

*It's About Time: Dancing Black in  
Canada 1900 – 1970 and Now*

Otoniya J. Okot Bitek | Justine A. Chambers

Adriana Contreras | Ceilidh Munroe

Support Material

OCT 13 - DEC 9, 2022

AUDAIN GALLERY

Presented at both Audain Gallery and Teck Gallery

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## Exhibition Text

*It's About Time: Dancing Black in Canada 1900 – 1970 and Now* illuminates the largely undocumented dance history of Canada's Black population before 1970, with responses from contemporary performing and visual artists reflecting on how the archival resonates in this moment, and in British Columbia. Guest curated by Seika Boye, PhD, this archival exhibition exposes the representation of Blackness on Canadian stages, as well as audience and media reception of Black performance in Canada during this era. *It's About Time* also explores legislation of leisure culture, dance lessons and the role of social dances at mid-century. Featured are individual dance artists such as Leonard Gibson, Ola Skanks, Ethel Bruneau, Joey Hollingsworth, and Kathryn Brown. This is the fifth presentation of the archival materials in *It's About Time*, and includes new commissions from dance artist Justine A. Chambers, visual artist Ceilidh Munroe, poet and scholar Otoniya J. Okot Bitek, with a graphic response by Adriana Contreras.

*It's About Time* was originally commissioned by Dance Collection Danse (2018) and further developed in partnership with Mitchell Art Gallery (2020). Partners: SFU School of Contemporary Arts; Mitchell Art Gallery; MacEwan University; Dance Collection Danse Gallery.

Guest curated by Seika Boye

[dancingblackincanada.ca](http://dancingblackincanada.ca)

## Events

Opening Reception

WED, OCT 12 / 5 - 7PM

Audain Gallery

Spotlight Presentations: Miss Coco Murray and Emilie Jabouin

FRI, OCT 14 / 2PM

Audain Gallery

Tour: Seika Boye and Ceilidh Munroe

FRI, OCT 14 / 5PM

Audain Gallery

Talk: Otoniya J. Okot Bitek

SUN, OCT 23 / 2PM

Audain Gallery

The Bernard Reading Circle: led by SFU Galleries Director  
Kimberly Phillips

THU, NOV 24 / 12 - 1:30PM

Audain Gallery

Performance: Justine A. Chambers

FRI, DEC 2 / 7PM

Teck Gallery



## Biographies

**Seika Boye** is a scholar, writer, educator, and artist whose practices revolve around dance and movement. She is an Assistant Professor and Director of the Institute for Dance Studies at the Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies, University of Toronto. Seika curated the archival exhibition *It's About Time: Dancing Black in Canada 1900–1970* and co-curated *Into the Light: Eugenics and Education in Southern Ontario*. Her publications have appeared in numerous academic journals and magazines, and she was an Artist-in-Residence at the Art Gallery of Ontario (2018). She was the Toronto District School Board's African Heritage Educators' Network Arts Honoree (2019) and in 2020 was the recipient of the Lieutenant Governor's Heritage Trust Award for her work on *Into the Light*.

**Otoniya J. Okot Bitek** is a poet. Her *100 Days* (University of Alberta 2016), a book of poetry that reflects on the meaning of memory two decades after the Rwanda genocide, was nominated for several writing prizes including the 2017 BC Book Prize, the Pat Lowther Award, the 2017 Alberta Book Awards and the 2017 Canadian Authors Award for Poetry. It won the 2017 IndieFab Book of the Year Award for poetry and the 2017 Glenna Luschei Prize for African Poetry. *A is for Acholi* (Wolsak and Wynn 2022), a new collection of poetry, is her most recent publication. Okot Bitek is an assistant professor at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario.

**Justine A. Chambers** is a choreographer, dancer, and educator living and working on the traditional and ancestral Coast Salish territories of the x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əyəm, Sk̓w̓x̓wú7mesh, and səliłwətaʔ. Her movement-based practice considers how choreography can be an empathic practice rooted in collaborative creation, close observation, and the body as a site of a cumulative embodied archive. She is Max Tyler-Hite's mother.

