

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The challenge of dance anthropology lies in finding ways to reveal and understand the webs of meaning created through the dance event. [...] The challenge in writing about dance from an anthropological perspective lies in simultaneously evoking the particular experience and the shimmering life which it refracts and reflects; the meanings and implications of dance, indeed, of all performed art, are embedded in the experiences of the art itself [...]. (Cynthia Jean Cohen Bull, a.k.a. Novack, 1997, pp. 269-270)

Heeding Novack's call, *Illuminating Luna* set into motion an ethnographic study of a contemporary dance event, from the unique viewpoint of "dance event presenting," evoking the beliefs and experiences of its various participant groups (artists, personnel, audiences and specialists). At the centerpiece of the dance event in this research project is a single case study of *O Vertigo* dance's *Luna* dance performance. *Luna* was a dance contemporary dance work envisioned and created by Québécoise choreographer Ginette Laurin, and performed in 40 cities across Europe and the Americas. More than forty years after the postmodern dance movement was instigated by the Judson Church Group in New York City (Banes, 1980),

this study re-examines the values and practices of this kind of large-scale and highly valued dance event in a post-Judson era.

The anthropological concept of “the dance event” was employed as a framework for characterizing and understanding this contemporary dance or, as some would call it in Québec, “*nouvelle danse*” event. This study was divided into three parts: a section with introductory matter, a descriptive story of the dance event, and an interpretation of meaning for event participants. It was further organized around the questions of what kinds of activities occurred (Chapter IV), who were the participants (Chapter V), where and when the event took place (Chapter VI), but especially why and how it was meaningful for those engaged in it (Chapters VII and VIII). The quest for meaning took two forms: (a) how the *Luna* dance event made meaning as part of its participants’ repertoire of life activities (Chapter VII), and (b) how and what kinds of meanings were apprehended and formulated about the *Luna* performance itself (the choreography) by those who were present (Chapter VIII).

The parameters of this *Luna* research project included not only the public performances found at the core of the event. But they also embraced the wider span of the event from conception, through preparation, throughout several performances, and even to an imagined aftermath. This text reflected a desire to seize and incorporate the participants’ voices as well as to situate the event as part of an international arts marketplace, and so to locate the dance event within particular geographic, socio-cultural and economic circumstances.

As discussed further in the methodology chapter, this case study was chosen for five reasons: (a) *O Vertigo* is one of several large-scale dance companies in Québec which could offer a rich pool of data on the many aspects of dance event presenting; (b) the company was highly valued in the larger context of an international dance touring circuit; (c) choreographer Laurin was exceptionally welcoming and cooperative about allowing me to

enter her environment; (d) the *Luna* choreographic project was timely in terms of my academic deadlines; and (e) *O Vertigo* was based in Montréal, and so one of several possible choices that suited my orientation towards doing “anthropology at home” within my local dance community.

As far as I have been able to determine, only three ethnographic research projects on the subject of Western artistic dance forms (classical ballet and contemporary dance) have thus far been published in book form. One is an excursion into the backstage life of ballet dancers by Wulff (2000), another an ethno-history of the American postmodern dance form Contact Improvisation by Novack (1995), and the most recent is a sociological analysis of *The Nutcracker* ballet viewed as an American ritualistic tradition by Fisher (2003). All have used ethnographic methodology and methods, and the researchers, like myself, had been native at some point in their lives to the dance communities they studied. They all discussed certain aspects of dance performances at various points, but none oriented their study from the viewpoint of an event in the anthropological sense.

The introductory matter that follows begins by revealing the underlying purposes and motives for this study. Next, in the spirit of auto-reflexivity, self-disclosure and to better inform the readers of the researcher’s point of view, I narrate pertinent autobiographical events that led to the conception of this research project. And then, initial working definitions are developed in order to situate key concepts underlying this project. Finally, a synthesis of the organization of the thesis and a concluding statement complete this introductory chapter.

1.1 Underlying purposes and motives

The idea of this study sprang directly from Kealiinohomoku’s challenge to Western dance scholars (especially historians) in the 1970s in her essay “An

Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance" (1969/1970). In it she affirmed that in the "generally accepted anthropological view, ethnic means a group which holds in common genetic, linguistic and cultural ties" and so "by definition, therefore, every dance form must be an ethnic form" (p. 30). In other words, all dances are ethnic as Buckland (1999b) quipped in her essay by the same title. Furthermore, Kealiinohomoku (1969/1970) urged dance scholars to reconsider their claims for ballet as a universal or international form by producing evidence that it is in fact a product of a particularly situated Western heritage in terms of its themes, roles, body image, and so on. She characterized classical ballet in terms such as "a dance form developed by Caucasians who speak Indo-European languages and who share a common European tradition" (p. 31-32) ¹. Thirty-five years later only a few dance researchers have taken up her challenge by bringing ballet's historical modern and postmodern progeny into the fold of anthropology.

