Black Women Dancers, Jazz Culture, and "Show Biz": Recentering Afro-Culture and Reclaiming Dancing Black Bodies in Montréal, 1920s–1950s

BY EMILIE JABOUIN

Abstract: The documentary Show Girls, directed by Meilan Lam, makes an unprecedented contribution to the history of jazz and Black women jazz dancers in Montréal, Quebec, and to the conversation of jazz in Canada. Show Girls offers a glimpse into the lives of three Black women dancers of the 1920s–1950s. This essay asks what the lives of Black women dancers were like and how they navigated their career paths in terms of social and economic opportunities and barriers. I seek to better understand three points: (1) the gap in the study of jazz that generally excludes and/or separates dance and singing from the music; (2) the use of dance as a way to commercialize, sell, and give visual and conceptual meaning to jazz; (3) the importance of the Black body and the role of what I would define as “Afro-culture” in producing the ingenious and creative genre of jazz. My study suggests there is a dominant narrative of jazz, at least in academic literature, that celebrates one dimension of jazz as it was advertised in show business, and that bringing in additional components of jazz provides a counternarrative, but also a restorative, whole and more authentic story of jazz and its origins. More specifically, by re-exploring jazz as a whole culture that relies on music, song, and dance, this essay explores three major ideas. First, Black women dancers played a significant role in the success of jazz shows. Second, they articulated stories of self, freedom, and the identity of the New Negro through jazz culture and dance. Third, Black women’s bodies and art were later crystallized into images that further served to sell jazz as a product of show business.

Keywords: Black women, Black dance, nightclubs, jazz, sexuality, entertainment, Afro-culture, visual culture

Résumé : Le documentaire Les Girls produit par Meilan Lam apporte une contribution sans précédent à l’histoire du jazz et des danseuses de jazz noires à Montréal, au Québec, ainsi qu’à la discussion sur le jazz au Canada. Les Girls offre un aperçu de la vie de trois danseuses noires des années 1920 à 1950. Le présent article intitulé « Danseuses noires, culture du jazz et “industrie du spectacle” : recentrage et réappropriation des corps des danseuses noires dans le Montréal des années 1920 à 1950 » cherche à répondre aux interrogations suivantes : à quoi ressemblait la vie des danseuses noires ? Comment elles se frayèrent un cheminement de carrière en termes de possibilités et d’obstacles sur le plan socio-économique ? Ce travail s’efforce de mieux cerner les trois points suivants : (1) les lacunes dans les recherches sur le jazz qui, en général, excluent et/ou séparent la danse et le chant de la musique ; (2) l’utilisation de la danse comme moyen de commercialiser, de vendre, et de donner un
sens visuel et conceptuel au jazz; (3) la dépendance du jazz vis-à-vis du corps de la femme noire et de ce qu’on pourrait nommer « Afro-culture » pour produire un style de jazz ingénieux et créatif. Cette étude suggère qu’il existe un discours dominant du jazz, à tout le moins, chez les universitaires, qui célèbre une dimension du jazz telle qu’elle fut médiatisée dans l’industrie du spectacle, et que le fait de dévoiler d’autres facettes du jazz permet de présenter non seulement un contre-discours, mais également une histoire réparatrice, entière et plus authentique du jazz et de ses origines. Plus exactement, en procédant à un réexamen du jazz en tant que culture qui s’appuie sur la musique, le chant et la danse, cet article analyse trois idées majeures. D’abord, les danseuses noires ont joué un rôle déterminant dans le succès des spectacles de jazz. Ensuite, elles ont contribué à l’expression de discours sur le soi, la liberté, et l’identité du New Negro à travers la culture du jazz et la danse. Enfin, les corps et l’art des femmes noires ont, plus tard, donné corps à des images qui ont davantage permis de vendre le jazz comme produit de l’industrie du spectacle.

Mots clés : Femmes noires, danse noire, boîtes de nuit, jazz, sexualité, divertissement, Afro-culture, culture visuelle

I. INTRODUCTION

In the 1998 National Film Board documentary Show Girls,1 Bernice Jordan Whims, Tina Baines Brereton, and Olga Spencer Foderingham tell their stories as professional “coloured” women dancers in Montréal’s nightclubs, which became leading jazz hotspots from the 1920s to 1950s.2 One of these nightclubs was Rockhead’s Paradise, a popular Black jazz locale comparable to New York’s Cotton Club. It was opened in 1928 by Rufus Nathaniel Rockhead at the peak of the Harlem Renaissance, the social and cultural rise of Black culture and art in the mainstream. The club hosted local and international talents such as Oscar Peterson and Louis Armstrong. “The club had a Black chorus line, and plenty of ‘shake dancers,’” noted Toronto Star columnist Robert Stewart decades later in 1973.3

Curious as to why this white journalist would reminisce about the Harlem Renaissance and jazz, which was dominated by Black artists, I wondered whether the term “shake dancers” was an accurate way to describe the performers, or whether it reflected his views, as a dominant outsider,

1 Show Girls: Celebrating Montréal’s Legendary Black Jazz Scene, dir. Meilan Lam (National Film Board of Canada, 1998).
2 Throughout the text, the women interviewed in the Show Girls documentary will be referred to by their first names in the same way they were referred to in the film.
3 Robert Stewart, “When American Blacks Are Looking for Fun, They Head for a Montréal Club Called: Rockhead’s Paradise,” Toronto Star, 21 July 1973, C21–C22, <ezproxy.torontopubliclibrary.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/page-c21/docview/1417168113/seq-2?accountid=14369>.
on the Jazz Age. Was it a vulgarization of these women’s performance work? I took a burlesque class in Toronto with Dainty Smith — a renowned burlesque dancer and performer with fifteen years of experience and the founder of Femmes Fatales, the first Black, Indigenous, and femmes of colour burlesque troupe in Canada. She told us about the history of burlesque and of the long presence of Black and Brown women in the industry. Smith highlighted the many words used to refer to burlesque dancers, including “showgirls” as well as “shake dancers,” “can-can dancers,” “grinders,” “shimmiers,” “bumpers,” “show ponies,” and “show birds,” the last two being more gender-neutral terms.

There are, however, blurred lines between “showgirls” as women performers in jazz clubs and “showgirls” as burlesque performers. Both categories of cultural expression play on feminine sexual expression. In interviews conducted with Black women dancers for Show Girls, discussion arises of what was and was not acceptable — what lines should not be crossed. Some feminist literature pigeonholes the rhetoric of Black women jazz dancers as “anti-sex work” or as participating in the respectability politics that shames sex work. However, I prefer to discard the practice of conflating dance, burlesque, and sex work, and I refuse to judge how a performer may want to represent or describe their work. As a dance artist, I have thought about the challenges of using my body as part of my art and the way my work is less valued in mainstream culture than are visual art, photography, and other forms of externalized art. Some scholars and community activists talk about defining sex work as simply work that utilizes the body (including modelling and dance). I have made connections between being a dancer and the use and sometimes exploitation of my body in film, photography, and choreography without my having full and permanent ownership of what my body has produced, nor access to the intellectual property of the final multidisciplinary art piece. Overall, though, I define my work by the purpose of its creation, which is spiritual, and thus see it as distinct from sex work. In conversation with colleagues, I have come to realize that there is dance as a profession in all of its forms, and there is sex work as a profession in all of its forms. Lumping these categories together is uncritical and does a disservice to both forms of expertise, because the matter goes far beyond elevating or reducing one type of work above the other. It is a matter of women’s work being valued or not.

I spent time reading about jazz of the 1920s to 1950s, learning from jazz experts, reviewing Meilan Lam’s documentary, and looking at some works that touch on the subject of Black “showgirls.” But given the limited

4 Vanessa Blais-Tremblay, “Gorgeous Girlies in Glittering Gyrations! Capital érotique et danse jazz dans l’entre-deux-guerres québécois,” Recherches féministes, 32.1 (2019): 89–109.
sources, I mainly took up the task of reading between the lines, following the patterns of narratives that too often left Black women dancers as side notes. I was committed to asking what the absence of Black women dancers meant in a given source. This paper foregrounds the erasure of dance in major Canadian jazz history records, and thus points to a need to reconsider how to understand jazz in order to capture the richness of the culture and its stories. What can we make of the social, economic, and symbolic realities of Black women’s work given the partial clues, inferential presence, or utter lack of representation where one could expect to find Black women dancers? In this article, I comment on and analyze images, playbills, programmes, flyers, and sheet music, taking into account the importance of images to convey context and to promote shows. I also use my own experiences as a Black woman dancer to imagine and further understand the perspectives and ideas Black women reified in their interviews with Meilan Lam. The women’s testimonies would have been lost had it not been for the documentary, and the images in the documentary enhance their stories and create parallel narratives that I explore briefly as well.

