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Polyrhythmic Dance Currents: Race Multiculturalism and the Montreal Dance
Community

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for a degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Critical Dance Studies

by

Melissa Templeton

September 2012

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Jacqueline Shea Murphy, Chairperson
Dr. Marta Savigliano
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This dissertation is dedicated in loving memory to my mother,
Sharon Rose Templeton.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Polyrhythmic Dance Currents: Race Multiculturalism and the Montreal Dance Community

by

Melissa Templeton

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Critical Dance Studies
University of California, Riverside, September 2012
Dr. Jacqueline Shea Murphy, Chairperson

This dissertation examines African and African Diaspora concert dance in Montreal in relation to Canadian multicultural policies and Québec nationalism. The multiple layers of colonization and various waves of immigration to Québec have made the province a unique nation with its own complex history of racial construction, quite unlike the racial histories of the U.S. or the rest of Canada (though still greatly informed by these racial paradigms). In the debates that arise in Québec over multiculturalism, language is often seen as the main cultural component in need of preservation. However, this focus on language often masks other elements at play in these cultural debates, in particular, how “race” informs notions of cultural belonging in Québec. A focus on African Diaspora dance in Montreal (Québec’s largest and most demographically varied city) helps bring racial construction to the fore for two reasons. First, language differences do not distinguish Québec’s Black community from the white French-Canadian majority as Québec’s Black population is comprised mainly of French-

speakers, and accordingly, studying Montreal's African Diaspora reduces the significance of linguistic difference. Second, concentrating on dance practices helps identify how the Montreal public interprets bodies and their cultural meanings. By analyzing the public support and critical reception of African Diaspora dance practices in Montreal, this dissertation examines how racial difference is constructed through multicultural rhetoric, policies, and debates about dance; it also suggests that dance practitioners have the ability to change and inform these constructed identities and the social landscape that frames them. To conduct this research, I use archival material along with personal interviews and participant-observer ethnography to examine: the early visits of Les Ballets Africains to North America (with a particular focus on Montreal); the Montreal-based company Les Ballets Jazz; the 1999 Montreal festival *Afrique: Aller/Retour*; and the work of Contemporary African dance choreographer Zab Maboungou. With these subjects, my projects contributes a partial history of African Diaspora dance in Montreal and analyzes the effectiveness and the shortcomings of Canadian Multiculturalism on this community.

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Introduction

Polyrhythmic Dance Currents: Race, Multiculturalism, and the Montreal Dance Community

When I began my training as a dance artist, I was wonderstruck by the incandescent dance scene in Montreal. For me, the Montreal dance community seemed to reflect everything I believed dance should do and I revered the artists working out of this city. Noted internationally for their extreme athleticism and provocative, avant-garde choreography, the dancers and choreographers behind such groups as La La La Human Steps, O Vertigo, Jean-Pierre Perreault and Marie Chouinard stood at the precipice of contemporary dance and dared Canadian artists to make the same ascent. I rarely took much interest in other dance styles (except for the occasional ballet performance, and of course my niece's lengthy dance recitals). It was upon entering graduate school and reading scholars like Brenda Dixon Gottschild (1996), Ann Cooper Albright (1997), and Susan Manning (2004)¹ that I began to ask more about my own aesthetic preferences. I started to question the pedestal I'd placed under modern dance and wondered why, for example, I had abandoned my studies in jazz, tap, and Afro-Caribbean, which I had pursued with such enthusiasm as an adolescent. I wondered if perhaps the Africanist aesthetics underpinning these forms had shaped my decision. Was it possible that implicit racial prejudices had influenced this shift in my judgment? Looking beyond my own personal experiences, I then began to ask: why are there so few major companies that

¹ In the preface of her book Modern Dance Negro Dance: Race in Motion, Susan Manning expresses a similar shift in her aesthetic preferences as the premise for her research. (vii-ix)

practice these styles in Canada? I had believed so strongly that Canada was a “multicultural patchwork.” However, looking through these dance scholarship lenses I’ve felt urged to ask not just how “multicultural” Canada is, but also about how useful a frame like multiculturalism is in itself for approaching these questions.

These observations provoke me to ask: how can discussions around race and multiculturalism in Québec inform the way we understand dance studies as a flourishing field within Québec and within Canada? And how can dance—its practice, history, funding, and critical reception— inform debates around multiculturalism in Québec where multiculturalism carries such profound political import? In this study, I explore these questions with a particular focus on representations of African and African Diaspora dance in Montreal from 1959 (a date that marks the first visits of the group Les Ballets Africains in Montreal) to the present. This project will re-examine Montreal’s cultural history in a manner that focuses specifically on the way that white and non-white bodies (in particular “black” bodies) are interpreted on stage and through social constructions of race. I suggest that, historically, the concern over cultural preservation in Québec is more than an attempt to sustain the French language; it can also be understood as surreptitiously defending the province’s “whiteness” against the “othering” implicit in Canada’s official multicultural stance.

In the following pages, I explicate the historical and theoretical context of this project, situate my research in terms of dance studies and academia in general, outline my methodological approach, and provide a summary of the chapters in this dissertation. In the following section, I outline the complicated history of multiculturalism in Canada and

the notions of biculturalism and interculturalism. Next, I explore the complex relationship between language and race in Québec and, in particular, the position of black culture in Québec. I then explore the influence of race on dance in Montreal and the current debates that arise in Canadian scholarship to suggest that dance studies can offer a new lens for understanding race in Canada, as it is an approach that focuses specifically on the body. The penultimate section outlines my methodological approach, which utilizes both archival research and participant-observer ethnography, and in the final section, I outline the theoretical content of the next four chapters.

I. Historical Context: Bicultural, Multicultural, or Intercultural?

To begin this section I would like to clarify what I mean by “multiculturalism.” Canadian multiculturalism is nebulous and is therefore hard to define. It was first officially linked to Canadian national identity in a declaration by Prime Minister Trudeau in 1971 who announced that Canada should no longer be considered bicultural (as it had generally been understood in the past) but rather a multicultural nation comprised of many ethnicities living within the country. Yet this declaration remained vague, without any clear legislation to define or enforce it until 1988 when the Canadian government passed the Multiculturalism Act, which laid out the main goals for integrating and accommodating ethnocultural groups in Canadian society.² This meant that for a period

² The four main goals of Multiculturalism as laid out in the Multiculturalism Act of 1988 are: to support cultural development of ethnocultural groups; to encourage full participation in Canadian society (like voting); to encourage creative exchange between cultures; and to help new immigrants in acquiring at least one of Canada’s official languages (French or English). (Kymlicka 15)

of seventeen years, Canada considered itself multicultural, and yet there was no clear policy to outline what that entailed. Accordingly, multiculturalism has largely been understood as a set of strategies that evolve as the demographics of Canada's population change. As Will Kymlicka explains in his book Finding our Way (1998), there was no particular "theory" behind multiculturalism when it began: "It was introduced in haste, largely as a way of deflecting opposition to the apparent privileging of French and English that was implicit in the introduction of official bilingualism." (40) For the sake of this study, I understand multiculturalism to mean the ways in which public institutions account for diversity in their promotion of culture. In Montreal, the public institutions I refer to are those that are either directly related to the federal government (like Canada Council for the Arts and Canadian Heritage) or are somehow supported by these institutions (like *Festival International de Nouvelle Danse*).

Understanding the history of Canada's multicultural stance requires understanding Québec's position within the Canadian federation. Québec, a region settled by the French beginning in the seventeenth century and then conquered by the British in the eighteenth, has been a contested land for centuries. More recently, starting in the 1960s, a movement that sought to liberate the largely French speaking province from Canada and make Québec its own country began to take shape. Although never solidly reaching a majority opinion, this movement towards Québec sovereignty increasingly influenced political debates in the province³ and in response, the Canadian government sought ways to abate

³ While support for separatism in Québec ranged from 8-11% from the early 1960's until 1972 (McRoberts 36), it was powerful enough to create a stir. This figure has grown significantly over the last few decades and by the 1980 referendum, 40% of Québec's

the mounting tensions and maintain the federation. Multiculturalism is notoriously tied to the federal government's attempts to contain this separatist movement in Québec; it became a way to superficially acknowledge some of Québec's cultural differences while justifying its place *within*, rather than separated from, a united Canada. The following pages provide a more comprehensive look at these developments through an examination of Canada's history as a "bicultural" colony, the development of separatism and shortly after of multiculturalism, a consideration of Aboriginal and immigrant groups in Canada, and Québec's policy of Interculturalism.

Historian Kenneth McRoberts argues in his book Misconceiving Canada (1997) that prior to 1971, historical accounts of Canada tended to recount the country not as "multicultural," but as "bicultural;" white settlers saw Canada as comprised of two "founding" peoples: the French and the English. Aboriginal peoples are glaringly unacknowledged in these early Europeanist accounts—an issue that I will address later in this essay. Even after the British victory over the French in 1759, Upper and Lower Canada (present day southern Ontario and Québec respectively) continued to develop as separate nations. During this period, one of the implicit goals of the British colonists was to assimilate French Canadians.⁴ Yet ironically, the government still tended to use dualist practices in governing the two territories, at least until, as McRoberts suggests, the

population supported sovereignty (Resnick 124), and in the 1995 referendum, the results were even closer at 49.42% in support of a sovereign Québec (Gagnon and La Chapelle 179).

⁴ English Canada's assimilative agenda is very apparent in the writings of Lord Durham who in 1839 recommended joining Upper and Lower Canada to form the United Canadas. (Kymlicka 30) This union, Durham believed, would cause the gradual

English speaking population of Canada was large enough to outnumber the French in a representative government (McRoberts 6). The year 1867 marks the confederation of Canada, which thus joined the Canadas and the Maritime colonies (with the exception of Newfoundland until 1949), and with this union, the position of French Canadians within the country became complicated. On the one hand, confederation meant that Upper and Lower Canada would be separate entities and French Canadians would have more say in the running of their province. On the other hand, federally, they would be severely outnumbered by the English. (Bothwell 210-213) Accordingly, French Canadians have historically been a marginalized voice in the Canadian federation.

In the past, English Canada has dominated economic matters in the country and even in the province of Québec itself. Sociologist John Porter attributes this phenomenon not only to the position of the English as colonists, but also (in a Weberian-inspired argument) to the staunch Catholic morals and authority of the church in French Canada,⁵ in comparison to the more capitalist-compatible Protestant ethic that allowed businesses to flourish in English Canada (95).⁶ Catholicism may have impeded the urbanization of Québec in the first half of the twentieth century, but after the death of Québec Premier Maurice Duplessis— a Premier who was infamous for being allied with the Catholic

acculturation of the French population in Canada so that the supposedly superior British culture would dominate the Canadian nation. (McRoberts 6)

⁵ Unlike France, where the church's power declined significantly after the French Revolution, the Catholic Church was a very powerful authority in Québec until the mid-twentieth century. For more on the influence of the Church on social thought in Québec compared to France please see Richard Handler's Nationalism and the Politics of Culture in Québec (1988).

Church— the 1960's witnessed a gradual rise of secularism and the growth of Québec's French middle class; this period is referred to as Québec's Quiet Revolution and is marked not by a momentous overthrow, but instead by the gradual (hence quiet) industrialization of Québec.

During the Quiet Revolution, Québec's new French middle class voiced their concerns about English hegemony over business and politics in Québec and Canada, and in response, the provincial government took on projects like its creation of Hydro Québec in 1962 to prove their economic independence. (Ignatieff 149) In a more violent spirit of independence, the terrorist group Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ)⁷ also voiced their own protest and began planting mailbox bombs in Westmount (the wealthy English neighbourhood in Montreal) in 1963. That same year, influenced by the increasing conflicts, concerns, and even emerging violence, Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson established The Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism to uncover the issues and debates that informed French-English relations (and tensions) in Canada. Implicit in this commission was Pearson's understanding of the "two nations" theory of Canada. McRoberts (1997) argues that this understanding of a dualist Canada continued

⁶ In his essay "Explaining Québec Nationalism" (in R. Kent Weaver's The Collapse of Canada?) Stéphane Dion makes a similar argument to suggest that because much of Québec's French-élite were Catholic, they were entrenched in anti-capitalist values. (97)

⁷ The FLQ terrorist organization began during the early 1960s. Their ambition was to liberate Québec from Canada. They are known for planting bombs throughout the 1960s but are perhaps most notoriously known for the kidnapping of Montreal's British consul James Cross and the Liberal party's minister of labour Pierre Laporte in October of 1970, and eventually the murder of Laporte. Curiously, Robert Bothwell (2006) notes in his history of Canada, the name "Front de libération du Québec" was intended to evoke the name of the Algerian group Front de libération Nationale and their successful decolonization movement. (447)

to frame discussions of Québec's relationship to Canada until Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau reevaluated the Bilingual and Bicultural commission.

Prime Minister Trudeau was known to be hostile towards nationalism in general, as he believed nationalist sentiment was irrational and emotional rather than logical or practical. He argued that Canada's ultimate goal was to abandon nationalism of any kind (whether it be Québécois or Canadian) and to promote federalism—a confederation made up of egalitarian provinces, rather than separate nations—believing federalism to be the most impartial, universal, and rational system, devoid of nationalist sentiment (Trudeau xxii, 194, and Stark 128-130).⁸ Seeing Québec nationalism as a threat to this aspiration, Trudeau continually attempted to find ways to appease Québec but wanted to avoid granting any kind of special status to Québec's cultural particularity that might encourage its nationalist pride. (Trudeau 32-33). He seemed at first to find his answer in the Bilingual and Bicultural commission.

As mentioned previously, the Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism began in 1963 with a focus on Ontario and Québec, and considered predominantly the position of British and French settlers who dominated this area. However, as the commission traveled beyond these provinces, many residents in Central and Western Canada protested the Commission's disregard for other ethnicities within the country. As Canadian sociologist Leo Driedger (2001) explains, “[w]hen the commission, comprised

⁸ As Andrew Stark (1992) has pointed out, Pierre Trudeau was more interested in promoting a kind of cosmopolitan citizenship rather than dedication to a particular “nation,” and that a federalist system, one that treats all provinces equally, would be the most conducive for this goal. Ironically, Stark continues, English Canadians have adopted

almost totally of British and French commissioners, arrived for hearings in the West, they found themselves castigated by Germans, Ukrainians, Scandinavians, and others in Winnipeg for neglecting a substantial number of other Europeans, who were being neither represented nor heard.” (487). The commission took this criticism very seriously and responded in 1970 by including a volume called *The Cultural Contributions of Other Ethnic Groups* in their report⁹ and in 1971, Prime Minister Trudeau declared Canada to be a bilingual and *multicultural* society.

McRoberts (1997) suggests that in this declaration, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau commandeered the critiques of Ethnic groups in Canada as a way to avoid Québec nationalism and biculturalism, which, as many of Trudeau’s associates at the political journal *Cité Libre* believed, would potentially lead to sovereignty for Québec. (120) Trudeau’s declaration diminished French Canada’s hardships to a simple question of superficial cultural difference, placing them in the same category as other marginalized groups, and thus casting a blind eye on the complicated history of English domination that had disadvantaged Francophones in Canada. In this way, the declaration of Canada as a “multicultural” society meant that French Canadians lost their special status as one of the “founding nations” of Canada.

the goals of federalism and “identity-less” citizenship as a part of their own nationalist goals. (130-134)

⁹ It is worthwhile to note, as Rennie Warburton does (2007 281), that it was the critique brought forth by other European descendents that caused the commission to rethink the bicultural status of Canada. In particular, the critiques offered by Canada’s Aboriginal people are not acknowledged in this context, nor are those of groups immigrating from outside of Europe.

Numerous scholars have raised concerns over the sincerity of Trudeau's multicultural vision, like Kenneth McRoberts (1997) who takes aim at the lack of clarity in Trudeau's multicultural project. According to McRoberts, the goals of multiculturalism seem to conflict with each other—like the goal to “preserve” culture and the goal to encourage cultural exchange, as hastily outlined in Trudeau's house of commons speech in October of 1971. Moreover, Trudeau was renowned for his objectives to promote individual rights over group rights, yet this may be incompatible with multiculturalism's aim to promote the liberties of ethnocultural groups within Canada.¹⁰ As McRoberts argues, these internal discrepancies suggest that Trudeau was not prepared to promote multiculturalism beyond rhetoric, which may be further proven when considering that Multicultural policy was not laid out in an official act until 1988. Finally, while Trudeau's bilingual program has been heavily supported, multicultural programs have received significantly less. In 1971, the secretary of state spent \$78 million on bilingualism, but less than \$2 million on multiculturalism. These statistics improved only slightly in the 1980s with multiculturalism receiving on average about 7% of what

¹⁰ One of Pierre Trudeau's goals was to ratify the Canadian constitution, which occurred in 1982, but without the signature of Québec's Premier René Lévesque (a Québec signature is still missing from this document). The first part of this document, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, outlines the individual rights of Canadian citizens, some of which have been rejected in Québec, especially those to do with language rights that are thought to threaten the survival of the French language in the province, thus putting group rights and individual rights in conflict. (Taylor 52-53) Legislation in Québec, like the infamous Bill 101 (which declared that public signs are to be in French), has gone against the Charter of Rights and Freedoms on numerous occasions by using the “notwithstanding” clause—a clause built into the charter that allows provinces, under certain circumstances, to opt out of the charter's rules. Trudeau largely objected to these rejections of the charter as he felt they put Québec's group rights over individual freedoms.

bilingual programs received. (McRoberts 125-128) However, its imprecision aside, multiculturalism became a powerful political device in Canada.

While multiculturalism has received high praise in mainstream English Canadian politics—becoming, as Himani Bannerji argues, a kind of slogan to promote Canada (291) and a way to encourage tourism through cultural events like festivals (295)—“multiculturalism” has met some resistance in Québec. Bannerji explains that multiculturalism has become a tool to justify and legitimize Canada as a liberal democratic state, and defend English Canada’s understanding of “Canada” against the charges made by Québec and First Nations Peoples that ask Canada to account for its colonial injustices. (292) As Canadian scholar Linda Hutcheon explains: “It was no coincidence that national multicultural policies were introduced at the same time that Quebec was developing its own discourses of decolonization [...] For some, these policies still function as implicit barriers to the recognition of both *québécois* demands for independence and aboriginal peoples’ land claims and desires for self-government” (29).

It is important here however to keep in mind that French Canadians too were colonizers and while Québec has suffered from colonialism, they have also profited, and continue to profit from it in their treatment of Aboriginal groups in the province. In claiming that the Québécois are colonized, First Nations and Inuit groups in the province are often ignored or forgotten. Aboriginals in Canada are still under colonial rule, and it was the French settlers in Canada who initially colonized them. Québec (and Canada) continues to struggle with its relationships to these communities. There is some evidence

that suggests that First Nations do not support Québec's quest for sovereignty. During the 1995 referendum, three aboriginal groups in Québec held their own referendum and voted "no" to sovereignty in overwhelming numbers; the Cree voted 96% against it, the Inuit 95%, and the francophone Montagnais 99%. (McRoberts 231) This is not to suggest that Canada's own treatment of Aboriginal groups has been acceptable, but these figures do suggest that in spite of ostensibly sharing a history of colonization, the aforementioned First Nations groups are not sympathetic to Québec's attempts to "decolonize." In fact, if anything, the separatist debate potentially causes the erasure of Québec's own history as a colonizer.

Recognizing the position of Aboriginal groups in Canada is crucial to understanding the complexity of the Québec sovereignty movement. Can Québec justify decolonization without granting the same opportunity to Aboriginals? First Nation and Inuit groups in Québec, and in Canada, have suffered greatly from colonization practices that continue today. This is particularly evident in land disputes that arose during the Oka Crisis of 1990, where property developers proposed to build a golf course on a Mohawk cemetery in Québec, resulting in massive protests. (Bothwell 493). The Canadian government bought the land from the property owners so that it would remain untouched, but the violence that erupted brought Québec and Canada's law enforcement practices in question.

The legitimacy of Canada's immigrant integration policies (like those of multiculturalism) comes into question when considering that the historically assimilationist policies of English and French settlers have attempted to cripple Native

cultures. How can Canada legitimately ask its immigrants to assimilate when French and English colonists did the opposite? If French and English settlers were (and continue to be) so aggressive and harmful to Native populations, how could the nation founded by these settlers justify asking immigrant populations to submissively integrate?

This problem finds scholars grappling with definitions of nation in order to justify the power of English and French Canada. Recently, many political thinkers have suggested that Canada is made up of three major nations: one major nationality (English Canada) and two national minorities (French and Aboriginal). While this system tries to account for the historical context of French and Aboriginal Peoples, a consideration of ethnocultural groups is absent in this categorization, which I suggest belies the implicit contradictions that haunt French and English “nationhood” in Canada. For example, in envisioning Canada this way, political scientists like Will Kymlicka have suggested that asymmetrical federalism—a federalism based on communities rather than provincial populations—would be a better system of representation. Kymlicka argues for a multi-nation federalism: a form of government representation that recognizes the distinctiveness of Aboriginals¹¹ and French-speaking Canadians and would use an asymmetrical distribution of power to ensure they are not subject to the tyranny of the majority but have greater self-governing powers than other territories (138). However, while this sort of system might at first glance seem to be at least a better compromise, the issue becomes more complicated when one tries to articulate what makes up a nation in

¹¹ Another issue that arises in this particular system would be the complications that occur in grouping all Aboriginal communities into one category, thus blanketing over the differences among them.

Canada. In defining immigrant groups in distinction to national minorities, Kymlicka writes: “these groups have very different histories. [Immigrant groups] are the result not of the involuntary incorporation of complete societies settled within their historic lands, but of the decisions of individuals to leave their original homelands for a new life.” (7) However, voluntary migration could surely be used to categorize early European settlers in Canada and could thus make a case for considering French and English Canadians as immigrant groups. Moreover, Kymlicka’s implicit definition of “national minority:” a group who has an established history on a particular land that was involuntarily taken away, could also be used to describe the situation of the Africville community in Nova Scotia. Many of the residents of this community were descendents of Black Loyalists who came to Nova Scotia in the early nineteenth century. In the 1960s, Africville was considered a “slum” and was razed to the ground. (Jennifer Nelson 7) One might interpret the Africville community as demonstrating Kymlicka’s definition of national minority: “involuntary incorporation of [a] complete [society] settled within their historic lands,” and yet Canada does not acknowledge the Africville community as a national minority. Defining “nation” in a Canadian context is a slippery slope as the categories of immigrant group and nationality continually collide when considering Canada’s settler populations.

Due to the controversial position of multiculturalism in Québec, the province has sought other ways to account for diversity. One angle through which Québec has approached the issue of cultural plurality is through interculturalism—the Québécois version of multiculturalism. In this project, I consider interculturalism to be an implicit extension of multiculturalism, but with a focus on the survival of the French language.

Interculturalism attempts to reconcile the tension between plurality and homogeneity in Québec by emphasizing the importance of preserving the French language in Québec (which is ostensibly the part of Québécois culture intended to be preserved) while encouraging the acceptance and integration of Québec's immigrant populations. Since the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s, Québec has urged the federal government to grant the province greater authority in selecting its immigrants so that it could ensure a large number of French speakers would enter the province. The federal government has complied with these wishes and today the province selects over 60% of its immigrants. (Bouchard and Taylor 77) In the process, Québec has gone through various immigration policies that have sought to accommodate its increasingly diverse population.

Interculturalism is the latest iteration of Québec's immigration policy. It began in 1990 with the goal of recognizing Québec as a democratic and pluralist nation with French as the common language (Blad and Couton 656). However, while this policy accounts for the preservation of language that is so crucial in Québec, it is still insufficient in outlining how immigrants to Québec are integrated and/or accepted in Québec society. Bouchard and Taylor explain in their report Building the Future: A Time for Reconciliation, a major work commissioned in 2007 by the Québec government to address these issues,¹² that in order for interculturalism to be more effective, it must be more clearly defined (39). In general, it seems to "[seek] to reconcile ethnocultural diversity with the

¹² Québec Premier Jean Charest established the Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices on February 8 2007. The project, which was lead by Gérard Bouchard and Charles Taylor (two well respected scholars within Québec), had a budget of \$5 million, and would travel across Québec to examine current accommodation

continuity of the French-speaking core and the preservation of the social link” (40), but much like multiculturalism, it still lacks precision. Bouchard and Taylor list numerous additions that might be added to this definition: that it should encourage interaction; that the majority ethnocultural group will be transformed through this interaction; that it is healthy to display rather than hide difference, and that multilingualism is encouraged so long as French is still the common public language. (40-43) Still, because of the similarities between interculturalism and multiculturalism, including their ambiguities, even intercultural goals of promoting cultural diversity are often viewed in Québec with some resistance and are seen as a potential threat to French Canadian culture (which is marginalized on the federal level but dominates on the provincial level).

In Québec, cultural discussions opposed to multiculturalism (although often targeted at Québec’s “intercultural” policies) have occasionally slipped into utterances that reflect ethnic nationalism¹³ and xenophobia as is apparent in the recent debates about reasonable accommodation that ask to what extent immigrants in Québec should assimilate to Québécois culture. Reasonable accommodation is a Québec intercultural policy that makes arrangements to ensure that institutions respect individuals’ rights to equal opportunity without unnecessary discrimination. In 2006 and 2007, this policy came under public scrutiny as numerous accommodation practices were receiving negative attention. For example, after a misunderstanding at a local maple farm, there was a widespread accusation that a visiting Muslim association forced their dietary and

practices in Québec, conduct numerous deliberations with Quebecers of various social backgrounds, and write a final report on their findings.

prayer needs upon the guests of a sugar house, when in fact, the group had made arrangements in advance with the owners of the sugar house in order to be as unimposing as possible. As Gérard Bouchard and Charles Taylor explain, these debates seemed to have been exacerbated by rumor and poorly researched media coverage. (15) Also adding fuel to the fire was a letter written by a member of the Action Démocratique du Québec (a conservative party in Québec), which chastised Québec leaders for giving in to “the old reflex of the minority” and accommodating such practices (cited in Bouchard and Taylor 15). According to Bouchard and Taylor, these debates are largely the result of French Canada’s peculiar position as a minority within Canada and North America, yet a majority in Quebec. (74) However, while calling upon French Canadian ethnicity has been an effective strategy for creating an awareness of Québec’s uniqueness within Canada, I suggest that it becomes a dangerous tool of racism when it is disseminated through institutions of power in Québec. Québec politicians have made numerous gaffes while trying to strike this balance.¹⁴ On the federal level, ethnic nationalism has helped Québec define its distinctiveness, but on the provincial level, it can lead to xenophobia.

Historically, there has been a great deal of anxiety over Québec’s “others,” which is the result of the complicated position in which French-speaking Canadians stand when

¹³ Even McRoberts, who attempts to validate the French Canadian position, admits that ethnic nationalism occasionally informs the nationalist movement in Québec (254-255).

¹⁴ Jacques Parizeau’s 1995 post-referendum speech is perhaps the most infamous example, where he cites “money and ethnic votes” as the reason for the separatists’ loss. However, more recent examples include Yves Michaud (a prominent public figure and supporter of the Parti Québécois) and his comments in 2000 about allophones being intolerant of the French majority (Maclure xii), or in 2007 when ADQ and former Québec opposition leader André Boisclair commented to students in Trois-Rivières about the

considering the Canadian nation and multiculturalism. Multiculturalism potentially denies rather than accepts French Canada's "difference" by ignoring their historical marginalization within the federation, yet implicitly, multiculturalism still holds an English Canadian norm, which simultaneously, and paradoxically, "others" French Canada.

II. Race, Language, and the Body

A survey from September 2007 revealed that 71.7% of native French speakers in Québec believed that the province was too tolerant and accommodating of new immigrants, yet for those whose mother tongue was not French, the percentage was only 35.2%. (Bouchard and Taylor 22). This discrepancy of perception between Francophone and Anglophone/Allophone¹⁵ (French and English/non-French speaking) inhabitants could have many explanations: perhaps this demonstrates a difference in French and non-French media in Québec, or perhaps non-French speakers in Québec are more in tune with discourses on mainstream English Canadian multicultural ideals. Other likely answers might have to do with the precarious position of French speakers in Canada as outlined above and a potential reluctance to newcomers who might threaten their linguistic heritage, or that allophones tend to be associated with immigrant groups in Québec and would therefore want to increase accommodation practices. However, these

surprising amount of students with "yeux bridés" (loosely translated as "slanted eyes") that he came across while studying in Boston. (Robitaille, Le Devoir 16 mars 2007)

¹⁵ The study conducted by the Commission on Reasonable Accommodation was interested primarily in the French majority and thus lumped Anglophone and Allophone speakers in the same category.

figures do suggest that in Québec there is a relationship between language and cultural values associated with ethnicity and belonging.

I begin with this statistic to point out that in the case of Canada, and Québec in particular, racial formation—a process whereby social factors inform the subject and significance of racial categories (Omi and Winant 61)—is profoundly informed by language. However, when we turn our focus to the importance of language, it potentially blinds us to other factors that are similarly contributing to this categorization. For example, language cannot explain the explicit racism towards Québec’s Black community¹⁶, especially when considering that most of Québec’s Black community immigrated from Haiti (a former French colony where French is still one of the official languages) and that over 80% of Québec’s black population speaks French, or both French and English (Ministère de l’Immigration et des Communautés culturelles 35). While I want to acknowledge that language plays an important role in understanding race in Canada, this project demonstrates how other factors, in particular factors that deal with bodies and movement, inform these categories as well. I begin this section by examining how language has informed racial formation in Québec and examine how French Canada’s “whiteness” has been under threat, and continues to be so under multiculturalism. I then explore how notions of race and language have dangerously elided Québécois decolonization struggles with similar liberation movements in African and African Diaspora communities. Following this, I argue that an examination of dance

¹⁶ Bouchard and Taylor explain that Muslims and Black Canadians are the groups most affected by discrimination in Québec (83). Curiously, while the authors outline the issues

practices in Montreal, and in particular of the way bodies move, can inform our understanding of race and multiculturalism in Canada.

Racial formation in Montreal is very complex. It is easy to make the assumption that the city is largely made up of Québécois “de souche—” those whose ancestors have been around since British rule began— yet this is not entirely true. The total visible minority¹⁷ population in Montreal is around 14%, which is about 92% of Québec’s total visible minority population¹⁸, of which the largest group, in both Montréal and Québec, is Black Canadians (Statistics Canada, 2001 Census). Moreover, 86.9% of Québec’s immigrant population lives in the greater Montreal area (Bouchard and Taylor 10). Finally, 12% of Montreal’s population has English as its mother tongue, while the percentage for Québec as a whole is less than 8% (Statistics Canada, 2001 Census). These statistics suggest that Montréal is ethnically and linguistically the most diverse part of Québec. Although white French-speaking Quebecers make up the majority of the city’s population, there is a significant population of “others” that are a part of Montréal, and while racial discrimination in Québec is not solely directed at Black communities, because of the prominence of French speakers in this demographic, a study focused on this group makes the non-linguistic aspects of racial formation in Québec clearer.

surrounding Islamophobia, they only address racial discrimination towards Black Canadians in passing.

¹⁷ The Canadian Census defines “visible minorities” as those who are not Aboriginal nor of caucasian descent. Aboriginal groups have a separate category in the census. (Statistics Canada, 2001 Census)

¹⁸ Montréal makes up about 47% of Québec’s total population (Statistics Canada, 2001 Census).

Curiously, the Québécois have not always been thought of as white. As French Canada scholar Josée Makropoulos explains, the phrase “speak white” was a common derogatory term used by Anglophones in Canada before the 1960’s in response to people speaking French. This marginalization of white French Canadians assumed that their “whiteness” was inferior to English “whiteness;” perhaps due to their subjugation by the English, French Canadians were somehow less white. But as the Quiet Revolution began in the early 1960s, the combination of Canada’s bicultural status and of Québec’s growing independence meant that French Canada was becoming increasingly powerful, while others, especially aboriginal groups, continued to remain marginalized. However, as I previously addressed, with the advent of Canadian multiculturalism in 1971, French Canada’s newfound position of power came into question. Multiculturalism became a way to deny Québec’s special status within the country and thus implicitly reaffirmed an English Canadian norm. In a surreptitious manner, multiculturalism became a tool to continue to marginalize French Canada by undermining Québec’s special status within a once “bicultural” nation.

I suggest that it is not merely the French language that is anxiously being preserved in response to English Canadian hegemony, but also a desire to reaffirm Québec’s “whiteness.”¹⁹ To clarify, by “whiteness” I do not necessarily mean skin color or other visual markers that might indicate “whiteness” (ironically, whiteness is more frequently about transcendence than embodiment). Instead I mean the prestige and power

¹⁹This is perhaps most apparent in Lucien Bouchard’s xenophobic comments in 1995 about the Québécois being the white race whose women have the least babies. (See Bruner 2002, 82)

associated with being represented as white, as outlined in some of the current work of white studies scholars. In his book White, film theorist Richard Dyer argues that if we are ever to move towards cultural equality and hybridity than we must racialize “whiteness”—that is, we must show the particularity of representations of whiteness rather than using it as an implicit universal standard. According to Dyer, “whiteness” can be understood as an invisible narrative position: it is less about stereotypes and more about “narrative structural positions, rhetorical tropes, and habits of perception.” (12) In this sense, whiteness is very much about who is in the position of telling the grand narrative—a position that French Canadians have sought out in Canada since they were dominated by British rule. Again, it seems that whiteness—the ability to be in a position to tell one’s story—seems to be very much tied to language.

Ironically, French Canada’s desire to reaffirm its whiteness borrowed from black culture. Makropoulos explains that in dealing with the cycle of marginalization that characterized the experiences of French Canada, during the 1960s and 1970s, many French Canadians were beginning to develop a discourse of racialized victimhood that appropriated blackness as is especially apparent in some of the literature of the time (like in Michèle Lalonde’s poem Speak White, Pierre Vallières’s manifesto Les Nègres Blancs d’Amérique, and later in Franco-Ontarian author Patrice Desbiens’s re-write of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man centred on a French Canadian figure). Curiously, although not about sovereignty per se, during the 2012 student protests that frequently closed Montreal’s downtown core, a group of protestors donned blackface makeup claiming that

they were not “les nègres du gouvernement.”²⁰ While the students regretted and later apologized for their insensitive actions, this event demonstrates that there is still today a kind of fascination with appropriating “blackness” to evoke notions of freedom, though often at the expense of Québec’s Black population. Since at least the 1950s, Québécois struggles for autonomy were compared to struggles for independence in Africa,²¹ and I will admit that if one examines the two loosely, interesting parallels emerge over the issue of language. In Black Skin White Masks (1967), for example, Frantz Fanon also sees a connection between racial/colonial oppression and language. Fanon argues that the colonialists’ language is used to “other” the black man.²² But he also argues that abandoning the colonists’ language does not seem to be the answer when mastery of the their language is the first step in countering the claims of European superiority. According to Fanon, this grasp for the colonists’ language is also a grasp for whiteness. Similarly, English has been the language of power in Canada and in order to gain stature

²⁰ For more on the student strike and Québec minorities please see Anthony Morgan’s article “La Grève et les minorités.” <http://quebec.huffingtonpost.ca/anthony-morgan/greve-etudiante-minorites_b_1383521.html>

²¹ In his 1974 book Prospero without Caliban for example, Max Dorsinville compares the literature of French Canadians with Black literature from Africa and America, noticing that “the emergent ‘Québécois’ identity of the late fifties and sixties drew definite parallels between its own social experience and that of Blacks in America and Africa.” (9)

²² In paraphrasing Fanon’s work, I use his phrasing of “the black man” and the “the white man,” in order to be true to his words, however, I wish to recognize the problematic gendered implications of this wording and how it often excludes or fails to accurately represent the experiences of black and white women.

(whether it be financial, political, or other), historically, one has had to mediate this through the English language.²³

However, this connection between French Canadian culture and African colonization is made in haste if we neglect the way Québec's own black population has been marginalized. Makropoulos argues that this affiliation with black culture has been limited. Indeed, when it came to accepting black Canadians into Québécois culture, Québec's disapproval of multicultural practices, and its social exclusion of ethnic minorities (which later became especially prominent in some of the speeches of separatist leaders like Parizeau), meant that claims about Québec's victimhood were often made at the expense of African- and Caribbean-Canadians, most of whom in Québec are native French speakers. Although it became popular to borrow from black culture in order to understand French Canadian plight, socially accepting Québec's black community risked giving in to multicultural ideals. According to Makropoulos, in Québec, 'French' becomes 'white' by subjugating minorities to the realms of "otherness."

Moreover, I argue that because these two regions, Québec and Africa, are part of vastly different contexts, there are significant differences that must be accounted for if such parallels are to be constructed. One in particular that I would like to call attention to is Fanon's understanding of black embodiment. According to Fanon, the "black man" has developed an inferiority complex to the "white man" not just because of economic reasons, but also because of an internalization and an "epidermization," which makes his

²³ This may also explain why in creating the Ministère des Affaires Culturelles in 1961, Georges-Emile Lapalme emulated France believing that France's cultural models would

blackness both internally and externally present (11). He further argues that the white man negates his bodily presence, while the black man is in constant dialogue with the world because of his body (110-11, 127). In this sense, the borrowing of discourses on decolonization from authors who write on black liberation movements cannot be extracted to justify Québec's situation without a serious consideration of embodiment.

In Québec's quest for "whiteness," language has obscured the materiality that becomes associated with non-white bodies. Cultural analyses of Montreal tend to turn on questions of language (Young 2000, Gagné and Langlois 2002), yet when language takes prominence, the racialized body fades. Dance offers a unique opportunity to think about Québécois identity and multiculturalism in a manner that foregrounds bodily difference rather than linguistic difference. In part, this includes visual markers like skin color, however, I suggest it can also be about the ways that bodies are trained to move in dance practices. My research indicates that there has generally been a lack of support for African and African Diaspora dance practices in Québec—even those practices deriving from other French colonies (thus suggesting that language difference cannot be the sole obstacle in appreciating these dance forms). Beginning with the protests against the visits of Les Ballets Africains in 1959, and climaxing with Festival International de Nouvelle Danse's controversial 1999 show *Afrique: Aller/Retour*, it would appear that by and large, Montrealers have conceived of these racially "marked" dances as mythical, static, and "other" to Québec.

reinvigorate the use of the French language, making it more secular and modern, so that French would not become obsolete in Québec (Handler 100-101)

While these symptoms indicate a social unease with racial difference, I suggest that the dance practitioners themselves potentially offer new “tactics” for challenging “strategies” (Certeau 1984 xix) of racial construction that could help redirect discussions of multiculturalism in a more productive way than it has been deployed thus far. In this dissertation I ask what the study of several non-white Montreal dance companies might offer in order to understand race and identity in Montreal in a more productive way. For example, in chapter four I examine the work of choreographer Zab Maboungou who creates dances that she describes as using a contemporary African dance vocabulary. Her choreographic strategies challenge Montreal audiences to think less rigidly about cultural categorization encouraging those championing multiculturalism to move away from attempts to preserve what’s “traditional” or “authentic” and to be more susceptible to the subtle ways that cultures change. Moreover, her work with other Black artists in Montreal suggests that while cultural boundaries are fluid, each practice grows most effectively when it is nurtured on its or her own terms, rather than the terms dictated by the (largely white) Canadian population. This is just one instance where a dance practitioner in Montreal has offered new insights into the ways we conceive of cultural plurality in Québec; while politicians debate the pros and cons of multiculturalism and assimilation, dancers find sophisticated ways to work in cross-cultural mediums.

