

Representations of Multicultural Dance in Photographic Images

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Abstract

This paper explores the tensions embedded in the photographic images of multicultural dance in the city of Thunder Bay (Ontario, Canada) in the 1980s. Informed by Nicholas Mirzoeff's (2002) work on the transversal glance, we showcase the interrelationships between conflicting notions of ethnicity, gender, and race within the locally constituted discourse of multiculturalism. We explore these themes through an analysis of the compositional framing and subject matter of "ethnic," "folk," and "national" dance photographs appearing in *Northern Mosaic*, a free, widely available, and local multicultural magazine.

Multicultural dance has long been a staple of Thunder Bay's cultural make-up, although it is often ignored in scholarly studies that represent the small, northwestern Ontario city as a predominantly white, working-class, masculine space (Sullivan 2009; Dunk 1994). In our work on the photographic representation of multicultural dance in the city, we trace the intersections between dance and its associations with identity constructs (namely, race, class, gender, nationality, and culture), and, in turn, with federal and local discourses of multiculturalism. Focusing on the subject matter and compositional elements of dance photographs, we tease out some of the unexpected meanings that surround multiculturalism (see Mirzoeff 2002). We critically look at such photographs, especially the ones that appear in *Northern Mosaic*, a local tabloid/newspaper published from 1975–1997 by the Thunder Bay Multicultural Association (TBMA), an organization started up by a group of local university students in 1972 in response to Canada's 1971 policy of multiculturalism.

The photographic images of multicultural dance in *Northern Mosaic* comprise mostly representations of local, amateur dance troupes performing at the city's annual Folklore Festival, although a few images of professional dancers, most often visiting on tour or giving lessons, occasionally grace its pages. In our paper, we concentrate on the intersections between multicultural dance, race, and ethnicity as narratively constructed and visually represented in *Northern Mosaic* between 1980 and 1985. Although we have reviewed over forty volumes of *Northern Mosaic* to date, our focus herein is on three cover images which signal a departure from the 1970s when only one dance photograph appeared on the tabloid's cover (*Northern Mosaic*, 1975 1[2]; see Figure 1, page 29). That cover is, however, emblematic of the then-commonsensical association between ethnicity and whiteness in Thunder Bay and across Canada (see Mackay 1999; Henry et al. 1995).



Figure 1: *Northern Mosaic's* Cover, Vol. 1, No. 2 (1975).

A careful comparative look at *Northern Mosaic*'s textual renderings of multiculturalism and its photographic representations of dance in the 1970s draws attention to the issues of gender, ethnic, and racial representation which were brought into public debate. In keeping with these nation-wide scholarly and popular discussions, *Northern Mosaic* began to give a greater voice to visible minorities. Several of articles featuring Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino communities emerged, accompanied by a significant number of photographic images (see *Northern Mosaic* 1981 4 [6]: 8–9; 1983 7 [4]: 10; 1983 7 [3]: 8–9, 5; 1985 9 [2]: 14). South Asian ethnicity, although already represented in the tabloid in the 1970s, was brought increasingly to the fore. This is not to say that these groups did not exist in Thunder Bay in the 1970s; on the contrary, it means they were either excluded from *Northern Mosaic* or included in a way that underlined their exotic difference from the white ethnic groups in the city (see Potestio and Pucci 1987; TBMA 1982).

In contrast to the 1970s, whereby we see the Lithuanian, Latvian, Hungarian, and Slovakian dance troupes featured prominently in *Northern Mosaic*, the 1980s editions include photographs of recreational Chinese lion and ribbon dance, East Indian dandia and bhangra dances, and many different types of belly dancers (which, interestingly enough, remain unspecified as to ethnic or national origin, as well as to particular dances) (see *Northern Mosaic* 1984, 8 [1–2]: 14; 1983, 7 [1]: 12; and 1983, 7 [2]:8).

Paradoxically, just as *Northern Mosaic* begins to engage more seriously with visible minorities in the early 1980s, attention is drawn simultaneously to the importance of preserving and celebrating ethnocultural difference – a term denoting, according to a TBMA position paper on multiculturalism, not solely immigrant culture but Aboriginal culture as well (*Northern Mosaic* 1985, 10 [4]: 5, 16). Multiculturalism was to transcend its categorization as a marker of ethnic immigrant groups and expand to include a more generalized diversity of cultures and traditions regardless of whether they were home-grown or imported; in particular, French, Aboriginal, and Celtic dancers are recognized within the umbrella of the mosaic, thereby glazing over the colonial past and its discontents (e.g., see *Northern Mosaic* 1981 5 [2–3]: 13). As shifts within understandings of multiculturalism evolve, articles in *Northern Mosaic* take issue with the idea that multiculturalism is too focused on folklore and, as such, downplay the problems visible minorities face. Articles call for racism to be tackled separately from the social inequalities of ethnocultural recognition. From this perspective, multiculturalism has a place for visible minorities who want to engage in cultural preservation, but issues with regard to social inequalities are directed elsewhere, to another unspecified arena of public policy. However, the problems white ethnic groups faced historically with Anglo-Celtic hegemony in the city were often dealt with within the pages of *Northern Mosaic* in the 1970s.

