revolution (late 1970s – early 1990s) and migrants (from the mid-1990s). The three arrived in very different periods in Spain, during and after Franco, and were each shaped by very different formative periods in Cuba, such that they had little in common with each other. Berg and Eckstein (2015) would subsequently link their work comparatively on the US and Spain, calling for a reimagining of the Cuban diaspora, highlighting its heterogeneous chang-

ing profile, which is increasingly more pragmatic, more removed from notions of *la patria* and more comparable with that of other recently arriving immigrant groups.

Berg signaled the need for further comparative analysis of immigration from former Caribbean colonies to metropolises with historically and politically divergent processes of colonization and decolonization and different modes of incorporation and postcolonial discourses of identity and belonging (cf. [Bosma/Lucassen/Oostindie 2012](#); [Cervantes Rodríguez/Grosfoguel/Mielants 2009](#)). Berg referred specifically to a comparative study of the UK and Spain, and we broaden this out, drawing on Cohen's (1997) conceptualization of the Caribbean as a deterritorialized cultural diaspora, both at home and abroad, with multiply displaced populations and continuing migratory traditions, and a heightened sense of hybridity, diversity, and difference. With reference to France, the Netherlands, and the UK, Cohen argued that new deterritorialization processes took place when conditions in the birth homeland were such that conditions in the diaspora were attractive. Homeland was displaced to colonial and postcolonial metropolitan centers promising cultural and economic opportunity. Cohen's argument was that Caribbean diasporas in global cities proved particularly adaptive, simultaneously holding on to ethnicity and also establishing transnational and intercultural ties, bending them to more cosmopolitan outcomes and purposes.

To our knowledge, there has been no attempt to date to situate the Caribbean migration to Canada within the deterritorialized cultural diasporic paradigm. There, the focus has been rather on the trajectory of one or other of the major Caribbean concentrations in Montreal and Toronto. The latter was primarily from the English-speaking Caribbean, while the former included the vestiges of an earlier anglophone Caribbean population but was overwhelmingly from Haiti (cf. [Austin 2013](#), [Mills 2016](#)). Moreover, in Canada, as in Western Europe, Caribbean migration has been overshadowed by the migration from Latin America, similarly concentrated in major cities. Study of the Latin American migration has highlighted waves triggered by political events and more recently the economic migrants from South and Central America (viz. for Canada, [Pozo 2006, 2009](#)). The recent migration in Europe has been such that McIlwaine in *Cross-Border Migration among Latin Americans: European Perspectives and Beyond* (2011a) argued strongly for a transnational rather than diasporic approach. For her, the scale and diversity of flows and networks across multiple borders on the part of more "transient migrants" (cf. [Levitt 2004](#)) with "liquid life paths" (cf. [Faist 2009](#)) and with little focus on exile or mythical return was such that diaspora had limited relevance.

In this context, how are we to conceptualize the post-'89 cohort of Cuban migrants to Canada and Western Europe? It is our contention that this cohort

lies ambiguously positioned in the post-'89 forces of globalization and configurations of world power. It is highly transnational and is also a historically grounded deterritorialized diaspora, one that is post-Soviet and contrapuntal to Cuba's Cold War relations with the US, which only since 2014 have shown any significant signs of thawing. Cubans headed to Canadian and Western European city "contact zones," reminiscent of Flores' 2009 characterization of New York City. These cities in turn functioned as "relay stations" (cf. [Bandau/Mallinckrodt's 2010](#) earlier characterization of Paris) creating new multidirectional counterflows. From the disconnects of their post-'89 world, Cubans forged new relations manifest through a range of visible cultural circuits, especially music and the performing arts, and also through less-acknowledged counterstreams of know-how, knowledge networks, and ideas and values, to which we now turn.

4 Cultural Circuits

Let us first consider how the rebranding of Cuba in Canada and Western Europe enabled Cubans to forge their own circuits of culture beyond those officially endorsed at the state level. In tandem with the new tourism, Cuba introduced differential, more open, and flexible migration policies in the 1990s cultural sector, facilitating the mobility of writers, artists, dancers, and musicians to travel and work abroad ([Bustamante Salazar/Soralla Fernández 2015](#)). The stage was set for increased mobility to lead to increased migration in the cultural sphere.