III. Dancing in Canada

In some respects, the development of Montreal’s major dance companies reflects a resistance to cultural plurality. In particular, modern dance and ballet thrive in Montreal

where they have become associated with Québécois culture, while “other” dance practices (that is to say, practices that are not primarily of Western European descent) have largely remained marginalized. Ballet and modern dance were imported to Québec from Europe and the United States; a period of particular growth in Québec’s dance community occurred around the time of World War II, where Canada gave European artists the opportunity to immigrate to the country as “specialized workers.” Many artists fleeing Nazi-occupied Germany (Ruth Sorel and Sédra Zaré for example) made a huge impact on the dance scene in Montreal. (Tembeck 2001, 28-36) So while ballet and modern dance came to Montreal predominantly through European immigrants,²⁴ these styles were nonetheless absorbed into Québec dance’s mainstream. This evidence seems to suggest that Québec audiences exhibit a preference for white European dance forms; the dancers and their movement appear to be easily assimilated with white Québécois (and Canadian) culture.

It would be inaccurate however to assume that Montreal dance is “mono-” cultural. Tembeck (2001) argues that professional works in the 1990s began to be performed by a wider diversity of dancers. She cites Roger Sinha, Zab Maboungou, Irène Stamour, Jocelyn Monpetit and Mariko Tanabé as examples of this new trend. I would argue that Tembeck’s account, which suggests that concert dance in Québec only began to expand away from ballet and modern dance within the last twenty years, does not

²⁴ It should be noted that the “three muses” Françoise Sullivan, Jeanne Renaud, and Françoise Riopelle are celebrated Québécois artists who very much defined the French Modern Dance scene. I do not wish to overlook their important contributions, but merely want to suggest that European dancers have been incorporated into, and even informative in the development of Québec culture since the early 1940s.

accurately describe the nuances of the Montreal dance scene. In particular, numerous African influenced dance practices have been influential on Montreal's dance communities even before the Quiet Revolution's urbanization of Québec began.

I have chosen to focus on African Diaspora dance because of the way that black culture has been appropriated in Québec and because this focus on a predominantly French speaking visual minority group illustrates how language potentially obscures the way bodies are racialized. However I would also like to acknowledge that there should be greater investigations made into Aboriginal dance practices in Québec as well as the practice of Indian dance forms (like Bharata Natyam by Benoît Villeneuve) by French Canadians (Tembeck 2001, 26), especially in understanding how different colonized cultures are appropriated in Québec.

The field of Canadian dance scholarship has faced many obstacles over the last few years. At the Society of Canadian Dance Studies' 2010 Conference (held at the University of Ottawa), many of the scholars in attendance complained about the difficulty in finding sources to publish their work and the general misapprehension of dance in the Canadian academy. In 2000, Selma Landen Odom and Mary Jane Warner compiled a selection of essays for their book Canadian Dance: Visions and Stories that "[celebrate] the achievements of teachers whose contributions often have gone unrecognized" in order to demonstrate that "dancers have banded together to assert the place of dance in Canadian culture." (7) Part of their project was to create a literature on Canadian dance that would legitimize the place of dance studies in academia. Dance, a discipline that is often marginalized in the university, still struggles to prove its worth as an object of study

in Canada. Sadly, Canada still has yet to produce a major academic journal dedicated to the study of dance; the major dance publications in Canada are magazines like The Dance Current and Dance Collection Danse, although the latter also publishes books on dance, and has produced thirty-seven books in the last eighteen years.

Moreover, a drastic regionalism seems to characterize the field. Returning to the events of the 2010 Canadian Dance Studies Conference, most of the scholars in attendance were from Ontario with few representatives from the West coast. The geography of Canada makes it difficult, not to mention expensive, for collaboration and discussion amongst the provinces. Moreover, most of the speakers were English; after the passing of Iro Tembeck in 2004, and with the possible exception of dance scholars Pamela Newell and Sylvie Fortin (2012), there has been very little bilingual scholarship in Canada. And finally, nearly all of the participants were practitioners of either ballet or modern dance. Perhaps due to these challenges, Canadian dance scholarship has focused a great deal of energy on documenting the contributions of white Canadian artists and often in a manner that might be considered adulatory, with some notable exceptions.²⁵

I have a deep admiration for the work being produced by Canadian dance scholars, especially when considering the unfavorable conditions of the field, however, I worry that the field is becoming quite insular and non-critical. With this project, I hope to open up a space for a more critical enquiry into the social conditions that shape Canada's dance scene rather than the hagiographic accounts of ballet mistresses and modern dance

²⁵ Some of the following authors have begun to bring non-white dance to the fore in Canadian scholarship: Aboriginal Dance Project (1997), Ann Cooper Albright (1997),

choreographers that tend to dominate the field today. Moreover, I believe that French and English dance practitioners and scholars have a great deal to offer each other and writing about French culture in English is at the very least a way to start a dialogue.

IV. Methodology

This study uses archival and ethnographic research to approach the analysis of African Diaspora dance in Montreal. Because I am interested in the way “Black dance” has been represented, funded, and generally supported in Montreal (and in Canada more generally) since the late 1950s, I have relied in part on archival sources to help piece together the racial discourses that surround my subjects of study. To help with this part of the research, I have visited major archives in Montreal (Tangente, Bibliothèque et Archive National du Québec, Bibliothèque de la Danse Vincent Warren), New York (New York Public Library for the Performing Arts), Ottawa (Canada Council for the Arts Archive), and Toronto (Toronto Public Library, Dance Collection Danse) to collect newspaper articles, old programs, photographs, and other forms of documentation relevant to this project. From these archives I have pieced together how African Diaspora dance performances are or have been represented and interpreted by Montreal audiences. However, the archives can only help piece together part of the story and so where possible, I have pursued interviews with individuals involved in African Diaspora dance practices/productions in order to breathe life into these archival sources— to help clarify archival discrepancies and to hear the stories that have not made it into the archive. I have

Marrie Mumford (1999), Lisa Doolittle and Anne Flynn (2000 and 2005), Zab

also taken a participant-observer approach to this study, which has involved attending performances, conferences, and classes (in particular Mabougou's RYPA technique, and Ballet-Jazz) to help inform my understanding of the Montreal dance community.

The ethnographic component of this research is important in order to help mediate my own "whiteness." I have tried, where possible, to let my interviewees voices speak for me, though ultimately their voices are still mediated by my own writing and by my position as a white Anglophone Canadian. I must admit that my own "whiteness" affects the way that I interpret events, and the ways that my subjects interact with me as coming from a place of privilege within Canada. As authors like Sneja Gunew (24), Will Kymlicka (1221-123) and Jocelyn Maclure (xi) have suggested, English Canadians have often problematically jumped to the conclusion that Québec's ethnocultural relations are racist or discriminatory as a way of championing English Canada's own model of cultural diversity. Due to this tendency, I want to encourage my readers to avoid simply dismissing Québec's ethnocultural relations as "racist" but to carefully consider the complexity of Québec's situation and to keep in mind that discrimination in Canada is not particular to Québec but exists in many insidious forms in all provinces. Telling a story about African Diaspora dance in Montreal requires many voices and many perspectives. Accordingly, this project should not be understood as exhaustive, but as a modest contribution to a much larger tapestry.

Theoretically I am informed by debates in postcolonial studies about hybridity and the stability of the colonizer/colonized binary. In particular, I suggest that this project will

Mabougou (2001), Aaron Glass (2005), and Jacqueline Shea Murphy (2007).

help complicate postcolonial models that attempt to universalize the relationship between culture and colonial experiences. As Ella Shohat argues, the danger of postcolonial studies is its tendency to “collapse very different national-racial formations [...] as equally post-colonial” thus implying that the experiences of European settlers and indigenous populations are similar, masking the settlers’ racist dealings with these populations. (102) Québec offers a new angle to study this approach as the dominant French population may be considered either colonized or a colonizer depending on the angle one takes to approach the subject. The very notion that Québec might be “postcolonial” is hotly debated. For one, Aboriginals in Québec continue to be colonized which would suggest that “post” is a problematic prefix. Moreover, Québec itself is often seen as a colony of Canada, especially by Québec sovereingtists. Finally, as Québec studies scholar Robert Schwartzwald has noted, the very term “postcolonialism” does not arise much in French scholarship and is more of an English notion.²⁶ This study recognizes the singularity of the situation in Québec by considering the multiples layers of “othering” that create the various marginalized identities within Montreal. I also ask how colonization practices might inform multiculturalism and cultural appropriation in Québec.

By uncovering archival material, attentively gathering oral histories, and investigating the current practice and reception of African dance in Montreal, I analyze directly how Canadian multiculturalism and Québécois interculturalism have both helped

²⁶ Québécois however were quite familiar with notions of “decolonization” and the term arises frequently in Québec political discourses. (Schwartzwald 89)

and hindered African dance practices in Montreal, but also, how these dance practices can suggest adjustments that would help to enrich Montreal's polyphonic arts scene.

V. Polyrhythmic Dance Currents

I use the term polyrhythm to describe my project both for the importance that polyrhythm holds in African Diaspora music and dance, but also as a general metaphor for cultural differences in the metropolitan city of Montreal. Polyrhythm, the sound of multiple rhythms at anyone time, articulates the complexity of culture in this city. The pulse of each cultural movement functions independently, to its own beat, but may share inflections and overlapping moments with other rhythms. Polyrhythm is best learnt by focusing on an individual rhythm on its own rather than trying to understand the product as a whole, especially since one rhythm will tend to dominate in your ear if you listen to it this way. I suggest that "listening" to the cultural rhythms of Montreal is done most effectively when you allow a single rhythm to entice you, teach you, move you. Similarly, rather than theorizing culture from a position of omniscience or of trying to understand all culture as a single unit, polyrhythm suggests that there is not single unit, but that culture is always plural, multiple, and complex, but also overlapping. I also use "polyrhythm" instead of "polyphony" (which means many voices) because while voices have the potential to take on metaphysical significance, rhythm—the beat or the pulse—carries a different kind of corporeal significance.

In this dissertation, I examine the "polyrhythms" that bring together currents of "black" and "white" dance, Québec and Canadian cultural policies, French and English

Canadian as well as American histories, and the ways these currents intersect with others. In chapter one, I reconstruct the events and controversy that emerged over the first tours of Les Ballets Africains (the national ensemble of Guinea) to North America. In analyzing these events, I highlight the history of racism in Canadian and American dance circles in the 1950s and 1960s with a particular focus on the way the company's women were objectified and exoticized. However, despite the gendered and racialized expectations imposed upon the Guinean troupe, I outline how the dancers were able to transgress such restrictions, in particular through their performance. The second chapter examines Québec's complex history of appropriating "black" culture using the dance company Les Ballets Jazz as an example. While Les Ballets Jazz quickly became an important part of Québec culture, I demonstrate how the company attempted to whiten itself by using narrative tropes that depicted Québec figures as universal and culturally "transcendent." However, as the company performed in a movement vocabulary associated with "blackness" this whitening process could not be successful and thus the dancers' bodies challenged such whitening strategies. Furthermore, the emergence of Les Ballets Jazz in the 1970s coincides with the advent of Canadian multiculturalism, however, an examination of Canada Council for the Arts' policies reveals that federal granting agencies were not as interested in "diversity" as the multicultural rhetoric of the period might imply. The last part of this chapter scrutinizes Canada Council dance division's treatment of the company and its prejudices against jazz dance. In the third chapter I examine the 1999 Montreal dance festival *Afrique: Aller/Retour* and demonstrate how France's colonialist history informs the way "Africa" is exoticized in

Québec as well as how much this colonialist perspective informs ethnocultural relations in the province more generally. However, while this festival often revealed the trappings of colonialist structures of representation, the dances and performers themselves exceeded such structures to both change mainstream discourses about Africa and also create new opportunities and strengthen African dance companies. In the final chapter, I look more closely at the work of Montreal dance artist Zab Maboungou—at the contributions she makes and the challenges she poses to Canada’s arts scene. With the increased emphasis on multiculturalism on dance policies in recent years, Maboungou, a choreographer and teacher of contemporary African dance, has found ways to redirect arts policies in order to voice her opinions and find economic opportunities that were largely absent when she first arrived in Canada. Moreover, Maboungou’s work in the Montreal arts community nurtures Black Canadian artists and offers a model for understanding cultural difference in a way that repositions “whiteness” along the margins in order to consider Black artistry on its own terms. I suggest that Maboungou’s own technique, which utilizes multiple bodily centers and rhythms, articulates a new way of conceiving cultural plurality. Rather than a single (white) centre as multicultural models often imply, Maboungou’s work suggests that culture can be understood as many body parts moving at the same time, not necessarily in accordance with each other, but not completely independent either. Throughout these chapters I suggest that dance offers ways to reformulate racialized identities and to reinvestigate the history of race and multiculturalism in Canada.

Chapter 1

Les Ballets Africains and the Policing of Nudity in North America: Figures of Speech and Bodies that Speak

“Oh Nimba! You who makes the dust bear fruit, here are my breasts—make them as bountiful as yours. Here is my womb, make it conceive the children of Bagata!”

-- tribute to Nimba, goddess of fertility
Les Ballets Africains' *Bagati*.

I. Introduction

In my search for resources for this project, I thought I might have to invoke the muses to find material on African Diaspora dance in Montreal prior to the advent of multiculturalism. Dance archives in Canada tend to have limited funding and resources and furthermore, although efforts to correct this have recently been made, archives have tended to document the work of white artists more often than non-white artists. However, upon closer inspection, I was able to find more than I had imagined I would. Concordia University holds a reasonable sized collection of Montreal jazz memorabilia from throughout the twentieth century. The National Film Board of Canada produced a documentary called Show Girls that focuses on the artistry of many Black Canadian cabaret artists working in Montreal in the 1950s. And finally, many of the dancers who taught or grew up learning to dance in the 1940s and 1950s in Little Burgundy, a prominent Montreal Black community, are still around and active in the dance world today. However, of all the material I've found, I was most fascinated by the story of Les Ballets Africains. The muses smiled upon me.

I was delighted when I first found an article by Iro Tembeck (2005) that made mention of the company Les Ballets Africains and their visits to Montreal starting in

1959. Les Ballets Africains— a group that began in Paris and would eventually become the national dance ensemble of Guinea— made several tours to North America beginning in 1959. Their visits were well documented due to the controversy that emerged over the dancers' costumes. Many of the female dancers performed topless—naked from the waist up—which sent shock waves throughout the East coast. In particular, Tembeck articulates how this company's visits to Montreal challenged the stringent Catholic influences that policed dancing bodies in Québec and suggests that Les Ballets Africains successfully effected new policy by protesting laws against nudity on stage in Montreal. I was a little reticent to accept her teleological premise that Les Ballets Africains became a catalyst in Québec's progress towards increased civil liberties, but I was also inspired by the possibility that an African dance company touring in the late 1950's, right around the time that Québec's Quiet Revolution began, could have attracted so much popular attention and what that might mean for African dance in the present. The purpose of this chapter is to revisit this material on Les Ballets Africains and to try to create a more comprehensive tapestry, with more attention paid to the perspective of the performers. While a great deal of my information comes from the North American press, it is my hope that by tracing the path of Les Ballets Africains' first North American tour and documenting the significant events I might be able to examine the ordeal that the dancers faced as they traveled from one city to the next.

After months of grant applications, visits to archives in Montreal, New York, and Toronto, and with a stack of photocopies and notes from my visits, I finally felt I had enough material to write about the company. But the more I looked at the images of these

dancers, the more I felt unsure about how to proceed. The dancers' breasts were ostensibly of interest in the late 1950s because they symbolized the need to fight censorship and respect cultural difference; however, the images of the dancers often evoked highly erotic and sexualized images that would easily cater to the fantasies of a heterosexual male gaze. The depiction of African women in the press seemed to validate stereotypes of black women as "naturally" licentious, and in response, I was "naturally" quite uncomfortable. In investigating this material, I analyze how North America, and Montreal in particular, has obsessively policed and fetishized black female sexuality. Looking at the tension between prudish attempts to cover up the women and the fantasies of the white male North American imagination— an ambiguous battle between racial fantasies of attraction and repulsion— this chapter examines how many Canadian and American audiences attempted to objectify these women.

My concern is that analyzing *Les Ballets Africains* in this manner may in effect recreate the very objectification that I am attempting to critique. I worry that in describing the women of *Les Ballets Africains* as passive victims, my writing may further objectify these dancers. Accordingly, I initially sought to analyze the company while excluding the obsessive way the press fetishized the women's bodies and in previous drafts I have tried to avoid discussing their breasts or making a spectacle of them while calling attention to the company's artistry rather than their nudity. But then I wondered if trying to deny, erase, or invisibilize their nudity was its own kind of bodily violence? Why was I intent on "covering up" their breasts just as their censors wished to do? Audre Lorde describes the erotic as "a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female

and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling.” (277) She suggests that it is a power that has been suppressed for the sake of maintaining a patriarchal order but if unleashed, has the potential to undermine those oppressive forces. Accordingly, what erotic power might the women of Les Ballets Africains command through performance?

In this analysis, I examine how the women of Les Ballets Africains found ways to undermine misogynistic and racist means of bodily control. I suggest that the performers challenged local “decency” laws by voicing their opposition and finding ways to transgress such laws in performance. This is where I believe dance studies can help articulate a new approach to analyzing bodies. Dance studies functions on the premise that bodies are not merely objects, but are also able to produce and create meaning. In this chapter I ask: how do these women “speak” through their bodies? I do not want to ventriloquize for the subjects I’m studying, nor do I want to suggest that they are subalterns that I am “virtuously” trying to save from being lost in the annals of history. Rather, I see their work as dancers as powerful examples of how African women have protested against the forces of colonial desire, in spite of attempts made to contain them as objects of pleasure for a (white) heterosexual male gaze. With that, I begin my narrative.

II. Keïta Fodéba and Les Ballets Africains: The early years

Les Ballets Africains began not as a dance company, but as a theatre company under the direction of Keïta Fodéba (1921-1969). Fodéba, a renowned African poet who

grew up in Siguiri, Guinea, began studying law in Paris in 1949 and founded Théâtre Africains de Keïta Fodéba (the theatrical precursor of Les Ballets Africains) as a way to help fund his studies while simultaneously educating Europeans about African culture. (Les Ballets Africains, Program) Fodéba's background as a teacher and a poet suited the company's early projects, but as the company grew in popularity, Fodéba realized that language would limit the company to francophone audiences. Accordingly, in 1952, Fodéba made dance and music the company's focus, and so was born Les Ballets Africains. The company toured colonial Africa extensively in 1955 and Fodéba was named Minister of Interior of the Republic of Guinea. Further, in 1958, after Guinea's independence from France, Les Ballets Africains was asked to return to Guinea as their national dance ensemble. Fodéba himself became an important political figure for Guinea. He held numerous positions within the government including the head of Defense and Security for Guinea, but was arrested in March 1965, and killed in prison four years later.

It is significant that Les Ballets Africains began as a project in Europe because much of the basis of the company's philosophies comes from a need to explain and define African dance to a non-African (and largely white European) public. Fodéba's own writing about African dance emphasizes the parallels between Africa and Europe as a way of building communication between the seemingly disparate cultures. In particular, he explains that naming the group a "ballet" company was meant to show the similarities between European and African expressive mediums: "if ballet is 'a form of artistic and cultural expression developed by man in his endless quest for new means of expression,

in his yearning to create forms which are ceaselessly renewed according to his genius and abilities', African dance as a means of expression and of exteriorization can be identified with ballet." (167) However, Fodéba also explains that the company's primary concern "is to avoid misleading the public by presenting a fictitious picture conforming to the usual preconceived idea." (166) He was quite concerned that the European public was flooded with false images of what "Africa" might be and hoped that his company could help dispel those ghosts that haunted the European imagination. In particular, Fodéba encourages his white audiences to consider that Africa is even more varied of a continent than Europe, and while there may be some connections between African countries and its Diaspora, it would be inaccurate to paint a single image of black culture²⁷. Fodéba suggests that it is often difficult for outsiders to see African folklore as artistic "for the simple reason that 2000 years of civilization have not yet drawn their attention to the existence of genuine forms of culture other than their own." (172) His mission however was to show the artistry that composes African dance and music.

According to Fodéba, the largest struggles Les Ballets Africains faced in these early years were the debates that surrounded the company's authenticity. Since the group had to compete with fictional images of Africa, images that were often created by European misconceptions of an imagined Africa of the past, European critics tended to judge Les Ballets Africains based on the extent to which the company aligned with those fictional images. In his 1958 article for the journal World Theatre, Fodéba explains that

²⁷ In fact, for Fodéba, the only thing uniting black culture globally is "d'être toutes marquées du légitime désir de défendre la cause d'une race injustement lésée." (Fodéba

folklore is a living expression that should not deny the present. While folklore may help connect performers and audiences alike to a pre-colonial past, this does not mean that it never develops or changes. For Fodéba, “authenticity” in a folk piece is about reflecting the life of the people it is meant to represent, and in order to judge authenticity, one must understand “the existence it wishes to bring to life on stage.” (172) This is not to suggest that the performance of African dance on the stage perfectly reflects the practices that occur in the continent. According to Fodéba, adaptations must be made to the performance in order to translate those practices for a proscenium stage. For example, many of the dances presented by Les Ballets Africains would normally involve spectator participation and may go all night, however, due to the limitations of the Western theatre space, many of the dances are made shorter so that a still audience will not get bored with the performance. “We must take our dances only at their culminating point, shorten them, and cut out a thousand details which are not important except in the public place of the village” (176) For Fodéba, the authenticity of the work does not come from the precision of recreated steps, but instead by highlighting the general spirit of the art. It is this spirit that Fodéba hopes the work will be judged upon. However, as the British Press reveals, this was not always the case.

The company appeared at the Palace Theatre in London in 1956 and at the Edinburgh International Dance Festival in 1957 and 1959. They received generally positive reviews at these performances, although some critics felt that the performers had a difficult time connecting with the audience: “Sometimes [...] it becomes hard to

166) (“to all be marked by a legitimate desire to defend the cause of an unjustly wronged

overlook the monotonous choreography” writes Peter Brinson of the London Observer (August 12 1959) yet as Noël Goodwin explains in Dance and Dancers the audience “bore with this for the sake of the dances and in the understanding that Fodéba’s versatile seven-year-old company is preserving one of the most ancient dance traditions in the world.” (November 1957). On the one hand, these comments suggest that critics and audiences were prepared to engage with the choreography and consider that its goals may differ from those of other European dance companies, however, the comments also suggest they saw the work as reflecting something “ancient,” a description that is condescending and does not recognize, as Fodéba had hoped, that these folk traditions are living and change with time. Brinson’s review also assimilates African culture in another comment when he writes: “people like Keïta Fodéba are struggling now to create theatrical dancing out of the shuffling, stamping, twirling, leaping movements which Africans from Cairo to the Cape have woven into a folk dance form.” He paints an image of African dance as composed of simple steps that demarcate an entire continent. It is likely due to comments like this that Fodéba felt the need to articulate how varied African culture is.

In general, the British press tended to evaluate Les Ballets Africains in terms of the way the company staged “blackness” for a white audience. Critics did not distinguish between African American companies and Les Ballets Africains, and would frequently compare Les Ballets Africains’ performances with the work of dancers and choreographers like Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus, and Josephine Baker (“Born to

race,” my translation).

Rhythm,” Brinson, Sunday Times, September 1 1957 and Mary Clarke, London Observer, September 1 1957). Moreover, the press frequently refers to the dancers as uncivilized, which fulfills European expectations that blackness is “savage” (Alexander Bland, London Observer, April 1 1956) compared to European “sophistication,” like when London’s newspaper Stage praised the show as entertaining “for those who are not frightened by the primitive and uninhibited expression of basic human emotions.” (April 5 1956 “African Ballet at the Palace”)

Finally the female dancers are certainly objectified in the press, but they are not generally the focus of reviews, as they would become in North America. Mary Clarke of the London Observer mentions that “The terrific strength of the men as they leap into the air is contrasted with the delicious wriggles of the adolescent girls” (September 1 1957) and certainly the “deliciousness” of the women alludes to their potential to be “consumed” by the audience. However, the articles are often ambiguous about the degree of nudity in the dances. While a 1965 program mentions that the dancers performed with brassieres in their early London performances, the reviews never outline the details of the censorship, and sometimes call the costumes “restrained” (Bland, London Observer, April 1 1956) while at other times “uninhibited” (Cyril Beaumont, Sunday Times London, April 1 1956). This ambiguity suggests that the reviewers never felt the need to state explicitly the degree of nudity present in the performance. Accordingly, the British press does not focus on the nakedness of the dancers in the performance, nor do they pay much attention on the dancers’ sexuality, especially compared, as we shall see, to the North American press.

III. Les Ballets Africains comes to North America

Luben Vichey, a successful white opera singer turned impresario, decided to invest in a North American tour for Les Ballets Africains. Having seen several of the company's performances in Europe, Vichey wanted to see if he could infiltrate the U.S. and Canadian markets. From the company's perspective, this was an opportunity to continue pursuing their goals of educating the international community about African culture to a whole new audience. Achkar Marof, former performer and artistic director for Les Ballets Africains explains "The purpose of this tour is to promote friendly relations between North America and Africa. We hope to do this by showing some of our culture honestly" ("African Ballet Will Cover up if Law Insists" Toronto Globe and Mail, March 31 1959) Their tour would be largely successful and the company would return frequently over the next decade.

Les Ballets Africains began their 1959 tour to North America in early February in Philadelphia. This first location was only moderately successful bringing in \$19 893, which is quite modest considering the size of the production consisting of 29 dancers and musicians. White critics generally enjoyed the performance but being relatively new to the world of African dance, they were often bored quickly and complained of the show being too monotonous. Henry T. Murdock for the Philadelphia Inquirer writes: "In the course of the evening, one witch doctor begins to look like another and the leaping and bounding has a sameness without too much discernible pattern." (February 3, 1959) Murdock exhibits a reticence to try to decipher the codes of African dance, as he sees the

stage full of aimlessly jumping “witch doctors” without attending to the more subtle nuances of each character and their movements. Misunderstanding the company’s goal—to teach non-Africans about African culture—this Philadelphia critic sought entertainment that catered to his own expectations of a dance performance. This pattern continues in the company’s next performances.

When the company arrived at its next stop, Boston, ticket sales were significantly better, profiting \$30 023, but the critics were still not convinced that the show was entertaining enough, though this time for slightly different reasons. For Margaret Lloyd, writing for Boston’s Christian Science Monitor, the issue is not the monotony of the show, but its authenticity. Lloyd relates the company’s work to Asadata Dafora’s *Kykunkor*²⁸ but is not amazed with Les Ballets Africains by comparison. She complains that the company is not “African” enough and even suspects that some of the dancers may be African Americans hired to play the part. Lloyd writes: “Whether by contact with the outside world through seven years of travel [...] whether by infiltration of modern ideas through the West Coast colonies or by American management (and possibly, personnel), an element of sophistication has transformed the production into the equivalent of a Broadway show.” (February 14 1959) Lloyd’s comments reveal an implicit assumption, common amongst European Americans, that Africa cannot be “modern,” and that the goal of African dance should be to represent a primitive self that implicitly calls attention to its Euro-American, modern “opposite.” It is curious that

²⁸ Choreographed in 1934 by Sierra Leonean Asadata Dafora, *Kykunkor* became a Broadway sensation depicting, as Dafora describes it, a “native African Opera” (quoted in Manning 46).

Lloyd qualifies herself as a judge of “authentic” African dance, especially when her only point of comparison is *Kykunkor*, a work first performed twenty-five years earlier.

Things became interesting however when the company arrived in New York and suddenly the city’s censors became concerned about the dancer’s attire. After an opening night success at the Martin Beck Theatre on February 16, 1959, city-licensing commissioner Bernard O’Connell insisted that the women perform with brassieres or the Martin Beck would lose its theatre license. A media-frenzy ensued. While touring through Europe, South America, and Africa, little attention was paid to the bare breasts of the female dancers. Censorship issues arose in London and Tel Aviv, and European papers would occasionally make passing comments about the bold costumes and statuesque figures of the semi-nude women, however, the issue did not stir nearly as much controversy in Europe as it did in North America, and in New York, the censorship of the women’s breasts set the papers into a twitter. In the New York Mirror, one reporter sarcastically jokes that only Boston and Philadelphia, “The Massachusetts Sodom and Pennsy Gomorah,” would allow such lewd performances (“Africa Unveils its Dancers—But not in New York” February 24 1959), while a report in Variety by Robert J. Landry takes aim at commissioner O’Connell himself: “His job is to license buildings, not ideas, not artistic standards, not performances.” (“O’Connell’s Bra Bra Black Sheep” n.d., circa 1959). For many artists and critics, Les Ballets Africains became a company that challenged the censors (Variety, “Milking Censorship,” May 27 1959) and therefore artistic boundaries.

Allowing the dancers to perform topless in New York was also seen as an issue of cultural appreciation. Breasts are symbolically important and meaningful in the dances themselves. During the show, the dancers pay tribute to the goddess Nimba who watches over fertility for both the land and the people and is known for her large breasts. In the performance, breasts are a sign of fertility and life, however, in North America, breasts are often symbolic of sexuality and shame. The women themselves took offense to being asked to cover-up in public, especially because they did not consider their actions to be lewd. In fact, the dancers were quite protective of their bodies. The New York Mirror explains that the dancers were reticent to allow anyone to help them change during performances as a result of their modesty (February 24 1959, “Africa Unveils its Dancers—But not in New York”). Zambo Italo, dancer and eventually artistic manager of the group, explained during a subsequent tour that until a woman is chosen to be a bride, it is proper for her to be topless (Sunday News, March 3 1968 “Show Business African Style”), however, this seemed to be lost upon North American censors. Even when cultural difference was acknowledged, it often took the form of misrepresentations of blackness at the hands of white authors. Walter Terry of the New York Herald Tribune suggests that the dancers’ topless-ness is only an issue because it is so cold in New York but that in Africa, due to the heat, such nudity is a necessity. (February 17, 1959 “Wow It’s a Jungle Flame”) Although this may be an attempt to contemplate the dancers’ perspective and is certainly an improvement on the Philadelphia critic’s inability to decipher “one witch doctor [...] from another,” the equation that sees temperature as a

source of cultural difference, though somewhat relevant, also implicitly hints at dated heliotropic theories of race.

At the same time, one might wonder how the degree of nudity of these women's bodies suddenly became of such interest to New York newspapers. Although advertisements and posters were already making thinly veiled appeals to the voyeur, the objectified breasts became matters of public opinion rather than clandestine desires. Reporters openly commented on the level of sexuality or eroticism they felt was present in the performance whereas previously, such comments were rarely seen in the press. Returning to reports from the New York Herald Tribune, Walter Terry describes the show as "movements born of ecstasy, strange ceremonials, and scanty attire." ("Wow It's a Jungle Flame February 15, 1959), but a few days later explains in defense of the performance that the dancers' nudity "is no more inflammatory than a lovely color photo in 'National Geographic'" (February 17, 1959). John Martin of the New York Times comments that "The girls [...] are also young and extremely comely, with spirit and vivacity and a warm humor. That local censorship has now compelled them to cover up parts of their anatomy that were previously (and primordially) exposed is unfortunate (though certainly not fatal to the entertainment), for there was a basic innocence in their behavior whether they were being ceremonial about it or merely mischievous." (February 22 1959) Martin's review, though condescending, spends a great deal of time analyzing the movement, staging, and skill of the performers. In this case, there was an increased attempt to understand the codes and the "authenticity" or character of the work, though the issue of the brassieres is still of great interest. Yet Martin does feel the need to

comment on the attractiveness of the “comely” women. Moreover, while Martin implies that the “innocence” of the dancers (an unfortunate stereotype European Americans often applied to Africa in general) keeps the nudity appropriate rather than overtly sexual, a few weeks later, Martin suggests that there are sexual overtones all the same. In spite of the required brassieres, “the genuinely erotic dances, however, remain untouched” he writes. (n.d., “‘Ballets Africains’ Extended Local Run”). Newspapers reported the dance show in a manner that simultaneously addressed the artistic merit of the group while feeding white male fantasies about black female sexuality: youth, innocence, uninhibited sexual availability.

The timing of the “scandal” was somewhat serendipitous as Guinea itself was making news in New York. Guinea had declared independence from French colonial rule the year before, and with independence, Les Ballets Africains had been named the national company of Guinea. On February 20 1959, just a few days after Les Ballets Africains opened at the Martin Beck Theatre, the Guinean flag would be raised for the first time at the United Nations in New York. Luben Vichey, who had begun to pursue legal action against the censorship of his dancers, decided to take his case to the U.N. with the support of three of his female dancers. Vichey argued that the dancers were in New York as part of a cultural exchange program and New York censorship laws violated the company’s right to perform according to their cultural traditions. He also urged the U.N. to use its extraterritorial rights to allow the dancers to perform braless at the U.N. Guinean Ambassador Telli Diallo responded by stating that the U.N. is not a theatre (February 20, 1959, New York Herald Tribune) though that he would be “most

happy to represent Guinean art if that can be done within the framework of the United Nations.” (Newman February 21, 1959, New York Herald Tribune). Apparently there was some controversy over whether or not the U.N. would invite the dancers to perform at the flag raising ceremony, and whether or not they would appear topless. The point was moot, as the February cold proved inhospitable to any outdoor dance performance. The dancers would be invited to perform in the U.N.’s general assembly nine years later; the dancers however would appear with brassieres.

Of the three women who accompanied Vichey to the U.N., Issa Niang appears to be the only name mentioned in the U.S. press, as an image of her in front of the U.N. appears in the New York Herald Tribune. Niang, with her hair wrapped in a thick flowing scarf, long gold earrings and dressed in what appears to be a pea coat, stands in front of the Guinean flag for a photograph entitled “African Dancer, Fully Clothed” (February 21, 1959). Niang’s clothing, or lack thereof, became associated with Guinean patriotism, and supporting the dancers’ right to perform bare-chested was superficially equated with support of Guinean culture, nationalism, and therefore of its right to be an independent country. At the same time, the informal way the media addressed the issue of the dancers’ attire, the lack of dignity that comes across in a line as simple as “African Dancer, Fully Clothed” suggests that the papers still used the controversy to turn these women into objects of desire. However, as I will address later in this paper, their dancing refuses to cater to these stereotypes, and through performance, they destabilize the projected images of desire and challenge Western audiences to reinterpret Black femininity.

Perhaps due to the controversy over censorship laws, perhaps in support of the cultural expression of the dancers, perhaps because of the excessive media attention, or perhaps because of the appeal of the performance to fantasies of colonial desire, the show's profits skyrocketed during its stay in New York. The first week of performances in this city brought in \$36 872, and the second week it grossed \$41 486—it's most profitable week during their first trip to North America. Due to this success, Les Ballets Africains extended their time in New York from two to six weeks.²⁹ The newspaper Variety printed an excerpt from a statement written by S. J. Friedman who handles publicity for Les Ballets Africains where he explicitly states: "good dancing alone could not account for the fantastic grosses." (May 27 1959 "Defense of 'Africains' Ballyhoo") Instead, it seems that the publicity received due to the censorship issue was key to their profits. Realizing this early on in the process, Vichey had begun baiting the censors before each visit to create the same stir. On March 11 1959, Variety reported that Vichey's office "is sending 'inquiries' to Chiefs of Police in cities where the dance company is booked. Will they advance-sanction native dancers appearing in certain scenes sans brassieres? The inquiry and the answer, invariably negative, is then 'leaked' to the newspapers." The article goes on to suggest that "Vichey is making publicity capital of an issue taken seriously by the American Civil Liberties Union, and others, as to whether the New York City Commissioner of Licenses exceeded his powers in extending from buildings to brassieres." ("As Foe of Censors, Vichey a Bust") The

²⁹ During Les Ballets Africains' third week in New York, profits dipped a bit, however, Variety reports that Broadway sales were down in general and that Les Ballets Africains was affected by this trend. ("As Foe of Censors" March 11, 1959)

sincerity of Vichey's protests are questionable as the controversy helped with ticket sales. Turning the dancers' breasts into a freedom of expression issue allowed Vichey to exploit their nudity in a manner that would otherwise be frowned upon.

After six weeks in New York, Les Ballets Africains moved on to Montreal where the controversy continued. While attending the company's opening Montreal production on March 31, Lieutenant Lucien Quintal, head of the Montreal morality squad, sent police officers back stage at intermission to ask the dancers to cover up. To add insult to injury, in a public statement to the press, Quintal calls the show boring³⁰ and "savage mumbo-jumbo" (Toronto Globe and Mail, April 2 1959, "Censor Bored, Asks Dancers to Cover Up") and suggests that if the dancers wish to dance topless, "they can go back to Africa and do it." (New York Post March 31 1959 "Montreal Bans Bare Bosoms in Les Ballets Africains Dances") The hostility with which the Lieutenant treats the African dancers reveals that as much as forces of attraction drew spectators in to watch the bare-chested dancers, forces of repulsion, subliminal desires to reject and distance oneself from the dangers of the "other," were also quite powerful.

In his book Colonial Desire, Robert Young notices a similar ambiguity that resides in nineteenth century theories of race. Looking at racist scientific tracts that inspect genealogies of races as "species," as well as the obsessive ways that the products of miscegenation are categorized and studied, Young suggests that Europe's colonizing societies were obsessed with the sexual encounters between their own culture and the

³⁰ Curiously, the Boston censor also felt that the show was "boring," but for this reason he felt that there was no need to censor it ("Africa unveils its Dancers, but not in New York," New York Mirror, February 24 1959).

culture of the “other.” Both allured by the thought of incorporating the “uncivilized” sexual other, but simultaneously frightened by the thought, white colonial thought rotates on “an ambivalent axis of desire and aversion.” (19) I suggest that this legacy of racism continued (and continues) to inform the way black dancers are understood on North American stages. Both an object to fetishize and to fear, these African dancers were constantly seen as either erotic or loathsome, or both, in the white North American imaginary.

Despite the controversy, in fact, quite likely because of the controversy, Les Ballets Africains’ week in Montreal would become their third most profitable week of their sixteen week North American tour, making a grand total of \$38 821 from March 30 until April 5 1959. It’s difficult to say what the demographics of the Montreal audience were like, in particular how much of the audience was French and English (and accordingly, how much of the censorship was related to “prudish” English Protestant values or “stringent” French Catholic morality). Advertisements that still remain of the show were printed in English but this is well before language laws like Bill 101 insisted upon French as the main language of conduct for business in Québec and as such, it does not necessarily mean that it was not sold to a French audience as well. Moreover, the fact that the censorship continued in Toronto suggests the controversy may be aligned with the English Canadian values, but the continuation of the censorship on later tours, well after the issue died down in other North American cities, not to mention Tembeck’s powerful argument about the Catholic Church’s influence on Québec’s dance community, suggests that Montreal’s French population also informed these debates.

