

Pink, Cirque and the *Québécoisisation de l'industrie*

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Abstract

On 31 January 2010, during the broadcast of the 52nd Grammy awards, the multiple-prize-winning vocal artist Pink offered a performance of the hit single *Glitter in the Air* that stunned many viewers. Spectators present in Los Angeles's Staples Center, along with those watching via electronic media that reached some 26 million people through television in the United States alone, were both thrilled and astonished. 'C'est la Québéçisation de l'industrie!', commented one excited observer. This paper attempts to unpack this observation and its celebration of a Québécois influence on, even signs of Québec itself in, the international performance industry. Through an exploration of certain genealogies associated with both the art and the artists and an examination of certain moments in the development of the circus arts in Québec, the article notes real traces of Québécois cultural productions appearing in international performance spaces. As it turns to offer a critical gaze onto the very celebration of this perception of a Québec in the popular cultural industry, these pages close on a proposed way of understanding how these performances may ultimately help create and maintain a Québécois identity for their viewers.

Introduction¹

On 31 January 2010, during the broadcast of the 52nd Grammy awards, the multiple-prize-winning vocal artist Pink offered a performance of the hit single *Glitter in the Air* that stunned many viewers. Spectators

present in Los Angeles's Staples Center, along with those watching via electronic media that reached some 26 million people through television in the United States alone, saw this vocalist enter from an upper backstage area through a corridor of walls lit with undulating blue LEDs. Wrapped in a simple white sheath that covered her body and hair, Pink walked slowly forward, singing three verses of the piece into a hand-held microphone as she followed a straight path down a few stairs and onto an elevated platform that was thrust into the audience. After a small vocal pause, some two minutes into the piece, she removed the outer layer of her clothing, revealing a flesh-coloured body-stocking accented with white straps, and moved forward again. The camera tracked backwards to reveal a rotating apparatus, where three female acrobats were gripping violet silks tracing the device's revolutions.

As the apparatus and acrobats slowly rose, the number's choreographer, Dreya Weber, assisted Pink into long white silks hanging from the mechanism's centre, giving the vocalist a twist at the last moment of contact. Pink continued to sing, her noted rejection of lip-synched performances visually underscored by the sight of her microphone's wireless transmitter on a back shoulder broadcast by the camera as it followed her rotations through the air. At some three and a half minutes into the piece, the apparatus dipped, dropping the still-rotating artist into what was revealed to be a small pool, from which she rose again, continuing to sing as she sent droplets of water over the audience. Closing the number with a tight upside-down spin, she dropped onto the stage, stepped forward out of the silks to bow, and turned to her left to exit the stage. The next series of camera shots showed numerous well-known musicians, from Rihanna to Carlos Santana and Sheryl Crow, in a standing ovation. As she applauded, India.Arie was caught spluttering out something like an astonished 'What?'²

Arie's stunned reaction was shared by many viewers. The *Huffington Post* wrote, for example, 'Pink wowed the crowd at the Grammy Awards when she sang "Glitter in the Air" while suspended in the air', in language typical of most morning-after responses in both social and print media.³ In full disclosure, I was among those millions thrilled by this boundary-shattering performance and found myself frequently commenting on it in discussions over the following days. Within the very first moments of a conversation with a close friend in Montreal, I discovered that he shared my excitement; noting what was particularly thrilling to him in the performance, he enthusiastically exclaimed: 'T'as-tu vu? C'est la Québécoisisation de l'industrie!'⁴ In the pages that

follow, I attempt to unpack what my friend may have meant in his celebration of a Québécois influence on, even signs of Québec itself in, the international performance industry. Through an exploration of certain genealogies associated with both the art and the artists and an examination of certain moments in the development of the circus arts in Québec, this article notes real traces of Québécois cultural productions appearing in international performance spaces. As it turns to offer a critical gaze onto the very celebration of this perception of a Québec in the popular cultural industry, these pages close on a proposed way of understanding how these performances may ultimately help create and maintain a Québécois identity for their viewers.

Genealogies: Perceptions, presences, influences

Much of the ‘wow’ factor highlighted by such outlets as the *Huffington Post* lies in the shock that Pink’s *Glitter in the Air* was performed indeed in the air. Despite its literal high-flying effects, the piece itself is marked by a simplicity, with its understated melodics, crisp yet cool-toned lighting and costumes, and smooth transitions in the artist’s physical movements from slow walk to regular rotations in the silks. Indeed, as an integral element of the piece’s simple structure, Pink did not engage in many complex movements as she manipulated her silks. After her original entry into her silk hammock, ‘she does not perform any dynamic movement’, notes Sarah Poole, aerial coach at Montreal’s National Circus School. As Poole describes the performance, Pink first ‘lies in a side balance, then rises from water in a suspended lay-back’. After her ascent from the pool:

she gracefully slides forward, suspending herself from the fabric under her shoulder blades in a crucifix position, lifts her leg to hook it on the fabric above her in a double stag, and finally accelerates her final spin, crocheting both [of] her legs above her in the fabric as her head points to the ground.

The performance is, however, ‘virtuosic’, in Poole’s analysis: even as she continues to sing, Pink achieves a remarkable combination of fluidity and height.⁵

The thrill that millions of viewers felt during this particular performance, then, did not depend solely on the clean, if slick, lines of its aesthetics. As she rose in her silks, Pink moved well beyond the

conventional comfort zones of many vocalists, joining the physical and the vocal in ways that brought real danger into the performance space. Knowing the risks of acrobatic and circus work, I shared her audience's *frisson* as we recognized those limit-threatening choices.⁶ India.Arie's stuttering 'What?' points to the audience's being called fully to attend, respond and react to this unsettling work performed tens of feet above the spectators, without netting or harness.