As an insider who had spent 30 years working in several communities of contemporary dance in the United States and Canada, I felt certain that -- because their métier is for the most part marginalized, physically dangerous and poorly remunerated -- most dance professionals ask themselves at some time or another "why do I dance?" The question of why we dance is a time-honored anthropological one, but occidental dance anthropologists have as yet paid most of their attention either to dances in faraway lands, or when they do study dances "at home," have chosen to work in the field with traditional and social dance forms and communities. As did Novack (1990), I applied theories and methods that were articulated by dance anthropologists as they researched dance from a cultural perspective (i.e. by way of beliefs, values and social organization). And so, I began and concluded this project with the conviction that contemporary dancers might

¹Anthropologist Wulff (1998) published a study of the backstage lives of ballet dancers on two continents, making claims for ballet as a transnational set of practices, but not as a universal dance form.

gain a deeper understanding of how and why they dance from dance anthropologists.

My initial intention was to pry open wider the usual framework that has been applied by dance scholars and critics when examining contemporary choreographies. In other words, they have generally limited themselves to a study of three phenomena: (a) the completed choreography (either as an autonomous aesthetic object or in terms of its/a live performance); (b) the interpretations of its audiences (in a field called reception theory); and (c) the interpretations and critiques of choreographies by specialists (dance criticism of the journalistic and philosophical kind). The framework for the contemporary dance event proposed here is visibly larger than that which contains these three phenomena, being inclusive of the entire process from dance preparation and its aftermath. This dance event framework also acknowledges the contribution of all manners of participants who engaged in any aspect of the dance event (e.g. stage house and dance company technicians, *O Vertigo*'s board of director's president, dance historians, company and venue staff). Dance critics and scholars were seen here to assume the role of expert and influential dance event participants, "expressive specialists" in the words of Ronström (1988, p. 26), in addition to their appearance in this ethnography as theoretical mentors for the analytical sections.

My choice of doing ethnography was also, in part, a form of resistance to some of the theories and methods of critical and cultural studies scholars (more about this in the next chapter). It seemed to me that their texts have been moving dance research towards albeit an eloquent but esoteric turn, creating an increasingly closed system of dance discourse. What I have also found through readings of their texts is that the author-researchers' voices largely predominate, and tend to be authoritative in tone telling us "how it is for others" (e.g. Cooper-Albright, 1997; Foster, 1997; Martin, 1998; and many others). That is why I have strived here to give as much weight as possible to

the voices of dance event participants. To the extent that this doctoral process has allowed, I aimed to write with transparency and simplicity, keeping in mind a potential readership from the very dance community under scrutiny in the *Luna* project.

As for the choice of doing fieldwork, there is a part of the dance event process from which I had been scrupulously absent, for ethical reasons, since becoming a dance presenter: the choreographer's creative process in the studio prior to the first public performance. It is during these dance studio sessions that the choreographer's vision is fleshed out and negotiated, mediated as it were between her/himself, the dancers and other artistic collaborators. Long ago I decided not to intervene in the dance-making process in view of the dangers of censorship, tempered by a belief that choreographers work best when unhampered by the demands of powerful sponsors and their tastes. By choosing fieldwork as my methodology and in my new role as ethnographer, I was obliged to spend hundreds of hours observing a choreographer and dancers at work. The need to experience and learn about dances from the perspective of their creative processes had become overwhelming.

As the concluding chapter elaborates, after having portrayed the *Luna* event in detail, this study crystallizes a unique portrait of contemporary dance practice in the 21st century. The understanding that was gained here about the nature and meaning of this kind of dance event from an anthropological perspective has already transformed my own presenting practice. And I am certainly hoping that it holds a potentially useful model for rethinking the dynamics of arts presenting for my art world colleagues in the international community.

1.2 Biographical events contributing to this study

Among the multitude of participant's biographies inscribed into this ethnography, and in the spirit of self-revelation, I felt it was important that the dance story of the narrator / researcher also be told. How else might the reader become aware of the "filter" through which this research was undertaken and written up, and so the biases which provided its orientation, its world view? As much as this imperative to acknowledge subjectivity and context has become part of the cultural studies project, it is also generally considered a tenet of academic credibility and trustworthiness for qualitative researchers (Anfara, Brown and Magione, 2000, pp. 28-38). These biographical notes situate me as a particular kind of dance event participant and insider. Also in this section, I felt it was possible to allow a little poetic fluidity to surface, because discussing my own memories.