Highlighting the ethnocultural specificity of visible minorities in *Northern Mosaic* in the early 1980s was, therefore, not so straightforward. This is evident in how multicultural dance images appear in the tabloid. For starters, European ethnicities continue to dominate, and complimentary commentaries about the increasingly professionalization of white folk dance appear. For instance, there are articles with photographs about the local Hungarians dancers performing out

of town, Ukrainian dancers garnering high honors at dance festivals, and Finns travelling abroad to Australia to showcase their folk dances (see: *Northern Mosaic* 1983–84, 7 [4]: 13; 1983, 7 [1]: 13; 1985, 9 [3]: 11).

The stress on whiteness is most forcefully expressed through the overt attention paid to Scottish ethnicity in the city, even though it was previously cast as non-ethnic and largely invisible in the 1970s editions of *Northern Mosaic* (although it was documented in many, many photographic images which are housed in the TBMA archives). Photographic images of highland dancers begin to make a more noticeable appearance in the tabloid alongside articles about the long history of Scottish performing arts (such as bagpiping) in Thunder Bay (see *Northern Mosaic*, 1980, 6 [3]: 6; 1983 7 [3]: 9; see 1980, 4 [2]: 12 for Irish ethnicity as well). The question arises: Why does Scottish highland dance, and Scottishness as an ethnic marker, become visible and more prominently featured at a time when visible minorities challenge the direction and discourses of multiculturalism?

The emphasis on white ethnic dance is, perhaps, most telling with the 1981 cover of *Northern Mosaic* (5 [2–3]). featuring a photograph of Laura Pascolo, a professional Cecchetti-trained dancer of self-identified Italian ancestry who is also the founder of and 15-year artistic director for the currently-existing Le Stelle Alpine Italian Performing Arts Association dancers (see Figure 2, page 32). Pascolo also worked with the Promysk Polish Dance Troupe, the Vesnyanka Ukrainian Dancers, and the Thunder Bay Folklore Festival, where she was the first to stage a cross-cultural dance production (internationaldanceacademy.com). This photograph, which was also used for the cover of two *Thunder Bay Guest* magazines (email correspondence, Spring 2011), features Pascolo performing, according to page 2 of the *Northern Mosaic* edition, “a lively dance.” In actuality, she is performing a Neapolitan tarantella, a dance Pascolo delineates as different from the peasant-like, social dances currently staged by the Italian dancers in Thunder Bay. Hers is, by implication, more attentive to technique, more polished, more demanding, and requiring classical ballet training to perform properly (email correspondence, Spring 2009 and 2011).

The framing of Italian dance as “professional” iterates the emerging discourse of a “higher order” Italian culture in Thunder Bay, which signals the move away from the immigrant peasant culture of the past. In doing so, it also marks the shift between higher-order culture and peasant or folk culture. The former becomes more closely associated with white ethnic groups which, if not assimilated into the dominant Anglo culture, are nevertheless distanced from their immigrant past and stereotypes as unwanted, rabble-rousing foreigners; meanwhile, the latter becomes more closely associated with visible minorities which, regardless of how long they have actually been in the city and in Canada more generally, are deemed newcomers (or “New Canadians,” the term used in the 1980s to refer to visible minority immigrant groups in Canada).



Figure 2: *Northern Mosaic's* Cover, Vol. 5, No. 2-3 (1981).

Visible minorities are in turn more closely associated with Aboriginal culture by implication, as visual representations of First Nations peoples, termed “Indians” or “Natives” in *Northern Mosaic*, become more prominent, especially through representations of Aboriginal dance. The 1980 cover, for instance, provides a close-up, profile headshot of Richard Lyons, the founder and artistic director of the “renowned Lyons Dance Troupe” (*Northern Mosaic*, 4 [1]: 4). In this issue, we are informed that the troupe received multicultural grant money to purchase a van to enable the troupe to travel around northwestern Ontario to perform. The article also stresses that “the director, Richard Lyons manages a core group of three *professional dancers* around which an ensemble of as many as forty dancers have been organized” (*Northern Mosaic*, 4 [1]: 4; emphasis ours). There is little other information provided, such as the names of the professional dancers, the dances they perform, and the significance of bodily movement.