An early unsettling twist to the new cultural openings came in the case of Spain, where, "the 'diaspora' trope debunked Miami as Cuba's oppositional capital, highlighting the rise of Europe as a preferred destination for young educated Cubans, many of whom wished to extricate themselves from traditional exile politics." ([Hernández-Reguant 2009: 79](#)) Madrid was promoted as an alternative center for Cuban diasporic culture and, in 1996, saw the launch of the journal *Encuentro*³, a publication designed to transcend the political polarization between Cubans on the island and those abroad. Publication finally

3 The Asociación Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana was founded in 1995 with the aim of publishing the journal *Encuentro* (Encounter), whose first issue was in summer 1996. The editor was Cuban writer and filmmaker Jesús Díaz, who had recently left Cuba, and co-editor was writer Pío E. Serrano, who had left Cuba in the 1970s and founded his own publishing house Verbum. Despite the express intention of contributions from Cubans in Cuba and abroad designed to break down the boundaries, the tensions continued and contributions by Cubans abroad predominated. The entire collection has been digitalized: <http://www.cubaencuentro.com/revista/revista-encuentro/>

ceased in 2009, for financial reasons, and no other such initiative materialized elsewhere in Western Europe or in Canada.

Many Cuban migrants we interviewed tended to distance themselves from politics. They were circumspect, if not oppositional, in their views when it came to the politics of older Cubans in Miami. As a young Cuban in Montreal put it, “in Miami the extreme right is very strong and this confrontational environment with the Cubans I really do not like. They are very extremist.” By contrast, it was important to him that “Canada has always had good relations with Cuba,” just as to another young woman it was important that “Cuba has never had a negative view of Canada as it has of the US.” This made choosing to migrate there less politically traumatic.

Similarly cautious views were expressed towards new Cuban dissidents in Madrid and the small but vocal group of dissident Cuban writers in 1990s Paris (cf. Navarrete 2007). Cubans in cities such as Barcelona and Marseille celebrated their distance from Madrid and Paris in this respect and possessed (similar to cohorts in London and Toronto) the ability to blend into their city’s ethnic diversity and cultural cosmopolitanism. In the words of a Cuban in London, “We came to a very cosmopolitan city [...]. There’s a myriad of cultures and I never feel left out or that I belong to a different place.” In a similar vein: “Toronto was appealing to me,” commented another. “I liked the dynamic of city, the multiculturalism. I liked Montreal also, but [...] didn’t see myself learning French.”

Berlin and Montreal presented political and cultural ambiguity for Cubans, carrying the baggage of pre-’89 divided Germany and post-1960s Quebec separatism and the province’s assertion of *Francophonie*. Quebec’s Quiet Revolution of the 1960s had created political affinity with Cuba, translating into closer state-to-state relations and events; yet this was compounded by the sovereignty movement promoting a more unicultural French-speaking Quebec.

Cubans experienced Canada and Western Europe in the broader context of the influx of peoples bound up in the colonial, neocolonial, and postcolonial past. Paris had long attracted artists and intellectuals from Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America, including Cuba. By the twenty-first century, there were signs of Madrid, London, and Berlin gaining over Paris in attraction, as also Toronto over Montreal.

Despite the momentous political times, Cuba became identified more by culture than politics, and London in particular proved emblematic. The city was already reverberating with rhythms brought by African and Caribbean migrants, and when the new turn-of-the-century wave of migrants from Cuba and Latin America added their stamp, London was established as a world music capital and Cuban music ‘frontier.’ (Hernández-Reguant 2012)