In his own engaged response, my friend leapt at seeing Québec rising with Pink in her silks. His celebration could well be justified by the many pages and pixels of the morning-after commentaries that linked Pink's performance to the Cirque du Soleil, the world-renowned Québec-based circus company. That *Huffington Post* article, for example, finishes its first sentence with a description of Pink 'spinning and singing like something out of Cirque de (sic) Soleil'. Moe Jackson's blog includes an article entitled 'Pink does a Wet Cirque de (sic) Soleil Act @ 2010 Grammy Awards'. MTV.com reports 'If Pink ever decides to pack in the mic, she could surely land a gig with Cirque du Soleil'. The Pink-Cirque conflation went on, as in Starpulse.com's note that 'Pink channeled Cirque du Soleil at last night's Grammy Awards in a breathtaking acrobatic performance', and Zap2it.com's reaction that 'Few could top Pink's Cirque du Soleil-esque performance ... – literally or figuratively'. In a comment that the pages below suggest may be interestingly prescient, one commentator offered this response to a question to 'Yahoo Answers' about how Pink got her acrobatic skills: 'She probably was trained by Cirque du Soleil ...'⁷

If we follow the logic of these multiple responses, a literally over-the-top aerial silks performance equals a number from Cirque du Soleil, in a slippage quite readily nourished by this company's solid presence in the cultural imaginary as the principal purveyor of the forms of the *nouveau cirque*, where circus's traditional three rings and animals disappear while elements of theatre, dance and character development find expanded presence. With the company's fixed shows in Las Vegas which grossed some \$650 million in 2008 alone, plus its numerous touring spectacles that have in fact taken the *nouveau cirque* to more spectators than any other troupe worldwide, Cirque du Soleil's billion-dollar revenue stream stands witness to its standing in terms of economic and cultural capital. Indeed, the Soleil commands such presence in this cultural understanding that the former American president Bill Clinton, in the closing days of the 2012 presidential campaign season, could note that the Republican candidate Mitt Romney should be the 'chief contortionist for Cirque du Soleil', fully expecting that the American

electorate would know of the highly developed position-bending skills of the company's acrobats.⁸

Buzzwords long associated with Las Vegas and its nightly performance parade of stars and showgirls, *glitz* and *glamour* also attach themselves to references to Cirque du Soleil, arguably the largest single performing-arts enterprise in that town of performing arts and indeed the largest, by some accounts, performing-arts enterprise in the world.⁹ Cirque du Soleil has itself nourished this sense of glamour for some decades, as Erin Hurley points out, investing in the spectacular from numbers with an exceptional degree of athleticism to the polish and shine of the costumes and make-up.¹⁰ Indeed, it is this particular Vegas-nourished combination of high glitz, glamorous costuming and elite-level performance that informs these references to that which is Cirque-like in the popular imagination and in popular cultural imagery. With its own particular glitter, strong acrobatic artistry and *nouveau cirque* skills in play, Pink's slick wet and white circus number could thus well be 'Cirque du Soleil-esque', in Zap2it's terms, highlighted through the glamour of its classic lines of tight body-stockings and clingy fabrics.

The relationship between this number and the Cirque du Soleil is much deeper, however, than any superficial recognition of a Cirque-like high-flying glamour. The genealogy of the apparatus itself, the aerial silks, points back to Cirque du Soleil and to Québec. Cirque's new touring show for 1996, *Quidam*, featured aerial silks for the first time in choreography developed by André Simard, a long-time creator with Cirque and trainer at Montréal's National Circus School. The French acrobat Isabelle Vaudelle had just won the silver medal at Paris's 1995 *Festival Mondial du Cirque de Demain*, representing Canada in a brand-new act that she credits to her time training in Europe with Gérard Fasoli.¹¹ Simard, who had been inventing highly technical aerial skills at Montreal's Circus school since at least 1989 with the development of the elastic cord for the Québécoise trapeze acrobat Anne Lepage, worked with Vaudelle back in Montreal on the approximately eight-minute *Quidam* silks number which revealed that apparatus to the general public.¹² In 1997, Vaudelle was replaced by Québec artist Isabelle Chassé for a long-term engagement in the number prior to her leaving Cirque in 2002 to create, with other alumni of the Soleil, a new circus troupe in Montreal called 'Les 7 doigts de la main', where she continues her aerial innovations. Hundreds of thousands of viewers saw this piece in performance: *Quidam* toured for two decades before it closed in February 2016, first under a *Grand Chapiteau* and then as a

show for large arenas, and a YouTube video of Chassé's performance of the number has had close to 300,000 viewers.¹³

In this cultural imaginary, silks and Québec's Cirque du Soleil are linked. With the act's very genealogy, my friend could be right in seeing Québec coming into southern California and, indeed, the industry. Only 18 months later, for example, Cirque premiered a new show, *Iris*, that included a silks number for Los Angeles's storied theatre known then as the Kodak, and now as the Dolby. Not far, geographically and culturally, from the Staples Center where Pink showed that Québec-ness in the eyes of my friend, this venue is perhaps most famous now for being the site of the Oscar awards, including 2012's show that featured a condensed version of some of *Iris*'s pieces, with choreography by Shana Carroll, co-founder of Montreal's Les 7 doights de la main and former performer herself with Cirque du Soleil.¹⁴ With those silks, Québec continues to penetrate the industry. The 2012 season of HBO's successful vampire-themed *True Blood*, for example, featured a fairy cabaret whose denizens performed in decidedly Cirque-like numbers, their aerial silks taking this cabaret into a world beyond the undulations of a Bob Fosse or the physical stylings à la *Moulin Rouge* that had long marked a cabaret-like movement vocabulary. In October of 2012, teen pop vocalist Justin Bieber released his video of *Beauty and a Beat*, featuring the hip-hop artist Nicki Minaj, that includes an aerial silks sequence approximately one and a half minutes into the piece. With that season's *True Blood* drawing some four to six million viewers per episode and with only one of several YouTube versions of the Bieber video pulling more than 765 million viewers,¹⁵ silks are taking pride of place in popular visual imagery of the contemporary entertainment industry.¹⁶

