Dance in US Popular Culture

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11 Popularizing "American-ness"

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Introduction

Based in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, The Halluci Nation—formerly known as A Tribe Called Red—are "an acclaimed electronic DJ collective known for their genre-bending mix of hip-hop, reggae, dubstep, and First Nations traditional musical traditions."[1] To date, their 2016 video "Stadium Pow Wow" has garnered over 7.9 million views on YouTube.[2] Shortly after the music video opens, the profile of Adrian Primeaux's face, streaked with red warpaint, appears momentarily, adorned by intricately beaded regalia. Primeaux (enrolled with the Yankton Sioux Tribe and of the Ponca Tribe of Indians of Oklahoma descent) is the Grass Dancer, a practitioner of an Indigenous dance form that enacts "balance and symmetry" and honors human relationships with grass and nonhuman animals.[3] His mouth opens slightly as if taking a breath; one of his brightly colored moccasins rises above the other in the long, flattened grass of the Badlands, located in South Dakota, United States. The video cuts to one of The Halluci Nation's live shows: a DJ mixes next to his laptop and a Hoop Dancer performs. Suddenly, the video flashes to a close-up of "Indigenous skateboarding legend" Joe Buffalo (Samson Cree Nation) in a skatepark, the city of Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, bustling behind him.[4]

Each of these people and locations contributes to the socio-political impact of this award-winning video: its opening montage splices images of movement practices in rural and urban locales. Kenzie Wilson (Cross Lake First Nation) wears a red tank and trunks, her long hair braided down her back, as she jabs and ducks in an indoor boxing ring at a gym in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. Three Native children play in the tall grass of Rapid City, South Dakota, US. The video shows rural Unist'ot'en lands (also located in British Columbia, Canada) where a person, their face indistinguishable in the darkness, wears a hard hat with a red headlamp that jolts to the bold beat of the music. This is also a place of "protest," where Native people seek to protect their lands and lifeways from yet another pipeline. Music videos and movement practices are political, and considering the enduring structure of settler colonialism, sometimes play *is* protest.

This chapter argues that "Stadium Pow Wow" expands dominant pop culture discourses by (1) making visible contemporary Native people, practices, and lands,

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and challenging patriarchal gender norms and (2) articulating human-to-human and more-than-human relationships that protect Indigenous futurities. I define more-than-humans as nonhuman animals, air, land, water, and the cosmos. The term "more-than-humans" challenges anthropocentric discourses which otherize nonhuman kin. "Stadium Pow Wow" foregrounds Indigenous resistance within an "American" pop culture context, and presents Indigenous solidarity.

Scare quotes around "American" indicate it is a construct initially imposed by Italian colonizer, Amerigo Vespucci, and often conflated with US citizenship. However, "America" or the "Americas" consists of 35 countries and two continents. Peoples who are indigenous to these lands are often obscured and subordinated through policies and practices. Those who are Native to the partition of Turtle Island often referred to as the US did not collectively receive US citizenship until 1924.[5] In Canada, many First Nations people did not receive citizenship until 1956.[6] Because many Native people are also citizens of and/or connected to their tribal nation(s), their contemporary presence is a threat to the very aim of settler colonialism: non-Native people possessing and profiting from Native land.[7]

"Stadium Pow Wow" intervenes in settler colonial discourses by emphasizing Native peoples' enduring interconnections and insisting on Native presence within contemporary "American" mainstream pop culture, which has frequently excluded and/or misrepresented Native Americans and their practices. This structural exclusion of Indigenous peoples produces detrimental, material consequences. Grass Dancer Primeaux told me the music video showcases "modern" Native peoples and practices in recognizably contemporary settings,[8] a critical first step toward social and structural change.

My analysis focuses on how movement modalities in the video combat settler colonialism and anthropocentric hierarchies. State policies in the US and Canada have attempted to control Native people and movement practices. Jacqueline Shea Murphy refers to this as "corporeal control," attempts to assimilate Native peoples and individuals through managing their bodies and movements.[9] From the late 1800s to the 1978 American Indian Religious Freedom Act, the US government outlawed some Native dances,[10] and Canada implemented legal prohibitions on Native dances from 1885 to 1951.[11]

Settler state policies and procedures have often enacted "corporeal control"[12] by seeking to confine Native people in institutional settings; yet the music video illuminates ways that Indigenous people have resisted. David Wallace Adams underscores how Native children have often been a target of "American" settler colonial violence through institutional confinement, control, and forced and/or coerced assimilation policies. He writes, "The last 'Indian War' was fought against Native American children in the dormitories and classrooms of government boarding schools."[13] The video "Stadium Pow Wow" indicates that "Indian Wars" are ongoing: pipeline construction and punitive measures that water protectors face for combating environmental destruction are often joint ventures between settler states and pipeline companies.[14] In addition, detention

centers disproportionately confine Native youth in the US and Canada.[15] Thus, Native children roaming freely on the land connote practices of resistance/reclamation that combat the confinement of Indigenous bodies and movements.

Making Visible Contemporary Native People, Practices, and Lands and Challenging Patriarchal Gender Norms

The very name of the DJ collective, "The Halluci Nation," emphasizes the structural invisibilization and subordination of Native Americans while simultaneously asserting their humanity and equality. "The Halluci Nation," the DJ collective's name, comes from a poem by John Trudell (Santee Sioux and "tribal roots [from] Mexico"),[16] which calls out and challenges Native invisibility. Trudell was a spokesperson for the 1969 Indians of All Tribes Occupation of Alcatraz Island and subsequently served as the Chairman for the American Indian Movement from 1973 to 1979.[17] He collaborated with The Halluci Nation on their album, *The Halluci Nation*.[18] His poem states: "We are the tribe that they cannot see…We are the Halluci Nation. We are the human beings," then lists derogatory terms for Indigenous peoples, including "the Indians," "Native American," "hostile," "Pagan," and "militant."[19] The DJ collective has expressed their aim to counter mainstream pop culture discourses, which frequently exclude and/or stereotype Native peoples.[20] Many Native peoples prefer their tribally specific name for themselves rather than "Native Americans."[21]

Further, inspiring Native people through music can be conducive to creating social change. Boxer Kenzie Wilson shared,

> When I listen to the song, I feel really empowered by it. [The song] has a very good energy… And a very strong Native culture representation in it. I get the kind of feeling, it's like, we're here. We're not going anywhere…And it's just like a rising up kind of energy.

A *Vibes* review of the song describes it as a "combination of hard hitting beats, intense progressions … the aggressive chanting and singing creates a powerful energy that you can feel coursing through your veins."[22] The review discusses that The Halluci Nation invented "a new genre known as powwow-step"[23] that illustrates "the tension that Native North Americans feel between modern culture and their ancient ancestral culture."[24] This statement reveals a settler colonial stereotype: imposing a false dichotomy between contemporary and Native cultures, denying how they are mutually constitutive. The review exposes how "American" pop culture discourses misread Native originalities as in "tension" with "modern culture."[25]

"Stadium Pow Wow" defies settler colonial constructions of Native people as historic or extinct[26] by prominently featuring contemporary Native people: Wilson, Adrian Primeaux, Joe Buffalo, and The Halluci Nation. Primeaux descends from generations of Native dancers and singers.[27] Buffalo, "a survivor of Canada's

notorious Indian residential school system," is a renowned skateboarder and actor.[28] Wilson is not only a boxing champion but also an award-winning student writer recognized for her "brains, brawn, and ambition."[29] Showcasing Native people who are athletic, creative, and successful contrasts with distorted depictions of Native peoples' "plight" that fail to acknowledge ongoing colonization.[30] Wilson said she was chosen because The Halluci Nation wanted to feature "a strong Aboriginal woman."[31]

As a woman training in a martial art, Wilson defies Eurocentric, patriarchal gender norms that typecast Native women as "princesses,"[32] sexualized objects,[33] symbols of Native consent to colonialism,[34] and tragic figures destined to perish.[35] Assimilation policies and institutions have often sought to impose patriarchal gender norms on Native students.[36] Indian boarding schools often offered "high profile" athletic activities only for males—basketball, football, and boxing[37]—and limited participation by female students in physical activities.[38] John Bloom explains these exclusions: "To the boarding schools' earliest founders, Native Americans were too strong and too well adapted to the outdoors."[39] As a female boxer, Wilson clearly debunks patriarchal gender norms.