Ever since the 1990s *Buena Vista Social Club* phenomenon, Cubans – to coin the words of Perna (2014) in his study of music and tourism – have been selling Cuba by its sound. The marketing success of World Music’s London-based Nick Gold and American guitarist Ry Cooder and the documentary by German director Wim Wenders were seen by many in Cuba as a stereotypical throwback creation for overseas consumption. However, *Buena Vista* has constantly reinvented itself, replacing not only aging members but also others who chose to stay over while on tour abroad. They joined other Cuban musicians in a range of genres, from popular to classical music, jazz, and hip-hop. Cuban culture more broadly made its mark via art exhibitions, film showings, theatre, ballet, and contemporary dance; but it was music, and especially salsa, that became the single most popular form, often mixed with other Caribbean and Latin American musical forms (Román-Velázquez 2009). There was a veritable explosion of salsa clubs, salsa classes, and themed trips to Cuba involving resident Cubans. The more the circuit widened, the more musicians, dancers, and artists came, the more Cubans networked to find ways of staying.

Variations on the London experience reverberated across the major cities of Canada and Western Europe, whose ethnic diversity made for a vibrant cultural scene from Berlin to Barcelona (cf Kummels 2005; Sánchez Fuarros 2013); Madrid and Paris to Marseille; Toronto to Montreal. In 2008, Montreal celebrated a major Museum of Fine Arts Cuban retrospective, which was organized at the state level by Cuba and Quebec. However, Montreal had long been bringing Cuban musicians to its renowned jazz festivals and today has clubs like Diez-Onze where resident Cuban jazz musicians play. In Toronto, it was the music scene that also contributed to artists, filmmakers, writers, and many other Cubans who saw the city as a most desirable place to live and work.

Cuban musicians interviewed commented on the fluidity in how this has come about. As expressed by a Cuban musician residing in London since 2004: “I came to study and see, you know, it was like ‘let’s see’ sort of, but of course what happens is that [...] once you come to a place like this doing what I do, it’s like every cell in your brain explodes.” Of the musicians he studied with in Cuba, he states, almost all are scattered abroad. A Cuban musician in Toronto felt: “My life as a musician has taken a 180-degree turn. I’ve been able to explore new musical genres [...]. It’s also been amazing to be able to work with excellent musicians from different parts of the world who converge in this city.” Cuban music today, another musician in Madrid affirmed, is being created in cities like Madrid, Paris, and Berlin, and Cuban musicians have opportunities and ease of movement to play in all those places. Living in Madrid, he added, “helped me rediscover Cuba musically and artistically and in many ways. That’s a privilege, a joy.”

Not everything came easy. As one Cuban musician in Barcelona reminisced: “It’s not the same coming on tour as living here. I thought everything was sorted. I thought it was a case of getting here, working, doing any kind of work to make a start. I’d no idea I’d need to have my residency to be able to work, be legal... I’d no idea!” Many, however, did do their homework before taking such a step, such that, while the cultural circuits are more visible, other circuits of knowledge were brought into play.

5 Citizenship and Migration Policy Know-How

From statistical studies carried out in Cuba of those emigrating, we know that many emigrants were young and had professional training and qualifications (Casaña Mata 2006–2007; Martín Romero/Araujo González 2008). The interviews for our project, conducted on a snowballing basis, were with Cubans ranging in age from their twenties to their sixties but grouped more around those who were in their thirties and forties. They were the ones who ‘came of age’ experiencing the dislocation of the 1990s and envisioning a bleak future for themselves and their families, despite the education and training they might have. Those who were older tended to have migrated later as part of family reunifications or to give their own offspring better opportunities in life. They were informed, ‘tech savvy’ and ‘tech connected’ on Facebook, blogs, and a host of news and social media websites. They built on personal, familial, study, and work contacts, circulating know-how regarding conditions and opportunities in various countries and their citizenship and migration policies.

Researchers in Cuba have singled out the citizenship and migration policy drivers in the case of the Cuban migration to Spain (Oroza Busutil 2014) and Canada (Marrero Peniche/Gutierrez Guerra 2010), of which Cubans took good advantage. Each of the two territories could be an end-site in itself and also act as a springboard to moving on.

