Thinking through Moving Together

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By Maria Meindl

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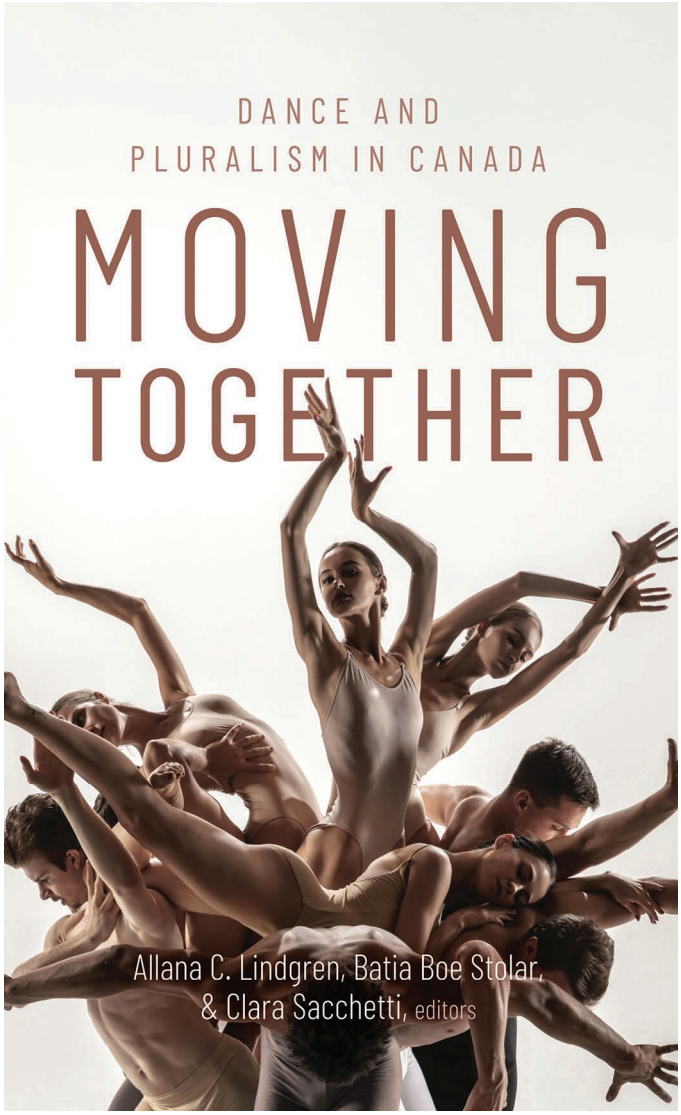

Cover image of *Moving Together: Dance and Pluralism in Canada* edited by Allana C. Lindgren, Batia Boe Stolar, and Clara Sacchetti. *Courtesy of Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2021*

As *Moving Together: Dance and Pluralism in Canada* arrived in my mailbox, searchers were uncovering the unmarked graves of children in the vicinity of former residential schools in Saskatchewan and British Columbia (Martens).[1] In the meantime, a long-called-for report had just exposed that COVID mortality rates in areas inhabited by "visible minorities" were more than double those in primarily white areas (Tasker). The express aim of *Moving Together* is to take a sounding of how pluralism is currently practised in Canadian dance (xvi), not to judge how the country as a whole is faring; still, I read it in the harsh light of questions I've been asking myself—as a white descendant of settlers—about my own addiction to cozy narratives of Canada the Good. With this nation's genocidal foundations literally emerging out of the ground, is there a place for even the most cautious of hopeful messages about pluralism in Canada?

As co-editors Allana C. Lindgren and Batia Boe Stolar point out, the terminology we use to describe the meeting of cultures on this soil has changed over the years. There was 'bilingualism'/'biculturalism,' 'multiculturalism (in its various incarnations),' 'inter-culturalism,' and 'diversity.' More recent terms are 'pluralism,' 'hybridity,' and 'fusion.' Shifts in terminology have gone along with such hotly contested shifts in thinking that prospective editors and publishers might be forgiven for avoiding a project like this in the first place. Admirably, the book cuts through such debates without ignoring them. Whatever words we use to describe the phenomenon, and no matter how it all came to be, there are a lot of different cultures moving together on this land. Dance is, for the book's editors, a "mode of inquiry" (xvii) for understanding emerging ideas of pluralism. Though it is often the site of injustice, dance also offers the potential for change.