To begin, I was recently struck by a photograph of myself (photo 19) when five years old, that resurfaced in my mother's archives. It was 1954 and there I was in the sandy backyard of my grandmother's house on the Pacific Coast of California, spinning with abandon. Eyes were closed, hair flying, skirt billowing like a sand dollar. Memory has failed. Was I imagining myself as a toddler dervish, an apprentice ballet dancer or simply taking childish pleasure in the sensation of dizziness? I now wonder if I was among those children for whom physical expressivity is irrepressible, as proved to be true for most of the *Luna* dance professionals.

It is now clear to me that seeds for this ethnographic doctoral project originated in early adulthood. It was in San Francisco in the 1960s, Minneapolis in the 1970s, when Eastern culture was infiltrating Occidental youth culture, that I made brief and fervent excursions into the study of Bharata Natyam and dances from (an unnamed part of) Africa. I pursued these dances along with many of my cohorts as a way of confronting challenging new dance skills and seeking out what we felt were more spiritual

motives for dancing. In the spirit of the times, we were pursuing rebellious excursions outside of the confines of the Euro-American dance academy into what we perceived as exotic dances from some distant “Third World”.

Somehow the noble postures of the classical and modern dance training techniques I had studied while at university came to seem absurdly mannered and, most of all, decidedly elitist. They had become out of sync with my own contemporary life and beliefs. And since these dances from Africa and India required we Caucasian women to assume unfamiliar ways of being and moving, our teachers provided us with copious contextual material about their aesthetic philosophies and cultural contexts. For instance, I can still picture my U.S.-born East Indian dance teacher instructing us to slap a relaxed foot quickly and forcibly against the floor so that it produced a sharp smacking sound. As we practiced the painful movement she motivated our efforts with a philosophical insight, “When it hurts, that’s when the sweetness comes.” At the time, I understood this to mean that we would attain spiritual enlightenment through pain. It occurs to me now that this was not unlike Western ballet training! In other words, these classes and consequent performances provided an early awakening to the idea of dance as the embodiment of cultural behaviors and beliefs.

I uncovered yet another sign of my future interest in the socio-cultural aspects of dancing within my passion for political activism during the 1960s. Like so many others of the “sixties generation,” I engaged whole-heartedly in a series of social movements: feminism, ecology, pacifism, socialism, sexual freedom, food cooperatives, communal living and so on. The field of ideas that were honed through these social movements became part of the foundation for my current feminist and humanist belief system. At the same time, I began to question the pertinence of studio dance training to this revolutionary outlook. As I still recall, the rigorous ballet bars and studious modern dance classes actually provided me with a haven from the turmoil of political work. It seems that at that time my compulsion to dance was as

strong as my desire to improve the world. Or, as I finally asked myself one fateful day, might the world be changed by... dancing?

I soon became a professional dancer, teaching and performing in one of the established modernist dance traditions (Nikolais technique). I also taught dance in elementary school classrooms, to a women's self-help group, and among disadvantaged high school children. Increasing body awareness and introducing creative movement as a means to "self-realization" (the personal is political as we feminists were proposing) were my teaching objectives at the time. One day I joined a dance class offered by Mary Cerny, because intrigued by the course description, and so found myself participating in the development of a dance form newly baptized Contact Improvisation. It was through this emerging dance form that I finally discovered a way to dance that embodied not only personal movement preferences, but also my social and political beliefs. For instance, this was a feminist way of dancing, giving men and women equal opportunity to carry and support each other, to lead and to follow, to push and pull. It was humanistic, not prescribing an ideal body type or prerequisite set of physical skills, available to all who wanted to move sensitively and cooperatively with others. This playful and tactile duet form, in which two partners improvise a dance by sharing weight through a physical point of contact, seemed to me a metaphor for tolerance and pacifism.² Most Contact dancers had adopted ecologically sensitive lifestyles, and the intimate touching involved in this kind of dancing seemed to many of us at the time to spring from the new openness towards the expression of sexuality. The organization of Contact jams, performance events and classes was based on non-hierarchical networking models. In her ethnohistory of the dance form, Novack (1990) explained how she perceived the link between Contact and American alternative culture of the 1970s:

²This is a period in my life that I find richly portrayed in Novak's ethnohistory of Contact Improvisation (1990), and in fact was a subject in her study.