Silks are not the only apparatus with which Québec and its *cirques* leave their marks. In 2009, for example, circus work was not unique to Pink's tour for her album *Funhouse* featuring *Glitter in the Air*. In a series of concerts related to her own album entitled *Circus*, the hugely successful former teen sensation Britney Spears found herself moving on stage among tens of circus artists on multiple apparatus, including the Cyr wheel.¹⁷ In 1993, the Québécois *circassien* Daniel Cyr had co-founded the Cirque Éloize with a group of graduates of Montreal's National Circus School, all of whom had origins in the Îles-de-la-Madeleine. Numerous innovations have appeared from this troupe's creative team, including the development of the Roue Cyr, a mono-wheel circus apparatus named for its designer who presented it at the Paris-based *Festival Mondial du Cirque de Demain* in 2003. Even

though it was created only eight and a half years before the Spears *Circus* tour began, the Cyr wheel's inclusion there signals that performances of this Québécois-designed apparatus have within a short period become features of circus-themed shows throughout the performing arts.

Other genealogies underscore my friend's vision of a Québec marking the industry. Pink's *Funhouse* tour included other acrobatic numbers, including a trapeze sequence performed to the tune 'Sober' that featured as her catcher the artist Sebastien Stella in a performance viewed by hundreds of thousands, including in a reprise on MTV's 2009 Video Music Awards. As Pink's 'trainer, performing partner, creative guru and all-around protector', Stella brought to both his collaborator and the performance space the skills he had honed in years of acrobatic work, including a long-term engagement with Cirque du Soleil's *O*, the aquatics-themed show based at Las Vegas's Bellagio.¹⁸ As such, Stella stands as another example of the rippling currents of influence of Québec and its circuses, as the thousands of performers and creators associated with scores of shows since Cirque's founding in 1984 and the hundreds of artists from the nearly 30 years of graduating classes of Montreal's National Circus School train,¹⁹ perform and share their skills with fellow performing artists. In those early morning-after reactions, that Yahoo commentator had surmised that Pink had trained with Cirque du Soleil. Even as Pink revealed in a widely watched post-Grammy interview with Oprah Winfrey that she had trained for eight years as a gymnast when she was much younger,²⁰ the Yahoo commentator may not be completely wrong: as her 'creative guru', a Cirque-trained artist *had* trained Pink in her *Funhouse* work. In such genealogies, Cirque's presence continues to expand.

In his keynote address at the September 2012 conference on the State of Circus Research in Québec held in Montreal, the circus historian and artistic adviser to the *Festival Mondial du Cirque de Demain* Pascal Jacob offered an overview of what he called the 'Planète Cirque'. In this *discours fleuve*, Jacob argued that various national influences have marked consecutive historical periods since the invention of the modern circus in the late eighteenth century. In his analysis, it is the English who dominated the circus world from its modern creation by the equestrian artist Philip Astley until approximately 1830, when their cross-Channel rivals, the French, began to lead in terms of innovation, with, for example, the Franconi brothers and the development of large-scale pantomime and animal-taming. From that time, successive schools of influence led by Germans, Americans, Soviets and again the French, brought waves of creative impulses particular to those artists to hold

sway in this 'Planète Cirque'. They moved modern, Western circus from those nineteenth-century forms into the contemporary circus world of the twenty-first century.

According to Jacob, it was in 2002 that what he calls the 'Période québécoise' began. In that year, Isabelle Chassé and her collaborators in *Les 7 doigts de la main* created their first show, *Loft*, that featured vocabularies of authenticity and intimacy; the Cirque Éloize developed their important theatre-circus hybrid show *Nomade* in the first of three significant spectacles created by the actor-clown-director Daniele Finzi Pasca; and Cirque du Soleil launched their touring show *Varekai*, a spectacle with what Jacob calls 'résonances néo-classiques' in terms of its structure and organization. Given that artists and impulses from all three companies have marked the performing arts scene explored in these pages, Jacob's analysis may well hold true – even beyond the purely circus disciplines that were the principal concerns of his discussions.²¹ It is interesting to note here that, in materials circulated at the premiere of that 2002 Cirque show, *Varekai* was reported to mean 'wherever' in the Romani language. My friend, well versed in circus cultures, may have understood, with Jacob, that 2002 could have been that *époque charnière* leading to Québec circus's influence appearing in a multiplicity of spaces – 'wherever' indeed – only a few years later.