The issue however becomes even more complicated when we consider how this condemnation of a racialized other's breasts relates to local nudity debates. Curiously, in Montreal the ban was less about the inappropriate arousal that might result from the dancers semi-nude performance, instead it was about ensuring that Montreal's own women (who were predominantly white) would not be able to follow suit. Lt. Quintal admitted that the dancing was not necessarily obscene but explains that the reason why he wanted them to cover up is that he "[doesn't] want them to set a precedent by dancing here in the nude or semi-nude states. A Montreal bylaw forbids that type of dancing." (Toronto Globe and Mail, April 2 1959, "Censor Bored, Asks Dancers to Cover Up") In this sense, Quintal was more concerned about policing the white women of Montreal; he was not interested in preserving the virtues of the black female body, which here he speaks of in a derogatory and disdainful manner, instead it seems his interest was in protecting the white female body and ensuring that it remains chaste.

This attitude follows a trend that Charmaine Nelson discusses in her article "The 'Hottentot Venus' in Canada." Nelson claims that while never appearing in Canada, Sarah Baartman— the so-called "Hottentot Venus" who was displayed nude for European audiences to marvel at the size of her buttocks and genitalia— still deeply influenced the Canadian imaginary. Nudity and censorship laws in Canada distinguished between art and pornographic images of female nudes, and this distinction seems to parallel the way white and black femininity are constructed by white heterosexual men. Nelson suggests that the nude black female was seen as being of scientific rather than artistic interest; figures such as Sarah Baartman would perform their culture for white

audiences, and their nudity was considered natural, primitive, promiscuous, excessive, and lowbrow. Depictions of the white female nude however needed to adhere to depictions of idealized white femininity: chastity, fidelity, docility, and submissiveness, if it were to appear in a public display. Nelson notices however that when qualities associated with black female nudity are grafted onto the white nude, Canadian censors would frequently see the work as pornographic. At a 1926 modern art exhibition in Toronto, white nudes painted by Weber and Archipenko were taken off display as these nudes, with their so-called meaty thighs and buttocks, “might win a prize in a Hottentot beauty contest” (“Paintings of Nudes,” quoted in Charmaine Nelson 377). Accordingly, the policing of black female nudity and white female nudity are closely linked in North American art circles. The censorship of *Les Ballets Africains* can be seen as another example of this desire to “protect” white femininity from a primal sexuality white heterosexual men came to associate with black women.³¹

In deed, the policing of local nudity repeated itself as the company continued their tour. After appearing in Toronto, Detroit and Cleveland (in brassieres at the insistence of local authorities in all three cases), *Les Ballets Africains* arrived in Chicago. Initially, Lieutenant Edward O’Malley, head of Chicago Censorship, allowed the dancers to perform bare-chested as they had intended. However to ensure that this did not provoke

³¹ Similarly, in 1966, two New York City waitresses were charged with indecent exposure for working, the maximum penalty at that time being a \$500 fine and up to one year in prison. Commenting on the relationship between the topless waitresses and the dancers of *Les Ballets Africains*, the *World Journal Tribune* reports that while Mayor Lindsay “catered to tradition for the belles of Guinea long enough to reverse a 1959 License Department edict [...] he remained adamant on restrictions for waitresses.” (Topless Dancers get official OK” November 17 1966).

local female performers to appear topless in local bars and clubs, Chicago censors suddenly buckled down on “peel parlors” making sure that local nudity was under control. “Thanks to culture, the saloon strippers here are covering up—or were as of last week,” complains one reporter, who suggests that a double standard allowed Les Ballets Africains to perform semi-nude but not Chicago strippers. (Variety May 6 1959 “Chi Strippers Run for Cover”) In spite of these attempts to continue monitoring local female nudity, Police Commissioner Tim O’Connor disagreed with Lt. O’Malley’s decision to allow Les Ballets Africains to perform sans-brassieres on opening night. O’Connor demanded the dancers cover up and shortly after the dancers left Chicago, Lt. O’Malley lost his position as head censor. (Variety May 20, 1959 “‘Africains’ bra stunt costs Censor his job”)

After Chicago, the dancers headed out to Pittsburgh where sales were quite low, however, their final destination of their first North American tour, Washington D.C., proved to be a great financial success. The cast members performed bare-chested, as intended, and the company brought in \$40 000 at the box office—their second most successful week of the entire tour. The dancers set sail for home on May 25 1959.

However, while the company may have exploited its female dancers, and the press sensationalized their nudity, it would be misleading to assume that these women passively accepted their fate. The dancers also voiced their critique of North American society in newspaper interviews, even if these opportunities were rare. In an article in the “Women’s Features” section of the Toronto Star, journalist Lotta Dempsey writes: “Everybody’s been talking about the ladies of Les Ballets Africains. But as always, when

women hit the headlines, nobody's talking TO them." (April 9 1959) Dempsey pursued interviews with dancers Anna Mansare and Suzy Baye who both spoke some English, but also occasionally relied on Achkar Morof, their artistic director to translate for them. Mansare called the police's actions against them "uncivilized." Admittedly, the rest of the article goes on to discuss shopping sales at Kleins in New York, but by the following year, as I will discuss, Mansare began to articulate further critiques of North American society.

The dancers also protested bodily restrictions with their bodies through their dancing. On April 7 1959, the day after Les Ballets Africains' opening night performance at the Royal Alexandra Theatre, Toronto Star reporter Nathan Cohen calls attention to a peculiar incident that occurred during the show. He writes:

The women had displayed a certain amount of cleavage, and there was the occasional instance of a dress slipping well past normal shoulder length. However compared to what one can see at a night club or a burleycue [sic] house, these moments of bodily self-consciousness seemed quite decorous. Then a girl who seemed to be having trouble with her costume let it fall to her waist, holding the pose just long enough to demonstrate that what had happened was no accident.

Cohen then calls the dancer's indiscretion "An act of defiance of Toronto's ban of nude dancing." Cohen however makes the argument that this slip was part of a larger conspiracy reaching all the way to Keita Fodéba, who was now the Minister of the Interior of Guinea, and that Guinea was making the women expose themselves so that they might reap the profits of a girlie show. Artistic Director Achkar Morof of course denied these accusations, and there is no other evidence to suggest that Cohen's position is accurate. However, there may be some truth to Cohen's accusation that the dancer's

slip was an intentional “act of defiance,” it certainly seems plausible, though admittedly there’s no way to know now for sure. In a moment of performance, this dancer’s actions became transgressive and threatening to the white male critic. Her performance did not adhere to North American codes of femininity and as she let her bra sit by her waist without shame or embarrassment, she was able to momentarily escape such codes. In this sense, while patriarchal rules that govern North American women make daunting demands on the female form in order to control its erotic potential, these rules are not steadfast. As the women of Les Ballets Africains suggest, there’s often a way to jiggle free.

III. Subsequent Tours

The 1959 North American tour proved quite profitable and due to this success, the company returned frequently over the next ten years,³² but there was a major change of personnel from the 1959 tour to the 1960 tour. According to the Philadelphia Inquirer, only six of the original twenty-nine cast members returned for the 1960 tour (Singer, 8 November 1960), and Walter Sorell writing for the Providence Sunday Journal suggests this change is due to the fact that years of touring have made many of the dancers “too Europeanized.” (October 16 1960) Similarly, the New York Times reports that Les Ballets Africains brought in new dancers, “fresh from the jungle,” because the company “had acquired a veneer of sophistication” that undermined the authenticity of the work. (“Dancers from Guinea” September 25, 1960) What is peculiar about these comments is

³² Les Ballets Africains toured North America in 1959, 1960, 1965-66, 1967, 1968, 1970, 1971 and 1973.

how they reveal the assumption that a high level of skill is equated with European qualities, while untrained dancers are seen as more “authentically” African. This implicitly falls back into stereotypes of the “natural” associated with blackness, and the “disciplined body” associated with whiteness. Though it is unclear why the cast changed so dramatically, in a 1968 interview, artistic director Zambo Italo explains that the women in the troupe, who are generally between 16 and 21, will only stay with the company between two and four years, leaving when they want to begin a family. (Wahls, Robert. Sunday News, New York’s Picture Paper. March 3 1968). However this explanation does not account for the change of male performers.

On subsequent tours, the censors were generally more open to the nudity and allowed the dancers to perform topless, although some cities found it difficult to loosen their grip on the policing of female sexuality, as was the case in Montreal, where the women dancers were fined \$25 in 1965 for appearing on stage bare-chested. Still, during Les Ballets Africains’ return to North America in 1960, most cities allowed the women to perform topless, in part, at least in the case of Toronto, because London (England) had removed the ban on topless dancing.³³ But while the censorship of the dancers’ breasts gradually faded, press coverage was slow to follow suit. In fact, it wasn’t until their tour in 1970 that critics began to omit comments about the dancers’ level of nudity (though some critics continue to comment on the nudity today.) But even on their 1969 tour, the

³³ On September 25, 1960, the New York Times reported: “Toronto last week did not demand [bras for Les Ballets Africains’ performance]. The police agreed with London’s Lord Chamberlain that this was art. Last year did not have the Lord Chamberlain’s precedent and ruled differently.” (“Dancers from Guinea” September 25 1960)

press paid great attention to the dancers' sexuality and in particular, reporter Robert Wahls of the New York Sunday News publishes unverifiable rumors about the dancers' sex lives: "Italo refused to confirm or deny that one restless African beauty became pregnant on a world tour." Wahls pries into the promiscuity of the dancers, exploiting the fantasy for the sake of selling a story to a largely white heterosexual male audience.

It is crucial to note however the very different way that African American communities responded to this company. In particular, when the company came to Harlem in 1971, the performers apparently stated that they felt as though they were "at home in Conakry" and thus the company decided that they would open their 1973 North American tour in Harlem. (The Amsterdam, January 17 1973 "Les Ballets Africains is coming home to Harlem") Les Ballets Africains also reached out to the African American community on many occasions. In particular, they made visits to many Harlem schools to "teach underprivileged children [...] the art of African dance and music" (Press release, March 29 1968, New York Public Library). Moreover, the performance was not being billed as "an exotic spectacle" (Les Ballets Africains, poster from 1959, Bibliothèque de la Danse Vincent Warren, Montreal) as it had been for white audiences during their 1959 tour. Instead, the African American press encouraged audience members to bring their children, calling it a family show. Likely influenced by an increasingly powerful pan-African movement, the African American community seemed to welcome the company as an important part of their heritage. Even Black contemporary dancers of the 1970's were commenting on the importance of the show. In a 1971 panel discussion on the TV show Like it is, host Gil Noble discussed the company with Katherine Dunham, Alvin

Ailey, Eleo Pomare and Carole Johnson. Johnson admits that reaching out to the company had proven to be somewhat difficult because of the language barrier, and Katherine Dunham suggests another difficulty is that the dancers are always quite exhausted from touring. However, Dunham also explained that the company always had tickets for her and her students in St Louis whenever the company came to visit and that they would even occasionally come to her company rehearsals. Unlike the white press, which had generally adjudicated the performance based on notions of authenticity, primitivism, and sexuality, the African American community had largely seen the group as an important artistic and educational resource.

IV. The Power of Expression

In Western history and culture, women have often used art as a medium for transgressing and speaking against patriarchy, and when faced with similar Western hegemonic forces, Les Ballets Africains evokes a comparable strategy. While the dancers of Les Ballets Africains were often unable to speak openly with their public, largely due to a language barrier (although also implicitly because of their gendered and racialized positions as African dancers), they still expressed, protested, and taught during their travels. In particular, their performances often allowed the women to transgress social norms as the use of improvisation gave them the power to decide how they would move.

I want to begin by explaining that while the women dancers of Les Ballets Africains largely appeared to be “voiceless” in popular reports, one dancer, Aissata Mansare, was interviewed in some depth by Robert Wahls in the New York Daily News (“An Intrepid Reporter Faces Stark Facts” October 9 1960). Mansare was in a special

position as a dancer with the company; she was one of the few women who returned to perform regularly with Les Ballets Africains (most did not return after the 1959 tour), and she could also speak English because her mother was originally from Freetown, a former British colony. On the one hand, the article betrays the reporter's own fantasies about young black women as he focuses his attentions on her age, marriage customs in Guinea, her level of education (which he seems to underestimate), and continually comments on her body and the novelty of interviewing a semi-nude woman. However, Mansare's responses reveal her own critique of American culture: "I think that New York has become more civilized since I was here last year [...] now there is no question about whether we should wear brassieres or not in our dances. I feel that Americans make too much of a fetish of clothes [...] We think nothing about being dressed or undressed and that is healthy. You think of nothing else except to be dressed or undressed, and that is unhealthy." Her comment helps demonstrate the relativity of "civilized" behaviour and contributes to what postcolonial theorist Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) calls "Provincializing Europe" (27-46). Mansare shows how values derived from Europe (in this case, the covering of women's breasts) are particular rather than universal while demonstrating the logic of her own values. Mansare suggests that it is New Yorkers who behave in an uncivilized manner in their rejection of African dance conventions. Furthermore, by questioning the value placed on nudity, Assare makes Euro-American standards appear strange and calls attention to the insularity and single-mindedness of such perspectives. The article ends the interview with a question that blatantly reveals just how much the company had infiltrated white male fantasies about black female

sexuality: “I had one more question for Miss Mansare. What about sex in Africa? Is there any mystery?” Yet Mansare responds to this cringe-worthy question with great acuity: “Sex in Africa is like anywhere else. If you have wealthy parents, you can do anything. If you have poor parents, be wary.” Her response succinctly comments on the precarious ways that wealth and status influence sexual activity, and furthermore, it also demonstrates her own awareness of the ways that sexuality may be exploited by those with money and power, including perhaps her interviewer.

In many ways, the very act of dancing without bras became a transgressive move and act of protest for the women of Les Ballets Africains. In a 1968 article in the New York Sunday News, Artistic director Zambo Italo explains that while in Montreal, censors attempted to stop the dancers from performing semi-nude. In response, Italo states, “one girl said she danced like this at home and would rather go to jail than dance covered up.” (Robert Wahls, “Show Business African Style” March 3) Knowing the consequences of their actions, the dancers began asserting their right to perform without bras, and their insistence on this right forced local policy makers to reevaluate nudity laws. In fact, when the troupe returned to Montreal for the 1967 World’s Fair, rather than protesting the dancers, audiences began protesting the laws that banned their nudity. Permitting the dancers to perform topless became a significant move in making Québec appear to be cosmopolitan and modern, as opposed to the religious atmosphere that had characterized the province during the 1950’s. The dancers in many ways instigated this shift in perspective, and they were able to do it through their dancing.

But our words are not the only way we speak and even when appearing to be silent, our bodies can find other ways to communicate powerful ideas and thoughts. Western culture often dismisses dance's expressive potential, mostly because its reliance on the body challenges the mind/body duality that Western philosophy has cherished at least since Descartes. However, Les Ballets Africains has generally recognized the importance of dance as a medium of assertion. Fodéba himself writes that in Africa "[nobody] dances for his neighbour but, instead, to express what he feels, translated by the rhythm of his body into a language which, although different from speech, is no less intelligible." (168) For Fodéba, dance is not necessarily about entertaining other people, but is a profound expression of one's self. In this case, dance is the physical manifestation of thoughts and feelings and like language, it speaks to the dancer and to the people around that dancer. It is also crucial to remember that the company was originally a theatre troupe but changed to dance because Fodéba believed that it would be more readily understandable by a wider audience whereas, as a theatre company, they were limited to an audience that understood the French language.

In her book The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas (2003) Diana Taylor suggests that performance, including dance, should be seen as its own kind of episteme. While Western culture has often preferred the apparent stability of a written text, knowledge is transmitted through other means as well, including embodied means. (xvi-xvii) In critiquing the logocentrism of Western thought, she distinguishes between two types of cultural memory: the archive and the repertoire. The archive consists of documents, texts, and other items that appear to be resistant to

change, while the repertoire consists of those things that appear ephemeral: dance, gestures, story telling, performance, etc³⁴. (19-20) Because of the apparent impermanence of performance, it has often been seen as an unreliable source of knowledge. However, as Taylor demonstrates, the things that do remain in the archive are often there because someone with the power to protect that kind of knowledge did. “If, however, we were to reorient the ways social memory and cultural identity [...] have traditionally been studied, with the disciplinary emphasis on historical documents, and look through the lens of performed, embodied behaviors, what would we know that we do not know now? Whose stories, memories, and struggles might become visible?” (xviii) If we re-examine the story of Les Ballets Africains from the perspective of the dancing, and consider how the movement itself creates meanings we do not always see in written texts, we can reexamine the dancers as powerful creative subjects expressing through performance.

Whether playing with fire, with the cora, or with the audience’s affection, both the men and women of Les Ballets Africains make a prominent mark on the stage, sharing their embodied knowledge with the audience and teaching them about their bodily practices. In 1968, the dancers performed at the United Nations Assembly Hall for delegates from around the world in celebration of the anniversary of the Proclamation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 19 of the declaration claims all

³⁴ “The archive” and “the repertoire” is a somewhat unstable binary, especially since the degree to which an archive is impervious to change is a contestable point. Moreover, various new forms of documentation allow certain elements of “live performance” to be captured where this may not have been possible before. One must also ask if an archive can ever truly preserve a text when its context can so deeply inform its meaning. However, Taylor is identifying a general trend of thought in Western academic circles by

people have the right to freedom of expression, yet this freedom seems to implicitly refer to expression in terms of words, for the women perform for the Assembly wearing the brassieres they had to wear during the 1959 tour. Moreover, this censorship suggests that the women are still persecuted, even in an ostensibly “universal” setting according to Euro-American codes of bodily conduct. However, I argue that the moving bodies on stage grant an empowerment that was not generally granted to images of blackness, and of black women in particular, on the world stage. If we consider the moment of performance as an act of transferring social knowledge than we can interpret this moment as a powerful expression in which the world is quite literally watching.

I want to focus in particular on the solos of two of the female dancers, as the energy and vigor of their performance challenges both notions of primal exoticism and also of victimization. After a slow-paced opening, which featured a virtuoso cora player and the women performing mesmerizing sways and swirls under their long goubas, a moderate-paced drumming fills the auditorium and the women enter the stage wearing long straight skirts and stiff bodices with thick folds of fabric ruffling around their waists and collars. As the first soloist comes forward, the other women stand in a line across the back of the stage, rhythmically stepping and throwing their torsos as they sway their arms. Their feet keep the rhythm of one drum while their bodies ripple to the accents of another. The dancers are rarely vertically aligned, but they are extremely stable due to the weighted-ness of their feet. The soloist moves to the center, and while the music moves at a medium speed, she comes forward at a much quicker tempo with fast forceful

suggesting the “archive” and “repertoire” paradigm. For more on the subtleties of the

movements. Her torso arcs back and forth and the flexibility in her neck allows her to throw her head so quickly that one can barely see the expression on her face. But while her frenetic energy is destabilizing to those watching, her strength keeps her balanced. When she hits the center of the stage, she jumps to her knees, continuing to throw her head and torso back and forth. The force of her body is so powerful that it lifts her off the ground and her pelvis thrusts violently forward as her arms thrash the air. The audience applauds in amazement and she finishes her solo by spinning herself off the stage, her body like a tornado threatening to touch down. A second female soloist comes forward and her energy, though not as forceful, is extremely powerful nonetheless. Her body arcs back and forth as her head launches her forward through the space. She releases her head back and throws her torso forward to the floor, grabbing her left leg with her right hand and repeating this movement left and right several times. Her spine is never vertical, instead, her world is thrown in constant flux, but she maintains her footing and her balance throughout. Her hands flex frequently and accentuate the musculature of her arms, and all the while, her spirits are high, she smiles joyously as though celebrating her dancing self. These dancers emit energy, force, and power. They take on the stage and demonstrate the strength of their bodies and spirit. While they may have dealt with censorship in their costumes, their figures speak through this restraint. The complexity of the movement, especially the way the arms, torso, and feet move polyrhythmically, suggests that in fact, the dancers movement is more sophisticated than European dance forms that often only consider the rhythm of the peripheral limbs. The women dance with

Archive and Repertoire dichotomization, see Taylor 19-21.

such strength and power, as opposed to the ethereal lightness often expected of female movement in European and North American circles, that the viewer must contemplate their assertiveness while making an interpretation of the work.

In effect, the content of what these dancers are expressing and creating through performance challenge white sexualized expectations about black women. The women do not perform in a manner that allows the gaze to spend any significant amount of time fetishizing their bodies, for their movement is so quick and forceful, that the eye can hardly focus. In Ann Cooper Albright's book Choreographing Difference, she argues that dance has the potential to disrupt fixed stereotypes and disrupt the so-called "gaze—" that in some situations, as a dancer moves, "the gaze is pulled away from any static image of who she is or what she represents." (27) For Albright, dancing allows us to recognize how signification is constantly on the move. Similarly, I suggest that the dancers present an image of Africa that challenges the stereotypes that filled the white North American imagination at the time of the 1959 tour (although, in some respects, their performance also set new expectations for black dance that would then have to be contested by later generations). This challenge is even evidenced in the contradictory ways that reviewers attempted to write about the performance: was it promiscuous or innocent? Authentic or inauthentic? Exciting or monotonous? Critics rarely came to a consensus on any of these issues. These conflicts left audiences perplexed and forced them to reconsider any fixed notion they may have had about African dance. However, I wondered if my interpretation would change if I saw the dancers perform topless?

Finding footage of the semi-nude dancers proved especially challenging,

however, a trip to New York and the Performing Arts Archive at the Lincoln Center helped me complete this part of my research. When I finally found Africa Ablaze, a two minute undated film reel that showed the women performing sans-brassieres, I wrote a note to myself: “what are you looking for?” I wondered what was inherently different about watching it with or without the bare-chested performance. I paused, unsure of myself, and looked down at my feet squirming awkwardly on the carpet. I asked the gentleman running the projector to play it again. He kindly obliged and said “Tribal dancing huh?” It was not quite a question, but not a statement either. I gave a hesitating smile, but wasn’t sure what to say. I wanted to protect these women from his eyes, as kind as they were, because I felt his eyes read them in a way I wanted so desperately to avoid. So I bring my own reading to the table.

Africa Ablaze is a short film that features two minutes of highly frenetic choreography—a whirlwind of activity and music that culminates in acrobatic movements and quick pounding rhythms. In fact, it features some of the same choreography that the dancers perform at the U.N., but it is in a studio and the women perform without bras. It begins calmly enough with the sound of a flute as five women dressed in yellow skirts with brown trim and feathers sway their arms freely in the background, all the while keeping the beat with their feet. The camera angle changes as two men enter the stage and chest bump each other to signal a dynamic change of intensity. The stage is nearly empty again, except for the musicians in the background who beat their drums ferociously. The five women enter again, crossing the screen from left to right as they smile and keep time while walking in step with one another. Their

arms are loose but precise and their feet calmly map out the underlying rhythm. These dancers, although often appearing in the background, can be thought of as the base/bass rhythm, the ever-important steady pulse that motivates the movement and that carries the music and the choreography forward. Much like how the bass line of a musical score may be less prominent but ultimately influences the colour of the sound, so too do these dancers colour the images present in the choreography of the work. In this way, the women of the company can be seen as strong centres that hold the choreography together.

The men of the company enter the stage with dynamic jumps that momentarily lift the energy from the groundedness of the women who stand in the back, though these women always return us to the suppleness of the earth. The men perform gymnastic feats that seem to overshadow the women who stand in the back with the musicians, however, shortly after this, two female dancers, dressed in bright white blue and brown pants enter the space. They enter in a crouched position, a stance indicative of preparedness and strength, as they scurry smoothly across the floor. The women quickly take a position on the floor—knees under their torso, they lay on their backs as their spine undulates left and right. In an instant, the two women are suddenly in a headstand. This moment surprised me the most, for in all the descriptions of the women dancers' movements I had read in newspaper reviews, they are rarely seen as acrobatic, this term is often reserved for describing the men. However, there, upside down and topless, these women literally turn this stereotype on its head. Moreover, the very fact that they can perform such feats without having to cover their breasts seems liberating to me. Thinking of my yoga practices, and how nervous I often am that my belly might show in headstand, I found

something refreshing about letting not just the belly hang, but the breasts as well. Watching this I suddenly became aware of how much I police my own body, even in the safety of a yoga class. How lovely it must be to just let them jiggle! In this sense, I suppose my interpretation did change upon watching the film of the semi-nude dancers. But what seemed to become clear to me was my own interpretation of the work as a (white) female viewer. While my whiteness may inform some of my interpretation, I also watched the film with a kinesthetic sense of connection to these women. I know what a burden those breasts can be (though I only have a modest notion), and I also recognized that they are a part of the body, my body, and that there is no need to treat them as a source of shame, as something to be covered and hidden.

The athleticism of these women continues as the stage is flooded with the rest of the dancers. The musicians are moving forward, the women in yellow skirts move with them making a weaving pattern around each other, and the men bound around the stage with daring leaps. The female acrobats climb on top of two men and sit on their shoulders. In a moment that reflects incredible core strength, the women flail their arms around and move their bodies back until their torso is parallel with the floor. Capable as their male counterparts, the women are even placed in situations where they initiate the movement and the men they partner must follow. The weight of the women is constantly shifting and the men must adapt according to the direction each woman takes. But it also requires the strength to hold one's self fiercely, the partner cannot do it himself. Quite unlike the European ballroom tradition, in this situation, the women take the lead. I found this moment quite profound; the women acrobats take charge of the movement. They are

in control of the manner in which they and their partners move. Their choices determine the shape of the performance, and it is in fact their agency that transmits this social knowledge from the dancers to the audience.

In fact, female decision-making is featured quite prominently in the choreography of Les Ballets Africains, especially through the use of improvisation. The group as a whole will often improvise various sections, sometimes to the dismay of the lighting technicians who must try to keep up with the decisions made on the stage. One article reports that soloists would often take so much time in performance that lighting crews would simply turn off the spotlight as a cue for the dancer to move on. (“Africa Unveils its Dancers” New York Mirror February 24 1959) But the women of the group have a special authorship in the piece *Tiranke*, first introduced to the repertoire in 1960, in which “homage is paid to the most beautiful girl in the village” (Les Ballets Africains program, n.d.) The narrative of the work follows a woman Tiranke who must choose a suitor and is trying to decide between a poet and a boaster. In the program, an interesting note follows the description of the piece: “The author of this gentle satire does not assume responsibility for Tiranke’s final decision since he was also perplexed by his heroine’s instability.” (Les Ballets Africains, program, Cultural de la XIX Olimpiad, 1968). On the one hand, the note indicates that the author is male (“for he was also perplexed”), illustrating how men are generally believed to be the ones with the power to tell a story. However, this peculiar statement suggests that even such seemingly fixed roles as “author” are open for interpretation. In effect, Tiranke transgresses her role as a stable predictable character controlled by the author. The author may claim ownership over the

character, but he cannot claim ownership over her will. Although there is no footage of this piece, based on the amount of improvisation that is generally used in the company's repertoire, there is a strong likelihood that this work could also make use of improvisation, and in the spirit of the anticipation of hearing Tiranke's decision, the leading woman may have great control over the shape the choreography takes.

In many ways, this portion of the performance celebrates female empowerment, and indeed, instances such as this one show that the female dancers of Les Ballets Africains had far more agency than was depicted in North American newspapers. However, I do not mean to suggest that the women had total freedom on tour. Instead, the very fact that their career with Les Ballets Africains depended upon the permission of their father and often ended when they were to be married (Wahls "Show Business African Style" Sunday News [New York] March 3 1968) suggests that the women faced patriarchal hegemony both at home and abroad. While *Tiranke* might paint a picture of a woman free to decide her own life path, such possibilities don't always exist outside of the performance. However, the theatre is not a space that is void of meaning or that is a space where reality doesn't apply as some theorists have assumed.³⁵ The theatre is a space ripe with meaning and has the potential to change preconceptions by acting out new ones on stage. Furthermore, one might say there is a kind of freedom allotted in danced movement. Dancing allows the female cast of Les Ballets Africains to express and act in ways that are empowering, and in performing such empowerment, they don't simply

³⁵ For example, in J.L. Austin's lecture series, How to do Things with Words, Austin suggests that a performative statement uttered by an actor on stage is "hollow or void" (22) and does not continue to hold power in the world outside of the theatre.

imagine being more powerful, they in effect become more powerful. In analyzing the dancing itself, we can better understand how the dancers exerted agency and will in their travels and how they helped persuade audiences to reconsider preconceived notions about black female sexuality.

V. Coda: Montreal and Multicultural Values

While this chapter has mostly examined the first North American tours of Les Ballets Africains, I would like to end by commenting more specifically Les Ballets Africains' impact on Québec society. Iro Tembeck has already provided a helpful analysis (2005) of how the company informed local debates about cultural diversity and helped pave the way for "multicultural" values in Montreal and it is worth summarizing here. Montreal held out on letting the dancers perform topless far longer than any other city in North America and Tembeck argues that this was because the Catholic influence in Québec inhibited expression of the body, seeing the body as sinful, and made it difficult to support a dance community in the province. She goes on to suggest however, that Les Ballets Africains challenged these conceptions. At first, racism and unyielding Catholic values prevented the dancers from performing topless, but as the Quiet Revolution began to transform Québec into a modern and secular society, Quebecers began to look for ways to express their new "progressive" selves. Furthermore, with the World's Fair in 1967, Montreal drew a great deal of attention and made every effort to appear "modern," which included "accommodating" non-white cultures. Iro Tembeck has

argued that it is likely for this reason that Les Ballets Africains were welcomed and embraced in 1967.

My own research also suggests that Les Ballets Africains had a powerful impact on Québec society and that their significance should not be underestimated. Debates about the company's appearances were so politically heated that full opinion pages in distinguished magazines like Cité Libre (founded by Pierre Trudeau and his colleagues early in their political career) discussing nudity laws and Québec's need to modernize citing Les Ballets Africains as an important example.³⁶ However, while Québec society became more open to understanding and accepting Les Ballets Africains as Tembeck suggests, the lasting impression of the company in Québec aligned blackness with hypersexuality. This sexualized understanding of "blackness" continued to inform the Montreal public's understanding of "Black" dance, as was the case with Les Ballets Jazz (as will be discussed in chapter 2). Even as recently as 1999, advertisements for the festival *Afrique: Aller/Retour* (see chapter 3) featured highly eroticized images of black dancers. While Les Ballets Africains opened Montreal audiences up to the possibility of accepting bodies, and especially of accepting "non-white" bodies, as powerful modes of creative expression, the way that blackness was associated with sexuality in the popular media meant that in Québec, "black" was equated with the sinful, sexual, but liberated, body.

Finally, while the eventual acceptance of Les Ballets Africains' topless performances indicates an early seed of multicultural sentiment in Montreal, it also demonstrates an assumption at the very core of multiculturalism: that diversity is about a

white majority graciously accepting the difference of a non-white minority. Performances such as those by Les Ballets Africain helped create an interest amongst white Canadians in learning about non-white cultures and the value of cultural diversity. However, as Homi Bhabha explains in The Location of Culture (1994), “diversity” is a way of conceiving culture as an epistemological object of study that identifies individual cultures as monolithic and radically separate from one another. In other words, “diversity” continues to identify non-white cultures as objects to study rather than as subjects that live and change in the world. As Bhabha explains, this type of perspective neglects the subjectivity, malleability, and interconnectedness of cultures (50). While Canadian multiculturalism finds roots in making “difference” acceptable to a white majority, it continues to assume that the white majority is the norm thus marginalizing, in spite of “accepting,”³⁷ non-white culture.

³⁶ See for example André Lussier’s 1960 article “Les Dessous de la Censure” in Cité Libre, (14- 21).

³⁷ For more on the “accepting” premise of multiculturalism, please see Chelva Kanaganayakam’s article “Cool Dots and a Hybrid Scarborough: Multiculturalism as Canadian Myth” (2003).

Chapter 2

What's in a Name? Les Ballets Jazz, BJM Danse, and the Whitening of Québec.

The title of the company is a contradiction in terms. Jazz dancing is dance, but it clearly is not ballet, and, the way this company does it, Jazz is strong enough to travel under its own name. But if we can gulp down a title like “Les Ballets Africains” why jib at “Les Ballets Jazz?”

--Lauretta Thistle, The Citizen
(Ottawa)
December 30, 1973.

I. Introduction

I began this project intent on investigating the early years of Les Ballets Jazz because I couldn't figure out how the company came to have “jazz” in its name. What I knew of the company from living in Montreal (on and off since 2004) was that it was a group of stunning dancers, all well trained in ballet, that performed contemporary ballet-type works with a sexy flare. Not quite “modern,” as the subject matter was usually too light, but not quite “ballet” either since the dancers were rarely on pointe, the company seemed to have a foot in both camps. I could understand if the company's name were “Les Ballets Moderns,” but how on earth did “jazz” work its way into the title? And what, if any, are the racial implications of a company that claims to have roots in Europeanist and Africanist dance styles, ballet and jazz?

One of the first the first things I learned was that the company's name has been contested almost since its inception. Sometimes the name has been in question because, as I had felt, “Ballet Jazz” didn't seem to accurately depict what the company was doing. However, in the early 1970s, “Ballets Jazz” was certainly a more accurate description of what the company was performing than it is today. When the company was founded,

artistic director Eva von Gencsy was choreographing in a style that borrowed from her training in New York with the famous Jazz dancer Luigi³⁸ while building on her extensive background as a Ballerina in Canada. Von Gencsy created a unique jazz ballet technique that she taught in Montreal and the enthusiasm of her students led her to found the company. But when the company took to the stage, the hybridization of these two styles was difficult for critics to swallow. The mainstream Canadian dance community generally saw (and often still sees) ballet and jazz on opposing ends of an artistic hierarchy. Due to this, dance reviews of that time period frequently deliberated over the style of Les Ballets Jazz, attempting to reconcile the amalgamation of these two seemingly disparate dance forms. For example, despite the fact that von Gencsy has no formal training in Modern dance, Noel Gallagher writing for the London Free Press (Ontario) suggests that the company is more “modern” than jazz or ballet and calls “Les Ballets Jazz” a misnomer. (26 October 1977). Rather than synthesizing these two seemingly opposing styles, Gallagher would rather call the company “modern” than break the ballet/jazz binary.

Moreover, the company’s name itself has changed several times over the years. Throughout the paper and for the sake of clarity, I tend to refer to the company as Les Ballets Jazz, which is an abbreviated version of their original name; when the company began in 1972, they were known officially as “Les Ballets Jazz Contemporains.” However, because of the significant amount of international tours they were doing, the

³⁸ Ohio-born Eugene Louis (Luigi) Falco worked in Hollywood as a dancer before relocating to New York in 1955 where he developed his own distinctive style of jazz that became hugely popular in the city during the 1960s. (Mahoney 4, and Straus 1)

company decided to change their name in the mid-1970s to “Les Ballets Jazz de Montréal” so that they could be better identified when abroad (Tembeck 1994 113). Occasionally, the company would be accidentally referred to as “Les Ballets Jazz du Québec,”³⁹ which in itself demonstrates how important the company was to the province, since, as Iro Tembeck suggests, the company was considered a “Quebec invention” (1994 114). But perhaps even more interesting was the name change that occurred in 2008. Rather than “Les Ballets Jazz de Montréal” the company’s name was changed to “BJM Danse.” Over the years, the “jazz” element that defined the company’s early character, gradually disappeared and in 2009, the company’s artistic director Louis Robitaille felt “jazz” did not adequately describe what the company was doing anymore.

With so few Jazz companies in Canada⁴⁰, it seemed so extraordinary to me that such a major contributor to Canada’s early dance scene featured jazz dance in its repertoire. Still, I found myself asking, what happened to the “jazz” in BJM Danse?

In this chapter, I examine the Jazz roots of Les Ballets Jazz and its implications for racial construction in Québec in relation to Québec nationalism of the 1970s. While Québec often celebrated “black culture—” especially for the political resistance it represented through developments like the Civil Rights movement in the U.S. and national independence movements in Africa— Québec’s appropriation of black culture, as I will demonstrate with a reading of Les Ballets Jazz’s first major work *Jérémie*, still

³⁹ For example, in an article for *Ici Radio Canada* about the 90th Anniversary of the newspaper *La Presse*, Fernand Côté mentions that “Les Ballets Jazz du Québec” will be performing in the televised celebration.

sought ways to reassert Québec's own whiteness. However, another force was working on Les Ballets Jazz that did not celebrate its "black roots." In spite of so-called "multicultural" ideals being celebrated beginning in the 1970s (Trudeau having declared Canada to be "bilingual and multicultural" in 1971) Canada Council for the Arts' Dance Division insisted that ballet and modern dance were the only forms worth funding, and rather than recognizing the "ballet" in Les Ballets Jazz, the Council continually labeled the company as "Jazz" and refused to fund it. This chapter ends by examining how this prejudice against jazz led the company to gradually whiten itself and rid itself of its "jazz" elements.

Sociologist Rennie Warburton suggests that Canadian Multiculturalism's main purpose was (and continues to be) to promote Canada's "deeply liberal" spirit but it does little to address the racial discrimination that has caused economic or material inequalities among ethno-cultural groups in the country (282). In other words, for many years, multiculturalism was a rhetorical strategy that promoted antiracism, but in effect, such rhetoric simply masked continuing institutional forms of discrimination. I suggest that the gradual demise of jazz from Les Ballets Jazz's repertoire is an example of this institutional discrimination and that the very name "BJM Danse" is a present day reminder of the effects of Canadian racism.

⁴⁰ One of the most notable Jazz companies in Canada is Decidedly Jazz Danceworks from Calgary. Also, the University of Calgary and Ryerson University's dance programs offer regular classes in Jazz as part of their curriculum.

II. History

Les Ballets Jazz was hugely popular both in and out of Canada and was known, as the name implies, for melding ballet and jazz styles into high-energy dance pieces. Les Ballets Jazz began in 1972 under the direction of Eva von Gency, Eddy Toussaint, and Geneviève Salbaing. Von Gency, a former dancer with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet and Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, discovered jazz dance at the age of forty-five and fell in love, saying “it suited my Hungarian temperament and the music made me feel like life just started for me.” (Eva dir. Dansereau) This inspiration led her to create her own technique that utilized what she learned from acclaimed jazz dancers in New York⁴¹ (especially Luigi) and her extensive knowledge of ballet to create a hybrid style that became hugely popular in Québec. The success of her classes led von Gency to combine artistic forces with her student, Haitian-Canadian ballet dancer Eddy Toussaint, and with the addition Geneviève Salbaing (a former ballet dancer and wealthy immigrant from France and Morocco) as administrator, the three founded the company “Les Ballets Jazz Contemporains.”