Post-‘89 Spain transformed from an emigrant to an immigrant country, receiving large numbers of Latin Americans, including Cubans. In the context of Cuba having long been a colony of Spain (until 1898) and having continued to receive large numbers of Spanish immigrants in the early twentieth century, many Cubans could lay claim to Spanish ancestry (González Yanci/Aguilera Arilla 2002). Knowledge of how to claim citizenship spread across the island and abroad, spiking especially after Spain passed its 2007 Historical Memory Law. In the words of one young Cuban migrant in Madrid: “If I was to leave Cuba, I was aware I needed to have all the necessary documentation so that it’d be as legal a status as possible. So, since my grandparents were Spanish, I got my citizenship.” She continued: “My grandparents moved to Cuba when they

were very young, about 26 years old. And, as my father says, ‘your grandparents did it, and now you’re doing it now, that is migrating for a reason.’”

Cubans lined up outside the Spanish Consulate in Havana to file for their Spanish passports and more recently were on their smart phones and tablets in open-air Wi-Fi spots, swapping information with friends and relatives over IMO, the Cuban-supported app. Not all necessarily intended to relocate to Spain, especially after the 2008 recession, of which they were well aware, sometimes firsthand from returning migrants. Some wanted to have their passports ready for any eventual overseas travel, made possible from the Cuban side since January 2013. This might well have included following in the footsteps of others we interviewed, who, like many Latin Americans, had travelled to Spain and from there trampolined to the UK as well as other parts of Europe (cf. [McIlwaine 2011b, 2012](#)) and to the Americas on visa waivers.

Canada, by contrast, has long been an immigrant country and Canadian immigration policy played in Cuba’s favor. Discriminatory as it has evolved regarding the ‘ideal immigrant’ on a point system, with required proficiency in either English or French, the goal is that a large proportion of immigrants hold a university degree and high-status professional positions. From the Cuban end, knowledge spread of Canada as a good and safe place to go, with a high standard of living and welcoming in its multiculturalism. This was gleaned through contact in Cuba with the many Canadian tourists travelling there (who today far outnumber any other foreign nationals) or from firsthand knowledge from Cubans who had studied, worked, or travelled in Canada. This ranged from Cubana airline crews flying in and out of Canada to Cubans who had relocated, whether through marriage or government immigration programs.

Quebec has its own control over immigration, aimed at strengthening *Francophonie*, as well as offsetting its declining birth rate, and Cubans interviewed described opting for Quebec as a more affordable and quicker route, one that might otherwise not have been their first choice. As one Cuban in Montreal recalled: “I already knew about it, I knew I could afford it and that it didn’t take long to get into it.” He added, “It’s very different from Canada’s, which is really expensive and which had a much reduced list of professions that they need. I knew I could have more chances to apply to Quebec’s migratory program and be accepted.” In another couple’s experience: “In the process of looking for options, we were very lucky that we came across the immigration program offered by the government of Quebec. Through this program, we were able to leave together, and to get to the new place with a legal status and the support of the government.” In their words, “To be honest, we weren’t sure about where we wanted to settle down. We didn’t come with a fixed idea.” Within a year, however, they had their visas for Quebec and knew they had

Cuban friends already in Quebec who could help them on arrival. In effect, they knew they wanted to leave and chose the easiest exit strategy.

They joined many others in the wave of migration to Canada, where, from 2001–2011, the proportion of those who were foreign born rose dramatically, registering 20.6% in Canada's 2011 *National Household Survey*, which made it the highest among the G8 Countries. Selection based on country of origin was wide ranging, and illegal immigration did not pose much of a problem, since the porous border with the US meant illegals could head south. Cases known to us of Cubans going south, often to Florida, were spurred by family ties or in search of warmer climes and proximity to the island. Several interviewed more recently also said they knew Cubans living in Canada who were only now contemplating heading south because they feared the US might soon repeal its Cuban Adjustment Act, which accorded them special status.

