

Dancing Memory.

In what ways and to what intent can *Dansons* by Zoulikha Bouabdellah be considered an expression of Franco-Algerian cultural memory?

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Introduction

‘Franco-Algerian’ memories in France as well as in Algeria, it seems, remain buried to a great extent despite somewhat resurging within the cultural domain. While official discourse preceding Bouteflika’s problematic re-election to the Algerian presidency in 2009 demonstrates that Algeria purports to collectively forgive and forget its grim recent past to the general outcry of a population traumatised by the loss of their disappeared loved ones, there is, furthermore, a definite turn towards re-establishing diplomatic ties with France via cultural events such as ‘l’Année de l’Algérie’ in France in 2003. This event featuring an ambitious programme across different institutions throughout France emblematically and conveniently circumvented themes pertaining to decolonisation. While Algerian memories in France are the subject of extensive historical scholarship and while their place in collective memory has been the subject of studies by Benjamin Stora et al, their translation within French culture is wanting and their affect on contemporary art has yet to benefit from sustained critical attention. Collective and cultural memory, however, is as vital as it is problematic for, as Fran Lloyd writes in *Displacement and Difference: Contemporary Arab Visual Culture in the Diaspora*, it is through memory that we locate ourselves as social beings. (Lloyd, Fran, 1999: p139) Collective memories thus need to be ascribed meaning within a continuous present, as fixed narratives risk pandering to cohesive visions of a unifying national collective that render minority memories illegitimate. This dissertation focuses on Zoulikha Bouabdellah’s video work *Dansons* (Figure1). *Dansons* draws on different pools of cultural memory in order to humorously question fixed identity frameworks that disallow her own Franco-Algerian experience. She states “I am Algerian and I am French born. But in France I am still an Algerian because of my face, because of how I look. But for me I am both and I don’t want to make any choice. People don’t really understand that. For people I have to choose.” (Bouabdellah, artist’s talk at Brooklyn museum)

Bouabdellah lives and works in Paris and has been living in the capital since 1994. Born in Moscow to Algerian parents in 1977, the artist was subsequently raised in Algiers. She studied at the Ecole Normale Supérieure d'Arts de Cergy-Paris from where she graduated in 2002. Her work has been exhibited internationally, most notably in the touring exhibition *Africa Remix* and in the African pavilion at the 52nd Venice Biennale. *Dansons* featured in *Africa Remix*, in *Global Feminisms* at the Brooklyn Museum, NYC in 2007 and in the major exhibition *Airs de Paris* at the Pompidou, Paris in 2007. Bouabdellah has just been awarded the Abraaj prize 2009 by Art Dubai. Her work displays concern for such issues as the veil, and traditions such as that of worship and marriage. *Dansons*, stands out for its ironic take on the relation between tradition and contemporary societal values. It is, furthermore, her first attempt to directly explore French culture. This dissertation is the first attempt to analyse *Dansons* through the prism of cultural memory. In fact, apart from Siobhán Shilton's article on *Dansons*, Zoulikha Bouabdellah's work has yet to be the subject of an art historical analysis.

In the video, a female figure enters the frame and commences methodically, to tie silken blue, white and red scarves adorned with clanking medal-like shapes around her midriff. She does so carefully, smoothing out the fabric on her hips in practiced movements. The scarves are instantly recognisable as part of a belly dancing costume whilst the strict order of blue, white and red in which she ties the three scarves leaves no doubt to the viewer that it is the French flag, or 'Tricolore' that is here signified. She marks a pause. The silence and relative stillness is interrupted as she then belly dances to an instrumental recording of the 'Marseillaise'. The method applied in her gestures suggests the acting out of a ritual. The camera remains focused on a close-up of the woman's belly, the figure thus remains anonymous. By limiting the viewing angle to that of an unmoving frontal close-up, the importance of symbol and signifier is accentuated. Indeed, the three scarves and the moving belly carry the focus of our attention as viewers. They are furthermore abstracted by the

close-up which severs them from a wider visual context. ‘Tricolore’ and ‘Marseillaise’ in *Dansons* are here symbolic, synonymous of France as Idea.¹ *Dansons* has been criticised as simplistic and unadventurous, however, I would sustain that it is the very simplicity of the piece that enables it to be effective.

In the first part of this dissertation I will explore the workings of collective and cultural memory in an attempt to understand what are the problems, demands and necessities of inscribing historical narratives into the public realm via the means of culture, concentrating on the Franco-Algerian example. *Dansons* as an object of cultural production is both product and symptom of cultural memory. Joan Gibbons appropriately writes that art is an expression of cultural and collective memory. Contemporary art can be revealing of the workings of cultural memory whilst lending itself to an analysis that explores the social and cultural parameters of both production and consumption of the artistic object. Art indeed exists at the juncture of the private and the public, viewing art is a public experience that nonetheless calls upon a web of memories both public and private, just as the medium of film does, and yet it is traditionally the site of more acute critical inquiry². This analysis of *Dansons* through the prism of cultural memory will thus highlight how private and public memory are interlinked, how individual experience is always lived through the prism of cultural narratives, and how despite the presence of minority memories these play to a certain extent in the hand of established collective narratives. Such an analysis will lead to an informed understanding of the role culture can play in opening the debate around cultural

¹ The woman is dark skinned, which instantly invalidates the Idea of France as a strictly white Caucasian nation and thus also hints at its colonial past. The belly dancing would of course carry a completely different connotation would she be white of skin.

² This dissertation does not argue, however, that art makes for a more suitable medium of cultural memory. Art reaches perhaps less broad an audience as film, for example.

memory and, by extension, around the construction of private and collective identities - thus preparing the ground for a deeper and fuller analysis of *Dansons*.

In the second part I will then focus more on *Dansons* and the ways in which it problematises the symbolic of ‘Tricolore’, ‘Marseillaise’ and belly dance, demonstrating the cultural and political resonance of such symbols and exploring the ways in which Bouabdellah performs or even re-stages collective memories allowing for diverse identity constructs. We will compare *Dansons* with the work of other artists, namely Saadane Afif, Latifa Echakhch and Michèle Magma. It is consciously that I choose to discuss here the work of French artists of diasporic origin – though such a decision can be counter-productive and problematic³. Themes of internationalism and nationalism are recurrent in the work of these artists for whom such notions are personal and manifest. Furthermore, the imagined community formed by artists working in France today and originating from the Diaspora, I would argue, form a counter-community or public (understood here to be neither prescriptive nor cohesive), distinguished from the predominant majority who does not share this experience. A counter public, as defined by Michael Rothberg is a community that emphasises its cultural difference or divergence from the norm as a calculated means to question the validity of the majority group’s values. (Rothberg, 2006) By creatively embodying difference, therefore presented as a positive force, these artists encourage the formation of a counter-public in which the imagined collective of viewers recognise cultural diversity present within the other and in the self. Bouabdellah’s is a deeply multicultural identity. The very fact that she invokes her dual Franco-Algerian origin problematises

³ It is important not to label these artists according to a supposed cultural specificity that they do not necessarily identify with. As Olu Oguibe reminds us: “Culture, though predicated on the ideal, the whole and the pure is of course never those things and neither are the artists upon whom the mantle of representing culture falls. Therefore, it seems ridiculous constantly to translocate contemporary African artists back to cultural milieux with which they have very little engagement.” (Oguibe, 1999: p272)

collective memory. However, I argue that *Dansons* goes beyond such binaries. Bouabdellah inscribes her personal experience into the public domain, the French flag in *Dansons* becomes an emblem not of national memory but of the personal, the belly dance suggests a plethora of meanings.

In the third and final part I will further explore the performative aspect of *Dansons* and demonstrate the problems of ascribing meaning to work that, bridging two cultures, seems to inevitably draw on established cultural narratives.