A 2011 *New York Times* article on the Cirque du Soleil notes the continued and expanding influence of this world, 'from the special effects in "Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark", which employs former Cirque employees, to the Metropolitan Opera, where the director Robert Lepage used technology he developed while with Cirque'.²² In February 2012, the Montreal daily *La Presse* announced, with some evident pride, that Cirque du Soleil would bring their spectacle-creation skills to Madonna's half-time show at the Super Bowl.²³ An October 2012 *La Presse* article concerning 'Le Québec en tournée mondiale' explores Québec's growing international presence in multimedia productions and names three companies in particular whose work is garnering important praise and influence. All three of those celebrated and influential enterprises – Solotech, Moment Factory and Geodesik – have close connections with Cirque du Soleil,²⁴ with such links even more recently underscored through such celebratory language as 'Collaborations with Cirque du Soleil got them a reputation', from a July 2013 *Canadian Business* article on Moment Factory.²⁵

As we explore these genealogies, it is important to remember that Cirque du Soleil does not merely have its headquarters in Québec, even after its 2015 sale to an international group of investors: it has

particular Québécois origins. Histories of the troupe remind us of the stilt-walkers, jugglers and buskers who came together in the early 1980s for performances that moved from the streets of the province to create multidisciplinary spectacles for a public for which home-grown circus was not a norm, unlike in the United States and in Europe.²⁶ For the artists who formed the *nouveau cirque* in Québec, their particular *nouveauté* was thus less marked by specific rebellion against traditional circus and more inflected with a generalized sense of the newness of the Québec society taking shape in the second half of the twentieth century. With a sympathetic population and a post-1960s government that funded artistic festivals for the express purpose of providing venues for Québécois artists, performance spaces became loci not only for forms of protest that had nourished earlier artists' calls for a *Refus global*: they also became places of burgeoning publicly supported creation. By the 1980s, groundbreaking and physically intense aesthetics, dramaturgies and movement forms were being created in the streets, theatres and nightclubs by such companies as the dance troupe La La La Human Steps and the physical theatre ensemble Carbone 14. Drawing on what has been termed the resultant *nouveau bouger montréalais*,²⁷ the creators of the Cirque du Soleil profited from a cauldron of creativity nourished not only by each other's artistic fervour but also by the cultural-political scene in that fruitfully friction-filled post-referendum decade.²⁸

It is tempting to think that my friend sensed this specifically Québécois genealogy when he was seeing Québec wrapped in Pink's silks. This foundational story of Québec's *nouveau cirque* has similarities, after all, with what Erin Hurley, in her cogent introduction to essays in *Globe* on Québec performing arts, reminds us is the 'Grand récit', that narrative of the Exodus of Québec and its peoples from the 'Grande noirceur' into a Quietly Revolutionary land of funded autonomy flavoured with vibrant creativity.²⁹ The very title of another article by the historian Pascal Jacob on the contemporary Québécois circus scene speaks eloquently to the mutually informing resonances among these narratives: 'Québec, un souffle de liberté'.³⁰

Québec circus artists themselves have spoken of a particularly Québécois, and *libre*, creativity that feeds their work. Gilles Ste-Croix, one of the artists initially associated with the Cirque du Soleil, locates Cirque's 'Québécois spirit' in 'its audacity and ability to change, to call into question'.³¹ The silks performer and co-founder of Les 7 doigts de la main, Isabelle Chassé, has spoken of Québec's cultural and linguistic minority status in North America as giving it 'not just a rich multiculturalism but also a drive to prove itself to the rest of the world'.³² For

Chassé, this difference, this drive, is integral to what Jacob senses as that 'souffle de liberté'. In a 2002 interview with the *St. Petersburg Times* conducted soon after the founding of the new troupe, Chassé explains some of the elan driving her fellow artists' work: "I think because we're different than our surroundings, it gives us more freedom to be different in our dreams, in our goals, in our aspirations," Chassé said. "Maybe we have a step ahead because of that".³³ The programme notes for Les 7 doigts's 2012 creation, *Séquence 8*, include a specific comment on the role of the city in which their work has taken principal form: 'merci à Montréal cette ville chaleureuse et cosmopolite pour nous avoir influencés, nous le collectif'.³⁴ For Les 7 doigts and other *circassiens* before them, this particular creativity has a specific anchor, a specific locus: the city of Montreal, the province of Québec.

As my friend sensed, this creativity has indeed found foothold in the United States and beyond. In 2017, Cirque du Soleil (founded 1984 in Baie-Saint-Paul, Québec) has 18 shows actively touring on five continents or staged in permanent fixtures from Las Vegas to Florida's Lake Buena Vista and Mexico's Riviera Maya. Cirque Éloize (founded in 1993 by seven circus artists all from the Magdalen Islands, Québec) has three major shows touring from Amsterdam and London to Rio de Janeiro, and has just announced a five-year contract for a theatre in Paris. Les 7 doigts de la main (founded 2002, with their first show in Montréal, Québec), lay claim to at least four shows touring from the Netherlands to China, with multiple active projects from Moscow to New York. Cavalia's first show premiered in Shawinigan, Québec, in 2001 and has been seen by more than four million spectators from Brisbane to Abu Dhabi. More than 95 per cent of the graduates of Montréal's National Circus School (founded 1981) find jobs within a few months in companies from the Americas to Oceania.

Les 7 doigts also have the distinction of garnering a year-long contract in New York for their show *Traces*, something no other prominent Québécois performance group has been able to do, not even the Soleil. *Traces* long had a specific website devoted to its USA shows (tracesusa.com), was named among the top ten plays and musicals by *Time* magazine and has been featured on US national television. My friend's vision of Québec penetrating the industry may be echoed in the selection of Les 7 doigts for two performances on the show *America's Got Talent*,³⁵ as America stakes claim to skills formed out of what the creators themselves see as a Québécois specificity.

