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### The Influence of Indigenous Dance in Canadian and American Society

Webster's dictionary defines expression as an act, process or instance of representing in a medium (Merriam-Webster). Every day humans express their own being in a multitude of mediums- speech, song, literature, art and dance are universal forms of human expression on which we are all dependant. The way individuals and communities express themselves is arguably the very foundation of their characters and identities. Cultures across the globe express their spirituality, milestones, celebrations and tragedies through the act of dance. Canadian and American Indigenous communities are no different. In fact, they have been doing so before Canada and America were even countries, before the Europeans came to North America, and since time immemorial. Different tribes have a diverse range of unique dance forms, however one commonality among many tribes is that the dance rituals they perform are carefully passed down from generation to generation (Prokosch Kurath).

Since the arrival of the European settlers in North America, there have been multiple attempts of cultural genocide against the Indigenous peoples of the land. Whether it be through massacre, the residential school system, the sixties scoop or loss of sacred territory, no attempt of cultural genocide has succeeded in completely eliminating Indigenous culture. First Nations, Inuit and Métis dance rituals are prime examples of the survival of Indigenous cultures that can be

seen today. I write this essay with the intent of proving that Indigenous dance rituals not only have survived, but also have a strong influence on Canadian and American society. The influence of Indigenous dance rituals in America and Canada can be seen through how it is used as a tool of cultural preservation, how its analysis can show the variation among Indigenous cultures and how Indigenous dance has the power to evoke political change.

Indigenous communities across Canada and the United States have found many ways to celebrate and preserve their cultures through the performance of dance rituals. Even though forced assimilation in the past has resulted in many tribes losing many of their cultural practices, many have clung to their dance. To truly appreciate how Indigenous dance rituals have been used to preserve cultures, we must take a look back in time to the year 1885, when Christianity played an important role in how legislation was created, and which frowned upon Indigenous dance practices (Bracken, 83). This is evident when examining section 114 in the Revised Statutes of Canada, it reads:

114: Every Indian or person who engages in or assists in celebrating the Indian festival known as the “Potlach” or the Indian dance known as the “Tamanawas,” is guilty of a misdemeanor, and liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months and not less than two months (Bracken, 83).

2. Every Indian or person who encourages, either directly or indirectly, an Indian to get up such a festival or dance, or to celebrate the same, is guilty of a like offence, and shall be liable to the same punishment (Bracken, 84).

This type of discriminatory law was prevalent in both Canadian and American governments during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This discrimination is also seen in other legislation such as the Indian Act of 1876 in Canada and the American Code of Indian Offences of 1883, which among other arbitrary rules, forbade Indigenous peoples from engaging in public dance (Clinton, Hansen). Despite this oppression, Indigenous communities still found ways to preserve their culture through dance. Their efforts of preservation are seen today, as hundreds of communities both celebrate and showcase their cultural dances.

The Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance (IPAA), an organization consisting of dance groups from all across Canada, as well as San Francisco and Melbourne, aids in Indigenous cultural preservation by promoting each group it represents (IPAA). It also provides Indigenous youth with the opportunity to audition and perform in these groups (IPAA). Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) is an organization located in Vancouver that serves as a rape crisis centre and engages with youth to develop leadership to prevent future violence (WAVAW). WAVAW preserves Indigenous culture by holding an annual Cree round dance hosted by Tsleil-Waututh Nation to honour the Indigenous women and girls who have been murdered or gone missing (WAVAW). The round dance is a suitable dance for this purpose, as it tells a story of a mother who can not move on after death knowing that her daughter is so crippled by her loss (Ogg). To help her daughter let go of her pain, the mother's spirit showed her the round dance and told her that when she and her people performed this dance, their deceased ancestors would be dancing with them (Ogg). Organizations like the IPAA and WAVAW are not the only way Indigenous dance rituals are being preserved, as many Indigenous communities and reservations

across Canada and the United states celebrate important occasions with dance ceremonies such as the pow-wow.

Originally celebrated as a gathering for welcoming spring and performing religious ceremonies the contemporary pow-wow has evolved into an event for many Indigenous people to gather to practice cultural dances, drum, sing, and strengthen friendships (Browner, 12). Although many different tribes may unite in celebration, it is essential to acknowledge and analyze the differences among dance rituals that are unique to different tribes and nations.

Through the analysis of Indigenous dance in Canada and America, one is able to acknowledge and appreciate the differences among Indigenous cultures. Many non-Indigenous Canadians and Americans tend to view Indigeneity as one monolithic culture that practices the same traditions. This is a huge problem in both Canada and America, as it can lead to many unhelpful generalizations. One can not look at one tribe's dance practices and know all Indigenous dance practices. For instance, Métis people of the Red River settlement in Canada practice the Red River Jig both recreationally and for celebration, but would not be perform an Inuit Polar Bear Dance. Just as the Inuit would not perform a Navajo Sash Belt Dance- because they are all entirely different cultures! This being said, the influence that analyzing Indigenous dance forms has on Canadian and American society is a very positive one.