Given the legal prohibitions of Native dance,[40] the Hoop Dance and Grass Dance in the video affirm that these practices not only endure but also evolve. If mainstream pop culture discourses often assume "traditional" Native dances are static, "Stadium Pow Wow" shows this is *not* the case.[41] Native experts trace origins of the modern Hoop Dance to the 1930s—approximately 50 years after the US government banned Native dances—when "Tony White Cloud, Jemez Pueblo … began using multiple hoops in a stylized version" of the dance.[42] An intertribal practice[43] with diverse origin stories,[44] the contemporary Hoop Dance is "a healing ceremony" often characterized by "fast-paced [movement] that involves doing intricate footwork and twirling while throwing hoops into the air and manipulating them into shapes."[45]

Similar to the Hoop Dance, the Grass Dance is an intertribal practice with multiple origin stories. Rather than viewing these narratives as conflicting, Primeaux highlighted how each one is "relevant."[46] Many Native experts attribute the Grass Dance's beginnings to flattening the grass for people to camp and the practice "grew from there."[47] These flattening movements are evident in "Stadium Pow Wow," which includes close-ups of Primeaux's feet as he dances upon this more-than-human in the Badlands. The music video links this action to Buffalo's feet as he rides his skateboard, connecting these movements and their rural and urban geographies.

Ironically, Native experts perceive attempts to suppress Native practices as critical to the Grass Dance's endurance.[48] Because of legal prohibitions on Native ways of life, "it became important to both preserve and spread dances—including the merging of many tribal dances that we now know as Grass Dance—to preserve indigenous unity."[49] Similar to the Grass Dance, "Stadium Pow Wow" blends intertribal and indigenized practices with non-Native roots. Today, the "spread[ing]" of Indigenous dances[50] also occurs online, as "Stadium Pow Wow" evidences, demonstrating how the digital realm circulates Native practices.

Beyond the recognizably Native movement modes that "Stadium Pow Wow" showcases, the music video also implies that even practices not necessarily viewed as having Native origins—such as skateboarding and boxing—can be means of expanding Native identities. Hilary N. Weaver writes, "Native Americans have challenged, adapted or adopted non-Native elements into their lives for generations. Now such tactics are applied to skating subculture."[51] Native people have also leveraged non-Native movement practices to strengthen self-perceptions.[52] In an *ESPN* article, Donna Kipp, "a fighter for the Blackfeet Nation Boxing Club," shared,

> When I started boxing, I remember watching the older girls train at the club and viewing them as role models… All of those older girls embodied strength, the type of strength that we'd hear about in stories about our ancestors. That meant something to me.[53]

Engaging with movement forms can amplify connections with ancestors,[54] and since many tribes developed martial arts for hunting and warfare, boxing might be understood as an Indigenous practice. Buffalo told me that skateboarding reminds him of his ancestors because of "the perseverance and to not give up and to just go out swinging no matter what, that kind of mentality. It's just been ingrained in me."[55] Buffalo's phrase "to just go out swinging no matter what" has its origins in boxing,[56] suggesting commonalities among these movement forms.[57]

For some Native people, engaging in non-Native movement practices is a form of healing. Given "a traumatic childhood and decades of addiction," Buffalo has stated, "skateboarding was just one giant family"[58] and "definitely a savior."[59] Native practitioners may leverage practices from other cultures not only for individual but also communal wellbeing.[60] This is *not* a sign of Native assimilation but rather reveals how Native peoples and practices evolve dynamically.

The color red is featured prominently in "Stadium Pow Wow," likewise evoking Native peoples, and perhaps in particular, the Red Power Movement of the 1960s and the 1970s in North America and Native activism in urban settings.[61] In the music video, the water protector's hard hat is red, as is Wilson's shirt as she boxes in the Winnipeg gym. Rather than relegate Native peoples to rural settings, the video includes urban areas, and, today, most Native people in the US and Canada live in cities.[62] Bruce D'Arcus writes,

> The Red Power Movement also had important, even essential, connections to urban politics and urban spaces. Indeed, I would go so far to argue that the 'reservations and rural' activism [for instance, at the 1973 Wounded Knee Occupation] would not have happened without the urban experience.[63]

"Stadium Pow Wow" references the 1973 Wounded Knee Occupation, as well as the 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre,[64]when Morgan Flores—today Primeaux's wife—appears reflective at Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. The music video also conveys the importance of Native peoples' presence, prominence,

and resistance in cityscapes. Buffalo moves freely through Vancouver, which has been a key site of the Idle No More Movement, a "women[-led] …inclusive, continent-wide network of urban and rural Indigenous working hand in hand with non-Indigenous allies to build a movement for Indigenous rights and the protection land, water, and sky,"[65] which has included round dance flash mobs in the city.

Human-to-Human and Human-to-More-than-Human Connections

Dance studies scholars often focus on human-to-human interactions,[66] which are evident in "Stadium Pow Wow" and its circulation, but tend to overlook human-to-more-than-human connections. The human-to-human relationships in "Stadium Pow Wow" are evident through movement forms that connect people in the present moment—skateboarding, boxing, playing—as well as through time. Flores's presence at Wounded Knee evokes Lakota and other Native people who were present and perished in 1890 and 1973. The video also illustrates human connections between Native and non-Native people through non-Native boxers[67] and visual depictions of Muhammad Ali, suggesting that movement practices might incorporate pop culture,[68] and facilitate intercultural exchange and solidarity. Moreover, movement forms are transmitted from body to body via live performance—what Diana Taylor refers to as the "repertoire."[69] These transmissions can also be intergenerational. When I asked Primeaux how he started Grass Dancing, he said, "Dancing was passed down to me from generation to generation, and then I have family members who helped me gather my regalia."[70] His words make evident familial continuity within Native dance practices.

Beyond human-to-human solidarity, John Trudell's poem about the Halluci Nation highlights the endurance and futurity of Native human and more-than-human linkages: "Our DNA is of the earth and sky/Our DNA is of past and future/We are the Halluci Nation/We are the evolution, the continuation."[71] Trudell challenges dominant discourses that mistakenly conflate human-to-more-than-human interconnections with the past and Native peoples' "primitivity."[72] In contrast, Indigenous peoples' worldviews—which often foreground human and more-than-human interdependencies—are recognized as solutions to the "pressure humans put on a global ecosystem."[73] This pressure produces human and more-than-human disease and death.[74]

"Stadium Pow Wow" references the histories of settler-spread disease when Buffalo saunters by the Hudson's Bay store window, which showcases its apparel.[75] In the 1700 and 1800s, "rumours swirl[ed] that [Hudson Bay's point blankets] were used to spread smallpox against First Nations."[76] A descendent of First Nations people, Buffalo defies these settler attempts at genocide, and his relaxed manner, the way that he effortlessly glides over obstacles on his skateboard, vivifies resistance. Nevertheless, the Hudson's Bay store suggests that the threat of settler colonialism, inextricable from capitalism, persists.

The Hoop Dance and Grass Dance evidence human-to-more-than-human relations in the past, present, and future through their names, origin stories,

movement qualities, and regalia. Rhea Johnston, Kathy Hixon, and Vanessa Anton write that the hoops may represent "the sacred circle (encompassed by the sky and the earth) and all that is connected to it—nature, animals, and the people" as well as human and more-than-human equality.[77] According to an Anishinaabe origin story, the Creator gifts Nanabosho, "a teacher and protector," tobacco to offer "before hunting animals or taking a plant," an act of human-to-more-than-human reciprocity.[78] However, after losing the tobacco, Nanabosho "became saddened and began making hoops from red willow sticks. He began creatively dancing with the hoops in formations that resembled animals and plants to honor the Creator's work."[79] The hoops Nanabosho creates are fashioned *from* more-than-humans to resemble more-than-humans.