In the context of the 1920s–1950s, what were the lives of Black women dancers like? How did they navigate their career paths in terms of social and economic opportunities and barriers? How did they balance professional dance careers with gendered norms of sexuality and their widely church-based political communities? What was the conversation between dance and jazz as a culture? What was the relationship of social dance, stage performances, and audience participation in jazz? Who danced on stage? What was the importance of dance in the “jazz show”? In the mid-to-late twentieth century, there was a stark separation in the Montréal jazz scene between jazz clubs that were open to everyone, including those with a predominantly Black clientele, and clubs in the East and Uptown that were exclusively white — reserved for white patrons and white jazz bands.5 How did racial dynamics impact the realities of Black women dancers? I focus on the role of dance, especially the work of Black women dancers, as a fundamental part of making jazz culture what it was in its beginnings and in building its legacy to this day. I am interested in the life stories of the “shake dancers” that we so seldom hear about. This essay seeks to give a more grounded context and a fuller picture of the lives of Black women dancers in Montréal. To do that, I provide an overview of the representation and conceptual space dance takes in the literature on jazz, in images and programmes representative of the jazz era, and in the material associated with jazz to understand what role “shake dancers” played in the success of jazz shows. By doing so, I address (a) a gap in the study of

5 John Gilmore, Swinging in Paradise: The Story of Jazz in Montréal (Montréal: Vehicule Press, 1989).
jazz that generally excludes or separates dance and singing from the music; (b) the use of dance as a way to commercialize, sell, and give visual and conceptual meaning to jazz; and (c) the importance of the Black body and the role of what I would define as “Afro-culture” — cultures derived from African and Afro-diasporic peoples around the world — in producing the ingenious and creative genre of jazz. My study suggests there is a dominant narrative of jazz, at least in academic literature, that celebrates one dimension of jazz as it was advertised in show business. Bringing in additional components provides not only a counternarrative but also a restorative and more authentic story of jazz and its origins.

II. FRAMING STUDIES OF CULTURE AND RETHINKING SOCIAL QUESTIONS

Meilan Lam’s archives at Concordia University seem to be the only extensive source on Black women dancers’ experiences in jazz nightclubs in the early to mid twentieth century in Montréal. Though access to these sources during a pandemic was limited or near impossible, I followed my curiosity within this set of available sources to see how the material could be read differently.

My rereading of the archive led me to consider more deeply the ongoing conversation between the dancer and drummer in Afro-diasporic dance traditions. In the spirit of “call-and-response,” a model brought to the Americas by enslaved Africans, the dancer and drummer are in harmony, at times competing and challenging each other; but generally the drummer follows the dancer. The structures and aesthetics of cultural expressions that predate jazz, such as the blues, reflect Afro-culture and establish a space of exchange, reflection, and storytelling to express collective experiences and historical facts: “The blues were certainly a communal expression of black experience which had developed out of the call and response patterns of work songs from the nineteenth century and have been described as a ‘complex interweaving of the general and the specific’ and of individual and group experience.”6 In its prime, jazz depended on the innovation of the musician, the protest and contestation of the singer, and the rhythmic duel of the dancer.

The 1920s were the height of the finessing of jazz. Duke Ellington was known for drawing from African American “vernacular idioms for novel invention”;7 Billie Holiday was drawing from African American singing and

6 Hazel V. Carby, “It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women’s Blues,” in The Jazz Cadence of American Culture, ed. Robert G. O’Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 475.
7 Gilmore, Swinging in Paradise, 48.
music traditions, continuing the protest found in enslaved and self-emancipated African peoples’ spirituals, which deeply changed popular culture;⁸ and Katherine Dunham was revolutionizing dance by going to the roots of African American, Caribbean, and African dance traditions to incorporate them into contemporary and European stages and dance worlds.⁹ All jazz artists influenced and depended on each other on stage: “jazz drummers were building on rhythmic phrases created by jazz tappers.”¹⁰ The show was embellished by the play and exhilarating effect of the back and forth between dancer and musician,¹¹ whether a drummer, trumpeter, pianist, or any other sort. That exchange is foundational in Afro-diasporic dances, marking the centrality of dance to the music, as water is to earth in order to grow life:

Legendary jazz orchestras and artists such as the Duke Ellington Orchestra, Fess Williams, Artie Shaw, Tommy Dorsey, Chick Webb, Dizzy Gillespie, and Cab Calloway were playing at the Savoy, and their music fueled the creative energy that fed the development of new jazz social dances. In turn, the musicians were creatively influenced by the dancers’ movements and rhythms. Other jazz social dances and dance steps developed alongside the Lindy, such as the Big Apple, Shorty George, and Suzie Q, the majority of them Savoy-originated. This new movement vocabulary continued the trend of serving as source material for experimentation and innovation for social, theatrical, and future concert jazz dance forms. Although the musician–dancer dynamic was mostly honed in the context of social dance, the adaptation to the stage is meant to be a true reflection of that artistic exchange.¹²

I think of jazz as a collective accompaniment, a relationship, a constant call and response between the musicians, dancers, and singers. American scholar Jill Flanders Crosby and Canadian scholar and choreographer Michèle Moss describe jazz as a collective experience that is hard to define in one particular way. They also acknowledge that the histories of jazz dance and jazz music are interwoven and complex: “Their parallel histories

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⁸ Angela Y. Davis. Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday (New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 1999), 165, 167.
⁹ KCAH — Katherine Dunham Centers for Arts and Humanities, <kdcah.org/katherine-dunham-biography/>, accessed 30 August 2021.
¹⁰ Jill Flanders Crosby and Michèle Moss, “Jazz Dance from Emancipation to 1970,” in Jazz Dance: A History of the Roots and Branches, ed. Lindsay Guarino and Wendy Oliver (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014), 48.
¹¹ Flanders Crosby and Moss, “Jazz Dance,” 50.
¹² Ibid., 49–50.
reveal a multiplicity of aesthetic approaches, interactions, and a fluidity of cultural, musical, and dance identities. Imagine the jazz tree … surrounded by a community dancing socially and performatively. The groove that the participants, dancers, and musicians share is one that celebrates individual expression yet moves as a collective.”

Understanding jazz in the way that it was created, as an experience and as a way to resist, a genre or style of expression, may be a more organic way of addressing the topic of jazz dance. Otherwise, jazz is assumed to be first and foremost the music, and the other parts of jazz culture are ignored. In *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, Black feminist activist and scholar Angela Y. Davis notes that “because most studies of the Blues have tended to be gendered implicitly as male, those that have engaged with the social implications of this music have overlooked or marginalized women.” Unfortunately, in the same way, jazz scholars have also overlooked the jazz singer and especially the jazz dancer, who tended to be women. Though their titles would suggest otherwise, two major works on jazz history in Montréal, Canada — John Gilmore’s *Swinging in Paradise* and Nancy Marrelli’s *Stepping Out: The Golden Age of Montréal Night Clubs, 1925–1955* — have seriously overlooked the role of jazz dancers in the development of jazz.

Caribbean folk dance, including Haitian dance, which I practice, is taught as a trinity of song, drum, and dance. To push the matter further, at the core, folk dance and music are always in conversation. Historically, the success and survival of musicians, such as banjo players in African American folk culture, was closely tied to their role playing for dancers.

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13 Ibid., 45.
14 I am guessing that the music has been given priority in discussions about jazz because of the idea that jazz dance cannot occur without the music. Yet their relationship is one of interdependence. Indeed, the dancer has to know the music and embody the rhythm in order to dance, and the music responds to the dancer’s movement and reflects everyday expressions of life. I prioritize the idea that the internal rhythm is what gave birth to the external rhythm. Either way, the argument is circular. None of the parts of jazz can actually be separated, given that the musician, singer, dancer all need the rhythm in their bodies — they need to feel, breathe, and dance the music — and be able to sing the rhythm in order to do their art. In order to give value to art and culture, it is crucial to rethink how we approach, engage, and translate them.
15 Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, xiv.
16 John Gilmore, *Swinging in Paradise*; Nancy Marelli, *Stepping Out: The Golden Age of Montréal Night Clubs, 1925–1955* (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 2004).
17 Laurent Dubois, *The Banjo: America’s African Instrument* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 17.
The connection to be made with jazz culture is that jazz comes from African American folk and follows similar principles. Jazz is influenced by Caribbean folk (via Caribbean migration to the United States) and a parallel evolution of more traditional or “tribal” dances, as Katherine Dunham, anthropologist, American choreographer, and creator of the Dunham Technique, prefers to describe them. Hence, jazz is connected to a particular time, culture, and place, resulting from the forced migration of African peoples to the Americas. Dunham gives the prominent examples of the Lindy Hop and the Big Apple — popular jazz dances in the United States in the first part of the twentieth century that resembled, in the case of the Lindy Hop, popular urban Jamaican dances such as the shay-shay or the mento, and in the case of the Big Apple, competitive “circle” dances such as “the plantation Juba dance,” also called jumba, or majumba in the West Indies. Another important point to make is that Afro-dances are not meant to be divorced from music and the rhythms in the songs. They are meant to always be a unit, a konbit in Haitian Creole, that works towards a collective objective to help one another. While learning Haitian folk songs, I realized that the most important part was humming the song to the rhythm. Lyrics can be adapted to any rhythm, but songs lose meaning if the proper rhythm is not used in context. Someone who did not understand the language or the words would still be able to connect to the essence of the song just by listening and humming along. When connecting with other artists, I started to understand that any musician, dancer, or singer of whatever culture and linguistic background would be able to pick up the song just by relying on the rhythm, not the lyrics. For reasons of preservation, cultural communication, and expression of cultural identities and stories, the music (i.e., the rhythm), the song (i.e., the lyrics and the vocals), and the dance must be taught and celebrated together.

