

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

The People Have Never Stopped Dancing: Native American Modern Dance Histories. By Jacqueline Shea Murphy.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4v37d76c>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 33(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Darby, Jaye T.

Publication Date

2009

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

role of pawn that she brings up in chapter 5 and would like more information about the degree to which pawning influenced early trading. Finally, I was intrigued with Wilkins's assertion that far from using the closest trading post, Navajos often selected a particular post they felt would provide them with the best terms. This is a wonderful topic for further research.

Patterns of Exchange: Navajo Weavers and Traders is a valuable contribution to the study of Navajo weaving, traders, evolution of rug designs, the weavers, and the complex intercultural relationships that helped shape modern Navajo rug designs.

Connie A. Jacobs
San Juan College

The People Have Never Stopped Dancing: Native American Modern Dance Histories. By Jacqueline Shea Murphy. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007. 320 pages. \$75.00 cloth; \$25.00 paper.

With this volume, awarded the Society of Dance History's prestigious de la Torre Bueno Prize in 2008, Jacqueline Shea Murphy makes a major contribution to Native performance studies and transformative scholarship by integrating the study of Native dance into the field of dance. Through extensive ethnographic and archival research and analysis, the book provides an in-depth study of Native American and Aboriginal dance in the United States and Canada from the nineteenth century to the present within the cultural, spiritual, artistic, and political context of the work. In the introduction, Murphy carefully articulates her complex plan for the book as "not just the history of Native dance and dancers, and not just the influence of American Indian dance on modern dance, but especially the interrelations between Native American dance and the history and development of modern dance in America" (4). To address these ambitious goals, the book has an in-depth introduction and three major sections.

The introduction sets up the context for the rest of the book and to me is a must-read in terms of understanding the complex, often oppositional issues raised throughout the volume. Here Murphy presents the thesis exemplified by the book's title, which focuses on the intergenerational continuity and agency of Native peoples to continue their millenniums-old dance and ceremonial traditions during the last two centuries despite ruthless federal bans on dancing in the nineteenth century and later aggressive assimilation policies in the United States and Canada.

The first part of the introduction outlines the theoretical framework that drives the book. Murphy writes that after seeing performances by the American Indian Dance Theatre, directed by Hanay Geiogamah, and Daystar/Rosalie Jones in the 1990s and reading *Chinook Winds: Aboriginal Dance Project*, she began to consider the ways Native dance performances embody theory. She notes that this view is shared by recent dance studies with its emphasis on "the idea that dance theorizes." Although this view remains

contested in mainstream dance scholarship, Murphy observes that the leading Native choreographers whom she interviewed “proceeded from this notion as a given: that learning dance, investigating through dance, is a scholarly and theoretical, as well as political and historical, act” (10). Also drawing from Paula Gunn Allen’s work on ceremony and performance, Murphy observed how many contemporary Native dances on the concert stage “envisioned a multilayered, interconnected, spiritually animated world, and inhabited the stage as a space in which to address, acknowledge, depict, and inhabit these multiple realms and layerings—including the relations of generations and of stories across time, the agency of an ever-present spirit world, and the interconnections of humans and other beings” (12). Then by way of example, she provides an analysis of Daystar/Rosalie Jones’s *No Home but the Heart*.

Murphy concludes the introduction by offering key challenges to mainstream dance criticism with important implications for Native performance studies. The first is “contesting prevailing stereotypes that see American Indian Dance as ‘authentic’ only when practiced in isolation from contemporary culture,” away from the concert stage. According to Murphy, this line of criticism fails to recognize the cultural continuance of contemporary expressions of Native dance. Next, based on ceremonial dimensions of Native performance, Murphy also makes a key distinction that Native “stage dance enacts, and doesn’t merely portray, relationship to ancestors, animals, and land,” in contrast to prevalent European theatrical understandings of stage performance (25).

Part 1, “Restrictions, Regulations, Resiliences,” investigates the complex relationship between colonialism and federal control of religion and culture in the United States and Canada during the nineteenth century. Drawing heavily on archival materials and federal restrictions, Murphy chronicles oppressive governmental policies and federal restrictions on Native peoples, banning their dances and ceremonies. Harsh penalties even included days without food. Against these devastating federal attempts to destroy Native cultures, she then describes the struggle, persistence, and agency of Native peoples to continue their traditions and dances.

In an insightful analysis, “Policing Authenticity,” Murphy historicized issues of authenticity that continue to impact current misunderstandings of Native dance and performance. She discusses how at the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century in the United States, “federal Indian agents increasingly assumed the right to police what was really Indian dance and what wasn’t” by discounting “religious practices as fakery” and controlling representations in shows, most notably Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West Show (57–58). Although many scholars have written about the Wild West Show and stereotypes, Murphy makes a compelling argument for how this federal authority and control in effect created a “theatrical disciplinary system” with disturbing implications (23). She carefully documents the numerous ways the Wild West Show “codified for the public for years to come what a ‘real Indian’ was” and “authorized viewers—and non-Indian officials—as experts in judging Indian authenticity,” thereby allowing outsiders to perpetuate Plains stereotypes and freeze Native peoples and their dances in the past (59).

