

Review of Dance Research in Quebec

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Introduction

In reviewing the body of research that has been conducted by the faculty and students of the Dance department at UQAM over the years, I have identified four major categories of research interests: first, creation-based research; second, the study of pedagogical approaches in dance training and education; third, issues of health and safety in dance; and finally, historical investigations of dance in Quebec.

In this paper, I will first highlight that research in our department is conducted primarily using qualitative research methods, with the majority of studies focusing on creation-based research and auto-ethnographic studies. Next, I will discuss the nature of the topics that are covered in the major areas of research interest, which I have identified. Finally, I will argue that the unique nature of Quebec's bilingual population encourages our researchers in the province to draw from both francophone and anglophone literature, allowing for a unique and particularly Quebecois "theoretical crossbreeding" of French and Anglo-Saxon dance and performance theory.

Methodological Approaches: Qualitative Research and Creation-Based Research

Dance-based research at UQAM is conducted from a post-positivist epistemological stance, using primarily qualitative methodologies. As is often the case in qualitative research, these studies are conducted using a "*bricolage*" (Bruneau, Villeneuve and Burns) of methodologies: researchers may combine ethnography and auto-ethnography, draw inspiration from phenomenology, and employ innovative and original methods of data collection, among them Explicitation or Auto-Explicitation interview techniques¹⁵ (Pierre Vermersch) and creative analytical and innovative practices. As Sylvie Fortin, Catherine Cyr, and Martyne Tremblay have argued:

In creative analytical practices, writing can be considered to be a path to knowledge and a tool for learning. In the hands of the creative analytical practitioner, writing, more than simply a method for presenting results, becomes a means of participating in the analysis, dissolving as it does the frontiers between method, results and discussion. (13)

Creation-Based Research

Close to half the dance research that has been conducted at UQAM is creation-based research (48%). We should clarify that while the early studies conducted through the Masters in dance did consist primarily of the production of a choreographic work accompanied by a short reflexive essay, today creation-based research projects are rigorous studies with clear aims, objectives, and questions, and well-designed methodologies. The period of creation serves not only as an opportunity for researchers to express themselves artistically, but also

as a “field study” through which they collect data on the phenomenon under investigation, which is in fact their own practice.

In the early days of the MA program, most artists-researchers addressed topics such as audacity, authenticity of movement, bodily sensations and interactions between dancer, rehearsal director, and choreographer. Today, however, a growing number of creation-based studies focus on the phenomenon of “interpretation” in dance. Since the mid 2000s, the socio-economic situation of dancers in Quebec, combined with efforts towards a unionization of the profession, seems to have favored the development of this new branch of dance studies that examines the socio-cultural elements of the dancer’s role as an artistic collaborator in the dance creation. Through the poïetic, auto-poïetic, or auto-ethnographic examination of the phenomenon of “interpretation” in dance, these studies address questions of the embodied, performative, sensorial, emotional, political, or even spiritual elements of dance performance. It is also worth noting that a number of studies address the notion of “interpretation” from a theoretical standpoint, be it through a health, sociological, psycho-analytic, or aesthetic lens.

The “technochoreographic” work developed by Professor Martine Époque and Denis Poulin is another interest of the creation-based research. These two scholars, who founded the LARTECH Laboratory in 1999, have developed a particular mode of artistic expression that they have named *‘la danse sans corps* (NoBody Dance)’. Époque explains:

[T]he digital actors, free from their physical appearance, offer a dance in which “Human” manifests itself through a dynamic print carrying the signature of its motion. Liberated from the traditional reference to body, this new work magnifies the danced movement and its energetic expression. (Époque and Poulin, “NoBody Dance”)

A final example of this uniquely Quebecois and “Uqamian” approach to creation-based research—which ultimately aims to reunite theory and practice—is the work of Professor Andrée Martin (2007), which she entitles *L’Abécédaire du Corps Dansant* (The Abecedarium for the Dancing Body). Through her research, Martin aims to “both create choreographic work and stimulate a reflection on the dancing body, working from an alphabetical series of terms, such as: A as *Action- D as Drop- E as Expression- F as Failure- G as Gesture-S as schooling etc*” (117).¹⁷

Research on Pedagogical Approaches in Dance Training and Education

Quebec could perhaps be described as a ‘cradle’ of creative dance in Canada, as it is home to an original dance education program, which was developed for elementary and high school aged students by professors from our Dance Department and the Quebec Ministry of Education.