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Figure 1:

Zoulikha Bouabdellah, *Dansons*, 2003
DVD Installation, Varied Size, Running Time 5min.
Images courtesy of the artist

Part I

Harnessed by shared verbal and visual conventions, cultural memory reflects predominant political discourse and gives substance to collective narratives that in turn determine individual memories. Cultural memory makes for a more flexible model than collective memory. Remembrance must remain open to debate and rethinking, a process which is indeed complicated if memory is thought purely as a homogeneous expression of the collective imaginary, suggested in the notion of collective memory. Barbara Misztal reminds us that memories which simply highlight the uniqueness of a social group, legitimised through history, run the risk of being used for nationalistic ends. Collective narratives perceived through the prism of culture on the other hand, allow for a broader set of meanings that ally the private to the public in a self-reflective process. I will be drawing on the ideas of Maurice Halbwachs, Paul Ricoeur and Barbara Misztal to understand the social aspect of memory before turning to the cultural memory theories of Alison Landsberg, Diana Taylor and Michael Rothberg while focusing on the mediation of collective narratives through the medium of art. What are the political and social consequences of cultural memory within the specific context of Franco-Algerian relations?

Sustaining cultural memory is as necessary as it is problematic. Maurice Halbwachs, in theorizing how present concerns determine how the past is remembered, draws on Durkheim's belief that all social groups require a sense of continuity, instrumental to the unity of a given society. The past is rendered understandable to the collective by organising memory into a concise narrative. To remember is thus to frame the past within narrative sequences that allows for social meaning and stability (Misztal, 2003: p13). Collective memory indeed contributes to the group's identity in the present, projected into an envisioned future - Ricoeur demonstrates that social and political imperatives to remember are dictated by the wish of a particular mnemonic group to secure its future (Ricoeur, 1999). Memory,

and by extension, a collective's perception of the past is therefore subject to the shortcomings of subjectivity and forgetting; memory is naturally edited as it is put into narrative form. Ernest Renan in his seminal talk 'Qu'est ce qu'une nation?' demonstrates that a nation is dependent on a collective sharing a common lot but also suffering, or rather, benefitting from, collective amnesia. Nations occur as the consequence of a convergence of historical facts and are sustained as an idea by means of the narrativisation of these historical facts translated in terms of collective memory. Conflicts and narratives of trauma often form the foundation of collective identities. On the one hand, Ricoeur calls into question the ethics of collective remembering when a group's founding narrative may often be rooted in an event that violence another collective (Ricoeur, 1999). Collective memory of the colonial period in France today is intensely problematic for a substantial minority are descendants from the colonised collective⁴. Renan echoes this concern by pointing out that historical enquiry often leads to events being uncovered that, though necessary to the development of the nation, are in fact known to be acts of brutality. On the other hand, narratives of trauma and pain are increasingly considered to be a corollary of authenticity that lend legitimacy to a collective. Thus, one can write of the 'balkanisation' of memory whereby traumatic collective memories become the premise for civil wars and territorial and cultural claims. Such collective self-definitions are more destructive than they are constructive for they focus on narratives of cultural specificity and thus deny any interaction or interrelation with other collectives.

Despite such reservations, however, it is necessary to recognise and assess a nation's past. Post-national political memory, Misztal argues, must thus attempt to juggle between the recognition of a diverse narrative that includes minority or immigrant memories, and the wish or responsibility to remember the past. "This friction between openness and diversity (an

⁴ The success of the colonial endeavour was predicated on the subjugation of the collective from whom the minority culture are descendant, it's cultural and historical legitimacy is thus threatened.

imperative placed on the agenda by immigration) on the one hand and the ethics of remembering and responsibility on the other is indicative of the most important dynamic of modernity.” (Miztal, 2003: p134) The past continuously informs, unwillingly or not, current social, cultural and political discourse and thus needs to be recognised. Traumatic memories effectively require working through.

The film *bleu, blanc, beur* poignantly evokes the Franco-Algerian football friendly that saw members of the ‘Beur’ community hissing the Marseillaise before invading the pitch. As this film attests, the violent reaction –although this violence was on the most part symbolic rather than physical - was interpreted by some to be a reflection of a general disregard for French culture and a resistance against processes of ‘integration’. However, the event of the 6th of October 2001 were undoubtedly the result of a deeply felt anguish in the face of inherited narratives of collective trauma that, frustratingly, were not discussed within French society.⁵ The absence of discourse surrounding these memories thus rendered French and Algerian memories antagonistic, causing a seeming mutual exclusiveness of these individuals identity as French and as Algerian. Issues of immigration and racism in contemporary France are, furthermore, very much influenced by tensions rooted in unresolved problems of past Franco-Algerian relations. The presence of North African populations in France is, for many, an ugly reminder of traumatic memories of the war and the process of decolonisation. Alec Hargreaves notes: “In a society where most of the majority ethnic population wanted to forget the trauma of decolonization, the highly visible rise of a growing minority of North African origin was an unwelcome reminder of the past, reopening old wounds and reenergizing old grudges.” (Hargreaves, 2006: p222)⁶

⁵ It is this event that provided the inspiration behind *Dansons*

⁶ At the time of writing, Hargreaves notes that Algerians represent the largest foreign national group in France. Immigration is often assimilated with an unskilled workforce on the most part originating from third world countries in the popular imagination. Populations from other

Indeed, populations from immigrant descent are overwhelmingly ‘visible’ in the public eye. Whilst in France the term ethnic minority is rarely used, the ‘integration’ of these minority groups into French society and culture is made a predominant issue – an issue that cannot but uncover a deep well of problematic memories that seem to be, in themselves, the cause of current problems. However, I would argue that there is a danger that, in collating current societal problems and problematic collective memory, the complexity of the current situation is overlooked. Indeed, the ‘visibility’ of populations of Algerian origin is not simply attributable to cultural disparity and a contentious traumatic past. Eric Savarèse demonstrates that to associate problems of integration in current society and memories of the colonial period and of decolonisation is to be guilty of an ethnocentrism that disguises other issues⁷ - we shall return to this when analysing the meaning ascribed to Franco-Algerian contemporary art. Perceived crises of immigration and social inequality are also socio-economic in nature. Hargreaves argues that rising unemployment and changes within economic structures have meant that immigrants are not incorporated into the system as previously. (Hargreaves, 1995: p 31) Nevertheless, the central problem regarding the question of minority populations is unfortunately the extent to which they can be differentiated from the majority.

It is necessary to the validity of the national Idea, that minority groups be ‘integrated’, brought into the fold of historical and cultural narratives that lend legitimacy to the nation, for minority groups threaten national homogeneity – in the second part we shall look further into imagined French narratives of national homogeneity and how these complicate the inclusion of minority groups within the nation-space. Hargreaves indeed points to the problematic nature of ‘integration’ that supposes the effacement of differentiations and advocates the use of the term ‘acculturation’ instead. Another analytical

origins are thought of as foreigners having the added merit of being less recognisably different.

⁷ In other words, a discourse that is inescapably framed by the binary of coloniser/colonised.

model is proposed by Diana Taylor, that of ‘transculturalisation, in *The Archive and the Repertoire*, she thus posits a more supple process through which cultural memory is to be inscribed within the collective. Cultural norms, Gerard Noiriel writes in *The French Melting Pot, Immigration, Citizenship and National Identity*, are forever changing via processes of assimilation which he argues partly operate as a two way process, however, he is critical of contemporary scholarship for approaching the subject of assimilation as a political issue that takes the attention away from the very workings of assimilative processes. Noiriel recognises the power of assimilationist pressures but argues that national norms are not necessarily imposed on immigrant population but are adopted because these norms are in favour of their daily interests (Noiriel, 1996: p 278).⁸Hargreaves, however, posits that integration is both a subjective and an objective process, dependent on the ways in which the individual is perceived by the collective as much as it is on the wish of the individual to become included within the predominant culture. Indeed, whilst cultural memories cannot be solely responsible for societal issues, Franco-Algerian memories certainly influence, and complicate, the way in which Franco-Algerians – as well as other North-Africans, who tend to all be lumped together - are perceived today. Bouabdellah talks of the complexities of being Franco-Algerian. “Je suis arrivée en France il y a dix ans de cela déjà pour faire mes études ... donc je suis venue. J’étais Algérienne mais j’allais vivre en France et... toute de suite... j’ai compris que ça aller pas être simple d’être Algérienne en France”(Bouabdellah, Resistance(s)) Let us now explore the workings of cultural memory to understand how Franco-Algerian memories are shaped and mediated.