Another origin of the dance tells of

> a 'dying' man [who] longs to leave a legacy behind on Earth. The Creator gives him a single wooden hoop and tells him that for each living thing he creates, one more hoop will be added. As the hoops multiply, the man miraculously grows stronger and creates the forms of other living things.[80]

This story suggests that human and more-than-human prosperity are intertwined, as the man's health increases "for each living thing he creates."[81] In the Hoop Dance, the practitioner arranges hoops into "shapes such as wings, tails, an open alligator mouth, or a sphere,"[82] "flowers, butterflies, animals,… stars, the sun, and the moon."[83] With his arms outstretched, the Hoop Dancer in "Stadium Pow Wow" momentarily displays linked hoops at one of The Halluci Nation's live shows. The Hoop Dancer's spin—itself a circle connoting human and more-than-human interconnectedness—resembles movement qualities in Primeaux's Grass Dancing. In a long shot, Primeaux rotates in a circle. His languid arms, the waving porcupine hair and eagle feathers on his headdress, and the rippling multicolored ribbons and fringe on his regalia evoke grasses of the Badlands, on which he dances. Primeaux carries a hoop, and told me that it has "the same universal meaning behind it" for Grass Dancers, meaning human-to-more-than-human interdependencies (Figure 11.1).[84]

Narratives about the Grass Dance emphasize its healing possibilities and the influence of more-than-humans on Native human movements. The origins of the Grass Dance involve a Northern Plains boy, "born handicapped yet yearning to dance," who

> was told by his medicine man to seek inspiration in the prairie. Upon doing so, the boy had a vision of himself dancing in the style of the swaying grasses; he returned to his village, shared his vision, and was eventually given back the use of his legs through the first ever Grass Dance.[85]

Primeaux shared a similar version which included that the boy "fasted on … a bed of sweet grass," "was approached by different elements and different beings," and had "some kind of communication with a deer," who gifted the boy with

Figure 11.1 Adrian Primeaux Grass Dances in Mako Sica (the Badlands), located in what is often referred to as South Dakota, US. Screenshot from "The Halluci Nation Ft. Black Bear — Stadium Pow Wow (Official Video)."

"some songs that talk about a story of a buffalo in a storm."[86] The Grass Dance also evidences relationships that Native people have with grass: one "strain of the dance's genesis points to the importance of the dried grass…[I]t could be used as tinder, or even makeshift stockings, for warmth…The regalia honors the role of grass in the warrior's life."[87] Grass Dance regalia furthers this connection:

> The most distinctive component of the grass dance regalia is the yarn [or fringe] that adorns every piece…[S]weeping lengths of yarn evoke grasses swaying in the wind, their weight bouncing with every step the dancer takes. The headpiece is usually the only item that uses feathers.[88]

Native regalia may incorporate more-than-human materials: Primeaux has horses beaded onto his regalia. In the music video, ribbons of rainbow sunlight reflect off mirrors on the dancer's regalia, making visible this more-than-human. Primeaux stated that the mirrors deflect "ill intentions" and "negativity."[89] At times, Native dancers can connect to the spirits of more-than-humans by imitating their actions and wearing regalia made from nonhuman animals.[90]

"Stadium Pow Wow" implies possible human and more-than-human interconnections via Native skateboarding, boxing, and play: sweat streaks the face of one of the boys playing on the plains, suggesting how water is vital to our bodies and life. Later, water beads on a drum's surface, made from more-than-human animal skin. In the cityscape, Buffalo, wearing all black, charges at a flock of pigeons, and the birds in motion seem to become an extension of the man. A child's hand sweeps through tall grass as he runs. Women's hair, worn loose, waves in the wind like grass. A horse trots. A boy catches a handful of grasshoppers. There are images of the Crazy Horse Memorial—carved from stone, a more-than-human that is sacred to some Lakota people—the Badlands, an Unist'ot'en forest, and a nonhuman animal's skull. The statue and poster

Figure 11.2 Kenzie Wilson, her championship belt slung over her left shoulder, walks toward a framed poster of Muhammad Ali in the boxing gym in which she trains, located in what is frequently called Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. Screenshot from "The Halluci Nation Ft. Black Bear — Stadium Pow Wow (Official Video)."

of Muhammad Ali may remind viewers of one of his most famous statements: "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee."[91] Ali's words recognize the value of humans embodying more-than-human movement qualities (Figure 11.2).

These interconnections become more urgent in "Stadium Pow Wow" when a man lifts his sleeve to reveal a black snake tattooed onto his arm, accompanied by the words, "NO PIPELINES." Native peoples' actions to protect the air, land, water, and more-than-human animals reinforce these interconnections. In the video, a sign states "NO ACCESS TO UNIST'OT'EN LAND WITHOUT CONSENT," where the Unist'ot'en clan (Wet'suwet'en First Nation) built a cabin and resistance camp "in the exact place where Trans-Canada, Enbridge, and Pacific Trail want to lay pipelines."[92] Their campaign motto is: "Heal the People, Heal the Land."[93] Some Native people danced on the frontlines of protests as a form of healing and prayer. Native dances can strengthen these connections, and encourage viewers of "Stadium Pow Wow" to reflect on relationships with and responsibilities to more-than-humans.

Conclusion

"Stadium Pow Wow" expands dominant pop culture narratives by demonstrating the continuity of Indigenous dances and movement modes despite settler colonial attempts to ban these practices and assimilate Native peoples. The video also encourages consideration of human-to-more-than-human connections and the interconnectedness of past, present, and future, which are vital to Indigenous epistemologies. While the dancing and playing in the video may appear frivolous, my analysis reveals the inextricable links between movement practices and political protest. Building on the work of Janet O'Shea,[94] I argue that the children roaming grasslands and cupping grasshoppers in their hands are

anything but simplistic. "Stadium Pow Wow" shows the vitality of outdoor play, being on and with the land, as a way of nurturing respectful relationships with more-than-humans, who are critical to human survival. O'Shea's writing forges another link between the disparate movement practices in the video[95]: Wilson, Primeaux, and Buffalo, who are recognized experts in their fields, appear to be playful. Though each has honed and exceled in their practice, they also enjoy the self-knowing and confidence acquired through movement modes. "Play," whether in the form of a child's curious exploration or an adult's diligent pursuit, reveals powerful knowledge.

"Play" can accomplish serious work by combating settler colonial structures and providing paths for social change. The rapid cuts and movement forms within the music video emphasize interconnectedness without sublimating their differences to a "melting pot" or "salad bowl," which are terms often used in anthropocentric "American" pop culture discourses to represent the US and Canada. In Lakota and other Native worldviews, more-than-human relatives can be considered "nations,"[96] and some Native people symbolize their interconnectedness with a hoop:

> Black Elk, a Lakota holy man who lived from 1863 to 1950, said that when the time of prosperity and well-being returned, his people would gather in a large hoop made up of many hoops that represent the many nations living together in harmony.[97]

Black Elk's words, like "Stadium Pow Wow," highlight the interconnectedness of humans and more-than-humans from diverse *nations*.

The climax of the music video occurs when a member of The Halluci Nation points at the audience with his index finger. Then a healthy, beautiful toddler sucks their own index finger while looking directly at the viewer. The child's eyes are curious, their expression relaxed. Sunlight with a glint of red reflects on the camera lens. The child is an embodiment of a Native American future, simultaneously distinct and inextricable from an *American* future.

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Ballet at the Movies or Dancing on the Limits of American-ness

Thalia Zanou[1]

Anna Leon

1920s, New York City: Audiences flock to movie theaters for the latest Hollywood productions accompanied by lavish, live shows (including instrumental music, opera singing, and dancing) spearheaded by impresario Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel. Thalia Zanou, dancer and actress of Greek origin, was a recurrent name in these programs, principally for the Capitol theater. Though Zanou was an important part of the vibrant 1920s dance community associated with the dissemination of early Hollywood productions, she is almost forgotten today. Her name is mentioned in passing in a couple of academic articles; her immigration story—she allegedly trained in Greece before working in the US[2]—unknown.