This article offers a commentary on the impact of how we remember cultural histories and the influences of our approach on how future generations experience and engage with them. One of my mentors, master drummer and Haitian dance teacher and choreographer Peniel Guerrier, uses the core

18 Flanders Crosby and Moss, “Jazz Dance.”
19 Here Dunham refers to the original meaning of the dance in terms of its roots in traditions and spiritual practices, much as I later describe the three levels of dance as first stemming from a traditional expression, in other words, from a spiritual foundation.
20 Katherine Dunham, “The Negro Dance,” in Kaiso! Writings by and about Katherine Dunham, ed. Vèvè A. Clarke and Sara E. Johnson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 217–26.
21 Also written djumba in Haitian creole.
22 Dunham, “The Negro Dance,” 223.
approach of “the threes.” He maintains that every aspect of life comes in threes, like an inseparable family. For example, the traditional Haitian drums (for most rhythms) come in threes — the Manman tanbou, the tanbou Segon, and the Boula. Traditional and folklore cultures are also composed of three elements — singing, drumming, and dancing — and understanding culture relies on three levels — the foundation or traditional life, the folklore or adaptation of the traditional in order to express people’s daily lives through performance, and the re/creation or new individual expressions of the folk. Therefore, my work critiques what is often characterized as a Western understanding of the arts and of the study of the arts as separate entities, where a person either plays an instrument, sings, or dances. Many artists of past generations learned to play instruments, sing, and dance or move to the rhythm as complements to one another. I have noticed a revival of this integrative approach as elders and professionals train the next generations. I propose that we reconsider how we understand cultural histories and resist the desire to segment and compartmentalize expressions of life and culture. When scholars choose to ignore one aspect in favor of another and to separate art into pieces, the expression loses its full sense and results in imbalances. The research has to stay connected to the work and to the art itself.

Approaching jazz from the philosophy of “the threes” is important for understanding Afro-derived dances, African American folk, and other mergers of African and European cultural forms and what happens when elements of the culture are separated, as is sometimes the case in mainstream popular culture. The commodification of jazz, or in other words, the rise of “show business” in the context of the Jazz Age, was responsible for disjointing jazz culture. I argue that “show business” was largely responsible for pushing aside jazz dancers, and that the silences about their role in the cultural production and memory of the Jazz Age reflects the societal tendency to disregard Black artistic practices and ingenuity. Overlooking the bigger picture means that the role of Black women dancers in jazz was and in some respect still is reduced to sexual, racial, and gendered stereotypes about Black women’s bodies.

a) Black Feminists Have Been Saying It! Points of Critique

There seems to be rising interest in the topic of Black women dancers during the Harlem Renaissance from a scholarly point of view, but it would be naïve to believe that scholars and dance practitioners had not tried to

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23 We can think of the third level as either creation or a re-creation based on the fact that in the traditional spiritual setting and in the folk presented on stage, no movement is ever exactly the same. Every new celebration and expression are new iterations of the movement, rhythm, song, and experience.
retrieve these histories before it became fashionable to do so. The structures of academia are still rigid. The juggling game of finding an adequate field that can leave room for doctoral students to study questions of performance history, communication, racial politics, and race as cultural identity, whether in a performance and theatre school or in other socioculturally focused departments, is a difficult endeavour. I have witnessed Black women doctoral students and candidates in performance and various other related fields quit because they were discouraged, felt isolated or harassed, or were told that their work had no place in academia and that it made no sense. In many cases, they simply failed to find committee members who could (and were willing to) support their work. For example, a foremother in the Canadian Black dance scene has shared with me on multiple occasions the difficulties of finishing her PhD. Her project is foundational and would document an important part of Black concert dance history. Therefore, the sparseness of in-depth scholarship addressing the lives of Black dancers and especially Black women dancers in Canada is not due to coincidence, lack of interest, or lack of effort.

Black women of the late nineteenth to mid twentieth century had rich and complex lives as performers, as organizers, as community members, and as women involved in clubs and associations that were a common way for women to build community around philanthropy at that time. Black thought as it relates to their lives and that era was, however, not limited to respectability politics or to a strict set of social behaviours to be adopted as a way of achieving racial and social uplift. Black women were churchgoers, nurses, domestic workers, farmers, mothers, writers and artists, social educators, and more. The social and cultural shift of the twentieth century marked an important move into a new era of industrialization. This new era reflected opportunity, experience, and expression of self in various ways that were groundbreaking and facilitated by portrait photography, among other new ways for Black people to imagine and “see” themselves differently from the burdened images of enslavement. These changes all amounted to aspirations of expressing a new autonomous self: the New Negro Woman and the New Negro. Though all Black women presumably sought this status, they did not express it in the same ways, especially middle-class women and working-class women, many of whom aspired in their own ways to (white) respectability, or to a particular way of being

24 See Shawn Michelle Smith, *Photography on the Color Line: W.E.B. Du Bois, Race and Visual Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).
25 See Carla Marano, “‘The Splendid Work Our Women Have Done’: African Canadian Women in the Universal Negro Improvement Association,” in *Women in the “Promised Land”: Essays in African Canadian History*, ed. Ebanda Reid-Maroney and Thomas Bernard B’béri (Toronto: Women’s Press, 2018), 136–60.
“modern.” Without limiting Black women’s desires and forms of expressions to only two opposing views, it is worth noting some Black women of the period saw fit to dress, act, and engage in a manner that was deemed respectable in order to inspire self-respect and equality in the hopes of countering racial stereotypes and white aggression. Nonetheless, many Black women also saw the era of the 1920s–1950s as a time of sexual freedom and assertiveness denied in the previous century. The two are not necessarily exclusive of each other. However, Black women who sought sexual freedom and independence were referred to as “wayward women” at the time. When I think of my own present-day experiences, concerns, and conversations with other Black women in my life, the constant “tug and pull” and tensions that heterosexual patriarchal expectations attempt to impose on women’s bodies and attitudes translate well beyond the two archetypes of respectable and wayward women.

Following the Black feminist tradition of calling for a serious re-education on social, cultural, and political histories, Saidiya V. Hartman critiques the historical categorization of Black women as wayward in Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval. She reminds us of the crucial role women deemed “wayward” played in building the social and cultural fabric of North American cultures. Furthermore, in Blues Legacies and Black Feminism, mentioned earlier, Davis provides a rich look at the contributions of Black women blues and jazz singers to Black thought in the early 1900s, especially as it pertains to questions of gender, sexuality, and various expressions of freedom. Davis highlights “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith’s proud assertions of sexuality and the varying desires — including forms of partnerships with men and women — that did not fit the conventions of white patriarchal society and ideas of respectability. Hence, these cultural shifters challenged ideals of womanhood as defined and reserved for white women in the dominant culture. Both books center Black women as part of the exchange of ideas or intellectual conversations of the period through the artforms of music, song and dance — and therefore position them as contributors to Black thought of the early twentieth-century.

Therefore, although mainstream writers and scholars of jazz have not given space to Black women’s thought and expressions of dance in the early twentieth century, Black women’s voices and scholarship exist and

26 Evelyn Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Church, 1880-1920 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 186.

27 Saidiya Hartman makes the layered lives of “wayward women” the focus of her book, Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval (New York: Norton, 2019).
should be recognized. For this reason, it is important for white and non-performance scholars who are interested in questions of race, performance history, Black women, and related themes to approach the topic with humility and to cite Black women, to avoid positioning themselves as originators of ideas long expressed and advocated by Black women themselves within and outside of academia.

b) There Is No Jazz without Black People: Immigration, Segregation, and the Great Depression

Michèle Moss, who grew up in Black communities in Montréal, and Jill Flanders Crosby say that “[t]he history of jazz dance is intimately tied to the history of jazz music.” There is no jazz culture without Black culture, and there is no jazz music without jazz dance and song to respond to the rhythm. From the late 1890s to well into the mid to late 1900s, the position of sleeping car porter was a main work opportunity and occupation for Black men. West Indian and African American men joined African Canadian men to work on the railroads in Canada during years of strict immigration laws.

Vanessa Blais-Tremblay positions her work on Black women jazz dancers at the intersections of feminist conversations, focusing on jazz in Quebec particularly in the inter-war period in the first half of the twentieth century to speak about underrepresented voices in Black feminist thought of the early twentieth century (“Gorgeous Girlies in Glittering Gyrations!” 92). Blais-Tremblay’s positioning of her work uniquely in Quebec, with a focus on Black communities as fitting into national Western narratives, works to erase the broader conversations of Black communities’ connectedness across all borders. Ironically, these national narratives are superficially imposed by authorities that located Black communities as outsiders and as unwanted. Black exclusion from Canadian and Quebec nation-building was apparent, for example, in the development of historically Black neighbourhoods such as Montréal’s St. Antoine, which resulted from the hiring of Black sleeping car porters on the railways at the turn of the twentieth century and from the racist immigration laws and segregation practices of the period, which need to be problematized in connection to this topic (see Sarah-Jane Mathieu, North of the Color Line: Migration and Resistance in Canada, 1870-1955 [Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010]). Similar patterns can be noticed today, for instance in the Montréal neighbourhood of St. Michel, which exemplifies how Black communities strive and function beyond artificial national borders that seek to marginalize them. Hence, ignoring the published works of Black feminists and Black studies scholars across borders (especially in Canada and the United States) that address and acknowledge the connectedness of Black communities in New York, Chicago, Montréal, Halifax, Toronto, Windsor, London, and so on, is deeply problematic.

Flanders Crosby and Moss, “Jazz Dance,” 45.
as well as when Black men and women were intermittently permitted entry to fill labour gaps in certain industries.\textsuperscript{30} As a result of racial segregation in neighbourhoods, St. Antoine in Montréal’s west side, where many Black porters resided, became a major hub for Black communities to grow and for the jazz scene to thrive. A series of nightclubs opened in Montréal specifically for Black dancers to perform in. What is left of the traces of Afro-culture in the neighbourhood is marked by Little Burgundy.