Les 7 doigts are also noted in particular for their *intimiste*-styled shows, in which spectators get a sense of not only seeing but also

'knowing' the artists, as they deliver performances that reveal snippets of themselves, often speaking of their histories, their concerns, their goals.³⁶ Creating cabaret-styled shows and executing unique numbers for special events, the artists of Les 7 Doigts both profit from and contribute to a growing presence of circus artists in venues from taverns to restaurants and corporate-sponsored events, as documented in newspapers like the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, where we mere earthbound mortals may get to brush up against our specially talented *confrères et sœurs*. My Québécois friend is not alone in finding pride in this Québec creativity expressed in this 'wherever' of these international bars, taverns and stages. As public announcements were made that another co-founder of Les 7 doigts and former Cirque du Soleil performer, Gypsy Snider, created the circus choreographies for the 2013 award-winning recreation of *Pippin* for New York's Music Box Theater, Montreal's *La Presse* splashed a picture of an acrobat with the title 'Les 7 Doigts de la Main à Broadway' on its 9 January 2013 cover, above the fold.³⁷

Celebration: Moving, finding, creating a Québec

We do well to interrogate this very celebration. In 2009, an important dossier entitled 'Le rayonnement du cirque québécois' appeared in the journal *Spirale*, offering an analytical gaze upon what Sylvain Lavoie, the editor of that special issue, calls 'la fête discursive qui accompagne normalement le phénomène au Québec', where 'le Cirque du Soleil ... occupe bien entendu une place centrale, mais son seul rayonnement interdit en quelque sorte un portrait complet de la situation'.³⁸ Similarly, in a 2006 interview published in *Voir*, Marc Lalonde, then the executive director of Montreal's National Circus School, lamented what he called a reigning standard of 'critiques complaisantes [qui] n'aident pas à l'évolution d'une discipline'.³⁹ As an element of his own proposed critical stance in front of the multiple acclamations that follow the success of Québécois cultural products beyond the province's borders, Lavoie offers language that may echo them in an ironic tone: 'On évoquera volontiers au passage le métissage, belle valeur que clame haut et fort notre pays, mais l'ouverture à l'autre, ne cache-t-elle pas le fantasme inavoué de pouvoir épingler une ville sur la mappemonde et de se dire: "I've done it"?'⁴⁰ As such, Lavoie calls us to attend to what messages are created and transmitted in such celebration of the 'fabriqué au Québec, ouvert au monde' that has accompanied Québécois *nouveau cirque's* various successes since early in the troupe's history.

The influential sovereigntist leader René Lévesque, for example, offered early praise for the Cirque du Soleil as a signal example of the fruits of the ‘superhuman effort Quebec put itself to in the middle of the 1960s, when it became aware of how dangerously underdeveloped its human capital was’, referring to this troupe as ‘the extraordinary Cirque du Soleil, that United Nations in miniature performing for the young of all ages, whose inventor and leader [Guy Laliberté] is only 25 well-lived years old’.⁴¹ Even now, the provincial government’s webpages devoted to the arts note Québec’s *nouveau cirque* in particular in a pamphlet called ‘Québec: A Vibrant Presence on the World Stage’: ‘If there is one field in which Québec has made an unparalleled mark, it is undoubtedly the circus arts. The major innovator, Cirque du Soleil, has quite simply reinvented the genre’. On its webpages, the Ministry of Culture and Communication has also posted a glossy document called ‘Culture Québec: Une Culture qui Voyage’ that features a reference to Cirque du Soleil in its first pages. With such language, we can see the government not only expressing pride for its world-travelling artists. It also stakes a claim to seeing the culture itself carried by voyaging denizens; where its artists go, there Québec also goes.⁴² Such pride-filled expressions for those artistic agents that carry and transmit Québécois culture beyond the province’s borders are not limited to government communiqués. In 2011, the world-straddling Cirque du Soleil was selected in the *Les Affaires* poll as the enterprise most admired by Québécois.⁴³

As Lavoie has suggested, examining the tenets of this admiration may bring us rich rewards. In one of the first pieces of scholarship devoted to Québécois circus studies, ‘States of Play: Locating Québec in the Performances of Robert Lepage, Ex Machina, and the Cirque du Soleil’, Jennifer Harvie and Erin Hurley point out that the Cirque du Soleil expressly claims allegiance not to a *terroir* or *nation* of Québec, but, rather, to the “‘imagi-nation” that the Cirque creates for itself and for its audiences each time it produces and tours a new show’.⁴⁴ My friend – and others, from the government to the readers of *Les Affaires* – may therefore be seeing a Québec-ness in what are ultimately free-floating signifiers in such productions where origins are purposefully effaced. Spectators discover names and nationalities of Cirque artists only if they buy the souvenir programmes and look deep into the fine print, as with the materials for *Totem*’s 2010 premiere that offered such information in thin lettering and at oblique angles to the artists’ images; sources of any recognizable language, including the province’s dominant French, slip away into the heteroglossia of the shows’ musical

vocalizations. Furthermore, as Las Vegas appears prominently in many of the genealogies at play in these pages, it is important to note the trenchant analysis of any evident Québec-ness there offered by Louis Patrick Leroux in his introduction to the dossier 'Le Québec à Las Vegas' for the journal *L'annuaire théâtral*: 'Le Québec est bien présent à Las Vegas, soit, mais il semblerait que seuls les Québécois en aient pleinement conscience'.⁴⁵ Cirque, deracinated from any originary space or place, is rarely recognized as Québécois; its name may lend it a French-sounding exoticism, but such a perception arguably consigns the name *cirque* to the same phonemic field as, say, *ambiance*. Even if Les 7 doigts explicitly include names and origins in their productions, in a counter-example to the dominant Cirque's nameless aesthetics, it is revelatory to remember that even they found their talent being 'gotten' by an 'America' that transposes their French name into an anglicized 7 Fingers and that at least one of their performers celebrates the American-ness of certain skills – basketball, for example – featured in their Montreal-developed *Traces*.⁴⁶