Zanou is historiographically marginalized for overlapping reasons. As a ballet dancer in popular cinema culture, she worked between genres and contexts, not neatly fitting in categories. As a neither fully American nor fully Greek woman, she hovered on the limits of US-American identity, her work overshadowed by dominant narratives of national culture. It is as a genre-crossing, racialized, and ethnically marginalized figure that I discuss Zanou, exploring how her work illustrates popularization as an artistic strategy for Americanization. Zanou's dancing reveals how the process of popularizing ballet involved negotiating disadvantaged identities and ethnically marked dance forms, inscribing them into new cultural narratives.

Few sources exist on Zanou: some performance programs, newspaper articles, and ads announcing (but not describing) the film evenings she featured in. In such discourse, we never hear Zanou's voice. Her dance, captured in a few surviving photographs, must be imaginatively recomposed by analyzing the various styles that we know she performed.

This recomposition leads us directly to ballet. The movie palaces where Zanou performed had professional ballet troupes. She ranked as a soloist in most billings, often dancing in works by Alexander Oumansky, a choreographer with a Ballets Russes background. Photos show her in pointe shoes, upper body expanding backwards, toes pointing, weight light, reflecting classical technique, at times supported by a male colleague. The performances she participated in included re-arranged excerpts from ballets like *Coppélia* and *Scheherazade* and balletic arrangements to Tchaikovsky, Brahms, Strauss, and Wagner.

In the movie theater, Zanou's ballet did not follow classical dance aesthetics. It was popularized. It crossed geographical and class boundaries, deviating from its European "high" art origins to become part of US-American popular spectacle, accessible for one or two dollars a ticket. In this process, ballet was transformed and remixed. Pictures of Zanou—not on pointe—display, in tandem with the ballerina's arching body, poses moving away from ballet's turnout and frontal open-ness. Her classical background blended with a variety of popular styles, from "original Irish reels"[3] to cakewalk and flamenco-inspired dances. To reconstruct Zanou's dance one therefore needs to imagine Irish dance's knee kicks and fast taps, the cakewalk's energetic hopping and strutting motions, and flamenco's sound-producing footwork combined with classical lines and postures. Ballet was also spectacularized to respond to the glitzy aesthetic of movie palaces: in the words of choreographer Florence Rogge, "we [the ballet] needed to adjust to all of those things. Large movements that were exaggerated were more visual to the audience's eye."[4]

These transformations of classical dance aesthetics and technique contributed to introducing popular American audiences to ballet.[5] Inversely, ballet's entry into cinema spectacle fostered its Americanization. Zanou's dances linked her ballet to US popular culture, ranging from *Toonerville Blues* (presumably referencing the *Toonerville* comic strip) to *Kitten on the Keys*, where she "shimm[ied] violently" to jazzy music.[6] The shift of ballet toward explicitly "American" popular styles—characteristic of European artists immigrating to the US—reveals how foreign artists inscribed their practices in the novel cultural narrative surrounding them and the extent to which immigrant culture nourished US-American cultural products.

In this context, Zanou occupied a precarious position marked by her Greek-ness, an identity on the margins of white American-ness. She was presented as a "Greek dancer"[7] at a time in the US when Greeks could "pass" but were not fully accepted as white. They received racist attacks from groups like the Ku Klux Klan, ranging from micro-aggressions to physical assaults.[8] Performance announcements also sometimes miscategorized Zanou (as Spanish, for instance),[9] amalgamating her into other ethnic and national groups of Southern-European, not fully white immigrants.

Zanou navigated this positionality by performing Greek-themed choreographies, notably in modern dance recitals with Greek dancer Vassos Kanellos outside the movie theater circuit. These shows included antiquity-themed dances blending ballet with Isadora-Duncan-inspired modern dance elements as well as Byzantine-themed dance-theater works. Such pieces combined representations of characters from Greek myth and theater (e.g., Electra in the *Return of Orestes*), costumes alluding to historical sources, and postures loosely based on ancient iconography. Such references to Greek (primarily ancient) history, highly valued in Western culture, arguably contributed to legitimizing Zanou as a "Greek" dancer. These performances further drew from American modern dance—whose own artistic standing was partly established by referencing Greek antiquity. But Zanou also performed Greece-themed pieces in movie palace shows: a *Cassandra*

dance including traditional dance material and a "Byzantine" ballet. There, rather than inscribing her dance in a genre positioning itself *as art*, Zanou introduced an ethnically marginal identity in a context of entertainment. In doing so, she introduced Greekness into American-ness: if ballet in the movie palace became pop, "Greek" dance, as part of this popularized ballet, found its entryway into *American* pop culture. Aligning with dominant Western modern dance aesthetics allowed Zanou to legitimize her dance as Greek; whereas integrating her dance into popularized ballet spectacle introduced it into American culture—and therefore countered the marginalization of Greekness in US national identity. Zanou appears to have been conscious of these dynamics, adapting her material in context-sensitive ways. Her *Cassandra* dance, for example, was performed in movie palaces *and* modern dance recitals, pointing to her capacity to negotiate her position as an ethnically marked artist, and introduce heterogeneity into "American" cultural products.

While this arguably allowed Zanou to present her identity as part of a heterogeneous but nevertheless explicitly US-American culture, it also involved appropriation. Her "Byzantine" dances were adapted to Hollywood portrayals of Byzantium, such as the 1921 film *Theodora*. The period such works referred to—when the Byzantine empire covered much of Eastern Europe including territories that are now Greece—is central in the historical narrative that forms mainstream Greek national identity. The appropriative recontextualization of this history in Hollywood film and spectacle intersected with Zanou's probable exotification, presented through an ethnically marked identity and sexualized appearance. A 1920 review refers to her as "the attractive and soothing picture that greets your eyes when relaxing after an engrossing five reel film at the Criterion."[10] In this sense, her work was part of a wider context where dances, especially dances of non-culturally dominant groups, both foreign (particularly non-Western) and US-American, were absorbed and transformed in cinematographic spectacle. Thus, some of Zanou's Greek-themed dances (along with "oriental," "Chinese," or "G*psy" pieces, or the above-mentioned cakewalk) were adapted to the hybrid ballet aesthetic of the movie palace, their cultural sources not fully or reliably acknowledged.

Thalia Zanou's dance balanced at the intersection of ballet and early 20th-century US-American cinema. Zanou herself balanced at the limits of US-American whiteness. Her work demonstrates how both ballet and mainstream white US popular culture appropriated and transformed ethnically marked, non-dominant dance forms, exotifying their performers in the process. Simultaneously, Zanou appears as an active agent negotiating her position in choreographic and social landscapes. Skillfully circulating between "high" and "low" culture, employing their codes in context-specific ways, and fine-tuning the cultural markers embodied by her dance, she reframed her practice as US-American. She thus manifests the mechanisms through which the popularization of pre-existing forms—be they European ballet or ethnically marked dances—allowed their Americanization. At the same time, Zanou draws attention to the resulting transformations of American-ness: by integrating, in pop-cultural

products marked as US-American, dance elements from cultural backgrounds marginalized in mainstream US society, she contributed to rendering the limits of American-ness a bit more blurry.

Notes

1 This research was funded in whole, or in part, by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) [T1336-G]. For the purpose of open access, the author has applied a CC BY public copyright licence to any Author Accepted Manuscript version arising from this submission.