Racial segregation and stereotypes, gendered and racial scripts of sexuality, and social norms of respectability marked the early to mid twentieth century in Canada.\textsuperscript{31} The establishment of nightclubs created a promising hub of work, culture, entertainment, and also freedom (or social escape) as early as the late nineteenth century: “The first black club opened in 1897, on St. James Street, just south of St. Antoine. The Recreation Key Club, as it was known, was officially a private club; in fact, it offered liquor and illegal gambling to anyone known to the doorman.”\textsuperscript{32} Rufus Nathaniel Rockhead saved money while working on the railroads and opened his nightclub in 1928. His club became a major player in the development of jazz in Montréal and a tourist and leisure attraction across North America. Sleeping car porters who lived in the area were the main clientèle and created a demand for the club life.\textsuperscript{33} Many of these men had migrated alone, leaving their families behind.\textsuperscript{34} This Montréal neighbourhood became a place where stereotypes connected to nightlife, partying, and their relationship to racialized and gendered communities were challenged by the realities of survival, expressions of freedom, and the making of the New Negro woman and man as identities.

Rockhead’s nightclub, the main Black-owned club in St. Antoine, challenged legal and social boundaries by allowing alcohol during prohibition and by offering opportunities for Black artists to develop their skills and make a living.\textsuperscript{35} Café St. Michel and Aldo’s were also hot spots for jazz bands, giving rise to local talent such as Oscar Peterson and Steep Wade.\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{30} James W. St. G. Walker, \textit{The West Indians in Canada} (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1984).
\textsuperscript{31} Barrington Walker, \textit{Race on Trial: Black Defendants in Ontario’s Criminal Courts, 1858–1958} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010); Graham Reynolds, \textit{Viola Desmond’s Canada: A History of Blacks and Racial Segregation in the Promised Land} (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2016); Cheryl Thompson, \textit{Beauty in a Box: Untangling the Roots of Canada’s Black Beauty Culture} (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2019).
\textsuperscript{32} Gilmore, \textit{Swinging in Paradise}, 22.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{34} Walker, \textit{The West Indians in Canada}, 1984.
\textsuperscript{35} Gilmore, \textit{Swinging in Paradise}.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
Show Girls paints a picture of St. Antoine where sleeping car porters, musicians, dancers, churchgoers, and everyone in between lived and knew each other in the community. The late 1910s was also a major period of migration of Black people from the U.S. South, who moved northward in search of industrial jobs while also fleeing mob lynchings, rapes, and the state-sanctioned criminalization of Black people.

History scholar Sarah-Jane Mathieu discusses the Canadian imaginary produced by the hiring of Black porters to serve white middle-class patrons on the Trans-Canadian Railway at a time when Western nations shifted to become modern and industrialized. Black men were deliberately hired as porters and hotel clerks in a Canadian Jim Crow era. Banning the entrance of Black people into Canada through immigration laws while hiring them to serve white middle-class people on trains worked to perpetuate historical Black objectification. Black men in uniforms serving white families became a rescripting of Black people as primitive and stuck in roles of servitude, contrasting with the idea of white people as actively progressing toward modernity.

Ultimately, everyday social and cultural dynamics between white and Black people reflected these tensions, including in jazz nightclubs. Decades of Black activism, especially by porters, culminated into protests for the right to work and a change to racist immigration laws and policy.

John Gilmore writes that jazz was first brought to Canada through Montréal and recorded by white musicians from the United States, whose interactions with Black musicians south of the border and whose resources and capital as white men allowed them to set the template for jazz in Canada. The evolution of jazz in Canada was affected by the country’s immigration laws and racial protectionism, which worked to limit the entry of Black American musicians and artists in the early days of jazz. Arguably, this was the reason for the slower development of the genre in Canada. However, at its peak, the jazz scene in Montréal developed considerably based on the hiring of Black talent from the United States, rather than putting local talent and shows on stage. The show business and performance industry connected the theatre, vaudeville, and jazz circuits for artists across North America “from Chicago through Detroit, as far east as

37 Ibid., 20.
38 Smith, Photography on the Color Line, 77–78.
39 Mathieu, North of the Color-Line, 4.
40 Ibid., 57; see note on racist immigration policies against Black people specifically, 226.
41 Ibid., 100–101.
42 Gilmore, Swinging in Paradise.
43 Ibid.
44 Show Girls.
New York and Boston, and as far north as Montréal.”45 The jazz circuits also corresponded to train routes in cities that have historically connected Black communities. The circuits followed the paths of Black performance from decades prior, making the connection across the border and the influence of Black American musicians on Montréal jazz undeniable.

During the Depression, segregation meant that the upper-class white clubs in Montréal did not hire Black shows. In addition, clubs reduced their cover charges, which impacted Black performers’ income from the 1930s to the 1950s, and particularly at the start of World War II. The Second World War represented, however, a time of opportunity for nightclubs because people had money for the first time since the Depression.46 Certain clubs, such as Connie’s Inn, also adopted “Black policies” that ensured the residency of Black bands and artists.47 The war allowed for more jobs in nightclubs at home in Montréal, a path that Tina Baines Brereton chose. There were also more opportunities to perform (especially singing and playing music) abroad for the troops, an avenue Olga Spencer Foderingham, along with her sister and niece, embraced.48

III. CULTURAL IMPORTANCE OF DANCE IN THE JAZZ ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY: 1920s TO 1950s

a) The Visual Culture of Jazz, Recurrent “Unnaming,” and the New Negro Woman

The Canadian literature on the Jazz Age glosses over Black women dancers to focus more widely on Black men jazz musicians and the impact of show business, racial segregation, immigration laws, and mainstream culture on their livelihoods and love of jazz.49 According to Gilmore, Black men could at least narrowly navigate the racial terrain and were able to live out their dream of being jazz musicians, even if it was short-lived. Was this also true of Black women performers?

Black women dancers, and Black dancers more broadly, were an integral part of the jazz show and were central to its development as an art form.

45 Gilmore, Swinging in Paradise, 20.
46 Ibid.; Show Girls.
47 Gilmore, Swinging in Paradise.
48 Show Girls.
49 Gilmore, Swinging in Paradise. It is noteworthy, for context, that in parallel to the evolution of the Jazz Age, the variety show and vaudeville were increasingly popular forms of entertainment that grabbed audiences’ attention (M. Alison Kibler, Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1999]).
As suggested earlier, it is more accurate to think of jazz as a culture that incorporates all three elements of music, dance, and song. Jazz originated from ragtime and the blues, which were shared with the world by southern and midwestern Black pianists, and New Orleans is considered its birthplace. What is intriguing about Gilmore’s account of jazz is that the majority of advertisements and promotional brochures, sheets of music, and other jazz artefacts that he incorporates to illustrate his research reflect the importance of movement and dance to capture the essence of jazz and promote shows. The exception to this rule, based on images found in *Swinging in Paradise* and *Show Girls*, is when a club advertised the Canadian Ambassadors, an all-Black Canadian band led by Myron Sutton that made its name in Montréal, and was known as the best Canadian Jazz band, or Birds of Paradise, an American band led by Eugene Primus.

Even in promotional flyers and announcements without images, the focus is on dance performances as the major attraction. A flyer for a 1934 show by the Canadian Ambassadors marking the beginning of the war reads in bold amid the rest of the text: 30 Performers. Below, more text indicates the extensive work and importance of dancers who provide important symbolic and cultural labour for the success of these jazz events:

One hour fast, Red Hot Dancing, Singing and Entertainment.
12 Beautiful Creole Dancing girls.
10 Star Feature Singing and dancers. Babe Wallace, M.C. (my emphasis).

The symbolic labour referred to is the visual performance of Black bodies on stage for entertainment and the stimulation of the senses. The advertisement emphasizes colours and elements that locate Black bodies as exotic, such as “red,” “hot,” and “creole.” The terms “singing” and “dancing” also add to the exotic and sensationalized stereotypes of the performing Black body that gave birth to the character of Jim Crow and the minstrel show. In addition, the double skill of singing and dancing also points to

50 Gilmore, *Swinging in Paradise*, 17, 19; Flanders Crosby and Moss, “Jazz Dance,” 46–47.
51 Gilmore, *Swinging in Paradise*, 62–63.
52 Ibid., 23.
53 Ibid., 70.
54 Ibid., 50.
55 Ibid., 66.
56 “Promotional Flyer Announcing a 1934 Battle of the Bands Which Pitted the Canadian Ambassadors against Several Other Dance Bands,” Myron Sutton Fonds, Concordia University Library Special Collections, reproduced in Gilmore, *Swinging in Paradise*, 76.
the multifaceted aspects of the show, speaking to the fullness of the entertainment experience. These elements are characteristic of the late nineteenth-century variety show. Comic and unconventional shows in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had women performers who were “unconventional” or fell outside of “ideals of feminine beauty”—that is, they were “fat, dark-skinned, or ‘too mannish.’” Various racial and colour politics came into play on stages in that period where Black women performers in chorus lines across North America were presented as desirable and as representing the New Negro Woman, so long as they were lighter-skinned and wearing straight hairdos.