**Adriana Contreras** is an Interdisciplinary Artist, bilingual Graphic Recorder and Illustrator (English and Spanish), born in Bogotá, Colombia, living and working with respect and gratitude on the unceded, traditional territory of the x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əy<sup>ə</sup>m, Sk<sup>w</sup>xwú7mesh, and səlilwətaʔ Nations. Artistic expression has always been a central part of Adriana's life but became an essential tool for navigating the world as a first-generation immigrant. Her migration journey profoundly informs her work and commitment to social justice at a local and global level. Adriana completed her BFA at SFU's School for the Contemporary Arts in 2006 and has worked at numerous local Arts organizations for over the past 20 years.

**Ceilidh Munroe** is a Jamaican-Canadian artist living and working on the unceded territories of the x<sup>w</sup>məθk<sup>w</sup>əy<sup>ə</sup>m, Sk<sup>w</sup>xwú7mesh, and səlilwətaʔ Nations. She works primarily in print media with a focus in relief and monotype printing, although this does not exclude experiments with other media. She typically engages with print media in unusual and thoughtful ways, taking the printing process away from paper and using it to explore other methods of production. Her work often engages with the architecture of its surroundings, drawing closely on the contexts in which it is presented. Her practice is partnered with a passion for fine arts education that manifests itself in developing workshops, writing, facilitating discussion, leading tours, and more.

## Audain Gallery: List of Works

1

Otoniya J. Okot Bitek

*Made Nude*, 2022

panty hose, vinyl, audio recording

2

Colour palette guide for mixing make-up to achieve “accurate”, “ethnic” complexions.

Reproduction from *Stage Make-up*, 4th edition by Richard Corson (Appleton-Century-Crofts Education Division, New York, 1970 ed. from original publication in 1942)

On loan from the personal collection of Seika Boye

3

Dancers in Blackface for a recital by the Florence Clough Dance Studio, Victoria, British Columbia, 1920s.

On loan from the South Vancouver Island Dance Archives, Florence Clough Collection, 006-2014-2-3

4

Theatrical players in Blackface, 1930.

Reproduction of Image 20N, Box 1, Series 1024, University Settlement House Fonds, courtesy of City of Toronto Archives

5

Mr. Leonard’s Troupe

Reproduction of a detail from the catalogue for *Syncopated: Black Stories — a photo exhibit* by Archie Alleyne and the Archie Alleyne Scholarship Fund

The catalogue states:

“The revue consisted of young entertainers selected from organizations throughout Toronto, including the UNIA [Universal Negro Improvement Association] Hall, St. Christopher Settlement



House, Home Service Association, and Club Savoy. The 13 entertainers performed for military personnel stationed on armed forces bases throughout Ontario in the final years of World War II.”

This image is an example of an excellent source for future research. What questions arise when you look at this photo? What dance forms, cultural practices, trends, performance styles, or hierarchal structures are visible here?

6

Stage Make-up, 4th edition by Richard Corson (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts Education Division, 1970 from original publication in 1942)

On loan from the personal collection of Seika Boye

7

*The Blacks in Canada: A History* by Robin W. Winks (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000)

On loan from the personal collection of Seika Boye

8

*The African Canadian Legal Odyssey: Historical Essays* by Barrington Walker (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012)

On loan from the personal collection of Seika Boye

9

Dionne Brand, *No Burden to Carry: Narratives of Black Working Women in Ontario, 1920s-1950s* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1991)

On loan from the personal collection of Seika Boye

Souvenir Program for Archie Alleyne's Syncopation: Life in the Key of Black, February 5, 2012

On loan from the personal collection of Seika Boye

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Souvenir Program for Archie Alleyne's Syncopation: Life in the Key of Black, February 5, 2012

On loan from the personal collection of Seika Boye

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Modern Dance Festival house program, Hart House Theatre, Toronto, April 25–26, 1961

Nancy Lima Dent Portfolio, Dance Collection Danse

**12**

Nancy Lim Dent news paper clipping, 1961

Nancy Lima Dent Portfolio, Dance Collection Danse

**13**

Lester Ltd.'s Distinctive Costume Designs catalogue, Chicago, 1935  
Flea Market Collection, Dance Collection Danse

**14**

Page excerpt from Lester Ltd.'s Distinctive Costume Designs catalogue, Chicago, 1935

Reproduction, Flea Market Collection, Dance Collection Danse

**15**

Cover of Lester Ltd.'s Distinctive Costume Designs catalogue, Chicago, 1935

Reproduction, Flea Market Collection, Dance Collection Danse

**16**

Petition, July 20, 1840

"To his Worship the Mayor and the Corporation of Toronto.