6 Language Proficiency

In Canada, Cubans were but one among a fast-growing plethora of visible minorities with Latin Americans as a whole growing the fastest of all, making Spanish Canada's third language today. Cubans interviewed were demonstrably on the ball, spreading the word about professions particularly welcomed by Canada, the online application process, and the required language test in either English or French. As of the 1990s, English replaced Russian as a taught second language in Cuba, while many of those speaking French had acquired it in Cuba at the Alliance Française. There, in addition to language training, they sought advice and made contacts both for France and Quebec. In the words of one young woman who put this to good use: "While I was studying at the Alliance Française, I heard about this option. I knew it was possible for Cubans to apply to this program and immigrate to Quebec." Similarly, one who had been a journalist in Cuba and considered Ecuador and the Dominican Republic, declared: "I studied French for one year at the Alliance Française and then we submitted our application to the Canadian immigration program in Montreal. This was the easiest way to leave the country."

Cubans interviewed in the UK highlighted the role of the British Council in fostering English-language teaching in Cuba and an interest in British culture, and several had initially traveled to the UK through the British Council or on UK Government Chevening Scholarships and Fellowships. These are highly selective, designed as "a unique opportunity for future leaders, influencers, and decision-makers from all over the world to develop professionally and academically, network extensively, experience UK culture, and build lasting positive relationships with the UK." (Chevening 2015) In Cuba's case, they are skewed to

the sciences, computing, and information technology. Chevening posters are prominently placed outside the British Embassy and Residence in Havana, and the rate of return to Cuba is high. However, among those we interviewed were some who married and stayed on to do their PhD and others whose trajectory suggests that more than a few subsequently returned to the UK, where they had partners or friends who helped them settle or move on to a third country of residence. In effect, mobility led to migration, and migration itself could be mobile.

Limitations on German language provision in Cuba were such that Cubans interviewed in Germany attached importance to enrolling in courses to learn the language and immerse themselves in the culture to meet residence and citizenship requirements. One young Cuban who married a German paid privately in Cuba to have three months' intensive German language from a Cuban who had studied in the former GDR before she and her husband filed their application for her to go to Germany. She then attached importance to further language training: "The more integrated you are, the better you are seen in society, and the better accepted [...]. If you speak less German, it's harder to get a job, it's harder to communicate [...]. I'm in Germany, so I try to integrate." And, as another young Cuban found out quickly, "Well, I thought that with my knowledge of English, I was going to be able to start a life, and at least survive at the beginning until I learnt German, but that wasn't the case [...] and thanks to the help from some people I was able to learn quickly."

Cubans singled out Berlin's Humboldt University and Leipzig University for language training, a role each had also played pre-'89, and those who had prior English-language proficiency turned to apply their language skills to learning German. All stressed how important this was to integrate well into German society and culture, as did those in France regarding assimilation into French society and culture. In Montreal, Cubans often expressed a discomfort regarding Quebecois *Francophonie* – itself a factor in some cases for their subsequent drift to Toronto. Even when proficient in English, Cubans felt this mattered far less in Toronto's (and in London's) cosmopolitan world.

7 School and Science Networks

Interviewees who came of age in Cuba's crisis of the 1990s spoke of many, if not almost all, of their year group now residing outside Cuba. This held true for university graduates and those who had studied at selective medical, military, and special senior high schools, the most elite of which was the Lenin school in Havana. In the words of one interviewee in Madrid, "from my group, from

when we were at the Lenin School until after university, well you can count on your fingers how many have stayed.”

Our findings concur with those of Berg’s “La Lenin is my passport” (2015) in that former cohort groups keep in regular online contact, logging onto internet sites and social media groups, as well as maintaining offline friendships transnationally. Their links are defined most by the need to stay in touch and share memories, thus creating a transnational web of relationships and material support. Berg suggested that the selective elite schooling, designed to school professionals and cadres for Cuba’s socialist system, had engendered a political embarrassment for the revolutionary government when their graduates left to seek betterment in capitalist systems abroad. However, we found this politicized context of state-diaspora relations dissipating over time.

Cuban state investment in human capital was nonetheless seen as risky (Pérez-Ones/Núñez-Jover 2009) and occasioned stricter controls in certain sectors. They were tight on the medical profession, though many Cuban doctors and nurses can be found abroad. One who has spent time in both Spain and the UK described how the process of requesting her *liberación*, (the term given to being released from the medical field) was stalled at the municipal and provincial levels in the late 1990s, although, in her words: “At that time it wasn’t so difficult. I always say to people that I got on the last train, because after that you had to spend two years working in another place, wherever they sent you, and then that was increased to five years. I was liberated in eight months.”