Von Gency firmly believed in the artistry of jazz dance. In the documentary Eva, she explains that she saw jazz being used too much for “entertainment” and felt jazz belonged on the same level as classical ballet. As an example, von Gency brings up Oscar Peterson, and how he began in nightclubs in Montreal but eventually ended up in Carnegie Hall. Von Gency felt that jazz dance too could make such strides and wanted

⁴¹ It should be noted that Gency’s trip to New York was in fact sponsored by Canada Council for the Arts. Prior to the economic crisis of the 1970s, the Council seemed to have been open to the idea of funding jazz dance.

to bring jazz dance to the same status that jazz musicians had accomplished. Von Gency approached her attempts to “elevate” jazz by adding ballet elements to it. While this logic belies the assumption that ballet is “higher” than jazz, it does not necessarily suggest that von Gency saw ballet as essentially better or worse than jazz, but rather, an understanding that audiences recognize ballet as high art and by connecting jazz dance with ballet, audiences may be more willing to see jazz too as high art. In this sense, much like how Keïta Fodéba uses “ballet” in the title of his company Les Ballets Africains to demonstrate to Europeans the artistry and parallels between ballet and African dance, so too does von Gency use “ballet” to convince Canadians of the artistry in Jazz dance. In 1979, von Gency left Les Ballets Jazz to pursue an independent career as a teacher. Von Gency does not like to discuss the details of her departure, but explained to me that her career as a teacher had taken off and that she decided to pursue this avenue more fully. However, in my discussions with former Les Ballets Jazz dancers Eddy Toussaint (October 13 2011) and André Lucas (November 6 2011) both felt that von Gency was pushed out by Salbaing who was losing trust in Gency’s abilities. Salbaing also discussed von Gency’s departure in my interview with her (October 21 2011) but expressed a sense of abandonment when von Gency left.

Eddy Toussaint, another founder of Les Ballets Jazz, was not a Jazz dancer before he met von Gency. Toussaint had trained extensively in ballet as a boy in Haiti and continued to do so when he moved to Montreal. But gradually Toussaint became disenchanted with the way ballet was performed in Canada. A friend of his recommended that he try von Gency’s class and he was immediately hooked. He even began teaching

his own classes and was quickly one of von Gencsy's prized pupils. When she asked him to start a company with her, he was thrilled, however, he was not completely sold on the idea of working with Geneviève Salbaing. The two did not get along and this tension would eventually cause Toussaint to leave the company and pursue his own successful career with Le Ballet de Montréal: Eddy Toussaint.

Geneviève Salbaing had been a dancer with Les Grands Ballets Canadiens but retired when she decided to start to raise a family. She still longed for her dance days however, and when von Gencsy asked her to act as President (head of administration) for Les Ballets Jazz, Salbaing was thrilled. In my interview with von Gencsy, she praised Salbaing's tenacity and explained that she knew from the start Salbaing would be the one to keep the company going, and indeed she did. After von Gencsy left Les Ballets Jazz in 1979, Salbaing took over as artistic director and Les Ballets Jazz became a repertory company (Salbaing would hire outside choreographers to choreograph for the company). Salbaing's personal investment in the company, both emotionally and financially, is what kept the company going through nearly a decade without funding from Canada Council for the Arts. In spite of the ongoing battle with Canada Council, Salbaing's efforts were finally acknowledged when in 1987 she became a Member of the Order of Canada, recognizing her outstanding contributions to Canadian society.

Geneviève Salbaing stepped down as artistic director in 1992 as the company was in need of rejuvenated artistry. Les Ballets Jazz went through a period of artistic directors in fast succession until finally in 1998, Louis Robitaille took over the job. Robitaille, a former dancer with Ballet Montréal: Eddy Toussaint and Les Grands Ballets Canadiens,

has successfully led the company ever since. But while his take on Les Ballets Jazz clearly informed the company's transition from a ballet-jazz company to a "contemporary" company, the company has been headed in this direction since at least the late 1970s.

III. Appropriating Black Culture in Québec

When I spoke with Eva von Gencsy (founding artistic director of Les Ballets Jazz) about her interest in jazz, she had a hard time expressing herself in words and so, at eighty-seven years of age, she stood up and started to show me. Using syllables "ta-ta-dee" to announce the rhythm, she swirled her arms to show what she called jazz's "roundness." As she moved, the words came to her. "Like the waves in the ocean, you almost hear [it] one, two, three, four" she counted, stretching each beat as she performed, stealing more and more time than rubato might imply. She continued her movement exploration in her living room, passionately interspersing aphorisms about her love for jazz and her joy for life when she mentioned something that struck a chord with me. "Jazz, well where did it come from? The people who were oppressed," she responded, referring to African Americans, "they had to find a liberating power." I couldn't help myself. I mentioned the growing movement for Québec sovereignty of the 1970's and asked "Did the separatist movement influence your work or do you think maybe it had something to do with why jazz was so popular in Québec at that time?" She quickly explained that she had no interest in politics, but agreed that this was a contributing factor to its popularity. "It was the youth," she replied. "The youth needed this liberating power.

I'm sure that they are not involved in politics but they knew something was wrong. [...] The jazz was there for them to express themselves." While Québec's interest in Les Ballets Jazz had many contributing factors: its "unbridled enthusiasm and vitality" (Siskind, "Unbridled Enthusiasm, Vitality" The Gazette n.d.), its "technique accompli" (Brousseau, "'Jérémie': un événement de la Danse" La Presse), not to mention the charisma of the jazz-ballet style's leader Eva von Gencsy, there was also a draw to the liberation that was associated with jazz and African American culture in general.

Having begun in the early 1970s, Les Ballets Jazz came about at a time when Canadians were witnessing the after effects of the American Civil Rights movement, and the national liberation movements that were changing the African continent. Quebecers were especially fascinated by these events seeing a parallel between these "black" movements and their own emerging nationalist sentiment. The following is an excerpt from Québec author Michèle Lalonde's poem *Speak White*, which was written in 1968 and published in 1974:

 speak white
 tell us again about Freedom and Democracy
 nous savons que liberté est un mot noir
 comme la misère est nègre
 et comme le sang se mêle des poussières des rues d'Algers ou de Little Rock⁴²

For Lalonde, the phrase "speak white," a derogatory slur once aimed at French-Canadians, symbolically captures the seemingly paradoxical position of Québec within Canada. French-Canadians, though physiologically appear "white," did not have the

⁴² "speak white/tell us again about Freedom and Democracy/we know that liberty is a black word/like misery is black/and like the blood that mixes with dust in the streets of Algeria or of Little Rock" (my translation)

social status, political power, or financial wealth generally associated with whiteness. The poem itself plays with these notions of language and power by continually referencing major English authors, works, and borrowing English phrases, to demonstrate how deeply embedded English cultural references are in Québec culture and the complicated ways French-speakers must mediate between these two cultural positions. Furthermore, Lalonde very critically expresses this inequality by highlighting throughout her poem how French-Canadians have been racialized as less-white than English-Canadians. In particular, Lalonde alludes to “Black” culture in order to call attention to the ways that Québécois culture has been oppressed by English culture. In this way, her poem also demonstrates an important trend in Québec art during this period—a fascination and sense of affiliation with “Black” culture. The poet not so subtly draws a link between her own experiences of discrimination within Canada to the civil rights movement in the U.S. and the independence movement in Algeria (and it should be noted that Québec separatists were becoming increasingly influential during this period).

In 1974 literary scholar Max Dorsinville explored these similarities in his book Caliban without Prospero: Essay on Quebec and Black Literature arguing that “‘Québécois’ identity of the late fifties and sixties drew definite parallels between its own social experience and that of Blacks in America and Africa.” (9) In particular, Dorsinville compares the American Civil Rights movement and African independence movements with Québec’s own quest for sovereignty and recognition within Canada. These parallels do not adequately recognize the very different contexts and histories of colonialism that have marked these vastly different cultures, nor does Dorsinville make much distinction

within what he calls “black culture,” grouping texts from the U.S., Haiti, and other countries together, when their main link appears to be Dorsinville’s own understanding of race and what constitutes “blackness.” However, what Dorsinville’s study reveals is that, as he explains, “in the early sixties [...] the Black man, as a symbol, image and myth emerges in the French Canadian consciousness.” (9-10)⁴³ Although, just what shape the “black man” took in the French Canadian imaginary is not easy to define, it seems to have been informed by racial discourses in North American and European (particularly French) white circles.

The trend of appropriating Black culture in Québec has some parallels to other cultural appropriations of blackness, in particular to Negrophilia and Blackface Minstrelsy, but with some distinctions. Negrophilia—the love of Black culture—was a particularly popular movement in France in the early twentieth century. Musicians like Claude Debussy, Erik Satie, and Igor Stravinsky were borrowing musical concepts from jazz music, painters like Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse were borrowing imagery from African art, and the French middleclass danced the Cakewalk, the Charleston, and enjoyed the performances of Josephine Baker on stage. Scholars Karen Dalton and Henry Louis Gates Jr. explain that at that time in France, borrowing from Black culture was associated with being “modern” and helped Europeans redefine themselves in a changing modern world. (906-908) Similarly, in the 1960s, Québec was going through its own changes due to urbanization and was seeking to find ways to assert its modern-ness.

⁴³ For example, Paul Chamberland expresses a sense of affiliation with Harlem (Dorsinville 10) and Jacques Godbout whose novel structurally links an FLQ bombing

While reinventing its cultural policies, the Ministère des Affaires Culturelles often looked to France for inspiration. There is a possibility that France informed Québec's own appropriation of African and African American culture and that Negrophilia in France helped Quebecers announce their newly Modern society, however, there is too little literature available on this subject to know for certain.

Blackface Minstrelsy might also inform the appropriation of Black culture in Québec, and while there is similarly little information about the practice of Minstrelsy in Québec, the fact that Montreal had a relatively large vaudeville scene (and vaudeville emerged from Minstrelsy) as well as the fact that the neighbouring city of Ottawa had a famous touring Blackface Minstrel group, the Gowan Brothers,⁴⁴ (Keillor, 164) suggests that Montreal (and perhaps Québec at large) was at least familiar with the practice, if not participating in it. But much the way white working class Americans performed Blackface as a way of creating a "white bond" where ethnic differences might normally interfere (Roediger 117), it is possible that the appropriation of black culture in Québec during the 1960s had a similar way of creating a unified whiteness where previously French and English Canadians were viewed as distinct within a racial hierarchy. In calling attention to images of blackness, the similarities between English and French cultures seem less disparate thus whitening French-Canadians by comparison.

with the 1963 Birmingham bombing of an African American Baptist Church (Dorsinville 209).

⁴⁴ Elaine Keillor also suggests in her book *Landscape and Diversity in Canada* that Minstrelsy was frequently performed by non-professional groups as a way of critiquing local politics. In this sense, putting on "blackness" was seen as a way of transgressing political issues. (164)

While these discourses of modernism and whiteness likely informed the “symbol of the black man” in Québec one of the traits that distinguishes the appropriation of blackness in Québec from what had occurred in Negrophilia in France and Blackface Minstrelsy in the U.S. was that in the 1960s, many Québécois identified with these Black figures (although, as I will demonstrate in my reading of Jérémie, this identification is somewhat limited). In the Québécois imaginary, the revolt of Black men and women against American and European oppressive forces made the symbol of the “black man” a sign of liberation, and thus a useful image for nationalists and sovereigntists.

Perhaps the most infamous example of this identification can be found in Pierre Vallières 1968 book “Nègres Blancs d’Amérique” (translated as “White Niggers of America”). Vallières was a leader in the Front de Libération du Québec, a terrorist group known for planting mailbox bombs and the kidnapping and murder of politician Pierre Laporte. His writing explicitly compares the plight of African Americans during slavery to the modern situation of French-Canadians, though it should be mentioned that his polemic prose was not widely accepted within Québécois culture. However, other less notorious examples exist as well. In the early 1980s, Franco-Ontarian writer Paul Desbiens wrote *Invisible Man/L’homme invisible*, calling attention to the difficulties that he faced as a French man in Canada and noticing a parallel between his own circumstances and that of Ralph Ellison’s nameless African-American protagonist in *Invisible Man*.

This appropriation of black culture in Québec manifests itself in the dance world as well, though in markedly different ways, largely because of Catholicism’s negative

view of the body. According to dance scholar Iro Tembeck (2005), the Church's censure of the body had a major hand in delaying the development of a dance community in Montreal. Tembeck explains that as late as the 1930's the Catholic Church's political sway in Montreal forced municipal policy makers to create strict legal regulations on dancing bodies. For example, social dance in Québec had many restrictions; dance halls had to be closed beginning Saturday at midnight and could not open again until Monday morning, and minors were banned from dance halls. (2005 31) Another example of these bodily restrictions comes from an anecdote by dancer Sheila Lawrence (in the film *Eva dir. Dansereau*). She explains that in the 1950s it was illegal for women to be outside in shorts. On break from a rehearsal, her and some other ballet dancers were sitting on stairs in their shorts and a police officer told them they had to go inside and put on skirts. Such stringent rules, along with the generally negative view of the body, made it difficult, though not impossible, for the work of dancers' to be accepted by the public.

An early example of a Québécois dancer appropriating black culture can be seen in the choreography of Françoise Sullivan. In 1945, Sullivan studied dance in New York at the Boas School of Dance (Lindgren 25) and her experience there encouraged her to pursue her fascination with "the interplay between art and society, dance and anthropology" (Lindgren 75). Sullivan is known in Québec for her association with the Automatists artists and her signing in 1948 of "Le Refus Global" (The Total Refusal)—a document that renounced the highly religious and anti-modern character of Québec

during the period.⁴⁵ Sullivan created experimental dance in spite of the often-unfavorable religious atmosphere in Québec. Curiously however, Sullivan often looked to jazz music for inspiration, as in her piece “Black and Tan”⁴⁶ (1948), which featured the music of Duke Ellington. (Tembeck 1994 48-49). For Sullivan, it seems that jazz was a valuable artistic resource that allowed her to resist the reservations imposed by Québec’s strict Catholic influences in the realm of dance. In a sense, the “sinful” dancing body could be liberated in its appropriation of jazz.

Similarly, Les Ballets Jazz became popular because of its implicit connection to African American culture and through jazz (both dance and music) the company appealed to Québec sentiments about political freedom. Moreover, because Les Ballets Jazz performed a style quite unique in Canada, its distinctiveness from the rest of Canadian culture gave it the potential to be a distinctively “Québécois” form. For example, in a poster from 1974, next to the company’s name is written: “L’expression de la joie de vivre au rythme québécois”⁴⁷ and since the company used mainly jazz music, the implication to such a heading was that Québec’s own rhythm was a jazzy one.

It should be noted that Ballet is not simply “white” nor that jazz is simply “black”—such a binary does not adequately depict the years of cross-pollination that have shaped dance forms in North America. For example, Brenda Dixon Gottschild has argued that George Balanchine’s project to create an Americanized ballet involved a fair amount

⁴⁵ Tembeck (1994 46) suggests that Le Refus Global was a precursor and inspiration for the Quiet Revolution

⁴⁶ An earlier title of this work was “Black and Tan Fantasy.”

of borrowing and appropriating from dances being performed by African Americans. The incorporation of “Africanist”⁴⁸ elements into his choreography distinguished American Ballet from what was being performed in Europe. With respect to jazz, the style of jazz dance that was being practiced by Luigi when von Gencsy was first introduced to it—a style sometimes referred to as “modern jazz—” was often considered a Euro-American dance form (Stearns and Stearns xvi). However, Thomas DeFrantz (2004) argues that this style of jazz dance is seen as Euro-American because it was codified by many white choreographers and teachers but that it still utilized Africanist qualities while adding an emphasis on balletic lines. In other words, ballet and jazz dance in and of themselves do not necessarily hold fast to these kind of racialized categorizations. However, in Canada, these connections and similarities between modern jazz dance and ballet were not clear, and, as is apparent from von Gencsy’s comments about jazz and liberation, jazz dancing was associated with jazz music and African American culture, while ballet was predominantly seen as European; for Canadians ballet was implicitly associated with whiteness and jazz with blackness.

In the following section I analyze Les Ballets Jazz’s first major work *Jérémie*, and the work *Fleur-de-Lit* (performed during the Montreal Olympics) in order to demonstrate how the company contributed to the trend in Québec of appropriating Black culture,

⁴⁷ Literally translated it reads: “The expression of the joy of living to the rhythm of Québec.” Curiously, in the English title below it just states “An expression of our life style.”

⁴⁸ Brenda Dixon Gottschild describes Africanist as referring to “African and African American resonances and presences, trends and phenomena. It indicates the African influence, past and present, and those forms and forces that arose as products of the African Diaspora.” (xiv)

however, this work also demonstrates Québec's own limits with this kind of identification. While appropriating Black culture became a way for Quebecers to express their sense of oppression, Québec's struggles, I suggest, were ultimately about reasserting its own whiteness and whitening the French language ("speaking white") in Canada. Accordingly, identifying with "blackness" had its limits. In *Jérémie* and *Fleur-de-Lit* Les Ballets Jazz manages to play with notions of blackness while promoting Québec's own whiteness.

IV. *Jérémie*, *Fleur-de-Lit*, and racialized identities in Québec

"*Jérémie* est québécoise de naissance [...] Le caractère du personnage n'est au fond purement qu'accessoire; si *Jérémie* est québécois il ne l'est que par les auteurs: Marcel Dubé pour l'argument, Lee Gagnon pour le texte musical."⁴⁹

-- Pierre Quensel, "Les Ballets Jazz: spectacles ombres et lumières."
Le Droit, Ottawa: jeudi le 20 décembre 1973.

Analyzing this work has been an extremely complex process as the only video that exists is rehearsal footage on 3/4" film, consisting of clips of danced phrases out of context without the score. As such, my analysis can only speak about the movement quality of the work in a general sense. However, there are plenty of archival traces that have helped me construct my analysis. In particular, a script for the ballet was published which guides its reader through the costuming, lighting, narrative, and direction of the choreography. Although there are some ways that the performance deviated from the

⁴⁹ "*Jérémie* is Québécois by birth. The character's personality is in essence but an accessory. If *Jérémie* is Québécois, he is so because of his creators: Marcel Dubé for the scenario and Lee Gagnon for the musical score." (my translation)

script, which I will address in my analysis, it still provides very thorough insight into the artistic process and complements the photographs, reviews, and personal interviews that I have conducted.

Curiously, Les Ballets Jazz was not the first group to do a jazz or “rock” ballet in Canada. In fact, just a few years prior, in their 1970-71 season, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet did a work called *Ballet High*, which featured original rock music by the Canadian band The Lighthouse and choreography by Brian MacDonald. That same season Les Grand Ballets Canadiens performed two rock ballets, *Hip and Straight* and a ballet version of the musical *Tommy*. Both ballets were attempts to reach younger audiences and create a renewed interest in ballet. In particular, *Tommy* seems to have been still fresh in many dancers’ and critics’ minds when Les Ballets Jazz produced the work *Jérémie*.⁵⁰ Moreover, these two works have similar themes and even imagery (like the significance of a blind protagonist, the implicit use of narcotics on stage, and of course, the use of popular music). In an interview (November 6, 2011), former Ballets Jazz dancer André Lucas mentioned the similarities between the two works, and suggested that there was at least some overlap in the artistic concepts.

Les Ballets Jazz however had a very different look from Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, and it is worthwhile to discuss the Ballets Jazz aesthetic here. While both companies used dancers well trained in “classical technique,” Les Ballets Jazz had a decidedly jazz character. Unlike the rigid ballet torso, the dancers in Les Ballets Jazz emphasized the hips in their movements, often leading their movement from their

⁵⁰ Claude Gingras La Presse (March 1974) calls *Jérémie* a poor copy of *Tommy*.

pelvises and allowing their ribs and chest to stretch behind as they followed. The chest and torso would frequently roll and undulate in different directions and the ribs and hips would often distinguish themselves in circular movements. Isolated shoulders would hunch up and down, accentuating the rhythmic pulse of the music and the arms were not limited to classical lines. Moreover, the choreography in *Les Ballets Jazz* utilized floor movement, often having the dancers in the splits on the floor, or in deep squatting lunges using their hand to prop up their bodies. However, Eva von Gencsy's use of pas-de-deux was hugely informed by classical ballet. Although her lifts would often stray from traditional ballet poses, frequently making use of parallel lines of the legs, both partners would face the audience while the man standing behind the woman would guide her through lifts and turns by carefully attending to her waist with his hands. In each pas-de-deux, the woman was featured while the man supported her. Von Gencsy's choreography also frequently made use of classically influenced pirouettes and turns. But for von Gencsy, the thing about ballet that she felt most informed her choreography and technique was the leg strength that ballet required. "Everything that makes the leg strong [tendus, grand pliés, développés, grand battements and the posture required to do it], those for me only come from ballet" (Interview with author, September 22, 2011). Pointed toes, turnout, and straight long lines of the legs are all essential to von Gencsy's aesthetic.



Figure 1: Les Ballets Jazz de Montréal, Program Cover and Poster (1974-75). Courtesy of Bibliothèque Vincent Warren

However, while I am of the opinion that these early years showed both a jazz and ballet influence, this may be a contested point. For founding administrative director Geneviève Salbaing, (Interview with author, September 21 2011) the company was always performing ballet, but set to jazz music, and indeed, when von Gencsy left and she took over as artistic director in 1979, this seemed to more accurately describe the direction the company was headed. Yet even if the company were “ballet” more so than jazz, it would be hard to deny the Africanist influences in the company’s dance style and public image. In this sense, the jazz ballet style of the company may be comparable with

the ballet style of George Balanchine and his “Americanization” of ballet. Just as Brenda Dixon Gottschild has argued that Balanchine borrowed from both European American and African American culture to create his ballet aesthetic (62), similarly, Africanist and Europeanist aesthetics, jazz and ballet, are present in the choreography of Les Ballets Jazz. However, unlike Balanchine’s clandestine borrowings, Les Ballets Jazz utilized its association with black culture as a way of linking the group’s work with the resistive and subversive potential of black cultural forms. While the company was mostly comprised of white dancers, advertisements frequently exploited images and symbols associated with African American culture. In a program cover from 1975 (Figure 1) familiar images of African American identity like the clearly visible afro hairstyles and the accentuated type of the word “jazz,” along with the use of silhouette that literally darkens the bodies on stage, create an implicit reference to the company’s “blackness.” In this sense, even if the company was performing ballet to jazz music as Mme Salbaing explains, the company’s public image still borrowed greatly from African American aesthetics in the 1970’s. Ultimately however, the extent to which the company performed “jazz” seems to be a contested point. André Lucas disagreed with Mme. Salbaing and commented that while he was with the company (1973-1976), they performed jazz.

Based on the video footage available, I would suggest that while the dancers are certainly well trained in ballet, there are clearly jazz or “Africanist” elements to the dancing:⁵¹ the use of multiple-centres emanating from the hips or the ribs, the heavy

⁵¹ Brenda Dixon Gottschild lists the following as Africanist Aesthetic principles: Embracing the Conflict, Polycentrism/Polyrhythm, High Affect Juxtaposition, Epebism, The Aesthetic of the Cool (11-19)

grounded-ness reminiscent of the “get down stance,” the use of syncopated rhythms; not to mention the youthfulness that so many critics identify in the company (an Africanist quality dance scholars like Brenda Dixon Gottschild refer to as “ephebism”). However, I do not wish to judge the “purity” of the company’s jazz or ballet elements. Instead, I wish to emphasize that the company utilized techniques belonging to both styles and that the company was at least in part affiliated with dances and images relating to African American heritage.

Jérémie premiered on May 7 1973 and was generally well-received by audiences and critics alike. It tells the story of a veteran of war, though which war is intentionally not specified. Disenchanted with life due to his traumatic experiences in battle, Jérémie is caught up in a life of “sex, drugs, money, and compromise” but finds refuge in a world of fantasy and dreams (Les Ballets Jazz, program 1973). The dark subject of the story is typical of Marcel Dubé (the famous Québec playwright hired to write the scenario for *Jérémie*), as he frequently explores tragedy and the psychological limits of humanity. The work builds on Christian iconography, and Jérémie’s resurrection at the end suggests that he acts in part as a Jesus figure. Also essential to the symbolism of the work is the emphasis on eyes and blindness; Jérémie is occasionally referred to as Oedipus and in Dubé’s original scenario, Jérémie removes his bandages and reveals blood running from his eyes, as though they had been gouged out.

Crucially, while Jérémie is himself a veteran of war he does not represent a particular nation or country. In Dubé’s instructions, Jérémie has no insignia or emblems of any sort on his military jacket so that he cannot be affiliated with a particular country

or movement. However, while the character is supposed to be void of a national marking, the character's inner monologues are narrated to the audience in French by Québécois actor Guy Godin. Considering how important language is in Québec debates about sovereignty, and how few ballets during this period incorporated text into their performances, the fact that *Jérémie* incorporates a French-speaking narrator is significant: while the character is intended to appear universal, he is speaking in a language that historically has been marginalized within Canada (and even when visiting English-speaking cities, the narrator would speak in French). Accordingly, though "universal," Jérémie's language ties him to Québec. This polysemous figure can be read in terms of nation and race in two very important ways: as having no nation or representing every nation. First, the fact that Jérémie is a "nationless" man but has fought in the war may be a reference to the conscription of French-Canadians in military ventures that were seen as British interests, like the Boer War and World Wars I and II (McRoberts 35). Following this allegorically, French-Canadians did not have their own sovereign "nation" but were forced to fight in a war nonetheless, just as Jérémie appears to be nationless, but severely wounded from his service. Also important is how his "lack" of nationality makes him a "universal" figure. According to race theorist Warren Montag, the "universalism" of the European Enlightenment became a quality associated "whiteness;" embedded within its construction is the assumption that whiteness is not particular at all, but contains a universal quality, exempting it from a racial marking. (285) In this sense, coupling Jérémie's universal quality with a Québécois voice helps whiten the sounds of Québec.

The French text is not seen as particular but as “universal,” thus re-inscribing French sounds with white universality.

Moreover, the lead character’s whiteness can be read in his costume, or at least, in the way his costume was originally envisioned. Dubé initially described the character as having a face covered in white bandages with only four holes: two for his eyes, one for his nose, and one for his mouth. Von Gencsy did not approve of this costuming for she felt that it would be near impossible for her lead dancer to perform with such limited vision, and so rather than having his face entirely covered, Jérémié simply wore white bandages around his head— not nearly to the extent that Dubé had envisioned. However, the spoken text in the show still makes reference to Jérémié’s bandages when a chorus of girls chants: “Jérémié n’a plus de visage/ Mais que quatre charbons noirs/ Qui sont les seuls miroirs/ de sa peur et de ses mirages.”⁵² (23) This peculiar depiction almost seems to suggest a reversed blackface with its coal-like eyes and mouth (as opposed to a blackface mask worn by a white man where the eyes and lips reveal pale skin underneath and highlight the “parodical” element of the performance). This “white mask” along with a pair of matching white gloves amplifies Jérémié’s whiteness. In this way, Jérémié reinforces Québec’s own whiteness by presenting a protagonist with a Québécois voice whose physical appearance exaggerates his own whiteness.

In the production, Jérémié’s face was barely covered with these white bandages, but there are still other ways in which Jérémié’s whiteness was created, in particular, through his contrast with black figures. In looking at the original casting of the

production, familiar tropes of whiteness and blackness begin to emerge. The title role of Jérémie went to James Boyd, a white ballet dancer. However, Haitian-Canadian Eddy Toussaint, who was one of the company's co-founders and an extraordinary ballet dancer, took on a role of hyper-sexuality and criminality: The Pimp. I asked Mr. Toussaint why he was given this role, he explained that he had the right assertive personality for it, though he admits that his colour likely had something to do with it. (September 13, 2011). A similar trend occurs in the casting of the female leads. Jérémie is saved from a life of debauchery by LOVE, also known as "the girl continent," played by a very young white ballet dancer, Nathalie Breuer. Her character is not a person per se, but the universally understood emotion "love." Curiously however, in the stage directions, Dubé states that this role should be played by a woman who "is Asiatic (or Black African, it all depends)." (66) In spite of these directions, which may be problematic in and of themselves, the role of LOVE went to Breuer, who was only 14 at the time, rather than, for example, Marie-José Robinson, the company's only Black female dancer, who ended up in the more minor role of Prostitute. In discussing this choice with Eva von Gencsy, she explained to me that Robinson was too tall and that Breuer was her strongest dancer and partnered well with Boyd (September 22, 2011). Still, to an audience, the principal roles belonged to white dancers and the antagonists were black; whiteness here again stands in for the universal, while blackness is relegated to the margins. It is also crucial to note the different types of intimacy these two women represent: As LOVE Breuer

⁵² "Jérémie has no face except for four pieces of coal that are the mirrors of his fear and his delusions [mirages]." (my translation)

embodies pure and chaste courtship while Robinson as the Prostitute embodies promiscuity and sexual availability.

The Pimp becomes the character responsible for Jérémie's increasingly downward spiral. He seduces Jérémie into a life of drugs and sex that he is almost unable to escape. The Pimp offers Jérémie wine while his⁵³ two prostitutes (one being Robinson) begin to perform a sensual dance for the hero. The miscegenation of this sexual encounter and the homoeroticism implicit in the involvement of the two women are perceived as racial and sexual perversions that, although tempting, become worthy of punishment and as the Prostitutes perform for him, The Pimp empties Jérémie's pockets and robs him of what little money he has. Following this, the "night strollers" enter the stage and the scene turns into a haze of sexual insinuation and implied drug use. The men and women dance provocatively, continually change partners, and one of the women forces Jérémie to smoke an "illegal" substance. A police siren goes off and breaks up the scene. Jérémie is left alone, penniless, wounded, and intoxicated, in the middle of a park bench.

However, Jérémie eventually emerges unscathed. Richard Dyer explains that one of the major tropes associated with whiteness, which is often deeply linked to Christianity, is its ability to transcend the material world. Similarly, Jérémie's "spirit" is also able to overcome his body and its material conditions. And indeed, by the end, Jérémie is cured and no longer needs his bandages or cane, finds LOVE, who mysteriously resurrects from the dead, while the rest of the cast become "motionless shadows." (69) In this manner, Jérémie is able to overcome his physical limitations,

which echoes Christian myths about man and his struggle for redemption from the sins of his body, as well as narratives of whiteness (as per Dyer) where the white man is understood as a strong spirit, while the racialized other is relegated to the realm of the body. The Pimp and Prostitutes, who are symbolic of blackness, criminality, and sexuality remain fixed in their corporeality; they act as character foils that illuminate Jérémie's whiteness all the more through their own blackness. Robinson and Toussaint take on symbols of eroticism and delinquency, of living outside the norms and codes of society, while Jérémie, the universal (read: white) man, dabbles in misadventure before being saved by a virtuous (read: white) woman. In many ways *Les Ballets Jazz* reconstruct familiar gendered and racialized patterns that see white women as pure and virginal, black men and women as lascivious and dangerous, and white men in a constant struggle against temptation.

In defense of the company's motives, which were in part to break racial barriers, I must mention that the Black Canadian members of the company I interviewed have been quite insistent on their adoration for Eva von Gencsy and did not feel that the company discriminated against them. In fact, André Lucas and Eddy Toussaint have both expressed that racism was certainly an issue for them in pursuing ballet careers, but *Les Ballets Jazz* was not like that. Moreover, *Les Ballets Jazz* struggled for many years with the Canada Council for the Arts, and it is largely because of their efforts that jazz is more frequently recognized as a legitimate dance form within Canada, though as many jazz

⁵³ In the ballet's script, there is a note that says the prostitutes are the Pimp's "objects" (56), which is why I use the possessive in this context.

practitioners in Canada would suggest, there is still a long way to go⁵⁴. Finally, Les Ballets Jazz became a venue for young emerging Black Canadian choreographers like Eddy Toussaint and Constantine Darling, to create new works for a professional company. However, hybridity rarely occurs on equal footing, and while there are certainly ways in which the company helped break boundaries in the Canadian dance community, there are also many ways that the company, even in spite of its best intentions, rearticulated white notions of blackness.

What makes *Jérémie* a fascinating case study is that it demonstrates the limits of Québécois affiliation with “blackness.” While toying with notions of blackness helps identify how Québec has been oppressed and “colonized,” it also puts Québec’s own “whiteness” into question. Accordingly, *Jérémie* is successful in part because its protagonist appropriately dabbles in blackness through dance, but ultimately reasserts his own whiteness through narrative strategies.

After watching *Jérémie*, Jacques Thériault of the Montreal paper Le Devoir wrote: “c’est un experience qu’il faudra répéter, en espérant que la troupe persiste à faire appeal des créateurs québécois.”⁵⁵ (10 May 1973) And indeed, it seems the company too was eager to recreate this experience as they re-invited Dubé to collaborate with von Gengsy on a new project to be performed at the Montreal Olympics in 1976. Rather than present an elusive character for whom, as Dubé explains, “le spectateur ne sait pas si le

⁵⁴ In conversations with Canadian jazz dancers Vicki St Denys and Shawn Newman at the Society for Dance Scholars Conference (June 23-26 2011), both mentioned that Canada Council for the Arts still resist supporting jazz dance in Canada.

⁵⁵ “it is an experience that must be repeated, and hopefully the troupe will continue to work with Québécois artists.” (my translation)

personage principal vit dans le monde actuel, s'il rêve, ou s'il pose symboliquement,"⁵⁶ (Sarrazzin, 29 avril 1973, 43) for the Olympics, Dubé decided to go with much more explicit symbolism in his creation entitled "Fleur de Lit or 300 years of Québec History."

The very title of the work seems to express a political agenda by referencing the history of Québec and the national symbol of Québec, the Fleur-de-Lys (though with a pun on the word "lys" with "lit"), however, von Gencsy again claimed that this work was not meant to represent a political position. An article from Le Devoir ("Ballet-Jazz: Les Danseurs doivent faire partie du rêve...") quotes von Gencsy as saying: "Ce n'est surtout pas un ballet à message politique. Fleur de Lit existe par les gens qui croient en elle par les poètes qui désirent qu'elle existe. Elle est le symbole du Québec, symbole non politique, mais plutôt évocation de ceux qui ont un rêve, comme les poètes qui croient en elle et qui transforment le rêve en réalité. En un mot, 'Fleur de Lit' c'est un idée ou une façon poétique de penser à un pays."⁵⁷ However, critics did not seem to share this opinion. Laretta Thistle writing for The Citizen (Ottawa) writes of *Fleur de Lit*: "It claims to be a poetic history of Quebec and according to the choreographer it is completely non-political. This is nonsense for it is impossible to see the ballet without reading allsorts of connotations, political and sociological, into it." (January 17, 1977)

⁵⁶ "the spectator doesn't know if the main character lives in the real world, if he's dreaming, or if he's a symbolic figure." (my translation)

⁵⁷ "This is not a ballet with a political message. Fleur-de-Lit exists through people who believe in her and through the poets who want her to exist. She is a symbol of Quebec, a non-political symbol, but mostly an evocation of those who have a dream, like the poets who believe in her and who transform dreams into reality. In a word, 'Fleur-de-Lit' is an idea or poetic way of thinking about a country." (my translation) The original French passage is likely a translation of Gencsy's words as she has expressed to me that her French is quite limited.

The lead character, Fleur de Lit, represents Québec as is clear from her name which alludes to the flower found on the Québécois flag, the fleur-de-lys. However, her name uses “lit,” as in “bed,” instead of “lys” in order to allude to Québec’s exploitation. Gencsy explains: “Fleur de Lit was supposed to be going through the history [of Québec], the English came in and [the French] had to prostitute themselves, I don’t know, these are not the words, but all the difficult things they had to go through, and therefore it was called Fleur de Lit, the lit is the bed. I had to learn all this.” (Interview with the author, September 22, 2011) Like many nationalist models, this story envisions the nation of Québec as a woman in need of protection, especially from the “séduisant et aguerri conquérant anglais”⁵⁸ (as described in the Guadalupe paper France-Antilles “Brillant succès du Ballets-Jazz” 22 November 1976). Moreover, perhaps in an attempt to re-envision Québec as a victim of colonization rather than a colonizer, Fleur de Lit falls in love with “le jeune Indien” (or Golden Eagle the Indian—Howe-Beck The Gazette 10 January 1977) and mourns for him when he is killed by the English conqueror. Reading Dubé’s narrative allegorically, there is a parallel here to Québec’s fascination with the story of Métis leader Louis Riel who was sentenced to death for leading various uprisings in Manitoba, and whose story is occasionally brought up in sovereignty debates. Although Québec did not initially support Riel, who was French-Catholic Métis, after his murder, Riel became symbolic of the federal government’s inability to adequately consider French perspectives (McRoberts 18-19).⁵⁹ Québec sovereigntists felt their own

⁵⁸ The “seductive and hardened English conqueror” (my translation)

⁵⁹ In Misconceiving Canada, Kenneth McRoberts explains how popular opinion of Louis Riel changed in Québec and that after he was sentenced to death, explaining that “French

struggles aligned with those of First Nation groups in Canada (although the sentiment may not have been mutual).⁶⁰ Fascinatingly, while Fleur-de-Lit falls in love with the character Golden Eagle, because he is murdered, their love is not consummated thus protecting the “whiteness” of Québec’s progeny.

There is less “jazz” in this work, both in terms of the music and the dancing. The music, written by Claude Léveill  , features only one section that explicitly uses jazz influenced music—a scene where the dancers perform the Charleston and different swing-inspired partner dancing. Beyond this, the music tends to borrow from Quebec folk music during its early scenes, and abstract arrhythmic music for its depictions of Québec’s contemporary moment and future. To be fair, there have been numerous versions of Fleur de Lit; its original was two hours long but was never recorded. Instead, a fifty-minute version exists that abbreviates much of the story line (though sometimes at the expense of a comprehensive narrative). Moreover, it appears that later versions were significantly shorter and excluded the futuristic scenes of Québec (Howe-Beck, Linde The Gazette January 10 1977), where Québec is depicted as having advanced its own technological savvy so much that they land on the moon. In general, the vocabulary tends to be heavily influenced by ballet and imitates social dance (patterned partner dancing, the use of spoons and sticks in the choreography evoking “folk” life in Québec). The piece also relies quite heavily on mimed gestures: men overlooking an imaginary map

Canadians tended to see the sentence as an expression of English-Canadian hatred for all French-speaking Catholics.” (18)

⁶⁰ For example, as mentioned in the introduction (see page 12), several aboriginal tribes held their own referendum in 1995 about whether or not Québec should separate, and they voted overwhelmingly against it. (McRoberts 231)

and shaking hands to indicate the beginning of their quest; men miming the cutting down of trees upon their “arrival” and an assembly line of workers constructing a new city; a hunt and the mimed use of a bow and arrow to kill a deer. The use of gestures is often distractingly literal and may have contributed to the general disapproval of Canadian critics.⁶¹

V. Funding Les Ballets Jazz

Crocuses bloom brightly in the freeze, but dance is a garden of roses: it needs care in nurturing, warmth in which to bloom and frequent infusions of private and public money [...] In February 1978, when the chilling winds of budgetary restraint were blowing hard, the Council announced that so long as financial restrictions continued, it would offer support only to classical and modern dance and experimental expressions of both forms.