Like other promotional material of the time, for the most part the aforementioned advertisement refers to Black women dancers without naming them. Only Babe Wallace is named. Playbills and programmes described later mention male tap dancers, whereas few promotional materials mention solo women dancers unless they are well known. The practice of unnamed speaks to the politics of recognizing men as dancers, performers, and musicians over women. A 1937 photograph taken at a Montréal club is reproduced in Gilmore’s book with the description “Entertainers and staff line up in front of the Canadian Ambassadors at the Montmartre,” and all the musicians are named, along with the club owner and manager. Yet the front line of Black women and the one white woman at the very front of the image, who seems to be a clerk, are unnamed. The same goes for the photograph of “Show entertainers” taken by Geraldine Carpenter Studio also located in Gilmore’s book. This photograph was even displayed in Show Girls, and Olga Spencer Foderingham was identified as one of the chorus girls. More surprisingly, a photograph of a lone show dancer is not accompanied by her name: “A show dancer at Rockhead’s Paradise.” Yet these women were well known by the men and colleagues that surrounded

57 During my time as a research assistant for Cheryl Thompson’s SSHRC-funded research project, “Newspapers, Minstrelsy and Black Performance at the Theatre: Mapping the Spaces of Nation Building in Toronto, 1870s to 1930s,” I became familiar with elements of theatre history and culture by reading and transcribing playbills.
58 Kibler, Rank Ladies, 14.
59 Thompson, Beauty in a Box, 53–54.
60 Photo by Roger Janelle, found in the Myron Sutton Fonds, Concordia University Library Special Collections.
61 “Show Entertainers,” by Geraldine Carpenter Studio, courtesy of Herb Johnson, John Gilmore Jazz History Collection, Concordia University Special Collections reproduced in Gilmore, Swinging in Paradise, 83.
62 “A Show Dancer at Rockhead’s Paradise,” photo by Emile of Montréal, courtesy of Walter Bacon, John Gilmore Jazz History Collection, Concordia University Library Special Collections, reproduced in Gilmore, Swinging in Paradise, 161.
them. The omission of Black women’s names shows how patriarchal culture in show business and advertising function to neglect the importance of Black women as full contributors to jazz culture. Images of unnamed Black women also reflect the exploitation of their symbolic labour and the exploitative use of their bodies to promote nightclubs that were predominantly owned by white men. These images remain uncritical of a white heteronormative patriarchal culture. My point is that advertisements and the visual culture of show business are informed by cultures of oppression and perpetuate the erasure of women in jazz culture. On a similar level, if scholarly work focuses on jazz music alone while ignoring women singers and dancers particularly, research will be replicated from that premise.

Black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins comments on the long history in Western culture of un-naming Black women using the example of music videos. Her analysis points again to the ways in which images circulate across time and leave imprints for the future:

The women in these videos typically share two attributes — they are rarely acknowledged as individuals and they are scantily clad. One black female body can easily replace another and all are reduced to their bodies. Ironically, displaying nameless, naked Black female bodies had a long history in Western societies, from the display of enslaved African women on the auction block under chattel slavery to representations of Black female bodies in contemporary film and music videos. Describing the placement and use of primitive art in Western exhibits, one scholar points out, “‘namelessness’ resembles ‘nakedness’: it is a category always brought to bear by the Westerner on the ‘primitive’ and yet a phony category insofar as the namelessness and nakedness exist only from the Euro-American point of view.”

Cultural institutions and jazz businesses of the time reflected the ideology of scientific racism, which suggested that Black women’s bodies were shameful while simultaneously portraying them as objects of entertainment. The public exposure and ridicule of Black women’s bodies by white men dehumanized Black women and justified acts of humiliation towards them while they were living and deceased. This was the case of Sara Baartman, whose remains were dissected by French “zoologists and physiologists” to observe her buttocks and genitalia. White American men precursors to gynecology practiced similar dehumanizing strategies on enslaved Black

63 Patricia Hill Collins, Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism (New York: Routledge, 2005), 128–29.
64 Christina Sharpe, Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-slavery Subjects (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 80–81.
women’s bodies, operating on them without anesthesia. These surgeries were conducted to increase white scientists’ understanding of how to heal Black women’s reproductive wounds and increase their ability to bear more children and contribute to the economic wealth of white men. These operations became forms of torture. It is also important to note that although naked drawings of Sara Baartman’s profile are a common reference to her story historically, Black studies and humanities scholar Christina Sharpe mentions that Baartman never exposed her naked body. Images of her (and their availability online and elsewhere) are a reminder that the scientific racist arguments — which claimed that Black people were primitive and animalistic — are deeply rooted in the dominant Western visual culture. The forms of violence inflicted on Black bodies in the early years of scientific racism linger and take form in the propagation of photographs of Black women dancers that do not indicate their names, as though they were devoid of individuality, identity, and human integrity. The lack of proper documentation and recognition of Black women dancers continues racist and sexist ideologies, extracts parts of jazz culture for commodification, and perpetuates the neglect of the depth of Afro-culture within the cultural genre of jazz.

The earlier mentioned photograph of “A Show Dancer at Rockhead’s Paradise” taken by “Emile of Montréal,” also published in Gilmore’s book, is an example of the symbolic labour Black women’s bodies produce to inspire promotional material that white men consumed. The dancer in the image poses while sitting on a sort of railing. She is wearing a loose but fitting two-piece costume with sequins and fabric arm pieces, sheer tights, and heels. She also has subtle chandelier earrings and her hair is done up neatly into a bun. She smiles towards the camera. This image is somewhat representative of the typical costuming of a “shake dancer” or “can-can dancer.” What is noteworthy is the stark differences between the photographs of the women and their representation on promotional and advertising material that show them either naked or as performing in more provocative ways than is suggested in the photographs. The hypersexualized caricature of these Black women performers harkens back to the negative caricatures of Black women in nineteenth-century white newspapers.

65 Camille Nelson, “American Husbandry: Legal Norms Impacting the Production of (Re)Productivity,” Yale Journal of Law and Feminism, 19.1 (2007): 1-48.
66 Sharpe, Monstrous Intimacies, 81. This was also briefly a topic of discussion during Christina Sharpe’s course “Imagining Slavery and Freedom” that I audited at York University in the fall of 2018.
67 Gilmore, Swinging in Paradise, 161.
68 For instance, in Show Girls, Tina Brereton speaks about the men in the audience who would tease and make sexual requests.
69 Shawn Michelle Smith, Photography on the Color Line.
Thus, the continued erasure of Black women’s names and identities in photographs echoes the ways in which Baartman and other African women’s humanity and agency were undermined. These gendered images should also be juxtaposed with those of comedic acts where men’s stage names are listed, for example, “Moke and Poke.”\(^{70}\) Given the quality of the photographs and their descriptions, some were taken professionally and others may have been taken by patrons. The unnaming of the women in the photographs exemplifies the lack of cultural weight given to these women’s presence and to the stories they were telling on and off stage.

The tendency of leaving women, Black women in particular, unnamed in photographs is a tradition that extends beyond the jazz scene. The erasure of their names and thus their importance contradicts the symbolic importance they had in the visual culture of the time. In the McCurdy fonds collection, a rich collection of Black historical photographs documenting life in southwestern Ontario in the late nineteenth century, a series of Black women’s portraits are also unnamed. As a prime example, a studio portrait shows an elderly woman with grey hair pulled back in a neat coiffe, round glasses, a Victorian-style white shirt, and long dark skirt, sitting assertively and calmly while staring straight at the camera. Her wedding ring, glasses, earrings, and locket hanging from her neck suggest she is a woman of status, maybe a teacher, an intellectual, a mother, married or maybe widowed (Figure 1).\(^{71}\) But only once the photograph was digitized and uploaded online did the caption mention that the woman was “Laura Holton Adams grandmother of Alvin McCurdy.”\(^{72}\) This was not the way in which she was originally identified, or “unidentified.” Other women, who may not have been direct family members of McCurdy, have no edited captions that identify them by name. These omissions expose the sexist perceptions of women’s place socially, but also reveal that the culture of cataloguing overlooks these troubling absences even to this day. All of these women have names — given and family names, nicknames, maybe stage names — that were known, yet they are not presented in the records.

Throughout the changing stages of jazz from ragtime to show business, advertising material utilizes the images of professional burlesque, jazz,

\(^{70}\) “Moke and Poke” [a comedy acrobatic team], photo by James Kreigsmann, courtesy of Walter Bacon, John Gilmore Jazz History Collection, Concordia University Library Special Collections, reproduced in Gilmore, Swinging in Paradise, 161.

\(^{71}\) “Studio Portrait of Unidentified Woman Sitting in a Chair,” F2076, edited online caption “Laura Holton Adams Grandmother of Alvin McCurdy,” I0013623, ca. 1900, Alvin McCurdy Fonds, “Images from Archives of Ontario,” <commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Laura_Holton_Adams,_grandmother_of_Alvin_McCurdy_(I0013623).jpg>, accessed 10 October 2021.

\(^{72}\) Ibid.
and tap dancers. On the cover of a ragtime sheet of music by Jean-Baptiste Lafrenière, who has been called “Montréal’s first known ragtime pianist,” the focus is on a couple dancing. The title at the top reads “Raggity-Rag,” right above “March & Two Step by J.B. Lafrenière” (Figure 2).

The image shows a woman and a man dancing in the form of a march or two-step. The man, a brown-skinned bald Black man with slightly closed eyes and full lips, is positioned slightly ahead of a light-skinned Black woman with full lips and an expression of surprise that has her eyes opened wide. He is looking back at her as though he is showing her how to dance the rhythm. The woman is looking ahead at him with an aura of hesitation as though she is trying to follow or is unsure of how to dance the steps. The man wears an open dress jacket that reveals a white dress shirt with the collar sticking upward, a bow tie, and a lighter-coloured checkered vest. He

73 “Raggity-Rag” sheet music by Jean-Baptiste Lafrenière, 1907, Alex Robertson Collection, Concordia University Library Special Collections, reproduced in Gilmore, Swinging in Paradise, 23.
also wears dress pants and narrow black ankle-high laced-up boots with a slight heel. His arms swing in alternation as he skips. The woman has a polka-dotted scarf covering her short and curly dark hair. She wears a long white dress with vertical dark stripes. The collar of her dress is white and folded down with a loose white bow, and her sleeves are slightly flared midway on the forearm. Her white underskirt shows and is ruffled slightly past her ankles, just above her black flat shoes. Her black belt holds her at the waist and accentuates her strong bust. There are shadows at the back of the image and at their feet, which suggests they are dancing on a lit stage. The title of the poster reads “Raggity-Rag” in small print at the bottom.