The subscribers of this humble petition represent to his Worship the Mayor, and the Corporation, that they have remarked with sorrow that the American Actors, who from time to time visit this City, invariably select for performance plays and characters which, by turning into ridicule and holding up to contempt the coloured population, cause them much heart-burning and lead occasionally to violence. They therefore respectfully entreat His Worship, and all those to whom the right pertains, to forbid in future the performance of plays likely to produce a breach of the public peace.

Your petitioners are, in all dutiful respect to you, Her Majesty's devoted and loyal subjects."

Reproduction of item 605, Series 1081, Fonds 200, courtesy of City of Toronto Archives

**17**

Make-up case and various items of stage make-up  
Flea Market Collection, Dance Collection Danse

**18**

Tin of "Negro Black" face make-up used in performance  
Flea Market Collection, Dance Collection Danse

**19**

Costume belonging to dance artist Michèle Moss from her time at the Negro Community Centre in Montreal, c. 1960s  
Courtesy of Michèle Moss

**20**

Len Gibson's tap shoes  
Leonard Gibson Portfolio, Dance Collection Danse

21

Len Gibson's jazz shoes

Leonard Gibson Portfolio, Dance Collection Danse

22

Image from "Grange Road Dances 1956," *The Globe and Mail* on August 9, 1956

Images from social dances, house parties, concerts, and recitals are a potential source for positive images of Canada's Black population, especially of young people, in the early to mid-twentieth century.

Photos: Harry McLorinan (staff photographer for *The Globe and Mail*). Public Domain. Reproductions provided courtesy of City of Toronto Archives (University Settlement House Fonds 1024, Series 709, Box 1, Image 20N)

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Image from "Grange Road Dances 1956," *The Globe and Mail*, August 9, 1956

Photos: Harry McLorinan (staff photographer for *The Globe and Mail*). Public Domain. Reproductions provided courtesy of City of Toronto Archives (University Settlement House Fonds 1024, Series 709, Box 1, Image 20N)

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Image from "Grange Road Dances 1956," *The Globe and Mail*, August 9, 1956

Photos: Harry McLorinan (staff photographer for *The Globe and Mail*). Public Domain. Reproductions provided courtesy of City of Toronto Archives (University Settlement House Fonds 1024, Series 709, Box 1, Image 20N)

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Image from "Grange Road Dances 1956," *The Globe and Mail*, August 9, 1956

Photos: Harry McLorinan (staff photographer for *The Globe and Mail*). Public Domain. Reproductions provided courtesy of City of Toronto Archives (University Settlement House Fonds 1024, Series 709, Box 1, Image 20N)

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Framed clipping reproduction of community dances in Montreal

The captions for these images from an unknown source demonstrate both class stratification and the broad range of differences in cultural backgrounds of Montreal's Black population. Dance is used to demonstrate both. More importantly, the captions reveal that there was a need to state that Black people differed from one another, lived in different parts of the city, came from different parts of the world and that they did not all know one another. Reproduction from the personal collection of Seika Boye

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Framed compilation of Negro Community Centre materials

Negro Community Centre materials consisting of Children's Dance Recital house program, ticket, press release, and outline of dance program objectives.

Reproductions provided courtesy of Concordia Archives with permission of Negro Community Centre, Shirley Giles

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*Breaking Loose: African-Canadian Dance in Southwestern Ontario 1900-1955* by Ruth Ann Shadd

This book is an example of local history documented through

dance. The Windsor, North Buxton, Kent, Chatham, and Dresden Townships of Ontario were an area of significant Black settlement in the mid-nineteenth century in the years preceding emancipation in the United States. This area was a destination for the Underground Railroad. The close proximity to Detroit alongside the rural location and geographic segregation of Black families in this region resulted in a range of dancing styles from square dancing to popular African-American forms such as the jive and jitterbug during the first half of the twentieth century.