Contact improvisation demonstrates how dance is a part of life and culture -- as metaphor for social interaction and values, as a focal point for different kinds of organizations and institutions, and, not least of all, as the direct apprehension of moving with and for a community of people. (Novack, 1990, p. 235)

The specific moment that led me to dance anthropology was a first reading of Joann Kealiinohomoku's essay "An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance" (1969/1970). The socio-cultural context of my own life-long art dance practice suddenly sprang into view. This compelling idea of seeking out the ethnicity of contemporary dance was soon to become the motif of the keynote essay for my master's thesis (later published in Davida, 1993 and 1997). In the summers of 1984 through 1987 at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, I was a mature graduate student in my 30s at mid-point in the Masters in Movement Studies program whose mandate was the "study [of] human movement as an interdisciplinary topic using perspectives provided by various fields in the humanities and social sciences" (Summer 1984). During four summer sessions within the Movement Studies program, I had my first encounters with scholars in several fledgling fields of dance theory. Among the professors it was Susan Foster, Cynthia Novack and Dianne Woodruff who were to become mentors for this current ethnographic project.

During our Wesleyan class "Anthropological Perspectives on Dance and Movement," Foster offered techniques for critical reading. Class readings included hundreds of pages on "the body" and "dancing" that she had culled from 20th century texts of Euro-American anthropologists. She sent us out into the field of a theatrical dance performance on campus, and showed us how to "make the familiar strange" through researching and writing an ethnographic study of a local dance group. Although I haven't

followed Foster's lead all the way to her advocacy of a neo-Marxist, critical analysis (e.g. Foster, 1986), she was the first who plunged me into the history and ideologies of dance-minded anthropologists. In another vein, Woodruff's "Movement Analysis" class provided my first academic introduction to Laban Movement Analysis, a theoretical basis for observation, description and interpretation of dance movement. I continued intensive studies with the Laban Institute, eventually becoming a Certified Movement Analyst. But Woodruff's importance to this project also lies in her later role as my master's thesis director, when she was the first scholar to suggest that my thinking was in fact analytic. And although I was never her student, my late colleague Cynthia Novack continues to be of central importance through her writings on American dance anthropology, and my professional contacts with her in our informal discussion and as an interview subject for her own doctoral research while at Wesleyan.

It was during my Wesleyan studies that I first came across Kealiinohomoku's essay (1969/1970) on ballet. Suddenly, through the common denominator of ethnicity, my small contemporary dance world seemed inevitably linked to a larger world of dancers. One morning at the end of a class she was teaching in the summer of 1990 called "The Anthropological Bases for Dance," I asked her: "I understand what you are saying about ballet, but what about postmodern dance?" It was then that she gave me her fateful answer: "That is, of course, *your* project."

It was during that same summer class that I also discovered Kealiinohomoku's still unpublished doctoral dissertation "Theory and Methods for an Anthropological Study of Dance" (1976). This encounter was decisive in developing some of the theoretical bases for this ethnography more than three decades later. It was in her methods text that I first encountered the idea that "dance is a universal human imperative" (1976, p. 2) and that because it exists in some form in every culture it must therefore be a purposeful activity (pp. 5-11). This notion exploded in my mind. Could

the contemporary dance I was doing be thought of as fulfilling a vital *social* purpose? I had come to believe that the dancing which consumed my passion was little more than the self-indulgent, somewhat narcissistic need for self-expression of a small group of artists and their voyeuristic audiences! It seemed clear to me at the time that these kinds of dances sustained limited public interest and funding. And so I carried this question throughout my consequent studies: what might be the purpose for the contemporary dance practice that I was engaged in?

Throughout the 1980s, as I was undertaking masters' studies, I began to organize supporting structures to facilitate dance presentation in my recently adopted city of Montréal. It began with teaching Contact Improvisation classes then organizing a performance group. This led me to presenting informal studio showings of touring dance improvisors, a city-wide choreographer's collective, a museum-sponsored series of new choreography from Montréal and Toronto, an international dance festival, and finally to co-founding the *Tangente* dance performance space with three dance colleagues: Howard Abrams, Louis Guillemette, and Silvy Panet-Raymond. My present day (and evening) job is that of artistic director of this small-scale venue. It is this vocational orientation that provided the rationale for my choice of the dance event framework as the subject of this ethnography. For it is from the viewpoint of a "dance presenter" that I have organized my ethnographic story. But, as mentioned above, I am currently engaged in several other dance world roles as well: Contact Improvisor, Laban Movement Analyst, university teacher and researcher, dance writer and consultant. All have contributed to my analysis and understanding of the dance event.