Cuba’s medical *cooperantes* serving abroad, both nurses and doctors, also maneuvered transnationally as well as defecting, albeit in relatively small numbers. The mobility of academics, scientists, and engineers was directed mainly to OECD countries and designed to guarantee a sustainable scientific culture in the global “market space.” (Arencibia Jorge/Araújo Ruiz/Torricella Morales 2004) The ensuing transnational knowledge networks are only just beginning to be studied.

Our interviews with professionals across academia, the media, science and engineering, the corporate world, and NGOs evidenced how a good number had started out collaborating with colleagues abroad, while in Cuba or off-island on study or work visits. These connections had developed into substantive relationships leading to longer-term overseas study and work opportunities. Not all who took the step to migrate sustained work in their profession but, if part of an established network, had the potential to carve out advantageous conditions. Those who left Cuba under duress might have severed contact with Cuba – or Cuban authorities and colleagues had severed contact with them. Others, however, actively sought ways of working with those back home.

In this respect, our findings mirror those of a recent biometric study of Cuban scientific collaboration by Palacios-Callender, a Cuban biochemist resi-

dent in the UK, who teamed up with British informatics professionals concerned by the asymmetries of researcher mobility and migration. Palacios-Callender and Roberts in “Help Academic Diasporas Seed International Collaborations” (2015) argue that mobility and residency in the developed world gives exposure to the “triple helix” of academia, government, and industry; enables learning to work with people from other cultures and religions; and aids in attaining local knowledge that can help home countries.

Palacios-Callender’s pilot study identified 103 Cuban researchers active in Europe, 74 in top-ranking universities, who collectively had collaborated with 990 institutions in 57 countries, and over one half (56) had co-authored at least one paper with colleagues in one of 34 institutions in Cuba. Heavily weighted to Western Europe and against the US, the distribution reflected the contrast between only 20% of the migration of Cuban scientists going to the US and the overall Cuban migration to the US, which topped 80%. Her final study spanned the period 1990–2010 and used the PubMed free online database (cf. [Palacios-Callender/Roberts/Roth-Berghofer 2016](#)). From 1989 to 1994, Cubans’ publications in international journals increased 211%, while decreasing 60% in national publications due to lack of resources in the publishing sector. The distinctive turn in 1990s international collaboration was from the Soviet Union to Spain, along with a diversification to Canada, Belgium, Denmark, Japan, and Austria, followed by the UK, Switzerland, and France. During 2000–2010, international collaborations rose from 43.5% to 60% of all publications. Western Europe topped the list, followed by Latin America, then Asia (principally Japan), with North America lagging behind and Oceania registering just a handful. In Western Europe, Spain accounted for over 30%, with Belgium, Germany, and the UK following, in descending order, with 13%, 12%, and 11%. In North America, the region with the highest overall scientific output, the Cuban share was lower, with Canada and the US each around the 7% mark.

Significantly, the collaborative scientific networks were concentrated in immunology and microbiology, biochemistry and molecular biology, biotechnology, medicine and pharmacology-toxicology pharmaceuticals, and chemical sciences – all priorities for Cuba’s continuing commitment to science as a way of promoting social welfare over individual and corporate interests while also overcoming isolation.

8 Border-crossing Ideas and Values

This brings us to a concluding note, which is how Cubans in Canada and Western Europe have found attractive not only cultural and economic opportunities but also prevailing ideas and values. These range from a welcoming ethos of

social and ethnic diversity, multiculturalism, and cosmopolitanism to respect for the individual as well as society – despite the increasing anti-immigration phobia in Western Europe, so markedly exposed in the UK’s recent Brexit referendum. Interviewees across the board valued liberties and civil rights, and also the provision of public services from education, health, and welfare to transport and recycling, which they saw as tempering the excesses of a US-style capitalism. They celebrated not needing a car in their cities, which they described as “safe,” “cycleable,” and “walkable;” and they decried the excessive consumerism and materialism of the US, not least Miami.