The influence that the analysis of Indigenous dance has on Canada and America can be seen in educational programs found in the public sphere. An exemplifier of this is Larry Yazzie, a two-time world champion Fancy Dancer member of the Sac and Fox tribe of the Mississippi, who is the founder and creative director of and organization called Native Pride Arts (Native

Pride Arts). Yazzie is an international lecturer and has earned a reputation of being one of the leading experts on Native American dance (Native Pride Arts). By teaching people of all backgrounds the dance practices of his own tribe, Larry is able to demonstrate the differences between Indigenous tribal dancing styles. Another great educator is Jaqueline Shea Murphy, author of *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing*, who discusses in her book the huge progress that Indigenous stage dance has made in the twenty-first century in regards to both celebrating and engaging Indigenous dance styles with the public (Murphy). This is evident when she says “ [Indigenous] Choreographers are forming companies that are funded, drawing audiences, and are awarded for the work they do [especially in Canada]; magazines are featuring articles and cover stories on ‘contemporary Native dance’ The dancing is raising awareness not just for the need to include Indigenous dance in modern dance history classes... but is also articulating particular Indigenous understanding and ways of knowing (Murphy, 240).” This influx of education and publicity for Indigenous dance in both Canadian and American society, is forcing people to acknowledge that Indigenous dance is not an activity of the past, but is still alive and well. It also helps people to be less ignorant of Indigenous cultures by showcasing that there is variety of dance forms. The public education of Indigenous dance can also aid in using Indigenous dance as an agent of political change.

The world is constantly changing. Sometimes it may seem for the best and other times, the worst. The latest presidential election is a prime example of this, as the newest president-elect of the United States is openly racist, sexist and Islamophobic. When minorities face oppression, the obstacles that stand between them and political change can seem oh so daunting. However it

is important to keep faith in the world as acts that may seem hopeless have resulted in great change. For instance, both Canadian and American Indigenous communities have proved time and again that dance can be used to evoke political change. An old and more well known example of this is the Ghost Dance movement of the nineteenth century (Smoak, 17). The Ghost Dance was a ritual in which different tribes would dance in a circular formation while leaders sang and beat drums, which quickly spread across the continent (Smoak, 17). Performing this ritual was believed to call upon ancestors to help restore North America to the plentiful and free place it had been before European colonization (Smoak, 17). The thought of Native peoples performing this ritual frightened colonizers, and as a result hundreds of men, women and children of the Lakota tribe were massacred by the American government for assembling to perform the dance at Wounded Knee in 1890 (Smoak, 40). Although the Ghost Dance was not necessarily immediately effective, its spirit lived on through out the centuries and ignited more successful Indigenous dance movements. As the Canadian Indigenous dancer Pablo Palma once said “We can feel the land, and we can feel the beat, and we can feel the vibration, and that is the connection. So, when I begin to feel that, I believe it is possible to make a movement (Murphy, 219).”

This spirit can be seen in the trial of *Delgamuukw v. Regina* when the Gitksan and Wet’suwet’en people who from 1987-1991 presented their claim to over 22 400 square miles of land in British Columbia to the British Columbia Supreme Court (Murphy, 219). During their hearing, the Gitksan chief presented *adaawk*- sacred ancestral stories, histories and territories, while the Wet’suwet’en presented *kungax*- spiritual songs, dances and performances about trials

between territories, which all proved their ties to the land (Murphy, 219). The British Columbia Supreme Court dismissed their claim due to the fact that the trial judge deemed their presentations as performances, not evidence (Murphy, 220). The Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en people appealed this ruling and in 1997 finally won their case against the crown when the Supreme Court of Canada rejected the British Columbia judge's ruling and contested that *kungax* was sufficient enough evidence to prove their ancestral ties (Murphy, 222). The trial of *Delgamuukw v. Regina* ultimately proved that Indigenous Dance practices have the power to ignite change.

Activism through dance is not only a thing of the past but is happening right now in Standing Rock North Dakota, where thousands of water protectors both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, are peacefully protesting the current construction of the Dakota Access Pipe Line, which threatens access to clean drinking water for the Standing Rock Sioux tribe (Luger). As peaceful protesters were being met with heavy militarization, tear gas, freezing water and rubber bullets, an estimated thirty Jingle Dress dancers gave appeared to give protestors encouragement on the 29th of October, 2016 (Brown). As of December 4th 2016, the pipeline has been denied access to standing rock which is great news except for the fact that the DAPL is still planned to be built and come in contact with a different body of water (Luger). This serves as a reminder to never give up the fight for justice and proves that Indigenous dance can be used as a form of activism.

In conclusion, the art and expression of dance is not simply movement of the body, it is a core aspect of cultural identity as seen in the different Indigenous dance practices of Canada and

the United States. It is a medium of expression that transcends racial or ideological barriers and translates one's true self or identity. When initially thinking about the topic of Indigenous dance rituals, one might not take into consideration its significance on daily life. However the influence that Indigenous dance practices and rituals have on Canadian and American society can clearly be seen in how it is used as a tool for cultural preservation, how its analysis can expose the variation among Indigenous cultures and how it can be used as an agent of political change. As long as peoples exist, so will dance and all of its power.



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