1.3 Working definitions of basic concepts

In this section I set out to articulate working definitions for four fundamental notions that give ground to this dissertation: culture, dance ethnology, contemporary dance and *nouvelle danse*, and the dance event. These definitions are briefly developed here in view of seizing their sense in the context of this study, but will be more fully fleshed out in the theory and methodology chapters to follow.

1.3.1 Culture and dance ethnology

In Kuyper's historical and interpretive account (1999) about the notion of culture³, he proposed that it has been a privileged domain of anthropologists ever since an early "burst of cultural theorizing" between the 1920s and 1950s (p. 5). He observed that within a thriving international market in cultural discourse there is at least consensus on one point: that culture is a way to talk about collective identities (p. 3).

Kuyper recalled that etymological traces were embedded in the culture concept from the 18th century German Romantic doctrine of *Kultur* that championed an authentic, folk culture and in which language and spiritual values were vital components (2000, pp. 5-9). He also recounted its 19th century roots, in which culture was conceived of as that which is learned, acquired and borrowed, and set in opposition to Darwinian biological theories of natural laws (p. 11). Kuyper (1999) also pointed out that the 1950s were marked by a science-minded approach to the culture concept by Kluckhohn and Kroeber (in Kroeber, 1953). In brief, these culture theorists proposed an anthropological definition of culture as a collective, symbolic

³In this study, I have been careful not to confuse the concept of culture that I have employed here, with another one that is implied by Western aesthetic philosophers. When they discuss the value of "acquiring culture" they are referring to the cultivation of a taste for the "high" arts and humanities.

discourse on knowledge, beliefs and values. The next generation, Kuyper concluded, characterized culture as an even more powerful concept, claiming that people lived in a world of symbols of their own making, and that culture is actually a fiction composed of local meanings created by ethnographers (pp. 16-17). While I adhere to this idea of culture as a fiction, this ethnography puts forward not only the ethnographer's story of the dance event, but strives to allow participants' voices to predominate in creating its narrative. To add a final perspective, Kealiinohomoku's notion of culture (1976) as expressed in her thesis and closely related to Kluckhohn and Kroeber's above, envisioned it as a dynamic and on-going process "learned by individuals, expressed by groups, influenced by its total environment, [that] has continuity through time, and value relative to each society" (p. 1).

With these definitions of culture in mind, let me now locate this research project in the field of cultural anthropology. This is one of four branches of general anthropology -- physical, cultural and linguistic anthropology, and archeology -- which in general encompass the study of the biological and cultural systems of humankind. The cultural branch is usually thought to embrace the beliefs, values and social organization that distinguish one community from another.

Dance ethnology in terms of this study refers principally to the North American school of the cultural anthropology of dance, one which views dances as microcosms of certain aspects of the larger culture and as purposeful activities in themselves and within society (Sklar, 1991b). Dance ethnology was the name given to the nascent discipline by Elsie Dunin and Allegra Fuller Snyder when they founded the first university program in that field in the 1970s within the Dance Department of University of California at Los Angeles (Snyder, 1992; Frosch, 1999). Also in that formative period, the field was called the anthropology of dance, a term which appeared as the name of Royce's groundbreaking book on the subject (1977), and also in the title of Kealiinohomoku's thesis (1976). In contrast, the British fostered the

concept of social anthropology, different from the cultural genre mainly because of its emphasis on the social aspect with its structure, institutions, roles and social relations (Barrett, 1996). They fostered the idea of dance anthropology as a sub-discipline of the larger social anthropology project (see Sklar, 1991b; Grau, 1993; Williams, 1991). Yet another branch of the field, most common among those European folklore specialists interested in dance, was named ethnochoreology by its proponents. Its goals as described by Giurchescu (1999) were the study of “dancing as a means of expressive communication which connects dancers, musicians and audience in an intricate network of relationships which takes place in different social contexts” (p. 44). Discussed more thoroughly in the following chapter, the ideological basis of this doctoral research will be largely drawn from American school of dance ethnology, with some ideas borrowed from the British and Eastern European schools of thought.

1.3.2 Ethnography

This study benefits from the field and practice of ethnography. By this I am referring to doing extensive fieldwork within a particular community of dance event participants, and at the same time to writing a descriptive, interpretive and analytical narrative based on participants' stated and observed views and understandings, as well as my own meta-perceptions of findings that emerged from the data.