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Romanticizing the Old South in the Confederate Pageant

Teresa Simone

Each Spring for about 90 years, residents of Natchez, Mississippi, have performed a Confederate Pageant that capitalizes on Lost Cause ideologies, nostalgically romanticizing the Confederacy in vignettes of dance and tableaux, with placards and minimal narration. Performers range from toddlers to senior citizens, but most are children. Dances include a waltz, polka, ballet, and can–can and the climax is a procession of the Confederate Queen, her General, and a "royal court." The pageant represents the antebellum South in soft focus and rosy light. Plantations are portrayed as happy sites of leisure, plantation owners as cultured and genteel, and histories of colonization and slavery are concealed. The pageant romantically imagines the Confederacy, performing ideals that reinforce gender norms, class privilege, and white supremacy, simultaneously obscuring racism and violence against people of color.

On March 16, 2019, I attended the pageant at the Natchez City Auditorium. The entrance to the community center, built by the WPA in 1939, features plantation-style columns. The audience sat behind rows of similar plantation-style columns, on three sides of a rectangular thrust stage decorated with flowers. The seats were sparsely filled. Except for one Black couple, everyone looked white. During the procession, Elena Christina Rodriguez, playing the Confederate Queen, entered upstage holding a crystal scepter and costumed in a white ball gown, satin gloves, and tiara. Six teenage girls in pastel blue hoop skirts holding fans stood in an arc behind her. A trio of young girls wearing white hoop skirts and bloomers held bouquets and tended to her dress train. Next, pairs of boys dressed in Confederate uniforms marched across the room toward the stage. Two boys about six years old led, followed by two rows composed of six teenagers. The Confederate General, played by Christopher Byrne Chandler, strode through the rows. Onstage, he took the Queen's hand and they stepped forward. The Queen traced an arc with her scepter, as a soldier bellowed "Present arms!" The soldiers raised their swords and the couple walked through the gauntlet. Reaching the middle, the Queen lifted her scepter, saluting with a polished wave. Lifting her head regally and smiling brilliantly, she was clearly the star of the show. The audience stood in ovation.

The pageant has always been dominated by women. Women began the pageant in 1932 as the highlight of "Spring Pilgrimage," a tourist attraction promoting

Confederate heritage. Members of two elite garden clubs dressed in antebellum costumes and exhibited plantation homes. The pilgrimage, attended by thousands, was highly profitable. Advertisements capitalized on nostalgia with the slogan "Natchez: Where the Old South Still Lives!" The Natchez Confederate Pageant is not unusual; Confederate heritage tourism proliferated during the Great Depression. Similar balls, pageants, pilgrimages, etc., were performed across the US—and still are. Like confederate monuments, these surged during Jim Crow. Women often led Confederate heritage initiatives and were central to white nationalist groups such as the KKK.[1]

The pageant depicts antebellum Natchez romantically, but its actual history is less flattering. Before the Civil War, Natchez was the wealthiest city in America due to its plantations and slave market. The pageant does not represent colonization or enslavement. Nor does it illustrate acts of resistance by people of color (the Natchez Revolt is one of many examples). The pageant portrays few historic events, instead creating a nostalgic *feeling* of the past. The antebellum years are imagined as a prosperous, happy time that was simpler and more innocent (for white people). The pageant exemplifies how performance evokes feelings and creates shared experiences that shape our understanding of national history. In repetitions and reiterations, the pageant passes movement from body to body, generation to generation, often as a multi-generational family tradition. Children, mothers, and grandmothers all perform, sentimentally binding family tradition and rituals of cultural memory. When I observed the pageant, most audience members were family or public figures (politicians and business owners). Audiences feel connected through kinship ties and by recalling their own past performances. Tourists lacking such connections may still share experiences that create a sense of shared history. Featuring adorable young children and beautiful teenage couples, the pageant evokes nostalgic feelings of innocence and romance, shaping historical memory and national culture.

As it reconfigures memory of the past, the pageant reflects ideals of the present, to imagine the future. This paradox illustrates the relationship between performance and nationalism. Nationalism relies on ideas that nations are distinct—due to language, culture, geography, etc.—and that these distinctions unite citizens while excluding outsiders. But such distinctions are not concrete. What unites the nation? Who belongs and who does not? Citizens disagree. Nations are imaginary concepts that are never fully attained. Thus, they must be continually recreated. Young people represent heroic, noble figures of the past and such representations of national ideals create feelings of belonging by articulating who is excluded.

The procession ritually weds ideal citizens: a military man and an aristocratic woman. The Queen walks down the aisle in a white gown with royal court evoking bridesmaids, groomsmen, flower girls, and ring bearers. The simple choreography is powerfully symbolic. As the Confederate Queen waves her scepter, the gesture *does* something. The actor waves to the audience, but the character waves to imaginary Confederate citizens. The wave *presents* the Confederacy. Matrimonial imagery implies reproduction: the imagined future nation is proliferated by

ideal citizens, in this case a Queen and General performed by beautiful youth on the cusp of adulthood (about 18). Playing these roles is expensive and time-consuming, marking privileged class status.

Several other scenes similarly feature heterosexual couplings. A waltz spotlights a pair of sweethearts. A scene reenacts the wedding of Varina Howell to Confederate President Jefferson Davis. And the youngest performers are coupled in the popular Maypole dance, exemplifying how ideologies of "racial innocence" (central to the development of US nationalism) circulate. White children are represented as vulnerable and innocent, while nonwhite children are excluded from vulnerability or innocence, absolving white adults of guilt and culpability.[2] Despite histories of colonization and slavery, America's past and future, represented by children, is rescripted and reimagined as innocent. Young white children perform ideals of white supremacy, which are passed off as harmless.

Like America's past, the pageant has often been rescripted and reimagined. Residents no longer call it the Confederate Pageant. Rebranded in 2001, it has gone by many names: the Historic Pageant, the Historic Tableaux, etc. Yet, the pageant still glorifies the Confederacy, symbolically wedding a Queen and Confederate General, as it has since 1932. As the nation is continually reimagined, dissenting views are revealed in the friction between what remains and what changes. Since 2011, organizers have gradually attempted to make the pageant more inclusive. They briefly represent the indigenous Natchez tribe (with white actors). A few Black actors have performed (but most refuse). When pressed to more accurately reflect the history of slavery, one of the clubs producing the pageant quit. In 2019 when I observed the pageant, a voiceover briefly mentioned slavery without depicting it. All adult performers were white, but a few children were Black or Asian. Rodriguez, the Confederate Queen, is of Puerto Rican heritage. That year during the procession "Washington Grays," a song honoring Union soldiers, was played instead of the traditional "Dixie," a song from blackface minstrelsy that imagines a formerly enslaved man yearning for the plantation. Marching to a Union song in Confederate uniform conveys conflicting meanings. The dissonant representation deftly allows white Southerners to simultaneously assert supremacy and innocence.

What do changes to the pageant indicate? Performance reflects shifting beliefs, creating sites where culture is negotiated. The pageant now includes BIPOC performers, but still obscures BIPOC histories. Such color-blind casting suggests BIPOC actors approve white-centered histories and disavows the realities of racism. White producers may claim to be benevolent allies while continuing to profit from people of color. White spectators can dismiss white supremacy as innocent. Perhaps Confederate heritage tourism is no longer profitable, and mixed ideologies appeal to broader markets. Perhaps representing a multicultural Confederacy permits its continued imagination, or white nationalist ideals have become more subtly encoded. We may see children as innocent irrespective of race, but not adults. But unequivocally, the performance presents people of color's bodies within the Confederacy. The Confederate Pageant exemplifies how dance reflects political struggles. If dance creates possibilities for social change, it also

may reiterate hierarchies or enforce inequities. Changing the world does not always mean political progressiveness. As a case study, the Confederate Pageant illustrates how dance influences historical memory, and articulates cultural change, social tensions, and conflicting beliefs about the nation. Which histories should be remembered? Whose stories? Who are the ideal citizens? Dance performs and negotiates these conflicts.