Having reminded us of these effacements of an original Québec, Hurley, in her 2011 *National Performance: Representing Quebec from Expo 67 to Céline Dion*, suggests that the very interrogation of how to be national with or without making 'recourse to the dubious category of ethnicity' or other origins is precisely a Québécois question. She goes on to argue that '[I]ike other nations without a state, Quebec relies on cultural production to vouch for its national status'.⁴⁷ Without a nation *de jure*, it is in performance that a nation *de facto* can take form. As she writes, 'Viewed from this angle, the vital role of cultural production in the national project in Quebec is clear: cultural production depicts the nation's attributes onstage [...]. Granting the nation referent status through performance effectively establishes the offstage "nation" as fact'. In her penultimate chapter, Hurley explores how the performances of Céline Dion may serve as signifiers of a Québécois nation, even as a national referent may disappear into the shifts marking and making 'Céline' 'the phenomenon', where little beyond biography may refer directly to Québec. Indeed, for Hurley, one *cannot* say that 'Céline's performances are Québécois because they reference Quebec in their lyrical content, musical structure, or in her performance ticks'. As such, the shows of this stage(d) 'Céline' may be just as emptied of an explicit Québec as the spectacles of the Cirque du Soleil. For Hurley, it is, rather, through the expressly provoked affective responses of her public that 'Céline' indexes Québec and gives it shape on stage. In her affect-laden work, this Céline performs an 'emotional labour', harnessing

her viewers' energies towards creating 'the conditions of possibility for reading certain performances as "ours" (or "theirs")', and thus, as "Québécois".

Such analyses thus lead to a process of seeing and 'thinking affect' as a mode of 'meaning creation' beyond any explicitly or exclusively referential semiotics. In the case of 'Céline' and other non-referential performances that somehow call forth a Québec for their Québécois viewers, the understanding that exchange and projection of emotion may complement other means of signification, for Hurley 'opens the door to seeing how people may produce themselves as national, even in conditions that militate against it'.⁴⁸ Therefore, we may allow ourselves to attend to how affective response attributes meaning, both to the spectacle – of 'Céline', of Cirque – and to the spectators.

As a Québécois, seeing and feeling a Québec-ness wherever there may be a genealogy back to Québec, even in a signifying chain that contains potentially slipping signifiers, my friend who saw Québec twisting in Pink's silks may well be participating in the important work of producing himself, in this circle of logic, as a Québécois. Tracing parts of a travelling Québec, he may well contribute to the creation of his – and his fellow Québécois's – whole. Interestingly, the contours of this whole may be particularly well suited to the circus. Les 7 doigts' Chassé has reminded us of the cultural and linguistic marginality of her fellow Québécois. As people who are thus called to be translators, people who do the transfers and crossings of trans-latio,⁴⁹ as a necessity for a certain *survivance*, Québécois artists in their nation without a state may be particularly drawn to participate in the displacement and replacement, the voyage and the trip, that circus has long constructed – prior to, but importantly including, Cirque. Indeed, Québec, that 'culture qui voyage', may find particular presence in the travel itself, as the language of that government document, whose English translation carries the title 'Culture Québec: A Culture that Travels the World', suggests a conception of itself as peopled with voyagers. We Québécois are ourselves when we travel, when we cross boundaries, when we enter the world beyond. With Hurley, we see the 'emotional labour' these artists perform for – and with – fellow Québécois, nourishing senses not only of pride but also of self as a Québec, the referent, is called and recalled into the moving itself, where crossings find reconstructed meanings as a signal of an originary identity that necessarily 'travels the world'.

Having begun an examination of my friend's celebration of a Québec-influenced American entertainment industry by exploring real

traces of Québec cultural production in Pink's unsettling, if 'wow'-inducing, aerial work and the genealogies associated with it, these pages now close by seeing a Québécois recognize himself as he watched a particularly strong artist glitter in the air. The Québec-ness of Pink's cirque performance is thus not mere *ambiance* for the Staples Center, for Los Angeles, for America, for the globe. It carries creative, even constitutive, resonances for the many Québécois like my friend who literally and figuratively find themselves in it.

It is perhaps important to note here, at the end of an analysis of circles of creative influence, that that vaunted 'Culture qui Voyage' seems to promise to continue its travels south of its provincial borders, at least for a while. With *Pippin*, for example, Broadway now has a Québec-inflected, award-winning circus-themed show which, in the logic of dominant investment-recouping strategies in today's theatre world, has already embarked on at least one major national tour, with the resultant need to recruit and train increasingly large numbers of performers. Pink's silks and Britney Spears's Roues Cyr are finding echoes in even more aerials and acrobatics in the touring shows of vocal artists from Katy Perry to Taylor Swift. Furthermore, Montreal's Cirque-connected Moment Factory created in 2013 a highly successful and popular interactive multimedia environment for the interior of the Los Angeles International Airport, thus bringing forms of and from a travelling Québec to even more voyagers.⁵⁰ Pascal Jacob's suggestion that now is a 'Période québécoise' in terms of influence may not be wrong. Leroux has reminded us, of course, that this particular influence may go unnoted and unnamed by large numbers of spectators experiencing it, apart from the Québécois who find meaning-filled celebration in it.⁵¹

In a November 2012 interview at Montreal's permanent circus performance space La TOHU, however, Les 7 doigts's American-born Shana Carroll may have pointed to at least one way in which this Montreal that has influenced them, this Québec that has become a creative home, may find itself named and noticed beyond its borders and by non-Québécois. There, she spoke of how the company's touring shows, in particular *Traces*, have influenced young people to pursue circus training – readily available back in Montreal – in order to perform in shows like theirs.⁵² At least one American 2013 graduate of Montreal's Circus School, Kyle Driggs, has spoken precisely of seeing *Traces* as a youth in Philadelphia, knowing that this was a world he wished to join, and discovering a very real Montreal, in a very real Québec, that could take him to it.⁵³ Here joined by Carroll, Driggs and others both before and after them, my friend is ultimately not

the only one celebrating, even desiring and working to maintain, a *Québéçisation de l'industrie*.