As a novice ethnographer, I was initially guided by definitions like those of Desmond (2000) who described ethnographies as “[...] complex descriptions and analysis of social structure and practices [...]” (p. 45). Another mentor was feminist anthropologist Skeggs (1995) who explained ethnographic approaches (as did many others as well) as combinations of different methods such as (a) accounting for context and for the relationships

developed between researcher and researched, (b) doing prolonged fieldwork in participants' "natural" settings, and (c) engaging the researcher in both participation and observation (p. 192). Frosch (1999) added yet another insight when she described the dynamics of ethnography as striving "to understand [...] indigenous categories and intentions" in order to discover "how dance means in relationship to the context of which it is a part" (p. 250). This was the heart of Geertz's proposal in the book that in 1973 did much to instigate this kind of "interpretive" approach, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, whose heritage deeply informs my understanding of ethnography.

The notion of ethnography also refers to the written description and interpretation, as suggested by the Greek and Latin root of the suffix "-graphy": *graphia* from the verb *graphein*. Among its several meanings are writing, description and discourse, or as Geertz wrote about both the act and its consequences,

[t]he ethnographer 'inscribes' social discourse; he writes it down. In so doing, he turns it from a passing event, which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscriptions and can be reconsulted. (1978, p. 19)

I approached these ethnographic writing tasks as both investigative and literary experiences. They were guided by conventions whose practical applications were initially clarified for me by one of the many detailed methods guides *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw, 1995). Among other things, these authors raised my awareness of the nature and various forms of writing involved in doing fieldwork. The consciousness with which I undertook writing tasks was also informed by recent debates and counter-debates about the "construction of ethnographic texts" (see for instance Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Sanjek, 1990; Marcus and Meyers, 1995; James, Dawson and Hockey, 1997). These theorists of the so-called "literary

turn,” and for whom all the world’s phenomena are characterized as “texts” to be “decoded,” have caused me to reflect on how choice of writing style and syntax shaped meaning every time I put pen to paper, or rather fingertips to keys -- whether in the jotting down of fieldnotes and their “writing up”, the supervision of written transcriptions made from recorded interviews, phases of the coding processes, or in the various stages of the final shaping of the ethnographic document.

1.3.3 Contemporary dance and *nouvelle danse*

What kind of dancer, dance event and dancing are at issue in the *Luna* event? As did many of the event’s participants, let me clarify at the onset that I will be referring to it in this document as simply “contemporary dance” when speaking about the genre in general. But when writing about the local Montréal variety, I will favor the Québécois expression “*nouvelle danse*.”

Before attempting to situate this way of dancing among others, it is pertinent to note that the very notion of what dance is and is not, is still subject to on-going debate among dance philosophers and anthropologists (e.g. Cohen and Copeland, 1983; Kaeppeler, 1978; Sparshott, 1995). One of Keallinohomoku’s proposals for a cross-cultural definition (1969/1970) offered a logical starting point for this study in which she wrote that dance can be seen to exist when it “is recognized as dance both by the performers and the observing members of a given society” (p. 541).

The *Luna* choreography is the kind of professional dance that takes place in societies that differentiate between dances that are art from those dances classified as non-art. Keallinohomoku (1976) traced the Western concept of dance as art back to the Greeks, characterized by its scholars as those dances that captured rarified dance forms performed by virtuosic dancers. In the dance world of the *Luna* event, government arts agencies, programmers, the dance milieu itself and dance specialists require dancers to

meet ever-changing and diverse criteria to attain the status of professional artist. But from the evidence of several official definitions of professional dancer (discussed in Chapter IV, section 5.2) it appears that there is institutional support for Aristotle's contention that professional dancers are "those who give their lives to dancing" (in Sparshott, 1995, p.30) and so consider dancing as their profession. Among the many kinds of existing professional dance, the contemporary variety at issue in *Luna* is the historical offspring of classical ballet, or as Marcus and Myers (1995) explained it, "[...] the contemporary, Western-centered tradition of fine arts that began with the birth of modernism [...] out of the previously dominant Academy system in nineteenth century France" (p.3).

Of all terms used by dance historians to describe the kind of dancing in *Luna*, it seemed to me from frequent conversations and readings over the years that "contemporary" (*contemporaine* in French) was the most frequently used by Montréalers. And the name *nouvelle danse* has been only one of several terms commonly heard in Montréal, as in other Francophone countries, to describe the kind of dancing at issue here, along with *danse actuelle* and *nouveau bouger*. It was initiated and popularized by the *Festival international de nouvelle danse de Montréal*. I settled on the use of *nouvelle danse* for several reasons: (a) it reflects the distinct Francophone character of the Montréal dance milieu; (b) it is commonly heard and understood by Montréal dancers; and (c) it is easily integrated into English text both as a noun and an adjective. Of course this is the kind of historical category that becomes ironic in time, as what is *nouvelle* one day eventually becomes *passé*.