-- Canada Council 1978-1979 Annual Report (10)

It may not be surprising to know that the financial crisis of the 1970s had a huge impact on arts funding in Canada and organizations like Canada Council for the Arts had some difficult decisions to make. While the 1970s may have begun with Trudeau’s declaration that Canadian society is bilingual and multicultural, an examination of the distribution of “cultural” funds tells quite a different story. In fact, as evidenced in the above quote, Canada Council for the Arts had a clear preference for funding arts from a white European/Euro-American tradition,⁶² especially in the field of dance, thus putting

⁶¹ Some critics who voiced their dislike for the project include Linde Howe-Beck The Gazette Jan 10 1977 (though says the audience’s applause suggests others appreciated it), Angèle Dagenais Le Devoir Jan 10 1977 (also says they applauded Lalonde even though didn’t like her performance), Audrey Gill Ottawa Journal January 17 1977,

⁶² As previously mentioned, though Ballet is generally understood as deriving from European culture, many non-European dancers and choreographers have certainly

the sincerity of Canada's "multicultural" stance into question. I suggest that Canada Council's lack of support for the company was an implicitly racist decision that led to a gradual demise of "blackness" from the company's image and repertoire. My analysis here is greatly informed by the work of Michel Foucault on biopower and his suggestion that modern society is characterized by the ability to make certain populations live, while letting "unwanted" populations die, and the racism that lies at the heart of this ability.⁶³ While perhaps less violent, a similar paradigm seems to inform the funding of Les Ballets Jazz. Rather than an unworthy population, jazz dance is perceived to be an unworthy art form and puts the financial security of other "beloved" art forms like ballet and modern

contributed to the form as it is today. Modern dance is similarly informed by many "non-white" cultures, as Brenda Dixon Gottschild has argued, Postmodern dance was hugely informed by the improvisation found in jazz (49), and Priya Srinivasan has written extensively about the influence of Nautch dancers on modern dancers like Ruth St Denis (2011). However, in Canada, both of these practices are implicitly associated with white dancing bodies from Celia Franca and Mikhail Baryshnikov to Martha Graham and Mary Wigman.

⁶³ In his lectures at the College de France in 1975-1976, Foucault began formulating his theory on biopower. According to Foucault, an important change in political power came into being in nineteenth century Europe. Previously a sovereign had the power to "let live and make die," to decide when someone's life should be over for whatever reason. But in the nineteenth century, this shifted from a power over death, sovereignty, to a power over life, biopower. People were no longer studied as individuals, but as populations, and the goal of political power became to protect the life of its populations by controlling its living environment. However, if this is the case, there can be no justification for war. Foucault writes: "Given that this power's objective is essentially to make live how can it let die? How can the power of death, the function of death, be exercised in a political system centred on biopower?" (254) For Foucault the answer is racism. With the division of the human species into categories of race, a state may consider the extinction of one race as beneficial for the existence of the whole. Though not as extreme in its violence, I suggest that a similar pattern can be seen in Canada Council's policies for funding artistic practices. Racism became a way to justify funding certain art forms, making them live, while denying funding to other forms, letting them die.

dance at risk. These policies led to Eurocentric and racist implications for Canadian culture in spite of Canada's so-called "multicultural" stance.

While the previous sections revealed how Les Ballets Jazz dabbled in blackness though ultimately identified with whiteness, I suggest that the company's relationship with Canada Council for the Arts was less nuanced. Les Ballet Jazz's problematic portrayal of "blackness" does not appear to have been an issue for public funding agencies, but rather, the very fact that they were performing a "low brow" art form seems to be what prevented them from receiving funding. In other words, organizations like Canada Council for the Arts seemed to have rejected the company not because they felt the company was racist, but because of the presumption that jazz dance is unartistic, which itself stems from racist prejudices about Africanist aesthetics.

In their first few years as a company, Les Ballets Jazz did well with Canada Council grants. Les Ballets Jazz began receiving funds from Canada Council in its very first year, and though it was a modest sum of \$5000, it was a generous amount for a company so new. Still, some critics commented on how they would have liked to see the company get more funding.⁶⁴ Over the next three years, Canada Council's grants to Les Ballets Jazz steadily increased and so too did the company's fan base. Receiving Council

⁶⁴ Jacques Thériault writing for Le Devoir mentions that he wishes the Canada Council Grant had been a bit bigger (10 May 1973) and similarly, Jean-Paul Brousseau of La Presse comments on how much the company has accomplished with so little support from Canada Council for the Arts: "Car après la soirée d'hier, on a peine à croire qu'une compagnie, fondée il y a moins d'un an et qui n'a reçu que \$5,000 de subvention du Conseil des Arts du Canada, puisse mettre au point une oeuvre d'une durée de 28 minutes [...]" (8 May 1973) ("For after last night, it's hard to believe a company, founded less than a year ago and with only \$5000 in grants from Canada Council could put together a 28-minute performance." My translation)

grants for \$7000 in 1974 and \$10 000 in both 1975 and 1976, Les Ballets Jazz successfully toured Western Canada, Guadalupe, Venice, they appeared numerous times on national television, and performed during the 1976 Montreal Olympics. But as their star was rising, the economy was on the decline; Canada Council no longer had the money to finance all its artists and had to make some major decisions about who to cut. On January 2 1976, Les Ballets Jazz received a letter from Canada Council explaining that they would not be funding their next season. According to the BJM Danse archive, the reason for this refusal was because the Council claimed the company had not achieved the expected artistic norm. Though a damaging blow, Les Ballets Jazz continued to tour and produce work, reapplying again the next year (BJM Danse Archive “Historique”). The results however did not improve. Les Ballets Jazz did not win over the Council and instead began to run with a deficit. Other public institutions began to follow the Council’s lead. In 1977 Ministère des Affaires Culturelles had given Les Ballets Jazz a grant of \$42 000, but for their 1978 season, they reduced it to less than \$5000 claiming they could not support a company with a deficit.⁶⁵

One might ask how precisely a company’s artistic value is determined by a federal funding agency, and so an explanation of how Canada Council adjudicates and distributes grants may be necessary here. There are two important structural components to Canada Council for the Arts’ funding structure. First, in order to maintain artistic integrity, the Council is considered an arm’s length organization, meaning that the governing federal party does not have the right to interfere or have a direct say over

⁶⁵ BJM Danse archive, November 12, 2009. Lettre de Geneviève Salbaing, 30 January

which artists receive money. This set up is meant to guarantee a certain amount of freedom of expression so that artists are not pressured to become propagandistic vehicles for the status quo. As former chair of Canada Council Gertrude Laing expressed in 1979, “Governments, since Plato’s day, have been suspicious of artists. It is the nature of their creative spirit that artists will be a source of discontent. They will be, and should be, troublemakers.” (199) However, while this set up ensures that artists are free to make political critiques, the artistic community does not always have to be held accountable for the prejudices they may hold. An example of this can be read in Timothy Plumptre’s 1982 report on Canada Council funding for the Canadian Department of Communication called Simply Dance: Inside Canadian Professional Dance. Plumptre explicitly questions the value of democracy in arts funding suggesting that allowing more individuals to participate in the professional dance world could potentially threaten the quality of work presented in Canada:

The difficulty with concepts like democratization or decentralization with reference to dance is that if misapplied they could be very damaging to other principles such as professionalism and quality, principles which have been the backbone of Canada Council policies toward the arts. For example, a principle like democratization, if interpreted to mean “bringing professional dance to more people” could lead to [...] a stronger federal role in developing national artistic assets [...] However, if interpreted to mean, “*allowing more people to take part in dance*” it could mean a de-emphasis on our professional institutions and training centres of national or international stature, and more support for small unprofessional schools or companies in regions of the country remote from those urban centres where, historically, professional dance has tended to grow and take root. (108, my emphasis)

For Plumptre, the principles of democracy in professional Canadian dance threaten the artistic values already in place. He implies that there is a danger in “allowing more people

to take part in dance,” that dance should be an elite form but fails to acknowledge how that elitism allows the same groups of people continue to dominate the Canadian dance scene without challenge.⁶⁶ Dance practice that are not ballet or modern dance must arrive on the dance scene as fully developed, professional and of high quality, in order to compete with ballet and modern dance companies. This kind of system however fails to consider the time, training, effort, and money it takes for a dance form to arrive at such a place. While a more “democratic” approach to federal arts funding has gradually worked its way into Canada Council’s arts policies, it was not until the early 1990’s that the Dance Division began seriously considering non-white dance practices (Cornell 418). Accordingly, certain principles of equality and democracy were deemed unnecessary in Canadian art circles and allowed Canada to continue producing national culture that represented those artists who were already in a position of power within the country, and this “approved” national culture was assumed to be “universal” but was in fact derived from Euro-American culture and was “white.”

The second important structural component to Canada Council for the Arts is the way artists are adjudicated: the peer-review process. In the peer-review process, recognized and established artists are asked to review the work being considered for funding. The decision to fund or not fund artists is based on the recommendations of these adjudicators. While this process ensures that “the” arts community has a greater say over its own funding, Canada has multiple arts communities, not simply one, yet it is the

⁶⁶ To be fair, Plumptre’s report is not an official statement of the opinions of Canada Council of the Arts. However, the report reflects a deep-seated ideology that, as he

most “established” communities, in particular the ballet world, that has the most say in these decisions. Moreover, internal jealousies and conflicts among companies and artists often mean that the acceptance of a new company that challenges the work being done by “established” artists may have a difficult time finding acceptance. I suggest that these adjudicators were resistant to accept the work being done by Les Ballets jazz, especially when considering that a European aesthetic lens rarely views dance forms with Africanist aesthetics as “art.” “By Europeanist standards,” explains dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild, “the Africanist dancing body is vulgar, comic, uncontrolled, undisciplined, and, most of all, promiscuous. The presumption of promiscuity is allied with and leads directly to the sexually licentious stereotypes that the Europeanist perspective attributes to Africanist dance and, by extension, African peoples.” (Gottschild 9)

To demonstrate how this “Europeanist” aesthetic informs Canada’s dance community, especially in terms of aligning jazz with sexuality, one needs only to look at the reviews of Les Ballets Jazz to see how often the company’s artistic merit gets tied up with its supposed sexuality. For example, in 1973, Jacob Siskind wrote of the group: “after you see the pelvis grind for the 30th or 40th time, [...] you start to look for something else, choreographically speaking, and there just isn’t very much more,” and later, “There are others in the company who attract your attention—not the least of whom is the young lady who could easily pose for a Playboy centerfold. In fact, there isn’t an ungainly creature in the bunch.” (“Unbridled Enthusiasm, Vitality” The Gazette, n.d.) In his comments, Siskind commends the group for their attractiveness and even outright

himself states, attempts to recognize the principles that are the “backbone of Canada

admits their sexual desirability in his reference to the pornographic magazine *Playboy*. But Siskind's comments also suggest that the prevalence of the "pelvis grind" in the choreography fails to offer anything beyond the initial excitement of seeing something sexy and new, that it does not have a power in its reiteration and that it loses the (sexual) excitement it first arouses when it becomes less about exoticism and more about a fundamental way of moving.

Montreal dance scholar Iro Tembeck (1994) speculates that the reason Les Ballets Jazz did not receive funding was tied in part to these concerns over the company's artistic merit (and she too suggests that the use of the pelvis and the company's perceived "sexiness" were factors that contributed to their perceived lack of artistry). However, Tembeck also felt that the company suffered because it was not considered Canadian: "From the start, the problem of funding was tied up with the difficulty of identifying the company's style. Although jazz ballet was a Quebec invention, jazz itself was an American form. Why then should Canadians fund it?" (1994 114) Linde Howe-Beck makes a similar suggestion writing in 2000 that: "Les Ballets Jazz had to face jealousy in the dance community; the company was condemned for its popularity and commercial success. It was also labeled un-Canadian for frequently drawing on American music, choreographers and dancers." (61) This reasoning, that jazz is "American" and therefore not worthy of Canadian funding, is peculiar, especially when one considers that Canadian Modern Dance is itself largely informed by American Modern Dance. For example, The Toronto Dance Theatre, a Canadian modern dance company based in the technique of

Council policies towards the arts." (108)

American modern dancer Martha Graham, received \$110 000 in operating grants and another \$10 000 to go towards teachers' salaries at the affiliated school for the 1976-77 season, the same season that Les Ballets Jazz's trouble with the Council began. Timothy Plumptre even admits in his Simply Dance report that ballet and modern dance were not born in Canada. In describing the history of ballet and modern dance, which he calls "the two main traditions" in Canada (3), he explains "[...] new developments were emerging, primarily in the United States. This country is generally credited with originating the 'modern dance' form just as France is recognized as the mother country of ballet." (7) In this sense, we might then ask why modern dance does not bear the "American" title that its jazz counterpart does?

Richard Dyer offers a theoretical model that might explain this inconsistency. In the introductory chapter of his book White, he explains how the racial markings of whiteness seem to be invisible:

For those in power in the West, as long as whiteness is felt to be the human condition, then it alone both defines normality and fully inhabits it. [...] the equation of being white with being human secures a position of power. White people have power and believe that they think, feel and act like and for all people; white people, unable to see their particularity, cannot take account of other people's; white people create the dominant images of the world and don't quite see that they thus construct the world in their own image. (9)

Dyer explains that the danger with "whiteness" is that it is often understood as all encompassing, rather than identified with its own particularity. In this sense, ballet and modern dance, both white forms, are not understood as particular, instead, they become

“universal” and unmarked by geographic region or culture.⁶⁷ These dances become a powerful expression of the “human condition,” while jazz dance—an African-American form, remains particular to America. Canadian discourses on race and racism tend to be underdeveloped, largely because “race” is thought to be an American issue rather than a Canadian one. As Camille and Charmaine Nelson argue, due to the dichotomization of Canadian and American culture so prevalent in Canadian nationalism, the U.S. is seen as the main site of “racial sins of North America” (3) and so Canada’s own sins tend to be ignored. Jazz dance, as a hybridized and racialized style, does not fit easily into the Canadian imaginary. In spite of Canada’s ideals of multiculturalism, the national fabric is woven white and struggles to incorporate strands of another colour.

Les Ballets Jazz continued to be denied funding from Canada Council for the Arts as is well documented in various newspaper articles from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s. In December of 1977, Canada Council released a press statement explaining their stance on funding titled: “Dance Other Forms” and the document mentions Les Ballets Jazz by name. In some ways, the fact that the document addresses “other forms”—that is to say, those dance forms that are not ballet, nor modern dance—reveals a paradigmatic problem that haunts multiculturalism too. As Himani Bannerji argues, Canada has been constructed in terms of European whiteness and multiculturalism is “a vehicle for racialization” in its reification of a white European Canadian core and “multi” cultured

⁶⁷ Furthermore, taking Dyer’s discussion of power into account, we may begin to understand why Plumtre focused so intently on white dance forms. *Simply Dance* was written in an attempt to justify and legitimize dance among the arts. By focusing on white dance styles, Plumtre intends to “secure a position of power;” he appeals to the

others (295). In other words, the act of identifying Euro-American whiteness as a social norm and relegating non-white cultural practices as “other” reasserts a white hegemonic order. Similarly, this press release assumes that Euro-American culture is the norm and marginalizes forms that do not easily fit into these categories. However, even more problematic in the case of this press release is that it also attempts to justify why European-derived practices like ballet and modern dance are superior to other forms. In justifying the decision not to fund Les Ballets Jazz the press release expressed the following:

There is no doubt that jazz has become a highly popular form of entertainment. What the sub-committee questions, and for several reasons, is its validity as an art form. [...] we are told that proficiency in jazz dance does not depend on long rigorous training, as is the case with ballet and modern dance. [...] there is evidence that jazz attracts quite a different audience than ballet and modern, that it does nothing to cultivate a taste for less approachable but more creative forms of dance. In Québec, for example, we are told that enrollment is down in ballet and modern dance schools, that modern dance is far from flourishing and that ballet audiences are dwindling. One could argue that money spent on jazz dance would be counter-productive in terms of the other forms of dance we are committed to developing. (2)

The above arguments against the support of jazz dance are not backed up with much evidence, as is apparent in the use of the passive voice in explaining “we are told” that jazz dance does not require rigorous training, or that modern and ballet enrollment is down while jazz enrollment is up. The document does not cite any sources and it is thus difficult to determine the accuracy of these assessments. However, the argument appears to suggest that jazz dance puts the livelihood of seemingly more “valuable” dance practices, ballet and modern dance, at risk. To put this in Foucauldian terms, ballet and

dominating white culture by showing them those dances “[constructed] in their own

modern dance must be made to live as they are the “more creative forms of dance” and should thus be nourished. Jazz dance is not seen as contributing to the dance community but instead as devaluing it, and accordingly, if the Council must make financial cuts, losing jazz dance would not be as harmful as losing ballet or modern.

The press release goes on to suggest that Les Ballets Jazz does not need financial support:

On the financial side, our experience with jazz dance has taught us that it is infinitely more lucrative than anything else we subsidize. All of our reports on jazz companies speak of packed houses. In considering a request from Les Ballets Jazz last year, we discovered that the organization was planning to greatly expand its commercial school operation, leaving the onus on the government to pick up the deficit of the professional company. In our view this was a case of misplaced priorities. The same company has toured France, Italy, and Mexico without any subsidy whatsoever from the Department of External Affairs. No ballet, modern or experimental company could ever be in a position to tour abroad without government support. (2)

The Council’s justification does not adequately consider the situation of Les Ballets Jazz.

The company’s numerous tours, as I will examine later, became the only way to support the company and were a necessity rather than a luxury. Moreover, while the report assumes the company has a lucrative business, they also acknowledge that Les Ballets Jazz has a deficit and that its school, an affiliated but separate institution, should cover these differences. Curiously, the National Ballet School, and the School of the Toronto Dance Theatre are both subsidized by Canada Council for the Arts. Part of the reason why Les Ballets Jazz’s school was ineligible for funding has to do with its for-profit status, while the school’s affiliated with the National Ballet of Canada and Toronto

image.”

Dance Theatre are not-for-profit institutions. However, as a dance company, Les Ballets Jazz is a not-for-profit institution and its expenses would eventually cause both the company and its school to run a deficit. (BJM Archive, “Historique”) Sadly, while Canada Council did not want to fund this “lucrative” dance company, Québec’s Ministère des Affaires Culturelle did not award Les Ballets Jazz that same year for the exact opposite reason—they did not want to fund a company with a deficit.

The press was generally supportive of Les Ballets Jazz and the company’s financial difficulties frequently made the news. On March 30 1978, the Ottawa Journal published an interview with Geneviève Salbaing about the company’s \$105 000 deficit, the Council’s refusal to use public funds to support a popular dance company, the dancers’ salaries (a meager \$185 per week), and the financial “limb [Les Ballets Jazz] has been hanging to for the past two years.” (Peterson 30 March 1978). The next day, Myron Galloway of the Montreal Star commented on the swell of applause from the company’s avid Montreal fans and the donations envelope that came with the program:

For those of you who have enjoyed the company in the past and wish to go on seeing more of the same, go prepared to fill that envelope and hand it to one of the apprentice students on hand to collect them. Your modest few dollars may make the difference between further public performances of Les Ballets Jazz and their impending oblivion. (Galloway, 31 March 1978)

Throughout April that same year, the Canadian press continued producing “eulogies” for the company, praising its accomplishments while constantly predicting its imminent demise. (Thistle, “Les Ballets Jazz, 5, faces untimely death by budget;” Gill, “What they do they do well;” Howe-Beck, “They need \$50 000: Jazz dance group may fold;” Kay, “Les Ballets Jazz: Slick! Sexy! Dying;” Rubin, Sandy. “A quiet and final fling”) In a

sense, these stories were appealing because of the representation of victimhood and the company's story became instantly newsworthy. In particular, the ephemerality of dance performance, the generally "feminine" qualities associated with dance, and of course the company's racialized and sexualized position relative to other dance companies made it sound as though the company had caught some sort of heinous venereal disease, or to put it more mildly, suffered a horrible abuse of injustice, all the while, the story simultaneously reasserts the security of white patriarchic hegemony. Still, this media attention also created a stir that allowed the company to find new fundraising strategies that would keep them afloat for the next few years.⁶⁸

In the 1981-82 season, Les Ballets Jazz had a bit of luck with the Council, and while the scores from the Dance jury were not high, the Touring Office gave them \$4902 to tour Western Canada, and an interdisciplinary committee awarded Les Ballets Jazz \$15 000 to commission a jazz score by Oscar Peterson, though this money went to Peterson rather than the company. The company had originally applied to produce the Peterson work in 1976 with Eva von Gencsy as choreographer but they were denied by the Council, again, over a concern for the company's artistic merit. (BJM Archive, November 12, 2009) When Les Ballets Jazz finally got the grant in 1980, von Gencsy had left the company so they had to find a new choreographer to take over the project. Les Ballets Jazz commissioned American choreographer Darryl Gray to choreograph to

⁶⁸ One particularly intriguing fundraising event they held was called "Bal et Jazz" and was considered "the 'in' party of the year" (Gordon, E.J. The Gazette, June 9, 1980). "Bal et Jazz" was a high society event held in the ballroom of l'Hôtel Regence Hyatt in Montreal, with a jazz orchestra, led by Perry Carman, for accompaniment. The event was so popular that Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau himself was in attendance.

Peterson's score, and the final product "Jailhouse Jam" was panned by the critics when it came out in 1984. Paula Citron writes: "*Jailhouse Jam* by Darryl Gray was a trivialization of the gorgeous score composed by Oscar Peterson especially for the company." (Toronto Star February 23 1984) and Alina Gildiner of the Globe and Mail writes: "Daryl Gray's Jailhouse Jam [...] is as middle of the road, in content and choreographic style, as any chain gang ever was." (February 23, 1984). While speculation is not necessarily evidence of an injustice, in this case, where so little evidence can be used due to various federal privacy regulations, I can't help but indulge. Had the company not had such difficulty with Canada Council for the Arts and its other funding institutions, would von Gencsy and Peterson have had a more successful collaboration?

While there were no other companies practicing jazz who had received funding from Canada Council at this time, there were a few similar sized modern dance companies who were receiving similar grant amounts, though Les Ballets Jazz's funding was still a bit low comparatively speaking. Groupe Nouvelle Aire⁶⁹ for example, a modern dance company also based in Montreal, received their first two project grants in 1972 for \$5000 and \$10 000, a 1973 grant for \$12 000, and received between \$5000 and \$30 000 a year from 1975-1978, until they ceased receiving Canada Council grants in 1979 (shortly after the Council announced severe cutbacks). Similarly, the Montreal-

⁶⁹ Le Groupe Nouvelle Aire began in Montreal in 1968 but very few of its members were trained in ballet, which may have led to the eventual decline of the Council's support. Based on the Council's extreme preference for funding ballet companies and on the tendency in both Plumtre's report and the press release "Dance Other Forms," ballet seems to be equated with high-quality art, and proficiency in ballet, even in the realm of modern dance, is implicitly expected.

based modern dance company Le Groupe de la Place Royale⁷⁰ received their first grant in 1970 for \$8300, followed by a \$5000 grant in 1971, and nearly \$15 000 in grants from the Canada Council in 1972. However, by 1974, the company jumped in status and became much more substantially funded by the Canada Council, receiving over \$50 000 in 1974, \$95 000 in 1975, and steadily increasing grants until 1983, when their total grants from Canada Council dipped from over \$280 000 to \$250 000. Curiously, in spite of the better federal funding received by these modern dance companies, both Groupe Nouvelle Aire and Le Groupe de la Place Royale have folded and Les Ballets Jazz is the only company that has survived. However, Les Ballets Jazz's survival must be attributed to the efforts of its company members, who toured and performed relentlessly to try to keep the company afloat, and in particular to Mme. Salbaing's clever marketing, fundraising, and personal investment in the company.

Figures 2 and 3 help illustrate the Dance Division's spending discrepancy. These figures chart the Dance Division's support for some of the companies that I have mentioned in this chapter (Les Ballets Jazz, Le Groupe de la Place Royale, Groupe Nouvelle Aire, Toronto Dance Theatre, and Les Grand Ballets Canadiens). Because the discrepancy between Les Grands Ballets Canadiens and Les Ballets Jazz is so high, the funding pattern for Les Ballets Jazz is barely visible on Figure 3, which is why the same data is presented in these two different graphs, but with the exclusion of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens in Figure 2. The financial data used to plot this graph was taken from

⁷⁰ Le Groupe de la Place Royale began in Montreal in 1966 but relocated to Ottawa in 1977. In 1988 changed their name to Le Groupe Dance Lab. The company folded in 2009.

Canada Council's annual reports but are only representative of awards granted by the Dance Division and does not include the Interdisciplinary Committee nor the Touring Office. There is occasionally some discrepancy within the Council's own records and so, the figures document a general trend and are not steadfast. What is interesting is that Les Ballets Jazz and the modern dance companies I've charted were all fairly close in terms of their funding in the early 1970s, though modern dance was still evidently better subsidized (even in the case of Groupe Nouvelle Aire). However, by the mid-1970s, Le Groupe de la Place Royale and Toronto Dance Theatre began to receive steadily increasing grants from Canada Council's Dance Division, while Groupe Nouvelle Aire maintained a steady flow of grant money until being dropped in 1978. Les Ballets Jazz was dropped before any of them. Moreover, when compared to the ballet company Les Grands Ballets Canadiens—one of Canada's major three ballet companies, though the least funded of the three—even the modern dance groups can hardly compare to the vast amounts of funding that went to the classical form. In general, these statistics suggest that Canada Council's Dance Division considers jazz to be the least valuable, ballet the most, while modern dance sits somewhere in the middle.

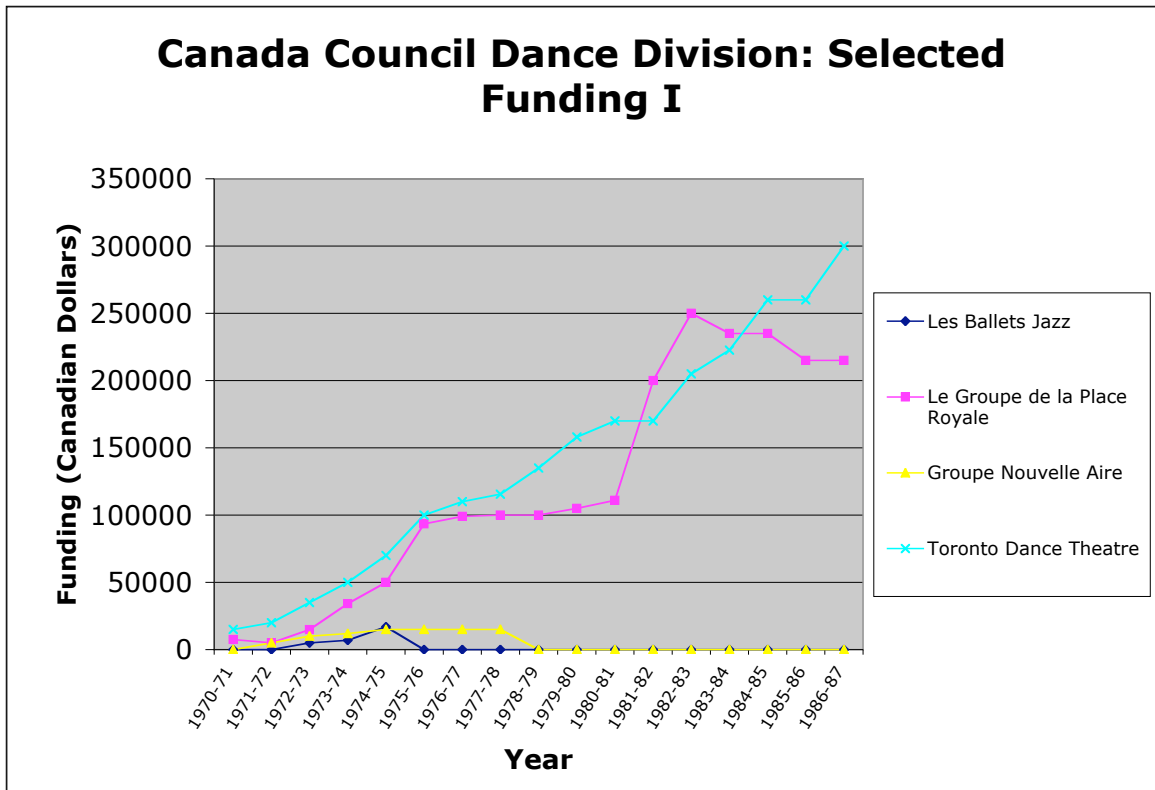


Figure 2: Canada Council for the Arts, Sample of Dance Division’s funding amounts for Modern and Jazz dance. (Data compiled by author through Canada Council’s Annual Reports)

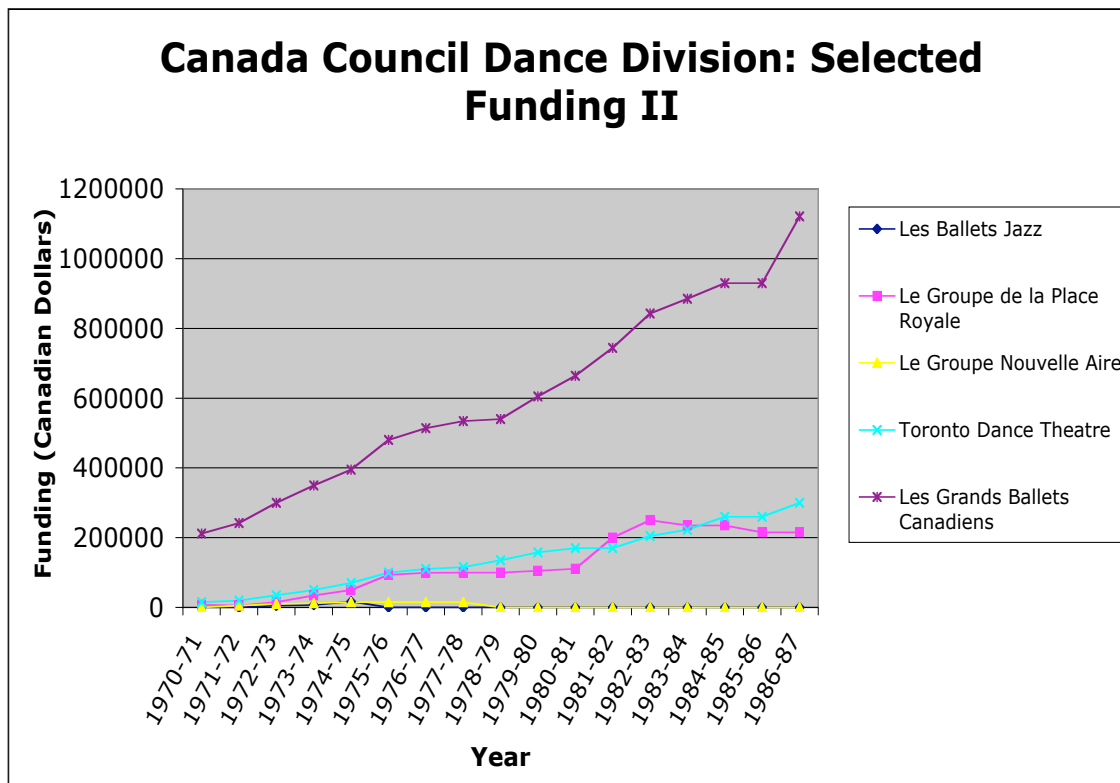


Figure 3: Canada Council for the Arts, Sample of Dance Division’s funding amounts for Ballet, Modern, and Jazz dance. (Data compiled by author through Canada Council’s Annual Reports)

Les Ballets Jazz managed to defy expectations and continued producing work. By gaining private sponsorships through corporations like Imperial Tobacco (“Quand le Tabac vient en aide au ballet” BJM Archive, n.d.), by holding fundraising events, and through donations from the school, Les Ballets Jazz continued to stay afloat, but also continued to be in the red. In 1978, the school was doing well with numerous studios across Québec and one in Toronto, and a student enrollment of about 2000. (Galloway, Montreal Star, March 31 1978) But in 1980 the schools started suffering and enrollment was dropping (Howe-Beck, “Les Jazz’ has been Dancing with Death” The Gazette 8

March 1980). By 1984, the Toronto School had closed and many of the Québec schools followed in 1985. The school was becoming less and less able to support the company. The company also maintained an exhaustive touring schedule, as touring seemed to be the best way for the company to make a profit. In a 1978 article for Perception magazine, Salbaing explains that touring is the only way for the company to turn a profit and that it's by necessity that the company spends so much time abroad rather than in Canada (July/August 1978). But the tours were also quite difficult for the company. In 1980 the company was scheduled to perform 135 concerts, which meant the company had little time for rehearsal, or even recuperation between performances (Howe-Beck, The Gazette 8 March 1980). In an interview with Linde Howe-Beck of The Gazette in 1980, dancer Denis Michaelson expresses his frustrations: "Once in Europe, dancers had to pay half of their per diem [...] to jostle all night on a train going from one city to another. There was no money left for hotels at the other end so they slept on a bus next to the theatre all day before getting up to perform. How can you give a good performance after that?" (8 March 1980). The tours ended up creating tension among the dancers and artistic director Geneviève Salbaing, however, Salbaing felt she had few other options available to her.

In 1986, Les Ballets Jazz finally received a substantial grant from Canada Council's Touring Office for just over \$20 000, however, considering their request to various Council divisions totaled about \$280 000, their victory seemed marginal. (Baele, Nancy. "Canada Council denies bias against Quebec dance companies" The Ottawa Citizen, 9 December 1987). On December 8, 1987, Les Ballets Jazz joined forces with Ballet de Montréal: Eddy Toussaint and Les Sortilèges, a folk dancing troupe, to picket

the offices of Canada Council. All three companies believed that the Council's policies were discriminatory. (Portman, Jamie. "City dance troupes stage demonstration, seek federal funding" The Gazette, 9 December 1987) The Québec folk dancing troupe Les Sortilèges was considered inelligible for federal funding because it did not practice ballet or modern dance, much the way Les Ballets Jazz was being discriminated against for the same reasons. However, Eddy Toussaint's company was a ballet company, and when I spoke with him, he explained to me that the discrimination he experienced was more explicitly racist. Toussaint's background as a dancer was largely in Classical dance. Having trained extensively in ballet in Haiti before moving to Montreal, his first encounter with jazz dance was when he began taking class with Eva von Gencsy. After Toussaint left Les Ballets Jazz, he began his own ballet company and while he was funded by Ministère des Affaires Culturelles du Québec, Canada Council never funded him. Toussaint explained to me that ballet was his preferred movement vocabulary, however, when he asked a member of Canada Council for the Arts (and he has asked that I do not mention this person's name), he was told "with all do respect, because of your origins I personally recommend that you stick to Jazz." (Toussaint, September 13, 2011). In spite of his ballet background, Toussaint was expected to be more valuable as a jazz dancer, not because of his training, but because of his "origins," which implicitly suggests, because he is "Black." The protests of 1986 were also meant to address the lack of companies from Québec that were being funded, since compared to the grants being received in Ontario, Québec seemed to be getting a much smaller piece of the pie. The increasingly public charges of discrimination clearly had an impact on the Council's

policies, and money began to make its way to Les Ballets Jazz and Les Sortilèges, though never to Toussaint who relocated his company to Sarasota Florida for personal reasons.



Figure 4: Les Ballets Jazz de Montréal, Program Cover (1980-81). Courtesy of Canada Council for the Arts Archives.

While privacy restrictions make it difficult to discuss the specific reasons why Les Ballets Jazz were eventually funded again, the evidence provided in newspaper articles, photographs, and from what I've learned in my interviews and seen of the company's work, lead me to suspect that what helped Les Ballets Jazz survive was the gradual erasure of jazz dance from its repertoire. The company's look changed so dramatically in that period that one might not even recognize it. Just looking at the company's 1981-1982 program (Figure 4), the cover featured a sketch of an all-white dancer, with long black hair flowing behind her and familiar curvilinear shapes on the body that one might see in a ballet. The design gives the dancer an ethereal quality, and the dancer's features wash away into a background of white. The Africanist influences so present in the 1975 program (see Figure 1 page 97), the accentuated angles and hips, the afro hair styles, the silhouetted body, disappears into this literally whitened body. This image subtly articulates how the company itself went through a whitening process.

The absence of jazz dancing in the company's movement vocabulary was a gradual process, but is particularly evident when Eva von Gencsy left the company and Geneviève Salbaing took over as Artistic Director, as is demonstrated in the very way these two women interpreted the company's mission: von Gencsy saw the company's work as an attempt to bring jazz dance to a level of appreciation comparable to ballet, and Salbaing saw it as a balletic interpretation of jazz music. By 1980, due to the intense touring and rehearsal schedules of the company, the dancers were no longer taking jazz classes, and only took ballet class daily. (Howe-Beck, The Gazette 8 March 1980) Moreover, the choreography itself made efforts to show the company's virtuosity in

terms understood by Canadian audiences: ballet. In a review of a 1983 performance, Linda Ramsay writes: “Much of their success was the direct result of a constant high level of energy and the ability to make the difficult look easy. Legs extended to altitudes beyond the normal range and stayed there [...] the dancers had the technique to let them do what the choreographer asked.” (The Daily News, December 1983) This review indicates that the technical prowess of the company was equated with its balletic components. While the dancers’ “ability to make the difficult look easy” may be a commonality between Europeanist and Africanist dance aesthetics, the “constant high energy” does not fit with the more varied energy levels seen in Africanist aesthetics that often make use of contradiction and high-affect juxtaposition in performance. Moreover, the review seems to equate skill with high legs, which places the emphasis on the dancers’ peripheries rather than the intricate movements of the dancers’ centres. In fact, though the review doesn’t state it explicitly, due to the difficulty involved in maintaining a high level of the leg, often a dancer’s torso will have to remain rigid in order to hold that level for an extended period of time, which is quite contrary to the polycentrism often found in Africanist dance practices. Also important is what this reviewer does not comment on: the pelvis. Whereas critics in the 1970s often focused on the gyrating pelvis (Siskind 1973), the pelvis is largely absent in movement descriptions of the 1980s.

Moreover, Salbaing began to hire “modern” choreographers to make the repertoire more “Canadian.” Because there were few Canadian jazz choreographers, the company often used American choreographers to provide the “jazz” element that the company required. As mentioned before, Tembeck and Howe-Beck both suspected that

the investment in American choreographers was one of the reasons the company was not being funded. Salbaing expressed her displeasure with the choreography done by one of the Canadian modern dance choreographers she hired, but she thought it might improve her chances with Canada Council, and even asked her to return and create another work for the company a few years later. (Interview with author, September 21, 2011) Jazz, though still present, was on its way out. As Graham Hicks writes of the company in 1985 “Gone is the uniform ‘le total sexy’ of past years. In its embryonic stages is a new identity, in transit from the black of ‘le thrill’ to the white of ‘l’art’” (Edmonton SUN, October 18, 1985, 17.) It seems that in order to survive, Les Ballets Jazz shed its jazz skin for a new “white” coat.