The documentary film, *The Greatest Freedom Show on Earth* (Orphan Boy Films/Keshet Productions/TVO 2015) and *Emancipation Day* by Natasha Henry (Dundurn Press, 2010) are further examples of sources that document important social and celebratory gatherings for Black communities in Canada including the annual celebration of the passing of the *Abolition of the Slavery Act* on August 1, 1834, which is known as *Emancipation Day*. (self-published by author, 1995)

Reproductions from the personal collection of Seika Boye

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Framed compilation of Ola Skanks' community work in Regina

Toronto-based dancer, teacher and choreographer Ola Skanks spent a year in Regina, Saskatchewan, with her husband and their four daughters. Skanks, who had been teaching and performing in Toronto, quickly became involved in the local Regina scene. During her time there she opened a studio in her home to invite Indigenous children from the nearby reserve to take lessons. Skanks's proposal to give lessons on the reserve was denied by local government officials. Regina is located on Treaty Four territory, the original lands of the Cree, Ojibwe, Saukteaux, Dakota, Nakota, Lakota, and on the homeland of the Métis Nation.

Top left: *Stairs for Stars* house program, Sheldon-Williams Auditorium, 1965

Bottom left: Reproduction of excerpt from “Student talent shines in ‘Gay 90s’ show” by Johnnie Wells, *Regina Leader-Post*, 1963

Centre: Reproduction of headline and photo for article by Donna Janusson published in *Regina Leader-Post*, 1963

Top right: Donna and Marianne Skanks in *Stairs for Stars* revue, 1965

Bottom right: Marianne Skanks performing years later in Toronto, unknown clipping.

Ola Skanks Portfolio, Dance Collection Danse

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Top left: Clipping from *Le Cabaret*, March 19, 1966

Bottom left: Miss Swing poster, Fort Frances Hotel, c. 1970

Centre: Ethel Bruneau and Cornelius “Poppy” Scott, *The Melody Twins*, c. 1950

Top right: Ethel Bruneau’s student Travis Knights with her life-long friend Gregory Hines, 1996

Bottom right: Ethel Bruneau at Rockhead’s Paradise, Montréal, c. 1970

All items reproduced from the Ethel Bruneau Electronic Archives, Dance Collection Danse

Ethel Bruneau was born in New York City in 1936 to a Barbadian father and Jamaican mother. From a young age she studied tap at the Mary Bruce Academy and eventually also took classes with Martha Graham and José Limón, as well as at the Katherine Dunham School of Cultural Arts. She performed on top variety television shows hosted by Ed Sullivan, Milton Berle, and Sid Caesar. Bruneau first travelled to Montréal in 1953 as a dancer with Cab Calloway’s orchestra. She stayed on performing in the top clubs of the era including the Black-owned nightclub Rockhead’s Paradise. She performed tap and Afro-Cuban acts, and came to

be well-known as Miss Swing. In 1964 Bruneau began teaching tap in Montréal, which led to a small home studio in Kim Reany's basement. This was the beginning of a teaching legacy that continues to unfold today in Canada's finest tap dancers. In 1995 Bruneau founded the Montréal Tap Dance Society, which gives student scholarships and hosts events with master teachers.

See Lys Stevens's "Ethel Bruneau: Montréal's Rhythm Tap Legend," *Dance Collection Danse Magazine*, number 71, Fall 2011

### 31

Poster for Kathryn Brown's show at the 1976 Toronto Modern Dance Festival with an illustration by John Fraser  
Dance Collection Danse Poster Collection

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Left: Artists associated with the Pavlychenko Studio, (L-R) Claudia Moore, David Wood, Nancy Ferguson, Anna Blewchamp, Murray Darroch, Susan Cash, Holly Small, Kathryn Brown, Susan McNaughton, and Gabby Micelli (Kamino)  
Dance in Canada Photo Collection, Dance Collection Danse

Right: David Earle and Kathryn Brown in Earle's Boat, River, Moon for Toronto Dance Theatre, 1972  
Photo: Andrew Oxenham, Andrew Oxenham Photo Collection, Dance Collection Danse

Sienna (formerly Kathryn) Brown was born in Jamaica and relocated to Toronto with her family in the 1960s. She trained at Toronto Dance Theatre and studied and taught at Pavlychenko Studios in the 1970s. Her professional career included dancing with Toronto Dance Theatre and creating work as an independent dance artist. Kathryn's brother David Brown also trained at Toronto Dance Theatre and went on to perform with the Martha Graham



Dance Company and was co-artistic director of Monte/Brown Dance. In the 1980s, Kathryn relocated to Australia where she embarked on a career as an independent filmmaker.