I also put aside several other possible English and French terms to distinguish the contemporary kind of dance in this study of the *Luna* event. European French currently favor "*danse d'auteur*" with its literary metaphor, a term transposed from the *auteur* movement in cinema (Bentivoglio, 1989), when discussing inventive, innovative forms of contemporary dance. They speak of "*une écriture de danse*" (literally meaning "dance writing") to indicate

choreographic style (Bentivoglio, 1989, p. 16). The *auteur* concept is not as yet common in the Montréal dance world, although I recently observed it coming into use in the course descriptions of the Dance Department at the *Université du Québec à Montréal*. As for “postmodern dance,” commonly heard in the United States, Montréal dancers rarely use the term at all. When I have asked why, they respond that they think of it as the kind of contemporary dancing that Americans, not Montréalers, are doing. There is an almost complete absence of this term in Québécois dance writing (for instance Albert, 1987; Barras, 1995; Époque, 1999; Tembeck, 1991). The descriptors “experimental” and “avant-garde” are problematic, because they might serve to describe an attitude towards art-making that could apply to any genre of dance at any time, from sport dancing to ice dancing, and so not the sole province of contemporary dancers. “Concert” dance has been a term rarely heard in Québec where it is more commonly associated with music performances. Dance historians Selma Jean Cohen (1974) and Lincoln Kirstein (1935) wrote about “theatrical dance” in referring to classical ballet and its modernist descendants. I didn’t employ “theatrical” because in today’s post-colonial dance world “theatrical dance” could refer to any professionally staged dance, including circus choreography, stage-adaptations of folk dances, musical theatre routines, and the dancing that accompanies popular music concerts and video-clips. Folk dance scholar Nahachewsky (1995) uses “presentational dance” when speaking of dances that are staged for spectators, and so not those that are participatory, a concept to which I occasionally refer in the course of this study.

It is also true that some Montréalers use the term *danse-théâtre* (theatrical dance in English) when discussing certain local and international strains of contemporary choreography. But not all choreographers fall into that interdisciplinary orientation. In her definitive thesis and book on the subject, Montréal dance researcher Febvre (1995) analyzed and defined this hyphenated genre since its resurgence in the 1970s as German *Tanztheater*.

Her exploration of the genre has convinced me that dance theater is both too specific and too generalized a term to use here, unless by a particular choreographer to describe their own work.

1.3.4 The dance event

The meta-conceptual framework for this study is the notion of the “dance event” in the sense developed by certain dance anthropologists and ethnologists, further elaborated in the next chapter. Montréal dance impresarios also use the term dance event, but when they do they are usually referring to those dance presentations with a particularly high profile, budget and public impact, such as an international festival.

My own understanding of the concept was honed gradually throughout the process of the literature review, and especially from some of the seminal writing of dance anthropologists as they worked on creating definitions (see section 2.3). The framework developed here for a contemporary dance event posits wide and inclusive boundaries in consideration of the nature (who, what, where, when) and the function (why) that was informed by cultural context and insider’s accounts.

As for who dance and what happened, the *Luna* event was understood as an extra-ordinary social occasion that encompassed all of the participants and goings on contributing in any way, whether part of the core public performances or in an indirect capacity. For instance, *Luna*’s activities included: imagining the choreography, planning and administration, marketing, creative and technical processes, documentation, teaching, mounting and performing *Luna*, writing and discussing the performance, and more. In this view, participants then were not only those who danced and watched the dancing, but all who contributed in any way and according to their roles in the event. Spatial parameters followed the dance company

from their home office and studios to the many theaters on several continents where they staged and restaged the event for local audiences. The temporal boundaries of the event were not as clear. Although I finally located a beginning point, or “day one,” of the event as the moment when choreographer Laurin began to imagine the *Luna* concept, I was unable to locate a definitive ending point. From previous knowledge of many dance events similar to *Luna*, I knew there would likely be an aftermath in the memory and writings of participants and perhaps (based on Laurin’s philosophy of extending the life of her creations) a future reconstruction of the work. And so, while taking into account an imagined aftermath beyond performances of *Luna*, I chose an arbitrary “final day” for the ethnography: the last official performance. In determining the function of this kind of dance event, I chose to focus on both the moment of performance itself and all participants’ points of view, and to also consider the entire enterprise of dance event-making in terms of its meaning within participants’ life process.