The volume confronts a formidable set of issues. The first arises from including Indigenous peoples with "ethnic minorities" in discussions of multiculturalism, thus denying the distinct identities and inherent rights of Indigenous nations (xviii–xix). Lindgren recounts Canada's history of exclusionary, white-supremacist immigration policies (5–6). And, as she remarks, "Dances have their own histories that can supplement, enrich, and even complicate existing narratives about diversity in Canada" (4–5). Historians ignore these at their peril. As just one example, overlooking the phenomenon of embodiment has meant denying what one Métis community has done to preserve its own heritage and engage in its own "embodied stewardship" by continuing to practise

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the Red River jig. Assumptions like these have fed into the sense that it is up to white settlers to preserve Indigenous cultures perceived to be dying out (4). Injustices of public policy have their parallels in the realm of dance, including the outlawing, policing, and appropriation of Indigenous dance over the centuries (11). And then there is the 1951 Massey Report, which insisted on a distinction between 'high' art (ballet) and folk art, including the so-called Indian arts (15). The latter, it concluded, would suffer "inevitable" death (Massey et al. 240).[2]

An early section of *Moving Together* shows how discourse about dance may both reflect and perpetuate assumptions, conflating where it should make distinctions and declaring separations where there are none. In her analysis of the critical reception of El Viento Flamenco in St. John's, Newfoundland, Stolar observes how the troupe was othered and exoticized in 1990s critiques (despite Iberian connections that are central to Newfoundland's history).[3] The Spanish character is constructed as heated, passionate, and expressive, a foil for the true 'Canadian' identity, which is Nordic, reserved, and conducive to cold (48). Meantime, Evadne Kelly's exploration of Vancouver performances of the Fijian song-dance genre meke explores how discourses of Canadian multiculturalism essentialize those with origins in a particular country, assuming that they "share a harmonious and homogenous culture, tradition, or heritage" (67). The Fijian diaspora, however, includes both those of Indigenous iTaukei descent and the descendants of indentured labourers from India.[4] Tensions between these groups play out in numerous ways, including, in Kelly's view, through a pressure felt by some to "perform" a cohesive "traditional" Fijianness (70). As Kelly remarks, "[C]olonial and postcolonial tensions enter bodies and become part of them" (71). She draws on a variety of research methods, including embodied participation (73), to produce the sort of nuanced critique ideally poised to challenge limiting discourses of multiculturalism.

Canada may be shifting from seeing its 'real' citizens as universally Nordic, as Stolar observes (50), yet have we replaced this illusion with a misplaced pride in being the world's best example of multiculturalism? Hari Krishnan reminds us that his birthplace of Singapore is "a cosmopolitan and diverse" country (112). As a mature artist, he resists binaries, "East or West. Contemporary or Indian dance" (117). "We're all complex beings," he asserts (115). Along similar lines, Bridget E. Cauthery recounts the struggles of Zab Maboungou to define herself artistically in the face of totalizing assumptions and rigid definitions. Cauthery writes, "New Canadians are often asked to perform their identities in both public and private spaces in ways that do not reflect their status as evolving, contemporary beings" (93). Over the years, Maboungou's funding has been affected by this pigeonholing, yet, seen as a whole, her career has proven that "immigrants could be more than transported vessels of their cultural heritage" (102). We must, for Cauthery, come to see "all dance forms as ethnic" (106).

Dena Davida's essay on the "Kinetic Crossroads" of Québec has a heavy load to carry, illuminating Québec's distinct cultural context and remarking on how pluralism manifests there. As Davida points out, "'[W]hite' Québécois ironically perceive themselves as a disenfranchised group within the Canadian context" (162), yet the province is a meeting point for multiple cultures. One of Davida's case studies is Québec-born Marie Chouinard, who weaves elements of world dance into her choreography (161). She based her 1991 work *Les trous du ciel* on an Inuit story and faced accusations of cultural appropriation (162–63). Davida's essay was initially published in 1994, with an epilogue added in 2018. The epilogue acknowledges that cultural appropriation is still under discussion (170) but misses a chance to convey what is at stake as its abuses continue, decade after decade. As Ojibwe broadcaster Jesse Wente put it, "This absorbs so much energy; it causes so much pain in our communities to have to re-argue our value as human beings, on our own land … in a foreign language … one that was imposed on us. Please, what are we talking about in 2017?" (Wente and Galloway 2:10–2:30).

These and other case studies have me thinking that thanks to three intersecting m's, or Public EMemies—Pierre Trudeau's multiculturalism policies, the Massey Report, and modern dance—we have danced ourselves into a terrible mess. Can we dance ourselves out of it? For many contributors to *Moving Together*, the answer is yes. The latter part of the book presents a rosy picture. For Janelle Joseph, participation in a Canada Day flash mob showed that body movement is not just fun and games. Dancing together can be a way of combatting othering, moving multicultural dance "out of the realm of cultural appropriation and into the domain of cultural transformation" (195). Dance—she writes—can establish "kinesthetic groupness" (193), a kind of "sensuous multiculturalism" (198). The flash-mob event was joyous indeed: "We screwed the light bulb, tapped our wrists, wined, butterflied, Willie bounced, gave them a run, and pumped it up to a fast-paced five minutes of contemporary tunes" (188).

