September 23, 2015
Trans-Montréal VESSEL, afterthoughts from the event that took place September 17-18 at McGill University in Montréal

With greetings and warmth to our colleagues in Ethiopia
DAY 1:
We had a fantastic first day of the Trans-Montréal workshop. ....

I introduced Fluid States and showed the very stunning video by the Japan group much acclaim.

Then the first panel of the day was “Trans-identification,” which I moderated and which included really sharp and interesting, brief polemics presented by Tawny Andersen (on the performative “across” practice and theory), Kama La Mackerel (on femme-of-color trans identities as a ”layering” and how to enact them through performance and other media), Johnny Forever Nawracaj (on two Polish sites of religious/national identification and xenophobia in the face of current xenophobic reactions across Europe), VK Preston (on 17th century colonial dictionaries forcing Wendat language into French: translation as domination), Mikhel Proulx (on the relationship between performing gender and coding identity through interface with computers, and the illusory sense of existing in “fluid states” in relation to our screens), and 2Fik (on the complexities of trans-identifications for someone born in Paris as a Moroccan immigrant, moved to Morocco where he had to learn Arabic, and then to Montréal: transculturality and identities as a bag of marbles, each relating to a different aspect of the self, of which, when placed on a surface, only some touch the surface and emerge into view).
The second panel, moderated and run by Erin Hurley (performance studies scholar at McGill), was on “Trans-Media and Translation,” in relation to Québec performance. Jean-Marc Larrue spoke about intermediality in relation to the performative; Leslie Baker talked about her location (geographical, conceptual, embodied) as a dancer, her “physical theatre,” grounded in dance, gestural theatre, and multimedia (or intermedial) performance art; 2boys tv (Stephen Lawson and Aaron Pollard) spoke of their work Tight Rope, a piece that “transforms” according to the venue, city, and culture at hand; and Sarah Henzi spoke of indigenous cultures across Canada and curator Louis Karl Picard-Siouii’s performance at the vernissage of his show The Indian Act Revisited at McGill’s McCord University, where he organized an attack on his person, deeply unsettling the audience.

Notably, Henzi pointed out that tomorrow, while we will be engaging with our colleagues in Regina on autochtone (aboriginal) issues, the Mohawk tribal peoples will be staging a powwow and protest at McGill, which is built on unceded Mohawk territory.
The first afternoon panel consisted of Victoria Stanton and Sylvie Tourangeau delivering the results of their 1 1/2 year long investigation into the themes of “Transaction/Transformation,” for which they enlisted four other performance artists to engage with them in fugitive and liminal performances in the public sphere. The group (Evelyne Bouchard, Diane Dubeau, and Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, and Nicole Panneton) performatively exemplified such fugitive acts throughout the presentation and all workshop participants were enlisted at various points in the exercise. For example, Bouchard passed around a purple phone attached to an iPod playing a recording of the entire morning’s session, creating a metacommentary on time and perception in relation to the “event.”
The second afternoon panel, run by Alanna Thain and Jen Spiegel, presented the research presented in a “shift” at PSi 2012 in Leeds (with collaborator Christoph Brunner, and others) investigating “Transmigration/Mobile Homes: Enduring Fluidity.” Questions of place, site, who owns public space, and what constitutes “home” were addressed. The session ended in a “conceptual speed dating” routine involving all members of the audience.

The attendees all adjourned to walk up Mont Royal to view an outdoor screening, run by Thain’s Cinema Out of the Box project, of the extraordinary film Québékoisie, directed by Mélanie Carrier and Olivier Higgins. The film plays onto a screen hung between trees in the lovely, tender Montréal fall evening, with volunteers trading shifts to ride the bicycle running the generator to make the digital projector and laptop work.

The film addresses the transculturality and transidentifications in Québec which normally go unacknowledged: the aboriginal people long ago intermarried with the francophone population such that there are actually
no “pure” francophone or “pure” aboriginal peoples. The film discusses the tendency to ignore this actuality so as to reinforce the myth of separate cultures.

Alanna Thain operating the “Cinema Out of the Box,” showing the screening of Québékoisie, a film by Mélanie Carrier and Olivier Higgins, in the park at Mont Royal

The evening ended on a beautiful note.