Images of Aboriginal dancers appear several other times between 1980 and 1985. For instance, one Lyons dancer is described as a “colorful” dancer who “performs a dance of tracking a partridge” (*Northern Mosaic*, 1981, 5 [2–3]: 13). What is odd, however, is the choice of image of Aboriginal dance used as the 1983 cover of the tabloid (7 [2]; see Figure 3, page 34). Our research at the archives yielded many photographic images of Aboriginal dance, and the image chosen to grace the cover is, aesthetically, not a good shot leading us to question why it was used (instead of other better shots) and how to interpret the image. The position of the dancer’s body with the head and torso inclined into the circle (which is not visible in this shot) connote the movement of the dance, but the emphasis appears to be more on the dress than the dance: the dancer in the foreground wears the full regalia of a feathered-headdress, fur moccasins, and sweetgrass hanging from his belt. There is an oddness or awkwardness to this photograph, which, upon closer analysis, lies in its composition, in the spatial relationship between the two dancers. The difference in size, position, and light between the two dancers is easily explained by the photographer’s standing too close to one of the dancers and the use of a flash. However, the visual effects of the figures demands that the viewer focus on one at the expense of the other. By shifting the visual focus in this manner, the compositional elements of the photograph emphasize a kind of duality at play. This duality is further emphasized when we consider that the frontal figure is male and the one obscured in the background is female. The frontal male dancer is framed by the light-colored feathers of the headdress. The figure itself is gargantuan, making him appear distorted as he plastically takes on the rectangular shape of the frame that literally and metaphorically contains and restricts him. Following the incline of his head, a line points to the obscured figure in the background, a female dancer in the shadows who seems to be slightly out of focus. Unlike other photographs of other dances, the composition of this photograph does not give the viewer the illusion of picturing the relationship between the two dancers, or of the dance as a whole. Instead, it seems to take the dancers out of the context of the dance.



Figure 3: *Northern Mosaic's* Cover, Vol. 7, No.2 (1983).

These compositional elements visually stress the thematic representation of Aboriginal dance in *Northern Mosaic*. Most often it is the male dancers who are featured, often in close-ups that, as we argue above, emphasize their dress rather than the dance. While the inclusion of photographs of Aboriginal dance visually marks the inclusion of First Nations peoples within the tabloid, the photographs included challenge the visibility and inclusion of First Nations peoples within the mosaic of the city. The paradox of visibility-invisibility is further revealed in the textual narrative of the tabloid, as most of the articles in *Northern Mosaic* in the early 1980s ignore the plight of First Nations Peoples and celebrate, instead, Aboriginal arts and crafts. The slant is thus culture-focused multiculturalism at the expense of postcolonial conditions and a history of exploitation (think here of land and treaty rights), and abuse (recall residential schools issues and ensuing problems with unemployment, alcoholism, poverty, and trauma). This erasure feeds the production of racism in Thunder Bay as it appears to promote Canadian-Aboriginal relations by marketing Aboriginality as a safe commodity for consumption to viewers who relish the image of a First Nations person donning full regalia. The image works to affirm the contested “natural” image of First Nations persons in a pre-colonial world performing, as it were, for a non-Aboriginal audience contemporarily divorced from its settler-invader past.

As the photographs of Aboriginal dancers suggest, visible minorities are often highlighted as exotic additions to the Canadian multicultural mosaic. Such exoticization is similarly repeated in the *Northern Mosaic* 1985, volume 9, number 2 cover featuring a close-up headshot of a South Asian dancer (see Figure 4, next page). However, unlike the Aboriginal dancer and dance, both of which remain unnamed, this performer is named and the pose she holds disclosed as part of the “Bharata Natyam, the most popular classical dance in India” (*Northern Mosaic*, 1985, 9 [2]: 2). The featured dancer is now the famous Anuradha Nair, the only South Asian self-identified “classical dancer” to receive the Le Mieux Prize by Canada Council in 1989. The daughter of a mathematics professor at Lakehead University, from where she also graduated prior to pursuing her M.F.A. at York, she regularly performed at the Folklore Festival during her time in Thunder Bay and her performances in the late 1970s are documented in photographs found in the TBMA archives (email correspondence, Spring 2011). It is not until 1983, however, that she is featured in an article in *Northern Mosaic* (7 [4]: 14; see Figure 5, page 38).

Returning to the cover photograph of Anuradha Nair, one of the most striking qualities of this photograph is the use of light: it showcases the beauty of photography, highlighting the contrast between the dark background, the white flowers and accents on the dancer’s dress and facial decorations, delineating the nuances the light carves alongside her hands and face. Unlike the images of Pascolo and the Aboriginal dancers, this dancer is still, posing for the photographer rather than dancing in the Folklore Festival. Half-exposed and half-hidden, her face commands the audience’s attention; as we look at her, she looks right at the camera, through it, and gazes right back at the viewer, a trait often remarked on in postcolonial studies.



Figure 4: Northern Mosaic's Cover, Vol. 9, No. 2 (1985).