⁸ Bouabdellah, for example, proudly perceives herself as French (without relinquishing her Algerian-ness). As Siobhán Shilton in her article on *Dansons* states, many artists from the diaspora fully assume their divergent background. “Art and literature depicting immigrants and their descendants most frequently reveals the protagonist’s (or artist’s) aim to be integrated into a dominant culture without abandoning their culture of origin.” (Siobhán Shilton, 2008: p436)

The Presentist approach to memory, as described by Barabara Misztal, takes as its premise that collective narratives are managed and organised by a commandeering force through public acts of celebration and institutionalised censorship. She notes: “The official management of collective memory, while always designed to legitimise power, is seen as revolving essentially around the two poles of censorship and celebration, or socially organised forgetting and socially organised remembering.” (Misztal, 2003: p56). However, cultural memory exists at the convergence of individual and group memories. Indeed, the rise of the internet as a commonly used means of communication and information exemplifies the fact that memory is a volatile process - it is the site of many narratives accessed across geographical and social boundaries and offers the possibility for commonly held ideas to be challenged, although this is not a given. Cultural memory is not necessarily imposed from above and thus cannot be reduced to the political realm. Misztal corroborates: “The memory of a social group cannot always be reduced to the political aim of sustaining relations of power as it is not necessarily solely imposed from above.” (Misztal, 2003: p61) This essay focuses on minority or diasporic memories, as such it is dependent on the understanding that cultural memory is shaped by many different yet co-existing forces. Two different perspectives on the workings of memory have been thought in seeming opposition, that of memory as individually determined, or that which is socially determined. Durkheim and Halbwachs adhered to this later school of thought and opposed individualism with ‘methodological holism’ to use Ricoeur’s term (Ricoeur: p 95) We shall see, however, that individual and collective memory are in fact deeply intertwined and inter-dependent.

Halbwachs, in *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire* argues that although the importance given to a specific memory is to a certain extent dependent on the individual, it is wholly governed by the very structures of society⁹. In other words, the significance that the

⁹ Halbwachs having made a distinction between ‘localiser’ as an intellectual effort and ‘reconnaître’ a memory, which he argues is automatic, proceeds to demonstrate that the

memory holds for the group conditions our recollection. Indeed, memory is the shaping of the past into languaged narratives, and is thus inter-subjective. Ricoeur concurs with Halbwachs that remembering sees us travelling from collective frame to collective frame along both spatial and temporal terms. However, he argues that Halbwachs' hypothesis is emblematic of the optimistic prejudice of socialism in its youth. Barbara Misztal, though heavily influenced by Halbwachs, is also somewhat critical of his 'methodological holism'. She argues that Halbwachs collates notions of memory and identity. In focusing on notions of solidarity and moral consensus he fails to engage with the role of 'individual consciousness' in shaping collective narratives. (Misztal, 2003: p55) She argues that remembering remains personal and subjective. I concur that cultural memory does not amount to the sum of myriad individual experiences but exists at the confluence of shared memories shaped by myriad political and cultural discourse. Looking at cultural memory through the prism of Bouabdellah's work demonstrates, indeed, that her individual memories, though symptomatic of the specificity of her personal and unique life-experience, are emblematic of, and dependent on, a wider social and cultural context. As an artist, Bouabdellah brings past personal experiences to the fore. As a member of a given society, however, these very experiences cannot fail to be conditioned by a given collective framework.¹⁰

Second and third generation Algerian immigrants are the inheritors of complex memories passed down through generations that, though to a small extent, do nonetheless

localisation of memory is wholly dependent on our social context, on social frames or 'cadres sociaux' that are spatially, linguistically and temporally determined (Halbwachs, 1975: p115). Localising a memory is necessary to communicate with other individuals and there is no recognition of memory that is not also the beginning of a localisation of memory.

¹⁰ Furthermore, and we will be exploring this theme in the final part of this dissertation, Zoulikha's work has the capacity to, in turn, shape collective memory, for, as Misztal argues, collective memory exists at the confluence of shared memories and art is part of the stuff of cultural and collective memory.

shape cultural memory.¹¹ Familial memories do not only pertain to the family enclave but are conditioned by ‘cadres sociaux’. Mannheim demonstrated that a generation is not a group unified simply by age but one in which its members share a common sociological context. It is via the exchange itself predicated by the fact that an individual will identify with a social group through social interaction, that lends significance to certain defining familial memories and not others. It therefore stands that narratives that originate from within the family enclave naturally cross-pollinate from collective to collective and influence cultural production beyond its initial cultural and local context. Familial memories are thus no longer specific to the family enclave. Familial memory is but an example, this indeed pertains to other mnemonic collectives. It substantiates, nonetheless, Alison Landsberg’s hypothesis, that she develops in *Prosthetic memory, The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*, that modernity has rendered inadequate Halbwachs’ model of collective memory as culturally specific. New technologies have the ability to create ‘imagined communities’ across geographical or social boundaries. The model of cultural memory propounded by Landsberg: ‘Prosthetic Memory’, she posits, is mediated through such transcultural processes. Thus, it encourages the beholder to feel connected to the experience of another without implying that the experience is shared. (Landsberg, 2004: p19).¹² What role can culture play?

Eric Savarèse argues for an ‘éclatement’ of Algerian memories, a valuable hypothesis when considering different expressions of Franco-Algerian cultural memory (Savarèse, 2007: p53). Whereas first generation migrants, on the most part illiterate,

¹¹ Inherited memories and traditions are source of stability and continuity, though I would posit, and this will be explored in part III, tradition is often wrongly perceived as a cohesive force diametrically opposed to change.

¹² It also suggests that new connections are formed rather between people with shared experience not linked to place, which is more problematic for in danger of becoming decontextualised.

considered their time spent in France as pre-empting a return to the homeland, written or cinematic work of second generation Algerians reflect a desire to rid themselves of the burden of colonial memory carried by their parents. Indeed, Hargreaves argues this generation oscillates between a disinterest for the Algerian war and a need for history and genealogy hindered by its absence in official French history and the reticence of their parent's generation towards this history. The rise of second generation Algerians born in France changed the situation. In more recent years French Algerians recognize that in order for them to be part of French society, the past has to be unearthed and debated in the public sphere. Richard Derderian posits that the memory work of this generation of Algerians is a 'constructive search for resolution of a past that continues to exert a powerful hold on the present' (Derderian, 2006: p248) Cultural production lends itself to 'constructive' discussion, as Derderian writes, of such issues in a context that is not dependent on party politics - which is not to say that it is not political. Mass culture opens up a group's memory and identity to a wide audience argues Landsberg. "In this process (the turn to mass culture), memories have ceased to belong exclusively to a particular group and instead have become part of a common public domain." (Landsberg, 2004: p11) Bouabdellah can be said to be part of this generation, and, whilst I would not categorise her work as mass culture, it indeed communicates her experience to a wider domain, a wider audience. Merely by being exhibited in Africa Remix, *Dansons* will have been seen in Dusseldorf, London, Paris and Tokyo.

I would argue that, seen through the prism of artistic practice, cultural memories are subjected to a specific mode of inquiry that potentially transcends frames of moral and historical consensus by delineating these very frames. In other words, by delineating cultural, social and moral conventions contemporary art claims to transcend these conventions, thus lending itself to critical inquiry. Lucy Lippard, in her fascinating text on ritual and performance art: *Overlay*, argues for the relevance of art as the performed experience of a

collective as its normative social values break down. (Lippard, 1983) Performance or ritual art would thus be a re-enactment of cultural memories, allowed through the prism of art at a time of collective need. This is a valuable hypothesis that finds deep echoes in the work of Franco-Algerian artists, producing work at the juncture of two cultures, two systems of cultural memory perceived to be antagonistic. The idea that art can serve to create a bridge between past rituals and traditions and contemporary society is one that resonates throughout *Dansons*. The consumption of art is intrinsically a public and performative experience that thus allows for myriad interpretations of cultural memory to be circulated, we shall be exploring this further in the third and final part to this dissertation¹³. The relation between viewer and video art is more tenuous and more heavily dependent on memory than with other mediums both in the experience of viewing and in the giving of meaning for, as video exists in parallel with film and television the act of viewing itself, I would argue, is an experience of embodied cultural memory. When viewing video work the audience inevitably calls upon a maze of cultural references drawn from film and television which carry with them somatic memories of their own that thus inform the meaning ascribed to the piece as well as the behaviour of the viewer confronted with the moving image.