Figure 2. Two dancers on the front cover of the music sheet “Raggity-Rag” by J. B. Lafrenière, 1907. Source: Alex Robertson Fonds, P023-S0477, Concordia University Library Special Collections.
right and there is a label beneath them that reads “Published by the Delmar Music Co., Montréal—Canada.”

What is telling is that the music company chose to publish an image of dancers, not music notes, a pianist, or the composer, to promote the sheet of music. I also suspect that the characters represent Black people as a way to mark the “authenticity” of the record as ragtime, a popular social and Black folk genre. In the image, they look like common Black folk who are hanging out or playing, reflecting the meaning of the term “ragtime,” which I learned while playing the piano. Ragtime is a style that plays on shifting accents to the off-beat, a common technique I recognize in some Haitian folk rhythms that people who are trained in Western music and dance traditions tend to have difficulty with at first.

Using an image of dancing Black bodies, dressed like working-class people, connects ragtime to its southern Black social roots and further validates the importance of the dance in speaking to the “authenticity” of the piece of music and, by association, gives further authority to the musician himself. The “Raggity-Rag” image is positioned in a way that highlights the importance of jazz music in the social life of Black communities, for the animation of “dances, weddings, parades, and picnics.” The image on Lafrenière’s sheet music indicates the emblematic weight that dance had in ragtime, a precursor to jazz.

b) “Negro” Women Performers Negotiating Respectability and Authenticity

The question of “authenticity” also raises various questions. For instance, for whom did this authenticity need to be proven? Was it for the primary Black audience, immersed in social dance settings where ragtime and jazz set the tone for a night of recreation and social bonding? Was it for a white consumer audience that was being introduced to these rhythms? In the late nineteenth century going into the Harlem Renaissance of the twentieth century, not all Black people were concerned with the same issues. Dance history scholar Danielle Robinson points to a small group who desired to distinguish themselves from the common Black folk, whom she refers to as the Black “elites.” Their entertainment and social dance interests revolved around European-American ballroom dances such as the Eclipse. But of course, dances, music, and songs are adapted by people depending

74 Judith Tick, “Ragtime and the Music of Charles Ives,” *Current Musicology* (January 2020), 105.
75 Gilmore, *Swinging in Paradise*, 23.
76 Ibid., 38.
77 Danielle Robinson, *Modern Moves: Dancing Race during the Ragtime and Jazz Eras* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 105.
on place, social, and cultural environment, so there would be variations in how even a Black elite would engage with the Eclipse and make it their own. Yet, in the midst of the ragtime–jazz era, “authenticity” also interacted and maybe collided with “modernity” in many ways. The late nineteenth to early twentieth-century was a time when Black people sought to redefine themselves, as explained by Robinson, through “a new modern black identity,” the New Negro.78 However, who is to say that the expression of the New Negro identity was only about Western ideals of social, cultural, and economic uplift? Black people also defined the New Negro identity through hybridity and the embrace of Afro-culture (or Black folk culture). Could they not embrace this form of rooted Blackness and be “respectable” all at once, regardless of class status and financial means? In the midst of these nuances, Blackness and Black faces were central markers of modern, forward thinking and the innovative rhythms and culture of the nineteenth and early twentieth century by virtue of being present. In summary, the Black elite who engaged in ballroom of the period and who defined their own Black identity were contributing to the New Negro and New Negro Woman identity. Black dancers, coming from “respectable,” church-based homes,79 who found work opportunity and freedom in performing and embracing Black dances that set them apart from older generations, were just as much a part of shaping the New Negro identity.

Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Victorian definitions of white womanhood, which characterized a respectable woman as being domestic, passive, and passionless, were losing weight by the end of the nineteenth century, especially with the influence of the women’s suffrage movement.80 As discussed through the stories of Show Girls’ Tina, Olga, and Bernice, Black women experienced various social pressures regarding gendered expectations of their lives as women, in addition to the fantasies projected onto Black women’s bodies in the mid twentieth century. The spotlighted show girls, Tina, Olga, and Bernice, chose to work and express their sexual and sensual freedoms while all indicating that family was an important marker of their humanity, whether that meant mentioning they came from respectable families or getting married and having children as was expected of women.

In 1928, the year Rufus Nathaniel Rockhead opened Rockhead’s Paradise, where Black women performers found success, African American writer Nella Larsen published the first novel that explicitly discusses Black women’s sexuality. In Quicksand, Larsen depicts the tensions between

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78 Robinson, Modern Moves, 105.
79 In Show Girls, both Tina and Bernice repeatedly mention that they were raised in Christian, good or “strict” households.
80 Kibler, Rank Ladies, 12-13.
African American women’s sexuality and their responsibilities to patriarchal social structures. African American studies scholar Hazel Carby explains, “Larsen explores questions of sexuality and power within both a rural and an urban landscape; in both contexts she condemns the ways in which female sexuality is confined and compromised as the object of male desire. In the city Larsen’s heroine, Helga, has to recognize the ways in which her sexuality has an exchange value within capitalist social relations, while in the country Helga is trapped by the consequences of woman’s reproductive capacity.” By criticizing the way that Black women’s sexuality was tied to social expectations, rather than a source of their own desires, Larsen makes the matter a political one. She also gives a clear and relevant example of what many Black women, both rural and urban, may have experienced. In addition, the use of fiction highlights the role of popular culture and its influence on people’s lives, and provides spaces of expression, liberation, and critique, particularly at a time when women were siloed into specific roles.

For Black women, who for the most part were working outside of the home to support their families, the entertainment industry was a way to keep their families out of poverty and avoid working as domestics in white people’s homes. Tina and Bernice in Show Girls describe this as well. When World War II came around, show business offered an alternative to working in the factories. Show girls’ and Black women dancers’ economic independence allowed them to claim passion, bodily autonomy, and financial freedom. By doing so they embraced a New Negro Woman identity differently than their white female counterparts did in the case of the New Woman identity, whether they were showgirls or consumers of vaudeville entertainment. In the case of white women who attended vaudeville shows newly advertised to married women, they were accompanied by

81 Nella Larsen, Quicksand (New York: Knopf, 1928).
82 Carby, “It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometime,” 473.
83 I use the word “liberation” here because I believe fiction and art provide a way for Black women to imagine and live far beyond any confines, as opposed to expressing freedom in a given social context.
84 Tina described her decision to continue working in the nightclubs when the war was declared during her interview with Meilan Lam in Show Girls.
85 The New Woman was a figure to which middle-class white women aspired — demanding the betterment of women’s lives in areas of work and higher education, among other points of activism. In her introduction, Janet Friskney describes the New Woman: “[m]iddle-class and assertive, she challenged marriage and conventional domesticity while claiming the right to higher education, the ballot, unescorted travel, sexual freedom, and a professional career” (Ethelwyn Wetherald and Janet B. Friskney, Thirty Years of Storytelling: Selected Short Fiction [Ottawa: Tecumseh Press, 2011], 40–41).
men, most often their husbands. The 1920s were, as Angela Davis reminds us, a time of sexual reclamation and its popularization that took the form of a “politicalization of sexuality.” It was also the time of the Harlem Renaissance, when Black culture was being recognized in the mainstream. Yet, it was still framed in the context of segregation, racism, and the exoticization of Blackness, in contrast to a white North American culture’s view of the period as the “Roaring Twenties.”

IV. REPRESENTATIONS OF JAZZ CULTURE IN SHOW BUSINESS: BLACK WOMEN AS POSTCARD IMAGES

Judging by the promotional material, Black people were perceived or at least used visually as the face of the latest social and cultural trends. But in mainstream representations, “authenticity” included a focus on working-class Black people who fit a given role in the hierarchy of entertainment. They would be part of an act, produced for white people’s pleasure. Jazz clubs serving predominantly Black patrons were integrated spaces, but were not regarded as high-class. They were spaces of racial mixing during racial segregation, and alcohol consumption when North America was undergoing prohibition. They were also places where the white population might have first-hand a fuller experience of jazz where the musician, singer, and dancer were harmonized on stage. The Uptown Montréal clubs were segregated until the 1950s, avoiding the challenge that Black performers on stage might have posed to wealthy white people’s views and consumption of jazz music and culture.

However, the use of Black faces to promote shows was ironic, given the popularity of blackface minstrel shows at the time. Blackface acts were not a part of these jazz shows, even though the visual representation of blackface, Black women’s bodies, and Black musicians’ bodies were central to the promotion of these shows, a point I discuss later. We can see how pervasive blackface culture was in that period, an observation American choreographer Katherine Dunham takes further. In the context of white American culture, she states that while blackface entertainment exploited Black culture, it also introduced Black folk to the spotlight and made possible the exposure and popularization of other African-centered cultural forms, but only in a way that would be palatable to the white middle class. The popularization of a “Westernized” Black folk culture was

86 Davis, *Blues Legacies*, xvi.
87 Ibid., 189.
88 *Show Girls*.
89 Gilmore, *Swinging in Paradise*.
90 Dunham, “The Negro Dance,” 224.
precisely what produced the jazz band and the “highly-stylized form of tap dancing”91 during the height of jazz. The visual culture of the jazz era is thus a testament to the pervasiveness of white racial culture and blackface culture. How ideas of jazz were circulated exposed how racism and segregation were prevalent and normalized in ways that presented Blackness as something to be consumed in the simple form of entertainment and show business, devoid of any deep social, cultural, and political meaning. Thus, profit was (and is) the central objective of show business: “The rise of the black-face minstrel bands achieved the induction of Negro culture into American culture not in terms of an appreciation of Negro cultural expressions as art forms but on the basis of their entertainment value.”92 As also indicated by Dunham’s research, further support for this statement can be observed in the multiple laws across the Americas banning assemblies of Black men and women for cultural events and ceremony, as was the case in New Orleans starting in 1751.93

a) The Black Performer in “Harmony”: Embodying Music, Dance, and Song

Approaching the late 1920s to early 1930s, the St. Antoine neighbourhood had a hub of clubs that showcased Black jazz bands and Black women dancers. Some clubs, such as the Owl Club, were described as cabarets. Connie’s Inn was a major jazz club that showcased bands such as the Canadian Ambassadors, which became known as the best Canadian jazz band.94 Jazz clubs’ promotional brochures for shows reflected the sensationalization of Black bodies based on their representation. These promotional materials also reflected the multilayered and contradictory racial dynamics at work in Montréal at the time, which drew white patrons to see Black shows in integrated spaces, while white jazz bands and dancers benefitted from jazz culture in their segregated neighbourhoods. The brochures do the visual work of articulating the expected roles of Black performers simply as entertainers by negatively and grotesquely caricaturing their bodies. Ultimately, the caricatures became part of jazz culture’s show business of the period. As a counternarrative, the programmes describe the importance of the Black performance line-up.