Part 2, "Twentieth-Century Modern Dance," analyzes the tensions between Native dance's influences on the emergence of American modern dance and its ironic absence in dance history. Murphy first discusses how Ted Shawn and Lester Horton appropriated elements of Native dance for their own purposes. She then provides an in-depth analysis of Martha Graham's complex relationship with Native dance. Again, even with this icon of American modern dance, Murphy addresses prevalent prejudices. Caught up in mainstream judgments of art, Martha Graham had a stereotypical assessment of Native and African American dance as "two primitive sources, dangerous and hard to handle in the arts, but of intense psychic influence" (2). According to Murphy, in Graham's *Appalachian Spring*, *Indian Girl*, by never appearing, remains a "representational absence from the stage" thus reifying assimilationist policy of the time (168).

Against these views, part 2 concludes with discussions of José Limón and Tom Two Arrows, whom Murphy argues worked against the critical constraints of the American modern dance community "as Native choreographers" (170). In her discussion of their dances, she suggests mainstream notions of authenticity and art marginalized their work. Thus, neither Native choreographer's creativity nor artistry were fully recognized as contributing to Native modern dance—Limón because of his Mexican heritage and mainstream critics' judgments that his innovative dances were not authentic enough, and Two Arrows because of the perception that he was a demonstrator of authentic dances, not a creative artist.

In terms of advancing Native performance studies, part 3, "Indigenous Choreographers Today," is the most important part of the book, bringing the reader into the world of leading Native choreographers and dances. Based on interviews and performances, this section develops a key premise introduced earlier that "Native peoples continue to engage in the Western concert stage as a tool for spiritual and cultural resilience and self-determination" (24). Most notable are discussions by major choreographers Marla Bingham, Daystar/Rosalie Jones, Hanay Geiogamah, Sandra Laronde, Jerry Longboat, Georgina Martinez, Marrie Mumford, and Raoul Trujillo regarding the ceremonial and spiritual power of Native dance, its integral connection to Native communities, and unique artistic traditions. Illuminating these views, Murphy discusses the creative process for *Miingooweziwin . . . The Gift*, "a dance of renewal and strength," based on an Anishinaabe story, performed by the Aboriginal Dance Program and choreographed by Georgina Martinez (256). Integral to the piece was the ongoing collaboration with elders at all stages of development.

Even with the growing strength of contemporary Native dance on concert stages throughout the United States and Canada, Murphy notes lingering colonial issues, tying the book back to the previous sections. She explains that dance in Canada has received far more funding because of improved Canadian/First Nations relationships while American Indian performing arts in the United States, like most Indian programs, remain woefully underfunded. She also describes ongoing colonial policing by some mainstream critics who believe that they have the right to dictate to contemporary Native choreographers what constitutes authenticity or artistry, based on Eurocentric misperceptions of Native dance.

Addressing these dual and often dueling historical and critical performance traditions—Native and Western—is both the strength and at times a weakness of the book. On the one hand, Murphy draws heavily on interviews with Native choreographers, the dances, and Native critical studies, especially in part 3, and goes to great lengths to reposition Native dance away from mainstream dance criticism and scholarship. On the other hand, more than half the book locates Native dance within larger US and Canadian federal policies and American modern dance histories. Given the strength of Murphy's theoretical perspective and interview materials, I would have welcomed more analysis of Native American dance history and performance on its own terms. This is a minor quibble from a reviewer who wanted to see part 3 continue for many more pages.

Overall, *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing* celebrates the power, artistry, spirituality, and agency of Native American dance. The book also opens major transformative spaces in dance studies. I believe it belongs on the bookshelf of all readers interested in Native performing arts and transformative studies.

Jaye T. Darby

University of California, Los Angeles

Sacred Claims: Repatriation and Living Tradition. By Greg Johnson. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007. 224 pages. \$55.00 cloth; \$19.50 paper.

This book focuses on the 1990 Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) and the means through which Native Americans and indigenous Hawaiians seek repatriation of the bones of ancestors and other sacred objects that are part of their cultural patrimony. Johnson's primary interest is in exploring the religious discourses that Native Americans and indigenous Hawaiians have used to address their claims. In doing so, he argues that living tradition is not found in sacred artifacts but is located in the struggles that indigenous peoples wage over the meaning of such artifacts.

The book provides a wealth of information about the history of NAGPRA and the struggles around repatriation that have ensued during the years since 1990. The author also demonstrates a tremendous breadth of knowledge about the intricacies of each claim, and the contradictory processes that Native groups face. For example, to challenge the scientific paradigm that views ancient bones primarily as sites for research and ancient artifacts solely for their economic value, indigenous peoples are required to highlight the sacred and traditional importance of these skeletal remains and artifacts. This requires them to present themselves at NAGPRA as "authentic" representatives of spiritual traditions. A crucial issue, where authenticity is equated with neutrality, is that regardless of the importance of repatriation to their communities, they cannot appear to be too influenced by political concerns or outcomes, at the risk of undercutting, or "profaning," their claims to authenticity. Another quandary relates to the reality that although modern