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Poster for Ola Skanks Studios, 1977  
Dance Collection Danse Poster Collection

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Left: "An African from Toronto" news clipping from the Toronto Telegram, January 4, 1968

Ola Skanks Portfolio, Dance Collection Danse

Centre: Ola Skanks

Ola Skanks Electronic Archives, Dance Collection Danse

Top right: Letter from the Toronto Musicians' Association, May 7, 1971

Ola Skanks Electronic Archives, Dance Collection Danse

Bottom right: Letter from the Mariposa Folk Festival, June 7, 1972

Ola Skanks Electronic Archives, Dance Collection Danse

Ola Skanks (née: Shepard) was born in 1926 in Toronto. Her father was from Barbados and her mother from St. Lucia; they immigrated to Toronto in 1918. Early on, Ola learned to tap dance by copying what she saw in movies and then performed professionally at various venues and events around Toronto including the Elks' Club and Home Service Association events in the 1940s. After her four daughters were born, she returned to dancing and trained in western interpretive dance forms with Willy Blok Hanson. Inspired to learn more about her African heritage, she reached out to universities in Ghana and Nigeria and learned dances directly from Nigerian students on exchange at the University of Toronto in the 1950s. She also took classes with Pearl Primus in Buffalo. Skanks worked to merge western interpretive dance forms and dances of the African diaspora in her choreographic work, teaching, and fashion

design. She performed, taught, and choreographed extensively in Toronto and the U.S. for stage and television including CBC, Mariposa Folk Festival, Caribana, and the San Diego Museum of Art. She was on faculty at the University of New York (Buffalo) and taught at the Three Schools Artists' Workshop in Toronto. She opened her own studio in 1974 located on Yonge Street. Ola Skanks died August 13, 2018.

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Photo collage of Len Gibson, photographer unknown, c. 1965  
Leonard Gibson Portfolio, Dance Collection Danse

### 36

Left: Len Gibson, c. 1950  
Leonard Gibson Electronic Archives, Dance Collection Danse  
Centre: Len Gibson in a photo given to Victoria, BC, dance teacher  
Florence Clough, c. 1950  
Florence Clough Electronic Archives, Dance Collection Danse

Right: Len Gibson, Eleanor Collins and Austin "Chic" Gibson in  
an excerpt from an unknown television guide regarding Bamboula,  
1954

Leonard Gibson Electronic Archives, Dance Collection Danse

Leonard Gibson was born in 1926 in Athabasca, Alberta, and raised in Vancouver, British Columbia. His parents were African-American settlers who migrated from Oklahoma in 1911. From an early age, Gibson was a self-taught dancer by copying Gene Kelly and Sammy Davis Jr. from their movies; he later taught his sister Thelma and brother Austin "Chic" to dance. He was performing for pay by age five and touring locally before ten. As a teenager, he took ballet classes with Vancouver teacher Mara McBirney, and later spent a year training (1947/48) at the Katherine Dunham School of Arts and Research in New York City. In addition to tap and ballet, he

trained in Afro-Cuban, modern and flamenco. Gibson had a prolific performing career on stages, in night clubs and on television in Canada, the U.S. and Britain including on the CBC, BBC and in the film *Cleopatra* with Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. He founded the Negro Workshop Dance Group in the late 1940s and was choreographer and performer for *Bamboula: A Day in the West Indies*, one of the first interracial television shows on the CBC. In the 1970s Gibson relocated to Toronto where he opened his own studio. His influence as a teacher and advocate for the preservation of dances of the African Diaspora is widespread and celebrated. Leonard Gibson died February 11, 2008.