Aleida Assmann argues that cultural memory is in part at least an archival trope of cultures in the face of the passage of time.

“Such artefacts (cultural artefacts), however, do not automatically create a long-term, trans-generational memory. If they are preserved at all, they enter into the cultural archive and

¹³ We will, however, be demonstrating some of the complexities of upholding art. Furthermore, as Lippard points out, artistic production continues to attract a loyal audience, but a broad one it is not. “Too often, however, a broader audience remains out of reach, even to those artists most resistant to the erosion of art’s communicative functions, because available forms are not readily understood.”(Lippard, 1983: 159)

become historical documents, traces of the past that are irreversibly severed from living memories.” (Assmann, 2002: p 31)

Diana Taylor recognises this difference between what is written and what is performed in the everyday but writes of the archive and the repertoire as interdependent. However, both Aleida Assmann and Diana Taylor commonly posit that cultural memory enables narratives to transcend social, intellectual or locational contexts, reconnecting these narratives with a broader public. Landsberg argues that mass culture opens up a group’s memory and identity to a wide audience. She thus conceives of the prosthetic memory, that, she states, has the ability to shape another’s subjectivity and politics beyond classifications of race, class and gender, and therefore encourages ethical thinking¹⁴. “As this book will demonstrate, prosthetic memory creates the conditions for ethical thinking precisely by encouraging people to feel connected to, while recognizing the alterity of, the ‘other’.” (Landsberg, 2004: p9) She presents prosthetic memory as embodied, worn on the body and experienced physically within the movie theatre or museum. Landsberg argues that prosthetic memory has the power to transform identity through knowledge, responsibility and feeling, thus echoing Jill Bennett’s belief in the potential of somatic memory, presented in *Emphatic Vision, Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*. Her idea that museums are able to position the body so as to perpetuate an experience of affinity, relates to the Idea of viewing as performative, enounced in the final part of this dissertation. However, we shall also see that all performance of cultural consumption is dependent on prevailing discourses, that problematise the notion of a prosthetic memory.

¹⁴ Landsberg further argues, the commodification of memory is a positive occurrence and is critical of scholars who focus on the disadvantages of mass culture rather than explore ways in which to ‘raise the level of public and popular discourse about history, memory, politics, and identity.’ (Landsberg, 2004: p21)

To a certain extent, the Media stands in its manifold forms for a platform of discussion where different memories are played against one another and where private memories become sustenance for collective narratives. Jo Mc Cormack in his book on collective memory of the Algerian war asserts: “Media coverage will influence how individuals, families, associations and other groups remember.” (Mc Cormack:2007, p136) However, as an important purveyor of memory, the Media formulates representations of the past by choosing what and when events are conveyed and is thus emblematic of ‘prevailing discourses’. The Media is not an innocent vector of information, but is, as Edward Said convincingly argues in *Covering Islam*, guilty of prejudices despite its claim of universalism. Diana Taylor draws on the findings of Jesus Martin Barbero in *The Archive and the Repertoire* to argue for a dialogic relationship between the media and collective narratives that allows for broader meaning. Modes of viewing and retelling narratives influence reception of information dispelled by the media which in turn informs its choice of narratives and modes of communication - a similar process as that explored above between majority and minority cultures in terms of transculturalisation.

“It’s not simply that the media impose structures of desire and appropriate behaviour. How populations develop ways of viewing, living with, and retelling or recycling the materials allows for a broad range of responses. (...) Those responses and behaviours, in turn, are taken up and appropriated by the mass media in a dialogic, rather than a one-way manner.”(Taylor, 2004: p 21)

Taylor’s hypothesis seemingly corroborates Rothberg’s Idea of multidirectional memory pointing to the overlapping nature of cultural memory that influences the public sphere and the substance of its subject’s reactions. Indeed, contemporary societal problems in France and

the discourses surrounding them are interlinked with past narratives of immigration, torture and decolonization to do with the Franco-Algerian war and interlaced with memories of civil unrest during the 1960's and, to go further back in time, of the Holocaust. However, Rothberg continues to argue that as testimonies of a traumatic event enter the public realm through different media the political and cultural impact of such memories demands the existence of counter-publics. Indeed it would seem that cultural memory will, if predicated on a unified collective, resist any political debate.

We have seen it is necessary for cultural memory to be recognised as dependent on interrelating individual and collective narratives, lest these narratives uphold cohesive national discourse. Necessary it is indeed, despite being intrinsically problematic for, as Franco-Algerian narratives exemplify, cultural memory continues to haunt the present, influencing contemporary societal problems. Cultural memory is at the root of identity constructs. Different collective narratives need to be allowed to cohabit in a process of transculturalisation rather than assimilation to predominant narratives. Cultural production can only enable flexible memories, however, if the culture sphere and the media do not try and implement a homogenous public. The following section looks further into cohesive memory narratives and the extent to which *Dansons* conflates such narratives by drawing on seemingly divergent cultural memories.

Part II

Dansons questions the rationale behind national narratives signified by ‘Tricolore’ and ‘Marseillaise’. By associating them to the tradition of belly dancing Bouabdellah asserts her myriad and thus ‘divergent’ identity drawn from different pools of cultural memory, invalidating collective narratives of national and historical cohesion. As we have seen in the preceding section, it is vital for the acceptance of minority groups within a historically legitimised nation-space that cultural memory is effectively understood to be in perpetual flux. Indeed, cultural memory plays a central role in the formation of a collective’s sense of identity. Despite the multidirectional aspect of cultural memory as previously demonstrated, to what extent are national myths and narratives enshrined within such symbols or sites of memory as ‘Tricolore’ and ‘Marseillaise’? I have argued that art lends itself to critical inquiry that transcends established discourse, however, does *Dansons* conflate national and monolithic narratives? Is dance, as a ritualised experience, an act of coercion or an embodied and creative expression of identity in *Dansons*? We shall first take closer look at the meaning of symbols such as the ‘Tricolore’ and the ‘Marseillaise’ to better understand the resonance that they might carry before turning our attention to the use of the belly dance as a symbol, I will argue, of the surpassing of societal constraints.

The weight that symbols of collective memory carry in the formation of national narratives paradoxically renders *Dansons* effective and loaded with meaning. ‘Tricolore’ and ‘Marseillaise’ are instantaneously recognisable and problematic symbols of the French Nation - problematic, to a certain extent, by virtue of being so recognisable. Nations are, we have seen, contingent on the collective imaginary. Renan conceives of the Nation as a ‘spiritual principle’. It is neither dependent on race nor on language, religion nor wholly on geography. It is a spiritual idea that unifies a group under a shared sense of history, a wish to adhere to and invest in this heritage, and is sustained through the trappings of culture and a

web of symbols of which the ‘Tricolore’ and the ‘Marseillaise’ are emblematic examples. In *Dansons*, the ‘Tricolore’ indeed stands as an indubitable symbol of the French nation. It is effectively less symbol than icon, invested with political resonance and emblematic of the marriage, in France, between the nation as historical and cultural collective and the state. The ‘Tricolore’, as a national flag is the symbol of France as a political entity, of its government, its military. However, the ‘Tricolore’ is furthermore a symbol of the principles of the French revolution which continues to be regarded as a founding myth both culturally and politically. As François Furet writes, the revolution of 1789 is revered as ‘le myth de l’an zero’. ‘Marseillaise’, just as much as ‘Tricolore’, thus upholds the myth of the French nation as anchored within a long, heroic and historically legitimated past. Indeed, these national symbols have come to signify the immutability of the Idea of France or ‘Patrie’, indifferent to various mutations in power and to the passage of time (Girardet 1997). The idea of ‘Destin National’, via the cult of ‘Patrie’, is thus sanctified.