In November 2009, I had the opportunity to see Les Ballet Jazz, now known as BJM Danse, perform at the Collège Saint-Jean sur Richelieu (Soirée Aszure Burton). The performance featured an amalgamation of dance styles, flashes of tango and salsa, the occasional faux-broadway snap, but no more than one might see in a contemporary ballet today. In a pre-show interview held in the auditorium, Louis Robitaille, the company’s current artistic director, made a point of calling the company’s style “contemporary,” an ambiguous word that claims no roots in particular, but still links this group to the history of modern dance and the experiments that came out of it. The company’s recent name change was meant to capture this “contemporary” spirit. Calling the group “Les Ballets Jazz” didn’t seem to accurately fit what the company was doing anymore. The 2009 press kit explains that BJM Danse is “renewing their artistic mission—to create, produce and bring to international stages choreographic works inspired by the innovative spirit of

modern jazz—through an approach based on the technique, vocabulary and aesthetic of classical dance.” (2) Curiously, the “spirit of modern jazz” was just that—a spectre that never materialized into a body on stage. Jazz had become the ghost of earlier years. While its ballet and modern dance components are now nurtured like a rose garden, it seems that its jazz component was left to die.

However, jazz dance in Canada is anything but dead. In early June 2012 at the Canadian Society of Dance Studies conference, a group of distinguished jazz dance artists from various generations sat together on a panel to discuss the status of jazz dance in Canada. Eva von Gencsy was there, along with Ethel Bruneau, a Montreal tap dancer who grew up in Harlem and moved to Canada after touring with Cab Calloway, Vicki St Denys, a prominent jazz dancer, choreographer, and teacher who co-directs the reputable dance program at Ryerson University in Toronto, and Michèle Moss, founder of the company Decidedly Jazz Danceworks and a professor at the University of Calgary. The discussion, assembled by myself and Shawn Newman (a Toronto jazz dance artists and emerging dance studies scholar), demonstrated that jazz artists, though still battling for recognition within Canada, continue to produce work and shape the Canadian dance landscape. Furthermore, there is talk that for its fortieth anniversary, BJM Danse will commission a jazz dance work in order to celebrate its roots.

Chapter 3

Importing Colonialism: FIND's 1999 Festival Afrique: Aller/Retour

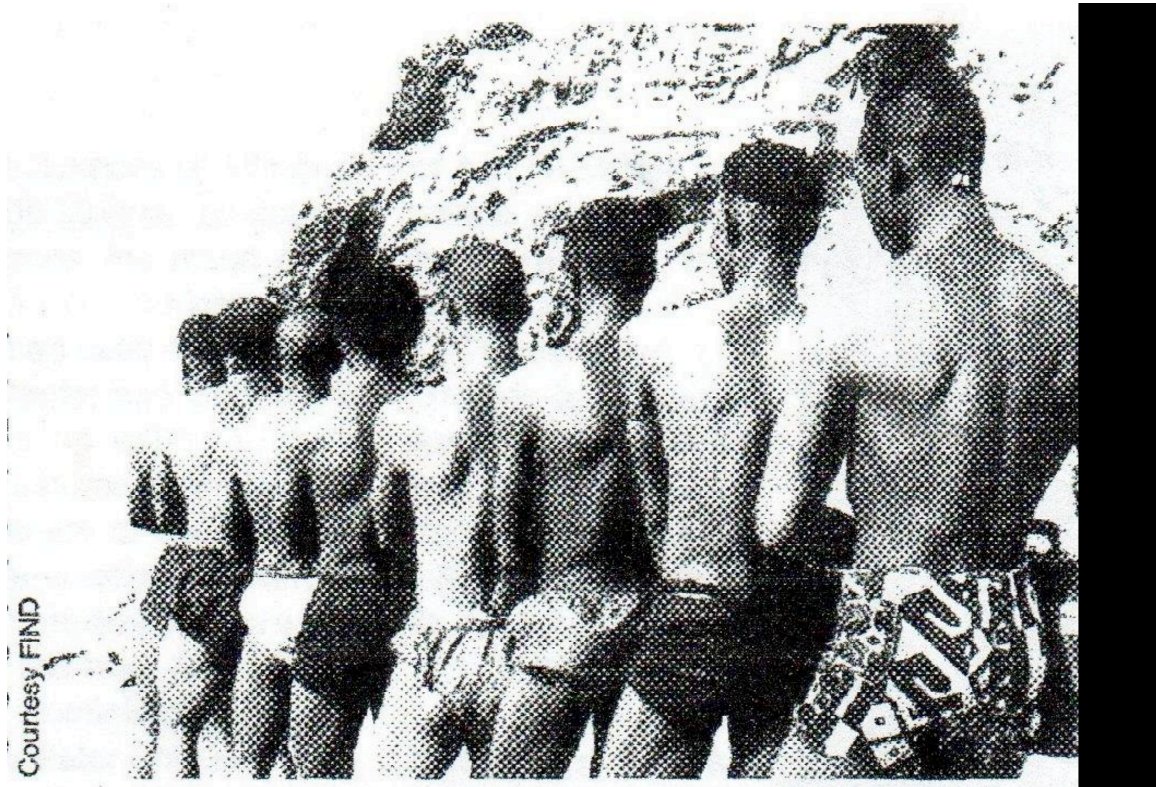


Figure 5: Publicity Poster for FIND *Afrique: Aller/Retour*. Image of Susanne Linke's *Le Coq est mort*. (Dance Magazine, September 1999, 40)

I. Introduction

In a publicity image (Figure 5) for the Festival International de Nouvelle Danse (FIND) 1999 festival *Afrique: Aller/Retour*, eight African⁷¹ dancers from Compagnie Jant Bi stand in single file, their backs to the camera, wearing nothing but tight fitting shorts. The dusty mountains of an African savannah act as a backdrop for this photo shoot. The

⁷¹ Although the company is based in Senegal, the Jant Bi dancers come from around the continent.

dancers' backs glisten in the light of the sun, emphasizing their muscularity, and the row of brightly patterned shorts draws the viewer's eye to the dancers' buttocks. Yet the image fails to give any of these dancers a face, their bodies on display for the Montreal voyeur. This poster represents Susanne Linke's *Le coq est mort*, a work choreographed specifically for Compagnie Jant Bi and one of the main attractions at FIND's 1999 festival. However, in *Le coq est mort* the dancers wear business suits for the majority of the work (though admittedly they lose their shirts by the end), and the tiny shorts the dancers wear in the photograph don't quite capture the aesthetic of the piece, with the exception of a briefcase in the bottom right hand corner of the image, mostly hidden behind a dancer's torso.⁷²

The image displayed on the poster represents the colonialist gaze so pervasive at the Montreal festival. The dancers' lack of clothing and the lack of any recognizable man-made landscape in the background recall the trope of an "uncivilized" Africa waiting for the tutelage of a European colonizer.⁷³ Moreover, the emphasis on the

⁷² In a review of *Afrique: Aller/Retour* for *Dance Research Journal*, Ann Cooper also reflects upon the colonialist images presented at the festival: "Like any self-respecting critical theorist I immediately felt that [an image of Compagnie Jant-Bi for FIND] although wonderfully seductive, was politically suspect. [...] I was prepared to deconstruct the neocolonialist basis of this latest importation of African culture [...] Fortunately over the course of my stay at the festival [...] I became aware of a silver lining within this international festival." (170) Like Albright, I too am struck by the colonialist perspective the festival often seemed to represent but believe the events of the festival were too powerful to be contained by this singular position.

⁷³ In an interview with *Le Devoir*, French choreographer Mathilde Monnier mentions how upon returning to Europe from Africa, people seemed to expect that she would return with "[des] beaux corps bien musclées qui bougent bien" ("beautiful bodies with defined muscles who move well," (my translation) and that people were rarely capable of expecting much else. ("Mathilde Monnier au FIND, parfum d'Afrique," September 25 1999)

dancers' naked bodies appeals to colonialist fascinations with skin color and with notions of "primitive" sexuality (and the fact that the English title was "Africa: In & Out" has certain erotic connotations that intentionally or unintentionally evoke sexual imagery). However, the question arises, how did this colonialist perspective infiltrate a Québec festival when just twenty years prior, as discussed in the previous chapter, many Québécois claimed to be colonized and sympathized with African struggles against European colonizers?

Afrique: Aller/Retour presents a fascinating case study of racial politics in Québec at the end of the millennium as the press, advertisement, and performances that came out of the festival represent a multitude of perspectives and opinions, often conflicting, that characterized ethnic relations in the province at that time. The press would sometimes contribute to these colonialist perspectives, and sometimes critique it. The performances sometimes created international performance opportunities for African artists, and other times gave Europe the power to define "Africa."

In this chapter, I examine the festival in terms of the images it presented to Montreal audiences, the interpretations of the critics, and the responses and discussions that the festival instigated. Although this chapter does not spend too much time reflecting on the work of each artist, I will provide some analysis on the most influential performances. The purpose of this chapter is to critically analyze the cultural landscape that stood as the backdrop for these events, and how that landscape changed over the course of the two-week festival. In the following section, I outline some of the history of Festival International de Nouvelle Danse. Following this history, I provide some

background information on Eurocentrism and Interculturalism in Québec. In sections IV and V I look more closely at the particulars of some of the artists and reflect upon European and African portrayals of “Africa” present at the 1999 festival.

II. History of the Festival

If Montreal has left an impression on the world of modern dance, it is in large part thanks to Festival International de Nouvelle Danse (FIND). This biennial festival began in 1985 as a way of bringing internationally renowned contemporary choreographers to Montreal. It placed these artists on the same stages as artists from Montreal in order to show off local talent. In an interview with Diane Boucher, co-founder of the festival (along with Chantal Pontbriand and Dena Davida), Boucher explained that in the mid-1980s, Montreal had an entire generation of promising choreographers producing work unlike anything being done anywhere else on the globe. And indeed, the 1980s marked the glory days of Québec’s modern dance stars: Édouard Lock and Louise Le Cavalier of La La La Human Steps, Ginette Laurin of O Vertigo, Marie Chouinard, Jean Pierre Perrault, and Paul-André Fortier. These artists were known for their daring physicality, their dramatic use of imagery, and their edgy critiques of modern society. “Ce ne sont pas toutes les villes de trois millions d’habitants qui ont un milieu de danse aussi stimulant,”⁷⁴ explains Pontbriand in a 1999 interview with Voir (Boutin, 26 August-1 September 1999). To have Merce Cunningham presented on the same stage as Jean Pierre Perrault would not only enrich the local dance scene, but also bring foreign audiences to

Montreal, introducing them to the talents of these Québécois artists. Because of the international platform FIND provided local Québec artists, FIND became an important institution for promoting Québec culture and identity.

In 1985, Pontbriand, Boucher, and Davida were able to bring the work of choreographers like Pina Bausch, Merce Cunningham, Trisha Brown, William Forsythe, and Saburo Teshigawara to the city. Boucher explains that the event was so sensational that audiences were 95% sold out. When the festival was over, the press asked Boucher and Pontbriand when the next festival would take place. Without having previously considered the possibility of another event, Pontbriand and Boucher improvised an answer and responded on the spot that it would be in two years, hoping that they had proposed a reasonable time line. (Interview with Boucher, 8 Sept. 2011).

For the next festival, held in 1987, Pontbriand, Boucher, and Davida noticed that the contemporary dance scene in France was particularly hot at that moment and decided to feature French artists in the next festival. Although France could loosely be seen as that year's "theme," describing it this way could be misleading. The festival brought in choreographers from around Europe, the U.S., Canada, and Japan and so the festival was not exclusively about France, however, the directors wanted to call attention to the choreography coming out of France as they felt it was noteworthy. (Boucher, Sept. 8, 2011) This idea of highlighting one particular country became a custom, and each year, another country was chosen to be the festival's focus. In 1989, the festival paid homage to Japan, Belgium in 1991, Canada in 1992, Great Britain in 1993, The Netherlands in

⁷⁴ "It is not every city with three million inhabitants that have a dance scene so

1995, and Spain and Portugal were chosen in 1997. With the exception of Japan and Canada, the countries chosen were European, which, as many critics have remarked, demonstrated the Eurocentric preferences of the festival's programmers. Michael Crabb writing for Canada's National Post writes that Montreal is "a city infatuated with whatever is most trendy and intellectually beguiling in European contemporary dance" (October 5 1999) while Linde Howe-Beck explains in her "Letter from Montreal" for Dance Magazine: "[the FIND organizers] share a Eurocentric viewpoint, particularly favoring France and Belgium." (September 1999, 40-41) Paula Citron of The Globe and Mail speaks unfavorably of the "hardening Eurocentric bias of FIND artistic director Chantal Pontbriand." (October 9, 1999) Finally, Ann Cooper Albright briefly mentions the festival in her book Choreographing Difference, explaining that the Montreal contemporary dance scene tends to be dominated by a "Eurocentric avant-garde." (1997 24)

It came as a surprise to many when, for the 1999 festival, Pontbriand and Boucher chose "Africa" as their theme. For one thing, in the past, a country was chosen. The fact that the entire continent of Africa became a theme suggests that the festival was not as attuned to variation on the African continent as it had been to variation on the European one. But perhaps more peculiar was the way the festival's organizers arrived at this theme. In discussing the focus on Africa for the 1999 festival, Diane Boucher explained that if they were to continue doing Europe, their next focus would be Germany; however, they were not impressed with the up and coming generation in Germany and while they

stimulating" (my translation)

were fascinated by Tanztheater artists like Pina Bausch and Susanne Linke, both these artists had already appeared at the festival and could not constitute an entire theme on their own. But things were starting to move in Africa Boucher explained. In particular, Boucher and Pontbriand noticed that many European choreographers were beginning to take an interest in Africa; that Africa had a strong dance tradition and European contemporary choreographers were going to Africa to find new inspiration. (Boucher, September 8, 2011). While Africa may have been the selected focus, this decision was still arrived at, at least in part, through the coordinators' interests in Europe.

FIND's 1999 festival was called *Afrique: Aller/Retour*, which is the French name for a roundtrip ticket to Africa (although a word for word translation might read: "Africa: Going/Returning"). The title emphasizes Africa's distance from Montreal: "Sur le thème de «Afrique>aller/retour», le FIND nous propose de partir à la découverte de l'Afrique par la danse."⁷⁵ (Dufort, *Ici* June 3-10 1999) African dance is thus seen as not just foreign, but unfamiliar, strange, and other to what Montreal has experienced in the past; it is a place one travels to in search of new discoveries. However, Pontbriand herself acknowledges that she was also inspired to pick Africa while reflecting upon its nearness to Portugal, both physically and aesthetically: "Cette idée m'est venue, en 1997, au Portugal (le dernier pays à l'affiche du FIND). On y sent la proximité de l'Afrique. On retrouve dans sa danse contemporaine le même travail organique"⁷⁶ (quoted in Boutin

⁷⁵ "On the theme of "Afrique> aller/retour," FIND proposes that we go on a discovery of Africa through dance" (my translation)

⁷⁶ "This idea came to me in 1997 in Portugal (the last featured country at FIND). One could sense Africa's proximity. The same organic (physical) quality could be found in its contemporary dance." (my translation)

Voir 10-16 June, 1999). Although Pontbriand's comments about the "organic" similarities between Portuguese choreography and African choreography are somewhat vague (and perhaps essentialist) she does however articulate that while African art was seen as vastly different from Europe in certain lights, parallels could still be made. This seemingly paradoxical perspective may be better articulated in the English title of the festival: *Africa: In & Out*. While this alternate title is meant to capture the same sense of journey that the "aller/retour" title does, it also articulates Africa's position as the abject in this festival. Much like how Julie Kristeva (1980) envisions the abject as something that is neither subject nor object, so to is Africa both "in and out" of the festivals' central focus. Africa may have been a part of the festival, but it is Africa in relation to Europe that became the focus.

Among the works selected to reflect FIND's African theme was the choreography of three European artists: Susanne Linke, Mathilde Monnier, and Clara Andermatt. Choreographers Mathilde Monnier of France and Clara Andermatt of Portugal went to Burkina Faso and Cape Verde respectively, to work in the culture and with the dancers of these former colonies.⁷⁷ Ironically however, it was Linke's piece, which was supposed to represent a critique of colonialism that critics found by far the most offensive. In an article for The Gazette, dance critic Linde Howe-Beck explained that Linke's piece *Le coq est mort*, which was set on the Senegalese Compagnie Jant Bi, "caused a furor among some spectators who claimed it belittled Africans." (October 11, 1999). The uproar was caused not just due to the images Linke created, at one point having the African men beat

their chests and scream as though they were wild animals, but also the very fact that these European artists were given the power to envision “Africa” for Montreal audiences. Linke’s authority as choreographer implicitly positioned herself, and European culture more generally, as artistically superior suggesting that Europe’s understanding of African culture was more accurate than understandings coming out of Africa itself. In the words of Brenda Dixon Gottschild writing about the tendency for European artists to borrow from Africa: “There seems to be a general assumption on the part of Europeanist cultures that African visual arts, music, and dance are raw materials that are improved upon and elevated when they are appropriated and finessed by European artists. Like diamonds and gold, they are natural resources for colonialist domination and exploitation.” (Gottschild 41) In general, the festival at first appeared to be shaped by a colonialist gaze that saw Europe as an artistic zenith and Africa in need of enlightenment.

It should also be mentioned that much of FIND’s funding from abroad came from Europe. In the financial summary of the festival, Germany, Belgium, France, Great Britain, Japan, Portugal, the Netherlands, and Switzerland are all listed as providing funding to the festival (usually for travel expenses for individual companies). Moreover, Québec’s consulate in France provided a \$10 000 donation to FIND’s *Afrique: Aller/Retour* and hosted a reception for the festival. The only African country listed as having contributed financially to the event is the Ivory Coast, however, it was the Délégation de la Commission de la Commission européenne en Côte d’Ivoire (the European consulate in the Ivory Coast) that provided the funding. ([Tangente Archive](#))

⁷⁷ The region of Bukina Faso was a French colony until 1960, while Cape Verde was

“FIND 1999”) While this may on the one hand be the result of the economic disparity between these two continents, it also suggests that the festival was better connected with European funding institutions.

In looking at the reception of FIND that year, it seems the public was often wary of European depictions of Africa. The press seemed to be conscious of the potential dangers of these colonialist depictions and was critical of the festival’s take on “Africa.” In an article for The Gazette, Howe-Beck writes: “France’s Mathilde Monnier, Portugal’s Clara Andermatt, and Germany’s Susanne Linke showed Africa from a perspective that occasionally smacked of artistic colonialism” (October 11, 1999). In the French press, Isabelle Poulin expresses her discomfort with the festival’s potentially Eurocentric framing: “Mais comment éviter l’écueil du regard colonialiste”⁷⁸ (14-20 October), although, for Poulin, the conference that was held along side the festival discussing “Métissage Culturel”⁷⁹ could rectify the festival’s colonialist framing. Reflecting on the festival as a whole, François Dufort of Ici writes: “Et puis il y eut l’Afrique des Européens. Autant de le dire tout de suite: j’ai détesté. Parler de récupération culturelle dans ce cas, c’est rester poli,”⁸⁰ (October 14-21, 1999) although Dufort did feel that Andermatt’s work in Cape Verde had some redeeming qualities.

However, while the press was often critical of this colonialist perspective, they also frequently contributed to the racism that haunted the festival. Newspapers would

under Portuguese rule until 1975.

⁷⁸ “But how to avoid the danger of the colonialist gaze?” (my translation)

⁷⁹ “Cultural mixing” (my translation)

⁸⁰ “And then there was the Africa of the Europeans. To be brief, I hated it. To speak of cultural appropriation in this case is to be polite” (my translation).

often print eroticized or essentialist comments about the festival and its theme. Headlines in the press in the weeks leading up to the festival would often describe the festival as “tainted” or “coloured” by Africa—an intentional play on racial differences between the majority white population of Montreal and the majority black population of Africa (“Touffu, métissé, coloré par l’Afrique” Dominique Lachance June 5, 1999; “Rythmes aux couleurs d’Afrique!” Dominique Lachance September 13, 1999; “Couleurs et contrastes” Philip Rezzonico September 29, 1999). While cultural sensitivity increased once the festival began, essentialist notions about the differences between “black” and “white” dancers became common. For example, Linde Howe-Beck writing for The Gazette explains that Mathilde Monnier’s piece *Pour Antigone* “ignited interest in the Africans by contrasting their beauty, vitality and sexuality with a bland collection of steps for Caucasian dancers that made them look even more pallid and lumpy.” (October 4, 1999)

Afrique: Aller/Retour may have been conceived through a colonialist lens, but in spite of this, African dancers made a powerful impact on the city and changed the way audiences responded to African and European dance artists. For example, audiences would vote every year on their favorite work in the festival and the winner would receive the Prix de Publique.⁸¹ In 1999, the Prix de Publique⁸² went to the Burkina Faso company

⁸¹ In my interview with Diane Boucher (September 8, 2011), she explained to me that the voting process to determine the Prix de Publique was done by a survey. Ballots were put in the every program for each performance and on the ballot audience members were asked to indicate how strongly they enjoyed or disliked the performance. The ballots were then counted and scaled according to audience sizes and audience enthusiasm to come up with a winner.

Salia nī Seydou, and the runner up was Vincent Mansoe of South Africa. While the press initially seemed infatuated with the possibilities of the works of Linke, Monnier, and Andermatt, by the end of the festival many had changed their tune. François Dufort for example, who I quoted above as having disliked the choreography of these European choreographers, wrote a preview article in June that mentioned nothing of the African companies coming to FIND, except the countries where they came from—not even their names. (Dufort, Ici 3-10 June).

I suggest that the organization of this festival and the response of the media reflect two powerful though often-conflicting impulses present in Québec. The first is the tendency for artists and thinkers to look to Europe for inspiration, which is closely tied to linguistic issues, in particular Québec’s sense of isolation as a French speaking region in an English-dominated North America, and a desire to find affiliation with white French-speaking nations. The second is a need to portray Québec as culturally sensitive and accepting of cultures that may not be considered “pure laine”⁸³ in order to resist the critiques of Canadian nationalists who see Québec’s rejection of multiculturalism as essentially racist. Ultimately, I argue that what lies at the heart of this tension is the very

⁸² The Japanese group Karas, who had appeared at FIND in 1989, 1991, 1995 and again in 1999 had won the prix de publique every year they performed except the *Afrique: Aller/Retour* festival. When I asked Mme. Boucher why Karas was so popular with Montreal audiences, she suggested that it was because Montreal had an “exotic fascination” with them. While I cannot address this issue fully in this paper, I believe that a closer look at FIND’s Japan themed festival would provide fascinating insights into Orientalist perspectives in Montreal.

⁸³ The term “pure laine” (pure wool) is used to denote Quebecers who can trace their ancestry to New France. This group is also sometimes referred to as “Québécois de souche.” These terms however are often appropriated by critics of Québec nationalism to demonstrate Québec’s deep interests in ethnicity.

paradox of the nation-state: how does a country justify its unity (or in the case of Québec, its sovereignty) while simultaneously accounting for the diversity within the population it relies on to hold it together.

III. Eurocentrism in Québec

In We the People of Europe, Étienne Balibar explains that historically, the creation of a nation-state has been about creating borders— divisions that distinguish a political, geographical, cultural, or religious group from an exteriorized other. However, Balibar calls attention to the fact that these artificial borders cannot adequately reflect the complexity of a political situation.⁸⁴ Similarly, I suggest that Québec attempts to create borders and define for itself “a people”⁸⁵ to justify its distinctiveness from/within Canada but that the creation of this distinct people has led to misrepresentations, ethnic tensions and intense Eurocentrism within the province. To legitimize its aspirations for sovereignty and/or national distinctiveness, Québec must create a boundary from the rest of Canada and to do so, Québec has often sought to identify itself as a distinct “people” with historical roots in France. However, Canada’s “multicultural” stance attempts to absorb these borders. As mentioned in the introduction of this project, multiculturalism was introduced, in part, as a way to subvert separatist appeals for distinctiveness. Multiculturalism equated “difference” with Canadian nationalism and so any attempts

⁸⁴ For example, Balibar suggests that the failure to resolve issues in the Balkans points to the difficulties in forming a “European Union.” (3)

⁸⁵ Balibar defines a people as a “constitution of fictive ethnicity.” (8) Much like Benedict Anderson’s notion (1983) that nations are “imagined communities,” Balibar suggests that

made by Québec to define itself as somehow “different” simply fed into Canadian nationalist notions that Canada is a single nation made of multiple ethnicities. In this sense, Eurocentrism in Québec is not simply a passive view of culture inherited from a European heritage, Eurocentrism in Québec is a kind of political strategy used to distinguish Québec from the rest of Canada. Because of the antagonisms between Québec nationalism and Canadian multiculturalism/nationalism, not only do many (white and French) Quebecers look to Europe in order to create a national ethnic identity, they also often resent Canadian multicultural rhetoric for negating their ethnic distinctiveness. In this manner, Eurocentric approaches to culture have become a way to challenge the assimilative forces of multiculturalism. By associating itself with Europe, and France more specifically, Québec nationalists can call attention to a history of a distinct people and also look for other ways of theorizing/representing culture that do not rely so heavily on the “multicultural” model.

However, rejecting multiculturalism through Eurocentrism is often done at the expense of non-European based culture in Québec. The question arises: if the province of Québec identifies ethnically with France, a country that has colonized many parts of Africa and the Caribbean, what might this mean for Black Quebecers who have may have roots in former French colonies? In this section, I analyze how Québec has looked to France in creating a Québécois culture, both through ideological and ethnic terms, and how these ties have created an inhospitable environment for African Diaspora dance practitioners.

the creation of a “people” involves creating an ethnic identity and that such identities,

Although one might think that Québec's connection to France stems from its days as a French colony, curiously, from the time of British colonization in 1763 until the 1960s, Québec culture drifted and became quite distinct from France. In particular, Catholicism continued to be of utmost importance in Québécois society while in France, the influence of religion had decreased dramatically since the French Revolution (Relations France-Québec 2011)⁸⁶ Premier Maurice Duplessis moreover, who led Québec from 1936-1939 and again from 1944-1959, was known for being contemptuous towards intellectuals (Handler 86) and to France, claiming that they had become perverse since abandoning religion. (Handler 100) Finally, industrialization was slow to hit Québec and so while nineteenth century France was increasingly characterized by busy industrial cities, French-speaking Québec was largely made up of rural communities. (Porter 94)

As Québec became more urban and secular, the severed ties between France and Québec began to heal. In the late 1950s, some of Duplessis's political opponents felt that the Premier was not doing enough to enrich French-Canadian culture and that France could be a valuable resource for Québec. In particular, Georges-Émile Lapalme, leader of the Québec Liberal Party from 1950-1958, believed that French-Canadians were becoming more modern and felt that political policy had to reflect this new identity. He believed that if francophone culture in Québec did not modernize with the times, it could become obsolete. As Québec political scholar Louis Bélanger has explained, Lapalme became inspired by the cultural potential of French-ness while on a trip to Paris. Lapalme

while politically powerful, are grounded in fiction.

⁸⁶ To view the Relations France-Québec website, please visit:
<<http://services.banq.qc.ca/sdx/rfq/static.xsp?page=accueil>>

wanted to move away from traditional nationalist images of the “French-Canadian” in order to “entrench the Québec identity in the universalist and modernist cultural shift—also reflective of a vigorous nation-state—which André Malraux,⁸⁷ De Gaulle’s minister for Cultural Affairs, was advocating for France at the time.” (199) Accordingly, Lapalme sought to promote the culture of France, especially its “high art,” in order to ensure that French (rather than English) would continue to be used as Québec shifted from a religious and rural to a secular modern society. (Handler 100-101). Shortly after France’s President Charles De Gaulle established the Ministère des Affaires Culturelles in 1959, Lapalme made a similar suggestion and in 1961, the Jean Lesage Liberal government created Québec’s Ministère des Affaires Culturelles. (Handler 101) With the Quiet Revolution and the gradual “modernization” of Québec, France increasingly became an important cultural ally for the province.

Over the last half century, Québec has worked to establish political connections to France that have helped French Canada establish itself as a “distinct nation” on an international stage.⁸⁸ In 1961, the Québec government opened an office in Paris that acted much like embassy for the province and was Québec’s first serious investment in paradiplomacy. (Bélanger 199) Moreover, although a French consulate in Québec city was already established in 1858, it was expanded during Québec’s Quiet Revolution of

⁸⁷ André Malraux was a French writer who became France’s first Minister of Cultural Affairs in 1959 under the rule of Prime Minister Charles De Gaulle, a position he served until 1969.

⁸⁸ The province finally gained federal recognition of their position when, on November 27 2006, Canadian parliament passed the Québec Nation Motion, which identified Québec as a “distinct nation” within Canada. For more on this bill, please visit CBC news archives: <<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2006/11/27/nation-vote.html>> .

the 1960s (Relations France-Québec). Since the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s, Québec has made serious attempts to form international relations without relying on representation from Canada and most of these efforts are spent on strengthening Québec's relationship to France. It should be noted that Québec does have paradiplomatic offices in other countries, but their most extensive efforts are made with France.⁸⁹ The province's emphasis on its connection to France is ostensibly because Québec was once a colony of France.

Further evidence of the importance of Québec's relationship to France can be seen in the various exchanges that have occurred between the two nations since the mid-twentieth century. An increase in the amount of French and Québécois literature, art, and music began traveling across the Atlantic in the 1950s with Québec artists like Anne Hébert, Jean Paul Riopelle, and Félix Leclerc becoming popular in France. (Relations France-Québec) In 1967, French President Charles de Gaulle made a passionate speech to a crowd in Montreal where he famously declared "Vive le Québec Libre." This moment was a turning point in Québec-France relations as it seemed to add legitimacy to the vision of a sovereign Québec nation. More recently, Bibliothèque et Archives Nationales du Québec and Bibliothèque nationale de France began working collaboratively in 1993 on a project that would document the history of Québec and France relations (Relations France-Québec). This project is unique in that Québec's national archives does not have similar projects with other countries. All these interactions have meant that Québec has

⁸⁹ Bélanger explains that Québec has twenty-five offices in twenty countries employing 239 workers in 2002 (197), but it's delegation-general office in Paris employs seventy-two employees and holds a pseudo-ambassador status within the country. (207)

often found artistic and intellectual common ground with France, at times more so with France than with other provinces within Canada. For these very crucial reasons, Québec has created a strong and influential bond with France.⁹⁰

The relationship between Québec and France has important ethnic dimensions. Nationalist histories often examine Québec from the position of the descendents of New France—the French colony that was eventually taken over by the British in 1763 as the Province of Québec. In other words, Québec has created its ethnicity in large part by recalling its moment of British colonization and by associating itself with French ancestors. As Québec political scholar Danielle Juteau has explained, secession, in most nations, has historically been legitimized through the historic experiences of one particular ethnic group. In the case of Québec, essentializing the history of French Canada became a way to legitimize Québec’s desire to be a separate nation. (51) Accordingly, the “history” of Québec emphasizes the white French majority of the population who often have ties to France. In this way, Europe, but France in particular, has a different kind of significance in Québec than it might for other European descendents in North America. Political sovereignty, or at the very least, political distinction within Canada, seems to be implicitly validated through the creation of a Québécois ethnicity as connected to a French (i.e. from France) heritage.

Many English-Canadians unfamiliar with Québec culture might at first glance simply dismiss Québec’s interest in French European culture as racist without

⁹⁰ Curiously, English Canadian nationalism sometimes evokes a similar strategy, calling attention to its British Loyalist heritage in order to distinguish itself from the U.S. For

understanding the complexity of the situation, in particular of the motivation behind Québec's interest in France, and of English Canada's own complicity in this process. In his article "From Ethnic Nationalism to Strategic Multiculturalism" Martin Bruner (1997) argues that multiculturalism was initially conceived of as a way to appease/subvert the separatist movement in Québec (47) and that accordingly, many sovereigntists initially adopted xenophobic strategies in response to English-Canada's assimilative power over Québec (49). Multiculturalism has been embraced by English-Canadian nationalism as a way to mask its dominant position in the Canadian polity, as well as a way to claim authority on national matters over French-Canadian nationalism. The association of English Canada with multiculturalism⁹¹ and French Canada with "ethnic exclusion" has helped English Canadian nationalism (as slippery as it is) to gain "legitimacy" while continuing to repress Québec nationalism as "inherently flawed." To reiterate, this tension is largely due to Québec's difficulty to define itself in nationalist terms. Québec struggles to assert itself in contradistinction to the amorphous shape of (English) Canadian nationalism; it tries, as Balibar explains, to create borders. However, Canada's "multicultural" stance is so strong in its assimilative powers that it has become difficult for Québec to build such borders and therefore finds itself continually grappling with white Anglophone hegemonic forces.

more on English Canada's anti-American sentiment, please see Andrew Stark's essay "English-Canadian Opposition to Québec Nationalism" (1992)

⁹¹ Furthermore, Himani Bannerji argues in her article "Geography Lessons: On Being an Insider/Outsider to the Canadian Nation", multiculturalism has become a powerful symbol of English Canadian nationalism (291) and an effective way to promote tourism through things like festivals (295) but that multiculturalism "skims the surface" when it comes to address issues the white English majority finds threatening (296).

Ethnic nationalism in Québec has a history of creating controversy and it tends to become particularly heated during times of political upheaval and sovereignty debates. As political scientist Robert Young (2000) explains, national identification “offered much scope for the sovereigntists, who devoted a lot of emotionally charged discourse to it. Their core position was that Quebeckers constitute a people, distinct from those in the rest of Canada.” (323). However, this “emotionally charged discourse,” which encouraged a kind of ethnic pride among French-Speaking Canadians, often threatened the place of non-white and/or non-French speaking populations in Québec. Bruner (1997) explains, “Québec separatists were oftentimes drawing upon the image of the colonized French Canadian to justify their secessionist agenda in 1995, and in doing so, risked articulating an ethnic nationalist ideology incapable of incorporating Anglophones and allophones”⁹² (49). While the failure to “incorporate” other ethnicities into French-Canadian identity is not necessarily a problem in itself, when that identity is associated so closely with the governance of Québec, there is a constant risk of institutional racism and political xenophobia. For example, during the 1995 sovereignty campaign, Lucien Bouchard, leader of the Bloc Québécois⁹³ party, made problematic racist and misogynistic comment about the need for French Canadian women to have more babies: “Do you think it makes sense that we have so few children in Québec? We are one of the white races that has the least children [and] that does not make sense” (quoted in Bruner 1997, 51). Comments such as this come from a place of anxiety about the future of

⁹² In Québec, “allophone” is the term used to describe individuals for whom neither English nor French is their first language.

Québec but reassert the continuing hierarchy of gendered and ethnic divisions within the province.

In 1995, just four years before the *Afrique: Aller/Retour* dance festival, Québec held a referendum to decide whether Québec would separate. The debates were heated and the polls were close. In the end the decision was “Non—” Québec would not separate, and the final results were 50.58 to 49.42 percent—less than fifty three thousand votes made the difference (Gagnon and Lachapelle 179). The most oft cited reasons for the defeat of the sovereigntists was the threat of economic disaster, and the objections of Québec’s ethnic minorities who felt Québécois nationalism excluded them. On the eve of the referendum, after the results had been announced, Parti Québécois leader Jacques Parizeau addressed his supporters and made a gaffe with severe consequences. After blaming the loss on “money and ethnic votes,” there was mass public outcry over his speech. Bruner explains, “Although newspaper reports across Canada and Québec before, during, and after the referendum suggest that Parizeau’s statement was factually true, public reactions to the remark were so universally and strongly negative that he was forced to resign from his office within a few days” (1997, 43). For the federalists, Parizeau’s exclamation justified their claims that a multicultural Canada would be more accepting of minorities than a sovereign Québec, and separatists disapproved of Parizeau for the same reason.

While this ethnic nationalist sentiment has been prominent in nationalist discourses in Québec, many nationalists recognize the potential dangers and pitfalls of

⁹³ The Bloc Québécois, founded in 1991 is a federal party that runs solely in Québec with

ethnic nationalism and the sorts of racially heated claims it often produces. As Bruner argues, Québec's nationalist strategies after the 1995 referendum shifted from promoting ethnic nationalism to strategic multiculturalism (1997 54). However, I suggest that this timeline may not be entirely accurate. In fact, the seeds of a "strategic multiculturalism" existed before the 1995 referendum. Juteau suggests that Québec's interest in incorporating more ethnicities into "the national fabric" began after the 1980 referendum when the provincial government began its "Autant de façon d'être Québécois"⁹⁴ campaign. (49-50) In 1981, Québec founded the Ministère des Communautés Culturelles et de l'Immigration⁹⁵ (MCCI) and created in 1990 Québec's policy of "Interculturalism," which, unlike Canadian multiculturalism, would promote the integration of cultural minorities but promote French as the public language of Québec culture.⁹⁶ It should be noted however that this model, much like Multiculturalism, still implicitly posits a white French-Canadian core with other cultural groups on the margins. Ethnic nationalist sentiment continues to inform debates in Québec today and did not simply cease after the 1995 referendum. This is especially apparent from the very

the aim of voicing Québec's distinct needs on the federal level.

⁹⁴ "Many ways to be Québécois" (my translation)

⁹⁵ Ministry of Cultural Communities and Immigration

⁹⁶ Charles Taylor's explains in his essay "Multiculturalism and The Politics of Recognition" (1992) that Québec's interest in the French language must be understood as a group right that may in some instances be in conflict with individual rights. In Canada, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms does account for some group rights, but is largely focused on individual rights. These rights do not take into consideration Québec's more pressing goal of cultural survival, or "survivance," which creates policies that "actively seek to create members of the community" (58). For Taylor, this collective goal can still be liberal so long as it continues to respect diversity. However, English Canada interpreted Québec's language laws (like Bill 101) as threatening to the difference-blind

controversial “reasonable accommodation” debates that took place throughout Québec during 2007 (as discussed in the introduction). Accordingly, it’s not that either ethnic nationalism or strategic multiculturalism exists at any one time as Bruner’s argument might suggest, but rather that there is a constant struggle in Québec between these two seemingly conflicting ideologies—a struggle that is palpable in the documentation of *Afrique: Aller:Retour*.

IV. “L’Afrique des Européens”

So much about the way this festival was presented reveals, both implicitly and explicitly, how Montreal came to see Africa not so much as kin (as had occasionally been the case during the Quiet Revolution), but through the eyes of its European colonizers. While I have listed some of the more obvious ways that the media and publicity for the event depicted African dance as “primitive” or unsophisticated in comparison to European dance, there are other more subtle ways that this occurred as well.

For example, the theme of “Africa” was often accompanied by the theme of hybridity. As Montreal dance critic Jo Leslie sardonically writes: “Perhaps Africa was not intellectually interesting enough for FIND and so the second theme of hybrid was created as a convenient framing for the favored choreographers.” (Hour October 14-20, 1999). In fact, FIND sponsored a conference in conjunction with the festival and its theme was hybridity (see “Danse: Langage Propre et Métissage Culturel” Pontbriand 2001), rather than African dance. The very fact that cultural mixing became an interest

version of the politics of equal respect that they understood as emanating from the

during the African themed festival but not during any of the European themed festivals articulates how Québec cultural projects at the end of the twentieth century often exhibited a sense of affinity with European art and artists.