Connie’s Inn is central to the story because this particular ballroom nightclub focused on bringing the best of jazz from Harlem to Montréal,

91 Ibid.
92 Ibid.
93 Herbert Asbury, “The French Quarter,” in The Negro Caravan: Writings by American Negroes, ed. Sterling A. Brown, Arthur P. Davis, and Ulysses Lee (New York: Dryden, 1941), cited in Dunham, Kaiso!, 225 n2.
94 Gilmore, Swinging in Paradise, 70.
which meant it opened its doors primarily to Black musicians. Its role as a ballroom space for jazz entertainment marks a shift in Montréal (and presumably in Canada) where jazz dance took place. Flanders Crosby and Moss describe the social push for jazz that resulted in this shift in the United States: “African-American vernacular dance was also beginning to swing through rhythms such as the Buck and Wing and the Shuffle. Thanks to a social dance boom to the new jazz music around 1910, dance once seen primarily in after-hours joints of ‘jook houses’ and brothels moved into ballrooms.” Given the slower evolution of jazz in Canada because of immigration restrictions, it makes sense that the shift here may have happened in later decades.

The inn’s approach to its jazz line-up was known as “the black show policy,” which ultimately enabled the Canadian Ambassadors to secure gigs and then their place as the resident band, seven nights per week, in 1933. As part of their shows, they had singers and dancers, one of whom was Bernice Jordan. A caption of an image of the Canadian Ambassadors on tour in North Bay, ON, describes the band members and “Bernice Jordan (vocals).” Her presence is explained by the fact that having a singer, particularly a woman, attracted more attention for the band while on tour. Having a singer clearly trumped having a dancer on tour given that Sutton reduced the size of his band in the time of the recession: “The Canadian Ambassadors’ 1935 tour of Ontario was the first of three they would undertake to survive the dry summers of the later Depression years. But Sutton couldn’t work miracles. He was forced to prune his band back to six musicians to make the tours feasible.”

It seems as though Black women performers had more consistent opportunities if they were also singers. But weren’t all dancers also trained in singing? A general rule in the show business world was that the more talent and skills a performer had, the more opportunities for work were available to them (this is still true today). In Show Girls, Bernice shares that she started singing in the church choir at the age of seven and won prizes at

95 Ibid., 71.
96 Flanders Crosby and Moss, “Jazz Dance,” 47. The move from brothels to ballroom connects to earlier questions raised about the fine lines between dance and sex work — a topic, however, that deserves a much more extensive discussion.
97 Gilmore, Swinging in Paradise, 71.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid., 79.
100 Myron Sutton Fonds, Concordia University Library Special Collections, reproduced in Gilmore, Swinging, 79.
101 Gilmore, Swinging in Paradise, 78.
the United Theatres in Montréal. Her singing brought in consistent money to help her mother with raising the family. She also regularly sang gospel during the day at the Café St. Michel downtown.¹⁰²

Black women dancers seemed to have limited work opportunities that relied mainly on the success and resources available to musicians and jazz bands. This was the case for Bernice. Her big break dancing in show business came from Frenchie Mendes, a male tap dancer and performer who put together a team of dancers.¹⁰³ The tap dance was often a major act, typically performed by a man, giving the sense that there was a hierarchy of styles within the jazz dance space. Club managers may also have imposed gender rules for the performances. In the literature at hand, although women tap dancers also performed during this era, the focus was on men as tap dancers, which suggests club managers may have spotlighted them over women. Mendes is an example of solidarity and harmony within jazz culture, which Tina Baines Brereton pointed out in Show Girls. She also was given access to opportunities from Mendes, and her early initiation into the chorus line at fifteen years old at the Café St. Michel marked the beginning of her career.

Unlike Tina and Bernice, Olga Spencer Foderingham had professional dance training, which she received in New York City. Upon her return to Canada, she had difficulty finding work, likely due to racial segregation. Vaudeville, theatres, and cruise ships offered job opportunities to dancers, but Olga could only get work in the downtown clubs.¹⁰⁴ She became the first Canadian girl in dance lines with the Americans at the Montmartre in Montréal. Olga grew up in a household of musicians — her brother played the violin, her sister the guitar, her niece the trumpet, and she learned to play the accordion. During the war, Olga on the accordion, along with her sister on the guitar and her niece on the trumpet, took an opportunity to play for the troops as the “Spencer Sisters Trio.” In parallel to the narratives offered by the three women, Show Girls tells a visual story of singers who also danced (the “song and dance girls”); of groups of dancers accompanied by a singer; and of solo dancers playing instruments such as the tcha-tcha (or shaker) at the same time. This was the case when Bernice performed a calypso dance act. There are also three moments in the documentary that speak to the harmonizing of music, song, and dance. The first is a woman swinging in perfect synergy to the saxophone, the guitar, and the trumpet; the second involves women in costumes drumming¹⁰⁵ for another dancer, who also coordinates her movements with the tcha-tcha; and

¹⁰² Show Girls.
¹⁰³ Flanders Crosby and Moss, “Jazz Dance,” 47–48.
¹⁰⁴ Show Girls.
¹⁰⁵ These women drummers were probably also dancers themselves.
the last is Bernice describing the dancers’ response to the beat of the drum and the play between certain drum sounds, and steps. The Show Girls documentary is invaluable in that there are many images that are not accompanied by dialogue but that communicate a wealth of information on the performance scene of the period, especially for those who can understand the visuals and the language of performance.

b) Brochures, Postcards, and the Myth of the Naked Black Woman

Without a lot of images and documentation of Black bands and Black performers, promotional brochures do much of the work of preserving or maintaining the imaginary of the time. They speak volumes to the central and animated role of dancers in the jazz show, as well as the complicated dynamics of representation, entertainment, and appreciation. A 1933 promotional brochure for Connie’s Inn spreads over three pages. Based on the various reproductions of the brochure found online, its representation of actors, musicians, and people involved in the jazz scene of the period has historical and cultural currency (Figure 3).

The front page has a mosaic of vignettes showing what happens at a jazz club, with text that reads “Connies Inn/(formerly The FROLICS)/‘Bringing Harlem to Montréal’/1417 St. Lawrence Blvd./(above St. Catherine)/RESERVATIONS/Phone Lanc. 3501.” In the lower central section, the advertisement focuses on the patrons, depicting two heterosexual white couples dancing. Both men are well groomed, in tuxedo suits with white dress shirts. Each woman has one arm around the top of her dance partner’s shoulder while holding hands with the other, as in ballroom dancing. With their hair carefully combed back in buns, the women wear strapless, open-back soirée dresses. As Olga mentioned in her interview, people really dressed up when they went to the club in this period.106

The other vignettes contain images of burlesque dancers. One is doing a reveal while slightly bent forward, with a flared and round sunhat and a coquettish look on her face. She is opening the split of her white thin-strapped dress, from the centre of her breasts all the way down, to reveal culottes and high sheer stockings. Her skin is pencilled in with horizontal stripes, which presumably signals that she is a light-skinned107 Black

106 Show Girls.
107 As briefly mentioned earlier while citing Thompson’s Beauty in a Box, lighter skin would have been a marker of desirability. However, the historical discussion of colourism and skin tones is complex and cannot be reduced to simple dichotomies of light skin vs. dark (whatever those terms may refer to) as markers of beauty based on a North American and contemporary understanding of these ideas.
woman. On her opposite side, another woman poses eroticly, with one arm reaching above her head and her body curving as though she is dancing. These women are portrayed with a teasing sexual expression, as indicated by the angling of their knees and shoulders and the curve of their hips. Bernice explained that in the shows, the shaking of the hips and breasts and the play with hand-held fans and other props was meant to excite the men. However, how Black women performed on stage and how they were represented on promotional materials differed.
Stark opposites are created in the Connie Inn’s brochure, where the white patrons are presented as well groomed, and fully and fashionably dressed, and dancing in pairs, which suggests respectability, especially for the women who were accompanied by the “ultimate gentlemen.” On the other hand, the remaining vignettes present Black women as almost naked, half-dressed, with loose messy hair or very short hair dancing alone — for men’s pleasure and entertainment. This dichotomy sustains the myth of “the naked Black woman,” who is positioned as less respectable than white women. As in the earlier conversation about white people’s association to modernity and Black people’s comparison to primitiveness in the Canadian imaginary, the promotional material contrasts Black women’s humanness and femininity with a colonial and patriarchal framing of white women as more respectable, an idea that is repeatedly refuted by Tina, Bernice, and Olga in Show Girls.