Lisa Doolittle recounts how the 1977 Odori concert, marking 100 years of the Japanese community in Canada (119), called on its anodyne "Folk-Dance" designation to access public resources and draw the community together (122). Blending multiple elements including Japanese classical dance and Noh traditions with contemporary choreographic, musical, and costume elements, the concert also represented diverse cultures from Japan (124–27). Thus, it challenged the reduction of any cultures on Canadian soil (other than the dominant French and English ones) to an "eternal unchanging 'folk' past" (123). The concert ended with a section emphasizing Japanese Canadian identity (127). Though it did not deal with the wartime internment, the concert contributed to the apology and compensation package that followed in 1988, in Doolittle's view (132).

Embodiment can become a *mode* of transformation. Lindgren's article on Chengxin Wei's performance at the Royal Ontario Museum posits dance as a curatorial practice. In moving through the space, Wei "re-curates" an exhibit that reflects outmoded practices of acquisition and interpretation (144). Lindgren terms Wei's performance "a conversation that takes place at the corporeal level" (146). For her part, Kahnyen'kehàka (Mohawk) choreographer, dancer, and teacher Santee Smith sees dance as a kind of embodied decolonizing process. "We don't really realize how much colonizers have impinged on our thoughts and bodies. My dancing aims to put those traditional essences back into motion" (214). "[T]he fact that I'm creating work as a First Nations person living in Canada (Turtle Island) is a political act" (211).

Some of the book's case studies show Canada as a place where different cultures reach out to each other and share what they have

to offer, refreshing traditions, developing new audiences, and challenging what is considered 'high' art. Roger Sinha blends modern dance, karate, and Bharatanatyam in his choreographic work (163). He has received criticism within the community of traditional Indian dance, yet has also suggested exciting new directions for other artists (Davida 166). Born in Toronto of Scottish/Irish parents, Yasmina Ramzy fell in love with Middle Eastern dance at a young age and devoted her life to studying and practising it (Andrews 255–71). In another story of dedication, two North American dance artists, Esmeralda Enrique (of Mexican ancestry, born in the United States) and Joanne DeSouza (of Scottish ancestry, born in Canada), have brought together Kathak and flamenco in a practice that, for author Catalina Fellay, blends tradition and innovation (289). Refreshingly, authors P. Megan Andrews (256) and Fellay (289–90) grapple with questions of privilege and cultural appropriation and show their subjects doing the same.

Tempting as it is to see dance as a way out of Canada's present troubles, the hopeful articles in Moving Together are best read in light of those that take a more bracing, critical approach. For this reason, a chapter on university dance education by Danielle Robinson and Eloisa Domenici might well have been placed at the end of the collection, , not simply as a conclusion but as a reminder of work still to be done. This is particularly true in light of the dearth of articles in the book authored by BIPOC individuals. Robinson and Domenici point out that dance is currently one of the whitest departments within Canadian universities, and they put pressure on the hegemony of modern dance (179). They lay out a series of "Enduring Myths" of modern dance, critiquing its perceived universality and the near-religious fervour of its adherents (177–78). With a self-reflective tone, the authors go on to enumerate the protective justifications for Eurocentric dance programs (178–79) and the assumptions that stand in the way of inter-culturalism in dance education (179–80). If Robinson and Domenici's recommendations for creating inter-cultural dance programs (181–82) are embraced by more institutions, there is indeed hope for moving together into a shared future.

Notes

1 The use of the term 'schools' has been called into question. As Andrew McConnell, a consultant on First Nations Education for York region and a descendant of survivors, observed, "They weren't schools; they were prisons, they were institutions, work camps" (McConnell and Serapio 2:40-55).

2 Giving the lie to the report's prophecy, Dr. Kevin Loring (Nlaka'pamux Nation), Artistic Director of Indigenous Theatre at the National Arts Centre, read this section aloud as part of his keynote address at the Canadian Association for Theatre Research conference in 2021 (28:00–31:00).

3 Sailors, fishers, and explorers of Basque, Portuguese, and Spanish origin were among the first Europeans in Newfoundland, and until the middle of the twentieth century, fishermen from Portugal's White Fleet spent part of each year in St. John's as they fished on the Grand Banks (48).

4 British colonizers brought indentured workers from India to Fiji up until 1916, and in recent years, they have struggled for equality vis-à-vis the Indigenous iTaukei, who are the only ones permitted to own land (64–65). Tensions also exist between the Christian identity of most iTaukei Fijians—based on Methodist missionary influence (69)—and the Hindu traditions observed by those of Indian descent (70).

About the Author

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