Another theme that continually emerged was the juxtaposition of “tradition” and “modernity.” While one shouldn’t deny the significance of these questions about tradition and modernity, what was troubling about the way these debates were laid out was that Africa was seen as the bed of tradition, and Europe of modernity and progress. Stéphanie Brody and Frédérique Doyon of La Presse write: “Aller/retour du balancier entre chorégraphe occidentaux et africains qui s’influence mutuellement, aller-retour aussi entre modernité et tradition”⁹⁷ (“Richesse, puissance et densité” October 10, 1999) The structure of this sentence subtly equates the West with modernity and Africa with tradition. Not only does “hybridity” become a theme that allows Europe to continue to be a major contributor to the festival, but cultural mixing between Europe and Africa is seen as the meeting of modernity and tradition. This kind of dichotomy implies that an African present represents a traditional past while Europe becomes a symbol for a modern future, and indeed, this seems to be how festival vice president Diane Boucher envisioned it. Boucher went to Africa to check out the scene and was an adjudicator for the dance festival *Rencontre chorégraphique de l’Afrique*, however, she was not as excited by the work she saw, as for her, it reflected “traditional” more so than “contemporary” dance. She did however find Salia nī Seydou, a company from Burkina Faso who had worked

Charter.

⁹⁷ “the festival must balance Western and African choreographers, who mutually inform each other, and also find a balance between modernity and tradition.” (my translation)

previously with France's Mathilde Monnier. Boucher selected Salia ni Seydou because she felt that they had "deeply personal movements, they had something to say, and what they had to say was profoundly rooted in African traditions [...] an essential African quality." (September 8, 2011, my translation). Boucher explained to me that Africa was a continent that had strong dance traditions and that she believed traditional art should inform contemporary art and with the exception of Salia ni Seydou, Boucher classified most of the work that she saw while in Africa as "traditional."

However, while FIND's organizers may have thought the value of African dance lied predominantly in its potential for contemporary European choreographers, one of said European choreographers, Mathilde Monnier, predicted that Western eyes were not yet ready to judge the aesthetic values of African dance. Not only was she conscious of the fact that the Western gaze is still full of prejudice when watching African dance, she was also hesitant to describe her work as interested in hybridity. In relaying her interview with Monnier, Julie Bouchard writes, "*Pour Antigone* n'est pas une danse métisée où danseurs africains et danseurs contemporains se laisseraient influencer l'un par l'autre [...] c'est] une rencontre entre deux cultures qui, chacune conservent ses propres références s'entrechoquent en un même lieu."⁹⁸ (Le Devoir, September 25-26 1999) While Monnier's classification of her dancers as "African" and "Contemporary" implicitly demonstrates an assumption that European modern dance is race-less and rooted in the present, she is also conscientious of the potential dangers of this type of encounter.

⁹⁸ "*Pour Antigone* is not a hybrid dance where African and Contemporary dancers are left to influence each other [...] it is] and encounter between two cultures who each maintain their references but collide in one place.

Fearing that her choreographic vocabulary might assimilate rather than showcase the talents of her dancers (five from Europe, five from Africa), Monnier attempted to bring together her dancers in a way that allowed them to both collaborate while remaining distinct, although the extent to which this collaboration was successful is debateable.

Monnier's piece *Pour Antigone* brought together five dancers from Monnier's France based company with five dancers from Burkina Faso. "From the Judeo-Christian perspective," the program reads,

Africa is frequently seen as another world, as an inhuman space of famine and poverty known only for its safaris and bare-chested dancing women.⁹⁹ While clichés may be rooted in reality, they prevent us from seeing further, seeing the complex matrix of folklore and ritual, where dance is a full-fledged art. Mathilde Monnier delves deep into this zone, not with a mixture of African and contemporary techniques, but through human encounters that respect the deep-rooted identity of the other (Tangente Archive February 8 2012)

However, Monnier's attempt to showcase the talents of both the African and European dancers she worked with seems to have been muddied in the choreographic process.

Instead of reading a critique of hybridity, critics saw Monnier's work as segregating these two cultures. Jo Leslie writes: "Monnier, who received the most advance publicity and opened the festival, did little more than display the African dancers in juxtaposition to her frosty French counterparts leaving many of us dazed and confused, if not outright angry. No real meeting took place and I've never seen Africans look so shut down (meeting Western standards?)" (Hour October 14-21, 1999)

I would suggest that Monnier's attempt to create a "cultural collision" was riddled with problematic assumptions about her own relationship to African dancers. Her interest

in Africa, as Julie Bouchard explains, was in “returning to a pure, primitive dance” (Le Devoir September 25-26, 1999, my translation), which suggests that she herself was not yet ready to see African dance with the integrity she claimed it deserves. In an interview with La Presse, Monnier explains: “ J’étais tellement perdue à L’époque, je venais de terminer une pièce qui avait bien marché, mais j’avais l’impression d’être en train d’écrire un style de danse et je cherchais à savoir où je pourrais trouver la fracture. Plusieurs de formes de danse avaient déjà été exploités par les chorégraphes, la danse indienne, le buto, mais l’Afrique avait été peu explorée.”¹⁰⁰ (“Mathilde Monnier au FIND” September 25, 1999) There is a haunting parallel here between Monnier’s artistic agenda and European colonialism, for Europe too decided to “explore” Africa when Asian countries had already been “exploited.” In this way, *Pour Antigone* echoes colonialist projects. Diane Boucher however comments that it’s not colonialist, it’s just beautiful work. (September 8 2011)

While Monnier’s “exploits” may or may not echo colonialist ideologies, unlike the consequences of many colonialist practices, in these choreographed collaborations there was a greater possibility for her African dancers to profit from their interaction and gain recognition for their work.¹⁰¹ In particular, two of Monnier’s dancers, Salia Sanou

⁹⁹ Curiously, this comment about the bare-chested African dancers is likely a reference to the women of Les Ballets Africains (see chapter 1)

¹⁰⁰ “I was terribly lost at the time [of choreographing *Pour Antigone*]. I had just finished choreographing a piece that went well, but I had the impression that I was writing a style of dance and I wanted to know where I could find the break. Many forms of dance had already been exploited by choreographers, Indian dance, Butoh, but Africa had been little explored.” (my translation)

¹⁰¹ A similar phenomenon occurred in the production of Paul Simon’s 1986 album *Graceland*. David B. Copland explains in his book In Township Tonight (2007) that a

and Seydou Boro¹⁰², began their own dance company and thanks to their exposure working with Mathilde Monnier, the company has gained significant international recognition. Moreover, due to their success abroad, Sanon and Boro began a training centre in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso dedicated to nurturing the work of African dance artists. Finally, in 2008, Salia Sanou published the book Afrique Danse Contemporaine funded by Centre National de la Danse in France, which pays tribute to Contemporary dancers and companies in Africa. In it he writes: “Je ne crie pas haut et fort que Mathilde Monnier a changé ma vie et fait de moi un artiste reconnu. Elle n’est d’ailleurs guère sensible aux honneurs. Cependant, j’aime répéter qu’elle ne m’a pas non plus trouvé allongé sous un baobab en Afrique. [...] Je dois reconnaître que l’avoir rencontrée m’a nourri.”¹⁰³ (82)

Similarly, Compagnie Jant Bi profited from their collaboration with Susanne Linke. Renowned African dancer, choreographer, and teacher, Germaine Acogny invited Susanne Linke— Tanztheater choreographer second perhaps only to Pina Bausch—to conduct a workshop with some promising dancers at l’École des Sables in Toubab Dialaw, Senegal. The success of the workshop led Acogny to found Compagnie Jant Bi

great deal of controversy emerged over Simon’s use of South African performers to revitalize his career. Copland points out however that while Simon may have profited off the work of these musicians, they also garnered international fame because of their association with Simon. Ladysmith Black Mambazo for example, who went from being a factory worker in Township to winning two grammy awards (in 1987 and 2005) for best world music albums. (303)

¹⁰² Sanou was training to be a police inspector and Boro was an actor (Sanou 11, 91-93)

¹⁰³ “I do not scream loud and clear that Mathilde Monnier changed my life and made me a recognized artist. She is not responsive to those types of honors anyway. However, I must repeat she did not find me lying under a baobab tree in African either. [...] I must recognize that meeting her nourished me.” (my translation)

in 1998 and she commissioned Linke to create their first major work, *Le coq est mort*, which had its North American debut at FIND. The company has since gone on to work with other international collaborators including Kota Yamazaki (Japan), and more recently with Urban Bush Women (U.S.A). However, while the company's interaction with Linke set them up for successful international notoriety, the content of *Le coq est mort* was controversial to say the least.

Le coq est mort proposed to be a critique of colonialism, but Linke may have overstepped her boundaries in attempting to create a work that, as François Dufort explains, “s’interroge sur la place de l’homme noir dans la société africaines.”¹⁰⁴ (Dufort, Ici 3-10 June 1999). While the creative process involved extensive collaboration between Linke, co-choreographer Avi Kaiser, and the company dancers, Linke was ultimately responsible for the structure of the work, while the dancers created the movement vocabulary through a series of improvisational activities designed by the choreographers. (Le Devoir September 25-26 1999). In other words, Linke was ultimately responsible for the construction of the work's narrative such that the “place of the black man in African society” became her own vision, though based on her experiences with her dancers.

However, Linke's conclusions about the “nature” of her African dancers are fraught with condescension and essentialist claims. La Presse quotes her as saying that Senegal has “l'énergie, l'innocence, et une précision dans la rythme absolument merveilleuse.”¹⁰⁵ (Doyon, October 6, 1999—my emphasis) And in the film African

¹⁰⁴ “interrogates the place of the black man in African society” (my translation)

¹⁰⁵ “energy, innocence, and an absolutely marvellous precision in rhythm” (my translation)

Dance: Sand Drum and Schostakovich (which was filmed at FIND that year) Linke explains that “people in Africa... a certain kind of innocence that they have—innocent but not naïve, not at all, very intelligent, naturally intelligent and also clever, enormous sense of humor and they have an enormous sense for rhythm... that’s what they bring us through the dancing.” Though likely attempting to be flattering, her words come across as condescending. It is telling that Linke feels the need to continually qualify her use of the term “innocent;” it seems that she too realizes that the word is itself loaded and problematic. While she pejoratively compliments Africans for their intelligence, her comments attempt to essentialize—to reveal the “nature” of her African subjects. Moreover, her comments are framed in such a manner that her conclusion revolves around what the Africans might do for “us.” Although she doesn’t entirely express who “us” might be, implicitly, she seems to insinuate that Westerners may still profit from cultural encounters with Africa. Ironically, while Linke attempts to create a critique of colonialism, her artistic methods reveal an implicit colonialist perspective.

Le coq est mort is a complex work that attempts to tackle many profound subjects but often lacked sensitivity to the racist interpretations it created. Donald Hutera of Dance Magazine explains: “[Linke’s] scenario was clear: breaking out of rigid, conformist diplomacy, eight business-suited men indulge their war-mongering impulses before reverting back to nature. The piece mourned a guileless innocence Linke fears modern society has lost.” (86) Hutera’s description of the choreography outlines Linke’s invisible colonialist narrative position; he understands her project as a nostalgic look at “guileless” culture in contrast to modern culture. However, these themes of guilelessness and a return

to nature are performed by African bodies revive stereotypes of a primitive Africa. Renée Richard writing for Le Point D'Outremont explains that as the piece progresses “la danse se ‘ritualise’; elle devient sauvage, vivante, et brute.”¹⁰⁶ (November 5, 1999) It is crucial to realize that this production ends with the image of African dancers performing a return to nature and primitivism. The choreography thus becomes a tool for subliminal colonial discourse that positions Africa in stark contrast to the intellectual and cultural “superiority” of Europe.

As Avi Kaiser, Linke’s co-choreographer, explains the title “*Le coq est mort*” carries multiple symbolic resonances for the piece. It symbolized a literal desire to kill the village rooster who would wake them up at 5:30am every morning; it symbolized the “coq gaulois” — a symbol of France — and its death announced “la fin de l’impérialisme colonial au Sénégal;”¹⁰⁷ it symbolized masculinity, and “enfin, il témoigne d’une réalité tout à fait concrète de la vie africaine: l’entourage animalistique, le quotidien vécu parmi chiens, poules, et chèvres.”¹⁰⁸ (Frédérique Doyon, La Presse October 6, 1999) However, these reflections on life in Africa reinforce stereotypical notions of the continent (that it is “savage” and “wild”) more so than it brings nuances to these old notions. Moreover, while French colonial rule may have ended in Senegal, this does not necessarily mean that French imperialism does not continue to have an impact of Senegalese life. In fact, scholars like Anne McClintock (1992) and Ella Shohat (1992) argue that the problem

¹⁰⁶ “the performance ritualizes itself: it becomes savage, lively, and rough.” (my translation)

¹⁰⁷ “The end of colonial imperialism in Senegal” (my translation)

¹⁰⁸ “and finally, it testifies to a concrete reality of African life: animalistic surroundings, the quotidian lived amongst dogs, chickens, and goats” (my translation)

with terms like “postcolonialism” is that it fails to recognize the continuity of first world hegemony after a colony’s formal independence. In this sense, suggesting that France is “dead” in Senegal¹⁰⁹ ignores its continued influence over the country.

Furthermore, Kaiser and Linke tend to over-romanticize what they view as the “animalistic” side of Africa. At the end of the performance at FIND the eight black male dancers step into the light making fleeting impressions with their feet on the sand covered stage. Wearing nothing but black slacks, the bare-chested dancers beat their hands against their torso and scream while the sound of gunfire pierces the air. Jo Leslie writes: “*Le Coq est mort* was disturbing for all the wrong reasons [...] I nearly had a seizure at the profundity of her naïveté: black men, bare chested, hopping about as gorillas?” (Hour October 14-20, 1999) To be fair, since the movement vocabulary came largely from the dancers, it is unclear whether the impulse to act “primitive” and “animalistic” at the end of the piece came from the dancers or the choreographers, since the dancers came up with much of the movement, though Linke and Kaiser gave them directions and ultimately decided the shape and structure of the work. The controversy was powerful enough that when the company performed the work again at Jacob’s Pillow the following year, the “gorilla” movement was taken out. (Compagnie Jant Bi 2000)

V. “La Contemporanéité Africaine est Multiple”

While these politically controversial versions of Africa dominated the main stage of FIND, contemporary African dance filled Montreal’s smaller venues with a different

¹⁰⁹ The extent to which France is “dead” in Senegal is further complicated by the fact that these artists collaborate in the colonizer’s language, French.

vision during the festival. Looking at the schedule of events at FIND, it seems clear that the European choreographers were expected to bring in the largest crowd—they received ideal performance times, large theatres in which to perform, and ticket prices for their shows were substantial.¹¹⁰ On the other hand, most of the contemporary African dance companies were presented in small black box theatres. Montreal-based dancer Zab Maboungou’s performance was scheduled to begin at 11pm on during the week making it inconvenient for many spectators. Even the most popular contemporary African dance company of the festival, Salia nī Seydou, was presented in a moderate sized theatre. Furthermore, tickets to see the two Ivory Coast companies TchéTché and Compagnie Sylvain Zabli, were free—they were literally being given away (Lachance, Dominique Le Journal de Montréal, September 13, 1999). On the one hand, this was a fine way to bring in audiences to see the performance, but on the other, it implies that the company was not as “valuable” as the more expensive shows of by European choreographers.

And yet in spite of these issues, the African contemporary dance companies received the highest praises from festival-goers and critics alike. The Prix-du-publicue went to Salia nī Seydou, and second place went to South Africa’s Vincent Mansoe. Moreover, critics consistently praised the work being done by Salia nī Seydou, Mansoe and TchéTché (Howe-Beck, The Gazette, October 9, 1999; Brody, La Presse, October 7, 1999; Leslie, Hour, October 14-20, 1999; Doyon, La Presse, October 2-3, 1999; Kisselgoff, New York Times, October 6, 1999; Dufort, Ici, October 14-21, 1999)

¹¹⁰ Unfortunately, due to a strike at Places-des-Arts, the major centre for dance performances, the FIND organizers has to scramble just weeks before the festival to find

Moreover, with the presence of these companies, and the multiple voices speaking about African dance at the festival, whether in interviews with the media or in presentations at the three-day conference, a significantly more complex vision of Africa began to take shape on the Montreal landscape. Local contemporary African choreographer Zab Maboungou explained to Le Devoir that: “ L’Afrique a droit à sa contemporanéité comme n’importe quel autre continent qui est dans le monde d’aujourd’hui et en subit tous les mouvements, les contrecoups, les obsessions, les formes de dominations. [...] La contemporanéité africaine est multiple et elle n’a pas à se définir simplement comme fusion avec le monde occidental.”¹¹¹ (Bouchard September 25-26, 1999) For Maboungou, whose work will be addressed more thoroughly in chapter 4, the very notion of “contemporary” is often thought to be associated with the West, and implicitly, Africa is seen as being “the past.” However, while tradition certainly plays an important part in African society, as it also does in “the West,” to choreograph contemporary African dance should not necessarily mean that it must engage with Western dance ideals. And while many of the African dancers and choreographers present at the festival may have been informed by artists in Europe, Europe is not necessarily at the centre of African contemporary dance.

Unlike many of the other contemporary African dance groups presenting at the festival, Maboungou’s *Incantation* avoids the use of European contemporary dance,

new locations for all their performances, which led to a decreased audience capacity and severe cut to ticket sales.

¹¹¹ “Africa has a right to its own contemporaneity just like any other continent that is in the world today and sustains with it all the movements, aftershocks, obsessions and forms

which, she explains, is in part for political reasons. Maboungou herself is of French and Congolese descent and is not necessarily suggesting that her work is completely devoid of European influence. However, her project has been to create a contemporary dance that uses an “African” vocabulary so that Africa may be seen as contemporary on its own terms (see chapter 4). *Incantation*, like much of Maboungou’s work, is characterized by silky, sinuous, and articulate movements, as she draws the audience into her highly introspective and captivating presence.

However, while viewing African contemporary dance through the eyes of the West may be precarious, reversing this paradigm— viewing contemporary European dance through the lens of African contemporary dance— may help undo these colonialist processes. In particular, examining the different use of symbolisms found in Linke and Monnier compared to Salia nĩ Seydou provides an interesting contrast.

Although Salia nĩ Seydou use the theme of “the other” as their starting point for *Fignito ou l’Œil troué*, much the way Mathilde Monnier does in *Pour Antigone*, the picture they paint of this subjective relationship is quite different than what Monnier does. “The stranger has large eyes to see nothing” the subheading in the program reads. (Tangente, February 8, 2012) The word Fignito means blindness in Bambara and the work reflects on issues of death, powerlessness, the passage of time, “our vulnerability, our otherness, our solitude” but also encounters, friendship, and love. (Program, Tangente, February 8, 2012). In the piece, the duo continually move without facing or even acknowledging the other, although their inability to see creates a powerful dramatic

of domination [...]. African contemporaneity is multiple and does not have to be defined

effect that causes near misses and subtle ironies amidst the generally somber tone of the work. (Doyon, La Presse, October 2, 1999) Curiously, while Monnier's work emphasized the possibility of bringing together two different cultures and believing that a single piece could speak to/for both of them, Salia ni Seydou presents a more complex image suggesting that such endeavors may be worthwhile, but acknowledging the struggle and potential inability for such encounters to ever be successful.

Another important image found both in the work of the "European" and the "African" choreographers is sand, as seen in the work of Susane Linke and Salia ni Seydou. In the documentary African Dance: Sand Drum and Shostakovich, Linke explains that she was inspired to use sand to cover the stage in *Le coq est mort* because when they conducted the workshop in Sénégal, they did not have a studio to work in and so they worked outside in the sand. However, the use of sand on the stage seemed to create more of a spectacle of the performance and sensationalize the experience of dancing in Africa. The use of a sand-covered stage creates an atypical performance space to emphasize how dancing in Africa is unusual. On the other hand, Salia ni Seydou incorporate sand in their piece in a much different way. Near the end of the work, Boro pours a gourd of sand over Sanou's head. In the same documentary, Boro explains the significance of the sand: "we come from the ground, and we will return to the ground." In this sense, Salia ni Seydou incorporate sand into their work as a profound metaphor of the passage of time, while in Linke's work it reads in part as a symbol, but also, quite literally, as a superficial "surface" and as an expensive elaborate staging tool.

simply as a fusion with the West." (my translation)

Finally, I would like to address the work of Tchétché, as the choreography presented by this all-female troupe is important in that it presented a very different version of African femininity than what was presented forty years earlier by Les Ballets Africains. Tchétché's founder and choreographer Gnapa Beatrice Kombé¹¹² grew up with dance as her father himself was a dancer. She studied with several companies on the Ivory Coast, as well as internationally with Alphonse Tiérou and Zab Maboungou, and with Viola Farber. Kombé presented *Dimi* at FIND, which became her most famous piece. "A hymn to feminine solidarity and a beacon of hope," reads the program, "*Dimi* is a celebration of reconciliation, enacted by dancers who make their bodies speak." (Program, Tangente, February 8, 2012). *Dimi*, which means "shock" or "pain" in Malinke, looked to portray a message of strength and hope to African women. In moments of intimacy, the women would grasp shoulders in support, at other times, they displayed fierce power and movements as agile and acrobatic as one might see from men. Anna Kisselgoff of The New York Times writes: "Ms. Kombé's opening solo, in silence, distills the astounding physical daring that the other dancers will pick up as they enter. She jumps stright [sic] up and lands in a split, cartwheels, erupts into barrel jumps or drops flat on her back." (October 6, 1999) While I have discusses how Les Ballets Africains featured powerful and acrobatic female dancers, the company's women were still very much part of a male-dominated group. Tchétché, which means eagle, testifies to women's ability to lead, create, and be heard on their own. Salia Sanou writes of Kombé:

¹¹² Tragically, Kombé passed away in 2007 of kidney failure. She was 35 years old.

“Sa danse, très physique, tonique, était une forme de lutte pour libérer les jeunes filles de la pression familiale et patriarcale sur leurs choix de vie.”¹¹³

At the close of the festival, Chantal Pontbriand expressed great excitement about the energy of African dance and felt that it could potentially change contemporary dance in the new millennium. She further states, “Africa is very open to the world and asks to be included and to have exchanges.” (Howe-Beck, The Gazette, October 11, 1999)

Although her words seem to inaccurately suggest that Africa has until then not been a part of world culture, her statement still seems to articulate that African dancers were not just seen but also heard at this festival. However, the sincerity of her statement is debateable. Linde Howe-Beck of The Gazette explains that traditionally, FIND has re-invited the public’s favorite performers to return to the festival the next year (October 11, 1999). However, despite the fact that Salia nī Seydou won the Prix du Publique, they returned the next year not on their own, but as part of Mathilde Monnier’s company. Moreover, many critics raved about Vincent Mansoe’s production, and François Dufort thought he would be invited to return the following year. (Ici, October 14-21, 1999). But Mansoe did not return either. In fact, the following year, FIND decided to abandon the idea of featuring a country or region and instead decided to have as its 2001 theme “Le Grand Labo”—the big laboratory. All the artists were either from Canada or Europe. Due to financial difficulties, 2001 was the final year of FIND.

¹¹³ “Their dancing, very physical and invigorating, was a form of struggle that allowed young women to find freedom from familial and patriarchal pressures on their choice of life” (my translation)

While African dance seems to have made a positive impact on the city during the 1999 festival, one thing that seems to be glaringly missing from these reviews is a fair critique of the work being performed by African choreographers. What I mean to suggest is that while dismissing African dance as unartistic denies the value of non-European aesthetic traditions, simply praising it doesn't necessarily accomplish that much more. While this praise of African dance companies may show Montreal's willingness to explore an "other," until Montrealers are familiar enough to engage with this art on its own terms, African art continues to exist on the margins of Québec. In his work on multiculturalism, Montreal philosopher Charles Taylor (1992) suggests that expanding our cultural knowledge is of utmost importance in pluralist societies as it allows us to make accurate judgments on the values placed on cultural products. By studying cultures beyond our own, he writes,

We learn to move in a broader horizon, within which what we have formally taken for granted as the background to valuation can be situated as one possibility alongside the different background of the formerly unfamiliar culture. The 'fusion of horizons' operates through our developing new vocabularies of comparison, by means of which we can articulate these contrasts. (67).

Afrique: Aller/Retour is difficult to pinpoint in this regard. Certainly the festival brought some important African choreographers to Montreal and helped promote new understandings about African culture in Québec. But while the Montreal audiences may have momentarily expanded its line of vision, choreography like that of Susanne Linke returned us to a European horizon line that is already so dominant in the Montreal dance community. However, I hope I have elucidated is that in calling attention to a tendency for this dominant focus to shift to images of colonial tropes, we may be better prepared to

resist that gaze. And as our eye line shifts, with time, perhaps as Taylor suggests, we may set our sights on new horizons.

Chapter 4

Zab Maboungou and the Creation of a Contemporary African Dance Vocabulary

“I recognize you means I cannot know you in thought or in flesh.”

—Luce Irigaray¹¹⁴ “You who will never be mine”

I. Introduction

With my lower torso taut and my shoulders back, I venture into the space in front of me. It’s not my legs that march me forward; they are at the service of my pelvis. My arms are stiff, too stiff, I know, so I try to send a sense of breath into them and free them up a little. “We’re not in the military Melissa,” Zab says to me with a chuckle. I chuckle too as my strained face melts and the corner of my mouth lifts into a smile. I close my eyes momentarily and recall an image I often use in moments like this: a gentle spiral of energy surrounds my upper body and extends my self— my body and my “spirit”— outwards through the space, while my pelvis, the eye of the cyclone, pulls me into the earth. I begin to walk again.

I suddenly realize I am hardly aware of the students around me. I rouse myself from my thoughts to acknowledge the presence of the dancers in the room. It is a constant struggle to maintain these multiple levels of awareness; being attentive towards my body and my surroundings is not an easy task. But then I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I immediately feel self-conscious; my shoulders cave and my eyes narrow. My pale skin is a constant reminder that I’m an outsider here. I recall how white dancers have marginalized black dancers in the “West;” how white dancers have tended to exoticize

African dance¹¹⁵ and that in many ways, my presence here continues this legacy. I cannot change this history. I cannot pretend it doesn't matter. But I am hopeful that my awareness of these issues might allow me to avoid contributing more to this problematic paradigm.

There is a core group of dancers who are here for every class, and who often stay after class is finished to discuss dance, politics, philosophy, or whatever may have come up for them that evening or afternoon. The sense of community is strong. On many occasions a more advanced student would kindly offer me advice if I was struggling with a concept or movement. And while the students think fondly of Zab, there have often been moments when we all look at each wondering what precisely she is asking of us, a kind of solidarity in our uncertainty. I enjoy being around this group, so friendly and enthusiastic about dance. There is a bond here that reminds me of the bond I felt with the women I first trained with in University, a bond that helped each of us through the unstable and arduous days, back when I still thought I might be a dancer. Perhaps my depiction is too idyllic, but the serene pleasantries built within the studio help counter the less than formidable environment that haunts African dancers outside of the studio. And I want to capture that spirit in this chapter.

¹¹⁴ From "You who will never be mine" in *I love to you* (103)

¹¹⁵ This exoticism frequently has sexual undertones. In my interview with Karla Étienne, she mentions how in the past there has been a tendency for white women to try to start sexual relationships with the studio's drummers. Moreover, in an informal conversation with BaKari Lindsay from Coalition of Black Artists (COBA) in Toronto before a class, he mentioned that he once had a group of women attend his class for what he discovered later was a bachelorette party. (July 2010)

In the heart of Montreal's trendy Plateau district sits the studio Cercle d'expression artistique Nyata Nyata, where I trained regularly in the fall and winter of 2011-2012. Congolese-Canadian dance artist Zab Maboungou opened Nyata Nyata in 1986 and the company has been an important artistic and cultural centre for Black Montreal artists since its inception. Afro-Cuban dancers and musicians regularly hold classes on the second floor. In the summers, Maboungou brings Black Canadian dancers to Montreal to teach workshops at the studio.¹¹⁶ Maboungou runs a professional training program (Programme d'entraînement et de formation artistique et professionnel en danse africaine, more commonly referred to as PEFAPDA) where she teaches technique and theory to up and coming dancers. When in demand, the studio offers drumming lessons, and the studio regularly offers introductory classes in African dance and RYPA—Rhythm, Posture, and Alignment, a technique Maboungou has codified over the years. The studio has become a meeting place for artists to perform, to debate, and to discuss dance. But politically speaking, it does much more. In particular, I suggest that Maboungou's work and her studio have created a space where Black Montreal artists can nurture a black subjectivity away from (though not altogether rid of) white structures of power.

In this essay, I define “black subjectivity” as representations of “blackness” that are created by Black artists, often in ways that emphasize notions of the “self”, with limited references to white markers. Authors like Frantz Fanon (1967) have questioned

¹¹⁶ In 2011, BaKari Lindsay from Toronto's Coalition of Black Artists and Zelma Badu-Younge, a former Montrealer now teaching at Ohio University, were the featured guests.

whether people of African descent would ever gain the power to position themselves as an actor or “subject” rather than a passive “object” in Western discourses since these discourses have largely been created by White people. Moreover, Fanon asks whether “black” can ever be defined without “white.” In *Black Skins White Masks*, Fanon seems to suggest that a Black ontology—an examination into the “nature” of being “black”—will always be mediated through whiteness: “Ontology—once it is admitted as leaving existence by the wayside—does not permit us to understand the being of the black man. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man.” (110). From a theoretical perspective, it may not be possible to define blackness without whiteness. Notions of race are so deeply embedded within society that escaping the omnipresence of white hegemony in the creation of race and racialized identities may not be achievable, and in this sense, as Fanon declares, blackness “must be black in relation to the white man.” However, as Benita Parry argues in her book Postcolonial Studies: a Materialist Critique (2004), there is a strategic advantage in constructing counter identities and such efforts should not be jettisoned simply because their discursive representations create paradoxes. Invoking liberation theory, Parry suggests instead that the creation of communal ethnic identities can be an important way of mobilizing populations (10). While a black ontology may never be possible without a white “other” (and so may be the opposite), I suggest that conceiving of a “black subjectivity” attempts to put the power of definition in the hands of Black men and women and creates an alternative to the ubiquity of white constructions of blackness.

In 2012, Learie McNicolls, Casimiro Nhussi taught classes alongside Maboungou, and

In discussing black subjectivity, I borrow from dance scholar Thomas DeFrantz (2004) and his writings on Alvin Ailey. DeFrantz suggests that Alvin Ailey's monumental 1960 work *Revelations* on the one hand builds on "universal" themes—themes that reflect human experiences in general—in order for Ailey's modern audiences to take his work seriously (21). However, as the piece develops, the choreographic themes move from the "universal" and recognizable "modern" dance vocabulary of "I've been Buked" to increasing allusions to African American culture, culminating with the pageantry of "Rocka my Soul," with its antebellum costuming and vernacular dances. These latter pieces "pull together abstract dance technique and cultural memory to create archetypal black personae." (25) While Ailey's work negotiated black subjectivity with white modern dance expectations, Maboungou's work takes the notion of black subjectivity further by rooting her choreography and her technique in an African dance vocabulary rather than attempting to establish her work in a vocabulary recognizable to white audiences. As I will elucidate later in this chapter, Maboungou has ardently fought to make white audiences view her work on her own terms and continually challenges Montreal's prominent modern (or "contemporary") dance community to change the way they conceive of dance.

Moreover, DeFrantz argues that *Revelations* would eventually lead to other concerns within the African American community, namely that white American audiences would come to expect African Americans to perform *Revelations*-style works

Daniel Bellegarde taught drums.

anytime a Black performer took the stage, and that these audiences would be reticent to accept new experimentations made by Black dancers. Thus,

Although the actions and artistry of African Americans may indeed express ‘universal truths’, the black body itself never achieves this transcendence in any discourse of the West. Marked even before it can be seen, before it can even exist, the black body carries its tangled web of work and sexual potentials, athletic and creative resources, and stratified social locations onto the stages of the modern. (19)

According to DeFrantz, one of the obstacles Black dancers must face is overcoming the many ways black bodies in the theatre often signify meanings created through white interpretations of “blackness.”

DeFrantz’s critique of the social impact of *Revelations* parallels critiques facing Canadian multiculturalism. Multicultural programs often promote cultural diversity by positing a white centre around which non-white “others” create a visible margin.¹¹⁷ While multiculturalism has focused on making non-white dancers “visible” as Peggy Phelan writes: “there are serious limitations to visibility as a political goal” (quoted in DeFrantz, 21). In particular, when dancing bodies are “marked” or “raced” in a manner that differs from the white Canadian majority, visibility potentially leads to ghettoizing or pigeonholing performers with fixed representational expectations, thus suggesting that a Black dancer should perform traditional “rituals” while “unmarked” white bodies continue to have the power to define and redefine themselves. Visibility does not necessarily help cultivate or nurture an art form, and thus, what multiculturalism fails to

¹¹⁷ For examples of these critiques, please see Lisa Lowe’s book *Immigrant Acts* (1996) and Sneja Gunew’s article “Postcolonialism and Multiculturalism: Between Race and Ethnicity” (1997).

provide non-white artists is the space to grow away from a white centre; instead multiculturalism subtly encourages non-white artists to remain fixed on the margins.

I suggest however that Maboungou co-opts multicultural practices to make them work for her. While Maboungou does not lament multicultural policy, Maboungou adheres to her own strong political autonomy by finding ways to work within and simultaneously challenge this system. To further elucidate this point, I borrow from the writings of Michel de Certeau. In his seminal work The Practice of Everyday Life (1984), Michel de Certeau distinguishes between strategies— the systems of power imposed upon by an established authority over individuals—and tactics—non-descript systems that allow individuals to willfully act either with or against these strategies. Within this paradigm, multiculturalism can be understood as a strategy invoked by the Canadian government to “promote” diversity (though this is a simplified version of what Canadian multiculturalism does).¹¹⁸ Maboungou supports these policies, as they have certainly made Canada’s arts scene more formidable than the explicitly Europeanist preferences that prevailed when Maboungou first came to Canada, however, she continually redefines what her own “multicultural” dance practice looks like, and thus destabilizes such categorization. I suggest that Maboungou has successfully created tactics that either observe or subvert multicultural ideals in order to work towards cultivating a specifically Black subjectivity in Montreal.

¹¹⁸ As the discussion of multiculturalism in the introduction implies, multiculturalism was a strategy that also attempted to promote Canada as a liberal nation while subverting separatist sentiments.

Maboungou creates a black subjectivity through her artistry and her activism in at least three important ways. First, Maboungou creates a space that is especially (though not exclusively) for “black” dance. At the Nyata Nyata studios, Black dancers are the norm rather than the exception and are thus less marginalized in this dance space than may be the case in ballet and modern dance classes. Moreover, with its emphasis on Africanist aesthetics, “black” dance is given its own space for growth and experimentation. Second, essential to Maboungou’s movement aesthetic is a strong focused dancer capable of moving suddenly and rapidly in surprising directions. Ultimately, this movement quality values mobility while maintaining a strong sense of one’s position in space, which I suggest corresponds philosophically with Maboungou’s political activism. Finally, Maboungou’s RYPA technique, which focuses on various iterations of “Lokéto” (an onomatopoeia used in class literally meaning “the hips”) builds upon spiritual queries into the self, thus creating a vocabulary for movement that connects African dance movements with notions of subjecthood. In the following sections, I give a more thorough background on Maboungou, analyze her choreographic aesthetic with an interpretation of *De/Liberated Gestures*, and outline her RYPA technique and the construction of a contemporary African dance.

II. Introductions

When I first met Zab Maboungou, I was enchanted by her serene but cheerful presence. On the corner of St-Laurent and Mount Royal, I saw her making her way across the street, eyes up and bright, a warm smile on her face as she bustled through the

Montreal crowd. I caught up to her before we reached her studio. “Mme. Zaboungou” I said, struggling and stumbling with the words, but her forgiving grin was comforting, and I continued. “Mme. Maboungou, je m’appelle Mélissa” I explained and told her who I was and that I was coming to attend her class. She very kindly complimented me on my French and said she would see me upstairs. Excited that I had finally met a woman I had been reading about for two years, I hurried up the stairs to the second floor studio, paid for my class, and proceeded to warm up. It wasn’t until a gentleman stood up at the front of the room and began leading a stretch that I realized I had accidentally signed up for the Afro-Cuban dance class one floor below where I wanted to be. Mildly embarrassed, though accustomed to inadvertently placing myself in awkward situations, I slipped out the back, made my way up another flight of stairs, and slipped into Maboungou’s class (grateful that I wasn’t the last to enter the room).

This first class wasn’t physically taxing, but was mentally exhausting. There were drums lined up in the corner of the room, but no drummers to play them. In Maboungou’s RYPA¹¹⁹ classes, she works intensely on posture and alignment with her students without music, but as a new comer, I couldn’t help falling into the rhythm of the Cuban drumming that penetrated the floor beneath us. Here, in this class, we were learning to walk again Maboungou explained to us, switching from French to English mid-sentence. Again and again, we would mindfully take our steps, conscientiously placing heel before toe while our pelvic basins glided along a sea of calm. It was hard to resist wanting to “achieve” some highly complex sequence, and even harder for me to accept that walking

¹¹⁹ RYPA is an acronym for “rythme posture et alignement” (rhythm, posture, alignment)

was in itself highly complex. But what struck me most about my first class with Maboungou was her tendency to speak to us through aphorisms, and her sophisticated and seemingly paradoxical instructions (examples of which I will discuss later). I left thinking: “this is how a philosopher teaches dance.”

I was not surprised by Maboungou’s gift for initiating profound internal reflection; having seen her choreography and read her work I could have guessed her class would combine subtle corporeal articulations with philosophical and poetic notions of the self. But what did surprise me was that she was far more generous with her students than I had expected. In almost every interview with Maboungou I’d ever read, Maboungou comes across a fiery instigator, or as Canadian dance scholar Bridget Cauthery (2008) writes: “a thorn in the side of the dance establishment” (22). I suppose I was expecting a tyrannical taskmaster, but in the classroom, she was very supportive and patient with her students. It wasn’t until I finally had the chance to interview Maboungou ten months after my first encounter with her, that I met the warrior I’d heard so much about.

Zab Maboungou grew up in Brazzaville as the Congo was going through its struggles for independence and a cultural renaissance. Born to a French White mother and a Congolese Black father who fought alongside Che Guevara during the Congo’s revolution, Maboungou is a self-professed “child of colonization.” She decided at the age of thirteen that she was going to be a dancer and even while pursuing her Philosophy degree in France, she continued to dance with the Cultural Association of Congolese Students. However, as she explained to me, while working on her degree she came to the

conclusion that teaching dance would not involve, in her own words: “showing what my aunty does.” She wanted to teach African dance in a way that reached out to people on a more fundamental level: “I wanted to come up with something that was... that was basically human.”