Notes

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Experimenting with Lady J

A Trans Take on Drag

J. Davenport, PhD

Until relatively recently, academic writing about the history of drag performance has remained largely silent around how transgender people use drag for both artistic pursuit and strategic survival within a world that often disallows transgender people from living openly as themselves. Currently, transgender people face routine, completely legal housing and employment discrimination in 19 states. Even within LGBTQIA+ organizations and businesses, transgender leaders are rare; cisgender lesbians and gays hold majority power in board rooms. Some scholars claim that when transgender people in the process of transition undertake drag, the art form is changed or even ruined. Theater and drag historian Laurence Senelick exemplifies this when describing some of the first well-known performers who underwent gender confirmation surgery in the first half of the 20th century:

> Were the transsexual's self-imposed "freakishness" to be exhibited, in sideshow fashion, with all the panoply of latex-lined vagina or hydraulically operated penis, the effect would be a display of the wonders of science…The hormonal impersonator embodies the very female ideal that the heterosexual male is supposed to desire. The theatrical impact of the gender blending disappears, and in the process the myth that drag queens are self-loathing and pathetic becomes reinforced.[1]

Though Senelick's words are now over 20 years old, these beliefs about transgender women within the drag community are still pervasive, especially in drag competitions. Pop culture commentators Tom Fitzgerald and Lorenzo Marquez point out that *RuPaul's Drag Race* and many contemporary drag pageants still only allow competitors that "adhere to a fairly traditional form of cisgender male, body-mod free drag."[2] Even Jim Flint's Baton Show Lounge in Chicago, which famously features transgender performers, does not cast anyone who has had genital surgery as part of their gender confirmation.[3]

Regardless of such discrimination, transgender performers continue to participate in the drag world. Transgender drag dates to at least the 1960s, when The Cockettes drag troupe debuted, including drag queens like cisgender Fayette Hauser and transgender Bambi Lake.[4] Earlier trans performers existed, of course,

but it is unclear whether they identified with female impersonation and drag. Today, transgender women are making inroads into even the biggest reality drag competitions. One example is when Bitter Betty showcased her talents on season four of *The Boulet Brothers' Dragula*, a horror-themed drag competition series airing on the Shudder streaming service.[5] Despite increasing acceptance of trans drag performers, few scholars, especially transgender ones, publish about transgender women who participate in the drag world, adding to the marginalization of our voices in discussions of the art form.

This case study draws on my experiences to highlight how transgender women explore gender identities through drag, even before we are ready to come out publicly. I illustrate the usefulness of drag as an expressive tool by embedding my interpretation in the concept of "hiding in plain sight," an approach coined by transgender drag performer Chris Cochrane.[6] My makeup, costuming, and physical movements for my drag persona, Dr. Lady J, shifted as understanding my gender shifted because drag is a complex, dynamic process—simultaneously helpful and harmful in addressing gender dysphoria while also allowing us to escape our own critical self-image to embrace positive new ones.

In my early career, when I identified publicly as male, transforming into drag meant that I became characters who were women by honing female impersonation-style drag. I redefined my body and facial structure using costumes and makeup techniques to look feminized: natural colored blush made my cheekbones look higher; eyeshadow and eyeliner reshaped my eyes; other makeup styles lowered my forehead and hairline to look relatively natural; and body padding made my waist into an hourglass shape. I feminized my body movements by swaying my hips, caressing my enhanced body, and posing in theatrical gestures that showcased my temporarily altered body and face. Through these changes, I finally saw a version of myself that matched my emerging gender as something other than male. Performing in drag allowed me to experiment under the guise of a stage persona that I often told people was simply "part of the job." I was "hiding in plain sight," openly experimenting with gender without talking about the inner issues I was confronting or acknowledging my nascent trans identity.[7] But when my performance was over—when the padding and makeup came off—I confronted my masculine face and body in the mirror and my dysphoria increased.

Over time, I shifted my makeup, costuming, and movement toward a version of femininity that felt more theatrical and separate from my offstage self. I enlarged my eyes with enormous paper eyelashes and added fluorescent neon pigment to my lids, expanded the borders of my mouth, and turned the colors of my blush a cartoonish purple and pink. Simultaneously, my stage movements shifted away from replications of glamorous pop icons and toward representations of rock and roll women. My stance became wider, I choreographed reaching toward the audience instead of self-touch. I took up space through larger steps and switched from stilettos to platform heels, adding ten inches to my frame. My costuming shifted from sequins to punk rock creations made from trash or discarded jewelry and fabric from earlier costumes. I embraced my drag persona as a character

that I had created, one quite different from the woman I was recognizing my own self to be. At this point, my persona became superhuman, allowing me to look at my real face and see the soft-butch woman I actually am. While my early career's glam look left me feeling plain, I now saw that behind the mask, there was a real woman worthy of loving herself.

As my career progressed, I learned how to make drag performance mixes by splicing together music with quotes from film and television. I finally crafted my own stage narratives, such as "Women Who Slay," a mix that identifies my character with heroic, yet deadly, female assassins. The sound score combined Within Temptation's heavy metal song "The Howling" with quotes from *Kill Bill's* The Bride, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer's* Buffy Summers, and *The Lord of the Rings'* Éowyn. On stage, I wield a foam replica broadsword and before each quote, I swing it through the air with precision to sword-slashing sound effects. I point my sword at the audience, then toward the venue's door, and lip sync Buffy's words: "Anyone else who wants to run, do it now! Because we just became an army; we just declared war." This invites audiences to participate in the battle for queer and trans rights. During the finale, my partner, Trae, enters as Éowyn's final foe, the Witch King of Angmar and we duel. When I parry and knock his weapon from his hands, the Witch King taunts, "Fool! No man can kill me!" As Éowyn, I respond the famous line: "I am no man!" I chop off his head and he falls to the floor, ending the performance.

Although this performance stems solely from my own experience (more trans voices are desperately needed in this conversation), "Women Who Slay" offers a foray into thinking through what it means for trans women to participate in the drag world beyond mere employment of survival. Here, drag is not just about mere female impersonation; rather it encompasses character creation through remixing and revising popular culture via soundscape creation, movement, costuming, storytelling, and makeup. This performance shows that drag can help trans people to heal ourselves and process our trauma through crafting stories and characters that go beyond reflecting the elite worlds of fashion and glamor. As drag scholarship expands, hopefully, it will include more trans voices, illustrating that scholars who claim we ruin or change the art form simply are not based in the reality of either performer's or audience's experience. Drag performance allows practitioners to write ourselves (however we choose) into a popular culture narrative that has largely excluded us. The creation of new, inclusive stories from pieces of pop culture that did not fully reflect our identities is one of drag's strongest appeals; an important part of its beauty is that anyone can take up the practice and write themselves authentically into the story of their choosing.

Notes

1 Laurence Senelick, *The Changing Room: Sex, Drag and Theater* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 392.

2 Tom Fitzgerald and Lorenzo Marquez, *Legendary Children: The First Decade of RuPaul's Drag Race and the Last Century of Queer Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 2020), 166.

3 Tracy Baim and Owen Keehnen, "Baton: In the Beginning," *Jim Flint: The Boy from Peoria*, eds. William B. Kelley and Jorjet Harper (Chicago: Prairie Avenue Productions, 2011), Kindle.
4 See Fayette Hauser, *The Cockettes: Acid Drag & Sexual Anarchy* (Port Townsend: Process Media, 2020) and Bambi Lake with Alvin Orloff, *The Unsinkable Bambi Lake: A Fairy Tale Containing the Dish on Cockettes, Punks, and Angels*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco, CA: Manic D Press, 2017).
5 The Boulet Brothers' Dragula, "Horror Icons Reimagined," *Shudder*, October 19, 2021, video, 72:00, https://www.shudder.com/play/e55f1f8af5f1db1b.
6 Chris Cochrane, "Hiding in Plain Sight: The Art of Drag," *Canadian Theatre Review* 185 (Winter 2020): 48.
7 Cochrane, "Hiding in Plain Sight," 48.