“L’emblème au trois couleurs tend à apparaître comme le symbole de la seule Patrie, une Patrie indifférente – pourvu que le symbole soit respecté et le culte célébré – aux mutations successive du pouvoir qui la gouverne et des institutions qui la gèrent.” (Girardet Raoul, 1997: p61)

As Raoul Girardet argues however, the symbioses of nation and state so poignantly expressed in French culture and symbolised by the ‘Tricolore’ is only conceivable as long as it is redolent of a unified conception of collective memory. Calling upon history and memory to uphold a vision of unified and unifying national identity thus renders the existence of minority or diverging memories problematic. Indeed, these divergent narratives are not legitimated and therefore recognised. *Dansons*, conflates the omnipotence of the problematic

symbolic highlighted above in order to propose a more flexible re-staging of identity constructs. Bouabdellah presents neither Algerian nor French memory as mutually exclusive. As Siobhán Shilton claims, assimilationist discourses as discussed previously are thus challenged:

“In addition to challenging attempts –both past and present – to polarize, and to establish a hierarchy between, French and Maghrebi cultures and identities, Bouabdellah’s work can also be interpreted as a challenge to the opposite extreme: the rhetoric of ‘integration’, understood as a one-way process of assimilation.”(Siobhán Shilton, 2008: p441)

Before exploring this further, I will now turn to Pierre Nora’s seminal collection of essays *Les Lieux de Mémoire* that has become a corner stone in the study of cultural memory - the very body of texts in which features Raoul Girardet’s essay on the ‘Tricolore’ - to understand how deeply entrenched is this “tacit, or explicit implication” that Girardet refers to. Nora demonstrates that the site of memory is subject to the vagaries of time, collective memory is shaped by social norms and is ascribed meaning according to prevailing socio-political discourse, as discussed previously, to a great extent. Nonetheless, the term ‘lieux’, I posit, is paradoxically emblematic of the fixity of symbols such as the ‘Tricolore’. ‘Tricolore’ and ‘Marseillaise’ are sites of memory in the sense that they are repositories of collective memory and purveyors of founding narratives. However, they are recognised rather than understood or let alone questioned, and behind them, lurk myths that pander to insular views of France as a nation. *Dansons* points to the deadening of national symbols. By juxtaposing the flag and the belly dance, Bouabdellah points to the fact that the concepts that are symbolised by the flag: that of ‘liberté’, ‘égalité’ and ‘fraternité’ are foreign to us as

concepts. “The principles of the French flag that are liberty, equality and fraternity are exotic for people all over the world because I think that no one respects them really. I make this issue with the exoticism of the belly dance.” Bouabdellah thus renders established symbols and narratives alien and foreign by placing them in a different context. Nora’s contribution does little to reverse the process delineated above of rendering culture and history mythicised. Indeed, *Les Lieux de Mémoires* is indicative of the barely veiled chauvinism that continues to permeate even France’s intellectual circles, as a consequence to which cultural memory unflinchingly upholds the myths of ‘Patrie’ and ‘Destin National’.

Diana Taylor is critical of Nora’s temporal differentiation between ‘milieux’ (which she perceives as similar to her Idea of the repertoire) and ‘lieux de mémoire’ (similar to the archive), pandering to the nostalgic Idea of before and after: between a lost past seen as authentic and the present as global, mass cultural and diametrically opposite to the past. She argues instead for a differentiation between different kinds of publics and communities. Diana Taylor thus posits that the ‘milieux de mémoire’ or performed repertoire of memory coincides temporally with the ‘lieux de mémoire’ or archive and that the two are interdependent and inter-informative. Indeed, *Dansons* as a repertoire is dependent on Franco-Algerian cultural memory as an archive of narratives both public and private, conveyed, we have seen, through different media and thus part of the collective imaginary. Rothberg propounds the idea of multidirectional memory as the mediation between different narratives and different communities, or publics and counter-publics. Counter-publics we have seen in the introduction are communities that emphasise cultural differences as a calculated means to question the validity of the majority group’s values. Bouabdellah indeed enables an experience of cultural narratives to be shared by different imagined communities that, fluid and open-ended, questions the ‘lieux de mémoire’ of ‘Tricolore’, ‘Marseillaise’ and belly dance.

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Figure 2:

Latifa Echakhch, *Fantasia (empty flag)*, 2008

Source: Kunsthalle Fredericanum, www.fredericanum-kassel.de

Dansons humorously demonstrates the diversity found within seemingly fixed boundaries of nations and peoples. Homi Bhabha in his seminal *Nation and Narration* criticises invisible boundaries adverse, he argues, to an internationalism present within the 'nation-space'. He argues for a hybridity of cultures enabled by conceiving of the nation as a process, continuously incorporating new peoples and divergent memories and cultures into the body politic. "The 'other' is never outside or beyond us; it emerges forcefully, within cultural discourse, when we *think* we speak most intimately and indigenously 'among ourselves'." (Bhabha 1990: p 4) Porous, ambivalent narratives are recurring notions within the work of diasporic artists as indicated in the introduction. *National* by Saadane Afif conflates the all-pervasive symbol that is the 'Tricolore' and seems to echo Homi Bhabha's writing. The French flag is portrayed using random myriad items of clothing suggesting aspects of globalisation that render nationalistic narratives obsolete. Indeed, the 'Tricolore' is deformed and the face of Mickey Mouse, plastered on one of the items of clothing, mockingly reminds the viewer of the underlying narratives that unfailingly underwrite French culture today (Figure 2). In Latifa Echakhch's *Fantasia* it is the whole idea of national belonging that seems to be questioned, if not ridiculed. The installation, such as at the Level 2 gallery of the Tate Modern in September 2008, consists of virgin flagpoles jutting out of the gallery walls and crowding the viewer's space. The absence of flags flying from the low flagpoles ridicules the apparent aggressiveness of the sharp protruding installation and renders their absence exacerbated (Figure 3).

In both *Fantasia* and *Dansons* the poignancy of the message is veiled by a note of irony that renders it more complex and foreign. The authenticity of what is represented is called into question and pompous national symbols are disarmed by the use of humour that only seemingly belittles the importance of the message conveyed. The sharp contrast between the sensuous rhythm of the belly dancing chimes and the harsh but faded militaristic music in *Dansons* is so incongruous as to be laughable. The recording of the 'Marseillaise' that plays

throughout is of a bad quality, giving the impression that it emanates from an old radio or recording device. This serves to lend an air of solemnity that is more self-conscious than believable and contributes to the semblance of tender pathos that permeates the piece as a whole. Furthermore, the dated recording evokes a historical past of conquests, military parades and documentary footage - effectively so by virtue of drawing on the auditory. Exemplifying this fact, Martin Stokes writes of music as a potent purveyor of memories. Music is an important locator of time and place, hence its mnemonic power. "The musical event (...) evokes and organises collective memories and present experiences of place with an intensity, power and simplicity unmatched by any other social activity." (Martin Stokes, 1995: p3) Quoting the 'Marseillaise', presented as a clearly loaded national symbol and yet, rendered incongruous, thus suggests a critique of narratives of nationalism similar to that in *Fantasia* or even *National*. Associated with the belly dance, recorded 'Marseillaise' and 'Tricolore' seemingly summon themes of colonisation and decolonisation. However, such a reading of *Dansons* pays little heed to the personal aspect of the video. Indeed, whilst *Les Lieux de Mémoires* fails to contend with the colonial aspect but also the personal dimensions of such symbols as the 'Tricolore', *Dansons* pertains to the specific in contrast with both *National* and *Fantasia*.

In *Dansons*, Bouabdellah literally embodies the meeting of French and Algerian culture. Indeed, she talks of wearing the flag like a skin, a deeply somatic, personal and profound experience. The interrelation of tradition and personal identity is a predominant concern of Bouabdellah's artistic practice as a whole and cannot therefore be obfuscated by tantalising but fabulated interpretations based on post-colonial discourse only. In *Dansons*, it is the inability for national narratives suggested through these symbols to include her own divergent experience that Bouabdellah aims to question rather than French national History. Similarly, the use of the belly dance in *Dansons* is an ironic reassertion of tradition and

difference that is somatic and personal, rather than a site of contestation over oriental and colonialist discourse.