Mabougou came to Montreal in 1973, shortly after finishing her studies in France. I asked her why she came to Montreal to which she replied “Chance.” Having been a world traveler since she was young, Mabougou was used to adventure and followed a friend to Montreal. When that relationship developed into a romance, she decided to stay longer. Immigrating to Montreal proved a bit of a challenge at first, and she was told that marrying her love interest would make the process go smoother. But Mabougou was clear that this would not be the case: “No no, Zab Mabougou is not fit for that; she is free forever.” So she returned to France until Canadian immigration approved her visa.

When Mabougou moved to Montreal in the mid-1970s, the city’s Black community was small but growing, though comprised mostly (as is still the case today) of people of Haitian descent. She came looking to dance but she explained to me: “There was no African dance [... and] hardly any Africans. Everybody took me for Haitian because I spoke French and the people were very surprised to hear some people were speaking French in Africa. [...] The people [in Montreal] had very little knowledge of the rest of the world.” She became interested in the classes and performances being done in Haitian communities and began performing along side Haitian artists in local arts events.

Eventually, after being asked by several interested parties to teach, Maboungou began to instruct classes while continuing to perform.

In the beginning of her Canadian career, Maboungou performed at local Montreal events, like for the African Student Associations at Université du Québec à Montréal and at Université de Montréal (1976-1978), and a two-week performance with djembe drummer Yaya Diallo in Old Montreal (1981). Maboungou also performed internationally in the early 1980s, with Malaki ma Kongo at the Contemporary Dance Studio in New York, and with Le Ballet –Theatre Lokole at Center Social Chopin in Mantes la Jolie, France. Gradually Maboungou’s performances increased and she participated in African inspired Montreal events like *Nuits d’Afrique* (1986, 1991), anti-apartheid events (1986, 1991), *Vue d’Afrique* (the opening of the African film festival, 1987, 1989, 1990), and Black History Week events at Concordia University (1990, 1991) and McGill (1991). However, Maboungou also took part in various multicultural events to develop her audience. Maboungou performed during the Canadian Citizenship celebrations at Complexe Guy Favreau (1989), Multicultural week at Concordia University (1992), *Festival Mondiale de Folklore de Drummondville* (1993), and *Ascendance*¹²⁰ (1993). However, in these latter festivals, performances were advertised as demonstrating “difference” and implicitly categorized Maboungou as an “other” kind of dancer. For example, in a 1993 poster for a dance series entitled *Les Ailleurs de la Danse* a photo advertising Maboungou’s *Reverdance* is featured along side performances of the

¹²⁰ According to Maboungou’s CV, *Ascendance* is a “program dedicated to the meeting of different cultures in the contemporary dance milieu” created by the dance organization Tangente. (Tangente 2009)

International Institut of Kathakali and Priyamvada Sankar & “a musical group from India” (Tangente Archive “Zab Maboungou” 2009). The thing linking these performances is that they are somehow envisioned as “outside” the mainstream dance scene, hence the title of the performances: “Les ailleurs de la danse.”¹²¹ While the English title is less overt in the way it marginalizes these dancers (in English its title is “New Horizons in Art Dance”), in its English Press Release it is advertised as offering “the public at large the opportunity to enjoy professionally produced music and dances, inspired by ideas and cultures as far away as India and the Congo” (Tangente, November 2009). The central figure of the image is a Kathakali dancer, dressed in the elaborate costume and exaggerated makeup typical of the style, but emanating from his headpiece is an animated spiral, giving him a parodic, cartoon-like quality, and stars that cluster around him are scattered around the poster. These stars suggest that Maboungou and these Indian dancers are “other-worldly” and the advertisement exploits this notion and exoticizes their performances. However, the poster fails to acknowledge, for example, that Maboungou is based in Montreal, and that she had been producing work in Canada for well over a decade by this point.

During the 1980s, Maboungou began applying for grants through the government, but much like *Les Ballets Jazz* (see chapter 2), Maboungou’s applications were continually overlooked in favor of modern and ballet projects. “For them [the ballet and modern dance communities] this was not serious dancing. We were just doing traditional

¹²¹ Though this phrasing does not translate perfectly into English, it might read something like “the other places of dance.” “Ailleur” actually means “elsewhere,” however, for the English title of the series, the producers went with “New Horizons.”

dance, folklore, [...] tradition is non-creative, it's something your ancestors have done so you don't create, how could you be an artist? [...] It was very clear at the time. I had already knocked at the doors of Ministère des Affaires Culturelles and Canada Council, all these institutions [would say] it's nice what you do but we have no programs for you.” She continues, “so as a true immigrant, [...] we don't wait we just do. [...] so I did. I started opening this place.” In 1986, Maboungou founded Cercle d'expression artistique Nyata Nyata, the home of her classes, technique, and company, with her own funds (largely subsidized by her salary as a Philosophy teacher at Cegep¹²² Montmorency). Maboungou knew how invaluable a centre for African dancers would be to Montreal, and to Canada in general, well before public cultural agencies knew themselves. Ironically, her first students were not Black dancers, but white dancers. In my interview with her, Maboungou explained she thought the largely white demographics of her first dance classes may have been due to the fact that Black dancers are often marginalized in dance classes like ballet and modern dance. Maboungou had to work hard to recruit Black dancers to attend her professional dance classes and to make them feel at home in her studio. Gradually Maboungou was able to entice Black dancers to attend her classes, all the while teaching white dancers that African dance requires attentive thought. Maboungou explained to me that she often dealt with White dancers who assumed African dance would be “simple.” Quoting one of her students, Maboungou said: ““It's good Zab, I like your class because you don't have to think—” I stopped her mid-

¹²² Cegep is a professional or vocational college that Québec students enter after high school, but before university if they decide to earn a bachelor's degree. “Cegep” is actually an acronym for “College d'Education Général Et Professionnel.”

sentence, “Who would ever say that about your class?!” I exclaimed, laughing but challenging her just a little, trying to catch her in a moment of exaggeration. Having taken her classes now for several months, I couldn’t believe that anyone would ever take a class with Zab and leave without finding it intellectually challenging and stimulating. She clarified: “Those people who come first and then they are disappointed: ‘oh yeah, I took an African dance class because I have rhythm, everybody tells me so’ [...] this idea about Africa and the drums and about letting go, this is pure bullshit.” Maboungou knew the stereotypes that circulated about African dance and that she was expected to fulfill these expectations for local White dancers. However, Maboungou’s classes refuse to cater to such expectations. (Maboungou, 2 March 2012).

In 1988, Canada Council’s practices came under scrutiny and the Racial Equity Committee was established to investigate the Council’s funding policies. (Cauthery, 18) Suddenly, government arts organizations took an interest in Maboungou seeing her as one of the few “multicultural” artists to have had so much success without aid from funding agencies. Maboungou became very active with Canada Council for the Arts and served on various committees to help revise its policies. She has been a member of Canada Council’s Dance Jury (1992-1999), Dance Advisory Committee (1992-1993) and Assessment Advisory Committee (1993-1994). Maboungou’s activism also led her to serve on committees for Québec’s Ministry of Cultural Affairs (1993-1994), and the Ontario Arts Council (1992). In 1991, Maboungou became the first African-Canadian choreographer to receive a grant from Canada Council for the Arts.

That same year was when she mounted *Reverdanse*, her first evening length solo work. It had modest beginnings in “Les Ailleurs de la Danse” at Bibliothèque National du Québec, but eventually toured internationally and was performed to critical acclaim at the Lincoln Center in New York (1995), John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington D.C. (1998), in Brazzaville (1996), South Korea (1998) and Germany (2001). *Reverdanse* is a suite in five movements: *Prélude*, *Savanes*, *Fertilité*, *Le Murmure des Ombres*, and *Reverdanse*. Both sinuous and hypnotic, the dance relies heavily on an engagement between the musicians and the dancer to create a self-reflexive and intimate atmosphere. In the height of the middle section, *Fertilité*, the intensity of Maboungou’s connection to the music becomes visually and aurally emphasized as she adds the music of her own body through bells placed on her hips, head, and feet. Her concentration and her kinesthetic sensibility are captivating, but the delicacy of this atmosphere relies on a subdued and honest engagement with the material. Unfortunately, Canadian dance critics, used to dealing with the largely European-based Canadian dance tradition would be slow to appreciate her artistic contributions. While Maboungou was quite successful abroad, her early performances of *Reverdanse* in Canada received less than favorable reviews. Toronto dance critic Lisa Cochrane wrote of Maboungou’s 1994 performance: “in her attempt to capture the authentic experience, Maboungou highlights little for dramatic effect, homogenizing the very art with which she finds her identification.” (44) This review however fails to evaluate Maboungou’s work on its own terms, but instead makes judgments based on classical European practices and European understandings of a “traditional” Africa. *Reverdanse* is neither an attempt to be

“authentic,” nor “dramatic” but instead a philosophically inclined exploration of the self through body and movement while building on an African dance vocabulary.

This lack of appreciation came to a head in Festival International de Nouvelle Danse’s (FIND) 1999 event *Afrique: Aller/Retour*. As discussed in the previous chapter, Maboungou participated in this event (which I’ve argued was deeply informed by colonialist notions of race and “Africa”) despite having been continually ignored in previous years. “*Incantation* was refused as being too traditional [...] by the FIND people and suddenly the FIND people call me and say ‘we want *Incantation*.’ [...] ‘Why? You refused it’ ‘No we never did so’ [...] ‘do you want the job or not Zab?’ to them they couldn’t believe that instead of jumping for joy I was questioning them.” Maboungou told me she believed they would not take her if they had their choice, but since Maboungou is a major figure of African dance in Montreal, and since she was a teacher of many of the festival’s invited performers, to not invite her would be a major omission on the festival’s behalf. *Incantation* was performed at one of FIND’s smaller venues and began at 11pm each night. However, Maboungou continued to question the festival and encouraged others to do the same. When she presented at the affiliated conference *Danse: langage propre, métissage culturel* she let her objections to the festival be known: “Lorsque je lis dans la presse que la danse européenne présente l’Afrique pour le première fois, je suis scandalisée. Je vis cela comme un outrage personnel et collectif qui choque au plus profond de moi-même mon expérience et mes connaissances.”¹²³

¹²³ “When I read in the paper that European dance would be presenting African dance for the first time I was scandalized. I saw this as a personal and collective outrage that

(Maboungou 182) She has fought with many Canadian dance institutions to be recognized, and her tenacity, not to mention her talent, has forced many agencies and organizations to pay attention. She is a fighter to be sure. But she is also a generous spirit who has nurtured the Black Canadian arts community, and, as I suggest, works to create and strengthen a Black Canadian subject position.

Over the years, Maboungou has won over much of Canada's mainstream concert dance community and today, as a result of her talent and her tenacity Maboungou is adored in Canada. The Canadian dance magazine The Dance Current recently printed an article about Maboungou calling her "an innovative and opinionated choreographer." (Szporer 57) Dancers flock to her classes, lectures, and performances as she brings a truly unique voice to the Canadian arts scene. But more importantly, at least from the perspective of this project, Maboungou has been a nurturing foremother for Black dancers in Canada. Maboungou has ceaselessly struggled to bring Black artists into the field of dance. "My classes when I started were only white people. [...] It took me twenty years of ardent struggle to have what you see now. So when people ask me: 'Zab—cultural diversity?' [... I say] you don't understand, Cultural diversity is not about having white people. It's the opposite. It's about having the Black ones." She has been a mentor for many of Montreal's promising Black artists. Among her mentees are Rhodie Désir, who mounted her compelling *[REC]* at Maison des Arts Interculturelles (MAI) in February 2012, and Karla Étienne, a stunning dancer with Maboungou's company and a promising teacher, whose classes I had the pleasure of taking while in Montreal 2011-

shocked the most profound part of myself my experiences and my knowledge." (my

2012 (and whom I credit with teaching me how to jump again). In January 2012, the International Association of Blacks in Dance recognized Maboungou with a lifetime achievement award. I remember sitting next to Patrick Parson, artistic director of Toronto's Ballet Creole at the awards dinner, and when I told him I was studying with Zab, he told me I was in good hands. Maboungou's reputation within Canada's Black dance community is thus today one of great esteem.

My interview with Maboungou was extremely helpful, humbling, and intimidating. I had been trying to set up this interview for months but her hectic performance schedule and other dance commitments made it difficult to arrange. We finally sat down together in her studio one Friday evening in March (2012). She sat across from me, leaning back in her chair, arms crossed. I've never been one for confrontations, and I suddenly realized I was about to have a face-off. I wanted to roll on my back and show my belly, but I knew that I was letting my anxiety stand in the way of hearing her perspective. I took a deep breath, and began. Maboungou had been nothing but courteous to me since I began taking classes at her studios, but the moment I turned on the tape recorder, I interpolated myself into a problematic tradition of white ethnographers trying to "figure out" a racialized "other." She was prepared for it. I was not.

translation)

III. Confrontation

A wave of apprehension overcame me almost every time I stepped up to the door at Nyata Nyata. The doors were normally locked and I was never entirely sure which button to use to buzz in. If there was a class in session, your ring might not be heard. On top of which, in the winter, classes were often cancelled due to the company's busy touring schedule, a memo that I rarely got for one reason or another. So every time I approached the door, I always wondered how long I would have to wait in the Montreal cold before I would finally get an answer. On the day of my interview with Zab, I was lucky enough to get there just a few minutes before a group of students were leaving the building. I still had to wait in the hall, but at least it was warm. I knocked on the third floor studio; no answer. I waited five minutes before knocking again; no answer. I continued to wait, occasionally working up the courage to rap at the door, when finally, Maboungou's son Elli, a talented young drummer who often plays for Karla Étienne's class— opened the door. He invited me in and explained that his mother was on her way but was running late. I knew Maboungou was busy, and part of me felt bad that she was giving up part of her Friday night just to talk to me, but we had been trying to set up this interview since December, and there just wasn't another time she could make. I took off my shoes, as was customary at the school, sat by the reception desk and looked over my questions while I awaited her arrival.

I've come to realize that Maboungou's talent as a provocative speaker comes from her skill in unsettling or destabilizing her audience. She has a gift for turning a thought on its head, inspecting it from a new light, and forcing her listener to reconsider

his or her own perspectives. In a lecture setting, it is inspiring. Watching her speak to students at Concordia University in January 2012, the students seemed enthusiastic to hear her thoughts and inundated her with questions as her presentation came to a close. In her dance classes, her comments often left me unsure of my self, made me feel I was learning to move again and forced me to reevaluate the way I understood movement. However, in each of these settings, I was a part of a group and so I hadn't noticed how piercing her comments could be. The interview showed me how precisely she can read her audience— her opponent— and how she forcefully disarms you of the things you take for granted as “true.”

When Maboungou entered the room with the warm smile I had grown accustomed to she apologized for her tardiness and offered me a glass of juice. She sat in her choreographer's chair on the near wall of the studio, and I chose to sit on the bench just beside her, my knobby ankles bruising on the hard wood where I sat cross-legged in order to face her. She looked over the consent form I brought in (a French translation of a standardized jargon-heavy form) and jokingly pointed out how ridiculous the document was. Not just the fact that she had to sign it, but the writing as well. I was too embarrassed to tell her that I was the bungling translator and politely smiled as she critiqued the awkward language. She paused when she read the title.

“I hate this word, ‘race’” she said to me in English. All I could think of was how a previous version of my title excluded the term “race” and how insistent my committee members were that I include it. Later during the interview, with the microphone running, I asked her why she disliked the word so much: “race is really outdated completely you

know, it's finished." She goes on to say she realizes that in North America, there is a whole group of African Americans who have been through so much so recently that it is hard to let go of the word "race" but explains that her perspective on race, coming from Africa, and in particular from the Republic of the Congo which gained independence from its colonizers in the 1960s, she has faced a different set of struggles and the term "race" does not hold the same significance for her. She did however go on to recognize how racialized identities have been important in North America, but critiques how little attention has been paid to understanding whiteness: "in the middle of these divisions stands the white person. Neutral, not coloured. We are the only coloured, he is not coloured. He is the universal subject [...] travels everywhere in the world, us the papers are still checked [...] this needs to be really examined. And is this about race? No. It is about cultures and societies." Maboungou however did concede that "black" and "white" are powerful political symbols but that they have a tendency to evade identifying power relations.

Discourses on "race" in Canada still need to be developed. Many Canadian race theorists, myself included, rely heavily on the work of American scholars, however, these writings don't always translate into the Canadian context. To begin with, most of Canada's Black community is comprised of immigrants from the Caribbean, a large influx of whom came to Canada beginning in the 1970s. Moreover, while slavery was present in Canada and full of its own atrocities,¹²⁴ the magnitude of the racial violence

¹²⁴ While much remains to be written about slavery in Canada, Robin W. Winks's article "Slavery, The Loyalists, and English Canada" outlines the various treaties that sanctioned slavery in Upper and Lower Canada (now Ontario and Québec), Nova Scotia, and Isle St

done to African Americans is not easily translatable to the Canadian context. I am not suggesting that Canada's racist past should be ignored, or that it is somehow less significant that the racist history of the U.S., just that Canada cannot be discussed without considering its very different context.

At the International Association of Blacks in Dance (IABD) Conference in Toronto, January 2012, I noticed an emerging tension between Black Canadian artists and African American artists. The conference was dominated by African Americans and Canada's community of Black artists seemed quite small by comparison. But perhaps most upsetting was when one of the organizers of the event, an African American man whose anonymity I will maintain, could not pronounce Maboungou's name. Rather than attempting to correct himself, he continued to mispronounce it intentionally in order to make a joke of it. The Canadians in the room did not find it amusing. When I saw Maboungou again in class after our trips to IABD, she looked at me and said with playful disdain: "Americans!"

But what about Québec? As I have outlined in the introduction, Québec holds an unusual position in Canada in that it often claims that it is a colonized state. I wanted to know Maboungou's thoughts on Québec and its struggles for independence. Maboungou

Jean (present day Prince Edward Island), and the waves of migration that brought slaves in and out of Canada. In his analysis however, Winks suggests that "On the whole, slaves appear to have been well treated" (36) in Canada, however, while the scale on which slavery occurred in Canada is small compared to the United States, this sort of conclusion makes light of the gravity of bondage. As African Canadian scholar George E. Clarke writes: "Canadian slavery was not as extensive as the Southern U.S. version [...]. However, we must recognize that slavery was practiced in a solid third of what is now Canada [...]; that it numbered thousands of slaves [...], held "legally" under various

explained to me that she was enthusiastic to see what would happen in Québec, but her enthusiasm waned when “immigrants” became the enemy. “In spite of the fact that we were telling them ‘you are not the only one in the world fighting for independence, you don’t see that we came from these places.’ [...] these are the racial politics [in Québec].” Maboungou goes on to say that she is not interested in depicting these politics in her work. She has already been through a decolonization movement, and wants to pursue bigger issues. “My choreography is about the person, the human being in the world.”

Because Maboungou so frequently describes her work in these universal terms, I felt compelled to ask why she calls her style Contemporary African Dance rather than Contemporary Dance. “It’s political,” she explained. “There is a necessity for you to understand that contemporary is not Western. [...] Even when we were colonized, we didn’t have the choice, we were thrown into modernity. [...] At the same time that we were questioning the West, we were questioning tradition [...] you’re forced to question who you are.” Using the term Contemporary African Dance was a way of “provoking the debate.” She concludes by explaining that African dance does not exist anyway. It is an invention of the Diaspora.

Over the course of the interview, we discussed her personal history, Québec politics, “black” and “white” dance practices, but it constantly felt as though she was attempting to derail me; whatever I was thinking, she wanted to challenge it. The distance between us changed with each question, sometimes bringing us closer, sometimes further apart. But without a doubt, I was moved by her sacrifices, by the labor of her efforts, all

colonial regimes and traded globally; that it lasted for more than two hundred years; and

for the sake of dance. I was captivated. By the end I was optimistic that we had reached a meeting point, but I still sensed that she was wary of me. I felt equally unsure in my next encounters with her. On the one hand, the next day during our RYPA class, I felt noticed for the first time in a while. My posture was improving and I even landed a jump that made her exclaim “*Yes Mélissa!*” a comment any dancer loves to hear in class, especially when it’s personalized as this one was. I wondered if I had won her over? Or was I just extra sensitive and seeking her approval? Perhaps it was both. But on Tuesday when I returned to class, a pang of jealousy hit me when Zab’s favor turned to a couple of Bharata Natyam dancers who had begun taking her class.

IV. *De/Liberated Gestures*

At the 2012 International Association of Blacks in Dance (IABD) conference in Toronto, Zab Maboungou was honoured as both the keynote speaker and the only Canadian represented in the International Showcase performance. Slotted in just after intermission, between the Philadelphia Dance Company (PHILADANCO) and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, Maboungou presented *De/Liberated Gestures* with musicians Marc Keyevuh and Elli Miller-Maboungou. The audience was excitable after giving a standing-ovation to the electrifying performance *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* by PHILADANCO. I thought to myself about how vastly different Maboungou’s style was compared to PHILADANCO, and how frequently I would receive the correction “No drama” in her class. PHILADANCO’s performance was constant drama, not to mention

that it ended only because it was not vital to the boreal economy.” (XVI)

the physically daring jumps, lifts and throws that had me holding my breath and gripping the arm rests beside me. I wondered what Maboungou might think of the performance.

The time it took to set up for Maboungou's piece helped calm the audience. The giant LED lit table from *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* had to be dismantled and a new floor of red marley had to be set up for *De/Liberated Gestures*. The red reflection created by the floor warmed the stage and gave Maboungou and her musicians a brightness that helped to counter the drowning effect of the black curtains behind them. A spotlight came on. There was a long pause while the audience's chatter dulled into silence. Once Maboungou entered the stage and stood in the spotlight, the lights went out. The spotlight then came up again on Maboungou, posed with her torso, legs, and arms all slanting in different directions. A slow single drumbeat penetrated the air and announced a solemn tone as Keyevuh took the stage with a slow but purposeful walk. Maboungou's pose gradually turned to movement and as the beat continued, Maboungou's straight torso would twist and torque, filling the silence in between each thud of the drum. Though her limbs did not dictate her movements, their articulations tended to be the focus of her choreography. Her arms would often make sharp, angular gestures, and she will often jump suddenly in bursts of energy.

Maboungou's solo, which changes with each performance, is particularly enticing to watch as each movement seems calculated and clear; it is as though you are participating with her, making decisions about where to move. The basic structure of the piece crescendos from the near stillness of the poses, to more intricate work in the ribs and shoulders, and finally to fast rhythmic gestures in the feet until suddenly, Maboungou

and her drummers come to a startling halt. In effect, Maboungou demonstrates how silence and stillness can be both calming and destabilizing depending on where they sit in time and space.

Maboungou's aesthetic in *De/Liberated Gestures*, like much of her work, focuses on the body and tends not to create complex spatial formations or traveling patterns across the stage. If Maboungou travels, it is by necessity of the movement, not for the sake of making some external pattern. In this way, it is the body, the person, and the decisions that person makes while moving that become the focus of the work. Nor does Maboungou use the conventions of the proscenium stage. Instead of facing the audience, Maboungou is more likely to be caught in a gesture from the side as she continually faces her drummers. In this way, there is less emphasis on making the dancing body a visible spectacle for the audience, as the angles she uses do not emphasize "frontal" viewership. Instead, as gestures are often aimed at the musicians, it is the relationship between dancer and drummer that Maboungou emphasizes in performance.

Maboungou's use of torso has always fascinated me. While dance scholars point out how African dance often utilizes a mobile torso, Maboungou exploits this kind of polycentrism sparingly. While she teaches that the torso has two centres, the pelvis and the chest, they are only occasionally visibly separate. Preferring to use angular shapes of the arms legs and torso, Maboungou frequently dances with her torso flat but pitched forward (a position referred to in class as "number 9") and the shifts of the body are rooted in the connection between her feet and the floor. The subtle back and forth in her body comes from her weight alternating from sitting in the heels to the toes, and her torso

moves in relation to her relationship to the ground. In order to create this effect, her torso often appears rigid, solid and immovable, but sudden moments of softness cause her ribs to make a circular motion, or her hips to pull her in a new direction. However, the tendency not to travel and to maintain a solid centre gives the illusion that Mabougou is strong and centred in her movement aesthetic.

V. Lokéto

I turn white as I step into African dance; I turn white like my dead ancestors who invented the tones of racialized discourse. This color sticks to my skin and cannot be brushed away by a blissful forgetfulness. The sweat of ecstatic dancing cannot wash out the whiteness on my body and erase the memory of four centuries of slavery, over half a century of colonial domination, and its permutation into neocolonial yokes.

-- Francesca Castaldi (2006 1)

I begin this section with a passage from dance scholar Francesca Castaldi's book African Identities as her description resonates deeply with my own experience in Mabougou's class. Every day that I stepped into the studio, I could not help but be aware of my whiteness and it makes up such a large portion of the lens through which I observed myself in class, that to ignore it would be dishonest to my reader. I want to bring this psychology to light because as much as I've tried to distill it in my writing, I write about this subject from a white perspective, and can only ever write about it in this way. What I write about Mabougou's technique must be understood as coming from my particular position, not from an objective one. This is especially challenging considering the fact that paradoxically, though I argue that Mabougou creates a Black subjectivity that avoids white notions of blackness, this essay is mediated by my own whiteness and therefore cannot "define" the contents of this black subject position without undoing the

very thing Maboungou's work attempts to do. It is for this reason that I want to clarify that I do not speak for Maboungou here; I am not writing about what it means to be a Black artist as I am in no way qualified to write that sort of ontology. However, Maboungou's technique classes deserve critical attention from multiple perspectives, and dancers (however they may be "raced") can profit from learning from her technique class. Moreover, politically speaking, a technique that claims to have this sort of "universal" appeal while being rooted in African dance practices helps undo the Eurocentric technique practices that proliferate throughout Canada.

Maboungou's technique, although based in an "African" dance vocabulary, attempts to create an approach to movement that has universal applications and, as she explains, "makes everyone advance." To be clear, this does not mean that Maboungou created a technique with Westerners in mind, in fact, she vehemently denies that her classes cater to this group. Instead, Maboungou's task seems to be to create a space where African dance becomes a kind of "universal" movement language. What I find so powerful about this work is that Maboungou's technique reclaims a characteristic that has historically been linked to "whiteness"—the "universal." Maboungou reappropriates the universal and roots it in an African movement vocabulary. This sense of universal continues in her description of her own technique, which, as I explained earlier, she calls an attempt to create something "basically human." In my interview with Karla Étienne, one of Maboungou's company dancers and a teacher at Nyata Nyata, she explained to me that RYPA was once called RYPADA (Rythme, posture, alignement de la danse Africaine) however, the change in name came because Maboungou felt that it was a

technique that was beneficial to dancers of any style (often comparing it to Yoga) and so in this instance, it was not necessary to keep the “African” moniker. (April 20, 2012)

However, as previously mentioned, Mabounou chooses to identify her company as performing Contemporary “African” dance. Maboungou and her company often debate whether “African” is necessary when describing their choreographic style “Contemporary African Dance.” On the one hand, why should Nyata Nyata have to have “African” in its name when Ballet companies don’t have to have “European” in theirs? However, the group came to the conclusion that politically, they want to promote African dance as a contemporary art form and not traditional. Accordingly, keeping “African” in the title helps change misconceptions about Africa that are prevalent in Canada. The RYPA classes help fulfill the claim that African dance does not have to be a marginal practice but has universal relevance.¹²⁵

Maboungou’s classes focus intently on spiritual and philosophical queries into the self. Sometimes her words are ontological: “There is no front or back in nature. Humans make up a front and back because they are so concerned with where they are going,” she once explained, encouraging us to understand how every “forward” movement has its own “backward” resistance. (December 6, 2011) Other times, she brings the body and the intellect together in poetic ways that speak of a phenomenological self: “Rhythm is the heart of the human intellect. It is the language of language that articulates our breath into matter.” (January 10, 2012) And sometimes her words resonate on a more spiritual plane:

¹²⁵ It is also interesting to note the benefits of marketing Nyata Nyata as “universal”: the classes are valuable to any dancer and thus appeals to dancers of all types, however,

“If there is a paradise, it is on the ground” (January 10, 2012). Each class, her students attentively wait with bated breath for her latest intellectual puzzle, parable, or musing.

The description thus far however fails to capture the physicality of her classes, and in spite of myself, I am worried that I may give the false impression that the mind and the body are separate in her technique when in fact, Maboungou teaches adamantly against such dualisms. I recall walking into her studio one evening and seeing notes on the wall for the students in her professional training program outlining the problems with Descartes’ famous mind/body split. Having studied philosophy in France, Maboungou is familiar with these thinkers, but as a dancer, her experience questions whether the mind and body are quite as separate as people assume.

Maboungou has created a system for teaching African dance technique that centres on the notion of “Lokéto.” From Lingala, Lokéto means “hips” but in her classes, Lokéto is a complex concept that encapsulates many ideas. In her studio, a poster on the wall describes Lokéto as follows:

Lo: Temps/mouvements des pieds/ l’appui/la force et l’impulsion

Ké: Temps/mouvements des genoux/ la ressort et la dynamique

To: Temps/mouvements des hanches/ la flexibilité et la réceptivité¹²⁶

The syllables Lo-ké-to are broken down so that each sound corresponds with an articulating joint. In its most basic formulation, Lo is the ankle joint, Ké is the knee, and

marketing their performances as “contemporary African” helps distinguish the group among the myriad contemporary dance groups flooding the Montreal scene.

¹²⁶ “Lo: Time/Movement of the Feet/Support/Force and Impulse

Ké: Time/Movement of the Knee/Spring and dynamic

To: Time/Movements of the Hips/Flexibility and receptivity.”

To is the pelvis. The pelvis is the first body centre, but there is a second, the ribcage. Accordingly, Lo-ké-to can also be translated into the upper body, Lo being the wrists, Ké being the elbow, and To being to shoulder girdle. Usually however, our focus is on patterns of walking and so most often, Lokéto refers to the ankle-knee-pelvis combination. In the movements of the ankle-knee-pelvis, the ankle and knee joints may move up or down depending on the movement pattern given, but the “to,” the pelvis, is almost always a return to a solid stable centre.

Lokéto is also a call that Mabougou shouts, and to which the class responds to indicate we are ready to move. The syllables then take on the role of the drum, and we speak the rhythm through the sounds “Lo-ké-to—” our voices are the music in this part of the class. The word functions as a kind of onomatopoeia, a rhythmic set of syllables that describes what the body does as it moves. However, it is not that the body responds to the call “Lokéto,” but rather that we sing in response to our bodies. This subtle direction helps dancers learn that the body does not simply follow the drum, the body must communicate with the drum. “Don’t listen to the drums,” she said to us one September afternoon, “listen to the rhythm inside you. Once you can do that, you can speak to any drummer in the world.” (September 24, 2011)

The principle of Lokéto is then transferred into ten different types of movement, some of which are more advanced, and some of which are integral to each class and you must memorize. It is common to hear corrections like “where is your number nine?” which means, where is your flat/pitched forward back. Or “use your Ké” which generally

means to bend your knees more. While the terminology is hard to pick up at first, Maboungou is often clear enough with her body movements that it comes in time.

The very name Nyata Nyata, meaning stamp your feet twice, illustrates the importance Maboungou places on walking in her technique. “It’s like acupuncture [...] the basis of your capacity to move comes from your capacity to absorb from the feet. You have to understand that the feet take the energy from the ground because we are standing beings. [...] at the basis of all movement is walking.”

Community is of utmost importance at Nyata Nyata and the very way the teachers encourage their students engage with each other through dance shows the significance of these connections. While in Karla Étienne’s beginner class, I had to relearn studio decorum. In the many years I’ve spent studying modern dance, I was always taught to take up space, to be bold, to stand at the front of the class to see what the teacher was looking for, to move large and to stand out. This unabashed behaviour however is not necessarily what Nyata Nyata values. While in Karla’s class one November evening, I was partnered to go across the floor with a girl who was new to the class. Being accustomed to moving unapologetically and taking up space when traveling in other dance classes, I began the movement sequence on the correct beat, with force and intensity and stepped confidently and powerfully without noticing that I had left my partner well behind me. When I got to the side of the room and Karla teasingly scolded me, asking me what happened to my partner? And there she was, my partner, halfway across the floor, timidly stepping to the beat, but smiling when I made eye contact. As much as the classes at Nyata Nyata encourage profound internal reflection on one’s self

and one's body, the group is not to be sacrificed for the sake of the individual (as is often the case in modern or ballet classes). Moving with your peers, with your musicians, with your teachers, is as much a part of the process as walking. When I moved across the floor again, I began on the correct beat, with force and intensity, but with the knowledge that my partner and I were both still learning the movement and that our dancing should support, rather than abandon each other.

VI. Conclusion

In her creation of Cercle d'expression artistique Nyata Nyata, Zab Maboungou founded a semi-autonomous space where the artistry of Black dancers could be nurtured. While in previous chapters I have demonstrated how Black dancers have been marginalized, exoticized, eroticized, or outright ignored, Maboungou has fought vehemently with white Montreal audiences to change their understanding of "African" dance. She continued to produce work in spite of what the mainstream dance community thought. In fact, her persistence helped change the way the mainstream conceives of Black dance, in particular through her invaluable contributions to the Race Equity Committee in the late 1980s, her participation in juries for Canada Council for the Arts and Ministère des Affaires Culturelles, and through her performances and lectures that demonstrate the complexities of African dance as it continues to change. Moreover, her movement aesthetic poetically articulates a strong "black" subject by creating works that emphasize strong centres, mobility without exaggerated travel, and limited engagement with the audience. These choices encourage audiences and practitioners alike to envision

“black” dance as a solid and forceful practice that moves on its own terms and requires deep internal reflection more so than conventions of the European stage. On top of which, her classes have helped artists, black and white, to think of African dance in ways that connect “Africa” with notions of the “universal” (which is usually reserved for European thought),¹²⁷ with ontological questions of the “self,” and with the contemporary (rather than the “traditional”). These contributions have allowed her to create a studio that draws in Black dancers and helps them become the next generation of artists to produce works that contemplate artistic notions from a Black perspective, and to change the generally “whitened” look of Montreal’s contemporary dance scene. I suggest that these qualities have effectively made a place where a Black subjectivity can grow in Montreal.

This analysis also helps identify certain strengths and weaknesses of multiculturalism. First and foremost, multicultural policy was largely ineffective on Canada’s arts scene for far too long. The fact that Canada Council for the Arts took as long as it did to fund non-white artists, William Lau and Zab Maboungou being the first in 1991, demonstrates that Trudeau’s 1971 declaration that Canada was a “multicultural” society carried little weight and that Canadian policy has struggled to keep up with its liberal rhetoric. Second, while multicultural programs have helped expose non-white artists to a broader milieu, the presenters and organizers of these multicultural performances often sell these performances in ways that oversimplify the complexities of their artists and simply label them as “different,” for example, in grouping Maboungou’s

¹²⁷ As discussed in chapter two, Warren Montag argues that “universalism” is a concept created by the European enlightenment and has ever since dominated notions of “whiteness.”

work with Indian dance practices. However, Maboungou has been able to create work and change perceptions of African dance in Canada despite these institutional pitfalls.

Conclusion

“Rhythm Cultures”

In this dissertation, I have surveyed the development of multiculturalism in the Montreal dance community with a particular focus on African and African Diaspora dance, while demonstrating how dancers intervene in Canadian racial discourses. In chapter 1, I examined how Les Ballets Africains responded to their controversial reception in Canada and the U.S. by the white majority, and how the company’s female dancers were able to challenge white North American misconceptions of Black women. In Québec, the eventual “acceptance” of Les Ballets Africains came about as “diversity” became a liberal value and as the province was trying to modernize itself. These principles of diversity however, which eventually grew into “multiculturalism” and “interculturalism,” were founded on the assumption that diversity entails a white majority graciously accommodating non-white culture while continuing to posit whiteness as the norm.

In chapter 2, I discussed the company Les Ballets Jazz to explore how concepts of diversity became increasingly complex in Montreal as the sovereigntist movement developed. More specifically, the French white majority began to identify with “Black” culture, though done in a manner that still privileged whiteness over blackness, and Les Ballets Jazz literally embodied this new relationship. However, federal support for the arts at this time catered only to ballet and modern dance companies, and implicitly, to white dance practices. Despite being a so-called “multicultural” nation since 1971, Canada struggled to keep their policy up to date with multicultural rhetoric.

In chapter 3, I examined FIND's 1999 festival *Afrique: Aller/Retour* to show how Québec's own complex relationship to Canadian Multiculturalism has created a unique tension within the province between Eurocentrism and multicultural/intercultural practices. As evident in the conflicting performances, reports, and events of the festival, the Québec public was torn between an ethnic nationalism that identified with Europe, and liberal-democratic principles of diversity, both of which are tied to recognizing Québec as a distinct nation. The festival, though full of controversial images and colonialist principles, nevertheless effected change and taught the Montreal public to understand Africa in a more nuanced way. In this sense, the dancers and choreographers were able to redirect racial discourses and redefine how Québec understood "Africa."

Finally, chapter 4 looked at how Zab Maboungou has reconfigured multicultural policy, both at the federal and personal level, to work for her and her company. While her work suggests that other "multicultural" artists can approach their career in a similar manner, it also suggests that there are ways Canadian "multiculturalism" should look to dance practitioners themselves to reevaluate how to understand "plurality."

In my interview with Maboungou, she explained to me: "Africa has the potential to make things co-exist. Why? Because they are rhythm cultures. You find a way, with another rhythm, to live with it." Building on her words, I suggest that the experience of playing polyrhythmic music is an apt metaphor for understanding cultural plurality.

In July 2012, Daniel Bellgrade, an accomplished Haitian drummer living in Montreal, gave a drumming workshop at Nyata Nyata. Each day, we would work intently on seven or eight rhythms, which we would then perform in our drum circle. When

learning polyrhythmic music, it is easy to accidentally assimilate one rhythm into another and so each rhythm has to be understood as having its own particularity, its own unique character. The Cheval Bwa rhythm (“wood horse”) we would remember as the rhythm played on wooden carousels, and by the distinctive patterns the hands make as they dance on the skin of the drum. The Ti Fer (“little iron,” the cowbell) we would remember with an absurdist rhyme made up by the students: “cinq patates manges cinq patates” (five potatoes eat five potatoes). The Ti Bwa (“little wood” a hollowed bamboo log), with a series of syllables “tak-pi-tak-pi-tak-tak,” and so on. When it came time to put all the rhythms together, what seemed to be the greatest challenge was playing one’s assigned part and still hearing the others, it was easy to lose the beat, or to start playing someone else’s part, or to simply forget for a moment what you were doing. But the more you play, the more your own rhythmic pattern sinks into your body, and the more you can begin to open yourself up to the other rhythms that surround you.

Seeing cultural plurality as a drum circle means understanding that each cultural practice brings something different to the polyrhythmic sounds that sing to our bodies and call them to dance. It means that hearing the nuances of each individual at the same time may not be possible, but that careful consideration of each part is certainly a helpful way to access the complex score. And most of all, it means that to begin to understand the complexity of what is being created around you, you must also learn to co-exist with rhythms that may not be your own, and in Maboungou’s own words, find a way to live with it.

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