DAY 2
The first panel, run by Anne Bénichou, on “(Re)performance and Transhistoricity” ((Re)Performance et transhistoricité) included four excellent presentations, in French (mainly), addressing abstract aspects of reperforming in relation to dance (Noémie Solomon), and specific case studies of dance archives and creative or “anarchival” projects playing with historic dance imagery in Québec (Catherine Lavoie-Marcus), the work of Anthea Thauberger redoing the redoing of Marquis de Sade work on the murder of Marat, via theatre and film precursors (Geneviève Chevalier), and the multiple recreations of Françoise Sullivan’s foundational Québec dance from 1948 (often via the photographs by Maurice Perron), including recently by Luis Jacob and the queer Toronto drag performer Keith Cole.

Much intelligent commentary on Lavoie-Marcus’s presentation by Vincent Marquis:
Ce projet soulève d’importantes questions. En premier lieu, je suis attiré vers un parallèle entre les archives comme objets / l’archivage comme pratique, et la manière dont je perçois les monuments public traditionnel [...]

Plus largement, les archives et les monuments font partie de ce groupe d’objets publics qui, considéré dans leur ensemble, constituent le canon mnémonique d’une société. Le projet des anarchives de la danse s’inscrit dans une ensemble de pratiques qui cherchent à renverser cette imposition d’un cadre rigide de mémoire sociale en le transformant, le modifiant, en jouant avec lui, voire en le détruisant. Son projet -- de façon similaire aux contre-monuments d’artistes et d’architectes tels que Thomas Hirschhorn, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Maya Lin, Thomas Schütte, Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz -- cherche à répondre aux questions suivantes: Dans quelle mesure est-il possible de renverser l’histoire publique générale et canonique? Quelles sont quelques unes des méthodes que l’on devrait employer afin d’arriver à cette fin? À quoi ressemblent des modèles de mémoires alternatifs? Autrement dit, dans quelle mesure est-il possible de mettre en œuvre une modalité plus fluide de mémoire collective? Pour utiliser les mots de Lavoie-Marcus, comment encourage une « chorégraphie de la mémoire, plutôt qu’une mémoire chorégraphique » ?

Par ailleurs, comme les réactions de la communauté québécoise de la danse le révèlent, il serait intéressant de se pencher davantage sur le lien qui existe entre les « anarchives », les contre-monuments et autres objets de mémoire renversée, et le concept d’admiration ou d’hommage.

Cette dimension du projet de Lavoie-Marcus soulève des questions de deux ordres. D’une part, qu’est-ce que cette réaction de la communauté de la danse révèle à propos de la société québécoise plus large? Cette hésitation à revoir la mémoire socioculturelle et ses figures marquantes est-elle le symptôme de quelque chose de plus vaste -- un malaise généralisé par rapport au passé québécois? Inversement, en France par exemple, qu’est-ce qu’une réaction positive par rapport au projet des anarchives révèle par au sujet du rapport que cette société entretient avec son passé? D’autre part, il est important de se pencher sur cette idée de devoir consolider une certain canon avant de pouvoir le revisiter, le renverser, le transformer. Dans quelle mesure est-ce nécessaire? Pourrait-on soutenir qu’au contraire, le fait de ne pas avoir de canon solide favorise sa fluidité, sa modification, sa transformation? Y a-t-il même des canons fluides? [...]

Qu’est-ce qui fait que certaines sociétés ou groupes se retrouvent dans un climat propice à l’expérimentation? Est-ce vraiment, comme Catherine semblait le soutenir, une question de stabiliser préalablement un canon? Quels sont les phénomènes sociologiques qui sous-tendent ces opérations -- tantôt ludiques, tantôt sérieuses -- de manipulation de la mémoire sociale?
The final panel was our joint session with Regina. I will let them answer to their part of this, but our moderator, Inuk scholar and theorist Heather Igloliorte first pointed out to us that “we are on Mohawk land,” and we were all aware that outside our window in the McGill University quad was the annual Mohawk powwow. We could hear the drums. And this just a few days after the Mohawk issued a letter to the chancellor of McGill demanding that McGill make reparations for the taking of these lands, which were not paid for: http://mohawknationnews.com/blog/2015/09/12/mohawk-seizure-notice-to-mcgill/