Notes

- 1 This article was first published under this same title in *Québec Studies* 58 (2014): 25–44. I'm grateful for the journal's permission to publish this updated version in these pages.
- 2 This description comes from the performance as broadcast on http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3stsDXki_U.
- 3 'Pink's Grammy Performance: Upside Down & Nearly Naked', *Huffington Post*, 4 February 2010.
- 4 Personal conversation, 19 February 2010. As a noted figure in Montreal's performance scene, my friend prefers anonymity in these pages.
- 5 Sarah Poole, Email communication, 2 January 2014.
- 6 The real risks of serious, even fatal, injury involved in circus work were underscored by the 29 June 2013 death of acrobat Sarah Guillot-Guyard during a performance of Cirque du Soleil's *Kà* at Las Vegas's MGM Grand hotel. News of yet another dramatic circus accident reminds us of these threats: on 4 May 2014, eight performers fell more than 20 feet from a hair-hang apparatus in a Rhode Island production of the Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey *Legends* show. Pink's use of a particularly safe cradle position for much of the aerial sequence may well have mitigated much of the risk for her and her audience; however, her own accident with an unsecure harness in a show in Nuremberg, Germany on 15 July 2010 reminds us that even the most safety-conscious performer can suffer injury. Chris Barth, 'Pink Hospitalized After Aerial Stage Stunt Mishap', *Rolling Stone*, 16 June 2010, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/pink-hospitalized-after-aerial-stage-stunt-mishap-20100716>.
- 7 'Pink's Grammy Performance', *Huffington Post*; Moe Jackson, 'Pink Does a Wet Cirque du Soleil Act @ Grammy Awards', *MoeJackson.com*, 3 February 2010; Rick Porter, 'Grammys Best and Worst: Pink in the Air and More', *Zap2it*, 31 January 2012; Carte Blanche, Response to 'Was Pink ever a member of Cirque du Soleil?', *Answers Yahoo.com*, 1 February 2010, <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20100131213850AAG20bH>.
- 8 Mark Leibovich, 'Voice is Strained, but Support on the Trail Unstinting', *New York Times*, 4 November 2012.
- 9 En Piste, 'State of Affairs: Circus Arts in Quebec and in Canada', <http://enpiste.qc.ca>.
- 10 Erin Hurley, 'Le cirque: de la différence à la ressemblance', *Spirale*, No. 227 (July/August 2009), 24–7 (26).
- 11 '18th Festival Mondial du Cirque de Demain', <http://www.cirquededemain.paris/en/>; Pat Donnelly, 'Quidam Performers Adapt to the Bell Centre', *Gazette*, 10 December 2010.
- 12 This history is not told without a touch of controversy. Some versions of the history, including the ones recounted in sources from the *Columbia Encyclopedia of Modern Drama* (Gabrielle H. Cody and Evert Sprinchorn, eds., [New York: Columbia University Press, 2007] entry on André Simard by Daniel Goldberg, 1245–6) to the Cirque du Soleil webpages devoted to Simard (<http://www.cirquedusoleil.com/fr/jobs/casting/team/mentor/andre-simard.aspx>), suggest that Simard himself invented the discipline. Vaudelle's published interviews, along with conversations with her peers studying in Europe in the 1990s, return, however, the actual invention to Fasoli; it is instructive to remember here that the silks themselves are occasionally referred to in Europe as the '*trissu Fasoli*'. All versions of this history agree that it is Simard's work with Vaudelle in *Quidam* that thrust the apparatus and its accompanying skills and aesthetics onto the world stage. (My own correspondence with the French aerial artist Fred Deb' [Frédérique Debitte, Email communication, 25 July 2013], one of the founding members