Welcome to America

Reassigning Appropriation through Choreography in *Soft Power*

Laura London Waringer

Iconic musicals such as *The King and I*, *South Pacific,* and *Miss Saigon* perpetuate the trope of the intrepid American spirit taming the exotic East, solidifying the authoritative Western gaze while presenting Asian cultural practices through a limited, often prejudicial, lens. Playwright David Henry Hwang and composer Jeanine Tesori's 2018 musical *Soft Power* capitalizes on such sentimental tropes to flip the script on politics, colonization, and cultural appropriation. Instead of a Western interloper teaching an Asian ruler how to govern his own country, what if an Asian protagonist saw America as a dangerous, barbaric, exotic land to be civilized? What begins as a play about a conflicted Chinese-American writer asked to pen a mega-musical for China evolves when the writer is stabbed in a hate crime and sent into a coma (an actual experience of Hwang's, which inspired the show). While unconscious, he conceives of a fever-dream musical. *Soft Power*, set 50 years after the 2016 presidential election, retells that historic race through a Chinese perspective. Standing in for The King of Siam, the leader in peril is none other than Hillary Clinton, whose affair with Chinese producer Xue Xing enables her to see democracy's flaws and China's political expertise. Xue convinces a Trump mob to abandon their guns and tiki torches, admit their indebtedness to the Chinese, and accept the New Silk Road as the new world order. It's a nationalist, propagandized musical pumped with all the grand patriotism of *The Music Man* or *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, but instead American ideals and democracy are depicted as asinine and antiquated.

In *Soft Power*, dance is the ultimate cultural expression. An almost-entirely Asian cast don blonde wigs, cargo shorts, and tote guns while playing a variety of "exotic Americans" who tap dance and twerk. *Soft Power* premiered in Los Angeles and San Francisco in Summer 2018 before transferring to the New York's Public Theatre in Fall 2019, anticipating a Broadway transfer before COVID-19's halted live theater. At the time of printing, the production awaits its future fate. The below interview with Daniel May, Assistant Dance Captain and original ensemble member, explores the process of creating the show's movement style, which complicates ideas of cultural appropriation and the insidiousness of American culture.

Figure 11.3 Screenshot from "Scenes from the Vault—'*Soft Power,*'" *Center Theatre Group,* accessed October 14, 2022, video, 3:41, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pg4MWF-tLrg. Ensemble dancers pose around the justice singing "Election Night," which explains the US electoral system.

Note: This case study aims to recount the production's creative process in the voice of a first-hand creative contributor, but for limitations of space has been edited (Figure 11.3).

How Did You Get Involved with Soft Power and What Was the Initial Creative Process Like?

I began work on the show as part of the original dance labs with (choreographer) Sam Pinkleton and (director) Leigh Silverman, which was a really wonderful experience. It was a small group of about six dancers and Sam's associate choreographer, Sunni Hitt. The way Sam works is so different and inclusive and playful and wonderful. At that time, we didn't even have any music for the show, so the labs were really just framed as an exploration of popular American dance. We created this sort of alphabet in the labs, and then we put them into formations that served the story. We'd watch these clips [of popular music videos or musical numbers] and he'd say, "You saw the dance language, now go create your own version based on memory," and then we presented it to each other. The thing that really clicked for me was when we did that for *Oklahoma!* … that sort of dream ballet western genre. Something came alive for me in those classic musical theater tropes that we were skewering. It was all really playful and improv-based, but when we all presented our versions of the dream ballet, I remember something really clicked that became the essence of *Soft Power.* That we were taking it really seriously to authentically recreate these movement vocabularies, but we could only go off of what we'd been shown, so how authentic could it really be?

When Did You Realize that Appropriation Was a Huge Part of the Story of Soft Power?

The conceit of *Soft Power* is: we've flashed forward 50 years after the 2016 election; democracy has fallen, and China has become the superpower and has made this hit musical about this moment in American history. Sam would say, "Imagine if the Chinese choreographer creating this musical had never been to America and only had YouTube videos to reference" (what we did in the dance labs); what would that interpretation or appropriation of American dance and pop culture look like? How would they integrate that to represent America through a Chinese lens? We recreated that. There were three dance labs and a big workshop before the premiere LA production. The dance labs were really about the physical language of appropriation. We were creating this imaginary language of these Chinese choreographers.

Did You Discuss How to Portray "American-ness" in Dance?

That evolved so much. In the LA version, in the "Welcome to America" number, where our Chinese hero arrives in the US for the first time, the choreography initially leaned into hip hop culture, which of course is already an appropriation. In the New York production, they wanted the movement to have more of a white-washed, Gap-commercial, wholesome feel. In the dance lab, I remember Sam would throw out a really white American name, like "Jessica," and everyone would have to move around the space in the way a "Jessica" would move. That was one way we as a group of Asian dancers explored what "whiteness" or "American-ness" looks like in dance. I really struggled with how this can even be communicated. I wondered, is this even reading as "American," or are we just Asians in blonde wigs? Will they get that we're essentially performing whiteface? Some audiences got very offended by that aspect of the show, but I think that's the intentionally jarring nature of the story. It asks audiences to consider what it would be like if American culture were not the norm, but actually exoticized.

Soft Power *parallels* The King and I*, which uses appropriated Thai dance styles to tell the American story of* Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Were there conversations about how that type of appropriation functioned in* Soft Power*?*

A lot of our cast members were in the most recent revival of *The King and I,* and we did have conversations about how Asian-set musicals that at least try to have a level of authenticity in the cultural movement are still performed through a Western perspective. With our number, "Fuxing Park," we watched videos on YouTube of real Chinese people practicing Tai Chi in Fuxing Park and created movement patterns based on what we saw. While it did eventually evolve into something more grounded in the reality of those movements, in the beginning, it felt like this sort of "Rodgers and Hammerstein" way of recreating

Asian movement. And even though it was a largely Asian community of people involved, it felt inauthentic, like it was a copy of a movement that was already an appropriation. But that was kind of the point. This is what Western musical theater has done forever.

How Did Having an Almost-Entirely Asian Cast Shape Soft Power?

Speaking personally as an Asian-American, I don't feel necessarily authorized to offer culturally Asian-specific contributions. I grew up very American. I'm way more versed in American dance than I ever will be in Asian dance. So, there was a lot of grappling with that, but the gift of *Soft Power* was being in a cast of largely Asian people and realizing that we were all having this very complicated experience with identity in a show that is about that hybrid identity and also the insidiousness of American culture and the pressure to assimilate. Especially in musical theater. The team had us circle up and talk about the complications of being Asian musical theater performers. I remember a lot of us saying that this was the first time we'd ever been asked what that's like.[1]

Conclusion

While *Soft Power*'s production future remains to be seen, the show's impact on musical theater is already profound. In his seminal work, postcolonial scholar Edward Said unpacks the complex relationships between culture, politics, and power, defining Orientalism as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient,"[2] a practical ideology that upholds distorted and injurious representations of the East as a means of justifying Western imperialist policies. *Soft Power* utilizes Orientalism, applying it to American musical theater to disrupt and subvert the art form's history of cultural appropriation. With its roots in blackface minstrelsy, the Broadway musical as we know it has flourished through the persistent erasure of minority cultural contributions. The industry provided performance opportunities to creatives of color while appropriating and commodifying their creative capital. This enactment of white power structures has persisted in the American theater for over a century.

Through its imaginative reversal of Orientalism, *Soft Power* undermines the stronghold of the Western gaze and grants agency to its Asian performers and creatives, who, for the first time, flip the script that previously held them in compliance with the appropriative lineage of musical theater. In all hopes, the type of critical creativity *Soft Power* embodies will pave a brighter, smarter, and more equitable way forward for representation and storytelling in American musical theater.

Notes

1 Daniel May, Zoom interview with the author, September 12, 2021.
2 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 3.