The violence originating in the meeting of French and Algerian culture throughout history - hinted at with the use of the gory and militaristic anthem as well as the belly dancing medallions, reminiscent of military medals – is sublimated by the ‘performative’ danced act in *Dansons* in contrast to the video *Oyé Oyé* by Michèle Magma. Michèle Magma places face-to-face silent archive images of dances performed for a celebratory festival culture under the aegis of Mobutu, and a video of the artist marching to the music and wearing a Zairian school uniform (Figure 4). *Dansons* and *Oyé Oyé* share obvious visual qualities - Magma and Bouabdellah use distilled aesthetics and frontal close ups of their own bodies thus rendered anonymous. In both, the violence suggested is contained to a certain extent by the very materiality of the video work. Taken out of context, march and belly dance are hence performed against a minimal white backdrop within the boxed frame of an encased monitor within a gallery setting. Magma states that the two-channel video of her marching demonstrates indifference, her head and ‘individuality’ being obscured from the shot. Nevertheless, consequent to confronting this recording with archive images of Mobutu’s reign she declares that:

“En caricaturant la marche militaire, je confronte l'image de mon corps tronqué avec celle du président Mobutu Seseke. Lorsque j'ai quitté le Congo, j'ai emporté avec moi les souvenirs des saluts au drapeau, des chants dédiés au président, et cet uniforme bleu et blanc. Cette œuvre détermine l'incidence du pouvoir politique du président Mobutu sur ma vie d'artiste.” (Magma, centrepompidou, parcours pédagogique)

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Figure 3:

Katia Kameli, *Nouba*,
Super 8 Film, Running time 5min
Image courtesy of the artist

Indeed, *Oyé Oyé* remains a military style march, the performing subject seemingly condemned to incessantly repeat the movements as the video loops continuously. Both the flag and of the belly dance in *Dansons* could equally represent suppression. I would argue, rather, that *Dansons* brings a flexible process of identity formation to the fore instead.

The fact that the title suggests a casual invitation: ‘dansons’ or ‘let’s dance’, supports this hypothesis. Indeed, Bouabdellah talks of dancing as a happy occasion¹⁵. She speaks of refusing to choose between her French and Algerian affiliations and of dancing with the flag (Bouabdellah, *Resistances* DVD). Bouabdellah indeed writes of transgressing conventions without violence but with serenity by paradoxically renewing cultural ties. “Déviation pour déviation, je procède par transgression mais sans empiétement, ni violence, ni à priori. (...)Ma transgression est paradoxale car elle est aspiration à renouer les liens.” (Bouabdellah, La Bank website) Whilst the belly dance does stand as an important symbolic of tradition it is here explored as a dynamic force. The figure in the video ties the scarves around her midriff carefully, smoothing out the fabric on her hips in practiced movements. This suggests the acting out of a ritual. The ritualised element lends an aura of seriousness to the performance and points to the belly dance as a site of tradition and cultural memory. Tradition is often assumed to be a force that is conservative and in direct opposition to change. Misztal notes: “There is a well established tradition of thought according to which tradition is something static, backward and conservative, something impervious to change and devoid of reflection, as well as connected with ignorance, dogma and irrationalism.” (Misztal, 2003: p91) Diana Taylor argues that performed tradition changes through time, even if these changes are not always perceptible to the performing collective. Furthermore, Misztal argues that in the face of a pluralisation within mnemonic groups, the normative aspect of tradition is no longer a given.

¹⁵ the author in discussion with the artist.

Let's take a closer look at the subject of dance as a force of tradition and seeming coercion. Anthropological and ethnographic research, such as that of Joan Cowan conducted on the subject of dance in Greece, demonstrates that music and ceremony is a space of organic social interrelations, rather than one where social relations and boundaries are simply replicated. However, Maurice Bloch, building on Durkheim's understanding of collective representation in ceremonies of song and dance as external to the individual, emphasises the idea of formalised 'speech' in danced rituals as a coercive force (Maurice Bloch, 1974). The authority of all ritual is would thus be dependant on the use of a formalised language in contrast with that of everyday life - ceremonies and rituals are acted out through a fixed set of syntax and expressions, vocal and bodily¹⁶. Lucy Lippard, however, referring to ritual art and practice, makes the distinction between danced ritual which is circular and self-aware, and thus unbound, and that found in Christianity (exemplary of a fixity in liturgic rituals that actively disallows any creative thought) arguing that Christianity in which 'all that remains is linear' has 'lost its spiral, growing motion, the natural circling of the spindle/axis' (Lippard, 1983:p 167). This distinction serves to highlight the creative scope of performed ritual when considered outside the limiting framework of western – or rather, Christian- liturgy, predominant within our western minds-eye. Indeed, I would argue that belly dancing is a ceremonial ritual as it is acted out by generation after generation, however, it is performative and thus open to individual interpretation.¹⁷ Furthermore, I would posit that in dance the individual is more aware of the body within society. I concur that the performative aspect of

¹⁶ The formalised nature of ritual negates not only the idea of the individual, but also that of the ceremonial event in its singularity, as eventful. The ceremonial present is bound to the past, body and voice to tradition. Understood in these terms tradition and ritual speak of authority and coercion.

¹⁷ Jane Cowan also argues for an understanding of dance as ambivalent experience of gender relations. "I regard each dance-event as a site, both physical and conceptual, where celebrants perform in gendered ways and experience themselves as gendered subjects." (Cowan, 1990: p4)

all ritual that is danced makes it a creative exploration of the dancer's social and cultural identity. Despite being a ritualised dance, the belly dance embodies a symbolic force of change or liberation rather than one of orthodoxy and subjugation. Indeed, Bouabdellah writes of memories of dancing as an act of momentary emancipation.

“Je me voie assise entre les femmes de ma famille, formant un cercle où chacune, une à une, est invitée à offrir de son corps et de son âme, au milieu de la ronde, les plus gracieuses arabesques. Elle est invitée à s'affranchir ainsi, le temps d'une danse, du fardeau porté depuis le moment où elle prend conscience de sa condition.”
(Bouabdellah, 10.08.09)

As outlined in the introduction, *Dansons* by creatively giving body to multidirectional cultural memories enables the formation of a counter-public sensorially aware – via memories mediated through the visual, somatic and auditory - of the diversity they themselves embody. Siobhán Shilton corroborates this hypothesis. “Contrasting with (neo-) Orientalist representation, which allows the spectator to assume the comfortable role of passive, disembodied eye, this multisensorial (visual, auditory and kinaesthetic) experience affects and interpolates the viewer, bringing their awareness to their status as embodied subjects and encouraging their relationship to an irreducible ‘otherness’.” (Siobhán Shilton, 2008: p443). Turning to Lucy Lippard's analysis of ritual in performance art, she argues that although ritual is repetition, within the realm of contemporary art, it presents collective needs by enacting them. “In contemporary art, ritual is not just a passive repetition but the acting out of collective needs.” (Lippard, *overlay* p 163) Through the prism of art, past collective narratives are re-enacted within a critical framework open to forever fluctuating and collective need for meaning.

In conclusion, the belly dance serves both to render the national symbols of ‘Tricolore’ and ‘Marseillaise’ alien and thus open to question, but also to suggest a creative exploration of social and cultural identities. In *Dansons*, through the use of subtle irony and by being testament to Zoulikha’s own personal experience, historical and cohesive narratives suggested by these symbols become part of a ‘repertoire’ or performed memory - that risks nonetheless becoming a fixed ‘lieux de memoire’ if care is not taken when ascribing meaning to the piece. Indeed, before drawing this section to a close I would like to address the plethora of specific connotations implied by the belly dance that renders the above hypothesis more complex. Indeed, Bouabdellah asserts: “Cette danse qui met à l’honneur la communion du corps et de l’esprit et le plaisir esthétique perçu comme contradictoire avec les règles des sociétés dans laquelle elle est apparue.” (Bouabdellah, 10.08.09) The belly dance is associated with Muslim countries, in which the lives of women are dictated by a strict code of conduct¹⁸. However, the belly dance is seen as an expression of a sensuous, thus, in the western eye, liberated female body. In Algeria, many late night bars have belly dancers and the erotic overtones ascribed to the dance in the west are thus also present in Muslim countries. However, the belly dance is also an integral part of weddings and other ceremonies, as Katia Kameli demonstrates in her engrossing video of phantom like aesthetics *Nouba* (Figure 5). Song and dance in Algeria are associated with the world of women and of the protective enclave of childhood - and are thus attached to positive memories - despite also being redolent of the same traditions which consign women to live according to restrictive rules. Traditional songs and dances are furthermore seen to be the purveyors of traditions which, preserved within the female realm, defy the memory of colonial rule. Nevertheless, the belly dance is also a universal symbol of the exotic and thus of the colonised oriental ‘other. The belly dance is indeed the sight of an intricate web of conflicting meanings that

¹⁸ Bouabdellah, who states that *Dansons* is “en l’honneur des femmes”, also writes that as they start to dance, women become “puissante et libre”. (Bouabdellah, 10.08.09)

demonstrates the care one must take in consigning meaning to artistic practice that draws upon cultural tradition that one does not share. In the next and final part of this dissertation I will be focusing on the performative aspect of *Dansons*, trying to elucidate this problematic.