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*Vancouver News-Herald* clipping featuring Len Gibson in the "Search for Talent," Vancouver, 1941

Reproductions from the personal research collection of Seika Boye

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*Vancouver News-Herald* clipping featuring Len Gibson in the "Search for Talent," Vancouver, 1941

Reproductions from the personal research collection of Seika Boye

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Framed compilation of Len Gibson and family

Left photo: Thelma Gibson, Marcella Choo Choo King, and Janet Gibson, Vancouver, c. 1950s

Reproduction of image courtesy of the Gibson and King families

Bottom photo: Group scene with Leonard Gibson in the corner on drums, Vancouver, c. 1950s

Reproduction of image courtesy of the Gibson and King families

Leonard Gibson's immediate and extended family were also actively involved in performing arts and night club entertainment in Vancouver and beyond. The Harlem Nocturne was founded and

co-owned by Black Vancouverites Ernie King and his wife Marcella Choo Choo Williams King in the Hogan's Alley district of the city and was a major destination in the "Hollywood North" of the 1950s–'60s. Ernie was band leader and Choo Choo was lead dancer and host. Leonard, Thelma, Austin 'Chic', Janet Gibson, and singer Eleanor Collins frequently performed here as well. Eleanor Collins went on to become a star singer on CBC TV and was made a member of the Order of Canada.

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*Crossroads* (NFB)

*Bamboula* (CBC)

*Showgirls* (NFB)

*Kathryn Brown* (DCD)

*Dancing into History with Joey Hollingsworth* (Vimeo)

*Harlem Nocturne* by Teeanna (Youtube)

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Joey Hollingsworth

Joey Hollingsworth was born in 1937 in London, Ontario, and was raised by adoptive parents. He learned to tap dance at a very young age and was dancing professionally by the time he was five. In the 1940s, he met and danced with Bill Bojangles Robinson backstage at a performance in London, Ontario. Hollingsworth appeared extensively on television from the 1950s–1970s. Credits include *Pick the Stars* (CBC Television), *The Ed Sullivan Show*, *Wayne and Shuster Show*, and *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. In the 1960s he danced in numerous Civil Rights events in Canada and the U.S. He was also part of recordings by the guitarist Lenny Breau. Hollingsworth has received multiple awards and accolades for his work and contributions, including a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Ontario Black History Society on January 28, 2018. Although there are many newspaper articles and videos clips

of Hollingsworth available online about his life in dance and show business, his advocacy for equality and human rights and his role as an outstanding Canadian have not been properly documented. He is a remarkable talent and should be included in Canadian dance history narratives. He is now retired and lives in Hamilton, Ontario.

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A Summary of Legislative Changes in British Columbia and Alberta

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This selection of clippings demonstrates the variety of ways that Black people were denied entry to dance and concert venues even when Black artists were on stage; dance classes when dance studios were teaching social dances derived from cultural practices of the African diaspora; and social dance venues for participating in racialized dances such as the jive or jitterbug. Framed clipping reproduction of community dances in Montréal.

Reproductions of newspaper clippings:

“Negro Young People to Picket Dance Hall.”

*The Globe and Mail*, March 23, 1943.

“Pickets Parade at Dance Studio.”

*The Globe and Mail*, March 20, 1947.

“Negro Put Out Dance Hall Says Jive Did It.”

*The Globe and Mail*, August 19, 1955.

Les Ballets Africains was founded in Paris in 1952 by choreographer Keita Fodeba and became the National Ensemble of the Republic of Guinea in 1958. In 1959, the company toured to Montréal and Toronto. Two of the dances performed by the company were customarily performed topless by men and women. This was considered indecent by some citizens and the press provided extensive coverage of the back and forth between theatres, police boards, morality squads, producers, politicians, and citizens. Despite the range of people interviewed for opinions, including a white

showgirl, the press failed to ask the female dancers of Les Ballets Africains what they thought of the insistence that they wear bras during performance. Note the difference in the language used by the press and in “The Nature and Meaning of African Art” from the Souvenir Program.

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*Les Ballets Africains Souvenir Program*, 1959.  
Flea Market Collection, Dance Collection Danse

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Reproductions of images from *Les Ballets Africains Souvenir Program*, 1959.  
Flea Market Collection, Dance Collection Danse

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Reproductions of a selection of articles from the mainstream press including the *Toronto Daily Star* and *The Globe and Mail*, March/April 1959.

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Ceilidh Munroe  
*Aint she something?*, 2022  
chiffon, fabric ink, framing stock, dowels



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