Tina explained that when she was asked to do a strip-tease number, it was meant to be a tease, not a complete strip, in her opinion. She, Olga, and Bernice repeatedly mentioned their strict Christian upbringing to validate that dance was their work and that they did not cross the line into fully exposing their bodies or giving in to sexual and intimate interactions with men inside or outside of the clubs. After all, many Black youth, such as Bernice, learned their craft, whether singing, dancing, or playing an instrument, at home and at church. I read their comments as a way to assert their boundaries and agency in the context of their work, as Black women faced very different repercussions for their actions than would white women. The images on the brochure sell the ideas of glamour, sex, and sexual freedom, when the reality of these Black women, though they were in control of their sexuality and desires, was very different.

The main attraction promoted on the brochure is the four “can-can girls” lined up with blond hair, striped bodies, and heels, wearing short shorts and strapless white bras or liners. Another image shows a dancer topless. Her body is also drawn in with horizontal stripes to indicate that she is a lighter-skinned Black woman. The target and prized consumer for jazz shows was the white consumer in both white and Black spaces. Based on the testimonies of Tina and Bernice particularly, Black women were more hesitant than white women to strip entirely because of their upbringing and also because of police raids that landed white women strippers at the police office, to say the least. These images were used to capitalize on these Black women’s erotic and symbolic currency without granting them full recognition for their work.

108 Show Girls; Gilmore, Swinging in Paradise.
109 Show Girls.
In the brochure, Black men are portrayed only as musicians, and all are depicted in blackface caricatures blending into the black background. Thus, completely disembodied, they are nearly invisible except for large white eyes and white lips, along with their instruments and the hands playing them. This is a testament to what matters to the intended audience: Black women’s bodies as a visual tease and Black men’s ability to entertain with their musical skills in playing the banjo, the two saxophones, the keyboard, the two trumpets, and the trombone. Jazz bands were on stage competing with vaudeville and minstrel shows in that time period, so the use of blackface elements in the brochure is not surprising.

The showgirl almost entirely left the stage both figuratively and physically as bebop rose in popularity and bands became smaller in the 1950s. The jazz dancer took the backstage as a poster image: the flirtatious coquette. Yet the process of her posterification had already started in the late 1930s, as the body of the light-skinned Black showgirl became emblematic of show business. A clipping from Myron Sutton’s scrapbook illustrates this point (Figure 4).110

The image depicts a slim, tall, light-skinned Black woman with dark wavy hair pulled back in a low curly bun. She has a slight smile and dark eyes. Her shoulders and neck are uncovered, and she holds a sign that hides her outfit, revealing only ruffles hanging below her shoulders and small dance shoes with white bows on them. The sign reads:

There’s Plenty of Action at
THE MONTMARTRE
59 St. Catherine St. W.
The only REAL coloured show in Montréal,
With Mynie Sutton’s Swing Okaystra
ZIPPY— SPICY— SPARKLING — RED HOT

DINE  No Couver Charge  BEER
DANCE  PL. 7368  WINE

A.ALLARD, prop.
W. LEGARE, mgr. HARRY MILLER, H.W.

Ultimately, the promotional image of the jazz dancer becomes that of a single cute-looking woman holding a promotional sign,111 obscuring the meaning, stories, and significance of the jazz dancer, who becomes an objectified poster girl. The jazz dancer disappeared behind an image similar to that of a hostess or clerk, the stereotype of the docile serving woman, which was imposed on women and challenged by the women’s suffrage

110 Myron Sutton Scrapbook in the Myron Sutton Fonds, P019-SB1-48A1, Concordia University Library Special Collections.
111 Gilmore, Swinging in Paradise, 85.
movement at the end of the nineteenth century, but made a resurgence leading into the early to mid twentieth century.\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{112} While women were fighting for sexual freedom, amongst other demands, consumer culture profited from pushing the narrative of women’s depoliticized sexuality. Experiences of race complicated these discussions for Black
Moreover, the jazz dancer’s role at the heart of band performance, and the expression of reclamation of self and freedom outside of traditional jobs reserved for women and Black people in particular, is annulled. The transition of the jazz dancer’s image to poster girl or sign holder indicates both literally and symbolically that her work is seen as mere entertainment. She holds a sign that promotes the musicians, the dining experience, the dancing experience for the patrons, the alcohol, and even the manager’s name. Yet, as in many of the images of Black women from one hundred years prior — such as the photograph of Laura Holton Adams — she is unnamed and unidentifiable. The dancer had already become the entertainment, and she was then crystallized into objects such as Rockhead’s Paradise vintage martini glass, which has now solidified in part how we remember her today. For Black dancers, and especially Black women dancers, their physical labour, symbolic labour (images and body), and cultural labour (transmission of stories and the meaning they give to jazz music and performance) are not valued beyond what they can offer as “entertainment” in show business.

women. African American and print studies scholar Noliwe Rooks explains how the rise of mainstream consumer culture, especially between the 1890s and the 1910s, developed the image of the white middle-class woman as the “Beautiful Charmer.” This archetype, which presented white women as gentle and beautiful, worked against the political and cultural changes brought about by women suffrage demands: “Martha Banta has described the mass-produced advertising images of white women that evolved between 1890 and 1910 as the convergence of three distinct female advertising types: the Beautiful Charmer, the New England Woman, and the Outdoors Girl. While the New England and Outdoors constructs tapped into a new awareness of white women as athletic, active, and glowing with health, the construction of the Beautiful Charmer, Banta contends, mediated and threatened to dilute the potentially radical politics of New Woman imagery. By evoking an ‘apolitical’ gracefulness and beauty, the Charmer was designed to appease a middle-class public increasingly threatened by the political and cultural upheaval brought about by the demands of white suffragists and Progressive Era reformers. Unfortunately for those interested in preserving political dissonance, the Charmer was a successful turn-of-the-century image, and advertisers productively used it to both identify and speak to a nineteenth-century white female middle class waiting to be targeted as consumers” (Noliwe M. Rooks, The Ladies’ Pages: African American Women’s Magazines and the Culture That Made Them [New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004], 1999, 20; my emphasis).

“What’s Left of Montréal’s Rockhead’s Paradise” (news clip, 2016), Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, <cbc.ca/player/play/851855939750>, accessed 30 August 2021.
V. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON DOCUMENTING CULTURAL MOVEMENTS AND DANCE

The representation of jazz in show business over time reduced Black women dancers’ work to catering to men’s pleasure, entertainment, and erotic sensation. The symbolic, cultural, and political work they did with their bodies, the storytelling of their movements, and the autonomy, desire, and joys of escape or “freedom” represented by the jazz era were put aside in the commercialization, commodification, and propagation of jazz. This idea of seeking and experiencing freedom was true, however, for Black people in their practice of jazz culture. An argument can be extended to white women who were confined to norms of respectability and white womanhood that generally shunned the sexually free burlesque dancer, whose image only graduated to a still contained female sexual icon such as Marilyn Monroe. Similarly, Josephine Baker was idolized as a Black star of the show in the Black community and abroad (but not among white American audiences). With the move toward bebop that brought more seated events, there was a push from club and ballroom owners to reduce the budget for bands, in part also due to the war and the subsequent recession. That particular shift in jazz culture meant that less figurative and literal space was given to dance performances.

Dance and Black dancers were central in jazz culture, and became central to the jazz venue in order to sell the product of “jazz.” During the height of the Jazz Age, the success and performance demand for the jazz dancer, and particularly the Black show dancer, was short-lived in Montréal. Acts highlighting Black women dancers, which occurred mostly in group performances (a marker of Afro-dances and Afro-culture), were most easily replaced by tap dance, which was — more often than not — performed as a solo by a man (a marker of Western dance culture) whose command of the drums was highlighted more often than were women dancers’ exchange in the call-and-response with the musicians, which was (and still is) a masterful skill to hone.

Part of the issue in documenting jazz only as a musical genre is that it distorts what jazz was in all of its complexities and maintains inequalities that are not necessarily based in the roots of the culture and its practices. My contribution is to urgently remind those of us who write and historicize cultures and cultural practices to maintain the sacredness of the arts we write about to the extent that the written form allows us to do so. Pointing to the common error of seeing jazz only as a musical genre, I hope to inspire more research that enables us to at least begin to learn, know, and share the

114 Gilmore, Swinging in Paradise; Sean Mills, “Democracy in Music: Louis Metcalf’s International Band and Montréal Jazz History”, The Canadian Historical Review, 199.3 (September 2019): 351–73.
names of dancers (and Canadian singers, where they are less known) who created movement, popularized a song, or made important statements about their time. Too few of us have managed to pave the way to remembering and learning from Canadian dance pioneers, with the exception of performance scholar Seika Boye’s work to reposition Portia White and Leonard Gibson in Black Canadian dance history.

In the midst of the Harlem Renaissance, jazz was a safe space for Black people to create, grow, heal, tell stories, support themselves and each other, and build community. It gradually became void of those possibilities as it gained traction in mainstream show business. Only a holistic approach grounded in history, in the memories and experiences of those who lived jazz and the culture, can do justice to documenting an era and a genre as complex as jazz.

EMILIE JABOuin is a researcher, dance artist, storyteller, workshop facilitator, public speaker, and freelance writer currently completing her doctoral dissertation at X (Ryerson)/York Universities in communication and culture. She is exploring the history of Black women writers, journalists, and organizers of the early twentieth century in English Canada. Her research and performance practices bring to the forefront hidden and forgotten stories. African Canadian and Afro-diasporic women’s intellectual histories and expressive cultures, performance history, early twentieth-century health, and Afro-diasporic liberation movements are part of her research interests.