Some explicitly self-identified as center-left, if not socialistic. In the words of one who has been in London for many years: “There are a lot of things I believe in that go with socialist mentality. I want good things for everybody.” She elaborated: “I believe in social care, education for everybody, everyone can access the medical care. And what I truly believe is that these are more important in this country than in other European countries, even in Germany, even in Belgium, even in France.”

Each of the countries under study presented differing scenarios and suffice it here to single out two that were quite distinct, namely Germany and Canada. Germany stood out due to the special relations of the pre-‘89 eastern-bloc German Democratic Republic (GDR) with post-‘59 Cuba, the post-‘89 severance of those relations, and Cuba’s rapid move for the return of those Cubans who had been working and studying in the GDR after the Berlin Wall came down. During the Soviet period, both the former GDR and Cuba were bolstered economically, educationally, and culturally as a showcase for the Soviet bloc, fostering a special place in their respective imaginaries (cf. [Hosek 2012](#)). Only vestiges remained of the pre-‘89 academic programs that sent Cuban students to universities of the former east, in Berlin, Dresden, Halle-Wittenberg, Leipzig, and Rostock, and little, if anything, survived of the former east’s docks and industries where some 30,000 Cubans had worked between 1975 and 1990. However, among Cuba’s returnees were those who retained an enduring empathy ([Vogel 2009](#)), and more than a few opted to settle in Germany ([Brandhorst 2013](#); [Pérez Naranjo 2013](#)), albeit to the West rather than the depleted East, Berlin being the exception as having straddled both.

Cubans saw Canada as a place opening up to them with new opportunities without needing to sever connections with homeland or heritage. Cubans identified with this before travelling to Canada, and once there, they helped propagate the image through their use of the internet and social media and the ease with which they could travel to and from Cuba. Since they came legally to Canada and the politics of Cuba were not anathema to most Canadians or their governments, they could choose whether to engage in discussions and activities touching the revolution and its ideals. They could also stay or leave, if able

to engineer it, though many expressed reservations about “heading south” and becoming embroiled in Miami politics.

Driven by conditions on the island and the desire to take advantage of opportunities opening up with Cuba’s repositioning and rebranding, Cubans in Canada and Western Europe proved highly adaptive, blending into the multicultural cosmopolitanism of new urban environments while also striving to assimilate and integrate when and where need be. In the maelstrom of new (g)local dynamics in relations and disconnections, they dispersed through Caribbean and Latin American cultural contact zones of major cities and chartered new horizons in which to forge transcultural and transnational practices and thinking. As expressed by a Cuban artist in Paris: “I didn’t come like a flying insect or butterfly, to fly around the city of light... I didn’t come looking, I came to participate, to collaborate and share my knowledge.” People try to box you in and put you down, he said, but “I try to be like the mist, like the wind, like Macandal [...] who could be with a concept and a direction everywhere, to make life impossible [...] for those who want to sink the human condition. I would like to save the human condition for myself and others if possible.”⁴

Such diverse post-’89 Cuban border crossings can be seen as counterstreams to those caught up in the Cold-War vestiges of the US-Cuba axis, better situated within Cohen’s notion of a deterritorialized Caribbean diaspora grounded in rich cultural capital. And, fanciful though it may seem, Cohen’s metaphor of the epiphyte captures them well: lightly rooted in their diverse diasporic spaces, not parasitic, rather adding something new.

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4 Macandal, a legendary figure in Haiti, shrouded in myth: a slave who escaped the plantation in what was then St Domingue to lead Maroons against enslavement imposed by French colonial rule, renowned for escaping capture and execution, his soul and spirit still wandering Haiti. In Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier’s classic novel *El reino de este mundo* (1949), Macandal had the magical capacity of metamorphosis and salvation (see chapters 6 and 8 of the novel), and the artist was alluding to this in his own journey to Paris – a city where Carpentier himself lived for many years, before and after the Cuban Revolution.

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