1.4 Organization of the dissertation

The document is divided into three main sections: (a) introductory matter concerning motives, definitions, dissertation organization, methods and methodologies, and a review of the theoretical literature; (b) descriptive and interpretive accounts of *Luna*’s activities, participants, time and space parameters; and (c) interpretations and analysis of *Luna*’s meanings in two senses, in the lives of participants and choreographic interpretations made at the moment of performance. A discussion of the outcome of the research process serves as a concluding chapter.

1.4.1 Part I: Introduction, theory and methodology

Following this introductory chapter in which objectives, motivations, questions and definitions are clarified, Chapter II assesses past and recent theoretical writing that gave ground to this study. They are grouped together into seven categories: (a) dance anthropology; (b) the dance event framework; (c) cross-disciplinary scholarship in dance and anthropology; (d) the cultural studies of dance; (e) reception theory, aesthetic philosophy, movement analysis and “sensual scholarship”; (f) Québécois dance writers and researchers; and (g) sociological studies on artists and audiences. Ideas and theories from these texts are critically reviewed and their pertinence to the processes of interpreting, analyzing and theorizing the *Luna* dance event is explored.

Chapter III discusses the methodologies and methods employed in creating this study and which guided the ethnographic processes. It begins with a consideration of the research problem, its origin and particularities. Two issues are then raised in terms of their application to this project: post-positivist research design and questions of language (bilingualism). Parameters of the research question and design are delineated and then the ethnographic methods employed are described: fieldwork, gathering and transcribing data, coding and interpreting the data both by hand and through the aid of a computer program. Finally, I identify and discuss four validity criteria specific to this study and which serve to enhance its credibility and trustworthiness.

1.4.2 Part 2: A descriptive story of the *Luna* dance event

The second section creates a detailed story of the participants and activities of the *Luna* event. Beginning with Chapter IV, a chronology of the

activities of the *Luna* event is listed, and then divided into thematic sections for further discussion: choreographic instigation, initial planning, creative processes, choreographic composition, management, documentation, teaching, presentation, touring, the final performance and aftermath. The dance and dancing itself is also described in a section on choreography, in which *Luna*'s structure and content, the dancers' stage persona, the movements, costumes, sound, and light and visual imagery are brought to life. In Chapter V, various aspects of the social identities, dance-related backgrounds, and dance event roles of various participant groups and individuals, are culled mainly from in-depth interviews. Professional participants' lives in the dance world are briefly portrayed in capsule biographies along with supplementary topics of interest (e.g. dancers' bodies, the métier of dancing, etc.). Also, selected demographic characteristics of all participants in the study are charted and discussed. As for where and when the event took place, the element of space is discussed in Chapter VI as the places and settings in which the event unfolded, and time as a multi-faceted phenomenon that is understood as *Luna*'s era, day-to-day scheduling, choreographic timing and the experience of everyday vs. theatrical time.

1.4.3 Part 3: Meanings of the *Luna* event for participants

Chapter VII tells how it was that participation in the *Luna* event held meaning in the lives of individual artists, event personnel, and dance specialists. Six general genres of life meanings are distinguished and each one briefly characterized. And then the motives that brought audience members to attend *Luna* are organized into five categories of meaning with their corresponding views about dance and discussed. Chapter VIII looks closely at the moment of the *Luna* performances, and the meaning-making processes of those participants who were present. More specifically, the kinds of

interpretations, evaluations and critiques that were made by the artists, personnel, spectators and specialists are examined. The impact of various participant groups on the form, content and meaning of *Luna* is charted and considered.

Following the third section, a final chapter concludes with a meta-narrative about the outcome of the research project. It includes a synthesis of the form and function of the *Luna* event, and a discussion of its impact on my practice as a dance presenter with implications for the field of contemporary dance and for further research in contemporary dance ethnography. An epilogue is formulated in the light of the choreographic project that came after *Luna*, as company dancers look back on the previous experience in contrast with the new one.

1.5 Conclusion

These introductory explanations have laid preliminary ground and context for the study and story still to come. This initial chapter has charted four strata of this foundation: (a) the evolution of the research question, (b) insights into the study's underlying assumptions, (c) revelation of the researcher's frame of reference, and (d) working definitions of basic concepts. This case study of the *Luna* event has been situated in time and place as a unique phenomenon among other dance events in Montréal, and its time and space boundaries have been clearly drawn.

By transposing the anthropologists' dance event framework into the realm of contemporary artistic dance studies a holistic, and I believe particularly inclusive, event concept has been conceived. Finally, the research question that began as an urgent personal and anthropological one of "why dance," has given rise to the structure of an elaborate ethnographic story of the nature and meaning of a contemporary dance event.