- of the influential French company Les Arts Sauts and who was successfully experimenting with various aerial apparatus at roughly the same time as Fasoli was working with Vaudelle in France's Centre National des Arts du Cirque, further underscores a vital need for further research on the history of this art.)
- 13 Accessible through <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j5ek52BJK5Y> (Isabelle Chassé in *Quidam*), with portions of other videos of this performance reappearing through fans' postings at, for example, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zlwkIDPzNil>.
 - 14 This performance can be seen at <https://vimeo.com/37606291>.
 - 15 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ys7-6_t7OEQ.
 - 16 Silks are penetrating not only the contemporary entertainment industry. Certain companies in modern dance are experimenting with them. See Jayne Bernasconi and Nancy Smith, *Aerial Dance* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2008) for an examination of the dance world's explorations in aerial work. See Wency Leung, 'Aerial silks: A Workout Fit for Acrobats, Coming to a Gym Near You', *Globe and Mail*, 19 February 2012, for an example of the apparatus's appearance as a fitness tool in gyms throughout North America.
 - 17 The Cyr wheel can be seen in this (poorly filmed) sequence from the *Circus* tour: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rFU1TDq3s1Q>. It is important to note in this context that Spears's show created for Vegas in late 2013 continues to engage circus apparatus – and garnered a review by Hannah Dreier entitled 'Britney's Vegas Show Looks Like Cirque du Spears', *Chicago Sun-Times*, 29 December 2013.
 - 18 'About Seb', SebandKatia.com. (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/profiles/5TN4Jh2nFZskZMXnMy1f9Pb/sebastien-stella>).
 - 19 For a history of the National Circus School, see: Pascal Jacob and Michel Vézina, *Désirs de vertige: 25 ans d'audace* (Montréal: École nationale de cirque et les Éditions Les 400 coups, 2007).
 - 20 This interview can be seen at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dWEqikOq4j8>. Pink has continued to develop her circus skills, including in an Apache dance sequence resembling a hand-to-hand number for the 2012 video *Try*, in choreography by the Cirque performer Sebastien Stella (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yTCDVfMz15M>), and in other acrobatic and aerial skills for her 2013 *The Truth About Love* tour. For the 2014 Grammys, Pink performed a version of her 'Try' that combined high-flying aerials (here, ropes stood in for the silks) and a dance sequence after her rigging landed her on stage.
 - 21 Pascal Jacob's keynote address has been reprised and revised as 'The Québécois Circus in the Concert of Nations: Exchange and Transversality', in *Cirque Global: Quebec's Expanding Circus Boundaries*, eds. Louis Patrick Leroux and Charles R. Batson (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016), 25–35.
 - 22 Jason Zinoman, 'Defiant Showman Demands his "Wow"', *New York Times*, 3 June 2011. Print programme: *Totem*, Montreal's Old Port, April 2010, Dir. Robert Lepage.
 - 23 Presse Canadienne, 'Le Cirque du Soleil viendra appuyer Madonna', *La Presse*, 3 February 2012.
 - 24 Alain De Repentigny, 'Le Québec en tournée mondiale', *La Presse*, 7 October 2012, <http://www.lapresse.ca/arts/musique/201210/06/01-4580904-le-quebec-en-tournee-mondiale.php>.
 - 25 Sarah Barmack, 'Magic in the Departure Lounge: Moment Factory's Moment to Shine', *Canadian Business*, 22 July 2013.
 - 26 Tony Babinski, *Cirque du Soleil: 20 Years Under the Sun* (New York: Abrams, 2004).
 - 27 See Iro Tembeck, *Dancing in Montreal: Seeds of a Choreographic History. Studies in Dance History*, 5.2 (1994).
 - 28 For more discussion of the 1980s context, see Erin Hurley, *National Performance: Representing Quebec from Expo 67 to Céline Dion* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), particularly chapter 6 and its explorations of Carbone 14.
 - 29 Erin Hurley, 'Le Grand récit des arts de la scène au Québec', *Globe*, 11.2 (2008), 11–22.
 - 30 Pascal Jacob, 'Québec, un soufflé de liberté', *Arts de la piste*, 28 (mai 2003), 20–1.
 - 31 Jennifer Harvie and Erin Hurley, 'States of Play: Locating Québec in

- the Performances of Robert LePage, Ex Machina, and the Cirque du Soleil', *Theatre Journal*, 51.3 (1999), 299–315.
- 32 John Fleming, 'Cirque du Surréal', *St. Petersburg Times*, 3 November 2002.
- 33 Fleming, 'Cirque du Surréal'.
- 34 Print programme: *Les 7 doigts de la main, Séquence 8*. Directed by Shana Carroll and Sébastien Soldevila.
- 35 See, for example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dIX3B8ksAdA>.
- 36 I have elsewhere explored the works of Les 7 doigts and their creative impulses. See in particular my 'Les 7 doigts de la main and Their Cirque: Origins, Resistances, Intimacies' in *Cirque Global: Quebec's Expanding Circus Boundaries*, eds. Leroux and Batson, 99–121.
- 37 'Les 7 Doigts de la Main à Broadway', *La Presse*, 9 January 2013.
- 38 Sylvain Lavoie, 'Le dernier homme, entre cirque et religion', *Spirale* (juillet/août 2009), 31–3.
- 39 Marie-Claude Marsolais, 'La grand salut', *Voir*, 23 novembre 2006.
- 40 Sylvain Lavoie, 'Le dernier homme, entre cirque et religion', *Spirale* 227 (juillet/août 2009), 31–3. Lavoie's voice is not alone. For a critical gaze upon Québécois theatre directors who choose to work for the Cirque du Soleil, see: Gilbert David, 'Quelques metteurs en scène québécois bercés par le chant des Sirènes', *Spirale* 227 (juillet/août 2009), 16–18.
- 41 Babinski, *Cirque*, 84.
- 42 'Québec: a Vibrant Presence on the World Stage', Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, <https://www.mcc.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/documents/publications/quebec-scenes-anglais.pdf>.
- 43 Martine Turenne, 'Le Top 10 des 150 sociétés les plus admirées', *Les Affaires*, 18 février 2011.
- 44 Harvie and Hurley, 'States of Play', 309.
- 45 Louis Patrick Leroux, 'Le Québec à Las Vegas: pérégrinations postidentitaires dans l'hyper-Amérique', *L'Annuaire théâtral* 45 (2009), 9–20.
- 46 Francisco Cruz, Participation in roundtable discussion on Québec–US cross-exchanges, National Circus School, Montreal, 12 July 2013.
- 47 Erin Hurley, *National Performance: Representing Quebec from Expo 67 to Céline Dion* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).
- 48 Hurley, *National Performance*, 18, 21–2, 167–9.
- 49 For an exploration of the Québécois-specific crossings and transfers in the province's cultural capital, see: Sherry Simon, *Translating Montreal: Episodes in the Life of a Divided City* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006).
- 50 Barmack, 'Magic in the Departure Lounge'.
- 51 Leroux, 'Le Québec à Las Vegas'.
- 52 Shana Carroll, personal interview (Montreal, 6 November 2012).
- 53 Kyle Driggs, Participation in roundtable discussion on Québec–US cross-exchanges, National Circus School, Montreal, 12 July 2013.

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