~POP CULTURE CONVERSATION~

closet disco: a meditation

Jeremy Guyton

In first grade, I spent my recess practicing cartwheels across the blacktop. While I hadn't yet learned that I wouldn't be able to participate in dance classes ("that's not what boys do"), I quickly gleaned from my classmates' jeers that "only sissies do cartwheels." My teacher, Mrs. Taylor, encouraged my desire to move across the playground in unconventional ways. She taught me how to do a roundoff. She introduced me to cheerleading and planted the seed that once I got to middle school, I could join the cheer squad. I did and committed to the squad for three years, amid disdain and persistent bullying from peers, their parents, family members, and the church community. This was my first experience performing and, as we'd strut inside the gym to set our formation, eyes of disapproval, like lasers, pierced holes in my confidence. I knew that the sharpness of my execution or the number of back handsprings I flipped couldn't distract from my identity on display. Bruised and ashamed, I learned that if I walked with my head toward the floor, I wouldn't catch anyone looking at me.

In ninth grade, I attended my first dance party. Grinding, dancing tailbone to pelvis with a partner, was the popular dance at the time. It was customary to spend the night grinding with a crush as a public expression of your desire for another. About an hour into the party, I strolled across the floor and spent the rest of the party dancing in my pre-teen lover's arms. When my mother arrived to take me home, she scolded me. It was a bitter reminder that my desires were shameful to those around me. I'd been seen without knowing; my mother's gaze was present even when she wasn't in the room. The darkness of the dance floor couldn't fully shield me. I learned that if I lived out my desires in the closet, I could create a vision in which I was brave and protected from spying eyes. I clung to this protective practice—over the next 12 years, I only returned "home" to Los Angeles for weeks at a time.

After college, I found a new home in New Orleans among a community that celebrated and affirmed my queerness. It was here that dance floors provided space to write, sweat, move, indulge, draft, listen to, and live in narratives of Afro//queer resistance and liberation. I, like so many of my community members, found family in the club; it was the first time I saw multiple representations of Afro//queer authenticity and where I first felt

safe and seen. I initiated *bar room sessions* in December 2018 with four other dancers and a local DJ. In rehearsals, we outlined the conditions necessary for the dance floor to evolve from cage with unwanted touch and gaze to sanctuary brimming with queer love and Black joy. As the whitening and "straight"ening of Afro//queer club spaces spread like wildfire, we desired an oasis where our community could gather and move.

When COVID drove us all inside, I returned to my childhood home in Los Angeles and continued this process as solo work. I sat in the emotional and spiritual closet I had left in 2008. In returning, I was confronted with the pain and trauma of my adolescence and began constructing a *closet disco* to facilitate my healing process. I carried my mother's jewelry and my father's 1978 uniform into the space and adorned my body. I painted the room with a disco light I purchased online; purple, blue, green, and red hues splashed a rainbow and disrupted the white walls. I planted a speaker on a shelf and closed the door—it was music and me.[1] I donned the character of DJ JG and called in Nina Simone, Gal Costa, KAYTRANADA, Sylvester, and many other Afro//queer storytellers. The soundtrack proved "fundamental to the creation of an alternative public realm, a kind of cultural free space"[2] and also a "a *means of resistance* and *a way to revision the future* through invoking past and presently used cultural materials."[3] Sound functions both as a mirror of our current culture and a sign of our future, holding potential energy akin to that of the head of a match. DJs, through their consistent sampling and blending of sounds (both old and current), model to club patrons the pregnant potential of repurposing current realities in innovative ways. As the DJ to a private closet disco, I ushered my inner child into a future vision where he could live out his fantasies and reimagine the closet that silenced him years ago.

Inside this closet, I excavate tools and futuring strategies manifested throughout my time in this dark, damp basement, illuminating an urgent, critical necessity to shuffle, in solitude, toward limitless possibilities of liberation. I am guided by dance scholar Thomas F. DeFrantz's assertion that

> there can be a great power in queer dance, drawing from and in relationship to black studies and African American dance histories. But not until…Not until we can articulate a liberatory theory of aesthetics…until strategies of improvisation and spontaneity are valued as ancient cultural imperatives completely imbricated in classicism.[4]

I free//styled my way to freedom and documented my experience through a fish-eye camera, a revision of the voyeuristic gaze that haunted my past. I controlled the gaze by pressing stop, record, and play at my discretion.

What happened in the closet was my story to tell, and I shared with my community what I had found in the most unlikely of places: a taste of freedom. They say time is cyclical and, in the West African cultural mythology of Sankofa, "go back and find it." In this 1975 time capsule relic of a future fantasy, I found peace.

As I deepen in this work, I am archiving and documenting closet discos of my Afro//queer siblings, inviting them to share their stories, weaving a tapestry of critical histories that serve as blueprint for Afro//queer youth. I am capturing these stories through filmed interviews and free//style movement meditations and compiling a digital library so that future generations of Afro//queer starlings can see themselves reflected in the beautiful cosmic array of our stories, pain, community, and love.

Notes

1 Michael Jackson, vocalist, "Music and Me," written by Jerry Marcellino, Mel Larson, Don Fenceton, and Mike Cannon, recorded March 1972-January 1973, track 10 on *Music & Me,* Motown Record Company, 1973, vinyl.
2 Ray Pratt, *Rhythm and Resistance: Explorations in the Political Uses of Popular Music* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1990), 14.
3 Pratt, *Rhythm and Resistance*, 3.
4 Thomas F. DeFrantz, "IV. Blacking Queer Dance," *Dance Research Journal* 134, no. 2 (Winter 2002): 104.

Chapter 11: Next Steps

Reading Questions:

- What does it mean to be "American" and how does dance reinforce this idea?
- How have histories of mobilization, visibilization, and invisibilization shaped US popular culture and how does dance illustrate your answers?
- How is the "Halluci Nation" helping to visibilize Indigenous people, practices, and lands?
- Looking back at case studies from this book, give examples of who is included and who is excluded from the definition of "being American" or within US popular culture and explain how their dancing helped you to arrive at your conclusions.
- Looking back at case studies from this book, give examples of how dance in US popular culture supports individuals and/or communities in protesting, resisting, and dismantling stereotypes, limitations, and/or forms of oppressions that seek to exclude people based on any part of their identity.
- What are three ways that dance in US popular culture creates inclusive ideas of being US-American?

Chapter 11: Your Move!

Activity 1: America

The US goes by many names, like "The Land of Opportunity," and is characterized by many symbols, like the Statue of Liberty. Keep this in mind as you consider the following:

- *Step 1*: Define "American" in your own words then look up a dictionary definition of the term. How do the two definitions differ and how are they similar? How does the dictionary definition shape American identity (whose is included, whose is excluded, for instance) and how does your personal definition shape your own identity?
- *Step 2*: Analyze and reflect. How can we create a definition of "American" to be all-inclusive and representative of all backgrounds? What would that definition look like?

- *Bonus*: Based on your above conclusions, choreograph your ideal US-American or American identity.

Activity 2: Indigenous Movements in Everyday Life/ Connections to Everyday Life

The chapter examines skateboarding and boxing as contemporary movement practices within Native American cultures. Using a search engine such as Google, research other movements or activities that are a part of Indigenous life.

- *Step 1*: Create a T-table of your information. Include these elements, each in their own row: What do you already know about the movement? What has your research revealed about the movement? What is new regarding the history of the activity? (Connections you make about prior knowledge and research to chapter themes).
- *Step 2*: Reflect. Address these questions:
  - What of this research is new knowledge for you? (i.e. previously invisibilized)
  - How has your perception of American movement (broadly) and Indigenous American movement (specifically) changed?
  - How has your perception of the relationship between history and movement changed? What about your awareness around the process of invisibilization?

Activity 3: Moving through American Pop Culture

Reflect on essays from this chapter as you ponder these questions in small group discussion:

- How might we generate a holistic, inclusive way of conceptualizing both American identity and popular dance?
- What steps might we take in everyday life to become more aware of how popular dance can invite a range of valuable identities and perspectives that support us in dismantling systems of oppression?
- How can critically engaging with US popular culture and dance allow us to recognize stereotypes and/or damaging (or absent) representations so that we can conscientiously create our own identity, take action in everyday life, and live purposefully rather than by default?