Part III

The acting out or performance of cultural memory is conducive to its continuous reassessment, performance being suggestive of the present. As Peggy Phelan argues in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, performance cannot be fixed as all documentation is but a record, it thus exemplifies the fact that culture should be considered within the frame of a continuous and changing present (Phelan, 1993: p 46). Lucy Lippard in *Overlay* presents dance as a ritualised experience forever situated in the present, though she places this experience within a *mythical* present thus turned towards the past (Lippard, 1983: 163). Diane Taylor, however, allows for continuing meaning to be found in performance, beyond the act itself and therefore extending into future presents, by means of the viewer's memory (Taylor, 2003). That the performance enters the realm of the imaginary, imprinted upon the viewer's minds-eye is what renders it potentially subversive because open to incessant meaning. *Dansons* is performative rather than being performance art per se, as the video is not a document but an end product. Nonetheless, I posit, the production of the piece is an 'acting out' of myriad cultural memory, and the experience of viewing *Dansons* is performative in itself. As I will purport to demonstrate the performative aspect of *Dansons* enables manifold meaning to be communicated to a viewing public, and yet, by being staged as all performance is, it renders it problematic.

The danced act that makes up *Dansons* implies that the video is performative. Indeed, be it for the camera, Bouabdellah performs *Dansons*. As Fran Lloyd argues, the performative aspect of a work of art suggests that it not simply a representation of a perceived reality but of a present act of discovery in the very making of the work, discovery that in the case of *Dansons*, we have seen, affirms myriad identity constructs. The belly dance was misinterpreted by the colonising forces to be an expression of sexuality and it thus became the symbol of an exotic, sexually charged 'Other'. However, as Bouabdellah reminds us, the

belly dance's truer meaning is that it is an articulation of the soul's torments (Bouabdellah, 10.08.09) – hence was it used as a purveyor of collective memory during the colonial period. The performance of the belly dance in itself thus indeed goes beyond perceptible realities, embodying narratives of cultural memory. The 'discovery' carried forth by performing the belly dance, and thus performing cultural memory, in *Dansons*, is exacerbated by virtue of being somatic, more keenly felt for intrinsically sensorial.

In *Africa Remix*, *Dansons* was exhibited as an installation. The video was mounted on a white wall and framed by two adjacent walls forming a U shaped space. The two walls were respectively painted, one blue, one red, from left to right. The 'Tricolore' is thus replicated in the very display of the piece and thus reasserts the themes discussed in part 2. More to the point, however, the space occupied by the viewer is made part of the piece¹⁹. The viewer experiences *Dansons* physically as he/she enters the room, or installation. The viewer's own physical experience becomes part of the work. As this serves to merely highlight, to view art is indeed, as I will be arguing, an embodied experience that is performative. It is enactment in its physical sense, in the case of *Dansons* one stands before and even within the space of the piece, and re-enactment: of a complex code of conduct specific to the art institution and influenced by cultural memory. Within this specific context the viewer finds himself/herself in, he/she will adopt habits and gestures specific to the viewing of art that cannot fail to influence the interpretation of the artwork itself. Phelan draws on Sophie Calle's work to demonstrate the performative aspect of all act of seeing by acknowledging the importance memory plays in the viewer's relation to the art object. "In this sense, Calle demonstrates the performative quality of all seeing."(Phelan, 1993: p147). The audience of an artwork draws effectively on a pool of cultural memory in support of an interpretation that is furthermore influenced by the recognition of a set of values particular to

¹⁹ This is a central tenet of all site-specific artistic practice.

the context of work of art and institution. In his influential book on collective memory, Paul Connerton focuses on habits and gestures that he argues are carriers of cultural memory via ceremonies and collective rituals (Connerton, 1989). The viewing of art invokes, indeed, a lexicon of gestures and embodied thoughts through which meaning is mediated. Does this entail that the viewing of art is merely a pre-defined re-enactment? No, it does not, for this lexicon is learned via behavioural habits specific to the art institution, as well as experiences gleaned, mediated through cultural memory.

The entire process of exhibiting art, Fran Lloyd perceives as a memory project in itself, providing a framework for the interpretation of the work. The framework provided by an exhibition exists within a specific yet undetermined context: that of the museum space and its extension into the individual consciousness and the inevitable web of collective and individual memories of the visiting audience. Indeed, we experience art works as physical objects through the prism of cultural memory, which, as demonstrated in the first part of this dissertation, is not solely subjective but dependent on individual as well as collective giving of meaning, extends across different collectives and collates distinct historical events. Phelan indeed argues that the fleeting artwork becomes the stuff of memory and is thus an interactive experience by virtue of being subjective.²⁰ I would argue that collective meaning is paramount or intrinsic to the ‘performance’ of seeing. However, the meaning we ascribe to art is dependent on divergent personal experiences that are both immediate and specific or personal. As Fran Lloyd writes, the embodied performance of the viewer in the process of making of meaning is influenced, not exclusively, by gender, race and location.

²⁰ Phelan’s answer to the ontological problem of writing performance – writing what cannot be documented – is to conceive of ‘writing towards disappearance’ where the ‘after-effect of disappearance is the experience of subjectivity itself’.

“If the performativity of the embodied artist is located in the present (against and through the arising of personal and collective memory) the performativity of the embodied spectator in the making of meaning will be necessarily different both from that of the artist and from other spectators according to the specificities of their locatedness through the multiple intersections of race, gender, class and sexuality and/or geography.” (Lloyd, Fran, 1999: p144)

Meaning is not intrinsic to the work itself but is dependent on the audience’s interpretation. Meaning is made and unmade as it is felt and understood through the viewing body in a particular time and space. Lloyd argues: “Instead, meanings are made (and remade) by the embodied subjects who made them and the embodied subjects who view them – embodied through the complex intersections of gender, class, race, sexuality and geographies – at specific historical moments in particular locations.” (Lloyd, Fran, 1999: p139)

Landsberg’s concept of prosthetic memory purports to demonstrate that cultural memory is communicated across accepted cultural boundaries, and by being embodied enables an affective response on behalf of the beholder. ‘Let’s dance’, the title suggests an invitation for the viewer to join in. It is therefore, further suggestive that he/she is able to share in the performative aspect and thus by extension with the meaning carried forward by the performance. That the meaning is ‘performed’ by the viewer corroborates the Idea that the experience of viewing art enables the creation of a counter-public through divergent interpretations of cultural narratives, whilst at the same time being dependent on it. The complexity of different meanings mirrored in the symbolic of the belly dance, however, exemplifies the problem raised. Indeed, Judith Butler argues that performative action can only carry meaning in as much as it subscribes to pre-established models that are

authoritative and readily understood. Performed cultural narratives need be recognised in order to carry meaning. However, entrenched meaning and cohesive narratives pre-empt recognition. *Dansons* is paradoxically dependent, however, on entrenched narratives.

Reina Lewis argues in Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson's *Performing the Body/Performing the Text* that the oriental woman can only communicate with a western audience by building on an entrenched and often stereotypical Western system of interpretation. She argues:

“Since the iterative elements of a performative action have to be familiar to the viewer before they can make sense, the ‘authentic’ Oriental woman who wants her performance to be recognizable to the West must relate herself to a series of already available stereotypes operating within a previously existing Western classification system.” (Lewis, Reina, 1999: p 71)

Reina Lewis questions whether performance can be understood across cultures and borders. Bouabdellah does not, we have seen, explore the Orientalist model in itself. She seemingly uses the stereotypical model of the belly dancer, as well as the ‘Tricolore’ and ‘Marseillaise’ as a readily understood symbolic. She performs the stereotypes. Her body becomes the ironic surface on which myths of the Orient and the ‘Patrie’ are projected. This is not however, to suggest that she does not take a position. Indeed, it is the veneer of irony, subtle yet unmistakable, that purports to question the stereotypes presented. As Emily Apter writes in *Acting out Orientalism* (in Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson's *Performing the Body/Performing the Text*), to repeat a stereotype has a deadening effect. As it is performed, the stereotype is a never exact repetition but is always a misfit. The authenticity of the original can only be questioned. *Dansons* encourages the viewer to be aware of the in-

authenticity of that which is signified. The performative aspect of viewing the artwork within an art institution supports interpretation rather than fore-closing it²¹. However, Bouabdellah risks being ascribed the stereotypes she purports to transcend. *Dansons* is naturally dependent on the context of the art institution. The critical context in which the viewing ‘performance’ is staged can indeed support or undo the careful balance of her performative experience, from myriad collective memories, to mere reification of pre-established classification systems of identity and collective.