Sign on McGill campus across from our event noting week of “Aboriginal Sensitivity”
The discussion we had in closing expanded upon the themes of the Regina panel as well as of the panels preceding it: who speaks for whom; what does “improvisational” mean in relation to political issues such as those indigenous people face in Canada? what is the goal of speaking about or doing performative acts? is it enough to speak of “giving voice” to the marginalized? We discussed the need to make ourselves aware (no matter how we identify) of how and when and in what situations we feel threatened and to work, perform, teach, and practice from that position of self awareness. We spoke finally, thanks to Noémie Solomon citing Foucault, of moving past liberatory rhetoric to invent (and do) practices.

And more thoughts, particularly relating to Bénichou’s panel, by Lauren Mattioni, correspondent:
When I initially received the opportunity to attend Trans-Montréal as a local correspondent, I had every intention of approaching the material presented exclusively as an art historian. Though I have been a performer for years, this conference opened my mind to the myriad ways that I could combine my critical apparatus as an art historian with my expressive drive as a dancer. All of the presentations at this conference have given me exciting food for thought in terms how I can be thinking about my own performance practices and how these practices can fuel my research interests and scholarly objectives.

Though I have studied many styles of dance throughout my life, my practice as a performer is primarily in Raqs Sharqi, or what is more commonly known as “belly dance”. This style of dance has a complex history and its origins are not fully documented. However, the dance style currently known as Raqs Sharqi (or ‘dance of the East’ as it translates in Arabic) is based on a combination of Middle Eastern and North African folkloric dances. In recent years, due to the rise in Islamic fundamentalism, this dance has increasingly moved Westward with the majority of famous practitioners now hailing from Eastern Europe and the United States as opposed to the Middle East. With this transition, many questions have arisen around cultural appropriation and defining authenticity as it relates to this practice, especially with the development of fusion styles as Raqs Sharqi has gained popularity. Furthermore, as this dance style is often perceived as highly sexualized, the problematics of the male gaze and gender binary are particularly prominent.
In my own practice as a dancer, I perform a version of fusion-style dance that combines a basis in Raqs Sharqi with elements of Western Contemporary dance. I primarily devised this practice as a way of both utilizing my varied dance background and being true to myself as a performer since as a Western, white woman I cannot claim to be an authentic practitioner of Raqs Sharqi. A point of tension in combining these Eastern and Western styles, however, is in the approach to choreography. In Western dance, the dancer acts as a body to animated by a separately-devised choreography. In Middle Eastern dance, the movements are almost exclusively improvised. However, the theory of this improvisation is that the dancer’s role is to animate the music thereby translating an aural and linguistic medium into a visual one. This relates heavily to the poetic traditions that have influenced the Arabic language and, in turn, the music such that a combination of media (music and dance) is thought to be the most effective in articulating meaning to the audience.

Following Trans-Montréal, I have devised the following questions to explore:

1. Regarding the assumption of the white female body as the standard vehicle for dance, there is significant post-colonial baggage as it relates to Raqs Sharqi in the West. However, in relation to what Anne Bénichou discussed regarding re-enactment/re-performance as a means of empowerment, could the performance of an often sexualized, highly gendered Arabic dance style on white female bodies be considered subversive in light of the West’s dominant view of Arab culture as oppressive to women?

2. Can the combination of the improvisational basis of Raqs Sharqi with the choreographic basis of Western contemporary dance (although seemingly at odds) transform dance as a performative medium by making the dancer as a body (both in the Arab sense of being a vehicle for the music and the Western sense as being a body to be animated by a disembodied choreography) and the dancer as an author an inextricable whole?

3. Furthermore, can this idea of re-performance/re-enactment coupled with the gendered nature of Raqs Sharqi be used to re-negotiate the performance female/femme identity such that it exists independently of the male gaze/gender binary while also becoming inclusive of queer/trans identities?