Whereas at one time literature on dance education consisted mainly of instructional or ‘how-to’ manuals, researchers are currently rethinking the ways in which dancers are taught and trained at the scholastic, pre-professional, and professional levels. Describing and analyzing various pedagogical practices, questioning traditional teaching models, considering the role that various actors (such as educator or dance artist) can play in the teaching process, or

even proposing new and innovative action-based studies are but some of the ways that researchers in our department investigate the phenomenon of dance education. For example, my 2009 study draws from a body of neuroscientific research on mirror neurons (Rizzolatti) to explore the process of learning dance through imitation, and to re-examine the conventional 'demonstration-reproduction' teaching model. I am also interested in further understanding the benefits of somatic education for the dancer's training from this neuroscientific perspective. Another professor, Caroline Raymond, analyses various pedagogical strategies used to teach dance in elementary and high school environments, through the lens of Didactic Transposition Theory. In collaboration with her colleague Nicole Turcotte, Raymond also examines how the integration of the cultural dimensions of dance into school curriculums can enrich both pedagogical and artistic practices. Finally, Professor H el ene Duval's (2011) innovative sociological examination on the identity tensions or crises that dance educators face as a result of their dual role as artist-teacher opens a new and exciting avenue for education-based dance research.

Research on Health and Safety in Dance

Another major research interest that can be seen in the work of the students and faculty of our department surrounds the notion of health and safety in dance. This branch of dance studies is intimately related to the practice of and reflections on various approaches to somatic education. Undertaken in a holistic manner (that is, one that takes into account both physical and psychological well being), the topic of health and safety in dance is not examined from a medical point of view as it might be in the field of dance sciences. Rather, it is treated from a socio-cultural or political point of view, at times influenced by the feminist standpoint often found in American dance research.

This interest in health and safety in dance can be linked directly to the work of Professor Sylvie Fortin, who not only called for the integration of somatic practices into the department's undergraduate curriculum in the 1990s, but also created a university-level graduate certificate program in somatic education in 2000. The introduction of this material to the teaching curriculum was not insignificant: not only do somatic practices force dancers to rethink their usual approaches to personal training, but they also encourage them to rethink their relationships to their own bodies and those of their teachers and choreographers. Our faculty and students have conducted more than fifteen health-related studies since the mid 1990s; these studies serve to reveal the paradoxes between the representations of health in dance practices, and the realities of the difficult working conditions of the dance workplace. As such, I would argue that somatic education approaches offer a possible way to overcome these paradoxes, thus allowing dancers to fully commit to their trade and art form without threatening their physical or mental well being.

Historical Research

A final area of research interest is historical investigation. The late Professor Iro Tembeck (1994) was an influential figure in the development of historical research on dance in Quebec. She examined how dance practices and approaches to dance training evolved in Quebec from the 1930s to the 1950s due to the influence of European immigrants, and considered how

dance manifested itself differently in francophone and anglophone communities. She was equally fascinated with the process by which historical accounts of dance are constructed and reconstructed through time (2001). Today, UQAM professor Marie Beaulieu (2013) continues to investigate the role that dance has played in Quebec culture. Her in-depth investigation of *Les Grands Ballets Canadiens* examined not only the artistic dynamics of the company, but also identified the social structures and events that ensured its development and survival over its first twenty years of existence. Beaulieu also explores the discourses surrounding dance by analyzing documentation of audience reactions to choreographic works presented in Montreal at the turn of the twentieth century. Her research examines the relationship between Quebec society and dance artists, asking: is dance in Quebec a product of our societal values, or a means by which these values are formed and transmitted? Who is concocted by whom?