An audience familiar with dance and well-versed in the language of the *bharata natyam* would be able to read and interpret the nuances of this photograph in a way that the presumed audience of *Northern Mosaic* would not. For instance, the position of the right hand above the head is positioned in the *alapadma* mudra, or “flower blossom,” in which all fingers are arranged as petals. The left hand near the chin is positioned in the *tamrachuda* mudra, or “cock bird,” which resembles a bird if placed in front of the face with the crooked finger facing front and a thrusting movement forward. However, as Anuradha Naimpally notes, “the mudras are a sign language, [and] specific usage within a context defines their meaning. The mudra, placement near the body, and the facial expression will all have a role here” (email correspondence, December 2013). Naimpally further states: “In this image, I am using the *alapadma* mudra to indicate the holding of an earthen pot on top of my head. This denotes that I am playing the character of a milk maid carrying a pot of buttermilk to the market. The *tamrachuda* near the chin is used as a gesture [...] to indicate coyness, hesitation, shyness. These two hands along with the sideways look, present a maiden coyly glancing at someone – possibly Krishna – without drawing attention to herself” (email correspondence, December 2013).

To the lay reader, in contrast, this photographic image tells a different story than that which the dancer, particularly her narrating hands, manifests. Her hands appear to be framing her face, perfectly positioned to mark a straight line from her outstretched finger through her nose and down below her chin. The dividing line, as it were, further accentuates the duality we allude to earlier, and which is further implied by her closed lips, suggesting silence and passivity, in contrast to her speaking hands, which connote agency. The play between binaries here, between light and shadow, voice and silence, agency and passivity, highlight the tensions faced by visual minorities within multiculturalism, which simultaneously emphasizes racial difference as exotic, and therefore desirable, at the same time that it marks a kind of foreignness, which is tinged (at the very least) with abject fear – in here portrayed by the seductive dancer who gazes back at the audience with a bold, defiant look.

Like the cover featuring the Aboriginal dance, there is little information provided in this issue about the meaning of the *bharata natyam*, its relevance to multiculturalism in the 1980s, and the section of “East Indian” usually featured in the tabloid is missing in this volume. Our review of Naimpally’s website, combined with our recent email correspondence with her, however, yields additional details which could have easily been incorporated in *Northern Mosaic*. She is a dancer who “learned her first steps with Dr. Menaka Thakkar” (anudance.com/bio), another professional female dancer who performed and taught South Asian dance in Thunder Bay, and who was featured in an article in *Northern Mosaic* in 1975 (3 [3]: 9). Naimpally recalls that the photograph was taken “by some male photographer” who said it would be specifically used for the cover of *Northern Mosaic*; and that it highlights the importance of hand gestures, a topic of long-time interest in her dance practice (email correspondence, Spring 2011). She recalls: “The photo is a studio shot, taken in an old building with bricks and tall windows because [the photographer] wanted the background to be dark and mysterious. I remember the people who

commissioned the shot (perhaps the *Northern Mosaic* editors?) wanting the shot to have mystique and specifically asked for a black background” (email correspondence, Spring 2011). The pose, which was part of a public performance, “captures a moment when her character, who is separated from her beloved, is telling a confidant how much she misses him. The hand symbols are meant to express her rather tentative frame of mind” (email correspondence, Spring 2011, paraphrased). Out of context, however, what the photograph conveys is not the dance or the emotion of the character but an image of an exotic Other who one might see in magazines like *National Geographic*. Comparing this image, which is, granted, a beautiful shot, with the image provided in the 1983 article (*Northern Mosaic*, 1983 7 [4]: 14; see Figure 5) makes this point clearer. Rather than a professional dancer holding a pose in the midst of a dance, the adherence to conventions of ethnographic portraiture represents here an exotic South Asian subject.



Figure 5: *Northern Mosaic*, Vol. 7, No. 4: 14.

What, then, do these three featured cover photographs of multicultural dance tell us about the discourse of multiculturalism in Thunder Bay during the early 1980s, a time when the notion of cultural difference was both upheld and torn apart for its lack of attention to matters of race? *Northern Mosaic* responds, on one level, by featuring photographs of many visible minority dancers to suggest their inclusion and visibility within the mosaic of the city. It is troubling, however, that these photographs exoticize rather than normalize visible minorities in the city, thereby repeating the very problem with multiculturalism expressed by its critiques. Missing from the pages of the newspaper is any attention to the plight of visible minorities. Taken outside of the social, political, economic, historical and religious contexts, these visual representations of multicultural dance are used to celebrate, and thus naturalize, visible minorities as members of just another ethnic group that is now absorbed into the mosaic. These visual images, paired with worrisome captions and omissions thus challenge the notion of inclusion and showcase instead the very tenuous acceptance of visible minorities as part of the city and as part of the Canadian mosaic more generally.

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