Hal Foster argues in his important early book *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* that art that is simply presentative (that presents what it aims to criticise) is dependent on a web of memories encapsulated in established stereotypes. The semiology of the work must thus be broken up to enable individual rather than cohesive interpretation. Presentational political art is problematic, he argues, as it renders the subject of artistic representation iconic, ahistorical and objectified (Foster: 1985, p155) Indeed, pre-established models identified by Butler cannot be disarmed. They thus need to be recognised within the process of creating but also exhibiting work especially from the diaspora, in which the danger of misconception is far greater we have seen. Fran Lloyd states that there is a need to be constantly aware of the bias present in the domain of visual culture towards dichotomies of pure versus mixed, of the unified to the myriad. (Lloyd, Fran, 1999: p 19) The politics of museums and other art institutions have to be transparent to reveal these subjectivities and thus enable individual interpretation to hold weight. Foster comments on the exhibition of art today in which pluralism, he believes disarms criticism. He states: “Art exist today in a state of pluralism: no style or even mode of art is dominant and no critical position is orthodox. Yet this state is also a position, and this position is an alibi.” (Foster: 1985, p13) He argues that the trend to shock the audience, once used to rub against the grain have now become

²¹ The art institution effectively benefits from a supposedly unique status that permits critical inquiry. Although Julian Stalabrass rightly argues that this is not a given.

orthodox. “Shock, scandal, estrangement: these are no longer tactics against conventional thought these are conventional thought.” (Foster: 1985, p26)

Conclusion

Dansons, I have argued, calls upon seemingly antagonistic cultural memories signified by ‘Tricolore’, ‘Marseillaise’ and belly dance. Thence ‘performed’, all-pervasive and fixed meanings signified by these very symbols are rendered invalid, thus enabling Bouabdellah to re-stage cultural narratives that pertain to, and shape, her own personal experience as a Franco-Algerian artist. There is indeed a direct causal relation between issues of minority identities and memory, though we have seen it is not a prescriptive one. Franco-Algerian memories reveal to what extent sustaining cultural memory is as necessary as it is problematic. Social meaning and stability within the nation-space is enabled via mnemonic sequences, whilst the formation of a minority group’s identity is dependent on cultural memories that may be at odds with these same sequences. Nonetheless, as demonstrated in this dissertation, cultural memory exists at the junction of different individual and collective memories, is transitive, and is multidirectional, mediating between different historical events and even cultural contexts. Indeed, cultural memory needs to be open-ended to allow legitimacy to minority memories. Cohesive and monolithic national narratives contained within such symbols as the ‘Tricolore’ are thus problematic and futile, and discourses of the integration of minority groups into a prevailing culture are thus illusory.

I have argued that the meaning of *Dansons* lies in the surpassing of cultural limitations to the formation of an identity bridging different traditions. However, I posit that its meaning goes beyond notions of hybridity and the binary France-Algeria. *Dansons* makes for ‘constructive’ remembering, to use Derderian’s term. The use of irony in *Dansons* derides grand immutable narratives, only seemingly disguising the more poignant aspect of the artwork carried forth, paradoxically, by the very weight of the symbolic represented. The ritualised aspect of Zoulikha’s danced performance further accentuates the notion of tradition and cultural memory while also supporting a joyful exploration of identity beyond social

constraints. As an intrinsically public experience, the viewing of art is emblematic of Alison Landsberg's notion of the prosthetic memory, encouraging the viewing audience to seek to understand narratives that pertain to divergent cultural groups – however, this is only sustainable if counter-publics are enabled. The viewer's interpretation of the piece is naturally predicated on a network of different cultural references or memories, a mnemonic bank of moving images, sounds and somatic memories collated from individual and public narratives. Although I would argue that a counter-public is hence created that enables its members to reconsider and question the authenticity of cohesive collective or national narratives, this is dependent on the incidence of prevailing discourse that may or may not smother any counter-meaning.

We have seen, the viewing and production of *Dansons* is to a great extent a performative one which is what renders it potentially subversive. Indeed, the viewer's experience of the artwork is somatic and thus subjective as well as interactive, by virtue of being subjective. However, this same performance relies on a set of prescriptive rules and values that are further dependent on the context predicated by the art establishment and institution. As revealed in this dissertation, the plethora of meanings encapsulated within the symbolic of the belly dance are emblematic of the difficulties we are faced with when analysing work that pertains to a culture that is not our own. Cultural narratives need to be recognised to carry meaning. However, this very process of recognition limits the scope for divergent interpretations. Bouabdellah, however, gives body to cultural stereotypes that, juxtaposed, are subtly reorganised and their validity questioned.

An analysis of *Dansons* through the prism of cultural memory reveals to what extent it is bound to very real issues of identity specific to a Franco-Algerian cultural context. Indeed, it is not enough to optimistically argue for notions of hybridity, however appealing the promise of such social constructs may be. Notions of hybridity and diasporic identities are now common place. Such notions threaten to deaden any other meaning present in the work

of artists such as that of Bouabdellah, Saadane Afif, Michelle Magema, Latifa Echakhch or Katia Kameli. Indeed, Fatima Mazmouz comments in an article in Art21 that there is a tendency to confine these artists to a fetishising ‘problématique identitaire’ (Mazmouz, 2006)²². As Foster argues, pluralism is no longer divergent but has become the norm.

Notions of hybridity become problematic when considered as a reflection of post-modern pluralism. Indeed the postmodern premise of the fragmentary consistently incorporates marginal narratives into normative discourses. To merely argue for hybridity within artistic production, furthermore, obscures real injustices and societal malaises represented - narratives of emigration, immigration multiculturalism and assimilationist processes that thickly underline all aspects of our globalised world²³. Olu Oguibe propounds in *Reading the contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace* that discourses of art criticism demand concrete strategies of engagement. He denounces the self-indulgent intellectualism of the debates surrounding the international art establishment. “To polemicise is our right, of course, but to polemicise endlessly has a cost.” (Oguibe, 1994: p 50) To interpret *Dansons* as performative - a performance dependent on a complex web of cultural memories - allows for personal and specific narratives to transpire, and for counter-publics within the viewing public to be identified that in turn enable truly plural, and engaged, meaning.

²² “Surtout que la définition de ces artistes comme ‘issus de l’immigration maghrébine’ ne laisse pas de les enfermer dans une problématique identitaire. A point que la représentation que l’on se fait de cette création artistique reste toujours circonscrite à un phénomène fétichisant.” (Mazmouz, 2006)

²³ A globalisation, that we may celebrate as cultural but that nonetheless, remains economically driven.

Relevant Exhibitions and Conferences

(January-May 2009) *Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East*, Saatchi Gallery, London

(October 2008-February 2009) *Zones of Conflict: Rethinking Contemporary Art During Global*

Crisis, conference series chaired by TJ.Demos

(April-August 2007) *Airs de Paris*, Centre Pompidou, Paris

(September 2006-January 2007) *Atlas Group 1089-2004*, A Project by Walid Raad, Hamburger

Bahnhof, Berlin

(March-May 2006) *Of Mice and Men*, 4th Berlin Biennial, Berlin

(April-June 2006) *The Iraqi Equation, Contemporary Arabic Representations*, KW Institute of

Contemporary Art, Berlin

(January-May 2006) *Notre Histoire...*, Palais de Tokyo, Paris

(February-April 2005) *Africa Remix, Contemporary Art of a Continent*, Hayward Gallery, London

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