Theoretical Crossbreeding

While UQAM is a francophone university, it is also home to a number of anglophone and bilingual researchers. This unique bilingual environment has allowed for an original 'theoretical crossbreeding' with dance researchers drawing from both anglophone and francophone bodies of literature in an innovative and often unexpected manner. On the one hand, I see that many of our researchers have strong theoretical grounding in the works of a number of French and European philosophers (Arendt, Andrieu, Barthes, Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault, Merleau-Ponty, Rancière), and particularly in the work of those French scholars who have turned a phenomenological and aesthetic eye to the study of dance (Bernard, Després, Dupuy, Febvre, Godard, Louppe). These francophone influences have allowed dance researchers at UQAM to develop a critical, anti-conformist, and distinctly Quebecois view of choreographic creation, all while deepening their awareness of the importance of the internal and sensorial dimensions of movement research (Febvre). This dimension of sensorial awareness relates closely to our researchers' preoccupations with performative states and scenic presence, as they relate to the works of theatre scholars such as Barbra, Grotowski, and Brook.

On the other hand, however, dance researchers at UQAM also continue to build on a body of aesthetic and socio-cultural works drawn from the American and Anglo-Saxon world (Banes, Cooper Albright, Foster, Franko, Green). Be it from the standpoint of sociological, anthropological, performance or feminist theory, these Anglo-Saxon dance researchers more commonly consider the aesthetic and artistic dimensions of dance as they relate to the socio-economic realities of the environment where the dance is produced.

Where I see a clear intersection between these French and Anglo-Saxon points of view is in the work of two French scholars: Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault. These two authors draw our attention to the relationships of power that exist both within and outside the dance world, and force us to consider how the practice and study of dance exists in relation to society at large. Thus, I would like to hypothesize that this dual influence of the French philosophical-aesthetic approach and the Anglo-Saxon socio-cultural approach allow researchers at UQAM to produce theoretical and creation-based studies that are as equally tied to the act of creation as they are to the socio-cultural realities in which they are created.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that dance researchers in Quebec distinguish themselves with their strong focus on creation-based research, their interest in “interpretation” in dance, and the integration of new technologies in creation and performance. Additionally, the students and faculty at the UQAM dance department continue to contribute to the body of knowledge in regards to two important concerns of dance educators and practitioners: pedagogical approaches in dance training and education and the health and safety of dancers. Finally, I have proposed that the unique bilingual nature of Montreal’s dance research community allows us to ground our research in both francophone and anglophone perspectives, which has allowed for the development of a unique and distinctly Quebecois approach to research in dance. In conclusion, I would argue that faculty research in UQAM’s dance department is moving more and more towards a metavisualization of the areas of research interest I have discussed, particularly in the development of new and innovative theoretical and creation-based research methodologies for the performing arts.

Contemporary Circus Research in Quebec: Building and Negotiating and Emerging Interdisciplinary Field

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Describing an emerging field of research, one that is fundamentally interdisciplinary and heuristic in its phenomenological approach, can be overwhelming. In one sense, everything has yet to be done, but to state even this would be to negate precursory forays into the study of contemporary circus as practiced in Quebec and disseminated throughout the world from an unexpected new circus capital. In this short essay, I give a first-hand account of the creation of the Montreal Working Group for Circus Research, its rapid growth and integration into Montreal’s vibrant cosmopolitan circus scene. The Working Group and its ongoing collaboration with National Circus School of Montreal have served as a nexus for developing research strategies and a vocabulary for the new field of contemporary circus studies in North America.

In thirty short years, circus—in its contemporary narrative-driven, animal-free form—has blossomed in Quebec to the extent that it has become a potent cultural and economic symbol of the successful marriage of creativity and entrepreneurship. Circus is both performing art and business, fundamentally global and multinational in its traditions and the provenance of its artists and, in the case of Quebec, very much presented as a distinctive hybrid model for creativity emerging from a distinct society.

The impact of Quebec circus on the Montreal economy is well over one billion dollars in direct revenue, not counting the trickle-down effect and impact on secondary and tertiary industries, which rely on circus activity locally and abroad. Cirque du Soleil’s annual gross